ANNE RICE

THE COMPLETE VAMPIRE CHRONICLES

Anne Rice

The Complete Vampire Chronicles 12-Book Bundle

Pandora

Vittorio, The Vampire

Interview with the Vampire

The Vampire Lestat

Queen of the Damned

The Tale of the Body Thief

Memnoch the Devil

The Vampire Armand

Merrick

Blood and Gold

Blackwood Farm

Blood Canticle

Ballantine Books

Pandora, Vittorio, The Vampire, Interview with the Vampire, The Vampire Lestat, Queen of the Damned, The Tale of the Body Thief, Memnoch the Devil, The Vampire Armand, Merrick, Blood and Gold, Blackwood Farm, and *Blood Canticle* are works of fiction. Names, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

A Ballantine eBook Edition

Pandora copyright © 1998 by Anne O'Brien Rice
Vittorio, The Vampire copyright © 1999 by Anne O'Brien Rice
Interview with the Vampire copyright © 1976 by Anne O'Brien Rice
The Vampire Lestat copyright © 1985 by Anne O'Brien Rice
Queen of the Damned copyright © 1988 by Anne O'Brien Rice
The Tale of the Body Thief copyright © 1992 by Anne O'Brien Rice
Memnoch the Devil copyright © 1995 by Anne O'Brien Rice
The Vampire Armand copyright © 1998 by Anne O'Brien Rice
Merrick copyright © 2000 by Anne O'Brien Rice
Blood and Gold copyright © 2001 by Anne O'Brien Rice
Blackwood Farm copyright © 2002 by Anne O'Brien Rice
Blood Canticle copyright © 2003 by Anne O'Brien Rice

All Rights Reserved.

Published in the United States by Ballantine Books, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York.

Ballantine and colophon are registered trademarks of Random House, Inc.

Pandora, Vittorio, The Vampire, Interview with the Vampire, The Vampire Lestat, Queen of the Damned, The Tale of the Body Thief, Memnoch the Devil, The Vampire Armand, Merrick, Blood and Gold, Blackwood Farm, and *Blood Canticle* were each published separately by Ballantine Books, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., in 1998, 1999, 1976, 1985, 1988, 1992, 1995, 1998, 2000, 2001, 2002, and 2003.

eISBN: 978-0-345-54474-2

www.ballantinebooks.com

v3.1

Contents

Cover
Title Page
Copyright

Pandora
Vittorio, The Vampire
Interview with the Vampire
The Vampire Lestat
Queen of the Damned
The Tale of the Body Thief
Memnoch the Devil
The Vampire Armand
Merrick
Blood and Gold
Blackwood Farm
Blood Canticle

Anne Rice

Pandora

A BALLANTINE e BOOK

PANDORA

NEW TALES
OF THE VAMPIRES

Anne Rice

BALLANTINE BOOKS • NEW YORK

A Ballantine Book
Published by The Random House Publishing Group
Copyright © 1998 by Anne O'Brien Rice

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Ballantine Books, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc.

BALLANTINE and colophon are registered trademarks of Random House, Inc.

eISBN: 978-0-307-57588-3

This edition published by arrangement with Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc.

www.ballantinebooks.com

v3.0_r3

Contents

Master Table of Contents

Cover
Title Page
Copyright
Epigraph

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven

Dedication

Of Mrs. Moore and the echo
in the Marabar Caves:

… but the echo began in some indescribable way to undermine her hold on life. Coming at a moment when she chanced to be fatigued, it had managed to murmur "Pathos, piety, courage—they exist, but are identical, and so is filth. Everything exists, nothing has value."

E. M. FORSTER
A Passage to India

Thou believest that there is
one God; thou doest well: the devils
also believe, and tremble.

The General Epistle of James
2:19

How ridiculous and what a stranger he is who is
surprised at anything which happens in life.

MARCUS AURELIUS
Meditations

Another part of our same belief is that many creatures will be damned; for example the angels who fell from heaven through pride, and are now fiends; and those men on earth who die apart from the Faith of Holy Church, namely, the heathen; and those, too, who are christened but live unchristian lives, and so die out of love—all these shall be condemned to hell everlastingly, as Holy Church teaches me to believe. This being so I thought it quite impossible that everything should turn out well, as our Lord was now showing me. But I had no answer to this revelation save this: "What is impossible to you is not impossible to me. I shall honour my word in every respect, and I will make everything turn out for the best." Thus was I taught by God's grace.…

JULIAN OF NORWICH
Revelations of Divine Love

1

Not twenty minutes has passed since you left me here in the café, since I said No to your request, that I would never write out for you the story of my mortal life, how I became a vampire—how I came upon Marius only years after he had lost his human life.

Now here I am with your notebook open, using one of the sharp pointed eternal ink pens you left me, delighted at the sensuous press of the black ink into the expensive and flawless white paper.

Naturally, David, you would leave me something elegant, an inviting page. This notebook bound in dark varnished leather, is it not, tooled with a design of rich roses, thornless, yet leafy, a design that means only Design in the final analysis but bespeaks an authority. What is written beneath this heavy and handsome book cover will count, sayeth this cover.

The thick pages are ruled in light blue—you are practical, so thoughtful, and you probably know I almost never put pen to paper to write anything at all.

Even the sound of the pen has its allure, the sharp scratch rather like the finest quills in ancient Rome when I would put them to parchment to write my letters to my Father, when I would write in a diary my own laments … ah, that sound. The only thing missing here is the smell of ink, but we have the fine plastic pen which will not run out for volumes, making as fine and deep a black mark as I choose to make.

I am thinking about your request in writing. You see you will get something from me. I find myself yielding to it, almost as one of our human victims yields to us, discovering perhaps as the rain continues to fall outside, as the café continues with its noisy chatter, to think that this might not be the agony I presumed—reaching back over the two thousand years—but almost a pleasure, like the act of drinking blood itself.

I reach now for a victim who is not easy for me to overcome: my own past. Perhaps this victim will flee from me with a speed that equals my own. Whatever, I seek now a victim that I have never faced. And there is the thrill of the hunt in it, what the modern world calls investigation.

Why else would I see those times so vividly now? You had no magic potion to give me to loosen my thoughts. There is but one potion for us and it is blood.

You said at one point as we walked towards the café, “You will remember everything.”

You, who are so young amongst us yet were so old as a mortal, and such a scholar as a mortal. Perhaps it is natural that you so boldly attempt to collect our stories.

But why seek to explain here such curiosity as yours, such bravery in face of blood-drenched truth?

How could you have kindled in me this longing to go back, two thousand years, almost exactly—to tell of my mortal days on Earth in Rome, and how I joined Marius, and what little chance he had against Fate.

How could origins so deeply buried and so long denied suddenly beckon to me. A door snaps open. A light shines. Come in.

I sit back now in the café.

I write, but I pause and look around me at the people of this Paris café. I see the drab unisex fabrics of this age, the fresh American girl in her olive green military clothes, all of her possessions slung over her shoulder in a backpack; I see the old Frenchman who has come here for decades merely to look at the bare legs and arms of the young, to feed on the gestures as if he were a vampire, to wait for some exotic jewel of a moment when a woman sits back laughing, cigarette in hand, and the cloth of her synthetic blouse becomes tight over her breasts and there the nipples are visible.

Ah, old man. He is gray-haired and wears an expensive coat. He is no menace to anyone. He lives entirely in vision. Tonight he will go back to a modest but elegant apartment which he has maintained since the last Great World War, and he will watch films of the young beauty Brigitte Bardot. He lives in his eyes. He has not touched a woman in ten years.

I don’t drift, David. I drop anchor here. For I will not have my story pour forth as from a drunken oracle.

I see these mortals in a more attentive light. They are so fresh, so exotic and yet so luscious to me, these mortals; they look like tropical birds must have looked when I was a child; so full of fluttering, rebellious life, I wanted to clutch them to have it, to make their wings

flap in my hands, to capture flight and own it and partake of it. Ah, that terrible moment in childhood when one accidentally crushes the life from a bright-red bird.

Yet they are sinister in their darker vestments, some of these mortals: the inevitable cocaine dealer—and they are everywhere, our finest prey—who waits for his contact in the far corner, his long leather coat styled by a noted Italian designer, his hair shaved close on the side and left bushy on the top to make him look distinctive, which it does, though there is no need when one considers his huge black eyes, and the hardness of what nature intended to be a generous mouth. He makes those quick impatient gestures with his cigarette lighter on the small marble table, the mark of the addicted; he twists, he turns, he cannot be comfortable. He doesn't know that he will never be comfortable in life again. He wants to leave to snort the cocaine for which he burns and yet he must wait for the contact. His shoes are too shiny, and his long thin hands will never grow old.

I think he will die tonight, this man. I feel a slow gathering desire to kill him myself. He has fed so much poison to so many. Tracking him, wrapping him in my arms, I would not even have to wreathe him with visions. I would let him know that death has come in the form of a woman too white to be human, too smoothed by the centuries to be anything but a statue come to life. But those for whom he waits plot to kill him. And why should I intervene?

What do I look like to these people? A woman with long wavy clean brown hair that covers me much like a nun's mantle, a face so white it appears cosmetically created, and eyes, abnormally brilliant, even from behind golden glasses.

Ah, we have a lot to be grateful for in the many styles of eyeglasses in this age—for if I were to take these off, I should have to keep my head bowed, not to startle people with the mere play of yellow and brown and gold in my eyes, that have grown ever more jewel-like over the centuries, so that I seem a blind woman set with topaz for her pupils, or rather carefully formed orbs of topaz, sapphire, even aquamarine.

Look, I have filled so many pages, and all I am saying is Yes, I will tell you how it began for me.

Yes, I will tell you the story of my mortal life in ancient Rome, how I came to love Marius and how we came to be together and then to part.

What a transformation in me, this resolution.

How powerful I feel as I hold this pen, and how eager to put us in sharp and clear perspective before I begin fulfilling your request.

This is Paris, in a time of peace. There is rain. High regal gray buildings with their double windows and iron balconies line this boulevard. Loud, tiny, dangerous automobiles race in the streets. Cafés, such as this, are overflowing with international tourists. Ancient churches are crowded here by tenements, palaces turned to museums, in whose rooms I linger for hours gazing at objects from Egypt or Sumer which are even older than me. Roman architecture is everywhere, absolute replicas of Temples of my time now serve as banks. The words of my native Latin suffuse the English language. Ovid, my beloved Ovid, the poet who predicted his poetry would outlast the Roman Empire, has been proved true.

Walk into any bookstore and you find him in neat, small paperbacks, designed to appeal to students.

Roman influence seeds itself, sprouting mighty oaks right through the modern forest of computers, digital disks, microviruses and space satellites.

It is easy here—as always—to find an embraceable evil, a despair worth tender fulfillment.

And with me there must always be some love of the victim, some mercy, some self-delusion that the death I bring does not mar the great shroud of inevitability, woven of trees and earth and stars, and human events, which hovers forever around us ready to close on all that is created, all that we know.

Last night, when you found me, how did it seem to you? I was alone on the bridge over the Seine, walking in the last dangerous darkness before dawn.

You saw me before I knew you were there. My hood was down and I let my eyes in the dim light of the bridge have their little moment of glory. My victim stood at the railing, no more than a child, but bruised and robbed by a hundred men. She wanted to die in the water. I don't know if the Seine is deep enough for one to drown there. So near the Ile St.-Louis. So near Notre Dame. Perhaps it is, if one can resist a last struggle for life.

But I felt this victim's soul like ashes, as though her spirit had been

cremated and only the body remained, a worn, disease-ridden shell. I put my arm around her, and when I saw the fear in her small black eyes, when I saw the question coming, I wreathed her with images. The soot that covered my skin was not enough to keep me from looking like the Virgin Mary, and she sank into hymns and devotion, she even saw my veils in the colors she had known in churches of childhood, as she yielded to me, and I—knowing that I needn't drink, but thirsting for her, thirsting for the anguish she could give forth in her final moment, thirsting for the tasty red blood that would fill my mouth and make me feel human for one instant in my very monstrosity—I gave in to her visions, bent her neck, ran my fingers over her sore tender skin, and then it was, when I sank my teeth into her, when I drank from her—it was then that I knew you were there. You watched.

I knew it, and I felt it, and I saw the image of us in your eye, distractingly, as the pleasure nevertheless flushed through me, making me believe I was alive, somehow connected to fields of clover or trees with roots deeper in the earth than the branches they raise to the welkin above.

At first I hated you. You saw me as I feasted. You saw me as I gave in. You knew nothing of my months of starvation, restraint, wandering. You saw only the sudden release of my unclean desire to suck her very soul from her, to make her heart rise in the flesh inside her, to drag from her veins every precious particle of her that still wanted to survive.

And she did want to survive. Wrapped in saints, and dreaming suddenly of the breasts that nursed her, her young body fought, pumping and pumping against me, she so soft, and my own form hard as a statue, my milkless nipples enshrined in marble, no comfort. Let her see her mother, dead, gone and now waiting. Let me glimpse through her dying eyes the light through which she sped towards this certain salvation.

Then I forgot about you. I would not be robbed. I slowed the drinking, I let her sigh, I let her lungs fill with the cold river air, her mother drawing closer and closer so that death now was as safe for her as the womb. I took every drop from her that she could give.

She hung dead against me, as one I'd rescued, one I would help from the bridge, some weakened, sickened, drunken girl. I slid my hand into her body, breaking the flesh so easily even with these delicate fingers, and I closed my fingers around her heart and brought it to my lips and

sucked it, my head tucked down by her face, sucked the heart like fruit, until no blood was left in any fiber or chamber, and then slowly—perhaps for your benefit—I lifted her and let her fall down into the water she had so desired.

Now there would be no struggle as her lungs filled with the river. Now there would be no last desperate thrashing. I fed from the heart one last time, to take even the color of blood out of it, and then sent it after her—crushed grapes—poor child, child of a hundred men.

Then I faced you, let you know that I knew you watched from the quay. I think I tried to frighten you. In rage I let you know how weak you were, that all the blood given to you by Lestat would make you no match should I choose to dismember you, pitch a fatal heat into you and immolate you, or only punish you with penetrating scar—simply for having spied upon me.

Actually I have never done such a thing to a younger one. I feel sorry for them when they see us, the ancient ones, and quake in terror. But I should, by all the knowledge of myself I possess, have retreated so quickly that you could not follow me in the night.

Something in your demeanor charmed me, the manner in which you approached me on the bridge, your young Anglo-Indian brown-skinned body gifted by your true mortal age with such seductive grace. Your very posture seemed to ask of me, without humiliation:

"Pandora, may we speak?"

My mind wandered. Perhaps you knew it. I don't remember whether I shut you out of my thoughts, and I know that your telepathic abilities are not really very strong. My mind wandered suddenly, perhaps of itself, perhaps at your prodding. I thought of all the things I could tell you, which were so different from the tales of Lestat, and those of Marius through Lestat, and I wanted to warn you, warn you of the ancient vampires of the Far East who would kill you if you went into their territory, simply because you were there.

I wanted to make certain you understood what we all had to accept—the Fount of our immortal vampiric hunger did reside in two beings—Mekare and Maharet—so ancient they are now both horrible to look upon, more than beautiful. And if they destroy themselves we will all die with them.

I wanted to tell you of others who have never known us as a tribe or

known our history, who survived the terrible fire brought down on her children by our Mother Akasha. I wanted to tell you that there were things walking the Earth that look like us but are not of our breed any more than they are human. And I wanted suddenly to take you under my wing.

It must have been your prodding. You stood there, the English gentleman, wearing your decorum more lightly and naturally than any man I'd ever seen. I marveled at your fine clothes, that you'd indulged yourself in a light black cloak of worsted wool, that you had even given yourself the luxury of a gleaming red silk scarf—so unlike you when you were newly made.

Understand, I was not aware the night that Lestat transformed you into a vampire. I didn't feel that moment.

All the preternatural world shimmered weeks earlier, however, with the knowledge that a mortal had jumped into the body of another mortal; we know these things, as if the stars tell us. One preternatural mind picks up the ripples of this sharp cut in the fabric of the ordinary, then another mind receives the image, and on and on it goes.

David Talbot, the name we all knew from the venerable order of psychic detectives, the Talamasca, had managed to move his entire soul and etheric body—into that of another man. That body itself was in the possession of a body thief whom you forced from it. And once anchored in the young body, you, with all your scruples and values, all your knowledge of seventy-four years, remained anchored in the young cells.

And so it was David the Reborn, David with the high-gloss India beauty, and raw well-nourished strength of British lineage, that Lestat had made into a vampire, bringing over both body and soul, compounding miracle with the Dark Trick, achieving once more a sin that should stun his contemporaries and his elders.

And this, this was done to you by your best friend!

Welcome to the darkness, David. Welcome to the domain of Shakespeare's "inconstant moon."

Bravely you came up the bridge towards me.

"Forgive me, Pandora," you said so quietly. Flawless British upper-class accent, and the usual beguiling British rhythm that is so seductive it seems to say that "we will all save the world."

You kept a polite distance between us, as if I were a virgin girl of the

last century, and you didn't want to alarm me and my tender sensibilities. I smiled.

I indulged myself then. I took your full measure, this fledgling that Lestat—against Marius's injunction—had dared to make. I saw the components of you as a man: an immense human soul, fearless, yet half in love with despair, and a body which Lestat had almost injured himself to render powerful. He had given you more blood than he could easily give in your transformation. He had tried to give you his courage, his cleverness, his cunning; he had tried to transport an armory for you through the blood.

He had done well. Your strength was complex and obvious. Our Queen Mother Akasha's blood was mixed with that of Lestat. Marius, my ancient lover, had given him blood as well. Lestat, ah, now what do they say, they say that he may even have drunk the blood of the Christ.

It was this first issue I took up with you, my curiosity overwhelming me, for to scan the world for knowledge is often to rake in such tragedy that I abhor it.

"Tell me the truth of it," I said. "This story *Memnoch the Devil*. Lestat claimed he went to Heaven and to Hell. He brought back a veil from St. Veronica. The face of Christ was on it! It converted thousands to Christianity, it cured alienation and succored bitterness. It drove other Children of Darkness to throw up their arms to the deadly morning light, as if the sun were in fact the fire of God."

"Yes, it's all happened, as I described it," you said, lowering your head with a polite but unexaggerated modesty. "And you know a few … of *us* perished in this fervor, whilst newspapers and scientists collected our ashes for examination."

I marveled at your calm attitude. A Twentieth-Century sensibility. A mind dominated by an incalculable wealth of information, and quick of tongue with an intellect devoted to swiftness, synthesis, probabilities, and all this against the backdrop of horrid experiences, wars, massacres, the worst perhaps the world has ever seen.

"It all happened," you said. "And I did meet with Mekare and Maharet, the ancient ones, and you needn't fear for me that I don't know how fragile is the root It was kind of you to think so protectively of me."

I was quietly charmed.

"What did you think of this Holy Veil yourself?" I asked.

“Our Lady of Fatima,” you said softly. “The Shroud of Turin, a cripple rising from the Miraculous Waters of Lourdes! What a consolation it must be to accept such a thing so easily.”

“And you did not?”

You shook your head. “And neither did Lestat, really. It was the mortal girl, Dora, snatching the Veil from him, who took it out into the world. But it was a most singular and meticulously made thing, I’ll tell you that, more worthy of the word ‘relic’ perhaps than any other I’ve ever seen.”

You sounded dejected suddenly.

“Some immense intent went into its making,” you said.

“And the vampire Armand, the delicate boylike Armand, he believed it?” I asked. “Armand looked at it and saw the face of Christ,” I said, seeking your confirmation.

“Enough to die for it,” you said solemnly. “Enough to open his arms to the morning sun.”

You looked away, and you closed your eyes. This was a simple unadorned plea to me not to make you speak of Armand and how he had gone into the morning fire.

I gave a sigh—surprised and gently fascinated to find you so articulate, skeptical, yet so sharply and frankly connected to the others.

You said in a shaken voice, “Armand.” And still looking away from me. “What a Requiem. And does he know now if Memnoch was real, if God Incarnate who tempted Lestat was in fact the Son of the God Almighty? Does anyone?”

I was taken with your earnestness, your passion. You were not jaded or cynical. There was an immediacy to your feelings for these happenings, these creatures, these questions you posed.

“They locked up the Veil, you know,” you said. “It’s in the Vatican. There were two weeks of frenzy on Fifth Avenue in St Patrick’s Cathedral in which people came to look into the eyes of The Lord, and then they had it, gone, taken to their vaults. I doubt there is a nation on the Earth with the power to gain even a glimpse of it now.”

“And Lestat,” I said. “Where is he now?”

“Paralyzed, silent,” you said. “Lestat lies on the floor of a chapel in New Orleans. He doesn’t move. He says nothing. His Mother has come to him. You knew her, Gabrielle, he made a vampire of her.”

“Yes, I remember her.”

“Even she draws no response from him. Whatever he saw, in his journey to Heaven and Hell, he doesn’t know the truth of it one way or the other—he tried to tell this to Dora! And eventually, after I’d written down the whole story for him, he passed within a few nights into this state.

“His eyes are fixed and his body pliant. They made a curious Pietà, he and Gabrielle, in this abandoned convent and its chapel. His mind is closed, or worse—it’s empty.”

I found I liked very much your manner of speaking. In fact, I was taken off guard.

“I left Lestat because he was beyond my help and my reach,” you said. “And I must know if there are old ones who want to put an end to me; I must make my pilgrimages and my progresses to know the dangers of this world to which I’ve been admitted.”

“You’re so forthright. You have no cunning.”

“On the contrary. I conceal my keenest assets from you.” You gave me a slow, polite smile. “Your beauty rather confuses me. Are you used to this?”

“Quite,” I said. “And weary of it. Come beyond it. Let me just warn, there are old ones, ones no one knows or can explain. It’s rumored you’ve been with Maharet and Mekare, who are now the Eldest and the Fount from which we all spring. Obviously they’ve drawn back from us, from all the world, into some secret place, and have no taste for authority.”

“You’re so very correct,” you said, “and my audience with them was beautiful but brief. They don’t want to rule over anyone, nor will Maharet, as long as the history of the world and her own physical descendants are in it—her own thousands of human descendants from a time so ancient there is no date for it—Maharet will never destroy herself and her sister, thereby destroying all of us.”

“Yes,” I said, “in that she believes, the Great Family, the generations she has traced for thousands of years. I saw her when we all gathered. She doesn’t see us as evil—you, or me, or Lestat—she thinks that we’re natural, rather like volcanoes or fires that rage through forests, or bolts of lightning that strike a man dead.”

“Precisely,” you said. “There is no Queen of the Damned now. I fear only one other immortal, and that’s your lover, Marius. Because it was

Marius who laid down the strict rule before he left the others that no more blood drinkers could be made. I'm base-born in the mind of Marius. That is, were he an Englishman, those would be his words."

I shook my head. "I can't believe he would harm you. Hasn't he come to Lestat? Did he not come to see the Veil with his own eyes?"

You said No to both questions.

"Heed this advice: whenever you sense his presence, talk to him. Talk to him as you have to me. Begin a conversation which he won't have the confidence to bring to a close."

You smiled again. "That's such a clever way of putting it," you said.

"But I don't think you have to fear him. If he wanted you gone off the Earth, you'd be gone. What we have to fear is the same things humans fear—that there are others of our same species, of varying power and belief, and we are never entirely sure where they are or what they do. That's my advice to you."

"You are so kind to take your time with me," you said.

I could have wept. "On the contrary. You don't know the silence and solitude in which I wander, and pray you never know it, and here you've given me heat without death, you've given me nourishment without blood. I'm glad you've come."

I saw you look up at the sky, the habit of the young ones.

"I know, we have to part now."

You turned to me suddenly. "Meet me tomorrow night," you said imploringly. "Let this exchange continue! I'll come to you in the Café where you sit every night musing. I'll find you. Let us talk to each other."

"So you've seen me there."

"Oh, often," you said. "Yes." You looked away again. I saw it was to conceal feeling. Then your dark eyes turned back to me.

"Pandora, we have the world, don't we?" you whispered.

"I don't know, David. But I'll meet you tomorrow night. Why haven't you come to me there? Where it was warm and lighted?"

"It seemed a far more outrageous intrusion, to move in on you in the sanctified privacy of a crowded café. People go to such places to be alone, don't they? This seemed somehow more proper. And I did not mean to be the voyeur. Like many fledglings, I have to feed every night. It was an accident that we saw each other at that moment."

"That is charming, David," I said. "It is a long time since anyone has

charmed me. I'll meet you there … tomorrow night."

And then a wickedness possessed me. I came towards you and embraced you, knowing that the hardness and coldness of my ancient body would strike the deepest chord of terror in you, newborn as you were, passing so easily for mortal.

But you didn't draw back. And when I kissed your cheek, you kissed mine.

I wonder now, as I sit here in the café, writing … trying to give you more with these words perhaps than you ask for … what I would have done had you not kissed me, had you shrunk back with the fear that is so common in the young.

David, you are indeed a puzzle.

You see that I have begun to chronicle not my life here, but what has passed these two nights between you and me.

Allow this, David. Allow that I speak of you and me, and then perhaps I can retrieve my lost life.

When you came into the café tonight, I thought nothing much about the notebooks. You had two. They were thick.

The leather of the notebooks smelled good and old, and when you set them down on the table, only then did I detect a glimmer from your disciplined and restrained mind that they had to do with me.

I had chosen this table in the crowded center of the room, as though I wanted to be in the middle of the whirlpool of mortal scent and activity. You seemed pleased, unafraid, utterly at home.

You wore another stunning suit of modern cut with a full cape of worsted wool, very tasteful, yet Old World, and with your golden skin and radiant eyes, you turned the head of every woman in the place and you turned the heads of some of the men.

You smiled. I must have seemed a snail to you beneath my cloak and hood, gold glasses covering well over half my face, and a trace of commercial lipstick on my lips, a soft purple pink that had made me think of bruises. It had seemed very enticing in the mirror at the store, and I liked that my mouth was something I didn't have to hide. My lips are now almost colorless. With this lipstick I could smile.

I wore these gloves of mine, black lace, with their sheared-off tips so that my fingers can feel, and I had sooted my nails so they would not sparkle like crystal in the Café. And I reached out my hand to you and

you kissed it.

There was your same boldness and decorum. And then the warmest smile from you, a smile in which I think your former physiology must have dominated because you looked far too wise for one so young and strong of build. I marveled at the perfect picture you had made of yourself.

“You don’t know what a joy it is to me,” you said, “that you’ve come, that you’ve let me join you here at this table.”

“You have made me want this,” I said, raising my hands, and seeing that your eyes were dazzled by my crystalline fingernails, in spite of the soot.

I reached towards you, expecting you to pull back, but you entrusted to my cold white fingers your warm dark hand.

“You find in me a living being?” I asked you.

“Oh, yes, most definitely, most radiantly and perfectly a living being.”

We ordered our coffee, as mortals expect us to do, deriving more pleasure from the heat and aroma than they could ever imagine, even stirring our little cups with our spoons. I had before me a red dessert. The dessert is still here of course. I ordered it simply because it was red —strawberries covered in syrup—with a strong sweet smell that bees would like.

I smiled at your blandishments. I liked them.

Playfully, I mocked them. I let my hood slip down and I shook out my hair so that its fullness and dark brown color could shimmer in the light.

Of course it’s no signal to mortals, as is Marius’s blond hair or that of Lestat. But I love my own hair, I love the veil of it when it is down over my shoulders, and I loved what I saw in your eyes.

“Somewhere deep inside me there is a woman,” I said.

To write it now—in this notebook as I sit here alone—it gives architecture to a trivial moment, and seems so dire a confession.

David, the more I write, the more the concept of narrative excites me, the more I believe in the weight of a coherence which is possible on the page though not in life.

But again, I didn’t know I meant to pick up this pen of yours at all. We were talking:

“Pandora, if anyone does not know you’re a woman, then he is a fool,” you said.

“How angry Marius would be with me for being pleased by that,” I said. “Oh, no. Rather he would seize it as a strong point in favor of his position. I left him, left him without a word, the last time we were together—that was before Lestat went on his little escapade of running around in a human body, and long before he encountered Memnoch the Devil—I left Marius, and suddenly I wish I could reach him! I wish I could talk with him as you and I are talking now.”

You looked so troubled for me, and with reason. On some level, you must have known that I had not evinced this much enthusiasm over anything in many a dreary year.

“Would you write your story for me, Pandora?” you asked suddenly.

I was totally surprised.

“Write it in these notebooks?” you pressed. “Write about the time when you were alive, the time when you and Marius came together, write what you will of Marius. But it’s your story that I most want.”

I was stunned.

“Why in the world would you want this of me?” You didn’t answer.

“David, surely you’ve not returned to that order of human beings, the Talamasca, they know too much—”

You put up your hand.

“No, and I will never; and if there was ever any doubt of it, I learnt it once and for all in the archives kept by Maharet.”

“She allowed you to see her archives, the books she’s saved over the course of time?”

“Yes, it was remarkable, you know … a storehouse of tablets, scrolls, parchments—books and poems from cultures of which the world knows nothing, I think. Books lost from time. Of course she forbade me to reveal anything I found or speak in detail of our meeting. She said it was too rash tampering with things, and she confirmed your fear that I might go to the Talamasca—my old mortal psychic friends. I have not. I will not. But it is a very easy vow to keep.”

“Why so?”

“Pandora, when I saw all those old writings—I knew I was no longer human. I knew that the history lying there to be collected was no longer mine! I am not one of these!” Your eyes swept the room. “Of course you must have heard this a thousand times from fledgling vampires! But you see, I had a fervent faith that philosophy and reason would make a

bridge for me by which I could go and come in both worlds. Well, there is no bridge. It's gone."

Your sadness shimmered about you, flashing in your young eyes and in the softness of your new flesh.

"So you know that," I said. I didn't plan the words. But out they came. "You know." I gave a soft bitter laugh.

"Indeed I do. I knew when I held documents from your time, so many from your time, Imperial Rome, and other crumbling bits of inscribed rock I couldn't even hope to place. I knew. I didn't care about them, Pandora! I care about what we are, what we are now."

"How remarkable," I said. "You don't know how much I admire you, or how attractive is your disposition to me."

"I am happy to hear this," you said. Then you leaned forward towards me: "I don't say we do not carry our human souls with us, our history; of course we do.

"I remember once a long time ago, Armand told me that he asked Lestat, 'How will I ever understand the human race?' Lestat said, 'Read or see all the plays of Shakespeare and you will know all you ever need to know about the human race.' Armand did it. He devoured the poems, he sat through the plays, he watched the brilliant new films with Laurence Fishburne and Kenneth Branagh and Leonardo DiCaprio. And when Armand and I last spoke together, this is what he said of his education:

" 'Lestat was right. He gave me not books but a passage into understanding. This man Shakespeare writes,'—and I quote both Armand and Shakespeare now as Armand spoke it, as I will to you—as if it came from my heart:

> *Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,*
> *Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,*
> *To the last syllable of recorded time;*
> *And all our yesterdays have lighted fools*
> *The way to dusty death. Out, out brief candle.*
> *Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player,*
> *That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,*
> *And then is heard no more; it is a tale*
> *Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,*

Signifying nothing.

" 'This man writes this,' said Armand to me, 'and we all know that it is absolutely the truth and every revelation has sooner or later fallen before it, and yet we want to love the way he has said it, we want to hear it again! We want to remember it! We want to never forget a single word.' "

We were both silent for a moment. You looked down, you rested your chin on your knuckles. I knew the whole weight of Armand's going into the sun was on you, and I had so loved your recitation of the words, and the words themselves.

Finally, I said, "And this gives me pleasure. Think of it, pleasure. That you recite these words to me now."

You smiled.

"I want to know now what we can learn," you said. "I want to know what we can see! So I come to you, a Child of the Millennia, a vampire who drank from the Queen Akasha herself, one who has survived two thousand years. And I ask you, Pandora, please will you write for me, write your story, write what you will."

For a long moment I gave you no answer.

Then I said sharply that I could not. But something had stirred in me. I saw and heard arguments and tirades of centuries ago, I saw the poet's lifted light shine on eras I had known intimately out of love. Other eras I had never known, wandering, ignorant, a wraith.

Yes, there was a tale to be written. There was. But at the moment I could not admit it.

You were in misery, having thought of Armand, having remembered his walking into the morning sun. You mourned for Armand.

"Was there any bond between you?" you asked. "Forgive me my boldness, but I mean was there any bond between you and Armand when you met, because Marius had given you both the Dark Gift? I know no jealousy exists, that I can feel. I wouldn't bring up the very name Armand if I detected a hurt in you, but all else is an absence, a silence. Was there no bond?"

"The bond is only grief. He went into the sun. And grief is absolutely the easiest and safest of bonds."

You laughed under your breath.

“What can I do to make you consider my request? Have pity on me, Gracious Lady, entrust to me your song.”

I smiled indulgently, but it was impossible, I thought.

“It’s far too dissonant, my dear,” I said. “It’s far too—”

I shut my eyes.

I had wanted to say that my song was far too painful to sing.

Suddenly your eyes moved upwards. Your expression changed. It was almost as if you were deliberately trying to appear to enter a trance. Slowly you turned your head. You pointed, with your hand close to the table, then let your hand go lax.

“What is it, David?” I said. “What are you seeing?”

“Spirits, Pandora, ghosts.”

You shuddered as if to clear your head.

“But that’s unheard of,” I said. Yet I knew that he was telling the truth. “The Dark Gift takes away that power. Even the ancient witches, Maharet and Mekare, told us this, that once Akasha’s blood entered them, and they became vampires, they never heard or saw the spirits again. You’ve recently been with them. Did you tell them of this power?”

He nodded. Obviously some loyalty bound him not to say that they did not have it. But I knew they did not. I saw it in his mind, and I had known it myself when I had encountered the ancient twins, the twins who had struck down the Queen of the Damned.

“I can see spirits, Pandora,” you said with the most troubled expression. “I can see them anywhere if I try, and in some very specific places when they choose. Lestat saw the ghost of Roger, his victim in *Memnoch the Devil.”*

“But that was an exception, a surge of love in the man’s soul that somehow defied death, or delayed the soul’s termination-something we can’t understand.”

“I see spirits, but I haven’t come to burden you with this or frighten you.”

“You must tell me more about this,” I said. “What did you see right now?”

“A weak spirit. It couldn’t harm anyone. It’s one of those sad sad humans who does not know he’s dead. They *are* an atmosphere around the planet. The ‘earthbound’ is the name for them. But Pandora, I have more than that in myself to explore.” You continued:

“Apparently each century yields a new kind of vampire, or let us say that our course of growth was not set in the beginning any more than the course of human beings. Some night perhaps I will tell you everything I see—these spirits who were never clear to me when I was mortal—I’ll tell you about something Armand confided to me, about the colors he saw when he took life, how the soul left body in waves of radiating color!”

“I’ve never heard of such a thing!”

“I too see this,” you said.

I could see it hurt you almost too much to speak of Armand.

“But whatever possessed Armand to believe in the Veil?” I asked, suddenly amazed at my own passion. “Why did he go into the sun? How could such a thing kill Lestat’s reason and will? Veronica. Did they know the very name means *Vera Ikon*, that there was never any such person, that she could not be found by one drawn back to ancient Jerusalem on the day Christ carried his cross; she was a concoction of Priests. Didn’t they know?”

I think I had taken the two notebooks in hand, for I looked down and I saw that I did indeed hold them. In fact, I clutched both of them to my breast and examined one of the pens.

“Reason,” I whispered. “Oh, precious reason! And consciousness within a void.” I shook my head, smiling kindly at you. “And vampires who speak now with spirits! Humans who can travel from body to body.”

I went on with a wholly unfamiliar energy.

“A lively fashionable modern cult of angels, devotion thriving everywhere. And people rising from operating tables to speak of life after death, a tunnel, an embracing love! Oh, you have been created perhaps in an auspicious time! I don’t know what to make of it.”

You were obviously quite impressed by these words, or rather the way that my perspective had been drawn from me. So was I.

“I’ve only started,” you said, “and will keep company alike with brilliant Children of the Millennia and street-corner fortune tellers who deal out the cards of the Tarot. I’m eager to gaze into crystal balls and darkened mirrors. I’ll search now among those whom others dismiss as mad, or among *us*—among those like you, who have looked on something that they do not believe they should share! That’s it, isn’t it? But I ask you to share it. I’m finished with the ordinary human soul. I am

finished with science and psychology, with microscopes and perhaps even with the telescopes aimed at the stars."

I was quite enthralled. How strongly you meant it. I could feel my face so warm with feeling for you as I looked at you. I think my mouth was slack with wonder.

"I am a miracle unto myself," you said. "I am immortal, and I want to learn about us! You have a tale to tell, you are ancient, and deeply broken. I feel love for you and cherish that it is what it is and nothing more."

"What a strange thing to say!"

"Love." You shrugged your shoulders. You looked up and then back at me for emphasis. "And it rained and it rained for millions of years, and the volcanoes boiled and the oceans cooled, and then there was love?" You shrugged to make a mock of the absurdity.

I couldn't help but laugh at your little gest. Too perfect, I thought. But I was suddenly so torn.

"This is very unexpected," I said. "Because if I do have a story, a very small story—"

"Yes?"

"Well, my story—if I have one—is very much to the point. It's linked to the very points you've made."

Suddenly something came over me. I laughed again softly.

"I understand you!" I said. "Oh, not that you can see spirits, for that is a great subject unto itself.

"But I see now the source of your strength. You have lived an entire human life. Unlike Marius, unlike me, you weren't taken in your prime. You were taken near the moment of your natural death, and you will not settle for the adventures and faults of the earthbound! You are determined to forge ahead with the courage of one who has died of old age and then finds himself risen from the grave. You've kicked aside the funeral wreaths. You are ready for Mount Olympus, aren't you?"

"Or for Osiris in the depths of the darkness," you said. "Or for the shades in Hades. Certainly I am ready for the spirits, for the vampires, for those who see the future and claim to know past lives, for you who have a stunning intellect encased beautifully, to endure for so many years, an intellect which has perhaps all but destroyed your heart."

I gasped.

“Forgive me. That was not proper of me,” you said.

“No, explain your meaning.”

“You always take the hearts from the victims, isn’t it so? You want the heart.”

“Perhaps. Don’t expect wisdom from me as it might come from Marius, or the ancient twins.”

“You draw me to you,” you said.

“Why?”

“Because you do have a story inside you; it lies articulate and waiting to be written—behind your silence and your suffering.”

“You are too romantic, friend,” I said.

You waited patiently. I think you could feel the tumult in me, the shivering of my soul in the face of so much new emotion.

“It’s such a small story,” I said. I saw images, memories, moments, the stuff that can incite souls to action and creation. I saw the very faintest possibility of faith.

I think you already knew the answer.

You knew what I would do when I did not.

You smiled discreetly, but you were eager and waiting.

I looked at you and thought of trying to write it, write it all out …

“You want me to leave now, don’t you?” you said. You rose, collected your rain-spattered coat and bent over gracefully to kiss my hand.

My hands were clutching the notebooks.

“No,” I said, “I can’t do it.”

You made no immediate judgment.

“Come back in two nights,” I said. “I promise you I will have your two notebooks for you, even if they are completely empty or only contain a better explanation of why I can’t retrieve my lost life. I won’t disappoint you. But expect nothing, except that I will come and I will put these books in your hands.”

“Two nights,” you said, “and we meet here again.”

In silence I watched you leave the Café.

And now you see it has begun, David.

And now you see, David, I have made our meeting the introduction to the story you asked me to tell.

2

PANDORA'S STORY

I was born in Rome, during the reign of Augustus Caesar, in the year that you now reckon to have been 15 B.C., or fifteen years "before Christ." All the Roman history and Roman names I give here are accurate; I have not falsified them or made up stories or created false political events. Everything bears upon my ultimate fate and the fate of Marius. Nothing is included for love of the past.

I have omitted my family name. I did this because my family has a history, and I cannot bring myself to connect their ancient reputations, deeds, epitaphs to this tale. Also Marius, when he confided in Lestat, did not give the full name of his Roman family. And I respect this and that also is not revealed.

Augustus had been Emperor for over ten years, and it was a marvelous time to be an educated woman in Rome, women had immense freedom, and I had a rich Senator for a father, five prosperous brothers, and grew up Motherless but cherished by teams of Greek tutors and nurses who gave me everything I wanted.

Now, if I really wanted to make this difficult for you, David, I'd write it in classical Latin. But I won't. And I must tell you that, unlike you, I came by my education in English haphazardly, and certainly I never learnt it from Shakespeare's plays.

Indeed I have passed through many stages of the English language in my wanderings and in my reading, but the great majority of my true acquaintance with it has been in this century, and I am writing for you in colloquial English.

There's another reason for this, which I'm sure you'll understand if you've read the modern translation of Petronius's *Satyricon* or Juvenal's satires. Very modern English is a really true equivalent to the Latin of my time.

The formal letters of Imperial Rome won't tell you this. But the graffiti scratched on the walls of Pompeii will make it obvious. We had a sophisticated tongue, countless clever verbal shortcuts and common

expressions.

I'm going to write, therefore, in the English which feels equivalent and natural to me.

Let me say here quickly—while the action is at a halt—that I was never, as Marius said, a Greek Courtesan. I was living with such a pretense when Marius gave me the Dark Gift, and perhaps out of consideration for old mortal secrets he so described me. Or maybe it was contemptuous of him to style me this way. I don't know.

But Marius knew all about my Roman family, that it was a Senatorial family, as purely aristocratic and privileged as his own mortal family, and that my people dated back to the time of Romulus and Remus, the same as Marius's mortal line. Marius did not succumb to me because I had "beautiful arms," as he indicated to Lestat. This trivialization was perhaps provocative.

I don't hold anything against either of them, Marius or Lestat. I don't know who got what wrong.

My feeling for my Father is so great to this very night, as I sit in the café, writing for you, David, that I am astonished at the power of writing —of putting words to paper and bringing back so vividly to myself my Father's loving face.

My Father was to meet a terrible end. He did not deserve what happened to him. But some of our kinsmen survived and re-established our family in later times.

My Father was rich, one of the true millionaires of that age, and his capital was invested widely. He was a soldier more often than required of him, a Senator, a thoughtful and quiet man by disposition. And after the terrors of the Civil War, he was a great supporter of Caesar Augustus and very much in the Emperor's good graces.

Of course he dreamed that the Roman Republic would come back; we all did But Augustus had brought unity and peace to the Empire.

I met Augustus many times in my youth, and it was always at some crowded social function and of no consequence. He looked like his portraits; a lean man with a long thin nose, short hair, average face; he was rather rational and pragmatic by nature and not invested with any abnormal cruelty. He had no personal vanity.

The poor man was really blessed that he couldn't see into the future— that he had no inkling of all the horrors and madness that would begin

with Tiberius, his successor, and go on for so long under other members of his family.

Only in later times did I understand the full singularity and accomplishment of Augustus's long reign. Was it forty-four years of peace throughout the cities of the Empire?

Alas, to be born during this time was to be born during a time of creativity and prosperity, when Rome was *caput mundi*, or capital of the world. And when I look back on it, I realize what a powerful combination it was to have both tradition and vast sums of money; to have old values and new power.

Our family life was conservative, strict, even a little dusty. And yet we had every luxury. My Father grew more quiet and conservative over the years. He enjoyed his grandchildren, who were born while he was still vigorous and active.

Though he had fought principally in the Northern campaigns along the Rhine, he had been stationed in Syria for a while. He had studied in Athens. He had served so much and so well that he was being allowed an early retirement in the years during which I grew up, an early withdrawal from the social life that whirled around the Imperial Palace, though I did not realize this at me time.

My five brothers came before me. So there was no "ritual Roman mourning" when I was born, as you hear tell of in Roman families when a girl comes into the world. Far from it.

Five times my Father had stood in the atrium—the main enclosed courtyard, or peristyle, of our house with its pillars and stairs and grand marblework—five times he had stood there before the assembled family and held in his hands a newborn son, inspected it and then pronounced it perfect and fit to be reared as his own, as was his prerogative. Now, you know he had the power of life and death over his sons from that moment on.

If my Father hadn't wanted these boys for any reason, he would have "exposed" them to die of starvation. It was against the law to steal such a child and make it a slave.

Having five boys already, my Father was expected by some to get rid of me immediately. Who needs a girl? But my Father never exposed or rejected any of my Mother's children.

And by the time I arrived, I'm told, he cried for joy.

“Thank the gods! A little darling.” I heard the story ad nauseam from my brothers, who, every time I acted up—did something unseemly frisky and wild—said sneeringly, “Thank the gods, a little darling!” It became charming goad.

My Mother died when I was two, and all I recall of her are gentleness and sweetness. She’d lost as many children as she had birthed, and early death was typical enough. Her Epitaph was beautifully written by my Father, and her memory honored throughout my life. My Father never took another woman into the house. He slept with a few of the female slaves, but this was nothing unusual. My brothers did the same thing. This was common in a Roman household. My Father brought no new woman from another family to rule over me.

There is no grief in me for my Mother because I was simply too young for it, and if I cried when my Mother did not come back, I don’t remember it.

What I remember is having the run of a big old rectangular palatial Roman house, with many rectangular rooms built onto the main rectangle, one off another, the whole nestled in a huge garden high on the Palatine Hill. It was a house of marble floors and richly painted walls, the garden meandering and surrounding every room of it.

I was the true jewel of my Father’s eye, and I remember having a marvelous time watching my brothers practice outside with their short broadswords, or listening as their tutors instructed them, and then having fine teachers of my own who taught me how to read the entire *Aeneid* of Virgil before I was five years old.

I loved words. I love to sing them and speak them and even now, I must admit, I have fallen into the joy of writing them. I couldn’t have told you that nights ago, David. You’ve brought back something to me and I must make the admission. And I must not write too fast in this mortal café, lest human beings notice!

Ah, so we continue.

My Father thought it was hysterical that I could recite verses from Virgil at so young an age and he liked nothing better than to show me off at banquets at which he entertained his conservative and somewhat old-fashioned Senatorial friends, and sometimes Caesar Augustus himself. Caesar Augustus was an agreeable man. I don’t think my Father ever really wanted him at our house, however. But now and then, I

suppose, the Emperor had to be wined and dined.

I'd rush in with my nurse, give a rousing recital and then be whisked away to where I could not see the proud Senators of Rome glutting themselves on peacock brains and *garum*—surely you know what *garum* is. It's the horrible sauce the Romans put on everything, rather like today's ketchup. Definitely it defeated the purpose of having eels and squids on your plate, or ostrich brains or unborn lamb or whatever other absurd delicacies were being brought by the platterful.

The point is, as you know, the Romans seemed to have a special place in their hearts for genuine gluttony, and the banquets inevitably became a disgrace. The guests would go off to the vomitorium of the house to heave up the first five courses of the meal so that they could then swallow the others. And I would lie upstairs, giggling in my bed, listening to all this laughter and vomiting.

Then the rape of the entire catering staff of slaves would follow, whether they were boys or girls or a mixture of both.

Family meals were an entirely different affair. Then we were old Romans. Everyone sat at the table; my Father was undisputed Master of his house, and would tolerate no criticism of Caesar Augustus, who, as you know, was Julius Caesar's nephew, and did not really rule as Emperor by law.

"When the time is right, he will step down," said my Father. "He knows he can't do it now. He is more weary and wise than ever he was ambitious. Who wants another Civil War?"

The times were actually too prosperous for men of stature to make a revolt.

Augustus kept the peace. He had profound respect for the Roman Senate. He rebuilt old Temples because he thought people needed the piety they had known under the Republic.

He gave free corn from Egypt to the poor. Nobody starved in Rome. He maintained a dizzying amount of old festivals, games and spectacles —enough to sicken one actually. But often as patriotic Romans we had to be there.

Of course there was great cruelty in the arena. There were cruel executions. There was the ever present cruelty of slavery.

But what is not understood by those today is that there coexisted with all this a sense of individual freedom on the part of even the poorest

man.

The courts took time over their decisions. They consulted the past laws. They followed logic and code. People could speak their minds fairly openly.

I note this because it is key to this story: that Marius and I both were born in a time when Roman law was, as Marius would say, based on reason, as opposed to divine revelation.

We are totally unlike those blood drinkers brought to Darkness in lands of Magic and Mystery.

Not only did we trust Augustus when we were alive, we also believed in the tangible power of the Roman Senate. We believed in public virtue and character; we held to a way of life which did not involve rituals, prayers, magic, except superficially. Virtue was embedded in character. That was the inheritance of the Roman Republic, which Marius and I shared.

Of course, our house was overcrowded with slaves. There were brilliant Greeks and grunting laborers and a fleet of women to rush about polishing busts and vases, and the city itself was choked with manumitted slaves—freedmen—some of whom were very rich.

They were all our people, our slaves.

My Father and I sat up all night when my old Greek teacher was dying. We held his hands until the body was cold. Nobody was flogged on our estate in Rome unless my Father himself gave the order. Our country slaves loafed under the fruit trees. Our stewards were rich, and showed off their wealth in their clothes.

I remember a time when there were so many old Greek slaves in the garden that I could sit day after day and listen to them argue. They had nothing else to do. I learned much from this.

I grew up more than happy. If you think I exaggerate the extent of my education, consult the letters of Pliny or other actual memoirs and correspondence of the times. Highborn young girls were well educated; modern Roman women went about unhampered for the most part by male interference. We partook of life as did men.

For example, I was scarcely eight years old when I was first taken to the arena with several of my brothers' wives, to have the dubious pleasure of seeing exotic creatures, such as giraffes, tear madly around before being shot to death with arrows, this display then followed by a

small group of gladiators who would hack other gladiators to death, and then after that came the flock of criminals to be fed to the hungry lions.

David, I can hear the sound of those lions as if it were now. There's nothing between me and the moment that I sat in the wooden benches, perhaps two rows up—the premium seats—and I watched these beasts devour living beings, as I was supposed to do, with a pleasure meant to demonstrate a strength of heart, a fearlessness in the face of death, rather than simple and utter monstrousness.

The audience screamed and laughed as men and women ran from the beasts. Some victims would give the crowd no such satisfaction. They merely stood there as the hungry lion attacked; those who were being devoured alive almost invariably lay in a stupor as though their souls had already taken flight, though the lion had not reached the throat.

I remember the smell of it. But more than anything, I remember the noise of the crowd.

I passed the test of character, I could look at all of it I could watch the champion gladiator finally meet his end, lying there bloody in the sand, as the sword went through his chest.

But I can certainly remember my Father declaring under his breath that the whole affair was disgusting. In fact, everybody I knew thought it was all disgusting. My Father believed, as did others, that the common man needed all this blood. We, the highborn, had to preside over it for the common man. It had a religious quality to it, all this spectacular viciousness.

The making of these appalling spectacles was considered something of a social responsibility.

Also Roman life was a life of being outdoors, involved in things, attending ceremonies and spectacles, being seen, taking an interest, coming together with others.

You came together with all the other highborn and lowborn of the city and you joined in one mass to witness a triumphant procession, a great offering at the altar of Augustus, an ancient ceremony, a game, a chariot race.

Now in the Twentieth Century, when I watch the endless intrigue and slaughter in motion pictures and on television throughout our Western world, I wonder if people do not need it, do not need to see murder, slaughter, death in all forms. Television at times seems an unbroken

series of gladiatorial fights or massacres. And look at the traffic now in video recordings of actual war.

Records of war have become art and entertainment.

The narrator speaks softly as the camera passes over the heap of bodies, or the skeletal children sobbing with their starving mothers. But it is gripping. One can wallow, shaking one's head, in all this death. Nights of television are devoted to old footage of men dying with guns in their hands.

I think we look because we are afraid. But in Rome, you had to look so that you would be hard, and that applied to women as well as men.

But the overall point is—I was not closeted away as a Greek woman might have been in some old Hellenistic household. I did not suffer under the earlier customs of the Roman Republic.

I vividly remember the absolute beauty of that time, and my Father's heartfelt avowal that Augustus was a god, and that Rome had never been more pleasing to her deities.

Now I want to give you one very important recollection. Let me set the scene. First, let's take up the question of Virgil, and the poem he wrote, the *Aeneid*, greatly amplifying and glorifying the adventures of the hero Aeneas, a Trojan fleeing the horrors of defeat by the Greeks who came out of the famous Trojan horse to massacre Helen's city of Troy.

It's a charming story. I always loved it. Aeneas leaves dying Troy, valiantly journeys all the way to beautiful Italy and there founds our nation.

But the point is that Augustus loved and supported Virgil all of Virgil's life, and Virgil was a respected poet, a poet fine and decent to quote, an approved and patriotic poet. It was perfectly fine to like Virgil.

Virgil died before I was born. But by ten I'd read everything he'd written, and had read Horace as well, and Lucretius, much of Cicero, and all the Greek manuscripts we possessed, and there were plenty.

My Father didn't erect his library for show. It was a place where members of the family spent hours. It was also where he sat to write his letters—which he seemed endlessly to be doing—letters on behalf of the Senate, the Emperor, the courts, his friends, etc.

Back to Virgil. I had also read another Roman poet, who was alive still, and deeply and dangerously out of favor with Augustus, the god. This was the poet Ovid, the author of the *Metamorphoses*, and dozens of

other earthy, hilarious and bawdy works.

Now, when I was too young to remember, Augustus turned on Ovid, whom Augustus had also loved, and Augustus banished Ovid to some horrible place on the Black Sea. Maybe it wasn't so horrible. But it was the sort of place cultured city Romans expect to be horrible—very far away from the capital and full, of barbarians.

Ovid lived there a long time, and his books were banned all over Rome. You couldn't find them in the bookshops or the public libraries. Or at the book stands all over the marketplace.

You know this was a hot time for popular reading; books were everywhere—both in scroll form and in codex, that is, with bound pages —and many booksellers had teams of Greek slaves spending all day copying books for public consumption.

To continue, Ovid had fallen out of favor with Augustus, and he had been banned, but men like my Father were not about to burn their copies of the *Metamorphoses*, or any other of Ovid's work, and the only reason they didn't plead for Ovid's pardon was fear.

The whole scandal had something to do with Augustus's daughter, Julia, who was a notorious slut by anyone's standards. How Ovid became involved in Julia's love affairs I don't know. Perhaps his sensuous early poetry, the *Amores*, was considered to be a bad influence. There was also a lot of "reform" in the air during the reign of Augustus, a lot of talk of old values.

I don't think anyone knows what really happened between Caesar Augustus and Ovid, but Ovid was banished for the rest of his life from Imperial Rome.

But I had read the *Amores* and the *Metamorphoses* in well-worn copies by the time of this incident which I want to recount. And many of my Father's friends were always worried about Ovid.

Now to the specific recollection. I was ten years old, I came in from playing covered with dust from head to foot, my hair loose, my dress torn, and breezed into my Father's large receiving room—and I plopped down at the foot of his couch to listen to what was being said, as he lounged there with all appropriate Roman dignity, chatting with several other lounging men who had come to visit.

I knew all of the men but one, and this one was fair-haired and blue-eyed, and very tall, and he turned, during the conversation—which was

all whispers and nods—and winked at me.

This was Marius, with skin slightly tanned from his travels and a flashing beauty in his eyes. He had three names like everyone else. But again, I will not disclose the name of his family. But I knew it. I knew he was sort of the “bad boy” in an intellectual way, the “poet” and the “loafer.” What nobody had told me was that he was beautiful.

Now, on this day, this was Marius when he was alive, about fifteen years before he was to be made a vampire. I can calculate that he was only twenty-five. But I'm not certain.

To continue, the men paid no attention to me, and it became plain to my ever curious little mind that they were giving my Father news of Ovid, that the tall blond one with the remarkable blue eyes, the one called Marius, had just returned from the Baltic Coast, and he had given my Father several presents, which were in fact good copies of Ovid's work, both past and current.

The men assured my Father that it was still far too dangerous to go crying to Caesar Augustus over Ovid, and my Father accepted this. But if I'm not mistaken, he entrusted some money for Ovid to Marius, the blond one.

When the gentlemen were all leaving, I saw Marius in the atrium, got a measure of his full height, which was quite unusual for a Roman, and let out a girlish gasp and then a streak of laughter. He winked at me again.

Marius had his hair short then, clipped military-Roman-style with a few modest curls on his forehead; his hair was long when he was later made a vampire, and he wears it long now, but then it was the typical boring Roman military cut. But it was blond and full of sunlight in the atrium, and he seemed the brightest and most impressive man I'd ever laid eyes upon. He was full of kindness when he looked at me.

“Why are you so tall?” I asked him. My Father thought this was amusing, of course, and he did not care what anyone else thought of his dusty little daughter, hanging onto his arms and speaking to his honored company.

“My precious one,” Marius said, “I'm tall because I'm a barbarian!” He laughed and was flirtatious when he laughed, with a deference to me as a little lady, which was rather rare.

Suddenly he made his hands into claws and ran at me like a bear.

I loved him instantly!

"No, truly!" I said. "You can't be a barbarian. I know your Father and all your sisters; they live just down the hill. The family is always talking about you at the table, saying only nice things, of course."

"Of that I'm sure," he said, breaking into laughter.

I knew my Father was getting anxious.

What I didn't know was that a ten-year-old girl could be betrothed.

Marius drew himself up and said in his gentle very fine voice, trained for public rhetoric as well as words of love, "I am descended through my mother from the Keltoi, little beauty, little muse. I come from the tall blond people of the North, the people of Gaul. My mother was a princess there, or so I am told. Do you know who they are?"

I said of course I knew and began to recite verbatim from Julius Caesar's account of conquering Gaul, or the land of the Keltoi: "All Gaul is made up of three parts …"

Marius was quite genuinely impressed. So was everybody. So I went on and on, "The Keltoi are separated from the Aquitani by the river Garonne, and the tribe of the Belgae by the rivers Marne and Seine—"

My Father, being slightly embarrassed by this time, with his daughter glorying in attention, spoke up to gently assure everyone that I was his precious joy, and I was let to run wild, and please make nothing of it.

And I said, being bold, and a born troublemaker, "Give my love to the great Ovid! Because I too wish he would come home to Rome."

I then rattled off several steamy lines of the *Amores:*

> *She laughed and gave her best, whole hearted kisses,*
> *They'd shake the three pronged bolt from Jove's hand.*
> *Torture to think that fellow got such good ones!*
> *I wish they hadn't been of the same brand!*

All laughed, except my Father, and Marius went wild with delight, clapping his hands. That was all the encouragement I needed to rush at him now like a bear, as he had rushed at me, and to continue singing out Ovid's hot words:

> *What's more these kisses were better than I'd taught her,*
> *She seemed possessed of knowledge that was new.*

They pleased too well—bad sign! Her tongue was in them,
And my tongue was kissing too.

My Father grabbed me by the small of my upper arm, and said, "That's it, Lydia, wrap it up!" And the men laughed all the harder, commiserating with him, and embracing him, and then laughing again.

But I had to have one final victory over this team of adults.

"Pray, Father," I said, "let me finish with some wise and patriotic words which Ovid said:

" 'I congratulate myself on not having arrived into the world until the present time. This age suits my taste.' "

This seemed to astonish Marius more than to amuse him. But my Father gathered me close and said very clearly:

"Lydia, Ovid wouldn't say that now, and now you, for being such a … a scholar and philosopher in one, should assure your Father's dearest friends that you know full well Ovid was banished from Rome by Augustus for good reason and that he can never return home."

In other words, he was saying "Shut up about Ovid."

But Marius, undeterred, dropped on his knees before me, lean and handsome with mesmeric blue eyes, and he took my hand and kissed it and said, "I will give Ovid your love, little Lydia. But your Father is right. We must all agree with the Emperor's censure. After all, we are Romans." He then did the very strange thing of speaking to me purely as if I were an adult. "Augustus Caesar has given far more to Rome, I think, than anyone ever hoped. And he too is a poet. He wrote a poem called 'Ajax' and burnt it up himself because he said it wasn't good."

I was having the time of my life. I would have run off with Marius then and there!

But all I could do was dance around him as he went out of the vestibule and out the gate.

I waved to him.

He lingered. "Goodbye, little Lydia," he said. He then spoke under his breath to my Father, and I heard my Father say:

"You are out of your mind!"

My Father turned his back on Marius, who gave me a sad smile and disappeared.

"What did he mean? What happened?" I asked my Father. "What's the

matter?"

"Listen, Lydia," said my Father. "Have you in all your readings come across the word 'betrothed'?"

"Yes, Father, of course."

"Well, that sort of wanderer and dreamer likes nothing better than to betroth himself to a young girl of ten because it means she is not old enough to marry and he has years of freedom, without the censure of the Emperor. They do it all the time."

"No, no, Father," I said. "I shall never forget him."

I think I forgot him the next day.

I didn't see Marius again for five years.

I remember because I was fifteen, and should have been married and didn't want to be married at all. I had wriggled out of it year after year, feigning illness, madness, total uncontrollable fits. But time was running out on me. In fact I'd been eligible for marriage since I was twelve.

At this time, we were all standing together at the foot of the Palatine Hill, watching a most sacrosanct ceremony—the Lupercalia—just one of so many festivals that were integral in Roman life.

Now the Lupercalia was very important to us, though there's no way to relate its significance to a Christian's concept of religion. It was pious to enjoy such a festival, to participate as a citizen and as a virtuous Roman.

And besides it was a great pleasure.

So I was there, not so far from the cave of the Lupercal, watching with other young women, as the two chosen men of that year were smeared with blood from a sacrifice of goats and then draped in the bleeding skins of the sacrificed animals. I couldn't see all of this very well, but I had seen it many times, and when years before two of my brothers had run in this festival, I had pushed to the front to get a good look at it.

On this occasion, I did have a fairly good view when each of the two young men took his own company and began his run around the base of the Palatine Hill. I moved forward because I was supposed to do it. The young men were hitting lightly on the arm of every young woman with a strip of goatskin, which was supposed to purify us. Render us fertile.

I stepped forward and received the ceremonial blow, and then stepped back again, wishing I was a man and could run around the hill with the other men, not an unusual thought for me at any time in my mortal life.

I had some sarcastic inner thoughts about "being purified," but by this age I behaved in public and would not on any account have humiliated my Father or my brothers.

These strips of goatskin, as you know, David, are called *Februa*, and February comes from that word. So much for language and all the magic it unwittingly carries with it. Surely the Lupercalia had something to do with Romulus and Remus; perhaps it even echoed some ancient human sacrifice. After all, the young men's heads were smeared with goat blood. It gives me shivers, because in Etruscan times, long before I was born, this might have been a far more cruel ceremony.

Perhaps this was the occasion that Marius saw my arms. Because I was exposing them to this ceremonial lash, and was already, as you can see, much of a show-off in general, laughing with the others as the company of men continued their run.

In the crowd, I saw Marius. He looked at me, then back to his book. So strange. I saw him standing against a tree trunk and writing. No one did this—stand against a tree, hold a book in one hand and write with the other. The slave stood beside him with a bottle of ink.

Marius's hair was long and most beautiful. Quite wild.

I said to my Father, "Look, there's our barbarian friend Marius, the tall one, and he's writing."

My Father smiled and said, "Marius is always writing. Marius is good for writing, if for nothing else. Turn around, Lydia. Be still."

"But he looked at me, Father. I want to talk to him."

"You will not, Lydia! You will not grace him with one small smile!"

On the way home, I asked my Father, "If you're going to marry me to someone—if there's no way short of suicide that I can avoid this disgusting development—why don't you marry me to Marius? I don't understand it. I'm rich. He's rich. I know his Mother was a wild Keltoi princess, but his Father has adopted him."

My Father said witheringly, "Where have you learned all this?" He stopped in his tracks, always an ominous sign. The crowd broke and streamed around.

"I don't know; it's common knowledge." I turned. There was Marius hovering about, glancing at me. "Father," I said, "please let me speak to him!"

My Father knelt down. Most of the crowd had gone on. "Lydia, I know

this is dreadful for you. I have caved to every objection you have raised to your suitors. But believe you me, the Emperor himself would not approve of you marrying such a mad wandering historian as Marius! He has never served in the military, he cannot enter the Senate, it is quite impossible. When you marry, you will marry well."

As we walked away, I turned again, thinking only to pick Marius out from the others, but to my surprise he was stark still, looking at me. With his flowing hair, he much resembled the Vampire Lestat. He is taller than Lestat, but he has the same lithe build, the same very blue eyes and a muscular strength to him, and a squareness of face which is almost pretty.

I pulled away from my Father and ran up to him.

"Well, I wanted to marry you," I said, "but my Father has said no."

I'll never forget the expression on his face. But before he could speak, my Father had gathered me up and gone into obliterating respectable conversation:

"How now, Marius, how goes it with your brother in the Army. And how is it with your history. I hear you have written thirteen volumes."

My Father backed up, virtually carrying me away.

Marius did not move or answer. Soon we were with others hurrying up the hill.

All the course of our lives was changed at that moment. But there was no conceivable way Marius or I could have known it.

Twenty years would pass before we would meet again.

I was thirty-five, then. I can say that we met in a realm of darkness in more respects than one.

For now, let me fill up the gap.

I was married twice, due to pressure from the Imperial House. Augustus wanted us all to have children. I had none. My husbands seeded plenty, however, with slave girls. So I was legally divorced and freed twice over, and determined then to retire from social life, just so the Emperor Tiberius, who had come to the Imperial throne at the age of fifty, would not meddle with me, for he was more a public puritan and domestic dictator than Augustus. If I kept to the house, if I didn't go abroad to banquets and parties and hang around with the Empress Livia, Augustus's wife and mother of Tiberius, perhaps I wouldn't be pushed into becoming a stepmother! I'd stay home. I had to care for my Father.

He deserved it. Even though he was perfectly healthy, he was still old!

With all due respect for the husbands I have mentioned, whose names are more than footnotes in common Roman histories, I was a wretched wife.

I had plenty of my own money from my Father, I listened to nothing, and yielded to the act of love only on my own terms, which I always obtained, being gifted with enough beauty to make men really suffer.

I became a member of the Cult of Isis just to spite these husbands and get away from them, so that I could hang around at the Temple of Isis, where I spent an enormous amount of time with other interesting women, some far more adventurous and unconventional than I dared to be. I was attracted to whores. I saw the brilliant, loose women as having conquered a barrier which I, the loving daughter of my Father, would never conquer.

I became a regular at the Temple. I was initiated at last in a secret ceremony, and I walked in every procession of Isis in Rome.

My husbands loathed this. Maybe that's why after I came home to my Father I gave up the worship. Whatever, it was a good thing perhaps that I had. But fortune could not be so easily shaped by any decision of mine.

Now Isis was an imported goddess, from Egypt, of course, and the old Romans were as suspicious of her as they were of the terrible Cybele, the Great Mother from the Far East, who led her male devotees to castrate themselves. The whole city was filled with these "Eastern cults," and the conservative population thought them dreadful.

These cults weren't rational; they were ecstatic or euphoric. They offered a complete rebirth through understanding.

The typical conservative Roman was far too practical for that. If you didn't know by age five that the gods were made-up creatures and the myths invented stories, then you were a fool.

But Isis had a curious distinction—something that set her far apart from the cruel Cybele. Isis was a loving mother and goddess. Isis forgave her worshipers anything. Isis had come before all Creation. Isis was patient and wise.

That's why the most degraded woman could pray at the Temple. That's why none were ever turned away.

Like the Blessed Virgin Mary, who is so well known today throughout the East and West, the Queen Isis had conceived her divine child by

divine means. From the dead and castrated Osiris, she had drawn the living seed by her own power. And many a time she was pictured or sculpted holding her divine son, Horus, on her knee. Her breast was bare in all innocence to feed the young god.

And Osiris ruled in the land of the dead, his phallus lost forever in the waters of the Nile, where an endless semen flowed from it, fertilizing the remarkable fields of Egypt every year when the River overflowed its banks.

The music of our Temple was divine. We used the sistrum, a small rigid metal lyre of sorts, and flutes and timbrels. We danced, and we sang together. The poetry of Isis's litanies was fine and rapturous.

Isis was the Queen of Navigation, much like the Blessed Virgin Mary would be called later, "Our Lady Star of the Sea."

When her statue was carried to the shore each year, the procession was so splendid that all Rome turned out to see the Egyptian gods with their animal heads, the huge abundance of flowers and the statue of the Queen Mother herself. The air rang with hymns. Her Priests and Priestesses walked in white linen robes. She herself, made of marble, and carried high, holding her sacred sistrum, dressed regally in a Grecian gown with Grecian hair.

That was my Isis. I fell away from her after my last divorce. My Father didn't like the worship, and I myself had enjoyed it long enough. As a free woman, I wasn't infatuated with prostitutes. I had it infinitely better. I kept my Father's house and he was just old enough, in spite of his black hair and his remarkably sharp vision, that the Emperor left me alone.

I can't say I remembered or thought of Marius. No one had mentioned Marius for years. He had disappeared out of my mind after the Lupercalia. There was no force on Earth that could come between me and my Father.

My brothers all had good luck. They married well, had children and came home from the hard wars in which they fought, keeping the boundaries of the Empire.

My youngest brother, Lucius, I did not like much, but he was always a little anxious and given to drinking and apparently also to gambling, which very much annoyed his wife.

She I loved, as I did all my sisters-in-law and my nieces and nephews.

I loved it when they descended upon the house, these flocks of children, squealing and running rampant with "Aunt Lydia's blessing," as they were never allowed to do at home.

The eldest of my brothers, Antony, was in potential a great man. Fate robbed him of greatness. But he had been most ready for it, well schooled, trained and most wise.

The only foolish thing I ever knew Antony to do was say to me very distinctly once that Livia, Augustus's wife, had poisoned him so that her son, Tiberius, would rise. My Father, the only other occupant of the room, told him sternly:

"Antony, never speak of that again! Not here, not anywhere!" My Father stood up, and without planning it, put in perspective the style of life which he and I lived. "Stay away from the Imperial Palace, stay away from the Imperial families, be in the front ranks of the games and always in the Senate, but don't get into their quarrels and their intrigues!"

Antony was very angry, but the anger had nothing to do with my Father. "I said it only to those two to whom I can say it, you and Lydia. I detest eating dinner with a woman who poisoned her husband! Augustus should have re-established the Republic. He knew when death was coming."

"Yes, and he knew that he could not restore the Republic. It was simply impossible. The Empire had grown to Britannia in the North, beyond Parthia in the East; it covers Northern Africa. If you want to be a good Roman, Antony, then stand up and speak your conscience in the Senate. Tiberius invites this."

"Oh, Father, you are much deceived," said Antony.

My Father put an end to this argument.

But he and I did live exactly the life he had described.

Tiberius was immediately unpopular with the noisy Roman crowds. He was too old, too dry, too humorless, too puritanical and tyrannical at the same time.

But he had one saving grace. Other than his extensive love and knowledge of philosophy, he had been a very good soldier. And that was the most important characteristic the Emperor had to possess.

The troops honored him.

He strengthened the Praetorian Guard around the Palace, hired a man named Sejanus to run things for him. But he didn't bring legions into

Rome, and he spoke a damned good line about personal rights and freedom, that is, if you could stay awake to listen. I thought him a brooder.

The Senate went mad with impatience when he refused to make decisions. They didn't want to make the decisions! But all this seemed relatively safe.

Then a horrible incident occurred which made me positively detest the Emperor wholeheartedly and lose all my faith in the man and his ability to govern.

This incident involved the Temple of Isis. Some clever evil man, claiming to be the Egyptian god Anubis, had enticed a highborn devotee of Isis to the Temple and gone to bed with her, fooling her completely, though how on Earth he did it I can't imagine.

I remember her to this day as the stupidest woman in Rome. But there's probably more to it.

Anyway, it had all happened at the Temple.

And then this man, this fake Anubis, went before the highborn virtuous woman and told her in the plainest terms that he had had her! She went screaming to her husband. It was a scandal of extraordinary flair.

It had been years since I had been at the Temple, and I was glad of it.

But what followed from the Emperor was more dreadful than I ever dreamed.

The entire Temple was razed to the very ground. All the worshipers were banished from Rome, and some of them executed. And our Priests and Priestesses were crucified, their bodies hung on the tree, as the old Roman expression goes, to die slowly, and to rot, for all to see.

My Father came into my bedroom. He went to the small shrine of Isis. He took the statue and smashed it on the marble floor. Then he picked up the larger pieces and smashed each of them. He made dust of her.

I nodded.

I expected him to condemn me for my old habits. I was overcome with sadness and shock at what had happened. Other Eastern cults were being persecuted. The Emperor was moving to take away the right of Sanctuary from various Temples throughout the Empire.

"The man doesn't want to be Emperor of Rome," said my Father. "He's been bent by cruelty and losses. He's stiff, boring and completely in

terror for his life! A man who would not be Emperor cannot be Emperor. Not now."

"Maybe he'll step down," I said sadly. "He has adopted the young General Germanicus Julius Caesar. This means Germanicus is to be his heir, does it not?"

"What good did it do to the earlier heirs of Augustus when they were adopted?" my Father asked.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Use your head," said my Father. "We cannot continue pretending we are a Republic. We must define the office of this Emperor and the limits of his power! We must outline a form of succession other than murder!"

I tried to calm him.

"Father, let's leave Rome. Let's go to our house in Tuscany. It's always beautiful there, Father."

"That's just it, we can't, Lydia," he said. "I have to remain here. I have to be loyal to my Emperor. I must do so for all my family. I must stand in the Senate."

Within months, Tiberius sent off his young and handsome nephew Germanicus Julius Caesar to the East, just to get him away from the adulation of the Roman public. As I said, people spoke their minds.

Germanicus was supposed to be Tiberius's heir! But Tiberius was too jealous to listen to the crowds screaming praise of Germanicus for his victories in battle. He wanted the man far from Rome.

And so this rather charming and seductive young general went to the East, to Syria; he vanished from the loving eyes of the Roman people, from the core of the Empire where a city crowd could determine the fate of the world.

Sooner or later there would be another campaign in the North, we all figured. Germanicus had hit hard at the German tribes in his last campaign.

My brothers vividly described it to me over the dinner table.

They told how they had gone back to avenge the hideous massacre of General Varus and his troops in the Teutoburg Forest. They could finish the job, if called up again, and my brothers would go. They were exactly the kind of old-fashioned patricians who would go!

Meantime there were rumors that the *Delatores*, the notorious spies of the Praetorian Guard, pocketed one-third of the estate of those against

whom they informed. I found it horrible. My Father shook his head, and said, “That started under Augustus.”

“Yes, Father,” I said, “but then treason was considered a matter of what one did, not what one said.”

“Which is all the more reason to say nothing.” He sat back wearily. “Lydia, sing to me. Get your lyre. Make up one of your comic epics. It’s been a long time.”

“I’m too old for that,” I said, thinking of the silly, bawdy satires on Homer which I used to make up so quickly and freely that everyone marveled. But I jumped at that idea. I remember that night so palpably that I cannot tear myself loose now from the writing of this story, even though I know what pain I must confess and explore.

What does it mean to write? David, you’ll see this question repeated, because with each page I understand more and more—I see the patterns that have before eluded me, and driven me to dream rather than live.

That night I did make a very funny epic. My Father laughed. He fell asleep on his couch. And then, as if from a trance state, he spoke, “Lydia, don’t live out your life alone on account of me. Marry for love! You must not give up!”

By the time I turned around, he was breathing deeply again.

Two weeks later, or maybe it was a month, our life came abruptly to an end.

I came home one day, found the house completely empty except for two terrified old slave men—men who actually belonged to the household of my brother Antony—who let me in and bolted the door ferociously.

I walked through the huge vestibule and then into the peristyle and into the dining room. I beheld an amazing sight.

My Father was in full battle dress, armed with sword and dagger, lacking only his shield. He even wore his red cloak. His breastplate was polished and gleaming.

He stared at the floor and with reason. It had been dug up. The old Hearth from generations ago had been dug up. This had been the first room of this house in the very ancient days of Rome, and it was around this Hearth that the family gathered, worshiped, dined.

I had never even seen it. We had our household Shrines, but this, this giant circle of burnt stones! There were actually ashes there, uncovered.

How ominous and sacred it appeared.

"What in the name of the gods is going on?" I asked. "Where is everybody?"

"They are gone," he said. "I have freed the slaves, sent them packing. I've been waiting for you. You have to leave here now!"

"Not without you!"

"You will not disobey me, Lydia!" I had never seen such an imploring yet dignified expression in his face. "There's a wagon out back, ready to take you to the coast, and a Jewish merchant who is my most trusted friend who will take you by ship out of Italy! I want you to go! Your money's been loaded on board the ship. Your clothing. Everything. These are men I trust. Nevertheless take this dagger."

He picked up a dagger from the nearby table and gave it to me. "You've watched your brothers enough to know how to use it," he said, "and this." He reached for a sack. "This is gold, the currency that all the world accepts. Take it and go."

I always carried a dagger, and it was in the sling on my forearm but I could not shock him with this just now, so I put the dagger in my girdle and took the purse.

"Father, I'm not afraid to stand by you! Who's turned on us? Father, you are Senator of Rome. Accused of any crime, you are entitled to a trial before the Senate."

"Oh, my precious quick-witted daughter! You think that evil Sejanus and his *Delatores* bring charges out in the open? His *Speculatores* have already surprised your brothers and their wives and children. These are Antony's slaves. He sent them to warn me as he fought, as he died. He saw his son dashed against the wall. Lydia, go."

Of course I knew this was a Roman custom—to murder the entire family, to wipe out the spouse and offspring of the condemned. It was even the law. And in matters such as this, when word got out that the Emperor had turned his back on a man, any of his enemies could precede the assassins.

"You come with me," I said. "Why do you stay here?"

"I will die a Roman in my house," he said. "Now go if you love me, my poet, my singer, my thinker. My Lydia. Go! I will not be disobeyed. I have spent the last hour of my life arranging for your salvation! Kiss me and obey me."

I ran to him, kissed him on the lips and at once the slaves led me through the garden.

I knew my Father. I could not revolt against him in this final wish. I knew that, in old-fashioned Roman style, he would probably take his life before the *Speculatores* broke down the front door.

When I reached the gate, when I saw the Hebrew merchants and their wagon, I couldn't go.

This is what I saw.

My Father had cut both his wrists and was walking around the household hearth in a circle, letting the blood flow right down onto the floor. He had really given his wrists the slash. He was turning white as he walked. In his eyes there was an expression I would only come to understand later.

There came a loud crash. The front door was being bashed in. My Father stopped quite still. And two of the Praetorian Guard came at him, one making sneering remarks, "Why don't you finish yourself off, Maximus, and save us the trouble. Go on."

"Are you proud of yourselves!" my Father said. "Cowards. You like killing whole families? How much money do you get? Did you ever fight in a true battle. Come on, die with me!"

Turning his back on them, he whipped around with sword and dagger, and brought down both of them, as they came at him, with unanticipated thrusts. He stabbed them repeatedly.

My Father wobbled as if he would faint. He was white. The blood flowed and flowed from his wrists. His eyes rolled up into his head.

Mad schemes came to me. We must get him into the wagon. But a Roman like my Father would never have cooperated.

Suddenly the Hebrews, one young and one elderly, had me by the arms and were carrying me out of the house.

"I vowed I would save you," said the old man. "And you will not make a liar of me to my old friend."

"Let go of me!" I whispered. "I will see him through it!"

Throwing them off in their polite timidity I turned and saw from a great distance my Father's body by the hearth. He had finished himself with his own dagger.

I was thrown into the wagon, my eyes closed, my hands over my mouth. I fell among soft pillows, bolts of fabric, tumbling as the wagon

began to roll very slowly down the winding road of the Palatine Hill.

Soldiers shouted at us to get the hell out of the way.

The elderly Hebrew said, “I am nearly deaf, sir, what did you say?”

It worked perfectly. They rode past us.

The Hebrew knew exactly what he was doing. As crowds rushed past us he kept to his slow pace.

The one young one came into the back of the wagon. “My name is Jacob,” he said. “Here, put on all these white mantles. You look now like an Eastern woman. If questioned at the gate, hold up your veil and pretend you do not understand.”

We went through the Gates of Rome with amazing ease. It was “Hail David and Jacob, has it been a good trip?”

I was helped aboard a large merchant vessel, with galley slaves and sails, nothing unusual at all, and then into a small barren wooden room.

“This is all we have for you,” said Jacob. “But we are sailing now.” He had long wavy brown hair and a beard. He wore striped robes to the ground.

“In the dark?” I asked. “Sailing in the dark?”

This was not usual.

But as we moved out, as the oars began to dip, and the ship found its proper distance and began to move South, I saw what we were doing.

All the beautiful Southwestern coast of Italy was well lighted by her hundreds and hundreds of palatial villas. Lighthouses stood on the rocks.

“We will never see the Republic again,” said Jacob wearily, as though he were a Roman citizen, which I think in fact he was. “But your Father’s last wish is fulfilled. We are safe now.”

The old man stepped up to me. He told me that his name was David.

The old man apologized profusely that there were no female attendants for me. I was the only woman on board.

“Oh, please, banish any such thoughts from your mind! Why have you taken these risks?”

“For years we have done business with your Father,” said David. “Years ago, when pirates sank our ships, your Father carried the debt. He trusted us again, and we repaid him fivefold. He has laid up riches for you. They are all stowed, among cargo we carried, as if they were nothing.”

I went into the cabin and collapsed on the small bed. The old man,

averting his eyes, brought a cover for me.

Slowly I realized something. I had fully expected them to betray me.

I had no words. I had no gestures or sentiments inside me. I turned my head to the wall. “Sleep, lady,” he said.

A nightmare came to me, a dream such as I have never had in my life. I was near a river. I wanted to drink blood. I waited in high grass to catch one of the villagers, and when I had this poor man, I took him by his shoulders, and I sank two fang teeth into his neck. My mouth filled with delicious blood. It was too sweet and too potent to be described, and even in the dream I knew it. But I had to move on. The man was nearly dead. I let him fall. Others who were more dangerous were after me. And there was another terrible threat to my life.

I came to the ruins of a Temple, far from the marsh. Here it was desert —just with the snap of the fingers, from wetland to sand. I was afraid. Morning was coming. I had to hide. Besides, I was also being hunted. I digested this delicious blood, and I entered the Temple. No place to hide! I lay my whole body on the cold walls! They were graven with pictures. But there was no small room, no hiding place for me.

I had to make it to the hills before sunrise, but that wasn’t possible. I was moving right towards the sun!

Suddenly, there came above the hills a great fatal light. My eyes hurt unbearably. They were on fire. “My eyes,” I cried and reached to cover them. Fire covered me. I screamed. “Amon Ra, I curse you!” I cried another name. I knew it meant Isis, but it was not that name, it was another title for her that flew from my lips.

I woke up. I sat bolt upright, shivering.

The dream had been as sharply defined as a vision. It had a deep resonance in me of memory. Had I lived before?

I went out on the deck of the ship. All was well enough. We could see the coastline clearly still, and the lighthouses, and the ship moved on. I stared at the sea, and I wanted blood.

“This is not possible. This is some evil omen, some twisted grief,” I said. I felt the fire. I could not shut out the taste of the blood, how natural it had seemed, how good, how perfect for my thirst. I saw the twisted body of the villager again in the marshes.

This was a horror; it was no escape from what I had just witnessed. I was incensed, and feverish.

Jacob, the tall young one, came to me. He had with him a young Roman. The young man had shaved his first beard, but otherwise he seemed a flushed and glistening child.

I wondered wearily if I were so old at thirty-five that everyone young looked beautiful to me.

He cried, “My family, too, has been betrayed. My Mother made me leave!”

“To whom do we owe this shared catastrophe?” I asked. I put my hands on his wet cheeks. He had a baby’s mouth, but the shaven beard was rough. He had broad strong shoulders, and wore only a light, simple tunic. Why wasn’t he cold out here on the water? Perhaps he was.

He shook his head. He was pretty still and would be handsome later. He had a nice curl to his dark hair. He didn’t fear his tears, or apologize for them.

“My Mother stayed alive to tell me. She lay gasping until I came. When the *Delatores* had told my Father that he plotted against the Emperor, my Father had laughed. He had actually laughed. They had accused him of plotting with Germanicus! My Mother wouldn’t die until she’d told me. She said that all my Father was accused of doing was talking with other men about how he would serve under Germanicus again if they were sent North.”

I nodded wearily. “I see. My brothers probably said the same thing. And Germanicus is the Emperor’s heir and *Imperium Maius* of the East. Yet this is treason, to speak of serving Rome under a pretty general.”

I turned to go. To understand gave no consolation.

“We are taking you to different cities,” said Jacob, “to different friends. Better that we not say.”

“Don’t leave me,” said the boy. “Not tonight.”

“All right,” I said. I took him into the cabin and closed the door, with a polite nod to Jacob, who was watching all with a guardian’s conscience.

“What do you want?” I asked.

The boy stared at me. He shook his head. He flung his hands out. He turned and drew close to me and kissed me. We went into a rampage of kisses.

I took off my shift and sank into the bed with him. He was a man all right, tender face or no.

And when I came to the moment of ecstasy, which was quite easy,

given his phenomenal stamina, I tasted blood. I was the blood drinker in the dream. I went limp, but it didn't matter. He had all he needed to finish the rites to his satisfaction.

He rose up. "You're a goddess," he said.

"No," I whispered. The dream was rising. I heard the wind on the sand. I smelled the river. "I am a god … a god who drinks blood."

We did the rites of love until we could do them no more.

"Be circumspect and very proper with our Hebrew hosts," I said. "They will never understand this sort of thing."

He nodded. "I adore you."

"Not necessary. What is your name?"

"Marcellus."

"Fine, Marcellus, go to sleep."

Marcellus and I made a night of every night after that until we finally saw the famous lighthouse of Pharos and knew we had come to Egypt.

It was perfectly obvious that Marcellus was being left in Alexandria. He explained to me that his maternal grandmother was still alive, a Greek, and indeed her whole clan.

"Don't tell me so much, just go," I said. "And be wise and safe."

He begged me to come with him. He said he had fallen in love with me. He would marry me. He didn't care if I bore no children. He didn't care that I was thirty-five. I laughed softly, mercifully.

Jacob noted all this with lowered eyes. And David looked away.

Quite a few trunks followed Marcellus into Alexandria.

"Now," I said to Jacob, "will you tell me where I'm being taken? I might have some thoughts on the matter, though I doubt I could improve on my Father's plan."

I still wondered. Would they deal honestly with me? What about now that they had seen me play the whore with the boy? They were such religious men.

"You're headed to a great city," Jacob said. "It couldn't be a better place. Your Father has Greek friends there!"

"How could it be better than Alexandria?" I said.

"Oh, it is far and away better," Jacob said. "Let me talk to my Father before I talk to you further."

We had put out to sea. The land was going away. Egypt. It was growing dark.

“Don’t be afraid,” Jacob said. “You look as though you are terrified.”

“I’m not afraid,” I said. “It’s only that I have to lie in my bed and think and remember and dream.” I looked at him, as he shyly looked away. “I held the boy like a Mother, against me, night after night.”

This was about the biggest lie I’ve told in my life.

“He was a child in my arms.” Some child! “And now I fear nightmares. You must tell me—what is our destination? What is our fate?”

3

"Antioch," said Jacob, "Antioch on the Orontes. Greek friends of your Father await you. And they are friends with Germanicus. Perhaps in time … but they will be loyal to you. You are to be married to a Greek of breeding and means."

Married! To a Greek, a provincial Greek? A Greek in Asia! I stifled my laughter and my tears. That was not going to happen to me. Poor man! If he really was a provincial Greek, he was going to have to experience the conquest of Rome all over again.

We sailed on, from port to port. I mulled all this over.

It was nauseating trivia like this which of course protected me from my full and inevitable grief and shock over what happened. Worry about whether your dress is properly girdled. Don't see your Father lying dead with his own dagger in his chest.

As for Antioch, I had been far too embroiled in the life of Rome to know or hear much about this city. If Tiberius had stationed his "heir," Germanicus, there to get him away from Roman popularity, then I thought: Antioch must be the end of the civilized world.

Why in the name of the gods had I not run away in Alexandria, I thought? Alexandria was the greatest city in the Empire, next to Rome. It was a young city, built by Alexander, for whom it was named, but it Was a marvelous port. No one would ever dare raze the Temple of Isis in Alexandria. Isis was an Egyptian goddess, wife of the powerful Osiris.

But what had that to do with things? I must have been plotting in the back of my mind already, but I didn't allow any conscious plot to surface and blemish my highborn Roman moral character.

I quietly thanked my Hebrew guardians for this intelligence, for keeping it even from the young Roman Marcellus, the other man they had rescued from the Emperor's assassins, and I asked for frank answers to my questions regarding my brothers.

"All taken by surprise," said Jacob. "The *Delatores*, those spies of the Praetorian Guard, are so swift. And your Father had so many sons. It was your eldest brother's slaves who jumped the wall at their Master's command and ran to warn your Father."

Antony. I hope you shed their blood. I know you fought with your last breath. And my niece, my little niece Flora, had she run screaming from them, or did they do it with mercy? The Praetorian Guard doing anything with mercy! Stupid to even think so.

I didn't say anything aloud. Just sighed.

After all, when they looked at me, these two Jewish merchants beheld the body and face of a woman; naturally my protectors should think a woman was inside of me. The disparity between outward appearances and inner disposition had disturbed me all my life. Why disturb Jacob and David? On to Antioch.

But I had no intention of living in any old-fashioned Greek family, if such still existed in the Greek city of Antioch, a family in which women lived apart from the men, and wove wool all day, never going out, having no part in the life of the world whatsoever.

I'd been taught all the virtuous female arts by my nurses and I could indeed do anything with yarn or thread or loom that any other woman could do, but I knew well what the "Old Greek Ways" had been, and I remembered vaguely my Father's Mother, who had died when I was very young—a virtuous Roman matron who was always making wool. So they had said of her in her Epitaph, and in fact, they had said in my Mother's Epitaph: "She kept the House. She made wool."

And so they had said of my Mother! The very same tiresome words.

Well, no one was going to say that on mine. (How humorous to reflect on the fact now, thousands of years later, that I have no Epitaph!)

What I failed to realize in my overall dejection was that the Roman world was enormous, and the Eastern portion of it differed dramatically from the Northern barbarian lands, where my brothers had fought.

The entire of Asia Minor, towards which we sailed, had been conquered by Alexander of Macedon hundreds of years before. As you know, Alexander had been the pupil of Aristotle. Alexander had wanted to spread Greek culture everywhere. And in Asia Minor Greek ideas and styles found not mere country towns or farmers, but ancient cultures, like the Empire of Syria, willing to receive the new ideas, the grace and beauty of the Greek enlightenment, and willing to bring in tune with it their own centuries-old literature, religion, styles of life and dress.

Antioch had been built by a general of Alexander the Great who sought to rival the beauty of other Hellenistic cities, with splendid

Temples, administrative buildings and libraries of books in the Greek language, its schools where Greek philosophy was taught. A Hellenistic government was established—quite enlightened compared to ancient Eastern despotism, and yet there lay beneath all this the knowledge and customs and possibly the wisdom of the mysterious East.

The Romans had conquered Antioch early on because it was a huge trade center. It was unique in this way, as Jacob showed to me, drawing a crude map with his wet finger on the wooden table. Antioch was a port of the great Mediterranean because she was only twenty miles up the Orontes River.

Yet on the Eastern side she was open to the desert: all the old caravan routes came to Antioch, the camel merchants who brought fantastic wares from fabled lands—lands we know now to have been India and China—silk, carpet and jewels which never reached the markets of Rome.

Countless other traders came and went to Antioch. Pine roads connected it in the East with the Euphrates River and the Parthian Empire beyond, and to the South you could go to Damascus and Judea, and to the North, of course, lay all the cities made by Alexander, which had flowered under Roman rule.

Roman soldiers loved it there. It was an easy and interesting life. And Antioch loved the Romans because the Romans protected the trade routes, and the caravans, and kept peace in the port.

“You will find open places, arcades, Temples, all that you seek and such markets you would not believe. There are Romans everywhere. I hope to One Most High that you are not recognized by someone from your own background! That is one danger of which your Father had no time to plan.”

I waved it away.

“Does it have teachers now, and markets of books?”

“From everywhere. You will find books which no one can read. And Greek is spoken by everyone. You have to go out in the country to find some poor farmer who does not understand Greek. Latin has now become common.

“The philosophers never stop; they speak of Plato and Pythagoras, names that don’t mean much to me; they talk about Chaldean magic from Babylon. Of course there are Temples to every imaginable god.”

He went on, reflecting as he spoke:

"The Hebrews? I think personally they are too worldly—they want to hang around in short tunics with the Greeks and go to the public baths. They are too interested in the Greek philosophy. It invades everything, all this thinking that Greeks did. Not good. But a Greek city is an inviting world."

He glanced up. His Father was watching over us, and we were too close together, at this table on the deck.

He hastily filled me in on other facts:

Germanicus Julius Caesar, heir to the Imperial throne, the official adopted son of Tiberius, had been granted the *Imperium Maius* in Antioch. That is, he controlled all of this territory. And Gnaeus Calpurnius Piso was the governor of Syria.

I assured him that they would know nothing of me or my old-fashioned family or our quiet, old house on the Palatine Hill, squeezed between so many other extravagant new mansions.

"It's all Roman-style," Jacob protested "You'll see. And you come with money! And forgive me, but you are still beautiful at your age; you have fresh skin and you move your limbs like a girl."

I sighed and gave Jacob thanks. Time for him to break away unless we wanted his Father coming down upon us.

I watched the ever rolling blue waves.

I was thankful in secret that our family had withdrawn from the parties and banquets at the Imperial Palace, but then I blamed myself for such thankfulness, knowing that our reclusiveness must have paved the way for our downfall.

I'd seen Germanicus on his triumphal procession through Rome, a gorgeous young man, much as Alexander had been, and I knew from my Father and my brothers that Tiberius, fearing the popularity of his appointed heir, had sent him off to the East to get him away from the Roman crowds.

The Governor Piso? I had never laid eyes on him. The gossip was that he was sent East to devil Germanicus. Oh, such a waste of talent and thought.

Jacob returned to me.

"Well, you go nameless and unknown into this vast city," said Jacob. "And you have protectors of high character who are beloved of

Germanicus. He's young and sets a tone of vitality and gaiety in the city."

"And Piso?" I asked.

"Everyone hates him. Especially the soldiers, and you know what that means in a Roman province."

You can look at the crashing, undulating sea from the railing of a deck forever, or just for so long.

That night I had my second blood dream. It was keenly similar to the first. I was thirsty for blood. And enemies were after me, enemies that knew I was a demon and must be destroyed. I was naming. My own kind had forsaken me, thrust me out unprotected to the superstitions of the people. Then I saw the desert and knew I would die; I awoke, sitting up and crying out but covering my mouth quickly so no one heard it.

What disturbed me so terribly was the thirst for blood. I could not imagine such a thing when I was awake, but in these dreams I was the monster that Romans called the Lamia. Or so it seemed. Blood was sweet, blood was all. Was the old Greek Pythagoras right? Souls do migrate from body to body? But my soul in this past life had been that of a monster.

During the day, I closed my eyes now and then and found myself dangerously on the edge of the dream, as if it were a trap in my mind, waiting to engulf my consciousness. But at night, that is when they came most strongly. *You have served me before!* What could this mean? *Come to me.*

Blood thirst. I closed my eyes, curled up in bed and prayed, "Mother Isis, Cleanse my Mind of this Blood madness."

Then I resorted to plain old ordinary eroticism. Get Jacob into bed! No such luck. Little did I know that Hebrews had been, and would be forever, the most difficult of men to seduce!

It was all made clear with great grace and tact.

I considered all the slaves. Out of the question. First off were the galley slaves, among whom no great "Ben Hur" was chained, waiting for me to rescue him. They were just the dregs of the criminal poor, fastened Roman-style, so they would drown if the ship went down, and they were dying, as all galley slaves do from the monotony and the whip. It wasn't a pleasant sight to go down into the hold of a galley ship and see those men bending their backs.

But my eyes were as cold as those of an American watching color

television pictures of the starving babies of Africa, little black skeletons with big heads screaming for water. News Break, Commercial Break, Sound Bite, CNN now switches to Palestine: rock throwing, rubber bullets. Television blood.

The rest on board were boring sailors, and two old pious merchant Hebrews who stared at me as if I were a whore, or worse, and turned their heads whenever I came out on deck in my long tunic with my long hair swinging free.

Such a disgrace I must have seemed! But what a fool I was then, really, Irving in numbness, and how pleasant that voyage—all because true grief and rage had not yet taken hold of me. Things had happened too fast.

I gloated over my last glimpse of my Father dispatching those soldiers of Tiberius, those cheap assassins sent by a cowardly, indecisive Emperor. And the rest—I banished it from my mind affecting the attitude of the hardened Roman man or woman.

A modern Irish poet, Yeats, best characterizes the official Roman attitude towards failure and tragedy.

> *Cast a cold eye on life, on death.*
> *Horseman, pass by!*

There was never a Roman born who would not have agreed with that.

That was my stance—sole survivor of a great house, commanded by her Father to "live." I didn't dare to dwell on the fate of my brothers, their lovely wives, their little children. I couldn't envision the slaughter of the children—little boys being run through by broadswords, or babies bashed against the wall. Oh, Rome, you and your bloody old wisdom. Be sure to kill the offspring. Kill the whole family!

Lying alone at night, I found myself amid more horrid blood dreams. They seemed fragments of a lost life, a lost land. Deep echoing vibrant tones of music dominated the dreams, as though someone were striking a gong, and others beside him beat solemnly on deep drums with soft coverings. I saw in a haze a world of stiff and flat alien paintings on the walls. Painted eyes around me. I drank blood! I drank it from a small shuddering human being, who knelt before me as if I were Mother Isis.

I woke to take the big jug of water by my bed and drink all of it down.

I drank water to defy and satisfy this dream thirst. I was almost sick from drinking water.

I racked my mind. Had I ever had such dreams as a child?

No. And now these dreams had the heat of recollection! Of initiation into the doomed Temple of Isis, when it had been still the fashion. I had been intoxicated, and drenched in the blood of a bull, and dancing wildly in circles. My head was filled with the litanies of Isis. We were promised rebirth! "Never tell, never tell, never tell …" How could an initiate tell anything of the rites, when you were so drunk you could hardly remember them?

Isis brought me memories now of lovely music of lyres, flutes, timbrels, of the high magical sound of the metal strings of the sistrum, which the Mother Herself held in her hand. There were only fleeting recollections of that naked blood dance, that night of rising into the stars, of seeing the scope of life in its cycles, of accepting perfectly just for a little while that the moon would always be changing, and the sun would set as it always rose. Embraces of other women. Soft cheeks and kissing and bodies rocking in unison. "Life, death, rebirth, it's no series of miracles," said the Priestess. "To understand it and accept it, that is the miracle. Make the miracle within your own breast."

Surely we had not drunk blood! And the bull—it was a sacrifice only for the initiation. We did not bring helpless animals to her flower-laden altars, no, our Blessed Mother did not ask that of us.

Now, at sea, alone, I lay awake to avoid these blood dreams.

When exhaustion won out, a dream came with sleep as if it had been waiting for my eyes to close.

I lay in a gold chamber. I was drinking blood, blood from the throat of a god, or so it seemed, and choruses were singing or chanting—it was a dull, repetitive sound not quite worthy of being called music, and when I had had my fill of blood, this god or whoever this was, this silken-skinned proud thing, lifted me and placed me on an altar.

Vividly, I could feel the cold marble beneath me. I realized I wore no clothes. I felt no modesty. Somewhere far off, echoing through these great halls, came the weeping of a woman. I was full of blood. Those who chanted approached with little clay oil lamps. Faces around me were dark, dark enough to be from far faraway Ethiopia or India. Or Egypt. Look. Painted eyes! I looked at my hands and arms. They were

dark. But I was this person who lay on the altar, and I say person now because it had come clear to me with no disturbance during the dream itself that I was a man lying there. Pain tore at me. The god said, “This is merely the passage. You will now drink from each of us, only a little blood.”

Only when I woke did the brief transition in the masculine gender leave me as puzzled as everything else. I was drenched with a sense of Egyptian art, Egyptian mystery—as I’d seen it in golden statues for sale in the marketplace, or when the Egyptian dancers performed at a banquet, like walking sculptures with their black-lined eyes, and black plaited wigs, whispering in that mysterious tongue. What had they thought of our Isis in Roman dress?

A mystery taunted me; something attacked my reason. The very thing the Roman Emperors had so feared in Egyptian cults and Oriental cults swept over me: mystery and emotion which claim a superiority to reason and law.

My Isis had been a Roman goddess, really, a universal goddess, the Mother of us all, her worship spreading out in a Greek and Roman world long before it had come into Rome itself. Our Priests were Greeks and Roman, poor men. We the congregation were all Greeks and Romans.

Something scratched at the back of my mind. It said, “Remember.” It was a tiny desperate voice within my own brain that urged me to “remember” for my own sake.

But remembering only led to confused and jumbled thoughts. Suddenly a veil would fall between the reality of my cabin on the ship, and the tumbling of the sea—between that and some dim and frightening world, of Temples covered in words that made magic! Long narrow beautifully bronzed faces. A voice whispered, “Beware the Priests of Ra; they lie!”

I shivered. I closed my eyes. The Queen Mother was bound and chained to her throne! She wept! It had been her crying. Unspeakable. “But you see, she has forgotten how to rule. Do as we say.”

I shook myself awake. I wanted to know and I did not want to know. The Queen wept beneath her monstrous fetters. I couldn’t see her clearly. It was all in progress. It was busy. “The King is with Osiris, you see. You see how he stares; each one whose blood you drink, you give to Osiris; each one becomes Osiris.”

“But why did the Queen scream?”

No, this was madness. I couldn’t let this confusion overcome me. I couldn’t deliberately slip from reason into these fantasies or recollections supposing they had a true root.

They had to be nonsense, twisted images of grief and guilt, guilt that I had not rushed to the hearth and driven the dagger into my breast.

I tried to remember the calming voice of my Father, explaining once how the blood of the gladiators satisfied the thirst of the dead, the *Manes*.

“Now, some say that the Dead drink blood,” spoke my Father from some long ago dinner talk. “That’s why we are so fearful on all these unlucky days, when the Dead are supposed to be able to walk the Earth. I personally think this is nonsense. We should revere our ancestors …”

“Where are the Dead, Father?” my brother Lucius asked.

Who had piped up from the other side of the table, to quote Lucretius in a sad little female voice that nevertheless commanded silence of all these men? Lydia:

> *Of earth return to earth, but any part*
> *Sent down from heaven, must ascend again*
> *Recalled to the high temples of the sky*
> *And death does not destroy the elements*
> *Of matter, only breaks the combinations*.

“No,” my Father had replied to me quite gently. “Rather quote Ovid: ‘The ghosts ask for but little; they value piety more than a costly gift.’ ” He drank his wine. “The ghosts are in the Underworld where they can’t harm us.”

My eldest brother Antony had said, “The Dead are nowhere and are nothing.”

My Father had raised his cup. “To Rome,” he said, and it was he this time who had quoted Lucretius: “ ‘Too many times, religion mothers crimes and wickedness.’ ”

Shrugs and sighs all around. The Roman attitude. Even the Priests and Priestesses of Isis would have joined Lucretius when he wrote:

> *Our terrors and our darknesses of mind*

Must be dispelled, then, not by sunshine's rays,
Not by those shining arrows of light,
But by insight into nature, and a scheme
Of systematic contemplation.

Drunk? Drugged? Bull's blood? Systematic? Well, it all came down to the same thing. Know! Twist the poetry as you will. And the phallus of Osiris lives forever in the Nile, and the water of the Nile inseminates the Mother Egypt eternally, death giving birth to life with the blessing of Mother Isis. Merely a particular scheme and a sort of systematic form of contemplation.

The ship sailed on.

I languished some eight more days in this torment, often lying awake in the dark, and sleeping only in the day to avoid the dreams.

Suddenly, in the early morning, Jacob pounded my door.

We were midway up the Orontes to the city.

Twenty miles now from Antioch. I did up my hair as best I could (I'd never done it without a slave) into a chignon on the back of my head, then covered my Roman gowns with a great black cloak and prepared to disembark—an Eastern woman, her face draped, protected by Hebrews.

When the city came into view—when the immense harbor greeted us and then embraced us with all its masts and racket and odors and cries, I ran to the deck of the ship and looked out at this city. It was splendid.

"You see," Jacob said.

Taken from the ship by litter I found myself carried rapidly through vast waterfront markets, and then into a great open square, crowded with people. I saw everywhere the Temples, porticoes, booksellers, even the high walls of an amphitheater—all that I could have expected in Rome. No, this was no town.

The young men were crowded about the barbershops ready to have their obligatory shave and the inevitable fancy curls on their foreheads, which Tiberius with his own hairstyle had made fashionable. There were wine shops all over. The slave markets were jammed. I glimpsed the entrances to the streets devoted to crafts—the street of the tent-makers, the street of the silversmiths.

And there in all its glory, in the very center of Antioch, stood the Temple of Isis!

My goddess, Isis, with her worshipers coming and going, undisturbed, and in huge numbers. A few very proper-looking linen-clad Priests stood at the doors! The Temple was aswarm.

I thought, I can run away from any husband in this place!

Gradually I realized a great commotion had come upon the Forum, the center of the city. I heard Jacob ordering the men to hurry out of the broad market street and into the back streets. My bearers were running. The curtains were brought shut by Jacob's hand so I couldn't see out.

News was being shouted out in Latin, in Greek, in Chaldean: Murder, Murder, Poison, Treachery.

I peeped out of the curtain.

People were weeping and cursing the Roman Gnaeus Calpurnius Piso, cursing him and his wife, Placina. Why? I didn't much like either one of them, but what was all this?

Jacob shouted again at my bearer to hurry.

We were rushed through the gates and into the vestibule of a sizable house no different in design or color than my own in Rome, only much smaller. I could see the same refinements, the distant peristyle, clusters of weeping slaves.

The litter was promptly set down and I stepped out, deeply concerned that they had not stopped me at the doors to wash my feet, as was proper. And my hair, it had all fallen down in waves.

But no one noticed me. I turned round and round, amazed at the Oriental curtains and tassels that hung over the doorways, the caged birds everywhere singing in their little prisons. The woven carpets lying all over the floor, one heaped upon another.

Two obvious ladies of the house came towards me.

"What's the matter!" I asked.

They were as fashionable as any rich woman in Rome, drenched in bracelets and wearing gold-trimmed gowns.

"I implore you," said one of the women, "for your own sake, go! Get back into the litter!"

They tried to push me inside the curtained cell of the litter. I wouldn't go. I became furious.

"I don't know where I am," I said. "And I don't know who you are! Now, stop pushing me!"

The Master of the House, or someone who certainly appeared to be

such, came dashing towards me, with tears streaming down his cheeks and his short tousled gray hair a mess—torn as if in mourning. He'd ripped his long tunic. He'd smeared dirt on his face! He was old with a bent back and a massive head, loaded with skin and wrinkles.

"Your Father was my young colleague," he said to me in Latin. He grabbed me by the arms. "I dined in your house when you were a baby. I saw you when you crawled on all fours."

"Tender," I said quickly.

"Your Father and I studied in Athens, slept under the same roof."

The women stood panic-stricken with their hands over their mouths.

"Your Father and I fought with Tiberius on his first campaign. We fought those lurid barbarians."

"Very brave," I said.

My black outer cloak fell down, revealing my unkempt wild long hair and plain dress. Nobody cared.

"Germanicus dined in this house because your Father spoke of me!"

"Oh dear, I see," I said.

One of the women motioned for me to get in the litter. Where was Jacob? The old man wouldn't let me go.

"I stood with your Father and with Augustus when news came to us of the massacre of our troops in the Teutoburg Forest, that General Varus and all his men were slain. My sons fought with your brothers in the legions of Germanicus when he punished those Northern tribes! Oh, God!"

"Yes, very marvelous, indeed," I said gravely.

"Get back in the litter and get out," said one of the women.

The old man clutched me.

"We fought the madman, King Arminius!" said the old man. "We could have won! Your brother Antony wasn't for giving up and coming back, was he?"

"I … no …"

"Get her out of here!" screamed a young patrician man, who had also been weeping. He came forward and shoved me towards the litter.

"Stand back, you imbecile!" I said to him. I slapped his face.

All this while, Jacob had been talking to the slaves, getting the scoop.

Jacob appeared beside me, as the gray-haired Greek sobbed and kissed my cheeks.

Jacob took over, guiding me into the litter.

"Germanicus has just been murdered," Jacob said in my ear. "Everybody loyal to him is convinced that the Emperor Tiberius put the Roman Governor Piso up to the murder. It was done with poison. Word is spreading through the city like fire."

"Tiberius, you idiot!" I whispered, rolling my eyes. "One cowardly step after another!"

I sank back into the darkness. The litter was being lifted.

Jacob went right on: "Gnaeus Calpurnius Piso has allies here, naturally. Everybody's fighting everybody else. Settling scores. Mayhem. This Greek family traveled with Germanicus to Egypt. There are riots already. We go!"

"Farewell, friend," I cried to the old Greek, as I was carried from the house. But I don't think he heard me. He had gone down on his knees. He cursed Tiberius. He screamed of suicide and begged for the dagger.

We were outside once more, hurrying through the street.

I lay askew in the litter, thinking dully in the darkness. Germanicus dead. Poisoned by Tiberius!

I knew that this recent trip of Germanicus to Egypt had made Tiberius very angry. Egypt was like no other Roman province. Rome was so dependent upon it for grain that Senators could not go there. But Germanicus had gone, "just to see the ancient relics," his friends had said in the streets of Rome.

"A mere excuse!" I thought in desperation. "Where was the trial? The sentence? Poison!"

My bearers were running. People were screaming and sobbing around us. "Germanicus, Germanicus! Give us back our beautiful Germanicus!"

Antioch had gone mad.

At last, we were obviously in a small narrow street that was little more than an alleyway—you know the kind, for a grid of them was uncovered in the ruins of Pompeii in Italy. You could smell the male urine collected in the jugs on the corner. You could smell food cooking from high chimneys. My bearers were running and stumbling over rough cobblestones.

Once we were all thrown to the side as a chariot came crashing through the narrow place, its wheels no doubt finding the ruts in the stone intended for it.

My head had hit the wall. I was furious and frightened. But Jacob said, “Lydia, we are with you.”

I covered up all over with the cloak, so that only one eye allowed me to see the seams of light between the curtains on either side of me. I had my hand on my dagger.

The litter was set down. It was a cool indoor place. I heard Jacob’s father, David, arguing. I knew no Hebrew. And I wasn’t even sure that he was speaking in Hebrew.

Finally, Jacob took over in Greek, and I realized that they were purchasing outright a proper house for me which came with all fine appointments, including much fine furniture, left recently by a rich widow who had lived there alone, but alas, the slaves had been sold off. No slaves. This was a quick cash deal.

Finally, I heard Jacob say in Greek:

“You damn well better be telling me the truth.”

As the litter was lifted I beckoned to him. “I owe you my life twice over now. That Greek family who was to shelter me? They are truly in danger?”

“Of course,” he said. “When a riot starts, who cares? They went with Germanicus to Egypt! Piso’s men know that! Anybody with the slightest excuse will attack, murder and plunder someone else. Look, fire.” He told the men to hurry.

“All right,” I said. “Never say my real name again. From now on say this name: My name is Pandora. I am a Greek from Rome. I paid you to bring me here.”

“You have it, my dear Pandora,” he replied. “You are some strong woman. The Deed to your new house is made up in a fake name with less charm. But the Deed verifies you are widowed, emancipated and a Roman Citizen. We’ll get the Deed when we pay up the gold, which we won’t do until we are in the house. And if the man does not give me that Deed with everything written out in full to protect you, I’ll strangle him!”

“You’re very clever, Jacob,” I said wearily.

On and on went this dark bouncing journey in the litter until at last it came to a halt. I could hear the metal key turning in the lock of the gate, and then we were brought into the large vestibule of the house itself.

I should have waited out of consideration for my guardians, but

frantically I climbed out of this miserable little black veiled prison, throwing off the cloak and taking a deep breath.

We were in the broad vestibule of a fine house, with great charm to it and much ingenuity in its decoration.

Even now, my thoughts scattered, I saw the lionhead fountain right near the gate through which we'd just come, and I washed my feet in the cool of the water.

The receiving room, or atrium, was huge, and beyond it I saw the rich couches of the dining room on the far side of a rather large enclosed garden—the peristyle.

It was not my massive ancient opulent old home on the Palatine Hill, which had grown new corridors and rooms over many generations, penetrating its broad gardens.

It was a bit too glossy. But it was grand. All the walls were freshly painted with a more Oriental bent, I think—more swirls and serpentine lines. How could I judge? I could have fainted from relief. Would people really leave me alone here?

There sat the desk in the atrium, and near it books! Along the porticoes flanking the garden, I saw the many doors; I looked up and saw the second-story windows closed on the porches. Splendor. Safety.

The mosaic floors were old; I knew the style, the festive figures of the Saturnalia on parade. They had to have been brought here from Italy.

Little real marble, plastered columns, but so many well-executed murals full of the requisite happy nymphs.

I went out into the soft wet grass of the peristyle and looked up at the blue sky.

I wanted only to breathe, but now came the moment of truth regarding my belongings. I was too dazed to ask about what was mine. And as it turned out, no such thing was necessary.

Jacob and David first did an entire inventory of the household furnishings they were purchasing for me, as I stood there staring at them in near disbelief at their patience with detail.

And when they'd found every room quite fine, and a bedchamber down the hall to the right, and a small open garden somewhere to the left, beyond the kitchen, they went upstairs, found things proper and then unloaded my possessions. Trunk followed trunk.

Then to my utter shock, Jacob's father, David, drew out a scroll and

actually started taking a full inventory of everything that belonged to me, from hairpins to ink and gold.

Jacob was meantime sent on an errand!

I could see the hasty writing of my Father on this inventory that David read under his breath.

"Personal toilet articles," David said in final summation of one portion of this examination. "Clothes, one, two, three trunks—to the largest bedroom, go! Household plate to the kitchen. Books here?"

"Yes, please." I was too shocked at his honesty and meticulousness to speak.

"Ah, so many books!"

"Fine, don't count them!" I said.

"I cannot, you see, these fragile …"

"Yes, I know. Carry on."

"You want your ivory and ebony shelves assembled here in the front room?"

"Magnificent."

I slumped down on the floor, only to be lifted at once by two helpful Asian slaves and settled in an amazingly soft cross-legged Roman chair. I was given a cup of fresh clean-smelling water. I drank it down, thought of blood. Closed my eyes.

"Ink, writing materials on the desk?" asked the old man.

"If you will," I sighed.

"Now, everybody out," said the old man, dispensing coins quickly and generously to these Asian slaves, who bowed from the waist and backed out of the room, nearly stumbling over each other.

I was about to try to form some sensible words of gratitude when a fresh brace of slaves rushed in—nearly colliding with the departing crew—carrying baskets of everything edible that a marketplace could yield, including at least nine kinds of bread, jugs of oil, melons, green vegetables and much smoked food that would last for days—fish, beef and exotic sea creatures dried out to look like parchment.

At once to the kitchen, save for a plate of olives and cheese and bread at once for the lady on that table to her left. Fetch the lady's wine, which her Father has sent.

Oh, how incredible. My Father's wine.

Then everyone was ordered out again with lots of coins freely given

and the old man at once returned to his inventory.

"Jacob, come here, count for me this gold as I read off the list to you! Plate, coin, more coin, jewels of exceptional value? Coin, bars of gold. Yes …"

On and on they went, rushing at it.

Where had my Father hidden all this gold? I couldn't imagine it.

What was I going to do with it? Were they really going to let me keep this? They were honest men but this was such a fortune.

"You must wait until everyone is gone," said David, "and then hide this gold yourself in various places about the house. You will find such places. We cannot do that for you, for then we would know where it was. Your jewels? Some I leave here to be hidden for they are much too valuable to be flashed abroad among the populace in your first days." He opened a casket of gems. "See this ruby? It is superb. Look at the size of it. This can feed you for the rest of your life if sold to an honest man for half of its worth. Every jewel in this box is exceptional. I know jewels. These are hand-picked from the finest. See these pearls? Perfection." He returned the ruby and the pearls to the casket and shut the lid.

"Yes," I said weakly.

"Pearls, more gold, silver, plate …" he muttered. "It's all here! We should take more care but …"

"Oh, no, you have done wonders," I declared.

I stared at the bread and the wine in the cup. My Father's wine bottle. My Father's amphorae around the room.

"Pandora," said Jacob, addressing me most seriously. "Here in my hand is the Deed to this house. And another paper which describes your official entry into the port under your new made-up name, Julia, La, La, La and so forth. Pandora, we have to leave you."

The old man shook his head and bit his lip.

"We have to sail for Ephesus, child," he said "I am ashamed that I must leave you, but the harbor will soon be blocked!"

"There are ships on fire already in the harbor," said Jacob under his breath. "They've pulled down the statue of Tiberius in the Forum."

"The transaction is closed" said the old man to me. "The man who sold the house has never laid eyes on you and does not know your real name, and there is no evidence of it remaining here. Those were not his slaves who brought you here."

“You’ve done miracles for me,” I said

“You are on your own, my beautiful Roman princess,” Jacob said. “It hurts my soul to leave you like this."

“We must,” said the old man.

“Don’t go out for three days,” said Jacob, coming near to me, about as near as he could as if he even meant to break all the rules and kiss my cheek. “There are enough legions here to quell this riot, but they will let it burn itself out, rather than slaughter Roman citizens. And forget those Greek friends. Their house is already an inferno.”

They turned to leave!

“Were you well paid for all this?” I asked. “If not, take from my gold now, freely. I insist!”

“Don’t even think of such things,” said the old man. “But for your peace of mind, know this: your Father staked me twice after my ships were captured by pirates in the Adriatic. Your Father put his money in with mine and I made profits for both of us. The Greek owed your Father money. Worry about those matters no more. But we must go!”

“God be with you, Pandora,” said Jacob.

Jewels. Where were the jewels? I leapt up and opened the casket. There were hundreds of them, flawless, dazzlingly clear and exquisitely polished. I saw their value, their clarity and the care of the polishing. I took the big egg-shaped ruby David had shown to me and then another just like it and thrust them at the two men.

They put up their hands to say No.

“Oh, but you must,” I said. “Give me this respect. Confirm for me that I am a free Roman woman and that I shall live as my Father told me to do! It will give me courage! Take this from me.”

David shook his head sternly, but Jacob took the ruby.

“Pandora, here, the keys. Follow us and lock the gate at the street and then the doors to the vestibule. Don’t fear. There are lamps everywhere. Plenty of oil—”

“Go!” I said as they passed over the threshold. I locked the gate and held to the bars, staring at them. “If you can’t get out, if you need me, come back here," I said.

“We have our own people here,” Jacob said soothingly. “Thank you from my heart for the beautiful ruby, Pandora. You will survive. Go back in, bolt the doors.”

I made it to the chair but I did not sit in it. Rather I collapsed and prayed, "*Lares familiares* … spirits of the house, I should find your altar. Welcome me, please, I bring no ill will to anyone. I will heap your altar with flowers and light your fire. Give me patience. Let me … rest."

Yet I did nothing but sit in shock on the floor, my hands limp, for hours as the daylight waned. As the strange little house grew dark.

A blood dream began, but I wouldn't have it. Not that alien Temple. Not the altar, no! Not the blood. I banished it and imagined I was home.

I was a little girl. Dream of that, I told myself, of listening to my eldest brother, Antony, talk of war in the North, driving the mad Germans back to the sea! He had so loved Germanicus. So had my other brothers. Lucius, the young one, he was so weak by nature. It broke my heart to think of him crying out for mercy as soldiers cut him down.

The Empire was the world. All that lay beyond was chaos and misery and struggle and strife. I was a soldier. I could fight. I dreamt I was putting on my armor. My brother said, "I am so relieved to discover you are a man, I always thought so."

I didn't waken till the following morning.

And then it was that grief and pain made themselves known to me as never before.

Note this. Because I knew the full absurdity of Fate and Fortune and Nature more truly than a human can bear to know it. And perhaps the description of this, brief as it is, may give consolation to another. The worst takes its time to come, and then to pass.

The truth is, you cannot prepare anyone for this, nor convey an understanding of it through language. It must be known. And this I would wish on no one in the world.

I was alone. I went from room to room of this small house, banging upon the walls with my fists and crying with my teeth clenched, and whirling. There was no Mother Isis.

There were no gods. Philosophers were fools! Poets sang lies.

I sobbed and tore at my hair; I tore at my dress as naturally as if it had been a newborn custom. I knocked over chairs and tables.

At times I felt a huge exhilaration, a freedom from all falsehoods and conventions, all means by which a soul or body can be held hostage!

And then the awesome nature of this freedom spread itself out around me as if the house did not exist, as if the darkness knew no walls.

Three nights and days I spent in this agony.

I forgot to eat food. I forgot to drink water.

I never lighted a lamp. The moon nearing her fullness gave enough light to this meaningless labyrinth of little painted chambers.

Sleep was gone from me forever.

My heart beat fast. My limbs clenched, then slackened, only to clench again.

At times, I lay on the moist good Earth of the courtyard, for my Father, because no one had laid his body on the moist good Earth, as it should have been done, right after his death and before any funeral.

I knew suddenly why this disgrace was so important, his body rent with wounds and not placed on the Earth. I knew the gravity of this omission as few have ever known the meaning of anything. It was of the utmost importance because it did not matter at all!

Live, Lydia.

I looked at the small leafy trees of the garden. I felt a strange gratitude that I had opened human eyes in this darkness on Earth long enough to see such things.

I quoted Lucretius:

“That which comes from Heaven ascends to Heaven”?

Madness!

Alas, as I said, I wandered, crawled, wept and cried for three nights and days.

4

Finally, one morning, when the sun came spilling down through the open roof, I looked at the objects in the room and I realized I didn't know what they were, or what they'd been made for. I didn't know their common names. I was removed from their definitions. I didn't even know this place.

I sat up and realized I was looking at the Lararium, the shrine of the household gods.

This was the dining room of course, and those were the couches, and there the glorious conjugal bed!

The Lararium was a high three-sided shrine, a little temple with three pediments, and inside stood figures of old household gods. No one in this profane city had even taken them away with the dead woman.

The flowers were dead. The fire had simply gone out. No one had quenched it with wine, as should have been done.

On hands and knees I crawled in my torn dress around the garden of the peristyle, gathering flowers for these gods. I found the wood and made their sacred fire.

I stared at them. I stared for hours. It seemed I would never move again.

Night fell. "Don't sleep," I whispered. "Keep watch with the night! They wait for you by dark, those Egyptians! The moon, look, it's almost full, only a night or so from being full."

But the worst of my agony had passed and I was exhausted, and sleep rose to embrace me. Sleep rose as if to say, "Care no more."

The dream came.

I saw men in gilded robes. "You will be taken now in the sanctum." But what's there? I didn't want to see. "Our Mother, our beloved Mother of Sorrows," said the Priest. The paintings on the walls were rows upon rows of Egyptians in profile, and words made of pictures. Myrrh burned in this place.

"Come," said those who held me. "All the impurities have gone from you now, and you will partake of the sacred Fount."

I could hear a woman crying and moaning. I peeped into the great

room before I entered it. There they were, the King and the Queen on their thrones, the King still and staring as in the last dream, and the Queen struggling against her golden fetters. She wore the crown of Upper and Lower Egypt. And pleated linen. Her hair was not a wig but real plaits. She cried and her white cheeks were stained in red. Red stained her necklace and her breasts. She looked soiled and ignominious.

"My Mother, my goddess," I said. "But this is an abomination."

I forced myself to wake.

I sat up and I laid my hand on the Lararium, and looked at the spiderwebs in the trees of the garden, made visible by the climbing sun.

I thought I heard people whispering in the ancient Egyptian tongue.

I was not going to allow this! I would not go mad.

Enough! The only man I had ever loved, my Father, said, "Live."

It was time for action. To get up and get going. I was suddenly all strength and purpose.

My long nights of mourning and weeping had been equivalent to the initiation in the Temple; death had been the intoxicant; comprehension had been the transformation.

It was over now, and the meaningless world was tolerable and need not be explained. And never would it be, and how foolish I had ever been to think so.

The facts of my predicament warranted action.

I poured out a cup of wine, and took it with me to the front gate.

The city seemed quiet. People walked to and fro, casting their eyes away from a half-dressed, ragged woman in her vestibule.

At last a workman trudging under his burden of bricks.

I thrust forth the wine. "I have been ill for three days," I said. "What of the death of Germanicus? How goes it in the city?"

The man was so grateful for the wine. Labor had made him old. His arms were thin. His hands shook.

"Madam, thank you," he said. He drained the cup, as if he could not stop himself. "Our Germanicus was laid out in the public square for all to see. How beautiful he was. Some compared him to the great Alexander. People could not determine. Had he been poisoned or not? Some said Yes, some said No.

"His soldiers loved him. Governor Piso, thank the gods, is not here and dares not come back. Germanicus's wife, the gracious Agrippina, has the

ashes of Germanicus in an urn she carries next to her breast. She sails for Rome, seeking justice for Tiberius."

He handed me the cup. "I humbly thank you."

"The city is as usual again."

"Oh, yes, what could stop this glorified marketplace?" he declared. "Business goes on as always. The loyal soldiers of Germanicus keep the peace, waiting for justice. They will not let the murderous Piso return, and Sentius gathers to himself here all who served under Germanicus. The city is happy. The flame burns for Germanicus. If there is war, it won't be here. Don't worry."

"Thank you, you have helped me marvelously much."

I took the cup, locked the gate, shut the door and went into action.

Nibbling on enough bread to give me strength, and murmuring aloud the common sense of Luretius, I surveyed the house. It had a large luxurious bath on the right side of the courtyard. Full of light. Water flowed steadily from the seashells of the nymphs into the plastered basin, and the water was fine. There was no need to light a fire for it.

In the bedchamber were my clothes.

Roman dresses were simple, as you know, just long shifts or tunics, and we wore two or three of them, plus an outdoor cover-up tunic, the stola, and finally the palla, or mantle, which hung to the ankles and belted below the breasts.

I chose the finest tunics, composing three layers of gossamer silk, and then a brilliant red palla that covered me from head to toe.

In all my life, I had never had to put on my own sandals. This was hysterically funny and annoying!

All my toilet articles had been laid out on tables which held burnished mirrors. What a mess!

I sat down in one of the many gilded chairs, pushed the burnished metal mirror close, and tried to work with the paints as my slaves had always done.

I managed to darken my eyebrows, but my horror of the painted Egyptian eyes stopped me. I rouged my lips, put some white powder on my face, but that was it. I couldn't attempt powdering my arms, as would have been done for me in Rome.

I don't know what I looked like. Now I had to braid this damned hair, and I managed it, and fixed the braids in a big coil on the back of my

head. I used enough pins for twenty women. Dragging down the loose curls around my face, on my forehead and cheeks, I saw in the mirror a Roman woman, modest and acceptable, I thought, her brown hair parted in the middle, her eyebrows black and her lips rosy red.

Gathering up all this drapery was the biggest nuisance. I attempted to match length with length. I tried to get the silk stola straight and then belt it tightly beneath my breasts. I mean, all this folding, all this drapery and fastening. I'd always had slave girls around me. Finally with two undertunics and a long, fine red stola, I snatched up a silk palla, a very large one, fringed and decorated all over with gold.

I put on rings, bracelets. But I intended to hide under this mantle as much as possible. I could remember my Father cursing every day of his life that he had to wear the toga, the official outer garment of the highborn Roman male. Well, only prostitutes wore togas. At least I didn't have to cope with that.

I headed straight for the slave markets.

Jacob was right about the population here. The city was filled with men and women of all nations. Many women walked in pairs, arm in arm.

Loose Greek cloaks were entirely acceptable here, and so were long exotic Phoenician or Babylonian gowns, both for men and women. Long hair among the men was common, as were heavy beards. Some women went about in tunics no longer than a man's. Others were completely veiled, revealing only the eyes, as they walked, accompanied by guards and servants.

The streets were cleaner than they might have been in Rome, the sewage flowing to wider gutters in the center and more swiftly to its destination.

Long before I reached the Forum, or the central plaza, I had passed three different doors in which rich courtesans stood arguing sarcastically over price with wealthy young Greeks and Romans.

One said, as I passed, to a handsome young man, "You want me in bed? You're dreaming. Any of the girls you can have, as I told you. If you want me, go home and sell everything you own!"

Rich Romans in their full togas stood at the corner wine shops, and respected my quick glance away with a simple nod as I passed.

Pray none of them would recognize me! It was not a likely thing, by

any means, and we were so far from Rome, and I had lived so long in my Father's house, happily reprieved by him from banquets and suppers, and even ceremonial gatherings.

The Forum was far larger than I had remembered from my brief glimpse. When I came to the edge of it and beheld the huge square flooded with sun, flanked on all sides with porticoes or Temples or Imperial buildings, I was amazed.

In the canopied markets, everything was for sale, silversmiths grouped together, the weavers in their own place, the silk merchants in a row, and I could see down the side street that came in to my right that it was dedicated to the sale of slaves—the better slaves, who might never have to go to an auction block.

Far away I saw the high masts of the ships. I could smell the river. There stood the Temple of Augustus, its fires burning, its uniformed Legionnaires in lazy readiness.

I was hot and anxious, because my mantle kept slipping, in fact, all this silk seemed to slip and to slide, and there were many open wine gardens where women gathered in groups, chatting. I could have found a place near enough to someone to have a drink.

But I had to have a household. I had to have loyal slaves.

Now, in Rome, of course I had never gone to a slave market. I would never have had to do such a thing. Besides, we had so many families of slaves on our land in Tuscany and in Rome that we seldom if ever bought a new slave. On the contrary, my Father had a habit of inheriting the decrepit and wise from his friends, and we had often teased my Father about the Academy, which did nothing in the slaves' garden but argue about history.

But now I had to act the shrewd woman of the world. I inspected every quality household slave on display, quickly settled upon a pair of sisters, very young and very frightened that they were going to be auctioned at noon and go to a brothel. I sent for stools and we sat together.

We talked.

They came from a small fine family household in Tyre; they'd been born slaves. They knew Greek and Latin well. They spoke Aramaic. They were angelic in their sweetness.

They had immaculate hands. They demonstrated every skill I required.

They knew how to dress hair, paint a face, cook food. They rattled off recipes for Eastern dishes of which I'd never heard; they named different pomades, rouges. One of them flushed with fear, and then said, "Madam, I can paint your face for you, and very quickly and perfectly!"

I knew this meant I had made a mess of the job.

I also knew that, coming from a small household, they were far more versatile than our slaves at home.

I bought them both, the answer to their prayers; I demanded clean tunics of modest length for both of them, got the tunics, made of blue linen, though they weren't very fine, then found a roaming merchant with an armful of pallae. I brought each sister a blue mantle. They were in such happiness. They were reticent and wanted their heads covered.

I had no doubt of them. They would have died for me.

It didn't occur to me that they were starving until, while searching for other slaves, I heard a nasty slave dealer remind an impudent educated Greek that he would get no food until he was sold.

"Horrors," I said. "You girls, you're probably hungry. Go to the cookshop in the Forum. Look down the street. See there, the scattering of benches and tables."

"Alone?" they said in dismay.

"Listen, girls. I have no time to feed you like birds from my hand. Don't look any man in the eye; eat and drink what you want." I gave them a seemingly shocking amount of money. "And don't leave the cookshop till I come for you. If a man comes to you, pretend to be in terror, bow your heads and protest as best you can that you don't speak his language. If worst comes to worst, go to the Temple of Isis."

They ran together down the narrow street towards the distant banquet, their mantles such a beautiful blue as they ballooned in the breeze that I can see it even now, the color of the sky streaking through the tight sweaty crowds beneath the jumble of canopies. Mia and Lia. Not hard to remember, but I could not tell them apart.

A low derisive laughter surprised me. It was the Greek slave who had just been threatened with starvation by his Master.

He said to his Master:

"All right, starve me. And then what will you have to sell? A sickened and dying man, instead of an unusual and great scholar."

Unusual and great scholar!

I turned and looked at the man. He sat on a stool and did not rise for me. He wore nothing but a filthy loincloth, which was plain stupidity on the part of the merchant, but this neglect certainly revealed that this slave was one very handsome man, beautiful in face, with soft brown hair and long almond-shaped green eyes, and a sarcastic expression to his pretty mouth. He was maybe thirty years old, perhaps a little younger. He was fit for his age, as Greeks like to be, having a sound musculature.

His brown hair was filthy, had been hacked off, and around his neck by a rope was the most wretched small board I ever beheld, crowded with tiny cramped letters in Latin.

Pulling up the mantle again, I stepped up very close to his gorgeous naked chest, a little amused by his audacious stare, and tried to read all this.

It seemed he could have taught all philosophy, all languages, all mathematics, could sing everything, knew every poet, could prepare whole banquets, was patient with children, had known military service with his Roman Master in the Balkans, could perform as an armed guard, was obedient and virtuous and had lived all his life in Athens in one house.

I read this a bit scornfully. He glared at me impertinently when he saw this scorn. Impudently, he folded his arms just below this little plaque. He leaned back against the wall.

Suddenly I saw why the merchant, hovering near, had not made the Greek rise. The Greek had only one good leg. The left leg below the knee was made of well-carved ivory, complete with carefully engraved foot and sandal. Perfect toes. Of course it had been pieced together, this fine ivory leg and foot, but in three proportionate sections, each girded with decorative work, and separate parts for the feet, nails defined and sandal straps exquisitely carved.

I had never seen such a false limb, such a surrender to artifice rather than a meager attempt to imitate nature.

“How did you lose your leg?” I asked him in Greek. No answer. I pointed to the leg. No answer.

I asked again in Latin. Still no answer.

The slave trader was rising on his toes in his anxiety and wringing his hands.

“Mistress, he can keep records, run any business; he writes in perfect hand, keeps honest numbers.”

Hmmm. So no mention of tutoring children? I did not look like a wife and mother. Not good.

The Greek sneered and looked away. He said softly under his breath in piercing Latin that if I did spend money for him, I was spending it for a dead man. His voice was soft and beautiful, though weary and full of contempt, his enunciation unaffected and refined.

I threw off all patience. I spoke quickly in Greek.

“Learn from me, you arrogant Athenian idiot!” I said, red in the face, and furious to be so misjudged both by a slave and a slave dealer. “If you can write Greek and Latin at all, if you have in fact studied Aristotle and Euclid, whose name you misspelled, by the way, if you have been schooled in Athens and have seen battle in the Balkans, if even half of this great epic is true, why wouldn’t you want to belong to one of the most keenly intelligent women you’ll ever meet, who’ll treat you with dignity and respect in exchange for your loyalty? What do you know of Aristotle and Plato that I don’t? I’ve never struck a slave in my life. You pass up the one mistress to whom your loyalty might earn you any reward of which you could dream. That tablet is a pack of lies, isn’t it?”

The slave was stunned, but not angered. He sat forward, trying to appraise me further, without being obvious. The merchant gestured furiously for the slave to rise to his feet, which the slave did, giving him an admirable height over me. His legs were sound and strong up to the ivory limb.

“What about telling me the real truth as to what you can do?” I said, switching to Latin.

I turned to the slave dealer. “Get me a pen to correct this, the spelling of these names. If this man has any chance of becoming a teacher, these misspellings destroy it. He looks like a fool for writing such.”

“I didn’t have space enough to write!” declared the slave suddenly, whispering in perfect Latin fury. He bent towards me, as if I should understand.

“Look at this little tablet, if you’re so keenly intelligent! Do you realize the ignorance of this dealer here. He has not sense enough to know he has an emerald, and thinks it a piece of green glass! This is wretched. I crammed here what generalities I could.”

I laughed. I was seduced and thrilled. I couldn't stop laughing. This was too funny! The slave merchant was confused. Chastise the slave and lower his value? Or let the two of us work this out?

"What was I to do," he demanded in the same confidential whisper, only this time in Greek, "shout to every man passing, 'Here sits a great teacher, here sits a philosopher!'?" He grew a little calm, having thus released this rage. "The names of my grandfathers are carved on the Acropolis at Athens," he said.

The merchant was mystified.

But I was so obviously delighted and interested.

My mantle slipped again and I gave it a hard jerk. These clothes. Had no one ever told me silk slides on silk?

"And what about Ovid?" I said, taking a deep breath. I almost laughed myself into tears. "You wrote Ovid's name here. Ovid. Is Ovid popular here? Nobody would dare write that on your card in Rome, I can tell you. You know, I don't even know if Ovid is still alive, and it's a shame. Ovid taught me to kiss when I was ten years old, when I read the *Amores*. You ever read the *Amores*?"

His entire demeanor altered. He softened and I could see he was just on the verge of hope, hope that I might be a good mistress for him. But he couldn't let himself believe it.

The merchant was waiting for the slightest signal as to what he might do. Clearly he could follow our exchanges.

"Look, you insolent one-legged slave," I said. "If I thought you could even read Ovid to me in the evenings, I'd buy you in a moment. But this tablet here makes you a glorified Socrates and Alexander the Great smashed in one. In what war in the Balkans did you carry arms? Why are you dumped in the hands of this lowly merchant rather than taken at once to some fine house? How could anyone believe all this? If blind Homer had sung such a preposterous tale, people would have gotten up and left the tavern."

He grew angry, frustrated.

The merchant put out his hand in warning, as if to control the man.

"What the hell happened to your leg?" I asked. "How did you lose it? Who made you this glorious replacement?"

Lowering his voice to an angry yet eloquent whisper, the slave declared slowly and patiently:

“I lost it in a boar hunt, with my Roman Master. He saved my life. We hunted often. It was on Pentelikon, the mountain …”

“I know where Pentelikon is, thank you,” I said.

His facial expressions were elegant. He was utterly confused. He licked his parched lips and said:

“Just make this merchant fetch the parchment and the ink.” He spoke his Latin with such beauty, the beauty of an actor or rhetorician, yet with no effort. “I’ll write the *Amores* of Ovid from memory for you,” he said, gently pleading through clenched teeth, which is no mean feat. “And then I’ll copy out all of Xenophon's history of the Persians for you, if you have the time, in Greek, of course! My Master treated me like a son; I fought with him, studied with him, learned with him. I wrote his letters for him. His education I made my education because he wanted it so.”

“Ah,” I said in proud relief.

He looked the full gentleman now, angered, caught in impossible circumstance yet dignified, and reasoning with just enough spirit to strengthen his own soul.

“And in bed? Can you do it in bed?” I asked. I can’t say what rage or desperation prompted this question.

He was genuinely shocked. Good sign. His eyes really widened. He furrowed his brow.

Meantime the slave trader emerged with the table, stool, parchment, ink, and set it all down on the hot cobblestones.

“Here, write,” he said to the slave. “Make letters for this woman. Add stuns. Or I’ll kill you and sell your leg.”

I broke again into helpless laughing. I looked at the slave, who still stood dazed. He broke away from my gaze to cast a disdainful look on the merchant.

“Are you safe around the slave girls?” I said patronizingly. “Are you a lover of boys?”

“I am completely trustworthy!” the slave said. “I am not capable of crimes for any Master.”

“And what if I desire you in my bed? I'm the Mistress of the house, twice widowed and on my own, and I am Roman.”

His face darkened. I couldn’t name the emotions that seemed to pass over his expression, the sadness, indecision, confusion and ultimate

perplexity that transformed him.

"Well?" I asked.

"Let's put it this way, Madam. You would be much more pleased with my recitation of Ovid than with any attempted enactment of his verses by me."

"You like boys," I said with a nod.

"I was a born a slave, Madam. I made do with boys. I know nothing else. And I need neither." His face was crimson now, and he had lowered his eyes.

Lovely Athenian modesty.

I gestured for him to sit down.

This he did with amazing simplicity and grace, considering the circumstances: the heat, the dirt, crowds, the fragile stool and the wobbling table.

He picked up the pen and quickly wrote in flawless Greek, "Have I foolishly offended this great lady of learning and exceptional patience? Have I brought about, through rashness, my own doom?" He wrote on in Latin, "Does Lucretius tell us the truth when he says that death is nothing to fear?" He thought for a moment, and then he wrote in Greek again, "Are Virgil and Horace really equal to our great poets? Do the Romans truly believe this, or only hope it is true, knowing their achievements shine in other arts?"

I read this all very thoughtfully, smiling most agreeably. I had fallen in love with him. I looked at his thin nose, his cleft chin, and I looked into the green eyes that looked up at me.

"How did you come to this?" I asked. "A slave shop in Antioch? You're Athenian-bred, just as you say."

He tried to stand to answer. I pushed him to sit down.

"I can tell you nothing of that," he said. "Only that I was much beloved by my Master, that my Master died in his bed with his family around him. And that here I am."

"Why didn't he set you free in his will?"

"He did, Madam, and with means."

"What happened?"

"I can tell you no more."

"Why not? Who sold you, why?"

"Madam," he said, "please place a value upon my loyalty to a house in

which I served all my life. I cannot speak more. If I become your servant, you will have the same loyalty from me. Your house will become my house, and sacred to me. What happens within your walls will remain within your walls. I speak of virtue and kindness in my Master because this is proper to say. Let me say no more."

Sublime old-Greek morality.

"Write more, hurry!" said the slave merchant.

"Be quiet," I told him. "He's written quite enough."

The handsome brown-haired slave, this enticingly beautiful one-legged man, had fallen into some deep pit of woe and looked towards the distant Forum, flash of figures back and forth over the mouth of the street.

"What would I do as a free man?" he said to me, looking up at me from a position of utter careless loneliness. "Copy all day for a pittance at the booksellers? Write letters for coins? My Master risked his own life to save me from that boar. In battle I served under Tiberius in Illyricum, where with some fifteen legions he put down all revolts. I chopped the head off a man to save my Master. What am I now?"

I was filled with pain.

"What am I now?" he repeated the question.

"If I were free, I would live hand to mouth, and when I slept in some filthy tenement, my ivory leg would be severed and stolen!"

I gasped and put my hand to my lips.

His eyes filled with tears as he looked at me, and his voice became all the more softer, yet sharply articulate:

"Oh, I could teach philosophy beneath the arches out there, you know, prattle on about Diogenes, and pretend that I liked wearing rags, as do his followers these days. What a circus out there, have you seen it? I have never seen so many philosophers in my life as in this city! Take a look when you go back. You know what it takes to teach philosophy here? You have to lie. You have to fling meaningless words as fast as you can at young people, and brood when you can't answer, and make up nonsense and ascribe it to the old Stoics."

He broke off, and tried to gain command of himself.

I was almost in tears as I looked down at him.

"But you see, I have no skill at lying," he said. "That has been my undoing with you, Great Lady."

I was shattered inside, my wounds silently opened. The nerve which had carried me out of confinement was ebbing away. But surely he saw my tears.

He looked towards the Forum again.

"I dream of an honorable Master or Mistress, a house with honor. Can a slave through the contemplation of honor thereby have honor? The law says not. So any slave called to testify in a court trial must be tortured, for he has no honor! But reason says otherwise. I have learned and I can teach both bravery and honor. And yes, all of this tablet is true. I didn't have time or opportunity to temper its boastful style."

He bowed his head and looked again towards the Forum, as though towards the lost world. He drew himself up in the chair, for bravery's sake. Again, he tried to stand.

"No, sit," I said.

"Madam," he said, "if you seek my services for a house of ill repute, let me tell you now … if it is to torture and force young girls such as those you just purchased, if you order me to advertise their charms abroad, I won't do it. It is as dishonorable to me as to steal or to lie. Why do you want me?"

The tears were halted, merely resting between him and his vision of the world around him. His face was serene.

"Do I look as if I am a whore?" I asked him with shock. "Yea gods, I wore all my best clothes. I'm doing my best to look revoltingly respectable in all these fancy silks! Do you see cruelty in my eyes? Can't you believe that it is perhaps the tempered soul that survives grief? One need not fight on a battlefield to have courage."

"No, Madam, no!" he said. He was so very sorry.

"Then why fling these insults at me now?" I said, full of hurt. "And no, I agree with you, what you've written there, our Roman poets are not the equals of the Greeks. I don't know our destiny as an Empire and this weighs as heavily on me as it ever did on my Father and his Father! Why? I don't know!" I turned as if to go, but I had really no intention of going! His insults had simply gone too far.

He bent towards me over the writing table.

"Madam," he said whispering even lower and with greater solicitude. "Forgive me my rash words. You are absolutely a paradox. Your face is eccentrically painted, and I think the lip rouge is not properly set. You

have rouge on your teeth. You have no powder on your arms. You wear three dresses of silk and I can see through all of them! Your hair is in two barbarian-style braids lying on your shoulders, and you are raining little silver and gold pins galore. Look at these little pins falling. Madam, you will be hurt by these pins. Your mantle, more appropriate for evening, has fallen on the ground. Your hems drag in the dirt."

Not missing a beat of his speech, he reached down deftly and picked up the palla, standing at once to offer it to me, coming round the table with a heavy shift of his leg, to lay the palla on my shoulders.

"You speak with miraculous speed, and stunning gibes," he went on, "yet you carry a huge dagger in your girdle. It should be hidden on your forearm under your mantle. And your purse. You take gold out of it to pay the girls. It's huge, carelessly visible. And your hands, your hands are beautiful, fine as your Latin and your Greek, but they are deeply creased with dirt as though you have been digging in the Earth itself."

I smiled. I had stopped my tears.

"You are very observant," I said cheerfully. I was charmed. "Why did I have to cut you so deeply to find your soul? Why can't we simply reveal ourselves to one another? I need a strong steward, a guardian who can bear arms, run my house and protect it because I am alone. Can you really see through all this silk?"

He nodded. "Well, now that the mantle is over your shoulders and hiding the … the dagger and the girdle—" He blushed. Then as I smiled at him, trying to regain my calm, trying to fight back the engulfing darkness that would take away all confidence from me, all faith in any task, he spoke on.

"Madam, we learn to hide our souls because we are betrayed by others. But I would entrust to you my soul! I know it, if you would reconsider your judgment! I can protect you, I can run your house. I will not molest your little girls. But mark, for all my time fighting in Illyricum I have one leg. I came home from three years of bloody constant battle to lose it to a boar because a spear, poorly tempered and made, broke as I thrust it into the boar."

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Flavius," he answered. This was a Roman name.

"Flavius," I said.

"Madam, the palla is slipping again from your head. And these little

pins, they are sharp, they are everywhere, they'll hurt you."

"Never mind that," I said, though I let him drape me again properly as if he were Pygmalion, and I his Galatea. He used the tips of his fingers. But the mantle was already soiled.

"Those girls," I said, "whom you glimpsed. They are my household, as of the past half-hour. You have to be their loving master. But if you lie in any woman's bed under my roof, the bed had better be mine. I am flesh and blood!"

He nodded, at a total loss for words.

I pulled open my purse and took out what I thought to pay, a reasonable price in Rome, I thought, where slaves were always bragging about how much they had cost. I laid down the gold, oblivious to the imprint of the coin, only gauging the value.

The slave stared at me with ever increasing fascination, then his eyes whipped the merchant.

The slimy, merciless, weasling slave trader puffed up like a toad and told me this priceless Greek scholar was to be auctioned for a high price. Several rich men had expressed interest. An entire school class was to question him within the hour. Roman officers had sent their stewards to inspect him.

"I have no more stamina for it," I said, and reached in my purse again.

At once, my new slave Flavius put his hand out gently to prevent me.

He glared at the merchant with great authority and fearless contempt.

"For a man with one leg!" said Flavius between his teeth. "You thief! You charge my Mistress that, here in Antioch, where slaves are so plentiful the ships take them on to Rome, for it's the only way to cut their losses!"

I was quite impressed. All had gone so well. The darkness flowed back away from me, and there seemed for the moment a divine meaning in the warmth of the sun.

"You cheat my Mistress and you know it! You're the scum of the Earth!" he went on. "Madam, do we ever purchase from this scoundrel again? I advise never!"

The slave trader broke into an inane smile, a hideous grimace of cowardice and stupidity, bowed and gave me back a third of what I'd given him.

I could hardly keep from another burst of laughing. I had to fetch the

mantle from the ground again. Flavius did it. This time, I knotted it properly in front.

I looked at the gold which had been returned, scooped it up, entrusted it to Flavius and off we went.

When we had plunged into the thick crowd in the center of the Forum I did laugh and laugh at the whole affair.

"Well, Flavius, you're protecting me already, saving me money, giving me excellent advice. If there were more men like you in Rome, the world might be better for it."

He was choked up. He couldn't talk. It was an effort to whisper:

"Lady, you have on trust my body and soul forever."

I went up on tiptoe and kissed his cheek. I realized that his nakedness, the filth of the loincloth, all this was a disgrace he bore without a sign of protest.

"Here," I said, giving him some money. "Take the girls home, put them to work, then you go to the baths. Get clean. Get Roman clean. Have a boy if you want. Have two. Then buy fine clothes for yourself, not slave clothes, mind you, but clothes that you would buy for a rich young Roman Master!"

"Madam, please hide that purse!" he said as he took the coins. "And what is my Mistress's name? To whom shall I say I belong, if asked."

"To Pandora of Athens," I said. "Though you shall have to fill me in on the current state of my birthplace, because I have never actually been there. But a Greek name serves me well. Now, go. See, the girls watch!"

Lots of people were watching. Oh, this red silk! And Flavius was such a splendid figure of a male.

I kissed him again, and whispered in his ear, calculatingly, devil that I am, "I need you, Flavius."

He looked down at me, awestruck. "I am yours forever, Madam," he whispered.

"Are you sure you can't do with me in bed!"

"Oh, believe me, I have tried!" he confessed, flushing again.

I made my hand into a fist and punched his muscular arm.

"Very well," I said.

The damsels had already risen, at my gesture. They knew I sent him to them.

I gave him my key, the directions to my house, described the

particularities of its gate, and the old bronze lion fountain right inside the gate.

"And you, Madam?" he asked. "You're going in the crowd unaccompanied? Madam, the purse is huge! It's full of gold."

"Wait till you see the gold in the house," I said. "Appoint yourself the only one who can open chests, and then hide them in obvious places. Replace all the furniture I've smashed in my … my solitude. There are many pieces stored in rooms above."

"Gold in the house!" He was alarmed. "Chests of gold!"

"Now, don't worry about me," I said. "I know where to seek help now. And if you betray me, if you steal my legacy and I find my house ruined when I return, I suppose I shall have deserved it Cover up the chests of gold with carpets. The place has heaps of little Persian carpets. Look upstairs. And tend to the Shrine!"

"I shall do everything you ask and more."

"So I thought. A man who cannot lie cannot steal. Now the sun is intolerable here. Go to the girls. They wait."

I turned.

He caught me by coming round in front of me.

"Madam, there is something I must tell you."

"What!" I said with an ominous face. "Not that you're a eunuch," I said. "Eunuchs don't grow muscles in their arms and legs like that."

"No," he said. Then he took on a sudden gravity. "Ovid, you spoke of Ovid. Ovid is dead. Ovid died two years ago in the wretched town of Tomis on the upper rim of the Black Sea. It was a miserable choice of exile, a barbarian outpost."

"No one told me this. What a revolting silence." I threw up my hands over my face. The mantle fell. He retrieved it. I scarce noticed. "I had so prayed that Tiberius would let Ovid come back to Rome!" I told myself I had no time to stop for this. "Ovid. No time to weep for him now …"

"His books are no doubt plentiful here," Flavius said. "They are very easily found in Athens."

"Good, perhaps you will have time to find some for me. Now, I'm off; pins or tumbled braids or sliding mantle, I do not care. And don't look so worried. When you leave the house, just lock up the girls and the gold."

When I finally turned around he was making his way rather gracefully towards the girls. The sun rippled prettily on his well-muscled back. His

hair was curly and brown, rather like my own. He stopped for one moment when a vendor attacked him with an armful of cheaply made tunics, cloaks and whatnot, more than likely stolen goods, full of dye that would run in the first rain, but who knows? He bought a tunic hastily and slipped it over his head, and purchasing a red sash, tied it around his waist.

Such a transformation. The tunic went halfway to his knees. That must have been a great relief to him, to have on something clean. I should have thought of this before I left him. Stupid.

I admired him. Naked or clothed, you can't carry such beauty and dignity unless you have been cherished. He wore the raiment of the affection bestowed on him and inscribed in the art of his ivory leg.

In our brief encounter, a bond had been forged forever.

He greeted the girls. With his arms around them, he guided them out of the crowd.

I went straight to the Temple of Isis, and thereby, unwittingly, took the first firm step towards a larcenous immortality, an inglorious and unearned supernature, a never ending and utterly useless doom.

5

As soon as I entered the Temple Compound I was received by several rich Roman women, who welcomed me generously. They were all properly painted with white on their arms and their faces, well-drawn eyebrows, lip color—all the details of which I'd made a hash that morning.

I explained that though I had means, I was on my own. They were for helping me in every way. When they heard I had been actually initiated in Rome, they were in awe.

"Thank Mother Isis they didn't discover you and execute you," said one of the Roman women.

"Go in and see the Priestess," they said. Many of them had not yet undergone the secret ceremonies and were waiting to be called by the goddess for this momentous event.

There were many other women here, some Egyptian, some Babylonian perhaps. I could only guess. Jewels and silks were the order of the day. Fancy painted gold borders lined their mantles; some wore simple dresses.

But it seemed to me that all of them spoke Greek.

I couldn't bring myself to enter the Temple. I looked up and saw in my mind our crucified Priests in Rome.

"Thank God you were not identified," said one. "Quite a few people fled to Alexandria," said another.

"I raised no protest," I said dismally.

There came a chorus of sympathy. "How could you, under Tiberius? Believe me, every one who could escaped."

"Don't be laden with misery," said a young blue-eyed Greek woman, very properly dressed.

"I'd fallen away from the worship," I said.

Again came a comforting round of soft voices.

"Go in now," said one woman, "and ask to pray in the very sanctuary of Our Mother. You are an initiate. Most of us here are not."

I nodded.

I went up the steps of the Temple and entered inside it.

I paused to shake from my mantle the mundane, that is, all the trivia I had discussed. My mind was focused upon the goddess, and desperate to believe in her. I loathed my hypocrisy, that I used this Temple and this worship, but then it didn't seem significant. My despair of the three nights had penetrated too deep.

What a shock awaited me as I found myself inside.

The Temple was far more ancient than our Temple in Rome, and Egyptian paintings covered its walls. A shiver at once went through me. The columns were in the Egyptian style, not fluted but smoothly round, and brightly painted in orange, and rising to giant lotus leaves at the capitals. The smell of the incense was overpowering and I could hear music emanating from the Sanctuary. I could hear the thin notes of the lyre, and of the wires of the sistrum being plucked, and I could hear a litany being chanted.

But this was a thoroughly Egyptian place, which enveloped me as firmly as my blood dreams. I almost fainted.

The dreams came back—the deep paralytic sense of being in some secret Sanctuary in Egypt, my soul swallowed within another body!

The Priestess came to me. This too was a shock.

In Rome, her dress would have been purely Roman, and she might have worn a small exotic headdress, a little cap to her shoulders, perhaps.

But this woman wore Egyptian clothes of pleated linen, in the old style, and she wore a magnificent Egyptian headdress and wig, the broad mass of long black braids falling down stiffly over her shoulders. She looked as extravagant perhaps as Cleopatra had ever looked, for all I knew.

I had only heard stories of Julius Caesar's love of Cleopatra, then her affair with Mark Antony and Cleopatra's death. All that was before my birth.

But I knew that Cleopatra's fabulous entrance into Rome had much affrighted the old Roman sense of morality. I had always known the old Roman families feared Egyptian magic. In the recent punitive Roman massacre, which I've described, there was a lot of shouting about license and lust; but beneath it, there had been an unspoken fear of the mystery and the power hidden behind the Temple doors.

And now as I gazed at this Priestess, at her painted eyes, I felt in my

soul this fear. I knew it. Of course this woman seemed to have stepped from the dreams, but it was not that which struck me so much, for after all, what are dreams? This was an Egyptian woman—wholly alien and inscrutable to me.

My Isis had been Greco-Roman. Even her statue in the Roman Sanctuary had been clothed in a gorgeously draped Greek dress and her hair had been done softly in the old Greek style, with waves around her face. She had held her sistrum and an urn. She had been a Romanized goddess.

Perhaps the same had happened with the goddess Cybele in Rome. Rome swallowed things and made them Roman.

In a very few centuries, though I had no thought of it then—how could I—Rome would swallow and shape the followers of Jesus of Nazareth, and make of his Christians the Roman Catholic church.

I suppose you are familiar with the modern expression, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do."

But here, in this reddish gloom, among flickering lights and a deeper muskier incense than I had ever smelled, I resented my timidity in silence. Then the dreams did descend, like so many veils lowered one by one to enclose me. In a flash I saw the beautiful Queen weeping. No. She screamed. Cried for help.

"Get away from me," I whispered to the air around me. "Fly from me, all things that are impure and evil. Get away from me as I enter the house of my Blessed Mother."

The Priestess took me in hand. I heard voices from my dream in violent argument. I strained to clear my vision, to see the worshipers coming and going towards the Sanctuary to meditate or to make sacrifice, to ask for some favor. I tried to realize it was a big busy crowd, very little different from Rome.

But the touch of the Priestess enfeebled me. Her painted eyes struck terror. Her broad necklace caused me to blink my eyes. Row upon row of flat stones.

I was taken into a private apartment of the Temple by her, offered a sumptuous couch. I lay back exhausted. "Fly from me, all things evil," I whispered. "Including dreams."

The Priestess sat beside me and enfolded me in her silken arms. I looked up into a mask!

“Talk to me, suffering one,” she said in Latin with a thick accent. “Speak all that must come forth.”

Suddenly—uncontrollably—I poured out my whole family story, the annihilation of my family, my guilt, my travails.

“What if I was the cause of my family's downfall—my worship at the Temple of Isis? What if Tiberius had remembered it? What have I done? The Priests were crucified and I did nothing. What does Mother Isis want of me? I want to die.”

“That she does *not* want of you,” said the Priestess, staring at me. Her eyes were huge, or was it the paint? No, I could see the whites of her eyes, so glistening and pure. Her painted mouth let loose words like a tiny breeze in a monotone.

I was fast becoming delirious and totally unreasonable. I murmured what I could about my initiation, what details I could tell a Priestess, for all these things were highly secret, you know, but I confirmed for her that I had been reborn in the rites.

All the stored-up weakness in me was cut loose in a flood.

Then I lay down my guilt. I confessed that I had, early on, left the Cult of Isis, that in recent years, I had walked only in the public processions to the sea, when the goddess was carried to the shore to bless the ships. Isis, the goddess of Navigation. I had not lived a life of devotion.

I had done nothing when the Priests of Isis were crucified, except speak out with many others behind the Emperor's back. There had been a solidarity between me and those Romans who thought Tiberius was a monster, but we had not raised our voices in defense of Isis. My Father had told me to remain silent So I had. This was the same Father who had told me to live.

I turned over and slipped down off this couch and I lay on the tiled floor. I don't know why. I pressed my cheek to the cold tile. I liked the coldness against my face. I was in a state of madness, but not an uncontrollable state. I lay staring.

I knew one thing. I wanted to get out of this Temple! I didn't like it. No, this had been a very bad idea.

I hated myself suddenly for having become so vulnerable to this woman, whatever sort she was, and the atmosphere of the blood dreams beckoned to me.

I opened my eyes. The Priestess bent over me. I saw the weeping

Queen of my nightmares. I turned away and shut my eyes.

"Be at peace," she said in her calculated and perfected voice. "You did nothing wrong," said the Priestess.

It seemed preposterous that such a voice should issue from such a painted face and form, but the voice was definite.

"First," the Priestess said, "you must understand that Mother Isis forgives anything. She is the Mother of Mercy." Then she said, "You have been more fully initiated by your description than most here or anywhere. You made a long fast. You bathed in the sacred blood of the bull. You must have drunk the potion. You dreamed and saw yourself reborn."

"Yes," I said, trying to revive the old ecstasy, the priceless gift of belief in something. "Yes. I saw the stars and great fields of flowers, such fields …"

It was no good. I was scared of this woman and I wanted to get out of there. I'd go home and confess all this to Flavius and make him let me weep on his shoulder.

"I am not pious by nature," I confessed. "I was young. I loved the free women who went there, the women who slept with whom they chose, the whores of Rome, the keepers of the houses of pleasure, I liked women who thought for themselves, and followed the goings-on of the Empire."

"You can enjoy such company here as well," said the Priestess, without batting an eye. "And don't fear that your old ties to the Temple caused your downfall in Rome. We have plenty of news to confirm that the highborn were not persecuted by Tiberius when he destroyed the Temple. It is always the poor who suffer: the street whore and the simple weaver, the hairdresser, the bricklayer. No noble family was persecuted in the name of Isis. You know that. Some women fled to Alexandria because they would not give up the worship, but they were never in danger."

The dreams approached. "Oh, Mother of God," I whispered.

The Priestess went on talking.

"You, like Mother Isis, have been the victim of tragedy. And you, like Mother Isis, must take strength and walk alone, as Isis did when her husband, Osiris, was skin. Who helped her when she searched all over Egypt for the body of her murdered husband, Osiris? She walked alone.

She is the greatest of the goddesses. When she recovered the body of her husband, Osiris, and could find no organ of generation for him with which she might be impregnated, she drew the semen right from his spirit. Thus, the god Horus was born of a woman and a god. It was the power of Isis who drew the spirit from the dead man. It is Isis who tricked the god Ra into revealing his name."

That was the old tale all right.

I looked away from the Priestess. I was unable to look at her decorated face! Surely she felt my revulsion. I must not hurt her. She meant well. It wasn't her fault that she looked to me like a monster. Why in hell had I come here!

I lay dazed. The room had a soft golden light coming mainly through its three doors, and they were cut Egyptian-style, these doors, wider at the base than at the top, and I let this light make a blur of my vision. I asked the light to do this.

I felt the Priestess's hand. Such silken warmth. So lovely, her touch, her sweetness.

"Do you believe all of it!" I suddenly whispered.

She completely ignored this question. Her painted mask gave forth the creed.

"You must be like Mother Isis. Depend on no one. You don't have the burden of recovering a lost husband or father. You are free. Receive into your house men with love as you choose. You belong to no one but Mother Isis. Remember, Isis is the goddess who loves, the goddess who forgives, the goddess of infinite undemanding because she herself has suffered!"

"Suffered!" I gasped. I moaned, a very uncommon sound for me, most of my life. But I saw the weeping Queen of my nightmares, bound to her throne.

"Listen to this," I said, "the dreams I will now recount, and then tell me why it is happening." I knew my voice sounded angry. I was sorry for it. "These dreams don't come from wine or potions, or after long periods of wakefulness that twist the mind."

Then I launched into another totally unplanned confession.

I told this woman of the blood dreams, the dreams of ancient Egypt in which I had drunk blood—the altar, the Temple, the desert, the sun rising.

“Amon Ra!” I said. This was the Egyptian name for the sun god, but I had never spoken it to my knowledge. I said it now. “Yes, Isis tricked him into revealing his name, but he killed me and I was her blood drinker, do you hear me, a thirsty god!”

“No!” said the Priestess. She sat motionless.

She thought for a long while. I had scared her and now this scared me all the more.

“Can you read the ancient picture writing of Egypt?” she asked.

“No,” I said.

Then she said, in a more relaxed and vulnerable tone:

“You speak of very old legends, legends buried in the history of our worship of Isis and Osiris; that they once did indeed take the blood of their victims as sacrifice. There are scrolls here that tell of this. But nobody can really decipher them, except for one …”

Her voice trailed off.

“Who is the one?” I asked. I sat up on my elbows. I realized the plaits of my hair had come undone. Good. It felt good because it was free now and clean. I raked my hair with both hands.

What did it feel like to be entombed in paint and wig like this Priestess?

“Tell me,” I said, “who is the one who can read these legends. Tell me!”

“These are evil tales,” she said, “that Isis herself and Osiris live on, somewhere, in material form, taking blood even now.” She made an expression of denial and disgust. “But this is not our worship! We sacrifice no humans here! Egypt was old and wise before Rome was born!”

Who was she trying to convince? Me?

“I’ve never had such dreams, in a string like this, with the same theme.”

She became very worked up with her declarations.

“Our Mother Isis has no taste for blood. She has conquered death and set her husband Osiris as King of the Dead, but for us, she is life itself. She didn’t send you these dreams.”

“Probably not! I agree with you. But then who did? Where do they come from? Why did they pursue me at sea? Who is this one who can read the old writing?”

She was shaken. She had let go of me and she stared off, her eyes

taking on a deceptive ferocity due to the black lining.

"Perhaps somewhere in childhood you heard an old tale, maybe an old Egyptian Priest told it to you. You forgot it, and now it flames in your tortured mind. It feeds on fires to which it has no right—your Father's death."

"Yes, well, I certainly hope so, but I've never known an old Egyptian. At the Temple, the Priests were Roman. Besides, if we take the dreams and lay them out, what is the pattern there? Why is the Queen weeping? Why does the sun kill me? The Queen is in fetters. The Queen is a prisoner. The Queen is in agony!"

"Stop." The Priestess shuddered. Then she put her arms around me, as if it was she who needed me. I felt her stiff linen and the thick hair of her wig, and beneath it the hurried pounding of her heart. "No," she said. "You're possessed of a demon, and we can drive this demon out of you! Maybe the way was opened for this wretched demon when your Father was attacked at his own Hearth."

"You really believe it's possible?" I asked.

"Listen," she said as casually now as one of the women outside. "I want you to be bathed, to have fresh garments. This money, what portion can you give me? If none, we will provide all for you. We are rich here."

"Here's plenty. I don't care." I pulled the purse loose from my girdle.

"I will have everything done for you. Fresh clothes. This silk is too fragile."

"You are telling me!" I said.

"This mantle is torn. Your hair is uncombed."

I spilled out a dozen or so gold coins, more than I had paid for Flavius.

It shocked her, but she covered up the shock very quickly. Suddenly she stared at me, and her painted mask managed to make a flexible expression, a frown. I thought it might crack.

I thought she might weep. I was becoming a regular expert in making people weep. Mia and Lia had wept. Flavius had wept. Now she was going to cry. The Queen in the dream was crying!

I laughed in madness, throwing back my head, but then I saw the Queen! I saw her in distant wavery recollection, and I felt such sorrow that I too could have cried. My mockery was blasphemy. It was a lie unto myself.

"Take the gold for the Temple," I said. "Take it for new clothes, for all I

need. But my offering to the goddess, I want it to be flowers, and bread, warm from the oven, a small loaf."

"Very good," she said with an eager nod. "That is what Isis wants. She wants no blood. No! No blood!"

She started to help me up.

I paused. "In the dream, you understand that she weeps. She is not happy with these blood drinkers, she protests, she objects. She herself is not the one who drinks blood."

The Priestess was confounded, and then she nodded. "Yes, that is obvious, is it not?"

"I too protest and suffer," I said.

"Yes, come," she said leading me through a thick tall door. She left me in the hands of the Temple slaves. I was relieved. I was weary.

I was taken into the ceremonial bath, cleansed by Temple maidens and re-dressed carefully by Temple maidens.

What a pleasure to have it all done right.

For a little while I wondered helplessly if they would frame me in white pleats and black plaits but they used the Roman style.

My hair was properly done by these girls in a correct circlet that would hold, leaving a generous frame of ringlets around the face.

The clothes given me were new and made of fine linen. Flowers had been stitched along the borders. This finery, so precise, so minute, seemed more valuable than gold.

It certainty gave more joy to me than gold.

I felt so tired! I was so grateful.

The girls then made up my face more artfully than I could have done it, and more in the Egyptian style, and I flinched when I saw myself in the mirror. Flinched. It wasn't the full paint of the Priestess, but my eyes were rimmed with black.

"How dare I complain?" I whispered.

I put down the mirror. One doesn't have to see oneself, fortunately.

I emerged into the great hall of the Temple, a proper Roman woman, with the extravagant face paint of the East. A common sight in Antioch.

I found the Priestess with two others, as formally dressed as she, and a Priest who wore the same old-fashioned Egyptian headdress, only he wore no wig, just a striped hood. His tunic was short, pleated. He turned and glared at me as I came forward.

Fear. Crushing fear. Flee this place! Forget about the offering, or have them make it for you. Go home. Flavius is waiting. Get out!

I was struck dumb. I let the Priest draw me aside.

"Pay attention," he said to me gently. "I will take you now into the holy place. I will let you talk to the Mother. But when you come out, you must come to me! Don't leave without coming to me. You must promise me, you will return each day, and if you have more of these dreams, you will lay them before us. There is one to whom they should be told, that is, unless the goddess drives them from your mind."

"Of course I will tell anyone who can help," I said. "I hate these dreams. But why are you so anxious? Are you afraid of me?"

He shook his head. "I don't fear you, but there is something I must confide to you. I must talk to you either today or tomorrow. I must speak with you. Go now to the Mother, then come to me."

The others led me to the chamber of the Sanctuary; there were white linen curtains before the shrine. I saw my sacrifice lying there, a great garland of sweet-smelling white flowers, and the warm loaf of bread. I knelt. The curtains were pulled back by unseen hands and I found myself alone in the chamber kneeling before the *Regina Caeli*, the Queen of Heaven. Another shock.

This was an ancient Egyptian statue of our Isis, carved from dark basalt. Her headdress was long, narrow, pushed behind her ears. On her head she wore a great disk between horns. Her breasts were bare. On her lap sat the adult Pharaoh, her son Horus. She held her left breast to offer him her milk.

I was struck with despair! This image meant nothing to me! I groped for the essence of Isis in this image.

"Did you send me the dreams, Mother!" I whispered.

I laid out the flowers. I broke the bread.

I heard nothing in the silence from the serene and ancient statue.

I prostrated myself on the floor, stretching out my arms. And from the depths of my soul, I struggled to say, I accept, I believe, I am yours, I need you, I need you!

But I wept. All was lost to me. Not merely Rome and my family, but even my Isis. This goddess was the embodiment of the faith of another nation, another people.

Very slowly a calm settled over me.

Is it so, I thought. The Cult of my Mother is in all places, North and South and East and West. It is the spirit of this Cult which gives it power. I need not literally kiss the feet of this effigy. That is not the point.

I raised my head slowly, then sat back on my heels. A real revelation came upon me. I cannot fully record it. I knew it, fully, in an instant.

I knew that all things were symbols of other things! I knew that all rituals were enactments of other happenings! I knew that out of our practical human minds we devised these things with an immensity of soul that would not allow the world to be devoid of meaning.

And this statue represented love. Love above cruelty. Love above injustice. Love above loneliness and condemnation.

That was what mattered, that single thing. I stared up at the face of the goddess and I knew her! I stared at the little Pharaoh, the proffered breast.

"I am yours!" I said coldly.

Her stark primitive Egyptian features were no obstacle to my heart; I looked at the right hand which held her breast.

Love. This requires strength from us; this requires endurance; this requires an acceptance of all that is unknown.

"Take the dreams away from me, Heavenly Mother," I said. "Or reveal their purpose. And the path I must follow. Please."

Then in Latin I said an old litany:

> *You are she who has separated the Heavens and the Earth.*
> *You are she who rises in the Dog Star.*
> *You are she who makes strong the right.*
> *You are she who makes the children to love their parents.*
> *You are she who decreed mercy for all who ask for it.*

I believed these words, but in a wholly profane way. I believed them because I saw her worship as having collected together from the minds of men and women the best ideas of which men and women were capable. That was the function for which a goddess existed; that was the spirit from which she drew her vitality.

The lost phallus of Osiris exists in the Nile. And the Nile inseminates the fields. Oh, it was so lovely.

The trick was not to reject it, as Lucretius might have suggested, but to

realize what her image meant. To extract from that image the best in my own soul.

And when I looked down at the beautiful white flowers, I thought, “It is your wisdom, Mother, that these bloom.” And I meant by that only that the world itself was filled with so much to be cherished, preserved, honored, that pleasure itself was resplendent—and she, Isis, embodied these concepts that were too deep to be called ideas.

I loved her—this expression of goodness which was Isis.

The longer I looked at her stone face, the more it seemed she saw me. An old trick. The more I knelt there, the more it seemed she spoke to me. I allowed this to happen, fully aware that it meant nothing. The dreams were remote. They seemed a puzzle which would find its idiot resolution.

Then with true fervor, I crawled towards her and kissed her feet.

My worship was over.

I went out refreshed, jubilant.

I wasn't going to have those dreams anymore. There was still daylight. I was happy.

I found many friends in the courtyard of the Temple, and sitting down with them under the olive trees, I drew out of them all the information I needed for practical life, how to get caterers, hairdressers, all that. Where to buy this thing and the other.

In other words, I was armed by my rich friends with full equipment to run a fine house without actually cluttering it up with slaves I didn't want. I could stick with Flavius and the two girls. Excellent. Anything else could be hired or bought.

Finally, very tired, with my head full of names to remember and directions to recall, and very amused with the jokes and stories of these women, delighted by their ease in speaking Greek—which I had always loved—I sat back and thought, I can go home now.

I can begin.

The Temple was still very busy. I looked at the doors. Where was the Priest? Well, I would come back tomorrow. I didn't want to revive those dreams now, that was certain. Many people were coming and going with flowers and bread and some with birds to be set free for the goddess, birds that would take wing out of the high window of her Sanctuary.

How warm it was here. What a blaze of flowers covered the wall! I

had never thought there could be a place as beautiful as Tuscany, but maybe this place was beautiful too.

I went out of the courtyard, before the steps, and into the Forum.

I approached a man under the arches who was teaching a group of young boys all of what Diogenes has espoused, that we give up the flesh and all its pleasures, that we live pure lives in denial of the senses.

It was so much as Flavius had described it. But the man meant his words, and was well versed. He spoke of a liberating resignation. He caught my fancy. For this is what I thought had come to me in the Temple, a liberating resignation.

The boys who listened were too young to know this. But I knew it. I liked him. He had gray hair and wore a simple long tunic. He was not ostentatiously in rags.

I at once interrupted. With a humble smile I offered the counsel of Epicurus, that the senses wouldn't have been given us were they not good Wasn't this so? "Must we deny ourselves? Look, back at the courtyard of the Temple of Isis, look at the flowers covering the top of the wall! Is this not something to savor? Look at the roaring red of those flowers! Those flowers are in themselves enough to lift a person out of sorrow. Who is to say that eyes are wiser than hands or lips?"

The young men turned to me. I fell into discussions with several of them. How fresh and pretty they were. There were long-haired men from Babylon and even highborn Hebrews here, all with very hairy arms and chests, and many colonial Romans who were dazzled by the points I made, that in the flesh and in the wine, we find the truth of life.

"The flowers, the stars, the wine, the kisses of one's lover, all is part of Nature, surely," I said. I was of course on fire, having just come from the Temple, having just unburdened all fears and having resolved all doubts. I was for the moment invincible. The world was new.

The Teacher, whose name was Marcellus, came from under the arch to greet me.

"Ah, Gracious Lady, you amaze me," he said. "But from whom did you really learn what you believe? Was it from Lucretius? Or was it from experience? You realize that we must not ever encourage people to abandon themselves to the senses!"

"Have I said anything about abandon?" I asked. "To yield is not to abandon. It is to honor. I speak of a prudent life; I speak of listening to

the wisdom of our bodies. I speak of the ultimate intelligence of kindness, and enjoyment. And if you will know, Lucretius didn't teach me as much as one might think. He was always too dry for me, you know. I learned to embrace the glory of life from poets like Ovid."

The crowd of boys cheered.

"I learnt from Ovid" came shout after shout.

"Well, that's fine, but remember your manners as well as your lessons," I said firmly.

More cheering. Then the young men began tossing out verses from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

"That's splendid," I declared "How many here? Fifteen. Why don't you come to my house for a supper?" I asked. "Five nights from now, all of you. I need the time to prepare. I have many books I want to show you. I promise you, I will show you what a delicious feast can do for the soul!"

My invitation was accepted with amusement and laughter. I disclosed the location of my house.

"I am a widow. My name is Pandora. I invite you with all propriety, and the feast awaits you. Don't expect dancing boys and girls, for you will not find them under my roof. Expect delicious food. Expect poetry. Which of you can sing the verses of Homer? Truly sing them? Which of you sings them now from memory for pleasure!"

Laughter, conviviality. Victory. It seemed everybody could do this, and welcomed the opportunity. Someone made a soft mention of another Roman woman who would be most jealous when she discovered she had competition in Antioch.

"Nonsense," said another, "her table is overcrowded Lady, may I kiss your hand?"

"You must tell me who she is," I said. "I'll welcome her. I want to know her, and what I can learn from her."

The Teacher was smiling. I slipped him some money.

It was getting dusk. I sighed. Look. The rising stars of the tinted evening that precedes blackness.

I received the boys' chaste kisses and confirmed our feast.

But something had changed. It was as quick as the opening of one's eyes. Ah, painted eyes, no.

Perhaps it was only the awful pall of twilight.

I felt a shudder. *It is I who summoned you*. Who spoke those words?

Beware, for you would be stolen from me now and I will not have it.

I was dumbstruck. I held the teacher's hand warmly. He talked about moderation in living. "Look at my plain tunic," he said. "These boys have so much money, they can destroy themselves."

The boys protested.

But this was dim to me. I tried to listen. My eyes roved. Whence came that voice! Who spoke those words! Who summoned me and who would attempt the theft?

Then to my silent astonishment I saw a man, his head covered by his toga, watching me. I knew him immediately, by his forehead and his eyes. I recognized his walk now as he moved steadily away.

This was my brother, the youngest, Lucius, the one I despised. It had to be him. And behold the sly manner in which he fled from notice into the shadows.

I knew the whole person. Lucius. He waited at the end of the long portico.

I couldn't move, and it was getting dark. All the merchants who are open only in the day were gone. The taverns were putting out their lanterns or torches. One bookseller remained open, with great displays of books under the lamps above.

Lucius—my much detested youngest brother—not coming to welcome me with tears but gliding in the shadows of the portico. Why?

I feared I knew.

Meantime, the boys were begging me to go to the nearby wine garden with them, a lovely place. They were fighting over who would pay for my supper there.

Think, Pandora. This sweet little invitation is some keen test of the degree of my daring and freedom. And I should not go to a common tavern with the boys! But within moments I would be alone.

The Forum grew quiet. The fires blazed before the Temples. But there were great spaces of darkness. The man in the toga waited.

"No, I must be off now," I said. Desperately I thought, what I shall I do for a torchbearer? Dare I ask these youths to see me home? I could see their slaves waiting about, some already lighting their torches or lanterns.

Singing came from the Temple of Isis. *It was I who summoned you. Beware … for me and my purpose!*

“This is madness,” I muttered, waving goodnight to those who left in pairs or trios. I forced smiles and kind words.

I glared at the distant figure of Lucius, who now slouched at the end of the portico in front of doors closed for the night. His very posture was furtive and cowardly.

Quite suddenly, I felt a hand on my shoulder. I brushed it off immediately, wishing to lay down limits to such familiarity, and then I realized a man was whispering in my ear:

“The Priest at the Temple begs for you to come back, Madam. He needs to talk with you. He did not mean for you to leave without talking.”

I turned to see a Priest there beside me, in full Egyptian headdress and impeccable white linen and wearing a medallion of the goddess around his neck.

Oh, thank Heaven.

But before I could recover myself or answer, another man had stepped up boldly, heaving forward his ivory leg and foot. Two torchbearers accompanied him. We were embraced by a warm light.

“Does my Mistress wish to talk to this Priest?” he asked.

It was Flavius. He had followed my commands. He was wonderfully dressed as a Roman gentleman in the long tunic and a loose cloak. As a slave, he couldn’t wear a toga. His hair was neat and trimmed and looked as impressive as any free man’s. He was shirting clean and appeared completely confident.

Marcellus, the Philosopher-Teacher, lingered. “Lady Pandora, you are most gracious, and let me assure you that the tavern these boys frequent may give rise to another Aristotle or Plato but it is not a fit place for you.”

“I know that,” I said. “Don’t worry.”

The Teacher looked warily at the Priest and at the handsome Flavius. I slipped my arm about Flavius’s waist. “This is my steward, who will welcome you the night you come to me. Thank you for letting me disrupt your teaching. You’re a kind man.”

The Teacher's face stiffened. Then he leaned closer. “There's a man under the portico; don’t look at him now, but you need more slaves to protect you. This city is divided, dangerous.”

“Yes, so you see him too,” I said. “And his glorious toga, the mark of

his genteel birth!"

"It's getting dark," Flavius said. "I'll hire more torchbearers now and a litter. Right over there."

He thanked the Teacher, who reluctantly slipped away.

The Priest. He was still waiting. Flavius gestured for two more torchbearers and they came trotting to join us. We now had a plenitude of light.

I turned to the Priest "I will come to the Temple directly, but I must first talk with that man over there! The man in the shadows?" I pointed quite visibly. I stood in a flood of light. I might as well have been on a stage.

I saw the distant figure cringe and try to fade into the wall.

"Why?" Flavius asked with about as much humility as a Roman Senator. "Something is very wrong about that man. He's hovering. The Teacher was right."

"I know," I answered. I heard the dim, echoing laughter of a woman! Yea gods, I had to stay sane long enough to get home! I looked at Flavius. He had not heard the laughter.

There was one sure way to do this. "You torch-bearers, all of you, come with me," I said to the four of them. "Flavius, you stand here with the Priest and watch as I greet this man. I know him. Come only if I call."

"Oh, I don't like it," said Flavius.

"Neither do I," said the Priest. "They want you in the Temple, Madam, and we have many guards to escort you home."

"I won't disappoint you," I said, but I walked straight towards the toga-clad figure, crossing yard after yard of paved squares, the torches flaring around me.

The toga-clad man gave a violent start, with his whole body, and then he took a few steps away from the wall.

I stopped, still out in the square.

He had to come closer. I wasn't going to move. The four torches gasped and blew in the breeze. Anybody anywhere near could see us. We were the brightest thing in the Forum.

The man approached. He walked slow, then fast. The light struck his face. He was consumed with rage.

"Lucius," I whispered. "I see you, but I can't believe what I see."

“Nor can I,” he said. “What the hell are you doing here?” he said to me.

“What?” I was too baffled to answer.

“Our family is in disgrace in Rome and you’re making a spectacle of yourself in the middle of Antioch! Look at you! Painted and perfumed and your hair full of ointment! You are a whore.”

“Lucius!” I cried. “What in the name of the gods are you thinking? Our Father is dead! Your own brothers may be dead. How did you escape? Why aren’t you glad to see me? Why don’t you take me to your house?”

“Glad to see you!” he hissed. “We are in hiding here, you bitch!”

“How many of you? Who? What about Antony? What happened to Flora?”

He sneered with exasperation.

“They are murdered, Lydia, and if you do not get yourself to some safe corner where no roaming citizen of Rome can find you, you are dead too. Oh, that you would turn up here, spouting philosophy! Everybody in the taverns was talking about you! And that slave with the leg made of ivory! I saw you at noon, you wretched and infernal nuisance. Damn you, Lydia!”

This was pure unadulterated hate.

Again, came that distinct echoing laughter. Of course he did not hear it. Only I could hear it.

“Your wife, where is she. I want to see her! You *will* take me in!”

“I will not.”

“Lucius, I am your sister. I want to see your wife. You’re right. I’ve been foolish. I didn’t think things through very well. There are so many miles of sea between here and Rome. It never occurred to me—”

“That’s just it, Lydia, you never really think of anything sensible or practical. You never did. You’re an uncompromising dreamer, and stupid on top of it.”

“Lucius, what can I do?”

He turned from right to left, sizing up the torchbearers.

He narrowed his eyes. I could feel his hatred. Oh, Father, do not see this from Heaven or the Underworld. My brother wants me dead!

“Yes,” I said, “four torchbearers and we are in the middle of the Forum. And don’t forget about the man with the ivory leg over there and the Priest,” I said softly. “And do regard the soldiers outside the Emperor’s Temple. Take note. How goes it with your wife? I must see her. I’ll come

in secret. She'll be happy that I am alive, surely, for I love her like a sister. I will never connect myself with you in public. I've made a grievous error."

"Oh, knock it off," he said. "Sisters! She's dead!" He looked from right to left again. "They were all massacred. Don't you understand? Get away from me." He took a few steps back but I moved forward, drawing the light around him again.

"But who is with you, then? Who escaped with you? Who else is alive?"

"Priscilla," he said, "and we were damned lucky to get away when we did."

"What? Your mistress? You came here with your mistress? The children, they are all dead?"

"Yes, of course, they must be. How could they have escaped? Look, Lydia, I give you one night to get out of this city and away from me. I am lodged here comfortably and will not tolerate you. Get out of Antioch. Go by sea or land, I don't care, but go!"

"You left your wife and children to die? And came here with Priscilla?"

"How the hell did you get away, you stinking bitch in heat, answer me that! Of course you had no children, the great famous barren womb of our family!" He looked at the torchbearers. "Get away from here!" he shouted.

"Stay right where you are."

I put my hand on my dagger. I moved the mantle so that he could see the flash of the metal.

He looked genuinely surprised and then gave a ghastly false smile. Oh, revolting!

"Lydia, I wouldn't hurt you for the world!" he said as if insulted. "I am only worried for us all. Word came from the house. Everyone had been killed. What was I to do, go back and die for nothing?"

"You're lying. And don't you call me a bitch in heat again unless you want to become a gelding. I know you lie. Somebody tipped you off, and you got out! Or it was you who betrayed us all."

Ah, how sad for him that he was not more clever, more quick. He did not take umbrage at these loathsome charges as he should have. He just tilted his head and said:

"No, that's not true. Look, come with me now. Send these men away,

get rid of that slave, and I will help you. Priscilla adores you."

"She's a liar and slut! And how calm you have become in the face of my suspicions. Nothing as steamed as when you saw me! I just accused you of betraying our family to the *Delatores*. I accused you of abandoning your wife and children to the Praetorian Guard. Can you hear these words?"

"It's utter stupidity, I would never do such a thing."

"You reek of guilt. Look at you. I should kill you now!"

He backed up. "Get out of Antioch!" he said. "I don't care how you judge me or what I had to do to save myself and Priscilla. Get out of Antioch!"

There were no words for my judgment. It was harsher than my soul could hold.

He backed away, and then walked fast into the darkness, disappearing before he reached the portico. I listened to his steps as they echoed down the street.

"Dear Heaven!" I whispered. I was about to cry. My hand was still on the dagger, however.

I turned around. The Priest and Flavius stood much closer than ordered. I was frankly utterly baffled, stopped.

I didn't know what to do.

"Come to the Temple at once," said the Priest.

"All right," I said. "Flavius, you come with me, stand watch with the four torchmen, I want you right by the Temple guards, and keep an eye out for that man."

"Who is he, Madam," Flavius whispered as I strode towards the Temple, leading them both.

How regal he looked. He had the presence of a free man. And his tunic was beautiful thin wool, striped in gold, belted in gold, well fitted across his chest. Even his ivory leg had been polished. I was more than pleased. But was he armed?

Beneath his quiet demeanor, he was deeply protective of me.

In my misery, I couldn't form words to answer him.

Several litters were now crisscrossing the square, carried on the shoulders of hurrying slaves, and other slaves carried the torches beside them. A kind of soft glow rose from the commotion. People were on their way to dinners or private ceremonies. Something was happening in

the Temple.

I turned to the Priest. “You will guard my slave and my torchbearers?”

“Yes, Madam,” he said.

It was full night. The breeze was sweet. A few lanterns had been lighted under the long porticoes. We drew near to the braziers of the goddess.

“Now I must leave you,” I said. “You have my permission to protect my property, as you so eloquently put it earlier, unto death. Don’t move from these doors. I won’t leave here without you. I won’t stay long. I don’t want to. But have you a knife?”

“Yes, Madam, but it’s untried. It was among your possessions, and when you did not come home and it grew dark …”

“Don’t recount the history of the world,” I said. “You did the right thing. You probably will always do the right thing.”

I turned my back to the square and said, “Let me see it. I’ll know if it’s decorative or sharp.”

When he drew it from the forearm sling, I touched it with my finger and blood came from the cut. I returned it. This had belonged to my Father. So my Father had filled my trunk with his weapons as well as his wealth, so that I might live!

Flavius and I exchanged one last slow glance.

The Priest grew very anxious. “Madam, please come inside,” he said.

I found myself ushered right through the tall doors into the Temple, and with the Priestesses and the Priest of earlier that afternoon.

“You want something of me?” I asked. I was out of breath. I was faint. “I have much on my mind, things that must be done. Can this wait?”

“No, Lady, it cannot!” said the Priest.

I felt a shudder in my limbs as if I were being watched by someone. The tall shadows of the Temples were too concealing.

“All right,” I said. “It’s about those awful dreams, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” said the Priest. “And more man that.”

6

We were taken into another chamber, and this one had only one dim light. I couldn't see well in the flickering of the flame and I realized I could not make out the faces of the other Priest and Priestess. An Oriental screen, a screen of worked ebony, partitioned off the end of this room, and I felt certain someone was behind it.

But I felt nothing but gentleness emanating from all of these gathered here. I looked around. I was so miserable over my brother, and so impatient that I couldn't find polite words.

"Please, you must forgive me," I said. "A dire matter requires me to hurry." I was becoming afraid for Flavius's safety. "Do send guards to flank my slave outside, now."

"Done, Lady," said the Priest, the one I knew. "I beg you to stay and recount your story again."

"Who is there!" I pointed. "Behind that screen. Why is this person concealed?" This was very rude and irreverent, but I was in a full state of alarm.

"That is one of our most devoted supporters," said the Priest who had escorted me to the shrine of Isis earlier. "This one often comes by night to pray at the shrine and has given much money to the Temple. He only wants to hear what we have to say."

"Well, I'm not so sure of that. Tell him to come out!" I said. "Besides, what is it we're supposed to say?"

I was infuriated suddenly that they might have betrayed my confidences. I hadn't told them my true Roman name, only of my tragedy, but the Temple was sacred.

They became all flustered in their gentleness.

The figure, draped in the toga, much taller than my brother, in fact, remarkably tall, stepped out from behind the screen. The toga was dark, but nevertheless the classical garment. His face was hidden by the toga. I could only see his lips.

He whispered:

"Don't be afraid. You told the Priest and Priestesses this afternoon of blood dreams."

“This was in confidence!” I said indignantly. I was completely suspicious, for I had told a good deal mote than blood dreams to these people.

I tried better to see the figure. There was something distinctly familiar about the figure—the voice, even in a whisper … something else.

“Lady Pandora,” said the Priestess who had so consoled me earlier. “You talked to me of an old legendary worship, worship which we oppose and condemn. A worship of our Beloved Mother which once involved human sacrifice. I told you that we abhor such things. And we do.”

“However,” said the Priest, “there is someone afoot in the city of Antioch who does drink blood from humans, draining them until they are dead. Then he flings the bodies before dawn on our steps. The very steps of our Temple.” He sighed. “Lady Pandora, I am entrusting you with a powerful confidence.”

All thought of my evil brother left me. The hound of the dreams bore down upon me with its evil breath. I tried to gather my wits. I thought again of the voice I’d heard in my head: *It is I who summoned you*. The feminine laughter.

“No, it was a woman’s laughter,” I murmured.

“Lady Pandora?”

“You tell me there is someone afoot in Antioch who drinks blood.”

“By night. He cannot walk in the day,” said the Priest.

I saw the dream, the rising sun, knowing I the blood drinker would die in the rays of the sun.

“You’re telling me that these blood drinkers I saw in my dream exist?” I asked. “That one of them is here.”

“Someone wants us to believe this,” said the Priest, “that the old legends have truth, but we don’t know who it is. And we are leery of the Roman authorities. You know what happened in Rome. You came speaking of dreams in which the sun killed you, in which you were a blood drinker. Lady, I’m not betraying your confidences here. This one —” He gestured to the tall man. “This is the one who reads the ancient writing. He’s read the legends. Your dreams echo the legends.”

“I am sick,” I said. “I need a chair. I have enemies to worry about.”

“I’ll protect you from your enemies,” said the mysterious tall man in the toga.

"How can you? You don't even know who they are."

There came a silent voice from the tall man in the toga:

Your brother Lucius betrayed the entire family. He did it out of jealousy of your brother Antony. He sold out everybody to the Delatores *for a guaranteed one-third of the family's wealth and left before the killing began. He had the cooperation of Sejanus of the Praetorian Guard. He wants to kill you.*

I was shocked but also not about to let this person overwhelm me.

You speak just like the woman, I said silently. *You speak right to my thoughts. You speak like the woman who said to me in my head, "It is I who summoned you."*

I could feel his shock at this. But I too slumped as if dealt a mortal blow. So this creature knew all about my brothers, and Lucius had betrayed us. And this creature knew.

What are you? I fired off to the mind speaker, the tall one. *Are you a magician?*

No answer.

The Priest and Priestess, unable to hear this silent exchange, pursued their course.

"This blood drinker, Lady Pandora, he leaves human victims on the steps of the Temple before dawn. He writes an old name in Egyptian on his victims with their blood. Should the government discover this, our Temple might be held accountable. This is not our worship.

"Will you recount again for us—for our friend here—your dreams? We must protect the worship of Isis. We did not believe in these old legends … until this creature appeared and began his killing, then comes out of the sea a beautiful Roman woman who speaks of similar beings who are in her dreams."

"What name does he write on his victims?" I asked. "This blood drinker. Is it Isis?"

"It's meaningless, it's forbidden, it's old Egyptian. It is one of the names by which Isis was once called, but never by us."

"What is it?"

None of them, including the silent one, answered me.

In the silence, I thought of Lucius and I almost wept. Then hatred came over me, deep hatred, as it had in the Forum when I spoke with him, saw his cowardly rage. Betrayed the entire family. To be weak is a

dangerous thing. Antony and my Father had been such strong men.

"Lady Pandora," said the Priest. "Tell us what you might know of this creature in Antioch. Have you dreamed of him?"

I thought of the dreams. I tried to respond in depth to what these people in this Temple were telling me.

The tall distant Roman spoke:

"Lady Pandora knows nothing about this blood drinker. She is telling you the truth. She knows only the dreams and there have been no names spoken in her dreams. In her dreams she sees an earlier time of Egypt."

"Well, thank you, Gracious Lord!" I said furiously. "And just how have you arrived at that conclusion?"

"By reading your thoughts!" the Roman said, quite unruffled. "The same as I have regarding those who would put you in danger here. I'll protect you from your brother."

"Indeed. You had better leave that to me. It is I who will settle that score with him. Now, let us leave the question of my personal misfortune. And you explain to me, most clever one, why I am having these dreams! Fork up some useful magic from your mind reading. You know, a man with your gifts should post yourself at the courthouse, and determine cases for the judges if you can read minds. Why don't you go to Rome and become the advisor to the Emperor Tiberius?"

I could feel, positively feel, the little tumult in the heart of the distant concealed Roman. Again, there came that sense of something familiar about this creature. Of course I was no stranger to necromancers, astrologists or oracles. But this man had mentioned specific names—Antony, Lucius. He was an astounder.

"Tell me, oh, mysterious one," I said. "How dose do my dreams come to what you've read in the old writing? And this blood drinker, the one that's roaming Antioch, is he a mortal man?"

Silence.

I strained to see the Roman more dearly but couldn't. He had in fact receded somewhat into the darkness. My nerves were on the breaking point. I wanted to kill Lucius; in fact, I had no choice.

The Roman said softly, "She knows nothing of this blood drinker in Antioch. Tell her what you know of him—for it may be he, this blood drinker, who is sending her the dreams."

I was confused. The woman's voice had been so dear in my head

earlier, *It is I who summoned you.*

This was causing confusion in the Roman; I could feel it like a little turbulence in the air.

"We've seen him," said the Priest. "Indeed, we watch, in order to collect these poor drained corpses before anyone finds them and blames the deed on us. He is burned, burned all over his body, blackened. He cannot be a man. He is an old god, burnt black as if in an inferno."

"Amon Ra," I said. "But why didn't he die? In the dreams, I die."

"Oh, it is a horror to behold," said the Priestess suddenly, as if she could contain herself no longer. "This thing cannot be human. Its bones show through its blackened skin. But it is weak and its victims are weak. It barely staggers, yet it can drain the blood from the poor maimed souls upon whom it feeds. It crawls away in the morning as if it hasn't the strength to walk."

The Priest seemed impatient.

"But he's alive," said the Priest. "Alive, god or demon or man, he lives. And each time he drinks blood from one of these weaklings, he grows a little stronger. And he is straight from the old legends, and you have dreamed of them. He wears his hair long in the old Egyptian style. He is in agony from his burns. He spits curses at the Temple."

"What kind of curses?"

The Priestess interjected at once. "He seems to think that Queen Isis has betrayed him. He speaks in old Egyptian. We barely understand him. Our Roman friend here, our benefactor, has translated the words for us."

"Stop!" I demanded. "My head is reeling. Don't say anymore. The man over there has told the truth. I know nothing of this bloody burnt creature. I don't know why I have the dreams. I think a woman is sending the dreams to me. It may be the Queen I described to you, the Queen on the throne, in fetters, who weeps, I don't know why!"

"You have never seen this man?" asked the Priest.

The Roman answered for me. "She has not."

"Oh, your marvelous talents as spokesman again!" I said to the Roman. "I am so delighted! Why are you hiding behind your toga? Why do you stand over there, so far away that I can't see you? Have you seen this blood drinker?"

"Be patient with me," he said. It was spoken with such charm that I couldn't bring myself to say more to him. I turned on the Priest and the

Priestess.

"Why don't you lie in wait for this black burnt thing," I said, "this weakling? I am hearing voices in my head. But it's the words of a woman that come to me, warning me of danger. It's a woman laughing. I want to leave now. I want to go home. I have something that must be done, and must be done cleverly. I need to go."

"I will protect you from your enemy," said the Roman.

"That's charming," I answered. "If you can protect me, if you know who my enemy is, then why can't you lie in wait for this blood drinker? Catch him in a gladiator's net. Sink five tridents into him. Five of you can hold him. All you have to do is hold him till the sun rises, the rays of Amon Ra will kill him. It may take two days, even three, but they'll kill him. He'll burn like I did in the dream. And you, mind reader, why don't you help?"

I broke off, shocked and disoriented. Why was I so certain of this. Why was I using the name Amon Ra so casually, as if I believed in the god? I scarcely knew his fables.

"The creature knows when we are lying in wait," said the Priest and Priestess. "He knows when the tall friend is here, and does not come. We are vigilant, we are patient, we think we will see no more of him, and then he comes. And now you have come with the dreams."

A vivid garish flash of the dream returned. I was a man. I argued and cursed. I refused to do something which I had been ordered to do. A woman was weeping. I fought off those who tried to stop me. But I had not foreseen that I would, as I ran away, come to a desert place where I could find no shelter.

If the others spoke, I took no note of it. I heard the woman of the dream crying, the fettered Queen, and the woman was a blood drinker too. "You must drink from the Fount," said the man in my dream. And he wasn't a man. I wasn't a man. We were gods. We were blood drinkers. That's why the sun destroyed me. It was the force of a more powerful god. Layers upon layers of the dream lay below this polished bit of remembrance.

I came to my senses, or back to an awareness of the others, when someone placed a cup of wine in my hands. I drank it. It was excellent wine, from Italy, and I felt refreshed, though at once tired. It would make the walk home much too tiring if I drank any more. I needed my

strength.

"Take this away," I said. I looked at the Priestess. "In the dream, I told you, I was one of them. They wanted me to drink from the Queen. They called her 'the Fount.' They said she did not know how to rule. I told you."

The Priestess burst into tears and turned her back, hunching up her narrow shoulders.

"I was one of the blood drinkers," I said. "I was thirsty for blood. Listen, I am no lover of blood sacrifice. What do you know here? Does Queen Isis exist somewhere, within this Temple, bound in fetters—"

"No!" cried the Priest. The Priestess turned around, echoing the same horrified denial.

"All right, then, but you said there were legends that she did exist somewhere in material form. Now, what do you think is happening? She has summoned me here to assist this one, this burnt-up weakling? Why me? How can I do it? I'm a mortal woman. Remembering dreams of a past life does not enhance my power. Listen! It was a woman's voice, I told you, which spoke in my head to me, not an hour ago out there in the Forum, and she said 'It is I who summoned you,' I heard this, and she swore she would not have me stolen from her. Then up comes this mortal man who's more of a threat to me than anything in my head. The voice in my head had warned me of him! I don't want any of your mysterious Egyptian religion. I refuse to go mad. It is you, all of you—especially the talented mind reader—who must find this thing before he makes any more trouble. Allow me to go on."

I stood up and began to walk out of the chamber.

The Roman spoke behind me, most gently, "Are you really going out into the night alone, knowing full well what awaits you—that you have an enemy who wants to kill you, and that you have in your dreams knowledge that may draw this blood drinker to you?"

This was such a change of pace for me lofty mind reader, such a slip into semi-sarcastic vernacular, that I almost laughed.

"I'm going home now!" I said firmly.

They all pleaded, in different modes and tones. "Stay in the Temple."

"Absolutely not," I said. "If the dreams return I'll write them down for you."

"How can you be so foolish!" said the Roman with genteel impatience.

You would have thought *he* was my brother!

"That is an unforgivable impertinence," I said. "Are not magicians and mind readers bound by manners?" I looked to the Priest and Priestess. "Who is this man?"

I went out and they followed me. I hurried to the door.

In the light I saw the Priestess's face. "We know only that he's our friend. Please listen to his advice. He has never done anything but good for the Temple. He comes to read the Egyptian books we have here. He buys them up from the shops as soon as the sea brings them to us. He is wise. He can read minds, as you see."

"You promised an escort of guards," I said.

And I will be with you. The voice came from the Roman, though I did not know where he was now at all. He was not in the great hall.

"Come, live within the Temple of Isis, and nothing can harm you," said the Priest.

"I'm not quite the woman for living in the Temple Compound," I said, trying to sound as humble and grateful as I could. "I'd drive you mad in a week. Please open the door."

I slipped out. I felt I had escaped from a dark corridor of spiderwebs, back into the Roman night, among Roman columns and Roman temples.

I discovered Flavius pressed against the column beside me, staring down into the stairs. Our four torchbearers were gathered next to us, very much alarmed.

There were men who were obviously Temple guards, but they stood cleaving to the doors, as did Flavius.

"Madam, go back in!" whispered Flavius.

At the foot of the stairs stood a group of helmeted Roman soldiers in full military dress with polished muscled breastplates and short red cloaks and tunics. They carried their deadly swords as if they were in battle. Their bronze helmets shone in the light of the Temple braziers.

Battle dress within the city. Everything but shields. And who was the leader?

Lucius, my brother, stood beside the leader. Lucius wore his battle tunic of red, but no breastplate or sword. His toga was doubled and redoubled over his left arm. He was clean, with shining hair, exuding money. A jeweled dagger was on his forearm; another dagger was in his belt.

Trembling, he pointed at me.

"There she is," said Lucius. "Of the entire family, she escaped the order of Sejanus. It was a plot to kill Tiberius and somehow she bribed her way out of Rome!"

I quickly sized up the soldiers. There were two young Asiatics but the others were *old* and *Roman;* six in number. Yea gods, they must have thought I was Circe!

"Go back in," said my beloved and loyal Flavius, "seek sanctuary."

"Be still," I said. "There's always time for that."

The leader, he was the key, and I saw that he was an older man, older than my brother Antony, yet not as old as my Father. He had thick gray eyebrows and was impeccably clean shaven.

He wore battle scars proudly, one on his cheek, another on his thigh. He was exhausted. His eyes were red and he shook his head as if to clear his vision.

This man's arms were very tanned, yet he was well muscled. This meant war—lots and lots of war.

Lucius declared, "The entire family stands condemned. She should be executed on the spot!"

I decided my strategy as if I were Caesar himself. I spoke up at once, proceeding two steps down:

"You are the Legate, are you not? How tired you must be!" I took his hand in both of mine. "Were you under the command of Germanicus?"

He nodded.

First blow struck!

"My brothers fought with Germanicus in the North," I said. "And Antony, the eldest, after the Triumphal March in Rome, lived long enough to tell us of the bones found in the Teutoburg Forest."

"Ah, Madam, to see that field of bones, an entire army ambushed and the bodies left to rot!"

"Two of my brothers died in the battle. It was in a storm, in the North Sea."

"Madam, you never saw such a disaster, but do you think the Barbarian God, Thor, could frighten our Germanicus?"

"Never. And you came here with the General?"

"Went everywhere with him, from the banks of the Elbe in the North to the South end of the River Nile."

“How marvelous, and you are so tired, Tribune, look at you, you need sleep. Where is the famous Governor Gnaeus Calpurnius Piso? Why did it take him so long to quiet the city?”

“Because he’s not here, Madam, and he doesn’t dare to come back. Some say he makes a mutiny in Greece, others that he flees for his life.”

“Stop listening to her!” shouted Lucius.

“He was never much loved in Rome, either,” I said. “It was Germanicus whom my brothers loved and my Father praised.”

“Indeed, and if we had been given one more year—one more year, Madam—we could have extinguished the fire of that bloody upstart King Arminius forever! We didn’t even need that long! You spoke of the North Sea. We fought on all terrain.”

“Oh, yes, in the thick of the forest, and tell me this, were you there, Sir, when they found the lost standard of General Varus’s legions? Is the story true!”

“Ah, Madam, when that golden eagle was raised, you never heard such cries as from the soldiers.”

“This woman is a liar and a traitor,” shouted Lucius.

I turned on him. “Don’t push me too far! You’re past all patience now. Do you even know the numbers of the Legions of General Varus who were ambushed in the Teutoburg Forest? I thought not! They were the Seventh, the Eighth and the Ninth.”

“Right, correct,” said the Legate. “And we could have wiped out those tribes completely The Empire would reach to the Elbe! But for some reason, and mine is not the place to question, our Emperor Tiberius called us back.”

“Hmmm, and then condemns your beloved leader forgoing to Egypt.”

“Madam, it was no trip to seize power, Germanicus’s trip to Egypt. It was because of a famine.”

“Yes, and Germanicus had been declared *Imperium Maius* of all the Eastern provinces,” I said.

“And there was so much trouble!” said the Legate. “You can not imagine the morale, the habits of the soldiers here, but our General never slept! He went directly when he heard of the famine.”

“And you with him?”

“All of us, his cohorts. In Egypt he delighted in seeing the old monuments. So did I.”

“Ah, how marvelous for him. You must tell me about Egypt! You know that I, as a Senator’s daughter, cannot go to Egypt any more than can a Senator. I would so love—”

“Why is that, Madam?” asked the Legate.

“She’s lying to you!” roared Lucius. “Her whole family was murdered.”

“Very simple reason, Tribune,” I said to the Legate. “It’s no state secret. Rome is so dependent upon Egypt for corn that the Emperor wants to prevent the country from ever falling under the control of a powerful traitor. Surely you grew up as I did in dread of another Civil War.”

“I put my faith in our Generals," said the Legate.

“You are right to do so. And you saw nothing from Germanicus but loyalty, is that not so?”

“It is absolutely so. Ah, Egypt. We saw such Temples and statues!”

“The singing statues,” I asked, “did you see them, the colossal man and woman who wail in the rising of the sun.”

“Yes, I heard it, Madam,” he said, nodding furiously. “I heard the sound! It is magical. Egypt is full of magic!”

“Hmmm.” A tremor ran through me. I banished it. In a flash I saw two images mixed: that of the tall Roman in his toga, and that of a burnt and cunning creature! Think straight, Pandora!

“And in the Temple of Ramses the Great,” said the Legate, “one of the Priests read the writing on the walls. All about victory? All about battle? We laughed because nothing really changes, Madam.”

“And Governor Piso, do you believe these rumors? Can we not speak safely of them, of rumors as if rumors were not things?”

“Everyone here despises him!” said the Legate. “He was a bad soldier, plain and simple! And Agrippina the Elder, Germanicus’s beloved wife, is on her way to Rome now with the General’s ashes. She will officially accuse the Governor before the Senate!”

“Yes, how courageous of her, and that is how it should be done. If families are judged without trial, then we have fallen into tyranny, haven’t we? Here, our friendly lunatic, don’t you agree to that?”

Lucius was speechless. He turned red.

“And in the Teutoburg Forest,” I said tenderly, “that gloomy arena for our doom, did you see all the bones of our lost legions, scattered about?”

“Buried them, Madam, with these hands!” The Legate held up his weathered callused palms. “For who could tell what bones were ours and

what bones were theirs? And Madam, the platform of that cowardly, sneaking King was still standing, from which the loathsome long-haired slob had ordered the sacrifice to his pagan gods of our men."

Nods and noble mumbles came from the other soldiers.

"I was but a small child," I said, "when word came of the ambush of General Varus. But I remember our Divine Emperor Augustus—how he let his hair grow long in mourning and how he would pound his head on the walls, crying, 'Varus, bring me back my legions.' "

"You actually saw him this way?"

"Oh, many a time, and was present one night when he discussed his often mentioned thoughts—that the Empire must not try to push further. Rather it should police the states which it now contains."

"Then Caesar Augustus did say this!" said the Legate in fascination.

"He cared about you," I said to the Legate. "How many years have you been in the field? Do you have a wife?"

"Oh, how I long to go home," said the Legate. "And now that my General has fallen. My wife is gray-haired as I am. I see her when we go to Rome for parades."

"Yes, and compulsory service was only six years under the Republic, but now, you must fight for what? Twelve? Twenty? But who am I to criticize Augustus, whom I loved as I loved my Father and all my dead brothers?"

Lucius could see what was happening. He sputtered when he spoke:

"Tribune, read my Safe Conduct! Read it!"

The Legate looked truly annoyed.

My brother marshaled what he could of his rhetoric, which wasn't much. "She lies. She is condemned. Her family is dead. I was compelled to bear witness to Sejanus because they sought to kill Tiberius himself!"

"You turned on your own family?" asked the soldier.

"Oh, don't wear yourself out with this," I said "The man has harried me all day. He has discovered that I am a woman alone, an heiress, and thinks that this is some uncivilized outpost of the Empire where he can bring a charge against a Senator's daughter with no proof. Dear lunatic, do pay attention. Julius Caesar gave Antioch its municipal standing less than one hundred years ago. There are legions stationed here, are there not?"

I looked at the Legate.

The Legate turned and glowered at my trembling brother.

"What is this Safe Conduct?" I asked. "This bears the name Tiberius."

The Legate snatched it from Lucius before Lucius could respond and handed the scroll to me. I had to take my hand off my dagger to unroll the paper.

"Ah, Sejanus of the Praetorian Guard! I knew it. And the Emperor probably knows nothing of it. Tribune, do you know those palace guards make one and one half times what a Legionnaire makes? And now they have these *Delatores*, given incentive to charge others with crimes for one-third of the condemned man's property!"

The Legate was now sizing up my brother and every flaw in Lucius shone in the light; his cowardly posture, his trembling hands, his shifty eyes, his growing desperation in the pursing of his lips.

I turned to Lucius.

"Do you realize, you madman, whoever you are, what you are asking of this seasoned and wise Roman officer? What if he should believe your insane lies? What will become of him when the letter arrives from Rome inquiring into my whereabouts and the disposition of my fortune!"

"Sir, this woman is a traitor!" shouted Lucius. "On my honor I swear—"

"What honor is that?" asked the soldier under his breath. His eyes fixed on Lucius.

"If Rome were such," I said, "that families as old as mine could be so easily dispatched as this man asks you now to do with me, then why would the widow of Germanicus dare to go before the Senate for a trial?"

"They are all executed," said my brother, who was at his worst and most solemn, and seemed to have lost all touch with the effect of his words, "every one of them, because they were in a plot to kill Tiberius and I was given Safe Conduct and passage out for reporting them, as was my duty, to the *Delatores*, and to Sejanus, with whom I spoke myself!"

The possibilities were making themselves known slowly to the Legate.

"Sir," I said to Lucius, "have you anything else on your person that identifies you?"

"I don't need anything else!" said Lucius. "Your fate is death."

"Same as it was for your Father?" asked the Legate, "and your wife? Had you children?"

"Throw her into prison tonight, and write to Rome!" declared Lucius. "You'll see that I speak the truth!"

“And where will you be, whoever you are, while I am in prison? Looting my house?”

“You slut!” shouted Lucius. “Don’t you see this is all feminine wiles and lurid distraction!”

There was shock among the soldiers, revulsion in the face of the Legate. Flavius moved next to me.

“Officer,” asked Flavius with tempered dignity, “what am I allowed to do on behalf of my Mistress against this madman?”

“You use such words again, Sir,” I said firmly to Lucius, “and I’ll lose my patience.”

The Legate took Lucius’s arm. Lucius’s right hand went to his dagger.

“Just who are you?” the Legate demanded. “Are you one of the *Delatores*? You tell me you turned on your whole family?”

“Tribune,” I said, laying the gentlest touch yet on his arm. “My Father’s roots went back to the time of Romulus and Remus. We know no origins other than those in Rome. It was the same with my Mother, who was herself the daughter of a Senator. This man is saying rather … horrible things.”

“So it seems,” said the Legate, narrowing his gaze, as he inspected Lucius. “Where are your friends here, your companions; where do you live?”

“You can’t do anything to me!” said Lucius.

The Legate glared at Lucius’s hand on the dagger.

“You prepare to draw that against me!” asked the Legate.

Lucius clearly was at a loss.

“Why did you come to Antioch?” I demanded of Lucius. “Were you the bearer of the poison that killed Germanicus?”

“Arrest her!” shouted Lucius.

“No, I don’t believe my own accusation. Not even Sejanus would put such treachery in the hands of a petty scoundrel like you! Come now, what else do you have on your person to connect you with this family, this Safe Conduct which you say came from the pen of Sejanus?”

Lucius was utterly baffled.

“I certainly have nothing belonging to me to connect me to your wild and bloody sagas and tales,” I said.

The Legate interrupted me. “Nothing to connect you to this name?” He took the Safe Conduct from my hand.

“Absolutely nothing,” I said, “nothing but this madman here who is spouting horrors, and would lead the world to believe that our Emperor has lost his wits. Only he connects me with his bloody plot without witness or verification, and hurls insults at me.”

The Legate rolled up the Safe Conduct. “And your purpose here, Madam?” he asked in a whisper.

“To live in peace and quiet,” I said softly. “To live in safety and under the true shelter of Roman rule.”

Now I knew the battle had been won. But something else was required to seal the victory. I took another gamble.

Slowly I reached for my dagger and slowly I brought it out of its sling.

Lucius leapt back at once. He drew his dagger and lunged at me. He was immediately stabbed by the Legate and at least two of the soldiers.

He hung there bleeding on their weapons, staring from right to left, and then he spoke, but his mouth was too full of blood. His eyes widened; it seemed again he would speak. Then, as the soldiers withdrew their daggers, his body folded up on the cobblestones at the foot of the stairs.

My brother Lucius was quite mercifully dead.

I looked at him and shook my head.

The Legate looked at me. This was a significant moment, and I knew it.

“What is it, Tribune,” I asked, “that separates us from the long-haired barbarians of the North? Is it not law? Written law? Traditional law? Is it not justice? That men and women are called to account for what they do?”

“Yes, Madam,” he said.

“You know,” I went on in a reverent voice, staring at this heap of blood and clothes and flesh that lay on the stones, “I saw our great Emperor Caesar Augustus on the day of his death.”

“You saw him? You did?”

I nodded. “When they were certain he was to die, we were rushed to him with a few other close friends. It was his hope to put down rumors in the capital that might lead to unrest. He had sent for a mirror and combed his hair. He was primly propped up. And he asked us as we entered the room: Didn’t we think he’d played his part well in the comedy of life?

“I thought, what courage! And then he made some further joke, the old theatrical line they say after plays:

> If I have made you happy, kindly let me know
> your appreciation with a warm goodbye.

“I could tell you more, but—”

“Oh, please do,” said the Legate.

“Well, why not?” I asked. “It was told to me that the Emperor said of Tiberius, his chosen successor, ‘Poor Rome, to be chewed slowly by those sluggish jaws!’ ”

The Legate smiled. “But there wasn’t anyone else,” he said under his breath.

“Thank you, Tribune, for all your assistance. Would you allow me to take from my purse sufficient funds to treat you and your soldiers to a fine dinner—”

“No, Madam, I wouldn’t have it be said I or any man here was bribed. Now this dead man. Do you know anything more of him?”

“Only this, Officer, that his body probably belongs in the river.”

The soldiers all laughed among themselves.

“Good night, Gracious Lady,” said the soldier.

And off I went, striding across the blackness of the Forum, with my beloved one-legged Flavius at my side and the torchbearers round us.

Only now did I shake all over. Only now did the sweat cover my whole body.

When we had plunged deeply into the unbroken darkness of a small alleyway, I said, “Flavius, let these torchbearers go. There is no reason for them to know where we are headed.”

“Madam, I don’t have any lantern.”

“The night’s full of stars and has a near full moon. Look! Besides, there are others from the Temple who are following us.”

“There are?” he asked. He paid off the torchbearers and they ran back towards the mouth of the street.

“Yes. There is one watching. And besides, we can see well enough by the lighted windows and Heaven’s light, don’t you think? I am tired, so tired.”

I walked on, reminding myself again and again that Flavius could not

keep up. I began to weep.

"Tell me something with your great philosophical knowledge," I said as I walked on, determined to make the tears stop. "Tell me why evil people are so stupid? Why are so many of them just plain stupid?"

"Madam, I think there are quite a few evil people who are quite clever," he said. "But never have I seen such skilled rhetoric on the part of anyone, either bad or good, as your talents revealed just now."

"I'm delighted that you know that that is all it was," I said. "Rhetoric. And to think he had the same teachers as I, the same library, the same Father—" My voice broke.

He put his arm gingerly about my shoulder and this time I didn't tell him to move away. I let him steady me. We walked faster as a pair.

"No," I said, "Flavius, the majority of the evil are just plain dumb, I've seen it all my life. The true crafty evil person is rare. It's bumbling that causes most of the misery of the world, utter stupid bumbling. It's underestimation of one's fellow man! You watch what happens with Tiberius. Tiberius Caesar and the Guard. Watch what happens to that damned Sejanus. You can sow the seeds of distrust everywhere, and lose yourself in an overgrown field."

"We are home, Madam," he said.

"Oh, thank God, you know it. I could never have told you this was the house."

Within moments, he stopped and turned the key in a lock. The smell of urine was everywhere overpowering, as it always was in the back streets of ancient cities. A lantern threw a dim light on our wooden door. The light danced in the jet of water which fell from the lion's mouth in the fountain.

Flavius gave a series of knocks. It sounded to me as if the women answering the inner door were crying.

"Oh, Lord, now what?" I said. "I am too sleepy. Whatever it is, tend to it." I went inside.

"Madam," squealed one of the girls. I couldn't remember her name. "I didn't let him in. I swear I never unbolted the door. I have no key to the gate. We had this house, all this, ready for you!" She sobbed.

"What on Earth are you talking about?" I asked.

But I knew. I'd seen in the corner of my eye. I knew. I turned and saw a very tall Roman sitting in my newly refurbished living room. He sat

relaxed with ankle on knee in a gilded wooden chair.

"It's all right, Flavius," I said. "I know him."

And I did. Because it was Marius. Marius the tall Keltoi. Marius, who had charmed me in childhood Marius, whom I had almost identified in the shadows of the Temple.

He rose at once.

He came towards me, where I stood in the darkness on the edges of the atrium, and he whispered, "My beautiful Pandora!"

He stopped just short of touching me. “Oh, do, please,” I said. I moved to kiss him, but he moved away. The room had scattered lamps. He played the shadows.

“Marius, of course, Marius! And you look not one day older than when I saw you in my girlhood. Your face is radiant, and your eyes, how beautiful are your eyes. I would sing these praises to the accompaniment of a lyre if I could.”

Flavius had slowly withdrawn, taking the distressed girls with him. He made not a sound.

“Pandora,” Marius said, “I wish I could take you in my arms, but there are reasons why I cannot, and you mustn’t touch me, not because I want it so much, but because I’m not what you think. You don’t see the evidence of youth in me; it is something so far afield of the promises of youth that I’ve only just begun to understand its agonies.”

Suddenly he looked off. He raised his hand for my silence and patience.

“That thing is abroad,” I said. “The burnt blood drinker.”

“Don’t think on your dreams just now,” he said to me directly. “Think on our youth. I loved you when you were a girl of ten. When you were fifteen I begged your Father for your hand.”

“You did? He never told me this.”

He looked away again. Then he shook his head.

“The burnt one,” I said.

“I feared this,” he cursed himself. “He followed you from the Temple! Oh, Marius! You are a fool. You have played into his hands. But he is not as clever as he thinks.”

“Marius, was it you who sent me the dreams!”

“No, never! I would do anything in my power to protect you from myself.”

“And from the old legends?”

“Don’t be quick of wit, Pandora. I know your immense cleverness served you well back there with your loathsome brother Lucius and the gentleman Legate. But don’t think too much about … dreams. Dreams

are nothing, and dreams will pass."

"Then the dreams came from him, this hideous burnt killer?"

"I can't figure it!" he said. "But don't think on the images. Don't feed him now with your mind."

"He reads minds," I said, "just as you do."

"Yes. But you can cloak your thoughts. It's a mental trick. You can learn it. You can walk with your soul locked up in a little metal box in your head."

I realized he was in much pain. An immense sadness came from him. "This cannot be allowed to happen!" he insisted.

"What is that, Marius? You speak about the woman's voice, you—"

"No, be quiet."

"I will not! I will get to the bottom of this!"

"You must take my instructions!" He stepped forward and again he reached to touch me, to take me by the arms, as my Father might have done, but then he did not.

"No, it is you who must tell me everything," I said.

I was amazed at the whiteness of his skin, its utter blemishless perfection. And once again the radiance of his eyes seemed almost impossible. Inhuman.

Only now did I see the full glory of his long hair. He did look like the Keltoi, who had been his ancestors. His hair touched his shoulders. It was a gleaming gold, overly bright, yellow as corn and full of soft curls.

"Look at you!" I whispered. "You're not alive!"

"No, take your last look, for you are leaving here!"

"What?" I said. "Last look?" I repeated his words. "What are you talking about! I've only arrived, laid my plans, rid myself of my brother! I am not leaving here. Do you mean to say you are leaving me?"

There was a terrible anguish in his face, a courageous appeal that I had never seen in any man, not even in my Father, who had worked swiftly in those last fatal moments at home, as if he were merely intent on sending me on an important appointment.

Marius's eyes were filmed with blood. He was crying, and his eyes were sore with the tears! No! These were tears like the tears of the magnificent Queen in the dream, who, bound to her throne, wept and stained her cheeks and her throat and her linen.

He wanted to deny it. He shook his head, but he knew I was quite

convinced.

"Pandora, when I saw it was you," he said, "when you came into the Temple and I saw it was you who had had these blood dreams, I was beside myself. I must get you far from this, far from all danger."

I separated myself from his spell, from the aura of his beauty. I beheld him with a cold eye, and I listened as he went on, noting all about him, from the glitter of his eyes to the way that he gestured.

"You have to leave Antioch at once," he said. "I will stay here the night with you. Then in the day, you pick up your faithful Flavius and your two girls, they are honest, and you take them with you. You put miles between you and this place by day, and this thing can't follow you! Don't tell me now where you mean to go. You can discuss all this at the docks in the morning. You have plenty of money."

"You are the one who is dreaming now, Marius; I am not going. Who is it precisely that you want me to flee? The weeping Queen on her throne? Or the prowling, burnt one? The former reaches me over miles and miles of sea with her summons. She warns me against my evil brother. The other I can easily dispatch. I have no fear of him. I know what he is from the dreams, and I know how the sun has hurt him, and I will myself pin him to the wall in the sun."

He was silent, biting his lip.

"I will do that for her, for the Queen in the dreams, to avenge her."

"Pandora, I am begging you."

"In vain," I said. "Do you think I have come so far only to run again? And the woman's voice—"

"How do you know it was this Queen of whom you dreamt? There could be other blood drinkers in this city. Men, women. They all want the same thing."

"And you fear them?"

"Loathe them! And I must keep clear of them, not give them what they want! Never give them what they want."

"Ah, I see it all," I said.

"You do not!" he said, scowling down at me. So fierce, so perfect.

"You are one of them, Marius. You are whole. You are unburnt. They want your blood to heal themselves."

"How could you think of such a thing?"

"In my dreams, they called the Queen 'the Fount.' "

I flew at him and imprisoned him in my arms! He was powerfully strong, solid as a tree! I never felt such hardness of muscle in a man. I lay my head on his shoulder, and his cheek against the top of my head was cold!

But he enfolded me gently with both arms, stroking my hair, pulling it down out of all the pins and letting it flow down my back. I felt a rich tingling all over the surface of my skin.

Hard, so hard, yet with no pulse of life. No warmth of human blood in his gentle, sweet gestures.

"My darling," he said, "I don't know the source of your dreams, but I know this. You will be protected from me and from them. You will never become part of this old tale that goes on verse by verse no matter how the world changes! I won't allow it."

"Explain these things to me. I will not cooperate with you until you explain everything. Do you know the anguish of the Queen of the dream? Her tears are like yours. Look. Blood. You stain your tunic! Is she here, this Queen; has she summoned me?"

"And what if she has and she wants to punish you for this former life you dreamt in which the evil gods kept her fettered. What if that is so!"

"No," I said. "That is not her intention. Besides, I wouldn't do what the dark gods of the dream said. I wouldn't drink from 'the Fount.' I ran and that's why I died in the desert."

"Ah!" He threw up his hands! And walked away. He stared out into the dark peristyle. Only the stars lighted the trees there. I saw a faint glow coming from the far dining room on the other side of the house.

I looked at him, at his great height and the straightness of his back, and the way his feet were so firmly fixed on the mosaic floor. The lamps made his blond hair glorious.

I heard him, though he whispered with his back to me.

"How could this stupid thing have happened!"

"What stupid thing!" I demanded. I came to his side. "You mean that I am here, in Antioch. I'll tell you how. My Father arranged my escape, that's how …"

"No, no, I don't mean that. I want you to be safe, alive, out of all danger, protected, so that you flower as you are meant to do. Your petals aren't even bruised at the edges, look at you, and your boldness heats your beauty! Your brother had no chance against your learning or your

rhetoric. And yet you charmed the soldiers and made slaves of them with your superiority, never once rousing their resentment. You have years of life in you! But I must think of some way to make you safe. Look. This is the heart of it. You have to leave Antioch during the day."

" 'Friend of the Temple,' that's what the Priest and Priestess called you. They said you could read the old script. They said you bought up all the Egyptian books when they came into the port. Why? If you seek her, the Queen, then seek her through me, because it is she who said that she had summoned me."

"She didn't speak in the dreams! You don't know who spoke the words! What if the dreams do have their root in your migrant soul? What if you have lived before? And now you come to the Temple and there is one of these loathed ancient gods on the prowl and you are in danger. You must get away, from here, from me, from this wounded hunter, whom I will find."

"You're not telling me all you know! What happened to you, Marius! What happened! Who did this to you, this miracle of your radiance. This is no cloak; the light comes from within!"

"Damn it, Pandora, do you think I wanted my life foreshortened and my destiny extended forever!" He was suffering. He looked at me, unwilling to speak, and I felt such pain coming from him, such loneliness, that for a moment it was unbearable.

I felt a wave of my own anguish of the long night before, when the utter vacuity of all religions and creeds had struck me hard and the sheer effort of a good life seemed a fool's trap, and nothing more.

He suddenly closed his arms around me, surprising me, holding me firmly and rubbing his cheek gently against my hair, and kissing my head. Silken, polished, gentle beyond words. "Pandora, Pandora, Pandora," he said. "The beautiful little girl grown into the marvelous woman."

I held this hard effigy of the most spectacular and singular man I had ever known or seen: I held it and this time heard the beating of his heart, the distinct rhythm of it. I laid my ear on his chest.

"Oh, Marius, if only I could lay my head to rest next to yours. If I could only yield to your protection. But you are driving me away! You don't promise guardianship, you ordain flight for me, wandering and more nightmares, and mystery, and despair. No. I can't."

I turned away from his caresses. I could feel his kisses on my hair.

"Don't tell me that I'll never see you again. Don't think I can bear that along with everything else that's happened. I have no one here, and then who comes but one who left such a stamp on my girlish heart that the details are as deep as the finest coin. And you say you will never see me again, that I must go."

I turned around.

It was lust shining in his eyes. Yet he checked it. In a soft voice, he confessed with a little smile:

"Oh, how I admired your work with the Legate. I thought the two of you would plan out the whole conquest of the Germanic tribes on your own." He sighed. "You must find a good life, a rich life, a life where your soul and body are fed." The color flared in his face. He looked at me, at my breasts, at my hips and then at my face. Ashamed and trying to conceal it. Lust.

"Are you a man still?" I asked.

He didn't answer me. But his expression grew chilly.

"You will never know the full extent of what I am!" he said.

"Ah, but not a man!" I said. "Am I right? Not a man."

"Pandora, you are deliberately taunting me. Why? Why do this?"

"This transformation, this induction into the blood drinkers; it's added no inches to your height. Did it add any inches anywhere else?"

"Please stop this," he said.

"Want me, Marius. Say that you do. I see it. Confirm it in words. What does that cost you?"

"You are infuriating!" he said. His face colored deeply with his rage, and pressed his lips together so hard that they went white. "Thank the gods that I don't want you! Not enough to betray love for brief and bloody ecstasy."

"The Temple people, they don't really know what you are, do they?"

"No!" he said.

"And you will not lay open your heart to me."

"Never. You will forget me and these dreams will fade. I wager I can make them fade, myself, through prayer for you. I will do it."

"That's a pious tack," I said. "What grants you such favor with the ancient Isis, who drank blood and was the Fount?"

"Don't say those words; it's all lies, all of it. You do not know that this

Queen you saw was Isis. What did you learn in these nightmares? Think. You learned that this Queen was the prisoner of those who drank blood and she condemned them! They were evil. Think. Go back into the dream. Think. You thought them evil, evil then, and you think them evil now. In the Temple, you caught the scent of evil. I know you did. I watched you."

"Yes. But you're not evil, Marius, you can't convince me of this! You have a body like marble, you're a blood drinker, but like a god, but not evil!"

He was about to protest when he stopped again. He looked out of the corner of his eye. And then slowly turned his head and let his gaze drift up through the roof of the peristyle.

"Is it the dawn coming," I asked, "the rays of Amon Ra?"

"You are the most maddening human being I've ever known!" he said. "If I had married you, you would have put me in an early grave. I would have been spared all of this!"

"All of what?"

He called out for Flavius, who had been close all the while, listening to everything.

"Flavius, I'm leaving now," he said. "I must. But guard her. When night falls, I'll be here again, as quickly as I can. Should anything precede me, any badly scarred and frightening assailant, go for its head with your sword. The head, remember? And of course your Mistress here will no doubt be quite able to lend a hand in defending herself."

"Yes, sir. Must we leave Antioch?"

"Watch your words, my faithful Greek," I said. "I am Mistress here. We are not leaving Antioch."

"Try to persuade her to prepare," said Marius.

He looked at me.

A long silence fell between us. I knew he read my thoughts. Then a shudder of the blood dreams passed over me. I saw his eyes brighten. Something quickened in his expression. I shook off the dream, filled with terror. I am no hostess to terror.

"It's all interwound," I murmured, "the dreams, the Temple, you being there, their calling on you for help. What are you, some white god put on Earth to hunt the dark blood drinkers? Does the Queen live?"

"Oh, I wish I were such a god!" he said. "I would be if I could be! That

no more blood drinkers will ever be made, of that I am certain. Let them lay flowers on an altar before a statue of basalt!"

I felt such love for him and rushed to him suddenly. "Take me with you now, wherever you are going."

"I can't!" he said. He blinked as though something hurt his eyes. He couldn't fully lift his head.

"It's the coming light, isn't it? You are one of them."

"Pandora, when I come to you, be ready to leave this place!" he said. And he vanished.

Like that, he vanished. Like that, he was gone from my arms and from my Irving room and from my house.

I turned away and walked slowly about the shadowy living room. I looked at the murals on the walls; the happy dancing figures with their laurels and their crowns of leaves—Bacchus and his nymphs, so modestly covered for such a riotous crew!

Flavius spoke. "Madam, a sword which I found among your possessions, may I have it in readiness?"

"Yes, and daggers galore, and fire, do not forget fire. It will run from fire." I sighed. How did I know this? I did. So much for it. "But Flavius." I turned around. "It won't come until dark. There is only a small margin of the night left. We can both sleep as soon as we see the sky turn purple." I lifted my hand to my forehead. "I am trying to remember …"

"What, Madam?" Flavius said. He looked no less splendid after the spectacle of Marius, simply a man of different proportion but equally fine, and with warm human skin.

"Whether the dreams ever came by day. Was it always night? Oh, I am sleepy and they summon me. Flavius, put a light in my bath. But I'm going to bed. I am drowsy. Can you watch?"

"Yes, Madam."

"Look, the stars have all but faded. What is it like to be one of them, Flavius, to be admired only in the darkness, when men and women live with candles and lamps. To be known and described, only in the heaviness of night, when all the business of day has ended!"

"You are truly the most resourceful woman I've ever known," he said. "How you brought justice to the man who accused you." He took my arm, and we moved towards the bedchamber where I had dressed that morning.

I loved him. An entire lifetime of crises could not have made it stronger.

"You will not sleep in the great bed of the house, in the dining room?"

"No," I said. "That is for the display of marriage, and I will never know marriage again. I want to bathe, but I'm so sleepy."

"I can wake the girls."

"No, to the bed. You have a chamber proper?"

"Yes," he led the way. It was still quite dark. I thought I heard a rustling noise. Realized it was nothing.

And there lay the bed with its small lamp, and on the bed so many pillows in the Oriental style, a soft soft nest into which I fell, like a Persian.

At once, the dream:

We blood drinkers stood in a vast Temple. It was meant to be dark. We could see this dark, as certain animals must see in the dark. We were all bronze-skinned, or tanned, or golden. We were all men.

On the floor lay the Queen screaming. Her skin was white. Pure white. Her long hair was black. Her crown bore the horns and the sun! The crown of Isis. She was the goddess! It took five blood drinkers on either side to hold her down. She thrashed her head from side to side, her eyes seeming to crackle with Divine Light.

"I am your Queen! You cannot do this to me!" How purely white she was, and her screams grew ever more desperate and imploring. "Great Osiris, save me from this! Save me from these blasphemers! Save me from the profane!"

The Priest beside me sneered at her.

The King sat motionless on the throne. But it was not to this King that she prayed. She prayed to an Osiris beyond.

"Hold her more tightly."

Two more came to secure her ankles.

"Drink!" said the Priest to me. "Kneel down and drink from her blood. Her blood is more powerful than any blood that exists in the world. Drink."

She cried softly.

"Monsters, demon children!" she sobbed.

"I won't do it," I said.

"Do it! You must have her blood!"

“No, not against her will. Not like this! She’s our Mother Isis!”

“She is our Fount and our prisoner.”

“No,” I said.

The Priest shoved me forward. I knocked him down to the floor. I looked at her.

She looked at me as indiscriminately as she looked at the others. Her face was delicate and exquisitely painted. Her rage did not distort her features. Her voice was low and full of hatred.

“I will destroy you all,” she said. “Some morning, I will escape and walk into the sun's light and all of you will burn! All of you will burn! As I burn! Because I am the Fount! And the evil in me will be burnt and extinguished in all of you forever. Come, you miserable fledgling,” she said to me. “Do as they say. Drink, and wait my vengeance.

“The god Amon Ra will rise in the East and I will walk towards him, and his deadly rays will kill me. I shall be a sacrifice of fire to destroy every one of you who has been born of me, transformed by my blood! You greedy wanton gods who would use the power we possess for gain!”

Then a hideous transformation befell the entire dream. She rose to her feet. She was pristine and freshly adorned. Torches burst into flame around her, one and two and three and then many and more, flaring as if they'd just been ignited, till she was surrounded by flame. The gods were gone. She smiled and beckoned to me. She lowered her head; the white beneath her eyes shone as she looked up at me. She smiled. She was cunning.

I woke up screaming.

I was in my bed. Antioch. The lamp burned. Flavius held me. I saw the light shine on his ivory leg as it was stretched out. I saw the light shine on the carved toes.

“Hold onto me, hold me!” I said. “Mother Isis! Hold me.

“How long have I been asleep?”

“Only moments,” he said.

“No.”

“The sun has just risen. Do you want to go out, lie in the warm sun perhaps?”

“No!” I screamed.

He tightened his warm, desperate comforting grip. “It was only a bad dream, my beautiful lady,” he said. “Close your eyes. I’ll sleep by your

side, with my dagger here."

"Oh, yes, please, please, Flavius. Don't let me go. Hold me," I cried.

I lay down and he snuggled next to me, his knees behind mine, his arm over me.

My eyes opened. I heard Marius's voice again:

"Thank the gods that I don't want you! Not enough to betray love for brief and bloody ecstasy."

"Oh, Flavius," I said. "My skin! Is my skin burning!" I started to rise. "Put out the light. Put out the sun!"

"No, Madam, your skin is as beautiful as it always was. Lie down. Let me sing to you."

"Yes, sing …" I said.

I followed his song, it was Homer, it was Achilles and Hector, and I loved the way he sang it, the pauses he made, I pictured those heroes, and the high walls of doomed Troy, and my eyes grew heavy. I drifted. I rested.

He placed his hand over my head, as if to keep the dreams out, as if to be a human dream catcher. And I sighed as he smoothed my hair.

I pictured Marius, the sheen of his skin. It had been so like that of the Queen, and the dazzle of his eyes, so truly like that of the Queen, and I heard him say, "Damn it, Pandora, do you think I wanted my life foreshortened and my destiny extended forever!"

And there followed, before unconsciousness, the utter despair, the sense of worthlessness of all striving. Better that we be no more than beasts, like the lions in the arena.

8

I awoke. I could hear the birds. I wasn't sure. I calculated that it was still morning, midmorning.

I walked barefoot into the next room, and through it into the peristyle. I walked on the tiled edge of the Earth and looked up at the blue sky. The sun had not yet risen high enough to be seen directly above.

I unbolted the door and went barefoot to the gate. To the first man I saw, a man of the desert wearing a long head veil, I said:

"What time is it? Noon?"

"Oh, no, Madam," he said. "Not by half. Have you overslept? How lucky for you." He nodded and went on.

A lamp burned in the living room. I walked into the Irving room and saw that the lamp stood on the desk which my servants had prepared for me.

The ink was there and so were the pens, and so were sheets of clean parchment.

I sat down and I wrote down everything that I could remember of the dreams, my eyes straining to see by the miserable little lamp in the shadows, too far from the light that filled the fresh green garden of the peristyle.

My arm hurt finally from the speed with which I scratched at the parchment. In detail I described the last dream, the torches, the Queen's smile, her beckoning to me.

It was done. All the while, I had set aside the pages to dry all about me on the floor. There was no breeze or wind to threaten them. I gathered them up.

I went to the edge of the garden deliberately to look at the blue sky, this sheaf of papers close to my breast. Blue and clear.

"And you cover this world," I said. "And you are changeless, save for one light that rises and sets," I said to the sky. "Then comes the night with deceptive and seductive patterns!"

"Madam!" It was Flavius behind me, and very sleepy. "You've scarcely slept at all. You need rest. Go back to bed."

"Go get my sandals now, hurry," I said.

And as he disappeared, so did I—out the front gate of the house, walking as fast as I could.

I was halfway to the Temple of Isis when I realized the discomfort of confronting this filthy street in bare feet. I realized I wore the rumpled linen dresses in which I'd slept. My hair streamed. I didn't slow my pace.

I was elated. I was not helpless as when I had fled my Father's house. I was not edgy and in deep danger as when Lucius had pointed me out to the Roman soldiers last night.

I was not gripped in fear as I had been when the Queen smiled to me in the dream. Nor shivering as I had been upon waking.

I walked on and on. I was in the grip of an immense drama. I would see it through to the last act.

People passed—laborers of the morning, an old man with a crooked stick. I barely saw these people.

I took a cold small delight in the fact that they noticed my loose, free hair and my wrinkled gowns. I wondered what it must be like to separate oneself from all civilization and never worry again about the position of a fastening or a pin, to sleep on grass, to fear nothing!

Fear nothing! Ah, that was so beautiful to me.

I came to the Forum. The markets were busy; the beggars were out in full force. Curtained litters were being carried every which way. The philosophers were teaching under the porticoes. I could hear those huge strange noises that always come from a harbor—of the cargo being dropped, perhaps, I didn't know. I smelled the Orontes. I hoped Lucius's body was floating in it.

I went up the steps and right into the Temple of Isis.

"The High Priest and Priestess," I said. "I must see them." I walked past a confused and distinctly virginal-looking young woman and went into the side chamber where they had first spoken to me. No table. Only the couch. I went into another apartment of the Temple. A table. Scrolls.

I heard feet rushing. The Priestess came to me. She was already painted for the day and her wig and ornaments were in place. I felt no shock as I looked at her.

"Look," I said. "I had another dream." I pointed to the sheets which I had piled neatly on the table. "I've written down everything for you."

The Priest arrived. He approached the table and stared at the sheets.

"Read it all, every word. Read it now. Bear witness lest something

happens to me!"

The Priest and Priestess stood on opposite sides of me, the Priest carefully lifting the pages to study each one, while not actually turning over the stack.

"I am a migrant soul," I said. "She wants some reckoning or favor of me, I don't know which, but she lives! She is no mere statue."

They stared at me.

"Well? Speak up? Everyone comes to you for guidance."

"But Madam," said the Priest, "we can't read any of this."

"What?"

"It's written in the most ancient and ornate form of the old picture writing."

"What!"

I stared down at the pages. I saw only my own words as they had flowed in a cadence from my mind, through my hand, through my pen. I couldn't make my eyes fix upon the form of the letters.

I lifted the last page and read aloud, "Her smile was cunning. It filled me with fear." I held out the page.

They shook their heads in firm denial.

Suddenly there was a little ruckus and Flavius, much out of breath and red in the face, was admitted to the room. He had my sandals. He took one look at me and rested back against the wall in great and obvious relief.

"Come here," I said.

He obeyed.

"Now look at these pages, read them, are they not in Latin?"

Two slaves came timidly, hastily washing my feet and fastening on my sandals. Above me Flavius looked at the pages.

"This is ancient Egyptian writing," Flavius said. "The oldest form I've ever seen. This would fetch a fortune in Athens!"

"I just wrote it!" I said. I looked at the Priest, then the Priestess. "Summon your tall blond-haired friend," I said. "Get him here. The mind reader, the one who can read the old script."

"We can't, Madam." The Priest looked helplessly at the Priestess.

"Why not? Where is he? He only comes after dark, doesn't he?" I asked.

They both nodded.

“And when he shops for books, all the books on Egypt, he does this by the light of lamps too?” I asked. I already knew the answer.

They looked at one another helplessly.

“Where does he live?”

“Madam, we do not know. Please don’t try to find him. He will be here as soon as the light fades. He cautioned us last night that you were most precious to him.”

“You don’t know where he lives.” I stood up.

“All right,” I said, I picked up the sheaf of my pages, my spectacular ancient writing.

“Your burnt one,” I said, as I walked out of the room, “your murdering blood drinker. Did he come last night? Did he leave you an offering?”

“Yes,” said the Priest. He looked humiliated. “Lady Pandora, rest and take some food.”

“Yes,” said my loyal Flavius, “you must.”

“Not a chance,” I said. Clutching the pages, I walked across the great hall to the front doors. They pleaded with me. I ignored them.

I went out into the heat of the day. Flavius followed. The Priest and Priestess pleaded with us to remain.

I scanned the enormous marketplace. The good booksellers were all grouped at the far left end of the Forum. I walked across the square.

Flavius struggled to keep up. “Madam, please, what are you going to do? You’ve lost your mind.”

“I have not and you know it,” I said. “You saw him last night!”

“Madam, wait for him at the Temple, as he asked,” Flavius said.

“Why? Why should I do that?” I asked.

The bookshops were numerous, containing manuscripts in all languages. “Egypt, Egypt!” I cried out, both in Latin and Greek. There was lots of noise, many buyers and sellers. Plato was everywhere, and Aristotle. There was a whole stack of the book of his life by Caesar Augustus, which he had completed in the years before his death.

“Egypt!” I cried out. Merchants pointed to old scrolls. Fragments.

The canopies flapped in the breeze. I looked into one room after another, at rows of slaves busily copying, slaves dipping their pens, who did not dare to look up from their work.

There were slaves outside, in the shade, writing letters dictated by humble men and women. It was all very busy.

Trunks were being brought into one shop. The owner, an elderly man, came forward.

"Marius," I said. "I come from Marius, the tall blond one who comes to your shop only by night."

The man said nothing.

I went into the next shop. Everything was Egyptian, not merely the scrolls rolled out for display but the fragments of painting on the walls, the chunks of plaster holding still the profile of a King or Queen, rows of little jars, figures from some long-defiled tomb. How the Egyptians loved to make those tiny wooden figures.

And there I beheld just the sort of man I sought, the true antiquarian. Only reluctantly did he look up from his book, a gray-haired man, the book a codex in modern Egyptian.

"Nothing that would interest Marius?" I asked, walking into the shop. Trunks and boxes blocked me at each turn. "You know, the tall Roman, Marius, who studies the ancient manuscripts, buys the most prized of them? You know the man I mean. Very blue eyes. Blond hair. He comes by night; you stay open for him."

The man nodded. He glanced at Flavius and said with a lift of his eyebrows, "Quite an ivory leg there." Cultured Greek. Excellent. "Grecian, Oriental and perfectly pale."

"I come on Marius's behalf," I said.

"I save everything for him, as he asks," said the man with a little shrug. "I sell nothing that isn't offered first to Marius."

"I'm sure you do. I come on his behalf." I looked around. "May I sit down?"

"Oh, please do, forgive me," said the man. He gestured to a sturdy trunk. Flavius stood perplexed. The man sat back down at his cluttered table.

"I wish I had a proper table. Where is my slave? I know I have some wine around here. I just … I was reading in this text the most amazing story!"

"Really," I said. "Well, take a look at this!" I thrust the pages into his hand.

"My God, but this is beautiful copying," he said, "and so fresh!" He whispered under his breath. He could make out many of the words. "Marius will be very interested in this. This is about the legends of Isis,

this is what Marius studies."

I drew back the papers gently. "I've written this for him!"

"You wrote it?"

"Yes, but you see, I want to surprise him with something, a gift! Something newly arrived, something he hasn't seen yet."

"Well, there's quite a lot."

"Flavius, money."

"Madam, I don't have any."

"That's not true, Flavius; you wouldn't leave the house without the keys and some money. Hand it over."

"Oh, I'll take it on credit if it's for Marius," said the old man. "Hmmm, you know, several things came onto the market this very week. It's because of the famine in Egypt. People were forced to sell, I suppose. You never know where an Egyptian manuscript comes from. But here—" He reached up and took a fragile papyrus from its niche in the dusty crisscross of wooden shelves.

He laid it down reverently and most cautiously opened it. The papyrus had been well preserved, but it was flaking at the edges. The thing would disintegrate if not handled with care.

I stood to look at it over his shoulder. A dizziness overcame me. I saw the desert and a town of huts with roofs of palm branches. I strained to open my eyes.

"This is," said the old man, "positively the oldest manuscript in Egyptian which I have ever seen! Here, steady yourself, my dear. Lean upon my shoulder. Let me give you my stool."

"No, not necessary," I said gazing at the letters. I read aloud, "To my Lord, Narmer, King of Upper and Lower Egypt, who are these enemies of me that say I do not walk in righteousness? When has Your Majesty ever known me not to be righteous? Indeed I seek to do always more than what is asked of me or expected. When have I not heard every word of the accused so that he may be judged in fairness, as would Your Majesty?…"

I broke off. My head swam. Some brief recollection. I was a child and we were all going up into the mountains over the desert to ask the god Osiris, the blood god, to look into the heart of the evildoer. "Look," said those around me. The god was a man of perfection, bronze of skin and under the moon; he took the condemned and slowly drew out his blood.

Beside me a woman whispered that the god had made his judgment and rendered punishment and the evil blood would go back now to be cleansed and reborn in another in which it would do no harm.

I tried to banish this vision, this sense of enclosing remembrance. Flavius was greatly concerned and held me by the shoulders.

I stood suspended in two worlds. I gazed out at the bright sun striking the stones of the Forum, and I lived somewhere else, a young man running up a mountain, declaring my innocence. “Summon the old blood god! He will look into my husband’s heart and see that the man lies. I never lay with another.” Oh, sweet darkness, come, I needed it to shroud the mountains because the blood god slept by day, hidden, lest Ra, the sun god, find him and destroy him out of jealousy.

“Because she had conquered them all,” I whispered. I meant Queen Isis. “Flavius, hold me.”

“I have you, Madam.”

“There,” said the old man, who had risen and pushed me down on his stool.

The night over Egypt filled with stars. I saw it as distinctly as I saw this shop around me in Antioch at midday. I saw the stars and knew I had won. The god would rule. “Oh, come forth, please, from this mountain, our beloved Osiris, and look into my husband’s heart and my heart, and if you find me in the wrong, then my blood is yours, I pledge it.” He was coming! There he was, as I had seen him in childhood before the Priests of Ra had forbidden the old worship. “Righteousness, righteousness, righteousness!” the crowd chanted. The man who was my husband cowered as the god pointed his finger in judgment at him. “Give me this evil blood and I shall devour it,” said the god. “Then bring back my offerings. Do not be cowards in the face of a rich priesthood. You stand before a god.” He pointed at each of the villagers and pronounced his or her name. He knew trades. He could read their minds! He drew back his lips and showed his fangs. The vision dissolved. I stared at common objects as though they had life and venom.

“Oh, yea gods,” I said in genuine distress. “I must reach Marius. I must reach him now!” When he heard these things, Marius would draw me into the truth with him. He had to do it.

“Hire a litter for your Mistress,” said the old bookseller to Flavius. “She is overtired, and it’s too long a walk up that hill!”

“Hill?” I perked up. This man knew where Marius lived! I quickly went faint again, bowing my head, and with a weary gesture said, “Please, old gentleman, tell my steward precisely how to reach the house.”

“Of course. I know two short cuts, one slightly more difficult than another. We deliver books to Marius all the time.”

Flavius was staring aghast.

I tried to suppress my smile. This was going much better than I had ever hoped. But I was torn and bruised from the visions of Egypt. I hated the look of the desert, the mountains, the thought of blood gods.

I rose to go.

“It’s a pink villa on the very edge of the city,” said the old man. “It’s just within the walls, overlooking the river, the last house. Once it was a country house outside the walls. It is on a mountain of stones. But no one will answer Marius’s gate by day. All know how he wants to sleep all day and study all night, as is his custom. We leave our books with the boys.”

“He’ll welcome me,” I said. “If you wrote that, most likely he will,” said the old man.

Then we were off. The sun had fully risen. The square was filled with shoppers. Women carried baskets on their heads. The Temples were thriving. It was a game, darting through the crowd, one way and then another.

“Come on, Flavius,” I said.

It was a torture keeping to Flavius’s slow pace as we mounted the hill, turn by turn, drawing ever closer.

“You know this is madness!” said Flavius. “He can’t be awake during the light of day; you’ve proven this to me and to yourself! I, the incredulous Athenian, and you the cynical Roman. What are we doing?”

Up and up we climbed, passing one sumptuous house after another. Locked gates. The bark of guard dogs.

“Hurry up. Must I listen to this lecture forever? Ah, there, look, my beloved Flavius. The pink house, the last house. Marius lives in style. Look at the walls and the gates.”

At last I had my hands on the iron bars. Flavius collapsed on the grass across the small road. He was spent.

I pulled on the bell rope.

Trees laid down heavy limbs over the top of the walls. Through the

mesh of leaf, I could make out a figure that came out on the high porch of the second floor.

"No admittance!" he cried out.

"I have to see Marius," I said. "He's expecting me!" I cupped my hands and shouted. "He wants me to come. He told me to come."

Flavius said a quick prayer under his breath. "Oh, Mistress, I hope you know this man better than you knew your own brother."

I laughed. "There is no comparison," I said. "Stop complaining."

The figure had disappeared. I heard running feet.

Finally two dark-headed young boys appeared before me, little more than children, beardless, with long black curls, and beautifully dressed in gold-trimmed tunics. They looked Chaldean.

"Open the gate, hurry!" I said.

"Madam, I can't admit you," said the speaker of the two. "I cannot admit anyone to this house until Marius himself comes. Those are his orders."

"Comes from where?" I asked.

"Madam, he appears when he wishes, then he receives who he will. Madam, please, tell me your name and I will tell him that you have called."

"You either open the gate or I will climb over the wall," I said.

The boys were horrified. "No, Madam, you can't do that!"

"Well? Aren't you going to shout for help?" I asked.

The two slaves stared amazed. They were so pretty. One was slightly taller than the other. Both wore exquisite bracelets.

"Just as I thought," I said. "There's no one else here but you." I turned and tested the thick snaggle of vine that rose over the plastered brick. I leapt up and planted my right foot as high as I could in the thick mesh and rose in one leap to throw my arms over the top of the wall.

Flavius had risen from the grass and rushed to me.

"Madam, I beg you not to do this," said Flavius. "Madam, this is bad, bad, bad! You can't just climb this man's wall."

The servants within were chattering frantically with one another. I think it was in Chaldean.

"Madam, I fear for you!" cried Flavius. "How can I protect you from such a man as this Marius? Madam, the man will be angry with you!"

I lay on the top of the wall, on my stomach, catching my breath. The

garden inside was vast and lovely. Ah, what marble fountains. The two slaves had backed up and were staring at me as if I were a powerful monster.

"Please, please!" both boys pleaded with me at once. "He'll exact a terrible vengeance! You don't know him. Please, Madam, wait!"

"Hand me the sheets of paper, Flavius, hurry. I have no time for disobedience!"

Flavius complied. "Oh, this is wrong, wrong, wrong!" he said. "Nothing can come of this but the most fearful misunderstandings."

Then I slid down the inside of the wall, tickled all over by the thick overlay of bristling and brilliant leaves, and I lay my head in the matted tendrils and blossoms. I didn't fear the bees. I never have. I rested. I held tight to my written pages. Then moved to the gate so I could see Flavius.

"You let me handle Marius," I said. "Now, you didn't come out without your dagger."

"No, I did not," he said, lifting his cloak to reveal it, "and with your permission I would like to plunge it through my heart now so that I will be most assuredly stone-cold dead before the Master of this house arrives home to find you running rampant in his garden!"

"Permission denied," I said. "Don't you dare. Haven't you heard all that has been said? You are on guard not against Marius but against a shriveled limping demon of burnt flesh. He'll come at dark! What if he reaches here before Marius?"

"Oh, yea gods, help me!" His hands flew to his face.

"Flavius, straighten up. You are a man! Do I have to remind you of this perpetually? You are watching for this dreaded burnt bag of bones, and he is weak. Remember what Marius said. Go for his head. Stab him in the eyes, just cut him and cut him and shout for me, and I will come. Now go to sleep until dark. He can't come till then, if he even knows to come here! Besides, I think Marius will arrive first."

I turned and walked towards the open doors of the villa. The beautiful long-haired boys were in tears.

For a moment the tranquillity and moist cool air of the garden lulled all fear in me, and I seemed safe, among patterns I understood, far far from dark Temples, safe in Tuscany, in our own family gardens there, which had been so rich like this.

"Let me beg you one last time to come back out of this man's garden!"

Flavius shouted. I ignored him.

All the doors of this lovely plastered villa stood open to the porches above or the outdoors below. Listen to the trickling of the fountains. There were lemon trees, and many a marble statue of a lazy, sensuous god or goddess, round which flowers grew in rich purple or blue. Diana, the huntress, rose from a bed of orange blossoms, the marble old and pitted And there, a lazy Ganymede, half-covered in green moss, marked some path that had been overgrown. Far off, I could see the naked bending Venus at her bath on the edge of a pool. Water flowed into the pool. I glimpsed fountains all around me.

The small common white lilies had gone Wild and there stood old olive trees with marvelously twisted trunks, so wondrous to climb in childhood.

A pastoral sweetness hung over all, yet nature had been kept at bay. The stucco of the walls was freshly painted and so were the wooden shutters, opened wide.

The two boys were crying. “Madam, he’ll be so angry.”

“Well, not with you,” I said, as I entered the house. I had come across the grass and left scarcely any footprint on the marble floor.

“Boys, do stop sobbing! You don’t even have to plead with him to believe you. Isn’t that true? He’ll read the truth in your thoughts?”

This startled each in his own way. They looked at me warily.

I stopped just past the threshold. Something emanated from the house, not loud enough to be called a sound, but very like the rhythmic precursor of a sound. I had heard this very soundless rhythm before. When was it? In the Temple? When first I entered the room where Marius had hidden behind the screen?

I walked on marble floors from room to room. Breezes everywhere played with the hanging lamps. There were many lamps. And the candles. How many candles. And lamps on stands. Why, when this place was lighted up, it must have been bright as day!

And gradually I realized the entire lower floor was a library, except for the inevitable sumptuous Roman bath, and an enormous wardrobe of clothes.

Every other room was filled with books. Nothing but books. Of course there were couches for lying and reading, and desks for writing, but every wall had its prodigious stack of scrolls or shelves of bound books.

Also there were strange doors. They appeared to open onto concealed stairwells. But they had no locks and seemed to be made of polished granite. I found at least two of these! And one chamber of the first floor was totally enclosed in stone and locked in the same way, by impenetrable doors.

As the slaves trembled and sobbed I went outside and up the stairs to the second floor. Empty. Every room simply empty, except the room that obviously belonged to the boys! There were their beds, and their little Persian altars and gods, and rich rugs and tasseled pillows and the usual Oriental swirl of design. I came down.

The boys sat at the main door, as if positioned like marble statues, each with his knees up, head down, weeping softly, perhaps getting a bit worn out.

"Where are the bedrooms of this house? Where is Marius's bedroom? Where is the kitchen? Where is the household shrine?"

One of them let out a soft choking cry. "There are no bedrooms."

"Of course not," I said.

"Our food is brought to us," wailed the other. "Cooked and most delicious. But I fear that, unwittingly, we have enjoyed our last meal."

"Oh, do take it easy. How can he blame you for what I've done? You're merely children and he's a gentle being, is he not? Here, put these pages on his desk, and weight them down so that they don't fly away."

"Yes, he is most gentle," said the boy. "But most set in his ways."

I closed my eyes. I sensed the sound again, the emanating encroaching sound. Did it want to be heard? I couldn't tell. It seemed impersonal, like the beat of a sleeping heart or the flow of the water in the fountains.

I walked over to a large beautiful couch, draped in fine silk with Persian designs. It was very wide and seemed to bear, despite much straightening, the imprint of a man's form. There was the pillow there, all fluffed and fresh, yet still I could see the indentation of the head, where the man had lain. "Does he lie here?"

The boys leapt to their feet, curls flying.

"Yes, Madam, that is his couch," said the speaker of the two. "Please, please, don't touch it. He lies there for hours and reads. Madam, please! He is most particular that we do not lie on it playfully in his absence, though he gives us free rein in every other regard."

"He'll know if you even touch it!" said the other boy, speaking up for

the first time.

"I'm going to sleep on it," I said. I lay down and closed my eyes. I rolled over and brought up my knees. "I am tired. I want only sleep. I feel safe for the first time in so long."

"You do?" asked one of the boys.

"Oh, come here and lie by me. Bring pillows for your heads, so that he will see me before he sees you. He knows me well. The pages I have brought, where are they, yes, on the desk, well, they will make it clear why I have come in. It's all changed now. Something is wanted from me. I have no choice. There is no road home. Marius will understand. I've come as close to him as possible for my protection."

I lay back right in the hollow of the pillow where he lay. I took a long deep breath. "The breeze is like music here," I whispered, "do you hear it?"

I slept the deep exhausted sleep which I had held off now for so many hours of both night and day.

Hours must have passed.

I woke with a start. The sky was purple. The slaves were curled up next to the couch, just beneath me, like terrified little animals.

I heard the noise again, the sound, distinct, a pulse. I thought oddly of something I used to like to do as a child. It was this: I would put my ear to my Father's chest. And when I heard his heart, then I would kiss it. It had always made him happy.

I rose, realizing that I was not fully awake but certain this was no dream. I was in the beautiful villa of Marius in Antioch. The marble rooms opened one upon another.

I went to the last room, the room enclosed in stone. The doors were impossibly heavy. But suddenly, silently, they opened as if pushed from within.

I entered a massive chamber. Another pair of doors lay ahead of me. They too were made of stone. They had to lead to a stairwell, for the house ended just beyond.

These doors too suddenly opened, as if released by a spring! light from below.

A stairway went down from the threshold of the door. It was white marble, and newly made, with no wear of feet on it. So smooth, each slab, so clean.

A soft series of flames burned below, sending their antic shadows up the stairwell.

The sound now seemed louder. I dosed my eyes. Oh, that all the world were these polished chambers and all that exists could be explained within.

Suddenly, I heard a loud cry.

“Lady Pandora!”

I spun around.

“Pandora, he is over the wall!”

The boys came screaming through the house, echoing Flavius's cry, “Lady Pandora!”

A great darkness gathered itself right before my eyes and then descended on me, throwing the helpless, beseeching boys to the side. I was almost pitched down the stairwell.

Then I realized I was in the grasp of the burnt thing. I looked down to see the black wrinkled arm, like old leather, that held me. Strong spices filled my nostrils. Fresh doming covered the hideously thin leg I saw, the dried-up foot.

“Boys, get the lamps, set it on fire!” I shouted. I fought desperately, driving us both back from the stairwell, but I couldn't get loose from the creature. “Boys, the lamps downstairs!”

The boys clung to one another.

“I have you!” this creature said tenderly in my ear.

“No, you don't!” I said, and gave him one fine blow with my right elbow. It drove him off balance. He nearly toppled. But he didn't let me go. The whiteness of his tunic glowed in the shadows as he once more enclosed my arms, and rendered me almost helpless.

“Boys, downstairs, lamps full of oil!” I said. “Flavius!”

The creature hugged me as if he were a giant snake. I could scarce breathe.

“We can't go downstairs!” one of the boys cried.

“We're not allowed,” said the other.

The creature laughed in my ear, a rich deep laugh. “Not everyone is so bound to rebellion as you are, beautiful woman, outwitting your brother at the foot of the Temple steps.”

It was shocking to hear this clear articulate voice coming from a body which seemed burnt beyond all hope of life. I watched the blackened

fingers moving over my own. I felt the touch of something cold on my neck. Then I felt the punctures. His fangs.

"Not!" I cried I thrashed back and forth in his grip, then threw all of my weight against him so that he almost toppled again but didn't fall.

"Stop it, bitch, or I'll kill you now."

"Why don't you?" I demanded.

I twisted to see his face. It was like that of a long-dead corpse dried in the desert, burnt black with a spine of a nose, and arched lips that seemed quite unable to dose over white teeth and the two fangs he bared now as he looked at me.

His eyes were full of blood as Marius's eyes had been. His hair was a fine black mop very thick, fresh and clean, as though it had sprung from his body, renewing itself like magic.

"Yes," he said confidently. "That is just what happened. And very soon I will have the blood I need to renew all of me! I won't be this hideous monster you see. I'll be what I was before those Egyptian fools put her in the sun!"

"Hmmm, so she kept her promise," I said "She walked into the rays of Amon Ra so you would all burn up."

"What do you know of it? She hasn't moved or spoken in a thousand years. I was that old when they removed the stones that enclosed her. She couldn't have walked into the sun. She is a great sacred vial of blood, an enthroned source of power, that's all, and I will have that blood, which your Marius has stolen out of Egypt."

I pondered, searching desperately for a means to free myself.

"You came to me as a gift," said the burnt one. "You were all I needed to take on Marius! He wears his affections and weakness for you like bright silk garments for me to see!"

"I see," I said.

"No, you don't!" he said. My head was pulled back by my hair. I screamed in annoyance.

His sharp teeth went into my neck. A series of heated wires threaded me through and through.

I swooned. An ecstasy rendered me motionless. I tried to resist, but I saw visions. I saw him in his glory, a golden man of an Eastern land, in a Temple of skulls. He was dressed in bright green silk breeches with an ornamented band around his forehead. Face delicate of nose and mouth.

Then I saw him, without explanation, burst into flames that sent his slaves screaming. He twisted and turned in these flames, not dying but suffering exquisitely.

My head was swimming, and I was weakening. My blood flowed from all parts of my body into his wretched form. I thought of my Father, of my Father saying, “Live, Lydia!” I wrenched my neck away from him and turned, poking him hard with my shoulder, and then pushed him with two hands so that he slid backwards on the floor. I brought my knee up against him. Nothing could get him off me!

I tried to reach for my dagger, but I was too dizzy, and besides, I didn’t have my dagger. My only chance lay with the burning oil in the lamps at the foot of the stairs. I turned, reeling, and the monster caught me again with both hands by my long hair. He yanked me back.

“You demon!” I said. His strength had worn me out. He tightened his grip slowly. I knew that soon my arms would break.

“Ah,” he said, twisting free of me, and holding tight as ever. “My purpose is served.”

A brighter light suddenly filled up the stairway.

A torch was placed at the foot of the steps. Then Marius stepped into view.

He appeared utterly calm and he appeared to be looking past me into the eyes of my captor.

“And what will you do now, Akbar?” Marius asked. “Hurt her, violate her but one more time, and I shall kill you. Kill her, and you will die in agony. Let her go and you can run.”

He mounted the steps one by one.

“You underestimate me,” said the burnt thing, “you arrogant Roman bumbler, you think I don’t know you keep the Queen and the King, that you stole them out of Egypt? It is known. The word is spread through the world, through the Northern woods, through the wild lands, through the lands of which you know nothing. You killed the Elder who guarded the King and the Queen and stole them! The King and Queen have not moved or spoken in a thousand years. You took our Queen from Egypt. You think you are a Roman Emperor? You think she is a Queen you can take captive, like Cleopatra! Cleopatra was a Greek whore. This is our Isis, our Akasha! You blaspheming fool. Now let me into Akasha’s presence. Stand against me, and this woman, the only mortal whom you

truly love, dies."

Marius came up step by step towards us.

"Akbar, did your informants tell you that it was the Elder in Egypt, her long keeper himself, who left the Royal Pair to stand in the sun?" asked Marius. He took another step upward. "Did they tell you that it was the Elder that caused the sun to strike them, the fire which destroyed hundreds of us, and spared the oldest only so they could live in agony as you do?"

Marius made a quick gesture. I felt the fangs deep in my neck. I couldn't get away. Again, I saw this creature in his former splendor, taunting me with his beauty, his jeweled feet as he danced, surrounded by painted women.

I heard Marius right beside me, but I couldn't make out the words.

The folly of it all went through my mind. I had led this creature to Marius, but was that what the Mother wanted? Akasha, that was the ancient name written on the bodies dumped on the steps of the Temple. I knew her name. I knew it in the dreams. I was losing consciousness. "Marius," I called out with all my strength.

My head fell forward, free of the fangs. I fought this total captivating weakness. I deliberately pictured the Emperor Augustus receiving us on his deathbed. "I shall not see the end of this comedy," I whispered.

"Oh, yes, you shall." It was Marius's calm voice right near us. I opened my eyes. "Akbar, don't risk it again, you've shown your determination."

"Don't reach for me again, Marius," said the burnt creature. "My teeth caress her neck. But one more drop and her heart is silent."

The rich dark of night brightened the torch below. That was all I could see. The torch. "Akasha," I whispered.

The burnt thing took a deep breath, his chest heaving against me. "Her blood is beautiful," he said. He kissed my cheek with the parched burnt lips. I closed my eyes. It was becoming harder and harder for me to breathe. I couldn't open my eyes.

He went on talking.

"You see, I have no fear to take her into death with me, Marius, for if I must die by your hand, why not with her as my consort?"

These words were distant, echoing.

"Pick her up in your arms," said Marius. He was very close to us. "And carry her gently, as if she were your only beloved child, and come down

with me into the Shrine. Come and see the Mother. Kneel before Akasha and see what she will allow!"

I swooned again, but I heard the creature laugh He did lift me now, under the knees, and my head fell back. We went down the steps.

"Marius," I said, "he's weak. You can kill him." My face fell against the chest of the burnt one as we descended. I could feel the bones of his chest. "Really, very weak," I said, scarcely able to remain conscious. Akasha, yes, her true name.

"Carefully, my friend," said Marius. "She dies and I destroy you. You've almost overplayed your hand. She narrows your chances with every labored breath. Pandora, be silent, please. Akbar is a great blood drinker, a great god."

I felt a cold firm hand clasp mine.

We had reached the lower floor. I tried to lift my head. I saw rows of lamps, splendid wall paintings hammered with gold, a ceiling veiled in gold.

Two great stone doors were opened. A chapel lay within, a chapel full of dense fluttering devotional light and the overpowering scent of lilies.

The blood drinker who held me let out a cry. "Mother Isis," he said piteously. "Oh, Akasha!"

He released me, setting me down on my feet, as Marius at once took hold of me, and the blistered and damaged one rushed towards the altar.

I stared, amazed. But I was dying. I couldn't breathe. I was falling to the floor. I tried to swallow air but I could not. I could not stand without Marius.

But oh, to leave the Earth and all its miseries with such a vision:

There they sat, The Great Goddess Isis and the King Osiris, or so it seemed, bronzed in skin, not white like the poor captive Queen in my dreams, but perfectly arrayed in garments of spun gold pleated and sewn in the fixed Egyptian style. Their black hair was long, plaited, real. The paint on their faces was fresh, the dark eyelining and mascara, the reddened lips.

She wore no crown of the horns and sun disk. Her collar of gold and jewels was superb, shimmering and alive in my eyes.

"I must get the crown, restore the crown!" I said aloud, hearing this voice come from me as if it had been born elsewhere to instruct me. My eyes closed.

The black thing knelt before the Queen.

I couldn't see clearly. I felt Marius's arms, and then a gush of hot blood come into my mouth. "No, Marius, protect her!" I tried to speak. My words were washed away in this infusion of blood. "Protect the Mother!" Again it came filling my mouth so that I had to swallow. Immediately I felt the strength, the power of this blood, infinitely stronger than the pull of Akbar. The blood rushed like so many rivers to the sea, through my body. It would not be stopped. Another gush followed, as if a giant storm had driven the river even faster into its delta, its broken and random streams seeking every morsel of flesh.

A wide and wondrous world opened and would have welcomed me, sunlight in the deep forest, but I wouldn't see it. I broke free. "The Queen, save her from him!" I whispered. Did the blood drip from my lips? No, it was gone inside me.

Marius wouldn't listen to me. Again a bloody wound was pressed to my mouth, and the blood was driven ever faster. I felt the air fill my lungs. I could feel the length of my own body, sturdy, standing on its own. The blood brightened inside me like light, as though it had enflamed my heart. I opened my eyes. I was a pillar. I saw Marius's face, his golden eyelashes, his deep blue eyes. His long hair parted in the middle fell to his shoulders. He was ageless, a god.

"Protect her!" I cried. I turned and pointed.

A veil was lifted that had all my life hung between me and all things; now in their true color and shape, they gave forth their deliberate purpose: the Queen stared forward, immobile as the King. Life could not have imitated such serenity, such utter paralysis. I heard water dropping from the flowers. Tiny drops striking the marble floor, the fall of a single leaf. I turned and saw it, curled and rocking on the stones, this tiny leaf. I heard the breeze move under the golden canopied ceiling. And the lamps had tongues of flame to sing.

The world was a woven song, a tapestry of song. The multicolored Mosiacs gleamed, then lost all form, then even pattern. The walls dissolved into clouds of colored mist which welcomed us, through which we could roam forever.

And there she sat, The Queen of Heaven, reigning over all in supreme and unperturbed stillness.

All the yearning of my childish heart was fulfilled. "She lives, she is

real, she reigns over Earth and Heaven."

The King and the Queen. They didn't stir. Their eyes beheld nothing. They did not look at us. They did not look at the burnt thing as he drew closer and closer to their throne.

The arms of the Royal Pair were covered in many inscribed and intricate bracelets. Their hands rested on their thighs. It was the manner of many an Egyptian statue. But there never has been a statue to equal either of them.

"The crown, she would have her crown," I said With astonishing vigor I walked forward towards her.

Marius took my hand. Keenly, he watched the progress of the burnt one.

"She was before all such crowns," Marius said "they do not mean anything to her."

The thought itself burst with the sweetness of a grape on my tongue. Of course she was there before. In my dreams, she had had no crown. She was safe. Marius kept her safe.

"My Queen," said Marius from behind me. "You have a supplicant. It is Akbar from the East. He would drink the royal blood What is your will, Mother?"

His voice was so tranquil! He had no fears.

"Mother Isis, let me drink!" cried this burnt creature. He stood up, threw up his arms and created another dancing vision of his former self. He wore human skulls hanging from his belt. He wore a necklace of blackened human fingers! Another of blackened human ears! It was grisly and revolting, yet he seemed to think it seductive and overpowering. At once the image left him. The god from the faraway land was on his knees.

"I am your servant and always was! I slew only the evildoer, as you commanded. I never abandoned your true worship."

How fragile and insignificant seemed this pleading one, so revolting, so easy to clear away now from her presence. I looked at the King Osiris, as remote and indifferent as the Queen.

"Marius," I said, "the corn for Osiris; doesn't he want the corn? He's the god of the corn." I was filled with visions of our processions in Rome, of people singing and bearing the offerings.

"No, he doesn't want the corn," said Marius. He laid his hand on my

shoulder.

"They are true, they are real!" I cried out. "It is all real. Everything is changed. Everything is redeemed."

The burnt thing turned and glared at me. But I was quite beyond all reason. He turned back to the Queen and reached out for her foot.

How her toenails flashed in the light with the golden flesh beneath them. But she was stone-still, as was the crownless King, without seeming judgment or power.

The creature suddenly sprang up and tried to seize the Queen by the neck!

I screamed.

"Shameless, despicable."

Swiftly the frozen right arm of the Queen rose, her hand surrounding the burnt thing's skull and crushing it, the blood gushing down her as the monster gave his last fractured cry for mercy. She caught his body as it dropped over her waist. She hurled it in the air, and all its limbs broke loose from it, crashing to the floor like so much timber.

A gusting wind caught each remnant and gathered them all in one as a lamp fell from its three-legged stand to spill its burning oil on the remains.

"The heart, look," I said. "I can see its heart. The heartbeats."

But the fire quickly consumed the heart, consumed the flexing fingers and the writhing toes. There was a great stirring, a dance in the fire of bones, bones whirling in the flames, and then the bones blackened, thinned, snapped to pieces, became fragments; all of this thing was reduced at last to smoking cinders, crisping and skittering on the floor.

Then came the breeze again, full of the breath of the garden, lifting these cinders and carrying them away, like so many fragile tiny black insects, into the shadows of the antechamber.

I was spellbound.

The Queen was as before, her hand in its old place. She and the King stared at nothing, as if nothing had taken place. Only the wretched stain on her gown bore witness.

Their eyes took no heed of Marius or of me.

Then there was only quiet in the chapel. Only sweet perfumed quiet. Golden light I breathed deeply. I could hear the oil in the lamps turned to flame. The Mosiacs were peopled with finely made worshipers. I could

see the slow minute beginnings of decay of the various flowers, and it seemed but another strain of the same song that expressed their growth, their browning edges but another color in no contradiction to their brilliant colors.

"Forgive me, Akasha," Marius said softly, "that I let him come so close. I was not wise."

I cried. Great gushing tears came from me.

"You summoned me," I said to the Queen through my tears. "You called me here! I will do all you want of me."

Slowly her right arm rose; it rose from her thigh and extended itself and her hand very gently curved in the beckoning gesture of the dream, but there was no smile, no change in her frozen face.

I felt something invisible and irresistible wrap itself around me. It came from her outstretching welcoming arm. It was sweet and soft and caressing. It made a flush of pleasure through all my limbs and my face.

I moved forward, wound up in its will.

"I beg you, Akasha!" Marius said softly. "I beg you under the name of manna, under the name of Isis, under the name of all goddesses, don't hurt her!"

Marius simply didn't understand! Marius had never known her worship! I knew. I knew that her blood drinker children had meant to be judges of the evildoer, and drink only from the condemned, according to her laws. I saw the god of the dark cave, whom I'd seen in my vision. I understood all.

I wanted to tell Marius. But I couldn't. Not now. The world was reborn, all systems built upon skepticism or selfishness were as fragile as spiderwebs and meant to be swept away. My own moments of despair had been nothing more than detours into an unholy and self-centered blackness.

"The Queen of Heaven," I whispered. I knew I was speaking in the ancient tongue. A prayer came to my lips.

"And Amon Ra, the Sun God, for all his power, shall never conquer the King of the Dead or his bride, for she is the ruler of the starry heavens, of the moon, of those who would bring the sacrifice of the evildoer. Cursed be those who misuse this magic. Cursed be those who seek to steal it!"

I felt myself, a human, held together by the intricate threads of blood

which Marius had given me. I felt the design of its support It had no weight my body.

I was lifted towards her. Her arm came around me and pulled my hair back from my face. I put out my arms to embrace her neck because I could do nothing else. We were too dose for any other possible sign of love.

I felt the soft silk of her real plaited hair, and the coldness and firmness of her shoulders, her arm. Yet she did not look at me. She was a petrified thing. Could she look at me? Did she choose to remain silent, staring forward? Did some evil spell hold her helpless, a spell from which a thousand hymns might waken her?

In my delirium I saw the words engraved in gold pieces among the jewels of her collar: “Bring to me the evildoer and I shall drink his blood.”

It seemed I was in the desert and the necklace was tumbling over and over in the sand, in the wind, rather like the body of the burnt one had tumbled. Fallen, lost, to be remade.

I felt my head drawn to her neck. She had opened her fingers over my hair. She directed it, that my lips should feel this skin.

“It’s what you want, isn’t it?” I asked. But my words seemed remote from me, a pathetic expression of the fullness of my soul. “That I am to be your daughter!”

She tipped her head slightly, away from me, so that I saw her neck. I saw the vein displayed, the vein from which she wanted me to drink.

Her finger rose gently through my hair, never pulling it or hurting it, merely embracing my head, sending rampant ecstasy through me, and urging my head gently down so that my lips could no longer avoid her shimmering skin.

“Oh, my adored Queen,” I whispered. I had never known such certainty, such ecstasy without limits or mundane cause. I had never known such bursting, triumphant faith as my faith in her.

I opened my mouth. Nothing human could bite through this hard flesh! Yet it gave, as though it were thin, and the blood pumped into me, “the Fount.” I heard her heart driving it, a deafening force that vibrated in the drums of my ears. This was not blood. This was nectar. This was all that any created being could ever desire.

9

With the nectar flowing into me, there came another realm. Her ringing laughter filled the corridor; she ran ahead of me, girlish, feline, unencumbered by grandeur. She beckoned for me to follow. Out under the stars, Marius sat alone in his soft shapeless garden. She pointed to him. I saw Marius rise and take me in his arms. His long hair was such a fine adornment. I saw what she wanted. It was Marius I kissed in this vision as I drank from her; it was Marius with whom I danced.

A shower of flower petals descended upon us as upon a bridal couple in Rome, and Marius held my arm as though we had just been wed, and all around us people sang. There was a flawless happiness, a happiness so keen that perhaps there are those born who never even have the capacity for it.

She stood atop a broad black altar of diorite.

It was night. This was an enclosed place, filled with people, but it was dark and cool with the sandy wind off the valley floor, and she looked down at the one they offered up to her. He was a man, his eyes closed, his hands were bound. He didn't struggle.

She showed her teeth; a gasp rose from the worshipers who filled the place, and then she took the man by the throat and drank his blood. When she had finished, she let him fall and she held up her arms.

"All things are cleansed in me!" she cried out. Once again the petals fell, petals of all colors, and peacock feathers waved about us, and branches of palm, and there was singing in great lusty bursts, and the sound of a riotous drum, and she smiled looking down from where she stood, her face remarkably flushed and mobile and human, her black-painted eyes sweeping over her worshipers.

All began to dance, save she, who watched, and then her eyes rose slowly and she looked over their heads, out the high rectangular windows of this place, at the twinkling firmament. Pipes played. The dance had become a frenzy.

A weary and secretive darkness crept into her face, a distraction, as though her soul had traveled out of doors towards Heaven, and then she looked sadly down. She looked lost. Anger overcame her.

Then she cried out in a deafening voice, “The rogue blood drinker!” The crowd fell silent. “Bring him to me.”

The crowd parted to let this struggling furious god be forced to her altar.

“You dare judge me!” he cried. He was Babylonian, with full long curly locks and beard and mustache. It took ten mortals to hold him.

“Into the burning place, in the mountains, in the sun, in the strongest fetters!” she cried. He was dragged away.

Once again she looked up. The stars grew big and age-old patterns were clear. We floated under the stars.

A boy in a delicate gilded chair argued with those around him. The men were old, half-invisible in the darkness. The lamp shone on the boy’s face. We stood in the door. The boy was frail, his little limbs like sticks.

“And you say,” said the incredulous boy, “that these blood drinkers are worshiped in the hills!”

I knew he was the Pharaoh by the sacred lock of hair that grew from his bald head, by the manner in which the others waited upon him. He looked up in horror as she approached. His guardians fled.

“Yes,” she said, “and you will do nothing to stop it!”

She lifted him, this small fragile boy, and tore at his throat as an animal might do it, letting the blood flood from the fatal wound. “Little King,” she said. “Little Kingdom.”

The vision ended.

Her cold white skin was closed beneath my lips. I kissed her now. I no longer drank.

I felt my own form, felt myself fall back over her arm, felt myself slipping out of her embrace.

In the dim radiance, her profile remained as it had before, silent and without feeling. Stark, a face without a blemish or a line. I sank back into Marius’s arms. Her arm and hand returned to their former rigid position.

Everything was brilliantly clear, the motionless King and Queen, the artful figures fixed in lapis lazuli in the gold mosaics.

I felt a sharp pain in me, in the heart, in the womb, as if someone had stabbed me. “Marius!” I cried out.

He picked me up and carried me from the chamber.

“No, I want to kneel at her feet,” I said. The pain took the breath out of me. I tried not to scream from this pain. Oh, the world had just been reborn. And now this agony.

He set me down on the high grass, letting it be crushed under me. A flood of sour human fluid came out of my womb, even out of my mouth. I saw flowers right near me. I saw the friendly Heavens, vivid as in my vision. The pain was unspeakable.

I knew now why he had removed me from the Shrine.

I wiped at my cheek. I couldn’t bear this filth. The pain devoured me. I struggled to see again what she had revealed to me, remember what she said, but there was too much obstruction in this pain.

“Marius!” I cried.

He covered me and kissed my cheek. “Drink from me,” he said, “drink until the pain goes away. It’s only the body dying, drink. Pandora, you are immortal.”

“Fill me, take me,” I said. I reached down between his legs.

“It doesn’t matter now.”

But it was hard, this organ I sought, the organ forever lost to the god Osiris. I guided it, hard and cold as it was, into my body. Then I drank and drank, and when I felt his teeth again on my neck, when he began to draw from me the new mixture that filled my veins, it was sweet suckling, and I knew him and loved him and knew all his secrets in one flash which meant nothing.

He was right. The lower organs meant nothing. He fed on me. I fed on him. This was our marriage. All around us, the grass was waving softly in the breeze, a majestic conjugal bed, and the smell of the green flooded me.

The pain was gone. I flung out my arm and felt the softness of flowers.

He tore off my fouled dress and lifted me. He carried me into the pool where the marble Venus stood forever with back bent, and one foot raised above the cool water.

“Pandora!” he whispered.

The boys stood at his side, offering him pitchers.

He dipped a pitcher and poured the water over me. I felt beneath my feet the tile at the bottom of the pool as the water ran down my skin. I had never known such sensation! Another pitcherful washed over me, deliciously. I feared for one instant the pain would return, but no, it was

gone.

"I love you with all my heart," I said. "All my love belongs to them and to you, Marius. Marius, I can see in the darkness, I can see in the deep dark beneath the trees."

Marius held me. The boys slowly bathed us both, dipping their pitchers and pouring the silvery water over us.

"Oh, to have you with me," Marius said, "to have you here; not to be alone, but to be with you, my beauty, you of all souls! You." He stood back, and I gloried in him, drenched as I was, reached to touch his long wild foreign hair. He sparkled all over with droplets.

"Yes," I said. "It was exactly what she wanted."

His face stiffened. He scowled. He stared at me. Something had changed altogether, and for the worse. I could feel it.

"What?" he asked.

"It is what she wanted. She made it plain to me in the visions. She wanted me to be with you, so you wouldn't be alone."

He stood back. Was this anger?

"Marius, what is the matter with you? Can't you see what she's done?"

He stepped back again, away from me.

"You didn't realize that's what was happening?" I asked.

The boys thrust forth towels. Marius took one and wiped his face and his hair. I did the same.

He was furious. He shook with anger. This was a moment of mingled and inexplicable beauty and horror—his white body there, the shimmering pool, the lights falling gracefully from the open doors of the house, and above, the stars, her stars. And Marius angry and bristling, his eyes full of outrage.

I looked at him.

"I am her Priestess now," I said. "I'm to restore her worship. That's what she wants. But she brought me also for you, because you were alone," I said. "Marius, I saw all this. I saw our own wedding in Rome, as if it were the old days and our families were with us. I saw her worshipers."

He was plainly horrified.

I didn't want to see this. Surely I was misunderstanding him.

I stepped up on the grass. I let the boys dry my body. I looked up at the stars. The house with all its warm lamps seemed crude and fragile, a

bumbled attempt to make an order of things, which could not compare to the making of one complete flower.

"Oh, how spectacular is the simple night," I said. "It seems an insult to the night to speak of purpose and intent, when this common moment is so brimming full of blessed design and tranquillity. All things follow their course."

I stood back and spun around, letting the water fly from me. I was so strong. No dizziness overcame when I stopped. I had a sense of infinite power.

One of the boys held out a tunic for me. It was a man's, but as I've said so often here, Roman clothes are very simple. It was just a short tunic. I put it on and let him tie the sash around my waist. I smiled at him. He trembled and stepped back from me.

"Dry my hair," I told him. Ah, such sensations.

Slowly I looked up. Marius too was dried and dressed. He was still looking at me with violent protest, and downright indignation.

"Someone has to go in," I said, "to change her golden gown. That blasphemer, he left her bloody."

"I will do that!" Marius said in plain anger.

"Oh, so it comes to this," I said. I looked around me, seduced by beauty to forget his altogether, to come back to him at some later hour after I had roamed beneath the olive trees and consorted with the constellations.

But his anger hurt me. The hurt was strange, and deep, without the various stages mortal flesh and mind command of pain.

"Oh, isn't it splendid!" I said. "I learn that the goddess reigns, that she is real, that she has made all things! That the world is not just a giant graveyard! But I learn this as I find myself in an arranged marriage! And behold the groom! How he nurses his own temper."

He sighed and bowed his head. Was I to see him cry again, this flawless familiar and beloved god among crushed flowers?

He looked up. "Pandora," he said. "She's not a goddess. She didn't make the world."

"How dare you say this!"

"I have to say it! I would have died for the truth when I was alive and will die for it now. But she will not let this happen. She needs me and she needs you to make me happy!"

“So very well!” I threw my hands. “I am happy to do it. And we will restore her worship.”

“We will not!” he said. “How can you even think of such a thing.”

“Marius, I want to sing it from the tops of mountains; I want to tell the world that this miracle exists. I want to run through the streets singing. We are to restore her to her throne in a great Temple in the very middle of Antioch!”

“You’re talking madness!” he shouted.

The boys had run away.

“Marius, have you stopped up your ears to her commands? We are to hunt down and kill her renegade gods and see that new gods are born from her, gods who look into souls, gods who seek justice, not lies, gods who are not fantastical, lustful idiots or the drunken whimsical creatures of the Northern sky who hurl thunderbolts. Her worship is founded in the good, in the pure!”

“No, no, no,” he said. He stepped back as if that would make it all the more emphatic. “You’re talking rot!” he said. “Stupidity, rank superstition!”

“I don’t believe you said those words!” I cried. “You are a monster!” I said. “She deserves her throne! So does the King, who sits beside her. They deserve their worshipers bringing flowers to them. Did you think you had the power to read minds for no good reason!” I came forward. “Do you remember when I first mocked you in the Temple? When I said you ought to station yourself at the courts and look into the minds of the accused? I had hit the mark in my ridicule!”

“No!” he roared. “This is absolutely not true,” he said.

He turned his back on me, rushing into the house. I followed him.

He rushed down the stairway and into her sanctum, stopping short before her. She and her King sat as before. Not an eyelash moved. Only the flowers clung to life in the perfumed air.

I looked down at my hands, so white! Could I die now? Would I live centuries like the burnt one?

I studied their seemingly divine faces. They did not smile. They did not dream. They looked, and nothing more.

I fell down on my knees.

“Akasha,” I whispered. “May I call you this name? Tell me what you want.”

There was no change in her. None whatsoever.

"Well, speak, Mother!" declared Marius, his voice thick with sadness. "Speak! Is it what you've always wanted?"

Suddenly he dashed forward, mounted the two steps of her dais and pounded on her breasts with his fists.

I was horrified.

She didn't move, she didn't blink. His fist struck a hardness he could not budge. Only her hair, struck by his arm, gave a little sway.

I ran to him and tried to pull him away.

"Stop it, Marius, she'll destroy you!"

I was amazed at my strength. Surely it equalled his. But he allowed me to pull him back, his face flooded with tears.

"Oh, what have I done!" he said staring at her. "Oh, Pandora, Pandora! What have I done! I've made another blood drinker when I swore that there would never, never be another made, not so long as I survived!"

"Come upstairs," I said calmly. I glanced at the King and Queen. No sign of response or recognition. "It isn't proper, Marius, that we argue here in the Shrine. Come upstairs."

He nodded.

He let me lead him slowly out of the room. His head was bowed.

"Your long barbarian hair is most becoming," I said. "And I have eyes now to see you as never before. Our blood is intertwined as it might be in a child born to us."

He wiped at his nose, and didn't look at me.

We walked into the large library.

"Marius, is there nothing in me that fills your eye, nothing you find beautiful?"

"Oh, yes, my dear, there is everything!" he said. "But for the love of Heaven, bring your wits with you into this! Don't you see! Your life's been stolen not for a sacred truth but for a degraded mystery! Reading minds doesn't make me any wiser than the next man! I kill to live! As she once did, thousands and thousands of years ago. Oh, and she knew she had to do this. She knew the time had come."

"What time? What did she know?"

I stared at him. I was gradually realizing that I could no longer read his thoughts, and surely he couldn't read mine. But the hovering boys, they were just open books in their fear, thinking themselves the servants

of kindhearted but very loud-voiced demons.

Marius sighed. “She did it because I had almost gained the courage to do what I had to do! To place them both and myself in the sun and finish forever what the Egyptian Elder had sought to do—rid the world of the King and Queen and all the fanged men and women who glut themselves on death! Oh, she is too clever.”

“You really planned to do that?” I asked. “To immolate them and yourself?”

He made a small sarcastic sound. “Yes, of course, I planned it. Next week, next month, next year, next decade, after another hundred years, maybe in two hundred, maybe after I’d read all the books in the world and seen all the places, maybe in five hundred years, maybe … maybe soon in my loneliness.”

I was at first too stunned to speak.

He smiled at me wisely and sadly. “Oh, but I cry like a child,” he said softly.

“Where comes the confidence,” I asked, “to put an end so swiftly to such bold and complex evidence of divine magic!”

“Magic!” he cursed.

“I’d rather if you did not do this,” I said. “I don’t mean the crying, I mean burning up the Mother and Father and …”

“I’m sure you would!” he answered. “And do you think I could bear to do it against your will, subject you to the fire? You innocent desperate idiot of a woman! Restore her altars! Oh! Restore her worship! Oh! You are out of your mind!”

“Idiot! You dare sling your insults at me! You think you’ve brought a slave into your household? You haven’t even brought a wife.”

Yes. Our minds were locked now to each other, and later I would find out that it was because of our heavy exchange of blood. But all I knew then was that we had to content ourselves with words like mortal men and women.

“I did not mean to use petty insults!” he said. He was stung.

“Well, then sharpen your great male reason and your lofty elegant patrician mode of expression!” I said.

We glowered at one another.

“Yes!” he said. “Reason,” he said. He held up his finger. “You are the most clever woman I’ve ever known. And you listen to reason. I will

explain and you will see. That is what must be done."

"Yes, and you are hotheaded and sentimental and give way to tears again and again—and you pound upon the Queen herself like a child throwing a tantrum!"

His face went red with immediate anger. It sealed his lips against his words.

He turned and went away.

"Do you cast me out?" I said. "Do you want me gone!" I shouted. "This is your house. Tell me now if you want me gone. I'll go now!"

He stopped. "No," he said.

He turned around and looked at me, shaken, and caught off guard. In a raw voice, he said, "Don't go, Pandora!" He blinked as if to clear his vision. "Don't go. Please, don't." And then he let fall a final whisper. "We have each other."

"And where do you go now, to get away from me?"

"Only to change her dress," he said with a sad bitter smile. "To clean and recostume 'such bold evidence of complex and divine magic.' "

He disappeared.

I turned to the violet outdoors. To the clouds stirred in a cauldron by the moon, to defy the darkness. To the big old trees that said, Mount our limbs, we will embrace you! To the scattered flowers everywhere that said, We are your bed. Lie down with us.

And so the two-hundred-year brawl began.

And it never really ended.

10

With my eyes still closed, I heard voices of the city, voices from nearby houses; I heard men talking as they passed on the road outside. I heard music coming from somewhere, and the laughter of women and children. When I concentrated I could understand what they said. I chose not to do this, and their voices melded with the breeze.

Suddenly, the state seemed unbearable. There seemed nothing to do but rush back to the chapel and kneel there and worship! These senses I had been given seemed fit for nothing else. If this was my destiny, then what was to become of me?

Through it all, I heard a soul weeping in agony; it was an echo of my own, a soul broken from a course of great hope, who could scarce believe that such fine beginnings should end in terror! It was Flavius.

I leapt into the old gnarled olive tree. It was as simple as taking a step. I stood among the branches, and then leapt to the next, and then to the top of the wall, encrusted with vine. I walked along the wall towards the gate.

There he stood, his forehead pressed to the bars, both hands clutching at the iron. He bled from several slash marks on his cheek. He gnashed his teeth.

"Flavius!" I said.

He looked up with a start. "Lady Pandora!"

Surely by the light of the moon, he saw the miracle wrought in me, whatever its cause. For I saw the mortality in him, the deep wrinkles of his skin, the painful flutter of his gaze, a thin layer of soil clinging to him all over in the natural moisture of his mortal skin.

"You must go home," I said, climbing to sit on the wall, with legs on the outside. I bent down so he could hear me. He didn't back away but his eyes were huge with fascination. "Go see to the girls, and sleep, and get those marks attended to. The demon's dead, you needn't worry anymore about him. Come back here tomorrow night at sundown."

He shook his head. He tried to speak but he couldn't. He tried to gesture but he couldn't. His heart thundered in his chest. He glanced back down the road to the small far-flung lights of Antioch. He looked at

me. I heard his heart galloping. I felt his shock, and his fear, and it was fear for me, not him. Fear that some awful fate had befallen me. He reached for the gate and clung to the bars, right arm hooked around and left hand clasping it as if he wouldn't be moved.

I saw myself as he saw me in his mind—in a boy's sashed tunic, my hair wildly free, sitting atop the wall, as if my body were young and pliant. All lines of age had gone from me. He saw a face on me no one could have ever painted.

But the point was this. The man had reached his limit. He could go no further. And I knew most fully how I loved him.

"All right," I said. I stood up and leaned over with both my hands. "Come on, I'll lift you over the wall if I can."

He raised his arms, doubtful, eyes still drinking up every detail of my transformation.

He weighed nothing. I lifted him up and deposited him on his feet within the gate. I dropped down on the grass beside him and put my arm around him. How hot was his alarm. How strong his courage.

"Still your heart," I said. I led him towards the house, as he looked down at me, his chest heaving as though he were out of breath, but it was mere shock. "I'll take care of you."

"I had the thing," he said, "I had it by its arm!" How opaque his voice sounded, how filled with Irving fluid and effort. "I sank my dagger into it over and over, but it just slashed at my face and it was gone over the wall like a swarm of gnats, just darkness, immaterial darkness!"

"Flavius, it's dead, burnt to cinders!"

"Had I not heard your voice, oh, I was going mad! I heard the boys crying. I couldn't climb the wall with this damned leg. Then I heard your voice, and I knew, knew you were alive!" He was filled with happiness. "You were with your Marius." The ease with which I could feel his love was sweet, and awe inspiring.

A sudden sense of the Shrine came back to me, of the Queen's nectar and the shower of flower petals. But I had to maintain my equilibrium in this new state. Flavius was also profoundly baffled.

I kissed him on the lips, warm, mortal lips, and then quickly like an artful cat I licked all the blood from the slash marks on his cheeks, feeling a shiver run through me.

I took him into the library, which in this house was the main room.

The boys hovered somewhere about. They had been lighting lamps everywhere, and now they cowered. I could smell their blood and their young human flesh.

"You'll stay with me, Flavius. Boys, can you make a bedroom for my steward on this floor? You have fruit and bread, don't you? I can smell it. Have you enough furniture to make him a comfortable place to the far right, where he is out of the way?"

They came rushing out of their respective hiding places, and they too struck me as vividly human. I was distracted. The smallest natural things about them seemed precious, their thick black eyebrows, their round little mouths, their smooth cheeks.

"Yes, Madam, yes!" they said almost in one voice. They hurried forward.

"This is Flavius, my steward. He will stay with us. For now, take him to the bath, heat the water and attend to him. Get him some wine."

They took Flavius in hand at once. But he paused.

"Don't abandon me, Madam," he said suddenly with the most serious and thoughtful expression. "I am loyal in all respects."

"I know," I said. "Oh, how clearly I understand. *You* cannot imagine."

Then it was off to the bath with the Babylonian boys, who seemed delighted to have something to do.

I found Marius's huge closets. He had enough clothes for the Kings of Parthia, Armenia, the Emperor's Mother, Livia, the dead Cleopatra, and an ostentatious patrician who paid no attention to Tiberius's stupid sumptuary laws.

I put on a much finer, long tunic, woven of silk and linen, and I chose a gold girdle. And with Marius's combs and brushes, I made a clean free mantle of my hair, free of all tangles, rippled and soft as it had been when I was a girl.

He had many mirrors, which, as you know, in those days were only polished metal. And I was rendered somber and mystified by the single fact that I was young again; my nipples were pink, as I had said; the lines of age no longer interrupted the intended endowments of my face or arms. Perhaps it is most accurate to say that I was timeless. Timeless in adulthood. And every solid object seemed there to serve in me my new strength.

I looked down at the blocks of marble tile which made up the floor

and saw in them a depth, a proof of process wondrous and barely understood.

I wanted to go out again, speak to the flowers, pick them up in handfuls. I wanted to talk urgently with the stars. I dared not seek the Shrine for fear of Marius, but if he had not been around I would have gone there and knelt at the Mother and merely looked at her, looked at her in silent contemplation, listening for the slightest articulation, though I knew, quite certainly after watching Marius's behavior, that there would be none.

She had moved her right arm without the seeming knowledge of the rest of her body. She had moved it to kill, and then to invite.

I went into the library, sat down at the desk, where lay all my pages, and I waited.

Finally, when Marius came, he too was freshly dressed, his hair parted in the middle and combed to his shoulders. He took a chair near me. It was ebony and curved and inlaid with gold, and I looked at him, realizing how very like the chair he was—a great preserved extension of all the raw materials which had gone into it. Nature did the carving and inlay, and then the whole had been lacquered.

I wanted to cry in his arms, but I swallowed my loneliness. The night would never desert me, and it was faithful in every open door with its intruding grass, and the veined olive branches rising to catch the light of the moon.

"Blessed is she who is made a blood drinker," I said, "when the moon is full, and the clouds are rising like mountains in the transparent night."

"Probably so," he said.

He moved the lamp that stood on the desk between us, so that it didn't flicker in my eyes.

"I made my steward at home here," I said. "I offered him bath, bed and clothes. Do you forgive me? I love him and will not lose him. It's too late now for him to go back into the world."

"He's an extraordinary man," Marius said, "and most welcome here. Tomorrow perhaps he can bring your girls. Then the boys will have company and there will be some discipline by day. Flavius knows books, among other things."

"You're most gracious. I was afraid you would be angry. Why do you suffer so? I cannot read your mind; I did not obtain that gift." No, this

wasn't correct. I could read Flavius's mind. I knew the boys at this very moment were very relieved by Flavius's presence as they helped him dress for bed.

"We are too closely linked by blood," he said. "I can never read your thoughts again either. We are thrown back on words like mortals, only our senses are infinitely keener, and the detachment we know at some times will be as cold as the ice in the North; and at other times feelings will enflame us, carry us on waves of burning sea."

"Hmmm," I said.

"You despise me," he said softly, contritely, "because I quenched your ecstasy, I took from you your joy, your convictions." He looked quite genuinely miserable. "I did this to you right at the happiest moment of your conversion."

"Don't be so sure you quenched it. I might still make her Temples, preach her worship. I'm an initiate. I have only begun."

"You will not revive her worship!" he said. "Of that I assure you! You will tell no one about her or what she is or where she is kept, and you will never make another blood drinker."

"My, if only Tiberius had such authority when he addressed the Senate!" I said.

"All Tiberius ever wanted was to study at the gymnasium at Rhodes, to go every day in a Greek cloak and sandals and talk philosophy. And so the propensity for action flowers in men of lesser mettle, who use him in his loveless loneliness."

"Is this a lecture for my improvement? Do you think I don't know this? What you don't know is that the Senate won't help Tiberius govern. Rome wants an Emperor now, to worship and to like. It was your generation, under Augustus, which accustomed us to forty years of autocratic rule. Don't talk to me of politics as though I were a fool."

"I should have realized that you understood it all," he said. "I remember you in your girlhood. Nobody could match your brilliance. Your fidelity to Ovid and his erotic writings was a rare sophistication, an understanding of satire and irony. A well-nourished Roman frame of mind."

I looked at him. His face too had been wiped clean of discernible age. I had time now to relish it, the squareness of his shoulders, the straightness and firmness of his neck, the distinct expression of his eyes

and well-placed eyebrows. We had been made over into portraits of ourselves in marble by a master sculptor.

"You know," I said, "even under this crushing and annoying barrage of definition and declaration which you make to me, as if I were weeping for your ratification, I feel love for you, and know full well that we are alone in this, and married to one another, and I am not unhappy."

He appeared surprised, but said nothing.

"I am exalted, bruised in the heart," I said, "a hardened pilgrim. But I do wish you would not speak to me as if my full indoctrination and education were your primary concern!"

"I have to speak this way!" he said gently. His voice was all kindness in its heat. "It *is* my primary concern," he said. "If you can understand what happened with the end of the Roman Republic, if you can understand Lucretius and the Stoics, whole, then you can understand what we are. You have to do this!"

"I'll let that insult pass," I answered. "I'm not in the mood for listing for you every philosopher or poet I have read. Nor for recounting the level of talk around our nighttime table."

"Pandora, I don't mean any offense! But Akasha is not a goddess! Remember your dreams. She is a vial of precious strength. Your dreams told you she could be used, that any unscrupulous blood drinker could pass on the blood to another, that she is a form of demon, host to the power we share."

"She can hear you!" I whispered, outraged.

"Of course, she can. For fifteen years I've been her guardian. I've fought off those renegades from the East. And other connivers from the African hinterlands. She knows what she is."

No one could have guessed his age, save from the seriousness of his expression. A man in perfect form, that was what he seemed. I tried not to be dazzled by him, by the pulsing night behind him, and yet I wanted so to drift. "Some wedding feast," I said. "I have things to say to the trees."

"They will be there tomorrow night," he said.

The last image I had of her passed before my eyes, colored in ecstasy; she took the young Pharaoh from his chair and broke him into sticks. I saw her before that revelation, at the beginning of the swoon, running down the corridor laughing.

A slow fear crept over me.

"What is it?" Marius asked. "Confide in me."

"When I drank from her, I saw her like a girl, laughing." I recounted then the marriage, the flood of rose petals, and then her strange Egyptian Temple full of frenzied worshipers. At last I told him how she had entered the chamber of the little King, whose advisors warned him of her gods.

"She broke him up as if he were a boy of wood. She said, 'Little King, little Kingdom.' "

I picked up my pages, which earlier I had placed on this desk. I described the last dream I had had of her, when she threatened, screaming, to walk into the sun and destroy her disobedient children. I described all the things I had seen—the many migrations of my soul.

My heart hurt so much. Even as I explained, I saw her vulnerability, the danger that was embodied in her. I explained finally how I had written all this in Egyptian.

I was weary and wished truly that I had never opened eyes on this life! I felt the keen and total despair again of those nights of weeping in my little house in Antioch when I had pounded on walls, and driven my dagger into the dirt. If she had not run, laughing down that corridor! What did the image mean? And the little boy King, broken so helplessly?

I made a sum of it easily enough. I waited for Marius's belittling remarks. I hadn't much patience for him now.

"How do you interpret it?" he asked gently. He tried to take my hand but I withdrew it.

"It's bits and pieces of her recollection," I said. I was heartbroken. "It's what she remembers. There is but one suggestion of a future in it all," I said "There is only one comprehensible image of a wish: our wedding, that we be together." My voice was full of sadness, yet I asked him.

"Why do you weep again, Marius?" I asked. "She must gather recollections like flowers picked at random from the garden of the world like leaves falling into her hands, and from these recollections she fastened for me a garland! A wedding garland! A trap. I have no migrant soul. I think not. If I did have a migrant soul, then why would she alone, one so archaic, helpless, irrelevant to the world itself, so out of fashion and out of power, be the one to know this? To make it known to me? The only one to know?"

I looked at him. He was engaged yet crying. He showed no shame in it, and would obviously render no apology.

"What was it you said before?" I asked. " 'That I can read minds makes me no wiser than the next man'?" I smiled. "That is the key. How she laughed as she led me to you. How she wanted me to behold you in your loneliness."

He only nodded.

"I wonder how she knew to cast her net so far," I said, "to find me across the rolling sea."

"Lucius, that's how she knew. She hears voices from many lands. She sees what she wants to see. One night here I badly startled a Roman, who appeared to recognize me and then slunk away as if I were a danger to him. I went after him, thinking vaguely that there was something to this, his excessive fear.

"I soon realized a great weight distorted his conscience and twisted his every thought and movement. He was terrified to be recognized by someone from the capital. He wanted to leave.

"He went to the house of a Greek merchant, pounding on the door late, by torchlight, and demanded the payment of a debt owed to your Father. The Greek told him what he had told him before, that the money would be repaid only to your Father himself.

"The next night I sought Lucius out again. This time the Greek had a surprise for him. A letter had just come from your Father by military ship. This was perhaps four days before your own arrival. The letter plainly stated that a favor was being asked of the Greek by your Father in the name of Hospitality and Honor. If the favor was granted, all debts were canceled. Everything would be explained by a letter accompanying a cargo destined for Antioch. The cargo would take some time, as the ship had many stops to make. The favor was of crucial importance.

"When your brother saw the date of this letter, he was stricken. The Greek, who was thoroughly sick of Lucius by this time, slammed the door in his face.

"I accosted Lucius only steps away. Of course he remembered me, the eccentric Marius of long ago. I pretended surprise to see him here and asked after you. He was in a panic and made up some story about your being married and living in Tuscany, and said that he was on his way out of town. He hurried off. But the moment's contact had been enough

to see the testimony he'd given the Praetorian Guard against his family—all lies—and to imagine the deeds that had resulted from it.

"The next time, on waking, I couldn't find him. I kept watch on the house of the Greeks. I weighed in my mind a visit to the old man, the Greek merchant, some way to lay down a friendship with him. I thought of you. I pictured you. I remembered you. I made up poems in my head about you. I didn't hear or see anything of your brother. I presumed he'd left Antioch.

"Then one night I awoke and came upstairs and looked out to see the city full of random fires.

"Germanicus had died, never retracting his accusations that Piso had poisoned him.

"When I reached the house of the Greek merchant, it was nothing but burnt timbers. I caught no sight or sound of your brother anywhere. For all I knew they were all dead, your brother, and the Greek merchant family.

"All through the nights after, I searched for sight or sound of Lucius. I had no idea you were here, only an obsessive longing for you. I tried to remind myself that if I mourned for every mortal tie I had had when alive, I would go mad long before I had learnt anything about my gifts from our King and Queen.

"Then, I was in the bookseller's and it was early evening and the Priest slipped up to me. He pointed to you. There you stood in the Forum, and the philosopher and students were bidding you farewell. I was so close!

"I was so overcome with love I didn't even listen to the Priest until I realized he was speaking of strange dreams as he pointed to you. He was saying that only I could put it all together. It had to do with the blood drinker who had recently been in Antioch, not an uncommon occurrence. I have slain other blood drinkers before. I've vowed to catch this one.

"Then I saw Lucius. I saw you come together. His anger and guilt were nearly blinding to me with this blood drinker's vision. I heard your words effortlessly from a great distance, but would not move until you were safely away from him.

"I wanted to kill him then, but the wiser course seemed to stay right with you, to enter the Temple and stay by your side. I was not certain of my right to kill your brother for you, that it was what you wanted. I

didn't know that until I'd told you of his guilt. Then I knew how much you wanted it done.

"Of course I had no idea how clever you had become, that all the talent for reason and words I'd loved in you when you were a girl was still there. Suddenly you were in the Temple, thinking three times faster than the other mortals present, weighing every aspect of what faced you, outwitting everyone. And then came the spectacular confrontation with your brother in which you caught him in the most clever net of truths, and thereby dispatched him, without ever touching him, but instead drawing three military witnesses into complicity with his death."

He broke off, then said, "In Rome, years ago, I followed you. You were sixteen. I remember your first marriage. Your Father took me aside, he was so gentle. 'Marius, you're destined to be a roaming historian,' he said. I didn't dare tell him my true estimation of your husband.

"And now you come to Antioch, and I think, in my self-centered manner, as you will promptly note—if ever a woman was created for me, it is this woman. And I know as soon as I leave you in the morning, that I must somehow get the Mother and Father out of Antioch, get them away, but then this blood drinker has to be destroyed, and then and only then can you be safely left."

"Safely abandoned," I said.

"Do you blame me?" he asked.

The question caught me off guard. I looked at him for a seemingly endless moment, allowing his beauty to fill my eyes, and sensing with intolerable keenness his sadness and desperation. Oh, how he needed me! How desperately he needed not just any mortal soul in which to confide, but me.

"You really did want to protect me, didn't you?" I asked. "And your explanation of all points is so completely rational; it has the elegance of mathematics. There is no need for reincarnation, or destiny, or any miraculous allowance for any part of what's happened."

"It's what I believe," he said sharply. His face grew blank, then stern. "I would never give you anything short of truth. Are you a woman who wants to be humored?"

"Don't be fanatical in your dedication to reason," I said.

These words both shocked and offended him. "Don't cling to reason so desperately in a world of so many horrid contradictions!"

He was silenced.

"If you so cling to reason," I said, "then in the passage of time reason may fail you, and when it does you may find yourself taking refuge in madness."

"What on Earth do you mean?"

"You've made of reason and logic religion. It's obviously the only way you can endure what's happened to you, that you're a blood drinker and custodian, apparently, of these displaced and forgotten deities."

"They aren't deities!" He grew angry. "Thousands of years ago, they were made, through some mingling of spirit and flesh that rendered them immortal. They find their refuge obviously in oblivion. In your kindness you characterize it as a garden from which the Mother gathered flowers and leaves to make a garland for you, a trap, as you said. But this is your sweet girlish poetry. We do not know that they string very many words together."

"I am no sweet girl," I said. "Poetry belongs to everyone. Speak to me!" I said. "And put aside these words, 'girl' and 'woman.' Don't be so frightened of me."

"I am not," he said angrily.

"You are! Even as this new blood races through me still, eats at me and transforms me, I cling to neither reason nor superstition for my safety. I can walk through a myth and out of it! You fear me, because you don't know what I am. I look like a woman, I sound like a man, and your reason tells you the sum total is impossible!"

He rose from the table. His face took on a sheen like sweat but far more radiant.

"Let me tell you what happened to me!" he said resolutely.

"Good, do tell me," I said. "In straightforward manner."

He let this go by. I spoke against my heart. I wanted only to love him. I knew his cautions. But for all his wisdom, he displayed an enormous will, a man's will, and I had to know the source of it. I concealed my love.

"How did they lure you?"

"They didn't," he said calmly. "I was captured by the Keltoi in Gaul, in the city of Massilia. I was brought North, my hair allowed to grow long, then shut up amid barbarians in a great hollow tree in Gaul. A burnt blood drinker made me into a 'new god' and told me to escape the local

Priests, go South to Egypt and find out why all the blood drinkers had been burnt, the young ones dying, the old one suffering. I went for my own reasons! I wanted to know what I was!"

"I can well understand," I said.

"But not before I saw blood worship at its most grisly and unspeakable —I was the god, mind you, Marius, who followed you adoringly all over Rome—and it was to me that these men were offered."

"I've read it in Caesar's history."

"You've read it but you haven't seen it. How dare you throw at me such a trivial boast!"

"Forgive me, I forgot your childish temper."

He sighed. "Forgive me, I forgot your practical and naturally impatient intellect."

"I'm sorry. I regret my words. I had to witness executions of Rome. It was my duty. And that was in the name of law. Who suffers more or less? Victims of sacrifice or the law?"

"Very well. I escaped these Keltoi and went to Egypt, and there I found the Elder, who was the keeper of the Mother and the Father, the Queen and the King, the first blood drinkers of all time, from which this enhancement of our blood flows. This Elder told me stories that were vague but compelling. The Royal Pair had once been human, no more. A spirit or demon had possessed one or both, lodging itself so firmly that no exorcism could oust it. The Royal Pair could transform others by giving the blood. They sought to make a religion. It was overthrown. Again and again it was overthrown. Anyone who possesses the blood can make another! Of course this Elder claimed ignorance of why so many had been burnt. But it was he who had dragged his sacred and royal charges into the sun after centuries of meaningless guardianship! Egypt was dead, he said to me. 'The granary of Rome,' he called it. He said the Royal Pair had not moved in a millennium."

This filled me with the most remarkable and poetic sense of horror.

"Well, one day's hot light was not enough anymore to destroy the ancient parents, but all over the world the children suffered. And this cowardly Elder, given only pain for his reward, a burned skin, lost the courage required to continue the exposure of the Royal Pair. He had no cause, one or another.

"Akasha spoke to me. She spoke as best she could. In images, pictures

of what had happened since the beginning, how this tribe of gods and goddesses had sprung from her, and rebellions had occurred, and how much history was lost, and purpose was lost, and when it came to the forming of words, Akasha could make but only a few silent sentences: 'Marius, take us out of Egypt!' " He paused. " 'Take us out of Egypt, Marius. The Elder means to destroy us. Guard us or we perish here.' "

He took a breath; he was calmer now, not so angry, but very much shattered, and in my ever increasing vampiric vision, I knew more about him, how very courageous he was, how very determined to hold to principles in which he believed, in spite of the magic that had swallowed him whole before he had had time even to question it. His was an attempt at a noble life, in spite of all.

"My fate," he said, "was directly connected to hers, to them! If I left them, the Elder would sooner or later put them in the sun again, and I, lacking the blood of centuries, would burn up like wax! My life, already altered, would have been ended. But the Elder did not ask me to install a new priesthood. Akasha did not ask me to install a new religion! She did not speak of altars or worship. Only the old burnt-out god in the Northern grove among the barbarians had asked me to do such a thing when he sent me to the South, to Egypt, the motherland of all mysteries."

"How long have you kept them?"

"Over fifteen years. I lose count. They never move or speak. The wounded ones, those burnt so badly that time will take centuries to heal them, they learn that I am here. They come. I try to extinguish them before their minds can give forth a flash of a confirming image to other distant minds. She doesn't guide these burnt children to where she is, as she once guided me! If I am tricked or overwhelmed, she moves only as you saw, to crush the blood drinker. But she has called you, Pandora, reached out for you. And we know now to what exact purpose. And I've been cruel to you. Clumsy."

He turned to me. His voice grew tender. "Tell me, Pandora," he asked. "In the vision you saw, when we were married, were we young or old? Were you the girl of fifteen I sought too early perhaps, or the mature full blossom of a creature you are now? Are the families happy? Are we comely?"

I was hotly embraced by the sincerity of his words. The anguish and

the pleading that lay behind them.

"We were as we are now," I said, cautiously answering his smile with my own. "You were a man fixed in the prime of life forever, and I? As I am at this hour."

"Believe me," he said with sweetness in his voice, "I would not have spoken so harshly on this of all nights, but you have now so many other nights to come. Nothing can kill you now, but the sun or fire. Nothing in you will deteriorate. You have a thousand experiences to discover."

"And what of the ecstasy when I drank from her?" I asked. "What of her own beginnings and her suffering? Does she in no way connect herself to the sacred?"

"What is sacred?" he asked, shrugging his shoulder. "Tell me. What is sacred? Was it sanctity you saw in her dreams?"

I bowed my head. I couldn't answer.

"Certainly not the Roman Empire," he said, "Certainly not the temples of Augustus Caesar. Certainly not the worship of Cybele! Certainly not the cult of those who worship fire in Persia. Is the name Isis sacred anymore, or was it ever? The Elder in Egypt, my first and only instructor in all this, said that Akasha invented the stories of Isis and Osiris to suit her purposes, to give a poetry to her worship. I think rather she grafted herself upon old stories. The demon in those two grows with each new blood drinker made. It must."

"But to no purpose?"

"That it may know more?" he said. "That it may see more, feel more, through each of us which carries its blood? Perhaps it is such a creature as that and each of us is but a tiny part of it, carrying all its senses and capacities and returning our experiences to it. It reaches out through us to know the world!"

"I can tell you this," he said. He paused and put his hands on the desk. "What burns in me does not care if the victim is innocent or guilty of any crime. It thirsts. Not every night, but often! It says nothing! It does not talk of altars to me in my heart! It drives me as though I were the battle steed and it the mounted General! It is Marius who weeds the good from the bad, according to the old custom, for reasons you can well understand, but not this ravening thirst; this thirst knows nature but no morality."

"I love you, Marius," I said. "You and my Father are the only men I've

ever really loved. But I must go out alone now."

"What did you say!" He was amazed. "It's just past midnight."

"You've been very patient, but I have to walk alone now."

"I'll come with you."

"You will not," I said.

"But you can't simply roam around Antioch on your own, alone."

"Why not? I can hear mortal thoughts now if I want to. A litter just passed. The slaves are so drunk it's a wonder they don't drop the thing and heave the Master into the road, and he himself is fast asleep. I want to walk alone, out there, in the city in the dark places and the dangerous places and the evil places and the places where even … where even a god would not go."

"This is your vengeance on me," he said. I walked towards the gate and he followed. "Pandora, not alone."

"Marius, my love," I said, turning, taking his hand. "It is not vengeance. The words you spoke earlier, 'girl' and 'woman,' they have always circumscribed my life. I want only now to walk fearlessly with my arms bare and my hair down my back, into any cavern of danger I choose. I am drunk still from her blood, from yours! Things shimmer and flicker that should shine. I must be alone to ponder all you've said."

"But you have to be back before dawn, well before. You have to be with me in the crypt below. You can't merely lie in some room somewhere. The deadly light will penetrate—"

He was so protective, so lustrous, so infuriated.

"I will be back," I said, "and well before dawn, and for now, my heart will break if we are not, as of this moment, bound together."

"We are bound," he said. "Pandora, you could drive me mad."

He stopped at the bars of the gate.

"Don't come any farther," I said as I left.

I walked down towards Antioch. My legs had such strength and spring, and the dust and pebbles of the road were nothing to my feet, and my eyes penetrated the night to see the full conspiracy of owls and little rodents that hovered in the trees', eyeing me, then fleeing as if their natural senses warned them against me.

Soon I came into the city proper. I think the resolution with which I moved from little street to little street was enough to frighten anyone who would have contemplated molesting me. I heard only cowardice

and erotic curses from the dark, those tangled ugly curses men heap on women they desire—half threat, half dismissal.

I could sense the people in their houses fast asleep, and hear the guards on watch, talking in their barracks behind the Forum.

I did all the things the new blood drinkers always do. I touched the surfaces of walls and stared, enchanted at a common torch and the moths that gave themselves up to it. I felt against my naked arms and fragile tunic the dreams of all Antioch surrounding me.

Rats fled up and down the gutters and the streets. The river gave off its own sound, and there came a hollow echoing from the ships at anchor, even from the faintest stirring of the water.

The Forum, resplendent with its ever burning lights, caught the moon as if it were a great human trap for it, the very reverse of an earthly crater, a man-made design that could be seen and blessed by the intransigent heavens.

When I came to my own house, I found I could climb to the very top easily, and there I sat on the tiled roof, so relaxed and secure and free, looking down into the courtyard, into the peristyle, where I had really learned—alone on those three nights—the truths that had prepared me for Akasha's blood.

In calmness and without pain, I thought it through again—as if I owed this reconsideration to the woman I had been, the initiate, the woman who had sought refuge in the Temple. Marius was right. The Queen and King were possessed of some demon which spread through the blood, feeding upon it and growing, as I could feel it doing in me now.

The King and Queen did not invent justice! The Queen, who broke the little Pharaoh into sticks, did not invent law or righteousness!

And the Roman courts, bumbling awkwardly towards each decision, weighing all sides, refusing any magical or religious device, they did even in these terrible times strive for justice. It was a system based not upon the revelation of the gods, but upon reason.

But I could not regret the moment of intoxication when I'd drunk her blood and believed in her, and seen the flowers come down upon us. I could not regret that any mind could conceive of such perfect transcendence.

She had been my Mother, my Queen, my goddess, my all. I had known it as we were meant to know it when we drink the potions in the

Temple, when we sing, when we are rocking in delirious song. And in her arms I had known it. In Marius's arms I'd known it as well, and in a safer measure, and I wanted only to be with him now.

How ghastly her worship seemed. Flawed and ignorant, being elevated to such power! And how revealing suddenly that at the core of mysteries there should lie such degrading explanations. Blood spilt on her golden gown!

All images and meaningful glimpses do but teach you deeper things, I thought again, as I had in the Temple, when I had settled for the consolation of a basalt statue.

It is I, and I alone, who must make of my new life a heroic tale.

I was very happy for Marius that he had such comfort in reason. But reason was only a created thing, imposed with faith upon the world, and the stars promise nothing to no one.

I had seen something deeper in those dark nights of hiding in this house in Antioch, in mourning for my Father. I had seen that at the very heart of Creation there very well might lie something as uncontrollable and incomprehensible as a raging volcano.

Its lava would destroy trees and poets alike.

So take this gift, Pandora, I told myself. Go home, thankful that you are again wed, for you have never made a better match or seen a more tantalizing future.

When I returned, and my return was very rapid, full of new lessons in how I might pass quickly over rooftops, scarce touching them, and over walls—when I returned, I found him as I had left him, only much sadder. He sat in the garden, just as he had in the vision shown to me by Akasha.

It must have been a place he loved, behind the villa with its many doors, a bench facing a thicket and a natural stream bubbling up and over the rocks and spilling down into a current through high grass.

He rose at once.

I took him in my arms.

"Marius, forgive me," I said.

"Don't say such a thing, I'm to blame for it all. And I didn't protect you from it."

We were in each other's arms. I wanted to press my teeth into him, drink his blood, and then I did, and felt him taking the blood from me.

This was a union more powerful than any I had ever known in a marriage bed, and I yielded to it as I never yielded in life to anyone.

I felt an exhaustion sweep me suddenly. I withdrew my kiss with its teeth.

"Come on, now," he said. "Your slave is asleep. And during the day, while we must sleep, he will bring all your possessions here, and those girls of yours, should you want to keep them."

We walked down the stairs, we entered another room. It took all Marius's strength to pull back the door, which meant simply that no mortal man could do it.

There lay a sarcophagus, plain, of granite.

"Can you lift the lid of the sarcophagus?" Marius asked.

"I am feeling weak!"

"It's the sun rising, try to lift the lid. Slide it to one side."

I did, and inside I found a bed of crushed lilies and rose petals, of silken pillows, and bits of dried flower kept for scent.

I stepped in, turned around, sat and stretched out in this stone prison. At once he took his place in the tomb beside me, and pushed the lid back to its place, and all the world's light in any form was shut out, as if the dead would have it so.

"I'm drowsy. I can hardly form words."

"What a blessing," he said.

"There is no need for such an insult," I murmured. "But I forgive you."

"Pandora, I love you!" he said helplessly.

"Put it inside me," I said, reaching between his legs. "Fill me and hold me."

"This is stupid and superstitious!"

"It is neither," I said "It is symbolic and comforting."

He obeyed. Our bodies were one, connected by this sterile organ which was no more to him now than his arm, but how I loved the arm he threw over me and the lips he pressed to my forehead.

"I love you, Marius, my strange, tall and beautiful Marius."

"I don't believe you," he said his voice barely a whisper.

"What do you mean?"

"You'll despise me soon enough for what I've done to you."

"Not so, oh, rational one. I am not as eager to grow old wither and die, as you might think. I should like a chance to know more, to see more …"

I felt his lips against my forehead.

“Did you really try to marry me when I was fifteen?”

“Oh, agonizing memories! Your Father’s insults still sting my ears! He had me all but thrown out of your house!”

“I love you with my whole heart,” I whispered. “And you have won. You have me now as your wife.”

“I have you as something, but I do not think that ‘wife’ is the word for it. I wonder that you’ve already forgotten your earlier strenuous objection to the term.”

“Together,” I said, scarce able to talk on account of his kisses. I was drowsy, and loved the feel of his lips, their sudden eagerness for pure affection. “We’ll think of another word more exalted than ‘wife.’ ”

Suddenly I moved back. I could not see him in the dark.

“Are you kissing me so that I will not talk?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I was doing,” he said.

I turned away from him.

“Turn back, please," he said.

“No,” I said.

I lay still, realizing dimly that his body felt quite normal to me now, because mine was as hard as his was, as strong perhaps. What a sublime advantage. Oh, but I loved him. I loved him! So let him kiss the back of the neck! He could not force me to turn towards him!

The sun must have risen.

For a silence fell on me which was as if the universe with all its volcanoes and raging tides—and all its Emperors, Kings, judges, Senators, philosophers and Priests—had been erased from existence.

11

Well, David, there you have it.

I could continue the Plautus-Terence style comedy for pages. I could vie with Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. But that is the basic story. That is what lies behind the flippant capsule version in *The Vampire Lestat*, fashioned into its final trivial form by Marius or Lestat, who knows.

Let me lead you through those points which are sacred and burn still in my heart, no matter how easily they have been dismissed by another.

And the tale of our parting is not mere dissonance but may contain some lesson.

Marius taught me to hunt, to catch the evildoer only, and to kill without pain, enwrapping the soul of my victim in sweet visions or allowing the soul to illuminate its own death with a cascade of fantasies which I must not judge, but merely devour, like the blood. All that does not require detailed documentation.

We were matched in strength. When some burnt and ruthlessly ambitious blood drinker did find his way to Antioch, which happened only a few times and then not at all, we executed the supplicant together. These were monstrous mentalities, forged in ages we could hardly understand, and they sought the Queen like jackals seek the bodies of the human dead.

There was no argument between us over any of them.

We often read aloud to each other, and we laughed together at Petronius's *Satyricon*, and we shared both tears and laughter later as we read the bitter satires of Juvenal. There was no end of new satire and history coming from Rome and from Alexandria.

But something forever divided Marius from me.

Love grew but so did constant argument, and argument became more and more the dangerous cement of the bond.

Over the years, Marius guarded his delicate rationality as a Vestal Virgin guards a sacred flame. If ever any ecstatic emotion took hold of me, he was there to grab me by the shoulders and tell me in no uncertain terms that it was irrational. Irrational, irrational, irrational!

When the terrible earthquake of the second century struck Antioch, and we were unharmed, I dared speak of it as a Divine Blessing. This set Marius into a rage, and he was quick to point that the same Divine Intervention had also protected the Roman Emperor Trajan, who was in the city at the time. What was I to make of that?

For the record, Antioch quickly rebuilt itself, the markets flourished, more slaves poured in, nothing stopped the caravans headed for the ships, and the ships headed for the caravans.

But long before that earthquake we had all but come to blows night after night.

If I lingered for hours in the room of the Mother and the Father, Marius invariably came to collect me and bring me back to my senses. He could not read in peace with me in such a state, he declared. He could not think because he knew I was downstairs deliberately inviting madness.

Why, I demanded, must his domination extend to every corner of our entire house and garden? And how was it that I was his match in strength when an old burnt blood drinker found his way to Antioch and we picked up the word of his killing and had to do away with him?

“We are not matched in minds?” I demanded.

“Only you could ask that question!” came his reply.

Of course the Mother and Father never moved or spoke again. No blood dreams, no divine directive ever reached me. Only now and then did Marius remind me of this. And after a long while, he allowed me to tend the Shrine with him, to see full well the extent of their silent and seemingly mindless compliance. They appeared utterly beyond reach; their cooperation was sluggish and frightening to witness.

When Flavius fell ill in his fortieth year, Marius and I had the first of our truly terrible battles. This came early on, well before the earthquake.

It was, by the way, a wondrous time because the wicked old Tiberius was filling Antioch with new and wonderful buildings. She was the rival of Rome. But Flavius was ill.

Marius could scarce bear it. He had become more than fond of Flavius —they talked about Aristotle all the time, and Flavius proved one of those men who can do anything for you, from managing a household to copying the most esoteric and crumbling text with complete accuracy.

Flavius had never put a single question to us as to what we were. In

his mind, I found, devotion and acceptance far superseded curiosity or fear.

We hoped Flavius had only a minor illness. But finally, as Flavius's fever grew worse, Flavius turned his head away from Marius whenever Marius came to him. But he held on to my hand always when I offered it. Frequently I lay beside him for hours, as he had once lain beside me.

Then one night Marius took me to the gate and said, "He'll be dead by the time I come back. Can you bear this alone?"

"Do you run from it?" I asked.

"No," he said. "But he doesn't want me to see him die; he doesn't want me to see him groan in pain."

I nodded.

Marius left.

Marius had long ago laid down the rule that no other blood drinker was ever to be made. I didn't bother to question him on this.

As soon as he was gone, I made Flavius into a vampire. I did it just the way the burnt one, Marius and Akasha had done it to me, for Marius and I had long discussed the methods—withdraw as much blood as you can, then give it back until you are near to fainting.

I did faint and wake to see this splendid Greek standing over me, smiling faintly, all disease gone from him. He reached down to take my hand and help me to my feet.

Marius walked in, stared at the reborn Flavius in amazement and said, "Get out, out of this house, out of this city, out of this province, out of this Empire."

Flavius's last words to me were:

"Thank you for this Dark Gift." That is the first I ever heard that particular phrase, which appears so often in Lestat's writings. How well this learned Athenian understood it.

For hours I avoided Marius. I would never be forgiven! Then I went out into the garden. I discovered Marius was grieving, and when he looked up, I realized that he had been utterly convinced that I meant to go off with Flavius. When I saw this, I took him in my arms. He was full of quiet relief and love; he forgave me at once for my "absolute rashness."

"Don't you see," I said, taking him in hand, "that I adore you? But you cannot rule over me! Can you not consider in your reasonable fashion

that the greatest part of our gift eludes you—it's the freedom from the confines of male, female!"

"You can't convince me," he said, "for one moment that you don't feel, reason and act in the manner of a woman. We both loved Flavius. But why another blood drinker?"

"I don't know except that Flavius wanted it, Flavius knew all about our secrets, there was a … an understanding between me and Flavius! He had been loyal in the darkest hours of my mortal life. Oh, I can't explain it."

"A woman's sentiments, exactly. And you have launched this creature into eternity."

"He joins our search," I replied.

About the middle of the century, when the city was very rich and the Empire was about as peaceful as it was ever going to be for the next two hundred years, the Christian Paul came to Antioch.

I went to hear him speak one night and came home, saying casually that the man could convert the very stones to this faith, such was his personal power.

"How can you spend your time on such things!" Marius demanded. "Christians. They aren't even a cult! Some worship John, some worship Jesus. They fight amongst one another! Don't you see what this man Paul has done?"

"No, what?" I said. "I didn't say I was going to join the sect. I only said I stopped to hear him. Who is hurt by that?"

"You, your mind, your equilibrium, your common sense. It's compromised by the foolish things in which you take an interest, and frankly the principle of truth is hurt!" He had only just begun.

"Let me tell you about this man Paul," Marius said. "He never knew either the Baptizer John or the Galilean Jesus. The Hebrews have thrown him out of the group. Jesus and John were both Hebrews! And so Paul has now turned to everyone. Jew and Christian alike, and Roman and Greek, and said, 'You needn't follow the Hebrew observance. Forget the Feasts in Jerusalem. Forget Circumcision. Become a Christian.' "

"Yes, that is true," I said with a sigh.

"It's a very easy religion to take up," he said. "It's nothing. You have to believe that this man rose from the Dead. And by the way, I've combed the available texts which are floating all over the marketplaces. Have

you?"

"No. I'm surprised you've found this search worthy of your time."

"I don't see anywhere in the writings of those who knew John and Jesus where these two are quoted as saying either one of them will rise from the Dead, or that all who believe in them will have life after death. Paul added all that. What an enticing promise! And you should hear your friend, Paul, on the subject of Hell! What a cruel vision—that flawed mortals could sin in this life so grievously that they would burn for all eternity."

"He's not my friend. You make so much of my passing remarks. Why do you feel so strongly?"

"I told you, I care about what is true, what is reasonable!"

"Well, there's something you're missing about this group of Christians, some way in which when they come together they share a euphoric love and and they believe in great generosity—"

"Oh, not again! And are you to tell me this is good?"

I didn't answer.

He was returning to his work when I spoke.

"You fear me," I said to him. "You fear that I'll be swept off my feet by somebody of belief and abandon you. No. No, that's not right. You fear that you will be swept up. That the world will somehow entice you back into it, so that you won't live here with me, the superior Roman observer recluse, anymore, but go back, seeking mortal comforts of companionship and proximity to others, friendship with mortals, their recognition of you as one of them when you are not one of them!"

"Pandora, you talk gibberish."

"Keep your proud secrets," I said. "But I do fear for you, that I will admit."

"Fear for me? And why?" he demanded.

"Because you don't realize everything perishes, everything is artifice! That even logic and mathematics and justice have no ultimate meaning!"

"That's not true," he said.

"Oh, yes it is. Some night will come when you will see what I saw, when I first came to Antioch, before you'd found me, before this transformation which should have swept away everything in its path.

"You will see a darkness," I went on, "a darkness so total that Nature never knows it anywhere on Earth at any time, in any place! Only the

human soul can know it. And it goes on forever. And I pray that when you finally can no longer escape from it, when you realize it is all around you, that your logic and your reason give you some strength against it."

He gave me the most respectful look. But he didn't speak. I continued:

"Resignation will do you no good," I said, "when such a time comes. Resignation requires will, and will requires decision, and decision requires belief, and belief requires that there is something to believe in! And all action or acceptance requires a concept of a witness! Well, there is nothing, and there are no witnesses! You don't know that yet, but I do. I hope, when you find it out, someone can comfort you as you dress and groom those monstrous relics below the stairs! As you bring their flowers!" I was so angry. I went on:

"Look back on me when this moment comes—if not for forgiveness, look back on me as a model. For I have seen this, and I have survived. And it matters not that I stopped to listen to Paul preach of Christ, or that I weave flowers into crowns for the Queen, or that I dance like a fool under the moon in the garden before dawn, or that I … that I love you. It matters not. Because there is nothing. And no one to see. No one!" I sighed. It was time to finish.

"Go back to your history, this stack of lies that tries to link event to event with cause and effect, this preposterous faith that postulates that one thing follows from another. I tell you, it's not so. But it is very Roman of you to think so."

He sat silent looking up at me. I couldn't tell what his thoughts were or what his heart felt. Then he asked:

"What would you have me do?" He had never looked more innocent.

Bitterly, I laughed. Did we not speak the same language? He heard not one word I had uttered. Yet he presented me not with a reply, but only with this simple question.

"All right," I said. "I'll tell you what I want. Love me, Marius, love me, but leave me alone!" I cried out. I had not even thought. The words just came. "Leave me alone, so that I may seek my own comforts, my own means to remain alive, no matter how foolish or pointless these comforts appear to you. Leave me alone!"

He was wounded, so uncomprehending, looking so innocent still.

We had many similar arguments as the decades passed.

Sometimes he would come to me after; he would fall into long thoughtful talks about what he felt was happening with the Empire, how the Emperors were going mad and the Senate had no power, how the very progress of man was unique in Nature and something to be watched. How he would crave life, he thought, until there was no more life.

"Even if there is nothing left but desert waste," he said, "I should want to be there, to see dune folding upon dune," he went on. "If there was but one lamp left in all the world, I'd want to watch its flame. And so would you."

But the terms of the battle, and its heat, never really changed.

At heart he thought I hated him for having been so unkind on the night I was given the Dark Blood. I told him this was childish. I could not convince him that my soul and my intelligence were infinitely too large for such a simple grudge, and that I owed him no explanation for my thoughts, words and deeds.

For two hundred years, we lived and loved together. He became ever more beautiful to me.

As more and more barbarians from the North and from the East poured into the city, he felt no necessity to dress like a Roman anymore, and frequently wore the jeweled clothes of the Easterners. His hair seemed to be growing finer, lighter. He seldom cut it, which of course he would have had to do every night had he wanted it short. It was a splendor on his shoulders.

As his face grew ever more smooth, away went the few lines that could so easily design anger in his expression. As I've told you before, he greatly resembles Lestat. Only he is more compact of build, and jaw and chin had hardened just a little more with age before the Dark Gift. But the unwanted folds were receding from his eyes.

Sometimes for nights on end, in fear of a fight, we didn't speak. There was between us always a continuous physical affection—embraces, kisses, sometimes the mere silent lock of our hands.

But we knew we had now lived far beyond a normal human life span.

You need from me no detailed history of that remarkable time. It is too well known. Only let me place here a few reminders. Only let me describe for you my perspective on the changes happening all over the Empire.

Antioch as a thriving city proved indestructible. The Emperors began to favor it and visit it. More Temples went up to the Eastern cults. And then Christians of all kinds poured into Antioch.

Indeed, the Christians of Antioch comprised at last an immense and fascinating bunch of people arguing with each other.

Rome went to war on the Jews, crushing Jerusalem completely and destroying the sacred Hebrew Temple. Many brilliant Jewish thinkers came to Antioch as well as Alexandria.

Twice or perhaps even three times, Roman legions pushed past us, North of us, into Parthia; once we even had a little rebellion of our own, but Rome always resecured the city of Antioch. So the market closed for a day! On went the trade, the great lust of the caravans for the ships, and of the ships for the caravans, and Antioch was the bed in which they must wed each other.

There was little new poetry. Satire. Satire seemed the only safe or honest expression of the Roman mind now, and so we had the riotously funny story *The Golden Ass*, by Apuleius, which seemed to make fun of every religion. But there was a bitterness to the poet Martial. And those letters of Pliny which reached me were full of dire judgments on the moral chaos of Rome.

I began as a vampire to feed exclusively on soldiers. I liked them, their look, their strength. I fed so much so on them, that in my carelessness, I became a legend amongst them, "The Greek Lady Death," this on account of my clothes which to them appeared archaic. I struck at random in the dark streets. There wasn't a chance of their ever surrounding me or stopping me, so great was my skill, my strength and my thirst.

But I saw things in their rebellious deaths, the blaze of a pitched battle in a march, a hand-to-hand struggle on a steep mountain. I took them down gently into the finish, filling myself to the brim with their blood, and sometimes, through a veil it seemed, I saw the souls of those whom they themselves had slain.

When I told Marius this, he said it was just the kind of mystical nonsense he would expect of me.

I didn't press the point.

He watched with keen interest the developments of Rome. To me they seemed merely surprising.

He pored over the histories of Dio Cassius and Plutarch and Tacitus,

and pounded his fist when he heard of the endless skirmishes on the Rhine River, and the push Northward into Britannia and the building of Hadrian's wall to forever keep away the Scots, who like the Germans would yield to no one.

"They are not patrolling, preserving, containing an Empire any longer," he said. "Conserving a way of life! It's just war, and trade!"

I couldn't disagree.

It was really even worse than he knew. If he had gone as often as I did to listen to the philosophers he would have been appalled.

Magicians were appearing everywhere, claiming to be able to fly, to see visions, to heal with the laying on of hands! They got into battles with the Christians and the Jews. I don't think the Roman army paid them any attention.

Medicine as I had known it in my mortal life had been flooded with a river of Eastern secret formulae, amulets, rituals, and little statues to clutch.

Well over half the Senate was no longer Italian by birth. This meant that our Rome was no longer our Rome. And the tide of Emperor had become a joke. There were so many assassinations, plots, squabbles, false emperors and palace coups that it soon became perfectly clear that the Army ruled. The Army chose the Emperor. The Army sustained him.

The Christians were divided into warring sects. It was positively astonishing. The religion didn't burn itself out in dispute. It gained strength in division. Occasional furious persecutions—in which people were executed for not worshiping at Roman altars—only seemed to deepen the sympathy of the populace with this new cult.

And the new cult was rampant with debate on every principle with regard to the Jews, God and Jesus.

The most amazing thing had happened to this religion. Spreading wildly on fast ships, good roads and well-maintained trade routes, it suddenly found itself in a peculiar position. The world had not come to an end, as Jesus and Paul had predicted.

And everybody who had ever known or seen Jesus was dead. Finally everyone who had ever known Paul was dead.

Christian philosophers arose, picking and choosing from old Greek ideas and old Hebrew traditions.

Justin of Athens wrote that Christ was the Logos; you could be an

atheist and still be saved in Christ if you upheld reason.

I had to tell this to Marius.

I thought sure it would set him off, and the night was dull, but he merely countered with more outlandish talk of the Gnostics.

"A man named Saturninus popped up in the Forum today," he said. "Perhaps you heard talk of him. He preaches a wild variant of this Christian creed you find so amusing, in which the God of the Hebrews is actually the Devil and Jesus the new God. This was not the man's first appearance. He and his followers, thanks to the local Christian Bishop Ignatius, are headed for Alexandria."

"There are books with those ideas already here," I said, "having come from Alexandria. They are impenetrable to me. Perhaps not to you. They speak of Sophia, a female principle of Wisdom, which preceded the Creation. Jews and Christians alike want somehow to include this concept of Sophia in their faith. It so reminds me of our beloved Isis."

"Your beloved Isis!" he said.

"It seems that there are minds who would weave it all together, every myth, or its essence, to make a glorious tapestry."

"Pandora, you are making me ill again," he warned. "Let me tell you what your Christians are doing. They are tightly organizing. This Bishop Ignatius will be followed by another, and the Bishops want to lay down now that the age of private revelation had ended; they want to weed through all the mad scrolls on the market and make a canon which all Christians believe."

"I never thought such could happen," I said. "I agreed with you more than you knew when you condemned them."

"They are succeeding because they are moving away from emotional morality," he said. "They are organizing like Romans. This Bishop Ignatius is very strict. He delegates power. He pronounced on the accuracy of manuscripts. Notice the prophets are getting thrown out of Antioch."

"Yes, you're right," I said. "What do you think? Is it good or bad?"

"I want the world to be better," he said. "Better for men and women. Better. Only one thing is clear: the old blood drinkers have by now died out, and there is nothing you or I, or the Queen and the King can do to interfere in the flow of human events. I believe men and women must try harder. I try to understand evil ever more deeply with any victim I

take.

"Any religion that makes fanatical claims and demands on the basis of a god's will frightens me."

"You are a true Augustan," I said. "I agree with you, but it is fun to read these mad Gnostics. This Marcion and this Valentinus."

"Fun for you perhaps. I see danger everywhere. This new Christianity, it isn't merely spreading, it's changing in each place as it spreads; it's like an animal which devours the local flora and fauna and then takes on some specific power from the food."

I didn't argue with him.

By the end of the second century, Antioch was a heavily Christian city. And it seemed to me as I read the works of new Bishops and philosophers that worse things than Christianity could come upon us.

Realize, however, David, that Antioch did not lie under a cloud of decay; there was no sense in the air of the end of the Empire. If anything there was bustling energy everywhere. Commerce gives one this feel, that false sense that there is growth and creativity, perhaps, when there is none. Things are exchanged, not necessarily improved.

Then came the dark time for us. Two forces came together which bore down on Marius, straining all his courage. Antioch was more interesting than it had ever been.

The Mother and the Father had never stirred since the first night of my coming!

Let me describe the first disaster, because for me it was not so hard to bear, and I had only sympathy for Marius.

As I've told you, the question of who was Emperor had become a joke. But it really became a howl with the events of the early 200s.

The Emperor of the moment was Caracalla, a regular murderer. On a pilgrimage to Alexandria to see the remains of Alexander the Great, he had—for reasons no one knows even now—rounded up thousands of young Alexandrians and slaughtered them. Alexandria had never seen such a massacre.

Marius was distraught. All the world was distraught.

Marius spoke of leaving Antioch, of getting far far away from the ruin of the Empire. I began to agree with him.

Then this revolting Emperor Caracalla marched in our direction, intending to make a war on the Parthians North of us and to the East of

us. Nothing out of the ordinary for Antioch!

His Mother—and you need not remember these names—Julia Domna, took up residence in Antioch. She was dying from cancer of her breast. And let me add here that this woman had, with her son Caracalla, helped murder her other son, Geta, because the two brothers had been sharing Imperial power and threatening to make a Civil War.

Let me continue, and again you need not remember the names.

Troops were massed for this Eastern war against two Kings to the East, Vologases the Fifth and Artabanus the Fifth. Caracalla did make war, achieve victory and return in triumph. Then, only miles from Antioch, he was assassinated by his own soldiers while trying to relieve himself!

All this cast Marius in a hopeless frame of mind. For hours he sat in the Shrine staring at the Mother and the Father. I felt I knew what he was thinking, that we should immolate ourselves and them, but I couldn't bear the thought of it. I didn't want to die. I didn't want to lose life. I didn't want to lose Marius.

I did not care so much about the fate of Rome. Life still stretched before me, extending the promise of wonders.

Back to the Comedy. The Army promptly made an Emperor out of a man from the Provinces named Macrinus, who was a Moor and wore an earring in his ear.

He at once had a fight with the dead Emperor's Mother, Julia Domna, because he wouldn't allow her to leave Antioch to die elsewhere. She starved herself to death.

This was all too close to home! These lunatics were in our dry, not far away in a capital which we mourned.

Then war broke out again, because the Eastern Kings, who were caught off guard before by Caracalla, were now ready, and Macrinus had to lead the Legions into battle.

As I told you, the Legions now controlled everything. Somebody should have told Macrinus. Instead of fighting he bought off the enemy. The troops were hardly proud of this. And then he cracked down on them, taking away some of their benefits.

He didn't seem to grasp that he had to maintain their approval to survive. Though of course what good had this done for Caracalla, whom they loved?

Whatever, the sister of Julia Domna, named Julia Maesa, who was a

Syrian and of a family dedicated to the Syrian sun god, seized this dreary moment in the life of the lusty legions to put her grandson, born of Julia Soemis, in power as Emperor! It was an outrageous plan actually, for any number of reasons. First and foremost, all three Julias were Syrian. The boy himself was fourteen years old, and also he was a hereditary Priest of the Syrian sun god.

But somehow or other Julia Maesa and her daughter's lover, Gannys, managed to convince a bunch of soldiers in a tent that this fourteen-year-old Syrian boy should become the Emperor of Rome.

The Army deserted the Imperial Macrinus, and he and his son were hunted down and murdered.

So, high on the shoulders of proud soldiers rode this fourteen-year-old boy! But he didn't want to be called by his Roman name. He wanted to be called by the name of the god he worshiped in Syria, Elagabalus. The very presence of him in Antioch shook the nerves of all citizens. At last, he and three remaining Julias—his aunt, his Mother and his grandmother, all of them Syrian Priestesses—left Antioch.

In Nicomedia, which was very near to us, Elagabalus murdered his Mother's lover. So who was left? He also picked up an enormous sacred black stone and brought it back to Rome, saying that this stone was sacred to the Syrian sun god, whom all must now worship.

He was gone, across the sea, but it took sometimes no more than eleven days for a letter to reach Antioch from Rome, and soon there were rampant rumors. Who will ever know the truth about him?

Elagabalus. He built a Temple for the stone on the Palatine Hill. He made Romans stand around in Phoenician gowns while he slaughtered cattle and sheep in sacrifice.

He begged the physicians to try to transform him into a woman by creating a proper opening between his legs. Romans were horrified by this. At night he dressed as a woman, complete with a wig, and went prowling taverns.

All over the Empire the soldiers started to riot.

Even the three Julias, grandmother Julia Maesa, his aunt Julia Domna, and his own Mother, Julia Soemis, started to get sick of him. After four years, four years, mind you, of this maniac's rule, the soldiers killed him and threw his body in the Tiber.

It did not seem to Marius that there was anything left of the world we

had once called Rome. And he was thoroughly sick of all the Christians in Antioch, their fights over doctrine. He found all mystery religions dangerous now. He served up this lunatic Emperor as a perfect example of the fanaticism gaining ground in the times.

And he was right. He was right.

It was all I could do to keep him from despair. In truth he had not yet confronted that terrible darkness I had once spoken of; he was far too agitated, far too irritated and quarrelsome. But I was very frightened for him, and hurt for him, and didn't want him to see more darkly, as I did, to be more aloof, expecting nothing and almost smiling at the collapse of our Empire.

Then the very worst thing happened, something we had both feared in one form or another. But it came upon us in the worst possible form.

One night there appeared at our eternally open doors five blood drinkers.

Neither of us had caught the sound of their approach. Lounging about with our books, we looked up to see these five, three women and a man and a boy, and to realize that all wore black garments. They were dressed like Christian hermits and ascetics who deny the flesh and starve themselves. Antioch had a whole passel of these men in the desert roundabouts.

But these were blood drinkers.

Dark of hair and eye, and dark of skin, they stood before us, their arms folded.

Dark of skin, I thought quickly. They are young. They were made after the great burning. So what if there are five?

They had in general rather attractive faces, well-shaped features and groomed eyebrows, and deep dark eyes, and all over them I saw the marks of their Irving bodies—tiny wrinkles next to their eyes, wrinkled around their knuckles.

They seemed as shocked to see us as we were to see them. They stared at the brightly lighted library; they stared at our finery, which was in such contrast to their ascetic robes.

"Well," said Marius, "who are you?"

Cloaking my thoughts, I tried to probe theirs. Their minds were locked. They were dedicated to something. It had the very scent of fanaticism. I felt a horrid foreboding.

They started timidly to enter the open door.

"No, stop, please," said Marius in Greek. "This is my house. Tell me who you are, and then I perhaps shall invite you over my threshold."

"You're Christians, aren't you?" I said. "You have the zeal."

"We are!" said one in Greek. It was the man. "We are the scourge of humanity in the name of God and his son, Christ. We are the Children of Darkness."

"Who made you?" asked Marius.

"We were made in a sacred cave and in our Temple," said another, a woman, speaking in Greek also. "We know the truth of the Serpent, and his fangs are our fangs."

I climbed to my feet and moved towards Marius.

"We thought you would be in Rome," said the young man. He had short black hair, and very round innocent eyes. "Because the Christian Bishop of Rome is now supreme among Christians and the theology of Antioch is no longer of great matter."

"Why would we be in Rome?" asked Marius. "What is the Roman Bishop to us?"

The woman took the fore. Her hair was severely parted in the middle but her face was very regal and regular. She had in particular beautifully defined lips.

"Why do you hide from us? We have heard of you for years! We know that you know things—about us and where the Dark Gift came from, that you know how God put it into the world, and that you saved our kind from extinction."

Marius was plainly horrified, but gave little sign of it.

"I have nothing to tell you," he said, perhaps too hastily. "Except I do not believe in your God or your Christ and I do not believe God put the Dark Gift, as you call it, into the world. You have made a terrible mistake."

They were highly skeptical and utterly dedicated.

"You have almost reached salvation," said another, the boy at the far end of the line, whose hair was unshorn and hung to his shoulders. He had a manly voice, but his limbs were small. "You have almost reached the point where you are so strong and white and pure that you need not drink!"

"Would that that were true, it's not," said Marius.

“Why don’t you welcome us?” asked the boy. “Why don’t you guide us and teach us that we may better spread the Dark Blood, and punish mortals for their sins! We are pure of heart. We were chosen. Each of us went into the cave bravely and there the dying devil, a crushed creature of blood and bone, cast out of Heaven in a blaze of fire, passed on to us his teachings.”

“Which were what?” asked Marius.

“Make them suffer,” the woman said. “Bring death. Eschew all things of the world, as do the Stoics and the hermits of Egypt, but bring death. Punish them.”

The woman had become hostile. “This man won’t help us,” she said under her breath. “This man is profane. This man is a heretic.”

“But you must receive us,” said the young man who had spoken first. “We have searched so long and so far, and we come to you in humility. If you wish to live in a palace, then perhaps that is your right, you have earned it, but we have not. We live in darkness, we enjoy no pleasure but the blood, we feast on the weak and the diseased and the innocent alike. We do the will of Christ as the Serpent did the will of God in Eden when he tempted Eve.”

“Come to our Temple,” said one of the others, “and see the tree of life with the sacred Serpent wound around it. We have his fangs. We have his power. God made him, just as God made Judas Iscariot, or Cain, or the evil Emperors of Rome.”

“Ah,” I said, “I see. Before you happened on the god in the cave, you were worshipers of the snake. You’re Ophites, Sethians, Nassenians.”

“That was our first calling,” said the boy. “But now we are of the Children of Darkness, committed to sacrifice and killing, dedicated to inflicting suffering.”

“Oh, Marcion and Valentinus,” Marius whispered. “You don’t know the names, do you? They’re the poetic Gnostics who invented the morass of your philosophy a hundred years ago. Duality—that, in a Christian world, evil could be as powerful as good.”

“Yes, we know this.” Several spoke at once. “We don’t know those profane names. But we know the Serpent and what God wants of us.”

“Moses lifted the Serpent in the desert, up over his head,” said the boy. “Even the Queen of Egypt knew the Serpent and wore him in her crown.”

“The story of the great Leviathan has been eradicated in Rome,” said

the woman. “They took it out of the sacred books. But we know it!”

“So you learned all this from Armenian Christians,” said Marius. “Or was it Syrians.”

A man, short of stature, with gray eyes, had not spoken all this while, but he stepped forward now and addressed Marius with considerable authority.

“You hold ancient truths,” he said, “and you use them profanely. All know of you. The blond Children of Darkness in the Northern woods know of you, and that you stole some important secret out of Egypt before the Birth of Christ. Many have come here, glimpsed you and the woman, and gone away in fear.”

“Very wise,” said Marius.

“What did you find in Egypt?” asked the woman. “Christian monks live now in those old rooms that once belonged to a race of blood drinkers. The monks don’t know about us, but we know all about them and you. There was writing there, there were secrets, there was something that by Divine Will belongs now in our hands.”

“No, there was nothing,” said Marius.

The woman spoke up again, “When the Hebrews left Egypt, when Moses parted the Red Sea, did the Hebrews leave something behind? Why did Moses raise the snake in the desert? Do you know how many we are? Nearly a hundred. We travel to the far North, to the South, and even to the East to lands you would not believe.”

I could see Marius was distraught.

“Very well,” I said, “we understand what you want and why you have been led to believe that we can satisfy you. I ask you, please, to go out in the Garden and let us speak. Respect our house. Don’t harm our slaves.”

“We wouldn’t dream of it.”

“And we’ll be back shortly.”

I snatched Marius’s hand and pulled him down the stairs.

“Where are you going?” he whispered. “Block all images from your mind! They must glimpse nothing.”

“They won’t glimpse,” I said, “and from where I will stand as I talk to you, they won’t hear either.”

He seemed to catch my meaning. I led him into the sanctuary of the unchanged Mother and Father, dosing the stone doors behind me.

I drew Marius behind the seated King and Queen.

“They can probably hear the hearts of the Pair,” I whispered in the softest manner audible. “But maybe they won’t hear us over that sound. Now, we have to kill them, destroy them completely.”

Marius was amazed.

“Look, you know we have to do this!” I said. “You have to kill them and anybody like them who ever comes near us. Why are you so shocked? Get ready. The simplest way is cut them to pieces first, and then burn them.”

“Oh, Pandora,” he sighed.

“Marius, why do you cringe?”

“I don’t cringe, Pandora,” he said. “I see myself irrevocably changed by such an act. To kill when I thirst, to keep to myself and keep these here who must be kept by somebody, that I have done for so long. But to become an executioner? To become like the Emperors burning Christians! To commence a war against this race, this order, this cult, whatever it is, to take such a stand.”

“No choice, come on. There are many decorative swords in the room where we sleep. We should take the big curved swords. And the torch. We should go to them and tell them how sorry we are for what we must impart to them, then do it!”

He didn’t answer.

“Marius, are you going to let them go so that others will come after us? The only security lies in destroying every blood drinker who ever discovers us and the King and Queen.”

He walked away from me and stood before the Mother. He looked into her eyes. I knew that he was silently talking to her. And I knew that she was not answering.

“There is one other possibility,” I said, “and it’s quite real.” I beckoned for him to come back, behind them, where I felt safest to plot.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Give the King and the Queen over to them. And you and I are free. They will care for the King and Queen with religious fervor! Maybe the King and Queen will even allow them to drink—”

“That's unspeakable!” he said.

“Exactly my feelings. We shall never know if we are safe. And they shall run rampant through the world like supernatural rodents. So do you have a third plan?”

“No, but I’m ready. We use the fire and the swords together. Can you tell the lies that will charm them as we approach, armed and carrying torches?”

“Oh, yes, of course,” I said.

We went into the chamber and took up the big curved swords that were keenly sharp and came from the desert world of the Arabs. We lighted another torch from that at the foot of the stairs and we went up together.

“Come to me, Children,” I said as I entered the room, loudly, “come, for what I have to reveal requires the light of this torch, and you will soon know the sacred purpose of this sword. How devout you are.”

We stood before them.

“How young you are!” I said.

Suddenly, the panic swept them together. They made it so simple for us by clustering in this manner that we had the task done in moments, lighting their garments, hacking their limbs, ignoring their piteous cries.

Never had I used my full strength and speed, never my full will, as I did against them. It was exhilarating to slash them, to force the torch upon them, to slash them until they fell, until they lost all life. Also, I did not want them to suffer.

Because they were so young, so very young as blood drinkers, it took quite some time to burn the bones, to see that all was ashes.

But it was finally done, and we stood together—Marius and I—in the garden, our garments smeared with soot, staring down at blowing grass, making certain with our eyes that the ashes were blown in all directions.

Marius turned suddenly and walked fast away from me, and down the stairs and into the Mother’s Sanctuary.

I rushed after him in panic. He stood holding the torch and the bloody sword—oh, how they had bled—and he looked into Akasha’s eyes.

“Oh, loveless Mother!” he whispered. His face was soiled with blood and grime. He looked at the flaming torch and looked up at the Queen.

Akasha and Enkil showed no sign of any knowledge of the massacre above. They showed neither approval, nor gratitude, nor any form of consciousness. They showed no awareness of the torch in his hand, or his thoughts, whatever they might be.

It was a finish for Marius, a finish to the Marius I had known and loved at that time.

He chose not to leave Antioch. I was for getting away and taking them away, for wild adventures, and seeing the wonders of the world.

But he said no. He had but one obligation. And that was to lay in wait for others until he had killed every one of them.

For weeks he wouldn't speak or move, unless I shook him and then he pleaded with me to leave him alone. He rose from the grave only to sit with the sword and the torch waiting.

It became unbearable to me. Months passed. I said, "You are going mad. We should take them away!"

Then one night, very angry and alone, I cried out foolishly, "I would I were free of them and you!" And leaving the house, I did not return for three nights.

I slept in dark safe places I made for myself with ease. Every time I thought of him, I thought of his sitting motionless there, so very like them, and I was afraid.

If only he did know true despair; if only he had confronted what we now call "the absurd." If only he had faced the nothingness! Then this massacre would not have demoralized him.

Finally one morning just before sunrise, when I was safely hidden, a strange silence fell over Antioch. A rhythm I had heard there all my days was gone. I was trying to think, What could this mean? But there was time to find out.

I had made a fatal miscalculation. The villa was empty. He had arranged for the transport by day. I had no clue as to where he had gone! Everything belonging to him had been taken, and all that I possessed scrupulously left behind.

I had failed him when he most needed me. I walked in circles around the empty Shrine. I screamed and let the cry echo off the walls.

He never returned to Antioch. No letter ever came.

After six months or more, I gave up and left.

Of course you know the dedicated, religious Christian vampires never died out, not until Lestat came dressed in red velvet and fur to dazzle them and make a mockery of their beliefs. That was in the Age of Reason. That is when Marius received Lestat. Who knows what other vampire cults exist?

As for me, I had lost Marius again by then.

I had seen him for only a single precious night one hundred years

earlier, and of course thousands of years after the collapse of what we call “the ancient world.”

I saw him! It was in the fancy fragile times of Louis XIV, the Sun King. We were at a court ball in Dresden. Music played—the tentative blend of clavichord, lute, violin—making the artful dances which seemed no more than bows and circles.

Across a room, I suddenly saw Marius!

He had been looking at me for a great while, and gave me now the most tragic and loving smile. He wore a big full-bottomed curly wig, dyed to the very color of his true hair, and a flared velvet coat, and layers of lace, so favored by the French. His skin was golden. That meant fire. I knew suddenly he had suffered something terrible. A jubilant love filled his blue eyes, and without forsaking his casual posture—he was leaning his elbow on the edge of the clavichord—he blew a kiss to me with his fingers.

I truly could not trust my eyes. Was he really there? Was I, myself, sitting here, in boned and low-necked bodice, and these huge skirts, one pulled back in artful folds to reveal the other? My skin in this age seemed an artificial contrivance. My hair had been professionally gathered and lifted into an ornate shape.

I had paid no mind to the mortal hands which had so bound me. During this age I let myself be led through the world by a fierce Asian vampire, about whom I cared nothing. I had fallen into an ever existing trap for a woman: I had become the noncommittal and ostentatious ornament of a male personality who for all his tiresome verbal cruelty possessed sufficient force to carry us both through time.

The Asian was off slowly taking his carefully chosen victim in a bedroom above.

Marius came towards me and kissed me and took me in his arms. I shut my eyes. “This is Marius!” I whispered “Truly Marius.”

“Pandora!” he said drawing back to look at me. “My Pandora!”

His skin had been burned. Faint scars. But it was almost healed.

He led me out on the dance floor! He was the perfect impersonation of a human being. He guided me in the steps of the dance. I could scarce breathe. Following his lead shocked at each new artful turn by the rapture of his face, I could not measure centuries or even millennia. I wanted suddenly to know everything—where he had been, what had

befallen him. Pride and shame in me held no sway. Could he see that I was no more than a ghost of the woman he'd known? "You are the hope of my soul!" I whispered.

Quickly he took me away. We went in a carriage to his palace. He deluged me with kisses. I clung to him.

"You," he said, "my dream, a treasure so foolishly thrown away, you are here, you have persevered."

"Because you see me, I am here," I said bitterly. "Because you lift the candle, I can almost see my strength in the looking glass."

Suddenly I heard a sound, an ancient and terrible sound. It was the heartbeat of Akasha, the heartbeat of Enkil.

The carriage had come to a halt. Iron gates. Servants.

The palace was spacious, fancy, the ostentatious residence of a rich noble.

"They are in there, the Mother and the Father?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, unchanged. Utterly reliable in their eternal silence." His voice seemed to defy the horror of it.

I couldn't bear it. I had to escape the sound of her heart. An image of the petrified King and Queen rose before my eyes.

"No! Get me away from here. I can't go in. Marius, I cannot look on them!"

"Pandora, they are hidden below the palace. There is no need to look on them. They won't know. Pandora, they are the same."

Ah! The same! My mind sped back, over perilous terrain, to my very first nights, alone and mortal, in Antioch, to the later victories and defeats of that time. Ah! Akasha was the same! I feared I would begin to scream and be unable to control it.

"Very well," said Marius, "we'll go where you want."

I gave the coachman the location of my hiding place.

I couldn't look at Marius. Valiantly, he kept the pretense of happy reunion. He talked of science and literature, Shakespeare, Dryden, the New World full of jungles and rivers. But behind his voice I heard the joy drained from him.

I buried my face against him. When the carriage stopped I leapt out and fled to the door of my little house. I looked back. He stood in the street.

He was sad and weary, and slowly he nodded and made a gesture of

acceptance. “May I wait it out?” he asked. “Is there hope you’ll change your mind? I’ll wait here forever!”

“It’s not my mind!” I said. “I leave this city tonight. Forget me. Forget you ever saw me!”

“My love,” he said softly. “My only love.”

I ran inside, shutting the door. I heard the carriage pull away. I went wild, as I had not since mortal life, beating the walls with my fists, trying to restrain my immense strength and trying not to let loose the howls and cries that wanted to break from me.

Finally I looked at the clock. Three hours left until dawn.

I sat down at the desk and wrote to him:

> Marius,
> At dawn we will be taken to Moscow. The very coffin in which I rest is to carry me many miles the first day. Marius, I am dazed. I can’t seek shelter in your house, beneath the same roof as the ancient ones. Please, Marius, come to Moscow. Help me to free myself of this predicament. Later you can judge me and condemn me. I need you. Marius, I shall haunt the vicinity of the Czar’s palace and the Great Cathedral until you come. Marius, I know I ask of you that *you* make a great journey, but please come. I am a slave to this blood drinker’s will.
>
> I love you,
> Pandora

Running back out in the street, I hurried in the direction of his house, trying to retrace the path which I had so stupidly ignored.

But what about the heartbeat? I would hear it, that ghastly sound! I had to run past it, run through it, long enough to give Marius this letter, perhaps to let him grasp me by the wrist and force me to some safe place, and drive away before dawn the Asian vampire who kept me.

Then the very carriage appeared, carrying in it my fellow blood drinker from the ball.

He stopped for me at once.

I took the driver aside. “The man who brought me home,” I said. “We went to his house, a huge palace.”

“Yes, Count Marius,” said the driver. “I just took him back to his own home.”

“You must take this letter to him. Hurry! You must go to his house and put it in his hands! Tell him I had no money to give you, that he must pay you, I demand that you tell him. He will pay you. Tell him the letter is from Pandora. You must find him!”

“Who are you speaking of?” demanded my Asian companion.

I motioned to the driver to leave! “Go!” Of course my consort was outraged. But the carriage was already on its way.

Two hundred years passed before I learned the very simple truth: Marius never received that letter!

He had gone back to his house, packed up his belongings and, the following night, left Dresden in sorrow, only finding the letter long after, as he related it to the Vampire Lestat, “a fragile piece of writing,” as he called it, “that had fallen to the bottom of a cluttered traveling case.”

When did I see him again?

In this modern world. When the ancient Queen rose from her throne and demonstrated the limits of her wisdom, her will and her power.

Two thousand years after, in our Twentieth Century still full of Roman columns and statues and pediments and peristyles, buzzing with computers and warmth-giving television, with Cicero and Ovid in every public library, our Queen, Akasha, was wakened by the image of Lestat on a television screen, in the most modern and secure of shrines, and sought to reign as a goddess, not only over us, but over humankind.

In the most dangerous hour, when she threatened to destroy us all if we did not follow her lead—and she had already slaughtered many—it was Marius with his reasoning, his optimism, his philosophy who talked to her, tried to calm her and divert her, who stalled her destructive intent until an ancient enemy came to fulfill an ancient curse, and struck her down with ancient simplicity.

David, what have you done to me in prodding me to write this narrative?

You have made me ashamed of the wasted years. You have made me acknowledge that no darkness has been ever deep enough to extinguish my personal knowledge of love, love from mortals who brought me into the world, love for goddesses of stone, love for Marius.

Above all, I cannot deny the resurgence of this love for Marius.

And all around me in this world I see evidence of love. Behind the image of the Blessed Virgin and her Infant Jesus, behind the image of the Crucified Christ, behind the remembered basalt image of Isis. I see love. I see it in the human struggle. I see its undeniable penetration in all that humans have accomplished in their poetry, their painting, their music, their love of one another and refusal to accept suffering as their lot.

Above all, however, I see it in the very fashioning of the world which outshines all art, and cannot by sheer randomness have accumulated such beauty.

Love. But whence comes this love? Why is it so secretive about its source, this love that makes rain and trees and has scattered the stars over us as the gods and goddesses once claimed to do?

So Lestat, the brat Prince, woke the Queen; and we survived her destruction. So Lestat, the brat Prince, had gone to Heaven and Hell and brought back disbelief, horror and the Veil of Veronica! Veronica, an invented Christian name which means *vera ikon*, or true icon. He found himself plunged into Palestine during the very years that I lived, and there saw something that has shattered the faculties in humans which we cherish so much: faith, reason.

I have to go to Lestat, look into his eyes. I have to see what he saw!

Let the young sing songs of death. They are stupid.

The finest thing under the sun and the moon is the human soul. I marvel at the small miracles of kindness that pass between humans, I marvel at the growth of conscience, at the persistence of reason in the face of all superstition or despair. I marvel at human endurance.

I have one more story to tell you. I don't know why I want to record it here. But I do. Perhaps it's because I feel you—a vampire who sees spirits—will understand this, and understand perhaps why I remained so unmoved by it.

Once in the Sixth Century—that is, five hundred years after the birth of Christ and three hundred years since I had left Marius—I went wandering in barbarian Italy. The Ostrogoths had long ago overrun the peninsula.

Then other tribes swept down on them, looting, burning, carrying off stones from old Temples.

It was like walking on burning coals for me to go there.

But Rome did struggle with some conception of itself, its principles, trying to blend the pagan with the Christian, and find some respite from the barbarian raids.

The Roman Senate still existed. Of all institutions it had survived.

And a scholar, sprung from the same stock as myself, Boethius, a very learned man who studied the ancients and the saints, had recently been put to death, but not before he had given us a great book. You can find it in any library today. It is, of course, *The Consolation of Philosophy*.

I had to see the ruined Forum for myself, the burnt and barren hills of Rome, the pigs and goats roaming where once Cicero had spoken to the crowds. I had to see the forsaken poor living desperately along the banks of the Tiber.

I had to see the fallen classical world. I had to see the Christian churches and shrines.

I had to see one scholar in particular. Like Boethius he had come from old Roman stock, and like Boethius he had read the classics and the saints. He was a man who wrote letters that went all over the world, even as far as to the scholar Bede in England.

And he had built a monastery there, some great flare of creativity and optimism, in spite of ruin and war.

This man was of course the scholar Cassiodorus, and his monastery lay at the very tip of the boot of Italy, in the paradisal land of green Calabria.

I came upon it in early evening, as I planned, when it looked like a great and splendid lighted little city.

Its monks were copying away ferociously in the Scriptorium.

And there in his cell, wide open to the night, sat Cassiodorus himself, at his writing, a man past ninety years of age.

He had survived the barbarian politics that doomed his friend Boethius, having served the Aryan Ostrogoth Emperor Theodoric, having lived to retire from Civil Service—he had survived to build this monastery, his dream, and to write to monks all over the world, to share what he knew with them of the ancients, to conserve the wisdom of the Greeks and the Romans.

Was he truly the last man of the ancient world, as some have said? The last man who could read both Latin and Greek? The last man who could treasure both Aristotle and the dogma of the Roman Pope? Plato

and Saint Paul?

I didn't know then that he would be so well remembered. And I didn't know how soon he'd be forgotten!

Vivarium, on its mountain slopes, was an architectural triumph. It had its sparkling ponds to catch and hold fish—the characteristic which gave it its name. It had its Christian church with the inevitable cross, its dormitories, its rooms for the weary guest traveler. Its library was rich in the classics of my time, as well as gospels which have now been lost. The monastery was rich in all the fruits of the field, all crops needed for food, trees laden with fruit, fields of wheat.

The monks cared for all of this, and they dedicated themselves to copying books day and night in their long Scriptorium.

There were beehives there, on this gentle moonlighted coast, hundreds of beehives from which the monks harvested honey to eat, and wax for sacred candles, and royal jelly for an ointment. The beehives covered a hill as big as the orchard or the farmland of Vivarium.

I spied on Cassiodorus. I walked among the beehives, and marveled as I always do at the inexplicable organization of bees, for the mysteries of the bees and their dance and their hunting for pollen and their breeding was all known to my eye long before it was understood by the human world.

As I left the hives, as I moved away towards the distant beacon of Cassiodorus's lamp, I looked back. I beheld something.

Something collected itself from the hives, something immense and invisible and forceful that I could both feel and hear. I was not gripped by fear, merely sparked by a temporary hope that some New Thing had come into the world. For I am not a seer of ghosts and never was.

This force rose out of the very bees themselves, out of their intricate knowledge and their countless sublime patterns, as though they had somehow accidentally evolved it, or empowered it with consciousness through the means of their endless creativity, meticulousness and endurance.

It was like an old Roman woodland spirit of the forest.

I saw this force fly loosely over the fields. I saw it enter the body of a straw man who stood in the fields, a scarecrow which the monks had made with a fine round wooden head, painted eyes, crude nose and smiling mouth—a creature whole and entire who could be moved from

time to time, intact in his monk's hood and robe.

I saw this scarecrow, this man of straw and wood hurry whirling and dancing through the fields and the vineyards until he had reached Cassiodorus's cell.

I followed!

Then I heard a silent wail rise from the being. I heard it and I saw the scarecrow in a bending, bowing dance of sorrow, its bundled straw hands over ears it didn't have. It writhed with grief.

Cassiodorus was dead. He had died quietly within his lamp-lighted cell, his door open, at his writing table. He lay, gray-haired, ancient, quiet against his manuscript. He had lived over ninety years. And he was dead.

This creature, this scarecrow, was wild with suffering and grief, rocking and moaning, though it was a sound no human could have heard.

I who have never seen spirits stared at it in wonder. Then it perceived that I was there. It turned. He—for so it seemed in this ragged attire and body of straw—reached out to me. He flung out his straw arms. The straw fell from his sleeves. His wooden head wobbled on the pole that was his spine. He—It—implored me: he begged me for the answer to the greatest questions humans and immortal have ever posed. He looked to me for answers!

Then glancing back again at the dead Cassiodorus, he ran to me, across the sloping grass, and the need came out of him, poured from him, his arms out as it beheld me. Could I not explain? Could I not contain in some Divine Design the mystery of the loss of Cassiodorus! Cassiodorus who had with his Vivarium rivaled the hive of bees in elegance and glory! It was Vivarium which had drawn this consciousness together from the hives! Could I not ease this creature's pain!

"There are horrors in this world," I whispered. "It is made up of mystery and dependent upon mystery. If you would have peace, go back to the hives; lose your human shape, and descend again, fragmented into the mindless life of the contented bees from which you rose."

He was fixed, and he listened to me.

"If you would have fleshly life, human life, hard life which can move through time and space, then fight for it. If you would have human philosophy then struggle and make yourself wise, so that nothing can

hurt you ever. Wisdom is strength. Collect yourself, whatever you are, into something with a purpose.

"But know this. All is speculation under the sky. All myth, all religion, all philosophy, all history—is lies."

The thing, whether it be male or female, drew up its bundled straw hands, as if to cover its mouth. I turned my back on it.

I walked away silently through the vineyards. In a little while the monks would discover that their Father Superior, their genius, their saint, had died at his work.

I looked back in amazement to discover that the figure of straw remained, organized, assuming the posture of an upright being, watching me.

"I will not believe in you!" I shouted back to this man of straw. "I will not search with you for any answer! But know this: if you would become an organized being as you see in me, love all mankind and womankind and all their children. Do not take your strength from blood! Do not feed on suffering. Do not rise like a god above crowds chanting in adoration. Do not lie!"

It listened. It heard. It remained still.

I ran. I ran and ran up the rocky slopes and through the forests of Calabria until I was far far away from it. Under the moon, I saw the sprawling majesty of Vivarium with its cloisters and sloped roofs as it surrounded the shores of its shimmering inlet from the sea.

I never saw the straw creature again. I don't know what it was. I don't want you to ask me any question about it.

You tell me spirits and ghosts walk. We know such beings exist. But that was the last I saw of that being.

And when next I drifted through Italy, Vivarium had been long destroyed. The earthquakes had shaken loose the last of its walls. Had it been sacked first by the next wave of ignorant tall men of Northern Europe, the Vandals? Was it an earthquake that brought about its ruin?

No one knows. What survives of it are the letters that Cassiodorus sent to others.

Soon the classics were declared profane. Pope Gregory wrote tales of magic and miracles, because it was the only way to convert thousands of superstitious uncatechized Northern tribes to Christianity in great en masse baptisms.

He conquered the warriors Rome could never conquer.

The history of Italy for one hundred years falls into absolute darkness after Cassiodorus. How do the books put it? For a century, nothing is heard from Italy.

Ah, what a silence!

Now David, as you come to these final pages, I must confess, I have left you. The smiles with which I gave you these notebooks were deceptive. Feminine wiles, Marius would call them. My promise to meet with you tomorrow night here in Paris was a lie. I will have left Paris by the time you come to these lines. I go to New Orleans.

It's your doing, David. You have transformed me. You have given me a desperate faith that in narrative there is a shadow of meaning. I now know a new strident energy. You have trained me through your demand upon my language and my memory to live again, to believe again that some good exists in this world.

I want to find Marius. Thoughts of other immortals fill the air. Cries, pleas, strange messages …

One who was believed gone from us is now apparently known to have survived.

I have strong reason to believe that Marius has gone to New Orleans, and I must be reunited with him. I must seek out Lestat, to see this fallen brat Prince lying on the chapel floor unable to speak or move.

Come join me, David. Don't fear Marius! I know he will come to help Lestat. I do the same.

Come back to New Orleans.

Even if Marius is not there, I want to see Lestat. I want to see the others again. What have you done, David? I now contain—with this new curiosity, with this flaming capacity to care once more, with reborn capacity to sing—I now contain the awful capacity to want and to love.

For that, if for nothing else, and there is indeed much more, I shall always thank you. No matter what suffering is to come, you have quickened me. And nothing you do or say will ever cause the death of my love for you.

THE END

Final: July 5, 1997

DEDICATED
TO
STAN, CHRISTOPHER AND MICHELE RICE

TO
SUZANNE SCOTT QUIROZ
AND
VICTORIA WILSON

TO THE MEMORY OF
JOHN PRESTON

TO
THE IRISH OF NEW ORLEANS
WHO, IN THE 1850S,
BUILT ON CONSTANCE STREET
THE GREAT CHURCH OF ST. ALPHONSUS,
WHILE PASSING ON TO US
THROUGH FAITH, ARCHITECTURE AND ART
A SPLENDID MONUMENT

TO
“THE GLORY THAT WAS GREECE
AND
THE GRANDEUR THAT WAS ROME”

Anne Rice

Vittorio, The Vampire

A BALLANTINE e BOOK

VITTORIO, THE VAMPIRE

NEW TALES OF THE VAMPIRES

Anne Rice

BALLANTINE BOOKS • NEW YORK

A Ballantine Book
Published by The Random House Publishing Group
Copyright © 1999 by Anne O'Brien Rice

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Ballantine Books, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, and simultaneously in Canada by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto.

BALLANTINE and colophon are registered trademarks of Random House, Inc.

eISBN: 978-0-307-57594-4

This edition published by arrangement with Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc.

www.ballantinebooks.com

v3.0_r1

Contents

Master Table of Contents

Cover
Title Page
Copyright

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16

Dedication
Selected and Annotated Bibliography

This novel is
dedicated
by
Vittorio
to the people of
Florence, Italy.

1

WHO I AM, WHY I WRITE, WHAT IS TO COME

When I was a small boy I had a terrible dream. I dreamt I held in my arms the severed heads of my younger brother and sister. They were quick still, and mute, with big fluttering eyes, and reddened cheeks, and so horrified was I that I could make no more of a sound than they could.

The dream came true.

But no one will weep for me or for them. They have been buried, nameless, beneath five centuries of time.

I am a vampire.

My name is Vittorio, and I write this now in the tallest tower of the ruined mountaintop castle in which I was born, in the northernmost part of Tuscany, that most beautiful of lands in the very center of Italy.

By anyone's standards, I am a remarkable vampire, most powerful, having lived five hundred years from the great days of Cosimo de' Medici, and even the angels will attest to my powers, if you can get them to speak to you. Be cautious on that point.

I have, however, nothing whatsoever to do with the "Coven of the Articulate," that band of strange romantic vampires in and from the Southern New World city of New Orleans who have regaled you already with so many chronicles and tales.

I know nothing of those heroes of macabre fact masquerading as fiction. I know nothing of their enticing paradise in the swamplands of Louisiana. You will find no new knowledge of them in these pages, not even, hereafter, a mention.

I have been challenged by them, nevertheless, to write the story of my own beginnings—the fable of my making—and to cast this fragment of my life in book form into the wide world, so to speak, where it may come into some random or destined contact with their well-published volumes.

I have spent my centuries of vampiric existence in clever, observant roaming and study, never provoking the slightest danger from my own kind, and never arousing their knowledge or suspicions.

But this is not to be the unfolding of my adventures.

It is, as I have said, to be the tale of my beginnings. For I believe I have revelations within me which will be wholly original to you. Perhaps when my book is finished and gone from my hands, I may take steps to become somehow a character in that grand *roman-fleuve* begun by other vampires in San Francisco or New Orleans. For now, I cannot know or care about it.

As I spend my tranquil nights, here, among the overgrown stones of the place where I was so happy as a child, our walls now broken and misshapen among the thorny blackberry vines and fragrant smothering forests of oak and chestnut trees, I am compelled to record what befell me, for it seems that I may have suffered a fate very unlike that of any other vampire.

I do not always hang about this place.

On the contrary, I spend most of my time in that city which for me is the queen of all cities—Florence—which I loved from the very first moment I saw it with a child's eyes in the years when Cosimo the Elder ran his powerful Medici bank with his own hand, even though he was the richest man in Europe.

In the house of Cosimo de' Medici lived the great sculptor Donatello making sculptures of marble and bronze, as well as painters and poets galore, writers on magic and makers of music. The great Brunelleschi, who had made the very dome of Florence's greatest church, was building yet another Cathedral for Cosimo in those days, and Michelozzo was rebuilding not only the monastery of San Marco but commencing the palazzo for Cosimo which would one day be known to all the world as the Palazzo Vecchio. For Cosimo, men went all over Europe seeking in dusty libraries long forgotten the classics of Greece and Rome, which Cosimo's scholars would translate into our native Italian, the language which Dante had boldly chosen many years before for his *Divine Comedy*.

And it was under Cosimo's roof that I saw, as a mortal boy of destiny and promise—yes, I myself saw—the great guests of the Council of Trent who had come from far Byzantium to heal the breach between the Eastern and Western church: Pope Eugenius IV of Rome, the Patriarch of Constantinople and the Emperor of the East himself, John VIII Paleologus. These great men I saw enter the city in a terrible storm of bitter rain, but nevertheless with indescribable glory, and these men I saw eat from Cosimo's table.

Enough, you might say. I agree with you. This is no history of the Medici. But let me only say that anyone who tells you that they were scoundrels, these great men, is a perfect idiot. It was the descendants of Cosimo who took care of Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo and artists without count. And it was all because a banker, a moneylender if you will, thought it splendid and good to give beauty and magnificence to the city of Florence.

I'll come back to Cosimo at the right point, and only for a few brief words, though I must confess I am having trouble being brief here on any score, but for now let me say that Cosimo belongs to the living.

I have been in bed with the dead since 1450.

Now to tell how it began, but allow me one more preface.

Don't look here, please, for antique language. You will not find a rigid fabricated English meant to conjure castle walls by stilted diction and constricted vocabulary.

I shall tell my tale naturally and effectively, wallowing in words, for I love them. And, being an immortal, I have devoured over four centuries of English, from the plays of Christopher Marlowe and Ben Jonson to the abrupt and harshly evocative words of a Sylvester Stallone movie.

You'll find me flexible, daring, and now and then a shock. But what can I do but draw upon the fullest descriptive power I can command, and mark that English now is no more the language of one land, or even two or three or four, but has become the language of all the modern world from the backwoods of Tennessee to the most remote Celtic isles and down under to the teeming cities of Australia and New Zealand.

I am Renaissance-born. Therefore I delve in all, and blend without prejudice, and that some higher good pertains to what I do, I cannot doubt.

As for my native Italian, hear it softly when you say my name, Vittorio, and breathe it like perfume from the other names which are sprinkled throughout this text. It is, beneath all, a language so sweet as to make of the English word "stone" three syllables: *pi-ea-tra.* There has never been a gentler language on earth. I speak all other tongues with the Italian accent you'll hear in the streets of Florence today.

And that my English-speaking victims find my blandishments so pretty, accented as they are, and yield to my soft lustrous Italian pronunciations, is a constant source of bliss for me.

But I am not happy.

Don't think so.

I wouldn't write a book to tell you that a vampire was happy.

I have a brain as well as a heart, and there hovers about me an etheric visage of myself, created most definitely by some Higher Power, and entangled completely within the intangible weave of that etheric visage is what men call a soul. I have such. No amount of blood can drown away its life and leave me but a thriving revenant.

Okay. No problem. Yes, yes. Thank you!—as everybody in the entire world can say in English. We're ready to begin.

Except I want to give you a quote from an obscure but wonderful writer, Sheridan Le Fanu, a paragraph spoken in extreme angst by a haunted character in one of his many exquisitely written ghost stories. This author, a native of Dublin, died in 1873, but mark how fresh is this language, and how horrifying the expression of the character Captain Barton in the story called "The Familiar":

> Whatever may be my uncertainty as to the authenticity of what we are taught to call revelation, of one fact I am deeply and horribly convinced, that there does exist beyond this a spiritual world—a system whose workings are generally in mercy hidden from us—a system which may be, and which is sometimes, partially and terribly revealed. I am sure—I *know* … that there is a God—a dreadful God—and that retribution follows guilt, in ways the most mysterious and stupendous—by agencies the most inexplicable and terrific;—there is a spiritual system—great God, how I have been convinced!—a system malignant, and implacable, and omnipotent, under whose persecutions I am, and have been, suffering the torments of the damned!

What do you think of that?

I am myself rather mortally struck by it. I don't think I am prepared to speak of our God as "dreadful" or our system as "malignant," but there seems an eerie inescapable ring of truth to these words, written in fiction but obviously with much emotion.

It matters to me because I suffer under a terrible curse, quite unique to me, I think, as a vampire. That is, the others don't share it. But I think we all—human, vampire, all of us who are sentient and can weep—we all suffer under a curse, the curse that we know more than we can

endure, and there is nothing, absolutely nothing, we can do about the force and the lure of this knowledge.

At the end, we can take this up again. See what you make of my story.

It's early evening here. The brave remnant of my father's highest tower still rises boldly enough against the sweetly star-filled heavens for me to see from the window the moonlighted hills and valleys of Tuscany, aye, even as far as the twinkling sea below the mines of Carrara. I smell the flowering green of the steep undiscovered country round where the irises of Tuscany still break out in violent red or white in sunny beds, to be found by me in the silky night.

And so embraced and protected, I write, ready for the moment when the full yet ever obscure moon leaves me for the hideaway of clouds, to light the candles that stand ready, some six, ensconced within the thick ruggedly worked silver of the candelabra which once stood on my father's desk, in those days when he was the old-style feudal lord of this mountain and all its villages, and the firm ally in peace and war of the great city of Florence and its unofficial ruler, when we were rich, fearless, curious and wondrously contented.

Let me speak now of what has vanished.

2

MY SMALL MORTAL LIFE, THE BEAUTY OF FLORENCE, THE GLORY OF OUR SMALL COURT—WHAT IS VANISHED

I was sixteen years old when I died. I have good height, thick brown hair down to the shoulders, hazel eyes that are far too vulnerable to behold, giving me the appearance of an androgyne in a way, and a desirable narrow nose with unremarkable nostrils, and a medium-sized mouth which is neither voluptuous nor stingy. A beautiful boy for the time. I wouldn't be alive now if I hadn't been.

That's the case with most vampires, no matter who says otherwise. Beauty carries us to our doom. Or, to put it more accurately, we are made immortal by those who cannot sever themselves from our charms.

I don't have a childish face, but I have an almost angelic one. My eyebrows are strong, dark, high enough over my eyes to allow them entirely too much luster. My forehead would be a little too high if it wasn't so straight, and if I didn't have so much thick brown hair, making as it does a curly, wavy frame for the whole picture. My chin is slightly too strong, too squared off for the rest. I have a dimple in it.

My body is overmuscular, strong, broad-chested, my arms powerful, giving an impression of manly power. This rather rescues my obdurate-looking jaw and allows me to pass for a full-fledged man, at least from a distance.

This well-developed physique I owe to tremendous practice with a heavy battle sword in the last years of my life, and ferocious hunting with my falcons in the mountains, up and down which I ran often on foot, though I had already four horses of my own by that age, including one of that special majestic breed made to support my weight when I wore my full suit of armor.

My armor is still buried beneath this tower. I never used it in battle. Italy was seething with war in my time, but all of the battles of the Florentines were being fought by mercenaries.

All my father had to do was declare his absolute loyalty to Cosimo, and let no one representing the Holy Roman Empire, the Duke of Milan or the Pope in Rome move troops through our mountain passes or stop

in our villages.

We were out of the way. It was no problem. Enterprising ancestors had built our castle three hundred years before. We went back to the time of the Lombards, or those barbarians who had come down from the North into Italy, and I think we had their blood in us. But who knows? Since the Fall of ancient Rome, so many tribes had invaded Italy.

We had interesting pagan relics lying about; alien tombstones most ancient were sometimes found in the fields, and funny little stone goddesses which the peasants still cherished if we didn't confiscate them. Beneath our towers were vaults that some said went back to the days even before the Birth of Christ, and I know now that is true. These places belonged to the people known to history as the Etruscans.

Our household, being of the old feudal style, scorning trade and requiring of its men that they be bold and brave, was full of treasure acquired through wars without count or record—that is, old silver and gold candelabra and sconces, heavy chests of wood with Byzantine designs encrusted on them, the usual Flemish tapestries, and tons of lace, and bed hangings hand-trimmed with gilt and gems, and all of the most desirable finery.

My father, admiring the Medici as he did, bought up all kinds of luxury items on his trips to Florence. There was little bare stone in any important room, because flowered wool carpets covered all, and every hallway or alcove had its own towering armoire filled with rattling, rusting battle dress of heroes whose names nobody even remembered.

We were incalculably rich: this I had more or less overheard as a child, and there was some hint that it had to do as much with valor in war as with secret pagan treasure.

There had been centuries of course when our family had warred with other hill towns and forts, when castle besieged castle and walls were ripped down as soon as they were built, and out of the city of Florence had gone the ever quarreling and murderous Guelfs and Ghibellines.

The old Commune of Florence had sent armies to tear down castles like ours and reduce any threatening Lord to nothingness.

But that time was long over.

We had survived due to cleverness and good choices, and also because we were much off to ourselves, in high craggy uninviting country, crowning a true mountain, as this is where the Alps come down into

Tuscany, and those castles most near to us were abandoned ruins.

Our nearest neighbor did rule his own mountain enclave of villages in loyalty to the Duke of Milan.

But he didn't bother with us or we him. It was a remote political matter.

Our walls were thirty feet high, immensely thick, older than the castle and keeps, old indeed beyond anyone's most romantic tales and constantly being thickened and repaired, and inside the compound there existed three little villages busy with good vineyards that yielded marvelous red wine; prosperous beehives; blackberries; and wheat and the like; with plenty of chickens and cows; and enormous stables for our horses.

I never knew how many people labored in our little world. The house was full of clerks who took care of such things, and very seldom did my father sit in judgment on any sort of case himself or was there cause to go to the courts of Florence.

Our church was the designated church for all the country round, so that those few who lived in less protected little hamlets down the mountain—and there were plenty—came to us for their baptisms, and marriages, and such, and we had for long periods of time within our walls a Dominican priest who said Mass for us every morning.

In olden times, the forest had been severely cut down on our mountain so that no invading enemy could make his way up the slopes, but by my time no such protection was necessary.

The woods had grown back full and sweet in some gullies and over old paths, even as wild as it is now, and almost up to the walls. One could make out clearly from our towers a dozen or so small towns descending to the valleys, with their little quilts of tilled fields, orchards of olive trees and vineyards. They were all under our governance and loyal to us. If there had been any war they would have come running to our gates as their ancestors had done, and rightly so.

There were market days, village festivals, saints' days, and a little alchemy now and then, and occasionally even a local miracle. It was a good land, ours.

Visiting clerics always stayed a long time. It wasn't uncommon to have two or three priests in various towers of the castle or in the lower, newer, more modern stone buildings.

I had been taken to Florence to be educated when I was very small, living in deluxe and invigorating style in the palazzo of my mother's uncle, who died before I was thirteen, and it was then—when the house was closed—that I was brought home, with two elderly aunts, and after that only visited Florence on occasion.

My father was still at heart an old-fashioned man, instinctively an indomitable Lord, though he was content to keep his distance from the power struggles of the capital, to have huge accounts in the Medici banks and to live an old-style courtly life in his own domain, visiting Cosimo de' Medici himself when he did journey into Florence on business.

But when it came to his son, my father wanted that I should be reared as a prince, a padrone, a knight, and I had to learn all the skills and values of a knight, and at thirteen, I could ride in full battle dress, my helmeted head bowed, at full speed with my spear thrust towards the straw-filled target. I had no difficulty with it. It was as much fun as hunting, or swimming in mountain streams, or having horse races with the village boys. I took to it without rebellion.

I was, however, a divided being. The mental part of me had been nourished in Florence by excellent teachers of Latin, Greek, philosophy and theology, and I had been deep into the boys' pageants and plays of the city, often taking the leading parts in the dramas presented by my own Confraternity in my uncle's house, and I knew how to solemnly portray the Biblical Isaac about to be sacrificed by the obedient Abraham, as well as the charming Angel Gabriel discovered by a suspicious St. Joseph with his Virgin Mary.

I pined for all that now and then, the books, the lectures in the Cathedrals to which I'd listened with precocious interest, and the lovely nights in my uncle's Florentine house when I'd fallen asleep to the sounds of spectacular opera extravaganzas, my mind brim full of the dazzle of miraculous figures swooping down on wires, lutes and drums playing wildly, dancers frolicking almost like acrobats and voices soaring beautifully in unison.

It had been an easy childhood. And in the boys' Confraternity to which I belonged, I'd met the poorer children of Florence, the sons of the merchants, orphans and boys from the monasteries and schools, because that is the way it was in my time for a landed Lord. You had to mix with

the people.

I think I crept out of the house a lot as a small child, easily as much as I slipped out of the castle later. I remember too much of the festivals and saints' days and processions of Florence for a disciplined child to have seen. I was too often slipping in and out of the crowd, looking at the spectacularly decorated floats in honor of the saints, and marveling at the solemnity of those in silent ranks who carried candles and walked very slowly as if they were in a trance of devotion.

Yes, I must have been a scamp. I know I was. I went out by the kitchen. I bribed the servants. I had too many friends who were out-and-out routies or beasties. I got into mayhem and then ran home. We played ball games and had battles in the piazzas, and the priests ran us off with switches and threats. I was good and bad, but not ever really wicked.

When I died to this world, at the age of sixteen, I never looked on a daylighted street again, not in Florence or anywhere. Well, I saw the best of it, that I can say. I can envisage with no difficulty the spectacle of the Feast of St. John, when every single solitary shop in Florence had to put out front all of its costly wares, and monks and friars sang the sweetest hymns on their way to the Cathedral to give thanks to God for the blessed prosperity of the city.

I could go on. There is no end to the praise one can heap upon the Florence of those times, for she was a city of men who worked at trades and business yet made the greatest art, of sharp politicians and true raving saints, of deep-souled poets and the most audacious scoundrels. I think Florence knew many things by that time that would only much later be learnt in France and England, and which are not known in some countries to this day. Two things were true. Cosimo was the most powerful man in all the world. And the people, and only the people, ruled Florence then and forever.

But back to the castle. I kept up my reading and studies at home, switching from knight to scholar in a twinkling. If there was any shadow on my life, it was that at sixteen I was old enough to go to a real university, and I knew it, and I sort of wanted to do it, but then again, I was raising new hawks, training them myself and hunting with them, and the country round was irresistible.

By this age of sixteen, I was considered bookish by the clan of elder kinsmen who gathered at the table every night, my parents' uncles

mostly, and all very much of a former time when “bankers had not run the world,” who had marvelous tales to tell of the Crusades, to which they had gone when they were young, and of what they had seen at the fierce battle of Acre, or fighting on the island of Cyprus or Rhodes, and what life had been like at sea, and in many exotic ports where they had been the terror of the taverns and the women.

My mother was spirited and beautiful, with brown hair and very green eyes, and she adored country life, but she'd never known Florence except from the inside of a convent. She thought there was something seriously wrong with me that I wanted to read Dante's poetry and write so much of my own.

She lived for nothing but receiving guests in gracious style, seeing to it that the floors were strewn with lavender and sweet-smelling herbs, and that the wine was properly spiced, and she led the dance herself with a great-uncle who was very good at it, because my father would have nothing to do with dancing.

All this to me, after Florence, was rather tame and slow. Bring on the war stories.

She must have been very young when she was married off to my father, because she was with child on the night she died. And the child died with her. I'll come to that quickly. Well, as quickly as I can. I'm not so good at being quick.

My brother, Matteo, was four years younger than me, and an excellent student, though he had not been sent off anywhere as yet (would that he had), and my sister, Bartola, was born less than a year after me, so close in fact that I think my father was rather ashamed of it.

I thought them both—Matteo and Bartola—the most lovely and interesting people in the world. We had country fun and country freedom, running in the woods, picking blackberries, sitting at the feet of gypsy storytellers before they got caught and sent away. We loved one another. Matteo worshipped me too much because I could outtalk our father. He didn't see our father's quiet strength, or well-fashioned old manners. I was Matteo's real teacher in all things, I suppose. As for Bartola, she was far too wild for my mother, who was in an eternal state of shock over the state of Bartola's long hair, the hair being all full of twigs and petals and leaves and dirt from the woods where we'd been running.

Bartola was forced into plenty of embroidering, however; she knew her songs, her poetry and prayers. She was too exquisite and too rich to be rushed into anything she didn't want. My father adored her, and more than once in very few words assured himself that I kept constant watch over her in all our woodland wanderings. I did. I would have killed anyone who touched her!

Ah. This is too much for me! I didn't know how hard this was going to be! Bartola. Kill anyone who touched her! And now nightmares descend, as if they were winged spirits themselves, and threaten to shut out the tiny silent and ever drifting lights of Heaven.

Let me return to my train of thought.

My mother I never really understood, and probably misjudged, because everything seemed a matter of style and manners with her, and my father I found to be hysterically self-satirical and always funny.

He was, beneath all his jokes and snide stories, actually rather cynical, but at the same time kind; he saw through the pomp of others, and even his own pretensions. He looked upon the human situation as hopeless. War was comic to him, devoid of heroes and full of buffoons, and he would burst out laughing in the middle of his uncles' harangues, or even in the middle of my poems when I went on too long, and I don't think he ever deliberately spoke a civil word to my mother.

He was a big man, clean shaven and long-haired, and he had beautiful long tapering fingers, very unusual for his size, because all his elders had thicker hands. I have the same hands myself. All the beautiful rings he wore had belonged to his mother.

He dressed more sumptuously than he would have dared to do in Florence, in regal velvet stitched with pearls, and wore massive cloaks lined in ermine. His gloves were true gauntlets trimmed in fox, and he had large grave eyes, more deep-set than mine, and full of mockery, disbelief and sarcasm.

He was never mean, however, to anyone.

His only modern affectation was that he liked to drink from fine goblets of glass, rather than old cups of hardwood or gold or silver. And we had plenty of sparkling glass always on our long supper table.

My mother always smiled when she said such things to him as "My Lord, please get your feet off the table," or "I'll thank you not to touch me until you've washed your greasy hands," or "Are you really coming

into the house like that?" But beneath her charming exterior, I think she hated him.

The one time I ever heard her raise her voice in anger, it was to declare in no uncertain terms that half the children in our villages round had been sired by him, and that she herself had buried some eight tiny infants who had never lived to see the light, because he couldn't restrain himself any better than a rampant stallion.

He was so amazed at this outburst—it was behind closed doors—that he emerged from the bedchamber looking pale and shocked, and said to me, "You know, Vittorio, your mother is nothing as stupid as I always thought. No, not at all. As a matter of fact, she's just boring."

He would never under normal circumstances have said anything so unkind about her. He was trembling.

As for her, when I tried to go in to her, she threw a silver pitcher at me. I said, "But Mother, it's Vittorio!" and she threw herself into my arms. She cried bitterly for fifteen minutes.

We said nothing during this time. We sat together in her small stone bedroom, rather high up in the oldest tower of our house, with many pieces of gilded furniture, both ancient and new, and then she wiped her eyes and said, "He takes care of everyone, you know. He takes care of my aunts and my uncles, you know. And where would they be if it weren't for him? And he's never denied me anything."

She went rambling on in her smooth convent-modulated voice. "Look at this house. It's filled with elders whose wisdom has been so good for you children, and all this on account of your father, who is rich enough to have gone anywhere, I suppose, but he is too kind. Only, Vittorio! Vittorio, don't … I mean … with the girls in the village."

I almost said, in a spasm of desire to comfort her, that I had only fathered one bastard to my knowledge, and he was just fine, when I realized this would have been a perfect disaster. I said nothing.

That might have been the only conversation I ever had with my mother. But it's not really a conversation because I didn't say anything.

She was right, however. Three of her aunts and two of her uncles lived with us in our great high-walled compound, and these old people lived well, always sumptuously dressed in the latest fabrics from the city, and enjoying the purest courtly life imaginable. I couldn't help but benefit from listening to them all the time, which I did, and they knew plenty of

all the world.

It was the same with my father's uncles, but of course it was their land, this, their family's, and so they felt more entitled, I assume, as they had done most of the heroic fighting in the Holy Land, or so it seemed, and they quarreled with my father over anything and everything, from the taste of the meat tarts served at supper to the distractingly modern style of the painters he hired from Florence to decorate our little chapel.

That was another sort of modern thing he did, the matter of the painters, maybe the only modern thing other than liking things made of glass.

Our little chapel had for centuries been bare. It was, like the four towers of our castle and all the walls around, built of a blond stone which is common in Northern Tuscany. This is not the dark stone you see so much in Florence, which is gray and looks perpetually unclean. This northern stone is almost the color of the palest pink roses.

But my father had brought pupils up from Florence when I was very young, good painters who had studied with Piero della Francesca and other such, to cover these chapel walls with murals taken from the lovely stories of saints and Biblical giants in the books known as *The Golden Legend*.

Not being himself a terribly imaginative man, my father followed what he had seen in the churches of Florence in his design and instructed these men to tell the tales of John the Baptist, patron saint of the city and cousin of Our Lord, and so it was that during the last years of my life on earth, our chapel was enfolded with representations of St. Elizabeth, St. John, St. Anne, the Blessed Mother, Zachary and angels galore, all dressed—as was the way of the time—in their Florentine finest.

It was to this "modern" painting, so unlike the stiffer work of Giotto or Cimabue, that my elderly uncles and aunts objected. As for the villagers, I don't think they exactly understood it all either, except they were so overawed in the main by the chapel at a wedding or baptism that it didn't matter.

I myself of course was terrifically happy to see these paintings made, and to spend time with the artists, who were all gone by the time that my life was brought to a halt by demonic slaughter.

I'd seen plenty of the greatest painting in Florence and had a weakness

for drifting about, looking at splendid visions of angels and saints in the rich dedicated chapels of the Cathedrals, and had even—on one of my trips to Florence with my father—in Cosimo's house, glimpsed the tempestuous painter Filippo Lippi, who was at that time actually under lock and key there to make him finish a painting.

I was much taken with the plain yet compelling man, the way that he argued and schemed and did everything but throw a tantrum to get permission to leave the palazzo while lean, solemn and low-voiced Cosimo just smiled and talked him down more or less out of his hysteria, telling him to get back to work and that he would be happy when he was finished.

Filippo Lippi was a monk, but he was mad for women and everybody knew it. You could say that he was a favorite bad guy. It was for women that he wanted out of the palazzo, and it was even suggested later at the supper table of our hosts in Florence on that visit that Cosimo ought to lock a few women in the room with Filippo, and that maybe that would keep Filippo happy. I don't think Cosimo did any such thing. If he had, his enemies would have made it the grand news of Florence.

Let me make note, for it is very important. I never forgot that glimpse of the genius Filippo, for that is what he was—and is—to me.

"So what did you so like about him?" my father asked me.

"He's bad and good," I said, "not just one or the other. I see a war going on inside of him! And I saw some of his work once, work he did with Fra Giovanni"—this was the man later called Fra Angelico by all the world—"and I tell you, I think he is brilliant. Why else would Cosimo put up with such a scene? Did you hear him!"

"And Fra Giovanni is a saint?" asked my father.

"Hmmmmm, yes. And that's fine, you know, but did you see the torment in Fra Filippo? Hmmm, I liked it."

My father raised his eyebrows.

On our next and very last trip to Florence, he took me to see all of Filippo's paintings. I was amazed that he had remembered my interest in this man. We went from house to house to look at the loveliest works, and then to Filippo's workshop.

There an altarpiece commissioned by Francesco Maringhi for a Florentine church—*The Coronation of the Virgin*—was well under way, and when I saw this work, I nearly fainted dead from shock and love of

it.

I couldn't leave it alone. I sighed and wept.

I had never seen anything as beautiful as this painting, with its immense crowd of still attentive faces, its splendid collection of angels and saints, its lithe and graceful feline women and willowy celestial men. I went crazy for it.

My father took me to see two more of his works, which were both paintings of the Annunciation.

Now, I have mentioned that as a child, I had played the Angel Gabriel coming to the Virgin to announce the Conception of Christ in her womb, and the way we played, he was supposed to be a pretty beguiling and virile angel, and Joseph would come in and, lo, find this overwhelming male with his pure ward, the Blessed Mary.

We were a worldly bunch, but you know, we gave the play a little spice. I mean we cooked it up a bit. I don't think it says anything in scripture about St. Joseph happening on a tryst.

But that had been my favorite role, and I had particularly enjoyed paintings of the Annunciation.

Well, this last one I saw before I left Florence, done by Filippo sometime in the 1440s, was beyond anything I had beheld before.

The angel was truly unearthly yet physically perfect. Its wings were made of peacock feathers.

I was sick with devotion and covetousness. I wished we could buy this thing and take it back home. That wasn't possible. No works of Filippo were on the market then. So my father finally dragged me away from this painting, and off we went home the next day or so.

Only later did I realize how quietly he listened to what I said as I ranted on and on about Fra Filippo:

"It's delicate, it's original, and yet it is commendable according to everybody's rules, that's the genius of it, to change, but not so much, to be inimitable, yet not beyond the common grasp, and that's what he's done, Father, I tell you."

I was unstoppable.

"This is what I think about that man," I said. "The carnality in him, the passion for women, the near beastly refusal to keep his vows is at war always with the priest, for look, he wears his robes, he is Fra Filippo. And out of that war, there comes into the faces he paints a look of utter

surrender."

My father listened.

"That's it," I said. "Those characters reflect his own continued compromise with the forces he cannot reconcile, and they are sad, and wise, and never innocent, and always soft, reflective of mute torment."

On the way back home, as we were riding together through the forest, up a rather steep road, very casually my father asked me if the painters who had done our chapel were good.

"Father, you're joking," I said. "They were excellent."

He smiled. "I didn't know, you know," he said. "I just hired the best." He shrugged.

I smiled.

Then he laughed with good nature. I never asked him when and if I could leave home again to study. I think I figured I could make both of us happy.

We must have made twenty-five stops on that last journey home from Florence. We were wined and dined at one castle after another, and wandered in and out of the new villas, lavish and full of light, and given over to their abundant gardens. I clung to nothing in particular because I thought it was my life, all those arbors covered with purple wisteria, and the vineyards on the green slopes, and the sweet-cheeked girls beckoning to me in the loggias.

Florence was actually at war the year we made this journey. She had sided with the great and famous Francesco Sforza, to take over the city of Milan. The cities of Naples and Venice were on the side of Milan. It was a terrible war. But it didn't touch us.

It was fought in other places and by hired men, and the rancor caused by it was heard in city streets, not on our mountain.

What I recall from it were two remarkable characters involved in the fray. The first of these was the Duke of Milan, Filippo Maria Visconti, a man who had been our enemy whether we liked it or not because he was the enemy of Florence.

But listen to what this man was like: he was hideously fat, it was said, and very dirty by nature, and sometimes would take off all his clothes and roll around naked in the dirt of his garden! He was terrified of the sight of a sword and would scream if he saw it unsheathed, and he was terrified too to have his portrait painted because he thought he was so

ugly, which he was. But that was not all. This man's weak little legs wouldn't carry him, so his pages had to heft him about. Yet he had a sense of humor. To scare people, he would suddenly draw a snake out of his sleeve! Lovely, don't you think?

Yet he ruled the Duchy of Milan for thirty-five years somehow, this man, and it was against Milan that his own mercenary, Francesco Sforza, turned in this war.

And that man I want to describe only briefly because he was colorful in an entirely different way, being the handsome strong brave son of a peasant—a peasant who, kidnapped as a child, had managed to become the commander of his band of kidnappers—and this Francesco became commander of the troop only when the peasant hero drowned in a stream trying to save a page boy. Such valor. Such purity! Such gifts.

I never laid eyes on Francesco Sforza until I was already dead to the world and a prowling vampire, but he was true to his descriptions, a man of heroic proportions and style, and believe it or not, it was to this bastard of a peasant and natural soldier that the weak-legged crazy Duke of Milan gave his own daughter in marriage, and this daughter, by the way, was not by the Duke's wife, poor thing, for she was locked up, but by his mistress.

It was this marriage which led eventually to the war. First Francesco was fighting bravely for Duke Filippo Maria, and then when the weird unpredictable little Duke finally croaked, naturally his son-in-law, handsome Francesco, who had charmed everybody in Italy from the Pope to Cosimo, wanted to become the Duke of Milan!

It's all true. Don't you think it's interesting? Look it up. I left out that the Duke Filippo Maria was also so scared of thunder that he was supposed to have built a soundproof room in his palace.

And there is more to it than that. Sforza more or less had to save Milan from other people who wanted to take it over, and Cosimo had to back him, or France would have come down on us, or worse.

It was all rather amusing, and as I have said, I was well prepared already at a young age to go into war or to court if it was ever required of me, but these wars and these two characters existed for me in dinner table talk, and every time someone railed about the crazy Duke Filippo Maria, and one of his insane tricks with a snake out of his sleeve, my father would wink at me and whisper in my ear, "Nothing like pure

lordly blood, my son." And then laugh.

As for the romantic and brave Francesco Sforza, my father had wisely nothing to say as long as the man was fighting for our enemy, the Duke, but once we had all turned together against Milan, then my father commended the bold self-made Francesco and his courageous peasant father.

There had been another great lunatic running around Italy during earlier times, a freebooter and ruffian named Sir John Hawkwood, who would lead his mercenaries against anybody, including the Florentines.

But he had ended up loyal to Florence, even became a citizen, and when he departed this earth, they gave him a splendid monument in the Cathedral! Ah, such an age!

I think it was a really good time to be a soldier, you know, to sort of pick and choose where you would fight, and get as carried away with it all as you wanted to.

But it was also a very good time for reading poetry, and for looking at paintings and for living in utter comfort and security behind ancestral walls, or wandering the thriving streets of prosperous cities. If you had any education at all, you could choose what you wanted to do.

And it was also a time to be very careful. Lords such as my father did go down to destruction in these wars. Mountainous regions that had been free and pretty much left alone could be invaded and destroyed. It happened now and then that someone who had pretty much stayed out of things got himself worked up against Florence and in came the clattering and clanking mercenaries to level everything.

By the way, Sforza won the war with Milan, and part of the reason was that Cosimo lent him the required money. What happened after that was absolute mayhem.

Well, I could go on describing this wonderland of Tuscany forever.

It is chilling and saddening for me to try to imagine what might have become of my family had evil not befallen us. I cannot see my father old, or imagine myself struggling as an elderly man, or envision my sister married, as I hoped, to a city aristocrat rather than a country baron.

It is a horror and a joy to me that there are villages and hamlets in these very mountains which have from that time never died out—never—surviving through the worst of even modern war, to thrive still with tiny cobbled market streets and pots of red geraniums in their windows.

There are castles which survive everywhere, enlivened by generation after generation.

Here there is darkness.

Here is Vittorio writing by the light of the stars.

Brambles and wild scratching things inhabit the chapel below, where the paintings are still visible to no one and the sacred relics of the consecrated altar stone are beneath heaps of dust.

Ah, but those thorns protect what remains of my home. I have let them grow. I have allowed the roads to vanish in the forest or broken them myself. I must have something of what there was! I must.

But I accuse myself again of going on and on, and I do, there is no doubt.

This chapter ought to be over.

But it's very like the little plays we used to do in my uncle's house, or those I saw before the Duomo in Cosimo's Florence. There must be painted backdrops, props of fine detail, wires rigged for flight and costumes cut out and sewn before I can put my players on the boards and tell the fable of my making.

I can't help it. Let me close my essay on the glories of the 1400s by saying what the great alchemist Ficino would say of it some years later on: It was "an age of gold."

I go now to the tragic moment.

3

IN WHICH THE HORROR DESCENDS UPON US

The beginning of the end came the following spring. I had passed my sixteenth birthday, which had fallen that year on the very Tuesday before Lent, when we and all the villages were celebrating Carnival. It had come rather early that year, so it was a bit cold, but it was a gay time.

It was on that night before Ash Wednesday that I had the terrible dream in which I saw myself holding the severed heads of my brother and my sister. I woke up in a sweat, horrified by this dream. I wrote it down in my book of dreams. And then actually I forgot about it. That was common with me, only it had been truly the most horrid nightmare I'd ever had. But when I mentioned my occasional nightmares to my mother or father or anyone else, they always said:

"Vittorio, it's your own fault for reading the books you read. You bring it on yourself."

To repeat, the dream was forgotten.

The country was by Easter in great flower, and the first warnings of horror to come, though I knew them not to be, were that the lower hamlets on our mountain were quite suddenly abandoned.

My father and I and two of the huntsmen and a gamekeeper and a soldier rode down to see for ourselves that the peasants in those parts had departed, some time before in fact, and taken the livestock with them.

It was eerie to see those deserted towns, small as they were and as insignificant.

We rode back up the mountain as a warm embracing darkness surrounded us, yet we found all the other villages we passed battened down with hardly a seam of light showing through the chinks of a shutter, or a tiny stem of reddened smoke rising from a chimney.

Of course my father's old clerk went into a rant that the vassals should be found, beaten, made to work the land.

My father, benevolent as always and completely calm, sat at his desk in the candlelight, leaning on his elbow, and said that these had all been

free men; they were not bound to him, if they did not choose to live on his mountain. This was the way of the modern world, only he wished he knew what was afoot in our land.

Quite suddenly, he took notice of me standing and observing him, as if he hadn't seen me before, and he broke off the conference, dismissing the whole affair.

I thought nothing much about it.

But in the days that followed, some of the villagers from the lower slopes came up to live within the walls. There were conferences in my father's chambers. I heard arguments behind closed doors, and one night, at supper, all sat entirely too somber for our family, and finally my father rose from his massive chair, the Lord in the center of the table as always, and declared, as if he'd been silently accused:

"I will not persecute some old women because they have stuck pins in wax dolls and burnt incense and read foolish incantations that mean nothing. These old witches have been on our mountain forever."

My mother looked truly alarmed, and then gathering us all up—I was most unwilling—she took us away, Bartola, Matteo and me, and told us to go to bed early.

"Don't stay up reading, Vittorio!" she said.

"But what did Father mean?" asked Bartola.

"Oh, it's the old village witches," I said. I used the Italian word *strega*. "Every now and then, one goes too far, there's a fight, but mostly it's just charms to cure a fever and such."

I thought my mother would hush me up, but she stood in the narrow stone stairs of the tower looking up at me with marked relief on her face, and she said:

"Yes, yes, Vittorio, you are so right. In Florence, people laugh at those old women. You know Gattena yourself; she never really did more then sell love potions to the girls."

"Surely we're not to drag her before a court!" I said, very happy that she was paying attention.

Bartola and Matteo were rapt.

"No, no, not Gattena, certainly not. Gattena's vanished. Run off."

"Gattena?" I asked, and then as my mother turned away, refusing, it seemed, to say another word, gesturing for me to escort my sister and brother safely to bed, I realized the gravity of this.

Gattena was the most feared and comical of the old witches, and if she had run off, if she was afraid of something, well, that was news, because she thought herself the one to be feared.

The following days were fresh and lovely and undisturbed by anything for me and my Bartola and Matteo, but when I looked back later, I recalled there was much going on.

One afternoon, I went up to the highest lookout window of the old tower where one guardsman, Tori, we called him, was falling asleep, and I looked down over all our land for as far as I could see.

"Well, you won't find it," he said.

"What's that?" I remarked.

"Smoke from a single hearth. There is no more." He yawned and leaned against the wall, heavily weighed down by his old boiled-leather jerkin, and sword. "All's well," he said, and yawned again. "So they like city life, or to fight for Francesco Sforza over the Duchy of Milan, so let them go. They didn't know how good they had it."

I turned away from him and looked over the woods again, and down into the valleys that I could see, and beyond to the slightly misty blue sky. It was true, the little hamlets seemed frozen in time down there, but how could one be so sure? It was not such a clear day. And besides, everything was fine within the household.

My father drew olive oil, vegetables, milk, butter and many such goods from these villages, but he didn't need them. If it was time for them to pass away, so be it.

Two nights later, however, it was undeniably obvious to me that everyone at supper was perpetually under a strain of sorts, which went entirely unvoiced, and that an agitation had gripped my mother, so that she was no longer engaging in her endless courtly chatter. Conversation was not impossible, but it had changed.

But for all the elders who seemed deeply and secretly conflicted, there were others who seemed relatively oblivious to such things, and the pages went about serving gaily, and a little group of musicians, who'd come up the preceding day, gave us a lovely series of songs with the viol and the lute.

My mother couldn't be persuaded to do her old slow dances, however.

It must have been very late when an unexpected visitor was announced. No one had left the main hall, except Bartola and Matteo,

who had been taken off to bed by me earlier and left in the care of our old nurse, Simonetta.

The Captain of my father's Guard came into the hall, clicked his heels and bowed to my father and said:

"My Lord, it seems there is a man of great rank come to the house, and he will not be received in the light, or so he says, and demands that you come out to him."

Everyone at the table was at once alert, and my mother went white with anger and umbrage.

No one ever used the word "demand" to my father.

Also it was plain to me that our Captain of the Guard, a rather prepossessing old soldier who'd seen many battles with the wandering mercenaries, was himself overvigilant and a little shaken.

My father rose to his feet. He did not speak or move, however.

"Would you do that, my Lord, or should I send this Signore away?" the Captain asked.

"Tell him that he is most welcome to come into my house as my guest," said my father, "that we extend to him in the name of Christ Our Lord our full hospitality."

His very voice seemed to have a calming effect on the whole table, except perhaps for my mother, who seemed not to know what to do.

The Captain looked almost slyly at my father, as if to convey the secret message that this would never do, but he went off to deliver the invitation.

My father did not sit down. He stood staring off, and then he cocked his head, as though listening. He turned and snapped his fingers, drawing to attention the two guards slumbering at the ends of the hall.

"Go through the house, see to everything," he said in a soft voice. "I think I hear birds which have entered the house. It's the warm air, and there are many open windows."

These two went off, and immediately two other soldiers appeared to take their place. That in itself was not usual, for it meant that there were many men on duty.

The Captain came back alone, and once more bowed.

"My Lord, he will not come into the light, he says, but that you must come out to him, and he has little time to wait on you."

This was the first time I had ever seen my father really angry. Even

when he whipped me or a peasant boy, he was rather lazy about it. Now the fine lineaments of his face, so given to reassurance by their very proportions, became absolutely wrathful.

"How dare he?" he whispered.

Yet he strode around the table, came in front of it and marched off with the Captain of the Guard hastening behind him.

I was out of my chair at once and after him. I heard my mother cry out softly, "Vittorio, come back."

But I stole down the stairs after my father, and into the courtyard, and only when he himself turned around and pressed my chest hard with his hand did I halt.

"Stay there, my son," he said with his old kindly warmth. "I shall see to it."

I had a good vantage point, right at the door of the tower, and there across the courtyard, at the gates in the full light of the torches, I saw this strange Signore who would not come into the light of the hall, for he did not seem to mind this outdoor illumination.

The huge gates of the arched entrance were locked and bolted for the night. Only the small man-sized gate was opened, and it was there that he stood, with the blazing crackling fire on either side of him, glorying in it, it seemed to me, in his splendid raiment of dark, wine-red velvet.

From head to toe he was dressed in this rich color, hardly the current style, but every detail of him, from his bejeweled doublet and blown-up sleeves of satin and velvet stripes, was this same hue, as though carefully dyed in the best fullers in Florence.

Even the gems sewn into his collar and hanging about his neck on a heavy golden chain were wine red—most likely rubies or even sapphires.

His hair was thick and black, hanging sleekly onto his shoulders, but I couldn't see his face, no, not at all, for the velvet hat he wore overshadowed it, and I caught but a glimpse of very white skin, the line of his jaw and a bit of his neck, for nothing else was visible. He wore a broadsword of immense size, with an antique scabbard, and casually over one shoulder was a cloak of the same wine-dark velvet trimmed in what seemed to my distant eyes to be ornate gilt symbols.

I strained, trying to make them out, this border of signs, and I thought I could see a star and crescent moon worked into his fancy adornments, but I was really too far away.

The man's height was impressive.

My father stopped quite far short of him, yet when he spoke his voice was soft and I couldn't hear it, and out of the mysterious man, who still revealed nothing now of his face but his smiling mouth and white teeth, there came a silky utterance that seemed both surly and charming.

"Get away from my house in the name of God and Our Holy Redeemer!" my father cried out suddenly. And with a quick gesture, he stepped forward and powerfully thrust this splendid figure right out of the gate.

I was amazed.

But from the hollow mouth of darkness beyond the opening there came only a low satin laughter, a mocking laughter, and this it seemed was echoed by others, and I heard a powerful thundering of hooves, as though several horsemen had commenced at once to ride off.

My father himself slammed the gate. And turned and made the Sign of the Cross, and pressed his hands together in prayer.

"Dear Lord God, how dare they!" he said, looking up.

It was only now, as he stormed back towards me and towards the tower itself, that I realized the Captain of the Guard was paralyzed with seeming terror.

My father's eye caught mine as soon as he came into the light from the stairs, and I gestured to the Captain. My father spun round.

"Batten down my house," my father called out. "Search it from top to bottom and batten it down and call out the soldiery and fill the night with torches, do you hear? I will have men in every tower and on the walls. Do it at once. It will give peace and calm to my people!"

We had not yet reached the supper room when an old priest living with us then, a learned Dominican named Fra Diamonte, came down with his white hair all mussed, and his cassock half unbuttoned, and his prayer book in his hand.

"What is it, my Lord?" he asked. "What in the name of God has happened?"

"Father, trust in God and come and pray with me in the chapel," said my father to him. He then pointed to another guard who was fast approaching. "Light up the chapel, all its candles, for I want to pray. Do it now, and have the boys come down and play for me some sacred music."

He then took my hand and that of the priest. “It’s nothing, really, you must both of you know that. It’s all superstitious foolishness, but any excuse which makes a worldly man like me turn to his God is a good one. Come on, Vittorio, you and Fra Diamonte and I will pray, but for your mother put on a good face.”

I was much calmer, but the prospect of being up all night in the lighted chapel was both welcome and alarming.

I went off to get my prayer books, my Mass books and books of other devotions, fine vellum books from Florence, with gilt print and beautifully edged illustrations.

I was just coming out of my room when I saw my father there with my mother, saying to her, “And do not leave the children alone for a moment, and you, you in this state, I will not tolerate this distress.”

She touched her belly.

I realized she was with child again. And I realized, too, that my father was really alarmed about something. What could it mean, “Do not leave the children alone for a moment”? What could this mean?

The chapel was comfortable enough. My father had long ago provided some decent wooden and velvet-padded prie-dieux, though on feast days everyone stood. Pews didn’t exist in those times.

But he also spent some of the night showing me the vault beneath the church, which opened by means of a ring handle on a trapdoor, faced in stone, the ring itself fitted down flat beneath what appeared to be only one of many marble inlaid ornaments in the floor tiles.

I knew of these crypts but had been whipped for sneaking into them when I was a child, and my father had told me back then how disappointed in me he’d been that I couldn’t keep a family secret.

That admonition had hurt far more than the whipping. And I'd never asked to go with him into the crypts, which I knew he had done over the years now and then. I thought treasure was down there, and secrets of the pagans.

Well, I saw now there was a cavernous room, carved high and deep out of the earth, and faced with stone, and that it was full of varied treasure. There were old chests and even old books in heaps. And two bolted doorways.

“Those lead to old burial places that you don’t need to go to,” he said, “but you need to know of this place now. And remember it.”

When we came back up into the chapel, he put the trapdoor right, laid down the ring, relaid the marble tile, and the whole was quite invisible.

Fra Diamonte pretended not to have seen. My mother was asleep and so were the children.

We all fell asleep before dawn in the chapel.

My father walked out in the courtyard at sunup, when the cocks were crowing all over the villages inside the walls, and he stretched and looked up at the sky and then shrugged his shoulders.

Two of my uncles ran at him, demanding to know what Signore from where dared to propose a siege against us and when we were supposed to have this battle.

"No, no, no, you've got it all wrong," my father said. "We're not going to war. You go back to bed."

But he had no sooner spoken these words than a ripping scream brought us all around, and through the opening courtyard gates there came one of the village girls, one of our near and dear girls, shrieking the terrible words:

"He's gone, the baby's gone, they've taken him."

The rest of the day was a relentless search for this missing child. But no one could find him. And it was soon discovered that one other child had also vanished without a trace. He had been a half-wit, rather beloved because he caused no harm, but so addle-brained he couldn't even much walk. And everyone was ashamed to say that they did not even know how long that half-wit had been missing.

By dusk, I thought I would go mad if I didn't get to see my father alone, if I couldn't push my way into the locked chambers where he sat with his uncles and the priests arguing and fighting. Finally, I hammered so loudly on the door and kicked so much that he let me in.

The meeting was about to break up and he drew me down by himself, and he said with wild eyes:

"Do you see what they've done? They took the very tribute they demanded of me. They took it! I refused it and they took it."

"But what tribute? You mean the children?"

He was wild-eyed. He rubbed his unshaven face, and he crashed his fist down on his desk, and then he pushed over all his writing things.

"Who do they think they are that they come to me by night and demand that I tender to them those infants unwanted by anyone?"

“Father, what is this? You must tell me.”

“Vittorio, you will tomorrow be off to Florence, at the first light, and with the letters I mean to write tonight. I need more than country priests to fight this. Now get ready for the journey.”

He looked up quite suddenly. He appeared to listen, and then to look about. I could see the light was gone from the windows. We ourselves were just dim figures, and he had thrown the candelabra down. I picked it up.

I watched him sidelong as I took one of the candles and lighted it by the torch at the door and brought it back, and then lighted the other candles.

He listened, still and alert, and then without making a sound he rose to his feet, his fists on the desk, seemingly uncaring of the light that the candles threw on his shocked and wary face.

“What do you hear, my Lord?” I said, using the formal address for him without so much as realizing it.

“Evil,” he whispered. “Malignant things such as God only suffers to live because of our sins. Arm yourself well. Bring your mother, your brother and your sister to the chapel, and hurry. The soldiers have their orders.”

“Shall I have some supper brought there as well, just bread and beer, perhaps?” I asked.

He nodded as though that were scarcely a concern.

Within less than an hour we were all gathered inside the chapel, the entire family, which included then five uncles and four aunts, and with us were two nurses and Fra Diamonte.

The little altar was decked out as if for Mass, with the finest embroidered altar cloth and the thickest golden candlesticks with blazing candles. The Image of Our Crucified Christ shone in the light, an ancient colorless and thin wooden carving that had hung on the wall there since the time of St. Francis, when the great saint was supposed to have stopped at our castle two centuries ago.

It was a naked Christ, common in those times, and a figure of tortured sacrifice, nothing as robust and sensual as those crucifixes made these days, and it stood out powerfully in contrast to the parade of freshly painted saints on the walls in their brilliant scarlet and gold finery.

We sat on plain brown benches brought in for us, nobody speaking a word, for Fra Diamonte had that morning said Mass and bestowed into

the Tabernacle the Body and Blood of Our Lord in the form of the Sacred Host, and the chapel was now, as it were, put to its full purpose as the House of God.

We did eat the bread, and drink a little bit of the beer near the front doors, but we kept quiet.

Only my father repeatedly went out, walking boldly into the torch-lighted courtyard and calling up to his soldiers in the towers and on the walls, and even sometimes being gone to climb up and see for himself that all was well under his protection.

My uncles were all armed. My aunts said their rosaries fervently. Fra Diamonte was confused, and my mother seemed pale to death and sick, perhaps from the baby in her womb, and she clung to my sister and brother, who were by this time pretty frankly frightened.

It seemed we would pass the night without incident.

It couldn't have been two hours before dawn when I was awakened from a shallow slumber by a horrid scream.

At once my father was on his feet, and so were my uncles, drawing out their swords as best they could with their knotted old fingers.

Screams rose all around in the night, and there came the alarms from the soldiers and the loud riotous clanging of old bells from every tower.

My father grabbed me by the arm. "Vittorio, come," he said, and at once, pulling up the handle of the trapdoor, he threw it back and thrust into my hand a great candle from the altar.

"Take your mother, your aunts, your sister and your brother down, now, and do not come out, no matter what you hear! Do not come out. Lock the trapdoor above you and stay there! Do as I tell you!"

At once I obeyed, snatching up Matteo and Bartola and forcing them down the stone steps in front of me.

My uncles had rushed through the doors into the courtyard, shouting their ancient war cries, and my aunts stumbled and fainted and clutched to the altar and would not be moved, and my mother clung to my father.

My father was in a very paroxysm. I reached out for my eldest aunt, but she was in a dead faint before the altar, and my father thundered back to me, forced me into the crypt and shut the door.

I had no choice but to latch the trapdoor as he had shown me how to do, and to turn with the flickering candle in my hand and face the terrified Bartola and Matteo.

“Go down all the way,” I cried, “all the way.”

They nearly fell, trying to move backward down the steep narrow steps that were by no means easy to descend, their faces turned towards me.

“What is it, Vittorio, why do they want to hurt us?” Bartola asked.

“I want to fight them,” Matteo said. “Vittorio, give me your dagger. You have a sword. It’s not fair.”

“Shhh, be quiet, do as our father said. Do you think it pleases me that I can’t be out there with the men? Quiet!”

I choked back my tears. My mother was up there! My aunts!

The air was cold and damp, but it felt good. I broke out in a sweat, and my arm ached from holding the big golden candlestick. Finally we sank down in a huddle, the three of us at the far end of the chamber, and it felt soothing to me to touch the cold stone.

But in the interval of our collective silence I could hear through the heavy floor howls from above, terrible cries of fear and panic, and rushing feet, and even the high chilling whinnies of the horses. It sounded as if horses had come crashing into the chapel itself over our heads, which was not at all impossible.

I rose to my feet and rushed to the two other doors of the crypt, those which led to the burial chambers or whatever they were, I didn’t care! I moved the latch on one, and could see nothing but a low passage, not even tall enough for me, and barely wide enough for my shoulders.

I turned back, holding the only light, and saw the children rigid with fear, gazing up at the ceiling as the murderous cries continued.

“I smell fire,” Bartola whispered suddenly, her face wet at once with tears. “Do you smell it, Vittorio? I hear it.”

I did hear it and I did smell it.

“Both of you make the Sign of the Cross; pray now,” I said, “and trust in me. We will get out of here.”

But the clamor of the battle went on, the cries did not die out, and then suddenly, so suddenly it was as wondrous and frightful as the noise itself, there fell a silence.

A silence fell over all, and it was too complete to spell victory.

Bartola and Matteo clung to me, on either side.

Above, there was a clatter. The chapel doors were being thrown back, and then quite suddenly the trapdoor was yanked up and open, and in

the glimmer of firelight beyond I saw a dark slender long-haired figure.

In the gust my candle went out.

Except for the infernal flicker above and beyond, we were committed unmercifully to total darkness.

Once again distinctly, I saw the outline of this figure, a tall, stately female with great long locks and a waist small enough for both my hands as she appeared to fly down the stairs soundlessly towards me.

How in the name of Heaven could this be, this woman?

Before I could think to pull my sword on a female assailant or make sense of anything at all, I felt her tender breasts brushed against my chest, and the cool of her skin as she seemed to be throwing her arms about me.

There was a moment of inexplicable and strangely sensuous confusion when the perfume of her tresses and her gown rose in my nostrils, and I fancied I saw the glistening whites of her eyes as she looked at me.

I heard Bartola scream, and then Matteo also.

I was knocked to the floor.

The fire blazed bright above.

The figure had them both, both struggling screaming children in one seemingly fragile arm, and stopping, apparently to look at me, a raised sword in her other hand, she raced up the stairway into the firelight.

I pulled my sword with both hands, rushed after her, up and out into the chapel, and saw that she had somehow by the most evil power all but reached the door, an impossible feat, her charges wailing and crying out for me, “Vittorio, Vittorio!”

All the upper windows of the chapels were full of fire, and so was the rose window above the crucifix.

I could not believe what I beheld, this young woman, who was stealing from me my sister and brother.

“Stop in the name of God!” I shouted at her. “Coward, thief in the night.”

I ran after her, but to my utter astonishment she did stop, still, and turned to look at me again, and this time I saw her full in all her refined beauty. Her face was a perfect oval with great benign gray eyes, her skin like the finest Chinese white enamel. She had red lips, too perfect even for a painter to make by choice, and her long ashen blond hair was gray like her eyes in the light of the fire, sweeping down her back in a

pampered swaying mass. Her gown, though stained dark with what must have been blood, was the same wine-red color I had seen in the apparel of the evil visitor of the night before.

With the most curious and then poignant face, she merely stared at me. Her right hand held her sword upraised, but she didn't move, and then she released from the powerful grip of her left arm my struggling brother and sister.

Both tumbled sobbing to the floor.

"Demon. Strega!" I roared. I leapt over them and advanced on her, swinging the sword.

But she dodged so swiftly that I didn't even see it. I couldn't believe that she was so far from me, standing now with the sword down, staring at me still and at the sobbing children.

Suddenly her head turned. There was a whistling cry, and then another and another. Through the door of the chapel, seeming to leap from the fires of Hell itself, there came another red-clad figure, hooded in velvet and wearing gold-trimmed boots, and as I swung my sword at him, he threw me aside and, in one instant, cut off the head of Bartola and then severed the head of the screaming Matteo.

I went mad. I howled. He turned on me. But from the female there came a sudden firm negation.

"Leave him alone," she cried in a voice that was both sweet and clear, and then off he went, this murderer, this hooded fiend in his gold-trimmed boots, calling back to her.

"Come on, now, have you lost your wits? Look at the sky. Come, Ursula."

She didn't move. She stared at me as before.

I sobbed and cursed and, grabbing my sword, ran at her again, and this time saw my blade descend to cut off her right arm, right below the elbow. The white limb, small and seemingly fragile like all of her parts, fell to the paved floor with her heavy sword. Blood spurted from her.

She did no more than look at it. And then at me with the same poignant, disconsolate and near heartbroken face.

I lifted my sword again. "Strega!" I cried, clenching my teeth, trying to see through my tears. "Strega!"

But in another feat of evil, she had moved back, far away from me, as if pulled by an invisible force, and in her left hand she now held her

right, which still clutched her sword as if it were not severed. She replaced the limb I had cut off. I watched her. I watched her put the limb in place and turn it and adjust it until it was as it should be, and then before my astonished eyes, I saw the wound I had made utterly seal up in her white skin.

Then the loose bell sleeve of her rich velvet gown fell down again around her wrist.

In a twinkling she was outside the chapel, only a silhouette now against the distant fires burning in the tower windows. I heard her whisper:

"Vittorio."

Then she vanished.

I knew it was vain to go after her! Yet still I ran out and swung my sword around in a great circle, crying out in rage and bitterness and mad menace at all the world, my eyes now blinded with tears, and my throat full to choking.

Everything was still. Everyone was dead. Dead. I knew it. The courtyard was strewn with bodies.

I ran back into the chapel. I grabbed up the head of Bartola and the head of Matteo into my arms. I sat down and held them in my lap, and I sobbed.

They seemed still alive, these severed heads, their eyes flashing, and their lips even moving with hopeless attempts to speak. Oh, God! It was beyond all human endurance. I sobbed.

I cursed.

I laid them side by side, these two heads in my lap, and I stroked their hair and stroked their cheeks and whispered comforting words to them, that God was close, God was with us, God would take care of us forever, that we were in Heaven. Oh, please, I beg you, God, I prayed in my soul, don't let them have the feeling and the consciousness which they still seem to possess. Oh, no, not such. I can't bear it. I cannot. No. Please.

At dawn, finally, when the sun poured arrogantly through the door of the chapel, when the fires had died away, when the birds sang as if nothing had happened, the innocent little heads of Bartola and Matteo were lifeless and still, and very obviously dead, and their immortal souls were gone from them, if they had not flown at the moment when the sword had severed these heads from the bodies.

I found my mother murdered in the courtyard. My father, covered with wounds on his hands and arms, as if he had grabbed at the very swords that struck him, lay dead on the stairs of the tower.

The work all around had been swift. Throats cut, and only here and there the evidence, as with my father, of a great struggle.

Nothing was stolen. My aunts, two dead in the far corner of the chapel, and two others in the yard, wore still all their rings and necklets and circlets about their hair.

Not a jeweled button had been ripped away.

It was the same throughout the entire compound.

The horses were gone, the cattle had roamed into the woods, the fowl flown. I opened the little house full of my hunting falcons, took off their hoods and let them all go into the trees.

There was no one to help me bury the dead.

By noon, I had dragged my family, one by one, to the crypt and tumbled them unceremoniously down the steps, and then laid them all out, side by side in the room, as best I could.

It had been a backbreaking task. I was near to fainting as I composed the limbs of each person, and last of all my father.

I knew that I could not do it for everyone else here in our compound. It was simply impossible. Besides, whatever had come might well come again, as I had been left alive, and there was a hooded demon man who had witnessed it, a vicious hooded assassin who had slaughtered two children piteously.

And whatever was the nature of this angel of death, this exquisite Ursula, with her barely tinted white cheeks and her long neck and sloping shoulders, I didn't know. She herself might come back to avenge the insult I had done her.

I had to leave the mountain.

That these creatures were not anywhere around now I felt instinctively, both in my heart and from the wholesomeness of the warm and loving sun, but also because I had witnessed their flight, heard their whistles to one another and heard the ominous words of the demon man to the woman, Ursula, that she must hurry.

No, these were things of the night.

So I had time to climb the highest tower and look at the country round.

I did. I confirmed that there was no one who could have seen the smoke of our few burning wooden floors and torched furniture. The nearest castle was a ruin, as I have said. The lower hamlets were long abandoned.

The nearest village of any size was a full day's walk, and I had to be off if I meant to get to any kind of hiding place by nightfall.

A thousand thoughts tormented me. I knew too many things. I was a boy; I could not even pass for a man! I had wealth in the Florentine banks but it was a week's ride from where I was! These were demons. Yet they had come into a church. Fra Diamonte had been struck dead.

Only one thought finally was possible for me.

Vendetta. I was going to get them. I was going to find them and get them. And if they couldn't come out by the light of day, then it would be by that means that I would get them! I would do it. For Bartola, for Matteo, for my father and mother, for the humblest child who had been taken from my mountain.

And they had taken the children. Yes, that they had done. I confirmed it before I left, for it was slow to dawn on me with all my concerns, but they had. There was not a corpse of a child on the place, only those boys of my age had been killed, but anything younger had been stolen away.

For what! For what horrors! I was beside myself.

I might have stood in the tower window, with clenched fist, consumed with anger and the vow for vendetta, if a welcome sight hadn't distracted me. Down in the closest valley, I saw three of my horses wandering about, aimlessly, as though wanting to be called home.

At least I should have one of my finest to ride, but I had to get moving. With a horse I might just reach a town by nightfall. I didn't know the land to the north. It was mountain country, but I had heard of a fair-sized town not too far away. I had to get there, for refuge, to think and to consult with a priest who had a brain in his head and knew demons.

My last task was ignominious and revolting to me, but I did it. I gathered up all the wealth I could carry.

This meant that I retired first to my own room, as if this were an ordinary day, dressed myself in my best dark hunter's green silk and velvet, put on my high boots and took up my gloves, and then taking the leather bags which I could affix to my horse's saddle, I went down into

the crypt and took from my parents and my aunts and uncles their very most treasured rings, necklaces and brooches, the buckles of gold and silver which had come from the Holy Land. God help me.

Then I filled my purse with all the gold ducats and florins I could find in my father's coffers, as if I were a thief, a very thief of the dead it seemed to me, and hefting these heavy leather bags, I went to get my mount, saddle him and bridle him and start off, a man of rank, with his weaponry, and his mink-edged cape, and a Florentine cap of green velvet, off into the forest.

4

IN WHICH I COME UPON FURTHER MYSTERIES, SUFFER SEDUCTION AND CONDEMN MY SOUL TO BITTER VALOR

Now, I was too full of rancor to be thinking straight, as I've already described, and surely you will understand this. But it wasn't smart of me to go riding through the woods of Tuscany dressed so richly, and by myself, because any woods in Italy was bound to have its bandits.

On the other hand, playing the poor scholar wouldn't have been the best choice either, it seemed to me.

I can't claim to have made a real decision. The desire for vengeance upon the demons that had destroyed us was the only central passion I could abide.

So there I was, riding steadily by mid-afternoon, trying to keep to the valley roads as I lost sight of our towers, trying not to cry anymore like a child, but being drawn off into the mountainous land over and over again.

My head was swimming. And the landscape gave me little time to think.

Nothing could have been more forlorn.

I came within sight of two huge ruined castles very soon after my departure, copings and ramparts lost in the greedy forest, which made me mindful that these had been the holdings of old Lords who had been fool enough to resist the power of Milan or Florence. It was enough to make me doubt my sanity, enough to make me think that we had not been annihilated by demons but that common enemies had made the assault.

It was utterly grim to see their broken battlements looming against the otherwise cheerful and brilliant sky, and to come upon the overgrown fragments of villages with their tumbledown hovels and forgotten crossroads shrines in which stone Virgins or saints had sunk into spiderwebs and shadows.

When I did spy a high distant well-fortified town, I knew well it was Milanese and had no intention of going up there. I was lost!

As for the bandits, I only ran into one little ragged band, which I took

on immediately with a deluge of chatter.

If anything, the little pack of idiots gave me some distraction. My blood ran as fast as my tongue:

"I'm riding in advance of a hundred men," I declared. "We search for a band of outlaws claiming to be fighting for Sforza when they're nothing but rapists and thieves; you seen any of them? I have a florin for each of you if you can tell me anything. We mean to cut them down on sight. I'm tired. I'm sick of this."

I tossed them some coins.

They were off immediately.

But not before they let slip in talk of the country round that the nearest Florentine town was Santa Maddalana, which was two hours up ahead, and that it would close its gates at night, and nobody could talk his way into it.

I pretended to know all about that and to be on the way to a famous monastery that I knew lay farther north, which I couldn't possibly have reached, and then threw more money over my shoulder as I raced off, hollering out that they ought to ride on to meet the band coming behind who would pay them for their service.

I know they were debating all the time whether to kill me and take everything I had or not. It was a matter of stares and bluffs and fast talking and standing one's ground, and they were just utter ruffians, and somehow I got out of it.

I rode off as quickly as I could, left the main road and cut towards the slopes from which I could see in the far distance the vague outline of Santa Maddalana. A big town. I could see four massive towers all gathered near the obvious front gates, and several distinct church steeples.

I had hoped for something before this Santa Maddalana, something small, less fortified. But I couldn't remember names or was too lost now to go looking further.

The afternoon sunshine was brilliant but now at a slant. I had to make for Santa Maddalana.

When I reached the mountain proper on which this town was built, I went up sharply on the small paths used by the shepherds.

The light was fading fast. The forest was too thick to be safe so near a walled town. I cursed them that they didn't keep the mountain cleared,

but then I had the safety of cover.

There were moments amid the deepening darkness when it seemed virtually impossible to reach the summit; the stars now lighted a glowing sapphirine sky, but that only made the venerable town in all its majesty seem ever more unattainable.

Finally the heedless night did plunge down amongst the thick trunks of the trees, and I was picking my way, counting on the instincts of my horse more than my own failing vision. The pale half-moon seemed in love with the clouds. The sky itself was nothing but bits and pieces thanks to the canopy of foliage above me.

I found myself praying to my father, as if he were safely with my guardian angels about me, and I think I believed in him and his presence more surely than I had ever believed in angels, saying, “Please, Father, help me get there. Help me get to safety, lest those demons render my vengeance impossible.”

I gripped my sword hard. I reminded myself of the daggers I wore in my boots, in my sleeve, in my jacket and in my belt. I strained to see by the light of the sky, and had to trust my horse to pick his way through the thick tree trunks.

At moments I stopped very still. I heard no unusual sound. Who else would be fool enough to be out in the night of this forest? At some point very near the end of the journey, I found the main road, the forest thinned and then gave way to smooth fields and meadows, and I took the twists and turns at a gallop.

At last the town rose right up in front of us, as it happens when you reach the gates by a final turn, you seem to have been thrown up on the ground at the foot of a magic fortress—and I took a deep breath of thanks, no matter that the giant gates were firmly shut as if a hostile army were camped beneath it.

This had to be my haven.

Of course the Watch, a sleepy soldier hollering down from above, wanted to know who I was.

Once again the effort of making up something good distracted me from wayward, near uncontrollable, images of the fiend Ursula and her severed arm, and the decapitated bodies of my brother and sister fallen on the chapel floor in mid-gesture.

I cried out, in a humble tone but with pretentious vocabulary, that I

was a scholar in the employ of Cosimo de' Medici come on a search for books in Santa Maddalana, in particular old prayer books pertaining to the saints and appearances of the Blessed Virgin Mary in this district.

What nonsense.

I had come, I declared, to visit the churches and schools and whatever old teachers the town might shelter, and to take back what I could purchase with good gold Florentine coin to my master in Florence.

"Yes, but your name, your name!" the soldier insisted as he opened the small lower gate only a crack, his lantern held high to inspect me.

I knew I made a good picture on my horse.

"De' Bardi," I declared. "Antonio De' Bardi, kinsman of Cosimo," I said with fierce nerve, naming the family of Cosimo's wife because it was the only name that came into my head. "Look, kindly man, take this payment for me, have a good supper with your wife as my guests, here, I know it's late, I'm so tired!"

The gate was opened. I had to dismount to lead my horse with lowered head through it and into the echoing stone piazza right inside.

"What in the name of God," asked the Watchman, "were you doing in these woods after dark alone? Do you know the dangers? And so young? What is the Bardi these days that they let their secretaries go riding all over unescorted?" He pocketed the money. "Look at you, a mere child! Somebody could murder you for your buttons. What's the matter with you?"

This was an immense piazza, and I could see more than one street leading off. Good luck. But what if the demons were here too? I had no clue as to where such things might roost or hide! But I went on talking.

"It's all my fault. I got lost. Tell on me and you'll get me in trouble," I said. "Show me to the Albergo. I'm so tired. Here, take this, no, you must." I gave him more money. "I got lost. I didn't listen. I'm about to faint. I need wine and supper and a bed. Here, good man, no, no, no, take more, I insist. The Bardi would not have it otherwise."

He ran out of pockets for the money, but managed somehow to stuff it in his shirt and then led me by torchlight to the Inn, banging on the door, and a sweet-faced old woman came down, grateful for the coins I thrust into her hand at once, to show me to a room.

"High up and looking out over the valley," I said, "if you please, and some supper, it can be stone cold, I don't care."

“You’re not going to find any books in this town,” said the Watchman, standing about as I beat it up the stairs after the woman. “All the young people go off; it’s a peaceable place, just happy little shopkeepers. Young men today run off to universities. But this is a beautiful place to live, simply beautiful.”

“How many churches do you have?” I asked the old woman when we’d reached the room. I told her that I must keep the lighted candle for the night.

“Two Dominican, one Carmelite,” said the Watchman, slouching in the little door, “and the beautiful old Franciscan church, which is where I go. Nothing bad ever happens here.”

The old woman shook her head and told him to be quiet. She set the candle down and gestured that it could stay.

The Watchman went on chattering as I sat on the bed, staring at nothing, until she’d brought a plate of cold mutton and bread, and a pitcher of wine.

“Our schools are strict,” the man went on.

Again the old woman told him to hush up.

“Nobody dares to make trouble in this place,” he said, and then both of them were gone.

I fell on my plate like an animal. All I wanted was strength. In my grief I couldn’t even think of pleasure. I looked out on a tiny bit of high star-sprinkled sky for a little while, praying desperately to every saint and angel whose name I knew for help, and then I locked up the window tight.

I bolted the door.

And making sure that the candle was well sheltered in the corner, and plenty big enough to last until dawn, I fell into the lumpy little bed, too exhausted to remove boots or sword or daggers or anything else. I thought I’d fall into a deep sleep, but I lay rigid, full of hatred, and hurt, and swollen broken soul, staring into the dark, my mouth full of death as if I’d eaten it.

I could hear distantly the sounds of my horse being tended to downstairs, and some lonely steps on the deserted stone street. I was safe, at least that much was so.

Finally sleep came. It came totally and completely and sweetly; the net of nerves which had held me suspended and maddened simply dissolved,

and I sank down into a dreamless darkness.

I was conscious of that sweet point where nothing for the moment matters except to sleep, to replenish and to fear yet no dreams, and then nothing.

A noise brought me around. I was immediately awake. The candle had gone out. I had my hand on my sword before my eyes opened. I lay on the narrow bed, back to the wall, facing the room and in a seemingly sourceless light. I could just make out the bolted door, but I couldn't see the window above me unless I turned my head to look up, and I knew, positively knew, that this window, heavily barred, had been broken open. The little light which fell on the wall came from the sky outside. It was a fragile, weak light, slipping down against the wall of the town and giving my little chamber the attitude of a prison cell.

I felt the cool fresh air come down around my neck and felt it on my cheek. I clutched the sword tight, listening, waiting. There were small creaking sounds. The bed had moved ever so slightly, as if from a pressure.

I couldn't focus my eyes. Darkness suddenly obscured everything, and out of this darkness there rose a shape before me, a figure bending over me, a woman looking right into my face as her hair fell down on me.

It was Ursula.

Her face was not an inch from mine. Her hand, very cool and smooth, closed over my own, on the hilt of my sword, with a deadly force, and she let her eyelashes stroke my cheek and then kissed my forehead.

I was enveloped in sweetness, no matter how hot my rebellion. A sordid flood of sensation penetrated to my very entrails.

"Strega!" I cursed her.

"I didn't kill them, Vittorio." Her voice was imploring but with dignity and a curious sonorous strength, though it was only a small voice, very young in tone and feminine in timbre.

"You were taking them," I said to her. I tried in a violent spasm to free myself. But her hand held me powerfully fast, and when I tried to free my left arm from under me, she caught my wrist and held me there too, and then she kissed me.

There came that magnificent perfume from her which I had breathed in before, and the stroking of her hair on my face and neck sent shameless chills through me.

I tried to turn my head, and she let her lips touch my cheek gently, almost respectfully.

I felt the length of her body against me, the definite swell of her breasts beneath costly fabric, and the smooth length of her thigh beside me in the bed, and her tongue touched my lips. She licked at my lips.

I was immobilized by the chills that went through me, humiliating me and kindling the passion inside me.

"Get away, strega," I whispered.

Filled with rage, I couldn't stop the slow smolder that had caught hold in my loins; I couldn't stop the rapturous sensations that were passing over my shoulders and down my back, and even through my legs.

Her eyes glowed above me, the flicker of her lids more a sensation than a spectacle I could see with my own eyes, and again her lips closed over mine, sucking at my mouth, teasing it, and then she drew back and pressed her cheek against me.

Her skin, which had looked so like porcelain, felt softer than a down feather against me, ah, all of her seemed a soft doll, made of luscious and magical materials far more yielding than flesh and blood yet utterly on fire with both, for a heat came out of her in a rhythmic throb, emanating right from the coolness of her fingers stroking my wrists as they held them, and then the heat of her tongue shot into my lips, against my will, with a wet, delicious and vehement force against which I could do nothing.

There formed in my crazed mind some realization that she had used my own hot desire to render me helpless, that carnal madness had made of me a body constructed about metal wires that could not help but conduct the fire she poured into my mouth.

She drew her tongue back and sucked with her lips again. My entire face was tingling. All my limbs were struggling both against her and to touch her, yes, embrace her yet fight her.

She lay against the very evidence of my desire. I couldn't have hidden it. I hated her.

"Why? What for!" I said, tearing my mouth loose. Her hair descended on both sides as she lifted her head. I could scarcely breathe for the unearthly pleasure.

"Get off me," I said, "and go back into Hell. What is this mercy to me! Why do this to me?"

“I don’t know,” she answered in her clever, tremulous voice. “Maybe it’s only that I don’t want you to die,” she said, breathing against my chest. Her words were rapid, like her heated pulse. “Maybe more,” she said, “I want you to go away, go south to Florence, go away and forget all that’s happened, as if it were nightmares or witches’ spells, as if none of it took place; leave this town, go, you must.”

“Stop your foul lies,” I said before I could stop myself. “You think I’ll do that? You murdered my family, you, you and yours, whatever you are!”

Her head dipped, her hair ensnaring me. I fought vainly to get loose. It was out of the question. I couldn’t budge her grip.

All was blackness, and indescribable softness. I felt a sudden tiny pain in my throat, no more than the prick of pins, and my mind was suddenly flooded with the most tranquil happiness.

It seemed I’d stumbled into a blowing meadow of flowers, quite far away from this place and from all woes, and she lay with me, fallen against silently crushed stems and uncomplaining irises, Ursula, with her undone ashen hair, and she smiled with the most engaging and demanding eyes, fervent, perhaps even brilliant, as if ours were a sudden and total infatuation of mind as well as body. On my chest she climbed, and though she rode me, looking down at me with exquisite smiling lips, she parted her legs gently for me to enter her.

It seemed a delirious blending of elements, the wet contracting secretive pocket between her legs and this great abundance of silent eloquence pouring from her gaze as she looked lovingly down at me.

Abruptly it stopped. I was dizzy. Her lips were against my neck.

I tried with all my might to throw her off.

“I will destroy you,” I said. “I will. I vow it. If I have to chase you into the mouth of Hell,” I whispered. I strained against her grasp so hard that my own flesh burned against hers. But she wouldn’t relent. I tried to clear my mind. No, no dreams of sweetness, no.

“Get away from me, witch.”

“Hush, be quiet,” she said sorrowfully. “You are so young and so stubborn, and so brave. I was young like you. Oh, yes, and so determined and such a fearless paragon.”

“Don’t talk your filth to me,” I said.

“Hush,” she said again. “You’ll wake the house. What good will that

do?" How painful, earnest and enticing she sounded. Her voice itself could have seduced me from behind a curtain. "I cannot make you safe forever," she said, "or even for very long. Vittorio, go."

She drew back so that I could see her sincere and large yielding eyes all the better. She was a masterpiece. And such beauty, the perfect simulacrum of the fiend I'd seen in the firelight of my chapel, needed no potions or spells to advance her cause. She was flawless and intimately magnificent.

"Oh, yes," she confessed, her half-visible eyes searching my face, "and I do find such beauty in you it pulls on my heart," she said. "Unfairly, unjustly. How am I to suffer this as well as all else?"

I struggled. I wouldn't answer. I wouldn't feed this enigmatic and infernal blaze.

"Vittorio, get out of here," she said, lowering her voice ever more delicately and ominously. "You have a few nights, maybe not even that. If I come to you again, I may lead them to you. Vittorio—. Don't tell anyone in Florence. They'll laugh at you."

She was gone.

The bed creaked and rocked. I was on my back, and my wrists ached from the pressure of her hands, and above me the window gaped on the gray featureless light, the wall beside the Inn rising up towards a sky I couldn't quite see from this helpless vantage point.

I was alone in the room. She was nowhere.

All of a sudden, I willed my limbs to action, but before I could so much as move, she appeared again, above in the window, visible from the waist to the top of her bowed head, peering down at me, and with her hands she tore loose the low embroidered border of her gown and bared her naked white breasts before me—tiny, rounded, very close together and with piquant nipples visible only in their darkness. With her right hand she scratched her left breast, just above the little nipple, made it bleed.

"Witch!"

I rose up to grab hold of her, to kill her, and instead felt her hand grasp my head, and there came the pressure of her left breast into my very mouth, irresistibly frail yet firm. Once again, all that was real melted and was swept away like so much idle smoke rising from a fire, and we were together in the meadow which belonged only to us, only to

our diligent and indissoluble embraces. I sucked the milk from her, as if she was maiden and mother, virgin and queen, all the while I broke with my thrusts whatever flower remained inside of her to be torn open.

I was let go. I fell. Helpless, unable even to raise a hand to keep her from flying, I fell down, weak and stupid onto the bed, my face wet and my limbs trembling.

I couldn't sit up. I could do nothing. I saw in flashes our field of tender white irises and red irises, the loveliest flowers of Tuscany, the wild irises of our land, blowing in the greenest grass, and I saw her running away from me. Yet all this was transparent, half-tinted, and could not mask the tiny cell of a room as it had done before, only linger, like a veil drawn across my face, to torment me with its tickling weightless silkiness.

"Spells!" I whispered. "My God, if you have ever committed me to guardian angels, will you spur them on now to cover me with their wings!" I sighed. "I need them."

Finally, shakily and with dim vision, I sat up. I rubbed at my neck. Chills ran up and down my spine, and the backs of my arms. My body was still full of desire.

I squeezed my eyes shut, refusing to think of her yet wanting anything, any source of stimulation, that would soothe this awful need.

I lay back again, and was very still until this carnal madness had left me.

I was a man again then, for not having been, at random, a man.

I got up, ready for tears, and I took my candle down to the main room of the Inn, trying not to make a sound on the crooked winding stone stairs, and I got a light from a candle there on a hook on the wall, at the mouth of the passage, and I went back up, clinging to this comforting little light, shielding the shuddering flame with my cupped hand and praying still, and then I set down the candle.

I climbed up and tried to see what I could from the window.

Nothing, nothing but an impossible drop beneath me, a sloping wall up which a flesh-and-blood maiden could never have climbed, and higher, the mute, passive sky, in which the few stars had been covered by fleecy clouds as if not to acknowledge my prayers or my predicament.

It seemed absolutely certain I was going to die.

I was going to fall victim to these demons. She was right. How could I

possibly exact the revenge they deserved? How in Hell could I do it! Yet I believed in my purpose utterly. I believed in my revenge as completely as I believed in her, this witch whom I had touched with my very own fingers, who had dared to kindle a wanton conflict in my soul, who had come with her comrades of the night to slaughter my family.

I couldn't overmaster the images of the night before, of her standing bewildered in the chapel door. I couldn't get the taste of her off my lips. All I had to do was think of her breasts, and my body would weaken as if she were feeding my desire from her nipple.

Make this subside, I prayed. You cannot run. You cannot go off to Florence, you cannot live forever with nothing but the memory of the slaughter you saw, that is impossible, unthinkable. You cannot.

I wept when I realized that I wouldn't be alive now if it had not been for her.

It was she, the ashen-haired one I was cursing with every breath, who had stopped her hooded companion from killing me. It would have been a complete victory!

A calm came over me. Well, if I was going to die, there was no choice, really. I would get them first. I would somehow do it.

As soon as the sun was up, so was I, and walking around the town, my saddlebags over my shoulder casually, as if they didn't contain a fortune, I sized up quite a portion of Santa Maddalana, with its treeless, narrow-stoned streets, built centuries before, perhaps some of its buildings with their wild patternless mortared stones going back even to Roman times.

It was a marvelously peaceful and prosperous town.

The forges were already at work, and so were the cabinetmakers and also the saddlemakers; there were several shoemakers dealing in some fine slippers as well as the workaday boots, and quite a cluster of jewelers and men who worked in a great variety of precious metals, as well as the usual swordmakers, men who made keys and the like and those who dealt in hides and furs.

I passed more fancy shops than I could count. One could buy fancy fabrics here, right from Florence, I supposed, and lace from north and south it seemed, and Oriental spices. The butchers were having a time of it with the abundance of fresh meat. And there were many wine shops, and I passed at least a couple of busy notaries, letter writers and the like, and several doctors or, rather, apothecaries.

Carts were rolling through the front gates, and there was even a little crush in the streets now and then before the sun was even high enough to come fiercely down over the close-tiled roofs and hit the bare stones on which I plodded uphill.

The churches rang their bells for Mass, and I saw plenty of schoolchildren rushing past me, all rather clean and neatly dressed, and then two little crews being paraded by monks into the churches, both of which were quite antique and had no ornament on the front at all, save for statues deep in niches—saints who scarcely had any features left to them at all—the heavily patched stones of the facades obviously having weathered the frequent earthquakes of this region.

There were two rather ordinary bookshops that had almost nothing much, except the prayer books one would expect to find, and these at very high prices. Two merchants sold really fine wares from the East. And there was a cluster of carpet sellers, too, who dealt in an impressive variety of country-made goods and intricate carpets from Byzantium.

Lots of money was changing hands. There were well-dressed people showing off their fine clothes. It seemed a self-sufficient place, though there were travelers coming uphill with the clop of horses' hooves echoing on the barren walls. And I think I spied one neglected and very much fortified convent.

I passed at least two more inns, and as I crisscrossed through the barely passable alleyways here and there, I ascertained that there were actually three basic streets to the town, all running parallel up and down the hill.

At the far deep end were the gates by which I had entered, and the huge farmers' markets opened now in the piazza.

At the high end was the ruined fortress or castle where once the Lord had lived—a great cumbersome mass of old stones, of which only a part was visible from the street, and in the lower floors of this complex there were the town's governing offices.

There were several small grottoes or piazzas, and old fountains almost crumbled away but still giving forth their gurgling water. Old women were busy, shuffling along with their market baskets and their shawls in spite of the warmth; and I saw beautiful young girls about giving me the eye, all of them very young.

I didn't want any part of them.

As soon as Mass was over and school had begun, I went to the Dominican church—the largest and most impressive of the three I could readily see—and asked at the rectory for a priest. I had to go to Confession.

There came out a young priest, very handsome with well-formed limbs and a healthy look to his complexion and a truly devout manner to him, his black and white robes very clean-looking. He looked at my attire, and my sword, indeed he took me in very respectfully but quite comprehensively, and obviously presuming me to be a person of importance, invited me into a small room for the Confession.

He was gracious more than servile. He had no more than a crown of golden hair clipped very short around the top of his bald head, and large almost shy eyes.

He sat down, and I knelt close to him on the bare floor, and then out of me came the whole lurid tale.

With bowed head, I went on and on with it, rushing from one thing to another, from the first hideous happenings that had so stirred my curiosity and alarm, to my father's fragmented and mysterious words and at last to the raid itself and the dreadful assassination of everyone in our compound. By the time I came to the death of my brother and sister, I was gesticulating madly, and all but shaping my brother's head with my hands in the empty air, and gasping and unable to catch my breath.

Only when I was utterly finished with every last word did I look up and realize that the young priest was staring down at me in perfect distress and horror.

I didn't know what to make of his expression. You could have seen the very same face on a man startled by an insect or an approaching battalion of bloody murderers.

What had I expected, for the love of God?

"Look, Father," I said. "All you have to do is send someone up that mountain and see for yourself!" I shrugged, and implored him with my open hands. "That's all! Send someone to look. Nothing's stolen, Father, nothing's taken, but what I took! Go look! I'll wager nothing has been disturbed except by ravens and buzzards if such are like to go up there."

He said nothing. The blood was palpitating in his young face, and his mouth was open and his eyes had a dazed, miserable look.

Oh, this was too marvelous. A silky boy of a priest, probably fresh out

of the seminary, used to hearing nuns tell of evil thoughts, and men once a year muttering resentfully about vices of the flesh because their wives had dragged them to their duty.

I became incensed.

"You are under the Seal of the Confessional," I said, trying to be patient with him, and not to play the Lord too much, because I could do that with priests if I wasn't careful; they made me so mad when they were stupid. "But I will give you permission, under the Seal, to send a messenger up that mountain to see with your own eyes …"

"But son, don't you see," he said, speaking with surprising resolve and firmness in his low voice. "The Medici themselves may have sent this band of assassins."

"No, no, no, Father," I pleaded, shaking my head. "I saw her hand fall. I cut off the creature's hand, I tell you. I saw her put it back. They were demons. Listen to me. These are witches, these are from Hell, these beings, and there's too many of them for me to fight alone. I need help. There's no time for disbelief. There's no time for rational reservations. I need the Dominicans!"

He shook his head. He didn't even hesitate.

"You are losing your mind, son," he said. "Something dreadful has happened to you, there's no doubt of that, and you believe all this, but it didn't happen. You are imagining things. Look, there are old women around who claim they make charms …"

"I know all that," I said. "I know an ordinary alchemist or witch when I see one. This was no side-street magic, Father, no country bunch of curses. I'm telling you, these demons slaughtered everyone in the castle, in the villages. Don't you see?"

I went into the lurid particulars again. I told how she had come into the window of my room, but then when I was halfway through it, I realized how utterly worse I was making it by going on about Ursula.

Why, this man thought I'd woken in a hot dream, imagining a damned succubus. This was futile, this entire enterprise.

My heart was hurting me in my chest. I was sweating all over. This was a waste of time.

"Give me absolution, then," I said.

"I want to ask something of you," he said. He touched my hand. He was trembling. He looked more dazed and perplexed than even before,

and very concerned, for my state of mind, I assumed.

"What is that?" I said coldly. I wanted to get away. I had to find a monastery! Or a damned alchemist. There were alchemists in this town. I could find someone, someone who had read the old works, the works of Hermes Trismegistus or Lactantius or St. Augustine, somebody who knew about demons.

"Have you read St. Thomas Aquinas?" I asked, choosing the most obvious demonologist of whom I could think. "Father, he talks all about demons. Look, you think I would have believed all this myself last year at this time? I thought all sorcery was for backdoor swindlers. These were demons!" I could not be deterred. I went at him.

"Father, in the *Summa Theologica*, the first book, St. Thomas talks of the fallen angels, that some of them are allowed to be here on earth, so that all of these fallen angels don't just fall out of the natural scheme of things. They are here, allowed to be useful, to tempt men, and Father, they carry the fire of Hell about with them! It's in St. Thomas. They are here. They have … have … bodies we can't understand. The *Summa* says so. It says that angels have bodies which are beyond our understanding! That's what this woman possesses." I struggled to remember the actual argument. I struggled in Latin. "This is what she does, this being! It's a form, it's a limited form, but one that I can't understand, but she was there, and I know it on account of her actions."

He put up his hand for my patience.

"Son, please," he said. "Allow me to confide what you have confessed to me to the Pastor," he asked me. "You understand, if I do this, he too will be bound by the same Seal of Confession as I am bound. But let me ask him to come in and let me tell him what you have said, and let me ask that he speak to you. You understand, I cannot do any of this without your solemn permission."

"Yes, I know all that," I said. "What good will this do? Let me see this Pastor."

Now I was being too haughty entirely, too impertinent. I was exhausted. I was doing the old Signore trick of treating a country priest like he was a servant. This was a man of God, and I had to get a grip on myself. Maybe the Pastor had read more, understood more. Oh, but who would understand who had not seen?

There came back to me a fleeting yet vivid and searing memory of my

father's anxious face on the night before the demons had struck. The pain was inexpressible.

"I'm sorry, Father," I said to the priest. I winced, trying to contain this memory, this awful drench of misery and hopelessness. I wondered why any of us were alive, ever, for any reason!

And then the words of my exquisite tormentor came back, her own tortured voice of the last night saying that she had been young too, and such a paragon. What had she meant, speaking of herself with such sorrow?

My study of Aquinas came back to haunt me. Were not demons supposed to remain absolutely confirmed in their hatred of us? In the pride which had made them sin?

That was not the sinuous luscious creature who had come to me. But this was folly. I was feeling for her, which is what she had wanted me to do. I had only so many hours of daylight to plan her destruction and must be on with it.

"Please, yes, Father, as you wish," I said. "But bless me first."

This drew him out of his troubled ruminations. He looked at me as if I'd startled him.

At once he gave his blessing and his absolution.

"You can do what you wish with the Pastor," I said. "Yes, please, ask the Pastor if he will see me. And here, for the church." I gave him several ducats.

He stared at the money. But he didn't touch it. He stared at this gold as if it were hot coals.

"Father, take it. This is a tidy little fortune. Take it."

"No, you wait here—or I tell you what, you come out into the garden."

The garden was lovely, a little old grotto, from which you could see the town sneaking up on the right all the way to the castle, and then you could see over the walls far out over the mountains. There was an antique statue of St. Dominic there, a fountain and a bench, and some old words carved into the stone about a miracle.

I sat down on the bench. I looked up at the healthy blue sky and the virgin white clouds, and I tried to catch my breath inside of myself. Could I be mad? I wondered. That was ridiculous.

The Pastor startled me. He came plunging out of the low arched doorway of the rectory, an elderly man with almost no hair at all, and a

small bulging nose and ferocious large eyes. The younger priest was running to keep up with him.

"Get out of here," the Pastor said to me in a whisper. "Get out of our town. Get clear away from it, and don't tell your stories to anybody in it, you hear me?"

"What?" I asked. "What sort of solace is this!"

He was steaming. "I'm warning you."

"Warning me of what?" I demanded. I didn't bother to get up from the bench. He glowered over me. "You're under the Seal of Confession. What are you going to do if I don't leave?" I asked.

"I don't have to do anything, that's just it!" he said. "Go away and take your misery with you." He stopped, clearly at a loss, embarrassed perhaps, as if he'd said something he regretted. He ground his teeth and looked off and then back at me.

"For your own sake, leave," he said in a whisper. He looked at the other priest. "You go," he said, "and let me talk to him."

The young priest was in a total fright. He left immediately.

I looked up at the Pastor.

"Leave," he said to me in his low, mean voice, his lower lip drawing back to reveal his lower teeth. "Get out of our town. Get out of Santa Maddalana."

I looked at him with cold contempt. "You know about them, don't you?" I said in a low voice.

"You're mad. Mad!" he said. "If you speak of demons to people here you'll end up burnt at the stake yourself for a sorcerer. You think it can't happen?"

It was hatred in his eyes, shameless hatred.

"Oh, poor damned priest," I said, "you're in league with the Devil."

"Get out!" he growled.

I got up and looked down into his swelling eyes, his pouting, overworked mouth.

"Don't you dare break the Seal of my Confession, Father," I said. "If you do, I'll kill you."

He stood stock-still, staring at me.

I smiled very coldly and went to pass on through the rectory and away.

He ran after me, whispering like a steaming kettle. "You

misunderstand everything. You're crazy, you're imagining things. I'm trying to save you from persecution and villainization."

I turned around at the door to the church and glared him into utter silence.

"You've tipped your hand," I said. "You're too merciless. Remember what I said. Break the Seal and I'll kill you."

He was as frightened now as the young priest had been.

I stood looking at the altar for a long while, ignoring him, forgetting him utterly, my mind pretending to have thoughts in it, to be construing and planning when all I could do was endure. Then I made the Sign of the Cross and I left the church.

I was in utter despair.

For a while I walked around. Once again, it was only the most pleasant town I had ever seen, with everyone happily at work, with best-swept cobbled streets, and pretty flower boxes under all the windows, and prettily dressed people going about their affairs.

It was the cleanest place I'd ever seen in my life, and the most contented. And the people, they were all eager to sell me their wares, but they didn't press it terribly much. But it was an awfully dull town in a way. There were no people my age, none at all that I saw. In fact, there weren't all that many children.

What should I do? Where should I go? What was I looking for?

I didn't quite know how to answer my own questions, but I was certainly on my guard for the slightest evidence that this town somehow harbored the demons, that Ursula had not found me here, but that I had found her.

The mere thought of her overcame me with a cool, inviting shock of desire. I saw her breasts, felt the taste of her, saw in a blurred flash the flowered meadow. No!

Think. Make some plan. As for this town, no matter what the priest knew, these people were too wholesome for harboring demons.

5

THE PRICE OF PEACE AND THE PRICE OF VENGEANCE

As the heat of the day started to really rise, I went into the arbor of the Inn for the heavy noon meal and sat down by myself under the wisteria, which was blooming magnificently over the latticework. This place was on the same side of the town as the Dominican church, and it too had a lovely view of the town to the left and a view out over the mountains.

I closed my eyes, and putting my elbows on the table, I clasped my hands and I prayed. "God, tell me what to do. Show me what is to be done." And then I was quiet in my heart, waiting, thinking.

What were my choices?

Take this tale to Florence? Who would believe it? Go to Cosimo himself and tell him this story? Much as I admired and trusted the Medici, I had to realize something. Nobody of my family was living but me. I alone could lay claim to our fortunes in the Medici bank. I didn't think Cosimo would deny my signature or my face. He'd give over to me what was mine, whether I had kinsmen or not, but a story of demons? I'd wind up locked up somewhere in Florence!

And talk of the stake, of being burnt for a sorcerer, that was entirely possible. Not likely. But possible. It could happen very suddenly and spontaneously in a town like this, a mob gathering, denunciations by a local priest, people shouting and running to see what was up. This did now and then happen to people.

About this time, my meal was set out for me, a good meal with plenty of fresh fruit and well-cooked mutton and gravy, and as I started to dip my bread and eat, up came two men who asked to sit down with me and buy a cup of wine for me.

I realized one of them was a Franciscan, a very kindly-looking priest, poorer it seemed than the Dominicans, which was logical I suppose, and the other an elderly man with little twinkling eyes and long stiff white eyebrows, sticking up as if with glue, as if he were costumed as a cheerful elf to delight children.

"We saw you go in to the Dominicans," said the Franciscan quietly and politely and smiling at me. "You didn't look so happy when you came

out." He winked. "Why don't you try us?" Then he laughed. It was no more than a good-natured joke and I knew it, about the rivalry of the two orders. "You're a fine-looking young man; you come from Florence?" he asked.

"Yes, Father, traveling," I said, "though where exactly, I don't know. I'm stopped here for a while, I think." I was talking with my mouth full, but I was too hungry to stop. "Sit down, please." I started to rise, but they sat down.

I bought another pitcher of red wine for the table.

"Well, you couldn't have found a finer place," said the little old man, who seemed to have his wits about him, "that is why I am so happy that God sent my own son, back here, to serve in our church, so that he could live out his days by his family."

"Ah, so you are father and son," I said.

"Yes, and I never thought I'd live so long," said the father, "to see such prosperity come to this town as has come. It's miraculous."

"It is, it is the blessing of God," said the priest innocently and sincerely. "It's a true wonder."

"Oh, really, instruct me in this, how so?" I asked. I pushed the plate of fruit to them. But they said they had eaten.

"Well, in my time," said the father, "you know we had more than our share of woes, or that's how it seemed to me. But now? It's utter bliss, this place. Nothing bad ever happens."

"It's true," said the priest. "You know, I remember the lepers we had in the old days, who lived outside the walls. They are all gone now. And then there were always a few really bad youths, young men causing trouble, you know, the really bad sort. You had them in every town. But now? You couldn't find one bad man in all of Santa Maddalana or in any of the villages around. It's as if people have returned to God with their whole hearts."

"Yes," said the old elfin man, shaking his head, "and God has been merciful in so many other ways."

I felt chills on my back again, as I had with Ursula, but it was not from pleasure.

"In what way is that, in particular?" I asked.

"Well, look around," said the old man. "Have you seen any cripples in our streets? Do you see any half-wits? When I was a child, why, when

you, my son, were a child"—he said to the priest—"there were always a few unfortunate souls, born ill formed, or without good brains, you know, and one had to look out for them. I can remember a time when there were always beggars at the gates. We have no beggars, haven't had any for years."

"Amazing," I said.

"Yes, true," said the priest thoughtfully. "Everyone here is in good health. That's why the nuns left so long ago. Did you see the old hospital shut up? And the convent out of town, long abandoned. I think there are sheep in there now. The farmers use its old rooms."

"No one ever takes sick?" I asked.

"Well, they do," said the priest, taking a slow drink of his wine, as though he were a moderate man in this respect, "but they don't suffer, you know. It's not like the old days. It seems if a person is like to go, then he goes quickly."

"Yes, true, thanks be to God," said the elder.

"And the women," said the priest, "they are lucky here in birth. They are not burdened with so many children. Oh, we have many whom God calls home to himself in the first few weeks—you know, it's the curse of a mother—but in general, our families are blessedly small." He looked to his father. "My poor mother," he said, "she had twenty babies all told. Well, that never happens now, does it?"

The little old man stuck out his chest and smiled proudly. "Aye, twenty children I reared myself; well, many have gone their way, and I don't even know what became of … but never mind. No, families are small here now."

The priest looked slightly troubled. "My brothers, maybe someday God will grant me some knowledge of what became of them."

"Oh, forget about them," said the old man.

"Were they a spirited bunch, might I ask?" I said under my breath, peering at both of them and trying to make it seem quite natural.

"Bad," muttered the priest, shaking his head. "But that's our blessing, see, bad people leave us."

"Is that so?" I asked.

The little old man scratched his pink scalp. His white hair was thin and long, sticking in all directions, rather like the hair of his eyebrows.

"You know, I was trying to remember," he said, "what did happen to

those poor cripple boys, you remember, the ones born with such miserable legs, they were brothers …"

"Oh, Tomasso and Felix," said the priest.

"Yes."

"They were taken off to Bologna to be cured. Same as Bettina's boy, the one born without his hands, remember, poor little child."

"Yes, yes, of course. We have several doctors."

"Do you?" I said. "I wonder what they do," I murmured. "What about the town council, the *gonfalonier*?" I asked. *Gonfalonier* was the name for the governor in Florence, the man who nominally, at least, ran things.

"We have a *borsellino*," said the priest, "and we pick a new six or eight names out of it now and then, but nothing much ever happens here. There's no quarreling. The merchants take care of the taxes. Everything runs smoothly."

The little elfin man went into laughter. "Oh, we have no taxes!" he declared.

His son, the priest, looked at the old fellow as though this was not something that ought to be said, but then he himself merely looked puzzled. "Well, no, Papa," he said, "it's only that the taxes are … small." He seemed perplexed.

"Well, then you are really blessed," I said agreeably, trying on the surface to make light of this utterly implausible picture of things.

"And that terrible Oviso, remember him?" the priest suddenly said to his father and then to me. "Now that was a diseased fellow. He nearly killed his son. He was out of his mind, roared like a bull. There was a traveling doctor who came through, said they would cure him at Padua. Or was it Assisi?"

"I'm glad he never came back," said the old man. "He used to drive the town crazy."

I studied them both. Were they serious? Were they talking double-talk to me? I could see nothing cunning in either one of them, but a melancholy was coming over the priest.

"God does work in the strangest ways," he said. "Oh, I know that's not quite the proverb."

"Don't tempt the Almighty!" said his father, downing the dregs of his cup.

I quickly poured out the wine for both of them.

“The little mute fellow,” said a voice.

I looked up. It was the innkeeper, with his hands on his hips, his apron stretching over his potbelly, a tray in his hand. “The nuns took him with them, didn’t they?”

“Came back for him, I think,” said the priest. He was now fully preoccupied. Troubled, I would say.

The innkeeper took up my empty plate.

“The worst scare was the plague,” he whispered in my ear. “Oh, it’s gone now, believe you me, or I wouldn’t utter the word. There’s no word that will empty a town any faster.”

“No, all those families, gone, just like that,” said the old man, “thanks to our doctors, and the visiting monks. All taken to the hospital in Florence.”

“Plague victims? Taken to Florence?” I asked, in obvious disbelief. “I wonder who was minding the city gates, and which gate it was by which they were admitted.”

The Franciscan stared at me fixedly for a moment, as if something had disturbed him violently and deeply.

The innkeeper gave the priest’s shoulder a squeeze. “These are happy times,” he said. “I miss the processions to the monastery—it’s gone too, of course—but we have never been better.”

I let my eyes shift quite deliberately from the innkeeper to the priest and found that the priest was gazing directly at me. There seemed a tremor to the edge of his mouth. He was sloppily shaven and had a loose jaw, and his deeply creased face looked sad suddenly.

The very old man chimed in that there had been a whole family down with the plague out in the country not very long ago, but they had been taken to Lucca.

“It was the generosity of … who was it, my son, I don’t …”

“Oh, what does it matter?” said the innkeeper. “Signore,” he said to me, “some more wine.”

“For my guests,” I gestured. “I have to be off. Restless limbs,” I said. “I must see what books are for sale.”

“This is a fine place for you to stay,” said the priest with sudden conviction, his voice soft as he continued to gaze at me, his eyebrows knitted. “A fine place indeed, and we could use another scholar. But—.”

“Well, I’m rather young myself,” I said. I made ready to rise, putting

one leg over the bench. “There are no young men here of my age?”

“Well, they go off, you see,” said the elfin one. “There are a few, but they are busy at the trades of their fathers. No, the rapscallions don’t hang around here. No, young man, they do not!”

The priest studied me as if he didn’t hear his father’s voice.

“Yes, and you’re a learned young man,” said the priest, but he was clearly troubled. “I can see that, and hear it in your voice, and all about you is thoughtful and clever—.” He broke off. “Well, I guess you’ll be on your way very soon, won’t you?”

“You think I should?” I asked. “Or stay, which is it?” I made my manner mild, not unkind.

He gave me a half-smile. “I don’t know,” he said. Then he looked dour again and almost tragic. “God be with you,” he whispered.

I leant towards him. The innkeeper, seeing this confidential manner, turned away and busied himself somewhere else. The old elfin one was talking to his cup.

“What is it, Father?” I asked in a whisper. “Is the town too well-off, is that it?”

“Go on your way, son,” he said almost wistfully. “I wish I could. But I’m bound by my vow of obedience and by the fact that this is my home, and here sits my father, and all the others have vanished into the wide world.” He became suddenly hard. “Or so it seems,” he said. And then, “If I were you, I wouldn’t stay here.”

I nodded.

“You look strange, son,” he said to me in the same whisper. Our heads were right together. “You stand out too much. You’re pretty and encased in velvet, and it’s your age; you’re not really a child, you know.”

“Yes, I see, not very many young men in the town at all, not the sort who question things. Just the old and the complacent and those who accept and who don’t see the tapestry for the one small monkey embroidered in the corner.”

He didn’t answer this overzealous streak of rhetoric, and I was sorry I’d said it. In that little lapse perhaps my anger and my pain had flashed through. Disgusting! I was angry with myself.

He bit his lip, anxious for me, or for himself, or for both of us.

“Why did you come here?” he asked sincerely, almost protectively. “By which way did you come? They said you came in the night. Don’t leave

by night." His voice had become such a whisper I could scarcely hear him.

"You don't need to worry about me, Father," I said. "Pray for me," I said. "That's all."

I saw in him a species of fear as real as that which I had seen in the young priest, but it was even more innocent, for all his age, and all his wrinkles, and the wetness of his lips with the wine. He looked fatigued by that which he couldn't comprehend.

I stepped free of the bench and was on my way when he grasped my hand. I bent my ear to his lips.

"My boy," he said, "there's something … something …"

"I know, Father," I said. I patted his hand.

"No, you don't. Listen. When you leave, take the main road south, even if it's out of your way. Don't go north; don't take the narrow road north."

"Why not?" I demanded.

Doubting, silent, utterly stricken, he let go of me.

"Why not?" I said in his ear.

He was no longer facing me. "Bandits," he said. "Toll bandits who control the road; they'll make you pay to go through. Go south." He turned sharply away from me and began to speak to his father in a soft gentle scolding manner as if I was already on my way.

I left.

I was stunned as I set foot in the hollow street. "Toll bandits?"

Many shops were shut now, as was definitely the custom after the heavy meal, but others were not.

My sword weighed a ton on my hip, and I felt feverish from the wine and dizzy from all these people had revealed to me.

So, I thought, my face burning, we have a town here with no young men, no cripples, no half-wits, no diseased people and no unwanted children! And on the road north we have dangerous bandits.

I moved downhill, walking faster and faster, and went out the wide-open gates and into the open country. The breeze was at once magnificent and welcome.

All around me lay rich, well-tended fields, vineyards, patches of orchard and farmhouses—lush and fertile vistas which I couldn't see when I had come in by darkness. As for the road north, I could see

nothing of it due to the immense size of the town, whose uppermost fortifications were northward.

I could see, below on a ridge, what must have been the ruins of the convent and, way down the mountain and far off to the west, what might have been the monastery.

I made my way to two farms within the hour, having a cup of cool water with both farmers.

It was all the same, talk of a paradise here, free of miscreants and the horror of executions, absolutely the most peaceful place in the world, and only well-formed children everywhere.

It had been years since any bandits had dared to linger in the woods. Of course you never knew who might pass through, but the town was strong and kept the peace.

"Oh, not even on the north road?" I asked.

Neither farmer knew anything about any north road.

When I asked what became of the unhealthy, the lame, the injured, it was the same. Some doctor or other, or priest, or order of friars or nuns, had taken them off to a university or city. The farmers sincerely couldn't remember.

I came back into the town well before twilight. I went poking around, in and out of every shop, in a near systematic manner, eyeing everyone as closely as I might without attracting undue attention.

Of course I couldn't hope to cover even one street of the place, but I was determined to discover what I could.

In the booksellers, I went through the old *Ars Grammatica* and *Ars Minor,* and the big beautiful Bibles that were for sale, which I could only see by asking that they be taken out of the cabinets.

"How do I go north from here?" I asked the bored man who leaned on his elbow and looked at me sleepily.

"North, nobody goes north," he said, and yawned in my face. He wore fine clothes without a sign of mending, and good new shoes of well-worked leather. "Look, I have much finer books than that," he said.

I pretended interest, then explained politely that all were more or less what I had and did not need, but thank you.

I went into a tavern where men were busy at dice and shouting over the game, lustily, as though they had nothing better to do. And then through the bakers' district, where the bread smelled wondrously

delicious, even to me.

I had never felt so utterly alone in my life, as I walked among these people listening to their pleasant talk and hearing the same tale of safety and blessings over and over again.

It froze my blood to think of nightfall. And what was this mystery of the road north? Nobody, nobody but the priest, even raised an eyebrow at the mention of that point of the compass.

About an hour before dark, I happened into one shop where the proprietor, a dealer in silks and lace from Venice and Florence, was not so patient with my idle presence, as others had been, in spite of the fact that I obviously had money.

"Why are you asking so many questions?" she said to me. She seemed tired and worn out. "You think it's easy to take care of a sick child? Look in there."

I stared at her as if she'd lost her mind. But then it dawned on me, clear and cold. I knew exactly what she meant. I poked my head through a curtained doorway and saw a child, feverish and sick, slumbering in a dirty narrow bed.

"You think it's easy? Year after year she doesn't get better," said the woman.

"I'm sorry," I said. "But what's to be done?"

The woman tore out her stitches and put down her needle. She seemed past all patience. "What's to be done? You mean to tell me you don't know!" she whispered. "You, a clever man like you!" She bit into her lip. "But my husband says, No, not yet, and so we go on with it."

She went back to her work, muttering to herself, and I, horrified and struggling to keep a straight face, made my way on. I went into a couple more shops. Nothing special happened. Then in the third on my way, I found an old man very out of his wits and his two daughters both trying to keep him from tearing his clothes off.

"Here, let me help you," I said at once.

We got him down in the chair, got his shirt over his head, and finally he stopped making incoherent noises. He was very wizened and drooling.

"Oh, thank God, this won't go on long," said one of the daughters, wiping her brow. "It's a mercy."

"Why won't it go on long?" I asked.

She glanced up at me, and away, and then back again. “Oh, you’re a stranger here, Signore, forgive me, you are so young. I only saw a boy when I looked at you. I mean God will be merciful. He's very old."

“Hmmm, I see,” I said.

She looked at me with cold cunning eyes, as if they were made of metal.

I bowed and went out. The old man had started to take off his shirt again, and the other sister, who had been silent all the time, slapped him.

I winced at it, and kept walking. I meant to see as much as I could right now.

Passing through rather peaceful little tailors' shops I came at last to the district of the porcelain dealers, where two men were having an argument about a fancy birthing tray.

Now, birthing trays, once used in practicality to receive the infant as it came from the womb, had become by my time fancy gifts given after the child was born. They were large platters painted with lovely domestic designs, and this shop had an impressive display of them.

I heard the argument before I was seen.

One man said to buy the damned tray, while the other said the infant wouldn’t even live and the gift was premature, and a third man said the woman would welcome the beautiful gorgeously painted birthing tray anyway.

They stopped when I entered the shop proper to look at all the imported wares, but then when I turned my back, one of the men uttered under his breath, “If she has a brain in her head, she’ll do it.”

I was struck by the words, so struck that I turned at once to snatch a handsome plate from the shelf and pretend to be much impressed with it. “So lovely,” I said, as if I hadn’t heard them.

The merchant got up and started to extoll the contents on display. The others melted into the gathering evening outside. I stared at the man.

“Is the child sick?” I asked in the smallest most childish voice that I myself could muster.

“Oh, no, well, I don’t think so, but you know how it is," said the man. “The child’s smallish."

“Weak,” I volunteered.

In a very clumsy way, he said, “Yes, weak.” His smile was artificial, but

he thought himself quite successful.

Then both of us turned to fussing over the wares. I bought a tiny porcelain cup, very beautifully painted, which he claimed to have bought from a Venetian.

I knew damned good and well I should leave without a word, but I couldn't stop myself from asking him as I paid, "Do you think the poor smallish weak child will live?"

He laughed a rather deep coarse laugh as he took my money. "No," he said, and then he glanced at me as though he'd been in his thoughts. "Don't worry about it, Signore," he said with a little smile. "Have you come to live here?"

"No, Sir, only passing through, going north," I said.

"North?" he asked, a little startled but sarcastic. He shut up the cashbox and turned the key. Then shaking his head as he put the box into the cabinet and closed the doors, he said, "North, eh? Well, good luck to you, my boy." He gave a sour chuckle. "That's an ancient road. You better ride as fast as you can from sunup."

"Thank you, Sir," I said.

Night was coming on.

I hurried into an alleyway and stood there, against the wall, catching my breath as though someone were chasing me. I let the little cup fall and it shattered loudly, the noise echoing up the towering buildings.

I was half out of my wits.

But instantly, and fully aware of my situation, and convinced of the horrors I had discovered, I made an inflexible decision.

I wasn't safe in the Inn, so what did this matter? I was going to do it my way and see for myself.

This is what I did.

Without going back to the Inn, without ever officially leaving my room in the Inn, I turned uphill when the shadows were thick enough to cover me, and I climbed the narrowing street towards the old ruined castle.

Now all day I had been looking at this imposing collection of rock and decay, and could see that it was indeed utterly ruined and empty of all save the birds of the air, except, as I have said, for the lower floors, which supposedly held offices.

But the castle had two standing towers remaining to it, one that faced

over the town, and another, much fallen away, beyond and remote on the edge of a cliff, as I had seen from the lower farmland.

Well, I made for the tower that overlooked the town.

The government offices were shut up of course already, and the curfew soldiers would soon be out, and there was noise from only a couple of taverns that obviously stayed open no matter what the law was.

The piazza before the castle was empty, and because the three streets of the town took many a curve in their way downhill, I could see almost nothing now but a few dim torches.

The sky, however, was wondrously bright, clear of all but the most rounded and discreetly shaped clouds, very visible against the deeper blue of the night, and the stars seemed exquisitely numerous.

I found old winding stairs, too narrow almost for a human being, that curved around the useful part of the old citadel and led up to the first platform of stone, before an entrance to the tower.

Of course this architecture was no stranger to me whatsoever. The stones were of a rougher texture than those of my old home, and somewhat darker, but the tower was broad and square and timelessly solid.

I knew that the place was ancient enough that I would find stone stairways leading quite high, and I did, and soon came to the end of my trek in a high room which gave me a view of the entire town stretched out before me.

There were higher chambers, but they had been accessible in centuries past by wooden ladders that could be pulled up, to defeat an enemy and isolate him below, and I couldn't get to them. I could hear the birds up there, disturbed by my presence. And I could hear the breeze moving faintly.

However, this was fine, this height.

I had a view all around from the four narrow windows of this place, looking in all directions.

And most especially, and important to me, I could see the town itself, directly below me, shaped like a great eye—an oval with tapered ends—with random torches burning here and there, and an occasional dimly lighted window, and I could see a lantern moving slowly as someone walked in a leisurely pace down one of the thoroughfares.

No sooner had I seen this moving lantern than it went out. It seemed the streets were utterly deserted.

Then the windows too went dark, and very shortly there were not four torches that I could see anywhere.

This darkness had a calming effect on me. The open country sank into a deep dark tinge of blue beneath the pearly heavens, and I could see the forests encroaching on the tilled land, creeping higher here and there, as the hills folded over one another or sank steeply into valleys of pure blackness.

I could hear the total emptiness of the tower.

Nothing stirred now, not even the birds. I was quite alone. I could have heard the slightest footfall on the stairs down below. No one knew I was here. All slept.

I was safe here. And I could keep a vigil.

I was too full of misery to be frightened, and frankly I was prepared to take my stand against Ursula in this spot, preferred it, in fact, to the confines of the Inn, and I feared nothing as I said my prayers and laid my hand on my sword as usual.

What did I expect to see in this sleeping town? *Anything that happened in it.*

Now, what did I think that was to be? I couldn't have told anyone. But as I circled the room, as I glanced again and again down at the few scattered lights below and the hulk of the descending ramparts beneath the glowing summer sky, the place seemed loathsome, full of deceit, full of witchcraft, full of payment to the Devil.

"You think I don't know where your unwanted babies are taken?" I muttered in a rage. "You think that people who are down with the plague are welcomed right through the open gates of your neighboring cities?"

I was startled by the echoes of my own murmurings off the cold walls.

"But what do you do with them, Ursula? What would you have done with my brother and sister?"

My ruminations were madness perhaps, or might have seemed so to some. But I learnt this. Revenge takes one's mind from the pain. Revenge is a lure, a mighty molten lure, even if it is hopeless.

One blow from this sword and I can strike off her head, I thought, and heave it out that window, and then what will she be but a demon

stripped of all worldly power?

Now and then I half-drew my sword, then put it back. I took out my longest dagger and slapped the palm of my left hand with its blade. I never stopped walking.

Suddenly, as I made one of my boring circumlocutions, I happened to spy far away, on a distant mountain, in which direction I really didn't know—but not the direction by which I had come—a great quantity of light playing behind the mesh of the sylvan darkness.

At first I thought this might be a fire, there was so much light, but as I narrowed my eyes and focused my mind, I saw that this was out of the question.

There was no riotous glare on the few visible clouds above, and the illumination, for all the breadth of it, was contained as if it emanated from a vast congregation gathered together with a fantastical quantity of candles. How steady yet pulsing was this orgy of fierce light!

I felt a chill in my bones as I looked at it. It was a dwelling! I leant over the window edge. I could see its complex and sprawling outline! It stood out from all the land, this one luxuriantly lighted castle, all by itself, and obviously visible from one entire side of this town, this spectacle of forest-shrouded house in which some celebration appeared to require that every torch and taper be lighted, that every window, battlement and coping be hung with lanterns.

North, yes, north, for the town dropped straight off behind me, and this castle lay north, and it was that direction of which I'd been warned, and who in this town could not have known of this place, yet there had not been one single solitary mention save for the whisper of the terrified Franciscan in the Inn at my table.

But what was I looking at? What could I see? Thick woods, yes; it was very high but surrounded by close and concealing woods, through which its light again and again palpitated like a great menace, but what was that coming from it, what was that wild, half-visible movement in the darkness, over the slopes that fell away from the mysterious promontory?

Were there things moving in the night? Moving from that very distant castle right towards this village? Amorphous black things, as if they were great soft shapeless birds following the alignment of the land but free of its gravity. Were they coming towards me? Had I been charmed?

No, I saw this. Or did I?

There were dozens of them!

They were coming closer and closer.

They were tiny shapes, not large at all, the largeness having been a delusion caused by the fact that they traveled in packs, these things, and now, as they came near to the town, the packs broke apart and I saw them springing up to the very walls beyond me on either side like so many giant moths.

I turned around and ran to the window.

They had descended in a swarm upon the town! I could see them dip down and vanish in the blackness. Below me on the piazza, there appeared two black shapes, men in streaming capes, who ran or rather leapt into the mouths of the streets, issuing from their lips an audible and audacious laughter.

I heard crying in the night, I heard sobs.

I heard a thin wail, and a muffled groan.

No lights appeared in the town.

Then out of the darkness, these evil things appeared again, on the tops of the walls, running right on the edge and then leaping free.

"God, I see you! Curse you!" I whispered.

There was a sudden loud noise in my ears, a great brush of soft cloth against me, and then the figure of a man reared up before my face.

"Do you see us, my boy?" It was a young man's voice, hearty, full of merriment. "My very curious little boy?"

He was too close for my sword. I could see nothing but rising garments.

With my elbow and shoulder and all my strength, I went for his groin.

His laughter filled the tower.

"Ah, but that does not hurt me, child, and if you're so curious, well then, we'll take you too with us to come and see what you long to see."

He caught me in a suffocating swaddle of fabric. And suddenly I felt myself lifted off the floor, encased in a sack, and I knew we had left the tower!

I was head down, sick to nausea. It seemed he flew, carrying me on his back, and his laughter was now half blown away by the wind, and I could not free my arms. I could feel my sword, but couldn't reach the handle.

Desperately I felt for my dagger, not the one which I must have dropped when I had been caught by him, but the other in my boot, and then having that, I twisted and turned towards the rough back on which I rode, bouncing and growling, and plunged the dagger through the cloth over and over again.

He gave a wild scream. I stabbed him again.

My whole body, inside the sack, was whipped up into the air, away from him.

“You little monster,” he cried. “You wretched impudent child.”

We descended sharply, and then I felt myself hit the ground, the rocky grassy ground, and I rolled over, tearing at the fabric of the blinding sack with my knife.

“You little bastard,” he cursed.

“Are you bleeding, you filthy devil?” I called out. “Are you?” I ripped at the sack, lost in it, rolling over and over, then feeling the wet grass with my naked hand.

I saw the stars.

Then the cloth was torn free of my struggling limbs.

I lay at his feet, but only for a moment.

6

THE COURT OF THE RUBY GRAIL

Nothing could have wrenched the dagger from my hand. I cut deep into his legs, bringing forth another riot of screams from him. He picked me up, indeed hurled me high in the air, and I fell, stunned, onto the dewy ground.

This gave me my first blurred but imperative glimpse of him. A great rush of red light illuminated him, a hooded and cloaked figure dressed as a knight, in long old-fashioned tunic and sleeves of shining mail. He twisted his torso, his golden hair tangling over his face, obviously in pain from the wounds inflicted on his back, and now stomped his wounded leg.

I rolled over twice, holding tight to the dagger, as I freed my sword sufficiently to draw it out of the scabbard. I was on my feet before he even so much as moved, and swung the sword with one hand, clumsily, but with all my force, hearing it smash into his side with a sickening moist slosh of a sound. The gush of blood in the bright light was horrific and monstrous.

There came his worst cry. He fell to his knees.

"Help me, you imbeciles; he's a devil!" he screamed. His hood fell back.

I scanned the immense fortifications rising to my right, the high crenelated towers with their fluttering flags in the unsteady glow of countless lights, just as I'd glimpsed from the distance of the town. It was a fantastical castle of pointed roofs, sharply broken arched windows, and high battlements crowded with dark figures moving in silhouette as they looked down on our struggle.

There came rushing down the wet grass the figure of Ursula in a red gown, cloakless, her hair in long braids with red ribbon, rushing towards me.

"Don't hurt him, I charge you," she screamed. "Don't touch him."

A group of male figures, all got up in the same old-fashioned knightly tunics, down to their knees, with somber pointed steel helmets, followed her. They had bearded faces all, and ghastly white skin.

My adversary pitched forward on the grass, spouting blood as if he were a hideous fountain.

“Look what he’s done to me, look!” he shouted.

I stuck my dagger in my belt, grabbed the sword with two hands and went at his neck, letting a roar escape my teeth as I did, and saw the head roll over and over and down the hill. “Ah, now you’re dead, you’re bloody dead!” I cried out. “You murderous fiend, you’re dead. Go get your head. Put that back on!”

Ursula flung her arms around me, her breasts sealed against my back. Her hand imprisoned mine once more and forced me to bow the tip of the sword to the ground.

“Don’t touch him,” she screamed again, with a threat in her voice. “Don’t come near, I charge you.”

One of the others had recovered the shaggy blond head of my foe and held it up as the others watched the body twitch and writhe.

“Oh, no, it’s too late,” said one of the men.

“No, put it back, put it on his neck," cried another.

“Let me go, Ursula,” I said. “Let me die with honor, will you do me that courtesy!” I struggled. “Let me free, to die in my own way, will you do that much?”

“No,” she said hotly into my ear. “I will not.”

I was absolutely powerless against her strength, no matter how soft the cushion of her breasts or how cool and soft her fingers. She had complete mastery of me.

“Go to Godric,” cried one of the men.

The other two had picked up the writhing, kicking, headless man. “Take him to Godric,” said the one who carried the head. “Only Godric can pronounce on this.”

Ursula let out a loud wail. “Godric!” It was like the howl of the wind or a beast, it was so shrill, so immense, echoing off the walls.

High up, against the wide gaping arched doorway of the citadel, his back to the light, there stood a slender elderly figure, limbs bent with age.

“Bring them both,” he called out. “Ursula, quiet yourself, lest you frighten everyone.”

I made a swift bid for freedom. She tightened her grip. There came the pinprick of her teeth in my neck. “Oh, no, Ursula, let me see what’s to

happen!" I whispered. But I could feel the murky clouds rising about me, as though the air itself had thickened and was enfolding me with scent and sound and the sensuous force.

Oh, love you, want you, yes, I did and can't deny it. I felt myself holding her in the high moist grasses of the field, and she lay beneath me, but these were dreams and there were no wild red flowers, and I was being taken somewhere, and she had but weakened me, pulled on my heart with the force of her own.

I tried to curse her. All around us lay the flowers and the grasses, and she said, "Run," but this was quite impossible because it was not made of truth, but of fantasy and the sucking of her mouth on me and her limbs entwining me as if she were a serpent.

A French castle. It was as though I had been transported to the north.

I had opened my eyes.

All the accoutrements of a French court.

Even the dim sedate music which I could hear made me think of old-fashioned French songs sung at suppers in long-ago childhood.

I awoke, sitting cross-legged on a carpet, slumped over, and came to myself rubbing my neck and feeling about desperately for weapons which had all been taken from me. I nearly lost my balance and fell backward.

The music was repetitive and dull and pounding as it rose up from some faraway place below, with too many muffled drums and the thin nasal whine of horns. It had no melody.

I looked up. French, yes, the high narrow pointed archway that led to a long balcony outside, below which some great celebration was in noisy progress. Fancy French, the tapestries of the ladies with their tall cone-shaped hats, and their snow-white unicorns.

Quaint antique, like the illustrations in prayer books of courts in which poets sat reading aloud the boring and tedious *Roman de la Rose*, or the fables of Reynard the Fox.

The window was draped in blue satin covered in the fleurs-de-lys. There was old filigree crumbling about the high doorway and what I could see of the window frame. And cabinets were gilded and painted in the French style, decayed and stiff.

I turned around.

There stood the two men, their long tunics streaked with blood, and

their mail sleeves coarse and thick. They had taken off their pointed helmets, and they stared at me with icy pale eyes, each a solemn bearded figure. The light positively glinted on their hard white skin.

And there stood Ursula, a silver-framed jewel upon the shadows, gazing down at me, her gown high-waisted and soft-falling and old-fashioned as their clothes, as though she too had come from some long-ago kingdom of the French, her snow-white breasts bare almost to her nipples, beneath a rich full little bodice of flowered red-and-gold velvet.

At a desk, on an X-shaped chair, there sat the Elderly one, his age quite true to the posture I had glimpsed silhouetted against the castle light, and he was pale as they, of the same deadly white complexion, both beautiful yet awful and monstrous.

Turkish lamps hung on chains about the room, flames glittering deep inside them, giving off a hurtful light against my dazed eyes, and also a fragrance as of roses and summer fields, something alien to heat and burnt things.

The Elderly one had a bald head, as ugly as the unearthed bulb of an iris, upended and shaved of all root, and implanted with two gleaming gray eyes, and a long narrow solemn uncomplaining and unjudging mouth.

"Ah, so," he said to me in a soft voice, lifting one eyebrow, which was scarcely visible except for the sharp arching wrinkle of his perfect white flesh. He had thick slanting lines for cheeks. "You realize you've killed one of us, don't you?"

"I hope so," I said. I climbed to my feet. I nearly lost my balance. Ursula reached out, then stepped back, as though she had caught herself in a breach of decorum.

I righted myself, glaring at her quite ferociously and then at the bald Elderly one, who looked up at me with unbroken calm.

"Do you care to see what you've done?" he asked of me.

"Why should I?" I asked. But I did see.

On a great trestle-board table to my left lay the dead blond thief who had hefted me body and soul into his big cloth sack. Ah, the debt was paid in full.

He lay still, shrunken horridly, as if his limbs had collapsed upon themselves, and his bloodless white head, lids open on dark clotted eyes, lay against his roughly torn neck. What a delight. I stared at one skeletal

hand of the being, which hung over the edge of the table, white and like some shriveling creature of the sea beneath a merciless sun on sand by the oceanside.

"Ah, excellent," I said. "This man who dared to abduct me and bring me here by force, quite dead, thank you for the sight of it." I looked at the Elderly one. "Honor demands nothing less. We don't even have to talk of common sense, do we? And what others did you take from the village? The wild old man who tore at his shirt? The infant born small? The weak, the infirm, the sick, whatever they'd give you, and what do you give them in exchange?"

"Oh, do be quiet, young one," said the Elderly solemn male. "You are courageous beyond honor or common sense, that's plain enough."

"No, it isn't. Your sins against me demand I fight you with my last breath, you, all of you." I pivoted and stared at the open door. The plodding music in itself sickened me and threatened to make me dizzy from all the blows and falls I'd suffered. "Such noise from below. What are you, a bloody court?"

All three men broke into laughter.

"Well, you've very nearly got it right," said one of the bearded soldiers in a deep bass of a voice. "We are the Court of the Ruby Grail, that's our very name, only we prefer that you say it properly in Latin or in French, as we say it."

"The Court of the Ruby Grail!" I said. "Leeches, parasites, blood drinkers, that's what you all are. What is the Ruby Grail? Blood?"

I struggled to remember the prick of her teeth against my throat without the spell which had always come with them, but there it was, threatening to swallow me, the drifting, fragrant memory of meadows and her tender breasts. I shook myself all over. "Blood drinkers. Ruby Grail! Is that what you do with all of them, the ones you take? Drink their blood?"

The Elderly one looked pointedly at Ursula. "What is it you're asking of me, Ursula?" he put the question to her. "How can I make such a choice?"

"Oh, but Godric, he's brave and fine and strong," said Ursula. "Godric, if you but say yes, no one will go against it. No one will question it. Please, I beg you, Godric. When have I ever asked—."

"Asked for what?" I demanded, looking from her solicitous and

heartbroken face to the Elderly man. “For my life? Is that what you ask? You’d better kill me.”

The old man knew that. I didn’t have to tell him. There was no way I could be given mercy at this juncture. I would merely fling myself against them again, seeking to bring down another or another.

Suddenly, as if quite angry and impatient, the Elderly figure rose with surprising agility and grabbed me by the collar as he swept past me in a great graceful rustle of red robes, and dragged me with him, as if I weighed nothing, out through the archway and to the edge of the stone railing.

“Look down on the Court,” he said.

The hall was immense. The overhang on which we stood ran all around, and below there was scarcely a foot of bare stone, so rich were the hangings of gold and burgundy. The long table below hosted a string of Lords and Ladies, all in the requisite burgundy-red cloth, the color of blood, not wine, as I had believed, and before them glared the bare wood, with not a plate of food nor a cup of wine, but all were content and watching with cheerful eyes, as they chattered, the dancers who covered the great floor, dancing deftly on thick carpets as though they liked this padding beneath their slippered feet.

There were so many interlocking circles of figures moving to the throb and beat of the music that they made a series of arabesques. The costumes embraced a great nationality of styles, from the very French to the modern Florentine, and everywhere there were gay circles of red-dyed silk or the red field covered with flowers or some other design which looked very like stars or crescent moons, I could not quite see it.

It was a somber yet tantalizing picture, all of them in this same rich color which held sway somewhere between the putrid ghastliness of blood and the stunning splendor of scarlet.

I noted the sconces, candlesticks, torches galore. How easy it would be to set their tapestries afire. I wondered if they could burn, they themselves, like other witches and heretics.

I heard Ursula let out a little gasp. “Vittorio, be wise,” she whispered.

At her whisper, the man at the center of the table below—he who held that very high-backed chair of honor, which my father would have held at home—looked up at me. He was blond-haired, blond as the shaggy one I’d slain, but his long locks were pampered and silky on his broad

shoulders. His face was youthful, far more so than my father's yet plenty older than my own, and as inhumanly pale as all the rest, his searing blue eyes fixing upon me. He returned at once to his study of the dance.

The whole spectacle seemed to shiver with the hot smoking quaver of the flames, and as my eyes watered, I realized with a start that the figures worked into the tapestry were not the quiet ladies and unicorns of the small studious chamber from which we'd come, but devils dancing in Hell. Indeed, there were quite hideous gargoyles in the most violent and cruel style, carved beneath the porch all around, on which we stood, and I could see at the capitals of the branching columns that held up the ceiling above us more of the demonic and winged creatures carved into the stone.

Grimaces of evil were emblazoned on the walls behind me, across from me. In one tapestry below, the circles of Dante's Hell climbed one upon another ever higher and higher.

I stared at the shining bare table. I was dizzy. I was going to be sick, lose consciousness.

"Make you a member of the Court, that is what she asks," said the Elder, pushing me hard against the rail, not letting me free, not letting me turn away. His voice was unhurried and low and without the slightest opinion on the matter. "She wants us to bring you into our Court as a reward for the fact that you slew one of us, that is her logic."

His glance to me was thoughtful, cool. His hand on my collar was neither cruel nor rough, merely simple.

I was a tempest of half-uttered words and curses, when suddenly I realized I was falling.

In the Elderly one's grasp, I had fallen over the rail, and in a second descended to the thick layers of carpet below, where I was yanked to my feet, as the dancers made way for us on either side.

We stood before the Lord in the high-backed chair, and I saw that the wood figures of his regal throne were, of course, animalian, feline and diabolical.

All was black wood, polished so that one could smell the oil, and it mingled sweetly with the perfume of all the lamps, and there came a soft crackling from the torches.

The musicians had stopped. I couldn't even see them. And then when I did, saw the little band quite high up in their own little balcony or loft, I

perceived that they too had the porcelain-white skin and the lethal cats' eyes, as they gazed down at me, all of them slender males, modestly clothed, and seemingly apprehensive.

I stared at the Lord. He had not moved or spoken. He was a fine, imperial figure of a man, his thick bulky blondish hair combed back from his face and falling, as I had seen before, in carefully combed locks on his shoulders.

His clothes too were of the old fashion, a great loose tunic of velvet, not a soldier's tunic, but almost a robe unto itself, trimmed in darkly dyed fur to match its lurid color, and beneath it he wore big beautiful full sleeves ballooning out loosely over his elbows and then tapering around his long narrow forearms and wrists. A huge chain of medallions hung about his neck, each heavily worked circle of gold set with a cabochon stone, a ruby, red as his clothing.

He held one slender naked hand curled on the table, simply. The other I could not see. He gazed at me with blue eyes. There was something puritanical and scholarly about his bare hand, and the refinement and cleanliness of it.

Across the thick overlapping carpets, Ursula came with a quick step, holding her skirts in two dainty hands. "Florian," she said, making a deep bow to the Lord behind the table. "Florian, I am begging you for this one, on account of character and strength, that you bring him into the Court for my sake, for my heart. It's as simple as that."

Her voice was tremulous but reasoning.

"Into the Court? Into this Court?" I demanded. I felt the heat rise in my face. I looked from right to left. I stared at their white cheeks, their dark mouths, which were all too often the color of fresh wounds. I stared at the blanched and colorless expressions with which they regarded me. Were their eyes full of demonic fire, or was it only that every other bit of humanity had been taken from their countenances?

I saw my own hands as I looked down, my own clenching fists, very ruddy and human, and quite suddenly, as if I were meant to smell it, I caught my own scent, the scent of my sweat and the dust from the road clinging to me and mingling with whatever in me was simply human.

"Yes, you are quite the morsel to us," said the Lord himself, speaking from the table. "You are indeed, and the hall is filled with your scent. And it is too early for us to feast. We feast when the bell rings twelve

times, that is our infallible custom."

It was a beautiful voice, a voice of ringing clarity and charm, tinged with the accent of the French, which can in itself be so beguiling. It was with a French restraint and regality that he expressed himself.

He smiled at me, and his smile was gentle, as was Ursula's smile, but not pitying, and not at all cruel or sarcastic.

I had no eyes now for the other faces to the left and the right of him. I knew only that there were many, and some were men and some women, and the women wore the stately French headdresses of olden times, and somewhere in the corner of my eye, I thought I saw a man got up like a jester.

"Ursula, such a thing as this," the Lord said, "requires long consideration."

"Does it!" I cried out. "You mean to make me one of your Court? That takes no consideration."

"Oh, come now, my boy," the Lord said in his soft, calming voice. "We are not subject to death or decay or disease here. You squirm on the end of a hook, you're a doomed catch from the sea, and you do not even know that you are no longer in the life-sustaining water."

"My Lord, I do not wish to be part of your Court," I said. "Spare yourself your kindnesses and your advice." I looked about. "Don't talk to me of your Feast."

These creatures had adopted an abominable stillness, a frozen regard which was in itself utterly unnatural and menacing. A wave of revulsion came over me. Or was it panic, panic which I would not allow to form inside of me, no matter how completely and hopelessly I was surrounded by them, and how alone I stood.

The figures at the table might have been made of china, so fixed they were. Indeed it seemed that the very act of posing to perfection was inherently part of their attentiveness.

"Oh, if I had but a crucifix," I said in a soft voice, not even thinking about what I was saying.

"That would mean nothing to us," said the Lord matter-of-factly.

"Oh, how well I know; your lady here came into my very chapel to take my brother and sister prisoner! No, crosses mean nothing to you. But it would mean something to me just now. Tell me, do I have angels about me that protect me? Are you always visible? Or do you, now and

then, melt with the night and vanish? And when that is so, can you see the angels that defend me?"

The Lord smiled.

The Elderly one, who had let go of my collar, for which I was very thankful, laughed softly under his breath. But there came no easy mirth from anyone else.

I glanced at Ursula. How loving and desperate she looked, how bold and steadfast as she glanced from me to this Lord, whom she had called Florian. But she was no more human than any of them; she was the deathly semblance of a young woman, past all description in gifts and graces but long out of life, as they were. Some grail was this Ruby Grail.

"Hear his words, Sir, in spite of what he actually says," she begged. "It's been so very long since there was a new voice within these walls, one that would remain with us, be one of us."

"Yes, and he almost believes in his angels, and you think him wondrously clever," said the Lord understandingly. "Young Vittorio, let me assure you, there are no guardian angels that I can see about you. And we are always visible, as you know, for you have seen us at our best and at our worst. No, not really truly at our best, not at our finest."

"Oh," I said, "and for that I can't wait, my Lord, for I am so in love with you all, and your style of slaughtering, and there is of course the matter of what your corruption has done to the town below and how you've stolen the souls of the very priests themselves."

"Hush, you work yourself into a mortal fever," he said. "Your scent fills my nostrils as if the pot is boiling over. I might devour you, child, cut you up and give your pulsing parts up and down the table to be suckled while the blood is still very hot, and your eyes blink—."

On those words I thought I would go mad. I thought of my dead sister and brother. I thought of the hideous and hopeless tender expressions of their severed heads. I couldn't bear this. I shut my eyes tight. I sought for any image to banish these horrors. I raised from memory the spectacle of Fra Filippo Lippi's Angel Gabriel on his knees before the Virgin, yes, angels, angels, fold your wings about me, now, oh, God, send me your angels!

"I curse your damned Court, you sweet-tongued devil!" I cried out. "How did you get your foot into this land! How did it happen?" I opened my eyes, but I saw only Fra Filippo's angels in a great tumbling, falling

spectacle of remembered works, radiant beings filled with the warm carnal breath of earth mingled with Heaven. “Did he go to Hell?” I cried out louder. “The one whose head I cut off? Is he burning?”

If silence can swell and fall back upon itself, then so did the silence of this great hall or solar, and I heard nothing but my own anxious breath.

But still the Lord remained unperturbed.

“Ursula,” he said. “This can be considered.”

“No!” I cried out. “Never! Join you? Become one of you?”

The Elder’s hand held me powerless with clamped fingers on my neck. I would only make myself foolish if I struggled. Were he to tighten his grip, I would be dead. And maybe that was best. Only I had more to say:

“I will never, I won’t. What? How dare you think my soul so cheap you can have it for the asking!”

“Your soul?” asked the Lord. “What is your soul that it does not want to travel centuries under the inscrutable stars, rather than a few short years? What is your soul that it will not seek for truth forever, rather than for one paltry common lifetime?”

Very slowly, with the muted rustle of garments, he rose to his feet, displaying for the first time a long full mantle of red which fell down, making a great patch of blood-colored shadow behind him. He bent his head ever so slightly, and lamps gave his hair a rich gilded look, and his blue eyes softened.

“We were here before you and your kindred,” he said. His voice never broke decorum. He remained civil, elegant. “We were here centuries before you came to your mountain. We were here when all these mountains round were ours. It is you who are the invader.” He paused and drew himself up. “It is your species that draws ever closer with farm and village and fortress and castle, and encroaches upon us, upon the forests which are ours, so that we must be cunning where we would be swift, and visible where we would be as the Gospel ‘thief in the night.’ ”

“Why did you kill my father and my family!” I demanded. I could keep silent no longer, I didn’t care how beguiling his eloquence, his soft purring words, his charmed face.

“Your father and his father,” he said, “and the Lord before him—they cut down the trees that crowded your castle. And so I must keep back the forest of humans from mine. And now and then I must range wide with my ax, and so I have, and so it was done. Your father could have

given tribute and remained as he was. Your father could have sworn a secret oath that required all but nothing of him."

"You can't believe he would have surrendered to you our babes, for what, do you drink their blood or sacrifice them to Satan on some altar?"

"You shall see by and by," he said, "for I think you must be sacrificed."

"No, Florian," Ursula gasped. "I beg you."

"Let me put a question to you, gracious Lord," I said, "since justice and history weigh so heavily with you. If this is a Court, a true Court, why have I no benefit of human defense? Or human peers? Or any humans to defend me?"

He seemed troubled by the question. Then he spoke.

"We are the Court, my son," he said. "You are nothing, and you know it. We would have let your father live, as we let the stag live in the forest so that it may breed with the doe. It's no more than that."

"Are there any humans here?"

"None that can help you," he said simply.

"No human guards by day?" I asked.

"No guards by day," he said, and for the first time he smiled a little proudly. "You think we require them? You think our small pigeon coop is not content by day? You think we need human guards here?"

"I certainly do. And you're a fool if you think I'd ever join your Court! No human guards, when right below is an entire village which knows what you are and who you are and that you come by night and cannot by day?"

He smiled patiently. "They are vermin," he said quietly. "You waste my time with those who are beneath contempt."

"Hmm, you do yourself wrong with such a harsh judgment. I think you have more love of them, in some way or another, my Lord, than that!"

The Elder laughed. "Of their blood perhaps," he said under his breath.

There was a bit of uneasy laughter from somewhere else in the hall, but it fell away, like a fragment of something broken.

The Lord spoke again:

"Ursula, I will consider but I do not—."

"No, for I will not!" I said. "Even if I were damned, I wouldn't join you."

"Hold your tongue," cautioned the Lord calmly.

"You are fools if you do not think the townspeople below will rise up

and take this citadel by the light of the day and open your hiding places!"

There was a rustling and noise throughout the great hall, but no words, none at least that I could hear, but it was as if these pale-faced monsters were communing with each other by thought or merely exchanging glances which made their ponderous and beautiful garments shift and move.

"You are numb with stupidity!" I declared. "You make yourselves known to the whole daylight world, and you think this Court of the Ruby Grail can endure forever?"

"You insult me," said the Lord. A bit of rosy color came divinely and beautifully into his cheeks. "I ask you with courtesy to be quiet."

"Do I insult you? My Lord, allow me to advise you. You are helpless by day; I know you are. You strike by night and only by night. All signs and words point to it. I remember your hordes fleeing my father's house. I remember the warning, 'Look at the sky.' My Lord, you have lived too long in your country forest. You should have followed my father's example and sent off a few pupils to the philosophers and priests of the city of Florence."

"Don't mock me anymore," he said imploringly with the same well-bred restraint. "You are causing anger in me, Vittorio, and I have no room for it."

"Your time is short, old Demon," I said. "So make merry in your antiquated castle while you can."

Ursula cried out under her breath, but I wouldn't be stopped.

"You may have bought off the old generation of idiots who run the town right now," I said, "but if you don't think the worlds of Florence and Venice and Milan are not moving in on you more fiercely than you can ever prevent, you are dreaming. It's not men such as my father who are a threat to you, my Lord. It's the scholar with his books; it's the university astrologers and alchemists who'll move in on you; it's the modern age of which you know nothing, and they will hunt you down, like some old beast of legend, and drag you out of this lair in the heat of the sun and cut off your heads, all of you—."

"Kill him!" There came a female voice from those who watched.

"Destroy him now," said a man.

"He isn't fit for the coop!" screamed another.

“He’s unworthy to be kept in the coop for a moment, or even to be sacrificed.”

Then a whole chorus let loose with demands for my death.

“No,” cried Ursula, throwing out her arms to the Lord. “Florian, I beg you!”

“Torture, torture, torture,” they began to chant, first two and three and then four.

“My Lord,” said the Elder, but I could scarce hear his voice, “he’s only a boy. Let us put him in the coop with the rest of the flock. In a night or two he won’t remember his name. He’ll be as tame and plump as the others.”

“Kill him now,” screamed one voice over all. And: “Be done with him,” cried others, their demands rising ever louder in volume.

There came a piercing shout seconded at once:

“Tear him limb from limb. Now. Do it.”

“Yes, yes, yes!” It was like the beat of battle drums.

7

THE COOP

Godric, the Elder, shouted loudly for silence, right at the moment that numerous rather glacial hands had tightened on my arms.

Now, once in Florence I had seen a man torn apart by a mob. I'd been far too close for my own desire to the spectacle, and had been nearly trampled in the efforts of those who, like me, wanted to get away.

So it was no fantasy to me that such could happen. I was as resigned to it as I was to any other form of death, believing, I think, as powerfully in my anger and my rectitude as I did in death.

But Godric ordered the blood drinkers back, and the entire pallid-faced company withdrew with a courtly grace that bordered upon the coy and the cloying, heads bowed or turned to one side, as if a moment before they had not been party to a rabble.

I kept my eyes fixed on the Lord, whose face now showed such a heat that it appeared near human, the blood pulsating in his thin cheeks, and his mouth as dark as a dried blood scar, for all its pleasing shape. His dark golden hair seemed almost brown, and his blue eyes were filled with pondering and concern.

"I say that he be put in with the others," said Godric, the bald Elder.

At once, Ursula's sobs broke forth, as though she could not restrain herself any longer. I looked over to see her, her head bowed, her hands struggling to completely shield her face, and, through the creases of her long fingers, droplets of blood falling as though her tears were made of it.

"Don't cry," I said, not even thinking about the wisdom of it. "Ursula, you have done all you can. I am impossible."

Godric turned and looked at me with one thickly creased raised eyebrow. This time I was close enough to see that his bald white head did have such hairs to it, scant eyebrows of gray as thick and ugly as old splinters.

Ursula brought up a rose-colored napkin from the fold of her long high-waisted French gown, a pale pink tissue of a thing stitched on the edges with green leaves and pink flowers, and on this she wiped her

lovely red tears and looked at me, as if she were crushed with longing.

"My predicament is impossible," I said to her. "You've done all you can to save me. If I could, I would put my arms around you to protect you from this pain. But this beast here is holding me hostage."

There were outraged gasps and murmurs from the still dark-garbed company, and in a blur I allowed myself to see the thin, gaunt, bone-white faces that lined the long board on either side of the Lord, to glance at some of the Ladies who were so Frenchified in their old headdresses and wimples of rose red that they had not a single hair visible. There seemed both a Frankish absurdity and delicacy to them, and of course they were all demons.

The bald Elder, Godric, only chuckled.

"Demons," I said, "such a collection."

"The coop, my Lord," said Godric, the bald one. "With the others, and then I may make my suggestions to you in private, and with Ursula we shall talk. She grieves unduly."

"I do!" she cried. "Please, Florian, if only because I have never asked anything of this sort, and you know it."

"Yes, Ursula," said the Lord, in the softest voice which had issued from his lips yet. "I know that, my loveliest flower. But this boy is recalcitrant, and his family, when from time to time they had the advantage over those of us who wandered from here to hunt, destroyed those unfortunate members of our tribe. It happened more than once."

"Marvelous!" I cried out. "How brave, how wondrous, what a gift you give me."

The Lord was astonished and annoyed.

But Ursula hurried forward, in a flurry of dark shadowy velvet skirts, and leaned over the polished table to be close to him. I could see only her hair in its long thick braids, twined exquisitely with red velvet ribbons, and the shape of her gorgeous arms, so perfectly narrow and plump at the same time, enchanted me against my own will.

"To the coop, please, my Lord," she begged, "and let me have him at least for so many nights as I need to reconcile my heart to this. Let him be admitted tonight for the Midnight Mass, and let him wonder."

I made no answer to this. I merely memorized it.

Two of the company, clean-shaven men in court dress, suddenly appeared at my side, to assist Godric, it seemed, in having me taken off.

Before I knew what was to befall me, a soft binding of cloth was put over my eyes. I was sightless.

"No, let me see!" I cried out.

"The coop then, it is, very well," came the Lord's voice, and I felt myself being taken away from the room, fast, as if the feet of those who escorted me scarcely needed to touch the floor.

The music rose again, in an eerie throb, but I was mercifully being escorted away from it. Only Ursula's voice accompanied me as I was carried up staircases, my feet now and then bruised coarsely on the steps, and the fingers that held me carelessly hurting me.

"Be quiet, please, Vittorio, don't struggle, be my brave one now in silence."

"And why, my love?" I asked. "Why set your heart on me? Can you kiss me without your stinging teeth?"

"Yes, and yes, and yes," she said in my ear.

I was being dragged along a passage. I could hear a loud mingled chorus of voices, common ordinary speech, and the wind of the outdoors and a wholly different kind of music.

"What is this? Where do we go?" I asked.

Behind me, I heard doors shut, and then the blindfold was ripped from my eyes.

"This is the coop, Vittorio," she said, pressing her arm against mine and trying to whisper in my ear. "This is where victims are kept until needed."

We stood on a high barren stone landing, the stairs leading down and at a curve into the huge courtyard, which contained so much activity and of such bizarre sorts that I could not possibly comprehend all of it immediately.

We were high within the walls of the castle, that I knew. And the courtyard itself was enclosed on all four sides, and I could see as I looked up that the walls were faced in white marble and there were everywhere the narrow pointed twin-arched windows of the French style. And above, the heavens had a bright pulsing glow, fed no doubt by countless fluttering torches on the roofs and abutments of the castle.

This was all nothing much to my eyes, except that it meant escape was impossible, for the nearest windows were far too high, and the marble too smooth to be scaled in any physical way.

There were many tiny balconies overhanging above, and they too were impossibly high. I saw the pale red-clothed demons on those balconies looking down at me, as though my introduction were a spectacle. There were some very large porches, and these too had their idle gloating and merciless occupants.

Damn them all, I thought.

What stunned me and fascinated me was the great jumble of human beings and dwellings which I saw crowding the courtyard before me.

First of all, it was far more fiercely illuminated than the ghastly Court, where I had just stood trial, if it could be called such, and it was an entire world unto itself—a rectangular court planted with dozens of olive trees and other flowering trees, orange trees, lemon trees, and all of these strung with lanterns.

It was an entire little world full of what seemed to be drunken and confused persons. Bodies, some half-naked, others fully and even richly clothed, shuffled, stumbled or lay about with no purpose. Everyone was filthy, disheveled, degraded.

There were hovels all over, like old-fashioned peasant huts of mere straw, and open wooden shacks, and little stone enclaves, and trellised gardens and countless circuitous pathways.

It was a drunken labyrinth of a garden gone wild under the naked night.

The fruit trees grew thick in clusters and then broke open to reveal grassy places where people merely lay staring at the stars, as if they were dozing, though their eyes were open.

Myriad flowering vines covered wire enclosures that seemed to have no purpose but to create some alcove of privacy, and there were giant cages full of fat birds, aye, birds, and cooking fires scattered about—and big kettles simmering on beds of coals, from which a deeply spiced fragrance arose.

Kettles! Yes, full of broth.

I saw that a foursome of demons roamed about—there may have been more—scrawny-limbed and bleached as their Lords, and forced to the same blood-red dress, only they were in shapeless garments no better than rags—peasant garb.

Two tended a pot of the simmering broth or soup or whatever it was, whilst another swept with a big old broom, and yet another carried on

his hip indifferently a small mewling human toddler, whose head rolled painfully on his weak neck.

It was more grotesque and disturbing than the hideous Court below, with its stately cadaverous mock aristocrats.

"It's stinging my eyes," I said. "I can feel the smoke rising from the kettles." It was a pungent delicious mingling of fragrances. I could identify many of the rich cooking spices, and the smell of mutton and beef, but there were other more exotic flavors intermingled with it.

Everywhere human beings were in this hopeless daze. Children, old women, the famed cripples who never appeared in the town below, hunchbacks, and little twisted bodies which had never grown to full size, and big hulking men as well, bearded and swart, and boys my age or older—all of them shuffling about or lying about, but dazed, and crazy, and looking up at us, and blinking and pausing as though our presence should mean something though they could not make out what.

I swayed on the landing, and Ursula held my arm. I felt ravenous as the heavy fumes filled my nostrils. Hunger, hunger such as I'd never known. No, it was a pure thirst for the soup, as though there were no food that was not liquid.

Suddenly the two gaunt and aloof men who had not left us—they who had blindfolded me and dragged me here—turned and went down the steps, letting their heels make a sharp marching sound on the stones.

A few eager cries came up from the great mottled and scattered assemblage. Heads turned. Sluggish bodies tried to rouse themselves from the vaporous torpor.

The two Lords, with their long trailing sleeves and stiff backs, marched together as if they were kinsmen as they approached the first of the visible cauldrons.

I watched as drunken mortals gathered themselves up and stumbled towards the red-clad Lords. As for the red-clad Lords, they seemed to glory in mystifying all.

"What are they doing? What will they do?" I was sick. I was going to fall. Yet how sweet this soup smelled, and how much I wanted it. "Ursula," I said. But I didn't know what words to make to follow this prayer of her name.

"I'm holding you, my love, this is the coop. Look, do you see?"

Through a haze, I saw the Lords pass beneath the jagged thorny

branches of the blooming orange trees, where fruit hung still, as though none of these swollen, lethargic souls needed such a fresh and bright thing as an orange.

The Lords took up a stance on either side of this first kettle, and each, extending a right hand, slashed his right wrist with a knife which he held in his left hand, and let the blood flow copiously into the brew.

A weak happy cry rose from those humans gathering meekly around them.

"Oh, damnable, it's the blood, of course," I whispered. I would have fallen if Ursula had not taken hold of me. "The brew is spiced with blood."

One of the Lords turned away, as though the smoke and the fumes disgusted him, yet he allowed himself to bleed into the mix. Then turning swiftly, almost crossly, he reached out to snatch by the arm one of the thin, weak-looking white demons in peasant garb.

He caught the poor fellow and dragged him to the kettle. The thin paltry demon begged and whined to be allowed to be free, but his wrists were both slashed, and now, though he turned his bony face away, he was bled furiously into the soup.

"Ah, you are better than Dante with your circles of Hell, aren't you?" I said. But it hurt me that I had taken such a tone with her.

She supported me utterly.

"They are peasants, yes, they dream of being Lords, and if they obey, they might."

I recalled now that the demon soldiers who had brought me back to the castle had been rude huntsmen. How well it was all thought out, but this, my narrow-shouldered love, with her soft yielding arms and her shining tear-stained face, was a pure Lady, was she not?

"Vittorio, I want so badly for you not to die."

"Do you, dearest?" I said. I had my arms around her. I could no longer stand without this support.

My vision was fading.

Yet with my head against her shoulder, my eyes directed to the crowd below, I could see the human beings surrounding the kettles and dipping their cups into the brew, dipping their cups right where the blood had fallen, and then blowing on the hot liquid to cool it before they drank.

A soft, horrid laughter echoed up the walls. I think it came from those

spectators above on the balconies.

There was a sudden swirl of red color, as if a giant unfurling flag had fallen.

But it was a Lady dropping down from the remote heights above, to land amid the worshipful hordes of the coop.

They bowed and saluted her, and backed away from her, and gave forth loud gasps of awe as she too approached the kettle and, with a loud rebellious laugh, cut her wrist and fed her blood into it.

“Yes, my darlings, my little chicks,” she declared. She looked up at us.

“Come down, Ursula, have pity on our hungry little world; be generous tonight. So it is not your night to give; give in honor of our new acquisition.”

Ursula seemed shamed by all of this, and held me gently with her long fingers. I looked into her eyes.

“I’m drunk, drunk merely from the fragrance.”

“My blood is only for you now,” she whispered.

“Give it to me then, I hunger for it, I’m weak to dying,” I said. “Oh, God, you’ve brought me to this. No, no, I did it myself.”

“Sshhh, my lover, my sweet,” she said.

Her arm coiled about my waist, and there came just under my ear her tender lips sucking on the flesh, as if she meant to make a pucker there on my neck, warm it with her tongue, and then the prick of her teeth.

I felt ravaged, and with both hands in a fantasy I reached out for her figure as we ran together through the meadow which belonged only to us and to which these others could never be admitted.

“Oh, innocent love,” she said even as she drank from me, “oh, innocent innocent love.”

Then a sudden icy hot fire entered the wound in my neck, and I felt it as if it were a delicate parasite of long tendrils that once inside my body could find the most remote reaches of me.

The meadow spread out around us, vast and cool, and utterly given over to the blowing lilies. Was she with me? Beside me? It seemed in one radiant instant I stood alone and heard her cry out as if she were behind me.

I meant, within this ecstatic dream, this fluttering cooling dream of blue skies and tender breaking stems, to turn and go to her. But out of the corner of my eyes, I beheld something of such splendor and

magnificence that my soul leapt.

"Look, yes, you see!"

My head fell back. The dream was gone. The high white marble walls of the prison castle rose above my hurting gaze. She held me and stared down at me, bewildered, her lips bloody.

She hoisted me in her arms. I was as helpless as a child. She carried me down the stairs, and there was nothing I could do to rouse my limbs.

It seemed all the world above was tiny figures ranging on balconies and battlements and laughing and pointing with their tiny outstretched hands, so dark against the torches all around them.

Blood red, smell it.

"But what was it; did you see it in the field?" I asked her.

"No!" she cried. She looked so frightened.

I lay on a heap of hay, a makeshift bed, and the poor underfed demon peasant boys stared stupidly down at me with bloodshot eyes, and she, she wept, her hands again to her face.

"I cannot leave him here," she said.

She was far, far away. I heard people crying. Was there a revolt among the drugged and the damned? I heard people weeping.

"But you will, and come to the kettle first and give your blood."

Who spoke those words?

I didn't know.

"… time for the Mass."

"You won't take him tonight."

"Why are they crying?" I asked. "Listen, Ursula, they've all started crying."

One of the scrawny boys stared right into my eyes. He had a hand on the back of my neck and a warm cup of brew to my mouth. I didn't want it to slop down my chin. I drank and drank. It filled my mouth.

"Not tonight," came Ursula's voice. Kisses on my forehead, on my neck. Someone snatched her away. I felt her hand hold tight to mine, then I felt her pulled away.

"Come now, Ursula, leave him."

"Sleep, my darling," she cried in my ear. I felt her skirts brushing me. "Vittorio, sleep."

The cup was thrown aside. Stupidly, in utter intoxication I watched the contents spill and sink darkly into the mounded hay. She knelt

before me, her mouth open and tender and luscious and red.

She took my face in her cool hands. The blood poured out of her mouth and into mine.

"Oh, love," I said. I wanted to see the field. It didn't come. "Let me see the field! Let me see it!"

But there was no meadow, only the shocking sight of her face again, and then a dimming light, a gathering embrace of darkness and sound. I could no longer fight. I could no longer speak. I could no longer remember … But someone had said that very thing.

And the crying. It was so sad. Such crying, such doleful, helpless weeping.

When next I opened my eyes, it was morning. The sun hurt me, and my head ached unbearably.

A man was on top of me, trying to get my clothes off me. Drunken fool. I turned over, dizzy and sick, sick to vomiting, and threw him off, and with a sound blow knocked him senseless.

I tried to get up but I couldn't. The nausea was intolerable. All around me others slept. The sun hurt my eyes. It scalded my skin. I snuggled into the hay. The heat beat down on my head, and when I ran my own fingers through my hair, my hair felt hot. The pain in my head throbbed in my ears.

"Come into the shelter," a voice said. It was an old crone, and she beckoned to me from beneath a thatched roof. "Come in, where it's cool."

"Curse you all," I said. I slept. I drifted.

Sometime during the late afternoon I came to my senses.

I found myself on my knees near one of the kettles. I was drinking in a slovenly wretched manner from a bowl of brew. The old woman had given it to me.

"The demons," I said. "They are asleep. We can … we can …" but then the futility of it overcame me. I wanted to throw away the cup, but I drank the hot brew.

"It's not just blood, it's wine, it's good wine," said the old woman. "Drink it, my boy, and feel no pain. They'll kill you soon enough. It's not so terrible."

When it was dark again, I knew it.

I rolled over.

I could fully open my eyes, and they did not hurt as they had in the

day.

I knew that I had lost the whole arc of the sun in this drugged and stupid and disastrous languor. I had fallen into their plans. I had been helpless when I should have been trying to rouse these useless ones around me to mutiny. Good God, how could I have let it happen! Oh, the sadness, the dim distant sadness … And the sweetness of slumber.

"Wake, boy."

A demon voice.

"They want you tonight."

"Oh, and who wants me for what?" I asked. I looked up. The torches were alight. All was twinkling and glowing, and there came the soft rustle of green leaves overhead—the sharp sweet smell of the orange trees. The world was woven of dancing flames above and the entrancing patterns of the black leaves. The world was hunger and thirst.

The brew simmered, and that scent blotted out all else. I opened my mouth for it, though there was none of it near me.

"I'll give it to you," said the demon voice. "But sit up. I must clean you up. You must look good for tonight."

"For what?" I said. "All of them are dead."

"Who?"

"My family."

"There is no family here. This is the Court of the Ruby Grail. You are the property of the Lord of the Court. Now, come, I have to prepare you."

"For what do you prepare me?"

"For the Mass, you're to go, get up," said the demon, who stood wearily over me, leaning on his broom, his shining hair an elfin mess around his face. "Get up, boy. They'll want you. It's almost midnight."

"No, no, not almost midnight, no!" I cried out. "No!"

"Don't be afraid," he said, coldly, wearily. "It's useless."

"But you don't understand, it's the loss of time, the loss of reason, the loss of hours during which my heart beat and my brain slept! I'm not afraid, you miserable demon!"

He held me flat to the hay. He washed my face.

"There, there, you are a handsome fine one. They always sacrifice those such as you right away. You're too strong, too fine of limb and face. Look at you, and the Lady Ursula dreaming of you and weeping for

you. They took her away."

"Ah, but I was dreaming too …" I said. Was I talking to this monstrous attendant as though he and I were friends? Where was the great magnificent web of my dreams, the immense and luminous majesty?

"You can talk to me, why not?" he said. "You will die in rapture, my pretty young Lord," he said. "And you'll see the church all alight, and the Mass; you'll be the sacrifice."

"No, I dreamed of the meadow," I said. "I saw something in the meadow. No, it wasn't Ursula." I was talking to myself, to my own sick bedeviled mind, talking to my wits to make them listen. "I saw someone in the meadow, someone so … I can't …"

"You make things so painful for yourself," said the demon soothingly. "Here, I have all your buttons and buckles right. What a fine Lord you must have been."

Must have been, must have been, must have been …

"You hear that?" he asked.

"I hear nothing."

"It's the clock, striking the third quarter of the hour. It's almost time for the Mass. Don't pay attention to the noise. It's the others who'll be sacrificed. Don't let it unnerve you. Just so much common weeping."

8

REQUIEM, OR THE HOLY SACRIFICE OF THE MASS AS I HAD NEVER SEEN IT

Had ever a chapel been more beautiful? Had ever white marble been used to such an advantage, and from which fount of eternal gold had come these glorious curlicues and serpentine adornments, these high-pointed windows, illuminated from without by fierce fires that brought into the perfection of jewels their tiny thick facets of tinted glass to form their solemn narrow and seemingly sacred pictures?

But they were not sacred pictures.

I stood in the choir loft, high above the vestibule, looking down over the great nave and at the altar at the far end. Once again I was flanked by ominous and regal Lords, who seemed now to be absolutely fervent in their duty as they held me firm and standing by the arms.

My mind had cleared, but only somewhat. The wet cloth was once again pressed to my eyes and forehead. The water was as if from a mountain stream of flowing melted snow.

In my sickness, in my fever, I saw everything.

I saw the demons fashioned in the glittering windows, as artfully put together of red and gold and blue glass as any angels or saints. I saw their leering faces as they peered down, these monsters with their webbed wings and clawlike hands, upon the congregation.

Below, allowing a broad central aisle, was gathered in its ruby dark finery the great Court on either side, standing to face the long heavily carved and broad Communion Rail and the high altar behind it.

Paintings covered the cove behind the altar. Demons dancing in Hell, graceful among the flames as though they bathed in a welcome radiance, and strung above them on loose and unfurling banners the golden letters from St. Augustine's words, so familiar to my study, that these flames were not the flames of real fire but only the absence from God, but the word "absence" had been replaced by the Latin word for "freedom."

"Freedom" was the word in Latin worked into the high white marble walls, in a frieze that ran beneath the balconies on either side of the church, on the same level as this, my place, in which more of the Court

beheld the spectacle.

Light rose to flood the high-groined arches of the roof.

And what was this spectacle?

The high altar was draped in crimson trimmed in gilt fringe, its abundant cloths short enough to reveal the tableau in white carving of figures prancing in Hell, though from this great distance my eyes might have deceived me as to their levity.

What I did see with perfection were the thick candlesticks before not a crucifix but a huge carved stone replica of Lucifer, the fallen angel, long locks aflame, and garments too a torrent of rising fire, frozen in marble, and in his upraised hands the symbols of death—in the right the scythe of the grim reaper—and in the other the sword of the executioner.

I gasped when I beheld the image! Monstrous, it was positioned precisely where I wanted so to see my Crucified Christ, and yet in a moment of delirium and agitation, I felt my lips curl in a smile, and I heard my own mind tell me cunningly that there was nothing less grotesque about the Crucified God if He Himself had been there.

My guards held me firm. Had I tottered?

From the assemblage around me and behind me, from those whom I had not even regarded, there came suddenly the muted roll of drums, ominous and slow, mournful and beautiful in their own muffled simplicity.

At once there followed a deep-throated chorus of horns, in lovely weaving song and effortless sweet intermingling, playing not the repetitious chord music of the night before, but a strong plaintive and imploring polyphony of melodies so sad that they flooded my heart with sadness, stroked my heart and made the tears nearly spring to my eyes.

Oh, what is this? What is this blended and rich music, surrounding me and pouring forth into the nave to echo off the satiny marble and rebound gently and with perfect modulation to the place where I stood, staring, rapt at the distant figure of Lucifer?

At his feet, all flowers laid out in vessels of silver and gold were red, the red of roses and carnations, the red of the iris, the red of wildflowers I could not name, an altar alive and decked and crawling with all those things which were high color, his glorious tint, the one color left to him that might rise from his inevitable and unredeemable darkness.

I heard the dusty, sonorous songs of the reed shawm, the small oboe

and the reed dulcian, and other small reed organs played by mouth, and then the more ringing tone of the brass sackbut horn, and perhaps even the light singing of the hammers striking the taut strings of the dulcimer.

This music alone might have engaged me, filled my soul, its threads of melody interweaving, overlapping, harmonizing and then drifting apart. It left me no breath to speak or eyes for other things. Yet I beheld the statues of the demons who ran from right to left—so like the Lords and Ladies of the Courtly table of last night—from the imposing figure of their Devil.

Were they blood drinkers all, these terrible gaunt saints of Hell, carved from hardwood with its own reddish mahogany glint, in their stark stylized garments, cleaving to thin bodies, their eyes half-lidded, their mouths open, and against each lower lip two white fangs, as if made from tiny bits of snow-white ivory to mark the purpose of each individual monster?

Oh, Cathedral of horrors. I tried to turn my head, to close my eyes, and yet the monstrosity of it enthralled me. Pathetic unformed thoughts never reached my lips.

The horns died around me, and the reedy woodland instruments died away. Oh, don't go, sweet music. Don't leave me here.

But what came was a chorus of the sweetest softest tenor voices; they called out the Latin words that I could not follow, an anthem for the dead, an anthem on the mutability of all things, and at once came a full lustrous harmonizing chorus of sopranos male and female, of basses and baritones, singing heartily in splendid polyphony in answer to these lone tenors:

"I go now to the Lord, for He has allowed these Creatures of Darkness to answer my supplications …"

What nightmarish words were these?

Once again there came the rich thick chorus of many voices to underscore the tenors:

"The instruments of death await me in their warm and devout kiss, and into their bodies, by the will of God, they shall take my life's blood, my rapture, my soul's ascent through their own, so as better to know both Heaven and Hell in their Dark Service."

The reed organ played its solemn song.

Into the Sanctuary of the church, there proceeded now, to the fullest

most lustrous strength of the polyphony yet, a stream of priestly figures.

I saw the Lord Florian in a rich red chasuble as if he were the bishop of Florence himself, only this garment bore the Cross of Christ impudently upside down in honor of the Damned One, and on his untonsured head of dark blond hair he wore a gilded jeweled crown as if he were both Frankish monarch and servant of the Dark Lord.

The strong piercing notes of the horns dominated the song. A march had begun. The drums rumbled beneath, hushed and steady.

Florian had taken his place before the altar with his face to the congregation, and on one side of him stood the fragile Ursula, her hair full and loose and down on her shoulders, though shrouded like a Mary Magdalene in a scarlet veil which hung to the very edge of the hem of her tapering gown.

Her upturned face was directed to me, and I could see even from this great airy span that her hands, shaped as a steeple, with fingers pressed together, trembled.

On the other side of this high priest Florian stood his bald Elder, in his own chasuble and thick embroidered lace sleeves, another priestly assistant.

Acolytes came from either side, tallish young demons with faces of the usual chiseled ivory, and the simple surplices of those who attend the Mass. They took their positions ranked down the long marble Communion Rail.

Once again, there rose the magnificent chorus of voices around me, falsettos mingling with true sopranos and the throbbing basses of the males, as redolent of the woodlands as the wooden horns, and beneath it all the heavy driving brass declaration.

What did they mean to do? What was this hymn which now the tenors sang, and what was the answer that came from all the voices so close to me, the words in Latin unstrung and only incoherently enveloping me:

“Lord, I am come into the Valley of Death; Lord, I am come to the end of my Sorrow; Lord, in thy deliverance I give life to those who would be idle in Hell were it not for thy divine plan.”

My soul rebelled. I loathed it, and yet I could not look away from the spectacle below. My eyes swept the church. I saw for the first time the gaunt, demonic fanged demons on their pedestals rising between the narrow windows, and everywhere the glint of racks upon racks of tiny

candles.

The music broke again for the solemn declaration of the tenors:

“Let the fount be brought forward, that those who are our sacrifices should be washed clean.”

And it was done.

Ranks of young demons in their guise as Altar Boys came forward, carrying with them in their preternaturally strong hands a magnificent baptismal fount of deep-pink Carrara marble. This they set some ten feet before the Communion Rail.

“Oh, abominations, to make it so beautiful,” I whispered.

“Quiet now, my young one,” said the regal guard beside me. “Watch, for what you see here you will never see between Heaven and Earth again, and as you will go unconfessed to God, you will burn in darkness forever.”

He sounded as if he believed it.

“You have no power to damn my soul,” I whispered, trying in vain to clear my eyes, not to so love the weakness that still caused me to depend upon their clamping hands.

“Ursula, farewell,” I whispered, making of my lips a kiss.

But in this miraculous and private little moment, seemingly unnoticed by the whole congregation, I saw her head shake in a small secretive negation.

No one saw because all eyes were now on another spectacle, far more tragic than any of the controlled and modulated ritual we had beheld.

Up the aisle, driven by acolyte demons in tunics of red and lace sleeves trimmed in red and gold, there came a poor wretched sampling of the lost ones of the coop, shuffling old women, drunken men and little boys, mere children, clinging to the very demons who escorted them to their deaths, like piteous victims of some horrid old trial where the offspring of the condemned are led to execution with their parents. Horror.

“I curse you all. I damn you. God, bring down your justice on this,” I whispered. “God, bring down your tears. Weep for us, Christ, that this is happening.”

My eyes turned up in my head. It seemed I dreamed, and once again came the bright green limitless meadow to my eyes, and once again, as Ursula ran from me, as her spirited young form rushed across the high

breaking field of grass and lilies, there rose another figure, another familiar figure—.

"Yes, I see you!" I cried out to this vision in my half-rescued dream.

But no sooner had I recognized it, locked to it, than it vanished; it was gone, and with it was gone all comprehension of it, all memory of its exquisite face and form and its meaning, its pure and powerful meaning. Words fled from me.

From below I saw the Lord Florian look up, angered, silent. The hands beside me dug into my flesh.

"Silence," said the guards next to me, their commands overlapping one another.

The lovely music rose higher and higher, as though the climbing soprano voices and the throbbing, winding horns would hush me now and pay tribute only to the unholy baptism.

The baptism had begun. The first victim, an ancient woman of bent and bony back, had been stripped of her poor garments and washed with handfuls of water in the fount, and now was led to the Communion Rail, oh, so frail, so unprotected by her kith and kin and her guardian angels!

Oh, and now to see the children stripped, to see their tiny little legs and buttocks bare, to see their bony shoulders, those tiny parts where it seemed the winglets of baby angels once sprouted from their backs, to see them washed and then delivered to stand trembling along the stretch of marble balustrade.

It happened very fast.

"Cursed animals, for that is what you are, not airy demons, no!" I muttered, struggling in the grasp of the two loathsome minions. "Yes, cowardly minions, both of you, to be a party to this evil."

The music drowned out my prayers. "Dear God, send my angels to me," I said to my heart, my secret heart, "send my wrathful angels, send them with your fiery sword. God, this cannot be borne."

The Communion Rail now had its full complement of victims, naked and trembling all, and blazing with carnal human color against the luminous marble and the colorless priests.

The candles flickered on the giant Lucifer, with its great webbed wings, who presided over all.

The Lord Florian now stepped down to take the first Communicant in his hands, and lowered his lips to drink.

The drums beat fierce and sweet, and the voices twined and reached to Heaven. But there was no Heaven here beneath these branching white columns, these groined arches. There was nothing but death.

All the Court had begun to make two streams along the sides of the chapel marching silently up to come behind the Communion Rail, where each might take a victim from those who stood helpless and ready, and now Lord and Lady chose which they wanted, and some shared, and one victim was passed from one to another, and so on it went, this mockery, this lurid, predatory Communion.

Only Ursula did not move.

The Communicants were dying. Some were already dead. None struck the floor. Their pliant dried-up limbs were captured silently and deftly by the attendant demons, and bodies were whisked away.

More victims were still being bathed. Others were taken to the Rail. On it went.

The Lord Florian drank again and again, one child after another put before him, his slender fingers capturing the small neck and holding it as he bent his lips.

I wonder what Latin words he dared to speak.

Slowly the members of the Court slipped out of the Sanctuary, moving down the side aisles again to pivot and take their old stance. They had had their fill.

All through the room the color of blood infused once pallid faces, and it seemed to my misted vision, to my head so full of the loveliness of song, that they all were human now, human for this little while.

“Yes,” said Florian, his voice arching out soft and sure to my ears over the length of the nave. “Human now for this one instant, with the blood of the living, incarnated again, we are, young prince. You have understood it.”

“Ah, but Lord,” I said, in my exhausted whisper, “I do not forgive it.”

An interval of silence fell. Then the tenors declared:

“It is time, and the midnight hour is not finished.”

The sure and tight hands in which I was held focused me now to the side. I was spirited out of the choir loft and down the winding screw stairs of white marble.

As I came to myself, still supported, staring up the center aisle, I saw that only the baptistry fount remained. All victims were gone.

But a great cross had been brought into the hall. It had been positioned *upside down*, to one side of the altar, and forward, at the Communion Rail.

The Lord Florian held up for me to see five huge iron nails in his hand, and beckoned for me to come.

The cross was anchored into place, as though it had often been brought to this spot. It was made of rich hardwood, thick, heavy and polished smooth, though it bore the marks of other nails, and no doubt the stains of other blood.

The very bottom of it fitted right at the Railing itself against the marble banister, so that he who was to be crucified would be three feet above the floor and visible to all the worshippers.

"The worshippers, you filthy lot!" I laughed. Thank God and all his angels that the eyes of my father and mother were filled with celestial light and could see nothing of this crude degradation.

The Elder revealed to me in his outstretched hands two golden goblets.

I knew the meaning. With these, to catch my blood as it gushed from the wounds made by the nails.

He bowed his head.

I was forced up the aisle. The statue of Lucifer grew immense behind the glittering pontifical figure of Florian. My feet did not touch the marble. All around me the members of the Court turned to attend my progress, but never so much that their eyes were not upon their Lord.

Before the baptismal fount my face was washed.

I tossed my head, twisting my neck, throwing the water impudently on those who tried to bathe me. The acolytes were in fear of me. They approached and reached hesitantly for my buckles.

"Strip him," said the Lord, and once again he held up the nails for me to see.

"I see well enough, my cowardly Lord," I said. "It is nothing to crucify a boy such as me. Save your soul, Lord, do that! And all your Court will wonder."

The music swelled from the loft above. The chorus came again, answering and underscoring the anthem of the tenors.

There were no words for me now; there was only candlelight and the knowledge that my clothes were about to be taken from me, and that

this horror would take place, this evil inverted crucifixion, never sanctified by St. Peter himself, for the inverted cross not now to be a symbol of the Evil One.

Suddenly the trembling hands of the acolytes withdrew.

Above, the horns played their most beautiful poignant melody.

The tenors hurled out their question, in flawless voices, from the loft above:

“Can this one not be saved? Can this one not be delivered?”

The chorus rose, in unison:

“Can this one not be released from the power of Satan?”

Ursula stepped forward and drew from her head the immense long red veil that hung to her feet, and threw it out so that it descended like a cloud of red around her. Beside her, an acolyte appeared with my very sword in his hand, and my daggers.

Once again the tenor voices implored:

“One soul released to go forth into the world, mad, and bearing witness only to the most patient ears to the power of Satan."

The chorus sang, a riot of melody erupting from them, and it seemed a swift affirmation had overtaken their song.

“What, not to die!” I said. I strained to see the face of the Lord in whose hands all of this rested. But he was blocked from my view.

Godric the Elder had come between. Opening the gate of the marble Communion Rail with his knee, he moved down the aisle towards me. He thrust one of his golden cups to my lips.

“Drink and forget, Vittorio, else we lose her heart and her soul.”

“Oh, but then you must lose it!”

“No!” she screamed. “No.” Over his shoulder, I could see her snatch three of the nails from Florian’s left hand and fling them out on the marble. The singing rose high and rich under the arches. I couldn’t hear the nails strike the stone.

The sound of the choir was jubilant, celebratory. The mournful tones of requiem were gone.

“No, God, if you would save her soul, then take me to the cross, take me!”

But the golden cup was forced to my lips. My jaws were opened by Ursula’s hand, and the liquid poured down my throat. I saw my sword lifted before my closing eyes as if it were a cross, the long hilt, the

handles.

Soft mocking laughter rose and blended with the magical and indescribable beauty of the choir.

Her red veil swirled about me. I saw the red fabric rise up in front of me. I felt it come down around me like a spellbinding shower, full of her perfume, soft with her tenderness.

“Ursula, come with me …” I whispered.

Those were my last words.

“Cast out,” cried the swelling voices above. “Cast out …” cried the huge choir, and it seemed the Court sang with the chorus, “Cast out,” and my eyes closed as the red fabric covered my face, as it came down like a witch's web over my struggling fingers and sealed itself over my open mouth.

The horns blared forth the truth. “Forgiven! Cast out!” sang the voices.

“Cast out to madness,” whispered Godric in my ear. “To madness all of your days, and you, you might have been one of us.”

“Yes, one of us,” came Florian's smooth unperturbed whisper.

“Fool that you were,” said Godric. “You might have been immortal.”

“One of us forever, immortal, imperishable, to reign here in glory,” said Florian.

“Immortality or death,” said Godric, “and these were choices royal, but you shall wander witless and scorned through the world.”

“Yes, witless and scorned,” came a childish voice at my ear. And then another, “Witless and scorned.”

“Witless and scorned,” said Florian.

But the choir sang on, obliterating all sting from their words, its delirious hymn growing ever more tremendous in my half-slumber.

“A fool to wander the world in contempt,” said Godric.

Blinded, sealed in the softness of the veil, intoxicated by the drink, I could not answer them. I think I smiled. Their words were too senselessly mingled with the sumptuous soothing voices of the choir. And fools that they were, they had never known that what they said simply had not mattered.

“And you could have been our young prince.” Was it Florian at my side? Cool, dauntless Florian. “We could have loved you as she loves you.”

“A young prince,” said Godric, “to rule here with us forever.”

“Become the jester of alchemists and old wives,” said Florian sadly, solemnly.

“Yes,” said a childish voice, “fool to leave us.”

How wondrous were the anthems that made their words mere sweet and contrapuntal syllables.

I think I felt her kiss through the silk. I think I felt it. I think. It seemed in the tiniest of feminine whispers, she said simply, without ceremony:

“My love.” It had her triumph and her farewell within it.

Down, down, down into the richest, kindest sleep that God can give, I sank. The music gave a shape to my limbs, gave air to my lungs, when all other senses had been abandoned.

9

ANGELS WE HAVE HEARD ON HIGH

It was pouring down rain. No, the rain had stopped. They still couldn't understand me.

I was surrounded by these men. We were right near Fra Filippo's workshop. I knew this street. I'd just been here with my father a year ago.

"Speak more slowly. Corrr … blub, it doesn't make sense!"

"Look," said the other one. "We want to help you. Tell me your father's name. Speak it slowly."

They shook their heads. I thought I was making perfect sense, I could hear it, Lorenzo di Raniari, why couldn't they hear it, and I was his son, Vittorio di Raniari. But I could feel my lips, how swollen they were. I knew I was filthy from the rain.

"Look, take me to Fra Filippo's shop. I know them there," I said. My great painter, my passionate and tormented painter, his apprentices would know me. He would not, but the helpers who had seen me weep that day at his work. And then, then, these men would take me to the house of Cosimo in the Via del Largo.

"Fee, fee?" they said. They repeated my clumsy attempts at speech. I had failed again.

I started towards the workshop. I staggered and almost fell. These were honest men. I had the heavy bags over my right shoulder, and my sword was clanking against me, practically throwing me off balance. The high walls of Florence were closing in on me. I almost hit the stones.

"Cosimo!" I shouted at the top of my voice.

"We can't take you to Cosimo like this! Cosimo won't see you."

"Ah, you understand; you heard me."

But the man now cocked his ear. An honest merchant, drenched to the skin in his somber green robes, and all because of me no doubt. I wouldn't come in out of the rain. No sense. They'd found me lying in the rain right in the middle of the Piazza della Signoria.

"It's coming back, it's coming clear."

I saw the entrance to Fra Filippo's workshop up ahead. The shutters

were being taken down. They were opening it up now that the thunderous storm had ceased, and the water was drying up on the stone streets. People were coming out.

"Those men in there," I shouted.

"What, what are you saying?"

Shrugs all around, but they aided me. An old man held my elbow.

"We should take him to San Marco, let the monks care for him."

"No, no, no, I need to talk to Cosimo!" I shouted.

Again, they shrugged and shook their heads.

Suddenly I stopped. I rocked and steadied myself by rudely grabbing hold of the younger man's shoulder.

I stared at the distant workshop.

The street was no more than an alleyway here, barely sufficient for horses to pass and for the pedestrians not to be injured, and the stone facades all but closed out the slate-gray sky above. Windows were opened, and it seemed that a woman could reach across upstairs and touch the house opposite her.

But look what was there, right before the shop.

I saw them. I saw the two of them! "Look," I said again. "Do you see them?"

The men couldn't see. Lord, the two figures before the shop were bright as if illuminated from within their flushed skin and loosely girdled robes.

I held the shoulder bags over my left shoulder and put my hand on my sword. I could stand, but my eyes must have been wide as plates staring blindly at what I beheld.

The two angels were arguing. The two angels, with their wings moving ever so slightly in time with their words and their gestures, were arguing with each other where they stood, right before the shop.

They stood oblivious to all humans who passed them and couldn't see them, and they argued one with another, both angels blond, both angels I knew, I knew these angels, I knew them from the paintings of Fra Filippo, and I could hear their voices.

I knew the rolled curls of the one, whose head was crowned with a wreath of small perfectly matched flowerlets, his loose mantle crimson, his undergarment a bright clear sky blue trimmed in gold.

And the other, I knew him as well, knew his bare head and soft

shorter hair, and his golden collar, and the insignia on his mantle, and the thick bands of ornament on his wrists.

But above all I knew their faces, their innocent pink-tinged faces, their serene full yet narrow eyes.

The light melted down, somber and stormy still, though the sun was burning up there behind the gray sky. My eyes began to water.

"Look at their wings," I whispered.

The men couldn't see.

"I know the wings. I know them both, look, the angel with the blond hair, the ringlets in rows coming down his head, it's from the *Annunciation,* and the wings, his wings are made like the peacock, brilliantly blue, and the other, his feathers are tipped in the purest dust of gold."

The angel with the crown of flowers gestured excitedly to the other; from a mortal man, the gestures, the posture, would have evinced anger, but it was nothing so heated as that. The angel was only seeking to be understood.

I moved slowly, pulling loose of my helpful companions, who couldn't see what I saw!

What did they think I stared at? The gaping shop, the apprentices in the deep shadows within, the meager half-tinted flashes of canvases and panels, the yawning mouth beyond which the work was carried out.

The other angel shook his head somberly. "I don't go along with it," he said in the most serene and lilting voice. "We can't go that far. Do you think this doesn't make me weep?"

"What?" I cried out. "What makes you weep?"

Both angels turned. They stared at me. In unison, they collected their dark, multicolored and spectacled wings close to themselves, as though they meant to shrink thereby into invisibility, but they were no less visible to me, shining, both so fair, so recognizable. Their eyes were full of wonder as they gazed at me. Wonder at the sight of me?

"Gabriel!" I cried out. I pointed, "I know you, I know you from the *Annunciation*. You are both Gabriel, I know the paintings, I have seen you, Gabriel and Gabriel, how can it be?"

"He can see us," said the angel who had been gesturing so pointedly. His voice was subdued but seemed to reach my ears effortlessly and gently. "He can hear us," he said, and the wonder in his face increased,

and he looked above all innocent and patient, and ever so gently concerned.

"What in the name of God are you saying, boy?" asked the old man beside me. "Now, collect your wits. You're carrying a fortune in your bags. Your hands are covered in rings. Now speak sensibly. I'll take you to your family, if you'll only tell me who they are."

I smiled. I nodded, but I kept my eyes fixed on the two startled and amazed angels. Their clothes appeared light, near translucent, as though the fabric were not of a natural weave any more than their incandescent skin was natural. All of their makeup was more rarefied, and fine-woven with light.

Beings of air, of purpose, made up of presence and of what they do—were these the words of Aquinas coming back to me, the *Summa Theologica* on which I had learnt my Latin?

Oh, how miraculously beautiful they were, and so safely apart from all around them, standing transfixed in the street in their quiet wide-eyed simplicity, pondering as they gazed with compassion and interest at me.

One of them, the one crowned with flowers, the one who wore the sky-blue sleeves, the one who had so caught my heart when I had seen him in the *Annunciation* with my father, the one with whom I had fallen in love, moved towards me.

He became larger as he drew closer, taller, slightly larger all over than an ordinary being, and so full of love in the soundless shuffle of his loose and gracefully spilling clothes that he seemed more immaterial and monumentally solid, more perhaps the very expression of God's creation, than anything of flesh and blood might be.

He shook his head and smiled. "No, for you are yourself the very finest of God's creation," he said in a low voice that stole its way through the chatter that surrounded me.

He walked as if he were a mortal being, with clean naked feet over the wet dirty stones of the Florentine street, oblivious to the men who could not see him as he stood now so close to me, letting his wings spread out and then folding them again tight, so that I only saw the high feathered bones of them above his shoulders, which were sloped like those of a young boy.

His face was brilliantly clean and flushed with all the radiant color Fra Filippo had painted. When he smiled, I felt my entire body tremble

violently with unadulterated joy.

"Is this my madness, Archangel?" I asked. "Is this their curse come true, that I shall see this as I gibber and incur the scorn of learned men?" I laughed out loud.

I startled the gentlemen who had been trying so much to help me. They were thoroughly flustered. "What? Speak again?"

But in a shimmering instant, a memory descended upon me, illuminating my heart and soul and mind all in one stroke, as though the sun itself had flooded a dark and hopeless cell.

"It was you I saw in the meadow, you I saw when she drank my blood."

Into my eyes he looked, this cool collected angel, with the rows and rows of immaculate blond curls and the smooth placid cheeks.

"Gabriel, the Archangel," I said in reverence. The tears flooded to my eyes, and it felt like singing to cry.

"My boy, my poor wretched boy," said the old merchant. "There is no angel standing in front of you. Pay attention, now, please."

"They can't see us," said the angel to me simply. Again came his smooth easy smile. His eyes caught the light falling from the brightening sky as he peered into me, as if he would see deeper with every moment of his study.

"I know," I answered. "They don't know!"

"But I am not Gabriel, you must not call me that," he said very courteously and soothingly. "My young one, I am very far from being the Archangel Gabriel. I am Setheus, and I'm a guardian angel only." He was so patient with me, so patient with my crying and with the collection of blind and concerned mortals around us.

He stood close enough for me to touch, but I didn't dare.

"My guardian angel?" I asked. "Is it true?"

"No," said the angel. "I am not your guardian angel. Those you must somehow find for yourself. You've seen the guardian angels of another, though why and how I don't know."

"Don't pray now," said the old man crankily. "Tell us who you are, boy. You said a name before, your father, tell us."

The other angel, who stood as if too shocked to move, suddenly broke his reserve and he too came forward in the same silent barefooted style, as though the roughened stones and the wet and dirt could not mar him

or harm him.

"Can this be good, Setheus?" he asked. But his pale iridescent eyes were focused on me with the same loving attention, the same rapt and forgiving interest.

"And you, you are in the other painting, I know you too, I love you with my whole heart," I said.

"Son, to whom are you speaking?" demanded the younger man. "Whom do you love with your whole heart?"

"Ah, you can hear me?" I turned to the man. "You can understand me."

"Yes, now tell me your name."

"Vittorio di Raniari," I said, "friend and ally of the Medici, son of Lorenzo di Raniari, Castello Raniari in the north of Tuscany, and my father is dead, and all my kinsmen. But—."

The two angels stood right before me, together, one head inclined towards the other as they regarded me, and it seemed that the mortals, for all their blindness, could not block the path of the angels' vision or come between me and them. If only I had the courage. I so wanted to touch them.

The wings of the one who'd spoken first were rising, and it seemed a soft shimmer of gold dust fell from the awakening feathers, the quivering, sparkling feathers, but nothing rivaled the angel's meditative and wondering face.

"Let them take you to San Marco," said this angel, the one named Setheus, "let them take you. These men mean well, and you will be put in a cell and cared for by the monks. You cannot be in a finer place, for this is a house under Cosimo's patronage, and you know that Fra Giovanni has decorated the very cell in which you'll stay."

"Setheus, he knows these things," said the other angel.

"Yes, but I am reassuring him," said the first angel with the simplest shrug, looking wonderingly at his companion. Nothing characterized their faces so much as subdued wonder.

"But you," I said, "Setheus, may I call you by name, you'll let them take me away from you? You can't. Please don't leave me. I beg you. Don't leave me."

"We have to leave you," said the other angel. "We are not your guardians. Why can't you see your own angels?"

"Wait, I know your name. I can hear it."

“No,” said this more disapproving angel, waving his finger at me as if correcting a child.

But I would not be stopped. “I know your name. I heard it when you were arguing, and I hear it now when I look at your face. Ramiel, that’s your name. And both of you are Fra Filippo’s guardians.”

“This is a disaster,” whispered Ramiel, with the most touching look of distress. “How did this occur?”

Setheus merely shook his head, and smiled again generously. “It has to be for the good, it must be. We have to go with him. Of course we do.”

“Now? Leave now?” demanded Ramiel, and again, for all the urgency, there was no anger. It was as though the thoughts were purified of all lower emotions, and of course it was so, it was perfectly so.

Setheus leaned close to the old man, who couldn’t of course either see him or hear him, and he said in the old man’s ear:

“Take the boy to San Marco; have him put in a goodly cell, for which he has plenty of money, and have him nursed to health.”

Then he looked at me. “We’ll go with you.”

“We can’t do that,” said Ramiel. “We can’t leave our charge; how can we do such a thing without permission?”

“It’s meant to be. This is permission. I know that it is,” said Setheus. “Don’t you see what’s happened? He’s seen us and he’s heard us and he’s caught your name, and he would have caught mine if I hadn’t revealed it. Poor Vittorio, we are with you.”

I nodded, almost ready to weep at the sound of myself addressed. The whole street had gone drab and hushed and indistinct around their large, quiet and flushed figures, the finespun light of their garments stirring about them as if the celestial fabric were subject to the invisible currents of the air which men cannot feel.

“Those are not our real names!” said Ramiel scoldingly to me, but gently, as one would scold an infant.

Setheus smiled. “They are good enough names by which to call us, Vittorio,” he said.

“Yes, take him to San Marco,” said the man beside me. “Let’s go. Let the monks handle all this.”

The men rushed me towards the mouth of the street.

“You’ll be very well cared for at San Marco,” said Ramiel, as though he were bidding me farewell, but the two angels were moving beside us,

and only falling a little behind.

"Don't you leave me, either of you, you can't!" I said to the angels.

They seemed perplexed, their lovely folded gossamer robes unstained by rain, the hems clean and shining as if they had not touched the street, and their bare feet looking so exquisitely tender as they followed at our pace.

"All right," said Setheus. "Don't worry so, Vittorio. We're coming."

"We can't simply leave our charge like this for another man, we can't do it," Ramiel continued to protest.

"It's God's will; how can it be otherwise?"

"And Mastema? We don't have to ask Mastema?" asked Ramiel.

"Why should we ask Mastema? Why bring care to Mastema? Mastema must know."

And there they were, arguing again, behind us, as I was hurried through the street.

The steel sky gleamed, then grew pale and gave way above to blue as we came to an open piazza. The sun shocked me, and made me sicken, yet how I wanted it, how I longed for it, and yet it rebuked me and seemed to scourge me as if it were a whip.

We were only a little ways from San Marco. My legs would soon give out. I kept looking over my shoulder.

The two lustrous, gilded figures came on, silently, with Setheus gesturing for me to go along.

"We're here, we're with you," said Setheus.

"I don't know about this, I don't know!" said Ramiel. "Filippo has never been in such trouble, he has never been subjected to such temptation, such indignity—."

"Which is why we have been drawn off now, so that we do not interfere with what must take place with Filippo. We know we were on the very verge of getting into trouble on account of Filippo and what Filippo has done now. Oh, Filippo, I see this, I see the grand design."

"What are they talking about?" I demanded of the men. "They're saying something about Fra Filippo."

"And who would that be, who is talking, may I ask?" said the old man, shaking his head as he escorted me along, the young madman in his charge with the clanking sword.

"My boy, be quiet now," said the other man, who took the larger

burden of supporting me. “We can understand you only too well now, and you are making less sense than ever, talking to people that no one can see and hear.”

“Fra Filippo, the painter, what’s happening with him?” I demanded. “There’s some trouble.”

“Oh, it is unbearable,” said the angel Ramiel behind me. “It is unthinkable that this should happen. And if you ask me, which no one has and no one will, I believe that if Florence were not at war with Venice, Cosimo de’ Medici would protect his painter from this.”

“But protect him from what?” I demanded. I looked into the eyes of the old man.

“Son, obey me,” said the old man. “Walk straight, and stop banging me with that sword. You are a great Signore, I can see this, and the name of the Raniari rings loud in my ears from the distant mountains of Tuscany, and the gold on your right hand alone weighs more than the dowry of both of my daughters put together, not to mention the gems, but don’t shout in my face.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to. It’s only, the angels won’t say precisely.”

The other man who led me so kindly, who helped me honestly with the saddlebags in which was my fortune, and did not even seek to steal anything from me, began to speak:

“If you’re asking about Fra Filippo, he’s deep into trouble again. He’s being put to the torture. He’s on the rack.”

“No, that can’t happen, not to Filippo Lippi!” I stopped dead and shouted. “Who would do such a thing to the great painter?”

I turned, and the two angels suddenly covered their faces, as tenderly as ever Ursula had covered hers, and they started weeping. Only their tears were marvelously crystalline and clear. They merely looked at me. Oh, Ursula, I thought with excruciating pain suddenly, how beautiful are these creatures, and in what grave do you sleep beneath the Court of the Ruby Grail that you cannot see them, cannot see their silent secret progress through the city streets?

“It’s true,” said Ramiel. “It’s all too terribly true. What have we been, what sort of guardians, that Filippo has gotten himself into this trouble, that he is so contentious and deceiving, and why have we been so helpless?”

“We are only angels,” said Setheus. “Ramiel, we do not have to accuse

Filippo. We are not accusers, we are guardians, and for the sake of the boy who loves him, don't say such things."

"They can't torture Fra Filippo Lippi," I cried out. "Who did he deceive?"

"He did it to himself," said the old man. "He's into fraud this time. He sold off a commission, and everybody knows that one of his apprentices painted too much of the work. He's been put on the rack, but he didn't really get hurt."

"Didn't really hurt him! He's only magnificent!" I said. "You tell me they tortured him. Why was he tortured, how can anyone justify such a stupidity, such an insult, it's an insult to the Medici."

"Silence, child; he confessed," said the younger of the two mortal men. "It's almost over. Some monk if you ask me, Fra Filippo Lippi; if he isn't chasing women, he's in a brawl."

We had come to San Marco. We stood in the Piazza San Marco right before the doors of the monastery, which were flush with the street, as was the case with all such buildings in Florence, as if the Arno never overflowed its banks, which it did. And I was glad, oh, so glad to see this haven.

But my mind was rampant. All memories of demons and horrid murder had been swept clean from me in an instant by the horror that the artist whom I cherished most in all the world had been put on the rack like a common criminal.

"He sometimes … well," said Ramiel, "behaves like a common … criminal."

"He'll get out of it, he'll pay a fine," said the old man. He rang the bell for the monks. He patted me with a long, tired, dry hand. "Now stop crying, child, stop. Filippo is a nuisance, everybody knows it. If only there were a little of the saintliness of Fra Giovanni in him, only a little!"

Fra Giovanni. Of course, by this man, Fra Giovanni, they meant the great Fra Angelico, the painter who in centuries to come would bring the awestruck to all but kneel before his paintings, and it was in this monastery that Fra Giovanni worked and lived, it was here that, for Cosimo, he painted the very cells of the monks.

What could I say? "Yes, yes, Fra Giovanni, but I don't … I don't … love him." Of course I loved him; I honored him and his wondrous work, but it was not like my love for Filippo, the painter I had glimpsed only once

—. How to explain these strange things?

A surge of nausea caused me to bend double. I backed away from my kindly helpers. I heaved up the contents of my stomach into the street, a bloody stream of filth from the demons who had fed me. I saw it drip and flow into the street. I smelled the putrid stench of it, and I saw it spill from me into the cracks between the cobblestones, this mess of half-digested wine and blood.

The whole horror of the Court of the Ruby Grail seemed manifest in this moment. Hopelessness seized me, and I heard the whisper of demons in my ear, *witless and scorned,* and I doubted all that I'd seen, all that I was, all that had transpired only moments before. In a dreamy woodland, my father and I rode together and we talked of Filippo's paintings, and I was a student and a young lord and had all the world before me, and the strong good smell of the horses filled my nostrils with the smell of the woods.

Witless and scorned. Mad when you might have been immortal.

As I rose up again, I leant back against the wall of the monastery. The light of the blue sky was bright enough to shut my eyes, but I bathed in its warmth. Slowly, as my stomach settled, I tried to gaze steadily before me, to fight the pain of the light and love it and trust in it.

My vision was filled with the face of the angel Setheus right in front of me, only a foot from me, peering at me with the deepest concern.

"Dear God, you *are* here," I whispered.

"Yes," he said. "I promised you."

"You aren't leaving me, are you?" I asked.

"No," he said.

Over his shoulder, Ramiel peered at me closely, as if studying me at leisure and with commitment for the first time. His shorter looser hair made him seem younger, though such distinctions made no difference.

"No, none at all," he whispered, and for the first time, he too smiled.

"Do as these gentle people tell you," said Ramiel. "Let them take you inside, and then you must sleep a natural sleep, and when you wake we'll be with you."

"Oh, but it's a horror, a story of horrors," I whispered. "Filippo never painted such horrors."

"We are not painted things," said Setheus. "What God has in store for us we will discover together, you and Ramiel and I. Now you must go

inside. The monks are here. Into their care we give you, and when you wake we will be at your side."

"Like the prayer," I whispered.

"Oh, yes, truly," Ramiel said. He raised his hand. I saw the shadow of his five fingers and then felt the silken touch of his fingers as he closed my eyes.

10

IN WHICH I CONVERSE WITH THE INNOCENT AND POWERFUL SONS OF GOD

I would sleep and deeply, yes, but not until much later. What came was a hazy, dreamlike wonderland of protective images. I was carried by a burly monk and his assistants into the monastery of San Marco.

There could be no place better for me in all of Florence—other than Cosimo's own house perhaps—than the Dominican Monastery of San Marco.

Now, in all of Florence, I know of many exquisite buildings and so much magnificence that even then, as a boy, I could not catalogue in my mind all the riches that lay before me.

But nowhere is there any cloister more serene, I think, than that of San Marco, which had only recently been renovated by the most humble and decent Michelozzo at the behest of Cosimo the Elder. It had a long and venerable history in Florence, but only in recent times had it been given over to the Dominicans, and it was endowed in certain sublime ways in which no other monastery was.

As all Florence knew, Cosimo had lavished a fortune on San Marco, maybe to make up for all the money he made by usury, for as a banker he was a taker of interest and therefore a usurer, but then so were we who had put money in his bank.

Whatever the case, Cosimo, our capo, our true leader, had loved this place and given to it many many treasures, but most of all perhaps its marvelously proportioned new buildings.

His detractors, the whiners, the ones who do nothing great, and suspect all that isn't in a state of perpetual disintegration, they said of him, "He even puts his coat of arms in the privies of the monks."

His coat of arms, by the way, is a shield with five protuberant balls on it, the meaning of which has been variously explained, but what these enemies actually said was: Cosimo had hung his balls over the monks' privies. Eh! That his enemies would be so lucky to have such privies, or such balls.

How much more clever it might have been for those men to point out

that Cosimo often spent days at this monastery himself in meditation and prayer, and that the former Prior here, who was Cosimo's great friend and advisor, Fra Antonino, was now the Archbishop of Florence.

Ah, so much for the ignorant, who still to the day five hundred years from then tell lies about Cosimo.

As I passed under the door, I thought, What in the name of God shall I say to these people in this House of God?

No sooner had that thought popped out of my sleepy head and, I fear, my drugged and sleepy mouth, than I heard Ramiel's laugh in my ear.

I tried to see if he was at my side. But I was blubbering and sick again, and dizzy, and could make out only that we had entered the most tranquil and pleasing cloister.

The sun so burnt my eyes that I couldn't thank God yet for the beauty of the square green garden in the center of this place, but I could see very starkly and sweetly the low rounded arches created by Michelozzo, arches which created gentle colorless and humble vaults over my head.

And the tranquillity achieved by the pure columns, with their small rolled Ionic capitals, all of this added to my sense of safety and peace. Proportions were always the gift of Michelozzo. He opened up things when he built them. And these wide spacious loggias were his stamp.

Nothing would erase the memory for me of the soaring dagger-tipped Gothic arches of the French castle in the North, of the filigreed stone peaks everywhere there that seemed to point in animosity at the Almighty. And though I knew I misjudged this architecture and its intent —for surely, before Florian and his Court of the Ruby Grail had taken hold of it, it had been born from the devotions of the French and the Germans—I still could not get the hated vision of it out of my head.

Trying desperately not to heave up my guts again, I relaxed all my limbs as I saw this Florentine enclosure.

Down around the cloister, down around the burning hot garden, the large monk, a bear of a man, beaming down at me in habitual and inveterate kindness, carried me in his burly arms, while there came others in their flowing black and white robes, with thin radiant faces seeming to encircle us even in our rapid progress. I couldn't see my angels.

But these men were the nearest to angels that the world provides.

I soon realized—due to my former visits to this great place—that I was

not being taken to the hospice, where drugs were dispensed to the sick of Florence, or to the pilgrims' refuge, which was always swarming with those who come to offer and pray, but up the stairs into the very hall of the monks' cells.

In a glaze of sickness in which beauty brought a catch in my throat, I saw at the head of the stairway, spread out on the wall, the fresco of Fra Giovanni's *Annunciation*.

My painting, the *Annunciation*! My chosen favorite, the painting which meant more to me than any other religious motif.

And no, it wasn't the genius of my turbulent Filippo Lippi, no, but it was my painting, and surely this was an omen that no demon can damn a soul through the poison of forced blood.

Was Ursula's blood forced on you too? Horrid thought. Try not to remember her soft fingers being pulled loose from you, you fool, you drunken fool, try not to remember her lips and the long thick kisslet of blood slipping into your own open mouth.

"Look at it!" I cried out. I pointed one flopping arm towards the painting.

"Yes, yes, we have so many," said the big smiling bear of a monk.

Fra Giovanni was of course the painter. Who could have not seen it in one glance? Besides, I knew it. And Fra Giovanni—let me remind you one more time that this is Fra Angelico of the ages—had made a severe, soothing, tender but utterly simple Angel and Virgin, steeped in humility and devoid of embellishments, the visitation itself taking place between low rounded arches such as made up the very cloister from which we had just come.

As the big monk swung me around to take me down the broad corridor—and broad it was, and so polished and austere and beautiful to me—I tried to form words as I carried the image of the angel in my mind.

I wanted to tell Ramiel and Setheus, if they were still with me, that look, Gabriel's wings had only simple stripes of color, and look, how his gown fell in symmetrical and disciplined folds. All of this I understood, as I understood the rampant grandeur of Ramiel and Setheus, but I was blubbering nonsense again.

"The halos," I said. "You two, where are you? Your halos hover over your heads. I saw them. I saw them in the street and in the paintings.

But you see in the painting by Fra Giovanni, the halo is flat and surrounds the painted face, a disk hard and golden right on the field of the painting …"

The monks laughed. "To whom are you speaking, young Signore Vittorio di Raniari?" one of them asked me.

"Be quiet, child," said the big monk, his booming bass voice pushing against me through his barrel of a chest. "You're in our tender care. And you must hush now, see, there, that's the library, you see our monks at work?"

They were proud of it, weren't they? Even in our progress when I might have vomited all over the immaculate floor, the monk turned to let me see through the open door the long room crowded with books and monks at work, but what I saw too was Michelozzo's vaulted ceiling, again, not soaring to leave us, but bending gently over the heads of the monks and letting a volume of light and air rise above them.

It seemed I saw visions. I saw multiple and triple figures where there should only be one, and even in a flash a misty confusion of angelic wings, and oval faces turned, peering at me through the veil of supernatural secrecy.

"Do you see?" was all I could say. I had to get to that library, I had to find texts in it that defined the demons. Yes, I had not given up! Oh, no, I was no babbling idiot. I had God's very own angels at my assistance. I'd take Ramiel and Setheus in there and show them the texts.

We know, Vittorio, wipe the pictures from your mind, for we see them.

"Where are you?" I cried out.

"Quiet," said the monks.

"But will you help me go back there and kill them?"

"You're babbling," said the monks.

Cosimo was the guardian patron of that library. When old Niccolo de' Niccoli died, a marvelous collector of books with whom I had many times spoken at Vaspasiano's bookshop, all of his religious books, and maybe more, had been donated by Cosimo to this monastery.

I would find them in there, in that library, and find proof in St. Augustine or Aquinas of the devils with which I'd fought.

No. I was not mad. I had not given up. I was no gibbering idiot. If only the sun coming in the high little windows of this airy place would stop baking my eyeballs and burning my hands.

“Quiet, quiet,” said the big monk, smiling still. “You are making noises like an infant. Hhhhh. Burgle, gurgle. Hear? Now, look, the library’s busy. It’s open to the public today. Everybody is busy today.”

He turned only a few steps past the library to take me into a cell. “Down there …” he went on, as if cajoling an unruly baby. “Only a few steps away is the Prior’s cell, and guess who is there this very minute? It’s the Archbishop.”

“Antonino,” I whispered.

“Yes, yes, you said it right. Once our own Antonino. Well, he’s here, and guess why?”

I was too groggy to respond. The other monks surrounded me. They wiped me with cool cloths. They smoothed back my hair.

This was a clean large cell. Oh, if the sun would only stop. What had those demons done to me, made me into a half-demon? Dare I ask for a mirror?

Set down on a thick soft bed, in this warm, clean place, I lost all control of my limbs. I was sick again.

The monks attended me with a silver basin. The sunlight pierced brilliantly upon a fresco, but I couldn’t bear to look at the gleaming figures, not in this hurtful illumination. It seemed the cell was filled with other figures. Were they angels? I saw transparent beings, drifting, stirring, but I could catch hold of no clear outline. Only the fresco burned into the wall in its colors seemed solid, valid, true.

“Have they done this to my eyes forever?” I asked. I thought I caught a glimpse of an angelic form in the doorway of the cell, but it was not the figure of either Setheus or Ramiel. Did it have webbed wings? Demon wings? I started in terror.

But it was gone. Rustling, whispering. *We know.*

“Where are my angels?” I asked. I cried. I told out the names of my father and his father, and of all the di Raniari whom I could remember.

“Shhhhh,” said the young monk. “Cosimo has been told that you are here. But this is a terrible day. We remember your father. Now let us remove these filthy clothes.”

My head swam. The room was gone.

Sodden sleep, a glimpse of her, my savior Ursula. She ran through the blowing meadow. Who was this pursuing her, driving her out of the nodding, weaving flowers? Purple irises surrounded her, were crushed

under her feet. She turned. Don't, Ursula! Don't turn. Don't you see the flaming sword?

I woke in a warm bath. Was it the cursed baptismal fount? No. I saw the fresco, the holy figures, dimly, and more immediately the real live monks who surrounded me on their knees on the stone, their big sleeves rolled back as they washed me in the warm, sweet-scented water.

"Ah, that Francesco Sforza …" they spoke in Latin to one another. "To charge into Milan and take possession of the Dukedom! As if Cosimo did not have enough trouble, without Sforza having done such a thing."

"He did it? He has taken Milan?" I asked.

"What did you say? Yes, son, he has. He broke the peace. And your family, all your poor family murdered by the freebooters; don't think they'll go unpunished, rampaging through that country, those damned Venetians …"

"No, you mustn't, you must tell Cosimo. It was not an act of war, what happened to my family, not by human beings …"

"Hush, child."

Chaste hands sponged the water over my shoulders. I sat slumped against the warm metal back of the tub.

"… di Raniari, always loyal," said one of them to me. "And your brother was to come to study with us, your sweet brother, Matteo …"

I let out a terrible cry. A soft hand sealed my lips.

"Sforza himself will punish them. He'll clean out that country."

I cried and cried. No one could understand me. They wouldn't listen to me.

The monks lifted me to my feet. I was dressed in a long comfortable soft linen robe. It came to me that I was being dressed for execution, but the hour of such danger had passed.

"I am not mad!" I said clearly.

"No, not at all, only grief-stricken."

"You understand me!"

"You are tired."

"The bed is soft for you, brought specially for you, hush, don't rave anymore."

"Demons did it," I whispered. "They weren't soldiers."

"I know, son, I know. War is terrible. War is the Devil's work."

No, but it wasn't war. Will you listen to me?

Hush, this is Ramiel at your ear; didn't I tell you to sleep? Will you listen to us? We have heard your thoughts as well as your words!

I lay down on the bed flat on my chest. The monks brushed and dried my hair. My hair was so long now. Unkempt, country Lord hair. But this was an immense comfort to be bathed and gentlemanly clean.

"Those are candles?" I asked. "The sun has gone down?"

"Yes," said the monk beside me. "You have slept."

"May I have more candles?"

"Yes, I'll bring them to you."

I lay in the darkness. I blinked and tried to shape the words of the *Ave*.

Many lights appeared in the door, some six or seven in a cluster, each a sweet small perfectly shaped flame. Then they fluttered as the monk's feet came softly towards me. I saw him clearly as he knelt to place the candelabra beside my bed.

He was thin and tall, a sapling in hollow willowy robes. His hands were so clean. "You are in a special cell. Cosimo has sent men to bury your dead."

"Thanks be to God," I said.

"Yes."

So now I could speak!

"They are still talking down there, and it's late," said the monk. "Cosimo is troubled. He'll stay the night here. The whole city is filled with Venetian agitators stirring up the populace against Cosimo."

"Now hush," said another monk who appeared suddenly. He bent down and lifted my head to place another thick pillow beneath it.

What bliss this was. I thought of the damned ones imprisoned in the coop. "Oh, horrors! It's night, and they're waiting for the horrible Communion."

"Who, child? What Communion?"

Once again, I glimpsed figures moving, drifting, as it were, in the shadows. But they were too soon gone.

I had to vomit. I needed the basin. They held my hair for me. Did they see the blood in the candlelight? The pure streak of blood? It smelled so rotten.

"How can one survive such poison?" one monk whispered to the other in Latin. "Do we dare purge him?"

"You'll frighten him. Be quiet. He has no fever."

“Well, you’re damned wrong if you think you took my wits,” I declared suddenly. I shouted it to Florian and to Godric and to all of them.

The monks looked at me in urgent astonishment.

I laughed. “I only was talking to those who tried to hurt me,” I said, again letting each word have a clear distinct shape.

The thin monk with the remarkably scrubbed hands knelt by me. He smoothed my forehead. “And the beautiful sister, the sister who was to be married, is she too …?”

“Bartola! She was to be married? I didn’t know. Well, he can have her head for a maidenhead.” I wept. “The worms are at work in the dark. And the demons dance on the hill, and the town does nothing.”

“What town?”

“You’re raving again,” said a monk who stood beyond the candles. How distinct he looked, though he was beyond the light, a round-shouldered individual with a hooked nose and thick somber heavy eyelids. “Don’t rave anymore, poor child.”

I wanted to protest, but I saw suddenly a giant soft wing, each feather tinged with gold, come down over me, enfolding me. I was tickled all over by the softness of the feathers. Ramiel said:

What must we do to make you shut up? Filippo needs us now; will you give us some peace and quiet for Filippo, whom God sent us to guard? Don’t answer me. Obey me.

The wing crushed out all vision, all woe.

Shadowy pale darkness. Even and complete. The candles were behind me, set up high.

I woke. I rose up on my elbows. My head was clear. A lovely even illumination gave just the smallest tremble as it filled the cell. From the high window came the moon. The shaft of the moon struck the fresco on the wall, the fresco obviously painted by Fra Giovanni.

My eyes could see it with amazing clarity. Was this my demonic blood?

A strange thought came to me. It rang in my consciousness with the clarity of a golden bell. I myself possessed no guardian angels! My angels had left me; they had departed, because my soul was damned.

I had no angels. I had seen Filippo’s because of the power the demons had given me, and because of something else. Filippo’s angels argued so much with each other! That’s how I had seen them. Some words came to

me.

They came back to me from Aquinas, or was it Augustine? I'd read so much of both to learn my Latin, and their endless excursuses had so delighted me. The demons are full of passion. But angels are not.

But those two angels had such spirit. That's why they'd cut through the veil.

I pushed back the covers and set my bare feet on the stone floor. It was cool, and pleasing, because the room, having received the sun all day, was still warm.

No drafts swept the polished and immaculate floor.

I stood before the wall painting. I wasn't dizzy or sick, or like to fall. I was myself again.

What an innocent and untroubled soul Fra Giovanni must have been. All his figures were devoid of malice. I could see the figure of Christ seated before a mountain, round gold halo decorated with the red arms and top of a cross. Beside him stood ministering angels. One held bread for him, and the other, whose figure was cut off by the door that was cut into the wall, this other angel, whose wingtips were barely visible, carried wine and meat.

Above, on the mountain, I saw Christ also. It was a painting of different incidents, in sequence, and above, Christ was standing in His same smooth and multiwrinkled pink robes, but here He was agitated, as agitated as Fra Giovanni could make Him, and Christ had lifted His left hand, as if in wrath.

The figure who fled from Him was the Devil! It was a horrid creature with the webbed wings I thought I'd glimpsed earlier, and it had hideous webbed feet. It had dewclaws on its webbed feet. Sour-faced and in a dirty gray robe, it fled from Christ, who stood firm in the Desert, refusing to be tempted, and, only after this confrontation, then had the ministering angels come, and had Christ taken His place with His hands clasped.

I sucked in my breath in terror as I beheld this image of the demon. But a great rush of comfort passed through me, causing my hair to tingle at its roots, causing my feet to tingle against the polished floor. I had routed the demons, I had refused their gift of immortality. I had refused it. Even faced with the cross!

I retched. The pain caught me as if I'd been kicked in the stomach. I

turned. The basin was there, clean and polished, sitting on the floor. I dropped to my knees and heaved up more of their syrupy filth. Was there no water?

I looked around. There stood the pitcher and the cup. The cup was full and I spilt some of it as I put it to my lips, but it tasted thin and rancid and awful. I threw down the cup.

"You've poisoned me for natural things, you monsters. You will not win!"

My hands trembling, I picked up the cup, filled it once more and tried again to drink. But it tasted unnatural. To what can I compare it? It was not foul like urine; it was like water that is full of minerals and metal and will leave a chalk on you and choke you. It was bad!

I put it aside. Very well then. Time to study. Time to take up the candles, which I now did.

I went out of the cell. The hall was empty and glowing in the pale light that came from tiny windows over the low-ceilinged cells.

I turned to my right and approached the doors of the library. They were unlocked.

I entered with my candelabra. Once again, the tranquillity of Michelozzo's design brought a warmth to me, a faith in all things, a trust. Two rows of arches and Ionic columns moved down the center of the room to make a broad aisle to the far distant door, and on either side were the study tables, and all along the far walls were racks and racks of codices and scrolls.

Across the herringbone stones of the floor I walked barefoot, lifting the candle higher so that the light would fill up the vaulted ceiling, so happy to be here alone.

Windows on either side let in shafts of pale illumination through the overwhelming clutter of shelves, but how divine and restful were the high ceilings. How boldly he had done it, made a basilica of a library.

How could I have known, child that I was then, that this style would be imitated all over my beloved Italy? Oh, there were so many wondrous things then for the living and for all time.

And I? What am I? Do I live? Or am I walking always in death, forever in love with time?

I stood still with my candles. How my eyes loved the moonlighted splendor. How I craved to stand here forever, dreaming, near to things of

the mind, and things of the soul, and far away in memory from the wretched enchained town on its cursed mountain and the castle nearby, which at this very moment probably gave forth its ghastly, ugly light.

Could I discern the order of this wealth of books?

The very cataloger of this library, the very monk who had done the work here, the very scholar, was now the Pope of all Christendom, Nicholas V.

I moved along the shelves to my right, holding high my candles. Would it be alphabetical? I thought of Aquinas, for I knew him more freely, but it was St. Augustine whom I found. And I had always loved Augustine, loved his colorful style and his eccentricities, and the dramatic manner in which he wrote.

"Oh, you wrote more about demons, you are better!" I said.

The City of God! I saw it, copy after copy. There were a score of codices of this very masterpiece, not to mention all of the other work of this great saint, his *Confessions,* which had gripped me as much as a Roman drama, and so much more. Some of these books were ancient, made of big sloppy parchment, others were extravagantly bound, some almost simple and very new.

In charity and consideration, I must take the most sturdy of these, even though there might be errors, and God only knew how hard monks worked to avoid errors. I knew which volume I wanted. I knew the volume on demons, because I had thought it so very fascinating and funny and so much poppycock. Oh, what a fool I'd been.

I took down the hefty fat volume, number nine of the text, slipping it into the crook of my arm, moved to the first desk and then carefully placed the candelabra in front of me, where it would light me but throw no shadows under my fingers, and I opened the book.

"It's all here!" I whispered. "Tell me, St. Augustine, what were they so that I may convince Ramiel and Setheus that they must help me, or give me the means to convince these modern Florentines, who care about nothing right now but making war with paid soldiers on the Serene Republic of Venice up north. Help me, Saint. I'm telling you."

Ah, Chapter Ten, of Volume Nine, I knew this …

Augustine was quoting Plotinus, or explaining him:

… that the very fact of man's corporal mortality is due to the compassion of God, who

would not have us kept for ever in the misery of this life. The wickedness of demons was not judged worthy of this compassion, and in the misery of their condition, with a soul subject to passions, they have not been granted the mortal body, which man had received, but an eternal body.

"Ah, yes!" I said. "And this is what Florian offered me, bragging that they did not age or decay and were not subject to disease, that I could have lived there with them forever. Evil, evil. Well, this is proof, and I have it here, and I can show it to the monks!"

I read on, skimming to find the kernels that would make my case grow. Down to Chapter Eleven:

Apuleius says also that the souls of men are demons. On leaving human bodies they become lares if they have shown themselves good, if evil, lemures or larvae.

"Yes, lemures. I know this word. Lemures or larvae, and Ursula, she said to me that she had been young, young as me; they were all human and now they are lemures."

According to Apuleius, larvae are malignant demons created out of men.

I was overcome with excitement. I needed parchment and pens. I had to note the place. I had to mark down what I had discovered and go on. For the next point was obviously to convince Ramiel and Setheus that they had gotten into the biggest—.

My thoughts were brought to an abrupt halt.

Behind me, a personage had come into the library. I heard a heavy footfall, but there was a muffled quality to it, and a great darkening occurred behind me, as though all the slim, sly beams of the moon that fell through the passage beyond had been cut off.

I turned slowly and looked over my shoulder.

"And why do you choose the left?" asked this personage.

He rose up before me, immense and winged, peering down at me, his face luminous in the flicker of the candles, his eyebrows gently raised but straight so that there was no arch to them to make them anything but severe. He had the riotous golden hair of Fra Filippo's brush, curling beneath a huge red battle helmet, and behind him his wings were heavily sheathed in gold.

He wore a suit of armor, with the breast-plates decorated and the

shoulders covered with immense buckles, and around his waist was a blue sash of silk. His sword was sheathed, and on one lax arm he wore his shield, with its red cross.

I had never seen his like.

"I need you!" I declared. I stood up, knocking the bench back. I reached out so that it would not clatter to the floor. I faced him.

"You need me!" he said in muted outrage. "You do! You who would lead off Ramiel and Setheus from Fra Filippo Lippi. You need me? Do you know who I am?"

It was a gorgeous voice, rich, silken, violent and piercing though deep.

"You have a sword," I said.

"Oh, and for what?"

"Killing them, all of them!" I said. "Going there with me by day to their castle. Do you know what I am speaking of?"

He nodded. "I know what you dreamt and what you babbled and what Ramiel and Setheus have gleaned from your feverish mind. Of course I know. You need me, you say, and Fra Filippo Lippi lies in bed with a whore who licks his aching joints, and one in particular that aches for her!"

"Such talk from an angel," I said.

"Don't mock me, I'll slap you," he said. His wings rose and fell as if he were sighing with them, or gasping rather, at me in umbrage.

"So do it!" I said. My eyes were feasting fiendishly on his glistering beauty, on the red silk cloak that was clasped just below the bit of tunic that showed above his armor, at the solemn smoothness of his cheeks. "But come with me to the mountains and kill them," I implored him.

"Why don't you go yourself and do it?"

"Do you think I can?" I demanded.

His face went serene. His lower lip gave the smallest most thoughtful pout. His jaw and neck were powerful, more powerful by far than the anatomy of Ramiel or Setheus, who seemed more youths, and this their splendid elder brother.

"You are not the Fallen One, are you?" I asked.

"How dare you!" he whispered, waking from his slumber. A terrible frown broke over him.

"Mastema, then, that's who you are. They said your name. Mastema."

He nodded and sneered. "They would, of course, say my name."

“Which means what, great angel? That I can call on you, that I have the power to command you?” I turned and reached for the book of St. Augustine.

“Put down that book!” he said impatiently yet coolly. “There is an angel standing before you, boy; look at me when I speak to you!”

“Ah, you speak like Florian, the demon in that far castle. You have the same control, the same modulation. What do you want of me, angel? Why did you come?”

He was silent, as if he couldn’t produce an answer. Then, quietly, he put a question to me. “Why do you think?”

“Because I prayed?”

“Yes,” he said coldly. “Yes! And because they have come to me on your account.”

My eyes widened. I felt light fill them up. But the light didn’t hurt them. A soft cluster of sweet noises filled my ears.

On either side of him there appeared Ramiel and Setheus, their milder, gentler faces focused on me.

Mastema raised his eyebrows again as he looked down at me.

“Fra Filippo Lippi is drunk,” he said. “When he wakes up, he’ll get drunk again until the pain stops.”

“Fools to rack a great painter,” I said, “but then you know my thoughts on that.”

“Ah, and the thoughts of all the women in Florence,” said Mastema. “And the thoughts of the great ones who pay for his paintings, if their minds were not on war.”

“Yes,” said Ramiel, glancing imploringly to Mastema. They were of the same height, but Mastema didn’t turn, and Ramiel came forward some, as if to catch his eye. “If they weren’t all so carried away with war.”

“War is the world,” said Mastema. “I asked you before, Vittorio di Raniari, do you know who I am?”

I was shaken, not by the question, but that the three had now come together, and that I stood before them, the only mortal being, and all the mortal world around us seemed to sleep.

Why had no monk come down the passage to see who whispered in the library? Why had no Watchman of the night come to see why the candles floated along the passage? Why the boy murmured and raved?

Was I mad?

It seemed to me quite suddenly and ludicrously that if I answered Mastema correctly, I would not be mad.

This thought brought from him a small laugh, neither harsh nor sweet.

Setheus stared at me with his obvious sympathy. Ramiel said nothing but looked again to Mastema.

"You are the angel," I said, "whom the Lord gives permission to wield that sword." There came no response from him. I went on. "You are the angel who slew the firstborn of Egypt," I said. No response. "You are the angel, the angel who can avenge."

He nodded, but only really with his eyes. They closed and then opened.

Setheus drew close to him, lips to his ears.

"Help him, Mastema, let us all go help him. Filippo cannot use our counsel now."

"And why?" demanded Mastema of the angel beside him. He looked at me.

"God has given me no leave to punish these demons of yours. Never has God said to me, 'Mastema, slay the vampires, the lemures, the larvae, the blood drinkers.' Never has God spoken to me and said, 'Lift your mighty sword to cleanse the world of these.' "

"I beg you," I said. "I, a mortal boy, beg you. Kill these, wipe out this nest with your sword."

"I can't do it."

"Mastema, you can!" declared Setheus.

Ramiel spoke up. "If he says he cannot, he cannot! Why do you never listen to him?"

"Because I know that he can be moved," said Setheus without hesitation to his compatriot. "I know that he can, as God can be moved."

Setheus stepped boldly in front of Mastema.

"Pick up the book, Vittorio," he said. He stepped forward. At once the large vellum pages, heavy as they were, began to flutter. He put it in my hand, and marked the place with his pale finger, barely touching the thick black crowded writing.

I read aloud:

> *And therefore God who made the visible marvels of Heaven and Earth does not disdain to work visible miracles in Heaven and Earth, by which He arouses the soul, hitherto*

preoccupied with visible things, to the worship of Himself.

His finger moved, and my eyes moved with it. I read of God:

To Him, there is no difference between seeing us about to pray and listening to our prayers, for even when His angels listen, it is He Himself who listens in them.

I stopped, my eyes full of tears. He took the book from me to guard it from my tears.

A noise had penetrated our small circle. Monks had come. I heard them whispering in the corridor, and then the door swung open. Into the library they came.

I cried, and when I looked up I saw them staring at me, two monks whom I didn't know or didn't remember, had never known.

"What is it, young man? Why are you here alone crying?" the first spoke.

"Here, let us take you back to bed. We'll bring you something to eat."

"No, I can't eat it," I said.

"No, he can't eat it," said the first monk to the other. "It still makes him sick. But he can rest." He looked at me.

I turned. The three radiant angels stood silently staring at the monks who could not see them, who had no clue that the angels were there!

"Dear God in Heaven, please tell me," I said. "Have I gone mad? Have the demons won out, have they so polluted me with their blood and their potions that I see things which are delusions, or am I come like Mary to the tomb to see an angel there?"

"Come to bed," said the monks.

"No," said Mastema, quietly addressing the monk who didn't even see him or hear him. "Let him stay. Let him read to quiet his mind. He is a boy of education."

"No, no," said the monk, shaking his head. He glanced to the other. "We should let him stay. He's a boy of education. He can read quietly. Cosimo said that he must have anything he desired."

"Go on, leave him now," said Setheus softly.

"Hush," said Ramiel. "Let Mastema tell them."

I was too flooded with sorrow and happiness to respond. I covered my face, and when I did so I thought of my poor Ursula, forever with her demon Court, and how she had wept for me. "How could that be?" I

whispered into my own fingers.

"Because she was human once, and has a human heart," said Mastema to me in the silence.

The two monks were hurrying out. For one moment the collection of angels was as sheer as light, and I saw through them to the two retreating figures of the monks who closed up the doors as they left.

Mastema looked at me with his still, powerful gaze.

"One could read anything into your face," I said.

"So it is with almost all angels all of the time," he answered.

"I beg you," I said. "Come with me. Help me. Guide me. Do what you just did with those monks! That you can do, can't you?"

He nodded.

"But we can't do more than that, you see," said Setheus.

"Let Mastema say," said Ramiel.

"Go back to Heaven!" said Setheus.

"Please, the both of you, be quiet," said Mastema. "Vittorio, I cannot slay them. I have no leave. That you can do, and with your own sword."

"But you'll come."

"I'll take you," he said. "When the sun rises, when they sleep under their stones. But you must slay them, you must open them to the light, and you must set free those awful wretched prisoners, and you must stand before the townsmen, or let loose that crippled flock and flee."

"I understand."

"We can move the stones away from their sleeping places, can't we?" asked Setheus. He put up his hand to hush Ramiel before Ramiel could protest. "We'll have to do it."

"We can do that," said Mastema. "As we can stop a beam from falling on Filippo's head. We can do that. But we cannot slay them. And you, Vittorio, we cannot make you go through with it, either, if your nerve or your will fails."

"You don't think the miracle of my having seen you will uphold me?"

"Will it?" Mastema asked.

"You speak of her, don't you?"

"Do I?" he asked.

"I will go through with it, but you must tell me …"

"What must I tell you?" Mastema asked.

"Her soul, will it go to Hell?"

“That I cannot tell you,” said Mastema.

“You have to.”

“No, I have to do nothing but what the Lord God has created me to do, and that I do, but to solve the mysteries over which Augustine pondered for a lifetime, no, that is not what I have to do or should do or will do.”

Mastema picked up the book.

Once again the pages moved with his will. I felt the breeze rising from them.

He read:

> *There is something to be gained from the inspired discourses of Scripture.*

“Don’t read those words to me; they don’t help me!” I said. “Can she be saved? Can she save her soul? Does she possess it still? Is she as powerful as you are? Can you Fall? Can the Devil come back to God?”

He put down the book with a swift, airy movement that I could scarcely follow.

“Are you ready for this battle?” he asked.

“They’ll lie helpless in the light of day,” said Setheus to me. “Including her. She too will lie helpless. You must open the stones that cover them, and you know what you must do.”

Mastema shook his head. He turned and gestured for them to get out of his way.

“No, please, I beg you!” said Ramiel. “Do it for him. Do it, please. Filippo is beyond our help for days.”

“You know no such thing,” said Mastema.

“Can my angels go to him?” I asked. “Have I none that can be sent?”

I had no sooner spoken these words than I realized that two more entities had taken form directly beside me, one on either side, and when I looked from left to right I saw them, only they were pale and remote from me, and they hadn’t the flame of Filippo’s guardians, only a quiet and quasi-visible and undeniable presence and will.

I looked at one for a long time and then the other, and could draw no descriptive words from my mind from them. Their faces seemed blank and patient and quiet. They were winged beings, tall, yes, I can say that much, but what more could I say, because I couldn’t endow them with color or splendor or individuality, and they had no garments or motion

to them or anything that I could love.

"What is it? Why won't they speak to me? Why do they look at me that way?"

"They know you," said Ramiel.

"You're full of vengeance, and desire," said Setheus. "They know it; they have been at your side. They have measured your pain and your anger."

"Good God, these demons killed my family!" I declared. "Do you know the future of my soul, any of you?"

"Of course not," said Mastema. "Why would we be here if we did? Why would any of us be here if it were ordained?"

"Don't they know that I faced death rather than take the demon blood? Would not a vendetta have required of me that I drink it and then destroy my enemies when I had powers such as theirs?"

My angels drew closer to me.

"Oh, where were you when I was about to die!" I declared.

"Don't taunt them. You have never really believed in them." It was Ramiel's voice. "You loved us when you saw our images, and when the demon blood was full inside you, you saw what you could love. That is the danger now. Can you kill what you love?"

"I will destroy all of them," I said. "One way or another, I swear it on my soul." I looked at my pale unyielding yet unjudging guardians, and then to the others who burnt so brightly against the shadows of the vast library, against the dark colors of the shelves and the crowded books.

"I will destroy them all," I vowed. I closed my eyes. I imagined her, lying helpless by day, and I saw myself bend and kiss her cold white forehead. My sobs were muffled and my body shook. I nodded again and again that I would do it, yes, I would do it, I would do it.

"At dawn," said Mastema, "the monks will have fresh clothes laid out for you, a suit of red velvet, and your weapons freshly polished, and your boots cleaned. All will be finished by then. Don't try to eat. It's too soon, and the demon blood is still churning in you. Prepare yourself, and we will take you north to do what has to be done in the light of day."

11

And the light shineth in darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.
—THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST. JOHN 1:5

Monasteries wake early, if they ever sleep at all.

My eyes opened quite suddenly, and only then, as I saw the morning light cover the fresco, as if the veil of darkness had been drawn from it, only then did I know how deeply I had slept.

Monks moved in my cell. They had brought in the red velvet tunic, the clothes as Mastema described, and were just laying them out. I had fine red wool hose to wear with them, and a shirt of gold silk, and to go over that, another of white silk, and then a thick new belt for the tunic. My weapons were polished, as I had been told they would be—my heavy jeweled sword gleaming as though my father himself had been toying with it all of a peaceful evening long by the fire. My daggers were ready.

I climbed out of the bed and dropped down to my knees in prayer. I made the Sign of the Cross. "God, give me the strength to send in your hands those who feed on death."

It was a whisper in Latin.

One of the monks touched me on the shoulder and smiled. Had the Great Silence not yet ended? I had no idea. He pointed to a table where there was food laid out for me—bread and milk. The milk had foam on the top of it.

I nodded and smiled at him, and then he and his companion made me a little bow and went out.

I turned around and around.

"All of you are here, I know it," I said, but I gave no more time to it. If they didn't come, then I had recovered my wits, but no such thing was true, any more than it was true that my father was alive.

On the table, not far from the food, and held in place beneath the weight of the candelabra, was a series of documents, freshly written and signed in ornate script.

I read them hastily.

They were receipts for all my money and jewels, those things which had been with me in my saddlebags when I came in. All these documents bore the seal of the Medici.

There was a purse of money there, to be tied to my belt. All my rings were there, cleaned and polished, so that the cabochon rubies were brilliant and the emeralds had a flawless depth. The gold gleamed as it had not in months perhaps, for my own negligence.

I brushed out my hair, annoyed at its thickness and length, but having no time to ask for a barber to cut it shorter than my shoulders. At least it was long enough, and had been for a while, to stay back over my shoulders and off my forehead. It was luxurious to have it so clean.

I dressed quickly. My boots were a little snug because they had been dried by a fire after the rain. But they felt good over the thin hose. I made right all my fastenings and positioned my sword.

The red velvet tunic was plaited along the edges with gold and silver thread, and the front of it was richly decorated with the silver fleurs-de-lys, which is the most ancient symbol of Florence. Once my belt was tightly fastened, the tunic didn't come to halfway down my thigh. That was for handsome legs.

The whole raiment was more than fancy for battle, but what battle was this? It was a massacre. I put on the short flaring cloak they had given me, fastening its gold buckles, though it would be warm for the city. It was lined in soft thin dark-brown squirrel fur.

I ignored the hat. I tied on the purse. I put on my rings one by one until my hands were weapons on account of their weight. I put on the soft fur-lined gloves. I found a dark-amber-beaded rosary that I had not noticed before. It had a gold crucifix, which I kissed, and this I put in my pocket under my tunic.

I realized that I was staring at the floor, and that I was surrounded by pairs of bare feet. Slowly I lifted my gaze.

My angels stood before me, my very own guardians, in long flowing robes of dark blue, which appeared to be made of something lighter yet more opaque than silk. Their faces were ivory white and shimmering faintly, and their eyes were large and like opals. They had dark hair, or hair that seemed to shift as if it were made of shadows.

They stood facing me, their heads together, so that their heads touched. It was as though they were communing silently with one another.

They overwhelmed me. It seemed a terrifying intimacy that I should see them so vividly and so close to me, and know them as the two who

had been with me always, or so I was to believe. They were slightly larger than human beings, as were the other angels I had seen, and they were not tempered by the sweet faces I had seen on the others, but had altogether smoother and broader countenances and larger though exquisitely shaped mouths.

"And you don't believe in us now?" one of them asked in a whisper.

"Will you tell me your names?" I asked.

Both shook their heads in a simple negation at once.

"Do you love me?" I asked.

"Where is it written that we should?" answered the one who had not yet spoken. His voice was as toneless and soft as a whisper, but more distinct. It might have been the same voice as the other angel.

"Do you love us?" asked the other.

"Why do you guard me?" I asked.

"Because we are sent to do it, and will be with you until you die."

"Lovelessly?" I asked.

They shook their heads again in negation.

Gradually the light brightened in the room. I turned sharply to look up at the window. I thought it was the sun. The sun couldn't hurt me, I thought.

But it wasn't. It was Mastema, who had risen up behind me as if he were a cloud of gold, and on either side of him were my arguers, my advancers of the cause, my champions, Ramiel and Setheus.

The room shimmered and seemed to vibrate without a sound. My angels appeared to glisten, and to grow brilliantly white and deep blue in their robes.

All looked to the helmeted figure of Mastema.

An immense and musical rustling filled the air, a singing sound, as if a great flock of tiny golden-throated birds had awakened and rushed upwards from the branches of their sun-filled trees.

I must have closed my eyes. I lost my balance, and the air became cooler, and it seemed my vision was clouded with dust.

I shook my head. I looked around me.

We stood within the castle itself.

The place was damp and very dark. Light crept in around the seams of the immense drawbridge, which was of course pulled up and locked into place. On either side were rustic stone walls, hung here and there with

great rusted hooks and chains that had not been used in many a year.

I turned and entered a dim courtyard, my breath suddenly taken from me by the height of the walls that surrounded me, climbing to the distinct cube of the bright blue sky.

Surely this was only one courtyard, the one at the entrance, for before us there loomed another immense pair of gates, quite large enough to admit the greatest haywagons imaginable or some new-fangled engine of war.

The ground was soiled. High above on all sides were windows, rows upon rows of the double-arched windows, and all were covered over with bars.

"I need you now, Mastema," I said. I made the Sign of the Cross again. I took out the rosary and kissed the crucifix, looking down for a moment at the tiny twisted body of Our Tortured Christ.

The huge doors before me broke open. There was a loud creaking sound, then the crumpling of metal bolts, and the gates groaned back on their hinges, revealing a distant and sun-filled inner court of far greater size.

The walls through which we walked were some thirty to forty feet in depth. There were doors on either side of us, heavily arched in worked stone and showing the first signs of care that I had glimpsed since we entered.

"These creatures do not go and come as others do," I said. I hurried my pace so as to reach the full sun of the courtyard. The mountain air was too cool and too damp in the foul thickness of the passage.

Here, as I stood up, I saw windows such as I remembered, hung with rich banners and strung with lanterns that would be lighted by night. Here I saw tapestries carelessly thrown over window ledges as if rain were nothing. And very high up I saw the jagged battlements and finer white marble copings.

But even this was not the great courtyard that lay beyond. These walls too were rustic. The stones were soiled and untrodden in many a year. Water was pooled here and there. Rank weeds sprang from crevices, but, ah, there were sweet wildflowers, and I looked at them tenderly and reached out to touch them, and marveled at them, existing here.

More gates awaited us, these two—huge, wooden, banded in iron and severely pointed at the top in their deep marble archway—gave way and

sprang back to let us pass through yet another wall.

Oh, such a garden greeted us!

As we made our way through another forty feet of darkness, I saw the great groves of orange trees ahead of us, and heard the cry of the birds. I wondered if they were not caught down here, prisoners, or could they soar all the way up to the top and escape?

Yes, they could. It was a great enough space. And here was the fine white marble facing I remembered, all the way to the summit, so high above.

As I made my way into the garden, as I walked on the first marble path that traversed the beds of violets and roses, I saw the birds coming and going, circling broadly in this wide place, so that they could clear the towers that rose so distantly and majestically against the sky.

Everywhere the scent of flowers overcame me. Lilies and irises were mingled in patches, and the oranges were ripe and almost red as they hung from the trees. The lemons were hard still and touched with green.

Shrubbery and vines hugged the walls.

The angels gathered around me. I realized that all along it was I who had led the way, I who had initiated any movement, and it was I who held us all still now, within the garden, and that they waited as I bowed my head.

“I am listening for the prisoners,” I said. “But I can’t hear them.”

I looked up at more of the luxuriously decorated balconies and windows, the twin arches, and here and there a long loggia, but made of their style of filigree, not ours.

I saw flags fluttering, and all were in that dark blood-red color, stained with death. I looked down for the first time at my own brilliant crimson clothes.

“Like fresh blood?” I whispered.

“Tend to what you must do first,” Mastema said. “Twilight can cover you when you go to the prisoners, but you must take your quarry now.”

“Where are they? Will you tell me?”

“In deliberate sacrilege, and in old-fashioned rigor, they lie beneath the stones of the church.”

There was a loud, searing noise. He had pulled out his sword. He pointed with it, his head turned, his red helmet on fire with the glint of the sun reflected off the marble-faced walls.

“The door there, and the stairs beyond it. The church lies on the third floor, up to our left.”

I made for the door without further delay. I rushed up the steps, taking turn after turn, my boots clattering on the stone, not even looking to see if they followed me, not wondering how they did it, knowing only that they were with me, feeling their presence as if I could feel their breath on me when no breath came.

At last we entered the corridor, broad and open on our right to the courtyard below. There was an endless strip of rich carpet before us, full of Persian flowers deeply embedded within a field of midnight blue. Unfaded, untrammeled. On and on it went until it turned, ahead of us. And at the end of the corridor was the perfectly framed sky and the jagged speck of green mountain beyond.

“Why have you stopped?” Mastema asked.

They had materialized around me, in their settling garments and their never-still wings.

“This is the door to the church here, you know it.”

“Only looking at the sky, Mastema,” I said. “Only looking at the blue sky.”

“And thinking of what?” asked one of my guardians in his toneless, clear whisper. He clung to me suddenly, and I saw his parchment-colored fingers, weightless, settled on my shoulder. “Thinking of a meadow that never existed and a young woman who is dead?”

“Are you merciless?” I asked him. I pressed close to him, so my forehead touched him, and I marveled to feel it against me and see his opalescent eyes so distinct.

“No, not merciless. Only one who reminds, and reminds, and reminds.”

I turned to the doors of the chapel. I pulled on both giant hooks until I heard the clasp give, and then I opened wide one side and then the other, though why I made such a vast and broad escape for myself I do not know. Maybe it was a passage for my mighty band of helpers.

The great empty nave lay before me, which last night no doubt had been crowded with the gaudy blood-drenched Court, and above my head was their choir loft from which the most ethereal dirge had come.

Sun violently pierced the demonic windows.

I gasped in shock to see the webbed spirits emblazoned so immensely in the fractured and welded fragments of glittering glass. How thick was

this glass, how heavily faceted, and how ominous the expressions of those webbed-winged monsters who leered at us as if they would come alive in the blazing light of day and stop our progress.

There was nothing to be done but to rip my eyes off them, to look down and away and along the great sprawling marble floor. I saw the hook, I saw it as it had been in the floor of my father's chapel, lying flat in a circle cut in the stone, a hook of gold, polished and smoothed so it did not rise above the floor and would not catch a toe or a heel. It had no cover.

It merely marked decisively the position of the one long main entrance to the crypt. One narrow marble rectangle cut into the center of the church floor.

I strode forward, heels echoing throughout the whole empty church, and went to pull the hook.

What stopped me? I saw the altar. At that very instant the sun had struck the figure of Lucifer, the giant red angel above his masses and masses of red flowers, which were fresh as they had been the night when I had been brought to this place.

I saw him and saw his fierce burning yellow eyes, fine gems set into the red marble, and saw the white ivory fangs that hung from his snarling upper lip. I saw all the fanged demons who lined the walls to the right and the left of him, and all their jeweled eyes seemed greedy and glorying in the light.

"The crypt," said Mastema.

I pulled with all my might. I couldn't budge the marble slab. No human could have done it. It would have taken teams of horses to do it. I locked both hands more tightly around the hook, yanking it harder, and still I couldn't budge it. It was like trying to move the walls themselves.

"Do it for him!" Ramiel pleaded. "Let us do it."

"It's nothing, Mastema; it's only like opening the gates."

Mastema reached out and pushed me gently aside, so that I was caught on my own feet for a moment and then righted myself. The long narrow trapdoor of marble was raised slowly.

I was astonished at its weight. It was more than two feet in thickness. Only its facing was marble, the rest being a heavier, darker, denser stone. No, no human could have lifted it.

And now, from the mouth below, there came a spear as if from a hidden spring.

I leapt back, though I had never been near enough to be in danger.

Mastema let the trapdoor fall on its back. The hinges were broken at once by its own weight. The light filled the space below. More spears awaited me, glinting in the sun, pointed at an angle, as if affixed in parallel to the angle of the stairs.

Mastema moved to the top of the stairs.

“Try to move them, Vittorio,” he said.

“He can’t. And if he trips and falls, he falls down into a pit of them,” said Ramiel. “Mastema, move them.”

“Let me move them,” said Setheus.

I drew my sword. I hacked at the first of the spears and knocked off its metal point, but the jagged wooden shaft remained.

I stepped down into the crypt, at once feeling a coldness rise and touch my legs. I hacked again at the wood, and broke off more of it. Then I stepped beside it, only to find with my left hand that I felt a pair of spears awaiting me in the uneven light. Again I lifted my sword, the weight of it making my arm ache.

But I broke these two with swift blows until their metal heads had gone clattering from their wooden stems as well.

I stepped down, holding tight with my right hand so as not to slip on the steps, and suddenly, with a loud cry, I swung out and off the edge of nothing, for the stairway broke there and was no more.

With my right hand I grabbed at the shaft of the broken spear, which I already held in my left. My sword went clattering down below me.

“Enough, Mastema,” said Setheus. “No human can do it.”

I was hanging, both hands locked around this splintery wood, staring up at them as they rimmed the mouth of the crypt. If I fell, I would no doubt die, for the fall was that far. If I did not die, I would never get out to live.

I waited, and I said nothing, though my arms ached excruciatingly.

Suddenly, they descended, as soundlessly as they did all things, in a rush of silk and wings, slipping into the crypt at once, all of them, and surrounding me, embracing me and carrying me down in a soft plummet to the floor of the chamber.

I was at once let go. And I scrambled around in the dimness until I

found my sword. I had it now.

I stood up, panting, holding it firmly, and then I looked up at the sharp distinct rectangle of brightness above. I shut my eyes, and bowed my head, and opened my eyes slowly so as to become accustomed to this deep damp dusk.

Here the castle had no doubt let the mountain rise up under it, for the chamber, though vast, seemed made of only the earth. At least this is what I saw before me, in the rude wall, and then turning around I saw my quarry, as Mastema had called them.

The vampires, the larvae—they lay sleeping, coffinless, cryptless, open in long rows, each exquisitely dressed body covered in a thin shroud of spun gold. They ringed three walls of the crypt. At the far end hung the broken stairs over nothingness.

I blinked and narrowed my eyes, and the light seemed to filter more fully upon them. I drew near to the first figure until I could see the dark-burgundy slippers, and the deep-russet hose and all of this beneath the webbing as if each night fine silkworms wove this shroud for the being, so thick and perfect and fine was it. Alas, it was no such magic; it was only the finest of what God's creatures can make. And it had been spun of the looms of men and women, and it had a fine-stitched hem.

I ripped off the veil.

I drew near the creature's folded arms, and then saw to my sudden horror that his sleeping face was quickened. His eyes opened, and one arm moved violently towards me.

I was yanked back out of the clutch of his fingers only just in time. I turned to see Ramiel holding me, and then he closed his eyes and bowed his forehead into my shoulder.

"Now you know their tricks. Watch it. You see. It folds its arm back now. It thinks it's safe. It closes its eyes."

"What do I do! Ah, I'll kill it!" I said.

Snatching up the veil in my left hand, I raised my sword in my right. I advanced on the sleeping monster, and this time, when the hand rose, I snared it with the veil, swirling the fabric around it, while, with my sword, I came down like the executioner on the block.

At once the head rolled off onto the floor. A wretched sound came, more from the neck perhaps than from the throat. The arm flopped. By light of day, it could not struggle as it might have in the dark of night in

my early battle, when I had decapitated my first assailant. Ah, I had won.

I snatched up the head, watching the blood spill out of the mouth. The eyes, if they had ever opened, were now shut. I hurled the head into the middle of the floor beneath the light. At once the light began to burn the flesh.

"Look at it, the head's burning!" I said. But I myself didn't stop.

I went to the next, snatching the transparent silken shroud from a woman with great long braids, taken to this eerie death in the prime of her life, and snaring her rising arm, severed her head with the same fury and caught it up by one braid and hurled it to land by its mate.

The other head was shriveling and turning black in the light that poured down from the high opening above.

"Lucifer, you see that?" I called out. The echo came back to taunt me, "See that? See that? See that?"

I rushed to the next. "Florian!" I cried out, as I grabbed the veil.

Terrible error.

When he heard his name, his eyes snapped open even before I had drawn abreast of him, and like a puppet yanked on a chain he would have risen if I had not struck him hard with my sword and gashed open his chest. Expressionless, he fell back. I brought the sword down on his tender gentlemanly neck. His blond hair was caked with blood, and his eyes went half-mast and empty and died before my sight.

I snatched him up by his long hair, this bodiless one, this leader of them all, this silver-tongued fiend, and I hurled his head into the smoking, stinking pile.

On and on I went, down the line to the left, why to the left I do not know, except it was my path, and each time I pulled back the veil, I leapt forward with ferocious speed, snaring the arm if it should rise, but sometimes gaining such momentum on it that it had no time to rise, and chopping off the head so fast that I became sloppy and my blows ugly, and I smashed the jawbones of my foes, and even their shoulder bones, but I killed them.

I killed them.

I ripped off their heads and fed them to the mountain, which had gained such smoke now that it seemed a simmering fire of autumn leaves. Ashes rose from it, tiny thin ashes, but in the main, the heads

languished, greasy and blackening, and the mass thickened and the ashes were only a few.

Did they suffer? Did they know? Where had their souls fled on invisible feet in this harsh and terrible moment when their Court was dissolved, when I roared in my work and stomped my feet and threw back my head and cried and cried until I couldn't see through my tears?

I had done with some twenty of them, twenty, and my sword was so thick with blood and gore that I had to wipe it clean. On their bodies, making my way back to go down the other side of the crypt, I wiped it, on one doublet after another, marveling at how their white hands had shriveled and dried up on their chests, at how the black blood flowed so sluggishly by day from their torn necks.

"Dead, you are all dead, and yet where did you go, where did the living soul in you go!"

The light was dimming. I stood breathing heavily. I looked up at Mastema.

"The sun is high overhead," he said gently. He was untouched, though he stood so near to them, the charred and reeking heads.

It seemed the smoke issued more truly from their eyes than anywhere else, as if the jelly melted into smoke more surely.

"The church is dim now, but it is only midday. Be quick. You have twenty more this side, and you know it. Work."

The other angels stood stock-still, clustered together, the magnificent Ramiel and Setheus in their rich robes, and the two simpler, plainer, more somber souls—all of them looking at me in utter suspense. I saw Setheus look at the pile of smoldering heads, and then again at me.

"Go on, poor Vittorio," he whispered. "Hurry on."

"Could you do it?" I asked.

"I cannot."

"No, I know that you are not permitted," I said, my chest aching from the exertion and now the talk I forced from myself. "I mean could you do it? Could you bring yourself to do it!"

"I am not a creature of flesh and blood, Vittorio," Setheus answered helplessly. "But I could do what God told me to do."

I went on past them. I looked back at them in their glorious radiance, the cluster of them, and the masterly one, Mastema, his armor gleaming in the falling light, and his sword so brilliant against his flank.

He said nothing.

I turned. I ripped off the first veil. It was Ursula.

"No." I stood back.

I let the veil drop. I was far enough away from her that she didn't appear to wake; she didn't move. Her lovely arms lay folded still in the same pose of graceful death which all of them had borne, only with her it was sweet, as if in her most innocent girlhood a gentle bane had taken her, not mussing so much as a single hair of long rippling unbraided locks. They made a nest of gold for her head and her shoulders, her swan neck.

I could hear my heaving breaths. I let the edge of my sword drag, singing on the stones. I licked at my parched lips. I didn't dare to look at them, though I knew they were collected only a few yards from me, staring at me. And in the thick stillness, I heard the crisping and sizzling of the burning heads of the damned.

I thrust my hand inside my pocket, and I drew out the rosary of amber beads. My hand shook shamefully as I held it, and then I lifted it, letting the crucifix dangle, and I hurled it at her, so that it struck her, just above her small hands, right on the white swell of her half-bared breasts. It lay there, the crucifix nestled in the curve of her pale skin, and she didn't so much as stir.

The light clung to her eyelashes as if it were dust.

Without excuse or explanation, I turned to the next one, ripping off the veil and assaulting him or her, I knew not which, with a loud raucous cry. I grabbed up the severed head by its thick brown locks and threw it crashing past the angels into the mass of slop that lay at their feet.

Then to the next. Godric. Oh, God, this will be sweet.

I saw his bald head before I ever touched the veil, and now, tearing the veil loose, hearing it rip on account of my carelessness, I waited for him to open his eyes, waited for him to rise up halfway from the slab and glare at me.

"Know me, monster? Know me?" I roared. The sword sliced through his neck. The white head hit the floor, and with my sword I speared it through its dripping stump of a neck. "Know me, monster?" I cried again to the fluttering eyes, the gaping, drooling red mouth. "Know me?"

I walked with him to the pile of the other heads and laid him like a

trophy on top of it. “Know me?” I wailed again.

And then in a fury I went back to my work.

Two more, then three, then five, then seven and then nine, and then some six more, and the Court was finished, and all its dancers and Lords and Ladies were dead.

And then, reeling to the other side, I made swift work of those poor peasant servants, who had no veils to cover their simple bodies, and whose feeble half-starved white limbs could scarce rise in defense.

“The huntsmen, where are they?”

“At the far end. It is almost dark in here. Take great care.”

“I see them,” I said. I drew myself up and caught my breath. They lay in a row of six, heads to the wall like all the others, but they were perilously close together. It would be a hard approach.

I laughed suddenly at the simplicity of it. I laughed. I snatched off the first veil and chopped at the feet. The corpse rose and then my blade could easily see the place to strike, while the blood had already begun to gush.

The second, I cut to stumps at once and then sliced across the middle, and only descended on the head before his hand had caught my blade. I ripped back my sword and chopped the hand off him. “Die, bastard, you who stole me with your fellow; I remember you."

And at last I came to the final one and had his bearded head hanging from my hand.

Slowly I walked back with this one, kicking others before me, others I had not had the strength to hurl very far, and I kicked them like so much refuse until the light fell on all of them.

It was bright now. The afternoon sun was coming in the west side of the church. And the opening above gave forth a terrific and fatal heat.

Slowly I wiped my face with the back of my left hand. I laid down my sword, and I felt for the napkins the monks had put in my pockets, and I took these and cleaned my face and cleaned my hands.

Then I picked up my sword, and I went to the foot of her bier again. She lay as before. The light was nowhere near her. It could not have touched any of them where they lay.

She was safe on her bed of stone, her hands as still as before, fingers beautifully folded, the right hand over the left, and on her mound of white breast there rested the Crucified Christ in gold. Her hair was

stirring in a faint draft that seemed to come from the narrow opening above. But this was a mere halo of tendrils about her otherwise lifeless face.

Her hair, in its loose ripples, without its ribbons or pearls, had fallen a little over the edges of the bier, so narrow was it, and so had the folds of her long gold-embroidered dress. It was not the same that she'd worn when I'd seen her. Only the deep rich blood red was the same, but all the rest was splendid and ornate and new, as if she were a regal princess, always prepared for the kiss of her prince.

"Could Hell receive this?" I whispered. I drew as close as I dared. I could not bear the thought of her arm rising in that mechanical fashion, the sudden clutch of her fingers on the empty air or her eyes opening. I couldn't bear it.

The points of her slippers were small beneath her hem. How daintily she must have lain down to her rest at sunrise. Who had pulled closed the trapdoor, whose chains had fallen? Who had set the trap of the spears, whose engines I had never inspected or compassed with my thoughts?

For the first time in the dimness, I saw a tiny golden circlet on her head, lying just around the crown and fixed by the tiniest pins into the waves so that its single pearl rested on her forehead. Such a small thing.

Was her soul so small? Would Hell take it, like the fire would take any tender part of her anatomy, like the sun would burn to horror her immaculate face?

In some mother's womb she had once slept and dreamt, and into some father's arms been placed.

What had been her tragedy to bring her to this foul and reeking grave, where the heads of her slain companions lay burning slowly in the sun's ever patient, ever indifferent light?

I turned on them. I held my sword down at my side.

"One, let one only live. One!" I declared.

Ramiel covered his face and turned his back on me. Setheus continued to stare but shook his head. My guardians only gazed at me with their level coldness, as they always had. Mastema stared at me, soundlessly, concealing whatever thought he possessed behind his serene mask of a face.

"No, Vittorio," he said. "Do you think a bevy of God's angels has

helped you past these barriers to leave one such as these to live?"

"Mastema, she loved me. And I love her. Mastema, she gave me my life. Mastema, I ask in the name of love. I beg in the name of love. All else here has been justice. But what can I say to God if I slay this one, who has loved and whom I love?"

Nothing in his countenance changed. He only regarded me with his eternal calm. I heard a terrible sound. It was the weeping of Ramiel and Setheus. My guardians turned to look at them, as though surprised, but only mildly so, and then their dreamy soft eyes fixed again, unchanging, on me.

"Merciless angels," I said. "Oh, but such is not fair, and I know it. I lie. I lie. Forgive me."

"We forgive you," said Mastema. "But you must do what you have promised me you would do."

"Mastema, can she be saved? If she herself renounces … can she … is her soul still human?"

No answer came from him. No answer.

"Mastema, please, tell me. Don't you see? If she can be saved, I can stay here with her, I can wring it out of her, I know I can because her heart is good. It's young and good. Mastema, tell me. Can such a creature as she is be saved?"

No answer. Ramiel had lain his head against Setheus's shoulder.

"Oh, please, Setheus," I said. "Tell me. Can she be saved? Must she die by my hand? What if I stay here with her, and wring it out of her, her confession, her final disavowal of all that she has ever done? Is there no priest who can give her absolution? Oh, God …"

"Vittorio," came the whisper from Ramiel. "Are your ears stopped with wax? Can you hear those prisoners starving, crying? You have not even set them free yet. Will you do it by night?"

"I can do it. I can yet do it. But can I not stay here with her, and when she finds she is all alone, that all the others have perished, that all the promises of Godric and Florian were tyranny, is there no way that she can render her soul to God?"

Mastema, without ever a change in his soft cold eyes, slowly turned his back.

"No! Don't do it, don't turn away!" I shouted. I caught hold of his powerful silk-clad arm. I felt his unsurmountable strength beneath the

fabric, the strange, unnatural fabric. He gazed down at me.

"Why can't you tell me!"

"For the love of God, Vittorio!" he roared suddenly, his voice filling the entire crypt. "Don't you realize? We don't know!"

He shook me loose, the better to glare down at me, his brows furrowed, his hand closing on the hilt of his sword.

"We don't come from a species that has ever known forgiveness!" he shouted. "We are not flesh and blood, and in our realm things are Light or they are the Darkness, and that is all we know!"

In a fury, he turned and marched towards her. I rushed after him, pulling at him, but unable to deter him a fraction from his purpose.

He plunged his hand down, past her groping hands, and clutched her tiny neck. Her eyes stared up at him in that terrible, terrible blindness.

"She has a human soul in her," he said in a whisper. And then he drew back as if he did not want to touch her, couldn't bear to touch her, and he backed away from her, shoving me away, forcing me back as he did.

I broke into weeping. The sun shifted, and the shadows began to thicken in the crypt. I turned finally. The patch of light above was now pale. It was a rich radiant gold, but it was pale.

My angels stood there, all gathered, watching me and waiting.

"I'm staying with her here," I said. "She'll wake soon. And I'll put it to her, that she pray for God's grace."

I knew it only as I said it. I understood it only as I made it plain.

"I'll stay with her. If she renounces all her sins for the love of God, then she can remain with me, and death will come, and we will not lift a hand to hasten it, and God will accept us both."

"You think you have the strength to do that?" Mastema asked. "And you think it of her?"

"I owe her this," I said. "I am bound. I never lied to you, not to any of you. I never lied to myself. She slew my brother and sister. I saw her. No doubt she killed many of them, my own. But she saved me. She saved me twice. And to kill is simple, but to save is not!"

"Ah," said Mastema as though I'd struck him. "That's true."

"So I'll stay. I expect nothing from you now. I know I cannot get out of here. Perhaps even she cannot."

"Of course she can," said Mastema.

"Don't leave him," said Setheus. "Take him against his will."

“None of us can do that, and you know it,” said Mastema.

“Only out of the crypt,” pleaded Ramiel, “as if from a canyon into which he's fallen.”

“But it is not such a thing, and I cannot.”

“Then let us stay with him,” said Ramiel.

“Yes, let us stay,” said my two guardians, more or less at the same time and in similar muted expressions.

“Let her see us.”

“How do we know that she can?” asked Mastema. “How do we know that she will? How many times does it happen that a human being can see us?”

For the first time I saw anger in him. He looked at me.

“God has played such a game with you, Vittorio!” he said. “Given you such enemies and such allies!”

“Yes, I know this, and I will beg Him with all my strength and the weight of all my suffering for her soul.”

I didn't mean to close my eyes.

I know that I did not.

But the entire scene was altered utterly. The pile of heads lay as before, and some at random, shriveling, drying up, the acrid smoke still rising from them, and the light above had darkened, yet it was still golden, golden beyond the broken stair, and the jagged broken spears, golden with the last burnt dregs of the late afternoon.

And my angels had gone.

12

DELIVER ME NOT INTO TEMPTATION

For all my youth, my body could take no more. Yet how could I remain in this crypt, waiting for her to awake, without attempting some form of exit?

I gave no thought to the dismissal by my angels. I deserved it, but I was convinced of the rectitude of the chance I meant to give her, that she throw herself on the mercy of God, and that we leave this crypt and, if necessary, find the priest who could absolve her human soul of all her sins. For if she could not make a perfect confession for the love of God alone, well, then, the absolution would surely save her.

I poked around the crypt, stepping among the drying-up corpses. What light there was gleamed on dried founts of blood that ran down the sides of the stone biers.

At last I found what I had hoped to find, a great ladder that could be lifted and thrown up to the ceiling above. Only, how could I wield such a thing?

I dragged it towards the center of the crypt, kicking out of my path the heads which were now damaged beyond reprieve, and I laid down the ladder, and stepped at midpoint, between two of the rungs, and tried from there to lift it.

Impossible. I simply did not possess the leverage. It weighed too much, slight as it was, because it was so long. Three or four strong men might have hoisted it sufficiently to make its topmost rungs catch on the broken spears, but I alone could not do it.

Alas, there was another possibility. A chain, or a rope, that could be tossed to the spears above. In the gloam, I made a search for such but found none.

No chains anywhere here? No coil of rope?

Had even the young larvae been able to leap the gap between the floor and the broken stairway?

At last I moved along the walls, searching for any bump or hook or excrescence which might indicate a storeroom or, God forbid, another crypt of these fiends.

But I could find nothing.

Finally, I staggered towards the center of the room again. I gathered all the heads, even the loathsome bald head of Godric, which was now black like leather with its yellowed slits of eyes, and I piled these heads where the light could not fail to continue its work on them.

Then, stumbling over the ladder, I fell on my knees at the foot of Ursula's bier.

I sank down. I would sleep this little while. No, not sleep, rest.

Not willing it, indeed, fearing it and regretting it, I felt my limbs go limp and I lay on the stone floor, and my eyes closed in a blessed restorative sleep.

How curious it was.

I had thought her scream would awaken me, that like a frightened child she would have risen up in the darkness on the bier, finding herself alone with so many dead ones.

I had thought the sight of the heads in the pile would have terrified her.

But no such had happened.

Twilight filled the space above, violet-colored, like the flowers of the meadow, and she stood over me. She had put the rosary around her neck, which is not common, and she wore it as a beautiful ornament with the gold crucifix turning and twisting in the light, a glinting speck of gold that matched the specks of light in her eyes.

She was smiling.

"My brave one, my hero, come, let's escape this place of death. You've done it, you have avenged them."

"Did you move your lips?"

"Need I do that with you?"

I felt a thrill pass through me as she lifted me to my feet. She stood looking up into my face, her hands firmly on my shoulders.

"Blessed Vittorio," she said. Then clasping me about the waist, she rose upwards and we passed the broken spears, without so much as touching their splintered tips, and found ourselves in the chapel in the dusk, the windows darkened and the shadows playing gracefully but mercifully around the distant altar.

"Oh, my darling, my darling," I said. "Do you know what the angels did? Do you know what they said?"

“Come, let’s free the prisoners as you wish,” she told me.

I felt so refreshed, so full of vigor. It was as if I’d suffered no exhausting labor at all, as if war hadn’t worn down my limbs and broken me, as though battle and struggle hadn’t been my portion for days.

I rushed with her through the castle. We threw open the doors, one pair after another, on the miserable occupants of the coop. It was she who scurried on her light, feline feet through the pathways beneath the orange trees and the bird aviaries, overturning the kettles of soup, crying out to the poor and the lame and the hopeless that they were free, that no one imprisoned them now.

In a twinkling we stood on a high balcony. I saw far below their miserable procession in the half-light, the long winding line of them progressing down the mountain under the purple sky and the rising evening star. The weak helped the strong; the old carried the young.

“Where will they go, back to that evil town? Back to the monsters who gave them up in sacrifice?” I was in a fury suddenly. “Punished, that’s what they must be.”

“In time, Vittorio; there is time. Your poor sad victims are free now. This is our time, yours and mine, come.”

Her skirts went out in a great dark circle as down we flew, down and down, down past the windows, and down past the walls, until my feet were allowed to touch the soft ground.

“Oh, Lord God, it’s the meadow, look, the meadow,” I said. “I can see it as clearly under the rising moon as ever I saw it in my dreams.”

A sudden softness filled me completely. I twined her in my arms, my fingers digging deep into her rippling hair. All the world seemed to sway about me, and yet I was anchored in dance with her, and the soft airy movement of the trees sang to us as we were bound together.

“Nothing can ever part us, Vittorio,” she said. She tore loose. She ran ahead of me.

“No, wait, Ursula, wait!” I cried. I ran after her, but the grass and the irises were tall and thick. It wasn’t so like the dream, but then again it was, because these things were alive and full of the verdant smell of the wild, and the sylvan woods were gently heaving their limbs on the scented wind.

I fell down exhausted and let the flowers climb up on either side of me. I let the red irises peer down upon my upturned face.

She knelt above me. “He will forgive me, Vittorio,” she said. “He will forgive all in his infinite mercy.”

“Oh, yes, my love, my blessed, beautiful love, my savior, He will.”

The tiny crucifix dangled down against my neck.

“But you must do this for me, you who let me live below, you who spared me and fell asleep in my trust at the feet of my grave, you must do this …”

“What, blessed one?” I asked. “Tell me and I’ll do it.”

“Pray first for strength, and then into your human body, into your wholesome and baptized body, you must take all the demon blood out of me which you can, you must draw it from me, and thereby free my soul from its spell; it will be vomited forth out of you like the potions we gave you, which cannot hurt you. Will you do it for me? Will you take the poison out of me?”

I thought of the sickness, of the vomit that had streamed from my mouth in the monastery. I thought of it all, the terrible gibbering and madness.

“Do this for me,” she said.

She lay against me and I felt her heart trapped in her chest, and I felt my own, and it seemed I had never known such dreamy languor. I could feel my fingers curl. For an instant it seemed they rested on hard rocks in this meadow, as if the backs of my hands had found harsh pebbles, but once again I felt the broken stems, the bed of purple and red and white irises.

She raised her head.

“In the Name of God,” I said, “for your salvation, I will take whatever poison I must from you; I will draw off the blood as if from a cankerous wound, as if it were the corruption of a leper. Give it to me, give me the blood.”

Her face was motionless above mine, so small, so dainty, so white.

“Be brave, my love, be brave, for I must make room for it first.”

She nestled in against my neck, and into my flesh there came her teeth. “Be brave, only a little more to make room.”

“A little more?” I whispered. “A little more. Ah, Ursula, look up, look up at Heaven and Hell in the sky, for the stars are balls of fire suspended there by the angels.”

But the language was stretched and meaningless and became an echo

in my ears. A darkness shrouded me, and when I lifted my hand it seemed a golden net covered it and I could see far, far away, my fingers shrouded in the net.

The meadow was suddenly flooded with sunlight. I wanted to break away, to sit up, to tell her, Look, the sun has come, and you're not hurt, my precious girl. But on and on there came these waves of divine and luscious pleasure passing through me, pulled from me, pulled up from my loins, this coaxing and magnificent pleasure.

When her teeth slipped from my flesh, it was as if she had tightened the grip of her soul on my organs, on all parts of me that were man and babe once, and human now.

"Oh, my love, my darling, don't stop." The sun made a bewildering dance in the branches of the chestnut trees.

She opened her mouth, and from her came the stream of blood, the deep dark kiss of blood. "Take it from me, Vittorio."

"All your sins into me, my divine child," I said. "Oh, God help me. God have mercy on me. Mastema—."

But the word was broken. My mouth was filled with the blood, and it was no rank potion mixed of parts, but that searing thrilling sweetness that she had first given me in her most secretive and perplexing kisses. Only this time it came in an overwhelming gush.

Her arms were tucked beneath me. They lifted me. The blood seemed to know no veins within but to fill my limbs themselves, to fill my shoulders and my chest, to drown and invigorate my very heart. I stared up at the twinkling playing sun, I felt her blinding and soft hair across my eyes but peered through its golden strands. My breath came in gasps.

The blood flowed down into my legs and filled them to my very toes. My body surged with strength. My organ pumped against her, and once more I felt her subtle feline weight, her sinuous limbs hugging me, holding me, binding me, her arms crossed beneath me, her lips sealed to mine.

My eyes struggled, grew wide. The sunlight filled them, and then contracted. It contracted, and my sighs seemed to grow immense, and the beating of my heart to echo, as though we were not in a wild meadow, and the sounds that came from my empowered body, my transformed body, my body so full of her blood, echoed off stone walls!

The meadow was gone or never was. The twilight was a rectangle high

above. I lay in the crypt.

I rose up, throwing her off, back away from me as she screamed in pain. I sprang to my feet and stared at my white hands outstretched before me.

A horrid hunger reared up in me, a fierce strength, a howl!

I stared up at the dark-purple light above and screamed.

"You've done it to me! You've made me one of you!"

She sobbed. I turned on her. She backed up, bent over, her hand over her mouth, crying and fleeing from me. I ran after her. Like a rat she ran, round and round the crypt, screaming.

"Vittorio, no, Vittorio, no, Vittorio, no, don't hurt me. Vittorio, I did this for us; Vittorio, we are free. Ah, God help me!"

And then upwards she flew, just missing my outstretched arms. She had fled to the chapel above.

"Witchlet, monster, larva, you tricked me with your illusions, with your visions, you made me one of you, you did it to me!" My roars echoed one upon the other as I scrambled about in the dark till I found my sword, and then dancing back to gain my momentum, I too made the leap and cleared the spears and found myself high up on the floor of the church, and she hovering with glittering tears before the altar.

She backed up into the bank of red flowers that barely showed in the starlight that passed through the darkened windows.

"No, Vittorio, don't kill me, don't do it. Don't," she sobbed and wailed. "I am a child, like you, please, don't."

I tore at her, and she scrambled to the end of the sanctuary. In a rage, I swung at the statue of Lucifer with my sword. It tottered and then crashed down, breaking on the marble floor of the cursed sanctuary.

She hovered at the far end. She dropped down on her knees and threw out her hands. She shook her head, her hair flying wildly from side to side.

"Don't kill me, don't kill me, don't kill me. You send me to Hell if you do; don't do it."

"Wretch!" I moaned. "Wretch!" My tears fell as freely as hers. "I thirst, you wretch. I thirst, and I can smell them, the slaves in the coop. I can smell them, their blood, damn you!"

I too had gone down on my knees. I lay down on the marble, and kicked aside the broken fragments of the hideous statue. With my sword

I snagged the lace of the altar cloth and brought it down with all its many red flowers tumbling on me, so that I could roll over into them and crush my face into their softness.

A silence fell, a terrible silence full of my own wailing. I could feel my strength, feel it even in the timbre of my voice, and the arm that held the sword without exhaustion or restraint, and feel it in the painless calm with which I lay on what should have been cold and was not cold, or only goodly cold.

Oh, she had made me mighty.

A scent overcame me. I looked up. She stood just above me, tender, loving thing that she was, with her eyes so full of the starlight now, so glinting and quiet and unjudging. In her arms she held a young human, a feeble-minded one, who did not know his danger.

How pink and succulent he was, how like the roasted pig ready for my lips, how full of naturally cooking and bubbling mortal blood and ready for me. She set him down before me.

He was naked, thin buttocks on his heels, his trembling chest very pink and his hair black and long and soft around his guileless face. He appeared to be dreaming or searching the darkness, perhaps for angels?

"Drink, my darling, drink from him," she said, "and then you'll have the strength to take us both to the Good Father for Confession."

I smiled. The desire for the feeble-minded boy before me was almost more than I could endure. But it was a whole new book now, was it not, what I might endure, and I took my time, rising up on my elbow as I looked at her.

"To the Good Father? You think that's where we'll go? Right away, just like that, the two of us?"

She began to cry again. "Not right away, no, not right away," she cried. She shook her head. Beaten.

I took him. I broke his neck when I drained him dry. He made not a sound. There was no time for fear or pain or crying.

Do we ever forget the first kill? Do we ever?

Through the coop I went all that night, devouring, feasting, gorging on their throats, taking what I wanted from each, sending each to God or to Hell, how could I ever know, bound now to this earth with her, and she feasting with me in her dainty way, ever watching for my howls and wails, and ever catching hold of me to kiss me and ply me with her sobs

when I shook with rage.

"Come out of here," I said.

It was just before sunrise. I told her I would spend no day beneath these pointed towers, in this house of horrors, in this place of evil and filthy birth.

"I know of a cave," she said. "Far down the mountains, past the farmlands."

"Yes, somewhere on the edge of a true meadow?"

"There are meadows in this fair land without count, my love," she said. "And under the moon their flowers shine as prettily for our magical eyes as ever they do for humans by the light of God's sun. Remember His moon is ours.

"And tomorrow night … before you think of the priest … you must take your time to think of the priest—."

"Don't make me laugh again. Show me how to fly. Wrap your arm around my waist and show me how to drop from the high walls to safety in a descent that would shatter a man's limbs. Don't talk of priests anymore. Don't mock me!"

"… before you think of the priest, of Confession," she went on, undeterred in her dainty sweet small voice, her eyes brimming with tears of love, "we'll go back to the town of Santa Maddalana while it's fast asleep, and we'll burn it all down around them."

13

CHILD BRIDE

We didn't put the torch to Santa Maddalana. It was too much of a pleasure to hunt the town.

By the third night, I had stopped weeping at sunrise, when we retired together, locked in each other's arms inside our concealed and unreachable cave.

And by the third night, the townspeople knew what had befallen them—how their clever bargain with the Devil had rebounded upon them—and they were in a panic, and it was a great game to outsmart them, to hide in the multitude of shadows that made up their twisted streets, and to tear open their most extravagant and clever locks.

In the early hours, when no one dared to stir, and the good Franciscan priest knelt awake in his cell, saying his rosary, and begging God for understanding of what was happening—this priest, you remember, who had befriended me at the inn, who had dined with me and warned me, not in anger like his Dominican brother, but in kindness—while this priest prayed, I crept into the Franciscan church and I too prayed.

But each night I told myself what a man says to himself under his breath when he couches with his adulterous whore: "One more night, God, and then I'll go to Confession. One more night of bliss, Lord, and then I'll go home to my wife."

The townspeople had no chance against us.

What skills I did not acquire naturally and through experimentation, my beloved Ursula taught to me with patience and grace. I could scan a mind, find a sin and eat it with a flick of my tongue as I sucked the blood from a lazy, lying merchant who had put out his own tender children once for the mysterious Lord Florian, who had kept the peace.

One night we found that the townsmen had been by day to the abandoned castle. There was evidence of hasty entry, with little stolen or disturbed. How it must have frightened them, the horrid saints still flanking the pedestal of the Fallen Lucifer in the church. They had not taken the golden candlesticks or the old tabernacle in which I discovered, with my groping hand, a shriveled human heart.

On our last visit to the Court of the Ruby Grail, I took the burned leathery heads of the vampires from the deep cellar and I hurled them like so many stones through the stained-glass windows. The last of the brilliant art of the castle was gone.

Together, Ursula and I roamed the bedchambers of the castle, which I had never glimpsed or even imagined, and she showed me those rooms in which the members of the Court had gathered for dice or chess or to listen to small ensembles of music. Here and there we saw evidence of something stolen—a coverlet ripped from a bed and a pillow fallen to the floor.

But obviously the townspeople were more afraid than greedy. They took little from the castle.

And as we continued to prey upon them, artfully defeating them, they began to desert Santa Maddalana. Shops lay open when we came into the empty streets at midnight; windows were unbolted, cradles empty. The Dominican church had been deconsecrated and abandoned, its altar stone removed. The cowardly priests, whom I had not granted the mercy of a quick death, had abandoned their flock.

The game became ever more invigorating to me. For now, those who remained were quarrelsome and avaricious and refusing to give up without a fight. It was simple to sort the innocent, who believed in the faith of the vigil light or the saints to protect them, from those who had played with the Devil and now kept an uneasy watch in the dark with sword in hand.

I liked to talk to them, spar with them verbally, as I killed them. “Did you think your game would go on forever? Did you think the thing you fed would never feed on you?”

As for my Ursula, she had no stomach for such sport. She could not endure the spectacle of suffering. The old Communion of Blood in the castle had for her been tolerable only because of the music, the incense and the supreme authority of Florian and Godric, who had led her in it with every step.

Night after night, as the town was slowly emptied, as the farms were deserted, as Santa Maddalana, my school town, became ever more ruined, Ursula took to playing with orphaned children. She sat sometimes on the church steps cradling a human infant and cooing to it, and telling it stories in French.

She sang old songs in Latin from the courts of her time, which had been two hundred years ago, she told me, and she talked of battles in France and in Germany whose names meant nothing to me.

"Don't play with the children," I said. "They'll remember it. They'll remember us."

A fortnight went by before the community was irreparably destroyed. Only the orphans remained and a few of the very old, and the Franciscan father, and his father, the elfin little man who sat in his lighted room at night, playing a game of cards with himself, as if he did not even now guess what was going on.

On the fifteenth night, it must have been, when we arrived in the town, we knew at once that only two persons were left. We could hear the little old man singing to himself in the empty Inn with the doors open. He was very drunk, and his wet pink head gleamed in the light of the candle. He slapped the cards down on the table in a circle, playing a game of solitaire called "clock."

The Franciscan priest sat beside him. He looked up at us, fearlessly and calmly, as we came into the Inn.

I was overcome with hunger, ravening hunger, for the blood in them both.

"I never told you my name, did I?" he asked me.

"No, you never did, Father," I said.

"Joshua," he said. "That's my name, Fra Joshua. All the rest of the community has gone back to Assisi, and they took with them the last of the children. It's a long journey south."

"I know, Father," I said. "I've been to Assisi, I've prayed at the shrine of St. Francis. Tell me, Father, when you look at me, do you see angels around me?"

"Why would I see angels?" he asked quietly. He looked from me to Ursula. "I see beauty, I see youth fixed in polished ivory. But I don't see angels. I never have."

"I saw them once," I said. "May I sit down?"

"Do as you like," he said to me. He watched us, drawing himself up in his hard simple wooden chair, as I seated myself opposite him, much as I had been on that day in the village, only now we were not in the fragrant arbor under the sun but inside, in the Inn itself, where the candlelight gave more volume and more warmth.

Ursula looked at me in confusion. She didn't know what was in my mind. I had never witnessed her speaking to any human being except for me myself and for the children with whom she'd played—in other words, only with those for whom her heart had quickened and whom she did not mean to destroy.

What she thought of the little man and his son, the Franciscan priest, I couldn't guess.

The old man was winning the card game. "There, you see, I told you. Our luck!" he said. He gathered up his greasy loose cards to shuffle them and to play again.

The priest looked at him with glazed eyes, as though he could not gather his own wits even to fool or reassure his old father, and then he looked at me.

"I saw these angels in Florence," I said, "and I disappointed them, broke my vow to them, lost my soul."

He turned from his father to me sharply.

"Why do you prolong this?" he asked.

"I will not hurt you. Neither will my companion," I said. I sighed. It would have been that moment in a conversation when I would have reached for the cup or the tankard and taken a drink. My hunger hurt me. I wondered if the thirst hurt Ursula. I stared at the priest's wine, which was nothing to me now, nothing, and I looked at his face, sweating in the light of the candle, and I went on:

"I want you to know that I saw them, that I talked to them, these angels. They tried to help me to destroy those monsters who held sway over this town, and over the souls of those here. I want you to know, Father."

"Why, son, why tell me?"

"Because they were beautiful, and they were as real as we are, and you have seen us. You have seen hellish things; you have seen sloth and treachery, cowardice and deceit. You see devils now, vampires. Well, I want you to know that with my own eyes I saw angels, true angels, magnificent angels, and that they were more glorious than I can ever tell you in words."

He regarded me thoughtfully for a long time, and then he looked at Ursula, who sat troubled and looking up at me, rather afraid that I would unduly suffer, and then he said:

“Why did you fail them? Why did they come with you in the first place, and if you had the aid of angels, why did you fail?”

I shrugged my shoulders. I smiled. “For love.”

He didn’t answer.

Ursula leaned her head against my arm. I felt her free hair brushing my back as she let me feel her weight.

“For love!” the priest repeated.

“Yes, and for honor as well.”

“Honor.”

“No one will ever understand it. God will not accept it, but it’s true, and now, what is there, Father, that divides us, you and I, and the woman who sits with me? What is between us—the two parties—the honest priest and the two demons?”

The little man chuckled suddenly. He had slapped down a marvelous run of cards. “Look at that!” he said. He looked up at me with his clever little eyes. “Oh, your question, forgive me. I know the answer.”

“You do?” asked the priest, turning to the little old man. “You know the answer?”

“Of course, I do,” said his father. He dealt out another card. “What separates them now from a good Confession is weakness and the fear of Hell if they must give up their lives.”

The priest stared at his father in amazement.

So did I.

Ursula said nothing. Then she kissed me on the cheek. “Let’s leave them now,” she whispered. “There is no more Santa Maddalana. Let’s go.”

I looked up, around the darkened room of the Inn. I looked at the old barrels. I looked in haunted perplexity and appalling sorrow at all things that humans used and touched. I looked at the heavy hands of the priest, folded on the table before me. I looked at the hair on his hands, and then up at his thick lips and his large watering and sorrowful eyes.

“Will you accept this from me?” I whispered. “This secret, of angels? That I saw them! I! And you, you see what I am, and you know therefore that I know whereof I speak. I saw their wings, I saw their halos, I saw their white faces, and I saw the sword of Mastema the powerful, and it was they who helped me sack the castle and lay waste to all the demons save for this one, this child bride, who is mine.”

“Child bride,” she whispered. It filled her with delight. She looked at me, musingly, and hummed a soft, old-fashioned air, one of those threads of songs from her times.

She spoke to me in an urgent persuasive whisper, squeezing my arm as she did:

“Come, Vittorio, leave these men in peace, and come with me, and I’ll tell you how indeed I was a child bride.” She looked at the priest with renewed animation. “I was, you know. They came to my father’s castle and purchased me as such, they said that I must be a virgin, and the midwives came and brought their basin of warm water, and they examined me and they said I was a virgin, and only then did Florian take me. I was his bride.”

The priest stared fixedly at her, as if he could not move if he wanted to move, and the old man merely glanced up again and again, cheerfully, nodding as he listened to her, and went on playing with his cards.

“Can you imagine my horror?” she asked them. She looked at me, tossing her hair back over her shoulder. It was in its ripples again from the plaits in which she’d had it bound earlier. “Can you imagine when I climbed onto the couch and I saw who was my bridegroom, this white thing, this dead thing, such as we look to you?”

The priest made no answer. His eyes filled slowly with tears. Tears!

It seemed a lovely human spectacle, bloodless, crystalline, and such an adornment for his old soft face, with its jowls and fleshy mouth.

“And then to be taken to a ruined chapel,” she said, “a ruined place, full of spiders and vermin, and there before a desecrated altar, to be stripped and laid down and taken by him and made his bride.”

She let go of my arm, her arms forming a loose embracing gesture. “Oh, I had a veil, a great long beautiful veil, and a dress of such fine flowered silk, and all this he tore from me, and took me first with his lifeless, seedless stone-hard organ and then with his fang teeth, like these very teeth which I have now. Oh, such a wedding, and my father had given me over for this.”

The tears coursed down the priest’s cheeks.

I stared at her, transfixed with sorrow and rage, rage against a demon I had already slaughtered, a rage that I hoped could reach down through the smoldering coals of Hell and find him with fingers like hot tongs.

I said nothing.

She raised her eyebrow; she cocked her head.

"He tired of me," she said. "But he never stopped loving me. He was new to the Court of the Ruby Grail, a young Lord and seeking at every turn to increase his might and his romance! And later, when I asked for Vittorio's life, he couldn't refuse me on account of our vows exchanged on that stone altar so long ago. After he let Vittorio leave us, after he had him cast down in Florence, certain of Vittorio's madness and ruin, Florian sang songs to me, songs for a bride. He sang the old poems as though our love could be revived."

I covered my brow with my right hand. I couldn't bear to weep the blood tears that flow from us. I couldn't bear to see before me, as if painted by Fra Filippo, the very romance she described.

It was the priest who spoke.

"You are children," he said. His lip trembled. "Mere children."

"Yes," she said in her exquisite voice, with certainty and a small accepting smile. She clasped my left hand in hers and rubbed it hard and tenderly. "Children forever. But he was only a young man, Florian, just a young man himself."

"I saw him once," said the priest, his voice thick with his crying but soft. "Only once."

"And you knew?" I asked.

"I knew I was powerless and my faith was desperate, and that around me were bonds that I could not loose or break."

"Let's go now, Vittorio, don't make him cry anymore," said Ursula. "Come on, Vittorio. Let's leave here. We need no blood tonight and cannot think of harming them, cannot even …"

"No, beloved, never," I said to her. "But take my gift, Father, please, the only clean thing which I can give, my testimony that I saw the angels, and that they upheld me when I was weak."

"And won't you take absolution from me, Vittorio!" he said. His voice rose, and his chest seemed to increase in size. "Vittorio and Ursula, take my absolution."

"No, Father," I said. "We cannot take it. We don't want it."

"But why?"

"Because, Father," said Ursula kindly, "we plan to sin again as soon as we possibly can."

14

THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY

She didn't lie.

We journeyed that night to my father's house. It was nothing for us to make that journey, but it was many miles for a mortal, and word had not reached that forlorn farmland that the threat of the night demons, the vampires of Florian, was gone. Indeed, it is most likely that my farms were still deserted because ghastly tales were given out by those who had fled Santa Maddalana, traveling over hill and valley, mouth to mouth.

It didn't take me long to realize, however, that the great castle of my family was occupied. A horde of soldiers and clerks had been hard at work.

As we crept over the giant wall after midnight, we found that all the dead of my family had been properly buried, or placed in their proper stone coffins beneath the chapel, and that the goods of the household, all of its abundant wealth, had been taken away. Only a few wagons remained of those which must have already started their progress south.

The few who slept in the offices of my father's steward were keepers of the accounts of the Medici bank, and on tiptoe, in the dim light of a star-studded sky, I inspected the few papers they had left out to dry.

All of the inheritance of Vittorio di Raniari had been collected and catalogued, and was being taken on to Florence for him, to be placed in safety with Cosimo until such time as Vittorio di Raniari was twenty-four years of age and could thereby assume responsibility for himself as a man.

Only a few soldiers slept in the barracks. Only a few horses were quartered in the stables. Only a few squires and attendants slept in proximity to their Lords.

Obviously the great castle, being of no strategic use to Milanese or German or French or Papal authority, or to Florence, was not being restored or repaired, merely shut down.

Well before dawn, we left my home, but before going, I took leave of my father's grave.

I knew that I would come back. I knew that soon the trees would climb the mountain to the walls. I knew that the grass would grow high through the crevices and cracks of the cobblestones. I knew that things human would lose all love of this place, as they had lost their love of so many ruins in the country round.

I would return then. I would come back.

That night, Ursula and I hunted the vicinity for the few brigands we could find in the woods, laughing gaily when we caught them and dragged them from their horses. It was a riotous old feast.

"And where now, my Lord?" my bride asked me towards morning. We had again found a cave for shelter, a deep and hidden place, full of thorny vines that barely scratched our resilient skin, behind a veil of wild blueberries that would hide us from all eyes, including that of the great rising sun.

"To Florence, my love. I have to go there. And in its streets, we'll never suffer hunger, or discovery, and there are things which I must see with my own eyes."

"But what are those things, Vittorio?" she asked.

"Paintings, my love, paintings. I have to see the angels in the paintings. I have to … face them, as it were."

She was content. She had never seen the great city of Florence. She had, all her wretched eternity of ritual and courtly discipline, been contained in the mountains, and she lay down beside me to dream of freedom, of brilliant colors of blue and green and gold, so contrary to the dark red that she still wore. She lay down beside me, trusting me, and, as for me, I trusted nothing.

I only licked the human blood on my lips and wondered how long I might have on this earth before someone struck off my head with a swift and certain sword.

15

THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

The city of Florence was in an uproar.

"Why?" I asked.

It was well past curfew, to which no one was paying much attention, and there was a huge crowd of students congregated in Santa Maria Maggiori—the Duomo—listening to a lecture by a humanist who pleaded that Fra Filippo Lippi was not such a pig.

No one took much note of us. We had fed early, in the countryside, and wore heavy mantles, and what could they see of us but a little pale flesh?

I went into the church. The crowd came out almost to the doors.

"What's the matter? What's happened to the great painter?"

"Oh, he's done it now," said the man who answered me, not even bothering to look at me or at the slender figure of Ursula clinging to me.

The man was too intent on looking at the lecturer, who stood up ahead, his voice echoing sharply in the overwhelming large nave.

"Done what?"

Getting no answer, I pushed my way a little deeper into the thick, odiferous human crowd, pulling Ursula with me. She was still shy of such an immense city, and she had not seen a Cathedral on this scale in the more than two hundred years of her life.

Once again I put my question to two young students, who turned at once to answer me, fashionable boys both, about eighteen, or what they called then in Florence *giovani*, being the most difficult of youths, too old to be a child, such as I was, and too young to be a man.

"Well, he asked for the fairest of the nuns to pose for the altarpiece that he was painting of the blessed Virgin, that's what he did," said the first student, black-haired and deep-eyed, staring at me with a cunning smile. "He asked for her as a model, asked that the convent choose her for him, so that the Virgin he painted would be most perfect, and then …"

The other student took it up.

"… he ran off with her! Stole the nun right out of the convent, ran off

with her and her sister, mind you, her blood-kindred sister, and has set up his household right over his shop, he and his nun and her sister, the three of them, the monk and the two nuns … and lives in sin with her, Lucrezia Buti, and paints the Virgin on the altarpiece and does not give a damn what anyone thinks."

There was jostling and pushing in the crowd about us. Men told us to be quiet. The students were choking on their laughter.

"If he didn't have Cosimo," said the first student, lowering his voice in an obedient but mischievous whisper, "they'd string him up, I mean her family, the Buti, would at least, if not the priests of the Carmelite Order, if not the whole damned town."

The other student shook his head and covered his mouth not to laugh out loud.

The speaker, far ahead, advised all to remain calm and let this scandal and outrage be handled by the proper authorities, for everyone knew that nowhere in all of Florence was there a painter any greater than Fra Filippo, and that Cosimo would tend to this in his own time.

"He's always been tormented," said the student beside me.

"Tormented," I whispered. "Tormented." His face came back to me, the monk glimpsed years ago in Cosimo's house in the Via Larga, the man arguing so fiercely to be free, only to be with a woman for a little while. I felt the strangest conflict within, the strangest darkest fear. "Oh, that they don't hurt him again."

"One might wonder," came a soft voice in my ear. I turned, but I saw no one who could have spoken to me. Ursula looked about.

"What is it, Vittorio?"

But I knew the whisper, and it came again, bodiless and intimate, "One might wonder, where were his guardian angels on the day that Fra Filippo did such a mad thing?"

I turned in a mad frantic circle, searching for the origin of the voice. Men backed away from me and made little gestures of annoyance. I snatched up Ursula's hand and made for the doors.

Only when I was outside in the piazza did my heart stop pounding. I had not known that with this new blood I could feel such anxiety and misery and fear.

"Oh, run off with a nun to paint the Virgin!" I cried out under my breath.

“Don’t cry, Vittorio,” she said.

“Don’t speak to me as if I were your little brother!” I said to her, and then was full of shame. She was stricken by my words, as if I’d slapped her. I took her fingers and kissed them. “I’m sorry, Ursula, I am sorry.”

I pulled her along beside me.

“But where are we going?”

“To the house of Fra Filippo, to his workshop. Don’t question me now.”

Within moments we had found our way, echoing and clattering down the narrow street, and we stood before the doors that were shut up and I could see no light, save in the third-story windows, as though he had had to flee to that height with his bride.

No mob was gathered here.

But out of the darkness there came suddenly a handful of filth heaved at the bolted doors, and then another and then a volley of stones. I stepped back, shielding Ursula, and watched as one passerby after another slunk forward and hurled his insults at the shop.

Finally, I lay against the wall opposite, staring dully in the darkness, and I heard the deep-throated bell of the church ring the hour of eleven, which meant surely that all men must vacate the streets.

Ursula only waited on me and said nothing, and she noted it quietly when I looked up and saw the last of Fra Filippo’s lights go out.

“It’s my doing,” I said. “I took his angels from him, and he fell into this folly, and for what did I do it, for what, that I might possess you as surely now as he possesses his nun?”

“I don’t know your meaning, Vittorio,” she said. “What are nuns and priests to me? I have never said a word to wound you, never, but I say such words now. Don’t stand here weeping over these mortals you loved. We are wedded now, and no convent vow or priestly anointment divides us. Let’s go away from here, and when by light of lamps you want to show me the wonders of this painter, then bring me, bring me to see the angels of which you spoke rendered in pigment and oil.”

I was chastened by her firmness. I kissed her hand again. I told her I was sorry. I held her to my heart.

How long I might have stood with her there, I don’t know. Moments passed. I heard the sound of running water and distant footsteps, but nothing of consequence, nothing which mattered in the thick night of crowded Florence, with its four- and five-story palaces, with its old half-

broken towers, and its churches, and its thousands upon thousands of sleeping souls.

A light startled me. It fell down upon me in bright yellow seams. I saw the first, a thin line of brilliance. It cut across her figure, and then there came another, illuminating the alley-like street beyond us, and I realized that the lamps had been lighted within Fra Filippo's shop.

I turned just as the bolts inside were made to slide back with a low, grating noise. The noise echoed up the dark walls. No light shone above, behind the barred windows.

Suddenly the doors were opened and slapped back softly, soundlessly almost, against the wall, and I saw the deep rectangle of the interior, a wide shallow room filled with brilliant canvases all blazing above candles enough to light a Bishop's Mass.

My breath left me. I clutched her tightly, my hand on the back of her head as I pointed.

"There they are, both of them, the *Annunciations*!" I whispered. "Do you see the angels, the angels who kneel, there, and there, the angels who kneel before the Virgins!"

"I see them," she said reverently. "Ah, they are more lovely even than I supposed." She shook my arm. "Don't cry, Vittorio, unless it's for beauty's sake, only for that."

"Is that a command, Ursula?" I asked. My eyes were so clouded I could scarce see the poised flat kneeling figures of Ramiel and Setheus.

But as I tried to clear my vision, as I tried to gather my wits and swallow the ache in my throat, the miracle I feared more than anything in this world, yet craved, yet hungered for—that miracle commenced.

Out of the very fabric of the canvas, they appeared simultaneously, my silk-clad blond-haired angels, my haloed angels, to unravel from the tight weave itself. They turned, gazing at me first and then moving so that they were no longer flat profiles but full robust figures, and then they stepped out and onto the stones of the shop.

I knew by Ursula's gasp that she had seen the same vivid series of miraculous gestures. Her hand went to her lips.

Their faces bore no wrath, no sadness. They merely looked at me, and in their sweet soft looks was all the condemnation I have ever understood.

"Punish me," I whispered. "Punish me by taking away my eyes that I

can never see your beauty again."

Very slowly, Ramiel shook his head to answer no. And Setheus followed with the same negation. They stood side by side in their bare feet, as always, their abundant garments too light for movement on the heavy air, as they merely continued to gaze.

"What then?" I said. "What do I deserve from you? How is it that I can see you and see your glory even still?" I was a wreck of childish tears again, no matter how Ursula stared at me, no matter how she tried with her silent reproach to make the man of me.

I couldn't stop myself.

"What then? How can I see you still?"

"You'll always see us," Ramiel said softly, tonelessly.

"Every time you ever look at one of his paintings, you will see us," said Setheus, "or you will see our like."

There was no judgment in it. There was merely the same lovely serenity and kindness that they had always bestowed on me.

But it was not finished. I saw behind them, taking dark shape, my own guardians, that solemn ivory pair, draped in their robes of shadowy blue.

How hard were their eyes, how knowing, how disdainful yet without the edge which men lend to such passions. How glacial and remote.

My lips parted. A cry was there. A terrible cry. But I dared not rouse the night around me, the infinite night that moved out over the thousands of slanted red-tile rooftops, out over the hills and the country, out under the numberless stars.

Suddenly the entire building began to move. It trembled, and the canvases, brilliant and shimmering in their bath of burning light, were glittering as if shaken by a tremor of the very earth itself.

Mastema appeared suddenly before me, and the room was swept backward, broadened, deepened, and all those lesser angels were swept back from him as if by a soundless wind that cannot be defied.

The flood of light ignited his immense gold wings as they spread out, crowding the very corners of the vastness and pushing it even to greater breadth, and the red of his helmet glared as if it were molten, and out of his sheath, he drew his sword.

I backed up. I forced Ursula behind me. I pushed her back against the damp cold wall and imprisoned her there, behind me, as safe as I could make her on the face of the earth, with my arms stretched back to hold

her so that she could not, must not, be taken away.

"Ah," said Mastema, nodding, smiling. The sword was uplifted. "So even now you would go into Hell rather than see her die!"

"I would!" I cried. "I have no choice."

"Oh, yes, you have a choice."

"No, not her, don't kill her. Kill me, and send me there, yes, but give her one more chance …"

Ursula cried against my shoulders, her hands clinging to my hair, catching hold of it, as if by means of it she'd be safe.

"Send me now," I said. "Go ahead, strike off my head and send me to my judgment before the Lord that I may beg for her! Please, Mastema, do it, but do not strike her. She does not know how to ask to be forgiven. Not yet!"

Holding the sword aloft, he reached out and grabbed my collar and jerked me towards him. I felt her fly against me. He held me beneath his face, and glowered down at me with his beaming eyes.

"And when will she learn, and when will you?"

What could I say? What could I do?

"I will teach you, Vittorio," said Mastema in a low, seething whisper. "I will teach you so that you know how to beg forgiveness every night of your life. I will teach you."

I felt myself lifted, I felt my garments blown by the wind, I felt her tiny hands clinging to me, and the weight of her head on my back.

Through the streets we were being dragged, and suddenly there appeared before us a great crowd of idle mortals issuing from a wine shop, drunken and laughing, a great jumble of swollen, natural faces and dark breeze-tossed clothes.

"Do you see them, Vittorio? Do you see those upon whom you feed?" Mastema demanded.

"I see them, Mastema!" I said. I groped for her hand, trying to find her, hold her, shield her. "I do see them, I do."

"In each and every one of them, Vittorio, there is what I see in you, and in her—a human soul. Do you know what that is, Vittorio? Can you imagine?"

I didn't dare to answer.

The crowd spread out over the moonlighted piazza, and drew closer to us, even as it loosened.

“A spark of the power that made all of us is within each of them,” cried Mastema, “a spark of the invisible, of the subtle, of the sacred, of the mystery—a spark of that which created all things.”

“Ah, God!” I cried out. “Look at them, Ursula, look!”

For each and every one of them, man, woman, it did not matter old or young, had taken on a powerful hazy golden glow. A light emanated from and surrounded and embraced each figure, a subtle body of light shaped to the very form of the human being who walked in it, unheeding of it, and the entire square was full of such golden light.

I looked down at my own hands, and they too were surrounded by this subtle, etheric body, this lovely gleaming and numinous presence, this precious and unquenchable fire.

I pivoted, my garments snagging around me, and I saw this flame envelop Ursula. I saw her living and breathing within it, and, turning back to the crowd, I saw again that each and every one of them lived and breathed in it, and I knew suddenly, understood perfectly—I would always see it. I would never see living human beings, be they monstrous or righteous, without this expanding, blinding, fire of the soul.

“Yes,” Mastema whispered in my ear. “Yes. Forever, and every time you feed, every time you raise one of their tender throats to your cursed fangs, every time you drink from them the lurid blood you would have, like the worst of God’s beasts, you will see that light flicker and struggle, and when the heart stops at the will of your hunger, you will see that light go out!”

I broke away from him. He let me go.

With her hand only, I ran. I ran and ran towards the Arno, towards the bridge, towards the taverns that might still be open, but long before I saw the blazing flames of the souls there, I saw the glow of the souls from hundreds of windows, I saw the glow of souls from beneath the bottoms of bolted doors.

I saw it, and I knew that he spoke the truth. I would always see it. I would see the spark of the Creator in every human life I ever encountered, and in every human life I took.

Reaching the river, I leant over the stone railing. I cried out and cried out and let my cries echo over the water and up the walls on either side. I was mad with grief, and then through the darkness there came a toddling child towards me, a beggar, already versed in words to speak

for bread or coins or any bit of charity that any man would vouchsafe him, and he glowed and sputtered and glittered and danced with brilliant and priceless light.

16

AND THE DARKNESS GRASPED IT NOT

Over the years, every time I saw one of Fra Filippo's magnificent creations, the angels came alive for me. It was only for an instant, only enough to prick the heart and draw the blood, as if with a needle, to the core.

Mastema himself did not appear in Fra Filippo's work until some years later, when Fra Filippo, struggling and arguing as always, was working for Piero, the son of Cosimo, who had gone to his grave.

Fra Filippo never did give up his precious nun, Lucrezia Buti, and it was said of Filippo that every Virgin he ever painted—and there were many—bore Lucrezia's beautiful face. Lucrezia gave Fra Filippo a son, and that painter took the name Filippino, and his work too was rich in magnificence and rich in angels, and those angels too have always for one instant met my eyes when I came to worship before those canvases, sad and brokenhearted and full of love and afraid.

In 1469, Filippo died in the town of Spoleto, and there ended the life of one of the greatest painters the world has ever known. This was the man who was put on the rack for fraud, and who had debauched a convent; this was a man who painted Mary as the frightened Virgin, as the Madonna of Christmas Night, as the Queen of Heaven, as the Queen of All Saints.

And I, five hundred years after, have never strayed too far from that city which gave birth to Filippo and to that time we call the Age of Gold.

Gold. That is what I see when I look at you.

That is what I see when I look at any man, woman, child.

I see the flaming celestial gold that Mastema revealed to me. I see it surrounding you, and holding you, encasing you and dancing with you, though you yourself may not behold it, or even care.

From this tower tonight in Tuscany, I look out over the land, and far away, deep in the valleys, I see the gold of human beings, I see the glowing vitality of beating souls.

So you have my story.

What do you think?

Do you not see a strange conflict here? Do you see a dilemma?

Let me put it to you this way.

Think back to when I told you about how my father and I rode through the woods together and we spoke of Fra Filippo, and my father asked me what it was that drew me to this monk. I said that it was struggle and a divided nature in Filippo which so attracted me to him, and that from this divided nature, this conflict, there came a torment to the faces which Filippo rendered in paint.

Filippo was a storm unto himself. So am I.

My father, a man of calm spirits and simpler thoughts, smiled at this.

But what does it mean in relationship to this tale?

Yes, I am a vampire, as I told you; I am a thing that feeds on mortal life. I exist quietly, contentedly in my homeland, in the dark shadows of my home castle, and Ursula is with me as always, and five hundred years is not so long for a love as strong as ours.

We are demons. We are damned. But have we not seen and understood things, have I not written things here that are of value to you? Have I not rendered a conflict so full of torment that something looms here which is full of brilliance and color, not unlike Filippo's work? Have I not embroidered, interwoven and gilded, have I not bled?

Look at my story and tell me that it gives you nothing. I don't believe you if you say that.

And when I think back on Filippo, and his rape of Lucrezia, and all his other tempestuous sins, how can I separate them from the magnificence of his paintings? How can I separate the violation of his vows, and his deceits and his quarrels, from the splendor which Filippo gave to the world?

I am not saying I am a great painter. I am not such a fool. But I say that out of my pain, out of my folly, out of my passion there comes a vision—a vision which I carry with me eternally and which I offer to you.

It is a vision of every human being, bursting with fire and with mystery, a vision I cannot deny, nor blot out, nor ever turn away from, nor ever belittle nor ever escape.

Others write of doubt and darkness.

Others write of meaninglessness and quiet.

I write of indefinable and celestial gold that will forever burn bright.

I write of blood thirst that is never satisfied. I write of knowledge and its price.

Behold, I tell you, the light is there in you. I see it. I see it in each and every one of us, and will always. I see it when I hunger, when I struggle, when I slaughter. I see it sputter and die in my arms when I drink.

Can you imagine what it would be like for me to kill you?

Pray it never takes a slaughter or a rape for you to see this light in those around you. God forbid it that it should demand such a price. Let me pay the price for you instead.

THE END

DEDICATION BY ANNE RICE

This novel is dedicated to
Stan, Christopher, Michele and Howard;
to Rosario and Patrice;
to Pamela and Elaine;
and to Niccolo.

SELECTED AND ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

I went to Florence to receive this manuscript directly from Vittorio di Raniari. It was my fourth visit to the city, and it was with Vittorio that I decided to list here a few books for those of you who might want to know more about the Age of Gold in Florence and about Florence itself.

Let me recommend first and foremost, and above all others, the brilliant *Public Life in Renaissance Florence* by Richard C. Trexler, published today by Cornell University Press.

Professor Trexler has also written other wonderful books on Italy, but this book is a particularly rich and inspiring one, especially for me, because Professor Trexler's analyses and insights regarding Florence have helped me to understand my own city of New Orleans, Louisiana, better than anything directly written by anyone about New Orleans itself.

New Orleans, like Florence, is a city of public spectacles, rituals and feast days, of demonstrations of communal celebration and belief. It is almost impossible to realistically explain New Orleans, and its Mardi Gras, its St. Patrick's Day and its annual Jazz Fest, to those who have not been here. Professor Trexler's brilliant scholarship gave me tools to gather thoughts about and observations pertaining to those things I most love.

Other works by Professor Trexler include his *Journey of the Magi: Meanings in History of a Christian Story*, a work only recently discovered by me. Readers familiar with my previous novels might remember the intense and blasphemously fervent relationship between my character the vampire Armand and the Florentine painting *The Procession of the Magi*, created for Piero de' Medici by Benozzo Gozzoli, which can be seen in all its glory in Florence today.

On the subject of the great painter Fra Filippo Lippi, let me first recommend his biography by the painter Vasari for its rich though unauthenticated details.

Also, there is the bright and shiny book *Filippo Lippi*, published by Scala, text by Gloria Fossi, which is for sale in numerous translations in Florence and other places in Italy as well. The only other book of which I know that is exclusively devoted to Filippo is the immense *Fra Filippo Lippi* by Jeffrey Ruda, subtitled *Life and Work, with a Complete Catalogue*. It is published by Phaidon Press in England and distributed in America by Harry N. Abrams.

The most enjoyable books for the general reader that I have read on Florence and on the Medici have been by Christopher Hibbert, including his *Florence: The Biography of a City*, published by Norton, and *The House of Medici: Its Rise and Fall*, published by Morrow.

There is also *The Medici of Florence: A Family Portrait*, by Emma Micheletti, published by Becocci Editore. *The Medici* by James Cleugh, published originally in 1975, is available now through Barnes & Noble.

Popular books on Florence and Tuscany—travelers' observations, loving memoirs and tributes—abound. Primary sources in translation—that is, letters and diaries and histories written during

the Renaissance in Florence—are everywhere on library and bookstore shelves.

In trying to render correctly Vittorio's quotations from Aquinas, I used the translation of the *Summa Theologica* by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. In dealing with St. Augustine, I have used Henry Bettenson's translation of *The City of God*, published by Penguin Books.

I caution readers to avoid abridged versions of Augustine's works. Augustine lived in a pagan world where the most theologically scrupulous Christians still believed in the demonic existence of fallen pagan gods. To understand Florence and her fifteenth-century romance with the joys and freedoms of a classical heritage, one must read Augustine and Aquinas in their full context.

For those who would read more about the marvelous museum of San Marco, there are countless works on Fra Angelico, the monastery's most famous painter, which include descriptions and details regarding the building, and there are many books available on the architecture of Florence entire. I owe a debt of gratitude not only to the museum of San Marco for having so beautifully preserved the architectural work of Michelozzo, so praised in this novel, but for the publications readily available in the shop there on the monastery's architecture and art.

In closing, let me add this: if Vittorio were asked to name a recording of Renaissance music which best captures the mood of the High Mass and Communion which he witnessed at the Court of the Ruby Grail, it would inevitably be the *All Souls' Vespers*, requiem music from Córdoba Cathedral, performed by the Orchestra of the Renaissance led by Richard Cheetham—though I must confess, this music is described as circa 1570—some years after Vittorio's fearful ordeal. The recording is available on the Veritas label, through Virgin Classics London and New York.

In closing these notes, allow me one final quote from St. Augustine's *The City of God*.

> *For God would never have created a man, let alone an angel, in the foreknowledge of his future evil state, if he had not known at the same time how he would put such creatures to good use, and thus enrich the course of the world history by the kind of antithesis which gives beauty to a poem.*

I personally do not know whether or not Augustine is right.

But I do believe this: it is worthwhile to try to make a painting, or a novel … or a poem.

Anne Rice

Anne Rice

Interview with the Vampire

A BALLANTINE e BOOK

INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE

BY

ANNE RICE

BALLANTINE BOOKS • NEW YORK

A Ballantine Book
Published by The Random House Publishing Group

Copyright © 1976 by Anne O'Brien Rice

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Ballantine Books, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York.

Ballantine and colophon are registered trademarks of Random House, Inc.

www.ballantinebooks.com

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 96-97120
eISBN: 978-0-307-57585-2

This edition published by arrangement with Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

v3.0_r1

Contents

Master Table of Contents

Cover
Title Page
Copyright

Part I
Part II
Part III
Part IV

Dedication

PART I

“I see …” said the vampire thoughtfully, and slowly he walked across the room towards the window. For a long time he stood there against the dim light from Divisadero Street and the passing beams of traffic. The boy could see the furnishings of the room more clearly now, the round oak table, the chairs. A wash basin hung on one wall with a mirror. He set his briefcase on the table and waited.

“But how much tape do you have with you?” asked the vampire, turning now so the boy could see his profile. “Enough for the story of a life?”

“Sure, if it’s a good life. Sometimes I interview as many as three or four people a night if I’m lucky. But it has to be a good story. That’s only fair, isn’t it?”

“Admirably fair,” the vampire answered. “I would like to tell you the story of my life, then. I would like to do that very much.”

“Great,” said the boy. And quickly he removed the small tape recorder from his briefcase, making a check of the cassette and the batteries. “I’m really anxious to hear why you believe this, why you …”

“No,” said the vampire abruptly. “We can’t begin that way. Is your equipment ready?”

“Yes,” said the boy.

“Then sit down. I’m going to turn on the overhead light.”

“But I thought vampires didn’t like light,” said the boy. “If you think the dark adds to the atmosphere …” But then he stopped. The vampire was watching him with his back to the window. The boy could make out nothing of his face now, and something about the still figure there distracted him. He started to say something again but he said nothing. And then he sighed with relief when the vampire moved towards the table and reached for the overhead cord.

At once the room was flooded with a harsh yellow light. And the boy, staring up at the vampire, could not repress a gasp. His fingers danced backwards on the table to grasp the edge. “Dear God!” he whispered, and then he gazed, speechless, at the vampire.

The vampire was utterly white and smooth, as if he were sculpted from bleached bone, and his face was as seemingly inanimate as a

statue, except for two brilliant green eyes that looked down at the boy intently like flames in a skull. But then the vampire smiled almost wistfully, and the smooth white substance of his face moved with the infinitely flexible but minimal lines of a cartoon. “Do you see?” he asked softly.

The boy shuddered, lifting his hand as if to shield himself from a powerful light. His eyes moved slowly over the finely tailored black coat he'd only glimpsed in the bar, the long folds of the cape, the black silk tie knotted at the throat, and the gleam of the white collar that was as white as the vampire's flesh. He stared at the vampire's full black hair, the waves that were combed back over the tips of the ears, the curls that barely touched the edge of the white collar.

“Now, do you still want the interview?” the vampire asked.

The boy's mouth was open before the sound came out. He was nodding. Then he said, “Yes.”

The vampire sat down slowly opposite him and, leaning forward, said gently, confidentially, “Don’t be afraid. Just start the tape.”

And then he reached out over the length of the table. The boy recoiled, sweat running down the sides of his face. The vampire clamped a hand on the boy’s shoulder and said, “Believe me, I won’t hurt you. I want this opportunity. It’s more important to me than you can realize now. I want you to begin.” And he withdrew his hand and sat collected, waiting.

It took a moment for the boy to wipe his forehead and his lips with a handkerchief, to stammer that the microphone was in the machine, to press the button, to say that the machine was on.

“You weren’t always a vampire, were you?” he began.

“No,” answered the vampire. “I was a twenty-five-year-old man when I became a vampire, and the year was seventeen ninety-one.”

The boy was startled by the preciseness of the date and he repeated it before he asked, “How did it come about?”

“There’s a simple answer to that. I don’t believe I want to give simple answers,” said the vampire. “I think I want to tell the real story. …”

“Yes,” the boy said quickly. He was folding his handkerchief over and over and wiping his lips now with it again.

“There was a tragedy …” the vampire started. “It was my younger

brother.… He died." And then he stopped, so that the boy cleared his throat and wiped at his face again before stuffing the handkerchief almost impatiently into his pocket.

"It's not painful, is it?" he asked timidly.

"Does it seem so?" asked the vampire. "No." He shook his head. "It's simply that I've only told this story to one other person. And that was so long ago. No, it's not painful.…

"We were living in Louisiana then. We'd received a land grant and settled two indigo plantations on the Mississippi very near New Orleans.…"

"Ah, that's the accent …" the boy said softly.

For a moment the vampire stared blankly. "I have an accent?" He began to laugh.

And the boy, flustered, answered quickly. "I noticed it in the bar when I asked you what you did for a living. It's just a slight sharpness to the consonants, that's all. I never guessed it was French."

"It's all right," the vampire assured him. "I'm not as shocked as I pretend to be. It's only that I forget it from time to time. But let me go on.…"

"Please …" said the boy.

"I was talking about the plantations. They had a great deal to do with it, really, my becoming a vampire. But I'll come to that. Our life there was both luxurious and primitive. And we ourselves found it extremely attractive. You see, we lived far better there than we could have ever lived in France. Perhaps the sheer wilderness of Louisiana only made it seem so, but seeming so, it was. I remember the imported furniture that cluttered the house." The vampire smiled. "And the harpsichord; that was lovely. My sister used to play it. On summer evenings, she would sit at the keys with her back to the open French windows. And I can still remember that thin, rapid music and the vision of the swamp rising beyond her, the moss-hung cypresses floating against the sky. And there were the sounds of the swamp, a chorus of creatures, the cry of the birds. I think we loved it. It made the rosewood furniture all the more precious, the music more delicate and desirable. Even when the wisteria tore the shutters off the attic windows and worked its tendrils right into the whitewashed brick in less than a year.… Yes, we loved it. All except my brother. I don't

think I ever heard him complain of anything, but I knew how he felt. My father was dead then, and I was head of the family and I had to defend him constantly from my mother and sister. They wanted to take him visiting, and to New Orleans for parties, but he hated these things. I think he stopped going altogether before he was twelve. Prayer was what mattered to him, prayer and his leatherbound lives of the saints.

"Finally I built him an oratory removed from the house, and he began to spend most of every day there and often the early evening. It was ironic, really. He was so different from us, so different from everyone, and I was so regular! There was nothing extraordinary about me whatsoever." The vampire smiled.

"Sometimes in the evening I would go out to him and find him in the garden near the oratory, sitting absolutely composed on a stone bench there, and I'd tell him my troubles, the difficulties I had with the slaves, how I distrusted the overseer or the weather or my brokers … all the problems that made up the length and breadth of my existence. And he would listen, making only a few comments, always sympathetic, so that when I left him I had the distinct impression he had solved everything for me. I didn't think I could deny him anything, and I vowed that no matter how it would break my heart to lose him, he could enter the priesthood when the time came. Of course, I was wrong." The vampire stopped.

For a moment the boy only gazed at him and then he started as if awakened from deep thought, and he floundered, as if he could not find the right words. "Ah … he didn't want to be a priest?" the boy asked. The vampire studied him as if trying to discern the meaning of his expression. Then he said:

"I meant that I was wrong about myself, about my not denying him anything." His eyes moved over the far wall and fixed on the panes of the window. "He began to see visions."

"Real visions?" the boy asked, but again there was hesitation, as if he were thinking of something else.

"I didn't think so," the vampire answered. "It happened when he was fifteen. He was very handsome then. He had the smoothest skin and the largest blue eyes. He was robust, not thin as I am now and was then … but his eyes … it was as if when I looked into his eyes I was

standing alone on the edge of the world … on a windswept ocean beach. There was nothing but the soft roar of the waves. Well," he said, his eyes still fixed on the window panes, "he began to see visions. He only hinted at this at first, and he stopped taking his meals altogether. He lived in the oratory. At any hour of day or night, I could find him on the bare flagstones kneeling before the altar. And the oratory itself was neglected. He stopped tending the candles or changing the altar cloths or even sweeping out the leaves. One night I became really alarmed when I stood in the rose arbor watching him for one solid hour, during which he never moved from his knees and never once lowered his arms, which he held outstretched in the form of a cross. The slaves all thought he was mad." The vampire raised his eyebrows in wonder. "I was convinced that he was only … overzealous. That in his love for God, he had perhaps gone too far. Then he told me about the visions. Both St. Dominic and the Blessed Virgin Mary had come to him in the oratory. They had told him he was to sell all our property in Louisiana, everything we owned, and use the money to do God's work in France. My brother was to be a great religious leader, to return the country to its former fervor, to turn the tide against atheism and the Revolution. Of course, he had no money of his own. I was to sell the plantations and our town houses in New Orleans and give the money to him."

Again the vampire stopped. And the boy sat motionless regarding him, astonished. "Ah … excuse me," he whispered. "What did you say? Did you sell the plantations?"

"No," said the vampire, his face calm as it had been from the start. "I laughed at him. And he … he became incensed. He insisted his command came from the Virgin herself. Who was I to disregard it? Who indeed?" he asked softly, as if he were thinking of this again. "Who indeed? And the more he tried to convince me, the more I laughed. It was nonsense, I told him, the product of an immature and even morbid mind. The oratory was a mistake, I said to him; I would have it torn down at once. He would go to school in New Orleans and get such inane notions out of his head. I don't remember all that I said. But I remember the feeling. Behind all this contemptuous dismissal on my part was a smoldering anger and a disappointment. I was bitterly disappointed. I didn't believe him at all."

“But that’s understandable,” said the boy quickly when the vampire paused, his expression of astonishment softening. “I mean, would anyone have believed him?”

“Is it so understandable?” The vampire looked at the boy. “I think perhaps it was vicious egotism. Let me explain. I loved my brother, as I told you, and at times I believed him to be a living saint. I encouraged him in his prayer and meditations, as I said, and I was willing to give him up to the priesthood. And if someone had told me of a saint in Arles or Lourdes who saw visions, I would have believed it. I was a Catholic; I believed in saints. I lit tapers before their marble statues in churches; I knew their pictures, their symbols, their names. But I didn’t, couldn’t believe my brother. Not only did I not believe he saw visions, I couldn’t entertain the notion for a moment. Now, why? Because he was my brother. Holy he might be, peculiar most definitely; but Francis of Assisi, no. Not *my* brother. No brother of mine could be such. That is egotism. Do you see?”

The boy thought about it before he answered and then he nodded and said that yes, he thought that he did.

“Perhaps he saw the visions,” said the vampire.

“Then you … you don’t claim to know … now … whether he did or not?”

“No, but I do know that he never wavered in his conviction for a second. That I know now and knew then the night he left my room crazed and grieved. He never wavered for an instant. And within minutes, he was dead.”

“How?” the boy asked.

“He simply walked out of the French doors onto the gallery and stood for a moment at the head of the brick stairs. And then he fell. He was dead when I reached the bottom, his neck broken.” The vampire shook his head in consternation, but his face was still serene.

“Did you see him fall?” asked the boy. “Did he lose his footing?”

“No, but two of the servants saw it happen. They said that he had looked up as if he had just seen something in the air. Then his entire body moved forward as if being swept by a wind. One of them said he was about to say something when he fell. I thought that he was about to say something too, but it was at that moment I turned away from the window. My back was turned when I heard the noise.” He glanced

at the tape recorder. “I could not forgive myself. I felt responsible for his death,” he said. “And everyone else seemed to think I was responsible also.”

“But how could they? You said they saw him fall.”

“It wasn’t a direct accusation. They simply knew that something had passed between us that was unpleasant. That we had argued minutes before the fall. The servants had heard us, my mother had heard us. My mother would not stop asking me what had happened and why my brother, who was so quiet, had been shouting. Then my sister joined in, and of course I refused to say. I was so bitterly shocked and miserable that I had no patience with anyone, only the vague determination they would not know about his ‘visions.’ They would not know that he had become, finally, not a saint, but only a … fanatic. My sister went to bed rather than face the funeral, and my mother told everyone in the parish that something horrible had happened in my room which I would not reveal; and even the police questioned me, on the word of my own mother. Finally the priest came to see me and demanded to know what had gone on. I told no one. It was only a discussion, I said. I was not on the gallery when he fell, I protested, and they all stared at me as if I'd killed him. And I felt that I'd killed him. I sat in the parlor beside his coffin for two days thinking, I have killed him. I stared at his face until spots appeared before my eyes and I nearly fainted. The back of his skull had been shattered on the pavement, and his head had the wrong shape on the pillow. I forced myself to stare at it, to study it simply because I could hardly endure the pain and the smell of decay, and I was tempted over and over to try to open his eyes. All these were mad thoughts, mad impulses. The main thought was this: I had laughed at him; I had not believed him; I had not been kind to him. He had fallen because of me.”

“This really happened, didn’t it?” the boy whispered. “You’re telling me something … that’s true.”

“Yes,” said the vampire, looking at him without surprise. “I want to go on telling you.” But as his eyes passed over the boy and returned to the window, he showed only faint interest in the boy, who seemed engaged in some silent inner struggle.

“But you said you didn’t know about the visions, that you, a

vampire … didn't know for certain whether …"

"I want to take things in order," said the vampire, "I want to go on telling you things as they happened. No, I don't know about the visions. To this day." And again he waited until the boy said:

"Yes, please, please go on."

"Well, I wanted to sell the plantations. I never wanted to see the house or the oratory again. I leased them finally to an agency which would work them for me and manage things so I need never go there, and I moved my mother and sister to one of the town houses in New Orleans. Of course, I did not escape my brother for a moment. I could think of nothing but his body rotting in the ground. He was buried in the St. Louis cemetery in New Orleans, and I did everything to avoid passing those gates; but still I thought of him constantly. Drunk or sober, I saw his body rotting in the coffin, and I couldn't bear it. Over and over I dreamed that he was at the head of the steps and I was holding his arm, talking kindly to him, urging him back into the bedroom, telling him gently that I did believe him, that he must pray for me to have faith. Meantime, the slaves on Pointe du Lac (that was my plantation) had begun to talk of seeing his ghost on the gallery, and the overseer couldn't keep order. People in society asked my sister offensive questions about the whole incident, and she became an hysteric. She wasn't really an hysteric. She simply thought she ought to react that way, so she did. I drank all the time and was at home as little as possible. I lived like a man who wanted to die but who had no courage to do it himself. I walked black streets and alleys alone; I passed out in cabarets. I backed out of two duels more from apathy than cowardice and truly wished to be murdered. And then I was attacked. It might have been anyone—and my invitation was open to sailors, thieves, maniacs, anyone. But it was a vampire. He caught me just a few steps from my door one night and left me for dead, or so I thought."

"You mean … he sucked your blood?" the boy asked.

"Yes," the vampire laughed. "He sucked my blood. That is the way it's done."

"But you lived," said the young man. "You said he left you for dead."

"Well, he drained me almost to the point of death, which was for him sufficient. I was put to bed as soon as I was found, confused and

really unaware of what had happened to me. I suppose I thought that drink had finally caused a stroke. I expected to die now and had no interest in eating or drinking or talking to the doctor. My mother sent for the priest. I was feverish by then and I told the priest everything, all about my brother's visions and what I had done. I remember I clung to his arm, making him swear over and over he would tell no one. 'I know I didn't kill him,' I said to the priest finally. 'It's that I cannot live now that he's dead. Not after the way I treated him.'

" 'That's ridiculous,' he answered me. 'Of course you can live. There's nothing wrong with you but self-indulgence. Your mother needs you, not to mention your sister. And as for this brother of yours, he was possessed of the devil.' I was so stunned when he said this I couldn't protest. The devil made the visions, he went on to explain. The devil was rampant. The entire country of France was under the influence of the devil, and the Revolution had been his greatest triumph. Nothing would have saved my brother but exorcism, prayer, and fasting, men to hold him down while the devil raged in his body and tried to throw him about. 'The devil threw him down the steps; it's perfectly obvious,' he declared. 'You weren't talking to your brother in that room, you were talking to the devil.' Well, this enraged me. I believed before that I had been pushed to my limits, but I had not. He went on talking about the devil, about voodoo amongst the slaves and cases of possession in other parts of the world. And I went wild. I wrecked the room in the process of nearly killing him."

"But your strength … the vampire …?" asked the boy.

"I was out of my mind," the vampire explained. "I did things I could not have done in perfect health. The scene is confused, pale, fantastical now. But I do remember that I drove him out of the back doors of the house, across the courtyard, and against the brick wall of the kitchen, where I pounded his head until I nearly killed him. When I was subdued finally, and exhausted then almost to the point of death, they bled me. The fools. But I was going to say something else. It was then that I conceived of my own egotism. Perhaps I'd seen it reflected in the priest. His contemptuous attitude towards my brother reflected my own; his immediate and shallow carping about the devil; his refusal to even entertain the idea that sanctity had passed so close."

"But he did believe in possession by the devil."

"That is a much more mundane idea," said the vampire immediately. "People who cease to believe in God or goodness altogether still believe in the devil. I don't know why. No, I do indeed know why. Evil is always possible. And goodness is eternally difficult. But you must understand, possession is really another way of saying someone is mad. I felt it was, for the priest. I'm sure he'd seen madness. Perhaps he had stood right over raving madness and pronounced it possession. You don't have to see Satan when he is exorcised. But to stand in the presence of a saint … To believe that the saint has seen a vision. No, it's egotism, our refusal to believe it could occur in our midst."

"I never thought of it in that way," said the boy. "But what happened to you? You said they bled you to cure you, and that must have nearly killed you."

The vampire laughed. "Yes. It certainly did. But the vampire came back that night. You see, he wanted Pointe du Lac, my plantation.

"It was very late, after my sister had fallen asleep. I can remember it as if it were yesterday. He came in from the courtyard, opening the French doors without a sound, a tall fair-skinned man with a mass of blond hair and a graceful, almost feline quality to his movements. And gently, he draped a shawl over my sister's eyes and lowered the wick of the lamp. She dozed there beside the basin and the cloth with which she'd bathed my forehead, and she never once stirred under that shawl until morning. But by that time I was greatly changed."

"What *was* this change?" asked the boy.

The vampire sighed. He leaned back against the chair and looked at the walls. "At first I thought he was another doctor, or someone summoned by the family to try to reason with me. But this suspicion was removed at once. He stepped close to my bed and leaned down so that his face was in the lamplight, and I saw that he was no ordinary man at all. His gray eyes burned with an incandescence, and the long white hands which hung by his sides were not those of a human being. I think I knew everything in that instant, and all that he told me was only aftermath. What I mean is, the moment I saw him, saw his extraordinary aura and knew him to be no creature I'd ever known, I was reduced to nothing. That ego which could not accept the presence of an extraordinary human being in its midst was crushed. All my

conceptions, even my guilt and wish to die, seemed utterly unimportant. I completely forgot *myself*!" he said, now silently touching his breast with his fist. "I forgot myself totally. And in the same instant knew totally the meaning of possibility. From then on I experienced only increasing wonder. As he talked to me and told me of what I might become, of what his life had been and stood to be, my past shrank to embers. I saw my life as if I stood apart from it, the vanity, the self-serving, the constant fleeing from one petty annoyance after another, the lip service to God and the Virgin and a host of saints whose names filled my prayer books, none of whom made the slightest difference in a narrow, materialistic, and selfish existence. I saw my real gods … the gods of most men. Food, drink, and security in conformity. Cinders."

The boy's face was tense with a mixture of confusion and amazement. "And so you decided to become a vampire?" he asked. The vampire was silent for a moment.

"Decided. It doesn't seem the right word. Yet I cannot say it was inevitable from the moment that he stepped into that room. No, indeed, it was not inevitable. Yet I can't say I decided. Let me say that when he'd finished speaking, no other decision was possible for me, and I pursued my course without a backward glance. Except for one."

"Except for one? What?"

"My last sunrise," said the vampire. "That morning, I was not yet a vampire. And I saw my last sunrise.

"I remember it completely; yet I do not think I remember any other sunrise before it. I remember the light came first to the tops of the French windows, a paling behind the lace curtains, and then a gleam growing brighter and brighter in patches among the leaves of the trees. Finally the sun came through the windows themselves and the lace lay in shadows on the stone floor, and all over the form of my sister, who was still sleeping, shadows of lace on the shawl over her shoulders and head. As soon as she was warm, she pushed the shawl away without awakening, and then the sun shone full on her eyes and she tightened her eyelids. Then it was gleaming on the table where she rested her head on her arms, and gleaming, blazing, in the water in the pitcher. And I could feel it on my hands on the counterpane and then on my face. I lay in the bed thinking about all the things the

vampire had told me, and then it was that I said good-bye to the sunrise and went out to become a vampire. It was … the last sunrise."

The vampire was looking out the window again. And when he stopped, the silence was so sudden the boy seemed to hear it. Then he could hear the noises from the street. The sound of a truck was deafening. The light cord stirred with the vibration. Then the truck was gone.

"Do you miss it?" he asked then in a small voice.

"Not really," said the vampire. "There are so many other things. But where were we? You want to know how it happened, how I became a vampire."

"Yes," said the boy. "How did you change, exactly?"

"I can't tell you exactly," said the vampire. "I can tell you about it, enclose it with words that will make the value of it to me evident to you. But I can't tell you exactly, any more than I could tell you exactly what is the experience of sex if you have never had it."

The young man seemed struck suddenly with still another question, but before he could speak the vampire went on. "As I told you, this vampire Lestat wanted the plantation. A mundane reason, surely, for granting me a life which will last until the end of the world; but he was not a very discriminating person. He didn't consider the world's small population of vampires as being a select club, I should say. He had human problems, a blind father who did not know his son was a vampire and must not find out. Living in New Orleans had become too difficult for him, considering his needs and the necessity to care for his father, and he wanted Pointe du Lac.

"We went at once to the plantation the next evening, ensconced the blind father in the master bedroom, and I proceeded to make the change. I cannot say that it consisted in any one step really—though one, of course, was the step beyond which I could make no return. But there were several acts involved, and the first was the death of the overseer. Lestat took him in his sleep. I was to watch and to approve; that is, to witness the taking of a human life as proof of my commitment and part of my change. This proved without doubt the most difficult part for me. I've told you I had no fear regarding my own death, only a squeamishness about taking my life myself. But I had a most high regard for the life of others, and a horror of death

most recently developed because of my brother. I had to watch the overseer awake with a start, try to throw off Lestat with both hands, fail, then lie there struggling under Lestat's grasp, and finally go limp, drained of blood. And die. He did not die at once. We stood in his narrow bedroom for the better part of an hour watching him die. Part of my change, as I said. Lestat would never have stayed otherwise. Then it was necessary to get rid of the overseer's body. I was almost sick from this. Weak and feverish already, I had little reserve; and handling the dead body with such a purpose caused me nausea. Lestat was laughing, telling me callously that I would feel so different once I was a vampire that I would laugh, too. He was wrong about that. I never laugh at death, no matter how often and regularly I am the cause of it.

"But let me take things in order. We had to drive up the river road until we came to open fields and leave the overseer there. We tore his coat, stole his money, and saw to it his lips were stained with liquor. I knew his wife, who lived in New Orleans, and knew the state of desperation she would suffer when the body was discovered. But more than sorrow for her, I felt pain that she would never know what had happened, that her husband had not been found drunk on the road by robbers. As we beat the body, bruising the face and the shoulders, I became more and more aroused. Of course, you must realize that all this time the vampire Lestat was extraordinary. He was no more human to me than a biblical angel. But under this pressure, my enchantment with him was strained. I had seen my becoming a vampire in two lights: The first light was simply enchantment; Lestat had overwhelmed me on my deathbed. But the other light was my wish for self-destruction. My desire to be thoroughly damned. This was the open door through which Lestat had come on both the first and second occasion. Now I was not destroying myself but someone else. The overseer, his wife, his family. I recoiled and might have fled from Lestat, my sanity thoroughly shattered, had not he sensed with an infallible instinct what was happening. Infallible instinct …" The vampire mused. "Let me say the powerful instinct of a vampire to whom even the slightest change in a human's facial expression is as apparent as a gesture. Lestat had preternatural timing. He rushed me into the carriage and whipped the horses home. 'I want to die,' I began

to murmur. 'This is unbearable. I want to die. You have it in your power to kill me. Let me die.' I refused to look at him, to be spellbound by the sheer beauty of his appearance. He spoke my name to me softly, laughing. As I said, he was determined to have the plantation."

"But would he have let you go?" asked the boy. "Under any circumstances?"

"I don't know. Knowing Lestat as I do now, I would say he would have killed me rather than let me go. But this was what I wanted, you see. It didn't matter. No, this was what I thought I wanted. As soon as we reached the house, I jumped down out of the carriage and walked, a zombie, to the brick stairs where my brother had fallen. The house had been unoccupied for months now, the overseer having his own cottage, and the Louisiana heat and damp were already picking apart the steps. Every crevice was sprouting grass and even small wildflowers. I remember feeling the moisture which in the night was cool as I sat down on the lower steps and even rested my head against the brick and felt the little wax-stemmed wildflowers with my hands. I pulled a clump of them out of the easy dirt in one hand. 'I want to die; kill me. Kill me,' I said to the vampire. 'Now I am guilty of murder. I can't live.' He sneered with the impatience of people listening to the obvious lies of others. And then in a flash he fastened on me just as he had on my man. I thrashed against him wildly. I dug my boot into his chest and kicked him as fiercely as I could, his teeth stinging my throat, the fever pounding in my temples. And with a movement of his entire body, much too fast for me to see, he was suddenly standing disdainfully at the foot of the steps. 'I thought you wanted to die, Louis,' he said."

The boy made a soft, abrupt sound when the vampire said his name, which the vampire acknowledged with the quick statement, "Yes, that is my name," and went on.

"Well, I lay there helpless in the face of my own cowardice and fatuousness again," he said. "Perhaps so directly confronted with it, I might in time have gained the courage to truly take my life, not to whine and beg for others to take it. I saw myself turning on a knife then, languishing in a day-to-day suffering which I found as necessary as penance from the confessional, truly hoping death would find me

unawares and render me fit for eternal pardon. And also I saw myself as if in a vision standing at the head of the stairs, just where my brother had stood, and then hurtling my body down on the bricks.

"But there was no time for courage. Or shall I say, there was no time in Lestat's plan for anything but his plan. 'Now listen to me, Louis,' he said, and he lay down beside me now on the steps, his movement so graceful and so personal that at once it made me think of a lover. I recoiled. But he put his right arm around me and pulled me close to his chest. Never had I been this close to him before, and in the dim light I could see the magnificent radiance of his eye and the unnatural mask of his skin. As I tried to move, he pressed his right fingers against my lips and said, 'Be still. I am going to drain you now to the very threshold of death, and I want you to be quiet, so quiet that you can almost hear the flow of blood through your veins, so quiet that you can hear the flow of that same blood through mine. It is your consciousness, your will, which must keep you alive.' I wanted to struggle, but he pressed so hard with his fingers that he held my entire prone body in check; and as soon as I stopped my abortive attempt at rebellion, he sank his teeth into my neck."

The boy's eyes grew huge. He had drawn farther and farther back in his chair as the vampire spoke, and now his face was tense, his eyes narrow, as if he were preparing to weather a blow.

"Have you ever lost a great amount of blood?" asked the vampire. "Do you know the feeling?"

The boy's lips shaped the word *no*, but no sound came out. He cleared his throat. "No," he said.

"Candles burned in the upstairs parlor, where we had planned the death of the overseer. An oil lantern swayed in the breeze on the gallery. All of this light coalesced and began to shimmer, as though a golden presence hovered above me, suspended in the stairwell, softly entangled with the railings, curling and contracting like smoke. 'Listen, keep your eyes wide,' Lestat whispered to me, his lips moving against my neck. I remember that the movement of his lips raised the hair all over my body, sent a shock of sensation through my body that was not unlike the pleasure of passion.…"

He mused, his right fingers slightly curled beneath his chin, the first finger appearing to lightly stroke it. "The result was that within

minutes I was weak to paralysis. Panic-stricken, I discovered I could not even will myself to speak. Lestat still held me, of course, and his arm was like the weight of an iron bar. I felt his teeth withdraw with such a keenness that the two puncture wounds seemed enormous, lined with pain. And now he bent over my helpless head and, taking his right hand off me, bit his own wrist. The blood flowed down upon my shirt and coat, and he watched it with a narrow, gleaming eye. It seemed an eternity that he watched it, and that shimmer of light now hung behind his head like the backdrop of an apparition. I think that I knew what he meant to do even before he did it, and I was waiting in my helplessness as if I'd been waiting for years. He pressed his bleeding wrist to my mouth, said firmly, a little impatiently, 'Louis, drink.' And I did. 'Steady, Louis,' and 'Hurry,' he whispered to me a number of times. I drank, sucking the blood out of the holes, experiencing for the first time since infancy the special pleasure of sucking nourishment, the body focused with the mind upon one vital source. Then something happened." The vampire sat back, a slight frown on his face.

"How pathetic it is to describe these things which can't truly be described," he said, his voice low almost to a whisper. The boy sat as if frozen.

"I saw nothing but that light then as I drew blood. And then this next thing, this next thing was … sound. A dull roar at first and then a pounding like the pounding of a drum, growing louder and louder, as if some enormous creature were coming up on one slowly through a dark and alien forest, pounding as he came, a huge drum. And then there came the pounding of another drum, as if another giant were coming yards behind him, and each giant, intent on his own drum, gave no notice to the rhythm of the other. The sound grew louder and louder until it seemed to fill not just my hearing but all my senses, to be throbbing in my lips and fingers, in the flesh of my temples, in my veins. Above all, in my veins, drum and then the other drum; and then Lestat pulled his wrist free suddenly, and I opened my eyes and checked myself in a moment of reaching for his wrist, grabbing it, forcing it back to my mouth at all costs; I checked myself because I realized that the drum was my heart, and the second drum had been his." The vampire sighed. "Do you understand?"

The boy began to speak, and then he shook his head. “No … I mean, I do,” he said. “I mean, I …”

“Of course,” said the vampire, looking away.

“Wait, wait!” said the boy in a welter of excitement. “The tape is almost gone. I have to turn it over.” The vampire watched patiently as he changed it.

“What happened then?” the boy asked. His face was moist, and he wiped it hurriedly with his handkerchief.

“I saw as a vampire,” said the vampire, his voice now slightly detached. It seemed almost distracted. Then he drew himself up. “Lestat was standing again at the foot of the stairs, and I saw him as I could not possibly have seen him before. He had seemed white to me before, starkly white, so that in the night he was almost luminous; and now I saw him filled with his own life and own blood: he was radiant, not luminous. And then I saw that not only Lestat had changed, but all things had changed.

“It was as if I had only just been able to see colors and shapes for the first time. I was so enthralled with the buttons on Lestat’s black coat that I looked at nothing else for a long time. Then Lestat began to laugh, and I heard his laughter as I had never heard anything before. His heart I still heard like the beating of a drum, and now came this metallic laughter. It was confusing, each sound running into the next sound, like the mingling reverberations of bells, until I learned to separate the sounds, and then they overlapped, each soft but distinct, increasing but discrete, peals of laughter.” The vampire smiled with delight. “Peals of bells.

“ ‘Stop looking at my buttons,’ Lestat said. ‘Go out there into the trees. Rid yourself of all the human waste in your body, and don’t fall so madly in love with the night that you lose your way!’

“That, of course, was a wise command. When I saw the moon on the flagstones, I became so enamored with it that I must have spent an hour there. I passed my brother’s oratory without so much as a thought of him, and standing among the cottonwood and oaks, I heard the night as if it were a chorus of whispering women, all beckoning me to their breasts. As for my body, it was not yet totally converted, and as soon as I became the least accustomed to the sounds and sights, it began to ache. All my human fluids were being forced out of me. I

was dying as a human, yet completely alive as a vampire; and with my awakened senses, I had to preside over the death of my body with a certain discomfort and then, finally, fear. I ran back up the steps to the parlor, where Lestat was already at work on the plantation papers, going over the expenses and profits for the last year. 'You're a rich man,' he said to me when I came in. 'Something's happening to me,' I shouted.

" 'You're dying, that's all; don't be a fool. Don't you have any oil lamps? All this money and you can't afford whale oil except for that lantern. Bring me that lantern.'

" 'Dying!' I shouted. 'Dying!'

" 'It happens to everyone,' he persisted, refusing to help me. As I look back on this, I still despise him for it. Not because I was afraid, but because he might have drawn my attention to these changes with reverence. He might have calmed me and told me I might watch my death with the same fascination with which I had watched and felt the night. But he didn't. Lestat was never the vampire I am. Not at all." The vampire did not say this boastfully. He said it as if he would truly have had it otherwise.

"Alors," he sighed. "I was dying fast, which meant that my capacity for fear was diminishing as rapidly. I simply regret I was not more attentive to the process. Lestat was being a perfect idiot. 'Oh, for the love of hell!' he began shouting. 'Do you realize I've made no provision for you? What a fool I am.' I was tempted to say, 'Yes, you are,' but I didn't. 'You'll have to bed down with me this morning. I haven't prepared you a coffin.' "

The vampire laughed. "The coffin struck such a chord of terror in me I think it absorbed all the capacity for terror I had left. Then came only my mild alarm at having to share a coffin with Lestat. He was in his father's bedroom meantime, telling the old man good-bye, that he would return in the morning. 'But where do you go, why must you live by such a schedule!' the old man demanded, and Lestat became impatient. Before this, he'd been gracious to the old man, almost to the point of sickening one, but now he became a bully. 'I take care of you, don't I? I've put a better roof over your head than you ever put over mine! If I want to sleep all day and drink all night, I'll do it, damn you!' The old man started to whine. Only my peculiar state of

emotions and most unusual feeling of exhaustion kept me from disapproving. I was watching the scene through the open door, enthralled with the colors of the counterpane and the positive riot of color in the old man's face. His blue veins pulsed beneath his pink and grayish flesh. I found even the yellow of his teeth appealing to me, and I became almost hypnotized by the quivering of his lip. 'Such a son, such a son,' he said, never suspecting, of course, the true nature of his son. 'All right, then, go. I know you keep a woman somewhere; you go to see her as soon as her husband leaves in the morning. Give me my rosary. What's happened to my rosary?' Lestat said something blasphemous and gave him the rosary…."

"But …" the boy started.

"Yes?" said the vampire. "I'm afraid I don't allow you to ask enough questions."

"I was going to ask, rosaries have crosses on them, don't they?"

"Oh, the rumor about crosses!" the vampire laughed. "You refer to our being afraid of crosses?"

"Unable to look on them, I thought," said the boy.

"Nonsense, my friend, sheer nonsense. I can look on anything I like. And I rather like looking on crucifixes in particular."

"And what about the rumor about keyholes? That you can … become steam and go through them."

"I wish I could," laughed the vampire. "How positively delightful. I should like to pass through all manner of different keyholes and feel the tickle of their peculiar shapes. No." He shook his head. "That is, how would you say today … bullshit?"

The boy laughed despite himself. Then his face grew serious.

"You mustn't be so shy with me," the vampire said. "What is it?"

"The story about stakes through the heart," said the boy, his cheeks coloring slightly.

"The same," said the vampire. "Bull-shit," he said, carefully articulating both syllables, so that the boy smiled. "No magical power whatsoever. Why don't you smoke one of your cigarettes? I see you have them in your shirt pocket."

"Oh, thank you," the boy said, as if it were a marvellous suggestion. But once he had the cigarette to his lips, his hands were trembling so badly that he mangled the first fragile book match.

“Allow me,” said the vampire. And, taking the book, he quickly put a lighted match to the boy's cigarette. The boy inhaled, his eyes on the vampire's fingers. Now the vampire withdrew across the table with a soft rustling of garments. “There's an ashtray on the basin,” he said, and the boy moved nervously to get it. He stared at the few butts in it for a moment, and then, seeing the small waste basket beneath, he emptied the ashtray and quickly set it on the table. His fingers left damp marks on the cigarette when he put it down. “Is this your room?” he asked.

“No,” answered the vampire. “Just a room.”

“What happened then?” the boy asked. The vampire appeared to be watching the smoke gather beneath the overhead bulb.

“Ah … we went back to New Orleans posthaste,” he said. “Lestat had his coffin in a miserable room near the ramparts.”

“And you did get into the coffin?”

“I had no choice. I begged Lestat to let me stay in the closet, but he laughed, astonished. ‘Don’t you know what you are?’ he asked. ‘But is it magical? Must it have this shape?’ I pleaded. Only to hear him laugh again. I couldn’t bear the idea; but as we argued, I realized I had no real fear. It was a strange realization. All my life I’d feared closed places. Born and bred in French houses with lofty ceilings and floor-length windows, I had a dread of being enclosed. I felt uncomfortable even in the confessional in church. It was a normal enough fear. And now I realized as I protested to Lestat, I did not actually feel this anymore. I was simply remembering it. Hanging on to it from habit, from a deficiency of ability to recognize my present and exhilarating freedom. ‘You’re carrying on badly,’ Lestat said finally. ‘And it’s almost dawn. I should let you die. You will die, you know. The sun will destroy the blood I’ve given you, in every tissue, every vein. But you shouldn’t be feeling this fear at all. I think you’re like a man who loses an arm or a leg and keeps insisting that he can feel pain where the arm or leg used to be.’ Well, that was positively the most intelligent and useful thing Lestat ever said in my presence, and it brought me around at once. ‘Now, I’m getting into the coffin,’ he finally said to me in his most disdainful tone, ‘and you will get in on top of me if you know what’s good for you.’ And I did. I lay face-down on him, utterly confused by my absence of dread and filled with a distaste for being so

close to him, handsome and intriguing though he was. And he shut the lid. Then I asked him if I was completely dead. My body was tingling and itching all over. 'No, you're not then,' he said. 'When you are, you'll only hear and see it changing and feel nothing. You should be dead by tonight. Go to sleep.' "

"Was he right? Were you … dead when you woke up?"

"Yes, changed, I should say. As obviously I am alive. My body was dead. It was some time before it became absolutely cleansed of the fluids and matter it no longer needed, but it was dead. And with the realization of it came another stage in my divorce from human emotions. The first thing which became apparent to me, even while Lestat and I were loading the coffin into a hearse and stealing another coffin from a mortuary, was that I did not like Lestat at all. I was far from being his equal yet, but I was infinitely closer to him than I had been before the death of my body. I can't really make this clear to you for the obvious reason that you are now as I was before my body died. You cannot understand. But before I died, Lestat was absolutely the most overwhelming *experience* I'd ever had. Your cigarette has become one long cylindrical ash."

"Oh!" The boy quickly ground the filter into the glass. "You mean that when the gap was closed between you, he lost his … spell?" he asked, his eyes quickly fixed on the vampire, his hands now producing a cigarette and match much more easily than before.

"Yes, that's correct," said the vampire with obvious pleasure. "The trip back to Pointe du Lac was thrilling. And the constant chatter of Lestat was positively the most boring and disheartening thing I experienced. Of course as I said, I was far from being his equal. I had my dead limbs to contend with … to use his comparison. And I learned that on that very night, when I had to make my first kill."

The vampire reached across the table now and gently brushed an ash from the boy's lapel, and the boy stared at his withdrawing hand in alarm. "Excuse me," said the vampire. "I didn't mean to frighten you."

"Excuse *me*," said the boy. "I just got the impression suddenly that your arm was … abnormally long. You reached so far without moving!"

"No," said the vampire, resting his hands again on his crossed knees.

“I moved forward much too fast for you to see. It was an illusion.”

“You moved forward? But you didn’t. You were sitting just as you are now, with your back against the chair.”

“No,” repeated the vampire firmly. “I moved forward as I told you. Here, I’ll do it again.” And he did it again, and the boy stared with the same mixture of confusion and fear. “You still didn’t see it,” said the vampire. “But, you see, if you look at my outstretched arm now, it’s really not remarkably long at all.” And he raised his arm, first finger pointing heavenward as if he were an angel about to give the Word of the Lord. “You have experienced a fundamental difference between the way you see and I see. My gesture appeared slow and somewhat languid to me. And the sound of my finger brushing your coat was quite audible. Well, I didn’t mean to frighten you, I confess. But perhaps you can see from this that my return to Pointe du Lac was a feast of new experiences, the mere swaying of a tree branch in the wind a delight.”

“Yes,” said the boy; but he was still visibly shaken. The vampire eyed him for a moment, and then he said, “I was telling you …”

“About your first kill,” said the boy.

“Yes. I should say first, however, that the plantation was in a state of pandemonium. The overseer’s body had been found and so had the blind old man in the master bedroom, and no one could explain the blind old man’s presence. And no one had been able to find me in New Orleans. My sister had contacted the police, and several of them were at Pointe du Lac when I arrived. It was already quite dark, naturally, and Lestat quickly explained to me that I must not let the police see me in even minimal light, especially not with my body in its present remarkable state; so I talked to them in the avenue of oaks before the plantation house, ignoring their requests that we go inside. I explained I’d been to Pointe du Lac the night before and the blind old man was my guest. As for the overseer, he had not been here, but had gone to New Orleans on business.

“After that was settled, during which my new detachment served me admirably, I had the problem of the plantation itself. My slaves were in a state of complete confusion, and no work had been done all day. We had a large plant then for the making of the indigo dye, and the overseer’s management had been most important. But I had several

extremely intelligent slaves who might have done his job just as well a long time before, if I had recognized their intelligence and not feared their African appearance and manner. I studied them clearly now and gave the management of things over to them. To the best, I gave the overseer's house on a promise. Two of the young women were brought back into the house from the fields to care for Lestat's father, and I told them I wanted as much privacy as possible and they would all of them be rewarded not only for service but for leaving me and Lestat absolutely alone. I did not realize at the time that these slaves would be the first, and possibly the only ones, to ever suspect that Lestat and I were not ordinary creatures. I failed to realize that their experience with the supernatural was far greater than that of white men. In my own inexperience I still thought of them as childlike savages barely domesticated by slavery. I made a bad mistake. But let me keep to my story. I was going to tell you about my first kill. Lestat bungled it with his characteristic lack of common sense."

"Bungled it?" asked the boy.

"I should never have started with human beings. But this was something I had to learn by myself. Lestat had us plunge headlong into the swamps right after the police and the slaves were settled. It was very late, and the slave cabins were completely dark. We soon lost sight of the lights of Pointe du Lac altogether, and I became very agitated. It was the same thing again: remembered fears, confusion. Lestat, had he any native intelligence, might have explained things to me patiently and gently—that I had no need to fear the swamps, that to snakes and insects I was utterly invulnerable, and that I must concentrate on my new ability to see in total darkness. Instead, he harassed me with condemnations. He was concerned only with our victims, with finishing my initiation and getting on with it.

"And when we finally came upon our victims, he rushed me into action. They were a small camp of runaway slaves. Lestat had visited them before and picked off perhaps a fourth of their number by watching from the dark for one of them to leave the fire, or by taking them in their sleep. They knew absolutely nothing of Lestat's presence. We had to watch for well over an hour before one of the men—they were all men—finally left the clearing and came just a few paces into the trees. He unhooked his pants now and attended to an ordinary

physical necessity; and as he turned to go, Lestat shook me and said, 'Take him.' " The vampire smiled at the boy's wide eyes. "I think I was about as horrorstruck as you would be," he said. "But I didn't know then that I might kill animals instead of humans. I said quickly I could not possibly take him. And the slave heard me speak. He turned, his back to the distant fire, and peered into the dark. Then quickly and silently, he drew a long knife out of his belt. He was naked except for the pants and the belt, a tall, strong-armed, sleek young man. He said something in the French patois, and then he stepped forward. I realized that, though I saw him clearly in the dark, he could not see us. Lestat stepped in back of him with a swiftness that baffled me and got a hold around his neck while he pinned his left arm. The slave cried out and tried to throw Lestat off. He sank his teeth now, and the slave froze as if from snakebite. He sank to his knees, and Lestat fed fast as the other slaves came running. 'You sicken me,' he said when he got back to me. It was as if we were black insects utterly camouflaged in the night, watching the slaves move, oblivious to us, discover the wounded man, drag him back, fan out in the foliage searching for the attacker. 'Come on, we have to get another one before they all return to camp,' he said. And quickly we set off after one man who was separated from the others. I was still terribly agitated, convinced I couldn't bring myself to attack and feeling no urge to do so. There were many things, as I mention, which Lestat might have said and done. He might have made the experience rich in so many ways. But he did not."

"What could he have done?" the boy asked. "What do you mean?"

"Killing is no ordinary act," said the vampire. "One doesn't simply glut oneself on blood." He shook his head. "It is the experience of another's life for certain, and often the experience of the loss of that life through the blood, slowly. It is again and again the experience of that loss of my own life, which I experienced when I sucked the blood from Lestat's wrist and felt his heart pound with my heart. It is again and again a celebration of that experience; because for vampires that is the ultimate experience." He said this most seriously, as if he were arguing with someone who held a different view. "I don't think Lestat ever appreciated that, though how he could not, I don't know. Let me say he appreciated something, but very little, I think, of what there is

to know. In any event, he took no pains to remind me now of what I'd felt when I clamped onto his wrist for life itself and wouldn't let it go; or to pick and choose a place for me where I might experience my first kill with some measure of quiet and dignity. He rushed headlong through the encounter as if it were something to put behind us as quickly as possible, like so many yards of the road. Once he had caught the slave, he gagged him and held him, baring his neck. 'Do it,' he said. 'You can't turn back now.' Overcome with revulsion and weak with frustration, I obeyed. I knelt beside the bent, struggling man and, clamping both my hands on his shoulders, I went into his neck. My teeth had only just begun to change, and I had to tear his flesh, not puncture it; but once the wound was made, the blood flowed. And once that happened, once I was locked to it, drinking … all else vanished.

"Lestat and the swamp and the noise of the distant camp meant nothing. Lestat might have been an insect, buzzing, lighting, then vanishing in significance. The sucking mesmerized me; the warm struggling of the man was soothing to the tension of my hands; and there came the beating of the drum again, which was the drumbeat of his heart—only this time it beat in perfect rhythm with the drumbeat of my own heart, the two resounding in every fiber of my being, until the beat began to grow slower and slower, so that each was a soft rumble that threatened to go on without end. I was drowsing, falling into weightlessness; and then Lestat pulled me back. 'He's dead, you idiot!' he said with his characteristic charm and tact. 'You don't drink after they're dead! Understand that!' I was in a frenzy for a moment, not myself, insisting to him that the man's heart still beat, and I was in an agony to clamp onto him again. I ran my hands over his chest, then grabbed at his wrists. I would have cut into his wrist if Lestat hadn't pulled me to my feet and slapped my face. This slap was astonishing. It was not painful in the ordinary way. It was a sensational shock of another sort, a rapping of the senses, so that I spun in confusion and found myself helpless and staring, my back against a cypress, the night pulsing with insects in my ears. 'You'll die if you do that,' Lestat was saying. 'He'll suck you right down into death with him if you cling to him in death. And now you've drunk too much, besides; you'll be ill.' His voice grated on me. I had the urge to throw myself on him

suddenly, but I was feeling just what he'd said. There was a grinding pain in my stomach, as if some whirlpool there were sucking my insides into itself. It was the blood passing too rapidly into my own blood, but I didn't know it. Lestat moved through the night now like a cat and I followed him, my head throbbing, this pain in my stomach no better when we reached the house of Pointe du Lac.

"As we sat at the table in the parlor, Lestat dealing a game of solitaire on the polished wood, I sat there staring at him with contempt. He was mumbling nonsense. I would get used to killing, he said; it would be nothing. I must not allow myself to be shaken. I was reacting too much as if the 'mortal coil' had not been shaken off. I would become accustomed to things all too quickly. 'Do you think so?' I asked him finally. I really had no interest in his answer. I understood now the difference between us. For me the experience of killing had been cataclysmic. So had that of sucking Lestat's wrist. These experiences so overwhelmed and so changed my view of everything around me, from the picture of my brother on the parlor wall to the sight of a single star in the topmost pane of the French window, that I could not imagine another vampire taking them for granted. I was altered, permanently; I knew it. And what I felt, most profoundly, for everything, even the sound of the playing cards being laid down one by one upon the shining rows of the solitaire, was respect. Lestat felt the opposite. Or he felt nothing. He was the sow's ear out of which nothing fine could be made. As boring as a mortal, as trivial and unhappy as a mortal, he chattered over the game, belittling my experience, utterly locked against the possibility of any experience of his own. By morning, I realized that I was his complete superior and I had been sadly cheated in having him for a teacher. He must guide me through the necessary lessons, if there were any more real lessons, and I must tolerate in him a frame of mind which was blasphemous to life itself. I felt cold towards him. I had no contempt in superiority. Only a hunger for new experience, for that which was beautiful and as devastating as my kill. And I saw that if I were to maximize every experience available to me, I must exert my own powers over my learning. Lestat was of no use.

"It was well past midnight when I finally rose out of the chair and went out on the gallery. The moon was large over the cypresses, and

the candlelight poured from the open doors. The thick plastered pillars and walls of the house had been freshly whitewashed, the floorboards freshly swept, and a summer rain had left the night clean and sparkling with drops of water. I leaned against the end pillar of the gallery, my head touching the soft tendrils of a jasmine which grew there in constant battle with a wisteria, and I thought of what lay before me throughout the world and throughout time, and resolved to go about it delicately and reverently, learning that from each thing which would take me best to another. What this meant, I wasn't sure myself. Do you understand me when I say I did not wish to rush headlong into experience, that what I'd felt as a vampire was far too powerful to be wasted?"

"Yes," said the boy eagerly. "It sounds as if it was like being in love."

The vampire's eyes gleamed. "That's correct. It is like love." He smiled. "And I tell you my frame of mind that night so you can know there are profound differences between vampires, and how I came to take a different approach from Lestat. You must understand I did not snub him because he did not appreciate his experience. I simply could not understand how such feelings could be wasted. But then Lestat did something which was to show me a way to go about my learning.

"He had more than a casual appreciation of the wealth at Pointe du Lac. He'd been much pleased by the beauty of the china used for his father's supper; and he liked the feel of the velvet drapes, and he traced the patterns of the carpets with his toe. And now he took from one of the china closets a crystal glass and said, 'I do miss glasses.' Only he said this with an impish delight that caused me to study him with a hard eye. I disliked him intensely! 'I want to show you a little trick,' he said. 'That is, if you like glasses.' And after setting it on the card table he came out on the gallery where I stood and changed his manner again into that of a stalking animal, eyes piercing the dark beyond the lights of the house, peering down under the arching branches of the oaks. In an instant, he had vaulted the railing and dropped softly on the dirt below, and then lunged into the blackness to catch something in both his hands. When he stood before me with it, I gasped to see it was a rat. 'Don't be such a damned idiot,' he said. 'Haven't you ever seen a rat?' It was a huge, struggling field rat with a long tail. He held its neck so it couldn't bite. 'Rats can be quite nice,'

he said. And he took the rat to the wine glass, slashed its throat, and filled the glass rapidly with blood. The rat then went hurtling over the gallery railing, and Lestat held the wine glass to the candle triumphantly. 'You may well have to live off rats from time to time, so wipe that expression off your face,' he said. 'Rats, chickens, cattle. Travelling by ship, you damn well better live off rats, if you don't wish to cause such a panic on board that they search your coffin. You damn well better keep the ship clean of rats.' And then he sipped the blood as delicately as if it were burgundy. He made a slight face. 'It gets cold so fast.'

" 'Do you mean, then, we can live from animals?' I asked.

" 'Yes.' He drank it all down and then casually threw the glass at the fireplace. I stared at the fragments. 'You don't mind, do you?' He gestured to the broken glass with a sarcastic smile. 'I surely hope you don't, because there's nothing much you can do about it if you do mind.'

" 'I can throw you and your father out of Pointe du Lac, if I mind,' I said. I believe this was my first show of temper.

" 'Why would you do that?' he asked with mock alarm. 'You don't know everything yet … do you?' He was laughing then and walking slowly about the room. He ran his fingers over the satin finish of the spinet. 'Do you play?' he asked.

"I said something like, 'Don't touch it!' and he laughed at me. 'I'll touch it if I like!' he said. 'You don't know, for example, all the ways you can die. And dying now would be *such* a calamity, wouldn't it?'

" 'There must be someone else in the world to teach me these things,' I said. 'Certainly you're not the only vampire! And your father, he's perhaps seventy. You couldn't have been a vampire long, so someone must have instructed you.…'

" 'And do you think you can find other vampires by yourself? They might see you coming, my friend, but you won't see them. No, I don't think you have much choice about things at this point, friend. I'm your teacher and you need me, and there isn't much you can do about it either way. And we both have people to provide for. My father needs a doctor, and then there is the matter of your mother and sister. Don't get any mortal notions about telling them you are a vampire. Just provide for them and for my father, which means that tomorrow

night you had better kill fast and then attend to the business of your plantation. Now to bed. We both sleep in the same room; it makes for far less risk.'

" 'No, you secure the bedroom for yourself,' I said. 'I've no intention of staying in the same room with you.'

"He became furious. 'Don't do anything stupid, Louis. I warn you. There's nothing you can do to defend yourself once the sun rises, nothing. Separate rooms mean separate security. Double precautions and double chance of notice.' He then said a score of things to frighten me into complying, but he might as well have been talking to the walls. I watched him intently, but I didn't listen to him. He appeared frail and stupid to me, a man made of dried twigs with a thin, carping voice. 'I sleep alone,' I said, and gently put my hand around the candle flames one by one. 'It's almost morning!' he insisted.

" 'So lock yourself in,' I said, embracing my coffin, hoisting it and carrying it down the brick stairs. I could hear the locks snapping on the French doors above, the swoosh of the drapes. The sky was pale but still sprinkled with stars, and another light rain blew now on the breeze from the river, speckling the flagstones. I opened the door of my brother's oratory, shoving back the roses and thorns which had almost sealed it, and set the coffin on the stone floor before the priedieu. I could almost make out the images of the saints on the walls. 'Paul,' I said softly, addressing my brother, 'for the first time in my life I feel nothing for you, nothing for your death; and for the first time I feel everything for you, feel the sorrow of your loss as if I never before knew feeling.' You see …"

The vampire turned to the boy. "For the first time now I was fully and completely a vampire. I shut the wood blinds flat upon the small barred windows and bolted the door. Then I climbed into the satin-lined coffin, barely able to see the gleam of cloth in the darkness, and locked myself in. That is how I became a vampire."

“And there you were,” said the boy after a pause, “with another vampire you hated.”

“But I had to stay with him,” answered the vampire. “As I’ve told you, he had me at a great disadvantage. He hinted there was much I didn’t know and must know and that he alone could tell me. But in fact, the main part of what he did teach me was practical and not so difficult to figure out for oneself. How we might travel, for instance, by ship, having our coffins transported for us as though they contained the remains of loved ones being sent here or there for burial; how no one would dare to open such a coffin, and we might rise from it at night to clean the ship of rats—things of this nature. And then there were the shops and businessmen he knew who admitted us well after hours to outfit us in the finest Paris fashions, and those agents willing to transact financial matters in restaurants and cabarets. And in all of these mundane matters, Lestat was an adequate teacher. What manner of man he’d been in life, I couldn’t tell and didn’t care; but he was for all appearances of the same class now as myself, which meant little to me, except that it made our lives run a little more smoothly than they might have otherwise. He had impeccable taste, though my library to him was a ‘pile of dust,’ and he seemed more than once to be infuriated by the sight of my reading a book or writing some observations in a journal. ‘That’s mortal nonsense,’ he would say to me, while at the same time spending so much of my money to splendidly furnish Pointe du Lac, that even I, who cared nothing for the money, was forced to wince. And in entertaining visitors at Pointe du Lac—those hapless travellers who came up the river road by horseback or carriage begging accommodations for the night, sporting letters of introduction from other planters or officials in New Orleans—to these he was so gentle and polite that it made things far easier for me, who found myself hopelessly locked to him and jarred over and over by his viciousness.”

“But he didn’t harm these men?” asked the boy.

“Oh yes, often, he did. But I’ll tell you a little secret if I may, which applies not only to vampires, but to generals, soldiers, and kings. Most of us would much rather see somebody die than be the object of

rudeness under our roofs. Strange … yes. But very true, I assure you. That Lestat hunted for mortals every night, I knew. But had he been savage and ugly to my family, my guests, and my slaves, I couldn't have endured it. He was not. He seemed particularly to delight in the visitors. But he said we must spare no expense where our families were concerned. And he seemed to me to push luxury upon his father to an almost ludicrous point. The old blind man must be told constantly how fine and expensive were his bed jackets and robes and what imported draperies had just been fixed to his bed and what French and Spanish wines we had in the cellar and how much the plantation yielded even in bad years when the coast talked of abandoning the indigo production altogether and going into sugar. But then at other times he would bully the old man, as I mentioned. He would erupt into such rage that the old man whimpered like a child. 'Don't I take care of you in baronial splendor!' Lestat would shout at him. 'Don't I provide for your every want! Stop whining to me about going to church or old friends! Such nonsense. Your old friends are dead. Why don't you die and leave me and my bankroll in peace!' The old man would cry softly that these things meant so little to him in old age. He would have been content on his little farm forever. I wanted often to ask him later, 'Where was this farm? From where did you come to Louisiana?' to get some clue to that place where Lestat might have known another vampire. But I didn't dare to bring these things up, lest the old man start crying and Lestat become enraged. But these fits were no more frequent than periods of near obsequious kindness when Lestat would bring his father supper on a tray and feed him patiently while talking of the weather and the New Orleans news and the activities of my mother and sister. It was obvious that a great gulf existed between father and son, both in education and refinement, but how it came about, I could not quite guess. And from this whole matter, I achieved a somewhat consistent detachment.

"Existence, as I've said, was possible. There was always the promise behind his mocking smile that he knew great things or terrible things, had commerce with levels of darkness I could not possibly guess at. And all the time, he belittled me and attacked me for my love of the senses, my reluctance to kill, and the near swoon which killing could produce in me. He laughed uproariously when I discovered that I

could see myself in a mirror and that crosses had no effect upon me, and would taunt me with sealed lips when I asked about God or the devil. 'I'd like to meet the devil some night,' he said once with a malignant smile. 'I'd chase him from here to the wilds of the Pacific. I am the devil.' And when I was aghast at this, he went into peals of laughter. But what happened was simply that in my distaste for him I came to ignore and suspect him, and yet to study him with a detached fascination. Sometimes I'd find myself staring at his wrist from which I'd drawn my vampire life, and I would fall into such a stillness that my mind seemed to leave my body or rather my body to become my mind; and then he would see me and stare at me with a stubborn ignorance of what I felt and longed to know and, reaching over, shake me roughly out of it. I bore this with an overt detachment unknown to me in mortal life and came to understand this as a part of vampire nature: that I might sit at home at Pointe du Lac and think for hours of my brother's mortal life and see it short and rounded in unfathomable darkness, understanding now the vain and senseless wasting passion with which I'd mourned his loss and turned on other mortals like a maddened animal. All that confusion was then like dancers frenzied in a fog; and now, now in this strange vampire nature, I felt a profound sadness. But I did not brood over this. Let me not give you that impression, for brooding would have been to me the most terrible waste; but rather I looked around me at all the mortals that I knew and saw all life as precious, condemning all fruitless guilt and passion that would let it slip through the fingers like sand. It was only now as a vampire that I did come to know my sister, forbidding her the plantation for the city life which she so needed in order to know her own time of life and her own beauty and come to marry, not brood for our lost brother or my going away or become a nursemaid for our mother. And I provided for them all they might need or want, finding even the most trivial request worth my immediate attention. My sister laughed at the transformation in me when we would meet at night and I would take her from our flat out the narrow wooden streets to walk along the tree-lined levee in the moonlight, savoring the orange blossoms and the caressing warmth, talking for hours of her most secret thoughts and dreams, those little fantasies she dared tell no one and would even whisper to me when we sat in the dim-lit parlor

entirely alone. And I would see her sweet and palpable before me, a shimmering, precious creature soon to grow old, soon to die, soon to lose these moments that in their intangibility promised to us, wrongly … wrongly, an immortality. As if it were our very birthright, which we could not come to grasp the meaning of until this time of middle life when we looked on only as many years ahead as already lay behind us. When every moment, every moment must be first known and then savored.

"It was detachment that made this possible, a sublime loneliness with which Lestat and I moved through the world of mortal men. And all material troubles passed from us. I should tell you the practical nature of it.

"Lestat had always known how to steal from victims chosen for sumptuous dress and other promising signs of extravagance. But the great problems of shelter and secrecy had been for him a terrible struggle. I suspected that beneath his gentleman's veneer he was painfully ignorant of the most simple financial matters. But I was not. And so he could acquire cash at any moment and I could invest it. If he were not picking the pocket of a dead man in an alley, he was at the greatest gambling tables in the richest salons of the city, using his vampire keenness to suck gold and dollars and deeds of property from young planters' sons who found him deceptive in his friendship and alluring in his charm. But this had never given him the life he wanted, and so for that he had ushered me into the preternatural world that he might acquire an investor and manager for whom these skills of mortal life became most valuable in this life after.

"But, let me describe New Orleans, as it was then, and as it was to become, so you can understand how simple our lives were. There was no city in America like New Orleans. It was filled not only with the French and Spanish of all classes who had formed in part its peculiar aristocracy, but later with immigrants of all kinds, the Irish and the German in particular. Then there were not only the black slaves, yet unhomogenized and fantastical in their different tribal garb and manners, but the great growing class of the free people of color, those marvellous people of our mixed blood and that of the islands, who produced a magnificent and unique caste of craftsmen, artists, poets, and renowned feminine beauty. And then there were the Indians, who

covered the levee on summer days selling herbs and crafted wares. And drifting through all, through this medley of languages and colors, were the people of the port, the sailors of the ships, who came in great waves to spend their money in the cabarets, to buy for the night the beautiful women both dark and light, to dine on the best of Spanish and French cooking and drink the imported wines of the world. Then add to these, within years after my transformation, the Americans, who built the city up river from the old French Quarter with magnificent Grecian houses which gleamed in the moonlight like temples. And, of course, the planters, always the planters, coming to town with their families in shining landaus to buy evening gowns and silver and gems, to crowd the narrow streets on the way to the old French Opera House and the Théâtre d'Orléans and the St. Louis Cathedral, from whose open doors came the chants of High Mass over the crowds of the Place d'Armes on Sundays, over the noise and bickering of the French Market, over the silent, ghostly drift of the ships along the raised waters of the Mississippi, which flowed against the levee above the ground of New Orleans itself, so that the ships appeared to float against the sky.

"This was New Orleans, a magical and magnificent place to live. In which a vampire, richly dressed and gracefully walking through the pools of light of one gas lamp after another might attract no more notice in the evening than hundreds of other exotic creatures—if he attracted any at all, if anyone stopped to whisper behind a fan, 'That man … how pale, how he gleams … how he moves. It's not natural!' A city in which a vampire might be gone before the words had even passed the lips, seeking out the alleys in which he could see like a cat, the darkened bars in which sailors slept with their heads on the tables, great high-ceilinged hotel rooms where a lone figure might sit, her feet upon an embroidered cushion, her legs covered with a lace counterpane, her head bent under the tarnished light of a single candle, never seeing the great shadow move across the plaster flowers of the ceiling, never seeing the long white fingers reached to press the fragile flame.

"Remarkable, if for nothing else, because of this, that all of those men and women who stayed for any reason left behind them some monument, some structure of marble and brick and stone that still

stands; so that even when the gas lamps went out and the planes came in and the office buildings crowded the blocks of Canal Street, something irreducible of beauty and romance remained; not in every street perhaps, but in so many that the landscape is for me the landscape of those times always, and walking now in the starlit streets of the Quarter or the Garden District I am in those times again. I suppose that is the nature of the monument. Be it a small house or a mansion of Corinthian columns and wrought-iron lace. The monument does not say that this or that man walked here. No, that what he felt in one time in one spot continues. The moon that rose over New Orleans then still rises. As long as the monuments stand, it still rises. The feeling, at least here … and there … it remains the same."

The vampire appeared sad. He sighed, as if he doubted what he had just said. "What was it?" he asked suddenly as if he were slightly tired. "Yes, money. Lestat and I had to make money. And I was telling you that he could steal. But it was investment afterwards that mattered. What we accumulated we must use. But I go ahead of myself. I killed animals. But I'll get to that in a moment. Lestat killed humans all the time, sometimes two or three a night, sometimes more. He would drink from one just enough to satisfy a momentary thirst, and then go on to another. The better the human, as he would say in his vulgar way, the more he liked it. A fresh young girl, that was his favorite food the first of the evening; but the triumphant kill for Lestat was a young man. A young man around your age would have appealed to him in particular."

"Me?" the boy whispered. He had leaned forward on his elbows to peer into the vampire's eyes, and now he drew up.

"Yes," the vampire went on, as if he hadn't observed the boy's change of expression. "You see, they represented the greatest loss to Lestat, because they stood on the threshold of the maximum possibility of life. Of course, Lestat didn't understand this himself. I came to understand it. Lestat understood nothing.

"I shall give you a perfect example of what Lestat liked. Up the river from us was the Freniere plantation, a magnificent spread of land which had great hopes of making a fortune in sugar, just shortly after the refining process had been invented. I presume you know sugar was refined in Louisiana. There is something perfect and ironic about it,

this land which I loved producing refined sugar. I mean this more unhappily than I think you know. This refined sugar is a poison. It was like the essence of life in New Orleans, so sweet that it can be fatal, so richly enticing that all other values are forgotten.… But as I was saying, up river from us lived the Frenieres, a great old French family which had produced in this generation five young women and one young man. Now, three of the young women were destined not to marry, but two were young enough still and all depended upon the young man. He was to manage the plantation as I had done for my mother and sister; he was to negotiate marriages, to put together dowries when the entire fortune of the place rode precariously on the next year's sugar crop; he was to bargain, fight, and keep at a distance the entire material world for the world of Freniere. Lestat decided he wanted him. And when fate alone nearly cheated Lestat, he went wild. He risked his own life to get the Freniere boy, who had become involved in a duel. He had insulted a young Spanish Creole at a ball. The whole thing was nothing, really; but like most young Creoles this one was willing to die for nothing. They were both willing to die for nothing. The Freniere household was in an uproar. You must understand, Lestat knew this perfectly. Both of us had hunted the Freniere plantation, Lestat for slaves and chicken thieves and me for animals."

"You were killing *only* animals?"

"Yes. But I'll come to that later, as I said. We both knew the plantation, and I had indulged in one of the greatest pleasures of a vampire, that of watching people unbeknownst to them. I knew the Freniere sisters as I knew the magnificent rose trees around my brother's oratory. They were a unique group of women. Each in her own way was as smart as the brother; and one of them, I shall call her Babette, was not only as smart as her brother, but far wiser. Yet none had been educated to care for the plantation; none understood even the simplest facts about its financial state. All were totally dependent upon young Freniere, and all knew it. And so, larded with their love for him, their passionate belief that he hung the moon and that any conjugal love they might ever know would only be a pale reflection of their love for him, larded with this was a desperation as strong as the will to survive. If Freniere died in the duel, the plantation would

collapse. Its fragile economy, a life of splendor based on the perennial mortgaging of the next year's crop, was in his hands alone. So you can imagine the panic and misery in the Freniere household the night that the son went to town to fight the appointed duel. And now picture Lestat, gnashing his teeth like a comic-opera devil because he was not going to kill the young Freniere."

"You mean then … that you *felt* for the Freniere women?"

"I felt for them totally," said the vampire. "Their position was agonizing. And I felt for the boy. That night he locked himself in his father's study and made a will. He knew full well that if he fell under the rapier at four a.m. the next morning, his family would fall with him. He deplored his situation and yet could do nothing to help it. To run out on the duel would not only mean social ruin for him, but would probably have been impossible. The other young man would have pursued him until he was forced to fight. When he left the plantation at midnight, he was staring into the face of death itself with the character of a man who, having only one path to follow, has resolved to follow it with perfect courage. He would either kill the Spanish boy or die; it was unpredictable, despite all his skill. His face reflected a depth of feeling and wisdom I'd never seen on the face of any of Lestat's struggling victims. I had my first battle with Lestat then and there. I'd prevented him from killing the boy for months, and now he meant to kill him before the Spanish boy could.

"We were on horseback, racing after the young Freniere towards New Orleans, Lestat bent on overtaking him, I bent on overtaking Lestat. Well, the duel, as I told you, was scheduled for four a.m. On the edge of the swamp just beyond the city's northern gate. And arriving there just shortly before four, we had precious little time to return to Pointe du Lac, which meant our own lives were in danger. I was incensed at Lestat as never before, and he was determined to get the boy. 'Give him his chance!' I was insisting, getting hold of Lestat before he could approach the boy. It was midwinter, bitter-cold and damp in the swamps, one volley of icy rain after another sweeping the clearing where the duel was to be fought. Of course, I did not fear these elements in the sense that you might; they did not numb me, nor threaten me with mortal shivering or illness. But vampires feel cold as acutely as humans, and the blood of the kill is often the rich, sensual

alleviation of that cold. But what concerned me that morning was not the pain I felt, but the excellent cover of darkness these elements provided, which made Freniere extremely vulnerable to Lestat's attack. All he need do would be to step away from his two friends towards the swamp and Lestat might take him. And so I physically grappled with Lestat. I held him."

"But towards all this you had detachment, distance?"

"Hmmm …" The vampire sighed. "Yes. I had it, and with it a supremely resolute anger. To glut himself upon the life of an entire family was to me Lestat's supreme act of utter contempt and disregard for all he should have seen with a vampire's depth. So I held him in the dark, where he spit at me and cursed at me; and young Freniere took his rapier from his friend and second and went out on the slick, wet grass to meet his opponent. There was a brief conversation, then the duel commenced. In moments, it was over. Freniere had mortally wounded the other boy with a swift thrust to the chest. And he knelt in the grass, bleeding, dying, shouting something unintelligible at Freniere. The victor simply stood there. Everyone could see there was no sweetness in the victory. Freniere looked on death as if it were an abomination. His companions advanced with their lanterns, urging him to come away as soon as possible and leave the dying man to his friends. Meantime, the wounded one would allow no one to touch him. And then, as Freniere's group turned to go, the three of them walking heavily towards their horses, the man on the ground drew a pistol. Perhaps I alone could see this in the powerful dark. But, in any event, I shouted to Freniere as I ran towards the gun. And this was all that Lestat needed. While I was lost in my clumsiness, distracting Freniere and going for the gun itself, Lestat, with his years of experience and superior speed, grabbed the young man and spirited him into the cypresses. I doubt his friends even knew what had happened. The pistol had gone off, the wounded man had collapsed, and I was tearing through the near-frozen marshes shouting for Lestat.

"Then I saw him. Freniere lay sprawled over the knobbed roots of a cypress, his boots deep in the murky water, and Lestat was still bent over him, one hand on the hand of Freniere that still held the foil. I went to pull Lestat off, and that right hand swung at me with such lightning speed I did not see it, did not know it had struck me until I

found myself in the water also; and, of course, by the time I recovered, Freniere was dead. I saw him as he lay there, his eyes closed, his lips utterly still as if he were just sleeping. 'Damn you!' I began cursing Lestat. And then I started, for the body of Freniere had begun to slip down into the marsh. The water rose over his face and covered him completely. Lestat was jubilant; he reminded me tersely that we had less than an hour to get back to Pointe du Lac, and he swore revenge on me. 'If I didn't like the life of a Southern planter, I'd finish you tonight. I know a way,' he threatened me. 'I ought to drive your horse into the swamps. You'd have to dig yourself a hole and smother!' He rode off.

"Even over all these years, I feel that anger for him like a white-hot liquid filling my veins. I saw then what being a vampire meant to him."

"He was just a killer," the boy said, his voice reflecting some of the vampire's emotion. "No regard for anything."

"No. Being a vampire for him meant revenge. Revenge against life itself. Every time he took a life it was revenge. It was no wonder, then, that he appreciated nothing. The nuances of vampire existence weren't even available to him because he was focused with a maniacal vengeance upon the mortal life he'd left. Consumed with hatred, he looked back. Consumed with envy, nothing pleased him unless he could take it from others; and once having it, he grew cold and dissatisfied, not loving the thing for itself; and so he went after something else. Vengeance, blind and sterile and contemptible.

"But I've spoken to you about the Freniere sisters. It was almost half past five when I reached their plantation. Dawn would come shortly after six, but I was almost home. I slipped onto the upper gallery of their house and saw them all gathered in the parlor; they had never even dressed for bed. The candles burnt low, and they sat already as mourners, waiting for the word. They were all dressed in black, as was their at-home custom, and in the dark the black shapes of their dresses massed together with their raven hair, so that in the glow of the candles their faces appeared as five soft, shimmering apparitions, each uniquely sad, each uniquely courageous. Babette's face alone appeared resolute. It was as if she had already made up her mind to take the burdens of Freniere if her brother died, and she had that same

expression on her face now which had been on her brother's when he mounted to leave for the duel. What lay ahead of her was nearly impossible. What lay ahead was the final death of which Lestat was guilty. So I did something then which caused me great risk. I made myself known to her. I did this by playing the light. As you can see, my face is very white and has a smooth, highly reflective surface, rather like that of polished marble."

"Yes," the boy nodded, and appeared flustered. "It's very … beautiful, actually," said the boy. "I wonder if … but what happened?"

"You wonder if I was a handsome man when I was alive," said the vampire. The boy nodded. "I was. Nothing structurally is changed in me. Only I never knew that I was handsome. Life whirled about me a wind of petty concerns, as I've said. I gazed at nothing, not even a mirror … especially not a mirror … with a free eye. But this is what happened. I stepped near to the pane of glass and let the light touch my face. And this I did at a moment when Babette's eyes were turned towards the panes. Then I appropriately vanished.

"Within seconds all the sisters knew a 'strange creature' had been seen, a ghostlike creature, and the two slave maids steadfastly refused to investigate. I waited out these moments impatiently for just that which I wanted to happen: Babette finally took a candelabrum from a side table, lit the candles, and, scorning everyone's fear, ventured out onto the cold gallery alone to see what was there, her sisters hovering in the door like great, black birds, one of them crying that the brother was dead and she had indeed seen his ghost. Of course, you must understand that Babette, being as strong as she was, never once attributed what she saw to imagination or to ghosts. I let her come the length of the dark gallery before I spoke to her, and even then I let her see only the vague outline of my body beside one of the columns. 'Tell your sisters to go back,' I whispered to her. 'I come to tell you of your brother. Do as I say.' She was still for an instant, and then she turned to me and strained to see me in the dark. 'I have only a little time. I would not harm you for the world,' I said. And she obeyed. Saying it was nothing, she told them to shut the door, and they obeyed as people obey who not only need a leader but are desperate for one. Then I stepped into the light of Babette's candles."

The boy's eyes were wide. He put his hand to his lips. "Did you look to her … as you do to me?" he asked.

"You ask that with such innocence," said the vampire. "Yes, I suppose I certainly did. Only, by candlelight I always had a less supernatural appearance. And I made no pretense with her of being an ordinary creature. 'I have only minutes,' I told her at once. 'But what I have to tell you is of the greatest importance. Your brother fought bravely and won the duel—but wait. You must know now, he is dead. Death was proverbial with him, the thief in the night about which all his goodness or courage could do nothing. But this is not the principal thing which I came to tell you. It is this. You can rule the plantation and you can save it. All that is required is that you let no one convince you otherwise. You must assume his position despite any outcry, any talk of convention, any talk of propriety or common sense. You must listen to nothing. The same land is here now that was here yesterday morning when your brother slept above. Nothing is changed. You must take his place. If you do not, the land is lost and the family is lost. You will be five women on a small pension doomed to live but half or less of what life could give you. Learn what you must know. Stop at nothing until you have the answers. And take my visitation to you to be your courage whenever you waver. You must take the reins of your own life. Your brother is dead.'

"I could see by her face that she had heard every word. She would have questioned me had there been time, but she believed me when I said there was not. Then I used all my skill to leave her so swiftly I appeared to vanish. From the garden I saw her face above in the glow of her candles. I saw her search the dark for me, turning around and around. And then I saw her make the Sign of the Cross and walk back to her sisters within."

The vampire smiled. "There was absolutely no talk on the river coast of any strange apparition to Babette Freniere, but after the first mourning and sad talk of the women left all alone, she became the scandal of the neighborhood because she chose to run the plantation on her own. She managed an immense dowry for her younger sister, and was married herself in another year. And Lestat and I almost never exchanged words."

"Did he go on living at Pointe du Lac?"

“Yes. I could not be certain he’d told me all I needed to know. And great pretense was necessary. My sister was married in my absence, for example, while I had a ‘malarial chill,’ and something similar overcame me the morning of my mother’s funeral. Meantime, Lestat and I sat down to dinner each night with the old man and made nice noises with our knives and forks, while he told us to eat everything on our plates and not to drink our wine too fast. With dozens of miserable headaches I would receive my sister in a darkened bedroom, the covers up to my chin, bid her and her husband bear with the dim light on account of the pain in my eyes, as I entrusted to them large amounts of money to invest for us all. Fortunately her husband was an idiot; a harmless one, but an idiot, the product of four generations of marriages between first cousins.

“But though these things went well, we began to have our problems with the slaves. They were the suspicious ones; and, as I’ve indicated, Lestat killed anyone and everyone he chose. So there was always some talk of mysterious death on that part of the coast. But it was what they saw of us which began the talk, and I heard it one evening when I was playing a shadow about the slave cabins.

“Now, let me explain first the character of these slaves. It was only about seventeen ninety-five, Lestat and I having lived there for four years in relative quiet, I investing the money which he acquired, increasing our lands, purchasing apartments and town houses in New Orleans which I rented, the work of the plantation itself producing little … more a cover for us than an investment. I say ‘our.’ This is wrong. I never signed anything over to Lestat, and, as you realize, I was still legally alive. But in seventeen ninety-five these slaves did not have the character which you’ve seen in films and novels of the South. They were not soft-spoken, brown-skinned people in drab rags who spoke an English dialect. They were Africans. And they were islanders; that is, some of them had come from Santo Domingo. They were very black and totally foreign; they spoke in their African tongues, and they spoke the French patois; and when they sang, they sang African songs which made the fields exotic and strange, always frightening to me in my mortal life. They were superstitious and had their own secrets and traditions. In short, they had not yet been destroyed as Africans completely. Slavery was the curse of their existence; but they had not

been robbed yet of that which had been characteristically theirs. They tolerated the baptism and modest garments imposed on them by the French Catholic laws; but in the evenings, they made their cheap fabrics into alluring costumes, made jewelry of animal bones and bits of discarded metal which they polished to look like gold; and the slave cabins of Pointe du Lac were a foreign country, an African coast after dark, in which not even the coldest overseer would want to wander. No fear for the vampire.

"Not until one summer evening when, passing for a shadow, I heard through the open doors of the black foreman's cottage a conversation which convinced me that Lestat and I slept in real danger. The slaves knew now we were not ordinary mortals. In hushed tones, the maids told of how, through a crack in the door, they had seen us dine on empty plates with empty silver, lifting empty glasses to our lips, laughing, our faces bleached and ghostly in the candlelight, the blind man a helpless fool in our power. Through keyholes they had seen Lestat's coffin, and once he had beaten one of them mercilessly for dawdling by the gallery windows of his room. 'There is no bed in there,' they confided one to the other with nodding heads. 'He sleeps in the coffin, I know it.' They were convinced, on the best of grounds, of what we were. And as for me, they'd seen me evening after evening emerge from the oratory, which was now little more than a shapeless mass of brick and vine, layered with flowering wisteria in the spring, wild roses in summer, moss gleaming on the old unpainted shutters which had never been opened, spiders spinning in the stone arches. Of course, I'd pretended to visit it in memory of Paul, but it was clear by their speech they no longer believed such lies. And now they attributed to us not only the deaths of slaves found in the fields and swamps and also the dead cattle and occasional horses, but all other strange events; even floods and thunder were the weapons of God in a personal battle waged with Louis and Lestat. But worse still, they were not planning to run away. We were devils. Our power inescapable. No, we must be destroyed. And at this gathering, where I became an unseen member, were a number of the Freniere slaves.

"This meant word would get to the entire coast. And though I firmly believed the entire coast to be impervious to a wave of hysteria, I did not intend to risk notice of any kind. I hurried back to the plantation

house to tell Lestat our game of playing planter was over. He'd have to give up his slave whip and golden napkin ring and move into town.

"He resisted, naturally. His father was gravely ill and might not live. He had no intention of running away from stupid slaves. 'I'll kill them all,' he said calmly, 'in threes and fours. Some will run away and that will be fine.'

" 'You're talking madness. The fact is I want you gone from here.'

" 'You want me gone! You,' he sneered. He was building a card palace on the dining room table with a pack of very fine French cards. 'You whining coward of a vampire who prowls the night killing alley cats and rats and staring for hours at candles as if they were people and standing in the rain like a zombie until your clothes are drenched and you smell like old wardrobe trunks in attics and have the look of a baffled idiot at the zoo.'

" 'You've nothing more to tell me, and your insistence on recklessness has endangered us both. I might live in that oratory alone while this house fell to ruin. I don't care about it!' I told him. Because this was quite true. 'But you must have all the things you never had of life and make of immortality a junk shop in which both of us become grotesque. Now, go look at your father and tell me how long he has to live, for that's how long you stay, and only if the slaves don't rise up against us!'

"He told me then to go look at his father myself, since I was the one who was always 'looking,' and I did. The old man was truly dying. I had been spared my mother's death, more or less, because she had died very suddenly on an afternoon. She'd been found with her sewing basket, seated quietly in the courtyard; she had died as one goes to sleep. But now I was seeing a natural death that was too slow with agony and with consciousness. And I'd always liked the old man; he was kindly and simple and made few demands. By day, he sat in the sun of the gallery dozing and listening to the birds; by night, any chatter on our part kept him company. He could play chess, carefully feeling each piece and remembering the entire state of the board with remarkable accuracy; and though Lestat would never play with him, I did often. Now he lay gasping for breath, his forehead hot and wet, the pillow around him stained with sweat. And as he moaned and prayed for death, Lestat in the other room began to play the spinet. I

slammed it shut, barely missing his fingers. ‘You won’t play while he dies!’ I said. ‘The hell I won’t!’ he answered me. ‘I’ll play the drum if I like!’ And taking a great sterling silver platter from a sideboard he slipped a finger through one of its handles and beat it with a spoon.

“I told him to stop it, or I would make him stop it. And then we both ceased our noise because the old man was calling his name. He was saying that he must talk to Lestat now before he died. I told Lestat to go to him. The sound of his crying was terrible. ‘Why should I? I’ve cared for him all these years. Isn’t that enough?’ And he drew from his pocket a nail file, and, seating himself on the foot of the old man's bed, he began to file his long nails.

“Meantime, I should tell you that I was aware of slaves about the house. They were watching and listening. I was truly hoping the old man would die within minutes. Once or twice before I’d dealt with suspicion or doubt on the part of several slaves, but never such a number. I immediately rang for Daniel, the slave to whom I’d given the overseer's house and position. But while I waited for him, I could hear the old man talking to Lestat; Lestat, who sat with his legs crossed, filing and filing, one eyebrow arched, his attention on his perfect nails. ‘It was the school,’ the old man was saying. ‘Oh, I know you remember … what can I say to you …’ he moaned.

“ ‘You’d better say it,’ Lestat said, ‘because you’re about to die.’ The old man let out a terrible noise, and I suspect I made some sound of my own. I positively loathed Lestat. I had a mind now to get him out of the room. ‘Well, you know that, don’t you? Even a fool like you knows that,’ said Lestat.

“ ‘You’ll never forgive me, will you? Not now, not even after I’m dead,’ said the old man.

“ ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about!’ said Lestat.

“My patience was becoming exhausted with him, and the old man was becoming more and more agitated. He was begging Lestat to listen to him with a warm heart. The whole thing was making me shudder. Meantime, Daniel had come, and I knew the moment I saw him that everything at Pointe du Lac was lost. Had I been more attentive I’d have seen signs of it before now. He looked at me with eyes of glass. I was a monster to him. ‘Monsieur Lestat’s father is very ill. Going,’ I said, ignoring his expression. ‘I want no noise tonight; the

slaves must all stay within the cabins. A doctor is on his way.' He stared at me as if I were lying. And then his eyes moved curiously and coldly away from me towards the old man's door. His face underwent such a change that I rose at once and looked in the room. It was Lestat, slouched at the foot of the bed, his back to the bedpost, his nail file working furiously, grimacing in such a way that both his great teeth showed prominently."

The vampire stopped, his shoulders shaking with silent laughter. He was looking at the boy. And the boy looked shyly at the table. But he had already looked, and fixedly, at the vampire's mouth. He had seen that the lips were of a different texture from the vampire's skin, that they were silken and delicately lined like any person's lips, only deadly white; and he had glimpsed the white teeth. Only, the vampire had such a way of smiling that they were not completely revealed; and the boy had not even thought of such teeth until now. "You can imagine," said the vampire, "what this meant.

"I had to kill him."

"You what?" said the boy.

"I had to kill him. He started to run. He would have alarmed everyone. Perhaps it might have been handled some other way, but I had no time. So I went after him, overpowering him. But then, finding myself in the act of doing what I had not done for four years, I stopped. This was a man. He had his bone-handle knife in his hand to defend himself. And I took it from him easily and slipped it into his heart. He sank to his knees at once, his fingers tightening on the blade, bleeding on it. And the sight of the blood, the aroma of it, maddened me. I believe I moaned aloud. But I did not reach for him, I would not. Then I remember seeing Lestat's figure emerge in the mirror over the sideboard. 'Why did you do this!' he demanded. I turned to face him, determined he would not see me in this weakened state. The old man was delirious, he went on, he could not understand what the old man was saying. 'The slaves, they know … you must go to the cabins and keep watch,' I managed to say to him. 'I'll care for the old man.'

" 'Kill him,' Lestat said.

" 'Are you mad!' I answered. 'He's your father!'

" 'I know he's my father!' said Lestat. 'That's why you have to kill him. I can't kill him! If I could, I would have done it a long time ago,

damn him!' He wrung his hands. 'We've got to get out of here. And look what you've done killing this one. There's no time to lose. His wife will be wailing up here in minutes … or she'll send someone worse!' "

The vampire sighed. "This was all true. Lestat was right. I could hear the slaves gathering around Daniel's cottage, waiting for him. Daniel had been brave enough to come into the haunted house alone. When he didn't return, the slaves would panic, become a mob. I told Lestat to calm them, to use all his power as a white master over them and not to alarm them with horror, and then I went into the bedroom and shut the door. I had then another shock in a night of shocks. Because I'd never seen Lestat's father as he was then.

"He was sitting up now, leaning forward, talking to Lestat, begging Lestat to answer him, telling him he understood his bitterness better than Lestat did himself. And he was a living corpse. Nothing animated his sunken body but a fierce will: hence, his eyes for their gleam were all the more sunken in his skull, and his lips in their trembling made his old yellowed mouth more horrible. I sat at the foot of the bed, and, suffering to see him so, I gave him my hand. I cannot tell you how much his appearance had shaken me. For when I bring death, it is swift and consciousless, leaving the victim as if in enchanted sleep. But this was the slow decay, the body refusing to surrender to the vampire of time which had sucked upon it for years on end. 'Lestat,' he said. 'Just for once, don't be hard with me. Just for once, be for me the boy you were. My son.' He said this over and over, the words, 'My son, my son'; and then he said something I could not hear about innocence and innocence destroyed. But I could see that he was not out of his mind, as Lestat thought, but in some terrible state of lucidity. The burden of the past was on him with full force; and the present, which was only death, which he fought with all his will, could do nothing to soften that burden. But I knew I might deceive him if I used all my skill, and, bending close to him now, I whispered the word, 'Father.' It was not Lestat's voice, it was mine, a soft whisper. But he calmed at once and I thought then he might die. But he held my hand as if he were being pulled under by dark ocean waves and I alone could save him. He talked now of some country teacher, a name garbled, who found in Lestat a brilliant pupil and

begged to take him to a monastery for an education. He cursed himself for bringing Lestat home, for burning his books. 'You must forgive me, Lestat,' he cried.

"I pressed his hand tightly, hoping this might do for some answer, but he repeated this again. 'You have it all to live for, but you are as cold and brutal as I was then with the work always there and the cold and hunger! Lestat, you must remember. You were the gentlest of them all! God will forgive me if you forgive me.'

"Well, at that moment, the real Esau came through the door. I gestured for quiet, but he wouldn't see that. So I had to get up quickly so the father wouldn't hear his voice from a distance. The slaves had run from him. 'But they're out there, they're gathered in the dark. I hear them,' said Lestat. And then he glared at the old man. 'Kill him, Louis!' he said to me, his voice touched with the first pleading I'd ever heard in it. Then he bit down in rage. 'Do it!'

'Lean over that pillow and tell him you forgive him all, forgive him for taking you out of school when you were a boy! Tell him that now.'

" 'For what!' Lestat grimaced, so that his face looked like a skull. 'Taking me out of school!' He threw up his hands and let out a terrible roar of desperation. 'Damn him! Kill him!' he said.

" 'No!' I said. 'You forgive him. Or you kill him yourself. Go on. Kill your own father.'

"The old man begged to be told what we were saying. He called out, 'Son, son,' and Lestat danced like the maddened Rumpelstiltskin about to put his foot through the floor. I went to the lace curtains. I could see and hear the slaves surrounding the house of Pointe du Lac, forms woven in the shadows, drawing near. 'You were Joseph among your brothers,' the old man said. 'The best of them, but how was I to know? It was when you were gone I knew, when all those years passed and they could offer me no comfort, no solace. And then you came back to me and took me from the farm, but it wasn't you. It wasn't the same boy.'

"I turned on Lestat now and veritably dragged him towards the bed. Never had I seen him so weak, and at the same time enraged. He shook me off and then knelt down near the pillow, glowering at me. I stood resolute, and whispered, 'Forgive!'

" 'It's all right, Father. You must rest easy. I hold nothing against

you,' he said, his voice thin and strained over his anger.

"The old man turned on the pillow, murmuring something soft with relief, but Lestat was already gone. He stopped short in the doorway, his hands over his ears. 'They're coming!' he whispered; and then, turning just so he could see me, he said, 'Take him. For *God's sake!'*

"The old man never even knew what happened. He never awoke from his stupor. I bled him just enough, opening the gash so he would then die without feeding my dark passion. That thought I couldn't bear. I knew now it wouldn't matter if the body was found in this manner, because I had had enough of Pointe du Lac and Lestat and all this identity of Pointe du Lac's prosperous master. I would torch the house, and turn to the wealth I'd held under many names, safe for just such a moment.

"Meantime, Lestat was after the slaves. He would leave such ruin and death behind him no one could make a story of that night at Pointe du Lac, and I went with him. Always before, his ferocity was mysterious, but now I bared my fangs on the humans who fled from me, my steady advance overcoming their clumsy, pathetic speed as the veil of death descended, or the veil of madness. The power and the proof of the vampire was incontestable, so that the slaves scattered in all directions. And it was I who ran back up the steps to put the torch to Pointe du Lac.

"Lestat came bounding after me. 'What are you doing!' he shouted. 'Are you mad!' But there was no way to put out the flames. 'They're gone and you're destroying it, all of it.' He turned round and round in the magnificent parlor, amid his fragile splendor. 'Get your coffin out. You have three hours till dawn!' I said. The house was a funeral pyre."

"Could the fire have hurt you?" asked the boy.

"Most definitely!" said the vampire.

"Did you go back to the oratory? Was it safe?"

"No. Not at all. Some fifty-five slaves were scattered around the grounds. Many of them would not have desired the life of a runaway and would most certainly go right to Freniere or south to the Bel Jardin plantation down river. I had no intention of staying there that night. But there was little time to go anywhere else."

"The woman, Babette!" said the boy.

The vampire smiled. "Yes, I went to Babette. She lived now at

Freniere with her young husband. I had enough time to load my coffin into the carriage and go to her."

"But what about Lestat?"

The vampire sighed. "Lestat went with me. It was his intention to go on to New Orleans, and he was trying to persuade me to do just that. But when he saw I meant to hide at Freniere, he opted for that also. We might not have ever made it to New Orleans. It was growing light. Not so that mortal eyes would have seen it, but Lestat and I could see it.

"Now, as for Babette, I had visited her once again. As I told you, she had scandalized the coast by remaining alone on the plantation without a man in the house, without even an older woman. Babette's greatest problem was that she might succeed financially only to suffer the isolation of social ostracism. She had such a sensibility that wealth itself meant nothing to her; family, a line … this meant something to Babette. Though she was able to hold the plantation together, the scandal was wearing on her. She was giving up inside. I came to her one night in the garden. Not permitting her to look on me, I told her in a most gentle voice that I was the same person she'd seen before. That I knew of her life and her suffering. 'Don't expect people to understand it,' I told her. 'They are fools. They want you to retire because of your brother's death. They would use your life as if it were merely oil for a proper lamp. You must defy them, but you must defy them with purity and confidence.' She was listening all the while in silence. I told her she was to give a ball for a cause. And the cause to be religious. She might pick a convent in New Orleans, any one, and plan for a philanthropic ball. She would invite her deceased mother's dearest friends to be chaperones and she would do all of this with perfect confidence. Above all, perfect confidence. It was confidence and purity which were all-important.

"Well, Babette thought this to be a stroke of genius. 'I don't know what you are, and you will not tell me,' she said. (This was true, I would not.) 'But I can only think that you are an angel.' And she begged to see my face. That is, she begged in the manner of such people as Babette, who are not given to truly begging anyone for anything. Not that Babette was proud. She was simply strong and honest, which in most cases makes begging … I see you want to ask

me a question." The vampire stopped.

"Oh, no," said the boy, who had meant to hide it.

"But you mustn't be afraid to ask me anything. If I held something too close …" And when the vampire said this his face darkened for an instant. He frowned, and as his brows drew together a small well appeared in the flesh of his forehead over his left brow, as though someone had pressed it with a finger. It gave him a peculiar look of deep distress. "If I held something too close for you to ask about it, I would not bring it up in the first place," he said.

The boy found himself staring at the vampire's eyes, at the eyelashes which were like fine black wires in the tender flesh of the lids.

"Ask me," he said to the boy.

"Babette, the way you speak of her," said the boy. "As if your feeling was special."

"Did I give you the impression I could not feel?" asked the vampire.

"No, not at all. Obviously you felt for the old man. You stayed to comfort him when you were in danger. And what you felt for young Freniere when Lestat wanted to kill him … all this you explained. But I was wondering … did you have a special feeling for Babette? Was it feeling for Babette all along that caused you to protect Freniere?"

"You mean love," said the vampire. "Why do you hesitate to say it?"

"Because you spoke of detachment," said the boy.

"Do you think that angels are detached?" asked the vampire.

The boy thought for a moment. "Yes," he said.

"But aren't angels capable of love?" asked the vampire. "Don't angels gaze upon the face of God with complete love?"

The boy thought for a moment. "Love or adoration," he said.

"What is the difference?" asked the vampire thoughtfully. "What is the difference?" It was clearly not a riddle for the boy. He was asking himself. "Angels feel love, and pride … the pride of The Fall … and hatred. The strong overpowering emotions of detached persons in whom emotion and will are one," he said finally. He stared at the table now, as though he were thinking this over, were not entirely satisfied with it. "I had for Babette … a strong feeling. It was not the strongest I've ever known for a human being." He looked up at the boy. "But it was very strong. Babette was to me in her own way an ideal human being.…"

He shifted in his chair, the cape moving softly about him, and turned his face to the windows. The boy bent forward and checked the tape. Then he took another cassette from his briefcase and, begging the vampire's pardon, fitted it into place. "I'm afraid I did ask something too personal. I didn't mean …" he said anxiously to the vampire.

"You asked nothing of the sort," said the vampire, looking at him suddenly. "It is a question right to the point. I feel love, and I felt some measure of love for Babette, though not the greatest love I've ever felt. It was foreshadowed in Babette.

"To return to my story, Babette's charity ball was a success and her re-entry in social life assured by it. Her money generously underwrote any doubts in the minds of her suitors' families, and she married. On summer nights, I used to visit her, never letting her see me or know that I was there. I came to see that she was happy, and seeing her happy I felt a happiness as the result.

"And to Babette I came now with Lestat. He would have killed the Frenieres long ago if I hadn't stopped him, and he thought now that was what I meant to do. 'And what peace would that bring?' I asked. 'You call me the idiot, and you've been the idiot all along. Do you think I don't know why you made me a vampire? You couldn't live by yourself, you couldn't manage even the simplest things. For years now, I've managed everything while you sat about making a pretense of superiority. There's nothing left for you to tell me about life. I have no need of you and no use for you. It's you who need me, and if you touch but one of the Freniere slaves, I'll get rid of you. It will be a battle between us, and I needn't point out to you I have more wit to fare better in my little finger than you in your entire frame. Do as I say.'

"Well, this startled him, though it shouldn't have; and he protested he had much to tell me, of things and types of people I might kill who would cause sudden death and places in the world I must never go and so forth and so on, nonsense that I could hardly endure. But I had no time for him. The overseer's lights were lit at Freniere; he was trying to quell the excitement of the runaway slaves and his own. And the fire of Pointe du Lac could be seen still against the sky. Babette was dressed and attending to business, having sent carriages to Pointe du

Lac and slaves to help fight the blaze. The frightened runaways were kept away from the others, and at that point no one regarded their stories as any more than slave foolishness. Babette knew something dreadful had happened and suspected murder, never the supernatural. She was in the study making a note of the fire in the plantation diary when I found her. It was almost morning. I had only a few minutes to convince her she must help. I spoke to her at first, refusing to let her turn around, and calmly she listened. I told her I must have a room for the night, to rest. 'I've never brought you harm. I ask you now for a key, and your promise that no one will try to enter that room until tonight. Then I'll tell you all.' I was nearly desperate now. The sky was paling. Lestat was yards off in the orchard with the coffins. 'But why have you come to me tonight?' she asked. 'And why not to you?' I replied. 'Did I not help you at the very moment when you most needed guidance, when you alone stood strong among those who are dependent and weak? Did I not twice offer you good counsel? And haven't I watched over your happiness ever since?' I could see the figure of Lestat at the window. He was in a panic. 'Give me the key to a room. Let no one come near it till nightfall. I swear to you I would never bring you harm.' 'And if I don't … if I believe you come from the devil!' she said now, and meant to turn her head. I reached for the candle and put it out. She saw me standing with my back to the graying windows. 'If you don't, and if you believe me to be the devil, I shall die.' I said. 'Give me the key. I could kill you now if I chose, do you see?' And now I moved close to her and showed myself to her more completely, so that she gasped and drew back, holding to the arm of her chair. 'But I would not. I would die rather than kill you. I will die if you don't give me such a key as I ask.'

"It was accomplished. What she thought, I don't know. But she gave me one of the ground-floor storage rooms where wine was aged, and I am sure she saw Lestat and me bringing the coffins. I not only locked the door but barricaded it.

"Lestat was up the next evening when I awoke."

"Then she kept her word."

"Yes. Only she had gone a step further. She had not only respected our locked door; she had locked it again from without."

"And the stories of the slaves … she'd heard them."

“Yes, she had. Lestat was the first to discover we were locked in, however. He became furious. He had planned to get to New Orleans as fast as possible. He was now completely suspicious of me. ‘I only needed you as long as my father lived,’ he said, desperately trying to find some opening somewhere. The place was a dungeon.

“ ‘Now I won’t put up with anything from you, I warn you.’ He didn’t even wish to turn his back on me. I sat there straining to hear voices in the rooms above, wishing that he would shut up, not wishing to confide for a moment my feeling for Babette or my hopes.

“I was also thinking something else. You ask me about feeling and detachment. One of its aspects—detachment with feeling, I should say—is that you can think of two things at the same time. You can think that you are not safe and may die, and you can think of something very abstract and remote. And this was definitely so with me. I was thinking at that moment, wordlessly and rather deeply, how sublime friendship between Lestat and me might have been; how few impediments to it there would have been, and how much to be shared. Perhaps it was the closeness of Babette which caused me to feel it, for how could I truly ever come to know Babette, except, of course, through the one final way; to take her life, to become one with her in an embrace of death when my soul would become one with her heart and nourished with it. But my soul wanted to know Babette without my need to kill, without robbing her of every breath of life, every drop of blood. But Lestat, how we might have known each other, had he been a man of character, a man of even a little thought. The old man’s words came back to me; Lestat a brilliant pupil, a lover of books that had been burned. I knew only the Lestat who sneered at my library, called it a pile of dust, ridiculed relentlessly my reading, my meditations.

“I became aware now that the house over our heads was quieting. Now and then feet moved and the boards creaked and the light in the cracks of the boards gave a faint, uneven illumination. I could see Lestat feeling along the brick walls, his hard enduring vampire face a twisted mask of human frustration. I was confident we must part ways at once, that I must if necessary put an ocean between us. And I realized that I’d tolerated him this long because of self-doubt. I’d fooled myself into believing I stayed for the old man, and for my sister

and her husband. But I stayed with Lestat because I was afraid he did know essential secrets as a vampire which I could not discover alone and, more important, because he was the only one of my kind whom I knew. He had never told me how he had become a vampire or where I might find a single other member of our kind. This troubled me greatly then, as much as it had for four years. I hated him and wanted to leave him; yet could I leave him?

"Meantime, as all this passed through my thoughts, Lestat continued his diatribe: he didn't need me; he wasn't going to put up with anything, especially not any threat from the Frenieres. We had to be ready when that door opened. 'Remember!' he said to me finally. 'Speed and strength; they cannot match us in that. And fear. Remember always, to strike fear. Don't be sentimental now! You'll cost us everything.'

" 'You wish to be on your own after this?' I asked him. I wanted him to say it. I did not have the courage. Or, rather, I did not know my own feelings.

" 'I want to get to New Orleans!' he said. 'I was simply warning you I don't need you. But to get out of here we need each other. You don't begin to know how to use your powers! You have no innate sense of what you are! Use your persuasive powers with this woman if she comes. But if she comes with others, then be prepared to act like what you are.'

" 'Which is what?' I asked him, because it had never seemed such a mystery to me as it did at that time. 'What am I?' He was openly disgusted. He threw up his hands.

" 'Be prepared …' he said, now baring his magnificent teeth, 'to kill!' He looked suddenly at the boards overhead. 'They're going to bed up there, do you hear them?' After a long silent time during which Lestat paced and I sat there musing, plumbing my mind for what I might do or say to Babette or, deeper still, for the answer to a harder question—what did I feel for Babette?—after a long time, a light flared beneath the door. Lestat was poised to jump whoever should open it. It was Babette alone and she entered with a lamp, not seeing Lestat, who stood behind her, but looking directly at me.

"I had never seen her as she looked then; her hair was down for bed, a mass of dark waves behind her white dressing gown; and her face

was tight with worry and fear. This gave it a feverish radiance and made her large brown eyes all the more huge. As I have told you, I loved her strength and honesty, the greatness of her soul. And I did not feel passion for her as you would feel it. But I found her more alluring than any woman I'd known in mortal life. Even in the severe dressing gown, her arms and breasts were round and soft; and she seemed to me an intriguing soul clothed in rich, mysterious flesh. I who am hard and spare and dedicated to a purpose, felt drawn to her irresistibly; and, knowing it could only culminate in death, I turned away from her at once, wondering if when she gazed into my eyes she found them dead and soulless.

" 'You are the one who came to me before,' she said now, as if she hadn't been sure. 'And you are the owner of Pointe du Lac. You are!' I knew as she spoke that she must have heard the wildest stories of last night, and there would be no convincing her of any lie. I had used my unnatural appearance twice to reach her, to speak to her; I could not hide it or minimize it now.

" 'I mean you no harm,' I said to her. 'I need only a carriage and horses … the horses I left last night in the pasture.' She didn't seem to hear my words; she drew closer, determined to catch me in the circle of her light.

"And then I saw Lestat behind her, his shadow merging with her shadow on the brick wall; he was anxious and dangerous. 'You will give me the carriage?' I insisted. She was looking at me now, the lamp raised; and just when I meant to look away, I saw her face change. It went still, blank, as if her soul were losing its consciousness. She closed her eyes and shook her head. It occurred to me that I had somehow caused her to go into a trance without any effort on my part. 'What are you!' she whispered. 'You're from the devil. You were from the devil when you came to me!'

" 'The devil!' I answered her. This distressed me more than I thought I could be distressed. If she believed this, then she would think my counsel bad; she would question herself. Her life was rich and good, and I knew she mustn't do this. Like all strong people, she suffered always a measure of loneliness; she was a marginal outsider, a secret infidel of a certain sort. And the balance by which she lived might be upset if she were to question her own goodness. She stared at me with

undisguised horror. It was as if in horror she forgot her own vulnerable position. And now Lestat, who was drawn to weakness like a parched man to water, grabbed her wrist, and she screamed and dropped the lamp. The flames leaped in the splattered oil, and Lestat pulled her backwards towards the open door. 'You get the carriage!' he said to her. 'Get it now, and the horses. You are in mortal danger; don't talk of devils!'

"I stomped on the flames and went for Lestat, shouting at him to leave her. He held her by both wrists, and she was furious. 'You'll rouse the house if you don't shut up!' he said to me. 'And I'll kill her! Get the carriage … lead us. Talk to the stable boy!' he said to her, pushing her into the open air.

"We moved slowly across the dark court, my distress almost unbearable, Lestat ahead of me; and before us both Babette, who moved backwards, her eyes peering at us in the dark. Suddenly she stopped. One dim light burned in the house above. 'I'll get you nothing!' she said. I reached for Lestat's arm and told him I must handle this. 'She'll reveal us to everyone unless you let me talk to her,' I whispered to him.

" 'Then get yourself in check,' he said disgustedly. 'Be strong. Don't quibble with her.'

" 'You go as I talk … go to the stables and get the carriage and the horses. But don't kill!' Whether he'd obey me or not I didn't know, but he darted away just as I stepped up to Babette. Her face was a mixture of fury and resolution. She said, *'Get thee behind me, Satan.*' And I stood there before her then, speechless, just holding her in my glance as surely as she held me. If she could hear Lestat in the night she gave no indication. Her hatred for me burned me like fire.

" 'Why do you say this to me?' I asked. 'Was the counsel I gave you bad? Did I do you harm? I came to help you, to give you strength. I thought only of you, when I had no need to think of you at all.'

"She shook her head. 'But why, why do you talk to me like this?' she asked. 'I know what you've done at Pointe du Lac; you've lived there like a devil! The slaves are wild with stories! All day men have been on the river road on the way to Pointe du Lac; my husband was there! He saw the house in ruins, the bodies of slaves throughout the orchards, the fields. *What are you!* Why do you speak to me gently!

What do you want of *me?'* She clung now to the pillars of the porch and was backing slowly to the staircase. Something moved above in the lighted window.

" 'I cannot give you such answers now,' I said to her. 'Believe me when I tell you I came to you only to do you good. And would not have brought worry and care to you last night for anything, had I the choice!' "

The vampire stopped.

The boy sat forward, his eyes wide. The vampire was frozen, staring off, lost in his thoughts, his memory. And the boy looked down suddenly, as if this were the respectful thing to do. He glanced again at the vampire and then away, his own face as distressed as the vampire's; and then he started to say something, but he stopped.

The vampire turned towards him and studied him, so that the boy flushed and looked away again anxiously. But then he raised his eyes and looked into the vampire's eyes. He swallowed, but he held the vampire's gaze.

"Is this what you want?" the vampire whispered. "Is this what you wanted to hear?"

He moved the chair back soundlessly and walked to the window. The boy sat as if stunned looking at his broad shoulders and the long mass of the cape. The vampire turned his head slightly. "You don't answer me. I'm not giving you what you want, am I? You wanted an interview. Something to broadcast on the radio."

"That doesn't matter. I'll throw the tapes away if you want!" The boy rose. "I can't say I understand all you're telling me. You'd know I was lying if I said I did. So how can I ask you to go on, except to say what I do understand … what I do understand is like nothing I've ever understood before." He took a step towards the vampire. The vampire appeared to be looking down into Divisadero Street. Then he turned his head slowly and looked at the boy and smiled. His face was serene and almost affectionate. And the boy suddenly felt uncomfortable. He shoved his hands into his pockets and turned towards the table. Then he looked at the vampire tentatively and said, "Will you … please go on?"

The vampire turned with folded arms and leaned against the window. "Why?" he asked.

The boy was at a loss. “Because I want to hear it.” He shrugged. “Because I want to know what happened.”

“All right,” said the vampire, with the same smile playing on his lips. And he went back to the chair and sat opposite the boy and turned the recorder just a little and said, “Marvellous contraption, really … so let me go on.

“You must understand that what I felt for Babette now was a desire for communication, stronger than any other desire I then felt … except for the physical desire for … blood. It was so strong in me, this desire, that it made me feel the depth of my capacity for loneliness. When I’d spoken to her before, there had been a brief but direct communication which was as simple and as satisfying as taking a person’s hand. Clasping it. Letting it go gently. All this in a moment of great need and distress. But now we were at odds. To Babette, I was a monster; and I found it horrible to myself and would have done anything to overcome her feeling. I told her the counsel I’d given her was right, that no instrument of the devil could do right even if he chose.

“ ‘I know!’ she answered me. But by this she meant that she could no more trust me than the devil himself. I approached her and she moved back. I raised my hand and she shrank, clutching for the railing. ‘All right, then,’ I said, feeling a terrible exasperation. ‘Why did you protect me last night! Why have you come to me alone!’ What I saw in her face was cunning. She had a reason, but she would by no means reveal it to me. It was impossible for her to speak to me freely, openly, to give me the communication I desired. I felt weary looking at her. The night was already late, and I could see and hear that Lestat had stolen into the wine cellar and taken our caskets, and I had a need to get away; and other needs besides … the need to kill and drink. But it wasn’t that which made me weary. It was something else, something far worse. It was as if this night were only one of thousands of nights, world without end, night curving into night to make a great arching line of which I couldn’t see the end, a night in which I roamed alone under cold, mindless stars. I think I turned away from her and put my hand to my eyes. I felt oppressed and weak suddenly. I think I was making some sound without my will. And then on this vast and desolate landscape of night, where I was standing alone and where Babette was only an illusion, I saw suddenly a possibility that I’d never

considered before, a possibility from which I'd fled, rapt as I was with the world, fallen into the senses of the vampire, in love with color and shape and sound and singing and softness and infinite variation. Babette was moving, but I took no note of it. She was taking something from her pocket; her great ring of household keys jingled there. She was moving up the steps. Let her go away, I was thinking. 'Creature of the devil!' I whispered. 'Get thee behind me, Satan,' I repeated. I turned to look at her now. She was frozen on the steps, with wide suspicious eyes. She'd reached the lantern which hung on the wall, and she held it in her hands just staring at me, holding it tight, like a valuable purse. 'You think I come from the devil?' I asked her.

"She quickly moved her left fingers around the hook of the lantern and with her right hand made the Sign of the Cross, the Latin words barely audible to me; and her face blanched and her eyebrows rose when there was absolutely no change because of it. 'Did you expect me to go up in a puff of smoke?' I asked her. I drew closer now, for I had gained detachment from her by virtue of my thoughts. 'And where would I go?' I asked her. 'And where would I go, to hell, from whence I came? To the devil, from whom I came?' I stood at the foot of the steps. 'Suppose I told you I know nothing of the devil. Suppose I told you that I do not even know if he exists!' It was the devil I'd seen upon the landscape of my thoughts; it was the devil about whom I thought now. I turned away from her. She wasn't hearing me as you are now. She wasn't listening. I looked up at the stars. Lestat was ready, I knew it. It was as if he'd been ready there with the carriage for years; and she had stood upon the step for years. I had the sudden sensation my brother was there and had been there for ages also, and that he was talking to me low in an excited voice, and what he was saying was desperately important but it was going away from me as fast as he said it, like the rustle of rats in the rafters of an immense house. There was a scraping sound and a burst of light. 'I don't know whether I come from the devil or not! I don't know what I am!' I shouted at Babette, my voice deafening in my own sensitive ears. 'I am to live to the end of the world, and I do not even know what I am!' But the light flared before me; it was the lantern which she had lit with a match and held now so I couldn't see her face. For a moment I could see

nothing but the light, and then the great weight of the lantern struck me full force in the chest and the glass shattered on the bricks and the flames roared on my legs, in my face. Lestat was shouting from the darkness, 'Put it out, put it out, idiot. It will consume you!' And I felt something thrashing me wildly in my blindness. It was Lestat's jacket. I'd fallen helpless back against the pillar, helpless as much from the fire and the blow as from the knowledge that Babette meant to destroy me, as from the knowledge that I did not know what I was.

"All this happened in a matter of seconds. The fire was out and I knelt in the dark with my hands on the bricks. Lestat at the top of the stairs had Babette again, and I flew up after him, grabbing him about the neck and pulling him backwards. He turned on me, enraged, and kicked me; but I clung to him and pulled him down on top of me to the bottom. Babette was petrified. I saw her dark outline against the sky and the glint of light in her eyes. 'Come on then!' Lestat said, scrambling to his feet. Babette was putting her hand to her throat. My injured eyes strained to gather the light to see her. Her throat bled. 'Remember!' I said to her. 'I might have killed you! Or let him kill you! I did not. You called me devil. You are wrong.' "

"Then you'd stopped Lestat just in time," said the boy.

"Yes. Lestat could kill and drink like a bolt of lightning. But I had saved only Babette's physical life. I was not to know that until later."

"In an hour and a half Lestat and I were in New Orleans, the horses nearly dead from exhaustion, the carriage parked on a side street a block from a new Spanish hotel. Lestat had an old man by the arm and was putting fifty dollars into his hand. 'Get us a suite,' he directed him, 'and order some champagne. Say it is for two gentlemen, and pay in advance. And when you come back I'll have another fifty for you. And I'll be watching for you, I wager.' His gleaming eyes held the man in thrall. I knew he'd kill him as soon as he returned with the hotel room keys, and he did. I sat in the carriage watching wearily as the man grew weaker and weaker and finally died, his body collapsing like a sack of rocks in a doorway as Lestat let him go. 'Good night, sweet prince,' said Lestat 'and here's your fifty dollars.' And he shoved the money into his pocket as if it were a capital joke.

“Now we slipped in the courtyard doors of the hotel and went up to the lavish parlor of our suite. Champagne glistened in a frosted bucket. Two glasses stood on the silver tray. I knew Lestat would fill one glass and sit there staring at the pale yellow color. And I, a man in a trance, lay on the settee staring at him as if nothing he could do mattered. I have to leave him or die, I thought. It would be sweet to die, I thought. Yes, die. I wanted to die before. Now I wish to die. I saw it with such sweet clarity, such dead calm.

“ ‘You’re being morbid!’ Lestat said suddenly. ‘It’s almost dawn.’ He pulled the lace curtains back, and I could see the rooftops under the dark blue sky, and above, the great constellation Orion. ‘Go kill!’ said Lestat, sliding up the glass. He stepped out of the sill, and I heard his feet land softly on the rooftop beside the hotel. He was going for the coffins, or at least one. My thirst rose in me like fever, and I followed him. My desire to die was constant, like a pure thought in the mind, devoid of emotion. Yet I needed to feed. I’ve indicated to you I would not then kill people. I moved along the rooftop in search of rats.”

“But why … you’ve said Lestat shouldn’t have made you *start* with people. Did you mean … do you mean for you it was an aesthetic choice, not a moral one?”

“Had you asked me then, I would have told you it was aesthetic, that I wished to understand death in stages. That the death of an animal yielded such pleasure and experience to me that I had only begun to understand it, and wished to save the experience of human death for my mature understanding. But it was moral. Because all aesthetic decisions are moral, really.”

“I don’t understand,” said the boy. “I thought aesthetic decisions could be completely immoral. What about the cliché of the artist who leaves his wife and children so he can paint? Or Nero playing the harp while Rome burned?”

“Both were moral decisions. Both served a higher good, in the mind of the artist. The conflict lies between the morals of the artist and the morals of society, not between aesthetics and morality. But often this isn’t understood; and here comes the waste, the tragedy. An artist, stealing paints from a store, for example, imagines himself to have made an inevitable but immoral decision, and then he sees himself as fallen from grace; what follows is despair and petty irresponsibility, as

if morality were a great glass world which can be utterly shattered by one act. But this was not my great concern then. I did not know these things then. I believed I killed animals for aesthetic reasons only, and I hedged against the great moral question of whether or not by my very nature I was damned.

"Because, you see, though Lestat had never said anything about devils or hell to me, I believed I was damned when I went over to him, just as Judas must have believed it when he put the noose around his neck. You understand?"

The boy said nothing. He started to speak but didn't. The color burned for a moment in blotches on his cheeks. "Were you?" he whispered.

The vampire only sat there, smiling, a small smile that played on his lips like the light. The boy was staring at him now as if he were just seeing him for the first time.

"Perhaps …" said the vampire drawing himself up and crossing his legs "… we should take things one at a time. Perhaps I should go on with my story."

"Yes, please …" said the boy.

"I was agitated that night, as I told you. I had hedged against this question as a vampire and now it completely overwhelmed me, and in that state I had no desire to live. Well, this produced in me, as it can in humans, a craving for that which will satisfy at least physical desire. I think I used it as an excuse. I have told you what the kill means to vampires; you can imagine from what I've said the difference between a rat and a man.

"I went down into the street after Lestat and walked for blocks. The streets were muddy then, the actual blocks islands above the gutters, and the entire city so dark compared to the cities of today. The lights were as beacons in a black sea. Even with morning rising slowly, only the dormers and high porches of the houses were emerging from the dark, and to a mortal man the narrow streets I found were like pitch. Am I damned? Am I from the devil? Is my very nature that of a devil? I was asking myself over and over. And if it is, why then do I revolt against it, tremble when Babette hurls a flaming lantern at me, turn away in disgust when Lestat kills? What have I become in becoming a vampire? Where am I to go? And all the while, as the death wish

caused me to neglect my thirst, my thirst grew hotter; my veins were veritable threads of pain in my flesh; my temples throbbed; and finally I could stand it no longer. Torn apart by the wish to take no action—to starve, to wither in thought on the one hand; and driven to kill on the other—I stood in an empty, desolate street and heard the sound of a child crying.

"She was within. I drew close to the walls, trying in my habitual detachment only to understand the nature of her cry. She was weary and aching and utterly alone. She had been crying for so long now, that soon she would stop from sheer exhaustion. I slipped my hand up under the heavy wooden shutter and pulled it so the bolt slipped. There she sat in the dark room beside a dead woman, a woman who'd been dead for some days. The room itself was cluttered with trunks and packages as though a number of people had been packing to leave; but the mother lay half clothed, her body already in decay, and no one else was there but the child. It was moments before she saw me, but when she did she began to tell me that I must do something to help her mother. She was only five at most, and very thin, and her face was stained with dirt and tears. She begged me to help. They had to take a ship, she said, before the plague came; their father was waiting. She began to shake her mother now and to cry in the most pathetic and desperate way; and then she looked at me again and burst into the greatest flow of tears.

"You must understand that by now I was burning with physical need to drink. I could not have made it through another day without feeding. But there were alternatives: rats abounded in the streets, and somewhere very near a dog was howling hopelessly. I might have fled the room had I chosen and fed and gotten back easily. But the question pounded in me: Am I damned? If so, why do I feel such pity for her, for her gaunt face? Why do I wish to touch her tiny, soft arms, hold her now on my knee as I am doing, feel her bend her head to my chest as I gently touch the satin hair? Why do I do this? If I am damned I must want to kill her, I must want to make her nothing but food for a cursed existence, because being damned I must hate her.

"And when I thought of this, I saw Babette's face contorted with hatred when she had held the lantern waiting to light it, and I saw Lestat in my mind and hated him, and I felt, yes, damned and this is

hell, and in that instant I had bent down and driven hard into her soft, small neck and, hearing her tiny cry, whispered even as I felt the hot blood on my lips, 'It's only for a moment and there'll be no more pain.' But she was locked to me, and I was soon incapable of saying anything. For four years I had not savored a human; for four years I hadn't really known; and now I heard her heart in that terrible rhythm, and such a heart—not the heart of a man or an animal, but the rapid, tenacious heart of the child, beating harder and harder, refusing to die, beating like a tiny fist beating on a door, crying, 'I will not die, I will not die, I cannot die, I cannot die.…' I think I rose to my feet still locked to her, the heart pulling my heart faster with no hope of cease, the rich blood rushing too fast for me, the room reeling, and then, despite myself, I was staring over her bent head, her open mouth, down through the gloom at the mother's face; and through the half-mast lids her eyes gleamed at me as if they were alive! I threw the child down. She lay like a jointless doll. And turning in blind horror of the mother to flee, I saw the window filled with a familiar shape. It was Lestat, who backed away from it now laughing, his body bent as he danced in the mud street. 'Louis, Louis,' he taunted me, and pointed a long, bone-thin finger at me, as if to say he'd caught me in the act. And now he bounded over the sill, brushing me aside, and grabbed the mother's stinking body from the bed and made to dance with her."

"Good God!" whispered the boy.

"Yes, I might have said the same," said the vampire. "He stumbled over the child as he pulled the mother along in widening circles, singing as he danced, her matted hair falling in her face, as her head snapped back and a black fluid poured out of her mouth. He threw her down. I was out of the window and running down the street, and he was running after me. 'Are you afraid of me, Louis?' he shouted. 'Are you afraid? The child's alive, Louis, you left her breathing. Shall I go back and make her a vampire? We could use her, Louis, and think of all the pretty dresses we could buy for her. Louis, wait, Louis! I'll go back for her if you say!' And so he ran after me all the way back to the hotel, all the way across the rooftops, where I hoped to lose him, until I leaped in the window of the parlor and turned in rage and slammed the window shut. He hit it, arms outstretched, like a bird who seeks to fly through glass, and shook the frame. I was utterly out of my mind. I

went round and round the room looking for some way to kill him. I pictured his body burned to a crisp on the roof below. Reason had altogether left me, so that I was consummate rage, and when he came through the broken glass, we fought as we'd never fought before. It was hell that stopped me, the thought of hell, of us being two souls in hell that grappled in hatred. I lost my confidence, my purpose, my grip. I was down on the floor then, and he was standing over me, his eyes cold, though his chest heaved. 'You're a fool, Louis,' he said. His voice was calm. It was so calm it brought me around. 'The sun's coming up,' he said, his chest heaving slightly from the struggle, his eyes narrow as he looked at the window. I'd never seen him quite like this. The fight had got the better of him in some way; or something had. 'Get in your coffin,' he said to me, without even the slightest anger. 'But tomorrow night … we talk.'

"Well, I was more than slightly amazed. Lestat talk! I couldn't imagine this. Never had Lestat and I really talked. I think I have described to you with accuracy our sparring matches, our angry go-rounds."

"He was desperate for the money, for your houses," said the boy. "Or was it that he was as afraid to be alone as you were?"

"These questions occurred to me. It even occurred to me that Lestat meant to kill me, some way that I didn't know. You see, I wasn't sure then why I awoke each evening when I did, whether it was automatic when the deathlike sleep left me, and why it happened sometimes earlier than at other times. It was one of the things Lestat would not explain. And he was often up before me. He was my superior in all the mechanics, as I've indicated. And I shut the coffin that morning with a kind of despair.

"I should explain now, though, that the shutting of the coffin is always disturbing. It is rather like going under a modern anesthetic on an operating table. Even a casual mistake on the part of an intruder might mean death."

"But how could he have killed you? He couldn't have exposed you to the light; he couldn't have stood it himself."

"This is true, but rising before me he might have nailed my coffin shut. Or set it afire. The principal thing was, I didn't know what he might do, what he might know that I still did not know.

“But there was nothing to be done about it then, and with thoughts of the dead woman and child still in my brain, and the sun rising, I had no energy left to argue with him, and lay down to miserable dreams.”

“You do dream!” said the boy.

“Often,” said the vampire. “I wish sometimes that I did not. For such dreams, such long and clear dreams I never had as a mortal; and such twisted nightmares I never had either. In my early days, these dreams so absorbed me that often it seemed I fought waking as long as I could and lay sometimes for hours thinking of these dreams until the night was half gone; and dazed by them I often wandered about seeking to understand their meaning. They were in many ways as elusive as the dreams of mortals. I dreamed of my brother, for instance, that he was near me in some state between life and death, calling to me for help. And often I dreamed of Babette; and often—almost always—there was a great wasteland backdrop to my dreams, that wasteland of night I’d seen when cursed by Babette as I've told you. It was as if all figures walked and talked on the desolate home of my damned soul. I don’t remember what I dreamed that day, perhaps because I remember too well what Lestat and I discussed the following evening. I see you’re anxious for that, too.

“Well, as I’ve said, Lestat amazed me in his new calm, his thoughtfulness. But that evening I didn’t wake to find him the same way, not at first. There were women in the parlor. The candles were a few, scattered on the small tables and the carved buffet, and Lestat had his arm around one woman and was kissing her. She was very drunk and very beautiful, a great drugged doll of a woman with her careful coif falling slowly down on her bare shoulders and over her partially bared breasts. The other woman sat over a ruined supper table drinking a glass of wine. I could see that the three of them had dined (Lestat pretending to dine … you would be surprised how people do not notice that a vampire is only pretending to eat), and the woman at the table was bored. All this put me in a fit of agitation. I did not know what Lestat was up to. If I went into the room, the woman would turn her attentions to me. And what was to happen, I couldn’t imagine, except that Lestat meant for us to kill them both. The woman on the settee with him was already teasing about his

kisses, his coldness, his lack of desire for her. And the woman at the table watched with black almond eyes that seemed to be filled with satisfaction; when Lestat rose and came to her, putting his hands on her bare white arms, she brightened. Bending now to kiss her, he saw me through the crack in the door. And his eyes just stared at me for a moment, and then he went on talking with the ladies. He bent down and blew out the candles on the table. 'It's too dark in here,' said the woman on the couch. 'Leave us alone,' said the other woman. Lestat sat down and beckoned her to sit in his lap. And she did, putting her left arm around his neck, her right hand smoothing back his yellow hair. 'Your skin's icy,' she said, recoiling slightly. 'Not always,' said Lestat; and then he buried his face in the flesh of her neck. I was watching all this with fascination. Lestat was masterfully clever and utterly vicious, but I didn't know how clever he was until he sank his teeth into her now, his thumb pressing down on her throat, his other arm locking her tight, so that he drank his fill without the other woman even knowing. 'Your friend has no head for wine,' he said, slipping out of the chair and seating the unconscious woman there, her arms folded under her face on the table. 'She's stupid,' said the other woman, who had gone to the window and had been looking out at the lights. New Orleans was then a city of many low buildings, as you probably know. And on such clear nights as this, the lamplit streets were beautiful from the high windows of this new Spanish hotel; and the stars of those days hung low over such dim light as they do at sea. 'I can warm that cold skin of yours better than she can.' She turned to Lestat, and I must confess I was feeling some relief that he would now take care of her as well. But he planned nothing so simple. 'Do you think so?' he said to her. He took her hand, and she said, 'Why, you're warm.' "

"You mean the blood had warmed him," said the boy.

"Oh, yes," said the vampire. "After killing, a vampire is as warm as you are now." And he started to resume; then, glancing at the boy, he smiled. "As I was saying … Lestat now held the woman's hand in his and said that the other had warmed him. His face, of course, was flushed; much altered. He drew her close now, and she kissed him, remarking through her laughter that he was a veritable furnace of passion.

“ ‘Ah, but the price is high,’ he said to her, affecting sadness. ‘Your pretty friend …’ He shrugged his shoulders. ‘I exhausted her.’ And he stood back as if inviting the woman to walk to the table. And she did, a look of superiority on her small features. She bent down to see her friend, but then lost interest—until she saw something. It was a napkin. It had caught the last drops of blood from the wound in the throat. She picked it up, straining to see it in the darkness. ‘Take down your hair,’ said Lestat softly. And she dropped it, indifferent, and took down the last tresses, so that her hair fell blond and wavy down her back. ‘Soft,’ he said, ‘so soft. I picture you that way, lying on a bed of satin.’

“ ‘Such things you say!’ she scoffed and turned her back on him playfully.

“ ‘Do you know what manner of bed?’ he asked. And she laughed and said *his* bed, she could imagine. She looked back at him as he advanced; and, never once looking away from her, he gently tipped the body of her friend, so that it fell backwards from the chair and lay with staring eyes upon the floor. The woman gasped. She scrambled away from the corpse, nearly upsetting a small end table. The candle went over and went out. ‘Put out the light … and then put out the light,’ Lestat said softly. And then he took her into his arms like a struggling moth and sank his teeth into her.”

“But what were you thinking as you watched?” asked the boy. “Did you want to stop him the way you wanted to stop him from killing Freniere?”

“No,” said the vampire. “I could not have stopped him. And you must understand I knew that he killed humans every night. Animals gave him no satisfaction whatsoever. Animals were to be banked on when all else failed, but never to be chosen. If I felt any sympathy for the women, it was buried deep in my own turmoil. I still felt in my chest the little hammer heart of that starving child; I still burned with the questions of my own divided nature. I was angry that Lestat had staged this show for me, waiting till I woke to kill the women; and I wondered again if I might somehow break loose from him and felt both hatred and my own weakness more than ever.

“Meantime, he propped their lovely corpses at the table and went about the room lighting all the candles until it blazed as if for a

wedding. ‘Come in, Louis,’ he said. ‘I would have arranged an escort for you, but I know what a man you are about choosing your own. Pity Mademoiselle Freniere likes to hurl flaming lanterns. It makes a party unwieldy, don’t you think? Especially for a hotel?’ He seated the blond-haired girl so that her head lay to one side against the damask back of the chair, and the darker woman lay with her chin resting just above her breasts; this one had blanched, and her features had a rigid look to them already, as though she was one of those women in whom the fire of personality makes beauty. But the other looked only as if she slept; and I was not sure that she was even dead. Lestat had made two gashes, one in her throat and one above her left breast, and both still bled freely. He lifted her wrist now, and slitting it with a knife, filled two wine glasses and bade me to sit down.

“ ‘I’m leaving you,’ I said to him at once. ‘I wish to tell you that now.’

“ ‘I thought as much,’ he answered, sitting back in the chair, ‘and I thought as well that you would make a flowery announcement. Tell me what a monster I am; what a vulgar fiend.’

“ ‘I make no judgments upon you. I’m not interested in you. I am interested in my own nature now, and I’ve come to believe I can’t trust you to tell me the truth about it. You use knowledge for personal power,’ I told him. And I suppose, in the manner of many people making such an announcement, I was not looking to him for an honest response. I was not looking to him at all. I was mainly listening to my own words. But now I saw that his face was once again the way it had been when he’d said we would talk. He was *listening* to me. I was suddenly at a loss. I felt that gulf between us as painfully as ever.

“ ‘Why did you become a vampire?’ I blurted out. ‘And why such a vampire as you are! Vengeful and delighting in taking human life even when you have no need. This girl … why did you kill her when one would have done? And why did you frighten her so before you killed her? And why have you propped her here in some grotesque manner, as if tempting the gods to strike you down for your blasphemy?’

“All this he listened to without speaking, and in the pause that followed I again felt at a loss. Lestat’s eyes were large and thoughtful; I’d seen them that way before, but I couldn’t remember when, certainly not when talking to me.

“ ‘What do you think a vampire is?’ he asked me sincerely.

“ ‘I don’t pretend to know. You pretend to know. What is it?’ I asked. And to this he answered nothing. It was as if he sensed the insincerity of it, the spite. He just sat there looking at me with the same still expression. Then I said, ‘I know that after leaving you, I shall try to find out. I’ll travel the world, if I have to, to find other vampires. I know they must exist; I don’t know of any reasons why they shouldn’t exist in great numbers. And I’m confident I shall find vampires who have more in common with me than I with you. Vampires who understand knowledge as I do and have used their superior vampire nature to learn secrets of which you don’t even dream. If you haven’t told me everything, I shall find things out for myself or from them, when I find them.’

“He shook his head. ‘Louis!’ he said. ‘You are in love with your mortal nature! You chase after the phantoms of your former self. Freniere, his sister … these are images for you of what you were and what you still long to be. And in your romance with mortal life, you’re dead to your vampire nature!’

“I objected to this at once. ‘My vampire nature has been for me the greatest adventure of my life; all that went before it was confused, clouded; I went through mortal life like a blind man groping from solid object to solid object. It was only when I became a vampire that I respected for the first time all of life. I never saw a living, pulsing human being until I was a vampire; I never knew what life was until it ran out in a red gush over my lips, my hands!’ I found myself staring at the two women, the darker one now turning a terrible shade of blue. The blonde was breathing. ‘She’s not dead!’ I said to him suddenly.

“ ‘I know. Let her alone,’ he said. He lifted her wrist and made a new gash by the scab of the other and filled his glass. ‘All that you say makes sense,’ he said to me, taking a drink. ‘You are an intellect. I’ve never been. What I’ve learned I’ve learned from listening to men talk, not from books. I never went to school long enough. But I’m not stupid, and you must listen to me because you are in danger. You do not know your vampire nature. You are like an adult who, looking back on his childhood, realizes that he never appreciated it. You cannot, as a man, go back to the nursery and play with your toys,

asking for the love and care to be showered on you again simply because now you know their worth. So it is with you and mortal nature. You've given it up. You no longer look "through a glass darkly." But you cannot pass back to the world of human warmth with your new eyes.'

" 'I know that well enough!' I said. 'But what is it that is our nature! If I can live from the blood of animals, why should I not live from the blood of animals rather than go through the world bringing misery and death to human creatures!'

" 'Does it bring you happiness?' he asked. 'You wander through the night, feeding on rats like a pauper and then moon at Babette's window, filled with care, yet helpless as the goddess who came by night to watch Endymion sleep and could not have him. And suppose you could hold her in your arms and she would look on you without horror or disgust, what then? A few short years to watch her suffer every prick of mortality and then die before your eyes? Does this give happiness? This is insanity, Louis. This is vain. And what truly lies before you is vampire nature, which is killing. For I guarantee you that if you walk the streets tonight and strike down a woman as rich and beautiful as Babette and suck her blood until she drops at your feet you will have no hunger left for Babette's profile in the candlelight or for listening by the window for the sound of her voice. You will be filled, Louis, as you were meant to be, with all the life that you can hold; and you will have hunger when that's gone for the same, and the same, and the same. The red in this glass will be just as red; the roses on the wallpaper just as delicately drawn. And you'll see the moon the same way, and the same the flicker of a candle. And with that same sensibility that you cherish you will see death in all its beauty, life as it is only known on the very point of death. Don't you understand that, Louis? You alone of all creatures can see death that way with impunity. You … alone … under the rising moon … can strike like the hand of God!'

"He sat back now and drained the glass, and his eyes moved over the unconscious woman. Her breasts heaved and her eyebrows knit as if she were coming around. A moan escaped her lips. He'd never spoken such words to me before, and I had not thought him capable of it. 'Vampires are killers,' he said now. 'Predators. Whose all-seeing

eyes were meant to give them detachment. The ability to see a human life in its entirety, not with any mawkish sorrow but with a thrilling satisfaction in being the end of that life, in having a hand in the divine plan.'

" 'That is how *you* see it!' I protested. The girl moaned again; her face was very white. Her head rolled against the back of the chair.

" 'That is the way it is,' he answered. 'You talk of finding other vampires! Vampires are killers! They don't want you or your sensibility! They'll see you coming long before you see them, and they'll see your flaw; and, distrusting you, they'll seek to kill you. They'd seek to kill you even if you were like me. Because they are lone predators and seek for companionship no more than cats in the jungle. They're jealous of their secret and of their territory; and if you find one or more of them together it will be for safety only, and one will be the slave of the other, the way you are of me.'

" 'I'm not your slave,' I said to him. But even as he spoke I realized I'd been his slave all along.

" 'That's how vampires increase … through slavery. How else?' he asked. He took the girl's wrist again, and she cried out as the knife cut. She opened her eyes slowly as he held her wrist over the glass. She blinked and strained to keep them open. It was as if a veil covered her eyes. 'You're tired, aren't you?' he asked her. She gazed at him as if she couldn't really see him. 'Tired!' he said, now leaning close and staring into her eyes. 'You want to sleep.' 'Yes …' she moaned softly And he picked her up and took her into the bedroom. Our coffins rested on the carpet and against the wall; there was a velvet-draped bed. Lestat did not put her on the bed; he lowered her slowly into his coffin. 'What are you doing?' I asked him, coming to the door sill. The girl was looking around like a terrified child. 'No …' she was moaning. And then, as he closed the lid, she screamed. She continued to scream within the coffin.

" 'Why do you *do this*, Lestat?' I asked.

" 'I like to do it,' he said. 'I enjoy it.' He looked at me. 'I don't say that you have to enjoy it. Take your aesthete's tastes to purer things. Kill them swiftly if you will, but do it! Learn that you're a killer! Ah!' He threw up his hands in disgust. The girl had stopped screaming. Now he drew up a little curved-legged chair beside the coffin and,

crossing his legs, he looked at the coffin lid. His was a black varnished coffin, not a pure rectangular box as they are now, but tapered at both ends and widest where the corpse might lay his hands upon his chest. It suggested the human form. It opened, and the girl sat up astonished, wild-eyed, her lips blue and trembling. 'Lie down, love,' he said to her, and pushed her back; and she lay, near-hysterical, staring up at him. 'You're dead, love,' he said to her; and she screamed and turned desperately in the coffin like a fish, as if her body could escape through the sides, through the bottom. 'It's a coffin, a coffin!' she cried. 'Let me out.'

" 'But we all must lie in coffins, eventually,' he said to her. 'Lie still, love. This is your coffin. Most of us never get to know what it feels like. You know what it feels like!' he said to her. I couldn't tell whether she was listening or not, or just going wild. But she saw me in the doorway, and then she lay still, looking at Lestat and then at me. 'Help me!' she said to me.

"Lestat looked at me. 'I expected you to feel these things instinctually, as I did,' he said. 'When I gave you that first kill, I thought you would hunger for the next and the next, that you would go to each human life as if to a full cup, the way I had. But you didn't. And all this time I suppose I kept from straightening you out because you were best weaker. I'd watch you playing shadow in the night, staring at the falling rain, and I'd think, He's easy to manage, he's simple. But you're weak, Louis. You're a mark. For vampires and now for humans alike. This thing with Babette has exposed us both. It's as if you want us both to be destroyed.'

" 'I can't stand to watch what you're doing,' I said, turning my back. The girl's eyes were burning into my flesh. She lay, all the time he spoke, staring at me.

" 'You can stand it!' he said. 'I saw you last night with that child. You're a vampire, the same as I am!'

"He stood up and came towards me, but the girl rose again and he turned to shove her down. 'Do you think we should make her a vampire? Share our lives with her?' he asked. Instantly I said, 'No!'

" 'Why, because she's nothing but a whore?' he asked. 'A damned expensive whore at that,' he said.

" 'Can she live now? Or has she lost too much?' I asked him.

“ ‘Touching!’ he said. ‘She can’t live.’

“ ‘Then kill her.’ She began to scream. He just sat there. I turned around. He was smiling, and the girl had turned her face to the satin and was sobbing. Her reason had almost entirely left her; she was crying and praying. She was praying to the Virgin to save her, her hands over her face now, now over her head, the wrist smearing blood in her hair and on the satin. I bent over the coffin. She was dying, it was true; her eyes were burning, but the tissue around them was already bluish and now she smiled. ‘You won’t let me die, will you?’ she whispered. ‘You’ll save me.’ Lestat reached over and took her wrist. ‘But it’s too late, love,’ he said. ‘Look at your wrist, your breast.’ And then he touched the wound in her throat. She put her hands to her throat and gasped, her mouth open, the scream strangled. I stared at Lestat. I could not understand why he did this. His face was as smooth as mine is now, more animated for the blood, but cold and without emotion.

“He did not leer like a stage villain, nor hunger for her suffering as if the cruelty fed him. He simply watched her. ‘I never meant to be bad,’ she was crying. ‘I only did what I had to do. You won’t let this happen to me. You’ll let me go. I can’t die like this, I can’t!’ She was sobbing, the sobs dry and thin. ‘You’ll let me go. I have to go to the priest. You’ll let me go.’

“ ‘But my friend is a priest,’ said Lestat, smiling. As if he’d just thought of it as a joke. ‘This is your funeral, dear. You see, you were at a dinner party and you died. But God has given you another chance to be absolved. Don’t you see? Tell him your sins.’

“She shook her head at first, and then she looked at me again with those pleading eyes. ‘Is it true?’ she whispered. ‘Well,’ said Lestat, ‘I suppose you’re not contrite, dear. I shall have to shut the lid!’

“ ‘Stop this, Lestat!’ I shouted at him. The girl was screaming again, and I could not stand the sight of it any longer. I bent down to her and took her hand. ‘I can’t remember my sins,’ she said, just as I was looking at her wrist, resolved to kill her. ‘You mustn’t try. Tell God only that you are sorry,’ I said, ‘and then you’ll die and it will be over.’ She lay back, and her eyes shut. I sank my teeth into her wrist and began to suck her dry. She stirred once as if dreaming and said a name; and then, when I felt her heartbeat reach that hypnotic

slowness, I drew back from her, dizzy, confused for the moment, my hands reaching for the door frame. I saw her as if in a dream. The candles glared in the corner of my eye. I saw her lying utterly still. And Lestat sat composed beside her, like a mourner. His face was still. 'Louis,' he said to me. 'Don't you understand? Peace will only come to you when you can do this every night of your life. There is nothing else. But this is everything!' His voice was almost tender as he spoke, and he rose and put both his hands on my shoulders. I walked into the parlor, shying away from his touch but not resolute enough to push him off. 'Come with me, out into the streets. It's late. You haven't drunk enough. Let me show you what you are. Really! Forgive me if I bungled it, left too much to nature. Come!'

" 'I can't bear it, Lestat,' I said to him. 'You chose your companion badly.'

" 'But Louis,' he said, 'you haven't tried!'

The vampire stopped. He was studying the boy. And the boy, astonished, said nothing.

"It was true what he'd said. I had not drunk enough; and shaken by the girl's fear, I let him lead me out of the hotel, down the back stairs. People were coming now from the Condé Street ballroom, and the narrow street was jammed. There were supper parties in the hotels, and the planter families were lodged in town in great numbers and we passed through them like a nightmare. My agony was unbearable. Never since I was a human being had I felt such mental pain. It was because all of Lestat's words had made sense to me. I knew peace only when I killed, only for that minute; and there was no question in my mind that the killing of anything less than a human being brought nothing but a vague longing, the discontent which had brought me close to humans, to watch their lives through glass. I was no vampire. And in my pain, I asked irrationally, like a child, Could I not return? Could I not be human again? Even as the blood of that girl was warm in me and I felt that physical thrill and strength, I asked that question. The faces of humans passed me like candle flames in the night dancing on dark waves. I was sinking into the darkness. I was weary of longing. I was turning around and around in the street, looking at the stars and thinking, Yes, it's true. I know what he is saying is true, that when I kill there is no longing; and I can't bear this truth. I can't bear

it.

"Suddenly there was one of those arresting moments. The street was utterly quiet. We had strayed far from the main part of the old town and were near the ramparts. There were no lights, only the fire in a window and the far-off sound of people laughing. But no one here. No one near us. I could feel the breeze suddenly from the river and the hot air of the night rising and Lestat near me, so still he might have been made of stone. Over the long, low row of pointed roofs were the massive shapes of oak trees in the dark, great swaying forms of myriad sounds under the low-hung stars. The pain for the moment was gone; the confusion was gone. I closed my eyes and heard the wind and the sound of water flowing softly, swiftly in the river. It was enough, for one moment. And I knew that it would not endure, that it would fly away from me like something torn out of my arms, and I would fly after it, more desperately lonely than any creature under God, to get it back. And then a voice beside me rumbled deep in the sound of the night, a drumbeat as the moment ended, saying, 'Do what it is your nature to do. This is but a taste of it. Do what it is your nature to do.' And the moment was gone. I stood like the girl in the parlor in the hotel, dazed and ready for the slightest suggestion. I was nodding at Lestat as he nodded at me. 'Pain is terrible for you,' he said. 'You feel it like no other creature because you are a vampire. You don't want it to go on.'

" 'No,' I answered him. 'I'll feel as I felt with her, wed to her and weightless, caught as if by a dance.'

" 'That and more.' His hand tightened on mine. 'Don't turn away from it, come with me.'

"He led me quickly through the street, turning every time I hesitated, his hand out for mine, a smile on his lips, his presence as marvellous to me as the night he'd come in my mortal life and told me we would be vampires. 'Evil is a point of view,' he whispered now. 'We are immortal. And what we have before us are the rich feasts that conscience cannot appreciate and mortal men cannot know without regret. God kills, and so shall we; indiscriminately He takes the richest and the poorest, and so shall we; for no creatures under God are as we are, none so like Him as ourselves, dark angels not confined to the stinking limits of hell but wandering His earth and all its kingdoms. I

want a child tonight. I am like a mother … I want a child!'

"I should have known what he meant. I did not. He had me mesmerized, enchanted. He was playing to me as he had when I was mortal; he was leading me. He was saying, 'Your pain will end.'

"We'd come to a street of lighted windows. It was a place of rooming houses, sailors, flatboat men. We entered a narrow door; and then, in a hollow stone passage in which I could hear my own breath like the wind, he crept along the wall until his shadow leapt out in the light of a doorway beside the shadow of another man, their heads bent together, their whispers like the rustling of dry leaves. 'What is it?' I drew near him as he came back, afraid suddenly this exhilaration in me would die. I saw again that nightmare landscape I'd seen when I spoke with Babette; I felt the chill of loneliness, the chill of guilt. 'She's there!' he said. 'Your wounded one. Your daughter.'

" 'What do you say, what are you talking about!'

" 'You've saved her,' he whispered. 'I knew it. You left the window wide on her and her dead mother, and people passing in the street brought her here.'

" 'The child. The little girl!' I gasped. But he was already leading me through the door to stand at the end of the long ward of wooden beds, each with a child beneath a narrow white blanket, one candle at the end of the ward, where a nurse bent over a small desk. We walked down the aisle between the rows. 'Starving children, orphans,' he said. 'Children of plague and fever.' He stopped. I saw the little girl lying in the bed. And then the man was coming, and he was whispering with Lestat; such care for the sleeping little ones. Someone in another room was crying. The nurse rose and hurried away.

"And now the doctor bent and wrapped the child in the blanket. Lestat had taken money from his pocket and set it on the foot of the bed. The doctor was saying how glad he was we'd come for her, how most of them were orphans; they came in on the ships, sometimes orphans too young even to tell which body was that of their mother. He thought Lestat was the father.

"And in moments, Lestat was running through the streets with her, the white of the blanket gleaming against his dark coat and cape; and even to my expert vision, as I ran after him it seemed sometimes as if the blanket flew through the night with no one holding it, a shifting

shape travelling on the wind like a leaf stood upright and sent scurrying along a passage, trying to gain the wind all the while and truly take flight. I caught him finally as we approached the lamps near the Place d'Armes. The child lay pale on his shoulder, her cheeks still full like plums, though she was drained and near death. She opened her eyes, or rather the lids slid back; and beneath the long curling lashes I saw a streak of white. 'Lestat, what are you doing? Where are you taking her?' I demanded. But I knew too well. He was heading for the hotel and meant to take her into our room.

"The corpses were as we left them, one neatly set in the coffin as if an undertaker had already attended her, the other in her chair at the table. Lestat brushed past them as if he didn't see them, while I watched him in fascination. The candles had all burned down, and the only light was that of the moon and the street. I could see his iced and gleaming profile as he set the child down on the pillow. 'Come here, Louis, you haven't fed enough, I know you haven't,' he said with that same calm, convincing voice he had used skillfully all evening. He held my hand in his, his own warm and tight. 'See her, Louis, how plump and sweet she looks, as if even death can't take her freshness; the will to live is too strong! He might make a sculpture of her tiny lips and rounded hands, but he cannot make her fade! You remember, the way you wanted her when you saw her in that room.' I resisted him. I didn't want to kill her. I hadn't wanted to last night. And then suddenly I remembered two conflicting things and was torn in agony: I remembered the powerful beating of her heart against mine and I hungered for it, hungered for it so badly I turned my back on her in the bed and would have rushed out of the room had not Lestat held me fast; and I remembered her mother's face and that moment of horror when I'd dropped the child and he'd come into the room. But he wasn't mocking me now; he was confusing me. 'You want her, Louis. Don't you see, once you've taken her, then you can take whomever you wish. You wanted her last night but you weakened, and that's why she's not dead.' I could feel it was true, what he said. I could feel again that ecstasy of being pressed to her, her little heart going and going. 'She's too strong for me … her heart, it wouldn't give up,' I said to him. 'Is she so strong?' he smiled. He drew me close to him. 'Take her, Louis, I know you want her.' And I did. I drew close to

the bed now and just watched her. Her chest barely moved with her breath, and one small hand was tangled in her long, gold hair. I couldn't bear it, looking at her, wanting her not to die and wanting her; and the more I looked at her, the more I could taste her skin, feel my arm sliding under her back and pulling her up to me, feel her soft neck. Soft, soft, that's what she was, so soft. I tried to tell myself it was best for her to die—what was to become of her?—but these were lying thoughts. I wanted her! And so I took her in my arms and held her, her burning cheek on mine, her hair falling down over my wrists and brushing my eyelids, the sweet perfume of a child strong and pulsing in spite of sickness and death. She moaned now, stirred in her sleep, and that was more than I could bear. I'd kill her before I'd let her wake and know it. I went into her throat and heard Lestat saying to me strangely, 'Just a little tear. It's just a little throat.' And I obeyed him.

"I won't tell you again what it was like, except that it caught me up just as it had done before, and as killing always does, only more; so that my knees bent and I half lay on the bed, sucking her dry, that heart pounding again that would not slow, would not give up. And suddenly, as I went on and on, the instinctual part of me waiting, waiting for the slowing of the heart which would mean death, Lestat wrenched me from her. 'But she's not dead,' I whispered. But it was over. The furniture of the room emerged from the darkness. I sat stunned, staring at her, too weak to move, my head rolling back against the headboard of the bed, my hands pressing down on the velvet spread. Lestat was snatching her up, talking to her, saying a name. 'Claudia, Claudia, listen to me, come round, Claudia.' He was carrying her now out of the bedroom into the parlor, and his voice was so soft I barely heard him. 'You're ill, do you hear me? You must do as I tell you to get well.' And then, in the pause that followed, I came to my senses. I realized what he was doing, that he had cut his wrist and given it to her and she was drinking. 'That's it, dear; more,' he was saying to her. 'You must drink it to get well.'

" 'Damn you!' I shouted, and he hissed at me with blazing eyes. He sat on the settee with her locked to his wrist. I saw her white hand clutching at his sleeve, and I could see his chest heaving for breath and his face contorted the way I'd never seen it. He let out a moan and

whispered again to her to go on; and when I moved from the threshold, he glared at me again, as if to say, 'I'll kill you!'

" 'But why, Lestat?' I whispered to him. He was trying now to push her off, and she wouldn't let go. With her fingers locked around his fingers and arm she held the wrist to her mouth, a growl coming out of her. 'Stop, stop!' he said to her. He was clearly in pain. He pulled back from her and held her shoulders with both hands. She tried desperately to reach his wrist with her teeth, but she couldn't; and then she looked at him with the most innocent astonishment. He stood back, his hand out lest she move. Then he clapped a handkerchief to his wrist and backed away from her, towards the bell rope. He pulled it sharply, his eyes still fixed on her.

" 'What have you done, Lestat?' I asked him. *'What have you done?'* I stared at her. She sat composed, revived, filled with life, no sign of pallor or weakness in her, her legs stretched out straight on the damask, her white gown soft and thin like an angel's gown around her small form. She was looking at Lestat. 'Not me,' he said to her, 'ever again. Do you understand? But I'll show you what to do!' When I tried to make him look at me and answer me as to what he was doing, he shook me off. He gave me such a blow with his arm that I hit the wall. Someone was knocking now. I knew what he meant to do. Once more I tried to reach out for him, but he spun so fast I didn't even see him hit me. When I did see him, I was sprawled in the chair and he was opening the door. 'Yes, come in, please, there's been an accident,' he said to the young slave boy. And then, shutting the door, he took him from behind, so that the boy never knew what happened. And even as he knelt over the body drinking, he beckoned for the child, who slid from the couch and went down on her knees and took the wrist offered her, quickly pushing back the cuff of the shirt. She gnawed first, as if she meant to devour his flesh, and then Lestat showed her what to do. He sat back and let her have the rest, his eye on the boy's chest, so that when the time came, he bent forward and said, 'No more, he's dying.... You must never drink after the heart stops or you'll be sick again, sick to death. Do you understand?' But she'd had enough and she sat next to him, their backs against the legs of the settee, their legs stretched out on the floor. The boy died in seconds. I felt weary and sickened, as if the night had lasted a thousand years. I

sat there watching them, the child drawing close to Lestat now, snuggling near him as he slipped his arm around her, though his indifferent eyes remained fixed on the corpse. Then he looked up at me.

" 'Where is Mamma?' asked the child softly. She had a voice equal to her physical beauty, clear like a little silver bell. It was sensual. She was sensual. Her eyes were as wide and clear as Babette's. You understand that I was barely aware of what all this meant. I knew what it might mean, but I was aghast. Now Lestat stood up and scooped her from the floor and came towards me. 'She's our daughter,' he said. 'You're going to live with us now.' He beamed at her, but his eyes were cold, as if it were all a horrible joke; then he looked at me, and his face had conviction. He pushed her towards me. I found her on my lap, my arms around her, feeling again how soft she was, how plump her skin was, like the skin of warm fruit, plums warmed by sunlight; her huge luminescent eyes were fixed on me with trusting curiosity. 'This is Louis, and I am Lestat,' he said to her, dropping down beside her. She looked about and said that it was a pretty room, very pretty, but she wanted her mamma. He had his comb out and was running it through her hair, holding the locks so as not to pull with the comb; her hair was untangling and becoming like satin. She was the most beautiful child I'd ever seen, and now she glowed with the cold fire of a vampire. Her eyes were a woman's eyes, I could see it already. She would become white and spare like us but not lose her shape. I understood now what Lestat had said about death, what he meant. I touched her neck where the two red puncture wounds were bleeding just a little. I took Lestat's handkerchief from the floor and touched it to her neck. 'Your mamma's left you with us. She wants you to be happy,' he was saying with that same immeasurable confidence. 'She knows we can make you very happy.'

" 'I want some more,' she said, turning to the corpse on the floor.

" 'No, not tonight; tomorrow night,' said Lestat. And he went to take the lady out of his coffin. The child slid off my lap, and I followed her. She stood watching as Lestat put the two ladies and the slave boy into the bed. He brought the covers up to their chins. 'Are they sick?' asked the child.

" 'Yes, Claudia,' he said. 'They're sick and they're dead. You see, they

die when we drink from them.' He came towards her and swung her up into his arms again. We stood there with her between us. I was mesmerized by her, by her *transformed*, by her every gesture. She was not a child any longer, she was a vampire child. 'Now, Louis was going to leave us,' said Lestat, his eyes moving from my face to hers. 'He was going to go away. But now he's not. Because he wants to stay and take care of you and make you happy.' He looked at me. 'You're not going, are you, Louis?'

" 'You bastard!' I whispered to him. 'You fiend!'

" 'Such language in front of your daughter,' he said.

" 'I'm not your daughter,' she said with the silvery voice. 'I'm my mamma's daughter.'

" 'No, dear, not anymore,' he said to her. He glanced at the window, and then he shut the bedroom door behind us and turned the key in the lock. 'You're our daughter, Louis's daughter and my daughter, do you see? Now, whom should you sleep with? Louis or me?' And then looking at me, he said, 'Perhaps you should sleep with Louis. After all, when I'm tired … I'm not so kind.' "

The vampire stopped. The boy said nothing. “A child vampire!” he whispered finally. The vampire glanced up suddenly as though startled, though his body made no movement. He glared at the tape recorder as if it were something monstrous.

The boy saw that the tape was almost out. Quickly, he opened his briefcase and drew out a new cassette, clumsily fitting it into place. He looked at the vampire as he pressed the record button. The vampire's face looked weary, drawn, his cheekbones more prominent and his brilliant green eyes enormous. They had begun at dark, which had come early on this San Francisco winter night, and now it was just before ten p.m. The vampire straightened and smiled and said calmly, “We are ready to go on?”

“He'd done this to the little girl just to keep you with him?” asked the boy.

“That is difficult to say. It was a statement. I'm convinced that Lestat was a person who preferred not to think or talk about his motives or beliefs, even to himself. One of those people who must act. Such a person must be pushed considerably before he will open up and confess that there is method and thought to the way he lives. That is what had happened that night with Lestat. He'd been pushed to where he had to discover even for himself why he lived as he did. Keeping me with him, that was undoubtedly part of what pushed him. But I think, in retrospect, that he himself wanted to know his own reasons for killing, wanted to examine his own life. He was discovering when he spoke what he did believe. But he did indeed want me to remain. He lived with me in a way he could never have lived alone. And, as I've told you, I was careful never to sign any property over to him, which maddened him. That, he could not persuade me to do.” The vampire laughed suddenly. “Look at all the other things he persuaded me to do! How strange. He could persuade me to kill a child, but not to part with my money.” He shook his head. “But,” he said, “it wasn't greed, really, as you can see. It was fear of him that made me tight with him.”

“You speak of him as if he were dead. You say Lestat *was* this or *was* that. Is he dead?” asked the boy.

“I don’t know,” said the vampire. “I think perhaps he is. But I’ll come to that. We were talking of Claudia, weren’t we? There was something else I wanted to say about Lestat’s motives that night. Lestat trusted no one, as you see. He was like a cat, by his own admission, a lone predator. Yet he had communicated with me that night; he had to some extent exposed himself simply by telling the truth. He had dropped his mockery, his condescension. He had forgotten his perpetual anger for just a little while. And this for Lestat was exposure. When we stood alone in that dark street, I felt in him a communion with another I hadn’t felt since I died. I rather think that he ushered Claudia into vampirism for revenge.”

“Revenge, not only on you but on the world,” suggested the boy.

“Yes. As I said, Lestat’s motives for everything revolved around revenge.”

“Was it all started with the father? With the school?”

“I don’t know. I doubt it,” said the vampire. “But I want to go on.”

“Oh, please go on. You have to go on! I mean, it’s only ten o’clock.” The boy showed his watch.

The vampire looked at it, and then he smiled at the boy. The boy’s face changed. It went blank as if from some sort of shock. “Are you still afraid of me?” asked the vampire.

The boy said nothing, but he shrank slightly from the edge of the table. His body elongated, his feet moved out over the bare boards and then contracted.

“I should think you’d be very foolish if you weren’t,” said the vampire. “*But don’t be*. Shall we go on?”

“Please,” said the boy. He gestured towards the machine.

“Well,” the vampire began, “our life was much changed with Mademoiselle Claudia, as you can imagine. Her body died, yet her senses awakened much as mine had. And I treasured in her the signs of this. But I was not aware for quite a few days how much I wanted her, wanted to talk with her and be with her. At first, I thought only of protecting her from Lestat. I gathered her into my coffin every morning and would not let her out of my sight with him if possible. This was what Lestat wanted, and he gave little suggestions that he might do her harm. ‘A starving child is a frightful sight,’ he said to me, ‘a starving vampire even worse.’ They’d hear her screams in Paris, he

said, were he to lock her away to die. But all this was meant for me, to draw me close and keep me there. Afraid of fleeing alone, I would not conceive of risking it with Claudia. She was a child. She needed care.

"And there was much pleasure in caring for her. She forgot her five years of mortal life at once, or so it seemed, for she was mysteriously quiet. And from time to time I even feared that she had lost all sense, that the illness of her mortal life, combined with the great vampire shock, might have robbed her of reason; but this proved hardly the case. She was simply unlike Lestat and me to such an extent I couldn't comprehend her; for little child she was, but also fierce killer now capable of the ruthless pursuit of blood with all a child's demanding. And though Lestat still threatened me with danger to her, he did not threaten her at all but was loving to her, proud of her beauty, anxious to teach her that we must kill to live and that we ourselves could never die.

"The plague raged in the city then, as I've indicated, and he took her to the stinking cemeteries where the yellow fever and plague victims lay in heaps while the sounds of shovels never ceased all through the day and night. 'This is death,' he told her, pointing to the decaying corpse of a woman, 'which we cannot suffer. Our bodies will stay always as they are, fresh and alive; but we must never hesitate to bring death, because it is how we live.' And Claudia gazed on this with inscrutable liquid eyes.

"If there was not understanding in the early years, there was no smattering of fear. Mute and beautiful, she played with dolls, dressing, undressing them by the hour. Mute and beautiful, she killed. And I, transformed by Lestat's instruction, was now to seek out humans in much greater numbers. But it was not only the killing of them that soothed some pain in me which had been constant in the dark, still nights on Pointe du Lac, when I sat with only the company of Lestat and the old man; it was their great, shifting numbers everywhere in streets which never grew quiet, cabarets which never shut their doors, balls which lasted till dawn, the music and laughter streaming out of the open windows; people all around me now, my pulsing victims, not seen with that great love I'd felt for my sister and Babette, but with some new detachment and need. And I did kill them, kills infinitely varied and great distances apart, as I walked with the vampire's sight

and light movement through this teeming, burgeoning city, my victims surrounding me, seducing me, inviting me to their supper tables, their carriages, their brothels. I lingered only a short while, long enough to take what I must have, soothed in my great melancholy that the town gave me an endless train of magnificent strangers.

"For that was it. I fed on strangers. I drew only close enough to see the pulsing beauty, the unique expression, the new and passionate voice, then killed before those feelings of revulsion could be aroused in me, that fear, that sorrow.

"Claudia and Lestat might hunt and seduce, stay long in the company of the doomed victim, enjoying the splendid humor in his unwitting friendship with death. But I still could not bear it. And so to me, the swelling population was a mercy, a forest in which I was lost, unable to stop myself, whirling too fast for thought or pain, accepting again and again the invitation to death rather than extending it.

"We lived meantime in one of my new Spanish town houses in the Rue Royale, a long, lavish upstairs flat above a shop I rented to a tailor, a hidden garden court behind us, a wall secure against the street, with fitted wooden shutters and a barred carriage door—a place of far greater luxury and security than Pointe du Lac. Our servants were free people of color who left us to solitude before dawn for their own homes, and Lestat bought the very latest imports from France and Spain: crystal chandeliers and Oriental carpets, silk screens with painted birds of paradise, canaries singing in great domed, golden cages, and delicate marble Grecian gods and beautifully painted Chinese vases. I did not need the luxury any more than I had needed it before, but I found myself enthralled with the new flood of art and craft and design, could stare at the intricate pattern of the carpets for hours, or watch the gleam of the lamplight change the somber colors of a Dutch painting.

"All this Claudia found wondrous, with the quiet awe of an unspoiled child, and marvelled when Lestat hired a painter to make the walls of her room a magical forest of unicorns and golden birds and laden fruit trees over sparkling streams.

"An endless train of dressmakers and shoemakers and tailors came to our flat to outfit Claudia in the best of children's fashions, so that she was always a vision, not just of child beauty, with her curling

lashes and her glorious yellow hair, but of the taste of finely trimmed bonnets and tiny lace gloves, flaring velvet coats and capes, and sheer white puffed-sleeve gowns with gleaming blue sashes. Lestat played with her as if she were a magnificent doll, and I played with her as if she were a magnificent doll; and it was her pleading that forced me to give up my rusty black for dandy jackets and silk ties and soft gray coats and gloves and black capes. Lestat thought the best color at all times for vampires was black, possibly the only aesthetic principle he steadfastly maintained, but he wasn't opposed to anything which smacked of style and excess. He loved the great figure we cut, the three of us in our box at the new French Opera House or the Théâtre d'Orléans, to which we went as often as possible, Lestat having a passion for Shakespeare which surprised me, though he often dozed through the operas and woke just in time to invite some lovely lady to midnight supper, where he would use all his skill to make her love him totally, then dispatch her violently to heaven or hell and come home with her diamond ring to give to Claudia.

"And all this time I was educating Claudia, whispering in her tiny seashell ear that our eternal life was useless to us if we did not see the beauty around us, the creation of mortals everywhere; I was constantly sounding the depth of her still gaze as she took the books I gave her, whispered the poetry I taught her, and played with a light but confident touch her own strange, coherent songs on the piano. She could fall for hours into the pictures in a book and listen to me read until she sat so still the sight of her jarred me, made me put the book down, and just stare back at her across the lighted room; then she'd move, a doll coming to life, and say in the softest voice that I must read some more.

"And then strange things began to happen, for though she said little and was the chubby, round-fingered child still, I'd find her tucked in the arm of my chair reading the work of Aristotle or Boethius or a new novel just come over the Atlantic. Or pecking out the music of Mozart we'd only heard the night before with an infallible ear and a concentration that made her ghostly as she sat there hour after hour discovering the music—the melody, then the bass, and finally bringing it together. Claudia was mystery. It was not possible to know what she knew or did not know. And to watch her kill was chilling. She would

sit alone in the dark square waiting for the kindly gentleman or woman to find her, her eyes more mindless than I had ever seen Lestat's. Like a child numbed with fright she would whisper her plea for help to her gentle, admiring patrons, and as they carried her out of the square, her arms would fix about their necks, her tongue between her teeth, her vision glazed with consuming hunger. They found death fast in those first years, before she learned to play with them, to lead them to the doll shop or the cafe where they gave her steaming cups of chocolate or tea to ruddy her pale cheeks, cups she pushed away, waiting, waiting, as if feasting silently on their terrible kindness.

"But when that was done, she was my companion, my pupil, her long hours spent with me consuming faster and faster the knowledge I gave her, sharing with me some quiet understanding which could not include Lestat. At dawn she lay with me, her heart beating against my heart, and many times when I looked at her—when she was at her music or painting and didn't know I stood in the room—I thought of that singular experience I'd had with her and no other, that I had killed her, taken her life from her, had drunk all of her life's blood in that fatal embrace I'd lavished on so many others, others who lay now moldering in the damp earth. But she lived, she lived to put her arms around my neck and press her tiny Cupid's bow to my lips and put her gleaming eye to my eye until our lashes touched and, laughing, we reeled about the room as if to the wildest waltz. Father and Daughter. Lover and Lover. You can imagine how well it was Lestat did not envy us this, but only smiled on it from afar, waiting until she came to him. Then he would take her out into the street and they would wave to me beneath the window, off to share what they shared: the hunt, the seduction, the kill.

"Years passed in this way. Years and years and years. Yet it wasn't until some time had passed that an obvious fact occurred to me about Claudia. I suppose from the expression on your face you've already guessed, and you wonder why I didn't guess. I can only tell you, time is not the same for me, nor was it for us then. Day did not link to day making a taut and jerking chain; rather, the moon rose over lapping waves."

"Her body!" the boy said. "She was never to grow up."

The vampire nodded. "She was to be the demon child forever," he

said, his voice soft as if he wondered at it. “Just as I am the young man I was when I died. And Lestat? The same. But her mind. It was a vampire’s mind. And I strained to know how she moved towards womanhood. She came to talk more, though she was never other than a reflective person and could listen to me patiently by the hour without interruption. Yet more and more her doll-like face seemed to possess two totally aware adult eyes, and innocence seemed lost somewhere with neglected toys and the loss of a certain patience. There was something dreadfully sensual about her lounging on the settee in a tiny nightgown of lace and stitched pearls; she became an eerie and powerful seductress, her voice as clear and sweet as ever, though it had a resonance which was womanish, a sharpness sometimes that proved shocking. After days of her usual quiet, she would scoff suddenly at Lestat’s predictions about the war; or drinking blood from a crystal glass say that there were no books in the house, we must get more even if we had to steal them, and then coldly tell me of a library she’d heard of, in a palatial mansion in the Faubourg Ste.-Marie, a woman who collected books as if they were rocks or pressed butterflies. She asked if I might get her into the woman’s bedroom.

“I was aghast at such moments; her mind was unpredictable, unknowable. But then she would sit on my lap and put her fingers in my hair and doze there against my heart, whispering to me softly I should never be as grown up as she until I knew that killing was the more serious thing, not the books, the music. ‘Always the music …’ she whispered. ‘Doll, doll,’ I called her. That’s what she was. A magic doll. Laughter and infinite intellect and then the round-cheeked face, the bud mouth. ‘Let me dress you, let me brush your hair,’ I would say to her out of old habit, aware of her smiling and watching me with the thin veil of boredom over her expression. ‘Do as you like,’ she breathed into my ear as I bent down to fasten her pearl buttons. ‘Only kill with me tonight. You never let me see you kill, Louis!’

“She wanted a coffin of her own now, which left me more wounded than I would let her see. I walked out after giving my gentlemanly consent; for how many years had I slept with her as if she were part of me I couldn’t know. But then I found her near the Ursuline Convent, an orphan lost in the darkness, and she ran suddenly towards me and

clutched at me with a human desperation. 'I don't want it if it hurts you,' she confided so softly that a human embracing us both could not have heard her or felt her breath. 'I'll stay with you always. But I must see it, don't you understand? A coffin for a child.'

"We were to go to the coffinmaker's. A play, a tragedy in one act: I to leave her in his little parlor and confide to him in the anteroom that she was to die. Talk of love, she must have the best, but she must not know; and the coffinmaker, shaken with the tragedy of it, must make it for her, picturing her laid there on the white satin, dabbing a tear from his eye despite all the years.…

" 'But, why, Claudia …' I pleaded with her. I loathed to do it, loathed cat and mouse with the helpless human. But hopelessly her lover, I took her there and set her on the sofa, where she sat with folded hands in her lap, her tiny bonnet bent down, as if she didn't know what we whispered about her in the foyer. The undertaker was an old and greatly refined man of color who drew me swiftly aside lest 'the baby' should hear. 'But why must she die?' he begged me, as if I were God who ordained it. 'Her heart, she cannot live,' I said, the words taking on for me a peculiar power, a disturbing resonance. The emotion in his narrow, heavily lined face disturbed me; something came to my mind, a quality of light, a gesture, the sound of something … a child crying in a stench-filled room. Now he unlocked one after another of his long rooms and showed me the coffins, black lacquer and silver, she wanted that. And suddenly I found myself backing away from him out of the coffin-house, hurriedly taking her hand. 'The order's been taken,' I said to her. 'It's driving me mad!' I breathed the fresh air of the street as though I'd been suffocated and then I saw her compassionless face studying mine. She slipped her small gloved hand back into my own. 'I want it, Louis,' she explained patiently.

"And then one night she climbed the undertaker's stairs, Lestat beside her, for the coffin, and left the coffinmaker, unawares, dead across the dusty piles of papers on his desk. And there the coffin lay in our bedroom, where she watched it often by the hour when it was new, as if the thing were moving or alive or unfolded some mystery to her little by little, as things do which change. But she did not sleep in it. She slept with me.

“There were other changes in her. I cannot date them or put them in order. She did not kill indiscriminately. She fell into demanding patterns. Poverty began to fascinate her; she begged Lestat or me to take a carriage out through the Faubourg Ste.-Marie to the riverfront places where the immigrants lived. She seemed obsessed with the women and children. These things Lestat told me with great amusement, for I was loath to go and would sometimes not be persuaded under any circumstance. But Claudia had a family there which she took one by one. And she had asked to enter the cemetery of the suburb city of Lafayette and there roam the high marble tombs in search of those desperate men who, having no place else to sleep, spend what little they have on a bottle of wine, and crawl into a rotting vault. Lestat was impressed, overcome. What a picture he made of her, the infant death, he called her. Sister death, and sweet death; and for me, mockingly, he had the term with a sweeping bow, Merciful Death! which he said like a woman clapping her hands and shouting out a word of exciting gossip: oh, merciful heavens! so that I wanted to strangle him.

“But there was no quarrelling. We kept to ourselves. We had our adjustments. Books filled our long flat from floor to ceiling in row after row of gleaming leather volumes, as Claudia and I pursued our natural tastes and Lestat went about his lavish acquisitions. Until she began to ask questions.”

The vampire stopped. And the boy looked as anxious as before, as if patience took the greatest effort. But the vampire had brought his long, white fingers together as if to make a church steeple and then folded them and pressed his palms tight. It was as if he’d forgotten the boy altogether. “I should have known,” he said, “that it was inevitable, and I should have seen the signs of it coming. For I was so attuned to her; I loved her so completely; she was so much the companion of my every waking hour, the only companion that I had, other than death. I should have known. But something in me was conscious of an enormous gulf of darkness very close to us, as though we walked always near a sheer cliff and might see it suddenly but too late if we made the wrong turn or became too lost in our thoughts. Sometimes

the physical world about me seemed insubstantial except for that darkness. As if a fault in the earth were about to open and I could see the great crack breaking down the Rue Royale, and all the buildings were falling to dust in the rumble. But worst of all, they were transparent, gossamer, like stage drops made of silk. Ah … I'm distracted. What do I say? That I ignored the signs in her, that I clung desperately to the happiness she'd given me. And still gave me; and ignored all else.

"But these were the signs. She grew cold to Lestat. She fell to staring at him for hours. When he spoke, often she didn't answer him, and one could hardly tell if it was contempt or that she didn't hear. And our fragile domestic tranquillity erupted with his outrage. He did not have to be loved, but he would not be ignored; and once he even flew at her, shouting that he would slap her, and I found myself in the wretched position of fighting him as I'd done years before she'd come to us. 'She's not a child any longer,' I whispered to him. 'I don't know what it is. She's a woman.' I urged him to take it lightly, and he affected disdain and ignored her in turn. But one evening he came in flustered and told me she'd followed him—though she'd refused to go with him to kill, she'd followed him afterwards. 'What's the matter with her!' he flared at me, as though I'd given birth to her and must know.

"And then one night our servants vanished. Two of the best maids we'd ever retained, a mother and daughter. The coachman was sent to their house only to report they'd disappeared, and then the father was at our door, pounding the knocker. He stood back on the brick sidewalk regarding me with that grave suspicion that sooner or later crept into the faces of all mortals who knew us for any length of time, the forerunner of death, as pallor might be to a fatal fever; and I tried to explain to him they had not been here, mother or daughter, and we must begin some search.

" 'It's she!' Lestat hissed from the shadows when I shut the gate. 'She's done something to them and brought risk for us all. I'll make her tell me!' And he pounded up the spiral stairs from the courtyard. I knew that she'd gone, slipped out while I was at the gate, and I knew something else also: that a vague stench came across the courtyard

from the shut, unused kitchen, a stench that mingled uneasily with the honeysuckle—the stench of graveyards. I heard Lestat coming down as I approached the warped shutters, locked with rust to the small brick building. No food was ever prepared there, no work ever done, so that it lay like an old brick vault under the tangles of honeysuckle. The shutters came loose, the nails having turned to dust, and I heard Lestat's gasp as we stepped into the reeking dark. There they lay on the bricks, mother and daughter together, the arm of the mother fastened around the waist of the daughter, the daughter's head bent against the mother's breast, both foul with feces and swarming with insects. A great cloud of gnats rose as the shutter fell back, and I waved them away from me in a convulsive disgust. Ants crawled undisturbed over the eyelids, the mouths of the dead pair, and in the moonlight I could see the endless map of silvery paths of snails. 'Damn her!' Lestat burst out, and I grabbed his arm and held him fast, pitting all my strength against him. 'What do you mean to do with her!' I insisted. 'What can you do? She's not a child anymore that will do what we say simply because we say it. We must teach her.'

" 'She knows!' He stood back from me brushing his coat. 'She knows! She's known for years what to do! What can be risked and what cannot. I won't have her do this without my permission! I won't tolerate it.'

" 'Then, are you master of us all? You didn't teach her that. Was she supposed to imbibe it from my quiet subservience? I don't think so. She sees herself as equal to us now, and us as equal to each other. I tell you we must reason with her, instruct her to respect what is ours. As all of us should respect it.'

"He stalked off, obviously absorbed in what I'd said, though he would give no admission of it to me. And he took his vengeance to the city. Yet when he came home, fatigued and satiated, she was still not there. He sat against the velvet arm of the couch and stretched his long legs out on the length of it. 'Did you bury them?' he asked me.

" 'They're gone,' I said. I did not care to say even to myself that I had burned their remains in the old unused kitchen stove. 'But there is the father to deal with, and the brother,' I said to him. I feared his temper. I wished at once to plan some way to quickly dispose of the whole problem. But he said now that the father and the brother were no

more, that death had come to dinner in their small house near the ramparts and stayed to say grace when everyone was done. ‘Wine,’ he whispered now, running his finger on his lip. ‘Both of them had drunk too much wine. I found myself tapping the fence posts with a stick to make a tune,’ he laughed. ‘But I don’t like it, the dizziness. Do you like it?’ And when he looked at me I had to smile at him because the wine was working in him and he was mellow; and in that moment when his face looked warm and reasonable, I leaned over and said, ‘I hear Claudia’s tap on the stairs. Be gentle with her. It’s all done.’

“She came in then, with her bonnet ribbons undone and her little boots caked with dirt. I watched them tensely, Lestat with a sneer on his lips, she as unconscious of him as if he weren’t there. She had a bouquet of white chrysanthemums in her arms, such a large bouquet it made her all the more a small child. Her bonnet fell back now, hung on her shoulder for an instant, and then fell to the carpet. And all through her golden hair I saw the narrow petals of the chrysanthemums. ‘Tomorrow is the Feast of All Saints,’ she said. ‘Do you know?’

“ ‘Yes,’ I said to her. It is the day in New Orleans when all the faithful go to the cemeteries to care for the graves of their loved ones. They whitewash the plaster walls of the vaults, clean the names cut into the marble slabs. And finally they deck the tombs with flowers. In the St. Louis Cemetery, which was very near our house, in which all the great Louisiana families were buried, in which my own brother was buried, there were even little iron benches set before the graves where the families might sit to receive the other families who had come to the cemetery for the same purpose. It was a festival in New Orleans; a celebration of death, it might have seemed to tourists who didn’t understand it, but it was a celebration of the life after. ‘I bought this from one of the vendors,’ Claudia said. Her voice was soft and inscrutable. Her eyes opaque and without emotion.

“ ‘For the two you left in the kitchen!’ Lestat said fiercely. She turned to him for the first time, but she said nothing. She stood there staring at him as if she’d never seen him before. And then she took several steps towards him and looked at him, still as if she were positively examining him. I moved forward. I could feel his anger. Her coldness. And now she turned to me. And then, looking from one to the other of

us, she asked:

" 'Which of you did it? *Which of you made me what I am?'*

"I could not have been more astonished at anything she might have said or done. And yet it was inevitable that her long silence would thus be broken. She seemed very little concerned with me, though. Her eyes fixed on Lestat. 'You speak of us as if we always existed as we are now,' she said, her voice soft, measured, the child's tone rounded with the woman's seriousness. 'You speak of them out there as mortals, us as vampires. But it was not always so. Louis had a mortal sister, I remember her. And there is a picture of her in his trunk. I've seen him look at it! He was mortal the same as she; and so was I. Why else this size, this shape?' She opened her arms now and let the chrysanthemums fall to the floor. I whispered her name. I think I meant to distract her. It was impossible. The tide had turned. Lestat's eyes burned with a keen fascination, a malignant pleasure.

" 'You made us what we are, didn't you?' she accused him.

"He raised his eyebrows now in mock amazement. 'What you are?' he asked. 'And would you be something other than what you are!' He drew up his knees and leaned forward, his eyes narrow. 'Do you know how long it's been? Can you picture yourself? Must I find a hag to show you your mortal countenance now if I had let you alone?'

"She turned away from him, stood for a moment as if she had no idea what she would do, and then she moved towards the chair beside the fireplace and, climbing on it, curled up like the most helpless child. She brought her knees up close to her, her velvet coat open, her silk dress tight around her knees, and she stared at the ashes in the hearth. But there was nothing helpless about her stare. Her eyes had independent life, as if the body were possessed.

" 'You could be dead by now if you were mortal!' Lestat insisted to her, pricked by her silence. He drew his legs around and set his boots on the floor. 'Do you hear me? Why do you ask me this now? Why do you make such a thing of it? You've known all your life you're a vampire.' And so he went on in a tirade, saying much the same things he'd said to me many times over: know your nature, kill, be what you are. But all of this seemed strangely beside the point. For Claudia had no qualms about killing. She sat back now and let her head roll slowly to where she could see him across from her. She was studying him

again, as if he were a puppet on strings. 'Did you do it to me? And how?' she asked, her eyes narrowing. 'How did you do it?'

" 'And why should I tell you? It's my power.'

" 'Why yours alone?' she asked, her voice icy, her eyes heartless. *'How was it done?'* she demanded suddenly in rage.

"It was electric. He rose from the couch, and I was on my feet immediately, facing him. 'Stop her!' he said to me. He wrung his hands. 'Do something about her! I can't endure her!' And then he started for the door, but turned and, coming back, drew very close so that he towered over Claudia, putting her in a deep shadow. She glared up at him fearlessly, her eyes moving back and forth over his face with total detachment. 'I can undo what I did. Both to you and to him,' he said to her, his finger pointing at me across the room. 'Be glad I made you what you are,' he sneered. 'Or I'll break you in a thousand pieces!' "

"Well, the peace of the house was destroyed, though there was quiet. Days passed and she asked no questions, though now she was deep into books of the occult, of witches and witchcraft, and of vampires. This was mostly fancy, you understand. Myth, tales, sometimes mere romantic horror tales. But she read it all. Till dawn she read, so that I had to go and collect her and bring her to bed.

"Lestat, meantime, hired a butler and maid and had a team of workers in to make a great fountain in the courtyard with a stone nymph pouring water eternal from a widemouthed shell. He had goldfish brought and boxes of rooted water lilies set into the fountain so their blossoms rested upon the surface and shivered in the ever-moving water.

"A woman had seen him kill on the Nyades Road, which ran to the town of Carrolton, and there were stories of it in the papers, associating him with a haunted house near Nyades and Melpomene, all of which delighted him. He was the Hyades Road ghost for some time, though it finally fell to the back pages; and then he performed another grisly murder in another public place and set the imagination of New Orleans to working. But all this had about it some quality of fear. He was pensive, suspicious, drew close to me constantly to ask

where Claudia was, where she'd gone, and what she was doing.

" 'She'll be all right,' I assured him, though I was estranged from her and in agony, as if she'd been my bride. She hardly saw me now, as she'd not seen Lestat before, and she might walk away while I spoke to her.

" 'She had better be all right!' he said nastily.

" 'And what will you do if she's not?' I asked, more in fear than accusation.

"He looked up at me with his cold gray eyes. 'You take care of her, Louis. You talk to her!' he said. 'Everything was perfect, and now this. There's no need for it.'

"But it was my choice to let her come to me, and she did. It was early one evening when I'd just awakened. The house was dark. I saw her standing by the French windows; she wore puffed sleeves and a pink sash and was watching with lowered lashes the evening rush in the Rue Royale. I could hear Lestat in his room, the sound of water splashing from his pitcher. The faint smell of his cologne came and went like the sound of music from the cafe two doors down from us. 'He'll tell me nothing,' she said softly. I hadn't realized she knew that I had opened my eyes. I came towards her and knelt beside her. 'You'll tell me, won't you? How it was done.'

" 'Is this what you truly want to know?' I asked, searching her face. 'Or is it why it was done to you … and what you were before? I don't understand what you mean by "how," for if you mean how was it done so that you in turn may do it.…'

" 'I don't even know what it is. What you're saying,' she said with a touch of coldness. Then she turned full around and put her hands on my face. 'Kill with me tonight,' she whispered as sensuously as a lover. 'And tell me all that you know. What are we? Why are we not like them?' She looked down into the street.

" 'I don't know the answers to your questions,' I said to her. Her face contorted suddenly, as if she were straining to hear me over a sudden noise. And then she shook her head. But I went on. 'I wonder the same things you wonder. I do not know. How I was made, I'll tell you that … that Lestat did it to me. But the real "how" of it, I don't know!' Her face had that same look of strain. I was seeing in it the first traces of fear, or something worse and deeper than fear. 'Claudia,' I said to

her, putting my hands over her hands and pressing them gently against my skin. ‘Lestat has one wise thing to tell you. Don’t ask these questions. You’ve been my companion for countless years in my search for all that I could learn of mortal life and mortal creation. Don’t be my companion now in this anxiety. He can’t give us the answers. And I have none.’

“I could see she could not accept this, but I hadn’t expected the convulsive turning away, the violence with which she tore at her own hair for an instant and then stopped as if the gesture were useless, stupid. It filled me with apprehension. She was looking at the sky. It was smoky, starless, the clouds blowing fast from the direction of the river. She made a sudden movement of her lips as if she’d bitten into them, then she turned to me and, still whispering, she said, ‘Then he made me … he did it … you did not!’ There was something so dreadful about her expression, I’d left her before I meant to do it. I was standing before the fireplace lighting a single candle in front of the tall mirror. And there suddenly, I saw something which startled me, gathering out of the gloom first as a hideous mask, then becoming its three-dimensional reality: a weathered skull. I stared at it. It smelled faintly of the earth still, but had been scrubbed. ‘Why don’t you answer me?’ she was asking. I heard Lestat’s door open. He would go out to kill at once, at least to find the kill. I would not.

“I would let the first hours of the evening accumulate in quiet, as hunger accumulated in me, till the drive grew almost too strong, so that I might give myself to it all the more completely, blindly. I heard her question again clearly, as though it had been floating in the air like the reverberation of a bell … and felt my heart pounding. ‘He did make me, of course! He said so himself. But you hide something from me. Something he hints at when I question him. He says that it could not have been done without you!’

“I found myself staring at the skull, yet hearing her as if the words were lashing me, lashing me to make me turn around and face the lash. The thought went through me more like a flash of cold than a thought, that nothing should remain of me now but such a skull. I turned around and saw in the light from the street her eyes, like two dark flames in her white face. A doll from whom someone had cruelly ripped the eyes and replaced them with a demonic fire. I found myself

moving towards her, whispering her name, some thought forming on my lips, then dying, coming towards her, then away from her, fussing for her coat and her hat. I saw a tiny glove on the floor which was phosphorescent in the shadows, and for just a moment I thought it a tiny, severed hand.

" 'What's the matter with you …?' She drew nearer, looking up into my face. 'What has *always* been the matter? Why do you stare at the skull like that, at the glove?' She asked this gently, but … not gently enough.

"There was a slight calculation in her voice, an unreachable detachment.

" 'I need you,' I said to her, without wanting to say it. 'I cannot bear to lose you. You're the only companion I have in immortality.'

" 'But surely there must be others! Surely we are not the only vampires on earth!' I heard her saying it as I had said it, heard my own words coming back to me now on the tide of her self-awareness, her searching. But there's no pain, I thought suddenly. There's urgency, heartless urgency. I looked down at her. 'Aren't you the same as I?' She looked at me. 'You've taught me all I know!'

" 'Lestat taught you to kill.' I fetched the glove. 'Here, come … let's go out. I want to go out.…' I was stammering, trying to force the gloves on her. I lifted the great curly mass of her hair and placed it gently over her coat. 'But you taught me to see!' she said. 'You taught me the words *vampire eyes,'* she said. 'You taught me to drink the world, to hunger for more than …'

" 'I never meant those words that way, *vampire eyes,*' I said to her. 'It has a different ring when you say it.…' She was tugging at me, trying to make me look at her. 'Come,' I said to her, 'I've something to show you.…' And quickly I led her down the passage and down the spiral stairs through the dark courtyard. But I no more knew what I had to show her, really, than I knew where I was going. Only that I had to move towards it with a sublime and doomed instinct.

"We rushed through the early evening city, the sky overhead a pale violet now that the clouds were gone, the stars small and faint, the air around us sultry and fragrant even as we moved away from the spacious gardens, towards those mean and narrow streets where the flowers erupt in the cracks of the stones and the huge oleander shoots

out thick, waxen stems of white and pink blooms, like a monstrous weed in the empty lots. I heard the staccato of Claudia's steps as she rushed beside me, never once asking me to slacken my pace; and she stood finally, her face infinitely patient, looking up at me in a dark and narrow street where a few old slope-roofed French houses remained among the Spanish façades, ancient little houses, the plaster blistered from the moldering brick beneath. I had found the house now by a blind effort, aware that I had always known where it was and avoided it, always turned before this dark lampless corner, not wishing to pass the low window where I'd first heard Claudia cry. The house was standing still. Sunk lower than it was in those days, the alleyway crisscrossed with sagging cords of laundry, the weeds high along the low foundation, the two dormer windows broken and patched with cloth. I touched the shutters. 'It was here I first saw you,' I said to her, thinking to tell it to her so she would understand, yet feeling now the chill of her gaze, the distance of her stare. 'I heard you crying. You were there in a room with your mother. And your mother was dead. Dead for days, and you didn't know. You clung to her, whining … crying pitifully, your body white and feverish and hungry. You were trying to wake her from the dead, you were hugging her for warmth, for fear. It was almost morning and …'

"I put my hand to my temples. 'I opened the shutters … I came into the room. I felt pity for you. Pity. But … something else.'

"I saw her lips slack, her eyes wide. 'You … fed on me?' she whispered. 'I was your victim!'

" 'Yes!' I said to her. 'I did it.' "

"There was a moment so elastic and painful as to be unbearable. She stood stark-still in the shadows, her huge eyes gathering the light, the warm air rising suddenly with a soft noise. And then she turned. I heard the clicking of her slippers as she ran. And ran. And ran. I stood frozen, hearing the sound grow smaller and smaller; and then I turned, the fear in me unravelling, growing huge and insurmountable, and I ran after her. It was unthinkable that I not catch her, that I not overtake her at once and tell her that I loved her, must have her, must keep her, and every second that I ran headlong down the dark street after her was like her slipping away from me drop by drop; my heart was pounding, unfed, pounding and rebelling against the strain. Until

I came suddenly to a dead stop. She stood beneath a lamppost, staring mutely, as if she didn't know me. I took her small waist in both hands and lifted her into the light. She studied me, her face contorted, her head turning as if she wouldn't give me her direct glance, as if she must deflect an overpowering feeling of revulsion. 'You killed me,' she whispered. 'You took my life!'

" 'Yes,' I said to her, holding her so that I could feel her heart pounding. 'Rather, I tried to take it. To drink it away. But you had a heart like no other heart I've ever felt, a heart that beat and beat until I had to let you go, had to cast you away from me lest you quicken my pulse till I would die. And it was Lestat who found me out; Louis the sentimentalist, the fool, feasting on a golden-haired child, a Holy Innocent, *a little girl*. He brought you back from the hospital where they'd put you, and I never knew what he meant to do except teach me my nature. "Take her, finish it," he said. And I felt that passion for you again. Oh, I know I've lost you now forever. I can see it in your eyes! You look at me as you look on mortals, from aloft, from some region of cold self-sufficiency I can't understand. But I did it. I felt it for you again, a vile unsupportable hunger for your hammering heart, this cheek, this skin. You were pink and fragrant as mortal children are, sweet with the bite of salt and dust. I held you again, I took you again. And when I thought your heart would kill me and I didn't care, he parted us and, gashing his own wrist, gave it to you to drink. And drink you did. And drink and drink until you nearly drained him and he was reeling. But you were a vampire then. And that very night you drank a human's blood and have every night thereafter.'

"Her face had not changed. The flesh was like the wax of ivory candles; only the eyes showed life. There was nothing more to say to her. I set her down. 'I took your life,' I said. 'He gave it back to you.'

" 'And here it is,' she said under her breath. 'And I hate you both!' "

The vampire stopped.

"But why did you tell her?" asked the boy after a respectful pause.

"How could I not tell her?" The vampire looked up in mild astonishment. "She had to know it. She had to weigh one thing against the other. It was not as if Lestat had taken her full from life as he had

taken me; I had stricken her. She would have died! There would have been no mortal life for her. But what's the difference? For all of us it's a matter of years, dying! So what she saw more graphically then was what all men know: that death will come inevitably, unless one chooses … this!" He opened his white hands now and looked at the palms.

"And did you lose her? Did she go?"

"Go! Where would she have gone? She was a child no bigger than that. Who would have sheltered her? Would she have found some vault, like a mythical vampire, lying down with worms and ants by day and rising to haunt some small cemetery and its surroundings? But that's not why she didn't go. Something in her was as akin to me as anything in her could have been. That thing in Lestat was the same. We could not bear to live alone! We needed our little company! A wilderness of mortals surrounded us, groping, blind, preoccupied, and the brides and bridegrooms of death.

" 'Locked together in hatred,' she said to me calmly afterwards. I found her by the empty hearth, picking the small blossoms from a long stem of lavender. I was so relieved to see her there that I would have done anything, said anything. And when I heard her ask me in a low voice if I would tell her all I knew, I did this gladly. For all the rest was nothing compared to that old secret, that I had claimed her life. I told her of myself as I've told you, of how Lestat came to me and what went on the night he carried her from the little hospital. She asked no questions and only occasionally looked up from her flowers. And then, when it was finished and I was sitting there, staring again at that wretched skull and listening to the soft slithering of the petals of the flowers on her dress and feeling a dull misery in my limbs and mind, she said to me, 'I don't despise you!' I wakened. She slipped off the high, rounded damask cushion and came towards me, covered with the scent of flowers, the petals in her hand. 'Is this the aroma of mortal child?' she whispered. 'Louis. Lover.' I remember holding her and burying my head in her small chest, crushing her bird-shoulders, her small hands working into my hair, soothing me, holding me. 'I was mortal to you,' she said, and when I lifted my eyes I saw her smiling; but the softness on her lips was evanescent, and in a moment she was looking past me like someone listening for faint, important music. 'You

gave me your immortal kiss,' she said, though not to me, but to herself. 'You loved me with your vampire nature.'

" 'I love you now with my human nature, if ever I had it,' I said to her.

" 'Ah yes …' she answered, still musing. 'Yes, and that's your flaw, and why your face was miserable when I said as humans say, "I hate you," and why you look at me as you do now. Human nature. I have no human nature. And no short story of a mother's corpse and hotel rooms where children learn monstrosity can give me one. I have none. Your eyes grow cold with fear when I say this to you. Yet I have your tongue. Your passion for the truth. Your need to drive the needle of the mind right to the heart of it all, like the beak of the hummingbird, who beats so wild and fast that mortals might think he had no tiny feet, could never set, just go from quest to quest, going again and again for the heart of it. I am your vampire self more than you are. And now the sleep of sixty-five years has ended.'

"*The sleep of sixty-five years has ended!* I heard her say it, disbelieving, not wanting to believe she knew and meant precisely what she'd said. For it had been exactly that since the night I tried to leave Lestat and failed and, falling in love with her, forgot my teeming brain, my awful questions. And now she had the awful questions on her lips and must know. She'd strolled slowly to the center of the room and strewn the crumpled lavender all around her. She broke the brittle stem and touched it to her lips. And having heard the whole story said, 'He made me then … to be your companion. No chains could have held you in your loneliness, and he could give you nothing. He gives me nothing.… I used to think him charming. I liked the way he walked, the way he tapped the flagstones with his walking stick and swung me in his arms. And the abandon with which he killed, which was as I felt. But I no longer find him charming. And you never have. And we've been his puppets, you and I; you remaining to take care of him, and I your saving companion. Now's time to end it, Louis. Now's time to leave him.'

"Time to leave him.

"I hadn't thought of it, dreamed of it in so long; I'd grown accustomed to him, as if he were a condition of life itself. I could hear a vague mingling of sounds now, which meant he had entered the

carriage way, that he would soon be on the back stairs. And I thought of what I always felt when I heard him coming, a vague anxiety, a vague need. And then the thought of being free of him forever rushed over me like water I'd forgotten, waves and waves of cool water. I was standing now, whispering to her that he was coming.

" 'I know,' she smiled. 'I heard him when he turned the far corner.'

" 'But he'll never let us leave,' I whispered, though I'd caught the implication of her words; her vampire sense was keen. She stood *en garde* magnificently. 'But you don't know him if you think he'll let us leave,' I said to her, alarmed at her self-confidence. 'He will not let us go.'

"And she, still smiling, said, 'Oh … *really?*' "

"It was agreed then to make plans. At once. The following night my agent came with his usual complaints about doing business by the light of one wretched candle and took my explicit orders for an ocean crossing. Claudia and I would go to Europe, on the first available ship, regardless of what port we had to settle for. And paramount was that an important chest be shipped with us, a chest which might have to be fetched carefully from our house during the day and put on board, not in the freight but in our cabin. And then there were arrangements for Lestat. I had planned to leave him the rents from several shops and town houses and a small construction company operating in the Faubourg Marigny. I put my signature to these things readily. I wanted to buy our freedom: to convince Lestat we wanted only to take a trip together and that he could remain in the style to which he was accustomed; he would have his own money and need come to me for nothing. For all these years, I'd kept him dependent on me. Of course, he demanded his funds from me as if I were merely his banker, and thanked me with the most acrimonious words at his command; but he loathed his dependence. I hoped to deflect his suspicion by playing to his greed. And, convinced that he could read any emotion in my face, I was more than fearful. I did not believe it would be possible to escape him. Do you understand what that means? I acted as though I believed it, but I did not.

"Claudia, meantime, was flirting with disaster, her equanimity

overwhelming to me as she read her vampire books and asked Lestat questions. She remained undisturbed by his caustic outbursts, sometimes asking the same question over and over again in different ways and carefully considering what little information he might let escape in spite of himself. 'What vampire made you what you are?' she asked, without looking up from her book and keeping her lids lowered under his onslaught. 'Why do you never talk about him?' she went on, as if his fierce objections were thin air. She seemed immune to his irritation.

" 'You're greedy, both of you!' he said the next night as he paced back and forth in the dark of the center of the room, turning a vengeful eye on Claudia, who was fitted into her corner, in the circle of her candle flame, her books in stacks about her. 'Immortality is not enough for you! No, you would look the Gift Horse of God in the mouth! I could offer it to any man out there in the street and he would jump for it …'

" 'Did you jump for it?' she asked softly, her lips barely moving.

" '… but you, you would know the *reason* for it. Do you want to end it? I can give you death more easily than I gave you life!' He turned to me, her fragile flame throwing his shadow across me. It made a halo around his blond hair and left his face, except for the gleaming cheekbone, dark. 'Do you want death?'

" 'Consciousness is not death,' she whispered.

" 'Answer me! Do you want death!'

" 'And you give all these things. They proceed from you. Life and death,' she whispered, mocking him.

" 'I have,' he said. 'I do.'

" 'You know nothing,' she said to him gravely, her voice so low that the slightest noise from the street interrupted it, might carry her words away, so that I found myself straining to hear her against myself as I lay with my head back against the chair. 'And suppose the vampire who made you knew nothing, and the vampire who made that vampire knew nothing, and the vampire before him knew nothing, and so it goes back and back, nothing proceeding from nothing, until there is nothing! And we must live with the knowledge that there is no knowledge.'

" 'Yes!' he cried out suddenly, his hands out, his voice tinged with

something other than anger.

"He was silent. She was silent. He turned, slowly, as if I'd made some movement which alerted him, as if I were rising behind him. It reminded me of the way humans turn when they feel my breath against them and know suddenly that where they thought themselves to be utterly alone … that moment of awful suspicion before they see my face and gasp. He was looking at me now, and I could barely see his lips moving. And then I sensed it. He was afraid. Lestat afraid.

"And she was staring at him with the same level gaze, evincing no emotion, no thought.

" 'You infected her with this …' he whispered.

"He struck a match now with a sharp crackle and lit the mantel candles, lifted the smoky shades of the lamps, went around the room making light, until Claudia's small frame took on a solidity and he stood with his back to the marble mantel looking from light to light as if they restored some peace. 'I'm going out,' he said.

"She rose the instant he had reached the street, and suddenly she stopped in the center of the room and stretched, her tiny back arched, her arms straight up into small fists, her eyes squeezed shut for a moment and then wide open as if she were waking to the room from a dream. There was something obscene about her gesture; the room seemed to shimmer with Lestat's fear, echo with his last response. It *demanded* her attention. I must have made some involuntary movement to turn away from her, because she was standing at the arm of my chair now and pressing her hand flat upon my book, a book I hadn't been reading for hours. 'Come out with me.'

" 'You were right. He knows nothing. There is nothing he can tell us,' I said to her.

" 'Did you ever really think that he did?' she asked me in that same small voice. 'We'll find others of our kind,' she said. 'We'll find them in central Europe. That is where they live in such numbers that the stories, both fiction and fact, fill volumes. I'm convinced it was from there that all vampires came, if they came from any place at all. We've tarried too long with him. Come out. Let the flesh instruct the mind.'

"I think I felt a tremor of delight when she said these words, *Let the flesh instruct the mind*. 'Put books aside and kill,' she was whispering to me. I followed her down the stairs, across the courtyard and down a

narrow alley to another street. Then she turned with outstretched arms for me to pick her up and carry her, though, of course, she was not tired; she wanted only to be near my ear, to clutch my neck. 'I haven't told him my plan, about the voyage, the money,' I was saying to her, conscious of something about her that was beyond me as she rode my measured steps, weightless in my arms.

" 'He killed the other vampire,' she said.

" 'No, why do you say this?' I asked her. But it wasn't the saying of it that disturbed me, stirred my soul as if it were a pool of water longing to be still. I felt as if she were moving me slowly towards something, as if she were the pilot of our slow walk through the dark street. 'Because I know it now,' she said with authority. 'The vampire made a slave of him, and he would no more be a slave than I would be a slave, and so he killed him. Killed him before he knew what he might know, and then in panic made a slave of you. And you've been his slave.'

" 'Never really …' I whispered to her. I felt the press of her cheek against my temple. She was cold and needed the kill. 'Not a slave. Just some sort of mindless accomplice,' I confessed to her, confessed to myself. I could feel the fever for the kill rising in me, a knot of hunger in my insides, a throbbing in the temples, as if the veins were contracting and my body might become a map of tortured vessels.

" 'No, slave,' she persisted in her grave monotone, as though thinking aloud, the words revelations, pieces of a puzzle. 'And I shall free us both.'

"I stopped. Her hand pressed me, urged me on. We were walking down the long wide alley beside the cathedral, towards the lights of Jackson Square, the water rushing fast in the gutter down the center of the alley, silver in the moonlight. She said, '*I will kill him.*'

"I stood still at the end of the alley. I felt her shift in my arm, move down as if she could accomplish being free of me without the awkward aid of my hands. I set her on the stone sidewalk. I said no to her, I shook my head. I had that feeling then which I described before, that the buildings around me—the Cabildo, the cathedral, the apartments along the square—all this was silk and illusion and would ripple suddenly in a horrific wind, and a chasm would open in the earth that was the reality. 'Claudia,' I gasped, turning away from her.

“ ‘And why not kill him!’ she said now, her voice rising, silvery and finally shrill. ‘I have no use for him! I can get nothing from him! And he causes me pain, which I will not abide!’

“ ‘And if he had so little use for us!’ I said to her. But the vehemence was false. Hopeless. She was at a distance from me now, small shoulders straight and determined, her pace rapid, like a little girl who, walking out on Sundays with her parents, wants to walk ahead and pretend she is all alone. ‘Claudia!’ I called after her, catching up with her in a stride. I reached for the small waist and felt her stiffen as if she had become iron. ‘Claudia, you cannot kill him!’ I whispered. She moved backwards, skipping, clicking on the stones, and moved out into the open street. A cabriolet rolled past us with a sudden surge of laughter and the clatter of horses and wooden wheels. The street was suddenly silent. I reached out for her and moved forward over an immense space and found her standing at the gate of Jackson Square, hands gripping the wrought-iron bars. I drew down close to her. ‘I don’t care what you feel, what you say, you cannot mean to kill him,’ I said to her.

“ ‘And why not? Do you think him so strong!’ she said, her eyes on the statue in the square, two immense pools of light.

“ ‘He is stronger than you know! Stronger than you dream! How do you mean to kill him? You can’t measure his skill. You don’t know!’ I pleaded with her but could see her utterly unmoved, like a child staring in fascination through the window of a toy shop. Her tongue moved suddenly between her teeth and touched her lower lip in a strange flicker that sent a mild shock through my body. I tasted blood. I felt something palpable and helpless in my hands. I wanted to kill. I could smell and hear humans on the paths of the square, moving about the market, along the levee. I was about to take her, make her look at me, shake her if I had to, to make her listen, when she turned to me with her great liquid eyes. ‘I love you, Louis,’ she said.

“ ‘Then listen to me, Claudia, I beg you,’ I whispered, holding her, pricked suddenly by a nearby collection of whispers, the slow, rising articulation of human speech over the mingled sounds of the night. ‘He’ll destroy you if you try to kill him. There is no way you can do such a thing for sure. You don’t know how. And pitting yourself against him you’ll lose everything. Claudia, I can’t bear this.’

“There was a barely perceptible smile on her lips. ‘No, Louis,’ she whispered. ‘I can kill him. And I want to tell you something else now, a secret between you and me.’

“I shook my head but she pressed even closer to me, lowering her lids so that her rich lashes almost brushed the roundness of her cheeks. ‘The secret is, Louis, that I want to kill him. I will enjoy it!’

“I knelt beside her, speechless, her eyes studying me as they’d done so often in the past; and then she said, ‘I kill humans every night. I seduce them, draw them close to me, with an insatiable hunger, a constant never-ending search for something … something, I don’t know what it is …’ She brought her fingers to her lips now and pressed her lips, her mouth partly open so I could see the gleam of her teeth. ‘And I care nothing about them—where they came from, where they would go—if I did not meet them on the way. But I dislike him! I *want* him dead and will have him dead. I shall enjoy it.’

“ ‘But Claudia, he is not mortal. He’s immortal. No illness can touch him. Age has no power over him. You threaten a life which might endure to the end of the world!’

“ ‘Ah, yes, that’s it, precisely!’ she said with reverential awe. ‘A lifetime that might have endured for centuries. Such blood, such power. Do you think I’ll possess his power and my own power when I take him?’

“I was enraged now. I rose suddenly and turned away from her. I could hear the whispering of humans near me. They were whispering of the father and the daughter, of some frequent sight of loving devotion. I realized they were talking of us.

“ ‘It’s not necessary,’ I said to her. ‘It goes beyond all need, all common sense, all …’

“ ‘What! Humanity? He’s a killer!’ she hissed. ‘Lone predator!’ She repeated his own term, mocking it. ‘Don’t interfere with me or seek to know the time I choose to do it, nor try to come between us.…’ She raised her hand now to hush me and caught mine in an iron grasp, her tiny fingers biting into my tight, tortured flesh. ‘If you do, you will bring me destruction by your interference. I can’t be discouraged.’

“She was gone then in a flurry of bonnet ribbons and clicking slippers. I turned, paying no attention to where I went, wishing the city would swallow me, conscious now of the hunger rising to

overtake reason. I was almost loath to put an end to it. I needed to let the lust, the excitement blot out all consciousness, and I thought of the kill over and over and over, walking slowly up this street and down the next, moving inexorably towards it, saying, 'It's a string which is pulling me through the labyrinth. I am not pulling the string. The string is pulling me.…' And then I stood in the Rue Conti listening to a dull thundering, a familiar sound. It was the fencers above in the salon, advancing on the hollow wooden floor, forward, back again, scuttling, and the silver zinging of the foils. I stood back against the wall, where I could see them through the high naked windows, the young men duelling late into the night, left arm poised like the arm of a dancer, grace advancing towards death, grace thrusting for the heart, images of the young Freniere now driving the silver blade forward, now being pulled by it towards hell. Someone had come down the narrow wooden steps to the street—a young boy, a boy so young he had the smooth, plump cheeks of a child; his face was pink and flushed from the fencing, and beneath his smart gray coat and ruffled shirt there was the sweet smell of cologne and salt. I could feel his heat as he emerged from the dim light of the stairwell. He was laughing to himself, talking almost inaudibly to himself, his brown hair falling down over his eyes as he went along, shaking his head, the whispers rising, then falling off. And then he stopped short, his eyes on me. He stared, and his eyelids quivered and he laughed quickly, nervously. 'Excuse me!' he said now in French. 'You gave me a start!' And then, just as he moved to make a ceremonial bow and perhaps go around me, he stood still, and the shock spread over his flushed face. I could see the heart beating in the pink flesh of his cheeks, smell the sudden sweat of his young, taut body.

" 'You saw me in the lamplight,' I said to him. 'And my face looked to you like the mask of death.'

"His lips parted and his teeth touched and involuntarily he nodded, his eyes dazed.

" 'Pass by!' I said to him. 'Fast!' "

The vampire paused, then moved as if he meant to go on. But he stretched his long legs under the table and, leaning back, pressed his

hands to his head as if exerting a great pressure on his temples.

The boy, who had drawn himself up into a crouched position, his hands hugging his arms, unwound slowly. He glanced at the tapes and then back at the vampire. “But you killed someone that night,” he said.

“Every night,” said the vampire.

“Why did you let him go then?” asked the boy.

“I don’t know,” said the vampire, but it did not have the tone of truly I don’t know, but rather, let it be. “You look tired,” said the vampire. “You look cold.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said the boy quickly. “The room’s a little cold; I don’t care about that. You’re not cold, are you?”

“No.” The vampire smiled and then his shoulders moved with silent laughter.

A moment passed in which the vampire seemed to be thinking and the boy to be studying the vampire’s face. The vampire’s eyes moved to the boy’s watch.

“She didn’t succeed, did she?” the boy asked softly.

“What do you honestly think?” asked the vampire. He had settled back in his chair. He looked at the boy intently.

“That she was … as you said, destroyed,” said the boy; and he seemed to feel the words, so that he swallowed after he’d said the word *destroyed*. “Was she?” he asked.

“Don’t you think that she could do it?” asked the vampire.

“But he was so powerful. You said yourself you never knew what powers he had, what secrets he knew. How could she even be sure how to kill him? How did she try?”

The vampire looked at the boy for a long time, his expression unreadable to the boy, who found himself looking away, as though the vampire’s eyes were burning lights. “Why don’t you drink from that bottle in your pocket?” asked the vampire. “It will make you warm.”

“Oh, that …” said the boy. “I was going to. I just.…”

The vampire laughed. “You didn’t think it was polite!” he said, and he suddenly slapped his thigh.

“That’s true,” the boy shrugged, smiling now; and he took the small flask out of his jacket pocket, unscrewed the gold cap, and took a sip. He held the bottle, now looking at the vampire.

“No,” the vampire smiled and raised his hand to wave away the offer.

Then his face became serious again and, sitting back, he went on.

“Lestat had a musician friend in the Rue Dumaine. We had seen him at a recital in the home of a Madame LeClair, who lived there also, which was at that time an extremely fashionable street; and this Madame LeClair, with whom Lestat was also occasionally amusing himself, had found the musician a room in another mansion nearby, where Lestat visited him often. I told you he played with his victims, made friends with them, seduced them into trusting and liking him, even loving him, before he killed. So he apparently played with this young boy, though it had gone on longer than any other such friendship I had ever observed. The young boy wrote good music, and often Lestat brought fresh sheets of it home and played the songs on the square grand in our parlor. The boy had a great talent, but you could tell that this music would not sell, because it was too disturbing. Lestat gave him money and spent evening after evening with him, often taking him to restaurants the boy could have never afforded, and he bought him all the paper and pens which he needed for the writing of his music.

“As I said, it had gone on far longer than any such friendship Lestat had ever had. And I could not tell whether he had actually become fond of a mortal in spite of himself or was simply moving towards a particularly grand betrayal and cruelty. Several times he’d indicated to Claudia and me that he was headed out to kill the boy directly, but he had not. And, of course, I never asked him what he felt because it wasn’t worth the great uproar my question would have produced. Lestat entranced with a mortal! He probably would have destroyed the parlor furniture in a rage.

“The next night—after that which I just described to you—he jarred me miserably by asking me to go with him to the boy’s flat. He was positively friendly, in one of those moods when he wanted my companionship. Enjoyment could bring that out of him. Wanting to see a good play, the regular opera, the ballet. He always wanted me along. I think I must have seen *Macbeth* with him fifteen times. We went to every performance, even those by amateurs, and Lestat would stride home afterwards, repeating the lines to me and even shouting

out to passers-by with an outstretched finger, 'Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow!' until they skirted him as if he were drunk. But this effervescence was frenetic and likely to vanish in an instant; just a word or two of amiable feeling on my part, some suggestion that I found his companionship pleasant, could banish all such affairs for months. Even years. But now he came to me in such a mood and asked me to go to the boy's room. He was not above pressing my arm as he urged me. And I, dull, catatonic, gave him some miserable excuse—thinking only of Claudia, of the agent, of imminent disaster. I could feel it and wondered that he did not feel it. And finally he picked up a book from the floor and threw it at me, shouting, 'Read your damn poems, then! Rot!' And he bounded out.

"This disturbed me. I cannot tell you how it disturbed me. I wished him cold, impassive, gone. I resolved to plead with Claudia to drop this. I felt powerless, and hopelessly fatigued. But her door had been locked until she left, and I had glimpsed her only for a second while Lestat was chattering, a vision of lace and loveliness as she slipped on her coat; puffed sleeves again and a violet ribbon on her breast, her white lace stockings showing beneath the hem of the little gown, and her white slippers immaculate. She cast a cold look at me as she went out.

"When I returned later, satiated and for a while too sluggish for my own thoughts to bother me, I gradually began to sense that this was the night. She would try tonight.

"I cannot tell you how I knew this. Things about the flat disturbed me, alerted me. Claudia moved in the back parlor behind closed doors. And I fancied I heard another voice there, a whisper. Claudia never brought anyone to our flat; no one did except Lestat, who brought his women of the streets. But I knew there was someone there, yet I got no strong scent, no proper sounds. And then there were aromas in the air of food and drink. And chrysanthemums stood in the silver vase on the square grand—flowers which, to Claudia, meant death.

"Then Lestat came, singing something soft under his breath, his walking stick making a rat-tat-tat on the rails of the spiral stairs. He came down the long hall, his face flushed from the kill, his lips pink; and he set his music on the piano. 'Did I kill him or did I not kill him!' He flashed the question at me now with a pointing finger. 'What's your

guess?'

" 'You did not,' I said numbly. 'Because you invited me to go with you, and would never have invited me to share that kill.'

" 'Ah, but! Did I kill him in a rage because you would not go with me!' he said and threw back the cover from the keys. I could see that he would be able to go on like this until dawn. He was exhilarated. I watched him flip through the music, thinking, Can he die? Can he actually die? And does she mean to do this? At one point, I wanted to go to her and tell her we must abandon everything, even the proposed trip, and live as we had before. But I had the feeling now that there was no retreat. Since the day she'd begun to question him, this—whatever it was to be—was inevitable. And I felt a weight on me, holding me in the chair.

"He pressed two chords with his hands. He had an immense reach and even in life could have been a fine pianist. But he played without feeling; he was always outside the music, drawing it out of the piano as if by magic, by the virtuosity of his vampire senses and control; the music did not come through him, was not drawn through him by himself. 'Well, did I kill him?' he asked me again.

" 'No, you did not,' I said again, though I could just as easily have said the opposite. I was concentrating on keeping my face a mask.

" 'You're right. I did not,' he said. 'It excites me to be close to him, to think over and over, I can kill him and I will kill him but not now. And then to leave him and find someone who looks as nearly like him as possible. If he had brothers … why, I'd kill them one by one. The family would succumb to a mysterious fever which dried up the very blood in their bodies!' he said, now mocking a barker's tone. 'Claudia has a taste for families. Speaking of families, I suppose you heard. The Freniere place is supposed to be haunted; they can't keep an overseer and the slaves run away.'

"This was something I did not wish to hear in particular. Babette had died young, insane, restrained finally from wandering towards the ruins of Pointe du Lac, insisting she had seen the devil there and must find him; I'd heard of it in wisps of gossip. And then came the funeral notices. I'd thought occasionally of going to her, of trying some way to rectify what I had done; and other times I thought it would all heal itself; and in my new life of nightly killing, I had grown far from the

attachment I'd felt for her or for my sister or any mortal. And I watched the tragedy finally as one might from a theater balcony, moved from time to time, but never sufficiently to jump the railing and join the players on the stage.

" 'Don't talk of her,' I said.

" 'Very well. I was talking of the plantation. Not her. Her! Your lady love, your fancy.' He smiled at me. 'You know, I had it all my way finally in the end, didn't I? But I was telling you about my young friend and how …'

" 'I wish you would play the music,' I said softly, unobtrusively, but as persuasively as possible. Sometimes this worked with Lestat. If I said something just right he found himself doing what I'd said. And now he did just that: with a little snarl, as if to say, 'You fool,' he began playing the music. I heard the doors of the back parlor open and Claudia's steps move down the hall. Don't come, Claudia, I was thinking, feeling; go away from it before we're all destroyed. But she came on steadily until she reached the hall mirror. I could hear her opening the small table drawer, and then the zinging of her hairbrush. She was wearing a floral perfume. I turned slowly to face her as she appeared in the door, still all in white, and moved across the carpet silently towards the piano. She stood at the end of the keyboard, her hands folded on the wood, her chin resting on her hands, her eyes fixed on Lestat.

"I could see his profile and her small face beyond, looking up at him. 'What is it now!' he said, turning the page and letting his hand drop to his thigh. 'You irritate me. Your very presence irritates me!' His eyes moved over the page.

" 'Does it?' she said in her sweetest voice.

" 'Yes, it does. And I'll tell you something else. I've met someone who would make a better vampire than you do.'

"This stunned me. But I didn't have to urge him to go on. 'Do you get my meaning?' he said to her.

" 'Is it supposed to frighten me?' she asked.

" 'You're spoiled because you're an only child,' he said. 'You need a brother. Or rather, I need a brother. I get weary of you both. Greedy, brooding vampires that haunt our own lives. I dislike it.'

" 'I suppose we could people the world with vampires, the three of

us,' she said.

" 'You think so!' he said, smiling, his voice with a note of triumph. 'Do you think you could do it? I suppose Louis has told you how it was done or how he thinks it was done. You don't have the power. *Either* of you,' he said.

"This seemed to disturb her. Something she had not accounted for. She was studying him. I could see she did not entirely believe him.

" 'And what gave you the power?' she asked softly, but with a touch of sarcasm.

" 'That, my dear, is one of those things which you may never know. For even the Erebus in which we live must have its aristocracy.'

" 'You're a liar,' she said with a short laugh. And just as he touched his fingers to the keys again, she said, 'But you upset my plans.'

" 'Your plans?' he asked.

" 'I came to make peace with you, even if you are the father of lies. You're my father,' she said. 'I want to make peace with you. I want things to be as they were.'

"Now he was the one who did not believe. He threw a glance at me, then looked at her. 'That can be. Just stop asking me questions. Stop following me. Stop searching in every alleyway for other vampires. There are no other vampires! And this is where you live and this is where you stay!' He looked confused for the moment, as if raising his own voice had confused him. 'I take care of you. You don't need anything.'

" 'And you don't know anything, and that is why you detest my questions. All that's clear. So now let's have peace, because there's nothing else to be had. I have a present for you.'

" 'And I hope it's a beautiful woman with endowments you'll never possess,' he said, looking her up and down. Her face changed when he did this. It was as if she almost lost some control I'd never seen her lose. But then she just shook her head and reached out one small, rounded arm and tugged at his sleeve.

" 'I meant what I said. I'm weary of arguing with you. Hell is hatred, people living together in eternal hatred. We're not in hell. You can take the present or not, I don't care. It doesn't matter. Only let's have an end to all this. Before Louis, in disgust, leaves us both.' She was urging him now to leave the piano, bringing down the wooden cover

again over the keys, turning him on the piano stool until his eyes followed her to the door.

" 'You're serious. Present, what do you mean, present?'

" 'You haven't fed enough, I can tell by your color, by your eyes. You've never fed enough at this hour. Let's say that I can give you a precious moment. *Suffer the little children to come unto me*,' she whispered, and was gone. He looked at me. I said nothing. I might as well have been drugged. I could see the curiosity in his face, the suspicion. He followed her down the hall. And then I heard him let out a long, conscious moan, a perfect mingling of hunger and lust.

"When I reached the door, and I took my time, he was bending over the settee. Two small boys lay there, nestled among the soft velvet pillows, totally abandoned to sleep as children can be, their pink mouths open, their small round faces utterly smooth. Their skin was moist, radiant, the curls of the darker of the two damp and pressed to the forehead. I saw at once by their pitiful and identical clothes that they were orphans. And they had ravaged a meal set before them on our best china. The tablecloth was stained with wine, and a small bottle stood half full among the greasy plates and forks. But there was an aroma in the room I did not like. I moved closer, better to see the sleeping ones, and I could see their throats were bare but untouched. Lestat had sunk down beside the darker one; he was by far the more beautiful. He might have been lifted to the painted dome of a cathedral. No more than seven years old, he had that perfect beauty that is of neither sex, but angelic. Lestat brought his hand down gently on the pale throat, and then he touched the silken lips. He let out a sigh which had again that longing, that sweet, painful anticipation. 'Oh … Claudia …' he sighed. 'You've outdone yourself. Where did you find them?'

"She said nothing. She had receded to a dark armchair and sat back against two large pillows, her legs out straight on the rounded cushion, her ankles drooping so that you did not see the bottom of her white slippers but the curved insteps and the tight, delicate little straps. She was staring at Lestat. 'Drunk on brandy wine,' she said. 'A thimbleful!' and gestured to the table. 'I thought of you when I saw them … I thought if I share this with him, even he will forgive.'

"He was warmed by her flattery. He looked at her now and reached

out and clutched her white lace ankle. ‘Ducky!’ he whispered to her and laughed, but then he hushed, as if he didn’t wish to wake the doomed children. He gestured to her, intimately, seductively, ‘Come sit beside him. You take him, and I’ll take this one. Come.’ He embraced her as she passed and nestled beside the other boy. He stroked the boy’s moist hair, he ran his fingers over the rounded lids and along the fringe of lashes. And then he put his whole softened hand across the boy’s face and felt at the temples, cheeks, and jaw, massaging the unblemished flesh. He had forgotten I was there or she was there, but he withdrew his hand and sat still for a moment, as though his desire was making him dizzy. He glanced at the ceiling and then down at the perfect feast. He turned the boy’s head slowly against the back of the couch, and the boy’s eyebrows tensed for an instant and a moan escaped his lips.

“Claudia’s eyes were steady on Lestat, though now she raised her left hand and slowly undid the buttons of the child who lay beside her and reached inside the shabby little shirt and felt the bare flesh. Lestat did the same, but suddenly it was as if his hand had life itself and drew his arm into the shirt and around the boy’s small chest in a tight embrace; and Lestat slid down off the cushions of the couch to his knees on the floor, his arm locked to the boy’s body, pulling it up close to him so that his face was buried in the boy’s neck. His lips moved over the neck and over the chest and over the tiny nipple of the chest and then, putting his other arm into the open shirt, so that the boy lay hopelessly wound in both arms, he drew the boy up tight and sank his teeth into his throat. The boy’s head fell back, the curls loose as he was lifted, and again he let out a small moan and his eyelids fluttered —but never opened. And Lestat knelt, the boy pressed against him, sucking hard, his own back arched and rigid, his body rocking back and forth carrying the boy, his long moans rising and falling in time with the slow rocking, until suddenly his whole body tensed, and his hands seemed to grope for some way to push the boy away, as if the boy himself in his helpless slumber were clinging to Lestat; and finally he embraced the boy again and moved slowly forward over him, letting him down among the pillows, the sucking softer, now almost inaudible.

“He withdrew. His hands pressed the boy down. He knelt there, his

head thrown back, so the wavy blond hair hung loose and dishevelled. And then he slowly sank to the floor, turning, his back against the leg of the couch. 'Ah … God …' he whispered, his head back, his lids half-mast. I could see the color rushing to his cheeks, rushing into his hands. One hand lay on his bent knee, fluttering, and then it lay still.

"Claudia had not moved. She lay like a Botticelli angel beside the unharmed boy. The other's body already withered, the neck like a fractured stem, the heavy head falling now at an odd angle, the angle of death, into the pillow.

"But something was wrong. Lestat was staring at the ceiling. I could see his tongue between his teeth. He lay too still, the tongue, as it were, trying to get out of the mouth, trying to move past the barrier of the teeth and touch the lip. He appeared to shiver, his shoulders convulsing … then relaxing heavily; yet he did not move. A veil had fallen over his clear gray eyes. He was peering at the ceiling. Then a sound came out of him. I stepped forward from the shadows of the hallway, but Claudia said in a sharp hiss, 'Go back!'

" 'Louis …' he was saying. I could hear it now … 'Louis … Louis.…'

" 'Don't you like it, Lestat?' she asked him.

" 'Something's wrong with it,' he gasped, and his eyes widened as if the mere speaking were a colossal effort. He could not move. I saw it. He could not move at all. 'Claudia!' He gasped again, and his eyes rolled towards her.

" 'Don't you like the taste of children's blood …?' she asked softly.

" 'Louis …' he whispered, finally lifting his head just for an instant. It fell back on the couch. 'Louis, it's … it's absinthe! Too much absinthe!' he gasped. 'She's poisoned them with it. She's poisoned me. Louis.…' He tried to raise his hand. I drew nearer, the table between us.

" 'Stay back!' she said again. And now she slid off the couch and approached him, peering down into his face as he had peered at the child. 'Absinthe, Father,' she said, 'and laudanum!'

" 'Demon!' he said to her. 'Louis … put me in my coffin.' He struggled to rise. 'Put me in my coffin!' His voice was hoarse, barely audible. The hand fluttered, lifted, and fell back.

" 'I'll put you in your coffin, Father,' she said, as though she were soothing him. 'I'll put you in it forever.' And then, from beneath the

pillows of the couch, she drew a kitchen knife.

" 'Claudia! Don't do this thing!' I said to her. But she flashed at me a virulency I'd never seen in her face, and as I stood there paralyzed, she gashed his throat, and he let out a sharp, choking cry. 'God!' he shouted out. 'God!'

"The blood poured out of him, down his shirt front, down his coat. It poured as it might never pour from a human being, all the blood with which he had filled himself before the child and from the child; and he kept turning his head, twisting, making the bubbling gash gape. She sank the knife into his chest now and he pitched forward, his mouth wide, his fangs exposed, both hands convulsively flying towards the knife, fluttering around its handle, slipping off its handle. He looked up at me, the hair falling down into his eyes. 'Louis! Louis!' He let out one more gasp and fell sideways on the carpet. She stood looking down at him. The blood flowed everywhere like water. He was groaning, trying to raise himself, one arm pinned beneath his chest, the other shoving at the floor. And now, suddenly, she flew at him and clamping both arms about his neck, bit deep into him as he struggled. 'Louis, Louis!' he gasped over and over, struggling, trying desperately to throw her off; but she rode him, her body lifted by his shoulder, hoisted and dropped, hoisted and dropped, until she pulled away; and, finding the floor quickly, she backed away from him, her hands to her lips, her eyes for the moment clouded, then clear. I turned away from her, my body convulsed by what I'd seen, unable to look any longer. 'Louis!' she said; but I only shook my head. For a moment, the whole house seemed to sway. But she said, 'Look what's happening to him!'

"He had ceased to move. He lay now on his back. And his entire body was shrivelling, drying up, the skin thick and wrinkled, and so white that all the tiny veins showed through it. I gasped, but I could not take my eyes off it, even as the shape of the bones began to show through, his lips drawing back from his teeth, the flesh of his nose drying to two gaping holes. But his eyes, they remained the same, staring wildly at the ceiling, the irises dancing from side to side, even as the flesh cleaved to the bones, became nothing but a parchment wrapping for the bones, the clothes hollow and limp over the skeleton that remained. Finally the irises rolled to the top of his head, and the whites of his eyes went dim. The thing lay still. A great mass of wavy

blond hair, a coat, a pair of gleaming boots; and this horror that had been Lestat, and I staring helplessly at it."

. . .

"For a long time, Claudia merely stood there. Blood had soaked the carpet, darkening the woven wreaths of flowers. It gleamed sticky and black on the floorboards. It stained her dress, her white shoes, her cheek. She wiped at it with a crumpled napkin, took a swipe at the impossible stains of the dress, and then she said, 'Louis, you must help me get him out of here!'

"I said, 'No!' I'd turned my back on her, on the corpse at her feet.

" 'Are you mad, Louis? It can't remain here!' she said to me. 'And the boys. You must help me! The other one's dead from the absinthe! Louis!'

"I knew that this was true, necessary; and yet it seemed impossible.

"She had to prod me then, almost lead me every step of the way. We found the kitchen stove still heaped with the bones of the mother and daughter she'd killed—a dangerous blunder, a stupidity. So she scraped them out now into a sack and dragged the sack across the courtyard stones to the carriage. I hitched the horse myself, shushing the groggy coachman, and drove the hearse out of the city, fast in the direction of the Bayou St. Jean, towards the dark swamp that stretched to Lake Pontchartrain. She sat beside me, silent, as we rode on and on until we'd passed the gas-lit gates of the few country houses, and the shell road narrowed and became rutted, the swamp rising on either side of us, a great wall of seemingly impenetrable cypress and vine. I could smell the stench of the muck, hear the rustling of the animals.

"Claudia had wrapped Lestat's body in a sheet before I would even touch it, and then, to my horror, she had sprinkled it over with the long-stemmed chrysanthemums. So it had a sweet, funereal smell as I lifted it last of all from the carriage. It was almost weightless, as limp as something made of knots and cords, as I put it over my shoulder and moved down into the dark water, the water rising and filling my boots, my feet seeking some path in the ooze beneath, away from

where I'd laid the two boys. I went deeper and deeper in with Lestat's remains, though why, I did not know. And finally, when I could barely see the pale space of the road and the sky which was coming dangerously close to dawn, I let his body slip down out of my arms into the water. I stood there shaken, looking at the amorphous form of the white sheet beneath the slimy surface. The numbness which had protected me since the carriage left the Rue Royale threatened to lift and leave me flayed suddenly, staring, thinking: This is Lestat. This is all of transformation and mystery, dead, gone into eternal darkness. I felt a pull suddenly, as if some force were urging me to go down with him, to descend into the dark water and never come back. It was so distinct and so strong that it made the articulation of voices seem only a murmur by comparison. It spoke without language, saying, 'You know what you must do. Come down into the darkness. Let it all go away.'

"But at that moment I heard Claudia's voice. She was calling my name. I turned, and, through the tangled vines, I saw her distant and tiny, like a white flame on the faint luminescent shell road.

"That morning, she wound her arms around me, pressed her head against my chest in the closeness of the coffin, whispering she loved me, that we were free now of Lestat forever. 'I love you, Louis,' she said over and over as the darkness finally came down with the lid and mercifully blotted out all consciousness.

"When I awoke, she was going through his things. It was a tirade, silent, controlled, but filled with a fierce anger. She pulled the contents from cabinets, emptied drawers onto the carpets, pulled one jacket after another from his armoires, turning the pockets inside out, throwing the coins and theater tickets and bits and pieces of paper away. I stood in the door of his room, astonished, watching her. His coffin lay there, heaped with scarves and pieces of tapestry. I had the compulsion to open it. I had the wish to see him there. 'Nothing!' she finally said in disgust. She wadded the clothes into the grate. 'Not a hint of where he came from, who made him!' she said. 'Not a scrap.' She looked to me as if for sympathy. I turned away from her. I was unable to look at her. I moved back into that bedroom which I kept for myself, that room filled with my own books and what things I'd saved from my mother and sister, and I sat on the bed. I could hear

her at the door, but I would not look at her. ‘He deserved to die!’ she said to me.

“ ‘Then we deserve to die. The same way. Every night of our lives,’ I said back to her. ‘Go away from me.’ It was as if my words were my thoughts, my mind alone only formless confusion. ‘I’ll care for you because you can’t care for yourself. But I don’t want you near me. Sleep in that box you bought for yourself. Don’t come near me.’

“ ‘I told you I was going to do it. I told you …’ she said. Never had her voice sounded so fragile, so like a little silvery bell. I looked up at her, startled but unshaken. Her face seemed not her face. Never had anyone shaped such agitation into the features of a doll. ‘Louis, I told you!’ she said, her lips quivering. ‘I did it for us. So we could be free.’ I couldn’t stand the sight of her. Her beauty, her seeming innocence, and this terrible agitation. I went past her, perhaps knocking her backwards, I don’t know. And I was almost to the railing of the steps when I heard a strange sound.

“Never in all the years of our life together had I heard this sound. Never since the night long ago when I had first found her, a mortal child, clinging to her mother. She was crying!

“It drew me back now against my will. Yet it sounded so unconscious, so hopeless, as though she meant no one to hear it, or didn’t care if it were heard by the whole world. I found her lying on my bed in the place where I often sat to read, her knees drawn up, her whole frame shaking with her sobs. The sound of it was terrible. It was more heartfelt, more awful than her mortal crying had ever been. I sat down slowly, gently, beside her and put my hand on her shoulder. She lifted her head, startled, her eyes wide, her mouth trembling. Her face was stained with tears, tears that were tinted with blood. Her eyes brimmed with them, and the faint touch of red stained her tiny hand. She didn’t seem to be conscious of this, to see it. She pushed her hair back from her forehead. Her body quivered then with a long, low, pleading sob. ‘Louis … if I lose you, I have nothing,’ she whispered. ‘I would undo it to have you back. I can’t undo what I’ve done.’ She put her arms around me, climbing up against me, sobbing against my heart. My hands were reluctant to touch her; and then they moved as if I couldn’t stop them, to enfold her and hold her and stroke her hair. ‘I can’t live without you …’ she whispered. ‘I would die rather than

live without you. I would die the same way he died. I can't bear you to look at me the way you did. I cannot bear it if you do not love me!' Her sobs grew worse, more bitter, until finally I bent and kissed her soft neck and cheeks. Winter plums. Plums from an enchanted wood where the fruit never falls from the boughs. Where the flowers never wither and die. 'All right, my dear …' I said to her. 'All right, my love …' And I rocked her slowly, gently in my arms, until she dozed, murmuring something about our being eternally happy, free of Lestat forever, beginning the great adventure of our lives."

"The great adventure of our lives. What does it mean to die when you can live until the end of the world? And what is 'the end of the world' except a phrase, because who knows even what is the world itself? I had now lived in two centuries, seen the illusions of one utterly shattered by the other, been eternally young and eternally ancient, possessing no illusions, living moment to moment in a way that made me picture a silver clock ticking in a void: the painted face, the delicately carved hands looked upon by no one, looking out at no one, illuminated by a light which was not a light, like the light by which God made the world before He had made light. Ticking, ticking, ticking, the precision of the clock, in a room as vast as the universe.

"I was walking the streets again, Claudia gone her way to kill, the perfume of her hair and dress lingering on my fingertips, on my coat, my eyes moving far ahead of me like the pale beam of a lantern. I found myself at the cathedral. What does it mean to die when you can live until the end of the world? I was thinking of my brother's death, of the incense and the rosary. I had the desire suddenly to be in that funeral room, listening to the sound of the women's voices rising and falling with the *Aves*, the clicking of the beads, the smell of the wax. I could remember the crying. It was palpable, as if it were just yesterday, just behind a door. I saw myself walking fast down a corridor and gently giving the door a shove.

"The great facade of the cathedral rose in a dark mass opposite the square, but the doors were open and I could see a soft, flickering light within. It was Saturday evening early, and the people were going to confession for Sunday Mass and Communion. Candles burned dim in

the chandeliers. At the far end of the nave the altar loomed out of the shadows, laden with white flowers. It was to the old church on this spot that they had brought my brother for the final service before the cemetery. And I realized suddenly that I hadn't been in this place since, never once come up the stone steps, crossed the porch, and passed through the open doors.

"I had no fear. If anything, perhaps, I longed for something to happen, for the stones to tremble as I entered the shadowy foyer and saw the distant tabernacle on the altar. I remembered now that I had passed here once when the windows were ablaze and the sound of singing poured out into Jackson Square. I had hesitated then, wondering if there were some secret Lestat had never told me, something which might destroy me were I to enter. I'd felt compelled to enter, but I had pushed this out of my mind, breaking loose from the fascination of the open doors, the throng of people making one voice. I had had something for Claudia, a doll I was taking to her, a bridal doll I'd lifted from a darkened toy shop window and placed in a great box with ribbons and tissue paper. A doll for Claudia. I remembered pressing on with it, hearing the heavy vibrations of the organ behind me, my eyes narrow from the great blaze of the candles.

"Now I thought of that moment; that fear in me at the very sight of the altar, the sound of the *Pange Lingua*. And I thought again, persistently, of my brother. I could see the coffin rolling along up the center aisle, the procession of mourners behind it. I felt no fear now. As I said, I think if anything I felt a longing for some fear, for some reason for fear as I moved slowly along the dark, stone walls. The air was chill and damp in spite of summer. The thought of Claudia's doll came back to me. Where was that doll? For years Claudia had played with that doll. Suddenly I saw myself searching for the doll, in the relentless and meaningless manner one searches for something in a nightmare, coming on doors that won't open or drawers that won't shut, struggling over and over against the same meaningless thing, not knowing why the effort seems so desperate, why the sudden sight of a chair with a shawl thrown over it inspires the mind with horror.

"I was in the cathedral. A woman stepped out of the confessional and passed the long line of those who waited. A man who should have stepped up next did not move; and my eye, sensitive even in my

vulnerable condition, noted this, and I turned to see him. He was staring at me. Quickly I turned my back on him. I heard him enter the confessional and shut the door. I walked up the aisle of the church and then, more from exhaustion than from any conviction, went into an empty pew and sat down. I had almost genuflected from old habit. My mind seemed as muddled and tortured as that of any human. I closed my eyes for a moment and tried to banish all thoughts. Hear and see, I said to myself. And with this act of will, my senses emerged from the torment. All around me in the gloom I heard the whisper of prayers, the tiny click of the rosary beads; soft the sighing of the woman who knelt now at the Twelfth Station. Rising from the sea of wooden pews came the scent of rats. A rat moving somewhere near the altar, a rat in the great wood-carved side altar of the Virgin Mary. The gold candlesticks shimmered on the altar; a rich white chrysanthemum bent suddenly on its stem, droplets glistening on the crowded petals, a sour fragrance rising from a score of vases, from altars and side altars, from statues of Virgins and Christs and saints. I stared at the statues; I became obsessed suddenly and completely with the lifeless profiles, the staring eyes, the empty hands, the frozen folds. Then my body convulsed with such violence that I found myself pitched forward, my hand on the pew before me. It was a cemetery of dead forms, of funereal effigy and stone angels. I looked up and saw myself in a most palpable vision ascending the altar steps, opening the tiny sacrosanct tabernacle, reaching with monstrous hands for the consecrated ciborium, and taking the Body of Christ and strewing Its white wafers all over the carpet; and walking then on the sacred wafers, walking up and down before the altar, giving Holy Communion to the dust. I rose up now in the pew and stood there staring at this vision. I knew full well the meaning of it.

"God did not live in this church; these statues gave an image to nothingness, I was the supernatural in this cathedral. I was the only supermortal thing that stood conscious under this roof! Loneliness. Loneliness to the point of madness. The cathedral crumbled in my vision; the saints listed and fell. Rats ate the Holy Eucharist and nested on the sills. A solitary rat with an enormous tail stood tugging and gnawing at the rotted altar cloth until the candlesticks fell and rolled on the slime-covered stones. And I remained standing. Untouched.

Undead—reaching out suddenly for the plaster hand of the Virgin and seeing it break in my hand, so that I held the hand crumbling in my palm, the pressure of my thumb turning it to powder.

"And then suddenly through the ruins, up through the open door through which I could see a wasteland in all directions, even the great river frozen over and stuck with the encrusted ruins of ships, up through these ruins now came a funeral procession, a band of pale, white men and women, monsters with gleaming eyes and flowing black clothes, the coffin rumbling on the wooden wheels, the rats scurrying across the broken and buckling marble, the procession advancing, so that I could see then Claudia in the procession, her eyes staring from behind a thin black veil, one gloved hand locked upon a black prayer book, the other on the coffin as it moved beside her. And there now in the coffin, beneath a glass cover, I saw to my horror the skeleton of Lestat, the wrinkled skin now pressed into the very texture of his bones, his eyes but sockets, his blond hair billowed on the white satin.

"The procession stopped. The mourners moved out, filling the dusty pews without a sound, and Claudia, turning with her book, opened it and lifted the veil back from her face, her eyes fixed on me as her finger touched the page. 'And now art thou cursed from the earth,' she whispered, her whisper rising in echo in the ruins. 'And now art thou cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand. When thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength. A fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth … and whoever slayeth thee, vengeance shall be taken on him seven-fold.'

"I shouted at her, I screamed, the scream rising up out of the depths of my being like some great rolling black force that broke from my lips and sent my body reeling against my will. A terrible sighing rose from the mourners, a chorus growing louder and louder as I turned to see them all about me, pushing me into the aisle against the very sides of the coffin, so that I turned to get my balance and found both my hands upon it. And I stood there staring down not at the remains of Lestat, but at the body of my mortal brother. A quiet descended, as if a veil had fallen over all and made their forms dissolve beneath its soundless folds. There was my brother, blond and young and sweet as he had

been in life, as real and warm to me now as he'd been years and years beyond which I could never have remembered him thus, so perfectly was he re-created, so perfectly in every detail. His blond hair brushed back from his forehead, his eyes closed as if he slept, his smooth fingers around the crucifix on his breast, his lips so pink and silken I could hardly bear to see them and not touch them. And as I reached out just to touch the softness of his skin, *the vision ended*.

"I was sitting still in the Saturday night cathedral, the smell of the tapers thick in the motionless air, the woman of the stations gone and darkness gathering—behind me, across from me, and now above me. A boy appeared in the black cassock of a lay brother, with a long extinguisher on a golden pole, putting its little funnel down upon one candle and then another and then another. I was stupefied. He glanced at me and then away, as if not to disturb a man deep in prayer. And then, as he moved on up to the next chandelier, I felt a hand on my shoulder.

"That two humans should pass this close to me without my hearing, without my even caring, registered somewhere within me that I was in danger, but I did not care. I looked up now and saw a gray-haired priest. 'You wish to go to confession?' he asked. 'I was about to lock up the church.' He narrowed his eyes behind his thick glasses. The only light now came from the racks of little red-glass candles which burned before the saints; and shadows leaped upon the towering walls. 'You *are* troubled, aren't you? Can I help you?'

" 'It's too late, too late,' I whispered to him, and rose to go. He backed away from me, still apparently unaware of anything about my appearance that should alarm him, and said kindly, to reassure me, 'No, it's still early. Do you want to come into the confessional?'

"For a moment I just stared at him. I was tempted to smile. And then it occurred to me to do it. But even as I followed him down the aisle, in the shadows of the vestibule, I knew this would be nothing, that it was madness. Nevertheless, I knelt down in the small wooden booth, my hands folded on the priedieu as he sat in the booth beside it and slid back the panel to show me the dim outline of his profile. I stared at him for a moment. And then I said it, lifting my hand to make the Sign of the Cross. 'Bless me, father, for I have sinned, sinned so often and so long I do not know how to change, nor how to confess before

God what I've done.'

" 'Son, God is infinite in His capacity to forgive,' he whispered to me. 'Tell Him in the best way you know how and from your heart.'

" 'Murders, father, death after death. The woman who died two nights ago in Jackson Square, I killed her, and thousands of others before her, one and two a night, father, for seventy years. I have walked the streets of New Orleans like the Grim Reaper and fed on human life for my own existence. I am not mortal, father, but immortal and damned, like angels put in hell by God. I am a vampire.'

"The priest turned. 'What is this, some sort of sport for you? Some joke? You take advantage of an old man!' he said. He slid the wooden panel back with a *splat*. Quickly I opened the door and stepped out to see him standing there. 'Young man, do you fear God at all? Do you know the meaning of sacrilege?' He glared at me. Now I moved closer to him, slowly, very slowly, and at first he merely stared at me, outraged. Then, confused, he took a step back. The church was hollow, empty, black, the sacristan gone and the candles throwing ghastly light only on the distant altars. They made a wreath of soft, gold fibers about his gray head and face. 'Then there is no mercy!' I said to him and suddenly clamping my hands on his shoulders, I held him in a preternatural lock from which he couldn't hope to move and held him close beneath my face. His mouth fell open in horror. 'Do you see what I am! Why, if God exists, does He suffer me to exist!' I said to him. 'You talk of sacrilege!' He dug his nails into my hands, trying to free himself, his missal dropping to the floor, his rosary clattering in the folds of his cassock. He might as well have fought the animated statues of the saints. I drew my lips back and showed him my virulent teeth. 'Why does He suffer me to live!' I said. His face infuriated me, his fear, his contempt, his rage. I saw in it all the hatred I'd seen in Babette, and he hissed at me, 'Let me go! Devil!' in sheer mortal panic.

"I released him, watching with a sinister fascination as he floundered, moving up the center aisle as if he plowed through snow. And then I was after him, so swift that I surrounded him in an instant with my outstretched arms, my cape throwing him into darkness, his legs scrambling still. He was cursing me, calling on God at the altar. And then I grabbed him on the very steps to the Communion rail and

pulled him down to face me there and sank my teeth into his neck."

The vampire stopped.

Sometime before, the boy had been about to light a cigarette. And he sat now with the match in one hand, the cigarette in the other, still as a store dummy, staring at the vampire. The vampire was looking at the floor. He turned suddenly, took the book of matches from the boy's hand, struck the match, and held it out. The boy bent the cigarette to receive it. He inhaled and let the smoke out quickly. He uncapped the bottle and took a deep drink, his eyes always on the vampire.

He was patient again, waiting until the vampire was ready to resume.

"I didn't remember Europe from my childhood. Not even the voyage to America, really. That I had been born there was an abstract idea. Yet it had a hold over me which was as powerful as the hold France can have on a colonial. I spoke French, read French, remembered waiting for the reports of the Revolution and reading the Paris newspaper accounts of Napoleon's victories. I remember the anger I felt when he sold the colony of Louisiana to the United States. How long the mortal Frenchman lived in me I don't know. He was gone by this time, really, but there was in me that great desire to see Europe and to know it, which comes not only from the reading of all the literature and the philosophy, but from the feeling of having been shaped by Europe more deeply and keenly than the rest of Americans. I was a Creole who wanted to see where it had all begun.

"And so I turned my mind to this now. To divesting my closets and trunks of everything that was not essential to me. And very little was essential to me, really. And much of that might remain in the town house, to which I was certain I would return sooner or later, if only to move my possessions to another similar one and start a new life in New Orleans. I couldn't conceive of leaving it forever. Wouldn't. But I fixed my mind and heart on Europe.

"It began to penetrate for the first time that I might see the world if I wanted. That I was, as Claudia said, free.

"Meantime, she made a plan. It was her idea most definitely that we

must go first to central Europe, where the vampire seemed most prevalent. She was certain we could find something there that would instruct us, explain our origins. But she seemed anxious for more than answers: a communion with her own kind. She mentioned this over and over, 'My own kind,' and she said it with a different intonation than I might have used. She made me feel the gulf that separated us. In the first years of our life together, I had thought her like Lestat, imbibing his instinct to kill, though she shared my tastes in everything else. Now I knew her to be less human than either of us, less human than either of us might have dreamed. Not the faintest conception bound her to the sympathies of human existence. Perhaps this explained why—despite everything I had done or failed to do—she clung to me. I was not her *own kind*. Merely the closest thing to it."

"But wouldn't it have been possible," asked the boy suddenly, "to instruct her in the ways of the human heart the way you'd instructed her in everything else?"

"To what avail?" asked the vampire frankly. "So she might suffer as I did? Oh, I'll grant you I should have taught her something to prevail against her desire to kill Lestat. For my own sake, I should have done that. But you see, I had no *confidence* in anything else. Once fallen from grace, I had confidence in nothing."

The boy nodded. "I didn't mean to interrupt you. You were coming to something," he said.

"Only to the point that it was possible to forget what had happened to Lestat by turning my mind to Europe. And the thought of the other vampires inspired me also. I had not been cynical for one moment about the existence of God. Only lost from it. Drifting, preternatural, through the natural world.

"But we had another matter before we left for Europe. Oh, a great deal happened indeed. It began with the musician. He had called while I was gone that evening to the cathedral, and the next night he was to come again. I had dismissed the servants and went down to him myself. And his appearance startled me at once.

"He was much thinner than I'd remembered him and very pale, with a moist gleam about his face that suggested fever. And he was perfectly miserable. When I told him Lestat had gone away, he refused at first to believe me and began insisting Lestat would have left him

some message, something. And then he went off up the Rue Royale, talking to himself about it, as if he had little awareness of anyone around him. I caught up with him under a gas lamp. 'He did leave you something,' I said, quickly feeling for my wallet. I didn't know how much I had in it, but I planned to give it to him. It was several hundred dollars. I put it into his hands. They were so thin I could see the blue veins pulsing beneath the watery skin. Now he became exultant, and I sensed at once that the matter went beyond the money. 'Then he spoke of me, he told you to give this to me!' he said, holding onto it as though it were a relic. 'He must have said something else to you!' He stared at me with bulging, tortured eyes. I didn't answer him at once, because during these moments I had seen the puncture wounds in his neck. Two red scratch-like marks to the right, just above his soiled collar. The money flapped in his hand; he was oblivious to the evening traffic of the street, the people who pushed close around us. 'Put it away,' I whispered. 'He did speak of you, that it was important you go on with your music.'

"He stared at me as if anticipating something else. 'Yes? Did he say anything else?' he asked me. I didn't know what to tell him. I would have made up anything if it would have given him comfort, and also kept him away. It was painful for me to speak of Lestat; the words evaporated on my lips. And the puncture wounds amazed me. I couldn't fathom this. I was saying nonsense to the boy finally—that Lestat wished him well, that he had to take a steamboat up to St. Louis, that he would be back, that war was imminent and he had business there … the boy hungering after every word, as if he couldn't possibly get enough and was pushing on with it for the thing he wanted. He was trembling; the sweat broke out fresh on his forehead as he stood there pressing me, and suddenly he bit his lip hard and said, 'But why did he go!' as if nothing had sufficed.

" 'What is it?' I asked him. 'What did you need from him? I'm sure he would want me to …'

" 'He was my friend!' He turned on me suddenly, his voice dropping with repressed outrage.

" 'You're not well,' I said to him. 'You need rest. There's something …' and now I pointed to it, attentive to his every move '… on your throat.' He didn't even know what I meant. His fingers

searched for the place, found it, rubbed it.

" 'What does it matter? I don't know. The insects, they're everywhere,' he said, turning away from me. 'Did he say anything else?'

"For a long while I watched him move up the Rue Royale, a frantic, lanky figure in rusty black, for whom the bulk of the traffic made way.

"I told Claudia at once about the wound on his throat.

"It was our last night in New Orleans. We'd board the ship just before midnight tomorrow for an early-morning departure. We had agreed to walk out together. She was being solicitous, and there was something remarkably sad in her face, something which had not left after she had cried. 'What could the marks mean?' she asked me now. 'That he fed on the boy when the boy slept, that the boy allowed it? I can't imagine …' she said.

" 'Yes, that must be what it is.' But I was uncertain. I remembered now Lestat's remark to Claudia that he knew a boy who would make a better vampire than she. Had he planned to do that? Planned to make another one of us?

" 'It doesn't matter now, Louis,' she reminded me. We had to say our farewell to New Orleans. We were walking away from the crowds of the Rue Royale. My senses were keen to all around me, holding it close, reluctant to say this was the last night.

"The old French city had been for the most part burned a long time ago, and the architecture of these days was as it is now, Spanish, which meant that, as we walked slowly through the very narrow street where one cabriolet had to stop for another, we passed whitewashed walls and great courtyard gates that revealed distant lamplit courtyard paradises like our own, only each seemed to hold such promise, such sensual mystery. Great banana trees stroked the galleries of the inner courts, and masses of fern and flower crowded the mouth of the passage. Above, in the dark, figures sat on the balconies, their backs to the open doors, their hushed voices and the flapping of their fans barely audible above the soft river breeze; and over the walls grew wisteria and passiflora so thick that we could brush against it as we passed and stop occasionally at this place or that to pluck a luminescent rose or tendrils of honeysuckle. Through the high windows we saw again and again the play of candlelight on richly

embossed plaster ceilings and often the bright iridescent wreath of a crystal chandelier. Occasionally a figure dressed for evening appeared at the railings, the glitter of jewels at her throat, her perfume adding a lush evanescent spice to the flowers in the air.

"We had our favorite streets, gardens, corners, but inevitably we reached the outskirts of the old city and saw the rise of swamp. Carriage after carriage passed us coming in from the Bayou Road bound for the theater or the opera. But now the lights of the city lay behind us, and its mingled scents were drowned in the thick odor of swamp decay. The very sight of the tall, wavering trees, their limbs hung with moss, had sickened me, made me think of Lestat. I was thinking of him as I'd thought of my brother's body. I was seeing him sunk deep among the roots of cypress and oak, that hideous withered form folded in the white sheet. I wondered if the creatures of the dark shunned him, knowing instinctively the parched, crackling thing there was virulent, or whether they swarmed about him in the reeking water, picking his ancient dried flesh from the bones.

"I turned away from the swamps, back to the heart of the old city, and felt the gentle press of Claudia's hand comforting. She had gathered a natural bouquet from all the garden walls, and she held it crushed to the bosom of her yellow dress, her face buried in its perfume. Now she said to me in such a whisper that I bent my ear to her, 'Louis, it troubles you. You know the remedy. Let the flesh … let the flesh instruct the mind.' She let my hand go, and I watched her move away from me, turning once to whisper the same command. 'Forget him. Let the flesh instruct the mind.…' It brought back to me that book of poems I'd held in my hand when she first spoke these words to me, and I saw the verse upon the page:

> *Her* lips were red, *her* looks were free,
> Her locks were yellow as gold:
> Her skin was as white as leprosy,
> The Night-mare LIFE-IN-DEATH was she,
> Who thicks man's blood with cold.

"She was smiling from the far corner, a bit of yellow silk visible for a moment in the narrowing dark, then gone. My companion, my

companion forever.

"I was turning into the Rue Dumaine, moving past darkened windows. A lamp died very slowly behind a broad scrim of heavy lace, the shadow of the pattern on the brick expanding, growing fainter, then vanishing into blackness. I moved on, nearing the house of Madame LeClair, hearing faint but shrill the violins from the upstairs parlor and then the thin metallic laughter of the guests. I stood across from the house in the shadows, seeing a small handful of them moving in the lighted rooms; from window to window to window moved one guest, a pale lemon-colored wine in his stem glass, his face turned towards the moon as if he sought something from a better vantage and found it finally at the last window, his hand on the dark drape.

"Across from me a door stood open in the brick wall, and a light fell on the passage at the far end. I moved silently over the narrow street and met the thick aromas of the kitchen rising on the air past the gate. The slightly nauseating smell of cooking meat. I stepped into the passage. Someone had just walked fast across the courtyard and shut a rear door. But then I saw another figure. She stood by the kitchen fire, a lean black woman with a brilliant tignon around her head, her features delicately chiselled and gleaming in the light like a figure in diorite. She stirred the mixture in the kettle. I caught the sweet smell of the spices and the fresh green of marjoram and bay leaf; and then in a wave came the horrid smell of the cooking meat, the blood and flesh decaying in the boiling fluids. I drew near and saw her set down her long iron spoon and stand with her hands on her generous, tapered hips, the white of her apron sash outlining her small, fine waist. The juices of the pot foamed on the lip and spit in the glowing coals below. Her dark odor came to me, her dusky spiced perfume, stronger than the curious mixture from the pot, tantalizing as I drew nearer and rested back against a wall of matted vine. Upstairs the thin violins began a waltz, and the floorboards groaned with the dancing couples. The jasmine of the wall enclosed me and then receded like water leaving the clean-swept beach; and again I sensed her salt perfume. She had moved to the kitchen door, her long black neck gracefully bent as she peered into the shadows beneath the lighted window. 'Monsieur!' she said, and stepped out now into the shaft of yellow light. It fell on her great round breasts and long sleek silken arms and

now on the long cold beauty of her face. ‘You’re looking for the party, Monsieur?’ she asked. ‘The party’s upstairs.…’

“ ‘No, my dear, I wasn’t looking for the party,’ I said to her, moving forward out of the shadows. ‘I was looking for you.’ ”

“Everything was ready when I awoke the next evening: the wardrobe trunk on its way to the ship as well as a chest which contained a coffin; the servants gone; the furnishings draped in white. The sight of the tickets and a collection of notes of credit and some other papers all placed together in a flat black wallet made the trip emerge into the bright light of reality. I would have forgone killing had that been possible, and so I took care of this early, and perfunctorily, as did Claudia; and as it neared time for us to leave, I was alone in the flat, waiting for her. She had been gone too long for my nervous frame of mind. I feared for her—though she could bewitch almost anyone into assisting her if she found herself too far away from home, and had many times persuaded strangers to bring her to her very door, to her father, who thanked them profusely for returning his lost daughter.

“When she came now she was running, and I fancied as I put my book down that she had forgotten the time. She thought it later than it was. By my pocket watch we had an hour. But the instant she reached the door, I knew that this was wrong. ‘Louis, the doors!’ she gasped, her chest heaving, her hand at her heart. She ran back down the passage with me behind her and, as she desperately signalled me, I shut up the doors to the gallery. ‘What is it?’ I asked her. ‘What’s come over you?’ But she was moving to the front windows now, the long French windows which opened onto the narrow balconies over the street. She lifted the shade of the lamp and quickly blew out the flame. The room went dark, and then lightened gradually with the illumination of the street. She stood panting, her hand on her breast, and then she reached out for me and drew me close to her beside the window.

“ ‘Someone followed me,’ she whispered now. ‘I could hear him block after block behind me. At first, I thought it was nothing!’ She stopped for breath, her face blanched in the bluish light that came from the windows across the way. ‘Louis, it was the musician,’ she

whispered.

“ ‘But what does that matter? He must have seen you with Lestat.’

“ ‘Louis, he’s down there. Look out the window. Try to see him.’ She seemed so shaken, almost afraid. As if she would not stand exposed on the threshold. I stepped out on the balcony, though I held her hand as she hovered by the drape; and she held me so tightly that it seemed she feared for me. It was eleven o’clock and the Rue Royale for the moment was quiet: shops shut, the traffic of the theater just gone away. A door slammed somewhere to my right, and I saw a woman and a man emerge and hurry towards the corner, the woman’s face hidden beneath an enormous white hat. Their steps died away. I could see no one, sense no one. I could hear Claudia’s labored breathing. Something stirred in the house; I started, then recognized it as the jingling and rustling of the birds. We’d forgotten the birds. But Claudia had started worse than I, and she pulled near to me. ‘There is no one, Claudia …’ I started to whisper to her.

“Then I saw the musician.

“He had been standing so still in the doorway of the furniture shop that I had been totally unaware of him, and he must have wanted this to be so. For now he turned his face upwards, towards me, and it shone from the dark like a white light. The frustration and care were utterly erased from his stark features; his great dark eyes peered at me from the white flesh. He had become a vampire.

“ ‘I see him,’ I murmured to her, my lips as still as possible, my eyes holding his eyes. I felt her move closer, her hand trembling, a heart beating in the palm of her hand. She let out a gasp when she saw him now. But at the same moment, something chilled me even as I stared at him and he did not move. Because I heard a step in the lower passage. I heard the gate-hinge groan. And then that step again, deliberate, loud, echoing under the arched ceiling of the carriage way, deliberate, familiar. That step advancing now up the spiral stairs. A thin scream rose from Claudia, and then she caught it at once with her hand. The vampire in the furniture shop door had not moved. And I knew the step on the stairs. I knew the step on the porch. It was Lestat. Lestat pulling on the door, now pounding on it, now ripping at it, as if to tear it loose from the very wall. Claudia moved back into the corner of the room, her body bent, as if someone had struck her a

sharp blow, her eyes moving frantically from the figure in the street to me. The pounding on the door grew louder. And then I heard his voice. 'Louis!' he called to me. 'Louis!' he roared against the door. And then came the smash of the back parlor window. And I could hear the latch turning from within. Quickly, I grabbed the lamp, struck a match hard and broke it in my frenzy, then got the flame as I wanted it and held the small vessel of kerosene poised in my hand. 'Get away from the window. Shut it,' I told her. And she obeyed as if the sudden clear, spoken command released her from a paroxysm of fear. 'And light the other lamps, now, at once.' I heard her crying as she struck the match. Lestat was coming down the hallway.

"And then he stood at the door. I let out a gasp, and, not meaning to, I must have taken several steps backwards when I saw him. I could hear Claudia's cry. It was Lestat beyond question, restored and intact as he hung in the doorway, his head thrust forward, his eyes bulging, as if he were drunk and needed the door jamb to keep him from plunging headlong into the room. His skin was a mass of scars, a hideous covering of injured flesh, as though every wrinkle of his 'death' had left its mark upon him. He was seared and marked as if by the random strokes of a hot poker, and his once clear gray eyes were shot with hemorrhaged vessels.

" 'Stay back … for the love of God …' I whispered. 'I'll throw it at you. I'll burn you alive,' I said to him. And at the same moment I could hear a sound to my left, something scraping, scratching against the facade of the town house. It was the other one. I saw his hands now on the wrought-iron balcony. Claudia let out a piercing scream as he threw his weight against the glass doors.

"I cannot tell you all that happened then. I cannot possibly recount it as it was. I remember heaving the lamp at Lestat; it smashed at his feet and the flames rose at once from the carpet. I had a torch then in my hands, a great tangle of sheet I'd pulled from the couch and ignited in the flames. But I was struggling with him before that, kicking and driving savagely at his great strength. And somewhere in the background were Claudia's panicked screams. And the other lamp was broken. And the drapes of the windows blazed. I remember that his clothes reeked of kerosene and that he was at one point smacking wildly at the flames. He was clumsy, sick, unable to keep his balance;

but when he had me in his grip, I even tore at his fingers with my teeth to get him off. There was noise rising in the street, shouts, the sound of a bell. The room itself had fast become an inferno, and I did see in one clear blast of light Claudia battling the fledgling vampire. He seemed unable to close his hands on her, like a clumsy human after a bird. I remember rolling over and over with Lestat in the flames, feeling the suffocating heat in my face, seeing the flames above his back when I rolled under him. And then Claudia rose up out of the confusion and was striking at him over and over with the poker until his grip broke and I scrambled loose from him. I saw the poker coming down again and again on him and could hear the snarls rising from Claudia in time with the poker, like the stress of an unconscious animal. Lestat was holding his hand, his face a grimace of pain. And there, sprawled on the smoldering carpet, lay the other one, blood flowing from his head.

"What happened then is not clear to me. I think I grabbed the poker from her and gave him one fine blow with it to the side of the head. I remember that he seemed unstoppable, invulnerable to the blows. The heat, by this time, was singeing my clothes, had caught Claudia's gossamer gown, so that I grabbed her up and ran down the passage trying to stifle the flames with my body. I remember taking off my coat and beating at the flames in the open air, and men rushing up the stairs and past me. A great crowd swelled from the passage into the courtyard, and someone stood on the sloped roof of the brick kitchen. I had Claudia in my arms now and was rushing past them all, oblivious to the questions, thrusting a shoulder through them, making them divide. And then I was free with her, hearing her pant and sob in my ear, running blindly down the Rue Royale, down the first narrow street, running and running until there was no sound but the sound of my running. And her breath. And we stood there, the man and the child, scorched and aching, and breathing deep in the quiet of night."

PART II

All night long I stood on the deck of the French ship *Mariana*, watching the gangplanks. The long levee was crowded, and parties lasted late in the lavish staterooms, the decks rumbling with passengers and guests. But finally, as the hours moved towards dawn, the parties were over one by one, and carriages left the narrow riverfront streets. A few late passengers came aboard, a couple lingered for hours at the rail nearby. But Lestat and his apprentice, if they survived the fire (and I was convinced that they had) did not find their way to the ship. Our luggage had left the flat that day; and if anything had remained to let them know our destination, I was sure it had been destroyed. Yet still I watched. Claudia sat securely locked in our stateroom, her eyes fixed on the porthole. But Lestat did not come.

"Finally, as I'd hoped, the commotion of putting out commenced before daylight. A few people waved from the pier and the grassy hump of the levee as the great ship began first to shiver, then to jerk violently to one side, and then to slide out in one great majestic motion into the current of the Mississippi.

"The lights of New Orleans grew small and dim until there appeared behind us only a pale phosphorescence against the lightening clouds. I was fatigued beyond my worst memory, yet I stood on the deck for as long as I could see that light, knowing that I might never see it again. In moments we were carried downstream past the piers of Freniere and Pointe du Lac and then, as I could see the great wall of cottonwood and cypress growing green out of the darkness along the shore, I knew it was almost morning. Too perilously close.

"And as I put the key into the lock of the cabin I felt the greatest exhaustion perhaps that I'd ever known. Never in all the years I'd lived in our select family had I known the fear I'd experienced tonight, the vulnerability, the sheer terror. And there was to be no sudden relief from it. No sudden sense of safety. Only that relief which weariness at last imposes, when neither mind nor body can endure the terror any longer. For though Lestat was now miles away from us, he had in his resurrection awakened in me a tangle of complex fears which I could not escape. Even as Claudia said to me, 'We're safe, Louis, safe,' and I whispered the word *yes* to her, I could see Lestat hanging in that

doorway, see those bulbous eyes, that scarred flesh. How had he come back, how had he triumphed over death? How could any creature have survived that shrivelled ruin he'd become? Whatever the answer, what did it mean—not only for him, but for Claudia, for me? Safe from him we were, but safe from ourselves?

"The ship was struck by a strange 'fever.' It was amazingly clean of vermin, however, though occasionally their bodies might be found, weightless and dry, as if the creatures had been dead for days. Yet there was this fever. It struck a passenger first in the form of weakness and a soreness about the throat; occasionally there were marks there, and occasionally the marks were someplace else; or sometimes there were no recognizable marks at all, though an old wound was reopened and painful again. And sometimes the passenger who fell to sleeping more and more as the voyage progressed and the fever progressed died in his sleep. So there were burials at sea on several occasions as we crossed the Atlantic. Naturally afraid of fever, I shunned the passengers, did not wish to join them in the smoking room, get to know their stories, hear their dreams and expectations. I took my 'meals' alone. But Claudia liked to watch the passengers, to stand on deck and see them come and go in the early evening, to say softly to me later as I sat at the porthole, 'I think she'll fall prey….'

"I would put the book down and look out the porthole, feeling the gentle rocking of the sea, seeing the stars, more clear and brilliant than they had ever been on land, dipping down to touch the waves. It seemed at moments, when I sat alone in the dark stateroom, that the sky had come down to meet the sea and that some great secret was to be revealed in that meeting, some great gulf miraculously closed forever. But who was to make this revelation when the sky and sea became indistinguishable and neither any longer was chaos? God? Or Satan? It struck me suddenly what consolation it would be to know Satan, to look upon his face, no matter how terrible that countenance was, to know that I belonged to him totally, and thus put to rest forever the torment of this ignorance. To step through some veil that would forever separate me from all that I called human nature.

"I felt the ship moving closer and closer to this secret. There was no visible end to the firmament; it closed about us with breathtaking beauty and silence. But then the words *put to rest* became horrible.

Because there would be no rest in damnation, could be no rest; and what was this torment compared to the restless fires of hell? The sea rocking beneath those constant stars—those stars themselves—what had this to do with Satan? And those images which sound so static to us in childhood when we are all so taken up with mortal frenzy that we can scarce imagine them desirable: seraphim gazing forever upon the face of God—and the face of God itself—this was rest eternal, of which this gentle, cradling sea was only the faintest promise.

"But even in these moments, when the ship slept and all the world slept, neither heaven nor hell seemed more than a tormenting fancy. To know, to believe, in one or the other … that was perhaps the only salvation for which I could dream.

"Claudia, with Lestat's liking for light, lit the lamps when she rose. She had a marvellous pack of playing cards, acquired from a lady on board; the picture cards were in the fashion of Marie Antoinette, and the backs of the cards bore gold fleurs-de-lis on gleaming violet. She played a game of solitaire in which the cards made the numbers of a clock. And she asked me until I finally began to answer her, how Lestat had accomplished it. She was no longer shaken. If she remembered her screams in the fire she did not care to dwell on them. If she remembered that, before the fire, she had wept real tears in my arms, it made no change in her; she was, as always in the past, a person of little indecision, a person for whom habitual quiet did not mean anxiety or regret.

" 'We should have burned him,' she said. 'We were fools to think from his appearance that he was dead.'

" 'But how could he have survived?' I asked her. 'You saw him, you know what became of him.' I had no taste for it, really. I would have gladly pushed it to the back of my mind, but my mind would not allow me to. And it was she who gave me the answers now, for the dialogue was really with herself. 'Suppose, though, he had ceased to fight us,' she explained, 'that he was still living, locked in that helpless dried corpse, conscious and calculating.…'

" 'Conscious in that state!' I whispered.

" 'And suppose, when he reached the swamp waters and heard the sounds of our carriage going away, that he had strength enough to propel those limbs to move. There were creatures all around him in

the dark. I saw him once rip the head of a small garden lizard and watch the blood run down into a glass. Can you imagine the tenacity of the will to live in him, his hands groping in that water for anything that moved?'

" 'The will to live? Tenacity?' I murmured. 'Suppose it was something else.…'

" 'And then, when he'd felt the resuscitation of his strength, just enough perhaps to have sustained him to the road, somewhere along that road he found someone. Perhaps he crouched, waiting for a passing carriage; perhaps he crept, gathering still what blood he could until he came to the shacks of those immigrants or those scattered country houses. And what a spectacle he must have been!' She gazed at the hanging lamp, her eyes narrow, her voice muted, without emotion. 'And then what did he do? It's clear to me. If he could not have gotten back to New Orleans in time, he could most definitely have reached the Old Bayou cemetery. The charity hospital feeds it fresh coffins every day. And I can see him clawing his way through the moist earth for such a coffin, dumping the fresh contents out in the swamps, and securing himself until the next nightfall in that shallow grave where no manner of man would be wont to disturb him. Yes … that is what he did, I'm certain.'

"I thought of this for a long time, picturing it, seeing that it must have happened. And then I heard her add thoughtfully, as she laid down her card and looked at the oval face of a white-coiffed king, '*I* could have done it.

" 'And why do you look that way at me?' she asked, gathering up her cards, her small fingers struggling to make a neat pack of them and then to shuffle them.

" 'But you do believe … that had we burned his remains he would have died?' I asked.

" 'Of course I believe it. If there is nothing to rise, there is nothing to rise. What are you driving at?' She was dealing out the cards now, dealing a hand for me on the small oak table. I looked at the cards, but I did not touch them.

" 'I don't know …' I whispered to her. 'Only that perhaps there was no will to live, no tenacity … because very simply there was no need of either.'

“Her eyes gazed at me steadily, giving no hint of her thoughts or that she understood mine.

“ ‘Because perhaps he was incapable of dying … perhaps he is, and we are … truly immortal?’

“For a long time she sat there looking at me.

“ ‘Consciousness in that state …’ I finally added, as I looked away from her. ‘If it were so, then mightn’t there be consciousness in any other? Fire, sunlight … what does it matter?’

“ ‘Louis,’ she said, her voice soft. ‘You’re afraid. You don’t stand *en garde* against fear. You don’t understand the danger of fear itself. We’ll know these answers when we find those who can tell us, those who’ve possessed knowledge for centuries, for however long creatures such as ourselves have walked the earth. That knowledge was our birthright, and he deprived us. He earned his death.’

“ ‘But he didn’t die …’ I said.

“ ‘He’s dead,’ she said. ‘No one could have escaped that house unless they’d run with us, at our very side. No. He’s dead, and so is that trembling aesthete, his friend. Consciousness, what does it matter?’

“She gathered up the cards and put them aside, gesturing for me to hand her the books from the table beside the bunk, those books which she’d unpacked immediately on board, the few select records of vampire lore which she’d taken to be her guides. They included no wild romances from England, no stories of Edgar Allan Poe, no fancy. Only those few accounts of the vampires of eastern Europe, which had become for her a sort of Bible. In those countries indeed they did burn the remains of the vampire when they found him, and the heart was staked and the head severed. She would read these now for hours, these ancient books which had been read and reread before they ever found their way across the Atlantic; they were travellers’ tales, the accounts of priests and scholars. And she would plan our trip, not with the need of any pen or paper, only in her mind. A trip that would take us at once away from the glittering capitals of Europe towards the Black Sea, where we would dock at Varna and begin that search in the rural countryside of the Carpathians.

“For me it was a grim prospect, bound as I was to it, for there were longings in me for other places and other knowledge which Claudia did not begin to comprehend. Seeds of these longings had been

planted in me years ago, seeds which came to bitter flower as our ship passed through the Straits of Gibraltar and into the waters of the Mediterranean Sea.

"I wanted those waters to be blue. And they were not. They were the nighttime waters, and how I suffered then, straining to remember the seas that a young man's untutored senses had taken for granted, that an undisciplined memory had let slip away for eternity. The Mediterranean was black, black off the coast of Italy, black off the coast of Greece, black always, black when, in the small cold hours before dawn, as even Claudia slept, weary of her books and the meager fare that caution allowed her vampire hunger, I lowered a lantern down, down through the rising vapor until the fire blazed right over the lapping waters; and nothing came to light on that heaving surface but the light itself, the reflection of that beam travelling constant with me, a steady eye which seemed to fix on me from the depths and say, 'Louis, your quest is for darkness only. This sea is not your sea. The myths of men are not your myths. Men's treasures are not yours.'

"But oh, how the quest for the Old World vampires filled me with bitterness in those moments, a bitterness I could all but taste, as if the very air had lost its freshness. For what secrets, what truths had those monstrous creatures of night to give us? What, of necessity, must be their terrible limits, if indeed we were to find them at all? What can the damned really say to the damned?

"I never stepped ashore at Piraeus. Yet in my mind I roamed the Acropolis at Athens, watching the moon rise through the open roof of the Parthenon, measuring my height by the grandeur of those columns, walking the streets of those Greeks who died at Marathon, listening to the sound of wind in the ancient olives. These were the monuments of men who could not die, not the stones of the living dead; here the secrets that had endured the passage of time, which I had only dimly begun to understand. And yet nothing turned me from our quest and nothing could turn me, but over and over, committed as I was, I pondered the great risk of our questions, the risk of any question that is truthfully asked; for the answer must carry an incalculable price, a tragic danger. Who knew that better than I, who had presided over the death of my own body, seeing all I called

human wither and die only to form an unbreakable chain which held me fast to this world yet made me forever its exile, a specter with a beating heart?

"The sea lulled me to bad dreams, to sharp remembrances. A winter night in New Orleans when I wandered through the St. Louis cemetery and saw my sister, old and bent, a bouquet of white roses in her arms, the thorns carefully bound in an old parchment, her gray head bowed, her steps carrying her steadily along through the perilous dark to the grave where the stone of her brother Louis was set, side by side with that of his younger brother … Louis, who had died in the fire of Pointe du Lac leaving a generous legacy to a godchild and namesake she never knew. Those flowers were for Louis, as if it had not been half a century since his death, as if her memory, like Louis's memory, left her no peace. Sorrow sharpened her ashen beauty, sorrow bent her narrow back. And what I would not have given, as I watched her, to touch her silver hair, to whisper love to her, if love would not have loosed on her remaining years a horror worse than grief. I left her with grief. Over and over and over.

"And I dreamed now too much. I dreamed too long, in the prison of this ship, in the prison of my body, attuned as it was to the rise of every sun as no mortal body had ever been. And my heart beat faster for the mountains of eastern Europe, finally, beat faster for the one hope that somewhere we might find in that primitive countryside the answer to why under God this suffering was allowed to exist—why under God it was allowed to begin, and how under God it might be ended. I had not the courage to end it, I knew, without that answer. And in time the waters of the Mediterranean became, in fact, the waters of the Black Sea."

The vampire sighed. The boy was resting on his elbow, his face cradled in his right palm; and his avid expression was incongruous with the redness of his eyes.

"Do you think I'm playing with you?" the vampire asked, his fine dark eyebrows knitted for an instant.

"No," the boy said quickly. "I know better than to ask you any more questions. You'll tell me everything in your own time." And his mouth settled, and he looked at the vampire as though he were ready for him to begin again.

There was a sound then from far off. It came from somewhere in the old Victorian building around them, the first such sound they'd heard. The boy looked up towards the hallway door. It was as if he'd forgotten the building existed. Someone walked heavily on the old boards. But the vampire was undisturbed. He looked away as if he were again disengaging himself from the present.

"That village. I can't tell you the name of it; the name's gone. I remember it was miles from the coast, however, and we'd been travelling alone by carriage. And such a carriage! It was Claudia's doing, that carriage, and I should have expected it; but then, things are always taking me unawares. From the first moment we arrived in Varna, I had perceived certain changes in her which made me at once aware she was Lestat's daughter as well as my own. From me she had learned the value of money, but from Lestat she had inherited a passion for spending it; and she wasn't to leave without the most luxurious black coach we could manage, outfitted with leather seats that might have accommodated a band of travellers, let alone a man and a child who used the magnificent compartment only for the transportation of an ornately carved oak chest. To the back were strapped two trunks of the finest clothes the shops there could provide, and we went speeding along, those light enormous wheels and fine springs carrying that bulk with a frightening ease over the mountain roads. There was a thrill to that when there was nothing else in this strange country, those horses at a gallop and the gentle listing of that carriage.

"And it was strange country. Lonely, dark, as rural country is always

dark, its castles and ruins often obscured when the moon passed behind the clouds, so that I felt an anxiety during those hours I'd never quite experienced in New Orleans. And the people themselves were no relief. We were naked and lost in their tiny hamlets, and conscious always that amongst them we were in grave danger.

"Never in New Orleans had the kill to be disguised. The ravages of fever, plague, crime—these things competed with us always there, and outdid us. But here we had to go to great lengths to make the kill unnoticed. Because these simple country people, who might have found the crowded streets of New Orleans terrifying, believed completely that the dead did walk and did drink the blood of the living. They knew our names: vampire, devil. And we, who were on the lookout for the slightest rumor, wanted under no circumstances to create rumor ourselves.

"We travelled alone and fast and lavishly amongst them, struggling to be safe within our ostentation, finding talk of vampires all too cheap by the inn fires, where, my daughter sleeping peacefully against my chest, I invariably found someone amongst the peasants or guests who spoke enough German or, at times, even French to discuss with me the familiar legends.

"But finally we came to that village which was to be the turning point in our travels. I savor nothing about that journey, not the freshness of the air, the coolness of the nights. I don't talk of it without a vague tremor even now.

"We had been at a farmhouse the night before, and so no news prepared us—only the desolate appearance of the place: because it wasn't late when we reached it, not late enough for all the shutters of the little street to be bolted or for a darkened lantern to be swinging idly from the broad archway of the inn.

"Refuse was collected in the doorways. And there were other signs that something was wrong. A small box of withered flowers beneath a shuttered shop window. A barrel rolling back and forth in the center of the inn yard. The place had the aspect of a town under siege by the plague.

"But even as I was setting Claudia down on the packed earth beside the carriage, I saw the crack of light beneath the inn door. 'Put the hood of your cape up,' she said quickly. 'They're coming.' Someone

inside was pulling back the latch.

"At first all I saw was the light behind the figure in the very narrow margin she allowed. Then the light from the carriage lanterns glinted in her eye.

" 'A room for the night!' I said in German. 'And my horses need tending, badly!'

" 'The night's no time for travelling …' she said to me in a peculiar, flat voice. 'And with a child.' As she said this, I noticed others in the room behind her. I could hear their murmurings and see the flickering of a fire. From what I could see there were mostly peasants gathered around it, except for one man who was dressed much like myself in a tailored coat, with an overcoat over his shoulders; but his clothes were neglected and shabby. His red hair gleamed in the firelight. He was a foreigner, like ourselves, and he was the only one not looking at us. His head wagged slightly as if he were drunk.

" 'My daughter's tired,' I said to the woman. 'We've no place to stay but here.' And now I took Claudia into my arms. She turned her face towards me, and I heard her whisper, 'Louis, the garlic, the crucifix above the door!'

"I had not seen these things. It was a small crucifix, with the body of Christ in bronze fixed to the wood, and the garlic was wreathed around it, a fresh garland entwined with an old one, in which the buds were withered and dried. The woman's eyes followed my eyes, and then she looked at me sharply and I could see how exhausted she was, how red were her pupils, and how the hand which clutched at the shawl at her breast trembled. Her black hair was completely dishevelled. I pressed nearer until I was almost at the threshold, and she opened the door wide suddenly as if she'd only just decided to let us in. She said a prayer as I passed her, I was sure of it, though I couldn't understand the Slavic words.

"The small, low-beamed room was filled with people, men and women along the rough, panelled walls, on benches and even on the floor. It was as if the entire village were gathered there. A child slept in a woman's lap and another slept on the staircase, bundled in blankets, his knees tucked in against one step, his arms making a pillow for his head on the next. And everywhere there was the garlic hanging from nails and hooks, along with the cooking pots and

flagons. The fire was the only light, and it threw distorting shadows on the still faces as they watched us.

"No one motioned for us to sit or offered us anything, and finally the woman told me in German I might take the horses into the stable if I liked. She was staring at me with those slightly wild, red-rimmed eyes, and then her face softened. She told me she'd stand at the inn door for me with a lantern, but I must hurry and leave the child here.

"But something else had distracted me, a scent I detected beneath the heavy fragrance of burning wood and the wine. It was the scent of death. I could feel Claudia's hand press my chest, and I saw her tiny finger pointing to a door at the foot of the stairs. The scent came from there.

"The woman had a cup of wine waiting when I returned, and a bowl of broth. I sat down, Claudia on my knee, her head turned away from the fire towards that mysterious door. All eyes were fixed on us as before, except for the foreigner. I could see his profile now clearly. He was much younger than I'd thought, his haggard appearance stemming from emotion. He had a lean but very pleasant face actually, his light, freckled skin making him seem like a boy. His wide, blue eyes were fixed on the fire as though he were talking to it, and his eyelashes and eyebrows were golden in the light, which gave him a very innocent, open expression. But he was miserable, disturbed, drunk. Suddenly he turned to me, and I saw he'd been crying. 'Do you speak English?' he said, his voice booming in the silence.

" 'Yes, I do,' I said to him. And he glanced at the others triumphantly. They stared at him stonily.

" 'You speak English!' he cried, his lips stretching into a bitter smile, his eyes moving around the ceiling and then fixing on mine. 'Get out of this country,' he said. 'Get out of it now. Take your carriage, your horses, drive them till they drop, but get out of it!' Then his shoulders convulsed as if he were sick. He put his hand to his mouth. The woman who stood against the wall now, her arms folded over her soiled apron, said calmly in German, 'At dawn you can go. At dawn.'

" 'But what is it?' I whispered to her; and then I looked to him. He was watching me, his eyes glassy and red. No one spoke. A log fell heavily in the fire.

" 'Won't you tell me?' I asked the Englishman gently. He stood up.

For a moment I thought he was going to fall. He loomed over me, a much taller man than myself, his head pitching forward, then backward, before he right himself and put his hands on the edge of the table. His black coat was stained with wine, and so was his shirt cuff. ‘You want to see?’ he gasped as he peered into my eyes. ‘Do you want to see for yourself?’ There was a soft, pathetic tone to his voice as he spoke these words.

“ ‘Leave the child!’ said the woman abruptly, with a quick, imperious gesture.

“ ‘She’s sleeping,’ I said. And, rising, I followed the Englishman to the door at the foot of the stairs.

“There was a slight commotion as those nearest the door moved away from it. And we entered a small parlor together.

“Only one candle burned on the sideboard, and the first thing I saw was a row of delicately painted plates on a shelf. There were curtains on the small window, and a gleaming picture of the Virgin Mary and Christ child on the wall. But the walls and chairs barely enclosed a great oak table, and on that table lay the body of a young woman, her white hands folded on her breast, her auburn hair mussed and tucked about her thin, white throat and under her shoulders. Her pretty face was already hard with death. Amber rosary beads gleamed around her wrist and down the side of her dark wool skirt. And beside her lay a very pretty red felt hat with a wide, soft brim and a veil, and a pair of dark gloves. It was all laid there as if she would very soon rise and put these things on. And the Englishman patted the hat carefully now as he drew close to her. He was on the verge of breaking down altogether. He’d drawn a large handkerchief out of his coat, and he had put it to his face. ‘Do you know what they want to do with her?’ he whispered as he looked at me. ‘Do you have any idea?’

“The woman came in behind us and reached for his arm, but he roughtly shook her off. ‘Do you know?’ he demanded of me with his eyes fierce. ‘Savages!’

“ ‘You stop now!’ she said under her breath.

“He clenched his teeth and shook his head, so that a shock of his red hair loosened in his eyes. ‘You get away from her,’ he said to the woman in German. ‘Get away from me.’ Someone was whispering in the other room. The Englishman looked again at the young woman,

and his eyes filled with tears. ‘So innocent,’ he said softly; and then he glanced at the ceiling and, making a fist with his right hand, he gasped, ‘Damn you … God! Damn you!’

“ ‘Lord,’ the woman whispered, and quickly she made the Sign of the Cross.

“ ‘Do you see this?’ he asked me. And he pried very carefully at the lace of the dead woman’s throat, as though he could not, did not wish to actually touch the hardening flesh. There on her throat, unmistakable, were the two puncture wounds, as I’d seen them a thousand times upon a thousand, engraved in the yellowing skin. The man drew his hands up to his face, his tall, lean body rocking on the balls of his feet. ‘I think I’m going mad!’ he said.

“ ‘Come now,’ said the woman, holding onto him as he struggled, her face suddenly flushed.

“ ‘Let him be,’ I said to her. ‘Just let him be. I’ll take care of him.’

“Her mouth contorted. ‘I’ll throw you all out of here, out into that dark, if you don’t stop.’ She was too weary for this, too close to some breaking point herself. But then she turned her back on us, drawing her shawl tight around her, and padded softly out, the men who’d gathered at the door making way for her.

“The Englishman was crying.

“I could see what I must do, but it wasn’t only that I wanted so much to learn from him, my heart pounding with silent excitement. It was heartrending to see him this way. Fate brought me too mercilessly close to him.

“ ‘I’ll stay with you,’ I offered. And I brought two chairs up beside the table. He sat down heavily, his eyes on the flickering candle at his side. I shut the door, and the walls seemed to recede and the circle of the candle to grow brighter around his bowed head. He leaned back against the sideboard and wiped his face with his handkerchief. Then he drew a leatherbound flask from his pocket and offered it to me, and I said no.

“ ‘Do you want to tell me what happened?’

“He nodded. ‘Perhaps you can bring some sanity to this place,’ he said. ‘You’re a Frenchman, aren’t you? You know, I’m English.’

“ ‘Yes,’ I nodded.

“And then, pressing my hand fervently, the liquor so dulling his

senses that he never felt the coldness of it, he told me his name was Morgan and he needed me desperately, more than he'd ever needed anyone in his life. And at that moment, holding that hand, feeling the fever of it, I did a strange thing. I told him my name, which I confided to almost no one. But he was looking at the dead woman as if he hadn't heard me, his lips forming what appeared to be the faintest smile, the tears standing in his eyes. His expression would have moved any human being; it might have been more than some could bear.

" 'I did this,' he said, nodding. 'I brought her here.' And he raised his eyebrows as if wondering at it.

" 'No,' I said quickly. 'You didn't do it. Tell me who did.'

"But then he seemed confused, lost in thought. 'I'd never been out of England,' he started. 'I was painting, you see … as if it mattered now … the paintings, the book! I thought it all so quaint! So picturesque!' His eyes moved over the room, his voice trailing off. For a long time he looked at her again, and then softly he said to her, 'Emily,' and I felt I'd glimpsed something precious he held to his heart.

"Gradually, then, the story began to come. A honeymoon journey, through Germany, into this country, wherever the regular coaches would carry them, wherever Morgan found scenes to paint. And they'd come to this remote place finally because there was a ruined monastery nearby which was said to be a very well-preserved place.

"But Morgan and Emily had never reached that monastery. Tragedy had been waiting for them here.

"It turned out the regular coaches did not come this way, and Morgan had paid a farmer to bring them by cart. But the afternoon they arrived, there was a great commotion in the cemetery outside of town. The farmer, taking one look, refused to leave his cart to see further.

" 'It was some kind of procession, it seemed,' Morgan said, 'with all the people outfitted in their best, and some with flowers; and the truth was I thought it quite fascinating. I wanted to see it. I was so eager I had the fellow leave us, bags and all. We could see the village just up ahead. Actually it was I more than Emily, of course, but she was so agreeable, you see. I left her, finally, seated on our suitcases, and I went on up the hill without her. Did you see it when you were coming, the cemetery? No, of course you didn't. Thank God that

carriage of yours brought you here safe and sound. Though, if you'd driven on, no matter how bad off your horses were …' He stopped.

" 'What's the danger?' I urged him, gently.

" 'Ah … danger! Barbarians!' he murmured. And he glanced at the door. Then he took another drink from his flask and capped it.

" 'Well, it was no procession. I saw that right off,' he said. 'The people wouldn't even speak to me when I came up—you know what they are; but they had no objection to letting me watch. The truth was, you wouldn't have thought I was standing there at all. You won't believe me when I tell you what I saw, but you must believe me; because if you don't, I'm mad, I know it.'

" 'I will believe you, go on,' I said.

" 'Well, the cemetery was full of fresh graves, I saw that at once, some of them with new wooden crosses and some of them just mounds of earth with the flowers still fresh; and the peasants there, they were holding flowers, a few of them, as though they meant to be trimming these graves; but all of them were standing stock-still, their eyes on these two fellows who had a white horse by the bridle—and what an animal that was! It was pawing and stomping and shying to one side, as if it wanted no part of the place; a beautiful thing it was, though, a splendid animal—a stallion, and pure white. Well, at some point—and I couldn't tell you how they agreed upon it, because not a one of them said a word—one fellow, the leader, I think, gave the horse a tremendous whack with the handle of a shovel, and it took off up the hill, just wild. You can imagine, I thought that was the last we'd see of that horse for a while for sure. But I was wrong. In a minute it had slowed to a gallop, and it was turning around amongst the old graves and coming back down the hill towards the newer ones. And the people all stood there watching it. No one made a sound. And here it came trotting right over the mounds, right through the flowers, and no one made a move to get hold of the bridle. And then suddenly it came to a stop, right on one of the graves.'

"He wiped at his eyes, but his tears were almost gone. He seemed fascinated with his tale, as I was.

" 'Well, here's what happened,' he continued. 'The animal just stood there. And suddenly a cry went up from the crowd. No, it wasn't a cry, it was as though they were all gasping and moaning, and then

everything went quiet. And the horse was just standing there, tossing its head; and finally this fellow who was the leader burst forward and shouted to several of the others; and one of the women—she screamed, and threw herself on the grave almost under the horse's hooves. I came up then as close as I could. I could see the stone with the deceased's name on it; it was a young woman, dead only six months, the dates carved right there, and there was this miserable woman on her knees in the dirt, with her arms around the stone now, as if she meant to pull it right up out of the earth. And these fellows trying to pick her up and get her away.

" 'Now I almost turned back, but I couldn't, not until I saw what they meant to do. And, of course, Emily was quite safe, and none of these people took the slightest notice of either of us. Well, two of them finally did have that woman up, and then the others had come with shovels and had begun to dig right into the grave. Pretty soon one of them was down in the grave, and everyone was so still you could hear the slightest sound, that shovel digging in there and the earth thrown up in a heap. I can't tell you what it was like. Here was the sun high above us and not a cloud in the sky, and all of them standing around, holding onto one another now, and even that pathetic woman …' He stopped now, because his eyes had fallen on Emily. I just sat there waiting for him. I could hear the whiskey when he lifted the flask again, and I felt glad for him that there was so much there, that he could drink it and deaden this pain. 'It might as well have been midnight on that hill,' he said, looking at me, his voice very low. 'That's how it felt. And then I could hear this fellow in the grave. He was cracking the coffin lid with his shovel! Then out came the broken boards. He was just tossing them out, right and left. And suddenly he let out an awful cry! The other fellows drew up close, and all at once there was a rush to the grave; and then they all fell back like a wave, all of them crying out, and some of them turning and trying to push away. And the poor woman, she was wild, bending her knees, and trying to get free of those men that were holding onto her. Well, I couldn't help but go up. I don't suppose anything could have kept me away; and I'll tell you that's the first time I've ever done such a thing, and, God help me, it's to be the last. Now, you must believe me, you must! But there, right there in that coffin, with that fellow standing on

the broken boards over her feet, was the dead woman, and I tell you … I tell you she was as fresh, as pink'—his voice cracked, and he sat there, his eyes wide, his hand poised as if he held something invisible in his fingers, pleading with me to believe him—'as pink as if she were alive! Buried six months! And there she lay! The shroud was thrown back off her, and her hands lay on her breast just as if she were asleep.'

"He sighed. His hand dropped to his leg and he shook his head, and for a moment he just sat staring. 'I swear to you!' he said. 'And then this fellow who was in the grave, he bent down and lifted the dead woman's hand. I tell you that arm moved as freely as my arm! And he held her hand out as if he were looking at her nails. Then he shouted; and that woman beside the grave, she was kicking at those fellows and shoving at the earth with her foot, so it fell right down in the corpse's face and hair. And oh, she was so pretty, that dead woman; oh, if you could have seen her, and what they did then!'

" 'Tell me what they did,' I said to him softly. But I knew before he said it.

" 'I tell you …' he said. 'We don't know the meaning of something like that until we see it!' And he looked at me, his eyebrow arched as if he were confiding a terrible secret. 'We just don't know.'

" 'No, we don't,' I said.

" 'I'll tell you. They took a stake, a wooden stake, mind you; and this one in the grave, he took the stake with a hammer and he put it right to her breast. I didn't believe it! And then with one great blow he drove it right into her. I tell you, I couldn't have moved even if I'd wanted to; I was rooted there. And then that fellow, that beastly fellow, he reached up for his shovel and with both his arms he drove it sharp, right into the dead woman's throat. The head was off like that.' He shut his eyes, his face contorted, and put his head to the side.

"I looked at him, but I wasn't seeing him at all. I was seeing this woman in her grave with the head severed, and I was feeling the most keen revulsion inside myself, as if a hand were pressing on my throat and my insides were coming up inside me and I couldn't breathe. Then I felt Claudia's lip against my wrist. She was staring at Morgan, and apparently she had been for some time.

"Slowly Morgan looked up at me, his eyes wild. 'It's what they want

to do with *her*,' he said. 'With Emily! Well I won't let them.' He shook his head adamantly. 'I won't let them. You've got to help me, Louis.' His lips were trembling, and his face so distorted now by his sudden desperation that I might have recoiled from it despite myself. 'The same blood flows in our veins, you and I. I mean, French, English, we're civilized men, Louis. They're savages!'

" 'Try to be calm now, Morgan,' I said, reaching out for him. 'I want you to tell me what happened then. You and Emily …'

"He was struggling for his bottle. I drew it out of his pocket, and he took off the cap. 'That's a fellow, Louis; that's a friend,' he said emphatically. 'You see, I took her away fast. They were going to burn that corpse right there in the cemetery; and Emily was not to see that, not while I …' He shook his head. 'There wasn't a carriage to be found that would take us out of here; not a single one of them would leave now for the two days' drive to get us to a decent place!'

" 'But how did they explain it to you, Morgan?' I insisted. I could see he did not have much time left.

" 'Vampires!' he burst out, the whiskey sloshing on his hand. 'Vampires, Louis. Can you believe that!' And he gestured to the door with the bottle. 'A plague of vampires! All this in whispers, as if the devil himself were listening at the door! Of course, God have mercy, they put a stop to it. That unfortunate woman in the cemetery, they'd stopped her from clawing her way up nightly to feed on the rest of us!' He put the bottle to his lips. 'Oh … God …' he moaned.

"I watched him drink, patiently waiting.

" 'And Emily …' he continued. 'She thought it fascinating. What with the fire out there and a decent dinner and a proper glass of wine. She hadn't seen that woman! She hadn't seen what they'd done,' he said desperately. 'Oh, I wanted to get out of here; I offered them money. "If it's over," I kept saying to them, "one of you ought to want this money, a small fortune just to drive us out of here.' "

" 'But it wasn't over …' I whispered.

"And I could see the tears gathering in his eyes, his mouth twisting with pain.

" 'How did it happen to her?' I asked him.

" 'I don't know,' he gasped, shaking his head, the flask pressed to his forehead as if it were something cool, refreshing, when it was not.

“ ‘It came into the inn?’

“ ‘They said she went out to it,’ he confessed, the tears coursing down his cheeks. ‘Everything was locked! They saw to that. Doors, windows! Then it was morning and they were all shouting, and she was gone. The window stood wide open, and she wasn’t there. I didn’t even take time for my robe. I was running. I came to a dead halt over her, out there, behind the inn. My foot all but came down on her … she was just lying there under the peach trees. She held an empty cup. Clinging to it, an empty cup! They said it lured her … she was trying to give it water….’

“The flask slipped from his hands. He clapped his hands over his ears, his body bent, his head bowed.

“For a long time I sat there watching him; I had no words to say to him. And when he cried softly that they wanted to desecrate her, that they said she, Emily, was now a vampire, I assured him softly, though I don’t think he ever heard me, that she was not.

“He moved forward finally, as if he might fall. He appeared to be reaching for the candle, and before his arm rested on the buffet, his finger touched it so the hot wax extinguished the tiny bit that was left of the wick. We were in darkness then, and his head had fallen on his arm.

“All of the light of the room seemed gathered now in Claudia’s eyes. But as the silence lengthened and I sat there, wondering, hoping Morgan wouldn’t lift his head again, the woman came to the door. Her candle illuminated him, drunk, asleep.

“ ‘You go now,’ she said to me. Dark figures crowded around her, and the old wooden inn was alive with the shuffling of men and women. ‘Go by the fire!’

“ ‘What are you going to do!’ I demanded of her, rising and holding Claudia. ‘I want to know what you propose to do!’

“ ‘Go by the fire,’ she commanded.

“ ‘No, don’t do this,’ I said. But she narrowed her eyes and bared her teeth. ‘You go!’ she growled.

“ ‘Morgan,’ I said to him; but he didn’t hear me, he couldn’t hear me.

“ ‘Leave him be,’ said the woman fiercely.

“ ‘But it’s stupid, what you’re doing; don’t you understand? This woman’s dead!’ I pleaded with her.

“ ‘Louis,’ Claudia whispered, so that they couldn’t hear her, her arm tightening around my neck beneath the fur of my hood. ‘Let these people alone.’

“The others were moving into the room now, encircling the table, their faces grim as they looked at us.

“ ‘But where do these vampires come from!’ I whispered. ‘You’ve searched your cemetery! If it’s vampires, where do they hide from you? This woman can’t do you harm. Hunt your vampires if you must.’

“ ‘By day,’ she said gravely, winking her eye and slowly nodding her head. ‘By day. We get them, by day.’

“ ‘Where, out there in the graveyard, digging up the graves of your own villagers?’

“She shook her head. ‘The ruins,’ she said. ‘It was always the ruins. We were wrong. In my grandfather’s time it was the ruins, and it is the ruins again. We’ll take them down stone by stone if we have to. But you … you go now. Because if you don’t go, we’ll drive you out there into that dark now!’

“And then out from behind her apron she drew her clenched fist with the stake in it and held it up in the flickering light of the candle. ‘You hear me, you go!’ she said; and the men pressed in close behind her, their mouths set, their eyes blazing in the light.

“ ‘Yes …’ I said to her. ‘Out there. I would prefer that. Out there.’ And I swept past her, almost throwing her aside, seeing them scuttle back to make way. I had my hand on the latch of the inn door and slid it back with one quick gesture.

“ ‘No!’ cried the woman in her guttural German. ‘You’re mad!’ And she rushed up to me and then stared at the latch, dumfounded. She threw her hands up against the rough boards of the door. ‘Do you know what you do!’

“ ‘Where are the ruins?’ I asked her calmly. ‘How far? Do they lie to the left of the road, or to the right?’

“ ‘No, no.’ She shook her head violently. I pried the door back and felt the cold blast of air on my face. One of the women said something sharp and angry from the wall, and one of the children moaned in its sleep. ‘I’m going. I want one thing from you. Tell me where the ruins lie, so I may stay clear of them. Tell me.’

“ ‘You don’t know, you don’t know,’ she said; and then I laid my

hand on her warm wrist and drew her slowly through the door, her feet scraping on the boards, her eyes wild. The men moved nearer but, as she stepped out against her will into the night, they stopped. She tossed her head, her hair falling down into her eyes, her eyes glaring at my hand and at my face. 'Tell me …' I said.

"I could see she was staring not at me but at Claudia. Claudia had turned towards her, and the light from the fire was on her face. The woman did not see the rounded cheeks nor the pursed lips, I knew, but Claudia's eyes, which were gazing at her with a dark, demonic intelligence. The woman's teeth bit down into the flesh of her lip.

" 'To the north or south?'

" 'To the north …' she whispered.

" 'To the left or the right?'

" 'The left.'

" 'And how far?'

"Her hand struggled desperately. 'Three miles,' she gasped. And I released her, so that she fell back against the door, her eyes wide with fear and confusion. I had turned to go, but suddenly behind me she cried out for me to wait. I turned to see she'd ripped the crucifix from the beam over her head, and she had it thrust out towards me now. And out of the dark nightmare landscape of my memory I saw Babette gazing at me as she had so many years ago, saying those words, *'Get thee behind me, Satan.*' But the woman's face was desperate. 'Take it, please, in the name of God,' she said. 'And ride fast.' And the door shut, leaving Claudia and me in total darkness."

"In minutes the tunnel of the night closed upon the weak lanterns of our carriage, as if the village had never existed. We lurched forward, around a bend, the springs creaking, the dim moon revealing for an instant the pale outline of the mountains beyond the pines. I could not stop thinking of Morgan, stop hearing his voice. It was all tangled with my own horrified anticipation of meeting the thing which had killed Emily, the thing which was unquestionably one of our own. But Claudia was in a frenzy. If she could have driven the horses herself, she would have taken the reins. Again and again she urged me to use the whip. She struck savagely at the few low branches that dipped

suddenly into the lamps before our faces; and the arm that clung to my waist on the rocking bench was as firm as iron.

"I remember the road turning sharply, the lanterns clattering, and Claudia calling out over the wind: 'There, Louis, do you see it?' And I jerked hard on the reins.

"She was on her knees, pressed against me, and the carriage was swaying like a ship at sea.

"A great fleecy cloud had released the moon, and high above us loomed the dark outline of the tower. One long window showed the pale sky beyond it. I sat there, clutching the bench, trying to steady a motion that continued in my head as the carriage settled on its springs. One of the horses whinnied. Then everything was still.

"Claudia was saying. 'Louis, come.…'

"I whispered something, a swift irrational negation. I had the distinct and terrifying impression that Morgan was near to me, talking to me in that low, impassioned way he'd pleaded with me in the inn. Not a living creature stirred in the night around us. There was only the wind and the soft rustling of the leaves.

" 'Do you think he knows we're coming?' I asked, my voice unfamiliar to me over this wind. I was in that little parlor, as if there were no escape from it, as if this dense forest were not real. I think I shuddered. And then I felt Claudia's hand very gently touch the hand I lifted to my eyes. The thin pines were billowing behind her and the rustle of the leaves grew louder, as if a great mouth sucked the breeze and began a whirlwind. 'They'll bury her at the crossroads? Is that what they'll do? An Englishwoman!' I whispered.

" 'Would that I had your size …' Claudia was saying. 'And would that you had my heart. Oh, Louis.…' And her head inclined to me now, so like the attitude of the vampire bending to kiss that I shrank back from her; but her lips only gently pressed my own, finding a part there to suck the breath and let it flow back into me as my arms enclosed her. 'Let me lead you …' she pleaded. 'There's no turning back now. Take me in your arms,' she said, 'and let me down, on the road.'

"But it seemed an eternity that I just sat there feeling her lips on my face and on my eyelids. Then she moved, the softness of her small

body suddenly snatched from me, in a movement so graceful and swift that she seemed now poised in the air beside the carriage, her hand clutching mine for an instant, then letting it go. And then I looked down to see her looking up at me, standing on the road in the shuddering pool of light beneath the lantern. She beckoned to me, as she stepped backwards, one small boot behind the other. 'Louis, come down …' until she threatened to vanish into the darkness. And in a second I'd unfastened the lamp from its hook, and I stood beside her in the tall grass.

" 'Don't you sense the danger?' I whispered to her. 'Can't you breathe it like the air?' One of those quick, elusive smiles played on her lips, as she turned towards the slope. The lantern pitched a pathway through the rising forest. One small, white hand drew the wool of her cape close, and she moved forward.

" 'Wait only for a moment.…'

" 'Fear's your enemy …' she answered, but she did not stop.

"She proceeded ahead of the light, feet sure, even as the tall grass gave way gradually to low heaps of rubble, and the forest thickened, and the distant tower vanished with the fading of the moon and the great weaving of the branches overhead. Soon the sound and scent of the horses died on the low wind. 'Be *en garde*,' Claudia whispered, as she moved, relentlessly, pausing only now and again where the tangled vines and rock made it seem for moments there was a shelter. But the ruins were ancient. Whether plague or fire or a foreign enemy had ravaged the town, we couldn't know. Only the monastery truly remained.

"Now something whispered in the dark that was like the wind and the leaves, but it was neither. I saw Claudia's back straighten, saw the flash of her white palm as she slowed her step. Then I knew it was water, winding its way slowly down the mountain, and I saw it far ahead through the black trunks, a straight, moonlit waterfall descending to a boiling pool below. Claudia emerged silhouetted against the fall, her hand clutching a bare root in the moist earth beside it; and now I saw her climbing hand over hand up the overgrown cliff, her arm trembling ever so slightly, her small boots dangling, then digging in to hold, then swinging free again. The water was cold, and it made the air fragrant and light all around it, so that

for a moment I rested. Nothing stirred around me in the forest. I listened, senses quietly separating the tune of the water from the tune of the leaves, but nothing else stirred. And then it struck me gradually, like a chill coming over my arms and my throat and finally my face, that the night was too desolate, too lifeless. It was as if even the birds had shunned this place, as well as all the myriad creatures that should have been moving about the banks of this stream. But Claudia, above me on the ledge, was reaching for the lantern, her cape brushing my face. I lifted it, so that suddenly she sprang into light, like an eerie cherub. She put her hand out for me as if, despite her small size, she could help me up the embankment. In a moment we were moving on again, over the stream, up the mountain. 'Do you sense it?' I whispered. 'It's too still.'

"But her hand tightened on mine, as if to say, 'Quiet.' The hill was growing steeper, and the quiet was unnerving. I tried to stare at the limits of the light, to see each new bark as it loomed before us. Something did move, and I reached for Claudia, almost pulling her sharply near to me. But it was only a reptile, shooting through the leaves with a whip of his tail. The leaves settled. But Claudia moved back against me, under the folds of my cape, a hand firmly clasping the cloth of my coat; and she seemed to propel me forward, my cape falling over the loose fabric of her own.

"Soon the scent of the water was gone, and when the moon shone clear for an instant I could see right ahead of us what appeared to be a break in the woods. Claudia firmly clasped the lantern and shut its metal door. I moved to stop this, my hand struggling with hers; but then she said to me quietly, 'Close your eyes for an instant, and then open them slowly. And when you do, you will see it.'

"A chill rose over me as I did this, during which I held fast to her shoulder. But then I opened my eyes and saw beyond the distant bark of the trees the long, low walls of the monastery and the high square top of the massive tower. Far beyond it, above an immense black valley, gleamed the snow-capped peaks of the mountains. 'Come,' she said to me, 'quiet, as if your body has no weight.' And she started without hesitation right towards those walls, right towards whatever might have been waiting in their shelter.

"In moments we had found the gap that would admit us, the great

opening that was blacker still than the walls around it, the vines encrusting its edges as if to hold the stones in place. High above, through the open roof, the damp smell of the stones strong in my nostrils, I saw, beyond the streaks of clouds, a faint sprinkling of stars. A great staircase moved upward, from corner to corner, all the way to the narrow windows that looked out upon the valley. And beneath the first rise of the stair, out of the gloom emerged the vast, dark opening to the monastery's remaining rooms.

"Claudia was still now, as if she had become the stones. In the damp enclosure not even the soft tendrils of her hair moved. She was listening. And then I was listening with her. There was only the low backdrop of the wind. She moved, slowly, deliberately, and with one pointed foot gradually cleared a space in the moist earth in front of her. I could see a flat stone there, and it sounded hollow as she gently tapped it with her heel. Then I could see the broad size of it and how it rose at one distant corner; and an image came to mind, dreadful in its sharpness, of that band of men and women from the village surrounding the stone, raising it with a giant lever. Claudia's eyes moved over the staircase and then fixed on the crumbling doorway beneath it. The moon shone for an instant through a lofty window. Then Claudia moved, so suddenly that she stood beside me without having made a sound. 'Do you hear it?' she whispered. 'Listen.'

"It was so low no mortal could have heard it. And it did not come from the ruins. It came from far off, not the long, meandering way that we had come up the slope, but another way, up the spine of the hill, directly from the village. Just a rustling now, a scraping, but it was steady; and then slowly the round tramping of a foot began to distinguish itself. Claudia's hand tightened on mine, and with a gentle pressure she moved me silently beneath the slope of the stairway. I could see the folds of her dress heave slightly beneath the edge of her cape. The tramp of the feet grew louder, and I began to sense that one step preceded the other very sharply, the second dragging slowly across the earth. It was a limping step, drawing nearer and nearer over the low whistling of the wind. My own heart beat hard against my chest, and I felt the veins in my temples tighten, a tremor passing through my limbs, so that I could feel the fabric of my shirt against me, the stiff cut of the collar, the very scraping of the buttons against

my cape.

"Then a faint scent came with the wind. It was the scent of blood, at once arousing me, against my will, the warm, sweet scent of human blood, blood that was spilling, flowing; and then I sensed the smell of living flesh and I heard in time with the feet a dry, hoarse breathing. But with it came another sound, faint and intermingled with the first, as the feet tramped closer and closer to the walls, the sound of yet another creature's halting, strained breath. And I could hear the heart of that creature, beating irregularly, a fearful throbbing; but beneath that was another heart, a steady, pulsing heart growing louder and louder, a heart as strong as my own! Then, in the jagged gap through which we'd come, I saw him.

"His great, huge shoulder emerged first and one long, loose arm and hand, the fingers curved; then I saw his head. Over his other shoulder he was carrying a body. In the broken doorway he straightened and shifted the weight and stared directly into the darkness towards us. Every muscle in me became iron as I looked at him, saw the outline of his head looming there against the sky. But nothing of his face was visible except the barest glint of the moon on his eye as if it were a fragment of glass. Then I saw it glint on his buttons and heard them rustle as his arm swung free again and one long leg bent as he moved forward and proceeded into the tower right towards us.

"I held fast to Claudia, ready in an instant to shove her behind me, to step forward to meet him. But then I saw with astonishment that his eyes did not see me as I saw him, and he was trudging under the weight of the body he carried towards the monastery door. The moon fell now on his bowed head, on a mass of wavy black hair that touched his bent shoulder, and on the full black sleeve of his coat. I saw something about his coat; the flap of it was badly torn and the sleeve appeared to be ripped from the seam. I almost fancied I could see his flesh through the shoulder. The human in his arms stirred now, and moaned miserably. And the figure stopped for a moment and appeared to stroke the human with his hand. And at that moment I stepped forward from the wall and went towards him.

"No words passed my lips: I knew none to say. I only knew that I moved into the light of the moon before him and that his dark, wavy head rose with a jerk, and that I saw his eyes.

“For one full instant he looked at me, and I saw the light shining in those eyes and then glinting on two sharp canine teeth; and then a low strangled cry seemed to rise from the depths of his throat which, for a second, I thought to be my own. The human crashed to the stones, a shuddering moan escaping his lips. And the vampire lunged at me, that strangled cry rising again as the stench of fetid breath rose in my nostrils and the clawlike fingers cut into the very fur of my cape. I fell backwards, my head cracking against the wall, my hands grabbing at his head, clutching a mass of tangled filth that was his hair. At once the wet, rotting fabric of his coat ripped in my grasp, but the arm that held me was like iron; and, as I struggled to pull the head backwards, the fangs touched the flesh of my throat. Claudia screamed behind him. Something hit his head hard, which stopped him suddenly; and then he was hit again. He turned as if to strike her a blow, and I sent my fist against his face as powerfully as I could. Again a stone struck him as she darted away, and I threw my full weight against him and felt his crippled leg buckling. I remember pounding his head over and over, my fingers all but pulling that filthy hair out by the roots, his fangs projected towards me, his hands scratching, clawing at me. We rolled over and over, until I pinned him down again and the moon shone full on his face. And I realized, through my frantic sobbing breaths, what it was I held in my arms. The two huge eyes bulged from naked sockets and two small, hideous holes made up his nose; only a putrid, leathery flesh enclosed his skull, and the rank, rotting rags that covered his frame were thick with earth and slime and blood. I was battling a mindless, animated corpse. But no more.

“From above him, a sharp stone fell full on his forehead, and a fount of blood gushed from between his eyes. He struggled, but another stone crashed with such force I heard the bones shatter. Blood seeped out beneath the matted hair, soaking into the stones and grass. The chest throbbed beneath me, but the arms shuddered and grew still. I drew up, my throat knotted, my heart burning, every fiber of my body aching from the struggle. For a moment the great tower seemed to tilt, but then it righted itself. I lay against the wall, staring at the thing, the blood rushing in my ears. Gradually I realized that Claudia knelt on his chest, that she was probing the mass of hair and bone that had been his head. She was scattering the fragments of his skull. We had

met the European vampire, the creature of the Old World. He was dead."

"For a long time I lay on the broad stairway, oblivious to the thick earth that covered it, my head feeling very cool against the earth, just looking at him. Claudia stood at his feet, hands hanging limply at her sides. I saw her eyes close for an instant, two tiny lids that made her face like a small, moonlit white statue as she stood there. And then her body began to rock very slowly. 'Claudia,' I called to her. She awakened. She was gaunt such as I had seldom seen her. She pointed to the human who lay far across the floor of the tower near the wall. He was still motionless, but I knew that he was not dead. I'd forgotten him completely, my body aching as it was, my senses still clouded with the stench of the bleeding corpse. But now I saw the man. And in some part of my mind I knew what his fate would be, and I cared nothing for it. I knew it was only an hour at most before dawn.

" 'He's moving,' she said to me. And I tried to rise off the steps. Better that he not wake, better that he never wake at all, I wanted to say; she was walking towards him, passing indifferently the dead thing that had nearly killed us both. I saw her back and the man stirring in front of her, his foot twisting in the grass. I don't know what I expected to see as I drew nearer, what terrified peasant or farmer, what miserable wretch that had already seen the face of that thing that had brought it here. And for a moment I did not realize who it was that lay there, that it was Morgan, whose pale face showed now in the moon, the marks of the vampire on his throat, his blue eyes staring mute and expressionless before him.

"Suddenly they widened as I drew close to him. 'Louis!' he whispered in astonishment, his lips moving as if he were trying to frame words but could not. 'Louis …' he said again; and then I saw he was smiling. A dry, rasping sound came from him as he struggled to his knees, and he reached out for me. His blanched, contorted face strained as the sound died in his throat, and he nodded desperately, his red hair loose and dishevelled, falling into his eyes. I turned and ran from him. Claudia shot past me, gripping me by the arm. 'Do you see the color of the sky!' she hissed at me. Morgan fell forward on his

hands behind her. 'Louis,' he called out again, the light gleaming in his eyes. He seemed blind to the ruins, blind to the night, blind to everything but a face he recognized, that one word again issuing from his lips. I put my hands to my ears, backing away from him. His hand was bloody now as he lifted it. I could smell the blood as well as see it. And Claudia could smell it, too.

"Swiftly she descended on him, pushing him down against the stones, her white fingers moving through his red hair. He tried to raise his head. His outstretched hands made a frame about her face, and then suddenly he began to stroke her yellow curls. She sank her teeth, and the hands dropped helpless at his side.

"I was at the edge of the forest when she caught up with me. 'You must go to him, take him,' she commanded. I could smell the blood on her lips, see the warmth in her cheeks. Her wrist burned against me, yet I did not move. 'Listen to me, Louis,' she said, her voice at once desperate and angry. 'I left him for you, but he's dying … there's no time.'

"I swung her up into my arms and started the long descent. No need for caution, no need for stealth, no preternatural host waiting. The door to the secrets of eastern Europe was shut against us. I was plowing through the dark to the road. 'Will you listen to me,' she cried out. But I went on in spite of her, her hands clutching at my coat, my hair. 'Do you see the sky, do you see it!' she railed.

"She was all but sobbing against my breast as I splashed through the icy stream and ran headlong in search of the lantern at the road.

"The sky was a dark blue when I found the carriage. 'Give me the crucifix,' I shouted to Claudia as I cracked the whip. 'There's only one place to go.' She was thrown against me as the carriage rocked into its turn and headed for the village.

"I had the eeriest feeling then as I could see the mist rising amongst the dark brown trees. The air was cold and fresh and the birds had begun. It was as if the sun were rising. Yet I did not care. And yet I knew that it was not rising, that there was still time. It was a marvellous, quieting feeling. The scrapes and cuts burned my flesh and my heart ached with hunger, but my head felt marvellously light. Until I saw the gray shapes of the inn and the steeple of the church; they were too clear. And the stars above were fading fast.

“In a moment I was hammering on the door of the inn. As it opened, I put my hood up around my face tightly and held Claudia beneath my cape in a bundle. ‘Your village is rid of the vampire!’ I said to the woman, who stared at me in astonishment. I was clutching the crucifix which she’d given me. ‘Thanks be to God he’s dead. You’ll find the remains in the tower. Tell this to your people at once.’ I pushed past her into the inn.

“The gathering was roused into commotion instantly, but I insisted that I was tired beyond endurance. I must pray and rest. They were to get my chest from the carriage and bring it to a decent room where I might sleep. But a message was to come for me from the bishop at Varna and for this, and this only, was I to be awakened. ‘Tell the good father when he arrives that the vampire is dead, and then give him food and drink and have him wait for me,’ I said. The woman was crossing herself. ‘You understand,’ I said to her, as I hurried towards the stairs, ‘I couldn’t reveal my mission to you until after the vampire had been.…’ ‘Yes, yes,’ she said to me. ‘But you are not a priest … the child!’ ‘No, only too well-versed in these matters. The Unholy One is no match for me,’ I said to her. I stopped. The door of the little parlor stood open, with nothing but a white square of cloth on the oak table. ‘Your friend,’ she said to me, and she looked at the floor. ‘He rushed out into the night … he was mad.’ I only nodded.

“I could hear them shouting when I shut the door of the room. They seemed to be running in all directions; and then came the sharp sound of the church bell in the rapid peal of alarm. Claudia had slipped down from my arms, and she was staring at me gravely as I bolted the door. Very slowly I unlatched the shutter of the window. An icy light seeped into the room. Still she watched me. Then I felt her at my side. I looked down to see she was holding out her hand to me. ‘Here,’ she said. She must have seen I was confused. I felt so weak that her face was shimmering as I looked at it, the blue of her eyes dancing on her white cheeks.

“ ‘Drink,’ she whispered, drawing nearer. ‘Drink.’ And she held the soft, tender flesh of the wrist towards me. ‘No, I know what to do; haven’t I done it in the past?’ I said to her. It was she who bolted the window tight, latched the heavy door. I remember kneeling by the small grate and feeling the ancient panelling. It was rotten behind the

varnished surface, and it gave under my fingers. Suddenly I saw my fist go through it and felt the sharp jab of splinters in my wrist. And then I remember feeling in the dark and catching hold of something warm and pulsing. A rush of cold, damp air hit my face and I saw a darkness rising about me, cool and damp as if this air were a silent water that seeped through the broken wall and filled the room. The room was gone. I was drinking from a never-ending stream of warm blood that flowed down my throat and through my pulsing heart and through my veins, so that my skin warmed against this cool, dark water. And now the pulse of the blood I drank slackened, and all my body cried out for it not to slacken, my heart pounding, trying to make that heart pound with it. I felt myself rising, as if I were floating in the darkness, and then the darkness, like the heartbeat, began to fade. Something glimmered in my swoon; it shivered ever so slightly with the pounding of feet on the stairs, on the floorboards, the rolling of wheels and horses' hooves on the earth, and it gave off a tinkling sound as it shivered. It had a small wooden frame around it, and in that frame there emerged, through the glimmer, the figure of a man. He was familiar. I knew his long, slender build, his black, wavy hair. Then I saw that his green eyes were gazing at me. And in his teeth, in his teeth, he was clutching something huge and soft and brown, which he pressed tightly with both his hands. It was a rat. A great loathsome brown rat he held, its feet poised, its mouth agape, its great curved tail frozen in the air. Crying out, he threw it down and stared aghast, blood flowing from his open mouth.

"A searing light hit my eyes. I struggled to open them against it, and the entire room was glowing. Claudia was right in front of me. She was not a tiny child, but someone much larger who drew me forward towards her with both hands. She was on her knees, and my arms encircled her waist. Then darkness descended, and I had her folded against me. The lock slid into place. Numbness came over my limbs, and then the paralysis of oblivion."

And that was how it was throughout Transylvania and Hungary and Bulgaria, and through all those countries where the peasants know that the living dead walk, and the legends of the vampires abound. In every village where we did encounter the vampire, it was the same."

"A mindless corpse?" the boy asked.

"Always," said the vampire. "When we found these creatures at all. I remember a handful at most. Sometimes we only watched them from a distance, all too familiar with their wagging, bovine heads, their haggard shoulders, their rotted, ragged clothing. In one hamlet it was a woman, only dead for perhaps a few months; the villagers had glimpsed her and knew her by name. It was she who gave us the only hope we were to experience after the monster in Transylvania, and that hope came to nothing. She fled from us through the forest and we ran after her, reaching out for her long, black hair. Her white burial gown was soaked with dried blood, her fingers caked with the dirt of the grave. And her eyes … they were mindless, empty, two pools that reflected the moon. No secrets, no truths, only despair."

"But what were these creatures? Why were they like this?" asked the boy, his lips grimacing with disgust. "I don't understand. How could they be so different from you and Claudia, yet exist?"

"I had my theories. So did Claudia. But the main thing which I had then was despair. And in despair the recurring fear that we had killed the only other vampire like us, Lestat. Yet it seemed unthinkable. Had he possessed the wisdom of a sorcerer, the powers of a witch … I might have come to understand that he had somehow managed to wrest a conscious life from the same forces that governed these monsters. But he was only Lestat, as I've described him to you: devoid of mystery, finally, his limits as familiar to me in those months in eastern Europe as his charms. I wanted to forget him, and yet it seemed I thought of him always. It was as if the empty nights were made for thinking of him. And sometimes I found myself so vividly aware of him it was as if he had only just left the room and the ring of his voice were still there. And somehow there was a disturbing comfort in that, and, despite myself, I'd envision his face—not as it had been the last night in the fire, but on other nights, that last

evening he spent with us at home, his hand playing idly with the keys of the spinet, his head tilted to one side. A sickness rose in me more wretched than anguish when I saw what my dreams were doing. I wanted him alive! In the dark nights of eastern Europe, Lestat was the only vampire I'd found.

"But Claudia's waking thoughts were of a far more practical nature. Over and over, she had me recount that night in the hotel in New Orleans when she'd become a vampire, and over and over she searched the process for some clue to why these things we met in the country graveyards had no mind. What if, after Lestat's infusion of blood, she'd been put in a grave, closed up in it until the preternatural drive for blood caused her to break the stone door of the vault that held her, what then would her mind have been, starved, as it were, to the breaking point? Her body might have saved itself when no mind remained. And through the world she would have blundered, ravaging where she could, as we saw these creatures do. That was how she explained them. But what had fathered them, how had they begun? That was what she couldn't explain and what gave her hope of discovery when I, from sheer exhaustion, had none. 'They spawn their own kind, it's obvious, but where does it begin?' she asked. And then, somewhere near the outskirts of Vienna, she put the question to me which had never before passed her lips. Why could I not do what Lestat had done with both of us? Why could I not make another vampire? I don't know why at first I didn't even understand her, except that in loathing what I was with every impulse in me I had a particular fear of that question, which was almost worse than any other. You see, I didn't understand something strong in myself. Loneliness had caused me to think on that very possibility years before, when I had fallen under the spell of Babette Freniere. But I held it locked inside of me like an unclean passion. I shunned mortal life after her. I killed strangers. And the Englishman Morgan, because I knew him, was as safe from my fatal embrace as Babette had been. They both caused me too much pain. Death I couldn't think of giving them. Life in death—it was monstrous. I turned away from Claudia. I wouldn't answer her. But angry as she was, wretched as was her impatience, she could not stand this turning away. And she drew near to me, comforting me with her hands and her eyes as if she were my

loving daughter.

" 'Don't think on it, Louis,' she said later, when we were comfortably situated in a small suburban hotel. I was standing at the window, looking at the distant glow of Vienna, so eager for that city, its civilization, its sheer size. The night was clear and the haze of the city was on the sky. 'Let me put your conscience at ease, though I'll never know precisely what it is,' she said, into my ear, her hand stroking my hair.

" 'Do that, Claudia,' I answered her. 'Put it at ease. Tell me that you'll never speak to me of making vampires again.'

" 'I want no orphans such as ourselves!' she said, all too quickly. My words annoyed her. My feeling annoyed her. 'I want answers, knowledge,' she said. 'But tell me, Louis, what makes you so certain that you've never done this without your knowing it?'

"Again there was that deliberate obtuseness in me. I must look at her as if I didn't know the meaning of her words. I wanted her to be silent and to be near me, and for us to be in Vienna. I drew her hair back and let my fingertips touch her long lashes and looked away at the light.

" 'After all, what does it take to make those creatures?' she went on. 'Those vagabond monsters? How many drops of your blood intermingled with a man's blood … and what kind of heart to survive that first attack?'

"I could feel her watching my face, and I stood there, my arms folded, my back to the side of the window, looking out.

" 'That pale-faced Emily, that miserable Englishman …' she said, oblivious to the flicker of pain in my face. 'Their hearts were nothing, and it was the fear of death as much as the drawing of blood that killed them. The idea killed them. But what of the hearts that survive? Are you sure you haven't fathered a league of monsters who, from time to time, struggled vainly and instinctively to follow in your footsteps? What was their life span, these orphans you left behind you —a day there, a week here, before the sun burnt them to ashes or some mortal victim cut them down?'

" 'Stop it,' I begged her. 'If you knew how completely I envision everything you describe, you would not describe it. I tell you it's never happened! Lestat drained me to the point of death to make me a

vampire. And gave back all that blood mingled with his own. That is how it was done!'

"She looked away from me, and then it seemed she was looking down at her hands. I think I heard her sigh, but I wasn't certain. And then her eyes moved over me, slowly, up and down, before they finally met mine. Then it seemed she smiled. 'Don't be frightened of my fancy,' she said softly. 'After all, the final decision will always rest with you. Is that not so?'

" 'I don't understand,' I said. And a cold laughter erupted from her as she turned away.

" 'Can you picture it?' she said, so softly I scarcely heard. 'A coven of children? That is all I could provide.…'

" 'Claudia,' I murmured.

" 'Rest easy,' she said abruptly, her voice still low. 'I tell you that as much as I hated Lestat …' She stopped.

" 'Yes …' I whispered. 'Yes.…'

" 'As much as I hated him, with him we were … complete.' She looked at me, her eyelids quivering, as if the slight rise in her voice had disturbed her even as it had disturbed me.

" 'No, only you were complete …' I said to her. 'Because there were two of us, one on either side of you, from the beginning.'

"I thought I saw her smile then, but I was not certain. She bowed her head, but I could see her eyes moving beneath the lashes, back and forth, back and forth. Then she said, 'The two of you at my side. Do you picture that as you say it, as you picture everything else?'

"One night, long gone by, was as material to me as if I were in it still, but I didn't tell her. She was desperate in that night, running away from Lestat, who had urged her to kill a woman in the street from whom she'd backed off, clearly alarmed. I was sure the woman had resembled her mother. Finally she'd escaped us entirely, but I'd found her in the armoire, beneath the jackets and coats, clinging to her doll. And, carrying her to her crib, I sat beside her and sang to her, and she stared at me as she clung to that doll, as if trying blindly and mysteriously to calm a pain she herself did not begin to understand. Can you picture it, this splendid domesticity, dim lamps, the vampire father singing to the vampire daughter? Only the doll had a human face, only the doll.

“ ‘But we must get away from here!’ said the present Claudia suddenly, as though the thought had just taken shape in her mind with a special urgency. She had her hand to her ear, as if clutching it against some awful sound. ‘From the roads behind us, from what I see in your eyes now, because I give voice to thoughts which are nothing more to me than plain considerations …’

“ ‘Forgive me,’ I said as gently as I could, withdrawing slowly from that long-ago room, that ruffled crib, that frightened monster child and monster voice. And Lestat, where was Lestat? A match striking in the other room, a shadow leaping suddenly into life, as light and dark come alive where there was only darkness.

“ ‘No, you forgive me …’ she was saying to me now, in this little hotel room near the first capital of western Europe. ‘No, we forgive each other. But we don’t forgive him; and, without him, you see what things are between us.’

“ ‘Only now because we are tired, and things are dreary …’ I said to her and to myself, because there was no one else in the world to whom I could speak.

“ ‘Ah, yes; and that is what must end. I tell you, I begin to understand that we have done it all wrong from the start. We must bypass Vienna. We need our language, our people. I want to go directly now to Paris.’ ”

PART III

I think the very name of Paris brought a rush of pleasure to me that was extraordinary, a relief so near to well-being that I was amazed, not only that I could feel it, but that I'd so nearly forgotten it.

"I wonder if you can understand what it meant. My expression can't convey it now, for what Paris means to me is very different from what it meant then, in those days, at that hour; but still, even now, to think of it, I feel something akin to that happiness. And I've more reason now than ever to say that happiness is not what I will ever know, or will ever deserve to know. I am not so much in love with happiness. Yet the name Paris makes me feel it.

"Mortal beauty often makes me ache, and mortal grandeur can fill me with that longing I felt so hopelessly in the Mediterranean Sea. But Paris, Paris drew me close to her heart, so I forgot myself entirely. Forgot the damned and questing preternatural thing that doted on mortal skin and mortal clothing. Paris overwhelmed, and lightened and rewarded more richly than any promise.

"It was the mother of New Orleans, understand that first; it had given New Orleans its life, its first populace; and it was what New Orleans had for so long tried to be. But New Orleans, though beautiful and desperately alive, was desperately fragile. There was something forever savage and primitive there, something that threatened the exotic and sophisticated life both from within and without. Not an inch of those wooden streets nor a brick of the crowded Spanish houses had not been bought from the fierce wilderness that forever surrounded the city, ready to engulf it. Hurricanes, floods, fevers, the plague—and the damp of the Louisiana climate itself worked tirelessly on every hewn plank or stone facade, so that New Orleans seemed at all times like a dream in the imagination of her striving populace, a dream held intact at every second by a tenacious, though unconscious, collective will.

"But Paris, Paris was a universe whole and entire unto herself, hollowed and fashioned by history; so she seemed in this age of Napoleon III with her towering buildings, her massive cathedrals, her grand boulevards and ancient winding medieval streets—as vast and indestructible as nature itself. All was embraced by her, by her volatile

and enchanted populace thronging the galleries, the theaters, the cafes, giving birth over and over to genius and sanctity, philosophy and war, frivolity and the finest art; so it seemed that if all the world outside her were to sink into darkness, what was fine, what was beautiful, what was essential might there still come to its finest flower. Even the majestic trees that graced and sheltered her streets were attuned to her—and the waters of the Seine, contained and beautiful as they wound through her heart; so that the earth on that spot, so shaped by blood and consciousness, had ceased to be the earth and had become Paris.

"We were alive again. We were in love, and so euphoric was I after those hopeless nights of wandering in eastern Europe that I yielded completely when Claudia moved us into the Hôtel Saint-Gabriel on the Boulevard des Capucines. It was rumored to be one of the largest hotels in Europe, its immense rooms dwarfing the memory of our old town house, while at the same time recalling it with a comfortable splendor. We were to have one of the finest suites. Our windows looked out over the gas-lit boulevard itself where, in the early evening, the asphalt sidewalks teemed with strollers and an endless stream of carriages flowed past, taking lavishly dressed ladies and their gentlemen to the Opéra or the Opéra Comique, the ballet, the theaters, the balls and receptions without end at the Tuileries.

"Claudia put her reasons for expense to me gently and logically, but I could see that she became impatient ordering everything through me; it was wearing for her. The hotel, she said, quietly afforded us complete freedom, our nocturnal habits going unnoticed in the continual press of European tourists, our rooms immaculately maintained by an anonymous staff, while the immense price we paid guaranteed our privacy and our security. But there was more to it than that. There was a feverish purpose to her buying.

" 'This is my world,' she explained to me as she sat in a small velvet chair before the open balcony, watching the long row of broughams stopping one by one before the hotel doors. 'I must have it as I like,' she said, as if speaking to herself. And so it was as she liked, stunning wallpaper of rose and gold, an abundance of damask and velvet furniture, embroidered pillows and silk trappings for the fourposter bed. Dozens of roses appeared daily for the marble mantels and the

inlaid tables, crowding the curtained alcove of her dressing room, reflected endlessly in tilted mirrors. And finally she crowded the high French windows with a veritable garden of camellia and fern. 'I miss the flowers; more than anything else I miss the flowers,' she mused. And sought after them even in the paintings which we brought from the shops and the galleries, magnificent canvases such as I'd never seen in New Orleans—from the classically executed lifelike bouquets, tempting you to reach for the petals that fell on a three-dimensional tablecloth, to a new and disturbing style in which the colors seemed to blaze with such intensity they destroyed the old lines, the old solidity, to make a vision like to those states when I'm nearest my delirium and flowers grow before my eyes and crackle like the flames of lamps. Paris flowed into these rooms.

"I found myself at home there, again forsaking dreams of ethereal simplicity for what another's gentle insistence had given me, because the air was sweet like the air of our courtyard in the Rue Royale, and all was alive with a shocking profusion of gas light that rendered even the ornate lofty ceilings devoid of shadows. The light raced on the gilt curlicues, flickered in the baubles of the chandeliers. Darkness did not exist. Vampires did not exist.

"And even bent as I was on my quest, it was sweet to think that, for an hour, father and daughter climbed into the cabriolet from such civilized luxury only to ride along the banks of the Seine, over the bridge into the Latin Quarter to roam those darker, narrower streets in search of history, not victims. And then to return to the ticking clock and the brass andirons and the playing cards laid out upon the table. Books of poets, the program from a play, and all around the soft humming of the vast hotel, distant violins, a woman talking in a rapid, animated voice above the zinging of a hairbrush, and a man high above on the top floor repeating over and over to the night air, 'I understand, I am just beginning, I am just beginning to understand.…'

" 'Is it as you would have it?' Claudia asked, perhaps just to let me know she hadn't forgotten me, for she was quiet now for hours; no talk of vampires. But something was wrong. It was not the old serenity, the pensiveness that was recollection. There was a brooding there, a smoldering dissatisfaction. And though it would vanish from her eyes when I would call to her or answer her, anger seemed to

settle very near the surface.

" 'Oh, you know how I would have it,' I answered, persisting in the myth of my own will. 'Some garret near the Sorbonne, near enough to the noise of the Rue St. Michel, far enough away. But I would mainly have it as you would have it.' And I could see her warmed, but looking past me, as if to say, 'You have no remedy; don't draw too near; don't ask of me what I ask of you: are you content?'

"My memory is too clear; too sharp; things should wear at the edges, and what is unresolved should soften. So, scenes are near my heart like pictures in lockets, yet monstrous pictures no artist or camera would ever catch; and over and over I would see Claudia at the piano's edge that last night when Lestat was playing, preparing to die, her face when he was taunting her, that contortion that at once became a mask; attention might have saved his life, if, in fact, he were dead at all.

"Something was collecting in Claudia, revealing itself slowly to the most unwilling witness in the world. She had a new passion for rings and bracelets children did not wear. Her jaunty, straight-backed walk was not a child's, and often she entered small boutiques ahead of me and pointed a commanding finger at the perfume or the gloves she would then pay for herself. I was never far away, and always uncomfortable—not because I feared anything in this vast city, but because I feared her. She'd always been the 'lost child' to her victims, the 'orphan,' and now it seemed she would be something else, something wicked and shocking to the passers-by who succumbed to her. But this was often private; I was left for an hour haunting the carved edifices of Notre-Dame, or sitting at the edge of a park in the carriage.

"And then one night, when I awoke on the lavish bed in the suite of the hotel, my book crunched uncomfortably under me, I found her gone altogether. I didn't dare ask the attendants if they'd seen her. It was our practice to spirit past them; we had no name. I searched the corridors for her, the side streets, even the ballroom, where some almost inexplicable dread came over me at the thought of her there alone. But then I finally saw her coming through the side doors of the lobby, her hair beneath her bonnet brim sparkling from the light rain, the child rushing as if on a mischievous escapade, lighting the faces of

doting men and women as she mounted the grand staircase and passed me, as if she hadn't seen me at all. An impossibility, a strange graceful slight.

"I shut the door behind me just as she was taking off her cape, and, in a flurry of golden raindrops, she shook it, shook her hair. The ribbons crushed from the bonnet fell loose and I felt a palpable relief to see the childish dress, those ribbons, and something wonderfully comforting in her arms, a small china doll. Still she said nothing to me; she was fussing with the doll. Jointed somehow with hooks or wire beneath its flouncing dress, its tiny feet tinkled like a bell. 'It's a lady doll,' she said, looking up at me. 'See? A lady doll.' She put it on the dresser.

" 'So it is,' I whispered.

" 'A woman made it,' she said. 'She makes baby dolls, all the same, baby dolls, a shop of baby dolls, until I said to her, "I want a lady doll.' "

"It was taunting, mysterious. She sat there now with the wet strands of hair streaking her high forehead, intent on that doll. 'Do you know why she made it for me?' she asked. I was wishing now the room had shadows, that I could retreat from the warm circle of the superfluous fire into some darkness, that I wasn't sitting on the bed as if on a lighted stage, seeing her before me and in her mirrors, puffed sleeves and puffed sleeves.

" 'Because you are a beautiful child and she wanted to make you happy,' I said, my voice small and foreign to myself.

"She was laughing soundlessly. 'A beautiful child,' she said, glancing up at me. 'Is that what you still think I am?' And her face went dark as again she played with the doll, her fingers pushing the tiny crocheted neckline down toward the china breasts. 'Yes, I resemble her baby dolls, I am her baby dolls. You should see her working in that shop; bent on her dolls, each with the same face, lips.' Her finger touched her own lip. Something seemed to shift suddenly, something within the very walls of the room itself, and the mirrors trembled with her image as if the earth had sighed beneath the foundations. Carriages rumbled in the streets; but they were too far away. And then I saw what her still childish figure was doing: in one hand she held the doll, the other to her lips; and the hand that held the doll was crushing it,

crushing it and popping it so it bobbed and broke in a heap of glass that fell now from her open, bloody hand onto the carpet. She wrung the tiny dress to make a shower of littering particles as I averted my eyes, only to see her in the tilted mirror over the fire, see her eyes scanning me from my feet to the top of my head. She moved through that mirror towards me and drew close on the bed.

" 'Why do you look away, why don't you look at me?' she asked, her voice very smooth, very like a silver bell. But then she laughed softly, a woman's laugh, and said, 'Did you think I'd be your daughter forever? Are you the father of fools, the fool of fathers?'

" 'Your tone is unkind with me,' I answered.

" 'Hmmm … unkind.' I think she nodded. She was a blaze in the corner of my eye, blue flames, golden flames.

" 'And what do they think of you,' I asked as gently as I could, 'out there?' I gestured to the open window.

" 'Many things.' She smiled. 'Many things. Men are marvellous at explanations. Have you see the "little people" in the parks, the circuses, the freaks that men pay money to laugh at?'

" 'I was a sorcerer's apprentice only!' I burst out suddenly, despite myself. 'Apprentice!' I said. I wanted to touch her, to stroke her hair, but I sat there afraid of her, her anger like a match about to kindle.

"Again she smiled, and then she drew my hand into her lap and covered it as best she could with her own. 'Apprentice, yes,' she laughed. 'But tell me one thing, one thing from that lofty height. What was it like … making love?'

"I was walking away from her before I meant to, I was searching like a dim-witted mortal man for cape and gloves. 'You don't remember?' she asked with perfect calm, as I put my hand on the brass door handle.

"I stopped, feeling her eyes on my back, ashamed, and then I turned around and made as if to think, Where am I going, what shall I do, why do I stand here?

" 'It was something hurried,' I said, trying now to meet her eyes. How perfectly, coldly blue they were. How earnest. 'And … it was seldom savored … something acute that was quickly lost. I think that it was the pale shadow of killing.'

" 'Ahhh …' she said. 'Like hurting you as I do now … that is also the

pale shadow of killing.'

" 'Yes, madam,' I said to her. 'I am inclined to believe that is correct.' And bowing swiftly, I bade her good-night."

"It was a long time after I'd left her that I slowed my pace. I'd crossed the Seine. I wanted darkness. To hide from her and the feelings that welled up in me, and the great consuming fear that I was utterly inadequate to make her happy, or to make myself happy by pleasing her.

"I would have given the world to please her, the world we now possessed, which seemed at once empty and eternal. Yet I was injured by her words and by her eyes, and no amount of explanations to her—which passed through and through my mind now, even forming on my lips in desperate whispers as I left the Rue St. Michel and went deeper and deeper into the older, darker streets of the Latin Quarter—no amount of explanations seemed to soothe what I imagined to be her grave dissatisfaction, or my own pain.

"Finally I left off words except for a strange chant. I was in the black silence of a medieval street, and blindly I followed its sharp turns, comforted by the height of its narrow tenements, which seemed at any moment capable of falling together, closing this alleyway under the indifferent stars like a seam. 'I cannot make her happy, I do not make her happy; and her unhappiness increases every day.' This was my chant, which I repeated like a rosary, a charm to change the facts, her inevitable disillusionment with our quest, which left us in this limbo where I felt her drawing away from me, dwarfing me with her enormous need. I even conceived a savage jealousy of the dollmaker to whom she'd confided her request for that tinkling diminutive lady, because that dollmaker had for a moment given her something which she held close to herself in my presence as if I were not there at all.

"What did it amount to, where could it lead?

"Never since I'd come to Paris months before did I so completely feel the city's immense size, how I might pass from this twisting, blind street of my choice into a world of delights; and never had I so keenly felt its uselessness. Uselessness to her if she could not abide this anger, if she could not somehow grasp the limits of which she seemed so

angrily, bitterly aware. I was helpless. She was helpless. But she was stronger than me. And I knew, had known even at the moment when I turned away from her in the hotel, that behind her eyes there was for me her continuing love.

"And dizzy and weary and now comfortably lost, I became aware with a vampire's inextinguishable senses that I was being followed.

"My first thought was irrational. She'd come out after me. And, cleverer than I, had tracked me at a great distance. But as surely as this came to mind, another thought presented itself, a rather cruel thought in light of all that had passed between us. The steps were too heavy for hers. It was just some mortal walking in this same alley, walking unwarily towards death.

"So I continued on, almost ready to fall into my pain again because I deserved it, when my mind said, You are a fool; listen. And it dawned on me that these steps, echoing as they were at a great distance behind me, were in perfect time with my own. An accident. Because if mortal they were, they were too far off for mortal hearing. But as I stopped now to consider that, they stopped. And as I turned saying, Louis, you deceive yourself, and started up, they started up. Footfall with my footfall, gaining speed now as I gained speed. And then something remarkable, undeniable occurred. *En garde* as I was for the steps that were behind me, I tripped on a fallen roof tile and was pitched against the wall. And behind me, those steps echoed to perfection the sharp shuffling rhythm of my fall.

"I was astonished. And in a state of alarm well beyond fear. To the right and left of me the street was dark. Not even a tarnished light shone in a garret window. And the only safety afforded me, the great distance between myself and these steps, was as I said the guarantee that they were not human. I was at a complete loss as to what I might do. I had the near-irresistible desire to call out to this being and welcome it, to let it know as quickly and as completely as possible that I awaited it, had been searching for it, would confront it. Yet I was afraid. What seemed sensible was to resume walking, waiting for it to gain on me; and as I did so I was again mocked by my own pace, and the distance between us remained the same. The tension mounted in me, the dark around me becoming more and more menacing; and I said over and over, measuring these steps, Why do you track me, why

do you let me know you are there?

"Then I rounded a sharp turn in the street, and a gleam of light showed ahead of me at the next corner. The street sloped up towards it, and I moved on very slowly, my heart deafening in my ears, reluctant to eventually reveal myself in that light.

"And as I hesitated—stopped, in fact—right before the turn, something rumbled and clattered above, as if the roof of the house beside me had all but collapsed. I jumped back just in time, before a load of tiles crashed into the street, one of them brushing my shoulder. All was quiet now. I stared at the tiles, listening, waiting. And then slowly I edged around the turn into the light, only to see there looming over me at the top of the street beneath the gas lamp the unmistakable figure of another vampire.

"He was enormous in height though gaunt as myself, his long, white face very bright under the lamp, his large, black eyes staring at me in what seemed undisguised wonder. His right leg was slightly bent as though he'd just come to a halt in mid-step. And then suddenly I realized that not only was his black hair long and full and combed precisely like my own, and not only was he dressed in identical coat and cape to my own, but he stood imitating my stance and facial expression to perfection. I swallowed and let my eyes pass over him slowly, while I struggled to hide from him the rapid pace of my pulse as his eyes in like manner passed over me. And when I saw him blink I realized I had just blinked, and as I drew my arms up and folded them across my chest he slowly did the same. It was maddening. Worse than maddening. Because, as I barely moved my lips, he barely moved his lips, and I found the words dead and I couldn't make other words to confront this, to stop it. And all the while, there was that height and those sharp black eyes and that powerful attention which was, of course, perfect mockery, but nevertheless riveted to myself. *He* was the vampire; *I* seemed the mirror.

" 'Clever,' I said to him shortly and desperately, and, of course, he echoed that word as fast as I said it. And maddened as I was more by that than anything else, I found myself yielding to a slow smile, defying the sweat which had broken from every pore and the violent tremor in my legs. He also smiled, but his eyes had a ferocity that was animal, unlike my own, and the smile was sinister in its sheer

mechanical quality.

“Now I took a step forward and so did he; and when I stopped short, staring, so did he. But then he slowly, very slowly, lifted his right arm, though mine remained poised and, gathering his fingers into a fist, he now struck at his chest in quickening time to mock my heartbeat. Laughter erupted from him. He threw back his head, showing his canine teeth, and the laughter seemed to fill the alleyway. I loathed him. Completely.

“ ‘You mean me harm?’ I asked, only to hear the words mockingly obliterated.

“ ‘Trickster!’ I said sharply. ‘Buffoon!’

“That word stopped him. Died on his lips even as he was saying it, and his face went hard.

“What I did then was impulse. I turned my back on him and started away, perhaps to make him come after me and demand to know who I was. But in a movement so swift I couldn’t possibly have seen it, he stood before me again, as if he had materialized there. Again I turned my back on him—only to face him under the lamp again, the settling of his dark, wavy hair the only indication that he had in fact moved.

“ ‘I’ve been looking for you! I’ve come to Paris looking for you!’ I forced myself to say the words, seeing that he didn’t echo them or move, only stood staring at me.

“Now he moved forward slowly, gracefully, and I saw his own body and his own manner had regained possession of him and, extending his hand as if he meant to ask for mine, he very suddenly pushed me backwards, off-balance. I could feel my shirt drenched and sticking to my flesh as I righted myself, my hand grimed from the damp wall.

“And as I turned to confront him, he threw me completely down.

“I wish I could describe to you his power. You would know, if I were to attack you, to deal you a sharp blow with an arm you never saw move towards you.

“But something in me said, Show him your own power; and I rose up fast, going right for him with both arms out. And I hit the night, the empty night swirling beneath that lamppost, and stood there looking about me, alone and a complete fool. This was a test of some sort, I knew it then, though consciously I fixed my attention on the dark street, the recesses of the doorways, anyplace he might have

hidden. I wanted no part of this test, but saw no way out of it. And I was contemplating some way to disdainfully make that clear when suddenly he appeared again, jerking me around and flinging me down the sloping cobblestones where I'd fallen before. I felt his boot against my ribs. And, enraged, I grabbed hold of his leg, scarcely believing it when I felt the cloth and the bone. He'd fallen against the stone wall opposite and let out a snarl of unrepressed anger.

"What happened then was pure confusion. I held tight to that leg, though the boot strained to get at me. And at some point, after he'd toppled over me and pulled loose from me, I was lifted into the air by strong hands. What might have happened I can well imagine. He could have flung me several yards from himself, he was easily that strong. And battered, severely injured, I might have lost consciousness. It was violently disturbing to me even in that melee that I didn't know whether I could lose consciousness. But it was never put to a test. For, confused as I was, I was certain someone else had come between us, someone who was battling him decisively, forcing him to relinquish his hold.

"When I looked up, I was in the street, and I saw two figures only for an instant, like the flicker of an image after the eye is shut. Then there was only a swirling of black garments, a boot striking the stones, and the night was empty. I sat, panting, the sweat pouring down my face, staring around me and then up at the narrow ribbon of faint sky. Slowly, only because my eye was totally concentrated upon it now, a figure emerged from the darkness of the wall above me. Crouched on the jutting stones of the lintel, it turned so that I saw the barest gleam of light on the hair and then the stark, white face. A strange face, broader and not so gaunt as the other, a large dark eye that was holding me steadily. A whisper came from the lips, though they never appeared to move. 'You are all right.'

"I was more than all right. I was on my feet, ready to attack. But the figure remained crouched, as if it were part of the wall. I could see a white hand working in what appeared to be a waistcoat pocket. A card appeared, white as the fingers that extended it to me. I didn't move to take it. 'Come to us, tomorrow night,' said that same whisper from the smooth, expressionless face, which still showed only one eye to the light. 'I won't harm you,' he said. 'And neither will that other. I won't

allow it.' And his hand did that thing which vampires can make happen; that is, it seemed to leave his body in the dark to deposit the card in my hand, the purple script immediately shining in the light. And the figure, moving upwards like a cat on the wall, vanished fast between the garret gables overhead.

"I knew I was alone now, could feel it. And the pounding of my heart seemed to fill the empty little street as I stood under the lamp reading that card. The address I knew well enough, because I had been to theaters along that street more than once. But the name was astonishing: 'Théâtre des Vampires,' and the time noted, nine p.m.

"I turned it over and discovered written there the note, 'Bring the petite beauty with you. You are most welcome. Armand.'

"There was no doubt that the figure who'd given it to me had written this message. And I had only a very short time to get to the hotel and to tell Claudia of these things before dawn. I was running fast, so that even the people I passed on the boulevards did not actually see the shadow that brushed them."

The Théâtre des Vampires was by invitation only, and the next night the doorman inspected my card for a moment while the rain fell softly all around us: on the man and the woman stopped at the shut-up box office; on the crinkling posters of penny-dreadful vampires with their outstretched arms and cloaks resembling bat wings ready to close on the naked shoulders of a mortal victim; on the couples that pressed past us into the packed lobby, where I could easily perceive that the crowd was all human, no vampires among them, not even this boy who admitted us finally into the press of conversation and damp wool and ladies' gloved fingers fumbling with felt-brimmed hats and wet curls. I pressed for the shadows in a feverish excitement. We had fed earlier only so that in the bustling street of this theater our skin would not be too white, our eyes too unclouded. And that taste of blood which I had not enjoyed had left me all the more uneasy; but I had no time for it. This was no night for killing. This was to be a night of revelations, no matter how it ended. I was certain.

"Yet here we stood with this all-too-human crowd, the doors opening now on the auditorium, and a young boy pushing towards us,

beckoning, pointing above the shoulders of the crowd to the stairs. Ours was a box, one of the best in the house, and if the blood had not dimmed my skin completely nor made Claudia into a human child as she rode in my arms, this usher did not seem at all to notice it nor to care. In fact, he smiled all too readily as he drew back the curtain for us on two chairs before the brass rail.

" 'Would you put it past them to have human slaves?' Claudia whispered.

" 'But Lestat never trusted human slaves,' I answered. I watched the seats fill, watched the marvellously flowered hats navigating below me through the rows of silk chairs. White shoulders gleamed in the deep curve of the balcony spreading out from us; diamonds glittered in the gas light. 'Remember, be sly for once,' came Claudia's whisper from beneath her bowed blond head. 'You're too much of a gentleman.'

"The lights were going out, first in the balcony, and then along the walls of the main floor. A knot of musicians had gathered in the pit below the stage, and at the foot of the long, green velvet curtain the gas flickered, then brightened, and the audience receded as if enveloped by a gray cloud through which only the diamonds sparkled, on wrists, on throats, on fingers. And a hush descended like that gray cloud until all the sound was collected in one echoing persistent cough. Then silence. And the slow, rhythmical beating of a tambourine. Added to that was the thin melody of a wooden flute, which seemed to pick up the sharp metallic tink of the bells of the tambourine, winding them into a haunting melody that was medieval in sound. Then the strumming of strings that emphasized the tambourine. And the flute rose, in that melody singing of something melancholy, sad. It had a charm to it, this music, and the whole audience seemed stilled and united by it, as if the music of that flute were a luminous ribbon unfurling slowly in the dark. Not even the rising curtain broke the silence with the slightest sound. The lights brightened, and it seemed the stage was not the stage but a thickly wooded place, the light glittering on the roughened tree trunks and the thick clusters of leaves beneath the arch of darkness above; and through the trees could be seen what appeared the low, stone bank of a river and above that, beyond that, the glittering waters of the river itself, this whole three-dimensional world produced in painting upon a

fine silk scrim that shivered only slightly in a faint draft.

"A sprinkling of applause greeted the illusion, gathering adherents from all parts of the auditorium until it reached its short crescendo and died away. A dark, draped figure was moving on the stage from tree trunk to tree trunk, so fast that as he stepped into the lights he seemed to appear magically in the center, one arm flashing out from his cloak to show a silver scythe and the other to hold a mask on a slender stick before the invisible face, a mask which showed the gleaming countenance of Death, a painted skull.

"There were gasps from the crowd. It was Death standing before the audience, the scythe poised, Death at the edge of a dark wood. And something in me was responding now as the audience responded, not in fear, but in some human way, to the magic of that fragile painted set, the mystery of the lighted world there, the world in which this figure moved in his billowing black cloak, back and forth before the audience with the grace of a great panther, drawing forth, as it were, those gasps, those sighs, those reverent murmurs.

"And now, behind this figure, whose very gestures seemed to have a captivating power like the rhythm of the music to which it moved, came other figures from the wings. First an old woman, very stooped and bent, her gray hair like moss, her arm hanging down with the weight of a great basket of flowers. Her shuttling steps scraped on the stage, and her head bobbed with the rhythm of the music and the darting steps of the Grim Reaper. And then she started back as she laid eyes on him and, slowly setting down her basket, made her hands into the attitude of prayer. She was tired; her head leaned now on her hands as if in sleep, and she reached out for him, supplicating. But as he came towards her, he bent to look directly into her face, which was all shadows to us beneath her hair, and started back then, waving his hand as if to freshen the air. Laughter erupted uncertainly from the audience. But as the old woman rose and took after Death, the laughter took over.

"The music broke into a jig with their running, as round and round the stage the old woman pursued Death, until he finally flattened himself into the dark of a tree trunk, bowing his masked face under his wing like a bird. And the old woman, lost, defeated, gathered up her basket as the music softened and slowed to her pace, and made

her way off the stage. I did not like it. I did not like the laughter. I could see the other figures moving in now, the music orchestrating their gestures, cripples on crutches and beggars with rags the color of ash, all reaching out for Death, who whirled, escaping this one with a sudden arching of the back, fleeing from that one with an effeminate gesture of disgust, waving them all away finally in a foppish display of weariness and boredom.

"It was then I realized that the languid, white hand that made these comic arcs was not painted white. It was a vampire hand which wrung laughter from the crowd. A vampire hand lifted now to the grinning skull, as the stage was finally clear, as if stifling a yawn. And then this vampire, still holding the mask before his face, adopted marvellously the attitude of resting his weight against a painted silken tree, as if he were falling gently to sleep. The music twittered like birds, rippled like the flowing of the water; and the spotlight, which encircled him in a yellow pool, grew dim, all but fading away as he slept.

"And another spot pierced the scrim, seeming to melt it altogether, to reveal a young woman standing alone far upstage. She was majestically tall and all but enshrined by a voluminous mane of golden blond hair. I could feel the awe of the audience as she seemed to flounder in the spotlight, the dark forest rising on the perimeter, so that she seemed to be lost in the trees. And she was lost; and not a vampire. The soil on her mean blouse and skirt was not stage paint, and nothing had touched her perfect face, which gazed into the light now, as beautiful and finely chiselled as the face of a marble Virgin, that hair her haloed veil. She could not see in the light, though all could see her. And the moan which escaped her lips as she floundered seemed to echo over the thin, romantic singing of the flute, which was a tribute to that beauty. The figure of Death woke with a start in his pale spotlight and turned to see her as the audience had seen her, and to throw up his free hand in tribute, in awe.

"The twitter of laughter died before it became real. She was too beautiful, her gray eyes too distressed. The performance too perfect. And then the skull mask was thrown suddenly into the wings and Death showed a beaming white face to the audience, his hurried hands stroking his handsome black hair, straightening a waistcoat, brushing imaginary dust from his lapels. Death in love. And clapping rose for

the luminous countenance, the gleaming cheekbones, the winking black eye, as if it were all masterful illusion when in fact it was merely and certainly the face of a vampire, the vampire who had accosted me in the Latin Quarter, that leering, grinning vampire, harshly illuminated by the yellow spot.

"My hand reached for Claudia's in the dark and pressed it tightly. But she sat still, as if enrapt. The forest of the stage, through which that helpless mortal girl stared blindly towards the laughter, divided in two phantom halves, moving away from the center, freeing the vampire to close in on her.

"And she who had been advancing towards the footlights, saw him suddenly and came to a halt, making a moan like a child. Indeed, she was very like a child, though clearly a full-grown woman. Only a slight wrinkling of the tender flesh around her eyes betrayed her age. Her breasts though small were beautifully shaped beneath her blouse, and her hips though narrow gave her long, dusty skirt a sharp, sensual angularity. As she moved back from the vampire, I saw the tears standing in her eyes like glass in the flicker of the lights, and I felt my spirit contract in fear for her, and in longing. Her beauty was heartbreaking.

"Behind her, a number of painted skulls suddenly moved against the blackness, the figures that carried the masks invisible in their black clothes, except for free white hands that clasped the edge of a cape, the folds of a skirt. Vampire women were there, moving in with the men towards the victim, and now they all, one by one, thrust the masks away so they fell in an artful pile, the sticks like bones, the skulls grinning into the darkness above. And there they stood, seven vampires, the women vampires three in number, their molded white breasts shining over the tight black bodices of their gowns, their hard luminescent faces staring with dark eyes beneath curls of black hair. Starkly beautiful, as they seemed to float close around that florid human figure, yet pale and cold compared to that sparkling golden hair, that petal-pink skin. I could hear the breath of the audience, the halting, the soft sighs. It was a spectacle, that circle of white faces pressing closer and closer, and that leading figure, that Gentleman Death, turning to the audience now with his hands crossed over his heart, his head bent in longing to elicit their sympathy: was she not

irresistible! A murmur of assenting laughter, of sighs.

"But it was she who broke the magic silence.

" 'I don't want to die …' she whispered. Her voice was like a bell.

" 'We *are* death,' he answered her; and from around her came the whisper, 'Death.' She turned, tossing her hair so it became a veritable shower of gold, a rich and living thing over the dust of her poor clothing. 'Help me!' she cried out softly, as if afraid even to raise her voice. 'Someone …' she said to the crowd she knew must be there. A soft laughter came from Claudia. The girl onstage only vaguely understood where she was, what was happening, but knew infinitely more than this house of people that gaped at her.

" 'I don't want to die! I don't want to!' Her delicate voice broke, her eyes fixed on the tall, malevolent leader vampire, that demon trickster who now stepped out of the circle of the others towards her.

" 'We all die,' he answered her. 'The one thing you share with every mortal is death.' His hand took in the orchestra, the distant faces of the balcony, the boxes.

" 'No,' she protested in disbelief. 'I have so many years, so many….' Her voice was light, lilting in her pain. It made her irresistible, just as did the movement of her naked throat and the hand that fluttered there.

" 'Years!' said the master vampire. 'How do you know you have so many years? Death is no respecter of age! There could be a sickness in your body now, already devouring you from within. Or, outside, a man might be waiting to kill you simply for your yellow hair!' And his fingers reached for it, the sound of his deep, preternatural voice sonorous. 'Need I tell you what fate may have in store for you?'

" 'I don't care … I'm not afraid,' she protested, her clarion voice so fragile after him. 'I would take my chance….'

" 'And if you do take that chance and live, live for years, what would be your heritage? The humpbacked, toothless visage of old age?' And now he lifted her hair behind her back, exposing her pale throat. And slowly he drew the string from the loose gathers of her blouse. The cheap fabric opened, the sleeves slipping off her narrow, pink shoulders; and she clasped it, only to have him take her wrists and thrust them sharply away. The audience seemed to sigh in a body, the women behind their opera glasses, the men leaning forward in their

chairs. I could see the cloth falling, see the pale, flawless skin pulsing with her heart and the tiny nipples letting the cloth slip precariously, the vampire holding her right wrist tightly at her side, the tears coursing down her blushing cheeks, her teeth biting into the flesh of her lip. 'Just as sure as this flesh is pink, it will turn gray, wrinkled with age,' he said.

" 'Let me live, please,' she begged, her face turning away from him. 'I don't care … I don't care!'

" 'But then, why should you care if you die now? If these things don't frighten you … these horrors?'

"She shook her head, baffled, outsmarted, helpless. I felt the anger in my veins, as sure as the passion. With a bowed head she bore the whole responsibility for defending life, and it was unfair, monstrously unfair that she should have to pit logic against his for what was obvious and sacred and so beautifully embodied in her. But he made her speechless, made her overwhelming instinct seem petty, confused. I could feel her dying inside, weakening, and I hated him.

"The blouse slipped to her waist. A murmur moved through the titillated crowd as her small, round breasts stood exposed. She struggled to free her wrist, but he held it fast.

" 'And suppose we were to let you go … suppose the Grim Reaper had a heart that could resist your beauty … to whom would he turn his passion? Someone must die in your place. Would you pick the person for us? The person to stand here and suffer as you suffer now?' He gestured to the audience. Her confusion was terrible. 'Have you a sister … a mother … a child?'

" 'No,' she gasped. 'No …' shaking the mane of hair.

" 'Surely someone could take your place, a friend? Choose!'

" 'I can't. I wouldn't.…' She writhed in his tight grasp. The vampires around her looked on, still, their faces evincing no emotion, as if the preternatural flesh were masks. 'Can't you do it?' he taunted her. And I knew, if she said she could, how he would only condemn her, say she was as evil as he for marking someone for death, say that she deserved her fate.

" 'Death waits for you everywhere.' He sighed now as if he were suddenly frustrated. The audience could not perceive it; I could. I could see the muscles of his smooth face tightening. He was trying to

keep her gray eyes on his eyes, but she looked desperately, hopefully away from him. On the warm, rising air I could smell the dust and perfume of her skin, hear the soft beating of her heart. 'Unconscious death … the fate of all mortals.' He bent closer to her, musing, infatuated with her, but struggling. 'Hmmm.… but we are *conscious* death! That would make you a bride. Do you know what it means to be loved by Death?' He all but kissed her face, the brilliant stain of her tears. 'Do you know what it means to have Death know your name?'

"She looked at him, overcome with fear. And then her eyes seemed to mist over, her lips to go slack. She was staring past him at the figure of another vampire who had emerged slowly from the shadows. For a long time he had stood on the periphery of the gathering, his hands clasped, his large, dark eyes very still. His attitude was not the attitude of hunger. He did not appear rapt. But she was looking into his eyes now, and her pain bathed her in a beauteous light, a light which made her irresistibly alluring. It was this that held the jaded audience, this terrible pain. I could feel her skin, feel the small, pointed breasts, feel my arms caressing her. I shut my eyes against it and saw her starkly against that private darkness. It was what they felt all around her, this community of vampires. She had no chance.

"And, looking up again, I saw her shimmering in the smoky light of the footlamps, saw her tears like gold, as softly from that other vampire who stood at a distance came the words … 'No pain.'

"I could see the trickster stiffen, but no one else would see it. They would see only the girl's smooth, childlike face, those parted lips, slack with innocent wonder as she gazed at that distant vampire, hear her soft voice repeat after him, 'No pain?'

" 'Your beauty is a gift to us.' His rich voice effortlessly filled the house, seemed to fix and subdue the mounting wave of excitement. And slightly, almost imperceptibly, his hand moved. The trickster was receding, becoming one of those patient, white faces, whose hunger and equanimity were strangely one. And slowly, gracefully, the other moved towards her. She was languid, her nakedness forgotten, those lids fluttering, a sigh escaping her moist lips. 'No pain,' she assented. I could hardly bear it, the sight of her yearning towards him, seeing her dying now, under this vampire's power. I wanted to cry out to her, to break her swoon. And I wanted her. Wanted her, as he was moving in

on her, his hand out now for the drawstring of her skirt as she inclined towards him, her head back, the black cloth slipping over her hips, over the golden gleam of the hair between her legs—a child's down, that delicate curl—the skirt dropping to her feet. And this vampire opened his arms, his back to the flickering footlights, his auburn hair seeming to tremble as the gold of her hair fell around his black coat. 'No pain … no pain …' he was whispering to her, and she was giving herself over.

"And now, turning her slowly to the side so that they could all see her serene face, he was lifting her, her back arching as her naked breasts touched his buttons, her pale arms enfolded his neck. She stiffened, cried out as he sank his teeth, and her face was still as the dark theater reverberated with shared passion. His white hand shone on her florid buttocks, her hair dusting it, stroking it. He lifted her off the boards as he drank, her throat gleaming against his white cheek. I felt weak, dazed, hunger rising in me, knotting my heart, my veins. I felt my hand gripping the brass bar of the box, tighter, until I could feel the metal creaking in its joints. And that soft, wrenching sound which none of those mortals might hear seemed somehow to hook me to the solid place where I was.

"I bowed my head; I wanted to shut my eyes. The air seemed fragrant with her salted skin, and close and hot and sweet. Around her the other vampires drew in, the white hand that held her tight quivered, and the auburn-haired vampire let her go, turning her, displaying her, her head fallen back as he gave her over, one of those starkly beautiful vampire women rising behind her, cradling her, stroking her as she bent to drink. They were all about her now, as she was passed from one to another and to another, before the enthralled crowd, her head thrown forward over the shoulder of a vampire man, the nape of her neck as enticing as the small buttocks or the flawless skin of her long thighs, the tender creases behind her limply bent knees.

"I was sitting back in the chair, my mouth full of the taste of her, my veins in torment. And in the corner of my eye was that auburn-haired vampire who had conquered her, standing apart as he had been before, his dark eyes seeming to pick me from the darkness, seeming to fix on me over the currents of warm air.

“One by one the vampires were withdrawing. The painted forest came back, sliding soundlessly into place. Until the mortal girl, frail and very white, lay naked in that mysterious wood, nestled in the silk of a black bier as if on the floor of the forest itself; and the music had begun again, eerie and alarming, growing louder as the lights grew dimmer. All the vampires were gone, except the trickster, who had gathered his scythe from the shadows and also his handheld mask. And he crouched near the sleeping girl as the lights slowly faded, and the music alone had power and force in the enclosing dark. And then that died also.

“For a moment, the entire crowd was utterly still.

“Then applause began here and there and suddenly united everyone around us. The lights rose in the sconces on the walls and heads turned to one another, conversation erupting all round. A woman rising in the middle of a row to pull her fox fur sharply from the chair, though no one had yet made way for her; someone else pushing out quickly to the carpeted aisle; and the whole body was on its feet as if driven to the exits.

“But then the hum became the comfortable, jaded hum of the sophisticated and perfumed crowd that had filled the lobby and the vault of the theater before. The spell was broken. The doors were flung open on the fragrant rain, the clop of horses’ hooves, and voices calling for taxis. Down in the sea of slightly askew chairs, a white glove gleamed on a green silk cushion.

“I sat watching, listening, one hand shielding my lowered face from anyone and no one, my elbow resting on the rail, the passion in me subsiding, the taste of the girl on my lips. It was as though on the smell of the rain came her perfume still, and in the empty theater I could hear the throb of her beating heart. I sucked in my breath, tasted the rain, and glimpsed Claudia sitting infinitely still, her gloved hands in her lap.

“There was a bitter taste in my mouth, and confusion. And then I saw a lone usher moving on the aisle below, righting the chairs, reaching for the scattered programs that littered the carpet. I was aware that this ache in me, this confusion, this blinding passion which only let me go with a stubborn slowness would be obliterated if I were to drop down to one of those curtained archways beside him and draw

him up fast in the darkness and take him as that girl was taken. I wanted to do it, and I wanted nothing. Claudia said near my bowed ear, 'Patience, Louis. Patience.'

"I opened my eyes. Someone was near, on the periphery of my vision; someone who had outsmarted my hearing, my keen anticipation, which penetrated like a sharp antenna even this distraction, or so I thought. But there he was, soundless, beyond the curtained entrance of the box, that vampire with the auburn hair, that detached one, standing on the carpeted stairway looking at us. I knew him now to be, as I'd suspected, the vampire who had given me the card admitting us to the theater. Armand.

"He would have startled me, except for his stillness, the remote dreamy quality of his expression. It seemed he'd been standing against that wall for the longest time, and betrayed no sign of change as we looked at him, then came towards him. Had he not so completely absorbed me, I would have been relieved he was not the tall, black-haired one; but I didn't think of this. Now his eyes moved languidly over Claudia with no tribute whatsoever to the human habit of disguising the stare. I placed my hand on Claudia's shoulder. 'We've been searching for you a very long time,' I said to him, my heart growing calmer, as if his calm were drawing off my trepidation, my care, like the sea drawing something into itself from the land. I cannot exaggerate this quality in him. Yet I can't describe it and couldn't then; and the fact that my mind sought to describe it even to myself unsettled me. He gave me the very feeling that he knew what I was doing, and his still posture and his deep, brown eyes seemed to say there was no use in what I was thinking, or particularly the words I was struggling to form now. Claudia said nothing.

"He moved away from the wall and began to walk down the stairs, while at the same time he made a gesture that welcomed us and bade us follow; but all this was fluid and fast. My gestures were the caricature of human gestures compared to his. He opened a door in the lower wall and admitted us to the rooms below the theater, his feet only brushing the stone stairway as we descended, his back to us with complete trust.

"And now we entered what appeared to be a vast subterranean ballroom, carved, as it were, out of a cellar more ancient than the

building overhead. Above us, the door that he had opened fell shut, and the light died away before I could get a fair impression of the room. I heard the rustle of his garments in the dark and then the sharp explosion of a match. His face appeared like a great flame over the match. And then a figure moved into the light beside him, a young boy, who brought him a candle. The sight of the boy brought back to me in a shock the teasing pleasure of the naked woman on the stage, her prone body, the pulsing blood. And he turned and gazed at me now, much in the manner of the auburn-haired vampire, who had lit the candle and whispered to him, 'Go.' The light expanded to the distant walls, and the vampire held the light up and moved along the wall, beckoning us both to follow.

"I could see a world of frescoes and murals surrounded us, their colors deep and vibrant above the dancing flame, and gradually the theme and content beside us came clear. It was the terrible 'Triumph of Death' by Breughel, painted on such a massive scale that all the multitude of ghastly figures towered over us in the gloom, those ruthless skeletons ferrying the helpless dead in a fetid moat or pulling a cart of human skulls, beheading an outstretched corpse or hanging humans from the gallows. A bell tolled over the endless hell of scorched and smoking land, towards which great armies of men came with the hideous, mindless march of soldiers to a massacre. I turned away, but the auburn-haired one touched my hand and led me further along the wall to see 'The Fall of the Angels' slowly materializing, with the damned being driven from the celestial heights into a lurid chaos of feasting monsters. So vivid, so perfect was it, I shuddered. The hand that had touched me did the same again, and I stood still despite it, deliberately looking above to the very height of the mural, where I could make out of the shadows two beautiful angels with trumpets to their lips. And for a second the spell was broken. I had the strong sense of the first evening I had entered Notre-Dame; but then that was gone, like something gossamer and precious snatched away from me.

"The candle rose. And horrors rose all around me: the dumbly passive and degraded damned of Bosch, the bloated, coffined corpses of Traini, the monstrous horsemen of Dürer, and blown out of all endurable scale a promenade of medieval woodcut, emblem, and engraving. The very ceiling writhed with skeletons and moldering

dead, with demons and the instruments of pain, as if this were the cathedral of death itself.

"Where we stood finally in the center of the room, the candle seemed to pull the images to life everywhere around us. Delirium threatened, that awful shifting of the room began, that sense of falling. I reached out for Claudia's hand. She stood musing, her face passive, her eyes distant when I looked to her, as if she'd have me let her alone; and then her feet shot off from me with a rapid tapping on the stone floor that echoed all along the walls, like fingers tapping on my temples, on my skull. I held my temples, staring dumbly at the floor in search of shelter, as if to lift my eyes would force me to look on some wretched suffering I would not, could not endure. Then again I saw the vampire's face floating in his flame, his ageless eyes circled in dark lashes. His lips were very still, but as I stared at him he seemed to smile without making even the slightest movement. I watched him all the harder, convinced it was some powerful illusion I could penetrate with keen attention; and the more I watched, the more he seemed to smile and finally to be animated with a soundless whispering, musing, singing. I could hear it like something curling in the dark, as wallpaper curls in the blast of a fire or paint peels from the face of a burning doll. I had the urge to reach for him, to shake him violently so that his still face would move, admit to this soft singing; and suddenly I found him pressed against me, his arm around my chest, his lashes so close I could see them matted and gleaming above the incandescent orb of his eye, his soft, tasteless breath against my skin. It *was* delirium.

"I moved to get away from him, and yet I was drawn to him and I didn't move at all, his arm exerting its firm pressure, his candle blazing now against my eye, so that I felt the warmth of it; all my cold flesh yearned for that warmth, but suddenly I waved to snuff it but couldn't find it, and all I saw was his radiant face, as I had never seen Lestat's face, white and poreless and sinewy and male. The other vampire. All other vampires. An infinite procession of my own kind.

"The moment ended.

"I found myself with my hand outstretched, touching his face; but he was a distance away from me, as if he'd never moved near me, making no attempt to brush my hand away. I drew back, flushed, stunned.

“Far away in the Paris night a bell chimed, the dull, golden circles of sound seeming to penetrate the walls, the timbers that carried that sound down into the earth like great organ pipes. Again came that whispering, that inarticulate singing. And through the gloom I saw that mortal boy watching me, and I smelled the hot aroma of his flesh. The vampire’s facile hand beckoned him, and he came towards me, his eyes fearless and exciting, and he drew up to me in the candlelight and put his arms around my shoulders.

“Never had I felt this, never had I experienced it, this yielding of a conscious mortal. But before I could push him away for his own sake, I saw the bluish bruise on his tender neck. He was offering it to me. He was pressing the length of his body against me now, and I felt the hard strength of his sex beneath his clothes pressing against my leg. A wretched gasp escaped my lips, but he bent close, his lips on what must have been so cold, so lifeless for him; and I sank my teeth into his skin, my body rigid, that hard sex driving against me, and I lifted him in passion off the floor. Wave after wave of his beating heart passed into me as, weightless, I rocked with him, devouring him, his ecstasy, his conscious pleasure.

“Then, weak and gasping, I saw him at a distance from me, my arms empty, my mouth still flooded with the taste of his blood. He lay against that auburn-haired vampire, his arm about the vampire’s waist, and he gazed at me in that same pacific manner of the vampire, his eyes misted over and weak from the loss of life. I remember moving mutely forward, drawn to him and seemingly unable to control it, that gaze taunting me, that conscious life defying me; he should die and would not die; he would live on, comprehending, surviving that intimacy! I turned. The host of vampires moved in the shadows, their candles whipped and fleeting on the cool air; and above them loomed a great broadcast of ink-drawn figures: the sleeping corpse of a woman ravaged by a vulture with a human face; a naked man bound hand and foot to a tree, beside him hanging the torso of another, his severed arms tied still to another branch, and on a spike this dead man’s staring head.

“The singing came again, that thin, ethereal singing. Slowly the hunger in me subsided, obeyed, but my head throbbed and the flames of the candles seemed to merge in burnished circles of light. Someone

touched me suddenly, pushed me roughly, so that I almost lost my balance, and when I straightened I saw the thin, angular face of the trickster vampire I despised. He reached out for me with his white hands. But the other one, the distant one, moved forward suddenly and stood between us. It seemed he struck the other vampire, that I saw him move, and then again I did not see him move; both stood still like statues, eyes fixed on one another, and time passed like wave after wave of water rolling back from a still beach. I cannot say how long we stood there, the three of us in those shadows, and how utterly still they seemed to me, only the shimmering flames seeming to have life behind them. Then I remember floundering along the wall and finding a large oak chair into which I all but collapsed. It seemed Claudia was near and speaking to someone in a hushed but sweet voice. My forehead teemed with blood, with heat.

" 'Come with me,' said the auburn-haired vampire. I was searching his face for the movement of his lips that must have preceded the sound, yet it was so hopelessly long after the sound. And then we were walking, the three of us, down a long stone stairway deeper beneath the city, Claudia ahead of us, her shadow long against the wall. The air grew cool and refreshing with the fragrance of water, and I could see the droplets bleeding through the stones like beads of gold in the light of the vampire's candle.

"It was a small chamber we entered, a fire burning in a deep fireplace cut into the stone wall. A bed lay at the other end, fitted into the rock and enclosed with two brass gates. At first I saw these things clearly, and saw the long wall of books opposite the fireplace and the wooden desk that was against it, and the coffin to the other side. But then the room began to waver, and the auburn-haired vampire put his hands on my shoulders and guided me down into a leather chair. The fire was intensely hot against my legs, but this felt good to me, sharp and clear, something to draw me out of this confusion. I sat back, my eyes only half open, and tried to see again what was about me. It was as if that distant bed were a stage and on the linen pillows of the little stage lay that boy, his black hair parted in the middle and curling about his ears, so that he looked now in his dreamy, fevered state like one of those lithe androgynous creatures of a Botticelli painting; and beside him, nestled against him, her tiny white hand stark against his

ruddy flesh, lay Claudia, her face buried in his neck. The masterful auburn-haired vampire looked on, his hands clasped in front of him; and when Claudia rose now, the boy shuddered. The vampire picked her up, gently, as I might pick her up, her hands finding a hold on his neck, her eyes half shut with the swoon, her lips rouged with blood. He set her gently on the desk, and she lay back against the leatherbound books, her hands falling gracefully into the lap of her lavender dress. The gates closed on the boy and, burying his face in the pillows, he slept.

"There was something disturbing to me in the room, and I didn't know what it was. I didn't in truth know what was wrong with me, only that I'd been drawn forcefully either by myself or someone else from two fierce, consuming states: an absorption with those grim paintings, and the kill to which I'd abandoned myself, obscenely, in the eyes of others.

"I didn't know what it was that threatened me now, what it was that my mind sought escape from. I kept looking at Claudia, the way she lay against the books, the way she sat amongst the objects of the desk, the polished white skull, the candle-holder, the open parchment book whose hand-painted script gleamed in the light; and then above her there emerged into focus the lacquered and shimmering painting of a medieval devil, horned and hoofed, his bestial figure looming over a coven of worshipping witches. Her head was just beneath it, the loose curling strands of her hair just stroking it; and she watched the brown-eyed vampire with wide, wondering eyes. I wanted to pick her up suddenly, and frightfully, horribly, I saw her in my kindled imagination flopping like a doll. I was gazing at the devil, that monstrous face preferable to the sight of her in her eerie stillness.

" 'You won't awaken the boy if you speak,' said the brown-eyed vampire. 'You've come from so far, you've travelled so long.' And gradually my confusion subsided, as if smoke were rising and moving away on a current of fresh air. And I lay awake and very calm, looking at him as he sat in the opposite chair. Claudia, too, looked at him. And he looked from one to the other of us, his smooth face and pacific eyes very like they'd been all along, as though there had never been any change in him at all.

" 'My name is Armand,' he said. 'I sent Santiago to give you the

invitation. I know your names. I welcome you to my house.'

"I gathered my strength to speak, my voice sounding strange to me when I told him that we had feared we were alone.

" 'But how did you come into existence?' he asked. Claudia's hand rose ever so slightly from her lap, her eyes moving mechanically from his face to mine. I saw this and knew that he must have seen it, and yet he gave no sign. I knew at once what she meant to tell me. 'You don't want to answer,' said Armand, his voice low and even more measured than Claudia's voice, far less human than my own. I sensed myself slipping away again into contemplation of that voice and those eyes, from which I had to draw myself up with great effort.

" 'Are you the leader of this group?' I asked him.

" 'Not in the way you mean *leader*,' he answered. 'But if there were a leader here, I would be that one.'

" 'I haven't come … you'll forgive me … to talk of how I came into being. Because that's no mystery to me, it presents no question. So if you have no power to which I might be required to render respect, I don't wish to talk of those things.'

" 'If I told you I did have such power, would you respect it?' he asked.

"I wish I could describe his manner of speaking, how each time he spoke he seemed to arise out of a state of contemplation very like that state into which I felt I was drifting, from which it took so much to wrench myself; and yet he never moved, and seemed at all times alert. This distracted me while at the same time I was powerfully attracted by it, as I was by this room, its simplicity, its rich, warm combination of essentials: the books, the desk, the two chairs by the fire, the coffin, the pictures. The luxury of those rooms in the hotel seemed vulgar, but more than that, meaningless, beside this room. I understood all of it except for the mortal boy, the sleeping boy, whom I didn't understand at all.

" 'I'm not certain,' I said, unable to keep my eyes off that awful medieval Satan. 'I would have to know from what … from whom it comes. Whether it came from other vampires … or elsewhere.'

" 'Elsewhere …' he said. 'What is elsewhere?'

" 'That!' I pointed to the medieval picture.

" 'That is a picture,' he said.

“ ‘Nothing more?’

“ ‘Nothing more.’

“ ‘Then Satan … some satanic power doesn’t give you your power here, either as leader or as vampire?’

“ ‘No,’ he said calmly, so calmly it was impossible for me to know what he thought of my questions, if he thought of them at all in the manner which I knew to be thinking.

“ ‘And the other vampires?’

“ ‘No,’ he said.

“ ‘Then we are not …’ I sat forward, ‘… the children of Satan?’

“ ‘How could we be the children of Satan?’ he asked. ‘Do you believe that Satan made this world around you?’

“ ‘No, I believe that God made it, if anyone made it. But He also must have made Satan, and I want to know if we are his children!’

“ ‘Exactly, and consequently if you believe God made Satan, you must realize that all Satan’s power comes from God and that Satan is simply God's child, and that we are God's children also. There are no children of Satan, really.’

“I couldn’t disguise my feelings at this. I sat back against the leather, looking at that small woodcut of the devil, released for the moment from any sense of obligation to Armand’s presence, lost in my thoughts, in the undeniable implications of his simple logic.

“ ‘But why does this concern you? Surely what I say doesn’t surprise you,’ he said. ‘Why do you let it affect you?’

“ ‘Let me explain,’ I began. ‘I know that you’re a master vampire. I respect you. But I’m incapable of your detachment. I know what it is, and I do not possess it and I doubt that I ever will. I accept this.’

“ ‘I understand,’ he nodded. ‘I saw you in the theater, your suffering, your sympathy with that girl. I saw your sympathy for Denis when I offered him to you; you die when you kill, as if you feel that you deserve to die, and you stint on nothing. But why, with this passion and this sense of justice, do you wish to call yourself the child of Satan!’

“ ‘I’m evil, evil as any vampire who ever lived! I've killed over and over and will do it again. I took that boy, Denis, when you gave him to me, though I was incapable of knowing whether he would survive or not.’

“ ‘Why does that make you as evil as any vampire? Aren’t there gradations of evil? Is evil a great perilous gulf into which one falls with the first sin, plummeting to the depth?’

“ ‘Yes, I think it is,’ I said to him. ‘It’s not logical, as you would make it sound. But it’s that dark, that empty. And it is without consolation.’

“ ‘But you’re not being fair,’ he said with the first glimmer of expression in his voice. ‘Surely you attribute great degrees and variations to goodness. There is the goodness of the child which is innocence, and then there is the goodness of the monk who has given up everything to others and lives a life of self-deprivation and service. The goodness of saints, the goodness of good housewives. Are all these the same?’

“ ‘No. But equally and infinitely different from evil.’ I answered.

“I didn’t know I thought these things. I spoke them now as my thoughts. And they were my most profound feelings taking a shape they could never have taken had I not spoken them, had I not thought them out this way in conversation with another. I thought myself then possessed of a passive mind, in a sense. I mean that my mind could only pull itself together, formulate thought out of the muddle of longing and pain, when it was touched by another mind; fertilized by it; deeply excited by that other mind and driven to form conclusions. I felt now the rarest, most acute alleviation of loneliness. I could easily visualize and suffer that moment years before in another century, when I had stood at the foot of Babette’s stairway, and feel the perpetual metallic frustration of years with Lestat; and then that passionate and doomed affection for Claudia which made loneliness retreat behind the soft indulgence of the senses, the same senses that longed for the kill. And I saw the desolate mountaintop in eastern Europe where I had confronted that mindless vampire and killed him in the monastery ruins. And it was as if the great feminine longing of my mind were being awakened again to be satisfied. And this I felt despite my own words: ‘But it’s that dark, that empty. And it is without consolation.’

“I looked at Armand, at his large brown eyes in that taut, timeless face, watching me again like a painting; and I felt the slow shifting of the physical world I’d felt in the painted ballroom, the pull of my old delirium, the wakening of a need so terrible that the very promise of

its fulfillment contained the unbearable possibility of disappointment. And yet there was the question, the awful, ancient, hounding question of evil.

"I think I put my hands to my head as mortals do when so deeply troubled that they instinctively cover the face, reach for the brain as if they could reach through the skull and massage the living organ out of its agony.

" 'And how is this evil achieved?' he asked. 'How does one fall from grace and become in one instant as evil as the mob tribunal of the Revolution or the most cruel of the Roman emperors? Does one merely have to miss Mass on Sunday, or bite down on the Communion Host? Or steal a loaf of bread … or sleep with a neighbor's wife?'

" 'No.…' I shook my head. 'No.'

" 'But if evil is without gradation, and it does exist, this state of evil, then only one sin is needed. Isn't that what you are saying? That God exists and.…'

" 'I don't know if God exists,' I said. 'And for all I do know … He doesn't exist.'

" 'Then no sin matters,' he said. 'No sin achieves evil.'

" 'That's not true. Because if God doesn't exist we are the creatures of highest consciousness in the universe. We alone understand the passage of time and the value of every minute of human life. And what constitutes evil, real evil, is the taking of a single human life. Whether a man would have died tomorrow or the day after or eventually … it doesn't matter. Because if God does not exist, this life … every second of it … is all we have.'

"He sat back, as if for the moment stopped, his large eyes narrowing, then fixing on the depths of the fire. This was the first time since he had come for me that he had looked away from me, and I found myself looking at him unwatched. For a long time he sat in this manner and I could all but feel his thoughts, as if they were palpable in the air like smoke. Not read them, you understand, but feel the power of them. It seemed he possessed an aura and even though his face was very young, which I knew meant nothing, he appeared infinitely old, wise. I could not define it, because I could not explain how the youthful lines of his face, how his eyes expressed innocence and this age and experience at the same time.

“He rose now and looked at Claudia, his hands loosely clasped behind his back. Her silence all this time had been understandable to me. These were not her questions, yet she was fascinated with him and was waiting for him and no doubt learning from him all the while that he spoke to me. But I understood something else now as they looked at each other. He had moved to his feet with a body totally at his command, devoid of the habit of human gesture, gesture rooted in necessity, ritual, fluctuation of mind; and his stillness now was unearthly. And she, as I’d never seen before, possessed the same stillness. And they were gazing at each other with a preternatural understanding from which I was simply excluded.

“I was something whirling and vibrating to them, as mortals were to me. And I knew when he turned towards me again that he’d come to understand she did not believe or share my concept of evil.

“His speech commenced without the slightest warning. ‘This is the only real evil left,’ he said to the flames.

“ ‘Yes,’ I answered, feeling that all-consuming subject alive again, obliterating all concerns as it always had for me.

“ ‘It’s true,’ he said, shocking me, deepening my sadness, my despair.

“ ‘Then God does not exist … you have no knowledge of His existence?’

“ ‘None,’ he said.

“ ‘No knowledge!’ I said it again, unafraid of my simplicity, my miserable human pain.

“ ‘None.’

“ ‘And no vampire here has discourse with God or with the devil!’

“ ‘No vampire that I’ve ever known,’ he said, musing, the fire dancing in his eyes. ‘And as far as I know today, after four hundred years, I am the oldest living vampire in the world.’

“I stared at him, astonished.

“Then it began to sink in. It was as I’d always feared, and it was as lonely, it was as totally without hope. Things would go on as they had before, on and on. My search was over. I sat back listlessly watching those licking flames.

“It was futile to leave him to continue it, futile to travel the world only to hear again the same story. ‘Four hundred years’—I think I repeated the words—‘four hundred years.’ I remember staring at the

fire. There was a log falling very slowly in the fire, drifting downwards in a process that would take it the night, and it was pitted with tiny holes where some substance that had larded it through and through had burned away fast, and in each of these tiny holes there danced a flame amid the larger flames: and all of these tiny flames with their black mouths seemed to me faces that made a chorus; and the chorus sang without singing. The chorus had no need of singing; in one breath in the fire, which was continuous, it made its soundless song.

"All at once Armand moved in a loud rustling of garments, a descent of crackling shadow and light that left him kneeling at my feet, his hands outstretched holding my head, his eyes burning.

" 'This evil, this concept, it comes from disappointment, from bitterness! Don't you see? Children of Satan! Children of God! Is this the only question you bring to me, is this the only power that obsesses you, so that you must make us gods and devils yourself when the only power that exists is inside ourselves? How could you believe in these old fantastical lies, these myths, these emblems of the supernatural?' He snatched the devil from above Claudia's still countenance so swiftly that I couldn't see the gesture, only the demon leering before me and then crackling in the flames.

"Something was broken inside me when he said this; something ripped aside, so that a torrent of feeling became one with my muscles in every limb. I was on my feet now, backing away from him.

" 'Are you mad?' I asked, astonished at my own anger, my own despair. 'We stand here, the two of us, immortal, ageless, rising nightly to feed that immortality on human blood; and there on your desk against the knowledge of the ages sits a flawless child as demonic as ourselves; and you ask me how I could believe I would find a meaning in the supernatural! I tell you, after seeing what I have become, I could damn well believe anything! Couldn't you? And believing thus, being thus confounded, I can now accept the most fantastical truth of all: that there is no meaning to any of this!'

"I backed towards the door, away from his astonished face, his hand hovering before his lips, the fingers curling to dig into his palm. 'Don't! Come back …' he whispered.

" 'No, not now. Let me go. Just a while … let me go.… Nothing's changed; it's all the same. Let that sink into me … just let me go.'

“I looked back before I shut the door. Claudia’s face was turned towards me, though she sat as before, her hands clasped on her knee. She made a gesture then, subtle as her smile, which was tinged with the faintest sadness, that I was to go on.

“It was my desire to escape the theater then entirely, to find the streets of Paris and wander, letting the vast accumulation of shocks gradually wear away. But, as I groped along the stone passage of the lower cellar, I became confused. I was perhaps incapable of exerting my own will. It seemed more than ever absurd to me that Lestat should have died, if in fact he had; and looking back on him, as it seemed I was always doing, I saw him more kindly than before. Lost like the rest of us. Not the jealous protector of any knowledge he was afraid to share. He knew nothing. There was nothing to know.

“Only, that was not quite the thought that was gradually coming clear to me. I had hated him for all the wrong reasons; yes, that was true. But I did not fully understand it yet. Confounded, I found myself sitting finally on those dark steps, the light from the ballroom throwing my own shadow on the rough floor, my hands holding my head, a weariness overcoming me. My mind said, Sleep. But more profoundly, my mind said, Dream. And yet I made no move to return to the Hôtel Saint-Gabriel, which seemed a very secure and airy place to me now, a place of subtle and luxurious mortal consolation where I might lie in a chair of puce velvet, put one foot on an ottoman and watch the fire lick the marble tile, looking for all the world to myself in the long mirrors like a thoughtful human. Flee to that, I thought, flee all that is pulling you. And again came that thought: I have wronged Lestat, I have hated him for all the wrong reasons. I whispered it now, trying to withdraw it from the dark, inarticulate pool of my mind, and the whispering made a scratching sound in the stone vault of the stairs.

“But then a voice came softly to me on the air, too faint for mortals: ‘How is this so? How did you wrong him?’

“I turned round so sharp that my breath left me. A vampire sat near me, so near as to almost brush my shoulder with the tip of his boot, his legs drawn up close to him, his hands clasped around them. For a moment I thought my eyes deceived me. It was the trickster vampire, whom Armand had called Santiago.

“Yet nothing in his manner indicated his former self, that devilish, hateful self that I had seen, even only a few hours ago when he had reached out for me and Armand had struck him. He was staring at me over his drawn-up knees, his hair dishevelled, his mouth slack and without cunning.

“ ‘It makes no difference to anyone else,’ I said to him, the fear in me subsiding.

“ ‘But you said a name; I heard you say a name,’ he said.

“ ‘A name I don’t want to say again,’ I answered, looking away from him. I could see now how he’d fooled me, why his shadow had not fallen over mine; he crouched in my shadow. The vision of him slithering down those stone stairs to sit behind me was slightly disturbing. Everything about him was disturbing, and I reminded myself that he could in no way be trusted. It seemed to me then that Armand, with his hypnotic power, aimed in some way for the maximum truth in presentation of himself: he had drawn out of me without words my state of mind. But this vampire was a liar. And I could feel his power, a crude, pounding power that was almost as strong as Armand’s.

“ ‘You come to Paris in search of us, and then you sit alone on the stairs …’ he said, in a conciliatory tone. ‘Why don’t you come up with us? Why don’t you speak to us and talk to us of this person whose name you spoke; I know who it was, I know the name.’

“ ‘You don’t know, couldn’t know. It was a mortal,’ I said now, more from instinct than conviction. The thought of Lestat disturbed me, the thought that this creature should know of Lestat’s death.

“ ‘You came here to ponder mortals, justice done to mortals?’ he asked; but there was no reproach or mockery in his tone.

“ ‘I came to be alone, let me not offend you. It’s a fact,’ I murmured.

“ ‘But alone in this frame of mind, when you don’t even hear my steps.… I like you. I want you to come upstairs.’ And as he said this, he slowly pulled me to my feet beside him.

“At that moment the door of Armand’s cell threw a long light into the passage. I heard him coming, and Santiago let me go. I was standing there baffled. Armand appeared at the foot of the steps, with Claudia in his arms. She had that same dull expression on her face which she’d had all during my talk with Armand. It was as if she were

deep in her own considerations and saw nothing around her; and I remember noting this, though not knowing what to think of it, that it persisted even now. I took her quickly from Armand, and felt her soft limbs against me as if we were both in the coffin, yielding to that paralytic sleep.

"And then, with a powerful thrust of his arm, Armand pushed Santiago away. It seemed he fell backwards, but was up again only to have Armand pull him towards the head of the steps, all of this happening so swiftly I could only see the blur of their garments and hear the scratching of their boots. Then Armand stood alone at the head of the steps, and I went upward towards him.

" 'You cannot safely leave the theater tonight,' he whispered to me. 'He is suspicious of you. And my having brought you here, he feels that it is his right to know you better. Our security depends on it.' He guided me slowly into the ballroom. But then he turned to me and pressed his lips almost to my ear: 'I must warn you. Answer no questions. Ask and you open one bud of truth for yourself after another. But give nothing, nothing, especially concerning your origin.'

"He moved away from us now, but beckoning for us to follow him into the gloom where the others were gathered, clustered like remote marble statues, their faces and hands all too like our own. I had the strong sense then of how we were all made from the same material, a thought which had only occurred to me occasionally in all the long years in New Orleans; and it disturbed me, particularly when I saw one or more of the others reflected in the long mirrors that broke the density of those awful murals.

"Claudia seemed to awaken as I found one of the carved oak chairs and settled into it. She leaned towards me and said something strangely incoherent, which seemed to mean that I must do as Armand said: say nothing of our origin. I wanted to talk with her now, but I could see that tall vampire, Santiago, watching us, his eyes moving slowly from us to Armand. Several women vampires had gathered around Armand, and I felt a tumult of feeling as I saw them put their arms around his waist. And what appalled me as I watched was not their exquisite form, their delicate features and graceful hands made hard as glass by vampire nature, or their bewitching eyes which fixed on me now in a sudden silence; what appalled me was my own fierce

jealousy. I was afraid when I saw them so close to him, afraid when he turned and kissed them each. And, as he brought them near to me now, I was unsure and confused.

"Estelle and Celeste are the names I remember, porcelain beauties, who fondled Claudia with the license of the blind, running their hands over her radiant hair, touching even her lips, while she, her eyes still misty and distant, tolerated it all, knowing what I also knew and what they seemed unable to grasp: that a woman's mind as sharp and distinct as their own lived within that small body. It made me wonder as I watched her turning about for them, holding out her lavender skirts and smiling coldly at their adoration, how many times I must have forgotten, spoken to her as if she were the child, fondled her too freely, brought her into my arms with an adult's abandon. My mind went in three directions: that last night in the Hôtel Saint-Gabriel, which seemed a year ago, when she talked of love with rancor; my reverberating shock at Armand's revelations or lack of them; and a quiet absorption of the vampires around me, who whispered in the dark beneath the grotesque murals. For I could learn much from the vampires without ever asking a question, and vampire life in Paris was all that I'd feared it to be, all that the little stage in the theater above had indicated it was.

"The dim lights of the house were mandatory, and the paintings appreciated in full, added to almost nightly when some vampire brought a new engraving or picture by a contemporary artist into the house. Celeste, with her cold hand on my arm, spoke with contempt of men as the originators of these pictures, and Estelle, who now held Claudia on her lap, emphasized to me, the naive colonial, that vampires had not made such horrors themselves but merely collected them, confirming over and over that men were capable of far greater evil than vampires.

" 'There is evil in making such paintings?' Claudia asked softly in her toneless voice.

"Celeste threw back her black curls and laughed. 'What can be imagined can be done,' she answered quickly, but her eyes reflected a certain contained hostility. 'Of course, we strive to rival men in kills of all kinds, do we not!' She leaned forward and touched Claudia's knee. But Claudia merely looked at her, watching her laugh nervously and

continue. Santiago drew near, to bring up the subject of our rooms in the Hôtel Saint-Gabriel; frightfully unsafe, he said, with an exaggerated stage gesture of the hands. And he showed a knowledge of those rooms which was amazing. He knew the chest in which we slept; it struck him as vulgar. 'Come here!' he said to me, with that near childlike simplicity he had evinced on the steps. 'Live with us and such disguise is unnecessary. We have our guards. And tell me, where do you come from!' he said, dropping to his knees, his hand on the arm of my chair. 'Your voice, I know that accent; speak again.'

"I was vaguely horrified at the thought of having an accent to my French, but this wasn't my immediate concern. He was strong-willed and blatantly possessive, throwing back at me an image of that possessiveness which was flowering in me more fully every moment. And meanwhile, the vampires around us talked on, Estelle explaining that black was the color for a vampire's clothes, that Claudia's lovely pastel dress was beautiful but tasteless. 'We blend with the night,' she said. 'We have a funereal gleam.' And now, bending her cheek next to Claudia's cheek, she laughed to soften her criticism; and Celeste laughed, and Santiago laughed, and the whole room seemed alive with unearthly tinkling laughter, preternatural voices echoing against the painted walls, rippling the feeble candle flames. 'Ah, but to cover up such curls,' said Celeste, now playing with Claudia's golden hair. And I realized what must have been obvious: that all of them had dyed their hair black, but for Armand; and it was that, along with the black clothes, that added to the disturbing impression that we were statues from the same chisel and paint brush. I cannot emphasize too much how disturbed I was by that impression. It seemed to stir something in me deep inside, something I couldn't fully grasp.

"I found myself wandering away from them to one of the narrow mirrors and watching them all over my shoulder. Claudia gleamed like a jewel in their midst; so would that mortal boy who slept below. The realization was coming to me that I found them dull in some awful way: dull, dull everywhere that I looked, their sparkling vampire eyes repetitious, their wit like a dull, brass bell.

"Only the knowledge I needed distracted me from these thoughts. 'The vampires of eastern Europe …' Claudia was saying. 'Monstrous creatures, what have they to do with us?'

“ ‘Revenants,’ Armand answered softly over the distance that separated them, playing on faultless preternatural ears to hear what was more muted than a whisper. The room fell silent. ‘Their blood is different, vile. They increase as we do but without skill or care. In the old days—’ Abruptly he stopped. I could see his face in the mirror. It was strangely rigid.

“ ‘Oh, but tell us about the old days,’ said Celeste, her voice shrill, at human pitch. There was something vicious in her tone.

“And now Santiago took up the same baiting manner. ‘Yes, tell us of the covens, and the herbs that would render us invisible.’ He smiled. ‘And the burnings at the stake!’

“Armand fixed his eyes on Claudia. ‘Beware those monsters,’ he said, and calculatedly his eyes passed over Santiago and then Celeste. ‘Those revenants. They will attack you as if you were human.’

“Celeste shuddered, uttering something in contempt, an aristocrat speaking of vulgar cousins who bear the same name. But I was watching Claudia because it seemed her eyes were misted again as before. She looked away from Armand suddenly.

“The voices of the others rose again, affected party voices, as they conferred with one another on the night’s kills, describing this or that encounter without a smattering of emotion, challenges to cruelty erupting from time to time like flashes of white lightning: a tall, thin vampire being accosted in one corner for a needless romanticizing of mortal life, a lack of spirit, a refusal to do the most entertaining thing at the moment it was available to him. He was simple, shrugging, slow at words, and would fall for long periods into a stupefied silence, as if, near-choked with blood, he would as soon have gone to his coffin as remained here. And yet he remained, held by the pressure of this unnatural group who had made of immortality a conformist’s club. How would Lestat have found it? Had he been here? What had caused him to leave? No one had dictated to Lestat—he was master of his small circle; but how they would have praised his inventiveness, his catlike toying with his victims. And waste … that word, that value which had been all-important to me as a fledgling vampire, was spoken of often. You ‘wasted’ the opportunity to kill this child. You ‘wasted’ the opportunity to frighten this poor woman or drive that man to madness, which only a little prestidigitation would have

accomplished.

“My head was spinning. A common mortal headache. I longed to get away from these vampires, and only the distant figure of Armand held me, despite his warnings. He seemed remote from the others now, though he nodded often enough and uttered a few words here and there so that he seemed a part of them, his hand only occasionally rising from the lion’s paw of his chair. And my heart expanded when I saw him this way, saw that no one amongst the small throng caught his glance as I caught his glance, and no one held it from time to time as I held it. Yet he remained aloof from me, his eyes alone returning to me. His warning echoed in my ears, yet I disregarded it. I longed to get away from the theater altogether and stood listlessly, garnering information at last that was useless and infinitely dull.

“ ‘But is there no crime amongst you, no cardinal crime?’ Claudia asked. Her violet eyes seemed fixed on me, even in the mirror, as I stood with my back to her.

“ ‘Crime! Boredom!’ cried out Estelle, and she pointed a white finger at Armand. He laughed softly with her from his distant position at the end of the room. ‘Boredom is death!’ she cried and bared her vampire fangs, so that Armand put a languid hand to his forehead in a stage gesture of fear and falling.

“But Santiago, who was watching with his hands behind his back, intervened. ‘Crime!’ he said. ‘Yes, there is a crime. A crime for which we would hunt another vampire down until we destroyed him. Can you guess what that is?’ He glanced from Claudia to me and back again to her masklike face. ‘You should know, who are so secretive about the vampire that made you.’

“ ‘And why is that?’ she asked, her eyes widening ever so slightly, her hands resting still in her lap.

“A hush fell over the room, gradually, then completely, all those white faces turned to face Santiago as he stood there, one foot forward, his hands clasped behind his back, towering over Claudia. His eyes gleamed as he saw he had the floor. And then he broke away and crept up behind me, putting his hand on my shoulder. ‘Can you guess what that crime is? Didn’t your vampire master tell you?’

“And drawing me slowly around with those invading familiar hands, he tapped my heart lightly in time with its quickening pace.

“ ‘It is the crime that means death to any vampire anywhere who commits it. It is to kill your own kind!’

“ ‘Aaaaah!’ Claudia cried out, and lapsed into peals of laughter. She was walking across the floor now with swirling lavender silk and crisp resounding steps. Taking my hand, she said, ‘I was so afraid it was to be born like Venus out of the foam, as we were! Master vampire! Come, Louis, let’s go!’ she beckoned, as she pulled me away.

“Armand was laughing. Santiago was still. And it was Armand who rose when we reached the door. ‘You’re welcome tomorrow night,’ he said. ‘And the night after.’

“I don’t think I caught my breath until I’d reached the street. The rain was still falling, and all of the street seemed sodden and desolate in the rain, but beautiful. A few scattered bits of paper blowing in the wind, a gleaming carriage passing slowly with the thick, rhythmic clop of the horse. The sky was pale violet. I sped fast, with Claudia beside me leading the way, then finally frustrated with the length of my stride, riding in my arms.

“ ‘I don’t like them,’ she said to me with a steel fury as we neared the Hôtel Saint-Gabriel. Even its immense, brightly lit lobby was still in the pre-dawn hour. I spirited past the sleepy clerks, the long faces at the desk. ‘I’ve searched for them the world over, and I despise them!’ She threw off her cape and walked into the center of the room. A volley of rain hit the French windows. I found myself turning up the lights one by one and lifting the candelabrum to the gas flames as if I were Lestat or Claudia. And then, seeking the puce velvet chair I’d envisioned in that cellar, I slipped down into it, exhausted. It seemed for the moment as if the room blazed about me; as my eyes fixed on a gilt-framed painting of pastel trees and serene waters, the vampire spell was broken. They couldn’t touch us here, and yet I knew this to be a lie, a foolish lie.

“ ‘I am in danger, danger,’ Claudia said with that smoldering wrath.

“ ‘But how can they know what we did to him? Besides, *we* are in danger! Do you think for a moment I don’t acknowledge my own guilt! And if you were the only one …’ I reached out for her now as she drew near, but her fierce eyes settled on me and I let my hands drop

back limp. ‘Do you think I would leave you in danger?’

“She was smiling. For a moment I didn’t believe my eyes. ‘No, you would not, Louis. You would not. Danger holds you to me.…’

“ ‘Love holds me to you,’ I said softly.

“ ‘Love?’ she mused. ‘What do you mean by love?’ And then, as if she could see the pain in my face, she came close and put her hands on my cheek. She was cold, unsatisfied, as I was cold and unsatisfied, teased by that mortal boy but unsatisfied.

“ ‘That you take my love for granted always,’ I said to her. ‘That we are wed.…’ But even as I said these words I felt my old conviction waver; I felt that torment I’d felt last night when she had taunted me about mortal passion. I turned away from her.

“ ‘You would leave me for Armand if he beckoned to you.…’

“ ‘Never …’ I said to her.

“ ‘You would leave me, and he wants you as you want him. He's been waiting for you.…’

“ ‘Never.…’ I rose now and made my way to that chest. The doors were locked, but they would not keep those vampires out. Only we could keep them out by rising as early as the light would let us. I turned to her and told her to come. And she was at my side. I wanted to bury my face in her hair, I wanted to beg her forgiveness. Because, in truth, she was right; and yet I loved her, loved her as always. And now, as I drew her in close to me, she said: ‘Do you know what it was that he told me over and over without ever speaking a word; do you know what was the kernel of the trance he put me in so my eyes could only look at him, so that he pulled me as if my heart were on a string?’

“ ‘So you felt it …’ I whispered. ‘So it was the same.’

“ ‘He rendered me powerless!’ she said. I saw the image of her against those books above his desk, her limp neck, her dead hands.

“ ‘But what are you saying? That he spoke to you, that he …’

“ ‘Without words!’ she repeated. I could see the gas lights going dim, the candle flames too solid in their stillness. The rain beat on the panes. ‘Do you know what he said … that I should die!’ she whispered. ‘That I should let you go.’

“I shook my head, and yet in my monstrous heart I felt a surge of excitement. She spoke the truth as she believed it. There was a film in her eyes, glassy and silver. ‘He draws life out of me into himself,’ she

said, her lovely lips trembling so, I couldn't bear it. I held her tight, but the tears stood in her eyes. 'Life out of the boy who is his slave, life out of me whom he would make his slave. He loves you. He loves you. He would have you, and he would not have me stand in the way.'

" 'You don't understand him!' I fought it, kissing her; I wanted to shower her with kisses, her cheek, her lips.

" 'No, I understand him only too well,' she whispered to my lips, even as they kissed her. 'It is you who don't understand him. Love's blinded you, your fascination with his knowledge, his power. If you knew how he drinks death you'd hate him more than you ever hated Lestat. Louis, you must never return to him. I tell you, I'm in danger!' "

"Early the next night, I left her, convinced that Armand alone among the vampires of the theater could be trusted. She let me go reluctantly, and I was troubled, deeply, by the expression in her eyes. Weakness was unknown to her, and yet I saw fear and something beaten even now as she let me go. And I hurried on my mission, waiting outside the theater until the last of the patrons had gone and the doormen were tending to the locks.

"What they thought I was, I wasn't certain. An actor, like the others, who did not take off his paint? It didn't matter. What mattered was that they let me through, and I passed them and the few vampires in the ballroom, unaccosted, to stand at last at Armand's open door. He saw me immediately, no doubt had heard my step a long way off, and he welcomed me at once and asked me to sit down. He was busy with his human boy, who was dining at the desk on a silver plate of meats and fish. A decanter of white wine stood next to him, and though he was feverish and weak from last night, his skin was florid and his heat and fragrance were a torment to me. Not apparently to Armand, who sat in the leather chair by the fire opposite me, turned to the human, his arms folded on the leather arm. The boy filled his glass and held it up now in a salute. 'My master,' he said, his eyes flashing on me as he smiled; but the toast was to Armand.

" 'Your slave,' Armand whispered with a deep intake of breath that was passionate. And he watched, as the boy drank deeply. I could see him savoring the wet lips, the mobile flesh of the throat as the wine

went down. And now the boy took a morsel of white meat, making that same salute, and consumed it slowly, his eyes fixed on Armand. It was as though Armand feasted upon the feast, drinking in that part of life which he could not share any longer except with his eyes. And lost though he seemed to it, it was calculated; not that torture I'd felt years ago when I stood outside Babette's window longing for her human life.

"When the boy had finished, he knelt with his arms around Armand's neck as if he actually savored the icy flesh. And I could remember the night Lestat first came to me, how his eyes seemed to burn, how his white face gleamed. You know what I am to you now.

"Finally, it was finished. He was to sleep, and Armand locked the brass gates against him. And in minutes, heavy with his meal, he was dozing, and Armand sat opposite me, his large, beautiful eyes tranquil and seemingly innocent. When I felt them pull me towards him, I dropped my eyes, wished for a fire in the grate, but there were only ashes.

" 'You told me to say nothing of my origin, why was this?' I asked, looking up at him. It was as if he could sense my holding back, yet wasn't offended, only regarding me with a slight wonder. But I was weak, too weak for his wonder, and again I looked away from him.

" 'Did you kill this vampire who made you? Is that why you are here without him, why you won't say his name? Santiago thinks that you did.'

" 'And if this is true, or if we can't convince you otherwise, you would try to destroy us?' I asked.

" 'I would not try to do anything to you,' he said, calmly. 'But as I told you, I am not the leader here in the sense that you asked.'

" 'Yet they believe you to be the leader, don't they? And Santiago, you shoved him away from me twice.'

" 'I'm more powerful than Santiago, older. Santiago is younger than you are,' he said. His voice was simple, devoid of pride. These were facts.

" 'We want no quarrel with you.'

" 'It's begun,' he said. 'But not with me. With those above.'

" 'But what reason has he to suspect us?'

"He seemed to be thinking now, his eyes cast down, his chin resting on his closed fist. After a while which seemed interminable, he looked

up. ‘I could give you reasons,’ he said. ‘That you are too silent. That the vampires of the world are a small number and live in terror of strife amongst themselves and choose their fledglings with great care, making certain that they respect the other vampires mightily. There are fifteen vampires in this house, and the number is jealously guarded. And weak vampires are feared; I should say this also. That you are flawed is obvious to them: you feel too much, you think too much. As you said yourself, vampire detachment is not of great value to you. And then there is this mysterious child: a child who can never grow, never be self-sufficient. I would not make a vampire of that boy there now if his life, which is so precious to me, were in serious danger, because he is too young, his limbs not strong enough, his mortal cup barely tasted: yet you bring with you this child. What manner of vampire made her, they ask; did you make her? So, you see, you bring with you these flaws and this mystery and yet you are completely silent. And so you cannot be trusted. And Santiago looks for an excuse. But there is another reason closer to the truth than all those things which I’ve just said to you. And that is simply this: that when you first encountered Santiago in the Latin Quarter you … unfortunately … called him a buffoon.’

“ ‘Aaaaah.’ I sat back.

“ ‘It would perhaps have been better all around if you had said nothing.’ And he smiled to see that I understood with him the irony of this.

“I sat reflecting upon what he’d said, and what weighed as heavily upon me through all of it were Claudia’s strange admonitions, that this gentle-eyed young man had said to her, ‘Die,’ and beyond that my slowly accumulating disgust with the vampires in the ballroom above.

“I felt an overwhelming desire to speak to him of these things. Of her fear, no, not yet, though I couldn’t believe when I looked into his eyes that he’d tried to wield this power over her: his eyes said, Live. His eyes said, Learn. And oh, how much I wanted to confide to him the breadth of what I didn’t understand; how, searching all these years, I’d been astonished to discover those vampires above had made of immortality a club of fads and cheap conformity. And yet through this sadness, this confusion, came the clear realization: Why should it be otherwise? What had I expected? What right had I to be so bitterly

disappointed in Lestat that I would let him die! Because he wouldn't show me what I must find in myself? Armand's words, what had they been? *The only power that exists is inside ourselves.…*

" 'Listen to me,' he said now. 'You must stay away from them. Your face hides nothing. You would yield to me now were I to question you. Look into my eyes.'

"I didn't do this. I fixed my eyes firmly on one of those small paintings above his desk until it ceased to be the Madonna and Child and became a harmony of line and color. Because I knew what he was saying to me was true.

" 'Stop them if you will, advise them that we don't mean any harm. Why can't you do this? You say yourself we're not your enemies, no matter what we've done.…'

"I could hear him sigh, faintly. 'I have stopped them for the time being,' he said. 'But I don't want such power over them as would be necessary to stop them entirely. Because if I exercise such power, then I must protect it. I will make enemies. And I would have forever to deal with my enemies when all I want here is a certain space, a certain peace. Or not to be here at all. I accept the scepter of sorts they've given me, but not to rule over them, only to keep them at a distance.'

" 'I should have known,' I said, my eyes still fixed on that painting.

" 'Then, you must stay away. Celeste has a great deal of power, being one of the oldest, and she is jealous of the child's beauty. And Santiago, as you can see, is only waiting for a shred of proof that you're outlaws.'

"I turned slowly and looked at him again where he sat with that eerie vampire stillness, as if he were in fact not alive at all. The moment lengthened. I heard his words just as if he were speaking them again: 'All I want here is a certain space, a certain peace. Or not to be here at all.' And I felt a longing for him so strong that it took all my strength to contain it, merely to sit there gazing at him, fighting it. I wanted it to be this way: Claudia safe amongst these vampires somehow, guilty of no crime they might ever discover from her or anyone else, so that I might be free, free to remain forever in this cell as long as I could be welcome, even tolerated, allowed here on any condition whatsoever.

"I could see that mortal boy again as if he were not asleep on the

bed but kneeling at Armand's side with his arms around Armand's neck. It was an icon for me of love. The love I felt. Not physical love, you must understand. I don't speak of that at all, though Armand was beautiful and simple, and no intimacy with him would ever have been repellent. For vampires, physical love culminates and is satisfied in one thing, the kill. I speak of another kind of love which drew me to him completely as the teacher which Lestat had never been. Knowledge would never be withheld by Armand, I knew it. It would pass through him as through a pane of glass so that I might bask in it and absorb it and grow. I shut my eyes. And I thought I heard him speak, so faintly I wasn't certain. It seemed he said, 'Do you know why I am here?'

"I looked up at him again, wondering if he knew my thoughts, could actually read them, if such could conceivably be the extent of that power. Now after all these years I could forgive Lestat for being nothing but an ordinary creature who could not show me the uses of my powers; and yet I still longed for this, could fall into it without resistance. A sadness pervaded it all, sadness for my own weakness and my own awful dilemma. Claudia waited for me. Claudia, who was my daughter and my love.

" 'What am I to do?' I whispered. 'Go away from them, go away from you? After all these years …'

" '*They* don't matter to you,' he said.

"I smiled and nodded.

" 'What is it you want to do?' he asked. And his voice assumed the most gentle, sympathic tone.

" 'Don't you know, don't you have that power?' I asked. 'Can't you read my thoughts as if they were words?'

"He shook his head. 'Not the way you mean. I only know the danger to you and the child is real because it's real to you. And I know your loneliness even with her love is almost more terrible than you can bear.'

"I stood up then. It would seem a simple thing to do, to rise, to go to the door, to hurry quickly down that passage; and yet it took every ounce of strength, every smattering of that curious thing I've called my detachment.

" 'I ask you to keep them away from us,' I said at the door; but I

couldn't look back at him, didn't even want the soft intrusion of his voice.

" 'Don't go,' he said.

" 'I have no choice.'

"I was in the passage when I heard him so close to me that I started. He stood beside me, eye level with my eye, and in his hand he held a key which he pressed into mine.

" 'There is a door there,' he said, gesturing to the dark end, which I'd thought to be merely a wall. 'And a stairs to the side street which no one uses but myself. Go this way now, so you can avoid the others. You are anxious and they will see it.' I turned around to go at once, though every part of my being wanted to remain there. 'But let me tell you this,' he said, and lightly he pressed the back of his hand against my heart. 'Use the power inside you. Don't abhor it anymore. Use that power! And when they see you in the streets above, use that power to make your face a mask and think as you gaze on them as on anyone: beware. Take that word as if it were an amulet I'd given you to wear about your neck. And when your eyes meet Santiago's eyes, or the eyes of any other vampire, speak to them politely what you will, but think of that word and that word only. Remember what I say. I speak to you simply because you respect what is simple. You understand this. That's your strength.'

"I took the key from him, and I don't remember actually putting it into the lock or going up the steps. Or where he was or what he'd done. Except that, as I was stepping into the dark side street behind the theater, I heard him say very softly to me from someplace close to me: 'Come here, to me, when you can.' I looked around for him but was not surprised that I couldn't see him. He had told me also sometime or other that I must not leave the Hôtel Saint-Gabriel, that I must not give the others the shred of evidence of guilt they wanted. 'You see,' he said, 'killing other vampires is very exciting; that is why it is forbidden under penalty of death.'

"And then I seemed to awake. To the Paris street shining with rain, to the tall, narrow buildings on either side of me, to the fact that the door had shut to make a solid dark wall behind me and that Armand was no longer there.

"And though I knew Claudia waited for me, though I passed her in

the hotel window above the gas lamps, a tiny figure standing among waxen petaled flowers, I moved away from the boulevard, letting the darker streets swallow me, as so often the streets of New Orleans had done.

"It was not that I did not love her; rather, it was that I knew I loved her only too well, that the passion for her was as great as the passion for Armand. And I fled them both now, letting the desire for the kill rise in me like a welcome fever, threatening consciousness, threatening pain.

"Out of the mist which had followed the rain, a man was walking towards me. I can remember him as roaming on the landscape of a dream, because the night around me was dark and unreal. The hill might have been anywhere in the world, and the soft lights of Paris were an amorphous shimmering in the fog. And sharp-eyed and drunk, he was walking blindly into the arms of death itself, his pulsing fingers reaching out to touch the very bones of my face.

"I was not crazed yet, not desperate. I might have said to him, 'Pass by.' I believe my lips did form the word Armand had given me, 'Beware.' Yet I let him slip his bold, drunken arm around my waist; I yielded to his adoring eyes, to the voice that begged to paint me now and spoke of warmth, to the rich, sweet smell of the oils that streaked his loose shirt. I was following him, through Montmartre, and I whispered to him, 'You are not a member of the dead.' He was leading me through an overgrown garden, through the sweet, wet grasses, and he was laughing as I said, 'Alive, alive,' his hand touching my cheek, stroking my face, clasping finally my chin as he guided me into the light of the low doorway, his reddened face brilliantly illuminated by the oil lamps, the warmth seeping about us as the door closed.

"I saw the great sparkling orbs of his eyes, the tiny red veins that reached for the dark centers, that warm hand burning my cold hunger as he guided me to a chair. And then all around me I saw faces blazing, faces rising in the smoke of the lamps, in the shimmer of the burning stove, a wonderland of colors on canvases surrounding us beneath the small, sloped roof, a blaze of beauty that pulsed and throbbed. 'Sit down, sit down …' he said to me, those feverish hands against my chest, clasped by my hands, yet sliding away, my hunger rising in waves.

“And now I saw him at a distance, eyes intent, the palette in his hand, the huge canvas obscuring the arm that moved. And mindless and helpless, I sat there drifting with his paintings, drifting with those adoring eyes, letting it go on and on till Armand’s eyes were gone and Claudia was running down that stone passage with clicking heels away from me, away from me.

“ ‘You are alive …’ I whispered. ‘Bones,’ he answered me. ‘Bones …’ And I saw them in heaps, taken from those shallow graves in New Orleans as they are and put in chambers behind the sepulcher so that another can be laid in that narrow plot. I felt my eyes close; I felt my hunger become agony, my heart crying out for a living heart; and then I felt him moving forward, hands out to right my face—that fatal step, that fatal lurch. A sigh escaped my lips. ‘Save yourself,’ I whispered to him. ‘Beware.’

“And then something happened in the moist radiance of his face, something drained the broken vessels of his fragile skin. He backed away from me, the brush falling from his hands. And I rose over him, feeling my teeth against my lip, feeling my eyes fill with the colors of his face, my ears fill with his struggling cry, my hands fill with that strong, fighting flesh until I drew him up to me, helpless, and tore that flesh and had the blood that gave it life. ‘Die,’ I whispered when I held him loose now, his head bowed against my coat, ‘die,’ and felt him struggle to look up at me. And again I drank and again he fought, until at last he slipped, limp and shocked and near to death, on the floor. Yet his eyes did not close.

“I settled before his canvas, weak, at peace, gazing down at him, at his vague, graying eyes, my own hands florid, my skin so luxuriously warm. ‘I am mortal again,’ I whispered to him. ‘I am alive. With your blood I am alive.’ His eyes closed. I sank back against the wall and found myself gazing at my own face.

“A sketch was all he’d done, a series of bold black lines that nevertheless made up my face and shoulders perfectly, and the color was already begun in dabs and splashes: the green of my eyes, the white of my cheek. But the horror, the horror of seeing my expression! For he had captured it perfectly, and there was nothing of horror in it. Those green eyes gazed at me from out of that loosely drawn shape with a mindless innocence, the expressionless wonder of that

overpowering craving which he had not understood. Louis of a hundred years ago lost in listening to the sermon of the priest at Mass, lips parted and slack, hair careless, a hand curved in the lap and limp. A mortal Louis. I believe I was laughing, putting my hands to my face and laughing so that the tears nearly rose in my eyes; and when I took my fingers down, there was the stain of the tears, tinged with mortal blood. And already there was begun in me the tingling of the monster that had killed, and would kill again, who was gathering up the painting now and starting to flee with it from the small house.

"When suddenly, up from the floor, the man rose with an animal groan and clutched at my boot, his hands sliding off the leather. With some colossal spirit that defied me, he reached up for the painting and held fast to it with his whitening hands. 'Give it back!' he growled at me. 'Give it back!' And we held fast, the two of us, I staring at him and at my own hands that held so easily what he sought so desperately to rescue, as if he would take it to heaven or hell; I the thing that his blood could not make human, he the man that my evil had not overcome. And then, as if I were not myself, I tore the painting loose from him and, wrenching him up to my lips with one arm, gashed his throat in rage."

"Entering the rooms of the Hôtel Saint-Gabriel, I set the picture on the mantel above the fire and looked at it a long time. Claudia was somewhere in the rooms, and some other presence intruded, as though on one of the balconies above a woman or a man stood near, giving off an unmistakable personal perfume. I didn't know why I had taken the picture, why I'd fought for it so that it shamed me now worse than the death, and why I still held onto it at the marble mantel, my head bowed, my hands visibly trembling. And then slowly I turned my head. I wanted the rooms to take shape around me; I wanted the flowers, the velvet, the candles in their sconces. To be mortal and trivial and safe. And then, as if in a mist, I saw a woman there.

"She was seated calmly at that lavish table where Claudia attended to her hair; and so still she sat, so utterly without fear, her green taffeta sleeves reflected in the tilted mirrors, her skirts reflected, that she was not one still woman but a gathering of women. Her dark-red

hair was parted in the middle and drawn back to her ears, though a dozen little ringlets escaped to make a frame for her pale face. And she was looking at me with two calm, violet eyes and a child's mouth that seemed almost obdurately soft, obdurately the Cupid's bow unsullied by paint or personality; and the mouth smiled now and said, as those eyes seemed to fire: 'Yes, he's as you said he would be, and I love him already. He's as you said.' She rose now, gently lifting that abundance of dark taffeta, and the three small mirrors emptied at once.

"And utterly baffled and almost incapable of speech, I turned to see Claudia far off on the immense bed, her small face rigidly calm, though she clung to the silk curtain with a tight fist. 'Madeleine,' she said under her breath, 'Louis is shy.' And she watched with cold eyes as Madeleine only smiled when she said this and, drawing closer to me, put both of her hands to the lace fringe around her throat, moving it back so I could see the two small marks there. Then the smile died on her lips, and they became at once sullen and sensual as her eyes narrowed and she breathed the word, 'Drink.'

"I turned away from her, my fist rising in a consternation for which I couldn't find words. But then Claudia had hold of that fist and was looking up at me with relentless eyes. 'Do it, Louis,' she commanded. 'Because I cannot do it.' Her voice was painfully calm, all the emotion under the hard, measured tone. 'I haven't the size, I haven't the strength! You saw to that when you made me! Do it!'

"I broke away from her, clutching my wrist as if she'd burned it. I could see the door, and it seemed to me the better part of wisdom to leave by it at once. I could feel Claudia's strength, her will, and the mortal woman's eyes seemed afire with that same will. But Claudia held me, not with a gentle pleading, a miserable coaxing that would have dissipated that power, making me feel pity for her as I gathered my own forces. She held me with the emotion her eyes had evinced even through her coldness and the way that she turned away from me now, almost as if she'd been instantly defeated. I did not understand the manner in which she sank back on the bed, her head bowed, her lips moving feverishly, her eyes rising only to scan the walls. I wanted to touch her and say to her that what she asked was impossible; I wanted to soothe that fire that seemed to be consuming her from

within.

"And the soft, mortal woman had settled into one of the velvet chairs by the fire, with the rustling and iridescence of her taffeta dress surrounding her like part of the mystery of her, of her dispassionate eyes which watched us now, the fever of her pale face. I remember turning to her, spurred on by that childish, pouting mouth set against the fragile face. The vampire kiss had left: no visible trace except the wound, no inalterable change on the pale-pink flesh. 'How do we appear to you?' I asked, seeing her eyes on Claudia. She seemed excited by the diminutive beauty, the awful woman's-passion knotted in the small dimpled hands.

"She broke her gaze and looked up at me. 'I ask you … how do we appear? Do you think us beautiful, magical, our white skin, our fierce eyes? Oh, I remember perfectly what mortal vision was, the dimness of it, and how the vampire's beauty burned through that veil, so powerfully alluring, so utterly deceiving! Drink, you tell me. You haven't the vaguest conception under God of what you ask!'

"But Claudia rose from the bed and came towards me. 'How dare you!' she whispered. 'How dare you make this decision for both of us! Do you know how I despise you! Do you know that I despise you with a passion that eats at me like a canker!' Her small form trembled, her hands hovering over the pleated bodice of her yellow gown. 'Don't you look away from me! I am sick at heart with your looking away, with your suffering. You understand nothing. Your evil is that you cannot be evil, and I must suffer for it. I tell you, I will suffer no longer!' Her fingers bit into the flesh of my wrist; I twisted, stepping back from her, floundering in the face of the hatred, the rage rising like some dormant beast in her, looking out through her eyes. 'Snatching me from mortal hands like two grim monsters in a nightmare fairy tale, you idle, blind parents! Fathers!' She spat the word. 'Let tears gather in your eyes. You haven't tears enough for what you've done to me. Six more mortal years, seven, eight … I might have had that shape!' Her pointed finger flew at Madeleine, whose hands had risen to her face, whose eyes were clouded over. Her moan was almost Claudia's name. But Claudia did not hear her. 'Yes, that shape, I might have known what it was to walk at your side. Monsters! To give me immortality in this hopeless guise, this helpless form!' The tears stood

in her eyes. The words had died away, drawn in, as it were, on her breast.

" 'Now, you give her to me!' she said, her head bowing, her curls tumbling down to make a concealing veil. 'You give her to me. You do this, or you finish what you did to me that night in the hotel in New Orleans. I will not live with this hatred any longer, I will not live with this rage! I cannot. I will not abide it!' And tossing her hair, she put her hands to her ears as if to stop the sound of her own words, her breath drawn in rapid gasps, the tears seeming to scald her cheeks.

"I had sunk to my knees at her side, and my arms were outstretched as if to enfold her. Yet I dared not touch her, dared not even say her name, lest my own pain break from me with the first syllable in a monstrous outpouring of hopelessly inarticulate cries. 'Oooh.' She shook her head now, squeezing the tears out onto her cheeks, her teeth clenched tight together. 'I love you still, that's the torment of it. Lestat I never loved. But you! The measure of my hatred is that love. They are the same! Do you know now how much I hate you!' She flashed at me through the red film that covered her eyes.

" 'Yes,' I whispered. I bowed my head. But she was gone from me into the arms of Madeleine, who enfolded her desperately, as if she might protect Claudia from me—the irony of it, the pathetic irony—protect Claudia from herself. She was whispering to Claudia, 'Don't cry, don't cry!' her hands stroking Claudia's face and hair with a fierceness that would have bruised a human child.

"But Claudia seemed lost against her breast suddenly, her eyes closed, her face smooth, as if all passion were drained away from her, her arm sliding up around Madeleine's neck, her head falling against the taffeta and lace. She lay still, the tears staining her cheeks, as if all this that had risen to the surface had left her weak and desperate for oblivion, as if the room around her, as if I, were not there.

"And there they were together, a tender mortal crying unstintingly now, her warm arms holding what she could not possibly understand, this white and fierce and unnatural childthing she believed she loved. And if I had not felt for her, this mad and reckless woman flirting with the damned, if I had not felt all the sorrow for her I felt for my mortal self, I would have wrested the demon thing from her arms, held it tight to me, denying over and over the words I'd just heard. But I knelt

there still, thinking only, The love is equal to the hatred; gathering that selfishly to my own breast, holding onto that as I sank back against the bed.

"A long time before Madeleine was to know it, Claudia had ceased crying and sat still as a statue on Madeleine's lap, her liquid eyes fixed on me, oblivious to the soft, red hair that fell around her or the woman's hand that still stroked her. And I sat slumped against the bedpost, staring back at those vampire eyes, unable and unwilling to speak in my defense. Madeleine was whispering into Claudia's ear, she was letting her tears fall into Claudia's tresses. And then gently, Claudia said to her, 'Leave us.'

" 'No.' She shook her head, holding tight to Claudia. And then she shut her eyes and trembled all over with some terrible vexation, some awful torment. But Claudia was leading her from the chair, and she was now pliant and shocked and white-faced, the green taffeta ballooning around the small yellow silk dress.

"In the archway of the parlor they stopped, and Madeleine stood as if confused, her hand at her throat, beating like a wing, then going still. She looked about her like that hapless victim on the stage of the Théâtre des Vampires who did not know where she was. But Claudia had gone for something. And I saw her emerge from the shadows with what appeared to be a large doll. I rose on my knees to look at it. It was a doll, the doll of a little girl with raven hair and green eyes, adorned with lace and ribbons, sweet-faced and wide-eyed, its porcelain feet tinkling as Claudia put it into Madeleine's arms. And Madeleine's eyes appeared to harden as she held the doll, and her lips drew back from her teeth in a grimace as she stroked its hair. She was laughing low under her breath. 'Lie down,' Claudia said to her; and together they appeared to sink into the cushions of the couch, the green taffeta rustling and giving way as Claudia lay with her and put her arms around her neck. I saw the doll sliding, dropping to the floor, yet Madeleine's hand groped for it and held it dangling, her own head thrown back, her eyes shut tight, and Claudia's curls stroking her face.

"I settled back on the floor and leaned against the soft siding of the bed. Claudia was speaking now in a low voice, barely above a whisper, telling Madeleine to be patient, to be still. I dreaded the sound of her step on the carpet; the sound of the doors sliding closed

to shut Madeleine away from us, and the hatred that lay between us like a killing vapor.

"But when I looked up to her, Claudia was standing there as if transfixed and lost in thought, all rancor and bitterness gone from her face, so that she had the blank expression of that doll.

" 'All you've said to me is true,' I said to her. 'I deserve your hatred. I've deserved it from those first moments when Lestat put you in my arms.'

"She seemed unaware of me, and her eyes were infused with a soft light. Her beauty burned into my soul so that I could hardly stand it, and then she said, wondering, 'You could have killed me then, despite him. You could have done it.' Then her eyes rested on me calmly. 'Do you wish to do it now?'

" 'Do it now!' I put my arm around her, moved her close to me, warmed by her softened voice. 'Are you mad, to say such things to me? Do I want to do it now!'

" 'I want you to do it,' she said. 'Bend down now as you did then, draw the blood out of me drop by drop, all you have the strength for; push my heart to the brink. I am small, you can take me. I won't resist you, I am something frail you can crush like a flower.'

" 'You mean these things? You mean what you say to me?' I asked. 'Why don't you place the knife here, why don't you turn it?'

" 'Would you die with me?' she asked, with a sly, mocking smile. 'Would you in fact die with me?' she pressed. 'Don't you understand what is happening to me? That he's killing me, that master vampire who has you in thrall, that he won't share your love with me, not a drop of it? I see his power in your eyes. I see your misery, your distress, the love for him you can't hide. Turn around, I'll make you look at me with those eyes that want him, I'll make you listen.'

" 'Don't anymore, don't … I won't leave you. I've sworn to you, don't you see? I cannot give you that woman.'

" 'But I'm fighting for my life! Give her to me so she can care for me, complete the guise I must have to live! And he can have you then! I am fighting for my life!'

"I all but shoved her off. 'No, no, it's madness, it's witchery,' I said, trying to defy her. 'It's you who will not share me with him, it's you who want every drop of that love. If not from me, from her. He

overpowers you, he disregards you, and it's you who wish him dead the way that you killed Lestat. Well, you won't make me a party to this death, I tell you, not this death! I will not make her one of us, I will not damn the legions of mortals who'll die at her hands if I do! Your power over me is broken. I will not!'

"Oh, if she could only have understood!

"Not for a moment could I truly believe her words against Armand, that out of that detachment which was beyond revenge he could selfishly wish for her death. But that was nothing to me now; something far more terrible than I could grasp was happening, something I was only beginning to understand, against which my anger was nothing but a mockery, a hollow attempt to oppose her tenacious will. She hated me, she loathed me, as she herself had confessed, and my heart shrivelled inside me, as if, in depriving me of that love which had sustained me a lifetime, she had dealt me a mortal blow. The knife was there. I was dying for her, dying for that love as I was that very first night when Lestat gave her to me, turned her eyes to me, and told her my name; that love which had warmed me in my self-hatred, allowed me to exist. Oh, how Lestat had understood it, and now at last his plan was undone.

"But it went beyond that, in some region from which I was shrinking as I strode back and forth, back and forth, my hands opening and closing at my sides, feeling not only that hatred in her liquid eyes: It was her pain. She had shown me her pain! *To give me immortality in this hopeless guise, this helpless form*. I put my hands to my ears, as if she spoke the words yet, and the tears flowed. For all these years I had depended utterly upon her cruelty, her absolute lack of pain! And pain was what she showed to me, undeniable pain. Oh, how Lestat would have laughed at us. That was why she had put the knife to him, because he would have laughed. To destroy me utterly she need only show me that pain. The child I made a vampire suffered. Her agony was as my own.

"There was a coffin in that other room, a bed for Madeleine, to which Claudia retreated to leave me alone with what I could not abide. I welcomed the silence. And sometime during the few hours that remained of the night I found myself at the open window, feeling the slow mist of the rain. It glistened on the fronds of the ferns, on

sweet white flowers that listed, bowed, and finally broke from their stems. A carpet of flowers littering the little balcony, the petals pounded softly by the rain. I felt weak now, and utterly alone. What had passed between us tonight could never be undone, and what had been done to Claudia by me could never be undone.

"But I was somehow, to my own bewilderment, empty of all regret. Perhaps it was the night, the starless sky, the gas lamps frozen in the mist that gave some strange comfort for which I never asked and didn't know how, in this emptiness and aloneness, to receive. I am alone, I was thinking. I am alone. It seemed just, perfectly, and so to have a pleasing, inevitable form. And I pictured myself then forever alone, as if on gaining that vampire strength the night of my death I had left Lestat and never looked back for him, as if I had moved on away from him, beyond the need of him and anyone else. As if the night had said to me, 'You are the night and the night alone understands you and enfolds you in its arms.' One with the shadows. Without nightmare. An inexplicable peace.

"Yet I could feel the end of this peace as surely as I'd felt my brief surrender to it, and it was breaking like the dark clouds. The urgent pain of Claudia's loss pressed in on me, behind me, like a shape gathered from the corners of this cluttered and oddly alien room. But outside, even as the night seemed to dissolve in a fierce driving wind, I could feel something calling to me, something inanimate which I'd never known. And a power within me seemed to answer that power, not with resistance but with an inscrutable, chilling strength.

"I moved silently through the rooms, gently dividing the doors until I saw, in the dim light cast by the flickering gas flames behind me, that sleeping woman lying in my shadow on the couch, the doll limp against her breast. Sometime before I knelt at her side I saw her eyes open, and I could feel beyond her in the collected dark those other eyes watching me, that breathless tiny vampire face waiting.

" 'Will you care for her, Madeleine?' I saw her hands clutch at the doll, turning its face against her breast. And my own hand went out for it, though I did not know why, even as she was answering me.

" 'Yes!' She repeated it again desperately.

" 'Is this what you believe her to be, a doll?' I asked her, my hand closing on the doll's head, only to feel her snatch it away from me, see

her teeth clenched as she glared at me.

" 'A child who can't die! That's what she is,' she said, as if she were pronouncing a curse.

" 'Aaaaah …' I whispered.

" 'I've done with dolls,' she said, shoving it away from her into the cushions of the couch. She was fumbling with something on her breast, something she wanted me to see and not to see, her fingers catching hold of it and closing over it. I knew what it was, had noticed it before. A locket fixed with a gold pin. I wish I could describe the passion that infected her round features, how her soft baby mouth was distorted.

" 'And the child who did die?' I guessed, watching her. I was picturing a doll shop, dolls with the same face. She shook her head, her hand pulling hard on the locket so the pin ripped the taffeta. It was fear I saw in her now, a consuming panic. And her hand bled as she opened it from the broken pin. I took the locket from her fingers. 'My daughter,' she whispered, her lip trembling.

"It was a doll's face on the small fragment of porcelain, Claudia's face, a baby face, a saccharine, sweet mockery of innocence an artist had painted there, a child with raven hair like the doll. And the mother, terrified, was staring at the darkness in front of her.

" 'Grief …' I said gently.

" 'I've done with grief,' she said, her eyes narrowing as she looked up at me. 'If you knew how I long to have your power; I'm ready for it, I hunger for it.' And she turned to me, breathing deeply, so that her breast seemed to swell under her dress.

"A violent frustration rent her face then. She turned away from me, shaking her head, her curls. 'If you were a mortal man; man *and* monster!' she said angrily. 'If I could only show you my power …' and she smiled malignantly, defiantly at me '… I could make you want me, desire me! But you're unnatural!' Her mouth went down at the corners. 'What can I give you! What can I do to make you give me what you have!' Her hand hovered over her breasts, seeming to caress them like a man's hand.

"It was strange, that moment; strange because I could never have predicted the feeling her words incited in me, the way that I saw her now with that small enticing waist, saw the round, plump curve of her

breasts and those delicate, pouting lips. She never dreamed what the mortal man in me was, how tormented I was by the blood I'd only just drunk. Desire her I did, more than she knew; because she didn't understand the nature of the kill. And with a man's pride I wanted to prove that to her, to humiliate her for what she had said to me, for the cheap vanity of her provocation and the eyes that looked away from me now in disgust. But this was madness. These were not the reasons to grant eternal life.

"And cruelly, surely, I said to her, 'Did you love this child?'

"I will never forget her face then, the violence in her, the absolute hatred. 'Yes.' She all but hissed the words at me. 'How dare you!' She reached for the locket even as I clutched it. It was guilt that was consuming her, not love. It was guilt—that shop of dolls Claudia had described to me, shelves and shelves of the effigy of that dead child. But guilt that absolutely understood the finality of death. There was something as hard in her as the evil in myself, something as powerful. She had her hand out towards me. She touched my waistcoat and opened her fingers there, pressing them against my chest. And I was on my knees, drawing close to her, her hair brushing my face.

" 'Hold fast to me when I take you,' I said to her, seeing her eyes grow wide, her mouth open. 'And when the swoon is strongest, listen all the harder for the beating of my heart. Hold and say over and over, "I will live." ' "

" 'Yes, yes,' she was nodding, her heart pounding with her excitement.

"Her hands burned on my neck, fingers forcing their way into my collar. 'Look beyond me at that distant light; don't take your eyes off of it, not for a second, and say over and over, "I will live".'

"She gasped as I broke the flesh, the warm current coming into me, her breasts crushed against me, her body arching up, helpless, from the couch. And I could see her eyes, even as I shut my own, see that taunting, provocative mouth. I was drawing on her, hard, lifting her, and I could feel her weakening, her hands dropping limp at her sides. 'Tight, tight,' I whispered over the hot stream of her blood, her heart thundering in my ears, her blood swelling my satiated veins. 'The lamp,' I whispered, 'look at it!' Her heart was slowing, stopping, and her head dropped back from me on the velvet, her eyes dull to the

point of death. It seemed for a moment I couldn't move, yet I knew I had to, that someone else was lifting my wrist to my mouth as the room turned round and round, that I was focusing on that light as I had told her to do, as I tasted my own blood from my own wrist, and then forced it into her mouth. 'Drink it. Drink,' I said to her. But she lay as if dead. I gathered her close to me, the blood pouring over her lips. Then she opened her eyes, and I felt the gentle pressure of her mouth, and then her hands closing tight on the arm as she began to suck. I was rocking her, whispering to her, trying desperately to break my swoon; and then I felt her powerful pull. Every blood vessel felt it. I was threaded through and through with her pulling, my hand holding fast to the couch now, her heart beating fierce against my heart, her fingers digging deep into my arm, my outstretched palm. It was cutting me, scoring me, so I all but cried out as it went on and on, and I was backing away from her, yet pulling her with me, my life passing through my arm, her moaning breath in time with her pulling. And those strings which were my veins, those searing wires pulled at my very heart harder and harder until, without will or direction, I had wrenched free of her and fallen away from her, clutching that bleeding wrist tight with my own hand.

"She was staring at me, the blood staining her open mouth. An eternity seemed to pass as she stared. She doubled and tripled in my blurred vision, then collapsed into one trembling shape. Her hand moved to her mouth, yet her eyes did not move but grew large in her face as she stared. And then she rose slowly, not as if by her own power but as if lifted from the couch bodily by some invisible force which held her now, staring as she turned round and round, her massive skirt moving stiff as if she were all of a piece, turning like some great carved ornament on a music box that dances helplessly round and round to the music. And suddenly she was staring down at the taffeta, grabbing hold of it, pressing it between her fingers so it zinged and rustled, and she let it fall, quickly covering her ears, her eyes shut tight, then opened wide again. And then it seemed she saw the lamp, the distant, low gas lamp of the other room that gave a fragile light through the double doors. And she ran to it and stood beside it, watching it as if it were alive. 'Don't touch it …' Claudia said to her, and gently guided her away. But Madeleine had seen the

flowers on the balcony and she was drawing close to them now, her outstretched palms brushing the petals and then pressing the droplets of rain to her face.

"I was hovering on the fringes of the room, watching her every move, how she took the flowers and crushed them in her hands and let the petals fall all around her and how she pressed her fingertips to the mirror and stared into her own eyes. My own pain had ceased, a handkerchief bound the wound, and I was waiting, waiting, seeing now that Claudia had no knowledge from memory of what was to come next. They were dancing together, as Madeleine's skin grew paler and paler in the unsteady golden light. She scooped Claudia into her arms, and Claudia rode round in circles with her, her own small face alert and wary behind her smile.

"And then Madeleine weakened. She stepped backwards and seemed to lose her balance. But quickly she righted herself and let Claudia go gently down to the ground. On tiptoe, Claudia embraced her. 'Louis.' She signalled to me under her breath. 'Louis.…'

"I beckoned for her to come away. And Madeleine, not seeming even to see us, was staring at her own outstretched hands. Her face was blanched and drawn, and suddenly she was scratching at her lips and staring at the dark stains on her fingertips. 'No, no!' I cautioned her gently, taking Claudia's hand and holding her close to my side. A long moan escaped Madeleine's lips.

" 'Louis,' Claudia whispered in that preternatural voice which Madeleine could not yet hear.

" 'She is dying, which your child's mind can't remember. You were spared it, it left no mark on you,' I whispered to her, brushing the hair back from her ear, my eyes never leaving Madeleine, who was wandering from mirror to mirror, the tears flowing freely now, the body giving up its life.

" 'But, Louis, if she dies …' Claudia cried.

" 'No.' I knelt down, seeing the distress in her small face. 'The blood was strong enough, she will live. But she will be afraid, terribly afraid.' And gently, firmly, I pressed Claudia's hand and kissed her cheek. She looked at me then with mingled wonder and fear. And she watched me with that same expression as I wandered closer to Madeleine, drawn by her cries. She reeled now, her hands out, and I

caught her and held her close. Her eyes already burned with unnatural light, a violet fire reflected in her tears.

" 'It's mortal death, only mortal death,' I said to her gently. 'Do you see the sky? We must leave it now and you must hold tight to me, lie by my side. A sleep as heavy as death will come over my limbs, and I won't be able to solace you. And you will lie there and you will struggle with it. But you hold tight to me in the darkness, do you hear? You hold tight to my hands, which will hold your hands as long as I have feeling.'

"She seemed lost for the moment in my gaze, and I sensed the wonder that surrounded her, how the radiance of my eyes was the radiance of all colors and how all those colors were all the more reflected for her in my eyes. I guided her gently to the coffin, telling her again not to be afraid. 'When you arise, you will be immortal,' I said. 'No natural cause of death can harm you. Come, lie down.' I could see her fear of it, see her shrink from the narrow box, its satin no comfort. Already her skin began to glisten, to have that brilliance that Claudia and I shared. I knew now she would not surrender until I lay with her.

"I held her and looked across the long vista of the room to where Claudia stood, with that strange coffin, watching me. Her eyes were still but dark with an undefined suspicion, a cool distrust. I set Madeleine down beside her bed and moved towards those eyes. And, kneeling calmly beside her, I gathered Claudia in my arms. 'Don't you recognize me?' I asked her. 'Don't you know who I am?'

"She looked at me. 'No,' she said.

"I smiled. I nodded. 'Bear me no ill will,' I said. 'We are even.'

"At that she moved her head to one side and studied me carefully, then seemed to smile despite herself and to nod in assent.

" 'For you see,' I said to her in that same calm voice, 'what died tonight in this room was not that woman. It will take her many nights to die, perhaps years. What has died in this room tonight is the last vestige in me of what was human.'

"A shadow fell over her face; clear, as if the composure were rent like a veil. And her lips parted, but only with a short intake of breath. Then she said, 'Well, then you are right. Indeed. We are even.' "

. . .

“ ‘I want to burn the doll shop!’

“Madeleine told us this. She was feeding to the fire in the grate the folded dresses of that dead daughter, white lace and beige linen, crinkled shoes, bonnets that smelled of camphor balls and sachet. ‘It means nothing now, any of it.’ She stood back watching the fire blaze. And she looked at Claudia with triumphant, fiercely devoted eyes.

“I did not believe her, so certain I was—even though night after night I had to lead her away from men and women she could no longer drain dry, so satiated was she with the blood of earlier kills, often lifting her victims off their feet in her passion, crushing their throats with her ivory fingers as surely as she drank their blood—so certain I was that sooner or later this mad intensity must abate, and she would take hold of the trappings of this nightmare, her own luminescent flesh, these lavish rooms of the Hôtel Saint-Gabriel, and cry out to be awakened; to be free. She did not understand it was no experiment; showing her fledgling teeth to the gilt-edged mirrors, she was mad.

“But I still did not realize how mad she was, and how accustomed to dreaming; and that she would not cry out for reality, rather would feed reality to her dreams, a demon elf feeding her spinning wheel with the reeds of the world so she might make her own weblike universe.

“I was just beginning to understand her avarice, her magic.

“She had a dollmaker’s craft from making with her old lover over and over the replica of her dead child, which I was to understand crowded the shelves of this shop we were soon to visit. Added to that was a vampire’s skill and a vampire’s intensity, so that in the space of one night when I had turned her away from killing, she, with that same insatiable need, created out of a few sticks of wood, with her chisel and knife, a perfect rocking chair, so shaped and proportioned for Claudia that seated in it by the fire, she appeared a woman. To that must be added, as the nights passed, a table of the same scale; and from a toy shop a tiny oil lamp, a china cup and saucer; and from a lady’s purse a little leather-bound book for notes which in Claudia’s

hands became a large volume. The world crumbled and ceased to exist at the boundary of the small space which soon became the length and breadth of Claudia's dressing room: a bed whose posters reached only to my breast buttons, and small mirrors that reflected only the legs of an unwieldy giant when I found myself lost among them; paintings hung low for Claudia's eye; and finally, upon her little vanity table, black evening gloves for tiny fingers, a woman's low-cut gown of midnight velvet, a tiara from a child's masked ball. And Claudia, the crowning jewel, a fairy queen with bare white shoulders wandering with her sleek tresses among the rich items of her tiny world while I watched from the doorway, spellbound, ungainly, stretched out on the carpet so I could lean my head on my elbow and gaze up into my paramour's eyes, seeing them mysteriously softened for the time being by the perfection of this sanctuary. How beautiful she was in black lace, a cold, flaxen-haired woman with a kewpie doll's face and liquid eyes which gazed at me so serenely and so long that, surely, I must have been forgotten; the eyes must be seeing something other than me as I lay there on the floor dreaming; something other than the clumsy universe surrounding me, which was now marked off and nullified by someone who had suffered in it, someone who had suffered always, but who was not seeming to suffer now, listening as it were to the tinkling of a toy music box, putting a hand on the toy clock. I saw a vision of shortened hours and little golden minutes. I felt I was mad.

"I put my hands under my head and gazed at the chandelier; it was hard to disengage myself from one world and enter the other. And Madeleine, on the couch, was working with that regular passion, as if immortality could not conceivably mean rest, sewing cream lace to lavender satin for the small bed, only stopping occasionally to blot the moisture tinged with blood from her white forehead.

"I wondered, if I shut my eyes, would this realm of tiny things consume the rooms around me, and would I, like Gulliver, awake to discover myself bound hand and foot, an unwelcome giant? I had a vision of houses made for Claudia in whose garden mice would be monsters, and tiny carriages, and flowery shrubbery become trees. Mortals would be so entranced, and drop to their knees to look into the small windows. Like the spider's web, it would attract.

"I *was* bound hand and foot here. Not only by that fairy beauty—

that exquisite secret of Claudia's white shoulders and the rich luster of pearls, bewitching languor, a tiny bottle of perfume, now a decanter, from which a spell is released that promises Eden—I was bound by fear. That outside these rooms, where I supposedly presided over the education of Madeleine—erratic conversations about killing and vampire nature in which Claudia could have instructed so much more easily than I, if she had ever showed the desire to take the lead—that outside these rooms, where nightly I was reassured with soft kisses and contented looks that the hateful passion which Claudia had shown once and once only would not return—that outside these rooms, I would find that I was, according to my own hasty admission, truly changed: the mortal part of me was that part which had loved, I was certain. So what did I feel then for Armand, the creature for whom I'd transformed Madeleine, the creature for whom I had wanted to be free? A curious and disturbing distance? A dull pain? A nameless tremor? Even in this worldly clutter, I saw Armand in his monkish cell, saw his dark-brown eyes, and felt that eerie magnetism.

"And yet I did not move to go to him. I did not dare discover the extent of what I might have lost. Nor try to separate that loss from some other oppressive realization: that in Europe I'd found no truths to lessen loneliness, transform despair. Rather, I'd found only the inner workings of my own small soul, the pain of Claudia's, and a passion for a vampire who was perhaps more evil than Lestat, for whom I became as evil as Lestat, but in whom I saw the only promise of good in evil of which I could conceive.

"It was all beyond me, finally. And so the clock ticked on the mantel; and Madeleine begged to see the performances of the Théâtre des Vampires and swore to defend Claudia against any vampire who dared insult her; and Claudia spoke of strategy and said, 'Not yet, not now,' and I lay back observing with some measure of relief Madeleine's love for Claudia, her blind covetous passion. Oh, I have so little compassion in my heart or memory for Madeleine. I thought she had only seen the first vein of suffering; she had no understanding of death. She was so easily sharpened, so easily driven to wanton violence. I supposed in my colossal conceit and self-deception that my own grief for my dead brother was the only true emotion. I allowed myself to forget how totally I had fallen in love with Lestat's iridescent

eyes, that I'd sold my soul for a many-colored and luminescent thing, thinking that a highly reflective surface conveyed the power to walk on water.

"What would Christ need have done to make me follow Him like Matthew or Peter? Dress well, to begin with. And have a luxurious head of pampered yellow hair.

"I hate myself. And it seemed, lulled half to sleep as I was so often by their conversation—Claudia whispering of killing and speed and vampire craft, Madeleine bent over her singing needle—it seemed then the only emotion of which I was still capable: hatred of self. I love them. I hate them. I do not care if they are there. Claudia puts her hands on my hair as if she wants to tell me with the old familiarity that her heart's at peace. I do not care. And there is the apparition of Armand, that power, that heartbreaking clarity. Beyond a glass, it seems. And taking Claudia's playful hand, I understand for the first time in my life what she feels when she forgives me for being myself whom she says she hates and loves: *she feels almost nothing."*

It was a week before we accompanied Madeleine on her errand, to torch a universe of dolls behind a plate-glass window. I remember wandering up the street away from it, round a turn into a narrow cavern of darkness where the falling rain was the only sound. But then I saw the red glare against the clouds. Bells clanged and men shouted, and Claudia beside me was talking softly of the nature of fire. The thick smoke rising in that flickering glare unnerved me. I was feeling fear. Not a wild, mortal fear, but something cold like a hook in my side. This fear—it was the old town house burning in the Rue Royale, Lestat in the attitude of sleep on the burning floor.

" 'Fire purifies …' Claudia said. And I said, 'No, fire merely destroys. …'

"Madeleine had gone past us and was roaming at the top of the street, a phantom in the rain, her white hands whipping the air, beckoning to us, white arcs of white fireflies. And I remember Claudia leaving me for her. The sight of wilted, writhing yellow hair as she told me to follow. A ribbon fallen underfoot, flapping and floating in a swirl of black water. It seemed they were gone. And I bent to retrieve that ribbon. But another hand reached out for it. It was Armand who gave it to me now.

"I was shocked to see him there, so near, the figure of Gentleman Death in a doorway, marvellously real in his black cape and silk tie, yet ethereal as the shadows in his stillness. There was the faintest glimmer of the fire in his eyes, red warming the blackness there to the richer brown.

"And I woke suddenly as if I'd been dreaming, woke to the sense of him, to his hand enclosing mine, to his head inclined as if to let me know he wanted me to follow—awoke to my own excited experience of his presence, which consumed me as surely as it had consumed me in his cell. We were walking together now, fast, nearing the Seine, moving so swiftly and artfully through a gathering of men that they scarce saw us, that we scarce saw them. That I could keep up with him easily amazed me. He was forcing me into some acknowledgment of my powers, that the paths I'd normally chosen were human paths I no longer need follow.

“I wanted desperately to talk to him, to stop him with both my hands on his shoulders, merely to look into his eyes again as I’d done that last night, to fix him in some time and place, so that I could deal with the excitement inside me. There was so much I wanted to tell him, so much I wanted to explain. And yet I didn’t know what to say or why I would say it, only that the fullness of the feeling continued to relieve me almost to tears. This was what I’d feared lost.

“I didn’t know where we were now, only that in my wanderings I’d passed here before: a street of ancient mansions, of garden walls and carriage doors and towers overhead and windows of leaded glass beneath stone arches. Houses of other centuries, gnarled trees, that sudden thick and silent tranquillity which means that the masses are shut out; a handful of mortals inhabit this vast region of high-ceilinged rooms; stone absorbs the sound of breathing, the space of whole lives.

“Armand was atop a wall now, his arm against the overhanging bough of a tree, his hand reaching for me; and in an instant I stood beside him, the wet foliage brushing my face. Above, I could see story after story rising to a lone tower that barely emerged from the dark, teeming rain. ‘Listen to me; we are going to climb to the tower,’ Armand was saying.

“ ‘I cannot … it’s impossible …!’

“ ‘You don’t begin to know your own powers. You can climb easily. Remember, if you fall you will not be injured. Do as I do. But note this. The inhabitants of this house have known me for a hundred years and think me a spirit; so if by chance they see you, or you see them through those windows, remember what they believe you to be and show no consciousness of them lest you disappoint them or confuse them. Do you hear? You are perfectly safe.’

“I wasn’t sure what frightened me more, the climb itself or the notion of being seen as a ghost; but I had no time for comforting witticisms, even to myself. Armand had begun, his boots finding the crack between the stones, his hands sure as claws in the crevices; and I was moving after him, tight to the wall, not daring to look down, clinging for a moment’s rest to the thick, carved arch over a window, glimpsing inside, over a licking fire, a dark shoulder, a hand stroking with a poker, some figure that moved completely without knowledge that it was watched. Gone. Higher and higher we climbed, until we

had reached the window of the tower itself, which Armand quickly wrenched open, his long legs disappearing over the sill; and I rose up after him, feeling his arm out around my shoulders.

"I sighed despite myself, as I stood in the room, rubbing the backs of my arms, looking around this wet, strange place. The rooftops were silver below, turrets rising here and there through the huge, rustling treetops; and far off glimmered the broken chain of a lighted boulevard. The room seemed as damp as the night outside. Armand was making a fire.

"From a molding pile of furniture he was picking chairs, breaking them into wood easily despite the thickness of their rungs. There was something grotesque about him, sharpened by his grace and the imperturbable calm of his white face. He did what any vampire could do, cracking these thick pieces of wood into splinters, yet he did what only a vampire could do. And there seemed nothing human about him; even his handsome features and dark hair became the attributes of a terrible angel who shared with the rest of us only a superficial resemblance. The tailored coat was a mirage. And though I felt drawn to him, more strongly perhaps than I'd ever been drawn to any living creature save Claudia, he excited me in other ways which resembled fear. I was not surprised that, when he finished, he set a heavy oak chair down for me, but retired himself to the marble mantelpiece and sat there warming his hands over the fire, the flames throwing red shadows into his face.

" 'I can hear the inhabitants of the house,' I said to him. The warmth was good. I could feel the leather of my boots drying, feel the warmth in my fingers.

" 'Then you know that I can hear them,' he said softly; and though this didn't contain a hint of reproach, I realized the implications of my own words.

" 'And if they come?' I insisted, studying him.

" 'Can't you tell by my manner that they won't come?' he asked. 'We could sit here all night and never speak of them. I want you to know that if we speak of them it is because you want to do so.' And when I said nothing, when perhaps I looked a little defeated, he said gently that they had long ago sealed off this tower and left it undisturbed; and if in fact they saw the smoke from the chimney or the light in the

window, none of them would venture up until tomorrow.

"I could see now there were several shelves of books at one side of the fireplace, and a writing table. The pages on top were wilted, but there was an inkstand and several pens. I could imagine the room a very comfortable place when it was not storming, as it was now, or after the fire had dried out the air.

" 'You see,' Armand said, 'you really have no need of the rooms you have at the hotel. You really have need of very little. But each of us must decide how much he wants. These people in this house have a name for me; encounters with me cause talk for twenty years. They are only isolated instants in my time which mean nothing. They cannot hurt me, and I use their house to be alone. No one of the Théâtre des Vampires knows of my coming here. This is my secret.'

"I had watched him intently as he was speaking, and thoughts which had occurred to me in the cell at the theater occurred to me again. Vampires do not age, and I wondered how his youthful face and manner might differ now from what he had been a century before or a century before that; for his face, though not deepened by the lessons of maturity, was certainly no mask. It seemed powerfully expressive as was his unobtrusive voice, and I was at a loss finally to fully anatomize why. I knew only I was as powerfully drawn to him as before; and to some extent the words I spoke now were a subterfuge. 'But what holds you to the Théâtre des Vampires?' I asked.

" 'A need, naturally. But I've found what I need,' he said. 'Why do you shun me?'

" 'I never shunned you,' I said, trying to hide the excitement these words produced in me. 'You understand I have to protect Claudia, that she has no one but me. Or at least she had no one until …'

" 'Until Madeleine came to live with you.…'

" 'Yes …' I said.

" 'But now Claudia has released you, yet still you stay with her, and stay bound to her as your paramour,' he said.

" 'No, she's no paramour of mine; you don't understand,' I said. 'Rather, she's my child, and I don't know that she can release me.…' These were thoughts I'd gone over and over in my mind. 'I don't know if the child possesses the power to release the parent. I don't know that I won't be bound to her for as long as she …'

“I stopped. I was going to say, ‘for as long as she lives.’ But I realized it was a hollow mortal cliche. She would live forever, as I would live forever. But wasn’t it so for mortal fathers? Their daughters live forever because these fathers die first. I was at a loss suddenly; but conscious all the while of how Armand listened; that he listened in the way that we dream of others listening, his face seeming to reflect on everything said. He did not start forward to seize on my slightest pause, to assert an understanding of something before the thought was finished, or to argue with a swift, irresistible impulse—the things which often make dialogue impossible.

“And after a long interval he said, ‘I want you. I want you more than anything in the world.’

“For a moment I doubted what I’d heard. It struck me as unbelievable. And I was hopelessly disarmed by it, and the wordless vision of our living together expanded and obliterated every other consideration in my mind.

“ ‘I said that I want you. I want you more than anything in the world,’ he repeated, with only a subtle change of expression. And then he sat waiting, watching. His face was as tranquil as always, his smooth, white forehead beneath the shock of his auburn hair without a trace of care, his large eyes reflecting on me, his lips still.

“ ‘You want this of me, yet you don’t come to me,’ he said. ‘There are things you want to know, and you don’t ask. You see Claudia slipping away from you, yet you seem powerless to prevent it, and then you would hasten it, and yet you do nothing.’

“ ‘I don’t understand my own feelings. Perhaps they are clearer to you than they are to me.…’

“ ‘You don’t begin to know what a mystery you are!’ he said.

“ ‘But at least you know yourself thoroughly. I can’t claim that,’ I said. ‘I love her, yet I am not close to her. I mean that when I am with you as I am now, I know that I know nothing of her, nothing of anyone.’

“ ‘She’s an era for you, an era of your life. If and when you break with her, you break with the only one alive who has shared that time with you. You fear that, the isolation of it, the burden, the scope of eternal life.’

“ ‘Yes, that’s true, but that’s only a small part of it. The era, it doesn’t

mean much to me. She made it mean something. Other vampires must experience this and survive it, the passing of a hundred eras.'

" 'But they don't survive it,' he said. 'The world would be choked with vampires if they survived it. How do you think I come to be the eldest here or anywhere?' he asked.

"I thought about this. And then I ventured, 'They die by violence?'

" 'No, almost never. It isn't necessary. How many vampires do you think have the stamina for immortality? They have the most dismal notions of immortality to begin with. For in becoming immortal they want all the forms of their life to be fixed as they are and incorruptible: carriages made in the same dependable fashion, clothing of the cut which suited their prime, men attired and speaking in the manner they have always understood and valued. When, in fact, all things change except the vampire himself; everything except the vampire is subject to constant corruption and distortion. Soon, with an inflexible mind, and often even with the most flexible mind, this immortality becomes a penitential sentence in a madhouse of figures and forms that are hopelessly unintelligible and without value. One evening a vampire rises and realizes what he has feared perhaps for decades, that he simply wants no more of life at any cost. That whatever style or fashion or shape of existence made immortality attractive to him has been swept off the face of the earth. And nothing remains to offer freedom from despair except the act of killing. And that vampire goes out to die. No one will find his remains. No one will know where he has gone. And often no one around him—should he still seek the company of other vampires—no one will know that he is in despair. He will have ceased long ago to speak of himself or of anything. He will vanish.'

"I sat back impressed by the obvious truth of it, and yet at the same time, everything in me revolted against that prospect. I became aware of the depth of my hope and my terror; how very different those feelings were from the alienation that he described, how very different from that awful wasting despair. There was something outrageous and repulsive in that despair suddenly. I couldn't accept it.

" 'But you wouldn't allow such a state of mind in yourself. Look at you,' I found myself answering. 'If there weren't one single work of art left in this world … and there are thousands … if there weren't a

single natural beauty … if the world were reduced to one empty cell and one fragile candle, I can't help but see you studying that candle, absorbed in the flicker of its light, the change of its colors … how long could that sustain you … what possibilities would it create? Am I wrong? Am I such a crazed idealist?'

" 'No,' he said. There was a brief smile on his lips, an evanescent flush of pleasure. But then he went on simply. 'But you feel an obligation to a world you love because that world for you is still intact. It is conceivable your own sensitivity might become the instrument of madness. You speak of works of art and natural beauty. I wish I had the artist's power to bring alive for you the Venice of the fifteenth century, my master's palace there, the love I felt for him when I was a mortal boy, and the love he felt for me when he made me a vampire. Oh, if I could make those times come alive for either you or me … for only an instant! What would that be worth? And what a sadness it is to me that time doesn't dim the memory of that period, that it becomes all the richer and more magical in light of the world I see today.'

" 'Love?' I asked. 'There was love between you and the vampire who made you?' I leaned forward.

" 'Yes,' he said. 'A love so strong he couldn't allow me to grow old and die. A love that waited patiently until I was strong enough to be born to darkness. Do you mean to tell me there was no bond of love between you and the vampire who made you?'

" 'None,' I said quickly. I couldn't repress a bitter smile.

"He studied me. 'Why then did he give you these powers?' he asked.

"I sat back. 'You see these powers as a gift!' I said. 'Of course you do. Forgive me, but it amazes me, how in your complexity you are so profoundly simple.' I laughed.

" 'Should I be insulted?' he smiled. And his whole manner only confirmed me in what I'd just said. He seemed so innocent. I was only beginning to understand him.

" 'No, not by me,' I said, my pulse quickening as I looked at him. 'You're everything I dreamed of when I became a vampire. You see these powers as a gift!' I repeated it. 'But tell me … do you now feel love for this vampire who gave you eternal life? Do you feel this now?'

"He appeared to be thinking, and then he said slowly, 'Why does

this matter?' But went on: 'I don't think I've been fortunate in feeling love for many people or many things. But yes, I love him. Perhaps I do not love him as you mean. It seems you confuse me, rather effortlessly. You are a mystery. I do not need him, this vampire, anymore.'

" 'I was gifted with eternal life, with heightened perception, and with the need to kill,' I quickly explained, 'because the vampire who made me wanted the house I owned and my money. Do you understand such a thing?' I asked. 'Ah, but there is so much else behind what I say. It makes itself known to me so slowly, so incompletely! You see, it's as if you've cracked a door for me, and light is streaming from that door and I'm yearning to get to it, to push it back, to enter the region you say exists beyond it! When, in fact, I don't believe it! The vampire who made me was everything that I truly believed evil to be: He was as dismal, as literal, as barren, as inevitably eternally disappointing as I believed evil had to be! I know that now. But you, you are something totally beyond that conception! Open the door for me, push it back all the way. Tell me about this palace in Venice, this love affair with damnation. I want to understand it.'

" 'You trick yourself. The palace means nothing to you,' he said. 'The doorway you see leads to me, now. To your coming to live with me as I am. I am evil with infinite gradations and without guilt.'

" 'Yes, exactly,' I murmured.

" 'And this makes you unhappy,' he said. 'You, who came to me in my cell and said there was only one sin left, the willful taking of an innocent human life.'

" 'Yes …' I said. 'How you must have been laughing at me.…'

" 'I never laughed at you,' he said. 'I cannot afford to laugh at you. It is through you that I can save myself from the despair which I've described to you as our death. It is through you that I must make my link with this nineteenth century and come to understand it in a way that will revitalize me, which I so desperately need. It is for you that I've been waiting at the Théâtre des Vampires. If I knew a mortal of that sensitivity, that pain, that focus, I would make him a vampire in an instant. But such can rarely be done. No, I've had to wait and watch for you. And now I'll fight for you. Do you see how ruthless I

am in love? Is this what you meant by love?'

" 'Oh, but you'd be making a terrible mistake,' I said, looking him in the eyes. His words were only slowly sinking in. Never had I felt my all-consuming frustration to be so clear. I could not conceivably satisfy him. I could not satisfy Claudia. I'd never been able to satisfy Lestat. And my own mortal brother, Paul: How dismally, mortally I had disappointed him!

" 'No. I must make contact with the age,' he said to me calmly. 'And I can do this through you … not to learn things from you which I can see in a moment in an art gallery or read in an hour in the thickest books … you are the spirit, you are the heart,' he persisted.

" 'No, no.' I threw up my hands. I was on the point of a bitter, hysterical laughter. 'Don't you see? I'm not the spirit of any age. I'm at odds with everything and always have been! I have never belonged anywhere with anyone at any time!' It was too painful, too perfectly true.

"But his face only brightened with an irresistible smile. He seemed on the verge of laughing at me, and then his shoulders began to move with this laughter. 'But Louis,' he said softly. 'This is the very spirit of your age. Don't you see that? Everyone else feels as you feel. Your fall from grace and faith has been the fall of a century.'

"I was so stunned by this, that for a long time I sat there staring into the fire. It had all but consumed the wood and was a wasteland of smoldering ash, a gray and red landscape that would have collapsed at the touch of the poker. Yet it was very warm, and still gave off powerful light. I saw my life in complete perspective.

" 'And the vampires of the Théâtre …' I asked softly.

" 'They reflect the age in cynicism which cannot comprehend the death of possibilities, fatuous sophisticated indulgence in the parody of the miraculous, decadence whose last refuge is self-ridicule, a mannered helplessness. You saw them; you've known them all your life. You reflect your age differently. You reflect its broken heart.'

" 'This is unhappiness. Unhappiness you don't begin to understand.'

" 'I don't doubt it. Tell me what you feel now, what makes you unhappy. Tell me why for a period of seven days you haven't come to me, though you were burning to come. Tell me what holds you still to Claudia and the other woman.'

“I shook my head. ‘You don’t know what you ask. You see, it was immensely difficult for me to perform the act of making Madeleine into a vampire. I broke a promise to myself that I would never do this, that my own loneliness would never drive me to do it. I don’t see our life as powers and gifts. I see it as a curse. I haven’t the courage to die. But to make another vampire! To bring this suffering on another, and to condemn to death all those men and women whom that vampire must subsequently kill! I broke a grave promise. And in so doing …’

“ ‘But if it’s any consolation to you … surely you realize I had a hand in it.’

“ ‘That I did it to be free of Claudia, to be free to come to you … yes, I realize that. But the ultimate responsibility lies with me!’ I said.

“ ‘No. I mean, directly. I made you do it! I was near you the night you did it. I exerted my strongest power to persuade you to do it. Didn’t you know this?

“ ‘No!’

“I bowed my head.

“ ‘I would have made this woman a vampire,’ he said softly. ‘But I thought it best you have a hand in it. Otherwise you would not give Claudia up. You must know you wanted it.…’

“ ‘I loathe what I did!’ I said.

“ ‘Then loathe me, not yourself.’

“ ‘No. You don’t understand. You nearly destroyed the thing you value in me when this happened! I resisted you with all my power when I didn’t even know it was your force which was working on me. Something nearly died in me! Passion nearly died in me! I was all but destroyed when Madeleine was created!’

“ ‘But that thing is no longer dead, that passion, that humanity, whatever you wish to name it. If it were not alive there wouldn’t be tears in your eyes now. There wouldn’t be rage in your voice,’ he said.

“For the moment, I couldn’t answer. I only nodded. Then I struggled to speak again. ‘You must never force me to do something against my will! You must never exert such power …’ I stammered.

“ ‘No,’ he said at once. ‘I must not. My power stops somewhere inside you, at some threshold. There I am powerless. However … this creation of Madeleine is done. You are free.’

“ ‘And you are satisfied,’ I said, gaining control of myself. ‘I don’t

mean to be harsh. You have me. I love you. But I'm mystified. You're satisfied?'

" 'How could I not be?' he asked. 'I am satisfied, of course.'

"I stood up and went to the window. The last embers were dying. The light came from the gray sky. I heard Armand follow me to the window ledge. I could feel him beside me now, my eyes growing more and more accustomed to the luminosity of the sky, so that now I could see his profile and his eye on the falling rain. The sound of the rain was everywhere and different: flowing in the gutter along the roof, tapping the shingles, falling softly through the shimmering layers of tree branches, splattering on the sloped stone sill in front of my hands. A soft intermingling of sounds that drenched and colored all of the night.

" 'Do you forgive me … for forcing you with the woman?' he asked.

" 'You don't need my forgiveness.'

" 'You need it,' he said. 'Therefore, I need it.' His face was as always utterly calm.

" 'Will she care for Claudia? Will she endure?' I asked.

" 'She is perfect. Mad; but for these days that is perfect. She will care for Claudia. She has never lived a moment of life alone; it is natural to her that she be devoted to her companions. She need not have particular reasons for loving Claudia. Yet, in addition to her needs, she does have particular reasons. Claudia's beautiful surface, Claudia's quiet, Claudia's dominance and control. They are perfect together. But I think … that as soon as possible they should leave Paris.'

" 'Why?'

" 'You know why. Because Santiago and the other vampires watch them with suspicion. All the vampires have seen Madeleine. They fear her because she knows about them and they don't know her. They don't let others alone who know about them.'

" 'And the boy, Denis? What do you plan to do with him?'

" 'He's dead,' he answered.

"I was astonished. Both at his words and his calm. 'You killed him?' I gasped.

"He nodded. And said nothing. But his large, dark eyes seemed entranced with me, with the emotion, the shock I didn't try to conceal. His soft, subtle smile seemed to draw me close to him; his hand closed

over mine on the wet window sill and I felt my body turning to face him, drawing nearer to him, as though I were being moved not by myself but by him. 'It was best,' he conceded to me gently. And then said, 'We must go now….' And he glanced at the street below.

" 'Armand,' I said. 'I can't….'

" 'Louis, come after me,' he whispered. And then on the ledge, he stopped. 'Even if you were to fall on the cobblestones there,' he said, 'you would only be hurt for a while. You would heal so rapidly and so perfectly that in days you would show no sign of it, your bones healing as your skin heals; so let this knowledge free you to do what you can so easily do already. Climb down, now.'

" 'What can kill me?' I asked.

"Again he stopped. 'The destruction of your remains,' he said. 'Don't you know this? Fire, dismemberment … the heat of the sun. Nothing else. You can be scarred, yes; but you are resilient. You are immortal.'

"I was looking down through the quiet silver rain into darkness. Then a light flickered beneath the shifting tree limbs, and the pale beams of the light made the street appear. Wet cobblestones, the iron hook of the carriage-house bell, the vines clinging to the top of the wall. The huge black hulk of a carriage brushed the vines, and then the light grew weak, the street went from yellow to silver and vanished altogether, as if the dark trees had swallowed it up. Or, rather, as if it had all been subtracted from the dark. I felt dizzy. I felt the building move. Armand was seated on the window sill looking down at me.

" 'Louis, come with me tonight,' he whispered suddenly, with an urgent inflection.

" 'No,' I said gently. 'It's too soon. I can't leave them yet.'

"I watched him turn away and look at the dark sky. He appeared to sigh, but I didn't hear it. I felt his hand close on mine on the window sill. 'Very well …' he said.

" 'A little more time …' I said. And he nodded and patted my hand as if to say it was all right. Then he swung his legs over and disappeared. For only a moment I hesitated, mocked by the pounding of my heart. But then I climbed over the sill and commenced to hurry after him, never daring to look down."

It was very near dawn when I put my key into the lock at the hotel. The gas light flared along the walls. And Madeleine, her needle and thread in her hands, had fallen asleep by the grate. Claudia stood still, looking at me from among the ferns at the window, in shadow. She had her hairbrush in her hands. Her hair was gleaming.

"I stood there absorbing some shock, as if all the sensual pleasures and confusions of these rooms were passing over me like waves and my body were being permeated with these things, so different from the spell of Armand and the tower room where we'd been. There was something comforting here, and it was disturbing. I was looking for my chair. I was sitting in it with my hands on my temples. And then I felt Claudia near me, and I felt her lips against my forehead.

" 'You've been with Armand,' she said. 'You want to go with him.'

"I looked up at her. How soft and beautiful her face was, and, suddenly, so much mine. I felt no compunction in yielding to my urge to touch her cheeks, to lightly touch her eyelids—familiarities, liberties I hadn't taken with her since the night of our quarrel. 'I'll see you again; not here, in other places. Always I'll know where you are!' I said.

"She put her arms around my neck. She held me tight, and I closed my eyes and buried my face in her hair. I was covering her neck with my kisses. I had hold of her round, firm little arms. I was kissing them, kissing the soft indentation of the flesh in the crooks of her arms, her wrists, her open palms. I felt her fingers stroking my hair, my face. 'Whatever you wish,' she vowed. 'Whatever you wish.'

" 'Are you happy? Do you have what you want?' I begged her.

" 'Yes, Louis.' She held me against her dress, her fingers clasping the back of my neck. 'I have all that I want. But do you truly know what you want?' She was lifting my face so I had to look into her eyes. 'It's you I fear for, you who might be making the mistake. Why don't you leave Paris with us!' she said suddenly. 'We have the world, come with us!'

" 'No.' I drew back from her. 'You want it to be as it was with Lestat. It can't be that way again, ever. It won't be.'

" 'It will be something new and different with Madeleine. I don't ask

for that again. It was I who put an end to that,' she said. 'But do you truly understand what you are choosing in Armand?'

"I turned away from her. There was something stubborn and mysterious in her dislike of him, in her failure to understand him. She would say again that he wished her death, which I did not believe. She didn't realize what I realized: He could not want her death, because I didn't want it. But how could I explain this to her without sounding pompous and blind in my love of him. 'It's meant to be. It's almost that sort of direction,' I said, as if it were just coming clear to me under the pressure of her doubts. 'He alone can give me the strength to be what I am. I can't continue to live divided and consumed with misery. Either I go with him, or I die,' I said. 'And it's something else, which is irrational and unexplainable and which satisfies only me.…'

" '… which is?' she asked.

" 'That I love him,' I said.

" 'No doubt you do,' she mused. 'But then, you could love even me.'

" 'Claudia, Claudia.' I held her close to me, and felt her weight on my knee. She drew up close to my chest.

" 'I only hope that when you have need of me, you can find me …' she whispered. 'That I can get back to you … I've hurt you so often, I've caused you so much pain.' Her words trailed off. She was resting still against me. I felt her weight, thinking, In a little while, I won't have her anymore. I want now simply to hold her. There has always been such pleasure in that simple thing. Her weight against me, this hand resting against my neck.

"It seemed a lamp died somewhere. That from the cool, damp air that much light was suddenly, soundlessly subtracted. I was sitting on the verge of dream. Had I been mortal I would have been content to sleep there. And in that drowsy, comfortable state I had a strange, habitual mortal feeling, that the sun would wake me gently later and I would have that rich, habitual vision of the ferns in the sunshine and the sunshine in the droplets of rain. I indulged that feeling. I half closed my eyes.

"Often afterwards I tried to remember those moments. Tried over and over to recall just what it was in those rooms as we rested there, that began to disturb me, should have disturbed me. How, being off my guard, I was somehow insensible to the subtle changes which must

have been taking place there. Long after, bruised and robbed and embittered beyond my wildest dreams, I sifted through those moments, those drowsy quiet early-hour moments when the clock ticked almost imperceptibly on the mantelpiece, and the sky grew paler and paler; and all I could remember—despite the desperation with which I lengthened and fixed that time, in which I held out my hands to stop the clock—all I could remember was the soft changing of light.

"On guard, I would never have let it pass. Deluded with larger concerns, I made no note of it. A lamp gone out, a candle extinguished by the shiver of its own hot pool of wax. My eyes half shut, I had the sense then of impending darkness, of being shut up in darkness.

"And then I opened my eyes, not thinking of lamps or candles. And it was too late. I remember standing upright, Claudia's hand slipping on my arm, and the vision of a host of black-dressed men and women moving through the rooms, their garments seeming to garner light from every gilt edge or lacquered surface, seeming to drain all light away I shouted out against them, shouted for Madeleine, saw her wake with a start, terrified fledgling, clinging to the arm of the couch, then down on her knees as they reached out for her. There was Santiago and Celeste coming towards us, and behind them, Estelle and others whose names I didn't know filling the mirrors and crowding together to make walls of shifting, menacing shadow. I was shouting to Claudia to run, having pulled back the door. I was shoving her through it and then was stretched across it, kicking out at Santiago as he came.

"That weak defensive position I'd held against him in the Latin Quarter was nothing compared to my strength now. I was too flawed perhaps to ever fight with conviction for my own protection. But the instinct to protect Madeleine and Claudia was overpowering. I remember kicking Santiago backwards and then striking out at that powerful, beautiful Celeste, who sought to get by me. Claudia's feet sounded on the distant marble stairway. Celeste was reeling, clawing at me, catching hold of me and scratching my face so the blood ran down over my collar. I could see it blazing in the corner of my eye. I was on Santiago now, turning with him, aware of the awful strength of the arms that held me, the hands that sought to get a hold on my

throat. ‘Fight them, Madeleine,’ I was shouting to her. But all I could hear was her sobbing. Then I saw her in the whirl, a fixed, frightened thing, surrounded by other vampires. They were laughing that hollow vampire laughter which is like tinsel or silverbells. Santiago was clutching at his face. My teeth had drawn blood there. I struck at his chest, at his head, the pain searing through my arm, something enclosing my chest like two arms, which I shook off, hearing the crash of broken glass behind me. But something else, someone else had hold of my arm with two arms and was pulling me with tenacious strength.

“I don’t remember weakening. I don't remember any turning point when anyone’s strength overcame my own. I remember simply being outnumbered. Hopelessly, by sheer numbers and persistence, I was stilled, surrounded, and forced out of the rooms. In a press of vampires, I was being forced along the passageway; and then I was falling down the steps, free for a moment before the narrow back doors of the hotel, only to be surrounded again and held tight. I could see Celeste's face very near me and, if I could have, I would have wounded her with my teeth. I was bleeding badly, and one of my wrists was held so tightly that there was no feeling in that hand. Madeleine was next to me sobbing still. And all of us were pressed into a carriage. Over and over I was struck, and still I did not lose consciousness. I remember clinging tenaciously to consciousness, feeling these blows on the back of my head, feeling the back of my head wet with blood that trickled down my neck as I lay on the carriage floor. I was thinking only, I can feel the carriage moving; I am alive; I am conscious.

“And as soon as we were dragged into the Théâtre des Vampires, I was crying out for Armand.

“I was let go, only to stagger on the cellar steps, the horde of them behind me and in front of me, pushing me with menacing hands. At one point I got hold of Celeste, and she screamed and someone struck me from behind.

“And then I saw Lestat—the blow that was more crippling than any blow. Lestat, standing there in the center of the ballroom, erect, his gray eyes sharp and focused, his mouth lengthening in a cunning smile. Impeccably dressed he was, as always, and as splendid in his rich black cloak and fine linen. But those scars still scored every inch

of his white flesh. And how they distorted the taut, handsome face, the fine, hard threads cutting the delicate skin above his lip, the lids of his eyes, the smooth rise of his forehead. And the eyes, they burned with a silent rage that seemed infused with vanity, an awful relentless vanity that said, 'See what I am!'

" 'This is the one?' said Santiago, thrusting me forward.

"But Lestat turned sharply to him and said in a harsh low voice, 'I told you I wanted Claudia, the child! She was the one!' And now I saw his head moving involuntarily with his outburst, and his hand reaching out as if for the arm of a chair only to close as he drew himself up again, eyes to me.

" 'Lestat,' I began, seeing now the few straws left to me. 'You are alive! You have your life! Tell them how you treated us.…'

" 'No,' he shook his head furiously. 'You come back to me, Louis,' he said.

"For a moment I could not believe my ears. Some saner, more desperate part of me said, Reason with him, even as the sinister laughter erupted from my lips. 'Are you mad!'

" 'I'll give you back your life!' he said, his eyelids quivering with the stress of his words, his chest heaving, that hand going out again and closing impotently in the dark. 'You promised me,' he said to Santiago, 'I could take him back with me to New Orleans.' And then, as he looked from one to the other of them as they surrounded us, his breath became frantic, and he burst out, 'Claudia, where is she? She's the one who did it to me, I told you!'

" 'By and by,' said Santiago. And when he reached out for Lestat, Lestat drew back and almost lost his balance. He had found the chair arm he needed and stood holding fast to it, his eyes closed, regaining his control.

" 'But he helped her, aided her …' said Santiago, drawing nearer to him. Lestat looked up.

" 'No,' he said. 'Louis, you must come back to me. There's something I must tell you … about that night in the swamp.' But then he stopped and looked about again, as though he were caged, wounded, desperate.

" 'Listen to me, Lestat,' I began now. 'You let her go, you free her … and I will … I'll return to you,' I said, the words sounding

hollow, metallic. I tried to take a step towards him, to make my eyes hard and unreadable, to feel my power emanating from them like two beams of light. He was looking at me, studying me, struggling all the while against his own fragility. And Celeste had her hand on my wrist. 'You must tell them,' I went on, 'how you treated us, that we didn't know the laws, that she didn't know of other vampires,' I said. And I was thinking steadily, as that mechanical voice came out of me: Armand must return tonight, Armand must come back. He will stop this, he won't let it go on.

"There was a sound then of something dragging across the floor. I could hear Madeleine's exhausted crying. I looked around and saw her in a chair, and when she saw my eyes on her, her terror seemed to increase. She tried to rise but they stopped her. 'Lestat,' I said. 'What do you want of me? I'll give it to you.…'

"And then I saw the thing that was making the noise. And Lestat had seen it too. It was a coffin with large iron locks on it that was being dragged into the room. I understood at once. 'Where is Armand?' I said desperately.

" 'She did it to me, Louis. She did it to me. You didn't! She has to die!' said Lestat, his voice becoming thin, rasping, as if it were an effort for him to speak. 'Get that thing away from here, he's coming home with me,' he said furiously to Santiago. And Santiago only laughed, and Celeste laughed, and the laughter seemed to infect them all.

" 'You promised me,' said Lestat to them.

" 'I promised you nothing,' said Santiago.

" 'They've made a fool of you,' I said to him bitterly as they were opening the coffin. 'A fool of you! You must reach Armand, Armand is the leader here,' I burst out. But he didn't seem to understand.

"What happened then was desperate and clouded and miserable, my kicking at them, struggling to free my arms, raging against them that Armand would stop what they were doing, that they dare not hurt Claudia. Yet they forced me down into the coffin, my frantic efforts serving no purpose against them except to take my mind off the sound of Madeleine's cries, her awful wailing cries, and the fear that at any moment Claudia's cries might be added to them. I remember rising against the crushing lid, holding it at bay for an instant before it was

forced shut on me and the locks were being shut with the grinding of metal and keys. Words of long ago came back to me, a strident and smiling Lestat in that faraway, trouble-free place where the three of us had quarrelled together: 'A starving child is a frightful sight … a starving vampire even worse. They'd hear her screams in Paris.' And my wet and trembling body went limp in the suffocating coffin, and I said, Armand will not let it happen; there isn't a place secure enough for them to place us.

"The coffin was lifted, there was the scraping of boots, the swinging from side to side; my arms braced against the sides of the box, my eyes shut perhaps for a moment, I was uncertain. I told myself not to reach out for the sides, not to feel the thin margin of air between my face and the lid; and I felt the coffin swing and tilt as their steps found the stairs. Vainly I tried to make out Madeleine's cries, for it seemed that she was crying for Claudia, calling out to her as if she could help us all. Call for Armand; he must come home this night, I thought desperately. And only the thought of the awful humiliation of hearing my own cry closed in with me, flooding my ears, yet locked in with me, prevented me from calling out.

"But another thought had come over me even as I'd phrased those words: What if he did not come? What if somewhere in that mansion he had a coffin hidden to which he returned …? And then it seemed my body broke suddenly, without warning, from the control of my mind, and I flailed at the wood around me, struggling to turn over and pit the strength of my back against the coffin lid. Yet I could not: it was too close; and my head fell back on the boards, and the sweat poured down my back and sides.

"Madeleine's cries were gone. All I heard were the boots, and my own breathing. Then, tomorrow night he will come—yes, tomorrow night—and they will tell him, and he will find us and release us. The coffin swayed. The smell of water filled my nostrils, its coolness palpable through the close heat of the coffin; and then with the smell of the water was the smell of the deep earth. The coffin was set down roughly, and my limbs ached and I rubbed the backs of my arms with my hands, struggling not to touch the coffin lid, not to sense how close it was, afraid of my own fear rising to panic, to terror.

"I thought they would leave me now, but they did not. They were

near at hand and busy, and another odor came to my nostrils which was raw and not known to me. But then, as I lay very still, I realized they were laying bricks and that the odor came from the mortar. Slowly, carefully, I brought my hand up to wipe my face. All right, then, tomorrow night, I reasoned with myself, even as my shoulders seemed to grow large against the coffin walls. All right, then, tomorrow night he will come; and until then this is merely the confines of my own coffin, the price I've paid for all of this, night after night after night.

"But the tears were welling in my eyes, and I could see myself flailing again at the wood; and my head was turning from side to side, my mind rushing on to tomorrow and the night after and the night after that. And then, as if to distract myself from this madness, I thought of Claudia—only to feel her arms around me in the dim light of those rooms in the Hôtel Saint-Gabriel, only to see the curve of her cheek in the light, the soft, languid flutter of her eyelashes, the silky touch of her lip. My body stiffened, my feet kicked at the boards. The sound of the bricks was gone, and the muffled steps were gone. And I cried out for her, 'Claudia,' until my neck was twisted with pain as I tossed, and my nails had dug into my palms; and slowly, like an icy stream, the paralysis of sleep came over me. I tried to call out to Armand—foolishly, desperately, only dimly aware as my lids grew heavy and my hands lay limp that the sleep was on him too somewhere, that he lay still in his resting place. One last time I struggled. My eyes saw the dark, my hands felt the wood. But I was weak. And then there was nothing."

I awoke to a voice. It was distant but distinct. It said my name twice. For an instant I didn't know where I was. I'd been dreaming, something desperate which was threatening to vanish completely without the slightest clue to what it had been, and something terrible which I was eager, willing to let go. Then I opened my eyes and felt the top of the coffin. I knew where I was at the same instant that, mercifully, I knew it was Armand who was calling me. I answered him, but my voice was locked in with me and it was deafening. In a moment of terror, I thought, He's searching for me, and I can't tell him that I am here. But then I heard him speaking to me, telling me not to be afraid. And I heard a loud noise. And another. And there was a cracking sound, and then the thunderous falling of the bricks. It seemed several of them struck the coffin. And then I heard them lifted off one by one. It sounded as though he were pulling off the locks by the nails.

"The hard wood of the top creaked. A pinpoint of light sparkled before my eyes. I drew breath from it, and felt the sweat break out on my face. The lid creaked open and for an instant I was blinded; then I was sitting up, seeing the bright light of a lamp through my fingers.

" 'Hurry,' he said to me. 'Don't make a sound.'

" 'But where are we going?' I asked. I could see a passage of rough bricks stretching out from the doorway he'd broken down. And all along that passage were doors which were sealed, as this door had been. I had a vision at once of coffins behind those bricks, of vampires starved and decayed there. But Armand was pulling me up, telling me again to make no sound; we were creeping along the passage. He stopped at a wooden door, and then he extinguished the lamp. It was completely black for an instant until the seam of light beneath the door brightened. He opened the door so gently the hinges did not make a sound. I could hear my own breathing now, and I tried to stop it. We were entering that lower passageway which led to his cell. But as I raced along behind him I became aware of one awful truth. He was rescuing me, but me alone. I put out my hand to stop him, but he only pulled me after him. Only when we stood in the alleyway beside the Théâtre des Vampires was I able to make him stop. And even then,

he was on the verge of going on. He began shaking his head even before I spoke.

" 'I can't save her!' he said.

" 'You don't honestly expect me to leave without her! They have her in there!' I was horrified. 'Armand, you must save her! You have no choice!'

" 'Why do you say this?' he answered. 'I don't have the power, you must understand. They'll rise against me. There is no reason why they should not. Louis, I tell you, I cannot save her. I will only risk losing you. You can't go back.'

"I refused to admit this could be true. I had no hope other than Armand. But I can truthfully say that I was beyond being afraid. I knew only that I had to get Claudia back or die in the effort. It was really very simple; not a matter of courage at all. And I knew also, could tell in everything about Armand's passivity, the manner in which he spoke, that he would follow me if I returned, that he would not try to prevent me.

"I was right. I was rushing back into the passage and he was just behind me, heading for the stairway to the ballroom. I could hear the other vampires. I could hear all manner of sounds. The Paris traffic. What sounded very much like a congregation in the vault of the theater above. And then, as I reached the top of the steps, I saw Celeste in the door of the ballroom. She held one of those stage masks in her hand. She was merely looking at me. She did not appear alarmed. In fact, she appeared strangely indifferent.

"If she had rushed at me, if she had sounded a general alarm, these things I could have understood. But she did nothing. She stepped backwards into the ballroom; she turned, seeming to enjoy the subtle movement of her skirts, seeming to turn for the love of making her skirts flare out, and she drifted in a widening circle to the center of the room. She put the mask to her face, and said softly behind the painted skull, 'Lestat … it is your friend Louis come calling. Look sharp, Lestat!' She dropped the mask, and there was a ripple of laughter from somewhere. I saw they were all about the room, shadowy things, seated here and there, standing together. And Lestat, in an armchair, sat with his shoulders hunched and his face turned away from me. It seemed he was working something with his hands, something I

couldn't see; and slowly he looked up, his full yellow hair falling into his eyes. There was fear in them. It was undeniable. Now he was looking at Armand. And Armand was moving silently through the room with slow, steady steps, and all of the vampires moved back away from him, watching him. 'Bonsoir, Monsieur,' Celeste bowed to him as he passed her, that mask in her hand like a scepter. He did not look at her in particular. He looked down at Lestat. 'Are you satisfied?' he asked him.

"Lestat's gray eyes seemed to regard Armand with wonder, and his lips struggled to form a word. I could see that his eyes were filling with tears. 'Yes …' he whispered now, his hand struggling with the thing he concealed beneath his black cloak. But then he looked at me, and the tears spilled down his face. 'Louis,' he said, his voice deep and rich now with what seemed an unbearable struggle. 'Please, you must listen to me. You must come back.…' And then, bowing his head, he grimaced with shame.

"Santiago was laughing somewhere. Armand was saying softly to Lestat that he must get out, leave Paris; he was outcast.

"And Lestat sat there with his eyes closed, his face transfigured with his pain. It seemed the double of Lestat, some wounded, feeling creature I'd never known. 'Please,' he said, the voice eloquent and gentle as he implored me.

" 'I can't talk to you here! I can't make you understand. You'll come with me … for only a little while … until I am myself again?'

" 'This is madness!…' I said, my hands rising suddenly to my temples. 'Where is she! Where is she! I looked about me, at their still, passive faces, those inscrutable smiles. 'Lestat.' I turned him now, grabbing at the black wool of his lapels.

"And then I saw the thing in his hands. I knew what it was. And in an instant I'd ripped it from him and was staring at it, at the fragile silken thing that it was—Claudia's yellow dress. His hand rose to his lips, his face turned away. And the soft, subdued sobs broke from him as he sat back while I stared at him, while I stared at the dress. My fingers moved slowly over the tears in it, the stains of blood, my hands closing, trembling as I crushed it against my chest.

"For a long moment it seemed I simply stood there; time had no bearing upon me nor upon those shifting vampires with their light,

ethereal laughter filling my ears. I remember thinking that I wanted to put my hands over my ears, but I wouldn't let go of the dress, couldn't stop trying to make it so small that it was hidden within my hands. I remember a row of candles burning, an uneven row coming to light one by one against the painted walls. A door stood open to the rain, and all the candles spluttered and blew on the wind as if the flames were being lifted from the wicks. But they clung to the wicks and were all right. I knew that Claudia was through the doorway. The candles moved. The vampires had hold of them. Santiago had a candle and was bowing to me and gesturing for me to pass through the door. I was barely aware of him. I didn't care about him or the others at all. Something in me said, If you care about them you will go mad. And they don't matter, really. She matters. Where is she? Find her. And their laughter was remote, and it seemed to have a color and a shape but to be part of nothing.

"Then I saw something through the open doorway which was something I'd seen before, a long, long time ago. No one knew of this thing I'd seen years before except myself. No. Lestat knew. But it didn't matter. He wouldn't know now or understand. That he and I had seen this thing, standing at the door of that brick kitchen in the Rue Royale, two wet shrivelled things that had been alive, mother and daughter in one another's arms, the murdered pair on the kitchen floor. But these two lying under the gentle rain were Madeleine and Claudia, and Madeleine's lovely red hair mingled with the gold of Claudia's hair, which stirred and glistened in the wind that sucked through the open doorway. Only that which was living had been burnt away—not the hair, not the long, empty velvet dress, not the small blood-stained chemise with its eyelets of white lace. And the blackened, burnt, and drawn thing that was Madeleine still bore the stamp of her living face, and the hand that clutched at the child was whole like a mummy's hand. But the child, the ancient one, my Claudia, was ashes.

"A cry rose in me, a wild, consuming cry that came from the bowels of my being, rising up like the wind in that narrow place, the wind that swirled the rain teeming on those ashes, beating at the trace of a tiny hand against the bricks, that golden hair lifting, those loose strands rising, flying upwards. And a blow struck me even as I cried

out; and I had hold of something that I believed to be Santiago, and I was pounding against him, destroying him, twisting that grinning white face around with hands from which he couldn't free himself, hands against which he railed, crying out, his cries mingling with my cries, his boots coming down into those ashes, as I threw him backwards away from them, my own eyes blinded with the rain, with my tears, until he lay back away from me, and I was reaching out for him even as he held out his hand. And the one I was struggling against was Armand. Armand, who was forcing me out of the tiny graveyard into the whirling colors of the ballroom, the cries, the mingling voices, that searing, silver laughter.

"And Lestat was calling out, 'Louis, wait for me; Louis, I must talk to you!'

"I could see Armand's rich, brown eyes close to mine, and I felt weak all over and vaguely aware that Madeleine and Claudia were dead, his voice saying softly, perhaps soundlessly, 'I could not prevent it, I could not prevent it.…' And they were dead, simply dead. And I was losing consciousness. Santiago was near them somewhere, there where they were still, that hair lilted on the wind, swept across those bricks, unraveling locks. But I was losing consciousness.

"I could not gather their bodies up with me, could not take them out. Armand had his arm around my back, his hand under my arm, and he was all but carrying me through some hollow wooden echoing place, and the smells of the street were rising, the fresh smell of the horses and the leather, and there were the gleaming carriages stopped there. And I could see myself clearly running down the Boulevard des Capucines with a small coffin under my arm and the people making way for me and dozens of people rising around the crowded tables of the open cafe and a man lifting his arm. It seemed I stumbled then, the Louis whom Armand held in his arm, and again I saw his brown eyes looking at me, and felt that drowsiness, that sinking. And yet I walked, I moved, I saw the gleam of my own boots on the pavement. 'Is he mad, that he says these things to me?' I was asking of Lestat, my voice shrill and angry, even the sound of it giving me some comfort. I was laughing, laughing loudly. 'He's stark-raving mad to speak to me in this manner! Did you hear him?' I demanded. And Armand's eye said, Sleep. I wanted to say something about Madeleine and Claudia, that

we could not leave them there, and I felt that cry again rising inside of me, that cry that pushed everything else out of its way, my teeth clenched to keep it in, because it was so loud and so full it would destroy me if I let it go.

"And then I conceived of everything too clearly. We were walking now, a belligerent, blind sort of walking that men do when they are wildly drunk and filled with hatred for others, while at the same time they feel invincible. I was walking in such a manner through New Orleans the night I'd first encountered Lestat, that drunken walking which is a battering against things, which is miraculously sure-footed and finds its path. I saw a drunken man's hands fumbling miraculously with a match. Flame touched to the pipe, the smoke drawn in. I was standing at a cafe window. The man was drawing on his pipe. He was not at all drunk. Armand stood beside me waiting, and we were in the crowded Boulevard des Capucines. Or was it the Boulevard du Temple? I wasn't sure. I was outraged that their bodies remained there in that vile place. I saw Santiago's foot touching the blackened burned thing that had been my child! I was crying out through clenched teeth, and the man had risen from his table and steam spread out on the glass in front of his face. 'Get away from me,' I was saying to Armand. 'Damn you into hell, don't come near me. I warn you, don't come near me.' I was walking away from him up the boulevard, and I could see a man and a woman stepping aside for me, the man with his arm out to protect the woman.

"Then I was running. People saw me running. I wondered how it appeared to them, what wild, white thing they saw that moved too fast for their eyes. I remember that by the time I stopped, I was weak and sick, and my veins were burning as if I were starved. I thought of killing, and the thought filled me with revulsion. I was sitting on the stone steps beside a church, at one of those small side doors, carved into the stone, which was bolted and locked for the night. The rain had abated. Or so it seemed. And the street was dreary and quiet, though a man passed a long way off with a bright, black umbrella. Armand stood at a distance under the trees. Behind him it seemed there was a great expanse of trees and wet grasses and mist rising as if the ground were warm.

"By thinking of only one thing, the sickness in my stomach and head

and the tightening in my throat, was I able to return to a state of calm. By the time these things had died away and I was feeling clear again, I was aware of all that had happened, the great distance we'd come from the theater, and that the remains of Madeleine and Claudia were still there. Victims of a holocaust in each other's arms. And I felt resolute and very near to my own destruction.

" 'I could not prevent it,' Armand said softly to me. And I looked up to see his face unutterably sad. He looked away from me as if he felt it was futile to try to convince me of this, and I could feel his overwhelming sadness, his near defeat. I had the feeling that if I were to vent all my anger on him he would do little to resist me. And I could feel that detachment, that passivity in him as something pervasive which was at the root of what he insisted to me again, 'I could not have prevented it.'

" 'Oh, but you could have prevented it!' I said softly. 'You know full well that you could have. You were the leader! *You* were the only one who knew the limits of your own power. They didn't know. They didn't understand. Your understanding surpassed theirs.'

"He looked away still. But I could see the effect of my words on him. I could see the weariness in his face, the dull lusterless sadness of his eyes.

" 'You held sway over them. They feared you!' I went on. 'You could have stopped them if you'd been willing to use that power even beyond your own self-prescribed limits. It was your sense of yourself you would not violate. Your own precious conception of truth! I understand you perfectly. I see in you the reflection of myself!'

"His eyes moved gently to engage mine. But he said nothing. The pain of his face was terrible. It was softened and desperate with pain and on the verge of some terrible explicit emotion he would not be able to control. He was in fear of that emotion. I was not. He was feeling my pain with that great spellbinding power of his which surpassed mine. I was not feeling his pain. It did not matter to me.

" 'I understand you only too well …' I said. 'That passivity in me has been the core of it all, the real evil. That weakness, that refusal to compromise a fractured and stupid morality, that awful pride! For that, I let myself become the thing I am, when I knew it was wrong. For that, I let Claudia become the vampire she became, when I knew it

was wrong. For that, I stood by and let her kill Lestat, when I knew that was wrong, the very thing that was her undoing. I lifted not a finger to prevent it. And Madeleine, Madeleine, I let her come to that, when I should never have made her a creature like ourselves. I knew that was wrong! Well, I tell you I am no longer that passive, weak creature that has spun evil from evil till the web is vast and thick while I remain its stultified victim. It's over! I know now what I must do. And I warn you, for whatever mercy you've shown me in digging me out of that grave tonight where I would have died: Do not seek your cell in the Théâtre des Vampires again. Do not go near it.' "

"I didn't wait to hear his answer. Perhaps he never attempted one. I don't know. I left him without looking back. If he followed me I was not conscious of it. I did not seek to know. I did not care.

"It was to the cemetery in Montmartre that I retreated. Why that place, I'm not certain, except that it wasn't far from the Boulevard des Capucines, and Montmartre was countryfied then, and dark and peaceful compared to the metropolis. Wandering among the low houses with their kitchen gardens, I killed without the slightest measure of satisfaction, and then sought out the coffin where I was to lie by day in the cemetery. I scraped the remains out of it with my bare hands and lay down to a bed of foulness, of damp, of the stench of death. I cannot say this gave me comfort. Rather, it gave me what I wanted. Closeted in that dark, smelling the earth, away from all humans and all living human forms, I gave myself over to everything that invaded and stifled my senses. And, in so doing, gave myself over to my grief.

"But that was short.

"When the cold, gray winter sun had set the next night, I was awake, feeling the tingling numbness leave me soon, as it does in winter, feeling the dark, living things that inhabited the coffin scurrying around me, fleeing my resurrection. I emerged slowly under the faint moon, savoring the coldness, the utter smoothness of the marble slab I shifted to escape. And, wandering out of the graves and out of the cemetery, I went over a plan in my mind, a plan on which I was willing to gamble my life with the powerful freedom of a being

who truly does not care for that life, who has the extraordinary strength of being willing to die.

"In a kitchen garden I saw something, something that had only been vague in my thoughts until I had my hands on it. It was a small scythe, its sharp curved blade still caked with green weeds from the last mowing. And once I'd wiped it clean and run my finger along the sharp blade, it was as if my plan came clear to me and I could move fast to my other errands: the getting of a carriage and a driver who could do my bidding for days—dazzled by the cash I gave him and the promises of more; the removing of my chest from the Hôtel Saint-Gabriel to the inside of that carriage; and the procuring of all the other things which I needed. And then there were the long hours of the night, when I could pretend to drink with my driver and talk with him and obtain his expensive cooperation in driving me at dawn from Paris to Fontainebleau. I slept within the carriage, where my delicate health required I not be disturbed under any circumstances—this privacy being so important that I was more than willing to add a generous sum to the amount I was already paying him simply for his not touching even the door handle of the carriage until I emerged from it.

"And when I was convinced he was in agreement and quite drunk enough to be oblivious to almost everything but the gathering up of the reins for the journey to Fountainebleau, we drove slowly, cautiously, into the street of the Théâtre des Vampires and waited some distance away for the sky to begin to grow light.

"The theater was shut up and locked against the coming day. I crept towards it when the air and the light told me I had at most fifteen minutes to execute my plan. I knew that, closeted far within, the vampires of the theater were in their coffins already. And that even if one late vampire lingered on the verge of going to bed, he would not hear these first preparations. Quickly I put pieces of wood against the bolted doors. Quickly I drove in the nails, which then locked these doors from the outside. A passer-by took some note of what I did but went on, believing me perhaps to be boarding up the establishment with the authority of the owner. I didn't know. I did know, however, that before I was finished I might encounter those ticket-sellers, those ushers, those men who swept up after, and might well remain inside

to guard the vampires in their daily sleep.

"It was of those men I was thinking as I led the carriage up to Armand's alley and left it there, taking with me two small barrels of kerosene to Armand's door.

"The key admitted me easily as I'd hoped, and once inside the lower passage, I opened the door of his cell to find he was not there. The coffin was gone. In fact, everything was gone but the furnishings, including the dead boy's enclosed bed. Hastily I opened one barrel and, rolling the other before me towards the stairs, I hurried along, splashing the exposed beams with kerosene and flinging it on the wooden doors of the other cells. The smell of it was strong, stronger and more powerful than any sound I might have made to alert anyone. And, though I stood stark still at the stairs with the barrels and the scythe, listening, I heard nothing, nothing of those guards I presumed to be there, nothing of the vampires themselves. And clutching the handle of the scythe I ventured slowly upwards until I stood in the door of the ballroom. No one was there to see me splash the kerosene on the horsehair chairs or on the draperies, or to see me hesitate just for an instant at that doorway of the small yard where Madeleine and Claudia had been killed. Oh, how I wanted to open that door. It so tempted me that for a minute I almost forgot my plan. I almost dropped the barrels and turned the knob. But I could see the light through the cracks of the old wood of the door. And I knew I had to go on. Madeleine and Claudia were not there. They were dead. And what would I have done had I opened that doorway, had I been confronted again with those remains, that matted, dishevelled golden hair? There was no time, no purpose. I was running through dark corridors I hadn't explored before, bathing old wooden doors with the kerosene, certain that the vampires lay closeted within, rushing on cat feet into the theater itself, where a cold, gray light, seeping from the bolted front entrance, sped me on to fling a dark stain across the great velvet stage curtain, the padded chairs, the draperies of the lobby doors.

"And finally the barrel was empty and thrown away, and I was pulling out the crude torch I'd made, putting my match to its kerosene-drenched rags, and setting the chairs alight, the flames licking their thick silk and padding as I ran towards the stage and sent

the fire rushing up that dark curtain into a cold, sucking draft.

"In seconds the theater blazed as with the light of day, and the whole frame of it seemed to creak and groan as the fire roared up the walls, licking the great proscenium arch, the plaster curlicues of the overhanging boxes. But I had no time to admire it, to savor the smell and the sound of it, the sight of the nooks and crannies coming to light in the fierce illumination that would soon consume them. I was fleeing to the lower floor again, thrusting the torch into the horsehair couch of the ball-room, into the curtains, into anything that would burn.

"Someone thundered on the boards above—in rooms I'd never seen. And then I heard the unmistakable opening of a door. But it was too late, I told myself, gripping both the scythe and the torch. The building was alight. They would be destroyed. I ran for the stairs, a distant cry rising over the crackling and roaring of the flames, my torch scraping the kerosene-soaked rafters above me, the flames enveloping the old wood, curling against the damp ceiling. It was Santiago's cry, I was sure of it; and then, as I hit the lower floor, I saw him above, behind me, coming down the stairs, the smoke filling the stairwell around him, his eyes watering, his throat thickened with his choking, his hand out towards me as he stammered, 'You … you … damn you!' And I froze, narrowing my eyes against the smoke, feeling the water rising in them, burning in them, but never letting go of his image for an instant, the vampire using all his power now to fly at me with such speed that he would become invisible. And as the dark thing that was his clothes rushed down, I swung the scythe and saw it strike his neck and felt the weight of his neck and saw him fall sideways, both hands reaching for the appalling wound. The air was full of cries, of screams, and a white face loomed above Santiago, a mask of terror. Some other vampire ran through the passage ahead of me towards that secret alleyway door. But I stood there poised, staring at Santiago, seeing him rise despite the wound. And I swung the scythe again, catching him easily. And there was no wound. Just two hands groping for a head that was no longer there.

"And the head, blood coursing from the torn neck, the eyes staring wild under the flaming rafters, the dark silky hair matted and wet with blood, fell at my feet. I struck it hard with my boot, I sent it flying along the passage. And I ran after it, the torch and the scythe

thrown aside as my arms went up to protect me from the blaze of white light that flooded the stairs to the alley.

"The rain descended in shimmering needles into my eyes, eyes that squinted to see the dark outline of the carriage flicker against the sky. The slumped driver straightened at my hoarse command, his clumsy hand going instinctively for the whip, and the carriage lurched as I pulled open the door, the horses driving forward fast as I grappled with the lid of the chest, my body thrown roughly to one side, my burnt hands slipping down into the cold protecting silk, the lid coming down into concealing darkness.

"The pace of the horses increased driving away from the corner of the burning building. Yet I could still smell the smoke; it choked me; it burnt my eyes and my lungs, even as my hands were burnt and my forehead was burnt from the first diffused light of the sun.

"But we were driving on, away from the smoke and the cries. We were leaving Paris. I had done it. The Théâtre des Vampires was burning to the ground.

"And as I felt my head fall back, I saw Claudia and Madeleine again in one another's arms in that grim yard, and I said to them softly, bending down to the soft heads of hair that glistened in the candlelight, 'I couldn't take you away. I couldn't take you. But they will lie ruined and dead all around you. If the fire doesn't consume them, it will be the sun. If they are not burnt out, then it will be the people who will come to fight the fire who will find them and expose them to the light of day. But I promise you, they will all die as you have died, everyone who was closeted there this dawn will die. And they are the only deaths I have caused in my long life which are both exquisite and good.' "

Two nights later I returned. I had to see that rain-flooded cellar where every brick was scorched, crumbling, where a few skeletal rafters jabbed at the sky like stakes. Those monstrous murals that once enclosed the ballroom were blasted fragments in the rubble, a painted face here, a patch of angel's wing there, the only identifiable things that remained.

"With the evening newspapers, I pushed my way to the back of a crowded little theater cafe across the street; and there, under the cover of the dim gas lamps and thick cigar smoke, I read the accounts of the holocaust. Few bodies were found in the burnt-out theater, but clothing and costumes had been scattered everywhere, as though the famous vampire mummers had in fact vacated the theater in haste long before the fire. In other words, only the younger vampires had left their bones; the ancient ones had suffered total obliteration. No mention of an eye-witness or a surviving victim. How could there have been?

"Yet something bothered me considerably. I did not fear any vampires who had escaped. I had no desire to hunt them out if they had. That most of the crew had died I was certain. But why had there been no human guards? I was certain Santiago had mentioned guards, and I'd supposed them to be the ushers and doormen who staffed the theater before the performance. And I had even been prepared to encounter them with my scythe. But they had not been there. It was strange. And my mind was not entirely comfortable with the strangeness.

"But, finally, when I put the papers aside and sat thinking these things over, the strangeness of it didn't matter. What mattered was that I was more utterly alone in the world than I had ever been in all my life. That Claudia was gone beyond reprieve. And I had less reason to live than I'd ever had, and less desire.

"And yet my sorrow did not overwhelm me, did not actually visit me, did not make of me the wracked and desperate creature I might have expected to become. Perhaps it was not possible to sustain the torment I'd experienced when I saw Claudia's burnt remains. Perhaps it was not possible to know that and exist over any period of time. I

wondered vaguely, as the hours passed, as the smoke of the cafe grew thicker and the faded curtain of the little lamplit stage rose and fell, and robust women sang there, the light glittering on their paste jewels, their rich, soft voices often plaintive, exquisitely sad—I wondered vaguely what it would be to feel this loss, this outrage, and be justified in it, be deserving of sympathy, of solace. I would not have told my woe to a living creature. My own tears meant nothing to me.

"Where to go then, if not to die? It was strange how the answer came to me. Strange how I wandered out of the cafe then, circling the ruined theater, wandering finally towards the broad Avenue Napoléon and following it towards the palace of the Louvre. It was as if that place called to me, and yet I had never been inside its walls. I'd passed its long façade a thousand times, wishing that I could live as a mortal man for one day to move through those many rooms and see those many magnificent paintings. I was bent on it now, possessed only of some vague notion that in works of art I could find some solace while bringing nothing of death to what was inanimate and yet magnificently possessed of the spirit of life itself.

"Somewhere along the Avenue Napoleon, I heard the step behind me which I knew to be Armand's. He was signalling, letting me know that he was near. Yet I did nothing other than slow my pace and let him fall into step with me, and for a long while we walked, saying nothing. I dared not look at him. Of course, I'd been thinking of him all the while, and how if we were men and Claudia had been my love I might have fallen helpless in his arms finally, the need to share some common grief so strong, so consuming. The dam threatened to break now; and yet it did not break. I was numbed and I walked as one numbed.

" 'You know what I've done,' I said finally. We had turned off the avenue and I could see ahead of me the long row of double columns on the façade of the Royal Museum. 'You removed your coffin as I warned you.…'

" 'Yes,' he answered. There was a sudden, unmistakable comfort in the sound of his voice. It weakened me. But I was simply too remote from pain, too tired.

" 'And yet you are here with me now. Do you mean to avenge them?'

" 'No,' he said.

“ ‘They were your fellows, you were their leader,’ I said. ‘Yet you didn’t warn them I was out for them, as I warned you?’

“ ‘No,’ he said.

“ ‘But surely you despise me for it. Surely you respect some rule, some allegiance to your own kind.’

“ ‘No,’ he said softly.

“It was amazing to me how logical his response was, even though I couldn’t explain it or understand it.

“And something came clear to me out of the remote regions of my own relentless considerations. ‘There were guards; there were those ushers who slept in the theater. Why weren’t they there when I entered? Why weren’t they there to protect the sleeping vampires?’

“ ‘Because they were in my employ and I discharged them. I sent them away,’ Armand said.

“I stopped. He showed no concern at my facing him, and as soon as our eyes met I wished the world were not one black empty ruin of ashes and death. I wished it were fresh and beautiful, and that we were both living and had love to give each other. ‘You did this, knowing what I planned to do?’

“ ‘Yes,’ he said.

“ ‘But you were their leader! They trusted you. They believed in you. They lived with you!’ I said. ‘I don’t understand you … why …?’

“ ‘Think of any answer you like,’ he said calmly and sensitively, as if he didn’t wish to bruise me with any accusation or disdain, but wanted me merely to consider this literally. ‘I can think of many. Think of the one you need and believe it. It’s as likely as any other. I shall give you the real reason for what I did, which is the least true: I was leaving Paris. The theater belonged to me. So I discharged them.’

“ ‘But with what you knew …’

“ ‘I told you, it was the actual reason and it was the least true,’ he said patiently.

“ ‘Would you destroy me as easily as you let them be destroyed?’ I demanded.

“ ‘Why should I?’ he asked.

“ ‘My God,’ I whispered.

“ ‘You’re much changed,’ he said. ‘But in a way, you are much the same.’

“I walked on for a while and then, before the entrance to the Louvre, I stopped. At first it seemed to me that its many windows were dark and silver with the moonlight and the thin rain. But then I thought I saw a faint light moving within, as though a guard walked among the treasures. I envied him completely. And I fixed my thoughts on him obdurately, that guard, calculating how a vampire might get to him, how take his life and his lantern and his keys. The plan was confusion. I was incapable of plans. I had made only one real plan in my life, and it was finished.

“And then finally I surrendered. I turned to Armand again and let my eyes penetrate his eyes, and let him draw close to me as if he meant to make me his victim, and I bowed my head and felt his firm arm around my shoulder. And, remembering suddenly and keenly Claudia’s words, what were very nearly her last words—that admission that she knew that I could love Armand because I had been able to love even her—those words struck me as rich and ironical, more filled with meaning than she could have guessed.

“ ‘Yes,’ I said softly to him, ‘that is the crowning evil, that we can even go so far as to love each other, you and I. And who else would show us a particle of love, a particle of compassion or mercy? Who else, knowing us as we know each other, could do anything but destroy us? Yet we can love each other.’

“And for a long moment, he stood there looking at me, drawing nearer, his head gradually inclining to one side, his lips parted as if he meant to speak. But then he only smiled and shook his head gently to confess he didn’t understand.

“But I wasn’t thinking of him anymore. I had one of those rare moments when it seemed I thought of nothing. My mind had no shape. I saw that the rain had stopped. I saw that the air was clear and cold. That the street was luminous. And I wanted to enter the Louvre. I formed words to tell Armand this, to ask him if he might help me do what was necessary to have the Louvre till dawn.

“He thought it a very simple request. He said only he wondered why I had waited so long.”

We left Paris very soon after that. I told Armand that I wanted to return to the Mediterranean—not to Greece, as I had so long dreamed. I wanted to go to Egypt. I wanted to see the desert there and, more importantly, I wanted to see the pyramids and the graves of the kings. I wanted to make contact with those grave-thieves who know more of the graves than do scholars, and I wanted to go down into the graves yet unopened and see the kings as they were buried, see those furnishings and works of art stored with them, and the paintings on their walls. Armand was more than willing. And we took leave of Paris early one evening by carriage without the slightest hint of ceremony.

"I had done one thing which I should note. I had gone back to my rooms in the Hôtel Saint-Gabriel. It was my purpose to take up some things of Claudia and Madeleine and put them into coffins and have graves prepared for them in the cemetery of Montmartre. I did not do this. I stayed a short while in the rooms, where all was neat and put right by the staff, so that it seemed Madeleine and Claudia might return at any time. Madeleine's embroidery ring lay with her bundles of thread on a chair-side table. I looked at that and at everything else, and my task seemed meaningless. So I left.

"But something had occurred to me there; or, rather, something I had already been aware of merely became clearer. I had gone to the Louvre that night to lay down my soul, to find some transcendent pleasure that would obliterate pain and make me utterly forget even myself. I'd been upheld in this. As I stood on the sidewalk before the doors of the hotel waiting for the carriage that would take me to meet Armand, I saw the people who walked there—the restless boulevard crowd of well-dressed ladies and gentlemen, the hawkers of papers, the carriers of luggage, the drivers of carriages—all these in a new light. Before, all art had held for me the promise of a deeper understanding of the human heart. Now the human heart meant nothing. I did not denigrate it. I simply forgot it. The magnificent paintings of the Louvre were not for me intimately connected with the hands that had painted them. They were cut loose and dead like children turned to stone. Like Claudia, severed from her mother, preserved for decades in pearl and hammered gold. Like Madeleine's

dolls. And of course, like Claudia and Madeleine and myself, they could all be reduced to ashes."

PART IV

And that is the end of the story, really.

"Of course, I know you wonder what happened to us afterwards. What became of Armand? Where did I go? What did I do? But I tell you nothing really happened. Nothing that wasn't merely inevitable. And my journey through the Louvre that last night I've described to you, that was merely prophetic.

"I never changed after that. I sought for nothing in the one great source of change which is humanity. And even in my love and absorption with the beauty of the world, I sought to learn nothing that could be given back to humanity. I drank of the beauty of the world as a vampire drinks. I was satisfied. I was filled to the brim. But I was dead. And I was changeless. The story ended in Paris, as I've said.

"For a long time I thought that Claudia's death had been the cause of the end of things. That if I had seen Madeleine and Claudia leave Paris safely, things might have been different with me and Armand. I might have loved again and desired again, and sought some semblance of mortal life which would have been rich and varied, though unnatural. But now I have come to see that was false. Even if Claudia had not died, even if I had not despised Armand for letting her die, it would have all turned out the same. Coming slowly to know his evil, or being catapulted into it … it was all the same. I wanted none of it finally. And, deserving nothing better, I closed up like a spider in the flame of a match. And even Armand who was my constant companion, and my only companion, existed at a great distance from me, beyond that veil which separated me from all living things, a veil which was a form of shroud.

"But I know you are eager to hear what became of Armand. And the night is almost ended. I want to tell you this because it is very important. The story is incomplete without it.

"We travelled the world after we left Paris, as I've told you; first Egypt, then Greece, then Italy, Asia Minor—wherever I chose to lead us, really, and wherever my pursuit of art led me. Time ceased to exist on any meaningful basis during these years, and I was often absorbed in very simple things—a painting in a museum, a cathedral window, one single beautiful statue—for long periods of time.

“But all during these years I had a vague but persistent desire to return to New Orleans. I never forgot New Orleans. And when we were in tropical places and places of those flowers and trees that grow in Louisiana, I would think of it acutely and I would feel for my home the only glimmer of desire I felt for anything outside my endless pursuit of art. And, from time to time, Armand would ask me to take him there. And I, being aware in a gentlemanly manner that I did little to please him and often went for long periods without really speaking to him or seeking him out, wanted to do this because he asked me. It seemed his asking caused me to forget some vague fear that I might feel pain in New Orleans, that I might experience again the pale shadow of my former unhappiness and longing. But I put it off. Perhaps the fear was stronger than I knew. We came to America and lived in New York for a long time. I continued to put it off. Then, finally, Armand urged me in another way. He told me something he’d concealed from me since the time we were in Paris.

“Lestat had not died in the Théâtre des Vampires. I had believed him to be dead, and when I asked Armand about those vampires, he told me they all had perished. But he told me now that this wasn’t so. Lestat had left the theater the night I had run away from Armand and sought out the cemetery in Montmartre. Two vampires who had been made with Lestat by the same master had assisted him in booking passage to New Orleans.

“I cannot convey to you the feeling that came over me when I heard this. Of course, Armand told me he had protected me from this knowledge, hoping that I would not undertake a long journey merely for revenge, a journey that would have caused me pain and grief at the time. But I didn’t really care. I hadn’t thought of Lestat at all the night I’d torched the theater. I’d thought of Santiago and Celeste and the others who had destroyed Claudia. Lestat, in fact, had aroused in me feelings which I hadn’t wished to confide in anyone, feelings I’d wished to forget, despite Claudia’s death. Hatred had not been one of them.

“But when I heard this now from Armand it was as if the veil that protected me were thin and transparent, and though it still hung between me and the world of feeling, I perceived through it Lestat, and that I wanted to see him again. And with that spurring me on, we

returned to New Orleans.

"It was late spring of this year. And as soon as I emerged from the railway station, I knew that I had indeed come home. It was as if the very air were perfumed and peculiar there, and I felt an extraordinary ease walking on those warm, flat pavements, under those familiar oaks, and listening to the ceaseless vibrant living sounds of the night.

"Of course, New Orleans was changed. But far from lamenting those changes, I was grateful for what seemed still the same. I could find in the uptown Garden District, which had been in my time the Faubourg Ste.-Marie, one of the stately old mansions that dated back to those times, so removed from the quiet brick street that, walking out in the moonlight under its magnolia trees, I knew the same sweetness and peace I'd known in the old days; not only in the dark, narrow streets of the Vieux Carré but in the wilderness of Pointe du Lac. There were the honeysuckle and the roses, and the glimpse of Corinthian columns against the stars; and outside the gate were dreamy streets, other mansions … it was a citadel of grace.

"In the Rue Royale, where I took Armand past tourists and antique shops and the bright-lit entrances of fashionable restaurants, I was astonished to discover the town house where Lestat and Claudia and I had made our home, the façade little changed by fresh plaster and whatever repairs had been done within. Its two French windows still opened onto the small balconies over the shop below, and I could see in the soft brilliance of the electric chandeliers an elegant wallpaper that would not have been unfamiliar in those days before the war. I had a strong sense of Lestat there, more of a sense of him than of Claudia, and I felt certain, though he was nowhere near this town house, that I'd find him in New Orleans.

"And I felt something else; it was a sadness that came over me then, after Armand had gone on his way. But this sadness was not painful, nor was it passionate. It was something rich, however, and almost sweet, like the fragrance of the jasmine and the roses that crowded the old courtyard garden which I saw through the iron gates. And this sadness gave a subtle satisfaction and held me a long time in that spot; and it held me to the city; and it didn't really leave me that night when I went away.

"I wonder now what might have come of this sadness, what it might

have engendered in me that could have become stronger than itself. But I jump ahead of my story.

"Because shortly after that I saw a vampire in New Orleans, a sleek white-faced young man walking alone on the broad sidewalks of St. Charles Avenue in the early hours before dawn. And I was at once convinced that if Lestat still lived here that vampire might know him and might even lead me to him. Of course, the vampire didn't see me. I had long ago learned to spot my own kind in large cities without their having a chance to see me. Armand, in his brief visits with vampires in London and Rome, had learned that the burning of the Théâtre des Vampires was known throughout the world, and that both of us were considered outcasts. Battles over this meant nothing to me, and I have avoided them to this day. But I began to watch for this vampire in New Orleans and to follow him, though often he led me merely to theaters or other pastimes in which I had no interest. But one night, finally, things changed.

"It was a very warm evening, and I could tell as soon as I saw him on St. Charles that he had someplace to go. He was not only walking fast, but he seemed a little distressed. And when he turned off St. Charles finally on a narrow street which became at once shabby and dark, I felt sure he was headed for something that would interest me.

"But then he entered one side of a small wooden duplex and brought death to a woman there. This he did very fast, without a trace of pleasure; and after he was finished, he gathered her child up from the bassinet, wrapped it gently in a blue wool blanket, and came out again into the street.

"Only a block or two after that, he stopped before a vine-covered iron fence that enclosed a large overgrown yard. I could see an old house beyond the trees, dark, the paint peeling, the ornate iron railings of its long upper and lower galleries caked with orange rust. It seemed a doomed house, stranded here among the numerous small wooden houses, its high empty windows looking out on what must have been a dismal clutter of low roofs, a corner grocery, and a small adjacent bar. But the broad, dark grounds protected the house somewhat from these things, and I had to move along the fence quite a few feet before I finally spotted a faint glimmer in one of the lower windows through the thick branches of the trees. The vampire had

gone through the gate. I could hear the baby wailing, and then nothing. And I followed, easily mounting the old fence and dropping down into the garden and coming up quietly onto the long front porch.

"It was an amazing sight I saw when I crept up to one of the long, floor-length windows. For despite the heat of this breezeless evening when the gallery, even with its warped and broken boards, might have been the only tolerable place for human or vampire, a fire blazed in the grate of the parlor and all its windows were shut, and the young vampire sat by that fire talking to another vampire who hovered very near it, his slippered feet right up against the hot grate, his trembling fingers pulling over and over at the lapels of his shabby blue robe. And, though a frayed electric cord dangled from a plaster wreath of roses in the ceiling, only an oil lamp added its dim light to the fire, an oil lamp which stood by the wailing child on a nearby table.

"My eyes widened as I studied this stooped and shivering vampire whose rich blond hair hung down in loose waves covering his face. I longed to wipe away the dust on the window glass which would not let me be certain of what I suspected. 'You all leave me!' he whined now in a thin, high-pitched voice.

" 'You can't keep us with you!' said the stiff young vampire sharply. He sat with his legs crossed, his arms folded on his narrow chest, his eyes looking around the dusty, empty room disdainfully. 'Oh, hush!' he said to the baby, who let out a sharp cry. 'Stop it, stop it.'

" 'The wood, the wood,' said the blond vampire feebly, and, as he motioned to the other to hand him the fuel by his chair, I saw clearly, unmistakably, the profile of Lestat, that smooth skin now devoid of even the faintest trace of his old scars.

" 'If you'd just go out,' said the other angrily, heaving the chunk of wood into the blaze. 'If you'd just hunt something other than these miserable animals.…' And he looked about himself in disgust. I saw then, in the shadows, the small furry bodies of several cats, lying helter-skelter in the dust. A most remarkable thing, because a vampire can no more endure to be near his dead victims than any mammal can remain near any place where he has left his waste. 'Do you know that it's summer?' demanded the young one. Lestat merely rubbed his hands. The baby's howling died off, yet the young vampire added, 'Get

on with it, take it so you'll be warm.'

" 'You might have brought me something else!' said Lestat bitterly. And, as he looked at the baby, I saw his eyes squinting against the dull light of the smoky lamp. I felt a shock of recognition at those eyes, even at the expression beneath the shadow of the deep wave of his yellow hair. And yet to hear that whining voice, to see that bent and quivering back! Almost without thinking I rapped hard on the glass. The young vampire was up at once affecting a hard, vicious expression; but I merely motioned for him to turn the latch. And Lestat, clutching his bathrobe to his throat, rose from the chair.

" 'It's Louis! Louis!' he said. 'Let him in.' And he gestured frantically, like an invalid, for the young 'nurse' to obey.

"As soon as the window opened I breathed the stench of the room and its sweltering heat. The swarming of the insects on the rotted animals scratched at my senses so that I recoiled despite myself, despite Lestat's desperate pleas for me to come to him. There, in the far corner, was the coffin where he slept, the lacquer peeling from the wood, half covered with piles of yellow newspapers. And bones lay in the corners, picked clean except for bits and tufts of fur. But Lestat had his dry hands on mine now, drawing me towards him and towards the warmth, and I could see the tears welling in his eyes; and only when his mouth was stretched in a strange smile of desperate happiness that was near to pain did I see the faint traces of the old scars. How baffling and awful it was, this smooth-faced, shimmering immortal man bent and rattled and whining like a crone.

" 'Yes, Lestat,' I said softly. 'I've come to see you.' I pushed his hand gently, slowly away and moved towards the baby, who was crying desperately now from fear as well as hunger. As soon as I lifted it up and loosened the covers, it quieted a little, and then I patted it and rocked it. Lestat was whispering to me now in quick, half-articulated words I couldn't understand, the tears streaming down his cheeks, the young vampire at the open window with a look of disgust on his face and one hand on the window latch, as if he meant at any minute to bolt.

" 'So you're Louis,' said the young vampire. This seemed to increase Lestat's inexpressible excitement, and he wiped frantically at his tears with the hem of his robe.

“A fly lit on the baby’s forehead, and involuntarily I gasped as I pressed it between two fingers and dropped it dead to the floor. The child was no longer crying. It was looking up at me with extraordinary blue eyes, dark-blue eyes, its round face glistening from the heat, and a smile played on its lips, a smile that grew brighter like a flame. I had never brought death to anything so young, so innocent, and I was aware of this now as I held the child with an odd feeling of sorrow, stronger even than that feeling which had come over me in the Rue Royale. And, rocking the child gently, I pulled the young vampire’s chair to the fire and sat down.

“ ‘Don’t try to speak … it’s all right,’ I said to Lestat, who dropped down gratefully into his chair and reached out to stroke the lapels of my coat with both hands.

“ ‘But I’m so glad to see you,’ he stammered through his tears. ‘I’ve dreamed of your coming … coming …’ he said. And then he grimaced, as if he were feeling a pain he couldn’t identify, and again the fine map of scars appeared for an instant. He was looking off, his hand up to his ear, as if he meant to cover it to defend himself from some terrible sound. ‘I didn’t …’ he started; and then he shook his head, his eyes clouding as he opened them wide, strained to focus them. ‘I didn’t mean to let them do it, Louis … I mean that Santiago … that one, you know, he didn’t tell me what they planned to do.’

“ ‘That’s all past, Lestat,’ I said.

“ ‘Yes, yes,’ he nodded vigorously. ‘Past. She should never … why, Louis, *you know*.…’ And he was shaking his head, his voice seeming to gain in strength, to gain a little in resonance with his effort. ‘She should have never been one of us, Louis.’ And he rapped his sunken chest with his fist as he said ‘Us’ again softly.

“She. It seemed then that she had never existed. That she had been some illogical, fantastical dream that was too precious and too personal for me ever to confide in anyone. And too long gone. I looked at him. I stared at him. And tried to think, Yes, the three of us together.

“ ‘Don’t fear me, Lestat,’ I said, as though talking to myself. ‘I bring you no harm.’

“ ‘You’ve come back to me, Louis,’ he whispered in that thin, high-pitched voice. ‘You’ve come home again to me, Louis, haven’t you?’

And again he bit his lip and looked at me desperately.

" 'No, Lestat.' I shook my head. He was frantic for a moment, and again he commenced one gesture and then another and finally sat there with his hands over his face in a paroxysm of distress. The other vampire, who was studying me coldly, asked:

" 'Are you … have you come back to him?'

" 'No, of course not,' I answered. And he smirked, as if this was as he expected, that everything fell to him again, and he walked out onto the porch. I could hear him there very near, waiting.

" 'I only wanted to see you, Lestat,' I said. But Lestat didn't seem to hear me. Something else had distracted him. And he was gazing off, his eyes wide, his hands hovering near his ears. Then I heard it also. It was a siren. And as it grew louder, his eyes shut tight against it and his fingers covered his ears. And it grew louder and louder, coming up the street from downtown. 'Lestat!' I said to him, over the baby's cries, which rose now in the same terrible fear of the siren. But his agony obliterated me. His lips were drawn back from his teeth in a terrible grimace of pain. 'Lestat, it's only a siren!' I said to him stupidly. And then he came forward out of the chair and took hold of me and held tight to me, and, despite myself, I took his hand. He bent down, pressing his head against my chest and holding my hand so tight that he caused me pain. The room was filled with the flashing red light of the siren, and then it was going away.

" 'Louis, I can't bear it, I can't bear it,' he growled through his tears. 'Help me, Louis, stay with me.'

" 'But why are you afraid?' I asked. 'Don't you know what these things are?' And as I looked down at him, as I saw his yellow hair pressed against my coat, I had a vision of him from long ago, that tall, stately gentleman in the swirling black cape, with his head thrown back, his rich, flawless voice singing the lilting air of the opera from which we'd only just come, his walking stick tapping the cobblestones in time with the music, his large, sparkling eye catching the young woman who stood by, enrapt, so that a smile spread over his face as the song died on his lips; and for one moment, that one moment when his eye met hers, all evil seemed obliterated in that flush of pleasure, that passion for merely being alive.

"Was this the price of that involvement? A sensibility shocked by

change, shrivelling from fear? I thought quietly of all the things I might say to him, how I might remind him that he was immortal, that nothing condemned him to this retreat save himself, and that he was surrounded with the unmistakable signs of inevitable death. But I did not say these things, and I knew that I would not.

"It seemed the silence of the room rushed back around us, like a dark sea that the siren had driven away. The flies swarmed on the festering body of a rat, and the child looked quietly up at me as though my eyes were bright baubles, and its dimpled hand closed on the finger that I poised above its tiny petal mouth.

"Lestat had risen, straightened, but only to bend over and slink into the chair. 'You won't stay with me,' he sighed. But then he looked away and seemed suddenly absorbed.

" 'I wanted to talk to you so much,' he said. 'That night I came home to the Rue Royale I only wanted to talk to you!' He shuddered violently, eyes closed, his throat seeming to contract. It was as if the blows I'd struck him then were falling now. He stared blindly ahead, his tongue moistening his lip, his voice low, almost natural. 'I went to Paris after you …'

" 'What was it you wanted to tell me?' I asked. 'What was it you wanted to talk about?'

"I could well remember his mad insistence in the Théâtre des Vampires. I hadn't thought of it in years. No, I had never thought of it. And I was aware that I spoke of it now with great reluctance.

"But he only smiled at me, an insipid, near apologetic smile. And shook his head. I watched his eyes fill with a soft, bleary despair.

"I felt a profound, undeniable relief.

" 'But you will stay!' he insisted.

" 'No,' I answered.

" 'And neither will I!' said that young vampire from the darkness outside. And he stood for a second in the open window looking at us. Lestat looked up at him and then sheepishly away, and his lower lip seemed to thicken and tremble. 'Close it, close it,' he said, waving his finger at the window. Then a sob burst from him and, covering his mouth with his hand, he put his head down and cried.

"The young vampire was gone. I heard his steps moving fast on the walk, heard the heavy chink of the iron gate. And I was alone with

Lestat, and he was crying. It seemed a long time before he stopped, and during all that time I merely watched him. I was thinking of all the things that had passed between us. I was remembering things which I supposed I had completely forgotten. And I was conscious then of that same overwhelming sadness which I'd felt when I saw the place in the Rue Royale where we had lived. Only, it didn't seem to me to be a sadness for Lestat, for that smart, gay vampire who used to live there then. It seemed a sadness for something else, something beyond Lestat that only included him and was part of the great awful sadness of all the things I'd ever lost or loved or known. It seemed then I was in a different place, a different time. And this different place and time was very real, and it was a room where the insects had hummed as they were humming here and the air had been close and thick with death and with the spring perfume. And I was on the verge of knowing that place and knowing with it a terrible pain, a pain so terrible that my mind veered away from it, said, No, don't take me back to that place—and suddenly it was receding, and I was with Lestat here now. Astonished, I saw my own tear fall onto the face of the child. I saw it glisten on the child's cheek, and I saw the cheek become very plump with the child's smile. It must have been seeing the light in the tears. I put my hand to my face and wiped at the tears that were in fact there and looked at them in amazement.

" 'But Louis …' Lestat was saying softly. 'How can you be as you are, how can you stand it?' He was looking up at me, his mouth in that same grimace, his face wet with tears. 'Tell me, Louis, help me to understand! How can you understand it all, how can you endure?' And I could see by the desperation in his eyes and the deeper tone which his voice had taken that he, too, was pushing himself towards something that for him was very painful, towards a place where he hadn't ventured in a long time. But then, even as I looked at him, his eyes appeared to become misty, confused. And he pulled the robe up tight, and shaking his head, he looked at the fire. A shudder passed through him and he moaned.

" 'I have to go now, Lestat,' I said to him. I felt weary, weary of him and weary of this sadness. And I longed again for the stillness outside, that perfect quiet to which I'd become so completely accustomed. But I realized, as I rose to my feet, that I was taking the little baby with

me.

"Lestat looked up at me now with his large, agonized eyes and his smooth, ageless face. 'But you'll come back … you'll come to visit me … Louis?' he said.

"I turned away from him, hearing him calling after me, and quietly left the house. When I reached the street, I looked back and I could see him hovering at the window as if he were afraid to go out. I realized he had not gone out for a long, long time, and it occurred to me then that perhaps he would never go out again.

"I returned to the small house from which the vampire had taken the child, and left it there in its crib."

"Not very long after that I told Armand I'd seen Lestat. Perhaps it was a month, I'm not certain. Time meant little to me then, as it means little to me now. But it meant a great deal to Armand. He was amazed that I hadn't mentioned this before.

"We were walking that night uptown where the city gives way to the Audubon Park and the levee is a deserted, grassy slope that descends to a muddy beach heaped here and there with driftwood, going out to the lapping waves of the river. On the far bank were the very dim lights of industries and riverfront companies, pinpoints of green or red that flickered in the distance like stars. And the moon showed the broad, strong current moving fast between the two shores; and even the summer heat was gone here, with the cool breeze coming off the water and gently lifting the moss that hung from the twisted oak where we sat. I was picking at the grass, and tasting it, though the taste was bitter and unnatural. The gesture seemed natural. I was feeling almost that I might never leave New Orleans. But then, what are such thoughts when you can live forever? Never leave New Orleans 'again'? *Again* seemed a human word.

" 'But didn't you feel any desire for revenge?' Armand asked. He lay on the grass beside me, his weight on his elbow, his eyes fixed on me.

" 'Why?' I asked calmly. I was wishing, as I often wished, that he was not there, that I was alone. Alone with this powerful and cool river under the dim moon. 'He's met with his own perfect revenge. He's dying, dying of rigidity, of fear. His mind cannot accept this time.

Nothing as serene and graceful as that vampire death you once described to me in Paris. I think he is dying as clumsily and grotesquely as humans often die in this century … of old age.'

" 'But you … what did you feel?' he insisted softly. And I was struck by the personal quality of that question, and how long it had been since either of us had spoken to the other in that way. I had a strong sense of him then, the separate being that he was, the calm and collected creature with the straight auburn hair and the large, sometimes melancholy eyes, eyes that seemed often to be seeing nothing but their own thoughts. Tonight they were lit with a dull fire that was unusual.

" 'Nothing,' I answered.

" 'Nothing one way or the other?'

"I answered no. I remembered palpably that sorrow. It was as if the sorrow hadn't left me suddenly, but had been near me all this time, hovering, saying, 'Come.' But I wouldn't tell this to Armand, wouldn't reveal this. And I had the strangest sensation of feeling his need for me to tell him this … this, or something … a need strangely akin to the need for living blood.

" 'But did he tell you anything, anything that made you feel the old hatred …' he murmured. And it was at this point that I became keenly aware of how distressed he was.

" 'What is it, Armand? Why do you ask this?' I said.

"But he lay back on the steep levee then, and for a long time he appeared to be looking at the stars. The stars brought back to me something far too specific, the ship that had carried Claudia and me to Europe, and those nights at sea when it seemed the stars came down to touch the waves.

" 'I thought perhaps he would tell you something about Paris …' Armand said.

" 'What should he say about Paris? That he didn't want Claudia to die?' I asked. Claudia again; the name sounded strange. Claudia spreading out that game of solitaire on the table that shifted with the shifting of the sea, the lantern creaking on its hook, the black porthole full of the stars. She had her head bent, her fingers poised above her ear as if about to loosen strands of her hair. And I had the most disconcerting sensation: that in my memory she would look up from

that game of solitaire, and the sockets of her eyes would be empty.

" 'You could have told me anything you wanted about Paris, Armand,' I said. 'Long before now. It wouldn't have mattered.'

" 'Even that it was I who …?'

"I turned to him as he lay there looking at the sky. And I saw the extraordinary pain in his face, in his eyes. It seemed his eyes were huge, too huge, and the white face that framed them too gaunt.

" 'That it was you who killed her? Who forced her out into that yard and locked her there?' I asked. I smiled. 'Don't tell me you have been feeling pain for it all these years, not you.'

"And then he closed his eyes and turned his face away, his hand resting on his chest as if I'd struck him an awful, sudden blow.

" 'You can't convince me you care about this,' I said to him coldly. And I looked out towards the water, and again that feeling came over me … that I wished to be alone. In a little while I knew I would get up and go off by myself. That is, if he didn't leave me first. Because I would have liked to remain there actually. It was a quiet, secluded place.

" 'You care about nothing …' he was saying. And then he sat up slowly and turned to me so again I could see that dark fire in his eyes. 'I thought you would at least care about that. I thought you would feel the old passion, the old anger if you were to see him again. I thought something would quicken and come alive in you if you saw him … if you returned to this place.'

" 'That I would come back to life?' I said softly. And I felt the cold metallic hardness of my words as I spoke, the modulation, the control. It was as if I were cold all over, made of metal, and he were fragile suddenly; fragile, as he had been, actually, for a long time.

" 'Yes!' he cried out. 'Yes, back to life!' And then he seemed puzzled, positively confused. And a strange thing occurred. He bowed his head at that moment as if he were defeated. And something in the way that he felt that defeat, something in the way his smooth white face reflected it only for an instant, reminded me of someone else I'd seen defeated in just that way. And it was amazing to me that it took me such a long moment to see Claudia's face in that attitude; Claudia, as she stood by the bed in the room at the Hôtel Saint-Gabriel pleading with me to transform Madeleine into one of us. That same helpless

look, that defeat which seemed to be so heartfelt that everything beyond it was forgotten. And then he, like Claudia, seemed to rally, to pull on some reserve of strength. But he said softly to the air, 'I am dying!'

"And I, watching him, hearing him, the only creature under God who heard him, knowing completely that it was true, said nothing.

"A long sigh escaped his lips. His head was bowed. His right hand lay limp beside him in the grass. 'Hatred … that is passion,' he said. 'Revenge, that is passion.…'

" 'Not from me …' I murmured softly. 'Not now.'

"And then his eyes fixed on me and his face seemed very calm. 'I used to believe you would get over it—that when the pain of all of it left you, you would grow warm again and filled with love, and filled with that wild and insatiable curiosity with which you first came to me, that inveterate conscience, and that hunger for knowledge that brought you all the way to Paris to my cell. I thought it was a part of you that couldn't die. And I thought that when the pain was gone you would forgive me for what part I played in her death. She never loved you, you know. Not in the way that I loved you, and the way that you loved us both. I knew this! I understood it! And I believed I would gather you to me and hold you. And time would open to us, and we would be the teachers of one another. All the things that gave you happiness would give me happiness; and I would be the protector of your pain. My power would be your power. My strength the same. But you're dead inside to me, you're cold and beyond my reach! It is as if I'm not here, beside you. And, not being here with you, I have the dreadful feeling that I don't exist at all. And you are as cold and distant from me as those strange modern paintings of lines and hard forms that I cannot love or comprehend, as alien as those hard mechanical sculptures of this age which have no human form. I shudder when I'm near you. I look into your eyes and my reflection isn't there.…'

" 'What you asked was impossible!' I said quickly. 'Don't you see? What I asked was impossible, too, from the start.'

"He protested, the negation barely forming on his lips, his hand rising as if to thrust it away.

" 'I wanted love and goodness in this which is living death,' I said. 'It

was impossible from the beginning, because you cannot have love and goodness when you do what you know to be evil, what you know to be wrong. You can only have the desperate confusion and longing and the chasing of phantom goodness in its human form. I knew the real answer to my quest before I ever reached Paris. I knew it when I first took a human life to feed my craving. It was my death. And yet I would not accept it, could not accept it, because like all creatures I don't wish to die! And so I sought for other vampires, for God, for the devil, for a hundred things under a hundred names. And it was all the same, all evil. And all wrong. Because no one could in any guise convince me of what I myself knew to be true, that I was damned in my own mind and soul. And when I came to Paris I thought you were powerful and beautiful and without regret, and I wanted that desperately. But you were a destroyer just as I was a destroyer, more ruthless and cunning even than I. You showed me the only thing that I could really hope to become, what depth of evil, what degree of coldness I would have to attain to end my pain. And I accepted that. And so that passion, that love you saw in me, was extinguished. And you see now simply a mirror of yourself.'

"A very long time passed before he spoke. He'd risen to his feet, and he stood with his back to me looking down the river, head bowed as before, his hands at his sides. I was looking at the river also. I was thinking quietly, There is nothing more I can say, nothing more I can do.

" 'Louis,' he said now, lifting his head, his voice very thick and unlike itself.

" 'Yes, Armand,' I said.

" 'Is there anything else you want of me, anything else you require?'

" 'No,' I said. 'What do you mean?'

"He didn't answer this. He began to slowly walk away. I think at first I thought he only meant to walk a few paces, perhaps to wander by himself along the muddy beach below. And by the time I realized that he was leaving me, he was a mere speck down there against the occasional flickering in the water under the moon. I never saw him again.

"Of course, it was several nights later before I realized he was gone. His coffin remained. But he did not return to it. And it was several

months before I had that coffin taken to the St. Louis cemetery and put into the crypt beside my own. The grave, long neglected because my family was gone, received the only thing he'd left behind. But then I began to be uncomfortable with that. I thought of it on waking, and again at dawn right before I closed my eyes. And I went downtown one night and took the coffin out, and broke it into pieces and left it in the narrow aisle of the cemetery in the tall grass.

"That vampire who was Lestat's latest child accosted me one evening not long after. He begged me to tell him all I knew of the world, to become his companion and his teacher. I remember telling him that what I chiefly knew was that I'd destroy him if I ever saw him again. 'You see, someone must die every night that I walk, until I've the courage to end it,' I told him. 'And you're an admirable choice for that victim, a killer as evil as myself.'

"And I left New Orleans the next night because the sorrow wasn't leaving me. And I didn't want to think of that old house where Lestat was dying. Or that sharp, modern vampire who'd fled me. Or of Armand.

"I wanted to be where there was nothing familiar to me. And nothing mattered.

"And that's the end of it. There's nothing else."

The boy sat mute, staring at the vampire. And the vampire sat collected, his hands folded on the table, his narrow, red-rimmed eyes fixed on the turning tapes. His face was so gaunt now that the veins of his temples showed as if carved out of stone. And he sat so still that only his green eyes evinced life, and that life was a dull fascination with the turning of the tapes.

Then the boy drew back and ran the fingers of his right hand loosely through his hair. “No,” he said with a short intake of breath. Then he said it again louder, “No!”

The vampire didn’t appear to hear him. His eyes moved away from the tapes towards the window, towards the dark, gray sky.

“It didn’t have to end like that!” said the boy, leaning forward.

The vampire, who continued to look at the sky, uttered a short, dry laugh.

“All the things you felt in Paris!” said the boy, his voice increasing in volume. “The love of Claudia, the feeling, even the feeling for Lestat! It didn’t have to end, not in this, not in despair! Because that’s what it is, isn’t it? Despair!”

“Stop,” said the vampire abruptly, lifting his right hand. His eyes shifted almost mechanically to the boy’s face. “I tell you and I have told you, that it could not have ended any other way.”

“I don’t accept it,” said the boy, and he folded his arms across his chest, shaking his head emphatically. “I can’t!” And the emotion seemed to build in him, so that without meaning to, he scraped his chair back on the bare boards and rose to pace the floor. But then, when he turned and looked at the vampire’s face again, the words he was about to speak died in his throat. The vampire was merely staring at him, and his face had that long drawn expression of both outrage and bitter amusement.

“Don’t you see how you made it sound? It was an adventure like I’ll never know in my whole life! You talk about passion, you talk about longing! You talk about things that millions of us won’t ever taste or come to understand. And then you tell me it ends like that. I tell you …” And he stood over the vampire now, his hands outstretched before him. “If you were to give me that power! The power to see and

feel and live forever!"

The vampire's eyes slowly began to widen, his lips parting. "What!" he demanded softly. *"What!"*

"Give it to me!" said the boy, his right hand tightening in a fist, the fist pounding his chest. "Make me a vampire now!" he said as the vampire stared aghast.

What happened then was swift and confused, but it ended abruptly with the vampire on his feet holding the boy by the shoulders, the boy's moist face contorted with fear, the vampire glaring at him in rage. "This is what you want?" he whispered, his pale lips manifesting only the barest trace of movement. "This … after all I've told you … is what you ask for?"

A small cry escaped the boy's lips, and he began to tremble all over, the sweat breaking out on his forehead and on the skin above his upper lip. His hand reached gingerly for the vampire's arm. "You don't know what human life is like!" he said, on the edge of breaking into tears. "You've forgotten. You don't even understand the meaning of your own story, what it means to a human being like me." And then a choked sob interrupted his words, and his fingers clung to the vampire's arm.

"God," the vampire uttered and, turning away from him, almost pushed the boy off-balance against the wall. He stood with his back to the boy, staring at the gray window.

"I beg you … give it all one more chance. One more chance in me!" said the boy.

The vampire turned to him, his face as twisted with anger as before. And then, gradually, it began to become smooth. The lids came down slowly over his eyes and his lips lengthened in a smile. He looked again at the boy. "I've failed," he sighed, smiling still. "I have completely failed.…"

"No …" the boy protested.

"Don't say any more," said the vampire emphatically. "I have but one chance left. Do you see the reels? They still turn. I have but one way to show you the meaning of what I've said." And then he reached out for the boy so fast that the boy found himself grasping for something, pushing against something that was not there, so his hand was outstretched still when the vampire had him pressed to his chest, the

boy's neck bent beneath his lips. "Do you see?" whispered the vampire, and the long, silky lips drew up over his teeth and two long fangs came down into the boy's flesh. The boy stuttered, a low guttural sound coming out of his throat, his hand struggling to close on something, his eyes widening only to become dull and gray as the vampire drank. And the vampire meantime looked as tranquil as someone in sleep. His narrow chest heaved so subtly with his sigh that he seemed to be rising slowly from the floor and then settling again with that same somnambulistic grace. There was a whine coming from the boy, and when the vampire let him go he held him out with both hands and looked at the damp white face, the limp hands, the eyes half closed.

The boy was moaning, his lower lip loose and trembling as if in nausea. He moaned again louder, and his head fell back and his eyes rolled up into his head. The vampire set him down gently in the chair. The boy was struggling to speak, and the tears which sprang now to his eyes seemed to come as much from that effort to speak as from anything else. His head fell forward, heavily, drunkenly, and his hand rested on the table. The vampire stood looking down at him, and his white skin became a soft luminous pink. It was as if a pink light were shining on him and his entire being seemed to give back that light. The flesh of his lips was dark, almost rose in color, and the veins of his temples and his hands were mere traces on his skin, and his face was youthful and smooth.

"Will I … die?" the boy whispered as he looked up slowly, his mouth wet and slack. "Will I die?" he groaned, his lip trembling.

"I don't know," the vampire said, and he smiled.

The boy seemed on the verge of saying something more, but the hand that rested on the table slid forward on the boards, and his head lay down beside it as he lost consciousness.

When next he opened his eyes, the boy saw the sun. It filled the dirty, undressed window and was hot on the side of his face and his hand. For a moment, he lay there, his face against the table and then with a great effort, he straightened, took a long deep breath and closing his eyes, pressed his hand to that place where the vampire had drawn

blood. When his other hand accidentally touched a band of metal on the top of the tape recorder, he let out a sudden cry because the metal was hot.

Then he rose, moving clumsily, almost falling, until he rested both his hands on the white wash basin. Quickly he turned on the tap, splashed his face with cold water, and wiped it with a soiled towel that hung there on a nail. He was breathing regularly now and he stood still, looking into the mirror without any support. Then he looked at his watch. It was as if the watch shocked him, brought him more to life than the sun or the water. And he made a quick search of the room, of the hallway, and, finding nothing and no one, he settled again into the chair. Then, drawing a small white pad out of his pocket, and a pen, he set these on the table and touched the button of the recorder. The tape spun fast backwards until he shut it off. When he heard the vampire's voice, he leaned forward, listening very carefully, then hit the button again for another place, and, hearing that, still another. But then at last his face brightened, as the reels turned and the voice spoke in an even modulated tone: "It was a very warm evening, and I could tell as soon as I saw him on St. Charles that he had someplace to go …"

And quickly the boy noted:

"Lestat … off St. Charles Avenue. Old house crumbling … shabby neighborhood. Look for rusted railings."

And then, stuffing the notebook quickly in his pocket, he gathered the tapes into his briefcase, along with the small recorder, and hurried down the long hallway and down the stairs to the street, where in front of the corner bar his car was parked.

For Stan Rice, Carole Malkin,
and Alice O'Brien Borchardt

Anne Rice

The Vampire Lestat

A BALLANTINE e BOOK

THE VAMPIRE LESTAT

THE SECOND BOOK
IN THE
CHRONICLES
OF THE VAMPIRES

by

ANNE RICE

Ballantine Books
New York

A Ballantine Book
Published by The Random House Publishing Group

Copyright © 1985 by Anne O'Brien Rice

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Ballantine Books, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, and simultaneously in Canada by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto.

Portions of this work originally appeared in *The Twilight Zone* magazine.

Ballantine and colophon are registered trademarks of Random House, Inc.

www.ballantinebooks.com

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 97-93893

eISBN: 978-0-307-57593-7

This edition published by arrangement with Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

v3.0

Contents

Master Table of Contents

Cover
Title Page
Copyright

Prologue

Part I - Lelio Rising
- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Chapter 3
- Chapter 4
- Chapter 5
- Chapter 6
- Chapter 7
- Chapter 8

Part II - The Legacy of Magnus
- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Chapter 3
- Chapter 4
- Chapter 5
- Chapter 6
- Chapter 7
- Chapter 8
- Chapter 9
- Chapter 10
- Chapter 11
- Chapter 12
- Chapter 13

Part III - Viaticum for the Marquise

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9

Part IV - The Children of Darkness
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6

Part V - The Vampire Armand
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5

Part VI - On the Devil's Road from Paris to Cairo
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7

Part VII - Ancient Magic, Ancient Mysteries
Chapter 1
Chapter 2

Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17

Epilogue: Interview with the Vampire
Chapter 1
Chapter 2

Dionysus in San Francisco 1985
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3

Dedication

Downtown
Saturday Night
in the
Twentieth Century
1984

I am the vampire Lestat. I'm immortal. More or less. The light of the sun, the sustained heat of an intense fire—these things might destroy me. But then again, they might not.

I'm six feet tall, which was fairly impressive in the 1780s when I was a young mortal man. It's not bad now. I have thick blond hair, not quite shoulder length, and rather curly, which appears white under fluorescent light. My eyes are gray, but they absorb the colors blue or violet easily from surfaces around them. And I have a fairly short narrow nose, and a mouth that is well shaped but just a little too big for my face. It can look very mean, or extremely generous, my mouth. It always looks sensual. But emotions and attitudes are always reflected in my entire expression. I have a continuously animated face.

My vampire nature reveals itself in extremely white and highly reflective skin that has to be powdered down for cameras of any kind.

And if I'm starved for blood I look like a perfect horror—skin shrunken, veins like ropes over the contours of my bones. But I don't let that happen now. And the only consistent indication that I am not human is my fingernails. It's the same with all vampires. Our fingernails look like glass. And some people notice that when they don't notice anything else.

Right now I am what America calls a Rock Superstar. My first album has sold 4 million copies. I'm going to San Francisco for the first spot on a nationwide concert tour that will take my band from coast to coast. MTV, the rock music cable channel, has been playing my video clips night and day for two weeks. They're also being shown in England on "Top of the Pops" and on the Continent, probably in some parts of Asia, and in Japan. Video cassettes of the whole series of clips are selling worldwide.

I am also the author of an autobiography which was published last week.

Regarding my English—the language I use in my autobiography—I first learned it from the flatboatmen who came down the Mississippi to New Orleans about two hundred years ago. I learned more after that from the English language writers—everybody from Shakespeare through Mark Twain to H. Rider Haggard, whom I read as the decades

passed. The final infusion I received from the detective stories of the early twentieth century in the *Black Mask* magazine. The adventures of Sam Spade by Dashiell Hammett in *Black Mask* were the last stories I read before I went literally and figuratively underground.

That was in New Orleans in 1929.

When I write I drift into a vocabulary that would have been natural to me in the eighteenth century, into phrases shaped by the authors I've read. But in spite of my French accent, I talk like a cross between a flatboatman and detective Sam Spade, actually. So I hope you'll bear with me when my style is inconsistent. When I blow the atmosphere of an eighteenth-century scene to smithereens now and then.

I came out into the twentieth century last year.

What brought me up were two things.

First—the information I was receiving from amplified voices that had begun their cacophony in the air around the time I lay down to sleep.

I'm referring here to the voices of radios, of course, and phonographs and later television machines. I heard the radios in the cars that passed in the streets of the old Garden District near the place where I lay. I heard the phonographs and TVs from the houses that surrounded mine.

Now, when a vampire goes underground as we call it—when he ceases to drink blood and he just lies in the earth—he soon becomes too weak to resurrect himself, and what follows is a dream state.

In that state, I absorbed the voices sluggishly, surrounding them with my own responsive images as a mortal does in sleep. But at some point during the past fifty-five years I began to "remember" what I was hearing, to follow the entertainment programs, to listen to the news broadcasts, the lyrics and rhythms of the popular songs.

And very gradually, I began to understand the caliber of the changes that the world had undergone. I began listening for specific pieces of information about wars or inventions, certain new patterns of speech.

Then a self-consciousness developed in me. I realized I was no longer dreaming. I was thinking about what I heard. I was wide awake. I was lying in the ground and I was starved for living blood. I started to believe that maybe all the old wounds I'd sustained had been healed by now. Maybe my strength had come back. Maybe my

strength had actually increased as it would have done with time if I'd never been hurt. I wanted to find out.

I started to think incessantly of drinking human blood.

The second thing that brought me back—the decisive thing really—was the sudden presence near me of a band of young rock singers who called themselves Satan's Night Out.

They moved into a house on Sixth Street—less than a block away from where I slumbered under my own house on Prytania near the Lafayette Cemetery—and they started to rehearse their rock music in the attic some time in 1984.

I could hear their whining electric guitars, their frantic singing. It was as good as the radio and stereo songs I heard, and it was more melodic than most. There was a romance to it in spite of its pounding drums. The electric piano sounded like a harpsichord.

I caught images from the thoughts of the musicians that told me what they looked like, what they saw when they looked at each other and into mirrors. They were slender, sinewy, and altogether lovely young mortals—beguilingly androgynous and even a little savage in their dress and movements—two male and one female.

They drowned out most of the other amplified voices around me when they were playing. But that was perfectly all right.

I wanted to rise and join the rock band called Satan's Night Out. I wanted to sing and to dance.

But I can't say that in the very beginning there was great thought behind my wish. It was rather a ruling impulse, strong enough to bring me up from the earth.

I was enchanted by the world of rock music—the way the singers could scream of good and evil, proclaim themselves angels or devils, and mortals would stand up and cheer. Sometimes they seemed the pure embodiment of madness. And yet it was technologically dazzling, the intricacy of their performance. It was barbaric and cerebral in a way that I don't think the world of ages past had ever seen.

Of course it was metaphor, the raving. None of them believed in angels or devils, no matter how well they assumed their parts. And the players of the old Italian commedia had been as shocking, as inventive, as lewd.

Yet it was entirely new, the extremes to which they took it, the

brutality and the defiance—and the way that they were embraced by the world from the very rich to the very poor.

Also there was something vampiric about rock music. It must have sounded supernatural even to those who don't believe in the supernatural. I mean the way the electricity could stretch a single note forever; the way harmony could be layered upon harmony until you felt yourself dissolving in the sound. So eloquent of dread it was, this music. The world just didn't have it in any form before.

Yes, I wanted to get closer to it. I wanted to *do* it. Maybe make the little unknown band of Satan's Night Out famous. I was ready to come up.

It took a week to rise, more or less. I fed on the fresh blood of the little animals who live under the earth when I could catch them. Then I started clawing for the surface, where I could summon the rats. From there it wasn't too difficult to take felines and finally the inevitable human victim, though I had to wait a long time for the particular kind I wanted—a man who had killed other mortals and showed no remorse.

One came along eventually, walking right by the fence, a young male with a grizzled beard who had murdered another in some far-off place on the other side of the world. True killer, this one. And oh, that first taste of human struggle and human blood!

Stealing clothes from nearby houses, getting some of the gold and jewels I'd hidden in the Lafayette Cemetery, that was no problem.

Of course I was scared from time to time. The stench of chemicals and gasoline sickened me. The drone of air conditioners and the whine of the jet planes overhead hurt my ears.

But after the third night up, I was roaring around New Orleans on a big black Harley-Davidson motorcycle making plenty of noise myself. I was looking for more killers to feed on. I wore gorgeous black leather clothes that I'd taken from my victims, and I had a little Sony Walkman stereo in my pocket that fed Bach's Art of the Fugue through tiny earphones right into my head as I blazed along.

I was the vampire Lestat again. I was back in action. New Orleans was once again my hunting ground.

As for my strength, well, it was three times what it had once been. I could leap from the street to the top of a four-story building. I could

pull iron gratings off windows. I could bend a copper penny double. I could hear human voices and thoughts, when I wanted to, for blocks around.

By the end of the first week I had a pretty female lawyer in a downtown glass and steel skyscraper who helped me procure a legal birth certificate, Social Security card, and driver's license. A good portion of my old wealth was on its way to New Orleans from coded accounts in the immortal Bank of London and the Rothschild Bank.

But more important, I was swimming in realizations. I knew that everything the amplified voices had told me about the twentieth century was true.

As I roamed the streets of New Orleans in 1984 this is what I beheld:

The dark dreary industrial world that I'd gone to sleep on had burnt itself out finally, and the old bourgeois prudery and conformity had lost their hold on the American mind.

People were adventurous and erotic again the way they'd been in the old days, before the great middle-class revolutions of the late 1700s. They even *looked* the way they had in those times.

The men didn't wear the Sam Spade uniform of shirt, tie, gray suit, and gray hat any longer. Once again, they costumed themselves in velvet and silk and brilliant colors if they felt like it. They did not have to clip their hair like Roman soldiers anymore; they wore it any length they desired.

And the women—ah, the women were glorious, naked in the spring warmth as they'd been under the Egyptian pharaohs, in skimpy short skirts and tuniclike dresses, or wearing men's pants and shirts skintight over their curvaceous bodies if they pleased. They painted, and decked themselves out in gold and silver, even to walk to the grocery store. Or they went fresh scrubbed and without ornament—it didn't matter. They curled their hair like Marie Antoinette or cut it off or let it blow free.

For the first time in history, perhaps, they were as strong and as interesting as men.

And these were the common people of America. Not just the rich who've always achieved a certain androgyny, a certain joie de vivre that the middle-class revolutionaries called decadence in the past.

The old aristocratic sensuality now belonged to everybody. It was wed to the promises of the middle-class revolution, and all people had a right to love and to luxury and to graceful things.

Department stores had become palaces of near Oriental loveliness—merchandise displayed amid soft tinted carpeting, eerie music, amber light. In the all-night drugstores, bottles of violet and green shampoo gleamed like gems on the sparkling glass shelves. Waitresses drove sleek leather-lined automobiles to work. Dock laborers went home at night to swim in their heated backyard pools. Charwomen and plumbers changed at the end of the day into exquisitely cut manufactured clothes.

In fact the poverty and filth that had been common in the big cities of the earth since time immemorial were almost completely washed away.

You just didn't see immigrants dropping dead of starvation in the alleyways. There weren't slums where people slept eight and ten to a room. Nobody threw the slops in the gutters. The beggars, the cripples, the orphans, the hopelessly diseased were so diminished as to constitute no presence in the immaculate streets at all.

Even the drunkards and lunatics who slept on the park benches and in the bus stations had meat to eat regularly, and even radios to listen to, and clothes that were washed.

But this was just the surface. I found myself astounded by the more profound changes that moved this awesome current along.

For example, something altogether magical had happened to time.

The old was not being routinely replaced by the new anymore. On the contrary, the English spoken around me was the same as it had been in the 1800S. Even the old slang ("the coast is clear" or "bad luck" or "that's the thing") was still "current." Yet fascinating new phrases like "they brainwashed you" and "it's so Freudian" and "I can't relate to it" were on everyone's lips.

In the art and entertainment worlds all prior centuries were being "recycled." Musicians performed Mozart as well as jazz and rock music; people went to see Shakespeare one night and a new French film the next.

In giant fluorescent-lighted emporiums you could buy tapes of medieval madrigals and play them on your car stereo as you drove

ninety miles an hour down the freeway. In the bookstores Renaissance poetry sold side by side with the novels of Dickens or Ernest Hemingway. Sex manuals lay on the same tables with the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*.

Sometimes the wealth and the cleanliness everywhere around me became like an hallucination. I thought I was going out of my head.

Through shop windows I gazed stupefied at computers and telephones as pure in form and color as nature's most exotic shells. Gargantuan silver limousines navigated the narrow French Quarter streets like indestructible sea beasts. Glittering office towers pierced the night sky like Egyptian obelisks above the sagging brick buildings of old Canal Street. Countless television programs poured their ceaseless flow of images into every air-cooled hotel room.

But it was no series of hallucinations. This century had inherited the earth in every sense.

And no small part of this unpredicted miracle was *the curious innocence* of these people in the very midst of their freedom and their wealth. The Christian god was as dead as he had been in the 1700s. *And no new mythological religion had arisen to take the place of the old.*

On the contrary, the simplest people of this age were driven by a vigorous secular morality as strong as any religious morality I had ever known. The intellectuals carried the standards. But quite ordinary individuals all over America cared passionately about "peace" and "the poor" and "the planet" as if driven by a mystical zeal.

Famine they intended to wipe out in this century. Disease they would destroy no matter what the cost. They argued ferociously about the execution of condemned criminals, the abortion of unborn babies. And the threats of "environmental pollution" and "holocaustal war" they battled as fiercely as men have battled witchcraft and heresy in ages past.

As for sexuality, it was no longer a matter of superstition and fear. The last religious overtones were being stripped from it. That was why the people went around half naked. That was why they kissed and hugged each other in the streets. They talked ethics now and responsibility and the beauty of the body. Procreation and venereal disease they had under control.

Ah, the twentieth century. Ah, the turn of the great wheel.

It had outdistanced my wildest dreams of it, this future. It had made fools of grim prophets of ages past.

I did a lot of thinking about this sinless secular morality, this optimism. This brilliantly lighted world where the value of human life was greater than it had ever been before.

In the amber electric twilight of a vast hotel room I watched on the screen before me the stunningly crafted film of war called *Apocalypse Now*. Such a symphony of sound and color it was, and it sang of the age-old battle of the Western world against evil. "You must make a friend of horror and moral terror," says the mad commander in the savage garden of Cambodia, to which the Western man answers as he has always answered: No.

No. Horror and moral terror can never be exonerated. They have no real value. Pure evil has no real place.

And that means, doesn't it, that I have no place.

Except, perhaps, in the art that repudiates evil—the vampire comics, the horror novels, the old gothic tales—or in the roaring chants of the rock stars who dramatize the battles against evil that each mortal fights within himself.

It was enough to make an Old World monster go back into the earth, this stunning irrelevance to the mighty scheme of things, enough to make him lie down and weep. Or enough to make him become a rock singer, when you think about it …

But where were the other Old World monsters? I wondered. How did other vampires exist in a world in which each death was recorded in giant electronic computers, and bodies were carried away to refrigerated crypts? Probably concealing themselves like loathsome insects in the shadows, as they have always done, no matter how much philosophy they talked or how many covens they formed.

Well, when I raised my voice with the little band called Satan's Night Out, I would bring them all into the light soon enough.

. . .

I continued my education. I talked to mortals at bus stops and at gas stations and in elegant drinking places. I read books. I decked myself out in the shimmering dream skins of the fashionable shops. I wore white turtleneck shirts and crisp khaki safari jackets, or lush gray velvet blazers with cashmere scarves. I powdered down my face so that I could "pass" beneath the chemical lights of the all-night supermarkets, the hamburger joints, the carnival thoroughfares called nightclub strips.

I was learning. I was in love.

And the only problem I had was that murderers to feed upon were scarce. In this shiny world of innocence and plenty, of kindness and gaiety and full stomachs, the common cutthroat thieves of the past and their dangerous waterfront hangouts were almost gone.

And so I had to work for a living. But I'd always been a hunter. I liked the dim smoky poolrooms with the single light shining on the green felt as the tattooed ex-convicts gathered around it as much as I liked the shiny satin-lined nightclubs of the big concrete hotels. And I was learning more all the time about my killers—the drug dealers, the pimps, the murderers who fell in with the motorcycle gangs.

And more than ever, I was resolute that I would not drink innocent blood.

Finally it was time to call upon my old neighbors, the rock band called Satan's Night Out.

At six thirty on a hot sticky Saturday night I rang the doorbell of the attic music studio. The beautiful young mortals were all lying about in their rainbow-colored silk shirts and skintight dungarees smoking hashish cigarettes and complaining about their rotten luck getting "gigs" in the South.

They looked like biblical angels, with their long clean shaggy hair and feline movements; their jewelry was Egyptian. Even to rehearse they painted their faces and their eyes.

I was overcome with excitement and love just looking at them, Alex and Larry and the succulent little Tough Cookie.

And in an eerie moment in which the world seemed to stand still beneath me, I told them what I was. Nothing new to them, the word "vampire." In the galaxy in which they shone, a thousand other singers had worn the theatrical fangs and the black cape.

And yet it felt so strange to speak it aloud to mortals, the forbidden truth. Never in two hundred years had I spoken it to anyone who had not been marked to become one of us. Not even to my victims did I confide it before their eyes closed.

And now I said it clearly and distinctly to these handsome young creatures. I told them that I wanted to sing with them, that if they were to trust to me, we would all be rich and famous. That on a wave of preternatural and remorseless ambition, I should carry them out of these rooms and into the great world.

Their eyes misted as they looked at me. And the little twentieth-century chamber of stucco and pasteboard rang with their laughter and delight.

I was patient. Why shouldn't I be? I knew I was a demon who could mimic almost any human sound or movement. But how could they be expected to understand? I went to the electric piano and began to play and to sing.

I imitated the rock songs as I started, and then old melodies and lyrics came back to me—French songs buried deep in my soul yet never abandoned—and I wound these into brutal rhythms, seeing before me a tiny crowded little Paris theater of centuries ago. A dangerous passion welled in me. It threatened my equilibrium. Dangerous that this should come so soon. Yet I sang on, pounding the slick white keys of the electric piano, and something in my soul was broken open. Never mind that these tender mortal creatures gathered around me should never know.

It was sufficient that they were jubilant, that they loved the eerie and disjointed music, that they were screaming, that they saw prosperity in the future, the impetus that they had lacked before. They turned on the tape machines and we began singing and playing together, jamming as they called it. The studio swam with the scent of their blood and our thunderous songs.

But then came a shock I had never in my strangest dreams anticipated—something that was as extraordinary as my little revelation to these creatures had been. In fact, it was so overwhelming that it might have driven me out of their world and back underground.

I don't mean I would have gone into the deep slumber again. But I might have backed off from Satan's Night Out and roamed about for a few years, stunned and trying to gather my wits.

The men—Alex, the sleek delicate young drummer, and his taller blond-haired brother, Larry—recognized my name when I told them it was Lestat.

Not only did they recognize it, but they connected it with a body of information about me that they had read in a book.

In fact, they thought it was delightful that I wasn't just pretending to be any vampire. Or Count Dracula. Everybody was sick of Count Dracula. They thought it was marvelous that I was pretending to be the vampire Lestat.

"*Pretending* to be the vampire Lestat?" I asked.

They laughed at my exaggeration, my French accent.

I looked at all of them for a long moment, trying to scan their thoughts. Of course I hadn't expected them to believe I was a real vampire. But to have read of a fictional vampire with a name as unusual as mine? How could this be explained?

But I was losing my confidence. And when I lose my confidence, my powers drain. The little room seemed to be getting smaller. And there was something insectile and menacing about the instruments, the antenna, the wires.

"Show me this book," I said.

From the other room they brought it, a small pulp paper "novel" that was falling to pieces. The binding was gone, the cover ripped, the whole held together by a rubber band.

I got a preternatural chill of sorts at the sight of the cover. *Interview with the Vampire*. Something to do with a mortal boy getting one of the undead to tell the tale.

With their permission, I went into the other room, stretched out on their bed, and began to read. When I was halfway finished, I took the book with me and left the house. I stood stock-still beneath a street

lamp with the book until I finished it. Then I placed it carefully in my breast pocket.

I didn't return to the band for seven nights.

During much of that time, I was roaming again, crashing through the night on my Harley-Davidson motorcycle with the Bach Goldberg Variations turned up to full volume. And I was asking myself, Lestat, what do you want to do now?

And the rest of the time I studied with a renewed purpose. I read the fat paperback histories and lexicons of rock music, the chronicles of its stars. I listened to the albums and pondered in silence the concert video tapes.

And when the night was empty and still, I heard the voices of *Interview with the Vampire* singing to me, as if they sang from the grave. I read the book over and over. And then in a moment of contemptible anger, I shredded it to bits.

Finally, I came to my decision.

I met my young lawyer, Christine, in her darkened skyscraper office with only the downtown city to give us light. Lovely she looked against the glass wall behind her, the dim buildings beyond forming a harsh and primitive terrain in which a thousand torches burned.

"It is not enough any longer that my little rock band be successful," I told her. "We must create a fame that will carry my name and my voice to the remotest parts of the world."

Quietly, intelligently, as lawyers are wont to do, she advised me against risking my fortune. Yet as I continued with maniacal confidence, I could feel her seduction, the slow dissolution of her common sense.

"The best French directors for the rock video films," I said. "You must lure them from New York and Los Angeles. There is ample money for that. And here you can find the studios, surely, in which we will do our work. The young record producers who mix the sound after—again, you must hire the best. It does not matter what we spend on this venture. What is important is that it be orchestrated, that we

do our work in secret until the moment of revelation when our albums and our films are released with the book that I propose to write."

Finally her head was swimming with dreams of wealth and power. Her pen raced as she made her notes.

And what did I dream of as I spoke to her? Of an unprecedented rebellion, a great and horrific challenge to my kind all over the world.

"These rock videos," I said. "You must find directors who'll realize my visions. The films are to be sequential. They must tell the story that is in the book I want to create. And the songs, many of them I've already written. You must obtain superior instruments—synthesizers, the finest sound systems, electric guitars, violins. Other details we can attend to later. The designing of vampire costumes, the method of presentation to the rock television stations, the management of our first public appearance in San Francisco—all that in good time. What is important now is that you make the phone calls, get the information you need to begin."

I didn't go back to Satan's Night Out until the first agreements were struck and signatures had been obtained. Dates were fixed, studios rented, letters of agreement exchanged.

Then Christine came with me, and we had a great leviathan of a limousine for my darling young rock players, Larry and Alex and Tough Cookie. We had breathtaking sums of money, we had papers to be signed.

Under the drowsy oaks of the quiet Garden District street, I poured the champagne into the glistening crystal glasses for them:

"To The Vampire Lestat," we all sang in the moonlight. It was to be the new name of the band, of the book I'd write. Tough Cookie threw her succulent little arms around me. We kissed tenderly amid the laughter and the reek of wine. Ah, the smell of innocent blood!

And when they had gone off in the velvet-lined motor coach, I moved alone through the balmy night towards St. Charles Avenue, and thought about the danger facing them, my little mortal friends.

It didn't come from me, of course. But when the long period of

secrecy was ended, they would stand innocently and ignorantly in the international limelight with their sinister and reckless star. Well, I would surround them with bodyguards and hangers-on for every conceivable purpose. I would protect them from other immortals as best I could. And if the immortals were anything like they used to be in the old days, they'd never risk a vulgar struggle with a human force like that.

As I walked up to the busy avenue, I covered my eyes with mirrored sunglasses. I rode the rickety old St. Charles streetcar downtown.

And through the early evening crowd I wandered into the elegant double-decker bookstore called de Ville Books, and there stared at the small paperback of *Interview with the. Vampire* on the shelf.

I wondered how many of our kind had "noticed" the book. Never mind for the moment the mortals who thought it was fiction. What about other vampires? Because if there is one law that all vampires hold sacred it is that *you do not tell mortals about us*.

You never pass on our "secrets" to humans unless you mean to bequeath the Dark Gift of our powers to them. You never name other immortals. You never tell where their lairs might be.

My beloved Louis, the narrator of *Interview with the Vampire*, had done all this. He had gone far beyond my secret little disclosure to my rock singers. He had told hundreds of thousands of readers. He had all but drawn them a map and placed an X on the very spot in New Orleans where I slumbered, though what he really knew about that, and what his intentions were, was not clear.

Regardless, for what he'd done, others would surely hunt him down. And there are very simple ways to destroy vampires, especially now. If he was still in existence, he was an outcast and lived in a danger from our kind that no mortal could ever pose.

All the more reason for me to bring the book and the band called The Vampire Lestat to fame as quickly as possible. I had to find Louis. I had to talk to him. In fact, after reading his account of things, I ached for him, ached for his romantic illusions, and even his dishonesty. I ached even for his gentlemanly malice and his physical presence, the deceptively soft sound of his voice.

Of course I hated him for the lies he told about me. But the love was far greater than the hate. He had shared the dark and romantic years of the nineteenth century with me, he was my companion as no other immortal had ever been.

And I ached to write my story for him, not an answer to his malice in *Interview with the Vampire*, but the tale of all the things I'd seen and learned before I came to him, the story I could not tell him before.

Old rules didn't matter to me now, either.

I wanted to break every one of them. And I wanted my band and my book to draw out not only Louis but all the other demons that I had ever known and loved. I wanted to find my lost ones, awaken those who slept as I had slept.

Fledglings and ancient ones, beautiful and evil and mad and heartless—they'd all come after me when they saw those video clips and heard those records, when they saw the book in the windows of the bookstores, and they'd know exactly where to find me. I'd be Lestat, the rock superstar. Just come to San Francisco for my first live performance. I'll be there.

But there was another reason for the whole adventure—a reason even more dangerous and delicious and mad.

And I knew Louis would understand. It must have been behind his interview, his confessions. I wanted mortals *to know* about us. I wanted to proclaim it to the world the way I'd told it to Alex and Larry and Tough Cookie, and my sweet lawyer, Christine.

And it didn't matter that they didn't believe it. It didn't matter that they thought it was art. The fact was that, after two centuries of concealment, I was visible to mortals! I spoke my name aloud. I told my nature. I was there!

But again, I was going farther than Louis. His story, for all its peculiarities, had passed for fiction. In the mortal world, it was as safe as the tableaux of the old Theater of the Vampires in the Paris where the fiends had pretended to be actors pretending to be fiends on a remote and gas-lighted stage.

I'd step into the solar lights before the cameras, I'd reach out and touch with my icy fingers a thousand warm and grasping hands. I'd scare the hell out of them if it was possible, and charm them and lead them into the truth of it if I could.

And suppose—just suppose—that when the corpses began to turn up in ever greater numbers, that when those closest to me began to hearken to their inevitable suspicions—just suppose that the art ceased to be art and became real!

I mean what if they really believed it, really understood that this world still harbored the Old World demon thing, the vampire—oh, what a great and glorious war we might have then!

We would be known, and we would be hunted, and we would be fought in this glittering urban wilderness as no mythic monster has ever been fought by man before.

How could I not love it, the mere idea of it? How could it not be worth the greatest danger, the greatest and most ghastly defeat? Even at the moment of destruction, I would be alive as I have never been.

But to tell the truth, I didn't think it would ever come to that—I mean, mortals believing in us. Mortals have never made me afraid.

It was the other war that was going to happen, the one in which we'd all come together, or they would all come to fight me.

That was the real reason for The Vampire Lestat. That was the kind of game I was playing.

But that other lovely possibility of real revelation and disaster … Well, that added a hell of a lot of spice!

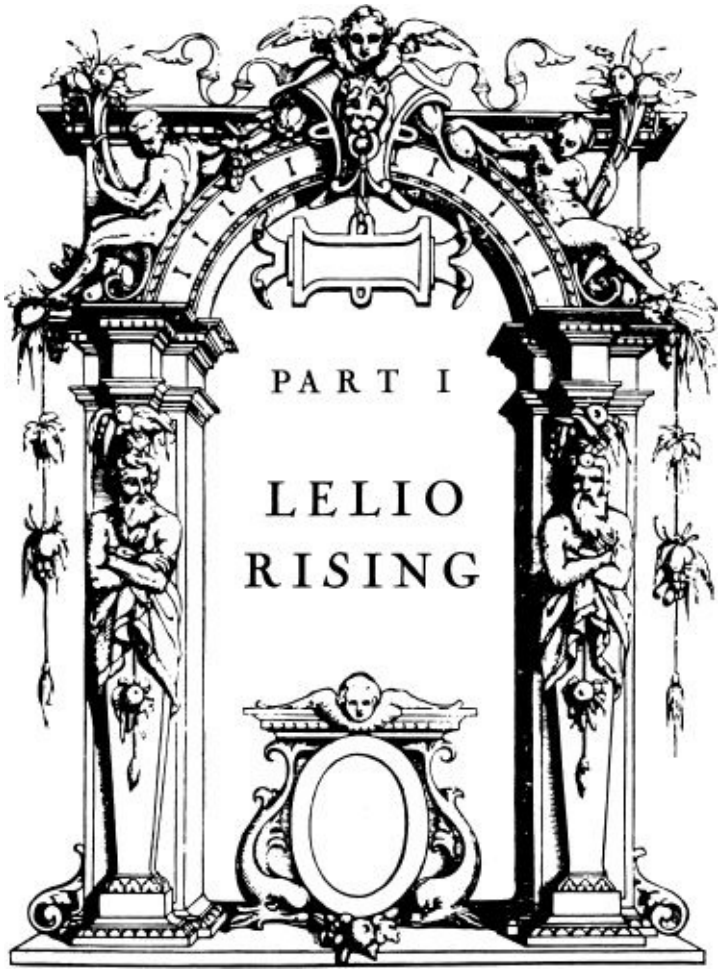
Out of the gloomy waste of Canal Street, I went back up the stairs to my rooms in the old-fashioned French Quarter hotel. Quiet it was, and suited to me, with the Vieux Carré spread out beneath its windows, the narrow little streets of Spanish town houses I'd known for so long.

On the giant television set I played the cassette of the beautiful Visconti film *Death in Venice*. An actor said at one point that evil was a necessity. It was food for genius.

I didn't believe that. But I wish it were true. Then I could just be Lestat, the monster, couldn't I? And I was always so good at being a monster! Ah, well …

I put a fresh disk into the portable computer word processor and I started to write the story of my life.

THE EARLY EDUCATION
AND
ADVENTURES
OF
THE VAMPIRE LESTAT


PART I
LELIO
RISING

1

In the winter of my twenty-first year, I went out alone on horseback to kill a pack of wolves.

This was on my father's land in the Auvergne in France, and these were the last decades before the French Revolution.

It was the worst winter that I could remember, and the wolves were stealing the sheep from our peasants and even running at night through the streets of the village.

These were bitter years for me. My father was the Marquis, and I was the seventh son and the youngest of the three who had lived to manhood. I had no claim to the title or the land, and no prospects. Even in a rich family, it might have been that way for a younger boy, but our wealth had been used up long ago. My eldest brother, Augustin, who was the rightful heir to all we possessed, had spent his wife's small dowry as soon as he married her.

My father's castle, his estate, and the village nearby were my entire universe. And I'd been born restless—the dreamer, the angry one, the complainer. I wouldn't sit by the fire and talk of old wars and the days of the Sun King. History had no meaning for me.

But in this dim and old-fashioned world, I had become the hunter. I brought in the pheasant, the venison, and the trout from the mountain streams—whatever was needed and could be got—to feed the family. It had become my life by this time—and one I shared with no one else—and it was a very good thing that I'd taken it up, because there were years when we might have actually starved to death.

Of course this was a noble occupation, hunting one's ancestral lands, and we alone had the right to do it. The richest of the bourgeois couldn't lift his gun in my forests. But then again he didn't have to lift his gun. He had money.

Two times in my life I'd tried to escape this life, only to be brought back with my wings broken. But I'll tell more on that later.

Right now I'm thinking about the snow all over those mountains and the wolves that were frightening the villagers and stealing my sheep.

And I'm thinking of the old saying in France in those days, that if you lived in the province of Auvergne you could get no farther from Paris.

Understand that since I was the lord and the only lord anymore who could sit a horse and fire a gun, it was natural that the villagers should come to me, complaining about the wolves and expecting me to hunt them. It was my duty.

I wasn't the least afraid of the wolves either. Never in my life had I seen or heard of a wolf attacking a man. And I would have poisoned them if I could, but meat was simply too scarce to lace with poison.

So early on a very cold morning in January, I armed myself to kill the wolves one by one. I had three flintlock guns and an excellent flintlock rifle, and these I took with me as well as my muskets and my father's sword. But just before leaving the castle, I added to this little arsenal one or two ancient weapons that I'd never bothered with before.

Our castle was full of old armor. My ancestors had fought in countless noble wars since the times of the Crusades with St. Louis. And hung on the walls above all this clattering junk were a good many lances, battleaxes, flails, and maces.

It was a very large mace—that is, a spiked club—that I took with me that morning, and also a good-sized flail: an iron ball attached to a chain that could be swung with immense force at an attacker.

Now remember this was the eighteenth century, the time when white-wigged Parisians tiptoed around in high-heeled satin slippers, pinched snuff, and dabbed at their noses with embroidered handkerchiefs.

And here I was going out to hunt in rawhide boots and buckskin coat, with these ancient weapons tied to the saddle, and my two biggest mastiffs beside me in their spiked collars.

That was my life. And it might as well have been lived in the Middle Ages. And I knew enough of the fancy-dressed travelers on the post road to feel it rather keenly. The nobles in the capital called us country lords "harecatchers." Of course we could sneer at them and call them lackeys to the king and queen. Our castle had stood for a thousand years, and not even the great Cardinal Richelieu in his war on our kind had managed to pull down our ancient towers. But as I said before, I didn't pay much attention to history.

I was unhappy and ferocious as I rode up the mountain.

I wanted a good battle with the wolves. There were five in the pack

according to the villagers, and I had my guns and two dogs with jaws so strong they could snap a wolf's spine in an instant.

Well, I rode for an hour up the slopes. Then I came into a small valley I knew well enough that no snowfall could disguise it. And as I started across the broad empty field towards the barren wood, I heard the first howling.

Within seconds there had come another howling and then another, and now the chorus was in such harmony that I couldn't tell the number of the pack, only that they had seen me and were signaling to each other to come together, which was just what I had hoped they would do.

I don't think I felt the slightest fear then. But I felt something, and it caused the hair to rise on the backs of my arms. The countryside for all its vastness seemed empty. I readied my guns. I ordered my dogs to stop their growling and follow me, and some vague thought came to me that I had better get out of the open field and into the woods and hurry.

My dogs gave their deep baying alarm. I glanced over my shoulder and saw the wolves hundreds of yards behind me and streaking straight towards me over the snow. Three giant gray wolves they were, coming on in a line.

I broke into a run for the forest.

It seemed I would make it easily before the three reached me, but wolves are extremely clever animals, and as I rode hard for the trees I saw the rest of the pack, some five full-grown animals, coming out ahead of me to my left. It was an ambush, and I could never make the forest in time. And the pack was eight wolves, not five as the villagers had told me.

Even then I didn't have sense enough to be afraid. I didn't ponder the obvious fact that these animals were starving or they'd never come near the village. Their natural reticence with men was completely gone.

I got ready for battle. I stuck the flail in my belt, and with the rifle I took aim. I brought down a big male yards away from me and had time to reload as my dogs and the pack attacked each other.

They couldn't get my dogs by the neck on account of the spiked collars. And in this first skirmish my dogs brought down one of the wolves in their powerful jaws immediately. I fired and brought down a second.

But the pack had surrounded the dogs. As I fired again and again,

reloading as quickly as I could and trying to aim clear of the dogs, I saw the smaller dog go down with its hind legs broken. Blood streamed over the snow; the second dog stood off the pack as it tried to devour the dying animal, but within two minutes, the pack had torn open the second dog's belly and killed it.

Now these were powerful beasts, as I said, these mastiffs. I'd bred them and trained them myself. And each weighed upwards of two hundred pounds. I always hunted with them, and though I speak of them as dogs now, they were known only by their names to me then, and when I saw them die, I knew for the first time what I had taken on and what might happen.

But all this had occurred in minutes.

Four wolves lay dead. Another was crippled fatally. But that left three, one of whom had stopped in the savage feasting upon the dogs to fix its slanted eyes on me.

I fired the rifle, missed, fired the musket, and my horse reared as the wolf shot towards me.

As if pulled on strings, the other wolves turned, leaving the fresh kill. And jerking the reins hard, I let my horse run as she wanted, straight for the cover of the forest.

I didn't look back even when I heard the growling and snapping. But then I felt the teeth graze my ankle. I drew the other musket, turned to the left, and fired. It seemed the wolf went up on his hind legs, but it was too quickly out of sight and my mare reared again. I almost fell. I felt her back legs give out under me.

We were almost to the forest and I was off her before she went down. I had one more loaded gun. Turning and steadying it with both hands, I took dead aim at the wolf who bore down on me and blasted away the top of his skull.

It was now two animals. The horse was giving off a deep rattling whinny that rose to a trumpeting shriek, the worst sound I have ever heard from any living thing. The two wolves had her.

I bolted over the snow, feeling the hardness of the rocky land under me, and made it to the trees. If I could reload I could shoot them down from there. But there was not a single tree with limbs low enough for me to catch hold of.

I leapt up trying to catch hold, my feet slipping on the icy bark, and

fell back down as the wolves closed in. There was no time to load the one gun I had left to me. It was the flail and the sword because the mace I had lost a long way back.

I think as I scrambled to my feet, I knew I was probably going to die. But it never even occurred to me to give up. I was maddened, wild. Almost snarling, I faced the animals and looked the closest of the two wolves straight in the eye.

I spread my legs to anchor myself. With the flail in my left hand, I drew the sword. The wolves stopped. The first, after staring back, bowed its head and trotted several paces to the side. The other waited as if for some invisible signal. The first looked at me again in that uncannily calm fashion and then plunged forward.

I started swinging the flail so that the spiked ball went round in a circle. I could hear my own growling breaths, and I know I was bending my knees as if I would spring forward, and I aimed the flail for the side of the animal's jaw, bashing it with all my strength and only grazing it.

The wolf darted off and the second ran round me in a circle, dancing towards me and then back again. They both lunged in close enough to make me swing the flail and slash with the sword, then they ran off again.

I don't know how long this went on, but I understood the strategy. They meant to wear me down and they had the strength to do it. It had become a game to them.

I was pivoting, thrusting, struggling back, and almost falling to my knees. Probably it was no more than half an hour that this went on. But there is no measuring time like that.

And with my legs giving out, I made one last desperate gamble. I stood stock-still, weapons at my sides. And they came in for the kill this time just as I hoped they would.

At the last second I swung the flail, felt the ball crack the bone, saw the head jerked upwards to the right, and with the broadsword I slashed the wolf's neck open.

The other wolf was at my side. I felt its teeth rip into my breeches. In one second it would have torn my leg out of the socket. But I slashed at the side of its face, gashing open its eye. The ball of the flail crashed down on it. The wolf let go. And springing back, I had enough room for the sword again and thrust it straight into the animal's chest to the hilt

before I drew it out again.

That was the end of it.

The pack was dead. I was alive.

And the only sound in the empty snow-covered valley was my own breathing and the rattling shriek of my dying mare who lay yards away from me.

I'm not sure I had my reason. I'm not sure the things that went through my mind were thoughts. I wanted to drop down in the snow, and yet I was walking away from the dead wolves towards the dying horse.

As I came close to her, she lifted her neck, straining to rise up on her front legs, and gave one of those shrill trumpeting pleas again. The sound bounced off the mountains. It seemed to reach heaven. And I stood staring at her, staring at her dark broken body against the whiteness of the snow, the dead hindquarters and the struggling forelegs, the nose lifted skyward, ears pressed back, and the huge innocent eyes rolling up into her head as the rattling cry came out of her. She was like an insect half mashed into a floor, but she was no insect. She was my struggling, suffering mare. She tried to lift herself again.

I took my rifle from the saddle. I loaded it. And as she lay tossing her head, trying vainly to lift herself once more with that shrill trumpeting, I shot her through the heart.

Now she looked all right. She lay still and dead and the blood ran out of her and the valley was quiet. I was shuddering. I heard an ugly choking noise come from myself, and I saw the vomit spewing out onto the snow before I realized it was mine. The smell of wolf was all over me, and the smell of blood. And I almost fell over when I tried to walk.

But not even stopping for a moment, I went among the dead wolves, and back to the one who had almost killed me, the last one, and slung him up to carry over my shoulders, and started the trek homeward.

It took me probably two hours.

Again, I don't know. But whatever I had learned or felt when I was fighting those wolves went on in my mind even as I walked. Every time I stumbled and fell, something in me hardened, became worse.

By the time I reached the castle gates, I think I was not Lestat. I was someone else altogether, staggering into the great hall, with that wolf

over my shoulders, the heat of the carcass very much diminished now and the sudden blaze of the fire an irritant in my eyes. I was beyond exhaustion.

And though I began to speak as I saw my brothers rising from the table and my mother patting my father, who was blind already then and wanted to know what was happening, I don't know what I said. I know my voice was very flat, and there was some sense in me of the simplicity of describing what had happened:

"And then … and then …" Sort of like that.

But my brother Augustin suddenly brought me to myself. He came towards me, with the light of the fire behind him, and quite distinctly broke the low monotone of my words with his own:

"You little bastard," he said coldly. "You didn't kill eight wolves!" His face had an ugly disgusted look to it.

But the remarkable thing was this: Almost as soon as he spoke these words, he realized for some reason that he had made a mistake.

Maybe it was the look on my face. Maybe it was my mother's murmured outrage or my other brother not speaking at all. It was probably my face. Whatever it was, it was almost instantaneous, and the most curious look of embarrassment came over him.

He started to babble something about how incredible, and I must have been almost killed, and would the servants heat some broth for me immediately, and all of that sort of thing, but it was no good. What had happened in that one single moment was irreparable, and the next thing I knew I was lying alone in my room. I didn't have the dogs in bed with me as always in winter because the dogs were dead, and though there was no fire lighted, I climbed, filthy and bloody, under the bed covers and went into deep sleep.

For days I stayed in my room.

I knew the villagers had gone up the mountain, found the wolves, and brought them back down to the castle, because Augustin came and told me these things, but I didn't answer.

Maybe a week passed. When I could stand having other dogs near me, I went down to my kennel and brought up two pups, already big animals, and they kept me company. At night I slept between them.

The servants came and went. But no one bothered me.

And then my mother came quietly and almost stealthily into the room.

2

It was evening. I was sitting on the bed, with one of the dogs stretched out beside me and the other stretched out under my knees. The fire was roaring.

And there was my mother coming at last, as I supposed I should have expected.

I knew her by her particular movement in the shadows, and whereas if anyone else had come near me I would have shouted "Go away," I said nothing at all to her.

I had a great and unshakable love of her. I don't think anyone else did. And one thing that endeared her to me always was that she never said anything ordinary.

"Shut the door," "Eat your soup," "Sit still," things like that never passed her lips. She read all the time; in fact, she was the only one in our family who had any education, and when she did speak it was really to speak. So I wasn't resentful of her now.

On the contrary she aroused my curiosity. What would she say, and would it conceivably make a difference to me? I had not wanted her to come, nor even thought of her, and I didn't turn away from the fire to look at her.

But there was a powerful understanding between us. When I had tried to escape this house and been brought back, it was she who had shown me the way out of the pain that followed. Miracles she'd worked for me, though no one around us had ever noticed.

Her first intervention had come when I was twelve, and the old parish priest, who had taught me some poetry by rote and to read an anthem or two in Latin, wanted to send me to school at the nearby monastery.

My father said no, that I could learn all I needed in my own house. But it was my mother who roused herself from her books to do loud and vociferous battle with him. I would go, she said, if I wanted to. And she sold one of her jewels to pay for my books and clothing. Her jewels had all come down to her from an Italian grandmother and each had its story, and this was a hard thing for her to do. But she did it

immediately.

My father was angry and reminded her that if this had happened before he went blind, his will would have prevailed surely. My brothers assured him that his youngest son wouldn't be gone long. I'd come running home as soon as I was made to do something I didn't want to do.

Well, I didn't come running home. I loved the monastery school.

I loved the chapel and the hymns, the library with its thousands of old books, the bells that divided the day, the ever repeated rituals. I loved the cleanliness of the place, the overwhelming fact that all things here were well kept and in good repair, that work never ceased throughout the great house and the gardens.

When I was corrected, which wasn't often, I knew an intense happiness because someone for the first time in my life was trying to make me into a good person, one who could learn things.

Within a month I declared my vocation. I wanted to enter the order. I wanted to spend my life in those immaculate cloisters, in the library writing on parchment and learning to read the ancient books. I wanted to be enclosed forever with people who believed I could be good if I wanted to be.

I was liked there. And that was a most unusual thing. I didn't make other people there unhappy or angry.

The Father Superior wrote immediately to ask my father's permission. And frankly I thought my father would be glad to be rid of me.

But three days later my brothers arrived to take me home with them. I cried and begged to stay, but there was nothing the Father Superior could do.

And as soon as we reached the castle, my brothers took away my books and locked me up. I didn't understand why they were so angry. There was the hint that I had behaved like a fool for some reason. I couldn't stop crying. I was walking round and round and smashing my fist into things and kicking the door.

Then my brother Augustin started coming in and talking to me. He'd circle the point at first, but what came clear finally was that no member of a great French family was going to be a poor teaching brother. How could I have misunderstood everything so completely? I was sent there to learn to read and write. Why did I always have to go to extremes?

Why did I behave habitually like a wild creature?

As for becoming a priest with real prospects within the Church, well, I was the youngest son of this family, now, wasn't I? I ought to think of my duties to my nieces and nephews.

Translate all that to mean this: We have no money to launch a real ecclesiastical career for you, to make you a bishop or cardinal as befits our rank, so you have to live out your life here as an illiterate and a beggar. Come in the great hall and play chess with your father.

After I got to understand it, I wept right at the supper table, and mumbled words no one understood about this house of ours being "chaos," and was sent back to my room for it.

Then my mother came to me.

She said: "You don't know what chaos is. Why do you use words like that?"

"I know," I said. I started to describe to her the dirt and the decay that was everywhere here and to tell how the monastery had been, clean and orderly, a place where if you set your mind to it, you could accomplish something.

She didn't argue. And young as I was, I knew that she was warming to the unusual quality of what I was saying to her.

The next morning, she took me on a journey.

We rode for half a day before we reached the impressive château of a neighboring lord, and there she and the gentleman took me out to the kennel, where she told me to choose my favorites from a new litter of mastiff puppies.

I had never seen anything as tender and endearing as these little mastiff pups. And the big dogs were like drowsy lions as they watched us. Simply magnificent.

I was too excited almost to make the choice. I brought back the male and female that the lord advised me to pick, carrying them all the way home on my lap in a basket.

And within a month, my mother also bought for me my first flintlock musket and my first good horse for riding.

She never did say why she'd done all this. But I understood in my own way what she had given me. I raised those dogs, trained them, and

founded a great kennel upon them.

I became a true hunter with those dogs, and by the age of sixteen I lived in the field.

But at home, I was more than ever a nuisance. Nobody really wanted to hear me talk of restoring the vineyards or replanting the neglected fields, or of making the tenants stop stealing from us.

I could affect nothing. The silent ebb and flow of life without change seemed deadly to me.

I went to church on all the feast days just to break the monotony of life. And when the village fairs came round, I was always there, greedy for the little spectacles I saw at no other time, anything really to break the routine.

It might be the same old jugglers, mimes, and acrobats of years past, but it didn't matter. It was something more than the change of the seasons and the idle talk of past glories.

But that year, the year I was sixteen, a troupe of Italian players came through, with a painted wagon in back of which they set up the most elaborate stage I'd ever seen. They put on the old Italian comedy with Pantaloon and Pulcinella and the young lovers, Lelio and Isabella, and the old doctor and all the old tricks.

I was in raptures watching it. I'd never seen anything like it, the cleverness of it, the quickness, the vitality. I loved it even when the words went so fast I couldn't follow them.

When the troupe had finished and collected what they could from the crowd, I hung about with them at the inn and stood them all to wine I couldn't really afford, just so that I could talk to them.

I felt inexpressible love for these men and women. They explained to me how each actor had his role for life, and how they did not use memorized words, but improvised everything on the stage. You knew your name, your character, and you understood him and made him speak and act as you thought he should. That was the genius of it.

It was called the commedia dell'arte.

I was enchanted. I fell in love with the young girl who played Isabella. I went into the wagon with the players and examined all the costumes and the painted scenery, and when we were drinking again at the tavern, they let me act out Lelio, the young lover to Isabella, and they clapped their hands and said I had the gift. I could make it up the way they did.

I thought this was all flattery at first, but in some very real way, it didn't matter whether or not it was flattery.

The next morning when their wagon pulled out of the village, I was in it. I was hidden in the back with a few coins I'd managed to save and all my clothes tied in a blanket. I was going to be an actor.

Now, Lelio in the old Italian comedy is supposed to be quite handsome; he's the lover, as I have explained, and he doesn't wear a mask. If he has manners, dignity, aristocratic bearing, so much the better because that's part of the role.

Well, the troupe thought that in all these things I was blessed. They trained me immediately for the next performance they would give. And the day before we put on the show, I went about the town—a much larger and more interesting place than our village, to be certain—advertising the play with the others.

I was in heaven. But neither the journey nor the preparations nor the camaraderie with my fellow players came near to the ecstasy I knew when I finally stood on that little wooden stage.

I went wildly into the pursuit of Isabella. I found a tongue for verses and wit I'd never had in life. I could hear my voice bouncing off the stone walls around me. I could hear the laughter rolling back at me from the crowd. They almost had to drag me off the stage to stop me, but everyone knew it had been a great success.

That night, the actress who played my inamorata gave me her own very special and intimate accolades. I went to sleep in her arms, and the last thing I remember her saying was that when we got to Paris we'd play the St.-Germain Fair, and then we'd leave the troupe and we'd stay in Paris working on the boulevard du Temple until we got into the Comédie-Française itself and performed for Marie Antoinette and King Louis.

When I woke up the next morning, she was gone and so were all the players, and my brothers were there.

I never knew if my friends had been bribed to give me over, or just frightened off. More likely the latter. Whatever the case, I was taken back home again.

Of course my family was perfectly horrified at what I'd done. Wanting to be a monk when you are twelve is excusable. But the theater had the taint of the devil. Even the great Molière had not been given a Christian

burial. And I'd run off with a troupe of ragged vagabond Italians, painted my face white, and acted with them in a town square for money.

I was beaten severely, and when I cursed everyone, I was beaten again.

The worst punishment, however, was seeing the look on my mother's face. I hadn't even told her I was going. And I had wounded her, a thing that had never really happened before.

But she never said anything about it.

When she came to me, she listened to me cry. I saw tears in her eyes. And she laid her hand on my shoulder, which for her was something a little remarkable.

I didn't tell her what it had been like, those few days. But I think she knew. Something magical had been lost utterly. And once again, she defied my father. She put an end to the condemnations, the beatings, the restrictions.

She had me sit beside her at the table. She deferred to me, actually talked to me in conversation that was perfectly unnatural to her, until she had subdued and dissolved the rancor of the family.

Finally, as she had in the past, she produced another of her jewels and she bought the fine hunting rifle that I had taken with me when I killed the wolves.

This was a superior and expensive weapon, and in spite of my misery, I was fairly eager to try it. And she added to that another gift, a sleek chestnut mare with strength and speed I'd never known in an animal before. But these things were small compared to the general consolation my mother had given me.

Yet the bitterness inside me did not subside.

I never forgot what it had been like when I was Lelio. I became a little crueler for what had happened, and I never, never went again to the village fair. I conceived of the notion that I should never get away from here, and oddly enough as my despair deepened, so my usefulness increased.

I alone put the fear of God into the servants or tenants by the time I was eighteen. I alone provided the food for us. And for some strange reason this gave me satisfaction. I don't know why, but I liked to sit at the table and reflect that everyone there was eating what I had provided.

So these moments had bound me to my mother. These moments had given us a love for each other unnoticed and probably unequaled in the lives of those around us.

And now she had come to me at this odd time, when for reasons I didn't understand myself, I could not endure the company of any other person.

With my eyes on the fire, I barely saw her climb up and sink down into the straw mattress beside me.

Silence. Just the crackling of the fire, and the deep respiration of the sleeping dogs beside me.

Then I glanced at her, and I was vaguely startled.

She'd been ill all winter with a cough, and now she looked truly sickly, and her beauty, which was always very important to me, seemed vulnerable for the first time.

Her face was angular and her cheekbones perfect, very high and broadly spaced but delicate. Her jawline was strong yet exquisitely feminine. And she had very clear cobalt blue eyes fringed with thick ashen lashes.

If there was any flaw in her it was perhaps that all her features were too small, too kittenish, and made her look like a girl. Her eyes became even smaller when she was angry, and though her mouth was sweet, it often appeared hard. It did not turn down, it wasn't twisted in any way, it was like a little pink rose on her face. But her cheeks were very smooth and her face narrow, and when she looked very serious, her mouth, without changing at all, looked mean for some reason.

Now she was slightly sunken. But she still looked beautiful to me. She still was beautiful. I liked looking at her. Her hair was full and blond, and that I had inherited from her.

In fact I resemble her at least superficially. But my features are larger, cruder, and my mouth is more mobile and can be very mean at times. And you can see my sense of humor in my expression, my capacity for mischievousness and near hysterical laughing, which I've always had no matter how unhappy I was. She did not laugh often. She could look profoundly cold. Yet she had always a little girl sweetness.

Well, I looked at her as she sat on my bed—I even stared at her, I

suppose—and immediately she started to talk to me.

"I know how it is," she said to me. "You hate them. Because of what you've endured and what they don't know. They haven't the imagination to know what happened to you out there on the mountain."

I felt a cold delight in these words. I gave her the silent acknowledgment that she understood it perfectly.

"It was the same the first time I bore a child," she said. "I was in agony for twelve hours, and I felt trapped in the pain, knowing the only release was the birth or my own death. When it was over, I had your brother Augustin in my arms, but I didn't want anyone else near me. And it wasn't because I blamed them. It was only that I'd suffered like that, hour after hour, that I'd gone into the circle of hell and come back out. They hadn't been in the circle of hell. And I felt quiet all over. In this common occurrence, this vulgar act of giving birth, I understood the meaning of utter loneliness."

"Yes, that's it," I answered. I was a little shaken.

She didn't respond. I would have been surprised if she had. Having said what she'd come to say, she wasn't going to converse, actually. But she did lay her hand on my forehead—very unusual for her to do that—and when she observed that I was wearing the same bloody hunting clothes after all this time, I noticed it too, and realized the sickness of it.

She was silent for a while.

And as I sat there, looking past her at the fire, I wanted to tell her a lot of things, how much I loved her particularly.

But I was cautious. She had a way of cutting me off when I spoke to her, and mingled with my love was a powerful resentment of her.

All my life I'd watched her read her Italian books and scribble letters to people in Naples, where she had grown up, yet she had no patience even to teach me or my brothers the alphabet. And nothing had changed after I came back from the monastery. I was twenty and I couldn't read or write more than a few prayers and my name. I hated the sight of her books; I hated her absorption in them.

And in some vague way, I hated the fact that only extreme pain in me could ever wring from her the slightest warmth or interest.

Yet she'd been my savior. And there was no one but her. And I was as tired of being alone, perhaps, as a young person can be.

She was here now, out of the confines of her library, and she was

attentive to me.

Finally I was convinced that she wouldn't get up and go away, and I found myself speaking to her.

"Mother," I said in a low voice, "there is more to it. Before it happened, there were times when I felt terrible things." There was no change in her expression. "I mean I dream sometimes that I might kill all of them," I said. "I kill my brothers and my father in the dream. I go from room to room slaughtering them as I did the wolves. I feel in myself the desire to murder …"

"So do I, my son," she said. "So do I." And her face was lighted with the strangest smile as she looked at me.

I bent forward and looked at her more closely. I lowered my voice.

"I see myself screaming when it happens," I went on. "I see my face twisted into grimaces and I hear bellowing coming out of me. My mouth is a perfect O, and shrieks, cries, come out of me."

She nodded with that same understanding look, as if a light were flaring behind her eyes.

"And on the mountain, Mother, when I was fighting the wolves … it was a little like that."

"Only a little?" she asked.

I nodded.

"I felt like someone different from myself when I killed the wolves. And now I don't know who is here with you—your son Lestat, or that other man, the killer."

She was quiet for a long time.

"No," she said finally. "It was you who killed the wolves. You're the hunter, the warrior. You're stronger than anyone else here, that's your tragedy."

I shook my head. That was true, but it didn't matter. It couldn't account for unhappiness such as this. But what was the use of saying it?

She looked away for a moment, then back to me.

"But you're many things," she said. "Not only one thing. You're the killer and the man. And don't give in to the killer in you just because you hate them. You don't have to take upon yourself the burden of murder or madness to be free of this place. Surely there must be other ways."

Those last two sentences struck me hard. She had gone to the core.

And the implications dazzled me.

Always I'd felt that I couldn't be a good human being and fight them. To be good meant to be defeated by them. Unless of course I found a more interesting idea of goodness.

We sat still for a few moments. And there seemed an uncommon intimacy even for us. She was looking at the fire, scratching at her thick hair which was wound into a circle on the back of her head.

"You know what I imagine," she said, looking towards me again. "Not so much the murdering of them as an abandon which disregards them completely. I imagine drinking wine until I'm so drunk I strip off my clothes and bathe in the mountain streams naked."

I almost laughed. But it was a sublime amusement. I looked up at her, uncertain for a moment that I was hearing her correctly. But she had said these words and she wasn't finished.

"And then I imagine going into the village," she said, "and up into the inn and taking into my bed any men that come there—crude men, big men, old men, boys. Just lying there and taking them one after another, and feeling some magnificent triumph in it, some absolute release without a thought of what happens to your father or your brothers, whether they are alive or dead. In that moment I am purely myself. I belong to no one."

I was too shocked and amazed to say anything. But again this was terribly terribly amusing. When I thought of my father and brothers and the pompous shopkeepers of the village and how they would respond to such a thing, I found it damn near hilarious.

If I didn't laugh aloud it was probably because the image of my mother naked made me think I shouldn't. But I couldn't keep altogether quiet. I laughed a little, and she nodded, half smiling. She raised her eyebrows, as if to say We understand each other.

Finally I roared laughing. I pounded my knee with my fist and hit my head on the wood of the bed behind me. And she almost laughed herself. Maybe in her own quiet way she was laughing.

Curious moment. Some almost brutal sense of her as a human being quite removed from all that surrounded her. We did understand each other, and all my resentment of her didn't matter too much.

She pulled the pin out of her hair and let it tumble down to her shoulders.

We sat quiet for perhaps an hour after that. No more laughter or talk, just the fire blazing, and her near to me.

She had turned so she could see the fire. Her profile, the delicacy of her nose and lips, were beautiful to look at. Then she looked back at me and in the same steady voice without undue emotion she said:

"I'll never leave here. I am dying now."

I was stunned. The little shock before was nothing to this.

"I'll live through this spring," she continued, "and possibly the summer as well. But I won't survive another winter. I know. The pain in my lungs is too bad."

I made some little anguished sound. I think I leaned forward and said, "Mother!"

"Don't say any more," she answered.

I think she hated to be called mother, but I hadn't been able to help it.

"I just wanted to speak it to another soul," she said. "To hear it out loud. I'm perfectly horrified by it. I'm afraid of it."

I wanted to take her hands, but I knew she'd never allow it. She disliked to be touched. She never put her arms around anyone. And so it was in our glances that we held each other. My eyes filled with tears looking at her.

She patted my hand.

"Don't think on it much," she said. "I don't. Just only now and then. But you must be ready to live on without me when the time comes. That may be harder for you than you realize."

I tried to say something; I couldn't make the words come.

She left me just as she'd come in, silently.

And though she'd never said anything about my clothes or my beard or how dreadful I looked, she sent the servants in with clean clothes for me, and the razor and warm water, and silently I let myself be taken care of by them.

3

I began to feel a little stronger. I stopped thinking about what happened with the wolves and I thought about her. I thought about the words "perfectly horrified," and I didn't know what to make of them except they sounded exactly true. I'd feel that way if I were dying slowly. It would have been better on the mountain with the wolves.

But there was more to it than that. She had always been silently unhappy. She hated the inertia and the hopelessness of our life here as much as I did. And now, after eight children, three living, five dead, she was dying. This was the end for her.

I determined to get up if it would make her feel better, but when I tried I couldn't. The thought of her dying was unbearable. I paced the floor of my room a lot, ate the food brought to me, but still I wouldn't go to her.

But by the end of the month, visitors came to draw me out.

My mother came in and said I must receive the merchants from the village who wanted to honor me for killing the wolves.

"Oh, hell with it," I answered.

"No, you must come down," she said. "They have gifts for you. Now do your duty." I hated all this.

When I reached the hall, I found the rich shopkeepers there, all men I knew well, and all dressed for the occasion.

But there was one startling young man among them I didn't recognize immediately.

He was my age perhaps, and quite tall, and when our eyes met I remembered who he was. Nicolas de Lenfent, eldest son of the draper, who had been sent to school in Paris.

He was a vision now.

Dressed in a splendid brocade coat of rose and gold, he wore slippers with gold heels, and layers of Italian lace at his collar. Only his hair was what it used to be, dark and very curly, and boyish looking for some reason though it was tied back with a fine bit of silk ribbon.

Parisian fashion, all this—the sort that passed as fast as it could

through the local post house.

And here I was to meet him in threadbare wool and scuffed leather boots and yellowed lace that had been seventeen times mended.

We bowed to each other, as he was apparently the spokesman for the town, and then he unwrapped from its modest covering of black serge a great red velvet cloak lined in fur. Gorgeous thing. His eyes were positively shining when he looked at me. You would have thought he was looking at a sovereign.

“Monsieur, we beg you to accept this,” he said very sincerely. “The finest fur of the wolves has been used to line it and we thought it would stand you well in the winter, this fur-lined cloak, when you ride out to hunt.”

“And these too, Monsieur,” said his father, producing a finely sewn pair of fur-lined boots in black suede. “For the hunt, Monsieur,” he said.

I was a little overcome. They meant these gestures in the kindest way, these men who had the sort of wealth I only dreamed of, and they paid me respect as the aristocrat.

I took the cloak and the boots. I thanked them as effusively as I’d ever thanked anybody for anything.

And behind me, I heard my brother Augustin say:

“Now he will really be impossible!”

I felt my face color. Outrageous that he should say this in the presence of these men, but when I glanced to Nicolas de Lenfent I saw the most affectionate expression on his face.

“I too am impossible, Monsieur,” he whispered as I gave him the parting kiss. “Someday, will you let me come to talk to you and tell me how you killed them all? Only the impossible can do the impossible.”

None of the merchants ever spoke to me like that. We were boys again for a moment. And I laughed out loud. His father was disconcerted. My brothers stopped whispering, but Nicolas de Lenfent kept smiling with a Parisian’s composure.

As soon as they had left I took the red velvet cloak and the suede boots up into my mother’s room.

She was reading as always while very lazily she brushed her hair. In the weak sunlight from the window, I saw gray in her hair for the first

time. I told her what Nicolas de Lenfent had said.

"Why is he impossible?" I asked her. "He said this with feeling, as if it meant something."

She laughed.

"It means something all right," she said. "He's in disgrace." She stopped looking at her book for a moment and looked at me. "You know how he's been educated all his life to be a little imitation aristocrat. Well, during his first term studying law in Paris, he fell madly in love with the violin, of all things. Seems he heard an Italian virtuoso, one of those geniuses from Padua who is so great that men say he has sold his soul to the devil. Well, Nicolas dropped everything at once to take lessons from Wolfgang Mozart. He sold his books. He did nothing but play and play until he failed his examinations. He wants to be a musician. Can you imagine?"

"And his father is beside himself."

"Exactly. He even smashed the instrument, and you know what a piece of expensive merchandise means to the good draper." I smiled.

"And so Nicolas has no violin now?"

"He has a violin. He promptly ran away to Clermont and sold his watch to buy another. He's impossible all right, and the worst part of it is that he plays rather well."

"You've heard him?"

She knew good music. She grew up with it in Naples. All I'd ever heard were the church choir, the players at the fairs.

"I heard him Sunday when I went to mass," she said. "He was playing in the upstairs bedroom over the shop. Everyone could hear him, and his father was threatening to break his hands."

I gave a little gasp at the cruelty of it. I was powerfully fascinated! I think I loved him already, doing what he wanted like that.

"Of course he'll never be anything," she went on.

"Why not?"

"He's too old. You can't take up the violin when you're twenty. But what do I know? He plays magically in his own way. And maybe he can sell his soul to the devil."

I laughed a little uneasily. It sounded tragic.

"But why don't you go down to the town and make a friend of him?" she asked.

“Why the hell should I do that?” I asked.

“Lestat, really. Your brothers will hate it. And the old merchant will be beside himself with joy. His son and the Marquis's son.”

“Those aren’t good enough reasons.”

“He’s been to Paris,” she said. She watched me for a long moment. Then she went back to her book, brushing her hair now and then lazily.

I watched her reading, hating it. I wanted to ask her how she was, if her cough was very bad that day. But I couldn’t broach the subject to her.

“Go on down and talk to him, Lestat,” she said, without another glance at me.

4

It took me a week to make up my mind that I would seek out Nicolas de Lenfent.

I put on the red velvet fur-lined cloak and the fur-lined suede boots, and I went down the winding main street of the village towards the inn.

The shop owned by Nicolas's father was right across from the inn, but I didn't see or hear Nicolas.

I had no more than enough for one glass of wine and I wasn't sure just how to proceed when the innkeeper came out, bowed to me, and set a bottle of his best vintage before me.

Of course these people had always treated me like the son of the lord. But I could see that things had changed on account of the wolves, and strangely enough, this made me feel even more alone than I usually felt.

But as soon as I poured the first glass, Nicolas appeared, a great blaze of color in the open doorway.

He was not so finely dressed as before, thank heaven, yet everything about him exuded wealth. Silk and velvet and brand-new leather.

But he was flushed as if he'd been running and his hair was windblown and messy, and his eyes full of excitement. He bowed to me, waited for me to invite him to sit down, and then he asked me:

"What was it like, Monsieur, killing the wolves?" And folding his arms on the table, he stared at me.

"Why don't you tell me what's it like in Paris, Monsieur?" I said, and I realized right away that it sounded mocking and rude. "I'm sorry," I said immediately. "I would really like to know. Did you go to the university? Did you really study with Mozart? What do people in Paris do? What do they talk about? What do they think?"

He laughed softly at the barrage of questions. I had to laugh myself. I signaled for another glass and pushed the bottle towards him.

"Tell me," I said, "did you go to the theaters in Paris? Did you see the Comédie-Française?"

"Many times," he answered a little dismissively. "But listen, the diligence will be coming in any minute. There'll be too much noise.

Allow me the honor of providing your supper in a private room upstairs. I should so like to do it—"

And before I could make a gentlemanly protest, he was ordering everything. We were shown up to a crude but comfortable little chamber.

I was almost never in small wooden rooms, and I loved it immediately. The table was laid for the meal that would come later on, the fire was truly warming the place, unlike the roaring blazes in our castle, and the thick glass of the window was clean enough to see the blue winter sky over the snow-covered mountains.

"Now, I shall tell you everything you want to know about Paris," he said agreeably, waiting for me to sit first. "Yes, I did go to the university." He made a little sneer as if it had all been contemptible. "And I did study with Mozart, who would have told me I was hopeless if he hadn't needed pupils. Now where do you want me to begin? The stench of the city, or the infernal noise of it? The hungry crowds that surround you everywhere? The thieves in every alley ready to cut your throat?"

I waved all that away. His smile was very different from his tone, his manner open and appealing.

"A really big Paris theater …" I said. "Describe it to me … what is it like?"

* * *

I think we stayed in that room for four solid hours and all we did was drink and talk.

He drew plans of the theaters on the tabletop with a wet finger, described the plays he had seen, the famous actors, the little houses of the boulevards. Soon he was describing all of Paris and he'd forgotten to be cynical, my curiosity firing him as he talked of the Ile de la Cité, and the Latin Quarter, the Sorbonne, the Louvre.

We went on to more abstract things, how the newspapers reported events, how his student cronies gathered in cafés to argue. He told me men were restless and out of love with the monarchy. That they wanted a change in government and wouldn't sit still for very long. He told me

about the philosophers, Diderot, Voltaire, Rousseau.

I couldn't understand everything he said. But in rapid, sometimes sarcastic speech he gave me a marvelously complete picture of what was going on.

Of course, it didn't surprise me to hear that educated people didn't believe in God, that they were infinitely more interested in science, that the aristocracy was much in ill favor, and so was the Church. These were times of reason, not superstition, and the more he talked the more I understood.

Soon he was outlining the Encyclopédie, the great compilation of knowledge supervised by Diderot. And then it was the salons he'd gone to, the drinking bouts, his evenings with actresses. He described the public balls at the Palais Royal, where Marie Antoinette appeared right along with the common people.

"I'll tell you," he said finally, "it all sounds a hell of a lot better in this room than it really is."

"I don't believe you," I said gently. I didn't want him to stop talking. I wanted it to go on and on.

"It's a secular age, Monsieur," he said, filling our glasses from the new bottle of wine. "Very dangerous."

"Why dangerous?" I whispered. "An end to superstition? What could be better than that?"

"Spoken like a true eighteenth-century man, Monsieur," he said with a faint melancholy to his smile. "But no one values anything anymore. Fashion is everything. Even atheism is a fashion."

I had always had a secular mind, but not for any philosophical reason. No one in my family much believed in God or ever had. Of course they said they did, and we went to mass. But this was duty. Real religion had long ago died out in our family, as it had perhaps in the families of thousands of aristocrats. Even at the monastery I had not believed in God. I had believed in the monks around me.

I tried to explain this in simple language that would not give offense to Nicolas, because for his family it was different.

Even his miserable money-grubbing father (whom I secretly admired) was fervently religious.

"But can men live without these beliefs?" Nicolas asked almost sadly. "Can children face the world without them?"

I was beginning to understand why he was so sarcastic and cynical. He had only recently lost that old faith. He was bitter about it.

But no matter how deadening was this sarcasm of his, a great energy poured out of him, an irrepressible passion. And this drew me to him. I think I loved him. Another two glasses of wine and I might say something absolutely ridiculous like that.

"I've always lived without beliefs," I said.

"Yes. I know," he answered. "Do you remember the story of the witches? The time you cried at the witches' place?"

"Cried over the witches?" I looked at him blankly for a moment. But it stirred something painful, something humiliating. Too many of my memories had that quality. And now I had to remember crying over witches. "I don't remember," I said.

"We were little boys. And the priest was teaching us our prayers. And the priest took us out to see the place where they burnt the witches in the old days, the old stakes and the blackened ground."

"Ah, that place." I shuddered. "That horrid, horrid place."

"You began to scream and to cry. They sent someone for the Marquise herself because your nurse couldn't quiet you."

"I was a dreadful child," I said, trying to shrug it off. Of course I did remember now—screaming, being carried home, nightmares about the fires. Someone bathing my forehead and saying, "Lestat, wake up."

But I hadn't thought of that little scene in years. It was the place itself I thought about whenever I drew near it—the thicket of blackened stakes, the images of men and women and children burnt alive.

Nicolas was studying me. "When your mother came to get you, she said it was all ignorance and cruelty. She was so angry with the priest for telling us the old tales."

I nodded.

The final horror to hear they had all died for nothing, those long-forgotten people of our own village, that they had been innocent. "Victims of superstition,' " she had said. "There were no real witches." No wonder I had screamed and screamed.

"But my mother," Nicolas said, "told a different story, that the witches had been in league with the devil, that they'd blighted the crops, and in the guise of wolves killed the sheep and the children—"

"And won't the world be better if no one is ever again burnt in the

name of God?" I asked. "If there is no more faith in God to make men do that to each other? What is the danger in a secular world where horrors like that don't happen?"

He leaned forward with a mischievous little frown.

"The wolves didn't wound you on the mountain, did they?" he asked playfully. "You haven't become a werewolf, have you, Monsieur, unbeknownst to the rest of us?" He stroked the furred edge of the velvet cloak I still had over my shoulders. "Remember what the good father said, that they had burnt a good number of werewolves in those times. They were a regular menace."

I laughed.

"If I turn into a wolf," I answered, "I can tell you this much. I won't hang around here to kill the children. I'll get away from this miserable little hellhole of a village where they still terrify little boys with tales of burning witches. I'll get on the road to Paris and never stop till I see her ramparts."

"And you'll find Paris is a miserable hellhole," he said. "Where they break the bones of thieves on the wheel for the vulgar crowds in the place de Grève."

"No," I said. "I'll see a splendid city where great ideas are born in the minds of the populace, ideas that go forth to illuminate the darkened corners of this world."

"Ah, you are a dreamer!" he said, but he was delighted. He was beyond handsome when he smiled.

"And I'll know people like you," I went on, "people who have thoughts in their heads and quick tongues with which to voice them, and we'll sit in cafés and we'll drink together and we'll clash with each other violently in words, and we'll talk for the rest of our lives in divine excitement."

He reached out and put his arm around my neck and kissed me. We almost upset the table we were so blissfully drunk.

"My lord, the wolfkiller," he whispered.

When the third bottle of wine came, I began to talk of my life, as I'd never done before—of what it was like each day to ride out into the mountains, to go so far I couldn't see the towers of my father's house anymore, to ride above the tilled land to the place where the forest seemed almost haunted.

The words began to pour out of me as they had out of him, and soon we were talking about a thousand things we had felt in our hearts, varieties of secret loneliness, and the words seemed to be essential words the way they did on those rare occasions with my mother. And as we came to describe our longings and dissatisfactions, we were saying things to each other with great exuberance, like “Yes, yes,” and “Exactly,” and “I know completely what you mean,” and “And yes, of course, you felt that you could not bear it,” etc.

Another bottle, and a new fire. And I begged Nicolas to play his violin for me. He rushed home immediately to get it.

It was now late afternoon. The sun was slanting through the window and the fire was very hot. We were very drunk. We had never ordered supper. And I think I was happier than I had ever been in my life. I lay on the lumpy straw mattress of the little bed with my hands under my head watching him as he took out the instrument.

He put the violin to his shoulder and began to pluck at it and twist the pegs.

Then he raised the bow and drew it down hard over the strings to bring out the first note.

I sat up and pushed myself back against the paneled wall and stared at him because I couldn’t believe the sound I was hearing.

He ripped into the song. He tore the notes out of the violin and each note was translucent and throbbing. His eyes were closed, his mouth a little distorted, his lower lip sliding to the side, and what struck my heart almost as much as the song itself was the way that he seemed with his whole body to lean into the music, to press his soul like an ear to the instrument.

I had never known music like it, the rawness of it, the intensity, the rapid glittering torrents of notes that came out of the strings as he sawed away. It was Mozart that he was playing, and it had all the gaiety, the velocity, and the sheer loveliness of everything Mozart wrote.

When he’d finished, I was staring at him and I realized I was gripping the sides of my head.

“Monsieur, what’s the matter!” he said, almost helplessly, and I stood up and threw my arms around him and kissed him on both cheeks and kissed the violin.

“Stop calling me Monsieur,” I said. “Call me by my name.” I lay back

down on the bed and buried my face on my arm and started to cry, and once I'd started I couldn't stop it.

He sat next to me, hugging me and asking me why I was crying, and though I couldn't tell him, I could see that he was overwhelmed that his music had produced this effect. There was no sarcasm or bitterness in him now.

I think he carried me home that night.

And the next morning I was standing in the crooked stone street in front of his father's shop, tossing pebbles up at his window.

When he stuck his head out, I said:

"Do you want to come down and go on with our conversation?"

5

From then on, when I was not hunting, my life was with Nicolas and "our conversation." Spring was approaching, the mountains were dappled with green, the apple orchard starting back to life. And Nicolas and I were always together.

We took long walks up the rocky slopes, had our bread and wine in the sun on the grass, roamed south through the ruins of an old monastery. We hung about in my rooms or sometimes climbed to the battlements. And we went back to our room at the inn when we were too drunk and too loud to be tolerated by others.

And as the weeks passed we revealed more and more of ourselves to each other. Nicolas told me about his childhood at school, the little disappointments of his early years, those whom he had known and loved.

And I started to tell him the painful things—and finally the old disgrace of running off with the Italian players.

It came to that one night when we were in the inn again, and we were drunk as usual. In fact we were at that moment of drunkenness that the two of us had come to call the Golden Moment, when everything made sense. We always tried to stretch out that moment, and then inevitably one of us would confess, "I can't follow anymore, I think the Golden Moment's passed."

On this night, looking out the window at the moon over the mountains, I said that at the Golden Moment it was not so terrible that we weren't in Paris, that we weren't at the Opéra or the Comédie, waiting for the curtain to rise.

"You and the theaters of Paris," he said to me. "No matter what we're talking about you bring it back to the theaters and the actors—"

His brown eyes were very big and trusting. And even drunk as he was, he looked spruce in his red velvet Paris frock coat.

"Actors and actresses make magic," I said. "They make things happen on the stage; they invent; they create."

"Wait until you see the sweat streaming down their painted faces in

the glare of the footlights," he answered.

"Ah, there you go again," I said. "And you, the one who gave up everything to play the violin."

He got terribly serious suddenly, looking off as if he were weary of his own struggles.

"That I did," he confessed.

Even now the whole village knew it was war between him and his father. Nicki wouldn't go back to school in Paris.

"You make life when you play," I said. "You create something from nothing. You make something good happen. And that is blessed to me."

"I make music and it makes me happy," he said. "What is blessed or good about that?"

I waved it away as I always did his cynicism now.

"I've lived all these years among those who create nothing and change nothing," I said. "Actors and musicians—they're saints to me."

"Saints?" he asked. "Blessedness? Goodness? Lestat, your language baffles me."

I smiled and shook my head.

"You don't understand. I'm speaking of the character of human beings, not what they believe in. I'm speaking of those who won't accept a useless life, just because they were born to it. I mean those who would be some-thing better. They work, they sacrifice, they do things …"

He was moved by this, and I was a little surprised that I'd said it. Yet I felt I had hurt him somehow.

"There is blessedness in that," I said. "There's sanctity. And God or no God, there is goodness in it. I know this the way I know the mountains are out there, that the stars shine."

He looked sad for me. And he looked hurt still. But for the moment I didn't think of him.

I was thinking of the conversation I had had with my mother and my perception that I couldn't be good and defy my family. But if I believed what I was saying …

As if he could read my mind, he asked:

"But do you really believe those things?"

"Maybe yes. Maybe no," I said. I couldn't bear to see him look so sad.

And I think more on account of that than anything else I told him the whole story of how I'd run off with the players. I told him what I'd never

told anyone, not even my mother, about those few days and the happiness they'd given me.

"Now, how could it not have been good," I asked, "to give and receive such happiness? We brought to life that town when we put on our play. Magic, I tell you. It could heal the sick, it could."

He shook his head. And I knew there were things he wanted to say, which out of respect for me he was leaving to silence.

"You don't understand, do you?" I asked.

"Lestat, sin always feels good," he said gravely. "Don't you see that? Why do you think the Church has always condemned the players? It was from Dionysus, the wine god, that the theater came. You can read that in Aristotle. And Dionysus was a god that drove men to debauchery. It felt good to you to be on that stage because it was abandoned and lewd—the age-old service of the god of the grape—and you were having a high time of it defying your father—"

"No, Nicki. No, a thousand times no."

"Lestat, we're partners in sin," he said, smiling finally. "We've always been. We've both behaved badly, both been utterly disreputable. It's what binds us together."

Now it was my turn to look sad and hurt. And the Golden Moment was gone beyond reprieve—unless something new was to happen.

"Come on," I said suddenly. "Get your violin, and we'll go off somewhere in the woods where the music won't wake up anybody. We'll see if there isn't some goodness in it."

"You're a madman!" he said. But he grabbed the unopened bottle by the neck and headed for the door immediately.

I was right behind him.

When he came out of his house with the violin, he said:

"Let's go to the witches' place! Look, it's a half moon. Plenty of light. We'll do the devil's dance and play for the spirits of the witches."

I laughed. I had to be drunk to go along with that. "We'll reconsecrate the spot," I insisted, "with good and pure music."

It had been years and years since I'd walked in the witches' place.

The moon was bright enough, as he'd said, to see the charred stakes in their grim circle and the ground in which nothing ever grew even one hundred years after the burnings. The new saplings of the forest kept their distance. And so the wind struck the clearing, and above, clinging

to the rocky slope, the village hovered in darkness.

A faint chill passed over me, but it was the mere shadow of the anguish I'd felt as a child when I'd heard those awful words “roasted alive," when I had imagined the suffering.

Nicki's white lace shone in the pale light, and he struck up a gypsy song at once and danced round in a circle as he played it.

I sat on a broad burned stump of tree and drank from the bottle. And the heartbreaking feeling came as it always did with the music. What sin was there, I thought, except to live out my life in this awful place? And pretty soon I was silently and unobtrusively crying.

Though it seemed the music had never stopped, Nicki was comforting me. We sat side by side and he told me that the world was full of inequities and that we were prisoners, he and I, of this awful corner of France, and someday we would break out of it. And I thought of my mother in the castle high up the mountain, and the sadness numbed me until I couldn't bear it, and Nicki started playing again, telling me to dance and to forget everything.

Yes, that's what it could make you do, I wanted to say. Is that sin? How can it be evil? I went after him as he danced in a circle. The notes seemed to be flying up and out of the violin as if they were made of gold. I could almost see them flashing. I danced round and round him now and he sawed away into a deeper and more frenzied music. I spread the wings of the fur-lined cape and threw back my head to look at the moon. The music rose all around me like smoke, and the witches' place was no more. There was only the sky above arching down to the mountains.

We were closer for all this in the days that followed.

But a few nights later, something altogether extraordinary happened.

It was late. We were at the inn again and Nicolas, who was walking about the room and gesturing dramatically, declared what had been on our minds all along.

That we should run away to Paris, even if we were penniless, that it was better than remaining here. Even if we lived as beggars in Paris! It had to be better.

Of course we had both been building up to this.

“Well, beggars in the streets it might be, Nicki,” I said. “Because I’ll be damned in hell before I’ll play the penniless country cousin begging at the big houses.”

“Do you think I want you to do that?” he demanded. “I mean run away, Lestat,” he said. “Spite them, every one of them.”

Did I want to go on like this? So our fathers would curse us. After all, our life was *meaningless* here.

Of course, we both knew this running off together would be a thousand times more serious than what I had done before. We weren’t boys anymore, we were men. Our fathers *would* curse us, and this was something neither of us could laugh off.

Also we were old enough to know what poverty meant.

“What am I going to do in Paris when we get hungry?” I asked. “Shoot rats for supper?”

“I’ll play my violin for coins on the boulevard du Temple if I have to, and you can go to the theaters!” Now he was really challenging me. He was saying, Is it all words with you, Lestat? “With your looks, you know, you’d be on the stage in the boulevard du Temple in no time.”

I loved this change in “our conversation”! I loved seeing him believe we could do it. All his cynicism had vanished, even though he did throw in the word “spite” every ten words or so. It seemed possible suddenly to do all this.

And this notion of the meaninglessness of our lives here began to enflame us.

I took up the theme again that music and acting were good because they drove back chaos. Chaos was the meaninglessness of day-to-day life, and if we were to die now, our lives would have been nothing but meaninglessness. In fact, it came to me that my mother dying soon was meaningless and I confided in Nicolas what she had said. “I’m perfectly *horrified*. I’m afraid.”

Well, if there had been a Golden Moment in the room it was gone now. And something different started to happen.

I should call it the Dark Moment, but it was still high-pitched and full of eerie light. We were talking rapidly, cursing this meaninglessness, and when Nicolas at last sat down and put his head in his hands, I took some glamorous and hearty swigs of wine and went to pacing and gesturing as he had done before.

I realized aloud in the midst of saying it that even when we die we probably don't find out the answer as to why we were ever alive. Even the avowed atheist probably thinks that in death he'll get some answer. I mean God will be there, or there won't be anything at all.

"But that's just it," I said, "we don't make any discovery at that moment! We merely stop! We pass into nonexistence without ever knowing a thing." I saw the universe, a vision of the sun, the planets, the stars, black night going on forever. And I began to laugh.

"Do you realize that! We'll never know why the hell any of it happened, not even when it's over!" I shouted at Nicolas, who was sitting back on the bed, nodding and drinking his wine out of a flagon. "We're going to die and not even know. We'll never know, and all this meaninglessness will just go on and on and on. And we won't any longer be witnesses to it. We won't have even that little bit of power to give meaning to it in our minds. We'll just be gone, dead, dead, dead, without ever knowing!"

But I had stopped laughing. I stood still and I understood perfectly what I was saying!

There was no judgment day, no final explanation, no luminous moment in which all terrible wrongs would be made right, all horrors redeemed.

The witches burnt at the stake would never be avenged. No one was ever going to tell us anything!

No, I didn't understand it at this moment. I *saw* it! And I began to make the single sound: "Oh!" I said it again "Oh!" and then I said it louder and louder and louder, and I dropped the wine bottle on the floor. I put my hands to my head and I kept saying it, and I could see my mouth opened in that perfect circle that I had described to my mother and I kept saying, "Oh, oh, oh!"

I said it like a great hiccuping that I couldn't stop. And Nicolas took hold of me and started shaking me, saying:

"Lestat, stop!"

I couldn't stop. I ran to the window, unlatched it and swung out the heavy little glass, and stared at the stars. I couldn't stand seeing them. I couldn't stand seeing the pure emptiness, the silence, the absolute absence of any answer, and I started roaring as Nicolas pulled me back from the windowsill and pulled shut the glass.

“You’ll be all right,” he said over and over. Someone was beating on the door. It was the innkeeper, demanding why we had to carry on like this.

“You’ll feel all right in the morning,” Nicolas kept insisting. “You just have to sleep.”

We had awakened everyone. I couldn’t be quiet. I kept making the same sound over again. And I ran out of the inn with Nicolas behind me, and down the street of the village and up towards the castle with Nicolas trying to catch up with me, and through the gates and up into my room.

“Sleep, that’s what you need,” he kept saying to me desperately. I was lying against the wall with my hands over my ears, and that sound kept coming. “Oh, oh, oh.”

“In the morning,” he said, “it will be better.”

Well, it was not better in the morning.

And it was no better by nightfall, and in fact it got worse with the coming of the darkness.

I walked and talked and gestured like a contented human being, but I was flayed. I was shuddering. My teeth were chattering. I couldn’t stop it. I was staring at everything around me in horror. The darkness terrified me. The sight of the old suits of armor in the hall terrified me. I stared at the mace and the flail I’d taken out after the wolves. I stared at the faces of my brothers. I stared at everything, seeing behind every configuration of color and light and shadow the same thing: death. Only it wasn’t just death as I’d thought of it before, it was death the way I saw it now. Real death, total death, inevitable, irreversible, and resolving nothing!

And in this unbearable state of agitation I commenced to do something I’d never done before. I turned to those around me and questioned them relentlessly.

“But do you believe in God?” I asked my brother Augustin. “How can you live if you don’t!”

“But do you really believe in anything?” I demanded of my blind father. “If you knew you were dying at this very minute, would you expect to see God or darkness! Tell me.”

“You’re mad, you’ve always been mad!” he shouted. “Get out of this

house! You'll drive us all crazy."

He stood up, which was hard for him, being crippled and blind, and he tried to throw his goblet at me and naturally he missed.

I couldn't look at my mother. I couldn't be near her. I didn't want to make her suffer with my questions. I went down to the inn. I couldn't bear to think of the witches' place. I would not have walked to that end of the village for anything! I put my hands over my ears and shut my eyes. "Go away!" I said at the thought of those who'd died like that without ever, ever understanding anything.

The second day it was no better.

And it wasn't any better by the end of the week either.

I ate, drank, slept, but every waking moment was pure panic and pure pain. I went to the village priest and demanded did he really believe the Body of Christ was present on the altar at the Consecration. And after hearing his stammered answers, and seeing the fear in his eyes, I went away more desperate than before.

"But how do you live, how do you go on breathing and moving and doing things when you know there is no explanation?" I was raving finally. And then Nicolas said maybe the music would make me feel better. He would play the violin.

I was afraid of the intensity of it. But we went to the orchard and in the sunshine Nicolas played every song he knew. I sat there with my arms folded and my knees drawn up, my teeth chattering though we were right in the hot sun, and the sun was glaring off the little polished violin, and I watched Nicolas swaying into the music as he stood before me, the raw pure sounds swelling magically to fill the orchard and the valley, though it wasn't magic, and Nicolas put his arms around me finally and we just sat there silent, and then he said very softly, "Lestat, believe me, this will pass."

"Play again," I said. "The music is innocent."

Nicolas smiled and nodded. Pamper the madman.

And I knew it wasn't going to pass, and nothing for the moment could make me forget, but what I felt was inexpressible gratitude for the music, that in this horror there could be something as beautiful as that.

You couldn't understand anything; and you couldn't change anything. But you could make music like that. And I felt the same gratitude when I saw the village children dancing, when I saw their arms raised and their

knees bent, and their bodies turning to the rhythm of the songs they sang. I started to cry watching them.

I wandered into the church and on my knees I leaned against the wall and I looked at the ancient statues and I felt the same gratitude looking at the finely carved fingers and the noses and the ears and the expressions on their faces and the deep folds in their garments, and I couldn't stop myself from crying.

At least we had these beautiful things, I said. Such goodness.

But nothing natural seemed beautiful to me now! The very sight of a great tree standing alone in a field could make me tremble and cry out. Fill the orchard with music.

And let me tell you a little secret. It *never did pass, really*.

6

What caused it? Was it the late night drinking and talking, or did it have to do with my mother and her saying she was going to die? Did the wolves have something to do with it? Was it a spell cast upon the imagination by the witches' place?

I don't know. It had come like something visited upon me from outside. One minute it was an idea, and the next it was *real*. I think you can invite that sort of thing, but you can't make it come.

Of course it was to slacken. But the sky was never quite the same shade of blue again. I mean the world looked different forever after, and even in moments of exquisite happiness there was the darkness lurking, the sense of our frailty and our hopelessness.

Maybe it was a presentiment. But I don't think so. It was more important than that, and frankly I don't believe in presentiments.

But to return to the story, during all this misery I kept away from my mother. I wasn't going to say these monstrous things about death and chaos to her. But she heard from everyone else that I'd lost my reason.

And finally, on the first Sunday night in Lent, she came to me.

I was alone in my room and the whole household had gone down to the village at twilight for the big bonfire that was the custom every year on this evening.

I had always hated the celebration. It had a ghastly aspect to it—the roaring flames, the dancing and singing, the peasants going afterwards through the orchards with their torches to the tune of their strange chanting.

We had had a priest for a little while who called it pagan. But they got rid of him fast enough. The farmers of our mountains kept to their old rituals. It was to make the trees bear and the crops grow, all this. And on this occasion, more than any other, I felt I saw the kind of men and women who could burn witches.

In my present frame of mind, it struck terror. I sat by my own little

fire, trying to resist the urge to go to the window and look down on the big fire that drew me as strongly as it scared me.

My mother came in, closed the door behind her, and told me that she must talk to me. Her whole manner was tenderness.

"Is it on account of my dying, what's come over you?" she asked. "Tell me if it is. And put your hands in mine."

She even kissed me. She was frail in her faded dressing gown, and her hair was undone. I couldn't stand to see the streaks of gray in it. She looked starved.

But I told her the truth. I didn't know, and then I explained some of what had happened in the inn. I tried not to convey the horror of it, the strange logic of it. I tried not to make it so absolute.

She listened and then she said, "You're such a fighter, my son. You never *accept*. Not even when it's the fate of all mankind, will you accept it."

"I can't!" I said miserably.

"I love you for it," she said. "It's all too like you that you should see this in a tiny bedroom in the inn late at night when you're drinking wine. And it's entirely like you to rage against it the way you rage against everything else."

I started to cry again though I knew she wasn't condemning me. And then she took out a handkerchief and opened it to reveal several gold coins.

"You'll get over this," she said. "For the moment, death is spoiling life for you, that's all. But life is more important than death. You'll realize it soon enough. Now listen to what I have to say. I've had the doctor here and the old woman in the village who knows more about healing than he knows. Both agree with me I won't live too long."

"Stop, Mother," I said, aware of how selfish I was being, but unable to hold back. "And this time there'll be no gifts. Put the money away."

"Sit down," she said. She pointed to the bench near the hearth. Reluctantly I did as I was told. She sat beside me.

"I know," she said, "that you and Nicolas are talking of running away."

"I won't go, Mother …"

"What, until I'm dead?"

I didn't answer her. I can't convey to you my frame of mind. I was still raw, trembling, and we had to talk about the fact that this living,

breathing woman was going to stop living and breathing and start to putrefy and rot away, that her soul would spin into an abyss, that everything she had suffered in life, including the end of it, would come to nothing at all. Her little face was like something painted on a veil.

And from the distant village came the thinnest sound of the singing villagers.

"I want you to go to Paris, Lestat," she said. "I want you to take this money, which is all I have left from my family. I want to know you're in Paris, Lestat, when my time comes. I want to die knowing you are in Paris."

I was startled. I remembered her stricken expression years ago when they'd brought me back from the Italian troupe. I looked at her for a long moment. She sounded almost angry in her persuasiveness.

"I'm terrified of dying," she said. Her voice went almost dry. "And I swear I will go mad if I don't know you're in Paris and you're free when it finally comes."

I questioned her with my eyes. I was asking her with my eyes, "Do you really mean this?"

"I have kept you here as surely as your father has," she said. "Not on account of pride, but on account of selfishness. And now I'm going to atone for it. I'll see you go. And I don't care what you do when you reach Paris, whether you sing while Nicolas plays the violin, or turn somersaults on the stage at the St.-Germain Fair. But go, and do what you will do as best you can."

I tried to take her in my arms. She stiffened at first but then I felt her weaken and she melted against me, and she gave herself over so completely to me in that moment that I think I understood why she had always been so restrained. She cried, which I'd never heard her do. And I loved this moment for all its pain. I was ashamed of loving it, but I wouldn't let her go. I held her tightly, and maybe kissed her for all the times she'd never let me do it. We seemed for the moment like two parts of the same thing.

And then she grew calm. She seemed to settle into herself, and slowly but very firmly she released me and pushed me away.

She talked for a long time. She said things I didn't understand then, about how when she would see me riding out to hunt, she felt some wondrous pleasure in it, and she felt that same pleasure when I angered

everyone and thundered my questions at my father and brothers as to why we had to live the way we lived. She spoke in an almost eerie way of my being a secret part of her anatomy, of my being the organ for her which women do not really have.

"You are the man in me," she said. "And so I've kept you here, afraid of living without you, and maybe now in sending you away, I am only doing what I have done before."

She shocked me a little. I never thought a woman could feel or articulate anything quite like this.

"Nicolas's father knows about your plans," she said. "The innkeeper overheard you. It's important you leave right away. Take the diligence at dawn, and write to me as soon as you reach Paris. There are letter writers at the cemetery of les Innocents near the St.-Germain Market. Find one who can write Italian for you. And then no one will be able to read the letter but me."

When she left the room, I didn't quite believe what had happened. For a long moment I stood staring before me. I stared at my bed with its mattress of straw, at the two coats I owned and the red cloak, and my one pair of leather shoes by the hearth. I stared out the narrow slit of a window at the black hulk of the mountains I'd known all my life. The darkness, the gloom, slid back from me for a precious moment.

And then I was rushing down the stairs and down the mountain to the village to find Nicolas and to tell him we were going to Paris! We were going to do it. Nothing could stop us this time.

He was with his family watching the bonfire. And as soon as he saw me, he threw his arm around my neck, and I hooked my arm around his waist and I dragged him away from the crowds and the blaze, and towards the end of the meadow.

The air smelled fresh and green as it does only in spring. Even the villagers' singing didn't sound so horrible. I started dancing around in a circle.

"Get your violin!" I said. "Play a song about going to Paris, we're on our way. We're going in the morning!"

"And how are we going to feed ourselves in Paris?" he sang out as he made with his empty hands to play an invisible violin. "Are you going to shoot rats for our supper?"

"Don't ask what we'll do when we get there!" I said. "The important

thing is just to get there."

7

Not even a fortnight passed before I stood in the midst of the noonday crowds in the vast public cemetery of les Innocents, with its old vaults and stinking open graves—the most fantastical marketplace I had ever beheld—and, amid the stench and the noise, bent over an Italian letter writer dictating my first letter to my mother.

Yes, we had arrived safely after traveling day and night, and we had rooms in the Ile de la Cité, and we were inexpressibly happy, and Paris was warm and beautiful and magnificent beyond all imagining.

I wished I could have taken the pen myself and written to her.

I wished I could have told her what it was like, seeing these towering mansions, ancient winding streets aswarm with beggars, peddlers, noblemen, houses of four and five stories banking the crowded boulevards.

I wished I could have described the carriages to her, the rumbling confections of gilt and glass bullying their way over the Pont Neuf and the Pont Notre Dame, streaming past the Louvre, the Palais Royal.

I wished I could describe the people, the gentlemen with their clocked stockings and silver walking sticks, tripping through the mud in pastel slippers, the ladies with their pearl-encrusted wigs and swaying panniers of silk and muslin, my first certain glimpse of Queen Marie Antoinette herself walking boldly through the gardens of the Tuileries.

Of course she'd seen it all years and years before I was born. She'd lived in Naples and London and Rome with her father. But I wanted to tell her what she had given to me, how it was to hear the choir in Notre Dame, to push into the jam-packed cafés with Nicolas, talk with his old student cronies over English coffee, what it was like to get dressed up in Nicolas's fine clothes—he made me do it—and stand below the footlights at the Comédie-Française gazing up in adoration at the actors on the stage.

But all I wrote in this letter was perhaps the very best of it, the address of the garret rooms we called our home in the Ile de la Cité, and the news:

“I have been hired in a real theater to study as an actor with a fine prospect of performing very soon.”

What I didn’t tell her was that we had to walk up six flights of stairs to our rooms, that men and women brawled and screamed in the alleyways beneath our windows, that we had run out of money already, thanks to my dragging us to every opera, ballet, and drama in town. And that the establishment where I worked was a shabby little boulevard theater, one step up from a platform at the fair, and my jobs were to help the players dress, sell tickets, sweep up, and throw out the troublemakers.

But I was in paradise again. And so was Nicolas though no decent orchestra in the city would hire him, and he was now playing solos with the little bunch of musicians in the theater where I worked, and when we were really pinched he did play right on the boulevard, with me beside him, holding out the hat. We were shameless!

We ran up the steps each night with our bottle of cheap wine and a loaf of fine sweet Parisian bread, which was ambrosia after what we’d eaten in the Auvergne. And in the light of our one tallow candle, the garret was the most glorious place I’d ever inhabited.

As I mentioned before, I’d seldom been in a little wooden room except in the inn. Well, this room had plaster walls and a plaster ceiling! It was really Paris! It had polished wood flooring, and even a tiny little fireplace with a new chimney which actually made a draft.

So what if we had to sleep on lumpy pallets, and the neighbors woke us up fighting. We were waking up in Paris, and could roam arm in arm for hours through streets and alleyways, peering into shops full of jewelry and plate, tapestries and statues, wealth such as I’d never seen. Even the reeking meat markets delighted me. The crash and clatter of the city, the tireless busyness of its thousands upon thousands of laborers, clerks, craftsmen, the comings and goings of an endless multitude.

By day I almost forgot the vision of the inn, and the darkness. Unless, of course, I glimpsed some uncollected corpse in a filthy alleyway, of which there were many, or I happened upon a public execution in the place de Grève.

And I was *always* happening upon a public execution in the place de Grève.

I’d wander out of the square shuddering, almost moaning. I could

become obsessed with it if not distracted. But Nicolas was adamant.

"Lestat, no talk of the eternal, the immutable, the unknowable!" He threatened to hit me or shake me if I should start.

And when twilight came on—the time I hated more than ever—whether I had seen an execution or not, whether the day had been glorious or vexing, the trembling would start in me. And only one thing saved me from it: the warmth and excitement of the brightly lighted theater, and I made sure that before dusk I was safely inside.

Now, in the Paris of those times, the theaters of the boulevards weren't even legitimate houses at all. Only the Comédie-Française and the Théâtre des Italiens were government-sanctioned theaters, and to them all serious drama belonged. This included tragedy as well as comedy, the plays of Racine, Corneille, the brilliant Voltaire.

But the old Italian commedia that I loved—Pantaloon, Harlequin, Scaramouche, and the rest—lived on as they always had, with tightrope walkers, acrobats, jugglers, and puppeteers, in the platform spectacles at the St.-Germain and the St.-Laurent fairs.

And the boulevard theaters had grown out of these fairs. By my time, the last decades of the eighteenth century, they were permanent establishments along the boulevard du Temple, and though they played to the poor who couldn't afford the grand houses, they also collected a very well-to-do crowd. Plenty of the aristocracy and the rich bourgeoisie crowded into the loges to see the boulevard performances, because they were lively and full of good talent, and not so stiff as the plays of the great Racine or the great Voltaire.

We did the Italian comedy just as I'd learned it before, full of improvisation so that every night it was new and different yet always the same. And we also did singing and all kinds of nonsense, not just because the people loved it, but because we had to: we couldn't be accused of breaking the monopoly of the state theaters on straight plays.

The house itself was a rickety wooden rattrap, seating no more than three hundred, but its little stage and props were elegant, it had a luxurious blue velvet stage curtain, and its private boxes had screens. And its actors and actresses were seasoned and truly talented, or so it seemed to me.

Even if I hadn't had this newly acquired dread of the dark, this "malady of mortality," as Nicolas persisted in calling it, it couldn't have

been more exciting to go through that stage door.

For five to six hours every evening, I lived and breathed in a little universe of shouting and laughing and quarreling men and women, struggling for this one and against that one, all of us comrades in the wings even if we weren't friends. Maybe it was like being in a little boat on the ocean, all of us pulling together, unable to escape each other. It was divine.

Nicolas was slightly less enthusiastic, but then that was to be expected. And he got even more ironical when his rich student friends came around to talk to him. They thought he was a lunatic to live as he did. And for me, a nobleman shoveling actresses into their costumes and emptying slop buckets, they had no words at all.

Of course all that these young bourgeois really wanted was to be aristocrats. They bought titles, married into aristocratic families whenever they could. And it's one of the little jokes of history that they got mixed up in the Revolution, and helped to abolish the class which in fact they really wanted to join.

I didn't care if we ever saw Nicolas's friends again. The actors didn't know about my family, and in favor of the very simple Lestat de Valois, which meant nothing actually, I'd dropped my real name, de Lioncourt.

I was learning everything I could about the stage. I memorized, I mimicked. I asked endless questions. And only stopped my education long enough each night for that moment when Nicolas played his solo on the violin. He'd rise from his seat in the tiny orchestra, the spotlight would pick him out from the others, and he would rip into a little sonata, sweet enough and just short enough to bring down the house.

And all the while I dreamed of my own moment, when the old actors, whom I studied and pestered and imitated and waited upon like a lackey, would finally say: "All right, Lestat, tonight we need you as Lelio. Now you ought to know what to do."

It came in late August at last.

Paris was at its warmest, and the nights were almost balmy and the house was full of a restless audience fanning itself with handkerchiefs and handbills. The thick white paint was melting on my face as I put it on.

I wore a pasteboard sword with Nicolas's best velvet coat, and I was trembling before I stepped on the stage thinking, This is like waiting to

be executed or something.

But as soon as I stepped out there, I turned and looked directly into the jam-packed hall and the strangest thing happened. The fear evaporated.

I beamed at the audience and very slowly I bowed. I stared at the lovely Flaminia as if I were seeing her for the first time. I had to win her. The romp began.

The stage belonged to me as it had years and years ago in that far-off country town. And as we pranced madly together across the boards—quarreling, embracing, clowning—laughter rocked the house.

I could feel the attention as if it were an embrace. Each gesture, each line brought a roar from the audience—it was too easy almost—and we could have worked it for another half hour if the other actors, eager to get into the next trick as they called it, hadn't forced us finally towards the wings.

The crowd was standing up to applaud us. And it wasn't that country audience under the open sky. These were *Parisians* shouting for Lelio and Flaminia to come back out.

In the shadows of the wings, I reeled. I almost collapsed. I could not see anything for the moment but the vision of the audience gazing up at me over the footlights. I wanted to go right back on stage. I grabbed Flaminia and kissed her and realized that she was kissing me back passionately.

Then Renaud, the old manager, pulled her away.

"All right, Lestat," he said as if he were cross about something. "All right, you've done tolerably well, I'm going to let you go on regularly from now on."

But before I could start jumping up and down for joy, half the troupe materialized around us. And Luchina, one of the actresses, immediately spoke up.

"Oh no, you'll not *let* him go on regularly!" she said. "He's the handsomest actor on the boulevard du Temple and you'll hire him outright for it, and pay him outright for it, and he doesn't touch another broom or mop." I was terrified. My career had just started and it was about to be over, but to my amazement Renaud agreed to all her terms.

Of course I was very flattered to be called handsome, and I understood as I had years ago that Lelio, the lover, is supposed to have considerable

style. An aristocrat with any breeding whatsoever was perfect for the part.

But if I was going to make the Paris audiences really notice me, if I was going to have them talking about me at the Comédie-Française, I had to be more than some yellow-haired angel fallen out of a marquis's family onto the stage. I had to be a great actor, and that is exactly what I determined to be.

That night Nicolas and I celebrated with a colossal drunk. We had all the troupe up to our rooms for it, and I climbed out on the slippery rooftops and opened my arms to Paris and Nicolas played his violin in the window until we'd awakened the whole neighborhood.

The music was rapturous, yet people were snarling and screaming up the alleyways, and banging on pots and pans. We paid no attention. We were dancing and singing as we had in the witches' place. I almost fell off the window ledge.

The next day, bottle in hand, I dictated the whole story to the Italian letter writer in the stinking sunshine in les Innocents and saw that the letter went off to my mother at once. I wanted to embrace everybody I saw in the streets. I was Lelio. I was an actor.

By September I had my name on the handbills. And I sent those to my mother, too.

And we weren't doing the old commedia. We were performing a farce by a famous writer who, on account of a general playwrights' strike, couldn't get it performed at the Comédie-Française.

Of course we couldn't say his name, but everyone knew it was his work, and half the court was packing Renaud's House of Thesbians every night.

I wasn't the lead, but I was the young lover, a sort of Lelio again really, which was almost better than the lead, and I stole every scene in which I appeared. Nicolas had taught me the part, bawling me out constantly for not learning to read. And by the fourth performance, the playwright had written extra lines for me.

Nicki was having his own moment at the intermezzo, when his latest rendering of a frothy little Mozart sonata was keeping the house in its seats. Even his student friends were back. We were getting invitations to

private balls. I went tearing off to les Innocents every few days to write to my mother, and finally I had a clipping from an English paper, *The Spectator*, to send her, which praised our little play and in particular the blond-haired rogue who steals the hearts of the ladies in the third and fourth acts. Of course I couldn't read this clipping. But the gentleman who'd brought it to me said it was complimentary, and Nicolas swore it was too.

When the first chill nights of fall came on, I wore the fur-lined red cloak on the stage. You could have seen it in the back row of the gallery even if you were almost blind. I had more skill now with the white makeup, shading it here and there to heighten the contours of my face, and though my eyes were ringed in black and my lips reddened a little, I looked both startling and human at the same time. I got love notes from the women in the crowd.

Nicolas was studying music in the mornings with an Italian maestro. Yet we had money enough for good food, wood, and coal. My mother's letters came twice a week and said her health had taken a turn for the better. She wasn't coughing as badly as last winter. She wasn't in pain. But our fathers had disowned us and would not acknowledge any mention of our names.

We were too happy to worry about that. But the dark dread, the "malady of mortality," was with me a lot when the cold weather came on.

The cold seemed worse in Paris. It wasn't clean as it had been in the mountains. The poor hovered in doorways, shivering and hungry, the crooked unpaved streets were thick with filthy slush. I saw barefoot children suffering before my very eyes, and more neglected corpses lying about than ever before. I was never so glad of the fur-lined cape as I was then. I wrapped it around Nicolas and held him close to me when we went out together, and we walked in a tight embrace through the snow and the rain.

Cold or no cold, I can't exaggerate the happiness of these days. Life was exactly what I thought it could be. And I knew I wouldn't be long in Renaud's theater. Everybody was saying so. I had visions of the big stages, of touring London and Italy and even America with a great

troupe of actors. Yet there was no reason to hurry. My cup was full.

8

But in the month of October when Paris was already freezing, I commenced to see, quite regularly, a strange face in the audience that invariably distracted me. Sometimes it almost made me forget what I was doing, this face. And then it would be gone as if I'd imagined it. I must have seen it off and on for a fortnight before I finally mentioned it to Nicki.

I felt foolish and found it hard to put into words:

"There is someone out there watching me," I said.

"Everyone's watching you," Nicki said. "That's what you want."

He was feeling a little sad that evening, and his answer was slightly sharp.

Earlier when he was making the fire, he had said he would never amount to much with the violin. In spite of his ear and his skill, there was too much he didn't know. And I would be a great actor, he was sure. I had said this was nonsense, but it was a shadow falling over my soul. I remembered my mother telling me that it was too late for him.

He wasn't envious, he said. He was just unhappy a little, that's all.

I decided to drop the matter of the mysterious face. I tried to think of some way to encourage him. I reminded him that his playing produced profound emotions in people, that even the actors backstage stopped to listen when he played. He had an undeniable talent.

"But I want to be a great violinist," he said. "And I'm afraid it will never be. As long as we were at home, I could pretend that it was going to be."

"You can't give up on it!" I said.

"Lestat, let me be frank with you," he said. "Things are easy for you. What you set your sights on you get for yourself. I know what you're thinking, about all the years you were miserable at home. But even then, what you really set your mind to, you accomplished. And we left for Paris the very day that you decided to do it."

"You don't regret coming to Paris, do you?" I asked.

"Of course not. I simply mean that you think things are possible which

aren't possible! At least not for the rest of us. Like killing the wolves …"

A coldness passed over me when he said this. And for some reason I thought of that mysterious face again in the audience, the one watching. Something to do with the wolves. Something to do with the sentiments Nicki was expressing. Didn't make sense. I tried to shrug it off.

"If you'd set out to play the violin, you'd probably be playing for the Court by now," he said.

"Nicki, this kind of talk is poison," I said under my breath. "You can't do anything but try to get what you want. You knew the odds were against you when you started. There isn't anything else … except …"

"I know." He smiled. "Except the meaninglessness. Death."

"Yes," I said. "All you can do is make your life have meaning, make it good—"

"Oh, not goodness again," he said. "You and your malady of mortality, and your malady of goodness." He had been looking at the fire and he turned to me with a deliberately scornful expression. "We're a pack of actors and entertainers who can't even be buried in consecrated ground. We're outcasts."

"God, if you could only believe in it," I said, "that we do good when we make others forget their sorrow, make them forget for a little while that …"

"What? That they are going to die?" He smiled in a particularly vicious way. "Lestat, I thought all this would change with you when you got to Paris."

"That was foolish of you, Nick," I answered. He was making me angry now. "I do good in the boulevard du Temple. I feel it—"

I stopped because I saw the mysterious face again and a dark feeling had passed over me, something of foreboding. Yet even that startling face was usually smiling, that was the odd thing. Yes, smiling … enjoying …

"Lestat, I love you," Nicki said gravely. "I love you as I have loved few people in my life, but in a real way you're a fool with all your ideas about goodness."

I laughed.

"Nicolas," I said, "I can live without God. I can even come to live with the idea there is no life after. But I do not think I could go on if I did not believe in the possibility of goodness. Instead of mocking me for once,

why don't you tell me what you believe?"

"As I see it," he said, "there's weakness and there's strength. And there is good art and bad art. And that is what I believe in. At the moment we are engaged in making what is rather bad art and it has *nothing* to do with goodness!"

"Our conversation" could have turned into a full-scale fight here if I had said all that was on my mind about bourgeois pomposity. For I fully believed that our work at Renaud's was in many ways finer than what I saw at the grand theaters. Only the framework was less impressive. Why couldn't a bourgeois gentleman forget about the frame? How could he be made to look at something other than the surface?

I took a deep breath.

"If goodness does exist," he said, "then I'm the opposite of it. I'm evil and I revel in it. I thumb my nose at goodness. And if you must know, I don't play the violin for the idiots who come to Renaud's to make them happy. I play it for me, for Nicolas."

I didn't want to hear any more. It was time to go to bed. But I was bruised by this little talk and he knew it, and as I started to pull off my boots, he got up from the chair and came and sat next to me.

"I'm sorry," he said in the most broken voice. It was so changed from the posture of a minute ago that I looked up at him, and he was so young and so miserable that I couldn't help putting my arm around him and telling him that he must not worry about it anymore.

"You have a radiance in you, Lestat," he said. "And it draws everyone to you. It's there even when you're angry, or discouraged—"

"Poetry," I said. "We're both tired."

"No, it's true," he said. "You have a light in you that's almost blinding. But in me there's only darkness. Sometimes I think it's like the darkness that infected you that night in the inn when you began to cry and to tremble. You were so helpless, so unprepared for it. I try to keep that darkness from you because I need your light. I need it desperately, but you don't need the darkness."

"You're the mad one," I said. "If you could see yourself, hear your own voice, your music—which of course you play for yourself—you wouldn't see darkness, Nicki. You'd see an illumination that is all your own. Somber, yes, but light and beauty come together in you in a thousand different patterns."

The next night the performance went especially well. The audience was a lively one, inspiring all of us to extra tricks. I did some new dance steps that for some reason never proved interesting in private rehearsal but worked miraculously on the stage. And Nicki was extraordinary with the violin, playing one of his own compositions.

But towards the end of the evening I glimpsed the mysterious face again. It jarred me worse than it ever had, and I almost lost the rhythm of my song. In fact it seemed my head for a moment was swimming.

When Nicki and I were alone I had to talk about it, about the peculiar sensation that I had fallen asleep on the stage and had been dreaming.

We sat by the hearth together with our wine on the top of a little barrel, and in the firelight Nicki looked as weary and dejected as he had the night before.

I didn't want to trouble him, but I couldn't forget about the face.

"Well, what does he look like?" Nicolas asked. He was warming his hands. And over his shoulder, I saw through the window a city of snow-covered rooftops that made me feel more cold. I didn't like this conversation.

"That's the worst part of it," I said. "All I see is a face. He must be wearing something black, a cloak and even a hood. But it looks like a mask to me, the face, very white and strangely clear. I mean the lines in his face are so deep they seemed to be etched with black greasepaint. I see it for a moment. It veritably glows. Then when I look again, there's no one there. Yet this is an exaggeration. It's more subtle than that, the way he looks and yet …"

The description seemed to disturb Nicki as much as it disturbed me. He didn't say anything. But his face softened somewhat as if he were forgetting his sadness.

"Well, I don't want to get your hopes up," he said. He was very kind and sincere now. "But maybe it *is* a mask you're seeing. And maybe it's someone from the Comédie-Française come to see you perform."

I shook my head. "I wish it was, but no one would wear a mask like that. And I'll tell you something else, too."

He waited, but I could see I was passing on to him some of my own apprehension. He reached over and took the wine bottle by the neck and poured a little in my glass.

"Whoever he is," I said, "he knows about the wolves."

“He what?”

“He knows about the wolves.” I was very unsure of myself. It was like recounting a dream I had all but forgotten. “He knows I killed the wolves back home. He knows the cloak I wear is lined with their fur.”

“What are you talking about? You mean you’ve spoken to him?”

“No, that’s just it,” I said. This was so confusing to me, so vague. I felt that swimming sensation again. “That’s what I’m trying to tell you. I’ve never spoken to him, never been near him. But he knows.”

“Ah, Lestat,” he said. He sat back on the bench. He was smiling at me in the most endearing way. “Next you’ll be seeing ghosts. You have the strongest imagination of anyone I’ve ever known.”

“There are no ghosts,” I answered softly. I scowled at our little fire. I laid a few more lumps of coal on it.

All the humor went out of Nicolas.

“How in the hell could he know about the wolves? And how could you …”

“I told you already, I don’t know!” I said. I sat thinking and not saying anything, disgusted, maybe, at how ridiculous it all seemed.

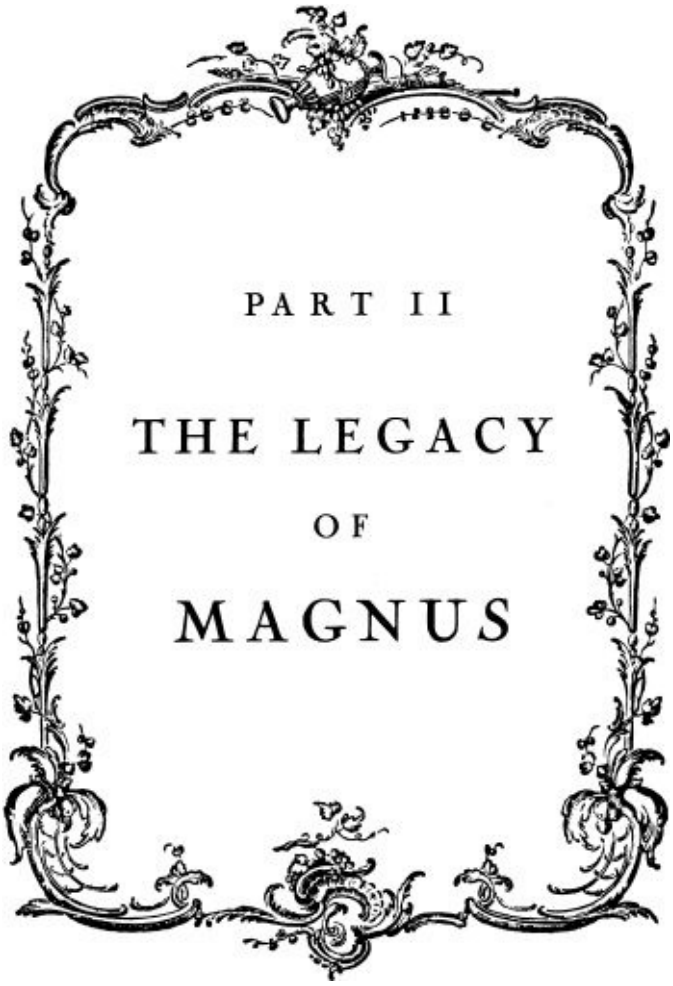
And then as we remained silent together, and the fire was the only sound or movement in the room, the name *Wolfkiller* came to me very distinctly as if someone had spoken it.

But nobody had.

I looked at Nicki, painfully aware that his lips had never moved, and I think all the blood drained from my face. I felt not the dread of death as I had on so many other nights, but an emotion that was really alien to me: fear.

I was still sitting there, too unsure of myself to say anything, when Nicolas kissed me.

“Let’s go to bed,” he said softly.



PART II

THE LEGACY OF MAGNUS

1

It must have been three o'clock in the morning; I'd heard the church bells in my sleep.

And like all sensible men in Paris, we had our door barred and our window locked. Not good for a room with a coal fire, but the roof was a path to our window. And we were locked in.

I was dreaming of the wolves. I was on the mountain and surrounded and I was swinging the old medieval flail. Then the wolves were dead again, and the dream was better, only I had all those miles to walk in the snow. The horse screamed in the snow. My mare turned into a loathsome insect half smashed on the stone floor.

A voice said "Wolfkiller" long and low, a whisper that was like a summons and a tribute at the same time.

I opened my eyes. Or I thought I did. And there was someone standing in the room. A tall, bent figure with its back to the little hearth. Embers still glowed on the hearth. The light moved upwards, etching the edges of the figure clearly, then dying out before it reached the shoulders, the head. But I realized I was looking right at the white face I'd seen in the audience at the theater, and my mind, opening, sharpening, realized the room was locked, that Nicolas lay beside me, that this figure stood over our bed.

I heard Nicolas's breathing. I looked into the white face.

"Wolfkiller," came the voice again. But the lips hadn't moved, and the figure drew nearer and I saw that the face was no mask. Black eyes, quick and calculating black eyes, and white skin, and some appalling smell coming from it, like the smell of moldering clothes in a damp room.

I think I rose up. Or perhaps I was lifted. Because in an instant I was standing on my feet. The sleep was slipping off me like garments. I was backing up into the wall.

The figure had my red cloak in its hand. Desperately I thought of my sword, my muskets. They were under the bed on the floor. And the thing thrust the red cloak towards me and then, through the fur-lined velvet, I

felt its hand close on the lapel of my coat.

I was torn forward. I was drawn off my feet across the room. I shouted for Nicolas. I screamed, “Nicki, Nicki!” as loud as I could. I saw the partially opened window, and then suddenly the glass burst into thousands of fragments and the wooden frame was broken out. I was flying over the alleyway, six stories above the ground.

I screamed. I kicked at this thing that was carrying me. Caught up in the red cloak, I twisted, trying to get loose.

But we were flying over the rooftop, and now going up the straight surface of a brick wall! I was dangling in the arm of the creature, and then very suddenly on the surface of a high place, I was thrown down.

I lay for a moment seeing Paris spread out before me in a great circle —the white snow, and chimney pots and church belfries, and the lowering sky. And then I rose up, stumbling over the fur-lined cloak, and I started to run. I ran to the edge of the roof and looked down. Nothing but a sheer drop of hundreds of feet, and then to another edge and it was exactly the same. I almost fell!

I turned desperate, panting. We were on the top of some square tower, no more than fifty feet across! And I could see nothing higher in any direction. And the figure stood staring at me, and I heard come out of it a low rasping laughter just like the whisper before.

“Wolfkiller,” it said again.

“Damn you!” I shouted. “Who the hell are you!” And in a rage I flew at it with my fists.

It didn’t move. I struck it as if I were striking the brick wall. I veritably bounced off it, losing my footing in the snow and scrambling up and attacking it again.

Its laughter grew louder and louder, and deliberately mocking, but with a strong undercurrent of pleasure that was even more maddening than the mockery. I ran to the edge of the tower and then turned on the creature again.

“What do you want with me!” I demanded. “Who are you!” And when it gave nothing but this maddening laughing, I went for it again. But this time I went for the face and the neck, and I made my hands like claws to do it, and I pulled off the hood and saw the creature’s black hair and the full shape of its human-looking head. Soft skin. Yet it was as immovable as before.

It backed up a little, raising its arms to play with me, to push me back and forth as a man would push a little child. Too fast for my eyes, it moved its face away from me, turning to one side and then the other, and all of these movements with seeming effortlessness, as I frantically tried to hurt it and could feel nothing but that soft white skin sliding under my fingers and maybe once or twice its fine black hair.

"Brave strong little Wolfkiller," it said to me now in a rounder, deeper voice.

I stopped, panting and covered with sweat, staring at it and seeing the details of its face. The deep lines I had only glimpsed in the theater, its mouth drawn up in a jester's smile.

"Oh, God help me, help me …" I said as I backed away. It seemed impossible that such a face should move, show expression, and gaze with such affection on me as it did. "God!"

"What god is that, Wolfkiller?" it asked.

I turned my back on it, and let out a terrible roar. I felt its hands close on my shoulders like things forged of metal, and as I went into a last frenzy of struggling, it whipped me around so that its eyes were right before me, wide and dark, and the lips were closed yet still smiling, and then it bent down and I felt the prick of its teeth on my neck.

Out of all the childhood tales, the old fables, the name came to me, like a drowned thing shooting to the surface of black water and breaking free in the light.

"Vampire!" I gave one last frantic cry, shoving at the creature with all I had.

Then there was silence. Stillness.

I knew that we were still on the roof. I knew that I was being held in the thing's arms. Yet it seemed we had risen, become weightless, were traveling through the darkness even more easily than we had traveled before.

"Yes, yes," I wanted to say, "exactly."

And a great noise was echoing all around me, enveloping me, the sound of a deep gong perhaps, being struck very slowly in perfect rhythm, its sound washing through me so that I felt the most extraordinary pleasure through all my limbs.

My lips moved, but nothing came out of them; yet this didn't really matter. All the things I had ever wanted to say were clear to me and that

is what mattered, not that they be expressed. And there was so much time, so much sweet time in which to say anything and do anything. There was no urgency at all.

Rapture. I said the word, and it seemed clear to me, that one word, though I couldn't speak or really move my lips. And I realized I was no longer breathing. Yet something was making me breathe. It was breathing for me and the breaths came with the rhythm of the gong which was nothing to do with my body, and I loved it, the rhythm, the way that it went on and on, and I no longer had to breathe or speak or know anything.

My mother smiled at me. And I said, "I love you …" to her, and she said, "Yes, always loved, always loved …" And I was sitting in the monastery library and I was twelve years old and the monk said to me, "A great scholar," and I opened all the books and could read everything, Latin, Greek, French. The illuminated letters were indescribably beautiful, and I turned around and faced the audience in Renaud's theater and saw all of them on their feet, and a woman moved the painted fan from in front of her face, and it was Marie Antoinette. She said "Wolfkiller," and Nicolas was running towards me, crying for me to come back. His face was full of anguish. His hair was loose and his eyes were rimmed with blood. He tried to catch me. I said, "Nicki, get away from me!" and I realized in agony, positive agony, that the sound of the gong was fading away.

I cried out, I begged. Don't stop it, please, please. I don't want to … I don't … please.

"Lelio, the Wolfkiller," said the thing, and it was holding me in its arms and I was crying because the spell was breaking.

"Don't, don't."

I was heavy all over, my body had come back to me with its aches and its pains and my own choking cries, and I was being lifted, thrown upwards, until I fell over the creature's shoulder and I felt its arm around my knees.

I wanted to say God protect me, I wanted to say it with every particle of me but I couldn't say it, and there was the alleyway below me again, that drop of hundreds of feet, and the whole of Paris tilted at an appalling angle, and there was the snow and the searing wind.

2

I was awake and I was very thirsty.

I wanted a great deal of very cold white wine, the way it is when you bring it up out of the cellar in autumn. I wanted something fresh and sweet to eat, like a ripe apple.

It did occur to me that I had lost my reason, though I couldn't have said why.

I opened my eyes and knew it was early evening. The light might have been morning light, but too much time had passed for that. It was evening.

And through a wide, heavily barred stone window I saw hills and woods, blanketed with snow, and the vast tiny collection of rooftops and towers that made up the city far away. I hadn't seen it like this since the day I came in the post carriage. I closed my eyes and the vision of it remained as if I'd never opened my eyes at all.

But it was no vision. It was there. And the room was warm in spite of the window. There had been a fire in the room, I could smell it, but the fire had gone out.

I tried to reason. But I couldn't stop thinking about cold white wine, and apples in the basket. I could see the apples. I felt myself drop down out of the branches of the tree, and I smelled all around me the freshly cut grass.

The sunlight was blinding on the green fields. It shone on Nicolas's brown hair, and on the deep lacquer of the violin. The music climbed up to the soft, rolling clouds. And against the sky I saw the battlements of my father's house.

Battlements.

I opened my eyes again.

And I knew I was lying in a high tower room several miles from Paris.

And just in front of me, on a crude little wooden table, was a bottle of cold white wine, precisely as I had dreamed it.

For a long time I looked at it, looked at the frost of droplets covering it, and I could not believe it possible to reach for it and drink.

Never had I known the thirst I was suffering now. My whole body thirsted. And I was so weak. And I was getting a little cold.

The room moved when I moved. The sky gleamed in the window.

And when at last I did reach for the bottle and pull the cork from it and smell the tart, delicious aroma, I drank and drank without stopping, not caring what would happen to me, or where I was, or why the bottle had been set here.

My head swung forward. The bottle was almost empty and the faraway city was vanishing in the black sky, leaving a little sea of lights behind it.

I put my hands to my head.

The bed on which I'd been sleeping was no more than stone with straw strewn upon it, and it was coming to me slowly that I might be in some sort of jail.

But the wine. It had been too good for a jail. Who would give a prisoner wine like that, unless of course the prisoner was to be executed.

And another aroma came to me, rich and overpowering and so delicious that it made me moan. I looked about, or I should say, I tried to look about because I was almost too weak to move. But the source of this aroma was near to me, and it was a large bowl of beef broth. The broth was thick with bits of meat, and I could see the steam rising from it. It was still hot.

I grabbed it in both hands immediately and I drank it as thoughtlessly and greedily as I'd drunk the wine.

It was so satisfying it was as if I'd never known any food like it, that rich boiled-down essence of the meat, and when the bowl was empty I fell back, full, almost sick, on the straw.

It seemed something moved in the darkness near me. But I was not sure. I heard the chink of glass.

"More wine," said a voice to me, and I knew the voice.

Gradually, I began remembering everything. Scaling the walls, the small square rooftop, that smiling white face.

For one moment, I thought, No, quite impossible, it must have been a nightmare. But this just wasn't so. It had happened, and I remembered the rapture suddenly, the sound of the gong, and I felt myself grow dizzy as though I were losing consciousness again.

I stopped it. I wouldn't let it happen. And fear crept over me so that I

didn't dare to move.

"More wine," said the voice again.

Turning my head slightly I saw a new bottle, corked, but ready for me, outlined against the window's luminous glow.

I felt the thirst again, and this time it was heightened by the salt of the broth. I wiped my lips and then I reached for the bottle and again I drank.

I fell back against the stone wall, and I struggled to look clearly through the darkness, half afraid of what I knew I would see.

Of course I was very drunk now.

I saw the window, the city. I saw the little table. And as my eyes moved slowly over the dusky corners of the room, I saw *him* there.

He no longer wore his black hooded cape, and he didn't sit or stand as a man might.

Rather he leaned to rest, it seemed, upon the thick stone frame of the window, one knee bent a little towards it, the other long spindly leg sprawled out to the other side. His arms appeared to hang at his sides.

And the whole impression was of something limp and lifeless, and yet his face was as animated as it had been the night before. Huge black eyes seeming to stretch the white flesh in deep folds, the nose long and thin, and the mouth the jester's smile. There were the fang teeth, just touching the colorless lip, and the hair, a gleaming mass of black and silver growing up high from the white forehead, and flowing down over his shoulders and his arms.

I think that he laughed.

I was beyond terror. I could not even scream.

I had dropped the wine. The glass bottle was rolling on the floor. And as I tried to move forward, to gather my senses and make my body more than something drunken and sluggish, his thin, gangly limbs found animation all at once.

He advanced on me.

I didn't cry out. I gave a low roar of angry terror and scrambled up off the bed, tripping over the small table and running from him as fast as I could.

But he caught me in long white fingers that were as powerful and as cold as they had been the night before.

"Let me go, damn you, damn you, damn you!" I was stammering. My

reason told me to plead, and I tried. “I’ll just go away, please. Let me out of here. You have to. Let me go.”

His gaunt face loomed over me, his lips drawn up sharply into his white cheeks, and he laughed a low riotous laugh that seemed endless. I struggled, pushing at him uselessly, pleading with him again, stammering nonsense and apologies, and then I cried, “God help me!” He clapped one of those monstrous hands over my mouth.

“No more of that in my presence, Wolfkiller, or I’ll feed you to the wolves of hell,” he said with a little sneer. “Hmmmm? Answer me. Hmmmm?”

I nodded and he loosened his grip.

His voice had had a momentary calming effect. He sounded capable of reason when he spoke. He sounded almost sophisticated.

He lifted his hands and stroked my head as I cringed.

“Sunlight in the hair,” he whispered, “and the blue sky fixed forever in your eyes.” He seemed almost meditative as he looked at me. His breath had no smell whatsoever, nor did his body, it seemed. The smell of mold was coming from his clothes.

I didn’t dare to move, though he was not holding me. I stared at his garments.

A ruined silk shirt with bag sleeves and smocking at the neck of it. And worsted leggings and short ragged pantaloons.

In sum he was dressed as men had been centuries before. I had seen such clothes in tapestries in my home, in the paintings of Caravaggio and La Tour that hung in my mother’s rooms.

“You’re perfect, my Lelio, my Wolfkiller,” he said to me, his long mouth opening wide so that again I saw the small white fangs. They were the only teeth he possessed.

I shuddered. I felt myself dropping to the floor.

But he picked me up easily with one arm and laid me down gently on the bed.

In my mind I was praying fiercely, God help me, the Virgin Mary help me, help me, help me, as I peered up into his face.

What was it I was seeing? What had I seen the night before? The mask of old age, this grinning thing cut deeply with the marks of time and yet frozen, it seemed, and hard as his hands. He wasn’t a living thing. He was a monster. A vampire was what he was, a blood-sucking corpse from

the grave gifted with intellect!

And his limbs, why did they so horrify me? He looked like a human, but he didn't move like a human. It didn't seem to matter to him whether he walked or crawled, bent over or knelt. It filled me with loathing. Yet he fascinated me. I had to admit it. He fascinated me. But I was in too much danger to allow such a strange state of mind.

He gave a deep laugh now, his knees wide apart, his fingers resting on my cheek as he made a great arc over me.

"Yeeeees, lovely one, I'm hard to look at!" he said. His voice was still a whisper and he spoke in long gasps. "I was old when I was made. And you're perfect, my Lelio, my blue-eyed young one, more beautiful even without the lights of the stage."

The long white hand played with my hair again, lifting up the strands and letting them drop as he sighed.

"Don't weep, Wolfkiller," he said. "You're chosen, and your tawdry little triumphs in the House of Thesbians will be nothing once this night comes to its close."

Again came that low riot of laughter.

There was no doubt in my mind, at least at this moment, that he was from the devil, that God and the devil existed, that beyond the isolation I'd known only hours ago lay this vast realm of dark beings and hideous meanings and I had been swallowed into it somehow.

It occurred to me quite clearly I was being punished for my life, and yet that seemed absurd. Millions believed as I believed the world over. Why the hell was this happening to me? And a grim possibility started irresistibly to take shape, that the world was no more meaningful than before, and this was but another horror …

"In God's name, get away!" I shouted. I *had* to believe in God now. I had to. That was absolutely the only hope. I went to make the Sign of the Cross.

For one moment he stared at me, his eyes wide with rage. And then he remained still.

He watched me make the Sign of the Cross. He listened to me call upon God again and again.

He only smiled, making his face a perfect mask of comedy from the proscenium arch.

And I went into a spasm of crying like a child. "Then the devil reigns

in heaven and heaven is hell," I said to him. "Oh, God, don't desert me …" I called on all the saints I had ever for a little while loved.

He struck me hard across the face. I fell to one side and almost slipped from the bed to the floor. The room went round. The sour taste of the wine rose in my mouth.

And I felt his fingers again on my neck.

"Yes, fight, Wolfkiller," he said. "Don't go into hell without a battle. Mock God."

"I don't mock!" I protested.

Once again he pulled me to himself.

And I fought him harder than I had ever fought anyone or anything in my existence, even the wolves. I beat on him, kicked him, tore at his hair. But I might as well have fought the animated gargoyles from a cathedral, he was that powerful.

He only smiled.

Then all the expression went out of his face. It seemed to become very long. The cheeks were hollow, the eyes wide and almost wondering, and he opened his mouth. The lower lip contracted. I saw the fangs.

"Damn you, damn you, damn you!" I was roaring and bellowing. And he drew closer and the teeth went through my flesh.

Not this time, I was raging, not this time. I will not feel it. I will resist. I will fight for my soul *this* time.

But it was happening again.

The sweetness and the softness and the world far away, and even he in his ugliness was curiously outside of me, like an insect pressed against a glass who causes no loathing in us because he cannot touch us, and the sound of the gong, and the exquisite pleasure, and then I was altogether lost. I was incorporeal and the pleasure was incorporeal. I was nothing but pleasure. And I slipped into a web of radiant dreams.

A catacomb I saw, a rank place. And a white vampire creature waking in a shallow grave. Bound in heavy chains he was, the vampire; and over him bent this monster who had abducted me, and I knew that his name was Magnus, and that he was mortal still in this dream, a great and powerful alchemist. And he had unearthed and bound this slumbering vampire right before the crucial hour of dusk.

And now as the light died out of the heavens, Magnus drank from his helpless immortal prisoner the magical and accursed blood that would

make him one of the living dead. Treachery it was, the theft of immortality. A dark Prometheus stealing a luminescent fire. Laughter in the darkness. Laughter echoing in the catacomb. Echoing as if down the centuries. And the stench of the grave. And the ecstasy, absolutely fathomless, and irresistible, and then drawing to a finish.

I was crying. I lay on the straw and I said:

"Please, don't stop it …"

Magnus was no longer holding me and my breathing was once again my own, and the dreams were dissolved. I fell down and down as the nightful of stars slid upwards, jewels affixed to a dark purple veil. "Clever that. I had thought the sky was … real."

The cold winter air was moving just a little in this room. I felt the tears on my face. I was consumed with thirst!

And far, far away from me, Magnus stood looking down at me, his hands dangling low beside his thin legs.

I tried to move. I was craving. My whole body was thirsty.

"You're dying, Wolfkiller," he said. "The light's going out of your blue eyes as if all the summer days are gone …"

"No, please …" This thirst was unbearable. My mouth was open, gaping, my back arched. And it was here at last, the final horror, death itself, like this.

"Ask for it, child," he said, his face no longer the grinning mask, but utterly transfigured with compassion. He looked almost human, almost naturally old. "Ask and you shall receive," he said.

I saw water rushing down all the mountain streams of my childhood. "Help me. Please."

"I shall give you the water of all waters," he said in my ear, and it seemed he wasn't white at all. He *was* just an old man, sitting there beside me. His face *was* human, and almost sad.

But as I watched his smile and his gray eyebrows rise in wonder, I knew it wasn't true. He wasn't human. He was that same ancient monster only he was filled with my blood!

"The wine of all wines," he breathed. "This is my Body, this is my Blood." And then his arms surrounded me. They drew me to him and I felt a great warmth emanating from him, and he seemed to be filled not with blood but with love for me.

"Ask for it, Wolfkiller, and you will live forever," he said, but his voice

sounded weary and spiritless, and there was something distant and tragic in his gaze.

I felt my head turn to the side, my body a heavy and damp thing that I couldn't control. I will not ask, I will die without asking, and then the great despair I feared so much lay before me, the emptiness that was death, and still I said No. In pure horror I said No. I will not bow down to it, the chaos and the horror. I said No.

"Life everlasting," he whispered.

My head fell on his shoulder.

"Stubborn Wolfkiller." His lips touched me, warm, odorless breath on my neck.

"Not stubborn," I whispered. My voice was so weak I wondered if he could hear me. "Brave. Not stubborn." It seemed pointless not to say it. What was vanity now? What was anything at all? And such a trivial word was stubborn, so cruel …

He lifted my face, and holding me with his right hand, he lifted his left hand and gashed his own throat with his nails.

My body bent double in a convulsion of terror, but he pressed my face to the wound, as he said: "Drink."

I heard my scream, deafening in my own ears. And the blood that was flowing out of the wound touched my parched and cracking lips.

The thirst seemed to hiss aloud. My tongue licked at the blood. And a great whiplash of sensation caught me. And my mouth opened and locked itself to the wound. I drew with all my power upon the great fount that I knew would satisfy my thirst as it had never been satisfied before.

Blood and blood and blood. And it was not merely the dry hissing coil of the thirst that was quenched and dissolved, it was all my craving, all the want and misery and hunger that I had ever known.

My mouth widened, pressed harder to him. I felt the blood coursing down the length of my throat. I felt his head against me. I felt the tight enclosure of his arms.

I was against him and I could feel his sinews, his bones, the very contour of his hands. I *knew* his body. And yet there was this numbness creeping through me and a rapturous tingling as each sensation penetrated the numbness, and was amplified in the penetration so that it became fuller, keener, and I could almost see what I felt.

But the supreme part of it remained the sweet, luscious blood filling me, as I drank and drank.

More of it, more, this was all I could think, if I thought at all, and for all its thick substance, it was like light passing into me, so brilliant did it seem to the mind, so blinding, that red stream, and all the desperate desires of my life were a thousandfold fed.

But his body, the scaffolding to which I clung, was weakening beneath me. I could hear his breath in feeble gasps. Yet he didn't make me stop.

Love you, I wanted to say, Magnus, my unearthly master, ghastly thing that you are, love you, love you, this was what I had always so wanted, wanted, and could never have, this, and you've given it to me!

I felt I would die if it went on, and on it did go, and I did not die.

But quite suddenly I felt his gentle loving hands caressing my shoulders and with his incalculable strength, he forced me backwards.

I let out a long mournful cry. Its misery alarmed me. But he was pulling me to my feet. He still held me in his arms.

He brought me to the window, and I stood looking out, with my hands out to the stone on either side. I was shaking and the blood in me pulsed in all my veins. I leaned my forehead against the iron bars.

Far far below lay the dark cusp of a hill, overgrown with trees that appeared to shimmer in the faint light of the stars.

And beyond, the city with its wilderness of little lights sunk not in darkness but in a soft violet mist. The snow everywhere was luminescent, melting. Rooftops, towers, walls, all were myriad facets of lavender, mauve, rose.

This was the sprawling metropolis.

And as I narrowed my eyes, I saw a million windows like so many projections of beams of light, and then as if this were not enough, in the very depths I saw the unmistakable movement of the people. Tiny mortals on tiny streets, heads and hands touching in the shadows, a lone man, no more than a speck ascending a windblown belfry. A million souls on the tessellated surface of the night, and coming soft on the air a dim mingling of countless human voices. Cries, songs, the faintest wisps of music, the muted throb of bells.

I moaned. The breeze seemed to lift my hair and I heard my own voice as I had never heard it before crying.

The city dimmed. I let it go, its swarming millions lost again in the

vast and wondrous play of lilac shadow and fading light.

"Oh, what have you done, what is this that you've given to me!" I whispered.

And it seemed my words did not stop one after another, rather they ran together until all of my crying was one immense and coherent sound that perfectly amplified my horror and my joy.

If there was a God, he did not matter now. He was part of some dull and dreary realm whose secrets had long ago been plundered, whose lights had long ago gone out. This was the pulsing center of life itself round which all true complexity revolved. Ah, the allure of that complexity, the sense of being *there* …

Behind me the scratch of the monster's feet came on the stones.

And when I turned I saw him white and bled dry and like a great husk of himself. His eyes were stained with blood-red tears and he reached out to me as if in pain.

I gathered him to my chest. I felt such love for him as I had never known before.

"Ah, don't you see?" came the ghastly voice with its long words, whispers without end, "My heir chosen to take the Dark Gift from me with more fiber and courage than ten mortal men, what a Child of Darkness you are to be."

I kissed his eyelids. I gathered his soft black hair in my hands. He was no ghastly thing to me now but merely that which was strange and white, and full of some deeper lesson perhaps than the sighing trees below or the shimmering city calling me over the miles.

His sunken cheeks, his long throat, the thin legs … these were but the natural parts of him.

"No, fledgling," he sighed. "Save your kisses for the world. My time has come and you owe me but one obeisance only. Follow me now."

3

Down a winding stairs he drew me. And everything I beheld absorbed me. The rough-cut stones seemed to give forth their own light, and even the rats shooting past in the dark had a curious beauty.

Then he unlocked a thick iron-studded wooden door and, giving over his heavy key ring to me, led me into a large and barren room.

"You are now my heir, as I told you," he said. "You'll take possession of this house and all my treasure. But you'll do as I say first."

The barred windows gave a limitless view of the moonlit clouds, and I saw the soft shimmering city again as if it were spreading its arms.

"Ah, later you may drink your fill of all you see," he said. He turned me towards him as he stood before a huge heap of wood that lay in the center of the floor.

"Listen carefully," he said. "For I'm about to leave you." He gestured to the wood offhandedly. "And there are things you must know. You're immortal now. And your nature shall lead you soon enough to your first human victim. Be swift and show no mercy. But stop your feasting, no matter how delicious, before the victim's heart ceases to beat.

"In years to come, you'll be strong enough to feel that great moment, but for the present pass the cup to time just before it's empty. Or you may pay heavily for your pride."

"But why are you leaving me!" I asked desperately. I clung to him. Victims, mercy, feasting … I felt myself bombarded by these words as if I were being physically beaten.

He pulled away so easily that my hands were hurt by his movement, and I wound up staring at them, marveling at the strange quality of the pain. It wasn't like mortal pain.

He stopped, however, and pointed to the stones of the wall opposite. I could see that one very large stone had been dislodged and lay a foot from the unbroken surface around it.

"Grasp that stone," he said, "and pull it out of the wall."

"But I can't," I said. "It must weigh—"

"Pull it out!" He pointed with one of his long bony fingers and

grimaced so that I tried to do it as he said.

To my pure astonishment I was able to move the stone easily, and I saw beyond it a dark opening just large enough for a man to enter if he crawled on his face.

He gave a dry cackling laugh and nodded his head.

"There, my son, is the passageway that leads to my treasure," he said. "Do with my treasure as you like, and with all my earthly property. But for now, I must have my vows."

And again astonishing me, he snatched up two twigs from the wood and rubbed them together so fiercely they were soon burning with bright small flames.

This he tossed at the heap, and the pitch in it caused the fire to leap up at once, throwing an immense light over the curved ceiling and the stone walls.

I gasped and stepped back. The riot of yellow and orange color enchanted and frightened me, and the heat, though I felt it, did not cause me a sensation I understood. There was no natural alarm that I should be burned by it. Rather the warmth was exquisite and I realized for the first time how cold I had been. The cold was an icing on me and the fire melted it and I almost moaned.

He laughed again, that hollow, gasping laugh, and started to dance about in the light, his thin legs making him look like a skeleton dancing, with the white face of a man. He crooked his arms over his head, bent his torso and his knees, and turned round and round as he circled the fire.

"Mon Dieu!" I whispered. I was reeling. Horrifying it might have been only an hour ago to see him dancing like this, but now in the flickering glare he was a spectacle that drew me after it step by step. The light exploded on his satin rags, the pantaloons he wore, the tattered shirt.

"But you can't leave me!" I pleaded, trying to keep my thoughts clear, trying to realize what he had been saying. My voice was monstrous in my ears: I tried to make it lower, softer, more like it should have been. "Where will you go!"

He gave his loudest laugh then, slapping his thigh and dancing faster and farther away from me, his hands out as if to embrace the fire.

The thickest logs were only now catching. The room for all its size was like a great clay oven, smoke pouring out its windows.

“Not the fire.” I flew backwards, flattening myself against the wall. “You can’t go into the fire!”

Fear was overwhelming me, as every sight and sound had overwhelmed me. It was like every sensation I had known so far. I couldn’t resist it or deny it. I was half whimpering and half screaming.

“Oh, yes I can,” he laughed. “Yes, I can!” He threw back his head and let his laughter stretch into howls. “But from you, fledgling,” he said, stopping before me with his finger out again, “promises now. Come, a little mortal honor, my brave Wolfkiller, or though it will cleave my heart in two, I shall throw you into the fire and claim for myself another offspring. Answer me!”

I tried to speak. I nodded my head.

In the raging light I could see my hands had become white. And I felt a stab of pain in my lower lip that almost made me cry out.

My eyeteeth had become fangs already! I felt them and looked to him in panic, but he was leering at me as if he enjoyed my terror.

“Now, after I am burned up,” he said, snatching my wrist, “and the fire is out, you *must* scatter the ashes. Hear me, little one. Scatter the ashes. Or else I might return, and in what shape that would be, I dare not contemplate. But mark my words, if you allow me to come back, more hideous than I am now, I shall hunt you down and burn you till you are scarred the same as I, do you hear me?”

I still couldn’t bring myself to answer. This was not fear. It was hell. I could feel my teeth growing and my body tingling all over. Frantically, I nodded my head.

“Ah, yes.” He smiled, nodding too, the fire licking the ceiling behind him, the light leaking all about the edges of his face. “It’s only mercy I ask, that I go now to find hell, if there is a hell, or sweet oblivion which surely I do not deserve. If there is a Prince of Darkness, then I shall set eyes upon him at last. I shall spit in his face.

“So scatter what is burned, as I command you, and when that is done, take yourself to my lair through that low passage, being most careful to replace the stone behind you as you enter there. Within you will find my coffin. And in that box or the like of it, you must seal yourself by day or the sun’s light shall burn you to a cinder. Mark my words, nothing on earth can end your life save the sun, or a blaze such as you see before you, and even then, only, and I say, only if your ashes are scattered

when it is done."

I turned my face away from him and away from the flames. I had begun to cry and the only thing that kept me from sobbing was the hand I clapped to my mouth.

But he pulled me about the edge of the fire until we stood before the loose stone, his finger pointing at it again.

"Please stay with me, please," I begged him. "Only a little while, only one night, I beg you!" Again the volume of my voice terrified me. It wasn't my voice at all. I put my arms around him. I held tight to him. His gaunt white face was inexplicably beautiful to me, his black eyes filled with the strangest expression.

The light flickered on his hair, his eyes, and then again he made his mouth into a jester's smile.

"Ah, greedy son," he said. "Is it not enough to be immortal with all the world your repast? Good-bye, little one. Do as I say. Remember, the ashes! And beyond this stone the inner chamber. Therein lies all that you will need to prosper."

I struggled to hold on to him. And he laughed low in my ear, marveling at my strength. "Excellent, excellent," he whispered. "Now, live forever, beautiful Wolfkiller, with the gifts nature gave you, and discover for yourself all those most unnatural gifts which I have added to the lot."

He sent me stumbling away from him. And he leapt so high and so far into the very middle of the flames he appeared to be flying.

I saw him descend. I saw the fire catch his garments.

It seemed his head became a torch, and then all of a sudden his eyes grew wide and his mouth became a great black cavern in the radiance of the flames and his laughter rose in such piercing volume, I covered my ears.

He appeared to jump up and down on all fours in the flames, and suddenly I realized that my cries had drowned out his laughter.

The spindly black arms and legs rose and fell, rose and fell and then suddenly appeared to wither. The fire shifted, roared. And in the heart of it I could see nothing now but the blaze itself.

Yet still I cried. I fell down upon my knees, my hands over my eyes. But against my closed lids I could still see it, one vast explosion of sparks after another until I pressed my forehead on the stones.

4

For years it seemed I lay on the floor watching the fire burn itself out to charred timbers.

The room had cooled. The freezing air moved through the open window. And again and again I wept. My own sobs reverberated in my ears until I felt I couldn't endure the sound of them. And it was no comfort to know that all things were magnified in this state, even the misery that I felt.

Now and then I prayed again. I begged for forgiveness, though forgiveness for what I couldn't have said. I prayed to the Blessed Mother, to the saints. I murmured the Aves over and over until they became a senseless chant.

And my tears were blood, and they left their stain on my hands when I wiped at my face.

Then I lay flat on the stones, murmuring not prayers any longer but those inarticulate pleas we make to all that is powerful, all that is holy, all that may or may not exist by any and all names. Do not leave me alone here. Do not abandon me. I am in the witches' place. It's the witches' place. Do not let me fall even farther than I have already fallen this night. Do not let it happen … *Lestat, wake up*.

But Magnus's words came back to me, over and over: *To find hell, if there is a hell … If there is a Prince of Darkness* …

Finally I rose on my hands and knees. I felt light-headed and mad, and almost giddy. I looked at the fire and saw that I might still bring it back to a roaring blaze and throw myself into it.

But even as I forced myself to imagine the agony of this, I knew that I had no intention of doing it.

After all, why should I do it? What had I done to deserve the witches' fate? I didn't want to be in hell, even for a moment. I sure as hell wasn't going there just to spit in the face of the Prince of Darkness, whoever he might be!

On the contrary, if I was a damned thing, then let the son of a bitch come for me! Let him tell me why I was meant to suffer. I would truly

like to know.

As for oblivion, well, we can wait a little while for that. We can think this over for a little while … at least.

An alien calm crept slowly over me. It was dark, full of bitterness and growing fascination.

I wasn't human anymore.

And as I crouched there thinking about it, and looking at the dying embers, an immense strength was gathering in me. Gradually my boyish sobs died away. And I commenced to study the whiteness of my skin, the sharpness of the two evil little teeth, and the way that my fingernails gleamed in the dark as though they'd been lacquered.

All the little familiar aches were gone out of my body. And the remaining warmth that came from the smoking wood was good to me, as something laid over me or wrapped about me.

Time passed; yet it did not pass.

Each change in the moving air was caressing. And when there came from the softly lighted city beyond a chorus of dim church bells ringing the hour, they did not mark the passage of mortal time. They were only the purest music, and I lay stunned, my mouth open, as I stared at the passing clouds.

But in my chest I started to feel a new pain, very hot and mercurial.

It moved through my veins, tightened about my head, and then seemed to collect itself in my bowels and belly. I narrowed my eyes. I cocked my head to one side. I realized I wasn't afraid of this pain, rather I was feeling it as if I were listening to it.

And I saw the cause of it then. My waste was leaving me in a small torrent. I found myself unable to control it. Yet as I watched the foulness stain my clothes, this didn't disgust me.

Rats creeping into the very room, approaching this filth on their tiny soundless feet, even these did not disgust me.

These things couldn't touch me, even as they crawled over me to devour the waste.

In fact, I could imagine nothing in the dark, not even the slithering insects of the grave, that could bring about revulsion in me. Let them crawl on my hands and face, it wouldn't matter now.

I wasn't part of the world that cringed at such things. And with a smile, I realized that I was of that dark ilk that makes others cringe.

Slowly and with great pleasure, I laughed.

And yet my grief was not entirely gone from me. It lingered like an idea, and the idea had a pure truth to it.

I am dead, I am a vampire. And things will die so that I may live; I will drink their blood so that I may live. And I will never, never see Nicolas again, nor my mother, nor any of the humans I have known and loved, nor any of my human family. I'll drink blood. And I'll live forever. That is exactly what will *be*. And what will *be* is only beginning; it is just born! And the labor that brought it forth was rapture such as I have never known.

I climbed to my feet. I felt myself light and powerful, and strangely numbed, and I went to the dead fire, and walked through the burnt timbers.

There were no bones. It was as if the fiend had disintegrated. What ashes I could gather in my hands I took to the window. And as the wind caught them, I whispered a farewell to Magnus, wondering if he could yet hear me.

At last only charred logs were left and the soot that I wiped up with my hands and dusted off into the darkness.

It was time now to examine the inner room.

5

The stone moved out easily enough, as I'd seen before, and it had a hook on the inside of it by which I could pull it closed behind me.

But to get into the narrow dark passage I had to lie on my belly. And when I dropped down on my knees and peered into it, I could see no visible light at the end. I didn't like the look of it.

I knew that if I'd been mortal still, nothing could have induced me to crawl into a passage like this.

But the old vampire had been plain enough in telling me the sun could destroy me as surely as the fire. I had to get to the coffin. And I felt the fear coming back in a deluge.

I got down flat on the ground, and crawled as a lizard might into the passage. As I feared, I could not really raise my head. And there was no room to turn and reach for the hook in the stone. I had to slip my foot into the hook and crawl forward to pull the stone behind me.

Total darkness. With room to rise only a few inches on my elbows.

I gasped, and the fear welled and I almost went mad thinking about the fact that I couldn't raise my head and finally I smacked it against the stone and lay still, whimpering.

But what was I to do? I must reach the coffin.

So telling myself to stop this whining, I commenced to crawl, faster and faster. My knees scraped the stone. My hands sought crevices and cracks to pull me along. My neck ached with the strain as I struggled not to try to lift my head again in panic.

And when my hand suddenly felt solid stone ahead, I pushed upon it with all my strength. I felt it move as a pale light seeped in.

I scrambled out of the passage, and found myself standing in a small room.

The ceiling was low, curved, and the high window was narrow with the familiar heavy grid of iron bars. But the sweet, violet light of the night poured in revealing a great fireplace cut in the far wall, the wood ready for the torch, and beside it, beneath the window, an ancient stone sarcophagus.

My red velvet fur-lined cape lay over the sarcophagus. And on a rude bench I glimpsed a splendid suit of red velvet worked with gold, and much Italian lace, as well as red silk breeches and white silk hose and red-heeled slippers.

I smoothed back my hair from my face and wiped the thin film of sweat from my upper lip and my forehead. It was bloody, this sweat, and when I saw this on my hands, I felt a curious excitement.

Ah, what am I, I thought, and what lies before me? For a long moment I looked at this blood and then I licked my fingers. A lovely zinging pleasure passed through me. It was a moment before I could collect myself sufficiently to approach the fireplace.

I lifted two sticks of kindling as the old vampire had done and, rubbing them very hard and fast, saw them almost disappear as the flame shot up from them. There was no magic in this, only skill. And as the fire warmed me, I took off my soiled clothes, and with my shirt wiped every last trace of human waste away, and threw all this in the fire, before putting on the new garments.

Red, dazzling red. Not even Nicolas had had such clothes as these. They were clothes for the Court at Versailles, with pearls and tiny rubies worked into their embroidery. The lace of the shirt was Valenciennes, which I had seen on my mother's wedding gown.

I put the wolf cape over my shoulders. And though the white chill was gone from my limbs, I felt like a creature carved from ice. My smile felt hard and glittering to me and strangely slow as I allowed myself to feel and to see these garments.

In the blaze of the fire, I looked at the coffin. The effigy of an old man was carved upon its heavy lid, and I realized immediately it was the likeness of Magnus.

But here he lay in tranquillity, his jester's mouth sealed, his eyes staring mildly at the ceiling, his hair a neat mane of deeply carved waves and ringlets.

Three centuries old was this thing surely. He lay with his hands folded on his chest, his garments long robes, and from his sword that had been carved into the stone, someone had broken out the hilt and part of the scabbard.

I stared at this for an interminable length of time, seeing that it had been carefully chipped away with much effort.

Was it the shape of the cross that someone had sought to remove? I traced it over with my finger. Nothing happened of course, any more than when I'd murmured all those prayers. And squatting in the dust beside the coffin, I drew a cross there.

Again, nothing.

Then to the cross I added a few strokes to suggest the body of Christ, his arms, the crook of his knees, his bowed head. I wrote "The Lord Jesus Christ," the only words I could write well, save for my own name, and again nothing.

And still glancing back uneasily at the words and the little crucifix, I tried to lift the lid of the coffin.

Even with this new strength, it was not easy. And no mortal man alone could have done it.

But what perplexed me was the extent of my difficulty. I did not have limitless strength. And certainly I didn't have the strength of the old vampire. Maybe the strength of three men was what I now possessed, or the strength of four; it was impossible to calculate.

It seemed pretty damned impressive to me at the moment.

I looked into the coffin. Nothing but a narrow place, full of shadows, where I couldn't imagine myself lying. There were Latin words inscribed around the rim, and I couldn't read them.

This tormented me. I wished the words weren't there, and my longing for Magnus, my helplessness, threatened to close in on me. I hated him for leaving me! And it struck me with full ironic force that I'd felt love for him before he'd leapt into the fire. I'd felt love for him when I saw the red garments.

Do devils love each other? Do they walk arm in arm in hell saying, "Ah, you are my friend, how I love you," things like that to each other? It was a rather detached intellectual question I was asking, as I did not believe in hell. But it was a matter of a concept of evil, wasn't it? All creatures in hell are supposed to hate one another, as all the saved hate the damned, without reservation.

I'd known that all my life. It had terrified me as a child, the idea that I might go to heaven and my mother might go to hell and that I should hate her. I couldn't hate her. And what if we were in hell together?

Well, now I know, whether I believe in hell or not, that vampires can love each other, that in being dedicated to evil, one does not cease to

love. Or so it seemed for that brief instant. But don't start crying again. I can't abide all this crying.

I turned my eyes to a large wooden chest that was partially hidden at the head of the coffin. It wasn't locked. Its rotted wooden lid fell almost off the hinges when I opened it.

And though the old master had said he was leaving me his treasure, I was flabbergasted by what I saw here. The chest was crammed with gems and gold and silver. There were countless jeweled rings, diamond necklaces, ropes of pearls, plate and coins and hundreds upon hundreds of miscellaneous valuables.

I ran my fingers lightly over the heap and then held up handfuls of it, gasping as the light ignited the red of the rubies, the green of the emeralds. I saw refractions of color of which I'd never dreamed, and wealth beyond any calculation. It was the fabled Caribbean pirates' chest, the proverbial king's ransom.

And it was mine now.

More slowly I examined it. Scattered throughout were personal and perishable articles. Satin masks rotting away from their trimming of gold, lace handkerchiefs and bits of cloth to which were fixed pins and brooches. Here was a strip of leather harness hung with gold bells, a moldering bit of lace slipped through a ring, snuffboxes by the dozens, lockets on velvet ribbon.

Had Magnus taken all this from his victims?

I lifted up a jewel-encrusted sword, far too heavy for these times, and a worn slipper saved perhaps for its rhinestone buckle.

Of course he had taken what he wanted. Yet he himself had worn rags, the tattered costume of another age, and he lived here as a hermit might have lived in some earlier century. I couldn't understand it.

But there were other objects scattered about in this treasure. Rosaries made up of gorgeous gems, and they still had their crucifixes! I touched the small sacred images. I shook my head and bit my lip, as if to say, How awful that he should have stolen these! But I also found it very funny. And further proof that God had no power over me.

And as I was thinking about this, trying to decide if it was as fortuitous as it seemed for the moment, I lifted from the treasure an exquisite pearl-handled mirror.

I looked into it almost unconsciously as one often glances in mirrors.

And there I saw myself as a man might expect, except that my skin was very white, as the old fiend's had been white, and my eyes had been transformed from their usual blue to a mingling of violet and cobalt that was softly iridescent. My hair had a high luminous sheen, and when I ran my fingers back through it I felt a new and strange vitality there.

In fact, this was not Lestat in the mirror at all, but some replica of him made of other substances! And the few lines time had given me by the age of twenty years were gone or greatly simplified and just a little deeper than they had been.

I stared at my reflection. I became frantic to discover *myself* in it. I rubbed my face, even rubbed the mirror and pressed my lips together to keep from crying.

Finally I closed my eyes and opened them again, and I smiled very gently at the creature. He smiled back. That was Lestat, all right. And there seemed nothing in his face that was any way malevolent. Well, not very malevolent. Just the old mischief, the impulsiveness. He could have been an angel, in fact, this creature, except that when his tears did rise, they were red, and the entire image was tinted red because his vision was red. And he had these evil little teeth that he could press into his lower lip when he smiled that made him look absolutely terrifying. A good enough face with one thing horribly, horribly wrong with it!

But it suddenly occurred to me, I am looking at my own reflection! And hadn't it been said enough that ghosts and spirits and those who have lost their souls to hell have no reflections in mirrors?

A lust to know all things about what I was came over me. A lust to know how I should walk among mortal men. I wanted to be in the streets of Paris, seeing with my new eyes all the miracles of life that I'd ever glimpsed. I wanted to see the faces of the people, to see the flowers in bloom, and the butterflies. To see Nicki, to hear Nicki play his music —no.

Forswear that. But there were a thousand forms of music, weren't there? And as I closed my eyes I could almost hear the orchestra of the Opéra, the arias rising in my ears. So sharp the recollection, so clear.

But nothing would be ordinary now. Not joy or pain, or the simplest memory. All would possess this magnificent luster, even grief for the things that were forever lost.

I put down the mirror, and taking one of the old yellowed lace

handkerchiefs from the chest, I wiped my tears. I turned and sat down slowly before the fire. Delicious the warmth on my face and hands.

A great sweet drowsiness came over me and as I closed my eyes again I felt myself immersed suddenly in the strange dream of Magnus stealing the blood. A sense of enchantment returned, of dizzying pleasure—Magnus holding me, connected to me, my blood flowing into him. But I heard the chains scraping the floor of the old catacomb, I saw the defenseless vampire thing in Magnus's arms. Something more to it … something important. A meaning. About theft, treachery, about surrendering to no one, not God, not demon, and never man.

I thought and thought about it, half awake, half dreaming again, and the maddest thought came to me, that I would tell Nicki all about this, that as soon as I got home I would lay it all out, the dream, the possible meaning and we would talk—

With an ugly shock, I opened my eyes. The human in me looked helplessly about this chamber. He started to weep again and the newborn fiend was too young yet to rein him in. The sobs came up like hiccups, and I put my hand over my mouth.

Magnus, why did you leave me? Magnus, what I am supposed to do, how do I go on?

I drew up my knees and rested my head on them, and slowly my head began to clear.

Well, it has been great fun pretending you will be this vampire creature, I thought, wearing these splendid clothes, running your fingers through all that glorious lucre. But you can't live as this! You can't feed on living beings! Even if you are a monster, you have a conscience in you, natural to you … Good and Evil, good and evil. You cannot live without believing in—You cannot abide the acts that—Tomorrow you will … you will … you will what?

You will drink blood, won't you?

The gold and the precious stones glowed like embers in the nearby chest, and beyond the bars of the window, there rose against the gray clouds the violet shimmer of the distant city. What *is* their blood like? Hot living blood, not monster blood. My tongue pushed at the roof of my mouth, at my fangs.

Think on it, Wolfkiller.

I rose to my feet slowly. It was as if the will made it happen rather than the body, so easy was it. And I picked up the iron key ring which I'd brought with me from the outer chamber and I went to inspect the rest of my tower.

6

Empty chambers. Barred windows. The great endless sweep of the night above the battlements. That is all I found aboveground.

But on the lower floor of the tower, just outside the door to the dungeon stairs, there was a resin torch in the sconce, and a tinderbox in the niche beside it. Tracks in the dust. The lock well oiled and easy to turn when I finally found the right key for it.

I shone the torch before me on a narrow screw stairway and started down, a little repelled by a stench that rose from somewhere quite far below me.

Of course I knew that stench. It was common enough in every cemetery in Paris. In les Innocents it was thick as noxious gas, and you had to live with it to shop the stalls there, deal with the letter writers. It was the stench of decomposing bodies.

And though it sickened me, made me back up a few steps, it wasn't all that strong, and the odor of the burning resin helped to subdue it.

I went on down. If there were dead mortals here, well, I couldn't run away from them.

But on the first level beneath the ground, I found no corpses. Only a vast cool burial chamber with its rusted iron doors open to the stairs, and three giant stone sarcophagi in the center of it. It was very like Magnus's cell above, only much larger. It had the same low curved ceiling, the same crude and gaping fireplace.

And what could that mean, except that other vampires had once slept here? No one puts fireplaces in burial vaults. At least not that I had ever known. And there were even stone benches here. And the sarcophagi were like the one above, with great figures carved on them.

But years of dust overlay everything. And there were so many spider-webs. Surely no vampires dwelled here now. Quite impossible. Yet it was very strange. Where were those who had lain in these coffins? Had they burnt themselves up like Magnus? Or were they still existing somewhere?

I went in and opened the sarcophagi one by one. Nothing but dust

inside. No evidence of other vampires at all, no indication that any other vampires existed.

I went out and continued down the stairway, even though the smell of the decay grew stronger and stronger. In fact, it very quickly became unbearable.

It was coming from behind a door that I could see below, and I had real difficulty in making myself approach it. Of course as a mortal man I'd loathed this smell, but that was nothing to the aversion I felt now. My new body wanted to run from it. I stopped, took a deep breath, and forced myself towards the door, determined to see what the fiend had done here.

Well, the stench was nothing to the sight of it.

In a deep prison cell lay a heap of corpses in all states of decay, the bones and rotted flesh crawling with worms and insects. Rats ran from the light of the torch, brushing past my legs as they made for the stairs. And my nausea became a knot in my throat. The stench suffocated me.

But I couldn't stop staring at these bodies. There was something important here, something terribly important, to be realized. And it came to me suddenly that all these dead victims had been men—their boots and ragged clothing gave evidence of that—and every single one of them had yellow hair, very much like my own hair. The few who had features left appeared to be young men, tall, slight of build. And the most recent occupant here—the wet and reeking corpse that lay with its arms outstretched through the bars—so resembled me that he might have been a brother.

In a daze, I moved forward until the tip of my boot touched his head. I lowered the torch, my mouth opening as if to scream. The wet sticky eyes that swarmed with gnats were blue eyes!

I stumbled backwards. A wild fear gripped me that the thing would move, grab hold of my ankle. And I knew why it would. As I drew up against the wall, I tripped on a plate of rotted food and a pitcher. The pitcher went over and broke, and out of it the curdled milk spilled like vomit.

Pain circled my ribs. Blood came up like liquid fire into my mouth and it shot out of my lips, splashing on the floor in front of me. I had to reach for the open door to steady myself.

But through the haze of nausea, I stared at the blood. I stared at the

gorgeous crimson color of it in the light of the torch. I watched the blood darken as it sank into the mortar between the stones. The blood was alive and the sweet smell of it cut like a blade through the stench of the dead. Spasms of thirst drove away the nausea. My back was arching. I was bending lower and lower to the blood with astonishing elasticity.

And all the while, my thoughts raced: This young man had been alive in this cell; this rotted food and milk were here either to nourish or torment him. He had died in the cell, trapped with those corpses, knowing full well he would soon be one of them.

God, to suffer that! To suffer that! And how many others had known exactly the same fate, young men with yellow hair, all of them.

I was down on my knees and bending over. I held the torch low with my left hand and my head went all the way down to the blood, my tongue flashing out of my mouth so that I saw it like the tongue of a lizard. It scraped at the blood on the floor. Shivers of ecstasy. Oh, too lovely!

Was I doing this? Was I lapping up this blood not two inches from this dead body? Was my heart heaving with every taste not two inches from this dead boy whom Magnus had brought here as he brought me? This boy that Magnus had then condemned to death instead of immortality?

The filthy cell flickered on and off like a flame as I licked up the blood. The dead man's hair touched my forehead. His eye like a fractured crystal stared at me.

Why wasn't I locked in this cell? What test had I passed that I was not screaming now as I shook the bars, the horror that I had foreseen in the village inn slowly closing in on me?

The blood tremors passed through my arms and legs. And the sound I heard—the gorgeous sound, as enthralling as the crimson of the blood, the blue of the boy's eye, the glistening wings of the gnat, the sliding opaline body of the worm, the blaze of the torch—was my own raw and guttural screaming.

I dropped the torch and struggled backwards on my knees, crashing against the tin plate and the broken pitcher. I climbed to my feet and ran up the stairway. And as I slammed shut the dungeon door, my screams rose up and up to the very top of the tower.

I was lost in the sound as it bounced off the stones and came back at me. I couldn't stop, couldn't close my mouth or cover it.

But through the barred entranceway and through a dozen narrow windows above I saw the unmistakable light of morning coming. My screams died. The stones had begun to glow. The light seeped around me like scalding steam, burning my eyelids.

I made no decision to run. I was simply doing it, running up and up to the inner chamber.

As I came out of the passage, the room was full of a dim purple fire. The jewels overflowing the chest appeared to be moving. I was almost blind as I lifted the lid of the sarcophagus.

Quickly, it fell into place above me. The pain in my face and hands died away, and I was still and I was safe, and fear and sorrow melted into a cool and fathomless darkness.

7

It was thirst that awakened me.

And I knew at once where I was, and what I was, too.

There were no sweet mortal dreams of chilled white wine or the fresh green grass beneath the apple trees in my father's orchard.

In the narrow darkness of the stone coffin, I felt of my fangs with my fingers and found them dangerously long and keen as little knife blades.

And a mortal was in the tower, and though he hadn't reached the door of the outer chamber I could *hear* his thoughts.

I *heard* his consternation when he discovered the door to the stairs unlocked. That had never happened before. I heard his fear as he discovered the burnt timbers on the floor and called out "Master." A servant was what he was, and a somewhat treacherous one at that.

It fascinated me, this soundless hearing of his mind, but something else was disturbing me. It was his scent!

I lifted the stone lid of the sarcophagus and climbed out. The scent was faint, but it was almost irresistible. It was the musky smell of the first whore in whose bed I had spent my passion. It was the roasted venison after days and days of starvation in winter. It was new wine, or fresh apples, or water roaring over a cliff's edge on a hot day when I reached out to gulp it in handfuls.

Only it was immeasurably richer than that, this scent, and the appetite that wanted it was infinitely keener and more simple.

I moved through the secret tunnel like a creature swimming through the darkness and, pushing out the stone in the outer chamber, rose to my feet.

There stood the mortal, staring at me, his face pale with shock.

An old, withered man he was, and by some indefinable tangle of considerations in his mind, I knew he was a stable master and a coachman. But the hearing of this was maddeningly imprecise.

Then the immediate malice he felt towards me came like the heat of a stove. And there was no misunderstanding that. His eyes raced over my face and form. The hatred boiled, crested. It was he who had procured

the fine clothes I wore. He who had tended the unfortunates in the dungeon while they had lived. And why, he demanded in silent outrage, was I not there?

This made me love him very much, as you can imagine. I could have crushed him to death in my bare hands for this.

"The master!" he said desperately. "Where is he? Master!"

But what did he think the master was? A sorcerer of some kind, that was what he thought. And now I had the power. In sum, he didn't know anything that would be of use to me.

But as I comprehended all this, as I drank it up from his mind, quite against his will, I was becoming entranced with the veins in his face and in his hands. And that smell was intoxicating me.

I could feel the dim throbbing of his heart, and then I could taste his blood, just what it would be like, and there came to me some full-blown sense of it, rich and hot as it filled me.

"The master's gone, burned in the fire," I murmured, hearing a strange monotone coming from myself. I moved slowly towards him.

He glanced at the blackened floor. He looked up at the blackened ceiling. "No, this is a lie," he said. He was outraged, and his anger pulsed like a light in my eye. I felt the bitterness of his mind and its desperate reasoning.

Ah, but that living flesh could look like this! I was in the grip of remorseless appetite.

And he knew it. In some wild and unreasoning way, he sensed it; and throwing me one last malevolent glance he ran for the stairway.

Immediately I caught him. In fact, I enjoyed catching him, so simple it was. One instant I was willing myself to reach out and close the distance between us. The next I had him helpless in my hands, holding him off the floor so that his feet swung free, straining to kick me.

I held him as easily as a powerful man might hold a child, that was the proportion. His mind was a jumble of frantic thoughts, and he seemed unable to decide upon any course to save himself.

But the faint humming of these thoughts was being obliterated by the vision he presented to me.

His eyes weren't the portals of his soul anymore. They were gelatinous orbs whose colors tantalized me. And his body was nothing but a writhing morsel of hot flesh and blood, that I must have or die without.

It horrified me that this food should be alive, that delicious blood should flow through these struggling arms and fingers, and then it seemed perfect that it should. He was what he was, and I was what I was, and I was going to feast upon him.

I pulled him to my lips. I tore the bulging artery in his neck. The blood hit the roof of my mouth. I gave a little cry as I crushed him against me. It wasn't the burning fluid the master's blood had been, not that lovely elixir I had drunk from the stones of the dungeon. No, that had been light itself made liquid. Rather this was a thousand times more luscious, tasting of the thick human heart that pumped it, the very essence of that hot, almost smoky scent.

I could feel my shoulders rising, my fingers biting deeper into his flesh, and almost a humming sound rising out of me. No vision but that of his tiny gasping soul, but a swoon so powerful that he himself, what he was, had no part in it.

It was with all my will that, before the final moment, I forced him away. How I wanted to feel his heart stop. How I wanted to feel the beats slow and cease and know I *possessed* him.

But I didn't dare.

He slipped heavily from my arms, his limbs sprawling out on the stones, the whites of his eyes showing beneath his half-closed eyelids.

And I found myself unable to turn away from his death, mutely fascinated by it. Not the smallest detail must escape me. I heard his breath give out, I saw the body relax into death without struggle.

The blood warmed me. I felt it beating in my veins. My face was hot against the palms of my hands, and my vision had grown powerfully sharp. I felt strong beyond all imagining.

I picked up the corpse and dragged it down and down the winding steps of the tower, into the stinking dungeon, and threw it to rot with the rest there.

8

It was time to go out, time to test my powers.

I filled my purse and my pockets with as much money as they would comfortably hold, and I buckled on a jeweled sword that was not too old-fashioned, and then went down, locking the iron gate to the tower behind me.

The tower was obviously all that remained of a ruined house. But I picked up the scent of horses on the wind—strong, very nice smell, perhaps the way an animal would pick up the scent—and I made my way silently around the back to a makeshift stable.

It contained not only a handsome old carriage, but four magnificent black mares. Perfectly wonderful that they weren't afraid of me. I kissed their smooth flanks and their long soft noses. In fact, I was so in love with them I could have spent hours just learning all I could of them through my new senses. But I was eager for other things.

There was a human in the stable also, and I'd caught his scent too as soon as I entered. But he was sound asleep, and when I roused him, I saw he was a dull-witted boy who posed no danger to me.

"I'm your master now," I said, as I gave him a gold coin, "but I won't be needing you tonight, except to saddle a horse for me."

He understood well enough to tell me there was no saddle in the stable before he fell back to dozing.

All right. I cut the long carriage reins from one of the bridles, put it on the most beautiful of the mares myself, and rode out bareback.

I can't tell you what it was like, the burst of the horse under me, the chilling wind, and the high arch of the night sky. My body was melded to animal. I was flying over the snow, laughing aloud and now and then singing. I hit high notes I had never reached before, then plunged into a lustrous baritone. Sometimes I was simply crying out in something like joy. It had to be joy. But how could a monster feel joy?

I wanted to ride to Paris, of course. But I knew I wasn't ready. There was too much I didn't know about my powers yet. And so I rode in the opposite direction, until I came to the outskirts of a small village.

There were no humans about, and as I approached the little church, I felt a human rage and impulsiveness breaking through my strange, translucent happiness.

I dismounted quickly and tried the sacristy door. Its lock gave and I walked through the nave to the Communion rail.

I don't know what I felt at this moment. Maybe I wanted something to happen. I felt murderous. And lightning did not strike. I stared at the red glare of the vigil lights on the altar. I looked up at the figures frozen in the unilluminated blackness of the stained glass.

And in desperation, I went up over the Communion rail and put my hands on the tabernacle itself. I broke open its tiny little doors, and I reached in and took out the jeweled ciborium with its consecrated Hosts. No, there was no power here, nothing that I could feel or see or know with any of my monstrous senses, nothing that responded to me. There were wafers and gold and wax and light.

I bowed my head on the altar. I must have looked like the priest in the middle of mass. Then I shut up everything in the tabernacle again. I closed it all up just fine, so nobody would know a sacrilege had been committed.

And then I made my way down one side of the church and up the other, the lurid paintings and statues captivating me. I realized I was seeing the process of the sculptor and the painter, not merely the creative miracle. I was seeing the way the lacquer caught the light. I was seeing little mistakes in perspective, flashes of unexpected expressiveness.

What will the great masters be to my eyes, I was thinking. I found myself staring at the simplest designs painted in the plaster walls. Then I knelt down to look at the patterns in the marble, until I realized I was stretched out, staring wide-eyed at the floor under my nose.

This is getting out of hand, surely. I got up, shivering a little and crying a little, and looking at the candles as if they were alive, and getting very sick of this.

Time to get out of this place and go into the village.

For two hours I was in the village, and for most of that time I was not seen or heard by anyone.

I found it absurdly easy to jump over the garden walls, to spring from the earth to low rooftops. I could leap from a height of three stories to the ground, and climb the side of a building digging my nails and my toes into the mortar between the stones.

I peered in windows. I saw couples asleep in their ruffled beds, infants dozing in cradles, old women sewing by feeble light.

And the houses looked like dollhouses to me in their completeness. Perfect collections of toys with their dainty little wooden chairs and polished mantelpieces, mended curtains and well-scrubbed floors.

I saw all this as one who had never been a part of life, gazing lovingly at the simplest details. A starched white apron on its hook, worn boots on the hearth, a pitcher beside a bed.

And the people … oh, the people were marvels.

Of course I picked up their scent, but I was satisfied and it didn't make me miserable. Rather I doted upon their pink skin and delicate limbs, the precision with which they moved, the whole process of their lives as if I had never been one of them at all. That they had five fingers on each hand seemed remarkable. They yawned, cried, shifted in sleep. I was entranced with them.

And when they spoke, the thickest walls could not prevent me from hearing their words.

But the most beguiling aspect of my explorations was that *I heard the thoughts of these people*, just as I had heard the evil servant whom I killed. Unhappiness, misery, expectation. These were currents in the air, some weak, some frighteningly strong, some no more than a glimmer gone before I knew the source.

But I could not, strictly speaking, read minds.

Most trivial thought was veiled from me, and when I lapsed into my own considerations, even the strongest passions did not intrude. In sum, it was intense feeling that carried thought to me and only when I wished to receive it, and there were some minds that even in the heat of anger gave me nothing.

These discoveries jolted me and almost bruised me, as did the common beauty everywhere I looked, the splendor in the ordinary. But I knew perfectly well there was an abyss behind it into which I might quite suddenly and helplessly drop.

After all, I wasn't one of these warm and pulsing miracles of

complication and innocence. They were my victims.

Time to leave the village. I'd learned enough here. But just before I left, I performed one final act of daring. I couldn't help myself. I just had to do it.

Pulling up the high collar of my red cloak, I went into the inn, sought a corner away from the fire, and ordered a glass of wine. Everyone in the little place gave me the eye, but not because they knew there was a supernatural being in their midst. They were merely glancing at the richly dressed gentleman! And for twenty minutes I remained, testing it even further. No one, not even the man who served me, detected anything! Of course I didn't touch the wine. One whiff of it and I knew that my body could not abide it. But the point was, I *could fool mortals!* I could move among them!

I was jubilant when I left the inn. As soon as I reached the woods, I started to run. And then I was running so fast that the sky and the trees had become a blur. I was almost flying.

Then I stopped, leapt, danced about. I gathered up stones and threw them so far I could not see them land. And when I saw a fallen tree limb, thick and full of sap, I picked it up and broke it over my knee as if it were a twig.

I shouted, then sang at the top of my lungs again. I collapsed on the grass laughing.

And then I rose, tore off my cloak and my sword, and commenced to turn cartwheels. I turned cartwheels just like the acrobats at Renaud's. And then I somersaulted perfectly. I did it again, and this time backwards, and then forward, and then I turned double somersaults and triple somersaults, and leapt straight up in the air some fifteen feet off the ground before landing squarely on my feet, somewhat out of breath, and wanting to do these tricks some more.

But the morning was coming.

Only the subtlest change in the air, the sky, but I knew it as if Hell's Bells were ringing. Hell's Bells calling the vampire home to the sleep of death. Ah, the melting loveliness of the sky, the loveliness of the vision of dim belfries. And an odd thought came to me, that in hell the light of the fires would be so bright it would be like sunlight, and this would be the only sunlight I would ever see again.

But what have I done? I thought. I didn't ask for this, I didn't give in.

Even when Magnus told me I was dying, I fought him, and yet I am hearing Hell's Bells now.

Well, who gives a damn?

When I reached the churchyard, quite ready for the ride home, something distracted me.

I stood holding the rein of my horse and looking at the small field of graves and could not quite figure what it was. Then again it came, and I knew. I felt a distinct *presence* in the churchyard.

I stood so still I heard the blood thundering in my veins.

It wasn't human, this *presence*! It had no scent. And there were no human thoughts coming from it. Rather it seemed veiled and defended and it knew I was here. It was watching me.

Could I be imagining this?

I stood listening, looking. A scattering of gray tombstones poked through the snow. And far away stood a row of old crypts, larger, ornamented, but just as ruined as the stones.

It seemed *the presence* lingered somewhere near the crypts, and then I felt it distinctly as it moved towards the enclosing trees.

"Who are you!" I demanded. I heard my voice like a knife. "Answer me!" I called out even louder.

I felt a great tumult in it, this *presence*, and I was certain that it was moving away very rapidly.

I dashed across the churchyard after it, and I could feel it receding. Yet I saw nothing in the barren forest. And I realized I was stronger than it, and that it had been afraid of me!

Well, fancy that. Afraid of me.

And I had no idea whether or not it was corporeal, vampire the same as I was, or something without a body.

"Well, one thing is sure," I said. "You're a coward!"

Tingling in the air. The forest seemed to breathe for an instant.

A sense of my own might came over me that had been brewing all along. I was in fear of nothing. Not the church, not the dark, not the worms swarming over the corpses in my dungeon. Not even this strange eerie force that had retreated into the forest, and seemed to be near at hand again. Not even of men.

I was an extraordinary fiend! If I'd been sitting on the steps of hell with my elbows on my knees and the devil had said, "Lestat, come, choose the form of the fiend you wish to be to roam the earth," how could I have chosen a better fiend than what I was? And it seemed suddenly that suffering was an idea I'd known in another existence and would never know again.

I can't help but laugh now when I think of that first night, especially of that particular moment.

9

The next night I went tearing into Paris with as much gold as I could carry. The sun had just sunk beneath the horizon when I opened my eyes, and a clear azure light still emanated from the sky as I mounted and rode off to the city.

I was starving.

And as luck would have it, I was attacked by a cutthroat before I ever reached the city walls. He came thundering out of the woods, pistol blazing, and I actually saw the ball leave the barrel of the gun and go past me as I leapt off my horse and went at him.

He was a powerful man, and I was astonished at how much I enjoyed his cursing and struggling. The vicious servant I'd taken last night had been old. This was a hard young body. Even the roughness of his badly shaven beard tantalized me, and I loved the strength in his hands as he struck at me. But it was no sport. He froze as I sank my teeth into the artery, and when the blood came it was pure voluptuousness. In fact, it was so exquisite that I forgot completely about drawing away before the heart stopped.

We were on our knees in the snow together, and it was a wallop, the life going into me with the blood. I couldn't move for a long moment. Hmmm, broke the rules already, I thought. Am I supposed to die now? Doesn't look like that is going to happen. Just this rolling delirium.

And the poor dead bastard in my arms who would have blown my face off with his pistol if I had let him.

I kept staring at the darkening sky, at the great spangled mass of shadows ahead that was Paris. And there was only this warmth after, and obviously increasing strength.

So far so good. I climbed to my feet and wiped my lips. Then I pitched the body as far as I could across the unbroken snow. I was more powerful than ever.

And for a little while I stood there, feeling gluttonous and murderous, just wanting to kill again so this ecstasy would go on forever. But I couldn't have drunk any more blood, and gradually I grew calm and

changed somewhat. A desolate feeling came over me. An aloneness as though the thief had been a friend to me or kin to me and had deserted me. I couldn't understand it, except that the drinking had been so intimate. His scent was on me now, and I sort of liked it. But there he lay yards away on the crumpled crust of the snow, hands and face looking gray under the rising moon.

Hell, the son of a bitch was going to kill me, wasn't he?

Within an hour I had found a capable attorney, name of Pierre Roget, at his home in the Marais, an ambitious young man with a mind that was completely open to me. Greedy, clever, conscientious. Exactly what I wanted. Not only could I read his thoughts when he wasn't talking, but he believed everything I told him.

He was most eager to be of service to the husband of an heiress from Saint-Domingue. And certainly he would put out all the candles, save one, if my eyes were still hurting from tropical fever. As for my fortune in gems, he dealt with the most reputable jewelers. Bank accounts and letters of exchange for my family in the Auvergne—yes, immediately.

This was easier than playing Lelio.

But I was having a hell of a time concentrating. Everything was a distraction—the smoky flame of the candle on the brass inkstand, the gilded pattern of the Chinese wallpaper, and Monsieur Roget's amazing little face, with its eyes glistening behind tiny octagonal spectacles. His teeth kept making me think of clavier keys.

Ordinary objects in the room appeared to dance. A chest stared at me with its brass knobs for eyes. And a woman singing in an upstairs room over the low rumble of a stove seemed to be saying something in a low and vibrant secret language, such as Come to me.

But it was going to be this way forever apparently, and I had to get myself in hand. Money must be sent by courier this very night to my father and my brothers, and to Nicolas de Lenfent, a musician with Renaud's House of Thesbians, who was to be told only that the wealth had come from his friend Lestat de Lioncourt. It was Lestat de Lioncourt's wish that Nicolas de Lenfent move at once to a decent flat on the Ile St.-Louis or some other proper place, and Roget should, of course, assist in this, and thereafter Nicolas de Lenfent should study the violin.

Roget should buy for Nicolas de Lenfent the best available violin, a Stradivarius.

And finally a separate letter was to be written to my mother, the Marquise Gabrielle de Lioncourt, in Italian, so that no one else could read it, and a special purse was to be sent to her. If she could undertake a journey to southern Italy, the place where she'd been born, maybe she could stop the course of her consumption.

It made me positively dizzy to think of her with the freedom to escape. I wondered what she would think about it.

For a long moment I didn't hear anything Roget said. I was picturing her dressed for once in her life as the marquise she was, and riding out of the gates of our castle in her own coach and six. And then I remembered her ravaged face and heard the cough in her lungs as if she were here with me.

"Send the letter and the money to her tonight," I said. "I don't care what it costs. Do it." I laid down enough gold to keep her in comfort for a lifetime, if she had a lifetime.

"Now," I said, "do you know of a merchant who deals in fine furnishings—paintings, tapestries? Someone who might open his shops and storehouses to us this very evening?"

"Of course, Monsieur. Allow me to get my coat. We shall go immediately."

We were headed for the faubourg St.-Denis within minutes.

And for hours after that, I roamed with my mortal attendants through a paradise of material wealth, claiming everything that I wanted. Couches and chairs, china and silver plate, drapery and statuary—all things were mine for the taking. And in my mind I transformed the castle where I'd grown up as more and more goods were carried out to be crated and shipped south immediately. To my little nieces and nephews I sent toys of which they'd never dreamed—tiny ships with real sails, dollhouses of unbelievable craft and perfection.

I learned from each thing that I touched. And there were moments when all the color and texture became too lustrous, too overpowering. I wept inwardly.

But I would have got away with playing human to the hilt during all this time, except for one very unfortunate mishap.

At one point as we wandered through the warehouse, a rat appeared

as bold city rats will, racing along the wall very close to us. I stared at it. Nothing unusual of course. But there amid plaster and hardwood and embroidered cloth, the rat looked marvelously particular. And the men, misunderstanding of course, began mumbling frantic apologies for the rat and stamping their feet to drive it away from us.

To me, their voices became a mixture of sounds like stew bubbling in a pot. All I could think was that the rat had very tiny feet, and that I had not yet examined a rat nor any small warm-blooded creature. I went and caught the rat, rather too easily I think, and looked at its feet. I wanted to see what kind of little toenails it had, and what was the flesh like between its little toes, and I forgot the men entirely.

It was their sudden silence that brought me back to myself. They were both staring dumbfounded at me.

I smiled at them as innocently as I could, let the rat go, and went back to purchasing.

Well, they never said anything about it. But there was a lesson in this. I had really frightened them.

Later that night, I gave my lawyer one last commission: He must send a present of one hundred crowns to a theater owner by the name of Renaud with a note of thanks from me for his kindness.

"Find out the situation with this little playhouse," I said. "Find out if there are any debts against it."

Of course, I'd never go near the theater. They must never guess what had happened, never be contaminated by it. And for now I had done what I could for all those I loved, hadn't I?

And when all this was finished, when the church clocks struck three over the white rooftops and I was hungry enough to smell blood everywhere that I turned, I found myself standing in the empty boulevard du Temple.

The dirty snow had turned to slush under the carriage wheels, and I was looking at the House of Thesbians with its spattered walls and its torn playbills and the name of the young mortal actor, Lestat de Valois, still written there in red letters.

10

The following nights were a rampage. I began to drink up Paris as if the city were blood. In the early evening I raided the worst sections, tangling with thieves and killers, often giving them a playful chance to defend themselves, then snarling them in a fatal embrace and feasting to the point of gluttony.

I savored different types of kills: big lumbering creatures, small wiry ones, the hirsute and the dark-skinned, but my favorite was the very young scoundrel who'd kill you for the coins in your pocket.

I loved their grunting and cursing. Sometimes I held them with one hand and laughed at them till they were in a positive fury, and I threw their knives over the rooftops and smashed their pistols to pieces against the walls. But in all this my full strength was like a cat never allowed to spring. And the one thing I loathed in them was fear. If a victim was really afraid I usually lost interest.

As time went on, I learned to postpone the kill. I drank a little from one, and more from another, and then took the grand wallop of the death itself from the third or the fourth one. It was the chase and the struggle that I was multiplying for my own pleasure. And when I'd had enough of all this hunting and drinking in an evening to content some six healthy vampires, I turned my eyes to the rest of Paris, all the glorious pastimes I couldn't afford before.

But not before going to Roget's house for news of Nicolas or my mother.

Her letters were brimming with happiness at my good fortune, and she promised to go to Italy in the spring if only she could get the strength to do it. Right now she wanted books from Paris, of course, and newspapers, and keyboard music for the harpsichord I'd sent. And she had to know, Was I truly happy? Had I fulfilled my dreams? She was leery of wealth. I had been so happy at Renaud's. I must confide in her.

It was agony to hear these words read to me. Time to become a liar in earnest, which I had never been. But for her I would do it.

As for Nicki, I should have known he wouldn't settle for gifts and

vague tales, that he would demand to see me and keep on demanding it. He was frightening Roget a little bit.

But it didn't do any good. There was nothing the attorney could tell him except what I've explained. And I was so wary of seeing Nicki that I didn't even ask for the location of the house into which he'd moved. I told the lawyer to make certain he studied with his Italian maestro and that he had everything he could possibly desire.

But I did manage somehow to hear quite against my will that Nicolas hadn't quit the theater. He was still playing at Renaud's House of Thesbians.

Now this maddened me. Why the hell, I thought, should he do that?

Because he loved it there, the same as I had, that was why. Did anybody really have to tell me this? We had all been kindred in that little rattrap playhouse. Don't think about the moment when the curtain goes up, when the audience begins to clap and shout …

No. Send cases of wine and champagne to the theater. Send flowers for Jeannette and Luchina, the girls I had fought with the most and most loved, and more gifts of gold for Renaud. Pay off the debts he had.

But as the nights passed and these gifts were dispatched, Renaud became embarrassed about all this. A fortnight later, Roget told me Renaud had made a proposal.

He wanted me to buy the House of Thesbians and keep him on as manager with enough capital to stage larger and more wondrous spectacles than he'd ever before attempted. With my money and his cleverness, we could make the house the talk of Paris.

I didn't answer right away. It took me more than a moment to realize that I could own the theater just like that. Own it like the gems in the chest, or the clothes I wore, or the dollhouse I'd sent to my nieces. I said no, and went out slamming the door.

Then I came right back.

"All right, buy the theater," I said, "and give him ten thousand crowns to do whatever he wants." This was a fortune. And I didn't even know why I had done this.

This pain will pass, I thought, it has to. And I must gain some control over my thoughts, realize that these things cannot affect me.

After all, where did I spend my time now? At the grandest theaters in Paris. I had the finest seats for the ballet and the opera, for the dramas

of Molière and Racine. I was hanging about before the footlights gazing up at the great actors and actresses. I had suits made in every color of the rainbow, jewels on my fingers, wigs in the latest fashion, shoes with diamond buckles as well as gold heels.

And I had eternity to be drunk on the poetry I was hearing, drunk on the singing and the sweep of the dancer's arms, drunk on the organ throbbing in the great cavern of Notre Dame and drunk on the chimes that counted out the hours to me, drunk on the snow falling soundlessly on the empty gardens of the Tuileries.

And each night I was becoming less wary among mortals, more at ease with them.

Not even a month had passed before I got up the courage to plunge right into a crowded ball at the Palais Royal. I was warm and ruddy from the kill and at once I joined the dance. I didn't arouse the slightest suspicion. Rather the women seemed drawn to me, and I loved the touch of their hot fingers and the soft crush of their arms and their breasts.

After that, I bore right into the early evening crowds in the boulevards. Rushing past Renaud's, I squeezed into the other houses to see the puppet shows, the mimes, and the acrobats. I didn't flee from street lamps anymore. I went into cafés and bought coffee just to feel the warmth of it against my fingers, and I spoke to men when I chose.

I even argued with them about the state of the monarchy, and I went madly into mastering billiards and card games, and it seemed to me I might go right into the House of Thesbians if I wanted to, buy a ticket, and slip up into the balcony and see what was going on. See Nicolas!

Well, I didn't do that. What was I dreaming of to go near to Nicki? It was one thing to fool strangers, men and women who'd never known me, but what would Nicolas see if he looked into my eyes? What would he see when he looked at my skin? Besides I had too much to do, I told myself.

I was learning more and more about my nature and my powers.

My hair, for example, was lighter, yet thicker, and grew not at all. Nor did my fingernails and toenails, which had a greater luster, though if I filed them away, they would regenerate during the day to the length they had been when I died. And though people couldn't discern such

secrets on inspection, they sensed other things, an unnatural gleam to my eyes, too many reflected colors in them, and a faint luminescence to my skin.

When I was hungry this luminescence was very marked. All the more reason to feed.

And I was learning that I could put people in thrall if I stared at them too hard, and my voice required very strict modulation. I might speak too low for mortal hearing, and were I to shout or laugh too loud, I could shatter another's ears. I could hurt my own ears.

There were other difficulties: my movements. I tended to walk, to run, to dance, and to smile and gesture like a human being, but if surprised, horrified, grieved, my body could bend and contort like that of an acrobat.

Even my facial expressions could be wildly exaggerated. Once forgetting myself as I walked in the boulevard du Temple, thinking of Nicolas naturally, I sat down beneath a tree, drew up my knees, and put my hands to the side of my head like a stricken elf in a fairy tale. Eighteenth-century gentlemen in brocade frock coats and white silk stockings didn't do things like that, at least not on the street.

And another time, while deep in contemplation of the changing of the light on surfaces, I hopped up and sat with my legs crossed on the top of a carriage, with my elbows on my knees.

Well, this startled people. It frightened them. But more often than not, even when frightened by the whiteness of my skin, they merely looked away. They deceived themselves, I quickly realized, that everything was explainable. It was the rational eighteenth-century habit of mind.

After all there hadn't been a case of witchcraft in a hundred years, the last that I knew of being the trial of La Voisin, a fortune-teller, burnt alive in the time of Louis the Sun King.

And this was Paris. So if I accidentally crushed crystal glasses when I lifted them, or slammed doors back into the walls when opening them, people assumed I was drunk.

But now and then I answered questions before mortals had asked them of me. I fell into stuporous states just looking at candles or tree branches, and didn't move for so long that people asked if I was ill.

And my worst problem was laughter. I would go into fits of laughter and I couldn't stop. Anything could set me off. The sheer madness of my

own position might set me off.

This can still happen to me fairly easily. No loss, no pain, no deepening understanding of my predicament changes it. Something strikes me as funny. I begin to laugh and I can't stop.

It makes other vampires furious, by the way. But I jump ahead of the tale.

As you have probably noticed, I have made no mention of other vampires. The fact was I could not find any.

I could find no other supernatural being in all of Paris.

Mortals to the left of me, mortals to the right of me, and now and then —just when I'd convinced myself it wasn't happening at all—I'd feel that vague and maddeningly elusive *presence*.

It was never any more substantial than it had been the first night in the village churchyard. And invariably it was in the vicinity of a Paris cemetery.

Always, I'd stop, turn, and try to draw it out. But it was never any good, the thing was gone before I could be certain of it. I could never find it on my own, and the stench of city cemeteries was so revolting I wouldn't, couldn't, go into them.

This was coming to seem more than fastidiousness or bad memories of my own dungeon beneath the tower. Revulsion at the sight or smell of death seemed part of my nature.

I couldn't watch executions any more than when I was that trembling boy from the Auvergne, and corpses made me cover my face. I think I was offended by death unless I was the cause of it! And I had to get clean away from my dead victims almost immediately.

But to return to the matter of *the presence*. I came to wonder if it wasn't some other species of haunt, something that couldn't commune with me. On the other hand, I had the distinct impression that *the presence* was watching me, maybe even deliberately revealing itself to me.

Whatever the case, I saw no other vampires in Paris. And I was beginning to wonder if there could be more than one of us at any given time. Maybe Magnus destroyed the vampire from whom he stole the blood. Maybe he had to perish once he passed on his powers. And I too would die if I were to make another vampire.

But no, that didn't make sense. Magnus had had great strength even

after giving me his blood. And he had bound his vampire victim in chains when he stole his powers.

An enormous mystery, and a maddening one. But for the moment, ignorance was truly bliss. And I was doing very well discovering things without the help of Magnus. And maybe this was what Magnus had intended. Maybe this had been his way of learning centuries ago.

I remembered his words, that in the secret chamber of the tower I would find all that I needed to prosper.

The hours flew as I roamed the city. And only to conceal myself in the tower by day did I ever deliberately leave the company of human beings.

Yet I was beginning to wonder: "If you can dance with them, and play billiards with them and talk with them, then why can't you dwell among them, just the way you did when you were living? Why couldn't you *pass* for one of them? And enter again into the very fabric of life where there is … what? Say it!"

And here it was nearly spring. And the nights were getting warmer, and the House of Thesbians was putting on a new drama with new acrobats between the acts. And the trees were in bloom again, and every waking moment I thought of Nicki.

One night in March, I realized as Roget read my mother's letter to me that I could read as well as he could. I had learned from a thousand sources how to read without even trying. I took the letter home with me.

Even the inner chamber was no longer really cold. And I sat by the window reading my mother's words for the first time in private. I could almost hear her voice speaking to me:

"Nicolas writes that you have purchased Renaud's. So you own the little theater on the boulevard where you were so happy. But do you possess the happiness still? When will you answer me?"

I folded up the letter and put it in my pocket. The blood tears were coming into my eyes. Why must she understand so much, yet so little?

11

The wind had lost its sting. All the smells of the city were coming back. And the markets were full of flowers. I dashed to Roget's house without even thinking of what I was doing and demanded that he tell me where Nicolas lived.

I would just have a look at him, make certain he was in good health, be certain the house was fine enough.

It was on the Ile St.-Louis, and very impressive just as I'd wanted, but the windows were all shuttered along the quais.

I stood watching it for a long time, as one carriage after another roared over the nearby bridge. And I knew that I had to see Nicki.

I started to climb the wall just as I had climbed walls in the village, and I found it amazingly easy. One story after another I climbed, much higher than I had ever dared to climb in the past, and then I sped over the roof, and down the inside of the courtyard to look for Nicki's flat.

I passed a handful of open windows before I came to the right one. And then there was Nicolas in the glare of the supper table and Jeannette and Luchina were with him, and they were having the late night meal that we used to take together when the theater closed.

At the first sight of him, I drew back away from the casement and closed my eyes. I might have fallen if my right hand hadn't held fast to the wall as if with a will of its own. I had seen the room for only an instant, but every detail was fixed in my mind.

He was dressed in old green velvet, finery he'd worn so casually in the crooked streets at home. But everywhere around him were signs of the wealth I'd sent him, leather-bound books on the shelves, and an inlaid desk with an oval painting above it, and the Italian violin gleaming atop the new pianoforte.

He wore a jeweled ring I'd sent, and his brown hair was tied back with a black silk ribbon, and he sat brooding with his elbows on the table eating nothing from the expensive china plate before him.

Carefully I opened my eyes and looked at him again. All his natural gifts were there in a blaze of light: the delicate but strong limbs, large

sober brown eyes, and his mouth that for all the irony and sarcasm that could come out of it was childlike and ready to be kissed.

There seemed in him a frailty I'd never perceived or understood. Yet he looked infinitely intelligent, my Nicki, full of tangled uncompromising thoughts, as he listened to Jeannette, who was talking rapidly.

"Lestat's married," she said as Luchina nodded, "the wife's rich, and he can't let her know he was a common actor, it's simple enough."

"I say we let him in peace," Luchina said. "He saved the theater from closing, and he showers us with gifts …"

"I don't believe it," Nicolas said bitterly. "He wouldn't be ashamed of us." There was a suppressed rage in his voice, an ugly grief. "And why did he leave the way he did? I heard him calling me! The window was smashed to pieces! I tell you I was half awake, and I heard his voice …"

An uneasy silence fell among them. They didn't believe his account of things, how I'd vanished from the garret, and telling it again would only isolate him and embitter him further. I could sense this from all their thoughts.

"You didn't really know Lestat," he said now, almost in a surly fashion, returning to the manageable conversation that other mortals would allow him. "Lestat would spit in the face of anyone who would be ashamed of us! He sends me money. What am I supposed to do with it? He plays games with us!"

No answer from the others, the solid, practical beings who would not speak against the mysterious benefactor. Things were going too well.

And in the lengthening silence, I felt the depth of Nicki's anguish, I *knew* it as if I were peering into his skull. And I couldn't bear it.

I couldn't bear delving into his soul without his knowing it. Yet I couldn't stop myself from sensing a vast secret terrain inside him, grimmer perhaps than I had ever dreamed, and his words came back to me that the darkness in him was like the darkness I'd seen at the inn, and that he tried to conceal it from me.

I could almost see it, this terrain. And in a real way it was beyond his mind, as if his mind were merely a portal to a chaos stretching out from the borders of all we know.

Too frightening that. I didn't want to see it. I didn't want to feel what he felt!

But what could I do *for* him? That was the important thing. What could I do to stop this torment once and for all?

Yet I wanted so to touch him—his hands, his arms, his face. I wanted to feel his flesh with these new immortal fingers. And I found myself whispering the word "Alive." Yes, you are alive and that means you can die. And everything I see when I look at you is utterly insubstantial. It is a commingling of tiny movements and indefinable colors as if you haven't a body at all, but are a collection of heat and light. You are light itself, and what am I now?

Eternal as I am, I curl like a cinder in that blaze.

But the atmosphere of the room had changed. Luchina and Jeannette were taking their leave with polite words. He was ignoring them. He had turned to the window, and he was rising as if he'd been called by a secret voice. The look on his face was indescribable.

He knew I was there!

Instantly, I shot up the slippery wall to the roof.

But I could still *hear* him below. I looked down and I saw his naked hands on the window ledge. And through the silence I heard his panic. He'd sensed that I was there! My presence, mind you, that is what he sensed, just as I sensed *the presence* in the graveyards, but how, he argued with himself, could Lestat have been here?

I was too shocked to do anything. I clung to the roof gutter, and I could feel the departure of the others, feel that he was now alone. And all I could think was, What in the name of hell is this presence that he felt?

I mean I wasn't Lestat anymore, I was this demon, this powerful and greedy vampire, and yet he felt my presence, the presence of Lestat, the young man he knew!

It was a very different thing from a mortal seeing my face and blurting out my name in confusion. He had recognized in my monster self something that he knew and loved.

I stopped listening to him. I merely lay on the roof.

But I knew he was moving below. I knew it when he lifted the violin from its place on the pianoforte, and I knew he was again at the window.

And I put my hands over my ears.

Still the sound came. It came rising out of the instrument and cleaving

the night as if it were some shining element, other than air and light and matter, that might climb to the very stars.

He bore down on the strings, and I could almost see him against my eyelids, swaying back and forth, his head bowed against the violin as if he meant to pass into the music, and then all sense of him vanished and there was only the sound.

The long vibrant notes, and the chilling glissandos, and the violin singing in its own tongue to make every other form of speech seem false. Yet as the song deepened, it became the very essence of despair as if its beauty were a horrid coincidence, grotesquery without a particle of truth.

Was this what he believed, what he had always believed when I talked on and on about goodness? Was he making the violin say it? Was he deliberately creating those long, pure liquid notes to say that beauty meant nothing because it came from the despair inside him, and it had nothing to do with the despair finally, because the despair wasn't beautiful, and beauty then was a horrid irony?

I didn't know the answer. But the sound went beyond him as it always had. It grew bigger than the despair. It fell effortlessly into a slow melody, like water seeking its own downward mountain path. It grew richer and darker still and there seemed something undisciplined and chastening in it, and heartbreaking and vast. I lay on my back on the roof now with my eyes on the stars.

Pinpoints of light mortals could not have seen. Phantom clouds. And the raw, piercing sound of the violin coming slowly with exquisite tension to a close.

I didn't move.

I was in some silent understanding of the language the violin spoke to me. Nicki, if we could talk again … If "our conversation" could only continue.

Beauty wasn't the treachery he imagined it to be, rather it was an uncharted land where one could make a thousand fatal errors, a wild and indifferent paradise without signposts of evil or good.

In spite of all the refinements of civilization that conspired to make art —the dizzying perfection of the string quartet or the sprawling grandeur of Fragonard's canvases—beauty was savage. It was as dangerous and lawless as the earth had been eons before man had one single coherent

thought in his head or wrote codes of conduct on tablets of clay. Beauty was a Savage Garden.

So why must it wound him that the most despairing music is full of beauty? Why must it hurt him and make him cynical and sad and untrusting?

Good and evil, those are concepts man has made. And man is better, really, than the Savage Garden.

But maybe deep inside Nicki had always dreamed of a harmony among all things that I had always known was impossible. Nicki had dreamed not of goodness, but of justice.

But we could never discuss these things now with each other. We could never again be in the inn. Forgive me, Nicki. Good and evil exist still, as they always will. But "our conversation" is over forever.

* * *

Yet even as I left the roof, as I stole silently away from the Ile St.-Louis, I knew what I meant to do.

I didn't admit it to myself but I knew.

The next night it was already late when I reached the boulevard du Temple. I'd fed well in the Ile de la Cité, and the first act at Renaud's House of Thesbians was already under way.

12

I'd dressed as if I were going to Court, in silver brocade with a lavender velvet roquelaure over my shoulders. I had a new sword with a deep-carved silver handle and the usual heavy, ornate buckles on my shoes, the usual lace, gloves, tricorne. And I came to the theater in a hired carriage.

But as soon as I paid the driver I went back the alley and opened the stage door exactly as I used to do.

At once the old atmosphere surrounded me, the smell of the thick greasepaint and the cheap costumes full of sweat and perfume, and the dust. I could see a fragment of the lighted stage burning beyond the helter-skelter of hulking props and hear bursts of laughter from the hall. A group of acrobats waited to go on at the intermezzo, a crowd of jesters in red tights, caps and dagged collars studded with little gold bells.

I felt dizzy, and for a moment afraid. The place felt close and dangerous over my head, and yet it was wonderful to be inside it again. And a sadness was, swelling inside me, no, a panic, actually.

Luchina saw me and she let out a shriek. Doors opened everywhere on the cluttered little dressing rooms. Renaud plunged towards me and pumped my hand. Where there had been nothing but wood and drapery a moment before, there was now a little universe of excited human beings, faces full of high color and dampness, and I found myself drawing back from a smoking candelabra with the quick words, "My eyes … put it out."

"Put out the candles, they hurt his eyes, can't you see that?" Jeannette insisted sharply. I felt her wet lips open against my face. Everyone was around me, even the acrobats who didn't know me, and the old scene painters and carpenters who had taught me so many things. Luchina said, "Get Nicki," and I almost cried No.

Applause was shaking the little house. The curtain was being pulled closed from either side. At once the old actors were upon me, and Renaud was calling for champagne.

I was holding my hands over my eyes as if like the basilisk I'd kill

every one of them if I looked at them, and I could feel tears and knew that before they saw the blood in the tears, I had to wipe the tears away. But they were so close I couldn't get to my handkerchief, and with a sudden terrible weakness, I put my arms around Jeannette and Luchina, and I pressed my face against Luchina's face. Like birds they were, with bones full of air, and hearts like beating wings, and for one second I listened with a vampire's ear to the blood in them, but that seemed an obscenity. And I just gave in to the hugging and the kissing, ignoring the thump of their hearts, and holding them and smelling their powdered skin, and feeling again the press of their lips.

"You don't know how you worried us!" Renaud was booming. "And then the stories of your good fortune! Everyone, everyone!" He was clapping his hands. "It's Monsieur de Valois, the owner of this great theatrical establishment …" and he said a lot of other pompous and playful things, dragging up the new actors and actresses to kiss my hand, I suppose, or my feet. I was holding tight to the girls as if I'd explode into fragments if I let them go, and then I heard Nicki, and knew he was only a foot away, staring at me, and that he was too glad to see me to be hurt anymore.

I didn't open my eyes but I felt his hand on my face, then holding tight to the back of my neck. They must have made way for him and when he came into my arms, I felt a little convulsion of terror, but the light was dim here, and I had fed furiously to be warm and human-looking, and I thought desperately I don't know to whom I pray to make the deception work. And then there was only Nicolas and I didn't care.

I looked up and into his face.

How to describe what humans look like to us! I've tried to describe it a little, when I spoke of Nicki's beauty the night before as a mixture of movement and color. But you can't imagine what it's like for us to look on living flesh. There are those billions of colors and tiny configurations of movement, yes, that make up a living creature on whom we concentrate. But the radiance mingles totally with the carnal scent. Beautiful, that's what any human being is to us, if we stop to consider it, even the old and the diseased, the downtrodden that one doesn't really "see" in the street. They are all like that, like flowers ever in the process of opening, butterflies ever unfolding out of the cocoon.

Well, I saw all this when I saw Nicki, and I smelled the blood pumping

in him, and for one heady moment I felt love and only love obliterating every recollection of the horrors that had deformed me. Every evil rapture, every new power with its gratification, seemed unreal. Maybe I felt a profound joy, too, that I could still love, if I'd ever doubted it, and that a tragic victory had been confirmed.

All the old mortal comfort intoxicated me, and I could have closed my eyes and slipped from consciousness carrying him with me, or so it seemed.

But something else stirred in me, collecting strength so fast my mind raced to catch up with it and deny it even as it threatened to grow out of control. And I knew it for what it was, something monstrous and enormous and natural to me as the sun was unnatural. I wanted Nicki. I wanted him as surely as any victim I'd ever struggled with in the Ile de la Cité. I wanted his blood flowing into me, wanted its taste and its smell and its heat.

The little place shook with shouts and laughter, Renaud telling the acrobats to get on with the intermezzo and Luchina opening the champagne. But we were closed off in this embrace.

The hard heat of his body made me stiffen and draw back, though it seemed I didn't move at all. And it maddened me suddenly that this one whom I loved even as I loved my mother and my brothers—this one who had drawn from me the only tenderness I'd ever felt—was an unconquerable citadel, holding fast in ignorance against my thirst for blood when so many hundreds of victims had so easily given it up.

This was what I'd been made for. This was the path I had been meant to walk. What were those others to me now—the thieves and killers I'd cut down in the wilderness of Paris? This was what I wanted. And the great awesome possibility of Nicki's death exploded in my brain. The darkness against my closed eyelids had become blood red. Nicki's mind emptying in that last moment, giving up its complexity with its life.

I couldn't move. I could feel the blood as if it were passing into me and I let my lips rest against his neck. Every particle in me said, "Take him, spirit him out of this place and away from it and feed on him and feed on him … until …" Until what! Until he's dead!

I broke loose and pushed him away. The crowd around us roared and rattled. Renaud was shouting at the acrobats, who stood staring at these proceedings. The audience outside demanded the intermezzo

entertainment with a steady rhythmic clap. The orchestra was fiddling away at the lively ditty that would accompany the acrobats. Bones and flesh poked and pushed at me. A shambles it had become, rank with the smell of those ready for the slaughter. I felt the all too human rise of nausea.

Nicki seemed to have lost his equilibrium, and when our eyes met, I felt the accusations emanating from him. I felt the misery and, worse, the near despair.

I pushed past all of them, past the acrobats with the jingling bells, and I don't know why I went forward to the wings instead of out the side door. I wanted to see the stage. I wanted to see the audience. I wanted to penetrate deeper into something for which I had no name or word.

But I was mad in these moments. To say I wanted or I thought makes no sense at all.

My chest was heaving and the thirst was like a cat clawing to get out. And as I leaned against the wooden beam beside the curtain, Nicki, hurt and misunderstanding everything, came to me again.

I let the thirst rage. I let it tear at my insides. I just clung to the rafter and I saw in one great recollection all my victims, the scum of Paris, scraped up from its gutters, and I knew the madness of the course I'd chosen, and the lie of it, and what I really was. What a sublime idiocy that I had dragged that paltry morality with me, striking down the damned ones only—seeking to be saved in spite of it all? What had I thought I was, a righteous partner to the judges and executioners of Paris who strike down the poor for crimes that the rich commit every day?

Strong wine I'd had, in chipped and broken vessels, and now the priest was standing before me at the foot of the altar with the golden chalice in his hands, and the wine inside it was the Blood of the Lamb.

Nicki was talking rapidly:

"Lestat, what is it? Tell me!" as if the others couldn't hear us. "Where have you been? What's happened to you? Lestat!"

"Get on that stage!" Renaud thundered at the gaping acrobats. They trotted past us into the smoky blaze of the footlamps and went into a chain of somersaults.

The orchestra made its instruments into twittering birds. A flash of red, harlequin sleeves, bells jangling, taunts from the unruly crowd,

“Show us something, really show us something!”

Luchina kissed me and I stared at her white throat, her milky hands. I could see the veins in Jeannette’s face and the soft cushion of her lower lip coming ever closer. The champagne, splashed into dozens of little glasses, was being drunk. Some speech was issuing forth from Renaud about our “partnership” and how tonight’s little farce was but the beginning and we would soon be the grandest theater on the boulevards. I saw myself decked out for the part of Lelio, and heard the ditty I had sung to Flaminia on bended knee.

Before me, little mortals flipflopped heavily and the audience was howling as the leader of the acrobats made some vulgar movement with his hind end.

Before I even meant to do it, I had gone out on the stage.

I was standing in the very center, feeling the heat of the footlights, the smoke stinging my eyes. I stared at the crowded gallery, the screened boxes, the rows and rows of spectators to the back wall. And I heard myself snarl a command for the acrobats to get away.

It seemed the laughter was deafening, and the taunts and shouts that greeted me were spasms and eruptions, and quite plainly behind every face in the house was a grinning skull. I was humming the little ditty I’d sung as Lelio, no more than a fragment of the part, but the one I’d carried in the streets afterwards with me, “lovely, lovely, Flaminia,” and on and on, the words forming meaningless sounds.

Insults were cutting through the din.

“On with the performance!” and “You’re handsome enough, now let’s see some action!” From the gallery someone threw a half-eaten apple that came thumping just past my feet.

I unclasped the violet roquelaure and let it fall. I did the same with the silver sword.

The song had become an incoherent humming behind my lips, but mad poetry was pounding in my head. I saw the wilderness of beauty and its savagery, the way I’d seen it last night when Nicki was playing, and the moral world seemed some desperate dream of rationality that in this lush and fetid jungle had not the slightest chance. It was a vision and I *saw* rather than understood, except that I was part of it, natural as the cat with her exquisite and passionless face digging her claws into the back of the screaming rat.

“ ‘Handsome enough’ is this Grim Reaper,” I half uttered, “who can snuff all these ‘brief candles,’ every fluttering soul sucking the air, from this hall.”

But the words were really beyond my reach. They floated in some stratum perhaps where a god existed who understood the colors patterned on a cobra’s skin and the eight glorious notes that make up the music erupting out of Nicki’s instrument, but never the principle, beyond ugliness or beauty, “Thou shalt not kill.”

Hundreds of greasy faces peered back at me from the gloom. Shabby wigs and paste jewels and filthy finery, skin like water flowing over crooked bones. A crew of ragged beggars whistled and hooted from the gallery, humpback and one eye, and stinking underarm crutch, and teeth the color of the skull’s teeth you sift from the dirt of the grave.

I threw out my arms. I crooked my knee, and I began turning as the acrobats and dancers could turn, round and round on the ball of one foot, effortlessly, going faster and faster, until I broke, flipping over backwards into a circle of cartwheels, and then somersaults, imitating everything I had ever seen the players at the fairs perform.

Applause came immediately. I was agile as I’d been in the village, and the stage was tiny and hampering, and the ceiling seemed to press down on me, and the smoke from the footlights to close me in. The little song to Flaminia came back to me and I started singing it loudly as I turned and jumped and spun again, and then gazing at the ceiling I willed my body upwards as I bent my knees to spring.

In an instant I touched the rafters and I was dropping down gracefully, soundlessly to the boards.

Gasps rose from the audience. The little crowd in the wings was stunned. The musicians in the pit who had been silent all the while were turning to one another. They could see there was no wire.

But I was soaring again to the delight of the audience, this time somersaulting all the way up, beyond the painted arch again to descend in even slower, finer turns.

Shouts and cheers broke out over the clapping, but those backstage were mute. Nicki stood at the very edge, his lips silently shaping my name.

“It has to be trickery, an illusion.” The same avowals came from all directions. People demanded agreement from those around them.

Renaud's face shone before me for an instant with gaping mouth and squinting eyes.

But I had gone into a dance again. And this time the grace of it no longer mattered to the audience. I could feel it, because the dance became a parody, each gesture broader, longer, slower than a human dancer could have sustained.

Someone shouted from the wings and was told to be still. And little cries burst from the musicians and those in the front rows. People were growing uneasy and whispering to one another, but the rabble in the gallery continued to clap.

I dashed suddenly towards the audience as if I meant to admonish it for its rudeness. Several persons were so startled they rose and tried to escape into the aisles. One of the hornplayers dropped his instrument and climbed out of the pit.

I could see the agitation, even the anger in their faces. What were these illusions? It wasn't amusing them suddenly; they couldn't comprehend the skill of it; and something in my serious manner made them afraid. For one terrible moment, I felt their helplessness.

And I felt their doom.

A great horde of jangling skeletons snared in flesh and rags, that's what they were, and yet their courage blazed out of them, they shouted at me in their irrepressible pride.

I raised my hands slowly to command their attention, and very loudly and steadily I sang the ditty to Flaminia, my lovely Flaminia, a dull little couplet spilling into another couplet, and I let my voice grow louder and louder until suddenly people were rising and screaming before me, but louder still I sang it until it obliterated every other noise and in the intolerable roar I saw them all, hundreds of them, overturning the benches as they stood up, their hands clamped to the sides of their heads.

Their mouths were grimaces, toneless screams.

Pandemonium. Shrieks, curses, all stumbling and struggling towards the doors. Curtains were pulled from their fastenings. Men dropped down from the gallery to rush for the street.

I stopped the horrid song.

I stood watching them in a ringing silence, the weak, sweating bodies straining clumsily in every direction. The wind gusted from the open

doorways, and I felt a strange coldness over all my limbs and it seemed my eyes were made of glass.

Without looking, I picked up the sword and put it on again, and hooked my finger into the velvet collar of my crumpled and dusty roquelaure. All these gestures seemed as grotesque as everything else I had done, and it seemed of no import that Nicolas was trying to get loose from two of the actors who held him in fear of his life as he shouted my name.

But something out of the chaos caught my attention. It did seem to matter—to be terribly, terribly important, in fact—that there was a figure standing above in one of the open boxes who did not struggle to escape or even move.

I turned slowly and looked up at him, daring him, it seemed, to remain there. An old man he was, and his dull gray eyes were boring into me with stubborn outrage, and as I glared at him, I heard myself let out a loud open-mouthed roar. Out of my soul it seemed to come, this sound. It grew louder and louder until those few left below cowered again with their ears stopped, and even Nicolas, rushing forward, buckled beneath the sound of it, both hands clasped to his head.

And yet the man stood there in the loge glowering, indignant and old, and stubborn, with furrowed brows under his gray wig.

I stepped back and leapt across the empty house, landing in the box directly before him, and his jaw fell in spite of himself and his eyes grew hideously wide.

He seemed deformed with age, his shoulders rounded, his hands gnarled, but the spirit in his eyes was beyond vanity and beyond compromise. His mouth hardened and his chin jutted. And from under his frock coat he pulled his pistol and he aimed it at me with both hands.

“Lestat!” Nicki shouted.

But the shot exploded and the ball hit me with full force. I didn’t move. I stood as steady as the old man had stood before, and the pain rolled through me and stopped, leaving in its wake a terrible pulling in all my veins.

The blood poured out. It flowed as I have never seen blood flow. It drenched my shirt and I could feel it spilling down my back. But the pulling grew stronger and stronger, and a warm tingling sensation had commenced to spread across the surface of my back and chest.

The man stared, dumbfounded. The pistol dropped out of his hand. His head went back, eyes blind, and his body crumpled as if the air had been let out of it, and he lay on the floor.

Nicki had raced up the stairs and was now rushing into the box. A low hysterical murmuring was issuing from him. He thought he was witnessing my death.

And I stood still hearkening to my body in that terrible solitude that had been mine since Magnus made me the vampire. And I knew the wounds were no longer there.

The blood was drying on the silk vest, drying on the back of my torn coat. My body throbbed where the bullet had passed through me and my veins were alive with that same pulling, but the injury was no more.

And Nicolas, coming to his senses as he looked at me, realized I was unharmed, though his reason told him it couldn't be true.

I pushed past him and made for the stairs. He flung himself against me and I threw him off. I couldn't stand the sight of him, the smell of him.

"Get away from me!" I said.

But he came back again and he locked his arm around my neck. His face was bloated and there was an awful sound coming out of him.

"Let go of me, Nicki!" I threatened him. If I shoved him off too roughly, I'd tear his arms out of the sockets, break his back.

Break his back …

He moaned, stuttered. And for one harrowing split second the sounds he made were as terrible as the sound that had come from my dying animal on the mountain, my horse, crushed like an insect into the snow.

I scarcely knew what I was doing when I pried loose his hands.

The crowd broke, screaming, when I walked out onto the boulevard.

Renaud ran forward, in spite of those trying to restrain him.

"Monsieur!" He grabbed my hand to kiss it and stopped, staring at the blood.

"Nothing, my dear Renaud," I said to him, quite surprised at the steadiness of my voice and its softness. But something distracted me as I started to speak again, something I should hearken to, I thought vaguely, yet I went on.

"Don't give it a thought, my dear Renaud," I said. "Stage blood, nothing but an illusion. It was all an illusion. A new kind of theatrical. Drama of the grotesque, yes, the grotesque."

But again came that distraction, something I was sensing in the melee around me, people shuffling and pushing to get close but not too close, Nicolas stunned and staring.

"Go on with your plays," I was saying, almost unable to concentrate on my own words, "your acrobats, your tragedies, your more civilized theatricals, if you like."

I pulled the bank notes out of my pocket and put them in his unsteady hand. I spilled gold coins onto the pavement. The actors darted forward fearfully to gather them up. I scanned the crowd around for the source of this strange distraction, *what was it*, not Nicolas in the door of the deserted theater, watching me with a broken soul.

No, something else both familiar and unfamiliar, having to do with the dark.

"Hire the finest mummers"—I was half babbling—"the best musicians, the great scene painters." More bank notes. My voice was getting loud again, the vampire voice, I could see the grimaces again and the hands going up, but they were afraid to let me see them cover their ears. "There is no limit, NO LIMIT, to what you can do here!"

I broke away, dragging my roquelaure with me, the sword clanking awkwardly because it was not buckled right. Something of the dark.

And I knew when I hurried into the first alleyway and started to run what it was that I had heard, what had distracted me, it had been *the presence*, undeniably, in the crowd!

I knew it for one simple reason: I was running now in the back streets faster than a mortal can run. And *the presence* was keeping time with me and *the presence* was more than one!

I came to a halt when I knew it for certain.

I was only a mile from the boulevard and the crooked alley around me narrow and black as any in which I had ever been. And I heard *them* before they seemed, quite purposefully and abruptly, to silence themselves.

I was too anxious and miserable to play with them! I was too dazed. I shouted the old question, "Who are you, speak to me!" The glass panes rattled in the nearby windows. Mortals stirred in their little chambers. There was no cemetery here. "Answer me, you pack of cowards. Speak if you have a voice or once and for all get away from me!"

And then I knew, though how I knew, I can't tell you, that they could

hear me and they could answer me, if they chose. And I knew that what I had always heard was the irrepressible evidence of their proximity and their intensity, which they couldn't disguise. But their thoughts they could cloak and they had. I mean, they had intellect, and they had words.

I let out a long low breath.

I was stung by their silence, but I was stung a thousand times more by what had just happened, and as I'd done so many times in the past I turned my back on them.

They followed me. This time they followed, and no matter how swiftly I moved, they came on.

And I did not lose that strange toneless shimmer of them until I reached the place de Gréve and went into the Cathedral of Notre Dame.

I spent the remainder of the night in the cathedral, huddled in a shadowy place by the right wall. I hungered for the blood I'd lost, and each time a mortal drew near I felt a strong pulling and tingling where the wounds had been.

But I waited.

And when a young beggar woman with a little child approached, I knew the moment had come. She saw the dried blood, and became frantic to get me to the nearby hospital, the Hôtel-Dieu. Her face was thin with hunger, but she tried to lift me herself with her little arms.

I looked into her eyes until I saw them glaze over. I felt the heat of her breasts swelling beneath her rags. Her soft, succulent body tumbled against me, giving itself to me, as I nestled her in all the bloodstained brocade and lace. I kissed her, feeding on her heat as I pushed the dirty cloth away from her throat, and I bent for the drink so skillfully that the sleepy child never saw it. Then I opened with careful trembling fingers the child's ragged shirt. This was mine, too, this little neck.

There weren't any words for the rapture. Before I'd had all the ecstasy that rape could give. But these victims had been taken in the perfect semblance of love. The very blood seemed warmer with their innocence, richer with their goodness.

I looked at them afterwards, as they slept together in death. They had found no sanctuary in the cathedral on this night.

And I knew my vision of the garden of savage beauty had been a true vision. There was meaning in the world, yes, and laws, and inevitability, but they had only to do with the aesthetic. And in this Savage Garden, these innocent ones belonged in the vampire's arms. A thousand other things can be said about the world, but only aesthetic principles can be verified, and these things alone remain the same.

I was now ready to go home. And as I went out in the early morning, I knew that the last barrier between my appetite and the world had been dissolved.

No one was safe from me now, no matter how innocent. And that included my dear friends at Renaud's and it included my beloved Nick.

13

I wanted them gone from Paris. I wanted the playbills down, the doors shut; I wanted silence and darkness in the little rattrap theater where I had known the greatest and most sustained happiness of my mortal life.

Not a dozen innocent victims a night could make me stop thinking about them, could make this ache in me dissolve. Every street in Paris led to their door.

And an ugly shame came over me when I thought of my frightening them. How could I have done that to them? Why did I need to prove to myself with such violence that I could never be part of them again?

No. I'd bought Renaud's. I'd turned it into the showcase of the boulevard. Now I would close it down.

It was not that they suspected anything, however. They believed the simple stupid excuses Roget gave them, that I was just back from the heat of the tropical colonies, that the good Paris wine had gone right to my head. Plenty of money again to repair the damage.

God only knows what they really thought. The fact was, they went back to regular performances the following evening, and the jaded crowds of the boulevard du Temple undoubtedly put upon the mayhem a dozen sensible explanations. There was a queue under the chestnut trees.

Only Nicki was having none of it. He had taken to heavy drinking and refused to return to the theater or study his music anymore. He insulted Roget when he came to call. To the worst cafés and taverns he went, and wandered alone through the dangerous nighttime streets.

Well, we have that in common, I thought.

All this Roget told me as I paced the floor a good distance from the candle on his table, my face a mask of my true thoughts.

"Money doesn't mean very much to the young man, Monsieur," he said. "The young man has had plenty of money in his life, he reminds me. He says things that disturb me, Monsieur. I don't like the sound of them."

Roget looked like a nursery rhyme figure in his flannel cap and gown,

legs and feet naked because I had roused him again in the middle of the night and given him no time to put on his slippers even or to comb his hair.

"What does he say?" I demanded.

"He talks about sorcery, Monsieur. He says that you possess unusual powers. He speaks of La Voisin and the *Chambre Ardente*, an old case of sorcery under the Sun King, the witch who made charms and poisons for members of the Court."

"Who would believe that trash now?" I affected absolute bewilderment. The truth was, the hair was standing up on the back of my neck.

"Monsieur, he says bitter things," he went on. "That your kind, as he puts it, has always had access to great secrets. He keeps speaking of some place in your town, called the witches' place."

"My kind!"

"That you are an aristocrat, Monsieur," Roget said. He was a little embarrassed. "When a man is angry as Monsieur de Lenfent is angry, these things come to be important. But he doesn't whisper his suspicions to the others. He tells only me. He says that you will understand why he despises you. You have refused to share with him your discoveries! Yes, Monsieur, your discoveries. He goes on about La Voisin, about things between heaven and earth for which there are no rational explanations. He says he knows now why you cried at the witches' place."

I couldn't look at Roget for a moment. It was such a lovely perversion of everything! And yet it hit right at the truth. How gorgeous, and how perfectly irrelevant. In his own way, Nicki was right.

"Monsieur, you are the kindest man—" Roget said.

"Spare me, please …"

"But Monsieur de Lenfent says fantastical things, things he should not say even in this day and age, that he saw a bullet pass through your body that should have killed you."

"The bullet missed me," I said. "Roget, don't go on with it. Get them out of Paris, all of them."

"Get them out?" he asked. "But you've put so much money into this little enterprise …"

"So what? Who gives a damn?" I said. "Send them to London, to Drury Lane. Offer Renaud enough for his own London theater. From there they

might go to America—Saint-Domingue, New Orleans, New York. Do it, Monsieur. I don't care what it takes. Close up my theater and get them gone!"

And then the ache will be gone, won't it? I'll stop seeing them gathered around me in the wings, stop thinking about Lelio, the boy from the provinces who emptied their slop buckets and loved it.

Roget looked so profoundly timid. What is it like, working for a well-dressed lunatic who pays you triple what anyone else would pay you to forget your better judgment?

I'll never know. I'll never know what it is like to be human in any way, shape, or form again.

"As for Nicolas," I said. "You're going to persuade him to go to Italy and I'll tell you how."

"Monsieur, even persuading him to change his clothes would take some doing."

"This will be easier. You know how ill my mother is. Well, get him to take her to Italy. It's the perfect thing. He can very well study music at the conservatories in Naples, and that is exactly where my mother should go."

"He does write to her … is very fond of her."

"Precisely. Convince him she'll never make the journey without him. Make all the arrangements for him. Monsieur, you must accomplish this. He must leave Paris. I give you till the end of the week, and then I'll be back for the news that he's gone."

It was asking a lot of Roget, of course. But I could think of no other way. Nobody would believe Nicki's ideas about sorcery, that was no worry. But I knew now that if Nicki didn't leave Paris, he would be driven slowly out of his mind.

As the nights passed, I fought with myself every waking hour not to seek him out, not to risk one last exchange.

I just waited, knowing full well that I was losing him forever and that he would never know the reasons for anything that had come to pass. I, who had once railed against the meaninglessness of our existence, was driving him off without explanation, an injustice that might torment him to the end of his days.

Better that than the truth, Nicki. Maybe I understand all illusions a little better now. And if you can only get my mother to go to Italy, if there is only time for my mother still …

Meantime I could see for myself that Renaud's House of Thesbians was closed down. In the nearby café, I heard talk of the troupe's departure for England. So that much of the plan had been accomplished.

It was near dawn on the eighth night when I finally wandered up to Roget's door and pulled the bell.

He answered sooner than I expected, looking befuddled and anxious in the usual white flannel nightshirt.

"I'm getting to like that garb of yours, Monsieur," I said wearily. "I don't think I'd trust you half as much if you wore a shirt and breeches and a coat …"

"Monsieur," he interrupted me. "Something quite unexpected—"

"Answer me first. Renaud and the others went happily to England?"

"Yes, Monsieur. They're in London by now, but—"

"And Nicki? Gone to my mother in the Auvergne. Tell me I'm right. It's done."

"But Monsieur!" he said. And then he stopped. And quite unexpectedly, I saw the image of my mother in his mind.

Had I been thinking, I would have known what it meant. This man had never to my knowledge laid eyes upon my mother, so how could he picture her in his thoughts? But I wasn't using my reason. In fact my reason had flown.

"She hasn't … you're not telling me that it's too late," I said.

"Monsieur, let me get my coat …" he said inexplicably. He reached for the bell.

And there it was, her image again, her face, drawn and white, and all too vivid for me to stand it.

I took Roget by the shoulders.

"You've seen her! She's here."

"Yes, Monsieur. She's in Paris. I'll take you to her now. Young de Lenfent told me she was coming. But I couldn't reach you, Monsieur! I

never know where to reach you. And yesterday she arrived."

I was too stunned to answer. I sank down into the chair, and my own images of her blazed hot enough to eclipse everything that was emanating from him. She was alive and she was in Paris. And Nicki was still here and he was with her.

Roget came close to me, reached out as if he wanted to touch me:

"Monsieur, you go ahead while I dress. She is in the Ile St.-Louis, three doors to the right of Monsieur Nicolas. You must go at once."

I looked up at him stupidly. I couldn't even really see him. I was seeing her. There was less than an hour before sunrise. And it would take me three-quarters of that time to reach the tower.

"Tomorrow … tomorrow night," I think I stammered. That line came back to me from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* … "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow …"

"Monsieur, you don't understand! There will be no trips to Italy for your mother. She has made her last journey in coming here to see you."

When I didn't answer he grabbed hold of me and tried to shake me. I'd never seen him like this before. I was a boy to him and he was the man who had to bring me to my senses.

"I've gotten lodgings for her," he said. "Nurses, doctors, all that you could wish. But they aren't keeping her alive. You are keeping her alive, Monsieur. She must see you before she closes her eyes. Now forget the hour and go to her. Even a will as strong as hers can't work miracles."

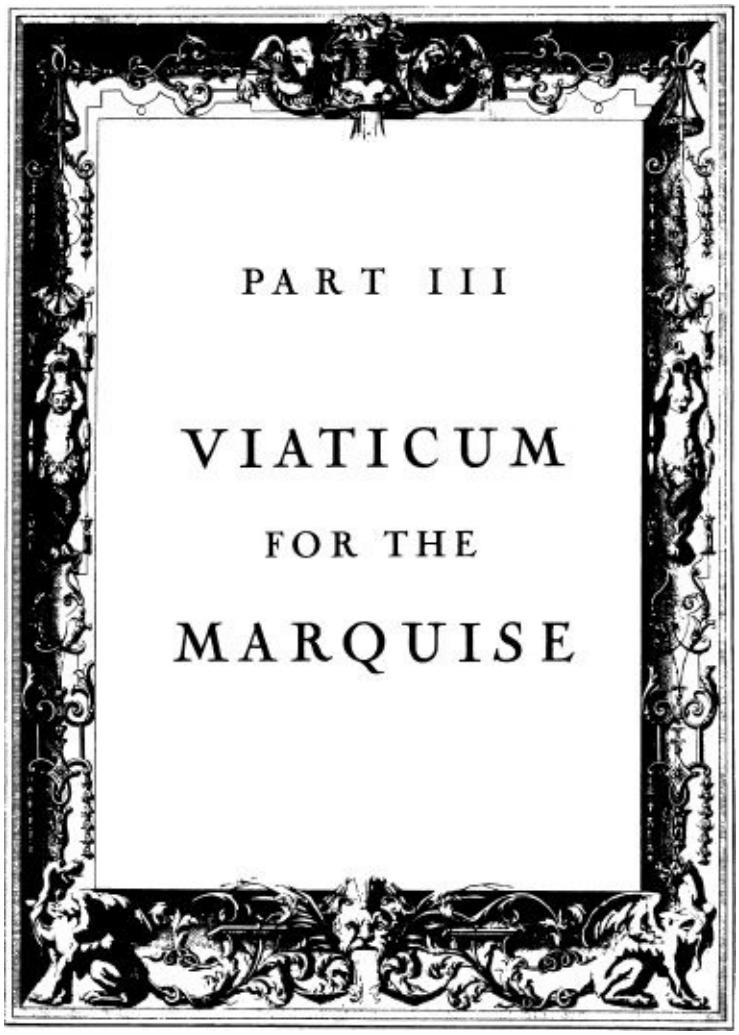
I couldn't answer. I couldn't form a coherent thought.

I stood up and went to the door, pulling him along with me. "Go to her now," I said, "and tell her I'll be there tomorrow night."

He shook his head. He was angry and disgusted. And he tried to turn his back on me.

I wouldn't let him.

"You go there at once, Roget," I said. "Sit with her all day, do you understand, and see that she waits—that she waits for me to come! Watch her if she sleeps. Wake her and talk to her if she starts to go. But don't let her die before I get there!"



PART III

VIATICUM

FOR THE

MARQUISE

1

In vampire parlance, I am an early riser. I rise when the sun has just sunk below the horizon and there is still red light in the sky. Many vampires don't rise until there is full darkness, and so I have a tremendous advantage in this, and in that they must return to the grave a full hour or more before I do. I haven't mentioned it before because I didn't know it then, and it didn't come to matter until much later.

But the next night, I was on the road to Paris when the sky was on fire.

I'd clothed myself in the most respectable garments I possessed before I slipped into the sarcophagus, and I was chasing the sun west into Paris.

It looked like the city was burning, so bright was the light to me and so terrifying, until finally I came pounding over the bridge behind Notre Dame, into the Ile St.-Louis.

I didn't think about what I would do or say, or how I might conceal myself from her. I knew only I had to see her and hold her and be with her while there was still time. I couldn't truly think of her death. It had the fullness of catastrophe, and belonged to the burning sky. And maybe I was being the common mortal, believing if I could grant her last wish, then somehow the horror was under my command.

Dusk was just bleeding the light away when I found her house on the quais.

It was a stylish enough mansion. Roget had done well, and a clerk was at the door waiting to direct me up the stairs. Two maids and a nurse were in the parlor of the flat when I came in.

"Monsieur de Lenfent is with her, Monsieur," the nurse said. "She insisted on getting dressed to see you. She wanted to sit in the window and look at the towers of the cathedral, Monsieur. She saw you ride over the bridge."

"Put out the candles in the room, except for one," I said. "And tell Monsieur de Lenfent and my lawyer to come out."

Roget came out at once, and then Nicolas appeared.

He too had dressed for her, all in brilliant red velvet, with his old

fancy linen and his white gloves. The recent drinking had left him thinner, almost haggard. Yet it made his beauty all the more vivid. When our eyes met, the malice leapt out of him, scorching my heart.

"The Marquise is a little stronger today, Monsieur," Roget said, "but she's hemorrhaging badly. The doctor says she will not—"

He stopped and glanced back at the bedroom. I got it clear from his thought. She won't last through the night.

"Get her back to bed, Monsieur, as fast you can."

"For what purpose do I get her back to bed?" I said. My voice was dull, a murmur. "Maybe she wants to die at the damned window. Why the hell not?"

"Monsieur!" Roget implored me softly. I wanted to tell him to leave with Nicki.

But something was happening to me. I went into the hall and looked towards the bedroom. She was in there. I felt a dramatic physical change in myself. I couldn't move or speak. She was in there and she was really dying.

All the little sounds of the flat became a hum. I saw a lovely bedroom through the double doors, a white painted bed with gold hangings, and the windows draped in the same gold, and the sky in the high panes of the windows with only the faintest wisps of gold cloud. But all this was indistinct and faintly horrible, the luxury I'd wanted to give her and she about to feel her body collapse beneath her. I wondered if it maddened her, made her laugh.

The doctor appeared. The nurse came to tell me only one candle remained, as I had ordered. The smell of medicines intruded and mingled with a rose perfume, and *I realized I was hearing her thoughts*.

It was the dull throb of her mind as she waited, her bones aching in her emaciated flesh so that to sit at the window even in the soft velvet chair with the comforter surrounding her was almost unendurable pain.

But what was she thinking, beneath her desperate anticipation? Lestat, Lestat, and Lestat, I could hear that. But beneath it:

"Let the pain get worse, because only when the pain is really dreadful do I want to die. If the pain would just get bad enough so that I'd be glad to die and I wouldn't be so frightened. I want it to be so terrible that I'm not frightened."

"Monsieur." The doctor touched my arm. "She will not have the priest

come."

"No … she wouldn't."

She had turned her head towards the door. If I didn't come in now, she would get up, no matter how it hurt her, and come to me.

It seemed I couldn't move. And yet I pushed past the doctor and the nurse, and I went into the room and closed the doors.

Blood scent.

In the pale violet light of the window she sat, beautifully dressed in dark blue taffeta, her hand in her lap and the other on the arm of the chair, her thick yellow hair gathered behind her ears so that the curls spilled over her shoulders from the pink ribbons. There was the faintest bit of rouge on her cheeks.

For one eerie moment she looked to me as she had when I was a little boy. So pretty. The symmetry of her face was unchanged by time or illness, and so was her hair. And a heartbreaking happiness came over me, a warm delusion that I was mortal again, and innocent again, and with her, and everything was all right, really truly all right.

There was no death and no terror, just she and I in her bedroom, and she would take me in her arms. I stopped.

I'd come very close to her, and she was crying as she looked up. The girdle of the Paris dress bound her too tightly, and her skin was so thin and colorless over her throat and her hands that I couldn't bear to look at them, and her eyes looked up at me from flesh that was almost bruised. I could smell death on her. I could smell decay.

But she was radiant, and she was mine; she was as she'd always been, and I told her so silently with all my power, that she was lovely as my earliest memory of her when she had had her old fancy clothes still, and she would dress up so carefully and carry me on her lap in the carriage to church.

And in this strange moment when I gave her to know this, how much I cherished her, I realized she *heard* me and she answered me that she loved me and always had.

It was the answer to a question I hadn't even asked. And she knew the importance of it; her eyes were clear, unentranced.

If she realized the oddity of this, that we could talk to each other without words, she gave no clue. Surely she didn't grasp it fully. She must have felt only an outpouring of love.

“Come here so I can see you,” she said, “as you are now.”

The candle was by her arm on the windowsill. And quite deliberately I pinched it out. I saw her frown, a tightening of her blond brows, and her blue eyes grew just a little larger as she looked at me, at the bright silk brocade and the usual lace I’d chosen to wear for her, and the sword on my hip with its rather imposing jeweled hilt.

“Why don’t you want me to see you?” she asked. “I came to Paris to see you. Light the candle again.” But there was no real chastisement in the words. I was here with her and that was enough.

I knelt down before her. I had some mortal conversation in mind, that she should go to Italy with Nicki, and quite distinctly, before I could speak, she said:

“Too late, my darling, I could never finish the journey. I’ve come far enough.”

A clamp of pain stopped her, circling her waist where the girdle bound it, and to hide it from me, she made her face very blank. She looked like a girl when she did this, and again I smelt the sickness in her, the decay in her lungs, and the clots of blood.

Her mind became a riot of fear. She wanted to scream out to me that she was afraid. She wanted to beg me to hold on to her and remain with her until it was finished, but she couldn’t do this, and to my astonishment, I realized she thought I would refuse her. That I was too young and too thoughtless to ever understand.

This was agony.

I wasn’t even conscious of moving away from her, but I’d walked across the room. Stupid little details embedded themselves in my consciousness: nymphs playing on the painted ceiling, the high gilt door handles and the melted wax in brittle stalactites on the white candles that I wanted to break off and crumple in my hand. The place looked hideous, overdressed. Did she hate it? Did she want those barren stone rooms again?

I was thinking about her as if there were “tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow …” I looked back at her, her stately figure holding to the windowsill. The sky had deepened behind her and a new light, the light of house lamps and passing carriages and nearby windows, gently touched the small inverted triangle of her thin face.

“Can’t you talk to me,” she said softly. “Can’t you tell me how it’s come

about? You've brought such happiness to all of us." Even talking hurt her. "But how does it go with you? With you!"

I think I was on the verge of deceiving her, of creating some strong emanation of contentment with all the powers I had. I'd tell mortal lies with immortal skill. I'd start talking and talking and testing my every word to make it perfect. But something happened in the silence.

I don't think I stood still more than a moment, but something changed inside of me. An awesome shift took place. In one instant I saw a vast and terrifying possibility, and in that same instant, without question, I made up my mind.

It had no words to it or scheme or plan. And I would have denied it had anyone questioned me at that moment. I would have said, "No, never, farthest from my thoughts. What do you think I am, what sort of monster" … And yet the choice had been made.

I understood something absolute.

Her words had completely died away, she was afraid again and in pain again, and in spite of the pain, she rose from her chair.

I saw the comforter slip away from her, and I knew she was coming towards me and that I should stop her, but I didn't do it. I saw her hands close to me, reaching for me, and the next thing I knew she had leapt backwards as if blown by a mighty wind.

She had scuffed backwards across the carpet, and fallen past the chair against the wall. But she grew very still quickly as though she willed it, and there wasn't fear in her face, even though her heart was racing. Rather there was wonder and then a baffled calm.

If I had thoughts at that moment, I don't know what they were. I came towards her just as steadily as she had come towards me. Gauging her every reaction, I drew closer until we were as near to each other as we had been when she leapt away. She was staring at my skin and my eyes, and quite suddenly she reached out again and touched my face.

"Not alive!" That was the horrifying perception that came from her silently. "Changed into something. But NOT ALIVE."

Quietly I said no. That was not right. And I sent a cool torrent of images to her, a procession of glimpses of what my existence had become. Bits, pieces of the fabric of the nighttime Paris, the sense of a blade cutting through the world soundlessly.

With a little hiss she let out her breath. The pain balled its fist in her,

opened its claw. She swallowed, sealing her lips against it, her eyes veritably burning into me. She knew now these were not sensations, these communications, but that they were thoughts.

"How then?" she demanded.

And without questioning what I meant to do I gave her the tale link by link, the shattered window through which I'd been torn by the ghostly figure who had stalked me at the theater, the tower and the exchange of blood. I revealed to her the crypt in which I slept, and its treasure, my wanderings, my powers, and above all, the nature of the thirst. The taste of blood and the feel of blood, and what it meant for all passion, all greed to be sharpened in that one desire, and that one desire to be satisfied over and over with the feeding and the death.

The pain ate at her but she no longer felt it. Her eyes were all that was left of her as she stared at me. And though I didn't mean to reveal all these things, I found I had taken hold of her and was turning so that the light of the carriages crashing along the quai below fell full on my face.

Without taking my eyes from her, I reached for the silver candelabra on the windowsill, and lifting it I slowly bent the metal, working it with my fingers into loops and twists.

The candles fell to the floor.

Her eyes rolled up into her head. She slipped backwards and away from me, and as she caught the curtains of the bed in her left hand, the blood came up out of her mouth.

It was coming from her lungs in a great silent cough. She was slipping down on her knees, and the blood was all over the side of the draped bed.

I looked at the twisted silver thing in my hands, the idiotic loops that meant nothing, and I let it drop. And I stared at her, her struggling against unconsciousness and pain, and wiping her mouth suddenly in sluggish gestures, like a vomiting drunk, on the bedclothes, as she sank unable to support herself to the floor.

I was standing over her. I was watching her, and her momentary pain meant nothing in light of the vow that I was speaking to her now. No words again, just the silent thrust of it, and the question, more immense than could ever be put into words, *Do you want to come with me now? DO YOU WANT TO COME WITH ME INTO THIS NOW?*

I hide nothing from you, not my ignorance, not my fear, not the simple

terror that if I try I might fail. I do not even know if it is mine to give more than once, or what is the price of giving it, but I will risk this for you, and we will discover it together, whatever the mystery and the terror, just as I've discovered alone all else.

With her whole being she said Yes.

"Yes!" she screamed aloud suddenly, drunkenly, the voice maybe that had always been her voice yet one that I had never heard. Her eyes closed and tightened and her head turned from the left and to the right. "Yes!"

I leant forward and kissed the blood on her open lips. It sent a zinging through all my limbs and the thirst leapt out for her and tried to transform her into mere flesh. My arms slipped around her light little form and I lifted her up and up, until I was standing with her against the window, and her hair was falling down behind her, and the blood came up in her out of her lungs again, but it didn't matter now.

All the memories of my life with her surrounded us; they wove their shroud around us and closed us off from the world, the soft poems and songs of childhood, and the sense of her before words when there had only been the flicker of the light on the ceiling above her pillows and the smell of her all around me and her voice silencing my crying, and then the hatred of her and the need of her, and the losing of her behind a thousand closed doors, and cruel answers, and the terror of her and her complexity and her indifference and her indefinable strength.

And jetting up into the current came the thirst, not obliterating but heating every concept of her, until she was flesh and blood and mother and lover and all things beneath the cruel pressure of my fingers and my lips, everything I had ever desired. I drove my teeth into her, feeling her stiffen and gasp, and I felt my mouth grow wide to catch the hot flood when it came.

Her heart and soul split open. There was no age to her, no single moment. My knowledge dimmed and flickered and there was no mother anymore, no petty need and petty terror; she was simply who she was. She was Gabrielle.

And all her life came to her defense, the years and years of suffering and loneliness, the waste in those damp, hollow chambers to which she'd been condemned, and the books that were her solace, and the children who devoured her and abandoned her, and the pain and disease, her

final enemy, which had, in promising release, pretended to be her friend. Beyond words and images there came the secret thudding of her passion, her seeming madness, her refusal to despair.

I was holding her, holding her off her feet, my arms crossed behind her narrow back, my hand cradling her limp head, and I was groaning so loud against her with the pumping of the blood that it was a song in time with her heart. But the heart was slowing too quickly. Her death was coming, and with all her will she pumped against it, and in a final burst of denial I pushed her away from me and held her still.

I was almost swooning. The thirst wanted her heart. It was no alchemist, the thirst. And I was standing there with my lips parted and my eyes glazed and I held her far, far away from me as if I were two beings, the one wanting to crush her and the other to bring her to me.

Her eyes were open and seemingly blind. For a moment she was in some place beyond all suffering, where there was nothing but sweetness and even something that might be understanding, but then I heard her calling to me by name.

I lifted my right wrist to my mouth and slashed the vein and pushed it against her lips. She didn't move as the blood spilled over her tongue.

"Mother, drink," I said frantically, and pushed it harder, but some change had already commenced.

Her lips quivered, and her mouth locked to me and the pain whipped through me suddenly encircling my heart.

Her body lengthened, tensed, her left hand rising to grasp my wrist as she swallowed the first spurt. And the pain grew stronger and stronger so that I almost cried out. I could see it as if it were molten metal coursing through my vessels, branching through every sinew and limb. Yet it was only her pulling, her sucking, her taking the blood out of me that I had taken from her. She was standing now on her own feet, her head barely leaning against my chest. And a numbness crept over me with the pulling burning through the numbness, and my heart thundered against it, feeding the pain as it fed her pulling with every beat.

Harder and harder she drew and faster, and I felt her grip tighten and her body grow hard. I wanted to force her away, but I would not do it, and when my legs gave under me it was she who held me up. I was swaying and the room was tilting, but she went on with it and a vast silence stretched out in all directions from me and then without will or

conviction, I thrust her backwards away.

She stumbled and stood before the window, her long fingers pressed flat against her open mouth. And before I turned and collapsed into the nearby chair I looked full at her white face for an instant, and her form swelling, it seemed, under the thin peeling of dark blue taffeta, her eyes like two crystal orbs gathering the light.

I think I said, “Mother,” in that instant like some stupid mortal, and I closed my eyes.

2

I was sitting in the chair. It seemed I'd been asleep forever, but I hadn't been asleep at all. I was home in my father's house.

I looked around for the fire poker and my dogs, and to see if there was any wine left, and then I saw the gold drapery around the windows and the back of Notre Dame against the evening stars, and I saw her there.

We were in Paris. And we were going to live forever.

She had something in her hands. Another candelabra. A tinderbox. She stood very straight and her movements were quick. She made a spark and touched it to the candles one by one. And the little flames rose, and the painted flowers on the walls rolled up to the ceiling and the dancers on the ceiling moved for one moment and then were frozen in their circle again.

She was standing in front of me, the candelabra to the right of her. And her face was white and perfectly smooth. The dark bruises under her eyes had gone away; in fact every blemish or flaw she had ever had had gone away, though what those flaws had been I couldn't have told you. She was perfect now.

And the lines given her by age had been reduced and curiously deepened, so that there were tiny laugh lines at the edge of each eye, and a very tiny crease on either side of her mouth. The barest fold of extra flesh remained to each eyelid, heightening her symmetry, the sense of triangles in her face, and her lips were the softest shade of pink. She looked delicate as a diamond can look delicate when preyed upon by the light.

I closed my eyes and opened them again and saw it was no delusion, any more than her silence was a delusion. And I saw that her body was even more profoundly changed. She had the fullness of young womanhood again, the breasts that the illness had withered away. They were swelling above the dark blue taffeta of her corset, the pale pink tint of her flesh so subtle it might have been reflected light. But her hair was even more astonishing because it appeared to be alive. So much color moved in it that the hair itself appeared to be writhing, billions of tiny

strands stirring around the flawless white face and throat.

The wounds on her throat were gone.

Now nothing remained but the final act of courage. Look into her eyes.

Look with these vampire eyes at another being like yourself for the first time since Magnus leapt into the fire.

I must have made some sound because she responded ever so slightly as if I had. Gabrielle, that was the only name I could ever call her now. "Gabrielle," I said to her, never having called her that except in some very private thoughts, and I saw her almost smile.

I looked down at my wrist. The wound was gone but the thirst gnashed in me. My veins spoke to me as if I had spoken to them. And I stared at her and saw her lips move in a tiny gesture of hunger. And she gave me a strange, meaningful expression as if to say, "Don't you understand?"

But I heard nothing from her. Silence, only the beauty of her eyes looking full at me and the love perhaps with which we saw each other, but silence stretching in all directions, ratifying nothing. I couldn't fathom it. Was she closing her mind? I asked her silently and she didn't appear to comprehend.

"Now," she said, and her voice startled me. It was softer, more resonant than before. For one moment we were in Auvergne, the snow was falling, and she was singing to me and it was echoing as if in a great cave. But that was finished. She said, "Go … done with all of this, quickly—now!" She nodded to coax me and she came closer and she tugged at my hand. "Look at yourself in the mirror," she whispered.

But I knew. I had given her more blood than I had taken from her. I was starved. I hadn't even fed before I came to her.

But I was so taken with the sound of the syllables and that glimpse of snow falling and the memory of the singing that for a moment I didn't respond. I looked at her fingers touching mine. I saw our flesh was the same. I rose up out of the chair and held her two hands and then I felt of her arms and her face. It was done and I was alive still! She was *with* me now. She had come through that awful solitude and she was with me, and I could think of nothing suddenly except holding her, crushing her to me, never letting her go.

I lifted her off her feet. I swung her up in my arms and we turned

round and round.

She threw back her head and her laughter shook loose from her, growing louder and louder, until I put my hand over her mouth.

"You can shatter all the glass in the room with your voice," I whispered. I glanced towards the doors. Nicki and Roget were out there.

"Then let me shatter it!" she said, and there was nothing playful in her expression. I set her on her feet. I think we embraced again and again almost foolishly. I couldn't keep myself from it.

But other mortals were moving in the flat, the doctor and the nurses thinking that they should come in.

I saw her look to the door. She was hearing them too. But why wasn't I hearing her?

She broke away from me, eyes darting from one object to another. She snatched up the candles again and brought them to the mirror where she looked at her face.

I understood what was happening to her. She needed time to see and to measure with her new vision. But we had to get out of the flat.

I could hear Nicki's voice through the wall, urging the doctor to knock on the door.

How was I to get her out of here, get rid of them?

"No, not that way," she said when she saw me look at the door.

She was looking at the bed, the objects on the table. She went to the bed and took her jewels from under the pillow. She examined them and put them back into the worn velvet purse. Then she fastened the purse to her skirt so that it was lost in the folds of cloth.

There was an air of importance to these little gestures. I knew even though her mind was giving me nothing that this was all she wanted from this room. She was taking leave of things, the clothes she'd brought with her, her ancient silver brush and comb, and the tattered books that lay on the table by the bed.

There was knocking at the door.

"Why not this way?" she asked, and turning to the window, she threw open the glass. The breeze gusted into the gold draperies and lifted her hair off the back of her neck, and when she turned I shivered at the sight of her, her hair tangling around her face, and her eyes wide and filled with myriad fragments of color and an almost tragic light. She was afraid of nothing.

I took hold of her and for a moment wouldn't let her go. I nestled my face into her hair, and all I could think again was that we were together and nothing was ever going to separate us now. I didn't understand her silence, why I couldn't *hear* her, but I knew it wasn't her doing, and perhaps I believed it would pass. She was with me. That was the world. Death was my commander and I gave him a thousand victims, but I'd snatched her right out of his hand. I said it aloud. I said other desperate and nonsensical things. We were the same terrible and deadly beings, the two of us, we were wandering in the Savage Garden and I tried to make it real for her with images, the meaning of the Savage Garden, but it didn't matter if she didn't understand.

"The Savage Garden," she repeated the words reverently, her lips making a soft smile.

It was pounding in my head. I felt her kissing me and making some little whisper as if in accompaniment to her thoughts.

She said, "But help me, now, I want to see you *do it*, now, and we have forever to hold to each other. Come."

Thirst. I should have been burning. I positively required the blood, and she wanted the taste, I knew she did. Because I remembered that I had wanted it that very first night. It struck me then that the pain of her physical death … the fluids leaving her … might be lessened if she could first drink.

The knocking came again. The door wasn't locked.

I stepped up on the sill of the window and reached for her, and immediately she was in my arms. She weighed nothing, but I could feel her power, the tenacity of her grip. Yet when she saw the alley below, the top of the wall and the quai beyond, she seemed for a moment to doubt.

"Put your arms around my neck," I said, "and hold tight."

I climbed up the stones, carrying her with her feet dangling, her face turned upwards to me, until we had reached the slippery slates of the roof.

Then I took her hand and pulled her after me, running faster and faster, over the gutters and the chimney pots, leaping across the narrow alleys until we had reached the other side of the island. I'd been ready any moment for her to cry out or cling to me, but she wasn't afraid.

She stood silent, looking over the rooftops of the Left Bank, and down

at the river crowded with thousands of dark little boats full of ragged beings, and she seemed for the moment simply to feel the wind unraveling her hair. I could have fallen in a stupor looking at her, studying her, all the aspects of the transformation, but there was an immense excitement in me to take her through the entire city, to reveal all things to her, to teach her everything I'd learned. She knew nothing of physical exhaustion now any more than I did. And she wasn't stunned by any horror such as I had been when Magnus went into the fire.

A carriage came speeding along the quai below, listing badly towards the river, the driver hunched over, trying to keep his balance on the high bench. I pointed to it as it drew near and I clasped her hand.

We leapt as it came beneath us, landing soundlessly on the leather top. The busy driver never looked around. I held tight to her, steadying her, until we were both riding easily, ready to jump off the vehicle when we chose.

It was indescribably thrilling, doing this with her.

We were thundering over the bridge and past the cathedral, and on through the crowds on the Pont Neuf. I heard her laughter again. I wondered what those in the high windows saw when they looked down on us, two gaily dressed figures clinging to the unsteady roof of the carriage like mischievous children as if it were a raft.

The carriage swerved. We were racing towards St.-Germain-des-Prés, scattering the crowds before us and roaring past the intolerable stench of the cemetery of les Innocents as towering tenements closed in.

For one second, I felt the shimmer of *the presence*, but it was gone so quickly I doubted myself. I looked back and could catch no glimmer of it. And I realized with extraordinary vividness that Gabrielle and I would talk about *the presence* together, that we would talk about everything together, and approach all things together. This night was as cataclysmic in its own way as the night Magnus had changed me, and this night had only begun.

The neighborhood was perfect now. I took her hand again, and pulled her after me, off the carriage, down into the street.

She stared dazed at the spinning wheels, but they were immediately gone. She didn't even look disheveled so much as she looked impossible, a woman torn out of time and place, clad only in slippers and dress, no chains on her, free to soar.

We entered a narrow alleyway and ran together, arms around each other, and now and then I looked down to see her eyes sweeping the walls above us, the scores of shuttered windows with their little streaks of escaping light.

I knew what she was seeing. I knew the sounds that pressed in on her. But still I could hear nothing from her, and this frightened me a little to think maybe she was deliberately shutting me out.

But she had stopped. She was having the first spasm of her death. I could see it in her face.

I reassured her, and reminded her in quick words of the vision I'd given her before.

"This is brief pain, nothing compared to what you've known. It will be gone in a matter of hours, maybe less if we drink now."

She nodded, more impatient with it than afraid.

We came out into a little square. In the gateway to an old house a young man stood, as if waiting for someone, the collar of his gray cloak up to shield his face.

Was she strong enough to take him? Was she as strong as I? This was the time to find out.

"If the thirst doesn't carry you into it, then it's too soon," I told her.

I glanced at her and a coldness crept over me. Her look of concentration was almost purely human, so intent was it, so fixed; and her eyes were shadowed with that same sense of tragedy I'd glimpsed before. Nothing was lost on her. But when she moved towards the man she wasn't human at all. She had become a pure predator, as only a beast can be a predator, and yet she was a woman walking slowly towards a man—a lady, in fact, stranded here without cape or hat or companions, and approaching a gentleman as if to beg for his aid. She was all that.

It was ghastly to watch it, the way that she moved over the stones as if she did not even touch them, and the way that everything, even the wisps of her hair blown this way and that by the breeze, seemed somehow under her command. She could have moved through the wall itself with that relentless step.

I drew back into the shadows.

The man quickened, turned to her with the faint grind of his boot heel on the stones, and she rose on tiptoe as if to whisper in his ear. I think

for one moment she hesitated. Perhaps she was faintly horrified. If she was, then the thirst had not had time enough to grow strong. But if she did question it, it was for no more than that second. She was taking him and he was powerless and I was too fascinated to do anything but watch.

But it came to me quite unexpectedly that I hadn't warned her about the heart. How could I have forgotten such a thing? I rushed towards her, but she had already let him go. And he had crumpled against the wall, his head to one side, his hat fallen at his feet. He was dead.

She stood looking down at him, and I saw the blood working in her, heating her and deepening her color and the red of her lips. Her eyes were a flash of violet when she glanced at me, almost exactly the color the sky had been when I'd come into her bedroom. I was silent watching her as she looked down at the victim with a curious amazement as if she did not completely accept what she saw. Her hair was tangled again and I lifted it back for her.

She slipped into my arms. I guided her away from the victim. She glanced back once or twice, then looked straight forward.

"It's enough for this night. We should go home to the tower," I said. I wanted to show her the treasure, and just to be with her in that safe place, to hold her and comfort her if she began to go mad over it all. She was feeling the death spasms again. There she could rest by the fire.

"No, I don't want to go yet," she said. "The pain won't go on long, you promised it wouldn't. I want it to pass and then to be here." She looked up at me, and she smiled. "I came to Paris to die, didn't I?" she whispered.

Everything was distracting her, the dead man back there, slumped in his gray cape, the sky shimmering on the surface of a puddle of water, a cat streaking atop a nearby wall. The blood was hot in her, moving in her.

I clasped her hand and urged her to follow me. "I have to drink," I said.

"Yes, I see it," she whispered. "You should have taken him. I should have thought … And you are the gentleman, even still."

"The starving gentleman." I smiled. "Let's not stumble over ourselves devising an etiquette for monsters." I laughed. I would have kissed her, but I was suddenly distracted. I squeezed her hand too tightly.

Far away, from the direction of les Innocents, I heard *the presence* as

strongly as ever before.

She stood as still as I was, and inclining her head slowly to one side, moved the hair back from her ear.

"Do you hear it?" I asked.

She looked up at me. "Is it *another one*!" She narrowed her eyes and glanced again in the direction from which the emanation had come.

"Outlaw!" she said aloud.

"What?" *Outlaw, outlaw, outlaw*. I felt a wave of light-headedness, something of a dream remembered. Fragment of a dream. But I couldn't think. I'd been damaged by doing it to her. I *had* to drink.

"It called us outlaws," she said. "Didn't you hear it?" And she listened again, but it was gone and neither of us heard it, and I couldn't be certain that I had received that clear pulse, *outlaw*, but it seemed I had!

"Never mind it, whatever it is," I said. "It never comes any closer than that." But even as I spoke I knew it had been more virulent this time. I wanted to get away from les Innocents. "It lives in graveyards," I murmured. "It may not be able to live elsewhere … for very long."

But before I finished speaking, I felt it again, and it seemed to expand and to exude the strongest malevolence I'd received from it yet.

"It's laughing!" she whispered.

I studied her. Without doubt, she was hearing it more clearly than I. "Challenge it!" I said. "Call it a coward! Tell it to come out!" She gave me an amazed look.

"Is that really what you want to do?" she questioned me under her breath. She was trembling slightly, and I steadied her. She put her arm around her waist as if one of the spasms had come again.

"Not now then," I said. "This isn't the time. And we'll hear it again, just when we've forgotten all about it."

"It's gone," she said. "But it hates us, this thing …"

"Let's get away from it," I said contemptuously, and putting my arm around her I hurried her along.

I didn't tell her what I was thinking, what weighed on me far more than *the presence* and its usual tricks. If she could hear *the presence* as well as I could, better in fact, then she had all my powers, including the ability to send and hear images and thoughts. Yet we could no longer *hear* each other!

3

I found a victim as soon as we had crossed the river, and as soon as I spotted the man, there came the deepening awareness that everything I had done alone I would now do with her. She would watch this act, learn from it. I think the intimacy of it made the blood rush to my face.

And as I lured the victim out of the tavern, as I teased him, maddened him, and then took him, I knew I was showing off for her, making it a little crueler, more playful. And when the kill came, it had an intensity to it that left me spent afterwards.

She loved it. She watched everything as if she could suck up the very vision as she sucked blood. We came together again and I took her in my arms and I felt her heat and she felt my heat. The blood was flooding my brain. And we just held each other, even the thin covering of our garments seeming alien, two burning statues in the dark.

After that, the night lost all ordinary dimensions. In fact, it remains one of the longest nights I have ever endured in my immortal life.

It was endless and fathomless and dizzying, and there were times when I wanted some defense against its pleasures and its surprises, and I had none.

And though I said her name over and over, to make it natural, she wasn't really Gabrielle yet to me. She was simply *she*, the one I had needed all of my life with all of my being. The only woman I had ever loved.

Her actual death didn't take long.

We sought out an empty cellar room where we remained until it was finished. And there I held on to her and talked to her as it went on. I told her everything that had happened to me again, in words this time.

I told her all about the tower. I told everything that Magnus had said. I explained all the occurrences of *the presence*. And how I had become almost used to it and contemptuous of it, and not willing to chase it down. Over and over again I tried to send her images, but it was useless. I didn't say anything about it. Neither did she. But she listened very attentively.

I talked to her about Nicki's suspicions, which of course he had not mentioned to her at all. And I explained that I feared for him even more now. Another open window, another empty room, and this time witnesses to verify the strangeness of it all.

But never mind, I should tell Roget some story that would make it plausible. I should find some means to do right by Nicki, to break the chain of suspicions that was binding him to me.

She seemed dimly fascinated by all of this, but it didn't really matter to her. What mattered to her was what lay before her now.

And when her death was finished, she was unstoppable. There was no wall that she could not climb, no door she wouldn't enter, no rooftop terrain too steep.

It was as if she did not believe she would live forever; rather she thought she had been granted this one night of supernatural vitality and all things must be known and accomplished before death would come for her at dawn.

Many times I tried to persuade her to go home to the tower. As the hours passed, a spiritual exhaustion came over me. I needed to be quiet there, to think on what had happened. I'd open my eyes and see only blackness for an instant. But she wanted only experiment, adventure.

She proposed that we enter the private dwellings of mortals now to search for the clothes she needed. She laughed when I said that I always purchased my clothes in the proper way.

"We can hear if a house is empty," she said, moving swiftly through the streets, her eyes on the windows of the darkened mansions. "We can hear if the servants are asleep."

It made perfect sense, though I'd never attempted such a thing. And I was soon following her up narrow back stairs and down carpeted corridors, amazed at the ease of it all, and fascinated by the details of the informal chambers in which mortals lived. I found I liked to touch personal things: fans, snuffboxes, the newspaper the master of the house had been reading, his boots on the hearth. It was as much fun as peering into windows.

But she had her purpose. In a lady's dressing room in a large St.-Germain house, she found a fortune in lavish clothes to fit her new and fuller form. I helped to peel off the old taffeta and to dress her up in pink velvet, gathering her hair in tidy curls under an ostrich-plume hat. I was

shocked again by the sight of her, and the strange eerie feeling of wandering with her through this overfurnished house full of mortal scents. She gathered objects from the dressing table. A vial of perfume, a small gold pair of scissors. She looked at herself in the glass.

I went to kiss her again and she didn't stop me. We were lovers kissing. And that was the picture we made together, white-faced lovers, as we rushed down the servants' stairs and out into the late evening streets.

We wandered in and out of the Opéra and the Comédie before they closed, then through the ball in the Palais Royal. It delighted her the way mortals saw us, but did not see us, how they were drawn to us, and completely deceived.

We heard *the presence* very sharply after that, as we explored the churches, then again it was gone. We climbed belfries to survey our kingdom, and afterwards huddled in crowded coffeehouses for a little while merely to feel and smell the mortals around us, to exchange secret glances, to laugh softly, tête-à-tête.

She fell into dream states, looking at the steam rising from the mug of coffee, at the layers of cigarette smoke hovering around the lamps.

She loved the dark empty streets and the fresh air more than anything else. She wanted to climb up into the limbs of the trees and onto the rooftops again. She marveled that I didn't always travel through the city by means of the rooftops, or ride about atop carriages as we had done.

Some time after midnight, we were in the deserted market, just walking hand in hand.

We had just heard *the presence* again but neither of us could discern a disposition in it as we had before. It was puzzling me.

But everything around us was astonishing her still—the refuse, the cats that chased the vermin, the bizarre stillness, the way that the darkest corners of the metropolis held no danger for us. She remarked on that. Perhaps it was that which enchanted her most of all, that we could slip past the dens of thieves unheard, that we could easily defeat anyone who should be fool enough to trouble us, that we were both visible and invisible, palpable and utterly unaccountable.

I didn't rush her or question her. I was merely borne along with her and content and sometimes lost in my own thoughts about this unfamiliar content.

And when a handsome, slightly built young man came riding through the darkened stalls I watched him as if he were an apparition, something coming from the land of the living into the land of the dead. He reminded me of Nicolas because of his dark hair and dark eyes, and something innocent yet brooding in the face. He shouldn't have been in the market alone. He was younger than Nicki and very foolish, indeed.

But just how foolish he was I didn't realize until she moved forward like a great pink feline, and brought him down almost silently from the horse.

I was shaken. The innocence of her victims didn't trouble her. She didn't fight my moral battles. But then I didn't fight them anymore either, so why should I judge her? Yet the ease with which she slew the young man—gracefully breaking his neck when the little drink she took was not enough to kill him—angered me though it had been extremely exciting to watch.

She was colder than I. She was better at all of it, I thought. Magnus had said, "Show no mercy." But had he meant us to kill when we did not have to kill?

It came clear in an instant why she'd done it. She tore off the pink velvet girdle and skirts right there and put on the boy's clothes. She'd chosen him for the fit of the clothes.

And to describe it more truly, as she put on his garments, she became the boy.

She put on his cream silk stockings and scarlet breeches, the lace shirt and the yellow waistcoat and then the scarlet frock coat, and even took the scarlet ribbon from the boy's hair.

Something in me rebelled against the charm of it, her standing so boldly in these new garments with all her hair still full over her shoulders looking more the lion's mane now than the lovely mass of woman's tresses it had been moments before. Then I wanted to ravage her. I closed my eyes.

When I looked at her again, my head was swimming with all that we'd seen and done together. I couldn't endure being so near to the dead boy.

She tied all of her blond hair together with the scarlet ribbon and let the long locks hang down her back. She laid the pink dress over the body of the boy to cover him, and she buckled on his sword, and drew it once and sheathed it again, and took his cream-colored roquelaure.

"Let's go, then, darling," she said, and she kissed me.

I couldn't move. I wanted to go back to the tower, and just be close to her. She looked at me and pressed my hand to spur me on. And she was almost immediately running ahead.

She had to feel the freedom of her limbs, and I found myself pounding after her, having to exert myself to catch up.

That had never happened with me and any mortal, of course. She seemed to be flying. And the sight of her flashing through the boarded-up stalls and the heaps of garbage made me almost lose my balance. Again I stopped.

She came back to me and kissed me. "But there's no real reason for me to dress that way anymore, is there?" she asked. She might have been talking to a child.

"No, of course there isn't," I said. Maybe it was a blessing that she couldn't read my thoughts. I couldn't stop looking at her legs, so perfect in the cream-colored stockings. And the way that the frock coat gathered at her small waist. Her face was like a flame.

Remember in those times you never saw a woman's legs like that. Or the silk of breeches tight over her small belly, or thighs.

But she was not really a woman now, was she? Any more than I was a man. For one silent second the horror of it all bled through.

"Come, I want to take to the roofs again," she said. "I want to go to the boulevard du Temple. I should like to see the theater, the one that you purchased and then shut up. Will you show that to me?" She was studying me as she asked this.

"Of course," I said. "Why not?"

We had two hours left of the endless night when we finally returned to the Ile St.-Louis and stood on the moonlit quais. Far down the paved street I saw my mare tethered where I'd left her. Perhaps she had gone unnoticed in the confusion that must have followed our departure.

We listened carefully for any sign of Nicki or Roget, but the house appeared deserted and dark.

"They are near, however," she whispered. "I think somewhere further down …"

"Nicki's flat," I said. "And from Nicki's flat someone could be watching

the mare, a servant posted to watch in case we came back."

"Better to leave the horse and steal another," she said.

"No, it's mine," I said. But I felt her grip on my hand tighten.

Our old friend again, *the presence*, and this time it was moving along the Seine on the other side of the island and towards the Left Bank.

"Gone," she said. "Let's go. We can steal another mount."

"Wait. I'm going to try to get her to come to me. To break the tether."

"Can you do that?"

"We'll see." I concentrated all my will on the mare, telling her silently to back up, to pull loose from the bond holding her and come.

In a second, the horse was prancing, jerking at the leather. Then she reared and the tether broke.

She came clattering towards us over the stones, and we were on her immediately, Gabrielle leaping up first and I right behind her, gathering up what was left of the rein as I urged the horse to go into a dead run.

As we crossed the bridge I felt something behind us, a commotion, the tumult of mortal minds.

But we were lost in the black echo chamber of the Ile de la Cité.

When we reached the tower, I lighted the resin torch and took her down with me into the dungeon. There was no time now to show her the upper chamber.

Her eyes were glassy and she looked about herself sluggishly as we descended the screw stairs. Her scarlet clothes gleamed against the dark stones. Ever so slightly she recoiled from the dampness.

The stench from the lower prison cells disturbed her, but I told her gently it was nothing to do with us. And once we had entered the huge burial crypt, the smell was shut out by the heavy iron-studded door.

The torchlight spread out to reveal the low arches of the ceiling, the three great sarcophagi with their deeply graven images.

She did not seem afraid. I told her that she must see if she could lift the stone lid of the one she chose for herself. I might have to do it for her.

She studied the three carved figures. And after a moment's reflection, she chose not the woman's sarcophagus but the one with the knight in armor carved on the top of it. And slowly she pushed the stone lid out of

place so she could look into the space within.

Not as much strength as I possessed but strong enough.

"Don't be frightened," I said.

"No, you mustn't ever worry on that account," she answered softly. Her voice had a lovely frayed sound to it, a faint timbre of sadness. She appeared to be dreaming as she ran her hands over the stone.

"By this hour," she said, "she might have already been laid out, your mother. And the room would be full of evil smells and the smoke of hundreds of candles. Think how humiliating it is, death. Strangers would have taken off her clothes, bathed her, dressed her—strangers seen her emaciated and defenseless in the final sleep. And those whispering in the corridors would have talked of their good health, and how they have never had the slightest illness in their families, no, no consumption in their families. 'The poor Marquise,' they would have said. They would have been wondering, did she have any money of her own? Did she leave it to her sons? And the old woman when she came to collect the soiled sheets, she would have stolen one of the rings off the dead woman's hand."

I nodded. And so we stand in this dungeon crypt, I wanted to say, and we prepare to lie down on stone beds, with only rats to keep us company. But it's infinitely better than that, isn't it? It has its dark splendor, to walk the nightmare terrain forever.

She looked wan, cold all over. Sleepily, she drew something out of her pocket.

It was the golden scissors she'd taken from the lady's table in the faubourg St.-Germain. Sparkling in the light of the torch like a bauble.

"No, Mother," I said. My own voice startled me. It leapt out echoing too sharply under the arched ceiling. The figures on the other sarcophagi seemed merciless witnesses. The hurt in my heart stunned me.

Evil sound, the snipping, the shearing. Her hair fell down in great long locks on the floor.

"Ooooh, Mother."

She looked down at it, scattering it silently with the tip of her boot, and then she looked up at me, and she was a young man now certainly, the short hair curling against her cheek. But her eyes were closing. She reached out to me and the scissors fell out of her hands.

"Rest now," she whispered.

“It’s only the rising sun,” I said to reassure her. She was weakening sooner than I did. She turned away from me and moved towards the coffin. I lifted her and her eyes shut. Pushing the lid of the sarcophagus even farther to the right, I laid her down inside, letting her pliant limbs arrange themselves naturally and gracefully.

Her face had already smoothed itself into sleep, her hair framing her face with a young boy's locks.

Dead, she seemed, and gone, the magic undone.

I kept looking at her.

I let my teeth cut into the tip of my tongue until I felt the pain and tasted the hot blood there. Then bending low I let the blood fall in tiny shining droplets on her lips. Her eyes opened. Violet blue and glittering, they stared up at me. The blood flowed into her opening mouth and slowly she lifted her head to meet my kiss. My tongue passed into her. Her lips were cold. My lips were cold. But the blood was hot and it flowed between us.

“Good night, my darling one,” I said. “My dark angel Gabrielle.” She sank back into stillness as I let her go. I closed the stone over her.

4

I did not like rising in the black underground crypt. I didn't like the chill in the air, and that faint stench from the prison below, the feeling that this was where all the dead things lay.

A fear overcame me. What if she didn't rise? What if her eyes never opened again? What did I know of what I'd done?

Yet it seemed an arrogant thing, an obscene thing to move the lid of the coffin again and gaze at her in her sleep as I had done last night. A mortal shame came over me. At home, I would never have dared to open her door without knocking, never dared to draw back the curtains of her bed.

She would rise. She had to. And better that she should lift the stone for herself, know how to rise, and that the thirst should drive her to it at the proper moment as it had driven me.

I lighted the torch on the wall for her, and went out for a moment to breathe the fresh air. Then leaving gates and doors unlocked behind me, I went up into Magnus's cell to watch the twilight melt from the sky.

I'd hear her, I thought, when she awakened.

An hour must have passed. The azure light faded, the stars rose, and the distant city of Paris lighted its myriad tiny beacons. I left the windowsill where I had sat against the iron bars and I went to the chest and began to select jewels for her.

Jewels she still loved. She had taken her old keepsakes with her when we left her room. I lighted the candles to help me see, though I didn't really need them. The illumination was beautiful to me. Beautiful on the jewels. And I found very delicate and lovely things for her—pearl-studded pins that she might wear in the lapels of her mannish little coat, and rings that would look masculine on her small hands if that was what she wanted.

I listened now and then for her. And this chill would clutch my heart. What if she did not rise? What if there had been only that one night for her? Horror thudding in me. And the sea of jewels in the chest, the candlelight dancing in the faceted stones, the gold settings—it meant

nothing.

But I didn't hear her. I heard the wind outside, the great soft rustle of the trees, the faint distant whistling of the stable boy as he moved about the barn, the neighing of my horses.

Far off a village church bell rang.

Then very suddenly there came over me the feeling that someone was watching me. This was so unfamiliar to me that I panicked. I turned, almost stumbling into the chest, and stared at the mouth of the secret tunnel. No one there.

No one in this small empty sanctum with the candlelight playing on the stones and Magnus's grim countenance on the sarcophagus.

Then I looked straight in front of me at the barred window.

And I saw her looking back at me.

Floating in the air she seemed to be, holding to the bars with both hands, and she was smiling.

I almost cried out. I backed up and the sweat broke out all over my body. I was embarrassed suddenly to be caught off guard, to be so obviously startled.

But she remained motionless, smiling still, her expression gradually changing from serenity to mischievousness. The candlelight made her eyes too brilliant.

"It's not very nice to frighten other immortals like that," I said. She laughed more freely and easily than she ever had when she was alive.

Relief coursed through me as she moved, made sounds. I knew I was blushing.

"How did you get there!" I said. I went to the window and reached through the bars and clasped both her wrists.

Her little mouth was all sweetness and laughter. Her hair was a great shimmering mane around her face.

"I climbed the wall, of course," she said. "How do you think I got here?"

"Well, go down. You can't come through the bars. I'll go to meet you."

"You're very right about that," she said. "I've been to all the windows. Meet me on the battlements above. It's faster."

She started climbing, hooking her boots easily into the bars, then she vanished.

She was all exuberance as she'd been the night before as we came

down the stairs together.

"Why are we lingering here?" she said. "Why don't we go on now to Paris?"

Something was wrong with her, lovely as she was, something not right … what was it?

She didn't want kisses now, or even talk, really. And that had a little sting to it.

"I want to show you the inner room," I said. "And the jewels."

"The jewels?" she asked.

She hadn't seen them from the window. The cover of the chest had blocked her view. She walked ahead of me into the room where Magnus had burned, and then she lay down to crawl through the tunnel.

As soon as she saw the chest, she was shocked by it.

She tossed her hair a little impatiently over her shoulder and bent to study the brooches, the rings, the small ornaments so like those heirlooms she'd had to sell long ago one by one.

"Why, he must have been collecting them for centuries," she said. "And such exquisite things. He chose what he would take, didn't he? What a creature he must have been."

Again, almost angrily, she pushed her hair out of her way. It seemed paler, more luminous, fuller. A glorious thing.

"The pearls, look at them," I said. "And these rings." I showed her the ones I'd already chosen for her. I took her hand and slipped the rings on her fingers. Her fingers moved as if they had life of their own, could feel delight, and again she laughed.

"Ah, but we are splendid devils, aren't we?"

"Hunters of the Savage Garden," I said.

"Then let's go into Paris," she said. Faint touch of pain in her face, the thirst. She ran her tongue over her lips. Was I half as fascinating to her as she was to me?

She raked her hair back from her forehead, and her eyes darkened with the intensity of her words.

"I want to feed quickly tonight," she said, "then go out of the city, into the woods. Go where there are no men and women about. Go where there is only the wind and the dark trees, and the stars overhead. Blessed silence."

She went to the window again. Her back was narrow and straight, and

her hands at her sides, alive with the jeweled rings. And coming as they did out of the thick cuffs of the man's coat, her hands looked all the more slender and exquisite. She must have been looking at the high dim clouds, the stars that burned through the purple layer of evening mist.

"I have to go to Roget," I said under my breath. "I have to take care of Nicki, tell them some lie about what's happened to you."

She turned, and her face looked small and cold suddenly, the way it could at home when she was disapproving. But she'd never really look that way again.

"Why tell them anything about me?" she asked. "Why ever even bother with them again?"

I was shocked by this. But it wasn't a complete surprise to me. Perhaps I'd been waiting for it. Perhaps I'd sensed it in her all along, the unspoken questions.

I wanted to say Nicki sat by your bed when you were dying, does that mean nothing? But how sentimental, how mortal that sounded, how positively foolish.

Yet it wasn't foolish.

"I don't mean to judge you," she said. She folded her arms and leaned against the window. "I simply don't understand. Why did you write to us? Why did you send us all the gifts? Why didn't you take this white fire from the moon and go where you wanted with it?"

"But where should I want to go?" I said. "Away from all those I'd known and loved? I did not want to stop thinking of you, of Nicki, even of my father and my brothers. I did what I wanted," I said.

"Then conscience played no role in it?"

"If you follow your conscience, you do what you want," I said. "But it was simpler than that. I wanted you to have the wealth I gave you. I wanted you … to be happy."

She reflected for a long time.

"Would you have had me forget *you*?" I demanded. It sounded spiteful, angry.

She didn't answer immediately.

"No, of course not," she said. "And had it been the other way around, I would never have forgotten you either. I'm sure of it. But the rest of them? I don't give a damn about them. I shall never exchange words with them again. I shall never lay eyes on them."

I nodded. But I hated what she was saying. She frightened me.

"I cannot overcome this notion that I've died," she said. "That I am utterly cut off from all living creatures. I can taste, I can see, I can feel. I can drink blood. But I am like something that cannot be seen, cannot affect things."

"It's not so," I said. "And how long do you think it will sustain you, feeling and seeing and touching and tasting, if there is no love? No one with you?"

The same uncomprehending expression.

"Oh, why do I bother to tell you this?" I said. "I am with you. We're together. You don't know what it was like when I was alone. You can't imagine it."

"I trouble you and I don't mean to," she said. "Tell them what you will. Maybe you can somehow make up a palatable story. I don't know. If you want me to go with you, I'll go. I'll do what you ask of me. But I have one more question for you." She dropped her voice. "Surely you don't mean to share this power with them!"

"No, never." I shook my head as if to say the thought was incredible. I was looking at the jewels, thinking of all the gifts I'd sent, thinking of the dollhouse. I had sent them a dollhouse. I thought of Renaud's players safely across the Channel.

"Not even with Nicolas?"

"No, God, no!" I looked at her.

She nodded slightly as if she approved of this answer. And she pushed at her hair again in a distracted way.

"Why not with Nicolas?" she asked. I wanted this to stop.

"Because he's young," I said, "and he has life before him. He's not on the brink of death." Now I was more than uneasy. I was miserable. "In time, he'll forget about us …" I wanted to say "about our conversation."

"He could die tomorrow," she said. "A carriage could crush him in the streets …"

"Do you want me to do it!" I glared at her.

"No. I don't want you to do it. But who am I to tell you what to do? I am trying to understand you."

Her long heavy hair had slipped over her shoulders again, and exasperated, she took hold of it in both hands.

Then suddenly she made a low hissing sound, and her body went

rigid. She was holding her long tresses and staring at them.

"My God," she whispered. And then in a spasm, she let go of her hair and screamed.

The sound paralyzed me. It sent a flash of white pain through my head. I had never heard her scream. And she screamed again as if she were on fire. She had fallen back against the window and she was screaming louder as she looked at her hair. She went to touch it and then pulled her fingers back from it as if it were blazing. And she struggled against the window, screaming and twisting from side to side, as if she were trying to get away from her own hair.

"Stop it!" I shouted. I grabbed hold of her shoulders and shook her. She was gasping. I realized instantly what it was. Her hair had grown back! It had grown back as she slept until it was as long as it had been before. And it was thicker even, more lustrous. That is what was wrong with the way she looked, what I had noticed and not noticed! And what she herself had just seen.

"Stop it, stop it now!" I shouted louder, her body shaking so violently I could hardly keep her in my arms. "It's grown back, that's all!" I insisted. "It's natural to you, don't you see? It's nothing!"

She was choking, trying to calm herself, touching it and then screaming as if her fingertips were blistered. She tried to get away from me, and then ripped at her hair in pure terror.

I shook her hard this time.

"Gabrielle!" I said. "Do you understand me? It's grown back, and it will every time you cut it! There's no horror in it, for the love of hell, stop!" I thought if she didn't stop, I'd start to rave myself. I was trembling as badly as she was.

She stopped screaming and she was giving little gasps. I'd never seen her like this, not in all the years and years in Auvergne. She let me guide her towards the bench by the hearth, where I made her sit down. She put her hands to her temples and tried to catch her breath, her body rocking back and forth slowly.

I looked about for a scissors. I had none. The little gold scissors had fallen on the floor of the crypt below. I took out my knife.

She was sobbing softly in her hands.

"Do you want me to cut it off again?" I asked.

She didn't answer.

“Gabrielle, listen to me.” I took her hands from her face. “I’ll cut it again if you like. Each night, cut it, and burn it. That’s all.”

She stared at me in such perfect stillness suddenly that I didn’t know what to do. Her face was smeared with blood from her tears, and there was blood on her linen. Blood all over her linen.

“Shall I cut it?” I asked her again.

She looked exactly as if someone had hit her and made her bleed. Her eyes were wide and wondering, the blood tears seeping out of them down her smooth cheeks. And as I watched, the flow stopped and the tears darkened and dried to a crust on her white skin.

I wiped her face carefully with my lace handkerchief. I went to the clothing I kept in the tower, the garments made for me in Paris that I’d brought back and kept here now.

I took off her coat. She made no move to help me or stop me and I unhooked the linen shirt that she wore.

I saw her breasts and they were perfectly white except for the palest pink tint to the small nipples. Trying not to look at them, I put the fresh shirt on her and buttoned it quickly. Then I brushed her hair, brushed it and brushed it, and not wanting to hack at it with the knife, I braided it for her in one long plait, and I put her coat back on her.

I could feel her composure and her strength coming back. She didn’t seem ashamed of what had happened. And I didn’t want her to be. She was merely considering things. But she didn’t speak. She didn’t move.

I started talking to her.

“When I was little, you used to tell me about all the places you’d been. You showed me pictures of Naples and Venice, remember? Those old books? And you had things, little keepsakes from London and St. Petersburg, all the places you’d seen.”

She didn’t answer.

“I want us to go to all those places. I want to see them now. I want to see them and live in them. I want to go farther even, places I never dreamed of seeing when I was alive.”

Something changed in her face.

“Did you know it would grow back?” she asked in a whisper.

“No. I mean yes. I mean, I didn’t think. I should have known it would do that.”

For a long time she stared at me again in that same still, listless

fashion.

"Does nothing about it all … ever … frighten you?" she asked. Her voice was guttural and unfamiliar. "Does nothing … ever … stop you?" she asked. Her mouth was open and perfect and looked like a human mouth.

"I don't know," I whispered helplessly. "I don't see the point," I said. But I felt confused now. Again I told her to cut it each night and to burn it. Simple.

"Yes, burn it," she sighed. "Otherwise it should fill all the rooms of the tower in time, shouldn't it? It would be like Rapunzel's hair in the fairy tale. It would be like the gold that the miller's daughter had to spin from straw in the fairy tale of the mean dwarf, Rumpelstiltskin."

"We write our own fairy tales, my love," I said. "The lesson in this is that nothing can destroy what you are now. Every wound will heal. You are a goddess."

"And the goddess thirsts," she said.

Hours later, as we walked arm in arm like two students through the boulevard crowds, it was already forgotten. Our faces were ruddy, our skin warm.

But I did not leave her to go to my lawyer. And she did not seek the quiet open country as she had wanted to do. We stayed close to each other, the faintest shimmer of *the presence* now and then making us turn our heads.

5

By the hour of three, when we reached the livery stables, we knew we were being stalked by *the presence*. For half an hour, forty-five minutes at a time, we wouldn't hear it. Then the dull hum would come again. It was maddening me.

And though we tried hard to hear some intelligible thoughts from it, all we could discern was malice, and an occasional tumult like the spectacle of dry leaves disintegrated in the roar of the blaze.

She was glad that we were riding home. It wasn't that the thing annoyed her. It was only what she had said earlier—she wanted the emptiness of the country, the quiet.

When the open land broke before us, we were going so fast that the wind was the only sound, and I think I heard her laughing but I wasn't sure. She loved the feel of the wind as I did, she loved the new brilliance of the stars over the darkened hills.

But I wondered if there had been moments tonight when she had wept inwardly and I had not known. There had been times when she was obscure and silent, and her eyes quivered as if they were crying, but there were absolutely no tears.

I was deep into thoughts of that, I think, when we neared a dense wood that grew along the banks of a shallow stream, and quite suddenly the mare reared and lurched to the side.

I was almost thrown, it was so unexpected. Gabrielle held on tight to my right arm.

Every night I rode into this little glade, crashing over the narrow wooden bridge above the water. I loved the sound of the horse's hooves on the wood and the climb up the sloping bank. And my mare knew the path. But now, she would have none of it.

Shying, threatening to rear again, she turned of her own and galloped back towards Paris until, with all the power of my will, I commanded her, reining her in.

Gabrielle was staring back at the thick copse, the great mass of dark, swaying branches that concealed the stream. And there came over the

thin howling of the wind and that soft volume of rustling leaves, the definite pulse of *the presence* in the trees.

We heard it at the same moment, surely, because I tightened my arm around Gabrielle as she nodded, gripping my hand.

"It's stronger!" she said to me quickly. "And it is not one alone."

"Yes," I said, enraged, "and it stands between me and my lair!" I drew my sword, bracing Gabrielle in my left arm.

"You're not riding into it," she cried out.

"The hell I'm not!" I said, trying to steady the horse. "We don't have two hours before sunrise. Draw your sword!"

She tried to turn to speak to me, but I was already driving the horse forward. And she drew her sword as I'd told her to do, her little hand knotted around it as firmly as that of a man.

Of course, the thing would flee as soon as we reached the copse, I was sure of that. I mean the damned thing had never done anything but turn tail and run. And I was furious that it had frightened my mount, and that it was frightening Gabrielle.

With a sharp kick, and the full force of my mental persuasion, I sent the horse racing straight ahead to the bridge.

I locked my hand to the weapon. I bent low with Gabrielle beneath me. I was breathing rage as if I were a dragon, and when the mare's hooves hit the hollow wood over the water, I saw them, the demons, for the first time!

White faces and white arms above us, glimpsed for no more than a second, and out of their mouths the most horrid shrieking as they shook the branches sending down on us a shower of leaves.

"Damn you, you pack of harpies!" I shouted as we reached the sloping bank on the other side, but Gabrielle had let out a scream.

Something had landed on the horse behind me, and the horse was slipping in the damp earth, and the thing had hold of my shoulder and the arm with which I tried to swing the sword.

Whipping the sword over Gabrielle's head and down past my left arm, I chopped at the creature furiously, and saw it fly off, a white blur in the darkness, while another one sprang at us with hands like claws. Gabrielle's blade sliced right through its outstretched arm. I saw the arm go up into the air, the blood spurting as if from a fountain. The screams became a searing wail. I wanted to slash every one of them to pieces. I

turned the horse back too sharply so that it reared and almost fell.

But Gabrielle had hold of the horse's mane and she drove it again towards the open road.

As we raced for the tower, we could hear them screaming as they came on. And when the mare gave out, we abandoned her and ran, hand in hand, towards the gates.

I knew we had to get through the secret passage to the inner chamber before they climbed the outside wall. They must not see us take that stone out of place.

And locking the gates and doors behind me as fast as I could, I carried Gabrielle up the stairs.

By the time we reached the secret room and pushed the stone into place again, I heard their howling and shrieking below and their first scraping against the walls.

I snatched up an armful of firewood and threw it beneath the window.

"Hurry, the kindling," I said.

But there were half a dozen white faces already at the bars. Their shrieks echoed monstrously in the little cell. For one moment I could only stare at them as I backed away.

They clung to the iron grating like so many bats, but they weren't bats. They were vampires, and vampires as we were vampires, in human form.

Dark eyes peered at us from under mops of filthy hair, howls growing louder and fiercer, the fingers that clung to the grating caked with filth. Such clothing as I could see was no more than colorless rags. And the stench coming from them was the graveyard stench.

Gabrielle pitched the kindling at the wall, and she jumped away as they reached to catch hold of her. They bared their fangs. They screeched. Hands struggled to pick up the firewood and throw it back at us. All together they pulled at the grating as if they might free it from the stone.

"Get the tinderbox," I shouted. I grabbed up one of the stouter pieces of wood and thrust it right at the closest face, easily flinging the creature out and off the wall. Weak things. I heard its scream as it fell, but the others had clamped their hands on the wood and they struggled with me now as I dislodged another dirty little demon. But by this time Gabrielle had lighted the kindling.

The flames shot upwards. The howling stopped in a frenzy of ordinary speech:

"It's fire, get back, get down, get out of the way, you idiots! Down, down. The bars are hot! Move away quickly!"

Perfectly regular French! In fact an ever increasing flood of pretty vernacular curse words.

I burst out laughing, stomping my foot and pointing to them, as I looked at Gabrielle.

"A curse on you, blasphemer!" one of them screamed. Then the fire licked at his hands and he howled, falling backwards.

"A curse on the profaners, the outlaws!" came screams from below. It caught on quickly and became a regular chorus. "A curse on the outlaws who dared to enter the House of God!" But they were scrambling down to the ground. The heavy timbers were catching, and the fire was roaring to the ceiling.

"Go back to the graveyard where you came from, you pack of pranksters!" I said. I would have thrown the fire down on them if I could have gotten near the window.

Gabrielle stood still with her eyes narrow, obviously listening.

Cries and howls continued from below. A new anthem of curses upon those who broke the sacred laws, blasphemed, provoked the wrath of God and Satan. They were pulling on the gates and lower windows. They were doing stupid things like throwing rocks at the wall.

"They can't get in," Gabrielle said in a low monotone, her head still cocked attentively. "They can't break the gate."

I wasn't so certain. The gate was rusted, very old. Nothing to do but wait.

I collapsed on the floor, leaning against the side of the sarcophagus, my arms around my chest and my back bent. I wasn't even laughing anymore.

She too sat down against the wall with her legs sprawled out before her. Her chest heaved a little, and her hair was coming loose from the braid. It was a cobra's hood around her face, loose strands clinging to her white cheeks. Soot clung to her garments.

The heat of the fire was crushing. The airless room shimmered with vapors and the flames rose to shut out the night. But we could breathe the little air that was there. We suffered nothing except the heat and the

exhaustion.

And gradually I realized she was right about the gate. They hadn't managed to break it down. I could hear them drawing away.

"May the wrath of God punish the profane!"

There was some faint commotion near the stables. I saw in my mind my poor half-witted mortal stable boy dragged in terror from his hiding place, and my rage was redoubled. They were sending me images of it from their thoughts, the murder of that poor boy. Damn them.

"Be still," Gabrielle said. "It's too late."

Her eyes widened and then grew small again as she listened. He was dead, the poor miserable creature.

I felt the death just as if I had seen a small dark bird suddenly rising from the stables. And she sat forward as though seeing it too, and then settled back as if she had lost consciousness, though she had not. She murmured and it sounded like "red velvet," but it was under her breath and I didn't catch the words.

"I'll punish you for this, you gang of ruffians!" I said aloud. I sent it out towards them. "You trouble my house. I swear you'll pay for this."

But my limbs were getting heavier and heavier. The heat of the fire was almost drugging. All the night's strange happenings were taking their toll.

In my exhaustion and in the glare of the fire I could not guess the hour. I think I fell to dreaming for an instant, and woke myself with a shiver, unsure of how much time had passed.

I looked up and saw the figure of an unearthly young boy, an exquisite young boy, pacing the floor of the chamber.

Of course it was only Gabrielle.

6

She gave the impression of almost rampant strength as she walked back and forth. Yet all of it was contained in an unbroken grace.

She kicked at the timbers and watched the blackened ruin of the fire flare for a moment before settling into itself again. I could see the sky. An hour perhaps remained.

"But who are they?" she asked. She stood over me, her legs apart, her hands in two liquid summoning gestures. "Why do they call us outlaws and blasphemers?"

"I've told you everything I know," I confessed. "Until tonight I didn't think they possessed faces or limbs or real voices."

I climbed to my feet and brushed off my clothes.

"They damned us for entering the churches!" she said. "Did you catch it, those images coming from them? And they don't know how we managed to do it. They themselves would not dare."

For the first time I observed that she was trembling. There were other small signs of alarm, the way the flesh quivered around her eyes, the way that she kept pushing the loose strands of her hair out of her eyes again.

"Gabrielle," I said. I tried to make my tone authoritative, reassuring. "The important thing is to get out of here now. We don't know how early those creatures rise, or how soon after sunset they'll return. We have to discover another hiding place."

"The dungeon crypt," she said.

"A worse trap than this," I said, "if they break through the gate." I glanced at the sky again. I pulled the stone out of the low passage. "Come on," I said.

"But where are we going?" she asked. For the first time tonight she looked almost fragile.

"To a village east of here," I said. "It's perfectly obvious that the safest place is within the village church itself."

"Would you do that?" she asked. "In the church?"

"Of course I would. As you just said, the little beasts would never dare

to enter! And the crypts under the altar will be as deep and dark as any grave."

"But Lestat, to rest under the very altar!"

"Mother, you astonish me," I said. "I have taken victims under the very roof of Notre Dame." But another little idea came to me. I went to Magnus's chest and started picking at the heap of treasure. I pulled out two rosaries, one of pearls, another of emeralds, both having the usual small crucifix.

She watched me, her face white, pinched.

"Here, you take this one," I said, giving her the emerald rosary. "Keep it on you. If and when we do meet with them, show them the crucifix. If I am right, they'll run from it."

"But what happens if we don't find a safe place in the church?"

"How the hell should I know? We'll come back here!"

I could feel a fear collecting in her and radiating from her as she hesitated, looking through the window at the fading stars. She had passed through the veil into the promise of eternity and now she was in danger again.

Quickly, I took the rosary from her and kissed her and slipped the rosary into the pocket of her frock coat.

"Emeralds mean eternal life, Mother," I said.

She appeared the boy standing there again, the last glow of the fire just tracing the line of her cheek and mouth.

"It's as I said before," she whispered. "You aren't afraid of anything, are you?"

"What does it matter if I am or not?" I shrugged. I took her arm and drew her to the passage. "We are the things that others fear," I said. "Remember that."

When we reached the stable, I saw the boy had been hideously murdered. His broken body lay twisted on the hay-strewn floor as if it had been flung there by a Titan. The back of his head was shattered. And to mock him, it seemed, or to mock me, they had dressed him in a gentleman's fancy velvet frock coat. Red velvet. Those were the words she'd murmured when they had done the crime. I'd seen only the death. I looked away now in disgust. All the horses were gone. "They'll pay for

that," I said.

I took her hand. But she stared at the miserable boy's body as if it drew her against her will. She glanced at me.

"I feel cold," she whispered. "I'm losing the strength in my limbs. I must, I must get to where it's dark. I can feel it."

I led her fast over the rise of the nearby hill and towards the road.

There were no howling little monsters hidden in this village churchyard, of course. I didn't think there would be. The earth hadn't been turned up on the old graves in a long time.

Gabrielle was past conferring with me on this.

I half carried her to the side door of the church and quietly broke the latch.

"I'm cold all over. My eyes are burning," she said again under her breath. "Someplace dark."

But as I started to take her in, she stopped.

"What if they're right," she said. "And we don't belong in the House of God."

"Gibberish and nonsense. God isn't in the House of God."

"Don't!…" She moaned.

I pulled her through the sacristy and out before the altar. She covered her face, and when she looked up it was at the crucifix over the tabernacle. She let out a long low gasp. But it was from the stained-glass windows that she shielded her eyes, turning her head towards me. The rising sun that I could not even feel yet was already burning her!

I picked her up as I had done last night. I had to find an old burial crypt, one that hadn't been used in years. I hurried towards the Blessed Virgin's altar, where the inscriptions were almost worn away. And kneeling, I hooked my fingernails around a slab and quickly lifted it to reveal a deep sepulcher with a single rotted coffin.

I pulled her down into the sepulcher with me and moved the slab back into place.

Inky blackness, and the coffin splintering under me so that my right hand closed on a crumbling skull. I felt the sharpness of other bones under my chest. Gabrielle spoke as if in a trance:

"Yes. Away from the light."

“We’re safe,” I whispered.

I pushed the bones out of the way, making a nest of the rotted wood and the dust that was too old to contain any smell of human decay.

But I did not fall into the sleep for perhaps an hour or more.

I kept thinking over and over of the stable boy, mangled and thrown there in that fancy red velvet frock coat. I had seen that coat before and I couldn’t remember where I had seen it. Had it been one of my own? Had they gotten into the tower? No, that was not possible, they couldn’t have gotten in. Had they had a coat made up identical to one of my own? Gone to such lengths to mock me? No. How could such creatures do a thing like that? But still … that particular coat. Something about it …

7

I heard the softest, loveliest singing when I opened my eyes. And as sound can often do, even in the most precious fragments, it took me back to childhood, to some night in winter when all my family had gone down to the church in our village and stood for hours among the blazing candles, breathing the heavy, sensual smell of the incense as the priest walked in procession with the monstrance lifted high.

I remembered the sight of the round white Host behind the thick glass, the starburst of gold and jewels surrounding it, and overhead the embroidered canopy, swaying dangerously as the altar boys in their lace surplices tried to steady it as they moved on.

A thousand Benedictions after that one had engraved into my mind the words of the old hymn.

O Salutaris Hostia
Quae caeli pandis ostium
Bella premunt hostilia,
Da robur, fer auxilium …

And as I lay in the remains of this broken coffin under the white marble slab at the side altar in this large country church, Gabrielle clinging to me still in the paralysis of sleep, I realized very slowly that above me were hundreds upon hundreds of humans who were singing this very hymn right now.

The church was full of people! And we could not get out of this damned nest of bones until all of them went away.

Around me in the dark, I could feel creatures moving. I could smell the shattered, crumbling skeleton on which I lay. I could smell the earth, too, and feel dampness and the harshness of the cold.

Gabrielle's hands were dead hands holding to me. Her face was as inflexible as bone.

I tried not to brood on this, but to lie perfectly still.

Hundreds of humans breathed and sighed above. Perhaps a thousand

of them. And now they moved on into the second hymn.

What comes now, I thought dismally. The litany, the blessings? On this of all nights, I had no time to lie here musing. I must get out. The image of that red velvet coat came to me again with an irrational sense of urgency, and a flash of equally inexplicable pain.

And quite suddenly, it seemed, Gabrielle opened her eyes. Of course I didn't see it. It was utterly black here. I felt it. I felt her limbs come to life.

And no sooner had she moved than she grew positively rigid with alarm. I slipped my hand over her mouth.

"Be still," I whispered, but I could feel her panic.

All the horrors of the preceding night must be coming back to her, that she was now in a sepulcher with a broken skeleton, that she lay beneath a stone she could hardly lift.

"We're in the church!" I whispered. "And we're safe."

The singing surged on. *"Tantum ergo Sacramentum, Veneremur cernui."*

"No, it's a Benediction," Gabrielle gasped. She was trying to lie still, but abruptly she lost the struggle, and I had to grip her firmly in both arms.

"We *must* get out," she whispered. "Lestat, the Blessed Sacrament is on the altar, for the love of God!"

The remains of the wooden coffin clattered and creaked against the stone beneath it, causing me to roll over on top of her and force her flat with my weight.

"Now lie still, do you hear me!" I said. "We have no choice but to wait."

But her panic was infecting me. I felt the fragments of bone crunching beneath my knees and smelled the rotting cloth. It seemed the death stench was penetrating the walls of the sepulcher, and I knew I could not bear to be shut up with that stench.

"We can't," she gasped. "We can't remain here. I have to get out!" She was almost whimpering. "Lestat, I can't." She was feeling the walls with both hands, and then the stone above us. I heard a pure toneless sound of terror issue from her lips.

Above the hymn had stopped. The priest would go up the altar steps, lift the monstrance in both hands. He would turn to the congregation and raise the Sacred Host in blessing. Gabrielle knew that of course, and

Gabrielle suddenly went mad, writhing under me, almost heaving me to the side.

"All right, listen to me!" I hissed. I could control this no longer. "We are going out. But we shall do it like proper vampires, do you hear! There are one thousand people in the church and we are going to scare them to death. I will lift the stone and we will rise up together, and when we do, raise your arms and make the most horrible face you can muster and cry out if you can. That will make them fall back, instead of pouncing upon us and dragging us off to prison, and then we'll rush to the door."

She couldn't even stop to answer, she was already struggling, slamming the rotted boards with her heels.

I rose up, giving the marble slab a great shove with both hands, and leapt out of the vault just as I had said I would do, pulling my cloak up in a giant arc.

I landed upon the floor of the choir in a blaze of candlelight, letting out the most powerful cry I could make.

Hundreds rose to their feet before me, hundreds of mouths opening to scream.

Giving another shout, I grabbed Gabrielle's hand and lunged towards them, leaping over the Communion rail. She gave a lovely high-pitched wail, her left hand raised as a claw as I pulled her down the aisle. Everywhere there was panic, men and women clutching for children, shrieking and falling backwards.

The heavy doors gave at once on the black sky and the gusting breeze. I threw Gabrielle ahead of me and, turning back, made the loudest shriek that I could. I bared my fangs at the writhing, screaming congregation, and unable to tell whether some pursued or merely fell towards me in panic, I reached into my pockets and showered the marble floor with gold coins.

"The devil throws money!" someone screeched.

We tore through the cemetery and across the fields.

Within seconds, we had gained the woods and I could smell the stables of a large house that lay ahead of us beyond the trees.

I stood still, bent almost double in concentration, and summoned the horses. And we ran towards them, hearing the dull thunder of their hooves against the stalls.

Bolting over the low hedge with Gabrielle beside me, I pulled the door off its hinges just as a fine gelding raced out of his broken stall, and we sprang onto his back, Gabrielle scrambling into place before me as I threw my arm around her.

I dug my heels into the animal and rode south into the woods and towards Paris.

8

I tried to form a plan as we approached the city, but in truth I was not sure at all how to proceed. There was no avoiding these filthy little monsters. We were riding towards a battle. And it was little different from the morning on which I'd gone out to kill the wolves, counting upon my rage and my will to carry me through.

We had scarcely entered the scattered farmhouses of Montmartre when we heard for a split second their faint murmuring. Noxious as a vapor, it seemed.

Gabrielle and I knew we had to drink at once, in order to be prepared for them.

We stopped at one of the small farms, crept through the orchard to the back door, and found inside the man and wife dozing at an empty hearth.

When it was finished, we came out of the house together and into the little kitchen garden where we stood still for a moment, looking at the pearl gray sky. No sound of the others. Only the stillness, the clarity of the fresh blood, and the threat of rain as the clouds gathered overhead.

I turned and silently bid the gelding to come to me. And gathering the reins, I turned to Gabrielle.

"I see no other way but to go into Paris," I told her, "to face these little beasts head on. And until they show themselves and start the war all over again, there are things that I must do. I have to think about Nicki. I have to talk to Roget."

"This isn't the time for that mortal nonsense," she said.

The dirt of the church sepulcher still clung to the cloth of her coat and to her blond hair, and she looked like an angel dragged in the dust.

"I won't have them come between me and what I mean to do," I said.

She took a deep breath.

"Do you want to lead these creatures to your beloved Monsieur Roget?" she asked.

That was too dreadful to contemplate.

The first few drops of rain were falling and I felt cold in spite of the

blood. In a moment it would be raining hard.

"All right," I said. "Nothing can be done until this is finished!" I said. I mounted the horse and reached for her hand.

"Injury only spurs you on, doesn't it?" she asked. She was studying me. "It would only strengthen you, whatever they did or tried to do."

"Now this is what I call mortal nonsense!" I said. "Come on!"

"Lestat," she said soberly. "They put your stable boy in a gentleman's frock coat after they killed him. Did you see the coat? Hadn't you seen it before?"

That damned red velvet coat …

"I have seen it," she said. "I had looked at it for hours at my bedside in Paris. It was Nicolas de Lenfent's coat."

I looked at her for a long moment. But I don't think I saw her at all. The rage building in me was absolutely silent. It will be rage until I have proof that it must be grief, I thought. Then I wasn't thinking.

Vaguely, I knew she had no notion yet how strong our passions could be, how they could paralyze us. I think I moved my lips, but nothing came out.

"I don't think they've killed him, Lestat," she said.

Again I tried to speak. I wanted to ask, Why do you say that, but I couldn't. I was staring forward into the orchard.

"I think he is alive," she said. "And that he is their prisoner. Otherwise they would have left his body there and never bothered with that stable boy."

"Perhaps, perhaps not." I had to force my mouth to form the words.

"The coat was a message."

I couldn't stand this any longer.

"I'm going after them," I said. "Do you want to return to the tower? If I fail at this …"

"I have no intention of leaving you," she said.

* * *

The rain was falling in earnest by the time we reached the boulevard du Temple, and the wet paving stones magnified a thousand lamps.

My thoughts had hardened into strategies that were more instinct than

reason. And I was as ready for a fight as I have ever been. But we had to find out where we stood. How many of them were there? And what did they really want? Was it to capture and destroy us, or to frighten us and drive us off? I had to quell my rage, I had to remember they were childish, susperstitious, conceivably easy to scatter or scare.

As soon as we reached the high ancient tenements near Notre Dame, I *heard* them near us, the vibration coming as in a silver flash and vanishing as quickly again.

Gabrielle drew herself up, and I felt her left hand on my wrist. I saw her right hand on the hilt of her sword.

We had entered a crooked alleyway that turned blindly in the dark in front of us, the iron clatter of the horse's shoes shattering the silence, and I struggled not to be unnerved by the sound itself.

It seemed we saw them at the same moment.

Gabrielle pressed back against me, and I swallowed the gasp that would have given an impression of fear.

High above us, on either side of the narrow thoroughfare, were their white faces just over the eaves of the tenements, a faint gleam against the lowering sky and the soundless drifts of silver rain.

I drove the horse forward in a rush of scraping and clattering. Above they streaked like rats over the roof. Their voices rose in a faint howling mortals could never have heard.

Gabrielle stifled a little cry as we saw their white arms and legs descending the walls ahead of us, and behind I heard the soft thud of their feet on the stones.

"Straight on," I shouted, and drawing my sword, I drove right over the two ragged figures who'd dropped down in our path. "Damnable creatures, out of my way," I shouted, hearing their screams underfoot.

I glimpsed anguished faces for a moment. Those above vanished and those behind us seemed to weaken and we bore ahead, putting yards between us and our pursuers as we came into the deserted place de Grève.

But they were regathering on the edges of the square, and this time I was hearing their distinct thoughts, one of them demanding what power was it we had, and why should they be frightened, and another insisting that they close in.

Some force surely came from Gabrielle at that moment because I could

see them visibly fall back when she threw her glance in their direction and tightened her grip on the sword.

"Stop, stand them off!" she said under her breath. "They're terrified." Then I heard her curse. Because flying towards us out of the shadows of the Hôtel-Dieu, there came at least six more of the little demons, their thin white limbs barely swathed in rags, their hair flying, those dreadful wails coming out of their mouths. They were rallying the others. The malice that surrounded us was gaining force.

The horse reared, and almost threw us. They were commanding it to halt as surely as I commanded it to go on.

I grabbed Gabrielle about the waist, leapt off the horse, and ran top speed for the doors of Notre Dame.

A horrid derisive babble rose silently in my ears, wails and cries and threats:

"You dare not, you dare not!" Malice like the heat of a blast furnace opened upon us, as their feet came thumping and splashing around us, and I felt their hands struggling to grab hold of my sword and my coat.

But I was certain of what would happen when we reached the church. I gave it one final spurt, heaving Gabrielle ahead of me so that together we slid through the doors across the threshold of the cathedral and landed sprawling within on the stones.

Screams. Dreadful dry screams curling upwards and then an upheaval, as if the entire mob had been scattered by a cannon blast.

I scrambled to my feet, laughing out loud at them. But I was not waiting so near the door to hear more. Gabrielle was on her feet and pulling me after her and together we hurried deep into the shadowy nave, past one lofty archway after another until we were near to the dim candles of the sanctuary, and then seeking a dark and empty corner by a side altar, we sank down together on our knees.

"Just like those damned wolves!" I said. "A bloody ambush."

"Shhhhh, be quiet a moment," Gabrielle said as she clung to me. "Or my immortal heart will burst."

9

After a long moment, I felt her stiffen. She was looking towards the square.

"Don't think of Nicolas," she said. "They are waiting and they are listening. They are hearing everything that goes on in our minds."

"But what are *they* thinking?" I whispered. "What is going on in *their* heads?"

I could feel her concentration.

I pressed her close, and looked straight at the silver light that came through the distant open doors. I could hear them too now, but just that low shimmer of sound coming from all of them collected there.

But as I stared at the rain, there came over me the strongest sense of peace. It was almost sensuous. It seemed to me we should yield to them, that it was foolish to resist them further. All things would be resolved were we merely to go out to them and give ourselves over. They would not torture Nicolas, whom they had in their power; they would not tear him limb from limb.

I saw Nicolas in their hands. He wore only his lace shirt and breeches because they had taken the coat. And I heard his screams as they pulled his arms from the sockets. I cried out No, putting my own hand over my mouth so that I did not rouse the mortals in the church.

Gabrielle reached up and touched my lips with her fingers.

"It's not being done to him," she said under her breath. "It's merely a threat. Don't think of him."

"He's still alive, then," I whispered.

"So they want us to believe. Listen!"

There came again the sense of peace, the summons, that's what it was, to join them, the voice saying *Come out of the church. Surrender to us, we welcome you, and we will not harm either of you if only you come.*

I turned towards the door and rose to my feet. Anxiously Gabrielle rose beside me, cautioning me again with her hand. She seemed wary of even speaking to me as we both looked at that great archway of silvery light.

You are lying to us, I said. *You have no power over us!* It was a rolling current of defiance moving through the distant door. *Surrender to you? If we do that then what's to stop you from holding the three of us! Why should we come out? Within this church we are safe; we can conceal ourselves in its deepest burial vaults. We could hunt among the faithful, drink their blood in the chapels and niches so skillfully we'd never be discovered, sending our victims out confused to die in the streets afterwards. And what would you do, you who cannot even cross the door! Besides, we don't believe you have Nicolas. Show him to us. Let him come to the door and speak*.

Gabrielle was in a welter of confusion. She was scanning me, desperate to know what I said. And she was clearly hearing them, which I could not do when I was sending these impulses.

It seemed their pulse weakened, but it had not stopped.

It went on as it had before, as if I'd not answered it, as if it were someone humming. It was promising truce again, and now it seemed to speak of rapture, that in the great pleasure of joining with it, all conflict would be resolved. It was sensuous again, it was beautiful.

"Miserable cowards, the lot of you." I sighed. I said the words aloud this time, so that Gabrielle could hear as well. "Send Nicolas into the church."

The hum of the voice became thin. It went on, but beyond it there was a hollow silence as if other voices had been withdrawn and only one or two remained now. Then I heard the thin, chaotic strains of argument and rebellion.

Gabrielle's eyes narrowed.

Silence. Only mortals out there now, weaving their way against the wind across the place de Grève. I didn't believe they would withdraw. Now what do we do to save Nicki?

I blinked my eyes. I felt weary suddenly; it was almost a feeling of despair. And I thought confusedly, This is ridiculous, I never despair! Others do that, not me. I go on fighting no matter what happens. Always. And in my exhaustion and anger, I saw Magnus leaping and jumping in the fire, I saw the grimace on his face before the flames consumed him and he disappeared. Was that despair?

The thought paralyzed me. Horrified me as the reality of it had done then. And I had the oddest feeling that someone else was speaking to me of Magnus. That is why the thought of Magnus had come into my head!

“Too clever …” Gabrielle whispered.

“Don’t listen to it. It’s playing tricks with our very thoughts,” I said.

But as I stared past her at the open doorway, I saw a small figure appear. Compact it was, the figure of a young boy, not a man.

I ached for it to be Nicolas, but knew immediately that it was not. It was smaller than Nicolas, though rather heavier of build. And the creature was not human.

Gabrielle made some soft wondering sound. It sounded almost like a prayer in its reference.

The creature wasn't dressed as men dress now. Rather he wore a belted tunic, very graceful, and stockings on his well-shaped legs. His sleeves were deep, hanging at his sides. He was clothed like Magnus, actually, and for one moment I thought madly that by some magic it was Magnus returned.

Stupid thought. This was a boy, as I had said, and he had a head of long curly hair, and he walked very straight and very simply through the silvery light and into the church. He hesitated for a moment. And by the tilt of the head, it seemed he was looking up. And then he came on through the nave and towards us, his feet making not the faintest sound on the stones.

He moved into the glow of the candles on the side altar. His clothes were black velvet, once beautiful, and now eaten away by time, and crusted with dirt. But his face was shining white, and perfect, the countenance of a god it seemed, a Cupid out of Caravaggio, seductive yet ethereal, with auburn hair and dark brown eyes.

I held Gabrielle closer as I looked at him, and nothing so startled me about him, this inhuman creature, as the manner in which he was staring at us. He was inspecting every detail of our persons, and then he reached out very gently and touched the stone of the altar at his side. He stared at the altar, at its crucifix and its saints, and then he looked back to us.

He was only a few yards away, and the soft inspection of us yielded to an expression that was almost sublime. And the voice I'd heard before came out of this creature, summoning us again, calling upon us to yield, saying with indescribable gentleness that we must love one another, he and Gabrielle, whom he didn’t call by name, and I.

There was something naive about it, his sending the summons as he

stood there.

I held fast against him. Instinctively. I felt my eyes becoming opaque as if a wall had gone up to seal off the windows of my thoughts. And yet I felt such a longing for him, such a longing to fall into him and follow him and be led by him, that all my longings of the past seemed nothing at all. He was all mystery to me as Magnus had been. Only he was beautiful, indescribably beautiful, and there seemed in him an infinite complexity and depth which Magnus had not possessed.

The anguish of my immortal life pressed in on me. He said, *Come to me. Come to me because only I, and my like, can end the loneliness you feel.* It touched a well of inexpressible sadness. It sounded the depth of the sadness, and my throat went dry with a powerful little knot where my voice might have been, yet I held fast.

We two are together, I insisted, tightening my grip on Gabrielle. And then I asked him, *Where is Nicolas?* I asked that question and clung to it, yielding to nothing that I heard or saw.

He moistened his lips; very human thing to do. And silently he approached us until he was standing no more than two feet from us, looking from one of us to the other. And in a voice very unlike a human voice, he spoke.

"Magnus," he said. It was unobtrusive. It was caressing. "He went into the fire as you said?"

"I never said it," I answered. The human sound of my own voice startled me. But I knew now he meant my thoughts of only moments before. "It's quite true," I answered. "He went into the fire." Why should I deceive anyone on that account?

I tried to penetrate his mind. He knew I was doing it and he threw up against me such strange images that I gasped.

What was it I'd seen for an instant? I didn't even know. Hell and heaven, or both made one, vampires in a paradise drinking blood from the very flowers that hung, pendulous and throbbing, from the trees.

I felt a wave of disgust. It was as if he had come into my private dreams like a succubus.

But he had stopped. He let his eyes pucker slightly and he looked down out of some vague respect. My disgust was withering him. He hadn't anticipated my response. He hadn't expected … what? Such strength?

Yes, and he was letting me know it in an almost courteous way.

I returned the courtesy. I let him see me in the tower room with Magnus; I recalled Magnus's words before he went into the fire. I let him know all of it.

He nodded and when I told the words Magnus had said, there was a slight change in his face as if his forehead had gone smooth, or all of his skin had tightened. He gave me no such knowledge of himself in answer.

On the contrary, much to my surprise, he looked away from us to the main altar of the church. He glided past us, turning his back to us as if he had nothing to fear from us and had for the moment forgotten us.

He moved towards the great aisle and slowly up it, but he did not appear to walk in a human way. Rather he moved so swiftly from one bit of shadow to another that he seemed to vanish and reappear. Never was he visible in the light. And those scores of souls milling in the church had only to glance at him for him to instantly disappear.

I marveled at his skill, because that is all it was. And curious to see if I could move like that, I followed him to the choir. Gabrielle came after without a sound.

I think we both found it simpler than we had imagined it would be. Yet he was clearly startled when he saw us at his side.

And in the very act of being startled, he gave me a glimpse of his great weakness, pride. He was humiliated that we had crept up on him, moving so lightly and managing at the same time to conceal our thoughts.

But worse was to come. When he realized I had perceived this … it was revealed for a split second … he was doubly enraged. A withering heat emanated from him that wasn't heat at all.

Gabrielle made a little scornful sound. Her eyes flashed on him for a second in some shimmer of communication between them that excluded me. He seemed puzzled.

But he was in the grip of some greater battle I was struggling to understand. He looked at the faithful around him, and at the altar and all the emblems of the Almighty and the Virgin Mary everywhere that he turned. He was perfectly the god out of Caravaggio, the light playing on the hard whiteness of his innocent-looking face.

Then he put his arm about my waist, slipping it under my cloak. His touch was so strange, so sweet and enticing, and the beauty of his face

so entrancing that I didn't move away. He put his other arm around Gabrielle's waist, and the sight of them together, angel and angel, distracted me.

He said: *You must come.*

"Why, where?" Gabrielle asked. I felt an immense pressure. He was attempting to move me against my will, but he could not. I planted myself on the stone floor. I saw Gabrielle's face harden as she looked at him. And again, he was amazed. He was maddened and he couldn't conceal it from us.

So he had underestimated our physical strength as well as our mental strength. Interesting.

"You must come now," he said, giving me the great force of his will, which I could see much too clearly to be fooled. "Come out and my followers won't harm you."

"You're lying to us," I said. "You sent your followers away, and you want us to come out before your followers return, because you don't want them to see you come out of the church. You don't want them to know you came into it!"

Again Gabrielle gave a little scornful laugh.

I put my hand on his chest and tried to move him away. He might have been as strong as Magnus. But I refused to be afraid. "Why don't you want them to see?" I whispered, peering into his face.

The change in him was so startling and so ghastly that I found myself holding my breath. His angelic countenance appeared to wither, his eyes widening and his mouth twisting down in consternation. His entire body became quite deformed as if he were trying not to grit his teeth and clench his fists.

Gabrielle drew away. I laughed. I didn't really mean to, but I couldn't help it. It was horrifying. But it was also very funny.

With stunning suddenness this awful illusion, if that is what it was, faded, and he came back to himself. Even the sublime expression returned. He told me in a steady stream of thought that I was infinitely stronger than he supposed. But it would frighten the others to see him emerge from the church, and so we should go at once.

"Lies again," Gabrielle whispered.

And I knew this much pride would forgive nothing. God help Nicolas if we couldn't trick this one!

Turning, I took Gabrielle's hand and we started down the aisle to the front doors, Gabrielle glancing back at him and to me questioningly, her face white and tense.

"Patience," I whispered. I turned to see him far away from us, his back to the main altar, and his eyes were so big as he stared that he looked horrible to me, loathsome, like a ghost.

When I reached the vestibule I sent out my summons to the others with all my power. And I whispered aloud for Gabrielle as I did so. I told them to come back and into the church if they wanted to, that nothing could harm them, their leader was inside the church standing at the very altar, unharmed.

I spoke the words louder, pumping the summons under the words, and Gabrielle joined me, repeating the phrases in unison with me.

I felt him coming towards us from the main altar, and then suddenly I lost him. I didn't know where he was behind us.

He grabbed hold of me suddenly, materializing at my side, and Gabrielle was thrown to the floor. He was attempting to lift me and pitch me through the door.

But I fought him. And desperately collecting everything I remembered of Magnus—his strange walk, and this creature's strange manner of moving—I hurled him, not off balance as one might do to a heavy mortal, but straight up in the air.

Just as I suspected, he went over in a somersault, crashing into the wall.

Mortals stirred. They saw movement, heard noises. But he'd vanished again. And Gabrielle and I looked no different from other young gentlemen in the shadows.

I motioned for Gabrielle to get out of the way. Then he appeared, shooting towards me, but I perceived what was to happen and stepped aside.

Some twenty feet away from me, I saw him sprawled on the stones staring at me with positive awe, as if I were a god. His long auburn hair was tossed about, his brown eyes enormous as he looked up. And for all the gentle innocence of his face, his will was rolling over me, a hot stream of commands, telling me I was weak and imperfect and a fool, and I would be torn limb from limb by his followers as soon as they appeared. They would roast my mortal lover slowly till he died.

I laughed silently. This was as ludicrous as a fight out of the old commedia.

Gabrielle was staring from one to the other of us. I sent the summons again to the others, and this time when I sent it, I heard them answering, questioning.

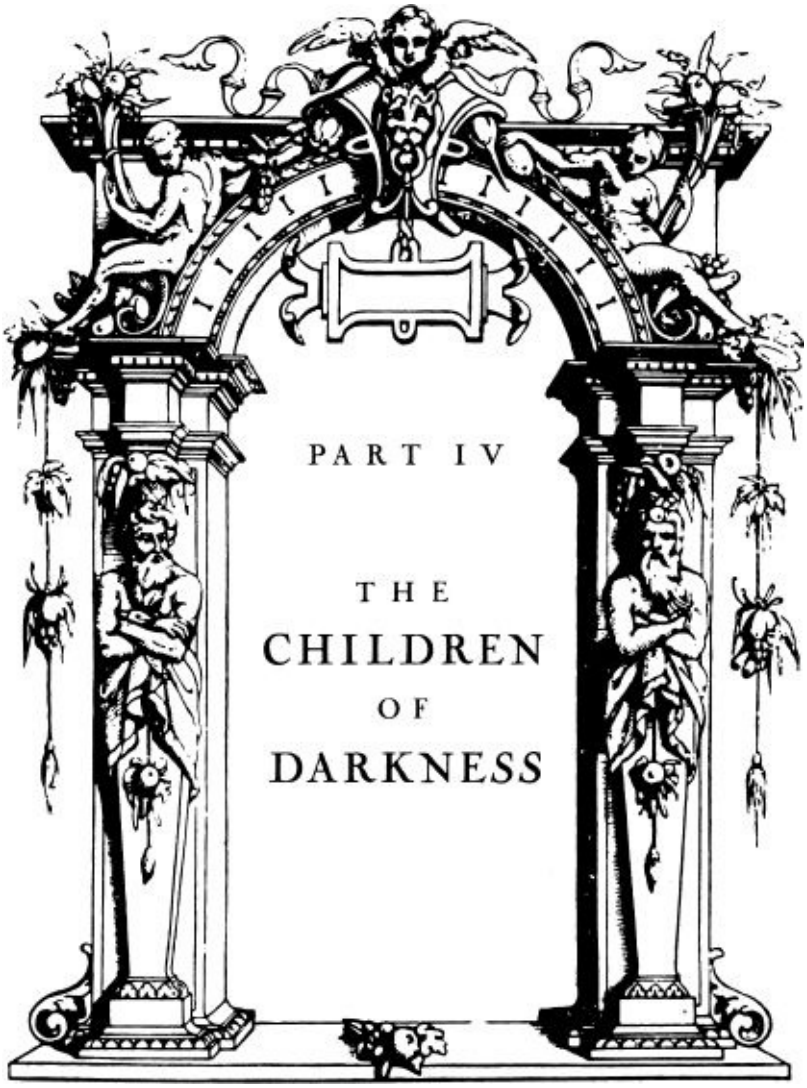
“Come into the church.” I repeated it over and over, even as he rose and ran at me again in blind and clumsy rage. Gabrielle caught him just as I did, and we both had hold of him and he couldn’t move.

In a moment of absolute horror for me he tried to sink his fangs into my neck. I saw his eyes round and empty as the fangs descended over his drawn lip. I flung him back and again he vanished.

They were coming nearer, the others.

“He’s in the church, your leader, look at him!” I repeated it. “And any of you can come into the church. You won’t be hurt.”

I heard Gabrielle let out a scream of warning. And too late. He rose up right in front of me, as if out of the floor itself, and struck my jaw, jerking my head back so that I saw the church ceiling. And before I could recover, he had dealt me one fine blow in the middle of the back that sent me flying out the door and onto the stones of the square.



PART IV

THE CHILDREN OF DARKNESS

1

I could see nothing but the rain. But I could hear them all around me. And he was giving his command.

"They have no great power, these two," he was telling them in thoughts that had a curious simplicity to them, as if he were commanding vagrant children. "Take them both prisoner."

Gabrielle said: "Lestat, don't fight. It's useless to prolong it." And I knew she was right. But I'd never surrendered to anybody in my life. And pulling her with me past the Hôtel-Dieu, I made for the bridge.

We tore through the press of wet cloaks and mud-spattered carriages, yet they were gaining upon us, rushing so fast they were almost invisible to mortals, and with only a little fear of us now.

In the dark streets of the Left Bank, the game was finished.

White faces appeared above and below me as though they were demonic cherubs, and when I tried to draw my weapon, I felt their hands on my arms. I heard Gabrielle say, "Let it be done."

I held fast to my sword but I couldn't stop them from lifting me off the ground. They were lifting Gabrielle too.

And in a blaze of hideous images, I understood where they were taking us. It was to les Innocents, only yards away. I could already see the flicker of the bonfires that burned each night among the stinking open graves, the flames that were supposed to drive away the effluvia.

I locked my arm around Gabrielle's neck and cried out that I couldn't bear that stench, but they were carrying us on swiftly through the darkness, through the gates and past the white marble crypts.

"Surely you can't endure it," I said, struggling. "So why do you live among the dead when you were made to feed on life?"

But I felt such revulsion now I couldn't keep it up, the verbal or physical struggle. All around us lay bodies in various states of decomposition, and even from the rich sepulchers there came that reek.

And as we moved into the darker part of the cemetery, as we entered an enormous sepulcher, I realized that they too hated the stench, as much as I. I could feel their disgust, and yet they opened their mouths

and their lungs as if they were eating it. Gabrielle was trembling against me, her fingers digging into my neck.

Through another doorway we passed, and then, by dim torchlight, down an earthen stairs.

The smell grew stronger. It seemed to ooze from the mud walls. I turned my face down and vomited a thin stream of glittering blood upon the steps beneath me, which vanished as we moved swiftly on.

“Live among graves,” I said furiously. “Tell me, why do you suffer hell already by your own choice?”

“Silence,” whispered one of them close to me, a dark-eyed female with a witch’s mop of hair. “You blasphemer,” she said. “You cursed profaner.”

“Don’t be a fool for the devil, darling!” I sneered. We were eye to eye. “Unless he treats you a damn sight better than the Almighty!”

She laughed. Or rather she started to laugh, and she stopped as if she weren’t allowed to laugh. What a gay and interesting little get-together this was going to be!

We were going lower and lower into the earth.

Flickering light, the scrape of their bare feet on the dirt, filthy rags brushing my face. For an instant, I saw a grinning skull. Then another, then a heap of them filling a niche in the wall.

I tried to wrench free and my foot hit another heap and sent the bones clattering on the stairs. The vampires tightened their grip, trying to lift us higher. Now we passed the ghastly spectacle of rotted corpses fixed in the walls like statues, bones swathed in rotted rags.

“This is too disgusting!” I said with my teeth clenched.

We had come to the foot of the steps and were being carried through a great catacomb. I could hear the low rapid beat of kettledrums.

Torches blazed ahead, and over a chorus of mournful wails, there came other cries, distant but filled with pain. Yet something beyond these puzzling cries had caught my attention.

Amid all the foulness, I sensed a mortal was near. It was Nicolas and he was alive and I could hear him, the warm, vulnerable current of his thoughts mingled with his scent. And something was terribly wrong with his thoughts. They were chaos.

I couldn’t know if Gabrielle had caught it.

We were quite suddenly thrown down together, in the dust. And the others backed away from us.

I climbed to my feet, lifting Gabrielle with me. And I saw that we were in a great domed chamber, scarcely illuminated by three torches which the vampires held to form a triangle, in the center of which we stood.

Something huge and black to the back of the chamber; smell of wood and pitch, smell of damp, moldering cloth, smell of living mortal. Nicolas there.

Gabrielle's hair had come loose entirely from the ribbon, and it fell around her shoulders as she cleaved to me, looking about with seemingly calm, cautious eyes.

Wails rose all around us, but the most piercing supplications came from those other beings we had heard before, creatures somewhere deep in the earth.

And I realized these were entombed vampires screaming, screaming for blood, and screaming for forgiveness and release, screaming even for the fires of hell. The sound was as unbearable as the stench.

No real thoughts from Nicki, only the formless shimmer of his mind. Was he dreaming? Was he mad?

The roll of the drums was very loud and very close, and yet those screams pierced the rumbling again and again without rhythm or warning. The wailing of those nearest us died away, but the drums went on, the pounding suddenly coming from inside my head.

Trying desperately not to clamp my hands to my ears, I looked about.

A great circle had been formed, and there were ten of them at least, these creatures. I saw young ones, old ones, men and women, a young boy—and all clothed in the remnants of human garments, caked with earth, feet bare, hair tangled with filth. There was the woman I had spoken to on the stairs, her well-shaped body clothed in a filthy robe, her quick black eyes glinting like jewels in the dirt as she studied us. And beyond these, the advance guard, were a pair in the shadows beating the kettledrums.

I begged silently for strength. I tried to hear Nicolas without actually thinking of him. Solemn vow: *I shall get us all out of here, though at the moment I do not know exactly how*.

The drumbeat was slowing, becoming an ugly cadence that made the alien feeling of fear a fist against my throat. One of the torchbearers approached.

I could feel the anticipation of the others, a palpable excitement as the

flames were thrust at me.

I snatched the torch from the creature, twisting his right hand until he was flung down on his knees. With a hard kick, I sent him sprawling, and as the others rushed in, I swung the torch wide driving them back.

Then defiantly, I threw down the torch.

This caught them off guard and I sensed a sudden quietness. The excitement was drained away, or rather it had lapsed into something more patient and less volatile.

The drums beat insistently, but it seemed they were ignoring the drums. They were staring at the buckles on our shoes, at our hair, and at our faces, with such distress they appeared menacing and hungry. And the young boy, with a look of anguish, reached out to touch Gabrielle.

"Get back!" I hissed. And he obeyed, snatching up the torch from the ground as he did.

But I knew it for certain now—we were surrounded by envy and curiosity, and this was the strongest advantage we possessed.

I looked from one to the other of them. And quite slowly, I commenced to brush the filth from my frock coat and breeches. I smoothed my cloak as I straightened my shoulders. Then I ran a hand through my hair, and stood with my arms folded, the picture of righteous dignity, gazing about.

Gabrielle gave a faint smile. She stood composed, her hand on the hilt of her sword.

The effect of this on the others was universal amazement. The dark-eyed female was enthralled. I winked at her. She would have been gorgeous if someone had thrown her into a waterfall and held her there for half an hour and I told her so silently. She took two steps backwards and pulled closed her robe over her breasts. Interesting. Very interesting indeed.

"What is the explanation for all this?" I asked, staring at them one by one as if they were quite peculiar. Again Gabrielle gave her faint smile.

"What are you meant to be?" I demanded. "The images of chain-rattling ghosts who haunt cemeteries and ancient castles?"

They were glancing to one another, getting uneasy. The drums had stopped.

"My childhood nurse many a time thrilled me with tales of such fiends," I said. "Told me they might at any moment leap out of the suits

of armor in our house to carry me away screaming." I stomped my foot and dashed forward. "IS THAT WHAT YOU ARE!" They shrieked and shrank back.

The black-eyed woman didn't move, however.

I laughed softly.

"And your bodies are just like ours, aren't they?" I asked slowly. "Smooth, without flaw, and in your eyes I can see evidence of my own powers. Most strange …"

Confusion coming from them. And the howling in the walls seemed fainter as if the entombed were listening in spite of their pain.

"Is it great fun living in filth and stench such as this?" I asked. "Is that why you do it?"

Fear. Envy again. How had we managed to escape their fate?

"Our leader is Satan," said the dark-eyed woman sharply. Cultured voice. She'd been something to reckon with when she was mortal. "And we serve Satan as we are meant to do."

"Why?" I asked politely. Consternation all around.

Faint shimmer of Nicolas. Agitation without direction. Had he heard my voice?

"You will bring down the wrath of God on all of us with your defiance," said the boy, the smallest of them, who couldn't have been more than sixteen when he was made. "In vanity and wickedness you disregard the Dark Ways. You live among mortals! You walk in the places of light."

"And why don't you?" I asked. "Are you to go to heaven on white wings when this penitential sojourn of yours is ended? Is that what Satan promises? Salvation? I wouldn't count on it, if I were you."

"You will be thrown into the pit of hell for your sins!" said one of the others, a tiny hag of a woman. "You will have power to do evil on earth no more."

"When is that supposed to happen?" I asked. "For half a year I've been what I am. God and Satan have not troubled me! It is you who trouble me!"

They were paralyzed for the moment. Why hadn't we been struck dead when we entered the churches? How could we be what we were?

It was very likely they could have been scattered now and beaten. But what about Nicki? If only his thoughts were directed, I could have

gained some image of exactly what lay behind that great heap of moldering black cloth.

I kept my eyes on the vampires.

Wood, pitch, a pyre there surely. And these damned torches.

The dark-eyed woman edged in. No malice, only fascination. But the boy pushed her to the side, infuriating her. He stepped so close I could feel his breath on my face:

"Bastard!" he said. "You were made by the outcast, Magnus, in defiance of the coven, and in defiance of the Dark Ways. And so you gave the Dark Gift to this woman in rashness and vanity as it was given to you."

"If Satan does not punish," said the tiny woman, "we will punish as is our duty and our right!"

The boy pointed to the black draped pyre. He motioned for the others to draw back.

The kettledrums came up again, fast and loud. The circle widened, the torchbearers drawing near to the cloth.

Two of the others tore down the ragged drapery, great sheets of black serge that sent up the dust in a suffocating cloud.

The pyre was as big as the one that had consumed Magnus.

And on top of the pyre in a crude wooden cage, Nicolas knelt slumped against the bars. He stared blindly at us, and I could find no recognition in his face or his thoughts.

The vampires held their torches high for us to see. And I could feel their excitement rising again as it had when they had first brought us into the room.

Gabrielle was cautioning me with the press of her hand to be calm. Nothing changed in her expression.

There were bluish marks on Nicki's throat. The lace of his shirt was filthy as were their rags, and his breeches were snagged and torn. He was in fact covered with bruises and drained almost to the point of death.

The fear silently exploded in my heart, but I knew this was what they wanted to see. And I sealed it within.

The cage is nothing, I can break it. And there are only three torches. The question is when to move, how. We would not perish like this, not like this.

I found myself staring coldly at Nicolas, coldly at the bundles of kindling, the crude chopped wood. The anger rolled out of me. Gabrielle's face was a perfect mask of hate.

The group seemed to feel this and to move ever so slightly away from it, and then to draw in, confused and uncertain again.

But something else was happening. The circle was tightening.

Gabrielle touched my arm.

"The leader is coming," she said.

A door had opened somewhere. The drums surged and it seemed those imprisoned in the walls went into agony, pleading to be forgiven and released. The vampires around us took up the cries in a frenzy. It was all I could do not to cover my ears.

A strong instinct told me not to look at the leader. But I couldn't resist him, and slowly I turned to look at him and measure his powers again.

2

He was moving towards the center of this great circle, his back to the pyre, a strange woman vampire at his side. And when I looked full at him in the torchlight I felt the same shock I had experienced when he entered Notre Dame.

It wasn't merely his beauty; it was the astonishing innocence of his boyish face. He moved so lightly and swiftly I could not see his feet actually take steps. His huge eyes regarded us without anger, his hair, for all the dust in it, giving off faint reddish glints.

I tried to feel his mind, what it was, why such a sublime being should command these sad ghosts when it had the world to roam. I tried to discover again what I had almost discovered when we stood before the altar of the cathedral, this creature and I. If I knew that, maybe I could defeat him and defeat him I would.

I thought I saw him respond to me, some silent answer, some flash of heaven in the very pit of hell in his innocent expression, as if the devil still retained the face and form of the angel after the fall.

But something was very wrong. The leader was not speaking. The drums beat on anxiously, yet there was no communal conviction. The dark-eyed woman vampire was not joined with the others in their wailing. And others had stopped as well.

And the woman who had come in with the leader, a strange creature clothed as an ancient queen might have been in ragged gown and braided girdle, commenced to laugh.

The coven or whatever it called itself was quite understandably stunned. One of the kettledrums stopped.

The queen creature laughed louder and louder. Her white teeth flashed through the filthy veil of her snarled hair.

Beautiful she'd been once. And it wasn't mortal age that had ravaged her. Rather, she appeared the lunatic, her mouth a horrid grimace, her eyes staring wildly before her, her body bent suddenly in an arc with her laughing, as Magnus had bent when he danced around his own funeral pyre.

“Did I not warn you?” she screamed. “Did I not?”

Far behind her, Nicolas moved in the little cage. I felt the laughter scorching him. But he was looking steadily at me, and the old sensibility was stamped on his features in spite of their distortion. Fear struggled with malice in him, and this was tangled with wonder and near despair.

The auburn-haired leader stared at the queen vampire, his expression unreadable, and the boy with the torch stepped forward and shouted for the woman to be silent at once. He made himself rather regal now, in spite of his rags.

The woman turned her back on him and faced us. She sang her words in a hoarse, sexless voice that gave way to a galloping laughter.

“A thousand times I said it, yet you would not listen to me,” she declared. Her gown shivered about her as she trembled. “And you called me mad, time’s martyr, a vagrant Cassandra corrupted by too long a vigil on this earth. Well, you see, every one of my predictions has come true.”

The leader gave her not the slightest recognition.

“And it took this creature”—she approached me, her face a hideous comic mask as Magnus’s face had been—“this romping cavalier to prove it to you once and for all.”

She hissed, drew in her breath, and stood erect. And for one moment in perfect stillness she passed into beauty. I longed to comb her hair, to wash it with my own hands, and to clothe her in modern dress, to see her in the mirror of my time. In fact, my mind went suddenly wild with the idea of it, the reclaiming of her and the washing away of her evil disguise.

I think for one second the concept of eternity burned in me. I knew then what immortality was. All things were possible with her, or so for that one moment it seemed.

She gazed at me and caught the visions, and the loveliness of her face deepened, but the mad humor was coming back.

“Punish them,” the boy stormed. “Call down the judgment of Satan. Light the fire.”

But no one moved in the vast room.

The old woman hummed with her lips closed, some eerie melody with the cadence of speech. The leader stared as before.

But the boy in panic advanced upon us. He bared his fangs, raised his

hand in a claw.

I snatched the torch from him and dealt him an indifferent blow to the chest that sent him across the dusty circle, sliding into the kindling banked against the pyre. I ground out the torch in the dirt.

The queen vampire let out a shriek of laughter that seemed to terrify the others, but nothing changed in the leader's face.

"I won't stand here for any judgment of Satan!" I said, glancing around the circle. "Unless you bring Satan here."

"Yes, tell them, child! Make them answer to you!" the old woman said triumphantly.

The boy was on his feet again.

"You know the crimes," he roared as he reentered the circle. He was furious now, and he exuded power, and I realized how impossible it was to judge any of them by the mortal form they retained. He might well have been an elder, the tiny old woman a fledgling, the boyish leader the eldest of them all.

"Behold," he said, stepping closer, his gray eyes gleaming as he felt the attention of the others. "This fiend was no novice here or anywhere; he did not beg to be received. He made no vows to Satan. He did not on his deathbed give up his soul, and in fact, he did not die!" His voice went higher, grew louder. "He was not buried! He has not risen from the grave as a Child of Darkness! Rather he dares to roam the world in the guise of a living being! And in the very midst of Paris conducts business as a mortal man!"

Shrieks answered him from the walls. But the vampires of the circle were silent as he gazed at them. His jaw trembled.

He threw up his arms and wailed. One or two of the others answered. His face was disfigured with rage.

The old queen vampire gave a shiver of laughter and looked at me with the most maniacal smile.

But the boy wasn't giving up.

"He seeks the comforts of the hearth, strictly forbidden," he screamed, stamping his foot and shaking his garments. "He goes into the very palaces of carnal pleasure, and mingles there with mortals as they play music! As they dance!"

"Stop your raving!" I said. But in truth, I wanted to hear him out.

He plunged forward, sticking his finger in my face.

“No rituals can purify him!” he shouted. “Too late for the Dark Vows, the Dark Blessings …”

“Dark Vows? Dark Blessings?” I turned to the old queen. “What do you say to all this? You’re as old as Magnus was when he went into the fire … Why do you suffer this to go on?”

Her eyes moved in her head suddenly as if they alone possessed life, and there came that racing laughter out of her again.

“I shall never harm you, young one,” she said. “Either of you.” She looked lovingly at Gabrielle. “You are on the Devil’s Road to a great adventure. What right have I to intervene in what the centuries have in store for you?”

The Devil’s Road. It was the first phrase from any of them that had rung a clarion in my soul. An exhilaration took hold of me merely looking at her. In her own way, she was Magnus’s twin.

“Oh yes, I am as old as your progenitor!” She smiled, her white fangs just touching her lower lip, then vanishing. She glanced at the leader, who watched her without the slightest interest or spirit. “I was here,” she said, “within this coven when Magnus stole our secrets from us, that crafty one, the alchemist, Magnus … when he drank the blood that would give him life everlasting in a manner which the World of Darkness had never witnessed before. And now three centuries have passed and he has given his pure and undiluted Dark Gift to you, beautiful child!”

Her face became again that leering, grinning mask of comedy, so much like Magnus’s face.

“Show it to me, child,” she said, “the strength he gave you. Do you know what it means to be made a vampire by one that powerful, who has never given the Gift before? It’s forbidden here, child, no one of such age conveys his power! For if he should, the fledgling born of him should easily overcome this gracious leader and his coven here.”

“Stop this ill-conceived lunacy!” the boy interrupted.

But everyone was listening. The pretty dark-eyed woman had come nearer to us, the better to see the old queen, and completely forgetting to fear or hate us now.

“One hundred years ago you’d said enough,” the boy roared at the old queen, with his hand up to command her silence. “You’re mad as all the old ones are mad. It’s the death you suffer. I tell you all this outlaw must

be punished. Order shall be restored when he and the woman he made are destroyed before us all."

With renewed fury, he turned on the others.

"I tell you, you walk this earth as all evil things do, by the will of God, to make mortals suffer for his Divine Glory. And by the will of God you can be destroyed if you blaspheme, and thrown in the vats of hell now, for you are damned souls, and your immortality is given you only at the price of suffering and torment."

A burst of wailing commenced uncertainly.

"So there it is finally," I said. "The whole philosophy—and the whole is founded upon a lie. And you cower like peasants, in hell already by your own choosing, enchained more surely than the lowest mortal, and you wish to punish us because we do not? Follow our examples because we do not!"

The vampires were some of them staring at us, others in frantic conversations that broke out all around. Again and again they glanced to the leader and to the old queen.

But the leader would say nothing.

The boy screamed for order:

"It is not enough that he has profaned holy places," he said, "not enough that he goes about as a mortal man. This very night in a village in the banlieue he terrified the congregation of an entire church. All of Paris is talking of this horror, the ghouls rising from the graves beneath the very altar, he and this female vampire on whom he worked the Dark Trick without consent or ritual, just as he was made."

There were gasps, more murmurs. But the old queen screamed with delight.

"These are high crimes," he said. "I tell you, they cannot go unpunished. And who among you does not know of his mockeries on the stage of the boulevard theater which he himself holds as property as a mortal man! There to a thousand Parisians he flaunted his powers as a Child of Darkness! And the secrecy we have protected for centuries was broken for his amusement and the amusement of a common crowd."

The old queen rubbed her hands together, cocking her head to the side as she looked at me.

"Is it all true, child?" she asked. "Did you sit in a box at the Opéra? Did you stand before the footlights of the Théâtre-Française? Did you dance

with the king and queen in the palace of the Tuileries, you and this beauty you made so perfectly? Is it true you travel the boulevards in a golden coach?"

She laughed and laughed, her eyes now and then scanning the others, subduing them as if she gave forth a beam of warm light.

"Ah, such finery and such dignity," she continued. "What happened in the great cathedral when you entered it? Tell me now!"

"Absolutely nothing, madam!" I declared.

"High crimes!" roared the outraged boy vampire. "These are frights enough to rouse a city, if not a kingdom against us. And after centuries in which we have preyed upon this metropolis in stealth, giving birth only to the gentlest whispers of our great power. Haunts we are, creatures of the night, meant to feed the fears of man, not raving demons!"

"Ah, but it is too sublime," sang the old queen with her eyes on the domed ceiling. "From my stone pillow I have dreamed dreams of the mortal world above. I have heard its voices, its new music, as lullabies as I lie in my grave. I have envisioned its fantastical discoveries, I have known its courage in the timeless sanctum of my thoughts. And though it shuts me out with its dazzling forms, I long for one with the strength to roam it fearlessly, to ride the Devil's Road through its heart."

The gray-eyed boy was beside himself.

"Dispense with the trial," he said, glaring at the leader. "Light the pyre now."

The queen stepped back out of my way with an exaggerated gesture, as the boy reached for the torch nearest him, and I rushed at him, snatching the torch away from him, and heaving him up towards the ceiling, head over heels, so that he came tumbling in that manner all the way down. I stamped out the torch.

That left one more. And the coven was in perfect disorder, several rushing to aid the boy, the others murmuring to one another, the leader stock-still as if in a dream.

And in this interval I went forward, climbed up the pyre and tore loose the front of the little wooden cage.

Nicolas looked like an animated corpse. His eyes were leaden, and his mouth twisted as if he were smiling at me, hating me, from the other side of the grave. I dragged him free of the cage and brought him down

to the dirt floor. He was feverish, and though I ignored it and would have concealed it if I could, he shoved at me and cursed me under his breath.

The old queen watched in fascination. I glanced at Gabrielle, who watched without a particle of fear. I drew out the pearl rosary from my waistcoat and letting the crucifix dangle, I placed the rosary around Nicolas's neck. He stared stuporously down at the little cross, and then he began to laugh. The contempt, the malice, came out of him in this low metallic sound. It was the very opposite of the sounds made by the vampires. You could hear the human blood in it, the human thickness of it, echoing against the walls. Ruddy and hot and strangely unfinished he seemed suddenly, the only mortal among us, like a child thrown among porcelain dolls.

The coven was more confused than ever. The two burnt-out torches still lay untouched.

"Now, by your own rules, you cannot harm him," I said. "Yet it's a vampire who has given him the supernatural protection. Tell me, how to compass that?"

I carried Nicki forward. And Gabrielle at once reached out to take him in her arms.

He accepted this, though he stared at her as if he didn't know her and even lifted his fingers to touch her face. She took his hand away as she might the hand of a baby, and kept her eyes fixed on the leader and on me.

"If your leader has no words for you now, I have words," I said. "Go wash yourselves in the waters of the Seine, and clothe yourselves like humans if you can remember how, and prowl among men as you are obviously meant to do."

The defeated boy vampire stumbled back into the circle, pushing roughly away those who had helped him to his feet.

"Armand," he implored the silent auburn-haired leader. "Bring the coven to order! Armand! Save us now!"

"Why in the name of hell," I outshouted him, "did the devil give you beauty, agility, eyes to see visions, minds to cast spells?"

Their eyes were fixed on me, all of them. The gray-haired boy cried out the name "Armand" again, but in vain.

"You waste your gifts!" I said. "And worse, you waste your

immortality! Nothing in all the world is so nonsensical and contradictory, save mortals, that is, who live in the grip of the superstitions of the past."

Perfect silence reigned. I could hear Nicki's slow breathing. I could feel his warmth. I could feel his numbed fascination struggling against death itself.

"Have you no cunning?" I asked the others, my voice swelling in the stillness. "Have you no craft? How did I, an orphan, stumble upon so much possibility, when you, nurtured as you are by these evil parents"—I broke off to stare at the leader and the furious boy—"grope like blind things under the earth?"

"The power of Satan will blast you into hell," the boy bellowed, gathering all his remaining strength.

"You keep saying that!" I said. "And it keeps not happening, as we can all see!"

Loud murmurs of assent!

"And if you really thought it would happen," I said, "you would never have bothered to bring me here." Louder voices in agreement.

I looked at the small forlorn figure of the leader. And all eyes turned away from me to him. Even the mad queen vampire looked at him. And in the stillness I heard him whisper:

"It is finished."

Not even the tormented ones in the wall made a sound.

And the leader spoke again:

"Go now, all of you, it is at an end."

"Armand, no!" the boy pleaded.

But the others were backing away, faces concealed behind hands as they whispered. The drums were cast aside, the single torch was hung upon the wall.

I watched the leader. I knew his words weren't meant to release us.

And after he had silently driven out the protesting boy with the others, so that only the queen remained with him, he turned his gaze once again to me.

3

The great empty room beneath its immense dome, with only the two vampires watching us, seemed all the more ghastly, the one torch giving a feeble and gloomy light.

Silently I considered: Will the others leave the cemetery, or hover at the top of the stairs? Will any of them allow me to take Nicki alive from this place? The boy will remain near, but the boy is weak; the old queen will do nothing. That leaves only the leader, really. But I must not be impulsive now.

He was still staring at me and saying nothing.

"Armand?" I said respectfully. "May I address you in this way?" I drew closer, scanning him for the slightest change of expression. "You are obviously the leader. And you are the one who can explain all this to us."

But these words were a poor cover for my thoughts. I was appealing to him. I was asking him how he had led them in all this, he who appeared as ancient as the old queen, compassing some depth they would not understand. I pictured him standing before the altar of Notre Dame again, that ethereal expression on his face. And I found myself believing perfectly in him, and the possibility of him, this ancient one who had stood silent all this while.

I think I searched him now for just an instant of human feeling! That's what I thought wisdom would reveal. And the mortal in me, the vulnerable one who had cried in the inn at the vision of the chaos, said:

"Armand, what is the meaning of all this?"

It seemed the brown eyes faltered. But then the face so subtly transformed itself to rage, that I drew back.

I didn't believe my senses. The sudden changes he had undergone in Notre Dame were nothing to this. And such a perfect incarnation of malice I'd never seen. Even Gabrielle moved away. She raised her right hand to shield Nicki, and I stepped back until I was beside her and our arms touched.

But in the same miraculous way, the hatred melted. The face was again that of a sweet and fresh mortal boy.

The old queen vampire smiled almost wanly and ran her white claws through her hair.

"You turn to me for explanations?" the leader asked.

His eyes moved over Gabrielle and the dazed figure of Nicolas against her shoulder. Then returned to me.

"I could speak until the end of the world," he said, "and I could never tell you what you have destroyed here."

I thought the old queen made some derisive sound, but I was too engaged with him, the softness of his speech and the great raging anger within.

"Since the beginning of time," he said, "these mysteries have existed." He seemed small standing in this vast chamber, the voice issuing from him effortlessly, his hands limp at his sides. "Since the ancient days there have been our kind haunting the cities of man, preying upon him by night as God and the devil commanded us to do. The chosen of Satan we are, and those admitted to our ranks had first to prove themselves through a hundred crimes before the Dark Gift of immortality was given to them."

He came just a little nearer to me, the torchlight glimmering in his eyes.

"Before their loved ones they appeared to die," he said, "and with only a small infusion of our blood did they endure the terror of the coffin as they waited for us to come. Then and only then was the Dark Gift given, and they were sealed again in the grave after, until their thirst should give them the strength to break the narrow box and rise."

His voice grew slightly louder, more resonant.

"It was death they knew in those dark chambers," he said. "It was death and the power of evil they understood as they rose, breaking open the coffin, and the iron doors that held them in. And pity the weak, those who couldn't break out. Those whose wails brought mortals the day after—for none would answer by night. We gave no mercy to them.

"But those who rose, ah, those were the vampires who walked the earth, tested, purified, Children of Darkness, born of a fledgling's blood, never, the full power of an ancient master, so that time would bring the wisdom to use the Dark Gifts before they grew truly strong. And on these were imposed the Rules of Darkness. To live among the dead, for we are dead things, returning always to one's own grave or one very nearly like

it. To shun the places of light, luring victims away from the company of others to suffer death in unholy and haunted places. And to honor forever the power of God, the crucifix about the neck, the Sacraments. And never never to enter the House of God; lest he strike you powerless, casting you into hell, ending your reign on earth in blazing torment."

He paused. He looked at the old queen for the first time, and it seemed, though I could not truly tell, that her face maddened him.

"You scorn these things," he said to her. "Magnus scorned these things!" He commenced to tremble. "It was the nature of his madness, as it is the nature of yours, but I tell you you do not understand these mysteries! You shatter them like so much glass, but you have no strength, no power save ignorance. You break and that is all."

He turned away, hesitating as if he would not go on, and looking about at the vast crypt.

I heard the old vampire queen very softly singing.

She was chanting something under her breath, and she began to rock back and forth, her head to one side, her eyes dreamy. Once again, she looked beautiful.

"It is finished for my children," the leader whispered. "It is finished and done, for they know now they can disregard all of it. The things that bound us together, gave us the strength to endure as damned things! The mysteries that protected us here."

Again he looked at me.

"And you ask me for explanations as if it were inexplicable!" he said. "You, for whom the working of the Dark Trick is an act of shameless greed. You gave it to the very womb that bore you! Why not to this one, the devil's fiddler, whom you worship from afar every night?"

"Have I not told you?" sang the vampire queen. "Haven't we always known? There is nothing to fear in the Sign of the Cross, nor the Holy Water, nor the Sacrament itself …" She repeated the words, varying the melody under her breath, adding as she went on. "And the old rites, the incense, the fire, the vows spoken, when we thought we saw the Evil One in the dark, whispering …"

"Silence!" said the leader, dropping his voice. His hands almost went to his ears in a strangely human gesture. Like a boy he looked, almost lost. God, that our immortal bodies could be such varied prisons for us, that our immortal faces should be such masks for our true souls.

Again he fixed his eyes on me. I thought for a moment there would be another of those ghastly transformations or that some uncontrollable violence would come from him, and I hardened myself.

But he was imploring me silently.

Why did this come about! His voice almost dried in his throat as he repeated it aloud, as he tried to curb his rage. "You explain to me! Why you, you with the strength of ten vampires and the courage of a hell full of devils, crashing through the world in your brocade and your leather boots! Lelio, the actor from the House of Thesbians, making us into grand drama on the boulevard! Tell me! Tell me why!"

"It was Magnus's strength, Magnus's genius," sang the woman vampire with the most wistful smile.

"No!" He shook his head. "I tell you, he is beyond all account. He knows no limit and so he has no limit. But why!"

He moved just a little closer, not seeming to walk but to come more clearly into focus as an apparition might.

"Why you," he demanded, "with the boldness to walk their streets, break their locks, call them by name. They dress your hair, they fit your clothes! You gamble at their tables! Deceiving them, embracing them, drinking their blood only steps from where other mortals laugh and dance. You who shun cemeteries and burst from crypts in churches. Why you! Thoughtless, arrogant, ignorant, and disdainful! You give *me* the explanation. Answer me!"

My heart was racing. My face was warm and pulsing with blood. I was in no fear of him now, but I was angry beyond all mortal anger, and I didn't fully understand why.

His mind—I had wanted to pierce his mind—and this is what I heard, this superstition, this absurdity. He was no sublime spirit who understood what his followers had not. He had not believed it. He had believed *in* it, a thousand times worse!

And I realized quite clearly what he was—not demon or angel at all, but a sensibility forged in a dark time when the small orb of the sun traveled the dome of the heavens, and the stars were no more than tiny lanterns describing gods and goddesses upon a closed night. A time when man was the center of this great world in which we roam, a time when for every question there had been an answer. That was what he was, a child of olden days when witches had danced beneath the moon

and knights had battled dragons.

Ah, sad lost child, roaming the catacombs beneath a great city and an incomprehensible century. Maybe your mortal form is more fitting than I supposed.

But there was no time to mourn for him, beautiful as he was. Those entombed in the walls suffered at his command. Those he had sent out of the chamber could be called back.

I had to think of a reply to his question that he would be able to accept. The truth wasn't enough. It had to be arranged poetically the way that the old thinkers would have arranged it in the world before the age of reason had come to be.

"My answer?" I said softly. I was gathering my thoughts and I could almost feel Gabrielle's warning, Nicki's fear. "I'm no dealer in mysteries," I said, "no lover of philosophy. But it's plain enough what has happened here."

He studied me with a strange earnestness.

"If you fear so much the power of God," I said, "then the teachings of the Church aren't unknown to you. You must know that the forms of goodness change with the ages, that there are saints for all times under heaven."

Visibly he hearkened to this, warmed to the words I used.

"In ancient days," I said, "there were martyrs who quenched the flames that sought to burn them, mystics who rose into the air as they heard the voice of God. But as the world changed, so changed the saints. What are they now but obedient nuns and priests? They build hospitals and orphanages, but they do not call down the angels to rout armies or tame the savage beast."

I could see no change in him but I pressed on.

"And so it is with evil, obviously. It changes its form. How many men in this age believe in the crosses that frighten your followers? Do you think mortals above are speaking to each other of heaven and hell? Philosophy is what they talk about, and science! What does it matter to them if white-faced haunts prowl a churchyard after dark? A few more murders in a wilderness of murders? How can this be of interest to God or the devil or to man?"

I heard again the old queen vampire laughing. But Armand didn't speak or move.

“Even your playground is about to be taken from you,” I continued. “This cemetery in which you hide is about to be removed altogether from Paris. Even the bones of our ancestors are no longer sacred in this secular age.”

His face softened suddenly. He couldn’t conceal his shock.

“Les Innocents destroyed!” he whispered. “You’re lying to me …”

“I never lie,” I said offhand. “At least not to those I don’t love. The people of Paris don’t want the stench of graveyards around them anymore. The emblems of the dead don’t matter to them as they matter to you. Within a few years, markets, streets, and houses will cover this spot. Commerce. Practicality. That is the eighteenth-century world.”

“Stop!” he whispered. “Les Innocents has existed as long as I have existed!” His boyish face was strained. The old queen was undisturbed.

“Don’t you see?” I said softly. “It is a new age. It requires a new evil. And I *am* that new evil.” I paused, watching him. “I am the vampire for these times.”

He had not foreseen my point. And I saw in him for the first time a glimmer of terrible understanding, the first glimmer of real fear. I made a small accepting gesture.

“This incident in the village church tonight,” I said cautiously, “it was vulgar, I’m inclined to agree. My actions on the stage of theater, worse still. But these were blunders. And you know they aren’t the source of your rancor. Forget them for the moment and try to envision my beauty and my power. Try to see the evil that I am. I stalk the world in mortal dress—the worst of fiends, the monster who looks exactly like everyone else.”

The woman vampire made a low song of her laughter. I could feel only pain from him, and from her the warm emanation of her love.

“Think of it, Armand,” I pressed carefully. “Why should Death lurk in the shadows? Why should Death wait at the gate? There is no bedchamber, no ballroom that I cannot enter. Death in the glow of the hearth, Death on tiptoe in the corridor, that is what I am. Speak to me of the Dark Gifts—I use them. I’m Gentleman Death in silk and lace, come to put out the candles. The canker in the heart of the rose.”

There was a faint moan from Nicolas.

I think I heard Armand sigh.

“There is no place where they can hide from me,” I said, “these godless

and powerful ones who would destroy les Innocents. There is no lock that can keep me out."

He stared back at me silently. He appeared sad and calm. His eyes were darkened slightly, but they were untroubled by malice or rage. He didn't speak for a long moment, and then:

"A splendid mission, that," he said, "to devil them mercilessly as you live among them. But it's you still who don't understand."

"How so?" I asked.

"You can't endure in the world, living among men, you cannot survive."

"But I do," I said simply. "The old mysteries have given way to a new *style*. And who knows what will follow? There's no romance in what you are. There is great romance in what I am!"

"You can't be that strong," he said. "You don't know what you're saying, you have only just come into being, you are young."

"He is very strong, however, this child," mused the queen, "and so is his beautiful newborn companion. They are fiends of high-blown ideas and great reason, these two."

"You can't live among men!" Armand insisted again.

His face colored for one second. But he wasn't my enemy now; rather he was some wondering elder struggling to tell me a critical truth. And at the same moment he seemed a child imploring me, and in that struggle lay his essence, parent and child, pleading with me to listen to what he had to say.

"And why not? I tell you I belong among men. It is their blood that makes me immortal."

"Ah, yes, immortal, but you have not begun to understand it," he said. "It's no more than a word. Study the fate of your maker. Why did Magnus go into the flames? It's an age-old truth among us, and you haven't even guessed it. Live among men, and the passing years will drive you to madness. To see others grow old and die, to see kingdoms rise and fall, to lose all you understand and cherish—who can endure it? It will drive you to idiot raving and despair. Your own immortal kind is your protection, your *salvation*. The ancient ways, don't you see, which *never changed!*"

He stopped, shocked that he had used this word, salvation, and it reverberated through the room, his lips shaping it again.

“Armand,” the old queen sang softly. “Madness may come to the eldest we know, whether they keep to the old ways or abandon them.” She made a gesture as if to attack him with her white claws, screeching with laughter as he stared coldly back. “I have kept to the old ways as long as you have and I am mad, am I not? Perhaps that is why I have kept them so well!”

He shook his head angrily in protest. Was he not the living proof it need not be so?

But she drew near to me and took hold of my arm, turning my face towards her.

“Did Magnus tell you nothing, child?” she asked. I felt an immense power flowing from her.

“While others prowled this sacred place,” she said, “I went alone across the snow-covered fields to find Magnus. My strength is so great now it is as if I have wings. I climbed to his window to find him in his chamber, and together we walked the battlements unseen by all save the distant stars.” She drew even closer, her grip tightening.

“Many things, Magnus knew,” she said. “And it is not madness which is your enemy, not if you are really strong. The vampire who leaves his coven to dwell among human beings faces a dreadful hell long before madness comes. He grows irresistibly to love mortals! He comes to *understand* all things in love.”

“Let me go,” I whispered softly. Her glance was holding me as surely as her hands.

“With the passage of time he comes to know mortals as they may never know each other,” she continued, undaunted, her eyebrows rising, “and finally there comes the moment when he cannot bear to take life, or bear to make suffering, and nothing but madness or his own death will ease his pain. That is the fate of the old ones which Magnus described to me, Magnus who suffered all afflictions in the end.”

At last she released me. She receded from me as if she were an image in a sailor’s glass.

“I don’t believe what you’re saying,” I whispered. But the whisper was like a hiss. “Magnus? Love mortals?”

“Of course you do not,” she said with her graven jester’s smile.

Armand, too, was looking at her as if he did not understand.

“My words have no meaning now,” she added. “But you have *all the*

time in the world to understand!"

Laughter, howling laughter, scraping the ceiling of the crypt. Cries again from within the walls. She threw back her head with her laughter.

Armand was horror-stricken as he watched her. It was as if he saw the laughter emanating from her like so much glittering light.

"No, but it's a lie, a hideous simplification!" I said. My head was throbbing suddenly. My eyes were throbbing. "I mean it's a concept born out of moral idiocy, this idea of love!"

I put my hands to my temples. A deadly pain in me was growing. The pain was dimming my vision, sharpening my memory of Magnus's dungeon, the mortal prisoners who had died among the rotted bodies of those condemned before them in the stinking crypt.

Armand looked to me now as if I were torturing him as the old queen tortured him with her laughter. And her laughter went right on, rising and falling away. Armand's hands went out towards me as if he would touch me but did not dare.

All the rapture and pain I'd known in these past months came together inside me. I felt quite suddenly as if I would begin to roar as I had that night on Renaud's stage. I was aghast at these sensations. I was murmuring nonsense syllables again aloud.

"Lestat!" Gabrielle whispered.

"Love mortals?" I said. I stared at the old queen's inhuman face, horrified suddenly to see the black eyelashes like spikes about her glistening eyes, her flesh like animated marble. "Love mortals? Does it take you three hundred years!" I glared at Gabrielle. "From the first nights when I held them close to me, I loved them. Drinking up their life, their death, I love them. Dear God, is that not the very essence of the Dark Gift?"

My voice was growing in volume as it had that night in the theater. "Oh, what are you that you do not? What vile things that this is the sum of your wisdom, the simple capacity to feel!"

I backed away from them, looking about me at this giant tomb, the damp earth arching over our heads. The place was passing out of the material into an hallucination.

"God, do you lose your reason with the Dark Trick," I asked, "with your rituals, your sealing up of the fledglings in the grave? Or were you monsters when you were living? How could we not all of us love mortals

with every breath we take!"

No answer. Except the senseless cries of the starving ones. No answer. Just the dim beating of Nicki's heart.

"Well, hear me, whatever the case," I said. I pointed my finger at Armand, at the old queen.

"I never promised my soul to the devil for this! And when I made this one it was to save her from the worms that eat the corpses around here. If loving mortals is the hell you speak of, I am already in it. I have met my fate. Leave me to it and all scores are settled now."

My voice had broken. I was gasping. I ran my hands back through my hair. Armand seemed to shimmer as he came close to me. His face was a miracle of seeming purity and awe.

"Dead things, dead things I said. "Come no closer. Talking of madness and love, in this reeking place! And that old monster, Magnus, locking them up in his dungeon. How did he love them, his captives? The way boys love butterflies when they rip off their wings!"

"No, child, you think you understand but you do not," sang the woman vampire unperturbed. "You have only just begun your loving." She gave a soft lilting laugh. "You feel sorry for them, that is all. And for yourself that you cannot be both human and inhuman. Isn't it so?"

"Lies!" I said. I moved closer to Gabrielle. I put my arm around her.

"You will come to understand all things in love," the old queen went on, "when you are a vicious and hateful thing. This is your immortality, child. Ever deeper understanding of it." And throwing up her arms, again she howled.

"Damn you," I said. I picked up Gabrielle and Nicki and carried them backwards towards the door. "You're in hell already," I said, "and I intend to leave you in hell now."

I took Nicolas out of Gabrielle's arms and we ran through the catacomb towards the stairs.

The old queen was in a frenzy of keening laughter behind us.

And human as Orpheus perhaps, I stopped and glanced back.

"Lestat, hurry!" Nicolas whispered in my ear. And Gabrielle gave a desperate gesture for me to come.

Armand had not moved, and the old woman stood beside him laughing still.

"Good-bye, brave children," she cried. "Ride the Devil's Road bravely.

Ride the Devil's Road as long as you can."

The coven scattered like frightened ghosts in the cold rain as we burst out of the sepulcher. And baffled, they watched as we sped out of les Innocents into the crowded Paris streets.

Within moments we had stolen a carriage and were on our way out of the city into the countryside.

I drove the team on relentlessly. Yet I was so mortally tired that preternatural strength seemed purely an idea. At every thicket and turn of the road I expected to see the filthy demons surrounding us again.

But somehow I managed to get from a country inn the food and drink Nicolas would need, and the blankets to keep him warm.

He was unconscious long before we reached the tower, and I carried him up the stairs to that high cell where Magnus had first kept me.

His throat was still swollen and bruised from their feasting on him. And though he slept deeply as I laid him on the straw bed, I could feel the thirst in him, the awful craving that I'd felt after Magnus had drunk from me.

Well, there was plenty of wine for him when he awakened, and plenty of food. And I knew—though how I couldn't tell—that he wouldn't die.

What his daylight hours would be like, I could hardly imagine. But he would be safe once I turned the key in the lock. And no matter what he had been to me, or what he stood to be in the future, no mortal could wander free in my lair while I slept.

Beyond that I couldn't reason. I felt like a mortal walking in his sleep.

I was still staring down at him, hearing his vague jumbled dreams—dreams of the horrors of les Innocents—when Gabrielle came in. She had finished burying the poor unfortunate stable boy, and she looked like a dusty angel again, her hair stiff and tangled and full of delicate fractured light.

She looked down at Nicki for a long moment and then she drew me out of the room. After I had locked the door, she led me down to the lower crypt. There she put her arms tightly around me and held me, as if she too were worn almost to collapse.

“Listen to me,” she said finally, drawing back and putting her hands up to hold my face. “We’ll get him out of France as soon as we rise. No one will ever believe his mad tales.”

I didn’t answer. I could scarce understand her, her reasoning or her intentions. My head swam.

“You can play the puppeteer with him,” she said, “as you did with Renaud’s actors. You can send him off to the New World.”

“Sleep,” I whispered. I kissed her open mouth. I held her with my eyes closed. I saw the crypt again, heard their strange, inhuman voices. All this would not stop.

“After he’s gone, then we can talk about these others,” she said calmly. “Whether to leave Paris altogether for a while …”

I let her go, and I turned away from her and I went to the sarcophagus and rested for a moment against the stone lid. For the first time in my immortal life I wanted the silence of the tomb, the feeling that all things were out of my hands.

It seemed she said something else then. *Do not do this thing!*

4

When I awoke I heard his cries. He was beating on the oaken door, cursing me for keeping him prisoner. The sound filled the tower, and the scent of him came through the stone walls: succulent, oh so succulent, smell of living flesh and blood, his flesh and blood. She slept still. *Do not do this thing.*

Symphony of malice, symphony of madness coming through the walls, philosophy straining to contain the ghastly images, the torture, to surround it with language …

When I stepped into the stairwell, it was like being caught in a whirlwind of his cries, his human smell.

And all the remembered scents mingled with it—the afternoon sunshine on a wooden table, the red wine, the smoke of the little fire.

"Lestat! Do you hear me! Lestat!" Thunder of fists against the door.

Memory of childhood fairy tale: the giant says he smells the blood of a human in his lair. Horror. I knew the giant was going to find the human. I could hear him coming after the human, step by step. I was the human.

Only no more.

Smoke and salt of flesh and pumping blood.

"This is the witches' place! Lestat, do you hear me! This is the witches' place!"

Dull tremor of the old secrets between us, the love, the things that only we had known, felt. Dancing in the witches' place. Can you deny it? Can you deny everything that passed between us?

Get him out of France. Send him to the New World. And then what? All his life he is one of those slightly interesting but generally tiresome mortals who have seen spirits, talk of them incessantly, and no one believes him. Deepening madness. Will he be a comical lunatic finally, the kind that even the ruffians and bullies look after, playing his fiddle in a dirty coat for the crowds on the streets of Port-au-Prince?

"Be the puppeteer again," she had said. Is that what I was? *No one will ever believe his mad tales.*

But he knows the place where we lie, Mother. He knows our names,

the name of our kin—too many things about us. And he will never go quietly to another country. And *they* may go after him; *they* will never let him live now.

Where are *they?*

I went up the stairs in the whirlwind of his echoing cries, looked out the little barred window at the open land. They'll be coming again. They have to come. First I was alone, then I had her with me, and now I have them!

But what was the crux? That he wanted it? That he had screamed over and over that I had denied him the power?

Or was it that I now had the excuses I needed to bring him to me as I had wanted to do from the first moment? My Nicolas, my love. Eternity waits. All the great and splendid pleasures of being dead.

I went further up the stairs towards him and the thirst sang in me. To hell with his cries. The thirst sang and I was an instrument of its singing.

And his cries had become inarticulate—the pure essence of his curses, a dull punctuation to the misery that I could hear without need of any sound. Something divinely carnal in the broken syllables coming from his lips, like the low gush of the blood through his heart.

I lifted the key and put it in the lock and he went silent, his thoughts washing backwards and into him as if the ocean could be sucked back into the tiny mysterious coils of a single shell.

I tried to see *him* in the shadows of the room, and not *it*—the love for him, the aching, wrenching months of longing for him, the hideous and unshakable human need for him, the lust. I tried to see the mortal who didn't know what he was saying as he glared at me:

"You, and your talk of goodness"—low seething voice, eyes glittering —"your talk of good and evil, your talk of what was right and what was wrong and death, oh yes, death, the horror, the tragedy …"

Words. Borne on the ever swelling current of hatred, like flowers opening in the current, petals peeling back, then falling apart:

"… and you shared it with her, the lord's son giveth to the lord's wife his great gift, the Dark Gift. Those who live in the castle share the Dark Gift—never were they dragged to the witches' place where the human grease pools on the ground at the foot of the burnt stake, no, kill the old crone who can no longer see to sew, and the idiot boy who cannot till the field. And what does he give us, the lord's son, the wolfkiller, the one

who screamed in the witches' place? Coin of the realm! That's good enough for us!"

Shuddering. Shirt soaked with sweat. Gleam of taut flesh through the torn lace. Tantalizing, the mere sight of it, the narrow tightly muscled torso that sculptors so love to represent, nipples pink against the dark skin.

"This power"—sputtering as if all day long he had been saying the words over with the same intensity, and it does not really matter that now I am present—"this power that made all the lies meaningless, this dark power that soared over everything, this truth that obliterated …"

No. Language. Not truth.

The wine bottles were empty, the food devoured. His lean arms were hardened and tense for the struggle—but what struggle?—his brown hair fallen out of its ribbon, his eyes enormous and glazed. But suddenly he pushed against the wall as if he'd go through it to get away from me—dim remembrance of their drinking from him, the paralysis, the ecstasy—yet he was drawn immediately forward again, staggering, putting his hands out to steady himself by taking hold of things that were not there.

But his voice had stopped.

Something breaking in his face.

"How could you keep it from me!" he whispered. Thoughts of old magic, luminous legend, some great eerie strata in which all the shadowy things thrived, an intoxication with forbidden knowledge in which the natural things become unimportant. No miracle anymore to the leaves falling from the autumn trees, the sun in the orchard.

No.

The scent was rising from him like incense, like the heat and the smoke of church candles rising. Heart thumping under the skin of his naked chest. Tight little belly glistening with sweat, sweat staining the thick leather belt. Blood full of salt. I could scarce breathe.

And we do breathe. We breathe and we taste and we smell and we feel and we thirst.

"You have misunderstood everything." Is this Lestat speaking? It sounded like some other demon, some loathsome thing for whom the voice was the imitation of a human voice. "You have misunderstood everything that you have seen and heard."

"I would have shared anything I possessed with you!" Rage building

again. He reached out. “It was you who never understood,” he whispered.

“Take your life and leave with it. Run.”

“Don’t you see it's the confirmation of everything? That it exists is the confirmation—pure evil, sublime evil!” Triumph in his eyes. He reached out suddenly and closed his hand on my face.

“Don’t taunt me!” I said. I struck him so hard he fell backwards, chastened, silent. “When it was offered me I said no. I tell you I said no. With my last breath, I said no.”

“You were always the fool,” he said. “I told you that.” But he was breaking down. He was shuddering and the rage was alchemizing into desperation. He lifted his arms again and then stopped. “You believed things that didn’t matter,” he said almost gently. “There was something you failed to see. Is it possible you don’t know yourself what you possess now?” The glaze over his eyes broke instantly into tears.

His face knotted. Unspoken words coming from him of love.

And an awful self-consciousness came over me. Silent and lethal, I felt myself flooded with the power I had over him and his knowledge of it, and my love for him heated the sense of power, driving it towards a scorching embarrassment which suddenly changed into something else.

We were in the wings of the theater again; we were in the village in Auvergne in that little inn. I smelled not merely the blood in him, but the sudden terror. He had taken a step back. And the very movement stoked the blaze in me, as much as the vision of his stricken face.

He grew smaller, more fragile. Yet he’d never seemed stronger, more alluring than he was now.

All the expression drained from his face as I drew nearer. His eyes were wondrously clear. And his mind was opening as Gabrielle’s mind had opened, and for one tiny second there flared a moment of us together in the garret, talking and talking as the moon glared on the snow-covered roofs, or walking through the Paris streets, passing the wine back and forth, heads bowed against the first gust of winter rain, and there had been the eternity of growing up and growing old before us, and so much joy even in misery, even in the misery—the real eternity, the real forever—the mortal mystery of that. But the moment faded in the shimmering expression of his face.

“Come to me, Nicki,” I whispered. I lifted both hands to beckon. “If you

want it, you must come …"

I saw a bird soaring out of a cave above the open sea. And there was something terrifying about the bird and the endless waves over which it flew. Higher and higher it went and the sky turned to silver and then gradually the silver faded and the sky went dark. The darkness of evening, nothing *to* fear, really, nothing. Blessed darkness. But it was falling gradually and inexorably over nothing save this one tiny creature cawing in the wind above a great wasteland that was the world. Empty caves, empty sands, empty sea.

All I had ever loved to look upon, or listen to, or felt with my hands was gone, or never existed, and the bird, circling and gliding, flew on and on, upwards past me, or more truly past no one, holding the entire landscape, without history or meaning, in the flat blackness of one tiny eye.

I screamed but without a sound. I felt my mouth full of blood and each swallow passing down my throat and into fathomless thirst. And I wanted to say, yes, I understand now, I understand how terrible, how unbearable, this darkness. I didn't know. Couldn't know. The bird sailing on through the darkness over the barren shore, the seamless sea. Dear God, stop it. Worse than the horror in the inn. Worse than the helpless trumpeting of the fallen horse in the snow. But the blood was the blood after all, and the heart—the luscious heart that was all hearts—was right there, on tiptoe against my lips.

Now, my love, now's the moment. I can swallow the life that beats from your heart and send you into the oblivion in which nothing may ever be understood or forgiven, or I can bring you to me.

I pushed him backwards. I held him to me like a crushed thing. But the vision wouldn't stop.

His arms slipped around my neck, his face wet, eyes rolling up into his head. Then his tongue shot out. It licked hard at the gash I had made for him in my own throat. Yes, eager.

But please stop this vision. Stop the upward flight and the great slant of the colorless landscape, the cawing that meant nothing over the howl of the wind. The pain is nothing compared to this darkness. I don't want to … I don't want to …

But it was dissolving. Slowly dissolving.

And finally it was finished. The veil of silence had come down, as it had with her. Silence. He was separate. And I was holding him away from me, and he was almost falling, his hands to his mouth, the blood running down his chin in rivulets. His mouth was open and a dry sound came out of it, in spite of the blood, a dry scream.

And beyond him, and beyond the remembered vision of the metallic sea and the lone bird who was its only witness—I saw her in the doorway and her hair was a Virgin Mary veil of gold around her shoulders, and she said with the saddest expression on her face:

"Disaster, my son."

By midnight it was clear that he would not speak or answer to any voice, or move of his own volition. He remained still and expressionless in the places to which he was taken. If the death pained him he gave no sign. If the new vision delighted him, he kept it to himself. Not even the thirst moved him.

And it was Gabrielle who, after studying him quietly for hours, took him in hand, cleaning him and putting new clothes on him. Black wool she chose, one of the few somber coats I owned. And modest linen, that made him look oddly like a young cleric, a little too serious, a little naive.

And in the silence of the crypt as I watched them, I knew without doubt that they could hear each other's thoughts. Without a word she guided him through the grooming. Without a word she sent him back to the bench by the fire.

Finally, she said, "He should hunt now," and when she glanced at him, he rose without looking at her as if pulled by a string.

Numbly I watched them going. Heard their feet on the stairs. And then I crept up after them, stealthily, and holding to the bars of the gate I watched them move, two feline spirits, across the field.

The emptiness of the night was an indissoluble cold settling over me, closing me in. Not even the fire on the hearth warmed me when I returned to it.

Emptiness here. And the quiet I had told myself that I wanted—just to be alone after the grisly struggle in Paris. Quiet, and the realization,

which I could not bring myself to confess to her, the realization gnawing at my insides like a starved animal—*that I couldn't stand the sight of him now*.

5

When I opened my eyes the next night, I knew what I meant to do. Whether or not I could stand to look at him wasn't important. I had made him this, and I had to rouse him from his stupor somehow.

The hunt hadn't changed him, though apparently he'd drunk and killed well enough. And now it was up to me to protect him from the revulsion I felt, and to go into Paris and get the one thing that might bring him around.

The violin was all he'd ever loved when he was alive. Maybe now it would awaken him. I'd put it in his hands, and he'd want to play it again, he'd want to play it with his new skill, and everything would change and the chill in my heart would somehow melt.

As soon as Gabrielle rose I told her what I meant to do.

"But what about the others?" she said. "You can't go riding into Paris alone."

"Yes, I can," I said. "You're needed here with him. If the little pests should come round, they could lure him into the open, the way he is now. And besides, I want to know what's happening under les Innocents. If we have a real truce, I want to know."

"I don't like your going," she said, shaking her head. "I tell you, if I didn't believe we should speak to the leader again, that we had things to learn from him and the old woman, I'd be for leaving Paris tonight."

"And what could they possibly teach us?" I said coldly. "That the sun really revolves around the earth? That the earth is flat?" But the bitterness of my words made me feel ashamed.

One thing they could tell me was why the vampires I'd made could hear each other's thoughts when I could not. But I was too crestfallen over my loathing of Nicki to think of all these things.

I only looked at her and thought how glorious it had been to see the Dark Trick work its magic in her, to see it restore her youthful beauty, render her again the goddess she'd been to me when I was a little child.

To see Nicki change had been to see him die.

Maybe without reading the words in my soul she understood it only too well.

We embraced slowly. “Be careful,” she said.

* * *

I should have gone to the flat right away to look for his violin. And there was still my poor Roget to deal with. Lies to tell. And this matter of getting out of Paris—it seemed more and more the thing for us to do.

But for hours I did just what I wanted. I hunted the Tuileries and the boulevards, pretending there was no coven under les Innocents, that Nicki was alive still and safe somewhere, that Paris was all mine again.

But I was listening for them every moment. I was thinking about the old queen. And I heard them when I least expected it, on the boulevard du Temple, as I drew near to Renaud’s.

Strange that they’d be in the places of light, as they called them. But within seconds, I knew that several of them were hiding behind the theater. And there was no malice this time, only a desperate excitement when they sensed that I was near.

Then I saw the white face of the woman vampire, the dark-eyed pretty one with the witch’s hair. She was in the alleyway beside the stage door, and she darted forward to beckon to me.

I rode back and forth for a few moments. The boulevard was the usual spring evening panorama: hundreds of strollers amid the stream of carriage traffic, lots of street musicians, jugglers and tumblers, the lighted theaters with their doors open to invite the crowd. Why should I leave it to talk to these creatures? I listened. There were four of them actually, and they were desperately waiting for me to come. They were in terrible fear.

All right. I turned the horse and rode into the alley and all the way to the back where they hovered together against the stone wall.

The gray-eyed boy was there, which surprised me, and he had a dazed expression on his face. A tall blond male vampire stood behind him with a handsome woman, both of them swathed in rags like lepers. It was the pretty one, the dark-eyed one who had laughed at my little jest on the

stairs under les Innocents, who spoke:

"You have to help us!" she whispered.

"I do?" I tried to steady the mare. She didn't like their company. "Why do I have to help you?" I demanded.

"He's destroying the coven," she said.

"Destroying us …" the boy said. But he didn't look at me. He was staring at the stones in front of him, and from his mind I caught flashes of what was happening, of the pyre lighted, of Armand forcing his followers into the fire.

I tried to get this out of my head. But the images were now coming from all of them. The dark-eyed pretty one looked directly into my eyes as she strove to sharpen the pictures—Armand swinging a great charred beam of wood as he drove the others into the blaze, then stabbing them down into the flames with the beam as they struggled to escape.

"Good Lord, there were twelve of you!" I said. "Couldn't you fight?"

"We did and we are here," said the woman. "He burned six together, and the rest of us fled. In terror, we sought strange resting places for the day. We had never done this before, slept away from our sacred graves. We didn't know what would happen to us. And when we rose he was there. Another two he managed to destroy. So we are all that is left. He has even broken open the deep chambers and burned the starved ones. He has broken loose the earth to block the tunnels to our meeting place."

The boy looked up slowly.

"You did this to us," he whispered. "You have brought us all down."

The woman stepped in front of him.

"You must help us," she said. "Make a new coven with us. Help us to exist as you exist." She glanced impatiently at the boy.

"But the old woman, the great one?" I asked.

"It was she who commenced it," said the boy bitterly. "She threw herself into the fire. She said she would go to join Magnus. She was laughing. It was then that he drove the others into the flames as we fled."

I bowed my head. So she was gone. And all she had known and witnessed had gone with her, and what had she left behind but the simple one, the vengeful one, the wicked child who believed what she had known to be false.

"You must help us," said the dark-eyed woman. "You see, it's his right

as coven master to destroy those who are weak, those who can't survive."

"He couldn't let the coven fall into chaos," said the other woman vampire who stood behind the boy. "Without the faith in the Dark Ways, the others might have blundered, alarmed the mortal populace. But if you help us to form a new coven, to perfect ourselves in new ways …"

"We are the strongest of the coven," said the man. "And if we can fend him off long enough, and manage to continue without him, then in time he may leave us alone."

"He will destroy us," the boy muttered. "He will never leave us alone. He will lie in wait for the moment when we separate …"

"He isn't invincible," said the tall male. "And he's lost all conviction. Remember that."

"And you have Magnus's tower, a safe place …" said the boy despairingly as he looked up at me.

"No, that I can't share with you," I said. "You have to win this battle on your own."

"But surely you can guide us …" said the man.

"You don't need me," I said. "What have you already learned from my example? What did you learn from the things I said last night?"

"We learned more from what you said to him afterwards," said the dark-eyed woman. "We heard you speak to him of a new evil, an evil for these times destined to move through the world in handsome human guise."

"So take on the guise," I said. "Take the garments of your victims, and take the money from their pockets. And you can then move among mortals as I do. In time you can gain enough wealth to acquire your own little fortress, your secret sanctuary. Then you will no longer be beggars or ghosts."

I could see the desperation in their faces. Yet they listened attentively.

"But our skin, the timbre of our voices …" said the dark-eyed woman.

"You can fool mortals. It's very easy. It just takes a little skill."

"But how do we start?" said the boy dully, as if he were only reluctantly being brought into it. "What sort of mortals do we pretend to be?"

"Choose for yourself!" I said. "Look around you. Masquerade as gypsies if you will—that oughtn't to be too difficult—or better yet mummers," I

glanced towards the lights of the boulevard.

"Mummers!" said the dark-eyed woman with a little spark of excitement.

"Yes, actors. Street performers. Acrobats. Make yourselves acrobats. Surely you've seen them out there. You can cover your white faces with greasepaint, and your extravagant gestures and facial expressions won't even be noticed. You couldn't choose a more nearly perfect disguise than that. On the boulevard you'll see every manner of mortal that dwells in this city. You'll learn all you need to know."

She laughed and glanced at the others. The man was deep in thought, the other woman musing, the boy unsure.

"With your powers, you can become jugglers and tumblers easily," I said. "It would be nothing for you. You could be seen by thousands who'd never guess what you are."

"That isn't what happened with you on the stage of this little theater," said the boy coldly. "You put terror into their hearts."

"Because I chose to do it," I said. Tremor of pain. "That's my tragedy. But I can fool anyone when I want to and so can you."

I reached into my pockets and drew out a handful of gold crowns. I gave them to the dark-eyed woman. She took them in both hands and stared at them as if they were burning her. She looked up and in her eyes I saw the image of myself on Renaud's stage performing those ghastly feats that had driven the crowd into the streets.

But she had another thought in her mind. She knew the theater was abandoned, that I'd sent the troupe off.

And for one second, I considered it, letting the pain double itself and pass through me, wondering if the others could feel it. What did it really matter, after all?

"Yes, please," said the pretty one. She reached up and touched my hand with her cool white fingers. "Let us inside the theater! Please." She turned and looked at the back doors of Renaud's.

Let them inside. Let them dance on my grave.

But there might be old costumes there still, the discarded trappings of a troupe that had had all the money in the world to buy itself new finery. Old pots of white paint. Water still in the barrels. A thousand treasures left behind in the haste of departure.

I was numb, unable to consider all of it, unwilling to reach back to

embrace all that had happened there.

"Very well," I said, looking away as if some little thing had distracted me. "You can go into the theater if you wish. You can use whatever is there."

She drew closer and pressed her lips suddenly to the back of my hand.

"We won't forget this," she said. "My name is Eleni, this boy is Laurent, the man here is Félix, and the woman with him, Eugénie. If Armand moves against you, he moves against us."

"I hope you prosper," I said, and strangely enough, I meant it. I wondered if any of them, with all their Dark Ways and Dark Rituals, had ever really wanted this nightmare that we all shared. They'd been drawn into it as I had, really. And we were all Children of Darkness now, for better or worse.

"But be wise in what you do here," I warned. "Never bring victims here or kill near here. Be clever and keep your hiding place safe."

It was three o'clock before I rode over the bridge on to the Ile St.-Louis. I had wasted enough time. And now I had to find the violin.

But as soon as I approached Nicki's house on the quai I saw that something was wrong. The windows were empty. All the drapery had been pulled down, and yet the place was full of light, as if candles were burning inside by the hundreds. Most strange. Roget couldn't have taken possession of the flat yet. Not enough time had passed to assume that Nicki had met with foul play.

Quickly, I went up over the roof and down the wall to the courtyard window, and saw that the drapery had been stripped away there too.

And candles were burning in all the candelabra and in the wall sconces. And some were even stuck in their own wax on the pianoforte and the desk. The room was in total disarray.

Every book had been pulled off the shelf. And some of the books were in fragments, pages broken out. Even the music had been emptied sheet by sheet onto the carpet, and all the pictures were lying about on the tables with other small possessions—coins, money, keys.

Perhaps the demons had wrecked the place when they took Nicki. But who had lighted all these candles? It didn't make sense.

I listened. No one in the flat. Or so it seemed. But then I heard not

thoughts, but tiny sounds. I narrowed my eyes for a moment, just concentrating, and it came to me that I was hearing pages turn, and then something being dropped. More pages turning, stiff, old parchment pages. Then again the book dropped.

I raised the window as quietly as I could. The little sounds continued, but no scent of human, no pulse of thought.

Yet there was a smell here. Something stronger than the stale tobacco and the candle wax. The smell the vampires carried with them from the cemetery soil.

More candles in the hallway. Candles in the bedroom and the same disarray, books open as they lay in careless piles, the bedclothes snarled, the pictures in a heap. Cabinets emptied, drawers pulled out.

And no violin anywhere, I managed to note that.

And those little sounds coming from another room, pages being turned very fast.

Whoever he was—and of course I knew who he had to be—he did not give a damn that I was there! He had not even stopped to take a breath.

I went farther down the hall and stood in the door of the library and found myself staring right at him as he continued with his task.

It was Armand, of course. Yet I was hardly prepared for the sight he presented here.

Candle wax dripped down the marble bust of Caesar, flowed over the brightly painted countries of the world globe. And the books, they lay in mountains on the carpet, save for those of the very last shelf in the corner where he stood, in his old rags still, hair full of dust, ignoring me as he ran his hand over page after page, his eyes intent on the words before him, his lips half open, his expression like that of an insect in its concentration as it chews through a leaf.

Perfectly horrible he looked, actually. He was sucking everything out of the books!

Finally he let this one drop and took down another, and opened it and started devouring it in the same manner, fingers moving down the sentences with preternatural speed.

And I realized that he had been examining everything in the flat in this fashion, even the bed sheets and curtains, the pictures that had been taken off their hooks, the contents of cupboards and drawers. But from the books, he was taking concentrated knowledge. Everything from

Caesar's *Gallic Wars* to modern English novels lay on the floor.

But his manner wasn't the entire horror. It was the havoc he was leaving behind him, the utter disregard of everything he used.

And his utter disregard of me.

He finished his latest book, or broke off from it, and went to the old newspapers stacked on a lower shelf.

I found myself backing out of the room and away from him, staring numbly at his small dirty figure. His auburn hair shimmered despite the dirt in it; his eyes burned like two lights.

Grotesque he seemed, among all the candles and the swimming colors of the flat, this filthy waif of the netherworld, and yet his beauty held sway. He hadn't needed the shadows of Notre Dame or the torchlight of the crypt to flatter him. And there was a fierceness in him in this bright light that I hadn't seen before.

I felt an overwhelming confusion. He was both dangerous and compelling. I could have looked on him forever, but an overpowering instinct said: Get away. Leave the place to him if he wants it. What does it matter now?

The violin. I tried desperately to think about the violin. To stop watching the movement of his hands over the words in front of him, the relentless focus of his eyes.

But these things were putting me in a trance.

I turned my back on him and went into the parlor. My hands were trembling. I could hardly endure knowing he was there. I searched everywhere and didn't find the damned violin. What could Nicki have done with it? I couldn't think.

Pages turning, paper crinkling. Soft sound of the newspaper dropping to the floor.

Go back to the tower at once.

I went to pass the library quickly, when without warning his soundless voice shot out and stopped me. It was like a hand touching my throat. I turned and saw him staring at me.

Do you love them, your silent children? Do they love you? That was what he asked, the sense disentangling itself from an endless echo.

I felt the blood rise to my face. The heat spread out over me like a mask as I looked at him.

All the books in the room were now on the floor. He was a haunt

standing in the ruins, a visitant from the devil he believed in. Yet his face was so tender, so young.

The Dark Trick never brings love, you see, it brings only the silence. His voice seemed softer in its soundlessness, clearer, the echo dissipated. *We used to say it was Satan's will, that the master and the fledgling not seek comfort in each other. It was Satan who had to be served, after all.*

Every word penetrated me. Every word was received by a secret, humiliating curiosity and vulnerability. But I refused to let him see this. Angrily I said:

"What do you want of me?"

It was shattering something to speak. I was feeling more fear of him at this moment than ever during the earlier battles and arguments, and I hate those who make me feel fear, those who know things that I need to know, who have that power over me.

"It is like not knowing how to read, isn't it?" he said aloud. "And your maker, the outcast Magnus, what did he care for your ignorance? He did not tell you the simplest things, did he?"

Nothing in his expression moved as he spoke.

"Hasn't it always been this way? Has anyone ever cared to teach you anything?"

"You're taking these things from my mind …" I said. I was appalled. I saw the monastery where I'd been as a boy, the rows and rows of books that I could not read, Gabrielle bent over her books, her back to all of us. "Stop this!" I whispered.

It seemed the longest time had passed. I was becoming disoriented. He was speaking again, but in silence.

They never satisfy you, the ones you make. In silence the estrangement and the resentment only grow.

I willed myself to move but I wasn't moving. I was merely looking at him as he went on.

You long for me and I for you, and we alone in all this realm are worthy of each other. Don't you know this?

The toneless words seemed to be stretched, amplified, like a note on the violin drawn out forever and ever.

"This is madness," I whispered. I thought of all the things he had said to me, what he had blamed me for, the horrors the others had described —that he had thrown his followers into the fire.

“Is it madness?” he asked. “Go then to your silent ones. Even now they say to each other what they cannot say to you.”

“You’re lying …” I said.

“And time will only strengthen their independence. But learn for yourself. You will find me easily enough when you want to come to me. After all, where can I go? What can I do? You have made me an orphan again.”

“I didn’t—” I said.

“Yes, you did,” he said. “You did it. You brought it down.” Still there was no anger. “But I can wait for you to come, wait for you to ask the questions that only I can answer.”

I stared at him for a long moment. I don’t know how long. It was as if I couldn’t move, and I couldn’t see anything else but him, and the great sense of peace I’d known in Notre Dame, the spell he cast, was again working. The lights of the room were too bright. There was nothing else but light surrounding him, and it was as if he were coming closer to me and I to him, yet neither of us was moving. He was drawing me, drawing me towards him.

I turned away, stumbling, losing my balance. But I was out of the room. I was running down the hallway, and then I was climbing out of the back window and up to the roof.

I rode into the Ile de la Cité as if he were chasing me. And my heart didn’t stop its frantic pace until I had left the city behind.

Hell’s Bells ringing.

The tower was in darkness against the first glimmer of the morning light. My little coven had already gone to rest in their dungeon crypt.

I didn’t open the tombs to look at them, though I wanted desperately to do it, just to see Gabrielle and touch her hand.

I climbed alone towards the battlements to look out at the burning miracle of the approaching morning, the thing I should never see to its finish again. Hell’s Bells ringing, my secret music …

But another sound was coming to me. I knew it as I went up the stairs. And I marveled at its power to reach me. It was like a song arching over an immense distance, low and sweet.

Once years ago, I had heard a young farm boy singing as he walked

along the high road out of the village to the north. He hadn't known anyone was listening. He had thought himself alone in the open country, and his voice had a private power and purity that gave it unearthly beauty. Never mind the words of his old song.

This was the voice that was calling to me now. The lone voice, rising over the miles that separated us to gather all sounds into itself.

I was frightened again. Yet I opened the door at the top of the staircase and went out onto the stone roof. Silken the morning breeze, dreamlike the twinkling of the last stars. The sky was not so much a canopy as it was a mist rising endlessly above me, and the stars drifted upwards, growing ever smaller, in the mist.

The faraway voice sharpened, like a note sung in the high mountains, touching my chest where I had laid my hand.

It pierced me as a beam pierces darkness, singing *Come to me; all things will be forgiven if only you come to me. I am more alone than I have ever been.*

And there came in time with the voice a sense of limitless possibility, of wonder and expectation that brought with it the vision of Armand standing alone in the open doors of Notre Dame. Time and space were illusions. He was in a pale wash of light before the main altar, a lissome shape in regal tatters, shimmering as he vanished, and nothing but patience in his eyes. There was no crypt under les Innocents now. There was no grotesquery of the ragged ghost in the glare of Nicki's library, throwing down the books when he had finished with them as if they were empty shells.

I think I knelt down and rested my head against the jagged stones. I saw the moon like a phantom dissolving, and the sun must have touched her because she hurt me and I had to close my eyes.

But I felt an elation, an ecstasy. It was as if my spirit could know the glory of the Dark Trick without the blood flowing, in the intimacy of the voice dividing me and seeking the tenderest, most secret part of my soul.

What do you want of me, I wanted to say again. How can there be this forgiveness when there was such rancor only a short while ago? Your coven destroyed. Horrors I don't want to imagine … I wanted to say it all again.

But I couldn't shape the words now any more than I could before. And this time, I knew that if I dared to try, the bliss would melt and leave me

and the anguish would be worse than the thirst for blood.

Yet even as I remained still, in the mystery of this feeling, I knew strange images and thoughts that weren't my own.

I saw myself retreat again to the dungeon and lift up the inanimate bodies of those kindred monsters I loved. I saw myself carrying them up to the roof of the tower and leaving them there in their helplessness at the mercy of the rising sun. Hell's Bells rang the alarm in vain for them. And the sun took them up and made them cinders with human hair.

My mind recoiled from this; it recoiled in the most heartbreaking disappointment.

"Child, still," I whispered. Ah, the pain of this disappointment, the possibility diminishing … "How foolish you are to think that such things could be done by me."

The voice faded; it withdrew itself from me. And I felt my aloneness in every pore of my skin. It was as if all covering had been taken from me forever and I would always be as naked and miserable as I was now.

And I felt far off a convulsion of power, as if the spirit that had made the voice was curling upon itself like a great tongue.

"Treachery!" I said louder. "But oh, the sadness of it, the miscalculation. How can you say that you desire *me!*"

Gone it was. Absolutely gone. And desperately, I wanted it back even if it was to fight with me. I wanted that sense of possibility, that lovely flare again.

And I saw his face in Notre Dame, boyish and almost sweet, like the face of an old da Vinci saint. A horrid sense of fatality passed over me.

6

As soon as Gabrielle rose, I drew her away from Nicki, out into the quiet of the forest, and I told her all that had taken place the preceding night. I told her all that Armand had suggested and said. In an embarrassed way, I spoke of the silence that existed between her and me, and of how I knew now that it wasn't to change.

"We should leave Paris as soon as possible," I said finally. "This creature is too dangerous. And the ones to whom I gave the theater—they don't know anything other than what they've been taught by him. I say let them have Paris. And let's take the Devil's Road, to use the old queen's words."

I had expected anger from her, and malice towards Armand. But through the whole story she remained calm.

"Lestat, there are too many unanswered questions," she said. "I want to know how this old coven started, I want to know all that Armand knows about *us.*"

"Mother, I'm tempted to turn my back on it. I don't care how it started. I wonder if he himself even knows."

"I understand, Lestat," she said quietly. "Believe me, I do. When all is said and done, I care less about these creatures than I do about the trees in this forest or the stars overhead. I'd rather study the currents of wind or the patterns in the falling leaves …"

"Exactly."

"But we mustn't be hasty. The important thing now is for the three of us to remain together. We should go into the city together and prepare slowly for our departure together. And together, we must try your plan to rouse Nicolas with the violin."

I wanted to talk about Nicki. I wanted to ask her what lay behind his silence, what could she divine? But the words dried up in my throat. I thought as I had all along of her judgment in those first moments: "Disaster, my son."

She put her arm around me and led me back towards the tower.

"I don't have to read your mind," she said, "to know what's in your

heart. Let's take him into Paris. Let's try to find the Stradivarius." She stood on tiptoe to kiss me. "We were on the Devil's Road together before all this happened," she said. "We'll be on it soon again."

It was as easy to take Nicolas into Paris as to lead him in everything else. Like a ghost he mounted his horse and rode alongside of us, only his dark hair and cape seemingly animate, whipped about as they were by the wind.

When we fed in the Ile de la Cité, I found I could not watch him hunt or kill.

It gave me no hope to see him doing these simple things with the sluggishness of a somnambulist. It proved nothing more than that he could go like this forever, our silent accomplice, little more than a resuscitated corpse.

Yet an unexpected feeling came over me as we moved through the alleyways together. We were not two, but three, now. A coven. And if only I could bring him around—

But the visit to Roget had to come first. I alone had to confront the lawyer. So I left them to wait only a few doors from his house, and as I pounded the knocker, I braced myself for the most grueling performance yet of my theatrical career.

Well, I was very quickly to learn an important lesson about mortals and their willingness to be convinced that the world is a safe place. Roget was overjoyed to see me. He was so relieved that I was "alive and in good health" and still wanted his services, that he was nodding his acceptance before my preposterous explanations had even begun.

(And this lesson about mortal peace of mind I never forgot. Even if a ghost is ripping a house to pieces, throwing tin pans all over, pouring water on pillows, making clocks chime at all hours, mortals will accept almost any "natural explanation" offered, no matter how absurd, rather than the obvious supernatural one, for what is going on.)

Also it became clear almost at once that he believed Gabrielle and I had slipped out of the flat by the servants' door to the bedroom, a nice possibility I hadn't considered before. So all I did about the twisted-up candelabra was mumble something about having been mad with grief when I saw my mother, which he understood right off.

As for the reason for our leaving, well, Gabrielle insisted upon being removed from everyone and taken to a convent, and there she was right now.

"Ah, Monsieur, it's a miracle, her improvement," I said. "If you could only see her—but never mind. We're going on to Italy immediately with Nicolas de Lenfent, and we need currency, letters of credit, whatever, and a traveling coach, a huge traveling coach, and a good team of six. You take care of it. Have it all ready by Friday evening early. And write to my father and tell him we're taking my mother to Italy. My father is all right, I presume?"

"Yes, yes, of course, I didn't tell him anything but the most reassuring —"

"How clever of you. I knew I could trust you. What would I do without you? And what about these rubies, can you turn them into money for me immediately? And I have here some Spanish coins to sell, quite old, I think."

He scribbled like a madman, his doubts and suspicions fading in the heat of my smiles. He was so glad to have something to do!

"Hold my property in the boulevard du Temple vacant," I said. "And of course, you'll manage everything for me. And so forth and so on."

My property in the boulevard du Temple, the hiding place of a ragged and desperate band of vampires unless Armand had already found them and burnt them up like old costumes. I should find the answer to that question soon enough.

I came down the steps whistling to myself in strictly human fashion, overjoyed that this odious task had been accomplished. And then I realized that Nicki and Gabrielle were nowhere in sight.

I stopped and turned around in the street.

I saw Gabrielle just at the moment I heard her voice, a young boyish figure emerging full blown from an alleyway as if she had just made herself material on the spot.

"Lestat, he's gone—vanished," she said.

I couldn't answer her. I said something foolish, like "What do you mean, vanished!" But my thoughts were more or less drowning out the words in my own head. If I had doubted up until this moment that I loved him, I had been lying to myself.

"I turned my back, and it was that quick, I tell you," she said. She was

half aggrieved, half angry.

"Did you hear any other …"

"No. Nothing. He was simply too quick."

"Yes, if he moved on his own, if he wasn't taken …"

"I would have heard his fear if Armand had taken him," she insisted.

"But does he feel fear? Does he feel anything at all?" I was utterly terrified and utterly exasperated. He'd vanished in a darkness that spread out all around us like a giant wheel from its axis. I think I clenched my fist. I must have made some uncertain little gesture of panic.

"Listen to me," she said. "There are only two things that go round and round in his mind …"

"Tell me!"

"One is the pyre under les Innocents where he was almost burned. And the other is a small theater—footlights, a stage."

"Renaud's," I said.

She and I were archangels together. It didn't take us a quarter of an hour to reach the noisy boulevard and to move through its raucous crowd past the neglected facade of Renaud's and back to the stage door.

The boards had all been ripped down and the locks broken. But I heard no sound of Eleni or the others as we slipped quietly into the hallway that went round the back of the stage. No one here.

Perhaps Armand had gathered his children home after all, and that was my doing because I would not take them in.

Nothing but the jungle of props, the great painted scrims of night and day and hill and dale, and the open dressing rooms, those crowded little closets where here and there a mirror glared in the light that seeped through the open door we had left behind.

Then Gabrielle's hand tightened on my sleeve. She gestured towards the wings proper. And I knew by her face that it wasn't the other ones. Nicki was there.

I went to the side of the stage. The velvet curtain was drawn back to both sides and I could see his dark figure plainly in the orchestra pit. He was sitting in his old place, his hands folded in his lap. He was facing me but he didn't notice me. He was staring off as he had done all along.

And the memory came back to me of Gabrielle's strange words the

night after I had made her, that she could not get over the sensation that she had died and could affect nothing in the mortal world.

He appeared that lifeless and that translucent. He was the still, expressionless specter one almost stumbles over in the shadows of the haunted house, all but melded with the dusty furnishings—the fright that is worse perhaps than any other kind.

I looked to see if the violin was there—on the floor, or against his chair—and when I saw that it wasn't, I thought, Well, there is still a chance.

"Stay here and watch," I said to Gabrielle. But my heart was knocking in my throat when I looked up at the darkened theater, when I let myself breathe in the old scents. Why did you have to bring us here, Nicki? To this haunted place? But then, who am I to ask that? I had come back, had I not?

I lighted the first candle I found in the old prima donna's dressing room. Open pots of paint were scattered everywhere, and there were many discarded costumes on the hooks. All the rooms I passed were full of cast-off clothing, forgotten combs and brushes, withered flowers still in the vases, powder spilled on the floor.

I thought of Eleni and the others again, and I realized that the faintest smell of les Innocents lingered here. And I saw very distinct naked footprints in the spilled powder. Yes, they'd come in. And they had lighted candles, too, hadn't they? Because the smell of the wax was too fresh.

Whatever the case, they hadn't entered my old dressing room, the room that Nicki and I had shared before every performance. It was locked still. And when I broke open the door, I got an ugly shock. The room was exactly the way I'd left it.

It was clean and orderly, even the mirror polished, and it was filled with my belongings as it had been on the last night I had been here. There was my old coat on the hook, the cast-off I'd worn from the country, and a pair of wrinkled boots, and my pots of paint in perfect order, and my wig, which I had worn only at the theater, on its wooden head. Letters from Gabrielle in a little stack, the old copies of English and French newspapers in which the play had been mentioned, and a bottle of wine still half full with a dried cork.

And there in the darkness beneath the marble dressing table, partly

covered by a bundled black coat, lay a shiny violin case. It was not the one we'd carried all the way from home with us. No. It must hold the precious gift I'd bought for him with the "coin of the realm" after, the Stradivarius violin.

I bent down and opened the lid. It was the beautiful instrument all right, delicate and darkly lustrous, and lying here among all these unimportant things.

I wondered whether Eleni and the others would have taken it had they come into this room. Would they have known what it could do?

I set down the candle for a moment and took it out carefully, and I tightened the horsehair of the bow as I'd seen Nicki do a thousand times. And then I brought the instrument and the candle back to the stage again, and I bent down and commenced to light the long string of candle footlights.

Gabrielle watched me impassively. Then she came to help me. She lit one candle after another and then lighted the sconce in the wings.

It seemed Nicki stirred. But maybe it was only the growing illumination on his profile, the soft light that emanated out from the stage into the darkened hall. The deep folds of velvet came alive everywhere; the ornate little mirrors affixed to the front of the gallery and the loges became lights themselves.

Beautiful this little place, our place. The portal to the world for us as mortal beings. And the portal finally to hell.

When I was finished, I stood on the boards looking at the gilded railings, the new chandelier that hung from the ceiling, and up at the arch overhead with its masks of comedy and tragedy like two faces stemming from the same neck.

It seemed so much smaller when it was empty, this house. No theater in Paris seemed larger when it was full.

Outside was the low thunder of the boulevard traffic, tiny human voices rising now and then like sparks over the general hum. A heavy carriage must have passed then because everything within the theater shivered slightly: the candle flames against their reflectors, the giant stage curtain gathered to right and left, the scrim behind of a finely painted garden with clouds overhead.

I went past Nicki, who never once looked up at me, and down the little stairs behind him, and came towards him with the violin.

Gabrielle stood back in the wings again, her small face cold but patient. She rested against the beam beside her in the easy manner of a strange long-haired man.

I lowered the violin over Nicki's shoulder and held it in his lap. I felt him move, as if he had taken a great breath. The back of his head pressed against me. And slowly he lifted his left hand to take the neck of the violin and he took the bow with his right.

I knelt and put my hands on his shoulders. I kissed his cheek. No human scent. No human warmth. Sculpture of my Nicolas.

"Play it," I whispered. "Play it here just for us."

Slowly he turned to face me, and for the first time since the moment of the Dark Trick, he looked into my eyes. He made some tiny sound. It was so strained it was as if he couldn't speak anymore. The organs of speech had closed up. But then he ran his tongue along his lip, and so low I scarcely heard him, he said:

"The devil's instrument."

"Yes," I said. If you must believe that, then believe it. But play.

His fingers hovered above the strings. He tapped the hollow wood with his fingertip. And now, trembling, he plucked at the strings to tune them and wound the pegs very slowly as if he were discovering the process with perfect concentration for the first time.

Somewhere out on the boulevard children laughed. Wooden wheels made their thick clatter over the cobblestones. The staccato notes were sour, dissonant, and they sharpened the tension.

He pressed the instrument to his ear for a moment. And it seemed to me he didn't move again for an eternity, and then he slowly rose to his feet. I went back out of the pit and into the benches, and I stood staring at his black silhouette against the glow of the lighted stage.

He turned to face the empty theater as he had done so many times at the moment of the intermezzo, and he lifted the violin to his chin. And in a movement so swift it was like a flash of light in my eye, he brought the bow down across the strings.

The first full-throated chords throbbed in the silence and were stretched as they deepened, scraping the bottom of sound itself. Then the notes rose, rich and dark and shrill, as if pumped out of the fragile violin by alchemy, until a raging torrent of melody suddenly flooded the hall.

It seemed to roll through my body, to pass through my very bones.

I couldn't see the movement of his fingers, the whipping of the bow; all I could see was the swaying of his body, his tortured posture as he let the music twist him, bend him forward, throw him back.

It became higher, shriller, faster, yet the tone of each note was perfection. It was execution without effort, virtuosity beyond mortal dreams. And the violin was talking, not merely singing, the violin was insisting. The violin was telling a tale.

The music was a lamentation, a fugue of terror looping itself into hypnotic dance rhythms, jerking Nicki even more wildly from side to side. His hair was a glistening mop against the footlights. The blood sweat had broken out on him. I could smell the blood.

But I too was doubling over; I was backing away from him, slumping down on the bench as if to cower from it, as once before in this house terrified mortals had cowered before me.

And I knew, knew in some full and simultaneous fashion, that the violin was telling everything that had happened to Nicki. It was the darkness exploded, the darkness molten, and the beauty of it was like the glow of smoldering coals; just enough illumination to show how much darkness there really was.

Gabrielle too was straining to keep her body still under the onslaught, her face constricted, her hands to her head. Her lion's mane of hair had shaken loose around her, her eyes were closed.

But another sound was coming through the pure inundation of song. *They* were here. They had come into the theater and were moving towards us through the wings.

The music reached impossible peaks, the sound throttled for an instant and then released again. The mixture of feeling and pure logic drove it past the limits of the bearable. And yet it went on and on.

And the others appeared slowly from behind the stage curtain—first the stately figure of Eleni, then the boy Laurent, and finally Félix and Eugenie. Acrobats, street players, they had become, and they wore the clothes of such players, the men in white tights beneath dagged harlequin jerkins, the women in full bloomers and ruffled dresses and with dancing slippers on their feet. Rouge gleamed on their immaculate white faces; kohl outlined their dazzling vampire eyes.

They glided towards Nicki as if drawn by a magnet, their beauty flowering ever more fully as they came into the glare of the stage

candles, their hair shimmering, their movements agile and feline, their expressions rapt.

Nicki turned slowly to face them as he writhed, and the song went into frenzied supplication, lurching and climbing and roaring along its melodic path.

Eleni stared wide-eyed at him as if horrified or enchanted. Then her arms rose straight up above her head in a slow dramatic gesture, her body tensing, her neck becoming ever more graceful and long. The other woman had made a pivot and lifted her knee, toe pointed down, in the first step of a dance. But it was the tall man who suddenly caught the pace of Nicki's music as he jerked his head to the side and moved his legs and arms as if he were a great marionette controlled from the rafters above by four strings.

The others saw it. They had seen the marionettes of the boulevard. And suddenly they all went into the mechanical attitude, their sudden movements like spasms, their faces like wooden faces, utterly blank.

A great cool rush of delight passed through me, as if I could breathe suddenly in the blasted heat of the music, and I moaned with pleasure watching them flip and flop and throw up their legs, toes to the ceiling, and twirl on their invisible strings.

They had found the grotesque heart of the music, the very balance between its hideous pleading and its insistent singing, and it was Nicki who commanded their strings.

But it was changing. He was playing to them now even as they danced to him.

He took a stride towards the stage, and leapt up over the smoky trough of the footlights, and landed in their midst. The light slithered off the instrument, off his glistering face.

A new element of mockery infected the never ending melody, a syncopation that staggered the song and made it all the more bitter and all the more sweet at the same time.

The jerking stiff-jointed puppets circled him, shuffling and bobbing along the floorboards. Fingers splayed, heads rocking from side to side, they jigged and twisted until all of them broke their rigid form as Nicki's melody melted into harrowing sadness, the dance becoming immediately liquid and heartbroken and slow.

It was as if one mind controlled them, as if they danced to Nicki's

thoughts as well as his music, and he began to dance with them as he played, the beat coming faster, as he became the country fiddler at the Lenten bonfire, and they leapt in pairs like country lovers, the skirts of the women flaring, the men bowing their legs as they lifted the women, all creating postures of tenderest love.

Frozen, I stared at the image: the preternatural dancers, the monster violinist, limbs moving with inhuman slowness, tantalizing grace. The music was like a fire consuming us all.

Now it screamed of pain, of horror, of the pure rebellion of the soul against all things. And they again carried it into the visual, faces twisted in torment, like the mask of tragedy graven on the arch above them, and I knew that if I didn't turn my back on this I would cry.

I didn't want to hear any more or see any more. Nicki was swinging to and fro as if the violin were a beast he could no longer control. And he was stabbing at the strings with short rough strokes of the bow.

The dancers passed in front of him, in back of him, embraced him, and caught him suddenly as he threw up his hands, the violin held high over his head.

A loud piercing laughter erupted from him. His chest shivered with it, his arms and legs quaking with it. And then he lowered his head and he fixed his eyes on me. And at the top of his voice he screamed:

"I GIVE YOU THE THEATER OF THE VAMPIRES! THE THEATER OF THE VAMPIRES! THE GREATEST SPECTACLE OF THE BOULEVARD!"

Astonished, the others stared at him. But again, all of one mind, they clapped their hands and roared. They leapt into the air, giving out shrieks of joy. They threw their arms about his neck and kissed him. And dancing around him in a circle, they turned him with their arms. The laughter rose, bubbling out of all of them, as he brought them close in his arms and answered their kisses, and with their long pink tongues they licked the blood sweat off his face.

"The Theater of the Vampires!" They broke from him and bawled it to the nonexistent audience, to the world. They bowed to the footlights, and frolicking and screaming they leapt up to the rafters and then let themselves drop down with a storm of reverberation on the boards.

The last shimmer of the music was gone, replaced by this cacophony of shrieking and stomping and laughter, like the clang of bells.

I do not remember turning my back on them. I don't remember

walking up the steps to the stage and going past them. But I must have.

Because I was suddenly sitting on the long narrow table of my little dressing room, my back against the corner, my knee crooked, my head against the cold glass of the mirror, and Gabrielle was there.

I was breathing hoarsely and the sound of it bothered me. I saw things —the wig I'd worn on the stage, the pasteboard shield—and these evoked thundering emotions. But I was suffocating. I could not think.

Then Nicki appeared in the door, and he moved Gabrielle to the side with a strength that astonished her and astonished me, and he pointed his finger at me:

"Well, don't you like it, my lord patron?" he asked, advancing, his words flowing in an unbroken stream so that they sounded like one great word. "Don't you admire its splendor, its perfection? Won't you endow the Theater of the Vampires with the coin of the realm which you possess in such great abundance? Won't you see your playhouse come to its final magnificent purpose? How was it now, 'the new evil, the canker in the heart of the rose, death in the very midst of things' …"

From a mute he had passed into mania, and even when he broke off talking, the low senseless frenzied sounds still issued from his lips like water from a spring. His face was drawn and hard and glistening with the blood droplets clinging to it, and staining the white linen at his neck.

And behind him there came an almost innocent laughter from the others, except for Eleni, who watched over his shoulder, trying very hard to comprehend what was really happening between us.

He drew closer, half laughing, grinning, stabbing at my chest with his finger:

"Well, speak. Don't you see the splendid mockery, the genius?" He struck his own chest with his fist. "They'll come to our performances, fill our coffers with gold, and never guess what they harbor, what flourishes right in the corner of the Parisian eye. In the back alleys we feed on them and they clap for us before the lighted stage …"

Laughter from the boy behind him. The tink of a tambourine, the thin sound of the other woman singing. A long streak of the man's laughter—like a ribbon unfurling, charting his movement as he rushed around in a circle through the rattling scrims.

Nicki drew in so that the light behind him vanished. I couldn't see Eleni.

“Magnificent evil!” he said. He was full of menace and his white hands looked like the claws of a sea creature that could at any given moment move to tear me to bits. “To serve the god of the dark wood as he has not been served ever and here in the very center of civilization. And for this you saved the theater. Out of your gallant patronage this sublime offering is born.”

“It is petty!” I said. “It is merely beautiful and clever and nothing more.”

My voice had not been very loud but it brought him to silence, and it brought the others to silence. And the shock in me melted slowly into another emotion, no less painful, merely easier to contain.

Nothing but the sounds again from the boulevard. A glowering anger flowed out of him, his pupils dancing as he looked at me.

“You’re a liar, a contemptible liar,” he said.

“There is no splendor in it,” I answered. “There is nothing sublime. Fooling helpless mortals, mocking them, and then going out from here at night to take life in the same old petty manner, one death after another in all its inevitable cruelty and shabbiness so that we can live. Any man can kill another man! Play your violin forever. Dance as you wish. Give them their money’s worth if it keeps you busy and eats up eternity! It's simply clever and beautiful. A grove in the Savage Garden. Nothing more.”

“Vile liar!” he said between his teeth. “You are God’s fool, that’s what you are. You who possessed the dark secret that soared above everything, rendered everything meaningless, and what did you do with it, in those months when you ruled alone from Magnus’s tower, but try to live like a good man! A good man!”

He was close enough to kiss me, the blood of his spittle hitting my face.

“Patron of the arts,” he sneered. “Giver of gifts to your family, giver of gifts to us!” He stepped back, looking down on me contemptuously.

“Well, we will take the little theater that you painted in gold, and hung with velvet,” he said, “and it will serve the forces of the devil more splendidly than he was ever served by the old coven.” He turned and glanced at Eleni. He glanced back at the others. “We will make a mockery of all things sacred. We will lead them to ever greater vulgarity and profanity. We will astonish. We will beguile. But above all, we will

thrive on their gold as well as their blood and in their midst we will grow strong."

"Yes," said the boy behind him. "We will become invincible." His face had a crazed look, the look of the zealot as he gazed at Nicolas. "We will have names and places in their very world."

"And power over them," said the other woman, "and a vantage point from which to study them and know them and perfect our methods of destroying them when we choose."

"I want the theater," Nicolas said to me. "I want it from you. The deed, the money to reopen it. My assistants here are ready to listen to me."

"You may have it, if you wish," I answered. "It is yours if it will take you and your malice and your fractured reason off my hands."

I got up off the dressing table and went towards him and I think that he meant to block my path, but something unaccountable happened. When I saw he wouldn't move, my anger rose up and out of me like an invisible fist. And I saw him moved backwards as if the fist had struck him. And he hit the wall with sudden force.

I could have been free of the place in an instant. I knew Gabrielle was only waiting to follow me. But I didn't leave. I stopped and I looked back at him, and he was still against the wall as if he couldn't move. And he was watching me and the hatred was as pure, as undiluted by remembered love, as it had been all along.

But I wanted to understand, I wanted really to know what had happened. And I came towards him again in silence and this time it was I who was menacing, and my hands looked like claws and I could feel his fear. They were all, except for Eleni, full of fear.

I stopped when I was very close to him and he looked directly at me, and it was as if he knew exactly what I was asking him.

"All a misunderstanding, my love," he said. Acid on the tongue. The blood sweat had broken out again, and his eyes glistened as if they were wet. "It was to hurt others, don't you see, the violin playing, to anger them, to secure for me an island where they could not rule. They would watch my ruin, unable to do anything about it."

I didn't answer. I wanted him to go on.

"And when we decided to go to Paris, I thought we would starve in Paris, that we would go down and down and down. It was what I wanted, rather than what *they* wanted, that I, the favored son, should

rise for them. I thought we would go down! We were supposed to go down."

"Oh, Nicki …" I whispered.

"But you didn't go down, Lestat," he said, his eyebrows rising. "The hunger, the cold—none of it stopped you. You were a triumph!" The rage thickened his voice again. "You didn't drink yourself to death in the gutter. You turned everything upside down! And for every aspect of our proposed damnation you found exuberance, and there was no end to your enthusiasms and the passion coming out of you—and the light, always the light. And in exact proportion to the light coming out of you, there was the darkness in me! Every exuberance piercing me and creating its exact proportion of darkness and despair! And then, the magic, when you got the magic, irony of ironies, you protected me from it! And what did you do with it but use your Satanic powers to simulate the actions of a good man!"

I turned around. I saw them scattered in the shadows, and farthest away, the figure of Gabrielle. I saw the light on her hand as she raised it, beckoning for me to come away.

Nicki reached up and touched my shoulders. I could feel the hatred coming through his touch. Loathsome to be touched in hate.

"Like a mindless beam of sunlight you routed the bats of the old coven!" he whispered. "And for what purpose? What does it mean, the murdering monster who is filled with light!"

I turned and smacked him and sent him hurtling into the dressing room, his right hand smashing the mirror, his head cracking against the far wall.

For one moment he lay like something broken against the mass of old clothing, and then his eyes gathered their determination again, and his face softened into a slow smile. He righted himself and slowly, as an indignant mortal might, he smoothed his coat and his rumpled hair.

It was like my gestures under les Innocents when my captors had set me down in the dirt.

And he came forward with the same dignity, and the smile was as ugly as any I had ever seen.

"I despise you," he said. "But I am done with you. I have the power from you and I know how to use it, which you do not. I am in a realm at last where I choose to triumph! In darkness, we're equal now. And you

will give me the theater, that because you owe it to me, and you are a giver of things, aren't you—a giver of gold coins to hungry children—and then, I won't ever look upon your light again."

He stepped around me and stretched out his arms to the others:

"Come, my beauties, come, we have plays to write, business to attend to. You have things to learn from me. I know what mortals really are. We must get down to the serious invention of our dark and splendid art. We will make a coven to rival all covens. We will do what has never been done."

The others looked at me, frightened, hesitant. And in this still and tense moment I heard myself take a deep breath. My vision broadened. I saw the wings around us again, the high rafters, the walls of scenery transecting the darkness, and beyond, the little blaze along the foot of the dusty stage. I saw the house veiled in shadow and knew in one limitless recollection all that had happened here. And I saw a nightmare hatch another nightmare, and I saw a story come to an end.

"The Theater of the Vampires," I whispered. "We have worked the Dark Trick on this little place." No one of the others dared to answer. Nicolas only smiled.

And as I turned to leave the theater I raised my hand in a gesture that urged them all towards him. I said my farewell.

* * *

We were not far from the lights of the boulevard when I stopped in my tracks. Without words a thousand horrors came to me—that Armand would come to destroy him, that his newfound brothers and sisters would tire of his frenzy and desert him, that morning would find him stumbling through the streets unable to find a hiding place from the sun. I looked up at the sky. I couldn't speak or breathe.

Gabrielle put her arms around me and I held her, burying my face in her hair. Like cool velvet was her skin, her face, her lips. And her love surrounded me with a monstrous purity that had nothing to do with human hearts and human flesh.

I lifted her off her feet embracing her. And in the dark, we were like lovers carved out of the same stone who had no memory of a separate

life at all.

"He's made his choice, my son," she said. "What's done is done, and you're free of him now."

"Mother, how can you say it?" I whispered. "He didn't know. He doesn't know still …"

"Let him go, Lestat," she said. "They will care for him."

"But now I have to find that devil, Armand, don't I?" I said wearily. "I have to make him leave them alone."

The following evening when I came into Paris, I learned that Nicki had already been to Roget.

He had come an hour earlier pounding on the doors like a madman. And shouting from the shadows, he had demanded the deed to the theater, and money that he said I had promised to him. He had threatened Roget and his family. He had also told Roget to write to Renaud and his troupe in London and to tell them to come home, that they had a new theater awaiting them, and he expected them back at once. When Roget refused, he demanded the address of the players in London, and began to ransack Roget's desk.

I went into a silent fury when I heard this. So he would make them all vampires, would he, this demon fledgling, this reckless and frenzied monster?

This would not come to pass.

I told Roget to send a courier to London, with word that Nicolas de Lenfent had lost his reason. The players must not come home.

And then I went to the boulevard du Temple and I found him at his rehearsals, excited and mad as he had been before. He wore his fancy clothes again and his old jewels from the time when he had been his father's favorite son, but his tie was askew, his stockings crooked, and his hair was as wild and unkempt as the hair of a prisoner in the Bastille who hadn't seen himself in a mirror in twenty years.

Before Eleni and the others I told him he would get nothing from me unless I had the promise that no actor or actress of Paris would ever be slain or seduced by the new coven, that Renaud and his troupe would never be brought into the Theater of the Vampires now or in the years to come, that Roget, who would hold the purse strings of the theater, must

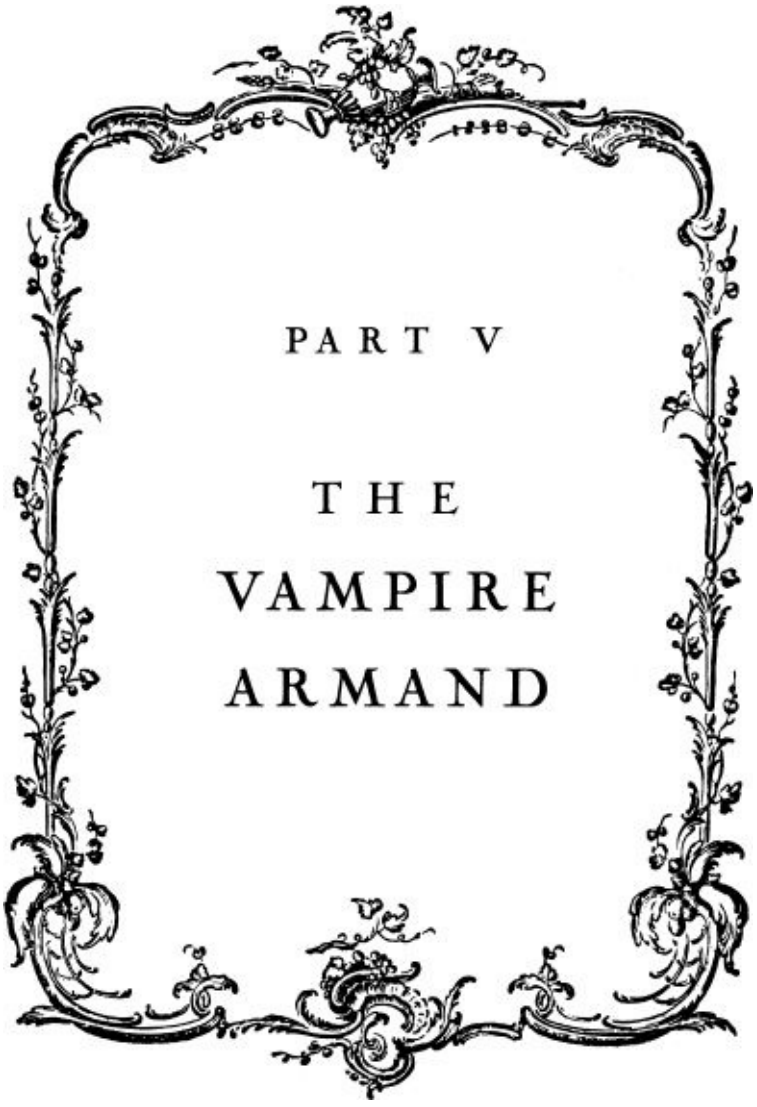
never come to the slightest harm.

He laughed at me, he ridiculed me as he had before. But Eleni silenced him. She was horrified to learn of his impulsive designs. It was she who gave the promises, and exacted them from the others. It was she who intimidated him and confused him with jumbled language of the old ways, and made him back down.

And it was to Eleni finally that I gave control of the Theater of the Vampires, and the income, to pass through Roget, which would allow her to do with it what she pleased.

Before I left her that night, I asked her what she knew of Armand. Gabrielle was with us. We were in the alleyway again, near the stage door.

"He watches," Eleni answered. "Sometimes he lets himself be seen." Her face was very confusing to me. Sorrowful. "But God only knows what he will do," she added fearfully, "when he discovers what is really going on here."



PART V

THE VAMPIRE ARMAND

1

Spring rain. Rain of light that saturated every new leaf of the trees in the street, every square of paving, drift of rain threading light through the empty darkness itself. And the ball in the Palais Royal.

The king and queen were there, dancing with the people. Talk in the shadows of intrigue. Who cares? Kingdoms rise and fall. Just don't burn the paintings in the Louvre, that's all.

Lost in a sea of mortals again; fresh complexions and ruddy cheeks, mounds of powdered hair atop feminine heads with all manner of millinery nonsense in them, even minute ships with three masts, tiny trees, little birds. Landscapes of pearl and ribbon. Broad-chested men like cocks in satin coats like feathered wings. The diamonds hurt my eyes.

The voices touched the surface of my skin at times, the laughter the echo of unholy laughter, wreaths of candles blinding, the froth of music positively lapping the walls.

Gust of rain from the open doors.

Scent of humans gently stoking my hunger. White shoulders, white necks, powerful hearts running at that eternal rhythm, so many gradations among these naked children hidden in riches, savages laboring beneath a swaddling of chenille, encrustations of embroidery, feet aching over high heels, masks like scabs about their eyes.

The air comes out of one body and is breathed into another. The music, does it pass out of one ear and into another, as the old expression goes? We breathe the light, we breathe the music, we breathe the moment as it passes through us.

Now and then eyes settled on me with some vague air of expectation. My white skin made them pause, but what was that when they let blood out of their veins themselves to keep their delicate pallor? (Let me hold the basin for you and drink it afterwards.) And my eyes, what were those, in this sea of paste jewels?

Yet their whispers slithered around me. And those scents, ah, not a one was like another. And as clearly as if spoken aloud it came, the

summons from mortals here and there, sensing what I was, and the lust.

In some ancient language they welcomed death; they ached for death as death was passing through the room. But did they really know? Of course they didn't know. And I did not know! That was the perfect horror! And who am I to bear this secret, to hunger so to impart it, to want to take that slender woman there and suck the blood right out of the plump flesh of her round little breast.

The music rushed on, human music. The colors of the room flamed for an instant as if the whole would melt. The hunger sharpened. It was no longer an idea. My veins were throbbing with it. Someone would die. Sucked dry in less than a moment. I cannot stand it, thinking of it, knowing it's about to happen, fingers on the throat feeling the blood in the vein, feeling the flesh give, give it to me! Where? *This is my body, this is my blood.*

Send out your power, Lestat, like a reptile tongue to gather in a flick the appropriate heart.

Plump little arms ripe for the squeezing, men's faces on which the close-shaven blond beard all but glitters, muscle struggling in my fingers, you haven't got a chance!

And beneath this divine chemistry suddenly, this panorama of the denial of decay, I saw the bones!

Skulls under these preposterous wigs, two gaping holes peering from behind the uplifted fan. A room of wobbling skeletons waiting only for the tolling of the bell. Just as I had seen the audience that night in the pit of Renaud's when I had done the tricks that terrified them. The horror should be visited upon every other being in this room.

I had to get out. I'd made a terrible miscalculation. *This* was death and I could get away from it, if I could just get out! But I was tangled in mortal beings as if this monstrous place were a snare for a vampire. If I bolted, I'd send the entire ballroom into panic. As gently as I could I pushed to the open doors.

And against the far wall, a backdrop of satin and filigree, I saw, out of the corner of my eye, like something imagined, Armand. Armand.

If there had been a summons, I never heard it. If there was a greeting, I didn't sense it now. He was merely looking at me, a radiant creature in jewels and scalloped lace. And it was Cinderella revealed at the ball, this vision, Sleeping Beauty opening her eyes under a mesh of cobwebs and

wiping them all away with one sweep of her warm hand. The sheer pitch of incarnate beauty made me gasp.

Yes, perfect mortal raiment, and yet he seemed all the more supernatural, his face too dazzling, his dark eyes fathomless and just for a split second glinting as if they were windows to the fires of hell. And when his voice came it was low and almost teasing, forcing me to concentrate to hear it: *All night you've been searching for me*, he said, *and here I am, waiting for you. I have been waiting for you all along.*

I think I sensed even then, as I stood unable to look away, that never in my years of wandering this earth would I ever have such a rich revelation of the true horror that we are.

Heartbreakingly innocent he seemed in the midst of the crowd.

Yet I saw crypts when I looked at him, and I heard the beat of the kettledrums. I saw torchlit fields where I had never been, heard vague incantations, felt the heat of raging fires on my face. And they didn't come out of him, these visions. Rather I drew them out on my own.

Yet never had Nicolas, mortal or immortal, been so alluring. Never had Gabrielle held me so in thrall.

Dear God, this is love. This is desire. And all my past amours have been but the shadow of this.

And it seemed in a murmuring pulse of thought he gave me to know that I had been very foolish to think it would not be so.

Who can love us, you and I, as we can love each other, he whispered and it seemed his lips actually moved.

Others looked at him. I saw them drifting with a ludicrous slowness; I saw their eyes pass over him, I saw the light fall on him at a rich new angle as he lowered his head.

I was moving towards him. It seemed he raised his right hand and beckoned and then he didn't, and he had turned and I saw the figure of a young boy ahead of me, with narrow waist and straight shoulders and high firm calves under silk stockings, a boy who turned as he opened a door and beckoned again.

A mad thought came to me.

I was moving after him, and it seemed that none of the other things had happened. There was no crypt under les Innocents, and he had not been that ancient fearful fiend. We were somehow safe.

We were the sum of our desires and this was saving us, and the vast

untasted horror of my own immortality did not lie before me, and we were navigating calm seas with familiar beacons, and it was time to be in each other's arms.

A dark room surrounded us, private, cold. The noise of the ball was far away. He was heated with the blood he'd drunk and I could hear the strong force of his heart. He drew me closer to him, and beyond the high windows there flashed the passing lights of the carriages, with dim incessant sounds that spoke of safety and comfort, and all the things that Paris was.

I had never died. The world was beginning again. I put out my arms and felt his heart against me, and calling out to my Nicolas, I tried to warn him, to tell him we were all of us doomed. Our life was slipping inch by inch from us, and seeing the apple trees in the orchard, drenched in green sunlight, I felt I would go mad.

"No, no, my dearest one," he was whispering, "nothing but peace and sweetness and your arms in mine."

"You know it was the damnedest luck!" I whispered suddenly. "I am an unwilling devil. I cry like some vagrant child. I want to go home."

Yes, yes, his lips tasted like blood, but it was not human blood. It was that elixir that Magnus had given me, and I felt myself recoil. I could get away this time. I had another chance. The wheel had turned full round.

I was crying out that I wouldn't drink; I wouldn't, and then I felt the two hot shafts driven hard through my neck and down to my soul.

I couldn't move. It was coming as it had come that night, the rapture, a thousandfold what it was when I held mortals in my arms. And I knew what he was doing! He was feeding upon me! He was draining me.

And going down on my knees, I felt myself held by him, the blood pouring out of me with a monstrous volition I couldn't stop.

"Devil!" I tried to scream. I forced the word up and up until it broke from my lips and the paralysis broke from my limbs. "Devil!" I roared again and I caught him in his swoon and hurled him backwards to the floor.

In an instant, I had my hands upon him and, shattering the French doors, had dragged him out with me into the night.

His heels were scraping on the stones, his face had become pure fury. I clutched his right arm and swung him from side to side so that his head snapped back and he could not see nor gauge where he was, nor catch

hold of anything, and with my right hand I beat him and beat him, until the blood was running out of his ears and his eyes and his nose.

I dragged him through the trees away from the lights of the Palais. And as he struggled, as he sought to resurrect himself with a burst of force, he shot his declaration at me that he would kill me because he had my strength now. He'd drunk it out of me and coupled with his own strength it would make him impossible to defeat.

Maddened, I clutched at his neck, pushing his head down against the path beneath me. I pinned him down, strangling him, until the blood in great gushes poured out of his open mouth.

He would have screamed if he could. My knees drove into his chest. His neck bulged under my fingers and the blood spurted and bubbled out of him and he turned his head from side to side, his eyes growing bigger and bigger, but seeing nothing, and then when I felt him weak and limp, I let him go.

I beat him again, turning him this way and that. And then I drew my sword to sever his head.

Let him live like that if he can. Let him be immortal like that if he can. I raised the sword and when I looked down at him, the rain was pelting his face, and he was staring up at me, as one half alive, unable to plead for mercy, unable to move.

I waited. I wanted him to beg. I wanted him to give me that powerful voice full of lies and cunning, the voice that had made me believe for one pure and dazzling instant that I was alive and free and in the state of grace again. Damnable, unforgivable lie. Lie I'd never forget for as long as I walked the earth. I wanted the rage to carry me over the threshold to his grave.

But nothing came from him.

And in this moment of stillness and misery for him, his beauty slowly returned.

He lay a broken child on the gravel path, only yards from the passing traffic, the ring of the horses' hooves, the rumble of the wooden wheels.

And in this broken child were centuries of evil and centuries of knowledge, and out of him there came no ignominious entreaty but merely the soft and bruised sense of what he was. Old, old evil, eyes that had seen dark ages of which I only dream.

I let him go, and I stood up and sheathed my sword.

I walked a few paces from him, and collapsed upon a wet stone bench.

Far away, busy figures labored about the shattered window of the palace.

But the night lay between us and those confused mortals, and I looked at him listlessly as he lay still.

His face was turned to me, but not by design, his hair a tangle of curls and blood. And with his eyes closed, and his hand open beside him, he appeared the abandoned offspring of time and supernatural accident, someone as miserable as myself.

What had he done to become what he was? Could one so young so long ago have guessed the meaning of any decision, let alone the vow to become this?

I rose, and walking slowly to him, I stood over him and looked at him, at the blood that soaked his lace shirt and stained his face.

It seemed he sighed, that I heard the passage of his breath.

He didn't open his eyes, and to mortals perhaps there would have been no expression there. But I felt his sorrow. I felt its immensity, and I wished I didn't feel it, and for one moment I understood the gulf that divided us, and the gulf that divided his attempt to overpower me from my rather simple defense of myself.

Desperately he had tried to vanquish what he did not comprehend.

And impulsively and almost effortlessly I had beaten him back.

All my pain with Nicolas came back to me and Gabrielle's words and Nicolas's denunciations. My anger was nothing to his misery, his despair.

And this perhaps was the reason that I reached down and gathered him up. And maybe I did it because he was so exquisitely beautiful and so lost, and we were after all of the same ilk.

Natural enough, wasn't it, that one of his own should take him away from this place where mortals would sooner or later have approached him, driven him stumbling away.

He gave no resistance to me. In a moment he was standing on his own feet. And then he walked drowsily beside me, my arm about his shoulder, bolstering him and steadying him until we were moving away from the Palais Royal, towards the rue St.-Honoré.

I only half glanced at the figures passing us, until I saw a familiar shape under the trees, with no scent of mortality coming from it, and I realized that Gabrielle had been there for some time.

She came forward hesitantly and silently, her face stricken when she saw the blood-drenched lace and the lacerations on his white skin, and she reached out as if to help me with the burden of him though she did not seem to know how.

Somewhere far off in the darkened gardens, the others were near. I *heard* them before I saw them. Nicki was there too.

They had come as Gabrielle had come, drawn over the miles, it seemed, by the tumult, or what vague messages I could not imagine, and they merely waited and watched as we moved away.

2

We took him with us to the livery stables, and there I put him on my mare. But he looked as if he would let himself fall off at any moment, and so I mounted behind him, and the three of us rode out.

All the way through the country, I wondered what I would do. I wondered what it meant to bring him to my lair. Gabrielle didn't give any protest. Now and then she glanced over at him. I heard nothing from him, and he was small and self-contained as he sat in front of me, light as a child but not a child.

Surely he had always known where the tower was, but had its bars kept him out? Now I meant to take him inside it. And why didn't Gabrielle say something to me? It was the meeting we had wanted, it was the thing for which we had waited, but surely she knew what he had just done.

When we finally dismounted, he walked ahead of me, and he waited for me to reach the gate. I had taken out the iron key to the lock and I studied him, wondering what promises one exacts from such a monster before opening one's door. Did the ancient laws of hospitality mean anything to the creatures of the night?

His eyes were large and brown and defeated. Almost drowsy they seemed. He regarded me for a long silent moment and then he reached out with his left hand, and his fingers curled around the iron crossbar in the center of the gate.

I stared helplessly as with a loud grinding noise the gate started to rip loose from the stone. But he stopped and contented himself with merely bending the iron bar a little. The point had been made. He could have entered this tower anytime that he wished.

I examined the iron bar that he'd twisted. I had beaten him. Could I do what he had just done? I didn't know. And unable to calculate my own powers, how could I ever calculate his?

"Come," Gabrielle said a little impatiently. And she led the way down the stairs to the dungeon crypt.

It was cold here as always, the fresh spring air never touching the

place. She made a big fire in the old hearth while I lighted the candles. And as he sat on the stone bench watching us, I saw the effect of the warmth on him, the way that his body seemed to grow slightly larger, the way that he breathed it in.

As he looked about, it was as if he were absorbing the light. His gaze was clear.

Impossible to overestimate the effect of warmth and light on vampires. Yet the old coven had forsworn both.

I settled on another bench, and I let my eyes roam about the broad low chamber as his eyes roamed.

Gabrielle had been standing all this while. And now she approached him. She had taken out a handkerchief and she touched this to his face.

He stared at her in the same way that he stared at the fire and the candles, and the shadows leaping on the curved ceiling. This seemed to interest him as simply as anything else.

And I felt a shudder when I realized the bruises on his face were now almost gone! The bones were whole again, the shape of the face having been fully restored, and he was only a little gaunt from the blood he had lost.

My heart expanded slightly, against my will, as it had on the battlements when I had heard his voice.

I thought of the pain only half an hour ago in the Palais when the lie had broken with the stab of his fangs into my neck. I hated him.

But I couldn't stop looking at him. Gabrielle combed his hair for him. She took his hands and wiped the blood from them. And he seemed helpless as all this was done. And she had not so much the expression of a ministering angel as an expression of curiosity, a desire to be near him and to touch him and examine him. In the quavering illumination they looked at one another.

He hunched forward a little, eyes darkening and full of expression now as they turned again to the grate. Had it not been for the blood on his lace ruff, he might have looked human. Might …

"What will you do now?" I asked. I spoke to make it clear to Gabrielle. "Will you remain in Paris and let Eleni and the others go on?"

No answer from him. He was studying me, studying the stone benches, the sarcophagi. Three sarcophagi.

"Surely you know what they're doing," I said. "Will you leave Paris or

remain?"

It seemed he wanted to tell me again the magnitude of what I had done to him and the others, but this faded away. For one moment his face was wretched. It was defeated and warm and full of human misery. How old was he, I wondered. How long ago had he been a human who looked like that?

He heard me. But he didn't give an answer. He looked to Gabrielle, who stood near the fire, and then to me. And silently, he said, *Love me. You have destroyed everything! But if you love me, it can all he restored in a new form. Love me.*

This silent entreaty had an eloquence, however, that I can't put into words.

"What can I do to make you love me?" he whispered. "What can I give? The knowledge of all I have witnessed, the secrets of our powers, the mystery of what I am?"

It seemed blasphemous to answer. And as I had on the battlements, I found myself on the edge of tears. For all the purity of his silent communications, his voice gave a lovely resonance to his sentiments when he actually spoke.

It occurred to me as it had in Notre Dame that he spoke the way angels must speak, if they exist.

But I was awakened from this irrelevant thought, this obviating thought, by the fact that he was now beside me. He was closing his arm round me, and pressing his forehead against my face. He gave that summons again, not the rich, thudding seduction of that moment in the Palais Royal, but the voice that had sung to me over the miles, and he told me there were things the two of us would know and understand as mortals never could. He told me that if I opened to him and gave him my strength and my secrets that he would give me his. He had been driven to try to destroy me, and he loved me all the more that he could not.

That was a tantalizing thought. Yet I felt danger. The word that came unbidden to me was Beware.

I don't know what Gabrielle saw or heard. I don't know what she felt.

Instinctively I avoided his eyes. There seemed nothing in the world I wanted more at this moment than to look right at him and understand him, and yet I *knew* I must not. I saw the bones under les Innocents

again, the flickering hellfires I had imagined in the Palais Royal. And all the lace and velvet in the eighteenth century could not give him a human face.

I couldn't keep this from him, and it pained me that it was impossible for me to explain it to Gabrielle. And the awful silence between me and Gabrielle was at that moment almost too much to bear.

With him, I could speak, yes, with him I could dream dreams. Some reverence and terror in me made me reach out and embrace him, and I held him, battling my confusion and my desire.

"Leave Paris, yes," he whispered. "But take me with you. I don't know how to exist here now. I stumble through a carnival of horrors. Please …"

I heard myself say: "No."

"Have I no value to you?" he asked. He turned to Gabrielle. Her face was anguished and still as she looked at him. I couldn't know what went on in her heart, and to my sadness, I realized that he was speaking to her and locking me out. What was her answer?

But he was imploring both of us now. "Is there nothing outside yourself you would respect?"

"I might have destroyed you tonight," I said. "It was respect which kept me from that."

"No." He shook his head in a startlingly human fashion. "That you never could have done."

I smiled. It was probably true. But we were destroying him quite completely in another way.

"Yes," he said, "that's true. You are destroying me. Help me," he whispered. "Give me but a few short years of all you have before you, the two of you. I beg you. That is all I ask."

"No," I said again.

He was only a foot from me on the bench. He was looking at me. And there came the horrible spectacle again of his face narrowing and darkening and caving in upon itself in rage. It was as if he had no real substance. Only will kept him robust and beautiful. And when the flow of his will was interrupted, he melted like a wax doll.

But, as before, he recovered himself almost instantly. The "hallucination" was past.

He stood up and backed away from me until he was in front of the

fire.

The will coming from him was palpable. His eyes were like something that didn't belong to him, nor to anything on earth. And the fire blazing behind him made an eerie nimbus around his head.

"I curse you!" he whispered.

I felt a jet of fear.

"I curse you," he said again and came closer. "Love mortals then, and live as you have lived, recklessly, with appetite for everything and love for everything, but there will come a time when only the love of your own kind can save you." He glanced at Gabrielle. "And I don't mean children such as this!"

This was so strong that I couldn't conceal its effect on me, and I realized I was rising from the bench and slipping away from him towards Gabrielle.

"I don't come empty-handed to you," he pressed, his voice deliberately softening. "I don't come begging with nothing to give of my own. Look at me. Tell me you don't need what you see in me, one who has the strength to take you through the ordeals that lie ahead."

His eyes flashed on Gabrielle and for one moment he remained locked to her and I saw her harden and begin to tremble.

"Let her be!" I said.

"You don't know what I say to her," he said coldly. "I do not try to hurt her. But in your love of mortals, what have you already done?"

He would say something terrible if I didn't stop him, something to wound me or Gabrielle. He knew all that had happened with Nicki. I knew that he did. If, somewhere deep down in my soul, I wished for the end of Nicki, he would know that too! Why had I let him in? Why had I not known what he could do?

"Oh, but it's always a travesty, don't you see?" he said with that same gentleness. "Each time the death and the awakening will ravage the mortal spirit, so that one will hate you for taking his life, another will run to excesses that you scorn. A third will emerge mad and raving, another a monster you cannot control. One will be jealous of your superiority, another shut you out." And here he shot his glance to Gabrielle again and half smiled. "And the veil will always come down between you. Make a legion. You will be, always and forever, alone!"

"I don't want to hear this. It means nothing," I said.

Gabrielle's face had undergone some ugly change. She was staring at him with hatred now, I was sure of it.

He made that bitter little noise that is a laugh but isn't a laugh at all.

"Lovers with a human face," he mocked me. "Don't you see your error? The other one hates you beyond all reason, and she—why, the dark blood has made her even colder, has it not? But even for her, strong as she is, there will come moments when she fears to be immortal, and who will she blame for what was done to her?"

"You are a fool," Gabrielle whispered.

"You tried to protect the violinist from it. But you never sought to protect her."

"Don't say any more," I answered. "You make me hate you. Is that what you want?"

"But I speak the truth and you know it. And what you will never know, either of you, is the full depth of each other's hatreds and resentments. Or suffering. Or love."

He paused and I could say nothing. He was doing exactly what I feared he would, and I didn't know how to defend myself.

"If you leave me now with this one," he continued, "you will do it again. Nicolas you never possessed. And she already wonders how she will ever get free of you. And unlike her, you cannot stand to be alone."

I couldn't answer. Gabrielle's eyes became smaller, her mouth a little more cruel.

"So the time will come when you will seek other mortals," he went on, "hoping once more that the Dark Trick will bring you the love you crave. And of these newly mutilated and unpredictable children you'll try to fashion your citadels against time. Well, they will be prisons if they last for half a century. I warn you. It is only with those as powerful and wise as yourself that the true citadel against time can be built."

The citadel against time. Even in my ignorance the words had their power. And the fear in me expanded, reached out to compass a thousand other causes.

He seemed distant for a moment, indescribably beautiful in the firelight, the dark auburn strands of his hair barely touching his smooth forehead, his lips parted in a beatific smile.

"If we cannot have the old ways, can't we have each other?" he asked, and now his voice was the voice of the summons again. "Who else can

understand your suffering? Who else knows what passed through your mind the night you stood on the stage of your little theater and you frightened all those you had loved?"

"Don't speak about that," I whispered. But I was softening all over, drifting into his eyes and his voice. Very near to me was the ecstasy I'd felt that night on the battlements. With all my will I reached out for Gabrielle.

"Who understands what passed through your mind when my renegade followers, reveling in the music of your precious fiddler, devised their ghastly boulevard enterprise?" he asked.

I didn't speak.

"The Theater of the Vampires!" His lips lengthened in the saddest smile. "Does she comprehend the irony of it, the cruelty? Does she know what it was like when you stood on that stage as a young man and you heard the audience screaming for you? When time was your friend, not your enemy as it is now? When in the wings, you put out your arms and your mortal darlings came to you, your little family, folding themselves against you …"

"Stop, please. I ask you to stop."

"Does anyone else know the size of your soul?"

Witchcraft. Had it ever been used with more skill? And what was he really saying to us beneath this liquid flow of beautiful language: *Come to me, and I shall be the sun round which you are locked in orbit, and my rays shall lay bare the secrets you keep from each other, and I, who possess charms and powers of which you have no inkling, shall control and possess and destroy you!*

"I asked you before," I said. "What do you want? Really want?"

"You!" he said. "You and her! That we become three at this crossroads!"

Not that we surrender to you?

I shook my head. And I saw the same wariness and recoiling in Gabrielle.

He was not angry; there was no malice now. Yet he said again, in the same beguiling voice:

"I curse you," and I felt it as if he'd declaimed it.

"I offered myself to you at the moment you vanquished me," he said. "Remember that when your dark children strike out at you, when they

rise up against you. Remember me."

I was shaken, more shaken even than I had been in the sad and awful finish with Nicolas at Renaud's. I had never once known fear in the crypt under les Innocents. But I had known it in this room since we came in.

And some anger boiled in him again, something too dreadful for him to control.

I watched him bow his head and turn away. He became small, light, and held his arms close to himself as he stood before the blaze and he thought of threats now to hurt me, and I heard them though they died before they ever reached his lips.

But something disturbed my vision for a fraction of a second. Maybe it was a candle guttering. Maybe it was the blink of my eye. Whatever it was, he vanished. Or he tried to vanish, and I saw him leaping away from the fire in a great dark streak.

"No!" I cried out. And lunging at something I couldn't even see, I held him, material again, in my hands.

He had only moved very fast, and I had moved faster, and we stood facing each other in the doorway of the crypt, and again I said that single negation and I wouldn't let him go.

"Not like this, we can't part. We can't leave each other in hatred, we can't." And my will dissolved suddenly as I embraced him and held tight to him so that he couldn't free himself nor even move.

I didn't care what he was, or what he had done in that doomed moment of lying to me, or even trying to overpower me, I didn't care that I was no longer mortal and would never be again.

I wanted only that he should remain. I wanted to be with him, what he was, and all the things he had said were true. Yet it could never be as he wished it to be. He could not have this power over us. He could not divide Gabrielle from me.

Yet I wondered, did he himself really understand what he was asking? Was it possible that he believed the more innocent words he spoke?

Without speaking, without asking his consent, I led him back to the bench by the fire. I felt danger again, terrible danger. But it didn't really matter. He had to remain here with us now.

Gabrielle was murmuring to herself. She was walking back and forth and

her cloak hung from one shoulder and she seemed almost to have forgotten we were there.

Armand watched her, and when she turned to him, quite suddenly and unexpectedly, she spoke aloud.

"You come to him and you say, 'Take me with you.' You say, 'Love me,' and you hint of superior knowledge, secrets, yet you give us nothing, either of us, except lies."

"I showed my power to understand," he answered in a soft murmur.

"No, you did tricks with your understanding," she replied. "You made pictures. And rather childish pictures. You have done this all along. You lure Lestat in the Palais with the most gorgeous illusions only to attack him. And here, when there is a respite in the struggle, what do you do but try to sow dissension between us …"

"Yes, illusions before, I admit it," he answered. "But the things I've spoken here are true. Already you despise your son for his love of mortals, his need to be ever near them, his yielding to the violinist. *You* knew the Dark Gift would madden that one, and that it will finally destroy him. You do wish for your freedom, from all the Children of Darkness. You can't hide that from me."

"Ah, but you're so simple," she said. "You see, but you don't see. How many mortal years did you live? Do you remember anything of them? What you've perceived is not the sum total of the passion I feel for my son. I have loved him as I have never loved any other being in creation. In my loneliness, my son is everything to me. How is it you can't interpret what you see?"

"It's you who fail to interpret," he answered in the same soft manner. "If you had ever felt real longing for any other one, you would know that what you feel for your son is nothing at all."

"This is futile," I said, "to talk like this."

"No," she said to him without the slightest wavering. "My son and I are kin to each other in more ways than one. In fifty years of life, I've never known anyone as strong as myself, except my son. And what divides us we can always mend. But how are we to make you one of us when you use these things like wood for fire! But understand my larger point: what is it of yourself that you can give that we should want you?"

"My guidance is what you need," he answered. "You've only begun your adventure and you have no beliefs to hold you. You cannot live

without some guidance …"

"Millions live without belief or guidance. It is you who cannot live without it," she said.

Pain coming from him. Suffering.

But she went on, her voice so steady and without expression it was almost a monologue:

"I have my questions," she asked. "There are things I must know. I cannot live without some embracing philosophy, but it has nothing to do with old beliefs in gods or devils." She started pacing again, glancing to him as she spoke.

"I want to know, for example, why beauty exists," she said, "why nature continues to contrive it, and what is the link between the life of a tree and its beauty, and what connects the mere existence of the sea or a lightning storm with the feelings these things inspire in us? If God does not exist, if these things are not unified into one metaphorical system, then why do they retain for us such symbolic power? Lestat calls it the Savage Garden, but for me that is not enough. And I must confess that this, this maniacal curiosity or call it what you will, leads me away from my human victims. It leads me into the open countryside, away from human creation.

And maybe it will lead me away from my son, who is under the spell of all things human."

She came up to him, nothing in her manner suggesting a woman now, and she narrowed her eyes as she looked into his face.

"But that is the lantern by which I see the Devil's Road," she said. "By what lantern have you traveled it? What have you really learned besides devil worship and superstition? What do you know about us, and how we came into existence? Give that to us, and it might be worth something. And then again, it might be worth nothing."

He was speechless. He had no art to hide his amazement.

He stared at her in innocent confusion. Then he rose and he slipped away, obviously trying to escape her, a battered spirit as he stared blankly before him.

The silence closed in. And I felt for the moment strangely protective for him. She had spoken the unadorned truth about the things that interested her as had been her custom ever since I could remember, and as always, there was something violently disregarding about it. She

spoke of what mattered to her with no thought of what had befallen him.

Come to a different plane, she had said, my plane. And he was stymied and belittled. The degree of his helplessness was becoming alarming. He was not recovering from her attack.

He turned and he moved towards the benches again, as if he would sit, then towards the sarcophagi, then towards the wall. It seemed these solid surfaces repelled him as though his will confronted them first in an invisible field and he was buffeted about.

He drifted out of the room and into the narrow stone stairwell and then he turned and came back.

His thoughts were locked inside himself or, worse, there were no thoughts!

There were only the tumbling images of what he saw before him, simple material things glaring back at him, the iron-studded door, the candles, the fire. Some full-blown evocation of the Paris streets, the vendors and the hawkers of papers, the cabriolets, the blended sound of an orchestra, a horrid din of words and phrases from the books he had so recently read.

I couldn't bear this, but Gabrielle gestured sternly that I should stay where I was.

Something was building in the crypt. Something was happening in the very air itself.

Something changed even as the candles melted, and the fire crackled and licked at the blackened stones behind it, and the rats moved in the chambers of the dead below.

Armand stood in the arched doorway, and it seemed hours had passed though they hadn't and Gabrielle was a long distance away in the corner of the room, her face cool in its concentration, her eyes as radiant as they were small.

Armand was going to speak to us, but it was no explanation he was going to give. There was no direction even to the things he would say, arid it was as if we'd cut him open and the images were coming out like blood.

Armand was just a young boy in the doorway, holding the backs of his own arms. And I knew what I felt. It was a monstrous intimacy with another being, an intimacy that made even the rapt moments of the kill

seem dim and under control. He was opened and could no longer contain the dazzling stream of pictures that made his old silent voice seem thin and lyrical and made up.

Had this been the danger all along, the trigger of my fear? Even as I recognized it, I was yielding, and it seemed the great lessons of my life had all been learned through the renunciation of fear. Fear was once again breaking the shell around me so that something else could spring to life.

Never, never in all my existence, not mortal or immortal, had I been threatened with an intimacy quite like this.

The Story of Armand

3

The chamber had faded. The walls were gone.

Horsemen came. A gathering cloud on the horizon. Then screams of terror. And an auburn-haired child in crude peasant's clothes running on and on, as the horsemen broke loose in a horde and the child fighting and kicking as he was caught and thrown over the saddle of a rider who bore him away beyond the end of the world. Armand was this child.

And these were the southern steppes of Russia, but Armand didn't know that it was Russia. He knew Mother and Father and Church and God and Satan, but he didn't even understand the name of home, or the name of his language, or that the horsemen who carried him away were Tatars and that he would never see anything that he knew or loved again.

Darkness, the tumultuous movement of the ship and its never ending sickness, and emerging out of the fear and the numbing despair, the vast glittering wilderness of impossible buildings that was Constantinople in the last days of the Byzantine Empire, with her fantastical multitudes and her slave-auction blocks. The menacing babble of foreign tongues, threats made in the universal language of gesture, and all around him the enemies he could not distinguish or placate or escape.

Years and years would pass, beyond a mortal lifetime, before Armand would look back on that awesome moment and give them names and histories, the Byzantine officials of the court who would have castrated him and the harem keepers of Islam who would have done the same, and the proud Mameluke warriors of Egypt who would have taken him to Cairo with them had he been fairer and stronger, and the radiant soft-spoken Venetians in their leggings and velvet doublets, the most dazzling creatures of all, Christians even as he was a Christian, yet laughing gently to one another as they examined him, as he stood mute, unable to answer, to plead, even to hope.

I saw the seas before him, the great rolling blue of the Aegean and the

Adriatic, and his sickness again in the hold and his solemn vow not to live.

And then the great Moorish palaces of Venice rising from the gleaming surface of the lagoon, and the house to which he was taken, with its dozens and dozens of secret chambers, the light of the sky glimpsed only through barred windows, and the other boys speaking to him in that soft strange tongue that was Venetian and the threats and the cajoling as he was convinced, against all his fear and superstitions, of the sins that he must commit with the endless procession of strangers in this landscape of marble and torchlight, each chamber opening to a new tableau of tenderness that surrendered to the same ritual and inexplicable and finally cruel desire.

And at last one night when, for days and days he had refused to submit and he was hungry and sore and would not speak any longer to anyone, he was pushed through one of those doors again, just as he was, soiled and blind from the dark room in which he'd been locked, and the creature standing there to receive him, the tall one in red velvet, with the lean and almost luminous face, touched him so gently with cool fingers that, half dreaming, he didn't cry as he saw the coins exchange hands. But it was a great deal of money. Too much money. He was being sold off. And the face, it was too smooth, it might have been a mask.

At the final moment, he screamed. He swore he would obey, he wouldn't fight anymore. Will someone tell him where he's being taken, he won't disobey anymore, please, please. But even as he was pulled down the stairs towards the dank smell of the water, he felt the firm, delicate fingers of his new Master again, and on his neck cool and tender lips that could never, never hurt him, and that first deadly and irresistible kiss.

Love and love and love in the vampire kiss. It bathed Armand, cleansed him, *this is everything*, as he was carried into the gondola and the gondola moved like a great sinister beetle through the narrow stream into the sewers beneath another house.

Drunk on pleasure. Drunk on the silky white hands that smoothed back his hair and the voice that called him beautiful; on the face that in moments of feeling was suffused with expression only to become as serene and dazzling as something made of jewels and alabaster in repose. Like a pool of moonlit water it was. Touch it even with the

fingertip and all its life rises to the surface only to vanish in quiet once again.

Drunk in the morning light on the memory of those kisses as, alone, he opened one door after another upon books and maps and statues in granite and marble, the other apprentices finding him and leading him patiently to his work—letting him watch as they ground the brilliant pigments, teaching him to blend the pure color with the yellow egg yolk, and how to spread the lacquer of the egg yolk over the panels, and taking him up on the scaffolding as they worked with careful strokes on the very edges of the vast depiction of sun and clouds, showing him those great faces and hands and angels' wings which only the Master's brush would touch.

Drunk as he sat at the long table with them, gorging himself on the delicious foods that he had never tasted before, and the wine which never ran out.

And falling asleep finally to wake at that moment of twilight when the Master stood beside the enormous bed, gorgeous as something imagined in his red velvet, with his thick white hair glistening in the lamplight, and the simplest happiness in his brilliant cobalt blue eyes. The deadly kiss.

"Ah, yes, never to be separated from you, yes,… not afraid."

"Soon, my darling one, we will be truly united soon."

Torches blazing throughout the house. The Master atop the scaffolding with the brush in his hand: "Stand there, in the light, don't move," and hours and hours frozen in the same position, and then before dawn, seeing his own likeness there in the paint, the face of the angel, the Master smiling as he moved down the endless corridor …

"No, Master, don't leave me, let me stay with you, don't go …"

Day again, and money in his pockets, real gold, and the grandeur of Venice with her dark green waterways walled in palaces, and the other apprentices walking arm in arm with him, and the fresh air and the blue sky over the Piazza San Marco like something he had only dreamed in childhood, and the palazzo again at twilight, and the Master coming, the Master bent over the smaller panel with the brush, working faster and faster as the apprentices gazed on half horrified, half fascinated, the Master looking up and seeing him and putting down the brush, and taking him out of the enormous studio as the others worked until the

hour of midnight, his face in the Master's hands as, alone in the bedchamber again, that secret, never tell anyone, kiss.

Two years? Three years? No words to recreate it or embrace it, the glory that was those times—the fleets that sailed away to war from that port, the hymns that rose before those Byzantine altars, the passion plays and the miracle plays performed on their platforms in the churches and in the piazza with their hell's mouth and cavorting devils, and the glittering mosaics spreading out over the walls of San Marco and San Zanipolo and the Palazzo Ducale, and the painters who walked those streets, Giambono, Uccello, the Vivarini and the Bellini; and the endless feast days and processions, and always in the small hours in the vast torchlighted rooms of the palazzo, alone with the Master when the others slept safely locked away. The Master's brush racing over the panel before it as if uncovering the painting rather than creating it—sun and sky and sea spreading out beneath the canopy of the angel's wings.

And those awful inevitable moments when the Master would rise screaming, hurling the pots of paint in all directions, clutching at his eyes as if he would pull them out of his head.

"Why can I not see? Why can I not see better than mortals see?"

Holding tight to the Master. Waiting for the rapture of the kiss. Dark secret, unspoken secret. The Master slipping out of the door sometime before dawn.

"Let me go with you, Master."

"Soon, my darling, my love, my little one, when you're strong enough and tall enough, and there is no flaw in you anymore. Go now, and have all the pleasures that await you, have the love of a woman, and have the love of a man as well in the nights that follow. Forget the bitterness you knew in the brothel and taste of these things while there is still time."

And rarely did the night close that there wasn't that figure come back again, just before the rising sun, and this time ruddy and warm as it bent over him to give him the embrace that would sustain him through the daylight hours until the deadly kiss at twilight again.

He learned to read and to write. He took the paintings to their final destinations in the churches and the chapels of the great palaces, and collected the payments and bargained for the pigments and the oils. He scolded the servants when the beds weren't made and the meals weren't ready. And beloved by the apprentices, he sent them to their new service

when they were finished, with tears. He read poetry to the Master as the Master painted, and he learned to play the lute and to sing songs.

And during those sad times when the Master left Venice for many nights, it was he who governed in the Master's absence, concealing his anguish from the others, knowing it would end only when the Master returned.

And one night finally, in the small hours when even Venice slept:

"This is the moment, beautiful one. For you to come to me and become like me. Is it what you wish?"

"Yes."

"Forever to thrive in secret upon the blood of the evildoer as I thrive, and to abide with these secrets until the end of the world."

"I take the vow, I surrender, I will … to be with you, my Master, always, you are the creator of all things that I am. There has never been any greater desire."

The Master's brush pointing to the painting that reached to the ceiling above the tiers of scaffolding.

"This is the only sun that you will ever see again. But a millennium of nights will be yours to see light as no mortal has ever seen it, to snatch from the distant stars as if you were Prometheus an endless illumination by which to understand all things."

How many months were there after? Reeling in the power of the Dark Gift.

This nighttime life of drifting through the alleyways and the canals together—at one with the danger of the dark and no longer afraid of it—and the age-old rapture of the killing, and never, never the innocent souls. No, always the evildoer, the mind pierced until Typhon, the slayer of his brother, was revealed, and then the drinking up of the evil from the mortal victim and the transmuting of it into ecstasy, the Master leading the way, the feast shared.

And the painting afterwards, the solitary hours with the miracle of the new skill, the brush sometimes moving as if by itself across the enamelled surface, and the two of them painting furiously on the triptych, and the mortal apprentices asleep among the paint pots and the wine bottles, and only one mystery disturbing the serenity, the mystery that the Master, as in the past, must now and then leave Venice for a journey that seemed endless to those left behind.

All the more terrible now the parting. To hunt alone without the Master, to lie alone in the deep cellar after the hunt, waiting. Not to hear the ring of the Master's laughter or the beat of the Master's heart.

"But where do you go? Why can't I go with you?" Armand pleaded. Didn't they share the secret? Why was this mystery not explained?

"No, my lovely one, you are not ready for this burden. For now, it must be, as it has been for over a thousand years, mine alone. Someday you will help me with what I have to do, but only when you are ready for the knowledge, when you have shown that you truly wish to know, and when you are powerful enough that no one can ever take the knowledge from you against your will. Until then understand I have no choice but to leave you. I go to tend to Those Who Must Be Kept as I have always done."

Those Who Must Be Kept.

Armand brooded upon it; it frightened him. But worst of all it took the Master from him, and only did he learn not to fear it when the Master returned to him again and again.

"Those Who Must Be Kept are in peace, or in silence," he would say as he took the red velvet cloak from his shoulders. "More than that we may never know."

And to the feast again, the stalking of the evildoer through the alleys of Venice, he and the Master would go.

How long might it have continued—through one mortal lifetime? Through a hundred?

Not a half year in this dark bliss before the evening at twilight when the Master stood over his coffin in the deep cellar just above the water, and said:

"Rise, Armand, we must leave here. They have come!"

"But who are they, Master? Is it Those Who Must Be Kept?"

"No, my darling. It is the others. Come, we must hurry!"

"But how can they hurt us? Why must we go?"

The white faces at the windows, the pounding at the doors. Glass shattering. The Master turning this way and that as he looked at the paintings. The smell of smoke. The smell of burning pitch. They were coming up from the cellar. They were coming down from above.

"Run, there is no time to save anything." Up the stairs to the roof.

Black hooded figures heaving their torches through the doorways, the

fire roaring in the rooms below, exploding the windows, boiling up the stairway. All the paintings were burning.

"To the roof, Armand. Come!"

Creatures like ourselves in these dark garments! Others like ourselves. The Master scattered them in all directions as he raced up the stairway, bones cracking as they struck the ceiling and the walls.

"Blasphemer, heretic!" the alien voices roared. The arms caught Armand and held him, and above at the very top of the stairway the Master turned back for him:

"Armand! Trust your strength. Come!"

But they were swarming behind the Master. They were surrounding him. For each one hurled into the plaster, three more appeared, until fifty torches were plunged into the Master's velvet garments, his long red sleeves, his white hair. The fire roared up to the ceiling as it consumed him, making of him a living torch, even as with flaming arms he defended himself, igniting his attackers as they threw the blazing torches like firewood at his feet.

But Armand was being borne down and away, out of the burning house, with the screaming mortal apprentices. And over the water and away from Venice, amid cries and wailing, in the belly of a vessel as terrifying as the slave ship, to an open clearing under the night sky.

"Blasphemer, blasphemer!" The bonfire growing, and the chain of hooded figures around it, and the chant rising and rising, "Into the fire."

"No, don't do it to me, no!"

And as he watched, petrified, he saw brought towards the pyre the mortal apprentices, his brothers, his only brothers, roaring in panic as they were hurled upwards and over into the flames.

"No … stop this, they're innocent! For the love of God, stop, innocent!…" He was screaming, but now his time had come. They were lifting him as he struggled, and he was flung up and up to fall down into the blast.

"Master, help me!" Then all words giving way to one wailing cry.

Thrashing, screaming, mad.

But he had been taken out of it. Snatched back into life. And he lay on the ground looking at the sky. The flames licked the stars, it seemed, but he was far away from them, and couldn't even feel the heat anymore. He could smell his burnt clothing and his burnt hair. The pain in his face

and hands was the worst and the blood was leaking out of him and he could scarcely move his lips …

"… All thy Master's vain works destroyed, all the vain creations which he made among mortals with his Dark Powers, images of angels and saints and living mortals! Wilt thou, too, be destroyed? Or serve Satan? Make thy choice. Thou hast tasted the fire, and the fire waits for thee, hungry for thee. Hell waits for thee. Wilt thou make thy choice?"

"… yes …"

"… to serve Satan as he is meant to be served."

"Yes …"

"… That all things of the world are vanity, and thou shalt never use thy Dark Powers for any mortal vanity, not to paint, not to create music, not to dance, nor to recite for the amusement of mortals but only and forever in the service of Satan, thy Dark Powers to seduce and to terrify and to destroy, only to destroy …"

"Yes …"

"… consecrated to thy one and only master, Satan, Satan forever, always and forever … to serve thy true master in darkness and pain and in suffering, to surrender thy mind and thy heart …"

"Yes."

"And to keep from thy brethren in Satan no secret, to yield all knowledge of the blasphemer and his burden …" Silence.

"To yield all knowledge of the burden, child! Come now, the flames wait."

"I do not understand you …"

"Those Who Must Be Kept. Tell."

"Tell what? I do not know anything, except that I do not wish to suffer. I am so afraid."

"The truth, Child of Darkness. Where are they? Where are Those Who Must Be Kept?"

"I do not know. Look into my mind if you have that same power. There is nothing I can tell."

"But *what*, child, *what* are they? Did he never tell you? *What* are Those Who Must Be Kept?"

And so they did not understand it either. It was no more than a phrase to them as it was to him. *When you are powerful enough that no one can ever take the knowledge from you against your will.* The Master had been

wise.

"What is its meaning! Where are they? We must have the answer."

"I swear to you, I do not have it. I swear on my fear which is all I possess now, I do not know!"

White faces appearing above him, one at a time. The tasteless lips giving hard, sweet kisses, hands stroking him, and from their wrists the glittering droplets of blood. They wanted the truth to come out in the blood. But what did it matter? The blood was the blood.

"Thou art the devil's child now."

"Yes."

"Don't weep for thy master, Marius. Marius is in hell where he belongs. Now drink the healing blood and rise and dance with thine own kind for the glory of Satan! And immortality will be truly thine!'

"Yes"—the blood burning his tongue as he lifted his head, the blood filling him with torturous slowness. "Oh, please."

All around him Latin phrases, and the low beat of drums. They were satisfied. They knew he had spoken the truth. They would not kill him and the ecstasy dimmed all considerations. The pain in his hands and his face had melted into this ecstasy—

"Rise, young one, and join the Children of Darkness."

"Yes, I do." White hands reaching for his hands. Horns and lutes shrilling over the thud of the drums, the harps plucked into an hypnotic strumming as the circle commenced to move. Hooded figures in mendicant black, robes flowing as they lifted their knees high and bent their backs.

And breaking hands, they whirled, leapt, and came down again, spinning round and round, and a humming song rose louder and louder from their closed lips.

The circle swept on faster. The humming was a great melancholy vibration without shape or continuity and yet it seemed to be a form of speaking, to be the very echo of thought. Louder and louder it came like a moan that could not break into a cry.

He was making the same sound with it, and then turning, and dizzy with turning, he leapt high into the air. Hands caught him, lips kissed him, he was whirling about and pulled along by the others, someone crying out in Latin, another answering, another crying louder, and another answer coming again.

He was flying, no longer bound to the earth and the awful pain of his Master's death, and the death of the paintings, and death of the mortals he loved. The wind sailed past him, and the heat blasted his face and eyes. But the singing was so beautiful that it didn't matter that he didn't know the words, or that he couldn't pray to Satan, didn't know how to believe or make such a prayer. No one knew that he didn't know and they were all in a chorus together and they cried and lamented and turned and leapt again and then, swaying back and forth, threw their heads back as the fire blinded them and licked them and someone shouted "Yes, YES!"

And the music surged. A barbarous rhythm broke loose all around him from drums and tambourines, voices in lurid rushing melody at last. The vampires threw up their arms, howled, figures flickering past him in riotous contortions, backs arched, heels stomping. The jubilation of imps in hell. It horrified him and it called to him, and when the hands clutched at him and swung him around, he stomped and twisted and danced like the others, letting the pain course through him, bending his limbs and giving the alarm to his cries.

And before dawn, he was delirious, and he had a dozen brothers around him, caressing him and soothing him, and leading him down a staircase that had opened in the bowels of the earth.

It seemed that some time in the months that followed Armand dreamed his Master had not been burnt to death.

He dreamed his Master had fallen from the roof, a blazing comet, into the saving waters of the canal below. And deep in the mountains of northern Italy, his Master survived. His Master called to him to come. His Master was in the sanctuary of Those Who Must Be Kept.

Sometimes in the dream his Master was as powerful and radiant as he had ever been; beauty seemed his raiment. And at others he was burnt black and shriveled, a breathing cinder, his eyes huge and yellow, and only his white hair as lustrous and full as it had been. He crept along the ground in his weakness, pleading for Armand to help him. And behind him, warm light spilled from the sanctuary of Those Who Must Be Kept; there came the smell of incense, and there seemed some promise of ancient magic there, some promise of cold and exotic beauty beyond all

evil and all good.

But these were vain imaginings. His Master had told him that fire and the light of the sun could destroy them, and he himself had seen his Master in flames. It was like wishing for his mortal life to come again to have these dreams.

And when his eyes were open on the moon and the stars, and the still mirror of the sea before him, he knew no hope, and no grief, and no joy. All those things had come from the Master, and the Master was no more.

"I am the devil's child." That was poetry. All will was extinguished in him, and there was nothing but the dark confraternity, and the kill was now of the innocent as well as the guilty. The kill was above all cruel.

In Rome in the great coven in the catacombs, he bowed before Santino, the leader, who came down the stone steps to receive him with outstretched arms. This great one had been Born to Darkness in the time of the Black Death, and he told Armand of the vision that had come to him in the year 1349 when the plague raged, that we were to be as the Black Death itself, a vexation without explanation, to cause man to doubt the mercy and intervention of God.

Into the sanctum lined with human skulls Santino took Armand, telling him of the history of the vampires.

From all times we have existed, as wolves have, a scourge of mortals. And in the coven of Rome, dark shadow of the Roman Church, lay our final perfection.

Armand already knew the rituals and common prohibitions; now he must learn the great laws:

One—that each coven must have its leader and only he might order the working of the Dark Trick upon a mortal, seeing that the methods and the rituals were properly observed.

Two—that the Dark Gifts must never be given to the crippled, the maimed, or to children, or to those who cannot, even with the Dark Powers, survive on their own. Be it further understood that all mortals who would receive the Dark Gifts should be beautiful in person so that the insult to God might be greater when the Dark Trick is done.

Three—that never should an old vampire work this magic lest the blood of the fledgling be too strong. For all our gifts increase naturally with age, and the old ones have too much strength to pass on. Injury, burning—these catastrophes, if they do not destroy the Child of Satan

will only increase his powers when he is healed. Yet Satan guards the flock from the power of old ones, for almost all, without exception, go mad.

In this particular, let Armand observe that there was no vampire then living who was more than three hundred years old. No one alive then could remember the first Roman coven. The devil frequently calls his vampires home.

But let Armand understand here also that the effect of the Dark Trick is unpredictable, even when passed on by the very young vampire and with all due care. For reasons no one knows, some mortals when Born to Darkness become as powerful as Titans, others may be no more than corpses that move. That is why mortals must be chosen with skill. Those with great passion and indomitable will should be avoided as well as those who have none.

Four—that no vampire may ever destroy another vampire, except that the coven master has the power of life and death over all of his flock. And it is, further, his obligation to lead the old ones and the mad ones into the fire when they can longer serve Satan as they should. It is his obligation to destroy all vampires who are not properly made. It is his obligation to destroy those who are so badly wounded that they cannot survive on their own. And it is his obligation finally to seek the destruction of all outcasts and all who have broken these laws.

Five—that no vampire shall ever reveal his true nature to a mortal and allow that mortal to live. No vampire must ever reveal the history of the vampires to a mortal and let the mortal live. No vampire must commit to writing the history of the vampires or any true knowledge of vampires lest such a history be found by mortals and believed. And a vampire's name must never be known to mortals, save from his tombstone, and never must any vampire reveal to mortals the location of his or any other vampire's lair.

These then were the great commandments, which all vampires must obey. And this was the condition of existence among all the Undead.

Yet Armand should know that there had always been stories of ancient ones, heretic vampires of frightening power who submitted to no authority, not even that of the devil—vampires who had survived for thousands of years. Children of the Millennia, they were sometimes called. In the north of Europe there were tales of Mael, who dwelt in the

forests of England and Scotland; and in Asia Minor the legend of Pandora. And in Egypt, the ancient tale of the vampire Ramses, seen again in this very time.

In all parts of the world one found such tales. And one could easily dismiss them as fanciful save for one thing. The ancient heretic Marius had been found in Venice, and there punished by the Children of Darkness. The legend of Marius had been true. But Marius was no more.

Armand said nothing to this last judgment. He did not tell Santino of the dreams he had had. In truth the dreams had dimmed inside Armand as had the colors of Marius's paintings. They were no longer held in Armand's mind or heart to be discovered by others who might try to see.

When Santino spoke of Those Who Must Be Kept, Armand again confessed that he did not know the meaning of it. Neither did Santino, nor any vampire that Santino had ever known.

Dead was the secret. Dead was Marius. And so consign to silence the old and useless mystery. Satan is our Lord and Master. In Satan, all is understood and all is known.

Armand pleased Santino. He memorized the laws, perfected his performance of the ceremonial incantations, the rituals, and the prayers. He saw the greatest Sabbats he was ever to witness. And he learned from the most powerful and skillful and beautiful vampires he was ever to know. He learned so well that he became a missionary sent out to gather the vagrant Children of Darkness into covens, and guide others in the performance of the Sabbat, and the working of the Dark Trick when the world and the flesh and the devil called for it to be done.

In Spain and in Germany and in France, he had taught the Dark Blessings and Dark Rituals, and he had known savage and tenacious Children of Darkness, and dim flames had flared in him in their company and in those moments when the coven surrounded him, comforted by him, deriving its unity from his strength.

He had perfected the act of killing beyond the abilities of all the Children of Darkness that he knew. He had learned to summon those who truly wished to die. He had but to stand near the dwellings of mortals and call silently to see his victim appear.

Old, young, wretched, diseased, the ugly or the beautiful, it did not matter because he did not choose. Dazzling visions he gave, if they should want to receive, but he did not move towards them nor even

close his arms around them. Drawn inexorably towards him, it was they who embraced him. And when their warm living flesh touched him, when he opened his lips and felt the blood spill, he knew the only surcease from misery that he could know.

It seemed to him in the best of these moments that his way was profoundly spiritual, uncontaminated by the appetites and confusions that made up the world, despite the carnal rapture of the kill.

In that act the spiritual and the carnal came together, and it was the spiritual, he was convinced, that survived. Holy Communion it seemed to him, the Blood of the Children of Christ serving only to bring the essence of life itself into his understanding for the split second in which death occurred. Only the great saints of God were his equals in this spirituality, this confrontation with mystery, this existence of meditation and denial.

Yet he had seen the greatest of his companions vanish, bring destruction upon themselves, go mad. He had witnessed the inevitable dissolution of covens, seen immortality defeat the most perfectly made Children of Darkness, and it seemed at times some awesome punishment that it never defeated him.

Was he destined to be one of the ancient ones? The Children of the Millennia? Could one believe those stories which persisted still?

Now and then a roaming vampire would speak of the fabled Pandora glimpsed in the far-off Russian city of Moscow, or of Mael living on the bleak English coast. The wanderers told even of Marius—that he had been seen again in Egypt, or in Greece. But these storytellers had not themselves laid eyes upon the legendary ones. They knew nothing really. These were often-repeated tales.

They did not distract or amuse the obedient servant of Satan. In quiet allegiance to the Dark Ways, Armand continued to serve.

Yet in the centuries of his long obedience, Armand kept two secrets to himself. These were his property, these secrets, more purely his than the coffin in which he locked himself by day, or the few amulets he wore.

The first was that no matter how great his loneliness, or how long the search for brothers and sisters in whom he might find some comfort, he never worked the Dark Trick himself. He wouldn't give that to Satan, no Child of Darkness made by him.

And the other secret, which he kept from his followers for their sake,

was simply the extent of his ever deepening despair.

That he craved nothing, cherished nothing, believed nothing finally, and took not one particle of pleasure in his ever increasing and awesome powers, and existed from moment to moment in a void broken once every night of his eternal life by the kill—that secret he had kept from them as long as they had needed him and it had been possible to lead them because his fear would have made them afraid.

But it was finished.

A great cycle had ended, and even years ago he had felt it closing without understanding it was a cycle at all.

From Rome there came the garbled travelers' accounts, old when they were told to him, that the leader, Santino, had abandoned his flock. Some said he had gone mad into the countryside, others that he had leapt into the fire, others that "the world" had swallowed him, that he had been borne off in a black coach with mortals never to be seen again.

"We go into the fire or we go into legend," said a teller of the tale.

Then came accounts of chaos in Rome, of dozens of leaders who put on the black hood and the black robes to preside over the coven. And then it seemed there were none.

Since the year 1700 there had been no word anymore from Italy. For half a century Armand had not been able to trust to his passion or that of the others around him to create the frenzy of the true Sabbat. And he had dreamed of his old Master, Marius, in those rich robes of red velvet, and seen the palazzo full of vibrant paintings, and he had been afraid.

Then another had come.

His children rushed down into the cellars beneath les Innocents to describe to him this new vampire, who wore a fur-lined cloak of red velvet and could profane the churches and strike down those who wore crosses and walk in the places of light. Red velvet. It was mere coincidence, and yet it maddened him and seemed an insult to him, a gratuitous pain that his soul couldn't bear.

And then the woman had been made, the woman with the hair of a lion and the name of an angel, beautiful and powerful as her son.

And he had come up the stairway out of the catacomb, leading the band against us, as the hooded ones had come to destroy him and his Master in Venice centuries before.

And it had failed.

He stood dressed in these strange lace and brocade garments. He carried coins in his pockets. His mind swam with images from the thousands of books he had read. And he felt himself pierced with all he had witnessed in the places of light in the great city called Paris, and it was as if he could hear his old Master whispering in his ear:

But a millennium of nights will be yours to see light as no mortal has ever seen it, to snatch from the distant stars as if you were Prometheus an endless illumination by which to understand all things.

"All things have eluded my understanding," he said. "I am as one whom the earth has given back, and you, Lestat and Gabrielle, are like the images painted by my old Master in cerulean and carmine and gold."

He stood still in the doorway, his hands on the backs of his arms, and he was looking at us, asking silently:

What is there to know? What is there to give? We are the abandoned of God. And there is no Devil's Road spinning out before me and there are no bells of hell ringing in my ears.

4

An hour passed. Perhaps more. Armand sat by the fire. No marks any longer on his face from the long-forgotten battle. He seemed, in his stillness, to be as fragile as an emptied shell.

Gabrielle sat across from him, and she too stared at the flames in silence, her face weary and seemingly compassionate. It was painful for me not to know her thoughts.

I was thinking of Marius. And Marius and Marius … the vampire who had painted pictures in and of the real world. Triptychs, portraits, frescoes on the walls of his palazzo.

And the real world had never suspected him nor hunted him nor cast him out. It was this band of hooded fiends who came to burn the paintings, the ones who shared the Dark Gift with him—had he himself ever called it the Dark Gift?—they were the ones who said he couldn't live and create among mortals. Not mortals.

I saw the little stage at Renaud's and I heard myself sing and the singing become a roar. Nicolas said, "It is splendid." I said, "It is petty." And it was like striking Nicolas. In my imagination he said what he had not said that night: "Let me have what I can believe in. You would never do that."

The triptychs of Marius were in churches and convent chapels, maybe on the walls of the great houses in Venice and Padua. The vampires would not have gone into holy places to pull them down. So they were there somewhere, with a signature perhaps worked into the detail, these creations of the vampire who surrounded himself with mortal apprentices, kept a mortal lover from whom he took the little drink, went out alone to kill.

I thought of the night in the inn when I had seen the meaninglessness of life, and the soft fathomless despair of Armand's story seemed an ocean in which I might drown. This was worse than the blasted shore in Nicki's mind. This was for three centuries, this darkness, this nothingness.

The radiant auburn-haired child by the fire could open his mouth

again and out would come blackness like ink to cover the world.

That is, if there had not been this protagonist, this Venetian master, who had committed the heretical act of making meaning on the panels he painted—it had to be meaning—and our own kind, the elect of Satan, had made him into a living torch.

Had Gabrielle seen these paintings in the story as I had seen them? Did they burn in her mind's eye as they did in mine?

Marius was traveling some route into my soul that would let him roam there forever, along with the hooded fiends who turned the paintings into chaos again.

In a dull sort of misery, I thought of the travelers' tales—that Marius was alive, seen in Egypt or Greece.

I wanted to ask Armand, wasn't it possible? Marius must have been so very strong … But it seemed disrespectful of him to ask.

"Old legend," he whispered. His voice was as precise as the inner voice. Unhurriedly, he continued without ever looking away from the flames. "Legend from the olden times before they destroyed us both."

"Perhaps not," I said. Echo of the visions, paintings on the walls. "Maybe Marius is alive."

"We are miracles or horrors," he said quietly, "depending upon how you wish to see us. And when "you first *know* about us, whether it's through the dark blood or promises or visitations, you think anything is possible. But that isn't so. The world closes tight around this miracle soon enough; and you don't hope for other miracles. That is, you become accustomed to the new limits and the limits define everything once again. So they say Marius continues. They all continue somewhere, that's what you *want* to believe.

"Not a single one remains in the coven in Rome from those nights when I was taught the ritual; and maybe the coven itself is no longer even there. Years and years have passed since there was any communication from the coven. But they all exist somewhere, don't they? After all, we can't die." He sighed. "Doesn't matter," he said.

Something greater and more terrible mattered, that this despair might crush Armand beneath it. That in spite of the thirst in him now, the blood lost when we had fought together, and the silent furnace of his body healing the bruises and the broken flesh, he could not will himself into the world above to hunt. Rather suffer the thirst and the heat of the

silent furnace. Rather stay here and be with us.

But he already knew the answer, that he could not be with us.

Gabrielle and I didn't have to speak to let him know. We did not even have to resolve the question in our minds. He knew, the way God might know the future because God is the possessor of all the facts.

Unbearable anguish. And Gabrielle's expression all the more weary, sad.

"You know that with all my soul I do want to take you with us," I said. I was surprised at my own emotion. "But it would be disaster for us all."

No change in him. He knew. No challenge from Gabrielle.

"I cannot *stop* thinking of Marius," I confessed.

I know. And you do not think of Those Who Must Be Kept, which is most strange.

"That is merely another mystery," I said. "And there are a thousand mysteries. I think of Marius! And I'm too much the slave of my own obsessions and fascination. It's a dreadful thing to linger so on Marius, to extract that one radiant figure from the tale."

Doesn't matter. If it pleases you, take it. I do not lose what I give.

"When a being reveals his pain in such a torrent, you are bound to respect the whole of the tragedy. You have to try to comprehend. And such helplessness, such despair is almost incomprehensible to me. That's why I think of Marius. Marius I understand. You I don't understand."

Why?

Silence.

Didn't he deserve the truth?

"I've been a rebel always," I said. "You've been the slave of everything that ever claimed you."

"I was the leader of my coven!"

"No. You were the slave of Marius and then of the Children of Darkness. You fell under the spell of one and then the other. What you suffer now is the absence of a spell. I think I shudder that you caused me so to understand it for a little while, to know it as if I were a different being than I am."

"Doesn't matter," he said, eyes still on the fire. "You think too much in terms of decision and action. This tale is no explanation. And I am not a being who requires a respectful acknowledgment in your thoughts or in words. And we all know the answer you have given is too immense to be

voiced and we all three of us know that it is final. What I don't know is why. So I am a creature very different from you, and so you cannot understand me. Why can't I go with you? I will do whatever you wish if you take me with you. I will be under your spell."

I thought of Marius with his brush and the pots of egg tempera.

"How could you have ever believed anything that they told you after they burned those paintings?" I asked. "How could you have given yourself over to them?"

Agitation, rising anger.

Caution in Gabrielle's face, but not fear.

"And you, when you stood on the stage and you saw the audience screaming to get out of the theater—how my followers described this to me, the vampire terrifying the crowd and the crowd streaming into the boulevard du Temple—what did you believe? That you did not belong among mortals, that's what you believed. You knew you did not. And there was no band of fiends in hooded robes to tell you. You knew. So Marius did not belong among mortals. So I did not."

"Ah, but it's different."

"No, it is not. That's why you scorn the Theater of the Vampires which is now at this very moment working out its little dramas to bring in the gold from the boulevard crowds. You do not wish to deceive as Marius deceived. It divides you ever more from mankind. You want to pretend to be mortal, but to deceive makes you angry and it makes you kill."

"In that moment on the stage," I said, "I revealed *myself*. I did the very opposite of deceiving. I wanted somehow in making manifest the monstrosity of myself to be joined with my fellow humans again. Better they should run from me than not see me. Better they should know I was something monstrous than for me to glide through the world unrecognized by those upon whom I preyed."

"But it was not better."

"No. What Marius did was better. He did not deceive."

"Of course he did. He fooled everyone!"

"No. He found a way to imitate mortal life. To be one with mortals. He slew only the evildoer, and he painted as mortals paint. Angels and blue skies, clouds, those are the things you made me see when you were telling. He created good things. And I see wisdom in him and a lack of vanity. He did not need to reveal himself. He had lived a thousand years

and he believed more in the vistas of heaven that he painted than in himself."

Confusion.

Doesn't matter now, devils who paint angels.

"Those are only metaphors," I said. "And it does matter! If you are to rebuild, if you are to find the Devil's Road again, it does matter! There are ways for us to exist. If I could only imitate life, just find a way …"

"You say things that mean nothing to me. We are the abandoned of God."

Gabrielle glanced at him suddenly. "Do you *believe* in God?" she asked.

"Yes, always in God," he answered. "It is Satan—our master—who is the fiction and that is the fiction which has betrayed me."

"Oh, then you are truly damned," I said. "And you know full well that your retreat into the fraternity of the Children of Darkness was a retreat from a sin that was not a sin."

Anger.

"Your heart breaks for something you'll never have," he countered, his voice rising suddenly. "You brought Gabrielle and Nicolas over the barrier to you, but you could not go back."

"Why is it you don't hearken to your own story?" I asked. "Is it that you have never forgiven Marius for not warning you about them, letting you fall into their hands? You will never take anything, not example or inspiration, from Marius again? I am not Marius, but I tell you since I set my feet on the Devil's Road, I have heard of only one elder who could teach me anything, and that is Marius, your Venetian master. He is talking to me now. He is saying something to me of a way to be immortal."

"Mockery."

"No. It wasn't mockery! And you are the one whose heart breaks for what he will never have: another body of belief, another spell."

No answer.

"We cannot be Marius for you," I said, "or the dark lord, Santino. We are not artists with a great vision that will carry you forward. And we are not evil coven masters with the conviction to condemn a legion to perdition. And this domination—this glorious mandate—is what you must have."

I had risen to my feet without meaning to. I had come close to the

fireplace and I was looking down at him.

And I saw, out of the corner of my eye, Gabrielle's subtle nod of approval, and the way that she closed her eyes for a moment as if she were allowing herself a sigh of relief.

He was perfectly still.

"You have to suffer through this emptiness," I said, "and find what impels you to continue. If you come with us we will fail you and you will destroy us."

"How suffer through it?" He looked up at me and his eyebrows came together in the most poignant frown. "How do I begin? You move like the right hand of God! But for me the world, the real world in which Marius lived, is beyond reach. I never lived in it. I push against the glass. But how do I get in?"

"I can't tell you that," I said.

"You have to study this age," Gabrielle interrupted. Her voice was calm but commanding.

He looked towards her as she spoke.

"You have to understand the age," she continued, "through its literature and its music and its art. You have come up out of the earth, as you yourself put it. Now live in the world."

No answer from him. Flash of Nicki's ravaged flat with all its books on the floor. Western civilization in heaps.

"And what better place is there than the center of things, the boulevard and the theater?" Gabrielle asked.

He frowned, his head turning dismissively, but she pressed on.

"Your gift is for leading the coven, and your coven is still there." He made a soft despairing sound.

"Nicolas is a fledgling," she said. "He can teach them much about the world outside, but he cannot really lead them. The woman, Eleni, is amazingly clever, but she will make way for you."

"What is it to me, their games?" he whispered.

"It is a way to exist," she said. "And that is all that matters to you now."

"The Theater of the Vampires! I should rather the fire."

"Think of it," she said. "There's a perfection in it you can't deny. We are illusions of what is mortal, and the stage is an illusion of what is real."

“It’s an abomination,” he said. “What did Lestat call it? Petty?”

“That was to Nicolas because Nicolas would build fantastical philosophies upon it,” she said. “You must live now without fantastical philosophies, the way you did when you were Marius’s apprentice. Live to learn the age. And Lestat does not believe in the value of evil. But you do believe in it. I know that you do.”

“I am evil,” he said half smiling. He almost laughed. “It’s not a matter of belief, is it? But do you think I could go from the spiritual path I followed for three centuries to voluptuousness and debauchery such as that? We were the saints of evil,” he protested. “I will not be common evil. I will not.”

“Make it uncommon,” she said. She was getting too impatient. “If you are evil, how can voluptuousness and debauchery be your enemies? Don’t the world, the flesh, and the devil conspire equally against man?”

He shook his head, as if to say he did not care.

“You are more concerned with what is spiritual than with evil,” I interjected, watching him closely. “Is that not so?”

“Yes,” he said at once.

“But don’t you see, the color of wine in a crystal glass can be spiritual,” I continued. “The look in a face, the music of a violin. A Paris theater can be infused with the spiritual for all its solidity. There’s nothing in it that hasn’t been shaped by the power of those who possessed spiritual visions of what it could be.”

Something quickened in him, but he pushed it away.

“Seduce the public with voluptuousness,” Gabrielle said. “For God’s sake, and the devil’s, use the power of the theater as you will.”

“Weren’t the paintings of your master spiritual?” I asked. I could feel a warming in myself now at the thought of it. “Can anyone look on the great works of that time and not call them spiritual?”

“I have asked myself that question,” Armand answered, “many times. Was it spiritual or was it voluptuous? Was the angel painted on the triptych caught in the material, or was the material transformed?”

“No matter what they did to you after, you never doubted the beauty and the value of his work,” I said. “I know you didn’t. And it was the material transformed. It ceased to be paint and it became magic, just as in the kill the blood ceases to be blood and becomes life.”

His eyes misted, but no visions came from him. Whatever road he

traveled back in his thoughts, he traveled alone.

"The carnal and the spiritual," Gabrielle said, "come together in the theater as they do in the paintings. Sensual fiends we are by our very nature. Take this as your key."

He closed his eyes for a moment as if he would shut us out.

"Go to them and listen to the music that Nicki makes," she said. "Make art with them in the Theater of the Vampires. You have to pass away from what failed you into what can sustain you. Otherwise—there is no hope."

I wished she had not said it so abruptly, brought it so to the point.

But he nodded and his lips pressed together in a bitter smile.

"The only thing really important for you," she said slowly, "is that you go to an extreme."

He stared at her blankly. He could not possibly understand what she meant by this. And I thought it too brutal a truth to say. But he didn't resist it. His face became thoughtful and smooth and childlike again.

For a long time he looked at the fire. Then he spoke:

"But why must you go at all?" he asked. "No one is at war with you now. No one is trying to drive you out. Why can't you build it with me, this little enterprise?"

Did that mean he would do it, go to the others and become part of the theater in the boulevard?

He didn't contradict me. He was asking again why couldn't I create the imitation of life, if that was what I wanted to call it, right in the boulevard?

But he was also giving up. He knew I couldn't endure the sight of the theater, or the sight of Nicolas. I couldn't even really urge him towards it. Gabrielle had done that. And he knew that it was too late to press us anymore.

Finally Gabrielle said:

"We can't live among our own kind, Armand."

And I thought, yes, that is the truest answer of all, and I don't know why I couldn't speak it aloud.

"The Devil's Road is what we want," she said. "And we are enough for each other now. Maybe years and years into the future, when we've been a thousand places and seen a thousand things, we'll come back. We'll talk then together as we have tonight."

This came as no real shock to him. But it was impossible now to know what he thought.

For a long time we didn't speak. I don't know how long we remained quiet together in the room.

I tried not to think of Marius anymore, or of Nicolas either. All sense of danger was gone now, but I was afraid of the parting, of the sadness of it, of the feeling that I had taken from this creature his astonishing story and given him precious little for it in return.

It was Gabrielle who finally broke the quiet. She rose and moved gracefully to the bench beside him.

"Armand," she said. "We are going. If I have my way we'll be miles from Paris before midnight tomorrow night."

He looked at her with calm and acceptance. Impossible to know now what he chose to conceal.

"Even if you do not go to the theater," she said, "accept the things that we can give you. My son has wealth enough to make an entrance into the world very easy for you."

"You can take this tower for your lair," I said. "Use it as long as you wish. Magnus found it safe enough."

After a moment, he nodded with a grave politeness, but he didn't say anything.

"Let Lestat give you the gold needed to make you a gentleman," Gabrielle said. "And all we ask in return is that you leave the coven in peace if you do not choose to lead it."

He was looking at the fire again, face tranquil, irresistibly beautiful. Then again he nodded in silence. And the nod itself meant no more than that he had heard, not that he would promise anything.

"If you will not go to them," I said slowly, "then do not hurt them. Do not hurt Nicolas."

And when I spoke these words, his face changed very subtly. It was almost a smile that crept over his features. And his eyes shifted slowly to me. And I saw the scorn in them.

I looked away but the look had affected me as much as a blow.

"I don't want him to be harmed," I said in a tense whisper.

"No. You want him destroyed," he whispered back. "So that you need never fear or grieve for him anymore." And the look of scorn sharpened hideously.

Gabrielle intervened.

"Armand," she said, "he is not dangerous to them. The woman alone can control him. And he has things to teach all of you about this time if you will listen."

They looked at each other for some time in silence. And again his face was soft and gentle and beautiful.

And in a strangely decorous manner he took Gabrielle's hand and held it firmly. Then they stood up together, and he let her hand go, and he drew a little away from her and squared his shoulders. He looked at both of us.

"I'll go to them," he said in the softest voice. "And I will take the gold you offer me, and I will seek refuge in this tower. And I will learn from your passionate fledgling whatever he has to teach me. But I reach for these things only because they float on the surface of the darkness in which I am drowning. And I would not descend without some finer understanding. I would not leave eternity to you without … without some final battle."

I studied him. But no thoughts came from him to clarify these words.

"Maybe as the years pass," he said, "desire will come again to me. I will know appetite again, even passion. Maybe when we meet in another age, these things will not be abstract and fleeting. I'll speak with a vigor that matches yours, instead of merely reflecting it. And we will ponder matters of immortality and wisdom. We will talk about vengeance or acceptance then. For now it's enough for me to say that I want to see you again. I want our paths to cross in the future. And for that reason alone, I will do as you ask and not what you want: I will spare your ill-fated Nicolas."

I gave an audible sigh of relief. Yet his tone was so changed, so strong, that it sounded a deep silent alarm in me. This was the coven master, surely, this quiet and forceful one, the one who would survive, no matter how the orphan in him wept.

But then he smiled slowly and gracefully, and there was something sad and endearing in his face. He became the da Vinci saint again, or more truly the little god from Caravaggio. And it seemed for a moment he couldn't be anything evil or dangerous. He was too radiant, too full of all that was wise and good.

"Remember my warnings," he said. "Not my curses."

Gabrielle and I both nodded.

“And when you have need of me,” he said, “I will be here.”

Then Gabrielle did the totally surprising thing of embracing him and kissing him. And I did the same.

He was pliant and gentle and loving in our arms. And he let us know without words that he was going to the coven, and we could find him there tomorrow night.

The next moment he was gone, and Gabrielle and I were there alone together, as if he'd never been in the room. I could hear no sound anywhere in the tower. Nothing but the wind in the forest beyond.

And when I climbed the steps, I found the gate open and the fields stretching to the woods in unbroken quiet.

I loved him. I knew it, as incomprehensible to me as he was. But I was so glad it was finished. So glad that we could go on. Yet I held to the bars for a long time just looking at the distant woods, and the dim glow far beyond that the city made upon the lowering clouds.

And the grief I felt was not only for the loss of him, it was for Nicki, and for Paris, and for myself.

5

When I came back down to the crypt I saw her building up the fire again with the last of the wood. In a slow, weary fashion, she stoked the blaze, and the light was red on her profile and in her eyes.

I sat quietly on the bench watching her, watching the explosion of sparks against the blackened bricks.

"Did he give you what you wanted?" I asked.

"In his own way, yes," she said. She put the poker aside and sat down opposite, her hair spilling down over her shoulders as she rested her hands beside her on the bench. "I tell you, I don't care if I never look upon another one of our kind," she said coldly. "I am done with their legends, their curses, their sorrows. And done with their insufferable humanity, which may be the most astonishing thing they've revealed. I'm ready for the world again, Lestat, as I was on the night I died."

"But Marius—" I said excitedly. "Mother, there are ancient ones—ones who have used immortality in a wholly different way."

"Are there?" she asked. "Lestat, you're too generous with your imagination. The story of Marius has the quality of a fairy tale."

"No, that's not true."

"So the orphan demon claims descent not from the filthy peasant devils he resembles," she said, "but from a lost lord, almost a god. I tell you any dirty-faced village child dreaming at the kitchen fire can tell you tales like that."

"Mother, he couldn't have invented Marius," I said. "I may have a great deal of imagination, but he has almost none. He couldn't have made up the images. I tell you he saw those things …"

"I hadn't thought of it exactly that way," she admitted with a little smile. "But he could well have borrowed Marius from the legends he heard …"

"No," I said. "There was a Marius and there is a Marius still. And there are others like him. There are Children of the Millennia who have done better than these Children of Darkness with the gifts given them."

"Lestat, what is important is that *we* do better," she said. "All I learned

from Armand, finally, was that immortals find death seductive and ultimately irresistible, that they fail to conquer death or humanity in their minds. Now I want to take that knowledge and wear it like armor as I move through the world. And luckily, I don't mean the world of change which these creatures have found so dangerous. I mean the world that for eons has been the same."

She tossed her hair back as she looked at the fire again. "It's of snow-covered mountains I dream," she said softly, "of desert wastes—of impenetrable jungles, or the great north woods of America where they say white men have never been." Her face warmed just a little as she looked at me. "Think on it," she said. "There is nowhere that we cannot go. And if the Children of the Millennia do exist, maybe that is where they are—far from the world of men."

"And how do they live if they are?" I asked. I was picturing my own world and it was full of mortal beings, and the things that mortal beings made. "It's man we feed on," I said.

"There are hearts that beat in those forests," she said dreamily. "There is blood that flows for the one who takes it … I can do the things now that you used to do. I could fight those wolves on my own …" Her voice trailed off as she was lost in her thoughts. "The important thing," she said after a long moment, "is that we can go wherever we wish now, Lestat. We're free."

"I was free before," I said. "I never cared for what Armand had to tell. But Marius—I know that Marius is alive. I feel it. I felt it when Armand told the tale. And Marius knows things—and I don't mean just about us, or about Those Who Must Be Kept or whatever the old mystery—he knows things about life itself, about how to move through time."

"So let him be your patron saint if you need it," she said.

This angered me, and I didn't say anything more. The fact was her talk of jungles and forests frightened me. And all the things Armand said to divide us came back to me, just as I'd known they would when he had spoken his well-chosen words. And so we live with our differences, I thought, just as mortals do, and maybe our divisions are exaggerated as are our passions, as is our love.

"There was one inkling …" she said as she watched the fire, "one little indication that the story of Marius had truth."

"There were a thousand indications," I said.

“He said that Marius slew the evildoer,” she continued, “and he called the evildoer Typhon, the slayer of his brother. Do you remember this?”

“I thought that he meant Cain who had slain Abel. It was Cain I saw in the images, though I heard the other name.”

“That’s just it. Armand himself didn’t understand the name Typhon. Yet he repeated it. But I know what it means.”

“Tell me.”

“It’s from the Greek and Roman myths—the old story of the Egyptian god, Osiris, slain by his brother Typhon, so that he became lord of the Underworld. Of course Armand could have read it in Plutarch, but he didn’t, that’s the strange thing.”

“Ah, you see then, Marius did exist. When he said he’d lived for a millennium he was telling the truth.”

“Perhaps, Lestat, perhaps,” she said.

“Mother, tell me this again, this Egyptian story …”

“Lestat, you have years to read all the old tales for yourself.” She rose and bent to kiss me, and I sensed the coldness and sluggishness in her that always came before dawn. “As for me, I am done with books. They are what I read when I could do nothing else.” She took my two hands in hers. “Tell me that we’ll be on the road tomorrow. That we won’t see the ramparts of Paris again until we’ve seen the other side of the world.”

“Exactly as you wish,” I said.

She started up the stairs.

“But where are you going?” I said as I followed her. She opened the gate and went out towards the trees.

“I want to see if I can sleep in the raw earth itself,” she said over her shoulder. “If I don’t rise tomorrow you’ll know I failed.”

“But this is madness,” I said, coming after her. I hated the very idea of it. She went ahead into a thicket of old oaks, and kneeling, she dug into the dead leaves and damp soil with her hands. Ghastly she looked, as if she were a beautiful blond-haired witch scratching with the speed of a beast.

Then she rose and waved a farewell kiss to me. And commanding all her strength, she descended as if the earth belonged to her. And I was left staring in disbelief at the emptiness where she had been, and the leaves that had settled as if nothing had disturbed the spot.

I walked away from the woods. I walked south away from the tower. And as my step quickened, I started singing softly to myself some little song, maybe a bit of melody that the violins had played earlier this night in the Palais Royal.

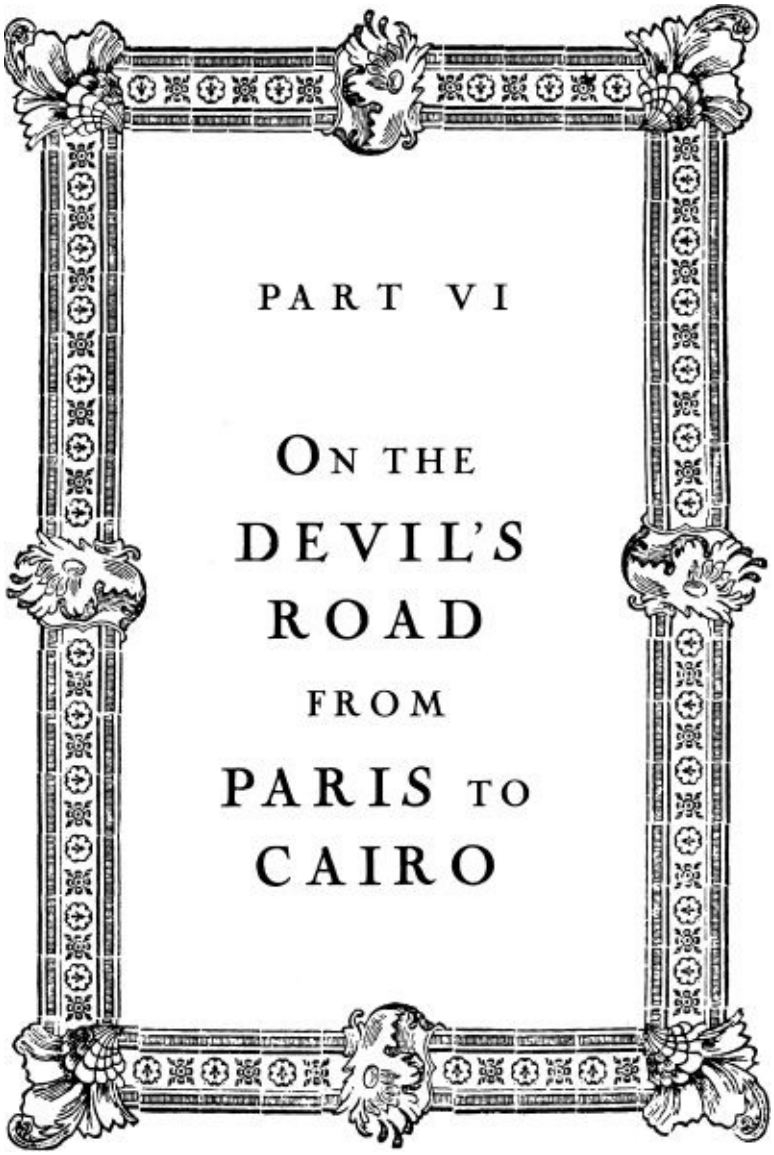
And the sense of grief came back to me, the realization that we were really going, that it was finished with Nicolas and finished with the Children of Darkness and their leader, and I wouldn't see Paris again, or anything familiar to me, for years and years. And for all my desire to be free, I wanted to weep.

But it seems I had some purpose in my wandering that I hadn't admitted to myself. A half hour or so before the morning light I was on the post road near the ruin of an old inn. Falling down it was, this last outpost of an abandoned village, with only the heavily mortared walls left intact.

And taking out my dagger, I began to carve deep in the soft stone:

MARIUS, THE ANCIENT ONE: LESTAT IS SEARCHING FOR YOU. IT IS THE MONTH OF MAY, IN THE YEAR 1780 AND I GO SOUTH FROM PARIS TOWARDS LYONS. PLEASE MAKE YOURSELF KNOWN TO ME.

What arrogance it seemed when I stepped back from it. And I had already broken the dark commandments, telling the name of an immortal, and putting it into written words. Well, it gave me a wondrous satisfaction to do it. And after all, I had never been very good at obeying rules.



PART VI

ON THE DEVIL'S ROAD FROM PARIS TO CAIRO

1

The last time we saw Armand in the eighteenth century, he was standing with Eleni and Nicolas and the other vampire mummers before the door of Renaud's theater, watching as our carriage made its way into the stream of traffic on the boulevard.

I'd found him earlier closeted in my old dressing room with Nicolas in the midst of a strange conversation dominated by Nicki's sarcasm and peculiar fire. He wore a wig and a somber red frock coat, and it seemed to me that he had already acquired a new opacity, as if every waking moment since the death of the old coven was giving him greater substance and strength.

Nicki and I had no words for each other in these last awkward moments, but Armand politely accepted the keys of the tower from me, and a great quantity of money, and the promise of more when he wanted it from Roget.

His mind was closed to me, but he said again that Nicolas would come to no harm from him. And as we said our farewells, I believed that Nicolas and the little coven had every chance for survival and that Armand and I were friends.

By the end of that first night Gabrielle and I were far from Paris, as we vowed we would be, and in the months that followed, we went on to Lyons, Turin, and Vienna, and after that to Prague and Leipzig and St. Petersburg, and then south again to Italy, where we were to settle for many years.

Eventually we went on to Sicily, then north into Greece and Turkey, and then south again through the ancient cities of Asia Minor and finally to Cairo, where we remained for some time.

And in all these places I was to write my messages to Marius on the walls.

Sometimes it was no more than a few words that I scratched with the tip of my knife. In other places, I spent hours chiseling my ruminations

into the stone. But wherever I was, I wrote my name, the date, and my future destination, and my invitation: “Marius, make yourself known to me.”

As for the old covens, we were to come upon them in a number of scattered places, but it was clear from the outset that the old ways were everywhere breaking down. Seldom more than three or four vampires carried on the old rituals, and when they came to realize that we wanted no part of them or their existence they let us alone.

Infinitely more interesting were the occasional rogues we glimpsed in the middle of society, lone and secretive vampires pretending to be mortal just as skillfully as we could pretend. But we never got close to these creatures. They ran from us as they must have from the old covens. And seeing nothing more than fear in their eyes, I wasn’t tempted to give chase.

Yet it was strangely reassuring to know that I hadn’t been the first aristocratic fiend to move through the ballrooms of the world in search of my victims—the deadly gentleman who would soon surface in stories and poetry and penny dreadful novels as the very epitome of our tribe. There were others appearing all the time.

But we were to encounter stranger creatures of darkness as we moved on. In Greece we found demons who did not know how they had been made, and sometimes even mad creatures without reason or language who attacked us as if we were mortal, and ran screaming from the prayers we said to drive them away.

The vampires in Istanbul actually dwelt in houses, safe behind high wall and gates, their graves in their gardens, and dressed as all humans do in that part of the world, in flowing robes, to hunt the nighttime streets.

Yet even they were quite horrified to see me living amongst the French and the Venetians, riding in carriages, joining the gatherings at the European embassies and homes. They menaced us, shouting incantations at us, and then ran in panic when we turned on them, only to come back and devil us again.

The revenants who haunted the Mameluke tombs in Cairo were beastly wraiths, held to the old laws by hollow-eyed masters who lived in the ruins of a Coptic monastery, their rituals full of Eastern magic and the evocation of many demons and evil spirits whom they called by

strange names. They stayed clear of us, despite all their acidic threats, yet they knew our names.

As the years passed, we learned nothing from all these creatures, which of course was no great surprise to me.

And though vampires in many places had heard the legends of Marius and the other ancient ones, they had never seen such beings with their own eyes. Even Armand had become a legend to them, and they were likely to ask: "Did you really see the vampire Armand?" Nowhere did I meet a truly old vampire. Nowhere did I meet a vampire who was in any way a magnetic creature, a being of great wisdom or special accomplishment, an unusual being in whom the Dark Gift had worked any perceivable alchemy that was of interest to me.

Armand was a dark god compared to these beings. And so was Gabrielle and so was I.

But I jump ahead of my tale.

Early on, when we first came into Italy, we gained a fuller and more sympathetic knowledge of the ancient rituals. The Roman coven came out to welcome us with open arms. "Come to the Sabbat," they said. "Come into the catacombs and join in the hymns."

Yes, they knew that we'd destroyed the Paris coven, and bested the great master of dark secrets, Armand. But they didn't despise us for it. On the contrary, they could not understand the cause of Armand's resignation of his power. Why hadn't the coven changed with the times?

For even here where the ceremonies were so elaborate and sensuous that they took my breath away, the vampires, far from eschewing the ways of men, thought nothing of passing themselves off as human whenever it suited their purposes. It was the same with the two vampires we had seen in Venice, and the handful we were later to meet in Florence as well.

In black cloaks, they penetrated the crowds at the opera, the shadowy corridors of great houses during balls and banquets, and even sometimes sat amid the press in lowly taverns or wine shops, peering at humans quite close at hand. It was their habit here more than anywhere to dress in the costumes of the time of their birth, and they were often splendidly attired and most regal, possessing jewels and finery and showing it often to great advantage when they chose.

Yet they crept back to their stinking graveyards to sleep, and they fled

screaming from any sign of heavenly power, and they threw themselves with savage abandon into their horrifying and beautiful Sabbats.

In comparison, the vampires of Paris had been primitive, coarse, and childlike; but I could see that it was the very sophistication and worldliness of Paris that had caused Armand and his flock to retreat so far from mortal ways.

As the French capital became secular, the vampires had clung to old magic, while the Italian fiends lived among deeply religious humans whose lives were drenched in Roman Catholic ceremony, men and women who respected evil as they respected the Roman Church. In sum the old ways of the fiends were not unlike the old ways of people in Italy, and so the Italian vampires moved in both worlds. Did they believe in the old ways? They shrugged. The Sabbat for them was a grand pleasure. Hadn't Gabrielle and I enjoyed it? Had we not finally joined in the dance?

"Come to us anytime that you wish," the Roman vampires told us.

As for this Theater of the Vampires in Paris, this great scandal which was shocking our kind the world over, well, they would believe *that* when they saw it with their own eyes. Vampires performing on a stage, vampires dazzling mortal audiences with tricks and mimicry—they thought it was too terribly Parisian! They laughed.

Of course I was hearing more directly about the theater all the time. Before I'd even reached St. Petersburg, Roget had sent me a long testament to the "cleverness" of the new troupe:

> They have gotten themselves up like giant wooden marionettes [he wrote]. Gold cords come down from the rafters to their ankles and their wrists and the tops of their heads, and by these they appear to be manipulated in the most charming dances. They wear perfect circles of rouge on their white cheeks, and their eyes are wide as glass buttons. You cannot believe the perfection with which they make themselves appear inanimate.
>
> But the orchestra is another marvel. Faces blank and painted in the very same style, the players imitate mechanical musicians—the jointed dolls one can buy that, on the winding of a key, saw away at

their little instruments, or blow their little horns, to make real music!

It is such an engaging spectacle that ladies and gentlemen of the audience quarrel amongst themselves as to whether or not these players are dolls or real persons. Some aver that they are all made of wood and the voices coming out of the actors' mouths are the work of ventriloquists.

As for the plays themselves, they would be extremely unsettling were they not so beautiful and skillfully done.

There is one most popular drama they do which features a vampiric revenant, risen from the grave through a platform in the stage. Terrifying is the creature with rag mop hair and fangs. But lo, he falls in love at once with a giant wooden puppet woman, never guessing that she is not alive. Unable to drink blood from her throat, however, the poor vampire soon perishes, at which moment the marionette reveals that she does indeed live, though she is made of wood, and with an evil smile she performs a triumphant dance upon the body of the defeated fiend.

I tell you it makes the blood run cold to see it. Yet the audience screams and applauds.

In another little tableau, the puppet dancers make a circle about a human girl and entice her to let herself be bound up with golden cords as if she too were a marionette. The sorry result is that the strings make her dance till the life goes out of her body. She pleads with eloquent gestures to be released, but the real puppets only laugh and cavort as she expires.

The music is unearthly. It brings to mind the gypsies of the country fairs. Monsieur de Lenfent is the director. And it is the sound of his violin which often opens the evening fare.

I advise you as your attorney to claim some of the profits being made by this remarkable company. The lines for each performance stretch a considerable length down the boulevard.

Roget's letters always unsettled me. They left me with my heart tripping, and I couldn't help but wonder: What had I expected the troupe to do? Why did their boldness and inventiveness surprise me? We all had the power to do such things.

By the time I settled in Venice, where I spent a great deal of time looking in vain for Marius's paintings, I was hearing from Eleni directly, her letters inscribed with exquisite vampiric skill.

They were the most popular entertainment in nighttime Paris, she wrote to me. "Actors" had come from all over Europe to join them. So their troupe had swelled to twenty in number, which even that metropolis could scarce "support."

"Only the most clever artists are admitted, those who possess truly astonishing talent, but we prize discretion above all else. We do not like scandal, as you can well guess."

As for their "Dear Violinist," she wrote of him affectionately, saying he was their greatest inspiration, that he wrote the most ingenious plays, taking them from stories that he read.

"But when he is not at work, he can be quite impossible. He must be watched constantly so that he does not enlarge our ranks. His dining habits are extremely sloppy. And on occasion he says most shocking things to strangers, which fortunately they are too sensible to believe."

In other words, he tried to make other vampires. And he didn't hunt in stealth.

> In the main it is Our Oldest Friend [Armand, obviously] who is relied upon to restrain him. And that he does with the most caustic threats. But I must say that these do not have an enduring effect upon Our Violinist. He talks often of old religious customs, of ritual fires, of the passage into new realms of being.
>
> I cannot say that we do not love him. For your sake we would care for him even if we did not. But we do love him. And Our Oldest Friend, in particular, bears him great affection. Yet I should remark that in the old times, such persons would not have endured among us for very long.
>
> As for Our Oldest Friend, I wonder if you would know him now. He has built a great manse at the foot of your tower, and there he lives among books and pictures very like a scholarly gentleman with little care for the real world.
>
> Each night, however, he arrives at the door of the theater in his black carriage. And he watches from his own curtained box.
>
> And he comes after to settle all disputes among us, to govern as

> he always did, to threaten Our Divine Violinist, but he will never, never consent to perform on the stage. It is he who accepts new members among us. As I told you, they come from all over. We do not have to solicit them. They knock upon our door.…
>
> Come back to us [she wrote in closing]. You will find us more interesting than you did before. There are a thousand dark wonders which I cannot commit to paper. We are a starburst in the history of our kind. And we could not have chosen a more perfect moment in the history of this great city for our little contrivance. And it is your doing, this splendid existence we sustain. Why did you leave us? Come home.

I saved these letters. I kept them as carefully as I kept the letters from my brothers in the Auvergne. I saw the marionettes perfectly in my imagination. I heard the cry of Nicki's violin. I saw Armand, too, arriving in his dark carriage, taking his seat in the box. And I even described all of this in veiled and eccentric terms in my long messages to Marius, working in a little frenzy now and then with my chisel in a dark street while mortals slept.

But for me, there was no going back to Paris, no matter how lonely I might become. The world around me had become my lover and my teacher. I was enraptured with the cathedrals and castles, the museums and palaces that I saw. In every place I visited, I went to the heart of society: I drank up its entertainments and its gossip, its literature and its music, its architecture and its art.

I could fill volumes with the things I studied, the things I struggled to understand. I was enthralled by gypsy violinists and street puppeteers as I was by great castrati sopranos in gilded opera houses or cathedral choirs. I prowled the brothels and the gambling dens and the places where the sailors drank and quarreled. I read the newspapers everywhere I went and hung about in taverns, often ordering food I never touched, merely to have it in front of me, and I talked to mortals incessantly in public places, buying countless glasses of wine for others, smelling their pipes and cigars as they smoked, and letting all these mortal smells get into my hair and clothes.

And when I wasn't out roaming, I was traveling the realm of the books that had belonged to Gabrielle so exclusively all through those dreary

mortal years at home.

Before we even got to Italy, I knew enough Latin to be studying the classics, and I made a library in the old Venetian palazzo I haunted, often reading the whole night long.

And of course it was the tale of Osiris that enchanted me, bringing back with it the romance of Armand's story and Marius's enigmatic words. As I pored over all the old versions, I was quietly thunderstruck by what I read.

Here we have an ancient king, Osiris, a man of unworldly goodness who turns the Egyptians away from cannibalism and teaches them the art of growing crops and making wine. And how is he murdered by his brother Typhon? Osiris is tricked into lying down in a box made to the exact size of his body, and his brother Typhon then nails shut the lid. He is then thrown into the river, and when his faithful Isis finds his body, he is again attacked by Typhon, who dismembers him. All parts of his body are found save one.

Now, why would Marius make reference to a myth such as this? And how could I not think on the fact that all vampires sleep in coffins which are boxes made to the size of their bodies—even the miserable rabble of les Innocents slept in their coffins. Magnus said to me, "In that box or its like you must always lie." As for the missing part of the body, the part that Isis never found, well, there is one part of us which is not enhanced by the Dark Gift, isn't there? We can speak, see, taste, breathe, move as humans move, but *we cannot procreate*. And neither could Osiris, so he became Lord of the Dead.

Was this a vampire god?

But so much puzzled me and tormented me. This god Osiris was the god of wine to the Egyptians, the one later called Dionysus by the Greeks. And Dionysus was the "dark god" of the theater, the devil god whom Nicki described to me when we were boys at home. And now we had the theater full of vampires in Paris. Oh, it was too rich.

I couldn't wait to tell all this to Gabrielle.

But she dismissed it indifferently, saying there were hundreds of such old stories.

"Osiris was the god of the corn," she said. "He was a good god to the Egyptians. What could this have to do with us?" She glanced at the books I was studying. "You have a great deal to learn, my son. Many an

ancient god was dismembered and mourned by his goddess. Read of Actaeon and Adonis. The ancients loved those stories."

And she was gone. And I was alone in the candlelighted library, leaning on my elbows amid all these books.

I brooded on Armand's dream of the sanctuary of Those Who Must Be Kept in the mountains. Was it a magic that went back to the Egyptian times? How had the Children of Darkness forgotten such things? Maybe it had all been poetry to the Venetian master, the mention of Typhon, the slayer of his brother, nothing more than that.

I went out into the night with my chisel. I wrote my questions to Marius on stones that were older than us both. Marius had become so real to me that we were talking together, the way that Nicki and I had once done. He was the confidant who received my excitement, my enthusiasm, my sublime bewilderment at all the wonders and puzzles of the world.

But as my studies deepened, as my education broadened, I was getting that first awesome inkling of what eternity might be. I was alone among humans, and my writing to Marius couldn't keep me from knowing my own monstrosity as I had in those first Paris nights so long ago. After all, Marius wasn't really there.

And neither was Gabrielle.

Almost from the beginning, Armand's predictions had proved true.

2

Before we were even out of France, Gabrielle was breaking the journey to disappear for several nights at a time. In Vienna, she often stayed away for over a fortnight, and by the time I settled in the palazzo in Venice she was going away for months on end. During my first visit to Rome, she vanished for a half year. And after she left me in Naples, I returned to Venice without her, angrily leaving her to find her way back to the Veneto on her own, which she did.

Of course it was the countryside that drew her, the forest or the mountains, or islands on which no human beings lived. And she would return in such a tattered state—her shoes worn out, her clothes ripped, her hair in hopeless tangles—that she was every bit as frightening to look at as the ragged members of the old Paris coven had been. Then she'd walk about my rooms in her dirty neglected garments staring at the cracks in the plaster or the light caught in the distortions of the hand-blown window glass.

Why should immortals pore over newspapers, she would ask, or dwell in palaces? Or carry gold in their pockets? Or write letters to a mortal family left behind?

In an eerie, rapid undertone she'd speak of cliffs she had climbed, the drifts of snow through which she had tumbled, the caves full of mysterious markings and ancient fossils that she had found.

Then she would go as silently as she'd come, and I would be left watching for her and waiting for her—and bitter and angry at her, and resenting her when she finally came back.

One night during our first visit to Verona, she startled me in a dark street.

"Is your father still alive?" she asked. Two months she'd been gone that time. I'd missed her bitterly, and there she was asking about them as if they mattered finally. Yet when I answered, "Yes, and very ill," she seemed not to hear. I tried to tell her then that things in France were bleak indeed. There would surely be a revolution. She shook her head and waved it all away.

“Don’t think about them anymore,” she said. “Forget them.” And once again, she was gone.

The truth was, I didn’t want to forget them. I never stopped writing to Roget for news of my family. I wrote to him more often than I wrote to Eleni at the theater. I’d sent for portraits of my nieces and nephews. I sent presents back to France from every place in which I stopped. And I did worry about the revolution, as any mortal Frenchman might.

And finally, as Gabrielle’s absences grew longer and our times together more strained and uncertain, I started to argue with her about these things.

“Time will take our family,” I said. “Time will take the France we knew. So why should I give them up now while I can still have them? I need these things, I tell you. This is what life is to me!”

But this was only the half of it. I didn’t have her any more than I had the others. She must have known what I was really saying. She must have heard the recriminations behind it all.

Little speeches like this saddened her. They brought out the tenderness in her. She’d let me get clean clothes for her, comb out her hair. And after that we’d hunt together and talk together. Maybe she would even go to the casinos with me, or to the opera. She’d be a great and beautiful lady for a little while.

And those moments still held us together. They perpetuated our belief that we were still a little coven, a pair of lovers, prevailing against the mortal world.

Gathered by the fire in some country villa, riding together on the driver’s seat of the coach as I held the reins, walking together through the midnight forest, we still exchanged our various observations now and then.

We even went in search of haunted houses together—a newfound pastime that excited us both. In fact, Gabrielle would sometimes return from one of her journeys precisely because she had heard of a ghostly visitation and she wanted me to go with her to see what we could.

Of course, most of the time we found nothing in the empty buildings where spirits were supposed to appear. And those wretched persons supposed to be possessed by the devil were often no more than commonly insane.

Yet there were times when we saw fleeting apparitions or mayhem

that we couldn't explain—objects flung about, voices roaring from the mouths of possessed children, icy currents that blew out the candles in a locked room.

But we never learned anything from all this. We saw no more than a hundred mortal scholars had already described.

It was just a game to us finally. And when I look back on it now, I know we went on with it because it kept us together—gave us convivial moments which otherwise we would not have had.

But Gabrielle's absences weren't the only thing destroying our affection for each other as the years passed. It was her manner when she was with me—the ideas she would put forth.

She still had that habit of speaking exactly what was on her mind and little more.

One night in our little house in the Via Ghibellina in Florence, she appeared after a month's absence and started to expound at once.

"You know the creatures of the night are ripe for a great leader," she said. "Not some superstitious mumbler of old rites, but a great dark monarch who will galvanize us according to new principles."

"What principles?" I asked. Ignoring the question, she went on.

"Imagine," she said, "not merely this stealthy and loathsome feeding on mortals, but something grand as the Tower of Babel was grand before it was brought down by the wrath of God. I mean a leader set up in a Satanic palace who sends out his followers to turn brother against brother, to cause mothers to kill their children, to put all the fine accomplishments of mankind to the torch, to scorch the land itself so that all would die of hunger, innocent and guilty! Make suffering and chaos wherever you turn, and strike down the forces of good so that men despair. Now that is something worthy of being called evil. That is what the work of a devil really is. We are nothing, you and I, except exotica in the Savage Garden, as you told me. And the world of men is no more or less now than what I saw in my books in the Auvergne years ago."

I hated this conversation. And yet I was glad she was in the room with me, that I was speaking to somebody other than a poor deceived mortal. That I wasn't alone with my letters from home.

"But what about your aesthetic questions?" I asked. "What you explained to Armand before, that you wanted to know why beauty existed and why it continues to affect us?"

She shrugged.

"When the world of man collapses in ruin, beauty will take over. The trees shall grow again where there were streets; the flowers will again cover the meadow that is now a dank field of hovels. That shall be the purpose of the Satanic master, to see the wild grass and the dense forest cover up all trace of the once great cities until nothing remains."

"And why call all this Satanic?" I asked. "Why not call it chaos? That is all it would be."

"Because," she said, "that is what men would call it. They invented Satan, didn't they? Satanic is merely the name they give to the behavior of those who would disrupt the orderly way in which men want to live."

"I don't see it."

"Well, use your preternatural brain, my blue-eyed one," she answered, "my golden-haired son, my handsome wolfkiller. It is very possible that God made the world as Armand said."

"This is what you discovered in the forest? You were told this by the leaves?"

She laughed at me.

"Of course, God is not necessarily anthropomorphic," she said. "Or what we would call, in our colossal egotism and sentimentality, 'a decent person.' But there is probably God. Satan, however, was man's invention, a name for the force that seeks to overthrow the civilized order of things. The first man who made laws—be he Moses or some ancient Egyptian king Osiris—that lawmaker created the devil. The devil meant the one who tempts you to break the laws. And we are truly Satanic in that we follow no law for man's protection. So why not truly disrupt? Why not make a blaze of evil to consume all the civilizations of the earth?"

I was too appalled to answer.

"Don't worry." She laughed. "I won't do it. But I wonder what will happen in the decades to come. Will not somebody do it?"

"I hope not!" I said. "Or let me put it this way. If one of us tries, then there shall be war."

"Why? Everyone will follow him."

"I will not. I will make the war."

"Oh, you are too amusing, Lestat," she said.

"It's petty," I said.

“Petty!” She had looked away, out into the courtyard, but she looked back and the color rose in her face. “To topple all the cities of the earth? I understood when you called the Theater of the Vampires petty, but now you are contradicting yourself.”

“It is petty to destroy anything merely for the sake of the destroying, don’t you think?”

“You’re impossible,” she said. “Sometime in the far future there may be such a leader. He will reduce man to the nakedness and fear from which he came. And we shall feed upon him effortlessly as we have always done, and the Savage Garden, as you call it, will cover the world.”

“I almost hope someone does attempt it,” I said. “Because I would rise up against him and do everything to defeat him. And possibly I could be saved, I could be good again in my own eyes, as I set out to save man from this.”

I was very angry. I’d left my chair and walked out into the courtyard. She came right behind me.

“You have just given the oldest argument in Christendom for the existence of evil,” she said. “It exists so that we may fight it and do good.”

“How dreary and stupid,” I said.

“What I don’t understand about you is this,” she said. “You hold to your old belief in goodness with a tenacity that is virtually unshakable. Yet you are so good at being what you are! You hunt your victims like a dark angel. You kill ruthlessly. You feast all the night long on victims when you choose.”

“So?” I looked at her coldly. “I don’t know how to be bad at being bad.”

She laughed.

“I was a good marksman when I was a young man,” I said, “a good actor on the stage. And now I am a good vampire. So much for our understanding of the word ‘good.’ ”

After she had gone, I lay on my back on the flagstones in the courtyard and looked up at the stars, thinking of all the paintings and the sculptures that I had seen merely in the single city of Florence. I knew that I hated places where there are only towering trees, and the softest and sweetest music to me was the sound of human voices. But what did

it matter really what I thought or felt?

But she didn't always bludgeon me with strange philosophy. Now and then when she appeared, she spoke of the practical things she'd learned. She was actually braver and more adventurous than I was. She taught me things.

We could sleep in the earth, she had ascertained that before we ever left France. Coffins and graves did not matter. And she would find herself rising naturally out of the earth at sunset even before she was awake.

And those mortals who did find us during the daylight hours, unless they exposed us to the sun at once, were doomed. For example, outside Palermo she had slept in a cellar far below an abandoned house, and when she had awakened, her eyes and face were burning as if they had been scalded, and she had in her right hand a mortal, quite dead, who had apparently attempted to disturb her rest.

"He was strangled," she said, "and my hand was still locked on his throat. And my face had been burned by the little light that leaked down from the opened door."

"What if there had been several mortals?" I asked, vaguely enchanted with her.

She shook her head and shrugged. She always slept in the earth now, not in cellars or coffins. No one would ever disturb her rest again. It did not matter to her.

I did not say so, but I believed there was a grace in sleeping in the crypt. There was a romance to rising from the grave. I was in fact going to the very opposite extreme in that I had coffins made for myself in places where we lingered, and I slept not in the graveyard or the church, as was our most common custom, but in hiding places within the house.

I can't say that she didn't sometimes patiently listen to me when I told her these things. She listened when I described to her the great works of art I had seen in the Vatican museum, or the chorus I had heard in the cathedral, or the dreams I had in the last hour before rising, dreams that seemed to be sparked by the thoughts of mortals passing my lair. But maybe she was watching my lips move. Who could possibly tell? And then she was gone again without explanation, and I walked the streets

alone, whispering aloud to Marius and writing to him the long, long messages that took the whole night sometimes to complete.

What did I want of her, that she be more human, that she be like me? Armand's predictions obsessed me. And how could she not think of them? She must have known what was happening, that we were growing ever farther apart, that my heart was breaking and I had too much pride to say it to her.

"Please, Gabrielle, I cannot endure the loneliness! Stay with me." By the time we left Italy I was playing dangerous little games with mortals. I'd see a man, or a woman—a human being who looked perfect to me spiritually—and I would follow the human about. Maybe for a week I'd do this, then a month, sometimes even longer than that. I'd fall in love with the being. I'd imagine friendship, conversation, intimacy that we could never have. In some magical and imaginary moment I would say: "But you see what I am," and this human being, in supreme spiritual understanding, would say: "Yes, I see. I understand."

Nonsense, really. Very like the fairy tale where the princess gives her selfless love to the prince who is enchanted and he is himself again and the monster no more. Only in this dark fairy tale I would pass right into my mortal lover. We would become one being, and I would be flesh and blood again.

Lovely idea, that. Only I began to think more and more of Armand's warnings, that I'd work the Dark Trick again for the same reasons I'd done it before. And I stopped playing the game altogether. I merely went hunting with all the old vengeance and cruelty, and it wasn't merely the evildoer I brought down.

In the city of Athens I wrote the following message to Marius:

"I do not know why I go on. I do not search for truth. I do not believe in it. I hope for no ancient secrets from you, whatever they may be. But I believe in something. Maybe simply in the beauty of the world through which I wander or in the will to live itself. This gift was given to me too early. It was given for no good reason. And already at the age of thirty mortal years, I have some understanding as to why so many of our kind have wasted it, given it up. Yet I continue. And I search for you."

How long I could have wandered through Europe and Asia in this fashion I do not know. For all my complaints about loneliness, I was used to it all. And there were new cities as there were new victims, new languages, and new music to hear. No matter what my pain, I fixed my mind on a new destination. I wanted to know all the cities of the earth, finally, even the far-off capitals of India and China, where the simplest objects would seem alien and the minds I pierced as strange as those of creatures from another world.

But as we went south from Istanbul into Asia Minor, Gabrielle felt the allure of the new and strange land even more strongly, so that she was scarcely ever at my side.

And things were reaching a horrid climax in France, not merely with the mortal world I still grieved for, but with the vampires of the theater as well.

3

Before I ever left Greece, I'd been hearing disturbing news from English and French travelers of the troubles at home. And when I reached the European hostelry in Ankara there was a large packet of letters waiting for me.

Roget had moved all of my money out of France, and into foreign banks. "You must not consider returning to Paris," he wrote. "I have advised your father and your brothers to keep out of all controversy. It is not the climate for monarchists here."

Eleni's letters spoke in their own way of the same things:

> Audiences want to see the aristocracy made fools of. Our little play featuring a clumsy queen puppet, who is trampled mercilessly by the mindless troop of puppet soldiers whom she seeks to command, draws loud laughter and screams.
>
> The clergy is also ripe for derision: In another little drama we have a bumptious priest come to chastise a group of dancing-girl marionettes for their indecent conduct. But alas, their dancing master, who is in fact a red-horned devil, turns the unfortunate cleric into a werewolf who ends his days kept by the laughing girls in a golden cage.
>
> All this is the genius of Our Divine Violinist, but we must now be with him every waking moment. To force him to write we tie him to the chair. We put ink and paper in front of him. And if this fails, we make him dictate as we write down the plays.
>
> In the streets he would accost the passers-by and tell them passionately there are horrors in this world of which they do not dream. And I assure you, if Paris were not so busy reading pamphlets that denounce Queen Marie Antoinette, he might have undone us all by now. Our Oldest Friend becomes more angry with every passing night.

Of course I wrote to her at once, begging her to be patient with Nicki,

to try to help him through these first years. “Surely he can be influenced,” I said. And for the first time I asked: “Would I have the power to alter things if I were to return?” I stared at the words for a long time before signing my name. My hands were trembling. Then I sealed the letter and posted it at once.

How could I go back? Lonely as I was, I couldn’t bear the thought of returning to Paris, of seeing that little theater again. And what would I do for Nicolas when I got there? Armand’s long-ago admonition was a din in my ears.

In fact, it seemed no matter where I was that Armand and Nicki were both with me, Armand full of grim warnings and predictions, and Nicolas taunting me with the little miracle of love turned into hate.

I had never needed Gabrielle as I did now. But she had gone ahead on our journey long ago. Now and then I remembered the way it had been before we ever left Paris. But I didn’t expect anything from her anymore.

At Damascus, Eleni’s answer was waiting for me.

> He despises you as much as ever. When we suggest that perhaps he should go to you, he laughs and laughs. I tell you these things not to haunt you but to let you know that we do our utmost to protect this child who should never have been Born to Darkness. He is overwhelmed by his powers, dazzled and maddened by his vision. We have seen it all and its sorry finish before.
>
> Yet he has written his greatest play this last month. The marionette dancers, *sans* strings for this one, are, in the flower of their youth, struck down by a pestilence and laid beneath tombstones and flower wreaths to rest. The priest weeps over them before he goes away. But a young violinist magician comes to the cemetery. And by means of his music makes them rise. As vampires dressed all in black silk ruffles and black satin ribbons, they come out of the graves, dancing merrily as they follow the violinist towards Paris, a beautifully rendered painting on the scrim. The crowd positively roars. I tell you we could feast on mortal victims on the stage and the Parisians, thinking it all the most novel illusion, would only cheer.

There was also a frightening letter from Roget:

Paris was in the grip of revolutionary madness. King Louis had been forced to recognize the National Assembly. The people of all classes were uniting against him as never before. Roget had sent a messenger south to see my family and try to determine the revolutionary mood in the countryside for himself.

I answered both letters with all the predictable concern and all the predictable feeling of helplessness.

But as I sent my belongings on to Cairo, I had the dread that all those things upon which I depended were in danger. Outwardly, I was unchanged as I continued my masquerade as the traveling gentleman; inwardly the demon hunter of the crooked back streets was silently and secretly lost.

Of course I told myself that it was important to go south to Egypt, that Egypt was a land of ancient grandeur and timeless marvels, that Egypt would enchant me and make me forget the things happening in Paris which I was powerless to change.

But there was a connection in my mind. Egypt, more than any other land the world over, was a place in love with death.

Finally Gabrielle came like a spirit out of the Arabian desert, and together we set sail.

It was almost a month before we reached Cairo, and when I found my belongings waiting for me in the European hostelry there was a strange package there.

I recognized Eleni's writing immediately, but I could not think why she would send me a package and I stared at the thing for a full quarter of an hour, my mind as blank as it had ever been.

There was not a word from Roget.

Why hasn't Roget written to me, I thought. What is this package? Why is it here?

At last I realized that for an hour I had been sitting in a room with a lot of trunks and packing cases and staring at a package and that Gabrielle, who had not seen fit to vanish yet, was merely watching me.

"Would you go out?" I whispered.

"If you wish," she said.

It was important to open this, yes, to open it and find out what it was.

Yet it seemed just as important for me to look around the barren little room and imagine that it was a room in a village inn in the Auvergne.

"I had a dream about you," I said aloud, glancing at the package. "I dreamed that we were moving through the world together, you and I, and we were both serene and strong. I dreamed we fed on the evildoer as Marius had done, and as we looked about ourselves we felt awe and sorrow at the mysteries we beheld. But we were strong. We would go on forever. And we talked. 'Our conversation' went on and on."

I tore back the wrapping and saw the case of the Stradivarius violin.

I went to say something again, just to myself, but my throat closed. And my mind couldn't carry out the words on its own. I reached for the letter which had slipped to one side over the polished wood.

> It has come to the worst, as I feared. Our Oldest Friend, maddened by the excesses of Our Violinist, finally imprisoned him in your old residence. And though his violin was given him in his cell, his hands were taken away.
>
> But understand that with us, such appendages can always be restored. And the appendages in question were kept safe by Our Oldest Friend, who allowed our wounded one no sustenance for five nights.
>
> Finally, after the entire troupe had prevailed upon Our Oldest Friend to release N. and give back to him all that was his, it was done.
>
> But N., maddened by the pain and the starvation—for this can alter the temperament completely—slipped into unbreakable silence and remained so for a considerable length of time.
>
> At last he came to us and spoke only to tell us that in the manner of a mortal he had put in order his business affairs. A stack of freshly written plays was ours to have. And we must call together for him somewhere in the countryside the ancient Sabbat with its customary blaze. If we did not, then he should make the theater his funeral pyre.
>
> Our Oldest Friend solemnly granted his wish and you have never seen such a Sabbat as this, for I think we looked all the more hellish in our wigs and fine clothes, our black ruffled vampire dancing costumes, forming the old circle, singing with an actor's bravado the

old chants.

"We should have done it on the boulevard," he said. "But here, send this on to my maker," and he put the violin in my hands. We began to dance, all of us, to induce the customary frenzy, and I think we were never more moved, never more in terror, never more sad. He went into the flames.

I know how this news will affect you. But understand we did all that we could to prevent what occurred. Our Oldest Friend was bitter and grieved. And I think you should know that when we returned to Paris, we discovered that N. had ordered the theater to be named officially the Theater of the Vampires and these words had already been painted on the front. As his best plays have always included vampires and werewolves and other such supernatural creatures, the public thinks the new title very amusing, and no one has moved to change it. It is merely clever in the Paris of these times.

Hours later when I finally went down the stairs into the street, I saw a pale and lovely ghost in the shadows—image of the young French explorer in soiled white linen and brown leather boots, straw hat down over the eyes.

I knew who she was, of course, and that we had once loved each other, she and I, but it seemed for the moment to be something I could scarce remember, or truly believe.

I think I wanted to say something mean to her, to wound her and drive her away. But when she came up beside me and walked with me, I didn't say anything. I merely gave the letter to her so that we didn't have to talk. And she read it and put it away, and then she had her arm around me again the way she used to long ago, and we were walking together through the black streets.

Smell of death and cooking fires, of sand and camel dung. Egypt smell. Smell of a place that has been the same for six thousand years.

"What can I do for you, my darling?" she whispered.

"Nothing," I said.

It was I who did it, I who seduced him, made him what he was, and left him there. It was I who subverted the path his life might have taken. And so in dark obscurity, removed from its human course, it comes to

this.

Later she stood silent as I wrote my message to Marius on an ancient temple wall. I told about the end of Nicolas, the violinist of the Theater of the Vampires, and I carved my words deep as any ancient Egyptian craftsman might have done. Epitaph for Nicki, a milestone in oblivion, which none might ever read or understand.

It was strange to have her there. Strange to have her staying with me hour by hour.

"You won't go back to France, will you?" she asked me finally. "You won't go back on account of what he's done?"

"The hands?" I asked her. "The cutting off of the hands?"

She looked at me and her face smoothed out as if some shock had robbed it of expression. But she knew. She had read the letter. What shocked her? The way I said it perhaps.

"You thought I would go back to get revenge?"

She nodded uncertainly. She didn't want to put the idea in my head.

"How could I do that?" I said. "It would be hypocrisy, wouldn't it, when I left Nicolas there counting on them all to do whatever had to be done?"

The changes in her face were too subtle to describe. I didn't like to see her feel so much. It wasn't like her.

"The fact is, the little monster was trying to help when he did it, don't you think, when he cut off the hands. It must have been a lot of trouble to him, really, when he could have burnt up Nicki so easily without a backward glance."

She nodded, but she looked miserable, and as luck would have it, beautiful, too. "I rather thought so," she said. "But I didn't think you would agree."

"Oh, I'm monster enough to understand it," I said. "Do you remember what you told me years ago, before we ever left home? You said it the very day that he came up the mountain with the merchants to give me the red cloak. You said that his father was so angry with him for his violin playing that he was threatening to break his hands. Do you think

we find our destiny somehow, no matter what happens? I mean, do you think that even as immortals we follow some path that was already marked for us when we were alive? Imagine it, the coven master cut off his hands."

It was clear in the nights that followed that she didn't want to leave me alone. And I sensed that she would have stayed on account of Nicki's death, no matter where we were. But it made a difference that we were in Egypt. It helped that she loved these ruins and these monuments as she had loved none before.

Maybe people had to be dead six thousand years for her to love them. I thought of saying that to her, teasing her with it a little, but the thought merely came and went. These monuments were as old as the mountains she loved. The Nile had coursed through the imagination of man since the dawn of recorded time.

We scaled the pyramids together, we climbed into the arms of the giant Sphinx. We pored over inscriptions on ancient stone fragments. We studied the mummies one could buy from thieves for a pittance, bits of old jewelry, pottery, glass. We let the water of the river move through our fingers, and we hunted the tiny streets of Cairo together, and we went into the brothels to sit back on the pillows and watch the boys dance and hear the musicians play a heated erotic music that drowned out for a little while the sound of a violin that was always in my head.

I found myself rising and dancing wildly to these exotic sounds, imitating the undulations of those who urged me on, as I lost all sense of time or reason in the wail of the horns, the strumming of the lutes.

Gabrielle sat still, smiling, with the brim of her soiled white straw hat over her eyes. We did not talk to each other anymore. She was just some pale and feline beauty, cheek smudged with dirt, who drifted through the endless night at my side. Her coat cinched by a thick leather belt, her hair in a braid down her back, she walked with a queen's posture and a vampire's languor, the curve of her cheek luminous in the darkness, her small mouth a blur of rose red. Lovely and soon to be gone again, no doubt.

Yet she remained with me even when I leased, a lavish little dwelling, once the house of a Mameluke lord, with gorgeously tiled floors and

elaborate tentwork hanging from its ceilings. She even helped me fill the courtyard with bougainvillea and palms and every kind of tropical plant until it was a verdant little jungle. She brought in the caged parrots and finches and brilliant canaries herself.

She even nodded now and then sympathetically when I murmured there were no letters from Paris, and I was frantic for news.

Why hadn't Roget written to me? Had Paris erupted into riots and mayhem? Well, it would never touch my distant provincial family, would it? But had something happened to Roget? Why didn't he write?

She asked me to go upriver with her. I wanted to wait for letters, to question the English travelers. But I agreed. After all, it was rather remarkable really that she wanted me to come with her. She was caring for me in her own way.

I knew she'd taken to dressing in fresh white linen frock coats and breeches only to please me. For me, she brushed out her long hair.

But it did not matter at all. I was sinking. I could feel it. I was drifting through the world as if it were a dream.

It seemed very natural and reasonable that around me I should see a landscape that looked exactly as it had thousands of years ago when artists painted it on the walls of royal tombs. Natural that the palm trees in the moonlight should look exactly as they looked then. Natural that the peasant should draw his water from the river in the same manner as he had done then. And the cows he watered were the same too.

Visions of the world when the world had been new.

Had Marius ever stood in these sands?

We wandered through the giant temple of Ramses, enchanted by the millions upon millions of tiny pictures cut into the walls. I kept thinking of Osiris, but the little figures were strangers. We prowled the ruins of Luxor. We lay in the riverboat together under the stars.

On our way back to Cairo when we came to the great Colossi of Memnon, she told in a passionate whisper how Roman emperors had journeyed to marvel at these statues just as we did now.

"They were ancient in the times of the Caesars," she said, as we rode our camels through the cool sands.

The wind was not so bad as it could have been on this night. We could see the immense stone figures clearly against the deep blue sky. Faces blasted away, they seemed nevertheless to stare forward, mute witnesses

to the passage of time, whose stillness made me sad and afraid.

I felt the same wonder I had known before the pyramids. Ancient gods, ancient mysteries. It made the chills rise. And yet what were these figures now but faceless sentinels, rulers of an endless waste?

"Marius," I whispered to myself. "Have you seen these? Will any one of us endure so long?"

But my reverie was broken by Gabrielle. She wanted to dismount and walk the rest of the way to the statues. I was game for it, though I didn't really know what to do with the big smelly stubborn camels, how to make them kneel down and all that.

She did it. And she left them waiting for us, and we walked through the sand.

"Come with me into Africa, into the jungles," she said. Her face was grave, her voice unusually soft.

I didn't answer for a moment. Something in her manner alarmed me. Or at least it seemed I should have been alarmed.

I should have heard a sound as sharp as the morning chime of Hell's Bells.

I didn't want to go into the jungles of Africa. And she knew I didn't. I was anxiously awaiting news of my family from Roget, and I had it in my mind to seek the cities of the Orient, to wander through India into China and on to Japan.

"I understand the existence you've chosen," she said. "And I've come to admire the perseverance with which you pursue it, you must know that."

"I might say the same of you," I said a little bitterly.

She stopped.

We were as near to the colossal statues as one should get, I suppose. And the only thing that saved them from overwhelming me was that there was nothing near at hand to put them in scale. The sky overhead was as immense as they were, and the sands endless, and the stars countless and brilliant and rising forever overhead.

"Lestat," she said slowly, measuring her words, "I am asking you to try, only once, to move through the world as I do."

The moon shone full on her, but the hat shadowed her small angular white face.

"Forget the house in Cairo," she said suddenly, dropping her voice as if in respect for the importance of what she said. "Abandon all your

valuables, your clothes, the things that link you with civilization. Come south with me, up the river into Africa. Travel with me as I travel."

Still I didn't answer. My heart was pounding.

She murmured softly under her breath that we would see the secret tribes of Africa unknown to the world. We would fight the crocodile and the lion with our bare hands. We might find the source of the Nile itself.

I began to tremble all over. It was as if the night were full of howling winds. And there was no place to go.

You are saying you will leave me forever if I don't come. Isn't that it?

I looked up at these horrific statues. I think I said:

"So it comes to this."

And this was why she had stayed close to me, this was why she had done so many little things to please, this was why we were together now. It had nothing to do with Nicki gone into eternity. It was another parting that concerned her now.

She shook her head as if communing with herself, debating on how to go on. In a hushed voice she described to me the heat of tropical nights, wetter, sweeter than this heat.

"Come with me, Lestat," she said. "By day I sleep in the sand. By night I am on the wing as if I could truly fly. I need no name. I leave no footprints. I want to go down to the very tip of Africa. I will be a goddess to those I slay."

She approached and slipped her arm about my shoulder and pressed her lips to my cheek, and I saw the deep glitter of her eyes beneath the brim of her hat. And the moonlight icing her mouth.

I heard myself sigh. I shook my head.

"I can't and you know it," I said. "I can't do it any more than you can stay with me."

All the way back to Cairo, I thought on it, what had come to me in those painful moments. What I had known but not said as we stood before the Colossi of Memnon in the sand.

She was already lost to me! She had been for years. I had known it when I came down the stairs from the room in which I grieved for Nicki and I had seen her waiting for me.

It had all been said in one form or another in the crypt beneath the tower years ago. She could not give me what I wanted of her. There was nothing I could do to make her what she would not be. And the truly

terrible part was this: she really didn't want anything of me!

She was asking me to come because she felt the obligation to do so. Pity, sadness—maybe those were also reasons. But what she really wanted was to be free.

She stayed with me as we returned to the city. She did and said nothing.

And I was sinking even lower, silent, stunned, knowing that another dreadful blow would soon fall. There was the clarity and the horror. She will say her farewell, and I can't prevent it. When do I start to lose my senses? When do I begin to cry uncontrollably?

Not now.

As we lighted the lamps of the little house, the colors assaulted me—Persian carpets covered with delicate flowers, the tentwork woven with a million tiny mirrors, the brilliant plumage of the fluttering birds.

I looked for a packet from Roget but there was none, and I became angry suddenly. Surely he would have written by now. I had to know what was going on in Paris! Then I became afraid.

"What the hell is happening in France?" I murmured. "I'll have to go and find other Europeans. The British, they always have information. They drag their damned Indian tea and their London *Times* with them wherever they go."

I was infuriated to see her standing there so still. It was as if something were happening in the room—that awful sense of tension and anticipation that I'd known in the crypt before Armand told us his long tale.

But nothing was happening, only that she was about to leave me forever. She was about to slip into time forever. And how would we ever find each other again!

"Damn it," I said. "I expected a letter." No servants. They hadn't known when we would be back. I wanted to send someone to hire musicians. I had just fed, and I was warm and I told myself that I wanted to dance.

She broke her stillness suddenly. She started to move in a rather deliberate way. With uncommon directness she went into the courtyard.

I watched her kneel down by the pond. There she lifted two blocks of paving, and she took out a packet and brushed the sandy earth off it, and she brought it to me.

Even before she brought it into the light I saw it was from Roget. This

had come before we had ever gone up the Nile, and she had hidden it!

"But why did you do this!" I said. I was in a fury. I snatched the package from her and put it down on the desk.

I was staring at her and hating her, hating her as never before. Not even in the egotism of childhood had I hated her as I did now!

"Why did you hide this from me!" I said.

"Because I wanted one chance!" she whispered. Her chin was trembling. Her lower lip quivered and I saw the blood tears. "But without this even," she said, "you have made your choice."

I reached down and tore the packet apart. The letter slipped out of it, along with folded clippings from an English paper. I unraveled the letter, my hands shaking, and I started to read:

> Monsieur, As you must know by now, on July 14, the mobs of Paris attacked the Bastille. The city is in chaos. There have been riots all over France. For months I have sought in vain to reach your people, to get them out of the country safely if I could.
>
> But on Monday last I received the word that the peasants and tenant farmers had risen against your father's house. Your brothers, their wives and children, and all who tried to defend the castle were slain before it was looted. Only your father escaped.
>
> Loyal servants managed to conceal him during the siege and later to get him to the coast. He is, on this very day, in the city of New Orleans in the former French colony of Louisiana. And he begs you to come to his aid. He is grief-stricken and among strangers. He begs for you to come.

There was more. Apologies, assurances, particulars … it ceased to make sense.

I put the letter down on the desk. I stared at the wood and the pool of light made by the lamp.

"Don't go to him," she said.

Her voice was small and insignificant in the silence. But the silence was like an immense scream.

"Don't go to him," she said again. The tears streaked her face like clown paint, two long streams of red coming down from her eyes.

"Get out," I whispered. The word trailed off and suddenly my voice

swelled again. “Get out,” I said. And again my voice didn’t stop. It merely went on until I said the words again with shattering violence: “GET OUT!”

4

I dreamed a dream of family. We were all embracing one another. Even Gabrielle in a velvet gown was there. The castle was blackened, all burnt up. The treasures I had deposited were melted or turned into ashes. It always comes back to ashes. But is the old quote actually ashes to ashes or dust to dust?

Didn't matter. I had gone back and made them all into vampires, and there we were, the House de Lioncourt, white-faced beauties even to the bloodsucking baby that lay in the cradle and the mother who bent to give it the wriggling long-tailed gray rat upon which it was to feed.

We laughed and we kissed one another as we walked through the ashes, my white brothers, their white wives, the ghostly children chattering together about victims, my blind father, who like a biblical figure had risen, crying:

"I CAN SEE!"

My oldest brother put his arm around me. He looked marvelous in decent clothes. I'd never seen him look so good, and the vampiric blood had made him so spare and so spiritual in expression.

"You know it's a damn good thing you came when you did with all the Dark Gifts." He laughed cheerfully.

"The Dark Tricks, dear, the Dark Tricks," said his wife.

"Because if you hadn't," he continued, "why, we'd all be dead!"

5

The house was empty. The trunks had been sent on. The ship would leave Alexandria in two nights. Only a small valise remained with me. On shipboard the son of the Marquis must now and then change his clothes. And, of course, the violin.

Gabrielle stood by the archway to the garden, slender, long-legged, beautifully angular in her white cotton garments, the hat on as always, her hair loose.

Was that for me, the long loose hair?

My grief was rising, a tide that included all the losses, the dead and the undead.

But it went away and the sense of sinking returned, the sense of the dream in which we navigate with or without will.

It struck me that her hair might have been described as a shower of gold, that all the old poetry makes sense when you look at one whom you have loved. Lovely the angles of her face, her implacable little mouth.

"Tell me what you need of me, Mother," I said quietly. Civilized this room. Desk. Lamp. Chair. All my brilliantly colored birds given away, probably for sale in the bazaar. Gray African parrots that live to be as old as men. Nicki had lived to be thirty.

"Do you require money from me?"

Great beautiful flush to her face, eyes a flash of moving light—blue and violet. For a moment she looked human. We might as well have been standing in her room at home. Books, the damp walls, the fire. Was she human then?

The brim of the hat covered her face completely for an instant as she bowed her head. Inexplicably she asked:

"But where will you go?"

"To a little house in the rue Dumaine in the old French city of New Orleans," I answered coldly, precisely. "And after he has died and is at rest, I haven't the slightest idea."

"You can't mean this," she said.

“I am booked on the next ship out of Alexandria,” I said. “I will go to Naples, then on to Barcelona. I will leave from Lisbon for the New World.”

Her face seemed to narrow, her features to sharpen. Her lips moved just a little but she didn’t say anything. And then I saw the tears rising in her eyes, and I felt her emotion as if it were reaching out to touch me. I looked away, busied myself with something on the desk, then simply held my hands very still so they wouldn’t tremble. I thought, I am glad Nicki took his hands with him into the fire, because if he had not, I would have to go back to Paris and get them before I could go on.

“But you can’t be going to him!” she whispered.

Him? Oh. My father.

“What does it matter? I am going!” I said.

She moved her head just a little in a negative gesture. She came near to the desk. Her step was lighter than Armand’s.

“Has any of our kind ever made such a crossing?” she asked under her breath.

“Not that I know of. In Rome they said no.”

“Perhaps it can’t be done, this crossing.”

“It can be done. You know it can.” We had sailed the seas before in our cork-lined coffins. Pity the leviathan who troubles me.

She came even nearer and looked down at me. And the pain in her face couldn’t be concealed anymore. Ravishing she was. Why had I ever dressed her in ball gowns or plumed hats or pearls?

“You know where to reach me,” I said, but the bitterness of my tone had no conviction to it. “The addresses of my banks in London and Rome. Those banks have lived as long as vampires already. They will always be there. You know all this, you’ve always known …”

“Stop,” she said under her breath. “Don’t say these things to me.”

What a lie all this was, what a travesty. It was just the kind of exchange she had always detested, the kind of talk she could never make herself. In my wildest imaginings, I had never expected it to be like this —that I should say cold things, that she should cry. I thought I would bawl when she said she was going. I thought I would throw myself at her very feet.

We looked at each other for a long moment, her eyes tinged with red, her mouth almost quivering.

And then I lost my control.

I rose and I went to her, and I gathered her small, delicate limbs in my arms. I determined not to let her go, no matter how she struggled. But she didn't struggle, and we both cried almost silently as if we couldn't make ourselves stop. But she didn't yield to me. She didn't melt in my embrace.

And then she drew back. She stroked my hair with both her hands, and leant forward and kissed me on the lips, and then moved away lightly and soundlessly.

"All right, then, my darling," she said.

I shook my head. Words and words and words unspoken. She had no use for them, and never had.

In her slow, languid way, hips moving gracefully, she went to the door to the garden and looked up at the night sky before she looked back at me.

"You must promise me something," she said finally.

Bold young Frenchman who moved with the grace of an Arab through places in a hundred cities where only an alleycat could safely pass.

"Of course," I answered. But I was so broken in spirit now I didn't want to talk anymore. The colors dimmed. The night was neither hot nor cold. I wished she would just go, yet I was terrified of the moment when that would happen, when I couldn't get her back.

"Promise me you will never seek to end it," she said, "without first being with me, without our coming together again."

For a moment I was too surprised to answer. Then I said:

"I will *never* seek to end it." I was almost scornful. "So you have my promise. It's simple enough to give. But what about you giving a promise to me? That you'll let me know where you go from here, where I can reach you—that you won't vanish as if you were something I imagined —"

I stopped. There had been a note of urgency in my voice, of rising hysteria. I couldn't imagine her writing a letter or posting it or doing any of the things that mortals habitually did. It was as if no common nature united us, or ever had.

"I hope you're right in your estimation of yourself," she said.

"I don't believe in anything, Mother," I said. "You told Armand long ago that you believe you'll find answers in the great jungles and forests;

that the stars will finally reveal a vast truth. But I don't believe in anything. And that makes me stronger than you think."

"Then why am I so afraid for you?" she asked. Her voice was little more than a gasp. I think I had to see her lips move in order to hear her.

"You sense my loneliness," I answered, "my bitterness at being shut out of life. My bitterness that I'm evil, that I don't deserve to be loved and yet I need love hungrily. My horror that I can never reveal myself to mortals. But these things don't stop me, Mother. I'm too strong for them to stop me. As you said yourself once, I am very good at being what I am. These things merely now and then make me suffer, that's all."

"I love you, my son," she said.

I wanted to say something about her promising, about the agents in Rome, that she would write. I wanted to say …

"Keep your promise," she said.

And quite suddenly I knew this was our last moment. I knew it and I could do nothing to change it.

"Gabrielle!" I whispered.

But she was already gone.

The room, the garden outside, the night itself, were silent and still.

Some time before dawn I opened my eyes. I was lying on the floor of the house, and I had been weeping and then I had slept.

I knew I should start for Alexandria, that I should go as far as I could and then down into the sand when the sun rose. It would feel so good to sleep in the sandy earth. I also knew that the garden gate stood open. That all the doors were unlocked.

But I couldn't move. In a cold silent way I imagined myself looking throughout Cairo for her. Calling her, telling her to come back. It almost seemed for a moment that I had done it, that, thoroughly humiliated, I had run after her, and I had tried to tell her again about destiny: that I had been meant to lose her just as Nicki had been meant to lose his hands. Somehow we had to subvert the destiny. We had to triumph after all.

Senseless that. And I hadn't run after her. I'd hunted and I had come back. She was miles from Cairo by now. And she was as lost from me as a tiny grain of sand in the air.

Finally after a long time I turned my head. Crimson sky over the garden, crimson light sliding down the far roof. The sun coming—and the warmth coming and the awakening of a thousand tiny voices all through the tangled alleyways of Cairo, and a sound that seemed to come out of the sand and the trees and the patch of grass themselves.

And very slowly, as I heard these things, as I saw the dazzle of the light moving on the roof, I realized that a mortal was near.

He was standing in the open gate of the garden, peering at my still form within the empty house. A young fair-haired European in Arab robes, he was. Rather handsome. And by the early light he saw me, his fellow European lying on the tile floor in the abandoned house.

I lay staring at him as he came into the deserted garden, the illumination of the sky heating my eyes, the tender skin around them starting to burn. Like a ghost in a white sheet he was in his clean headdress and robe.

I knew that I had to run. I had to get far away immediately and hide myself from the coming sun. No chance now to go into the crypt beneath the floor. This mortal was in my lair. There was not time enough even to kill him and get rid of him, poor unlucky mortal.

Yet I didn't move. And he came nearer, the whole sky flickering behind him, so that his figure narrowed and became dark.

"Monsieur!" The solicitous whisper, like the woman years and years ago in Notre Dame who had tried to help me before I made a victim of her and her innocent child. "Monsieur, what is it? May I be of help?"

Sunburnt face beneath the folds of the white headdress, golden eyebrows glinting, eyes gray like my own.

I knew I was climbing to my feet, but I didn't will myself to do it. I knew my lips were curling back from my teeth. And then I heard a snarl rise out of me and saw the shock on his face.

"Look!" I hissed, the fangs coming down over my lower lip. "Do you see!"

And rushing towards him, I grabbed his wrist and forced his open hand flat against my face.

"Did you think I was human?" I cried. And then I picked him up, holding him off his feet before me as he kicked and struggled uselessly. "Did you think I was your brother?" I shouted. And his mouth opened with a dry rasping noise, and then he screamed.

I hurled him up into the air and out over the garden, his body spinning round with arms and legs out before it vanished over the shimmering roof.

The sky was blinding fire.

I ran out of the garden gate and into the alleyway. I ran under tiny archways and through strange streets. I battered down gates and doorways, and hurled mortals out of my path. I bore through the very walls in front of me, the dust of the plaster rising to choke me, and shot out again into the packed mud alley and the stinking air. And the light came after me like something chasing me on foot.

And when I found a burnt-out house with its lattices in ruins, I broke into it and went down into the garden soil, digging deeper and deeper and deeper until I could not move my arms or my hands any longer.

I was hanging in coolness and in darkness.

I was safe.

6

I was dying. Or so I thought. I couldn't count how many nights had passed. I had to rise and go to Alexandria. I had to get across the sea. But this meant moving, turning over in the earth, giving in to the thirst. I wouldn't give in.

The thirst came. The thirst went. It was the rack and the fire, and my brain thirsted as my heart thirsted, and my heart grew bigger and bigger, and louder and louder, and still I wouldn't give in.

Maybe mortals above could hear my heart. I saw them now and then, spurts of flame against the darkness, heard their voices, babble of foreign tongue. But more often I saw only the darkness. Heard only the darkness.

I was finally just the thirst lying in the earth, with red sleep and red dreams, and the slow knowledge that I was now too weak to push up through the soft sandy clods, too weak, conceivably, to turn the wheel again.

That's right. I couldn't rise if I wanted to. I couldn't move at all. I breathed. I went on. But not the way that mortals breathe. My heart sounded in my ears.

Yet I didn't die. I just wasted. Like those tortured beings in the walls under les Innocents, deserted metaphors of the misery that is everywhere unseen, unrecorded, unacknowledged, unused.

My hands were claws, and my flesh was shrunk to the bones, and my eyes bulged from the sockets. Interesting that we can go on like this forever, that even when we don't drink, don't surrender to the luscious and fatal pleasure, we go on. Interesting that is, if each beat of the heart wasn't such agony.

And if I could stop thinking: Nicolas de Lenfent is gone. My brothers are gone. Pale taste of wine, sound of applause. *"But don't you think it's good what we do when we are there, that we make people happy?"*

"Good? What are you talking about? Good?"

"That it's good, that it does some good, that there is good in it! Dear God, even if there is no meaning in this world, surely there can still be goodness.

It's good to eat, to drink, to laugh … to be together …"

Laughter. That insane music. That din, that dissonance, that never ending shrill articulation of the meaninglessness …

Am I awake? Am I asleep? I am sure of one thing. I am a monster. And because I lie in torment in the earth, certain human beings move on through the narrow pass of life unmolested.

Gabrielle may be in the jungles of Africa now.

Sometime or other mortals came into the burnt-out house above, thieves hiding. Too much babble of foreign tongue. But all I had to do was sink deeper inside myself, withdraw even from the cool sand around me not to hear them.

Am I really trapped?

Stink of blood above.

Maybe they are the last hope, these two camping in the neglected garden, that the blood will draw me upwards, that it will make me turn over and stretch out these hideous—they must be—claws.

I will frighten them to death before I even drink. Shameful. I was always such a beautiful little devil, as the expression goes. Not now.

Now and then, it seems, Nicki and I are engaged in our best conversations. "I am beyond all pain and sin," he says to me. "But do you feel anything?" I ask. "Is that what it means to be free of this, that you no longer feel?" Not misery, not thirst, not ecstasy? It is interesting to me in these moments that our concept of heaven is one of ecstasy. The joys of heaven. That our concept of hell is pain. The fires of hell. So we don't think it very good not to *feel* anything, do we?

Can you give it up, Lestat? Or isn't it true that you'd rather fight the thirst with this hellish torment than die and feel nothing? At least you have the desire for blood, hot and delicious and filling every particle of you—blood.

How long are these mortals going to be here, above in my ruined garden? One night, two nights? I left the violin in the house where I lived. I have to get it, give it to some young mortal musicians, someone who will …

Blessed silence. Except for the playing of the violin. And Nicki's white fingers stabbing at the strings, and the bow streaking in the light, and

the faces of the immortal marionettes, half entranced, half amused. One hundred years ago, the people of Paris would have got him. He wouldn't have had to burn himself. Got me too maybe. But I doubt it.

No, there never would have been any witches' place for me.

He lives on in my mind now. Pious mortal phrase. And what kind of life is that? I don't like living here myself! What does it mean to live on in the mind of another? Nothing, I think. You aren't really there, are you?

Cats in the garden. Stink of cat blood.

Thank you, but I would rather suffer, rather dry up like a husk with teeth.

7

There was a sound in the night. What was it like?

The giant bass drum beaten slowly in the street of my childhood village as the Italian players announced the little drama to be performed from the back of their painted wagon. The great bass drum that I myself had pounded through the streets of the town during those precious days when I, the runaway boy, had been one of them.

But it was stronger than that. The booming of a cannon echoing through valleys and mountain passes? I felt it in my bones. I opened my eyes in the dark, and I knew it was drawing nearer.

The rhythm of steps, it had, or was it the rhythm of a heart beating? The world was filled with the sound.

It was a great ominous din that drew closer and closer. And yet some part of me knew there was no real sound, nothing a mortal ear could hear, nothing that rattled the china on its shelf or the glass windows. Or made the cats streak to the top of the wall.

Egypt lies in silence. Silence covers the desert on both sides of the mighty river. There is not even the bleat of sheep or the lowing of cattle. Or a woman crying somewhere.

Yet it was deafening, this sound.

For one second I was afraid. I stretched in the earth. I forced my fingers up towards the surface. Sightless, weightless, I was floating in the soil, and I couldn't breathe suddenly, I couldn't scream, and it seemed that if I could have screamed, I would have cried out so loud all the glass for miles about me would have been shattered. Crystal goblets would have been blown to bits, windows exploded.

The sound was louder, nearer. I tried to roll over and to gain the air but I couldn't.

And it seemed then I saw the thing, the figure approaching. A glimmer of red in the dark.

It was someone coming, this sound, some creature so powerful that even in the silence the trees and the flowers and the air itself did feel it. The dumb creatures of the earth did know. The vermin ran from it, the

felines darting out of its path.

Maybe this is death, I thought.

Maybe by some sublime miracle it is alive, Death, and it takes us into its arms, and it is no vampire, this thing, it is the very personification of the heavens.

And we rise up and up into the stars with it. We go past the angels and the saints, past illumination itself and into the divine darkness, into the void, as we pass out of existence. In oblivion we are forgiven all things.

The destruction of Nicki becomes a tiny pinpoint of vanishing light. The death of my brothers disintegrates into the great peace of the inevitable.

I pushed at the soil. I kicked at it, but my hands and legs were too weak. I tasted the sandy mud in my mouth. I knew I had to rise, and the sound was telling me to rise.

I felt it again like the roar of artillery: the cannon boom.

And quite completely I understood that it was looking for me, this sound, it was seeking me out. It was searching like a beam of light. I couldn't lie here anymore. I had to answer.

I sent it the wildest current of welcome. I told it I was here, and I heard my own miserable breaths as I struggled to move my lips. And the sound grew so loud that it was pulsing through every fiber of me. The earth was moving with it around me.

Whatever it was, it had come into the burnt-out ruined house.

The door had been broken away, as if the hinges had been anchored not in iron but in plaster. I saw all this against the backdrop of my closed eyes. I saw it moving under the olive trees. It was in the garden.

In a frenzy again I clawed towards the air. But the low, common noise I heard now was of a digging through the sand from above.

I felt something soft like velvet brush my face. And I saw overhead the gleam of the dark sky and the drift of the clouds like a veil over the stars, and never had the heavens in all their simplicity looked so blessed.

My lungs filled with air.

I let out a loud moan at the pleasure of it. But all these sensations were beyond pleasure. To breathe, to see light, these were miracles. And the drumming sound, the great deafening boom seemed the perfect accompaniment.

And he, the one who had been looking for me, the one from whom the

sound came, was standing over me.

The sound melted; it disintegrated until it was no more than the aftersound of a violin string. And I was rising, just as if I were being lifted, up out of the earth, though this figure stood with its hands at its side.

At last, it lifted its arms to enfold me and the face I saw was beyond the realm of all possibility. What one of us could have such a face? What did we know of patience, of seeming goodness, of compassion? No, it wasn't one of us. It couldn't have been. And yet it was. Preternatural flesh and blood like mine. Iridescent eyes, gathering the light from all directions, tiny eyelashes like strokes of gold from the finest pen.

And this creature, this powerful vampire, was holding me upright and looking into my eyes, and I believe that I said some mad thing, voiced some frantic thought, that I knew now the secret of eternity.

"Then tell it to me," he whispered, and he smiled. The purest image of human love.

"O God, help me. Damn me to the pit of hell." This was my voice speaking. I can't look on this beauty.

I saw my arms like bones, hands like birds' talons. Nothing can live and be what I am now, this wraith. I looked down at my legs. They were sticks. The clothing was falling off me. I couldn't stand or move, and the remembered sensation of blood flowing in my mouth suddenly overcame me.

Like a dull blaze before me I saw his red velvet clothes, the cloak that covered him to the ground, the dark red gloved hands with which he held me. His hair was thick, white and gold strands mingled in waves fallen loosely around his face, and over his broad forehead. And the blue eyes might have been brooding under their heavy golden brows had they not been so large, so softened with the feeling expressed in the voice.

A man in the prime of life at the moment of the immortal gift. And the square face, with its slightly hollowed cheeks, its long full mouth, stamped with terrifying gentleness and peace.

"Drink," he said, eyebrows rising slightly, lips shaping the word carefully, slowly, as if it were a kiss.

As Magnus had done on that lethal night so many eons ago, he raised his hand now and moved the cloth back from his throat. The vein, dark purple beneath the translucent preternatural skin, offered itself. And the

sound commenced again, that overpowering sound, and it lifted me right off the earth and drew me into it.

Blood like light itself, liquid fire. Our blood.

And my arms gathering incalculable strength, winding round his shoulders, my face pressed to his cool white flesh, the blood shooting down into my loins and every vessel in my body ignited with it. How many centuries had purified this blood, distilled its power?

It seemed beneath the roar of the flow he spoke. He said again:

“Drink, my young one, my wounded one.”

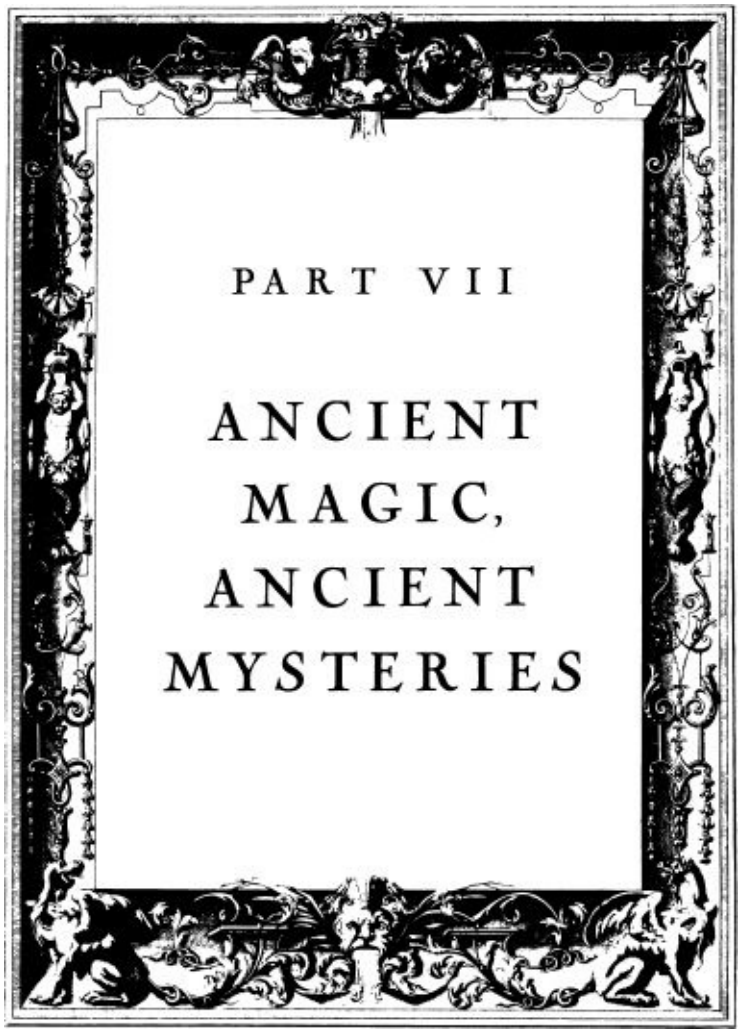
I felt his heart swell, his body undulate, and we were sealed against each other.

I think I heard myself say:

“Marius.”

And he answered:

“Yes.”



PART VII

ANCIENT MAGIC, ANCIENT MYSTERIES

1

When I awoke, I was on board a ship. I could hear the creak of the boards, smell the sea. I could smell the blood of those who manned the ship. And I knew that it was a galley because I could hear the rhythm of the oars under the low rumbling of the giant canvas sails.

I couldn't open my eyes, couldn't make my limbs move. Yet I was calm. I didn't thirst. In fact, I experienced an extraordinary sense of peace. My body was warm as if I had only just fed, and it was pleasant to lie there, to dream waking dreams on the gentle undulation of the sea. Then my mind began to clear.

I knew that we were slipping very fast through rather still waters. And that the sun had just gone down. The early evening sky was darkening, the wind was dying away. And the sound of the oars dipping and rising was as soothing as it was clear.

My eyes were now open.

I was no longer in the coffin. I had just come out of the rear cabin of the long vessel and I was standing on the deck.

I breathed the fresh salt air and I saw the lovely incandescent blue of the twilight sky and the multitude of brilliant stars overhead. Never from land do the stars look like that. Never are they so near.

There were dark mountainous islands on either side of us, cliffs sprinkled with tiny flickering lights. The air was full of the scent of green things, of flowers, of land itself.

And the small sleek vessel was moving fast to a narrow pass through the cliffs ahead.

I felt uncommonly clearheaded and strong. There was a moment's temptation to try to figure out how I had gotten here, whether I was in the Aegean or the Mediterranean itself, to know when we had left Cairo and if the things I remembered had really taken place.

But this slipped away from me in some quiet acceptance of what was happening.

Marius was up ahead on the bridge before the mainmast. I walked towards the bridge and stood beside it, looking up.

He was wearing the long red velvet cloak he had worn in Cairo, and his full white blond hair was blown back by the wind. His eyes were fixed on the pass before us, the dangerous rocks that protruded from the shallow water, his left hand gripping the rail of the little deck.

I felt an overpowering attraction to him, and the sense of peace in me expanded.

There was no forbidding grandeur to his face or his stance, no loftiness that might have humbled me and made me afraid. There was only a quiet nobility about him, his eyes rather wide as they looked forward, the mouth suggesting a disposition of exceptional gentleness as before.

Too smooth the face, yes. It had the sheen of scar tissue, it was so smooth, and it might have startled, even frightened, in a dark street. It gave off a faint light. But the expression was too warm, too human in its goodness to do anything but invite.

Armand might have looked like a god out of Caravaggio, Gabrielle a marble archangel at the threshold of a church.

But this figure above me was that of an immortal man.

And the immortal man, with his right hand outstretched before him, was silently but unmistakably piloting the ship through the rocks before the pass.

The waters around us shimmered like molten metal, flashing azure, then silver, then black. They sent up a great white froth as the shallow waves beat upon the rocks.

I drew closer and as quietly as I could I climbed the small steps to the bridge.

Marius didn't take his eyes off the waters for an instant, but he reached out with his left hand and took my hand, which was at my side.

Warmth. Unobtrusive pressure. But this wasn't the moment for speaking and I was surprised that he had acknowledged me at all.

His eyebrows came together and his eyes narrowed slightly, and, as if impelled by his silent command, the oarsmen slowed their stroke.

I was fascinated by what I was watching, and I realized as I deepened my own concentration that I could feel the power emanating from him, a low pulse that came in time with his heart.

I could also hear mortals on the surrounding cliffs, and on the narrow island beaches stretching out to our right and to our left. I saw them gathered on the promontories, or running towards the edge of the water

with torches in their hands. I could hear thoughts ringing out like voices from them as they stood in the thin evening darkness looking out to the lanterns of our ship. The language was Greek and not known to me, but the message was clear:

The lord is passing. Come down and look: the lord is passing. And the word "lord" incorporated in some vague way the supernatural in its meaning. And a reverence, mingled with excitement, emanated like a chorus of overlapping whispers from the shores.

I was breathless listening to this! I thought of the mortal I'd terrified in Cairo, the old debacle on Renaud's stage. But for those two humiliating incidents, I'd passed through the world invisibly for ten years, and these people, these dark-clad peasants gathered to watch the passing of the ship, knew what Marius was. Or at least they knew something of what he was. They were not saying the Greek word for vampire, which I had come to understand.

But we were leaving the beaches behind. The cliffs were closing on either side of us. The ship glided with its oars above water. The high walls diminished the sky's light.

In a few moments, I saw a great silver bay opening before us, and a sheer wall of rock rising straight ahead, while gentler slopes enclosed the water on either side. The rock face was so high and so steep that I could make out nothing at the top.

The oarsmen cut their speed as we came closer. The boat was turning ever so slightly to the side. And as we drifted on towards the cliff, I saw the dim shape of an old stone embankment covered with gleaming moss. The oarsmen had lifted their oars straight towards the sky.

Marius was as still as ever, his hand exerting a gentle force on mine, as with the other he pointed towards the embankment and the cliff that rose like the night itself, our lanterns sending up their glare on the wet rock.

When we were no more than five or six feet from the embankment—dangerously close for a ship of this size and weight it seemed—I felt the ship stop.

Then Marius took my hand and we went across the deck together and mounted the side of the ship. A dark-haired servant approached and placed a sack in Marius's hand. And together, Marius and I leapt over the water to the stone embankment, easily clearing the distance without a

sound.

I glanced back to see the ship rocking slightly. The oars were being lowered again. Within seconds the ship was heading for the distant lights of a tiny town on the far side of the bay.

Marius and I stood alone in the darkness, and when the ship had become only a dark speck on the glimmering water, he pointed to a narrow stairway cut into the rock.

“Go before me, Lestat,” he said.

It felt good to be climbing. It felt good to be moving up swiftly, following the rough-cut steps and the zigzag turns, and feeling the wind get stronger, and seeing the water become ever more distant and frozen as if the movement of the waves had been stopped.

Marius was only a few steps behind me. And again, I could feel and hear that pulse of power. It was like a vibration in my bones.

The rough-cut steps disappeared less than halfway up the cliff, and I was soon following a path not wide enough for a mountain goat. Now and then boulders or outcroppings of stone made a margin between us and a possible fall to the water below. But most of the time the path itself was the only outcropping on the cliff face, and as we went higher and higher, even I became afraid to look down.

Once, with my hand around a tree branch, I looked back and saw Marius moving steadily towards me, the bag slung over his shoulder, his right hand hanging free. The bay, the distant little town, and the harbor, all this appeared toylike, a map made by a child on a tabletop with a mirror and sand and tiny bits of wood. I could even see beyond the pass into the open water, and the deep shadowy shapes of other islands rising out of the motionless sea. Marius smiled and waited. Then he whispered very politely:

“Go on.”

I must have been spellbound. I started up again and didn’t stop until I reached the summit. I crawled over a last jut of rocks and weeds and climbed to my feet in soft grass.

Higher rocks and cliffs lay ahead, and seeming to grow out of them was an immense fortress of a house. There were lights in its windows, lights on its towers.

Marius put his arm around my shoulder and we went towards the entrance.

I felt his grip loosen on me as he paused in front of the massive door. Then came the sound of a bolt sliding back inside. The door swung open and his grip became firm again. He guided me into the hallway where a pair of torches provided an ample light.

I saw with a little shock that there was no one there who could have moved the bolt or opened the door for us. He turned and he looked at the door and the door closed.

"Slide the bolt," he said.

I wondered why he didn't do it the way he had done everything else. But I put it in place immediately as he asked.

"It's easier that way, by far," he said, and a little mischief came into his expression. "I'll show you to the room where you may sleep safely, and you may come to me when you wish."

I could hear no one else in the house. But mortals had been here, that I could tell. They'd left their scent here and there. And the torches had all been lighted only a short time ago.

We went up a little stairway to the right, and when I came out into the room that was to be mine, I was stunned.

It was a huge chamber, with one entire wall open to a stone-railed terrace that hung over the sea.

When I turned around, Marius was gone. The sack was gone. But Nicki's violin and my valise of belongings lay on a stone table in the middle of the room.

A current of sadness and relief passed through me at the sight of the violin. I had been afraid that I had lost it.

There were stone benches in the room, a lighted oil lamp on a stand. And in a far niche was a pair of heavy wooden doors.

I went to these and opened them and found a little passage which turned sharply in an L. Beyond the bend was a sarcophagus with a plain lid. It had been cleanly fashioned out of diorite, which to my knowledge is one of the hardest stones on earth. The lid was immensely heavy, and when I examined the inside of it I saw that it was plated in iron and contained a bolt that could be slipped from within.

Several glittering objects lay on the bottom of the box itself. As I lifted them, they sparkled almost magically in the light that leaked in from the room.

There was a golden mask, its features carefully molded, the lips

closed, the eye holes narrow but open, attached to a hood made up of layered plates of hammered gold. The mask itself was heavy but the hood was very light and very flexible, each little plate strung to the others by gold thread. And there was also a pair of leather gloves covered completely in tinier more delicate gold plates like scales. And finally a large folded blanket of the softest red wool with one side sewn with larger gold plates.

I realized that if I put on this mask and these gloves—if I laid over me the blanket—then I would be protected from the light if anyone opened the lid of the sarcophagus while I slept.

But it wasn't likely that anyone could get into the sarcophagus. And the doors of this L-shaped chamber were also covered with iron, and they too had their iron bolt.

Yet there was a charm to these mysterious objects. I liked to touch them, and I pictured myself wearing them as I slept. The mask reminded me of the Greek masks of comedy and tragedy.

All of these things suggested the burial of an ancient king.

I left these things a little reluctantly.

I came back out into the room, took off the garments I'd worn during my nights in the earth in Cairo, and put on fresh clothes. I felt rather absurd standing in this timeless place in a violet blue frock coat with pearl buttons and the usual lace shirt and diamond buckle satin shoes, but these were the only clothes I had. I tied back my hair in a black ribbon like any proper eighteenth-century gentleman and went in search of the master of the house.

2

Torches had been lighted throughout the house. Doors lay open. Windows were uncovered as they looked out over the firmament and the sea.

And as I left the barren little stairs that led down from my room, I realized that for the first time in my wandering I was truly in the safe refuge of an immortal being, furnished and stocked with all the things that an immortal being might want.

Magnificent Grecian urns stood on pedestals in the corridors, great bronze statues from the Orient in their various niches, exquisite plants bloomed at every window and terrace open to the sky. Gorgeous rugs from India, Persia, China covered the marble floors wherever I walked.

I came upon giant stuffed beasts mounted in lifelike attitudes—the brown bear, the lion, the tiger, even the elephant standing in his own immense chamber, lizards as big as dragons, birds of prey clutching dried branches made to look like the limbs of real trees.

But the brilliantly colored murals covering every surface from floor to ceiling dominated all.

In one chamber was a dark vibrant painting of the sunburnt Arabian desert complete with an exquisitely detailed caravan of camels and turbaned merchants moving over the sand. In another room a jungle came to life around me, swarming with delicately rendered tropical blossoms, vines, carefully drawn leaves.

The perfection of the illusion startled me, enticed me, but the more I peered into the pictures the more I saw.

There were creatures everywhere in the texture of the jungle—insects, birds, worms in the soil—a million aspects of the scene that gave me the feeling, finally, that I had slipped out of time and space into something that was more than a painting. Yet it was all quite flat upon the wall.

I was getting dizzy. Everywhere I turned walls gave out on new vistas. I couldn't name some of the tints and hues I saw.

As for the style of all this painting, it baffled me as much as it delighted me. The technique seemed utterly realistic, using the classical

proportions and skills that one sees in all the later Renaissance painters: da Vinci, Raphael, Michelangelo, as well as the painters of more recent times, Watteau, Fragonard. The use of light was spectacular. Living creatures seemed to breathe as I looked on.

But the details. The details couldn't have been realistic or in proportion. There were simply too many monkeys in the jungle, too many bugs crawling on the leaves. There were thousands of tiny insects in one painting of a summer sky.

I came into a large gallery walled on either side by painted men and women staring at me, and I almost cried out. Figures from all ages these were—bedouins, Egyptians, then Greeks and Romans, and knights in armor, and peasants and kings and queens. There were Renaissance people in doublets and leggings, the Sun King with his massive mane of curls, and finally the people of our own age.

But again, the details made me feel as if I were imagining them—the droplets of water clinging to a cape, the cut on the side of a face, the spider half-crushed beneath a polished leather boot.

I started to laugh. It wasn't funny. It was just delightful. I began to laugh and laugh.

I had to force myself out of this gallery and the only thing that gave me the willpower was the sight of a library, blazing with light.

Walls and walls of books and rolled manuscripts, giant glistening world globes in their wooden cradles, busts of the ancient Greek gods and goddesses, great sprawling maps.

Newspapers in all languages lay in stacks on tables. And there were strewn everywhere curious objects. Fossils, mummified hands, exotic shells. There were bouquets of dried flowers, figurines and fragments of old sculpture, alabaster jars covered with Egyptian hieroglyphs.

And everywhere in the center of the room, scattered among the tables and the glass cases, were comfortable chairs with footstools, and candelabra or oil lamps.

In fact, the impression was one of comfortable messiness, of great long hours of pure enjoyment, of a place that was human in the extreme. Human knowledge, human artifacts, chairs in which humans might sit.

I stayed a long time here, perusing the Latin and Greek titles. I felt a little drunk, as if I'd happened on a mortal with a lot of wine in his blood.

But I had to find Marius. I went on out of this room, down a little stairs, and through another painted hallway to an even larger room that was also full of light.

I heard the singing of the birds and smelled the perfume of the flowers before I even reached this place. And then I found myself lost in a forest of cages. There were not only birds of all sizes and colors here, there were monkeys and baboons, all of them gone wild in their little prisons as I made my way around the room.

Potted plants crowded against the cages—ferns and banana trees, cabbage roses, moonflower, jasmine, and other sweetly fragrant nighttime vines. There were purple and white orchids, waxen flowers that trapped insects in their maw, little trees groaning with peaches and lemons and pears.

When I finally emerged from this little paradise, it was into a hall of sculptures equal to any gallery in the Vatican museum. And I glimpsed adjoining chambers full of paintings, Oriental furnishings, mechanical toys.

Of course I was no longer lingering on each object or new discovery. To learn the contents of this house would have taken a lifetime. And I pressed on.

I didn't know where I was going. But I knew that I was being allowed to see all these things.

Finally I heard the unmistakable sound of Marius, that low rhythmic beat of the heart which I had heard in Cairo. And I moved towards it.

3

I came into a brightly illuminated eighteenth-century salon. The stone walls had been covered in fine rosewood paneling with framed mirrors rising to the ceiling. There were the usual painted chests, upholstered chairs, dark and lush landscapes, porcelain clocks. A small collection of books in the glass-doored bookcases, a newspaper of recent date lying on a small table beside a brocaded winged chair.

High narrow French doors opened onto the stone terrace, where banks of white lilies and red roses gave off their powerful perfume.

And there, with his back to me, at the stone railing stood an eighteenth-century man.

It was Marius when he turned around and gestured for me to come out.

He was dressed as I was dressed. The frock coat was red, not violet, the lace Valenciennes, not Bruxelles. But he wore very much the same costume, his shining hair tied back loosely in a dark ribbon just as mine was, and he looked not at all ethereal as Armand might have, but rather like a superpresence, a creature of impossible whiteness and perfection who was nevertheless connected to everything around him—the clothes he wore, the stone railing on which he laid his hand, even the moment itself in which a small cloud passed over the bright half moon.

I savored the moment: that he and I were about to speak, that I was really here. I was still clearheaded as I had been on the ship. I couldn't feel thirst. And I sensed that it was his blood in me that was sustaining me. All the old mysteries collected in me, arousing me and sharpening me. Did Those Who Must Be Kept lie somewhere on this island? Would all these things be known?

I went up to the railing and stood beside him, glancing out over the sea. His eyes were now fixed on an island not a half mile off the shore below. He was listening to something that I could not hear. And the side of his face, in the light from the open doors behind us, looked too frighteningly like stone.

But immediately, he turned to me with a cheerful expression, the

smooth face vitalized impossibly for an instant, and then he put his arm around me and guided me back into the room.

He walked with the same rhythm as a mortal man, the step light but firm, the body moving through space in the predictable way.

He led me to a pair of winged chairs that faced each other and there we sat down. This was more or less the center of the room. The terrace was to my right, and we had a clear illumination from the chandelier above as well as a dozen or so candelabra and sconces on the paneled walls.

Natural, civilized it all was. And Marius settled in obvious comfort on the brocade cushions and let his fingers curl around the arms of the chair.

As he smiled, he looked entirely human. All the lines, the animation were there until the smile melted again.

I tried not to stare at him, but I couldn't help it.

And something mischievous crept into his face.

My heart was skipping.

"What would be easier for you?" he asked in French. "That I tell you why I brought you here, or that you tell me why you asked to see me?"

"Oh, the former would be easier," I said. "You talk."

He laughed in a soft ingratiating fashion.

"You're a remarkable creature," he said. "I didn't expect you to go down into the earth so soon. Most of us experience the first death much later—after a century, maybe even two."

"The first death? You mean it's common—to go into the earth the way I did?"

"Among those who survive, it's common. We die. We rise again. Those who don't go into the earth for periods of time usually do not last."

I was amazed, but it made perfect sense. And the awful thought struck me that if only Nicki had gone down into the earth instead of into the fire—But I couldn't think of Nicki now. I would start asking inane questions if I did. Is Nicki somewhere? Has Nicki stopped? Are my brothers somewhere? Have they simply stopped?

"But I shouldn't have been so surprised that it happened when it did in your case," he resumed as if he hadn't heard these thoughts, or didn't want to address them just yet. "You've lost too much that was precious to you. You saw and learned a great deal very fast."

“How do you know what’s been happening to me?” I asked.

Again, he smiled. He almost laughed. It was astonishing the warmth emanating from him, the immediacy. The manner of his speech was lively and absolutely current. That is, he spoke like a well-educated Frenchman.

“I don’t frighten you, do I?” he asked.

“I didn’t think that you were trying to,” I said.

“I’m not.” He made an offhand gesture. “But your self-possession is a little surprising, nevertheless. To answer your question, I know things that happen to our kind all over the world. And frankly I do not always understand how or why I know. The power increases with age as do all our powers, but it remains inconsistent, not easily controlled. There are moments when I can hear what is happening with our kind in Rome or even in Paris. And when another calls to me as you have done, I can hear the call over amazing distances. I can find the source of it, as you have seen for yourself.

“But information comes to me in other ways as well. I know of the messages you left for me on walls throughout Europe because I read them. And I’ve heard of you from others. And sometimes you and I have been near to each other—nearer than you ever supposed—and I have heard your thoughts. I can hear your thoughts now, of course, as I’m sure you realize. But I prefer to communicate with words.”

“Why?” I asked. “I thought the older ones would dispense with speech altogether.”

“Thoughts are imprecise,” he said. “If I open my mind to you I cannot really control what you read there. And when I read your mind it is possible for me to misunderstand what I hear or see. I prefer to use speech and let my mental faculties work with it. I like the alarm of sound to announce my important communications. For my voice to be received. I do not like to penetrate the thoughts of another without warning. And quite frankly, I think speech is the greatest gift mortals and immortals share.”

I didn’t know what to answer to this. Again, it made perfect sense. Yet I found myself shaking my head. “And your manner,” I said. “You don’t move the way Armand or Magnus moved, the way I thought the ancient ones—”

“You mean like a phantom? Why should I?” He laughed again, softly,

charming me. He slumped back in the chair a little further and raised his knee, resting his foot on the seat cushion just as a man might in his private study.

"There were times, of course," he said, "when all of that was very interesting. To glide without seeming to take steps, to assume physical positions that are uncomfortable or impossible for mortals. To fly short distances and land without a sound. To move objects by the mere wish to do so. But it can be crude, finally. Human gestures are *elegant*. There is wisdom in the flesh, in the way the human body does things. I like the sound of my foot touching the ground, the feel of objects in my fingers. Besides, to fly even short distances and to move things by sheer will alone is exhausting. I can do it when I have to, as you've seen, but it's much easier to use my hands to do things."

I was delighted by this and didn't try to hide it.

"A singer can shatter a glass with the proper high note," he said, "but the simplest way for anyone to break a glass is simply to drop it on the floor."

I laughed outright this time.

I was already getting used to the shifts in his face between masklike perfection and expression, and the steady vitality of his gaze that united both. The impression remained one of evenness and openness—of a startlingly beautiful and perceptive man.

But what I could not get used to was the sense of presence, that something immensely powerful, dangerously powerful, was so contained and immediately there.

I became a little agitated suddenly, a little overwhelmed. I felt the unaccountable desire to weep.

He leaned forward and touched the back of my hand with his fingers, and a shock coursed through me. We were connected in the touch. And though his skin was silky like the skin of all vampires, it was less pliant. It was like being touched by a stone hand in a silk glove.

"I brought you here because I want to tell you what I know," he said. "I want to share with you whatever secrets I possess. For several reasons, you have attracted me."

I was fascinated. And I felt the possibility of an overpowering love.

"But I warn you," he said, "there's a danger in this. I don't possess the ultimate answers. I can't tell you who made the world or why man

exists. I can't tell you why we exist. I can only tell you more about us than anyone else has told you so far. I can show you Those Who Must Be Kept and tell you what I know of them. I can tell you why I *think* I have managed to survive for so long. This knowledge may change you somewhat. That's all knowledge ever really does, I suppose …"

"Yes—"

"But when I've given all I have to give, you will be exactly where you were before: an immortal being who must find his own reasons to exist."

"Yes," I said, "reasons to exist." My voice was a little bitter. But it was good to hear it spelled out that way.

But I felt a dark sense of myself as a hungry, vicious creature, who did a very good job of existing without reasons, a powerful vampire who always took exactly what he wanted, no matter who said what. I wondered if he knew how perfectly awful I was.

The reason to kill was the blood.

Acknowledged. The blood and the sheer ecstasy of the blood. And without it we are husks as I was in the Egyptian earth.

"Just remember my warning," he said, "that the circumstances will be the same afterwards. Only you might be changed. You might be more bereft than before you came here."

"But why have you chosen to reveal things to me?" I asked. "Surely others have gone looking for you. You must know where Armand is."

"There are several reasons, as I told you," he said. "And probably the strongest reason is the manner in which you sought me. Very few beings really seek knowledge in this world. Mortal or immortal, few really *ask*. On the contrary, they try to wring from the unknown the answers they have already shaped in their own minds—justifications, confirmations, forms of consolation without which they can't go on. To really ask is to open the door to the whirlwind. The answer may annihilate the question and the questioner. But you have been truly asking since you left Paris ten years ago.

I understood this, but only inarticulately.

"You have few preconceptions," he said. "In fact, you astound me because you admit to such extraordinary simplicity. You want a purpose. You want love."

"True," I said with a little shrug. "Rather crude, isn't it?"

He gave another soft laugh:

“No. Not really. It’s as if eighteen hundred years of Western civilization have produced an innocent.”

“An innocent? You can’t be speaking of me.”

“There is so much talk in this century of the nobility of the savage,” he explained, “of the corrupting force of civilization, of the way we must find our way back to the innocence that has been lost. Well, it’s all nonsense really. Truly primitive people can be monstrous in their assumptions and expectations. They cannot conceive of innocence. Neither can children. But civilization has at last created men who behave innocently. For the first time they look about themselves and say, ‘What the hell is all this!’ ”

“True. But I’m not innocent,” I said. “Godless yes. I come from godless people, and I’m glad of it. But I know what good and evil are in a very practical sense, and I am Typhon, the slayer of his brother, not the killer of Typhon, as you must know.”

He nodded with a slight lift of his eyebrows. He did not have to smile anymore to look human. I was seeing an expression of emotion now even when there were no lines whatsoever in his face.

“But you don’t seek any system to justify it either,” he said. “That’s what I mean by innocence. You’re guilty of killing mortals because you’ve been made into something that feeds on blood and death, but you’re not guilty of lying, of creating great dark and evil systems of thought within yourself.”

“True.”

“To be godless is probably the first step to innocence,” he said, “to lose the sense of sin and subordination, the false grief for things supposed to be lost.”

“So by innocence you mean not an absence of experience, but an absence of illusions.”

“An absence of need for illusions,” he said. “A love of and respect for what is right before your eyes.”

I sighed. I sat back in the chair for the first time, thinking this over, what it had to do with Nicki and what Nicki said about the light, always the light. Had he meant this?

Marius seemed now to be pondering. He too was sitting back in his chair, as he had been all along, and he was looking off at the night sky beyond the open doors, his eyes narrow, his mouth a little tense.

“But it wasn’t merely your spirit that attracted me,” he said, “your honesty, if you will. It was the way you came into being as one of us.”

“Then you know all that, too.”

“Yes, everything,” he said, dismissing that. “You have come into being at the end of an era, at a time when the world faces changes undreamed of. And it was the same with me. I was born and grew to manhood in a time when the ancient world, as we call it now, was coming to a close. Old faiths were worn out. A new god was about to rise.”

“When was this time?” I asked excitedly.

“In the years of Augustus Caesar, when Rome had just become an empire, when faith in the gods was, for all lofty purposes, dead.”

I let him see the shock and the pleasure spread over my face. I never doubted him for a moment. I put my hand to my head as if I had to steady myself a little.

But he went on:

“The common people of those days,” he said, “still believed in religion just as they do now. And for them it was custom, superstition, elemental magic, the use of ceremonies whose origins were lost in antiquity, just as it is today. But the world of those who *originated* ideas—those who ruled and advanced the course of history—was a godless and hopelessly sophisticated world like that of Europe in this day and age.”

“When I read Cicero and Ovid and Lucretius, it seemed so to me,” I said.

He nodded and gave a little shrug.

“It has taken eighteen hundred years,” he said, “to come back to the skepticism, the level of practicality that was our daily frame of mind then. But history is by no means repeating itself. That is the amazing thing.”

“How do you mean?”

“Look around you! Completely new things are happening in Europe. The value placed upon human life is higher than ever before. Wisdom and philosophy are coupled with new discoveries in science, new inventions which will completely alter the manner in which humans live. But that is a story unto itself. That is the future. The point is that you were born on the cusp of the old way of seeing things. And so was I. You came of age without faith, and yet you aren’t cynical. And so it was with me. We sprang up from a crack between faith and despair, as it

were."

And Nicki fell into that crack and perished, I thought.

"That's why your questions are different," he said, "from those who were born to immortality under the Christian god."

I thought of my conversation with Gabrielle in Cairo—my last conversation. I myself had told her this was my strength.

"Precisely," he said. "So you and I have that in common. We did not grow to manhood expecting very much of others. And the burden of conscience was private, terrible though it might be."

"But was it under the Christian god … in the very first days of the Christian god that you were—born to immortality—as you said?"

"No," he said with a hint of disgust. *"We* never served the Christian God. That you can put out of your mind right now."

"But the forces of good and evil behind the names of Christ and Satan?"

"Again, they have very little if anything to do with *us.*"

"But the concept of evil in some form surely …"

"No. We are older than that, Lestat. The men that made me were worshipers of gods, true. And they believed in things that I did not believe. But their faith hearkened back to a time long before the temples of the Roman Empire, when the shedding of innocent human blood could be done on a massive scale in the name of good. And evil was the drought and the plague of the locust and the death of the crops. I was made what I am by these men in the name of good."

This was too enticing, too enthralling.

All the old myths came to my mind, in a chorus of dazzling poetry. *Osiris was a good god to the Egyptians, a god of the corn. What has this to do with us?* My thoughts were spinning. In a flash of mute pictures, I recalled the night I left my father's house in the Auvergne when the villagers had been dancing round the Lenten fire, and making their chants for the increase of the crops. Pagan, my mother had said. Pagan, had declared the angry priest they had long ago sent away.

And it all seemed more than ever the story of the Savage Garden, dancers in the Savage Garden, where no law prevailed except the law of the garden, which was the aesthetic law. That the crops shall grow high, that the wheat shall be green and then yellow, that the sun shall shine. Look at the perfectly shaped apple that the tree has made, fancy that!

The villagers would run through the orchards with their burning brands from the Lenten bonfire, to make the apples grow.

"Yes, the Savage Garden," Marius said with a spark of light in his eyes. "And I had to go out of the civilized cities of the Empire to find it. I had to go into the deep woods of the northern provinces, where the garden still grew at its lushest, the very land of Southern Gaul in which you were born. I had to fall into the hands of the barbarians who gave us both our stature, our blue eyes, our fair hair. I had it through the blood of my mother, who had come from those people, the daughter of a Keltic chieftain married to a Roman patrician. And you have it through the blood of your fathers directly from those days. And by a strange coincidence, we were both chosen for immortality for the very same reason—you by Magnus and I by my captors—that we were the nonpareils of our blond and blue-eyed race, that we were taller and more finely made than other men."

"Ooooh, you have to tell me all of it! You have to explain everything!" I said.

"I *am* explaining everything," he said. "But first, I think it is time for you to see something that will be very important as we go on."

He waited a moment for the words to sink in.

Then he rose slowly in human fashion, assisting himself easily with his hands on the arms of the chair. He stood looking down at me and waiting.

"Those Who Must Be Kept?" I asked. My voice had gotten terribly small, terribly unsure of itself.

And I could see a little mischief again in his face, or rather a touch of the amusement that was never far away.

"Don't be afraid," he said soberly, trying to conceal the amusement. "It's very unlike you, you know."

I was burning to see them, to know what they were, and yet I didn't move. I'd never really thought that I would see them. I'd never really thought what it would mean …

"Is it … is it something terrible to see?" I asked. He smiled slowly and affectionately and placed his hand on my shoulder.

"Would it stop you if I said yes?"

"No," I said. But I was afraid.

"It's only terrible as time goes on," he said. "In the beginning, it's

beautiful."

He waited, watching me, trying to be patient. Then he said softly: "Come, let's go."

4

A stairway into the earth.

It was much older than the house, this stairway, though how I knew I couldn't say. Steps worn concave in the middle from the feet that have followed them. Winding deeper and deeper down into the rock.

Now and then a rough-cut portal to the sea, an opening too small for a man to climb through, and a shelf upon which birds have nested, or where the wild grass grew out of the cracks.

And then the chill, the inexplicable chill that you find sometimes in old monasteries, ruined churches, haunted rooms.

I stopped and rubbed the backs of my arms with my hands. The chill was rising through the steps.

"They don't cause it," he said gently. He was waiting for me on the steps just below.

The semidarkness broke his face into kindly patterns of light and shadow, gave the illusion of mortal age that wasn't there.

"It was here long before I brought them," he said. "Many have come to worship on this island. Maybe it was there before they came, too."

He beckoned to me again with his characteristic patience. His eyes were compassionate.

"Don't be afraid," he said again as he started down.

I was ashamed not to follow. The steps went on and on.

We came on larger portals and the noise of the sea. I could feel the cool spray on my hands and face, see the gleam of the damp on the stones. But we went on down farther and farther, the echo of our shoes swelling against the rounded ceiling, the rudely finished walls. This was deeper than any dungeon, this was the pit you dig in childhood when you brag to your mother and father that you will make a tunnel to the very center of the earth.

Finally I saw a burst of light as we rounded another bend. And at last, two lamps burning before a pair of doors.

Deep vessels of oil fed the wicks of the lamps. And the doors themselves were bolted by an enormous beam of oak. It would have

taken several men to lift it, possibly levers, ropes.

Marius lifted this beam and laid it aside easily, and then he stood back and looked at the doors. I heard the sound of another beam being moved on the inside. Then the doors opened slowly, and I felt my breathing come to a halt.

It wasn't only that he'd done it without touching them. I had seen that little trick before. It was that the room beyond was full of the same lovely flowers and lighted lamps that I had seen in the house above. Here deep underground were lilies, waxen and white, and sparkling with droplets of moisture, roses in rich hues of red and pink ready to fall from their vines. It was a chapel, this chamber with the soft flicker of votive candles and the perfume of a thousand bouquets.

The walls were painted in fresco like the walls of ancient Italian churches, with gold leaf hammered into the design. But these were not the pictures of Christian saints.

Egyptian palm trees, the yellow desert, the three pyramids, the blue waters of the Nile. And the Egyptian men and women in their gracefully shaped boats sailing the river, the multicolored fishes of the deep beneath them, the purple-winged birds of the air above.

And the gold worked into it all. Into the sun that shone from the heavens, and the pyramids that gleamed in the distance, into the scales of the fishes and the feathers of the birds, and the ornaments of the lithe and delicate Egyptian figures who stood frozen looking forward, in their long narrow green boats.

I closed my eyes for a moment. I opened them slowly and saw the whole like a great shrine.

Banks of lilies on a low stone altar which held an immense golden tabernacle worked all over with fine engraving of the same Egyptian designs. And the air coming down through deep shafts in the rock above, stirring the flames of the ever burning lamps, ruffling the tall green bladelike leaves of the lilies as they stood in their vessels of water giving off their heady perfume.

I could almost hear hymns in this place. I could hear chants and ancient invocations. And I was no longer afraid. The beauty was too soothing, too grand.

But I stared at the gold doors of the tabernacle on the altar. The tabernacle was taller than I was. It was broader by three times.

And Marius, too, was looking at it. And I felt the power moving out of him, the low heat of his invisible strength, and I heard the inside lock of the tabernacle doors slide back.

I would have moved just a little closer to him had I dared. I wasn't breathing as the gold doors opened completely, folding back to reveal two splendid Egyptian figures—a man and a woman—seated side by side.

The light moved over their slender, finely sculpted white faces, their decorously arranged white limbs; it flashed in their dark eyes.

They were as severe as all the Egyptian statues I had ever seen, spare of detail, beautiful in contour, magnificent in their simplicity, only the open and childlike expression on the faces relieving the feeling of hardness and cold. But unlike all the others, they were dressed in real fabric and real hair.

I had seen saints in Italian churches dressed in this manner, velvet hung on marble, and it was not always pleasing. But this had been done with great care.

Their wigs were of long thick black locks, cut straight across the forehead and crowned with circlets of gold. Round their naked arms were bracelets like snakes, and on their fingers were rings.

The clothes were the finest white linen, the man naked to the waist and wearing only a skirt of sorts, and the woman in a long, narrow, beautifully pleated dress. Both wore many gold necklaces, some inlaid with precious stones.

Almost the same size they were, and they sat in the very same manner, hands laid flat before them on their thighs. And this sameness astonished me somehow, as much as their stark loveliness, and the jewellike quality of their eyes.

Not in any sculpture anywhere had I ever seen such a lifelike attitude, but actually there was nothing lifelike about them at all. Maybe it was a trick of the accoutrements, the twinkling of the lights on their necklaces and rings, the reflected light in their gleaming eyes.

Were they Osiris and Isis? Was it tiny writing I saw on their necklaces, on the circlets of their hair?

Marius said nothing. He was merely gazing at them as I was, his expression unreadable, perhaps sad.

"May I go near to them," I whispered.

“Of course,” he said.

I moved towards the altar like a child in a cathedral, getting ever more tentative with each step. I stopped only a few feet before them and looked directly into their eyes. Oh, too gorgeous in depth and variegation. Too real.

With infinite care each black eyelash had been fixed, each black hair of their gently curved brows.

With infinite care their mouths made partly open so that one could see the glimmer of teeth. And the faces and the arms had been so polished that not the slightest flaw disturbed the luster. And in the manner of all statues or painted figures who stare directly forward, they appeared to be looking at me.

I was confused. If they were not Osiris and Isis, who were they meant to be? Of what old truth were they the symbols, and why the imperative in that old phrase, Those Who *Must* Be Kept?

I fell into contemplating them, my head a little to the side.

The eyes were really brown, with the black deep in their centers, the whites moist looking as though covered with the clearest lacquer, and the lips were the softest shade of ashen rose.

“Is it permissible …?” I whispered, turning back to Marius, but lacking confidence I stopped.

“You may touch them,” he said.

Yet it seemed sacrilegious to do it. I stared at them a moment longer, at the way that their hands opened against their thighs, at the fingernails, which looked remarkably like our fingernails—as if someone had made them of inlaid glass.

I thought that I could touch the back of the man's hand, and it wouldn't seem so sacrilegious, but what I really wanted to do was to touch the woman's face. Finally I raised my fingers hesitantly to her cheek. And I just let my fingertips graze the whiteness there. And then I looked into her eyes.

It couldn't be stone I was feeling. It couldn't … Why, it felt exactly like … And the woman's eyes, something—

I jumped backwards before I could stop myself.

In fact I shot backwards, overturning the vases of lilies, and slammed against the wall beside the door.

I was trembling so violently, my legs could hardly hold me.

“They’re alive!” I said. “They aren’t statues! They’re vampires just like us!”

“Yes,” Marius said. “That word, however, they wouldn’t know.” He was just ahead of me and he was still looking at them, his hands at his sides, just as he had been all along.

Slowly, he turned and came up to me and took my right hand. The blood had rushed to my face. I wanted to say something but I couldn’t. I kept staring at them. And now I was staring at him and staring at the white hand that held mine.

“It’s quite all right,” he said almost sadly. “I don’t think they dislike your touching them.”

For a moment I couldn’t understand him. Then I did understand. “You mean you … You don’t know whether … They just sit there and … Oooh God!”

And his words of hundreds of years ago, embedded in Armand’s tale, came back to me: *Those Who Must Be Kept are at peace, or in silence. More than that we may never know*.

I was shuddering all over. I couldn’t stop the tremors in my arms and my legs.

“They’re breathing, thinking, living, as we are,” I stammered. “How long have they been like this, how long?”

“Calm yourself,” he said, patting my hand.

“Oh God,” I said again stupidly. I kept saying it. No other words sufficed. “But who are they?” I asked finally. My voice was rising hysterically. “Are they Osiris and Isis? Is that who they are?”

“I don’t know.”

“I want to get away from them. I want to get out of here.”

“Why?” he asked calmly.

“Because they … they are alive inside their bodies and they … they can’t speak or move!”

“How do you know they can’t?” he said. His voice was low, soothing as before.

“But they don’t. That’s the whole point. They don’t—”

“Come,” he said. “I want you to look at them a little more. And then I’ll take you back up and I’ll tell you everything, as I’ve already said I would.”

“I don’t want to look at them anymore, Marius, honestly I don’t,” I

said, trying to get my hand free, and shaking my head. But he was holding on to me as firmly as a statue might, it seemed, and I couldn't stop thinking how much like their skin was his skin, how he was taking on the same impossible luster, how when his face was in repose, it was as smooth as theirs!

He was becoming like them. And sometime in the great yawn of eternity, I would become like him! If I survived that long.

"Please, Marius …" I said. I was beyond shame and vanity. I wanted to get out of the room.

"Wait for me then," he said patiently. "Stay here."

And he let my hand go. He turned and looked down at the flowers I had crushed, the spilled water.

And before my eyes these things were corrected, the flowers put back in the vase, the water gone from the floor.

He stood looking at the two before him, and then I heard his thoughts. He was greeting them in some personal way that did not require an address or a title. He was explaining to them why he had been away the last few nights. He had gone into Egypt. And he had brought back gifts for them which he would soon bring. He would take them out to look at the sea very soon.

I started to calm down a little. But my mind was now anatomizing all that had come clear to me at the moment of shock. He cared for them. He had always cared for them. He made this chamber beautiful because they were staring at it, and they just might care about the beauty of the paintings and the flowers he brought.

But he didn't know. And all I had to do was look squarely at them again to feel horror, that they were alive and locked inside themselves!

"I can't bear this," I murmured. I knew, without his ever telling me, the reason that he kept them. He could not bury them deep in the earth somewhere because they were conscious. He would not burn them because they were helpless and could not give their consent. Oh, God, it was getting worse and worse.

But he kept them as the ancient pagans kept their gods in temples that were their houses. He brought them flowers.

And now as I watched, he was lighting incense for them, a small cake that he had taken out of a silk handkerchief. This he told them had come from Egypt. And he was putting it to burn in a small bronze dish.

My eyes began to tear. I actually began to cry.

When I looked up, he was standing with his back to them, and I could see them over his shoulder. He looked shockingly like them, a statue dressed in fabric. And I felt maybe he was doing it deliberately, letting his face go blank.

"I've disappointed you, haven't I?" I whispered.

"No, not at all," he said kindly. "You have not."

"I'm sorry that I—"

"No, you have not."

I drew a little closer. I felt I had been rude to Those Who Must Be Kept. I had been rude to him. He had revealed to me this secret and I had shown horror and recoiling. I had disappointed myself.

I moved even closer. I wanted to make up for what I'd done. He turned towards them again and he put his arm around me. The incense was intoxicating. Their dark eyes were full of the eerie movement of the flames of the lamps.

No ridge of vein anywhere in the white skin, no fold or crease. Not even the penstroke lines in the lips which even Marius still had. They did not move with the rise and fall of breath.

And listening in the stillness I heard no thought from them, no heartbeat, no movement of blood.

"But it's there, isn't it?" I whispered.

"Yes, it's there."

"And do you—?" Bring the victims to them, I wanted to ask.

"They no longer drink."

Even that was ghastly! They had not even that pleasure. And yet to imagine it—how it would have been—their firing with movement long enough to take the victim and lapsing back into stillness, ah! No, I should have been relieved. But I was not.

"Long long ago, they still drank, but only once in a year. I would leave the victims in the sanctuary for them—evildoers who were weak and close to death. I would come back and find that they had been taken, and Those Who Must Be Kept would be as they were before. Only the color of the flesh was a little different. Not a drop of blood had been spilt.

"It was at the full moon always that this was done, and usually in the spring. Other victims left were never taken. And then even this yearly

feast stopped. I continued to bring victims now and then. And once after a decade had passed, they took another. Again, it was the time of the full moon. It was spring. And then no more for at least half a century. I lost count. I thought perhaps they had to see the moon, that they had to know the change of the seasons. But as it turned out, this did not matter.

"They have drunk nothing since the time before I took them into Italy. That was three hundred years ago. Even in the warmth of Egypt they do not drink."

"But even when it happened, you never saw it with your own eyes?"

"No," he said.

"You've never seen them move?"

"Not since … the beginning."

I was trembling again. As I looked at them, I fancied I saw them breathing, fancied I saw their lips change. I knew it was illusion. But it was driving me wild. I had to get out of here. I would start crying again.

"Sometimes when I come to them," Marius said, "I find things changed."

"How? What?"

"Little things," he said. He looked at them thoughtfully. He reached out and touched the woman's necklace. "She likes this one. It is the proper kind apparently. There was another which I used to find broken on the floor."

"Then they *can* move."

"I thought at first the necklace had fallen. But after repairing it three times I realized that was foolish. She was tearing it off her neck, or making it fall with her mind."

I made some little horrified whisper. And then I felt absolutely mortified that I had done this in her presence. I wanted to go out at once. Her face was like a mirror for all my imaginings. Her lips curved in a smile but did not curve.

"It has happened with other ornaments, ornaments bearing the names of gods whom they do not like, I think. A vase I brought from a church was broken once, blown to tiny fragments as if by their glance. And then there have been more startling changes as well."

"Tell me."

"I have come into the sanctuary and found one or the other of them standing."

This was too terrifying. I wanted to tug his hand and pull him out of here.

"I found him once several paces from the chair. And the woman, another time, at the door."

"Trying to get out?" I whispered.

"Perhaps," he said thoughtfully. "But then they could easily get out if they wanted to. When you hear the whole story you can judge. Whenever I've found them moved, I've carried them back. I've arranged their limbs as they were before. It takes enormous strength to do it. They are like flexible stone, if you can imagine it. And if I have such strength, you can imagine what theirs might be."

"You say want … wanted to. What if they want to do everything and they no longer can? What if it was the limit of her greatest effort even to reach the door!"

"I think she could have broken the doors, had she wanted to. If I can open bolts with my mind, what can she do?"

I looked at their cold, remote faces, their narrow hollowed cheeks, their large and serene mouths.

"But what if you're wrong. And what if they can hear every word that we are saying to each other, and it angers them, outrages them …"

"I think they do hear," he said, trying to calm me again, his hand on mine, his tone subdued, "but I do not think they care. If they cared, they would move."

"But how can you know that?"

"They do other things that require great strength. For example, there are times when I lock the tabernacle and they at once unlock it and open the doors again. I know they are doing it because they are the only ones who could be doing it. The doors fly back and there they are. I take them out to look at the sea. And before dawn, when I come to fetch them, they are heavier, less pliant, almost impossible to move. There are times when I think they do these things to torment me as it were, to play with me."

"No. They are trying and they can't."

"Don't be so quick to judge," he said. "I have come into their chamber and found evidence of strange things indeed. And of course, there are the things that happened in the beginning …"

But he stopped. Something had distracted him.

“Do you hear thoughts from them?” I asked. He did seem to be listening.

He didn’t answer. He was studying them. It occurred to me that something had changed! I used every bit of my will not to turn and run. I looked at them carefully. I couldn’t see anything, hear anything, feel anything. I was going to start shouting and screaming if Marius didn’t explain why he was staring.

“Don’t be so impetuous, Lestat,” he said finally, smiling a little, his eyes still fixed on the male. “Every now and then I do hear them, but it is unintelligible, it is merely the presence of them—you know the sound.”

“And you heard him just then.”

“Yeeesss … Perhaps.”

“Marius, please let us go out of here, I beg you. Forgive me, I can’t bear it! Please, Marius, let’s go.”

“All right,” he said kindly. He squeezed my shoulder. “But do something for me first.”

“Anything you ask.”

“Talk to them. It need not be out loud. But talk. Tell them you find them beautiful.”

“They know,” I said. “They know I find them indescribably beautiful.” I was certain that they did. But he meant tell them in a ceremonial way, and so I cleared my mind of all fear and all mad suppositions and I told them this.

“Just talk to them,” Marius said, urging me on.

I did. I looked into the eyes of the man and into the eyes of the woman. And the strangest feeling crept over me. I was repeating the phrases *I find you beautiful, I find you incomparably beautiful* with the barest shape of real words. I was praying as I had when I was very very little and I would lie in the meadow on the side of the mountain and ask God please please to help me get away from my father’s house.

I talked to her like this now and I said I was grateful that I had been allowed to come near her and her ancient secrets, and this feeling became physical. It was all over the surface of my skin and at the roots of my hair. I could feel tension draining from my face. I could feel it leaving my body. I was light all over, and the incense and the flowers were enfolding my spirit as I looked into the black centers of her deep brown eyes.

“Akasha,” I said aloud. I heard the name at the same moment of speaking it. And it sounded lovely to me. The hairs rose all over me. The tabernacle became like a flaming border around her, and there was only something indistinct where the male figure sat. I drew close to her without willing it, and I leaned forward and I almost kissed her lips. I wanted to. I bent nearer. Then I felt her lips.

I wanted to make the blood come up in my mouth and pass it to her as I had that time to Gabrielle when she lay in the coffin.

The spell was deepening, and I looked right into the fathomless orbs of her eyes.

I am kissing the goddess on her mouth, what is the matter with me! Am I mad to think of it!

I moved back. I found myself against the wall again, trembling, with my hands clamped to the sides of my head. At least this time I had not upset the lilies, but I was crying again.

Marius closed the tabernacle doors. He made the bolt inside slip into place.

We went into the passage and he made the inner bolt rise and go into its brackets. He put the outside bolt in with his hands.

“Come, young one,” he said. “Let’s go upstairs.”

But we had walked only a few yards when we heard a crisp clicking sound, and then another. He turned and looked back.

“They did it again,” he said. And a look of distress divided his face like a shadow.

“What?” I backed up against the wall.

“The tabernacle, they opened it. Come. I’ll return later and lock it before the sun rises. Now we will go back to my drawing room and I will tell you my tale.”

When we reached the lighted room, I collapsed in the chair with my head in my hands. He was standing still just looking at me, and when I realized it, I looked up.

“She told you her name,” he said.

“Akasha!” I said. It was snatching a word out of the whirlpool of a dissolving dream. “She did tell me! I said Akasha out loud.” I looked at him, imploring him for answers. For some explanation of the attitude with which he stared at me.

I thought I’d lose my mind if his face didn’t become expressive again.

“Are you angry with me?”

“Shhh. Be quiet,” he said.

I could hear nothing in the silence. Except maybe the sea. Maybe a sound from the wicks of the candles in the room. Maybe the wind. Not even their eyes had appeared more lifeless than his eyes now seemed.

“You cause something to stir in them,” he whispered.

I stood up.

“What does it mean?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Maybe nothing. The tabernacle is still open and they are merely sitting there as always. Who knows?”

And I felt suddenly all his long years of wanting to know. I would say centuries, but I cannot really imagine centuries. Not even now. I felt his years and years of trying to elicit from them the smallest signs and getting nothing, and I knew that he was wondering why I had drawn from her the secret of her name. Akasha. Things had happened, but that had been in the time of Rome. Dark things. Terrible things. Suffering, unspeakable suffering.

The images went white. Silence. He was stranded in the room like a saint taken down off an altar and left in the aisle of a church.

“Marius!” I whispered.

He woke and his face warmed slowly, and he looked at me affectionately, almost wonderingly.

“Yes, Lestat,” he said and gave my hand a reassuring squeeze.

He seated himself and gestured for me to do the same, and we were once again facing each other comfortably. And the even light of the room was reassuring. It was reassuring to see, beyond the windows, the night sky.

His former quickness was returning, the glint of good humor in his eyes.

“It’s not yet midnight,” he said. “And all is well on the islands. If I’m not disturbed, I think there is time for me to tell you the whole tale.”

Marius's Story

5

"It happened in my fortieth year, on a warm spring night in the Roman Gallic city of Massilia, when in a dirty waterfront tavern I sat scribbling away on my history of the world.

"The tavern was deliciously filthy and crowded, a hangout for sailors and wanderers, travelers like me, I fancied, loving them all in a general sort of way, though most of them were poor and I wasn't poor, and they couldn't read what I wrote when they glanced over my shoulder.

"I'd come to Massilia after a long and studious journey that had taken me through all the great cities of the Empire. To Alexandria, Pergamon, Athens I'd traveled, observing and writing about the people, and now I was making my way through the cities of Roman Gaul.

"I couldn't have been more content on this night had I been in my library at Rome. In fact, I liked the tavern better. Everywhere I went I sought out such places in which to write, setting up my candle and ink and parchment at a table close to the wall, and I did my best work early in the evening when the places were at their noisiest.

"In retrospect, it's easy to see that I lived my whole life in the midst of frenzied activity. I was used to the idea that nothing could affect me adversely.

"I'd grown up an illegimate son in a rich Roman household—loved, pampered, and allowed to do what I wanted. My legitimate brothers had to worry about marriage, politics, and war. By the age of twenty, I'd become the scholar and the chronicler, the one who raised his voice at drunken banquets to settle historical and military arguments.

"When I traveled I had plenty of money, and documents that opened doors everywhere. And to say life had been good to me would be an understatement. I was an extraordinarily happy individual. But the really important point here is that life had never bored me or defeated me.

"I carried within me a sense of invincibility, a sense of wonder. And this was as important to me later on as your anger and strength have

been to you, as important as despair or cruelty can be in the spirits of others.

"But to continue … If there was anything I'd missed in my rather eventful life—and I didn't think of this too much—it was the love and knowledge of my Keltic mother. She'd died when I was born, and all I knew of her was that she'd been a slave, daughter of the warlike Gauls who fought Julius Caesar. I was blond and blue-eyed as she was. And her people had been giants it seemed. At a very young age, I towered over my father and my brothers.

"But I had little or no curiosity about my Gallic ancestors. I'd come to Gaul as an educated Roman, through and through, and I carried with me no awareness of my barbarian blood, but rather the common beliefs of my time—that Caesar Augustus was a great ruler, and that in this blessed age of the Pax Romana, old superstition was being replaced by law and by reason throughout the Empire. There was no place too wretched for the Roman roads, and for the soldiers, the scholars, and the traders who followed them.

"On this night I was writing like a madman, scribbling down descriptions of the men who came and went in the tavern, children of all races it seemed, speakers of a dozen different languages.

"And for no apparent reason, I was possessed of a strange idea about life, a strange concern that amounted almost to a pleasant obsession. I remember that it came on me this night because it seemed somehow related to what happened after. But it wasn't related. I had had the idea before. That it came to me in these last free hours as a Roman citizen was no more than coincidence.

"The idea was simply that there was somebody who knew everything, somebody who had seen everything. I did not mean by this that a Supreme Being existed, but rather that there was on earth a continual intelligence, a continual awareness. And I thought of it in practical terms that excited me and soothed me simultaneously. There was an awareness somewhere of all things I had seen in my travels, an awareness of what it had been like in Massilia six centuries ago when the first Greek traders came, an awareness of what it had been like in Egypt when Cheops built the pyramids. Somebody knew what the light had been like in the late afternoon on the day that Troy fell to the Greeks, and someone or something knew what the peasants said to each other in their little

farmhouse outside Athens right before the Spartans brought down the walls.

“My idea of who or what it was, was vague. But I was comforted by the notion that nothing spiritual—and knowing was spiritual—was lost to us. That there was this continuous knowing …

“And as I drank a little more wine, and thought about it, and wrote about it, I realized it wasn’t so much a belief of mine as it was a prejudice. I just felt that there was a continual awareness.

“And the history that I was writing was an imitation of it. I tried to unite all things I had seen in my history, linking my observations of lands and people with all the written observations that had come down to me from the Greeks—from Xenophon and Herodotus, and Poseidonius—to make one continuous awareness of the world in my lifetime. It was a pale thing, a limited thing, compared to the true awareness. Yet I felt good as I continued writing.

“But around midnight, I was getting a little tired, and when I happened to look up after a particularly long period of unbroken concentration, I realized something had changed in the tavern.

“It was unaccountably quieter. In fact, it was almost empty. And across from me, barely illuminated by the sputtering light of my candle, there sat a tall fair-haired man with his back to the room who was watching me in silence. I was startled, not so much by the way he looked—though this was startling in itself—but by the realization that he had been there for some time, close to me, observing me, and I hadn’t noticed him.

“He was a giant of a Gaul as they all were, even taller than I was, and he had a long narrow face with an extremely strong jaw and hawklike nose, and eyes that gleamed beneath their bushy blond brows with a childlike intelligence. What I mean to say is he looked very very clever, but very young and innocent also. And he wasn’t young. The effect was perplexing.

“And it was made all the more so by the fact that his thick and coarse yellow hair wasn’t clipped short in the popular Roman style, but was streaming down to his shoulders. And instead of the usual tunic and cloak which you saw everywhere in those times, he wore the old belted leather jerkin that had been the barbarian dress before Caesar.

“Right out of the woods this character looked, with his gray eyes burning through me, and I was vaguely delighted with him. I wrote

down hurriedly the details of his dress, confident he couldn't read the Latin.

"But the stillness in which he sat unnerved me a little. His eyes were unnaturally wide, and his lips quivered slightly as if the mere sight of me excited him. His clean and delicate white hand, which casually rested on the table before him, seemed out of keeping with the rest of him.

"A quick glance about told me my slaves weren't in the tavern. Well, they're probably next door playing cards, I thought, or upstairs with a couple of women. They'll stop in any minute.

"I forced a little smile at my strange and silent friend, and went back to writing. But directly he started talking.

" 'You are an educated man, aren't you?' he asked. He spoke the universal Latin of the Empire, but with a thick accent, pronouncing each word with a care that was almost musical.

"I told him, yes, I was fortunate enough to be educated, and I started to write again, thinking this would surely discourage him. After all, he was fine to look at, but I didn't really want to talk to him.

" 'And you write both in Greek and in Latin, don't you?' he asked, glancing at the finished work that lay before me.

"I explained politely that the Greek I had written on the parchment was a quotation from another text. My text was in Latin. And again I started scribbling.

" 'But you are a Keltoi, are you not?' he asked this time. It was the old Greek word for the Gauls.

" 'Not really, no. I am a Roman,' I answered.

" 'You look like one of us, the Keltoi,' he said. 'You are tall like us, and you walk the way we do.'

"This was a strange statement. For hours I'd been sitting here, barely sipping my wine. I hadn't walked anywhere. But I explained that my mother had been Keltic, but I hadn't known her. My father was a Roman senator.

" 'And what is it you write in Greek and Latin?' he asked. 'What is it that arouses your passion?'

"I didn't answer right away. He was beginning to intrigue me. But I knew enough at forty to realize that most people you meet in taverns sound interesting for the first few minutes and then begin to weary you beyond endurance.

“ ‘Your slaves say,’ he announced gravely, ‘that you are writing a great history.’

“ ‘Do they?’ I answered, a bit stiffly. ‘And where are my slaves, I wonder!’ Again I looked around. Nowhere in sight. Then I conceded to him that it was a history I was writing.

“ ‘And you have been to Egypt,’ he said. And his hand spread itself out flat on the table.

“I paused and took another good look at him. There was something otherworldly about him, the way that he sat, the way he used this one hand to gesture. It was the decorum primitive people often have that makes them seem repositors of immense wisdom, when in fact all they possess is immense conviction.

“ ‘Yes,’ I said a little warily. ‘I’ve been to Egypt.’

“Obviously this exhilarated him. His eyes widened slightly, then narrowed, and he made some little movement with his lips as though speaking to himself.

“ ‘And you know the language and the writing of Egypt?’ he asked earnestly, his eyebrows knitting. ‘You know the cities of Egypt?’

“ ‘The language as it is spoken, yes, I do know it. But if by the writing you mean the old picture writing, no, I can’t read it. I don’t know anyone who can read it. I’ve heard that even the old Egyptian priests can’t read it. Half the texts they copy they can’t decipher.’

“He laughed in the strangest way. I couldn’t tell whether this was exciting him or he knew something I didn’t know. He appeared to take a deep breath, his nostrils dilating a little. And then his face cooled. He was actually a splendid-looking man.

“ ‘The gods can read it,’ he whispered.

“ ‘Well, I wish they’d teach it to me,’ I said pleasantly.

“ ‘You do!’ he said in an astonished gasp. He leant forward over the table. ‘Say this again!’

“ ‘I was joking,’ I said. ‘I only meant I wished I could read the old Egyptian writing. If I could read it, then I could know true things about the people of Egypt, instead of all the nonsense written by the Greek historians. Egypt is a misunderstood land—’ I stopped myself. Why was I talking to this man about Egypt?

“ ‘In Egypt there are true gods still,’ he said gravely, ‘gods who have been there forever. Have you been to the very bottom of Egypt?’

“This was a curious way to put it. I told him I had been up the Nile quite far, that I had seen many wonders. ‘But as for there being true gods,’ I said, I can scarce accept the veracity of gods with the heads of animals—’

“He shook his head almost a little sadly.

“ ‘The true gods require no statues of them to be erected,’ he said. ‘They have the heads of man and they themselves appear when they choose, and they are living as the crops that come from the earth are living, as all things under the heavens are living, even the stones and the moon itself, which divides time in the great silence of its never changing cycles.’

“ ‘Very likely,’ I said under my breath, not wishing to disturb him. So it was zeal, this mixture of cleverness and youthfulness I had perceived in him. I should have known it. And something came back to me from Julius Caesar’s writings about Gaul, that the Keltoi had come from Dis Pater, the god of the night. Was this strange creature a believer in these things?

“ ‘There are old gods in Egypt,’ he said softly, ‘and there are old gods in this land for those who know how to worship them. I do not mean in your temples round which merchants sell the animals to defile the altars, and the butchers after sell the meat that is left over. I speak of the proper worship, the proper sacrifice for the god, the one sacrifice to which he will hearken.’

“ ‘Human sacrifice, you mean, don’t you?’ I said unobtrusively. Caesar had described well enough that practice among the Keltoi, and it rather curdled my blood to think of it. Of course I’d seen ghastly deaths in the arena in Rome, ghastly deaths at the places of execution, but human sacrifice to the gods, that we had not done in centuries. If ever.

“And now I realized what this remarkable man might actually be. A Druid, a member of the ancient priesthood of the Keltoi, whom Caesar had also described, a priesthood so powerful that nothing like it existed, so far as I knew, anywhere in the Empire. But it wasn’t supposed to exist in Roman Gaul anymore either.

“Of course the Druids were always described as wearing long white robes. They went into the forests and collected mistletoe off the oak trees with ceremonial sickles. And this man looked more like a farmer, or a soldier. But then what Druid was going to wear his white robes into

a waterfront tavern? And it wasn't lawful anymore for the Druids to go about being Druids.

" 'Do you really believe in this old worship?' I asked, leaning forward. 'Have you yourself been down to the bottom of Egypt?'

"If this was a real live Druid, I had made a marvelous catch, I was thinking. I could get this man to tell me things about the Keltoi that nobody knew. And what on earth did Egypt have to do with it, I wondered?

" 'No,' he said. 'I have not been to Egypt, though from Egypt our gods came to us. It is not my destiny to go there. It is not my destiny to learn to read the ancient language. The tongue I speak is enough for the gods. They give ear to it.'

" 'And what tongue is that?'

" 'The tongue of the Keltoi, of course,' he said. 'You know that without asking.'

" 'And when you speak to your gods, how do you know that they hear you?'

"His eyes widened again, and his mouth lengthened in an unmistakable look of triumph.

" 'My gods answer me,' he said quietly.

"Surely he was a Druid. And he appeared to take on a shimmer, suddenly. I pictured him in his white robes. There might have been an earthquake then in Massilia, and I doubt I would have noticed it.

" 'Then you yourself have heard them,' I said.

" 'I have laid eyes upon my gods,' he said. 'And they have spoken to me both in words and in silence.'

" 'And what do they say? What do they do that makes them different from our gods, I mean aside from the nature of the sacrifice?'

"His voice took on the lilting reverence of a song as he spoke. 'They do as gods have always done; they divide the evil from the good. They bring down blessings upon all who worship them. They draw the faithful into harmony with all the cycles of the universe, with the cycles of the moon, as I have told you. They fructify the land, the gods do. All things that are good proceed from them.'

"Yes, I thought, the old old religion in its simplest forms, and the forms that still held a great spell for the common people of the Empire.

" 'My gods sent me here,' he said. 'To search for you.'

“ ‘For me?’ I asked. I was startled.

“ ‘You will understand all these things,’ he said. ‘Just as you will come to know the true worship of ancient Egypt. The gods will teach you.’

“ ‘Why ever would they do that?’ I asked.

“ ‘The answer is simple,’ he said. ‘Because you are going to become one of them.’

“I was about to answer when I felt a sharp blow to the back of my head and the pain spread out in all directions over my skull as if it were water. I knew I was going out. I saw the table rising, saw the ceiling high above me. I think I wanted to say if it is ransom you want, take me to my house, to my steward.

“But I knew even then that the rules of my world had absolutely nothing to do with it.

“When I awoke it was daylight and I was in a large wagon being pulled fast along an unpaved road through an immense forest. I was bound hand and foot and a loose cover was thrown over me. I could see to the left and right, through the wicker sides of the cart, and I saw the man who had talked to me, riding beside me. There were others riding with him, and all were dressed in the trousers and belted leather jerkins, and they wore iron swords and iron bracelets. Their hair was almost white in the dappled sun, and they didn’t talk as they rode beside the cart together.

“This forest itself seemed made to the scale of Titans. The oaks were ancient and enormous, the interlacing of their limbs blocked out most of the light, and we moved for hours through a world of damp and dark green leaves and deep shadow.

“I do not remember towns. I do not remember villages. I remember only a crude fortress. Once inside the gates I saw two rows of thatched-roof houses, and everywhere the leather-clad barbarians. And when I was taken into one of the houses, a dark low place, and left there alone, I could hardly stand for the cramps in my legs, and I was as wary as I was furious.

“I knew now that I was in an undisturbed enclave of the ancient Keltoi, the very same fighters who had sacked the great shrine of Delphi only a few centuries ago, and Rome itself not too long after, the same

warlike creatures who rode stark naked into battle against Caesar, their trumpets blasting, their cries affrighting the disciplined Roman soldiers.

"In other words, I was beyond the reach of everything I counted upon. And if all this talk about my becoming one of the gods meant I was to be slain on some blood-stained altar in an oak grove, then I had better try to get the hell out of here."

6

When my captor appeared again, he was in the fabled long white robes, and his coarse blond hair had been combed, and he looked immaculate and impressive and solemn. There were other tall white-robed men, some old, some young, and all with the same gleaming yellow hair, who came into the small shadowy room behind him.

"In a silent circle they enclosed me. And after a protracted silence, a riff of whispers passed amongst them.

" 'You are perfect for the god,' said the eldest, and I saw the silent pleasure in the one who had brought me here. 'You are what the god has asked for,' the eldest said. 'You will remain with us until the great feast of Samhain, and then you will be taken to the sacred grove and there you will drink the Divine Blood and you will become a father of gods, a restorer of all the magic that has inexplicably been taken from us.'

" 'And will my body die when this happens?' I asked. I was looking at them, their sharp narrow faces, their probing eyes, the gaunt grace with which they surrounded me. What a terror this race must have been when its warriors swept down on the Mediterranean peoples. No wonder there had been so much written about their fearlessness. But these weren't warriors. These were priests, judges, and teachers. These were the instructors of the young, the keepers of the poetry and the laws that were never written in any language.

" 'Only the mortal part of you will die,' said the one who had spoken to me all along.

" 'Bad luck,' I said. 'Since that's about all there is to me.'

" 'No,' he said. 'Your form will remain and it will become glorified. You will see. Don't fear. And besides, there is nothing you can do to change these things. Until the feast of Samhain, you will let your hair grow long, and you will learn our tongue, and our hymns and our laws. We will care for you. My name is Mael, and I myself will teach you.'

" 'But I am not willing to become the god,' I said. 'Surely the gods don't want one who is unwilling.'

" 'The old god will decide,' said Mael. 'But I know that when you drink

the Divine Blood you will become the god, and all things will be clear to you.'

"Escape was impossible.

"I was guarded night and day. I was allowed no knife with which I might cut off my hair or otherwise damage myself. And a good deal of the time I lay in the dark empty room, drunk on wheaten beer and satiated with the rich roasted meats they gave to me. I had nothing with which to write and this tortured me.

"Out of boredom I listened to Mael when he came to instruct me. I let him sing anthems to me and tell me old poems and talk on about laws, only now and then taunting him with the obvious fact that a god should not have to be so instructed.

"This he conceded, but what could he do but try to make me understand what would happen to me.

" 'You can help me get out of here, you can come with me to Rome,' I said. I have a villa all my own on the cliffs above the Bay of Naples. You have never seen such a beautiful spot, and I would let you live there forever if you would help me, asking only that you repeat all these anthems and prayers and laws to me so that I might record them.'

" 'Why do you try to corrupt me?' he would ask, but I could see he was tantalized by the world I came from. He confessed that he had searched the Greek city of Massilia for weeks before my arrival, and he loved the Roman wine and the great ships that he had seen in the port, and the exotic foods he had eaten.

" 'I don't try to corrupt you,' I said. 'I don't believe what you believe, and you've made me your prisoner.'

"But I continued to listen to his prayers out of boredom and curiosity, and the vague fear of what was in store for me.

"I began waiting for him to come, for his pale, wraithlike figure to illuminate the barren room like a white light, for his quiet, measured voice to pour forth with all the old melodious nonsense.

"It soon came clear that his verses did not unfold continuous stories of the gods as we knew them in Greek and Latin. But the identity and characteristics of the gods began to emerge in the many stanzas. Deities of all the predictable sorts belonged to the tribe of the heavens.

“But the god I was to become exerted the greatest hold over Mael and those he instructed. He had no name, this god, though he had numerous titles, and the Drinker of the Blood was the most often repeated. He was also the White One, the God of the Night, the God of the Oak, the Lover of the Mother.

“This god took blood sacrifice at every full moon. But on Samhain (the first of November in our present Christian calendar—the day that has become the Feast of All Saints or the Day of the Dead) this god would accept the greatest number of human sacrifices before the whole tribe for the increase of the crops, as well as speak all manner of predictions and judgments.

“It was the Great Mother he served, she who is without visible form, but nevertheless present in all things, and the Mother of all things, of the earth, of the trees, of the sky overhead, of all men, of the Drinker of the Blood himself who walks in her garden.

“My interest deepened but so did my apprehension. The worship of the Great Mother was certainly not unknown to me. The Mother Earth and the Mother of All Things was worshiped under a dozen names from one end of the Empire to the other, and so was her lover and son, her Dying God, the one who grew to manhood as the crops grow, only to be cut down as the crops are cut down, while the Mother remains eternal. It was the ancient and gentle myth of the seasons. But the celebration anywhere and at any time was hardly ever gentle.

“For the Divine Mother was also Death, the earth that swallows the remains of that young lover, the earth that swallows all of us. And in consonance with this ancient truth—old as the sowing of seed itself—there came a thousand bloody rituals.

“The goddess was worshiped under the name of Cybele in Rome, and I had seen her mad priests castrating themselves in the midst of their devoted frenzy. And the gods of myth met their ends even more violently—Attis gelded, Dionysus rent limb from limb, the old Egyptian Osiris dismembered before the Great Mother Isis restored him.

“And now I was to be that God of Growing Things—the vine god, the corn god, the god of the tree, and I knew that whatever happened it was going to be something appalling.

“And what was there to do but get drunk and murmur these anthems with Mael, whose eyes would cloud with tears from time to time as he

looked at me.

“ ‘Get me out of here, you wretch,’ I said once in pure exasperation. ‘Why the hell don’t you become the God of the Tree? Why am I so honored?’

“ ‘I have told you, the god confided to me his wishes. I wasn’t chosen.’

“ ‘And would you do it, if you were chosen?’ I demanded.

“I was sick of hearing of these old rites by which any man threatened by illness or misfortune must serve up a human sacrifice to the god if he wished to be spared, and all the other sacrosanct beliefs that had to them the same childlike barbarity.

“ ‘I would fear but I would accept,’ he whispered. ‘But do you know what is so terrible about your fate? It is that your soul will be locked in your body forever. It will have no chance in natural death to pass into another body or another lifetime. No, all through time your soul will be the soul of the god. The cycle of death and rebirth will be closed in you.’

“In spite of myself and my general contempt for his belief in reincarnation, this silenced me. I felt the eerie weight of his conviction, I felt his sadness.

“My hair grew longer and fuller. And the hot summer melted into the cooler days of fall, and we were nearing the great annual feast of Samhain.

“Yet I wouldn’t let up on the questions.

“ ‘How many have you brought to be gods in this manner? What was it in me that caused you to choose me?’

“ ‘I have never brought a man to be a god,’ he said. ‘But the god is old; he is robbed of his magic. A terrible calamity has befallen him, and I can’t speak of these things. He has chosen his successor.’ He looked frightened. He was saying too much. Something was stirring the deepest fears in him.

“ ‘And how do you know he will want me? Have you sixty other candidates stashed in this fortress?’

“He shook his head and in a moment of uncharacteristic rawness, he said:

“ ‘Marius, if you fail to Drink the Blood, if you do not become the father of a new race of gods, what will become of us?’

“ ‘I wish I could care, my friend—’ I said.

“ ‘Ah, calamity,’ he whispered. And there followed a long subdued

observation of the rise of Rome, the terrible invasions of Caesar, the decline of a people who had lived in these mountains and forests since the beginning of time, scorning the cities of the Greek and the Etruscan and the Roman for the honorable strongholds of powerful tribal leaders.

" 'Civilizations rise and fall, my friend,' I said. Old gods give way to new ones.'

" 'You don't understand, Marius,' he said. 'Our god was not defeated by your idols and those who tell their frivolous and lascivious stories. Our god was as beautiful as if the moon itself had fashioned him with her light, and he spoke with a voice that was as pure as the light, and he guided us in that great oneness with all things that is the only cessation of despair and loneliness. But he was stricken with terrible calamity, and all through the north country other gods have perished completely. It was the revenge of the sun god upon him, but how the sun entered into him in the hours of darkness and sleep is not known to us, nor to him. You are our salvation, Marius. You are the mortal Who Knows, and is Learned and Can Learn, and Who Can Go Down into Egypt.'

"I thought about this. I thought of the old worship of Isis and Osiris, and of those who said she was the Mother Earth and he the corn, and Typhon the slayer of Osiris was the fire of the sunlight.

"And now this pious communicator with the god was telling me that the sun had found his god of the night and caused great calamity.

"Finally my reason gave out on me.

"Too many days passed in drunkenness and solitude.

"I lay down in the dark and I sang to myself the hymns of the Great Mother. She was no goddess to me, however. Not Diana of Ephesus with her rows and rows of milk-filled breasts, or the terrible Cybele, or even the gentle Demeter, whose mourning for Persephone in the land of the dead had inspired the sacred mysteries of Eleusis. She was the strong good earth that I smelled through the small barred windows of this place, the wind that carried with it the damp and the sweetness of the dark green forest. She was the meadow flowers and the blowing grass, the water I heard now and then gushing as if from some mountain spring. She was all the things that I still had in this rude little wooden room where everything else had been taken from me. And I knew only what all men know, that the cycle of winter and spring and all growing things has within itself some sublime truth that restores without myth or

language.

“I looked through the bars to the stars overhead, and it seemed to me I was dying in the most absurd and foolish way, among people I did not admire and customs I would have abolished. And yet the seeming sanctity of it all infected me. It caused me to dramatize and to dream and to give in, to see myself at the center of something that possessed its own exalted beauty.

“I sat up one morning and touched my hair, and realized it was thick and curling at my shoulders.

“And in the days that followed, there was endless noise and movement in the fortress. Carts were coming to the gates from all directions. Thousands on foot passed inside. Every hour there was the sound of people on the move, people coming.

“At last Mael and eight of the Druids came to me. Their robes were white and fresh, smelling of the spring water and sunshine in which they’d been washed and dried, and their hair was brushed and shining.

“Carefully, they shaved all the hair from my chin and upper lip. They trimmed my fingernails. They brushed my hair and put on me the same white robes. And then shielding me on all sides with white veils they passed me out of the house and into a white canopied wagon.

“I glimpsed other robed men holding back an enormous crowd, and I realized for the first time that only a select few of the Druids had been allowed to see me.

“Once Mael and I were under the canopy of the cart, the flaps were closed, and we were completely hidden. We seated ourselves on rude benches as the wagon started to move. And we rode for hours without speaking.

“Occasional rays of sun pierced the white fabric of the tentlike enclosure. And when I put my face close to the cloth I could see the forest—deeper, thicker than I remembered. And behind us came an endless train, and great wagons of men who clung to wooden bars and cried out to be released, their voices commingling in an awful chorus.

“ ‘Who are they? Why do they cry like that?’ I asked finally. I couldn’t stand the tension any longer.

“Mael roused himself as if from a dream. ‘They are evildoers, thieves, murderers, all justly condemned, and they shall perish in sacred sacrifice.’

“ ‘Loathsome,’ I muttered. But was it? We condemned our criminals to die on crosses in Rome, to be burnt at the stake, to suffer all manner of cruelties. Did it make us more civilized that we didn’t call it a religious sacrifice? Maybe the Keltoi were wiser than we were in not wasting the deaths.

“But this was nonsense. My head was light. The cart was creeping along. I could hear those who passed us on foot as well as on horseback. Everyone going to the festival of Samhain. I was about to die. I didn’t want it to be fire. Mael looked pale and frightened. And the wailing of the men in the prison carts was driving me to the edge of madness.

“What would I think when the fire was lighted? What would I think when I felt myself start to burn? I couldn’t stand this.

“ ‘What is going to happen to me!’ I demanded suddenly. I had the urge to strangle Mael. He looked up and his brows moved ever so slightly.

“ ‘What if the god is already dead …’ he whispered.

“ ‘Then we go to Rome, you and I, and we get drunk together on good Italian wine!’ I whispered.

“It was late afternoon when the cart came to a stop. The noise seemed to rise like steam all around us.

“When I went to look out, Mael didn’t stop me. I saw we had come to an immense clearing hemmed on all sides by the giant oaks. All the carts including ours were backed into the trees, and in the middle of the clearing hundreds worked at some enterprise involving endless bundles of sticks and miles of rope and hundreds of great rough-hewn tree trunks.

“The biggest and longest logs I had ever seen were been hefted upright in two giant X’s.

“The woods were alive with those who watched. The clearing could not contain the multitudes. Yet more and more carts wound their way through the press to find a spot at the edges of the forest.

“I sat back and pretended to myself that I did not know what they were doing out there, but I did. And before the sunset I heard louder and more desperate screams from those in the prison carts.

“It was almost dusk. And when Mael lifted the flap for me to see, I stared in horror at two gargantuan wicker figures—a man and a woman, it seemed, from the mass of vines that suggested dress and hair—

constructed all of logs and osiers and ropes, and filled from top to bottom with the bound and writhing bodies of the condemned who screamed in supplication.

"I was speechless looking at these two monstrous giants. I could not count the number of wriggling human bodies they held, victims stuffed into the hollow framework of their enormous legs, their torsos, their arms, even their hands, and even into their immense and faceless cagelike heads, which were crowned with ivy leaves and flowers. Ropes of flowers made up the woman's gown, and stalks of wheat were stuffed into the man's great belt of ivy. The figures shivered as if they might at any moment fall, but I knew the powerful cross scaffolding of timbers supported them as they appeared to tower over the distant forest. And all around the feet of these figures were stacked the bundles of kindling and pitch-soaked wood that would soon ignite them.

" 'And all these who must die are guilty of some wrongdoing, you wish me to believe that?' I asked of Mael.

"He nodded with his usual solemnity. This didn't concern him.

" 'They have waited months, some years, to be sacrificed,' he said almost indifferently. 'They come from all over the land. And they cannot change their fate any more than we can change ours. It is to perish in the forms of the Great Mother and her Lover.'

"I was becoming ever more desperate. I should have done anything to escape. But even now some twenty Druids surrounded the cart and beyond them was a legion of warriors. And the crowd itself went so far back into the trees that I could see no end to it.

"Darkness was falling quickly, and everywhere torches were being lighted.

"I could feel the roar of excited voices. The screams of the condemned grew ever more piercing and beseeching.

"I sat still and tried to deliver my mind from panic. If I could not escape, then I would meet these strange ceremonies with some degree of calm, and when it came clear what a sham they were, I would with dignity and righteousness pronounce my judgments loud enough for others to hear them. That would be my last act—the act of the god—and it must be done with authority, or else it would do nothing in the scheme of things.

"The cart began to move. There was much noise, shouting, and Mael

rose and took my arm and steadied me. When the flap was opened we had come to a stop deep in the woods many yards from the clearing. I glanced back at the lurid sight of the immense figures, torchlight glinting on the swarm of pathetic movement inside them. They seemed animate, these horrors, like things that would suddenly start to walk and crush all of us. The play of light and shadow on those stuffed into the giant heads gave a false impression of hideous faces.

"I couldn't make myself turn away from it, and from the sight of the crowd gathered all around, but Mael tightened his grip on my arm and said that I must come now to the sanctuary of the god with the elect of the priesthood.

"The others closed me in, obviously trying to conceal me. I realized the crowd did not know what was happening now. In all likelihood they knew only that the sacrifices would soon begin, and some manifestation of the god would be claimed by the Druids.

"Only one of the band carried a torch, and he led the way deeper into the evening darkness, Mael at my side, and other white-robed figures ahead of me, flanking me, and behind me.

"It was still. It was damp. And the trees rose to such dizzying heights against the vanishing glow of the distant sky that they seemed to be growing even as I looked up at them.

"I could run now, I thought, but how far would I get before this entire race of people came thundering after me?

"But we had come into a grove, and I saw, in the feeble light of the flames, dreadful faces carved into the barks of the trees and human skulls on stakes grinning in the shadows. In carved-out tree trunks were other skulls in rows, piled one row upon another. In fact, the place was a regular charnel house, and the silence that enclosed us seemed to give life to these horrid things, to let them speak suddenly.

"I tried to shake the illusion, the sense that these staring skulls were watching.

"There is no one really watching, I thought, there is no continuous awareness of anything.

"But we had paused before a gnarled oak of such enormous girth that I doubted my senses. How old it must have been, this tree, to have grown to such width I couldn't imagine. But when I looked up I saw that its soaring limbs were still alive, it was still in green leaf, and the living

mistletoe everywhere decorated it.

"The Druids had stepped away to right and left. Only Mael remained near me. And I stood facing the oak, with Mael at my far right, and I saw that hundreds of bouquets of flowers had been laid at the base of the tree, their little blooms barely showing any color anymore in the gathering shadows.

"Mael had bowed his head. His eyes were closed. And it seemed the others were in the same attitude, and their bodies were trembling. I felt the cool breeze stir the green grass. I heard the leaves all around us carry the breeze in a loud and long sigh that died away as it had come in the forest.

"And then very distinctly, I heard words spoken in the dark that had no sound to them!

"They came undeniably from within the tree itself, and they asked whether or not all the conditions had been met by him who would drink the Divine Blood tonight.

"For a moment I thought that I was going mad. They had drugged me. But I had drunk nothing since morning! My head was clear, too painfully clear, and I heard the silent pulse of this personage again and it was asking questions:

"He is a man of learning?

"Mael's slender form seemed to shimmer as surely he expressed the answer. And the faces of the others had become rapt, their eyes fixed on the great oak, the flutter of the torch the only movement.

"Can he go down into Egypt?

"I saw Mael nod. And the tears rose in his eyes, and his pale throat moved as he swallowed.

"Yes, I live, my faithful one, and I speak, and you have done well, and I shall make the new god. Send him in to me.

"I was too astonished to speak, and I had nothing to say either. *Everything had changed.* Everything that I believed, depended upon, had suddenly been called into question. I hadn't the slightest fear, only paralyzing amazement. Mael took me by the arm. The other Druids came to assist him, and I was led around the oak, clear of the flowers heaped at its roots, until we stood behind it before a huge pile of stones banked against it.

"The grove had its carved images on this side as well, its troves of

skulls, and the pale figures of Druids whom I had not seen before. And it was these men, some with long white beards, who drifted forward to lay their hands on the stones and start to remove them.

"Mael and the others worked with them, silently lifting these great rocks and casting them aside, some of the stones so heavy that three men had to lift them.

"And finally there was revealed in the base of the oak a heavy doorway of iron with huge locks over it. Mael drew out an iron key and he said some long words in the language of the Keltoi, to which the others gave responses. Mael's hand was shaking. But he soon had all the locks undone, and then it took four of the Druids to pull back the door. And then the torchbearer lighted another brand for me and placed it in my hands and Mael said:

" 'Enter, Marius.'

"In the wavering light, we glanced at each other. He seemed a helpless creature, unable to move his limbs, though his heart brimmed as he looked at me. I knew now the barest glimpse of the wonder that had shaped him and enflamed him, and was utterly humbled and baffled by its origins.

"But from within the tree, from the darkness beyond this rudely cut doorway, there came the silent one again:

"Do not be afraid, Marius. I wait for you. Take the light and come to me."

7

When I stepped through the doorway, the Druids closed it. And I realized that I stood at the top of a long stone stairs. It was a configuration I was to see over and over again in the centuries that followed, and you have already seen it twice and you will see it again—the steps leading down into the Mother Earth, into the chambers where Those Who Drink the Blood always hide.

"The oak itself contained a chamber, low and unfinished, the light of my torch glinting on the rude marks left everywhere in the wood by the chisels, but the thing that called me was at the bottom of the stairs. And again, it told me that I must not be afraid.

"I was not afraid. I was exhilarated beyond my wildest dreams. I was not going to die as simply as I had imagined. I was descending to a mystery that was infinitely more interesting than I had ever thought it would be.

"But when I reached the bottom of the narrow steps and stood in the small stone chamber there, I was terrified by what I saw—terrified and repelled by it, the loathing and fear so immediate that I felt a lump rising to suffocate me or make me uncontrollably sick.

"A creature sat on a stone bench opposite the foot of the stairway, and in the full light of the torch I saw that it had the face and limbs of a man. But it was burnt black all over, horribly burnt, its skin shriveled to its very bones. In fact it appeared a yellow-eyed skeleton coated in pitch, only its flowing mane of white hair untouched. It opened its mouth to speak and I saw its white teeth, its fang teeth, and I gripped the torch firmly, trying not to scream like a fool.

" 'Do not come too close to me,' it said. 'Stand there where I may really see you, not as they see you, but as my eyes can still see.'

"I swallowed, tried to breathe easily. No human being could have been burnt like that and survived. And yet the thing lived—naked and shrunken and black. And its voice was low and beautiful. It rose, and then moved slowly across the chamber.

"It pointed its finger at me, and the yellow eyes widened slightly,

revealing a blood red tinge in the light.

“ ‘What do you want of me?’ I whispered before I could stop myself. ‘Why have I been brought here?’

“ ‘Calamity,’ he said in the same voice, colored with genuine feeling—not the rasping sound I had expected from such a thing. I will give you my power, Marius, I will make you a god and you will be immortal. But you must leave here when it is finished. You must somehow escape our faithful worshipers, and you must go down into Egypt to find why this … this … has befallen me.’

“He appeared to be floating in the darkness, his hair a mop of white straw around him, his jaws stretching the blackened leathery skin that clung to his skull as he spoke.

“ ‘You see, we are the enemies of light, we gods of darkness, we serve the Holy Mother and we live and rule only by the light of the moon. But our enemy, the sun, has escaped his natural path and sought us out in darkness. All over the north country where we are worshiped, in the sacred groves from the lands of snow and ice, down into this fruitful country, and to the east, the sun has found its way into the sanctuary by day or the world by night and burned the gods alive. The youngest of these perished utterly, some exploding like comets before their worshipers! Others died in such heat that the sacred tree itself became a funeral pyre. Only the old ones—the ones who have long served the Great Mother—continued to walk and to talk as I do, but in agony, affrighting the faithful worshipers when they appeared.

“ ‘There must be a new god, Marius, strong and beautiful as I was, the lover of the Great Mother, but more truly there must be one strong enough to escape the worshipers, to get out of the oak somehow, and to go down into Egypt and seek out the old gods and find why this calamity has occurred. You must go to Egypt, Marius, you must go into Alexandria and into the older cities, and you must summon the gods with the silent voice that you will have after I make you, and you must find who lives still and who walks still, and why this calamity has occurred.’

“It closed its eyes now. It stood still, its light frame wavering uncontrollably as if it were a thing made of black paper, and I saw suddenly, unaccountably, a spill of violent images—these gods of the grove bursting into flame. I heard their screams. My mind, being

rational, being Roman, resisted these images. It tried to memorize and contain them, rather than yield to them, but the maker of the images—this thing—was patient and the images went on. I saw the country that could only be Egypt, the burnt yellow look to all things, the sand that overlies everything and soils it and dusts it to the same color, and I saw more stairways into the earth and I saw sanctuaries …

" 'Find them,' he said. 'Find why and how this has come to pass. See to it that it never comes to pass again. Use your powers in the streets of Alexandria until you find the old ones. Pray the old ones are there as I am still here.'

"I was too shocked to answer, too humbled by the mystery. And perhaps there was even a moment when I accepted this destiny, accepted it completely, but I am not sure.

" 'I know,' he said. 'From me you can keep no secrets. You do not wish to be the God of the Grove, and you will seek to escape. But you see, this disaster may seek you out wherever you are unless you discover the cause and the prevention of it. So I know you will go into Egypt, else you too in the womb of the night or the womb of the dark earth may be burnt by this unnatural sun.'

"It came towards me a little, dragging its dried feet on the stone floor. 'Now mark my words, you must escape this very night,' it said. 'I will tell the worshipers that you must go down into Egypt, for the salvation of all of us, but having a new and able god, they will be loath to part with him. But you must go down. And you must not let them imprison you in the oak after the festival. You must travel fast. And before sunrise, go into the Mother Earth to escape the light. She will protect you. Now come to me. I will give you The Blood. And pray I still have the power to give you my ancient strength. It will be slow. It will be long. I will take and I will give, and I will take and I will give, but I must do it, and you must become the god, and you must do as I have said.'

"Without waiting for my compliance, it was suddenly on me, its blackened fingers clutching at me, the torch falling from my hands. I fell backwards on the stairs, but its teeth were already in my throat.

"You know what happened, you know what it was to feel the blood being drawn, to feel the swoon. I saw in those moments the tombs and temples of Egypt. I saw two figures, resplendent as they sat side by side as if on a throne. I saw and heard other voices speaking to me in other

languages. And underneath it all, there came the same command: serve the Mother, take the blood of the sacrifice, preside over the worship that is the only worship, the eternal worship of the grove.

"I was struggling as one struggles in dreams, unable to cry out, unable to escape. And when I realized I was free and no longer pinned to the floor, I saw the god again, black as he had been before, but this time he was robust, as if the blaze had only baked him and he retained his full strength. His face had definition, even beauty, features well formed beneath the cracked casing of blackened leather that was his skin. The yellow eyes had round them now the natural folds of flesh that made them portals of a soul. But he was still crippled, still suffering, almost unable to move.

" 'Rise, Marius,' he said. 'You thirst and I will give you to drink. Rise and come to me.'

"And you know then the ecstasy I felt when his blood came into me, when it worked its way into every vessel, every limb. But the horrid pendulum had only begun to swing.

"Hours passed in the oak, as he took the blood out of me and gave it back over and over again. I lay sobbing on the floor when I was drained. I could see my hands like bones in front of me. I was shriveled as he had been. And again he would give me the blood to drink and I would rise in a frenzy of exquisite feeling, only to have him take it out of me again.

"With every exchange there came the lessons: that I was immortal, that only the sun and the fire could kill me, that I would sleep by day in the earth, that I should never know illness or natural death. That my soul should never migrate from my form into another, that I was the servant of the Mother, and that the moon would give me strength.

"That I would thrive on the blood of the evildoers, and even of the innocent who were sacrificed to the Mother, that I should remain in starvation between sacrifices, so that my body would become dry and empty like the dead wheat in the fields at winter, only to be filled with the blood of the sacrifice and to become full and beautiful like the new plants of the spring.

"In my suffering and ecstasy there would be the cycle of the seasons. And the powers of my mind, to read the thoughts and intentions of others, these I should use to make the judgments for my worshipers, to guide them in their justice and their laws. Never should I drink any

blood but the blood of the sacrifice. Never should I seek to take my powers for my own.

"These things I learned, these things I understood. But what was really taught to me during those hours was what we all learn at the moment of the Drinking of the Blood, that I was no longer a mortal man—that I had passed away from all I knew into something so powerful that these old teachings could barely harness or explain it, that my destiny, to use Mael's words, was beyond all the knowledge that anyone—mortal or immortal—could give.

"At last the god prepared me to go out of the tree. He drained so much blood from me now that I was scarcely able to stand. I was a wraith. I was weeping from thirst, I was seeing blood and smelling blood, and would have rushed at him and caught him and drained him had I the strength. But the strength, of course, was his.

" 'You are empty, as you will always be at the commencement of the festival,' he said, 'so that you may drink your fill of the sacrificial blood. But remember what I have told you. After you preside, you must find a way to escape. As for me, try to save me. Tell them that I must be kept with you. But in all likelihood my time has come to an end.'

" 'Why, how do you mean?' I asked.

" 'You will see. There need be only one god here, one good god,' he said. 'If I could only go with you to Egypt, I could drink the blood of the old ones and it might heal me. As it is, I will take hundreds of years to heal. And I shall not be allowed that time. But remember, go into Egypt. Do all that I have said.'

"He turned me now and pushed me towards the stairs. The torch lay blazing in the corner, and as I rose towards the door above, I smelled the blood of the Druids waiting, and I almost wept.

" 'They will give you all the blood that you can take,' he said behind me. 'Place yourself in their hands.' "

8

You can well imagine how I looked when I stepped from the oak. The Druids had waited for my knock upon the door, and in my silent voice, I had said:

"Open. It is the god.

"My human death was long finished, I was ravenous, and surely my face was no more than a living skull. No doubt my eyes were bulging from their sockets, and my teeth were bared. The white robe hung on me as on a skeleton. And no clearer evidence of my divinity could have been given to the Druids, who stood awestruck as I came out of the tree.

"But I saw not merely their faces, I saw into their hearts. I saw the relief in Mael that the god within had not been too feeble to create me, I saw the confirmation in him of all that he believed.

"And I saw the other great vision that is ours to see—the great spiritual depth of each man buried deep within a crucible of heated flesh and blood.

"My thirst was pure agony. And summoning all my new strength, I said: 'Take me to the altars. The Feast of Samhain is to begin.'

"The Druids let out chilling screams. They howled in the forest. And far beyond the sacred grove there came a deafening roar from the multitudes who had waited for that cry.

"We walked swiftly, in procession towards the clearing, and more and more of the white-robed priests came out to greet us and I found myself pelted with fresh and fragrant flowers from all sides, blossoms I crushed under my feet as I was saluted with hymns.

"I need not tell you how the world looked to me with the new vision, how I saw each tint and surface beneath the thin veil of darkness, how these hymns and anthems assaulted my ears.

"Marius, the man, was disintegrated inside this new being.

"Trumpets blared from the clearing as I mounted the steps of the stone altar and looked out over the thousands gathered there—the sea of expectant faces, the giant wicker figures with their doomed victims still struggling and crying inside.

“A great silver caldron of water stood before the altar, and as the priests sang, a chain of prisoners was led to this caldron, their arms bound behind their backs.

“The voices were singing in concert around me as the priests placed the flowers in my hair, on my shoulders, at my feet.

“ ‘Beautiful one, powerful one, god of the woods and the fields, drink now the sacrifices offered to you, and as your wasted limbs fill with life, so the earth will renew itself. So you will forgive us for the cutting of the corn which is the harvest, so you will bless the seed we sow.’

“And I saw before me those selected to be my victims, three stout men, bound as the others were bound, but clean and dressed also in white robes, with flowers on their shoulders and in their hair. Youths they were, handsome and innocent and overcome with awe as they awaited the will of the god.

“The trumpets were deafening. The roaring was ceaseless. I said:

“ ‘Let the sacrifices begin!’ And as the first youth was delivered up to me, as I prepared to drink for the very first time from that truly divine cup which is human life, as I held the warm flesh of the victim in my hands, the blood ready for my open mouth, I saw the fires lighted beneath the towering wicker giants, I saw the first two prisoners forced head down into the water of the silver caldron.

“Death by fire, death by water, death by the piercing teeth of the hungry god.

“Through the age-old ecstasy, the hymns continued: ‘God of the waning and waxing moon, god of the woods and fields, you who are the very image of death in your hunger, grow strong with the blood of the victims, grow beautiful so that the Great Mother will take you to herself.’

“How long did it last? I do not know. It was forever—the blaze of the wicker giants, the screaming of the victims, the long procession of those who must be drowned. I drank and drank, not merely from the three selected for me, but from a dozen others before they were returned to the caldron, or forced into the blazing giants. The priests cut the heads from the dead with great bloody swords, stacking them in pyramids to either side of the altar, and the bodies were borne away.

“Everywhere I turned I saw rapture on sweating faces, everywhere I turned I heard the anthems and cries. But at last the frenzy was dying out. The giants were fallen into a smoldering heap upon which men

poured more pitch, more kindling.

"And it was now time for the judgments, for men to stand before me and present their cases for vengeance against others, and for me to look with my new eyes into their souls. I was reeling. I had drunk too much blood, but I felt such power in me I could have leapt up and over the clearing and deep into the forest. I could have spread invisible wings, or so it seemed.

"But I carried out my 'destiny,' as Mael would have called it. I found this one just, that one in error, this one innocent, that one deserving of death.

"I don't know how long it went on because my body no longer measured time in weariness. But finally it was finished, and I realized the moment of action had come.

"I had somehow to do what the old god had commanded me, which was to escape the imprisonment in the oak. And I also had precious little time in which to do it, no more than an hour before dawn.

"As for what lay ahead in Egypt, I had not made my decision yet. But I knew that if I let the Druids enclose me in the sacred tree again, I would starve in there until the small offering at the next full moon. And all of my nights until that time would be thirst and torture, and what the old one had called 'the god's dreams' in which I'd learn the secrets of the tree and the grass that grew and the silent Mother.

"But these secrets were not for me.

"The Druids surrounded me now and we proceeded to the sacred tree again, the hymns dying to a litany which commanded me to remain within the oak to sanctify the forest, to be its guardian, and to speak kindly through the oak to those of the priesthood who would come from time to time to ask guidance of me.

"I stopped before we reached the tree. A huge pyre was blazing in the middle of the grove, casting ghastly light on the carved faces and the heaps of human skulls. The rest of the priesthood stood round it waiting. A current of terror shot through me with all the new power that such feelings have for us.

"I started talking hastily. In an authoritative voice I told them that I wished them all to leave the grove. That I should seal myself up in the oak at dawn with the old god. But I could see it wasn't working. They were staring at me coldly and glancing one to the other, their eyes

shallow like bits of glass.

“ ‘Mael!’ I said. ‘Do as I command you. Tell these priests to leave the grove.’

“Suddenly, without the slightest warning, half the assemblage of priests ran towards the tree. The other took hold of my arms.

“I shouted for Mael, who led the siege on the tree, to stop. I tried to get loose but some twelve of the priests gripped my arms and my legs.

“If I had only understood the extent of my strength, I might easily have freed myself. But I didn’t know. I was still reeling from the feast, too horrified by what I knew would happen now. As I struggled, trying to free my arms, even kicking at those who held me, the old god, the naked and black thing, was borne out of the tree and heaved into the fire.

“Only for a split second did I see him, and all I beheld was resignation. He did not once lift his arms to fight. His eyes were closed and he did not look at me, nor at anyone or anything, and I remembered in that moment what he had told me, of his agony, and I started to cry.

“I was shaking violently as they burned him. But from the very midst of the flames I heard his voice. ‘Do as I commanded you, Marius. You are our hope.’ That meant Get Out of Here Now.

“I made myself still and small in the grip of those who held me. I wept and wept and acted like I was just the sad victim of all this magic, just the poor god who must mourn his father who had gone into the flames. And when I felt their hands relax, when I saw that, one and all, they were gazing into the pyre, I pivoted with all my strength, tearing loose from their grip, and I ran as fast as I could for the woods.

“In that initial sprint, I learned for the first time what my powers were. I cleared hundreds of yards in an instant, my feet barely touching the ground.

“But the cry rang out immediately: ‘THE GOD HAS FLOWN!’ and within seconds the multitude in the clearing was screaming it over and over as thousands of mortals plunged into the trees.

“How on earth did this happen, I thought suddenly, that I’m a god, full of human blood, and running from thousands of Keltic barbarians through this damned woods!

“I didn’t even stop to tear the white robe off me, but ripped it off while I was still running, and then I leapt up to the branches overhead and

moved even faster through the tops of the oaks.

"Within minutes I was so far away from my pursuers that I couldn't hear them anymore. But I kept running and running, leaping from branch to branch, until there was nothing to fear anymore but the morning sun.

"And I learned then what Gabrielle learned so early in your wanderings, that I could easily dig into the earth to save myself from the light.

"When I awoke the heat of my thirst astonished me. I could not imagine how the old god had endured the ritual starvation. I could think only of human blood.

"But the Druids had had the day in which to pursue me. I had to proceed with great care.

"And I starved all that night as I sped through the forest, not drinking until early morning when I came upon a band of thieves in the woods which provided me with the blood of an evildoer, and a good suit of clothes.

"In those hours just before dawn, I took stock of things. I had learned a great deal about my powers, I would learn more. And I would go down to Egypt, not for the sake of the gods or their worshipers, but to find out what this was all about.

"And so even then you see, more than seventeen hundred years ago, we were questing, we were rejecting the explanations given us, we were, loving the magic and the power for its own sake.

"On the third night of my new life, I wandered into my old house in Massilia and found my library, my writing table, my books all there still. And my faithful slaves overjoyed to see me. What did these things mean to me? What did it mean that I had written this history, that I had lain in this bed?

"I knew I could not be Marius, the Roman, any longer. But I would take from him what I could. I sent my beloved slaves back home. I wrote my father to say that a serious illness compelled me to live out my remaining days in the heat and dryness of Egypt. I packed off the rest of my history to those in Rome who would read it and publish it, and then I set out for Alexandria with gold in my pockets, with my old travel documents, and with two dull-witted slaves who never questioned that I traveled by night.

“And within a month of the great Samhain Feast in Gaul, I was roaming the black crooked nighttime streets of Alexandria, searching for the old gods with my silent voice.

“I was mad, but I knew the madness would pass. I had to find the old gods. And you know why I had to find them. It was not only the threat of the calamity again, the sun god seeking me out in the darkness of my daytime slumber, or visiting me with obliterating fire in the full darkness of the night.

“I had to find the old gods because I could not bear to be alone among men. The full horror of it was upon me, and though I killed only the murderer, the evildoer, my conscience was too finely tuned for self-deception. I could not bear the realization that I, Marius, who had known and enjoyed such love in his life, was the relentless bringer of death.”

9

“Alexandria was not an old city. It had existed for just a little over three hundred years. But it was a great port and the home of the largest libraries in the Roman world. Scholars from all over the Empire came to study there, and I had been one of them in another lifetime, and now I found myself there again.

“Had not the god told me to come, I would have gone deeper into Egypt, ‘to the bottom,’ to use Mael’s phrase, suspecting that the answers to all riddles lay in the older shrines.

“But a curious feeling came on me in Alexandria. I *knew* the gods were there. I knew they were guiding my feet when I sought the streets of the whorehouses and the thieves’ dens, the places where men went to lose their souls.

“At night I lay on my bed in my little Roman house and I called to the gods. I grappled with my madness. I puzzled just as you have puzzled over the power and strength and crippling emotions which I now possessed. And one night just before morning, when the light of only one lamp shone through the sheer veils of the bed where I lay, I turned my eyes towards the distant garden doorway and saw a still black figure standing there.

“For one moment it seemed a dream, this figure, because it carried no scent, did not seem to breathe, did not make a sound. Then I knew it was one of the gods, but it was gone and I was left sitting up and staring after it, trying to remember what I had seen: a black naked thing with a bald head and red piercing eyes, a thing that seemed lost in its own stillness, strangely diffident, only marshaling its strength to move at the last moment before complete discovery.

“The next night in the back streets I heard a voice telling me to come. But it was a less articulate voice than that which had come from the tree. It made known to me only that the door was near. And finally there came the still and silent moment when I stood before the door.

“It was a god who opened it for me. It was a god who said Come.

“I was frightened as I descended the inevitable stairway, as I followed

a steeply sloping tunnel. I lighted the candle I had brought with me, and I saw that I was entering an underground temple, a place older than the city of Alexandria, a sanctuary built perhaps under the ancient pharaohs, its walls covered with tiny colored pictures depicting the life of old Egypt.

"And then there was the writing, the magnificent picture writing with its tiny mummies and birds and embracing arms without bodies, and coiling snakes.

"I moved on, coming into a vast place of square pillars and a soaring ceiling. The same paintings decorated every inch of stone here.

"And then I saw in the corner of my eye what seemed at first a statue, a black figure standing near a pillar with one hand raised to rest against the stone. But I knew it was no statue. No Egyptian god made out of diorite ever stood in this attitude nor wore a real linen skirt about its loins.

"I turned slowly, bracing myself against the full sight of it, and saw the same burnt flesh, the same streaming hair, though it was black, the same yellow eyes. The lips were shriveled around the teeth and the gums, and the breath came out of its throat full of pain.

" 'How and whence did you come?' he asked in Greek.

"I saw myself as he saw me, luminous and strong, even my blue eyes something of an incidental mystery, and I saw my Roman garments, my linen tunic gathered in gold buckles on my shoulders, my red cloak. With my long yellow hair, I must have looked like a wanderer from the north woods, 'civilized' only on the surface, and perhaps this was now true.

"But he was the one who concerned me. And I saw him more fully, the seamed flesh burnt to his ribs and molded to his collarbone and the jutting bones of his hips. He was not starved, this thing. He had recently drunk human blood. But his agony was like heat coming from him, as though the fire still cooked him from within, as though he were a self-contained hell.

" 'How have you escaped the burning?' he asked. 'What saved you? Answer!'

" 'Nothing saved me,' I said, speaking Greek as he did.

"I approached him holding the candle to the side when he shied from it. He had been thin in life, broad-shouldered like the old pharaohs, and

his long black hair was cropped straight across the forehead in that old style.

" 'I wasn't made when it happened,' I said, 'but afterwards, by the god of the sacred grove in Gaul.'

" 'Ah, then he was unharmed, this one who made you.'

" 'No, burned as you are, but he had enough strength to do it. He gave and took the blood over and over again. He said, "Go into Egypt and find why this has happened." He said the gods of the wood had burst into flames, some in their sleep and some awake. He said this had happened all over the north.'

" 'Yes.' He nodded, and he gave a dry rasping laugh that shook his entire form. 'And only the ancient had the strength to survive, to inherit the agony which only immortality can sustain. And so we suffer. But you have been made. You have come. You will make more. But is it justice to make more? Would the Father and the Mother have allowed this to happen to us if the time had not come?'

" 'But who are the Father and the Mother?' I asked. I knew he did not mean the earth when he said Mother.

" 'The first of us,' he answered, 'those from whom all of us descend.'

"I tried to penetrate his thoughts, feel the truth of them, but he knew what I was doing, and his mind folded up like a flower at dusk.

" 'Come with me,' he said. And he commenced to walk with a shuffling step out of the large room and down a long corridor, decorated as the chamber had been.

"I sensed we were in an even older place, something built before the temple from which we'd just come. I do not know how I knew it. The chill you felt on the steps here on the island was not there. You don't feel such things in Egypt. You feel something else. You feel the presence of something living in the air itself.

"But there was more palpable evidence of antiquity as we walked on. The paintings on these walls were older, the colors fainter, and here and there was damage where the colored plaster had flaked and fallen away. The style had changed. The black hair of the little figures was longer and fuller, and it seemed the whole was more lovely, more full of light and intricate design.

"Somewhere far off water dripped on stone. The sound gave a songlike echo through the passage. It seemed the walls had captured life in these

delicate and tenderly painted figures, it seemed that the magic attempted again and again by the ancient religious artists had its tiny glowing kernel of power. I could hear whispers of life where there were no whispers. I could feel the great continuity of history even if there was no one who was aware.

"The dark figure beside me paused as I looked at the walls. He made an airy gesture for me to follow him through a doorway, and we entered a long rectangular chamber covered entirely with the artful hieroglyphs. It was like being encased in a manuscript to be inside it. And I saw two older Egyptian sarcophagi placed head to head against the wall.

"These were boxes carved to conform to the shape of the mummies for which they were made, and fully modeled and painted to represent the dead, with faces of hammered gold, and eyes of inlaid lapis lazuli.

"I held the candle high. And with great effort my guide opened the lids of these cases and let them fall back so that I might see inside.

"I saw what at first appeared to be bodies, but when I drew closer I realized that they were heaps of ash in manly form. Nothing of tissue remained to them except a white fang here, a chip of bone there.

" 'No amount of blood can bring them back now,' said my guide. 'They are past all resurrection. The vessels of the blood are gone. Those who could rise have risen, and centuries will pass before we are healed, before we know the cessation of our pain.'

"Before he closed the mummy cases, I saw that the lids inside were blackened by the fire that had immolated these two. I wasn't sorry to see them shut up again.

"He turned and moved towards the doorway again, and I followed with the candle, but he paused and glanced back at the painted coffins.

" 'When the ashes are scattered,' he said, 'their souls are free.'

" 'Then why don't you scatter the ashes!' I said, trying not to sound so desperate, so undone.

" 'Should I?' he asked of me, the crisped flesh around his eyes widening. 'Do you think that I should?'

" 'You ask me!' I said.

"He gave one of those dry laughs again, that seemed to carry agony with it, and he led on down the passage to a lighted room.

"It was a library we entered, where a few scattered candles revealed the diamond-shaped wooden racks of parchment and papyrus scrolls.

“This delighted me, naturally, because a library was something I could understand. It was the one human place in which I still felt some measure of my old sanity.

“But I was startled to see another one—another one of us—sitting to the side behind the writing table, his eyes on the floor.

“This one had no hair whatsoever, and though he was pitch black all over, his skin was full and well-modeled and gleamed as if it had been oiled. The planes of his face were beautiful, the hand that rested in the lap of his white linen kilt was gracefully curled, all the muscles of his naked chest well defined.

“He turned and looked up at me. And something immediately passed between us, something more silent than silence, as it can be with us.

“ ‘This is the Elder,’ said the weaker one who’d brought me here. ‘And you see for yourself how he withstood the fire. But he will not speak. He has not spoken since it happened. Yet surely he knows where are the Mother and the Father, and why this was allowed to pass.’

“The Elder merely looked forward again. But there was a curious expression on his face, something sarcastic and faintly amused, and a little contemptuous.

“ ‘Even before this disaster,’ the other one said, ‘the Elder did not often speak to us. The fire did not change him, make him more receptive. He sits in silence, more and more like the Mother and the Father. Now and then he reads. Now and then he walks in the world above. He Drinks the Blood, he listens to the singers. Now and then he will dance. He speaks to mortals in the streets of Alexandria, but he will not speak to us. He has nothing to say to us. But he knows … He knows why this happened to us.’

“ ‘Leave me with him,’ I said.

“I had the feeling that all beings have in such situations. I will make the man speak. I will draw something out of him, as no one else has been able to do. But it wasn’t mere vanity that impelled me. This was the one who had come to me in the bedroom of my house, I was sure of it. This was the one who had stood watching me in my door.

“And I had sensed something in his glance. Call it intelligence, call it interest, call it recognition of some common knowledge—there was something there.

“And I knew that I carried with me the possibilities of a different

world, unknown to the God of the Grove and even to this feeble and wounded one beside me who looked at the Elder in despair.

“The feeble one withdrew as I had asked. I went to the writing table and looked at the Elder.

“ ‘What should I do?’ I asked in Greek.

“He looked up at me abruptly, and I could see this thing I call intelligence in his face.

“ ‘Is there any point,’ I asked, ‘to questioning you further?’

“I had chosen my tone carefully. There was nothing formal in it, nothing reverential. It was as familiar as it could be.

“ ‘And just what is it you seek!’ he asked in Latin suddenly, coldly, his mouth turning down at the ends, his attitude one of abruptness and challenge.

“It relieved me to switch to Latin.

“ ‘You heard what I told the other,’ I said in the same informal manner, ‘how I was made by the God of the Grove in the country of the Keltoi, and how I was told to discover why the gods had died in flames.’

“ ‘You don’t come on behalf of the Gods of the Grove!’ he said, sardonic as before. He had not lifted his head, merely looked up, which made his eyes seem all the more challenging and contemptuous.

“ ‘I do and I don’t,’ I said. ‘If we can perish in this way, I would like to know why. What happened once can happen a second time. And I would like to know if we are really gods, and if we are, then what are our obligations to man. Are the Mother and the Father true beings, or are they legend? How did all this start? I would like to know that, of course.’

“ ‘By accident,’ he said.

“ ‘By accident?’ I leaned forward. I thought I had heard wrong.

“ ‘By accident it started,’ he said coolly, forbiddingly, with the clear implication that the question was absurd. ‘Four thousand years ago, by accident, and it has been enclosed in magic and religion ever since.’

“ ‘You are telling me the truth, aren’t you?’

“ ‘Why shouldn’t I? Why should I protect you from the truth? Why should I bother to lie to you? I don’t even know who you are. I don’t care.’

“ ‘Then will you explain to me what you mean, that it happened by accident,’ I pressed.

“ ‘I don’t know. I may. I may not. I have spoken more in these last few

moments than I have in years. The story of the accident may be no more true than the myths that delight the others. The others have always chosen the myths. It's what you really want, is it not?' His voice rose and he rose slightly out of the chair as if his angry voice were impelling him to his feet.

" 'A story of our creation, analogous to the Genesis of the Hebrews, the tales in Homer, the babblings of your Roman poets Ovid and Virgil—a great gleaming morass of symbols out of which life itself is supposed to have sprung.' He was on his feet and all but shouting, his black forehead knotted with veins, his hand a fist on the desk. 'It is that kind of tale that fills the documents in these rooms, that emerges in fragments from the anthems and the incantations. Want to hear it? It's as true as anything else.'

" 'Tell me what you will,' I said. I was trying to keep calm. The volume of his voice was hurting my ears. And I heard things stirring in the rooms near us. Other creatures, like that dried-up wisp of a thing that had brought me in here, were prowling about.

" 'And you might begin,' I said acidly, 'by confessing why you came to me in my rooms here in Alexandria. It was you who led me here. Why did you do that? To rail at me? To curse me for asking you how it started?'

" 'Quiet yourself.'

" 'I might say the same to you.'

"He looked me up and down calmly, and then he smiled. He opened both his hands as if in greeting or offering, and then he shrugged.

" 'I want you to tell me about the accident,' I said. 'I would beg you to tell me if I thought it would do any good. What can I do for you to make you tell?'

"His face underwent several remarkable transformations. I could feel his thoughts, but not hear them, feel a high-pitched humor. And when he spoke again, his voice was thickened as if he were fighting back sorrow, as if it were strangling him.

" 'Hearken to our old story,' he said. 'The good god, Osiris, the first pharaoh of Egypt, in the eons before the invention of writing, was murdered by evil men. And when his wife, Isis, gathered together the parts of his body, he became immortal and thereafter ruled in the realm of the dead. This is the realm of the moon, and the night, in which he

reigned, and to him were brought the blood sacrifices for the great goddess which he drank. But the priests tried to steal from him the secret of his immortality, and so his worship became secret, and his temples were known only to those of his cult who protected him from the sun god, who might at any time seek to destroy Osiris with the sun's burning rays. But you can see the truth in the legend. The early king discovered something—or rather he was the victim of an ugly occurrence—and he became unnatural with a power that could be used for incalculable evil by those around him, and so he made a worship of it, seeking to contain it in obligation and ceremony, seeking to limit The Powerful Blood to those who would use it for white magic and nothing else. And so here we are.'

" 'And the Mother and Father are Isis and Osiris?'

" 'Yes and no. They are the first two. Isis and Osiris are the names that were used in the myths that they told, or the old worship onto which they grafted themselves.'

" 'What was the accident, then? How was this thing discovered?'

"He looked at me for a long period of silence, and then he sat down again, turning to the side and staring off as he'd been before.

" 'But why should I tell you?' he asked, yet this time he put the question with new feeling, as though he meant it sincerely and had to answer it for himself. 'Why should I do anything? If the Mother and the Father will not rise from the sands to save themselves as the sun comes over the horizon, why should I move? Or speak? Or go on?' Again he looked up at me.

" 'This is what happened, the Mother and the Father went out into the sun?'

" 'Were left in the sun, my dear Marius,' he said, astonishing me with the knowledge of my name. 'Left in the sun. The Mother and the Father do not move of their own volition, save now and then to whisper to each other, to knock those of us down who would come to them for their healing blood. They could restore all of us who were burned, if they would let us drink the healing blood. Four thousand years the Father and Mother have existed, and our blood grows stronger with every season, every victim. It grows stronger even with starvation, for when the starvation is ended, new strength is enjoyed. But the Father and the Mother do not care for their children. And now it seems they do not care

for themselves. Maybe after four thousand nights, they merely wished to see the sun!

“ ‘Since the coming of the Greek into Egypt, since the perversion of the old art, they have not spoken to us. They have not let us see the blink of their eye. And what is Egypt now but the granary of Rome? When the Mother and the Father strike out to drive us away from the veins in their necks, they are as iron and can crush our bones. And if they do not care anymore, then why should I?’

“I studied him for a long moment.

“ ‘And you are saying,’ I asked, ‘that this is what caused the others to burn up? That the Father and Mother were left out in the sun?’

“He nodded.

“ ‘Our blood comes from them!’ he said. ‘It is their blood. The line is direct, and what befalls them befalls us. If they are burnt, we are burnt.’

“ ‘We are connected to them!’ I whispered in amazement.

“ ‘Exactly, my dear Marius,’ he said, watching me, seeming to enjoy my fear. ‘That is why they have been kept for a thousand years, the Mother and the Father, that is why victims are brought to them in sacrifice, that is why they are worshiped. What happens to them happens to us.’

“ ‘Who did it? Who put them in the sun?’ “He laughed without making a sound.

“ ‘The one who kept them,’ he said, ‘the one who couldn’t endure it any longer, the one who had had this solemn charge for too long, the one who could persuade no one else to accept the burden, and finally, weeping and shivering, took them out into the desert sands and left them like two statues there.’

“ ‘And my fate is linked to this,’ I murmured.

“ ‘Yes. But you see, I do not think he believed it any longer, the one who kept them. It was just an old tale. After all, they were worshiped as I told you, worshiped by us, as we are worshiped by mortals, and no one dared to harm them. No one held a torch to them to see if it made the rest of us feel pain. No. He did not believe it. He left them in the desert, and that night when he opened his eyes in his coffin and found himself a burnt and unrecognizable horror, he screamed and screamed.’

“ ‘You got them back underground.’

“ ‘Yes.’

“ ‘And they are blackened as you are …’

“ ‘No.’ He shook his head. ‘Darkened to a golden bronze, like the meat turning on the spit. No more than that. And beautiful as before, as if beauty has become part of their heritage, beauty part and parcel of what they are destined to be. They stare forward as they always have, but they no longer incline their heads to each other, they no longer hum with the rhythm of their secret exchanges, they no longer let us drink their blood. And the victims brought to them, they will not take, save now and then, and only in solitude. No one knows when they will drink, when they will not.’

“I shook my head. I moved back and forth, my head bowed, the candle fluttering in my hand, not knowing what to say to all this, needing time to think it out.

“He gestured for me to take the chair on the other side of the writing table, and without thinking of it, I did.

“ ‘But wasn’t it meant to happen, Roman?’ he asked. ‘Weren’t they meant to meet their death in the sands, silent, unmoving, like statues cast there after a city is sacked by the conquering army, and were we not meant to die too? Look at Egypt. What is Egypt, I ask you again, but the granary of Rome? Were they not meant to burn there day after day while all of us burned like stars the world over?’

“ ‘Where are they?’ I asked.

“ ‘Why do you want to know?’ he sneered. ‘Why should I give you the secret? They cannot be hacked to pieces, they are too strong for that, a knife will barely pierce their skin. Yet cut them and you cut us. Burn them and you burn us. And whatever they make us feel, they feel only a particle of it because their age protects them. And yet to destroy every one of us, you have merely to bring them annoyance! The blood they do not even seem to need! Maybe their minds are connected to ours as well. Maybe the sorrow we feel, the misery, the horror at the fate of the world itself, comes from their minds, as locked in their chambers they dream! No. I cannot tell you where they are, can I? Until I decide for certain that I am indifferent, that it is time for us to die out.’

“ ‘Where are they?’ I said again.

“ ‘Why should I not sink them into the very depths of sea?’ he asked. ‘Until such time as the earth herself heaves them up into the sunlight on the crest of a great wave?’

“I didn’t answer. I was watching him, wondering at his excitement, understanding it but in awe of it just the same.

“ ‘Why should I not bury them in the depths of the earth, I mean the darkest depths beyond the faintest sounds of life, and let them lie in silence there, no matter what they think and feel?’

“What answer could I give? I watched him. I waited until he seemed calmer. He looked at me and his face became tranquil and almost trusting.

“ ‘Tell me how they became the Mother and the Father,’ I said.

“ ‘Why?’

“ ‘You know damn good and well why. I want to know! Why did you come into my bedroom if you didn’t mean to tell me?’ I asked again.

“ ‘So what if I did?’ he said bitterly. ‘So what if I wanted to see the Roman with my own eyes? We will die and you will die with us. So I wanted to see our magic in a new form. Who worships us now, after all? Yellow-haired warriors in the northern forests? Old old Egyptians in secret crypts beneath the sands? We do not live in the temples of Greece and Rome. We never did. And yet they celebrate our myth—the only myth—they call the names of the Mother and the Father …’

“ ‘I don’t give a damn,’ I said. ‘You know I don’t. We are alike, you and I. I won’t go back to the northern forests to make a race of gods for those people! But I came here to know and you must tell.’

“ ‘All right. So that you can understand the futility of it, so that you can understand the silence of the Mother and the Father, I will tell. But mark my words, I may yet bring us all down. I may yet burn the Mother and the Father in the heat of a kiln! But we will dispense with lengthy initiations and high-blown language. We will do away with the myths that died in the sand the day the sun shone on the Mother and the Father. I will tell you what all these scrolls left by the Father and the Mother reveal. Set down your candle. And listen to me.’ ”

10

“ ‘What the scrolls will tell you,’ he said, ‘if you could decipher them, is that we have two human beings, Akasha and Enkil, who had come into Egypt from some other, older land. This was in the time long before the first writing, before the first pyramids, when the Egyptians were still cannibals and hunted for the bodies of enemies to eat.

“ ‘Akasha and Enkil directed the people away from these practices. They were worshipers of the Good Mother Earth and they taught the Egyptians how to sow seed in the Good Mother, and how to herd animals for meat and milk and skins.

“ ‘In all probability, they were not alone as they taught these things, but rather the leaders of a people who had come with them from older cities whose names are now lost beneath the sands of Lebanon, their monuments laid waste.

“ ‘Whatever is the truth, these were benevolent rulers, these two, in whom the good of others was the commanding value, as the Good Mother was the Nourishing Mother and wished for all men to live in peace, and they decided all questions of justice for the emerging land.

“ ‘Perhaps they would have passed into myth in some benign form had it not been for a disturbance in the house of the royal steward which began with the antics of a demon that hurled the furniture about.

“ ‘Now this was no more than a common demon, the kind one hears of in all lands at all times. He devils those who live in a certain place for a certain while. Perhaps he enters into the body of some innocent and roars through her mouth with a loud voice. He may cause the innocent one to belch obscenities and carnal invitations to those around her. Do you know of these things?’

“I nodded. I told him you always heard such stories. Such a demon was supposed to have possessed a vestal virgin in Rome. She made lewd overtures to all those around her, her face turning purple with exertion, then fainted. But the demon had somehow been driven out. ‘I thought the girl was simply mad,’ I said. ‘That she was, shall we say, not suited to be a vestal virgin …’

“ ‘Of course!’ he said with a note of rich irony. ‘And I would assume the same thing, and so would most any intelligent man walking the streets of Alexandria above us. Yet such stories come and go. And if they are remarkable for any one thing it is that they do not affect the course of human events. These demons rather trouble some household, some person, and then they are gone into oblivion and we are right where we started again.’

“ ‘Precisely,’ I said.

“ ‘But you understand this was old old Egypt. This was a time when men ran from the thunder, or ate the bodies of the dead to absorb their souls.’

“ ‘I understand,’ I said.

“ ‘And this good King Enkil decided that he would himself address the demon who had come into his steward’s house. This thing was out of harmony, he said. The royal magicians begged, of course, to be allowed to see to this, to drive the demon out. But this was a king who would do good for everyone. He had some vision of all things being united in good, of all forces being made to go on the same divine course. He would speak to this demon, try to harness its power, so to speak, for the general good. And only if that could not be done would he consent to the demon’s being driven out.

“ ‘And so he went into the house of his steward, where furniture was being flung at the walls, and jars broken, and doors slammed. And he commenced to talk to this demon and invite it to talk to him. Everyone else ran away.

“ ‘A full night passed before he came out of the haunted house and he had amazing things to say:

“ ‘ “These demons are mindless and childlike,” he told his magicians, “but I have studied their conduct and I have learned from all the evidence why it is that they rage. They are maddened that they do not have bodies, that they cannot feel as we feel. They make the innocent scream filth because the rites of love and passion are things that they cannot possibly know. They can work the body parts but not truly inhabit them, and so they are obsessed with the flesh that they cannot invade. And with their feeble powers they bump upon objects, they make their victims twist and jump. This longing to be carnal is the origin of their anger, the indication of the suffering which is their lot.” And

with these pious words he prepared to lock himself in the haunted chambers to learn more.

“ ‘But this time his wife came between him and his purpose. She would not let him stay with the demons. He must look into the mirror, she said. He had aged remarkably in the few hours that he had remained in the house alone.

“ ‘And when he would not be deterred, she locked herself in with him, and all those who stood outside the house heard the crashing and banging of objects, and feared for the moment when they would hear the King and the Queen themselves screaming or raging in spirit voices. The noise from the inner chambers was alarming. Cracks were appearing in the walls.

“ ‘All fled as before, except for a small party of interested men. Now these men since the beginning of the reign had been the enemies of the King. These were old warriors who had led the campaigns of Egypt in search of human flesh, and they had had enough of the King’s goodness, enough of the Good Mother and farming and the like, and they saw in this spirit adventure not only more of the King's vain nonsense, but a situation that nevertheless provided a remarkable opportunity for them.

“ ‘When night fell, they crept into the haunted house. They were fearless of spirits, just as the grave robbers are who rifle the tombs of the pharaohs. They believe, but not enough to control their greed.

“ ‘And when they saw Enkil and Akasha together in the middle of this room full of flying objects, they set upon them and they stabbed the King over and over, as your Roman senators stabbed Caesar, and they stabbed the only witness, his wife.

“ ‘And the King cried out, “No, don’t you see what you have done? You have given the spirits a way to get in! You have opened my body to them! Don’t you see!” But the men fled, sure of the death of the King and the Queen, who was on her hands and knees, cradling her husband’s head in her hands, both bleeding from more wounds than one could count.

“ ‘Now the conspirators stirred up the populace. Did everyone know that the King had been killed by the spirits? He should have left the demons to his magicians as any other king would have done. And bearing torches, all flocked to the haunted house, which had grown suddenly and totally quiet.

“ ‘The conspirators urged the magicians to enter, but they were afraid. “Then we will go in and see what’s happened,” said the evil ones, and they threw open the doors.

“ ‘There stood the King and the Queen, staring calmly at the conspirators, and all of their wounds were healed. And their eyes had taken on an eerie light, their skin a white shimmer, their hair a magnificent gleam. Out of the house they came as the conspirators ran in terror, and they dismissed all the people and the priests and went back to the palace alone.

“ ‘And though they confided in no one, they knew what had happened to them.

“ ‘They had been entered through their wounds by the demon at the point when mortal life itself was about to escape. But it was the blood that the demon permeated in that twilight moment when the heart almost stopped. Perhaps it was the substance that he had always sought in his ragings, the substance that he had tried to bring forth from his victims with his antics, but he had never been able to inflict enough wounds before his victim died. But now he was in the blood, and the blood was not merely the demon, or the blood of the King and Queen, but a combination of the human and the demon which was an altogether different thing.

“ ‘And all that was left of the King and Queen was what this blood could animate, what it could infuse and claim for its own. Their bodies were for all other purposes dead. But the blood flowed through the brain and through the heart and through the skin, and so the intelligence of the King and Queen remained. Their souls, if you will, remained, as the souls reside in these organs, though why we do not know. And though the demon blood had no mind of its own, no character of its own that the King and Queen could discover, it nevertheless enhanced their minds and their characters, for it flowed through the organs that create thought. And it added to their faculties its purely spiritual powers, so that the King and Queen could hear the thoughts of mortals, and sense things and understand things that mortals could not.

“ ‘In sum, the demon had added and the demon had taken away, and the King and Queen were New Things. They could no longer eat food, or grow, or die, or have children, yet they could feel with an intensity that terrified them. And the demon had what it wanted: a body to live in, a

way to be in the world at last, a way to *feel*.

“ ‘But then came the even more dreadful discovery, that to keep their corpses animate, the blood must be fed. And all it could convert to its use was the selfsame thing of which it was made: blood. Give it more blood to enter, give it more blood to push through the limbs of the body in which it enjoyed such glorious sensations, of blood it could not get enough.

“ ‘And oh, the grandest of all sensations was the drinking in which it renewed itself, fed itself, enlarged itself. And in that moment of drinking it could feel the death of the victim, the moment it pulled the blood so hard out of the victim that the victim’s heart stopped.

“ ‘The demon had them, the King and Queen. They were Drinkers of the Blood; and whether or not the demon knew of them, we will never be able to tell. But the King and Queen knew that they had the demon and could not get rid of it, and if they did they would die because their bodies were already dead. And they learned immediately that these dead bodies, animated as they were entirely by this demonic fluid, could not withstand fire or the light of the sun. On the one hand, they seemed as fragile white flowers that can be withered black in the daytime desert heat. On the other, it seemed the blood in them was so volatile that it would boil if heated, thereby destroying the fibers through which it moved.

“ ‘It has been said that in these very early times, they could withstand no brilliant illumination, that even a nearby fire would cause their skin to smoke.

“ ‘Whatever, they were of a new order of being, and their thoughts were of a new order of being, and they tried to understand the things that they saw, the dispositions that afflicted them in this new state.

“ ‘All discoveries are not recorded. There is nothing in writing or in the unwritten tradition about when they first chose to pass on the blood, or ascertained the method by which it must be done—that the victim must be drained to the twilight moment of approaching death, or the demonic blood given him cannot take hold.

“ ‘We do know through the unwritten tradition that the King and Queen tried to keep secret what had happened to them, but their disappearance by day aroused suspicions. They could not attend to the religious duties in the land.

“ ‘And so it came to pass that even before they had formed their clearest decisions, they had to encourage the populace to a worship of the Good Mother in the light of the moon.

“ ‘But they could not protect themselves from the conspirators, who still did not understand their recovery and sought to do away with them again. The attack came despite all precautions and the strength of the King and the Queen proved overwhelming to the conspirators, and they were all the more frightened by the fact that those wounds they managed to inflict upon the King and the Queen were miraculously and instantly healed. An arm was severed from the King and this he put back on his shoulder and it came to life again and the conspirators fled.

“ ‘And through these attacks, these battles, the secret came into the possession not only of the King’s enemies but the priests as well.

“ ‘And no one wanted to destroy the King and the Queen now; rather they wanted to take them prisoner and gain the secret of immortality from them, and they sought to take the blood from them, but their early attempts failed.

“ ‘The drinkers were not near to death; and so they became hybrid creatures—half god and half human—and they perished in horrible ways. Yet some succeeded. Perhaps they emptied their veins first. It isn’t recorded. But in later ages, this has always proved a way to steal the blood.

“ ‘And perhaps the Mother and the Father chose to make fledglings. Maybe out of loneliness and fear, they chose to pass on the secret to those of good mettle whom they could trust. Again we are not told. Whatever the case, other Drinkers of the Blood did come into being, and the method of making them was eventually known.

“ ‘And the scrolls tell us that the Mother and the Father sought to triumph in their adversity. They sought to find some reason in what had happened, and they believed that their heightened senses must surely serve some good. The Good Mother had allowed this to happen, had she not?

“ ‘And they must sanctify and contain what was done by mystery, or else Egypt might become a race of blood-drinking demons who would divide the world into Those Who Drink the Blood and those who are bred only to give it, a tyranny that once achieved might never be broken by mortal men alone.

“ ‘And so the good King and Queen chose the path of ritual, of myth. They saw in themselves the images of the waning and waxing moon, and in their drinking of the blood the god incarnate who takes unto himself his sacrifice, and they used their superior powers to divine and predict and judge. They saw themselves as truly accepting the blood for the god, which otherwise would run down the altar. They girded with the symbolic and the mysterious what could not be allowed to become common, and they passed out of the sight of mortal men into the temples, to be worshiped by those who would bring them blood. They took to themselves the most fit sacrifices, those that had always been made for the good of the land. Innocents, outsiders, evildoers, they drank the blood for the Mother and for the Good.

“ ‘They set into motion the tale of Osiris, composed in part of their own terrible suffering—the attack of the conspirators, the recovery, their need to live in the realm of darkness, the world beyond life, their inability to walk anymore in sun. And they grafted this upon the older stories of the gods who rise and fall in their love of the Good Mother, which were already there in the land from which they came.

“ ‘And so these stories came down to us; these stories spread beyond the secret places in which the Mother and the Father were worshiped, in which those they made with the blood were installed.

“ ‘And they were already old when the first pharaoh built his first pyramid. And the earliest texts record them in broken and strange form.

“ ‘A hundred other gods ruled in Egypt, just as they rule in all lands. But the worship of the Mother and Father and Those Who Drink the Blood remained secret and powerful, a cult to which the devoted went to hear the silent voices of the gods, to dream their dreams.

“ ‘We are not told who were the first fledglings of the Mother and Father. We know only that they spread the religion to the islands of the great sea, and to the lands of the two rivers, and to the north woods. That in shrines everywhere the moon god ruled and drank his blood sacrifices and used his powers to look into the hearts of men. During the periods between sacrifice, in starvation, the god’s mind could leave his body; it could travel the heavens; he could learn a thousand things. And those mortals of the greatest purity of heart could come to the shrine and hear the voice of the god, and he could hear them.

“ ‘But even before my time, a thousand years ago, this was all an old

and incoherent story. The gods of the moon had ruled in Egypt for maybe three thousand years. And the religion had been attacked again and again.

" 'When the Egyptian priests turned to the sun god Amon Ra, they opened the crypts of the moon god and let the sun burn him to cinders. And many of our kind were destroyed. The same happened when the first rude warriors rode down into Greece and broke open the sanctuaries and killed what they did not understand.

" 'Now the babbling oracle of Delphi rules where we once ruled, and statues stand where we once stood. Our last hour is enjoyed in the north woods whence you came, among those who still drench our altars with the blood of the evildoer, and in the small villages of Egypt, where one or two priests tend the god in the crypt and allow the faithful to bring to him the evildoers, for they cannot take the innocent without arousing suspicion, and of evildoers and outsiders there are always some to be had. And down in the jungles of Africa, near the ruins of old cities that no one remembers, there, too, we are still obeyed.

" 'But our history is punctuated by tales of rogues—the Drinkers of the Blood who look to no goddess for guidance and have always used their powers as they chose.

" 'In Rome they live, in Athens, in all cities of the Empire, these who hearken to no laws of right and wrong and use their powers for their own ends.

" 'And they died horribly in the heat and the flame just as did the gods in the groves and the sanctuaries, and if any have survived they probably do not even guess why they were subjected to the killing flame, of how the Mother and the Father were put into the sun.'

"He had stopped.

"He was studying my reaction. The library was quiet and if the others prowled behind the walls, I couldn't hear them anymore.

" 'I don't believe a word of it,' I said.

"He stared at me in stupefied silence for a moment and then he laughed and laughed.

"In a rage, I left the library and went out through the temple rooms and up through the tunnel and out into the street."

11

This was very uncharacteristic of me, to leave in temper, to break off abruptly and depart. I had never done that sort of thing when I was a mortal man. But as I've said, I was on the edge of madness, the first madness many of us suffer, especially those who have been brought into this by force.

"I went back to my little house near the great library of Alexandria, and I lay down on my bed as if I could really let myself fall asleep there and escape from this thing.

" 'Idiot nonsense,' I murmured to myself.

"But the more I thought about the story, the more it made sense. It made sense that something was in my blood impelling me to drink more blood. It made sense that it heightened all sensations, that it kept my body—a mere imitation now of a human body—functioning when it should have come to a stop. And it made sense that this thing had no mind of its own but was nevertheless a power, an organization of force with a desire to live all its own.

"And then it even made sense that we could all be connected to the Mother and the Father because this thing was spiritual, and had no bodily limits except the limits of the individual bodies in which it had gained control. It was the vine, this thing, and we were the flowers, scattered over great distances, but connected by the twining tendrils that could reach all over the world.

"And this was why we gods could hear each other so well, why I could know the others were in Alexandria, even before they called to me. It was why they could come and find me in my house, why they could lead me to the secret door.

"All right. Maybe it was true. And it *was* an accident, this melding of an unnamed force and a human body and mind to make the New Thing as the Elder had said.

"But still—I didn't like it.

"I revolted against all of it because if I was anything, I was an individual, a particular being, with a strong sense of my own rights and

prerogatives. I could not realize that I was host to an alien entity. I was still Marius, no matter what had been done to me.

"I was left finally with one thought and one thought only: if I was connected to this Mother and Father then I must see them, and I must know that they were safe. I could not live with the thought that I could die at any moment on account of some alchemy I could neither control nor understand.

"But I didn't return to the underground temple. I spent the next few nights feasting on blood until my miserable thoughts were drowned in it, and then in the early hours I roamed the great library of Alexandria, reading as I had always done.

"Some of the madness dissolved in me. I stopped longing for my mortal family. I stopped being angry at that cursed thing in the cellar temple, and I thought rather of this new strength I possessed. I would live for centuries: I would know the answers to all kinds of questions. I would be the continual awareness of things as time passed! And as long as I slew only the evildoer, I could endure my blood thirst, revel in it, in fact. And when the appropriate time came, I would make my companions and make them well.

"Now what remained? Go back to the Elder and find out where he had put the Mother and the Father. And see these creatures for myself. And do the very thing the Elder had threatened, sink them so deep into the earth that no mortal could ever find them and expose them to the light.

"Easy to think about this, easy to imagine them as so simply dispatched.

"Five nights after I'd left the Elder, when all these thoughts had had time to develop in me, I lay resting in my bedroom, with the lamps shining through the sheer bed curtains as before. In filtered and golden light, I listened to the sounds of sleeping Alexandria, and slipped into thin and glittering waking dreams. I wondered if the Elder would come to me again, disappointed that I had not returned—and as the thought came clear to me, I realized that someone was standing in the doorway again.

"Someone was watching me. I could feel it. To see this person I had but to turn my head. And then I would have the upper hand with the

Elder. I would say, 'So you've come out of loneliness and disillusionment and now you want to tell me more, do you? Why don't you go back and sit in silence to wound your wraithlike companions, the brotherhood of the cinders?' Of course I wouldn't say such a thing to him. But I wasn't above thinking about it and letting him—if he was the one in the doorway—hear these thoughts.

"The one who was there did not go away.

"And slowly I turned my eyes in the direction of the door, and it was a woman I saw standing there. And not merely a woman, but a magnificent bronze-skinned Egyptian woman as artfully bejeweled and dressed as the old queens, in fine pleated linen, with her black hair down to her shoulders and braided with strands of gold. An immense force emanated from her, an invisible and commanding sense of her presence, her occupation of this small and insignificant room.

"I sat up and moved back the curtains, and the lamps in the room went out. I saw the smoke rising from them in the dark, gray wisps like snakes coiling towards the ceiling and then gone. She was still there, the remaining light defining her expressionless face, sparkling on the jewels around her neck and in her large almond-shaped eyes. And silently she said:

"Marius, take us out of Egypt.

"And then she was gone.

"My heart was knocking in me uncontrollably. I went into the garden looking for her. I leapt over the wall and stood alone listening in the empty unpaved street.

"I started to run towards the old section where I had found the door. I meant to get into the underground temple and find the Elder and tell him that he must take me to her, I had seen her, she had moved, she had spoken, she had come to me! I was delirious, but when I reached the door, I knew that I didn't have to go down. I knew that if I went out of the city into the sands I could find her. She was already leading me to where she was.

"In the hour that followed I was to remember the strength and the speed I'd known in the forests of Gaul, and had not used since. I went out from the city to where the stars provided the only light, and I walked until I came to a ruined temple, and there I began to dig in the sand. It would have taken a band of mortals several hours to discover the

trapdoor, but I found it quickly, and I was able to lift it, which mortals couldn't have done.

"The twisting stairs and corridors I followed were not illuminated. And I cursed myself for not bringing a candle, for being so swept off my feet by the sight of her that I had rushed after her as if I were in love.

" 'Help me, Akasha,' I whispered. I put my hands out in front of me and tried not to feel mortal fear of the blackness in which I was as blind as an ordinary man.

"My hands touched something hard before me. And I rested, catching my breath, trying to command myself. Then my hands moved on the thing and felt what seemed the chest of a human statue, its shoulders, its arms. But this was no statue, this thing, this thing was made of something more resilient than stone. And when my hand found the face, the lips proved just a little softer than all the rest of it, and I drew back.

"I could hear my heart beat. I could feel the sheer humiliation of cowardice. I didn't dare say the name Akasha. I knew that this thing I had touched had a man's form. It was Enkil.

"I closed my eyes, trying to gather my wits, form some plan of action that didn't include turning and running like a madman, and I heard a dry, crackling sound, and against my closed lids saw fire.

"When I opened my eyes, I saw a blazing torch on the wall beyond him, and his dark outline looming before me, and his eyes animate, and looking at me without question, the black pupils swimming in a dull gray light. He was otherwise lifeless, hands limp at his sides. He was ornamented as she had been, and he wore the glorified dress of the pharaoh and his hair too was plaited with gold. His skin was bronze all over, as hers had been, enhanced, as the Elder had said. And he was the incarnation of menace in his stillness as he stood staring at me.

"In the barren chamber behind him, she sat on a stone shelf, with her head at an angle, her arms dangling, as if she were a lifeless body flung there. Her linen was smeared with sand, her sandaled feet caked with it, and her eyes were vacant and staring. Perfect attitude of death.

"And he like a stone sentinel in a royal tomb blocked my path.

"I could hear no more from either of them than you heard from them when I took you down to the chamber here on the island. And I thought I might expire on the spot from fear.

"Yet there was the sand on her feet and on her linen. She'd come to

me! She had!

“But someone had come into the corridor behind me. Someone was shuffling along the passage, and when I turned, I saw one of the burnt ones—a mere skeleton, this one, with black gums showing and the fangs cutting into the shiny black raisin skin of his lower lip.

“I swallowed a gasp at the sight of him, his bony limbs, feet splayed, arms jiggling with every step. He was plowing towards us, but he did not seem to see me. He put his hands up and shoved at Enkil.

“ ‘No, no, back into the chamber!’ he whispered in a low, crackling voice. ‘No, no!’ and each syllable seemed to take all he had. His withered arms shoved at the figure. He couldn’t budge it.

“ ‘Help me!’ he said to me. ‘They have moved. Why did they move? Make them go back. The further they move, the harder it is to get them back.’

“I stared at Enkil and I felt the horror that you felt to see this statue with life in it, seemingly unable or unwilling to move. And as I watched the spectacle grew even more horrible, because the blackened wraith was now screaming and scratching at Enkil, unable to do anything with him. And the sight of this thing that should have been dead wearing itself out like this, and this other thing that looked so perfectly godlike and magnificent just standing there, was more than I could bear.

“ ‘Help me!’ the thing said. ‘Get him back into the chamber. Get them back where they must remain.’

“How could I do this? How could I lay hands on this being? How could I presume to push him where he did not wish to go?

“ ‘They will be all right, if you help me,’ the thing said. ‘They will be together and they will be at peace. Push on him. Do it. Push! Oh, look at her, what’s happened to her. Look.’

“ ‘All right, damn it!’ I whispered, and overcome with shame, I tried. I laid my hands again on Enkil and I pushed at him, but it was impossible. My strength meant nothing here, and the burnt one became all the more irritating with his useless ranting and shoving.

“But then he gasped and cackled and threw his skeletal arms up in the air and backed up.

“ ‘What’s the matter with you!’ I said, trying not to scream and run. But I saw soon enough.

“Akasha had appeared behind Enkil. She was standing directly behind

him and looking at me over his shoulder, and I saw her fingertips come round his muscular arms. Her eyes were as empty in their glazed beauty as they had been before. But she was making him move, and now came the spectacle of these two things walking of their own volition, he backing up slowly, feet barely leaving the ground, and she shielded by him so that I saw only her hands and the top of her head and her eyes.

"I blinked, trying to clear my head.

"They were sitting on the shelf again, together, and they had lapsed into the same posture in which you saw them downstairs on this island tonight.

"The burnt creature was near to collapse. He had gone down on his knees, and he didn't have to explain to me why. He had found them many a time in different positions, but he had never witnessed their movement. And he had never seen her as she had been before.

"I was bursting with the knowledge of why she had been as she was before. She had come to me. But there was a point at which my pride and exhilaration gave way to what it should have been: overwhelming awe, and finally grief.

"I started to cry. I started to cry uncontrollably as I had not cried since I had been with the old god in the grove and my death had occurred, and this curse, this great luminous and powerful curse, had descended on me. I cried as you cried when you first saw them. I cried for their stillness and their isolation, and this horrible little place in which they stared forward at nothing or sat in darkness while Egypt died above.

"The goddess, the mother, the thing, whatever she was, the mindless and silent or helpless progenitor was looking at me. Surely it wasn't an illusion. Her great glossy eyes, with their black fringe of lashes, were fixed upon me. And there came her voice again, but it had nothing of its old power, it was merely the thought, quite beyond language, inside my head.

"Take us out of Egypt, Marius. The Elder means to destroy us. Guard us, Marius. Or we perish here.

" 'Do they want blood?' the burnt one cried. 'Did they move because they would have sacrifice?' the dried one begged.

" 'Go get them a sacrifice,' I said.

" 'I cannot now. I haven't the strength. And they won't give their healing blood to me. Would they but allow me a few drops, my burnt

flesh might restore itself, the blood in me would be replenished, and I should bring them glorious sacrifices …'

"But there was an element of dishonesty in this little speech, because *they* didn't desire glorious sacrifices anymore.

" 'Try again to drink their blood,' I said and this was horribly selfish of me. I just wanted to see what would happen.

"Yet to my humiliation, he did approach them, bent over and weeping, begging them to give their powerful blood, their old blood, so that his burns might heal faster, saying that he was innocent, he had not put them in the sand—it had been the Elder—please, please, would they let him drink from the original fount.

"And then ravenous hunger consumed him. And, convulsing, he distended his fangs as a cobra might and he shot forward, his black claws out, to the neck of Enkil.

"Enkil's arm rose as the Elder said it would, and it flung the burnt one across the chamber on his back before it returned to its proper place.

"The burnt one was sobbing and I was even more ashamed. The burnt one was too weak to hunt for victims or bring victims. I had urged him on to this to see it. And the gloom of this place, the gritty sand on the floor, the barrenness, the stink of the torch, and the ugly sight of the burnt one writhing and crying, all this was dispiriting beyond words.

" 'Then drink from me,' I said, shuddering at the sight of him, the fangs distended again, the hands out to grasp me. But it was the least I could do."

12

“As soon as I was done with that creature, I ordered him to let no one enter the crypt. How the hell he was supposed to keep anyone out I couldn’t imagine, but I told him this with tremendous authority and I hurried away.

“I went back into Alexandria, and I broke into a shop that sold antique things and I stole two fine painted and gold-plated mummy cases, and I took a great deal of linen for wrapping, and I went back to the desert crypt.

“My courage and my fear were at their peak.

“As often happens when we give the blood or take it from another of our kind, I had seen things, dreamed things as it were, when the burnt one had his teeth in my throat. And what I had seen and dreamed had to do with Egypt, the age of Egypt, the fact that for four thousand years this land had known little change in language, religion, or art. And for the first time this was understandable to me and it put me in profound sympathy with the Mother and the Father as relics of this country, as surely as the pyramids were relics. It intensified my curiosity and made it something more akin to devotion.

“Though to be honest, I would have stolen the Mother and the Father just in order to survive.

“This new knowledge, this new infatuation, inspired me as I approached Akasha and Enkil to put them in the wooden mummy cases, knowing full well that Akasha would allow it and that one blow from Enkil could probably crush my skull.

“But Enkil yielded as well as Akasha. They allowed me to wrap them in linen, to make mummies of them, and to place them into the shapely wooden coffins which bore the painted faces of others, and the endless hieroglyph instructions for the dead, and to take them with me into Alexandria, which I did.

“I left the wraith being in a terrible state of agitation as I went off dragging a mummy case under each arm.

“When I reached the city I hired men to carry these coffins properly to

my house, out of a sense of fittingness, and then I buried them deep beneath the garden, explaining to Akasha and Enkil all the while aloud that their stay in the earth would not be long.

"I was in terror to leave them the next night. I hunted and killed within yards of my own garden gate. And then I sent my slaves to purchase horses and a wagon for me, and to make preparations for a journey around the coast to Antioch on the Orontes River, a city I knew and loved, and in which I felt I would be safe.

"As I feared, the Elder soon appeared. I was actually waiting for him in the shadowy bedroom, seated on my couch like a Roman, one lamp beside me, an old copy of some Roman poem in my hand. I wondered if he would sense the location of Akasha and Enkil, and deliberately imagined false things—that I had shut them up in the great pyramid itself.

"I still dreamed the dream of Egypt that had come to me from the burnt one: a land in which the laws and the beliefs had remained the same for longer than we could imagine, a land that had known the picture writing and the pyramids and the myths of Osiris and Isis when Greece had been in darkness and when there was no Rome. I saw the river Nile overflowing her banks. I saw the mountains on either side which created the valley. I saw time with a wholly different idea of it. And it was not merely the dream of the burnt one—it was all I had ever seen or known in Egypt, a sense of things beginning there which I had learned from books long before I had become the child of the Mother and the Father, whom I meant now to take.

" 'What makes you think that we would entrust them to you!' the Elder said as soon as he appeared in the doorway.

"He appeared enormous as, girded only in the short linen kilt, he walked around my room. The lamplight shone on his bald head, his round face, his bulging eyes. 'How dare you take the Mother and the Father! What have you done with them!' he said.

" 'It was you who put them in the sun,' I answered. 'You who sought to destroy them. You were the one who didn't believe the old story. You were the guardian of the Mother and the Father, and you lied to me. You brought about the death of our kind from one end of the world to the other. You, and you lied to me.'

"He was dumbfounded. He thought me proud and impossible beyond

words. So did I. But so what? He had the power to burn me to ashes if and when he burnt the Mother and the Father. And she had come to me! To me!

" 'I did not know what would happen!' he said now, his veins cording against his forehead, his fists clenched. He looked like a great bald Nubian as he tried to intimidate me. 'I swear to you by all that is sacred, I didn't know. And you cannot know what it means to keep them, to look at them year after year, decade after decade, century after century, and know that they could speak, they could move, and they will not!'

"I had no sympathy for him and what he said. He was merely an enigmatic figure poised in the center of this small room in Alexandria railing at me of sufferings beyond the imagination. How could I sympathize with him?

" 'I inherited them,' he said. 'They were given to me! What was I to do?' he declared. 'And I must contend with their punishing silence, their refusal to direct the tribe they had loosed into the world. And why came this silence? Vengeance, I tell you. Vengeance on us. But for what? Who exists who can remember back a thousand years now? No one. Who understands all these things? The old gods go into the sun, into the fire, or they meet with obliteration through violence, or they bury themselves in the deepest earth never to rise again. But the Mother and the Father go on forever, and they do not speak. Why don't they bury themselves where no harm can come to them? Why do they simply watch and listen and refuse to speak? Only when one tries to take Akasha from Enkil does he move, does he strike out and then batter down his foes as if he were a stone colossus come to life. I tell you when I put them in the sand they did not try to save themselves! They stood facing the river as I ran!'

" 'You did it to see what would happen, if it would make them move!'

" 'To free myself! To say, "I will keep you no longer. Move. Speak." To see if it was true, the old story, and if it was true, then let us all die in flames.'

"He had exhausted himself. In a feeble voice he said finally, 'You cannot take the Mother and the Father. How could you think that I would allow you to do this! You who might not last out the century, you who ran from the obligations of the grove. You don't really know what the Mother and the Father are. You have heard more than one lie from me.'

“ ‘I have something to tell you,’ I said. ‘You *are* free now. You know that we’re not gods. And we’re not men, either. We don’t serve the Mother Earth because we do not eat her fruits and we do not naturally descend to her embrace. We are not of her. And I leave Egypt without further obligation to you, and I take them with me because it is what they have asked me to do and I will not suffer them or me to be destroyed.’

“He was again dumbfounded. How had they asked me? But he couldn’t find words, he was so angry, and so full of hatred suddenly, and so full of dark wrathful secrets that I could not even glimpse. He had a mind as educated as mine, this one; but he knew things about our powers that I didn’t guess. I had never slain a man when I was mortal. I did not know how to kill any living thing, save in the tender and remorseless need for blood.

“He knew how to use his supernatural strength. He closed his eyes to slits, and his body hardened. Danger radiated from him.

“He approached me and his intentions went before him, and in an instant I had risen off my couch, and I was trying to ward off his blows. He had me by the throat and he threw me against the stone wall so that the bones of my shoulder and right arm were crushed. In a moment of exquisite pain, I knew he would dash my head against the stone and crush all my limbs, and then he would pour the oil of the lamp over me and burn me, and I would be gone out of his private eternity as if I had never known these secrets or dared to intrude.

“I fought as I never could have before. But my battered arm was a riot of pain, and his strength was to me what mine would be to you. But instead of clawing at his hands as they locked round my throat, instead of trying to free my throat as was instinctive, I shot my thumbs into his eyes. Though my arm blazed with pain, I used all my strength to push his eyes backwards into his head.

“He let go of me and he wailed. Blood was pouring down his face. I ran clear of him and towards the garden door. I still could not breathe from the damage he’d done to my throat, and as I clutched at my dangling arm, I saw things out of the corner of my eye that confused me, a great spray of earth flying up from the garden, the air dense as if with smoke. I bumped the door frame, losing my balance, as if a wind had moved me, and glancing back I saw him coming on, eyes still glittering,

though from deep inside his head. He was cursing me in Egyptian. He was saying that I should go into the netherworld with the demons, unmourned.

“And then his face froze in a mask of fear. He stopped in his tracks and looked almost comical in his alarm.

“Then I saw what he saw—the figure of Akasha, who moved past me to my right. The linen wrapping had been ripped from around her head, and her arms were torn free, and she was covered with the sandy earth. Her eyes had the same expressionless stare they always had, and she bore down on him slowly, drawing ever closer because he could not move to save himself.

“He went down on his knees, babbling to her in Egyptian, first with a tone of astonishment and then with incoherent fright. Still she came on, tracking the sand after her, the linen falling off her as each slow sliding step ruptured the wrappings more violently. He turned away and fell forward on his hands and started to crawl as if, by some unseen force, she prevented him from rising to his feet. Surely that was what she was doing, because he lay prone finally, his elbows jutting up, unable to move himself.

“Quietly and slowly, she stepped on the back of his right knee, crushing it flat beneath her foot, the blood squirting from under her heel. And with the next step she crushed his pelvis just as flat while he roared like a dumb beast, the blood gushing from his mangled parts. Then came her next step down upon his shoulder and the next upon his head, which exploded beneath her weight as if it had been an acorn. The roaring ceased. The blood spurted from all his remains as they twitched.

“Turning, she revealed to me no change in expression, signifying nothing of what had happened to him, indifferent even to the lone and horrified witness who shrank back against the wall. She walked back and forth over his remains with the same slow and effortless gait, and crushed the last of him utterly.

“What was left was not even the outline of a man, but mere blood-soaked pulp upon the floor, and yet it glittered, bubbled, seemed to swell and contract as if there were still life in it.

“I was petrified, knowing that there was life in it, that this was what immortality could mean.

“But she had come to a stop, and she turned to her left so slowly it

seemed the revolution of a statue on a chain, and her hand rose and the lamp beside the couch rose in the air and fell down upon the bloody mass, the flame quickly igniting the oil as it spilled.

"Like grease he went up, flames dancing from one end of the dark mass to the other, the blood seeming to feed the fire, the smoke acrid but only with the stench of the oil.

"I was on my knees, with my head against the side of the doorway. I was as near to losing consciousness from shock as I have ever been. I watched him burn to nothing. I watched her standing there, beyond the flames, her bronze face giving forth not the slightest sign of intelligence or triumph or will.

"I held my breath, expecting her eyes to move to me. But they didn't. And as the moment lengthened, as the fire died, I realized that she had ceased to move. She had returned to the state of absolute silence and stillness that all the others had come to expect of her.

"The room was dark now. The fire had gone out. The smell of burning oil sickened me. She looked like an Egyptian ghost in her torn wrappings, poised there before the glittering embers, the gilded furnishings glinting in the light from the sky, bearing, for all their Roman craftsmanship, some resemblance to the elaborate and delicate furnishings of a royal burial chamber.

"I rose to my feet, and the pain in my shoulder and in my arm throbbed. I could feel the blood rushing to heal it, but the damage was considerable. I did not know how long I would have this.

"I did know, of course, that if I were to drink from her, the healing would be much faster, perhaps instantaneous, and we could start our journey out of Alexandria tonight. I could take her far far away from Egypt.

"Then I realize that *she* was telling me this. The words, far far away, were breathed in by me sensuously.

"And I answered her: *I have been all through the world and I will take you to safe places*. But then again perhaps this dialogue was all my doing. And the soft, yielding sensation of love for her was my doing. And I was going completely mad, knowing this nightmare would never, never end except in fire such as that, that no natural old age or death would ever quiet my fears and dull my pains, as I had once expected it to do.

"It ceased to matter. What mattered was that I was alone with her, and

in this darkness she might have been a human woman standing there, a young god woman full of vitality and full of lovely language and ideas and dreams.

"I moved closer to her and it seemed then that she was this pliant and yielding creature, and some knowledge of her was inside me, waiting to be remembered, waiting to be enjoyed. Yet I was afraid. She could do to me what she had done to the Elder. But that was absurd. She would not. I was her guardian now. She would never let anyone hurt me. No. I was to understand that. And I came closer and closer to her, until my lips were almost at her bronze throat, and it was decided when I felt the firm cold press of her hand on the back of my head."

13

“I won’t try to describe the ecstasy. You know it. You knew it when you took the blood from Magnus. You knew it when I gave you the blood in Cairo. You know it when you kill. And you know what it means when I say it was that, but a thousand times that.

“I neither saw nor heard nor felt anything but absolute happiness, absolute satisfaction.

“Yet I was in other places, other rooms from long ago, and voices were talking and battles were being lost. Someone was crying in agony. Someone was screaming in words I knew and didn’t know: *I do not understand. I do not understand.* A great pool of darkness opened and there came the invitation to fall and to fall and to fall and she sighed and said: *I can fight no longer*.

“Then I awoke, and found myself lying on my couch. She was in the center of the room, still as before, and it was late in the night, and the city of Alexandria murmured around us in its sleep.

“I knew a multitude of other things.

“I knew so many things that it would have taken hours if not nights for me to learn them if they’d been confided in mortal words. And I had no inkling of how much time had passed.

“I knew that thousands of years ago there had been great battles among the Drinkers of the Blood, and many of them after the first creation had become ruthless and profane bringers of death. Unlike the benign lovers of the Good Mother who starved and then drank her sacrifices, these were death angels who could swoop down upon any victim at any moment, glorying in the conviction that they were part of the rhythm of all things in which no individual human life matters, in which death and life are equal—and to them belonged suffering and slaughter as they chose to mete it out.

“And these terrible gods had their devoted worshipers among men, human slaves who brought victims to them, and quaked in fear of the moment when they themselves might fall to the god’s whim.

“Gods of this kind had ruled in ancient Babylon, and in Assyria, and in

cities long forgotten, and in far-off India, and in countries beyond whose names I did not understand.

"And even now, as I sat silent and stunned by these images, I understood that these gods had become part of the Oriental world which was alien to the Roman world to which I'd been born. They were part of the world of the Persians whose men were abject slaves to their king, while the Greeks who had fought them had been free men.

"No matter what our cruelties and our excesses, even the lowliest peasant had value to us. Life had value. And death was merely the end of life, something to be faced with bravery when honor left no choice. Death was not grand to us. In fact, I don't think death was anything really to us. It certainly was not a state preferable to life.

"And though these gods had been revealed to me by Akasha in all their grandeur and mystery, I found them appalling. I could not now or ever embrace them and I knew that the philosophies that proceeded from them or justified them would never justify my killing, or give me consolation as a Drinker of the Blood. Mortal or immortal, I was of the West. And I loved the ideas of the West. And I should always *be guilty* of what I did.

"Nevertheless I saw the power of these gods, their incomparable loveliness. They enjoyed a freedom I would never know. And I saw their contempt for all those who challenged them. And I saw them wearing in the pantheon of other countries their glittering crowns.

"And I saw them come to Egypt to steal the original and all-powerful blood of the Father and the Mother, and to ensure that the Father and the Mother did not burn themselves to bring an end to the reign of these dark and terrible gods for whom all the good gods must be brought down.

"And I saw the Mother and the Father imprisoned. I saw them entombed with blocks of diorite and granite pressed against their very bodies in an underground crypt, only their heads and their necks free. In this manner the dark gods could feed the Mother and the Father the human blood they could not resist, and take from their necks the powerful blood against their will. And all the dark gods of the world came to drink from this oldest of founts.

"The Father and the Mother screamed in torment. They begged to be released. But this meant nothing to the dark gods, who relished such

agony, who drank it as they drank human blood. The dark gods wore human skulls dangling from their girdles; their garments were dyed with human blood. The Mother and the Father refused sacrifice, but this only increased their helplessness. They did not take the very thing that might have given them the strength to move the stones, and to affect objects by mere thought.

"Nevertheless their strength increased …

"Years and years of this torment, and wars among the gods, wars among the sects that held to life and those who held to death.

"Years beyond counting, until finally the Mother and the Father became silent, and there were none in existence who could even remember a time when they begged or fought or talked. Years came when nobody could remember who had imprisoned the Mother and the Father, or why the Mother and the Father must not ever be let out. Some did not believe that the Mother and the Father were even the originals or that their immolation would harm anyone else. It was just an old tale.

"And all the while Egypt was Egypt and its religion, uncorrupted by outsiders, finally moved on towards the belief in conscience, the judgment after death of all beings, be they rich or poor, the belief in goodness on earth and life after death.

"And then the night came when the Mother and the Father were found free of their prison, and those who tended them realized that only they could have moved the stones. In silence, their strength had grown beyond all reckoning. Yet they were as statues, embracing each other in the middle of the dirty and darkened chamber where for centuries they had been kept. Naked and shimmering they were, all their clothing having long ago rotted away.

"If and when they drank from the victims offered, they moved with the sluggishness of reptiles in winter, as though time had taken on an altogether different meaning for them, and years were as nights to them, and centuries as years.

"And the ancient religion was strong as ever, not of the East and not really of the West. The Drinkers of the Blood remained good symbols, the luminous image of life in the afterworld which even the lowliest Egyptian soul might come to enjoy.

"Sacrifice could only be the evildoer in these later times. And by this means the gods drew the evil out of the people, and protected the

people, and the silent voice of the god consoled the weak, telling the truths learned by the god in starvation: that the world was full of abiding beauty, that no soul here is really alone.

"The Mother and the Father were kept in the loveliest of all shrines and all the gods came to them and took from them, with their will, droplets of their precious blood.

"But then the impossible was happening. Egypt was reaching its finish. Things thought to be unchangeable were about to be utterly changed. Alexander had come, the Ptolemies were the rulers, Caesar and Antony —all rude and strange protagonists of the drama which was simply The End of All This.

"And finally the dark and cynical Elder, the wicked one, the disappointed one, who put the Mother and Father in the sun.

"I got up off the couch and I stood in this room in Alexandria looking at the motionless and staring figure of Akasha and the soiled linen hanging from her seemed an insult. And my head swam with old poetry. And I was overcome with love.

"There was no more pain in my body from the battle with the Elder. The bones were restored. And I went down on my knees, and I kissed the fingers of the right hand that hung at Akasha's side. I looked up and I saw her looking down at me, her head tilted, and the strangest look passed over her; it seemed as pure in its suffering as the happiness I had just known. Then her head, very slowly, inhumanly slowly, returned to its position of facing forward, and I knew in that instant that I had seen and known things that the Elder had never known.

"As I wrapped her body again in linen, I was in a trance. More than ever I felt the mandate to take care of her and Enkil, and the horror of the Elder's death was flashing before me every second, and the blood she had given me had increased my exhilaration as well as my physical strength.

"And as I prepared to leave Alexandria, I suppose I dreamed of waking Enkil and Akasha, that in the years to come they would recover all the vitality stolen from them, and we would know each other in such intimate and astonishing ways that these dreams of knowledge and experience given me in the blood would pale.

“My slaves had long ago come back with the horses and the wagons for our journey, with the stone sarcophagi and the chains and locks I had told them to procure. They waited outside the walls.

“I placed the mummy cases with the Mother and the Father in the sarcophagi side by side in the wagon, and I covered them with locks and chains and heavy blankets, and we set out, heading towards the door to the underground temple of the gods on our way to the city gates.

“When I reached the door, I left my slaves with firm orders to give a loud alarm if anyone approached, and then I took a leather sack and went down into the temple, and into the library of the Elder, and I put all the scrolls I could find into the sack. I stole every bit of portable writing that was in the place. I wished I could have taken the writing off the walls.

“There were others in the chambers, but they were too terrified to come out. Of course they knew I had stolen the Mother and the Father. And they probably knew of the Elder’s death.

“It didn’t matter to me. I was getting out of old Egypt, and I had the source of all our power with me. And I was young and foolish and enflamed.

“When I finally reached Antioch on the Orontes—a great and wonderful city that rivaled Rome in population and wealth—I read these old papyri and they told of all the things Akasha had revealed to me.

“And she and Enkil had the first of many chapels I would build for them all over Asia and Europe, and they knew that I would always care for them and I knew that they would let no harm come to me.

“Many centuries after, when I was set afire in Venice by the band of the Children of Darkness, I was too far from Akasha for rescue, or again, she would have come. And when I did reach the sanctuary, knowing full well the agony that the burnt gods had known, I drank of her blood until I was healed.

“But by the end of the first century of keeping them in Antioch I had despaired that they would ever ‘come to life,’ as it were. Their silence and stillness was almost continuous as it is now. Only the skin changed dramatically with the passing years, losing the damage of the sun until it was like alabaster again.

“But by the time I realized all this I was powerfully engaged in watching the goings-on of the city and the changing of the times. I was madly in love with a beautiful brown-haired Greek courtesan named Pandora, with the loveliest arms I have ever beheld on a human being, who knew what I was from the first moment she set eyes on me and bided her time, enchanting me and dazzling me until I was ready to bring her over into the magic, at which time she was allowed the blood from Akasha and became one of the most powerful supernatural creatures I have ever known. Two hundred years I lived and fought and loved with Pandora. But that is another tale.

“There are a million tales I could tell of the centuries I have lived since then, of my journeys from Antioch to Constantinople, back to Alexandria and on to India and then to Italy again and from Venice to the bitter cold highlands of Scotland and then to this island in the Aegean, where we are now.

“I could tell you of the tiny changes in Akasha and Enkil over the years, of the puzzling things they do, and the mysteries they leave unsolved.

“Perhaps some night in the far distant future, when you’ve returned to me, I’ll talk of the other immortals I’ve known, those who were made as I was made by the last of the gods who survived in various lands—some the servants of the Mother and others of the terrible gods out of the East.

“I could tell you how Mael, my poor Druid priest, finally drank from a wounded god himself and in one instant lost all his belief in the old religion, going on to become as enduring and dangerous a rogue immortal as any of us. I could tell you how the legends of Those Who Must Be Kept spread through the world. And of the times other immortals have tried to take them from me out of pride or sheer destructiveness, wanting to put an end to us all.

“I will tell you of my loneliness, of the others I made, and how they met their ends. Of how I have gone down into the earth with Those Who Must Be Kept, and risen again, thanks to their blood, to live several mortal lifetimes before burying myself again. I will tell you of the other truly eternal ones whom I meet only now and then. Of the last time I saw Pandora in the city of Dresden, in the company of a powerful and vicious vampire from India, and of how we quarreled and separated, and of how I discovered too late her letter begging me to meet her in

Moscow, a fragile piece of writing that had fallen to the bottom of a cluttered traveling case. Too many things, too many stories, stories with and without lessons …

"But I have told you the most important things—how I came into possession of Those Who Must Be Kept, and who we really were.

"What is crucial now is that you understand this:

"As the Roman Empire came to its close, all the old gods of the pagan world were seen as demons by the Christians who rose. It was useless to tell them as the centuries passed that their Christ was but another God of the Wood, dying and rising, as Dionysus or Osiris had done before him, and that the Virgin Mary was in fact the Good Mother again enshrined. Theirs was a new age of belief and conviction, and in it we became devils, detached from what they believed, as old knowledge was forgotten or misunderstood.

"But this had to happen. Human sacrifice had been a horror to the Greeks and Romans. I had thought it ghastly that the Keltoi burned for the god their evildoers in the wicker colossi as I described. And so it was to the Christians. So how could we, gods who fed upon human blood, have been seen as 'good'?

"But the real perversion of us was accomplished when the Children of Darkness came to believe they served the Christian devil, and like the terrible gods of the East, they tried to give value to evil, to believe in its power in the scheme of things, to give it a just place in the world.

"Hearken to me when I say: *There has never been a just place for evil in the Western world*. There has never been an easy accommodation of death.

"No matter how violent have been the centuries since the fall of Rome, no matter how terrible the wars, the persecutions, the injustices, the value placed upon human life has only increased.

"Even as the Church erected statues and pictures of her bloody Christ and her bloody martyrs, she held the belief that these deaths, so well used by the faithful, could only have come at the hands of enemies, not God's own priests.

"It is the belief in the value of human life that has caused the torture chambers and the stake and the more ghastly means of execution to be abandoned all over Europe in this time. And it is the belief in the value of human life that carries man now out of the monarchy into the

republics of America and France.

"And now we stand again on the cusp of an atheistic age—an age where the Christian faith is losing its hold, as paganism once lost its hold, and the new humanism, the belief in man and his accomplishments and his rights, is more powerful than ever before.

"Of course we cannot know what will happen as the old religion thoroughly dies out. Christianity rose on the ashes of paganism, only to carry forth the old worship in new form. Maybe a new religion will rise now. Maybe without it, man will crumble in cynicism and selfishness because he really needs his gods.

"But maybe something more wonderful will take place: the world will truly move forward, past all gods and goddesses, past all devils and angels. And in such a world, Lestat, we will have less of a place than we have ever had.

"All the stories I have told you are finally as useless as all ancient knowledge is to man and to us. Its images and its poetry can be beautiful; it can make us shiver with the recognition of things we have always suspected or felt. It can draw us back to times when the earth was new to man, and wondrous. But always we come back to the way the earth is now.

"And in this world the vampire is only a Dark God. He is a Child of Darkness. He can't be anything else. And if he wields any lovely power upon the minds of men, it is only because the human imagination is a secret place of primitive memories and unconfessed desires. The mind of each man is a Savage Garden, to use your phrase, in which all manner of creatures rise and fall, and anthems are sung and things imagined that must finally be condemned and disavowed.

"Yet men love us when they come to know us. They love us even now. The Paris crowds love what they see on the stage of the Theater of the Vampires. And those who have seen your like walking through the ballrooms of the world, the pale and deadly lord in the velvet cloak, have worshiped in their own way at your feet.

"They thrill at the possibility of immortality, at the possibility that a grand and beautiful being could be utterly evil, that he could feel and know all things yet choose willfully to feed his dark appetite. Maybe they wish they could be that lusciously evil creature. How simple it all seems. And it is the simplicity of it that they want.

“But give them the Dark Gift and only one in a multitude will not be as miserable as you are.

“What can I say finally that will not confirm your worst fears? I have lived over eighteen hundred years, and I tell you life does not need us. I have never had a true purpose. We have no place.”

14

Marius paused.

He looked away from me for the first time and towards the sky beyond the windows, as if he were listening to island voices I couldn't hear.

"I have a few more things to tell you," he said, "things which are important, though they are merely practical things …" But he was distracted. "And there are promises," he said, finally, "which I must exact …"

And he slipped into quiet, listening, his face too much like that of Akasha and Enkil.

There were a thousand questions I wanted to ask. But more significant perhaps there were a thousand statements of his I wanted to reiterate, as if I had to say them aloud to grasp them. If I talked, I wouldn't make very good sense.

I sat back against the cool brocade of the winged chair with my hands together in the form of a steeple, and I just looked ahead of me, as if his tale were spread out there for me to read over, and I thought of the truth of his statements about good and evil, and how it might have horrified me and disappointed me had he tried to convince me of the rightness of the philosophy of the terrible gods of the East, that we could somehow glory in what we did.

I too was a child of the West, and all my brief life I had struggled with the Western inability to accept evil or death.

But underneath all these considerations lay the appalling fact that Marius could annihilate all of us by destroying Akasha and Enkil. Marius could kill every single one of us in existence if he were to burn Akasha and Enkil and thereby get rid of an old and decrepit and useless form of evil in the world. Or so it seemed.

And the horror of Akasha and Enkil themselves … What could I say to this, except that I too had felt the first glimmer of what he once felt, that I could rouse them, I could make them speak again, I could make them move. Or more truly, I had felt when I saw them that someone should and could do it. Someone could end their open-eyed sleep.

And what would they be if they ever walked and talked again? Ancient Egyptian monsters. What would they do?

I saw the two possibilities as seductive suddenly—rousing them or destroying them. Both tempted the mind. I wanted to pierce them and commune with them, and yet I understood the irresistible madness of trying to destroy them. Of going out in a blaze of light with them that would take all our doomed species with it.

Both attitudes had to do with power. And some triumph over the passage of time.

"Aren't you ever tempted to do it?" I asked, and my voice had pain in it. I wondered if down in their chapel they heard.

He awakened from his listening and turned to me and he shook his head. No.

"Even though you know better than anyone that we have no place?" Again he shook his head. No.

"I am immortal," he said, *"truly* immortal. To be perfectly honest, I do not know what can kill me now, if anything. But that isn't the point. I want to go on. I do not even think of it. I am a continual awareness unto myself, the intelligence I longed for years and years ago when I was alive, and I'm in love as I've always been with the great progress of mankind. I want to see what will happen now that the world has come round again to questioning its gods. Why, I couldn't be persuaded now to close my eyes for any reason."

I nodded in understanding.

"But I don't suffer what you suffer," he said. "Even in the grove in northern France, when I was made into this, I was not young. I have been lonely since, I have known near madness, indescribable anguish, but I was never immortal and young. I have done over and over what you have yet to do—the thing that must take you away from me very very soon."

"Take me away? But I don't want—"

"You have to go, Lestat," he said. "And very soon, as I said. You're not ready to remain here with me. This is one of the most important things I have left to tell you and you must listen with the same attention with which you listened to the rest."

"Marius, I can't imagine leaving now. I can't even …" I felt anger suddenly. Why had he brought me here to cast me out? And I

remembered all Armand's admonitions to me. It is only with the old ones that we find communion, not with those we create. And I had found Marius. But these were mere words. They didn't touch the core of what I felt, the sudden misery and fear of separation.

"Listen to me," he said gently. "Before I was taken by the Gauls, I had lived a good lifetime, as long as many a man in those days. And after I took Those Who Must Be Kept out of Egypt, I lived again for years in Antioch as a rich Roman scholar might live. I had a house, slaves, and the love of Pandora. We had life in Antioch, we were watchers of all that passed. And having had that lifetime, I had the strength for others later on. I had the strength to become part of the world in Venice, as you know. I had the strength to rule on this island as I do. You, like many who go early into the fire or the sun, have had no real life at all.

"As a young man, you tasted real life for no more than six months in Paris. As a vampire, you have been a roamer, an outsider, haunting houses and other lives as you drifted from place to place.

"If you mean to survive, you must live out one complete lifetime as soon as you can. To forestall it may be to lose everything, to despair and to go into the earth again, never to rise. Or worse …"

"I want it. I understand," I said. "And yet when they offered it to me in Paris, to remain with the Theater, I couldn't do it."

"That was not the right place for you. Besides, the Theater of the Vampires is a coven. It isn't the world any more than this island refuge of mine is the world. And too many horrors happened to you there.

"But in this New World wilderness to which you're headed, this barbaric little city called New Orleans, you may enter into the world as never before. You may take up residence there as a mortal, just as you tried to do so many times in your wanderings with Gabrielle. There will be no old covens to bother you, no rogues to try to strike you down out of fear. And when you make others—and you will, out of loneliness, make others—make and keep them as human as you can. Keep them close to you as members of a family, not as members of a coven, and understand the age you live in, the decades you pass through. Understand the style of garment that adorns your body, the styles of dwellings in which you spend your leisure hours, the place in which you hunt. Understand what it means to feel the passage of time!"

"Yes, and feel all the pain of seeing things die …" All the things

Armand advised against.

"Of course. You are made to triumph over time, not to run from it. And you will suffer that you harbor the secret of your monstrosity and that you must kill. And maybe you will try to feast only on the evildoer to assuage your conscience, and you may succeed, or you may fail. But you can come very close to life, if you will only lock the secret within you. You are fashioned to be close to it, as you yourself once told the members of the old Paris coven. You are the imitation of a man."

"I want it, I do want it—"

"Then do as I advise. And understand this also. In a real way, eternity is merely the living of one human lifetime after another. Of course, there may be long periods of retreat; times of slumber or of merely watching. But again and again we plunge into the stream, and we swim as long as we can, until time or tragedy brings us down as they will do mortals."

"Will you do it again? Leave this retreat and plunge into the stream?"

"Yes, definitely. When the right moment presents itself. When the world is so interesting again that I can't resist it. Then I'll walk city streets. I'll take a name. I'll do things."

"Then come now, with me!" Ah, painful echo of Armand. And of the vain plea from Gabrielle ten years after.

"It's a more tempting invitation than you know," he answered, "but I'd do you a great disservice if I came with you. I'd stand between you and the world. I couldn't help it."

I shook my head and looked away, full of bitterness.

"Do you want to continue?" he asked. "Or do you want Gabrielle's predictions to come true?"

"I want to continue," I said.

"Then you must go," he said. "A century from now, maybe less, we'll meet again. I won't be on this island. I will have taken Those Who Must Be Kept to another place. But wherever I am and wherever you are, I'll find you. And then I'll be the one who will not want you to leave me. I'll be the one who begs you to remain. I'll fall in love with your company, your conversation, the mere sight of you, your stamina and your recklessness, and your lack of belief in anything—all the things about you I already love rather too strongly."

I could scarcely listen to this without breaking down. I wanted to beg him to let me remain.

“Is it absolutely impossible now?” I asked. “Marius, can’t you spare me this lifetime?”

“Quite impossible,” he said. “I can tell you stories forever, but they are no substitute for life. Believe me, I’ve tried to spare others. I’ve never succeeded. I can’t teach what one lifetime can teach. I never should have taken Armand in his youth, and his centuries of folly and suffering are a penance to me even now. You did him a mercy driving him into the Paris of this century, but I fear for him it is too late. Believe me, Lestat, when I say this has to happen. You must have that lifetime, for those who are robbed of it spin in dissatisfaction until they finally live it somewhere or they are destroyed.”

“And what about Gabrielle?”

“Gabrielle had her life; she had her death almost. She has the strength to reenter the world when she chooses, or to live on its fringes indefinitely.”

“And do you think she will ever reenter?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Gabrielle defies my understanding. Not my experience—she’s too like Pandora. But I never understood Pandora. The truth is most women are weak, be they mortal or immortal. But when they are strong, they are absolutely unpredictable.”

I shook my head. I closed my eyes for a moment. I didn’t want to think of Gabrielle. Gabrielle was gone, no matter what we said here.

And I still could not accept that I had to go. This seemed an Eden to me. But I didn’t argue anymore. I knew he was resolute, and I also knew that he wouldn’t force me. He’d let me start worrying about my mortal father, and he’d let me come to him and say I had to go. I had a few nights left.

“Yes,” he answered softly. “And there are other things I can tell you.”

I opened my eyes again. He was looking at me patiently, affectionately. I felt the ache of love as strongly as I’d ever felt it for Gabrielle. I felt the inevitable tears and did my best to suppress them.

“You’ve learned a great deal from Armand,” he said, his voice steady as if to help me with this little silent struggle. “And you learned much more on your own. But there are still some things I might teach you.”

“Yes, please,” I said.

“Well, for one thing,” he said, “your powers are extraordinary, but you can’t expect those you make in the next fifty years to equal you or

Gabrielle. Your second child didn't have half Gabrielle's strength and later children will have even less. The blood I gave you will make some difference. If you drink … if you drink from Akasha and Enkil, which you may choose not to do … that will make some difference too. But no matter, only so many children can be made by one in a century. And new offspring will be weak. However, this is not necessarily a bad thing. The rule of the old covens had wisdom in it that strength should come with time. And then again, there is the old truth: you might make titans or imbeciles, no one knows why or how.

"Whatever will happen will happen, but choose your companions with care. Choose them because you like to look at them and you like the sound of their voices, and they have profound secrets in them that you wish to know. In other words, choose them because you love them. Otherwise you will not be able to bear their company for very long."

"I understand," I said. "Make them in love."

"Exactly, make them in love. And make certain they have had some lifetime before you make them; and never never make one as young as Armand. That is the worst crime I have ever committed against my own kind, the taking of the young boy child Armand."

"But you didn't know the Children of Darkness would come when they did, and separate him from you."

"No. But still, I should have waited. It was loneliness that drove me to it. And Armand's helplessness, that his mortal life was so completely in my hands. Remember, beware of that power, and the power you have over those who are dying. Loneliness in us, and that sense of power, can be as strong as the thirst for blood. If there were not an Enkil there might be no Akasha, and if there were not an Akasha, then there would be no Enkil."

"Yes. And from everything you said, it seems Enkil covets Akasha. That Akasha is the one who now and then …"

"Yes, that's true." His face became very somber suddenly, and his eyes had a confidential look in them as if we were whispering to each other and fearful another might hear. He waited for a moment as if thinking what to say. "Who knows what Akasha might do if there were no Enkil to hold her?" he whispered. "And why do I pretend that he can't hear this even when I think it? Why do I whisper? He can destroy me anytime that he likes. Maybe Akasha is the only thing keeping him from it. But

then what would become of them if he did away with me?"

"Why did they let themselves be burnt by the sun?" I asked.

"How can we know? Perhaps they knew it wouldn't hurt them. It would only hurt and punish those who had done it to them. Perhaps in the state they live in they are slow to realize what is going on outside them. And they did not have time to gather their forces, to wake from their dreams and save themselves. Maybe their movements after it happened—the movements of Akasha I witnessed—were only possible because they had been awakened by the sun. And now they sleep again with their eyes open. And they dream again. And they do not even drink."

"What did you mean … if I *choose* to drink their blood?" I asked. "How could I not choose?"

"That is something we have to think on, both of us," he said. "And there is always the possibility that they won't allow you to drink."

I shuddered thinking of one of those arms striking out at me, knocking me twenty feet across the chapel, or perhaps right through the stone floor itself.

"She told you her name, Lestat," he said. "I think she will let you drink. But if you take her blood, then you will be even more resilient than you are now. A few droplets will strengthen you, but if she gives you more than that, a full measure, hardly any force on earth can destroy you after that. You have to be certain you want it."

"Why wouldn't I want it?" I said.

"Do you want to be burnt to a cinder and live on in agony? Do you want to be slashed with knives a thousand times over, or shot through and through with guns, and yet live on, a shredded husk that cannot fend for itself? Believe me, Lestat, that can be a terrible thing. You could suffer the sun even, and live through it, burnt beyond recognition, wishing as the old gods did in Egypt that they had died."

"But won't I heal faster?"

"Not necessarily. Not without another infusion of her blood in the wounded state. Time with its constant measure of human victims or the blood of old ones—these are the restoratives. But you may wish you had died. Think on this. Take your time."

"What would you do if you were I?"

"I would drink from Those Who Must Be Kept, of course. I would drink

to be stronger, more nearly immortal. I would beseech Akasha on my knees to allow it, and then I would go into her arms. But it's easy to say these things. She has never struck out at me. She has never forbidden me, and I know that I want to live forever. I would endure the fire again. I would endure the sun. And all manner of suffering in order to go on. You may not be so sure that eternity is what you want."

"I want it," I said. "I could pretend to think about it, pretend to be clever and wise as I weigh it. But what the hell? I wouldn't fool you, would I? You knew what I would say."

He smiled.

"Then before you leave we will go into the chapel and we will ask her, humbly, and we will see what she says."

"And for now, more answers?" I asked. He gestured for me to ask.

"I've seen ghosts," I said. "Seen the pesty demons you described. I've seen them possess mortals and dwellings."

"I know no more than you do. Most ghosts seem to be mere apparitions without knowledge that they are being watched. I have never spoken to a ghost nor been addressed by one. As for the pesty demons, what can I add to Enkil's ancient explanation, that they rage because they do not have bodies. But there are other immortals that are more interesting."

"What are they?"

"There are at least two in Europe who do not and have never drunk blood. They can walk in the daylight as well as in the dark, and they have bodies and they are very strong. They look exactly like men. There was one in ancient Egypt, known as Ramses the Damned to the Egyptian court, though he was hardly damned as far as I can tell. His name was taken off all the royal monuments after he vanished. You know the Egyptians used to do that, obliterate the name as they sought to kill the being. And I don't know what happened to him. The old scrolls didn't tell."

"Armand spoke of him," I said. "Armand told of legends, that Ramses was an ancient vampire."

"He is not. But I didn't believe what I read of him till I'd seen the others with my own eyes. And again, I have not communicated with them. I have only seen them, and they were terrified of me and fled. I fear them because they walk in the sun. And they are powerful and

bloodless and who knows what they might do? But you may live centuries and never see them."

"But how old are they? How long has it been?"

"They are very old, probably as old as I am. I can't tell. They live as wealthy, powerful men. And possibly there are more of them, they may have some way of propagating themselves, I'm not sure. Pandora said once that there was a woman too. But then Pandora and I couldn't agree upon anything about them. Pandora said they had been what we were, and they were ancient, and had ceased to drink as the Mother and the Father have ceased to drink. I don't think they were ever what we are. They are something else without blood. They don't reflect light as we do. They absorb it. They are just a shade darker than mortals. And they are dense, and strong. You may never see them, but I tell you to warn you. You must never let them know where you lie. They can be more dangerous than humans."

"But are humans really dangerous? I've found them so easy to deceive."

"Of course they're dangerous. Humans could wipe us out if they ever really understood about us. They could hunt us by day. Don't ever underestimate that single advantage. Again, the rules of the old covens have their wisdom. Never, never tell mortals about us. Never tell a mortal where you lie or where any vampire lies. It is absolute folly to think you can control mortals."

I nodded, though it was very hard for me to fear mortals. I never had.

"Even the vampire theater in Paris," he cautioned, "does not flaunt the simplest truths about us. It plays with folklore and illusions. Its audience is completely fooled."

I realized this was true. And that even in her letters to me Eleni always disguised her meanings and never used our full names.

And something about this secrecy oppressed me as it always had.

But I was racking my brain, trying to discover if I'd ever seen the bloodless things … The truth was, I might have mistaken them for rogue vampires.

"There is one other thing I should tell you about supernatural beings," Marius said.

"What is it?"

"I am not certain of this, but I'll tell you what I think. I suspect that

when we are burnt—when we are destroyed utterly—that we can come back again in another form. I don't speak of man now, of human reincarnation. I know nothing of the destiny of human souls. But we do live forever and I think we come back."

"What makes you say this?" I couldn't help but think of Nicolas.

"The same thing that makes mortals talk of reincarnation. There are those who claim to remember other lives. They come to us as mortals, claiming to know all about us, to have been one of us, and asking to be given the Dark Gift again. Pandora was one of these. She knew many things, and there was no explanation for her knowledge, except perhaps that she imagined it, or drew it, without realizing it, out of my mind. That's a real possibility, that they are merely mortals with hearing that allows them to receive our undirected thoughts.

"Whatever the case, there are not many of them. If they were vampires, then surely they are only a few of those who have been destroyed. So the others perhaps do not have the strength to come back. Or they do not choose to do so. Who can know? Pandora was convinced she had died when the Mother and the Father had been put in the sun."

"Dear God, they are born again as mortals and they *want* to be vampires again?"

Marius smiled.

"You're young, Lestat, and how you contradict yourself. What do you *really* think it would be like to be mortal again? Think on this when you set eyes on your mortal father."

Silently I conceded the point. But what I had made of mortality in my imagination I didn't really want to lose. I wanted to go on grieving for my lost mortality. And I knew that my love of mortals was all bound up with my not being afraid of them.

Marius looked away, distracted once more. The same perfect attitude of listening. And then his face became attentive to me again.

"Lestat, we should have no more than two or three nights," he said sadly.

"Marius!" I whispered. I bit down on the words that wanted to spill out.

My only consolation was the expression on his face, and it seemed now he had never looked even faintly inhuman.

"You don't know how I want you to stay here," he said. "But life is out

there, not here. When we meet again I'll tell you more things, but you have all you need for now. You have to go to Louisiana and see your father to the finish of his life and learn from that what you can. I've seen legions of mortals grow old and die. You've seen none. But believe me, my young friend, I want you desperately to remain with me. You don't know how much. I promise you that I will find you when the time comes."

"But why can't I return to you? Why must you leave here?"

"It's time," he said. "I've ruled too long over these people as it is. I arouse suspicions, and besides, Europeans are coming into these waters. Before I came here I was hidden in the buried city of Pompeii below Vesuvius, and mortals, meddling and digging up those ruins, drove me out. Now it's happening again. I must seek some other refuge, something more remote, and more likely to remain so. And frankly I would never have brought you here if I planned to remain."

"Why not?"

"You know why not. I can't have you or anyone else know the location of Those Who Must Be Kept. And that brings us now to something very important: the promises I must have from you."

"Anything," I said. "But what could you possibly want that I could give?"

"Simply this. *You must never tell others the things that I have told you.* Never tell of Those Who Must Be Kept. Never tell the legends of the old gods. Never tell others that you have seen me."

I nodded gravely. I had expected this, but I knew without even thinking that this might prove very hard indeed.

"If you tell even one part," he said, "another will follow, and with every telling of the secret of Those Who Must Be Kept you increase the danger of their discovery."

"Yes," I said. "But the legends, our origins … What about those children that I make? Can't I tell them—"

"No. As I told you, tell part and you will end up telling all. Besides, if these fledglings are children of the Christian god, if they are poisoned as Nicolas was with the Christian notion of Original Sin and guilt, they will only be maddened and disappointed by these old tales. It will all be a horror to them that they cannot accept. Accidents, pagan gods they don't believe in, customs they cannot understand. One has to be ready for this

knowledge, meager as it may be. Rather listen hard to their questions and tell them what you must to make them contented. And if you find you cannot lie to them, don't tell them anything at all. Try to make them strong as godless men today are strong. But mark my words, the old legends never. Those are mine and mine alone to tell."

"What will you do to me if I tell them?" I asked.

This startled him. He lost his composure for almost a full second, and then he laughed.

"You are the damnedest creature, Lestat," he murmured. "The point is I can do anything I like to you if you tell. Surely you know that. I could crush you underfoot the way Akasha crushed the Elder. I could set you ablaze with the power of my mind. But I don't want to utter such threats. I want you to come back to me. But I will not have these secrets known. I will not have a band of immortals descend upon me again as they did in Venice. I will not be known to our kind. You must never—deliberately or accidentally—send anyone searching for Those Who Must Be Kept or for Marius. You will never utter my name to others."

"I understand," I said.

"Do you?" he asked. "Or must I threaten you after all? Must I warn you that my vengeance can be terrible? That my punishment would include those to whom you've told the secrets as well as you? Lestat, I have destroyed others of our kind who came in search of me. I have destroyed them simply because they knew the old legends and they knew the name of Marius, and they would never give up the quest."

"I can't bear this," I murmured. "I won't tell anyone, ever, I swear. But I'm afraid of what others can read in my thoughts, naturally. I fear that they might take the images out of my head. Armand could do it. What if —"

"You can conceal the images. You know how. You can throw up other images to confuse them. You can lock your mind. It's a skill you already know. But let's be done with threats and admonitions. I feel love for you."

I didn't respond for a moment. My mind was leaping ahead to all manner of forbidden possibilities. Finally I put it in words:

"Marius, don't you ever have the desire to tell all of it to all of them! I mean, to make it known to the whole world of our kind, and to draw them together?"

“Good God, no, Lestat. Why would I do that?” He seemed genuinely puzzled.

“So that we might possess our legends, might at least ponder the riddles of our history, as men do. So that we might swap our stories and share our power—”

“And combine to use it as the Children of Darkness have done, against men?”

“No … Not like that.”

“Lestat, in eternity, covens are actually rare. Most vampires are distrustful and solitary beings and they do not love others. They have no more than one or two well-chosen companions from time to time, and they guard their hunting grounds and their privacy as I do mine. They wouldn’t want to come together, and if they did ever overcome the viciousness and suspicions that divide them, their convocation would end in terrible battles and struggles for supremacy like those revealed to me by Akasha, which happened thousands of years ago. We are evil things finally. We are killers. Better that those who unite on this earth be mortal and that they unite for the good.”

I accepted this, ashamed of how it excited me, ashamed of all my weaknesses and all my impulsiveness. Yet another realm of possibilities was already obsessing me.

“And what about to mortals, Marius? Have you never wanted to reveal yourself to them, and tell them the whole story?”

Again, he seemed positively baffled by the notion.

“Have you never wanted the world to know about us, for better or for worse? Has it never seemed preferable to living in secret?”

He lowered his eyes for a moment and rested his chin against his closed hand. For the first time I perceived a communication of images coming from him, and I felt that he allowed me to see them because he was uncertain of his answer. He was remembering with a recall so powerful that it made my powers seem fragile. And what he remembered were the earliest times, when Rome had still ruled the world, and he was still within the range of a normal human lifetime.

“You remember wanting to tell them all,” I said. “To make it known, the monstrous secret.”

“Perhaps,” he said, “in the very beginning, there was some desperate passion to communicate.”

“Yes, communicate,” I said, cherishing the word. And I remembered that long-ago night on the stage when I had so frightened the Paris audience.

“But that was in the dim beginning,” he said slowly, speaking of himself. His eyes were narrow and remote as if he were looking back over all the centuries. “It would be folly, it would be madness. Were humanity ever really convinced, it would destroy us. I don’t want to be destroyed. Such dangers and calamities are not interesting to me.”

I didn’t answer.

“You don’t feel the urge yourself to reveal these things,” he said to me almost soothingly.

But I do, I thought. I felt his fingers on the back of my hand. I was looking beyond him, back over my brief past—the theater, my fairy-tale fantasies. I felt paralyzed in sadness.

“What you feel is loneliness and monstrousness,” he said. “And you’re impulsive and defiant.”

“True.”

“But what would it matter to reveal anything to anyone? No one can forgive. No one can redeem. It’s a childish illusion to think so. Reveal yourself and be destroyed, and what have you done? The Savage Garden would swallow your remains in pure vitality and silence. Where is there justice or understanding?”

I nodded.

I felt his hand close on mine. He rose slowly to his feet, and I stood up, reluctantly but compliantly.

“It’s late,” he said gently. His eyes were soft with compassion. “We’ve talked enough for now. And I must go down to my people. There’s trouble in the nearby village, as I feared there would be. And it will take what time I have until dawn, and then more tomorrow evening. It may well be after midnight tomorrow before we can talk—”

He was distracted again, and he lowered his head and listened.

“Yes, I have to go,” he said. And we embraced lightly and very comfortably.

And though I wanted to go with him and see what happened in the village—how he would conduct his affairs there—I wanted just as much to seek my rooms and look at the sea and finally sleep.

“You’ll be hungry when you rise,” he said. “I’ll have a victim for you.

Be patient till I come."

"Yes, of course …"

"And while you wait for me tomorrow," he said, "do as you like in the house. The old scrolls are in the cases in the library. You may look at them. Wander all the rooms. Only the sanctuary of Those Who Must Be Kept should not be approached. You must not go down the stairs alone."

I nodded.

I wanted to ask him one thing more. When would he hunt? When would he drink? His blood had sustained me for two nights, maybe more. But whose blood sustained him? Had he taken a victim earlier? Would he hunt now? I had a growing suspicion that he no longer needed the blood as much as I did. That, like Those Who Must Be Kept, he had begun to drink less and less. And I wanted desperately to know if this was true.

But he was leaving me. The village was definitely calling him. He went out onto the terrace and then he disappeared. For a moment I thought he had gone to the right or left beyond the doors. Then I came to the doors and saw the terrace was empty. I went to the rail and I looked down and I saw the speck of color that was his frock coat against the rocks far below.

And so we have all this to look forward to, I thought: that we may not need the blood, that our faces will gradually lose all human expression, that we can move objects with the strength of our minds, that we can all but fly. That some night thousands of years hence we may sit in utter silence as Those Who Must Be Kept are sitting now? How often tonight had Marius looked like them? How long did he sit without moving when no one was here?

And what would half a century mean to him, during which time I was to live out that one mortal life far across the sea?

I turned away and went back through the house to the bedchamber I'd been given. And I sat looking at the sea and the sky until the light started to come. When I opened the little hiding place of the sarcophagus, there were fresh flowers there. I put on the golden mask headdress and the gloves and I lay down in the stone coffin, and I could still smell the flowers as I closed my eyes.

The fearful moment was coming. The loss of consciousness. And on the edge of dream, I heard a woman laugh. She laughed lightly and long

as though she were very happy and in the midst of conversation, and just before I went into darkness, I saw her white throat as she bent her head back.

15

When I opened my eyes I had an idea. It came full blown to me, and it immediately obsessed me so that I was scarcely conscious of the thirst I felt, of the sting in my veins.

"Vanity," I whispered. But it had an alluring beauty to it, the idea. No, forget about it. Marius said to stay away from the sanctuary, and besides he will be back at midnight and then you can present the idea to him. And he can … what? Sadly shake his head.

I came out in the house and all was as it had been the night before, candles burning, windows open to the soft spectacle of the dying light. It didn't seem possible that I would leave here soon. And that I would never come back to it, that he himself would vacate this extraordinary place. I felt sorrowful and miserable. And then there was the idea. Not to do it in his presence, but silently and secretly so that I did not feel foolish, to go all alone.

No. Don't do it. After all, it won't do any good. Nothing will happen when you do it.

But if that's the case, why not do it? Why not do it now? I made my rounds again, through the library and the galleries and the room full of birds and monkeys, and on into other chambers where I had not been.

But that idea stayed in my head. And the thirst nagged at me, making me just a little more impulsive, a little more restless, a little less able to reflect on all the things Marius had told me and what they might mean as time went on.

He wasn't in the house. That was certain. I had been finally through all the rooms. Where he slept was his secret, and I knew there were ways to get in and out of the house that were his secret as well.

But the door to the stairway down to Those Who Must Be Kept, that I discovered again easily enough. And it wasn't locked.

I stood in the wallpapered salon with its polished furniture looking at the clock. Only seven in the evening, five hours till he came back. Five hours of the thirst burning in me. And the idea … The idea.

I didn't really decide to do it. I just turned my back on the clock and

started walking back to my room. I knew that hundreds of others before me must have had such ideas. And how well he had described the pride he felt when he thought he could rouse them. That he might make them move.

No. I just want to do it, even if nothing happens, which is exactly how it will go. I just want to go down there alone and do it. It has something to do with Nicki maybe. I don't know. I don't know!

I went into my chamber and in the incandescent light rising from the sea, I unlocked the violin case and I looked at the Stradivarius violin.

Of course I didn't know how to play it, but we are powerful mimics. As Marius said, we have superior concentration and superior skills. And I had seen Nicki do it so often.

I tightened the bow now and rubbed the horsehair with the little piece of resin, as I had seen him do.

Only two nights ago, I couldn't have borne the idea of touching this thing. Hearing it would have been pure pain.

Now I took it out of its case and I carried it through the house, the way I'd carried it to Nicki through the wings of the Theater of the Vampires, and not even thinking of vanity, I rushed faster and faster towards the door to the secret stairs.

It was as if they were drawing me to them, as if I had no will. Marius didn't matter now. Nothing much mattered, except to be going down the narrow damp stone steps faster and faster, past the windows full of sea spray and early evening light.

In fact, my infatuation was getting so strong, so total that I stopped suddenly, wondering if it was originating with me. But that was foolishness. Who could have put it in my head? Those Who Must Be Kept? Now that was real vanity, and besides, did these creatures know what this strange, delicate little wooden instrument was?

It made a sound, did it not, that no one had ever heard in the ancient world, a sound so human and so powerfully affecting that men thought the violin the work of the devil and accused its finest players of being possessed.

I was slightly dizzy, confused.

How had I gotten so far down the steps, and didn't I remember that the door was bolted from inside? Give me another five hundred years and I might be able to open that bolt, but not just now.

Yet I went on down, these thoughts breaking up and disintegrating as fast as they'd come. I was on fire again, and the thirst was making it worse, though the thirst had nothing to do with it.

And when I came round the last turn I saw the doors to the chapel were open wide. The light of the lamps poured out into the stairwell. And the scent of the flowers and incense was suddenly overwhelming and made a knot in my throat.

I drew nearer, holding the violin with both hands to my chest, though why I didn't know. And I saw that the tabernacle doors were open, and there they sat.

Someone had brought them more flowers. Someone had laid out the incense in cakes on golden plates.

And I stopped just inside the chapel, and I looked at their faces and they seemed as before to look directly at me.

White, so white I could not imagine them bronzed, and as hard, it seemed, as the jewels they wore. Snake bracelet around her upper arm. Layered necklace on her breast. Tiniest lip of flesh from his chest covering the top of the clean linen skirt he wore.

Her face was narrower than his face, her nose just a little longer. His eyes were slightly longer, the folds of flesh defining them a little thicker. Their long black hair was very much the same.

I was breathing uneasily. I felt suddenly weak and let the scent of the flowers and the incense fill my lungs.

The light of the lamps danced in a thousand tiny specks of gold in the murals.

I looked down at the violin and tried to remember my idea, and I ran my fingers along the wood and wondered what this thing looked like to them.

In a hushed voice I explained what it was, that I wanted them to hear it, that I didn't really know how to play it but that I was going to try. I wasn't speaking loud enough to hear myself, but surely they could hear it if they chose to listen.

And I lifted the violin to my shoulder, braced it under my chin, and lifted the bow. I closed my eyes and I remembered music, Nicki's music, the way that his body had moved with it and his fingers came down with the pressure of hammers and he let the message travel to his fingers from his soul.

I plunged into it, the music suddenly wailing upwards and rippling down again as my fingers danced. It was a song, all right, I could make a song. The tones were pure and rich as they echoed off the close walls with a resounding volume, creating the wailing beseeching voice that only the violin can make. I went madly on with it, rocking back and forth, forgetting Nicki, forgetting everything but the feel of my fingers stabbing at the soundboard and the realization that I was making this, this was coming out of me, and it plummeted and climbed and overflowed ever louder and louder as I bore down upon it with the frantic sawing of the bow.

I was singing with it, I was humming and then singing loudly, and all the gold of the little room was a blur. And suddenly it seemed my own voice became louder, inexplicably louder, with a pure high note which I knew that I myself could not possibly sing. Yet it was there, this beautiful note, steady and unchanging and growing even louder until it was hurting my ears. I played harder, more frantically, and I heard my own gasps coming, and I knew suddenly that I was not the one making this strange high note!

The blood was going to come out of my ears if the note did not stop. And I wasn't making the note! Without stopping the music, without giving in to the pain that was splitting my head, I looked forward and I saw Akasha had risen and her eyes were very wide and her mouth was a perfect O. The sound was coming from her, she was making it, and she was moving off the steps of the tabernacle towards me with her arms outstretched and the note pierced my eardrums as if it were a blade of steel.

I couldn't see. I heard the violin hit the stone floor. I felt my hands on the sides of my head. I screamed and screamed, but the note absorbed my screaming.

"Stop it! Stop it!" I was roaring. But all the light was there again and she was right in front of me and she was reaching out.

"O God, Marius!" I turned and ran towards the doors. And the doors flew shut against me, knocking my face so hard I fell down on my knees. Under the high shrill continuum of the note I was sobbing,

"Marius, Marius, Marius!"

And turning to see what was about to happen to me, I saw her foot come down on the violin. It popped and splintered under her heel. But

the note she sang was dying. The note was fading away.

And I was left in silence, deafness, unable to hear my own screams for Marius which were going on and on, as I scrambled to my feet.

Ringing silence, shimmering silence. She was right in front of me, and her black eyebrows came together delicately, barely creasing her white flesh, her eyes full of torment and questioning and her pale pink lips opened to reveal her fang teeth.

Help me, help me, Marius, help me, I was stammering, unable to hear myself except in the pure abstraction of intention in my mind. And then her arms enclosed me, and she drew me closer, and I felt the hand as Marius had described it, cupping my head gently, very gently, and I felt my teeth against her neck.

I did not hesitate. I did not think about the limbs that were locked around me, that could crush the life out of me in a second. I felt my fangs break through the skin as if through a glacial crust, and the blood came steaming into my mouth.

Oh, yes, yes … oh, yes. I had thrown my arm over her left shoulder, I was clinging to her, my living statue, and it didn't matter that she was harder than marble, that was the way it was supposed to be, it was perfect, my Mother, my lover, my powerful one, and the blood was penetrating every pulsing particle of me with the threads of its burning web. But her lips were against my throat. She was kissing me, kissing the artery through which her own blood so violently flowed. Her lips were opening on it, and as I drew upon her blood with all my strength, sucking, and feeling that gush again and again before it spread itself out into me, I felt the unmistakable sensation of her fangs going into my neck.

Out of every zinging vessel my blood was suddenly drawn into her, even as hers was being drawn into me.

I saw it, the shimmering circuit, and more divinely I felt it because nothing else existed but our mouths locked to each other's throats and the relentless pounding path of the blood. There were no dreams, there were no visions, there was just this, *this*—gorgeous and deafening and heated—and nothing mattered, absolutely nothing, except that this never stop. The world of all things that had weight and filled space and interrupted the flow of light was gone.

And yet some horrid noise intruded, something ugly, like the sound of

stone cracking, like the sound of stone dragged across the floor. Marius coming. No, Marius, don't come. Go back, don't touch. Don't separate us.

But it wasn't Marius, this awful sound, this intrusion, this sudden disruption of everything, this thing grabbing hold of my hair and tearing me off her so the blood spurted out of my mouth. It was Enkil. And his powerful hands were clamped on the sides of my head.

The blood gushed down my chin. I saw her stricken face! I saw her reach out for him. Her eyes blazed with common anger, her glistening white limbs animate as she grabbed at the hands that held my head. I heard her voice rise out of her, screaming, shrieking, louder than the note she had sung, the blood drooling from the end of her mouth.

The sound took sight as well as sound with it. The darkness swirled, broken into millions of tiny specks. My skull was going to crack.

He was forcing me down on my knees. He was bent over me, and suddenly I saw his face completely and it was as impassive as ever, only the stress of the muscles in his arms evincing true life.

And even through the obliterating sound of her scream I knew the door behind me quaked with Marius's pounding, his shouts almost as loud as her cries.

The blood was coming out of my ears from her screams. I was moving my lips.

The vise of stone clamped to my head suddenly let go. I felt myself hit the floor. I was sprawled out flat, and I felt the cold pressure of his foot on my chest. He would crush my heart in a second, and she, her screams growing ever louder, ever more piercing, was on his back with her arm locked around his neck. I saw her knotted eyebrows, her flying black hair.

But it was Marius I heard through the door talking to him, cutting through the white sound of her screams.

Kill him, Enkil, and I will take her away from you forever, and she will help me to do it! I swear!

Sudden silence. Deafness again. The warmth of blood trickling down the sides of my neck.

She stepped aside and she looked straight forward and the doors flew open, smacking the side of the narrow stone passage, and Marius was suddenly standing above me with his hands on Enkil's shoulders and Enkil seemed unable to move.

The foot slid down, bruising my stomach, and then it was gone. And Marius was speaking words I could hear only as thoughts: *Get out, Lestat. Run.*

I struggled to sit up, and I saw him driving them both slowly back towards the tabernacle, and I saw them both staring not forward, but at him, Akasha clutching Enkil's arm, and I saw their faces blank again, but for the first time the blankness seemed listless and not the mask of curiosity but the mask of death.

"Lestat, run!" he said again, without turning. And I obeyed.

16

I was at the farthest corner of the terrace when Marius finally came into the lighted salon. There was a heat in all my veins still that breathed as if it had its own life. And I could see far beyond the dim hulking shapes of the islands. I could hear the progress of a ship along a distant coast. But all I kept thinking was that if Enkil came at me again, I could jump over this railing. I could get into the sea and swim. I kept feeling his hands on the sides of my head, his foot on my chest.

I stood against the stone railing, shivering, and there was blood all over my hands still from the bruises on my face which had already completely healed.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry I did it," I said as soon as Marius came out of the salon. "I don't know why I did it. I shouldn't have done it. I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I swear it, I'm sorry, Marius. I'll never never do anything you tell me not to do again."

He stood with his arms folded looking at me. He was glowering.

"Lestat, what did I say last night?" he asked. "You are the *damnedest creature!*"

"Marius, forgive me. Please forgive me. I didn't think anything would happen. I was sure nothing would happen …"

He gestured for me to be quiet, for us to go down onto the rocks together, and he slipped over the railing and went first. I came behind him, vaguely delighted with the ease of it, but too dazed still to care about things like that. Her presence was all over me like a fragrance, only she had had no fragrance, except that of the incense and the flowers that must have somehow managed to permeate her hard white skin. How strangely fragile she had seemed in spite of that hardness.

We went down over the slippery boulders until we reached the white beach and we walked together in silence, looking out over the snow-white froth that leapt against the rocks or streaked towards us on the smooth hard-packed white sand. The wind roared in my ears, and I felt the sense of solitude this always creates in me, the roaring wind that blots out all other sensations as well as sound.

And I was getting calmer and calmer, and more and more agitated and miserable at the same time.

Marius had slipped his arm around me the way Gabrielle used to do it, and I paid no attention to where we were going, quite surprised when I saw we'd come to a small inlet of the water where a longboat lay at anchor with only a single pair of oars.

When we stopped I said again, "I'm sorry I did it! I swear I am. I didn't believe …"

"Don't tell me you regret it," Marius said calmly. "You are not at all sorry that it occurred, and that you were the cause of it, now that you are safe, and not crushed like an eggshell on the chapel floor."

"Oh, but that's not the point," I said. I started crying. I took out my handkerchief, grand accoutrement of an eighteenth-century gentleman, and wiped the blood off my face. I could feel her holding me, feel her blood, feel his hands. The whole thing commenced to reenact itself. If Marius hadn't come in time …

"But what did happen, Marius? What did you see?"

"I wish we could get beyond his hearing," Marius said wearily. "It's madness to speak or think anything that could disturb him any further. I have to let him lapse back."

And now he seemed truly furious and he turned his back on me.

But how could I not think about it? I wished I could open my head and pull the thoughts out of it. They were rocketing through me, like her blood. In her body was locked a mind still, an appetite, a blazing spiritual core whose heat had moved through me like liquid lightning, and without question Enkil had a deathhold upon her! I loathed him. I wanted to destroy him. And my brain seized upon all sorts of mad notions, that somehow he could be destroyed without endangering us as long as she remained!

But that made little sense. Hadn't the demons entered first into him? But what if that wasn't so …

"Stop it, young one!" Marius flashed.

I went to crying again. I felt of my neck where she had touched it, and licked my lips and tasted her blood again. I looked at the scattered stars above and even these benign and eternal things seemed menacing and senseless and I felt a scream swelling dangerously in my throat.

The effects of her blood were waning already. The first clear vision

was clouded, and my limbs were once again my limbs. They might be stronger, yes, but the magic was dying. The magic had left only something stronger than memory of the circuit of the blood through us both.

"Marius, what happened!" I said, shouting over the wind. "Don't be angry with me, don't turn away from me. I can't …"

"Shhh, Lestat," he said. He came back and took me by the arm. "Don't worry about my anger," he said. "It's unimportant, and it is not directed, at you. Give me a little more time to collect myself."

"But did you see what happened between her and me?"

He was looking out to sea. The water looked perfectly black and the foam perfectly white.

"Yes, I saw," he said.

"I took the violin and I wanted to play it for them, I was thinking—"

"Yes, I know, of course …"

"—that music would affect them, especially that music, that strange, unnatural-sounding music, you know how a violin …"

"Yes—"

"Marius, she gave me … she … and she took—"

"I know."

"And he keeps her there! He keeps her prisoner!"

"Lestat, I beg you …" He was smiling wearily, sadly.

Imprison him, Marius, the way that they did, and let her go!

"You dream, my child," he said. "You dream."

He turned and he left me, gesturing for me to leave him alone. He went down to the wet beach and let the water lap at him as he walked back and forth.

I tried to get calm again. It seemed unreal to me that I had ever been any place but this island, that the world of mortals was out there, that the strange tragedy and menace of Those Who Must Be Kept was unknown beyond these wet and shining cliffs.

Finally Marius made his way back.

"Listen to me," he said. "Straight west is an island that is not under my protection and there is an old Greek city on the northern tip of it where the seamen's taverns stay open all night. Go there now in the boat. Hunt and forget what has happened here. Assess the new powers you might have from her. But try not to think of her or him. Above all try not to

plot against him. Before dawn, come back to the house. It won't be difficult. You'll find a dozen open doors and windows. Do as I say, now, for me."

I bowed my head. It was the one thing under heaven that could distract me, that could wipe out any noble or enervating thoughts. Human blood and human struggle and human death.

And without protest, I made my way out through the shallow water to the boat.

In the early hours I looked at my reflection in a fragment of metallic mirror pinned to the wall of a seaman's filthy bedroom in a little inn. I saw myself in my brocade coat and white lace, and my face warm from killing, and the dead man sprawled behind me across the table. He still held the knife with which he'd tried to cut my throat. And there was the bottle of wine with the drug in it which I'd kept refusing, with playful protestations, until he'd lost his temper and tried the last resort. His companion lay dead on the bed.

I looked at the young blond-haired rake in the mirror.

"Well, if it isn't the vampire Lestat," I said.

But all the blood in the world couldn't stop the horrors from coming over me when I went to my rest.

I couldn't stop thinking of her, wondering if it was her laugh I had heard in my sleep the night before. And I wondered that she had told me nothing in the blood, until I closed my eyes and quite suddenly things came back to me, of course, wonderful things, incoherent as they were magical. She and I were walking down a hallway together—not here but in a place I knew. I think it was a palace in Germany where Haydn wrote his music—and she spoke casually as she had a thousand times to me. *But tell me about all this, what do the people believe, what turns the wheels inside of them, what are these marvelous inventions* … She wore a fashionable black hat with a great white plume on its broad brim and a white veil tied round the top of it and under her chin, and her face was merely beginning, merely young.

* * *

When I opened my eyes, I knew Marius was waiting for me. I came out into the chamber and saw him standing by the empty violin case, with his back to the open window over the sea.

"You have to go now, my young one," he said sadly. "I had hoped for more time, but that is impossible. The boat is waiting to take you away."

"Because of what I did …" I said miserably. So I was being cast out.

"He's destroyed the things in the chapel," Marius said, but his voice was asking for calm. He put his arm around my shoulder, and he took my valise in his other hand. We went towards the door. "I want you to go now because it is the only thing that will quiet him, and I want you to remember not his anger, but everything that I told you, and to be confident that we will meet again as we said."

"But are you afraid of him, Marius?"

"Oh, no, Lestat. Don't carry this worry away with you. He has done little things like this before, now and then. He does not know what he does, really. I am convinced of that. He only knows that someone stepped between him and Akasha. Time is all that is required for him to lapse back."

There it was, that phrase again, "lapse back."

"And she sits as if she never moved, doesn't she?" I asked.

"I want you away now so that you don't provoke him," Marius said, leading me out of the house and towards the cliffside stairs. He continued speaking:

"Whatever ability we creatures have to move objects mentally, to ignite them, to do any real harm by the power of the mind does not extend very far from the physical spot where we stand. So I want you gone from here tonight and on your way to America. All the sooner to return to me when he is no longer agitated and no longer remembers, and I will have forgotten nothing and will be waiting for you."

I saw the galley in the harbor below when we reached the edge of the cliff. The stairs looked impossible, but they weren't impossible. What was impossible was that I was leaving Marius and this island right now.

"You needn't come down with me," I said, taking the valise from him. I was trying not to sound bitter and crestfallen. After all, I had caused this.

“I would rather not weep in front of others. Leave me here.”

“I wish we had had a few more nights together,” he said, “for us to consider in quiet what took place. But my love goes with you. And try to remember the things I’ve told you. When we meet again we’ll have much to say to each other—” He paused.

“What is it, Marius?”

“Tell me truthfully,” he asked. “Are you sorry that I came for you in Cairo, sorry that I brought you here?”

“How could I be?” I asked. “I’m only sorry that I’m going. What if I can’t find you again or you can’t find me?”

“When the time is right, I’ll find you,” he said. “And always remember: you have the power to call to me, as you did before. When I hear that call, I can bridge distances to answer that I could never bridge on my own. If the time is right, I will answer. Of that you can be sure.”

I nodded. There was too much to say and I didn’t speak a word.

We embraced for a long moment, and then I turned and slowly started my descent, knowing he would understand why I didn’t look back.

17

I did not know how much I wanted “the world” until my ship finally made its way up the murky Bayou St. Jean towards the city of New Orleans, and I saw the black ragged line of the swamp against the luminous sky.

The fact that none of our kind had ever penetrated this wilderness excited me and humbled me at the same time.

Before the sun rose on that first morning, I'd fallen in love with the low and damp country, as I had with the dry heat of Egypt, and as time passed I came to love it more than any spot on the globe.

Here the scents were so strong you smelled the raw green of the leaves as well as the pink and yellow blossoms. And the great brown river, surging past the miserable little Place d’Armes and its tiny cathedral, threw into eclipse every other fabled river I’d ever seen.

Unnoticed and unchallenged, I explored the ramshackle little colony with its muddy streets and gunwale sidewalks and dirty Spanish soldiers lounging about the calaboose. I lost myself in the dangerous waterfront shacks full of gambling and brawling flatboatmen and lovely dark-skinned Caribbean women, wandering out again to glimpse the silent flash of lightning, hear the dim roar of the thunder, feel the silky warmth of the summer rain.

The low-slung roofs of the little cottages gleamed under the moon. Light skittered on the iron gates of the fine Spanish town houses. It flickered behind real lace curtains hung inside freshly washed glass doors. I walked among the crude little bungalows that spread out to the ramparts, peeping through windows at gilded furniture and enameled bits of wealth and civilization that in this barbaric place seemed priceless and fastidious and even sad.

Now and then through the mire there came a vision: a real French gentleman done up in snow-white wig and fancy frock coat, his wife in panniers, and a black slave carrying clean slippers for the two high above the flowing mud.

I knew that I had come to the most forsaken outpost of the Savage

Garden, and that this was my country and I would remain in New Orleans, if New Orleans could only manage to remain. Whatever I suffered should be lessened in this lawless place, whatever I craved should give me more pleasure once I had it in my grasp.

And there were moments on that first night in this fetid little paradise when I prayed that in spite of all my secret power, I was somehow kin to every mortal man. Maybe I was not the exotic outcast that I imagined, but merely the dim magnification of every human soul.

Old truths and ancient magic, revolution and invention, all conspire to distract us from the passion that in one way or another defeats us all.

And weary finally of this complexity, we dream of that long-ago time when we sat upon our mother's knee and each kiss was the perfect consummation of desire. What can we do but reach for the embrace that must now contain both heaven and hell: our doom again and again and again.

Epilogue

Interview with the Vampire

1

And so I came to the end of The Early Education and Adventures of the Vampire Lestat, the tale that I set out to tell. You have the account of Old World magic and mystery which I have chosen, despite all prohibitions and injunctions, to pass on.

But my story isn't finished, no matter how reluctant I might be to continue it. And I must consider, at least briefly, the painful events that led to my decision to go down into the earth in 1929.

That was a hundred and forty years after I left Marius's island. And I never set eyes upon Marius again. Gabrielle also remained completely lost to me. She'd vanished that night in Cairo never to be heard from by anyone mortal or immortal that I was ever to know.

And when I made my grave in the twentieth century, I was alone and weary and badly wounded in body and soul.

I'd lived out my "one lifetime" as Marius advised me to do. But I couldn't blame Marius for the way in which I'd lived it, and the hideous mistakes I'd made.

Sheer will had shaped my experience more than any other human characteristic. And advice and predictions notwithstanding, I courted tragedy and disaster as I have always done. Yet I had my rewards, I can't deny that. For almost seventy years I had my fledgling vampires Louis and Claudia, two of the most splendid immortals who ever walked the earth, and I had them on my terms.

Shortly after reaching the colony, I fell fatally in love with Louis, a young dark-haired bourgeois planter, graceful of speech and fastidious of manner, who seemed in his cynicism and self-destructiveness the very twin of Nicolas.

He had Nicki's grim intensity, his rebelliousness, his tortured capacity to believe and not to believe, and finally to despair.

Yet Louis gained a hold over me far more powerful than Nicolas had ever had. Even in his crudest moments, Louis touched the tenderness in me, seducing me with his staggering dependence, his infatuation with my every gesture and every spoken word.

And his naiveté conquered me always, his strange bourgeois faith that God was still God even if he turned his back on us, that damnation and salvation established the boundaries of a small and hopeless world.

Louis was a sufferer, a thing that loved mortals even more than I did. And I wonder sometimes if I didn't look to Louis to punish me for what had happened to Nicki, if I didn't create Louis to be my conscience and to mete out year in and year out the penance I felt I deserved.

But I loved him, plain and simple. And it was out of the desperation to keep him, to bind him closer to me at the most precarious of moments, that I committed the most selfish and impulsive act of my entire life among the living dead. It was the crime that was to be my undoing: the creation with Louis and for Louis of Claudia, a stunningly beautiful vampire child.

Her body wasn't six years old when I took her, and though she would have died if I hadn't done it (just as Louis would have died if I hadn't taken him also), this was a challenge to the gods for which Claudia and I would both pay.

But this is the tale that was told by Louis in *Interview with the Vampire*, which for all its contradictions and terrible misunderstandings manages to capture the atmosphere in which Claudia and Louis and I came together and stayed together for sixty-five years.

During that time, we were nonpareils of our species, a silk- and velvet-clad trio of deadly hunters, glorying in our secret and in the swelling city of New Orleans that harbored us in luxury and supplied us endlessly with fresh victims.

And though Louis did not know it when he wrote his chronicle, sixty-five years is a phenomenal time for any bond in our world.

As for the lies he told, the mistakes he made, well, I forgive him his excess of imagination, his bitterness, and his vanity, which was, after all, never very great. I never revealed to him half my powers, and with reason, because he shrank in guilt and self-loathing from using even half of his own.

Even his unusual beauty and unfailing charm were something of a secret to him. When you read his statement that I made him a vampire because I coveted his plantation house, you can write that off to modesty more easily than stupidity, I suppose.

As for his belief that I was a peasant, well that was understandable. He

was, after all, a discriminating and inhibited child of the middle class, aspiring as all the colonial planters did to be a genuine aristocrat though he had never met one, and I came from a long line of feudal lords who licked their fingers and threw the bones over their shoulders to the dogs as they dined.

When he says I played with innocent strangers, befriending them and then killing them, how was he to know that I hunted almost exclusively among the gamblers, the thieves, and the killers, being more faithful to my unspoken vow to kill the evildoer than even I had hoped I would be? (The young Freniere, for example, a planter whom Louis romanticizes hopelessly in his text, was in fact a wanton killer and a cheater at cards on the verge of signing over his family's plantation for debt when I struck him down. The whores I feasted upon in front of Louis once, to spite him, had drugged and robbed many a seaman who was never seen alive again.)

But little things like this don't really matter. He told the tale as he believed it.

And in a real way, Louis was always the sum of his flaws, the most beguilingly human fiend I have ever known. Even Marius could not have imagined such a compassionate and contemplative creature, always the gentleman, even teaching Claudia the proper use of table silver when she, bless her little black heart, had not the slightest need ever to touch a knife or a fork.

His blindness to the motives or the suffering of others was as much a part of his charm as his soft unkempt black hair or the eternally troubled expression in his green eyes.

And why should I bother to tell of the times he came to me in wretched anxiety, begging me never to leave him, of the times we walked together and talked together, acted Shakespeare together for Claudia's amusement, or went arm in arm to hunt the riverfront taverns or to waltz with the dark-skinned beauties of the celebrated quadroon balls?

Read between the lines.

I betrayed him when I created him, that is the significant thing. Just as I betrayed Claudia. And I forgive the nonsense he wrote, because he told the truth about the eerie contentment he and Claudia and I shared and had no right to share in those long nineteenth-century decades when the

peacock colors of the ancient regime died out and the lovely music of Mozart and Haydn gave way to the bombast of Beethoven, which could sound at times too remarkably like the clang of my imaginary Hell's Bells.

I had what I wanted, what I had always wanted. I had *them*. And I could now and then forget Gabrielle and forget Nicki, and even forget Marius and the blank staring face of Akasha, or the icy touch of her hand or the heat of her blood.

But I had always wanted many things. What accounted for the duration of the life he described in *Interview with the Vampire?* Why did we last so long?

All during the nineteenth century, vampires were "discovered" by the literary writers of Europe. Lord Ruthven, the creation of Dr. Polidori, gave way to Sir Francis Varney in the penny dreadfuls, and later came Sheridan Le Fanu's magnificent and sensuous Countess Carmilla Karnstein, and finally the big ape of the vampires, the hirsute Slav Count Dracula, who though he can turn himself into a bat or dematerialize at will, nevertheless crawls down the wall of his castle in the manner of a lizard apparently for fun—all of these creations and many like them feeding the insatiable appetite for "gothic and fantastical tales."

We were the essence of that nineteenth-century conception—aristocratically aloof, unfailingly elegant, and invariably merciless, and cleaving to each other in a land ripe for, but untroubled by, others of our kind.

Maybe we had found the perfect moment in history, the perfect balance between the monstrous and the human, the time when that "vampiric romance" born in my imagination amid the colorful brocades of the ancient regime should find its greatest enhancement in the flowing black cape, the black top hat, and the little girl's luminous curls spilling down from their violet ribbon to the puffed sleeves of her diaphanous silk dress.

But what had I done to Claudia? And when would I have to pay for that? How long was she content to be the mystery that bound Louis and me so tightly together, the muse of our moonlit hours, the one object of devotion common to us both?

Was it inevitable that she who would never have a woman's form would strike out at the demon father who condemned her to the body of

a little china doll?

I should have listened to Marius's warning. I should have stopped for one moment to reflect on it as I stood on the edge of that grand and intoxicating experiment: to make a vampire of "the least of these." I should have taken a deep breath.

But you know, it was like playing the violin for Akasha. I *wanted* to do it. I wanted to see what would happen, I mean, with a beautiful little girl like that!

Oh, Lestat, you deserve everything that ever happened to you. You'd better not die. You might actually go to hell.

But why was it that for purely selfish reasons, I didn't listen to some of the advice given me? Why didn't I learn from any of them—Gabrielle, Armand, Marius? But then, I never have listened to anyone, really. Somehow or other, I never can.

And I cannot say even now that I regret Claudia, that I wish I had never seen her, nor held her, nor whispered secrets to her, nor heard her laughter echoing through the shadowy gaslighted rooms of that all too human town house in which we moved amid the lacquered furniture and the darkening oil paintings and the brass flowerpots as living beings should. Claudia was my dark child, my love, evil of my evil. Claudia broke my heart.

And on a warm sultry night in the spring of the year 1860, she rose up to settle the score. She enticed me, she trapped me, and she plunged a knife over and over again into my drugged and poisoned body, until almost every drop of the vampiric blood gushed out of me before my wounds had the precious few seconds in which to heal.

I don't blame her. It was the sort of thing I might have done myself.

And those delirious moments will never be forgotten by me, never consigned to some unexplored compartment of the mind. It was her cunning and her will that laid me low as surely as the blade that slashed my throat and divided my heart. I will think on those moments every night for as long as I go on, and of the chasm that opened under me, the plunge into mortal death that was nearly mine. Claudia gave me that.

But as the blood flowed, taking with it all power to see or hear or move finally, my thoughts traveled back and back, way beyond the creation of the doomed vampire family in their paradise of wallpaper and lace curtains, to the dimly envisioned groves of mythical lands

where the old Dionysian god of the wood had felt again and again his flesh torn, his blood spilled.

If there was not meaning, at least there was the luster of congruence, the stunning repetition of the *same old theme*.

And the god dies. And the god rises. But this time no one is redeemed.

With the blood of Akasha, Marius had said to me, you will survive disasters that would destroy others of our kind.

Later, abandoned in the stench and darkness of the swamp, I felt the thirst define my proportions, I felt the thirst propel me, I felt my jaws open in the rank water and my fangs seek the warm-blooded things that could put my feet on the long road back.

And three nights later, when again I had been beaten and my children left me once and for all in the blazing inferno of our town house, it was the blood of the old ones, Magnus and Marius and Akasha, that sustained me as I crawled away from the flames.

But without more of that healing blood, without a fresh infusion, I was left at the mercy of time to heal my wounds.

And what Louis could not describe in his story is what happened to me after, how for years I hunted on the edge of the human herd, a hideous and crippled monster, who could strike down only the very young or infirm. In constant danger from my victims, I became the very antithesis of the romantic demon, bringing terror rather than rapture, resembling nothing so much as the old revenants of les Innocents in their filth and rags.

The wounds I'd suffered affected my very spirit, my capacity to reason. And what I saw in the mirror every time I dared to look further shriveled my soul.

Yet not once in all this time did I call out to Marius, did I try to reach him over the miles. I could not beg for his healing blood. Better suffer purgatory for a century than Marius's condemnation. Better suffer the worst loneliness, the worst anguish, than discover that he knew everything I'd done and had long ago turned his back on me.

As for Gabrielle, who would have forgiven me anything, whose blood was powerful enough at least to hasten my recovery, I did not know even where to look.

When I had recovered sufficiently to make the long voyage to Europe, I turned to the only one that I could turn to: Armand. Armand who lived

still on the land I'd given him, in the very tower where I'd been made by Magnus, Armand who still commanded the thriving coven of the Theater of the Vampires in the boulevard du Temple, which still belonged to me. After all, I owed Armand no explanations. And did he not owe something to me?

It was a shock to see him when he came to answer the knock on his door.

He looked like a young man out of the novels of Dickens in his somber and sleekly tailored black frock coat, all the Renaissance curls clipped away. His eternally youthful face was stamped with the innocence of a David Copperfield and the pride of a Steerforth—anything but the true nature of the spirit within.

For one moment a brilliant light burned in him as he looked at me. Then he stared slowly at the scars that covered my face and hands, and he said softly and almost compassionately:

"Come in, Lestat."

He took my hand. And we walked together through the house he had built at the foot of Magnus's tower, a dark and dreary place fit for all the Byronic horrors of this strange age.

"You know, the rumor is that you met the end somewhere in Egypt, or the Far East," he said quickly in everyday French with an animation I'd never seen in him before. He was skilled now at pretending to be a living being. "You went with the old century, and no one has heard of you since."

"And Gabrielle?" I demanded immediately, wondering that I had not blurted it out at the door.

"No one has ever seen her or heard of her since you left Paris," he said.

Once again his eyes moved over me caressingly. And there was thinly veiled excitement in him, a fever that I could feel like the warmth of the nearby fire. I knew he was trying to read my thoughts.

"What's happened to you?" he asked.

My scars were puzzling him. They were too numerous, too intricate, scars of an attack that should have meant death. I felt a sudden panic that in my confusion I'd reveal everything to him, the things that Marius had long ago forbidden me to tell.

But it was the story of Louis and Claudia that came rushing out, in stammering and half truths, *sans* one salient fact: that Claudia had been only … a child.

I told briefly of the years in Louisiana, of how they had finally risen against me just as he had predicted my children might. I conceded everything to him, without guile or pride, explaining that it was his blood I needed now. Pain and pain and pain, to lay it out for him, to feel him considering it. To say, yes, you were right. It isn't the whole story. But in the main, you were right.

Was it sadness I saw in his face then? Surely it wasn't triumph. Unobtrusively, he watched my trembling hands as I gestured. He waited patiently when I faltered, couldn't find the right words.

A small infusion of his blood would hasten my healing, I whispered. A small infusion would clear my mind. I tried not to be lofty or righteous when I reminded him that I had given him this tower, and the gold he'd used to build his house, that I still owned the Theater of the Vampires, that surely he could do this little thing, this intimate thing, for me now. There was an ugly naiveté to the words I spoke to him, addled as I was, and weak and thirsting and afraid. The blaze of the fire made me anxious. The light on the dark grain of the woodwork of these stuffy rooms made imagined faces appear and disappear.

"I don't want to stay in Paris," I said. "I don't want to trouble you or the coven at the theater. I am asking this small thing. I am asking …" It seemed my courage and the words had run out.

A long moment passed:

"Tell me again about this Louis," he said.

The tears rose to my eyes disgracefully. I repeated some foolish phrases about Louis's indestructible humanity, his understanding of things that other immortals couldn't grasp. Carelessly I whispered things from the heart. It wasn't Louis who had attacked me. It was the woman, Claudia …

I saw something in him quicken. A faint blush came to his cheeks.

"They have been seen here in Paris," he said softly. "And she is no woman, this creature. She is a vampire child."

I can't remember what followed. Maybe I tried to explain the blunder. Maybe I admitted there was no accounting for what I'd done. Maybe I brought us round again to the purpose of my visit, to what I needed,

what I must have. I remember being utterly humiliated as he led me out of the house and into the waiting carriage, as he told me that I must go with him to the Theater of the Vampires.

"You don't understand," I said. "I can't go there. I will not be seen like this by the others. You must stop this carriage. You must do as I ask."

"No, you have it backwards," he said in the tenderest voice. We were already in the crowded Paris streets. I couldn't see the city I remembered. This was a nightmare, this metropolis of roaring steam trains and giant concrete boulevards. Never had the smoke and filth of the industrial age seemed so hideous as it was here in the City of Light.

I scarcely remember being forced by him out of the carriage and stumbling along the broad pavements as he pushed me towards the theater doors. What was this place, this enormous building? Was this the boulevard du Temple? And then the descent into that hideous cellar full of ugly copies of the bloodiest paintings of Goya and Brueghel and Bosch.

And finally starvation as I lay on the floor of a brick-lined cell, unable even to shout curses at him, the darkness full of the vibrations of the passing omnibuses and tramcars, penetrated again and again by the distant screech of iron wheels.

Sometime in the dark, I discovered a mortal victim there. But the victim was dead. Cold blood, nauseating blood. The worst kind of feeding, lying on that clammy corpse, sucking up what was left.

And then Armand was there, standing motionless in the shadows, immaculate in his white linen and black wool. He spoke in an undertone about Louis and Claudia, that there would be some kind of trial. Down on his knees he came to sit beside me, forgetting for a moment to be human, the boy gentleman sitting in this filthy damp place. "You will declare it before the others, that she did it," he said. And the others, the new ones, came to the door to look at me one by one.

"Get clothing for him," Armand said. His hand was resting on my shoulder. "He must look presentable, our lost lord," he told them. "That was always his way."

They laughed when I begged to speak to Eleni or Félix or Laurent. They did not know those names. Gabrielle—it meant nothing.

And where was Marius? How many countries, rivers, mountains lay between us? Could he hear and see these things?

High above, in the theater, a mortal audience, herded like sheep into a corral, thundered on the wooden staircases, the wooden floors.

I dreamed of getting away from here, getting back to Louisiana, letting time do its inevitable work. I dreamed of the earth again, its cool depths which I'd known so briefly in Cairo. I dreamed of Louis and Claudia and that we were together. Claudia had grown miraculously into a beautiful woman, and she said, laughing, "You see this is what I came to Europe to discover, how to do this!"

And I feared that I was never to be allowed out of here, that I was to be entombed as those starving ones had been under les Innocents, that I had made a fatal mistake. I was stuttering and crying and trying to talk to Armand. And then I realized Armand was not even there. If he had come, he had gone as quickly. I was having delusions.

And the victim, the warm victim—"Give it to me, I beg you!"—and Armand saying:

"You will say what I have told you to say."

It was a mob tribunal of monsters, white-faced demons shouting accusations, Louis pleading desperately, Claudia staring at me mute, and my saying, yes, she was the one who did it, yes, and then cursing Armand as he shoved me back into the shadows, his innocent face radiant as ever.

"But you have done well, Lestat. You have done well."

What had I done? Borne testimony against them that they had broken the old rules? They'd risen against the coven master? What did they know of the old rules? I was screaming for Louis. And then I was drinking blood in the darkness, living blood from another victim, and it wasn't the healing blood, it was just blood.

We were in the carriage again and it was raining. We were riding through the country. And then we went up and up through the old tower to the roof. I had Claudia's bloody yellow dress in my hands. I had seen her in a narrow wet place where she had been burnt by the sun. "Scatter the ashes!" I had said. Yet no one moved to do it. The torn bloody yellow dress lay on the cellar floor. Now I held it in my hands. "They will scatter the ashes, won't they?" I said.

"Didn't you want justice?" Armand asked, his black wool cape close

around him in the wind, his face dark with the power of the recent kill.

What did it have to do with justice? Why did I hold this thing, this little dress?

I looked out from Magnus's battlements and I saw the city had come to get me. It had reached out its long arms to embrace the tower, and the air stank of factory smoke.

Armand stood still at the stone railing watching me, and he seemed suddenly as young as Claudia had seemed. *And make sure they have had some lifetime before you make them; and never never make one as young as Armand*. In death she said nothing. She had looked at those around her as if they were giants jabbering in an alien tongue.

Armand's eyes were red.

"Louis—where is he?" I asked. "They didn't kill him. I saw him. He went out into the rain …"

"They have gone after him," he answered. "He is already destroyed."

Liar, with the face of a choirboy.

"Stop them, you have to! If there's still time …"

He shook his head.

"Why can't you stop them? Why did you do it, the trial, all of it, what do you care what they did to me?"

"It's finished."

Under the roar of the winds came the scream of a steam whistle. Losing the train of thought. Losing it … Not wanting to go back. Louis, come back.

"And you don't mean to help me, do you?" Despair.

He leaned forward, and his face transformed itself as it had done years and years ago, as if his rage were melting it from within.

"You, who destroyed all of us, you who took everything. Whatever made you think that I would help you!" He came closer, the face all but collapsed upon itself. "You who put us on the lurid posters in the boulevard du Temple, you who made us the subject of cheap stories and drawing room talk!"

"But I didn't. You know I … I swear … It wasn't me!"

"You who carried our secrets into the limelight—the fashionable one, the Marquis in the white gloves, the fiend in the velvet cape!"

"You're mad to blame it all on me. You have no right," I insisted, but my voice was faltering so badly I couldn't understand my own words.

And his voice shot out of him like the tongue of a snake.

"We had our Eden under that ancient cemetery," he hissed. "We had our faith and our purpose. And it was you who drove us out of it with a flaming sword. What do we have now! Answer me! Nothing but the love of each other and what can that mean to creatures like us!"

"No, it's not true, it was all happening already. You don't understand anything. You never did."

But he wasn't listening to me. And it didn't matter whether or not he was listening. He was drawing closer, and in a dark flash his hand went out, and my head went back, and I saw the sky and the city of Paris upside down.

I was falling through the air.

And I went down and down past the windows of the tower, until the stone walkway rose up to catch me, and every bone in my body broke within its thin case of preternatural skin.

2

Two years passed before I was strong enough to board a ship for Louisiana. And I was still badly crippled, still scarred. But I had to leave Europe, where no whisper had come to me of my lost Gabrielle or of the great and powerful Marius, who had surely rendered his judgment upon me.

I had to go home. And home was New Orleans, where the warmth was, where the flowers never stopped blooming, where I still owned, through my never ending supply of "coin of the realm," a dozen empty old mansions with rotting white columns and sagging porches round which I could roam.

And I spent the last years of the 1800s in complete seclusion in the old Garden District a block from the Lafayette Cemetery, in the finest of my houses, slumbering beneath towering oaks.

I read by candle or oil lamp all the books I could procure. I might as well have been Gabrielle trapped in her castle bedroom, save there was no furniture here. And the stacks of books reached to the ceiling in one room after another as I went on to the next. Now and then I mustered enough stamina to break into a library or an old bookstore for new volumes, but less and less I went out. I wrote off for periodicals. I hoarded candles and bottles and tin cans of oil.

I do not remember when it became the twentieth century, only that everything was uglier and darker, and the beauty I'd known in the old eighteenth-century days seemed more than ever some kind of fanciful idea. The bourgeois ran the world now upon dreary principles and with a distrust of the sensuality and the excess that the ancient regime had so loved.

But my vision and thoughts were getting ever more clouded. I no longer hunted humans. And a vampire cannot thrive without human blood, human death. I survived by luring the garden animals of the old neighborhood, the pampered dogs and cats. And when they couldn't be got easily, well, then there was always the vermin that I could call to me like the Pied Piper, fat long-tailed gray rats.

One night I forced myself to make the long trek through the quiet streets to a shabby little theater called the Happy Hour near the waterfront slums. I wanted to see the new silent moving pictures. I was wrapped in a greatcoat with a muffler hiding my gaunt face. I wore gloves to hide my skeletal hands. The sight of the daytime sky even in this imperfect film terrified me. But it seemed the dreary tones of black and white were perfect for a colorless age.

I did not think about other immortals. Yet now and then a vampire would appear—some orphaned fledgling who had stumbled on my lair, or a wanderer come in search of the legendary Lestat, begging for secrets, power. Horrid, these intrusions.

Even the timbre of the supernatural voice shattered my nerves, drove me into the farthest corner. Yet no matter how great the pain, I scanned each new mind for knowledge of my Gabrielle. I never discovered any. Nothing to do after that but ignore the poor human victims the fiend would bring in the vain hope of restoring me.

But these encounters were over soon enough. Frightened, aggrieved, shouting curses, the intruder would depart, leaving me in blessed silence.

I'd slip a little deeper away from things, just lying there in the dark.

I wasn't even reading much anymore. And when I did read, I read the *Black Mask* magazine. I read the stories of the ugly nihilistic men of the twentieth century—the gray-clad crooks and the bank robbers and the detectives—and I tried to remember things. But I was so weak. I was so tired.

And then early one evening, Armand came.

I thought at first it was a delusion. He was standing so still in the ruined parlor, looking younger than ever with his short auburn cap of twentieth-century hair and narrow little suit of dark cloth.

It had to be an illusion, this figure coming into the parlor and looking down at me as I lay on my back on the floor by the broken French window reading Sam Spade by the light of the moon. Except for one thing. If I were going to conjure up an imaginary visitor, it certainly wouldn't have been Armand.

I glanced at him and some vague shame passed over me, that I was so ugly, that I was no more than a skeleton with bulging eyes lying there. Then I went back to reading about the Maltese Falcon, my lips moving to

speak Sam Spade's lines.

When I looked up again, Armand was still there. It might have been the same night, or the next night, for all I knew.

He was talking about Louis. He had been for some time.

And I realized it was a lie he'd told me in Paris about Louis. Louis had been with Armand all these years. And Louis had been looking for me. Louis had been downtown in the old city looking for me near the town house where we had lived for so long. Louis had come finally to this very place and seen me through the windows.

I tried to imagine it. Louis alive. Louis here, so close, and I had not even known it.

I think I laughed a little. I couldn't keep it clear in my mind that Louis wasn't burnt up. But it was really wonderful that Louis still lived. It was wonderful that there existed still that handsome face, that poignant expression, that tender and faintly imploring voice. My beautiful Louis surviving, instead of dead and gone with Claudia and Nick.

But then maybe he *was* dead. Why should I believe Armand? I went back to reading by the moonlight, wishing the garden out there hadn't gotten so high. A good thing for Armand to do, I told him, would be to go out there and pull down some of those vines, since Armand was so strong. The morning-glory vines and the wisteria were dripping off the upstairs porches and they blocked out the moonlight and then there were the old black oaks that had been here when there was nothing but swamp.

I don't think I actually suggested this to Armand.

And I only vaguely remember Armand letting me know that Louis was leaving him and he, Armand, did not want to go on. Hollow he sounded. Dry. Yet he gathered the moonlight to him as he stood there. And his voice still had its old resonance, its pure undertone of pain.

Poor Armand. And you told me Louis was dead. Go dig a room for yourself under the Lafayette Cemetery. It's just up the street.

No words spoken. No audible laughter, just the secret enjoyment of laughter in me. I remember one clear image of him stranded in the middle of the dirty empty room, looking at the walls of books on all sides. The rain had bled down from leaks in the roof and melded the books together like papier-mâché bricks. And I noticed it distinctly when I saw him standing there against the backdrop of it. And I knew all the

rooms in the house were walled in books like this. I hadn't thought about it until that moment, when he started to look at it. I hadn't been in the other rooms in years.

It seems he came back several times after that.

I didn't see him, but I would hear him moving through the garden outside, looking for me with his mind, like a beam of light.

Louis had gone away to the west.

One time, when I was lying in the rubble under the foundations, Armand came to the grating and peered in at me, and I did see him, and he hissed at me and called me ratcatcher.

You've gone mad—you, the one who knew everything, the one who scoffed at us! You're mad and you feed on the rats. You know, in France in the old days what they called your kind, you country lords, they called you harecatchers, because you hunted the hare so you wouldn't starve. And now what are you in this house, a ragged haunt, a ratcatcher. You're mad as the ancient ones who cease to talk sense and jabber at the wind! And yet you hunt the rats as you were born to do.

Again I laughed. I laughed and laughed. I remembered the wolves and I laughed.

"You always make me laugh," I told him. "I would have laughed at you under that cemetery in Paris, except it didn't seem the kind thing to do. And even when you cursed me and blamed me for all the stories about us, that was funny too. If you hadn't been about to throw me off the tower I would have laughed. You always make me laugh."

Delicious it was, the hatred between us, or so I thought. Such unfamiliar excitement, to have him there to ridicule and despise.

Yet suddenly the scene about me began to change. I wasn't lying in the rubble. I was walking through my house. And I wore not the filthy rags that had covered me for years, but a fine black tailcoat and a satin-lined cape. And the house, why, the house was beautiful, and all the books were in their proper place upon shelves. The parquet floor glistened in the light of the chandelier and there was music coming from everywhere, the sound of a Vienna waltz, the rich harmony of violins. With each step I felt powerful again, and light, marvelously light. I could have easily taken the stairs two by two. I could have flown out and up through the darkness, the cloak like black wings.

And then I was moving up in the darkness, and Armand and I stood

together on the high roof. Radiant he was, in the same old-fashioned evening clothes, and we were looking over the jungle of dark singing treetops at the distant silver curve of the river and the low heavens where the stars burned through the pearl gray clouds.

I was weeping at the sheer sight of it, at the feel of the damp wind against my face. And Armand stood beside me, with his arm around me. And he was talking of forgiveness and sadness, of wisdom and things learned through pain. “I love you, my dark brother,” he whispered.

And the words moved through me like blood itself.

“It wasn’t that I wanted vengeance,” he whispered. His face was stricken, his heart broken. He said, “But you came to be healed, and you did not want me! A century I had waited, and you did not want me!”

And I knew, as I had all along really, that my restoration was illusion, that I was the same skeleton in rags, of course. And the house was still a ruin. And in the preternatural being who held me was the power that could give me back the sky and the wind.

“Love me and the blood is yours,” he said. “This blood that I have never given to another.” I felt his lips against my face.

“I can’t deceive you,” I answered. “I can’t love you. What are you to me that I should love you? A dead thing that hungers for the power and the passion of others? The embodiment of thirst itself?”

And in a moment of incalculable power, it was I who struck him and knocked him backwards and off the roof. Absolutely weightless he was, his figure dissolving into the gray night.

But who was defeated? Who fell down and down again through the soft tree branches to the earth where he belonged? Back to the rags and filth beneath the old house. Who lay finally in the rubble, with hands and face against the cool soil?

Yet memory plays its tricks. Maybe I imagined it, his last invitation, and the anguish after. The weeping. I do know that as the months passed he was out there again. I heard him from time to time just walking those old Garden District streets. And I wanted to call to him, to tell him that it was a lie I’d spoken to him, that I did love him. I did.

But it was my time to be at peace with all things. It was my time to starve and to go down into the earth finally, and maybe at last to dream the god’s dreams. And how could I tell Armand about the god’s dreams?

There were no more candles, and there was no more oil for the lamps. Somewhere was a strongbox full of money and jewels and letters to my lawyers and bankers who would continue to administer these properties I owned forever, on account of sums I had left with them.

And so why not go now into the ground, knowing that it would never be disturbed, not in this old city with its crumbling replicas of other centuries. Everything would just go on and on and on.

By the light of the heavens I read more of the story of Sam Spade and the Maltese Falcon. I looked at the date on the magazine and I knew it was 1929, and I thought, oh, that's not possible, is it? And I drank enough from the rats to have the strength to dig really deep.

The earth was holding me. Living things slithered through its thick and moist clods against my dried flesh. And I thought if I ever do rise again, if I ever see even one small patch of the night sky full of stars, I will never never do terrible things. I will never slay innocents. Even when I hunted the weak, it was the hopeless and the dying I took, I swear it was. I will never never work the Dark Trick again. I will just … you know, be the "continual awareness" for no purpose, no purpose at all.

Thirst. Pain as clear as light.

I saw Marius. I saw him so vividly that I thought, This can't be a dream! And my heart expanded painfully. How splendid Marius looked. He wore a narrow plain modern suit of clothes, but it was made of red velvet, and his white hair was cut short and brushed back from his face. He had a glamour to him, this modern Marius, and a sprightliness that his costume of the old days had apparently concealed.

And he was doing the most remarkable things. He had before him a black camera upon three spider legs, and this he cranked with his right hand as he made motion pictures of mortals in a studio full of incandescent light. How my heart was swelling to see this, the way that he spoke to these mortal beings, told them how they must hold one another, dance, move about. Painted scenery behind them, yes. And outside the windows of his studio were high brick buildings, and the

noise of motor coaches in the streets.

No, this isn't a dream, I told myself. It is happening. He is there. And if only I try I can see the city beyond the windows, know where he is. If only I try I can hear the language that he speaks to the young players. "Marius!" I said, but the earth around me devoured the sound.

The scene changed.

Marius rode in the great cage of an elevator down into a cellar. Metal doors screeched and clanked. And into the vast sanctum of Those Who Must Be Kept he went, and how different it all was. No more the Egyptian paintings, the perfume of flowers, the glitter of gold.

The high walls were covered with the dappled colors of the impressionists building out of myriad fragments a vibrant twentieth-century world. Airplanes flew over sunlit cities, towers rose beyond the arch of steel bridges, iron ships drove through silver seas. A universe it was, dissolving the walls on which it was rendered, surrounding the motionless and unchanged figures of Akasha and Enkil.

Marius moved about the chapel. He moved past dark tangled sculptures, telephone devices, typewriting machines upon wooden stands. He set before Those Who Must Be Kept a large and stately gramophone. Delicately he put the tiny needle to its task upon the revolving record. A thin and rasping Vienna waltz poured forth from the metal horn.

I laughed to see it, this sweet invention, set before them like an offering. Was the waltz like incense rising in the air?

But Marius had not completed his tasks. A white screen he had unrolled down the wall. And now from a high platform behind the seated god and goddess, he projected moving pictures of mortals onto the white screen. Those Who Must Be Kept stared mute at the flickering images. Statues in a museum, the electric light glaring on their white skin.

And then the most marvelous thing happened. The jittery little figures in the motion picture began to talk. Above the grind of the gramophone waltz they actually talked.

And as I watched, frozen in excitement, frozen in joy to see it all, a great sadness suddenly engulfed me, a great crushing realization. It was just a dream, this. Because the truth was, the little figures in the moving pictures couldn't possibly talk.

The chamber and all its little wonders lost its substance, went dim.

Ah, horrid imperfection, horrid little giveaway that I'd made it all up. And out of real bits and pieces, too—the silent movies I'd seen myself at the little theater called the Happy Hour, the gramophones I'd heard around me from a hundred houses in the dark.

And the Vienna waltz, ah, taken from the spell Armand had worked upon me, too heartbreaking to think of that.

Why hadn't I been just a little more clever in fooling myself, kept the film silent as it should have been, and I might have gone on believing it was a true vision after all.

But here was the final proof of my invention, this audacious and self-serving fancy: Akasha, my beloved, was speaking to me!

Akasha stood in the door of the chamber gazing down the length of the underground corridor to the elevator by which Marius had returned to the world above. Her black hair hung thickly and heavily about her white shoulders. She raised her cold white hand to beckon. Her mouth was red.

"Lestat!" she whispered. "Come."

Her thoughts flowed out of her soundlessly in the words of the old queen vampire who had spoken them to me under les Innocents years and years before:

From my stone pillow I have dreamed dreams of the mortal world above. I have heard its voices, its new music, as lullabies as I lie in my grave. I have envisioned its fantastical discoveries, I have known its courage in the timeless sanctum of my thoughts. And though it shuts me out with its dazzling forms, I long for one with the strength to roam it fearlessly, to ride the Devil's Road through its heart.

"Lestat!" she whispered again, her marble face tragically animate. "Come!"

"Oh, my darling," I said, tasting the bitter earth between my lips, "if only I could."

Lestat de Lioncourt

In the year of his Resurrection

1984

Dionysus in San Francisco 1985

1

The week before our record album went on sale, *they* reached out for the first time to threaten us over the telephone wires. Secrecy regarding the rock band called *The Vampire Lestat* had been expensive but almost impenetrable. Even the book publishers of my autobiography had cooperated in full. And during the long months of recording and filmmaking, I hadn't seen a single one of *them* in New Orleans, nor heard them roaming about.

Yet somehow *they* had obtained the unlisted number and into the electronic answering machine they issued their admonitions and epithets.

"Outcast. We know what you are doing. We are ordering you to stop." "Come out where we can see you. We dare you to come out."

I had the band holed up in a lovely old plantation house north of New Orleans, pouring the Dom Pérignon for them as they smoked their hashish cigarettes, all of us weary of anticipation and preparation, eager for the first live audience in San Francisco, the first certain taste of success.

Then my lawyer, Christine, sent on the first phone messages—uncanny how the equipment captured the timbre of the unearthly voices—and in the middle of the night, I drove my musicians to the airport and we flew west.

After that, even Christine didn't know where we were hiding. The musicians themselves were not entirely sure. In a luxurious ranch house in Carmel Valley we heard our music for the first time over the radio. We danced as our first video films appeared nationwide on the television cable.

And each evening I went alone to the coastal city of Monterey to pick up Christine's communications. Then I went north to hunt.

I drove my sleek powerful black Porsche all the way to San Francisco, taking the hairpin curves of the coast road at intoxicating speed. And in the immaculate yellow gloom of the big city skid row I stalked my killers a little more cruelly and slowly than before.

The tension was becoming unbearable.

Still I didn't see the others. I didn't hear them. All I had were those phone messages from immortals I'd never known:

"We warn you. Do not continue this madness. You are playing a more dangerous game than you realize." And then the recorded whisper that mortal ears could not hear:

"Traitor!" "Outcast!" "Show yourself, Lestat!"

If they were hunting San Francisco, I didn't see them. But then San Francisco is a dense and crowded city. And I was sly and silent as I had always been.

Finally the telegrams came pouring in to the Monterey postbox. We had done it. Sales of our album were breaking records here and in Europe. We could perform in any city we wanted after San Francisco. My autobiography was in all the bookstores from coast to coast. *The Vampire Lestat* was at the top of the charts.

And after the nightly hunt in San Francisco, I started riding the long length of Divisadero Street. I let the black carapace of the Porsche crawl past the ruined Victorian houses, wondering in which one of these—if any—Louis had told the tale of *Interview with the Vampire* to the mortal boy. I was thinking constantly about Louis and Gabrielle. I was thinking about Armand. I was thinking about Marius, Marius whom I had betrayed by telling the whole tale.

Was *The Vampire Lestat* stretching its electronic tentacles far enough to touch them? Had they seen the video films: *The Legacy of Magnus, The Children of Darkness, Those Who Must Be Kept?* I thought of the other ancient ones whose names I'd revealed: Mael, Pandora, Ramses the Damned.

The fact was, Marius could have found me no matter what the secrecy or the precautions. His powers could have bridged even the vast distances of America. If he was looking, if he had heard …

The old dream came back to me of Marius cranking the motion picture camera, of the flickering patterns on the wall of the sanctum of Those Who Must Be Kept. Even in recollection it seemed impossibly lucid, made my heart trip.

And gradually I realized that I possessed a new concept of loneliness, a new method of measuring a silence that stretched to the end of the world. And all I had to interrupt it were those menacing recorded

preternatural voices which carried no images as their virulency increased:

"Don't dare to appear on stage in San Francisco. We warn you. Your challenge is too vulgar, too contemptuous. We will risk anything, even a public scandal, to punish you."

I laughed at the incongruous combination of archaic language and the unmistakable American sound. What were they like, these modern vampires? Did they affect breeding and education once they walked with the undead? Did they assume a certain style? Did they live in covens or ride about on big black motorcycles, as I liked to do?

The excitement was building in me uncontrollably. And as I drove alone through the night with the radio blaring our music, I sensed a purely human enthusiasm mounting in me.

I wanted to perform the way my mortals, Tough Cookie and Alex and Larry, wanted to perform. After the grueling work of building the records and films, I wanted us to raise our voices together before the screaming throng. And at odd moments I remembered those long-ago nights at Renaud's little theater too clearly. The strangest details came back—the feel of the white paint as I had smoothed it over my face, the smell of the powder, the instant of stepping before the footlights.

Yes, it was all coming together, and if the wrath of Marius came with it, well, I deserved it, did I not?

San Francisco charmed me, subdued me somewhat. Not hard to imagine my Louis in this place. Almost Venetian, it seemed, the somber multicolored mansions and tenements rising wall to wall over the narrow black streets. Irresistible the lights sprinkled over hilltop and vale; and the hard brilliant wilderness of downtown skyscrapers shooting up like a fairy-tale forest out of an ocean of mist.

Each night on my return to Carmel Valley, I took out the sacks of fan mail forwarded to Monterey from New Orleans, and I looked through them for the vampire writing: characters inscribed a little too heavily, style slightly old-fashioned—maybe a more outrageous display of supernatural talent in a handwritten letter made to look as if it had been printed in Gothic style. But there was nothing but the fervent devotion of mortals.

> Dear Lestat, my friend Sheryl and I love you, and we can't get tickets for the San Francisco concert even though we stood in line for six hours. Please send us two tickets. We will be your victims. You can drink our blood.

Three o'clock in the morning on the night before the San Francisco concert:

The cool green paradise of Carmel Valley was asleep. I was dozing in the giant "den" before the glass wall that faced the mountains. I was dreaming off and on of Marius. Marius said in my dream:

"Why did you risk my vengeance?"

And I said: "You turned your back on me."

"That is not the reason," he said. "You act on impulse, you want to throw all the pieces in the air."

"I want to affect things, to make something happen!" I said. In the dream I shouted, and I felt suddenly the presence of the Carmel Valley house around me. Just a dream, a thin mortal dream.

Yet something, something else … a sudden "transmission" like a vagrant radio wave intruding upon the wrong frequency, a voice saying *Danger. Danger to us all.*

For one split second the vision of snow, ice. Wind howling. Something shattered on a stone floor, broken glass. *Lestat! Danger!*

I awoke.

I was not lying on the couch any longer. I was standing and looking towards the glass doors. I could hear nothing, see nothing but the dim outline of the hills, the black shape of the helicopter hovering over its square of concrete like a giant fly.

With my soul I listened. I listened so hard I was sweating. Yet no more of the "transmission." No images.

And then the gradual awareness that there was a creature outside in the darkness, that I was hearing tiny physical sounds.

Someone out there walking in the stillness. No human scent.

One of *them* was out there. One of *them* had penetrated the secrecy and was approaching beyond the distant skeletal silhouette of the helicopter, through the open field of high grass.

Again I listened. No, not a shimmer to reinforce the message of

Danger. In fact the mind of the being was locked to me. I was getting only the inevitable signals of a creature passing through space.

The rambling low-roofed house slumbered around me—a giant aquarium, it seemed, with its barren white walls and the blue flickering light of the silent television set. Tough Cookie and Alex in each other's arms on the rug before the empty fireplace. Larry asleep in the cell-like bedroom with the carnally indefatigable groupie called Salamander whom they had "picked up" in New Orleans before we came west. Sleeping bodyguards in the other low-ceilinged modern chambers, and in the bunkhouse beyond the great blue oyster-shell swimming pool.

And out there under the clear black sky this creature coming, moving towards us from the highway, on foot. This thing that I sensed now was completely alone. Beat of a supernatural heart in the thin darkness. Yes, I can hear it very distinctly. The hills were like ghosts in the distance, the yellow blossoms of the acacias gleaming white under the stars.

Not afraid of anything, it seemed. Just coming. And the thoughts absolutely impenetrable. That could mean one of the old ones, the very skilled ones, except the skilled ones would never crush the grass underfoot. This thing moved almost like a human. This vampire had been "made" by me.

My heart was skipping. I glanced at the tiny lights of the alarm box half concealed by the gathered drapery in the corner. Promise of sirens if anything, mortal or immortal, tried to penetrate this house.

On the edge of the white concrete he appeared. Tall, slender figure. Short dark hair. And then he paused as if he could see me in the electric blue haze behind the glass veil.

Yes, he saw me. And he moved towards me, towards the light.

Agile, traveling just a little too lightly for a mortal. Black hair, green eyes, and the limbs shifting silkily under the neglected garments: a frayed black sweater that hung shapelessly from his shoulders, legs like long black spokes.

I felt the lump come up in my throat. I was trembling. I tried to remember what was important, even in this moment, that I must scan the night for others, must be careful. *Danger*. But none of that mattered now. I knew. I shut my eyes for a second. It did not help anything, make anything easier.

Then my hand went out to the alarm buttons and I turned them off. I

opened the giant glass doors and the cold fresh air moved past me into the room.

He was past the helicopter, turning and stepping away like a dancer to look up at it, his head back, his thumbs hooked very casually in the pockets of his black jeans. When he looked at me again, I saw his face distinctly. And he smiled.

Even our memories can fail us. He was proof of that, delicate and blinding as a laser as he came closer, all the old images blown away like dust.

I flicked on the alarm system again, closed the doors on my mortals, and turned the key in the lock. For a second I thought, I cannot stand this. And this is only the beginning. And if he is here, only a few steps away from me now, then surely the others, too, will come. They will all come.

I turned and went towards him, and for a silent moment I just studied him in the blue light falling through the glass. My voice was tight when I spoke:

"Where's the black cape and the 'finely tailored' black coat and the silk tie and all that foolishness?" I asked. Eyes locked on each other.

Then he broke the stillness and laughed without making a sound. But he went on studying me with a rapt expression that gave me a secret joy. And with the boldness of a child, he reached out and ran his fingers down the lapel of my gray velvet coat.

"Can't always be the living legend," he said. The voice was like a whisper that wasn't a whisper. And I could hear his French accent so clearly, though I had never been able to hear my own.

I could scarcely bear the sound of the syllables, the complete familiarity of it.

And I forgot all the stiff surly things I had planned to say and I just took him in my arms.

We embraced the way we never had in the past. We held each other the way Gabrielle and I used to do. And then I ran my hands over his hair and his face, just letting myself really see him, as if he belonged to me. And he did the same. Seems we were talking and not talking. True silent voices that didn't have any words. Nodding a little. And I could feel him brimming with affection and a feverish satisfaction that seemed almost as strong as my own.

But he was quiet suddenly, and his face became a little drawn.

"I thought you were dead and gone, you know," he said. It was barely audible.

"How did you find me here?" I asked.

"You wanted me to," he answered. Flash of innocent confusion. He gave a slow shrug of the shoulders.

Everything he did was magnetizing me just the way it had over a century ago. Fingers so long and delicate, yet hands so strong.

"You let me see you and you let me follow you," he said. "You drove up and down Divisadero Street looking for me."

"And you were still there?"

"The safest place in the world for me," he said. "I never left it. They came looking for me and they didn't find me and then they went away. And now I move among them whenever I want and they don't know me. They never knew what I looked like, really."

"And they'd try to destroy you if they knew," I said.

"Yes," he answered. "But they've been trying to do that since the Theater of the Vampires and the things that happened there. Of course *Interview with the Vampire* gave them some new reasons. And they do need reasons to play their little games. They need the impetus, the excitement. They feed upon it like blood." His voice sounded labored for a second.

He took a deep breath. Hard to talk about all this. I wanted to put my arms around him again but I didn't.

"But at the moment," he said, "I think you are the one that they want to destroy. And they do know what you look like." Little smile. "Everybody knows now what you look like. Monsieur Le Rock Star."

He let his smile broaden. But the voice was polite and low as it had always been. And the face suffused with feeling. There had been not the slightest change there yet. Maybe there never would be.

I slipped my arm around his shoulder and we walked together away from the lights of the house. We walked past the great gray hulk of the copter and into the dry sunbaked field and towards the hills.

I think to be this happy is to be miserable, to feel this much satisfaction is to burn.

"Are you going to go through with it?" he asked. "The concert tomorrow night?"

Danger to us all. Had it been a warning or a threat? “Yes, of course,” I said. “What in hell could stop me from it?”

“I would like to stop you,” he answered. “I would have come sooner if I could. I spotted you a week ago, then lost you.”

“And why do you want to stop me?”

“You know why,” he said. “I want to talk to you.” So simple, the words, and yet they had such meaning.

“There’ll be time after,” I answered. “ ‘Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.’ Nothing is going to happen. You’ll see.” I kept glancing at him and away from him, as if his green eyes were hurting me. In modern parlance he *was* a laser beam. Deadly and delicate he seemed. His victims had always loved him.

And I had always loved him, hadn’t I, no matter what happened, and how strong could love grow if you had eternity to nourish it, and it took only these few moments in time to renew its momentum, its heat?

“How can you be sure of that, Lestat?” he asked. Intimate his speaking my name. And I had not brought myself to say Louis in that same natural way.

We were walking slowly now, without direction, and his arm was around me loosely as mine was around him.

“I have a battalion of mortals guarding us,” I said. “There’ll be bodyguards on the copter and in the limousine with my mortals. I’ll travel alone from the airport in the Porsche so I can more easily defend myself, but we’ll have a veritable motorcade. And just what can a handful of hateful twentieth-century fledglings do anyway? These idiot creatures use the telephone for their threats.”

“There are more than a handful,” he said. “But what about Marius? Your enemies out there are debating it, whether the story of Marius was true, whether Those Who Must Be Kept exist or not—”

“Naturally, and you, did you believe it?”

“Yes, as soon as I read it,” he said. And there passed between us a moment of silence, in which perhaps we were both remembering the questing immortal of long ago who had asked me over and over, Where did it begin?

Too much pain to be reinvoked. It was like taking pictures from the attic, cleaning away the dust and finding the colors still vibrant. And the pictures should have been portraits of dead ancestors and they were

pictures of us.

I made some little nervous mortal gesture, raked my hair back off my forehead, tried to feel the cool of the breeze.

"What makes you so confident," he asked, "that Marius won't end this experiment as soon as you step on the stage tomorrow night?"

"Do you think any of the old ones would do that?" I answered.

He reflected for a long moment, slipping deep into his thoughts the way he used to do, so deep it was as if he forgot I was there. And it seemed that old rooms took shape around him, gaslight gave off its unsteady illumination, there came the sounds and scents of a former time from outside streets. We two in that New Orleans parlor, coal fire in the grate beneath the marble mantel, everything growing older except us.

And he stood now a modern child in sagging sweater and worn denim gazing off towards the deserted hills. Disheveled, eyes sparked with an inner fire, hair mussed. He roused himself slowly as if coming back to life.

"No. I think if the old ones trouble themselves with it at all, they will be too interested to do that."

"Are you interested?"

"Yes, you know I am," he said.

And his face colored slightly. It became even more human. In fact, he looked more like a mortal man than any of our kind I've ever known. "I'm here, aren't I?" he said. And I sensed a pain in him, running like a vein of ore through his whole being, a vein that could carry feeling to the coldest depths.

I nodded. I took a deep breath and looked away from him, wishing I could say what I really wanted to say. That I loved him. But I couldn't do that. The feeling was too strong.

"Whatever happens, it will be worth it," I said. "That is, if you and I, and Gabrielle, and Armand … and Marius are together even for a short while, it will be worth it. Suppose Pandora chooses to show herself. And Mael. And God only knows how many others. What if all the old ones come. It will be worth it, Louis. As for the rest, I don't care."

"No, you care," he said, smiling. He was deeply fascinated. "You're just confident that it's going to be exciting, and that whatever the battle, you'll win."

I bowed my head. I laughed. I slipped my hands into the pockets of my pants the way mortal men did in this day and age, and I walked on through the grass. The field still smelled of sun even in the cool California night. I didn't tell him about the mortal part, the vanity of wanting to perform, the eerie madness that had come over me when I saw myself on the television screen, saw my face on the album covers plastered to the windows of the North Beach record store. He followed at my side.

"If the old ones really wanted to destroy me," I said, "don't you think it would already be done?"

"No," he said. "I saw you and I followed you. But before that, I couldn't find you. As soon as I heard that you'd come out, I tried."

"How did you hear?" I asked.

"There are places in all the big cities where the vampires meet," he said. "Surely you know this by now."

"No, I don't. Tell me," I said.

"They are the bars we call the Vampire Connection," he said, smiling a little ironically as he said it. "They are frequented by mortals, of course, and known to us by their names. There is Dr. Polidori in London, and Lamia in Paris. There is Bela Lugosi in the city of Los Angeles, and Carmilla and Lord Ruthven in New York. Here in San Francisco we have the most beautiful of them all, possibly, the cabaret called Dracula's Daughter, on Castro Street."

I started laughing. I couldn't help it and I could see that he was about to laugh, too.

"And where are the names from *Interview with the Vampire?*" I asked with mock indignation.

"*Verboten*," he said with a little lift of the eyebrows. "They are not fictional. They are real. But I will tell you they are playing your video clips on Castro Street now. The mortal customers demand it. They toast you with their vodka Bloody Marys. *The Dance of les Innocents* is pounding through the walls."

A real laughing fit was definitely coming. I tried to stop it. I shook my head.

"But you've effected something of a revolution in speech in the back room as well," he continued in the same mock sober fashion, unable to keep his face entirely straight.

"What do you mean?"

"Dark Trick, Dark Gift, Devil's Road—they're all bantering those words about, the crudest fledglings who never even styled themselves vampires. They're imitating the book even though they condemn it utterly. They are loading themselves down with Egyptian jewelry. Black velvet is once again de rigueur."

"Too perfect," I said. "But these places, what are they like?"

"They're saturated with the vampire trappings," he said. "Posters from the vampire films adorn the walls, and the films themselves are projected continuously on high screens. The mortals who come are a regular freak show of theatrical types—punk youngsters, artists, those done up in black capes and white plastic fangs. They scarcely notice *us*. We are often drab by comparison. And in the dim lights we might as well be invisible, velvet and Egyptian jewelry and all. Of course, no one preys upon these mortal customers. We come to the vampire bars for information. The vampire bar is the safest place for a mortal in all Christendom. You cannot kill in the vampire bar."

"Wonder somebody didn't think of it before," I said.

"They did think of it," he said. "In Paris, it was the Théâtre des Vampyres."

"Of course," I admitted. He went on:

"The word went out a month ago on the Vampire Connection that you were back. And the news was old then. They said you were hunting New Orleans, and then they learned what you meant to do. They had early copies of your autobiography. There was endless talk about the video films."

"And why didn't I see them in New Orleans?" I asked.

"Because New Orleans has been for half a century Armand's territory. No one dares to hunt New Orleans. They learned through mortal sources of information, out of Los Angeles and New York."

"I didn't see Armand in New Orleans," I said.

"I know," he answered. He looked troubled, confused for a moment.

I felt a little tightening in the region of the heart.

"No one knows where Armand is," he said a little dully. "But when he was there, he killed the young ones. They left New Orleans to him. They say that many of the old ones do that, kill the young ones. They say it of me, but it isn't so. I haunt San Francisco like a ghost. I do not trouble

anyone save my unfortunate mortal victims."

All this didn't surprise me much.

"There are too many of us," he said, "as there always have been. And there is much warring. And a coven in any given city is only a means by which three or more powerful ones agree not to destroy each other, and to share the territory according to the rules."

"The rules, always the rules," I said.

"They are different now, and more stringent. Absolutely no evidence of the kill must ever be left about. Not a single corpse must be left for mortals to investigate."

"Of course."

"And there must be no exposure whatsoever in the world of close-up photography and zoom lenses, of freeze-frame video examination—no risk that could lead to capture, incarceration, and scientific verification by the mortal world."

I nodded. But my pulse was racing. I loved being the outlaw, the one who had already broken every single law. And so they were imitating my book, were they? Oh, it was started already. Wheels set into motion.

"Lestat, you think you understand," he said patiently, "but do you? Let the world have but one tiny fragment of our tissue for their microscopes, and there will be no arguments anymore about legend or superstition. The proof will be there."

"I don't agree with you, Louis," I said. "It isn't that simple."

"They have the means to identify and classify us, to galvanize the human race against us."

"No, Louis. Scientists in this day and age are witch doctors perpetually at war. They quarrel over the most rudimentary questions. You would have to spread that supernatural tissue to every microscope in the world and even then the public might not believe a word of it."

He reflected for a moment.

"One capture then," he said. "One living specimen in their hands."

"Even that wouldn't do it," I said. "And how could they ever hold me?"

But it was too lovely to contemplate—the chase, the intrigue, the possible capture and escape. I loved it.

He was smiling now in a strange way. Full of disapproval and delight.

"You are madder than you ever were," he said under his breath. "Madder than when you used to go about New Orleans deliberately

scaring people in the old days."

I laughed and laughed. But then I got quiet. We didn't have that much time before morning. And I could laugh all the way into San Francisco tomorrow night.

"Louis, I've thought this over from every angle," I said. "It will be harder to start a real war with mortals than you think—"

"—And you're bound and determined to start it, aren't you? You want everyone, mortal or immortal, to come after you."

"Why not?" I asked. "Let it begin. And let them try to destroy us the way they have destroyed their other devils. Let them try to wipe us out."

He was watching me with that old expression of awe and incredulity that I had seen a thousand times on his face. I was a fool for it, as the expression goes.

But the sky was paling overhead, the stars drifting steadily away. Only precious moments we had together before the early spring morning.

"And so you really mean for it to happen," he said earnestly, his tone gentler than before.

"Louis, I mean for something and everything to happen," I said. "I mean for all that we have been to change! What are we but leeches now —loathsome, secretive, without justification. The old romance is gone. So let us take on a new meaning. I crave the bright lights as I crave blood. I crave the divine visibility. I crave war."

"The new evil, to use your old words," he said. "And this time it is the twentieth-century evil."

"Precisely," I said. But again, I thought of the purely mortal impulse, the vain impulse, for worldly fame, acknowledgment. Faint blush of shame. It was all going to be such a pleasure.

"But why, Lestat?" he asked a little suspiciously. "Why the danger, the risk? After all, you have done it. You have come back. You're stronger than ever. You have the old fire as if it had never been lost, and you know how precious this is, this will simply to go on. Why risk it immediately? Have you forgotten what it was like when we had the world all around us, and no one could hurt us except ourselves?"

"Is this an offer, Louis? Have you come back to me, as lovers say?"

His eyes darkened and he looked away from me.

"I'm not mocking you, Louis," I said.

"You've come back to *me*, Lestat," he said evenly, looking at me again.

“When I heard the first whispers of you at Dracula’s Daughter, I felt something that I thought was gone forever—” He paused.

But I knew what he was talking about. He had already said it. And I had understood it centuries ago when I felt Armand’s despair after the death of the old coven. Excitement, the desire to continue, these things were priceless to us. All the more reason for the rock concert, the continuation, the war itself.

“Lestat, don’t go on the stage tomorrow night,” he said. “Let the films and the book do what you want. But protect yourself. Let us come together and let us talk together. Let us have each other in this century the way we never did in the past. And I do mean all of us.”

“Very tempting, beautiful one,” I said. “There were times in the last century when I would have given almost anything to hear those words. And we will come together, and we will talk, all of us, and we will have each other. It will be splendid, better than it ever was before. But I am going on the stage. I am going to be Lelio again the way I never was in Paris. I will be the Vampire Lestat for all to see. A symbol, an outcast, a freak of nature—something loved, something despised, all of those things. I tell you I can’t give it up. I can’t miss it. And quite frankly I am not the least afraid.”

I braced myself for a coldness or a sadness to come over him. And I hated the approaching sun as much as I ever had in the past. He turned his back to it. The illumination was hurting him a little. But his face was as full of warm expression as before.

“Very well, then,” he said. “I would like to go into San Francisco with you. I would like that very much. Will you take me with you?”

I couldn’t immediately answer. Again, the sheer excitement was excruciating, and the love I felt for him was positively humiliating.

“Of course I’ll take you with me,” I said.

We looked at each other for a tense moment. He had to leave now. The morning had come for him.

“One thing, Louis,” I said.

“Yes?”

“Those clothes. Impossible. I mean, tomorrow night, as they say in the twentieth century, you will *lose* that sweater and those pants.”

The morning was too empty after he had gone. I stood still for a while thinking of that message, *Danger*. I scanned the distant mountains, the never ending fields. Threat, warning—what did it matter? The young ones dial the telephones. The old ones raise their supernatural voices. Was it so strange?

I could only think of Louis now, that he was with me. And of what it would be like when the others came.

2

The vast sprawling parking lots of the San Francisco Cow Palace were overflowing with frenzied mortals as our motorcade pushed through the gates, my musicians in the limousine ahead, Louis in the leather-lined Porsche beside me. Crisp and shining in the black-caped costume of the band, he looked as if he'd stepped out of the pages of his own story, his green eyes passing a little fearfully over the screaming youngsters and motorcycle guards who kept them back and away from us.

The hall had been sold out for a month; the disappointed fans wanted the music broadcast outside so they could hear it. Beer cans littered the ground. Teenagers sat atop car roofs and on trunks and hoods, radios blaring *The Vampire Lestat* at appalling volume.

Alongside my window, our manager ran on foot explaining that we would have the outside video screens and speakers. The San Francisco police had given the go-ahead to prevent a riot.

I could feel Louis's mounting anxiety. A pack of youngsters broke through the police lines and pressed themselves against his window as the motorcade made its sharp turn and plowed on towards the long ugly tube-shaped hall.

I was positively enthralled with what was happening. And the recklessness in me was cresting. Again and again the fans surrounded the car before they were swept back, and I was beginning to understand how woefully I had underestimated this entire experience.

The filmed rock shows I'd watched hadn't prepared me for the crude electricity that was already coursing through me, the way the music was already surging in my head, the way the shame for my mortal vanity was evaporating.

It was mayhem getting into the hall. Through a crush of guards, we ran into the heavily secured backstage area, Tough Cookie holding tight to me, Alex pushing Larry ahead of him.

The fans tore at our hair, our capes. I reached back and gathered Louis under my wing and brought him through the doors with us.

And then in the curtained dressing rooms I heard it for the first time,

the bestial sound of the crowd—fifteen thousand souls chanting and screaming under one roof.

No, I did not have this under control, this fierce glee that made my entire body shudder. When had this ever happened to me before, this near hilarity?

I pushed up to the front and looked through the peephole into the auditorium. Mortals on both sides of the long oval, up to the very rafters. And in the vast open center, a mob of thousands dancing, caressing, pumping fists into the smoky haze, vying to get close to the stage platform. Hashish, beer, human blood smell swirled on the ventilation currents.

The engineers were shouting that we were set. Face paint had been retouched, black velvet capes brushed, black ties straightened. No good to keep this crowd waiting a moment longer.

The word was given to kill the houselights. And a great inhuman cry swelled in the darkness, rolling up the walls. I could feel it in the floor beneath me. It grew stronger as a grinding electronic buzz announced the connection of "the equipment."

The vibration went through my temples. A layer of skin was being peeled off. I clasped Louis's arm, gave him a lingering kiss, and then felt him release me.

Everywhere beyond the curtain people snapped on their little chemical cigarette lighters, until thousands and thousands of tiny flames trembled in the gloom. Rhythmic clapping erupted, died out, the general roar rolling up and down, pierced by random shrieks. My head was teeming.

And yet I thought of Renaud's so long ago. I positively saw it. But this place was like the Roman Colosseum! And making the tapes, the films—it had been so controlled, so cold. It had given no taste of this.

The engineer gave the signal, and we shot through the curtain, the mortals fumbling because they couldn't see, as I maneuvered effortlessly over the cables and wires.

I was at the lip of the stage right over the heads of the swaying, shouting crowd. Alex was at the drums. Tough Cookie had her flat shimmering electric guitar in hand, Larry was at the huge circular keyboard of the synthesizer.

I turned around and glanced up at the giant video screens which would magnify our images for the scrutiny of every pair of eyes in the

house. Then back at the sea of screaming youngsters.

Waves and waves of noise inundated us from the darkness. I could smell the heat and the blood.

Then the immense bank of overhead lights went on. Violent beams of silver, blue, red crisscrossed as they caught us, and the screaming reached an unbelievable pitch. The entire hall was on its feet.

I could feel the light crawling on my white skin, exploding in my yellow hair. I glanced around to see my mortals glorified and frenzied already as they perched amid the endless wires and silver scaffolding.

The sweat broke out on my forehead as I saw the fists raised everywhere in salute. And scattered all through the hall were youngsters in their Halloween vampire clothes, faces gleaming with artificial blood, some wearing floppy yellow wigs, some with black rings about their eyes to make them all the more innocent and ghastly. Catcalls and hoots and raucous cries rose above the general din.

No, this was not like making the little films. This was nothing like singing in the air-cooled cork-lined chambers of the studio. This was a human experience made vampiric, as the music itself was vampiric, as the images of the video film were the images of the blood swoon.

I was shuddering with pure exhilaration and the red-tinged sweat was pouring down my face.

The spotlights swept the audience, leaving us bathed in a mercuric twilight, and everywhere the light hit, the crowd went into convulsions, redoubling their cries.

What was it about this sound? It signaled man turned into mob—the crowds surrounding the guillotine, the ancient Romans screaming for Christian blood. And the Keltoi gathered in the grove awaiting Marius, the god. I could see the grove as I had when Marius told the tale; had the torches been any more lurid than these colored beams? Had the horrific wicker giants been larger than these steel ladders that held the banks of speakers and incandescent spotlights on either side of us?

But there was no violence here; there was no death—only this childish exuberance pouring forth from young mouths and young bodies, an energy focused and contained as naturally as it was cut loose.

Another wave of hashish from the front ranks. Long-haired leather-clad bikers with spiked leather bracelets clapping their hands above their heads—ghosts of the Keltoi, they seemed, barbarian locks

streaming. And from all corners of this long hollow smoky place an uninhibited wash of something that felt like love.

The lights were flashing on and off so that the movement of the crowd seemed fragmented, to be happening in fits and jerks.

They were chanting in unison, now the volume swelling, what was it, LESTAT, LESTAT, LESTAT.

Oh, this is too divine. What mortal could withstand this indulgence, this worship? I clasped the ends of my black cloak, which was the signal. I shook out my hair to its fullest. And these gestures sent a current of renewed screaming to the very back of the hall.

The lights converged on the stage. I raised my cloak on either side like bat wings.

The screams fused into a great monolithic roar.

"I AM THE VAMPIRE LESTAT!" I shouted at the top of my lungs as I stepped way back from the microphone, and the sound was almost visible as it arched over the length of the oval theater, and the voice of the crowd rose even higher, louder, as if to devour the ringing sound.

"COME ON, LET ME HEAR YOU! YOU LOVE ME!" I shouted suddenly, without deciding to do it. Everywhere people were stomping. They were stomping not only on the concrete floors but on the wooden seats.

"HOW MANY OF YOU WOULD BE VAMPIRES?"

The roar became a thunder. Several people were trying to scramble up onto the front of the stage, the bodyguards pulling them off. One of the big dark shaggy-haired bikers was jumping straight up and down, a beer can in each hand.

The lights went brighter like the glare of an explosion. And there rose from the speakers and equipment behind me the full-throated engine of a locomotive at stultifying volume as if the train were racing onto the stage.

Every other sound in the auditorium was swallowed by it. In blaring silence the crowd danced and bobbed before me. Then came the piercing, twanging fury of the electrical guitar. The drums boomed into a marching cadence, and the grinding locomotive sound of the synthesizer crested, then broke into a bubbling caldron of noise in time with the march. It was time to begin the chant in the minor key, its puerile lyrics leaping over the accompaniment:

I AM THE VAMPIRE LESTAT
YOU ARE HERE FOR THE GRAND SABBAT
BUT I PITY YOU YOUR LOT

I grabbed the microphone from the stand and ran to one side of the stage and then to the other, the cape flaring out behind me:

YOU CAN'T RESIST THE LORDS OF NIGHT
THEY HAVE NO MERCY ON YOUR PLIGHT
IN YOUR FEAR THEY TAKE DELIGHT

They were reaching out for my ankles, throwing kisses, girls lifted by their male companions to touch my cape as it swirled over their heads.

YET IN LOVE, WE WILL TAKE YOU,
AND IN RAPTURE, WE'LL BREAK YOU
AND IN DEATH WE'LL RELEASE YOU
NO ONE CAN SAY
YOU WERE NOT WARNED.

Tough Cookie, strumming furiously, danced up beside me, gyrating wildly, the music peaking in a shrill glissando, drums and cymbals crashing, the bubbling caldron of the synthesizer rising again.

I felt the music come up into my bones. Not even at the old Roman Sabbat had it taken hold of me like this.

I pitched myself into the dance, swinging my hips elastically, then pumping them as the two of us moved towards the edge of the stage. We were performing the free and erotic contortions of Punchinello and Harlequin and all the old commedia players—improvising now as they had done, the instruments cutting loose from the thin melody, then finding it again, as we urged each other on with our dancing, nothing rehearsed, everything within character, everything utterly new.

The guards shoved people back roughly as they tried to join us. Yet we danced over the edge of the platform as if taunting them, whipping our hair around our faces, turning round to see ourselves above in an impossible hallucination on the giant screens. The sound traveled up through my body as I turned back to the crowd. It traveled like a steel

ball finding one pocket after another in my hips, my shoulders, until I knew I was rising off the floor in a great slow leap, and then descending silently again, the black cape flaring, my mouth open to reveal the fang teeth. Euphoria. Deafening applause.

And everywhere I saw pale mortal throats bared, boys and girls shoving their collars down and stretching their necks and some had made red lipstick marks like wounds on their necks. And they were gesturing to me to come and take them, inviting me and begging me, and some of the girls were crying.

The blood scent was thick as the smoke in the air. Flesh and flesh and flesh. And yet everywhere the canny innocence, the unfathomable trust that it was art, nothing but art! No one would be hurt. It was safe, this splendid hysteria.

When I screamed, they thought it was the sound system. When I leapt, they thought it was a trick. And why not, when magic was blaring at them from all sides and they could forsake our flesh and blood for the great glowing giants on the screens above us?

Marius, I wish you could behold this! Gabrielle, where are you?

The lyrics poured out, sung by the whole band again in unison, Tough Cookie's lovely soprano soaring over the others, before she wrung her head round and round in a circle, her hair flopping down to touch the boards in front of her feet, her guitar jerking lasciviously like a giant phallus, thousands and thousands stamping and clapping in unison.

"I AM TELLING YOU I AM A VAMPIRE!" I screamed suddenly.

Ecstasy, delirium.

"I AM EVIL! EVIL!"

"Yes, Yes, *Yes, Yes*, YES, YES, YES."

I threw out my arms, my hands curved upwards:

"I WANT TO DRINK UP YOUR SOULS!"

The big woolly-haired biker in the black leather jacket backed up, knocking over those behind him, and leapt on the stage next to me, fists over his head. The bodyguards went to tackle him but I had him, locking him to my chest, lifting him off his feet in one arm and closing my mouth on his neck, teeth just touching him, just touching that geyser of blood ready to spew straight upwards!

But they had torn him loose, thrown him back like a fish into the sea. Tough Cookie was beside me, the light skittering on her black satin

pants, her whirling cape, her arm out to steady me, even as I tried to slip free.

Now I knew all that had been left out of the pages I had read about the rock singers—this mad marriage of the primitive and the scientific, this religious frenzy. We were in the ancient grove all right. We were all with the gods.

And we were blowing out the fuses on the first song. And rolling into the next, as the crowd picked up the rhythm, shouting the lyrics they knew from the albums and the clips. Tough Cookie and I sang, stomping in time with it:

> CHILDREN OF DARKNESS
> MEET THE CHILDREN OF LIGHT
> CHILDREN OF MAN,
> FIGHT THE CHILDREN OF NIGHT

And again they cheered and bellowed and wailed, unmindful of the words. Could the old Keltoi have cut loose with lustier ululations on the verge of massacre?

But again there was no massacre, there was no burnt offering.

Passion rolled towards the images of evil, not evil. Passion embraced the image of death, not death. I could feel it like the scalding illumination on the pores of my skin, in the roots of my hair, Tough Cookie's amplified scream carrying the next stanza, my eyes sweeping the farthest nooks and crannies, the amphitheater become a great wailing soul.

Deliver me from this, deliver me from loving it. Deliver me from forgetting everything else, and sacrificing all purpose, all resolve to it. I want you, my babies. I want your blood, innocent blood. I want your adoration at the moment when I sink my teeth. Yes, this is beyond all temptation.

But in this moment of precious stillness and shame, I saw them for the first time, the real ones out there. Tiny white faces tossed like masks on the waves of shapeless mortal faces, distinct as Magnus's face had been

in that long-ago little boulevard hall. And I knew that back beyond the curtains, Louis also saw them. But all I saw in them, all I felt emanating from them, was wonder and fear.

"ALL YOU REAL VAMPIRES OUT THERE," I shouted. "REVEAL YOURSELVES!" And they remained changeless, as the painted and costumed mortals about them went wild.

For three solid hours we danced, we sang, we beat the hell out of the metallic instruments, the whiskey splashing back and forth among Alex and Larry and Tough Cookie, the crowd surging towards us over and over until the phalanx of police had doubled, and the lights had been raised. Wooden seats were breaking in the high corners of the auditorium, cans rolled on the concrete floors. The real ones never ventured a step closer. Some vanished.

That's how it was.

Unbroken screaming, like fifteen thousand drunks on the town, right up to the final moments, when it was the ballad from the last clip, *Age of Innocence*.

And then the music softening. The drums rolling out, and the guitar dying, and the synthesizer throwing up the lovely translucent notes of an electric harpsichord, notes so light yet profuse that it was as if the air were showered with gold.

One mellow spot hit the place where I stood, my clothes streaked with blood sweat, my hair wet with it and tangled, the cape dangling from one shoulder.

Into a great yawning mouth of rapt and drunken attention I raised my voice slowly, letting each phrase become clear:

> This is the Age of Innocence
> True Innocence
> All your Demons are visible
> All your Demons are material
> Call them Pain
> Call them Hunger
> Call them War
> Mythic evil you don't need anymore.

Drive out the vampires and the devils
With the gods you no longer adore
Remember:
The Man with the fangs wears a cloak.
What passes for charm
Is a charm.
Understand what you see
When you see me!
Kill us, my brothers and sisters
The war is on
Understand what you see
When you see me.

I closed my eyes on the rising walls of applause. What were they really clapping for? What were they celebrating?

Electric daylight in this giant auditorium. The real ones were vanishing in the shifting throng. The uniformed police had jumped up onto the platform to make a solid row in front of us. Alex was tugging at me as we went through the curtain:

"Man, we have to run for it. They've got the damned limo surrounded. And you'll never make it to your own car."

I said no, they had to go on, to take the limo, to get going now.

And to my left I saw the hard white face of one of the real ones as he shoved his way through the press. He wore the black leather skins of the motorcycle riders, his silken preternatural hair a gleaming black mop.

The curtains were ripping from their overhead rods, letting the house flow into the backstage area. Louis was beside me. I saw another immortal on my right, a thin grinning male with tiny dark eyes.

Blast of cold air as we pushed into the parking lot, and pandemonium of squirming, struggling mortals, the police yelling for order, the limo rocking like a boat as Tough Cookie and Alex and Larry were shoved into it. One of the bodyguards had the engine of the Porsche running for me, but the youngsters were beating on the hood and the roof as if it were a drum.

Behind the black-haired vampire male there appeared another demon, a woman, and the pair were pushing inexorably closer. What the hell did they think they were going to do?

The giant motor of the limousine was growling like a lion at the children who wouldn't make way for it, and the motorcycle guards gunned their little engines, spewing fumes and noise into the throng.

The vampire trio was suddenly surrounding the Porsche, the tall male's face ugly with fury, and one thrust of his powerful arm lifted the low-slung car in spite of the youngsters who held to it. It was going to capsize. I felt an arm around my throat suddenly. And I felt Louis's body pivot, and I heard the sound of his fist strike the preternatural skin and bone behind me, heard the whispered curse.

Mortals everywhere were suddenly screaming. A policeman exhorted the crowd over a loudspeaker to clear out.

I rushed forward, knocking down several of the youngsters, and steadied the Porsche just before it went over like a scarab on its back. As I struggled to open the door, I felt the crowd crushing against me. Any moment this would become a riot. There would be a stampede.

Whistles, screams, sirens. Bodies shoving Louis and me together, and then the leather-clad vampire male rising on the other side of the Porsche, a great silver scythe flashing in the floodlights as he swung it over his head. I heard Louis's shout of warning. I saw another scythe gleaming in the corner of my eye.

But a preternatural screech cut through the cacophony as in a blinding flash the vampire male burst into flames. Another blaze exploded beside me. The scythe clattered to the concrete. And yards away yet another vampiric figure suddenly went up in a crackling gust.

The crowd was in utter panic, rushing back into the auditorium, streaming out into the parking lot, running anyplace it could to escape the whirling figures as they were burnt black in their own private infernos, their limbs melting in the heat to mere bones. And I saw other immortals streaking away at invisible speed through the sluggish human press.

Louis was stunned as he turned to me, and surely the look of amazement on my face only stunned him more. Neither of us had done this! Neither of us had the power! I knew but one immortal who did.

But I was suddenly slammed back by the car door opening and a small delicate white hand reached out to pull me inside.

"Hurry, both of you!" said a female voice in French suddenly. "What are you waiting for, the Church to pronounce it a miracle?" And I was

jerked into the leather bucket seat before I realized what was happening, dragging Louis in on top of me so that he had to scramble over me into the compartment in back.

The Porsche lurched forward, scattering the fleeing mortals in front of its headlights. I stared at the slender figure of the driver beside me, her yellow hair streaming over her shoulders, her soiled felt hat smashed down over her eyes.

I wanted to throw my arms around her, to crush her with kisses, to press my heart against her heart and forget absolutely everything else. The hell with these idiot fledglings. But the Porsche almost went over again as she made the sharp right out of the gate and into the busy street.

"Gabrielle, stop!" I shouted, my hand closing on her arm. "You didn't do that, burn them like that—!"

"Of course not," she said, in sharp French still, barely glancing at me. She looked irresistible as with two fingers she twisted the wheel again, swinging us into yet another ninety-degree turn. We were headed for the freeway.

"Then you're driving us away from Marius!" I said. "Stop."

"So let him blow up the van that's following us!" she cried. "Then I'll stop." She had the gas pedal floored, her eyes fixed on the road in front of her, her hands locked to the leather-clad wheel.

I turned to see it over Louis's shoulder, a monster of a vehicle bearing down with surprising speed—an overgrown hearse it seemed, hulking and black, with a mouthful of chromium teeth across the snub-nosed front and four of the undead leering at us from behind the tinted windshield glass.

"We can't get clear of this traffic to outrun them!" I said. "Turn around. Go back to the auditorium. Gabrielle, turn around!"

But she bore on, weaving in and out of the motor coaches wildly, driving some of them in sheer panic to the side.

The van was gaining.

"It's a war machine, that's what it is!" Louis said. "They've rigged it with an iron bumper. They're going to try to ram us, the little monsters!"

Oh, I had played this one wrong. I had underestimated. I had envisioned my own resources in this modern age, but not theirs.

And we were moving farther and farther away from the one immortal

who could blow them to Kingdom Come. Well, I would handle them with pleasure. I'd smash their windshield to pieces for starters, then tear off their heads one by one. I opened the window, climbing halfway up and out of it, the wind whipping my hair, as I glared at them, their ugly white faces behind the glass.

As we shot up the freeway ramp, they were almost on top of us. Good. Just a little closer and I would spring. But our car was skidding to a halt. Gabrielle couldn't clear the path ahead.

"Hold on, it's coming!" she screamed.

"Like hell it is!" I shouted, and in an instant I would have jumped off the roof and gone into them like a battering ram.

But I didn't have that instant. They had struck us full force, and my body flew up in the air, diving over the side of the freeway as the Porsche shot out in front of me, sailing into space.

I saw Gabrielle break through the side door before the car hit the ground. And she and I were both rolling over on the grassy slope as the car capsized and exploded with a deafening roar.

"Louis!" I shouted. I scrambled towards the blaze. I would have gone right into it after him. But the glass of the back portal splintered as he came through it. He hit the embankment just as I reached him. And with my cape I beat at his smoking garments, Gabrielle ripping off her jacket to do the same.

The van had stopped at the freeway railing high above. The creatures were dropping over the edge, like big white insects, and landing on their feet on the slope.

And I was ready for them.

But again, as the first one skidded down towards us, scythe raised, there came that ghastly preternatural scream again and the blinding combustion, the creature's face a black mask in a riot of orange flame. The body convulsed in a horrid dance.

The others turned and ran under the freeway.

I started after them, but Gabrielle had her arms around me and wouldn't let me go. Her strength maddened me and amazed me.

"Stop, damn it!" she said. "Louis, help me!"

"Let me loose!" I said furiously. "I want one of them, just one of them. I can get the hindmost in the pack!"

But she wouldn't release me, and I certainly wasn't going to fight her,

and Louis had joined with her in her angry and desperate entreaties.

"Lestat, don't go after them!" he said, his polite manner strained to the fullest. "We've had quite enough. We must leave here now."

"All right!" I said, giving it up resentfully. Besides, it was too late. The burnt one had expired in smoke and sputtering flames, and the others were gone into silence and darkness without a trace.

The night around us was suddenly empty, except for the thunder of the freeway traffic high above. And there we were, the three of us, standing together in the lurid glare of the blazing car.

Louis wiped the soot from his face wearily, his stiff white shirtfront smudged, his long velvet opera cape burnt and torn.

And there was Gabrielle, the waif just as she'd been so long ago, the dusty, ragged boy in frayed khaki jungle jacket and pants, the squashed brown felt hat askew on her lovely head.

Out of the cacophony of city noises, we heard the thin whine of sirens approaching.

Yet we stood motionless, the three of us, waiting, glancing to one another. And I knew we were all scanning for Marius. Surely it was Marius. It had to be. And he was with us, not against us. And he would answer us now.

I said his name aloud softly. I peered into the dark under the freeway, and out over the endless army of little houses that crowded the surrounding slopes.

But all I could hear were the sirens growing louder and the murmur of human voices as mortals began the long climb from the boulevard below.

I saw fear in Gabrielle's face. I reached out for her, went towards her, in spite of all the hideous confusion, the mortals coming nearer and nearer, the vehicles stopped on the freeway above.

Her embrace was sudden, warm. But she gestured for me to hurry.

"We're in danger! All of us," she whispered. "Terrible danger. Come!"

3

It was five o'clock in the morning and I stood alone at the glass doors of the Carmel Valley ranch house. Gabrielle and Louis had gone into the hills together to find their rest.

A phone call north had told me that my mortal musicians were safe in the new Sonoma hideaway, partying madly behind electric fences and gates. As for the police and the press and all their inevitable questions, well, that would have to wait.

And now I waited alone for the morning light as I'd always done, wondering why Marius hadn't shown himself, why he had saved us only to vanish without a word.

"And suppose it wasn't Marius," Gabrielle had said anxiously as she paced the floor afterwards. "I tell you I felt an overwhelming sense of menace. I felt danger to us as well as to them. I felt it outside the auditorium when I drove away. I felt it when we stood by the burning car. Something about it. It wasn't Marius, I'm convinced—"

"Something almost barbaric about it," Louis had said. "Almost but not quite—"

"Yes, almost savage," she had answered, glancing to him in acknowledgment. "And even if it was Marius, what makes you think he didn't save you so that he could take his private vengeance in his own way?"

"No," I had said, laughing softly. "Marius doesn't want revenge, or he would already have it, that much I know."

But I had been too excited just watching her, the old walk, the old gestures. And ah, the frayed safari clothing. After two hundred years, she was still the intrepid explorer. She straddled the chair like a cowboy when she sat down, resting her chin on her hands on the high back.

We had so much to talk about, to tell each other, and I was simply too happy to be afraid.

And besides, being afraid was too awful, because I knew now I had

made another serious miscalculation. I'd realized it for the first time when the Porsche exploded with Louis still inside it. This little war of mine would put all those I loved in danger. What a fool I'd been to think I could draw the venom to myself.

We had to talk all right. We had to be cunning. We had to take great care.

But for now we were safe. I'd told her that soothingly. She and Louis didn't feel the menace here; it had not followed us to the valley. And I had never felt it. And our young and foolish immortal enemies had scattered, believing that we possessed the power to incinerate them at will.

"You know a thousand times, a thousand times, I pictured our reunion," Gabrielle said. "And never once was it anything like this."

"I rather think it went splendidly!" I said. "And don't suppose for a moment that I couldn't have gotten us out of it! I was about to throttle that one with the scythe, toss him over the auditorium. And I saw the other one coming. I could have broken him in half. I tell you one of the frustrating things about all this is I didn't get the chance—"

"You, Monsieur, are an absolute imp!" she said. "You are impossible! You are—what did Marius himself call you—the damnedest creature! I am in full accord."

I laughed delightedly. Such sweet flattery. And how lovely the old-fashioned French.

And Louis had been so taken with her, sitting back in the shadows as he watched her, reticent, musing as he'd always been. Immaculate he was again, as if his garments were entirely at his command, and we'd just come from the last act of *La Traviata* to watch the mortals drink their champagne at the marble-top café tables as the fashionable carriages clattered past.

Feeling of the new coven formed, magnificent energy, the denial of the human reality, the three of us together against all tribes, all worlds. And a profound feeling of safety, of unstoppable momentum—how to explain that to them.

"Mother, stop worrying," I had said finally, hoping to settle it all, to create a moment of pure equanimity. "It's pointless. A creature powerful enough to burn his enemies can find us anytime that he chooses, do exactly what he likes."

"And this should stop me from worrying?" she said.

I saw Louis shake his head.

"I don't have your powers," he said unobtrusively, "nevertheless I felt this thing. And I tell you it was alien, utterly uncivilized, for want of a better word."

"Ah, you've hit it again," Gabrielle interjected. "It was completely foreign as if coming from a being so removed …"

"And your Marius is too civilized," Louis insisted, "too burdened with philosophy. That's why you know he doesn't want revenge."

"Alien? Uncivilized?" I glanced at both of them. "Why didn't I feel this menace!" I asked.

"Mon Dieu, it could have been anything," Gabrielle had said finally. "That music of yours could wake the dead."

I had thought of last night's enigmatic message—*Lestat! Danger*—but it had been too close to dawn for me to worry them with it. And besides, it explained nothing. It was merely another fragment of the puzzle, and one perhaps that did not belong at all.

And now they were gone together, and I was standing alone before the glass doors watching the gleam of light grow brighter and brighter over the Santa Lucia Mountains, thinking:

"Where are you, Marius? Why the hell don't you reveal yourself?" It could damn well be true, everything that Gabrielle said. "Is it a game to you?"

And was it a game to me that I didn't really call out to him? I mean raise my secret voice with its full power, as he had told me two centuries ago that I might do?

Through all my struggles, it had become such a matter of pride not to call to him, but what did that pride matter now?

Maybe it was the call he required of me. Maybe he was demanding that call. All the old bitterness and stubbornness were gone from me now. Why not make that effort, at least?

And closing my eyes, I did what I had not done since those old eighteenth-century nights when I'd talked to him aloud in the streets of

Cairo or Rome. Silently, I called. And I felt the voiceless cry rising out of me and traveling into oblivion. I could almost feel it traverse the world of visible proportions, feel it grow fainter and fainter, feel it burn out.

And there it was again for a split second, the distant unrecognizable place I had glimpsed last night. Snow, endless snow, and some sort of stone dwelling, windows encrusted with ice. And on a high promontory a curious modern apparatus, a great gray metal dish turning on an axis to draw to itself the invisible waves that crisscross the earth skies.

Television antenna! Reaching from this snowy waste to the satellite—that is what it was! And the broken glass on the floor was the glass of a television screen. I saw it. Stone bench … a broken television screen. Noise.

Fading.

MARIUS!

Danger, Lestat. All of us in danger. She has … I cannot … Ice. Buried in ice. Flash of shattered glass on a stone floor, the bench empty, the clang and vibration of *The Vampire Lestat* throbbing from the speakers—*"She has … Lestat, help me! All of us … danger. She has …"*

Silence. The connection broken.

MARIUS!

Something, but too faint. For all its intensity simply too faint!

MARIUS!

I was leaning against the window, staring right into the morning light as it grew brighter, my eyes watering, the tips of my fingers almost burning on the hot glass.

Answer me, is it Akasha? Are you telling me that it is Akasha, that she is the one, that it was she?

But the sun was rising over the mountains. The lethal rays were spilling down into the valley, ranging across the valley floor.

I ran out of the house, across the field and towards the hills, my arm up to shield my eyes.

And within moments I had reached my hidden underground crypt, pulled back the stone, and I went down the crudely dug little stairs. One more turn and then another and I was in cold and safe blackness, earth smell, and I lay on the mud floor of the tiny chamber, my heart thudding, my limbs trembling. Akasha! *That music of yours could wake the dead.*

Television set in the chamber, of course, Marius had given them that, and the broadcasts right off the satellite. They had seen the video films! I knew it, I knew it as certainly as if he had spelled it out to the last detail. He had brought the television down into their sanctum, just as he had brought the movies to them years and years ago.

And she had been awakened, she had risen. *That music of yours could wake the dead.* I'd done it again.

Oh, if only I could keep my eyes open, could only think, if the sun wasn't rising.

She had been there in San Francisco, she had been that close to us, burning our enemies. *Alien, utterly foreign*, yes.

But not uncivilized, no, not savage. She was not that. She was only just reawakened, my goddess, risen like a magnificent butterfly from its cocoon. And what was the world to her? How had she come to us? What was the state of her mind? *Danger to all of us*. No. I don't believe it! She had slain our enemies. She had come to us.

But I couldn't fight the drowsiness and heaviness any longer. Pure sensation was driving out all wonder and excitement. My body grew limp and helplessly still against the earth.

And then I felt a hand suddenly close on mine.

Cold as marble it was, and just about that strong.

My eyes snapped open in the darkness. The hand tightened its grip. A great mass of silken hair brushed my face. A cold arm moved across my chest.

Oh, please, my darling, my beautiful one, please! I wanted to say. But my eyes were closing! My lips wouldn't move. I was losing consciousness. The sun had risen above.

THE END

This book is dedicated with love to Stan Rice, Karen O'Brien, and Allen Daviau

Anne Rice

The Queen of the Damned

A BALLANTINE e BOOK

THE QUEEN OF THE DAMNED

THE THIRD BOOK
IN THE
VAMPIRE CHRONICLES

by

ANNE RICE

Ballantine Books
New York

A BALLANTINE BOOKS TRADE PAPERBACK Copyright © 1988 by Anne O'Brien Rice
Untitled poem copyright © 1988 by Stan Rice

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Ballantine Books, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York.

Ballantine and colophon are registered trademarks of Random House, Inc.

Poems by Stan Rice quoted in this book were originally published in:

Some Lamb by Stan Rice. Copyright © 1975 by Stan Rice. Published by The Figures. Reprinted by permission of Stan Rice.

Whiteboy by Stan Rice. Copyright © 1976 by Stan Rice. Published by Mudra. Reprinted by permission of Stan Rice.

Body of Work by Stan Rice. Copyright © 1983 by Stan Rice. Reprinted by permission of Lost Roads Publishers.

www.ballantinebooks.com

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 97-93891

eISBN: 978-0-307-57589-0

v3.0_r2

TRAGIC RABBIT

Tragic rabbit, a painting.
The caked, ears green like rolled corn.
The black forehead pointing at the stars.
A painting on my wall, alone
as rabbits are
and aren't. Fat red cheek,
all Art, trembling nose,
a habit hard to break as not.
You too can be a tragic rabbit; green and red
your back, blue your manly little chest.
But if you're ever goaded into being one
beware the True Flesh, it
will knock you off your tragic horse
and break your tragic colors like a ghost
breaks marble; your wounds will heal
so quickly water
will be jealous.
Rabbits on white paper painted
outgrow all charms against their breeding wild;
and their rolled corn ears become horns.
So watch out if the tragic life feels fine—
caught in that rabbit trap
all colors look like sunlight's swords,
and scissors like The Living Lord.

STAN RICE
Some Lamb (1975)

CONTENTS

Master Table of Contents

Cover
Title Page
Copyright
Epigraph
PROEM

PART I
THE ROAD TO THE VAMPIRE LESTAT
1 The Legend of the Twins
2 The Short Happy Life of Baby Jenks and the Fang Gang
3 The Goddess Pandora
4 The Story of Daniel, the Devil's Minion, or the Boy from *Interview with the Vampire*
5 Khayman, My Khayman
6 The Story of Jesse, the Great Family, and the Talamasca

PART II
ALL HALLOW'S EVE

PART III
AS IT WAS IN THE BEGINNING, IS NOW, AND EVER SHALL BE …
1 Lestat: In the Arms of the Goddess
2 Marius: Coming Together
3 Lestat: The Queen of Heaven
4 The Story of the Twins, Part I
5 Lestat: This Is My Body; This Is My Blood
6 The Story of the Twins, Part II
7 Lestat: The Kingdom of Heaven
8 The Story of the Twins, Conclusion

PART IV
THE QUEEN OF THE DAMNED

PART V
… WORLD WITHOUT END, AMEN

Dedication

I'm the Vampire Lestat. Remember me? The vampire who became a super rock star, the one who wrote the autobiography? The one with the blond hair and the gray eyes, and the insatiable desire for visibility and fame? You remember. I wanted to be a symbol of evil in a shining century that didn't have any place for the literal evil that I am. I even figured I'd do some good in that fashion—playing the devil on the painted stage.

And I was off to a good start when we talked last. I'd just made my debut in San Francisco—first "live concert" for me and my mortal band. Our album was a huge success. My autobiography was doing respectably with both the dead and the undead.

Then something utterly unforeseen took place. Well, at least I hadn't seen it coming. And when I left you, I was hanging from the proverbial cliff, you might say.

Well, it's all over now—what followed. I've survived, obviously. I wouldn't be talking to you if I hadn't. And the cosmic dust has finally settled; and the small rift in the world's fabric of rational beliefs has been mended, or at least closed.

I'm a little sadder for all of it, and a little meaner and a little more conscientious as well. I'm also infinitely more powerful, though the human in me is closer to the surface than ever—an anguished and hungry being who both loves and detests this invincible immortal shell in which I'm locked.

The blood thirst? Insatiable, though physically I have never needed the blood less. Possibly I could exist now without it altogether. But the lust I feel for everything that walks tells me that this will never be put to the test.

You know, it was never merely the need for the blood anyway, though the blood is all things sensual that a creature could desire; it's the intimacy of that moment—drinking, killing—the great heart-to-heart dance that takes place as the victim weakens and I feel myself expanding, swallowing the death which, for a split second, blazes as large as the life.

That's deceptive, however. No death can be as large as a life. And that's why I keep taking life, isn't it? And I'm as far from salvation now as I could ever get. The fact that I know it only makes it worse.

Of course I can still pass for human; all of us can, in one way or another, no matter how old we are. Collar up, hat down, dark glasses, hands in pockets—it usually does the trick. I like slim leather jackets and tight jeans for this disguise now, and a pair of plain black boots that are good for walking on any terrain. But now and then I wear the fancier silks which people like in these southern climes where I now reside.

If someone does look too closely, then there is a little telepathic razzle-dazzle: *Perfectly normal, what you see*. And a flash of the old smile, fang teeth easily concealed,

and the mortal goes his way.

Occasionally I throw up all the disguises; I just go out the way I am. Hair long, a velvet blazer that makes me think of the olden times, and an emerald ring or two on my right hand. I walk fast right through the downtown crowds in this lovely corrupt southern city; or stroll slowly along the beaches, breathing the warm southern breeze, on sands that are as white as the moon.

Nobody stares for more than a second or two. There are too many other inexplicable things around us—horrors, threats, mysteries that draw you in and then inevitably disenchant you. Back to the predictable and humdrum. The prince is never going to come, everybody knows that; and maybe Sleeping Beauty's dead.

It's the same for the others who have survived with me, and who share this hot and verdant little corner of the universe—the southeastern tip of the North American continent, the glistering metropolis of Miami, a happy hunting ground for bloodthirsting immortals if ever there was such a place.

It's good to have them with me, the others; it's crucial, really—and what I always thought I wanted: a grand coven of the wise, the enduring, the ancient, and the careless young.

But ah, the agony of being anonymous among mortals has never been worse for me, greedy monster that I am. The soft murmur of preternatural voices can't distract me from it. That taste of mortal recognition was too seductive—the record albums in the windows, the fans leaping and clapping in front of the stage. Never mind that they didn't really believe I was a vampire; for that moment we were together. They were calling my name!

Now the record albums are gone, and I will never listen to those songs again. My book remains—along with *Interview with the Vampire*—safely disguised as fiction, which is, perhaps, as it should be. I caused enough trouble, as you will see.

Disaster, that's what I wrought with my little games. The vampire who would have been a hero and a martyr finally for one moment of pure relevance …

You'd think I'd learn something from it, wouldn't you? Well, I did, actually. I really did.

But it's just so painful to shrink back into the shadows—Lestat, the sleek and nameless gangster ghoulie again creeping up on helpless mortals who know nothing of things like me. So hurtful to be again the outsider, forever on the fringes, struggling with good and evil in the age-old private hell of body and soul.

In my isolation now I dream of finding some sweet young thing in a moonlighted chamber—one of those tender teenagers, as they call them now, who read my book and listened to my songs; one of the idealistic lovelies who wrote me fan letters on scented

paper, during that brief period of ill-fated glory, talking of poetry and the power of illusion, saying she wished I was real; I dream of stealing into her darkened room, where maybe my book lies on a bedside table, with a pretty velvet marker in it, and I dream of touching her shoulder and smiling as our eyes meet. "Lestat! I always believed in you. I always knew you would come!"

I clasp her face in both hands as I bend to kiss her. "Yes, darling," I answer, "and you don't know how I need you, how I love you, how I always have."

Maybe she would find me more charming on account of what's befallen me—the unexpected horror I've seen, the inevitable pain I've endured. It's an awful truth that suffering can deepen us, give a greater luster to our colors, a richer resonance to our words. That is, if it doesn't destroy us, if it doesn't burn away the optimism and the spirit, the capacity for visions, and the respect for simple yet indispensable things.

Please forgive me if I sound bitter.

I don't have any right to be. I started the whole thing; and I got out in one piece, as they say. And so many of our kind did not. Then there were the mortals who suffered. That part was inexcusable. And surely I shall always pay for that.

But you see, I still don't really fully understand what happened. I don't know whether or not it was a tragedy, or merely a meaningless venture. Or whether or not something absolutely magnificent might have been born of my blundering, something that could have lifted me right out of irrelevance and nightmare and into the burning light of redemption after all.

I may never know, either. The point is, it's over. And our world—our little private realm—is smaller and darker and safer than ever. It will never again be what it was.

It's a wonder that I didn't foresee the cataclysm, but then I never really envision the finish of anything that I start. It's the risk that fascinates, the moment of infinite possibility. It lures me through eternity when all other charms fail.

After all, I was like that when I was alive two hundred years ago—the restless one, the impatient one, the one who was always spoiling for love and a good brawl. When I set out for Paris in the 1780s to be an actor, all I dreamed of were beginnings—the moment each night when the curtain went up.

Maybe the old ones are right. I refer now to the true immortals—the blood drinkers who've survived the millennia—who say that none of us really changes over time; we only become more fully what we are.

To put it another way, you do get wiser when you live for hundreds of years; but you also have more time to turn out as badly as your enemies always said you might.

And I'm the same devil I always was, the young man who would have center stage, where you can best see me, and maybe love me. One's no good without the other. And I

want so much to amuse you, to enthrall you, to make you forgive me everything.… Random moments of secret contact and recognition will never be enough, I'm afraid.

But I'm jumping ahead now, aren't I?

If you've read my autobiography then you want to know what I'm talking about. What was this disaster of which I speak?

Well, let's review, shall we? As I've said, I wrote the book and made the album because I wanted to be visible, to be seen for what I am, even if only in symbolic terms.

As to the risk that mortals might really catch on, that they might realize I was exactly what I said I was—I was rather excited by that possibility as well. Let them hunt us down, let them destroy us, that was in a way my fondest wish. We don't deserve to exist; they ought to kill us. And think of the battles! Ah, fighting those who really know what I am.

But I never really expected such a confrontation; and the rock musician persona, it was too marvelous a cover for a fiend like me.

It was my own kind who took me literally, who decided to punish me for what I had done. And of course I'd counted on that too.

After all, I'd told our history in my autobiography; I'd told our deepest secrets, things I'd been sworn never to reveal. And I was strutting before the hot lights and the camera lenses. And what if some scientist had gotten hold of me, or more likely a zealous police officer on a minor traffic violation five minutes before sunup, and somehow I'd been incarcerated, inspected, identified, and classified—all during the daylight hours while I lay helpless—to the satisfaction of the worst mortal skeptics worldwide?

Granted, that wasn't very likely. Still isn't. (Though it could be such fun, it really could!)

Yet it was inevitable that my own kind should be infuriated by the risks I was taking, that they would try to burn me alive, or chop me up in little immortal pieces. Most of the young ones, they were too stupid to realize how safe we were.

And as the night of the concert approached, I'd found myself dreaming of those battles, too. Such a pleasure it was going to be to destroy those who were as evil as I was; to cut a swathe through the guilty; to cut down my own image again and again.

Yet, you know, the sheer joy of being out there, making music, making theater, making magic!—that's what it was all about in the end. I wanted to be alive, finally. I wanted to be simply human. The mortal actor who'd gone to Paris two hundred years ago and met death on the boulevard, would have his moment at last.

But to continue with the review—the concert was a success. I had my moment of triumph before fifteen thousand screaming mortal fans; and two of my greatest immortal loves were there with me—Gabrielle and Louis—my fledglings, my

paramours, from whom I'd been separated for too many dark years.

Before the night was over, we licked the pesty vampires who tried to punish me for what I was doing. But we'd had an invisible ally in these little skirmishes; our enemies burst into flames before they could do us harm.

As morning approached, I was too elated by the whole night to take the question of danger seriously. I ignored Gabrielle's impassioned warnings—too sweet to hold her once again; and I dismissed Louis's dark suspicions as I always had.

And then the jam, the cliffhanger …

Just as the sun was rising over Carmel Valley and I was closing my eyes as vampires must do at that moment, I realized I wasn't alone in my underground lair. It wasn't only the young vampires I'd reached with my music; my songs had roused from their slumber the very oldest of our kind in the world.

And I found myself in one of those breathtaking instants of risk and possibility. What was to follow? Was I to die finally, or perhaps to be reborn?

Now, to tell you the full story of what happened after that, I must move back a little in time.

I have to begin some ten nights before the fatal concert and I have to let you slip into the minds and hearts of other beings who were responding to my music and my book in ways of which I knew little or nothing at the time.

In other words, a lot was going on which I had to reconstruct later. And it is the reconstruction that I offer you now.

So we will move out of the narrow, lyrical confines of the first person singular; we will jump as a thousand mortal writers have done into the brains and souls of "many characters." We will gallop into the world of "third person" and "multiple point of view."

And by the way, when these other characters think or say of me that I am beautiful or irresistible, etc., don't think I put these words in their heads. I didn't! It's what was told to me after, or what I drew out of their minds with infallible telepathic power; I wouldn't lie about that or anything else. I can't help being a gorgeous fiend. It's just the card I drew. The bastard monster who made me what I am picked me on account of my good looks. That's the long and short of it. And accidents like that occur all the time.

We live in a world of accidents finally, in which only aesthetic principles have a consistency of which we can be sure. Right and wrong we will struggle with forever, striving to create and maintain an ethical balance; but the shimmer of summer rain under the street lamps or the great flashing glare of artillery against a night sky—such brutal beauty is beyond dispute.

Now, be assured: though I am leaving you, I will return with full flair at the appropriate moment. The truth is, I hate not being the first person narrator all the way through! To paraphrase David Copperfield, I don't know whether I'm the hero or the victim of this tale. But either way, shouldn't I dominate it? I'm the one really telling it, after all.

Alas, my being the James Bond of vampires isn't the whole issue. Vanity must wait. I want you to know what really took place with us, even if you never believe it. In fiction if nowhere else, I must have a little meaning, a little coherence, or I will go mad.

So until we meet again, I am thinking of you always; I love you; I wish you were here … in my arms.

PROEM

DECLARATION IN THE FORM OF GRAFFITI

—written in black felt-tip pen on a red wall in the back room of a bar called Dracula's Daughter in San Francisco—

Children of Darkness
Be Advised of the Following:

Book One: *Interview with the Vampire*, published in 1976, was a true story. Any one of us could have written it—an account of becoming what we are, of the misery and the searching. Yet Louis, the two-hundred-year-old immortal who reveals all, insists on mortal sympathy. Lestat, the villain who gave Louis the Dark Gift, gave him precious little else in the way of explanations or consolation. Sound familiar? Louis hasn't given up the search for salvation yet, though even Armand, the oldest immortal he was ever to find, could tell him nothing of why we are here or who made us. Not very surprising, is it, vampire boys and girls? After all, there has never been a Baltimore Catechism for vampires.

That is, there wasn't until the publication of:

Book Two: *The Vampire Lestat*, this very week. Subtitle: His "early education and adventures." You don't believe it? Check with the nearest mortal bookseller. Then go into the nearest record store and ask to see the album which has only just arrived—also entitled *The Vampire Lestat*, with predictable modesty. Or if all else fails, switch on your cable TV, if you don't disdain such things, and wait for one of Lestat's numerous rock video films which began to air with nauseating frequency only yesterday. You will know Lestat for what he is immediately. And it may not surprise you to be told that he plans to compound these unprecedented outrages by appearing "live" on stage in a debut concert in this very city. Yes, on Halloween, you guessed it.

But let us forget for the moment the blatant insanity of his preternatural eyes flashing from every record store window, or his powerful voice singing out the secret names and stories of the most ancient among us. Why is he doing all this? What do his songs tell us? It is spelled out in his book. He has given us not only a catechism but a Bible.

And deep into biblical times we are led to confront our first parents: Enkil and

Akasha, rulers of the valley of the Nile before it was ever called Egypt. Kindly disregard the gobbledygook of how they became the first bloodsuckers on the face of the earth; it makes only a little more sense than the story of how life formed on this planet in the first place, or how human fetuses develop from microscopic cells within the wombs of their mortal mothers. The truth is we are descended from this venerable pair, and like it or no, there is considerable reason to believe that the primal generator of all our delicious and indispensable powers resides in one or the other of their ancient bodies. What does this mean? To put it bluntly, if Akasha and Enkil should ever walk hand in hand into a furnace, we should all burn with them. Crush them to glittering dust, and we are annihilated.

Ah, but there's hope. The pair haven't moved in over fifty centuries! Yes, that's correct. Except of course that Lestat claims to have wakened them both by playing a violin at the foot of their shrine. But if we dismiss his extravagant tale that Akasha took him in her arms and shared with him her primal blood, we are left with the more likely state of affairs, corroborated by stories of old, that the two have not batted an eyelash since before the fall of the Roman Empire. They've been kept all this time in a nice private crypt by Marius, an ancient Roman vampire, who certainly knows what's best for all of us. And it was he who told the Vampire Lestat never to reveal the secret.

Not a very trustworthy confidant, the Vampire Lestat. And what are his motives for the book, the album, the films, the concert? Quite impossible to know what goes on in the mind of this fiend, except that what he wants to do he does, with reliable consistency. After all, did he not make a vampire child? And a vampire of his own mother, Gabrielle, who for years was his loving companion? He may set his sights upon the papacy, this devil, out of sheer thirst for excitement!

So that's the gist: Louis, a wandering philosopher whom none of us can find, has confided our deepest moral secrets to countless strangers. And Lestat has dared to reveal our history to the world, as he parades his supernatural endowments before the mortal public.

Now the Question: Why are these two still in existence? Why have we not destroyed them already? Oh, the danger to us from the great mortal herd is by no means a certainty. The villagers are not yet at the door, torches in hand, threatening to burn the castle. But the monster is courting a change in mortal perspective. And though we are too clever to corroborate for the human record his foolish fabrications, the outrage exceeds all precedent. It cannot go unpunished.

Further observations: If the story the Vampire Lestat has told is true—and there are many who swear it is, though on what account they cannot tell you—may not the two-thousand-year-old Marius come forward to punish Lestat's disobedience? Or perhaps the

King and Queen, if they have ears to hear, will waken at the sound of their names carried on radio waves around the planet. What might happen to us all if this should occur? Shall we prosper under their new reign? Or will they set the time for universal destruction? Whatever the case, might not the swift destruction of the Vampire Lestat avert it?

The Plan: Destroy the Vampire Lestat and all his cohorts as soon as they dare to show themselves. Destroy all those who show him allegiance.

A Warning: Inevitably, there are other very old blood drinkers out there. We have all from time to time glimpsed them, or felt their presence. Lestat's revelations do not shock so much as they rouse some unconscious awareness within us. And surely with their great powers, these old ones can hear Lestat's music. What ancient and terrible beings, incited by history, purpose, or mere recognition, might be moving slowly and inexorably to answer his summons?

Copies of this Declaration have to been sent to every meeting place on the Vampire Connection, and to coven houses the world over. But you must take heed and spread the word: The Vampire Lestat is to be destroyed and with him his mother, Gabrielle, his cohorts, Louis and Armand, and any and all immortals who show him loyalty.

Happy Halloween, vampire boys and girls. We shall see you at the concert. We shall see that the Vampire Lestat never leaves it.

The blond-haired figure in the red velvet coat read the declaration over again from his comfortable vantage point in the far corner. His eyes were almost invisible behind his dark tinted glasses and the brim of his gray hat. He wore gray suede gloves, and his arms were folded over his chest as he leaned back against the high black wainscoting, one boot heel hooked on the rung of his chair.

"Lestat, you are the damnedest creature!" he whispered under his breath. "You are a brat prince." He gave a little private laugh. Then he scanned the large shadowy room.

Not unpleasing to him, the intricate black ink mural drawn with such skill, like spiderwebs on the white plaster wall. He rather enjoyed the ruined castle, the graveyard, the withered tree clawing at the full moon. It was the cliché reinvented as if it were not a cliché, an artistic gesture he invariably appreciated. Very fine too was the molded ceiling with its frieze of prancing devils and hags upon broomsticks. And the incense, sweet—an old Indian mixture which he himself had once burnt in the shrine of Those Who Must Be Kept centuries ago.

Yes, one of the more beautiful of the clandestine meeting places.

Less pleasing were the inhabitants, the scattering of slim white figures who hovered

around candles set on small ebony tables. Far too many of them for this civilized modern city. And they knew it. To hunt tonight, they would have to roam far and wide, and young ones always have to hunt. Young ones have to kill. They are too hungry to do it any other way.

But they thought only of him just now—who was he, where had he come from? Was he very old and very strong, and what would he do before he left here? Always the same questions, though he tried to slip into their "vampire bars" like any vagrant blood drinker, eyes averted, mind closed.

Time to leave their questions unanswered. He had what he wanted, a fix on their intentions. And Lestat's small audio cassette in his jacket pocket. He would have a tape of the video rock films before he went home.

He rose to go. And one of the young ones rose also. A stiff silence fell, a silence in thoughts as well as words as he and the young one both approached the door. Only the candle flames moved, throwing their shimmer on the black tile floor as if it were water.

"Where do you come from, stranger?" asked the young one politely. He couldn't have been more than twenty when he died, and that could not have been ten years ago. He painted his eyes, waxed his lips, streaked his hair with barbaric color, as if the preternatural gifts were not enough. How extravagant he looked, how unlike what he was, a spare and powerful revenant who could with luck survive the millennia.

What had they promised him with their modern jargon? That he should know the Bardo, the Astral Plane, etheric realms, the music of the spheres, the sound of one hand clapping?

Again he spoke: "Where do you stand on the Vampire Lestat, on the Declaration?"

"You must forgive me. I'm going now."

"But surely you know what Lestat's done," the young one pressed, slipping between him and the door. Now, this was not good manners.

He studied this brash young male more closely. Should he do something to stir them up? To have them talking about it for centuries? He couldn't repress a smile. But no. There'd be enough excitement soon, thanks to his beloved Lestat.

"Let me give you a little piece of advice in response," he said quietly to the young inquisitor. "You cannot destroy the Vampire Lestat; no one can. But why that is so, I honestly can't tell you."

The young one was caught off guard, and a little insulted.

"But let me ask you a question now," the other continued. "Why this obsession with the Vampire Lestat? What about the content of his revelations? Have you fledglings no desire to seek Marius, the guardian of Those Who Must Be Kept? To see for yourselves the Mother and the Father?"

The young one was confused, then gradually scornful. He could not form a clever answer. But the true reply was plain enough in his soul—in the souls of all those listening and watching. Those Who Must Be Kept might or might not exist; and Marius perhaps did not exist either. But the Vampire Lestat was real, as real as anything this callow immortal knew, and the Vampire Lestat was a greedy fiend who risked the secret prosperity of all his kind just to be loved and seen by mortals.

He almost laughed in the young one's face. Such an insignificant battle. Lestat understood these faithless times so beautifully, one had to admit it. Yes, he'd told the secrets he'd been warned to keep, but in so doing, he had betrayed nothing and no one.

"Watch out for the Vampire Lestat," he said to the young one finally with a smile. "There are very few true immortals walking this earth. He may be one of them."

Then he lifted the young one off his feet and set him down out of the way. And he went out the door into the tavern proper.

The front room, spacious and opulent with its black velvet hangings and fixtures of lacquered brass, was packed with noisy mortals. Cinema vampires glared from their gilt frames on satin-lined walls. An organ poured out the passionate Toccata and Fugue of Bach, beneath a babble of conversation and violent riffs of drunken laughter. He loved the sight of so much exuberant life. He loved even the age-old smell of the malt and the wine, and the perfume of the cigarettes. And as he made his way to the front, he loved the crush of the soft fragrant humans against him. He loved the fact that the living took not the slightest notice of him.

At last the moist air, the busy early evening pavements of Castro Street. The sky still had a polished silver gleam. Men and women rushed to and fro to escape the faint slanting rain, only to be clotted at the corners, waiting for great bulbous colored lights to wink and signal.

The speakers of the record store across the street blared Lestat's voice over the roar of the passing bus, the hiss of wheels on the wet asphalt:

In my dreams, I hold her still,
Angel, lover, Mother.
And in my dreams, I kiss her lips,
Mistress, Muse, Daughter.

She gave me life
I gave her death
My beautiful Marquise.

And on the Devil's Road we walked
Two orphans then together.

And does she bear my hymns tonight
of Kings and Queens and Ancient truths?
Of broken vows and sorrow?

Or does she climb some distant path
where rhyme and song can't find her?

Come back to me, my Gabrielle
My Beautiful Marquise.
The castle's ruined on the hill
The village lost beneath the snow
But you are mine forever.

Was she here already, his mother?

The voice died away in a soft drift of electric notes to be swallowed finally by the random noise around him. He wandered out into the wet breeze and made his way to the corner. Pretty, the busy little street. The flower vendor still sold his blooms beneath the awning. The butcher was thronged with after-work shoppers. Behind the cafe windows, mortals took their evening meals or lingered with their newspapers. Dozens waited for a downhill bus, and a line had formed across the way before an old motion picture theater.

She was here, Gabrielle. He had a vague yet infallible sense of it.

When he reached the curb, he stood with his back against the iron street lamp, breathing the fresh wind that came off the mountain. It was a good view of downtown, along the broad straight length of Market Street. Rather like a boulevard in Paris. And all around the gentle urban slopes covered with cheerful lighted windows.

Yes, but where was she, precisely? Gabrielle, he whispered. He closed his eyes. He listened. At first there came the great boundless roar of thousands of voices, image crowding upon image. The whole wide world threatened to open up, and to swallow him with its ceaseless lamentations. *Gabrielle.* The thunderous clamor slowly died away. He caught a glimmer of pain from a mortal passing near. And in a high building on the hill, a dying woman dreamed of childhood strife as she sat listless at her window. Then in a dim steady silence, he saw what he wanted to see: Gabrielle, stopped in her tracks. She'd heard his voice. She knew that she was watched. A tall blond female, hair in a

single braid down her back, standing in one of the clean deserted streets of downtown, not far from him. She wore a khaki jacket and pants, a worn brown sweater. And a hat not unlike his own that covered her eyes, only a bit of her face visible above her upturned collar. Now she closed her mind, effectively surrounding herself with an invisible shield. The image vanished.

Yes, here, waiting for her son, Lestat. Why had he ever feared for her—the cold one who fears nothing for herself, only for Lestat. All right. He was pleased. And Lestat would be also.

But what about the other? Louis, the gentle one, with the black hair and green eyes, whose steps made a careless sound when he walked, who even whistled to himself in dark streets so that mortals heard him coming. *Louis, where are you?*

Almost instantly, he saw Louis enter an empty drawing room. He had only just come up the stairs from the cellar where he had slept by day in a vault behind the wall. He had no awareness at all of anyone watching. He moved with silky strides across the dusty room, and stood looking down through the soiled glass at the thick flow of passing cars. Same old house on Divisadero Street. In fact, nothing changed much at all with this elegant and sensuous creature who had caused such a little tumult with his story in *Interview with the Vampire*. Except that now he was waiting for Lestat. He had had troubling dreams; he was fearful for Lestat, and full of old and unfamiliar longings.

Reluctantly, he let the image go. He had a great affection for that one, Louis. And the affection was not wise because Louis had a tender, educated soul and none of the dazzling power of Gabrielle or her devilish son. Yet Louis might survive as long as they, he was sure of that. Curious the kinds of courage which made for endurance. Maybe it had to do with acceptance. But then how account for Lestat, beaten, scarred, yet risen again? Lestat who never accepted anything?

They had not found each other yet, Gabrielle and Louis. But it was all right. What was he to do? Bring them together? The very idea.… Besides, Lestat would do that soon enough.

But now he was smiling again. "Lestat, you are the damnedest creature! Yes, a brat prince." Slowly, he reinvoked every detail of Lestat's face and form. The ice-blue eyes, darkening with laughter; the generous smile; the way the eyebrows came together in a boyish scowl; the sudden flares of high spirits and blasphemous humor. Even the catlike poise of the body he could envisage. So uncommon in a man of muscular build. Such strength, always such strength and such irrepressible optimism.

The fact was, he did not know his own mind about the entire enterprise, only that he was amused and fascinated. Of course there was no thought of vengeance against Lestat for telling his secrets. And surely Lestat had counted upon that, but then one never

knew. Maybe Lestat truly did not care. He knew no more than the fools back there in the bar, on that score.

What mattered to him was that for the first time in so many years, he found himself thinking in terms of past and future; he found himself most keenly aware of the nature of this era. Those Who Must Be Kept were fiction even to their own children! Long gone were the days when fierce rogue blood drinkers searched for their shrine and their powerful blood. Nobody believed or even cared any longer!

And there lay the essence of the age; for its mortals were of an even more practical ilk, rejecting at every turn the miraculous. With unprecedented courage, they had founded their greatest ethical advances squarely upon the truths embedded in the physical.

Two hundred years since he and Lestat had discussed these very things on an island in the Mediterranean—the dream of a godless and truly moral world where love of one's fellow man would be the only dogma. *A world in which we do not belong.* And now such a world was almost realized. And the Vampire Lestat had passed into popular art where all the old devils ought to go, and would take with him the whole accused tribe, including Those Who Must Be Kept, though they might never know it.

It made him smile, the symmetry of it. He found himself not merely in awe but strongly seduced by the whole idea of what Lestat had done. He could well understand the lure of fame.

Why, it had thrilled him shamelessly to see his own name scrawled on the wall of the bar. He had laughed; but he had enjoyed the laughter thoroughly.

Leave it to Lestat to construct such an inspiring drama, and that's what it was, all right. Lestat, the boisterous boulevard actor of the ancien régime, now risen to stardom in this beauteous and innocent era.

But had he been right in his little summation to the fledgling in the bar, that no one could destroy the brat prince? That was sheer romance. Good advertising. *The fact is, any of us can be destroyed … one way or another. Even Those Who Must Be Kept, surely*.

They were weak, of course, those fledgling "Children of Darkness," as they styled themselves. The numbers did not increase their strength significantly. But what of the older ones? If only Lestat had not used the names of Mael and Pandora. But were there not blood drinkers older even than that, ones of whom he himself knew nothing? He thought of that warning on the wall: "ancient and terrible beings … moving slowly and inexorably to answer his summons."

A frisson startled him; coldness, yet for an instant he thought he saw a jungle—a green, fetid place, full of unwholesome and smothering warmth. Gone, without explanation, like so many sudden signals and messages he received. He'd learned long

ago to shut out the endless flow of voices and images that his mental powers enabled him to hear; yet now and then something violent and unexpected, like a sharp cry, came through.

Whatever, he had been in this city long enough. He did not know that he meant to intervene, no matter what happened! He was angry with his own sudden warmth of feeling. He wanted to be home now. He had been away from Those Who Must Be Kept for too long.

But how he loved to watch the energetic human crowd, the clumsy parade of shining traffic. Even the poison smells of the city he did not mind. They were no worse than the stench of ancient Rome, or Antioch, or Athens—when piles of human waste fed the flies wherever you looked, and the air reeked of inevitable disease and hunger. No, he liked the clean pastel-colored cities of California well enough. He could have lingered forever among their clear-eyed and purposeful inhabitants.

But he must go home. The concert was not for many nights, and he would see Lestat then, if he chose.… How delicious not to know precisely what he might do, any more than others knew, others who didn't even believe in him!

He crossed Castro Street and went swiftly up the wide pavement of Market. The wind had slackened; the air was almost warm. He took up a brisk pace, even whistling to himself the way that Louis often did. He felt good. Human. Then he stopped before the store that sold television sets and radios. Lestat was singing on each and every screen, both large and small.

He laughed under his breath at the great concert of gesture and movement. The sound was off, buried in tiny glowing seeds within the equipment. He'd have to search to receive it. But wasn't there a charm in merely watching the antics of the yellow-haired brat prince in merciless silence?

The camera drew back to render the full figure of Lestat who played a violin as if in a void. A starry darkness now and then enclosed him. Then quite suddenly a pair of doors were opened—it was the old shrine of Those Who Must Be Kept, quite exactly! And there—Akasha and Enkil, or rather actors made up to play the part, white-skinned Egyptians with long black silken hair and glittering jewelry.

Of course. Why hadn't he guessed that Lestat would carry it to this vulgar and tantalizing extreme? He leant forward, listening for the transmission of the sound. He heard the voice of Lestat above the violin:

Akasha! Enkil!
Keep your secrets
Keep your silence

It is a better gift than truth.

And now as the violin player closed his eyes and bore down on his music, Akasha slowly rose from the throne. The violin fell from Lestat's hands as he saw her; like a dancer, she wrapped her arms around him, drew him to her, bent to take the blood from him, while pressing his teeth to her own throat.

It was rather better than he had ever imagined—such clever craft. Now the figure of Enkil awakened, rising and walking like a mechanical doll. Forward he came to take back his Queen. Lestat was thrown down on the floor of the shrine. And there the film ended. The rescue by Marius was not part of it.

"Ah, so I do not become a television celebrity," he whispered with a faint smile. He went to the entrance of the darkened store.

The young woman was waiting to let him in. She had the black plastic video cassette in her hand.

"All twelve of them," she said. Fine dark skin and large drowsy brown eyes. The band of silver around her wrist caught the light. He found it enticing. She took the money gratefully, without counting it. "They've been playing them on a dozen channels. I caught them all over, actually. Finished it yesterday afternoon."

"You've served me well," he answered. "I thank you." He produced another thick fold of bills.

"No big thing," she said. She didn't want to take the extra money.

You will.

She took it with a shrug and put it in her pocket.

No big thing. He loved these eloquent modern expressions. He loved the sudden shift of her luscious breasts as she'd shrugged, and the lithe twist of her hips beneath the coarse denim clothes that made her seem all the more smooth and fragile. An incandescent flower. As she opened the door for him, he touched the soft nest of her brown hair. Quite unthinkable to feed upon one who has served you; one so innocent. He would not do this! Yet he turned her around, his gloved fingers slipping up through her hair to cradle her head:

"The smallest kiss, my precious one."

Her eyes closed; his teeth pierced the artery instantly and his tongue lapped at the blood. Only a taste. A tiny flash of heat that burnt itself out in his heart within a second. Then he drew back, his lips resting against her frail throat. He could feel her pulse. The craving for the full draught was almost more than he could bear. Sin and atonement. He let her go. He smoothed her soft, springy curls, as he looked into her misted eyes.

Do not remember.

"Good-bye now," she said, smiling.

He stood motionless on the deserted sidewalk. And the thirst, ignored and sullen, gradually died back. He looked at the cardboard sheath of the video cassette.

"A dozen channels," she had said. "I caught them all over, actually." Now if that was so, his charges had already seen Lestat, inevitably, on the large screen positioned before them in the shrine. Long ago, he'd set the satellite dish on the slope above the roof to bring them broadcasts from all the world. A tiny computer device changed the channel each hour. For years, they'd stared expressionless as the images and colors shifted before their lifeless eyes. Had there been the slightest flicker when they heard Lestat's voice, or saw their very own image? Or heard their own names sung as if in a hymn?

Well, he would soon find out. He would play the video cassette for them. He would study their frozen, gleaming faces for something—anything—besides the mere reflection of the light.

"Ah, Marius, you never despair, do you? You are no better than Lestat, with your foolish dreams."

. . .

It was midnight before he reached home.

He shut the steel door against the driving snow, and, standing still for a moment, let the heated air surround him. The blizzard through which he'd passed had lacerated his face and his ears, even his gloved fingers. The warmth felt so good.

In the quiet, he listened for the familiar sound of the giant generators, and the faint electronic pulse of the television set within the shrine many hundreds of feet beneath him. Could that be Lestat singing? Yes. Undoubtedly, the last mournful words of some other song.

Slowly he peeled off his gloves. He removed his hat and ran his hand through his hair. He studied the large entrance hall and the adjacent drawing room for the slightest evidence that anyone else had been here.

Of course that was almost an impossibility. He was miles from the nearest outpost of the modern world, in a great frozen snow-covered waste. But out of force of habit, he always observed everything closely. There were some who could breach this fortress, if only they knew where it was.

All was well. He stood before the giant aquarium, the great room-sized tank which abutted the south wall. So carefully he had constructed this thing, of the heaviest glass and the finest equipment. He watched the schools of multicolored fishes dance past him, then alter their direction instantly and totally in the artificial gloom. The giant sea kelp

swayed from one side to another, a forest caught in a hypnotic rhythm as the gentle pressure of the aerator drove it this way and that. It never failed to captivate him, to lock him suddenly to its spectacular monotony. The round black eyes of the fish sent a tremor through him; the high slender trees of kelp with their tapering yellow leaves thrilled him vaguely; but it was the movement, the constant movement that was the crux.

Finally he turned away from it, glancing back once into that pure, unconscious, and incidentally beautiful world.

Yes, all was well here.

Good to be in these warm rooms. Nothing amiss with the soft leather furnishings scattered about the thick wine-colored carpet. Fireplace piled with wood. Books lining the walls. And there the great bank of electronic equipment waiting for him to insert Lestat's tape. That's what he wanted to do, settle by the fire and watch each rock film in sequence. The craft intrigued him as well as the songs themselves, the chemistry of old and new—how Lestat had used the distortions of media to disguise himself so perfectly as another mortal rock singer trying to appear a god.

He took off his long gray cloak and threw it on the chair. Why did the whole thing give him such an unexpected pleasure! Do we all long to blaspheme, to shake our fists in the faces of the gods? Perhaps so. Centuries ago, in what is now called "ancient Rome," he, the well-mannered boy, had always laughed at the antics of bad children.

He should go to the shrine before he did anything else, he knew that. Just for a few moments, to make certain things were as they should be. To check the television, the heat, and all the complex electrical systems. To place fresh coals and incense in the brazier. It was so easy to maintain a paradise for them now, with the livid lights that gave the nutrients of the sun to trees and flowers that had never seen the natural lights of heaven. But the incense, that must be done by hand, as always. And never did he sprinkle it over the coals that he did not think of the first time he'd ever done it.

Time to take a soft cloth, too, and carefully, respectfully, wipe the dust from the parents—from their hard unyielding bodies, even from their lips and their eyes, their cold unblinking eyes. And to think, it had been a full month. It seemed shameful.

Have you missed me, my beloved Akasha and Enkil? Ah, the old game.

His reason told him, as it always had, that they did not know or care whether he came or went. But his pride always teased with another possibility. Does not the crazed lunatic locked in the madhouse cell feel something for the slave who brings it water? Perhaps it wasn't an apt comparison. Certainly not one that was kind.

Yes, they had moved for Lestat, the brat prince, that was true—Akasha to offer the powerful blood and Enkil to take vengeance. And Lestat could make his video films

about it forever. But had it not merely proved once and for all that there was no mind left in either of them? Surely no more than an atavistic spark had flared for an instant; it had been too simple to drive them back to silence and stillness on their barren throne.

Nevertheless, it had embittered him. After all, it had never been his goal to transcend the emotions of a thinking man, but rather to refine them, reinvent them, enjoy them with an infinitely perfectible understanding. And he had been tempted at the very moment to turn on Lestat with an all-too-human fury.

Young one, why don't you take Those Who Must Be Kept since they have shown you such remarkable favor? I should like to be rid of them now. I have only had this burden since the dawn of the Christian era.

But in truth that wasn't his finer feeling. Not then, not now. Only a temporary indulgence. Lestat he loved as he always had. Every realm needs a brat prince. And the silence of the King and Queen was as much a blessing as a curse, perhaps. Lestat's song had been quite right on that point. But who would ever settle the question?

Oh, he would go down later with the video cassette and watch for himself, of course. And if there were just the faintest flicker, the faintest shift in their eternal gaze.

But there you go again.… Lestat makes you young and stupid. Likely to feed on innocence and dream of cataclysm.

How many times over the ages had such hopes risen, only to leave him wounded, even heartbroken. Years ago, he had brought them color films of the rising sun, the blue sky, the pyramids of Egypt. Ah, such a miracle! Before their very eyes the sun-drenched waters of the Nile flowed. He himself had wept at the perfection of illusion. He had even feared the cinematic sun might hurt him, though of course he knew that it could not. But such had been the caliber of the invention. That he could stand there, watching the sunrise, as he had not seen it since he was a mortal man.

But Those Who Must Be Kept had gazed on in unbroken indifference, or was it wonder—great undifferentiated wonder that held the particles of dust in the air to be a source of endless fascination?

Who will ever know? They had lived four thousand years before he was ever born. Perhaps the voices of the world roared in their brains, so keen was their telepathic hearing; perhaps a billion shifting images blinded them to all else. Surely such things had almost driven him out of his mind until he'd learned to control them.

It had even occurred to him that he would bring modern medical tools to bear on the matter, that he would hook electrodes to their very heads to test the patterns of their brains! But it had been too distasteful, the idea of such callous and ugly instruments. After all, they were his King and his Queen, the Father and Mother of us all. Under his roof, they had reigned without challenge for two millennia.

One fault he must admit. He had an acid tongue of late in speaking to them. He was no longer the High Priest when he entered the chamber. No. There was something flippant and sarcastic in his tone, and that should be beneath him. Maybe it was what they called "the modern temper." How could one live in a world of rockets to the moon without an intolerable self-consciousness threatening every trivial syllable? And he had never been oblivious to the century at hand.

Whatever the case, he had to go to the shrine now. And he would purify his thoughts properly. He would not come with resentment or despair. Later, after he had seen the videos, he would play the tape for them. He would remain there, watching. But he did not have the stamina for it now.

He entered the steel elevator and pressed the button. The great electronic whine and the sudden loss of gravity gave him a faint sensuous pleasure. The world of this day and age was full of so many sounds that had never been heard before. It was quite refreshing. And then there was the lovely ease of plummeting hundreds of feet in a shaft through solid ice to reach the electrically lighted chambers below.

He opened the door and stepped into the carpeted corridor. It was Lestat again singing within the shrine, a rapid, more joyful song, his voice battling a thunder of drums and the twisted undulating electronic moans.

But something was not quite right here. Merely looking at the long corridor he sensed it. The sound was too loud, too clear. The antechambers leading to the shrine were open!

He went to the entrance immediately. The electric doors had been unlocked and thrown back. How could this be? Only he knew the code for the tiny series of computer buttons. The second pair of doors had been opened wide as well and so had the third. In fact he could see into the shrine itself, his view blocked by the white marble wall of the small alcove. The red and blue flicker of the television screen beyond was like the light of an old gas fireplace.

And Lestat's voice echoed powerfully over the marble walls, the vaulted ceilings.

Kill us, my brothers and sisters
The war is on.

Understand what you see,
When you see me.

He took a slow easy breath. No sound other than the music, which was fading now to be replaced by characterless mortal chatter. And no outsider here. No, he would have known. No one in his lair. His instincts told him that for certain.

There was a stab of pain in his chest. He even felt a warmth in his face. How remarkable.

He walked through the marble antechambers and stopped at the door of the alcove. Was he praying? Was he dreaming? He knew what he would soon see—Those Who Must be Kept—just as they had always been. And some dismal explanation for the doors, a shorted circuit or a broken fuse, would soon present itself.

Yet he felt not fear suddenly but the raw anticipation of a young mystic on the verge of a vision, that at last he would see the living Lord, or in his own hands the bloody stigmata.

Calmly, he stepped into the shrine.

For a moment it did not register. He saw what he expected to see, the long room filled with trees and flowers, and the stone bench that was the throne, and beyond it the large television screen pulsing with eyes and mouths and unimportant laughter. Then he acknowledged the fact: there was only one figure seated on the throne; and this figure was almost completely transparent! The violent colors of the distant television screen were passing right through it!

No, but this is quite out of the question! *Marius, look carefully. Even your senses are not infallible*. Like a flustered mortal he put his hands to his head as if to block out all distraction.

He was gazing at the back of Enkil, who, save for his black hair, had become some sort of milky glass statue through which the colors and the lights moved with faint distortion. Suddenly an uneven burst of light caused the figure to radiate, to become a source of faint glancing beams.

He shook his head. Not possible. Then he gave himself a little shake all over. "All right, Marius," he whispered. "Proceed slowly."

But a dozen unformed suspicions were sizzling in his mind. Someone had come, someone older and more powerful than he, someone who had discovered Those Who Must Be Kept, and done something unspeakable! And all this was Lestat's doing! Lestat, who had told the world his secret.

His knees were weak. Imagine! He had not felt such mortal debilities in so long that he had utterly forgotten them. Slowly he removed a linen handkerchief from his pocket. He wiped at the thin layer of blood sweat that covered his forehead. Then he moved towards the throne, and went round it, until he stood staring directly at the figure of the King.

Enkil as he had been for two thousand years, the black hair in long tiny plaits, hanging to his shoulders. The broad gold collar lying against his smooth, hairless chest, the linen of his kilt immaculate with its pressed pleats, the rings still on his motionless

fingers.

But the body itself was glass! And it was utterly hollow! Even the huge shining orbs of the eyes were transparent, only shadowy circles defining the irises. No, wait. Observe everything. And there, you can see the bones, turned to the very same substance as the flesh, they are there, and also the fine crazing of veins and arteries, and something like lungs inside, but it is all transparent now, it is all of the same texture. But what had been done to him!

And the thing was changing still. Before his very eyes, it was losing its milky cast. It was drying up, becoming ever more transparent.

Tentatively, he touched it. Not glass at all. A husk.

But his careless gesture had upset the thing. The body teetered, then fell over onto the marble tile, its eyes locked open, its limbs rigid in their former position. It made a sound like the scraping of an insect as it settled.

Only the hair moved. The soft black hair. But it too was changed. It was breaking into fragments. It was breaking into tiny shimmering splinters. A cool ventilating current was scattering it like straw. And as the hair fell away from the throat, he saw two dark puncture wounds in it. Wounds that had not healed as they might have done because all the healing blood had been drawn out of the thing.

"Who has done this?" He whispered aloud, tightening the fingers of his right fist as if this would keep him from crying out. Who could have taken every last drop of life from him?

And the thing was dead. There wasn't the slightest doubt of it. And what was revealed by this awful spectacle?

Our King is destroyed, our Father. And I still live; I breathe. And this can only mean that *she* contains the primal power. She was the first, and it has always resided in her. *And someone has taken her!*

Search the cellar. Search the house. But these were frantic, foolish thoughts. No one had entered here, and he knew it. Only one creature could have done this deed! Only one creature would have known that such a thing was finally possible.

He didn't move. He stared at the figure lying on the floor, watching it lose the very last trace of opacity. And would that he could weep for the thing, for surely someone should. Gone now with all that it had ever known, all that it had ever witnessed. This too coming to an end. It seemed beyond his ability to accept it.

But he wasn't alone. Someone or something had just come out of the alcove, and he could feel it watching him.

For one moment—one clearly irrational moment—he kept his eyes on the fallen King. He tried to comprehend as calmly as he could everything that was occurring around

him. The thing was moving towards him now, without a sound; it was becoming a graceful shadow in the corner of his eye, as it came around the throne and stood beside him.

He knew who it was, who it had to be, and that it had approached with the natural poise of a living being. Yet, as he looked up, nothing could prepare him for the moment.

Akasha, standing only three inches away from him. Her skin was white and hard and opaque as it had always been. Her cheek shone like pearl as she smiled, her dark eyes moist and enlivened as the flesh puckered ever so slightly around them. They positively glistered with vitality.

Speechless, he stared. He watched as she lifted her jeweled fingers to touch his shoulder. He closed his eyes, then opened them. Over thousands of years he had spoken to her in so many tongues—prayers, pleas, complaints, confessions—and now he said not a word. He merely looked at her mobile lips, at the flash of white fang teeth, and the cold glint of recognition in her eyes, and the soft yielding cleft of the bosom moving beneath the gold necklace.

"You've served me well," she said. "I thank you." Her voice was low, husky, beautiful. But the intonation, the words; it was what he'd said hours ago to the girl in the darkened store in the city!

The fingers tightened on his shoulder.

"Ah, Marius," she said, imitating his tone perfectly again, "you never despair, do you? You are no better than Lestat, with your foolish dreams."

His own words again, spoken to himself on a San Francisco street. She mocked him!

Was this terror? Or was it hatred that he felt—hatred that had lain waiting in him for centuries, mixed with resentment and weariness, and grief for his human heart, hatred that now boiled to a heat he could never have imagined. He didn't dare move, dare speak. The hate was fresh and astonishing and it had taken full possession of him and he could do nothing to control it or understand it. All judgment had left him.

But she knew. Of course. She knew everything, every thought, word, deed, that's what she was telling him. She had always known, everything and anything that she chose to know! And she'd known that the mindless thing beside her was past defending itself. And this, which should have been a triumphant moment, was somehow a moment of horror!

She laughed softly as she looked at him. He could not bear the sound of it. He wanted to hurt her. He wanted to destroy her, all her monstrous children be damned! Let us all perish with her! If he could have done it, he would have destroyed her!

It seemed she nodded, that she was telling him she understood. The monstrous insult of it. Well, he did not understand. And in another moment, he would be weeping like a

child. Some ghastly error had been made, some terrible miscarriage of purpose.

"My dear servant," she said, her lips lengthening in a faint bitter smile. "You have never had the power to stop me."

"What do you want! What do you mean to do!"

"You must forgive me," she said, oh, so politely, just as he had said the very words to the young one in the back room of the bar. "I'm going now."

He heard the sound before the floor moved, the shriek of tearing metal. He was falling, and the television screen had blown apart, the glass piercing his flesh like so many tiny daggers. He cried out, like a mortal man, and this time it was fear. The ice was cracking, roaring, as it came down upon him.

"Akasha!"

He was dropping into a giant crevasse, he was plunging into scalding coldness.

"Akasha!" he cried again.

But she was gone, and he was still falling. Then the broken tumbling ice caught him, surrounded him, and buried him, as it crushed the bones of his arms, his legs, his face. He felt his blood pouring out against the searing surface, then freezing. He couldn't move. He couldn't breathe. And the pain was so intense that he couldn't bear it. He saw the jungle again, inexplicably for an instant, as he had seen it earlier. The hot fetid jungle, and something moving through it. Then it was gone. And when he cried out this time, it was to Lestat: *Danger. Lestat, beware. We are all in danger.*

Then there was only the cold and the pain, and he was losing consciousness. A dream coming, a lovely dream of warm sun shining on a grassy clearing. Yes, the blessed sun. The dream had him now. And the women, how lovely their red hair. But what was it, the thing that was lying there, beneath the wilted leaves, on the altar?

PART I

THE ROAD TO THE VAMPIRE LESTAT

Tempting to place in coherent collage
the bee, the mountain range, the shadow
of my hoof—
tempting to join them, enlaced by logical
vast & shining molecular thought-thread
thru all Substance—

….

Tempting

to say I see in all I see
the place where the needle
began in the tapestry—but ah,
it all looks whole and *part—*
long live the eyeball and the lucid heart.

STAN RICE
from "Four Days in Another City"
Some Lamb (1975)

1
THE LEGEND OF THE TWINS

Tell it
in rhythmic
continuity.
Detail by detail
the living creatures.
Tell it
as must, the rhythm
solid in the shape.
Woman. Arms lifted. Shadow eater.

STAN RICE
from "Elegy"
Whiteboy (1976)

"Call her for me," he said. "Tell her I have had the strangest dreams, that they were about the twins. You must call her!"

His daughter didn't want to do it. She watched him fumble with the book. His hands were his enemies now, he often said. At ninety-one, he could scarcely hold a pencil or turn a page.

"Daddy," she said, "that woman's probably dead."

Everybody he had known was dead. He'd outlived his colleagues; he'd outlived his brothers and sisters, and even two of his children. In a tragic way, he had outlived the twins, because no one read his book now. No one cared about "the legend of the twins."

"No, you call her," he said. "You must call her. You tell her that I dreamed of the twins. I *saw* them in the dream."

"Why would she want to know that, Daddy?"

His daughter took the little address book and paged through it slowly. Dead all these people, long dead. The men who had worked with her father on so many expeditions, the editors and photographers who had worked with him on his book. Even his enemies who had said his life was wasted, that his research had come to nothing; even

the most scurrilous, who had accused him of doctoring pictures and lying about the caves, which her father had never done.

Why should she be still alive, the woman who had financed his long-ago expeditions, the rich woman who had sent so much money for so many years?

"You must ask her to come! Tell her it's very important. I must describe to her what I've seen."

To come? All the way to Rio de Janeiro because an old man had had strange dreams? His daughter found the page, and yes, there was the name and the number. And the date beside it, only two years old.

"She lives in Bangkok, Daddy." What time was it in Bangkok? She had no idea.

"She'll come to me. I know she will."

He closed his eyes and settled back onto the pillow. He was small now, shrunken. But when he opened his eyes, there was her father looking at her, in spite of the shriveling yellowed skin, the dark spots on the backs of his wrinkled hands, the bald head.

He appeared to be listening to the music now, the soft singing of the Vampire Lestat, coming from her room. She would turn it down if it kept him awake. She wasn't much for American rock singers, but this one she'd rather liked.

"Tell her I must speak to her!" he said suddenly, as though coming back to himself.

"All right, Daddy, if you want me to." She turned off the lamp by the bed. "You go back to sleep."

"Don't give up till you find her. Tell her … the twins! I've seen the twins."

But as she was leaving, he called her back again with one of those sudden moans that always frightened her. In the light from the hall, she could see he was pointing to the books on the far wall.

"Get it for me," he said. He was struggling to sit up again.

"The book, Daddy?"

"The twins, the pictures …"

She took down the old volume and brought it to him and put it in his lap. She propped the pillows up higher for him and turned on the lamp again.

It hurt her to feel how light he was as she lifted him; it hurt her to

see him struggle to put on his silver-rimmed glasses. He took the pencil in hand, to read with it, ready to write, as he had always done, but then he let it fall and she caught it and put it back on the table.

"You go call her!" he said.

She nodded. But she stayed there, just in case he needed her. The music from her study was louder now, one of the more metallic and raucous songs. But he didn't seem to notice. Very gently she opened the book for him, and turned to the first pair of color pictures, one filling the left page, the other the right.

How well she knew these pictures, how well she remembered as a little girl making the long climb with him to the cave on Mount Carmel, where he had led her into the dry dusty darkness, his flashlight lifted to reveal the painted carvings on the wall.

"There, the two figures, you see them, the red-haired women?"

It had been difficult at first to make out the crude stick figures in the dim beam of the flashlight. So much easier later to study what the close-up camera so beautifully revealed.

But she would never forget that first day, when he had shown her each small drawing in sequence: the twins dancing in rain that fell in tiny dashes from a scribble of cloud; the twins kneeling on either side of the altar upon which a body lay as if in sleep or death; the twins taken prisoner and standing before a tribunal of scowling figures; the twins running away. And then the damaged pictures of which nothing could be recovered; and finally the one twin alone weeping, her tears falling in tiny dashes, like the rain, from eyes that were tiny black dashes too.

They'd been carved in the rock, with pigments added—orange for the hair, white chalk for the garments, green for the plants that grew around them, and even blue for the sky over their heads. Six thousand years had passed since they had been created in the deep darkness of the cave.

And no less old were the near identical carvings, in a shallow rock chamber high on the slope of Huayna Picchu, on the other side of the world.

She had made that journey also with her father, a year later, across the Urubamba River and up through the jungles of Peru. She'd seen for herself the same two women in a style remarkably similar though

not the same.

There again on the smooth wall were the same scenes of the rain falling, of the red-haired twins in their joyful dance. And then the somber altar scene in loving detail. It was the body of a woman lying on the altar, and in their hands the twins held two tiny, carefully drawn plates. Soldiers bore down upon the ceremony with swords uplifted. The twins were taken into bondage, weeping. And then came the hostile tribunal and the familiar escape. In another picture, faint but still discernible, the twins held an infant between them, a small bundle with dots for eyes and the barest bit of red hair; then to others they entrusted their treasure as once more the menacing soldiers appeared.

And lastly, the one twin, amid the full leafy trees of the jungle, her arms out as if reaching for her sister, the red pigment of her hair stuck to the stone wall with dried blood.

How well she could recall her excitement. She had shared her father's ecstasy, that he had found the twins a world apart from each other, in these ancient pictures, buried in the mountain caves of Palestine and Peru.

It seemed the greatest event in history; nothing could have been so important. Then a year later a vase had been discovered in a Berlin museum that bore the very same figures, kneeling, plates in hand before the stone bier. A crude thing it was, without documentation. But what did that matter? It had been dated 4000 B.C. by the most reliable methods, and there unmistakably, in the newly translated language of ancient Sumer, were the words that meant so much to all of them:

"The Legend of the Twins"

Yes, so terribly significant, it had all seemed. The foundation of a life's work, until he presented his research.

They'd laughed at him. Or ignored him. Not believable, such a link between the Old World and the New. Six thousand years old, indeed! They'd relegated him to the "crazy camp" along with those who talked of ancient astronauts, Atlantis, and the lost kingdom of Mu.

How he'd argued, lectured, begged them to believe, to journey with

him to the caves, to see for themselves! How he'd laid out the specimens of pigment, the lab reports, the detailed studies of the plants in the carvings and even the white robes of the twins.

Another man might have given it up. Every university and foundation had turned him away. He had no money even to care for his children. He took a teaching position for bread and butter, and, in the evenings, wrote letters to museums all over the world. And a clay tablet, covered with drawings, was found in Manchester, and another in London, both clearly depicting the twins! On borrowed money he journeyed to photograph these artifacts. He wrote papers on them for obscure publications. He continued his search.

Then she had come, the quiet-spoken and eccentric woman who had listened to him, looked at his materials, and then given him an ancient papyrus, found early in this century in a cave in Upper Egypt, which contained some of the very same pictures, and the words "The Legend of the Twins."

"A gift for you," she'd said. And then she'd bought the vase for him from the museum in Berlin. She obtained the tablets from England as well.

But it was the Peruvian discovery that fascinated her most of all. She gave him unlimited sums of money to go back to South America and continue his work.

For years he'd searched cave after cave for more evidence, spoken to villagers about their oldest myths and stories, examined ruined cities, temples, even old Christian churches for stones taken from pagan shrines.

But decades passed and he found nothing.

It had been the ruin of him finally. Even she, his patron, had told him to give it up. She did not want to see his life spent on this. He should leave it now to younger men. But he would not listen. This was his discovery! The Legend of the Twins! And so she wrote the checks for him, and he went on until he was too old to climb the mountains and hack his way through the jungle anymore.

In the last years, he lectured only now and then. He could not interest the new students in this mystery, even when he showed the papyrus, the vase, the tablets. After all, these items did not fit anywhere really, they were of no definable period. And the caves,

could anyone have found them now?

But she had been loyal, his patron. She'd bought him this house in Rio, created a trust for him which would come to his daughter when he died. Her money had paid for his daughter's education, for so many other things. Strange that they lived in such comfort. It was as if he had been successful after all.

"Call her," he said again. He was becoming agitated, empty hands scraping at the photographs. After all, his daughter had not moved. She stood at his shoulder looking down at the pictures, at the figures of the twins.

"All right, Father." She left him with his book.

It was late afternoon the next day when his daughter came in to kiss him. The nurse said that he'd been crying like a child. He opened his eyes as his daughter squeezed his hand.

"I know now what they did to them," he said. "I've seen it! It was sacrilege what they did."

His daughter tried to quiet him. She told him that she had called the woman. The woman was on her way.

"She wasn't in Bangkok, Daddy. She's moved to Burma, to Rangoon. But I reached her there, and she was so glad to hear from you. She said she'd leave within a few hours. She wants to know about the dreams."

He was so happy. She was coming. He closed his eyes and turned his head into the pillow. "The dreams will start again, after dark," he whispered. "The whole tragedy will start again."

"Daddy, rest," she said. "Until she comes."

Sometime during the night he died. When his daughter came in, he was already cold. The nurse was waiting for her instructions. He had the dull, half-lidded stare of dead people. His pencil was lying on the coverlet, and there was a piece of paper—the flyleaf of his precious book—crumpled under his right hand.

She didn't cry. For a moment she didn't do anything. She remembered the cave in Palestine, the lantern. "Do you see? The two women?"

Gently, she closed his eyes, and kissed his forehead. He'd written something on the piece of paper. She lifted his cold, stiff fingers and removed the paper and read the few words he'd scrawled in his uneven spidery hand:

"IN THE JUNGLES—WALKING."

What could it mean?

And it was too late to reach the woman now. She would probably arrive sometime that evening. All that long way….

Well, she would give her the paper, if it mattered, and tell her the things he'd said about the twins.

2
THE SHORT HAPPY LIFE OF BABY JENKS AND THE FANG GANG

The Murder Burger
is served right here.
You need not wait
at the gate of Heaven
for unleavened death.
You can be a goner
on this very corner.
Mayonnaise, onions, dominance of flesh.
If you wish to eat it
you must feed it.
"Yall come back."
"You bet."

STAN RICE
from "Texas Suite"
Some Lamb (1975)

Baby Jenks pushed her Harley to seventy miles an hour, the wind freezing her naked white hands. She'd been fourteen last summer when they'd done it to her, made her one of the Dead, and "dead weight" she was eighty-five pounds max. She hadn't combed out her hair since it happened—didn't have to—and her two little blond braids were swept back by the wind, off the shoulders of her black leather jacket. Bent forward, scowling with her little pouting mouth turned down, she looked mean, and deceptively cute. Her big blue eyes were vacant.

The rock music of *The Vampire Lestat* was blaring through her earphones, so she felt nothing but the vibration of the giant motorcycle under her, and the mad lonesomeness she had known all the way from Gun Barrel City five nights ago. And there was a dream that was bothering her, a dream she kept having every night right

before she opened her eyes.

She'd see these redheaded twins in the dream, these two pretty ladies, and then all these terrible things would go down. No, she didn't like it one damn bit and she was so lonely she was going out of her head.

The Fang Gang hadn't met her south of Dallas as they had promised. She had waited two nights by the graveyard, then she had known that something was really, really wrong. They would never have headed out to California without her. They were going to see the Vampire Lestat on stage in San Francisco, but they'd had plenty of time. No, something was wrong. She knew it.

Even when she had been alive, Baby Jenks could feel things like that. And now that she was Dead it was ten times what it had been then. She knew the Fang Gang was in deep trouble. Killer and Davis would never have dumped her. Killer said he loved her. Why the hell else would he have ever made her, if he didn't love her? She would have died in Detroit if it hadn't been for Killer.

She'd been bleeding to death, the doctor had done it to her all right, the baby was gone and all, but she was going to die too, he'd cut something in there, and she was so high on heroin she didn't give a damn. And then that funny thing happened. Floating up to the ceiling and looking down at her body! And it wasn't the drugs either. Seemed to her like a whole lot of other things were about to happen.

But down there, Killer had come into the room and from up where she was floating she could see that he was a Dead guy. Course she didn't know what he called himself then. She just knew he wasn't alive. Otherwise he just looked kind of ordinary. Black jeans, black hair, real deep black eyes. He had "Fang Gang" written on the back of his leather jacket. He'd sat down on the bed by her body and bent over it.

"Ain't you cute, little girl!" he'd said. Same damn thing the pimp had said to her when he made her braid her hair and put plastic barrettes in it before she went out on the street.

Then whoom! She was back in her body all right, and she was just full of something warmer and better than horse and she heard him say: "You're not going to die, Baby Jenks, not ever!" She had her teeth in his goddamn neck, and boy, was that heaven!

But the never dying part? She wasn't so sure now.

Before she'd lit out of Dallas, giving up on the Fang Gang for good, she'd seen the coven house on Swiss Avenue burnt to timbers. All the glass blown out of the windows. It had been the same in Oklahoma City. What the hell had happened to all those Dead guys in those houses? And they were the big city bloodsuckers, too, the smart ones that called themselves vampires.

How she'd laughed when Killer and Davis had told her that, that those Dead guys went around in three-piece suits and listened to classical music and called themselves vampires. Baby Jenks could have laughed herself to death. Davis thought it was pretty funny too, but Killer just kept warning her about them. Stay away from them.

Killer and Davis, and Tim and Russ, had taken her by the Swiss Avenue coven house just before she left them to go to Gun Barrel City.

"You got to always know where it is," Davis had said. "Then stay away from it."

They'd showed her the coven houses in every big city they hit. But it was when they showed her the first one in St. Louis that they'd told her the whole story.

She'd been real happy with the Fang Gang since they left Detroit, feeding off the men they lured out of the roadside beer joints. Tim and Russ were OK guys, but Killer and Davis were her special friends and they were the leaders of the Fang Gang.

Now and then they'd gone into town and found some little shack of a place, all deserted, with maybe two bums in there or something, men who looked kinda like her dad, wearing bill caps and with real calloused hands from the work they did. And they'd have a feast in there on those guys. You could always live off that kind, Killer told her, because nobody gives a damn what happens to them. They'd strike fast, kachoom!—drinking the blood quick, draining them right down to the last heartbeat. It wasn't fun to torture people like that, Killer said. You had to feel sorry for them. You did what you did, then you burnt down the shack, or you took them outside and dug a hole real deep and stuck them down there. And if you couldn't do anything like that to cover it up, you did this little trick: cut your finger, let your Dead blood run over the bite where you'd sucked them dry, and look at that, the little puncture wounds just like to vanished. Flash!

Nobody'd ever figure it out; it looked like stroke or heart attack.

Baby Jenks had been having a ball. She could handle a full-sized Harley, carry a dead body with one arm, leap over the hood of a car, it was fantastic. And she hadn't had the damn dream then, the dream that had started up in Gun Barrel City—with those redheaded twins and that woman's body lying on an altar. *What were they doing?*

What would she do now if she couldn't find the Fang Gang? Out in California the Vampire Lestat was going on stage two nights from now. And every Dead guy in creation would be there, leastways that's how she figured it, and that's how the Fang Gang had figured it and they were all supposed to be together. So what the hell was she doing lost from the Fang Gang and headed for a jerkwater city like St. Louis?

All she wanted was for everything to be like it had been before, goddamn it. Oh, the blood was good, yum, it was so good, even now that she was alone and had to work up her nerve, the way it had been this evening, to pull into a gas station and lure the old guy out back. Oh, yeah, snap, when she'd gotten her hands on his neck, and the blood came, it had been just fine, it was hamburgers and french fries and strawberry shakes, it was beer and chocolate sundaes. It was mainline, and coke and hash. It was better than screwing! It was all of it.

But everything had been better when the Fang Gang was with her. And they had understood when she got tired of the chewed-up old guys and said she wanted to taste something young and tender. No problem. Hey, it was a nice little runaway kid she needed, Killer said. Just close your eyes and wish. And sure enough, like that, they found him hitchhiking on the main road, just five miles out of some town in northern Missouri, name of Parker. Real pretty boy with long shaggy black hair, just twelve years old, but real tall for his age, with some beard on his chin, and trying to pass for sixteen. He'd climbed on her bike and they'd taken him into the woods. Then Baby Jenks laid down with him, real gentle like, and slurp, that was it for Parker.

It was delicious all right, juicy was the word. But she didn't know really whether it was any better than the mean old guys when you got down to it. And with them it was more sport. Good ole boy blood, Davis called it.

Davis was a black Dead guy and one damned good-looking black

Dead guy, as Baby Jenks saw it. His skin had a gold glow to it, the Dead glow which in the case of white Dead guys made them look like they were standing in a fluorescent light all the time. Davis had beautiful eyelashes too, just damn near unbelievably long and thick, and he decked himself out in all the gold he could find. He stole the gold rings and watches and chains and things off the victims.

Davis loved to dance. They all loved to dance. But Davis could outdance any of them. They'd go to the graveyards to dance, maybe round three a.m., after they'd all fed and buried the dead and all that jazz. They'd set the ghetto blaster radio on a tombstone and turn it way up, with the Vampire Lestat roaring. "The Grand Sabbat" song, that was the one that was good for dancing. And oh, man, how good it felt, twisting and turning and leaping in the air, or just watching Davis move and Killer move and Russ spinning in circles till he fell down. Now that was real Dead guy dancing.

Now if those big city bloodsuckers weren't hip to that, they were crazy.

God, she wished now that she could tell Davis about this dream she'd been having since Gun Barrel City. How it had come to her in her mom's trailer, zap, the first time when she'd been sitting waiting. It was so clear for a dream, those two women with the red hair, and the body lying there with its skin all black and crackled like. And what the hell was that on the plates in the dream? Yeah, it had been a heart on one plate and a brain on the other. Christ. All those people kneeling around that body and those plates. It was creepy. And she'd had it over and over again since then. Why, she was having it every goddamn time she shut her eyes and again right before she dug her way out of wherever she'd been hiding by daylight.

Killer and Davis would understand. They'd know if it meant something. They wanted to teach her everything.

When they first hit St. Louis on their way south, the Fang Gang had headed off the boulevard into one of those big dark streets with iron gates that they call "a private place" in St. Louis. It was the Central West End down here, they said. Baby Jenks had liked those big trees. There just aren't enough big trees in south Texas. There wasn't much of nothing in south Texas. And here the trees were so big their branches made a roof over your head. And the streets were full of

noisy rustling leaves and the houses were big, with peaked roofs and the lights buried deep inside them. The coven house was made of brick and had what Killer called Moorish arches.

"Don't go any closer," Davis had said. Killer just laughed. Killer wasn't scared of the big city Dead. Killer had been made sixty years ago, he was old. He knew everything.

"But they will try to hurt you, Baby Jenks," he said, walking his Harley just a little farther up the street. He had a lean long face, wore a gold earring in his ear, and his eyes were small, kind of thoughtful. "See, this one's an old coven, been in St. Louis since the turn of the century."

"But why would they want to hurt us?" Baby Jenks had asked. She was real curious about that house. What did the Dead do who lived in houses? What kind of furniture did they have? Who paid the bills, for God's sakes?

Seems like she could see a chandelier in one of those front rooms, through the curtains. A big fancy chandelier. Man! Now that's living.

"Oh, they got all that down," said Davis, reading her mind. "You don't think the neighbors think they're real people? Look at that car in the drive, you know what that is? That's a Bugatti, baby. And the other one beside it, a Mercedes-Benz."

What the hell was wrong with a pink Cadillac? That's what she'd like to have, a big gas-guzzling convertible that she could push to a hundred and twenty on the open stretch. And that's what had got her into trouble, got her to Detroit, an asshole with a Cadillac convertible. But just 'cause you were Dead didn't mean you had to drive a Harley and sleep in the dirt every day, did it?

"We're free, darlin'," Davis said, reading her thoughts. "Don't you see? There's a lotta baggage goes with this big city life. Tell her, Killer. And you ain't getting me in no house like that, sleeping in a box under the floorboards."

He broke up. Killer broke up. She broke up too. But what the hell was it like in there? Did they turn on the late show and watch the vampire movies? Davis was really rolling on the ground.

"The fact is, Baby Jenks," Killer said, "we're rogues to them, they wanna run everything. Like they don't think we have a right to be Dead. Like when they make a new vampire as they call it, it's a big

ceremony."

"Like what happens, like a wedding or something you mean?"

More laughter from those two.

"Not exactly," Killer said, "more like a funeral!"

They were making too much noise. Surely those Dead guys in the house were going to hear them. But Baby Jenks wasn't afraid if Killer wasn't afraid. Where were Russ and Tim, gone off hunting?

"But the point is, Baby Jenks," said Killer, "they have all these rules, and I'll tell you what, they're spreading it all over that they're going to get the Vampire Lestat the night of his concert, but you know what, they're reading his book like it was the Bible. They're using all that language he used, Dark Gift, Dark Trick, I tell you it's the stupidest thing I've ever seen, they're going to burn the guy at the stake and then use his book like it was Emily Post or Miss Manners—"

"They'll never get Lestat," Davis had sneered. "No way, man. You can't kill the Vampire Lestat, that is flat out impossible. It has been tried, you see, and it has failed. Now that is one cat who is utterly and completely immortal."

"Hell, they're going out there same as we are," Killer said, "to join up with the cat if he wants us."

Baby Jenks didn't understand the whole thing. She didn't know who Emily Post was or Miss Manners either. And weren't we all supposed to be immortal? And why would the Vampire Lestat want to be running around with the Fang Gang? I mean he was a rock star, for Chrissakes. Probably had his own limousine. And was he ever one adorable-looking guy, Dead or alive! Blond hair to die for and a smile that just made you wanna roll over and let him bite your goddamn neck!

She'd tried to read the Vampire Lestat's book—the whole history of Dead guys back to ancient times and all—but there were just too many big words and konk, she was asleep.

Killer and Davis said she'd find out she could read real fast now if she just stuck with it. They carried copies of Lestat's book around with them, and the first one, the one with the title she could never get straight, something like "conversations with the vampire," or "talking with the vampire," or "getting to meet the vampire," or something like that. Davis would read out loud from that one sometimes, but

Baby Jenks couldn't take it in, snore! The Dead Guy, Louis, or whoever he was, had been made Dead down in New Orleans and the book was full of stuff about banana leaves and iron railings and Spanish moss.

"Baby Jenks, they know everything, the old European ones," Davis had said. "They know how it started, they know we can go on and on if we hang in there, live to be a thousand years old and turn into white marble."

"Gee, that's just great, Davis," Baby Jenks said. "It's bad enough now not being able to walk into a Seven Eleven under those lights without people looking at you. Who wants to look like white marble?"

"Baby Jenks, you don't need anything anymore from the Seven Eleven," Davis said real calmly. But he got the point.

Forget the books. Baby Jenks did love the Vampire Lestat's music, and those songs just kept giving her a lot, especially that one about Those Who Must Be Kept—the Egyptian King and Queen—though to tell the truth she didn't know what the hell it meant till Killer explained.

"They're the parents of all vampires, Baby Jenks, the Mother and the Father. See, we're all an unbroken line of blood coming down from the King and the Queen in ancient Egypt who are called Those Who Must Be Kept. And the reason you gotta keep them is if you destroy them, you destroy all of us, too."

Sounded like a bunch of bull to her.

"Lestat's seen the Mother and the Father," Davis said. "Found them hidden on a Greek island, so he knows that it's the truth. That's what he's been telling everybody with these songs—and it's the truth."

"And the Mother and the Father don't move or speak or drink blood, Baby Jenks," Killer said. He looked real thoughtful, sad, almost. "They just sit there and stare like they've done for thousands of years. Nobody knows what those two know."

"Probably nothing," Baby Jenks had said disgustedly. "And I tell you, this is some kind of being immortal! What do you mean the big city Dead guys can kill us? Just how can they manage that?"

"Fire and sun can always do it," Killer answered just a touch impatient. "I told you that. Now mind me, please. You can always fight the big city Dead guys. You're tough. Fact is, the big city Dead

are as scared of you as you will ever be of them. You just beat it when you see a Dead guy you don't know. That's a rule that's followed by everybody who's Dead."

After they'd left the coven house, she'd got another big surprise from Killer: he'd told her about the vampire bars. Big fancy places in New York and San Francisco and New Orleans, where the Dead guys met in the back rooms while the damn fool human beings drank and danced up front. In there, no other Dead guy could kill you, city slicker, European, or rogue like her.

"You run for one of those places," he told her, "if the big city Dead guys ever get on your case."

"I'm not old enough to go in a bar," Baby Jenks said.

That really did it. He and Davis laughed themselves sick. They were falling off their motorcycles.

"You find a vampire bar, Baby Jenks," Killer said, "you just give them the Evil Eye and say 'Let me in.' "

Yeah, she'd done that Evil Eye on people and made them do stuff, it worked OK. And truth was, they'd never seen the vampire bars. Just heard about them. Didn't know where they were. She'd had lots of questions when they finally left St. Louis.

But as she made her way north towards the same city now, the only thing in the world she cared about was getting to that same damned coven house. Big city Dead guys, here I come. She'd go clean out of her head if she had to go on alone.

The music in the earphones stopped. The tape had run out. She couldn't stand the silence in the roar of the wind. The dream came back; she saw those twins again, the soldiers coming. Jesus. If she didn't block it out, the whole damn dream would replay itself like the tape.

Steadying the bike with one hand, she reached in her jacket to open the little cassette player. She flipped the tape over. "Sing on, man!" she said, her voice sounding shrill and tiny to her over the roar of the wind, if she heard it at all.

Of Those Who Must Be Kept
What can we know?
Can any explanation save us?

Yes sir, that was the one she loved. That's the one she'd been listening to when she fell asleep waiting for her mother to come home from work in Gun Barrel City. It wasn't the words that got to her, it was the way he sang it, groaning like Bruce Springsteen into the mike and making it just break your heart.

It was kind of like a hymn in a way. It had that kind of sound, yet Lestat was right there in the middle of it, singing to her, and there was a steady drumbeat that went to her bones.

"OK, man, OK, you're the only goddamn Dead guy I've got now, Lestat, keep singing!"

Five minutes to St. Louis, and there she was thinking about her mother again, how strange it had all been, how bad.

Baby Jenks hadn't even told Killer or Davis why she was going home, though they knew, they understood.

Baby Jenks had to do it, she had to get her parents before the Fang Gang went out west. And even now she didn't regret it. Except for that strange moment when her mother was dying there on the floor.

Now Baby Jenks had always hated her mother. She thought her mother was just a real fool, making crosses every day of her life with little pink seashells and bits of glass and then taking them to the Gun Barrel City Flea Market and selling them for ten dollars. And they were ugly, too, just real ready-made junk, those things with a little twisted-up Jesus in the middle made up of tiny red and blue beads and things.

But it wasn't just that, it was everything her mother had ever done that got to Baby Jenks and made her disgusted. Going to church, that was bad enough, but talking the way she did to people so sweet and just putting up with her husband's drinking and always saying nice things about everybody.

Baby Jenks never bought a word of it. She used to lie there on her bunk in the trailer thinking to herself, What really makes that lady tick? When is she going to blow up like a stick of dynamite? Or is she just too stupid? Her mother had stopped looking Baby Jenks in the eye years ago. When Baby Jenks was twelve she'd come in and said, "You know I done it, don't you? I hope to God you don't think I'm no virgin." And her mother just faded out, like, just looked away with her eyes wide and empty and stupid, and went back to her work,

humming like always as she made those seashell crosses.

One time some big city person told her mother that she made real folk art. “They’re making a fool of you,” Baby Jenks had said. “Don’t you know that? They didn’t buy one of those ugly things, did they? You know what those things look like to me? I’ll tell you what they look like. They look like great big dime-store earrings!”

No arguing. Just turning the other cheek. “You want some supper, honey?”

It was like an open and shut case, Baby Jenks figured. So she had headed out of Dallas early, making Cedar Creek Lake in less than an hour, and there was the familiar sign that meant her sweet little old home town:

WELCOME TO GUN BARREL CITY. WE SHOOT STRAIGHT WITH YOU.

She hid her Harley behind the trailer when she got there, nobody home, and lay down for a nap, Lestat singing in the earphones, and the steam iron ready by her side. When her mother came in, slam bam, thank you, ma’am, she’d take her out with it.

Then the dream happened. Why, she wasn’t even asleep when it started. It was like Lestat faded out, and the dream pulled her down and snap:

She was in a place full of sunlight. A clearing on the side of a mountain. And these two twins were there, beautiful women with soft wavy red hair, and they knelt like angels in church with their hands folded. Lots of people around, people in long robes, like people in the Bible. And there was music, too, a creepy thumping and the sound of a horn playing, real mournful. But the worst part was the dead body, the burned body of the woman on a stone slab. Why, she looked like she’d been cooked, lying there! And on the plates, there was a fat shiny heart and a brain. Yep, sure thing, that was a heart and a brain.

Baby Jenks had woken up, scared. To hell with that. Her mother was standing in the door. Baby Jenks jumped up and banged her with the steam iron till she stopped moving. Really bashed in her head. And she should have been dead, but she wasn’t yet, and then that crazy moment came.

Her mother was lying there on the floor, half dead, staring, just like her daddy would be later. And Baby Jenks was sitting in the chair, one blue jean leg thrown over the arm, leaning on her elbow, or twirling

one of her braids, just waiting, thinking about the twins in the dream sort of, and the body and the things on the plates, what was it all for? But mostly just waiting. Die, you stupid bitch, go on, die, I'm not slamming you again!

Even now Baby Jenks wasn't sure what had happened. It was like her mother's thoughts had changed, grown wider, bigger. Maybe she was floating up on the ceiling somewhere the way Baby Jenks had been when she nearly died before Killer saved her. But whatever was the cause, the thoughts were just amazing. Just flat out amazing. Like her mother knew everything! All about good and bad and how important it was to love, really love, and how it was so much more than just all the rules about don't drink, don't smoke, pray to Jesus. It wasn't preacher stuff. It was just gigantic.

Her mother, lying there, had thought about how the lack of love in her daughter, Baby Jenks, had been as awful as a bad gene that made Baby Jenks blind and crippled. Yet it didn't matter. It was going to be all right. Baby Jenks would rise out of what was going on now, just as she had almost done before Killer had got to her, and there would be a finer understanding of everything. What the hell did that mean? Something about everything around us being part of one big thing, the fibers in the carpet, the leaves outside the window, the water dripping in the sink, the clouds moving over Cedar Creek Lake, and the bare trees, and they weren't really so ugly as Baby Jenks had thought. No, the whole thing was almost too beautiful to describe suddenly. And Baby Jenks' mother had always known about this! Seen it that way. Baby Jenks' mother forgave Baby Jenks everything. Poor Baby Jenks. She didn't know. She didn't know about the green grass. Or the seashells shining in the light of the lamp.

Then Baby Jenks' mother had died. Thank God! Enough! But Baby Jenks had been crying. Then she'd carried the body out of the trailer and buried it in back, real deep, feeling how good it was to be one of the Dead and so strong and able to just heft those shovels full of dirt.

Then her father came home. This one's really for fun! She buried him while he was still alive. She'd never forget the look on his face when he came in the door and saw her with the fire ax. "Well, if it ain't Lizzie Borden."

Who the hell was Lizzie Borden?

Then the way his chin stuck out, and his fist came flying towards her, he was so sure of himself! "You little slut!" She split his goddamn forehead in half. Yeah, that part was great, feeling the skull cave—"Go down, you bastard!"—and so was shoveling dirt on his face while he was still looking at her. Paralyzed, couldn't move, thinking he was a kid again on a farm or something in New Mexico. Just baby talk. *You son of a bitch, I always knew you had shit for brains. Now I can smell it!*

But why the hell had she ever gone down there? Why had she left the Fang Gang?

If she'd never left them, she'd be with them now in San Francisco, with Killer and Davis, waiting to see Lestat on the stage. They might have even made the vampire bar out there or something. Leastways, if they had ever gotten there. If something wasn't really really wrong.

And what the hell was she doing now backtracking? Maybe she should have gone along out west. Two nights, that was all that was left.

Hell, maybe she'd rent a motel room when the concert happened, so she could watch it on TV. But before that, she had to find some Dead guys in St. Louis. She couldn't go on alone.

How to find the Central West End. Where was it?

This boulevard looked familiar. She was cruising along, praying no meddling cop would start after her. She'd outrun him of course, she always did, though she dreamed of getting just one of those damn sons-a-bitches on a lonely road. But the fact was she didn't want to be chased out of St. Louis.

Now this looked like something she knew. Yeah, this was the Central West End or whatever they called it and she turned off now to the right and went down an old street with those big cool leafy trees all around her. Made her think of her mother again, the green grass, the clouds. Little sob in her throat.

If she just wasn't so damn lonesome! But then she saw the gates, yeah, this was the street. Killer had told her that Dead guys never really forget anything. Her brain would be like a little computer. Maybe it was true. These were the gates all right, great big iron gates, opened wide and coveted with dark green ivy. Guess they never really close up "a private place."

She slowed to a rumbling crawl, then cut the motor altogether. Too

noisy in this dark valley of mansions. Some bitch might call the cops. She had to get off to walk her bike. Her legs weren't long enough to do it any other way. But that was OK. She liked walking in these deep dead leaves. She liked this whole quiet street.

Boy, if I was a big city vampire I'd live here too, she thought, and then far off down the street, she saw the coven house, saw the brick walls and the white Moorish arches. Her heart was really going!

Burnt up!

At first she didn't believe it! Then she saw it was true all right, big streaks of black on the bricks, and the windows all blown out, not a pane of glass left anywhere. Jesus Christ! She was going crazy. She walked her bike up closer, biting her lip so hard she could taste her own blood. Just look at it. Who the hell was doing it! Teeny bits of glass all over the lawn and even in the trees so the whole place was kind of sparkling in a way that human beings probably couldn't make out. Looked to her like nightmare Christmas decorations. And the stink of burning wood. It was just hanging there.

She was going to cry! She was going to start screaming! But then she heard something. Not a real sound, but the things that Killer had taught her to listen for. There was a Dead guy in there!

She couldn't believe her luck, and she didn't give a damn what happened, she was going in there. Yeah, somebody in there. It was real faint. She went a few more feet, crunching real loud in the dead leaves. No light but something moving in there, and it knew she was coming. And as she stood there, heart hammering, afraid, and frantic to go in, somebody came out on the front porch, a Dead guy looking right at her.

Praise the Lord, she whispered. And he wasn't no jerkoff in a three-piece suit, either. No, he was a young kid, maybe no more than two years older than her when they did it to him, and he looked real special. Like he had silver hair for one thing, just real pretty short curly gray hair, and that always looked great on a young person. And he was tall too, about six feet, and skinny, a real elegant guy, the way she saw it. He had an icy look to his skin it was so white, and he wore a dark brown turtleneck shirt, real smooth across his chest, and a fancy cut brown leather jacket and pants, nothing at all like biker leather. Really boss, this guy, and cuter than any Dead guy in the Fang

Gang.

"Come inside!" he said in a hiss. "Hurry."

She like to flew up the steps. The air was still full of tiny ashes, and it hurt her eyes and made her cough. Half the porch had fallen in. Carefully she made her way into the hallway. Some of the stairs was left, but the roof way above was wide open. And the chandelier had fallen down, all crushed and full of soot. Real spooky, like a haunted house this place.

The Dead guy was in the living room or what was left of it, kicking and picking through burnt-up stuff, furniture and things, sort of in a rage, it looked like.

"Baby Jenks, is it?" he said, flashing her a weird fake smile, full of pearly teeth including his little fangs, and his gray eyes glittering kind of. "And you're lost, aren't you?"

OK, another goddamn mind reader like Davis. And one with a foreign accent.

"Yeah, so what?" she said. And real surprising, she caught his name like as if it was a ball and he'd tossed it to her: Laurent. Now that was a classy name, French sounding.

"Stay right there, Baby Jenks," he said. The accent was French too, probably. "There were three in this coven and two were incinerated. The police can't detect the remains but you will know them if you step on them and you will not like it."

Christ! And he was telling her the truth, 'cause there was one of them right there, no jive, at the back of the hall, and it looked like a half-burnt suit of clothes lying there, kind of vaguely in the outline of a man, and sure thing, she could tell by the smell, there'd been a Dead guy in the clothes, and just the sleeves and the pant legs and shoes were left. In the middle of it all there was a kind of grayish messy stuff, looked more like grease and powder than ashes. Funny the way the shirt sleeve was still neatly sticking out of the coat sleeve. Now that had been a three-piece suit maybe.

She was getting sick. Could you get sick when you were Dead? She wanted to get out of here. What if whatever had done this was coming back? Immortal, tie a can to it!

"Don't move," the Dead guy said to her, "and we'll be leaving together just as soon as we can."

"Like now, OK!" she said. She was shaking, goddamn it. This is what they meant when they said cold sweat!

He'd found a tin box and he was taking all the unburnt money out of it.

"Hey, man, I'm splitting," she said. She could feel something around here, and it had nothing to do with that grease spot on the floor. She was thinking of the burnt-up coven houses in Dallas and Oklahoma City, the way the Fang Gang had vanished on her. He got all that, she could tell. His face got soft, real cute again. He threw down the box and came towards her so fast it scared her worse.

"Yes, *ma chère*," he said in a real nice voice, "all those coven houses, exactly. The East Coast has been burnt out like a circuit of lights. There is no answer at the coven house in Paris or the coven house in Berlin."

He took her arm as they headed for the front door.

"Who the hell's doing this!" she said.

"Who the hell knows, *chérie?* It destroys the houses, the vampire bars, whatever rogues it finds. We have got to get out of here. Now make the bike go."

But she had come to a halt. *Something out here.* She was standing at the edge of the porch. Something. She was as scared to go on as she was to go back in the house.

"What's wrong?" he asked her in a whisper.

How dark this place was with these great big trees and the houses, they all looked haunted, and she could hear something, something real low like … like something's breathing. Something like that.

"Baby Jenks? Move it now!"

"But where are we going?" she asked. This thing, whatever it was, it was almost a sound.

"The only place we can go. To him, darling, to the Vampire Lestat. He is out there in San Francisco waiting, unharmed!"

"Yeah?" she said, staring at the dark street in front of her. "Yeah, right, to the Vampire Lestat." Just ten steps to the bike. Take it, Baby Jenks. He was about to leave without her. "No, don't you do that, you son of a bitch, don't you touch my bike!"

But it was a sound now, wasn't it? Baby Jenks had never heard anything quite like it. But you hear a lot of things when you're Dead.

You hear trains miles away, and people talking on planes over your head.

The Dead guy heard it. No, he heard her hearing it! "What is it?" he whispered. Jesus, he was scared. And now he heard it all by himself too.

He pulled her down the steps. She stumbled and almost fell, but he lifted her off her feet and put her on the bike.

The noise was getting really loud. It was coming in beats like music. And it was so loud now she couldn't even hear what this Dead guy was saying to her. She twisted the key, turned the handles to give the Harley gas, and the Dead guy was on the bike behind her, but Jesus, the noise, she couldn't think. She couldn't even hear the engine of the bike!

She looked down, trying to see what the hell was going on, was it running, she couldn't even feel it. Then she looked up and she knew she was looking towards the thing that was sending the noise. It was in the darkness, behind the trees.

The Dead guy had leaped off the bike, and he was jabbering away at it, as if he could see it. But no, he was looking around like a crazy man talking to himself. But she couldn't hear a word. She just knew it was there, it was looking at them, and the crazy guy was wasting his breath!

She was off the Harley. It had fallen over. The noise stopped. Then there was a loud ringing in her ears.

"—anything you want!" the Dead guy next to her was saying, "just anything, name it, we will do it. We are your servants—!" Then he ran past Baby Jenks, nearly knocking her over and grabbing up her bike.

"Hey!" she shouted, but just as she started for him, he burst into flames! He screamed.

And then Baby Jenks screamed too. She screamed and screamed. The burning Dead guy was turning over and over on the ground, just pinwheeling. And behind her, the coven house exploded. She felt the heat on her back. She saw stuff flying through the air. The sky looked like high noon.

Oh, sweet Jesus, let me live, let me live!

For one split second she thought her heart had burst. She meant to look down to see if her chest had broken open and her heart was

spewing out blood like molten lava from a volcano, but then the heat built up inside her head and swoosh! she was gone.

She was rising up and up through a dark tunnel, and then high above she floated, looking down on the whole scene.

Oh yeah, just like before. And there it was, the thing that had killed them, a white figure standing in a thicket of trees. And there was the Dead guy's clothes smoking on the pavement. And her own body just burning away.

Through the flames she could see the pure black outline of her own skull and her bones. But it didn't frighten her. It didn't really seem that interesting at all.

It was the white figure that amazed her. It looked just like a statue, like the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Catholic church. She stared at the sparkling silver threads that seemed to move out from the figure in all directions, threads made out of some kind of dancing light. And as she moved higher, she saw that the silver threads stretched out, tangling with other threads, to make a giant net all over the whole world. All through the net were Dead guys, caught, like helpless flies in a web. Tiny pinpoints of light, pulsing, and connected to the white figure, and almost beautiful, the sight of it, except it was so sad. Oh, poor souls of all the Dead guys locked in indestructible matter unable to grow old or die.

But she was free. The net was way far away from her now. She was seeing so many things.

Like there were thousands and thousands of other dead people floating up here, too, in a great hazy gray layer. Some were lost, others were fighting with each other, and some were looking back down to where they'd died, so pitiful, like they didn't know or wouldn't believe they were dead. There was even a couple of them trying to be seen and heard by the living, but that they could not do.

She knew she was dead. This had happened before. She was just passing through this murky lair of sad lingering people. She was on her way! And the pitifulness of her life on earth caused her sorrow. But it was not the important thing now.

The light was shining again, the magnificent light she'd glimpsed when she'd almost died that first time around. She moved towards it, into it. And this was truly beautiful. Never had she seen such colors,

such radiance, never had she heard the pure music that she was hearing now. There were no words to describe this; it was beyond any language she'd ever known. And this time nobody would bring her back!

Because the one coming towards her, to take her and to help her—it was her mother! And her mother wouldn't let her go.

Never had she felt such love as she felt for her mother; but then love surrounded her; the light, the color, the love—these things were utterly indistinguishable.

Ah, that poor Baby Jenks, she thought as she looked down to earth just one last time. But she wasn't Baby Jenks now. No, not at all.

3
THE GODDESS PANDORA

Once we had the words.
Ox and Falcon. Plow.
There was clarity.
Savage as horns
curved.
We lived in stone rooms.
We hung our hair out the windows and up it climbed the men.
A garden behind the ears, the curls.
On each hill a king
of that hill. At night the threads were pulled out
of the tapestries. The unravelled men screamed.
All moons revealed. We had the words.
….

STAN RICE
from "The Words Once"
Whiteboy (1976)

She was a tall creature, clad in black, with only her eyes uncovered, her strides long as she moved with inhuman speed up the treacherous snow-covered path.

Almost clear this night of tiny stars in the high thin air of the Himalayas, and far ahead—beyond her powers of reckoning distance—loomed the massive pleated flank of Everest, splendidly visible above a thick wreath of turbulent white cloud. It took her breath away each time she glanced at it, not only because it was so beautiful, but because it was so seemingly full of meaning, though no true meaning was there.

Worship this mountain? Yes, one could do that with impunity, because the mountain would never answer. The whistling wind that chilled her skin was the voice of nothing and no one. And this

incidental and utterly indifferent grandeur made her want to cry.

So did the sight of the pilgrims far below her, a thin stream of ants it seemed, winding their way up an impossibly narrow road. Too unspeakably sad their delusion. Yet she moved towards the same hidden mountain temple. She moved towards the same despicable and deceiving god.

She was suffering from the cold. Frost covered her face, her eyelids. It clung in tiny crystals to her eyelashes. And each step in the driving wind was hard even for her. Pain or death it couldn't cause her, really; she was too old for that. It was something mental, her suffering. It came from the tremendous resistance of the elements, from seeing nothing for hours but the sheer white and dazzling snows.

No matter. A deep shiver of alarm had passed through her nights ago, in the crowded stinking streets of Old Delhi, and every hour or so since had repeated itself, as if the earth had begun to tremble at its core.

At certain moments, she was sure that the Mother and the Father must be waking. Somewhere far away in a crypt where her beloved Marius had placed them, Those Who Must Be Kept had stirred at last. Nothing less than such a resurrection could transmit this powerful yet vague signal—Akasha and Enkil rising, after six thousand years of horrifying stillness, from the throne they shared.

But that was fancy, wasn't it? Might as well ask the mountain to speak. For these were no mere legend to her, the ancient parents of all blood drinkers. Unlike so many of their spawn, she had seen them with her own eyes. At the door of their shrine she had been made immortal; she had crept forward on her knees and touched the Mother; she had pierced the smooth shining surface that had once been the Mother's human skin and caught in her open mouth the gushing stream of the Mother's blood. What a miracle it had been even then, the living blood pouring forth from the lifeless body before the wounds miraculously closed.

But in those early centuries of magnificent belief she had shared Marius's conviction that the Mother and Father merely slumbered, that the time would come when they would wake and speak to their children once again.

In the candlelight, she and Marius had sung hymns to them

together; she herself had burnt the incense, placed before them the flowers; she had sworn never to reveal the location of the sanctuary lest other blood drinkers come to destroy Marius, to steal his charges and feast gluttonously on the original and most powerful blood.

But that was long ago when the world was divided among tribes and empires, when heroes and emperors were made gods in a day. In that time elegant philosophical ideas had caught her fancy.

She knew now what it meant to live forever. Tell it to the mountain.

Danger. She felt it again coursing through her, a scorching current. Then gone. And then a glimpse of a green and humid place, a place of soft earth and stifling growth. But it vanished almost immediately.

She paused, the moonlit snow blinding her for a moment, and she raised her eyes to the stars, twinkling through a thin fleece of passing cloud. She listened for other immortal voices. But she heard no clear and vital transmission—only a dim throb from the temple to which she was going, and from far behind her, rising out of the dark warrens of a dirty overcrowded city, the dead, electronic recordings of that mad blood drinker, "the rock star," the Vampire Lestat.

Doomed that impetuous modern fledgling who had dared to fashion garbled songs of bits and pieces of old truths. She had seen countless young ones rise and fall.

Yet his audacity intrigued her, even as it shocked her. Could it be that the alarm she heard was somehow connected to his plaintive yet raucous songs?

Akasha, Enkil
Hearken to your children

How dare he speak the ancient names to the mortal world? It seemed impossible, an offense to reason, that such a creature not be dismissed out of hand. Yet the monster, reveling in improbable celebrity, revealed secrets he could have learned only from Marius himself. And where was Marius, who for two thousand years had taken Those Who Must Be Kept from one secret sanctuary to another? Her heart would break if she let herself think of Marius, of the quarrels that had long ago divided them.

But the recorded voice of Lestat was gone now, swallowed by other

faint electric voices, vibrations rising from cities and villages, and the ever audible cry of mortal souls. As so often happened, her powerful ears could separate no one signal. The rising tide had overwhelmed her—shapeless, horrific—so that she closed herself off. Only the wind again.

Ah, what must the collective voices of the earth be to the Mother and the Father whose powers had grown, inevitably, from the dawn of recorded time? Had they the power, as she had still, to shut off the flow, or to select from time to time the voices they might hear? Perhaps they were as passive in this regard as in any other, and it was the unstoppable din that kept them fixed, unable to reason, as they heard the endless cries, mortal and immortal, of the entire world.

She looked at the great jagged peak before her. She must continue. She tightened the covering over her face. She walked on.

And as the trail led her to a small promontory, she saw her destination at last. Across an immense glacier, the temple rose from a high cliff, a stone structure of near invisible whiteness, its bell tower disappearing into the swirling snow that had just begun to fall.

How long would it take her to reach it, even fast as she could walk? She knew what she must do, yet she dreaded it. She must lift her arms, defy the laws of nature and her own reason, and rise over the gulf that separated her from the temple, gently descending only when she had reached the other side of the frozen gorge. No other power she possessed could make her feel so insignificant, so inhuman, so far from the common earthly being she had once been.

But she wanted to reach the temple. She had to. And so she did raise her arms slowly, with conscious grace. Her eyes closed for the moment as she willed herself upwards, and she felt her body rising immediately as if it were weightless, a force seemingly unfettered by substance, riding by sheer intention the wind itself.

For a long moment she let the winds buffet her; she let her body twist, drift. She rose higher and higher, allowing herself to turn away from the earth altogether, the clouds flying past her, as she faced the stars. How heavy her garments felt; was she not ready to become invisible? Would that not be the next step? A speck of dust in the eye of God, she thought. Her heart was aching. The horror of this, to be utterly unconnected.… The tears welled in her eyes.

And as always happened in such moments, the vague shining human past she clung to seemed more than ever a myth to be cherished as all practical belief died away. *That I lived, that I loved, that my flesh was warm*. She saw Marius, her maker, not as he was now, but then, a young immortal burning with a supernatural secret: "Pandora, my dearest …" "Give it to me, I beg you." "Pandora, come with me to ask the blessing of the Mother and the Father. Come into the shrine."

Unanchored, in despair, she might have forgotten her destination. She could have let herself drift towards the rising sun. But the alarm came again, the silent, pulsating signal of *Danger*, to remind her of her purpose. She spread out her arms, willed herself to face the earth again, and saw the temple courtyard with its smoking fires directly below. *Yes, there*.

The speed of her descent astonished her; momentarily, it shattered her reason. She found herself standing in the courtyard, her body aching for one flashing instant, and then cold and still.

The scream of the wind was distant. The music of the temple came through the walls, a dizzying throb, the tambourines and drums driving with it, voices melding into one gruesome and repetitive sound. And before her were the pyres, spitting, crackling, the dead bodies darkening as they lay heaped on the burning wood. The stench sickened her. Yet for a long time, she watched the flames working slowly at the sizzling flesh, the blackening stumps, the hair that gave off sudden wisps of white smoke. The smell suffocated her; the cleansing mountain air could not reach her here.

She stared at the distant wooden door to the inner sanctum. She would test the power again, bitterly. *There*. And she found herself moving over the threshold, the door opened, the light of the inner chamber dazzling her, along with the warm air and the deafening chant.

"Azim! Azim! Azim!" the celebrants sang over and over, their backs turned to her as they pressed to the center of the candle-lighted hall, their hands raised, twisting at the wrists in rhythm with their rocking heads. "Azim! Azim! Azim-Azim-Azim! Ahhhh Zeeeem!" Smoke rose from the censers; an endless swarm of figures turned, circling in place on their bare feet, but they did not see her. Their eyes were closed, their dark faces smooth, only their mouths moving as they repeated

the revered name.

She pushed into the thick of them, men and women in rags, others in gorgeous colored silks and clattering gold jewelry, all repeating the invocation in horrifying monotony. She caught the smell of fever, starvation, dead bodies fallen in the press, unheeded in the common delirium. She clung to a marble column, as if to anchor herself in the turbulent stream of movement and noise.

And then she saw Azim in the middle of the crush. His dark bronze skin was moist and gleaming in the light of the candles, his head bound in a black silk turban, his long embroidered robes stained with a mingling of mortal and immortal blood. His black eyes, ringed in kohl, were enormous. To the hard underlying beat of the drums, he danced, undulating, thrusting his fists forward and drawing them back as though pounding upon an invisible wall. His slippered feet tapped the marble in frenzied rhythm. Blood oozed from the corners of his mouth. His expression was one of utter mindless absorption.

Yet he knew that she had come. And from the center of his dance, he looked directly at her, and she saw his blood-smeared lips curl in a smile.

Pandora, my beautiful immortal Pandora.…

Glutted with the feast he was, plump and heated with it as she had seldom ever seen an immortal become. He threw back his head, spun round, and gave a shrill cry. His acolytes came forward, slashing at his outstretched wrists with their ceremonial knives.

And the faithful surged against him, mouths uplifted to catch the sacred blood as it gushed out. The chant grew louder, more insistent over the strangled cries of those nearest him. And suddenly, she saw him being lifted, his body stretched out full length on the shoulders of his followers, golden slippers pointed to the high tessellated ceiling, the knives slashing at his ankles and again at his wrists where the wounds had already closed.

The maddened crowd seemed to expand as its movements grew more frantic, reeking bodies slamming against her, oblivious to the coldness and hardness of the ancient limbs beneath her soft shapeless wool clothes. She did not move. She let herself be surrounded, drawn in. She saw Azim lowered to the ground once more; bled, moaning, wounds already healed. He beckoned to her to join him. Silently she

refused.

She watched as he reached out and snatched a victim, blindly, at random, a young woman with painted eyes and dangling golden earrings, gashing open her slender throat.

The crowd had lost the perfect shape of the syllables it chanted; it was now a simple wordless cry that came from every mouth.

Eyes wide as if in horror at his own power, Azim sucked the woman dry of blood in one great draught, then dashed the body on the stones before him where it lay mangled as the faithful surrounded it, hands out in supplication to their staggering god.

She turned her back; she went out in the cold air of the courtyard, moving away from the heat of the fires. Stink of urine, offal. She stood against the wall, gazing upwards, thinking of the mountain, paying no heed when the acolytes dragged past her the bodies of the newly dead and threw them into the flames.

She thought of the pilgrims she had seen on the road below the temple, the long chain that moved sluggishly day and night through the uninhabited mountains to this unnamed place. How many died without ever reaching this precipice? How many died outside the gates, waiting to be let in?

She loathed it. And yet it did not matter. It was an ancient horror. She waited. Then Azim called her.

She turned and moved back through the door and then through another into a small exquisitely painted antechamber where, standing on a red carpet bordered with rubies, he waited silently for her, surrounded by random treasures, offerings of gold and silver, the music in the hall lower, full of languor and fear.

"Dearest," he said. He took her face in his hands and kissed her. A heated stream of blood flowed out of his mouth into her, and for one rapturous moment her senses were filled with the song and dance of the faithful, the heady cries. Flooding warmth of mortal adoration, surrender. Love.

Yes, love. She saw Marius for one instant. She opened her eyes, and stepped back. For a moment she saw the walls with their painted peacocks, lilies; she saw the heaps of shimmering gold. Then she saw only Azim.

He was changeless as were his people, changeless as were the

villages from which they had come, wandering through snow and waste to find this horrid, meaningless end. One thousand years ago, Azim had begun his rule in this temple from which no worshiper ever departed alive. His supple golden skin nourished by an endless river of blood sacrifice had paled only slightly over the centuries, whereas her own flesh had lost its human blush in half the time. Only her eyes, and her dark brown hair perhaps, gave an immediate appearance of life. She had beauty, yes, she knew that, but he had a great surpassing vigor. *Evil*. Irresistible to his followers, shrouded in legend, he ruled, without past or future, as incomprehensible to her now as he had ever been.

She didn't want to linger. The place repelled her more than she wanted him to know. She told him silently of her purpose, the alarm that she had heard. Something wrong somewhere, something changing, something that has never happened before! And she told him too of the young blood drinker who recorded songs in America, songs full of truths about the Mother and the Father, whose names he knew. It was a simple opening of her mind, without drama.

She watched Azim, sensing his immense power, the ability with which he'd glean from her any random thought or idea, and shield from her the secrets of his own mind.

"Blessed Pandora," he said scornfully. "What do I care about the Mother and the Father? What are they to me? What do I care about your precious Marius? That he calls for help over and over! This is nothing to me!"

She was stunned. Marius calling for help. Azim laughed.

"Explain what you're saying," she said.

Again laughter. He turned his back to her. There was nothing she could do but wait. Marius had made her. All the world could hear Marius's voice, but she could not hear it. Was it an echo that had reached her, dim in its deflection, of a powerful cry that the others had heard? *Tell me, Azim. Why make an enemy of me?*

When he turned to her again, he was thoughtful, his round face plump, human-looking as he yielded to her, the backs of his hands fleshy and dimpled as he pressed them together just beneath his moist lower lip. He wanted something of her. There was no scorn or malice now.

“It’s a warning,” he said. “It comes over and over, echoing through a chain of listeners who carry it from its origins in some far-off place. We are all in danger. Then it is followed by a call for help, which is weaker. Help him that he may try to avert the danger. But in this there is little conviction. It is the warning above all that he would have us heed.”

“The words, what are they?”

He shrugged. “I do not listen. I do not care.”

“Ah!” She turned her back now on him. She heard him come towards her, felt his hands on her shoulders.

“You must answer *my* question now,” he said. He turned her to face him. “It is the dream of the twins that concerns me. What does this mean?”

Dream of the twins. She didn’t have an answer. The question didn’t make sense to her. She had had no such dream.

He regarded her silently, as if he believed she was lying. Then he spoke very slowly, evaluating her response carefully.

“Two women, red hair. Terrible things befall them. They come to me in troubling and unwelcome visions just before I would open my eyes. I see these women raped before a court of onlookers. Yet I do not know who they are or where this outrage takes place. And I am not alone in my questioning. Out there, scattered through the world, there are other dark gods who have these dreams and would know why they come to us now.”

Dark gods! We are not gods, she thought contemptuously.

He smiled at her. Were they not standing in his very temple? Could she not hear the moaning of the faithful? Could she not smell their blood?

“I know nothing of these two women,” she said. Twins, red hair. No. She touched his fingers gently, almost seductively. “Azim, don’t torment me. I want you to tell me about Marius. From where does his call come?”

How she hated him at this moment, that he might keep this secret from her.

“From where?” he asked her defiantly. “Ah, that is the crux, isn’t it? Do you think he would dare to lead us to the shrine of the Mother and the Father? If I thought that, I would answer him, oh, yes, oh, truly. I

would leave my temple to find him, of course. But he cannot fool us. He would rather see himself destroyed than reveal the shrine."

"From where is he calling?" she asked patiently.

"These dreams," he said, his face darkening with anger. "The dreams of the twins, this I would have explained!"

"And I would tell you who they are and what they mean, if only I knew." She thought of the songs of Lestat, the words she'd heard. Songs of Those Who Must Be Kept and crypts beneath European cities, songs of questing, sorrow. Nothing there of red-haired women, nothing….

Furious, he gestured for her to stop. "The Vampire Lestat," he said, sneering. "Do not speak of this abomination to me. Why hasn't he been destroyed already? Are the dark gods asleep like the Mother and the Father?"

He watched her, calculating. She waited.

"Very well. I believe you," he said finally. "You've told me what you know."

"Yes."

"I close my ears to Marius. I told you. Stealer of the Mother and the Father, let him cry for help until the end of time. But you, Pandora, for you I feel love as always, and so I will soil myself with these affairs. Cross the sea to the New World. Look in the frozen north beyond the last of the woodlands near the western sea. And there you may find Marius, trapped in a citadel of ice. He cries that he is unable to move. As for his warning, it is as vague as it is persistent. We are in danger. We must help him so that he may stop the danger. So that he may go to the Vampire Lestat."

"Ah. So it is the young one who has done this!"

The shiver passed through her, violent, painful. She saw in her mind's eye the blank, senseless faces of the Mother and the Father, indestructible monsters in human form. She looked at Azim in confusion. He had paused, but he wasn't finished. And she waited for him to go on.

"No," he said, his voice dropping, having lost its sharp edge of anger. "There is a danger, Pandora, yes. Great danger, and it does not require Marius to announce it. It has to do with the red-haired twins." How uncommonly earnest he was, how unguarded. "This I know," he

said, “because I was old before Marius was made. The twins, Pandora. Forget Marius. And hearken to your dreams.”

She was speechless, watching him. He looked at her for a long moment, and then his eyes appeared to grow smaller, to become solid. She could feel him drawing back, away from her and all the things of which they’d spoken. Finally, he no longer saw her.

He heard the insistent wails of his worshipers; he felt thirst again; he wanted hymns and blood. He turned and started out of the chamber, then he glanced back.

“Come with me, Pandora! Join me but for an hour!” His voice was drunken, unclear.

The invitation caught her off guard. She considered. It had been years since she had sought the exquisite pleasure. She thought not merely of the blood itself, but of the momentary union with another soul. And there it was, suddenly, waiting for her, among those who had climbed the highest mountain range on earth to seek this death. She thought also of the quest that lay before her—to find Marius—and of the sacrifices it would entail.

“Come, dearest.”

She took his hand. She let herself be led out of the room and into the center of the crowded hall. The brightness of the light startled her; yes, the blood again. The smell of humans pressed in on her, tormenting her.

The cry of the faithful was deafening. The stamp of human feet seemed to shake the painted walls, the glimmering gold ceiling. The incense burned her eyes. Faint memory of the shrine, eons ago, of Marius embracing her. Azim stood before her as he removed her outer cloak, revealing her face, her naked arms, the plain gown of black wool she wore, and her long brown hair. She saw herself reflected in a thousand pairs of mortal eyes.

“The goddess Pandora!” he cried out, throwing back his head.

Screams rose over the rapid thudding of drums. Countless human hands stroked her. “Pandora, Pandora, Pandora!” The chant mingled with the cries of “Azim!”

A young brown-skinned man danced before her, white silk shirt plastered to the sweat of his dark chest. His black eyes, gleaming under low dark brows, were fired with the challenge. *I am your victim!*

Goddess! She could see nothing suddenly in the flickering light and drowning noise but his eyes, his face. She embraced him, crushing his ribs in her haste, her teeth sinking deep into his neck. *Alive*. The blood poured into her, reached her heart and flooded its chambers, then sent its heat through all her cold limbs. It was beyond remembrance, this glorious sensation—and the exquisite lust, the wanting again! The death shocked her, knocked the breath out of her. She felt it pass into her brain. She was blinded, moaning. Then instantly, the clarity of her vision was paralyzing. The marble columns lived and breathed. She dropped the body, and took hold of another young male, half starved, naked to the waist, his strength on the verge of death maddening her.

She broke his tender neck as she drank, hearing her own heart swell, feeling even the surface of her skin flooded with blood. She could see the color in her own hands just before she closed her eyes, yes, human hands, the death slower, resistant, and then yielding in a rush of dimming light and roaring sound. *Alive*.

"Pandora! Pandora! Pandora!"

God, is there no justice, is there no end?

She stood rocking back and forth, human faces, each discrete, lurid, dancing in front of her. The blood inside her was boiling as it sought out every tissue, every cell. She saw her third victim hurling himself against her, sleek young limbs enfolding her, so soft this hair, this fleece on the back of his arms, the fragile bones, so light, as if she were the real being and these were but creatures of the imagination.

She ripped the head half off the neck, staring at the white bones of the broken spinal cord, then swallowing the death instantly with the violent spray of blood from the torn artery. But the heart, the beating heart, she would see it, taste it. She threw the body back over her right arm, bones cracking, while with her left hand she split the breast bone and tore open the ribs, and reached through the hot bleeding cavity to pull the heart free.

Not dead yet this, not really. And slippery, glistening like wet grapes. The faithful crushed against her as she held it up over her head, squeezing it gently so that the living juice ran down her fingers and into her open mouth. Yes, this, forever and ever.

"Goddess! Goddess!"

Azim was watching her, smiling at her. But she did not look at him.

She stared at the shriveled heart as the last droplets of blood left it. A pulp. She let it fall. Her hands glowed like living hands, smeared with blood. She could feel it in her face, the tingling warmth. A tide of memory threatened, a tide of visions without understanding. She drove it back. This time it wouldn't enslave her.

She reached for her black cloak. She felt it enclosing her, as warm, solicitous human hands brought the soft wool covering up over her hair, over the lower part of her face. And ignoring the heated cries of her name all around her, she turned and went out, her limbs accidentally bruising the frenzied worshipers who stumbled into her path.

So deliciously cold the courtyard. She bent her head back slightly, breathing a vagrant wind as it gusted down into the enclosure, where it fanned the pyres before carrying their bitter smoke away. The moonlight was clear and beautiful falling on the snow-covered peaks beyond the walls.

She stood listening to the blood inside her, and marveling in a crazed, despairing way that it could still refresh her and strengthen her, even now. Sad, grief-stricken, she looked at the lovely stark wilderness encircling the temple, she looked up at the loose and billowing clouds. How the blood gave her courage, how it gave her a momentary belief in the sheer rightness of the universe—fruits of a ghastly, unforgivable act.

If the mind can find no meaning, then the senses give it. Live for this, wretched being that you are.

She moved towards the nearest pyre and, careful not to singe her clothes, reached out to let the fire cleanse her hands, burn away the blood, the bits of heart. The licking flames were nothing to the heat of the blood inside her. When finally the faintest beginning of pain was there, the faintest signal of change, she drew back and looked down at her immaculate white skin.

But she must leave here now. Her thoughts were too full of anger, new resentment. Marius needed her. *Danger*. The alarm came again, stronger than ever before, because the blood made her a more powerful receptor. And it did not seem to come from one. Rather it was a communal voice, the dim clarion of a communal knowledge. She was afraid.

She allowed her mind to empty itself, as tears blurred her vision. She lifted her hands, just her hands, delicately. And the ascent was begun. Soundlessly, swiftly, as invisible to mortal eyes, perhaps, as the wind itself.

High over the temple, her body pierced a soft thin agitated mist. The degree of light astonished her. Everywhere the shining whiteness. And below the crenellated landscape of stone peak and blinding glacier descending to a soft darkness of lower forests and vale. Nestled here and there were clusters of sparkling lights, the random pattern of villages or towns. She could have gazed on this forever. Yet within seconds an undulating fleece of cloud had obscured all of it. And she was with the stars alone.

The stars—hard, glittering, embracing her as though she were one of their own. But the stars claimed nothing, really, and no one. She felt terror. Then a deepening sorrow, not unlike joy, finally. No more struggle. No more grief.

Scanning the splendid drift of the constellations, she slowed her ascent and reached out with both hands to the west.

The sunrise lay nine hours behind her. And so she commenced her journey away from it, in time with the night on its way to the other side of the world.

4
THE STORY OF DANIEL, THE DEVIL'S MINION, OR THE BOY FROM INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE

Who are these shades we wait for and believe
will come some evening in limousines
from Heaven?
The rose
though it knows
is throatless
and cannot say.
My mortal half laughs.
The code and the message are not the same.
And what is an angel
but a ghost in drag?

STAN RICE
from "Of Heaven"
Body of Work (1983)

He was a tall, slender young man, with ashen hair and violet eyes. He wore a dirty gray sweat shirt and jeans, and in the icy wind whipping along Michigan Avenue at five o'clock, he was cold.

Daniel Molloy was his name. He was thirty-two, though he looked younger, a perennial student, not a man, that kind of youthful face. He murmured aloud to himself as he walked. "Armand, I need you. Armand, that concert is tomorrow night. And something terrible is going to happen, something terrible.…"

He was hungry. Thirty-six hours had passed since he'd eaten. There was nothing in the refrigerator of his small dirty hotel room, and besides, he had been locked out of it this morning because he had not paid the rent. Hard to remember everything at once.

Then he remembered the dream that he kept having, the dream that came every time he closed his eyes, and he didn't want to eat at all.

He saw the twins in the dream. He saw the roasted body of the

woman before them, her hair singed away, her skin crisped. Her heart lay glistening like a swollen fruit on the plate beside her. The brain on the other plate looked exactly like a cooked brain.

Armand knew about it, he had to know. It was no ordinary dream, this. Something to do with Lestat, definitely. And Armand would come soon.

God, he was weak, delirious. Needed something, a drink at least. In his pocket there was no money, only an old crumpled royalty check for the book *Interview with the Vampire,* which he had "written" under a pseudonym over twelve years ago.

Another world, that, when he had been a young reporter, roaming the bars of the world with his tape recorder, trying to get the flotsam and jetsam of the night to tell him some truth. Well, one night in San Francisco he had found a magnificent subject for his investigations. And the light of ordinary life had suddenly gone out.

Now he was a ruined thing, walking too fast under the lowering night sky of Chicago in October. Last Sunday he had been in Paris, and the Friday before that in Edinburgh. Before Edinburgh, he had been in Stockholm and before that he couldn't recall. The royalty check had caught up with him in Vienna, but he did not know how long ago that was.

In all these places he frightened those he passed. The Vampire Lestat had a good phrase for it in his autobiography: "One of those tiresome mortals who has seen spirits …" *That's me!*

Where was that book, *The Vampire Lestat?* Ah, somebody had stolen it off the park bench this afternoon while Daniel slept. Well, let them have it. Daniel had stolen it himself, and he'd read it three times already.

But if only he had it now, he could sell it, maybe get enough for a glass of brandy to make him warm. And what was his net worth at this moment, this cold and hungry vagabond that shuffled along Michigan Avenue, hating the wind that chilled him through his worn and dirty clothes? Ten million? A hundred million? He didn't know. Armand would know.

You want money, Daniel? I'll get it for you. It's simpler than you think.

A thousand miles south Armand waited on their private island, the island that belonged in fact to Daniel alone. And if only he had a

quarter now, just a quarter, he could drop it into a pay phone and tell Armand that he wanted to come home. Out of the sky, they'd come to get him. They always did. Either the big plane with the velvet bedroom on it or the smaller one with the low ceiling and the leather chairs. Would anybody on this street lend him a quarter in exchange for a plane ride to Miami? Probably not.

Armand, now! I want to be safe with you when Lestat goes on that stage tomorrow night.

Who would cash this royalty check? No one. It was seven o'clock and the fancy shops along Michigan Avenue were for the most part closed, and he had no identification because his wallet had somehow disappeared day before yesterday. So dismal this glaring gray winter twilight, the sky boiling silently with low metallic clouds. Even the stores had taken on an uncommon grimness, with their hard facades of marble or granite, the wealth within gleaming like archaeological relics under museum glass. He plunged his hands in his pockets to warm them, and he bowed his head as the wind came with greater fierceness and the first sting of rain.

He didn't give a damn about the check, really. He couldn't imagine pressing the buttons of a phone. Nothing here seemed particularly real to him, not even the chill. Only the dream seemed real, and the sense of impending disaster, that the Vampire Lestat had somehow set into motion something that even he could never control.

Eat from a garbage can if you have to, sleep somewhere even if it's a park. None of that matters. But he'd freeze if he lay down again in the open air, and besides the dream would come back.

It was coming now every time he closed his eyes. And each time, it was longer, more full of detail. The red-haired twins were so tenderly beautiful. He did not want to hear them scream.

The first night in his hotel room he'd ignored the whole thing. Meaningless. He'd gone back to reading Lestat's autobiography, and glancing up now and then as Lestat's rock video films played themselves out on the little black and white TV that came with that kind of dump.

He'd been fascinated by Lestat's audacity; yet the masquerade as rock star was so simple. Searing eyes, powerful yet slender limbs, and a mischievous smile, yes. But you really couldn't tell. Or could you?

He had never laid eyes on Lestat.

But he was an expert on Armand, wasn't he, he had studied every detail of Armand's youthful body and face. Ah, what a delirious pleasure it had been to read about Armand in Lestat's pages, wondering all the while if Lestat's stinging insults and worshipful analyses had put Armand himself into a rage.

In mute fascination, Daniel had watched that little clip on MTV portraying Armand as the coven master of the old vampires beneath the Paris cemetery, presiding over demonic rituals until the Vampire Lestat, the eighteenth-century iconoclast, had destroyed the Old Ways.

Armand must have loathed it, his private history laid bare in flashing images, so much more crass than Lestat's more thoughtful written history. Armand, whose eyes scanned perpetually the living beings around him, refusing even to speak of the undead. But it was impossible that he did not know.

And all this for the multitudes—like the paperback report of an anthropologist, back from the inner circle, who sells the tribe's secrets for a slot on the best-seller list.

So let the demonic gods war with each other. This mortal has been to the top of the mountain where they cross swords. And he has come back. He has been turned away.

The next night, the dream had returned with the clarity of a hallucination. He knew that it could not have been invented by him. He had never seen people quite like that, seen such simple jewelry made of bone and wood.

The dream had come again three nights later. He'd been watching a Lestat rock video for the fifteenth time, perhaps—this one about the ancient and immovable Egyptian Father and Mother of the vampires, Those Who Must Be Kept:

Akasha and Enkil,
We are your children,
but what do you give us?
Is your silence
A better gift than truth?

And then Daniel was dreaming. And the twins were about to begin

the feast. They would share the organs on the earthen plates. One would take the brain, the other the heart.

He'd awakened with a sense of urgency, dread. Something terrible going to happen, something going to happen to all of us … And that was the first time he'd connected it with Lestat. He had wanted to pick up the phone then. It was four o'clock in the morning in Miami. Why the hell hadn't he done it? Armand would have been sitting on the terrace of the villa, watching the tireless fleet of white boats wend its way back and forth from the Night Island. "Yes, Daniel?" That sensuous, mesmerizing voice. "Calm down and tell me where you are, Daniel."

But Daniel hadn't called. Six months had passed since he had left the Night Island, and this time it was supposed to be for good. He had once and for all forsworn the world of carpets and limousines and private planes, of liquor closets stocked with rare vintages and dressing rooms full of exquisitely cut clothing, of the quiet overwhelming presence of his immortal lover who gave him every earthly possession he could want.

But now it was cold and he had no room and no money, and he was afraid.

You know where I am, you demon. You know what Lestat's done. And you know I want to come home.

What would Armand say to that?

But I don't know, Daniel. I listen. I try to know. I am not God, Daniel.

Never mind. Just come, Armand. Come. It's dark and cold in Chicago. And tomorrow night the Vampire Lestat will sing his songs on a San Francisco stage. And something bad is going to happen. This mortal knows.

Without slowing his pace, Daniel reached down under the collar of his sagging sweat shirt and felt the heavy gold locket he always wore —the amulet, as Armand called it with his unacknowledged yet irrepressible flair for the dramatic—which held the tiny vial of Armand's blood.

And if he had never tasted that cup would he be having this dream, this vision, this portent of doom?

People turned to look at him; he was talking to himself again, wasn't he? And the wind made him sigh loudly. He had the urge for

the first time in all these years to break open the locket and the vial, to feel that blood burn his tongue. *Armand, come!*

The dream had visited him in its most alarming form this noon.

He'd been sitting on a bench in the little park near the Water Tower Place. A newspaper had been left there, and when he opened it he saw the advertisement: "Tomorrow Night: The Vampire Lestat Live on Stage in San Francisco." The cable would broadcast the concert at ten o'clock Chicago time. How nice for those who still lived indoors, could pay their rent, and had electricity. He had wanted to laugh at the whole thing, delight in it, revel in it, Lestat surprising them all. But the chill had passed through him, becoming a deep jarring shock.

And what if Armand does not know? But the record stores on the Night Island must have *The Vampire Lestat* in their windows. In the elegant lounges, they must be playing those haunting and hypnotic songs.

It had even occurred to Daniel at that moment to go on to California on his own. Surely he could work some miracle, get his passport from the hotel, go into any bank with it for identification. Rich, yes so very rich, this poor mortal boy.…

But how could he think of something so deliberate? The sun had been warm on his face and shoulders as he'd lain down on the bench. He'd folded the newspaper to make of it a pillow.

And there was the dream that had been waiting all the time.…

Midday in the world of the twins: the sun pouring down onto the clearing. Silence, except for the singing of the birds.

And the twins kneeling quite still together, in the dust. Such pale women, their eyes green, their hair long and wavy and coppery red. Fine clothes they wore, white linen dresses that had come all the way from the markets of Nineveh, bought by the villagers to honor these powerful witches, whom the spirits obey.

The funeral feast was ready. The mud bricks of the oven had been torn down and carried away, and the body lay steaming hot on the stone slab, the yellow juices running out of it where the crisp skin had broken, a black and naked thing with only a covering of cooked leaves. It horrified Daniel.

But it horrified no one present, this spectacle, not the twins or the villagers who knelt to watch the feast begin.

This feast was the right and the duty of the twins. *This was their mother, the blackened body on the stone slab*. And what was human must remain with the human. A day and night it may take to consume the feast, but all will keep watch until it is done.

Now a current of excitement passes through the crowd around the clearing. One of the twins lifts the plate on which the brain rests together with the eyes, and the other nods and takes the plate that holds the heart.

And so the division has been made. The beat of a drum rises, though Daniel cannot see the drummer. Slow, rhythmic, brutal.

"Let the banquet begin."

But the ghastly cry comes, just as Daniel knew it would. *Stop the soldiers*. But he can't. All this has happened somewhere, of that he is now certain. It is no dream, it is a vision. And he is not there. The soldiers storm the clearing, the villagers scatter, the twins set down the plates and fling themselves over the smoking feast. But this is madness.

The soldiers tear them loose so effortlessly, and as the slab is lifted, the body falls, breaking into pieces, and the heart and the brain are thrown down into the dust. The twins scream and scream.

But the villagers are screaming too, the soldiers are cutting them down as they run. The dead and the dying litter the mountain paths. The eyes of the mother have fallen from the plate into the dirt, and they, along with the heart and brain, are trampled underfoot.

One of the twins, her arms pulled behind her back, cries to the spirits for vengeance. And they come, they do. It is a whirlwind. But not enough.

If only it were over. But Daniel can't wake up.

Stillness. The air is full of smoke. Nothing stands where these people have lived for centuries. The mud bricks are scattered, clay pots are broken, all that will burn has burned. Infants with their throats slit lie naked on the ground as the flies come. No one will roast these bodies, no one will consume this flesh. It will pass out of the human race, with all its power and its mystery. The jackals are already approaching. And the soldiers have gone. Where are the twins! He hears the twins crying, but he cannot find them. A great storm is rumbling over the narrow road that twists down through the valley towards the desert.

The spirits make the thunder. The spirits make the rain.

His eyes opened. Chicago, Michigan Avenue at midday. The dream had gone out like a light turned off. He sat there shivering, sweating.

A radio had been playing near him, Lestat singing in that haunting mournful voice of Those Who Must Be Kept.

Mother and Father.
Keep your silence,
Keep your secrets,
But those of you with tongues,
sing my song.

Sons and daughters
Children of darkness
Raise your voices
Make a chorus
Let heaven hear us

Come together,
Brother and sisters,
Come to me.

He had gotten up, started walking. Go into the Water Tower Place, so like the Night Island with its engulfing shops, endless music and lights, shining glass.

And now it was almost eight o'clock and he had been walking continuously, running from sleep and from the dream. He was far from any music and light. How long would it go on next time? Would he find out whether they were alive or dead? My beauties, my poor beauties.…

He stopped, turning his back to the wind for a moment, listening to the chimes somewhere, then spotting a dirty clock above a dime store lunch counter; yes, Lestat had risen on the West Coast. Who is with him? Is Louis there? And the concert, a little over twenty-four hours. Catastrophe! *Armand, please.*

The wind gusted, pushed him back a few steps on the pavement, left him shivering violently. His hands were frozen. Had he ever been this

cold in his life? Doggedly, he crossed Michigan Avenue with the crowd at the stoplight and stood at the plate glass windows of the bookstore, where he could see the book, *The Vampire Lestat*, on display.

Surely Armand had read it, devouring every word in that eerie, horrible way he had of reading, of turning page after page without pause, eyes flashing over the words, until the book was finished, and then tossing it aside. How could a creature shimmer with such beauty yet incite such … what was it, revulsion? No, he had never been revolted by Armand, he had to admit it. What he always felt was ravening and hopeless desire.

A young girl inside the warmth of the store picked up a copy of Lestat's book, then stared at him through the window. His breath made steam on the glass in front of him. *Don't worry, my darling, I am a rich man. I could buy this whole store full of books and make it a present to you. I am lord and master of my own island, I am the Devil's minion and he grants my every wish. Want to come take my arm?*

It had been dark for hours on the Florida coast. The Night Island was already thronged.

The shops, restaurants, bars had opened their broad, seamless plate glass doors at sunset, on five levels of richly carpeted hallway. The silver escalators had begun their low, churning hum. Daniel closed his eyes and envisioned the walls of glass rising above the harbor terraces. He could almost hear the great roar of the dancing fountains, see the long narrow beds of daffodils and tulips blooming eternally out of season, hear the hypnotic music that beat like a heart beneath it all.

And Armand, he was probably roaming the dimly lighted rooms of the villa, steps away from the tourists and the shoppers, yet utterly cut off by steel doors and white walls—a sprawling palace of floor-length windows and broad balconies, perched over white sand. Solitary, yet near to the endless commotion, its vast living room facing the twinkling lights of the Miami shore.

Or maybe he had gone through one of the many unmarked doors into the public galleria itself. "To live and breathe among mortals" as he called it in this safe and self-contained universe which he and Daniel had made. How Armand loved the warm breezes of the Gulf, the endless springtime of the Night Island.

No lights would go out until dawn.

“Send someone for me, Armand, I need you! You know you want me to come home.”

Of course it had happened this way over and over again. It did not need strange dreams, or Lestat to reappear, roaring like Lucifer from tape and film.

Everything would go all right for months as Daniel felt compelled to move from city to city, walking the pavements of New York or Chicago or New Orleans. Then the sudden disintegration. He’d realize he had not moved from his chair in five hours. Or he’d wake suddenly in a stale and unchanged bed, frightened, unable to remember the name of the city where he was, or where he’d been for days before. Then the car would come for him, then the plane would take him home.

Didn’t Armand cause it? Didn’t he somehow drive Daniel to these periods of madness? Didn’t he by some evil magic dry up every source of pleasure, every fount of sustenance until Daniel welcomed the sight of the familiar chauffeur come to drive him to the airport, the man who was never shocked by Daniel’s demeanor, his unshaven face, his soiled clothes?

When Daniel finally reached the Night Island, Armand would deny it.

“You came back to me because you wanted to, Daniel,” Armand always said calmly, face still and radiant, eyes full of love. “There is nothing for you now, Daniel, except me. You know that. Madness waits out there.”

“Same old dance,” Daniel invariably answered. And all that luxury, so intoxicating, soft beds, music, the wine glass placed in his hand. The rooms were always full of flowers, the foods he craved came on silver trays.

Armand lay sprawled in a huge black velvet wing chair gazing at the television, Ganymede in white pants and white silk shirt, watching the news, the movies, the tapes he’d made of himself reading poetry, the idiot sitcoms, the dramas, the musicals, the silent films.

“Come in, Daniel, sit down. I never expected you back so soon.”

“You son of a bitch,” Daniel would say. “You wanted me here, you summoned me. I couldn’t eat, sleep, nothing, just wander and think of you. You did it.”

Armand would smile, sometimes even laugh. Armand had a rich, beautiful laugh, always eloquent of gratitude as well as humor. He looked and sounded mortal when he laughed. "Calm yourself, Daniel. Your heart's racing. It frightens me." Small crease to the smooth forehead, the voice for a moment deepened by compassion. "Tell me what you want, Daniel, and I'll get it for you. Why do you keep running away?"

"Lies, you bastard. Say that you wanted me. You'll torment me forever, won't you, and then you'll watch me die, and you'll find that interesting, won't you? It was true what Louis said. You watch them die, your mortal slaves, they mean nothing to you. You'll watch the colors change in my face as I die."

"That's Louis's language," Armand said patiently. "Please don't quote that book to me. I'd rather die than see you die, Daniel."

"Then give it to me! Damn you! Immortality that close, as close as your arms."

"No, Daniel, because I'd rather die than do that, too."

But even if Armand did not cause this madness that brought Daniel home, surely he always knew where Daniel was. He could hear Daniel's call. The blood connected them, it had to—the precious tiny drinks of burning preternatural blood. Never enough to do more than awaken dreams in Daniel, and the thirst for eternity, to make the flowers in the wallpaper sing and dance. Whatever, Armand could always find him, of that he had no doubt.

In the early years, even before the blood exchange, Armand had pursued Daniel with the cunning of a harpy. There had been no place on earth that Daniel could hide.

Horrifying yet tantalizing, their beginning in New Orleans, twelve years ago when Daniel had entered a crumbling old house in the Garden District and known at once that it was the vampire Lestat's lair.

Ten days before he'd left San Francisco after his night-long interview with the vampire Louis, suffering from the final confirmation of the frightening tale he had been told. In a sudden embrace, Louis had demonstrated his supernatural power to drain Daniel almost to the point of death. The puncture wounds had

disappeared, but the memory had left Daniel near to madness. Feverish, sometimes delirious, he had traveled no more than a few hundred miles a day. In cheap roadside motels, where he forced himself to take nourishment, he had duplicated the tapes of the interview one by one, sending the copies off to a New York publisher, so that a book was in the making before he ever stood before Lestat's gate.

But that had been secondary, the publication, an event connected with the values of a dimming and distant world.

He had to find the vampire Lestat. He had to unearth the immortal who had made Louis, the one who still survived somewhere in this damp, decadent, and beautiful old city, waiting perhaps for Daniel to awaken him, to bring him out into the century that had terrified him and driven him underground.

It was what Louis wanted, surely. Why else had he given this mortal emissary so many clues as to where Lestat could be found? Yet some of the details were misleading. Was this ambivalence on Louis's part? It did not matter, finally. In the public records, Daniel had found the title to the property, and the street number, under the unmistakable name: Lestat de Lioncourt.

The iron gate had not even been locked, and once he'd hacked his way through the overgrown garden, he had managed easily to break the rusted lock on the front door.

Only a small pocket flash helped him as he entered. But the moon had been high, shining its full white light here and there through the oak branches. He had seen clearly the rows and rows of books stacked to the ceiling, making up the very walls of every room. No human could or would have done such a mad and methodical thing. And then in the upstairs bedroom, he had knelt down in the thick dust that covered the rotting carpet and found the gold pocket watch on which was written the name Lestat.

Ah, that chilling moment, that moment when the pendulum swung away from ever increasing dementia to a new passion—he would track to the ends of the earth these pale and deadly beings whose existence he had only glimpsed.

What had he wanted in those early weeks? Did he hope to possess the splendid secrets of life itself? Surely he would gain from this

knowledge no purpose for an existence already fraught with disappointment. No, he wanted to be swept away from everything he had once loved. He longed for Louis's violent and sensuous world.

Evil. He was no longer afraid.

Maybe he was like the lost explorer who, pushing through the jungle, suddenly sees the wall of the fabled temple before him, its carvings overhung with spiderwebs and vines; no matter that he may not live to tell his story; he has beheld the truth with his own eyes.

But if only he could open the door a little further, see the full magnificence. If they would only let him in! Maybe he just wanted to live forever. Could anyone fault him for that?

He had felt good and safe standing alone in the ruin of Lestat's old house, with the wild roses crawling at the broken window and the four-poster bed a skeleton, its hangings rotting away.

Near them, near to their precious darkness, their lovely devouring gloom. How he had loved the hopelessness of it all, the moldering chairs with their bits of carving, shreds of velvet, and the slithering things eating the last of the carpet away.

But the relic; ah, the relic was everything, the gleaming gold watch that bore an immortal's name!

After a while, he had opened the armoire; the black frock coats fell to pieces when he touched them. Withered and curling boots lay on the cedar boards.

But Lestat, you are here. He had taken the tape recorder out, set it down, put in the first tape, and let the voice of Louis rise softly in the shadowy room. Hour by hour, the tapes played.

Then just before dawn he had seen a figure in the hallway, and known that he was meant to see it. And he had seen the moon strike the boyish face, the auburn hair. The earth tilted, the darkness came down. The last word he uttered had been the name Armand.

He should have died then. Had a whim kept him alive?

He'd awakened in a dark, damp cellar. Water oozed from the walls. Groping in the blackness, he'd discovered a bricked-up window, a locked door plated with steel.

And what was his comfort, that he had found yet another god of the secret pantheon—Armand, the oldest of the immortals whom Louis had described, Armand, the coven master of the nineteenth-century

Theater of the Vampires in Paris, who had confided his terrible secret to Louis: of our origins nothing is known.

For three days and nights, perhaps, Daniel had lain in this prison. Impossible to tell. He had been near to dying certainly, the stench of his own urine sickening him, the insects driving him mad. Yet his was a religious fervor. He had come ever nearer to the dark pulsing truths that Louis had revealed. Slipping in and out of consciousness, he dreamed of Louis, Louis talking to him in that dirty little room in San Francisco, *there have always been things such as we are, always*, Louis embracing him, his green eyes darkening suddenly as he let Daniel see the fang teeth.

The fourth night, Daniel had awakened and known at once that someone or something was in the room. The door lay open to a passage. Water was flowing somewhere fast as if in a deep underground sewer. Slowly his eyes grew accustomed to the dirty greenish light from the doorway and then he saw the pale white-skinned figure standing against the wall.

So immaculate the black suit, the starched white shirt—like the imitation of a twentieth-century man. And the auburn hair clipped short and the fingernails gleaming dully even in this semidarkness. Like a corpse for the coffin—that sterile, that well prepared.

The voice had been gentle with a trace of an accent. Not European; something sharper yet softer at the same time. Arabic or Greek perhaps, that kind of music. The words were slow and without anger.

"Get out. Take your tapes with you. They are there beside you. I know of your book. No one will believe it. Now you will go and take these things."

Then you won't kill me. And you won't make me one of you either. Desperate, stupid thoughts, but he couldn't stop them. He had seen the power! No lies, no cunning here. And he'd felt himself crying, so weakened by fear and hunger, reduced to a child.

"Make you one of us?" The accent thickened, giving a fine lilt to the words. "Why would I do that?" Eyes narrowing. "I would not do that to those whom I find to be despicable, whom I would see burning in hell as a matter of course. So why should I do it to an innocent fool—like you?"

I want it. I want to live forever. Daniel had sat up, climbed to his feet

slowly, struggling to see Armand more clearly. A dim bulb burned somewhere far down the hall. *I want to be with Louis and with you.*

Laughter, low, gentle. But contemptuous. "I see why he chose you for his confidant. You are naive and beautiful. But the beauty could be the only reason, you know."

Silence.

"Your eyes are an unusual color, almost violet. And you are strangely defiant and beseeching in the same breath."

Make me immortal. Give it to me!

Laughter again. Almost sad. Then silence, the water rushing fast in that distant someplace. The room had become visible, a filthy basement hole. And the figure more nearly mortal. There was even a faint pink tinge to the smooth skin.

"It was all true, what he told you. But no one will ever believe it. And you will go mad in time from this knowledge. That's what always happens. But you're not mad yet."

No. This is real, it's all happening. You're Armand and we're talking together. And I'm not mad.

"Yes. And I find it rather interesting … interesting that you know my name and that you're alive. I have never told my name to anyone who is alive." Armand hesitated. "I don't want to kill you. Not just now."

Daniel had felt the first touch of fear. If you looked closely enough at these beings you could see what they were. It had been the same with Louis. No, they weren't living. They were ghastly imitations of the living. And this one, the gleaming manikin of a young boy!

"I am going to let you leave here," Armand had said. So politely, softly. "I want to follow you, watch you, see where you go. As long as I find you interesting, I won't kill you. And of course, I may lose interest altogether and not bother to kill you. That's always possible. You have hope in that. And maybe with luck I'll lose track of you. I have my limitations, of course. You have the world to roam, and you can move by day. Go now. Start running. I want to see what you do, I want to know what you are."

Go now, start running!

He'd been on the morning plane to Lisbon, clutching Lestat's gold watch in his hand. Yet two nights later in Madrid, he'd turned to find

Armand seated on a city bus beside him no more than inches away. A week later in Vienna he'd looked out the window of a cafe to see Armand watching him from the street. In Berlin, Armand slipped into a taxi beside him, and sat there staring at him, until finally Daniel had leapt out in the thick of the traffic and run away.

Within months, however, these shattering silent confrontations had given way to more vigorous assaults.

He woke in a hotel room in Prague to find Armand standing over him, crazed, violent. "Talk to me now! I demand it. Wake up. I want you to walk with me, show me things in this city. Why did you come to this particular place?"

Riding on a train through Switzerland, he looked up suddenly to see Armand directly opposite watching him over the upturned cover of his fur-lined coat. Armand snatched the book out of his hand and insisted that he explain what it was, why he read it, what did the picture on the cover mean?

In Paris Armand pursued him nightly through the boulevards and the back streets, only now and then questioning him on the places he went, the things he did. In Venice, he'd looked out of his room at the Danieli, to see Armand staring from a window across the way.

Then weeks passed without a visitation. Daniel vacillated between terror and strange expectation, doubting his very sanity again. But there was Armand waiting for him in the New York airport. And the following night in Boston, Armand was in the dining room of the Copley when Daniel came in. Daniel's dinner was already ordered. Please sit down. Did Daniel know that *Interview with the Vampire* was in the bookstores?

"I must confess I enjoy this small measure of notoriety," Armand had said with exquisite politeness and a vicious smile. "What puzzles me is that you do not want notoriety! You did not list yourself as the 'author,' which means that you are either very modest or a coward. Either explanation would be very dull."

"I'm not hungry, let's get out of here," Daniel had answered weakly. Yet suddenly dish after dish was being placed on the table; everyone was staring.

"I didn't know what you wanted," Armand confided, the smile becoming absolutely ecstatic. "So I ordered everything that they had."

“You think you can drive me crazy, don’t you?” Daniel had snarled. “Well, you can’t. Let me tell you. Every time I lay eyes on you, I realize that I didn’t invent you, and that I’m sane!” And he had started eating, lustily, furiously—a little fish, a little beef, a little veal, a little sweetbreads, a little cheese, a little everything, put it all together, what did he care, and Armand had been so delighted, laughing and laughing like a schoolboy as he sat watching, with folded arms. It was the first time Daniel had ever heard that soft, silky laughter. So seductive. He got drunk as fast as he could.

The meetings grew longer and longer. Conversations, sparring matches, and downright fights became the rule. Once Armand had dragged Daniel out of bed in New Orleans and shouted at him: “That telephone, I want you to dial Paris, I want to see if it can really talk to Paris.”

“Goddamn it, do it yourself,” Daniel had roared. “You’re five hundred years old and you can’t use a telephone? Read the directions. What are you, an immortal idiot? I will do no such thing!”

How surprised Armand had looked.

“All right, I’ll call Paris for you. But you pay the bill.”

“But of course,” Armand had said innocently. He had drawn dozens of hundred-dollar bills out of his coat, sprinkling them on Daniel’s bed.

More and more they argued philosophy at these meetings. Pulling Daniel out of a theater in Rome, Armand had asked what did Daniel really think that death was? People who were still living knew things like that! Did Daniel know what Armand truly feared?

As it was past midnight and Daniel was drunk and exhausted and had been sound asleep in the theater before Armand found him, he did not care.

“I’ll tell you what I fear,” Armand had said, intense as any young student. “That it’s chaos after you die, that it’s a dream from which you can’t wake. Imagine drifting half in and out of consciousness, trying vainly to remember who you are or what you were. Imagine straining forever for the lost clarity of the living….”

It had frightened Daniel. Something about it rang true. Weren’t there tales of mediums conversing with incoherent yet powerful presences? He didn’t know. How in hell could he know? Maybe when

you died there was flat out nothing. That terrified Armand, no effort expended to conceal the misery.

"You don't think it terrifies me?" Daniel had asked, staring at the white-faced figure beside him. "How many years do I have? Can you tell just by looking at me? Tell me."

When Armand woke him up in Port-au-Prince, it was war he wanted to talk about. What did men in this century actually think of war? Did Daniel know that Armand had been a boy when this had begun for him? Seventeen years old, and in those times that was young, very young. Seventeen-year-old boys in the twentieth century were virtual monsters; they had beards, hair on their chests, and yet they were children. Not then. Yet children worked as if they were men.

But let us not get sidetracked. The point was, Armand didn't know what men felt. He never had. Oh, of course he'd known the pleasures of the flesh, that was par for the course. Nobody then thought children were innocent of sensuous pleasures. But of true aggression he knew little. He killed because it was his nature as a vampire; and the blood was irresistible. But why did men find war irresistible? What was the desire to clash violently against the will of another with weapons? What was the physical need to destroy?

At such times, Daniel did his best to answer: for some men it was the need to affirm one's own existence through the annihilation of another. Surely Armand knew these things.

"Know? Know? What does that matter if you don't understand," Armand had asked, his accent unusually sharp in his agitation, "if you cannot proceed from one perception to another? Don't you see, this is what I cannot do."

When he found Daniel in Frankfurt, it was the nature of history, the impossibility of writing any coherent explanation of events that was not in itself a lie. The impossibility of truth being served by generalities, and the impossibility of learning proceeding without them.

Now and then these meetings had not been entirely selfish. In a country inn in England Daniel woke to the sound of Armand's voice warning him to leave the building at once. A fire destroyed the inn in less than an hour.

Another time he had been in jail in New York, picked up for

drunkenness and vagrancy when Armand appeared to bail him out, looking all too human as he always did after he had fed, a young lawyer in a tweed coat and flannel pants, escorting Daniel to a room in the Carlyle, where he left him to sleep it off with a suitcase full of new clothes waiting, and a wallet full of money hidden in a pocket.

Finally, after a year and a half of this madness, Daniel began to question Armand. What had it really been like in those days in Venice? Look at this film, set in the eighteenth century, tell me what is wrong.

But Armand was remarkably unresponsive. "I cannot tell you those things because I have no experience of them. You see, I have so little ability to synthesize knowledge; I deal in the immediate with a cool intensity. What was it like in Paris? Ask me if it rained on the night of Saturday, June 5, 1793. Perhaps I could tell you that."

Yet at other moments, he spoke in rapid bursts of the things around him, of the eerie garish cleanliness of this era, of the horrid acceleration of change.

"Behold, earthshaking inventions which are useless or obsolete within the same century—the steamboat, the railroads; yet do you know what these meant after six thousand years of galley slaves and men on horseback? And now the dance hall girl buys a chemical to kill the seed of her lovers, and lives to be seventy-five in a room full of gadgets which cool the air and veritably eat the dust. And yet for all the costume movies and the paperback history thrown at you in every drugstore, the public has no accurate memory of anything; every social problem is observed in relation to 'norms' which in fact never existed, people fancy themselves 'deprived' of luxuries and peace and quiet which in fact were never common to any people anywhere at all."

"But the Venice of your time, tell me.…"

"What? That it was dirty? That it was beautiful? That people went about in rags with rotting teeth and stinking breath and laughed at public executions? You want to know the key difference? There is a horrifying loneliness at work in this time. No, listen to me. We lived six and seven to a room in those days, when I was still among the living. The city streets were seas of humanity; and now in these high buildings dim-witted souls hover in luxurious privacy, gazing through

the television window at a faraway world of kissing and touching. It is bound to produce some great fund of common knowledge, some new level of human awareness, a curious skepticism, to be so alone."

Daniel found himself fascinated, sometimes trying to write down the things Armand told him. Yet Armand continued to frighten him. Daniel was ever on the move.

He wasn't quite sure how long it had gone on before he stopped running, though the night itself was quite impossible to forget.

Maybe four years had passed since the game had begun. Daniel had spent a long quiet summer in southern Italy during which he had not seen his demon familiar even once.

In a cheap hotel only a half block from the ruins of ancient Pompeii, he had spent his hours reading, writing, trying to define what his glimpse of the supernatural had done to him, and how he must learn again to want, to envision, to dream. Immortality on this earth was indeed possible. This he knew without question, but what did it matter if immortality was not Daniel's to have?

By day he walked the broken streets of the excavated Roman city. And when the moon was full he wandered there, alone, by night as well. It seemed sanity had come back to him. And life might soon come back too. Green leaves smelled fresh when he crushed them in his fingers. He looked up at the stars and did not feel resentful so much as sad.

Yet at other times, he burned for Armand as if for an elixir without which he could not go on. The dark energy that had fired him for four years was now missing. He dreamed Armand was near him; he awoke weeping stupidly. Then the morning would come and he would be sad but calm.

Then Armand had returned.

It was late, perhaps ten o'clock in the evening, and the sky, as it is so often in southern Italy, was a brilliant dark blue overhead. Daniel had been walking alone down the long road that leads from Pompeii proper to the Villa of the Mysteries, hoping no guards would come to drive him away.

As soon as he'd reached the ancient house, a stillness had descended. No guards here. No one living. Only the sudden silent

appearance of Armand before the entrance. Armand again.

He'd come silently out of the shadows into the moonlight, a young boy in dirty jeans and worn denim jacket, and he had slipped his arm around Daniel and gently kissed Daniel's face. Such warm skin, full of the fresh blood of the kill. Daniel fancied he could smell it, the perfume of the living clinging to Armand still.

"You want to come into this house?" Armand had whispered. No locks ever kept Armand from anything. Daniel had been trembling, on the edge of tears. And why was that? So glad to see him, touch him, ah, damn him!

They had entered the dark, low-ceilinged rooms, the press of Armand's arm against Daniel's back oddly comforting. Ah, yes, this intimacy, because that's what it is, isn't it? You, my secret …

Secret lover.

Yes.

Then the realization had come to Daniel as they stood together in the ruined dining room with its famous murals of ritual flagellation barely visible in the dark: He isn't going to kill me after all. He isn't going to do it. Of course he won't make me what he is, but he isn't going to kill me. The dance will not end like that.

"But how could you not know such a thing," Armand had said, reading his thoughts. "I love you. If I hadn't grown to love you, I would have killed you before now, of course."

The moonlight poured through the wooden lattices. The lush figures of the murals came to life against their red backdrop, the color of dried blood.

Daniel stared hard at the creature before him, this thing that looked human and sounded human but was not. There was a horrid shift in his consciousness; he saw this being like a great insect, a monstrous evil predator who had devoured a million human lives. And yet he loved this thing. He loved its smooth white skin, its great dark brown eyes. He loved it not because it looked like a gentle, thoughtful young man, but because it was ghastly and awful and loathsome, and beautiful all at the same time. He loved it the way people love evil, because it thrills them to the core of their souls. Imagine, killing like that, just taking life any time you want it, just doing it, sinking your teeth into another and taking all that that person can possibly give.

Look at the garments he wore. Blue cotton shirt, brass-buttoned denim jacket. Where had he gotten them? Off a victim, yes, like taking out his knife and skinning the kill while it was still warm? No wonder they reeked of salt and blood, though none was visible. And the hair trimmed just as if it weren't going to grow out within twenty-four hours to its regular shoulder length. This is evil. This is illusion. *This is what I want to be, which is why I cannot stand to look at him.*

Armand's lips had moved in a soft, slightly concealed smile. And then his eyes had misted and closed. He had bent close to Daniel, pressed his lips to Daniel's neck.

And once again, as he had in a little room on Divisadero Street in San Francisco with the vampire Louis, Daniel felt the sharp teeth pierce the surface of his skin. Sudden pain and throbbing warmth. "Are you killing me finally?" He grew drowsy, on fire, filled with love. "Do it, yes."

But Armand had taken only a few droplets. He'd released Daniel and pressed gently on his shoulders, forcing Daniel down to his knees. Daniel had looked up to see the blood flowing from Armand's wrist. Great electric shocks had passed through Daniel at the taste of that blood. It had seemed in a flash that the city of Pompeii was full of a whispering, a crying, some vague and pulsing imprint of long-ago suffering and death. Thousands perishing in smoke and ash. Thousands dying together. *Together*. Daniel had clung to Armand. But the blood was gone. Only a taste—no more.

"You are mine, beautiful boy," Armand had said.

The following morning when he awoke in bed at the Excelsier in Rome, Daniel knew that he would not run away from Armand ever again. Less than an hour after sunset, Armand came to him. They would go to London now, the car was waiting to take them to the plane. But there was time enough, wasn't there, for another embrace, another small exchange of blood. "Here from my throat," Armand had whispered, cradling Daniel's head in his hand. A fine soundless throbbing. The light of the lamps expanded, brightened, obliterated the room.

Lovers. Yes, it had become an ecstatic and engulfing affair.

"You are my teacher," Armand told him. "You will tell me everything about this century. I am learning secrets already that have

eluded me since the beginning. You'll sleep when the sun rises, if you wish, but the nights are mine."

Into the very midst of life they plunged. At pretense Armand was a genius, and killing early on any given evening, he passed for human everywhere that they went. His skin was burning hot in those early hours, his face full of passionate curiosity, his embraces feverish and quick.

It would have taken another immortal to keep up with him. Daniel nodded off at symphonies and operas or during the hundreds upon hundreds of films that Armand dragged him to see. Then there were the endless parties, the cluttered noisy gatherings from Chelsea to Mayfair where Armand argued politics and philosophy with students, or women of fashion, or anyone who would give him the slightest chance. His eyes grew moist with excitement, his voice lost its soft preternatural resonance and took on the hard human accent of the other young men in the room.

Clothes of all kinds fascinated him, not for their beauty but for what he thought they meant. He wore jeans and sweat shirts like Daniel; he wore cable-knit sweaters and workmen's brogans, leather windbreakers, and mirrored sunglasses pushed up on his head. He wore tailored suits, and dinner jackets, and white tie and tails when the fancy suited him; his hair was cut short one night so he looked like any young man down from Cambridge, and left curly and long, an angel's mane, the next.

It seemed that he and Daniel were always walking up four unlighted flights of stairs to visit some painter, sculptor, or photographer, or to see some special never-released yet revolutionary film. They spent hours in the cold-water flats of dark-eyed young women who played rock music and made herbal tea which Armand never drank.

Men and women fell in love with Armand, of course, "so innocent, so passionate, so brilliant!" You don't say. In fact, Armand's power to seduce was almost beyond his control. And it was Daniel who must bed these unfortunates, if Armand could possibly arrange it, while he watched from a chair nearby, a dark-eyed Cupid with a tender approving smile. Hot, nerve-searing, this witnessed passion, Daniel working the other body with ever greater abandon, aroused by the

dual purpose of every intimate gesture. Yet he lay empty afterwards, staring at Armand, resentful, cold.

In New York they went tearing to museum openings, cafés, bars, adopted a young dancer, paying all his bills through school. They sat on the stoops in SoHo and Greenwich Village whiling the hours away with anybody who would stop to join them. They went to night classes in literature, philosophy, art history, and politics. They studied biology, bought microscopes, collected specimens. They studied books on astronomy and mounted giant telescopes on the roofs of the buildings in which they lived for a few days or a month at most. They went to boxing matches, rock concerts, Broadway shows.

Technological inventions began to obsess Armand, one after the other. First it was kitchen blenders, in which he made frightful concoctions mostly based on the colors of the ingredients; then microwave ovens, in which he cooked roaches and rats. Garbage disposers enchanted him; he fed them paper towels and whole packages of cigarettes. Then it was telephones. He called long distance all over the planet, speaking for hours with "mortals" in Australia or India. Finally television caught him up utterly, so that the flat was full of blaring speakers and flickering screens.

Anything with blue skies enthralled him. Then he must watch news programs, prime time series, documentaries, and finally every film, regardless of merit, ever taped.

At last particular movies struck his fancy. Over and over he watched Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, fascinated by Rutger Hauer, the powerfully built actor who, as the leader of the rebel androids, confronts his human maker, kisses him, and then crushes his skull. It would bring a slow and almost impish laugh from Armand, the bones cracking, the look in Hauer's ice-cold blue eye.

"That's your friend, Lestat, there," Armand whispered once to Daniel. "Lestat would have the … how do you say?… guts?… to do that!"

After *Blade Runner* it was the idiotic and hilarious *Time Bandits*, a British comedy in which five dwarfs steal a "Map of Creation" so they can travel through the holes in Time. Into one century after another they tumble, thieving and brawling, along with a little boy

companion, until they all wind up in the devil's lair.

Then one scene in particular became Armand's favorite: the dwarfs on a broken-down stage in Castelleone singing "Me and My Shadow" for Napoleon really sent Armand out of his mind. He lost all supernatural composure and became utterly human, laughing till the tears rose in his eyes.

Daniel had to admit there was a horrible charm to it, the "Me and My Shadow" number, with the dwarfs stumbling, fighting with each other, finally lousing up the whole proceedings, and the dazed eighteenth-century musicians in the pit not knowing what to make of the twentieth-century song. Napoleon was stupefied, then delighted! A stroke of comic genius, the entire scene. But how many times could a mortal watch it? For Armand there seemed no end.

Yet within six months he had dropped the movies for video cameras and must make his own films. All over New York he dragged Daniel, as he interviewed people on the nighttime streets. Armand had reels of himself reciting poetry in Italian or Latin, or merely staring with his arms folded, a gleaming white presence slipping in and out of focus in eternally dim bronze light.

Then somewhere, somehow, in a place unbeknownst to Daniel, Armand made a long tape of himself lying in the coffin during his daytime deathlike sleep. Daniel found this impossible to look at. Armand sat before the slow-moving film for hours, watching his own hair, cut at sunrise, slowly growing against the satin as he lay motionless with closed eyes.

Next it was computers. He was filling disk after disk with his secret writings. He rented additional apartments in Manhattan to house his word processors and video game machines.

Finally he turned to planes.

Daniel had always been a compulsive traveler, he had fled Armand to cities worldwide, and certainly he and Armand had taken planes together. Nothing new in that. But now it was a concentrated exploration; they must spend the entire night in the air. Flying to Boston, then Washington, then to Chicago, then back to New York City, was not unusual. Armand observed everything, passengers, stewardesses; he spoke with the pilots; he lay back in the deep first-class seats listening to the engines roar. Double-decker jets particularly

enchanted him. He must try longer, more daring adventures: all the way to Port-au-Prince or San Francisco, or Rome, or Madrid or Lisbon, it didn't matter, as long as Armand was safely landed by dawn.

Armand virtually disappeared at dawn. Daniel was never to know where Armand actually slept. But then Daniel was dead on his feet by daybreak anyway. Daniel didn't see high noon for five years.

Often Armand had been in the room some time before Daniel awakened. The coffee would be perking, the music going—Vivaldi or honky-tonk piano, as Armand loved both equally—and Armand would be pacing, ready for Daniel to get up.

"Come, lover, we're going to the ballet tonight. I want to see Baryshnikov. And after that, down to the Village. You remember that jazz band I loved last summer, well, they've come back. Come on, I'm hungry, my beloved. We must go."

And if Daniel was sluggish, Armand would push him into the shower, soap him all over, rinse him off, drag him out, dry him thoroughly, then shave his face as lovingly as an old-fashioned barber, and finally dress him after carefully selecting from Daniel's wardrobe of dirty and neglected clothes.

Daniel loved the feel of the hard gleaming white hands moving over his naked flesh, rather like satin gloves. And the brown eyes that seemed to draw Daniel out of himself; ah, the delicious disorientation, the certainty that he was being carried downwards, out of all things physical, and finally the hands closing on his throat gently, and the teeth breaking through the skin.

He closed his eyes, his body heating slowly, only to burn truly when Armand's blood touched his lips. He heard the distant sighs again, the crying, was it of lost souls? It seemed a great luminous continuity was there, as if all his dreams were suddenly connected and vitally important, yet it was all slipping away….

Once he'd reached out, held Armand with all his strength, and tried to gash the skin of his throat. Armand had been so patient, making the tear for him, and letting him close his mouth on it for the longest time —yes, this—then guiding him gently away.

Daniel was past all decision. Daniel lived only in two alternating states: misery and ecstasy, united by love. He never knew when he'd be given the blood. He never knew if things looked different because

of it—the carnations staring at him from their vases, skyscrapers hideously visible like plants sprung up from steel seeds overnight—or because he was just going out of his mind.

Then had come the night when Armand said he was ready to enter this century in earnest, he understood enough about it now. He wanted "incalculable" wealth. He wanted a vast dwelling full of all those things he'd come to value. And yachts, planes, cars—millions of dollars. He wanted to buy Daniel everything that Daniel might ever desire.

"What do you mean, millions!" Daniel had scoffed. "You throw your clothes away after you wear them, you rent apartments and forget where they are. Do you know what a zip code is, or a tax bracket? I'm the one who buys all the goddamned airline tickets. Millions. How are we going to get millions! Steal another Maserati and be done with it, for God's sakes!"

"Daniel, you are a gift to me from Louis," Armand had said tenderly. "What would I do without you? You misunderstand everything." His eyes were large, childlike. "I want to be in the vital center of things the way I was years ago in Paris in the Theater of the Vampires. Surely you remember. I want to be a canker in the very eye of the world."

Daniel had been dazzled by the speed with which things happened.

It had begun with a treasure find in the waters off Jamaica, Armand chartering a boat to show Daniel where salvage operations must begin. Within days a sunken Spanish galleon loaded with bullion and jewels had been discovered. Next it was an archaeological find of priceless Olmec figurines. Two more sunken ships were pinpointed in rapid succession. A cheap piece of South American property yielded a long forgotten emerald mine.

They purchased a mansion in Florida, yachts, speedboats, a small but exquisitely appointed jet plane.

And now they must be outfitted like princes for all occasions. Armand himself supervised the measurements for Daniel's custom-made shirts, suits, shoes. He chose the fabrics for an endless parade of sports coats, pants, robes, silk foulards. Of course Daniel must have for colder climes mink-lined raincoats, and dinner jackets for Monte

Carlo, and jeweled cuff links, and even a long black suede cloak, which Daniel with his "twentieth-century height" could carry off quite well.

At sunset when Daniel awoke, his clothes had already been laid out for him. Heaven help him if he were to change a single item, from the linen handkerchief to the black silk socks. Supper awaited in the immense dining room with its windows open to the pool. Armand was already at his desk in the adjoining study. There was work to do: maps to consult, more wealth to be acquired.

"But how do you do it!" Daniel had demanded, as he watched Armand making notes, writing directions for new acquisitions.

"If you can read the minds of men, you can have anything that you want," Armand had said patiently. Ah, that soft reasonable voice, that open and almost trusting boyish face, the auburn hair always slipping into the eye a bit carelessly, the body so suggestive of human serenity, of physical ease.

"Give *me* what I want," Daniel had demanded.

"I'm giving you everything you could ever ask for."

"Yes, but not what I *have* asked for, not what I want!"

"Be alive, Daniel." A low whisper, like a kiss. "Let me tell you from my heart that life is better than death."

"I don't want to be alive, Armand, I want to live forever, and then *I* will tell *you* whether life is better than death."

The fact was, the riches were maddening him, making him feel his mortality more keenly than ever before. Sailing the warm Gulf Stream with Armand under a clear night sky, sprinkled with countless stars, he was desperate to possess all of this forever. With hatred and love he watched Armand effortlessly steering the vessel. Would Armand really let him die?

The game of acquisition continued.

Picassos, Degas, Van Goghs, these were but a few of the stolen paintings Armand recovered without explanation and handed over to Daniel for resales or rewards. Of course the recent owners would not dare to come forward, if in fact they had survived Armand's silent nocturnal visit to the sanctums where these stolen treasures had been displayed. Sometimes no clear title to the work in question existed. At auction, they brought millions. But even this was not enough.

Pearls, rubies, emeralds, diamond tiaras, these he brought to Daniel. "Never mind, they were stolen, no one will claim them." And from the savage narcotics traders off the Miami coast, Armand stole anything and everything, guns, suitcases full of money, even their boats.

Daniel stared at the piles and piles of green bills, as the secretaries counted them and wrapped them for coded accounts in European banks.

Often Daniel watched Armand go out alone to hunt the warm southern waters, a youth in soft black silk shirt and black pants, manning a sleek unlighted speedboat, the wind whipping his uncut long hair. Such a deadly foe. Somewhere far out there, beyond sight of land, he finds his smugglers and he strikes—the lone pirate, death. Are the victims dropped into the deep, hair billowing perhaps for one moment while the moon can still illuminate them as they look up for a last glimpse at what has been their ruin? This boy! They thought they were the evil ones.…

"Would you let me go with you? Would you let me see it when you do it?"

"No."

Finally enough capital had been amassed; Armand was ready for real action.

He ordered Daniel to make purchases without counsel or hesitation: a fleet of cruise ships, a chain of restaurants and hotels. Four private planes were now at their disposal. Armand had eight phones.

And then came the final dream: the Night Island, Armand's own personal creation with its five dazzling glass stories of theaters, restaurants, and shops. He drew the pictures for the architects he'd chosen. He gave them endless lists of the materials he wanted, the fabrics, the sculptures for the fountains, even the flowers, the potted trees.

Behold, the Night Island. From sunset till dawn, the tourists mobbed it, as boat after boat brought them out from the Miami docks. The music played eternally in the lounges, on the dance floors. The glass elevators never stopped their climb to heaven; ponds, streams, waterfalls glittered amid banks of moist, fragile blooms.

You could buy anything on the Night Island—diamonds, a Coca-Cola, books, pianos, parrots, designer fashions, porcelain dolls. All the

fine cuisines of the world awaited you. Five films played nightly in the cinemas. Here was English tweed and Spanish leather, Indian silk, Chinese carpets, sterling silver, ice-cream cones or cotton candy, bone china, and Italian shoes.

Or you could live adjacent to it, in secret luxury, slipping in and out of the whirl at will.

"All this is yours, Daniel," Armand said, moving slowly through the spacious airy rooms of their very own Villa of the Mysteries, which covered three stories—and cellars verboten to Daniel—windows open to the distant burning nightscape of Miami, to the dim high clouds rolling above.

Gorgeous the skilled mixture of old and new. Elevator doors rolling back on broad rectangular rooms full of medieval tapestries and antique chandeliers; giant television sets in every room. Renaissance paintings filled Daniel's suite, where Persian rugs covered the parquet. The finest of the Venetian school surrounded Armand in his white carpeted study full of shining computers, intercoms, and monitors. The books, magazines, newspapers came from all over the world.

"This is your home, Daniel."

And so it had been and Daniel had loved it, he had to admit that, and what he had loved even more was the freedom, the power, and the luxury that attended him everywhere that he went.

He and Armand had gone into the depths of the Central American jungles by night to see the Mayan ruins; they had gone up the flank of Annapurna to glimpse the distant summit under the light of the moon. Through the crowded streets of Tokyo they had wandered together, through Bangkok and Cairo and Damascus, through Lima and Rio and Kathmandu. By day Daniel wallowed in comfort at the best of the local hostelries; by night he wandered fearless with Armand at his side.

Now and then, however, the illusion of civilized life would break down. Sometimes in some far-flung place, Armand sensed the presence of other immortals. He explained that he had thrown his shield around Daniel, yet it worried him. Daniel must stay at his side.

"Make me what you are and worry no more."

"You don't know what you're saying," Armand had answered. "Now you're one of a billion faceless humans. If you were one of us,

you'd be a candle burning in the dark."

Daniel wouldn't accept it.

"They would spot you without fail," Armand continued. He had become angry, though not at Daniel. The fact was he disliked any talk at all of the undead. "Don't you know the old ones destroy the young ones out of hand?" he'd asked. "Didn't your beloved Louis explain that to you? It's what I do everywhere that we settle—I clean them out, the young ones, the vermin. But I am not invincible." He'd paused as though debating whether or not he should continue. Then: "I'm like any beast on the prowl. I have enemies who are older and stronger who would try to destroy me if it interested them to do so, I am sure."

"Older than you are? But I thought you were the oldest," Daniel had said. It had been years since they'd spoken of *Interview with the Vampire*. They had, in fact, never discussed its contents in detail.

"No, of course I'm not the oldest," Armand had answered. He seemed slightly uneasy. "Merely the oldest your friend Louis was ever to find. There are others. I don't know their names, I've seldom seen their faces. But at times, I feel them. You might say that we feel each other. We send our silent yet powerful signals. 'Keep away from me.' "

The following night, he'd given Daniel the locket, the amulet as he called it, to wear. He'd kissed it first and rubbed it in his hands as if to warm it. Strange to witness this ritual. Stranger still to see the thing itself with the letter A carved on it, and inside the tiny vial of Armand's blood.

"Here, snap the clasp if they come near you. Break the vial instantly. And they will feel the power that protects you. They will not dare—"

"Ah, you'll let them kill me. You know you will," Daniel had said coldly. Shut out. "Give me the power to fight for myself."

But he had worn the locket ever since. Under the lamp, he'd examined the A and the intricate carvings all over the thing to find they were tiny twisted human figures, some mutilated, others writhing as if in agony, some dead. Horrid thing actually. He had dropped the chain down into his shirt, and it was cold against his naked chest, but out of sight.

Yet Daniel was never to see or sense the presence of another supernatural being. He remembered Louis as if he'd been a

hallucination, something known in a fever. Armand was Daniel's single oracle, his merciless and all-loving demonic god.

More and more his bitterness increased. Life with Armand inflamed him, maddened him. It had been years since Daniel had even thought of his family, of the friends he used to know. Checks went out to kin, of that he'd made certain, but they were just names now on a list.

"You'll never die, and yet you look at me and you watch me die, night after night, you watch it."

Ugly fights, terrible fights, finally, Armand broken down, glassy-eyed with silent rage, then crying softly but uncontrollably as if some lost emotion had been rediscovered which threatened to tear him apart. "I will not do it, I cannot do it. Ask me to kill you, it would be easier than that. You don't know what you ask for, don't you see? It is always a damnable error! Don't you realize that any one of us would give it up for one human lifetime?"

"Give up immortality, just to live one life? I don't believe you. This is the first time you have told me an out-and-out lie."

"How dare you!"

"Don't hit me. You might kill me. You're very strong."

"I'd give it up. If I weren't a coward when it gets right down to it, if I weren't after five hundred greedy years in this whirlwind still terrified to the marrow of my bones of death."

"No, you wouldn't. Fear has nothing to do with it. Imagine one lifetime back then when you were born. And all this lost? The future in which you know power and luxury of which Genghis Khan never dreamed? But forget the technical miracles. Would you settle for ignorance of the world's destiny? Ah, don't tell me you would."

No resolution in words was ever reached. It would end with the embrace, the kiss, the blood stinging him, the shroud of dreams closing over him like a great net, hunger! I love you! Give me more! Yes, more. But never enough.

It was useless.

What had these transfusions done to his body and soul? Made him see the descent of the falling leaf in greater detail? Armand was not going to give it to him!

Armand would see Daniel leave time and again, and drift off into the terrors of the everyday world, risk that, rather than do it. There

was nothing Daniel could do, nothing he could give.

And the wandering started, the escaping, and Armand did not follow him. Armand would wait each time until Daniel begged to come back. Or until Daniel was beyond calling, until Daniel was on the verge of death itself. And then and only then, Armand would bring him back.

The rain hit the wide pavements of Michigan Avenue. The bookstore was empty, the lights had gone out. Somewhere a clock had struck the hour of nine. He stood against the glass watching the traffic stream past in front of him. Nowhere to go. Drink the tiny drop of blood inside the locket. Why not?

And Lestat in California, on the prowl already, perhaps stalking a victim even now. And they were preparing the hall for the concert, weren't they? Mortal men rigging up lights, microphones, concession stands, oblivious to the secret codes being given, the sinister audience that would conceal itself in the great indifferent and inevitably hysterical human throng. Ah, maybe Daniel had made a horrible miscalculation. Maybe Armand was there!

At first it seemed an impossibility, then a certainty. Why hadn't Daniel realized this before?

Surely Armand had gone! If there was any truth at all in what Lestat had written, Armand would go for a reckoning, to witness, to search perhaps for those he'd lost over the centuries now drawn to Lestat by the same call.

And what would a mortal lover matter then, a human who'd been no more than a toy for a decade? No. Armand had gone on without him. And this time there would be no rescue.

He felt cold, small, as he stood there. He felt miserably alone. It didn't matter, his premonitions, how the dream of the twins descended upon him and then left him with foreboding. These were things that were passing him by like great black wings. You could feel the indifferent wind as they swept over. Armand had proceeded without him towards a destiny that Daniel would never fully understand.

It filled him with horror, with sadness. Gates locked. The anxiety aroused by the dream mingled with a dull sickening fear. He had come to the end of the line. What would he do? Wearily, he envisioned the

Night Island locked against him. He saw the villa behind its white walls, high above the beach, impossible to reach. He imagined his past gone, along with his future. Death was the understanding of the immediate present: that there is finally nothing else.

He walked on a few steps; his hands were numb. The rain had drenched his sweat shirt. He wanted to lie down on the very pavement and let the twins come again. And Lestat's phrases ran through his head. The Dark Trick he called the moment of rebirth. The Savage Garden he called the world that could embrace such exquisite monsters, ah, yes.

But let me be a lover in the Savage Garden with you, and the light that went out of life would come back in a great burst of glory. Out of mortal flesh I would pass into eternity. I would be one of you.

Dizzy. Did he almost fall? Someone talking to him, someone asking if he was all right. No, of course not. Why should I be?

But there was a hand on his shoulder.

Daniel.

He looked up.

Armand stood at the curb.

At first he could not believe it, he wanted it so badly, but there was no denying what he saw. Armand stood there. He was peering silently from the unearthly stillness he seemed to carry with him, his face flushed beneath the faintest touch of unnatural pallor. How normal he looked, if beauty is ever normal. And yet how strangely set apart from the material things touching him, the rumpled white coat and pants he wore. Behind him the big gray hulk of a Rolls waited, like an ancillary vision, droplets teeming on its silver roof.

Come on, Daniel. You made it hard for me this time, didn't you, so hard.

Why the urgency of the command when the hand that pulled him forward was so strong? Such a rare thing to see Armand truly angry. Ah, how Daniel loved this anger! His knees went out from under him. He felt himself lifted. And then the soft velvet of the back seat of the car spread out under him. He fell over on his hands. He closed his eyes.

But Armand gently pulled him upright, held him. The car rocked gently, deliciously as it moved forward. So nice to sleep at last in Armand's arms. But there was so much he must tell Armand, so much

about the dream, the book.

"Don't you think I know?" Armand whispered. A strange light in the eye, what was it? Something raw and tender in the way Armand looked, all the composure stripped away. He lifted a tumbler half full of brandy and put it in Daniel's hand.

"And you running from me," he said, "from Stockholm and Edinburgh and Paris. What do you think I am that I can follow you at such speed down so many pathways? And such danger—"

Lips against Daniel's face, suddenly, ah, that's better, I like kissing. And snuggling with dead things, yes, hold me. He buried his face in Armand's neck. *Your blood.*

"Not yet, my beloved." Armand pushed him forward, pressing his fingers to Daniel's lips. Such uncommon feeling in the low, controlled voice. "Listen to what I'm saying to you. All over the world, our kind are being destroyed."

Destroyed. It sent a current of panic through him, so that his body tensed in spite of his exhaustion. He tried to focus on Armand, but he saw the red-haired twins again, the soldiers, the blackened body of the mother being overturned in the ashes. But the meaning, the continuity … Why?

"I cannot tell you," Armand said. And he meant the dream when he spoke, because he'd had the dream too. He lifted the brandy to Daniel's lips.

Oh, so warm, yes. He would slip into unconsciousness if he didn't hold tight. They were racing silently along the freeway now, out of Chicago, the rain flooding the windows, locked together in this warm, velvet-lined little place. Ah, such lovely silver rain. And Armand had turned away, distracted, as if listening to some faraway music, his lips parted, frozen on the verge of speech.

I'm with you, safe with you.

"No, Daniel, not safe," he answered. "Maybe not even for a night or so much as an hour."

Daniel tried to think, to form a question, but he was too weak, too drowsy. The car was so comfortable, the motion of it so soothing. And the twins. The beautiful red-haired twins wanted in now! His eyes closed for a split second and he sank against Armand's shoulder, feeling Armand's hand on his back.

Far away he heard Armand's voice: "What do I do with you, my beloved? Especially now, when I myself am so afraid."

Darkness again. He held fast to the taste of the brandy in his mouth, to the touch of Armand's hand, but he was already dreaming.

The twins were walking in the desert; the sun was high above. It burned their white arms, their faces. Their lips were swollen and cracked from thirst. Their dresses were stained with blood.

"Make the rain fall," Daniel whispered aloud, "you can do it, make the rain fall." One of the twins fell down on her knees, and her sister knelt and put her arms around her. Red hair and red hair.

Somewhere far off he heard Armand's voice again. Armand said that they were too deep in the desert. Not even their spirits could make rain in such a place.

But why? Couldn't spirits do anything?

He felt Armand kiss him gently again.

The twins have now entered a low mountain pass. But there is no shade because the sun is directly above them, and the rocky slopes are too treacherous for them to climb. On they walk. Can't someone help them? They stumble and fall every few steps now. The rocks look too hot to touch. Finally one of them falls face down in the sand, and the other lies over her, sheltering her with her hair.

Oh, if only evening would come, with its cold winds.

Suddenly the twin who is protecting her sister looks up. Movement on the cliffs. Then stillness again. A rock falls, echoes with a soft clear shuffling sound. And then Daniel sees the men moving over the precipices, desert people as they have looked for thousands of years with their dark skin and heavy white robes.

The twins rise on their knees together as these men approach. The men offer them water. They pour the cool water over the twins. Suddenly the twins are laughing and talking hysterically, so great is their relief, but the men don't understand. Then it is gestures, so purely eloquent, as one twin points to the belly of her sister, and then folding her arms makes the universal sign for rocking a child. Ah, yes. The men lift the pregnant woman. And all move together towards the oasis, round which their tents stand.

At last by the light of a fire outside the tent, the twins sleep, safe, among the desert people, the Bedouins. Could it be that the Bedouins

are so very ancient, that their history goes back thousands and thousands of years? At dawn, one of the twins rises, the one who does not carry a child. As her sister watches, she walks out towards the olive trees of the oasis. She lifts her arms, and at first it seems she is only welcoming the sun. Others have awakened; they gather to see. Then a wind rises, gently, moving the branches of the olive trees. And the rain, the light sweet rain begins to fall.

He opened his eyes. He was on the plane.

He recognized the small bedroom immediately by the white plastic walls and the soothing quality of the dim yellow light. Everything synthetic, hard and gleaming like the great rib bones of prehistoric creatures. Have things come full circle? Technology has recreated Jonah's chamber deep within the belly of the whale.

He was lying on the bed that had no head or foot or legs or frame to it. Someone had washed his hands and his face. He was clean-shaven. Ah, that felt so good. And the roar of the engines was a huge silence, the whale breathing, slicing through the sea. That made it possible for him to see things around him very distinctly. A decanter. Bourbon. He wanted it. But he was too exhausted to move. And something not right, something.… He reached up, felt his neck. The amulet was gone! But it didn't matter. He was with Armand.

Armand sat at the little table near the whale's eye window, the white plastic lid pulled all the way down. He had cut his hair. And he wore black wool now, neat and fine, like the corpse again dressed for the funeral even to the shining black shoes. Grim all this. Someone will now read the Twenty-third Psalm. Bring back the white clothes.

"You're dying," Armand said softly.

" 'And though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,' et cetera," Daniel whispered. His throat was so dry. And his head ached. Didn't matter saying what was really on his mind. All been said long ago.

Armand spoke again silently, a laser beam touching Daniel's brain:

Shall we bother with the particulars? You weigh no more than a hundred and thirty pounds now. And the alcohol is eating at your insides. You are half mad. There is almost nothing left in the world that you enjoy.

"Except talking to you now and then. It's so easy to hear everything

you say."

If you were never to see me again, that would only make things worse. If you go on as you are, you won't live another five days.

Unbearable thought, actually. But if that's so, then why have I been running away?

No response.

How clear everything seemed. It wasn't only the roar of the engines, it was the curious movement of the plane, that never-ending irregular undulation as if it rode the air in bumps and dips and over curbs and now and then uphill. The whale speeding along on the whale path, as Beowulf called it.

Armand's hair was brushed to one side, neatly. Gold watch on his wrist, one of those high-tech numbers he so adored. Think of that thing flashing its digits inside a coffin during the day. And the black jacket, old-fashioned rather with narrow lapels. The vest was black silk, it looked like that anyway. But his face, ah, he had fed all right. Fed plenty.

Do you remember anything I said to you earlier?

"Yes," Daniel said. But the truth is he had trouble remembering. Then it came back suddenly, oppressively. "Something about destruction everywhere. But I'm dying. They're dying, I'm dying. They got to be immortal before it happened; I am merely alive. See? I remember. I would like to have the bourbon now."

There is nothing I can do to make you want to live, isn't that so?

"Not that again. I will jump out of the plane if you go on."

Will you listen to me, then? Really listen?

"How can I help it? I can't get away from your voice when you want me to listen; it's like a tiny microphone inside my head. What is this, tears? You're going to weep over me?"

For one second, he looked so young. What a travesty.

"Damn you, Daniel," he said, so that Daniel heard the words aloud.

A chill passed over Daniel. Horrid to see him suffering. Daniel said nothing.

"What we are," Armand said, "it wasn't meant to be, you know that. You didn't have to read Lestat's book to find it out. Any one of us could have told you it was an abomination, a demonic fusion—"

"Then what Lestat wrote was true." A demon going into the ancient

Egyptian Mother and the Father. Well, a spirit anyway. They had called it a demon back then.

"Doesn't matter whether or not it's true. The beginning is no longer important. What matters is that the end may be at hand."

Deep tightening of panic, the atmosphere of the dream returning, the shrill sound of the twins' screams.

"Listen to me," Armand said patiently, calling him back away from the two women. "Lestat has awakened something or someone—"

"Akasha … Enkil."

"Perhaps. It may be more than one or two. No one knows for certain. There is a vague repeated cry of danger, but no one seems to know whence it comes. They only know that we are being sought out and annihilated, that coven houses, meeting places, go up in flames."

"I've heard the cry of danger," Daniel whispered. "Sometimes very strong in the middle of the night, and then at other moments like an echo." Again he saw the twins. It had to be connected to the twins. "But how do you know these things, about the coven houses, about—"

"Daniel, don't try me. There isn't much time left. I know. The others know. It's like a current, running through the wires of a great web."

"Yes." Whenever Daniel had tasted the vampiric blood, he had glimpsed for one instant that great glittering mesh of knowledge, connections, half-understood visions. And it was true then. The web had begun with the Mother and the Father—

"Years ago," Armand interrupted, "it wouldn't have mattered to me, all this."

"What do you mean?"

"But I don't want it to end now. I don't want to continue unless you —" His face changed slightly. Faint look of surprise. "I don't want you to die."

Daniel said nothing.

Eerie the stillness of this moment. Even with the plane riding the air currents gently. Armand sitting there, so self-contained, so patient, with the words belying the smooth calm of the voice.

"I'm not afraid, because you're here," Daniel said suddenly.

"You're a fool then. But I will tell you another mysterious part of it."

"Yes?"

"Lestat is still in existence. He goes on with his schemes. And those who've gathered near him are unharmed."

"But how do you know for certain?"

Short little velvet laugh. "There you go again. So irrepressibly human. You overestimate me or underestimate me. Seldom do you ever hit the mark."

"I work with limited equipment. The cells in my body are subject to deterioration, to a process called aging and—"

"They're gathered in San Francisco. They crowd the back rooms of a tavern called Dracula's Daughter. Perhaps I know because others know it and one powerful mind picks up images from another and unwittingly or deliberately passes those images along. Perhaps one witness telegraphs the image to many. I can't tell. Thoughts, feelings, voices, they're just there. Traveling the web, the threads. Some are clear, others clouded. Now and then the warning overrides everything. *Danger*. It is as if our world falls silent for one instant. Then other voices rise again."

"And Lestat. Where is Lestat?"

"He's been seen but only in glimpses. They can't track him to his lair. He's too clever to let that happen. But he teases them. He races his black Porsche through the streets of San Francisco. He may not know all that's happened."

"Explain."

"The power to communicate varies. To listen to the thoughts of others is often to be heard oneself. Lestat is concealing his presence. His mind may be completely cut off."

"And the twins? The two women in the dream, who are they?"

"I don't know. Not all have had these dreams. But many know of them, and all seem to fear them, to share the conviction that somehow Lestat is to blame. For all that's happened, Lestat is to blame."

"A real devil among devils." Daniel laughed softly.

With a subtle nod, Armand acknowledged the little jest wearily. He even smiled.

Stillness. Roar of the engines.

"Do you understand what I'm telling you? There have been attacks upon our kind everywhere but there."

"Where Lestat is."

"Precisely. But the destroyer moves erratically. It seems it must be near to the thing it would destroy. It may be waiting for the concert in order to finish what it has begun."

"It can't hurt you. It would have already—"

The short, derisive laugh again, barely audible. A telepathic laugh?

"Your faith touches me as always, but don't be my acolyte just now. The thing is not omnipotent. It can't move with infinite speed. You have to understand the choice I've made. We're going to him because there isn't any other safe place to go. It has found rogues in far-flung places and burnt them to ashes—"

"And because you want to be with Lestat."

No answer.

"You know you do. You want to see him. You want to be there if he needs you. If there's going to be a battle …"

No answer.

"And if Lestat caused it, maybe he can stop it."

Still Armand didn't answer. He appeared confused.

"It is simpler than that," he said finally. "I *have* to go."

The plane seemed a thing suspended on a spume of sound. Daniel looked drowsily at the ceiling, at the light moving.

To see Lestat at last. He thought of Lestat's old house in New Orleans. Of the gold watch he'd recovered from the dusty floor. And now it was back to San Francisco, back to the beginning, back to Lestat. God, he wanted the bourbon. Why wouldn't Armand give it to him? He was so weak. They'd go to the concert, he'd see Lestat—

But then the sense of dread came again, deepening, the dread which the dreams inspired. "Don't let me dream any more of them," he whispered suddenly.

He thought he heard Armand say yes.

Suddenly Armand stood beside the bed. His shadow fell over Daniel. The whale's belly seemed smaller, no more than the light surrounding Armand.

"Look at me, beloved," he said.

Darkness. And then the high iron gates opening, and the moon flooding down on the garden. *What is this place?*

Oh, Italy, it had to be, with this gentle embracing warm air and a full moon shining down on the great sweep of trees and flowers, and

beyond, the Villa of the Mysteries at the very edge of ancient Pompeii.

"But how did we get here!" He turned to Armand, who stood beside him dressed in strange, old-fashioned velvet clothes. For one moment he could do nothing but stare at Armand, at the black velvet tunic he wore and the leggings, and his long curling auburn hair.

"We aren't really here," Armand said. "You know we aren't." He turned and walked into the garden towards the villa, his heels making the faintest sound on the worn gray stones.

But it was real! Look at the crumbling old brick walls, and the flowers in their long deep beds, and the path itself with Armand's damp footprints! And the stars overhead, the stars! He turned around and reached up into the lemon tree and broke off a single fragrant leaf.

Armand turned, reached back to take his arm. The smell of freshly turned earth rose from the flower beds. *Ah, I could die here.*

"Yes," said Armand, "you could. And you will. And you know, I've never done it before. I told you but you never believed me. Now Lestat's told you in his book. I've never done it. Do you believe him?"

"Of course I believed you. The vow you made, you explained everything. But Armand, this is my question, to whom did you make this vow?"

Laughter.

Their voices carried over the garden. Such roses and chrysanthemums, how enormous they were. And light poured from the doorways of the Villa of the Mysteries. Was there music playing? Why, the whole ruined place was brilliantly illuminated under the incandescent blue of the night sky.

"So you would have me break my vow. You would have what you think you want. But look well at this garden, because once I do it, you'll never read my thoughts or see my visions again. A veil of silence will come down."

"But we'll be brothers, don't you see?" Daniel asked.

Armand stood so close to him they were almost kissing. The flowers were crushed against them, huge drowsing yellow dahlias and white gladioli, such lovely drenching perfume. They had stopped beneath a dying tree in which the wisteria grew wild. Its delicate blossoms shivered in clusters, its great twining arms white as bone. And beyond

voices poured out of the Villa. Were there people singing?

"But where are we really?" Daniel asked. "Tell me!"

"I told you. It's just a dream. But if you want a name, let me call it the gateway of life and death. I'll bring you with me through this gateway. And why? Because I am a coward. And I love you too much to let you go."

Such joy Daniel felt, such cold and lovely triumph. And so the moment was his, and he was lost no more in the awesome free fall of time. No more one of the teeming millions who would sleep in this dank odoriferous earth, beneath the broken withered flowers, without name or knowledge, all vision lost.

"I promise you nothing. How can I? I've told you what lies ahead."

"I don't care. I'll go towards it with you."

Armand's eyes were reddened, weary, old. Such delicate clothes these were, hand sewn, dusty, like the clothes of a ghost. Were they what the mind conjured effortlessly when it wanted to be purely itself?

"Don't cry! It's not fair," Daniel said. "This is my rebirth. How can you cry? Don't you know what this means? Is it possible you never knew?" He looked up suddenly, to catch the whole sweep of this enchanted landscape, the distant Villa, the rolling land above and below. And then he turned his face upwards, and the heavens astonished him. Never had he seen so many stars.

Why, it seemed as if the sky itself went up and up forever with stars so plentiful and bright that the constellations were utterly lost. No pattern. No meaning. Only the gorgeous victory of sheer energy and matter. But then he saw the Pleiades—the constellation beloved of the doomed red-haired twins in the dream—and he smiled. He saw the twins together on a mountaintop, and they were happy. It made him so glad.

"Say the word, my love," Armand said. "I'll do it. We'll be in hell together after all."

"But don't you see," Daniel said, "all human decisions are made like this. Do you think the mother knows what will happen to the child in her womb? Dear God, we are lost, I tell you. What does it matter if you give it to me and it's wrong! There is no wrong! There is only desperation, and I would *have it!* I want to live forever with you."

He opened his eyes. The ceiling of the cabin of the plane, the soft yellow lights reflected in the warm wood-paneled walls, and then around him the garden, the perfume, the sight of the flowers almost breaking loose from their stems.

They stood beneath the dead tree twined full of airy purple wisteria blossoms. And the blossoms stroked his face, the clusters of waxy petals. Something came back to him, something he had known long ago—that in the language of an ancient people the word for flowers was the same as the word for blood. He felt the sudden sharp stab of the teeth in his neck.

His heart was caught suddenly, wrenched in a powerful grip! The pressure was more than he could bear. Yet he could see over Armand's shoulder and the night was sliding down around him, the stars growing as large as these moist and fragrant blooms. Why, they were rising into the sky!

For a split second he saw the Vampire Lestat, driving, plunging through the night in his long sleek black car. How like a lion Lestat looked with his mane of hair blown back by the wind, his eyes filled with mad humor and high spirits. And then he turned and looked at Daniel, and from his throat came a deep soft laugh.

Louis was there too. Louis was standing in a room on Divisadero Street looking out of the window, waiting, and then he said, "Yes, come, Daniel, if that is what must happen."

But they didn't know about the burnt-out coven houses! They didn't know about the twins! About the cry of danger!

They were all in a crowded room, actually, inside the Villa, and Louis was leaning against the mantel in a frock coat. Everyone was there! Even the twins were there! "Thank God, you've come," Daniel said. He kissed Louis on one cheek and then the other decorously. "Why, my skin is as pale as yours!"

He cried out suddenly as his heart was let go, and the air filled his lungs. The garden again. The grass was all around him. The garden grew up over his head. *Don't leave me here, not here against the earth.*

"Drink, Daniel." The priest said the Latin words as he poured the Holy Communion wine into his mouth. The red-haired twins took the sacred plates—the heart, the brain. "This the brain and the heart of my mother I devour with all respect for the spirit of my mother—"

"God, give it to me!" He'd knocked the chalice to the marble floor of the church, so clumsy, but God! The blood!

He sat up, crushing Armand to him, drawing it out of him, draught after draught. They had fallen over together in the soft bank of flowers. Armand lay beside him, and his mouth was open on Armand's throat, and the blood was an unstoppable fount.

"Come into the Villa of the Mysteries," said Louis to him. Louis was touching his shoulder. "We're waiting." The twins were embracing each other, stroking each other's long curling red hair.

The kids were screaming outside the auditorium because there were no more tickets. They would camp in the parking lot until tomorrow night.

"Do we have tickets?" he asked. "Armand, the tickets!"

Danger. Ice. It's coming from the one trapped beneath the ice!

Something hit him, hard. He was floating.

"Sleep, beloved."

"I want to go back to the garden, the Villa." He tried to open his eyes. His belly was hurting. Strangest pain, it seemed so far away.

"You know he's buried under the ice?"

"Sleep," Armand said, covering him with the blanket. "And when you wake, you'll be just like me. Dead."

San Francisco. He knew he was there before he even opened his eyes. And such a ghastly dream, he was glad to leave it—suffocating, blackness, and riding the rough and terrifying current of the sea! But the dream was fading. A dream without sight, and only the sound of the water, the feel of the water! A dream of unspeakable fear. He'd been a woman in it, helpless, without a tongue to scream.

Let it go away.

Something about the wintry air on his face, a white freshness that he could almost taste. San Francisco, of course. The cold moved over him like a tight garment, yet inside he was deliciously warm.

Immortal. Forever.

He opened his eyes. Armand had put him here. Through the viscid darkness of the dream, he'd heard Armand telling him to remain. Armand had told him that here he would be safe.

Here.

The French doors stood open all along the far wall. And the room itself, opulent, cluttered, one of those splendid places that Armand so often found, so dearly loved.

Look at the sheer lace panel blown back from the French doors. Look at the white feathers curling and glowing in the Aubusson carpet. He climbed to his feet and went out through the open doors.

A great mesh of branches rose between him and the wet shining sky. Stiff foliage of the Monterey cypress. And down there, through the branches, against a velvet blackness, he saw the great burning arc of the Golden Gate Bridge. The fog poured like thick white smoke past the immense towers. In fits and gusts it tried to swallow the pylons, the cables, then vanished as if the bridge itself with its glittering stream of traffic burnt it away.

Too magnificent, this spectacle—and the deep dark outline of the distant hills beneath their mantle of warm lights. Ah, but to take one tiny detail—the damp rooftops spilling downhill away from him, or the gnarled branches rising in front of him. Like elephant hide, this bark, this living skin.

Immortal … forever.

He ran his hands back through his hair and a gentle tingling passed through him. He could feel the soft imprint of his fingers on his scalp after he had taken his hands away. The wind stung him exquisitely. He remembered something. He reached up to find his fang teeth. Yes, they were beautifully long and sharp.

Someone touched him. He turned so quickly he almost lost his balance. Why, this was all so inconceivably different! He steadied himself, but the sight of Armand made him want to cry. Even in deep shadow, Armand's dark brown eyes were filled with a vibrant light. And the expression on his face, so loving. He reached out very carefully and touched Armand's eyelashes. He wanted to touch the tiny fine lines in Armand's lips. Armand kissed him. He began to tremble. The way it felt, the cool silky mouth, like a kiss of the brain, the electric purity of a thought!

"Come inside, my pupil," Armand said. "We have less than an hour left."

"But the others—"

Armand had gone to discover something very important. What was

it? Terrible things happening, coven houses burned. Yet nothing at the moment seemed more important than the warmth inside him, and the tingling as he moved his limbs.

"They're thriving, plotting," Armand said. Was he speaking out loud? He must have been. But the voice was so clear! "They're frightened of the wholesale destruction, but San Francisco isn't touched. Some say Lestat has done it to drive everyone to him. Others that it's the work of Marius, or even the twins. Or Those Who Must Be Kept, who strike with infinite power from their shrine."

The twins! He felt the darkness of the dream again around him, a woman's body, tongueless, terror, closing him in. Ah, nothing could hurt him now. Not dreams or plots. He was Armand's child.

"But these things must wait," Armand said gently. "You must come and do as I tell you. We must finish what was begun."

"Finish?" It was finished. He was reborn.

Armand brought him in out of the wind. Glint of the brass bed in the darkness, of a porcelain vase alive with gilded dragons. Of the square grand piano with its keys like grinning teeth. Yes, touch it, feel the ivory, the velvet tassels hanging from the lampshade.…

The music, where did the music come from? A low, mournful jazz trumpet, playing all alone. It stopped him, this hollow melancholy song, the notes flowing slowly into one another. He did not want to move just now. He wanted to say he understood what was happening, but he was absorbing each broken sound.

He started to say thank you for the music, but again, his voice sounded so unaccountably strange—sharper, yet more resonant. Even the feel of his tongue, and out there, the fog, look at it, he pointed, the fog blowing right past the terrace, the fog eating the night!

Armand was patient. Armand understood. Armand brought him slowly through the darkened room.

"I love you," Daniel said.

"Are you certain?" Armand answered.

It made him laugh.

They had come into a long high hallway. A stairs descending in deep shadow. A polished balustrade. Armand urged him forward. He wanted to look at the rug beneath him, a long chain of medallions woven with lilies, but Armand had brought him into a brightly lighted

room.

He caught his breath at the sheer flood of illumination, light moving over the low-slung leather couches, chairs. Ah, but the painting on the wall!

So vivid the figures in the painting, formless creatures who were actually great thick smears of glaring yellow and red paint. Everything that looked alive was alive, that was a distinct possibility. You painted armless beings, swimming in blinding color, and they had to exist like that forever. Could they see you with all those tiny, scattered eyes? Or did they see only the heaven and hell of their own shining realm, anchored to the studs in the wall by a piece of twisted wire?

He could have wept to think of it, wept at the deep-throated moan of the trumpet—and yet he wasn't weeping. He had caught a strong seductive aroma. *God, what is it?* His whole body seemed to harden inexplicably. Then suddenly he was staring at a young girl.

She sat in a small gilded straight-back chair watching him, ankles crossed, her thick brown hair a gleaming mop around her white face. Her scant clothes were dirty. A little runaway with her torn jeans and soiled shirt. What a perfect picture, even to the sprinkling of freckles across her nose, and the greasy backpack that lay at her feet. But the shape of her little arms, the way her legs were made! And her eyes, her brown eyes! He was laughing softly, but it was humorless, crazed. It had a sinister sound to it; how strange! He realized he had taken her face in his hands and she was staring up at him, smiling, and a faint scarlet blush came in her warm little cheeks.

Blood, that was the aroma! His fingers were burning. Why, he could even see the blood vessels beneath her skin! And the sound of her heart, he could hear it. It was getting louder, it was such a … a moist sound. He backed away from her.

"God, get her out of here!" he cried.

"Take her," Armand whispered. "And do it now."

5
KHAYMAN, MY KHAYMAN

No one is listening.
Now you may sing the selfsong,
as the bird does, not for territory
or dominance,
but for self-enlargement.
Let something
come from nothing.
…

STAN RICE
from "Texas Suite"
Body of Work (1983)

Until this night, this awful night, he'd had a little joke about himself: He didn't know who he was, or where he'd come from, but he knew what he liked.

And what he liked was all around him—the flower stands on the corners, the big steel and glass buildings full of milky evening light, the trees, of course, the grass beneath his feet. And the bought things of shining plastic and metal—toys, computers, telephones—it didn't matter. He liked to figure them out, master them, then crush them into tiny hard multicolored balls which he could then juggle or toss through plate glass windows when nobody was about.

He liked piano music, the motion pictures, and the poems he found in books.

He also liked the automobiles that burnt oil from the earth like lamps. And the great jet planes that flew on the same scientific principles, above the clouds.

He always stopped and listened to the people laughing and talking up there when one of the planes flew overhead.

Driving was an extraordinary pleasure. In a silver Mercedes-Benz, he had sped on smooth empty roads from Rome to Florence to Venice in

one night. He also liked television—the entire electric process of it, with its tiny bits of light. How soothing it was to have the company of television, the intimacy with so many artfully painted faces speaking to you in friendship from the glowing screen.

The rock and roll, he liked that too. He liked all music. He liked the Vampire Lestat singing "Requiem for the Marquise." He didn't pay attention to the words much. It was the melancholy, and the dark undertone of drums and cymbals. Made him want to dance.

He liked giant yellow machines that dug into the earth late at night in the big cities with men in uniforms crawling all over them; he liked the double-decker buses of London, and the people—the clever mortals everywhere—he liked them, too, of course.

He liked walking in Damascus during the evening, and seeing in sudden flashes of disconnected memory the city of the ancients. Romans, Greeks, Persians, Egyptians in these streets.

He liked the libraries where he could find photographs of ancient monuments in big smooth good-smelling books. He took his own photographs of the new cities around him and sometimes he could put images on these pictures which came from his thoughts. For example, in his photograph of Rome there were Roman people in tunics and sandals superimposed upon the modern versions in their thick ungraceful clothes.

Oh, yes, much to like all around him always—the violin music of Bartók, little girls in snow white dresses coming out of the church at midnight having sung at the Christmas mass.

He liked the blood of his victims too, of course. That went without saying. It was no part of his little joke. Death was not funny to him. He stalked his prey in silence; he didn't want to know his victims. All a mortal had to do was speak to him and he was turned away. Not proper, as he saw it, to talk to these sweet, soft-eyed beings and then gobble their blood, break their bones and lick the marrow, squeeze their limbs to a dripping pulp. And that was the way he feasted now, so violently. He felt no great need for blood anymore; but he wanted it. And the desire overpowered him in all its ravening purity, quite apart from thirst. He could have feasted upon three or four mortals a night.

Yet he was sure, absolutely sure, that he had been a human being

once. Walking in the sun in the heat of the day, yes, he had once done that, even though he certainly couldn't do it now. He envisioned himself sitting at a plain wood table and cutting open a ripe peach with a small copper knife. Beautiful the fruit before him. He knew the taste of it. He knew the taste of bread and beer. He saw the sun shining on the dull yellow sand that stretched for miles and miles outside. "Lie down and rest in the heat of the day," someone had once said to him. Was this the last day that he had been alive? Rest, yes, because tonight the King and the Queen will call all the court together and something terrible, something.…

But he couldn't really remember.

No, he just knew it, that is, until this night. This night …

Not even when he'd heard the Vampire Lestat did he remember. The character merely fascinated him a little—a rock singer calling himself a blood drinker. And he did look unearthly, but then that was television, wasn't it? Many humans in the dizzying world of rock music appeared unearthly. And there was such human emotion in the Vampire Lestat's voice.

It wasn't merely emotion; it was human ambition of a particular sort. The Vampire Lestat wanted to be heroic. When he sang, he said: "Allow me my significance! I am the symbol of evil; and if I am a true symbol, then I do good."

Fascinating. Only a human being could think of a paradox like that. And he himself knew this, because he'd been human, of course.

Now he did have a supernatural understanding of things. That was true. Humans couldn't look at machines and perceive their principles as he could. And the manner in which everything was "familiar" to him—that had to do with his superhuman powers as well. Why, there was nothing that surprised him really. Not quantum physics or theories of evolution or the paintings of Picasso or the process by which children were inoculated with germs to protect them from disease. No, it was as if he'd been aware of things long before he remembered being here. Long before he could say: "I think; therefore I am."

But disregarding all that, he still had a human perspective. That no one would deny. He could feel human pain with an eerie and frightening perfection. He knew what it meant to love, and to be

lonely, ah, yes, he knew that above all things, and he felt it most keenly when he listened to the Vampire Lestat's songs. That's why he didn't pay attention to the words.

And another thing. The more blood he drank the more human-looking he became.

When he'd first appeared in this time—to himself and others—he hadn't looked human at all. He'd been a filthy skeleton, walking along the highway in Greece towards Athens, his bones enmeshed in tight rubbery veins, the whole sealed beneath a layer of toughened white skin. He'd terrified people. How they had fled from him, gunning the engines of their little cars. But he'd read their minds—seen himself as they saw him—and he understood, and he was so sorry, of course.

In Athens, he'd gotten gloves, a loose wool garment with plastic buttons, and these funny modern shoes that covered up your whole foot. He'd wrapped rags around his face with only holes for his eyes and mouth. He'd covered his filthy black hair with a gray felt hat.

They still stared but they didn't run screaming. At dusk, he roamed through the thick crowds in Omonia Square and no one paid him any mind. How nice the modern bustle of this old city, which in long ago ages had been just as vital, when students came there from all over the world to study philosophy and art. He could look up at the Acropolis and see the Parthenon as it had been then, perfect, the house of the goddess. Not the ruin it was today.

The Greeks as always were a splendid people, gentle and trusting, though they were darker of hair and skin now on account of their Turkish blood. They didn't mind his strange clothes. When he talked in his soft, soothing voice, imitating their language perfectly—except for a few apparently hilarious mistakes—they loved him. And in private, he had noticed that his flesh was slowly filling out. It was hard as a rock to the touch. Yet it was changing. Finally, one night when he unwrapped the ragged covering, he had seen the contours of a human face. So this is what he looked like, was it?

Big black eyes with fine soft wrinkles at the corners and rather smooth lids. His mouth was a nice, smiling mouth. The nose was neat and finely made; he didn't disdain it. And the eyebrows: he liked these best of all because they were very black and straight, not broken or bushy, and they were drawn high enough above his eyes so that he

had an open expression, a look of veiled wonder that others might trust. Yes, it was a very pretty young male face.

After that he'd gone about uncovered, wearing modern shirts and pants. But he had to keep to the shadows. He was just too smooth and too white.

He said his name was Khayman when they asked him. But he didn't know where he'd gotten it. And he had been called Benjamin once, later, he knew that, too. There were other names.… But when? Khayman. That was the first and secret name, the one he never forgot. He could draw two tiny pictures that meant Khayman, but where these symbols had come from he had no idea.

His strength puzzled him as much as anything else. He could walk through plaster walls, lift an automobile and hurl it into a nearby field. Yet he was curiously brittle and light. He drove a long thin knife right through his own hand. Such a strange sensation! And blood everywhere. Then the wounds closed and he had to open them again to pull the knife out.

As for the lightness, well, there was nothing that he could not climb. It was as though gravity had no control over him once he decided to defy it. And one night after climbing a tall building in the middle of the city, he flew off the top of it, descending gently to the street below.

Lovely, this. He knew he could traverse great distances if only he dared. Why, surely he had once done it, moving into the very clouds. But then … maybe not.

He had other powers as well. Each evening as he awakened, he found himself listening to voices from all over the world. He lay in the darkness bathed in sound. He heard people speaking in Greek, English, Romanian, Hindustani. He heard laughter, cries of pain. And if he lay very still, he could hear thoughts from people—a jumbled undercurrent full of wild exaggeration that frightened him. He did not know where these voices came from. Or why one voice drowned out another. Why, it was as if he were God and he were listening to prayers.

And now and then, quite distinct from the human voices, there came to him immortal voices too. Others like him out there, thinking, feeling, sending a warning? Far away their powerful silvery cries, yet

he could easily separate them from the human warp and woof.

But this receptiveness hurt him. It brought back some awful memory of being shut up in a dark place with only these voices to keep him company for years and years and years. Panic. He would not remember that. Some things one doesn't want to remember. Like being burned, imprisoned. Like remembering everything and crying, terrible anguished crying.

Yes, bad things had happened to him. He had been here on this earth under other names and at other times. But always with this same gentle and optimistic disposition, loving things. Was his a migrant soul? No, he had always had this body. That's why it was so light and so strong.

Inevitably he shut off the voices. In fact, he remembered an old admonition: If you do not learn to shut out the voices, they will drive you mad. But with him now, it was simple. He quieted them simply by rising, opening his eyes. Actually, it would have required an effort to listen. They just went on and on and became one irritating noise.

The splendor of the moment awaited him. And it was easy to drown out the thoughts of mortals close at hand. He could sing, for instance, or fix his attention hard upon anything around him. Blessed quiet. In Rome there were distractions everywhere. How he loved the old Roman houses painted ocher and burnt sienna and dark green. How he loved the narrow stone streets. He could drive a car very fast through the broad boulevard full of wreckless mortals, or wander the Via Veneto until he found a woman with whom to fall in love for a little while.

And he did so love the clever people of this time. They were still people, but they knew so much. A ruler was murdered in India, and within the hour all the world could mourn. All manner of disasters, inventions, and medical miracles weighed down upon the mind of the ordinary man. People played with fact and fancy. Waitresses wrote novels at night that would make them famous. Laborers fell in love with naked movie queens in rented cassette films. The rich wore paper jewelry, and the poor bought tiny diamonds. And princesses sallied forth onto the Champs Elysées in carefully faded rags.

Ah, he wished he was human. After all, what was he? What were the others like?—the ones whose voices he shut out. Not the First

Brood, he was sure of it. The First Brood could never contact each other purely through the mind. But what the hell was the First Brood? He couldn't remember! A little panic seized him. Don't think of those things. He wrote poems in a notebook—modern and simple, yet he knew that they were in the earliest style he'd ever known.

He moved ceaselessly about Europe and Asia Minor, sometimes walking, sometimes rising into the air and willing himself to a particular place. He charmed those who would have interfered with him and slumbered carelessly in dark hiding places by day. After all, the sun didn't burn him anymore. But he could not function in the sunlight. His eyes began to close as soon as he saw light in the morning sky. Voices, all those voices, other blood drinkers crying in anguish—then nothing. And he awoke at sunset, eager to read the age-old pattern of the stars.

Finally he grew brave with his flying. On the outskirts of Istanbul he went upwards, shooting like a balloon far over the roofs. He tossed and tumbled, laughing freely, and then willed himself to Vienna, which he reached before dawn. Nobody saw him. He moved too fast for them to see him. And besides he did not try these little experiments before prying eyes.

He had another interesting power too. He could travel without his body. Well, not really travel. He could send out his vision, as it were, to look at things far away. Lying still, he would think, for example, of a distant place that he would like to see, and suddenly he was there before it. Now, there were some mortals who could do that too, either in their dreams or when they were awake, with great and deliberate concentration. Occasionally he passed their sleeping bodies and perceived that their souls were traveling elsewhere. But the souls themselves he could never see. He could not see ghosts or any kind of spirit for that matter

But he knew they were there. They *had* to be.

And some old awareness came to him, that once as a mortal man, in the temple, he had drunk a strong potion given to him by the priests, and had traveled in the very same way, up out of his body, and into the firmament. The priests had called him back. He had not wanted to come. He was with those among the dead whom he loved. But he had known he must return. That was what was expected of him.

He'd been a human being then, all right. Yes, definitely. He could remember the way the sweat had felt on his naked chest when he lay in the dusty room and they brought the potion to him. Afraid. But then they all had to go through it.

Maybe it was better to be what he was now, and be able to fly about with body and soul together.

But not knowing, not really remembering, not understanding how he could do such things or why he lived off the blood of humans—all this caused him intense pain.

In Paris, he went to "vampire" movies, puzzling over what seemed true and what was false. Familiar all this, though much of it was silly. The Vampire Lestat had taken his garments from these old black and white films. Most of the "creatures of the night" wore the same costume—the black cloak, the stiff white shirt, the fine black jacket with tails, the black pants.

Nonsense of course, yet it comforted him. After all, these were blood drinkers, beings who spoke gently, liked poetry, and yet killed mortals all the time.

He bought the vampire comics and cut out certain pictures of beautiful gentlemen blood drinkers like the Vampire Lestat. Maybe he himself should try this lovely costume; again, it would be a comfort. It would make him feel that he was part of something, even if the something didn't really exist.

In London, past midnight in a darkened store, he found his vampire clothes. Coat and pants, and shining patent leather shoes; a shirt as stiff as new papyrus with a white silk tie. And oh, the black velvet cloak, magnificent, with its lining of white satin; it hung down to the very floor.

He did graceful turns before the mirrors. How the Vampire Lestat would have envied him, and to think, he, Khayman, was no human pretending; he was real. He brushed out his thick black hair for the first time. He found perfumes and unguents in glass cases and anointed himself properly for a grand evening. He found rings and cuff links of gold.

Now he was beautiful, as he had once been in other garments long ago. And immediately in the streets of London people adored him! This had been the right thing to do. They followed him as he walked

along smiling and bowing, now and then, and winking his eye. Even when he killed it was better. The victim would stare at him as if seeing a vision, as if *understanding*. He would bend—as the Vampire Lestat did in the television songs—and drink first, gently, from the throat, before ripping the victim apart.

Of course this was all a joke. There was something frightfully trivial about it. It had nothing to do with being a blood drinker, that was the dark secret, nothing to do with the faint things he only half remembered, now and then, and pushed from his mind. Nevertheless it was fun for the moment to be "somebody" and "something."

Yes, the moment, the moment was splendid. And the moment was all he ever had. After all, he would forget this time too, wouldn't he? These nights with their exquisite details would vanish from him; and in some even more complex and demanding future he would be loosed again, remembering only his name.

Home to Athens he went finally.

Through the museum by night he roamed with a stub of candle, inspecting the old tombstones with their carved figures which made him cry. The dead woman seated—always the dead are seated—reaches out for the living baby she has left behind, who is held in her husband's arm. Names came back to him, as if bats were whispering in his ear. *Go to Egypt; you'll remember*. But he would not. Too soon to beg for madness and forgetfulness. Safe in Athens, roaming the old cemetery beneath the Acropolis, from which they'd taken all the stele; never mind the traffic roaring by; the earth here is beautiful. And it still belongs to the dead.

He acquired a wardrobe of vampire garments. He even bought a coffin, but he did not like to get inside. For one thing, it was not shaped like a person, this coffin, and it had no face on it, and no writings to guide the soul of the dead. Not proper. Rather like a box for jewelry, as he saw it. But still, being a vampire, well, he thought he should have it and it was fun. Mortals who came to the flat loved it. He served them bloodred wine in crystal glasses. He recited "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" for them or sang songs in strange tongues which they loved. Sometimes he read his poems. What good-hearted mortals. And the coffin gave them something to sit on in a flat that contained nothing else.

But gradually the songs of the American rock singer, the Vampire Lestat, had begun to disturb him. They weren't fun anymore. Neither were the silly old films. But the Vampire Lestat really bothered him. What blood drinker would dream of acts of purity and courage? Such a tragic tone to the songs.

Blood drinker.… Sometimes when he awoke, alone on the floor of the hot airless flat with the last light of day fading through the curtained windows, he felt a heavy dream lift from him in which creatures sighed and groaned in pain. Had he been following through a ghastly nightscape the path of two beautiful red-haired women who suffered unspeakable injustice, twin beauties to whom he reached out again and again? After they cut out her tongue, the red-haired woman in the dream snatched the tongue back from the soldiers and ate it. Her courage had astonished them—

Ah, do not look at such things!

His face hurt, as if he had been crying also or miserably anxious. He let himself relax slowly. Behold the lamp. The yellow flowers. Nothing. Just Athens with its miles and miles of undistinguished stucco buildings, and the great broken temple of Athena on the hill, looming over all despite the smoke-filled air. Evening time. The divine rush as thousands in their drab workaday clothes poured down the escalators to the underground trains. Syntagma Square scattered with the lazy drinkers of retsina or ouzo, suffering beneath the early evening heat. And the little kiosks selling magazines and papers from all lands.

He didn't listen to any more of the Vampire Lestat's music. He left the American dance halls where they played it. He moved away from the students who carried small tape players clipped to their belts.

Then one night in the heart of the Plaka, with its glaring lights and noisy taverns, he saw other blood drinkers hurrying through the crowds. His heart stopped. Loneliness and fear overcame him. He could not move or speak. Then he tracked them through the steep streets, in and out of one dancing place after another where the electronic music blared. He studied them carefully as they rushed on through the crush of tourists, not aware that he was there.

Two males and a female in scant black silk garments, the woman's feet strapped painfully into high-heeled shoes. Silver sunglasses

covered their eyes; they whispered together and gave out sudden piercing bursts of laughter; decked with jewels and scent, they flaunted their shining preternatural skin and hair.

But never mind these superficial matters, they were very different from him. They were nothing as hard and white, to begin with. In fact they were made up of so much soft human tissue that they were animated corpses still. Beguilingly pink and weak. And how they needed the blood of their victims. Why, they were suffering agonies of thirst right now. And surely this was their fate nightly. Because the blood had to work endlessly on all the soft human tissue. It worked not merely to animate the tissue, but to convert it slowly into something else.

As for him, he was all made up of that something else. He had no soft human tissue left. Though he lusted for blood, it was not needed for this conversion. Rather he realized suddenly that the blood merely refreshed him, increased his telepathic powers, his ability to fly, or to travel out of his body, or his prodigious strength. Ah, he understood it! For the nameless power that worked in all of them, he was now a nearly perfected host.

Yes, that was it exactly. And they were younger, that's all. They had merely begun their journey towards true vampiric immortality. Didn't he remember—? Well, not actually, but he *knew* it, that they were fledglings, no more than one or two hundred years along the way! That was the dangerous time, when you first went mad from it, or the others got you, shut you up, burned you, that sort of thing. Many did not survive those years. And how long ago it had been for him, of the First Brood. Why, the amount of time was almost inconceivable! He stopped beside the painted wall of a garden, reaching up to rest his hand on a gnarled branch, letting the cool fleecy green leaves touch his face. He felt himself washed in sadness suddenly, sadness more terrible than fear. He heard someone crying, not here but in his head. Who was it? Stop!

Well, he would not hurt them, these tender children! No, he wanted only to know them, to embrace them. After all, we are of the same family, blood drinkers, you and I!

But as he drew nearer, as he sent out his silent yet exuberant greeting, they turned and looked at him with undisguised terror. They

fled. Through a dark tangle of hillside lanes they descended, away from the lights of the Plaka, and nothing he could say or do would make them stop.

He stood rigid and silent, feeling a sharp pain he had not known before. Then a curious and terrible thing happened. He went after them till he had them in sight again. He became angry, really angry. *Damn you. Punish you that you hurt me!* And lo and behold he felt a sudden sensation in his forehead, a cold spasm just behind the bone. Out of him, a power seemed to leap as if it were an invisible tongue. Instantly it penetrated the hindmost of the fleeing trio, the female, and her body burst into flame.

Stupefied he watched this. Yet he realized what had happened. He had penetrated her with some sharply directed force. It had kindled the powerful combustible blood that he and she had in common, and at once the fire had shot through the circuit of her veins. Invading the marrow of her bones, it had caused her body to explode. In seconds, she was no more.

Ye gods! He had done this! In grief and terror, he stood staring down at her empty clothes, unburnt, yet blackened and stained with grease. Only a little of her hair was left on the stones, and this burnt away to wisps of smoke as he watched.

Maybe there was some mistake. But no, he knew he'd done it. He'd felt himself doing it. And she had been so afraid!

In shocked silence, he made his way home. He knew he'd never used this power before, or even been aware of it. Had it come to him only now, after centuries of the blood working, drying out his cells, making them thin and white and strong like the chambers of a wasps' nest?

Alone in his flat, with the candles and incense burning to comfort him, he pierced himself again with his knife and watched the blood gush. Thick and hot it was, pooling on the table before him, glittering in the light of the lamp as if it was alive. And it was!

In the mirror, he studied the darkening radiance which had returned to him after so many weeks of dedicated hunting and drinking. A faint yellow tinge to his cheeks, a trace of pink to his lips. But never mind, he was as the abandoned skin of the snake lying on the rock—dead and light and crisp save for the constant pumping of this blood. This

vile blood. And his brain, ah, his brain, what did it look like now? Translucent as a thing made of crystal with the blood surging through its tiny compartments? And therein the power lived, did it not, with its invisible tongue?

Going out again, he tried this newfound force upon animals, upon the cats, for which he had an unreasonable loathing—evil things, those creatures—and upon rats, which all men disdain. Not the same. He killed these creatures with the invisible tongue flick of energy, but they didn't catch fire. Rather the brains and hearts suffered some sort of fatal rupture, but the natural blood in them, it was not combustible. And so they did not burn.

This fascinated him in a cold, harrowing fashion. "What a subject I am for study," he whispered, eyes shining suddenly with unwelcome tears. Capes, white ties, vampire movies, what was this to him! *Who in hell was he?* The fool of the gods, roaming the road from moment to moment through eternity? When he saw a great lurid poster of the Vampire Lestat mocking him in a video store window, he turned and with the tongue flick of energy shattered the glass.

Ah, lovely, lovely. Give me the forests, the stars. He went to Delphi that night, ascending soundlessly above the darkened land. Down into the moist grass he went to walk where the oracle had once sat, in this the ruin of the god's house.

But he would not leave Athens. He must find the two blood drinkers, and tell them he was sorry, that he would never, never use this power against them. They must talk to him! They must be with him—! Yes.

The next night upon awakening, he listened for them. And an hour later, he heard them as they rose from their graves. A house in the Plaka was their lair, with one of those noisy, smoky taverns open to the street. In its cellars they slept by day, he realized, and came up by dark to watch the mortals of the tavern sing and dance. Lamia, the old Greek word for vampire, was the name of this establishment in which the electric guitars played the primitive Greek music, and the young mortal men danced with one another, hips churning with all the seductiveness of women, as the retsina flowed. On the walls hung pictures from the vampire movies—Bela Lugosi as Dracula, the pale Gloria Holden as his daughter—and posters of the blond and blue-

eyed Vampire Lestat.

So they too had a sense of humor, he thought gently. But the vampire pair, stunned with grief and fear, sat together, staring at the open door as he peered in. How helpless they looked!

They did not move when they saw him standing on the threshold with his back to the white glare of the street. What did they think when they saw his long cloak? A monster come alive from their own posters to bring them destruction when so little else on earth could?

I come in peace. I only wish to speak with you. Nothing shall anger me. I come in … love.

The pair appeared transfixed. Then suddenly one of them rose from the table, and both gave a spontaneous and horrid cry. Fire blinded him as it blinded the mortals who pushed past him in their sudden stampede to the street. The blood drinkers were in flames, dying, caught in a hideous dance with twisted arms and legs. The house itself was burning, rafters smoking, glass bottles exploding, orange sparks shooting up to the lowering sky.

Had he done this! Was he death to the others, whether he willed such a thing or not?

Blood tears flowed down his white face onto his stiff shirt front. He lifted his arm to shield his face with his cloak. It was a gesture of respect for the horror happening before him—the blood drinkers dying within.

No, couldn't have done it, couldn't. He let the mortals push him and shove him out of the way. Sirens hurt his ears. He blinked as he tried to see, despite the flashing lights.

And then in a moment of violent understanding he knew that he had not done it. Because he saw the being who had! There covered in a cloak of gray wool, and half hidden in a dark alleyway, stood the one, silently watching him.

And as their eyes met, she softly whispered his name:

"Khayman, my Khayman!"

His mind went blank. Wiped clean. It was as though a white light descended on him, burning out all detail. He felt nothing for one serene moment. He heard no noise of the raging fire, nothing of those who still jostled him as they went past.

He merely stared at this thing, this beautiful and delicate being,

exquisite as ever she had been. An unsupportable horror overcame him. He remembered everything—everything he had ever seen or been or known.

The centuries opened before him. The millennia stretched out, going back and back to the very beginning. *First Brood.* He knew it all. He was shuddering, crying. He heard himself say with all the rancor of an accusation:

"You!"

Suddenly, in a great withering flash he felt the full force of her undisguised power. The heat struck him in the chest, and he felt himself staggering backwards.

Ye gods, you will kill me, too! But she could not hear his thoughts! He was knocked against the whitewashed wall. A fierce pain collected in his head.

Yet he continued to see, to feel, to think! And his heart beat steadily as before. He was not burning!

And then with sudden calculation, he gathered his strength and fought this unseen energy with a violent thrust of his own.

"Ah, it is malice again, my sovereign," he cried out in the ancient language. How human the sound of his voice!

But it was finished. The alleyway was empty. She was gone.

Or more truly she had taken flight, rising straight upwards, just as he himself had often done, and so fast that the eye could not see. Yes, he felt her receding presence. He looked up and, without effort, found her—a tiny pen stroke moving towards the west above the bits and pieces of pale cloud.

Raw sounds shocked him—sirens, voices, the crackle of the burning house as its last timbers collapsed. The little narrow street was jam-crowded; the bawling music of the other taverns had not stopped. He drew back, away from the place, weeping, with one backward glance for the domain of the dead blood drinkers. Ah, how many thousands of years he could not count, and yet it was still the same war.

For hours he wandered the dark back streets.

Athens grew quiet. People slept behind wooden walls. The pavements shone in the mist that came as thick as rain. Like a giant snail shell was his history, curling and immense above him, pressing

him down to the earth with its impossible weight.

Up a hill he moved finally, and into the cool luxurious tavern of a great modern steel and glass hotel. Black and white this place, just as he was, with its checkered dance floor, black tables, black leather banquettes.

Unnoticed he sank down on a bench in the flickering dimness, and he let his tears flow. Like a fool he cried, with his forehead pressed to his arm.

Madness did not come to him; neither did forgetfulness. He was wandering the centuries, revisiting the places he had known with tender thoughtless intimacy. He cried for all those he had known and loved.

But what hurt him above all things was the great suffocating sense of the beginning, the true beginning, even before that long ago day when he had lain down in his house by the Nile in the noon stillness, knowing he must go to the palace that night.

The true beginning had been a year before when the King had said to him, "But for my beloved Queen, I would take my pleasure of these two women. I would show that they are not witches to be feared. You will do this in my stead."

It was as real as this moment; the uneasy court gathered there watching; black-eyed men and women in their fine linen skirts and elaborate black wigs, some hovering behind the carved pillars, others proudly close to the throne. And the red-haired twins standing before him, his beautiful prisoners whom he had come to love in their captivity. *I cannot do this*. But he had done it. As the court waited, as the King and the Queen waited, he had put on the King's necklace with its gold medallion, to act for the King. And he had gone down the steps from the dais, as the twins stared at him, and he had defiled them one after the other.

Surely this pain couldn't last.

Into the womb of the earth he would have crawled, if he had had the strength for it. Blessed ignorance, how he wanted it. Go to Delphi, wander in the high sweet-smelling green grass. Pick the tiny wild flowers. Ah, would they open for him, as for the light of the sun, if he held them beneath the lamp?

But then he did not want to forget at all. Something had changed;

something had made this moment like no other. *She* had risen from her long slumber! He had seen her in an Athens street with his own eyes! Past and present had become one.

As his tears dried, he sat back, listening, thinking.

Dancers writhed on the lighted checkerboard before him. Women smiled at him. Was he a beautiful porcelain Pierrot to them, with his white face and red-stained cheeks? He raised his eyes to the video screen pulsing and glittering above the room. His thoughts grew strong like his physical powers.

This was now, the month of October, in the late twentieth century after the birth of Christ. And only a handful of nights ago, he had seen the twins in his dreams! No. There was no retreat. For him the true agony was just beginning, but that did not matter. He was more *alive* than he had ever been.

He wiped his face slowly with a small linen handkerchief. He washed his fingers in the glass of wine before him, as if to consecrate them. And he looked up again to the high video screen where the Vampire Lestat sang his tragic song.

Blue-eyed demon, yellow hair flung wild about him, with the powerful arms and chest of a young man. Jagged yet graceful his movements, lips seductive, voice full of carefully modulated pain.

And all this time you have been telling me, haven't you? Calling me! Calling her name!

The video image seemed to stare at him, respond to him, sing to him, when of course it could not see him at all. *Those Who Must Be Kept! My King and my Queen.* Yet he listened with his full attention to each syllable carefully articulated above the din of horns and throbbing drums.

And only when the sound and the image faded did he rise and leave the tavern to walk blindly through the cool marble corridors of the hotel and into the darkness outside.

Voices called out to him, voices of blood drinkers the world over, signaling. Voices that had always been there. They spoke of calamity, of converging to prevent some horrid disaster. *The Mother Walks*. They spoke of the dreams of the twins which they did not understand. And he had been deaf and blind to all this!

"How much you do not understand, Lestat," he whispered.

He climbed to a dim promontory finally and gazed at the High City of temples far beyond—broken white marble gleaming beneath the feeble stars.

"Damn you, my sovereign!" he whispered. "Damn you into hell for what you did, to all of us!" And to think that in this world of steel and gasoline, of roaring electronic symphonies and silent gleaming computer circuitry, we wander still.

But another curse came back to him, far stronger than his own. It had come a year after the awful moment when he had raped the two women—a curse screamed within the courtyard of the palace, under a night sky as distant and uncaring as this.

"Let the spirits witness: for theirs is the knowledge of the future—both what it would be, *and what I will:* You are the Queen of the Damned, that's what you are! Evil is your only destiny. But at your greatest hour, it is I who will defeat you. Look well on my face. It is I who will bring you down."

How many times during the early centuries had he remembered those words? In how many places across desert and mountains and through fertile river valleys had he searched for the two red-haired sisters? Among the Bedouins who had once sheltered them, among the hunters who wore skins still and the people of Jericho, the oldest city in the world. They were already legend.

And then blessed madness had descended; he had lost all knowledge, rancor, and pain. He was Khayman, filled with love for all he saw around him, a being who understood the word *joy*.

Could it be that the hour had come? That the twins had somehow endured just as he had? And for this great purpose his memory had been restored?

Ah, what a lustrous and overwhelming thought, that the First Brood would come together, that the First Brood would finally know victory.

But with a bitter smile, he thought of the Vampire Lestat's human hunger for heroism. *Yes, my brother, forgive me for my scorn. I want it too, the goodness, the glory. But there is likely no destiny, and no redemption. Only what I see before me as I stand above this soiled and ancient landscape—just birth and death, and horrors await us all.*

He took one last look at the sleeping city, the ugly and careworn modern place where he had been so content, wandering over countless

old graves.

And then he went upwards, rising within seconds above the clouds. Now would come the greatest test of this magnificent gift, and how he loved the sudden sense of purpose, illusory though it might be. He moved west, towards the Vampire Lestat, and towards the voices that begged for understanding of the dreams of the twins. He moved west as she had moved before him.

His cloak flared like sleek wings, and the delicious cold air bruised him and made him laugh suddenly as if for one moment he were the happy simpleton again.

6
THE STORY OF JESSE, THE GREAT FAMILY, AND THE TALAMASCA

i.

The dead don't share.
Though they reach towards us
from the grave (I swear
they do) they do
not hand their hearts to you.
They hand their heads,
the part that stares.

STAN RICE
from "Their Share"
Body of Work (1983)

ii.

Cover her face; mine eyes dazzle; she died young.
JOHN WEBSTER

iii.

THE TALAMASCA

Investigators of the Paranormal
We watch
And we are always here.

London Amsterdam Rome

Jesse was moaning in her sleep. She was a delicate woman of thirty-five with long curly red hair. She lay deep in a shapeless feather mattress, cradled in a wooden bed which hung from the ceiling on

four rusted chains.

Somewhere in the big rambling house a clock chimed. She must wake up. Two hours until the Vampire Lestat's concert. But she could not leave the twins now.

This was new to her, this part unfolding so rapidly, and the dream was maddeningly dim as all the dreams of the twins had been. Yet she knew the twins were in the desert kingdom again. The mob surrounding the twins was dangerous. And the twins, how different they looked, how pale. Maybe it was an illusion, this phosphorescent luster, but they appeared to glow in the semidarkness, and their movements were languid, almost as if they were caught in the rhythm of a dance. Torches were thrust at them as they embraced one another; but look, something was wrong, very wrong. One of them was now blind.

Her eyelids were shut tight, the tender flesh wrinkled and sunken. Yes, they have plucked out her eyes. And the other one, why does she make those terrible sounds? "Be still, don't fight anymore," said the blind one, in the ancient language which was always understandable in the dreams. And out of the other twin came a horrid, guttural moaning. She couldn't speak. They'd cut out her tongue!

I don't want to see any more, I want to wake up. But the soldiers were pushing their way through the crowd, something dreadful was to happen, and the twins became suddenly very still. The soldiers took hold of them, dragged them apart.

Don't separate them! Don't you know what this means to them? Get the torches away. Don't set them on fire! Don't burn their red hair.

The blind twin reached out for her sister, screaming her name: "Mekare!" And Mekare, the mute one, who could not answer, roared like a wounded beast.

The crowd was parting, making way for two immense stone coffins, each carried on a great heavy bier. Crude these sarcophagi, yet the lids had the roughened shape of human faces, limbs. What have the twins done to be put in these coffins? I can't stand it, the biers being set down, the twins dragged towards the coffins, the crude stone lids being lifted. Don't do it! The blind one is fighting as if she can see it, yet they are overpowering her, lifting her and putting her inside the

stone box. In mute terror, Mekare is watching, though she herself is being dragged to the other bier. Don't lower the lid, or I will scream for Mekare! For both of them—

Jesse sat up, her eyes open. She had screamed.

Alone in this house, with no one to hear her, she'd screamed, and she could feel the echo still. Then nothing but the quiet settling around her, and the faint creaking of the bed as it moved on its chains. The song of the birds outside in the forest, the deep forest; and her own curious awareness that the clock had struck six.

The dream was fading rapidly. Desperately she tried to hold on to it, to see the details that always slipped away—the clothing of these strange people, the weapons the soldiers carried, the faces of the twins! But it was already gone. Only the spell remained and an acute awareness of what had happened—and the certainty that the Vampire Lestat was linked to these dreams.

Sleepily, she checked her watch. No time left. She wanted to be in the auditorium when the Vampire Lestat entered; she wanted to be at the very foot of the stage.

Yet she hesitated, staring at the white roses on the bedside table. Beyond, through the open window, she saw the southern sky full of a faint orange light. She picked up the note that lay beside the flowers and she read it through once more.

> My darling,
>
> I have only just received your letter, as I am far from home and it took some time for this to reach me. I understand the fascination which this creature, Lestat, holds for you. They are playing his music even in Rio. I have already read the books which you have enclosed. And I know of your investigation of this creature for the Talamasca. As for your dreams of the twins, this we must talk about together. It is of the utmost importance. For there are others who have had such dreams. But I beg you—no, I order you not to go to this concert. You must remain at the Sonoma compound until I get there. I am leaving Brazil as soon as I can.
>
> Wait for me. I love you.

"Maharet, I'm sorry," she whispered. But it was unthinkable that she not go. And if anyone in the world would understand, it was Maharet.

The Talamasca, for whom she'd worked for twelve long years, would never forgive her for disobeying their orders. But Maharet knew the reason; *Maharet was the reason.* Maharet would forgive.

Dizzy. The nightmare still wouldn't let go. The random objects of the room were disappearing in the shadows, yet the twilight burned so clear suddenly that even the forested hills were giving back the light. And the roses were phosphorescent, like the white flesh of the twins in the dream.

White roses, she tried to remember something she'd heard about white roses. You send white roses for a funeral. But no, Maharet could not have meant that.

Jesse reached out, took one of the blossoms in both hands, and the petals came loose instantly. Such sweetness. She pressed them to her lips, and a faint yet shining image came back to her from that long ago summer of Maharet in this house in a candle-lighted room, lying on a bed of rose petals, so many white and yellow and pink rose petals, which she had gathered up and pressed to her face and her throat.

Had Jesse really seen such a thing? So many rose petals caught in Maharet's long red hair. Hair like Jesse's hair. Hair like the hair of the twins in the dream—thick and wavy and streaked with gold.

It was one of a hundred fragments of memory which she could never afterwards fit into a whole. But it no longer mattered, what she could or could not remember of that dreamy lost summer. The Vampire Lestat waited: there would be a finish if not an answer, not unlike the promise of death itself.

She got up. She put on the worn hacking jacket that was her second skin these days, along with the boy's shirt, open at the neck, and the jeans she wore. She slipped on her worn leather boots. Ran the brush through her hair.

Now to take leave of the empty house she'd invaded this morning. It hurt her to leave it. But it had hurt her more to come at all.

At the first light, she'd arrived at the edge of the clearing, quietly stunned to discover it unchanged after fifteen years, a rambling structure built into the foot of the mountain, its roofs and pillared porches veiled in blue morning glory vines. High above, half hidden in the grassy slopes, a few tiny secret windows caught the first flash of morning light.

Like a spy she'd felt as she came up the front steps with the old key in her hand. No one had been here in months, it seemed. Dust and leaves wherever she looked.

Yet there were the roses waiting in their crystal vase, and the letter for her pinned to the door, with the new key in the envelope.

For hours, she'd wandered, revisited, explored. Never mind that she was tired, that she'd driven all night. She had to walk the long shaded galleries, to move through the spacious and overwhelming rooms. Never had the place seemed so much like a crude palace with its enormous timbers shouldering the rough-sawn plank ceilings, the rusted smokestack chimneys rising from the round stone hearths.

Even the furnishings were massive—the millstone tables, chairs and couches of unfinished lumber piled with soft down pillows, bookshelves and niches carved into the unpainted adobe walls.

It had the crude medieval grandeur, this place. The bits and pieces of Mayan art, the Etruscan cups and Hittite statues, seemed to belong here, amid the deep casements and stone floors. It was like a fortress. It felt safe.

Only Maharet's creations were full of brilliant color as if they'd drawn it from the trees and sky outside. Memory hadn't exaggerated their beauty in the least. Soft and thick the deep hooked wool rugs carrying the free pattern of woodland flower and grass everywhere as if the rug were the earth itself. And the countless quilted pillows with their curious stick figures and odd symbols, and finally the giant hanging quilts—modern tapestries that covered the walls with childlike pictures of fields, streams, mountains and forests, skies full of sun and moon together, of glorious clouds and even falling rain. They had the vibrant power of primitive painting with their myriad tiny bits of fabric sewn so carefully to create the detail of cascading water or falling leaf.

It had killed Jesse to see all this again.

By noon, hungry and light-headed from the long sleepless night, she'd gotten the courage to lift the latch from the rear door that led into the secret windowless rooms within the mountain itself. Breathless, she had followed the stone passage. Her heart pounded as she found the library unlocked and switched on the lamps.

Ah, fifteen years ago, simply the happiest summer of her life. All her wonderful adventures afterwards, ghost hunting for the Talamasca, had been nothing to that magical and unforgettable time.

She and Maharet in this library together, with the fire blazing. And the countless volumes of the family history, amazing her and delighting her. The lineage of "the Great Family," as Maharet always called it—"the thread we cling to in the labyrinth which is life." How lovingly she had taken down the books for Jesse, unlocked for her the caskets that contained the old parchment scrolls.

Jesse had not fully accepted it that summer, the implications of all she'd seen. There had been a slow confusion, a delicious suspension of ordinary reality, as if the papyruses covered with a writing she could not classify belonged more truly to dream. After all, Jesse had already become a trained archaeologist by that time. She'd done her time on digs in Egypt and at Jericho. Yet she could not decipher those strange glyphs. *In the name of God, how old were these things?*

For years after, she'd tried to remember other documents she'd seen. Surely she had come into the library one morning and discovered a back room with an open door.

Into a long corridor, she'd gone past other unlighted rooms. She'd found a light switch finally, and seen a great storage place full of clay tablets—clay tablets covered with tiny pictures! Without doubt, she'd held these things in her hands.

Something else had happened; something she had never really wanted to recall. Was there another hallway? She knew for certain that there had been a curving iron stairway which took her down into lower rooms with plain earthen walls. Tiny bulbs were fixed in old porcelain light sockets. She had pulled chains to turn them on.

Surely she had done that. Surely she had opened a heavy redwood door …

For years after, it had come back to her in little flashes—a vast, low-ceilinged room with oak chairs, a table and benches that looked as if they were made from stone. And what else? Something that at first seemed utterly familiar. And then—

Later that night, she'd remembered nothing but the stairway. Suddenly it was ten o'clock, and she'd just awakened and Maharet was standing at the foot of her bed. Maharet had come to her and kissed her. Such a lovely warm kiss; it had sent a low throbbing sensation through her. Maharet said they'd found her down by the creek, asleep in the clearing, and at sunset, they'd brought her in.

Down by the creek? For months after, she'd actually "remembered" falling asleep there. In fact, it was a rather rich "recollection" of the peace and stillness of the forest, of the water singing over the rocks. But it had never happened, of that she was now sure.

But on this day, some fifteen years later, she had found no evidence one way or the other of these half-remembered things. Rooms were bolted against her. Even the neat volumes of the family history were in locked glass cases which she dared not disturb.

Yet never had she believed so firmly in what she could recall. Yes, clay tablets covered with nothing but tiny stick figures for persons, trees, animals. She'd seen them, taken them off the shelves and held them under the feeble overhead light. And the stairway, and the room that frightened her, no, terrified her, yes … all there.

Nevertheless, it had been paradise here, in those warm summer days and nights, when she had sat by the hour talking to Maharet, when she had danced with Mael and Maharet by the light of the moon. Forget for now the pain afterwards, trying to understand why Maharet had sent her back home to New York never to come here again.

> My darling,
> The fact is I love you too much. My life will engulf yours
> if we are not separated. You must have freedom, Jesse,
> to devise your own plans, ambitions, dreams …

It was not to relive the old pain that she had returned, it was to know again, for a little while, the joy that had gone before.

Fighting weariness this afternoon, she'd wandered out of the house finally, and down the long lane through the oaks. So easy to find the old paths through the dense redwoods. And the clearing, ringed in fern and clover on the steep rocky banks of the shallow rushing creek.

Here Maharet had once guided her through total darkness, down into the water and along a path of stones. Mael had joined them. Maharet had poured the wine for Jesse, and they had sung together a song Jesse could never recall afterwards, though now and then she would find herself humming this eerie melody with inexplicable accuracy, then stop, aware of it, unable to find the proper note again.

She might have fallen asleep near the creek in the deep mingled sounds of the forest, so like the false "recollection" of years ago.

So dazzling the bright green of the maples, catching the rare shafts of light. And the redwoods, how monstrous they seemed in the unbroken quiet. Mammoth, indifferent, soaring hundreds of feet before their somber lacy foliage closed on the frayed margin of sky.

And she'd known what the concert tonight, with Lestat's screaming fans, would demand of her. But she'd been afraid that the dream of the twins would start again.

Finally, she'd gone back to the house, and taken the roses and the letter with her. Her old room. Three o'clock. Who wound the clocks of this place that they knew the hour? The dream of the twins was stalking her. And she was simply too tired to fight anymore. The place felt so good to her. No ghosts here of the kind she'd encountered so many times in her work. Only the peace. She'd lain down on the old hanging bed, on the quilt that she herself had made so carefully with Maharet that summer. And sleep—and the twins—had come together.

Now she had two hours to get to San Francisco, and she must leave this house, maybe in tears, again. She checked her pockets. Passport, papers, money, keys.

She picked up her leather bag, slung it over her shoulder, and hurried through the long passage to the stairs. Dusk was coming fast, and when darkness did cover the forest, nothing would be visible at all.

There was still a bit of sunlight in the main hall when she reached it. Through the western windows, a few long dusty rays illuminated the giant tapestry quilt on the wall.

Jesse caught her breath as she looked at it. Always her favorite, for its intricacy, its size. At first it seemed a great mass of random tiny prints and patches—then gradually the wooded landscape emerged from the myriad pieces of cloth. One minute you saw it; the next it was gone. That's how it had happened over and over again that summer when, drunk with wine, she had walked back and forth before it, losing the picture, then recovering it: the mountain, the forest, a tiny village nestled in the green valley below.

"I'm sorry, Maharet," she whispered again softly. She had to go. Her journey was nearly ended.

But as she looked away, something in the quilted picture caught her eye. She turned back, studied it again. Were there figures there, which she had never seen? Once more it was a swarm of stitched-together fragments. Then slowly the flank of the mountain emerged, then the olive trees, and finally the rooftops of the village, no more than yellow huts scattered on the smooth valley floor. The figures? She could not find them. That is, until she again turned her head away. In the corner of her eye, they were visible for a split second. Two tiny figures holding each other, women with red hair!

Slowly, almost cautiously she turned back to the picture. Her heart was skipping. Yes, there. But was it an illusion?

She crossed the room until she stood directly before the quilt. She reached up and touched it. Yes! Each little rag-doll being had a tiny pair of green buttons for its eyes, a carefully sewn nose and red mouth! And the hair, the hair was red yarn, crimped into jagged waves and delicately sewn over the white shoulders.

She stared at it, half disbelieving. Yet there they were—the twins! And as she stood there, petrified, the room began to darken. The last light had slipped below the horizon. The quilt was fading before her eyes into an unreadable pattern.

In a daze, she heard the clock strike the quarter hour. Call the Talamasca. Call David in London. Tell him part of it, anything—But that was out of the question and she knew it. And it broke her heart to realize that no matter what did happen to her tonight, the Talamasca

would never know the whole story.

She forced herself to leave, to lock the door behind her and walk across the deep porch and down the long path.

She didn't fully understand her feelings, why she was so shaken and on the verge of tears. It confirmed her suspicions, all she thought she knew. And yet she was frightened. She was actually crying.

Wait for Maharet.

But that she could not do. Maharet would charm her, confuse her, drive her away from the mystery in the name of love. That's what had happened in that long ago summer. The Vampire Lestat withheld nothing. The Vampire Lestat was the crucial piece in the puzzle. To see him and touch him was to validate everything.

The red Mercedes roadster started instantly. And with a spray of gravel she backed up, turned, and made for the narrow unpaved road. The convertible top was down; she'd be frozen by the time she reached San Francisco, but it didn't matter. She loved the cold air on her face, she loved to drive fast.

The road plunged at once into the darkness of the woods. Not even the rising moon could penetrate here. She pushed to forty, swinging easily into the sudden turns. Her sadness grew heavier suddenly, but there were no more tears. The Vampire Lestat … almost there.

When at last she hit the county road, she was speeding, singing to herself in syllables she could hardly hear above the wind. Full darkness came just as she roared through the pretty little city of Santa Rosa and connected with the broad swift current of Highway 101 south.

The coastal fog was drifting in. It made ghosts of the dark hills to the east and west. Yet the bright flow of tail lamps illuminated the road ahead of her. Her excitement was mounting. One hour to the Golden Gate. The sadness was leaving her. All her life she'd been confident, lucky; and sometimes impatient with the more cautious people she'd known. And despite her sense of fatality on this night, her keen awareness of the dangers she was approaching, she felt her usual luck might be with her. She wasn't really afraid.

She'd been born lucky, as she saw it, found by the side of the road minutes after the car crash that had killed her seven-months-pregnant

teenaged mother—a baby spontaneously aborted from the dying womb, and screaming loudly to clear her own tiny lungs when the ambulance arrived.

She had no name for two weeks as she languished in the county hospital, condemned for hours to the sterility and coldness of machines; but the nurses had adored her, nicknaming her "the sparrow," and cuddling her and singing to her whenever allowed.

Years later they were to write to her, sending along the snapshots they'd taken, telling her little stories, which had greatly amplified her early sense of having been loved.

It was Maharet who at last came for her, identifying her as the sole survivor of the Reeves family of South Carolina and taking her to New York to live with cousins of a different name and background. There she was to grow up in a lavish old two-story apartment on Lexington Avenue with Maria and Matthew Godwin, who gave her not only love but everything she could want. An English nanny had slept in her room till Jesse was twelve years old.

She could not remember when she'd learned that her aunt Maharet had provided for her, that she could go on to any college and any career she might choose. Matthew Godwin was a doctor, Maria was a sometime dancer and teacher; they were frank about their attachment to Jesse, their dependence upon her. She was the daughter they had always wanted, and these had been rich and happy years.

The letters from Maharet started before she was old enough to read. They were wonderful, often full of colorful postcards and odd pieces of currency from the countries where Maharet lived. Jesse had a drawerful of rupees and lire by the time she was seventeen. But more important, she had a friend in Maharet, who answered every line she ever wrote with feeling and care.

It was Maharet who inspired her in her reading, encouraged her music lessons and painting classes, arranged her summer tours of Europe and finally her admission to Columbia, where Jesse studied ancient languages and art.

It was Maharet who arranged her Christmas visits with European cousins—the Scartinos of Italy, a powerful banking family who lived in a villa outside Siena, and the humbler Borchardts of Paris, who

welcomed her to their overcrowded but cheerful home.

The summer that Jesse turned seventeen she went to Vienna to meet the Russian émigré branch of the family, young fervent intellectuals and musicians whom she greatly loved. Then it was off to England to meet the Reeves family, directly connected to the Reeveses of South Carolina, who had left England centuries ago.

When she was eighteen, she'd gone to visit the Petralona cousins in their villa on Santorini, rich and exotic-looking Greeks. They had lived in near feudal splendor, surrounded by peasant servants, and had taken Jesse with them on a spur-of-the-moment voyage aboard their yacht to Istanbul, Alexandria, and Crete.

Jesse had almost fallen in love with young Constantin Petralona. Maharet had let her know the marriage would have everyone's blessing, but she must make her own decision. Jesse had kissed her lover good-bye and flown back to America, the university, and preparation for her first archaeological dig in Iraq.

But even through the college years, she remained as close to the family as ever. Everyone was so good to her. But then everyone was good to everyone else. Everyone believed in the family. Visits among the various branches were common; frequent intermarriage had made endless entanglements; every family house contained rooms in constant readiness for relatives who might drop in. Family trees seemed to go back forever; people passed on funny stories about famous relatives who had been dead for three or four hundred years. Jesse had felt a great communion with these people, no matter how different they seemed.

In Rome she was charmed by the cousins who drove their sleek Ferraris at breakneck speed, stereos blaring, and went home at night to a charming old palazzo where the plumbing didn't work and the roof leaked. The Jewish cousins in southern California were a dazzling bunch of musicians, designers, and producers who had one way or the other been connected with the motion pictures and the big studios for fifty years. Their old house off Hollywood Boulevard was home to a score of unemployed actors. Jesse could live in the attic if she wanted to; dinner was served at six to anybody and everybody who walked in.

But who was this woman Maharet, who had always been Jesse's distant but ever attentive mentor, who guided her studies with

frequent and thoughtful letters, who gave her the personal direction to which she so productively responded and which she secretly craved?

To all the cousins whom Jesse was ever to visit, Maharet was a palpable presence though her visits were so infrequent as to be remarkable. She was the keeper of the records of the Great Family, that is, all the branches under many names throughout the world. It was she who frequently brought members together, even arranging marriages to unite different branches, and the one who could invariably provide help in times of trouble, help that could sometimes mean the difference between life and death.

Before Maharet, there had been her mother, now called Old Maharet, and before that Great-aunt Maharet and so forth and so on as long as anybody could remember. "There will always be a Maharet" was an old family saying, rattled off in Italian as easily as in German or Russian or Yiddish or Greek. That is, a single female descendant in each generation would take the name and the record-keeping obligations, or so it seemed, anyhow, for no one save Maharet herself really knew those details.

"When will I meet you?" Jesse had written many times over the years. She had collected the stamps off the envelopes from Delhi and Rio and Mexico City, from Bangkok, and Tokyo and Lima and Saigon and Moscow.

All the family were devoted to this woman and fascinated by her, but with Jesse there was another secret and powerful connection.

From her earliest years, Jesse had had "unusual" experiences, unlike those of the people around her.

For example, Jesse could read people's thoughts in a vague, wordless way. She "knew" when people disliked her or were lying to her. She had a gift for languages because she frequently understood the "gist" even when she did not know the vocabulary.

And she saw ghosts—people and buildings that could not possibly be there.

When she was very little she often saw the dim gray outline of an elegant town house across from her window in Manhattan. She'd known it wasn't real, and it made her laugh at first, the way it came and went, sometimes transparent, other times as solid as the street itself, with lights behind its lace-curtained windows. Years passed

before she learned that the phantom house had once been the property of architect Stanford White. It had been torn down decades ago.

The human images she saw were not at first so well formed. On the contrary, they were brief flickering apparitions that often compounded the inexplicable discomfort she felt in particular places.

But as she got older these ghosts became more visible, more enduring. Once on a dark rainy afternoon, the translucent figure of an old woman had ambled towards her and finally passed right through her. Hysterical, Jesse had run into a nearby shop, where clerks had called Matthew and Maria. Over and over Jesse tried to describe the woman's troubled face, her bleary-eyed stare which seemed utterly blind to the real world about her.

Friends often didn't believe Jesse when she described these things. Yet they were fascinated and begged her to repeat the stories. It left Jesse with an ugly vulnerable feeling. So she tried not to tell people about the ghosts, though by the time she was in her early teens she was seeing these lost souls more and more often.

Even walking in the dense crowds of Fifth Avenue at midday she glimpsed these pale searching creatures. Then one morning in Central Park, when Jesse was sixteen, she saw the obvious apparition of a young man sitting on a bench not far from her. The park was crowded, noisy; yet the figure seemed detached, a part of nothing around it. The sounds around Jesse began to go dim as if the thing were absorbing them. She prayed for it to go away. Instead it turned and fixed its eyes on her. It tried to speak to her.

Jesse ran all the way home. She was in a panic. These things knew her now, she told Matthew and Maria. She was afraid to leave the apartment. Finally Matthew gave her a sedative and told her she would be able to sleep. He left the door of her room open so she wouldn't be frightened.

As Jesse lay there halfway between dream and waking, a young girl came in. Jesse realized she knew this young girl; of course, she was one of the family, she'd always been here, right by Jesse, they'd talked lots of times, hadn't they, and no surprise at all that she was so sweet, so loving, and so familiar. She was just a teenager, no older than Jesse.

She sat on Jesse's bed and told Jesse not to worry, that these spirits

could never hurt her. No ghost had ever hurt anybody. They didn't have the power. They were poor pitiful weak things. "You write to Aunt Maharet," the girl said, and then she kissed Jesse and brushed the hair back out of Jesse's face. The sedative was really working then. Jesse couldn't even keep her eyes open. There was a question she wanted to ask about the car wreck when she was born, but she couldn't think of it. "Good-bye, sweetheart," said the girl and Jesse was asleep before the girl had left the room.

When she woke up it was two o'clock in the morning. The flat was dark. She began her letter to Maharet immediately, recounting every strange incident that she could remember.

It wasn't until dinnertime that she thought of the young girl with a start. Impossible that such a person had been living here and was familiar and had always been around. How could she have accepted such a thing? Even in her letter she had said, "Of course Miriam was here and Miriam said …" And who was Miriam? A name on Jesse's birth certificate. Her mother.

Jesse told no one what had happened. Yet a comforting warmth enveloped her. She could feel Miriam here, she was sure of it.

Maharet's letter came five days later. Maharet believed her. These spirit apparitions were nothing surprising at all. Such things most certainly did exist, and Jesse was not the only person who saw them:

> Our family over the generations has contained many a seer of spirits. And as you know these were the sorcerers and witches of ages past. Frequently this power appears in those who are blessed with your physical attributes: your green eyes, pale skin, and red hair. It would seem the genes travel together. Maybe science one day will explain this to us. But for now be assured that your powers are entirely natural.
>
> This does not mean, however, that they are constructive. Though spirits are real, they make almost no difference in the scheme of things! They can be childish, vindictive, and deceitful. By and large you cannot help the entities who try to communicate with you, and sometimes you are merely gazing at a lifeless ghost—that is, a visual echo of a personality no longer present.

> Don't fear them, but do not let them waste your time. For that they love to do, once they know that you can see them. As for Miriam, you must tell me if you see her again. But as you have done as she asked in writing to me I do not think she will find it necessary to return. In all probability she is quite above the sad antics of those whom you see most often. Write to me about these things whenever they frighten you. But try not to tell others. Those who do not see will never believe you.

This letter proved invaluable to Jesse. For years she carried it with her, in her purse or pocket wherever she went. Not only had Maharet believed her, but Maharet had given her a way to understand and survive this troublesome power. Everything that Maharet said had made sense.

After that Jesse was occasionally frightened again by spirits; and she did share these secrets with her closest friends. But by and large she did as Maharet had instructed her, and the powers ceased to bother her. They seemed to go dormant. She forgot them for long periods.

Maharet's letters came with ever greater frequency. Maharet was her confidante, her best friend. As Jesse entered college, she had to admit that Maharet was more real to her through the letters than anyone else she had ever known. But she had long come to accept that they might never see each other.

Then one evening during Jesse's third year at Columbia she had opened the door of her apartment to discover the lights burning, and a fire going under the mantel, and a tall, thin red-haired woman standing at the andirons with the poker.

Such beauty! That had been Jesse's first overwhelming impression. Skillfully powdered and painted, the face had an Oriental artifice, save for the remarkable intensity of the green eyes and the thick curly red hair pouring down over the shoulders.

"My darling," the woman said. "It's Maharet."

Jesse had rushed into her arms. But Maharet had caught her, gently holding her apart as if to look at her. Then she'd covered Jesse with kisses, as if she dared not touch her in any other way, her gloved hands barely holding Jesse's arms. It had been a lovely and delicate

moment. Jesse had stroked Maharet's soft thick red hair. So like her own.

"You are my child," Maharet had whispered. "You are everything I had hoped you would be. Do you know how happy I am?"

Like ice and fire, Maharet had seemed that night. Immensely strong, yet irrepressibly warm. A thin, yet statuesque creature with a tiny waist and flowing skirts, she had the high-toned mystery of fashion manikins, the eerie glamour of women who have made of themselves sculpture, her long brown wool cape moving with sweeping grace as they left the flat together. Yet how easy with one another they had been.

It had been a long night on the town; they'd gone to galleries, the theater, and then to a late night supper though Maharet had wanted nothing. She was too excited, she said. She did not even remove her gloves. She wanted only to listen to all that Jesse had to tell her. And Jesse had talked unendingly about everything—Columbia, her work in archaeology, her dreams of fieldwork in Mesopotamia.

So different from the intimacy of letters. They had even walked through Central Park in the pitch darkness together, Maharet telling Jesse there was not the slightest reason to be afraid. And it had seemed entirely normal then, hadn't it? And so beautiful, as if they were following the paths of an enchanted forest, fearing nothing, talking in excited yet hushed voices. How divine to feel so safe! Near dawn, Maharet left Jesse at the apartment with promises to bring her to visit in California very soon. Maharet had a house there, in the Sonoma mountains.

But two years were to pass before the invitation ever came. Jesse had just finished her bachelor's degree. She was scheduled to work on a dig in Lebanon in July.

"You must come for two weeks," Maharet had written. The plane ticket was enclosed. Mael, "a dear friend," would fetch her from the airport.

Though Jesse hadn't admitted it at the time, there had been strange things happening from the start.

Mael, for instance, a tall overpowering man with long wavy blond hair and deep-set blue eyes. There had been something almost eerie

about the way he moved, the timbre of his voice, the precise way he handled the car as they drove north to Sonoma County. He'd worn the rawhide clothes of a rancher it seemed, even to the alligator boots, except for a pair of exquisite black kid gloves and a large pair of gold-rimmed blue-tinted glasses.

And yet he'd been so cheerful, so glad to see her, and she'd liked him immediately. She'd told him the story of her life before they reached Santa Rosa. He had the most lovely laugh. But Jesse had gotten positively dizzy looking at him once or twice. Why?

The compound itself was unbelievable. Who could have built such a place? It was at the end of an impossible unpaved road, to begin with; and its back rooms had been dug out of the mountain, as if by enormous machines. Then there were the roof timbers. Were they primeval redwood? They must have been twelve feet in girth. And the adobe walls, positively ancient. Had there been Europeans in California so long ago that they could have … but what did it matter? The place was magnificent, finally. She loved the round iron hearths and animal-skin rugs, and the huge library and the crude observatory with its ancient brass telescope.

She had loved the good-hearted servants who came each morning from Santa Rosa to clean, do laundry, prepare the sumptuous meals. It did not even bother her that she was alone so much. She loved walking in the forest. She went into Santa Rosa for novels and newspapers. She studied the tapestried quilts. There were ancient artifacts here she could not classify; she loved examining these things.

And the compound had every convenience. Aerials high on the mountain brought television broadcasts from far and wide. There was a cellar movie theater complete with projector, screen, and an immense collection of films. On warm afternoons she swam in the pond to the south of the house. As dusk fell bringing the inevitable northern California chill, huge fires blazed in every hearth.

Of course the grandest discovery for her had been the family history, that there were countless leather volumes tracing the lineage of all the branches of the Great Family for centuries back. She was thrilled to discover photograph albums by the hundreds, and trunks full of painted portraits, some no more than tiny oval miniatures, others large canvases now layered with dust.

At once she devoured the history of the Reeveses of South Carolina, her own people—rich before the Civil War, and ruined after. Their photographs were almost more than she could bear. Here at last were the forebears she truly resembled; she could see her features in their faces. They had her pale skin, even her expression! And two of them had her long curly red hair. To Jesse, an adopted child, this had a very special significance.

It was only towards the end of her stay that Jesse began to realize the implications of the family records, as she opened scrolls covered with ancient Latin, Greek, and finally Egyptian hieroglyphs. Never afterwards was she able to pinpoint the discovery of the clay tablets deep within the cellar room. But the memory of her conversations with Maharet were never clouded. They'd talked for hours about the family chronicles.

Jesse had begged to work with the family history. She would have given up school for this library. She wanted to translate and adapt the old records and feed them into computers. Why not publish the story of the Great Family? For surely such a long lineage was highly unusual, if not absolutely unique. Even the crowned heads of Europe could not trace themselves back before the Dark Ages.

Maharet had been patient with Jesse's enthusiasm, reminding her that it was time-consuming and unrewarding work. After all, it was only the story of one family's progress through the centuries; sometimes there were only lists of names in the record, or short descriptions of uneventful lives, tallies of births and deaths, and records of migration.

Good memories, those conversations. And the soft mellow light of the library, the delicious smells of the old leather and parchment, of the candles and the blazing fire. And Maharet by the hearth, the lovely manikin, her pale green eyes covered with large faintly tinted glasses, cautioning Jesse that the work might engulf her, keep her from better things. It was the Great Family that mattered, not the record of it, it was the vitality in each generation, and the knowledge and love of one's kin. The record merely made this possible.

Jesse's longing for this work was greater than anything she'd ever known. Surely Maharet would let her stay here! She'd have years in this library, discovering finally the very origins of the family!

Only afterwards did she see it as an astounding mystery, and one among many during that summer. Only afterwards, had so many little things preyed on her mind.

For example, Maharet and Mael simply never appeared until after dark, and the explanation—they slept all day—was no explanation at all. And where did they sleep?—that was another question. Their rooms lay empty all day with the doors open, the closets overflowing with exotic and spectacular clothes. At sunset they would appear almost as if they'd materialized. Jesse would look up. Maharet would be standing by the hearth, her makeup elaborate and flawless, her clothes dramatic, her jeweled earrings and necklace sparkling in the broken light. Mael, dressed as usual in soft brown buckskin jacket and pants, stood silently against the wall.

But when Jesse asked about their strange hours, Maharet's answers were utterly convincing! They were pale beings, they detested sunlight, and they did stay up so late! True. Why, at four in the morning, they were still arguing with each other about politics or history, and from such a bizarre and grand perspective, calling cities by their ancient names, and sometimes speaking in a rapid, strange tongue that Jesse could not classify, let alone understand. With her psychic gift, she sometimes knew what they were saying; but the strange sounds baffled her.

And something about Mael rankled Maharet, it was obvious. Was he her lover? It did not really seem so.

Then it was the way that Mael and Maharet kept speaking to each other, as if they were reading each other's minds. All of a sudden, Mael would say, "But I told you not to worry," when in fact Maharet had not said a word out loud. And sometimes they did it with Jesse too. One time, Jesse was certain, Maharet had called her, asked her to come down to the main dining hall, though Jesse could have sworn she heard the voice only in her head.

Of course Jesse was psychic. But were Mael and Maharet both powerful psychics as well?

Dinner: that was another thing—the way that Jesse's favorite dishes appeared. She didn't have to tell the servants what she liked and didn't like. They knew! Escargots, baked oysters, fettucini alla

carbonara, beef Wellington, any and all her favorites were the nightly fare. And the wine, she had never tasted such delicious vintages. Yet Maharet and Mael ate like birds, or so it seemed. Sometimes they sat out the entire meal with their gloves on.

And the strange visitors, what about them? Santino, for instance, a black-haired Italian, who arrived one evening on foot, with a youthful companion named Eric. Santino had stared at Jesse as if she were an exotic animal, then he'd kissed her hand and given her a gorgeous emerald ring, which had disappeared without explanation several nights later. For two hours Santino had argued with Maharet in that same unusual language, then left in a rage, with the flustered Eric.

Then there were the strange nighttime parties. Hadn't Jesse awakened twice at three or four in the morning to find the house full of people? There had been people laughing and talking in every room. And all of these people had something in common. They were very pale with remarkable eyes, much like Mael and Maharet. But Jesse had been so sleepy. She couldn't even remember going back to bed. Only that at one point she had been surrounded by several very beautiful young men who filled a glass of wine for her, and the next thing she knew it was morning. She was in bed. The sun was pouring through the window. The house was empty.

Also, Jesse had heard things at odd hours. The roar of helicopters, small planes. Yet no one said a word about such things.

But Jesse was so happy! These things seemed of no consequence! Maharet's answers would banish Jesse's doubts in an instant. Yet how unusual that Jesse would change her mind like that. Jesse was such a confident person. Her own feelings were often known to her at once. She was actually rather stubborn. And yet she always had two attitudes towards various things Maharet told her. On the one hand, "Why, that's ridiculous," and on the other, "Of course!"

But Jesse was having too much fun to care. She spent the first few evenings of her visit talking with Maharet and Mael about archaeology. And Maharet was a fund of information though she had some very strange ideas.

For example, she maintained that the discovery of agriculture had actually come about because tribes who lived very well by hunting wanted to have hallucinogenic plants ever available to them for

religious trances. And also they wanted beer. Never mind that there wasn't a shred of archaeological evidence. Just keep digging. Jesse would find out.

Mael read poetry out loud beautifully; Maharet sometimes played the piano, very slowly, meditatively. Eric reappeared for a couple of nights, joining them enthusiastically in their singing.

He'd brought films with him from Japan and Italy, and they'd had a splendid time watching these. *Kwaidan*, in particular, had been quite impressive, though frightening. And the Italian *Juliet of the Spirits* had made Jesse break into tears.

All of these people seemed to find Jesse interesting. In fact, Mael asked her incredibly odd questions. Had she ever in her life smoked a cigarette? What did chocolate taste like? How could she dare to go with young men alone in automobiles or to their apartments? Didn't she realize they might kill her? She had almost laughed. No, but seriously, that could happen, he insisted. He worked himself into a state over it. Look at the papers. Women of the modern cities were hunted by men like deer in the wood.

Best to get him off that subject, and onto his travels. His descriptions of all the places he'd been were marvelous. He'd lived for years in the jungles of the Amazon. Yet he would not fly in "an aeroplane." That was too dangerous. What if it exploded? And he didn't like "cloth garments" because they were too fragile.

Jesse had a very peculiar moment with Mael. They'd been talking together at the dining table. She'd been explaining about the ghosts she sometimes saw, and he had referred to these crossly as the addlebrained dead, or the insane dead, which had made her laugh in spite of herself. But it was true; ghosts did behave as if they were a little addlebrained, that was the horror of it. Do we cease to exist when we die? Or do we linger in a stupid state, appearing to people at odd moments and making nonsensical remarks to mediums? When had a ghost ever said anything interesting?

"But they are merely the earthbound, of course," Mael had said. "Who knows where we go when we at last let loose of the flesh and all its seductive pleasures?"

Jesse had been quite drunk by this time, and she felt a a terrible dread coming over her—thoughts of the old ghost mansion of Stanford

White, and the spirits roaming the New York crowds. She'd focused sharply upon Mael, who for once was not wearing his gloves or his tinted glasses. Handsome Mael, whose eyes were very blue except for a bit of blackness at the centers.

"Besides," Mael had said, "there are other spirits who have always been here. They were never flesh and blood; and it makes them so angry."

What a curious idea. "How do you know this?" Jesse had asked, still staring at Mael. Mael was beautiful. The beauty was the sum of the faults—the hawk nose, the too prominent jaw, the leanness of the face with the wild wavy straw-colored hair around it. Even the eyes were too deep-set, yet all the more visible for it. Yes, beautiful—to embrace, to kiss, to invite to bed … In fact, the attraction she'd always felt to him was suddenly overwhelming.

Then, an odd realization had seized her. *This isn't a human being.* This is something pretending to be a human being. It was so clear. But it was also ridiculous! If it wasn't a human being, what the hell was it? It certainly was no ghost or spirit. That was obvious.

"I guess we don't know what's real or unreal," she had said without meaning to. "You stare at anything long enough and suddenly it looks monstrous." She had in fact turned away from him to stare at the bowl of flowers in the middle of the table. Old tea roses, falling to pieces amid the baby's breath and fern and purple zinnias. And they did look absolutely alien, these things, the way that insects always do, and sort of horrible! What were these things, really? Then the bowl broke into pieces and the water went everywhere. And Mael had said quite sincerely, "Oh, forgive me. I didn't mean to do that."

Now that had happened, without question. Yet it had made not the slightest impact. Mael had slipped away for a walk in the woods, kissing her forehead before he went, his hand trembling suddenly as he reached to touch her hair and then apparently thought the better of it.

Of course, Jesse had been drinking. In fact, Jesse drank too much the entire time she was there. And no one seemed to notice.

Now and then they went out and danced in the clearing under the moon. It was not an organized dancing. They would move singly, in circles, gazing up at the sky. Mael would hum or Maharet would sing

songs in the unknown language.

What had been her state of mind to do such things for hours? And why had she never questioned, even in her mind, Mael's strange manner of wearing gloves about the house, or walking in the dark with his sunglasses on?

Then one morning well before dawn, Jesse had gone to bed drunk and had a terrible dream. Mael and Maharet were fighting with each other. Mael kept saying over and over:

"But what if she dies? What if somebody kills her, or a car hits her? What if, what if, what if …" It had become a deafening roar.

Then several nights later the awful and final catastrophe had begun. Mael had been gone for a while, but then he'd returned. She'd been drinking burgundy all evening long, and she was standing on the terrace with him and he had kissed her and she had lost consciousness and yet she knew what was going on. He was holding her, kissing her breasts, yet she was slipping down through a fathomless darkness. Then the girl had come again, the teenaged girl who'd come to her that time in New York when she was so afraid. Only Mael couldn't see the girl, and of course Jesse knew exactly who she was, Jesse's mother, Miriam, and that Miriam was afraid. Mael had suddenly released Jesse.

"Where is she!" he'd cried out angrily.

Jesse had opened her eyes. Maharet was there. She struck Mael so hard he flew backwards over the railing of the terrace. And Jesse screamed, pushing aside the teenaged girl accidentally as she ran to look over the edge.

Far down there in the clearing Mael stood, unhurt. Impossible, yet obviously the case. He was on his feet already, and he made Maharet a deep ceremonial bow. He stood in the light falling from the windows of the lower rooms, and he blew a kiss to Maharet. Maharet looked sad, but she smiled. She'd said something under her breath and made a little dismissive gesture to Mael, as if to say she wasn't angry.

Jesse was in a panic that Maharet would be angry with her, but when she looked into Maharet's eyes she knew that there was no cause for worry. Then Jesse looked down and saw that the front of her dress was torn. She felt a sharp pain where Mael had been kissing her, and when she turned to Maharet, she became disoriented, unable to

hear her own words.

She was sitting on her bed somehow, propped against the pillows, and she wore a long flannel gown. She was telling Maharet that her mother had come again, she'd seen her on the terrace. But that was only part of what she'd been saying because she and Maharet had been talking for hours about the whole thing. But what whole thing? Maharet told her she would forget.

Oh, God, how she tried to recall after. Bits and pieces had tormented her for years. Maharet's hair was down, and it was very long and full. They had moved through the dark house together, like ghosts, she and Maharet, Maharet holding her, and now and then stopping to kiss her, and she had hugged Maharet. Maharet's body felt like stone that could breathe.

They were high up in the mountain in a secret room. Massive computers were there, with their reels and red lights, giving off a low electronic hum. And there, on an immense rectangular screen that stretched dozens of feet up the wall, was an enormous family tree drawn electronically by means of light. This was the Great Family, stretching back through all the millennia. Ah, yes, to one root! The plan was matrilineal, which had always been the way with the ancient peoples—as it had been with the Egyptians, yes, descent through the princesses of the royal house. And as it was, after a fashion, with the Hebrew tribes to this day.

All the details had been plain to Jesse at this moment—ancient names, places, the beginning!—God, had she known even the beginning?—the staggering reality of hundreds of generations charted before her eyes! She had seen the progress of the family through the ancient countries of Asia Minor and Macedonia and Italy and finally up through Europe and then to the New World! And this could have been the chart of any human family!

Never after was she able to reinvoke the details of that electronic map. No, Maharet had told her she would forget it. The miracle was that she remembered anything at all.

But what else had happened? What had been the real thrust of their long talk?

Maharet crying, that she remembered. Maharet weeping with the soft feminine sound of a young girl. Maharet had never appeared so

alluring; her face had been softened, yet luminous, the lines so few and so delicate. But it had been shadowy then, and Jesse could scarcely see anything clearly. She remembered the face burning like a white ember in the darkness, the pale green eyes clouded yet vibrant, and the blond eyelashes glistening as if the tiny hairs had been stroked with gold.

Candles burning in her room. The forest rising high outside the window. Jesse had been begging, protesting. But what in God's name was the argument about?

You will forget this. You will remember nothing.

She'd known when she opened her eyes in the sunlight that it was over; they had gone. Nothing had come back to her in those first few moments, except that something irrevocable had been said. Then she had found the note on the bedside table:

> My darling,
>
> It is no longer good for you to be around us. I fear we have all become too enamored of you and would sweep you off your feet and take you away from those things which you have set out to do.
>
> You will forgive us for leaving so suddenly. I am confident that this is best for you. I have arranged for the car to take you to the airport. Your plane leaves at four o'clock. Your cousins Maria and Matthew will meet you in New York.
>
> Be assured I love you more than words can say. My letter will be waiting for you when you reach home. Some night many years from now we will discuss the family history again. You may become my helper with these records if you still wish it. But for now this must not engulf you. It must not lead you away from life itself.
>
> Yours always,
> with unquestioning love,
> Maharet

Jesse had never seen Maharet again.

Her letters came with the same old regularity, full of affection,

concern, advice. But never again was there to be a visit. Never was Jesse invited back to the house in the Sonoma forest.

In the following months, Jesse had been showered with presents—a beautiful old town house on Washington Square in Greenwich Village, a new car, a heady increase in income, and the usual plane tickets to visit members of the family all over the world. Eventually, Maharet underwrote a substantial part of Jesse's archaeological work at Jericho. In fact, as the years passed she gave Jesse anything and everything Jesse could possibly desire.

Nevertheless, Jesse had been damaged by that summer. Once in Damascus she had dreamed of Mael and awakened crying.

She was in London, working at the British Museum, when the memories began to come back with full force. She never knew what triggered them. Maybe the effect of Maharet's admonition—*You will forget*—had simply worn off. But there might have been another reason. One evening in Trafalgar Square, she'd seen Mael or a man who looked exactly like him. The man, who stood many feet away, had been staring at her when their eyes met. Yet when she'd waved, he'd turned his back and walked off without the slightest recognition. She'd run after him trying to catch up with him; but he was gone as if he'd never been there.

It had left her hurt and disappointed. Yet three days later she'd received an anonymous gift, a bracelet of hammered silver. It was an ancient Celtic relic, she soon found out, and probably priceless. Could Mael have sent her this precious and lovely thing? She wanted so to believe it.

Holding the bracelet tightly in her hand she felt his presence. She remembered the long ago night when they'd spoken of addlebrained ghosts. She smiled. It was as if he were there, holding her, kissing her. She told Maharet about the gift when she wrote. She wore the bracelet ever after that.

Jesse kept a diary of the memories that came back to her. She wrote down dreams, fragments she saw in flashes. But she did not mention any of this in her letters to Maharet.

She had a love affair while she was in London. It ended badly, and she felt rather alone. It was at that time that the Talamasca contacted

her and the course of her life was changed forever.

Jesse had been living in an old house in Chelsea, not far from where Oscar Wilde had once lived. James McNeill Whistler had once shared the neighborhood and so had Bram Stoker, the author of *Dracula*. It was a place that Jesse loved. But unbeknownst to her, the house in which she'd leased her rooms had been haunted for many years. Jesse saw several strange things within the first few months. They were faint, flickering, apparitions of the kind one frequently sees in such places; echoes, as Maharet had called them, of people who'd been there years before. Jesse ignored them.

However when a reporter stopped her one afternoon, explaining that he was doing a story on the haunted house, she told him rather matter-of-factly about the things she'd seen. Common enough ghosts for London—an old woman carrying a pitcher from the pantry, a man in a frock coat and top hat who would appear for a second or more on the stair.

It made for a rather melodramatic article. Jesse had talked too much, obviously. She was called a "psychic" or "natural medium" who saw these things all the time. One of the Reeves family in Yorkshire called to tease her a little about it. Jesse thought it was funny too. But other than that, she didn't much care. She was deep into her studies at the British Museum. It just didn't matter at all.

Then the Talamasca, having read the paper, came to call.

Aaron Lightner, an old-fashioned gentleman with white hair and exquisite manners, asked to take Jesse to lunch. In an old but meticulously maintained Rolls Royce, he and Jesse were driven through London to a small and elegant private club.

Surely it was one of the strangest meetings Jesse had ever had. In fact, it reminded her of the long ago summer, not because it was like it, but because both experiences were so unlike anything else that had ever happened to Jesse.

Lightner was a bit on the glamorous side, as Jesse saw it. His white hair was quite full and neatly groomed, and he wore an impeccably tailored suit of Donegal tweed. He was the only man she'd ever seen with a silver walking stick.

Rapidly and pleasantly he explained to Jesse that he was a "psychic

detective;" he worked for a "secret order called the Talamasca," whose sole purpose was to collect data on "paranormal" experiences and maintain those records for the study of such phenomena. The Talamasca held out its hand to people with paranormal powers. And to those of extremely strong ability, it now and then offered membership, a career in "psychic investigation," which was in fact more truly a vocation, as the Talamasca demanded full devotion, loyalty, and obedience to its rules.

Jesse almost laughed. But Lightner was apparently prepared for her skepticism. He had a few "tricks" he always used at such introductory meetings. And to Jesse's utter amazement, he managed to move several objects on the table without touching them. A simple power, he said, which functioned as a "calling card."

As Jesse watched the salt shaker dance back and forth of its own volition, she was too amazed to speak. But the real surprise came when Lightner confessed he knew all about her. He knew where she'd come from, where she'd studied. He knew that she'd seen spirits when she was a little girl. It had come to the attention of the order years ago through "routine channels," and a file had been created for Jesse. She must not be offended.

Please understand the Talamasca proceeded in its investigations with the utmost respect for the individual. The file contained only hearsay reports of things that Jesse had told neighbors, teachers, and school friends. Jesse could see the file any time she wanted. That was always the way it was with the Talamasca. Contact was always eventually attempted with subjects under observation. Information was freely given to the subject, though it was otherwise confidential.

Jesse questioned Lightner rather relentlessly. It soon became clear that he did know a great deal about her, but he knew nothing whatsoever about Maharet or the Great Family.

And it was this combination of knowledge and ignorance that lured Jesse. One mention of Maharet and she would have turned her back on the Talamasca forever, for to the Great Family Jesse was unfailingly loyal. But the Talamasca cared only about Jesse's abilities. And Jesse, in spite of Maharet's advice, had always cared about them, too.

Then the history of the Talamasca itself proved powerfully

attractive. Was this man telling the truth? A secret order, which traced its existence back to the year 758, an order with records of witches, sorcerers, mediums, and seers of spirits going back to that remote period? It dazzled her as the records of the Great Family had once dazzled her.

And Lightner graciously withstood another round of relentless questioning. He knew his history and his geography, that was clear enough. He spoke easily and accurately of the persecution of the Cathars, the suppression of the Knights Templar, the execution of Grandier, and a dozen other historical "events." In fact, Jesse couldn't stump him. On the contrary, he referred to ancient "magicians" and "sorcerers" of whom she had never heard.

That evening, when they arrived at the Motherhouse outside London, Jesse's fate was pretty much sealed. She didn't leave the Motherhouse for a week, and then only to close up her flat in Chelsea and return to the Talamasca.

The Motherhouse was a mammoth stone structure built in the 1500s and acquired by the Talamasca "only" two hundred years ago. Though the sumptuous paneled libraries and parlors had been created in the eighteenth century, along with appropriate plasterwork and friezes, the dining room and many of the bedchambers dated back to the Elizabethan period.

Jesse loved the atmosphere immediately, the dignified furnishings, the stone fireplaces, the gleaming oak floors. Even the quiet civil members of the order appealed to her, as they greeted her cheerfully, then returned to their discussions or the reading of the evening papers, as they sat about the vast, warmly lighted public rooms. The sheer wealth of the place was startling. It lent substance to Lightner's claims. And the place felt good. Psychically good. People here were what they said they were.

But it was the libraries themselves that finally overwhelmed her, and brought her back to that tragic summer when another library and its ancient treasures had been shut against her. Here were countless volumes chronicling witch trials and hauntings and poltergeist investigations, cases of possession, of psychokinesis, reincarnation, and the like. Then there were museums beneath the building, rooms crammed with mysterious objects connected with paranormal

occurrences. There were vaults to which no one was admitted except the senior members of the order. Delicious, the prospect of secrets revealed only over a period of time.

"So much work to be done, always," Aaron had said casually. "Why, all these old records, you see, are in Latin, and we can no longer demand that the new members read and write Latin. It's simply out of the question in this day and age. And these storage rooms, you see, the documentation on most of these objects hasn't been reevaluated in four centuries—"

Of course Aaron knew that Jesse could read and write not only Latin, but Greek, ancient Egyptian, and ancient Sumerian as well. What he didn't know was that here Jesse had found a replacement for the treasures of that lost summer. She had found another "Great Family."

That night a car was sent to get Jesse's clothing and whatever she might want from the Chelsea flat. Her new room was in the southwest corner of the Motherhouse, a cozy little affair with a coffered ceiling and a Tudor fireplace.

Jesse never wanted to leave this house, and Aaron knew it. On Friday of that week, only three days after her arrival, she was received into the order as a novice. She was given an impressive allowance, a private parlor adjacent to her bedroom, a full-time driver, and a comfortable old car. She left her job at the British Museum as soon as possible.

The rules and regulations were simple. She would spend two years in full-time training, traveling with other members when and where necessary throughout the world. She could talk about the order to members of her family or friends, of course. But all subjects, files, and related details remained confidential. And she must never seek to publish anything about the Talamasca. In fact, she must never contribute to any "public mention" of the Talamasca. References to specific assignments must always omit names and places, and remain vague.

Her special work would be within the archives, translating and "adapting" old chronicles and records. And in the museums she would work on organizing various artifacts and relics at least one day of each week. But fieldwork—investigations of hauntings and the like—would

take precedence over research at any time.

It was a month before she wrote to Maharet of her decision. And in her letter she poured out her soul. She loved these people and their work. Of course the library reminded her of the family archive in Sonoma, and the time when she'd been so happy. Did Maharet understand?

Maharet's answer astonished her. Maharet knew what the Talamasca was. In fact, Maharet seemed quite thoroughly familiar with the history of the Talamasca. She said without preamble that she admired enormously the efforts of the order during the witchcraft persecutions of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to save the innocent from the stake.

> Surely they have told you of their "underground railroad" by means of which many accused persons were taken from the villages and hamlets where they might have been burnt and given refuge in Amsterdam, an enlightened city, where the lies and foolishness of the witchcraft era were not long believed.

Jesse hadn't known anything about this, but she was soon to confirm every detail. However, Maharet had her reservations about the Talamasca:

> Much as I admire their compassion for the persecuted of all eras, you must understand that I do not think their investigations amount to much. To clarify: spirits, ghosts, vampires, werewolves, witches, entities that defy description —all these may exist and the Talamasca may spend another millennium studying them, but what difference will this make to the destiny of the human race?
>
> Undoubtedly there have been, in the distant past, individuals who saw visions and spoke to spirits. And perhaps as witches or shamans, these people had some value for their tribes or nations. But complex and fanciful religions have been founded upon such simple and deceptive experiences, giving mythical names to vague entities, and creating an

enormous vehicle for compounded superstitious belief. Have not these religions been more evil than good?

Allow me to suggest that, however one interprets history, we are now well past the point where contact with spirits can be of any use. A crude but inexorable justice may be at work in the skepticism of ordinary individuals regarding ghosts, mediums, and like company. The supernatural, in whatever form it exists, *should not* interfere in human history.

In sum, I am arguing that, except for comforting a few confused souls here and there, the Talamasca compiles records of things that are not important and should not be important. The Talamasca is an interesting organization. But it cannot accomplish great things.

I love you. I respect your decision. But I hope for your sake that you tire of the Talamasca—and return to the real world—very soon.

Jesse thought carefully before answering. It tortured her that Maharet didn't approve of what she had done. Yet Jesse knew there was a recrimination in her decision. Maharet had turned her away from the secrets of the family; the Talamasca had taken her in.

When she wrote, she assured Maharet that the members of the order had no illusions about the significance of their work. They had told Jesse it was largely secret; there was no glory, sometimes no real satisfaction. They would agree in full with Maharet's opinions about the insignificance of mediums, spirits, ghosts.

But did not millions of people think that the dusty finds of archaeologists were of little significance as well? Jesse begged Maharet to understand what this meant to her. And lastly she wrote, much to her own surprise, the following lines:

I will never tell the Talamasca anything about the Great Family. I will never tell them about the house in Sonoma and the mysterious things that happened to me while I was there. They would be too hungry for this sort of mystery. And my loyalty is to you. But some day, I beg you, let me come back to the California house. Let me talk to you about the things

> that I saw. I've remembered things lately. I have had puzzling dreams. But I trust your judgment in these matters. You've been so generous to me. I don't doubt that you love me. Please understand how much I love you.

Maharet's response was brief.

> Jesse, I am an eccentric and willful being; very little has ever been denied me. Now and then I deceive myself as to the effect I have upon others. I should never have brought you to the Sonoma house; it was a selfish thing to do, for which I cannot forgive myself. But you must soothe my conscience for me. Forget the visit ever took place. Do not deny the truth of what you recall; but do not dwell on it either. Live your life as if it had never been so recklessly interrupted. Some day I will answer all your questions, but never again will I try to subvert your destiny. I congratulate you on your new vocation. You have my unconditional love forever.

Elegant presents soon followed. Leather luggage for Jesse's travels and a lovely mink-lined coat to keep her warm in "the abominable British weather." It is a country "only a Druid could love," Maharet wrote.

Jesse loved the coat because the mink was inside and didn't attract attention. The luggage served her well. And Maharet continued to write twice and three times a week. She remained as solicitous as ever.

But as the years passed, it was Jesse who grew distant—her letters brief and irregular—because her work with the Talamasca was confidential. She simply could not describe what she did.

Jesse still visited members of the Great Family, at Christmas and Easter. Whenever cousins came to London, she met them for sight-seeing or lunch. But all such contact was brief and superficial. The Talamasca soon became Jesse's life.

A world was revealed to Jesse in the Talamasca archives as she began her translations from the Latin: records of psychic families and

individuals, cases of "obvious" sorcery, "real" *maleficia*, and finally the repetitive yet horribly fascinating transcripts of actual witchcraft trials which invariably involved the innocent and the powerless. Night and day she worked, translating directly into the computer, retrieving invaluable historical material from crumbling parchment pages.

But another world, even more seductive, was opening up to her in the field. Within a year of joining the Talamasca, Jesse had seen poltergeist hauntings frightening enough to send grown men running out of the house and into the street. She had seen a telekinetic child lift an oak table and send it crashing through a window. She had communicated in utter silence with mind readers who received any message she sent to them. She had seen ghosts more palpable than anything she had ever believed could exist. Feats of psychometry, automatic writing, levitation, trance mediumship—all these she witnessed, jotting down her notes afterwards, and forever marveling at her own surprise.

Would she never get used to it? Take it for granted? Even the older members of the Talamasca confessed that they were continually shocked by the things they witnessed.

And without doubt Jesse's power to "see" was exceptionally strong. With constant use it developed enormously. Two years after entering the Talamasca, Jesse was being sent to haunted houses all over Europe and the United States. For every day or two spent in the peace and quiet of the library, there was a week in some drafty hallway watching the intermittent appearances of a silent specter who had frightened others.

Jesse seldom came to any conclusions about these apparitions. Indeed, she learned what all members of the Talamasca knew: there was no single theory of the occult to embrace all the strange things one saw or heard. The work was tantalizing, but ultimately frustrating. Jesse was unsure of herself when she addressed these "restless entities," or addlebrained spirits as Mael had once rather accurately described them. Yet Jesse advised them to move on to "higher levels," to seek peace for themselves and thereby leave mortals at peace also.

It seemed the only possible course to take, though it frightened her that she might be forcing these ghosts out of the only life that

remained to them. What if death were the end, and hauntings came about only when tenacious souls would not accept it? Too awful to think of that—of the spirit world as a dim and chaotic afterglow before the ultimate darkness.

Whatever the case, Jesse dispelled any number of hauntings. And she was constantly comforted by the relief of the living. There developed in her a profound sense of the specialness of her life. It was exciting. She wouldn't have swapped it for anything in the world.

Well, not for almost anything. After all, she might have left in a minute if Maharet had appeared on her doorstep and asked her to return to the Sonoma compound and take up the records of the Great Family in earnest. And then again perhaps not.

Jesse did have one experience with the Talamasca records, however, which caused her considerable personal confusion regarding the Great Family.

In transcribing the witch documents Jesse eventually discovered that the Talamasca had monitored for centuries certain "witch families" whose fortunes appeared to be influenced by supernatural intervention of a verifiable and predictable sort. The Talamasca was watching a number of such families right now! There was usually a "witch" in each generation of such a family, and this witch could, according to the record, attract and manipulate supernatural forces to ensure the family's steady accumulation of wealth and other success in human affairs. The power appeared to be hereditary—i.e., based in the physical—but no one knew for sure. Some of these families were now entirely ignorant as to their own history; they did not understand the "witches" who had manifested in the twentieth century. And though the Talamasca attempted regularly to make "contact" with such people, they were often rebuffed, or found the work too "dangerous" to pursue. After all, these witches could work actual *maleficia*.

Shocked and incredulous, Jesse did nothing after this discovery for several weeks. But she could not get the pattern out of her mind. It was too like the pattern of Maharet and the Great Family.

Then she did the only thing she could do without violating her loyalty to anybody. She carefully reviewed the records of every witch family in the Talamasca files. She checked and double-checked. She went back to the oldest records in existence and went over them

minutely.

No mention of anyone named Maharet. No mention of anyone connected to any branch or surname of the Great Family that Jesse had ever heard of. No mention of anything even vaguely suspicious.

Her relief was enormous, but in the end, she was not surprised. Her instincts had told her she was on the wrong track. Maharet was no witch. Not in this sense of the word. *There was more to it than that.*

Yet in truth, Jesse never tried to figure it all out. She resisted theories about what had happened as she resisted theories about everything. And it occurred to her, more than once, that she had sought out the Talamasca in order to lose this personal mystery in a wilderness of mysteries. Surrounded by ghosts and poltergeists and possessed children, she thought less and less about Maharet and the Great Family.

By the time Jesse became a full member, she was an expert on the rules of the Talamasca, the procedures, the way to record investigations, when and how to help the police in crime cases, how to avoid all contact with the press. She also came to respect that the Talamasca was not a dogmatic organization. It did not require its members to believe *anything*, merely to be honest and careful about all the phenomena that they observed.

Patterns, similarities, repetitions—these fascinated the Talamasca. Terms abounded, but there was no rigid vocabulary. The files were merely cross-referenced in dozens of different ways.

Nevertheless members of the Talamasca studied the theoreticians. Jesse read the works of all the great psychic detectives, mediums, and mentalists. She studied anything and everything related to the occult.

And many a time she thought of Maharet's advice. What Maharet had said was true. Ghosts, apparitions, psychics who could read minds and move objects telekinetically—it was all fascinating to those who witnessed it firsthand. But to the human race at large it meant very little. There was not now, nor would there ever be, any great occult discovery that would alter human history.

But Jesse never tired of her work. She became addicted to the excitement, even the secrecy. She was within the womb of the Talamasca, and though she grew accustomed to the elegance of her

surroundings—to antique lace and poster beds and sterling silver, to chauffeured cars and servants—she herself became ever more simple and reserved.

At thirty she was a fragile-looking light-skinned woman with her curly red hair parted in the middle and kept long so that it would fall behind her shoulders and leave her alone. She wore no cosmetics, perfume, or jewelry, except for the Celtic bracelet. A cashmere blazer was her favorite garment, along with wool pants, or jeans if she was in America. Yet she was an attractive person, drawing a little more attention from men than she thought was best. Love affairs she had, but they were always short. And seldom very important.

What mattered more were her friendships with the other members of the order; she had so many brothers and sisters. And they cared about her as she cared about them. She loved the feeling of the community surrounding her. At any hour of the night, one could go downstairs to a lighted parlor where people were awake—reading, talking, arguing perhaps in a subdued way. One could wander into the kitchen where the night cook was ever ready to prepare an early breakfast or a late dinner, whatever one might desire.

Jesse might have gone on forever with the Talamasca. Like a Catholic religious order, the Talamasca took care of its old and infirm. To die within the order was to know every luxury as well as every medical attention, to spend your last moments the way you wanted, alone in your bed, or with other members near you, comforting you, holding your hand. You could go home to your relatives if that was your choice. But most, over the years, chose to die in the Motherhouse. The funerals were dignified and elaborate. In the Talamasca, death was a part of life. A great gathering of black-dressed men and women witnessed each burial.

Yes, these had become Jesse's people. And in the natural course of events she would have remained forever.

But when she reached the end of her eighth year, something happened that was to change everything, something that led eventually to her break with the order.

Jesse's accomplishments up to that point had been impressive. But in the summer of 1081, she was still working under the direction of Aaron Lightner and she had seldom even spoken to the governing

council of the Talamasca or the handful of men and women who were really in charge.

So when David Talbot, the head of the entire order, called her up to his office in London, she was surprised. David was an energetic man of sixty-five, heavy of build, with iron-gray hair and a consistently cheerful manner. He offered Jesse a glass of sherry and talked pleasantly about nothing for fifteen minutes before getting to the point.

Jesse was being offered a very different sort of assignment. He gave her a novel called *Interview with the Vampire*. He said, "I want you to read this book."

Jesse was puzzled. "The fact is, I have read it," she said. "It was a couple of years ago. But what does a novel like this have to do with us?"

Jesse had picked up a paperback copy at the airport and devoured it on a long transcontinental flight. The story, supposedly told by a vampire to a young reporter in present-day San Francisco, had affected Jesse rather like a bad dream. She wasn't sure she liked it. Matter of fact, she'd thrown it away later, rather than leave it on a bench at the next airport for fear some unsuspecting person might find it.

The main characters of the work—rather glamorous immortals when you got right down to it—had formed an evil little family in antebellum New Orleans where they preyed on the populace for over fifty years. Lestat was the villain of the piece, and the leader. Louis, his anguished subordinate, was the hero, and the one telling the tale. Claudia, their exquisite vampire "daughter," was a truly tragic figure, her mind maturing year after year while her body remained eternally that of a little girl. Louis's fruitless quest for redemption had been the theme of the book, obviously, but Claudia's hatred for the two male vampires who had made her what she was, and her own eventual destruction, had had a much stronger effect upon Jesse.

"The book isn't fiction," David explained simply. "Yet the purpose of creating it is unclear. And the act of publishing it, even as a novel, has us rather alarmed."

"Not fiction?" Jesse asked. "I don't understand."

"The author's name is a pseudonym," David continued, "and the

royalty checks go to a nomadic young man who resists all our attempts at contact. He was a reporter, however, much like the boy interviewer in the novel. But that's neither here nor there at the moment. Your job is to go to New Orleans and document the events in the story which took place there before the Civil War."

"Wait a minute. You're telling me there are vampires? That these characters—Louis and Lestat and the little girl Claudia—are real!"

"Yes, exactly," David answered. "And don't forget about Armand, the mentor of the Théâtre des Vampires in Paris. You do remember Armand."

Jesse had no trouble remembering Armand or the theater. Armand, the oldest immortal in the novel, had had the face and form of an adolescent boy. As for the theater, it had been a gruesome establishment where human beings were killed on stage before an unsuspecting Parisian audience as part of the regular fare.

The entire nightmarish quality of the book was coming back to Jesse. Especially the parts that dealt with Claudia. Claudia had died in the Theater of the Vampires. The coven, under Armand's command, had destroyed her.

"David, am I understanding you correctly? You're saying these creatures exist?"

"Absolutely," David answered. "We've been observing this type of being since we came into existence. In a very real way, the Talamasca was formed to observe these creatures, but that's another story. In all probability, there are no fictional characters in this little novel whatsoever, but that would be your assignment, you see—to document the existence of the New Orleans coven, as described here—Claudia, Louis, Lestat."

Jesse laughed. She couldn't help it. She really laughed. David's patient expression only made her laugh more. But she wasn't surprising David, any more than her laughter had surprised Aaron Lightner eight years ago when they first met.

"Excellent attitude," David said, with a little mischievous smile. "We wouldn't want you to be too imaginative or trusting. But this field requires great care, Jesse, and strict obedience to the rules. Believe me when I say that this is an area which can be extremely dangerous. You are certainly free to turn down the assignment right

now."

"I'm going to start laughing again," Jesse said. She had seldom if ever heard the word "dangerous" in the Talamasca. She had seen it in writing only in the witch family files. Now, she could believe in a witch family without much difficulty. Witches were human beings, and spirits could be manipulated, most probably. But vampires?

"Well, let's approach it this way," David said. "Before you make up your mind, we'll examine certain artifacts pertaining to these creatures which we have in the vaults."

The idea was irresistible. There were scores of rooms beneath the Motherhouse to which Jesse had never been admitted. She wasn't going to pass up this opportunity.

As she and David went down the stairs together, the atmosphere of the Sonoma compound came back to her unexpectedly and rather vividly. Even the long corridor with its occasional dim electric bulbs reminded her of Maharet's cellar. She found herself all the more excited.

She followed David silently through one locked storage room after another. She saw books, a skull on a shelf, what seemed old clothing heaped on the floor, furniture, oil paintings, trunks and strongboxes, dust.

"All this paraphernalia," David said, with a dismissive gesture, "is in one way or another connected to our blood-drinking immortal friends. They tend to be a rather materialistic lot, actually. And they leave behind them all sorts of refuse. It is not unknown for them to leave an entire household, complete with furnishings, clothing, and even coffins—very ornate and interesting coffins—when they tire of a particular location or identity. But there are some specific things which I must show you. It will all be rather conclusive, I should think."

Conclusive? There was something conclusive in this work? This was certainly an afternoon for surprises.

David led her into a final chamber, a very large room, paneled in tin and immediately illuminated by a bank of overhead lights.

She saw an enormous painting against the far wall. She placed it at once as Renaissance, and probably Venetian. It was done in egg tempera on wood. And it had the marvelous sheen of such paintings, a

gloss that no synthetic material can create. She read the Latin title along with the name of the artist, in small Roman-style letters painted in the lower right corner.

"The Temptation of Amadeo"
by Marius

She stood back to study it.

A splendid choir of black-winged angels hovered around a single kneeling figure, that of a young auburn-haired boy. The cobalt sky behind them, seen through a series of arches, was splendidly done with masses of gilded clouds. And the marble floor before the figures had a photographic perfection to it. One could feel its coldness, see the veins in the stone.

But the figures were the true glory of the picture. The faces of the angels were exquisitely modeled, their pastel robes and black feathered wings extravagantly detailed. And the boy, the boy was very simply alive! His dark brown eyes veritably glistened as he stared forward out of the painting. His skin appeared moist. He was about to move or speak.

In fact, it was all too realistic to be Renaissance. The figures were particular rather than ideal. The angels wore expressions of faint amusement, almost bitterness. And the fabric of the boy's tunic and leggings, it was too exactly rendered. She could even see the mends in it, a tiny tear, the dust on his sleeve. There were other such details—dried leaves here and there on the floor, and two paintbrushes lying to one side for no apparent reason.

"Who is this Marius?" she whispered. The name meant nothing. And never had she seen an Italian painting with so many disturbing elements. Black-winged angels …

David didn't answer. He pointed to the boy. "It's the boy I want you to observe," he said. "He's not the real subject of your investigation, merely a very important link."

Subject? Link.… She was too engrossed in the picture. "And look, bones in the corner, human bones covered with dust, as if someone had merely swept them out of the way. But what on earth does it all mean?"

"Yes," David murmured. "When you see the word 'temptation,' usually there are devils surrounding a saint."

"Exactly," she answered. "And the craft is exceptional." The more she stared at the picture, the more disturbed she became. "Where did you get this?"

"The order acquired it centuries ago," David answered. "Our emissary in Venice retrieved it from a burnt-out villa on the Grand Canal. These vampires are endlessly associated with fires, by the way. It is the one weapon they can use effectively against one another. There are always fires. In *Interview with the Vampire*, there were several fires, if you recall. Louis set fire to a town house in New Orleans when he was trying to destroy his maker and mentor, Lestat. And later, Louis burned the Theater of the Vampires in Paris after Claudia's death."

Claudia's death. It sent a shiver through Jesse, startling her slightly.

"But look at this boy carefully," David said. "It's the boy we're discussing now."

Amadeo. It meant "one who loves God." He was a handsome creature, all right. Sixteen, maybe seventeen, with a square, strongly proportioned face and a curiously imploring expression.

David had put something in her hand. Reluctantly she took her eyes off the painting. She found herself staring at a tintype, a late-nineteenth-century photograph. After a moment, she whispered: "This is the same boy!"

"Yes. And something of an experiment," David said. "It was most likely taken just after sunset in impossible lighting conditions which might not have worked with another subject. Notice not much is really visible but his face."

True, yet she could see the style of the hair was of the period.

"You might look at this as well," David said. And this time he gave her an old magazine, a nineteenth-century journal, the kind with narrow columns of tiny print and ink illustrations. There was the same boy again alighting from a barouche—a hasty sketch, though the boy was smiling.

"The article's about him, and about his Theater of the Vampires. Here's an English journal from 1789. That's a full eighty years earlier, I believe. But you will find another very thorough description of the

establishment and the same young man."

"The Theater of the Vampires …" She stared up at the auburn-haired boy kneeling in the painting. "Why, this is Armand, the character in the novel!"

"Precisely. He seems to like that name. It may have been Amadeo when he was in Italy, but it became Armand by the eighteenth century and he's used Armand ever since."

"Slow down, please," Jesse said. "You're telling me that the Theater of the Vampires has been documented? By our people?"

"Thoroughly. The file's enormous. Countless memoirs describe the theater. We have the deeds to the property as well. And here we come to another link with our files and this little novel, *Interview with the Vampire*. The name of the owner of the theater was Lestat de Lioncourt, who purchased it in 1789. And the property in modern Paris is in the hands of a man by the same name even now."

"This is verified?" Jesse said.

"It's all in the file," David said, "photostats of the old records and the recent ones. You can study the signature of Lestat if you like. Lestat does everything in a big way—covers half the page with his magnificent lettering. We have photostats of several examples. We want you to take those photostats to New Orleans with you. There's a newspaper account of the fire which destroyed the theater exactly as Louis described it. The date is consistent with the facts of the story. You must go over everything, of course. And the novel, do read it again carefully."

By the end of the week, Jesse was on a plane for New Orleans. She was to annotate and document the novel, in every way possible, searching property titles, transfers, old newspapers, journals—anything she could find to support the theory that the characters and events were real.

But Jesse still didn't believe it. Undoubtedly there was "something here," but there had to be a catch. And the catch was in all probability a clever historical novelist who had stumbled upon some interesting research and woven it into a fictional story. After all, theater tickets, deeds, programs, and the like do not prove the existence of bloodsucking immortals.

As for the rules Jesse had to follow, she thought they were a scream.

She was not allowed to remain in New Orleans except between the hours of sunrise and four p.m. At four p.m. she had to drive north to the city of Baton Rouge and spend the nights safe within a sixteenth-story room in a modern hotel. If she should have the slightest feeling that someone was watching her or following her, she was to make for the safety of a large crowd at once. From a well-lighted and populated place, she was to call the Talamasca long distance in London immediately.

Never, under any circumstances, must she attempt a "sighting" of one of these vampire individuals. The parameters of vampiric power were not known to the Talamasca. But one thing was certain: the beings could read minds. Also, they could create mental confusion in human beings. And there was considerable evidence that they were exceptionally strong. Most certainly they could kill.

Also some of them, without doubt, knew of the existence of the Talamasca. Over the centuries, several members of the order had disappeared during this type of investigation.

Jesse was to read the daily papers scrupulously. The Talamasca had reason to believe that there were no vampires in New Orleans at present. Or Jesse would not be going there. But at any time, Lestat, Armand, or Louis might appear. If Jesse came across an article about a suspicious death she was to get out of the city and not return.

Jesse thought all this was hilarious. Even a handful of old items about mysterious deaths did not impress her or frighten her. After all, these people could have been the victims of a satanic cult. And they were all too human.

But Jesse had wanted this assignment.

On the way to the airport, David had asked her why. "If you really can't accept what I'm telling you, then why do you want to investigate the book?"

She'd taken her time in answering. "There is something obscene about this novel. It makes the lives of these beings seem attractive. You don't realize it at first; it's a nightmare and you can't get out of it. Then all of a sudden you're comfortable there. You want to remain. Even the tragedy of Claudia isn't really a deterrent."

"And?"

"I want to prove it's fiction," Jesse said.

That was good enough for the Talamasca, especially coming from a trained investigator.

But on the long flight to New York, Jesse had realized there was something she couldn't tell David. She had only just faced it herself. *Interview with the Vampire* "reminded" her of that long ago summer with Maharet, though Jesse didn't know why. Again and again she stopped her reading to think about that summer. And little things were coming back to her. She was even dreaming about it again. Quite beside the point, she told herself. Yet there was some connection, something to do with the atmosphere of the book, the mood, even the attitudes of the characters, and the whole manner in which things seemed one way and were really not that way at all. But Jesse could not figure it out. Her reason, like her memory, was curiously blocked.

Jesse's first few days in New Orleans were the strangest in her entire psychic career.

The city had a moist Caribbean beauty, and a tenacious colonial flavor that charmed her at once. Yet everywhere Jesse went she "felt" things. The entire place seemed haunted. The awesome antebellum mansions were seductively silent and gloomy. Even the French Quarter streets, crowded with tourists, had a sensuous and sinister atmosphere that kept her forever walking out of her way or stopping for long periods to dream as she sat slumped on a bench in Jackson Square.

She hated to leave the city at four o'clock. The high-rise hotel in Baton Rouge provided a divine degree of American luxury. Jesse liked that well enough. But the soft lazy ambience of New Orleans clung to her. She awoke each morning dimly aware that she'd dreamed of the vampire characters. And of Maharet.

Then, four days into her investigation, she made a series of discoveries that sent her directly to the phone. There most certainly had been a Lestat de Lioncourt on the tax rolls in Louisiana. In fact, in 1862 he had taken possession of a Royal Street town house from his business partner, Louis de Pointe du Lac. Louis de Pointe du Lac had owned seven different pieces of Louisiana property, and one of them had been the plantation described in *Interview with the Vampire*. Jesse

was flabbergasted. She was also delighted.

But there were even more discoveries. Somebody named Lestat de Lioncourt owned houses all over the city right now. And this person's signature, appearing in records dated 1895 and 1910, was identical to the eighteenth-century signatures.

Oh, this was too marvelous. Jesse was having a wonderful time.

At once she set out to photograph Lestat's properties. Two were Garden District mansions, clearly uninhabitable and falling to ruin behind rusted gates. But the rest, including the Royal Street town house—the very same deeded to Lestat in 1862—were rented by a local agency which made payment to an attorney in Paris.

This was more than Jesse could bear. She cabled David for money. She must buy out the tenants in Royal Street, for this was surely the house once inhabited by Lestat, Louis, and the child Claudia. They may or may not have been vampires, but they lived there!

David wired the money immediately, along with strict instructions that she mustn't go near the ruined mansions she'd described. Jesse answered at once that she'd already examined these places. Nobody had been in them for years.

It was the town house that mattered. By week's end she'd bought out the lease. The tenants left cheerfully with fists full of cash. And early on a Monday morning, Jesse walked into the empty second-floor flat.

Deliciously dilapidated. The old mantels, moldings, doors all there!

Jesse went to work with a screwdriver and chisel in the front rooms. Louis had described a fire in these parlors in which Lestat had been badly burnt. Well, Jesse would find out.

Within an hour she had uncovered the burnt timbers! And the plasterers—bless them—when they had come to cover up the damage, they had stuffed the holes with old newspapers dated 1862. This fitted with Louis's account perfectly. He'd signed the town house over to Lestat, made plans to leave for Paris, then came the fire during which Louis and Claudia had fled.

Of course Jesse told herself she was still skeptical, but the characters of the book were becoming curiously real. The old black telephone in the hall had been disconnected. She had to go out to call David, which annoyed her. She wanted to tell him everything right now.

But she didn't go out. On the contrary, she merely sat in the parlor for hours, feeling the warm sun on the rough floorboards around her, listening to the creaking of the building. A house of this age is never quiet, not in a humid climate. It feels like a living thing. No ghosts here, not that she could see anyway. Yet she didn't feel alone. On the contrary, there was an embracing warmth. Someone shook her to wake her up suddenly. No, of course not. No one here but her. A clock chiming four …

The next day she rented a wallpaper steamer and went to work in the other rooms. She must get down to the original coverings. Patterns could be dated, and besides she was looking for something in particular. But there was a canary singing nearby, possibly in another flat or shop, and the song distracted her. So lovely. Don't forget the canary. The canary will die if you forget it. Again, she fell asleep.

It was well after dark when she awakened. She could hear the nearby music of a harpsichord. For a long time, she'd listened before opening her eyes. Mozart, very fast. Too fast, but what skill. A great rippling riff of notes, a stunning virtuosity. Finally she forced herself to get up and turn on the overhead lights and plug in the steamer again.

The steamer was heavy; the hot water dripped down her arm. In each room she stripped a section of wall to the original plaster, then she moved on. But the droning noise of the thing bothered her. She seemed to hear voices in it—people laughing, talking to one another, someone speaking French in a low urgent whisper, and a child crying —or was it a woman?

She'd turn the damn thing off. Nothing. Just a trick of the noise itself in the empty echoing flat.

She went back to work with no consciousness of time, or that she had not eaten, or that she was getting drowsy. On and on she moved the heavy thing until quite suddenly in the middle bedroom she found what she'd been seeking—a hand-painted mural on a bare plaster wall.

For a moment, she was too excited to move. Then she went to work in a frenzy. Yes, it was the mural of the "magical forest" that Lestat had commissioned for Claudia. And in rapid sweeps of the dripping steamer she uncovered more and more.

“Unicorns and golden birds and laden fruit trees over sparkling streams.” It was exactly as Louis had described it. Finally she had laid bare a great portion of the mural running around all four walls. Claudia’s room, this, without question. Her head was spinning. She was weak from not eating. She glanced at her watch. One o’clock.

One o’clock! She’d been here half the night. She should go now, immediately! This was the first time in all these years that she’d broken a rule!

Yet she could not bring herself to move. She was so tired, in spite of her excitement. She was sitting against the marble mantel, and the light from the ceiling bulb was so dreary, and her head hurt, too. Yet she kept staring at the gilded birds, the small, wonderfully wrought flowers and trees. The sky was a deep vermilion, yet there was a full moon in it and no sun, and a great drifting spread of tiny stars. Bits of hammered silver still clinging to the stars.

Gradually she noticed a stone wall painted in the background in one corner. There was a castle behind it. How lovely to walk through the forest towards it, to go through the carefully painted wooden gate. Pass into another realm. She heard a song in her head, something she’d all but forgotten, something Maharet used to sing.

Then quite abruptly she saw that the gate was painted over an actual opening in the wall!

She sat forward. She could see the seams in the plaster. Yes, a square opening, which she had not seen, laboring behind the heavy steamer. She knelt down in front of it and touched it. A wooden door. Immediately she took the screwdriver and tried to pry it open. No luck. She worked on one edge and then the other. But she was only scarring the picture to no avail.

She sat back on her heels and studied it. A painted gate covering a wooden door. And there was a worn spot right where the painted handle was. Yes! She reached out and gave the worn spot a little jab. The door sprang open. It was as simple as that.

She lifted her flashlight. A compartment lined in cedar. And there were things there. A small white leather-bound book! A rosary, it looked like, and a doll, a very old porcelain doll.

For a moment she couldn’t bring herself to touch these objects. It was like desecrating a tomb. And there was a faint scent there as of

perfume. She wasn't dreaming, was she? No, her head hurt too much for this to be a dream. She reached into the compartment, and removed the doll first.

The body was crude by modern standards, yet the wooden limbs were well jointed and formed. The white dress and lavender sash were decaying, falling into bits and pieces. But the porcelain head was lovely, the large blue paperweight eyes perfect, the wig of flowing blond hair still intact.

"Claudia," she whispered.

Her voice made her conscious of the silence. No traffic now at this hour. Only the old boards creaking. And the soft soothing flicker of an oil lamp on a nearby table. And then that harpsichord from somewhere, someone playing Chopin now, the Minute Waltz, with the same dazzling skill she'd heard before. She sat still, looking down at the doll in her lap. She wanted to brush its hair, fix its sash.

The climactic events of *Interview with the Vampire* came back to her —Claudia destroyed in Paris. Claudia caught by the deadly light of the rising sun in a brick-lined airshaft from which she couldn't escape. Jesse felt a dull shock, and the rapid silent beat of her heart against her throat. Claudia gone, while the others continued. Lestat, Louis, Armand.…

Then with a start, she realized she was looking at the other things inside the compartment. She reached for the book.

A diary! The pages were fragile, spotted. But the old-fashioned sepia script was still readable, especially now that the oil lamps were all lighted, and the room had a cozy brightness to it. She could translate the French effortlessly. The first entry was September 21, 1836:

> This is my birthday present from Louis. Use as I like, he tells me. But perhaps I should like to copy into it those occasional poems which strike my fancy, and read these to him now and then?
>
> I do not understand entirely what is meant by birthday. Was I born into this world on the 21st of September or was it on that day that I departed all things human to become this?
>
> My gentlemen parents are forever reluctant to illuminate such simple matters. One would think it bad taste to dwell on

such subjects. Louis looks puzzled, then miserable, before he returns to the evening paper. And Lestat, he smiles and plays a little Mozart for me, then answers with a shrug: "It was the day you were born *to us."*

Of course, he gave me a doll as usual, the replica of me, which as always wears a duplicate of my newest dress. To France he sends for these dolls, he wants me to know. And what should I do with it? Play with it as if I were really a child?

"Is there a message here, my beloved father?" I asked him this evening. "That I shall be a doll forever myself?" He has given me thirty such dolls over the years if recollection serves me. And recollection never does anything else. Each doll has been exactly like the rest. They would crowd me out of my bedroom if I kept them. But I do not keep them. I burn them, sooner or later. I smash their china faces with the poker. I watch the fire eat their hair. I can't say that I like doing this. After all, the dolls are beautiful. And they do resemble me. Yet, it becomes the appropriate gesture. The doll expects it. So do I.

And now he has brought me another, and he stands in my doorway staring at me afterwards, as if my question cut him. And the expression on his face is so dark suddenly, I think, this cannot be my Lestat.

I wish that I could hate him. I wish that I could hate them both. But they defeat me not with their strength but with their weakness. They are so loving! And so pleasing to look at. Mon Dieu, how the women go after them!

As he stood there watching me, watching me examine this doll he had given me, I asked him sharply:

"Do you like what you see?"

"You don't want them anymore, do you?" he whispered.

"Would you want them," I asked, "if you were me?"

The expression on his face grew even darker. Never have I seen him the way he looked. A scorching heat came into his face, and it seemed he blinked to clear his vision. His perfect vision. He left me and went into the parlor. I went after him.

In truth, I couldn't bear to see him the way he was, yet I pursued him. "Would you like them," I asked, "if you were me?"

He stared at me as if I frightened him, and he a man of six feet and I a child no more than half that, at best.

"Am I beautiful to you?" I demanded.

He went past me down the hall, out the back door. But I caught up with him. I held tight to his sleeve as he stood at the top of the stairs. "Answer me!" I said to him. "Look at me. What do you see?"

He was in a dreadful state. I thought he'd pull away, laugh, flash his usual brimming colors. But instead he dropped to his knees before me and took hold of both my arms. He kissed me roughly on the mouth. "I love you," he whispered. "I love you!" As if it were a curse he laid on me, and then he spoke this poetry to me:

Cover her face;
mine eyes dazzle;
she died young.

Webster it is, I am almost certain. One of those plays Lestat so loves. I wonder … will Louis be pleased by this little poem? I cannot imagine why not. It is small but very pretty.

Jesse closed the book gently. Her hand was trembling. She lifted the doll and held it against her breast, her body rocking slightly as she sat back against the painted wall.

"Claudia," she whispered.

Her head throbbed, but it didn't matter. The light of the oil lamps was so soothing, so different from the harsh electric bulb. She sat still, caressing the doll with her fingers almost in the manner of a blind woman, feeling its soft silken hair, its stiff starched little dress. The clock chimed again, loudly, each somber note echoing through the room. She must not faint here. She must get up somehow. She must take the little book and the doll and the rosary and leave.

The empty windows were like mirrors with the night behind them.

Rules broken. Call David, yes, call David now. But the phone was ringing. At this hour, imagine. The phone ringing. And David didn't have any number for this flat because the phone.… She tried to ignore it, but it went on and on ringing. All right, answer it!

She kissed the doll's forehead. "Be right back, my darling," she whispered.

Where was the damn phone in this flat anyway? In the niche in the hallway, of course. She had almost reached it when she saw the wire with the frayed end, curled around it. It wasn't connected. She could see it wasn't connected. Yet it was ringing, she could hear it, and it was no auditory hallucination, the thing was giving one shrill pulse after another! And the oil lamps! My God, there were no oil lamps in this flat!

All right, you've seen things like this before. Don't panic, for the love of God. Think! What should you do? But she was about to scream. The phone would not stop ringing! If you panic, you will lose control utterly. You must turn off these lamps, stop this phone! But the lamps can't be real. And the living room at the end of the hall—the furniture's not real! The flicker of the fire, not real! And the person moving in there, who is it, a man? Don't look up at him! She reached out and shoved the phone out of the niche so that it fell to the floor. The receiver rolled on its back. Tiny and thin, a woman's voice came out of it.

"Jesse?"

In blind terror, she ran back to the bedroom, stumbling over the leg of a chair, falling against the starched drapery of a four-poster bed. Not real. Not there. Get the doll, the book, the rosary! Stuffing them in her canvas bag, she climbed to her feet and ran out of the flat to the back stairway. She almost fell as her feet hit the slippery iron. The garden, the fountain—But you know there's nothing there but weeds. There was a wrought-iron gate blocking her path. Illusion. Go through it! Run!

It was the proverbial nightmare and she was caught in it, the sounds of horses and carriages thudding in her ears as she ran down the cobblestone pavement. Each clumsy gesture stretched over eternity, her hands struggling to get the car keys, to get the door open, and then the car refusing to start.

By the time she reached the edge of the French Quarter, she was sobbing and her body was drenched with sweat. On she drove through the shabby garish downtown streets towards the freeway. Blocked at the onramp, she turned her head. Back seat empty. OK, they didn't follow. And the canvas bag was in her lap; she could feel the hard porcelain head of the doll against her breast. She floored it to Baton Rouge.

She was sick by the time she reached the hotel. She could barely walk to the desk. An aspirin, a thermometer. Please help me to the elevator.

When she woke up eight hours later, it was noon. The canvas bag was still in her arms. Her temperature was 104. She called David, but the connection was dreadful. He called her back; it was still no good. Nevertheless she tried to make herself understood. The diary, it was Claudia's, absolutely, it confirmed everything! And the phone, it wasn't connected, yet she heard the woman's voice! The oil lamps, they'd been burning when she ran out of the flat. The flat had been filled with furniture; there'd been fires in the grates. Could they burn down the flat, these lamps and fires? David must do something! And he was answering her, but she could barely hear him. She had the bag, she told him, he must not worry.

It was dark when she opened her eyes. The pain in her head had woken her up. The digital clock on the dresser said ten thirty. Thirst, terrible thirst, and the glass by the bed was empty. *Someone else was in the room.*

She turned over on her back. Light through the thin white curtains. Yes, there. A child, a little girl. She was sitting in the chair against the wall.

Jesse could just see the outline clearly—the long yellow hair, the puff-sleeved dress, the dangling legs that didn't touch the floor. She tried to focus. Child … not possible. Apparition. No. Something occupying space. Something malevolent. Menace—And the child was looking at her.

Claudia.

She scrambled out of the bed, half falling, the bag in her arms still as she backed up against the wall. The little girl got up. There was the clear sound of her feet on the carpet. The sense of menace seemed to

grow stronger. The child moved into the light from the window as she came towards Jesse, and the light struck her blue eyes, her rounded cheeks, her soft naked little arms.

Jesse screamed. Clutching the bag against her, she rushed blindly in the direction of the door. She clawed at the lock and chain, afraid to look over her shoulder. The screams were coming out of her uncontrollably. Someone was calling from the other side, and finally she had the door open and she was stumbling out into the hallway.

People surrounded her, but they couldn't stop her from getting away from the room. But then someone was helping her up because apparently she'd fallen again. Someone else had gotten a chair. She cried, trying to be quiet, yet unable to stop it, and she held the bag with the doll and the diary in both hands.

When the ambulance arrived, she refused to let them take the bag away from her. In the hospital they gave her antibiotics, sedatives, enough dope to drive anyone to insanity. She lay curled up like a child in the bed with the bag beside her under the covers. If the nurse so much as touched it, Jesse woke at once.

When Aaron Lightner arrived two days later, she gave it to him. She was still sick when she got on the plane for London. The bag was in his lap, and he was so good to her, calming her, caring for her, as she slept on and off on the long flight home. It was only just before they landed that she realized her bracelet was gone, her beautiful silver bracelet. She'd cried softly with her eyes closed. Mael's bracelet gone.

They pulled her off the assignment.

She knew even before they told her. She was too young for this work, they said, too inexperienced. It had been their mistake, sending her. It was simply too dangerous for her to continue. Of course what she had done was of "immense value." And the haunting, it had been one of unusual power. The spirit of a dead vampire? Entirely possible. And the ringing phone, well, there were many reports of such things—entities used various means to "communicate" or frighten. Best to rest now, put it out of her mind. Others would continue the investigation.

As for the diary, it included only a few more entries, nothing more significant than what she herself had read. The psychometrics who had examined the rosary and the doll learned nothing. These things

would be stored with utmost care. But Jesse really must remove her mind from all this immediately.

Jesse argued. She begged to go back. She threw a scene of sorts, finally. But it was like talking to the Vatican. Some day, ten years from now, maybe twenty, she could enter this particular field again. No one was ruling out such a possibility, but for the present the answer was no. Jesse was to rest, get better, forget what had taken place.

Forget what had taken place.…

She was sick for weeks. She wore white flannel gowns all day long and drank endless cups of hot tea. She sat in the window seat of her room. She looked out on the soft deep greenery of the park, at the heavy old oak trees. She watched the cars come and go, tiny bits of soundless color moving on the distant gravel road. Lovely here, such stillness. They brought her delicious things to eat, to drink. David came and talked softly to her of anything but the vampires. Aaron filled her room with flowers. Others came.

She talked little, or not at all. She could not explain to them how deeply this hurt her, how it reminded her of the long ago summer when she'd been pushed away from other secrets, other mysteries, other documents in vaults. It was the same old story. She'd glimpsed something of inestimable importance, only to have it locked away.

And now she would never understand what she'd seen or experienced. She must remain here in silence with her regrets. Why hadn't she picked up that phone, spoken into it, listened to the voice on the other end?

And the child, what had the spirit of the child wanted! Was it the diary or the doll! No, Jesse had been meant to find them and remove them! And yet she had turned away from the spirit of the child! She who had addressed so many nameless entities, who had stood bravely in darkened rooms talking to weak flickering things when others fled in panic. She who comforted others with the old assurance: these beings, whatever they are, cannot do us harm!

One more chance, she pleaded. She went over everything that had happened. She must return to that New Orleans flat. David and Aaron were silent. Then David came to her and put his arm around her.

"Jesse, my darling," he said. "We love you. But in this area above all others, one simply does not break the rules."

At night she dreamed of Claudia. Once she woke at four o'clock and went to the window and looked out over the park straining to see past the dim lights from the lower windows. There was a child out there, a tiny figure beneath the trees, in a red cloak and hood, a child looking up at her. She had run down the stairs, only to find herself stranded finally on the empty wet grass with the cold gray morning coming.

In the spring they sent her to New Delhi.

She was to document evidence of reincarnation, reports from little children in India that they remembered former lives. There had been much promising work done in this field by a Dr. Ian Stevenson. And Jesse was to undertake an independent study on behalf of the Talamasca which might produce equally fruitful results.

Two elder members of the order met her in Delhi. They made her right at home in the old British mansion where they lived. She grew to love the work; and after the initial shocks and minor discomforts, she grew to love India as well. By the end of the year she was happy—and useful—again.

And something else happened, a rather small thing, yet it seemed a good omen. In a pocket of her old suitcase—the one Maharet had sent her years ago—she'd found Mael's silver bracelet.

Yes, happy she had been.

But she did not forget what had happened. There were nights when she would remember so vividly the image of Claudia that she would get up and turn on every light in the room. At other times she thought she saw around her in the city streets strange white-faced beings very like the characters in *Interview with the Vampire*. She felt she was being watched.

Because she could not tell Maharet about this strange adventure, her letters became even more hurried and superficial. Yet Maharet was as faithful as ever. When members of the family came to Delhi, they visited Jesse. They tried to keep her in the fold. They sent her news of weddings, births, funerals. They begged her to visit during the holidays. Matthew and Maria wrote from America, begging Jesse to come home soon. They missed her.

Jesse spent four happy years in India. She documented over three

hundred individual cases which included startling evidence of reincarnation. She worked with some of the finest psychic investigators she had ever known. And she found her work continuously rewarding, almost comforting. Very unlike the chasing of haunts which she had done in her early years.

In the fall of her fifth year, she finally yielded to Matthew and Maria. She would come home to the States for a four-week visit. They were overjoyed.

The reunion meant more to Jesse than she had ever thought it would. She loved being back in the old New York apartment. She loved the late night dinners with her adopted parents. They didn't question her about her work. Left alone during the day, she called old college friends for lunch or took long solitary walks through the bustling urban landscape of all her childhood hopes and dreams and griefs.

Two weeks after her return, Jesse saw *The Vampire Lestat* in the window of a bookstore. For a moment, she thought she'd made a mistake. Not possible. But there it was. The bookstore clerk told her of the record album by the same name, and the upcoming San Francisco concert. Jesse bought a ticket on the way home at the record store where she purchased the album.

All day Jesse lay alone in her room reading the book. It was as if the nightmare of *Interview with the Vampire* had returned and, once again, she could not get out of it. Yet she was strangely compelled by every word. *Yes, real, all of you.* And how the tale twisted and turned as it moved back in time to the Roman coven of Santino, to the island refuge of Marius, and to the Druid grove of Mael. And finally to Those Who Must Be Kept, alive yet hard and white as marble.

Ah, yes, she had touched that stone! She had looked into Mael's eyes; she had felt the clasp of Santino's hand. She had seen the painting done by Marius in the vault of the Talamasca!

When she closed her eyes to sleep, she saw Maharet on the balcony of the Sonoma compound. The moon was high above the tips of the redwoods. And the warm night seemed unaccountably full of promise and danger. Eric and Mael were there. So were others whom she'd

never seen except in Lestat's pages. All of the same tribe; eyes incandescent, shimmering hair, skin a poreless shining substance. On her silver bracelet she had traced a thousand times the old Celtic symbols of gods and goddesses to whom the Druids spoke in woodland groves like that to which Marius had once been taken prisoner. How many links did she require between these esoteric fictions and the unforgettable summer?

One more, without question. The Vampire Lestat himself—in San Francisco, where she would see him and touch him—that would be the final link. She would know then, in that physical moment, the answer to everything.

The clock ticked. Her loyalty to the Talamasca was dying in the warm quiet. She could tell them not a word of it. And such a tragedy it was, when they would have cared so much and so selflessly; they would have doubted none of it.

The lost afternoon. She was there again. Going down into Maharet's cellar by the spiral stairway. Could she not push back the door? Look. See what you saw then. Something not so horrible at first glance—merely those she knew and loved, asleep in the dark, asleep. But Mael lies on the cold floor as if dead and Maharet sits against the wall, upright like a statue. Her eyes are open!

She awoke with a start, her face flushed, the room cold and dim around her. "Miriam," she said aloud. Gradually the panic subsided. She had drawn closer, so afraid. She had touched Maharet. Cold, petrified. And Mael dead! The rest was darkness.

New York. She lay on the bed with the book in her hand. And Miriam didn't come to her. Slowly, she climbed to her feet and walked across the bedroom to the window.

There, opposite in the dirty afternoon gloom, stood the high narrow phantom town house of Stanford White. She stared until the bulky image gradually faded.

From the album cover propped on the dresser the Vampire Lestat smiled at her.

She closed her eyes. She envisioned the tragic pair of Those Who Must Be Kept. Indestructible King and Queen on their Egyptian throne, to whom the Vampire Lestat sang his hymns out of the radios and the jukeboxes and from the little tapes people carried with them. She saw

Maharet's white face glowing in the shadows. Alabaster. The stone that is always full of light.

Dusk falling, suddenly as it does in the late fall, the dull afternoon fading into the sharp brightness of evening. Traffic roared through the crowded street, echoing up the sides of the buildings. Did ever traffic sound so loud as in the streets of New York? She leaned her forehead against the glass. Stanford White's house was visible in the corner of her eye. There were figures moving inside it.

Jesse left New York the next afternoon, in Mart's old roadster. She paid him for the car in spite of his arguments. She knew she'd never bring it back. Then she embraced her parents and, as casually as she could, she told them all the simple heartfelt things she'd always wanted them to know.

That morning, she had sent an express letter to Maharet, along with the two "vampire" novels. She explained that she had left the Talamasca, she was going to the Vampire Lestat's concert out west, and she wanted to stop at the Sonoma compound. She had to see Lestat, it was of crucial importance. Would her old key fit the lock of the Sonoma house? Would Maharet allow her to stop there?

It was the first night in Pittsburgh that she dreamed of the twins. She saw the two women kneeling before the altar. She saw the cooked body ready to be devoured. She saw one twin lift the plate with the heart; the other the plate with the brain. Then the soldiers, the sacrilege.

By the time she reached Salt Lake City she had dreamed of the twins three times. She had seen them raped in a hazy and terrifying scene. She had seen a baby born to one of the sisters. She had seen the baby hidden when the twins were again hunted down and taken prisoner. Had they been killed? She could not tell. The red hair. If only she could see their faces, their eyes! The red hair tormented her.

Only when she called David from a roadside pay phone did she learn that others had had these dreams—psychics and mediums the world over. Again and again the connection had been made to the Vampire Lestat. David told Jesse to come home immediately.

Jesse tried to explain gently. She was going to the concert to see Lestat for herself. She had to. There was more to tell, but it was too

late now. David must try to forgive her.

"You will not do this, Jessica," David said. "What is happening is no simple matter for records and archives. You must come back, Jessica. The truth is, you are needed here. You are needed desperately. It's unthinkable that you should attempt this 'sighting' on your own. Jesse, listen to what I'm telling you."

"I can't come back, David. I've always loved you. Loved you all. But tell me. It's the last question I'll ever ask you. How can you not come yourself?"

"Jesse, you're not listening to me."

"David, the truth. Tell me the truth. Have you ever really believed in them? Or has it always been a question of artifacts and files and paintings in vaults, things you can see and touch! You know what I'm saying, David. Think of the Catholic priest, when he speaks the words of consecration at Mass. Does he really believe Christ is on the altar? Or is it just a matter of chalices and sacramental wine and the choir singing?"

Oh, what a liar she had been to keep so much from him yet press him so hard. But his answer had not disappointed her.

"Jesse, you've got it wrong. I know what these creatures are. I've always known. There's never been the slightest doubt with me. And on account of that, no power on earth could induce me to attend this concert. It is you who can't accept the truth. You'll have to see it to believe it! Jesse, the danger's real. Lestat is exactly what he professes to be, and there will be others there, even more dangerous, others who may spot you for what you are and try to hurt you. Realize this and do as I tell you. Come home now."

What a raw and painful moment. He was striving to reach her, and she was only telling him farewell. He had said other things, that he would tell her "the whole story," that he would open the files to her, that she was needed on this very matter by them all.

But her mind had been drifting. She couldn't tell him her "whole story," that was the sorrow. She'd been drowsy again, the dream threatening as she hung up the phone. She'd seen the plates, the body on the altar. Their mother. Yes, their mother. Time to sleep. The dream wants in. And then go on.

Highway 101. Seven thirty-five p.m. Twenty-five minutes until the concert.

She had just come through the mountain pass on the Waldo Grade and there was the old miracle—the great crowded skyline of San Francisco tumbling over the hills, far beyond the black glaze of the water. The towers of the Golden Gate loomed ahead of her, the ice cold wind off the Bay freezing her naked hands as she gripped the steering wheel.

Would the Vampire Lestat be on time? It made her laugh to think of an immortal creature having to be *on time*. Well, she would be on time; the journey was almost ended.

All grief was gone now, for David and Aaron and those she'd loved. There was no grief either for the Great Family. Only the gratitude for all of it. Yet maybe David was right. Perhaps she had not accepted the cold frightening truth of the matter, but had merely slipped into the realm of memories and ghosts, of pale creatures who were the proper stuff of dreams and madness.

She was walking towards the phantom town house of Stanford White, and it didn't matter now who lived there. She would be welcome. They had been trying to tell her that ever since she could remember.

PART II

ALL HALLOWS EVE

Very little is
more worth our time
than understanding
the talent of Substance.
…
A bee, a living bee,
at the windowglass, trying to get out, doomed,
it can't understand.

STAN RICE
Untitled Poem
from

Pig's Progress (1976)

Daniel

Long curving lobby; the crowd was like liquid sloshing against the colorless walls. Teenagers in Halloween costume poured through the front doors; lines were forming to purchase yellow wigs, black satin capes—"Fang teeth, fifty cents!"—glossy programs. Whiteface everywhere he looked. Painted eyes and mouths. And here and there bands of men and women carefully done up in authentic nineteenth-century clothes, their makeup and coiffed hair exquisite.

A velvet-clad woman tossed a great shower of dead rosebuds into the air above her head. Painted blood flowed down her ashen cheeks. Laughter.

He could smell the greasepaint, and the beer, so alien now to his senses: rotten. The hearts beating all around him made a low, delicious thunder against the tender tympana of his ears.

He must have laughed out loud, because he felt the sharp pinch of Armand's fingers on his arm. "Daniel!"

"Sorry, boss," he whispered. Nobody was paying a damn bit of attention anyway; every mortal within sight was disguised; and who were Armand and Daniel but two pale nondescript young men in the press, black sweaters, jeans, hair partially hidden under sailor's caps of blue wool, eyes behind dark glasses. "So what's the big deal? I can't laugh out loud, especially now that everything is so funny?"

Armand was distracted; listening again. Daniel couldn't get it through his head to be afraid. He had what he wanted now. None of you my brothers and sisters!

Armand had said to him earlier, "You take a lot of teaching." That was during the hunt, the seduction, the kill, the flood of blood through his greedy heart. But he had become a natural at being unnatural, hadn't he, after the clumsy anguish of the first murder, the one that had taken him from shuddering guilt to ecstasy within seconds. Life by the mouthful. He'd woken up thirsting.

And thirty minutes ago, they'd taken two exquisite little vagabonds in the ruins of a derelict school by the park where the kids lived in boarded-up rooms with sleeping bags and rags and little cans of Sterno

to cook the food they stole from the Haight-Ashbury dumpsters. No protests this time around. No, just the thirsting and the ever increasing sense of the perfection and the inevitability of it, the preternatural memory of the taste faultless. Hurry. Yet there had been such an art to it with Armand, none of the rush of the night before when time had been the crucial element.

Armand had stood quietly outside the building, scanning it, waiting for "those who wanted to die"; that was the way he liked to do it; you called to them silently and they came out. And the death had a serenity to it. He'd tried to show that trick to Louis long ago, he'd said, but Louis had found it distasteful.

And sure enough the denim-clad cherubs had come wandering through the side door, as if hypnotized by the music of the Pied Piper. "Yes, you came, we knew you'd come.…" Dull flat voices welcoming them as they were led up the stairs and into a parlor made out of army blankets on ropes. To die in this garbage in the sweep of the passing headlights through the cracks in the plywood.

Hot dirty little arms around Daniel's neck; reek of hashish in her hair; he could scarcely stand it, the dance, her hips against him, then driving his fangs into the flesh. "You love me, you know you do," she'd said. And he'd answered yes with a clear conscience. Was it going to be this good forever? He'd clasped her chin with his hand, underneath, pushing her head back, and then, the death like a doubled fist going down his throat, to his gut, the heat spreading, flooding his loins and his brain.

He'd let her drop. Too much and not enough. He'd clawed at the wall for a moment thinking it must be flesh and blood, too, and were it flesh and blood it could be his. Then such a shock to know he wasn't hungry anymore. He was filled and complete and the night waited, like something made out of pure light, and the other one was dead, folded up like a baby in sleep on the grimy floor, and Armand, glowing in the dark, just watching.

It was getting rid of the bodies after that had been hard. Last night that had been done out of his sight, as he wept. Beginner's luck. This time Armand said "no trace means no trace." So they'd gone down together to bury them deep beneath the basement floor in the old furnace room, carefully putting the paving stones back in place. Lots

of work even with such strength. So loathsome to touch the corpse like that. Only for a second did it flicker in his mind: *who were they?* Two fallen beings in a pit. No more *now*, no destiny. And the waif last night? Was somebody looking for her somewhere? He'd been crying suddenly. He'd heard it, then reached up and touched the tears coming out of his eyes.

"What do you think this is?" Armand had demanded, making him help with the paving stones. "A penny dreadful novel? You don't feed if you can't cover it up."

The building had been crawling with gentle humans who noticed not a thing as they'd stolen the clothes they now wore, uniforms of the young, and left by a broken door into an alley. Not my brothers and sisters anymore. The woods have always been filled with these soft doe-eyed things, with hearts beating for the arrow, the bullet, the lance. And now at last I reveal my secret identity: I have always been the huntsman.

"Is it all right, the way I am now?" he'd asked Armand. "Are you happy?" Haight Street, seven thirty-five. Bumper-to-bumper traffic, junkies screaming on the corner. Why didn't they just go on to the concert? Doors open already. He couldn't bear the anticipation.

But the coven house was near, Armand had explained, big tumbledown mansion one block from the park, and some of them were still hanging back in there plotting Lestat's ruin. Armand wanted to pass close, just for a moment, know what was going on.

"Looking for someone?" Daniel had asked. "Answer me, are you pleased with me or not?"

What had he seen in Armand's face? A sudden flare of humor, lust? Armand had hurried him along the dirty stained pavements, past the bars, the cafés, the stores crowded with stinking old clothes, the fancy clubs with their gilded letters on the greasy plate glass and overhead fans stirring the fumes with gilded wooden blades, while the potted ferns died a slow death in the heat and the semidarkness. Past the first little children—"Trick or treat!"—in their taffeta and glitter costumes.

Armand had stopped, at once surrounded by tiny upturned faces covered in store-bought masks, plastic spooks, ghouls, witches; a lovely warm light had filled his brown eyes; with both hands he'd dropped shiny silver dollars in their little candy sacks, then taken

Daniel by the arm and led him on.

"I love it well enough the way you turned out," he had whispered with a sudden irrepressible smile, the warmth still there. "You're my firstborn," he'd said. Was there a catch in his throat, a sudden glancing from right to left as if he'd found himself cornered? Back to the business at hand. "Be patient. I am being afraid for us both, remember?"

Oh, we shall go to the stars together! Nothing can stop us. All the ghosts running through these streets are mortal!

Then the coven house had blown up.

He'd heard the blast before he saw it—and a sudden rolling plume of flame and smoke, accompanied by a shrill sound he would never before have detected: preternatural screams like silver paper curling in the heat. Sudden scatter of shaggy-haired humans running to see the blaze.

Armand had shoved Daniel off the street, into the stagnant air of a narrow liquor store. Bilious glare; sweat and reek of tobacco; mortals, oblivious to the nearby conflagration, reading the big glossy girlie magazines. Armand had pushed him to the very rear of the tiny corridor. Old lady buying tiny carton of milk and two cans of cat food out of the icebox. No way out of here.

But how could one hide from the thing that was passing over, from the deafening sound that mortals could not even hear? He'd lifted his hands to his ears, but that was foolish, useless. Death out there in alleyways. Things like him running through the debris of backyards, caught, burnt in their tracks. He saw it in sputtering flashes. Then nothing. Ringing silence. The clanging bells and squealing tires of the mortal world.

Vet he'd been too enthralled still to be afraid. Every second was eternal, the frost on the icebox door beautiful. The old lady with the milk in her hand, eyes like two small cobalt stones.

Armand's face had gone blank beneath the mask of his dark glasses, hands slipped into his tight pants pockets. The tiny bell on the door jangled as a young man entered, bought a single bottle of German beer, and went out.

"It's over, isn't it?"

"For now," Armand had answered.

Not until they'd gotten in the cab did he say more.

"It knew we were there; it heard us."

"Then why didn't it—?"

"I don't know. I only know it knew we were there. It knew before we found shelter."

And now, push and shove inside the hall, and he loved it, the crowd carrying them closer and closer to the inner doors. He could not even raise his arms, so tight was the press; yet young men and women elbowed past him, buffeted him with delicious shocks; he laughed again as he saw the life-sized posters of Lestat plastered to the walls.

He felt Armand's fingers against his back; he felt a subtle change in Armand's whole body. A red-haired woman up ahead had turned around and was facing them as she was moved along towards the open door.

A soft warm shock passed through Daniel. "Armand, the red hair." So like the twins in the dream! It seemed her green eyes locked on him as he said, "Armand, the twins!"

Then her face vanished as she turned away again and disappeared inside the hall.

"No," Armand whispered. Small shake of his head. He was in a silent fury, Daniel could feel it. He had the rigid glassy look he always got when profoundly offended. "Talamasca," he whispered, with a faint uncharacteristic sneer.

"Talamasca." The word struck Daniel suddenly as beautiful. Talamasca. He broke it down from the Latin, understood its parts. Somewhere out of his memory bank it came: animal mask. Old word for witch or shaman.

"But what does it really mean?" he asked.

"It means Lestat is a fool," Armand said. Flicker of deep pain in his eyes. "But it makes no difference now."

Khayman

Khayman watched from the archway as the Vampire Lestat's car entered the gates of the parking lot. Almost invisible Khayman was, even in the stylish denim coat and pants he'd stolen earlier from a shop manikin. He didn't need the silver glasses that covered his eyes. His glowing skin didn't matter. Not when everywhere he looked he saw masks and paint, glitter and gauze and sequined costumes.

He moved closer to Lestat, as if swimming through the wriggling bodies of the youngsters who mobbed the car. At last he glimpsed the creature's blond hair, and then his violet blue eyes as he smiled and blew kisses to his adorers. Such charm the devil had. He drove the car himself, gunning the motor and forcing the bumper against these tender little humans even as he flirted, winked, seduced, as if he and his foot on the gas pedal weren't connected to each other.

Exhilaration. Triumph. That's what Lestat felt and knew at this moment. And even his reticent companion, Louis, the dark-haired one in the car beside him, staring timidly at the screaming children as if they were birds of paradise, didn't understand what was truly happening.

Neither knew that the Queen had waked. Neither knew the dreams of the twins. Their ignorance was astonishing. And their young minds were so easy to scan. Apparently the Vampire Lestat, who had hidden himself quite well until this night, was now prepared to do battle with everyone. He wore his thoughts and intentions like a badge of honor.

"Hunt us down!" That's what he said aloud to his fans, though they didn't hear. "Kill us. We're evil. We're bad. It's perfectly fine to cheer and sing with us now. But when you catch on, well, then the serious business will begin. And you'll remember that I never lied to you."

For one instant his eyes and Khayman's eyes met. *I want to be good! I would die for that!* But there was no recognition of who or what received this message.

Louis, the watcher, the patient one, was there on account of love pure and simple. The two had found each other only last night, and theirs had been an extraordinary reunion. Louis would go where Lestat

led him. Louis would perish if Lestat perished. But their fears and hopes for this night were heartbreakingly human.

They did not even guess that the Queen's wrath was close at hand, that she'd burnt the San Francisco coven house within the hour. Or that the infamous vampire tavern on Castro Street was burning now, as the Queen hunted down those fleeing from it.

But then the many blood drinkers scattered throughout this crowd did not know these simple facts either. They were too young to hear the warnings of the old, to hear the screams of the doomed as they perished. The dreams of the twins had only confused them. From various points, they glared at Lestat, overcome with hatred or religious fervor. They would destroy him or make of him a god. They did not guess at the danger that awaited them.

But what of the twins themselves? What was the meaning of the dreams?

Khayman watched the car move on, forcing its way towards the back of the auditorium. He looked up at the stars overhead, the tiny pinpricks of light behind the mist that hung over the city. He thought he could feel the closeness of his old sovereign.

He turned back towards the auditorium and made his way carefully through the press. To forget his strength in such a crowd as this would have been disaster. He would bruise flesh and break bones without even feeling it.

He took one last look at the sky, and then he went inside, easily befuddling the ticket taker as he went through the little turnstile and towards the nearest stairway.

The auditorium was almost filled. He looked about himself thoughtfully, savoring the moment somewhat as he savored everything. The hall itself was nothing, a shell of a place to hold light and sound—utterly modern and unredeemably ugly.

But the mortals, how pretty they were, glistering with health, their pockets full of gold, sound bodies everywhere, in which no organ had been eaten by the worms of disease, no bone ever broken.

In fact the sanitized well-being of this entire city rather amazed Khayman. True, he'd seen wealth in Europe such as he could never have imagined, but nothing equaled the flawless surface of this small and over-populated place, even to the San Francisco peasantry, whose

tiny stucco cottages were choked with luxuries of every description. Driveways here were jammed with handsome automobiles. Paupers drew their money from bank machines with magic plastic cards. No slums anywhere. Great towers the city had, and fabulous hostelries; mansions in profusion; yet girded as it was by sea and mountains and the glittering waters of the Bay, it seemed not so much a capital as a resort, an escape from the world's greater pain and ugliness.

No wonder Lestat had chosen this place to throw down the gauntlet. In the main, these pampered children were good. Deprivation had never wounded or weakened them. They might prove perfect combatants for real evil. That is, when they came to realize that the symbol and the thing were one and the same. Wake up and smell the blood, young ones.

But would there be time for that now?

Lestat's great scheme, whatever it truly was, might be stillborn; for surely the Queen had a scheme of her own, and Lestat knew nothing of it.

Khayman made his way now to the top of the hall. To the very last row of wooden seats where he had been earlier. He settled comfortably in the same spot, pushing aside the two "vampire books," which still lay on the floor, unnoticed.

Earlier, he had devoured the texts—Louis's testament: "Behold, the void." And Lestat's history: "And this and this and this, and it means nothing." They had clarified for him many things. And what Khayman had divined of Lestat's intentions had been confirmed completely. But of the mystery of the twins, of course, the book told nothing.

And as for the Queen's true intent, that continued to baffle him.

She had slain hundreds of blood drinkers the world over, yet left others unharmed.

Even now, Marius lived. In destroying her shrine, she had punished him but not killed him, which would have been simple. He called to the older ones from his prison of ice, warning, begging for assistance. And effortlessly, Khayman sensed two immortals moving to answer Marius's call, though one, Marius's own child, could not even hear it. Pandora was that one's name; she was a lone one, a strong one. The other, called Santino, did not have her power, but he could hear Marius's voice, as he struggled to keep pace with her.

Without doubt the Queen could have struck them down had she chosen to do it. Yet on and on they moved, clearly visible, clearly audible, yet unmolested.

How did the Queen make such choices? Surely there were those in this very hall whom she had spared for some purpose.…

Daniel

They had reached the doors, and now had to push the last few feet down a narrow ramp into the giant open oval of the main floor.

The crowd loosened, like marbles rolling in all directions. Daniel moved towards the center, his fingers hooked around Armand's belt so as not to lose him, his eyes roaming over the horseshoe-shaped theater, the high banks of seats rising to the ceiling. Mortals everywhere swarmed the cement stairs, or hung over iron railings, or flowed into the milling crowd around him.

A blur it was suddenly, the noise of it like the low grind of a giant machine. But then in the moment of deliberately distorted vision, he saw *the others*. He saw the simple, inescapable difference between the living and the dead. Beings like himself in every direction, concealed in the mortal forest, yet shining like the eyes of an owl in the light of the moon. No paint or dark glasses or shapeless hats or hooded capes could ever conceivably hide them from each other. And it wasn't merely the unearthly sheen to their faces or hands. It was the slow, lissome grace of their movements, as if they were more spirit than flesh.

Ah, my brothers and sisters, at last!

But it was hatred he felt around him. A rather dishonest hatred! They loved Lestat and condemned him simultaneously. They loved the very act of hating, punishing. Suddenly, he caught the eye of a powerful hulking creature with greasy black hair who bared his fangs in an ugly flash and then revealed the plan in stunning completeness. Beyond the prying eyes of mortals, they would hack Lestat's limbs from his body; they would sever his head; then the remains would be burnt on a pyre by the sea. The end of the monster and his legend. *Are you with us or against us?*

Daniel laughed out loud. "You'll never kill him," Daniel said. Yet he gaped as he glimpsed the sharpened scythe the creature held against his chest inside his coat. Then the beast turned and vanished. Daniel gazed upwards through the smoky light. *One of them now. Know all their secrets!* He felt giddy, on the verge of madness.

Armand's hand closed on his shoulder. They had come to the very center of the main floor. The crowd was getting denser by the second. Pretty girls in black silk gowns shoved and pushed against the crude bikers in their worn black leather. Soft feathers brushed his cheek; he saw a red devil with giant horns; a bony skeleton face topped with golden curls and pearl combs. Random cries rose in the bluish gloom. The bikers howled like wolves; someone shouted "Lestat" in a deafening voice, and others took up the call instantly.

Armand again had the lost expression, the expression that belonged to deep concentration, as if what he saw before him meant nothing at all.

"Thirty perhaps," he whispered in Daniel's ear, "no more than that, and one or two so old they could destroy the rest of us in an instant."

"Where, tell me where?"

"Listen," Armand said. "And see for yourself. There is no hiding from them."

Khayman

Maharet's child. Jessica. The thought caught Khayman off guard. *Protect Maharet's child. Somehow escape from here.*

He roused himself, senses sharpened. He'd been listening to Marius again, Marius trying to reach the young untuned ears of the Vampire Lestat, who preened backstage, before a broken mirror. What could this mean, Maharet's child, Jessica, and when the thoughts pertained, without doubt, to a mortal woman?

It came again, the unexpected communication of some strong yet unveiled mind: *Take care of Jesse. Somehow stop the Mother*.... But there were no words really—it was no more than a shining glimpse into another's soul, a sparkling overflow.

Khayman's eyes moved slowly over the balconies opposite, over the swarming main floor. Far away in some remote corner of the city, an old one wandered, full of fear of the Queen yet longing to look upon her face. He had come here to die, but to know her face in the final instant. Khayman closed his eyes to shut this out.

Then he heard it again suddenly. *Jessica, my Jessica.* And behind the soulful call, the knowledge of Maharet! The sudden vision of Maharet, enshrined in love, and ancient and white as he himself was. It was a moment of stunning pain. He slumped back in the wooden seat and bowed his head just a little. Then he looked out again over the steel rafters, the ugly tangles of black wire and rusted cylindrical lights. *Where are you?*

There, far away against the opposite wall, he saw the figure from whom the thoughts were coming. Ah, the oldest he had seen so far. A giant Nordic blood drinker, seasoned and cunning, dressed in coarse brown rawhide garments, with flowing straw-colored hair, his heavy brows and small deep-set eyes giving him a brooding expression.

The being was tracking a small mortal woman who fought her way through the crowds of the main floor. Jesse, Maharet's mortal daughter.

Maddened, disbelieving, Khayman focused tightly on the small woman. He felt his eyes mist with tears as he saw the astonishing

resemblance. Here was Maharet's long coppery red hair, curling, thick, and the same tall birdlike frame, the same clever and curious green eyes, sweeping the scene as the female let herself be turned around and around by those who pushed against her.

Maharet's profile. Maharet's skin, which had been so pale and almost luminous in life, so like the inner lining of a seashell.

In a sudden vivid memory, he saw Maharet's skin through the mesh of his own dark fingers. As he had pushed her face to the side during the rape, his fingertips had touched the delicate folds of flesh over her eyes. Not till a year later had they plucked out her eyes and he had been there remembering the moment, the feel of the flesh. That is before he had picked up the eyes themselves and….

He shuddered. He felt a sharp pain in his lungs. His memory wasn't going to fail him. He would not slip away from this moment, the happy clown remembering nothing.

Maharet's child, all right. But how? Through how many generations had these characteristics survived to flower again in this small female who appeared to be fighting her way towards the stage at the end of the hall?

It was not impossible, of course. He quickly realized it. Perhaps three hundred ancestors stood between this twentieth-century woman and the long ago afternoon when he had put on the King's medallion and stepped down from the dais to commit the King's rape. Maybe even less than that. A mere fraction of this crowd, to put it more neatly in perspective.

But more astonishing than this, that Maharet knew her own descendants. And know this woman Maharet did. The tall blood drinker's mind yielded that fact immediately.

He scanned the tall Nordic one. Maharet, alive. Maharet, the guardian of her mortal family. Maharet, the embodiment of illimitable strength and will. Maharet who had given him, this blond servant, no explanation of the dreams of the twins, but had sent him here instead to do her bidding: save Jessica.

Ah, but she lives, Khayman thought. She lives, and if she lives then in a real way, they both live, the red-haired sisters!

Khayman studied the creature even more intently, probing even deeper. But all he caught now was the fierce protectiveness. Rescue

Jesse, not merely from the danger of the Mother but from this place altogether, where Jesse's eyes would see what no one could ever explain away.

And how he loathed the Mother, this tall, fair being with the posture of a warrior and a priest in one. He loathed that the Mother had disrupted the serenity of his timeless and melancholy existence; loathed that his sad, sweet love for this woman, Jessica, exacerbated the alarm he felt for himself. He knew the extent of the destruction too, that every blood drinker from one end of this continent to the other had been destroyed, save for a precious few, most of whom were under this roof, never dreaming of the fate that threatened them.

He knew as well of the dreams of the twins, but he did not understand them. After all, two redheaded sisters he had never known; only one red-haired beauty ruled his life. And once again Khayman saw Maharet's face, a vagrant image of softened weary human eyes peering from a porcelain mask: *Mael, do not ask me anything more. But do as I tell you.*

Silence. The blood drinker was aware of the surveillance suddenly. With a little jerk of his head he looked around the hall, trying to spot the intruder.

The name had done it, as names so often do. The creature had felt himself known, recognized. And Khayman had recognized the name at once, connecting it with the Mael of Lestat's pages. Undoubtedly they were one and the same—this was the Druid priest who had lured Marius into the sacred grove where the blood god had made him one of its own, and sent him off to Egypt to find the Mother and the Father.

Yes, this was the same Mael. And the creature felt himself recognized and hated it.

After the initial spasm of rage, all thought and emotion vanished. A rather dizzying display of strength, Khayman conceded. He relaxed in the chair. But the creature couldn't find him. Two dozen other white faces he picked out of the crowd, but not Khayman.

Intrepid Jessica had meantime reached her destination. Ducking low, she'd slipped through the heavy-muscled motorcycle riders who claimed the space before the stage as their own, and had risen to take hold of the lip of the wooden platform.

Flash of her silver bracelet in the light. And that might as well have been a tiny dagger to the mental shield of Mael, because his love and his thoughts were wholly visible again for one fluid instant.

This one is going to die, too, if he doesn't become wise, Khayman thought. He'd been schooled by Maharet, no doubt, and perhaps nourished by her powerful blood; yet his heart was undisciplined, and his temper beyond his control, it was obvious.

Then some feet behind Jesse, in the swirling color and noise, Khayman spied another intriguing figure, much younger, yet almost as powerful in his own fashion as the Gaul, Mael.

Khayman sought for the name, but the creature's mind was a perfect blank; not so much as a glimmer of personality escaped from it. A boy he'd been when he died, with straight dark auburn hair, and eyes a little too big for his face. But it was easy, suddenly, to filch the being's name from Daniel, his newborn fledgling who stood beside him. Armand. And the fledgling, Daniel, was scarcely dead. All the tiny molecules of his body were dancing with the demon's invisible chemistry.

Armand immediately attracted Khayman. Surely he was the same Armand of whom Louis and Lestat had both written—the immortal with the form of a youth. And this meant that he was no more than five hundred years old, yet he veiled himself completely. Shrewd, cold he seemed, yet without flair—a stance that required no room in which to display itself. And now, sensing infallibly that he was watched, he turned his large soft brown eyes upward and fixed instantly upon the remote figure of Khayman.

"No harm meant to you or your young one," Khayman whispered, so that his lips might shape and control the thoughts. "No friend to the Mother."

Armand heard but gave no answer. Whatever terror he felt at the sight of one so old, he masked completely. One would have thought he was looking at the wall behind Khayman's head, at the steady stream of laughing and shouting children who poured down the steps from the topmost doorways.

And, quite inevitably, this oddly beguiling little five-hundred-year-old being fixed his eyes upon Mael as the gaunt one felt another irresistible surge of concern for his fragile Jesse.

Khayman understood this being, Armand. He felt he understood him and liked him completely. As their eyes met again, all that had been written of this creature in the two little histories was informed and balanced by the creature's innate simplicity. The loneliness which Khayman had felt in Athens was now very strong.

"Not unlike my own simple soul," Khayman whispered. "You're lost in all this because you know the terrain too well. And that no matter how far you walk, you come again to the same mountains, the same valley."

No response. Of course. Khayman shrugged and smiled. To this one he'd give anything that he could; and guilelessly, he let Armand know it.

Now the question was, how to help them, these two that might have some hope of sleeping the immortal sleep until another sunset. And most important of all, how to reach Maharet, to whom the fierce and distrusting Mael was unstintingly devoted.

To Armand, Khayman said with the slightest movement of his lips: "No friend of the Mother. I told you. And keep with the mortal crowd. She'll pick you out when you step apart. It's that simple."

Armand's face registered no change. Beside him, the fledgling Daniel was happy, glorying in the pageant that surrounded him. He knew no fear, no plans or dreams. And why not? He had this extremely powerful creature to take care of him. He was a damn sight luckier than the rest.

Khayman rose to his feet. It was the loneliness as much as anything else. He would be near to one of these two, Armand or Mael. That's what he had wanted in Athens when all this glorious remembering and knowing had begun. To be near another like himself. To speak, to touch … something.

He moved along the top aisle of the hall, which circled the entire room, save for a margin at the far end behind the stage which belonged to the giant video screen.

He moved with slow human grace, careful not to crush the mortals who pushed against him. And also he wanted this slow progress because he must give Mael the opportunity to see him.

He knew instinctively that if he snuck up on this proud and quarrelsome thing, the insult would never be borne. And so he

proceeded, only picking up his pace when he realized Mael was now aware of his approach.

Mael couldn't hide his fear as Armand could. Mael had never seen a blood drinker of Khayman's age save for Maharet; he was gazing at a potential enemy. Khayman sent the same warm greeting he had sent to Armand—Armand who watched—but nothing in the old warrior's stance changed.

The auditorium was now full and locked; outside children screamed and beat upon the doors. Khayman heard the whine and belch of the police radios.

The Vampire Lestat and his cohorts stood spying upon the hall through the holes in a great serge curtain.

Lestat embraced his companion Louis, and they kissed on the mouth, as the mortal musicians put their arms around both of them.

Khayman paused to feel the passion of the crowd, the very air charged with it.

Jessica had rested her arms on the edge of the platform. She had rested her chin upon the back of her hands. The men behind her, hulking creatures clothed in shiny black leather, shoved her brutally, out of carelessness and drunken exuberance, but they couldn't dislodge her.

Neither could Mael, should he make the attempt.

And something else came clear to Khayman suddenly, as he looked down at her. It was the single word Talamasca. This woman belonged to them; she was part of the order.

Not possible, he thought again, then laughed silently at his own foolish innocence. This was a night of shocks, was it not? Yet it seemed quite incredible that the Talamasca should have survived from the time he had known it centuries before, when he had played with its members and tormented them, and then turned his back on them out of pity for their fatal combination of innocence and ignorance.

Ah, memory was too ghastly a thing. Let his past lives slip into oblivion! He could see the faces of those vagabonds, those secular monks of the Talamasca who had so clumsily pursued him across Europe, recording glimpses of him in great leather-bound books, their quill pens scratching late into the night. Benjamin had been his name in that brief respite of consciousness, and Benjamin the Devil they had

labeled him in their fancy Latin script, sending off crackling parchment epistles with big sloppy wax seals to their superiors in Amsterdam.

It had been a game to him, to steal their letters and add his notes to them; to frighten them; to crawl out from under their beds in the night and grab them by the throats and shake them; it had been fun; and what was not? When the fun stopped, he'd always lost his memory again.

But he had loved them; not exorcists they, or witch-hunting priests, or sorcerers who hoped to chain and control his power. It had even occurred to him once that when it came time to sleep, he would choose the vaults beneath their moldy Motherhouse. For all their meddlesome curiosity, they would never have betrayed him.

And now to think that the order had survived, with the tenacity of the Church of Rome, and this pretty mortal woman with the shining bracelet on her arm, beloved of Maharet and Mael, was one of their special breed. No wonder she had fought her way to the front ranks, as if to the bottom step of the altar.

Khayman drew closer to Mael, but he stopped short of him by several feet, the crowd passing ceaselessly in front of them. This he did out of respect for Mael's apprehension, and the shame the creature felt for being afraid. It was Mael who approached and stood at Khayman's side.

The restless crowd passed them as if they were the wall itself. Mael leant close to Khayman, which in its own way was a greeting, an offering of trust. He looked out over the hall, where no empty seat was visible, and the main floor was a mosaic of flashing colors and glistening hair and tiny upthrust fists. Then he reached out and touched Khayman as if he couldn't prevent himself from doing it. With his fingertips he touched the back of, Khayman's left hand. And Khayman remained still to allow this little exploration.

How many times had Khayman seen such a gesture between immortals, the young one verifying for himself the texture and hardness of the elder's flesh. Hadn't some Christian saint slipped his hand in Christ's wounds because the sight of them had not been sufficient? More mundane comparisons made Khayman smile. It was like two fierce dogs tentatively examining each other.

Far below, Armand remained impassive as he kept his eyes upon the two figures. Surely he saw Mael's sudden disdainful glance, but he did not acknowledge it.

Khayman turned and embraced Mael, and smiled at him. But this merely frightened Mael, and Khayman felt the disappointment heavily. Politely, he stepped away. For a moment he was painfully confused. He stared down at Armand. Beautiful Armand who met his gaze with utter passivity. But it was time to say now what he'd come to say.

"You must make your shield stronger, my friend," he explained to Mael gently. "Don't let your love for that girl expose you. The girl will be perfectly safe from our Queen if you curb your thoughts of the girl's origins and her protector. That name is anathema to the Queen. It always has been."

"And where is the Queen?" Mael asked, his fear surging again, along with the rage that he needed to fight it.

"She's close."

"Yes, but where?"

"I cannot say. She's burnt their tavern house. She hunts the few rogues who haven't come to the hall. She takes her time with it. And this I've learned through the minds of her victims."

Khayman could see the creature shudder. He could see subtle changes in him that marked his ever increasing anger. Well and good. The fear withered in the heat of the anger. But what a basically quarrelsome creature this one was. His mind did not make sophisticated distinctions.

"And why do you give me this warning," demanded Mael, "when she can hear every word we speak to each other?"

"But I don't think that she Can," Khayman replied calmly. "I am of the First Brood, friend. To hear other blood drinkers as we hear mortal men, that curse belongs only to distant cousins. I could not read her mind if she stood on this spot; and mine is closed to her as well, you can be sure of it. And so it was with all our kind through the early generations."

That clearly fascinated the blond giant. So Maharet could not hear the Mother! Maharet had not admitted this to him.

"No," Khayman said, "and the Mother can only know of her through your thoughts, so kindly guard them. Speak to me now in a

human voice, for this city is a wilderness of such voices."

Mael considered, brows puckered in a frown. He glared at Khayman as if he meant to hit him.

"And this will defeat her?"

"Remember," Khayman said, "that excess can be the very opposite of essence." He looked back at Armand as he spoke. "She who hears a multitude of voices may not hear any one voice. And she who would listen closely to one, must shut out the others. You are old enough to know the trick."

Mael didn't answer out loud. But it was clear that he understood. The telepathic gift had always been a curse to him, too, whether he was besieged by the voices of blood drinkers or humans.

Khayman gave a little nod. The telepathic gift. Such nice words for the madness that had come on him eons ago, after years of listening, years of lying motionless, covered with dust in the deep recesses of a forgotten Egyptian tomb, listening to the weeping of the world, without knowledge of himself or his condition.

"Precisely my point, my friend," he said. "And for two thousand years you have fought the voices while our Queen may well have been drowned by them. It seems the Vampire Lestat has outshouted the din; he has, as it were, snapped his fingers in the corner of her eye and brought her to attention. But do not overestimate the creature who sat motionless for so long. It isn't useful to do so."

These ideas startled Mael somewhat. But he saw the logic of them. Below, Armand remained attentive.

"She can't do all things," Khayman said, "whether she herself knows it or not. She was always one to reach for the stars, and then draw back as if in horror."

"How so?" Mael said. Excited, he leaned closer. "What is she really like!" he whispered.

"She was full of dreams and high ideals. She was like Lestat." Khayman shrugged. "The blond one down there who would be good and do good and gather to himself the needy worshipers."

Mael smiled, coldly, cynically.

"But what in the name of hell does she mean to do?" he asked. "So he has waked her with his abominable songs. Why does she destroy us?"

“There’s a purpose, you can be sure of it. With our Queen there has always been a purpose. She could not do the smallest thing without a grand purpose. And you must know we do not really change over time; we are as flowers unfolding, we merely become more nearly ourselves.” He glanced again at Armand. “As for what her purpose may be, I can give you only speculations …”

“Yes, tell me.”

“This concert will take place because Lestat wants it. And when it is finished, she will slaughter more of our kind. But she will leave some, some to serve this purpose, some perhaps to witness.”

Khayman gazed at Armand. Marvelous how his expressionless face conveyed wisdom, while the harried, weary face of Mael did not. And who can say which one understood the most? Mael gave a little bitter laugh.

“To witness?” Mael asked. “I think not. I think she is cruder than that. She spares those whom Lestat loves, it’s that simple.”

This hadn’t occurred to Khayman.

“Ah, yes, think on it,” Mael said, in the same sharply pronounced English. “Louis, Lestat’s companion. Is he not alive? And Gabrielle, the mother of the fiend, she is near at hand, waiting to rendezvous with her son as soon as it is wise to do so. And Armand, down there, whom you so like to look at, it seems Lestat would see him again, so he is alive, and that outcast with him, the one who published the accursed book, the one the others would tear limb from limb if only they guessed …”

“No, there’s more to it than that. There has to be,” Khayman said. “Some of us she can’t kill. And those who go to Marius now, Lestat knows nothing of them but their names.”

Mael’s face changed slightly; it underwent a deep, human flush, as his eyes narrowed. It was clear to Khayman that Mael would have gone to Marius if he could. He would have gone this very night, if only Maharet had come to protect Jessica. He tried now to banish Maharet’s name from his thoughts. He was afraid of Maharet, deeply afraid.

“Ah, yes, you try to hide what you know,” Khayman said. “And this is just what you must reveal to me.”

“But I can’t,” Mael said. The wall had gone up. Impenetrable. “I am

not given answers, only orders, my friend. And my mission is to survive this night, and to take my charge safely out of here."

Khayman meant to press, to demand. But he did neither. He had felt a soft, subtle change in the atmosphere around him, a change so insignificant yet pure that he couldn't call it movement or sound.

She was coming. She was moving close to the hall. He felt himself slip away from his body into pure listening; yes, it was she. All the sounds of the night rose to confuse him, yet he caught it; a low irreducible sound which she could not veil, the sound of her breathing, of the beat of her heart, of a force moving through space at tremendous and unnatural speed, causing the inevitable tumult amid the visible and the invisible.

Mael sensed it; so did Armand. Even the young one beside Armand heard it, though so many other young ones did not. Even some of the more finely tuned mortals seemed to feel it and to be distracted by it.

"I must go, friend," Khayman said. "Remember my advice." Impossible to say more now.

She was very close. Undoubtedly she scanned; she listened.

He felt the first irresistible urge to see her, to scan for the minds of those hapless souls out there in the night whose eyes might have passed over her.

"Good-bye, friend," he said. "It's no good for me to be near you."

Mael looked at him in confusion. Below, Armand gathered Daniel to him and made for the edge of the crowd.

The hall went dark suddenly; and for one split second Khayman thought it was her magic, that some grotesque and vengeful judgment would now be made.

But the mortal children all around him knew the ritual. The concert was about to begin! The hall went mad with shrieks, and cheers, and stomping. Finally it became a great collective roar. He felt the floor tremble.

Tiny flames appeared as mortals struck their matches, ignited their chemical lighters. And a drowsy beautiful illumination once again revealed the thousands upon thousands of moving forms. The screams were a chorus from all sides.

"I am no coward," Mael whispered suddenly, as if he could not remain silent. He took hold of Khayman's arm, then let it go as if the

hardness of it repelled him.

"I know," Khayman said.

"Help me. Help Jessica."

"Don't speak her name again. Stay away from her as I've told you. You are conquered again, Druid. Remember? Time to fight with cunning, not rage. Stay with the mortal herd. I will help you when and if I can."

There was so much more he wanted to say! Tell me where Maharet is! But it was too late now for that. He turned away and moved along the aisle swiftly until he came to an open place above a long narrow flight of cement stairs.

Below on the darkened stage, the mortal musicians appeared, darting over wires and speakers to gather their instruments from the floor.

The Vampire Lestat came striding through the curtain, his black cloak flaring around him, as he moved to the very front of the platform. Not three feet from Jesse he stood with microphone in hand.

The crowd had gone into ecstasies. Clapping, hooting, howling, it was a noise such as Khayman had never actually heard. He laughed in spite of himself at the stupid frenzy, at the tiny smiling figure down there who loved it utterly, who was laughing even as Khayman laughed.

Then in a great white flash, light flooded the small stage. Khayman stared, not at the small figures strutting in their finery, but at the giant video screen that rose behind them to the very roof. The living image of the Vampire Lestat, thirty feet in height, blazed before Khayman. The creature smiled; he lifted his arms, and shook his mane of yellow hair; he threw back his head and howled.

The crowd was on its feet in delirium; the very structure rumbled; but it was the howl that filled all ears. The Vampire Lestat's powerful voice swallowed every other sound in the auditorium.

Khayman closed his eyes. In the heart of the monstrous cry of the Vampire Lestat, he listened again for the sound of the Mother, but he could no longer find it.

"My Queen," he whispered, searching, scanning, hopeless though it was. Did she stand up there on some grassy slope listening to the music of her troubadour? He felt the soft damp wind and saw the gray

starless sky as random mortals felt and saw these things. The lights of San Francisco, its spangled hills and glowing towers, these were the beacons of the urban night, as terrible suddenly as the moon or the drift of the galaxies.

He closed his eyes. He envisioned her again as she'd been in the Athens street watching the tavern burn with her children in it; her tattered cape had hung loose over her shoulders, the hood thrown back from her plaited hair. Ah, the Queen of Heaven she'd seemed, as she had once so loved to be known, presiding over centuries of litany. Her eyes had been shining and empty in the electric light; her mouth soft, guileless. The sheer sweetness of her face had been infinitely beautiful.

The vision carried him back now over the centuries to a dim and awful moment, when he'd come, a mortal man, heart pounding to hear her will. His Queen, now cursed and consecrated to the moon, the demon in her demanding blood, his Queen who would not allow even the bright lamps to be near to her. How agitated she had been, pacing the mud floor, the colored walls around her full of silent painted sentinels.

"These twins," she'd said, "these evil sisters, they have spoken such abominations."

"Have mercy," he had pleaded. "They meant no harm, I swear they tell the truth. Let them go again, Your Highness. They cannot change it now."

Oh, such compassion he had felt for all of them! The twins, and his afflicted sovereign.

"Ah, but you see, we must put it to the test, their revolting lies," she had said. "You must come closer, my devoted steward, you who have always served me with such devotion—"

"My Queen, my beloved Queen, what do you want of me?"

And with the same lovely expression on her face, she had lifted her icy hands to touch his throat, to hold him fast suddenly with a strength that terrified him. In shock, he'd watched her eyes go blank, her mouth open. The two tiny fang teeth he'd seen, as she rose on tiptoe with the eerie grace of nightmare. *Not me. You would not do this to me! My Queen, I am Khayman!*

He should have perished long before now, as so many blood

drinkers had afterwards. Gone without a trace, like the nameless multitudes dissolved within the earth of all lands and nations. But he had not perished. And the twins—at least one—had lived on also.

Did she know it? Did she know those terrible dreams? Had they come to her from the minds of all the others who had received them? Or had she traveled the night around the world, dreamless, and without cease, and bent upon one task, since her resurrection?

They live, my Queen, they live on in the one if not in the two together. *Remember the old prophecy!* If only she could hear his voice!

He opened his eyes. He was back again in the moment, with this ossified thing that was his body. And the rising music saturated him with its remorseless rhythm. It pounded against his ears. The flashing lights blinded him.

He turned his back and put his hand against the wall. Never had he been so engulfed by sound. He felt himself losing consciousness, but Lestat's voice called him back.

With his fingers splayed across his eyes, Khayman looked down at the fiery white square of the stage. Behold the devil dance and sing with such obvious joy. It touched Khayman's heart in spite of himself.

Lestat's powerful tenor needed no electric amplification. And even the immortals lost among their prey were singing with him, it was so contagious, this passion. Everywhere he looked Khayman saw them caught up, mortal and immortal alike. Bodies twisted in time with the bodies on the stage. Voices rose; the hall swayed with one wave of movement after another.

The giant face of Lestat expanded on the video screen as the camera moved in upon it. The blue eye fixed upon Khayman and winked.

"WHY DON'T YOU KILL ME! YOU KNOW WHAT I AM!"

Lestat's laughter rose above the twanging scream of the guitars.

"DON'T YOU KNOW EVIL WHEN YOU SEE IT?"

Ah, such a belief in goodness, in heroism. Khayman could see it even in the creature's eyes, a dark gray shadow there of tragic need. Lestat threw back his head and roared again; he stamped his feet and howled; he looked to the rafters as if they were the firmament.

Khayman forced himself to move; he had to escape. He made his way clumsily to the door, as if suffocating in the deafening sound. Even his sense of balance had been affected. The blasting music came

after him into the stairwell, but at least he was sheltered from the flashing lights. Leaning against the wall, he tried to clear his vision.

Smell of blood. Hunger of so many blood drinkers in the hall. And the throb of the music through the wood and the plaster.

He moved down the steps, unable to hear his own feet on the concrete, and sank down finally on a deserted landing. He wrapped his arms around his knees and bowed his head.

The music was like the music of old, when all songs had been the songs of the body, and the songs of the mind had not yet been invented.

He saw himself dancing; he saw the King—the mortal king he had so loved—turn and leap into the air; he heard the beat of the drums; the rise of the pipes; the King put the beer in Khayman's hand. The table sagged beneath its wealth of roasted game and glistening fruit, its steaming loaves of bread. The Queen sat in her golden chair, immaculate and serene, a mortal woman with a tiny cone of scented wax atop her elaborate hair, melting slowly in the heat to perfume her plaited tresses.

Then someone had put the coffin in his hand; the tiny coffin that was passed now among those who feasted; the little reminder: Eat. Drink. For Death awaits all of us.

He held it tight; should he pass it now to the King?

He felt the King's lips against his face suddenly. "Dance, Khayman. Drink. Tomorrow we march north to slay the last of the flesh eaters." The King didn't even look at the tiny coffin as he took it; he slipped it into the Queen's hands and she, without looking down, gave it to another.

The last of the flesh eaters. How simple it had all seemed; how good. Until he had seen the twins kneeling before that altar.

The great rattle of drums drowned out Lestat's voice. Mortals passed Khayman, hardly noticing him huddled there; a blood drinker ran quickly by without the slightest heed of him.

The voice of Lestat rose again, singing of the Children of Darkness, hidden beneath the cemetery called Les Innocents in superstition and fear.

Into the light

We've come
My Brothers and Sisters!

KILL US!
My Brothers and Sisters!

Sluggishly, Khayman rose. He was staggering, but he moved on, downward until he had come out in the lobby where the noise was just a little muted, and he rested there, across from the inner doors, in a cooling draft of fresh air.

Calm was returning to him, but only slowly, when he realized that two mortal men had paused nearby and were staring at him as he stood against the wall with his hands in his pockets, his head bowed.

He saw himself suddenly as they saw him. He sensed their apprehension, mingled with a sudden irrepressible sense of victory. Men who had known about his kind, men who had lived for a moment such as this, yet dreaded it, and never truly hoped for it.

Slowly, he looked up. They stood some twenty feet away from him, near to the cluttered concession stand, as if it could hide them—proper British gentlemen. They were old, in fact, learned, with heavily creased faces and prim formal attire. Utterly out of place here their fine gray overcoats, the bit of starched collar showing, the gleaming knot of silk tie. They seemed explorers from another world among the flamboyant youth that moved restlessly to and fro, thriving on the barbaric noise and broken chatter.

And with such natural reticence they stared; as if they were too polite to be afraid. Elders of the Talamasca looking for Jessica.

Know us? Yes, you do of course. No harm. Don't care.

His silent words drove the one called David Talbot back a pace. The man's breathing became hurried, and there was a sudden dampness on his forehead and upper lip. Yet such elegant composure. David Talbot narrowed his eyes as if he would not be dazzled by what he saw; as if he would see the tiny dancing molecules in the brightness.

How small it seemed suddenly the span of a human life; look at this fragile man, for whom education and refinement have only increased all risks. So simple to alter the fabric of his thought, his expectations. Should Khayman tell them where Jesse was? Should he meddle? It

would make no difference ultimately.

He sensed now that they were afraid to go or to remain, that he had them fixed almost as if he'd hypnotized them. In a way, it was respect that kept them there, staring at him. It seemed he had to offer something, if only to end this awful scrutiny.

Don't go to her. You'd be fools if you did. She has others like me now to look after her. Best leave here. I would if I were you.

Now, how would all this read in the archives of the Talamasca? Some night he might find out. To what modern places had they removed their old documents and treasures?

Benjamin, the Devil. That's who I am. Don't you know me? He smiled at himself. He let his head droop, staring at the floor. He had not known he possessed this vanity. And suddenly he did not care what this moment meant to them.

He thought listlessly of those olden times in France when he had played with their kind. "Allow us but to speak to you!" they'd pleaded. Dusty scholars with pale eternally red-rimmed eyes and worn velvet clothing, so unlike these two fine gentlemen, for whom the occult was a matter of science, not philosophy. The hopelessness of that time suddenly frightened him; the hopelessness of this time was equally frightening.

Go away.

Without looking up, he saw that David Talbot had nodded. Politely, he and his companion withdrew. Glancing back over their shoulders, they hurried down the curve of the lobby, and into the concert.

Khayman was alone again, with the rhythm of the music coming from the doorway, alone and wondering why he had come here, what it was he wanted; wishing that he could forget again; that he was in some lovely place full of warm breezes and mortals who didn't know what he was, and twinkling electric lights beneath the faded clouds, and flat endless city pavements to walk until morning.

Jesse

"Let me alone, you son of a bitch!" Jesse kicked the man beside her, the one who had hooked his arm around her waist and lifted her away from the stage. "You bastard!" Doubled over with the pain in his foot, he was no match for her sudden shove. He toppled and went down.

Five times she'd been swept back from the stage. She ducked and pushed through the little cluster that had taken her place, sliding against their black leather flanks as if she were a fish and rising up again to grab the apron of unpainted wood, one hand taking hold of the strong synthetic cloth that decorated it, and twisting it into a rope.

In the flashing lights she saw the Vampire Lestat leap high into the air and come down without a palpable sound on the boards, his voice rising again without benefit of the mike to fill the auditorium, his guitar players prancing around him like imps.

The blood ran in tiny rivulets down his white face, as if from Christ's Crown of Thorns, his long blond hair flying out as he turned full circle, his hand ripping at his shirt, tearing it open down his chest, the black tie loose and falling. His pale crystalline blue eyes were glazed and shot with blood as he screamed the unimportant lyrics.

Jesse felt her heart knocking again as she stared up at him, at the rocking of his hips, the tight cloth of the black pants revealing the powerful muscles of his thighs. He leapt again, rising effortlessly, as if he would ascend to the very ceiling of the hall.

Yes, you see it, and there is no mistake! No other explanation!

She wiped at her nose. She was crying again. But touch him, damn it, you have to! In a daze she watched him finish the song, stomping his foot to the last three resounding notes, as the musicians danced back and forth, taunting, tossing their hair over their heads, their voices lost in his as they struggled to meet his pace.

God, how he loved it! There was not the slightest pretense. He was bathed in the adoration he was receiving. He was soaking it up as if it were blood.

And now as he went into the frenzied opening of another song, he ripped off the black velvet cloak, gave it a great twirl, and sent it

flying into the audience. The crowd wailed, shifted. Jesse felt a knee in her back, a boot scraping her heel, but this was her chance, as the guards jumped down off the boards to stop the melee.

With both hands pressed down hard on the wood, she sprang up and, over on her belly and onto her feet. She ran right towards the dancing figure whose eyes suddenly looked into hers.

"Yes, you! You!" she cried out. In the corner of her eye was the approaching guard. She threw her full weight at the Vampire Lestat. Shutting her eyes, she locked her arms around his waist. She felt the cold shock of his silky chest against her face, she tasted the blood suddenly on her lip!

"Oh, God, real!" she whispered. Her heart was going to burst, but she hung on. Yes, Mael's skin, like this, and Maharet's skin, like this, and all of them. Yes, this! Real, not human. Always. And it was all here in her arms and she knew and it was too late for them to stop her now!

Her left hand went up, and caught a thick tangle of his hair, and as she opened her eyes, she saw him smiling down at her, saw the poreless gleaming white skin, and the tiny fang teeth.

"You devil!" she whispered. She was laughing like a mad woman, crying and laughing.

"Love you, Jessica," he whispered back at her, smiling at her as if he were teasing her, the wet blond hair tumbling down into his eyes.

Astonished, she felt his arm around her, and then he lifted her on his hip, swinging her in a circle. The screaming musicians were a blur, the lights were violent streaks of white, red. She was moaning; but she kept looking up at him, at his eyes, yes, real. Desperately she hung on, for it seemed he meant to throw her high into the air over the heads of the crowd. And then as he set her down and bowed his head, his hair falling against her cheek, she felt his mouth close on hers.

The throbbing music went dim as if she'd been plunged into the sea. She felt him breathe into her, sigh against her, his smooth fingers sliding up her neck. Her breasts were pressed against the beat of his heart; and a voice was speaking to her, purely, the way a voice had long ago, a voice that knew her, a voice that understood her questions and knew how they must be answered.

Evil, Jesse. As you have always known.

Hands pulled her back. Human hands. She was being separated from him. She screamed.

Bewildered, he stared at her. He was reaching deep, deep into his dreams for something he only faintly remembered. The funeral feast; the red-haired twins kneeling on either side of the altar. But it was no more than a split second; then gone; he was baffled; his smile flashed again, impersonal, like one of the lights that were constantly blinding her. "Beautiful Jesse!" he said, his hand lifted as if in farewell. They were carrying her backwards away from him, off the stage.

She was laughing when they set her down.

Her white shirt was smeared with blood. Her hands were covered with it—pale streaks of salty blood. She felt she knew the taste of it. She threw back her head and laughed; and it was so curious not to be able to hear it, only to feel it, to feel the shudder running through her, to know she was crying and laughing at the same time. The guard said something rough to her, something crude, threatening. But that didn't matter.

The crowd had her again. It just swallowed her, tumbling against her, driving her out of the center. A heavy shoe crushed her right foot. She stumbled, and turned, and let herself be pushed along ever more violently, towards the doors.

Didn't matter now. *She knew*. She knew it all. Her head spun. She could not have stood upright if it were not for the shoulders knocking against her. And never had she felt such wondrous abandon. Never had she felt such release.

The crazy cacophonous music went on; faces flickered and disappeared in a wash of colored light. She smelled the marijuana, the beer. Thirst. Yes, something cold to drink. Something cold. So thirsty. She lifted her hand again and licked at the salt and the blood. Her body trembled, vibrated, the way it so often did on the verge of sleep. A soft delicious tremor that meant that dreams were coming. She licked at the blood again and closed her eyes.

Quite suddenly she felt herself pass into an open place. No one shoving her. She looked up and saw that she had come to the doorway, to the slick ramp that led some ten feet into the lobby below. The crowd was behind her, above her. And she could rest here. She was all right.

She ran her hand along the greasy wall, stepping over the crush of paper cups, a fallen wig with cheap yellow curls. She lay her head back suddenly and merely rested, the ugly light from the lobby shining in her eyes. The taste of the blood was on the tip of her tongue. It seemed she was going to cry again, and it was a perfectly fine thing to do. For the moment, there was no past or present, no necessity, and all the world was changed, from the simplest things to the grandest. She was floating, as if in the center of the most seductive state of peace and acceptance that she had ever known. Oh, if only she could tell David these things; if only somehow she could share this great and overwhelming secret.

Something touched her. Something hostile to her. Reluctantly she turned and saw a hulking figure at her side. *What?* She struggled to see it clearly.

Bony limbs, black hair slicked back, red paint on the twisted ugly mouth, but the skin, the same skin. And the fang teeth. Not human. One of them!

Talamasca?

It came at her like a hiss. It struck her in the chest. Instinctively her arms rose, crossing over her breasts, fingers locking on her shoulders.

Talamasca?

It was soundless yet deafening in its rage.

She moved to back away, but his hand caught her, fingers biting into her neck. She tried to scream as she was lifted off her feet.

Then she was flying across the lobby and she was screaming until her head slammed into the wall.

Blackness. She saw the pain. It flashed yellow and then white as it traveled down her backbone and then spread out as if into a million branches in her limbs. Her body went numb. She hit the floor with another shocking pain in her face and in the open palms of her hands and then she rolled over on her back.

She couldn't see. Maybe her eyes were closed, but the funny thing was, if they were, she couldn't open them. She heard voices, people shouting. A whistle blew, or was it the clang of a bell? There was a thunderous noise, but that was the crowd inside applauding. People near her argued.

Someone close to her ear said:

"Don't touch her. Her neck's broken!"

Broken? Can you live when your neck is broken?

Someone laid a hand on her forehead. But she couldn't really feel it so much as a tingling sensation, as if she were very cold, walking in snow, and all real feeling had left her. *Can't see.*

"Listen, honey." A young man's voice. One of those voices you could hear in Boston or New Orleans or New York City. Firefighter, cop, saver of the injured. "We're taking care of you, honey. The ambulance is on its way. Now lie still, honey, don't you worry."

Someone touching her breast. No, taking the cards out of her pocket. Jessica Miriam Reeves. Yes.

She stood beside Maharet and they were looking up at the giant map with all the tiny lights. And she understood. Jesse born of Miriam, who was born of Alice, who was born of Carlotta, who was born of Jane Marie, who was born of Anne, who was born of Janet Belle, who was born of Elizabeth, who was born of Louise, who was born of Frances, who was born of Frieda, who was born of—

"If you will allow me, please, we are her friends—"

David.

They were lifting her; she heard herself scream, but she had not meant to scream. She saw the screen again and the great tree of names. "Frieda born of Dagmar, born of …"

"Steady now, steady! Goddamn it!"

The air changed; it went cool and moist; she felt the breeze moving over her face; then all feeling left her hands and feet completely. She could feel her eyelids but not move them.

Maharet was talking to her. "… came out of Palestine, down into Mesopotamia and then up slowly through Asia Minor and into Russia and then into Eastern Europe. Do you see?"

This was either a hearse or an ambulance and it seemed too quiet to be the latter, and the siren, though steady, was too far away. What had happened to David? He wouldn't have let her go, unless she was dead. But then how could David have been there? David had told her nothing could induce him to come. David wasn't here. She must have imagined it. And the odd thing was, Miriam wasn't here either. "Holy Mary, Mother of God … now and at the hour of our death.…"

She listened: they were speeding through the city; she felt them turn

the corner; but where was her body? She couldn't feel it. Broken neck. That meant surely that one had to be dead.

What was that, the light she could see through the jungle? A river? It seemed too wide to be a river. How to cross it. But it wasn't Jesse who was walking through the jungle, and now along the bank of the river. It was somebody else. Yet she could see the hands out in front of her, moving aside the vines and the wet sloppy leaves, as if they were her hands. She could see red hair when she looked down, red hair in long curling tangles, full of bits of leaf and earth.…

"Can you hear me, honey? We've got you. We're taking care of you. Your friends are in the car behind us. Now don't you worry."

He was saying more. But she had lost the thread. She couldn't hear him, only the tone of it, the tone of loving care. Why did he feel so sorry for her? He didn't even know her. Did he understand that it wasn't her blood all over her shirt? Her hands? *Guilty*. Lestat had tried to tell her it was evil, but that had been so unimportant to her, so impossible to relate to the whole. It wasn't that she didn't care about what was good and what was right; it was that this was bigger for the moment. *Knowing*. And he'd been talking as if she meant to do something and she hadn't meant to do anything at all.

That's why dying was probably just fine. If only Maharet would understand. And to think, David was with her, in the car behind them. David knew some of the story, anyway, and they would have a file on her: Reeves, Jessica. And it would be more evidence. "One of our devoted members, definitely the result of … most dangerous … must not under any circumstances attempt a sighting.…"

They were moving her again. Cool air again, and smells rising of gasoline and ether. She knew that just on the other side of this numbness, this darkness, there was terrible pain and it was best to lie very still and not try to go there. Let them carry you along; let them move the gurney down the hallway.

Someone crying. A little girl.

"Can you hear me, Jessica? I want you to know that you're in the hospital and that we are doing everything we can for you. Your friends are outside. David Talbot and Aaron Lightner. We've told them that you must lie very still.…"

Of course. When your neck is broken you are either dead or you die

if you move. That was it. Years ago in a hospital she had seen a young girl with a broken neck. She remembered now. And the girl's body had been tied to a huge aluminum frame. Every now and then a nurse would move the frame to change the girl's position. Will you do that to me?

He was talking again but this time he was farther away. She walked a little faster through the jungle, to get closer, to hear over the sound of the river. He was saying.…

"… of course we can do all that, we can run those tests, of course, but you must understand what I'm saying, this situation is terminal. The back of the skull is completely crushed. You can see the brain. And the obvious injury to the brain is enormous. Now, in a few hours the brain will begin to swell, if we even have a few hours.…"

Bastard, you killed me. You threw me against the wall. If I could move anything—my eyelids, my lips. But I'm trapped inside here. I have no body anymore yet I'm trapped in here! When I was little, I used to think it would be like this, death. You'd be trapped in your head in the grave, with no eyes to see and no mouth to scream. And years and years would pass.

Or you roamed the twilight realm with the pale ghosts; thinking you were alive when you were really dead. Dear God, I have to know when I'm dead. I have to know when it's begun!

Her lips. There was the faintest sensation. Something moist, warm. Something parting her lips. But there's no one here, is there? They were out in the hallway, and the room was empty. She would have known if someone was here. Yet now she could taste it, the warm fluid flowing into her mouth.

What is it? What are you giving me? I don't want to go under.

Sleep, my beloved.

I don't want to. I want to feel it when I die. I want to know!

But the fluid was filling her mouth, and she was swallowing. The muscles of her throat were alive. Delicious the taste of it, the saltiness of it. She knew this taste! She knew this lovely, tingling sensation. She sucked harder. She could feel the skin of her face come alive, and the air stirring around her. She could feel the breeze moving through the room. A lovely warmth was moving down her spine. It was moving through her legs and her arms, taking exactly the path the pain had

taken, and all her limbs were coming back.

Sleep, beloved.

The back of her head tingled; and the tingling moved through the roots of her hair.

Her knees were bruised but her legs weren't hurt and she'd be able to walk again, and she could feel the sheet under her hand. She wanted to reach up, but it was too soon for that, too soon to move.

Besides she was being lifted, carried.

And it was best to sleep now. Because if this was death … well, it was just fine. The voices she could barely hear, the men arguing, threatening, they didn't matter now. It seemed David was calling out to her. But what did David want her to do? To die? The doctor was threatening to call the police. The police couldn't do anything now. That was almost funny.

Down and down the stairs they went. Lovely cold air.

The sound of the traffic grew louder; a bus roaring past. She had never liked these sounds before but now they were like the wind itself, that pure. She was being rocked again, gently, as if in a cradle. She felt the car move forward with a sudden lurch, and then the smooth easy momentum. Miriam was there and Miriam wanted Jesse to look at her, but Jesse was too tired now.

"I don't want to go, Mother."

"But Jesse. Please. It's not too late. You can still come!" Like David calling. "Jessica."

Daniel

About halfway through, Daniel understood. The white-faced brothers and sisters would circle each other, eye each other, even threaten each other all during the concert, but nobody would do anything. The rule was too hard and fast: leave no evidence of what we are—not victims, not a single cell of our vampiric tissue.

Lestat was to be the only kill and that was to be done most carefully. Mortals were not to see the scythes unless it was unavoidable. Snatch the bastard when he tried to take his leave, that was the scheme; dismember him before the cognoscenti only. That is, unless he resisted, in which case he must die before his fans, and the body would have to be destroyed completely.

Daniel laughed and laughed. Imagine Lestat allowing such a thing to happen.

Daniel laughed in their spiteful faces. Pallid as orchids, these vicious souls who filled the hall with their simmering outrage, their envy, their greed. You would have thought they hated Lestat if for no other reason than his flamboyant beauty.

Daniel had broken away from Armand finally. Why not?

Nobody could hurt him, not even the glowing stone figure he'd seen in the shadows, the one so hard and so old he looked like the Golem of legend. What an eerie thing that was, that stone one staring down at the wounded mortal woman who lay with her neck broken, the one with the red hair who looked like the twins in the dream. And probably some stupid human being had done that to her, broken her neck like that. And the blond vampire in the buckskin, pushing past them to reach the scene, he had been an awe-inspiring sight as well, with the hardened veins bulging on his neck and on the backs of his hands when he reached the poor broken victim. Armand had watched the men take the red-haired woman away with the most unusual expression on his face, as if he should somehow intervene; or maybe it was only that the Golem thing, standing idly by, made him wary. Finally, he'd shoved Daniel back into the singing crowd. But there was no need to fear. It was sanctuary for *them* in this place, this cathedral

of sound and light.

And Lestat was Christ on the cathedral cross. How describe his overwhelming and irrational authority? His face would have been cruel if it hadn't been for the childlike rapture and exuberance. Pumping his fist into the air, he bawled, pleaded, roared at the powers that be as he sang of his downfall—Lelio, the boulevard actor turned into a creature of night against his will!

His soaring tenor seemed to leave his body utterly as he recounted his defeats, his resurrections, the thirst inside him which no measure of blood could ever quench. "Am I not the devil in you all!" he cried, not to the moonflower monsters in the crowd but to the mortals who adored him.

And even Daniel was screaming, bellowing, leaping off his feet as he cried in agreement, though the words meant nothing finally; it was merely the raw force of Lestat's defiance. Lestat cursed heaven on behalf of all who had ever been outcasts, all who had ever known violation, and then turned, in guilt and malice, on their own kind.

It seemed to Daniel at the highest moments as though it were an omen that he should find immortality on the eve of this great Mass. The Vampire Lestat was God; or the nearest thing he had ever known to it. The giant on the video screen gave his benediction to all that Daniel had ever desired.

How could the others resist? Surely the fierceness of their intended victim made him all the more inviting. The final message behind all Lestat's lyrics was simple: Lestat had the gift that had been promised to each of them; Lestat was unkillable. He devoured the suffering forced upon him and emerged all the stronger. To join with him was to live forever:

This is my Body. This is my Blood.

Yet the hate boiled among the vampire brothers and sisters. As the concert came to a close, Daniel felt it keenly—an odor rising from the crowd—an expanding hiss beneath the strum of the music.

Kill the god. Tear him limb from limb. Let the mortal worshipers do as they have always done—mourn for him who was meant to die. "Go, the Mass is ended."

The houselights went on. The fans stormed the wooden stage, tearing down the black serge curtain to follow the fleeing musicians.

Armand grabbed Daniel's arm. "Out the side door," he said. "Our only chance is to get to him quickly."

Khayman

It was just as he had expected. She struck out at the first of those who struck at him. Lestat had come through the back door, Louis at his side, and made a dash for his black Porsche when the assassins set upon him. It seemed a rude circle sought to close, but at once the first, with scythe raised, went up in flames. The crowd panicked, terrified children stampeding in all directions. Another immortal assailant was suddenly on fire. And then another.

Khayman slipped back against the wall as the clumsy humans hurtled past him. He saw a tall elegant female blood drinker slice unnoticed through the mob, and slide behind the wheel of Lestat's car, calling to Louis and Lestat to join her. It was Gabrielle, the fiend's mother. And logically enough the lethal fire did not harm her. There wasn't a particle of fear in her cold blue eyes as she readied the vehicle with swift, decisive gestures.

Lestat meantime turned around and around in a rage. Maddened, robbed of the battle, he finally climbed into the car only because the others forced him to do so.

And as the Porsche plowed viciously through the rushing youngsters, blood drinkers burst into flame everywhere. In a horrid silent chorus, their cries rose, their frantic curses, their final questions.

Khayman covered his face. The Porsche was halfway to the gates before the crowd forced it to stop. Sirens screamed; voices roared commands; children had fallen with broken limbs. Mortals cried in misery and confusion.

Get to Armand, Khayman thought. But what was the use? He saw them burning everywhere he looked in great writhing plumes of orange and blue flame that changed suddenly to white in their heat as they released the charred clothes which fell to the pavements. How could he come between the fire and Armand? How could he save the young one, Daniel?

He looked up at the distant hills, at a tiny figure glowing against the dark sky, unnoticed by all who screamed and fled and cried for help around him.

Suddenly he felt the heat; he felt it touch him as it had in Athens. He felt it dance about his face, he felt his eyes watering. Steadily he regarded the distant tiny source. And then for reasons that he might never himself understand, he chose not to drive back the fire, but rather to see what it might do to him. Every fiber of his being said, Give it back. Yet he remained motionless, washed of thought, and feeling the sweat drip from him. The fire circled him, embraced him. And then it moved away, leaving him alone, cold, and wounded beyond his wildest imagining. Quietly he whispered a prayer: *May the twins destroy you.*

Daniel

“Fire!” Daniel caught the rank greasy stench just as he saw the flames themselves breaking out here and there all through the multitude. What protection was the crowd now? Like tiny explosions the fires were, as groups of frantic teenagers stumbled to get away from them, and ran in senseless circles, colliding helplessly with one another.

The sound. Daniel heard it again. It was moving above them. Armand pulled him back against the building. It was useless. They could not get to Lestat. And they had no cover. Dragging Daniel after him, Armand retreated into the hall again. A pair of terrified vampires ran past the entrance, then exploded into tiny conflagrations.

In horror, Daniel watched the skeletons glowing as they melted within the pale yellow blaze. Behind them in the deserted auditorium a fleeing figure was suddenly caught in the same ghastly flames. Twisting, turning, he collapsed on the cement floor, smoke rising from his empty clothing. A pool of grease formed on the cement, then dried up even as Daniel stared at it.

Out into the fleeing mortals, they ran again, this time towards the distant front gates over yards and yards of asphalt.

And suddenly they were traveling so fast that Daniel’s feet had left the ground. The world was nothing but a smear of color. Even the piteous cries of the frightened fans were stretched, softened. Abruptly they stopped at the gates, just as Lestat’s black Porsche raced out of the parking lot, past them, and onto the avenue. Within seconds it was gone, like a bullet traveling south towards the freeway.

Armand made no attempt to follow it; he seemed not even to see it. He stood near the gatepost looking back over the heads of the crowd, beyond the curved roof of the hall to the distant horizon. The eerie telepathic noise was deafening now. It swallowed every other sound in the world; it swallowed every sensation.

Daniel couldn’t keep his hands from going to his ears, couldn’t keep his knees from buckling. He felt Armand draw close. But he could no longer see. He knew that if it was meant to happen it would be now, yet still he couldn’t feel the fear; still he couldn’t believe in his own

death; he was paralyzed with wonder and confusion.

Gradually the sound faded. Numb, he felt his vision clear; he saw the great red shape of a lumbering ladder truck approach, the firemen shouting for him to move out of the gateway. The siren came as if from another world, an invisible needle through his temples.

Armand was gently pulling him out of the path. Frightened people thundered past as if driven by a wind. He felt himself fall. But Armand caught him. Into the warm crush of mortals, outside the fence they passed, slipping among those who peered through the chain mesh at the melee.

Hundreds still fled. Sirens, sour and discordant, drowned out their cries. One fire engine after another roared up to the gates, to nudge its way through dispersing mortals. But these sounds were thin and distant, dulled still by the receding supernatural noise. Armand clung to the fence, his eyes closed, his forehead pressed against the metal. The fence shuddered, as if it alone could hear the thing as they heard it.

It was gone.

An icy quiet descended. The quiet of shock, emptiness. Though the pandemonium continued, it did not touch them.

They were alone, the mortals loosening, milling, moving away. And the air carried those lingering preternatural cries like burning tinsel again; more dying, but where?

Across the avenue he moved at Armand′s side. Unhurried. And down a dark side street they made their way, past faded stucco houses and shabby corner stores, past sagging neon signs and over cracked pavements.

On and on, they walked. The night grew cold and still around them. The sound of the sirens was remote, almost mournful.

As they came to a broad garish boulevard, a great lumbering trolleybus appeared, flooded with a greenish light. Like a ghost it seemed, proceeding towards them, through the emptiness and the silence. Only a few forlorn mortal passengers peered from its smeared and dirty windows. The driver drove as if in his sleep.

Armand raised his eyes, wearily, as if only to watch it pass. And to Daniel′s amazement the bus came to a halt for them.

They climbed aboard together, ignoring the little coin box, and sank

down side by side on the long leather bench seat. The driver never turned his head from the dark windshield before him. Armand sat back against the window. Dully, he stared at the black rubber floor. His hair was tousled, his cheek smudged with soot. His lower lip protruded ever so slightly. Lost in thought, he seemed utterly unconscious of himself.

Daniel looked at the lackluster mortals: the prune-faced woman with a slit for a mouth who looked at him angrily; the drunken man, with no neck, who snored on his chest; and the small-headed teenage woman with the stringy hair and the sores at the corners of her mouth who held a giant toddler on her lap with skin like bubblegum. Why, something was horribly wrong with each of them. And there, the dead man on the back seat, with his eyes half mast and the dried spit on his chin. Did nobody know he was dead? The urine stank as it dried beneath him.

Daniel's own hands look dead, lurid. Like a corpse with one live arm, the driver seemed, as he turned the wheel. Was this a hallucination? The bus to hell?

No. Only a trolleybus like a million he had taken in his lifetime, on which the weary and the down-and-out rode the city's streets through the late hours. He smiled suddenly, foolishly. He was going to start laughing, thinking of the dead man back there, and these people just riding along, and the way the light made everyone look, but then a sense of dread returned.

The silence unnerved him. The slow rocking of the bus unnerved him; the parade of dingy houses beyond the windows unnerved him; the sight of Armand's listless face and empty stare was unbearable.

"Will she come back for us?" he asked. He could not endure it any longer.

"She knew we were there," Armand said, eyes dull, voice low. "She passed us over."

Khayman

He had retreated to the high grassy slope, with the cold Pacific beyond it.

It was like a panorama now; death at a distance, lost in the lights, the vapor-thin wails of preternatural souls interwoven with the darker, richer voices of the human city.

The fiends had pursued Lestat, forcing the Porsche over the edge of the freeway. Unhurt, Lestat had emerged from the wreck, spoiling for battle; but the fire had struck again to scatter or destroy those who surrounded him.

Finally left alone with Louis and Gabrielle, he had agreed to retreat, uncertain of who or what had protected him.

And unbeknownst to the trio, the Queen pursued their enemies for them.

Over the roofs, her power moved, destroying those who had fled, those who had tried to hide, those who had lingered near fallen companions in confusion and anguish.

The night stank of their burning, these wailing phantoms that left nothing on the empty pavement but their ruined clothes. Below, under the arc lamps of the abandoned parking lots, the lawmen searched in vain for bodies; the firefighters looked in vain for those to assist. The mortal youngsters cried piteously.

Small wounds were treated; the crazed were narcotized and taken away gently. So efficient the agencies of this plentiful time. Giant hoses cleaned the lots. They washed away the scorched rags of the burnt ones.

Tiny beings down there argued and swore that they had witnessed these immolations. But no evidence remained. She had destroyed completely her victims.

And now she moved on far away from the hall, to search the deepest recesses of the city. Her power turned corners and entered windows and doorways. There would be a tiny burst of flame out there like the striking of a sulphur match; then nothing.

The night grew quieter. Taverns and shops shut their doors, winking

out in the thickening darkness. Traffic thinned on the highways.

The ancient one she caught in the North Beach streets, the one who had wanted but to see her face; she had burned him slowly as he crawled along the sidewalk. His bones turned to ash, the brain a mass of glowing embers in its last moments. Another she struck down upon a high flat roof, so that he fell like a shooting star out over the glimmering city. His empty clothes took flight like dark paper when it was finished.

And south Lestat went, to his refuge in Carmel Valley. Jubilant, drunk on the love he felt for Louis and Gabrielle, he spoke of old times and new dreams, utterly oblivious to the final slaughter.

"Maharet, where are you?" Khayman whispered. The night gave no answer. If Mael was near, if Mael heard the call, he gave no sign of it. Poor, desperate Mael, who had run out into the open after the attack upon Jessica. Mael, who might have been slain now, too. Mael staring helplessly as the ambulance carried Jesse away from him.

Khayman could not find him.

He combed the light-studded hills, the deep valleys in which the beat of souls was like a thunderous whisper. "Why have I witnessed these things?" he asked. "Why have the dreams brought me here?"

He stood listening to the mortal world.

The radios chattered of devil worship, riots, random fires, mass hallucinations. They whined of vandalism and crazed youth. But it was a big city for all its geographic smallness. The rational mind had already encapsulated the experience and disregarded it. Thousands took no notice. Others slowly and painstakingly revised in memory the impossible things they had seen. The Vampire Lestat was a human rock star and nothing more, his concert the scene of predictable though uncontrollable hysteria.

Perhaps it was part of the Queen's design to so smoothly abort Lestat's dreams. To burn his enemies off the earth before the frail blanket of human assumptions could be irreparably damaged. If this was so, would she punish the creature himself finally?

No answer came to Khayman.

His eyes moved over the sleepy terrain. An ocean fog had swept in, settling in deep rosy layers beneath the tops of the hills. The whole had a fairy-tale sweetness to it now in the first hour past midnight.

Collecting his strongest power, he sought to leave the confines of his body, to send his vision out of himself like the wandering *ka* of the Egyptian dead, to see those whom the Mother might have spared, to draw close to them.

"Armand," he said aloud. And then the lights of the city went dim. He felt the warmth and illumination of another place, and Armand was there before him.

He and his fledgling, Daniel, had come safely again to the mansion where they would sleep beneath the cellar floor unmolested. Groggily the young one danced through the large and sumptuous rooms, his mind full of Lestat's songs and rhythms. Armand stared out into the night, his youthful face as impassive as before. He saw Khayman! He saw him standing motionless on the faraway hill, yet felt him near enough to touch. Silently, invisibly, they studied one another.

It seemed Khayman's loneliness was more than he could bear; but the eyes of Armand held no emotion, no trust, no welcome.

Khayman moved on, drawing on ever greater strength, rising higher and higher in his search, so far from his body now that he could not for the moment even locate it. To the north he went, calling the names Santino, Pandora.

In a blasted field of snow and ice he saw them, two black figures in the endless whiteness—Pandora's garments shredded by the wind, her eyes full of blood tears as she searched for the dim outline of Marius's compound. She was glad of Santino at her side, this unlikely explorer in his fine clothes of black velvet. The long sleepless night through which Pandora had circled the world had left her aching in every limb and near to collapsing. All creatures must sleep; must dream. If she did not lie down soon in some dark place, her mind would be unable to fight the voices, the images, the madness. She did not want to take to the air again, and this Santino could not do such things, and so she walked beside him.

Santino cleaved to her, feeling only her strength, his heart shrunken and bruised from the distant yet inescapable cries of those whom the Queen had slaughtered. Feeling the soft brush of Khayman's gaze, he pulled his black cloak tight around his face. Pandora took no notice whatsoever.

Khayman veered away. Softly, it hurt him to see them touch; it hurt

him to see the two of them together.

In the mansion on the hill, Daniel slit the throat of a wriggling rat and let its blood flow into a crystal glass. "Lestat's trick," he said studying it in the light. Armand sat still by the fire, watching the red jewel of blood in the glass as Daniel lifted it to his lips lovingly.

Back into the night Khayman moved, wandering higher again, far from the city lights as if in a great orbit.

Mael, answer me. Let me know where you are. Had the Mother's cold fiery beam struck him, too? Or did he mourn now so deeply for Jesse that he hearkened to nothing and no one? Poor Jesse, dazzled by miracles, struck down by a fledgling in the blink of an eye before anyone could prevent it.

Maharet's child, my child!

Khayman was afraid of what he might see, afraid of what he dared not seek to alter. But maybe the Druid was simply too strong for him now; the Druid concealed himself and his charge from all eyes and all minds. Either that or the Queen had had her way and it was finished.

Jesse

So quiet here. She lay on a bed that was hard and soft, and her body felt floppy like that of a rag doll. She could lift her hand but then it would drop, and still she could not see, except in a vague ghostly way things that might have been an illusion.

For example lamps around her; ancient clay lamps shaped like fish and filled with oil. They gave a thick odoriferous perfume to the room. Was this a funeral parlor?

It came again, the fear that she was dead, locked in the flesh yet disconnected. She heard a curious sound; what was it? A scissors cutting. It was trimming the edges of her hair; the feel of it traveled to her scalp. She felt it even in her intestines.

A tiny vagrant hair was plucked suddenly from her face; one of those annoying hairs, quite out of place, which women so hate. She was being groomed for the coffin, wasn't she? Who else would take such care, lifting her hand now, and inspecting her fingernails so carefully.

But the pain came again, an electric flash moving down her back and she screamed. She screamed aloud in this room where she'd been only hours before in this very bed with the chains creaking.

She heard a gasp from someone near her. She tried to see, but she only saw the lamps again. And some dim figure standing in the window. Miriam watching.

"Where?" he asked. He was startled, trying to see the vision. Hadn't this happened before?

"Why can't I open my eyes?" she asked. He could look forever and he would never see Miriam.

"Your eyes are open," he said. How raw and tender his voice sounded. "I can't give you any more unless I give it all. We are not healers. We are slayers. It's time for you to tell me what you want. There is no one to help me."

I don't know what I want. All I know is I don't want to die! I don't want to stop living. What cowards we are, she thought, what liars. A great fatalistic sadness had accompanied her all the way to this night, yet

there had been the secret hope of this always! Not merely to see, to know, but to be part of.…

She wanted to explain, to hone it carefully with audible words, but the pain came again. A fiery brand touched to her spine, the pain shooting into her legs. And then the blessed numbness. It seemed the room she couldn't see grew dark and the flames of the ancient lamps sputtered. Outside the forest whispered. The forest writhed in the dark. And Mael's grip on her wrist was weak suddenly, not because he had let her go but because she couldn't any longer feel it.

"Jesse!"

He shook her with both his hands, and the pain was like lightning shattering the dark. She screamed through her clenched teeth. Miriam, stony-eyed and silent, glared from the window.

"Mael, do it!" she cried.

With all her strength, she sat up on the bed. The pain was without shape or limit; the scream strangled inside her. But then she opened her eyes, truly opened them. In the hazy light, she saw Miriam's cold unmerciful expression. She saw the tall bent figure of Mael towering over the bed. And then she turned to the open door. Maharet was coming.

Mael didn't know, didn't realize, till she did. With soft silky steps, Maharet came up the stairs, her long skirts moving with a dark rustling sound; she came down the corridor.

Oh, after all these years, these long years! Through her tears, Jesse watched Maharet move into the light of the lamps; she saw her shimmering face, and the burning radiance of her hair. Maharet gestured for Mael to leave them.

Then Maharet approached the bed. She lifted her hands, palms open, as if in invitation; she raised her hands as if to receive a baby.

"Yes, do it."

"Say farewell then, my darling, to Miriam."

In olden times there was a terrible worship in the city of Carthage. To the great bronze god Baal, the populace offered in sacrifice their little children. The small bodies were laid on the statue's outstretched arms, and then by means of a spring, the arms would rise and the children would fall into the roaring furnace of the god's belly.

After Carthage was destroyed, only the Romans carried the old tale, and as the centuries passed wise men came not to believe it. Too terrible, it seemed, the immolation of these children. But as the archaeologists brought their shovels and began to dig, they found the bones of the small victims in profusion. Whole necropolises they unearthed of nothing but little skeletons.

And the world knew the old legend was true; that the men and women of Carthage had brought their offspring to the god and stood in obeisance as their children tumbled screaming into the fire. It was religion.

Now as Maharet lifted Jesse, as Maharet's lips touched her throat, Jesse thought of the old legend. Maharet's arms were like the hard metal arms of the god Baal, and in one fiery instant Jesse knew unspeakable torment.

But it was not her own death that Jesse saw; it was the deaths of others—the souls of the immolated undead, rising upwards away from terror and the physical pain of the flames that consumed their preternatural bodies. She heard their cries; she heard their warnings; she saw their faces as they left the earth, dazzling as they carried with them still the stamp of human form without its substance; she felt them passing from misery into the unknown; she heard their song just beginning.

And then the vision paled, and died away, like music half heard and half remembered. She was near to death; her body gone, all pain gone, all sense of permanence or anguish.

She stood in the clearing in the sunshine looking down at the mother on the altar. "In the flesh," Maharet said. "In the flesh all wisdom begins. Beware the thing that has no flesh. Beware the gods, beware the *idea*, beware the devil."

Then the blood came; it poured through every fiber of her body; she was legs and arms again as it electrified her limbs, her skin stinging with the heat; and the hunger making her body writhe as the blood sought to anchor her soul to substance forever.

They lay in each other's arms, she and Maharet, and Maharet's hard skin warmed and softened so that they became one wet and tangled thing, hair enmeshed, Jesse's face buried in Maharet's neck as she gnawed at the fount, as one shock of ecstasy passed through her after

another.

Suddenly Maharet drew away and turned Jesse's face against the pillow. Maharet's hand covered Jesse's eyes, and Jesse felt the tiny razor-sharp teeth pierce her skin; she felt it all being taken back, drawn out. Like the whistling wind, the sensation of being emptied, of being devoured; of being nothing!

"Drink again, my darling." Slowly she opened her eyes; she saw the white throat and the white breasts; she reached out and caught the throat in her hands, and this time it was she who broke the flesh, she tore it. And when the first spill of blood hit her tongue, she pulled Maharet down under her. Utterly compliant Maharet was; hers; Maharet's breasts against her breasts; Maharet's lips against her face, as she sucked the blood, sucked it harder and harder. *You are mine, you are utterly and completely mine*. All images, voices, visions, gone now.

They slept, or almost slept, folded against one another. It seemed the pleasure left its shimmer; it seemed that to breathe was to feel it again; to shift against the silken sheets or against Maharet's silken skin was to begin again.

The fragrant wind moved through the room. A great collective sigh rose from the forest. No more Miriam, no more the spirits of the twilight realm, caught between life and death. She had found her place; her eternal place.

As she closed her eyes, she saw the thing in the jungle stop and look at her. The red-haired thing saw her and saw Maharet in her arms; it saw the red hair; two women with red hair; and the thing veered and moved towards them.

Khayman

Dead quiet the peace of Carmel Valley. So happy were the little coven in the house, Lestat, Louis, Gabrielle, so happy to be together. Lestat had rid himself of his soiled clothes and was resplendent again in shining "vampire attire," even to the black velvet cloak thrown casually over one shoulder. And the others, how animated they were, the woman Gabrielle unbraiding her yellow hair rather absently as she talked in an easy, passionate manner. And Louis, the human one, silent, yet profoundly excited by the presence of the other two, entranced, as it were, by their simplest gestures.

At any other time, how moved Khayman would have been by such happiness. He would have wanted to touch their hands, look into their eyes, tell them who he was and what he had seen, he would have wanted just to be with them.

But she was near. And the night was not finished.

The sky paled and the faintest warmth of the morning crept across the fields. Things stirred in the growing light. The trees shifted, their leaves uncurling ever so slowly.

Khayman stood beneath the apple tree, watching the color of the shadows change; listening to the morning. She was here, without question.

She concealed herself, willfully, and powerfully. But Khayman she could not deceive. He watched; he waited, listening to the laughter and talk of the small coven.

At the doorway of the house, Lestat embraced his mother, as she took leave of him. Out into the gray morning she came, with a sprightly step, in her dusty neglected khaki clothes, her thick blond hair brushed back, the picture of a carefree wanderer. And the black-haired one, the pretty one, Louis, was beside her.

Khayman watched them cross the grass, the female moving on into the open field before the woods where she meant to sleep within the earth itself, while the male entered the cool darkness of a small outbuilding. Something so refined about that one, even as he slipped beneath the floorboards, something about the way that he lay down as

if in the grave; the way he composed his limbs, falling at once into utter darkness.

And the woman; with stunning violence, she made her deep and secret hiding place, the leaves settling as if she had never been there. The earth held her outstretched arms, her bent head. Into the dreams of the twins she plunged, into images of jungle and river she would never remember.

So far so good. Khayman did not want them to die, to burn up. Exhausted, he stood with his back to the apple tree, the pungent green fragrance of the apples enveloping him.

Why was she here? And where was she hiding? When he opened himself to it, he felt the low radiant sound of her presence, rather like an engine of the modern world, giving off some irrepressible whisper of itself and its lethal power.

Finally Lestat emerged from the house and hurried towards the lair he had made for himself beneath the acacia trees against the hillside. Through a trapdoor he descended, down earthen steps, and into a dank chamber.

So it was peace for them all, peace until tonight when he would be the bringer of bad tidings.

The sun rose closer to the horizon; the first deflected rays appeared, which always dulled Khayman's vision. He focused upon the soft deepening colors of the orchard as all the rest of the world lost its distinct lines and shapes. He closed his eyes for a moment, realizing that he must go into the house, that he must seek some cool and shadowy place where mortals were unlikely to disturb him.

And when the sun set, he'd be waiting for them when they woke. He would tell them what he knew; he would tell them about the others. With a sudden stab of pain he thought of Mael, and of Jesse, whom he could not find, as if the earth had devoured them.

He thought of Maharet and he wanted to weep. But he made his way towards the house now. The sun was warm on his back; his limbs were heavy. Tomorrow night, whatever else came to pass, he wouldn't be alone. He would be with Lestat and his cohorts; and if they turned him away, he would seek out Armand. He would go north to Marius.

He heard the sound first—a loud, crackling roar. He turned, shielding his eyes from the rising sun. A great spray of earth shot up

from the floor of the forest. The acacias swayed as if in a storm, limbs cracking, roots heaved up from the soil, trunks falling helter-skelter.

In a dark streak of windblown garments the Queen rose with ferocious speed, the limp body of Lestat dangling from her arms as she made for the western sky away from the sunrise.

Khayman gave a loud cry before he could stop himself. And his cry rang out over the stillness of the valley. So she had taken her lover.

Oh, poor lover, oh, poor beautiful blond-haired prince.…

But there was no time to think or to act or to know his own heart; he turned to the shelter of the house; the sun had struck the clouds and the horizon had become an inferno.

Daniel stirred in the dark. The sleep seemed to lift like a blanket that had been about to crush him. He saw the gleam of Armand's eye. He heard Armand's whisper: "She's taken him."

Jesse moaned aloud. Weightless, she drifted in the pearly gloom. She saw the two rising figures as if in a dance—the Mother and the Son. Like saints ascending on the painted ceiling of a church. Her lips formed the words "the Mother."

In their deep-dug grave beneath the ice, Pandora and Santino slept in each other's arms. Pandora heard the sound. She heard Khayman's cry. She saw Lestat with his eyes closed and his head thrown back, rising in Akasha's embrace. She saw Akasha's black eyes fixed upon his sleeping face. Pandora's heart stopped in terror.

Marius closed his eyes. He could keep them open no longer. Above the wolves howled; the wind tore at the steel roof of the compound. Through the blizzard the feeble rays of the sun came as if igniting the swirling snow, and he could feel the dulling heat move down through layer upon layer of ice to numb him.

He saw the sleeping figure of Lestat in her arms; he saw her rising into the sky. "Beware of her, Lestat," he whispered with his last conscious breath. "Danger."

On the cool carpeted floor, Khayman stretched out and buried his face

in his arm. And a dream came at once, a soft silky dream of a summer night in a lovely place, where the sky was big over the city lights, and they were all together, these immortals whose names he knew and held to his heart now.

PART III

AS IT WAS IN THE BEGINNING, IS NOW, AND EVER SHALL BE …

Hide me
from me.
Fill these
holes with eyes
for mine are not
mine. Hide
me head & need
for I am no good
so dead in life
so much time.
Be wing, and
shade my me
from my desire
to be
hooked fish.
That worm
wine
looks sweet and
makes my me
blind. And, too,
my heart bide
for I shall at
this rate it also
eat in time.

STAN RICE

“Cannibal”

Some Lamb (1975)

1
LESTAT:
IN THE ARMS OF THE GODDESS

I can't say when I awoke, when I first came to my senses.

I remember knowing that she and I had been together for a long time, that I'd been feasting on her blood with an animal abandon, that Enkil was destroyed and she alone held the primeval power; and that she was causing me to see things and understand things that made me cry like a child.

Two hundred years ago, when I'd drunk from her in the shrine, the blood had been silent, eerily and magnificently silent. Now it was an utter transport of images—ravishing the brain just as the blood itself ravished the body; I was learning everything that had happened; I was there as the others died one by one in that horrible way.

And then there were the voices: the voices that rose and fell, seemingly without purpose, like a whispering choir in a cave.

It seemed there was a lucid moment in which I connected everything—the rock concert, the house in Carmel Valley, her radiant face before me. And the knowledge that I was here now with her, in this dark snowy place. I'd waked her. Or rather I had given her the reason to rise as she had said it. The reason to turn and stare back at the throne on which she'd sat and take those first faltering steps away from it.

Do you know what it meant to lift my hand and see it move in the light? Do you know what it meant to bear the sudden sound of my own voice echoing in that marble chamber?

Surely we had danced together in the dark snow-covered wood, or was it only that we had embraced over and over again?

Terrible things had happened. Over the whole world, terrible things. The execution of those who should never have been born. *Evil spawn*. The massacre at the concert had been only the finish.

Yet I was in her arms in this chilling darkness, in the familiar scent of winter, and her blood was mine again, and it was enslaving me.

When she drew away, I felt agony. I had to clear my thoughts, had to know whether or not Marius was alive, whether or not Louis and Gabrielle, and Armand, had been spared. I had to find myself again, somehow.

But the voices, the rising tide of voices! Mortals near and far. Distance made no difference. Intensity was the measure. It was a million times my old hearing, when I could pause on a city street and hear the tenants of some dark building, each in his own chamber, talking, thinking, praying, for as long and as closely as I liked.

Sudden silence when she spoke:

"Gabrielle and Louis are safe. I've told you this. Do you think I would hurt those you love? Look into my eyes now and listen only to what I say. I have spared many more than are required. And this I did for you as well as for myself, that I may see myself reflected in immortal eyes, and hear the voices of my children speaking to me. But I chose the ones you love, the ones you would see again. I could not take that comfort from you. But how you are with me, and you must see and know what is being revealed to you. You must have courage to match mine."

I couldn't endure it, the visions she was giving me—that horrid little Baby Jenks in those last moments; had it been a desperate dream the moment of her death, a string of images flickering within her dying brain? I couldn't bear it. And Laurent, my old companion Laurent, drying up in the flames on the pavement; and on the other side of the world, Felix, whom I had known also at the Theater of the Vampires, driven, burning, through the alleyways of Naples, and finally into the sea. And the others, so many others, the world over; I wept for them; I wept for all of it. Suffering without meaning.

"A life like that," I said of Baby Jenks, crying.

"That's why I showed you all of it," she answered. "That's why it is finished. The Children of Darkness are no more. And we shall have only angels now."

"But the others," I asked. "What has happened to Armand?" And the voices were starting again, the low humming that could mount to a deafening roar.

"Come now, my prince," she whispered. Silence again. She reached up and held my face in her hands. Her black eyes grew larger, the

white face suddenly supple and almost soft. “If you must see it, I’ll show you those who still live, those whose names will become legend along with yours and mine.”

Legend?

She turned her head ever so slightly; it seemed a miracle when she closed her eyes; because then the visible life went out of her altogether. A dead and perfect thing, fine black eyelashes curling exquisitely. I looked down at her throat; at the pale blue of the artery beneath the flesh, suddenly visible as if she meant for me to see it. The lust I felt was unsupportable. The goddess, mine! I took her roughly with a strength that would have hurt a mortal woman. The icy skin seemed absolutely impenetrable and then my teeth broke through it and the hot fount was roaring into me again.

The voices came, yet they died back at my command. And there was nothing then but the low rush of the blood and her heart beating slowly next to my own.

Darkness. A brick cellar. A coffin made of oak and polished to a fine luster. Locks of gold. The magic moment; the locks opened as if sprung by an invisible key. The lid rose, revealing the satin lining. There was a faint scent of Eastern perfume. I saw Armand lying on the white satin pillow, a seraph with long full auburn hair; head to one side, eyes blank, as if to wake was unfailingly startling. I watched him rise from the coffin, with slow, elegant gestures; our gestures, for we are the only beings who routinely rise from coffins. I saw him close the lid. Across the damp brick floor, he walked to yet another coffin. And this one he opened reverently, as if it were a casket containing a rare prize. Inside, a young man lay sleeping; lifeless, yet dreaming. Dreaming of a jungle where a red-haired woman walked, a woman I could not clearly see. And then the most bizarre scene, something I’d glimpsed before, but where? Two women kneeling beside an altar. That is, I thought it was an altar.…

A tensing in her; a tightening. She shifted against me like a statue of the Virgin ready to crush me. I swooned; I thought I heard her speak a name. But the blood came in another gush and my body was throbbing again with the pleasure; no earth; no gravity.

The brick cellar once more. A shadow had fallen over the young man’s body. Another had come into the cellar and placed a hand on

Armand's shoulder. Armand knew him. Mael was his name. *Come.*

But where is be taking them?

Purple evening in the redwood forest. Gabrielle was walking in that careless, straight-backed, unstoppable way of hers, her eyes like two chips of glass, giving back nothing to what she saw around her, and there was Louis beside her, struggling gracefully to keep up. Louis looked so touchingly civilized in the wilderness; so hopelessly out of place. The vampire guise of last night had been discarded; yet he seemed even more the gentleman in his worn old clothing, merely a little down on his luck. Out of his league with her, and does she know it? Will she take care of him? *But they're both afraid, afraid for me!*

The tiny sky above was turning to polished porcelain; the trees seemed to bring the light down their massive trunks almost to the roots. I could hear a creek rushing in the shadows. Then I saw it. Gabrielle walked right into the water in her brown boots. *But where are they going?* And who was the third one with them, who came into view only as Gabrielle turned back to look at him?—my God, such a face, and so placid. Ancient, powerful, yet letting the two young ones walk before him. Through the trees I could see a clearing, a house. On a high stone veranda stood a red-haired woman; the woman whom I'd seen in the jungle? Ancient expressionless mask of a face like the face of the male in the forest who was looking up at her; face like the face of my Queen.

Let them come together. I sighed as the blood poured into me. *It will make it all the simpler.* But who were they, these ancient ones, these creatures with countenances washed as clean as her own?

The vision shifted. This time the voices were a soft wreath around us, whispering, crying. And for one moment I wanted to listen, to try to detach from the monstrous chorus one fleeting mortal song. Imagine it, voices from all over, from the mountains of India, from the streets of Alexandria, from the tiny hamlets near and far.

But another vision was coming.

Marius. Marius was climbing up out of a bloodstained pit of broken ice with Pandora and Santino to aid him. They had just managed to reach the jagged shelf of a basement floor. The dried blood was a crust covering half of Marius's face; he looked angry, bitter, eyes dull, his long yellow hair matted with blood. With a limp he went up a

spiraling iron stairs, Pandora and Santino in his wake. It was like a pipe through which they ascended. When Pandora tried to help him he brushed her aside roughly.

Wind. Bitter cold. Marius's house lay open to the elements as if an earthquake had broken it apart. Sheets of glass were shattered into dangerous fragments; rare and beautiful tropical fish were frozen on the sand floor of a great ruined tank. Snow blanketed the furnishings and lay heaped against the bookshelves, against the statues, against the racks of records and tapes. The birds were dead in their cages. The green plants were dripping with icicles. Marius stared at the dead fish in the murky margin of ice in the bottom of the tank. He stared at the great dead stalks of seaweed that lay among the shards of gleaming glass.

Even as I watched, I saw him healing; the bruises seemed to melt from his face; I saw the face itself regain its natural shape. His leg was mending. He could stand almost straight. In rage he stared at the tiny blue and silver fish. He looked up at the sky, at the white wind that obliterated the stars completely. He brushed the flakes of dried blood from his face and hair.

Thousands of pages had been scattered about by the wind—pages of parchment, old crumbling paper. The swirling snow came down now lightly into the ruined parlor. There Marius took up the brass poker for a walking stick, and stared out through the ruptured wall at the starving wolves howling in their pen. No food for them since he, their master, had been buried. Ah, the sound of the wolves howling. I heard Santino speak to Marius, try to tell him that they must go, they were expected, that a woman waited for them in the redwood forest, a woman as old as the Mother, and the meeting could not begin until they had come. A chord of alarm went through me. What was this meeting? Marius understood but he didn't answer. He was listening to the wolves. To the wolves.…

The snow and the wolves. I dreamed of wolves. I felt myself drift away, back into my own mind, into my own dreams and memories. I saw a pack of fleet wolves racing over the newly fallen snow.

I saw myself as a young man fighting them—a pack of wolves that had come in deep winter to prey upon my father's village two hundred years ago. I saw myself, the mortal man, so close to death that I could

smell it. But I had cut down the wolves one by one. Ah, such coarse youthful vigor, the pure luxury of thoughtless irresistible life! Or so it seemed. At the time it had been misery, hadn't it? The frozen valley, my horse and dogs slain. But now all I could do was remember, and ah, to see the snow covering the mountains, my mountains, my father's land.

I opened my eyes. She had let me go and forced me back a pace. For the first time I understood where we really were. Not in some abstract night, but in a real place and a place that had once, for all purposes, been mine.

"Yes," she whispered. "Look around you."

I knew it by the air, by the smell of winter, and as my vision cleared again, I saw the broken battlements high above, and the tower.

"This is my father's house!" I whispered. "This is the castle in which I was born."

Stillness. The snow shining white over the old floor. This had been the great hall, where we now stood. God, to see it in ruins; to know that it had been desolate for so long. Soft as earth the old stones seemed; and here had been the table, the great long table fashioned in the time of the Crusades; and there had been the gaping hearth, and there the front door.

The snow was not falling now. I looked up and I saw the stars. The tower had its round shape still, soaring hundreds of feet above the broken roof, though all the rest was as a fractured shell. My father's house.…

Lightly she stepped away from me, across the shimmering whiteness of the floor, turning slowly in a circle, her head back, as if she were dancing.

To move, to touch solid things, to pass from the realm of dreams into the real world, of all these joys she'd spoken earlier. It took my breath away, watching her. Her garments were timeless, a black silk cloak, a gown of silken folds that swirled gently about her narrow form. Since the dawn of history women have worn such garments, and they wear them now into the ballrooms of the world. I wanted to hold her again, but she forbade it with a soft sudden gesture. What had she said? *Can you imagine it? When I realized that be could no longer keep me there? That I was standing before the throne, and he had not stirred! That*

not the faintest response came from him?

She turned; she smiled; the pale light of the sky struck the lovely angles of her face, the high cheekbones, the gentle slope of her chin. Alive she looked, utterly alive.

Then she vanished!

"Akasha!"

"Come to me," she said.

But where was she? Then I saw her far, far away from me at the very end of the hall. A tiny figure at the entrance to the tower. I could scarce make out the features of her face now, yet I could see behind her the black rectangle of the open door.

I started to walk towards her.

"No," she said. "Time to use the strength I've given you. Merely come!"

I didn't move. My mind was clear. My vision was clear. And I knew what she meant. But I was afraid. I'd always been the sprinter, the leaper, the player of tricks. Preternatural speed that baffled mortals, that was not new to me. But she asked for a different accomplishment. I was to leave the spot where I stood and locate myself suddenly beside her, with a speed which I myself could not track. It required a surrender, to try such a thing.

"Yes, surrender," she said gently. "Come."

For a tense moment I merely looked at her, her white hand gleaming on the edge of the broken door. Then I made the decision to be standing at her side. It was as if a hurricane touched me, full of noise and random force. Then I was there! I felt myself shudder all over. The flesh of my face hurt a little, but what did that matter! I looked down into her eyes and I smiled.

Beautiful she was, so beautiful. The goddess with her long black plaited hair. Impulsively I took her in my arms and kissed her; kissed her cold lips and felt them yield to me just a little.

Then the blasphemy of it struck me. It was like the time I'd kissed her in the shrine. I wanted to say something in apology, but I was staring at her throat again, hungry for the blood. It tantalized me that I could drink it and yet she was who she was; she could have destroyed me in a second with no more than the wish to see me die. That's what she had done to the others. The danger thrilled me,

darkly. I closed my fingers round her arms, felt the flesh give ever so slightly. I kissed her again, and again. I could taste blood in it.

She drew back and placed her finger on my lips. Then she took my hand and led me through the tower door. Starlight fell through the broken roof hundreds of feet above us, through a gaping hole in the floor of the highest room.

"Do you see?" she said. "The room at the very top is still there? The stairs are gone. The room is unreachable. Except for you and me, my prince."

Slowly she started to rise. Never taking her eyes off me she traveled upwards, the sheer silk of her gown billowing only slightly. I watched in astonishment as she rose higher and higher, her cloak ruffled as if by a faint breeze. She passed through the opening and then stood on the very edge.

Hundreds of feet! Not possible for me to do this.…

"Come to me, my prince," she said, her soft voice carrying in the emptiness. "Do as you have already done. Do it quickly, and as mortals so often say, don't look down." Whispered laughter.

Suppose I got a fifth of the way up—a good leap, the height, say, of a four-story building, which was rather easy for me but also the limit of—Dizziness. Not possible. Disorientation. How had we come to be here? It was all spinning again. I saw her but it was dreamlike, and the voices were intruding. I didn't want to lose this moment. I wanted to remain connected with time in a series of linked moments, to understand this on my terms.

"Lestat!" she whispered. "Now." Such a tender thing, her small gesture to me to be quick.

I did what I had done before; I looked at her and decided that I should instantly be at her side.

The hurricane again, the air bruising me; I threw up my arms and fought the resistance. I think I saw the hole in the broken boards as I passed through it. Then I was standing there, shaken, terrified I would fall.

It sounded as if I were laughing; but I think I was just going mad a little. Crying actually. "But how?" I said. "I have to know how I did it."

"You know the answer," she said. "The intangible thing which

animates you has much more strength now than it did before. It moved you as it has always moved you. Whether you take a step or take flight, it is simply a matter of degree."

"I want to try it again," I said.

She laughed very softly, but spontaneously. "Look about this room," she said. "Do you remember it?"

I nodded. "When I was a young man, I came here all the time," I said. I moved away from her. I saw piles of ruined furniture—the heavy benches and stools that had once filled our castle, medieval work so crude and strong it was damn near indestructible, like the trees that fall in the forest and remain for centuries, the bridges over streams, their trunks covered with moss. So these things had not rotted away. Even old caskets remained, and armor. Oh, yes, the old armor, ghosts of past glory. And in the dust I saw a faint bit of color. Tapestries, but they were utterly destroyed.

In the revolution, these things must have been brought here for safekeeping and then the stairs had fallen away.

I went to one of the tiny narrow windows and I looked out on the land. Far below, nestled in the mountainside, were the electric lights of a little city, sparse, yet there. A car made its way down the narrow road. Ah, the modern world so close yet far away. The castle was the ghost of itself.

"Why did you bring me here?" I asked her. "It's so painful to see this, as painful as everything else."

"Look there, at the suits of armor," she said. "At what lies at their feet. You remember the weapons you took with you the day you went out to kill the wolves?"

"Yes. I remember them."

"Look at them again. I will give you new weapons, infinitely more powerful weapons with which you will kill for me now."

"Kill?"

I glanced down at the cache of arms. Rusted, ruined it seemed; save for the old broadsword, the fine one, which had been my father's and given to him by his father, who had got it from his father, and so forth and so on, back to the time of St. Louis. The lord's broadsword, which I, the seventh son, had used on that long ago morning when I'd gone out like a medieval prince to kill the wolves.

“But whom will I kill?” I asked.

She drew closer. How utterly sweet her face was, how brimming with innocence. Her brows came together; there was that tiny vertical fold of flesh in her forehead, just for an instant. Then all went smooth again.

“I would have you obey me without question,” she said gently. “And then understanding would follow. But this is not your way.”

“No,” I confessed. “I’ve never been able to obey anyone, not for very long.”

“So fearless,” she said, smiling.

She opened her right hand gracefully; and quite suddenly she was holding the sword. It seemed I’d felt the thing moving towards her, a tiny change of atmosphere, no more. I stared at it, at the jeweled scabbard and the great bronze hilt that was of course a cross. The belt still hung from it, the belt I’d bought for it, during some long ago summer, of toughened leather and plaited steel.

It was a monster of a weapon, as much for battering as for slashing or piercing. I remembered the weight of it, the way it had made my arm ache when I had slashed again and again at the attacking wolves. Knights in battle had often held such weapons with two hands.

But then what did I know of such battles? I’d been no knight. I’d skewered an animal with this weapon. My only moment of mortal glory, and what had it got me? The admiration of an accursed bloodsucker who chose to make me his heir.

She placed the sword in my hands.

“It’s not heavy now, my prince,” she said. “You are immortal. Truly immortal. My blood is in you. And you will use your new weapons for me as you once used this sword.”

A violent shudder went through me as I touched the sword; it was as if the thing held some latent memory of what it had witnessed; I saw the wolves again; I saw myself standing in the blackened frozen forest ready to kill.

And I saw myself a year later in Paris, dead, immortal; a monster, and on account of those wolves. “Wolfkiller,” the vampire had called me. He had picked me from the common herd because I had slain those cursed wolves! And worn their fur so proudly through the winter streets of Paris.

How could I feel such bitterness even now? Did I want to be dead and buried down below in the village graveyard? I looked out of the window again at the snow-covered hillside. Wasn't the same thing happening now? Loved for what I'd been in those early thoughtless mortal years. Again I asked, "But whom or what will I kill?"

No answer.

I thought of Baby Jenks again, that pitiful little thing, and all the blood drinkers who were now dead. And I had wanted a war with them, a little war. And they were all dead. All who had responded to the battle call—dead. I saw the coven house in Istanbul burning; I saw an old one she had caught and burned so slowly; one who had fought her and cursed her. I was crying again.

"Yes, I took your audience from you," she said. "I burnt away the arena in which you sought to shine. I stole the battle! But don't you see? I offer you finer things than you have ever reached for. I offer you the world, my prince."

"How so?"

"Stop the tears you shed for Baby Jenks, and for yourself. Think on the mortals you should weep for. Envision those who have suffered through the long dreary centuries—the victims of famine and deprivation and ceaseless violence. Victims of endless injustice and endless battling. How then can you weep for a race of monsters, who without guidance or purpose played the devil's gambit on every mortal they chanced to meet!"

"I know. I understand—"

"Do you? Or do you merely retreat from such things to play your symbolic games? Symbol of evil in your rock music. That is nothing, my prince, nothing at all."

"Why didn't you kill me along with the rest of them?" I asked, belligerently, miserably. I grasped the hilt of the sword in my right hand. I fancied I could see the dried blood of the wolf still on it. I pulled the blade free of the leather scabbard. Yes, the blood of the wolf. "I'm no better than they are, am I?" I said. "Why spare any of us?"

Fear stopped me suddenly. Terrible fear for Gabrielle and Louis and Armand. For Marius. Even for Pandora and Mael. Fear for myself. There isn't a thing made that doesn't fight for life, even when there is

no real justification. I wanted to live; I always had.

"I would have you love me," she whispered tenderly. Such a voice. In a way, it was like Armand's voice; a voice that could caress you when it spoke to you. Draw you into itself. "And so I take time with you," she continued. She put her hands on my arms, and looked up into my eyes. "I want you to understand. You are my instrument! And so the others shall be if they are wise. Don't you see? There has been a design to all of it—your coming, my waking. For now the hopes of the millennia can be realized at last. Look on the little town below, and on this ruined castle. This could be Bethlehem, my prince, my savior. And together we shall realize all the world's most enduring dreams."

"But how could that possibly be?" I asked. Did she know how afraid I was? That her words moved me from simple fear into terror? Surely she did.

"Ah, you are so strong, princeling," she said. "But you were destined for me, surely. Nothing defeats you. You fear and you don't fear. For a century I watched you suffer, watched you grow weak and finally go down in the earth to sleep, and I then saw you rise, the very image of my own resurrection."

She bowed her head now as if she were listening to sounds from far away. The voices rising. I heard them too, perhaps because she did. I heard the ringing din. And then, annoyed, I pushed them away.

"So strong," she said. "They cannot drag you down into them, the voices, but do not ignore this power; it's as important as any other you possess. They are praying to you just as they have always prayed to me."

I understood her meaning. But I didn't want to hear their prayers; what could I do for them? What had prayers to do with the thing that I was?

"For centuries they were my only comfort," she continued. "By the hour, by the week, by the year I listened; it seemed in early times that the voices I heard had woven a shroud to make of me a dead and buried thing. Then I learned to listen more carefully. I learned to select one voice from the many as if picking a thread from the whole. To that voice alone I would listen and through it I knew the triumph and ruin of a single soul."

I watched her in silence.

“Then as the years passed, I acquired a greater power—to leave my body invisibly and to go to the single mortal whose voice I listened to, to see then through that mortal’s eyes. I would walk in the body of this one, or that one. I would walk in sunshine and in darkness; I would suffer; I would hunger; I would know pain. Sometimes I walked in the bodies of immortals as I walked in the body of Baby Jenks. Often, I walked with Marius. Selfish, vain Marius, Marius who confuses greed with respect, who is ever dazzled by the decadent creations of a way of life as selfish as he is. Oh, don’t suffer so. I loved him. I love him now; he cared for me. My keeper.” Her voice was bitter but only for that instant. “But more often I walked with one among the poor and the sorrowful. It was the rawness of true life I craved.”

She stopped; her eyes clouded; her brows came together and the tears rose in her eyes. I knew the power of which she spoke, but only slightly. I wanted so to comfort her but when I reached out to embrace her she motioned for me to be still.

“I would forget who I was, where I was,” she continued. “I would be that creature, the one whose voice I had chosen. Sometimes for years. Then the horror would return, the realization that I was a motionless, purposeless thing condemned to sit forever in a golden shrine! Can you imagine the horror of waking suddenly to that realization? That all you have seen and heard and been is nothing but illusion, the observation of another’s life? I would return to myself. I would become again what you see before you. This idol with a heart and brain.”

I nodded. Centuries ago when I had first laid eyes upon her, I had imagined unspeakable suffering locked within her. I had imagined agonies without expression. And I had been right.

“I knew he kept you there,” I said. I spoke of Enkil. Enkil who was now gone, destroyed. A fallen idol. I was remembering the moment in the shrine when I’d drunk from her and he’d come to claim her and almost finished me then and there. Had he known what he meant to do? Was all reason gone even then?

She only smiled in answer. Her eyes were dancing as she looked out into the dark. The snow had begun again, swirling almost magically, catching the light of the stars and the moon and diffusing it through

all the world, it seemed.

"It was meant, what happened," she answered finally. "That I should pass those years growing ever more strong. Growing so strong finally that no one … no one can be my equal." She stopped. Just for a moment her conviction seemed to waver. But then she grew confident again. "He was but an instrument in the end, my poor beloved King, my companion in agony. His mind was gone, yes. And I did not destroy him, not really. I took into myself what was left of him. And at times I had been as empty, as silent, as devoid of the will even to dream as he was. Only for him there was no returning. He had seen his last visions. He was of no use anymore. He has died a god's death because it only made me stronger. And it was all meant, my prince. All meant from start to finish."

"But how? By whom?"

"Whom?" She smiled again. "Don't you understand? You need look no further for the cause of anything. I am the fulfillment and I shall from this moment on be the cause. There is nothing and no one now who can stop me." Her face hardened for a second. That wavering again. "Old curses mean nothing. In silence I have attained such power that no force in nature could harm me. Even my first brood cannot harm me though they plot against me. It was meant that those years should pass before you came."

"How did I change it?"

She came a step closer. She put her arm around me and it felt soft for the moment, not like the hard thing it truly was. We were just two beings standing near to each other, and she looked indescribably lovely to me, so pure and otherworldly. I felt the awful desire for the blood again. To bend down, to kiss her throat, to have her as I had had a thousand mortal women, yet she the goddess, she with the immeasurable power. I felt the desire rising, cresting.

Again, she put her finger on my lips, as if to say be still.

"Do you remember when you were a boy here?" she asked. "Think back now on the time when you begged them to send you to the monastery school. Do you remember the things the brothers taught you? The prayers, the hymns, the hours you worked in the library, the hours in the chapel when you prayed alone?"

"I remember, of course." I felt the tears coming again. I could see it

so vividly, the monastery library, and the monks who had taught me and believed I could be a priest. I saw the cold little cell with its bed of boards; I saw the cloister and the garden veiled in rosy shadow; God, I didn't want to think now of those times. But some things can never be forgotten.

"Do you remember the morning that you went into the chapel," she continued, "and you knelt on the bare marble floor, with your arms out in the form of the cross, and you told God you would do anything if only he would make you good?"

"Yes, good…." Now it was my voice that was tinged with bitterness.

"You said you would suffer martyrdom; torments unspeakable; it did not matter; if only you were to be someone who was good."

"Yes, I remember." I saw the old saints; I heard the hymns that had broken my heart. I remembered the morning my brothers had come to take me home, and I had begged them on my knees to let me stay there.

"And later, when your innocence was gone, and you took the high road to Paris, it was the same thing you wanted; when you danced and sang for the boulevard crowds, you wanted to be good."

"I was," I said haltingly. "It was a good thing to make them happy and for a little while I did."

"Yes, happy," she whispered.

"I could never explain to Nicolas, my friend, you know, that it was so important to … believe in a concept of goodness, even if we make it up ourselves. We don't really make it up. It's there, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes, it's there," she said. "It's there because we put it there."

Such sadness. I couldn't speak. I watched the falling snow. I clasped her hand and felt her lips against my cheek.

"You were born for me, my prince," she said. "You were tried and perfected. And in those first years, when you went into your mother's bedchamber and brought her into the world of the undead with you, it was but a prefigurement of your waking me. I am your true Mother, the Mother who will never abandon you, and I have died and been reborn, too. All the religions of the world, my prince, sing of you and of me."

"How so?" I asked. "How can that be?"

"Ah, but you know. *You know!*" She took the sword from me and

examined the old belt slowly, running it across the open palm of her right hand. Then she dropped it down into the rusted heap—the last remnants on earth of my mortal life. And it was as if a wind touched these things, blowing them slowly across the snow-covered floor, until they were gone.

"Discard your old illusions," she said. "Your inhibitions. They are no more of use than these old weapons. Together, we will make the myths of the world real."

A chill cut through me, a dark chill of disbelief and then confusion; but her beauty overcame it.

"You wanted to be a saint when you knelt in that chapel," she said. "Now you shall be a god with me."

There were words of protest on the tip of my tongue; I was frightened; some dark sense overcame me. Her words, what could they possibly mean?

But suddenly I felt her arm around me, and we were rising out of the tower up through the shattered roof. The wind was so fierce it cut my eyelids. I turned towards her. My right arm went round her waist and I buried my head against her shoulder.

I heard her soft voice in my ear telling me to sleep. It would be hours before the sun set on the land to which we were going, to the place of the first lesson.

Lesson. Suddenly I was weeping again, clinging to her, weeping because I was lost, and she was all there was to cling to. And I was in terror now of what she would ask of me.

2
MARIUS: COMING TOGETHER

They met again at the edge of the redwood forest, their clothes tattered, their eyes tearing from the wind. Pandora stood to the right of Marius, Santino to the left. And from the house across the clearing, Mael came towards them, a lanky figure almost loping over the mown grass.

Silently, he embraced Marius.

"Old friend," Marius said. But his voice had no vitality. Exhausted, he looked past Mael towards the lighted windows of the house. He sensed a great hidden dwelling within the mountain behind the visible structure with its peaked and gabled roof.

And what lay there waiting for him? For all of them? If only he had the slightest spirit for it; if only he could recapture the smallest part of his own soul.

"I'm weary," he said to Mael. "I'm sick from the journey. Let me rest here a moment longer. Then I'll come."

Marius did not despise the power to fly, as he knew Pandora did, nevertheless it invariably chastened him. He had been defenseless against it on this night of all nights; and he had now to feel the earth under him, to smell the forest, and to scan the distant house in a moment of uninterrupted quiet. His hair was tangled from the wind and still matted with dried blood. The simple gray wool jacket and pants he had taken from the ruins of his house barely gave him warmth. He brought the heavy black cloak close around him, not because the night here required it, but because he was still chilled and sore from the wind.

Mael appeared not to like his hesitation, but to accept it. Suspiciously he gazed at Pandora, whom he had never trusted, and then with open hostility he stared at Santino, who was busy brushing off his black garments and combing his fine, neatly trimmed black hair. For one second, their eyes met, Santino bristling with viciousness, then Mael turned away.

Marius stood still listening, thinking. He could feel the last bit of

healing in his body; it rather amazed him that he was once again whole. Even as mortals learn year by year that they are older and weaker, so immortals must learn that they are stronger than ever they imagined they would be. It maddened him at the moment.

Scarcely an hour had passed since he was helped from the icy pit by Santino and Pandora, and now it was as if he had never been there, crushed and helpless, for ten days and nights, visited again and again by the nightmares of the twins. Yet nothing could ever be as it had been.

The twins. The red-haired woman was inside the house waiting. Santino had told him this. Mael knew it too. But who was she? And why did he not want to know the answers? Why was this the blackest hour he had ever known? His body was fully healed, no doubt about it; but what was going to heal his soul?

Armand in this strange wooden house at the base of the mountain? Armand again after all this time? Santino had told him about Armand also, and that the others—Louis and Gabrielle—had also been spared.

Mael was studying him. "He's waiting for you," he said. "Your Amadeo." It was respectful, not cynical or impatient.

And out of the great bank of memories that Marius carried forever with him, there came a long neglected moment, startling in its purity —Mael coming to the palazzo in Venice in the contented years of the fifteenth century, when Marius and Armand had known such happiness, and Mael seeing the mortal boy at work with the other apprentices on a mural which Marius had only lately left to their less competent hands. Strange how vivid, the smell of the egg tempera, the smell of the candles, and that familiar smell—not unpleasant now in remembering—which permeated all Venice, the smell of the rottenness of things, of the dark and putrid waters of the canals. "And so you would make that one?" Mael had asked with simple directness. "When it's time," Marius had said dismissively, "when it's time." Less than a year later, he had made his little blunder. "Come into my arms, young one, I can live without you no more."

Marius stared at the distant house. *My world trembles and I think of him, my Amadeo, my Armand.* The emotions he felt were suddenly as bittersweet as music, the blended orchestral melodies of recent centuries, the tragic strains of Brahms or Shostakovich which he had

come to love.

But this was no time for cherishing this reunion. No time to feel the keen warmth of it, to be glad of it, and to say all the things to Armand that he so wanted to say.

Bitterness was something shallow compared to his present state of mind. *Should have destroyed them, the Mother and the Father. Should have destroyed us all.*

"Thank the gods," Mael said, "that you did not."

"And why?" Marius demanded. "Tell me why?"

Pandora shuddered. He felt her arm come around his waist. And why did that make him so angry? He turned sharply to her; he wanted to strike her, push her away. But what he saw stopped him. She wasn't even looking at him; and her expression was so distant, so soul weary that he felt his own exhaustion all the more heavily. He wanted to weep. The well-being of Pandora had always been crucial to his own survival. He did not need to be near her—better that he was not near her—but he had to know that she was somewhere, and continuing, and that they might meet again. What he saw now in her—had seen earlier—filled him with foreboding. If he felt bitterness, then Pandora felt despair.

"Come," Santino said, "they're waiting." It was said with courtly politeness.

"I know," Marius answered.

"Ah, what a trio we are!" Pandora whispered suddenly. She was spent, fragile, hungering for sleep and dreams, yet protectively she tightened her grip on Marius's waist.

"I can walk unaided, thank you," he said with uncharacteristic meanness, and to this one, the one he most loved.

"Walk, then," she answered. And just for a second, he saw her old warmth, even a spark of her old humor. She gave him a little shove, and then started out alone towards the house.

Acid. His thoughts were acid as he followed. He could not be of use to these immortals. Yet he walked on with Mael and Santino into the light streaming from the windows beyond. The redwood forest receded into shadow; not a leaf moved. But the air was good here, warm here, full of fresh scents and without the sting of the north.

Armand. It made him want to weep.

Then he saw the woman appear in the doorway. A sylph with her long curly red hair catching the hallway light.

He did not stop, but surely he felt a little intelligent fear. Old as Akasha she was, certainly. Her pale eyebrows were all but faded into the radiance of her countenance. Her mouth had no color anymore. And her eyes.… Her eyes were not really her eyes. No, they had been taken from a mortal victim and they were already failing her. She could not see very well as she looked at him. Ah, the blinded twin from the dreams, she was. And she felt pain now in the delicate nerves connected to the stolen eyes.

Pandora stopped at the edge of the steps.

Marius went past her and up onto the porch. He stood before the red-haired woman, marveling at her height—she was as tall as he was—and at the fine symmetry of her masklike face. She wore a flowing gown of black wool with a high neck and full dagged sleeves. In long loose gores the cloth fell from a slender girdle of braided black cord just beneath her small breasts. A lovely garment really. It made her face seem all the more radiant and detached from everything around it, a mask with the light behind it, glowing in a frame of red hair.

But there was a great deal more to marvel at than these simple attributes which she might have possessed in one form or another six thousand years ago. The woman's vigor astonished him. It gave her an air of infinite flexibility and overwhelming menace. Was she the true immortal?—the one who had never slept, never gone silent, never been released by madness? One who had walked with a rational mind and measured steps through all the millennia since she had been born?

She let him know, for what it was worth, that this was exactly what she was.

He could see her immeasurable strength as if it were incandescent light; yet he could sense an immediate informality, the immediate receptivity of a clever mind.

How to read her expression, however. How to know what she really felt.

A deep, soft femininity emanated from her, no less mysterious than anything else about her, a tender vulnerability that he associated exclusively with women though now and then he found it in a very young man. In the dreams, her face had evinced this tenderness; now

it was something invisible but no less real. At another time it would have charmed him; now he only took note of it, as he noted her gilded fingernails, so beautifully tapered, and the jeweled rings she wore.

"All those years you knew of me," he said politely, speaking in the old Latin. "You knew I kept the Mother and the Father. Why didn't you come to me? Why didn't you tell me who you were?"

She considered for a long moment before answering, her eyes moving back and forth suddenly over the others who drew close to him now.

Santino was terrified of this woman, though he knew her very well. And Mael was afraid of her too, though perhaps a little less. In fact, it seemed that Mael loved her and was bound to her in some subservient way. As for Pandora, she was merely apprehensive. She drew even closer to Marius as if to stand with him, regardless of what he meant to do.

"Yes, I knew of you," the woman said suddenly. She spoke English in the modern fashion. But it was the unmistakable voice of the twin in the dream, the blind twin who had cried out the name of her mute sister, Mekare, as both had been shut up in stone coffins by the angry mob.

Our voices never really change, Marius thought. The voice was young, pretty. It had a reticent softness as she spoke again.

"I might have destroyed your shrine if I had come," she said. "I might have buried the King and the Queen beneath the sea. I might even have destroyed them, and so doing, destroyed all of us. And this I didn't want to do. And so I did nothing. What would you have had me do? I couldn't take your burden from you. I couldn't help you. So I did not come."

It was a better answer than he had expected. It was not impossible to like this creature. On the other hand, this was merely the beginning. And her answer—it wasn't the whole truth.

"No?" she asked him. Her face revealed a tracery of subtle lines for an instant, the glimpse of something that had once been human. "What is the whole truth?" she asked. "That I owed you nothing, least of all the knowledge of my existence and that you are impertinent to suggest that I should have made myself known to you? I have seen a thousand like you. I know when you come into being. I know when

you perish. What are you to me? We come together now because we have to. We are in danger. All living things are in danger! And maybe when this is finished we will love each other and respect each other. And maybe not. Maybe we'll all be dead."

"Perhaps so," he said quietly. He couldn't help smiling. She was right. And he liked her manner, the bone-hard way in which she spoke.

It had been his experience that all immortals were irrevocably stamped by the age in which they were born. And so it was true, also, of even this ancient one, whose words had a savage simplicity, though the timbre of the voice had been soft.

"I'm not myself," he added hesitantly. "I haven't survived all this as well as I should have survived it. My body's healed—the old miracle." He sneered. "But I don't understand my present view of things. The bitterness, the utter—" He stopped.

"The utter darkness," she said.

"Yes. Never has life itself seemed so senseless," he added. "I don't mean for us. I mean—to use your phrase—for all living things. It's a joke, isn't it? Consciousness, it's a kind of joke."

"No," she said. "That's not so."

"I disagree with you. Will you patronize me? Tell me now how many thousands of years you've lived before I was born? How much you know that I don't know?" He thought again of his imprisonment, the ice hurting him, the pain shooting through his limbs. He thought of the immortal voices that had answered him; the rescuers who had moved towards him, only to be caught one by one by Akasha's fire. He had heard them die, if he had not seen them! And what had sleep meant for him? The dreams of the twins.

She reached out suddenly and caught his right hand gently in both of hers. It was rather like being held in the maw of a machine; and though Marius had inflicted that very impression upon many young ones himself over the years, he had yet to feel such overpowering strength himself.

"Marius, we need you now," she said warmly, her eyes glittering for an instant in the yellow light that poured out of the door behind her, and out of the windows to the right and to the left.

"For the love of heaven, why?"

“Don’t jest,” she answered. “Come into the house. We must talk while we have time.”

“About what?” he insisted. “About why the Mother has allowed us to live? I know the answer to that question. It makes me laugh. You she cannot kill, obviously, and we … we are spared because Lestat wants it. You realize this, don’t you? Two thousand years I cared for her, protected her, worshiped her, and she has spared me now on account of her love for a two-hundred-year-old fledgling named Lestat.”

“Don’t be so sure of it!” Santino said suddenly.

“No,” the woman said. “It’s not her only reason. But there are many things we must consider—”

“I know you’re right.” he said. “But I haven’t the spirit for it. My illusions are gone, you see, and I didn’t even know they were illusions. I thought I had attained such wisdom! It was my principal source of pride. I was with the eternal things. Then, when I saw her standing there in the shrine, I knew that all my deepest hopes and dreams had come true! She was alive inside that body. Alive, while I played the acolyte, the slave, the eternal guardian of the tomb!”

But why try to explain it? Her vicious smile, her mocking words to him, the ice falling. The cold darkness afterwards and the twins. Ah, yes, the twins. That was at the heart of it as much as anything else, and it occurred to him suddenly that the dreams had cast a spell on him. He should have questioned this before now. He looked at her, and the dreams seemed to surround her suddenly, to take her out of the moment back to those stark times. He saw sunlight; he saw the dead body of the mother; he saw the twins poised above the body. So many questions …

“But what have these dreams to do with this catastrophe!” he demanded suddenly. He had been so defenseless against those endless dreams.

The woman looked at him for a long moment before answering. “This I will tell you, insofar as I know. But you must calm yourself. It’s as if you’ve got your youth back, and what a curse it must be.”

He laughed. “I was never young. But what do you mean by this?”

“You rant and rave. And I can’t console you.”

“And you would if you could?”

"Yes."

He laughed softly.

But very gracefully she opened her arms to him. The gesture shocked him, not because it was extraordinary but because he had seen her so often go to embrace her sister in this manner in the dreams. "My name is Maharet," she said. "Call me by my name and put away your distrust. Come into my house."

She leant forward, her hands touching the sides of his face as she kissed him on the cheek. Her red hair touched his skin and the sensation confused him. The perfume rising from her clothes confused him—the faint Oriental scent that made him think of incense, which always made him think of the shrine.

"Maharet," he said angrily. "If I am needed, why didn't you come for me when I lay in that pit of ice? Could she have stopped *you?*"

"Marius, I have come," she said. "And you are here now with us." She released him, and let her hands fall, gracefully clasped before her skirts. "Do you think I had nothing to do during these nights when all our kind were being destroyed? To the left and right of me, the world over, she slew those I had loved or known. I could not be here and there to protect these victims. Cries reached my ears from every corner of the earth. And I had my own quest, my own sorrow—" Abruptly she stopped.

A faint carnal blush came over her; in a warm flash the normal expressive lines of her face returned. She was in pain, both physical and mental, and her eyes were clouding with thin blood tears. Such a strange thing, the fragility of the eyes in the indestructible body. And the suffering emanating from her—he could not bear it—it was like the dreams themselves. He saw a great riff of images, vivid yet wholly different. And quite suddenly he realized—

"You aren't the one who sent the dreams to us!" he whispered. "You are not the source." She didn't answer.

"Ye gods, where is your sister! What does all this mean?"

There was a subtle recoiling, as if he'd struck her heart. She tried to veil her mind from him; but he felt the unquenchable pain. In silence, she stared at him, taking in all of his face and figure slowly and obviously, as if to let him know that he had unforgivably transgressed.

He could feel the fear coming from Mael and Santino, who dared to

say nothing. Pandora drew even closer to him and gave him a little warning signal as she clasped his hand.

Why had he spoken so brutally, so impatiently? *My quest, my own sorrow*.... But damn it all!

He watched her close her eyes, and press her fingers tenderly to her eyelids as if she would make the ache in her eyes go away, but she could not.

"Maharet," he said with a soft, honest sigh. "We're in a war and we stand about on the battlefield speaking harsh words to each other. I am the worst offender. I only want to understand."

She looked up at him, her head still bowed, her hand hovering before her face. And the look was fierce, almost malicious. Yet he found himself staring senselessly at the delicate curve of her fingers, at the gilded nails and the ruby and emerald rings which flashed suddenly as if sparked with electric light.

The most errant and awful thought came to him, that if he didn't stop being so damned stupid he might never see Armand. She might drive him out of here or worse.... And he wanted so—before it was over—to see Armand.

"You come in now, Marius," she said suddenly, her voice polite, forgiving. "You come with me, and be reunited with your old child, and then we'll gather with the others who have the same questions. We will begin."

"Yes, my old child...." he murmured. He felt the longing for Armand again like music, like Bartók's violin phrases played in a remote and safe place where there was all the time in the world to hear. Yet he hated her; he hated all of them. He hated himself. The other twin, where was the other twin? Flashes of heated jungle. Flashes of the vines torn and the saplings breaking underfoot. He tried to reason, but he couldn't. Hatred poisoned him.

Many a time he had witnessed this black denial of life in mortals. He had heard the wisest of them say, "Life is not worth it," and he had never fathomed it; well, he understood it now.

Vaguely he knew she had turned to those around him. She was welcoming Santino and Pandora into the house.

As if in a trance, he saw her turn to lead the way. Her hair was so long it fell to her waist in back, a great mass of soft red curls. And he

felt the urge to touch it, see if it was as soft as it looked. How positively remarkable that he could be distracted by something lovely at this moment, something impersonal, and that it could make him feel all right; as if nothing had happened; as if the world were good. He beheld the shrine intact again; the shrine at the center of his world. Ah, the idiot human brain, he thought, how it seizes whatever it can. And to think Armand was waiting, so near.…

She led them through a series of large, sparely furnished rooms. The place for all its openness had the air of a citadel; the ceiling beams were enormous; the fireplaces, each with a roaring blaze, were no more than open stone hearths.

So like the old meeting halls of Europe in the dark times, when the Roman roads had fallen to ruin and the Latin tongue had been forgotten, and the old warrior tribes had risen again. The Celts had been triumphant in the end really. They were the ones who conquered Europe; its feudal castles were no more than Celtic encampments; even in the modern states, the Celtic superstitions, more than Roman reason, lived on.

But the appointments of this place hearkened back to even earlier times. Men and women had lived in cities built like this before the invention of writing; in rooms of plaster and wood; among things woven, or hammered by hand.

He rather liked it; ah, the idiot brain again, he thought, that he could like something at such a time. But the places built by immortals always intrigued him. And this one was a place to study slowly, to come to know over a great span of time.

Now they passed through a steel door and into the mountain itself. The smell of the raw earth enclosed him. Yet they walked in new metal corridors, with walls of tin. He could hear the generators, the computers, all the sweet humming electrical sounds that had made him feel so safe in his own house.

Up an iron stairs they went. It doubled back upon itself again and again as Maharet led them higher and higher. Now roughened walls revealed the innards of the mountain, its deep veins of colored clay and rock. Tiny ferns grew here; but where did the light come from? A skylight high above. Little portal to heaven. He glanced up thankfully at the bare glimmer of blue light.

Finally they emerged on a broad landing and entered a small darkened room. A door lay open to a much larger chamber where the others waited; but all Marius could see for the moment was the bright shock of distant firelight, and it made him turn his eyes away.

Someone was waiting here in this little room for him, someone whose presence he had been unable, except by the most ordinary means, to detect. A figure who stood behind him now. And as Maharet went on into the large room, taking Pandora and Santino and Mael with her, he understood what was about to happen. To brace himself he took a slow breath and closed his eyes.

How trivial all his bitterness seemed; he thought of this one whose existence had been for centuries unbroken suffering; whose youth with all its needs had been rendered truly eternal; this one whom he had failed to save, or to perfect. How many times over the years had he dreamed of such a reunion, and he had never had the courage for it; and now on this battlefield, in this time of ruin and upheaval, they were at last to meet.

"My love," he whispered. He felt himself chastened suddenly as he had been earlier when he had flown up and up over the snowy wastes past the realm of the indifferent clouds. Never had he spoken words more heartfelt. "My beautiful Amadeo," he said.

And reaching out he felt the touch of Armand's hand.

Supple still this unnatural flesh, supple as if it were human, and cool and so soft. He couldn't help himself now. He was weeping. He opened his eyes to see the boyish figure standing before him. Oh, such an expression. So accepting, so yielding. Then he opened his arms.

Centuries ago in a palazzo in Venice, he had tried to capture in imperishable pigment the quality of this love. What had been its lesson? That in all the world no two souls contain the same secret, the same gift of devotion or abandon; that in a common child, a wounded child, he had found a blending of sadness and simple grace that would forever break his heart? This one had understood him! This one had loved him as no other ever had.

Through his tears he saw no recrimination for the grand experiment that had gone wrong. He saw the face that he had painted, now darkened slightly with the thing we naively call wisdom; and he saw the same love he had counted upon so totally in those lost nights.

If only there were time, time to seek the quiet of the forest—some warm, secluded place among the soaring redwoods—and there talk together by the hour through long unhurried nights. But the others waited; and so these moments were all the more precious, and all the more sad.

He tightened his arms around Armand. He kissed Armand's lips, and his long loose vagabond hair. He ran his hand covetously over Armand's shoulders. He looked at the slim white hand he held in his own. Every detail he had sought to preserve forever on canvas; every detail he had certainly preserved in death.

"They're waiting, aren't they?" he asked. "They won't give us more than a few moments now."

Without judgment, Armand nodded. In a low, barely audible voice, he said, "It's enough. I always knew that we would meet again." Oh, the memories that the timbre of the voice brought back. The palazzo with its coffered ceilings, beds draped in red velvet. The figure of this boy rushing up the marble staircase, his face flushed from the winter wind off the Adriatic, his brown eyes on fire. "Even in moments of the greatest jeopardy," the voice continued, "I knew we would meet before I would be free to die."

"Free to die?" Marius responded. "We are always free to die, aren't we? What we must have now is the courage to do it, if indeed it is the right thing to do."

Armand appeared to think on this for a moment. And the soft distance that crept into his face brought back the sadness again to Marius. "Yes, that's true," he said.

"I love you," Marius whispered suddenly, passionately as a mortal man might. "I have always loved you. I wish that I could believe in anything other than love at this moment; but I can't."

Some small sound interrupted them. Maharet had come to the door.

Marius slipped his arm around Armand's shoulder. There was one final moment of silence and understanding between them. And then they followed Maharet into an immense mountaintop room.

All of glass it was, except for the wall behind him, and the distant iron chimney that hung from the ceiling above the blazing fire. No other light here save the blaze, and above and beyond, the sharp tips of the

monstrous redwoods, and the bland Pacific sky with its vaporous clouds and tiny cowardly stars.

But it was beautiful still, wasn't it? Even if it was not the sky over the Bay of Naples, or seen from the flank of Annapurna or from a vessel cast adrift in the middle of the blackened sea. The mere sweep of it was beautiful, and to think that only moments ago he had been high up there, drifting in the darkness, seen only by his fellow travelers and by the stars themselves. The joy came back to him again as it had when he looked at Maharet's red hair. No sorrow as when he thought of Armand beside him; just joy, impersonal and transcendent. A reason to remain alive.

It occurred to him suddenly that he wasn't very good at bitterness or regret, that he didn't have the stamina for them, and if he was to recapture his dignity, he had better shape up fast.

A little laugh greeted him, friendly, unobtrusive; a little drunken maybe, the laugh of a fledgling who lacked common sense. He smiled in acknowledgment, darting a glance at the amused one, Daniel. Daniel the anonymous "boy" of *Interview with the Vampire*. It hit him quickly that this was Armand's child, the only child Armand had ever made. A good start on the Devil's Road this creature had, this exuberant and intoxicated being, strengthened with all that Armand had to give.

Quickly he surveyed the others who were gathered around the oval table.

To his right and some distance away, there was Gabrielle, with her blond hair in a braid down her back and her eyes full of undisguised anguish; and beside her, Louis, unguarded and passive as always, staring at Marius mutely as if in scientific inquiry or worship or both; then came his beloved Pandora, her rippling brown hair free over her shoulders and still speckled with the tiny sparkling droplets of melted frost. Santino sat to her right, finally, looking composed once more, all the dirt gone from his finely cut black velvet clothes.

On his left sat Khayman, another ancient one, who gave his name silently and freely, a horrifying being, actually, with a face even smoother than that of Maharet. Marius found he couldn't take his eyes off this one. Never had the faces of the Mother and the Father so

startled him, though they too had had these black eyes and jet black hair. It was the smile, wasn't it? The open, affable expression fixed there in spite of all the efforts of time to wash it away. The creature looked like a mystic or a saint, yet he was a savage killer. Recent feasts of human blood had softened his skin just a little, and given a faint blush to his cheeks.

Mael, shaggy and unkempt as always, had taken the chair to Khayman's left. And after him came another old one, Eric, past three thousand years by Marius's reckoning, gaunt and deceptively fragile in appearance, perhaps thirty when he died. His soft brown eyes regarded Marius thoughtfully. His handmade clothes were like exquisite replicas of the store-bought goods men of business wore today.

But what was this other being? The one who sat to the right of Maharet, who stood directly opposite Marius at the far end? Now, this one truly gave him a shock. The other twin was his first rash conjecture as he stared at her green eyes and her coppery red hair.

But this being had been alive yesterday, surely. And he could find no explanation for her strength, her frigid whiteness; the piercing manner in which she stared at him; and the overwhelming telepathic power that emanated from her, a cascade of dark and finely delineated images which she seemed unable to control. She was seeing with uncanny accuracy the painting he had done centuries ago of his Amadeo, surrounded by black-winged angels as he knelt in prayer. A chill passed over Marius.

"In the crypt of the Talamasca," he whispered. "My painting?" He laughed, rudely, venomously. "And so it's there!"

The creature was frightened; she hadn't meant to reveal her thoughts. Protective of the Talamasca, and hopelessly confused, she shrank back into herself. Her body seemed to grow smaller and yet to redouble its power. A monster. A monster with green eyes and delicate bones. Born yesterday, yes, exactly as he had figured it; there was living tissue in her; and suddenly he understood all about her. This one, named Jesse, had been made by Maharet. This one was an actual human descendant of the woman; and now she had become the fledgling of her ancient mother. The scope of it astonished him and frightened him slightly. The blood racing through the young one's

veins had a potency that was unimaginable to Marius. She was absolutely without thirst; yet she wasn't even really dead.

But he must stop this, this merciless and rummaging appraisal. They were, after all, waiting for him. Yet he could not help but wonder where in God's name were his own mortal descendants, spawn of the nephews and nieces he had so loved when he was alive? For a few hundred years, true, he had followed their progress; but finally, he could no longer recognize them; he could no longer recognize Rome itself. And he had let it all go into darkness, as Rome had passed into darkness. Yet surely there were those walking the earth today who had that old family blood in their veins.

He continued to stare at the red-haired young one. How she resembled her great mother; tall, yet frail of bone, beautiful yet severe. *Some great secret here, something to do with the lineage, the family*.... She wore soft dark clothes rather similar to those of the ancient one; her hands were immaculate; she wore no scent or paint.

They were all of them magnificent in their own way. The tall heavily built Santino was elegant in his priestly black, with his lustrous black eyes and a sensuous mouth. Even the unkempt Mael had a savage and overpowering presence as he glowered at the ancient woman with an obvious mixture of love and hate. Armand's angelic face was beyond description; and the boy Daniel, a vision with his ashen hair and gleaming violet eyes.

Was nobody ugly ever given immortality? Or did the dark magic simply make beauty out of whatever sacrifice was thrown into the blaze? But Gabrielle had been a lovely thing in life surely, with all her son's courage and none of his impetuosity, and Louis, ah, well, Louis of course had been picked for the exquisite bones of his face, for the depth of his green eyes. He had been picked for the inveterate attitude of somber appreciation that he revealed now. He looked like a human being lost among them, his face softened with color and feeling; his body curiously defenseless; his eyes wondering and sad. Even Khayman had an undeniable perfection of face and form, horrifying as the total effect had come to be.

As for Pandora, he saw her alive and mortal when he looked at her, he saw the eager innocent woman who had come to him so many eons ago in the ink-black nighttime streets of Antioch, begging to be made

immortal, not the remote and melancholy being who sat so still now in her simple biblical robes, staring through the glass wall opposite her at the fading galaxy beyond the thickening clouds.

Even Eric, bleached by the centuries and faintly radiant, retained, as Maharet did, an air of great human feeling, made all the more appealing by a beguiling androgynous grace.

The fact was, Marius had never laid eyes on such an assemblage—a gathering of immortals of all ages from the newborn to the most ancient; and each endowed with immeasurable powers and weaknesses, even to the delirious young man whom Armand had skillfully created with all the unspent virtue of his virgin blood. Marius doubted that such a "coven" had ever come together before.

And how did he fit into the picture, he who had been the eldest of his own carefully controlled universe in which the ancients had been silent gods? The winds had cleansed him of the dried blood that had clung to his face and shoulder-length hair. His long black cloak was damp from the snows from which he'd come. And as he approached the table, as he waited belligerently for Maharet to tell him he might be seated, he fancied he looked as much the monster as the others did, his blue eyes surely cold with the animosity that was burning him from within.

"Please," she said to him graciously. She gestured to the empty wooden chair before him, a place of honor obviously, at the foot of the table; that is, if one conceded that she stood at the head.

Comfortable it was, not like so much modern furniture. Its curved back felt good to him as he seated himself, and he could rest his hand on the arm, that was good, too. Armand took the empty chair to his right.

Maharet seated herself without a sound. She rested her hands with fingers folded on the polished wood before her. She bowed her head as if collecting her thoughts to begin.

"Are we all that is left?" Marius asked. "Other than the Queen and the brat prince and—" He paused.

A ripple of silent confusion passed through the others. The mute twin, where was she? What was the mystery?

"Yes," Maharet answered soberly. "Other than the Queen, and the brat prince, and my sister. Yes, we are the only ones left. Or the only

ones left who count."

She paused as if to let her words have their full effect. Her eyes gently took in the complete assembly.

"Far off," she said, "there may be others—old ones who choose to remain apart. Or those she hunts still, who are doomed. But we are what remains in terms of destiny or decision. Or intent."

"And my son," Gabrielle said. Her voice was sharp, full of emotion, and subtle disregard for those present. "Will none of you tell me what she's done with him and where he is?" She looked from the woman to Marius, fearlessly and desperately. "Surely you have the power to know where he is."

Her resemblance to Lestat touched Marius. It was from this one that Lestat had drawn his strength, without doubt. But there was a coldness in her that Lestat would never understand.

"He's with her, as I've already told you," Khayman said, his voice deep and unhurried. "But beyond that she doesn't let us know."

Gabrielle did not believe it, obviously. There was a pulling away in her, a desire to leave here, to go off alone. Nothing could have forced the others away from the table. But this one had made no such commitment to the meeting, it was clear.

"Allow me to explain this," Maharet said, "because it's of the utmost importance. The Mother is skillful at cloaking herself, of course. But we of the early centuries have never been able to communicate silently with the Mother and the Father or with each other. We are all simply too close to the source of the power that makes us what we are. We are deaf and blind to each other's minds just as master and fledgling are among you. Only as time passed and more and more blood drinkers were created did they acquire the power to communicate silently with each other as we have done with mortals all along."

"Then Akasha couldn't find you," Marius said, "you or Khayman—if you weren't with us."

"That's so. She must see us through your minds or not at all. And so we must see her through the minds of others. Except of course for a certain sound we hear now and then on the approach of the powerful, a sound that has to do with a great exertion of energy, and with breath and blood."

"Yes, that sound," Daniel murmured softly. "That awful relentless sound."

"But is there nowhere *we* can hide from her?" Eric asked. "Those of us she can hear and see?" It was a young man's voice, of course, and with a heavy undefinable accent, each word rather beautifully intoned.

"You know there isn't," Maharet answered with explicit patience. "But we waste time talking of hiding. You are here either because she cannot kill you or she chooses not to. And so be it. We must go on."

"Or she hasn't finished," Eric said disgustedly. "She hasn't made up her infernal mind on the matter of who shall die and who shall live!"

"I think you are safe here," Khayman said. "She had her chance with everyone present, did she not?"

But that was just it, Marius realized. It was not at all clear that the Mother had had her chance with Eric, Eric who traveled, apparently, in the company of Maharet. Eric's eyes locked on Maharet. There was some quick silent exchange but it wasn't telepathic. What came clear to Marius was that Maharet had made Eric, and neither knew for certain whether Eric was too strong now for the Mother. Maharet was pleading for calm.

"But Lestat, you can read *his* mind, can't you?" Gabrielle said. "Can't you discover them both through him?"

"Not even I can always cover a pure and enormous distance," Maharet answered. "If there were other blood drinkers left who could pick up Lestat's thoughts and relay them to me, well, then of course I could find him in an instant. But in the main, those blood drinkers are no more. And Lestat has always been good at cloaking his presence; it's natural to him. It's always that way with the strong ones, the ones who are self-sufficient and aggressive. Wherever he is now, he instinctively shuts us out."

"She's taken him," Khayman said. He reached across the table and laid his hand on Gabrielle's hand. "She'll reveal everything to us when she is ready. And if she chooses to harm Lestat in the meantime there is absolutely nothing that any of us can do."

Marius almost laughed. It seemed these ancient ones thought statements of absolute truth were a comfort; what a curious combination of vitality and passivity they were. Had it been so at the

dawn of recorded history? When people sensed the inevitable, they stood stock-still and accepted it? It was difficult for him to grasp.

"The Mother won't harm Lestat," he said to Gabrielle, to all of them. "She loves him. And at its core it's a common kind of love. She won't harm him because she doesn't want to harm herself. And she knows all his tricks, I'll wager, just as we know them. He won't be able to provoke her, though he's probably foolish enough to try."

Gabrielle gave a little nod at that with a trace of a sad smile. It was her considered opinion that Lestat could provoke anyone, finally, given enough time and opportunity; but she let it pass.

She was neither consoled nor resigned. She sat back in the wooden chair and stared past them as if they no longer existed. She felt no allegiance to this group; she felt no allegiance to anyone but Lestat.

"All right then," she said coldly. "Answer the crucial question. If I destroy this monster who's taken my son, do we all die?"

"How the hell are you going to destroy her?" Daniel asked in amazement.

Eric sneered.

She glanced at Daniel dismissively. Eric she ignored. She looked at Maharet. "Well, is the old myth true? If I waste this bitch, to use the vernacular, do I waste the rest of us too?"

There was faint laughter in the gathering. Marius shook his head. But Maharet gave a little smile of acknowledgment as she nodded:

"Yes. It was tried in the earlier times. It was tried by many a fool who didn't believe it. The spirit who inhabits her animates us all. Destroy the host, you destroy the power. The young die first; the old wither slowly; the eldest perhaps would go last. But she is the Queen of the Damned, and the Damned can't live without her. Enkil was only her consort, and that is why it does not matter now that she has slain him and drunk his blood to the last drop."

"The Queen of the Damned." Marius whispered it aloud softly. There had been a strange inflection when Maharet had said it, as if memories had stirred in her, painful and awful, and undimmed by time. Undimmed as the dreams were undimmed. Again he had a sense of the starkness and severity of these ancient beings, for whom language perhaps, and all the thoughts governed by it, had not been needlessly complex.

“Gabrielle,” Khayman said, pronouncing the name exquisitely, “we cannot help Lestat. We must use this time to make a plan.” He turned to Maharet. “The dreams, Maharet. Why have the dreams come to us now? This is what we all want to know.”

There was a protracted silence. All present had known, in some form, these dreams. Only lightly had they touched Gabrielle and Louis, so lightly in fact that Gabrielle had, before this night, given no thought to them, and Louis, frightened by Lestat, had pushed them out of his mind. Even Pandora, who confessed no personal knowledge of them, had told Marius of Azim′s warning. Santino had called them horrid trances from which he couldn′t escape.

Marius knew now that they had been a noxious spell for the young ones, Jesse and Daniel, almost as cruel as they had been for him.

Yet Maharet did not respond. The pain in her eyes had intensified; Marius felt it like a soundless vibration. He felt the spasms in the tiny nerves.

He bent forward slightly, folding his hands before him on the table.

“Maharet,” he said. “Your sister is sending the dreams. Isn′t this so?”

No answer.

“Where is Mekare?” he pushed.

Silence again.

He felt the pain in her. And he was sorry, very sorry once more for the bluntness of his speech. But if he was to be of use here, he must push things to a conclusion. He thought of Akasha in the shrine again, though why he didn′t know. He thought of the smile on her face. He thought of Lestat—protectively, desperately. But Lestat was just a symbol now. A symbol of himself. Of them all.

Maharet was looking at him in the strangest way, as if he were a mystery to her. She looked at the others. Finally she spoke:

“You witnessed our separation,” she said quietly. “All of you. You saw it in the dreams. You saw the mob surround me and my sister; you saw them force us apart; in stone coffins they placed us, Mekare unable to cry out to me because they had cut out her tongue, and I unable to see her for the last time because they had taken my eyes.

“But I saw through the minds of those who hurt us. I knew it was to the seashores that we were being taken. Mekare to the west; and I to

the east.

"Ten nights I drifted on the raft of pitch and logs, entombed alive in the stone coffin. And finally when the raft sank and the water lifted the stone lid, I was free. Blind, ravenous, I swam ashore and stole from the first poor mortal I encountered the eyes to see and the blood to live.

"But Mekare? Into the great western ocean she had been cast—the waters that ran to the end of the world.

"Yet from that first night on I searched for her; I searched through Europe, through Asia, through the southern jungles and the frozen lands of the north. Century after century I searched, finally crossing the western ocean when mortals did to take my quest to the New World as well.

"I never found my sister. I never found a mortal or immortal who had set eyes upon her or heard her name. Then in this century, in the years after the second great war, in the high mountain jungles of Peru, the indisputable evidence of my sister's presence was discovered by a lone archaeologist on the walls of a shallow cave—pictures my sister had created—of stick figures and crude pigment which told the tale of our lives together, the sufferings you all know.

"But six thousand years ago these drawings had been carved into the stone. And six thousand years ago my sister had been taken from me. No other evidence of her existence was ever found.

"Yet I have never abandoned the hope of finding my sister. I have always known, as only a twin might, that she walks this earth still, that I am not here alone.

"And now, within these last ten nights, I have, for the first time, proof that my sister is still with me. It has come to me through the dreams.

"These are Mekare's thoughts; Mekare's images; Mekare's rancor and pain."

Silence. All eyes were fixed on her. Marius was quietly stunned. He feared to be the one to speak again, but this was worse than he had imagined and the implications were now entirely clear.

The origin of these dreams was almost certainly not a conscious survivor of the millennia; rather the visions had—very possibly—come from one who had no more mind now than an animal in whom

memory is a spur to action which the animal does not question or understand. It would explain their clarity; it would explain their repetition.

And the flashes he had seen of something moving through the jungles, this was Mekare herself.

"Yes," Maharet said immediately. " 'In the jungles. Walking,' " she whispered. "The words of the dying archaeologist, scribbled on a piece of paper and left for me to find when I came. 'In the jungles. Walking.' But where?"

It was Louis who broke the silence.

"Then the dreams may not be a deliberate message," he said, his words marked by a slight French accent. "They may simply be the outpouring of a tortured soul."

"No. They are a message," Khayman said. "They are a warning. They are meant for all of us, and for the Mother as well."

"But how can you say this?" Gabrielle asked him. "We don't know what her mind is now, or that she even knows that we are here."

"You don't know the whole story," Khayman said. "I know it. Maharet will tell it." He looked to Maharet.

"I saw her," Jesse said unobtrusively, her voice tentative as she looked at Maharet. "She's crossed a great river; she's coming. I saw her! No, that's not right. I saw as if I were she."

"Yes," Marius answered. "Through her eyes!"

"I saw her red hair when I looked down," Jesse said. "I saw the jungle giving way with each step."

"The dreams must be a communication," Mael said with sudden impatience. "For why else would the message be so strong? Our private thoughts don't carry such power. She raises her voice; she wants someone or something to know what she is thinking…."

"Or she is obsessed and acting upon that obsession," Marius answered. "And moving towards a certain goal." He paused. "To be united with you, her sister! What else could she possibly want?"

"No," Khayman said. "That is not her goal." Again he looked at Maharet. "She has a promise to keep to the Mother, and that is what the dreams mean."

Maharet studied him for a moment in silence; it seemed this was almost beyond her endurance, this discussion of her sister, yet she

fortified herself silently for the ordeal that lay ahead.

"We were there in the beginning," Khayman said. "We were the first children of the Mother, and in these dreams lies the story of how it began."

"Then you must tell us … all of it," Marius said as gently as he could.

"Yes." Maharet sighed. "And I will." She looked at each of them in turn and then back to Jesse. "I must tell you the whole story," she said, "so that you can understand what we may be powerless to avert. You see, this is not merely the story of the beginning. It may be the story of the end as well." She sighed suddenly as if the prospect were too much for her. "Our world has never seen such upheaval," she said, looking at Marius. "Lestat's music, the rising of the Mother, so much death."

She looked down for a moment, as if collecting herself again for the effort. And then she glanced at Khayman and at Jesse, who were the ones she most loved.

"I have never told it before," she said as if pleading for indulgence. "It has for me now the hard purity of mythology—those times when I was alive. When I could still see the sun. But in this mythology is rooted all the truths that I know. And if we go back, we may find the future, and the means to change it. The very least that we can do is seek to understand."

A hush fell. All waited with respectful patience for her to begin.

"In the beginning," she said, "we were witches, my sister and I. We talked to the spirits and the spirits loved us. Until she sent her soldiers into our land."

3
LESTAT:
THE QUEEN OF HEAVEN

She let me go. Instantly I began to plummet; the wind was a roar in my ears. But the worst part was that I couldn't see! I heard her say *Rise*.

There was a moment of exquisite helplessness. I was plunging towards the earth and nothing was going to stop it; then I looked up, my eyes stinging, the clouds closing over me, and I remembered the tower, and the feeling of rising. I made the decision. *Go up!* And my descent stopped at once.

It was as if a current of air had caught me. I went up hundreds of feet in one instant, and then the clouds were below me—a white light that I could scarcely see. I decided to drift. Why did I have to go anywhere for the moment? Maybe I could open my eyes fully, and see through the wind, if I wasn't afraid of the pain.

She was laughing somewhere—in my head or over it, I didn't know which. *Come on, prince, come higher*.

I spun around and shot upwards again, until I saw her coming towards me, her garments swirling about her, her heavy plaits lifted more gently by the wind.

She caught me and kissed me. I tried to steady myself, holding onto her, to look down and really see something through the breaks in the clouds. Mountains, snow-covered and dazzling in the moonlight, with great bluish flanks that disappeared into deep valleys of fathomless snow.

"Lift me now," she whispered in my ear. "Carry me to the northwest."

"I don't know the direction."

"Yes, you do. The body knows it. Your mind knows it. Don't ask them which way it is. Tell them that is the way you wish to go. You know the principles. When you lifted your rifle, you looked at the wolf running; you didn't calculate the distance or the speed of the bullet;

you fired; the wolf went down."

I rose again with that same incredible buoyancy; and then I realized she had become a great weight in my arm. Her eyes were fixed on me; she was making me carry her. I smiled. I think I laughed aloud. I lifted her and kissed her again, and continued the ascent without interruption. *To the northwest*. That is to the right and to the right again and higher. My mind did know it; it knew the terrain over which we'd come. I made a little artful turn and then another; I was spinning, clutching her close to me, rather loving the weight of her body, the press of her breasts against me, and her lips again closing delicately on mine.

She drew close to my ear. "Do you hear it?" she asked.

I listened; the wind seemed annihilating; yet there came a dull chorus from the earth, human voices chanting; some in time with each other, others at random; voices praying aloud in an Asian tongue. Far far away I could hear them, and then near at hand. Important to distinguish the two sounds. First, there was a long procession of worshipers ascending through the mountain passes and over the cliffs, chanting to keep themselves alive as they trudged on in spite of weariness and cold. And within a building, a loud, ecstatic chorus, chanting fiercely over the clang of cymbals and drums.

I gathered her head close to mine and looked down, but the clouds had become a solid bed of whiteness. Yet I could see through the minds of the worshipers the brilliant vision of a courtyard and a temple of marble arches and vast painted rooms. The procession wound towards the temple.

"I want to see it!" I said. She didn't answer, but she didn't stop me as I drifted downward, stretching out on the air as if I were a bird flying, yet descending until we were in the very middle of the clouds. She had become light again, as if she were nothing.

And as we left the sea of whiteness, I saw the temple gleaming below, a tiny clay model of itself, it seemed, the terrain buckling here and there beneath its meandering walls. The stench of burning bodies rose from its blazing pyres. And towards this cluster of roofs and towers, men and women wound their way along perilous paths from as far as I could see.

"Tell me who is inside, my prince," she said. "Tell me who is the

god of this temple."

See it! Draw close to it. The old trick, but all at once I began to fall. I let out a terrible cry. She caught me.

"More care, my prince," she said, steadying me.

I thought my heart was going to burst.

"You cannot move out of your body to look into the temple and fly at the same time. Look through the eyes of the mortals the way you did it before."

I was still shaking, clutching hold of her.

"I'll drop you again if you don't calm yourself," she said gently. "Tell your heart to do as you would have it do."

I gave a great sigh. My body ached suddenly from the constant force of the wind. And my eyes, they were stinging so badly again, I couldn't see anything. But I tried to subdue these little pains; or rather to ignore them as if they didn't exist. I took hold of her firmly and started down, telling myself to go slowly; and then again I tried to find the minds of the mortals and see what they saw:

Gilded walls, cusped arches, every surface glittering with decoration; incense rising, mingling with the scent of fresh blood. In blurred snatches I saw him, "the god of the temple."

"A vampire," I whispered. "A bloodsucking devil. He draws them to himself, and slaughters them at his leisure. The place reeks of death."

"And so there shall be more death," she whispered, kissing my face again tenderly. "Now, very fast, so fast mortal eyes can't see you. Bring us down to the courtyard beside the funeral pyre."

I could have sworn it was done before I'd decided it; I'd done no more than consider the idea! And there I was fallen against a rough plaster wall, with hard stones under my feet, trembling, my head reeling, my innards grinding in pain. My body wanted to keep going down, right through solid rock.

Sinking back against the wall, I heard the chanting before I could see anything. I smelt the fire, the bodies burning; then I saw the flames.

"That was very clumsy, my prince," she said softly. "We almost struck the wall."

"I don't exactly know how it happened."

"Ah, but that's the key," she said, "the word 'exact.' The spirit in

you obeys swiftly and completely. Consider a little more. You don't cease to hear and see as you descend; it merely happens faster than you realize. Do you know the pure mechanics of snapping your fingers? No, you do not. Yet you can do it. A mortal child can do it."

I nodded. The principle was clear all right, as it had been with the target and the gun.

"Merely a matter of degrees," I said.

"And of surrender, fearless surrender."

I nodded. The truth was I wanted to fall on a soft bed and sleep. I blinked my eyes at the roaring fire, the sight of the bodies going black in the flames. One of them wasn't dead; an arm was raised, fingers curled. Now he was dead. Poor devil. All right.

Her cold hand touched my cheek. It touched my lips, and then she smoothed back the tangled hair of my head.

"You've never had a teacher, have you?" she asked. "Magnus orphaned you the night he made you. Your father and brothers were fools. As for your mother, she hated her children."

"I've always been my own teacher," I said soberly. "And I must confess I've always been my favorite pupil as well."

Laughter.

"Maybe it was a little conspiracy," I said. "Of pupil and teacher. But as you said, there was never anyone else."

She was smiling at me. The fire was playing in her eyes. Her face was luminous, frighteningly beautiful.

"Surrender," she said, "and I'll teach you things you never dreamed of. You've never known battle. Real battle. You've never felt the purity of a righteous cause."

I didn't answer. I felt dizzy, not merely from the long journey through the air, but from the gentle caress of her words, and the fathomless blackness of her eyes. It seemed a great part of her beauty was the sweetness of her expression, the serenity of it, the way that her eyes held steady even when the glistening white flesh of her face moved suddenly with a smile or a subtle frown. I knew if I let myself, I'd be terrified of what was happening. She must have known it too. She took me in her arms again. "Drink, prince," she whispered. "Take the strength you need to do as I would have you do."

I don't know how many moments passed. When she pulled away, I

was drugged for an instant, then the clarity was as always overwhelming. The monotonous music of the temple was thundering through the walls.

"Azim! Azim! Azim!"

As she drew me along after her, it seemed my body didn't exist anymore except as a vision I kept in place. I felt of my own face, the bones beneath my skin, to touch something solid that was myself; but this skin, this sensation. It was utterly new. What was left of me?

The wooden doors opened as if by magic before us. We passed silently into a long corridor of slender white marble pillars and scalloped arches, but this was but the outer border of an immense central room. And the room was filled with frenzied, screaming worshipers who did not even see us or sense our presence as they continued to dance, to chant, to leap into the air in the hopes of glimpsing their one and only god.

"Keep at my side, Lestat," she said, the voice cutting through the din as if I'd been touched by a velvet glove.

The crowd parted, violently, bodies thrust to right and left. Screaming replaced the chant immediately; the room was in chaos, as a path lay open for us to the center of the room. The cymbals and drums were silenced; moans and soft piteous cries surrounded us.

Then a great sigh of wonder rose as Akasha stepped forward and threw back her veil.

Many feet away, in the center of the ornate floor stood the blood god, Azim, clothed in a black silk turban and jeweled robes. His face was disfigured with fury as he stared at Akasha, as he stared at me.

Prayers rose from the crowd around us; a shrill voice cried out an anthem to "the eternal mother."

"Silence!" Azim commanded. I didn't know the language; but I understood the word.

I could hear the sound of human blood in his voice; I could see it rushing through his veins. Never in fact had I seen any vampire or blood drinker so choked with human blood as was this one; he was as old as Marius, surely, yet his skin had a dark golden gleam. A thin veil of blood sweat covered it completely, even to the backs of his large, soft-looking hands.

"You dare to come into my temple!" he said, and again the

language itself eluded me but the meaning was telepathically clear.

"You will die now!" Akasha said, the voice even softer than it had been a moment ago. "You who have misled these hopeless innocents; you who have fed upon their lives and their blood like a bloated leech."

Screams rose from the worshipers, cries for mercy. Again, Azim told them to be quiet.

"What right have you to condemn my worship," he cried, pointing his finger at us, "you who have sat silent on your throne since the beginning of time!"

"Time did not begin with you, my cursed beauty," Akasha answered. "I was old when you were born. And I am risen now to rule as I was meant to rule. And you shall die as a lesson to your people. You are my first great martyr. You shall die now!"

He tried to run at her, and I tried to step between them; but it was all too fast to be seen. She caught him by some invisible means and shoved him backwards so that his feet slid across the marble tile and he teetered, almost falling and then dancing as he sought to right himself, his eyes rolling up into his head.

A deep gurgling cry came out of him. He was burning. His garments were burning; and then the smoke rose from him gray and thin and writhing in the gloom as the terrified crowd gave way to screams and wails. He was twisting as the heat consumed him; then suddenly, bent double, he rose, staring at her, and flew at her with his arms out.

It seemed he would reach her before she thought what to do. And again, I tried to step before her, and with a quick shove of her right hand she threw me back into the human swarm. There were half-naked bodies all around, struggling to get away from me as I caught my balance.

I spun around and saw him poised not three feet from her, snarling at her, and trying to reach her over some invisible and unsurmountable force.

"Die, damnable one!" she cried out. (I clamped my hands over my ears.) "Go into the pit of perdition. I create it for you now."

Azim's head exploded. Smoke and flame poured out of his ruptured skull. His eyes turned black. With a flash, his entire frame ignited; yet he went down in a human posture, his fist raised against her, his legs

curling as if he meant to try to stand again. Then his form disappeared utterly in a great orange blaze.

Panic descended upon the crowd, just as it had upon the rock fans outside the concert hall when the fires had broken out and Gabrielle and Louis and I had made our escape.

Yet it seemed the hysteria here reached a more dangerous pitch. Bodies crashed against the slender marble pillars. Men and women were crushed instantly as others rushed over them to the doors.

Akasha turned full circle, her garments caught in a brief dance of black and white silk around her; and everywhere human beings were caught as if by invisible hands and flung to the floor. Their bodies went into convulsions. The women, looking down at the stricken victims, wailed and tore their hair.

It took me a moment to realize what was happening, that she was killing the men. It wasn't fire. It was some invisible attack upon the vital organs. Blood poured from their ears and their eyes as they expired. Enraged, several of the women ran at her, only to meet the same fate. The men who attacked her were vanquished instantly.

Then I heard her voice inside my head:

Kill them, Lestat. Slaughter the males to the last one.

I was paralyzed. I stood beside her, lest one of them get close to her. But they didn't have a chance. This was beyond nightmare, beyond the stupid horrors to which I'd been a party all of my accursed life.

Suddenly she was standing in front of me, grasping my arms. Her soft icy voice had become an engulfing sound in my brain.

My prince, my love. You will do this for me. Slaughter the males so that the legend of their punishment will surpass the legend of the temple. They are the henchmen of the blood god. The women are helpless. Punish the males in my name.

"Oh, God help me, please don't ask this of me," I whispered. "They are pitiful humans!"

The crowd seemed to have lost its spirit. Those who had run into the rear yard were trapped. The dead and the mourning lay everywhere around us, while from the ignorant multitude at the front gates there rose the most piteous pleas.

"Let them go, Akasha, please," I said to her. Had I ever in my life begged for anything as I did now? What had these poor beings to do

with us?

She drew closer to me. I couldn't see anything now but her black eyes.

"My love, this is divine war. Not the loathsome feeding upon human life which you have done night after night without scheme or reason save to survive. You kill now in my name and for my cause and I give you the greatest freedom ever given man: I tell you that to slay your mortal brother is right. Now use the new power I've given you. Choose your victims one by one, use your invisible strength or the strength of your hands."

My head was spinning. Had I this power to make men drop in their tracks? I looked around me in the smoky chamber where the incense still poured from the censers and bodies tumbled over one another, men and women embracing each other in terror, others crawling into corners as if there they would be safe.

"There is no life for them now, save in the lesson," she said. "Do as I command."

It seemed I saw a vision; for surely this wasn't from my heart or mind; I saw a thin emaciated form rise before me; I gritted my teeth as I glared at it, concentrating my malice as if it were a laser, and then I saw the victim rise off his feet and tumble backwards as the blood came out of his mouth. Lifeless, withered, he fell to the floor. It had been like a spasm; and then as effortless as shouting, as throwing one's voice out unseen yet powerful, over a great space.

Yes, kill them. Strike for the tender organs; rupture them; make the blood flow. You know that you have always wanted to do it. To kill as if it were nothing, to destroy without scruple or regret!

It was true, so true; but it was also forbidden, forbidden as nothing else on earth is forbidden.…

My love, it is as common as hunger; as common as time. And now you have my power and command. You and I shall put an end to it through what we will do now.

A young man rushed at me, crazed, hands out to catch my throat. *Kill him.* He cursed me as I drove him backwards with the invisible power, feeling the spasm deep in my throat and my belly; and then a sudden tightening in the temples; I *felt* it touching him, I felt it pouring out of me; I felt it as surely as if I had penetrated his skull

with my fingers and was squeezing his brain. Seeing it would have been crude; there was no need to see it. All I needed to see was the blood spurting from his mouth and his ears, and down his naked chest.

Oh, was she ever right, how I had wanted to do it! How I had dreamed of it in my earliest mortal years! The sheer bliss of killing them, killing them under all their names which were the same name —*enemy*—those who deserved killing, those who were born for killing, killing with full force, my body turning to solid muscle, my teeth clenched, my hatred and my invisible strength made one.

In all directions they ran, but that only further inflamed me. I drove them back, the power slamming them into the walls. I aimed for the heart with this invisible tongue and heard the heart when it burst. I turned round and round, directing it carefully yet instantly at this one, and that one, and then another as he ran through the doorway, and yet another as he rushed down the corridor, and yet another as he tore the lamp from its chains and hurled it foolishly at me.

Into the back rooms of the temple I pursued them, with exhilarating ease through the heaps of gold and silver, tossing them over on their backs as if with long invisible fingers, then clamping those invisible fingers on their arteries until the blood gushed through the bursting flesh.

The women crowded together weeping; others fled. I heard bones break as I walked over the bodies. And then I realized that she too was killing them; that we were doing it together, and the room was now littered with the mutilated and the dead. A dark, rank smell of blood permeated everything; the fresh cold wind could not dispel it; the air was filled with soft, despairing cries.

A giant of a man raced at me, eyes bulging as he tried to stop me with a great curved sword. In rage I snatched the sword from him and sliced through his neck. Right through the bone the blade went, breaking as it did so, and head and broken blade fell at my feet.

I kicked aside the body. I went in the courtyard and stared at those who shrank from me in terror. I had no more reason, no more conscience. It was a mindless game to chase them, corner them, thrust aside the women behind whom they hid, or who struggled so pitifully to hide them, and aim the power at the right place, to pump the power at that vulnerable spot until they lay still.

The front gates! She was calling me. The men in the courtyard were dead; the women were tearing their hair, sobbing. I walked through the ruined temple, through the mourners and the dead they mourned. The crowd at the gates was on its knees in the snow, ignorant of what had gone on inside, voices raised in desperate entreaty.

Admit me to the chamber; admit me to the vision and the hunger of the lord.

At the sight of Akasha, their cries rose in volume. They reached out to touch her garments as the locks broke and the gates swung open. The wind howled down the mountain pass; the bell in the tower above gave a faint hollow sound.

Again I shoved them down, rupturing brains and hearts and arteries. I saw their thin arms flung out in the snow. The wind itself stank of blood. Akasha's voice cut through the horrid screams, telling the women to draw back and away and they would be safe.

Finally I was killing so fast I couldn't even see it anymore: The males. The males must die. I was rushing towards completion, that every single male thing that moved or stirred or moaned should be dead.

Like an angel I moved on down the winding path, with an invisible sword. And finally all the way down the cliff they dropped to their knees and waited for death. In a ghastly passivity they accepted it!

Suddenly I felt her holding me though she was nowhere near me. I heard her voice in my head:

Well done, my prince.

I couldn't stop. This invisible thing was one of my limbs now. I couldn't withdraw it and bring it back into myself. It was as if I was poised to take a breath, and if I did not take that breath I should die. But she held me motionless, and a great calm was coming over me, as if a drug had been fed into my veins. Finally I grew still and the power concentrated itself within me and became part of me and nothing more.

Slowly I turned around. I looked at the clear snowy peaks, the perfectly black sky, and at the long line of dark bodies that lay on the path from the temple gates. The women were clinging to one another, sobbing in disbelief, or giving off low and terrible moans. I smelled death as I have never smelled it; I looked down at the bits of flesh and

gore that had splashed my garments. But my hands! My hands were so white and clean. *Dear God, I didn't do it! Not me. I didn't. And my hands, they are clean!*

Oh, but I had! And what am I that I could do it? That I loved it, loved it beyond all reason, loved it as men have always loved it in the absolute moral freedom of war—

It seemed a silence had fallen.

If the women still cried I didn't hear them. I didn't hear the wind either. I was moving, though why I didn't know. I had dropped down to my knees and I reached out for the last man I had slain, who was flung like broken sticks in the snow, and I put my hand into the blood on his mouth and then I smeared this blood all over both my hands and pressed them to my face.

Never had I killed in two hundred years that I hadn't tasted the blood, and taken it, along with the life, into myself. And that was a monstrous thing. But more had died here in these few ghastly moments than all those I'd ever sent to their untimely graves. And it had been done with the ease of thought and breath. Oh, this can never be atoned for! This can never never be justified!

I stood staring at the snow, through my bloody fingers; weeping and yet hating that as well. Then gradually I realized that some change had taken place with the women. Something was happening around me, and I could feel it as if the cold air had been warmed and the wind had risen and left the steep slope undisturbed.

Then the change seemed to enter into me, subduing my anguish and even slowing the beat of my heart.

The crying *had* ceased. Indeed the women were moving by twos and threes down the path as if in a trance, stepping over the dead. It seemed that sweet music was playing, and that the earth had suddenly yielded spring flowers of every color and description, and that the air was full of perfume.

Yet these things weren't happening, were they? In a haze of muted colors, the women passed me, in rags and silks, and dark cloaks. I shook myself all over. I had to think clearly! This was no time for disorientation. This power and these dead bodies were no dream and I could not, absolutely could not, yield to this overwhelming sense of well-being and peace.

“Akasha!” I whispered.

Then lifting my eyes, not because I wanted to, but because I had to, I saw her standing on a far promontory, and the women, young and old, were moving towards her, some so weak from the cold and from hunger that others had to carry them over the frozen ground.

A hush had fallen over all things.

Without words she began to speak to those assembled before her. It seemed she addressed them in their own language, or in something quite beyond specific language. I couldn’t tell.

In a daze, I saw her stretch out her arms to them. Her black hair spilled down on her white shoulders, and the folds of her long simple gown barely moved in the soundless wind. It struck me that never in all my life had I beheld anything quite as beautiful as she was, and it was not merely the sum of her physical attributes, it was the pure serenity, the essence that I perceived with my innermost soul. A lovely euphoria came over me as she spoke.

Do not be afraid, she told them. The bloody reign of your god is over, and now you may return to the truth.

Soft anthems rose from the worshipers. Some dipped their foreheads to the ground before her. And it appeared that this pleased her or at least that she would allow it.

You must return now to your villages, she said. You must tell those who knew of the blood god that he is dead. The Queen of Heaven has destroyed him. The Queen will destroy all those males who still believe in him. The Queen of Heaven will bring a new reign of peace on earth. There will be death for the males who have oppressed you, but you must wait for my sign.

As she paused the anthems rose again. The Queen of Heaven, the Goddess, the Good Mother—the old litany sung in a thousand tongues the world over was finding a new form.

I shuddered. I made myself shudder. I had to penetrate that spell! It was a trick of the power, just as the killing had been a trick of the power—something definable and measurable, yet I remained drugged by the sight of her, and by the anthems. By the soft embrace of this feeling: all is well; all is as it should be. We are all safe.

Somewhere, from the sunlit recesses of my mortal memory a day came back, a day like many before it, when in the month of May in

our village we had crowned a statue of the Virgin amid banks of sweet-smelling flowers, when we had sung exquisite hymns. Ah, the loveliness of that moment, when the crown of white lilies had been lifted to the Virgin's veiled head. I'd gone home that night singing those hymns. In an old prayer book, I'd found a picture of the Virgin, and it had filled me with enchantment and wondrous religious fervor such as I felt now.

And from somewhere deeper in me even, where the sun had never penetrated, came the realization that if I believed in her and what she was saying, then this unspeakable thing, this slaughter that I had committed against fragile and helpless mortals would somehow be redeemed.

You kill now in my name and for my cause and I give you the greatest freedom ever given man: I tell you that to slay your brother is right.

"Go on," she said aloud. "Leave this temple forever. Leave the dead to the snow and the winds. Tell the people. A new era is coming when those males who glorify death and killing shall reap their reward; and the era of peace shall be yours. I will come again to you. I will show you the way. Await my coming. And I will tell you then what you must do. For now, believe in me and what you have seen here. And tell others that they too may believe. Let the men come and see what awaits them. Wait for signs from me."

In a body they moved to obey her command; they ran down the mountain path towards those distant worshipers who had fled the massacre; their cries rose thin and ecstatic in the snowy void.

The wind gusted through the valley; high on the hill, the temple bell gave another dull peal. The wind tore at the scant garments of the dead. The snow had begun to fall, softly and then thickly, covering brown legs and arms and faces, faces with open eyes.

The sense of well-being had dissipated, and all the raw aspects of the moment were clear and inescapable again. These women, this visitation.… Bodies in the snow! Undeniable displays of power, disruptive and overwhelming.

Then a soft little sound broke the silence; things shattering in the temple above; things falling, breaking apart.

I turned and looked at her. She stood still on the little promontory, the cloak very loose over her shoulders, her flesh as white as the

falling snow. Her eyes were fixed on the temple. And as the sounds continued, I knew what was happening within.

Jars of oil breaking; braziers falling. The soft whisper of cloth exploding into flame. Finally the smoke rose, thick and black, billowing from the bell tower, and from over the rear wall.

The bell tower trembled; a great roaring noise echoed against the far cliffs; and then the stones broke loose; the tower collapsed. It fell down into the valley, and the bell, with one final peal, disappeared into the soft white abyss.

The temple was consumed in fire.

I stared at it, my eyes watering from the smoke that blew down over the path, carrying with it tiny ashes and bits of soot.

Vaguely, I was aware that my body wasn't cold despite the snow. That it wasn't tired from the exertion of killing. Indeed my flesh was whiter than it had been. And my lungs took in the air so efficiently that I couldn't hear my own breathing; even my heart was softer, steadier. Only my soul was bruised and sore.

For the first time ever in my life, either mortal or immortal, I was afraid that I might die. I was afraid that she might destroy me and with reason, because I simply could not do again what I'd just done. I could not be part of this design. And I prayed I couldn't be made to do it, that I would have the strength to refuse.

I felt her hands on my shoulders.

"Turn and look at me, Lestat," she said.

I did as she asked. And there it was again, the most seductive beauty I'd ever beheld.

And I am yours, my love. You are my only true companion, my finest instrument. You know this, do you not?

Again, a deliberate shudder. Where in God's name are you, Lestat! Are you going to shrink from speaking your heart?

"Akasha, help me," I whispered. "Tell me. Why did you want me to do this, this killing? What did you mean when you told them that the males would be punished? That there would be a reign of peace on earth?" How stupid my words sounded. Looking into her eyes, I could believe she was the goddess. It was as if she drew my conviction out of me, as if it were merely blood.

I was quaking suddenly with fear. Quaking. I knew what the word

meant for the first time. I tried to say more but I merely stammered. Finally I blurted it out:

"In the name of what morality will all this be done?"

"In the name of *my* morality!" she answered, the faint little smile as beautiful as before. "I am the reason, the justification, the right by which it is done!" Her voice was cold with anger, but her blank, sweet expression had not changed. "Now, listen to me, beautiful one," she said. "I love you. You've awakened me from my long sleep and to my great purpose; it gives me joy merely to look at you, to see the light in your blue eyes, and to hear the sound of your voice. It would wound me beyond your understanding of pain to see you die. But as the stars are my witness, you will aid me in my mission. Or you will be no more than the instrument for the commencement, as Judas was to Christ. And I shall destroy you as Christ destroyed Judas once your usefulness is past."

Rage overcame me. I couldn't help myself. The shift from fear to anger was so fast, I was boiling inside.

"But how do you dare to do these things!" I asked. "To send these ignorant souls abroad with mad lies!"

She stared at me in silence; it seemed she would strike out at me; her face became that of a statue again; and I thought, Well, the moment is now. I will die the way I saw Azim die. I can't save Gabrielle or Louis. I can't save Armand. I won't fight because it's useless. I won't move when it happens. I'll go deep into myself, perhaps, if I must run from the pain. I'll find some last illusion like Baby Jenks did and cling to it until I am no longer Lestat.

She didn't move. The fires on the hill were burning down. The snow was coming more thickly and she had become like a ghost standing there in the silent snowfall, white as the snow was white.

"You really aren't afraid of anything, are you?" she said.

"I'm afraid of you," I said.

"Oh, no, I do not think so."

I nodded. "I am. And I'll tell you what else I am. Vermin on the face of the earth. Nothing more than that. A loathsome killer of human beings. But I *know* that's what I am! I do not pretend to be what I am not! You have told these ignorant people that you are the Queen of Heaven! How do you mean to redeem those words and what they will

accomplish among stupid and innocent minds?"

"Such arrogance," she said softly. "Such incredible arrogance, and yet I love you. I love your courage, even your rashness, which has always been your saving grace. I even love your stupidity. Don't you understand? There is no promise now that I cannot keep! I shall make the myths over! I *am* the Queen of Heaven. And Heaven shall reign on earth finally. I am anything that I say I am!"

"Oh, lord, God," I whispered.

"Do not speak those hollow words. Those words that have never meant anything to anyone! You stand in the presence of the only goddess you will ever know. You are the only god these people will ever know! Well, you must think like a god now, my beauty. You must reach for something beyond your selfish little ambitions. Don't you realize what's taken place?"

I shook my head. "I don't know anything. I'm going mad."

She laughed. She threw back her head and laughed. "We are what they dream of, Lestat. We cannot disappoint them. If we did, the truth implicit in the earth beneath our feet would be betrayed."

She turned away from me. She went back up again to the small outcropping of snow-covered rock where she had stood before. She was looking down into the valley, at the path that cut along the sheer cliff beneath her, at the pilgrims turning back now as the fleeing women gave them the word.

I heard cries echo off the stone face of the mountain. I heard the men dying down there, as she, unseen, struck them with that power, that great seductive and easy power. And the women stammering madly of miracles and visions. And then the wind rose, swallowing everything, it seemed; the great indifferent wind. I saw her shimmering face for an instant; she came towards me; I thought this is death again, this is death coming, the woods and the wolves coming, and no place to hide; and then my eyes closed.

When I awoke I was in a small house. I didn't know how we'd gotten here, or how long ago the slaughter in the mountains had been. I'd been drowning in the voices, and now and then a dream had come to me, a terrible yet familiar dream. I had seen two redheaded women in this dream. They knelt beside an altar where a body lay waiting for

them to perform some ritual, some crucial ritual. And I'd been struggling desperately to understand the dream's content, for it seemed that everything depended upon it; I must not forget it again.

But now all that faded. The voices, the unwelcome images; the moment pressed in.

The place where I lay was dark and dirty, and full of foul smells. In little dwellings all around us, mortals lived in misery, babies crying in hunger, amid the smell of cooking fires and rancid grease.

There was war in this place, true war. Not the debacle of the mountainside, but old-fashioned twentieth-century war. From the minds of the afflicted I caught it in viscid glimpses—an endless existence of butchery and menace—buses burned, people trapped inside beating upon the locked windows; trucks exploding, women and children running from machine gun fire.

I lay on the floor as if someone had flung me there. And Akasha stood in the doorway, her cloak wrapped tightly around her, even to her eyes, as she peered out into the dark.

When I had climbed to my feet and come up beside her, I saw a mud alley full of puddles and other small dwellings, some with roofs of tin and others with roofs of sagging newspaper. Against the filthy walls men slept, wrapped from head to toe as if in shrouds. But they were not dead; and the rats they sought to avoid knew it. And the rats nibbled at the wrappings, and the men twitched and jerked in their sleep.

It was hot here, and the warmth cooked the stenches of the place—urine, feces, the vomit of dying children. I could even smell the hunger of the children, as they cried in spasms. I could smell the deep dank sea smell of the gutters and the cesspools.

This was no village; it was a place of hovels and shacks, of hopelessness. Dead bodies lay between the dwellings. Disease was rampant; and the old and the sick sat silent in the dark, dreaming of nothing, or of death perhaps, which was nothing, as the babies cried.

Down the alley there came now a tottering child with a swollen belly, screaming as it rubbed with a small fist its swollen eye.

It seemed not to see us in the darkness. From door to door it went crying, its smooth brown skin glistening in the dim flicker of the

cooking fires as it moved away.

"Where are we?" I asked her.

Astonished, I saw her turn and lift her hand tenderly to stroke my hair and my face. Relief washed through me. But the raw suffering of this place was too great for that relief to matter. So she had not destroyed me; she had brought me to hell. What was the purpose? All around me I felt the misery, the despair. What could alter the suffering of these abject people?

"My poor warrior," she said. Her eyes were full of blood tears. "Don't you know where we are?"

I didn't answer.

She spoke slowly, close to my ear. "Shall I recite the poetry of names?" she asked. "Calcutta, if you wish, or Ethiopia; or the streets of Bombay; these poor souls could be the peasants of Sri Lanka; of Pakistan; of Nicaragua, of El Salvador. It does not matter what it is; it matters how much there is of it; that all around the oases of your shining Western cities it exists; it is three-fourths of the world! Open your ears, my darling; listen to their prayers; listen to the silence of those who've learned to pray for nothing. For nothing has always been their portion, whatever the name of their nation, their city, their tribe."

We walked out together into the mud street; past piles of dung and filthy puddles and the starving dogs that came forth, and the rats that darted across our path. Then we came to the ruins of an ancient palace. Reptiles slithered among the stones. The blackness swarmed with gnats. Derelicts slept in a long row beside a running gutter. Beyond in the swamp, bodies rotted, bloated and forgotten.

Far away on the highway, the trucks passed, sending their rumble through the stifling heat like thunder. The misery of the place was like a gas, poisoning me as I stood there. This was the ragged edge of the savage garden of the world in which hope could not flower. This was a sewer.

"But what can we do?" I whispered. "Why have we come here?" Again, I was distracted by her beauty, the look of compassion that suddenly infected her and made me want to weep.

"We can reclaim the world," she said, "as I've told you. We can make the myths real; and the time will come when this will be a myth,

that humans ever knew such degradation. We shall see to that, my love."

"But this is for them to solve, surely. It isn't only their obligation, it's their right. How can we aid in such a thing? How can our interference not lead to catastrophe?"

"We shall see that it does not," she said calmly. "Ah, but you don't begin to comprehend. You don't realize the strength we now possess. Nothing can stop us. But you must watch now. You are not ready and I would not push you again. When you kill again for me you must have perfect faith and perfect conviction. Be assured that I love you and I know that a heart can't be educated in the space of a night. But *learn* from what you see and hear."

She went back out in the street. For one moment she was merely a frail figure, moving through the shadows. Then suddenly I could hear beings roused in the tiny hovels all around us, and I saw the women and children emerge. Around me the sleeping forms began to stir. I shrank back into the dark.

I was trembling. I wanted desperately to do something, to beg her to have patience!

But again that sense of peace descended, that spell of perfect happiness, and I was traveling back through the years to the little French church of my childhood as the hymns began. Through my tears I saw the shining altar. I saw the icon of the Virgin, a gleaming square of gold above the flowers; I heard the Aves whispered as if they were a charm. Under the arches of Notre Dame de Paris I heard the priests singing "Salve Regina."

Her voice came, clear, inescapable as it had been before, as if it were inside my brain. Surely the mortals heard it with the same irresistible power. The command itself was without words; and the essence was beyond dispute—that a new order was to begin, a new world in which the abused and injured would know peace and justice finally. The women and the children were exhorted to rise, and to slay all males within this village. All males save one in a hundred should be killed, and all male babies save one in a hundred should also be slaughtered immediately. Peace on earth would follow once this had been done far and wide; there would be no more war; there would be food and plenty.

I was unable to move, or to voice my terror. In panic I heard the frenzied cries of the women. Around me, the sleeping derelicts rose from their wrappings, only to be driven back against the walls, dying as I had seen the men die in Azim's temple.

The street rang with cries. In clouded flashes, I saw people running; I saw the men rushing out of the houses, only to drop in the mud. On the distant road the trucks went up in flames, wheels screeching as the drivers lost control. Metal was hurled against metal. Gas tanks exploded; the night was full of magnificent light. Rushing from house to house, the women surrounded the men and beat them with any weapon they could find. Had the village of shanties and hovels ever known such vitality as it did now in the name of death?

And she, the Queen of Heaven, had risen and was hovering above the tin rooftops, a stark delicate figure burning against the clouds as if made of white flame.

I closed my eyes and turned towards the wall, fingers clutching at the crumbling rock. To think that we were solid as this, she and I. Yet not of it. No, never of it. And we did not belong here! We had no right.

But even as I wept, I felt the soft embrace of the spell again; the sweet drowsy sensation of being surrounded by flowers, of slow music with its inevitable and enthralling rhythm. I felt the warm air as it passed into my lungs; I felt the old stone tiles beneath my feet.

Soft green hills stretched out before me in hallucinatory perfection —a world without war or deprivation in which women roamed free and unafraid, women who even under provocation would shrink from the common violence that lurks in the heart of every man.

Against my will I lingered in this new world, ignoring the thud of bodies hitting the wet earth, and the final curses and cries of those who were being killed.

In great dreamy flashes, I saw whole cities transformed; I saw streets without fear of the predatory and the senselessly destructive; streets in which beings moved without urgency or desperation. Houses were no longer fortresses; gardens no longer needed their walls.

"Oh, Marius, help me," I whispered, even as the sun poured down on the tree-lined pathways and endless green fields. "Please, please help me."

And then another vision shocked me, crowding out the spell. I saw fields again, but there was no sunlight; this was a real place somewhere—and I was looking through the eyes of someone or something walking in a straight line with strong strides at incredible speed. But who was this someone? What was this being's destination? Now, this vision was being sent; it was powerful, refusing to be ignored. But why?

It was gone as quickly as it had come.

I was back in the crumbling palace arcade, among the scattered dead; staring through the open archway at the rushing figures; hearing the high-pitched cries of victory and jubilation.

Come out, my warrior, where they can see you. Come to me.

She stood before me with her arms extended. God, what did they think they were seeing? For a moment I didn't move, then I went towards her, stunned and compliant, feeling the eyes of the women, their worshipful gaze. They fell down on their knees as she and I came together. I felt her hand close too tightly; I felt my heart thudding. *Akasha, this is a lie, a terrible lie. And the evil sown here will flourish for a century*.

Suddenly the world tilted. We weren't standing on the ground anymore. She had me in her embrace and we were rising over the tin roofs, and the women below were bowing and waving their arms, and touching their foreheads to the mud.

"Behold the miracle, behold the Mother, behold the Mother and her Angel …"

Then in an instant, the village was a tiny scattering of silver roofs far below us, all that misery alchemized into images, and we were traveling once again on the wind.

I glanced back, trying in vain to recognize the specific location—the dark swamps, the lights of the nearby city, the thin strip of road where the overturned trucks still burned. But she was right, it really didn't matter.

Whatever was going to happen had now begun, and I did not know what could possibly stop it.

4
THE STORY OF THE TWINS
PART I

All eyes were fixed on Maharet as she paused. Then she began again, her words seemingly spontaneous, though they came slowly and were carefully pronounced. She seemed not sad, but eager to reexamine what she meant to describe.

"Now, when I say that my sister and I were witches, I mean this: we inherited from our mother—as she had from her mother—the power to communicate with the spirits, to get them to do our bidding in small and significant ways. We could feel the presence of the spirits—which are in the main invisible to human eyes—and the spirits were drawn to us.

"And those with such powers as we had were greatly revered amongst our people, and sought after for advice and miracles and glimpses into the future, and occasionally for putting the spirits of the dead to rest.

"What I am saying is that we were perceived as good; and we had our place in the scheme of things.

"There have always been witches, as far as I know. And there are witches now, though most no longer understand what their powers are or how to use them. Then there are those known as clairvoyants or mediums, or channelers. Or even psychic detectives. It is all the same thing. These are people who for reasons we may never understand attract spirits. Spirits find them downright irresistible; and to get the notice of these people, the spirits will do all kinds of tricks.

"As for the spirits themselves, I know that you're curious about their nature and properties, that you did not—all of you—believe the story in Lestat's book about how the Mother and the Father were made. I'm not sure that Marius himself believed it, when he was told the old story, or when he passed it on to Lestat."

Marius nodded. Already he had numerous questions. But Maharet gestured for patience. "Bear with me," she said. "I will tell you all we

knew of the spirits then, which is the same as what I know of them now. Understand of course that others may use a different name for these entities. Others may define them more in the poetry of science than I will do.

"The spirits spoke to us only telepathically; as I have said, they were invisible; but their presence could be felt; they had distinct personalities, and our family of witches had over many generations given them various names.

"We divided them as sorcerers have always done into the good and the evil; but there is no evidence that they themselves have a sense of right and wrong. The evil spirits were those who were openly hostile to human beings and who liked to play malicious tricks such as the throwing of stones, the making of wind, and other such pesty things. Those who possess humans are often 'evil' spirits; those who haunt houses and are called poltergeists fall into this category, too.

"The good spirits could love, and wanted by and large to be loved as well. Seldom did they think up mischief on their own. They would answer questions about the future; they would tell us what was happening in other, remote places; and for very powerful witches such as my sister and me, for those whom the good spirits really loved, they would do their greatest and most taxing trick: they would make the rain.

"But you can see from what I'm saying that labels such as good and evil were self-serving. The good spirits were useful; the bad spirits were dangerous and nerve-wracking. To pay attention to the bad spirits—to invite them to hang about—was to court disaster, because ultimately they could not be controlled.

"There was also abundant evidence that what we called bad spirits envied us that we were fleshly and also spiritual—that we had the pleasures and powers of the physical while possessing spiritual minds. Very likely, this mixture of flesh and spirit in human beings makes all spirits curious; it is the source of our attraction for them; but it rankles the bad spirits; the bad spirits would know sensuous pleasure, it seems; yet they cannot. The good spirits did not evince such dissatisfaction.

"Now, as to where these spirits came from—they used to tell us that they had always been here. They would brag that they had watched

human beings change from animals into what they were. We didn't know what they meant by such remarks. We thought they were being playful or just lying. But now, the study of human evolution makes it obvious that the spirits had witnessed this development. As for questions about their nature—how they were made or by whom—well, these they never answered. I don't think they understood what we were asking. They seemed insulted by the questions or even slightly afraid, or even thought the questions were humorous.

"I suspect that someday the scientific nature of spirits will be known. I suspect that they are matter and energy in sophisticated balance as is everything else in our universe, and that they are no more magical than electricity or radio waves, or quarks or atoms, or voices over the telephone—the things that seemed supernatural only two hundred years ago. In fact the poetry of modern science has helped me to understand them in retrospect better than any other philosophical tool. Yet I cling to my old language rather instinctively.

"It was Mekare's contention that she could now and then see them, and that they had tiny cores of physical matter and great bodies of whirling energy which she compared to storms of lightning and wind. She said there were creatures in the sea which were equally exotic in their organization; and insects who resembled the spirits, too. It was always at night that she saw their physical bodies, and they were never visible for more than a second, and usually only when the spirits were in a rage.

"Their size was enormous, she said, but then they said this too. They told us we could not imagine how big they were; but then they love to brag; one must constantly sort from their statements the part which makes sense.

"That they exert great force upon the physical world is beyond doubt. Otherwise how could they move objects as they do in poltergeist hauntings? And how could they have brought together the clouds to make the rain? Yet very little is really accomplished by them for all the energy they expend. And that was a key, always, to controlling them. There is only so much they can do, and no more, and a good witch was someone who understood that perfectly.

"Whatever their material makeup is, they have no apparent biological needs, these entities. They do not age; they do not change.

And the key to understanding their childish and whimsical behavior lies in this. They have no *need* to do anything; they drift about unaware of time, for there is no physical reason to care about it, and they do whatever strikes the fancy. Obviously they see our world; they are part of it; but how it looks to them I can't guess.

"Why witches attract them or interest them I don't know either. But that's the crux of it; they see the witch, they go to her, make themselves known to her, and are powerfully flattered when they are noticed; and they do her bidding in order to get more attention; and in some cases, in order to be loved.

"And as this relationship progresses, they are made for the love of the witch to concentrate on various tasks. It exhausts them but it also delights them to see human beings so impressed.

"But imagine now, how much fun it is for them to listen to prayers and try to answer them, to hang about altars and make thunder after sacrifices are offered up. When a clairvoyant calls upon the spirit of a dead ancestor to speak to his descendants, they are quite thrilled to start chattering away in pretense of being the dead ancestor, though of course they are not that person; and they will telepathically extract information from the brains of the descendants in order to delude them all the more.

"Surely all of you know the pattern of their behavior. It's no different now than it was in our time. But what is different is the attitude of human beings to what spirits do; and that difference is crucial.

"When a spirit in these times haunts a house and makes predictions through the vocal cords of a five-year-old child, no one much believes it except those who see and hear it. It does not become the foundation of a great religion.

"It is as if the human species has grown immune to such things; it has evolved perhaps to a higher stage where the antics of spirits no longer befuddle it. And though religions linger—old religions which became entrenched in darker times—they are losing their influence among the educated very rapidly.

"But I'll say more on this later on. Let me continue now to define the properties of a witch, as such things relate to me and my sister, and to what happened to us.

“It was an inherited thing in our family. It may be physical for it seemed to run in our family line through the women and to be coupled invariably with the physical attributes of green eyes and red hair. As all of you know—as you’ve come to learn in one way or another since you entered this house—my child, Jesse, was a witch. And in the Talamasca she used her powers often to comfort those who were plagued by spirits and ghosts.

“Ghosts, of course, are spirits too. But they are without question spirits of those who have been human on earth; whereas the spirits I have been speaking of are not. However, one can never be too sure on this point. A very old earthbound ghost could forget that he had ever been alive; and possibly the very malevolent spirits are ghosts; and that is why they hunger so for the pleasures of the flesh; and when they possess some poor human being they belch obscenities. For them, the flesh is filth and they would have men and women believe that erotic pleasures and malice are equally dangerous and evil.

“But the fact is, given the way spirits lie—if they don’t want to tell you—there’s no way to know why they do what they do. Perhaps their obsession with the erotic is merely something abstracted from the minds of men and women who have always felt guilty about such things.

“To return to the point, it was mostly the women in our family who were witches. In other families it passes through both men and women. Or it can appear full-blown in a human being for reasons we can’t grasp.

“Be that as it may, ours was an old, old family of witches. We could count witches back fifty generations, to what was called The Time Before the Moon. That is, we claimed to have lived in the very early period of earth history before the moon had come into the night sky.

“The legends of our people told of the coming of the moon, and the floods, storms, and earthquakes that attended it. Whether such a thing really happened I don’t know. We also believed that our sacred stars were the Pleiades, or the Seven Sisters, that all blessings came from that constellation, but why, I never knew or cannot remember.

“I talk of old myths now, beliefs that were old before I was born. And those who commune with spirits become for obvious reasons rather skeptical of things.

“Yet science even now cannot deny or verify the tales of The Time Before the Moon. The coming of the moon—its subsequent gravitational pull—has been used theoretically to explain the shifting of the polar caps and the late ice ages. Maybe there was truth in the old stories, truths that will someday be clarified for us all.

“Whatever the case, ours was an old line. Our mother had been a powerful witch to whom the spirits told numerous secrets, reading men’s minds as they do. And she had a great effect upon the restless spirits of the dead.

“In Mekare and me, it seemed her power had been doubled, as is often true with twins. That is, each of us was twice as powerful as our mother. As for the power we had together, it was incalculable. We talked to the spirits when we were in the cradle. We were surrounded by them when we played. As twins, we developed our own secret language, which not even our mother understood. But the spirits knew it. The spirits would understand anything we said to them; they could even speak our secret language back to us.

“Understand, I don’t tell you all this out of pride. That would be absurd. I tell you so that you will grasp what we were to each other and to our own people before the soldiers of Akasha and Enkil came into our land. I want you to understand why this evil—this making of the blood drinkers—eventually happened!

“We were a great family. We had lived in the caves of Mount Carmel for as long as anybody knew. And our people had always built their encampments on the valley floor at the foot of the mountain. They lived by herding goats and sheep. And now and then they hunted; and they grew a few crops, for the making of the hallucinogenic drugs we took to make trances—this was part of our religion—and also for the making of beer. They cut down the wild wheat which grew then in profusion.

“Small round mud-brick houses with thatched roofs made up our village, but there were others which had grown into small cities, and some in which all the houses were entered from the roofs.

“Our people made a highly distinctive pottery which they took to the markets of Jericho for trade. From there they brought back lapis lazuli, ivory, incense, and mirrors of obsidian and other such fine things. Of course we knew of many other cities, vast and beautiful as

Jericho, cities which are now buried completely under the earth and which may never be found.

"But by and large we were simple people. We knew what writing was—that is, the concept of it. But it did not occur to us to use such a thing, as words had a great power and we would not have dared to write our names, or curses or truths that we knew. If a person had your name, he could call on the spirits to curse you; he could go out of his body in a trance and travel to where you were. Who could know what power you would put into his hands if he could write your name on stone or papyrus? Even for those who weren't afraid, it was distasteful at the very least.

"And in the large cities, writing was largely used for financial records which we of course could keep in our heads.

"In fact, all knowledge among our people was committed to memory; the priests who sacrificed to the bull god of our people—in whom we did not believe, by the way—committed his traditions and beliefs to memory and taught them to the young priests by rote and by verse. Family histories were told from memory, of course.

"We did however paint pictures; they covered the walls of the bull shrines in the village.

"And my family, living in the caves on Mount Carmel as we had always, covered our secret grottoes with paintings which no one saw but us. Therein we kept a kind of record. But this was done with caution. I never painted or drew the image of myself, for example, until after catastrophe had struck and I and my sister were the things which we all are.

"But to return to our people, we were peaceful; shepherds, sometime craftsmen, sometime traders, no more, no less. When the armies of Jericho went to war, sometimes our young men joined them; but that was what they wanted to do. They wanted to be young men of adventure, and to be soldiers and know glory of that sort. Others went to the cities, to see the great markets, the majesty of the courts, or the splendor of the temples. And some went to ports of the Mediterranean to see the great merchant ships. But for the most part life went on in our villages as it had for many centuries without change. And Jericho protected us, almost indifferently, because it was the magnet which drew an enemy's force unto itself.

“Never, never, did we hunt men to eat their flesh! This was not our custom! And I cannot tell you what an abomination such cannibalism would have been to us, the eating of enemy flesh. Because we were cannibals, and the eating of the flesh had a special significance—we ate the flesh of our dead.”

Maharet paused for a moment as if she wanted the significance of these words to be plain to all.

Marius saw the image again of the two red-haired women kneeling before the funeral feast. He felt the warm midday stillness, and the solemnity of the moment. He tried to clear his mind and see only Maharet’s face.

“Understand,” Maharet said. “We believed that the spirit left the body at death; but we also believed that the residue of all living things contains some tiny amount of power after life itself is gone. For example, a man’s personal belongings retain some bit of his vitality; and the body and bones, surely. And of course when we consumed the flesh of our dead this residue, so to speak, would be consumed as well.

“But the real reason we ate the dead was out of respect. It was in our view the proper way to treat the remains of those we loved. We took into ourselves the bodies of those who’d given us life, the bodies from which our bodies had come. And so a cycle was completed. And the sacred remains of those we loved were saved from the awful horror of putrefaction within the earth, or from being devoured by wild beasts, or burnt as if they were fuel or refuse.

“There is a great logic to it if you think on it. But the important thing to realize is that it was part and parcel of us as a people. The sacred duty of every child was to consume the remains of his parents; the sacred duty of the tribe was to consume the dead.

“Not a single man, woman, or child died in our village whose body was not consumed by kith or kin. Not a single man, woman, or child of our village had not consumed the flesh of the dead.”

Again, Maharet paused, her eyes sweeping the group slowly before she went on.

“Now, it was not a time of great wars,” she said. “Jericho had been at peace for as long as anyone could remember. And Nineveh had been at peace as well.

“But far away, to the southwest in the Nile Valley, the savage

people of that land made war as they had always done upon the jungle peoples south of them so that they might bring back captives for their spits and pots. For not only did they devour their own dead with all proper respect as we did, they ate the bodies of their enemies; they gloried in it. They believed the strength of the enemy went into their bodies when they consumed his flesh. Also they liked the taste of the flesh.

"We scorned what they did, for the reasons I've explained. How could anyone want the flesh of an enemy? But perhaps the crucial difference between us and the warlike dwellers of the Nile Valley was not that they ate their enemies, but that they were warlike and we were peaceful. We did not have any enemies.

"Now, about the time that my sister and I reached our sixteenth year, a great change occurred in the Nile Valley. Or so we were told.

"The aging Queen of that realm died without a daughter to carry on the royal blood. And amongst many ancient peoples the royal blood went only through the female line. Since no male can ever be certain of the paternity of his wife's child, it was the Queen or the Princess who brought with her the divine right to the throne. This is why Egyptian pharaohs of a later age often married their sisters. It was to secure their royal right.

"And so it would have been with this young King Enkil if he had had a sister, but he did not. He did not even have a royal cousin or aunt to marry. But he was young and strong and determined to rule his land. Finally, he settled upon a new bride, not from his own people, but from those of the city of Uruk in the Tigris and Euphrates Valley.

"And this was Akasha, a beauty of the royal family, and a worshiper of the great goddess Inanna, and one who could bring into Enkil's kingdom the wisdom of her land. Or so the gossip went in the marketplaces of Jericho and Nineveh and with the caravans that came to trade for our wares.

"Now the people of the Nile were farmers already, but they tended to neglect this to hunt to make war for human flesh. And this horrified the beautiful Akasha, who set about at once to turn them away from this barbaric habit as possibly anyone of higher civilization might do.

"She probably also brought with her writing, as the people of Uruk

had it—they were great keepers of records—but as writing was something largely scorned by us, I do not know this for sure. Perhaps the Egyptians had already begun to write on their own.

"You cannot imagine the slowness with which such things affect a culture. Records of taxation might be kept for generations before anyone commits to a clay tablet the words of a poem. Peppers and herbs might be cultivated by a tribe for two hundred years before anyone thinks to grow wheat or corn. As you know, the Indians of South America had toys with wheels when the Europeans swept down upon them; and jewelry they had, made of metal. But they had no wheels in use in any other form whatsoever; and they did not use metal for their weapons. And so they were defeated by the Europeans almost at once.

"Whatever the case, I don't know the full story of the knowledge Akasha brought with her from Uruk. I do know that our people heard great gossip about the ban upon all cannibalism in the Nile Valley, and how those who disobeyed were cruelly put to death. The tribes who had hunted for flesh for generations were infuriated that they could no longer enjoy this sport; but even greater was the fury of all the people that they could not eat their own dead. Not to hunt, that was one thing, but to commit one's ancestors to the earth was a horror to them as it would have been to us.

"So in order that Akasha's edict would be obeyed, the King decreed that all the bodies of the dead must be treated with unguents and wrapped up. Not only could one not eat the sacred flesh of mother or father, but it must be secured in linen wrappings at great expense, and these intact bodies must be displayed for all to see, and then placed in tombs with proper offerings and incantation of the priest.

"The sooner the wrapping was done the better; because no one could then get to the flesh.

"And to further assist the people in this new observance, Akasha and Enkil convinced them that the spirits of the dead would fare better in the realm to which they had gone if their bodies were preserved in these wrappings on earth. In other words, the people were told, 'Your beloved ancestors are not neglected; rather they are well kept.'

"We thought it was very amusing when we heard it—wrapping the

dead and putting them away in furnished rooms above or below the desert sand. We thought it amusing that the spirits of the dead should be helped by the perfect maintenance of their bodies on earth. For as anyone knows who has ever communicated with the dead, it is better that they forget their bodies; it is only when they relinquish their earthly image that they can rise to the higher plane.

"And now in Egypt in the tombs of the very rich and very religious, there lay these things—these mummies in which the flesh rotted away.

"If anyone had told us that this custom of mummification would become entrenched in that culture, that for four thousand years the Egyptians would practice it, that it would become a great and enduring mystery to the entire world—that little children in the twentieth century would go into museums to gaze at mummies—we would not have believed such a thing.

"However, it did not matter to us, really. We were very far from the Nile Valley. We could not even imagine what these people were like. We knew their religion had come out of Africa, that they worshiped the god Osiris, and the sun god, Ra, and animal gods as well. But we really didn't understand these people. We didn't understand their land of inundation and desert. When we held in our hands fine objects which they had made, we knew some faint shimmer of their personalities, but it was alien. We felt sorry for them that they could not eat their dead.

"When we asked the spirits about them, the spirits seemed mightily amused by the Egyptians. They said the Egyptians had 'nice voices' and 'nice words' and that it was pleasurable to visit their temples and altars; they liked the Egyptian tongue. Then they seemed to lose interest in the question, and to drift off as was often the case.

"What they said fascinated us but it didn't surprise us. We knew how the spirits liked our words and our chants and our songs. So the spirits were playing gods there for the Egyptians. The spirits did that sort of thing all the time.

"As the years passed, we heard that Enkil, to unite his kingdom and stop the rebellion and resistance of the die-hard cannibals, had made a great army and embarked on conquests to north and south. He had launched ships in the great sea. It was an old trick: get them all to fight an enemy and they'll stop quarreling at home.

“But again, what had this to do with us? Ours was a land of serenity and beauty, of laden fruit trees and fields of wild wheat free for anyone to cut with the scythe. Ours was a land of green grass and cool breezes. But there wasn’t anything that anyone would want to take from us. Or so we believed.

“My sister and I continued to live in perfect peace on the gentle slopes of Mount Carmel, often speaking to our mother and to each other silently, or with a few private words, which we understood perfectly; and learning from our mother all she knew of the spirits and men’s hearts.

“We drank the dream potions made by our mother from the plants we grew on the mountain, and in our trances and dream states, we traveled back into the past and spoke with our ancestors—very great witches whose names we knew. In sum, we lured the spirits of these ancient ones back to earth long enough to give us some knowledge. We also traveled out of our bodies and high over the land.

“I could spend these hours telling what we saw in these trances; how once Mekare and I walked hand in hand through the streets of Nineveh, gazing on wonders which we had not imagined; but these things are not important now.

“Let me say only what the company of the spirits meant to us—the soft harmony in which we lived with all living things around us and with the spirits; and how at moments, the love of the spirits was palpable to us, as Christian mystics have described the love of God or his saints.

“We lived in bliss together, my sister and I and our mother. The caves of our ancestors were warm and dry; and we had all things that we needed—fine robes and jewelry and lovely combs of ivory and sandals of leather—brought to us by the people as offerings, for no one ever paid us for what we did.

“And every day the people of our village came to consult with us, and we would put their questions to the spirits. We would try to see the future, which of course the spirits can do after a fashion, insofar as certain things tend to follow an inevitable course.

“We looked into minds with our telepathic power and we gave the best wisdom that we could. Now and then those possessed were brought to us. And we drove out the demon, or the bad spirit, for that

is all it was. And when a house was bedeviled, we went there and ordered the bad spirit away.

"We gave the dream potion to those who requested it. And they would fall into the trance, or sleep and dream heavily in vivid images, which we sought then to interpret or explain.

"For this we didn't really need the spirits though sometimes we sought their particular advice. We used our own powers of understanding and deep vision, and often the information handed down to us, as to what various images mean.

"But our greatest miracle—which took all our power to accomplish, and which we could never guarantee—was the bringing down of the rain.

"Now, in two basic ways we worked this miracle—'little rain,' which was largely symbolic and a demonstration of power and a great healing thing for our people's souls. Or 'big rain,' which was needed for the crops, and which was very hard, indeed, to do if we could do it at all.

"Both required a great wooing of the spirits, a great calling of their names, and demanding that they come together and concentrate and use their force at our command. 'Little rain' was often done by our most familiar spirits, those who loved Mekare and me most particularly, and had loved our mother and her mother, and all our ancestors before us, and could always be counted upon to do hard tasks out of love.

"But many spirits were required for 'big rain' and since some of these spirits seemed to loathe each other and to loathe cooperation, a great deal of flattery had to be thrown into the bargain. We had to do chants, and a great dance. For hours, we worked at it as the spirits gradually took interest, came together, became enamored of the idea, and then finally set to work.

"Mekare and I were able to accomplish 'big rain' only three times. But what a lovely thing it was to see the clouds gather over the valley, to see the great blinding sheets of rain descend. All our people ran out into the downpour; the land itself seemed to swell, to open, to give thanks.

" 'Little rain' we did often; we did it for others, we did it for joy.

"But it was the making of 'big rain' that really spread our fame far

and wide. We had always been known as the witches of the mountain; but now people came to us from the cities of the far north, from lands whose names we didn't know.

"Men waited their turn in the village to come to the mountain and drink the potion and have us examine their dreams. They waited their turn to seek our counsel or sometimes merely to see us. And of course our village served them meat and drink and took an offering for this, and all profited, or so it seemed. And in this regard what we did was not so different from what doctors of psychology do in this century; we studied images; we interpreted them; we sought for some truth from the subconscious mind; and the miracles of 'little rain' and 'big rain' merely bolstered the faith of others in our abilities.

"One day, half a year I think before our mother was to die, a letter came into our hands. A messenger had brought it from the King and Queen of Kemet, which was the land of Egypt as the Egyptians called it themselves. It was a letter written on a clay tablet as they wrote in Jericho and Nineveh, and there were little pictures in the clay, and the beginnings of what men would later call cuneiform.

"Of course we could not read it; in fact, we found it frightening, and thought that it might be a curse. We did not want to touch it, but touch it we had to do if we were to understand anything about it that we should know.

"The messenger said that his sovereigns Akasha and Enkil had heard of our great power and would be honored if we would visit at their court; they had sent a great escort to accompany us to Kemet, and they would send us home with great gifts.

"We found ourselves, all three, distrustful of this messenger. He was speaking the truth as far as he knew it, but there was more to the whole thing.

"So our mother took the clay tablet into her hands. Immediately, she felt something from it, something which passed through her fingers and gave her great distress. At first she wouldn't tell us what she had seen; then taking us aside, she said that the King and Queen of Kemet were evil, great shedders of blood, and very disregarding of others' beliefs. And that a terrible evil would come to us from this man and woman, no matter what the writing said.

"Then Mekare and I touched the letter and we too caught the

presentiment of evil. But there was a mystery here, a dark tangle, and caught up with the evil was an element of courage and what seemed good. In sum this was no simple plot to steal us and our power; there was some genuine curiosity and respect.

"Finally we asked the spirits—those two spirits which Mekare and I most loved. They came near to us and they read the letter which was a very easy thing for them to do. They said that the messenger had told the truth. But some terrible danger would come to us if we were to go to the King and Queen of Kemet.

" 'Why?' we asked the spirits.

" 'Because the King and Queen will ask you questions,' the spirits answered, 'and if you answer truthfully, which you will, the King and Queen will be angry with you, and you will be destroyed.'

"Of course we would never have gone to Egypt anyway. We didn't leave our mountain. But now we knew for sure that we must not. We told the messenger with all respect that we could not leave the place where we had been born, that no witch of our family had ever left here, and we begged him to tell this to the King and Queen.

"And so the messenger left and life returned to its normal routine.

"Except that several nights later, an evil spirit came to us, one which we called Amel. Enormous, powerful, and full of rancor, this thing danced about the clearing before our cave trying to get Mekare and me to take notice of him, and telling us that we might soon need his help.

"We were long used to the blandishments of evil spirits; it made them furious that we would not talk to them as other witches and wizards might. But we knew these entities to be untrustworthy and uncontrollable and we had never been tempted to use them and thought that we never would.

"This Amel, in particular, was maddened by our 'neglect' of him, as he called it. And he declared over and over again that he was 'Amel, the powerful,' and 'Amel, the invincible,' and we should show him some respect. For we might have great need of him in the future. We might need him more than we could imagine, for trouble was coming our way.

"At this point, our mother came out of the cave and demanded of this spirit what was this trouble that he saw.

“This shocked us because we had always been forbidden by her to speak to evil spirits; and when she had spoken to them it was always to curse them or drive them away; or to confuse them with riddles and trick questions so that they got angry, felt stupid, and gave up.

“Amel, the terrible, the evil, the overwhelming—whatever he called himself, and his boasting was endless—declared only that great trouble was coming and we should pay him the proper respect if we were wise. He then bragged of all the evil he had worked for the wizards of Nineveh. That he could torment people, bedevil them, and even prick them as if he were a swarm of gnats! He could draw blood from humans, he declared; and he liked the taste of it; and he would draw blood for us.

“My mother laughed at him. ‘How could you do such a thing?’ she demanded. ‘You are a spirit; you have no body; you can taste nothing!’ she said. And this is the sort of language which always made spirits furious, for they envy us the flesh, as I’ve said.

“Well, this spirit, to demonstrate his power, came down upon our mother like a gale; and immediately her good spirits fought him and there was a terrible commotion over the clearing, but when it had died away and Amel had been driven back by our guardian spirits, we saw that there were tiny pricks upon our mother’s hand. Amel, the evil one, had drawn blood from her, exactly as he had said he would—as if a swarm of gnats had tormented her with little bites.

“My mother looked at these tiny pinprick wounds; the good spirits went mad to see her treated with such disrespect, but she told them to be still. Silently she pondered this thing, how it could be possible, and how this spirit might taste the blood that he had drawn.

“And it was then that Mekare explained her vision that these spirits had infinitesimal material cores at the very center of their great invisible bodies, and it was possibly through this core that the spirit tasted the blood. Imagine, Mekare said, the wick of a lamp, but a tiny thing within a flame. The wick might absorb blood. And so it was with the spirit who appeared to be all flame but had that tiny wick in it.

“Our mother was scornful but she did not like this thing. She said ironically that the world was full of wonders enough without evil spirits with a taste for blood. ‘Be gone, Amel,’ she said, and laid curses on him, that he was trivial, unimportant, did not matter, was not to be

recognized, and might as well blow away. In other words the things she always said to get rid of pesty spirits—the things which priests say even now in slightly different form when they seek to exorcise children who are possessed.

"But what worried our mother more than Amel's antics was his warning, that evil was coming our way. It deepened the distress she had felt when she took hold of the Egyptian tablet. Yet she did not ask the good spirits for comfort or advice. Maybe she knew better than to ask them. But this I can never know. Whatever was the case, our mother knew something was going to happen, and clearly she felt powerless to prevent it. Perhaps she understood that sometimes, when we seek to prevent disaster, we play into its hands.

"Whatever was the truth of it, she grew sick in the days that followed, then weak, and then unable to speak.

"For months she lingered, paralyzed, half asleep. We sat by her night and day and sang to her. We brought flowers to her and we tried to read her thoughts. The spirits were in a terrible state of agitation as they loved her. And they made the wind blow on the mountain; they tore the leaves from the trees.

"All the village was in sorrow. Then one morning the thoughts of our mother took shape again; but they were fragments. We saw sunny fields and flowers and images of things she'd known in childhood; and then only brilliant colors and little more.

"We knew our mother was dying, and the spirits knew it. We did our best to calm them, but some of them had gone into a rage. When she died, her ghost would rise and pass through the realm of the spirits and they would lose her forever and go mad for a while in their grief.

"But finally it happened, as it was perfectly natural and inevitable, and we came out of the cave to tell the villagers our mother had gone to higher realms. All the trees of the mountain were caught in the wind made by the spirits; the air was full of green leaves. My sister and I wept; and for the first time in my life I thought I heard the spirits; I thought I heard their cries and lamentations over the wind.

"At once the villagers came to do what must be done.

"First our mother was laid out on a stone slab as was the custom so that all could come and pay their respects. She was dressed in the

white gown she so loved in life, of Egyptian linen, and all her fine jewelry from Nineveh and the rings and necklaces of bone which contained tiny bits of our ancestors, and which would soon come to us.

"And after ten hours had passed, and hundreds had come to visit, both from our village and all the surrounding villages, we then prepared the body for the funeral feast. For any other dead person of our village, the priests would have done this honor. But we were witches and our mother was a witch; and we alone could touch her. And in privacy, and by the light of oil lamps, my sister and I removed the gown from our mother and covered her body completely with fresh flowers and leaves. We sawed open her skull and lifted the top carefully so that it remained intact at the forehead, and we removed her brain and placed it on a plate with her eyes. Then with an equally careful incision we removed the heart and placed it on another plate. Then these plates were covered with heavy domes of clay to protect them.

"And the villagers came forward and built a brick oven around the body of our mother on the stone slab, with the plates beside her, and they put the fire in the oven, beneath the slab, between the rocks upon which it rested, and the roasting began.

"All night it took place. The spirits had quieted because the spirit of our mother was gone. I don't think the body mattered to them; what we did now did not matter, but it certainly mattered to us.

"Because we were witches and our mother was a witch, we alone would partake of her flesh. It was all ours by custom and right. The villagers would not assist in the feast as they might have done at any other where only two offspring were left with the obligation. No matter how long it took we would consume our mother's flesh. And the villagers would keep watch with us.

"But as the night wore on, as the remains of our mother were prepared in the oven, my sister and I deliberated over the heart and the brain. We would divide these organs of course; and which should take which organ, that was what concerned us; for we had strong beliefs about these organs and what resided in each.

"Now to many peoples of that time, it was the heart that mattered. To the Egyptians, for example, the heart was the seat of conscience.

This was even so to the people of our village; but we as witches believed that the brain was the residence of the human spirit: that is, the spiritual part of each man or woman that was like unto the spirits of the air. And our belief that the brain was important came from the fact that the eyes were connected to the brain; and the eyes were the organs of sight. And *seeing* is what we did as witches; we *saw* into hearts, we saw into the future; we saw into the past. Seer, that was the word for what we were in our language; that is what 'witch' meant.

"But again, this was largely ceremony of which we spoke; we believed our mother's spirit had gone. Out of respect for her, we consumed these organs so that they should not rot. So it was easy for us to reach agreement; Mekare would take the brain and the eyes; and I would take the heart.

"Mekare was the more powerful witch; the one born first; and the one who always took the lead in things; the one who spoke out immediately; the one who acted as the older sister, as one twin invariably does. It seemed right that she should take the brain and the eyes; and I, who had always been quieter of disposition, and slower, should take the organ which was associated with deep feeling, and love—the heart.

"We were pleased with the division and as the morning sky grew light we slept for a few hours, our bodies weak from hunger and the fasting that prepared us for the feast.

"Sometime before dawn the spirits waked us. They were making the wind come again. I went out of the cave; the fire glowed in the oven. The villagers who kept watch were asleep. Angrily I told the spirits to keep quiet. But one of them, that one which I most loved, said that strangers were gathered on the mountain, many many strangers who were most impressed with our power and dangerously curious about the feast.

" 'These men want something of you and Mekare,' the spirit told me. 'These men are not for the good.'

"I told him that strangers always came here; that this was nothing, and that he must be quiet now, and let us do what we had to do. But then I went to one of the men of our village and asked that the village be ready in case some trouble was to happen, that the men bring their arms with them when they gathered for the feast to begin.

“It wasn’t such a strange request. Most men carried their weapons with them wherever they went. Those few who had been professional soldiers or could afford swords frequently wore them; those with knives kept them tucked in their belt.

“But in the main I was not concerned about such things; after all, strangers from far and wide came to our village; it was only natural that they would for this special event—the death of a witch.

“But you know what was to happen. You saw it in your dreams. You saw the villagers gather around the clearing as the sun rose towards the high point of noon. Maybe you saw the bricks taken down slowly from the cooling oven; or only the body of our mother, darkened, shriveled, yet peaceful as in sleep, revealed on the warm slab of stone. You saw the wilted flowers covering her, and you saw the heart and the brain and the eyes upon their plates.

“You saw us kneel on either side of our mother’s body. And you heard the musicians begin to play.

“What you could not see, but you know now, is that for thousands of years our people had gathered at such feasts. For thousands of years we had lived in that valley and on the slopes of the mountain where the high grass grew and the fruit fell from the trees. This was our land, our custom, our moment.

“Our sacred moment.

“And as Mekare and I knelt opposite each other, dressed in the finest robes we possessed and wearing now the jewelry of our mother as well as our own adornments, we saw before us, not the warnings of the spirits, or the distress of our mother when she had touched the tablet of the King and Queen of Kemet. We saw our own lives—with hope, long and happy—to be lived here among our own.

“I don’t know how long we knelt there; how long we prepared our souls. I remember that finally, in unison, we lifted the plates which contained the organs of our mother; and the musicians began to play. The music of the flute and the drum filled the air around us; we could hear the soft breath of the villagers; we could hear the song of the birds.

“And then the evil came down upon us; came so suddenly with the tramp of feet and loud shrill war cries of the Egyptian soldiers, that we scarce knew what was happening. Over our mother’s body, we threw

ourselves, seeking to protect the sacred feast; but at once they had pulled us up and away, and we saw the plates falling into the dirt, and the slab overturned!

"I heard Mekare screaming as I had never heard a human scream. But I too was screaming, screaming as I saw my mother's body thrown down into the ashes.

"Yet curses filled my ears; men denouncing us as flesh eaters, cannibals, men denouncing us as savages and those who must be put to the sword.

"Only no one harmed us. Screaming, struggling, we were bound and kept helpless, though all of our kith and kin were slaughtered before our eyes. Soldiers tramped on the body of our mother; they tramped on her heart and her brain and her eyes. They tramped back and forth in the ashes, while their cohorts skewered the men and women and children of our village.

"And then, through the chorus of screams, through the hideous outcry of all those hundreds dying on the side of the mountain, I heard Mekare call on our spirits for vengeance, call on them to punish the soldiers for what they had done.

"But what was wind or rain to such men as these? The trees shook; it seemed the earth itself trembled; leaves filled the air as they had the night before. Rocks rolled down the mountain; dust rose in clouds. But there was no more than a moment's hesitation, before the King, Enkil, himself stepped forth and told his men that these were but tricks that all men had witnessed, and we and our demons could do no more.

"It was all too true, this admonition; and the massacre went on unabated. My sister and I were ready to die. But they did not kill us. It was not their intention to kill us, and as they dragged us away, we saw our village burning, we saw the fields of wild wheat burning, we saw all the men and women of our tribe lying dead, and we knew their bodies would be left there for the beasts and the earth to consume, in utter disregard and abandon."

Maharet stopped. She had made a small steeple of her hands and now she touched the tips of her fingers to her forehead, and rested it seemed before she went on. When she continued, her voice was roughened slightly and lower, but steady as it had been before.

"What is one small nation of villages? What is one people—or even

one life?

"Beneath the earth a thousand such peoples are buried. And so our people are buried to this day.

"All we knew, all we had been, was laid waste within the space of an hour. A trained army had slaughtered our simple shepherds, our women, and our helpless young. Our villages lay in ruins, huts pulled down; everything that could burn was burned.

"Over the mountain, over the village that lay at the foot of it, I felt the presence of the spirits of the dead; a great haze of spirits, some so agitated and confused by the violence done them that they clung to the earth in terror and pain; and others rising above the flesh to suffer no more.

"And what could the spirits do?

"All the way to Egypt, they followed our procession; they bedeviled the men who kept us bound and carried us by means of a litter on their shoulders, two weeping women, snuggling close to each other in terror and grief.

"Each night when the company made camp, the spirits sent wind to tear up their tents and scatter them. Yet the King counseled his soldiers not to be afraid. The King said the gods of Egypt were more powerful than the demons of the witches. And as the spirits were in fact doing all that they were capable of, as things got no worse, the soldiers obeyed.

"Each night the King had us brought before him. He spoke our language, which was a common one in the world then, spoken all through the Tigris and Euphrates Valley and along the flanks of Mount Carmel. 'You are great witches,' he would say, his voice gentle and maddeningly sincere. 'I have spared your life on this account though you were flesh eaters as were your people, and you were caught in the very act by me and my men. I have spared you because I would have the benefit of your wisdom. I would learn from you, and my Queen would learn as well. Tell me what I can give you to ease your suffering and I will do it. You are under my protection now; I am your King.'

"Weeping, refusing to meet his eyes, saying nothing, we stood before him until he tired of all this, and sent us back to sleep in the small crowded litter—a tiny rectangle of wood with only small windows—as we had been before.

“Alone once more, my sister and I spoke to each other silently, or by means of our language, the twin language of gestures and abbreviated words that only we understood. We recalled what the spirits had said to our mother; we remembered that she had taken ill after the letter from the King of Kemet and she had never recovered. Yet we weren’t afraid.

“We were too stricken with grief to be afraid. It was as if we were already dead. We’d seen our people massacred, we’d seen our mother’s body desecrated. We did not know what could be worse. We were together; maybe separation would be worse.

“But during this long journey to Egypt, we had one small consolation which we were not later to forget. Khayman, the King’s steward, looked upon us with compassion, and did everything that he could, in secret, to ease our pain.”

Maharet stopped again and looked at Khayman, who sat with his hands folded before him on the table and his eyes down. It seemed he was deep in his recollection of the things which Maharet described. He accepted this tribute but it didn’t seem to console him. Then finally he looked to Maharet in acknowledgment. He seemed dazed and full of questions. But he didn’t ask them. His eyes passed over the others, acknowledging their glances as well, acknowledging the steady stare of Armand, and of Gabrielle, but again, he said nothing.

Then Maharet continued:

“Khayman loosened our bonds whenever possible; he allowed us to walk about in the evening; he brought us meat and drink. And there was a great kindness in that he didn’t speak to us when he did these things; he did not ask for our gratitude. He did these things with a pure heart. It was simply not to his taste to see people suffer.

“It seemed we traveled ten days to reach the land of Kemet. Maybe it was more; maybe it was less. Some time during that journey the spirits tired of their tricks; and we, dejected and without courage, did not call upon them. We sank into silence finally, only now and then looking into each other’s eyes.

“At last we came into a kingdom the like of which we had never seen. Over scorching desert we were brought to the rich black land that bordered the Nile River, the black earth from which the word Kemet derives; and then over the mighty river itself by raft we were

taken as was all the army, and into a sprawling city of brick buildings with grass roofs, of great temples and palaces built of the same coarse materials, but all very fine.

"This was long before the time of the stone architecture for which the Egyptians would become known—the temples of the pharaohs which have stood to this day.

"But already there was a great love of show and decoration, a movement towards the monumental. Unbaked bricks, river reeds, matting—all of these simple materials had been used to make high walls which were then whitewashed and painted with lovely designs.

"Before the palace into which we were taken as royal prisoners were great columns made from enormous jungle grasses, which had been dried and bound together and plastered with river mud; and within a closed court a lake had been made, full of lotus blossoms and surrounded by flowering trees.

"Never had we seen people so rich as these Egyptians, people decked out with so much jewelry, people with beautifully plaited hair and painted eyes. And their painted eyes tended to unnerve us. For the paint hardened their stare; it gave an illusion of depth where perhaps there was no depth; instinctively, we shrank from this artifice.

"But all we saw merely inspired further misery in us. How we hated everything around us. And we could sense from these people—though we didn't understand their strange tongue—that they hated and feared us too. It seemed our red hair caused great confusion among them; and that we were twins, this too produced fear.

"For it had been the custom among them now and then to kill twin children; and the red-haired were invariably sacrificed to the gods. It was thought to be lucky.

"All this came clear to us in wanton flashes of understanding; imprisoned, we waited grimly to see what would be our fate.

"As before, Khayman was our only consolation in those first hours. Khayman, the King's chief steward, saw that we had comforts in our imprisonment. He brought us fresh linen, and fruit to eat and beer to drink. He brought us even combs for our hair and clean dresses; and for the first time he spoke to us; he told us that the Queen was gentle and good, and we must not be afraid.

"We knew that he was speaking the truth, there was no doubt of it;

but something was wrong, as it had been months before with the words of the King's messenger. Our trials had only begun.

"We also feared the spirits had deserted us; that maybe they did not want to come into this land on our behalf. But we didn't call upon the spirits; because to call and not to be answered—well, that would have been more than we could bear.

"Then evening came and the Queen sent for us; and we were brought before the court.

"The spectacle overwhelmed us, even as we despised it: Akasha and Enkil upon their thrones. The Queen was then as she is now—a woman of straight shoulders and firm limbs with a face almost too exquisite to evince intelligence, a being of enticing prettiness with a soft treble voice. As for the King, we saw him now not as a soldier but as a sovereign. His hair was plaited, and he wore his formal kilt and jewels. His black eyes were full of earnestness as they had always been; but it was clear, within a moment, that it was Akasha who ruled this kingdom and always had. Akasha had the language—the verbal skill.

"At once, she told us that our people had been properly punished for their abominations; that they had been dealt with mercifully, as all flesh eaters are savages, and they should have, by right, suffered a slow death. And she said that we had been shown mercy because we were great witches, and the Egyptians would learn from us; they would know what wisdom of the realms of the invisible we had to impart.

"Immediately, as if these words were nothing, she went into her questions. Who were our demons? Why were some good, if they were demons? Were they not gods? How could we make the rain fall?

"We were too horrified by her callousness to respond. We were bruised by the spiritual coarseness of her manner, and had begun to weep again. We turned away from her and into each other's arms.

"But something else was also coming clear to us—something very plain from the manner in which this person spoke. The speed of her words, their flippancy, the emphasis she put upon this or that syllable—all this made known to us that she was lying and did not herself know that she lied.

"And looking deep into the lie, as we closed our eyes, we saw the

truth which she herself would surely deny:

"She had slaughtered our people in order to bring us here! She had sent her King and her soldiers upon this 'holy war' simply because we had refused her earlier invitation, and she wanted us at her mercy. *She was curious about us*.

"This was what our mother had seen when she held the tablet of the King and Queen in her hands. Perhaps the spirits in their own way had foreseen it. We only understood the full monstrousness of it now.

"Our people had died because we had attracted the interest of the Queen just as we attracted the interest of the spirits; we had brought this evil upon all.

"Why, we wondered, hadn't the soldiers merely taken us from our helpless villagers? Why had they brought to ruin all that our people were?

"But that was the horror! A moral cloak had been thrown over the Queen's purpose, a cloak through which she could not see any more than anyone else.

"She had convinced herself that our people should die, yes, that their savagery merited it, even though they were not Egyptians and our land was far from her home. And oh, wasn't it rather convenient, that then we should be shown mercy and brought here to satisfy her curiosity at last. And we should, of course, be grateful by then and willing to answer her questions.

"And even deeper beyond her deception, we beheld the mind that made such contradictions possible.

"This Queen had no true morality, no true system of ethics to govern the things which she did. This Queen was one of those many humans who sense that perhaps there is nothing and no reason to anything that can ever be known. Yet she cannot bear the thought of it. And so she created day in and day out her ethical systems, trying desperately to believe in them, and they were all cloaks for things she did for merely pragmatic reasons. Her war on the cannibals, for instance, had stemmed more from her *dislike* of such customs than anything else. Her people of Uruk hadn't eaten human flesh; and so she would not have this offensive thing happening around her; there really wasn't a whole lot more to it than that. For always in her there was a dark place full of despair. And a great driving force to make

meaning because there was none.

"Understand, it was not a shallowness we perceived in this woman. It was a youthful belief that she could make the light shine if she tried; that she could shape the world to comfort herself; and it was also a lack of interest in the pain of others. She knew others felt pain, but well, she could not really dwell on it.

"Finally, unable to bear the extent of this obvious duplicity, we turned and studied her, for we must now contend with her. She was not twenty-five years old, this Queen, and her powers were absolute in this land which she had dazzled with her customs from Uruk. And she was almost too pretty to be truly beautiful, for her loveliness overcame any sense of majesty or deep mystery; and her voice contained still a childish ring to it, a ring which evokes tenderness instinctively in others, and gives a faint music to the simplest words. A ring which we found maddening.

"On and on she went with her questions. How did we work our miracles? How did we look into men's hearts? Whence came our magic, and why did we claim that we talked to beings who were invisible? Could we speak in the same manner to her gods? Could we deepen her knowledge or bring her into closer understanding of what was divine? She was willing to pardon us for our savagery if we were to be grateful; if we were to kneel at her altars and lay before her gods and before her what we knew.

"She pursued her various points with a single-mindedness that could make a wise person laugh.

"But it brought up the deepest rage from Mekare. She who had always taken the lead in anything spoke out now.

" 'Stop your questions. You speak in stupidities,' she declared. 'You have no gods in this kingdom, because there are no gods. The only invisible inhabitants of the world are spirits, and they play with you through your priests and your religion as they play with everyone else. Ra, Osiris—these are merely made-up names with which you flatter and court the spirits, and when it suits their purposes they give you some little sign to send you scurrying to flatter them some more.'

"Both the King and Queen stared at Mekare in horror. But Mekare went on:

" 'The spirits are real, but they are childlike and capricious. And

they are dangerous as well. They marvel at us and envy us that we are both spiritual and fleshly, which attracts them and makes them eager to do our will. Witches such as we have always known how to use them; but it takes great skill and great power to do it, and this we have and you do not have. You are fools, and what you have done to take us prisoner is evil; it is dishonest; you live in the lie! But we will not lie to you.'

"And then, half weeping, half choking with rage, Mekare accused the Queen before the entire court of duplicity, of massacring our peaceable people simply so that we might be brought here. Our people had not hunted for human flesh in a thousand years, she told this court; and it was a funeral feast that was desecrated at our capture, and all this evil done so that the Queen of Kemet might have witches to talk to, witches of whom to ask questions, witches in her possession whose power she would seek to use for herself.

"The court was in an uproar. Never had anyone heard such disrespect, such blasphemy, and so forth and so on. But the old lords of Egypt, those who still chafed at the ban on sacred cannibalism, they were horrified by this mention of the desecrated funeral feast. And others who also feared the retribution of heaven for not devouring the remains of their parents were struck dumb with fear.

"But in the main, it was confusion. Except for the King and the Queen, who were strangely silent and strangely intrigued.

"Akasha didn't make any answer to us, and it was clear that something in our explanation had rung true for her in the deeper regions of her mind. There flared for the moment a deadly earnest curiosity. *Spirits who pretend to be gods? Spirits who envy the flesh?* As for the charge that she had sacrificed our people needlessly, she didn't even consider it. Again, it did not interest her. It was the spiritual question which fascinated her, and in her fascination the spirit was divorced from the flesh.

"Allow me to draw your attention to what I have just said. It was the spiritual question which fascinated her—you might say the abstract idea; and in her fascination the abstract idea was everything. I do not think she believed that the spirits could be childlike and capricious. But whatever was there, she meant to know of it; and she meant to know of it through us. As for the destruction of our people,

she did not care!

"Meantime the high priest of the temple of Ra was demanding our execution. So was the high priest of the temple of Osiris. We were evil; we were witches; and all those with red hair should be burned as had always been done in the land of Kemet. And at once the assemblage echoed these denunciations. There should be a burning. Within moments it seemed a riot would have broken out in the palace.

"But the King ordered all to be quiet. We were taken to our cell again, and put under heavy guard.

"Mekare, enraged, paced the floor, as I begged her not to say any more. I reminded her of what the spirits had told us: that if we went to Egypt, the King and Queen would ask us questions, and if we answered truthfully, which we would, the King and Queen would be angry with us, and we would be destroyed.

"But this was like talking to myself now; Mekare wouldn't listen. Back and forth she walked, now and then striking her breast with her fist. I felt the anguish she felt.

" 'Damnable,' she was saying. 'Evil.' And then she'd fall silent and pace, and then say these words again.

"I knew she was remembering the warning of Amel, the evil one. And I also knew that Amel was near; I could hear him, sense him.

"I knew that Mekare was being tempted to call upon him; and I felt that she must not. What would his silly torments mean to the Egyptians? How many mortals could he afflict with his pinpricks? It was no more than the storms of wind and flying objects which we could already produce. But Amel heard these thoughts; and he began to grow restless.

" 'Be quiet, demon,' Mekare said. 'Wait until I need you!' Those were the first words I ever heard her speak to an evil spirit, and they sent a shiver of horror through me.

"I don't remember when we fell asleep. Only that sometime after midnight I was awakened by Khayman.

"At first I thought it was Amel doing some trick, and I awoke in a frenzy. But Khayman gestured for me to be quiet. He was in a terrible state. He wore only a simple bed gown and no sandals, and his hair was mussed. It seemed he'd been weeping. His eyes were red.

"He sat down beside me. 'Tell me, is this true, what you said of the

spirits?' I didn't bother to tell him it was Mekare who said it. People always confused us or thought of us as one being. I merely told him, yes, it was true.

"I explained that there have always been these invisible entities; that they themselves had told us there were no gods or goddesses of which they knew. They had bragged to us often of the tricks they played at Sumer or Jericho or in Nineveh at the great temples. Now and then they would come booming that they *were* this or that god. But we knew their personalities, and when we called them by their old names, they gave up the new game at once.

"What I did not say was that I wished Mekare had never made known such things. What purpose could it serve now?

"He sat there defeated, listening to me, listening as if he had been a man lied to all his life and now he saw truth. For he had been deeply moved when he had seen the spirits strike up the wind on our mountain and he had seen a shower of leaves fall upon the soldiers; it had chilled his soul. And that is always what produces faith, that mixture of truth and a physical manifestation.

"But then I perceived there was an even greater burden upon his conscience, or on his reason, one might say. 'And the massacre of your people, this was a holy war; it was not a selfish thing, as you said.'

" 'Oh, no,' I told him. 'It was a selfish and simple thing, I can't say otherwise.' I told him of the tablet sent to us by the messenger, of what the spirits had said, of my mother's fear and her illness, and of my own power to hear the truth in the Queen's words, the truth which she herself might not be able to accept.

"But long before I'd finished, he was defeated again. He knew, from his own observations, that what I was saying was true. He had fought at the King's side through many a campaign against foreign peoples. That an army should fight for gain was nothing to him. He had seen massacres and cities burned; he had seen slaves taken; he had seen men return laden with booty. And though he himself was no soldier, these things he understood.

"But there had been no booty worth taking in our villages; there had been no territory which the King would retain. Yes, it had been fought for our capture, he knew it. And he too felt the distaste for the lie of a holy war against flesh eaters. And he felt a sadness that was

even greater than his defeat. He was of an old family; he had eaten the flesh of his ancestors; and he found himself now punishing such traditions among those whom he had known and loved. He thought of the mummification of the dead with repugnance, but more truly he felt repugnance for the ceremony which accompanied it, for the depth of superstition in which the land had been steeped. So much wealth heaped upon the dead; so much attention to those putrefying bodies simply so men and women would not feel guilty for abandoning the older customs.

"Such thoughts exhausted him; they weren't natural to him; what obsessed him finally were the deaths he had seen; executions; massacres. Just as the Queen could not grasp such things, he could not forget them and he was a man losing his stamina; a man drawn into a mire in which he might drown.

"Finally he took his leave of me. But before he went he promised that he would do his best to see that we were released. He did not know how he could do it, but he would try to do it. And he begged me not to be afraid. I felt a great love for him at that moment. He had then the same beautiful face and form which he has now; only then he was dark-skinned and leaner and the curls had been ironed from his hair and it had been plaited and hung long to his shoulders, and he had the air of the court about him, the air of one who commands, and one who stands in the warm love of his prince.

"The following morning the Queen sent for us again. And this time we were brought privately to her chamber, where only the King was with her, and Khayman.

"It was a more lavish place even than the great hall of the palace; it was stuffed to overflowing with fine things, with a couch made of carved leopards, and a bed hung with sheer silk; and with polished mirrors of seemingly magical perfection. And the Queen herself, like a temptress she was, bedecked with finery and perfume, and fashioned by nature into a thing as lovely as any treasure around her.

"Once again she put her questions.

"Standing together, our hands bound, we had to listen to the same nonsense.

"And once again Mekare told the Queen of the spirits; she explained that the spirits have always existed; she told how they bragged of

playing with the priests of other lands. She told how the spirits had said the songs and chants of the Egyptians pleased them. It was all a game to the spirits, and no more.

" 'But these spirits! They are the gods, then, that is what you are saying!' Akasha said with great fervor. 'And you speak to them? I want to see you do it! Do it for me now.'

" 'But they are not gods,' I said. 'That is what we are trying to tell you. And they do not abhor the eaters of the flesh as you say your gods do. They don't care about such things. They never have.' Painstakingly I strove to convey the difference; these spirits had no code; they were morally inferior to us. Yet I knew this woman couldn't grasp what I was telling her.

"I perceived the war inside her, between the handmaiden of the goddess Inanna who wanted to believe herself blessed, and the dark brooding soul who believed finally in nothing. A chill place was her soul; her religious fervor was nothing but a blaze which she fed constantly, seeking to warm that chill place.

" 'Everything you say is a lie!' she said finally. 'You are evil women!' She ordered our execution. We should be burnt alive the next day and together, so that we might see each other suffer and die. Why had she ever bothered with us?

"At once the King interrupted her. He told her that he had seen the power of the spirits; so had Khayman. What might not the spirits do if we were so treated? Wouldn't it be better to let us go?

"But there was something ugly and hard in the Queen's gaze. The King's words meant nothing; our lives were being taken from us. What could we do? And it seemed she was angry with us because we had not been able to frame our truths in ways which she could use or take pleasure in. Ah, it was an agony to deal with her. Yet her mind is a common mind; there are countless human beings who think and feel as she did then; and does now, in all likelihood.

"Finally Mekare seized the moment. She did the thing which I did not dare to do. She called the spirits—all of them by name, but so quickly this Queen would never remember the words. She screamed for them to come to her and do her bidding; and she told them to show their displeasure at what was happening to those mortals—Maharet and Mekare—whom they claimed to love.

“It was a gamble. But if nothing happened, if they had deserted us as I feared, well, then she could call on Amel, for he was there, lurking, waiting. And it was the only chance we had finally.

“Within an instant the wind had begun. It howled through the courtyard and whistled through the corridors of the palace. The draperies were torn by it; doors slammed; fragile vessels were smashed. The Queen was in a state of terror as she felt it surround her. Then small objects began to fly through the air. The spirits gathered up the ornaments of her dressing table and hurled them at her; the King stood beside her, striving to protect her, and Khayman was rigid with fear.

“Now, this was the very limit of the spirits’ power; and they would not be able to keep it up for very long. But before the demonstration stopped, Khayman begged the King and Queen to revoke the sentence of execution. And on the spot they did.

“At once Mekare, sensing that the spirits were spent anyway, ordered them with great pomp to stop. Silence fell. And the terrified slaves ran here and there to gather up what had been thrown about.

“The Queen was overcome. The King tried to tell her that he had seen, this spectacle before and it had not harmed him; but something deep had been violated within the Queen’s heart. She’d never witnessed the slightest proof of the supernatural; and she was struck dumb and still now. In that dark faithless place within her, there had been a spark of light; true light. And so old and certain was her secret skepticism, that this small miracle had been for her a revelation of great magnitude; it was as if she had seen the face of her gods.

“She sent the King and Khayman away from her. She said she would speak with us alone. And then she implored us to talk to the spirits so that she could hear it. There were tears in her eyes.

“It was an extraordinary moment, for I sensed now what I’d sensed months ago when I’d touched the clay tablet—a mixture of good and evil that seemed more dangerous than evil itself.

“Of course we couldn’t make the spirits speak so that she could understand it, we told her. But perhaps she would give us some questions that they might answer. At once she did.

“These were no more than the questions which people have been putting to wizards and witches and saints ever since. ‘Where is the

necklace I lost as a child? What did my mother want to tell me the night she died when she could no longer speak? Why does my sister detest my company? Will my son grow to manhood? Will he be brave and strong?'

"Struggling for our lives, we put these questions patiently to the spirits, cajoling them and flattering them to make them pay attention. And we got answers which veritably astonished Akasha. The spirits knew the name of her sister; they knew the name of her son. She seemed on the edge of madness as she considered these simple tricks.

"Then Amel, the evil one, appeared—obviously jealous of all these goings-on—and suddenly flung down before Akasha the lost necklace of which she'd been speaking—a necklace lost in Uruk; and this was the final blow. Akasha was thunderstruck.

"She wept now, holding on to this necklace. And then she begged us to put to the spirits the really important questions whose answers she must know.

"Yes, the gods were made up by her people, the spirits said. No, the names in the prayers didn't matter. The spirits merely liked the music and rhythm of the language—the shape of the words, so to speak. Yes, there were bad spirits who liked to hurt people, and why not? And there were good spirits who loved them, too. And would they speak to Akasha if we were to leave the kingdom? Never. They were speaking now, and she couldn't hear them, what did she expect them to do? But yes, there were witches in the kingdom who could hear them, and they would tell those witches to come to the court at once if that was what she wanted.

"But as this communication progressed, a terrible change came over Akasha.

"She went from jubilance to suspicion and then misery. Because these spirits were only telling her the same dismal things that we had already told her.

" 'What do you know of the life after?' she asked. And when the spirits said only that the souls of the dead either hovered about the earth, confused and suffering, or rose and vanished from it completely, she was brutally disappointed. Her eyes dulled; she was losing all appetite for this. When she asked what of those who had lived bad lives, as opposed to those who had lived good lives, the spirits could

give no answer. They didn't know what she meant.

"Yet it continued, this interrogation. And we could sense that the spirits were tiring of it, and playing with her now, and that the answers would become more and more idiotic.

" 'What is the will of the gods?' she asked. 'That you sing all the time,' said the spirits. 'We like it.'

"Then all of a sudden, Amel, the evil one, so proud of the trick with the necklace, flung another great string of jewels before Akasha. But from this she shrank back in horror.

"At once we saw the error. It had been her mother's necklace, and lay on her mother's body in the tomb near Uruk, and of course Amel, being only a spirit, couldn't guess how bizarre and distasteful it could be to bring this thing here. Even now he did not catch on. He had seen this necklace in Akasha's mind when she had spoken of the other one. Why didn't she want it too? Didn't she like necklaces?

"Mekare told Amel this had not pleased. It was the wrong miracle. Would he please wait for her command, as she understood this Queen and he didn't.

"But it was too late. Something had happened to the Queen which was irrevocable. She had seen two pieces of evidence as to the power of the spirits, and she had heard truth and nonsense, neither of which could compare to the beauty of the mythology of her gods which she had always forced herself to believe in. Yet the spirits were destroying her fragile faith. How would she ever escape the dark skepticism in her own soul if these demonstrations continued?

"She bent down and picked up the necklace from her mother's tomb. 'How was this got!' she demanded. But her heart wasn't really in the question. She knew the answer would be more of what she'd been hearing since we had arrived. She was frightened.

"Nevertheless I explained; and she listened to every word.

"The spirits read our minds; and they are enormous and powerful. Their true size is difficult for us to imagine; and they can move with the swiftness of thought; when Akasha thought of this second necklace, the spirit saw it; he went to look for it; after all, one necklace had pleased her, so why not another? And so he had found it in her mother's tomb; and brought it out by means perhaps of some small opening. For surely it could not pass through stone. That was

ridiculous.

"But as I said this last part I realized the truth. This necklace had probably been stolen from the body of Akasha's mother, and very possibly by Akasha's father. It had never been buried in any tomb. That is why Amel could find it. Maybe even a priest had stolen it. Or so it very likely seemed to Akasha, who was holding the necklace in her hand. She loathed this spirit that he made known such an awful thing to her.

"In sum, all the illusions of this woman lay now in complete ruin; yet she was left with the sterile truth she had always known. She had asked her questions of the supernatural—a very unwise thing to do—and the supernatural had given her answers which she could not accept; yet she could not refute them either.

" 'Where are the souls of the dead?' she whispered, staring at this necklace.

"As softly as I could I said, 'The spirits simply do not know.'

"Horror. Fear. And then her mind began to work, to do what it had always done—find some grand system to explain away what caused pain; some grand way to accommodate what she saw before her. The dark secret place inside her was becoming larger; it was threatening to consume her from within; she could not let such a thing happen; she had to go on. She was the Queen of Kemet.

"On the other hand, she was angry, and the rage she felt was against her parents and against her teachers, and against the priests and priestesses of her childhood, and against the gods she had worshiped and against anyone who had ever comforted her, or told her that life was good.

"A moment of silence had fallen; something was happening in her expression; fear and wonder had gone; there was something cold and disenchanted and, finally, malicious in her gaze.

"And then with her mother's necklace in hand she rose and declared that all we had said were lies. These were demons to whom we were speaking, demons who sought to subvert her and her gods, who looked with favor upon her people. The more she spoke the more she believed what she was saying; the more the elegance of her beliefs seized her; the more she surrendered to their logic. Until finally she was weeping and denouncing us, and the darkness within had been

denied. She evoked the images of her gods; she evoked her holy language.

"But then she looked again at the necklace; and the evil spirit, Amel, in a great rage—furious that she was not pleased with his little gift and was once again angry with us—told us to tell her that if she did us any harm he would hurl at her every object, jewel, wine cup, looking glass, comb, or other such item that she ever so much as asked for, or imagined, or remembered, or wished for, or missed.

"I could have laughed had we not been in such danger; it was such a wonderful solution in the mind of the spirit; and so perfectly ridiculous from a human point of view. Yet it certainly wasn't something that one would want to happen.

"And Mekare told Akasha exactly what Amel had said.

" 'He that can produce this necklace can inundate you in such reminders of suffering,' Mekare said. 'And I do not know that any witch on earth can stop him, should he so begin.'

" 'Where is he?' Akasha screamed. 'Let me see this demon thing you speak to!'

"And at this, Amel, in vanity and rage, concentrated all his power and dove at Akasha, declaring 'I am Amel, the evil one, who pierces!' and he made the great gale around her that he had made around our mother; only it was ten times that. Never had I seen such fury. The room itself appeared to tremble as this immense spirit compressed himself and directed himself into this tiny place. I could hear the cracking of the brick walls. And all over the Queen's beautiful face and arms the tiny bitelike wounds appeared as so many red dots of blood.

"She screamed helplessly. Amel was in ecstasy. Amel could do wondrous things! Mekare and I were in terror.

"Mekare commanded him to stop. And now she heaped flattery upon him, and great thanks, and told him he was very simply the most powerful of all spirits, but he must obey her now, to demonstrate his great wit as well as his power; and that she would allow him to strike again at the right time.

"Meantime, the King rushed to the aid of Akasha; Khayman ran to her; all the guards ran to her. But when the guards raised their swords to strike us down, she ordered them to leave us alone. Mekare and I

stood staring at her, silently threatening her with this spirit's power, for it was all that we had left. And Amel, the evil one, hovered above us, filling the air with the most eerie of all sounds, the great hollow laughter of a spirit, that seemed then to fill the entire world.

"Alone in our cell again, we could not think what to do or how to use what little advantage we now had in Amel.

"As for Amel himself, he would not leave us. He ranted and stormed in the little cell; he made the reed mats rustle, and made our garments move; he sent winds through our hair. It was a nuisance. But what frightened me was to hear the things of which he boasted. That he liked to draw blood; that it plumped him up inside and made him slow; but that it tasted good; and when the peoples of the world made blood sacrifice upon their altars he liked to come down and slurp up that blood. After all, it was there for him, was it not? More laughter.

"There was a great recoiling in the other spirits. Mekare and I both sensed this. Except for those who were faintly jealous and demanded to know what this blood tasted like, and why he liked such a thing so much.

"And then it came out—that hatred and jealousy of the flesh which is in so many evil spirits, that feeling that we are abominations, we humans, because we have both body and soul, which should not exist on this earth. Amel ranted of the times when there had been but mountains and oceans and forests and no living things such as us. He told us that to have spirit within mortal bodies was a curse.

"Now, I had heard these complaints among the evil ones before; but I had never thought much about them. For the first time I believed them, just a little, as I lay there and I saw my people put to the sword in my mind's eye. I thought as many a man or woman has thought before and since that maybe it was a curse to have the concept of immortality without the body to go with it.

"Or as you said, on this very night, Marius—life seemed not worth it; it seemed a joke. My world was darkness at that moment, darkness and suffering. All that I was no longer mattered; nothing I looked at could make me want to be alive.

"But Mekare began to speak to Amel again, informing him that she would much rather be what she was than what he was—drifting about forever with nothing important to do. And this sent Amel into a rage

again. He would show her what he could do!

“ ‘When I command you, Amel!’ she said. ‘Count upon me to choose the moment. Then all men will know what you can do.’ And this childish vain spirit was contented, and spread himself out again over the dark sky.

“For three nights and days we were kept prisoner. The guards would not look at us or come near us. Neither would the slaves. In fact, we would have starved had it not been for Khayman, the royal steward, who brought us food with his own hands.

“Then he told us what the spirits had already told us. A great controversy raged; the priests wanted us put to death. But the Queen was afraid to kill us, that we’d loose these spirits on her, and there would be no way she could drive them off. The King was intrigued by what had happened; he believed that more could be learned from us; he was curious about the power of the spirits, and to what uses it could be put. But the Queen feared it; the Queen had seen enough.

“Finally we were brought before the entire court in the great open atrium of the palace.

“It was high noon in the kingdom and the King and Queen made their offerings to the sun god Ra as was the custom, and this we were made to watch. It meant nothing to us to see this solemnity; we were afraid these were the last hours of our lives. I dreamed then of our mountain, our caves; I dreamed of the children we might have borne —fine sons and daughters, and some of them who would have inherited our power—I dreamed of the life that had been taken from us, of the annihilation of our kith and kindred which might soon be complete. I thanked whatever powers that be that I could see blue sky above my head, and that Mekare and I were still together.

“At last the King spoke. There was a terrible sadness and weariness in him. Young as he was, he had something of an old man’s soul in these moments. Ours was a great gift, he told us, but we had misused it, clearly, and could be no use to anyone else. For lies, for the worship of demons, for black magic, he denounced us. He would have us burned, he said, to please the people; but he and his Queen felt sorry for us. The Queen in particular wanted him to have mercy on us.

“It was a damnable lie, but one look at her face told us she’d convinced herself that it was true. And of course the King believed it.

But what did this matter? What was this mercy, we wondered, trying to look deeper into their souls.

"And now the Queen told us in tender words that our great magic had brought her the two necklaces she most wanted in all the world and for this and this alone she would let us live. In sum, the lie she spun grew larger and more intricate, and more distant from the truth.

"And then the King said he would release us, but first he would demonstrate to all the court that we had no power, and therefore the priests would be appeased.

"And if at any moment an evil demon should manifest himself and seek to abuse the just worshipers of Ra or Osiris, then our pardon should be revoked and we should be put to death at once. For surely the power of our demons would die with us. And we would have forfeited the Queen's mercy which we scarce deserved as it was.

"Of course we realized what was to happen; we saw it now in the hearts of the King and the Queen. A compromise had been struck. And we had been offered a bargain. As the King removed his gold chain and medallion and put it around the neck of Khayman, we knew that we were to be raped before the court, raped as common female prisoners or slaves would have been raped in any war. And if we called the spirits we'd die. That was our position.

" 'But for the love of my Queen,' said Enkil, 'I would take my pleasure of these two women, which is my right; I would do it before you all to show that they have no power and are not great witches, but are merely women, and my chief steward, Khayman, my beloved Khayman, will be given the privilege of doing it in my stead.'

"All the court waited in silence as Khayman looked at us, and prepared to obey the King's command. We stared at him, daring him in our helplessness not to do it—not to lay hands upon us or to violate us, before these uncaring eyes.

"We could feel the pain in him and the tumult. We could feel the danger that surrounded him, for were he to disobey he would surely have died. Yet this was our honor he meant to take; he meant to desecrate us; ruin us as it were; and we who had lived always in the sunshine and peace on our mountain knew nothing really of the act which he meant to perform.

"I think, as he came towards us, I believed he could not do it, that a

man could not feel the pain which he felt and still sharpen his passion for this ugly work. But I knew little of men then, of how the pleasures of the flesh can combine in them with hatred and anger; of how they can hurt as they perform the act which women perform, more often than not, for love.

"Our spirits clamored against what was to happen; but for our very lives, we told them to be quiet. Silently I pressed Mekare's hand; I gave her to know that we would live when this was over; we would be free; this was not death after all; and we would leave these miserable desert people to their lies and their illusions; to their idiot customs; we would go home.

"And then Khayman set about to do what he had to do. Khayman untied our bonds; he took Mekare to himself first, forcing her down on her back against the matted floor, and lifting her gown, as I stood transfixed and unable to stop him, and then I was subjected to the same fate.

"But in his mind, we were not the women whom Khayman raped. As his soul trembled, as his body trembled, he stoked the fire of his passion with fantasies of nameless beauties and half remembered moments so that body and soul could be one.

"And we, our eyes averted, closed our souls to him and to these vile Egyptians who had done to us these terrible things; our souls were alone and untouched within our bodies; and all around us, I heard without doubt the weeping of the spirits, the sad, terrible weeping, and in the distance, the low rolling thunder of Amel.

"You are fools to hear this, witches.

"It was nightfall when we were left at the edge of the desert. The soldiers gave us what food and drink was allowed. It was nightfall as we started our long journey north. Our rage then was as great as it had ever been.

"And Amel came, taunting us and raging at us; why did we not want him to exact vengeance?

" 'They will come after us and kill us!' Mekare said. 'Now go away from us.' But that did not do the trick. So finally she tried to put Amel to work on something important. 'Amel, we want to reach our home alive. Make cool winds for us; and show us where we can find water.'

"But these are things which evil spirits never do. Amel lost interest.

And Amel faded away, and we walked on through the cold desert wind, arm in arm, trying not to think of the miles that lay before us.

"Many things befell us on our long journey which are too numerous here to tell.

"But the good spirits had not deserted us; they made the cooling winds, and they led us to springs where we could find water and a few dates to eat; and they made 'little rain' for us as long as they could; but finally we were too deep in the desert for such a thing, and we were dying, and I knew I had a child from Khayman in my womb, and I wanted my child to live.

"It was then that the spirits led us to the Bedouin peoples, and they took us in, they cared for us.

"I was sick, and for days I lay singing to my child inside my body, and driving away my sickness and my moments of worst remembering with my songs. Mekare lay beside me, holding me in her arms.

"Months passed before I was strong enough to leave the Bedouin camps, and then I wanted my child to be born in our land and I begged Mekare that we should continue our journey.

"At last, with the food and drink the Bedouins had given us, and the spirits to guide us, we came into the green fields of Palestine, and found the foot of the mountain and the shepherd peoples—so like our own tribe—who had come down to claim our old grazing places.

"They knew us as they had known our mother and all our kindred and they called us by name, and immediately took us in.

"And we were so happy again, among the green grasses and the trees and the flowers that we knew, and my child was growing bigger inside my womb. It would live; the desert had not killed it.

"So, in my own land I gave birth to my daughter and named her Miriam as my mother had been named before me. She had Khayman's black hair but the green eyes of her mother. And the love I felt for her and the joy I knew in her were the greatest curative my soul could desire. We were three again. Mekare, who knew the birth pain with me, and who lifted the child out of my body, carried Miriam in her arms by the hour and sang to her just as I did. The child was ours, as much as it was mine. And we tried to forget the horrors we had seen in Egypt.

"Miriam thrived. And finally Mekare and I vowed to climb the

mountain and find the caves in which we'd been born. We did not know yet how we would live or what we would do, so many miles from our new people. But with Miriam, we would go back to the place where we had been so happy; and we would call the spirits to us, and we would make the miracle of rain to bless my newborn child.

"But this was never to be. Not any of it.

"For before we could leave the shepherd people, soldiers came again, under the command of the King's high steward, Khayman, soldiers who had passed out gold along the way to any tribe who had seen or heard of the red-haired twins and knew where they might be.

"Once again at midday as the sun poured down on the grassy fields, we saw the Egyptian soldiers with their swords raised. In all directions the people scattered, but Mekare ran out and dropped down on her knees before Khayman and said, 'Don't harm our people again.'

"Then Khayman came with Mekare to the place where I was hiding with my daughter, and I showed him this child, which was his child, and begged him for mercy, for justice, that he leave us in peace.

"But I had only to look at him to understand that he would be put to death if he did not bring us back. His face was thin and drawn and full of misery, not the smooth white immortal face that you see here at this table tonight.

"Enemy time has washed away the natural imprint of his suffering. But it was very plain on that long ago afternoon.

"In a soft, subdued voice he spoke to us. 'A terrible evil has come over the King and the Queen of Kemet,' he said. 'And your spirits have done it, your spirits that tormented me night and day for what I did to you, until the King sought to drive them out of my house.'

"He stretched out his arms to me that I could see the tiny scars that covered him where this spirit had drawn blood. Scars covered his face and his throat.

" 'Oh, you don't know the misery in which I have lived,' he said, 'for nothing could protect me from these spirits; and you don't know the times I cursed you, and cursed the King for what he made me do to you, and cursed my mother that I'd been born.'

" 'Oh, but we have not done this!' Mekare said. 'We have kept faith with you. For our lives we left you in peace. But it is Amel, the evil one, who has done this! Oh, this evil spirit! And to think he has

deviled you instead of the King and Queen who made you do what you did! We cannot stop him! I beg you, Khayman, let us go.'

" 'Whatever Amel does,' I said, 'he will tire of, Khayman. If the King and Queen are strong, he will eventually go away. You are looking now upon the mother of your child, Khayman. Leave us in peace. For the child's sake, tell the King and Queen that you could not find us. Let us go if you fear justice at all.'

"But he only stared at the child as if he did not know what it was. He was Egyptian. Was this child Egyptian? He looked at us: 'All right, you did not send this spirit,' he said. 'I believe you. For you do not understand what this spirit has done, obviously. His bedeviling has come to an end. He has gone *into* the King and Queen of Kemet! He is in their bodies! He has changed the very substance of their flesh!'

"For a long time, we looked at him and considered his words, and we understood that he did not mean by this that the King and the Queen were possessed. And we understood also that he himself had seen such things that he could not but come for us himself and try on his life to bring us back.

"But I didn't believe what he was saying. How could a spirit be made flesh!

" 'You do not understand what has happened in our kingdom,' he whispered. 'You must come and see with your own eyes.' He stopped then because there was more, much more, that he wanted to tell us, and he was afraid. Bitterly he said, 'You must undo what has been done, even if it is not your doing!'

"Ah, but we could not undo it. That was the horror. And even then we knew it; we sensed it. We remembered our mother standing before the cave gazing at the tiny wounds on her hand.

"Mekare threw back her head now and called to Amel, the evil one, to come to her, to obey her command. In our own tongue, the twin tongue, she screamed, 'Come out of the King and Queen of Kemet and come to me, Amel. Bow down before my will. You did this not by my command.'

"It seemed all the spirits of the world listened in silence; this was the cry of a powerful witch; but there was no answer; and then we felt it—a great recoiling of many spirits as if something beyond their knowledge and beyond their acceptance had suddenly been revealed.

It seemed the spirits were shrinking from us; and then coming back, sad and undecided; seeking our love, yet repelled.

" 'But what is it?' Mekare screamed. 'What is it!' She called to the spirits who hovered near her, her chosen ones. And then in the stillness, as the shepherds waited in fear, and the soldiers stood in anticipation, and Khayman stared at us with tired glazed eyes, we heard the answer. It came in wonder and uncertainty.

" 'Amel has now what he has always wanted; *Amel has the flesh. But Amel is no more.'*

"What could it mean?

"We could not fathom it. Again, Mekare demanded of the spirits that they answer, but it seemed that the uncertainty of the spirits was now turning to fear.

" 'Tell me what has happened!' Mekare said. 'Make known to me what you know!' It was an old command used by countless witches. 'Give me the knowledge which is yours to give.'

"And again the spirits answered in uncertainty:

" 'Amel is in the flesh; and Amel is not Amel; he cannot answer now.'

" 'You must come with me,' Khayman said. 'You must come. The King and Queen would have you come!'

"Mutely, and seemingly without feeling, he watched as I kissed my baby girl and gave her to the shepherd women who would care for her as their own. And then Mekare and I gave ourselves up to him; but this time we did not weep. It was as if all our tears had been shed. Our brief year of happiness with the birth of Miriam was past now—and the horror that had come out of Egypt was reaching out to engulf us once more.

Maharet closed her eyes for a moment; she touched the lids with her fingers, and then looked up at the others, as they waited, each in his or her own thoughts and considerations, each reluctant for the narrative to be broken, though they all knew that it must.

The young ones were drawn and weary; Daniel's rapt expression had changed little. Louis was gaunt, and the need for blood was hurting him, though he paid it no mind. "I can tell you no more now," Maharet said. "It's almost morning; and the young ones must go down

to the earth. I have to prepare the way for them.

"Tomorrow night we will gather here and continue. That is, if our Queen will allow. The Queen is nowhere near us now; I cannot hear the faintest murmur of her presence; I cannot catch the faintest flash of her countenance in another's eyes. If she knows what we do, she allows it. Or she is far away and indifferent, and we must wait to know her will.

"Tomorrow, I'll tell you what we saw when we went into Kemet."

"Until then, rest safe within the mountain. All of you. It has kept my secrets from the prying eyes of mortal men for countless years. Remember not even the Queen can hurt us until nightfall."

Marius rose as Maharet did. He moved to the far window as the others slowly left the room. It was as if Maharet's voice were still speaking to him. And what affected him most deeply was the evocation of Akasha, and the hatred Maharet felt for her; because Marius felt that hatred too; and he felt more strongly than ever that he should have brought this nightmare to a close while he'd had the power to do it.

But the red-haired woman could not have wanted any such thing to happen. None of them wanted to die any more than he did. And Maharet craved life, perhaps, more fiercely than any immortal he'd ever known.

Yet her tale seemed to confirm the hopelessness of it all. What had risen when the Queen stood up from her throne? What was this being that had Lestat in its maw? He could not imagine.

We change, but we do not change, he thought. We grow wise, but we are fallible things! We are only human for however long we endure, that was the miracle and the curse of it.

He saw again the smiling face he had seen as the ice began to fall. Is it possible that he loved as strongly still as he hated? That in his great humiliation, clarity had escaped him utterly? He honestly didn't know.

And he was tired suddenly, craving sleep, craving comfort; craving the soft sensuous pleasure of lying in a clean bed. Of sprawling upon it and burying his face in a pillow; of letting his limbs assemble themselves in the most natural and comfortable position.

Beyond the glass wall, a soft radiant blue light was filling the

eastern sky, yet the stars retained their brilliance, tiny and distant though they seemed. The dark trunks of the redwoods had become visible; and a lovely green smell had come into the house from the forest as always happens near dawn.

Far below where the hillside fell away and a clearing full of clover moved out to the woods, Marius saw Khayman walking alone. His hands appeared to glow in the thin, bluish darkness, and as he turned and looked back—up at Marius—his face was an eyeless mask of pure white.

Marius found himself raising his hand in a small gesture of friendship towards Khayman. And Khayman returned the gesture and went on into the trees.

Then Marius turned and saw what he already knew, that only Louis remained with him in the room. Louis stood quite still looking at him as he had earlier, as though he were seeing a myth made real.

Then he put the question that was obsessing him, the question he could not lose sight of, no matter how great was Maharet's spell. "You know whether or not Lestat's still alive, don't you?" he asked. It had a simple human tone to it, a poignant tone, yet the voice was so reserved.

Marius nodded. "He's alive. But I don't really know that the way you think I do. Not from asking or receiving the answer. Not from using all these lovely powers which plague us. I know it simply because I know."

He smiled at Louis. Something in the manner of this one made Marius happy, though he wasn't sure why. He beckoned for Louis to come to him and they met at the foot of the table and walked together out of the room. Marius put his arm around Louis's shoulder and they went down the iron stairs together, through the damp earth, Marius walking slowly and heavily, exactly like a human being might walk.

"And you're sure of it?" Louis asked respectfully.

Marius stopped. "Oh, yes, quite sure." They looked at one another for a moment, and again Marius smiled. This one was so gifted yet not gifted at the same time; he wondered if the human light would go out of Louis's eyes if he ever gained more power, if he ever had, for instance, a little of the blood of Marius in his veins.

And this young one was hungry too; he was suffering; and he

seemed to like it, to like the hunger and the pain.

"Let me tell you something," Marius said now, agreeably. "I knew the first moment I ever laid eyes on Lestat that nothing could kill him. That's the way it is with some of us. We can't die." But why was he saying this? Did he believe it again as he had before these trials had begun? He thought back to that night in San Francisco when he had walked down the broad clean-swept pavements of Market Street with his hands in his pockets, unnoticed by mortal men.

"Forgive me," Louis said, "but you remind me of the things they said of him at Dracula's Daughter, the talk among the ones who wanted to join him last night."

"I know," Marius said. "But they are fools and I'm right." He laughed softly. Yes, he did believe it. Then he embraced Louis again warmly. Just a little blood, and Louis might be stronger, true, but then he might lose the human tenderness, the human wisdom that no one could give another; the gift of knowing others' suffering with which Louis had probably been born.

But the night was over now for this one. Louis took Marius's hand, and then turned and walked down the tin-walled corridor to where Eric waited to show him the way.

Then Marius went up into the house.

He had perhaps a full hour more before the sun forced him into sleep, and tired as he was, he would not give it up. The lovely fresh smell of the woods was overpowering. And he could hear the birds now, and the clear singing of a deep creek.

He went into the great room of the adobe dwelling, where the fire had burnt down on the central hearth. He found himself standing before a giant quilt that covered almost half the wall.

Slowly he realized what he was seeing before him—the mountain, the valley, and the tiny figures of the twins as they stood together in the green clearing beneath the burning sun. The slow rhythm of Maharet's speech came back to him with the faint shimmer of all the images her words had conveyed. So immediate was that sun-drenched clearing, and how different it seemed now from the dreams. Never had the dreams made him feel close to these women! And now he knew them; he knew this house.

It was such a mystery, this mixture of feeling, where sorrow touched

something that was undeniably positive and good. Maharet's soul attracted him; he loved the particular complexity of it, and he wished he could somehow tell her so.

Then it was as if he caught himself; he realized that he had forgotten for a little while to be bitter, to be in pain. Maybe his soul was healing faster than he had ever supposed it could.

Or maybe it was only that he had been thinking about others—about Maharet, and before that about Louis, and what Louis needed to believe. Well, hell, Lestat probably was immortal. In fact, the sharp and bitter fact occurred to him that Lestat might survive all this even if he, Marius, did not.

But that was a little supposition that he could do without. Where was Armand? Had Armand gone down into the earth already? If only he could see Armand just now….

He went towards the cellar door again but something distracted him. Through an open doorway he saw two figures, very like the figures of the twins on the quilt. But these were Maharet and Jesse, arm in arm before an eastern window, watching motionless as the light grew brighter in the dark woods.

A violent shudder startled him. He had to grip the door frame to steady himself as a series of images flooded his mind. Not the jungle now; there was a highway in the distance, winding north, it seemed, through barren burnt land. And the creature had stopped, shaken, but by what? An image of two red-haired women? He heard the feet begin their relentless tramp again; he saw the feet caked with earth as if they were his feet; the hands caked with earth as if they were his hands. And then he saw the sky catching fire, and he moaned aloud.

When he looked up again, Armand was holding him. And with her bleary human eyes Maharet was imploring him to tell her what he had just seen. Slowly the room came alive around him, the agreeable furnishings, and then the immortal figures near him, who were of it, yet of nothing. He closed his eyes and opened them again.

"She's reached our longitude," he said, "yet she's miles to the east. The sun's just risen there with blazing force." He had felt it, that lethal heat! But she had gone into the earth; that too he had felt.

"But it's very far south of here," Jesse said to him. How frail she looked in the translucent darkness, her long thin fingers hugging the

backs of her slender arms.

"Not so far," Armand said. "And she was moving very fast."

"But in what direction does she move!" Maharet asked. "Is she coming towards us?"

She didn't wait for an answer. And it didn't seem that they could give it. She lifted her hand to cover her eyes as if the pain there was now intolerable; and then gathering Jesse to her, and kissing her suddenly, she bid the others good sleep.

Marius closed his eyes; he tried to see again the figure he had seen before. The garment, what was it? A rough thing thrown over the body like a peasant poncho, with a torn opening for the head. Bound at the waist, yes, he'd felt it. He tried to see more but he could not. What he had felt was power, illimitable power and unstoppable momentum, and almost nothing other than that.

When he opened his eyes again the morning shimmered in the room around him. Armand stood close to him, embracing him still, yet Armand seemed alone and perturbed by nothing; his eyes moved only a little as he looked at the forest, which now seemed to press against the house through every window, as if it had crept to the very edge of the porch.

Marius kissed Armand's forehead. And then he did exactly what Armand was doing.

He watched the room grow lighter; he watched the light fill the windowpanes; he watched the beautiful colors brighten in the vast network of the giant quilt.

5
LESTAT:
THIS IS MY BODY;
THIS IS MY BLOOD

When I awoke it was quiet, and the air was clean and warm, with the smell of the sea.

I was now thoroughly confused as to time. And I knew from my light-headedness that I had not slept through a day. Also I wasn't in any protective enclosure.

We'd been following the night around the world, perhaps, or rather moving at random in it, as Akasha maybe didn't need at all to sleep.

I needed it, that was obvious. But I was too curious not to want to be awake. And frankly too miserable. Also I'd been dreaming of human blood.

I found myself in a spacious bedroom with terraces to the west and to the north. I could smell the sea and I could hear it, yet the air was fragrant and rather still. Very gradually, I took stock of the room.

Lavish old furnishings, most likely Italian—delicate yet ornamented—were mingled with modern luxuries everywhere I looked. The bed on which I lay was a gilded four-poster, hung with gauzy curtains, and covered with down pillows and draperies of silk. A thick white carpet concealed the old floor.

There was a dressing table littered with glittering jars and silver objects, and a curious old-fashioned white telephone. Velvet chairs; a monster of a television set and shelves of stereo music equipment; and small polished tables everywhere, strewn with newspapers, ashtrays, decanters of wine.

People had lived here up till an hour ago; but now the people were dead. In fact, there were many dead on this island. And as I lay there for a moment, drinking in the beauty around me, I saw the village in my mind where we had been before. I saw the filth, the tin roofs, the mud. And now I lay in this bower, or so it seemed.

And there was death here too. We had brought it.

I got up off the bed and went out onto the terrace and looked down over the stone railing at a white beach. No land on the horizon, only the gently rolling sea. The lacy foam of the receding waves glistening under the moon. And I was in an old weathered palazzo, probably built some four centuries ago, decked with urns and cherubs and covered with stained plaster, a rather beautiful place. Electric lights shone through the green-painted shutters of other rooms. Nestled on a lower terrace just beneath me was a little swimming pool.

And ahead where the beach curved to the left, I saw another old graceful dwelling nestled into the cliffs. People had died in there too. This was a Greek island, I was sure of it; this was the Mediterranean Sea.

When I listened, I heard cries coming from the land behind me, over the crest of the hill. Men being slain. I leaned against the frame of the door. I tried to stop my heart from racing.

Some sudden memory of the slaughter in Azim's temple gripped me —a flash of myself walking through the human herd, using the invisible blade to pierce solid flesh. Thirst. Or was it merely lust? I saw those mangled limbs again; wasted bodies contorted in the final struggle, faces smeared with blood.

Not my doing, I couldn't have … But I had.

And now I could smell fires burning, fires like those fires in Azim's courtyard where the bodies were being burnt. The smell nauseated me. I turned towards the sea again and took a deep clean breath. If I let them, the voices would come, voices from all over the island, and from other islands, and from the nearby land, too. I could feel it, the sound, hovering there waiting; I had to push it back.

Then I heard more immediate noise. Women in this old mansion. They were approaching the bedchamber. I turned around just in time to see the double doors opened, and the women, dressed in simple blouses and skirts and kerchiefs, come into the room.

It was a motley crowd of all ages, including young beauties and stout older matrons, and even some rather frail creatures with darkly wrinkled skin and snow white hair. They brought vases of flowers with them; they were placing them everywhere. And then one of the women, a tentative slender thing with a beautiful long neck, moved forward with beguiling natural grace, and began to turn on the many

lamps.

Smell of their blood. How could it be so strong and so enticing, when I felt no thirst?

Suddenly they all came together in the center of the room and they stared at me; it was as if they'd fallen into a trance. I was standing on the terrace, merely looking at them; then I realized what they saw. My torn costume—the vampire rags—black coat, white shirt, and the cloak—all spattered with blood.

And my skin, that had changed measurably. I was whiter, more ghastly to look at, of course. And my eyes must have been brighter; or maybe I was being deceived by their naive reactions. When had they seen one of us before?

Whatever … it all seemed to be some sort of dream, these still women with their black eyes and their rather somber faces—even the stout ones had rather gaunt faces—gathered there staring at me, and then their dropping one by one to their knees. Ah, to their knees. I sighed. They had the crazed expression of people who had been delivered out of the ordinary; they were seeing a vision and the irony was that they looked like a vision to me.

Reluctantly, I read their thoughts.

They had seen the Blessed Mother. That is what she was here. The Madonna, the Virgin. She'd come to their villages and told them to slaughter their sons and husbands; even the babies had been slaughtered. And they had done it, or witnessed the doing of it; and they were now carried upon a wave of belief and joy. They were witnesses to miracles; they had been spoken to by the Blessed Mother herself. And she was the ancient Mother, the Mother who had always dwelt in the grottoes of this island, even before Christ, the Mother whose tiny naked statues were now and then found in the earth.

In her name they had knocked down the columns of the ruined temples, the ones the tourists came here to see; they had burned the only church on the island; they had knocked out its windows with sticks and stones. Ancient murals had burned in the church. The marble columns, broken into fragments, had fallen into the sea.

As for me, what was I to them? Not merely a god. Not merely the chosen of the Blessed Mother. No, something else. It puzzled me as I stood there, trapped by their eyes, repelled by their convictions, yet

fascinated and afraid.

Not of them, of course, but of everything that was happening. Of this delicious feeling of mortals looking at me, the way they had been looking when I'd been on the stage. Mortals looking at me and sensing my power after all the years of hiding, mortals come here to worship. Mortals like all those poor creatures strewn over the path in the mountains. But they'd been worshipers of Azim, hadn't they? They'd gone there to die.

Nightmare. Have to reverse this, have to stop it; have to stop myself from accepting it or any aspect of it!

I mean I could start believing that I was really—But I know what I am, don't I? And these are poor, ignorant women; women for whom television sets and phones are miracles, these are women for whom change itself is a form of miracle.… And they will wake up tomorrow and they will see what they have done!

But now the feeling of peace came over us—the women and me. The familiar scent of flowers, the spell. Silently, through their minds, the women were receiving their instructions.

There was a little commotion; two of them rose from their knees and entered an adjoining bath—one of those massive marble affairs that wealthy Italians and Greeks seem to love. Hot water was flowing; steam poured out of the open doors.

Other women had gone to the closets, to take out clean garments. Rich, whoever he was, the poor bastard who had owned this little palace, the poor bastard who had left that cigarette in the ashtray and the faint greasy fingerprints on the white phone.

Another pair of women came towards me. They wanted to lead me into the bath. I did nothing. I felt them touch me—hot human fingers touching me and all the attendant shock and excitement in them as they felt the peculiar texture of my flesh. It sent a powerful and delicious chill through me, these touches. Their dark liquid eyes were beautiful as they looked at me. They tugged at me with their warm hands; they wanted me to come with them.

All right. I allowed myself to be taken along. White marble tile, carved gold fixtures; an ancient Roman splendor, when you got right down to it, with gleaming bottles of soaps and scents lining marble shelves. And the flood of hot water in the pool, with the jets pumping

it full of bubbles, it was all very inviting; or might have been at some other time.

They stripped my garments off me. Absolutely fascinating feeling. No one had ever done such a thing to me. Not since I'd been alive and then only when I was a very small child. I stood in the flood of steam from the bath, watching all these small dark hands, and feeling the hairs rise all over my body; feeling the adoration in the women's eyes.

Through the steam I looked into the mirror—a wall of mirror actually, and I saw myself for the first time since this sinister odyssey had begun. The shock was more for a moment than I could handle. *This can't be me.*

I was much paler than I'd imagined. Gently I pushed the women away and went towards the mirror wall. My skin had a pearlescent gleam to it; and my eyes were even brighter, gathering all the colors of the spectrum and mingling them with an icy light. Yet I didn't look like Marius. I didn't look like Akasha. The lines in my face were still there!

In other words I'd been bleached by Akasha's blood, but I hadn't become smooth yet. I'd kept my human expression. And the odd thing was, the contrast now made these lines all the more visible. Even the tiny lines all over my fingers were more clearly etched than before.

But what consolation was this when I was more than ever noticeable, astonishing, unlike a human being? In a way, this was worse than that first moment two hundred years ago, when an hour or so after my death I'd seen myself in a mirror, and tried to find my humanity in what I was seeing. I was just as afraid right now.

I studied my reflection—my chest was like a marble torso in a museum, that white. And the organ, the organ we don't need, poised as if ready for what it would never again know how to do or want to do, marble, a Priapus at a gate.

Dazed, I watched the women draw closer; lovely throats, breasts, dark moist limbs. I watched them touch me all over again. I was beautiful to them, all right.

The scent of their blood was stronger in here, in the rising steam. Yet I wasn't thirsty, not really. Akasha had filled me, but the blood was tormenting me a little. No, quite a lot.

I *wanted* their blood—and it had nothing to do with thirst. I wanted

it the way a man can want vintage wine, though he's drunk water. Only magnify that by twenty or thirty or a hundred. In fact, it was so powerful I could imagine taking all of them, tearing at their tender throats one after another and leaving their bodies lying here on the floor.

No, this is not going to take place, I reasoned. And the sharp, dangerous quality of this lust made me want to weep. *What's been done to me!* But then I knew, didn't I? I knew I was so strong now that twenty men couldn't have subdued me. And think what I could do to them. I could rise up through the ceiling if I wanted to and get free of here. I could do things of which I'd never dreamed. Probably I had the fire gift now; I could burn things the way she could burn them, the way Marius said that he could. Just a matter of strength, that's all it was. And dizzying levels of awareness, of acceptance.…

The women were kissing me. They were kissing my shoulders. Just a lovely little sensation, the soft pressure of the lips on my skin. I couldn't help smiling, and gently I embraced them and kissed them, nuzzling their heated little necks and feeling their breasts against my chest. I was utterly surrounded by these malleable creatures, I was blanketed in succulent human flesh.

I stepped into the deep tub and allowed them to wash me. The hot water splashed over me deliriously, washing away easily all the dirt that never really clings to us, never penetrates us. I looked up at the ceiling and let them brush the hot water through my hair.

Yes, extraordinarily pleasurable, all of it. Yet never had I been so alone. I was sinking into these mesmerizing sensations; I was drifting. Because really, there was nothing else that I could do.

When they were finished I chose the perfumes that I wanted and told them to get rid of the others. I spoke in French but they seemed to understand. Then they dressed me with the clothes I selected from what they presented to me. The master of this house had liked handmade linen shirts, which were only a little too large for me. And he'd liked handmade shoes as well, and they were a tolerable fit.

I chose a suit of gray silk, very fine weave, and rather jaunty modern cut. And silver jewelry. The man's silver watch, and his cuff links which had tiny diamonds embedded in them. And even a tiny diamond pin for the narrow lapel of the coat. But all these clothes felt

so strange on me; it was as if I could feel the surface of my own skin yet not feel it. And there came that déjà vu. Two hundred years ago. The old mortal questions. Why in the hell is this happening? How can I gain control of it?

I wondered for a moment, was it possible not to care what happened? To stand back from it and view them all as alien creatures, things upon which I fed? Cruelly I'd been ripped out of their world! Where was the old bitterness, the old excuse for endless cruelty? Why had it always focused itself upon such small things? Not that a life is small. Oh, no, never, not any life! That was the whole point actually. Why did I who could kill with such abandon shrink from the prospect of seeing their precious traditions laid waste?

Why did my heart come up in my throat now? Why was I crying inside, like something dying myself?

Maybe some other fiend could have loved it; some twisted and conscienceless immortal could have sneered at her visions, yet slipped into the robes of a god as easily as I had slipped into that perfumed bath.

But nothing could give me that freedom, nothing. Her permissions meant nothing; her power finally was but another degree of what we all possessed. And what we all possessed had never made the struggle simple; it had made it agony, no matter how often we won or lost.

It couldn't happen, the subjugation of a century to one will; the design had to be foiled somehow, and if I just maintained my calm, I'd find the key.

Yet mortals had inflicted such horrors upon others; barbarian hordes had scarred whole continents, destroying everything in their path. Was she merely human in her delusions of conquest and domination? Didn't matter. She had inhuman means to see her dreams made real!

I would start weeping again if I didn't stop reaching now for the solution; and these poor tender creatures around me would be even more damaged and confused than before.

When I lifted my hands to my face, they didn't move away from me. They were brushing my hair. Chills ran down my back. And the soft thud of the blood in their veins was deafening suddenly.

I told them I wanted to be alone. I couldn't endure the temptation any longer. And I could have sworn they knew what I wanted. Knew

it, and were yielding to it. Dark salty flesh so close to me. Too much temptation. Whatever the case, they obeyed instantly, and a little fearfully. They left the room in silence, backing away as if it weren't proper to simply walk out.

I looked at the face of the watch. I thought it was pretty funny, me wearing this watch that told the time. And it made me angry suddenly. And then the watch broke! The glass shattered; everything flew out of the ruptured silver case. The strap broke and the thing fell off my wrist onto the floor. Tiny glittering wheels disappeared into the carpet.

"Good God!" I whispered. Yet why not?—if I could rupture an artery or a heart. But the point was to control this thing, to direct it, not let it escape like that.

I looked up and chose at random a small mirror, one standing on the dresser in a silver frame. I thought *Break* and it exploded into gleaming fragments. In the hollow stillness I could hear the pieces as they struck the walls and the dresser top.

Well, that was useful, a hell of a lot more useful than being able to kill people. I stared at the telephone on the edge of the dresser. I concentrated, let the power collect, then consciously subdued it and directed it to push the phone slowly across the glass that covered the marble. Yes. All right. The little bottles tumbled and fell as it was pushed into them. Then I stopped them; I couldn't right them however. I couldn't pick them up. Oh, but wait, yes I could. I imagined a hand righting them. And certainly the power wasn't literally obeying this image; but I was using it to organize the power. I righted all the little bottles. I retrieved the one which had fallen and put it back in place.

I was trembling just a little. I sat on the bed to think this over, but I was too curious to think. The important thing to realize was this: it was physical; it was energy. And it was no more than an extension of powers I'd possessed before. For example, even in the beginning, in the first few weeks after Magnus had made me, I'd managed once to move another—my beloved Nicolas with whom I'd been arguing—across a room as if I'd struck him with an invisible fist. I'd been in a rage then; I hadn't been able to duplicate the little trick later. But it was the same power, the same verifiable and measurable trait.

"You are no god," I said. But this increase of power, this new dimension, as they say so aptly in this century.... Hmmmm....

Looking up at the ceiling, I decided I wanted to rise slowly and touch it, run my hands over the plaster frieze that ran around the cord of the chandelier. I felt a queasiness; and then I realized I was floating just beneath the ceiling. And my hand, why, it looked like my hand was going through the plaster. I lowered myself a little and looked down at the room.

Dear God, I'd done this without taking my body with me! I was still sitting there, on the side of the bed. I was staring at myself, at the top of my own head. I—my body at any rate—sat there motionless, dreamlike, staring. *Back*. And I was there again, thank God, and my body was all right, and then looking up at the ceiling, I tried to figure what this was all about.

Well, I knew what it was all about, too. Akasha herself had told me how her spirit could travel out of her body. And mortals had always done such things, or so they claimed. Mortals had written of such invisible travel from the most ancient times.

I had almost done it when I tried to see into Azim's temple, *gone there to see*, and she had stopped me because when I left my body, my body had started to fall. And long before that, there had been a couple of other times.... But in general, I'd never believed all the mortal stories.

Now I knew I could do this as well. But I certainly didn't want to do it by accident. I made the decision to move to the ceiling again but this time with my body, and it was accomplished at once! We were there together, pushing against the plaster and this time my hand didn't go through. All right.

I went back down and decided to try the other again. Now *only in spirit*. The queasy feeling came, I took a glance down at my body, and then I was rising right through the roof of the palazzo. I was traveling out over the sea. Yet things looked unaccountably different; I wasn't sure this was the literal sky or the literal sea. It was more like a hazy conception of both, and I didn't like this, not one bit. No, thank you. Going home now! Or should I bring my body to me? I tried, but absolutely nothing happened, and that didn't surprise me actually. This was some kind of hallucination. I hadn't really left my body, and

ought to just accept that fact.

And Baby Jenks, what about the beautiful things Baby Jenks had seen when she went up? Had they been hallucinations? I would never know, would I?

Back!

Sitting. Side of the bed. Comfortable. The room. I got up and walked around for a few minutes, merely looking at the flowers, and the odd way the white petals caught the lamplight and how dark the reds looked; and how the golden light was caught on the surfaces of the mirrors, all the other lovely things.

It was overwhelming suddenly, the pure detail surrounding me; the extraordinary complexity of a single room.

Then I practically fell into the chair by the bed. I lay back against the velvet, and listened to my heart pounding. Being invisible, leaving my body, I hated it! I wasn't going to do it again!

Then I heard laughter, faint, gentle laughter. I realized Akasha was there, somewhere behind me, near the dresser perhaps.

There was a sudden surge in me of gladness to hear her voice, to feel her presence. In fact I was surprised at how strong these sensations were. I wanted to see her but I didn't move just yet.

"This traveling without your body—it's a power you share with mortals," she said. "They do this little trick of traveling out of their bodies all the time."

"I know," I said dismally. "They can have it. If I can fly with my body, that's what I intend to do."

She laughed again; soft, caressing laughter that I'd heard in my dreams.

"In olden times," she said, "men went to the temple to do this; they drank the potions given them by the priests; it was in traveling the heavens that men faced the great mysteries of life and death."

"I know," I said again. "I always thought they were drunk or stoned out of their minds as one says today."

"You're a lesson in brutality," she whispered. "Your responses to things are so swift."

"That's brutal?" I asked. I caught a whiff again of the fires burning on the island. Sickening. *Dear God*. And we talk here as if this isn't happening, as if we hadn't penetrated their world with these horrors.

…

"And flying with your body does not frighten you?" she asked.

"It all frightens me, you know that," I said. "When do I discover the limits? Can I sit here and bring death to mortals who are miles away?"

"No," she said. "You'll discover the limits rather sooner than you think. It's like every other mystery. There really is no mystery."

I laughed. For a split second I heard the voices again, the tide rising, and then it faded into a truly audible sound—cries on the wind, cries coming from villages on the island. They had burned the little museum with the ancient Greek statues in it; and with the icons and the Byzantine paintings.

All that art going up in smoke. Life going up in smoke.

I had to see her suddenly. I couldn't find her in the mirrors, the way they were. I got up.

She was standing at the dresser; and she too had changed her garments, and the style of her hair. Even more purely lovely, yet timeless as before. She held a small hand mirror, and she was looking at herself in it; but it seemed she was not really looking at anything; she was listening to the voices; and I could hear them again too.

A shiver went through me; she resembled her old self, the frozen self sitting in the shrine.

Then she appeared to wake; to look into the mirror again, and then at me as she put the mirror aside.

Her hair had been loosened; all those plaits gone. And now the rippling black waves came down free over her shoulders, heavy, glossy, and inviting to kiss. The dress was similar to the old one, as if the women had made it for her out of dark magenta silk that she had found here. It gave a faint rosy blush to her cheeks, and to her breasts which were only half covered by the loose folds that went up over her shoulders, gathered there by tiny gold clasps.

The necklaces she wore were all modern jewelry, but the profusion made them look archaic, pearls and gold chains and opals and even rubies.

Against the luster of her skin, all this ornament appeared somehow unreal! It was caught up in the overall gloss of her person; it was like the light in her eyes, or the luster of her lips.

She was something fit for the most lavish palace of the imagination;

something both sensuous and divine. I wanted her blood again, the blood without fragrance and without killing. I wanted to go to her and lift my hand and touch the skin which seemed absolutely impenetrable but which would break suddenly like the most fragile crust.

"All the men on the island are dead, aren't they?" I asked. I shocked myself.

"All but ten. There were seven hundred people on this island. Seven have been chosen to live."

"And the other three?"

"They are for you."

I stared at her. For me? The desire for blood shifted a little, revised itself, included her and human blood—the hot, bubbling, fragrant kind, the kind that—But there was no physical need. I could still call it thirst, technically, but it was actually worse.

"You don't want them?" she said, mockingly, smiling at me. "My reluctant god, who shrinks from his duty? You know all those years, when I listened to you, long before you made songs to me, I loved it that you took only the hard ones, the young men. I loved it that you hunted thieves and killers; that you liked to swallow their evil whole. Where's your courage now? Your impulsiveness? Your willingness to plunge, as it were?"

"Are they evil?" I said. "These victims who are waiting for me?"

She narrowed her eyes for a moment. "Is it cowardice finally?" she asked. "Does the grandeur of the plan frighten? For surely the killing means little."

"Oh, but you're wrong," I said. "The killing always means something. But yes, the grandeur of the plan terrifies me. The chaos, the total loss of all moral equilibrium, it means everything. But that's not cowardice, is it?" How calm I sounded. How sure of myself. It wasn't the truth, but she knew it.

"Let me release you from all obligation to resist," she said. "You cannot stop me. I love you, as I told you. I love to look at you. It fills me with happiness. But you can't influence me. Such an idea is absurd."

We stared at each other in silence. I was trying to find words to tell myself how lovely she was, how like the old Egyptian paintings of princesses with shining tresses whose names are now forever lost. I

was trying to understand why my heart hurt even looking at her; and yet I didn't care that she was beautiful; I cared about what we said to each other.

"Why have you chosen this way?" I asked.

"You know why," she said with a patient smile. "It is the best way. It is the only way; it is the clear vision after centuries of searching for a solution."

"But that can't be the truth, I can't believe it."

"Of course it can. Do you think this is impulse with *me?* I don't make my decisions as you do, my prince. Your youthful exuberance is something I treasure, but such small possibilities are long gone for me. You think in terms of lifetimes; in terms of small accomplishments and human pleasures. I have thought out for thousands of years my designs for the world that is now mine. And the evidence is overwhelming that I must proceed as I have done. I cannot turn this earth into a garden, I cannot create the Eden of human imagination—unless I eliminate the males almost completely."

"And by this you mean kill forty percent of the population of the earth? Ninety percent of all males?"

"Do you deny that this will put an end to war, to rape, to violence?"

"But the point …"

"No, answer my question. Do you deny that it will put an end to war, to rape, and to violence?"

"Killing everyone would put an end to those things!"

"Don't play games with me. Answer my question."

"Isn't that a game? The price is unacceptable. It's madness; it's mass murder, it's against nature."

"Quiet yourself. None of what you say is true. What is natural is simply what has been done. And don't you think the peoples of this earth have limited in the past their female children? Don't you think they have killed them by the millions, because they wanted only male children so that those children could go to war? Oh, you cannot imagine the extent to which such things have been done.

"And so now they will choose female over male and there will be no war. And what of the other crimes committed by men against women? If there were any nation on earth which had committed such crimes against another nation, would it not be marked for extermination?

And yet nightly, daily, throughout this earth these crimes are perpetrated without end."

"All right, that's true. Undoubtedly that's true. But is your solution any better? It's unspeakable, the slaughter of all things male. Surely if you want to rule—" But even this to me was unthinkable. I thought of Marius's old words, spoken long ago to me when we existed still in the age of powdered wigs and satin slippers—that the old religion, Christianity, was dying, and maybe no new religion would rise:

"Maybe something more wonderful will take place," Marius had said, "the world will truly move forward, past all gods and goddesses, past all devils and angels …"

Wasn't that the destiny Of this world, really? The destiny to which it was moving without our intervention?

"Ah, you are a dreamer, my beautiful one," she said harshly. "How you pick and choose your illusions! Look to the eastern countries, where the desert tribes, now rich on the oil they have pulled up from beneath the sands, kill each other by the thousands in the name of Allah, their god! Religion is not dead on this earth; it never will be. You and Marius, what chess players you are; your ideas are nothing but chess pieces. And you cannot see beyond the board on which you place them in this or that pattern as suits your small ethical souls."

"You're wrong," I said angrily. "Not about us perhaps. We don't matter. You're wrong in all this that you've begun. You're wrong."

"No, I am not wrong," she said. "And there is no one who can stop me, male or female. And we shall see for the first time since man lifted the club to strike down his brother, the world that women would make and what women have to teach men. And only when men can be taught, will they be allowed to run free among women again!"

"There must be some other way! Ye gods, I'm a flawed thing, a weak thing, a thing no better than most of the men who've ever lived. I can't argue for their lives now. I couldn't defend my own. But, Akasha, for the love of all things living, I'm begging you to turn away from this, this wholesale murder—"

"You speak to me of murder? Tell me the value of one human life, Lestat. Is it not infinite? And how many have you sent to the grave? We have blood on our hands, all of us, just as we have it in our veins."

"Yes, exactly. And we are not all wise and all knowing. I'm begging

you to stop, to consider … Akasha, surely Marius—"

"Marius!" Softly she laughed. "What did Marius teach you? What did he give you? Really give you!"

I didn't answer. I couldn't. And her beauty was confusing me! So confusing to see the roundness of her arms; the tiny dimple in her cheek.

"My darling," she said, her face suddenly tender and soft as her voice was. "Bring to mind your vision of the Savage Garden, in which aesthetic principles are the only enduring principles—the laws that govern the evolution of all things large and small, of colors and patterns in glorious profusion, and beauty! Beauty everywhere one looks. That is nature. And death is everywhere in it.

"And what I shall make is Eden, the Eden all long for, and it shall be better than nature! It shall take things a step further; and the utter abusive and amoral violence of nature shall be redeemed. Don't you understand that men will never do more than dream of peace? But women can realize that dream? My vision is amplified in the heart of every woman. But it cannot survive the heat of male violence! And that heat is so terrible that the earth itself may not survive."

"What if there's something you don't understand," I said. I was struggling, grasping for the words. "Suppose the duality of masculine and feminine is indispensable to the human animal. Suppose the women want the men; suppose they rise against you and seek to protect the men. The world is not this little brutal island! All women are not peasants blinded by visions!"

"Do you think men are what women want?" she asked. She drew closer, her face changing imperceptibly in the play of the light. "Is that what you're saying? If it is so, then we shall spare a few more of the men, and keep them where they may be looked at as the women looked at you, and touched as the women touched you. We'll keep them where the women may have them when they want them, and I assure you they shall not be used as women have been used by men."

I sighed. It was useless to argue. She was absolutely right and absolutely wrong.

"You do yourself an injustice," she said. "I know your arguments. For centuries I have pondered them, as I've pondered so many questions. You think I do what I do with human limitations. I do not.

To understand me, you must think in terms of abilities yet unimagined. Sooner will you understand the mystery of splitting atoms or of black holes in space."

"There has to be a way without death. There has to be a way that triumphs over death."

"Now that, my beauty, is truly against nature," she said. "Even I cannot put an end to death." She paused; she seemed suddenly distracted; or rather deeply distressed by the words she'd just spoken. "An end to death," she whispered. It seemed some personal sorrow had intruded on her thoughts. "An end to death," she said again. But she was drifting away from me. I watched her close her eyes, and lift her fingers to her temples.

She was hearing the voices again; letting them come. Or maybe even unable to stop them for a moment. She said some words in an ancient tongue, and I didn't understand them. I was struck by her sudden seeming vulnerability, the way the voices seemed to be cutting her off; the way her eyes appeared to search the room and then to fix on me and brighten.

I was speechless and overwhelmed with sadness. How small had my visions of power always been! To vanquish a mere handful of enemies, to be seen and loved by mortals as an image; to find some place in the great drama of things which was infinitely larger than I was, a drama whose study could occupy the mind of one being for a thousand years. And we stood outside time suddenly; outside of justice; capable of collapsing whole systems of thought. Or was it just an illusion? How many others had reached for such power, in one form or another?

"They were not immortals, my beloved." It was almost an entreaty.

"But it's an accident that we are," I said. "We're things that never should have come into existence."

"Don't speak those words!"

"I can't help it."

"It doesn't matter now. You fail to grasp how little *anything* matters. I give you no sublime reason for what I do because the reasons are simple and practical; how we came into being is irrelevant. What matters is that we have survived. Don't you see? That is the utter beauty of it, the beauty out of which all other beauties will be born, that we have survived."

I shook my head. I was in a panic. I saw again the museum that the villagers on this island had only just burnt. I saw the statues blackened and lying on the floor. An appalling sense of loss engulfed me.

"History does not matter," she said. "Art does not matter; these things imply continuities which in fact do not exist. They cater to our need for pattern, our hunger for meaning. But they cheat us in the end. We must make the meaning."

I turned my back. I didn't want to be drugged by her resolution or her beauty; by the glimmer of light in her jet black eyes. I felt her hands on my shoulders; her lips against my neck.

"When the years have passed," she said, "when my garden has bloomed through many summers and gone to sleep through many winters; when the old ways of rape and war are nothing but memory, and women watch the old films in mystification that such things could ever have been done; when the ways of women are inculcated into every member of the population, naturally, as aggression is now inculcated, then perhaps the males can return. Slowly, their numbers can be increased. Children will be reared in an atmosphere where rape is unthinkable, where war is unimaginable. And then … then … there can be men. When the world is ready for them."

"It won't work. It can't work."

"Why do you say so? Let us look to nature, as you wanted to do only moments ago. Go out in the lush garden that surrounds this villa; study the bees in their hives and the ants who labor as they have always done. They are female, my prince, by the millions. A male is only an aberration and a matter of function. They learned the wise trick a long time before me of limiting the males.

"And we may now live in an age where males are utterly unnecessary. Tell me, my prince, what is the primary use of men now, if it is not to protect women from other men?"

"What is it that makes you want me here!" I said desperately. I turned around to face her again. "Why have you chosen me as your consort! For the love of heaven, why don't you kill me with the other men! Choose some other immortal, some ancient being who hungers for such power! There must be one. I don't want to rule the world! I don't want to rule anything! I never did."

Her face changed just a little. It seemed there was a faint,

evanescent sadness in her that made her eyes even deeper in their darkness for an instant. Her lip quivered as if she wanted to say something but couldn't. Then she did answer.

"Lestat, if all the world were destroyed, I would not destroy you," she said. "Your limitations are as radiant as your virtues for reasons I don't understand myself. But more truly perhaps, I love you because you are so perfectly what is wrong with all things male. Aggressive, full of hate and recklessness, and endlessly eloquent excuses for violence—you are the essence of masculinity; and there is a gorgeous quality to such purity. But only because it can now be controlled."

"By you."

"Yes, my darling. This is what I was born for. This is why I am here. And it does not matter if no one ratifies my purpose. I shall make it so. Right now the world burns with masculine fire; it is a conflagration. But when that is corrected, your fire shall burn ever more brightly—as a torch burns."

"Akasha, you prove my point! Don't you think the souls of women crave that very fire? My God, would you tamper with the stars themselves?"

"Yes, the soul craves it. But to see it in the blaze of a torch as I have indicated, or in the flame of a candle. But not as it rages now through every forest and over every mountain and in every glen. There is no woman alive who has ever wanted to be burnt by it! They want the light, my beauty, the light! And the warmth! But not the destruction. How could they? They are only women. They are not mad."

"All right. Say you accomplish your purpose. That you begin this revolution and it sweeps the world—and mind you I don't think such a thing will happen! But if you do, is there nothing under heaven that will demand atonement for the death of so many millions? If there are no gods or goddesses, is there not some way in which humans themselves—and you and I—shall be made to pay?"

"It is the gateway to innocence and so it shall be remembered. And never again will the male population be allowed to increase to such proportions, for who would want such horrors again?"

"Force the men to obey you. Dazzle them as you've dazzled the women, as you've dazzled me."

"But Lestat, that is just the point; they would never obey. Will you

obey? They would die first, as you would die. They would have another reason for rebellion, as if any were ever wanting. They would gather together in magnificent resistance. Imagine a goddess to fight. We shall see enough of that by and by as it is. They cannot help but be men. And I could rule only through tyranny, by endless killing. And there would be chaos. But this way, there shall be a break in the great chain of violence. There shall be an era of utter and perfect peace."

I was quiet again. I could think of a thousand answers but they were all short-circuited. She knew her purpose only too well. And the truth was, she was right in many things she said.

Ah, but it was fantasy! A world without males. What exactly would have been accomplished? Oh, no. No, don't even accept the idea for a moment. Don't even.… Yet the vision returned, the vision I'd glimpsed in that miserable jungle village, of a world without fear.

Imagine trying to explain to them what men had been like. Imagine trying to explain that there had been a time when one could be murdered in the streets of the cities; imagine trying to explain what rape meant to the male of the species … imagine. And I saw their eyes looking at me, the uncomprehending eyes as they tried to fathom it, tried to make that leap of understanding. I felt their soft hands touching me.

"But this is madness!" I whispered.

"Ah, but you fight me so hard, my prince," she whispered. There was a flash of anger, hurt. She came near to me. If she kissed me again I was going to start weeping. I'd thought I knew what beauty was in women; but she'd surpassed all the language I had for it.

"My prince," she said again in a low whisper. "The logic of it is elegant. A world in which only a handful of males are kept for breeding shall be a female world. And that world will be what we have never known in all our bloody miserable history, in which men now breed germs in vials with which to kill continents in chemical warfare, and design bombs which can knock the earth from its path around the sun."

"What if the women divide along principles of masculine/feminine, the way men so often divide if there are no females there?"

"You know that's a foolish objection. Such distinctions are never more than superficial. Women are women! Can you conceive of war

made by women? Truly, answer me. Can you? Can you conceive of bands of roving women intent only on destruction? Or rape? Such a thing is preposterous. For the aberrant few justice will be immediate. But overall, something utterly unforeseen will take place. Don't you see? The possibility of peace on earth has always existed, and there have always been people who could realize it, and preserve it, and those people are women. If one takes away the men."

I sat down on the bed in consternation, like a mortal man. I put my elbows on my knees. Dear God, dear God! Why did those two words keep coming to me? There was no God! I was in the room with God.

She laughed triumphantly.

"Yes, precious one," she said. She touched my hand and turned me around and drew me towards her. "But tell me, doesn't it excite you even a little?"

I looked at her. "What do you mean?"

"You, the impulsive one. You who made that child, Claudia, into a blood drinker, just to see what would happen?" There was mockery in her tone but it was affectionate. "Come now, don't you want to see what will happen if all the males are gone? Aren't you even a little curious? Reach into your soul for the truth. It is a very interesting idea, isn't it?"

I didn't answer. Then I shook my head. "No," I said.

"Coward," she whispered.

No one had ever called me that, no one.

"Coward," she said again. "Little being with little dreams."

"Maybe there would be no war and no rape and no violence," I said, "if all beings were little and had little dreams, as you put it."

She laughed softly. Forgivingly.

"We could argue these points forever," she whispered. "But very soon we will know. The world will be as I would have it be; and we shall see what happens as I said."

She sat beside me. For a moment it seemed I was losing my mind. She slipped her smooth naked arms around my neck. It seemed there had never been a softer female body, never anything as yielding and luscious as her embrace. Yet she was so hard, so strong.

The lights in the room were dimming. And the sky outside seemed ever more vivid and darkly blue.

“Akasha,” I whispered. I was looking beyond the open terrace at the stars. I wanted to say something, something crucial that would sweep away all arguments; but the meaning escaped me. I was so drowsy; surely it was her doing. It was a spell she was working, yet knowing it did not release me. I felt her lips again on my lips, and on my throat. I felt the cool satin of her skin.

“Yes, rest now, precious one. And when you wake, the victims will be waiting.”

“Victims.…” Almost dreaming, as I held her in my arms.

“But you must sleep now. You are young still and fragile. My blood’s working on you, changing you, perfecting you.”

Yes, destroying me; destroying my heart and my will. I was vaguely conscious of moving, of lying down on the bed. I fell back into the silken pillows, and then there was the silk of her hair near me, the touch of her fingers, and again, her lips on my mouth. Blood in her kiss; blood thundering beneath it.

“Listen to the sea,” she whispered. “Listen to the flowers open. You can hear them now, you know. You can hear the tiny creatures of the sea if you listen. You can hear the dolphins sing, for they do.”

Drifting. Safe in her arms; she the powerful one; she was the one they all feared.

Forget the acrid smell of the burning bodies; yes, listen to the sea pounding like guns on the beach beneath us; listen to the sound of a rose petal breaking loose and falling onto marble. And the world is going to hell, and I cannot help it, and I am in her arms and I am going to sleep.

“Hasn’t that happened a million times, my love?” she whispered. “On a world full of suffering and death, you turned your back as millions of mortals do every night?”

Darkness. Splendid visions taking place; a palace even more lovely than this. Victims. Servants. The mythical existence of pashas, and emperors.

“Yes, my darling, anything that you desire. All the world at your feet. I shall build you palace upon palace; they shall do it; they that worship you. That is nothing. That is the simplest part of it. And think of the hunting, my prince. Until the killing is done, think of the chase. For they would surely run from you and hide from you, yet you would

find them."

In the dwindling light—just before dreams come—I could see it. I could see myself traveling through the air, like the heroes of old, over the sprawling country where their campfires flickered.

In packs like wolves they would travel, through the cities as well as the woods, daring to show themselves only by day; for only then would they be safe from us. When night fell, we would come; and we would track them by their thoughts and by their blood, and by the whispered confessions of the women who had seen them and maybe even harbored them. Out in the open they might run, firing their useless weapons. And we would swoop down; we would destroy them one by one, our prey, save for those we wanted alive, those whose blood we would take slowly, mercilessly.

And out of that war shall come peace? Out of that hideous game shall come a garden?

I tried to open my eyes. I felt her kiss my eyelids.

Dreaming.

A barren plain and the soil breaking. Something rising, pushing the dried clods of earth out of its way. I am this thing. This thing walking across the barren plain as the sun sinks. The sky is still full of light. I look down at the stained cloth that covers me, but this is not me. I'm only Lestat. And I'm afraid. I wish Gabrielle were here. And Louis. Maybe Louis could make her understand. Ah, Louis, of all of us, Louis who always knew.…

And there is the familiar dream again, the redheaded women kneeling by the altar with the body—their mother's body and they are ready to consume it. Yes, it's their duty, their sacred right—to devour the brain and the heart. Except that they never will because something awful always happens. Soldiers come.… I wish I knew the meaning.

Blood.

I woke up with a start. Hours had passed. The room had cooled faintly. The sky was wondrously clear through the open windows. From her came all the light that filled the room.

"The women are waiting, and the victims, they are afraid."

The victims. My head was spinning. The victims would be full of luscious blood. Males who would have died anyway. Young males all

mine to take.

"Yes. But come, put an end to their suffering."

Groggily I got up. She wrapped a long cloak over my shoulders, something simpler than her own garment, but warm and soft to touch. She stroked my hair with her two hands.

"Masculine—feminine. Is that all there ever was to it?" I whispered. My body wanted to sleep some more. But the blood.

She reached up and touched my cheek with her fingers. Tears again?

We went out of the room together, and onto a long landing with a marble railing, from which a stairs descended, turning once, into an immense room. Candelabra everywhere. Dim electric lamps creating a luxurious gloom.

At the very center, the women were assembled, perhaps two hundred or more of them, standing motionless and looking up at us, their hands clasped as if in prayer.

Even in their silence, they seemed barbaric, amid the European furniture, the Italian hardwoods with their gilt edges, and the old fireplace with its marble scrolls. I thought of her words suddenly: "history doesn't matter; art doesn't matter." Dizzy. On the walls, there ran those airy eighteenth-century paintings, full of gleaming clouds and fat-cheeked angels, and skies of luminescent blue.

The women stood looking past this wealth which had never touched them and indeed meant nothing to them, looking up at the vision on the landing, which now dissolved, and in a rush of whispered noise and colored light, materialized suddenly at the foot of the stairs.

Sighs rose, hands were raised to shield bowed heads as if from a blast of unwelcome light. Then all eyes were fixed upon the Queen of Heaven and her consort, who stood on the red carpet, only a few feet above the assembly, the consort a bit shaken and biting his lip a little and trying to see this thing clearly, this awful thing that was happening, this awful mingling of worship and blood sacrifice, as the victims were brought forth.

Such fine specimens. Dark-haired, dark-skinned, Mediterranean men. Every bit as beautiful as the young women. Men of that stocky build and exquisite musculature that has inspired artists for thousands of years. Ink black eyes and darkly shaved faces; and deep cunning;

and deep anger as they looked upon these hostile supernatural creatures who had decreed the death of their brothers far and wide.

With leather straps they'd been bound—probably their own belts, and the belts of dozens of others; but the women had done it well. Their ankles were tethered even, so that they could walk but not kick or run. Naked to the waist they were, and only one was trembling, as much with anger as with fear. Suddenly he began to struggle. The other two turned, stared at him, and started to struggle as well.

But the mass of women closed on them, forcing them to their knees. I felt the desire rise in me at the sight of it, at the sight of leather belts cutting into the dark naked flesh of the men's arms. Why is this so seductive! And the women's hands holding them, those tight menacing hands that could be so soft otherwise. They couldn't fight so many women. Heaving sighs, they stopped the rebellion, though the one who had started the struggle looked up, accusingly, at me.

Demons, devils, things from hell, that is what his mind told him; for who else could have done such things to his world? Oh, this is the beginning of darkness, terrible darkness!

But the desire was so strong. *You are going to die and I am going to do it!* And he seemed to hear it, and to understand it. And a savage hatred of the women rose out of him, replete with images of rape and retribution that made me smile, and yet I understood. Rather completely I understood. So easy to feel that contempt for them, to be outraged that they had dared to become the enemy, the enemy in the age-old battle, they, the women! And it was darkness, this imagined retribution, it was unspeakable darkness, too.

I felt Akasha's fingers on my arm. The feeling of bliss came back; the delirium. I tried to resist it, but I felt it as before. Yet the desire didn't go away. The desire was in my mouth now. I could taste it.

Yes, pass into the moment; pass into pure function; let the bloody sacrifice begin.

The women went down on their knees en masse, and the men who were already kneeling seemed to grow calm, their eyes glazing over as they looked at us, their lips trembling and loose.

I stared at the muscled shoulders of the first one, the one who had rebelled. I imagined as I always do at such moments the feel of his coarse rough-shaven throat when my lips would touch it, and my teeth

would break through the skin—not the icy skin of the goddess—but hot, salty human skin.

Yes, beloved. Take him. He is the sacrifice that you deserve. You are a god now. Take him. Do you know how many wait for you?

It seemed the women understood what to do. They lifted him as I stepped forward; there was another struggle, but it was no more than a spasm in the muscles as I took him into my arms. My hand closed too hard on his head; I didn't know my new strength, and I heard the bones cracking even as my teeth went in. But the death came almost instantly, so great was my first draught of blood. I was burning with hunger, and the whole portion, complete and entire in one instant, had not been enough. Not nearly enough!

At once I took the next victim, trying to be slow with it, so that I would tumble into the darkness as I'd so often done, with only the soul speaking to me. Yes, telling me its secrets as the blood spurted into my mouth, as I let my mouth fill before I swallowed. *Yes, brother. I am sorry, brother*. And then staggering forward, I stepped on the corpse before me and crushed it underfoot.

"Give me the last one."

No resistance. He stared up at me in utter quiet, as if some light had dawned in him, as if he'd found in theory or belief some perfect rescue. I pulled him to me—gently, Lestat—and this was the real fount I wanted, this was the slow, powerful death I craved, the heart pumping as if it would never stop, the sigh slipping from his lips, my eyes clouded still, even as I let him go, with the fading images of his brief and unrecorded life, suddenly collapsed into one rare second of meaning.

I let him drop. Now there was no meaning.

There was only the light before me, and the rapture of the women who had at last been redeemed through miracles.

The room was hushed; not a thing stirred; the sound of the sea came in, that distant monotonous booming.

Then Akasha's voice:

The sins of the men have now been atoned for; and those who are kept now, shall be well cared for, and loved. But never give freedom to those who remain, those who have oppressed you.

And then soundlessly, without distinct words, the lesson came.

The ravening lust which they had just witnessed, the deaths they had seen at my hands—that was to be the eternal reminder of the fierceness that lived in all male things and must never be allowed free again. The males had been sacrificed to the embodiment of their own violence.

In sum, these women had witnessed a new and transcendent ritual; a new holy sacrifice of the Mass. And they would see it again; and they must always remember it.

My head swam from the paradox. And my own small designs of not very long ago were there to torment me. I had wanted the world of mortals to know of me. I had wanted to be the image of evil in the theater of the world and thereby somehow do good.

And now I was that image all right, I was its literal embodiment, passing through the minds of these few simple souls into myth as she had promised. And there was a small voice whispering in my ear, hammering me with that old adage: be careful what you wish for; your wish might come true.

Yes, that was the heart of it; all I'd ever wished for was coming true. In the shrine I had kissed her and longed to awaken her, and dreamt of her power; and now we stood together, she and I, and the hymns rose around us. Hosannas. Cries of joy.

The doors of the palazzo were thrown open.

And we were taking our leave; we were rising in splendor and in magic, and passing out of the doors, and up over the roof of the old mansion, and then out over the sparkling waters into the calm sweep of the stars.

I had no fear of falling anymore; I had no fear of anything so insignificant. Because my whole soul—petty as it was and always had been—knew fears I'd never imagined before.

6
THE STORY OF THE TWINS
PART II

She was dreaming of killing. It was a great dark city like London or Rome, and she was hurrying through it, on an errand of killing, to bring down the first sweet human victim that would be her own. And just before she opened her eyes, she had made the leap from the things she had believed all her life, to this simple amoral act—killing. She had done what the reptile does when it hoists in its leathery slit of a mouth the tiny crying mouse that it will crush slowly without ever hearing that soft heartbreaking song.

Awake in the dark; and the house alive above her; the old ones saying Come. A television talking somewhere. The Blessed Virgin Mary had appeared on an island in the Mediterranean Sea.

No hunger. Maharet's blood was too strong. The idea was growing, beckoning like a crone in a dark alley. *Killing.*

Rising from the narrow box in which she lay, she tiptoed through the blackness until her hands felt the metal door. She went into the hallway and looked up the endless iron stairs, crisscrossing back over itself as if it were a skeleton, and she saw the sky through the glass like smoke. Mael was halfway up, at the door of the house proper, gazing down at her.

She reeled with it—*I am one of you and we are together*—and the feel of the iron rail under her hand, and some sudden grief, just a fleeting thing, for all she had been before this fierce beauty had grabbed her by the hair.

Mael came down as if to retrieve her, because it was carrying her away.

They understood, didn't they, the way the earth breathed for her now, and the forest sang, and the roots prowled the dark, coming through these earthen walls.

She stared at Mael. Faint smell of buckskin, dust. How had she ever thought such beings were human? Eyes glittering like that. And yet

the time would come when she would be walking among human beings again, and she would see their eyes linger and then suddenly move away. She'd be hurrying through some dark city like London or Rome. Looking into the eyes of Mael, she saw the crone again in the alleyway; but it had not been a literal image. No, she saw the alleyway, she saw the killing, purely. And in silence, they both looked away at the same instant, but not quickly, rather respectfully. He took her hand; he looked at the bracelet he'd given her. He kissed her suddenly on the cheek. And then he led her up the stairs towards the mountaintop room.

The electronic voice of the television grew louder and louder, speaking of mass hysteria in Sri Lanka. Women killing men. Even male babies murdered. On the island of Lynkonos there had been mass hallucinations and an epidemic of unexplained deaths.

Only gradually did it dawn on her, what she was hearing. So it wasn't the Blessed Virgin Mary, and she had thought how lovely, when she first heard it, that they can believe something like that. She turned to Mael but he was looking ahead. He knew these things. The television had been playing its words to him for an hour.

Now she saw the eerie blue flicker as she came into the mountaintop room. And the strange spectacle of these her new brethren in the Secret Order of the Undead, scattered about like so many statues, glowing in the blue light, as they stared fixedly at the large screen.

"… outbreaks in the past caused by contaminants in food or water. Yet no explanation has been found for the similarity of the reports from widely divergent places, which now include several isolated villages in the mountains of Nepal. Those apprehended claim to have seen a beautiful woman, called variously the Blessed Virgin, or the Queen of Heaven, or simply the Goddess, who commanded them to massacre the males of their village, except for a few carefully chosen to be spared. Some reports describe a male apparition also, a fair-haired deity who does not speak and who as yet has no official or unofficial title or name …"

Jesse looked at Maharet, who watched without expression, one hand resting on the arm of her chair.

Newspapers covered the table. Papers in French and Hindustani as

well as English.

"… from Lynkonos to several other islands before the militia was called in. Early estimates indicate some two thousand men may have been killed in this little archipelago just off the tip of Greece."

Maharet touched the small black control under her hand and the screen vanished. It seemed the entire apparatus vanished, fading into the dark wood, as the windows became transparent and the treetops appeared in endless, misted layers against the violent sky. Far away, Jesse saw the twinkling lights of Santa Rosa cradled in the dark hills. She could smell the sun that had been in this room; she could feel the heat rising slowly through the glass ceiling.

She looked at the others who were sitting there in stunned silence. Marius glared at the television screen, at the newspapers spread out before him.

"We have no time to lose," Khayman said quickly to Maharet. "You must continue the tale. We don't know when she will come here."

He made a small gesture, and the scattered newspapers were suddenly cleared away, crushed together, and hurtling soundlessly into the fire which devoured them with a gust that sent a shower of sparks up the gaping smokestack.

Jesse was suddenly dizzy. Too fast, all of that. She stared at Khayman. Would she ever get used to it? Their porcelain faces and their sudden violent expressions, their soft human voices, and their near invisible movements?

And what was the Mother doing? Males slaughtered. The fabric of life for these ignorant people utterly destroyed. A cold sense of menace touched her. She searched Maharet's face for some insight, some understanding.

But Maharet's features were utterly rigid. She had not answered Khayman. She turned towards the table slowly and clasped her hands under her chin. Her eyes were dull, remote, as if she saw nothing before her.

"The fact is, she has to be destroyed," Marius said, as if he could hold it in no longer. The color flared in his cheeks, shocking Jesse, because all the normal lines of a man's face had been there for an instant. And now they were gone, and he was visibly shaking with anger. "We've loosed a monster, and it's up to us to reclaim it."

“And how can that be done?” Santino asked. “You speak as if it’s a simple matter of decision. You cannot kill her!”

“We forfeit our lives, that’s how it’s done,” Marius said. “We act in concert, and we end this thing once and for all as it should have been ended long ago.” He glanced at them all one by one, eyes lingering on Jesse. Then shifting to Maharet. “The body isn’t indestructible. It isn’t made of marble. It can be pierced, cut. I’ve pierced it with my teeth. I’ve drunk its blood!”

Maharet made a small dismissive gesture, as if to say I know these things and you know I know.

“And as we cut it, we cut ourselves?” Eric said. “I say we leave here. I say we hide from her. What do we gain staying in this place?”

“No!” Maharet said.

“She’ll kill you one by one if you do that,” Khayman said. “You’re alive because you wait now for her purpose.”

“Would you go on with the story,” Gabrielle said, speaking directly to Maharet. She’d been withdrawn all this time, only now and then listening to the others. “I want to know the rest,” she said. “I want to hear everything.” She sat forward, arms folded on the table.

“You think you’ll discover some way to vanquish her in these old tales?” Eric asked. “You’re mad if you think that.”

“Go on with the story, please,” Louis said. “I want to …” He hesitated. “I want to *know* what happened also.”

Maharet looked at him for a long moment.

“Go on, Maharet,” Khayman said. “For in all likelihood, the Mother will be destroyed and we both know how and why, and all this talk means nothing.”

“What can prophecy mean now, Khayman?” Maharet asked, her voice low, devitalized. “Do we fall into the same errors that ensnare the Mother? The past may instruct us. But it won’t save us.”

“Your sister comes, Maharet. She comes as she said she would.”

“Khayman,” Maharet said with a long, bitter smile.

“Tell us what happened,” Gabrielle said.

Maharet sat still, as if trying to find some way to begin. The sky beyond the windows darkened in the interval. Yet a faint tinge of red appeared in the far west, growing brighter and brighter against the gray clouds. Finally, it faded, and they were wrapped in absolute

darkness, except for the light of the fire, and the dull sheen of the glass walls which had become mirrors.

"Khayman took you to Egypt," Gabrielle said. "What did you see there?"

"Yes, he took us to Egypt," Maharet said. She sighed as she sat back in the chair, her eyes fixed on the table before her. "There was no escape from it; Khayman would have taken us by force. And in truth, we accepted that we had to go. Through twenty generations, we had gone between man and the spirits. If Amel had done some great evil, we would try to undo it. Or at least … as I said to you when we first came to this table … we would seek to understand.

"I left my child. I left her in the care of those women I trusted most. I kissed her. I told her secrets. And then I left her, and we set out, carried in the royal litter as if we were guests of the King and Queen of Kemet and not prisoners, just as before.

"Khayman was gentle with us on the long march, but grim and silent, and refusing to meet our gaze. And it was just as well, for we had not forgotten our injuries. Then on the very last night when we camped on the banks of the great river, which we would cross in the morning to reach the royal palace, Khayman called us into his tent and told us all that he knew.

"His manner was courteous, decorous. And we tried to put aside our personal suspicions of him as we listened. He told us of what the demon—as he called it—had done.

"Only hours after we had been sent out of Egypt, he had known that something was watching him, some dark and evil force. Everywhere that he went, he felt this presence, though in the light of day it tended to wane.

"Then things within his house were altered—little things which others did not notice. He thought at first he was going mad. His writing things were misplaced; then the seal which he used as great steward. Then at random moments—and always when he was alone—these objects came flying at him, striking him in the face, or landing at his feet. Some turned up in ridiculous places. He would find the great seal, for instance, in his beer or his broth.

"And he dared not tell the King and Queen. He knew it was our spirits who were doing it; and to tell would be a death sentence for us.

“And so he kept this awful secret, as things grew worse and worse. Ornaments which he had treasured from childhood were now rent to pieces and made to rain down upon him. Sacred amulets were hurled into the privy; excrement was taken from the well and smeared upon the walls.

“He could barely endure his own house, yet he admonished his slaves to tell no one, and when they ran off in fear, he attended to his own toilet and swept the place like a lowly servant himself.

“But he was now in a state of terror. Something was there with him in his house. He could hear its breath upon his face. And now and then he would swear that he felt its needlelike teeth.

“At last in desperation he began to talk to it, beg it to get out. But this seemed only to increase its strength. With the talking, it redoubled its power. It emptied his purse upon the stones and made the gold coins jingle against each other all night long. It upset his bed so that he landed on his face on the floor. It put sand in his food when he wasn’t looking.

“Finally six months had passed since we had left the kingdom. He was growing frantic. Perhaps we were beyond danger. But he could not be sure, and he did not know where to turn, for the spirit was really frightening him.

“Then in the dead of night, as he lay wondering what the thing was up to, for it had been so quiet, he heard suddenly a great pounding at his door. He was in terror. He knew he shouldn’t answer, that the knocking didn’t come from a human hand. But finally he could bear it no longer. He said his prayers; he threw open the door. And what he beheld was the horror of horrors—the rotted mummy of his father, the filthy wrappings in tatters, propped against the garden wall.

“Of course, he knew there was no life in the shrunken face or dead eyes that stared at him. Someone or something had unearthed the corpse from its desert mastaba and brought it there. And this was the body of his father, putrid, stinking; the body of his father, which by all things holy, should have been consumed in a proper funeral feast by Khayman and his brothers and sisters.

“Khayman sank to his knees weeping, half screaming. And then, before his unbelieving eyes, the thing moved! The thing began to dance! Its limbs were jerked hither and thither, the wrappings

breaking to bits and pieces, until Khayman ran into the house and shut the door against it. And then the corpse was flung, pounding its fist it seemed, upon the door, demanding entrance.

"Khayman called on all the gods of Egypt to be rid of this monstrosity. He called out to the palace guards; he called to the soldiers of the King. He cursed the demon thing and ordered it to leave him; and Khayman became the one flinging objects now, and kicking the gold coins about in his rage.

"All the palace rushed through the royal gardens to Khayman's house. But the demon now seemed to grow even stronger. The shutters rattled and then were torn from their pivots. The few bits of fine furniture which Khayman possessed began to skitter about.

"Yet this was only the beginning. At dawn when the priests entered the house to exorcise the demon, a great wind came out of the desert, carrying with it torrents of blinding sand. And everywhere Khayman went, the wind pursued him; and finally he looked down to see his arms covered with tiny pinpricks and tiny droplets of blood. Even his eyelids were assaulted. In a cabinet he flung himself to get some peace. And the thing tore up the cabinet. And all fled from it. And Khayman was left crying on the floor.

"For days the tempest continued. The more the priests prayed and sang, the more the demon raged.

"The King and Queen were beside themselves in consternation. The priests cursed the demon. The people blamed it upon the red-haired witches. They cried that we should never have been allowed to leave the land of Kemet. We should be found at all costs and brought back to be burnt alive. And then the demon would be quiet.

"But the old families did not agree with this verdict. To them the judgment was clear. Had not the gods unearthed the putrid body of Khayman's father, to show that the flesh eaters had always done what was pleasing to heaven? No, it was the King and Queen who were evil, the King and Queen who must die. The King and Queen who had filled the land with mummies and superstition.

"The kingdom, finally, was on the verge of civil war.

"At last the King himself came to Khayman, who sat weeping in his house, a garment drawn over him like a shroud. And the King talked to the demon, even as the tiny bites afflicted Khayman and made

drops of blood on the cloth that covered Khayman.

" 'Now think what those witches told us,' the King said. 'These are but spirits; not demons. And they can be reasoned with. If only I could make them hear me as the witches could; and make them answer.'

"But this little conversation only seemed to enrage the demon. It broke what little furniture it had not already smashed. It tore the door off its pivots; it uprooted the trees from the garden and flung them about. In fact, it seemed to forget Khayman altogether for the moment, as it went tearing through the palace gardens destroying all that it could.

"And the King went after it, begging it to recognize him and to converse with him, and to impart to him its secrets. He stood in the very midst of the whirlwind created by this demon, fearless and enrapt.

"Finally the Queen appeared. In a loud piercing voice she addressed the demon too. 'You punish us for the affliction of the red-haired sisters!' she screamed. 'But why do you not serve us instead of them!' At once the demon tore at her clothes and greatly afflicted her, as it had done to Khayman before. She tried to cover her arms and her face, but it was impossible. And so the King took hold of her and together they ran back to Khayman's house.

" 'Now, go,' said the King to Khayman. 'Leave us alone with this thing for I will learn from it, I will understand what it wants.' And calling the priests to him, he told them through the whirlwind what we had said, that the spirit hated mankind because we were both spirit and flesh. But he would ensnare it and reform it and control it. For he was Enkil, King of Kemet, and he could do this thing.

"Into Khayman's house, the King and the Queen went together, and the demon went with them, tearing the place to pieces, yet there they remained. Khayman, who was now free of the thing, lay on the floor of the palace exhausted, fearing for his sovereigns but not knowing what to do.

"The entire court was in an uproar; men fought one another; women wept, and some even left the palace for fear of what was to come.

"For two whole nights and days, the King remained with the demon; and so did the Queen. And then the old families, the flesh eaters, gathered outside the house. The King and Queen were in error, it was

time to seize the future of Kemet. At nightfall, they went into the house on their deadly errand with daggers raised. They would kill the King and Queen; and if the people raised any outcry, then they would say that the demon had done it; and who could say that the demon had not? And would not the demon stop when the King and Queen were dead, the King and Queen who had persecuted the red-haired witches?

"It was the Queen who saw them coming; and as she rushed forward, crying in alarm, they thrust their daggers into her breast and she sank down dying. The King ran to her aid, and they struck him down too, just as mercilessly; and then they ran out of the house, for the demon had not stopped his persecutions.

"Now Khayman, all this while, had knelt at the very edge of the garden, deserted by the guards who had thrown in with the flesh eaters. He expected to die with other servants of the royal family. Then he heard a horrid wailing from the Queen. Sounds such as he had never heard before. And when the flesh eaters heard these sounds, they deserted the place utterly.

"It was Khayman, loyal steward to the King and Queen, who snatched up a torch and went to the aid of his master and mistress.

"No one tried to stop him. All crept away in fear. Khayman alone went into the house.

"It was pitch-black now, save for the torchlight. And this is what Khayman saw:

"The Queen lay on the floor writhing as if in agony, the blood pouring from her wounds, and a great reddish cloud enveloped her; it was like a whirlpool surrounding her, or rather a wind sweeping up countless tiny drops of blood. And in the midst of this swirling wind or rain or whatever it could be called, the Queen twisted and turned, her eyes rolling up in her head. The King lay sprawled on his back.

"All instinct told Khayman to leave this place. To get as far away from it as he could. At that moment, he wanted to leave his homeland forever. But this was his Queen, who lay there gasping for breath, her back arched, her hands clawing at the floor.

"Then the great blood cloud that veiled her, swelling and contracting around her, grew denser and, all of a sudden, as if drawn into her wounds, disappeared. The Queen's body went still; then

slowly she sat upright, her eyes staring forward, and a great guttural cry broke from her before she fell quiet.

"There was no sound whatsoever as the Queen stared at Khayman, except for the crackling of the torch. And then hoarsely the Queen began to gasp again, her eyes widening, and it seemed she should die; but she did not. She shielded her eyes from the bright light of the torch as though it was hurting her, and she turned and saw her husband lying as if dead at her side.

"She cried a negation in her agony; it could not be so. And at the same instant, Khayman beheld that all her wounds were healing; deep gashes were no more than scratches upon the surface of her skin.

" 'Your Highness!' he said. And he came towards her as she crouched weeping and staring at her own arms, which had been torn with the slashes of the daggers, and at her own breasts, which were whole again. She was whimpering piteously as she looked at these healing wounds. And suddenly with her long nails, she tore at her own skin and the blood gushed out and yet the wound healed!

" 'Khayman, my Khayman!' she screamed, covering her eyes so that she did not see the bright torch. 'What has befallen me!' And her screams grew louder and louder; and she fell upon the King in panic, crying, 'Enkil, help me. Enkil, do not die!' and all the other mad things that one cries in the midst of disaster. And then as she stared down at the King, a great ghastly change came over her, and she lunged at the King, as if she were a hungry beast, and with her long tongue, she lapped at the blood that covered his throat and his chest.

"Khayman had never seen such a spectacle. She was a lioness in the desert lapping the blood from a tender kill. Her back was bowed, and her knees were drawn up, and she pulled the helpless body of the King towards her and bit the artery in his throat.

"Khayman dropped the torch. He backed halfway from the open door. Yet even as he meant to run for his life, he heard the King's voice. Softly the King spoke to her. 'Akasha,' he said. 'My Queen.' And she, drawing up, shivering, weeping, stared at her own body, and at his body, at her smooth flesh, and his torn still by so many wounds. 'Khayman,' she cried. 'Your dagger. Give it to me. For they have taken their weapons with them. Your dagger. I must have it now.'

"At once Khayman obeyed, though he thought it was to see his King

die once and for all. But with the dagger the Queen cut her own wrists and watched the blood pour down upon the wounds of her husband, and she saw it heal them. And crying out in her excitement, she smeared the blood all over his torn face.

"The King's wounds healed. Khayman saw it. Khayman saw the great gashes closing. He saw the King tossing, heaving his arms this way and that. His tongue lapped at Akasha's spilt blood as it ran down his face. And then rising in that same animal posture that had so consumed the Queen only moments before, the King embraced his wife, and opened his mouth on her throat.

"Khayman had seen enough. In the flickering light of the dying torch these two pale figures had become haunts to him, demons themselves. He backed out of the little house and up against the garden wall. And there it seems he lost consciousness, feeling the grass against his face as he collapsed.

"When he waked, he found himself lying on a gilded couch in the Queen's chambers. All the palace lay quiet. He saw that his clothes had been changed, and his face and hands bathed, and that there was only the dimmest light here and sweet incense, and the doors were open to the garden as if there was nothing to fear.

"Then in the shadows, he saw the King and the Queen looking down at him; only this was not his King and not his Queen. It seemed then that he would cry out; he would give voice to screams as terrible as those he had heard from others; but the Queen quieted him.

" 'Khayman, my Khayman,' she said. She handed to him his beautiful gold-handled dagger. 'You have served us well.'

"There Khayman paused in his story. 'Tomorrow night,' he said, 'when the sun sets, you will see for yourselves what has happened. For then and only then, when all the light is gone from the western sky, will they appear together in the rooms of the palace, and you will see what I have seen.'

" 'But why only in the night?' I asked him. 'What is the significance of this?'

"And then he told us, that not one hour after he'd waked, even before the sun had risen, they had begun to shrink from the open doors of the palace, to cry that the light hurt their eyes. Already they had fled from torches and lamps; and now it seemed the morning was

coming after them; and there was no place in the palace that they could hide.

"In stealth they left the palace, covered in garments. They ran with a speed no human being could match. They ran towards the mastabas or tombs of the old families, those who had been forced with pomp and ceremony to make mummies of their dead. In sum, to the sacred places which no one would desecrate, they ran so fast that Khayman could not follow them. Yet once the King stopped. To the sun god, Ra, he called out for mercy. Then weeping, hiding their eyes from the sun, crying as if the sun burnt them even though its light had barely come into the sky, the King and the Queen disappeared from Khayman's sight.

" 'Not a day since have they appeared before sunset; they come down out of the sacred cemetery, though no one knows from where. In fact the people now wait for them in a great multitude, hailing them as the god and the goddess, the very image of Osiris and Isis, deities of the moon, and tossing flowers before them, and bowing down to them.

" 'For the tale spread far and wide that the King and Queen had vanquished death at the hands of their enemies by some celestial power; that they are gods, immortal and invincible; and that by that same power they can see into men's hearts. No secret can be kept from them; their enemies are immediately punished; they can hear the words one speaks only in one's head. All fear them.

" 'Yet I know as all their faithful servants know that they cannot bear a candle or a lamp too close to them; that they shriek at the bright light of a torch; and that when they execute their enemies in secret, they drink their blood! They drink it, I tell you. Like jungle cats, they feed upon these victims; and the room after is as a lion's den. And it is I, Khayman, their trusted steward, who must gather these bodies and heave them into the pit.' And then Khayman stopped and gave way to weeping.

"But the tale was finished; and it was almost morning. The sun was rising over the eastern mountains; we made ready to cross the mighty Nile. The desert was warming; Khayman walked to the edge of the river as the first barge of soldiers went across. He was weeping still as he saw the sun come down upon the river; saw the water catch fire.

“ ‘The sun god, Ra, is the oldest and greatest god of all Kemet,’ he whispered. ‘And this god has turned against them. Why? In secret they weep over their fate; the thirst maddens them; they are frightened it will become more than they can bear. You must save them. You must do it for our people. They have not sent for you to blame you or harm you. They need you. You are powerful witches. Make this spirit undo his work.’ And then looking at us, remembering all that had befallen us, he gave way to despair.

“Mekare and I made no answer. The barge was now ready to carry us to the palace. And we stared across the glare of the water at the great collection of painted buildings that was the royal city, and we wondered what the consequences of this horror would finally be.

“As I stepped down upon the barge, I thought of my child, and I knew suddenly I should die in Kemet. I wanted to close my eyes, and ask the spirits in a small secret voice if this was truly meant to happen, yet I did not dare. I could not have my last hope taken from me.”

Maharet tensed.

Jesse saw her shoulders straighten; saw the fingers of her right hand move against the wood, curling and then opening again, the gold nails gleaming in the firelight.

“I do not want you to be afraid,” she said, her voice slipping into monotone. “But you should know that the Mother has crossed the great eastern sea. She and Lestat are closer now …”

Jesse felt the current of alarm passing through all those at the table. Maharet remained rigid, listening, or perhaps seeing; the pupils of her eyes moving only slightly.

“Lestat calls,” Maharet said. “But it is too faint for me to hear words; too faint for pictures. He is not harmed, however; that much I know, and that I have little time now to finish this story….”

7
LESTAT:
THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

The Caribbean. Haiti. The Garden of God.

I stood on the hilltop in the moonlight and I tried not to see this paradise. I tried to picture those I loved. Were they gathered still together in that fairy-tale wood of monster trees, where I had seen my mother walking? If only I could see their faces or hear their voices. Marius, do not be the angry father. Help me! Help us all! I do not give in, but I am losing. I am losing my soul and my mind. My heart is already gone. It belongs to her.

But they were beyond my reach; the great sweep of miles closed us off; I had not the power to overarch that distance.

I looked instead on these verdant green hills, now patched with tiny farms, a picture book world with flowers blooming in profusion, the red poinsettia as tall as trees. And the clouds, ever changing, borne like the tall sailing ships on brisk winds. What had the first Europeans thought when they looked upon this fecund land surrounded by the sparkling sea? That this was the Garden of God?

And to think, they had brought such death to it, the natives gone within a few short years, destroyed by slavery, disease, and endless cruelty. Not a single blood descendant remains of those peaceful beings who had breathed this balmy air, and plucked the fruit from the trees which ripened all year round, and thought their visitors gods perhaps, who could not but return their kindness.

Now, below in the streets of Port-au-Prince, riots and death, and not of our making. Merely the unchanging history of this bloody place, where violence has flourished for four hundred years as flowers flourish; though the vision of the hills rising into the mist could break the heart.

But we had done our work all right, she because she did it, and I because I did nothing to stop it—in the small towns strewn along the winding road that led to this wooded summit. Towns of tiny pastel

houses, and banana trees growing wild, and the people so poor, so hungry. Even now the women sang their hymns and, by the light of candles and the burning church, buried the dead.

We were alone. Far beyond the end of the narrow road; where the forest grew again, hiding the ruins of this old house that had once overlooked the valley like a citadel. Centuries since the planters had left here; centuries since they danced and sang and drank their wine within these shattered rooms while the slaves wept.

Over the brick walls, the bougainvillea climbed, fluorescent in the light of the moon. And out of the flagstone floor a great tree had risen, hung with moon blossoms, pushing back with its gnarled limbs the last remnants of the old timbers that had once held the roof.

Ah, to be here forever, and with her. And for the rest to be forgotten. No death, no killing.

She sighed; she said: "This is the Kingdom of Heaven."

In the tiny hamlet below, the women had run barefoot after the men with clubs in hand. And the voodoo priest had screamed his ancient curses as they caught him in the graveyard. I had left the scene of the carnage; I'd climbed the mountain alone. Fleeing, angry, unable any longer to bear witness.

And she had come after, finding me in this ruin, clinging to something that I could understand. The old iron gate, the rusted bell; the brick pillars swathed in vines; things, fashioned by hands, which had endured. Oh, how she had mocked me.

The bell that had called the slaves, she said; this was the dwelling place of those who'd drenched this earth in blood; why was I hurt and driven here by the hymns of simple souls who had been exalted? Would that every such house had fallen to ruin. We had fought. Really fought, as lovers fight.

"Is that what you want?" she had said. "Not ever to taste blood again?"

"I was a simple thing, dangerous yes, but simple. I did what I did to stay alive."

"Oh, you sadden me. Such lies. Such lies. What must I do to make you see? Are you so blind, so selfish!"

I'd glimpsed it again, the pain in her face, the sudden flash of hurt that humanized her utterly. I'd reached out for her.

And for hours we had been in each other's arms, or so it seemed.

And now the peace and the stillness; I walked back from the edge of the cliff, and I held her again. I heard her say as she looked up at the great towering clouds through which the moon poured forth its eerie light: "This is the Kingdom of Heaven."

It did not matter anymore such simple things as lying down together, or sitting on a stone bench. Standing, my arms wound around her, this was pure happiness. And I'd drunk the nectar again, her nectar, even though I'd been weeping, and thinking ah, well, you are being dissolved as a pearl in wine. You're gone, you little devil—you're gone, you know—into her. You stood and watched them die; you stood and watched.

"There is no life without death," she whispered. "I am the way now, the way to the only hope of life without strife that there may ever be." I felt her lips on my mouth. I wondered, would she ever do what she had done in the shrine? Would we lock together like that, taking the heated blood from each other?

"Listen to the singing in the villages, you can hear it."

"Yes."

"And then listen hard for the sounds of the city far below. Do you know how much death is in that city tonight? How many have been massacred? Do you know how many more will die at the hands of men, if we do not change the destiny of this place? If we do not sweep it up into a new vision? Do you know how long this battle has gone on?"

Centuries ago, in my time, this had been the richest colony of the French crown. Rich in tobacco, indigo, coffee. Fortunes had been made here in one season. And now the people picked at the earth; barefoot they walked through the dirt streets of their towns; machine guns barked in the city of Port-au-Prince; the dead in colored cotton shirts lay in heaps on the cobblestones. Children gathered water in cans from the gutters. Slaves had risen; slaves had won; slaves had lost everything.

But it is their destiny; their world; they who are human.

She laughed softly. "And what are we? Are we useless? How do we justify what we are! How do we stand back and watch what we are unwilling to alter?"

"And suppose it is wrong," I said, "and the world is worse for it, and it is all horror finally—unrealizable, unexecutable, what then? And all those men in their graves, the whole earth a graveyard, a funeral pyre. And nothing is better. And it's wrong, wrong."

"Who's to tell you it is wrong?"

I didn't answer.

"Marius?" How scornfully she laughed. "Don't you realize there are no fathers now? Angry or no?"

"There are brothers. And there are sisters," I said. "And in each other we find our fathers and mothers, isn't that so?"

Again she laughed, but it was gentle.

"Brothers and sisters," she said. "Would you like to see your real brothers and sisters?"

I lifted my head from her shoulder. I kissed her cheek. "Yes. I want to see them." My heart was racing again. "Please," I said, even as I kissed her throat, and her cheekbones and her closed eyes. "Please."

"Drink again," she whispered. I felt her bosom swell against me. I pressed my teeth against her throat and the little miracle happened again, the sudden breaking of the crust, and the nectar poured into my mouth.

A great hot wave consumed me. No gravity; no specific time or place. *Akasha.*

Then I saw the redwood trees; the house with the lights burning in it, and in the high mountaintop room, the table and all of them around it, their faces reflected in the walls of dark glass, and the fire dancing. Marius, Gabrielle, Louis, Armand. They're together and they're safe! Am I dreaming this? They're listening to a red-haired woman. And I know this woman! I've seen this woman.

She was in the dream of the red-haired twins.

But I want to see this—these immortals gathered at the table. The young red-haired one, the one at the woman's side, I've seen her too. But she'd been alive then. At the rock concert, in the frenzy, I'd put my arm around her and looked into her crazed eyes. I'd kissed her and said her name; and it was as if a pit had opened under me, and I was falling down into those dreams of the twins that I could never really recall. Painted walls; temples.

It all faded suddenly. *Gabrielle. Mother.* Too late. I was reaching out;

I was spinning through the darkness.

You have all of my powers now. You need only time to perfect them. You can bring death, you can move matter, you can make fire. You are ready now to go to them. But we will let them finish their reverie; their stupid schemes and discussion. We will show them a little more of our power—

No, please, Akasha, please, let's go to them.

She drew away from me; she struck me.

I reeled from the shock. Shuddering, cold, I felt the pain spread out through the bones of my face, as if her fingers were still splayed and pressed there. In anger I bit down, letting the pain swell and then recede. In anger I clenched my fists and did nothing.

She walked across the old flags with crisp steps, her hair swaying as it hung down her back. And then she stopped at the fallen gate, her shoulders rising slightly, her back curved as if she were folding into herself.

The voices rose; they reached a pitch before I could stop them. And then they lapsed back, like water receding after a great flood.

I saw the mountains again around me; I saw the ruined house. The pain in my face was gone; but I was shaking.

She turned and looked at me, tensely, her face sharpened, and her eyes slightly narrowed. "They mean so much to you, don't they? What do you think they will do, or say? You think Marius will turn me from my course? I know Marius as you could never know him. I know every pathway of his reason. He is greedy as you are greedy. What do you think I am that I am so easily swayed? I was born a Queen. I have always ruled; even from the shrine I ruled." Her eyes were glazed suddenly. I heard the voices, a dull hum rising. "I ruled if only in legend; if only in the minds of those who came to me and paid me tribute. Princes who played music for me; who brought me offerings and prayers. What do you want of me now? That for you, I renounce my throne, my destiny!"

What answer could I make?

"You can read my heart," I said. "You know what I want, that you go to them, that you give them a chance to speak on these things as you've given me the chance. They have words I don't have. They know things I don't know."

"Oh, but Lestat, I do not love them. I do not love them as I love you.

So what does it matter to me what they say? I have no patience for them!"

"But you need them. You said that you did. How can you begin without them? I mean really begin, not with these backward villages, I mean in the cities where the people will fight. Your angels, that's what you called them."

She shook her head sadly. "I need no one," she said, "except … Except …" She hesitated, and then her face went blank with pure surprise.

I made some little soft sound before I could stop myself; some little expression of helpless grief. I thought I saw her eyes dim; and it seemed the voices were rising again, not in my ears but in hers; and that she stared at me, but that she didn't see me.

"But I will destroy you all if I have to," she said, vaguely, eyes searching for me, but not finding me. "Believe me when I say it. For this time I will not be vanquished; I will not lapse back. I will see my dreams realized."

I looked away from her, through the ruined gateway, over the broken edge of the cliff, and down over the valley. What would I have given to be released from this nightmare? Would I be willing to die by my own hand? My eyes were filled with tears, looking over the dark fields. It was cowardice to think of it; this was my doing! There was no escape now for me.

Stark still she stood, listening; and then she blinked slowly; her shoulders moved as if she carried a great weight inside her. "Why can you not believe in me?" she said.

"Abandon it!" I answered. "Turn away from all such visions." I went to her and took hold of her arms. Almost groggily she looked up. "This is a timeless place we stand in—and those poor villages we've conquered, they are the same as they've been for thousands of years. Let me show you my world, Akasha; let me show you the tiniest part of it! Come with me, like a spy into the cities; not to destroy, but to see!"

Her eyes were brightening again; the lassitude was breaking. She embraced me; and suddenly I wanted the blood again. It was all I could think of, even though I was resisting it; even though I was weeping at the pure weakness of my will. I wanted it. I wanted her

and I couldn't fight it; yet my old fantasies came back to me, those long ago visions in which I imagined myself waking her, and taking her with me through the opera houses, and the museums and the symphony halls, through the great capitals and their storehouses of all things beautiful and imperishable that men and women had made over the centuries, artifacts that transcended all evil, all wrongs, all fallibility of the individual soul.

"But what have I to do with such paltry things, my love?" she whispered. "And you would teach me of your world? Ah, such vanity. I am beyond time as I have always been."

But she was gazing at me now with the most heartbroken expression. Sorrow, that's what I saw in her.

"I need you!" she whispered. And for the first time her eyes filled with tears.

I couldn't bear it. I felt the chills rise, as they always do, at moments of surprising pain. But she put her fingers to my lips to silence me.

"Very well, my love," she said. "We'll go to your brothers and sisters, if you wish it. We'll go to Marius. But first, let me hold you one more time, close to my heart. You see, I cannot be other than what I would be. This is what you waked with your singing; this is what I am!"

I wanted to protest, to deny it; I wanted again to begin the argument that would divide us and hurt her. But I couldn't find the words as I looked into her eyes. And suddenly I realized what had happened.

I had found the way to stop her; I had found the key; it had been there before me all the time. It was not her love for me; it was her need of me; the need of one ally in all the great realm; one kindred soul made of the same stuff that she was made of. And she had believed she could make me like herself, and now she knew she could not.

"Ah, but you are wrong," she said, her tears shimmering. "You are only young and afraid." She smiled. "You belong to me. And if it has to be, my prince, I'll destroy you."

I didn't speak. I couldn't. I knew what I had seen; I knew even as she couldn't accept it. Not in all the long centuries of stillness had she ever been alone; had she ever suffered the ultimate isolation. Oh, it

was not such a simple thing as Enkil by her side, or Marius come to lay before her his offerings; it was something deeper, infinitely more important than that; she had never all alone waged a war of reason with those around her!

The tears were flowing down her cheeks. Two violent streaks of red. Her mouth was slack; her eyebrows knit in a dark frown, though her face would never be anything but radiant.

"No, Lestat," she said again. "You are wrong. But we must see this through now to the finish; if they must die—all of them—so that you cleave to me, so be it." She opened her arms.

I wanted to move away; I wanted to rail against her again, against her threats; but I didn't move as she came closer.

Here; the warm Caribbean breeze; her hands moving up my back; her fingers slipping through my hair. The nectar flowing into me again, flooding my heart. And her lips on my throat finally; the sudden stab of her teeth through my flesh. Yes! As it had been in the shrine, so long ago, yes! Her blood and my blood. And the deafening thunder of her heart, yes! And it was ecstasy and yet I couldn't yield; I couldn't do it; and she knew it.

8
THE STORY OF THE TWINS
CONCLUSION

We found the palace the same as we remembered it, or perhaps a little more lavish, with more booty from conquered lands. More gold drapery, and even more vivid paintings; and twice as many slaves about, as if they were mere ornaments, their lean naked bodies hung with gold and jewels.

"To a royal cell we were now committed, with graceful chairs and tables, and a fine carpet, and dishes of meat and fish to eat.

"Then at sunset, we heard cheers as the King and the Queen appeared in the palace; all the court went to bow to them, singing anthems to the beauty of their pale skin and their shimmering hair; and to the bodies that had miraculously healed after the assault of the conspirators; all the palace echoed with these hymns of praise.

"But when this little spectacle was finished, we were taken into the bedchamber of the royal couple, and for the first time, by the small light of distant lamps, we beheld the transformation with our own eyes.

"We saw two pale yet magnificent beings, resembling in all particulars what they had been when they were alive; but there was an eerie luminescence surrounding them; their skin was no longer skin. And their minds were no longer entirely their minds. Yet gorgeous they were. As you can well imagine, all of you. Oh, yes, gorgeous, as though the moon had come down from heaven and fashioned them with its light. Amid their dazzling gold furniture they stood, draped in finery, and staring at us with eyes that gleamed like obsidian. And then, with a wholly different voice, a voice softly shaded by music, it seemed, the King spoke:

" 'Khayman's told you what has befallen us,' he said. 'We stand before you the beneficiaries of a great miracle; for we have triumphed over certain death. We are now quite beyond the limitations and needs of human beings; and we see and understand things which were

withheld from us before.'

"But the Queen's facade gave way immediately. In a hissing whisper she said, 'You must explain this to us! *What has your spirit done?'*

"We were in worse danger than ever from these monsters; and I tried to convey this warning to Mekare, but at once the Queen laughed. 'Do you think I don't know what you are thinking?' she said.

"But the King begged her to be silent. 'Let the witches use their powers,' he said. 'You know that we have always revered you.'

" 'Yes.' The Queen sneered. 'And you sent this curse upon us.'

"At once I averred that we had not done it, that we had kept faith when we left the kingdom, that we had gone back to our home. And as Mekare studied the pair of them in silence, I begged them to understand that if the spirit had done this, he had done it of his own whim.

" 'Whim!' the Queen said. 'What do you mean by such a word as whim? What has happened to us? What are we!' she asked again. Then she drew back her lips for us to see her teeth. We beheld the fangs in her mouth, tiny, yet sharp as knives. And the King demonstrated to us this change as well.

" 'The better to draw the blood,' he whispered. 'Do you know what this thirst is to us! We cannot satisfy it! Three, four men a night die to feed us, yet we go to our bed tortured by thirst.'

"The Queen tore at her hair as if she would give in to screaming. But the King laid his hand on her arm. 'Advise us, Mekare and Maharet,' he said. 'For we would understand this transformation and how it might be used for good.'

" 'Yes,' the Queen said, struggling to recover. 'For surely such a thing cannot happen without reason.…' Then losing her conviction, she fell quiet. Indeed it seemed her small pragmatic view of things, ever puny and seeking for justifications, had collapsed utterly, while the King clung to his illusions as men often do, until very late in life.

"Now, as they fell silent, Mekare went forward and laid her hands upon the King. She laid her hands upon his shoulders; and closed her eyes. Then she laid her hands upon the Queen in the same manner, though the Queen glared at her with venom in her eyes.

" 'Explain to us,' Mekare said, looking at the Queen, 'what happened at the very moment. What do you remember? What did you

see?'

"The Queen was silent, her face drawn and suspicious. Her beauty had been, in truth, enhanced by this transformation, yet there was something repellent in her, as if she were not the flower now but the replica of the flower made of pure white wax. And as she grew reflective she appeared somber and vicious, and instinctively I drew close to Mekare to protect her from what might take place.

"But then the Queen spoke:

" 'They came to kill us, the traitors! They would blame it on the spirits; that was the plan. And all to eat the flesh again, the flesh of their mothers and fathers, and the flesh for which they loved to hunt. They came into the house and they stabbed me with their daggers, I their sovereign Queen.' She paused as if seeing these things again before her eyes. 'I fell as they slashed at me, as they drove their daggers into my breast. One cannot live with such wounds as I received; and so as I fell to the floor, I knew that I was dead! Do you hear what I am saying? I knew that nothing could save me. My blood was pouring out onto the floor.

" 'But even as I saw it pooling before me, I realized I was not in my wounded body, that I had already left it, that death had taken me and was drawing me upwards sharply as if through a great tunnel to where I would suffer no more!

" 'I wasn't frightened; I felt nothing; I looked down and saw myself lying pale and covered with blood in that little house. Yet I did not care. I was free of it. But suddenly something took hold of me, took hold of my invisible being! The tunnel was gone; I was caught in a great mesh like a fisherman's net. With all my strength I pushed against it, and it gave with my strength but it did not break and it gripped me and held me fast and I could not rise through it.

" 'When I tried to scream I was in my body again! I felt the agony of my wounds as if the knives were cutting me afresh. But this net, this great net, it still had a hold of me, and instead of being the endless thing it had been before, it was now contracted into a tighter weave like the weave of a great silk veil.

" 'And all about me this thing—visible yet invisible—whirled as if it were wind, lifting me, casting me down, turning me about. The blood gushed from my wounds. And it ran into the weave of this veil, just as

it might into the mesh of any fabric.

“ ‘And that which had been transparent was now drenched in blood. And a monstrous thing I saw, shapeless, and enormous, with my blood broadcast throughout it. And yet this thing had another property to it, a center, it seemed, a tiny burning center which was in me, and ran riot in my body like a frightened animal. Through my limbs it ran, thumping and beating. A heart with legs scampering. In my belly it circled as I clawed at myself. I would have cut myself open to get this thing out of me!

“ ‘And it seemed the great invisible part of this thing—the blood mist that surrounded me and enveloped me—was controlled by this tiny center, twisting this way and that as it scurried within me, racing into my hands one moment and into my feet the next. Up my spine it ran.

” ‘I would die, surely I would die, I thought. Then came a moment of blindness! Silence. It had killed me, I was certain. I should rise again, should I not? Yet suddenly I opened my eyes; I sat up off the floor as if no attack had befallen me; and I saw so clearly! Khayman, the glaring torch in his hand!—the trees of the garden—why, it was as if I had never truly seen such simple things for what they were! The pain was gone completely, from inside and from my wounds as well. Only the light hurt my eyes; I could not endure its brilliance. Yet I had been saved from death; my body had been glorified and made perfect. Except that—’ And there she stopped.

“She stared before her, indifferent for a moment. Then she said, ‘Khayman has told you all the rest.’ She looked to the King who stood beside her, watching her; trying to fathom the things she said, just as we tried to fathom them.

“ ‘Your spirit,’ she said. ‘It tried to destroy us. But something else had happened; some great power has intervened to triumph over its diabolical evil.’ Then again her conviction deserted her. The lies stopped on her tongue. Her face was suddenly cold with menace. And sweetly she said: ‘Tell us, witches, wise witches. You who know all the secrets. What is the name for what we are!’

“Mekare sighed. She looked at me. I knew she didn’t want to speak now on this thing. And the old warning of the spirits came back. The Egyptian King and Queen would ask us questions and they would not

like our answers. We would be destroyed.…

"Then the Queen turned her back. She sat down and bowed her head. And it was then, and only then, that her true sadness came to the fore. The King smiled at us, wearily. 'We are in pain, witches,' he said. 'We could bear the burden of this transformation if only we understood it better. You, who have communed with all things invisible; tell us what you know of such magic; help us, if you will, for you know that we never meant to harm you, only to spread the truth and the law.'

"We did not dwell on the stupidity of this statement—the virtue of spreading the truth through wholesale slaughter and so forth and so on. But Mekare demanded that the King now tell what he could recall.

"He spoke of things which you—all of you seated here—surely know. Of how he was dying; and how he tasted the blood from his wife which had covered his face; and of how his body quickened, and wanted this blood, and then how he took it from his wife and she gave it; and then he became as she was. But for him there was no mysterious cloud of blood. There was no thing running rampant within him. 'The thirst, it's unbearable,' he said to us. 'Unbearable.' And he too bowed his head.

"We stood in silence for a moment looking at each other, Mekare and I, and as always, Mekare spoke first:

" 'We know no name for what you are,' she said. 'We know no stories of such a thing ever happening in this world before. But it's plain enough what took place.' She fixed her eyes upon the Queen. 'As you perceived your own death, your soul sought to make its swift escape from suffering as souls so often do. But as it rose, the spirit Amel seized it, this thing being invisible as your soul was invisible; and in the normal course of things you might have easily overcome this earthbound entity and gone on to realms we do not know.

" 'But this spirit had long before wrought a change within himself; a change that was utterly new. This spirit had tasted the blood of humans whom he had pierced or tormented, as you yourself have seen him do. And your body, lying there, and full of blood despite its many wounds, had life still.

" 'And so the spirit, thirsting, plunged down into your body, his invisible form still wedded to your soul.

“ ‘Still you might have triumphed, fighting off this evil thing as possessed persons often do. But now the tiny core of this spirit—the thing of matter which is the roaring center of all spirits, from which their endless energy comes—was suddenly filled with blood as never in the past.

“ ‘And so the fusion of blood and timeless tissue was a million times magnified and accelerated; and blood flowed through all his body, both material and nonmaterial, and this was the blood cloud that you saw.

“ ‘But it is the pain you felt which is most significant, this pain which traveled through your limbs. For surely as inevitable death came to your body, the spirit’s tiny core merged with the flesh of your body as its energy had already merged with your soul. It found some special place or organ in which matter merged with matter as spirit had already merged with spirit; and a new thing was formed.’

“ ‘Its heart and my heart,’ the Queen whispered. ‘They became one.’ And closing her eyes, she lifted her hand and laid it on her breast.

“We said nothing, for this seemed a simplification, and we did not believe the heart was the center of intellect or emotion. For us, it had been the brain which controlled these things. And in that moment, both Mekare and I saw a terrible memory—our mother’s heart and brain thrown down and trampled in ashes and dust.

“But we fought this memory. It was abhorrent that this pain should be glimpsed by those who had been its cause.

“The King pressed us with a question. ‘Very well,’ he said, ‘you’ve explained what has happened to Akasha. This spirit is in her, core wedded perhaps to core. But what is in me? I felt no such pain, no such scurrying demon. I felt … I felt only the thirst when her bloodied hands touched my lips.’ He looked to his wife.

“The shame, the horror, they felt over the thirst was clear.

“ ‘But the same spirit is in you, too,’ Mekare answered. ‘There is but one Amel. Its core resides in the Queen, but it is in you also.’

“ ‘How is such a thing possible?’ asked the King.

“ ‘This being has a great invisible part,’ Mekare said. ‘Were you to have seen it in its entirety, before this catastrophe took place, you would have seen something almost without end.’

“ ‘Yes,’ the Queen confessed. ‘It was as if the net covered the whole

sky.'

"Mekare explained: 'It is only by concentrating such immense size that these spirits achieve any physical strength. Left on their own, they are as clouds over the horizon; greater even; they have now and then boasted to us that they have no true boundaries, though this is not likely the truth.'

"The King stared at his wife.

" 'But how can it be released!' demanded Akasha.

" 'Yes. How can it be made to depart!' the King asked.

"Neither of us wanted to answer. We wondered that the answer was not obvious to them both. 'Destroy your body,' Mekare said to the Queen finally. 'And it will be destroyed as well.'

"The King looked at Mekare with disbelief. 'Destroy her body!' Helplessly he looked at his wife.

"But Akasha merely smiled bitterly. The words came as no surprise to her. For a long moment, she said nothing. She merely looked at us with plain hatred; then she looked at the King. When she looked to us, she put the question. 'We are dead things, aren't we? We cannot live if it departs. We do not eat; we do not drink, save for the blood it wants; our bodies throw off no waste any longer; we have not changed in one single particular since that awful night; we are not alive anymore.'

"Mekare didn't answer. I knew that she was studying them; struggling to see their forms not as a human would see them but as a witch would see them, to let the quiet and the stillness collect around them, so that she might observe the tiny imperceptible aspects of this which eluded regular gaze. Into a trance she fell as she looked at them and listened. And when she spoke her voice was flat, dull:

" 'It is working on your body; it is working and working as fire works on the wood it consumes; as worms work on the carcass of an animal. It is working and working and its work is inevitable; it is the continuance of the fusion which has taken place; that is why the sun hurts it, for it is using all of its energy to do what it must do; and it cannot endure the sun's heat coming down upon it.'

" 'Or the bright light of a torch even,' the King sighed.

" 'At times not even a candle flame,' said the Queen.

" 'Yes,' Mekare said, shaking off the trance finally. 'And you are dead,' she said in a whisper. 'Yet you are alive! If the wounds healed

as you say they did; if you brought the King back as you say you did, why, you may have vanquished death. That is, if you do not go into the burning rays of the sun.'

" 'No, this cannot continue!' the King said. 'The thirst, you don't know how terrible is the thirst.'

"But the Queen only smiled bitterly again. 'These are not living bodies now. These are hosts for this demon.' Her lip trembled as she looked at us. 'Either that or we are truly gods!'

" 'Answer us, witches,' said the King. 'Could it be that we are divine beings now, blessed with gifts that only gods share?' He smiled as he said it; he so wanted to believe it. 'Could it not be that when your demon sought to destroy us, our gods intervened?'

"An evil light shone in the Queen's eye. How she loved this idea, but she didn't believe it … not really.

"Mekare looked at me. She wanted me to go forward and to touch them as she had done. She wanted me to look at them as she had done. There was something further that she wanted to say, yet she was not sure of it. And in truth, I had slightly stronger powers of the instinctive nature, though less of a gift for words than she.

"I went forward; I touched their white skin, though it repelled me as they repelled me for all that they had done to our people and us. I touched them and then withdrew and gazed at them; and I saw the work of which Mekare spoke, I could even hear it, the tireless churning of the spirit within. I stilled my mind; I cleared it utterly of all preconception or fear and then as the calmness of the trance deepened in me, I allowed myself to speak.

" 'It wants more humans,' I said. I looked at Mekare. This was what she had suspected.

" 'We offer to it all we can!' the Queen gasped. And the blush of shame came again, extraordinary in its brightness to her pale cheeks. And the King's face colored also. And I understood then, as did Mekare, that when they drank the blood they felt ecstasy. Never had they known such pleasure, not in their beds, not at the banquet table, not when drunk with beer or wine. That was the source of the shame. It hadn't been the killing; it had been the monstrous feeding. It had been the pleasure. Ah, these two were such a pair.

"But they had misunderstood me. 'No,' I explained. 'It wants more

like you. It wants to go in and make blood drinkers of others as it did with the King; it is too immense to be contained within two small bodies. The thirst will become bearable only when you make others, for they will share the burden of it with you.'

" 'No!' the Queen screamed. 'That is unthinkable.'

" 'Surely it cannot be so simple!' the King declared. 'Why, we were both made at one and the same terrible instant, when our gods warred with this demon. Conceivably, when our gods warred and won.'

" 'I think not,' I said.

" 'You mean to say,' the Queen asked, 'that if we nourish others with this blood that they too will be so infected?' But she was recalling now every detail of the catastrophe. Her husband dying, the heartbeat gone from him, and then the blood trickling into his mouth.

" 'Why, I haven't enough blood in my body to do such a thing!' she declared. 'I am only what I am!' Then she thought of the thirst and all the bodies that had served it.

"And we realized the obvious point; that she had sucked the blood out of her husband before he had taken it back from her, and that is how the thing had been accomplished; that and the fact that the King was on the edge of death, and most receptive, his own spirit shaking loose and ready to be locked down by the invisible tentacles of Amel.

"Of course they read our thoughts, both of them.

" 'I don't believe what you say,' said the King. 'The gods would not allow it. We are the King and Queen of Kemet. Burden or blessing, this magic has been meant for us.'

"A moment of silence passed. Then he spoke again, most sincerely. 'Don't you see, witches? This was destiny. We were meant to invade your lands, to bring you and this demon here, so that this might befall us. We suffer, true, but we are gods now; this is a holy fire; and we must give thanks for what has happened to us.'

"I tried to stop Mekare from speaking. I clasped her hand tightly. But they already knew what she meant to say. Only her conviction jarred them.

" 'It could very likely pass into anyone,' she said, 'were the conditions duplicated, were the man or woman weakened and dying, so that the spirit could get its grip.'

"In silence they stared at us. The King shook his head. The Queen

looked away in disgust. But then the King whispered, ‘If this is so, then others may try to take this from us!’

“ ‘Oh, yes,’ Mekare whispered. ‘If it would make them immortal? Most surely, they would. For who would not want to live forever?’

“At this the King’s face was transformed. He paced back and forth in the chamber. He looked at his wife, who stared forward as one about to go mad, and he said to her most carefully, ‘Then we know what we must do. We cannot breed a race of such monsters! We know!’

“But the Queen threw her hands over her ears and began to scream. She began to sob, and finally to roar in her agony, her fingers curling into claws as she looked up at the ceiling above her.

“Mekare and I withdrew to the edges of the room, and held tight to each other. And then Mekare began to tremble, and to cry also, and I felt tears rise in my eyes.

“ ‘You did this to us!’ the Queen roared, and never had we heard a human voice attain such volume. And as she went mad now, shattering everything within the chamber, we saw the strength of Amel in her, for she did things no human could do. The mirrors she hurled at the ceiling; the gilded furniture went to splinters under her fists. ‘Damn you into the lower world among demons and beasts forever!’ she cursed us, ‘for what you have done to us. Abominations. Witches. You and your demon! You say you did not send this thing to us. But in your hearts you did. You sent this demon! And he read it from your hearts, just as I read it now, that you wished us evil!’

“But then the King caught her in his arms and hushed her and kissed her and caught her sobs against his chest.

“Finally she broke away from him. She stared at us, her eyes brimming with blood. ‘You lie!’ she said. ‘You lie as your demons lied before. Do you think such a thing could happen if it was not meant to happen!’ She turned to the King. ‘Oh, don’t you see, we’ve been fools to listen to these mere mortals, who have not such powers as we have! Ah, but we are young deities and must struggle to learn the designs of heaven. And surely our destiny is plain; we see it in the gifts we possess.’

“We didn’t respond to what she had said. It seemed to me at least for a few precious moments that it was a mercy if she could believe such nonsense. For all I could believe was that Amel, the evil one,

Amel, the stupid, the dull-witted, the imbecile spirit, had stumbled into this disastrous fusion and that perhaps the whole world would pay the price. My mother's warning came back to me. All our suffering came back to me. And then such thoughts—wishes for the destruction of the King and Queen—seized me that I had to cover my head with my hands and shake myself and try to clear my mind, lest I face their wrath.

"But the Queen was paying no mind to us whatsoever, except to scream to her guards that they must at once take us prisoner, and that tomorrow night she would pass judgment upon us before the whole court.

"And quite suddenly we were seized; and as she gave her orders with gritted teeth and dark looks, the soldiers dragged us away roughly and threw us like common prisoners into a lightless cell.

"Mekare took hold of me and whispered that until the sun rose we must think nothing that could bring us harm; we must sing the old songs we knew and pace the floor so that as not even to dream dreams that would offend the King and Queen, for she was mortally afraid.

"Now I had never truly seen Mekare so afraid. Mekare was always the one to rave in anger; it was I who hung back imagining the most terrible things.

"But when dawn came, when she was sure the demon King and Queen had gone to their secret retreat, she burst into tears.

" 'I did it, Maharet,' she said to me. 'I did it. I sent him against them. I tried not to do it; but Amel, he read it in my heart. It was as the Queen said, exactly.'

"There was no end to her recriminations. It was she who had spoken to Amel; she who had strengthened him and puffed him up and kept his interest; and then she had wished his wrath upon the Egyptians and he had known.

"I tried to comfort her. I told her none of us could control what was in our hearts; that Amel had saved our lives once; that no one could fathom these awful choices, these forks in the road; and we must now banish all guilts and look only to the future. How could we get free of this place? How could we make these monsters release us? Our good spirits would not frighten them now; not a chance of it; we must think; we must plan; we must do something.

“Finally, the thing for which I secretly hoped happened: Khayman appeared. But he was even more thin and drawn than before.

“ ‘I think you are doomed, my red-haired ones,’ he said to us. ‘The King and Queen were in a quandary over the things which you said to them; before morning they went to the temple of Osiris to pray. Could you not give them any hope of reclamation? Any hope this horror would come to an end?’

“ ‘Khayman, there is one hope,’ Mekare whispered. ‘Let the spirits be my witness; I don’t say that you should do it. I only answer your question. If you would put an end to this, put an end to the King and Queen. Find their hiding place and let the sun come down upon them, the sun which their new bodies cannot bear.’

“But he turned away, terrified by the prospect of such treason. Only to look back and sigh and say, ‘Ah, my dear witches. Such things I’ve seen. And yet I dare not do such a thing.’

“As the hours passed we went through agony, for surely we would be put to death. But there were no regrets any longer in us for the things we’d said, or the things we’d done. And as we lay in the dark in one another’s arms, we sang the old songs again from our childhood; we sang our mother’s songs; I thought of my little baby and I tried to go to her, to rise in spirit from this place and be close to her, but without the trance potion, I could not do it. I had never learned such skill.

“Finally dusk fell. And soon we heard the multitude singing hymns as the King and Queen approached. The soldiers came for us. Into the great open court of the palace we were brought as we had been before. Here it was that Khayman had laid his hands upon us and we had been dishonored, and before those very same spectators we were brought, with our hands bound again.

“Only it was night and the lamps burnt low in the arcades of the court; and an evil light played upon the gilded lotus blossoms of the pillars, and upon the painted silhouettes which covered the walls. At last the King and Queen stepped upon the dais. And all those assembled fell to their knees. The soldiers forced us into the same subservience. And then the Queen stepped forward and began to speak.

“In a quavering voice, she told her subjects that we were monstrous

witches, and that we had loosed upon this kingdom the demon which had only lately plagued Khayman and tried its evil devilment upon the King and Queen themselves. But lo, the great god Osiris, oldest of all the gods, stronger even than the god Ra, had cast down this diabolical force and raised up into celestial glory the King and the Queen.

"But the great god could not look kindly upon the witches who had so troubled his beloved people. And he demanded now that no mercy be shown.

" 'Mekare, for your evil lies and your discourse with demons,' the Queen said, 'your tongue shall be torn from your mouth. And Maharet, for the evil which you have envisioned and sought to make us believe in, your eyes shall be plucked out! And all night, you shall be bound together, so that you may hear each other's weeping, the one unable to speak, the other unable to see. And then at high noon tomorrow in the public place before the palace you shall be burnt alive for all the people to see.

" 'For behold, no such evil shall ever prevail against the gods of Egypt and their chosen King and Queen. For the gods have looked upon us with benevolence and special favor, and we are as the King and Queen of Heaven, and our destiny is for the common good!'

"I was speechless as I heard the condemnation; my fear, my sorrow lay beyond my reach. But Mekare cried out at once in defiance. She startled the soldiers as she pulled away from them and stepped forward. Her eyes were on the stars as she spoke. And above the shocked whispers of the court she declared:

" 'Let the spirits witness; for theirs is the knowledge of the future—both what it would be, *and what I will!* You are the Queen of the Damned, that's what you are! Your only destiny is evil, as well you know! But I shall stop you, if I must come back from the dead to do it. At the hour of your greatest menace it is I who will defeat you! It is I who will bring you down. Look well upon my face, for you will see me again!'

"And no sooner had she spoken this oath, this prophecy, than the spirits, gathering, began their whirlwind and the doors of the palace were flung open and the sands of the desert salted the air.

"Screams rose from the panic-stricken courtiers.

"But the Queen cried out to her soldiers: 'Cut out her tongue as I

have commanded you!' and though the courtiers were clinging to the walls in terror, the soldiers came forward and caught hold of Mekare and cut out her tongue.

"In cold horror I watched it happen; I heard her gasp as it was done. And then with astonishing fury, she thrust them aside with her bound hands and going down on her knees snatched up the bloody tongue and swallowed it before they would tramp upon it or throw it aside.

"Then the soldiers laid hold of me.

"The last things I beheld were Akasha, her finger pointed, her eyes gleaming. And then the stricken face of Khayman with tears streaming down his cheeks. The soldiers clamped their hands on my head and pushed back my eyelids and tore all vision from me, as I wept without a sound.

"Then suddenly, I felt a warm hand lay hold of me; and I felt something against my lips. Khayman had my eyes; Khayman was pressing them to my lips. And at once I swallowed them lest they be desecrated or lost.

"The wind grew fiercer; sand swirled about us, and I heard the courtiers running now in all directions, some coughing, others gasping, and many crying as they fled, while the Queen implored her subjects to be calm. I turned, groping for Mekare, and felt her head come down on my shoulder, her hair against my cheek.

" 'Burn them now!' declared the King.

" 'No, it is too soon,' said the Queen. 'Let them suffer.'

"And we were taken away, and bound together, and left alone finally on the floor of the little cell.

"For hours the spirits raged about the palace; but the King and Queen comforted their people, and told them not to be afraid. At noon tomorrow all evil would be expurgated from the kingdom; and until then let the spirits do what they would.

"Finally, it was still and quiet as we lay together. It seemed nothing walked in the palace save the King and the Queen. Even our guards slept.

"And these are the last hours of my life, I thought. And will her suffering be more than mine in the morning, for she shall see me burn, whereas I cannot see her, and she cannot even cry out. I held Mekare to me. She laid her head against my heartbeat. And so the minutes

passed.

"Finally, it must have been three hours before morning, I heard noises outside the cell. Something violent; the guard giving a sharp cry and then falling. The man had been slain. Mekare stirred beside me. I heard the lock pulled, and the pivots creak. Then it seemed I heard a noise from Mekare, something like unto a moan.

"Someone had come into the cell, and I knew by my old instinctive power that it was Khayman. As he cut the ropes which bound us, I reached out and clasped his hand. But instantly I thought, this is not Khayman! And then I understood. 'They have done it to you! They have worked it on you.'

" 'Yes,' he whispered, and his voice was full of wrath and bitterness, and a new sound had crept into it, an inhuman sound. 'They have done it! To put it to the test, they have done it! To see if you spoke the truth! They have put this evil into *me*.' It seemed he was sobbing; a rough dry sound, coming from his chest. And I could feel the immense strength of his fingers, for though he didn't want to hurt my hand, he was.

" 'Oh, Khayman,' I said, weeping. 'Such treachery from those you've served so well.'

" 'Listen to me, witches,' he said, his voice guttural and full of rage. 'Do you want to die tomorrow in fire and smoke before an ignorant populace; or would you fight this evil thing? Would you be its equal and its enemy upon this earth? For what stays the power of mighty men save that of others of the same strength? What stops the swordsman but a warrior of the same mettle? Witches, if they could do this to me, can I not do it to you?'

"I shrank back, away from him, but he wouldn't let me go. I didn't know if it was possible. I knew only that I didn't want it.

" 'Maharet,' he said. 'They shall make a race of fawning acolytes unless they are beaten, and who can beat them save ones as powerful as themselves!'

" 'No, I would die first,' I said, yet even as the words left me I thought of the waiting flames. But no, it was unforgivable. Tomorrow I should go to my mother; I should leave here forever, and nothing could make me remain.

" 'And you, Mekare?' I heard him say. 'Will you reach now for the

fulfillment of your own curse? Or die and leave it to the spirits who have failed you from the start?'

"The wind came up again, howling about the palace; I heard the outside doors rattling; I heard the sand flung against the walls. Servants ran through distant passages; sleepers rose from their beds. I could hear the faint, hollow, and unearthly wails of the spirits I most loved.

" 'Be still,' I told them, 'I will not do it. I will not let this evil in.'

"But as I knelt there, leaning my head against the wall, and reasoning that I must die, and must somehow find the courage for it, I realized that within the small confines of this cell, the unspeakable magic was being worked again. As the spirits railed against it, Mekare had made her choice. I reached out and felt these two forms, man and woman, melded like lovers; and as I struggled to part them, Khayman struck me, knocking me unconscious on the floor.

"Surely only a few minutes passed. Somewhere in the blackness, the spirits wept. The spirits knew the final outcome before I did. The winds died away; a hush fell in the blackness; the palace was still.

"My sister's cold hands touched me. I heard a strange sound like laughter; can those who have no tongue laugh? I made no decision really; I knew only that all our lives we had been the same; twins and mirror images of each other; two bodies it seemed and one soul. And I was sitting now in the hot close darkness of this little place, and I was in my sister's arms, and for the first time she was changed and we were not the same being; and yet we were. And then I felt her mouth against my throat; I felt her hurting me; and Khayman took his knife and did the work for her; and the swoon began.

"Oh, those divine seconds; those moments when I saw again within my brain the lovely light of the silver sky; and my sister there before me smiling, her arms uplifted as the rain came down. We were dancing in the rain together, and all our people were there with us, and our bare feet sank into the wet grass; and when the thunder broke and the lightning tore the sky, it was as if our souls had released all their pain. Drenched by the rain we went deep into the cave together; we lighted one small lamp and looked at the old paintings on the walls —the paintings done by all the witches before us; huddling together, with the sound of the distant rain we lost ourselves in these paintings

of witches dancing; of the moon coming for the first time into the night sky.

"Khayman fed me the magic; then my sister; then Khayman again. You know what befell me, don't you? But do you know what the Dark Gift is for those who are blind? Tiny sparks flared in the gaseous gloom; then it seemed a glowing light began to define the shapes of things around me in weak pulses; like the afterimages of bright things when one closes one's eyes.

"Yes, I could move through this darkness. I reached out to verify what I beheld. The doorway, the wall; then the corridor before me; a faint map flashed for a second of the path ahead.

"Yet never had the night seemed so silent; nothing inhuman breathed in the darkness. The spirits were utterly gone.

"And never, never again did I ever hear or see the spirits. Never ever again were they to answer my questions or my call. The ghosts of the dead yes, but the spirits, gone forever.

"But I did not realize this abandonment in those first few moments, or hours, or even in the first few nights.

"So many other things astonished me; so many other things filled me with agony or joy.

"Long before the sunrise, we were hidden, as the King and Queen were hidden, deep within a tomb. It was to the grave of Khayman's own father that he took us, the grave to which the poor desecrated corpse had been restored. I had by then drunk my first draught of mortal blood. I had known the ecstasy which made the King and Queen blush for shame. But I had not dared to steal the eyes of my victim; I had not even thought such a thing might work.

"It was five nights later that I made such a discovery; and saw as a blood drinker truly sees for the first time.

"By then we had fled the royal city, moving north all night. And in place after place, Khayman had revealed the magic to various persons declaring that they must rise up against the King and Queen, for the King and Queen would have them believe they alone had the power, which was only the worst of their many lies.

"Oh, the rage Khayman felt in those early nights. To any who wanted the power he gave it, even when he was so weakened that he could scarce walk at our side. That the King and the Queen should

have worthy enemies, that was his vow. How many blood drinkers were created in those thoughtless weeks, blood drinkers who would increase and multiply and create the battles of which Khayman dreamed?

"But we were doomed in this first stage of the venture—doomed in the first rebellion, doomed in our escape. We were soon to be separated forever—Khayman, Mekare, and I.

"Because the King and Queen, horrified at Khayman's defection, and suspecting that he had given us the magic, sent their soldiers after us, men who could search by day as well as night. And as we hunted ravenously to feed our newborn craving, our trail was ever easy to follow along the small villages of the riverbank or even to the encampments of the hills.

"And finally not a fortnight after we had fled the royal palace, we were caught by the mobs outside the gates of Saqqâra, less than two nights' walk from the sea.

"If only we had reached the sea. If only we had remained together. The world had been born over again to us in darkness; desperately we loved one another; desperately we had exchanged our secrets by the light of the moon.

"But a trap lay waiting for us at Saqqâra. And though Khayman did manage to fight his way to freedom, he saw that he could not possibly save us, and went deep into the hills to wait his moment, but it never came.

"Mekare and I were surrounded as you remember, as you have seen in your dreams. My eyes were torn from me again; and we feared the fire now, for surely that could destroy us; and we prayed to all things invisible for final release.

"But the King and the Queen feared to destroy our bodies. They had believed Mekare's account of the one great spirit, Amel, who infected all of us, and they feared that whatever pain we might feel would then be felt by them. Of course this was not so; but who could know it then?

"And so into the stone coffins we were put, as I've told you. One to be taken to the east and one to the west. The rafts had already been made to set us adrift in the great oceans. I had seen them even in my blindness; we were being carried away upon them; and I knew from

the minds of my captors what they meant to do. I knew also that Khayman could not follow, for the march would go on by day as it had by night, and surely this was true.

"When I awoke, I was drifting on the breast of the sea. For ten nights the raft carried me as I've told you. Starvation and terror I suffered, lest the coffin sink to the bottom of the waters; lest I be buried alive forever, a thing that cannot die. But this did not happen. And when I came ashore at last on the eastern coast of lower Africa, I began my search for Mekare, crossing the continent to the west.

"For centuries I searched from one tip of the continent to the other. I went north in Europe. I traveled up and down along the rocky beaches, and even into the northern islands, until I reached the farthest wastes of ice and snow. Over and over again, however, I journeyed back to my own village, and that part of the story I will tell you in a moment, for it is very important to me that you know it, as you will see.

"But during those early centuries I turned my back upon Egypt; I turned my back upon the King and Queen.

"Only much later, did I learn that the King and Queen made a great religion of their transformation; that they took upon themselves the identity of Osiris and Isis, and darkened those old myths to suit themselves.

" 'God of the underworld' Osiris became—that is, the King who could appear only in darkness. And the Queen became Isis, the Mother, who gathers up her husband's battered and dismembered body and heals it and brings it back to life.

"You've read in Lestat's pages—in the tale Marius told to Lestat as it was told to him—of how the blood gods created by the Mother and Father took the blood sacrifice of evildoers in shrines hidden within the hills of Egypt; and how this religion endured until the time of Christ.

"And you have learned something also of how Khayman's rebellion succeeded, how the equal enemies of the King and Queen whom he had created eventually rose up against the Mother and Father; and how great wars were fought among the blood drinkers of the world. Akasha herself revealed these things to Marius, and Marius revealed them to Lestat.

“In those early centuries, the Legend of the Twins was born; for the Egyptian soldiers who had witnessed the events of our lives from the massacre of our people to our final capture were to tell the tales. The Legend of the Twins was even written by the scribes of Egypt in later times. It was believed that one day Mekare would reappear to strike down the Mother, and all the blood drinkers of the world would die as the Mother died.

“But all this happened without my knowledge, my vigilance, or my collusion, for I was long gone from such things.

“Only three thousand years later did I come to Egypt, an anonymous being, swathed in black robes, to see for myself what had become of the Mother and Father—listless, staring statues, shut up in stone in their underground temple, with only their heads and throats exposed. And to the priestly blood drinkers who guarded them, the young ones came, seeking to drink from the primal fount.

“Did I wish to drink, the young blood drinker priest asked me. Then I must go to the Elders and declare my purity and my devotion to the old worship, declare that I was not a rogue bent upon selfish ends. I could have laughed.

“But oh, the horror to see those staring things! To stand before them and whisper the names Akasha and Enkil, and see not a flicker within the eye or the tiniest twitch of the white skin.

“And so they had been for as long as anyone could remember, and so the priests told me; no one even knew anymore if the myths of the beginning were true. We—the very first children—had come to be called merely the First Brood who had spawned the rebels; but the Legend of the Twins was forgotten; and no one knew the names Khayman or Mekare or Maharet.

“Only one time later was I to see them, the Mother and the Father. Another thousand years had passed. The great burning had just happened when the Elder in Alexandria—as Lestat has told you—sought to destroy the Mother and the Father by placing them in the sun. They’d been merely bronzed by the day’s heat as Lestat told it, so strong had they become; for though we all sleep helplessly by day, the light itself becomes less lethal with the passage of time.

“But all over the world blood drinkers had gone up in flames during those daylight hours in Egypt; while the very old ones had suffered

and darkened but nothing more. My beloved Eric was then one thousand years; we lived together in India; and he was during those interminable hours severely burned. It took great draughts of my blood to restore him. I myself was bronzed only, and though I lived with great pain for many nights, there was a curious side effect to it: it was then easier for me to pass among human beings with this dark skin.

"Many centuries later, weary of my pale appearance, I was to burn myself in the sun deliberately. I shall probably do it again.

"But it was all a mystery to me the first time it happened. I wanted to know why I had seen fire and heard the cries of so many perishing in my dreams, and why others whom I had made—beloved fledglings—had died this unspeakable death.

"And so I journeyed from India to Egypt, which to me has always been a hateful place. It was then I heard tell of Marius, a young Roman blood drinker, miraculously unburnt, who had come and stolen the Mother and Father and taken them out of Alexandria where no one could ever burn them—or us—again.

"It was not difficult to find Marius. As I've told you, in the early years we could never hear each other. But as time passed we could hear the younger ones just as if they were human beings. In Antioch, I discovered Marius's house, a virtual palace where he lived a life of Roman splendor though he hunted the dark streets for human victims in the last hours before dawn.

"He had already made an immortal of Pandora, whom he loved above all other things on earth. And the Mother and Father he had placed in an exquisite shrine, made by his own hands of Carrara marble and mosaic flooring, in which he burned incense as if it were a temple, as if they were truly gods.

"I waited for my moment. He and Pandora went to hunt. And then I entered the house, making the locks give way from the inside.

"I saw the Mother and Father, darkened as I had been darkened, yet beautiful and lifeless as they'd been a thousand years before. On a throne he'd placed them, and so they would sit for two thousand years, as you all know. I went to them; I touched them. I struck them. They did not move. Then with a long dagger I made my test. I pierced the flesh of the Mother, which had become an elastic coating as my

flesh had become. I pierced the immortal body which had become both indestructible and deceptively fragile, and my blade went right through her heart. From right to left I slashed with it, then stopped.

"Her blood poured viscous and thick for a moment; for a moment the heart ceased to beat; then the rupture began to heal; the spilt blood hardened like amber as I watched.

"But most significant, I had felt that moment when the heart failed to pump the blood; I had felt the dizziness, the vague disconnection; the very whisper of death. No doubt, all through the world blood drinkers had felt it, perhaps the young ones strongly, a shock which knocked them off their feet. The core of Amel was still within her; the terrible burning and the dagger, these things proved that the life of the blood drinkers resided within her body as it always would.

"I would have destroyed her then, if it had not been so. I would have cut her limb from limb; for no span of time could ever cool my hatred for her; my hatred for what she had done to my people; for separating Mekare from me. Mekare my other half; Mekare my own self.

"How magnificent it would have been if the centuries had schooled me in forgiveness; if my soul had opened to understand all the wrongs done me and my people.

"But I tell you, it is the soul of humankind which moves towards perfection over the centuries, the human race which learns with each passing year how better to love and forgive. I am anchored to the past by chains I cannot break.

"Before I left, I wiped away all trace of what I had done. For an hour perhaps I stared at the two statues, the two evil beings who had so long ago destroyed my kindred and brought such evil upon me and my sister; and who had known such evil in return.

" 'But you did not win, finally,' I said to Akasha. 'You and your soldiers and their swords. For my child, Miriam, survived to carry the blood of my family and my people forward in time; and this, which may mean nothing to you as you sit there in silence, means all things to me.'

"And the words I spoke were true. But I will come to the story of my family in a moment. Let me deal now with Akasha's one victory: that Mekare and I were never united again.

“For as I have told you, never in all my wanderings did I ever find a man, woman, or blood drinker who had gazed upon Mekare or heard her name. Through all the lands of the world I wandered, at one time or another, searching for Mekare. But she was gone from me as if the great western sea had swallowed her; and I was as half a being reaching out always for the only thing which can render me complete.

“Yet in the early centuries, I knew Mekare lived; there were times when the twin I was felt the suffering of the other twin; in dark dreamlike moments, I knew inexplicable pain. But these are things which human twins feel for each other. As my body grew harder, as the human in me melted away and this more powerful and resilient immortal body grew dominant, I lost the simple human link with my sister. Yet I knew, I knew that she was alive.

“I spoke to my sister as I walked the lonely coast, glancing out over the ice cold sea. And in the grottoes of Mount Carmel I made our story in great drawings—all that we had suffered—the panorama which you beheld in the dreams.

“Over the centuries many mortals were to find that grotto, and to see those paintings; and then they would be forgotten again, to be discovered anew.

“Then finally in this century, a young archaeologist, hearing tell of them, climbed Mount Carmel one afternoon with a lantern in his hand. And when he gazed on the pictures that I had long ago made, his heart leapt because he had seen these very same images on a cave across the sea, above the jungles in Peru.

“It was years before his discovery was known to me. He had traveled far and wide with his bits and pieces of evidence—photographs of the cave drawings from both the Old World and the New; and a vase he found in the storage room of a museum, an ancient artifact from those dim forgotten centuries when the Legend of the Twins was still known.

“I cannot tell you the pain and happiness I experienced when I looked at the photographs of the pictures he had discovered in a shallow cave in the New World.

“For Mekare had drawn there the very same things that I had drawn; the brain, the heart, and the hand so much like my own had given expression to the same images of suffering and pain. Only the

smallest differences existed. But the proof was beyond denial.

"Mekare's bark had carried her over the great western ocean to a land unknown in our time. Centuries perhaps before man had penetrated the southern reaches of the jungle continent, Mekare had come ashore there, perhaps to know the greatest loneliness a creature can know. How long had she wandered among birds and beasts before she'd seen a human face?

"Had it been centuries, or millennia, this inconceivable isolation? Or had she found mortals at once to comfort her, or run from her in terror? I was never to know. My sister may have lost her reason long before the coffin which carried her ever touched the South American shore.

"All I knew was that she had been there; and thousands of years ago she had made those drawings, just as I had made my own.

"Of course I lavished wealth upon this archaeologist; I gave him every means to continue his research into the Legend of the Twins. And I myself made the journey to South America. With Eric and Mael beside me, I climbed the mountain in Peru by the light of the moon and saw my sister's handiwork for myself. So ancient these paintings were. Surely they had been done within a hundred years of our separation and very possibly less.

"But we were never to find another shred of evidence that Mekare lived or walked in the South American jungles, or anywhere else in this world. Was she buried deep in the earth, beyond where the call of Mael or Eric could reach her? Did she sleep in the depths of some cave, a white statue, staring mindlessly, as her skin was covered with layer upon layer of dust?

"I cannot conceive of it. I cannot bear to think on it.

"I know only, as you know now, that she has risen. She has waked from her long slumber. Was it the songs of the Vampire Lestat that waked her? Those electronic melodies that reached the far corners of the world? Was it the thoughts of the thousands of blood drinkers who heard them, interpreted them, and responded to them? Was it Marius's warning that the Mother walks?

"Perhaps it was some dim sense collected from all these signals—that the time had come to fulfill the old curse. I cannot tell you. I know only that she moves northward, that her course is erratic, and

that all efforts on my part through Eric and Mael to find her have failed.

"It is not me she seeks. I am convinced of it. It is the Mother. And the Mother's wanderings throw her off course.

"But she will find the Mother if that is her purpose! She will find the Mother! Perhaps she will come to realize that she can take to the air as the Mother can, and she will cover the miles in the blink of an eye when that discovery is made.

"But she will find the Mother. I know it. And there can be but one outcome. Either Mekare will perish; or the Mother will perish, and with the Mother so shall all of us.

"Mekare's strength is equal to mine, if not greater. It is equal to the Mother's; and she may draw from her madness a ferocity which no one can now measure or contain.

"I am no believer of curses; no believer of prophecy; the spirits that taught me the validity of such things deserted me thousands of years ago. But Mekare believed the curse when she uttered it. It came from the depths of her being; she set it into motion. And her dreams now speak only of the beginning, of the sources of her rancor, which surely feed the desire for revenge.

"Mekare may bring about the fulfillment; and it may be the better thing for us all. And if she does not destroy Akasha, if we do not destroy. Akasha, what will be the outcome? We know now what evils the Mother has already begun to do. Can the world stop this thing if the world understands nothing of it? That it is immensely strong, yet certainly vulnerable; with the power to crush, yet skin and bone that can be pierced or cut? This thing that can fly, and read minds, and make fire with its thoughts; yet can be burnt itself?

"How can we stop her and save ourselves, that is the question. I want to live, as I have always wanted it. I do not want to close my eyes on this world. I do not want those I love to come to harm. Even the young ones, who must take life, I struggle in my mind to find some way to protect them. Is this evil of me? Or are we not a species, and do we not share the desire of any species to live on?

"Hearken to everything that I've told you of the Mother. To what I've said of her soul, and of the nature of the demon that resides in her —its core wedded to her core. Think on the nature of this great

invisible thing which animates each one of us, and every blood drinker who has ever walked.

"We are as receptors for the energy of this being; as radios are receptors for the invisible waves that bring sound. Our bodies are no more than shells for this energy. We are—as Marius so long ago described it—blossoms on a single vine.

"Examine this mystery. For if we examine it closely perhaps we can yet find a way to save ourselves.

"And I would have you examine one thing further in regard to it; perhaps the single most valuable thing which I have ever learned.

"In those early times, when the spirits spoke to my sister and me on the side of the mountain, what human being would have believed that the spirits were irrelevant things? Even we were captives of their power, thinking it our duty to use the gifts we possessed for the good of our people, just as Akasha would later believe.

"For thousands of years after that, the firm belief in the supernatural has been part of the human soul. There were times when I would have said it was natural, chemical, an indispensable ingredient in the human makeup; something without which humans could not prosper, let alone survive.

"Again and again we have witnessed the birth of cults and religions —the dreary proclamations of apparitions and miracles and the subsequent promulgation of the creeds inspired by these 'events.'

"Travel the cities of Asia and Europe—behold the ancient temples still standing, and the cathedrals of the Christian god in which his hymns are still sung. Walk through the museums of all countries; it is religious painting and sculpture that dazzles and humbles the soul.

"How great seems that achievement; the very machinery of culture dependent upon the fuel of religious belief.

"Yet what has been the price of that faith which galvanizes countries and sends army against army; which divides up the map of nations into victor and vanquished; which annihilates the worshipers of alien gods.

"But in the last few hundred years, a true miracle has happened which has nothing to do with spirits or apparitions, or voices from the heavens telling this or that zealot what he must now do!

"We have seen in the human animal a resistance finally to the

miraculous; a skepticism regarding the works of spirits, or those who claim to see them and understand them and speak their truths.

"We have seen the human mind slowly abandon the traditions of law based upon revelation, to seek ethical truths through reason; and a way of life based upon respect for the physical and the spiritual as perceived by all human beings.

"And with this loss of respect for supernatural intervention; with this credulity of all things divorced from the flesh, has come the most enlightened age of all; for men and women seek for the highest inspiration not in the realm of the invisible, but in the realm of the human—the thing which is both flesh and spirit; invisible and visible; earthly and transcendent.

"The psychic, the clairvoyant, the witch, if you will, is no longer of value, I am convinced of it. The spirits can give us nothing more. In sum, we have outgrown our susceptibility to such madness, and we are moving to a perfection that the world has never known.

"The word has been made flesh at last, to quote the old biblical phrase with all its mystery; but the word is the word of reason; and the flesh is the acknowledgment of the needs and the desires which all men and women share.

"And what would our Queen do for this world with her intervention? What would she give it—she whose very existence is now irrelevant, she whose mind has been locked for centuries in a realm of unenlightened dreams?

"She must be stopped; Marius is right; who could disagree with him? We must stand ready to help Mekare, not to thwart her, even if it means the end for us all.

"But let me lay before you now the final chapter of my tale in which lies the fullest illumination of the threat that the Mother poses to us all:

"As I've already said, Akasha did not annihilate my people. They lived on in my daughter Miriam and in her daughters, and those daughters born to them.

"Within twenty years I had returned to the village where I'd left Miriam, and found her a young woman who had grown up on the stories that would become the Legend of the Twins.

"By the light of the moon I took her with me up the mountain and

revealed to her the caves of her ancestors, and gave her the few necklaces and the gold that was still hidden deep within the painted grottoes where others feared to go. And I told Miriam all the stories of her ancestors which I knew. But I adjured her: stay away from the spirits; stay away from all dealings with things invisible, whatever people call them, and especially if they are called gods.

"Then I went to Jericho, for there in the crowded streets it was easy to hunt for victims, for those who wished for death and would not trouble my conscience; and easy to hide from prying eyes.

"But I was to visit Miriam many times over the years; and Miriam gave birth to four daughters and two sons, and these gave birth in turn to some five children who lived to maturity and of these five, two were women, and of those women eight different children were born. And the legends of the family were told by their mothers to these children; the Legend of the Twins they also learned—the legend of the sisters who had once spoken to spirits, and made the rain fall, and were persecuted by the evil King and Queen.

"Two hundred years later, I wrote down for the first time all the names of my family, for they were an entire village now, and it took four whole clay tablets for me to record what I knew. I then filled tablet after tablet with the stories of the beginning, of the women who had gone back to The Time Before the Moon.

"And though I wandered sometimes for a century away from my homeland, searching for Mekare, hunting the wild coasts of northern Europe, I always came back to my people, and to my secret hiding places in the mountains and to my house in Jericho, and I wrote down again the progress of the family, which daughters had been born and the names of those daughters born to them. Of the sons, too, I wrote in detail—of their accomplishments, and personalities, and sometime heroism—as I did with the women. But of their offspring no. It was not possible to know if the children of the men were truly of my blood, and of my people's blood. And so the thread became matrilineal as it has always been since.

"But never, never, in all this time, did I reveal to my family the evil magic which had been done to me. I was determined that this evil should never touch the family; and so if I used my ever increasing supernatural powers, it was in secret, and in ways that could be

naturally explained.

"By the third generation, I was merely a kinswoman who had come home after many years in another land. And when and if I intervened, to bring gold or advice to my daughters, it was as a human being might do it, and nothing more.

"Thousands of years passed as I watched the family in anonymity, only now and then playing the long lost kinswoman to come into this or that village or family gathering and hold the children in my arms.

"But by the early centuries of the Christian era, another concept had seized my imagination. And so I created the fiction of a branch of the family which kept all its records—for there were now tablets and scrolls in abundance, and even bound books. And in each generation of this fictional branch, there was a fictional woman to whom the task of recordkeeping was passed. The name of Maharet came with the honor; and when time demanded it, old Maharet would die, and young Maharet would inherit the task.

"And so I myself was within the family; and the family knew me; and I knew the family's love. I became the writer of letters; the benefactor; the unifier; the mysterious yet trusted visitor who appeared to heal breaches and right wrongs. And though a thousand passions consumed me; though I lived for centuries in different lands, learning new languages and customs, and marveling at the infinite beauty of the world, and the power of the human imagination, I always returned to the family, the family which knew me and expected things from me.

"As the centuries passed, as the millennia passed, I never went down into the earth as many of you have done. I never faced madness and loss of memory as was common among the old ones, who became often like the Mother and Father, statues buried beneath the ground. Not a night has passed since those early times that I have not opened my eyes, known my own name, and looked with recognition upon the world around me, and reached for the thread of my own life.

"But it was not that madness didn't threaten. It was not that weariness did not sometimes overwhelm. It was not that grief did not embitter me, or that mysteries did not confuse me, or that I did not know pain.

"It was that I had the records of my family to safeguard; I had my

own progeny to look after, and to guide in the world. And so even in the darkest times, when all human existence seemed monstrous to me and unbearable, and the changes of the world beyond comprehension, I turned to the family as if it were the very spring of life itself.

"And the family taught me the rhythms and passions of each new age; the family took me into alien lands where perhaps I would never have ventured alone; the family took me into realms of art which might have intimidated me; the family was my guide through time and space. My teacher, my book of life. The family was all things."

Maharet paused.

For a moment it seemed she would say something more. Then she rose from the table. She glanced at each of the others, and then she looked at Jesse.

"Now I want you to come with me. I want to show you what this family has become."

Quietly, all rose and waited as Maharet walked round the table and then they followed her out of the room. They followed her across the iron landing in the earthen stairwell, and into another great mountaintop chamber, with a glass roof and solid walls.

Jesse was the last to enter, and she knew even before she had passed through the door what she would see. An exquisite pain coursed through her, a pain full of remembered happiness and unforgettable longing. It was the windowless room in which she'd stood long ago.

How clearly she recalled its stone fireplace, and the dark leather furnishings scattered over the carpet; and the air of great and secret excitement, infinitely surpassing the memory of the physical things, which had forever haunted her afterwards, engulfing her in half-remembered dreams.

Yes, there the great electronic map of the world with its flattened continents, covered with thousands and thousands of tiny glowing lights.

And the other three walls, so dark, seemingly covered by a fine black wire mesh, until you realized what you were seeing: an endless ink-drawn vine, crowding every inch between floor and ceiling, growing from a single root in one corner into a million tiny swarming branches, each branch surrounded by countless carefully inscribed

names.

A gasp rose from Marius as he turned about, looking from the great glowing map to the dense and delicately drawn family tree. Armand gave a faint sad smile also, while Mael scowled slightly, though he was actually amazed.

The others stared in silence; Eric had known these secrets; Louis, the most human of them all, had tears standing in his eyes. Daniel gazed in undisguised wonder. While Khayman, his eyes dulled as if with sadness, stared at the map as if he did not see it, as if he were still looking deep into the past.

Slowly Gabrielle nodded; she made some little sound of approval, of pleasure.

"The Great Family," she said in simple acknowledgment as she looked at Maharet.

Maharet nodded.

She pointed to the great sprawling map of the world behind her, which covered the south wall.

Jesse followed the vast swelling procession of tiny lights that moved across it, out of Palestine, spreading all over Europe, and down into Africa, and into Asia, and then finally to both continents of the New World. Countless tiny lights flickering in various colors; and as Jesse deliberately blurred her vision, she saw the great diffusion for what it was. She saw the old names, too, of continents and countries and seas, written in gold script on the sheet of glass that covered the three-dimensional illusion of mountains, plains, valleys.

"These are my descendants," Maharet said, "the descendants of Miriam, who was my daughter and Khayman's daughter, and of my people, whose blood was in me and in Miriam, traced through the maternal line as you see before you, for six thousand years."

"Unimaginable!" Pandora whispered. And she too was sad almost to the point of tears. What a melancholy beauty she had, grand and remote, yet reminiscent of warmth as if it had once been there, naturally, overwhelmingly. It seemed to hurt her, this revelation, to remind her of all that she had long ago lost.

"It is but one human family," Maharet said softly. "Yet there is no nation on earth that does not contain some part of it, and the descendants of males, blood of our blood and uncounted, surely exist

in equal numbers to all those now known by name. Many who went into the wastes of Great Russia and into China and Japan and other dim regions were lost to this record. As are many of whom I lost track over the centuries for various reasons. Nevertheless their descendants are there! No people, no race, no country does not contain some of the Great Family. The Great Family is Arab, Jew, Anglo, African; it is Indian; it is Mongolian; it is Japanese and Chinese. In sum, the Great Family is the human family."

"Yes," Marius whispered. Remarkable to see the emotion in his face, the faint blush of human color again and the subtle light in the eyes that always defies description. "One family and all families—" he said. He went towards the enormous map and lifted his hands irresistibly as he looked up at it, studying the course of lights moving over the carefully modeled terrain.

Jesse felt the atmosphere of that long ago night enfold her; and then unaccountably those memories—flaring for an instant—faded, as though they didn't matter anymore. She was here with all the secrets; she was standing again in this room.

She moved closer to the dark, fine engraving on the wall. She looked at the myriad tiny names inscribed in black ink; she stood back and followed the progress of one branch, one thin delicate branch, as it rose slowly to the ceiling through a hundred different forks and twists.

And through the dazzle of all her dreams fulfilled now, she thought lovingly of all those souls who had made up the Great Family that she had known; of the mystery of heritage and intimacy. The moment was timeless; quiet for her; she didn't see the white faces of her new kin, the splendid immortal forms caught in their eerie stillness.

Something of the real world was alive still for her now, something that evoked awe and grief and perhaps the finest love she had ever been capable of; and it seemed for one moment that natural and supernatural possibility were equal in their mystery. They were equal in their power. And all the miracles of the immortals could not outshine this vast and simple chronicle. The Great Family.

Her hand rose as if it had a life of its own. And as the light caught Mael's silver bracelet which she wore around her wrist still, she laid her fingers out silently on the wall. A hundred names covered by the

palm of her hand.

"This is what is threatened now," Marius said, his voice softened by sadness, his eyes still on the map.

It startled her, that a voice could be so loud yet so soft. No, she thought, no one will hurt the Great Family. No one will hurt the Great Family!

She turned to Maharet; Maharet was looking at her. And here we are, Jesse thought, at the opposite ends of this vine, Maharet and I.

A terrible pain welled in Jesse. A terrible pain. To be swept away from all things real, that had been irresistible, but to think that all things real could be swept away was unendurable.

During all her long years with the Talamasca, when she had seen spirits and restless ghosts, and poltergeists that could terrify their baffled victims, and clairvoyants speaking in foreign tongues, she had always known that somehow the supernatural could never impress itself upon the natural. Maharet had been so right! Irrelevant, yes, safely irrelevant—unable to intervene!

But now that stood to be changed. The unreal had been made real. It was absurd to stand in this strange room, amid these stark and imposing forms, and say, This cannot happen. This thing, this thing called the Mother, could reach out from behind the veil that had so long separated her from mortal eyes and touch a million human souls.

What did Khayman see when he looked at her now, as if he understood her. Did he see his daughter in Jesse?

"Yes," Khayman said. "My daughter. And don't be afraid. Mekare will come. Mekare will fulfill the curse. And the Great Family will go on."

Maharet sighed. "When I knew the Mother had risen, I did not guess what she might do. To strike down her children, to annihilate the evil that had come out of her, and out of Khayman and me and all of us who out of loneliness have shared this power—that I could not really question! What right have we to live? What right have we to be immortal? We are accidents; we are horrors. And though I want my life, greedily, I want it as fiercely as ever I wanted it—I cannot say that it is wrong that she has slain so many—"

"She'll slay more!" Eric said desperately.

"But it is the Great Family now which falls under her shadow,"

Maharet said. “It is their world! And she would make it her own. Unless …”

“Mekare will come,” Khayman said. The simplest smile animated his face. “Mekare will fulfill the curse. I made Mekare what she is, so that she would do it. It is our curse now.”

Maharet smiled, but it was vastly different, her expression. It was sad, indulgent, and curiously cold. “Ah, that you believe in such symmetry, Khayman.”

“And we’ll die, all of us!” Eric said.

“There has to be a way to kill her,” Gabrielle said coldly, “without killing us. We have to think on this, to be ready, to have some sort of plan.”

“You cannot change the prophecy,” Khayman whispered.

“Khayman, if we have learned anything,” Marius said, “it is that there is no destiny. And if there is no destiny then there is no prophecy. Mekare comes here to do what she vowed to do; it may be all she knows now or all she can do, but that does not mean that Akasha can’t defend herself against Mekare. Don’t you think the Mother knows Mekare has risen? Don’t you think the Mother has seen and heard her children’s dreams?”

“Ah, but prophecies have a way of fulfilling themselves,” Khayman said. “That’s the magic of it. We all understood it in ancient times. The power of charms is the power of the will; you might say that we were all great geniuses of psychology in those dark days, that we could be slain by the power of another’s designs. And the dreams, Marius, the dreams are but part of a great design.”

“Don’t talk of it as if it were already done,” Maharet said. “We have another tool. We can use reason. This creature speaks now, does she not? She understands what is spoken to her. Perhaps she can be diverted—”

“Oh, you are mad, truly mad!” Eric said. “You are going to speak to this monster that roamed the world incinerating her offspring!” He was becoming more frightened by the minute. “What does this thing know of reason, that inflames ignorant women to rise against their men? This thing knows slaughter and death and violence, that is all it has ever known, as your story makes plain. We don’t change, Maharet. How many times have you told me. We move ever closer to the

perfection of what we were meant to be."

"None of us wants to die, Eric," Maharet said patiently. But something suddenly distracted her.

At the same moment, Khayman too felt it. Jesse studied both of them, attempting to understand what she was seeing. Then she realized that Marius had undergone a subtle change as well. Eric was petrified. Mael, to Jesse's surprise, was staring fixedly at her.

They were hearing some sound. It was the way they moved their eyes that revealed it; people listen with their eyes; their eyes dance as they absorb the sound and try to locate its source.

Suddenly Eric said: "The young ones should go to the cellar immediately."

"That's no use," Gabrielle said. "Besides, I want to be here." She couldn't hear the sound, but she was trying to hear it.

Eric turned on Maharet. "Are you going to let her destroy us, one by one?"

Maharet didn't answer. She turned her head very slowly and looked towards the landing.

Then Jesse finally heard the sound herself. Certainly human ears couldn't hear it; it was like the auditory equivalent of tension without vibration, coursing through her as it did through every particle of substance in the room. It was inundating and disorienting, and though she saw that Maharet was speaking to Khayman and that Khayman was answering, she couldn't hear what they were saying. Foolishly, she'd put her hands to her ears. Dimly, she saw that Daniel had done the same thing, but they both knew it did no good at all.

The sound seemed suddenly to suspend all time; to suspend momentum. Jesse was losing her balance; she backed up against the wall; she stared at the map across from her, as if she wanted it somehow to sustain her. She stared at the soft flow of the lights streaming out of Asia Minor and to the north and to the south.

Some dim, inaudible commotion filled the room. The sound had died away, yet the air rang with a deafening silence.

In a soundless dream, it seemed, she saw the figure of the Vampire Lestat appear in the door; she saw him rush into Gabrielle's arms; she saw Louis move towards him and then embrace him. And then she saw the Vampire Lestat look at her—and she caught the flashing

image of the funeral feast, the twins, the body on the altar. He didn't know what it meant! He didn't know.

It shocked her, the realization. The moment on the stage came back to her, when he had obviously struggled to recognize some fleeting image, as they had drawn apart.

Then as the others drew him away now, with embraces and kisses again—and even Armand had come to him with his arms out—he gave her the faintest little smile. "Jesse," he said.

He stared at the others, at Marius, at the cold and wary faces. And how white his skin was, how utterly white, yet the warmth, the exuberance, the almost childlike excitement—it was exactly as it had been before.

PART IV

THE QUEEN OF THE DAMNED

i

Wings stir the sunlit dust
of the cathedral in which
the Past is buried
to its chin in marble.

STAN RICE
from
"Poem on Crawling into Bed: Bitterness"
Body of Work (1983)

ii

In the glazed greenery of hedge,
and ivy, and inedible strawberries

the lilies are white; remote; extreme.
Would they were our guardians.
They are barbarians.

STAN RICE

from
"4'Greek Fragments"
Body of Work (1983)

She sat at the end of the table, waiting for them; so still, placid, the magenta gown giving her skin a deep carnal glow in the light of the fire.

The edge of her face was gilded by the glow of the flames, and the dark window glass caught her vividly in a flawless mirror, as if the reflection were the real thing, floating out there in the transparent night.

Frightened. Frightened for them and for me. And strangely, for her. It was like a chill, the presentiment. For her. The one who might destroy all that I had ever loved.

At the door, I turned and kissed Gabrielle again. I felt her body collapse against me for an instant; then her attention locked on Akasha. I felt the faint tremor in her hands as she touched my face. I looked at Louis, my seemingly fragile Louis with his seemingly invincible composure; and at Armand, the urchin with the angel's face. Finally those you love are simply … those you love.

Marius was frigid with anger as he entered the room; nothing could disguise this. He glared at me—I, the one who had slain those poor helpless mortals and left them strewn down the mountain. He knew, did he not? And all the snow in the world couldn't cover it up. *I need you, Marius. We need you.*

His mind was veiled; all their minds were veiled. Could they keep their secrets from her?

As they filed into the room, I went to her right hand because she wanted me to. And because that's where I knew I ought to be. I gestured for Gabrielle and Louis to sit opposite, close, where I could see them. And the look on Louis's face, so resigned, yet sorrowful, struck my heart.

The red-haired woman, the ancient one called Maharet, sat at the opposite end of the table, the end nearest the door. Marius and Armand were on her right. And on her left was the young red-haired one, Jesse. Maharet looked absolutely passive, collected, as if nothing could alarm her. But it was rather easy to see why. Akasha couldn't hurt this creature; or the other very old one, Khayman, who sat down now to my right.

The one called Eric was terrified, it was obvious. Only reluctantly did he sit at the table at all. Mael was afraid too, but it made him furious. He glowered at Akasha, as if he cared nothing about hiding his disposition.

And Pandora, beautiful, brown-eyed Pandora—she looked truly uncaring as she took her place beside Marius. She didn't even look at Akasha. She looked out through the glass walls, her eyes moving slowly, lovingly, as she saw the forest, the layers and layers of dim forest, with their dark streaks of redwood bark and prickling green.

The other one who didn't care was Daniel. This one I'd seen at the concert too. I hadn't guessed that Armand had been with him! Hadn't picked up the faintest indication that Armand had been there. And to think, whatever we might have said to each other, it was lost now forever. But then that couldn't be, could it? We would have our time together, Armand and I; all of us. Daniel knew it, pretty Daniel, the reporter with his little tape recorder who with Louis in a room on Divisadero Street had somehow started all of this! That's why he looked so serenely at Akasha; that's why he explored it moment by moment.

I looked at the black-haired Santino—a rather regal being, who was appraising me in a calculating fashion. He wasn't afraid either. But he cared desperately about what happened here. When he looked at Akasha he was awed by her beauty; it touched some deep wound in him. Old faith flared for a moment, faith that had meant more to him than survival, and faith that had been bitterly burnt away.

No time to understand them all, to evaluate the links which connected them, to ask the meaning of that strange image—the two red-haired women and the body of the mother, which I saw again in a glancing flash when I looked at Jesse.

I was wondering if they could scan my mind and find in it all the things I was struggling to conceal; the things I unwittingly concealed from myself.

Gabrielle's face was unreadable now. Her eyes had grown small and gray, as if shutting out all light and color; she looked from me to Akasha and back again, as if trying to figure something out.

And a sudden terror crept over me. Maybe it had been there all the time. They would never yield either. Something inveterate would

prevent it, just as it had with me. And some fatal resolution would come before we left this room.

For a moment I was paralyzed. I reached out suddenly and took Akasha's hand. I felt her fingers close delicately around mine.

"Be quiet, my prince," she said, unobtrusively and kindly. "What you feel in this room is death, but it is the death of beliefs and strictures. Nothing more." She looked at Maharet. "The death of dreams, perhaps," she said, "which should have died a long time ago."

Maharet looked as lifeless and passive as a living thing can look. Her violet eyes were weary, bloodshot. And suddenly I realized why. They were human eyes. They were dying in her head. Her blood was infusing them over and over again with life but it wasn't lasting. Too many of the tiny nerves in her own body were dead.

I saw the dream vision again. The twins, the body before them. What was the connection?

"It is nothing," Akasha whispered. "Something long forgotten; for there are no answers in history now. We have transcended history. History is built on errors; we will begin with truth."

Marius spoke up at once:

"Is there nothing that can persuade you to stop?" His tone was infinitely more, subdued than I'd expected. He sat forward, hands folded, in the attitude of one striving to be reasonable. "What can we say? We want you to cease the apparitions. We want you not to intervene."

Akasha's fingers tightened on mine. The red-haired woman was staring at me now with her bloodshot violet eyes.

"Akasha, I beg you," Marius said. "Stop this rebellion. Don't appear again to mortals; don't give any further commands."

Akasha laughed softly. "And why not, Marius? Because it so upsets your precious world, the world you've been watching for two thousand years, the way you Romans once watched life and death in the arena, as if such things were entertainment or theater, as if it did not matter—the literal fact of suffering and death—as long as you were enthralled?"

"I see what you mean to do," Marius said. "Akasha, you do not have the right."

"Marius, your student here has given me those old arguments," she

answered. Her tone was now as subdued and eloquent of patience as his. “But more significantly, I have given them a thousand times to myself. How long do you think I have listened to the prayers of the world, pondering a way to terminate the endless cycle of human violence? It is time now for you to listen to what I have to say.”

“We are to play a role in this?” Santino asked. “Or to be destroyed as the others have been destroyed?” His manner was impulsive rather than arrogant.

And for the first time the red-haired woman evinced a flicker of emotion, her weary eyes fixing on him immediately, her mouth tense.

“You will be my angels,” Akasha answered tenderly as she looked at him. “You will be my gods. If you do not choose to follow me, I’ll destroy you. As for the old ones, the old ones whom I cannot so easily dispatch”—she glanced at Khayman and Maharet again—“if they turn against me, they shall be as devils opposing me, and all humanity shall hunt them down, and they shall through their opposition serve the scheme quite well. But what you had before—a world to roam in stealth—you shall never have again.”

It seemed Eric was losing his silent battle with fear. He moved as if he meant to rise and leave the room.

“Patience,” Maharet said, glancing at him. She looked back at Akasha.

Akasha smiled.

“How is it possible,” Maharet asked in a low voice, “to break a cycle of violence through more wanton violence? You are destroying the males of the human species. What can possibly be the outcome of such a brutal act?”

“You know the outcome as well as I do,” Akasha said. “It’s too simple and too elegant to be misunderstood. It has been unimaginable *until now*. All those centuries I sat upon my throne in Marius’s shrine; I dreamed of an earth that was a garden, a world where beings lived without the torment that I could hear and feel. I dreamed of people achieving this peace without tyranny. And then the utter simplicity of it struck me; it was like dawn coming. The people who can realize such a dream are women; but only if all the men—or very nearly all the men—are removed.

“In prior ages, such a thing would not have been workable. But now

it is easy; there is a vast technology which can reinforce it. After the initial purgation, the sex of babies can be selected; the unwanted unborn can be mercifully aborted as so many of both sexes are now. But there is no need to discuss this aspect of it, really. You are not fools, any of you, no matter how emotional or impetuous you are.

"You know as I know that there will be universal peace if the male population is limited to one per one hundred women. All forms of random violence will very simply come to an end.

"The reign of peace will be something the world has never known. Then the male population can be increased gradually. But for the conceptual framework to be changed, the males must be gone. Who can dispute that? It may not even be necessary to keep the one in a hundred. But it would be generous to do so. And so I will allow this. At least as we begin."

I could see that Gabrielle was about to speak. I tried to give her a silent signal to be quiet, but she ignored me.

"All right, the effects are obvious," she said. "But when you speak in terms of wholesale extermination, then questions of peace become ridiculous. You're abandoning one half of the world's population. If men and women were born without arms and legs, this might be a peaceful world as well."

"The men deserve what will happen to them. As a species, they will reap what they have sown. And remember, I speak of a temporary cleansing—a retreat, as it were. It's the simplicity of it which is beautiful. Collectively the lives of these men do not equal the lives of women who have been killed at the hands of men over the centuries. You know it and I know it. Now, tell me, how many men over the centuries have fallen at the hands of women? If you brought back to life every man slain by a woman, do you think these creatures would fill even this house?

"But you see, these points don't matter. Again, we know what I say is true. What matters—what is relevant and even more exquisite than the proposition itself—is that we now have the means to make it happen. I am indestructible. You are equipped to be my angels. And there is no one who can oppose us with success."

"That's not true," Maharet said.

A little flash of anger colored Akasha's cheeks; a glorious blush of

red that faded and left her as inhuman looking as before.

"You are saying that *you* can stop me?" she asked, her mouth stiffening. "You are rash to suggest this. Will you suffer the death of Eric, and Mael, and Jessica, for such a point?"

Maharet didn't answer. Mael was visibly shaken but with anger not fear. He glanced at Jesse and at Maharet and then at me. I could feel his hatred.

Akasha continued to stare at Maharet.

"Oh, I know you, believe me," Akasha went on, her voice softening slightly. "I know how you have survived through all the years unchanged. I have seen you a thousand times in the eyes of others; I know you dream now that your sister lives. And perhaps she does—in some pathetic form. I know your hatred of me has only festered; and you reach back in your mind, all the way back, to the very beginning as if you could find there some rhyme or reason for what is happening now. But as you yourself told me long ago when we talked together in a palace of mud brick on the banks of the Nile River, there is no rhyme or reason. There is nothing! There are things visible and invisible; and horrible things can befall the most innocent of us all. Don't you see—this is as crucial to what I do now as all else."

Again, Maharet didn't answer. She sat rigid, only her darkly beautiful eyes showing a faint glimmer of what might have been pain.

"I shall *make* the rhyme or reason," Akasha said, with a trace of anger. "I shall *make* the future; I shall define goodness; I shall define peace. And I don't call on mythic gods or goddesses or spirits to justify my actions, on abstract morality. I do not call on history either! I don't look for my mother's heart and brain in the dirt!"

A shiver ran through the others. A little bitter smile played on Santino's lips. And protectively, it seemed, Louis looked towards the mute figure of Maharet.

Marius was anxious lest this go further.

"Akasha," he said in entreaty, "even if it could be done, even if the mortal population did not rise against you, and the men did not find some way to destroy you long before such a plan could be accomplished—"

"You're a fool, Marius, or you think I am. Don't you think I know what this world is capable of? What absurd mixture of the savage and

the technologically astute makes up the mind of modern man?"

"My Queen, I don't think you know it!" Marius said. "Truly, I don't. I don't think you can hold in your mind the full conception of what the world is. None of us can; it is too varied, too immense; we seek to embrace it with our reason; but we can't do it. You know a world; but it is not *the* world; it is the world you have selected from a dozen other worlds for reasons within yourself."

She shook her head; another flare of anger. "Don't try my patience, Marius," she said. "I spared you for a very simple reason. Lestat wanted you spared. And because you are strong and you can be of help to me. But that is all there is to it, Marius. Tread with care."

A silence fell between them. Surely he realized that she was lying. I realized it. She loved him and it humiliated her, and so she sought to hurt him. And she had. Silently, he swallowed his rage.

"Even if it could be done," he pressed gently, "can you honestly say that human beings have done so badly that they should receive such a punishment as this?"

I felt the relief course through me. I'd known he would have the courage, I'd known that he would find some way to take it into the deeper waters, no matter how she threatened him; he would say all that I had struggled to say.

"Ah, now you disgust me," she answered.

"Akasha, for two thousand years I have watched," he said. "Call me the Roman in the arena if you will and tell me tales of the ages that went before. When I knelt at your feet I begged you for your knowledge. But what I have witnessed in this short span has filled me with awe and love for all things mortal; I have seen revolutions in thought and philosophy which I believed impossible. Is not the human race moving towards the very age of peace you describe?"

Her face was a picture of disdain.

"Marius," she said, "this will go down as one of the bloodiest centuries in the history of the human race. What revolutions do you speak of, when millions have been exterminated by one small European nation on the whim of a madman, when entire cities were melted into oblivion by bombs? When children in the desert countries of the East war on other children in the name of an ancient and despotic God? Marius, women the world over wash the fruits of their

wombs down public drains. The screams of the hungry are deafening, yet unheard by the rich who cavort in technological citadels; disease runs rampant among the starving of whole continents while the sick in palatial hospitals spend the wealth of the world on cosmetic refinements and the promise of eternal life through pills and vials." She laughed softly. "Did ever the cries of the dying ring so thickly in the ears of those of us who can hear them? Has *ever* more blood been shed!"

I could feel Marius's frustration. I could feel the passion that made him clench his fist now and search his soul for the proper words.

"There's something you cannot *see*," he said finally. "There is something that you fail to understand."

"No, my dear one. There is nothing wrong with my vision. There never was. It is you who fail to see. You always have."

"Look out there at the forest!" he said, gesturing to the glass walls around us, "Pick one tree; describe it, if you will, in terms of what it destroys, what it defies, and what it does not accomplish, and you have a monster of greedy roots and irresistible momentum that eats the light of other plants, their nutrients, their air. But that is not the truth of the tree. That is not the whole truth when the thing is seen as part of nature, and by nature I mean nothing sacred, I mean only the full tapestry, Akasha. I mean only the larger thing which embraces all."

"And so you will select now your causes for optimism," she said, "as you always have. Come now. Examine for me the Western cities where even the poor are given platters of meat and vegetables daily and tell me hunger is no more. Well, your pupil here has given me enough of that pap already—the idiot foolishness upon which the complacency of the rich has always been based. The world is sunk into depravity and chaos; it is as it always was or worse."

"Oh, no, not so," he said adamantly. "Men and women are learning animals. If you do not see what they have learned, you're blind. They are creatures ever changing, ever improving, ever expanding their vision and the capacity of their hearts. You are not fair to them when you speak of this as the most bloody century; you are not seeing the light that shines ever more radiantly on account of the darkness; you are not seeing the evolution of *the* human soul!"

He rose from his place at the table, and came round towards her on the left-hand side. He took the empty chair between her and Gabrielle. And then he reached out and he lifted her hand.

I was frightened watching him. Frightened she wouldn't allow him to touch her; but she seemed to like this gesture; she only smiled.

"True, what you say about war," he said, pleading with her, and struggling with his dignity at the same time. "Yes, and the cries of the dying, I too have heard them; we have all heard them, through all the decades; and even now, the world is shocked by daily reports of armed conflict. But it is the outcry against these horrors which is the light I speak of; it's the attitudes which were never possible in the past. It is the intolerance of thinking men and women in power who for the first time in the history of the human race truly want to put an end to injustice in all forms."

"You speak of the intellectual attitudes of a few."

"No," he said. "I speak of changing philosophy; I speak of idealism from which true realities will be born. Akasha, flawed as they are, they must have the time to perfect their own dreams, don't you see?"

"Yes!" It was Louis who spoke out.

My heart sank. So vulnerable! Were she to turn her anger on him— But in his quiet and refined manner, he was going on:

"It's their world, not ours," he said humbly. "Surely we forfeited it when we lost our mortality. We have no right now to interrupt their struggle. If we do we rob them of victories that have cost them too much! Even in the last hundred years their progress has been miraculous; they have righted wrongs that mankind thought were inevitable; they have for the first time developed a concept of the true family of man."

"You touch me with your sincerity," she answered. "I spared you only because Lestat loved you. Now I know the reason for that love. What courage it must take for you to speak your heart to me. Yet you yourself are the most predatory of all the immortals here. You kill without regard for age or sex or will to live."

"Then kill me!" he answered. "I wish that you would. But don't kill human beings! Don't interfere with them. Even if they kill each other! Give them time to see this new vision realized; give the cities of the West, corrupt as they may be, time to take their ideals to a suffering

and blighted world."

"Time," Maharet said. "Maybe that is what we are asking for. Time. And that is what you have to give."

There was a pause.

Akasha didn't want to look again at this woman; she didn't want to listen to her. I could feel her recoiling. She withdrew her hand from Marius; she looked at Louis for a long moment and then she turned to Maharet as if it couldn't be avoided, and her face became set and almost cruel.

But Maharet went on:

"You have meditated in silence for centuries upon your solutions. What is another hundred years? Surely you will not dispute that the last century on this earth was beyond all prediction or imagining—and that the technological advances of that century can conceivably bring food and shelter and health to all the peoples of the earth."

"Is that really so?" Akasha responded. A deep smoldering hate heated her smile as she spoke. "This is what technological advances have given the world. They have given it poison gas, and diseases born in laboratories, and bombs that could destroy the planet itself. They have given the world nuclear accidents that have contaminated the food and drink of entire continents. And the armies do what they have always done with modern efficiency. The aristocracy of a people slaughtered in an hour in a snow-filled wood; the intelligentsia of a nation, including all those who wear eyeglasses, systematically shot. In the Sudan, women are still habitually mutilated to be made pleasing to their husbands; in Iran the children run into the fire of guns!"

"This cannot be all you've seen," Marius said. "I don't believe it. Akasha, look at me. Look kindly on me, and what I'm trying to say."

"It doesn't matter whether or not you believe it!" she said with the first sustained anger. "You haven't accepted what I've been trying to tell you. You have not yielded to the exquisite image I've presented to your mind. Don't you realize the gift I offer you? I would save you! And what are you if I don't do this thing! A blood drinker, a killer!"

I'd never heard her voice so heated. As Marius started to answer, she gestured imperiously for silence. She looked at Santino and at Armand.

“You, Santino,” she said. “You who governed the Roman Children of Darkness, when they believed they did God’s will as the Devil’s henchmen—do you remember what it was like to have a purpose? And you, Armand, the leader of the old Paris coven; remember when you were a saint of darkness? Between heaven and hell, you had your place. I offer you that again; and it is no delusion! Can you not reach for your lost ideals?”

Neither answered her. Santino was horror-struck; the wound inside him was bleeding. Armand’s face revealed nothing but despair.

A dark fatalistic expression came over her. This was futile. None of them would join her. She looked at Marius.

“Your precious mankind!” she said. “It has learned nothing in six thousand years! You speak to me of ideals and goals! There were men in my father’s court in Uruk who knew the hungry ought to be fed. Do you know what your modern world is? Televisions are tabernacles of the miraculous and helicopters are its angels of death!”

“All right, then, what would your world be?” Marius said. His hands were trembling. “You don’t believe that the women aren’t going to fight for their men?”

She laughed. She turned to me. “Did they fight in Sri Lanka, Lestat? Did they fight in Haiti? Did they fight in Lynkonos?”

Marius stared at me. He waited for me to answer, to take my stand with him. I wanted to make arguments; to reach for the threads he’d given me and take it further. But my mind went blank.

“Akasha,” I said. “Don’t continue this bloodbath. Please. Don’t lie to human beings or befuddle them anymore.”

There it was—brutal and unsophisticated, but the only truth I could give.

“Yes, for that’s the essence of it,” Marius said, his tone careful again, fearful, and almost pleading. “It’s a lie, Akasha; it’s another superstitious lie! Have we not had enough of them? And now, of all times, when the world’s waking from its old delusions. When it has thrown off the old gods.”

“A lie?” she asked. She drew back, as if he’d hurt her. “What is the lie? Did I lie when I told them I would bring a reign of peace on earth? Did I lie when I told them I was the one they had been waiting for? No, I didn’t lie. What I can do is give them the first bit of truth they’ve

ever had! I am what they think I am. I am eternal, and all powerful, and shall protect them—"

"Protect them?" Marius asked. "How can you protect them from their most deadly foes?"

"What foes?"

"Disease, my Queen. Death. You are no healer. You cannot give life or save it. And they will expect such miracles. *All you can do is kill."*

Silence. Stillness. Her face suddenly as lifeless as it had been in the shrine; eyes staring forward; emptiness or deep thought, impossible to distinguish.

No sound but the wood shifting and falling into the fire.

"Akasha," I whispered. "Time, the thing that Maharet asked for. A century. So little to give."

Dazed, she looked at me. I could feel death breathing on my face, death close as it had been years and years ago when the wolves tracked me into the frozen forest, and I couldn't reach up high enough for the limbs of the barren trees.

"You are all my enemies, aren't you?" she whispered. "Even you, my prince. You are my enemy. My lover and my enemy at the same time."

"I love you!" I said. "But I can't lie to you. I cannot believe in it! It is wrong! It is the very simplicity and the elegance which make it so wrong!"

Her eyes moved rapidly over their faces. Eric was on the verge of panic again. And I could feel the anger cresting in Mael.

"Is there not one of you who would stand with me?" she whispered. "Not one who would reach for that dazzling dream? Not even one who is ready to forsake his or her small and selfish world?" Her eyes fixed on Pandora. "Ah, you, poor dreamer, grieving for your lost humanity; would you not be redeemed?"

Pandora stared as if through a dim glass. "I have no taste for bringing death," she answered in an even softer whisper. "It is enough for me to see it in the falling leaves. I cannot believe good things can come from bloodshed. For that's the crux, my Queen. Those horrors happen still, but good men and women everywhere deplore them; you would reclaim such methods; you would exonerate them and bring the dialogue to an end." She smiled sadly. "I am a useless thing to you. I

have nothing to give."

Akasha didn't respond. Then her eyes moved over the others again; she took the measure of Mael, of Eric. Of Jesse.

"Akasha," I said. "History is a litany of injustice, no one denies it. But when has a simple solution ever been anything but evil? Only in complexity do we find answers. Through complexity men struggle towards fairness; it is slow and clumsy, but it's the only way. Simplicity demands too great a sacrifice. It always has."

"Yes," Marius said. "Exactly. Simplicity and brutality are synonymous in philosophy and in actions. It is brutal what you propose!"

"Is there no humility in you?" she asked suddenly. She turned from me to him. "Is there no willingness to understand? You are so proud, all of you, so arrogant. You want your world to remain the same on account of your greed!"

"No," Marius said.

"What have I done that you should set yourselves so against me?" she demanded. She looked at me, then at Marius, and finally to Maharet. "From Lestat I expected arrogance," she said. "I expected platitudes and rhetoric, and untested ideas. But from many of you I expected more. Oh, how you disappoint me. How can you turn away from the destiny that awaits you? You who could be saviors! How can you deny what you have seen?"

"But they'd want to know what we really are," Santino said. "And once they did know, they'd rise against us. They'd want the immortal blood as they always do."

"Even women want to live forever," Maharet said coldly. "Even women would kill for that."

"Akasha, it's folly," said Marius. "It cannot be accomplished. For the Western world, not to resist would be unthinkable."

"It is a savage and primitive vision," Maharet said with cold scorn.

Akasha's face darkened again with anger. Yet even in rage, the prettiness of her expression remained. "You have always opposed me!" she said to Maharet. "I would destroy you if I could. I would hurt those you love."

There was a stunned silence. I could smell the fear of the others, though no one dared to move or speak.

Maharet nodded. She smiled knowingly.

"It is you who are arrogant," she answered. "It is you who have learned nothing. It is you who have not changed in six thousand years. It is your soul which remains unperfected, while mortals move to realms you will never grasp. In your isolation you dreamed dreams as thousands of mortals have done, protected from all scrutiny or challenge; and you emerge from your silence, ready to make these dreams real for the world? You bring them here to this table, among a handful of your fellow creatures, and they crumble. You cannot defend them. How could anyone defend them? And you tell us we deny what we see!"

Slowly Maharet rose from the chair. She leant forward slightly, her weight resting on her fingers as they touched the wood.

"Well, I'll tell you what I see," she went on. "Six thousand years ago, when men believed in spirits, an ugly and irreversible accident occurred; it was as awful in its own way as the monsters born now and then to mortals which nature does not suffer to live. But you, clinging to life, and clinging to your will, and clinging to your royal prerogative, refused to take that awful mistake with you to an early grave. To sanctify it, that was your purpose. To spin a great and glorious religion; and that is still your purpose now. But it was an accident finally, a distortion, and nothing more.

"And look now at the ages since that dark and evil moment; look at the other religions founded upon magic; founded upon some apparition or voice from the clouds! Founded upon the intervention of the supernatural in one guise or another—miracles, revelations, a mortal man rising from the dead!

"Look on the effect of your religions, those movements that have swept up millions with their fantastical claims. Look at what they have done to human history. Look at the wars fought on account of them; look at the persecutions, the massacres. Look at the pure enslavement of reason; look at the price of faith and zeal.

"And you tell us of children dying in the Eastern countries, in the name of Allah as the guns crackle and the bombs fall!

"And the war of which you speak in which one tiny European nation sought to exterminate a people.… In the name of what grand spiritual design for a new world was that done? And what does the

world remember of it? The death camps, the ovens in which bodies were burnt by the thousands. The ideas are gone!

"I tell you, we would be hard put to determine what is more evil—religion or the pure idea. The intervention of the supernatural or the elegant simple abstract solution! Both have bathed this earth in suffering; both have brought the human race literally and figuratively to its knees.

"Don't *you* see? It is not man who is the enemy of the human species. It is the irrational; it is the spiritual when it is divorced from the material; from the lesson in one beating heart or one bleeding vein.

"You accuse us of greed. Ah, but our greed is our salvation. Because we know what we are; we know our limits and we know our sins; you have never known yours.

"You would begin it all again, wouldn't you? You would bring a new religion, a new revelation, a new wave of superstition and sacrifice and death."

"You lie," Akasha answered, her voice barely able to contain her fury. "You betray the very beauty I dream of; you betray it because you have no vision, you have no dreams."

"The beauty is out there!" Maharet said. "It does not deserve your violence! Are you so merciless that the lives you would destroy mean *nothing!* Ah, it was always so!"

The tension was unbearable. The blood sweat was breaking out on my body. I could see the panic all around. Louis had bowed his head and covered his face with his hands. Only the young Daniel seemed hopelessly enraptured. And Armand merely gazed at Akasha as if it were all out of his hands.

Akasha was silently struggling. But then she appeared to regain her conviction.

"You lie as you have always done," she said desperately. "But it does not matter whether you fight on my side. I will do what I mean to do; I will reach back over the millennia and I will redeem that long ago moment, that long ago evil which you and your sister brought into our land; I will reach back and raise it up in the eyes of the world until it becomes the Bethlehem of the new era; and peace on earth will exist at last. There is no great good that was ever done without

sacrifice and courage. And if you all turn against me, if you all resist me, then I shall make of better mettle the angels I require."

"No, you will not do it," Maharet said.

"Akasha, please," Marius said. "Grant us time. Agree only to wait, to consider. Agree that nothing must come from this moment."

"Yes," I said. "Give us time. Come with me. Let us go together out there—you and I and Marius—out of dreams and visions and into the world itself."

"Oh, how you insult me and belittle me," she whispered. Her anger was turned on Marius but it was about to turn on me.

"There are so many things, so many places," he said, "that I want to show you! Only give me a chance. Akasha, for two thousand years I cared for you, I protected you …"

"You protected yourself! You protected the source of your power, the source of your evil!"

"I'm imploring you," Marius said. "I will get on my knees to you. A month only, to come with me, to let us talk together, to let us examine all the evidence …"

"So small, so selfish," Akasha whispered. "And you feel no debt to the world that made you what you are, no debt to give it now the benefit of your power, to alchemize yourselves from devils into gods!"

She turned to me suddenly, the shock spreading over her face.

"And you, my prince, who came into my chamber as if I were the Sleeping Beauty, who brought me to life again with your passionate kiss. Will you not reconsider? For my love!" The tears again were standing in her eyes. "Must you join with them now against me, too?" She reached up and placed her two hands on the sides of my face. "How can you betray me?" she said. "How can you betray such a dream? They are slothful beings; deceitful; full of malice. But your heart was pure. You had a courage that transcended pragmatism. You had your dreams too!"

I didn't have to answer. She knew. She could see it better perhaps than I could see it. And all I saw was the suffering in her black eyes. The pain, the incomprehension; and the grief she was already experiencing for me.

It seemed she couldn't move or speak suddenly. And there was nothing I could do now; nothing to save them; or me. I loved her! But

I couldn't stand with her! Silently, I begged her to understand and forgive.

Her face was frozen, almost as if the voices had reclaimed her; it was as if I were standing before her throne in the path of her changeless gaze.

"I will kill you first, my prince," she said, her fingers caressing me all the more gently. "I want you gone from me. I will not look into your face and see this betrayal again."

"Harm him and that shall be our signal," Maharet whispered. "We shall move against you as one."

"And you move against yourselves!" she answered, glancing at Maharet. "When I finish with this one I love, I shall kill those you love; those who should have been dead already; I shall destroy all those whom I can destroy; but who shall destroy me?"

"Akasha," Marius whispered. He rose and came towards her; but she moved in the blink of an eye and knocked him to the floor. I heard him cry out as he fell. Santino went to his aid.

Again, she looked at me; and her hands closed on my shoulders, gentle and loving as before. And through the veil of my tears, I saw her smile sadly. "My prince, my beautiful prince," she said.

Khayman rose from the table. Eric rose. And Mael. And then the young ones rose, and lastly Pandora, who moved to Marius's side.

She released me. And she too rose to her feet. The night was so quiet suddenly that the forest seemed to sigh against the glass.

And this is what I've wrought, I who alone remained seated, looking not at any of them, but at nothing. At the small glittering sweep of my life, my little triumphs, my little tragedies, my dreams of waking the goddess, my dreams of goodness, and of fame.

What was she doing? Assessing their power? Looking from one to the other, and then back to me. A stranger looking down from some lofty height. And so now the fire comes, Lestat. Don't dare to look at Gabrielle or Louis, lest she turn it that way. Die first, like a coward, and then you don't have to see them die.

And the awful part is, you won't know who wins finally—whether or not she triumphs, or we all go down together. Just like not knowing what it was all about, or why, or what the hell the dream of the twins meant, or how this whole world came into being. You just won't ever

know.

I was weeping now and she was weeping and she was that tender fragile being again, the being I had held on Saint-Domingue, the one who needed me, but that weakness wasn't destroying her after all, though it would certainly destroy me.

"Lestat," she whispered as if in disbelief.

"I can't follow you," I said, my voice breaking. Slowly I rose to my feet. "We're not angels, Akasha; we are not gods. To be human, that's what most of us long for. It is the human which has become myth to us."

It was killing me to look at her. I thought of her blood flowing into me; of the powers she'd given me. Of what it had been like to travel with her through the clouds. I thought of the euphoria in the Haitian village when the women had come with their candles, singing their hymms.

"But that is what it will be, my beloved," she whispered. "Find your courage! It's there." The blood tears were coursing down her face. Her lip trembled and the smooth flesh of her forehead was creased with those perfectly straight lines of utter distress.

Then she straightened. She looked away from me: and her face went blank and beautifully smooth again. She looked past us, and I felt she was reaching for the strength to do it, and the others had better act fast. I wished for that—like sticking a dagger into her; they had better bring her down now, and I could feel the tears sliding down my face.

But something else was happening. There was a great soft musical sound from somewhere. Glass shattering, a great deal of glass. There was a sudden obvious excitement in Daniel. In Jesse. But the old ones stood frozen, listening. Again, glass breaking; someone entering by one of the many portals of this rambling house.

She took a step back. She quickened as if seeing a vision; and a loud hollow sound filled the stairwell beyond the open door. Someone down below in the passage.

She moved away from the table, towards the fireplace. She seemed for all the world afraid.

Was that possible? Did she know who was coming, and was it another old one? And was that what she feared—that more could accomplish what these few could not?

It was nothing so calculated finally; I knew it; she was being defeated inside. All courage was leaving her. It was the need, the loneliness, after all! It had begun with my resistance, and they had deepened it, and then I had dealt her yet another blow. And now she was transfixed by this loud, echoing, and impersonal noise. Yet she did know who this person was, I could sense it. And the others knew too.

The noise was growing louder. The visitor was coming up the stairs. The skylight and the old iron pylons reverberated with the shock of each heavy step.

"But who is it!" I said suddenly. I could stand it no longer. There was that image again, that image of the mother's body and the twins.

"Akasha!" Marius said. "Give us the time we ask for. Forswear the moment. That is enough!"

"Enough for what!" she cried sharply, almost savagely.

"For our lives, Akasha," he said. "For *all* our lives!"

I heard Khayman laugh softly, the one who hadn't spoken even once.

The steps had reached the landing.

Maharet stood at the edge of the open doorway, and Mael was beside her. I hadn't even seen them move.

Then I saw who and what it was. The woman I'd glimpsed moving through the jungles, clawing her way out of the earth, walking the long miles on the barren plain. The other twin of the dreams I'd never understood! And now she stood framed in the dim light from the stairwell, staring straight at the distant figure of Akasha, who stood some thirty feet away with her back to the glass wall and the blazing fire.

Oh, but the sight of this one. Gasps came from the others, even from the old ones, from Marius himself.

A thin layer of soil encased her all over, even the rippling shape of her long hair. Broken, peeling, stained by the rain even, the mud still clung to her, clung to her naked arms and bare feet as if she were made of it, made of earth itself. It made a mask of her face. And her eyes peered out of the mask, naked, rimmed in red. A rag covered her, a blanket filthy and torn, and tied with a hemp rope around her waist.

What impulse could make such a being cover herself, what tender human modesty had caused this living corpse to stop and make this

simple garment, what suffering remnant of the human heart?

Beside her, staring at her, Maharet appeared to weaken suddenly all over as if her slender body were going to drop.

"Mekare!" she whispered.

But the woman didn't see her or hear her; the woman stared at Akasha, the eyes gleaming with fearless animal cunning as Akasha moved back towards the table, putting the table between herself and this creature, Akasha's face hardening, her eyes full of undisguised hate.

"Mekare!" Maharet cried. She threw out her hands and tried to catch the woman by the shoulders and turn her around.

The woman's right hand went out, shoving Maharet backwards so that she was thrown yards across the room until she tumbled against the wall.

The great sheet of plate glass vibrated, but did not shatter. Gingerly Maharet touched it with her fingers; then with the fluid grace of a cat, she sprang up and into the arms of Eric, who was rushing to her aid.

Instantly he pulled her back towards the door. For the woman now struck the enormous table and sent it sliding northward, and then over on its side.

Gabrielle and Louis moved swiftly into the northwest corner, Santino and Armand the other way, towards Mael and Eric and Maharet.

Those of us on the other side merely backed away, except for Jesse, who had moved towards the door.

She stood beside Khayman and as I looked at him now I saw with amazement that he wore a thin, bitter smile.

"The curse, my Queen," he said, his voice rising sharply to fill the room.

The woman froze as she heard him behind her. But she did not turn around.

And Akasha, her face shimmering in the firelight, quavered visibly, and the tears flowed again.

"All against me, all of you!" she said. "Not a one who would come to my side!" She stared at me, even as the woman moved towards her.

The woman's muddy feet scraped the carpet, her mouth gaping and her hands only slightly poised, her arms still down at her sides. Yet it

was the perfect attitude of menace as she took one slow step after another.

But again Khayman spoke, bringing her suddenly to a halt.

In another language, he cried out, his voice gaining volume until it was a roar. And only the dimmest translation of it came clear to me.

"Queen of the Damned … hour of worst menace … I shall rise to stop you.…" I understood. It had been Mekare's—the woman's—prophecy and curse. And everyone here knew it, understood it. It had to do with that strange, inexplicable dream.

"Oh, no, my children!" Akasha screamed suddenly. "It is not finished!"

I could feel her collecting her powers; I could see it, her body tensing, breasts thrust forward, her hands rising as if reflexively, fingers curled.

The woman was struck by it, shoved backwards, but instantly resisted. And then she too straightened, her eyes widening, and she rushed forward so swiftly I couldn't follow it, her hands out for the Queen.

I saw her fingers, caked with mud, streaking towards Akasha; I saw Akasha's face as she was caught by her long black hair. I heard her scream. Then I saw her profile, as her head struck the western window and shattered it, the glass crashing down in great dagged shards.

A violent shock passed through me; I could neither breathe nor move. I was falling to the floor. I couldn't control my limbs. Akasha's headless body was sliding down the fractured glass wall, the shards still falling around it. Blood streamed down the broken glass behind her. And the woman held Akasha's severed head by the hair!

Akasha's black eyes blinked, widened. Her mouth opened as if to scream again.

And then the light was going out all around me; it was as if the fire had been extinguished, only it hadn't, and as I rolled over on the carpet, crying, my hand clawing at it involuntarily, I saw the distant flames through a dark rosy haze.

I tried to lift my weight. I couldn't. I could hear Marius calling to me, Marius silently calling only my name.

Then I was rising, just a little, and all my weight pressed against my aching arms and hands.

Akasha's eyes were fixed on me. Her head was lying there almost within my reach, and the body lay on its back, blood gushing from the stump of the neck. Suddenly the right arm quivered; it was lifted, then it flopped back down to the floor. Then it rose again, the hand dangling. It was reaching for the head!

I could help it! I could use the powers she'd given me to try to move it, to help it reach the head. And as I struggled to see in the dimming light, the body lurched, shivered, and flopped down closer to the head.

But the twins! They were beside the head and the body. Mekare, staring at the head dully, with those vacant red-rimmed eyes. And Maharet, as if with the last breath in her, kneeling now beside her sister, over the body of the Mother, as the room grew darker and colder, and Akasha's face began to grow pale and ghostly white as if all the light inside were going out.

I should have been afraid; I should have been in terror, the cold was creeping over me, and I could hear my own choking sobs. But the strangest elation overcame me; I realized suddenly what I was seeing:

"It's the dream," I said. Far away I could hear my own voice. "The twins and the body of the Mother, do you see it! The image from the dream!"

Blood spread out from Akasha's head into the weave of the carpet; Maharet was sinking down, her hands out flat, and Mekare too had weakened and bent down over the body, but it was still the same image, and I knew why I'd seen it now, I knew what it meant!

"The funeral feast!" Marius cried. "The heart and the brain, one of you—take them into yourself. It is the only chance."

Yes, that was it. And they knew! No one had to tell them. They knew!

That was the meaning! And they'd all seen it, and they all knew. Even as my eyes were closing, I realized it; and this lovely feeling deepened, this sense of completeness, of something finished at last. Of something known!

Then I was floating, floating in the ice cold darkness again as if I were in Akasha's arms, and we were rising into the stars.

A sharp crackling sound brought me back. Not dead yet, but dying. And where are those I love?

Fighting for life still, I tried to open my eyes; it seemed impossible.

But then I saw them in the thickening gloom—the two of them, their red hair catching the hazy glow of the fire; the one holding the bloody brain in her mud-covered fingers, and the other, the dripping heart. All but dead they were, their own eyes glassy, their limbs moving as if through water. And Akasha stared forward still, her mouth open, the blood gushing from her shattered skull. Mekare lifted the brain to her mouth; Maharet put the heart in her other hand; Mekare took them both into herself.

Darkness again; no firelight; no point of reference; no sensation except pain; pain all through the thing that I was which had no limbs, no eyes, no mouth to speak. Pain, throbbing, electrical; and no way to move to lessen it, to push it this way, or that way, or tense against it, or fade into it. Just pain.

Yet I was moving. I was thrashing about on the floor. Through the pain I could feel the carpet suddenly; I could feel my feet digging at it as if I were trying to climb a steep cliff. And then I heard the unmistakable sound of the fire near me; and I felt the wind gusting through the broken window, and I smelled all those soft sweet scents from the forest rushing into the room. A violent shock coursed through me, through every muscle and pore, my arms and legs flailing. Then still.

The pain was gone.

I lay there gasping, staring at the brilliant reflection of the fire in the glass ceiling, and feeling the air fill my lungs, and I realized I was crying again, brokenheartedly, like a child.

The twins knelt with their backs to us; and they had their arms around each other, and their heads were together, their hair mingling, as they caressed each other, gently, tenderly, as if talking through touch alone.

I couldn't muffle my sobs. I turned over and drew my arm up under my face and just wept.

Marius was near me. And so was Gabrielle. I wanted to take Gabrielle into my arms. I wanted to say all the things I knew I should say—that it was over and we had survived it, and it was finished—but I couldn't.

Then slowly I turned my head and looked at Akasha's face again, her face still intact, though all the dense, shining whiteness was gone,

and she was as pale, as translucent as glass! Even her eyes, her beautiful ink black eyes were becoming transparent, as if there were no pigment in them; it had all been the blood.

Her hair lay soft and silken beneath her cheek, and the dried blood was lustrous and ruby red.

I couldn't stop crying. I didn't want to. I started to say her name and it caught in my throat. It was as if I shouldn't do it. I never should have. I never should have gone up those marble steps and kissed her face in the shrine.

They were all coming to life again, the others. Armand was holding Daniel and Louis, who were both groggy and unable yet to stand; and Khayman had come forward with Jesse beside him, and the others were all right too. Pandora, trembling, her mouth twisted with her crying, stood far apart, hugging herself as if she were cold.

And the twins turned around and stood up now, Maharet's arm around Mekare. And Mekare stared forward, expressionless, uncomprehending, the living statue; and Maharet said:

"Behold. The Queen of the Damned."

PART V

… WORLD WITHOUT END, AMEN

Some things lighten nightfall
and make a Rembrandt of a grief.
But mostly the swiftness of time
is a joke; on us. The flame-moth
is unable to laugh. What luck.
The myths are dead.
….

STAN RICE
"Poem on Crawling into Bed: Bitterness"
Body of Work (1983)

Miami.

A vampire's city—hot, teeming, and embracingly beautiful. Melting pot, marketplace, playground. Where the desperate and the greedy are locked in subversive commerce, and the sky belongs to everyone, and the beach goes on forever; and the lights outshine the heavens, and the sea is as warm as blood.

Miami. The happy hunting ground of the devil.

That's why we are here, in Armand's large, graceful white villa on the Night Island, surrounded by every conceivable luxury, and the wide open southern night.

Out there, across the water, Miami beckons; victims just waiting: the pimps, the thieves, the dope kings, and the killers. The nameless ones; so many who are almost as bad as I am, but not quite.

Armand had gone over at sunset with Marius; and they were back now, Armand playing chess with Santino in the drawing room, Marius reading as he did constantly, in the leather chair by the window over the beach.

Gabrielle had not appeared yet this evening; since Jesse left, she was frequently alone.

Khayman sat in the downstairs study talking with Daniel now, Daniel who liked to let the hunger build, Daniel who wanted to know all about what it had been like in ancient Miletus, and Athens, and Troy. Oh, don't forget Troy. I myself was vaguely intrigued by the idea of Troy.

I liked Daniel. Daniel who might go with me later if I asked him; if I could bring myself to leave this island, which I have done only once since I arrived. Daniel who still laughed at the path the moon made over the water, or the warm spray in his face. For Daniel, all of it—her death even—had been spectacle. But he cannot be blamed for that.

Pandora almost never moved from the television screen. Marius had brought her the stylish modern garments she wore; satin shirt, boots to the knee, cleaving velvet skirt. He'd put the bracelets on her arms, and the rings on her fingers, and each evening he brushed her long brown hair. Sometimes he presented her with little gifts of perfume. If he did not open them for her, they lay on the table untouched. She stared the

way Armand did at the endless progression of video movies, only now and then breaking off to go to the piano in the music room and play softly for a little while.

I liked her playing; rather like the Art of the Fugue, her seamless variations. But she worried me; the others didn't. The others had all recovered from what had happened, more quickly than I had ever imagined they could. She'd been damaged in some crucial way before it all began.

Yet she liked it here; I knew she did. How could she not like it? Even though she never listened to a word that Marius said.

We all liked it. Even Gabrielle.

White rooms filled with gorgeous Persian carpets and endlessly intriguing paintings—Matisse, Monet, Picasso, Giotto, Géricault. One could spend a century merely looking at the paintings; Armand was constantly changing them, shifting their positions, bringing up some new treasure from the cellar, slipping in little sketches here and there.

Jesse had loved it here too, though she was gone now, to join Maharet in Rangoon.

She had come here into my study and told me her side of it very directly, asking me to change the names she'd used and to leave out the Talamasca altogether, which of course I wouldn't do. I'd sat silently, scanning her mind as she talked, for all the little things she was leaving out. Then I'd poured it into the computer, while she sat watching, thinking, staring at the dark gray velvet curtains, and the Venetian clock; and the cool colors of the Morandi on the wall.

I think she knew I wouldn't do what she told me to do. She also knew it wouldn't matter. People weren't likely to believe in the Talamasca any more than they would ever believe in us. That is, unless David Talbot or Aaron Lightner came to call on them the way that Aaron had called on Jesse.

As for the Great Family, well, it wasn't likely that any of them would think it more than a fiction, with a touch here and there of truth; that is, if they ever happened to pick up the book.

That's what everybody had thought of *Interview with the Vampire* and my autobiography, and they would think it about *The Queen of the Damned* too.

And that's how it should be. Even I agree with that now. Maharet

was right. No room for us; no room for God or the Devil; it should be metaphor—the supernatural—whether it's High Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral, or Faust selling his soul in an opera, or a rock star pretending to be the Vampire Lestat.

Nobody knew where Maharet had taken Mekare. Even Eric probably didn't know now either, though he'd left with them, promising to meet Jesse in Rangoon.

Before she left the Sonoma compound, Maharet had startled me with a little whisper: "Get it straight when you tell it—the Legend of the Twins."

That was permission, wasn't it? Or cosmic indifference, I'm not sure which. I'd said nothing about the book to anyone; I'd only brooded on it in those long painful hours when I couldn't really think, except in terms of chapters: an ordering; a road map through the mystery; a chronicle of seduction and pain.

Maharet had looked worldly yet mysterious that last evening, coming to find me in the forest, garmented in black and wearing her fashionable paint, as she called it—the skillful cosmetic mask that made her into an alluring mortal woman who could move with only admiring glances through the real world. What a tiny waist she had, and such long hands, even more graceful, it seemed, for the tight black kid gloves she wore. So carefully she had stepped through the ferns and past the tender saplings, when she might have pushed the trees themselves out of her path.

She'd been to San Francisco with Jessica and Gabrielle; they had walked past houses with cheerful lights; on clean narrow pavements; where people lived, she'd said. How crisp her speech had been, how effortlessly contemporary; not like the timeless woman I had first encountered in the mountaintop room.

And why was I alone again, she'd asked, sitting by myself near the little creek that ran through the thick of the redwoods? Why would I not talk to the others, even a little? Did I know how protective and fearful they were?

They are still asking me those questions now.

Even Gabrielle, who in the main never bothers with questions, never says much of anything. They want to know when I'm going to recover,

when I'm going to talk about what happened, when I'm going to stop writing all through the night.

Maharet had said that we would see her again very soon. In the spring perhaps we should come to her house in Burma. Or maybe she'd surprise us one evening. But the point was, we were never to be isolated from one another; we had ways to find each other, no matter where we might roam.

Yes, on that vital point at least everyone had agreed. Even Gabrielle, the loner, the wanderer, had agreed.

Nobody wanted to be lost in time again.

And Mekare? Would we see her again? Would she ever sit with us around a table? Speak to us with a language of gestures and signs?

I had laid eyes upon her only once after that terrible night. And it had been entirely unexpected, as I came through the forest, back to the compound, in the soft purple light just before dawn.

There had been a mist crawling over the earth, thinning above the ferns and the few scattered winter wild flowers, and then paling utterly into phosphorescence as it rose among the giant trees.

And the twins had come through the mist together, walking down into the creek bed to make their way along the stones, arms locked around each other, Mekare in a long wool gown as beautiful as her sister's, her hair brushed and shining as it hung down around her shoulders and over her breasts.

It seemed Maharet had been speaking softly in Mekare's ear. And it was Mekare who stopped to look at me, her green eyes wide and her face for one moment unaccountably frightening in its blankness, as I'd felt my grief like a scorching wind on my heart.

I'd stood entranced looking at her, at both of them, the pain in me suffocating, as if my lungs were being dried up.

I don't know what my thoughts were; only that the pain seemed unbearable. And that Maharet had made some little tender motion to me of greeting, and that I should go my way. Morning coming. The forest was waking all around us. Our precious moments slipping by. My pain had been finally loosened, like a moan coming out of me, and I'd let it go as I'd turned away.

I'd glanced back once to see the two figures moving eastward, down the rippling silver creek bed, swallowed as it were by the roaring

music of the water that followed its relentless path through the scattered rocks.

The old image of the dream had faded just a little. And when I think of them now, I think not of the funeral feasts but of that moment, the two sylphs in the forest, only nights before Maharet left the Sonoma compound taking Mekare away.

I was glad when they were gone because it meant that we would be going. And I did not care if I ever saw the Sonoma compound again. My sojourn there had been agony, though the first few nights after the catastrophe had been the worst.

How quickly the bruised silence of the others had given way to endless analysis, as they strained to interpret what they'd seen and felt. How had the thing been transferred exactly? Had it abandoned the tissues of the brain as they disintegrated, racing through Mekare's bloodstream until it found the like organ in her? Had the heart mattered at all?

Molecular, nucleonic; solitons; protoplasm; glittering modern words! Come now, we are vampires! We thrive on the blood of the living; we kill; and we love it. Whether we need to do it or not.

I couldn't bear to listen to them; I couldn't bear their silent yet obsessive curiosity: *What was it like with her? What did you do in those few nights?* I couldn't get away from them either; I certainly hadn't the will to leave altogether; I trembled when I was with them; trembled when I was apart.

The forest wasn't deep enough for me; I'd roamed for miles through the mammoth redwoods, and then through scrub oaks and open fields and into dank impassable woods again. No getting away from their voices: Louis confessing how he had lost consciousness during those awful moments; Daniel saying that he had heard our voices, yet seen nothing; Jesse, in Khayman's arms, had witnessed it all.

How often they had pondered the irony—that Mekare had brought down her enemy with a human gesture; that, knowing nothing of invisible powers, she had struck out as any human might, but with inhuman speed and strength.

Had any of *her* survived in Mekare? That was what I kept wondering. Forget the "poetry of science" as Maharet had called it. That was what I wanted to know. Or had her soul been released at last

when the brain was torn loose?

Sometimes in the dark, in the honeycombed cellar with its tin-plated walls and its countless impersonal chambers, I'd wake, certain that she was right there beside me, no more than an inch from my face; I'd feel her hair again; her arm around me; I'd see the black glimmer of her eye. I'd grope in the darkness; nothing but the damp brick walls.

Then I'd lie there and think of poor little Baby Jenks, as *she* had shown her to me, spiraling upwards; I'd see the varicolored lights enveloping Baby Jenks as she looked down on the earth for the last time. How could Baby Jenks, the poor biker child, have invented such a vision? Maybe we do go home, finally.

How can we know?

And so we remain immortal; we remain frightened; we remain anchored to what we can control. It all starts again; the wheel turns; we are the vampires; because there are no others; the new coven is formed.

Like a gypsy caravan we left the Sonoma compound, a parade of shining black cars streaking through the American night at lethal speed on immaculate roads. It was on that long ride that they told me everything—spontaneously and sometimes unwittingly as they conversed with one another. Like a mosaic it came together, all that had gone before. Even when I dozed against the blue velvet upholstery, I heard them, saw what they had seen.

Down to the swamplands of south Florida; down to the great decadent city of Miami, parody of both heaven and hell.

Immediately I locked myself in this little suite of tastefully appointed rooms; couches, carpet, the pale pastel paintings of Piero della Francesca; computer on the table; the music of Vivaldi pouring from tiny speakers hidden in the papered walls. Private stairway to the cellar, where in the steel-lined crypt the coffin waited: black lacquer; brass handles; a match and the stub of a candle; lining stitched with white lace.

Blood lust; how it hurt; but you don't need it; yet you can't resist it; and it's going to be like this forever; you never get rid of it; you want it even more than before.

When I wasn't writing, I lay on the gray brocade divan, watching

the palm fronds move in the breeze from the terrace, listening to their voices below.

Louis begging Jesse politely to describe one more time the apparition of Claudia. And Jesse's voice, solicitous, confidential: "But Louis, it wasn't real."

Gabrielle missed Jesse now that she was gone; Jesse and Gabrielle had walked on the beach for hours. It seemed not a word passed between them; but then, how could I be sure?

Gabrielle was doing more and more little things to make me happy: wearing her hair brushed free because she knew I loved it; coming up to my room before she vanished with the morning. Now and then she'd look at me, probing, anxious.

"You want to leave here, don't you?" I'd ask fearfully; or something like it.

"No," she said. "I like it here. It suits me." When she got restless now she went to the islands, which weren't so very far away. She rather liked the islands. But that wasn't what she wanted to talk about. There was always something else on her mind. Once she had almost voiced it. "But tell me …" And then she'd stopped.

"Did I love her?" I asked. "Is that what you want to know? Yes, I loved her."

And I still couldn't say her name.

Mael came and went.

Gone for a week; here again tonight—downstairs—trying to draw Khayman into conversation; Khayman, who fascinated everybody. First Brood. All that power. And to think, he had walked the streets of Troy.

The sight of him was continuously startling, if that is not a contradiction in terms.

He went to great lengths to appear human. In a warm place like this, where heavy garments are conspicuous, it isn't an easy thing. Sometimes he covered himself with a darkening pigment—burnt sienna mixed with a little scented oil. It seemed a crime to do so, to mar the beauty; but how else could he slice through the human crowd like a greased knife?

Now and then he knocked on my door. "Are you ever coming out?"

he would ask. He'd look at the stack of pages beside the computer; the black letters: *The Queen of the Damned*. He'd stand there, letting me search his mind for all the little fragments, half-remembered moments; he didn't care. I seemed to puzzle him, but why I couldn't imagine. What did he want from me? Then he'd smile that shocking saintly smile.

Sometimes he took the boat out—Armand's black racer—and he let it drift in the Gulf as he lay under the stars. Once Gabrielle went with him, and I was tempted to listen to them, over all that distance, their voices so private and intimate. But I hadn't done it. Just didn't seem fair.

Sometimes he said he feared the memory loss; that it would come suddenly, and he wouldn't be able to find his way home to us. But then it had come in the past on account of pain, and he was so happy. He wanted us to know it; so happy to be with us all.

It seemed they'd reached some kind of agreement down there—that no matter where they went, they would always come back. This would be the coven house, the sanctuary; never would it be as it had been before.

They were settling a lot of things. Nobody was to make any others, and nobody was to write any more books, though of course they knew that was exactly what I was doing, gleaning from them silently everything that I could; and that I didn't intend to obey any rules imposed on me by anybody, and that I never had.

They were relieved that the Vampire Lestat had died in the pages of the newspapers; that the debacle of the concert had been forgotten. No provable fatalities, no true injuries; everybody bought off handsomely; the band, receiving my share of everything, was touring again under its old name.

And the riots—the brief era of miracles—they too had been forgotten, though they might never be satisfactorily explained.

No, no more revelations, disruptions, interventions; that was their collective vow; and please cover up the kill.

They kept impressing that upon the delirious Daniel, that even in a great festering urban wilderness like Miami, one could not be too careful with the remnants of the meal.

Ah, Miami. I could hear it again, the low roar of so many desperate

humans; the churning of all those machines both great and small. Earlier I had let its voices sweep over me, as I'd lain stock-still on the divan. It was not impossible for me to direct this power; to sift and focus, and amplify an entire chorus of different sounds. Yet I drew back from it, unable yet to really use it with conviction, just as I couldn't use my new strength.

Ah, but I loved being near to this city. Loved its sleaze and glamour; the old ramshackle hotels and spangled high rises; its sultry winds; its flagrant decay. I listened now to that never ending urban music, a low throbbing hum.

"Why don't you go there, then?"

Marius.

I looked up from the computer. Slowly, just to needle him a little, though he was the most patient of immortal men.

He stood against the frame of the terrace door, with his arms folded, one ankle crossed over the other. The lights out there behind him. In the ancient world had there been anything like it? The spectacle of an electrified city, dense with towers glowing like narrow grids in an old gas fire?

He'd clipped his hair short; he wore plain yet elegant twentieth-century clothes: gray silk blazer and pants, and the red this time, for there was always red, was the dark turtleneck shirt.

"I want you to put the book aside and come join us," he said. "You've been locked in here for over a month."

"I go out now and then," I said. I liked looking at him, at the neon blue of his eyes.

"This book," he said. "What's the purpose of it? Would you tell me that much?"

I didn't answer. He pushed a little harder, tactful though the tone was.

"Wasn't it enough, the songs and the autobiography?"

I tried to decide what made him look so amiable really. Maybe it was the tiny lines that still came to life around his eyes, the little crinkling of flesh that came and went as he spoke.

Big wide eyes like Khayman's had a stunning effect.

I looked back at the computer screen. Electronic image of language. Almost finished. And they all knew about it; they'd known all along.

That's why they volunteered so much information: knocking, coming in, talking, then going away.

"So why talk about it?" I asked. "I want to make the record of what happened. You knew that when you told me what it had been like for you."

"Yes, but for whom is this record being made?"

I thought of all the fans again in the auditorium; the visibility; and then those ghastly moments, at her side, in the villages, when I'd been a god without a name. I was cold suddenly in spite of the caressing warmth, the breeze that came in from the water. Had she been right when she called us selfish, greedy? When she'd said it was self-serving of us to want the world to remain the same?

"You know the answer to that question," he said. He drew a little closer. He put his hand on the back of my chair.

"It was a foolish dream, wasn't it?" I asked. It hurt to say it. "It could never have been realized, not even if we had proclaimed her the goddess and obeyed her every command."

"It was madness," he answered. "They would have stopped her; destroyed her; more quickly than she ever dreamed."

Silence.

"The world would not have *wanted* her," he added. "That's what she could never comprehend."

"I think in the end she knew it; no place for her; no way for her to have value and be the thing that she was. She knew it when she looked into our eyes and saw the wall there which she could never breach. She'd been so careful with her visitations, choosing places as primitive and changeless as she was herself."

He nodded. "As I said, you know the answers to your questions. So why do you continue to ask them? Why do you lock yourself here with your grief?"

I didn't say anything. I saw her eyes again. *Why can't you believe in me!*

"Have you forgiven me for all of it?" I asked suddenly.

"You weren't to blame," he said. "She was waiting, listening. Sooner or later something would have stirred the will in her. The danger was always there. It was as much an accident as the beginning, really, that she woke when she did." He sighed. He sounded bitter

again, the way he'd been in the first nights after, when he had grieved too. "I always knew the danger," he murmured. "Maybe I wanted to believe she was a goddess; until she woke. Until she spoke to me. Until she smiled."

He was off again, thinking of the moment before the ice had fallen and pinned him helplessly for so long.

He moved away, slowly, indecisively, and then went out onto the terrace and looked down at the beach. Such a casual way of moving. Had the ancient ones rested their elbows like that on stone railings?

I got up and went after him. I looked across the great divide of black water. At the shimmering reflection of the skyline. I looked at him.

"Do you know what it's like, not to carry that burden?" he whispered. "To know now for the first time that I am free?"

I didn't answer. But I could most certainly feel it. Yet I was afraid for him, afraid perhaps that it had been the anchor, as the Great Family was the anchor for Maharet.

"No," he said quickly, shaking his head. "It's as if a curse has been removed. I wake; I think I must go down to the shrine; I must burn the incense; bring the flowers; I must stand before them and speak to them; and try to comfort them if they are suffering inside. Then I realize that they're gone. It's over, finished. I'm free to go wherever I would go and do whatever I would like." He paused, reflecting, looking at the lights again. Then, "What about you? Why aren't you free too? I wish I understood you."

"You do. You always have," I said. I shrugged.

"You're burning with dissatisfaction. And we can't comfort you, can we? It's *their* love you want." He made a little gesture towards the city.

"You comfort me," I answered. "All of you. I couldn't think of leaving you, not for very long, anyway. But you know, when I was on that stage in San Francisco …" I didn't finish. What was the use of saying it, if he didn't know. It had been everything I'd ever wanted it to be until the great whirlwind had descended and carried me away.

"Even though they never believed you?" he asked. "They thought you were merely a clever performer? An author with a hook, as they say?"

"They knew my name!" I answered. "It was *my* voice they heard.

They saw *me* up there above the footlights."

He nodded. "And so the book, *The Queen of the Damned*," he said.

No answer.

"Come down with us. Let us try to keep you company. Talk to us about what took place."

"You saw what took place."

I felt a little confusion suddenly; a curiosity in him that he was reluctant to reveal. He was still looking at me.

I thought of Gabrielle, the way she would start to ask me questions and stop. Then I realized. Why, I'd been a fool not to see it before. They wanted to know what powers she'd given me; they wanted to know how much her blood had affected me; and all this time I'd kept those secrets locked inside. I kept them locked there now. Along with the image of those dead bodies strewn throughout Azim's temple; along with the memory of the ecstasy I'd felt when I'd slain every man in my path. And along with yet another awful and unforgettable moment: her death, when I had failed to use the gifts to help her!

And now it started again, the obsession with the end. Had she seen me lying there so close to her? Had she known of my refusal to aid her? Or had her soul risen when the first blow was struck?

Marius looked out over the water, at the tiny boats speeding towards the harbor to the south. He was thinking of how many centuries it had taken him to acquire the powers he now possessed. Infusions of her blood alone had not done it. Only after a thousand years had he been able to rise towards the clouds as if he were one of them, unfettered, unafraid. He was thinking of how such things vary from one immortal to another; how no one knows what power is locked inside another; no one knows perhaps what power is locked within oneself.

All very polite; but I could not confide in him or anyone just yet.

"Look," I said. "Let me mourn just a little while more. Let me create my dark images here, and have the written words for friends. Then later I'll come to you; I'll join you all. Maybe I'll obey the rules. Some of them, anyway, who knows? What are you going to do if I don't, by the way, and haven't I asked you this before?"

He was clearly startled.

"You are the damnedest creature!" he whispered. "You make me

think of the old story about Alexander the Great. He wept when there were no more worlds to conquer. Will you weep when there are no more rules to break?"

"Ah, but there are always rules to break."

He laughed under his breath. "Burn the book."

"No."

We looked at each other for a moment; then I embraced him, tightly and warmly, and I smiled. I didn't even know why I'd done it, except that he was so patient and so earnest, and there had been some profound change in him as there had been in all of us, but with him it was dark and hurtful as it had been with me.

It had to do with the whole struggle of good and evil which he understood exactly the way I did, because he was the one who had taught me to understand it years ago. He was the one who had told me how we must wrestle forever with those questions, how the simple solution was not what we wanted, but what we must always fear.

I'd embraced him also because I loved him and wanted to be near to him, and I didn't want him to leave just now, angry or disappointed in me.

"You will obey the rules, won't you?" he asked suddenly. Mixture of menace and sarcasm. And maybe a little affection, too.

"Of course!" Again I shrugged. "What are they, by the way? I've forgotten. Oh, we don't make any new vampires; we do not wander off without a trace; we cover up the kill."

"You are an imp, Lestat, you know it? A brat."

"Let me ask you a question," I said. I made my hand into a fist and touched him lightly on the arm. "That painting of yours, *The Temptation of Amadeo,* the one in the Talamasca crypt …"

"Yes?"

"Wouldn't you like to have it back?"

"Ye gods, no. It's a dreary thing, really. My black period, you might say. But I do wish they'd take it out of the damned cellar. You know, hang it in the front hall? Some decent place."

I laughed.

Suddenly he became serious. Suspicious.

"Lestat!" he said sharply.

"Yes, Marius."

"You leave the Talamasca alone!"

"Of course!" Another shrug. Another smile. Why not?

"I mean it, Lestat. I'm quite serious. Do not meddle with the Talamasca. Do we understand each other, you and I?"

"Marius, you are remarkably easy to understand. Did you hear that? The clock's striking midnight. I always take my little walk around the Night Island now. Do you want to come?"

I didn't wait for him to answer. I heard him give one of those lovely forbearing sighs of his as I went out the door.

Midnight. The Night Island sang. I walked through the crowded galleria. Denim jacket, white T-shirt, face half covered by giant dark glasses; hands shoved into the pockets of my jeans. I watched the hungry shoppers dipping into the open doorways, perusing stacks of shining luggage, silk shirts in plastic, a sleek black manikin swathed in mink.

Beside the shimmering fountain, with its dancing plumes of myriad droplets, an old woman sat curled on a bench, paper cup of steaming coffee in her trembling hand. Hard for her to raise it to her lips; when I smiled as I passed she said in a quavering voice: "When you're old you don't need sleep anymore."

A soft whoozy music gushed out of the cocktail lounge. The young toughs prowled the video emporium; blood lust! The raucous zip and flash of the arcade died as I turned my head away. Through the door of the French restaurant I caught the swift beguiling movement of a woman lifting a glass of champagne; muted laughter. The theater was full of black and white giants speaking French.

A young woman passed me; dark skin, voluptuous hips, little pout of a mouth. The blood lust crested. I walked on, forcing it back into its cage. *Do not need the blood. Strong now as the old ones.* But I could taste it; I glanced back at her, saw her seated on the stone bench, naked knees jutting from her tight little skirt; eyes fixed on me.

Oh, Marius was right about it; right about everything. I was burning with dissatisfaction; burning with loneliness. I want to pull her up off that bench: *Do you know what I am!* No, don't settle for the other; don't lure her out of here, don't do it; don't take her down on the white sands, far beyond the lights of the galleria, where the rocks are

dangerous and the waves are breaking violently in the little cove.

I thought of what *she* had said to us, about our selfishness, our greed! Taste of blood on my tongue. Someone's going to die if I linger here.…

End of the corridor. I put my key into the steel door between the shop that sold Chinese rugs made by little girls and the tobacconist who slept now among the Dutch pipes, his magazine over his face.

Silent hallway into the bowels of the villa.

One of them was playing the piano. I listened for a long moment. Pandora, and the music as always had a dark sweet luster, but it was more than ever like an endless beginning—a theme ever building to a climax which would never come.

I went up the stairs and into the living room. Ah, you can tell this is a vampire house; who else could live by starlight and the glow of a few scattered candles? Luster of marble and velvet. Shock of Miami out there where the lights never go out.

Armand still playing chess with Khayman and losing. Daniel lay under the earphones listening to Bach, now and then glancing to the black and white board to see if a piece had been moved.

On the terrace, looking out over the water, her thumbs hooked in her back pockets, Gabrielle stood. Alone. I went out to her, kissed her cheek, and looked into her eyes; and when I finally won the begrudging little smile I needed, then I turned and wandered back into the house.

Marius in the black leather chair reading the newspaper, folding it as a gentleman might in a private club.

"Louis is gone," he said, without looking up from the paper.

"What do you mean, gone?"

"To New Orleans," Armand said without looking up from the chessboard. "To that flat you had there. The one where Jesse saw Claudia."

"The plane's waiting," Marius said, eyes still on the paper.

"My man can drive you down to the landing strip," Armand said with his eyes still on the game.

"What is this? Why are you two being so helpful? Why should I go get Louis?"

"I think you should bring him back," Marius said. "It's no good his

being in that old flat in New Orleans."

"I think you should get out and do something," Armand said. "You've been holed up here too long."

"Ah, I can see what this coven is going to be like, advice from all sides, and everyone watching everyone else out of the corner of an eye. Why did you ever let Louis go off to New Orleans anyway? Couldn't you have stopped him?"

I landed in New Orleans at two o'clock. Left the limousine at Jackson Square.

So clean it all was; with the new flagstones, and the chains on the gates, imagine, so the derelicts couldn't sleep on the grass in the square the way they'd done for two hundred years. And the tourists crowding the Café du Monde where the riverfront taverns had been; those lovely nasty places where the hunting was irresistible and the women were as tough as the men.

But I loved it now; always would love it. The colors were somehow the same. And even in this blasted cold of January, it had the old tropical feel to it; something to do with the flatness of the pavements; the low buildings; the sky that was always in motion; and the slanting roofs that were gleaming now with a bit of icy rain.

I walked slowly away from the river, letting the memories rise as if from the pavements; hearing the hard, brassy music of the Rue Bourbon, and then turning into the quiet wet darkness of the Rue Royale.

How many times had I taken this route in the old days, coming back from the riverfront or the opera house, or the theater, and stopping here on this very spot to put my key in the carriage gate?

Ah, the house in which I'd lived the span of a human lifetime, the house in which I'd almost died twice.

Someone up there in the old flat. Someone who walks softly yet makes the boards creak.

The little downstairs shop was neat and dark behind its barred windows; porcelain knickknacks, dolls, lace fans. I looked up at the balcony with its wrought-iron railings; I could picture Claudia there, on tiptoe, looking down at me, little fingers knotted on the rail. Golden hair spilling down over her shoulders, long streak of violet

ribbon. My little immortal six-year-old beauty; *Lestat, where have you been?*

And that's what he was doing, wasn't he? Picturing things like that.

It was dead quiet; that is, if you didn't hear the televisions chattering behind the green shutters and the old vine-covered walls; and the raucous noise from Bourbon; a man and a woman fighting deep within a house on the other side of the street.

But no one about; only the shining pavements; and the shut-up shops; and the big clumsy cars parked over the curb, the rain falling soundlessly on their curved roofs.

No one to see me as I walked away and then turned and made the quick feline leap, in the old manner, to the balcony and came down silently on the boards. I peered through the dirty glass of the French doors.

Empty; scarred walls; the way Jesse had left them. A board nailed up here, as though someone had tried once to break in and had been found out; smell of burnt timbers in there after all these years.

I pulled down the board silently; but now there was the lock on the other side. Could I use the new power? Could I make it open? Why did it hurt so much to do it—to think of her, to think that, in that last flickering moment, I could have helped her; I could have helped head and body to come together again; even though she had meant to destroy me; even though she had not called my name.

I looked at the little lock. *Turn, open.* And with tears rising, I heard the metal creak, and saw the latch move. Little spasm in the brain as I kept my eye on it; and then the old door popped from its warped frame, hinges groaning, as if a draft inside had pushed it out.

He was in the hallway, looking through Claudia's door.

The coat was perhaps a little shorter, a little less full than those old frock coats had been; but he looked so very nearly like himself in the old century that it made the ache in me deepen unbearably. For a moment I couldn't move. He might as well have been a ghost there: his black hair full and disheveled as it had always been in the old days, and his green eyes full of melancholy wonder, and his arms rather limp at his sides.

Surely he hadn't contrived to fit so perfectly into the old context. Yet he *was* a ghost in this flat, where Jesse had been so frightened;

where she'd caught in chilling glimpses the old atmosphere I'd never forget.

Sixty years here, the unholy family. Sixty years Louis, Claudia, Lestat.

Could I hear the harpsichord if I tried?—Claudia playing her Haydn; and the birds singing because the sound always excited them; and the collected music vibrating in the crystal baubles that hung from the painted glass shades of the oil lamps, and in the wind chimes even that hung in the rear doorway before the curving iron stairs.

Claudia. A face for a locket; or a small oval portrait done on porcelain and kept with a curl of her golden hair in a drawer. But how she would have hated such an image, such an unkind image.

Claudia who sank her knife into my heart and twisted it, and watched as the blood poured down my shirt. *Die, Father. I'll put you in your coffin forever.*

I will kill you first, my prince.

I saw the little mortal child, lying there in the soiled covers; smell of sickness. I saw the black-eyed Queen, motionless on her throne. And I had kissed them both, the Sleeping Beauties! *Claudia, Claudia, come round now, Claudia … That's it, dear, you must drink it to get well.*

Akasha!

Someone was shaking me. "Lestat," he said.

Confusion.

"Ah, Louis, forgive me." The dark neglected hallway. I shuddered. "I came here because I was so concerned … about you."

"No need," he said considerately. "It was just a little pilgrimage I had to make."

I touched his face with my fingers; so warm from the kill.

"She's not here, Louis," I said. "It was something Jesse imagined."

"Yes, so it seems," he said.

"We live forever; but they don't come back."

He studied me for a long moment; then he nodded. "Come on," he said.

We walked down the long hallway together; no, I did not like it; I did not want to be here. It was haunted; but real hauntings have nothing to do with ghosts finally; they have to do with the menace of memory; that had been my room in there; my room.

He was struggling with the back door, trying to make the old weathered frame behave. I gestured for him to go out on the porch and then I gave it the shove it needed. Locked up tight.

So sad to see the overgrown courtyard; the fountain ruined; the old brick kitchen crumbling, and the bricks becoming earth again.

"I'll fix it all for you if you want," I told him. "You know, make it like it was before."

"Not important now," he said. "Will you come with me, walk with me a little?"

We went down the covered carriageway together, water rushing through the little gutter. I glanced back once. Saw her standing there in her white dress with the blue sash. Only she wasn't looking at me. I was dead, she thought, wrapped in the sheet that Louis thrust into the carriage; she was taking my remains away to bury me; yet there she stood, and our eyes met.

I felt him tugging on me. "No good to stay here any longer," he said.

I watched him close the gate up properly; and then his eyes moved sluggishly over the windows again, the balconies, and the high dormers above. Was he saying farewell, finally? Maybe not.

We went together up to the Rue Ste. Anne, and away from the river, not speaking, just walking, the way we'd done so many times back then. The cold was biting at him a little, biting at his hands. He didn't like to put his hands in his pockets the way men did today. He didn't think it a graceful thing to do.

The rain had softened into a mist.

Finally, he said: "You gave me a little fright; I didn't think you were real when I first saw you in the hallway; you didn't answer when I said your name."

"And where are we going now?" I asked. I buttoned up my denim jacket. Not because I suffered from cold anymore; but because being warm felt good.

"Just one last place, and then wherever you wish. Back to the coven house, I should think. We don't have much time. Or maybe you can leave me to my meanderings, and I'll be back in a couple of nights."

"Can't we meander together?"

"Yes," he said eagerly.

What in God's name did I want? We walked beneath the old porches, past the old solid green shutters; past the walls of peeling plaster and naked brick, and through the garish light of the Rue Bourbon and then I saw the St. Louis Cemetery up ahead, with its thick whitewashed walls.

What did I want? Why was my soul aching still when all the rest of them had struck some balance? Even Louis had struck a balance, and we had each other, as Marius had said.

I was happy to be with him, happy to be walking these old streets; but why wasn't it enough?

Another gate now to be opened; I watched him break the lock with his fingers. And then we went into the little city of white graves with their peaked roofs and urns and doorways of marble, and the high grass crunching under our boots. The rain made every surface luminous; the lights of the city gave a pearl gleam to the clouds traveling silently over our heads.

I tried to find the stars. But I couldn't. When I looked down again, I saw Claudia; I felt her hand touch mine.

Then I looked at Louis again, and saw his eyes catch the dim and distant light and I winced. I touched his face again, the cheekbones, the arch beneath the black eyebrow. What a finely made thing he was.

"Blessed darkness!" I said suddenly. "Blessed darkness has come again."

"Yes," he said sadly, "and we rule in it as we have always done."

Wasn't that enough?

He took my hand—what did it feel like now?—and led me down the narrow corridor between the oldest, the most venerable tombs; tombs that went back to the oldest time of the colony, when he and I had roamed the swamps together, the swamps that threatened to swallow everything, and I had fed on the blood of roustabouts and cutthroat thieves.

His tomb. I realized I was looking at his name engraved on the marble in a great slanting old-fashioned script.

Louis de Pointe du Lac
1766–1794

He rested against the tomb behind him, another one of those little temples, like his own, with a peristyle roof.

"I only wanted to see it again," he said. He reached out and touched the writing with his finger.

It had faded only slightly from the weather wearing at the surface of the stone. The dust and grime had made it all the clearer, darkening each letter and numeral. Was he thinking of what the world had been in those years?

I thought of her dreams, her garden of peace on earth, with flowers springing from the blood-soaked soil.

"Now we can go home," he said.

Home. I smiled. I reached out and touched the graves on either side of me; I looked up again at the soft glow of the city lights against the ruffled clouds.

"You're not going to leave us, are you?" he asked suddenly, voice sharpened with distress.

"No," I said. I wished I could speak of it, all the things that were in the book. "You know, we were lovers, she and I, as surely as a mortal man and woman ever were."

"Of course, I know," he said.

I smiled. I kissed him suddenly, thrilled by the warmth of him, the soft pliant feel of his near human skin. God, how I hated the whiteness of my fingers touching him, fingers that could have crushed him now effortlessly. I wondered if he even guessed.

There was so much I wanted to say to him, to ask him. Yet I couldn't find the words really, or a way to begin. He had always had so many questions; and now he had his answers, more answers perhaps than he could ever have wanted; and what had this done to his soul? Stupidly I stared at him. How perfect he seemed to me as he stood there waiting with such kindness and such patience. And then, like a fool, I came out with it.

"Do you love me now?" I asked.

He smiled; oh, it was excruciating to see his face soften and brighten simultaneously when he smiled. "Yes," he said.

"Want to go on a little adventure?" My heart was thudding suddenly. It would be so grand if—"Want to break the new rules?"

"What in the world do you mean?" he whispered.

I started laughing, in a low feverish fashion; it felt so good. Laughing and watching the subtle little changes in his face. I really had him worried now. And the truth was, I didn't know if I could do it. Without her. What if I plunged like Icarus—?

"Oh, come now, Louis," I said. "Just a little adventure. I promise, I have no designs this time on Western civilization, or even on the attentions of two million rock music fans. I was thinking of something small, really. Something, well, a little mischievous. And rather elegant. I mean, I've been awfully good for the last two months, don't you think?"

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"Are you with me or not?"

He gave another little shake of his head again. But it wasn't a No. He was pondering. He ran his fingers back through his hair. Such fine black hair. The first thing I'd ever noticed about him—well, after his green eyes, that is—was his black hair. No, all that's a lie. It was his expression; the passion and the innocence and the delicacy of conscience. I just loved it!

"When does this little adventure begin?"

"Now," I said. "You have four seconds to make up your mind."

"Lestat, it's almost dawn."

"It's almost dawn *here*," I answered.

"What do you mean?"

"Louis, put yourself in my hands. Look, if I can't pull it off, you won't really be hurt. Well, not that much. Game? Make up your mind. I want to be off now."

He didn't say anything. He was looking at me, and so affectionately that I could hardly stand it.

"Yes or no."

"I'm probably going to regret this, but…."

"Agreed then." I reached out and placed my hands firmly on his arms and I lifted him high off his feet. He was flabbergasted, looking down at me. It was as if he weighed nothing. I set him down.

"Mon Dieu," he whispered.

Well, what was I waiting for? If I didn't try it, I'd never find out. There came a dark, dull moment of pain again; of remembering her; of us rising together. I let it slowly slip away.

I swung my arm around his waist. *Upwards now*. I lifted my right hand, but that wasn't even necessary. We were climbing on the wind that fast.

The cemetery was spinning down there, a tiny sprawling toy of itself with little bits of white scattered all over under the dark trees.

I could hear his astonished gasp in my ear.

"Lestat!"

"Put your arm around my neck," I said. "Hold on tight. We're going west, of course, and then north, and we're going a very long distance, and maybe we'll drift for a while. The sun won't set where we're going for some time."

The wind was ice cold. I should have thought of that, that he'd suffer from it; but he gave no sign. He was merely gazing upwards as we pierced the great snowy mist of the clouds.

When he saw the stars, I felt him tense against me; his face was perfectly smooth and serene; and if he was weeping the wind was carrying it away. Whatever fear he'd felt was gone now, utterly; he was lost as he looked upward; as the dome of heaven came down around us, and the moon shone full on the endless thickening plain of whiteness below.

No need to tell him what to observe, or what to remember. He always knew such things. Years ago, when I'd done the dark magic on him, I hadn't had to tell him anything; he had savored the smallest aspects of it all on his own. And later he'd said I'd failed to guide him. Didn't he know how unnecessary that had always been?

But I was drifting now, mentally and physically; feeling him a snug yet weightless thing against me; just the pure presence of Louis, Louis belonging to me, and with me. And no burden at all.

I was plotting the course firmly with one tiny part of my mind, the way she'd taught me to do it; and I was also remembering so many things; the first time, for example, that I'd ever seen him in a tavern in New Orleans. He'd been drunk, quarreling; and I'd followed him out into the night. And he had said in that last moment before I'd let him slip through my hands, his eyes closing:

"But who are you!"

I'd known I'd come back for him at sunset, that I'd find him if I had to search the whole city for him, though I was leaving him then half

dead in the cobblestone street. I had to have him, had to. Just the way I had to have everything I wanted; or had to do everything I'd ever wanted to do.

That was the problem, and nothing she'd given me—not suffering, or power, or terror finally—had changed it one bit.

Four miles from London.

One hour after sunset. We lay in the grass together, in the cold darkness under the oak. There was a little light coming from the huge manor house in the middle of the park, but not much. The small deep-cut leaded windows seemed made to keep it all inside. Cozy in there, inviting, with all the book-lined walls, and the flicker of flames from those many fireplaces; and the smoke belching up from the chimneys into the foggy dark.

Now and then a car moved on the winding road beyond the front gates; and the beams would sweep the regal face of the old building, revealing the gargoyles, and the heavy arches over the windows, and the gleaming knockers on the massive front doors.

I have always loved these old European dwellings, big as landscapes; no wonder they invite the spirits of the dead to come back.

Louis sat up suddenly, looking about himself, and then hastily brushed the grass from his coat. He had slept for hours, inevitably, on the breast of the wind, you might say, and in the places where I'd rested for a little while, waiting for the world to turn. "Where are we?" he whispered, with a vague touch of alarm.

"Talamasca Motherhouse, outside London," I said. I was lying there with my hands cradling my head. Lights on in the attic. Lights on in the main rooms of the first floor. I was thinking, what way would be the most fun?

"What are we doing here?"

"Adventure, I told you."

"But wait a minute. You don't mean to go in there."

"Don't I? They have Claudia's diary in there, in their cellar, along with Marius's painting. You know all that, don't you? Jesse told you those things."

"Well, what do you mean to do? Break in and rummage through the

cellar till you find what you want?"

I laughed. "Now, that wouldn't be very much fun, would it? Sounds more like dreary work. Besides, it's not really the diary I want. They can keep the diary. It was Claudia's. I want to talk to one of them, to David Talbot, the leader. They're the only mortals in the world, you know, who really believe in us."

Twinge of pain inside. Ignore it. The fun's beginning.

For the moment he was too shocked to answer. This was even more delicious than I had dreamed.

"But you can't be serious," he said. He was getting wildly indignant. "Lestat, let these people alone. They think Jesse is dead. They received a letter from someone in her family."

"Yes, naturally. So I won't disabuse them of that morbid notion. Why would I? But the one who came to the concert—David Talbot, the older one—he fascinates me. I suppose I want to know.… But why say it? Time to go in and find out."

"Lestat!"

"Louis!" I said, mocking his tone. I got up and helped him up, not because he needed it, but because he was sitting there glowering at me, and resisting me, and trying to figure out how to control me, all of which was an utter waste of his time.

"Lestat, Marius will be furious if you do this!" he said earnestly, his face sharpening, the whole picture of high cheekbones and dark probing green eyes firing beautifully. "The cardinal rule is—"

"Louis, you're making it irresistible!" I said.

He took hold of my arm. "What about Maharet? These were Jesse's friends!"

"And what is she going to do? Send Mekare to crush my head like an egg!"

"You are really past all patience!" he said. "Have you learned anything at all!"

"Are you coming with me or not?"

"You're not going into that house."

"You see that window up there?" I hooked my arm around his waist. Now, he couldn't get away from me. "David Talbot is in that room. He's been writing in his journal for about an hour. He's deeply troubled. He doesn't know what happened with us. He knows

something happened; but he'll never really figure it out. Now, we're going to enter the bedroom next to him by means of that little window to the left."

He gave one last feeble protest, but I was concentrating on the window, trying to visualize a lock. How many feet away was it? I felt the spasm, and then I saw, high above, the little rectangle of leaded glass swing out. He saw it too, and while he was standing there, speechless, I tightened my grip on him and went up.

Within a second we were standing inside the room. A small Elizabethan chamber with dark paneling, and handsome period furnishings, and a busy little fire.

Louis was in a rage. He glared at me as he straightened his clothes now with quick, furious gestures. I liked the room. David Talbot's books; his bed.

And David Talbot staring at us through the half-opened door to his study, from where he sat in the light of one green shaded lamp on his desk. He wore a handsome gray silk smoking jacket, tied at the waist. He had his pen in hand. He was as still as a creature of the wood, sensing a predator, before the inevitable attempt at flight.

Ah, now this was lovely!

I studied him for a moment; dark gray hair, clear black eyes, beautifully lined face; very expressive, immediately warm. And the intelligence of the man was obvious. All very much as Jesse and Khayman had described.

I went into the study.

"You'll forgive me," I said. "I should have knocked at the front door. But I wanted our meeting to be private. You know who I am, of course."

Speechless.

I looked at the desk. Our files, neat manila folders with various familiar names: "Théâtre des Vampires" and "Armand" and "Benjamin, the Devil." And "Jesse."

Jesse. There was the letter from Jesse's aunt Maharet lying there beside the folder. The letter which said that Jesse was dead.

I waited, wondering if I should force him to speak first. But then that's never been my favorite game. He was studying me very intensely, infinitely more intensely than I had studied him. He was

memorizing me, using little devices he'd learned to record details so that he would remember them later no matter how great the shock of an experience while it was going on.

Tall, not heavy, not slender either. A good build. Large, very well-formed hands. Very well groomed, too. A true British gentleman; a lover of tweed and leather and dark woods, and tea, and dampness and the dark park outside, and the lovely wholesome feeling of this house.

And his age, sixty-five or so. A very good age. He knew things younger men just could not possibly know. This was the modern equivalent of Marius's age in ancient times. Not really old for the twentieth century at all.

Louis was still in the other room, but he knew Louis was there. He looked towards the doorway now. And then back to me.

Then he rose, and surprised me utterly. He extended his hand.

"How do you do?" he said.

I laughed. I took his hand and shook it firmly and politely, observing his reactions, his astonishment when he felt how cold my flesh was; how lifeless in any conventional sense.

He was frightened all right. But he was also powerfully curious; powerfully interested.

Then very agreeably and very courteously he said, "Jesse isn't dead, is she?"

Amazing what the British do with language; the nuances of politeness. The world's great diplomats, surely. I found myself wondering what their gangsters were like. Yet there was such grief there for Jesse, and who was I to dismiss another being's grief?

I looked at him solemnly. "Oh, yes," I said. "Make no mistake about it. Jesse is dead." I held his gaze firmly; there was no misunderstanding. "Forget about Jesse," I said.

He gave a little nod, eyes glancing off for a moment, and then he looked at me again, with as much curiosity as before.

I made a little circle in the center of the room. Saw Louis back there in the shadows, standing against the side of the bedroom fireplace watching me with such scorn and disapproval. But this was no time to laugh. I didn't feel at all like laughing. I was thinking of something Khayman had told me.

"I have a question for you now," I said.

"Yes."

"I'm here. Under your roof. Suppose when the sun rises, I go down into your cellar. I slip into unconsciousness there. You know." I made a little offhand gesture. "What would you do? Would you kill me while I slept?"

He thought about it for less than two seconds.

"No."

"But you know what I am. There isn't the slightest doubt in your mind, is there? Why wouldn't you?"

"Many reasons," he said. "I'd want to know about you. I'd want to talk to you. No, I wouldn't kill you. Nothing could make me do that."

I studied him; he was telling the truth completely. He didn't elaborate on it, but he would have thought it frightfully callous and disrespectful to kill me, to kill a thing as mysterious and old as I was.

"Yes, precisely," he said, with a little smile.

Mind reader. Not very powerful however. Just the surface thoughts.

"Don't be so sure." Again it was said with remarkable politeness.

"Second question for you," I said.

"By all means." He was really intrigued now. The fear had absolutely melted away.

"Do you want the Dark Gift? You know. To become one of us." Out of the corner of my eye I saw Louis shake his head. Then he turned his back. "I'm not saying that I'd ever give it you. Very likely, I would not. But do you want it? If I was willing, would you accept it from me?"

"No."

"Oh, come now."

"Not in a million years would I ever accept it. As God is my witness, no."

"You don't believe in God, you know you don't."

"Merely an expression. But the sentiment is true."

I smiled. Such an affable, alert face. And I was so exhilarated; the blood was moving through my veins with a new vigor; I wondered if he could sense it; did I look any less like a monster? Were there all those little signs of humanity that I saw in others of our kind when they were exuberant or absorbed?

“I don’t think it will take a million years for you to change your mind,” I said. “You don’t have very much time at all, really. When you think about it.”

“I will never change my mind,” he said. He smiled, very sincerely. He was holding his pen in both hands. And he toyed with it, unconsciously and anxiously for a second, but then he was still.

“I don’t believe you,” I said. I looked around the room; at the small Dutch painting in its lacquered frame: a house in Amsterdam above a canal. I looked at the frost on the leaded window. Nothing visible of the night outside at all. I felt sad suddenly; only it wasn’t anything as bad as before. It was just an acknowledgment of the bitter loneliness that had brought me here, the need with which I’d come, to stand in his little chamber and feel his eyes on me; to hear him say that he knew who I was.

The moment darkened. I couldn’t speak.

“Yes,” he said in a timid tone behind me. “I *know* who you are.”

I turned and looked at him. It seemed I’d weep suddenly. Weep on account of the warmth here, and the scent of human things; the sight of a living man standing before a desk. I swallowed. I wasn’t going to lose my composure, that was foolish.

“It’s quite fascinating really,” I said. “You wouldn’t kill me. But you wouldn’t become what I am.”

“That’s correct.”

“No. I don’t believe you,” I said again.

A little shadow came into his face, but it was an interesting shadow. He was afraid I’d seen some weakness in him that he wasn’t aware of himself.

I reached for his pen. “May I? And a piece of paper please?”

He gave them to me immediately. I sat down at the desk in his chair. All very immaculate—the blotter, the small leather cylinder in which he kept his pens, and even the manila folders. Immaculate as he was, standing there watching as I wrote.

“It’s a phone number,” I said. I put the piece of paper in his hand. “It’s a Paris number, an attorney, who knows me under my proper name, Lestat de Lioncourt, which I believe is in your files? Of course he doesn’t know the things about me you know. But he can reach me. Or, perhaps it would be accurate to say that I am always in touch with

him."

He didn't say anything, but he looked at the paper, and he memorized the number.

"Keep it," I said. "And when you change your mind, when you want to be immortal, and you're willing to say so, call the number. And I'll come back."

He was about to protest. I gestured for silence.

"You never know what may happen," I told him. I sat back in his chair, and crossed my hands on my chest. "You may discover you have a fatal illness; you may find yourself crippled by a bad fall. Maybe you'll just start to have nightmares about being dead; about being nobody and nothing. Doesn't matter. When you decide you want what I have to give, call. And remember please, I'm not saying I'll give it to you. I may never do that. I'm only saying that when you decide you want it, then the dialogue will begin."

"But it's already begun."

"No, it hasn't."

"You don't think you'll be back?" he asked. "I think you will, whether I call or not."

Another little surprise. A little stab of humiliation. I smiled at him in spite of myself. He was a very interesting man. "You silver-tongued British bastard," I said. "How dare you say that to me with such condescension? Maybe I should kill you right now."

That did it. He was stunned. Covering it up rather well but I could still see it. And I knew how frightening I could look, especially when I smiled.

He recovered himself with amazing swiftness. He folded the paper with the phone number on it and slipped it into his pocket.

"Please accept my apology," he said. "What I meant to say was that I hope you'll come back."

"Call the number," I said. We looked at each other for a long moment; then I gave him another little smile. I stood up to take my leave. Then I looked down at his desk.

"Why don't I have my own file?" I asked.

His face went blank for a second; then he recovered again, miraculously. "Ah, but you have the book!" He gestured to *The Vampire Lestat* on the shelf.

“Ah, yes, right. Well, thank you for reminding me.” I hesitated. “But you know, I think I should have my own file.”

“I agree with you,” he said. “I’ll make one up immediately. It was always … just a matter of time.”

I laughed softly in spite of myself. He was so courteous. I made a little farewell bow, and he acknowledged it gracefully.

And then I moved past him, as fast as I could manage it, which was quite fast, and I caught hold of Louis, and left immediately through the window, moving out and up over the grounds until I came down on a lonely stretch of the London road.

It was darker and colder here, with the oaks closing out the moon, and I loved it. I loved the pure darkness! I stood there with my hands shoved into my pockets looking at the faint faraway aureole of light hovering over London; and laughing to myself with irrepressible glee.

“Oh, that was wonderful; that was perfect!” I said, rubbing my hands together; and then clasping Louis’s hands, which were even colder than mine.

The expression on Louis’s face sent me into raptures. This was a real laughing fit coming on.

“You’re a bastard, do you know that!” he said. “How could you do such a thing to that poor man! You’re a fiend, Lestat. You should be walled up in a dungeon!”

“Oh, come on, Louis,” I said. I couldn’t stop laughing. “What do you expect of me? Besides, the man’s a student of the supernatural. He isn’t going to go stark raving mad. What does everybody expect of me?” I threw my arm around his shoulder. “Come on, let’s go to London. It’s a long walk, but it’s early. I’ve never been to London. Do you know that? I want to see the West End, and Mayfair, and the Tower, yes, let’s do go to the Tower. And I want to feed in London! Come on.”

“Lestat, this is no joking matter. Marius will be furious. Everyone will be furious!”

My laughing fit was getting worse. We started down the road at a good clip. It was so much fun to walk. Nothing was ever going to take the place of that, the simple act of walking, feeling the earth under your feet, and the sweet smell of the nearby chimneys scattered out there in the blackness; and the damp cold smell of deep winter in

these woods. Oh, it was all very lovely. And we'd get Louis a decent overcoat when we reached London, a nice long black overcoat with fur on the collar so that he'd be warm as I was now.

"Do you hear what I'm saying to you?" Louis said. "You *haven't* learned anything, have you? You're more incorrigible than you were before!"

I started to laugh again, helplessly.

Then more soberly, I thought of David Talbot's face, and that moment when he'd challenged me. Well, maybe he was right. I'd be back. Who said I couldn't come back and talk to him if I wanted to? Who said? But then I ought to give him just a little time to think about that phone number; and slowly lose his nerve.

The bitterness came again, and a great drowsy sadness suddenly that threatened to sweep my little triumph away. But I wouldn't let it. The night was too beautiful. And Louis's diatribe was becoming all the more heated and hilarious:

"You're a perfect devil, Lestat!" he was saying. "That's what you are! You are the devil himself!"

"Yes, I know," I said, loving to look at him, to see the anger pumping him so full of life. "And I love to hear you say it, Louis. I need to hear you say it. I don't think anyone will ever say it quite like you do. Come on, say it again. I'm a perfect devil. Tell me how bad I am. It makes me feel so good!"

THE END

This book is dedicated
with love
to
Stan Rice, Christopher Rice,
and John Preston

And to the memory
of
my beloved editors:
John Dodds
and
William Whitehead

Anne Rice

The Tale of the Body Thief

A BALLANTINE e BOOK

THE TALE OF THE BODY THIEF

THE VAMPIRE CHRONICLES

ANNE RICE

Ballantine Books
New York

A Ballantine Book
Published by The Random House Publishing Group

Copyright © 1992 by Anne O'Brien Rice

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Ballantine Books, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, and simultaneously in Canada by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto.

Grateful acknowledgment is made to Macmillan Publishing Company for permission to reprint "The Dolls" and "Sailing to Byzantium" by W. B. Yeats from *The Poems of W. B. Yeats: A New Edition*, edited by Richard J. Finneran. Copyright 1928 by Macmillan Publishing Company, copyright renewed 1956 by Georgie Yeats (New York: Macmillan, 1983).

A portion of this work was originally published in *Playboy* magazine.

Ballantine and colophon are registered trademarks of Random House, Inc.

www.ballantinebooks.com

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 97-93892

eISBN: 978-0-307-57591-3

This edition published by arrangement with Alfred A Knopf, Inc.

v3.0_r1

Contents

Master Table of Contents

Cover
Title Page
Copyright

Sailing to Byzantium

Part I - The Tale of the Body Thief
- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Chapter 3
- Chapter 4
- Chapter 5
- Chapter 6
- Chapter 7
- Chapter 8
- Chapter 9
- Chapter 10
- Chapter 11
- Chapter 12
- Chapter 13
- Chapter 14
- Chapter 15
- Chapter 16
- Chapter 17
- Chapter 18
- Chapter 19
- Chapter 20
- Chapter 21
- Chapter 22
- Chapter 23
- Chapter 24
- Chapter 25

Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28

Part II - Once Out of Nature
The Dolls
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33

Dedication

Sailing to Byzantium

by W. B. Yeats

I

That is no country for old men. The young
In one another's arms, birds in the trees
—Those dying generations—at their song,
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unageing intellect.

II

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress,
Nor is there singing school but studying
Monuments of its own magnificence;
And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
To the holy city of Byzantium.

III

O sages standing in God's holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
And be the singing-masters of my soul.
Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity.

IV

Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

The Vampire Lestat here. I have a story to tell you. It's about something that happened to me.

It begins in Miami, in the year 1990, and I really want to start right there. But it's important that I tell you about the dreams I'd been having before that time, for they are very much part of the tale too. I'm talking now about dreams of a child vampire with a woman's mind and an angel's face, and a dream of my mortal friend David Talbot.

But there were dreams also of my mortal boyhood in France—of winter snows, my father's bleak and ruined castle in the Auvergne, and the time I went out to hunt a pack of wolves that were preying upon our poor village.

Dreams can be as real as events. Or so it seemed to me afterwards.

And I was in a dark frame of mind when these dreams began, a vagabond vampire roaming the earth, sometimes so covered with dust that no one took the slightest notice of me. What good was it to have full and beautiful blond hair, sharp blue eyes, razzle-dazzle clothes, an irresistible smile, and a well-proportioned body six feet in height that can, in spite of its two hundred years, pass for that of a twenty-year-old mortal. I was still a man of reason however, a child of the eighteenth century, in which I'd actually lived before I was Born to Darkness.

But as the 1980s were drawing to a close I was much changed from the dashing fledgling vampire I had once been, so attached to his classic black cape and Bruxelles lace, the gentleman with walking stick and white gloves, dancing beneath the gas lamp.

I had been transformed into a dark god of sorts, thanks to suffering and triumph, and too much of the blood of our vampire elders. I had powers which left me baffled and sometimes even frightened. I had powers which made me sorrowful though I did not always understand the reason for it.

I could, for example, move high into the air at will, traveling the night winds over great distances as easily as a spirit. I could effect or destroy matter with the power of my mind. I could kindle a fire by the mere wish to do so. I could also call to other immortals over countries and continents with my preternatural voice, and I could effortlessly read the minds of vampires and humans.

Not bad, you might think. I loathed it. Without doubt, I was grieving for my old selves—the mortal boy, the newborn revenant once determined to be good at being bad if that was his predicament.

I'm not a pragmatist, understand. I have a keen and merciless conscience. I could have been a nice guy. Maybe at times I am. But always, I've been a man of action. Grief is a waste, and so is fear. And action is what you will get here, as soon as I get through this introduction.

Remember, beginnings are always hard and most are artificial. It was the best of times and the worst of times—really? When! And all happy families are not alike; even Tolstoy must

have realized that. I can't get away with "In the beginning," or "They threw me off the hay truck at noon," or I would do it. I always get away with whatever I can, believe me. And as Nabokov said in the voice of Humbert Humbert, "You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style." Can't fancy mean experimental? I already know of course that I am sensuous, florid, lush, humid—enough critics have told me that.

Alas, I have to do things my own way. And we will get to the beginning—if that isn't a contradiction in terms—I promise you.

Right now I must explain that before this adventure commenced, I was also grieving for the other immortals I had known and loved, because they had long ago scattered from our last late-twentieth-century gathering place. Folly to think we wanted to create a coven again. They had one by one disappeared into time and the world, which was inevitable.

Vampires don't really like others of their kind, though their need for immortal companions is desperate.

Out of that need I'd made my fledglings—Louis de Pointe du Lac, who became my patient and often loving nineteenth-century comrade, and with his unwitting aid, the beautiful and doomed child vampire, Claudia. And during these lonely vagabond nights of the late twentieth century, Louis was the only immortal whom I saw quite often. The most human of us all, the most ungodlike.

I never stayed away too long from his shack in the wilderness of uptown New Orleans. But you'll see. I'll get to that. Louis is in this story.

The point is—you'll find precious little here about the others. Indeed, almost nothing.

Except for Claudia. I was dreaming more and more often of Claudia. Let me explain about Claudia. She'd been destroyed over a century before, yet I felt her presence all the time as if she were just around the corner.

It was 1794 when I made this succulent little vampire out of a dying orphan, and sixty years passed before she rose up against me. "I'll put you in your coffin forever, Father."

I did sleep in a coffin then. And it was a period piece, that lurid attempted murder, involving as it did mortal victims baited with poisons to cloud my mind, knives tearing my white flesh, and the ultimate abandonment of my seemingly lifeless form in the rank waters of the swamp beyond the dim lights of New Orleans.

Well, it didn't work. There are very few sure ways to kill the undead. The sun, fire … One must aim for total obliteration. And after all, we are talking about the Vampire Lestat here.

Claudia suffered for this crime, being executed later by an evil coven of blood drinkers who thrived in the very heart of Paris in the infamous Theatre of the Vampires. I'd broken the rules when I made a blood drinker of a child so small, and for that reason alone, the Parisian monsters might have put an end to her. But she too had broken their rules in trying to destroy her maker, and that you might say was their logical reason for shutting her out into the bright

light of day which burnt her to ashes.

It's a hell of a way to execute someone, as far as I'm concerned, because those who lock you out must quickly retire to their coffins and are not even there to witness the mighty sun carrying out their grim sentence. But that's what they did to this exquisite and delicate creature that I had fashioned with my vampiric blood from a ragged, dirty waif in a ramshackle Spanish colony in the New World—to be my friend, my pupil, my love, my muse, my fellow hunter. And yes, my daughter.

If you read Interview with the Vampire, *then you know all about this. It's Louis's version of our time together. Louis tells of his love for this our child, and of his vengeance against those who destroyed her.*

If you read my autobiographical books, The Vampire Lestat *and* The Queen of the Damned, *you know all about me, also. You know our history, for what it's worth—and history is never worth too much—and how we came into being thousands of years ago and that we propagate by carefully giving the Dark Blood to mortals when we wish to take them along the Devil's Road with us.*

But you don't have to read those works to understand this one. And you won't find here the cast of thousands that crowded The Queen of the Damned, *either. Western civilization will not for one second teeter on the brink. And there will be no revelations from ancient times or old ones confiding half-truths and riddles and promising answers that do not in fact exist and never have existed.*

No, I have done all that before.

This is a contemporary story. It's a volume in the Vampire Chronicles, make no mistake. But it is the first really modern volume, for it accepts the horrifying absurdity of existence from the start, and it takes us into the mind and the soul of its hero—guess who?—for its discoveries.

Read this tale, and I will give you all you need to know about us as you turn the pages. And by the way, lots of things do happen! I'm a man of action as I said—the James Bond of the vampires, if you will—called the Brat Prince, and the Damnedest Creature, and "you monster" by various and sundry other immortals.

The other immortals are still around, of course—Maharet and Mekare, the eldest of us all, Khayman of the First Brood, Eric, Santino, Pandora, and others whom we call the Children of the Millennia. Armand is still about, the lovely five-hundred-year-old boy-faced ancient who once ruled the Théâtre des Vampires, and before that a coven of devil worshiping blood drinkers who lived beneath the Paris Cemetery, Les Innocents. *Armand, I hope, will always be around.*

And Gabrielle, my mortal mother and immortal child will no doubt turn up one of these nights sometime before the end of another thousand years, if I'm lucky.

As for Marius, my old teacher and mentor, the one who kept the historical secrets of our tribe, he is still with us and always will be. Before this tale began, he would come to me now and then to scold and plead: Would I not stop my careless kills which invariably found their way into the pages of mortal newspapers! Would I not stop deviling my mortal friend David Talbot, and tempting him with the Dark Gift of our blood? Better we make no more, did I not know this?

Rules, rules, rules. They always wind up talking about rules. And I love to break the rules the way mortals like to smash their crystal glasses after a toast against the bricks of the fireplace.

But enough about the others. The point is—this is my book from start to finish.

Let me speak now of the dreams that had come to trouble me in my wanderings.

With Claudia, it was almost a haunting. Just before my eyes would close each dawn, I'd see her beside me, hear her voice in a low and urgent whisper. And sometimes I'd slide back over the centuries to the little colonial hospital with its rows of tiny beds where the orphan child had been dying.

Behold the sorrowful old doctor, potbellied and palsied, as he lifts the child's body. And that crying. Who is crying? Claudia was not crying. She slept as the doctor entrusted her to me, believing me to be her mortal father. And she is so pretty in these dreams. Was she that pretty then? Of course she was.

"Snatching me from mortal hands like two grim monsters in a nightmare fairy tale, you idle, blind parents!"

The dream of David Talbot came once only.

David is young in the dream and he is walking in a mangrove forest. He was not the man of seventy-four who had become my friend, the patient mortal scholar who regularly refused my offer of the Dark Blood, and laid his warm, fragile hand on my cold flesh unflinchingly to demonstrate the affection and trust between us.

No. This is young David Talbot of years and years ago, when his heart didn't beat so fast within his chest. Yet he is in danger.

Tyger, tyger burning bright.

Is that his voice, whispering those words or is it mine?

And out of the dappled light it comes, its orange and black stripes like the light and shade itself so that it is scarcely visible. I see its huge head, and how soft its muzzle, white and bristling with long, delicate whiskers. But look at its yellow eyes, mere slits, and full of horrid mindless cruelty. David, its fangs! Can't you see these fangs!

But he is curious as a child, watching its big pink tongue touch his throat, touch the thin gold chain he wears around his throat. Is it eating the chain? Good God, David! The fangs.

Why is my voice dried up inside me? Am I even there in the mangrove forest? My body

vibrates as I struggle to move, dull moans coming from behind my sealed lips, and each moan taxes every fiber of my being. David, beware!

And then I see that he is down on one knee, with the long shiny rifle cocked against his shoulder. And the giant cat is still yards away, bearing down on him. On and on it rushes, until the crack of the gun stops it in its tracks, and over it goes as the gun roars once again, its yellow eyes full of rage, its paws crossed as they push in one last final breath at the soft earth.

I wake.

What does this dream mean—that my mortal friend is in danger? Or simply that his genetic clock has ticked to a stop. For a man of seventy-four years, death can come at any instant.

Do I ever think of David that I do not think of death?

David, where are you?

Fee, Fie, Fo, Fum, I smell the blood of an Englishman.

"*I want you to ask me for the Dark Gift,*" *I'd said to him when first we met.* "*I may not give it to you. But I want you to ask.*"

He never had. He never would. And now I loved him. I saw him soon after the dream. I had to. But I could not forget the dream and perhaps it did come to me more than once in the deep sleep of my daylight hours when I am stone cold and helpless under literal cover of darkness.

All right, you have the dreams now.

But picture the winter snow in France one more time, if you would, piling about the castle walls, and a young male mortal asleep on his bed of hay, in the light of the fire, with his hunting dogs beside him. This had become the image of my lost human life, more truly than any remembrance of the boulevard theatre in Paris, where before the Revolution I'd been so very happy as a young actor.

Now we are truly ready to begin. Let's turn the page, shall we?

I

THE TALE
OF THE
BODY THIEF

ONE

Miami—the vampires' city. This is South Beach at sunset, in the luxurious warmth of the winterless winter, clean and thriving and drenched in electric light, the gentle breeze moving in from the placid sea, across the dark margin of cream-colored sand, to cool the smooth broad pavements full of happy mortal children.

Sweet the parade of fashionable young men displaying their cultured muscles with touching vulgarity, of young women so proud of their streamlined and seemingly sexless modern limbs, amid the soft urgent roar of traffic and human voices.

Old stucco hostelries, once the middling shelters of the aged, were now reborn in smart pastel colors, sporting their new names in elegant neon script. Candles flickered on the white-draped tables of the open-porch restaurants. Big shiny American cars pushed their way slowly along the avenue, as drivers and passengers viewed the dazzling human parade, lazy pedestrians here and there blocking the thoroughfare.

On the distant horizon the great white clouds were mountains beneath a roofless and star-filled heaven. Ah, it never failed to take my breath away—this southern sky filled with azure light and drowsy relentless movement.

To the north rose the towers of new Miami Beach in all their splendour. To the south and to the west, the dazzling steel skyscrapers of the downtown city with its high roaring freeways and busy cruise-ship docks. Small pleasure boats sped along the sparkling waters of the myriad urban canals.

In the quiet immaculate gardens of Coral Gables, countless lamps illuminated the handsome sprawling villas with their red-tiled roofs, and swimming pools shimmering with turquoise light. Ghosts walked in the grand and darkened rooms of the Biltmore. The massive mangrove trees threw out their primitive limbs to cover the broad and carefully tended streets.

In Coconut Grove, the international shoppers thronged the luxurious hotels and fashionable malls. Couples embraced on the high balconies of

their glass-walled condominiums, silhouettes gazing out over the serene waters of the bay. Cars sped along the busy roads past the ever-dancing palms and delicate rain trees, past the squat concrete mansions draped with red and purple bougainvillea, behind their fancy iron gates.

All of this is Miami, city of water, city of speed, city of tropical flowers, city of enormous skies. It is for Miami, more than any other place, that I periodically leave my New Orleans home. The men and women of many nations and different colors live in the great dense neighborhoods of Miami. One hears Yiddish, Hebrew, the languages of Spain, of Haiti, the dialects and accents of Latin America, of the deep south of this nation and of the far north. There is menace beneath the shining surface of Miami, there is desperation and a throbbing greed; there is the deep steady pulse of a great capital—the low grinding energy, the endless risk.

It's never really dark in Miami. It's never really quiet.

It is the perfect city for the vampire; and it never fails to yield to me a mortal killer—some twisted, sinister morsel who will give up to me a dozen of his own murders as I drain his memory banks and his blood.

But tonight it was the Big-Game Hunt, the unseasonal Easter feast after a Lent of starvation—the pursuit of one of those splendid human trophies whose gruesome modus operandi reads for pages in the computer files of mortal law enforcement agencies, a being anointed in his anonymity with a flashy name by the worshipful press: "Back Street Strangler."

I lust after such killers!

What luck for me that such a celebrity had surfaced in my favorite city. What luck that he has struck six times in these very streets—slayer of the old and the infirm, who have come in such numbers to live out their remaining days in these warm climes. Ah, I would have crossed a continent to snap him up, but he is here waiting for me. To his dark history, detailed by no less than twenty criminologists, and easily purloined by me through the computer in my New Orleans lair, I have secretly added the crucial elements—his name and mortal habitation. A simple trick for a dark god who can read minds. Through his blood-soaked dreams I found him. And tonight the pleasure will be mine of finishing his illustrious career in a dark cruel embrace, without a scintilla of moral illumination.

Ah, Miami. The perfect place for this little Passion Play.

I always come back to Miami, the way I come back to New Orleans. And I'm the only immortal now who hunts this glorious corner of the Savage Garden, for as you have seen, the others long ago deserted the coven house here—unable to endure each other's company any more than I can endure them.

But so much the better to have Miami all to myself.

I stood at the front windows of the rooms I maintained in the swanky little Park Central Hotel on Ocean Drive, every now and then letting my preternatural hearing sweep the chambers around me in which the rich tourists enjoyed that premium brand of solitude—complete privacy only steps from the flashy street—my Champs Élysées of the moment, my Via Veneto.

My strangler was almost ready to move from the realm of his spasmodic and fragmentary visions into the land of literal death. Ah, time to dress for the man of my dreams.

Picking from the usual wilderness of freshly opened cardboard boxes, suitcases, and trunks, I chose a suit of gray velvet, an old favorite, especially when the fabric is thick, with only a subtle luster. Not very likely for these warm nights, I had to admit, but then I don't feel hot and cold the way humans do. And the coat was slim with narrow lapels, very spare and rather like a hacking jacket with its fitted waist, or, more to the point, like the graceful old frock coats of earlier times. We immortals forever fancy old-fashioned garments, garments that remind us of the century in which we were Born to Darkness. Sometimes you can gauge the true age of an immortal simply by the cut of his clothes.

With me, it's also a matter of texture. The eighteenth century was so shiny! I can't bear to be without a little luster. And this handsome coat suited me perfectly with the plain tight velvet pants. As for the white silk shirt, it was a cloth so soft you could ball the garment in the palm of your hand. Why should I wear anything else so close to my indestructible and curiously sensitive skin? Then the boots. Ah, they look like all my fine shoes of late. Their soles are immaculate, for they so seldom touch the mother earth.

My hair I shook loose into the usual thick mane of glowing yellow shoulder-length waves. What would I look like to mortals? I honestly don't know. I covered up my blue eyes, as always, with black glasses,

lest their radiance mesmerize and entrance at random—a real nuisance—and over my delicate white hands, with their telltale glassy fingernails, I drew the usual pair of soft gray leather gloves.

Ah, a bit of oily brown camouflage for the skin. I smoothed the lotion over my cheekbones, over the bit of neck and chest that was bare.

I inspected the finished product in the mirror. Still irresistible. No wonder I'd been such a smash in my brief career as a rock singer. And I've always been a howling success as a vampire. Thank the gods I hadn't become invisible in my airy wanderings, a vagabond floating far above the clouds, light as a cinder on the wind. I felt like weeping when I thought of it.

The Big-Game Hunt always brought me back to the actual. Track him, wait for him, catch him just at the moment that he would bring death to his next victim, and take him slowly, painfully, feasting upon his wickedness as you do it, glimpsing through the filthy lens of his soul all his earlier victims …

Please understand, there is no nobility in this. I don't believe that rescuing one poor mortal from such a fiend can conceivably save my soul. I have taken life too often—unless one believes that the power of one good deed is infinite. I don't know whether or not I believe that. What I do believe is this: The evil of one murder is infinite, and my guilt is like my beauty—eternal. I cannot be forgiven, for there is no one to forgive me for all I've done.

Nevertheless I like saving those innocents from their fate. And I like taking my killers to me because they are my brothers, and we belong together, and why shouldn't they die in my arms instead of some poor merciful mortal who has never done anyone any willful harm? These are the rules of my game. I play by these rules because I made them. And I promised myself, I wouldn't leave the bodies about this time; I'd strive to do what the others have always ordered me to do. But still … I liked to leave the carcass for the authorities. I liked to fire up the computer later, after I'd returned to New Orleans, and read the entire postmortem report.

Suddenly I was distracted by the sound of a police car passing slowly below, the men inside it speaking of my killer, that he will strike soon again, his stars are in the correct positions, the moon is at the right height. It will be in the side streets of South Beach most certainly, as it

has been before. But who is he? How can he be stopped?

Seven o'clock. The tiny green numerals of the digital clock told me it was so, though I already knew, of course. I closed my eyes, letting my head drop just a little to one side, bracing myself perhaps for the full effects of this power which I so loathed. First came an amplification of the hearing again, as if I had thrown a modern technological switch. The soft purring sounds of the world became a chorus from hell—full of sharp-edged laughter and lamentation, full of lies and anguish and random pleas. I covered my ears as if that could stop it, then finally I shut it off.

Gradually I saw the blurred and overlapping images of their thoughts, rising like a million fluttering birds into the firmament. *Give me my killer, give me his vision!*

He was there, in a small dingy room, very unlike this one, yet only two blocks from it, just rising from his bed. His cheap clothes were rumpled, sweat covering his coarse face, a thick nervous hand going for the cigarettes in his shirt pocket, then letting them go—already forgotten. A heavy man he was, of shapeless facial features and a look full of vague worry, or dim regret.

It did not occur to him to dress for the evening, for the Feast for which he'd been hungering. And now his waking mind was almost collapsed beneath the burden of his ugly palpitating dreams. He shook himself all over, loose greasy hair falling onto his sloping forehead, eyes like bits of black glass.

Standing still in the silent shadows of my room, I continued to track him, to follow down a back stairs, and out into the garish light of Collins Avenue, past dusty shop windows and sagging commercial signs, propelled onward, towards the inevitable and yet unchosen object of his desire.

And who might she be, the lucky lady, wandering blindly and inexorably towards this horror, through the sparse and dismal crowds of the early evening in this same dreary region of town? Does she carry a carton of milk and a head of lettuce in a brown paper bag? Will she hurry at the sight of the cutthroats on the corner? Does she grieve for the old beachfront where she lived perhaps so contentedly before the architects and the decorators drove her to the cracked and peeling hostelries further away?

And what will he think when he finally spots her, this filthy angel of death? Will she be the very one to remind him of the mythic shrew of childhood, who beat him senseless only to be elevated to the nightmare pantheon of his subconscious, or are we asking too much?

I mean there are killers of this species who make not the smallest connection between symbol and reality, and remember nothing for longer than a few days. What is certain is only that their victims don't deserve it, and that they, the killers, deserve to meet with me.

Ah, well, I will tear out his menacing heart before he has had a chance to "do" her, and he will give me everything that he has, and is.

I walked slowly down the steps, and through the smart, glittering art deco lobby with its magazine-page glamour. How good it felt to be moving like a mortal, to open the doors, to wander out into the fresh air. I headed north along the sidewalk among the evening strollers, eyes drifting naturally over the newly refurbished hotels and their little cafés.

The crowd thickened as I reached the corner. Before a fancy open-air restaurant, giant television cameras focused their lenses on a stretch of sidewalk harshly illuminated by enormous white lights. Trucks blocked the traffic; cars slowed to a stop. A loose crowd had gathered of young and old, only mildly fascinated, for television and motion picture cameras in the vicinity of South Beach were a familiar sight.

I skirted the lights, fearing their effect upon my highly reflective face. Would I were one of the tan-skinned ones, smelling of expensive beach oils, and half naked in friable cotton rags. I made my way around the corner. Again, I scanned for the prey. He was racing, his mind so thick with hallucinations that he could scarce control his shuffling, sloppy steps.

There was no time left.

With a little spurt of speed, I took to the low roofs. The breeze was stronger, sweeter. Gentle the roar of excited voices, the dull natural songs of radios, the sound of the wind itself.

In silence I caught his image in the indifferent eyes of those who passed him; in silence I saw his fantasies once more of withered hands and withered feet, of shrunken cheeks and shrunken breasts. The thin membrane between fantasy and reality was breaking.

I hit the pavements of Collins Avenue, so swiftly perhaps I simply seemed to appear. But nobody was looking. I was the proverbial tree

falling in the uninhabited forest.

And in minutes, I was ambling along, steps behind him, a menacing young man perhaps, piercing the little clusters of tough guys who blocked the path, pursuing the prey through the glass doors of a giant ice-cooled drugstore. Ah, such a circus for the eye—this low-ceilinged cave—chock-full of every imaginable kind of packageable and preserved foodstuff, toilet article, and hair accoutrement, ninety percent of which existed not at all in any form whatsoever during the century when I was born.

We're talking sanitary napkins, medicinal eyedrops, plastic bobby pins, felt-tip markers, creams and ointments for all nameable parts of the human body, dishwashing liquid in every color of the rainbow, and cosmetic rinses in some colors never before invented and yet undefined. Imagine Louis XVI opening a noisy crackling plastic sack of such wonders? What would he think of Styrofoam coffee cups, chocolate cookies wrapped in cellophane, or pens that never run out of ink?

Well, I'm still not entirely used to these items myself, though I've watched the progress of the Industrial Revolution for two centuries with my own eyes. Such drugstores can keep me enthralled for hours on end. Sometimes I become spellbound in the middle of Wal-Mart.

But this time I had a prey in my sights, didn't I? Later for *Time* and *Vogue*, pocket computer language translators, and wristwatches that continue to tell time even as you swim in the sea.

Why had *he* come to this place? The young Cuban families with babies in tow were not his style. Yet aimlessly he wandered the narrow crowded aisles, oblivious to the hundreds of dark faces and the fast riffs of Spanish around him, unnoticed by anyone but me, as his red-rimmed eyes swept the cluttered shelves.

Lord God, but he was filthy—all decency lost in his mania, craggy face and neck creased with dirt. Will I love it? Hell, he's a sack of blood. Why push my luck? I couldn't kill little children anymore, could I? Or feast on waterfront harlots, telling myself it's all perfectly fine, for they have poisoned their share of flatboatmen. My conscience is killing me, isn't it? And when you're immortal that can be a really long and ignominious death. Yeah, look at him, this dirty, stinking, lumbering killer. Men in prison get better chow than this.

And then it hit me as I scanned his mind once more as if cutting open

a cantaloupe. He doesn't know what he is! He has never read his own headlines! And indeed he does not remember episodes of his life in any discerning order, and could not in truth confess to the murders he has committed for he does not truly recall them, and he does not know that he will kill tonight! He does not know what I know!

Ah, sadness and grief, I had drawn the very worst card, no doubt about it. Oh, Lord God! What had I been thinking of to hunt this one, when the starlit world is full of more vicious and cunning beasts? I wanted to weep.

But then came the provocative moment. He had seen *the* old woman, seen her bare wrinkled arms, the small hump of her back, her thin and shivering thighs beneath her pastel shorts. Through the glare of fluorescent light, she made her way idly, enjoying the buzz and throb of those around her, face half hidden beneath the green plastic of a visor, hair twisted with dark pins on the back of her small head.

She carried in her little basket a pint of orange juice in a plastic bottle, and a pair of slippers so soft they were folded up into a neat little roll. And now to this she added, with obvious glee, a paperback novel from the rack, which she had read before, but fondled lovingly, dreaming of reading it again, like visiting with old acquaintances. *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. Yes, I loved it too.

In a trance, he fell in behind her, so close that surely she felt his breath on her neck. Dull-eyed and stupid, he watched as she inched her way closer and closer to the register, drawing out a few dirty dollar bills from the sagging collar of her blouse.

Out the doors they went, he with the listless plodding style of a dog after a bitch in heat, she making her way slowly with her gray sack drooping from its cut-out handles, veering broadly and awkwardly around the bands of noisy and brazen youngsters on the prowl. Is she talking to herself? Seems so. I didn't scan her, this little being walking faster and faster. I scanned the beast behind her, who was wholly unable to see her as the sum of her parts.

Pallid, feeble faces flashed through his mind as he trailed behind her. He hungered to lie on top of old flesh; he hungered to put a hand over an old mouth.

When she reached her small forlorn apartment building, made of crumbling chalk, it seemed, like everything else in this seedy section of

town, and guarded by bruised palmettos, he came to a sudden swaying stop, watching mutely as she walked back the narrow tiled courtyard and up the dusty green cement steps. He noted the number of her painted door as she unlocked it, or rather he clamped on to the location, and sinking back against the wall, he began to dream very specifically of killing her, in a featureless and empty bedroom that seemed no more than a smear of color and light.

Ah, look at him resting against the wall as if he had been stabbed, head lolling to one side. Impossible to be interested in him. Why don't I kill him now!

But the moments ticked, and the night lost its twilight incandescence. The stars grew ever more brilliant. The breeze came and went. We waited.

Through her eyes, I saw her parlour as if I could really see through walls and floors—clean, though filled with careless old furniture of ugly veneer, round-shouldered, unimportant to her. But all had been polished with a scented oil she loved. Neon light passed through the Dacron curtains, milky and cheerless as the view of the yard below. But she had the comforting glow of her small carefully positioned lamps. That was what mattered to her.

In a maple rocking chair with hideous plaid upholstery, she sat composed, a tiny but dignified figure, open paperback novel in hand. What happiness to be once more with Francie Nolan. Her thin knees were barely hidden now by the flowered cotton robe she had taken from her closet, and she wore the little blue slippers like socks over her small misshapen feet. She had made of her long gray hair one thick and graceful braid.

On the small black-and-white television screen before her, dead movie stars argued without making a sound. Joan Fontaine thinks Cary Grant is trying to kill her. And judging by the expression on his face, it certainly did seem that way to me. How could anyone ever trust Cary Grant, I wondered—a man who looked as though he were made entirely of wood?

She didn't need to hear their words; she had seen this movie, by her careful count, some thirteen times. She had read this novel in her lap only twice, and so it will be with very special pleasure that she revisits these paragraphs, which she does not know yet by heart.

From the shadowy garden below, I discerned her neat and accepting concept of self, without drama and detached from the acknowledged bad taste that surrounded her. Her few treasures could be contained in any cabinet. The book and the lighted screen were more important to her than anything else she owned, and she was well aware of their spirituality. Even the color of her functional and styleless clothes was not worth her concern.

My vagabond killer was near paralysis, his mind a riot of moments so personal they defied interpretation.

I slipped around the little stucco building and found the stairs to her kitchen door. The lock gave easily when I commanded it to do so. And the door opened as if I had touched it, when I had not.

Without a sound I slipped into the small linoleum-tiled room. The stench of gas rising from the small white stove was sickening to me. So was the smell of the soap in its sticky ceramic dish. But the room touched my heart instantly. Beautiful the cherished china of Chinese blue and white, so neatly stacked, with plates displayed. Behold the dog-eared cookbooks. And how spotless her table with its shining oilcloth of pure yellow, and waxen green ivy growing in a round bowl of clear water, which projected upon the low ceiling a single quivering circle of light.

But what filled my mind as I stood there, rigid, pushing the door shut with my fingers, was that she was unafraid of death as she read her Betty Smith novel, as she occasionally glanced at the glittering screen. She had no inner antenna to pick up the presence of the spook who stood, sunk into madness, in the nearby street, or the monster who haunted her kitchen now.

The killer was immersed so completely in his hallucinations that he did not see those who passed him by. He did not see the police car prowling, or the suspicious and deliberately menacing looks of the uniformed mortals who knew all about him, and that he would strike tonight, but not who he was.

A thin line of spit moved down his unshaven chin. Nothing was real to him—not his life by day, not fear of discovery—only the electric shiver which these hallucinations sent through his hulking torso and clumsy arms and legs. His left hand twitched suddenly. There was a catch at the left side of his mouth.

I hated this guy! I didn't want to drink his blood. He was no classy killer. It was her blood I craved.

How thoughtful she was in her solitude and silence, how small, how contented, her concentration as fine as a light beam as she read the paragraphs of this story she knew so well. Traveling, traveling back to those days when she first read this book, at a crowded soda fountain on Lexington Avenue in New York City, when she was a smartly dressed young secretary in a red wool skirt and a white ruffled blouse with pearl buttons on the cuffs. She worked in a stone office tower, infinitely glamorous, with ornate brass doors on its elevators, and dark yellow marble tile in its halls.

I wanted to press my lips to her memories, to the remembered sounds of her high heels clicking on the marble, to the image of her smooth calf beneath the pure silk stocking as she put it on so carefully, not to snag it with her long enameled nails. I saw her red hair for an instant. I saw her extravagant and potentially hideous yet charming yellow brimmed hat.

That's blood worth having. And I was starving, starving as I have seldom been in all these decades. The unseasonal Lenten fast had been almost more than I could endure. Oh, Lord God, I wanted so to kill her!

Below in the street, a faint gurgling sound came from the lips of the stupid, clumsy killer. It cleared its way through the raging torrent of other sounds that poured into my vampiric ears.

At last, the beast lurched away from the wall, listing for a moment as if he would go sprawling, then sauntered towards us, into the little courtyard and up the steps.

Will I let him frighten her? It seemed pointless. I have him in my sights, do I not? Yet I allowed him to put his small metal tool into the round hole in her doorknob, I gave him time to force the lock. The chain tore loose from the rotten wood.

He stepped into the room, fixing upon her without expression. She was terrified, shrinking back in her chair, the book slipping from her lap.

Ah, but then he saw me in the kitchen doorway—a shadowy young man in gray velvet, glasses pushed up over his forehead. I was gazing at him in his own expressionless fashion. Did he see these iridescent eyes, this skin like polished ivory, hair like a soundless explosion of white light? Or was I merely an obstacle between him and his sinister goal, all beauty wasted?

In a second, he bolted. He was down the steps as the old woman screamed and rushed forward to slam the wooden door.

I was after him, not bothering to touch terra firma, letting him see me poised for an instant under the street lamp as he turned the corner. We went for half a block before I drifted towards him, a blur to the mortals, who didn't bother to notice. Then I froze beside him, and heard his groan as he broke into a run.

For blocks we played this game. He ran, he stopped, he saw me behind him. The sweat poured down his body. Indeed the thin synthetic fabric of the shirt was soon translucent with it, and clinging to the smooth hairless flesh of his chest.

At last he came to his seedy flophouse hotel and pounded up the stairs. I was in the small top-floor room when he reached it. Before he could cry out, I had him in my arms. The stench of his dirty hair rose in my nostrils, mingled with a thin acidic smell from the chemical fibers of the shirt. But it didn't matter now. He was powerful and warm in my arms, a juicy capon, chest heaving against me, the smell of his blood flooding my brain. I heard it pulsing through ventricles and valves and painfully constricted vessels. I licked at it in the tender red flesh beneath his eyes.

His heart was laboring and nearly bursting—careful, careful, don't crush him. I let my teeth clamp down on the wet leathery skin of his neck. Hmmm. My brother, my poor befuddled brother. But this was rich, this was good.

The fountain opened; his life was a sewer. All those old women, those old men. They were cadavers floating in the current; they tumbled against each other without meaning, as he went limp in my arms. No sport. Too easy. No cunning. No malice. Crude as a lizard he had been, swallowing fly after fly. Lord God, to know this is to know the time when the giant reptiles ruled the earth, and for a million years, only their yellow eyes beheld the falling rain, or the rising sun.

Never mind. I let him go, tumbling soundlessly out of my grip. I was swimming with his mammalian blood. Good enough. I closed my eyes, letting this hot coil penetrate my intestines, or whatever was down there now in this hard powerful white body. In a daze, I saw him stumbling on his knees across the floor. So exquisitely clumsy. So easy to pick him up from the mess of twisted and tearing newspapers, the overturned cup

pouring its cold coffee into the dust-colored rug.

I jerked him back by his collar. His big empty eyes rolled up into his head. Then he kicked at me, blindly, this bully, this killer of the old and weak, shoe scuffing my shin. I lifted him to my hungry mouth again, fingers sliding through his hair, and felt him stiffen as if my fangs were dipped in poison.

Again the blood flooded my brain. I felt it electrify the tiny veins of my face. I felt it pulse even into my fingers, and a hot prickling warmth slide down my spine. Draught after draught filled me. Succulent, heavy creature. Then I let him go once more, and when he stumbled away this time, I went after him, dragging him across the floor, turning his face to me, then tossing him forward and letting him struggle again.

He was speaking to me now in something that ought to have been language, but it wasn't. He pushed at me but he could no longer see clearly. And for the first time a tragic dignity infused him, a vague look of outrage, blind as he was. It seemed I was embellished and enfolded now in old tales, in memories of plaster statues and nameless saints. His fingers clawed at the instep of my shoe. I lifted him up, and when I tore his throat this time, the wound was too big. It was done.

The death came like a fist in the gut. For a moment I felt nausea, and then simply the heat, the fullness, the sheer radiance of the living blood, with that last vibration of consciousness pulsing through all my limbs.

I sank down on his soiled bed. I don't know how long I lay there.

I stared at his low ceiling. And then when the sour musty smells of the room surrounded me, and the stench of his body, I rose and stumbled out, an ungainly figure as surely as he had been, letting myself go soft in these mortal gestures, in rage and hatred, in silence, because I didn't want to be the weightless one, the winged one, the night traveler. I wanted to be human, and feel human, and his blood was threaded all through me, and it wasn't enough. Not nearly enough!

Where are all my promises? The stiff and bruised palmettos rattle against the stucco walls.

"Oh, you're back," she said to me.

Such a low, strong voice she had, no tremor in it. She was standing in front of the ugly plaid rocker, with its worn maple arms, peering at me through her silver-rimmed glasses, the paperback novel clasped in her hand. Her mouth was small and shapeless and showing a bit of yellow

teeth, a hideous contrast to the dark personality of the voice, which knew no infirmity at all.

What in God's name was she thinking as she smiled at me? Why doesn't she pray?

"I knew you'd come," she said. Then she took off the glasses, and I saw that her eyes were glazed. What was she seeing? What was I making her see? I who can control all these elements flawlessly was so baffled I could have wept. "Yes, I knew."

"Oh? And how did you know?" I whispered as I approached her, loving the embracing closeness of the common little room.

I reached out with these monstrous fingers too white to be human, strong enough to tear her head off, and I felt her little throat. Smell of Chantilly—or some other drugstore scent.

"Yes," she said airily but definitely. "I always knew."

"Kiss me, then. Love me."

How hot she was, and how tiny were her shoulders, how gorgeous in this the final withering, the flower tinged with yellow, yet full of fragrance still, pale blue veins dancing beneath her flaccid skin, eyelids perfectly molded to her eyes when she closed them, the skin flowing over the bones of her skull.

"Take me to heaven," she said. Out of the heart came the voice.

"I can't. I wish I could," I was purring into her ear.

I closed my arms around her. I nuzzled her soft nest of gray hair. I felt her fingers on my face like dried leaves, and it sent a soft chill through me. She, too, was shivering. Ah, tender and worn little thing, ah, creature reduced to thought and will with a body insubstantial like a fragile flame! Just the "little drink," Lestat, no more.

But it was too late and I knew it when the first spurt of blood hit my tongue. I was draining her. Surely the sounds of my moans must have alarmed her, but then she was past hearing … They never hear the real sounds once it's begun.

Forgive me.

Oh, darling!

We were sinking down together on the carpet, lovers in a patch of nubby faded flowers. I saw the book fallen there, and the drawing on the cover, but this seemed unreal. I hugged her so carefully, lest she break. But I was the hollow shell. Her death was coming swiftly, as if she

herself were walking towards me in a broad corridor, in some extremely particular and very important place. Ah, yes, the yellow marble tile. New York City, and even up here you can hear the traffic, and that low boom when a door slams on a stairway, down the hall.

"Good night, my darling," she whispered.

Am I hearing things? How can she still make words?

I love you.

"Yes, darling. I love you too."

She stood in the hallway. Her hair was red and stiff and curling prettily at her shoulders; she was smiling, and her heels had been making that sharp, enticing sound on the marble, but now there was only silence around her as the folds of her woolen skirt still moved; she was looking at me with such a strange clever expression; she lifted a small black snub-nosed gun and pointed it at me.

What the hell are you doing?

She is dead. The shot was so loud that for a moment I could hear nothing. Only ringing in my ears. I lay on the floor staring blankly at the ceiling overhead, smelling cordite in a corridor in New York.

But this was Miami. Her clock was ticking on the table. From the overheated heart of the television came the pinched and tiny voice of Cary Grant telling Joan Fontaine that he loved her. And Joan Fontaine was so happy. She'd thought sure Cary Grant meant to kill her.

And so had I.

South Beach. Give me the Neon Strip once more. Only this time I walked away from the busy pavements, out over the sand and towards the sea.

On and on I went until there was no one near—not even the beach wanderers, or the night swimmers. Only the sand, blown clean already of all the day's footprints, and the great gray nighttime ocean, throwing up its endless surf upon the patient shore. How high the visible heavens, how full of swiftly moving clouds and distant unobtrusive stars.

What had I done? I'd killed her, his victim, pinched out the light of the one I'd been bound to save. I'd gone back to her and I'd lain with her, and I'd taken her, and she'd fired the invisible shot too late.

And the thirst was there again.

I'd laid her down on her small neat bed afterwards, on the dull quilted

nylon, folding her arms and closing her eyes.

Dear God, help me. Where are my nameless saints? Where are the angels with their feathered wings to carry me down into hell? When they do come, are they the last beautiful thing that you see? As you go down into the lake of fire, can you still follow their progress heavenward? Can you hope for one last glimpse of their golden trumpets, and their upturned faces reflecting the radiance of the face of God?

What do I know of heaven?

For long moments I stood there, staring at the distant nightscape of pure clouds, and then back at the twinkling lights of the new hotels, flash of headlamps.

A lone mortal stood on the far sidewalk, staring in my direction, but perhaps he did not note my presence at all—a tiny figure on the lip of the great sea. Perhaps he was only looking towards the ocean as I had been looking, as if the shore were miraculous, as if the water could wash our souls clean.

Once the world was nothing but the sea; rain fell for a hundred million years! But now the cosmos crawls with monsters.

He was still there, that lone and staring mortal. And gradually I realized that over the empty sweep of beach and its thin darkness, his eyes were fixed intently on mine. Yes, looking at me.

I scarce thought about it, looking at him only because I did not bother to turn away. Then a curious sensation passed over me—and one which I had never felt before.

I was faintly dizzy as it began, and a soft tingling vibration followed, coursing through my trunk and then my arms and legs. It felt as if my limbs were growing tighter, narrower, and steadily compressing the substance within. Indeed, so distinct was this feeling that it seemed I might be squeezed right out of myself. I marveled at it. There was something faintly delicious about it, especially to a being as hard and cold and impervious to all sensations as I am. It was overwhelming, very like the way the drinking of blood is overwhelming, though it was nothing as visceral as that. Also no sooner had I analyzed it than I realized it was gone.

I shuddered. Had I imagined the entire thing? I was still staring at that distant mortal—poor soul who gazed back at me without the slightest knowledge of who or what I was.

There was a smile on his young face, brittle and full of crazed wonder. And gradually I realized I had seen this face before. I was further startled to make out in his expression now a certain definite recognition, and the odd attitude of expectation. Suddenly he raised his right hand and waved.

Baffling.

But I knew this mortal. No, more nearly accurate to say I had glimsed him more than once, and then the only certain recollections returned to me with full force.

In Venice, hovering on the edge of the Piazza San Marco, and months after in Hong Kong, near the Night Market, and both times I had taken particular notice of him because he had taken particular notice of me. Yes, there stood the same tall, powerfully built body, and the hair was the same thick, wavy brown hair.

Not possible. Or do I mean probable, for there he stood!

Again he made the little gesture of greeting, and then hurriedly, indeed very awkwardly, he ran towards me, coming closer and closer with his strange ungainly steps as I watched in cold unyielding amazement.

I scanned his mind. Nothing. Locked up tight. Only his grinning face coming clearer and clearer as he entered the brighter luminous glare of the sea. The scent of his fear filled my nostrils along with the smell of his blood. Yes, he was terrified, and yet powerfully excited. Very inviting he looked suddenly—another victim all but thrown into my arms.

How his large brown eyes glittered. And what shining teeth he had.

Coming to a halt some three feet from me, his heart pounding, he held out a fat crumpled envelope in his damp and trembling hand.

I continued to stare at him, revealing nothing—not injured pride nor respect for this astonishing accomplishment that he could find me here, that he would dare. I was just hungry enough to scoop him up now and feed again without giving it another thought. I wasn't reasoning anymore as I looked at him. I saw only blood.

And as if he knew it, indeed sensed it in full, he stiffened, glared at me fiercely for one moment, and then tossed the thick envelope at my feet and danced back frantically over the loose sand. It seemed his legs might go out from under him. He almost fell as he turned and fled.

The thirst subsided a little. Maybe I wasn't reasoning, but I was

hesitating, and that did seem to involve some thought. Who was this nervy young son of a bitch?

Again, I tried to scan him. Nothing. Most strange. But there are mortals who cloak themselves naturally, even when they have not the slightest awareness that another might pry into their minds.

On and on he sped, desperately and in ungainly fashion, disappearing in the darkness of a side street as he continued his progress away from me.

Moments passed.

Now I couldn't pick up his scent anymore at all, save from the envelope, which lay where he had thrown it down.

What on earth could all this mean? He'd known exactly what I was, no doubt of it. Venice and Hong Kong had not been coincidence. His sudden fear, if nothing else, had made it plain. But I had to smile at his overall courage. Imagine, following such a creature as me.

Was he some crazed worshiper, come to pound on the temple door in the hopes I'd give him the Dark Blood simply out of pity or reward for his temerity? It made me angry suddenly, and bitter, and then again I simply didn't care.

I picked up the envelope, and saw that it was blank and unsealed. Inside, I found, of all things, a printed short story clipped apparently from a paperback book.

It made a small thick wad of pulp pages, stapled together in the upper-left-hand corner. No personal note at all. The author of the story was a lovable creature I knew well, H. P. Lovecraft by name, a writer of the supernatural and the macabre. In fact, I knew the story, too, and could never forget its title: "The Thing on the Doorstep." It had made me laugh.

"The Thing on the Doorstep." I was smiling now. Yes, I remembered the story, that it was clever, that it had been fun.

But why would this strange mortal give such a story to me? It was ludicrous. And suddenly I was angry again, or as angry as my sadness allowed me to be.

I shoved the packet in my coat pocket absently. I pondered. Yes, the fellow was definitely gone. Couldn't even pick up an image of him from anyone else.

Oh, if only he had come to tempt me on some other night, when my soul wasn't sick and weary, when I might have cared just a little—

enough at least to have found out what it was all about.

But it seemed already that eons had passed since he had come and gone. The night was empty save for the grinding roar of the big city, and the dim crash of the sea. Even the clouds had thinned and disappeared. The sky seemed endless and harrowingly still.

I looked to the hard bright stars overhead, and let the low sound of the surf wrap me in silence. I gave one last grief-stricken look to the lights of Miami, this city I so loved.

Then I went up, simple as a thought to rise, so swift no mortal could have seen it, this figure ascending higher and higher through the deafening wind, until the great sprawling city was nothing but a distant galaxy fading slowly from view.

So cold it was, this high wind that knows no seasons. The blood inside me was swallowed up as if its sweet warmth had never existed, and soon my face and hands wore a sheathing of cold as if I'd frozen solid, and that sheathing moved underneath my fragile garments, covering all my skin.

But it caused no pain. Or let us say it did not cause enough pain.

Rather it simply dried up comfort. It was only dismal, dreary, the absence of what makes existence worth it—the blazing warmth of fires and caresses, of kisses and arguments, of love and longing and blood.

Ah, the Aztec gods must have been greedy vampires to convince those poor human souls that the universe would cease to exist if the blood didn't flow. Imagine presiding over such an altar, snapping your fingers for another and another and another, squeezing those fresh blood-soaked hearts to your lips like bunches of grapes.

I twisted and turned with the wind, dropped a few feet, then rose again, arms outstretched playfully, then falling at my sides. I lay on my back like a sure swimmer, staring again into the blind and indifferent stars.

By thought alone, I propelled myself eastward. The night still stretched over the city of London, though its clocks ticked out the small hours. London.

There was time to say farewell to David Talbot—my mortal friend.

It had been months since our last meeting in Amsterdam, and I had left him rudely, ashamed for that and for bothering him at all. I'd spied upon him since, but not troubled him. And I knew that I had to go to

him now, whatever my state of mind. There wasn't any doubt he would want me to come. It was the proper, decent thing to do.

For one moment I thought of my beloved Louis. No doubt he was in his crumbling little house in its deep swampy garden in New Orleans, reading by the light of the moon as he always did, or giving in to one shuddering candle should the night be cloudy and dark. But it was too late to say farewell to Louis … If there was any being among us who would understand, it was Louis. Or so I told myself. The opposite is probably closer to the truth … On to London I went.

TWO

The Motherhouse of the Talamasca, outside London, silent in its great park of ancient oaks, its sloped rooftops and its vast lawns blanketed with deep clean snow.

A handsome four-storey edifice full of lead-mullioned windows, and chimneys ever sending their winding plumes of smoke into the night.

A place of dark wood-paneled libraries and parlours, bedrooms with coffered ceilings, thick burgundy carpets, and dining rooms as quiet as those of a religious order, and members dedicated as priests and nuns, who can read your mind, see your aura, tell your future from the palm of your hand, and make an educated guess as to who you might have been in a past life.

Witches? Well, some of them are, perhaps. But in the main they are simply scholars—those who have dedicated their lives to the study of the occult in all its manifestations. Some know more than others. Some believe more than others. For example, there are those members in this Motherhouse—and in other motherhouses, in Amsterdam or Rome or the depths of the Louisiana swamp—who have laid eyes upon vampires and werewolves, who have felt the potentially lethal physical telekinetic powers of mortals who can set fires or cause death, who have spoken to ghosts and received answers from them, who have battled invisible entities and won—or lost.

For over one thousand years, this order has persisted. It is in fact older, but its origins are shrouded in mystery—or, to put it more specifically, David will not explain them to me.

Where does the Talamasca get its money? There is a staggering abundance of gold and jewels in its vaults. Its investments in the great banks of Europe are legendary. It owns property in all its home cities, which alone could sustain it, if it did not possess anything else. And then there are its various archival treasures—paintings, statues, tapestries, antique furnishings and ornaments—all of which it has acquired in connection with various occult cases and upon which it places no monetary value, for the historical and scholarly value far exceeds any

appraisal which could be made.

Its library alone is worth a king's ransom in any earthly currency. There are manuscripts in all languages, indeed some from the famous old library of Alexandria burnt centuries ago, and others from the libraries of the martyred Cathars, whose culture is no more. There are texts from ancient Egypt for a glimpse of which archaeologists might cheerfully commit murder. There are texts by preternatural beings of several known species, including vampires. There are letters and documents in these archives which have been written by me.

None of these treasures interest me. They never have. Oh, in my more playful moments I have toyed with the idea of breaking into the vaults and reclaiming a few old relics that once belonged to immortals I loved. I know these scholars have collected possessions which I myself have abandoned—the contents of rooms in Paris near the end of the last century, the books and furnishings of my old house in the tree-shaded streets of the Garden District, beneath which I slumbered for decades, quite oblivious to those who walked the rotted floors above. God knows what else they have saved from the gnawing mouth of time.

But I no longer cared about those things. That which they had salvaged they might keep.

What I cared about was David, the Superior General who had been my friend since the long ago night when I came rudely and impulsively through the fourth-storey window of his private rooms.

How brave and poised he had been. And how I had liked to look at him, a tall man with a deeply lined face and iron-gray hair. I wondered then if a young man could ever possess such beauty. But that he knew me, knew what I was—that had been his greatest charm for me.

What if I make you one of us. I could do it, you know …

He's never wavered in his conviction. "Not even on my deathbed will I accept," he'd said. But he'd been fascinated by my mere presence, he couldn't conceal it, though he had concealed his thoughts well enough from me ever since that first time.

Indeed his mind had become like a strongbox to which there was no key. And I'd been left only with his radiant and affectionate facial expressions and a soft, cultured voice that could talk the Devil into behaving well.

As I reached the Motherhouse now in the small hours, amid the snow

of the English winter, it was to David's familiar windows that I went, only to find his rooms empty and dark.

I thought of our most recent meeting. Could he have gone to Amsterdam again?

That last trip had been unexpected or so I was able to find out, when I came to search for him, before his clever flock of psychics sensed my meddlesome telepathic scanning—which they do with remarkable efficiency—and quickly cut me off.

Seems some errand of great importance had compelled David's presence in Holland.

The Dutch Motherhouse was older than the one outside London, with vaults beneath it to which the Superior General alone had the key. David had to locate a portrait by Rembrandt, one of the most significant treasures in the possession of the order, have it copied, and send that copy to his close friend Aaron Lightner, who needed it in connection with an important paranormal investigation being carried on in the States.

I had followed David to Amsterdam and spied on him there, telling myself that I would not disturb him, as I had done many times before.

Let me tell the story of that episode now.

At a safe distance I had tracked him as he walked briskly in the late evening, masking my thoughts as skillfully as he always masked his own. What a striking figure he made under the elm trees along the Singel gracht, as he stopped again and again to admire the narrow old three- and four-storey Dutch houses, with their high step gables, and bright windows left undraped, it seemed, for the pleasure of the passersby.

I sensed a change in him almost at once. He carried his cane as always, though it was plain he still had no need of it, and he flipped it upon his shoulder as he'd done before. But there was a brooding to him as he walked; a pronounced dissatisfaction; and hour after hour passed during which he wandered as if time were of no importance at all.

It was very clear to me soon that David was reminiscing, and now and then I did manage to catch some pungent image of his youth in the tropics, even flashes of a verdant jungle so very different from this wintry northern city, which was surely never warm. I had not had my dream of the tiger yet. I did not know what this meant.

It was tantalizingly fragmentary. David's skills at keeping his thoughts

inside were simply too good.

On and on he walked, however, sometimes as if he were being driven, and on and on I followed, feeling strangely comforted by the mere sight of him several blocks ahead.

Had it not been for the bicycles forever whizzing past him, he would have looked like a young man. But the bicycles startled him. He had an old man's inordinate fear of being struck down and hurt. He'd look resentfully after the young riders. Then he'd fall back into his thoughts.

It was almost dawn when he inevitably returned to the Motherhouse. And surely he must have slept the greater part of each day.

He was already walking again when I caught up with him one evening, and once again there seemed no destination in particular. Rather he meandered through Amsterdam's many small cobblestoned streets. He seemed to like it as much as I knew he liked Venice, and with reason, for the cities, both dense and darkly colored, have, in spite of all their marked differences, a similar charm. That one is a Catholic city, rank and full of lovely decay, and the other is Protestant and therefore very clean and efficient, made me, now and then, smile.

The following night, he was again on his own, whistling to himself as he covered the miles briskly, and it soon came clear to me that he was avoiding the Motherhouse. Indeed, he seemed to be avoiding everything, and when one of his old friends—another Englishman and a member of the order—chanced to meet him unexpectedly near a bookseller's in the Leidsestraat, it was plain from the conversation that David had not been himself for some time.

The British are so very polite in discussing and diagnosing such matters. But this is what I separated out from all the marvelous diplomacy. David was neglecting his duties as Superior General. David spent all his time away from the Motherhouse. When in England, David went to his ancestral home in the Cotswolds more and more often. What was wrong?

David merely shrugged off all these various suggestions as if he could not retain interest in the exchange. He made some vague remark to the effect that the Talamasca could run itself without a Superior General for a century, it was so well disciplined and tradition bound, and filled with dedicated members. Then off he went to browse in the bookseller's, where he bought a paperback translation in English of Goethe's *Faust*.

Then he dined alone in a small Indonesian restaurant, with *Faust* propped before him, eyes racing over the pages, as he consumed his spicy feast.

As he was busy with his knife and fork, I went back to the bookstore and bought a copy of the very same book. What a bizarre piece of work!

I can't claim to have understood it, or why David was reading it. Indeed it frightened me that the reason might be obvious and perhaps I rejected the idea at once.

Nevertheless I rather loved it, especially the ending, where Faust went to heaven, of course. I don't think that happened in the older legends. Faust always went to hell. I wrote it off to Goethe's Romantic optimism, and the fact that he had been so old by the time he wrote the end. The work of the very old is always extremely powerful and intriguing, and infinitely worth pondering, and all the more perhaps because creative stamina deserts so many artists before they are truly old.

In the very small hours, after David had vanished into the Motherhouse, I roamed the city alone. I wanted to know it because he knew it, because Amsterdam was part of his life.

I wandered through the enormous Rijksmuseum, perusing the paintings of Rembrandt, whom I had always loved. I crept like a thief through the house of Rembrandt in the Jodenbreestraat, now made into a little shrine for the public during daylight hours, and I walked the many narrow lanes of the city, feeling the shimmer of olden times. Amsterdam is an exciting place, swarming with young people from all over the new homogenized Europe, a city that never sleeps.

I probably would never have come here had it not been for David. This city had never caught my fancy. And now I found it most agreeable, a vampire's city for its vast late-night crowds, but it was David of course that I wanted to see. I realized I could not leave without at least exchanging a few words.

Finally, a week after my arrival, I found David in the empty Rijksmuseum, just after sunset, sitting on the bench before the great Rembrandt portrait of the Members of the Drapers' Guild.

Did David know, somehow, that I'd been there? Impossible, yet there he was.

And it was obvious from his conversation with the guard—who was just taking his leave of David—that his venerable order of moss-back

snoops contributed mightily to the arts of the various cities in which they were domiciled. So it was an easy thing for the members to gain access to museums to see their treasures when the public was barred.

And to think, I have to break into these places like a cheap crook!

It was completely silent in the high-ceilinged marble halls when I came upon him. He sat on the long wooden bench, his copy of *Faust*, now very dog-eared and full of bookmarks, held loosely and indifferently in his right hand.

He was staring steadily at the painting, which was that of several proper Dutchmen, gathered at a table, dealing with the affairs of commerce, no doubt, yet staring serenely at the viewer from beneath the broad brims of their big black hats. This is scarcely the total effect of this picture. The faces are exquisitely beautiful, full of wisdom and gentleness and a near angelic patience. Indeed, these men more resemble angels than ordinary men.

They seemed possessed of a great secret, and if all men were to learn that secret, there would be no more wars or vice or malice on earth. How did such persons ever become members of the Drapers' Guild of Amsterdam in the 1600s? But then I move ahead of my tale …

David gave a start when I appeared, moving slowly and silently out of the shadows towards him. I took a place beside him on the bench.

I was dressed like a tramp, for I had acquired no real lodgings in Amsterdam, and my hair was tangled from the wind.

I sat very still for a long moment, opening my mind with an act of will that felt rather like a human sigh, letting him know how concerned I was for his well-being, and how I'd tried for his sake to leave him in peace.

His heart was beating rapidly. His face, when I turned to him, was filled with immediate and generous warmth.

He reached over with his right hand and grasped my right arm. "I'm glad to see you as always, so very glad."

"Ah, but I've done you harm. I know I have." I didn't want to say how I'd followed him, how I'd overheard the conversation between him and his comrade, or dwell upon what I saw with my own eyes.

I vowed I would not torment him with my old question. And yet I saw death when I looked at him, even more perhaps for his brightness and cheerfulness, and the vigor in his eyes.

He gave me a long lingering thoughtful look, and then he withdrew

his hand, and his eyes moved back to the painting.

"Are there any vampires in this world who have such faces?" he asked. He gestured to the men staring down at us from the canvas. "I am speaking of the knowledge and understanding which lies behind these faces. I'm speaking of something more indicative of immortality than a preternatural body anatomically dependent upon the drinking of human blood."

"Vampires with such faces?" I responded. "David, that is unfair. There are no *men* with such faces. There never were. Look at any of Rembrandt's paintings. Absurd to believe that such people ever existed, let alone that Amsterdam was full of them in Rembrandt's time, that every man or woman who ever darkened his door was an angel. No, it's Rembrandt you see in these faces, and Rembrandt is immortal, of course."

He smiled. "It's not true what you're saying. And what a desperate loneliness emanates from you. Don't you see I can't accept your gift, and if I did, what would you think of me? Would you still crave my company? Would I crave yours?"

I scarce heard these last words. I was staring at the painting, staring at these men who were indeed like angels. And a quiet anger had come over me, and I didn't want to linger there anymore. I had forsworn the assault, yet he had defended himself against me. No, I should not have come.

Spy on him, yes, but not linger. And once again, I moved swiftly to go.

He was furious with me for doing it. I heard his voice ring out in the great empty space.

"Unfair of you to go like that! Positively rude of you to do it! Have you no honor? What about manners if there is no honor left?" And then he broke off, for I was nowhere near him, it was as if I'd vanished, and he was a man alone in the huge and cold museum speaking aloud to himself.

I was ashamed but too angry and bruised to go back to him, though why, I didn't know. What had I done to this being! How Marius would scold me for this.

I wandered about Amsterdam for hours, purloining some thick parchment writing paper of the kind I most like, and a fine-pointed pen of the automatic kind that spews black ink forever, and then I sought a

noisy sinister little tavern in the old red-light district with its painted women and drugged vagabond youths, where I could work on a letter to David, unnoticed and undisturbed as long as I kept a mug of beer at my side.

I didn't know what I meant to write, from one sentence to the next, only that I had to tell him in some way that I was sorry for my behavior, and that something had snapped in my soul when I beheld the men in the Rembrandt portrait, and so I wrote, in a hasty and driven fashion, this narrative of sorts.

> You are right. It was despicable the way I left you. Worse, it was cowardly. I promise you that when we meet again, I shall let you say all you have to say.
>
> I myself have this theory about Rembrandt. I have spent many hours studying his paintings everywhere—in Amsterdam, Chicago, New York, or wherever I find them—and I do believe as I told you that so many great souls could not have existed as Rembrandt's paintings would have us believe.
>
> This is my theory, and please bear in mind when you read it that it accommodates all the elements involved. And this accommodation used to be the measure of the elegance of theories … before the word "science" came to mean what it means today.
>
> I believe that Rembrandt sold his soul to the Devil when he was a young man. It was a simple bargain. The Devil promised to make Rembrandt the most famous painter of his time. The Devil sent hordes of mortals to Rembrandt for portraits. He gave wealth to Rembrandt, he gave him a charming house in Amsterdam, a wife and later a mistress, because he was sure he would have Rembrandt's soul in the end.
>
> But Rembrandt had been changed by his encounter with the Devil. Having seen such undeniable evidence of evil, he found himself obsessed with the question What is good? He searched the faces of his subjects for their inner divinity; and to his amazement he was able to see the spark of it in

the most unworthy of men.

His skill was such—and please understand, he had got no skill from the Devil; the skill was his to begin with—that not only could he see that goodness, he could paint it; he could allow his knowledge of it, and his faith in it, to suffuse the whole.

With each portrait he understood the grace and goodness of mankind ever more deeply. He understood the capacity for compassion and for wisdom which resides in every soul. His skill increased as he continued; the flash of the infinite became ever more subtle; the person himself ever more particular; and more grand and serene and magnificent each work.

At last the faces Rembrandt painted were not flesh-and-blood faces at all. They were spiritual countenances, portraits of what lay within the body of the man or the woman; they were visions of what that person was at his or her finest hour, of what that person stood to become.

This is why the merchants of the Drapers' Guild look like the oldest and wisest of God's saints.

But nowhere is this spiritual depth and insight more clearly manifest than in Rembrandt's self-portraits. And surely you know that he left us one hundred and twenty-two of these.

Why do you think he painted so many? They were his personal plea to God to note the progress of this man who, through his close observation of others like him, had been completely religiously transformed. "This is my vision," said Rembrandt to God.

Towards the end of Rembrandt's life, the Devil grew suspicious. He did not want his minion to be creating such magnificent paintings, so full of warmth and kindness. He had believed the Dutch to be a materialistic and therefore worldly people. And here in pictures full of rich clothing and expensive possessions, gleamed the undeniable evidence that human beings are wholly unlike any other animal in the cosmos—they are a precious mingling of the

flesh and immortal fire.

Well, Rembrandt suffered all the abuse heaped upon him by the Devil. He lost his fine house in the Jodenbreestraat. He lost his mistress, and finally even his son. Yet on and on he painted, without a trace of bitterness or perversity; on and on he infused his paintings with love.

Finally he lay on his deathbed. The Devil pranced about, gleefully, ready to snatch Rembrandt's soul and pinch it between evil little fingers. But the angels and saints cried to God to intervene.

"In all the world, who knows more about goodness?" they asked, pointing to the dying Rembrandt. "Who has shown more than this painter? We look to his portraits when we would know the divine in man."

And so God broke the pact between Rembrandt and the Devil. He took to himself the soul of Rembrandt, and the Devil, so recently cheated of Faust for the very same reason, went mad with rage.

Well, he would bury the life of Rembrandt in obscurity. He would see to it that all the man's personal possessions and records were swallowed by the great flow of time. And that is of course why we know almost nothing of Rembrandt's true life, or what sort of person he was.

But the Devil could not control the fate of the paintings. Try as he might, he could not make people burn them, throw them away, or set them aside for the newer, more fashionable artists. In fact, a curious thing happened, seemingly without a marked beginning. Rembrandt became the most admired of all painters who had ever lived; Rembrandt became the greatest painter of all time.

That is my theory of Rembrandt and those faces.

Now if I were mortal, I would write a novel about Rembrandt, on this theme. But I am not mortal. I cannot save my soul through art or Good Works. I am a creature like the Devil, with one difference. I love the paintings of Rembrandt!

Yet it breaks my heart to look at them. It broke my heart

to see you there in the museum. And you are perfectly right that there are no vampires with faces like the saints of the Drapers' Guild.

That's why I left you so rudely in the museum. It was not the Devil's Rage. It was merely sorrow.

Again, I promise you that next time we meet, I shall let you say all that you want to say.

I scribbled the number of my Paris agent on the bottom of this letter, along with the post address, as I had done in the past when writing to David though David had never replied.

Then I went on a pilgrimage of sorts, revisiting the paintings of Rembrandt in the great collections of the world. I saw nothing in my travels to sway me in my belief in Rembrandt's goodness. The pilgrimage proved penitential, for I clung to my fiction about Rembrandt. But I resolved anew never to bother David again.

Then I had the dream. *Tyger, tyger* … David in danger. I woke with a start in my chair in Louis's little shack—as if I'd been shaken by a warning hand.

Night had almost ended in England. I had to hurry. But when I finally found David, he was in a quaint little tavern in a village in the Cotswolds which can only be reached by one narrow and treacherous road.

This was his home village, not far from his ancestral manor, I quickly divined from scanning those around him—a little one-street place of sixteenth-century buildings, housing shops and an inn now dependent upon the fickleness of tourists, which David had restored from his own pocket, and visited more and more often to escape his London life.

Positively eerie little spot!

All David was doing, however, was guzzling his beloved single-malt Scotch and scribbling drawings of the Devil on napkins. Mephistopheles with his lute? The homed Satan dancing under the light of the moon? It must have been his dejection I had sensed over the miles, or more truly the concern of those watching him. It was their image of him which I had caught.

I wanted so to talk to him. I didn't dare to do it. I would have created too much of a stir in the little tavern, where the concerned old

proprietor and his two hulking and silent nephews remained awake and smoking their odoriferous pipes only on account of the august presence of the local lord—who was getting as drunk as a lord.

For an hour, I had stood near, peering through the little window. Then I'd gone away.

Now—many, many months later—as the snow fell over London, as it fell in big silent flakes over the high facade of the Motherhouse of the Talamasca, I searched for him, in a dull weary state, thinking that there was no one in all the world whom I must see but him. I scanned the minds of the members, sleeping and awake. I roused them. I heard them come to attention as clearly as if they had snapped on their lights on rising from bed.

But I had what I wanted before they could shut me out.

David was gone to the manor house in the Cotswolds, somewhere, no doubt, in the vicinity of that curious little village with its quaint tavern.

Well, I could find it, couldn't I? I went to seek him there.

The snow was falling ever more heavily as I traveled close to the earth, cold and angry, with all memory of the blood I'd drunk now wiped away.

Other dreams came back to me, as they always do in bitter winter, of the harsh and miserable snows of my mortal boyhood, of the chill stone rooms of my father's castle, and of the little fire, and my great mastiffs snoring in the hay beside me, keeping me snug and warm.

Those dogs had been slain on my last wolf hunt.

I hated so to remember it, and yet it was always sweet to think I was there again—with the clean smell of the little fire and of those powerful dogs tumbled against me, and that I was alive, truly alive!—and the hunt had never taken place. I'd never gone to Paris, I'd never seduced the powerful and demented vampire Magnus. The little stone room was full of the good scent of the dogs, and I could sleep now beside them, and be safe.

At last I drew near to a small Elizabethan manor house in the mountains, a very beautiful stone structure of deep-pitched roofs and narrow gables, of deep-set thick glass windows, far smaller than the Motherhouse, yet very grand on its own scale.

Only one set of windows was lighted, and when I approached I saw that it was the library and David was there, seated by a great noisily

burning fire.

He had his familiar leatherbound diary in his hand, and he was writing with an ink pen, very rapidly. He had no sense at all that he was being watched. Now and then he consulted another leatherbound book, on the table at his side. I could easily see that this was a Christian Bible, with its double columns of small print and the gilt edges of its pages, and the ribbon that marked his place.

With only a little effort I observed it was the Book of Genesis from which David was reading, and apparently making notes. There was his copy of *Faust* beside it. What on earth interested him in all this?

The room itself was lined with books. A single lamp burned over David's shoulder. It was as many a library in northern climes—cozy and inviting, with a low beamed ceiling, and big comfortable old leather chairs.

But what rendered it unusual were the relics of a life lived in another clime. There were his cherished mementos of those remembered years.

The mounted head of a spotted leopard was perched above the glowing fireplace. And the great black head of a buffalo was fixed to the far right wall. There were many small Hindu statues of bronze here and there on shelves and on tables. Small jewel-like Indian rugs lay on the brown carpet, before hearth and doorway and windows.

And the long flaming skin of his Bengal tiger lay sprawled in the very center of the room, its head carefully preserved, with glass eyes and those immense fangs which I had seen with such horrid vividness in my dream.

It was to this last trophy that David gave his full attention suddenly, and then taking his eyes off it with difficulty, went back to writing again. I tried to scan him. Nothing. Why had I bothered? Not even a glimmer of the mangrove forests where such a beast might have been slain. But once again he looked at the tiger, and then, forgetting his pen, sank deep into his thoughts.

Of course it comforted me merely to watch him, as it had always done. I glimpsed many framed photographs in the shadows—pictures of David when he'd been young, and many obviously taken of him in India before a lovely bungalow with deep porches and a high roof. Pictures of his mother and father. Pictures of him with the animals he'd killed. Did this explain my dream?

I ignored the snow falling all around me, covering my hair and my shoulders and even my loosely folded arms. Finally I stirred. There was only an hour before dawn.

I moved around the house, found a back door, commanded the latch to slide back, and entered the warm little low-ceilinged hall. Old wood in this place, soaked through and through with lacquers or oil. I laid my hands on the beams of the door and saw in a shimmer a great oak woodland full of sunlight, and then only the shadows surrounded me. I smelled the aroma of the distant fire.

I realized David was standing at the far end of the hallway, beckoning for me to come near. But something in my appearance alarmed him. Ah, well, I was covered with snow and a thin layer of ice.

We went into the library together and I took the chair opposite his. He left me for a moment during which time I was merely staring at the fire and feeling it melt the sleet that covered me. I was thinking of why I had come and how I would put it into words. My hands were as white as the snow was white.

When he appeared again, he had a large warm towel for me, and I took this and wiped my face and my hair and then my hands. How good it felt.

"Thank you," I said.

"You looked a statue," he said.

"Yes, I do look that way, now, don't I? I'm going on."

"What do you mean?" He sat down across from me. "Explain."

"I'm going to a desert place. I've figured a way to end it, I think. This is not a simple matter at all."

"Why do you want to do that?"

"Don't want to be alive anymore. That part is simple enough. I don't look forward to death the way you do. It isn't that. Tonight I—" I stopped. I saw the old woman in her neat bed, in her flowered robe, against the quilted nylon. Then I saw that strange brown-haired man watching me, the one who had come to me on the beach and given me the story which I still had, crammed inside my coat.

Meaningless. You come too late, whoever you are.

Why bother to explain?

I saw Claudia suddenly as if she were standing there in some other realm, staring at me, waiting for me to see her. How clever that our

minds can invoke an image so seemingly real. She might as well have been right there by David's desk in the shadows. Claudia, who had forced her long knife through my chest. "I'll put you in your coffin forever, Father." But then I saw Claudia all the time now, didn't I? I saw Claudia in dream after dream …

"Don't do this," David said.

"It's time, David," I whispered, thinking in a vague and distant way how disappointed Marius would be.

Had David heard me? Perhaps my voice had been too soft. Some small crackling sound came from the fire, a bit of kindling collapsing perhaps or sap still moist and sizzling within the huge log. I saw that cold bedchamber in my boyhood home again, and suddenly, I had my arm around one of those big dogs, those lazy loving dogs. To see a wolf slay a dog is monstrous!

I should have died that day. Not even the best of hunters should be able to slay a pack of wolves. And maybe that was the cosmic error. I'd been meant to go, if indeed there is any such continuity, and in overreaching, had caught the devil's eye. "Wolf killer." The vampire Magnus had said it so lovingly, as he had carried me to his lair.

David had sunk back in the chair, putting one foot absently on the fender, and his eyes were fixed on the flames. He was deeply distressed, even a little frantic, though he held it inside very well.

"Won't it be painful?" he asked, looking at me.

Just for a moment, I didn't know what he meant. Then I remembered.

I gave a little laugh.

"I came to say good-bye to you, to ask you if you're certain about your decision. It seemed somehow the right thing to tell you I was going, and that this would be your last chance. It seemed sporting, actually. You follow me? Or do you think it's simply another excuse? Doesn't matter really."

"Like Magnus in your story," he said. "You'd make your heir, then go into the fire."

"It wasn't merely a story," I said, not meaning to be argumentative, and wondering why it sounded that way. "And yes, perhaps it's like that. I honestly don't know."

"Why do you want to destroy yourself?" He sounded desperate.

How I had hurt this man.

I looked at the sprawling tiger with its magnificent black stripes and deep orange fur.

"That was a man-eater, wasn't it?" I asked.

He hesitated as if he didn't fully understand the question, then as if waking, he nodded. "Yes." He glanced at the tiger, then he looked at me. "I don't want you to do it. Postpone it, for the love of heaven. Don't do it. Why tonight, of all times?"

He was making me laugh against my will. "Tonight's a fine night for doing it," I said. "No, I'm going." And suddenly there was a great exhilaration in me because I realized I meant it! It wasn't just some fancy. I would never have told him if it was. "I've figured a method. I'll go as high as I can before the sun comes over the horizon. There won't be any way to find shelter. The desert there is very hard."

And I will die in fire. Not cold, as I'd been on that mountain when the wolves surrounded me. In heat, as Claudia had died.

"No, don't do it," he said. How earnest he was, how persuasive. But it didn't work.

"Do you want the blood?" I asked. "It doesn't take very long. There's very little pain. I'm confident the others won't hurt you. I'll make you so strong they'd have a devil of a time if they tried."

Again, it was so like Magnus, who'd left me an orphan without so much as a warning that Armand and his ancient coven could come after me, cursing me and seeking to put an end to my newborn life. And Magnus had known that I would prevail.

"Lestat, I do not want the blood. But I want you to stay here. Look, give me a matter of a few nights only. Just that much. On account of friendship, Lestat, stay with me now. Can't you give me those few hours? And then if you must go through with it, I won't argue anymore."

"Why?"

He looked stricken. Then he said, "Let me talk to you, let me change your mind."

"You killed the tiger when you were very young, didn't you? It was in India." I gazed around at the other trophies. "I saw the tiger in a dream."

He didn't answer. He seemed anxious and perplexed.

"I've hurt you," I said. "I've driven you deep into memories of your youth. I've made you aware of time, and you weren't so aware of it before."

Something happened in his face. I had wounded him with these words. Yet he shook his head.

"David, take the blood from me before I go!" I whispered suddenly, desperately. "You don't have a year left to you. I can hear it when I'm near you! I can hear the weakness in your heart."

"You don't know that, my friend," he said patiently. "Stay here with me. I'll tell you all about the tiger, about those days in India. I hunted in Africa then, and once in the Amazon. Such adventures. I wasn't the musty scholar then as I am now …"

"I know." I smiled. He had never spoken this way to me before, never offered so much. "It's too late, David," I said. Again, I saw the dream. I saw that thin gold chain around David's neck. Had the tiger been going for the chain? That didn't make sense. What remained was the sense of danger.

I stared at the skin of the beast. How purely vicious was his face.

"Was it fun to kill the tiger?" I asked.

He hesitated. Then forced himself to answer. "It was a man-eater. It feasted on children. Yes, I suppose it was fun."

I laughed softly. "Ah, well, then we have that in common, me and the tiger. And Claudia is waiting for me."

"You don't really believe that, do you?"

"No. I guess if I did, I'd be afraid to die." I saw Claudia quite vividly … a tiny oval portrait on porcelain—golden hair, blue eyes. Something fierce and true in the expression, in spite of the saccharine colors and the oval frame. Had I ever possessed such a locket, for that is what it was, surely. A locket. A chill came over me. I remembered the texture of her hair. Once again, it was as if she were very near me. Were I to turn, I might see her beside me in the shadows, with her hand on the back of my chair. I did turn around. Nothing. I was going to lose my nerve if I didn't get out of here.

"Lestat!" David said urgently. He was scanning me, desperately trying to think of something more to say. He pointed to my coat. "What's that in your pocket? A note you've written? You mean to leave it with me? Let me read it now."

"Oh, this, this strange little story," I said, "here, you may have it. I bequeath it to you. Fitting that it should be in a library, perhaps wedged somewhere on one of these shelves."

I took out the little folded packet and glanced at it. “Yes, I’ve read this. It’s sort of amusing.” I tossed the packet into his lap. “Some fool mortal gave it to me, some poor benighted soul who knew who I was and had just enough courage to toss it at my feet.”

“Explain this to me,” said David. He unfolded the pages. “Why are you carrying it with you? Good Lord—Lovecraft.” He gave a little shake of his head.

“I just did explain it,” I said. “It’s no use, David, I can’t be talked down from the high ledge. I’m going. Besides, the story doesn’t mean a thing. Poor fool …”

He had had such strange glittering eyes. Whatever had been so wrong about the way he came running towards me across the sand? About his awkward panic-stricken retreat? His manner had indicated such importance! Ah, but this was foolish. I didn’t care, and I knew I didn’t. I knew what I meant to do.

“Lestat, stay here!” David said. “You promised the very next time we met, you would let me say all I have to say. You wrote that to me, Lestat, you remember? You won’t go back on your word.”

“Well, I have to go back on it, David. And you have to forgive me because I’m going. Perhaps there is no heaven or hell, and I’ll see you on the other side.”

“And what if there is both? What then?”

“You’ve been reading too much of the Bible. Read the Lovecraft story.” Again, I gave a short laugh. I gestured to the pages he was holding. “Better for your peace of mind. And stay away from *Faust*, for heaven’s sake. You really think angels will come in the end and take us away? Well, not me, perhaps, but you?”

“Don’t go,” he said, and his voice was so soft and imploring that it took my breath away.

But I was already going.

I barely heard him call out behind me:

“Lestat, I need you. You’re the only friend I have.”

How tragic those words! I wanted to say I was sorry, sorry for all of it. But it was too late now for that. And besides, I think he knew.

I shot upwards in the cold darkness, driving through the descending snow. All life seemed utterly unbearable to me, both in its horror and its splendour. The tiny house looked warm down there, its light spilling on

the white ground, its chimney giving forth that thin coil of blue smoke.

I thought of David again walking alone through Amsterdam, but then I thought of Rembrandt's faces. And I saw David's face again in the library fire. He looked like a man painted by Rembrandt. He had looked that way ever since I'd known him. And what did we look like—frozen forever in the form we had when the Dark Blood entered our veins? Claudia had been for decades that child painted on porcelain. And I was like one of Michelangelo's statues, turning white as marble. And just as cold.

I knew I would keep my word.

But you know there is a terrible lie in all this. I didn't really believe I *could* be killed by the sun anymore. Well, I was certainly going to give it a good try.

THREE

The Gobi Desert.

Eons ago, in the saurian age, as men have called it, great lizards died in this strange part of the world by the thousands. No one knows why they came here; why they perished. Was it a realm of tropical trees and steaming swamps? We don't know. All we have now in this spot is the desert and millions upon millions of fossils, telling a fragmentary tale of giant reptiles who surely made the earth tremble with each step they took.

The Gobi Desert is therefore an immense graveyard and a fitting place for me to look the sun in the face. I lay a long time in the sand before the sunrise, collecting my last thoughts.

The trick was to rise to the very limit of the atmosphere, into the sunrise, so to speak. Then when I lost consciousness I would tumble down in the terrible heat, and my body would be shattered by this great fall upon the desert floor. How could it then dig in beneath the surface, as it might have done, by its own evil volition, were I whole and in a land of soft soil?

Besides, if the blast of light was sufficiently strong to burn me up, naked and so high above the earth, perhaps I would be dead and gone before my remains ever struck the hard bed of sand.

As the old expression goes, it seemed like a good idea at the time. Nothing much could have deterred me. Yet I did wonder if the other immortals knew what I meant to do and whether or not they were in the least concerned. I certainly sent them no farewell messages; I threw out no random images of what I meant to do.

At last the great warmth of dawn crept across the desert. I rose to my knees, stripped off my clothing, and began the ascent, my eyes already burning from the faintest bit of light.

Higher and higher I went, propelling myself well beyond the place where my body tended to stop and begin to float of its own accord. Finally I could not breathe, as the air was very thin, and it took a great effort to support myself at this height.

Then the light came. So immense, so hot, so blinding that it seemed a great roaring noise as much as a vision filling my sight. I saw yellow and orange fire covering everything. I stared right into it, though it felt like scalding water poured into my eyes. I think I opened my mouth as if to swallow it, this divine fire! The sun was mine suddenly. I was seeing it; I was reaching for it. And then the light was covering me like molten lead, paralyzing me and torturing me beyond endurance, and my own cries filled my ears. Still I would not look away, still I would not fall!

Thus I defy you, heaven! And there were no words suddenly and no thoughts. I was twisting, swimming in it. And as the darkness and the coldness rose up to envelop me—it was nothing but the loss of consciousness—I realized that I had begun to fall.

The sound was the sound of the air rushing past me, and it seemed that the voices of others were calling to me, and through the horrid mingled roar, I heard distinctly the voice of a child.

Then nothing …

Was I dreaming?

We were in a small close place, a hospital smelling of sickness and death, and I was pointing to the bed, and the child who lay on the pillow, white and small and half dead.

There was a sharp riff of laughter. I smelled an oil lamp—that moment when the wick has blown out.

"Lestat," she said. How beautiful her little voice.

I tried to explain about my father's castle, about the snow falling, and my dogs waiting there. That's where I had wanted to go. I could hear them suddenly, that deep baying bark of the mastiffs, echoing up the snow-covered slopes, and I could almost see the towers of the castle itself.

But then she said:

"Not yet."

It was night again when I awoke. I was lying on the desert floor. The dunes bestirred by the wind had spread a fine mist of sand over all my limbs. I felt pain all over. Pain even in the roots of my hair. I felt such pain I couldn't will myself to move.

For hours I lay there. Now and then I gave a soft moan. It made no

difference in the pain I felt. When I moved my limbs even a little, the sand was like tiny particles of sharp glass against my back and my calves and the heels of my feet.

I thought of all those to whom I might have called for help. I did not call. Only gradually did I realize that if I remained here, the sun would come again, naturally enough, and I would be caught once more and burned once more. Yet still I might not die.

I had to remain, didn't I? What sort of coward would seek shelter now?

But all I had to do was look at my hands in the light of the stars to see that I was not going to die. I was burnt, yes, my skin was brown and wrinkled and roaring with pain. But I was nowhere near death.

At last I rolled over and tried to rest my face against the sand, but this was no more comforting than staring up into the stars.

Then I felt the sun coming. I was weeping as the great orange light spilled over all the world. The pain caught my back first and then I thought my head was burning, that it would explode, and that the fire was eating my eyes. I was mad when the darkness of oblivion came, absolutely mad.

When I awoke the following evening, I felt sand in my mouth, sand covering me in my agony. In that madness, I'd apparently buried myself alive.

For hours I remained so, thinking only that this pain was more than any creature could endure.

Finally I struggled to the surface, whimpering like an animal, and I climbed to my feet, each gesture pulling at the pain and intensifying it, and then I willed myself into the air and I started the slow journey west and into the night.

No diminishing of my powers. Ah, only the surface of my body had been deeply harmed.

The wind was infinitely softer than the sand. Nevertheless it brought its own torment, like fingers stroking my burnt skin all over and tugging at the burnt roots of my hair. It stung my burnt eyelids; and scraped at my burnt knees.

I traveled gently for hours, willing myself to David's house once more and feeling the most glorious relief for a few moments as I descended through the cold wet snow.

It was just before morning in England.

I entered by the rear door again, each step an excruciating ordeal. Almost blindly, I found the library and I went down on my knees, ignoring the pain, and collapsed upon the tigerskin rug.

I laid my head beside the tiger's head, and my cheek against its open jaws. Such fine, close fur! I stretched out my arms on its legs and felt its smooth, hard claws under my wrists. The pain shot through me in waves. The fur felt almost silky and the room was cool in its darkness. And in faint shimmers of silent visions, I saw the mangrove forests of India, I saw dark faces, and heard distant voices. And once very clearly for a full instant I saw David as a young man, as I'd seen him in my dream.

It seemed such a miracle, this living young man, full of blood and tissue and such miraculous achievements as eyes and a beating heart and five fingers to each long slender hand.

I saw myself walking in Paris in the old days when I was alive. I was wearing the red velvet cloak, lined with the fur of the wolves I'd killed back in my native Auvergne, never dreaming that things lurked in the shadows, things that could see you and fall in love with you, just because you were young, things that could take your life, just because they loved you and you'd slain a whole pack of wolves …

David, the hunter! In belted khaki, with that magnificent gun.

Slowly, I became aware that the pain was already lessened. Good old Lestat, the god, healing with preternatural speed. The pain was like a deep glow settling over my body. I imagined myself giving a warm light to the entire room.

I picked up the scent of mortals. A servant had come into the room and quickly gone out. Poor old guy. It made me laugh to myself in my half sleep, to think what he had seen—a dark-skinned naked man, with a mop of unkempt blond hair, lying atop David's tiger in the darkened room.

Suddenly, I caught David's scent, and I heard again the low familiar thunder of blood in mortal veins. Blood. I was so thirsty for blood. My burnt skin cried for it, and my burning eyes.

A soft flannel blanket was laid over me, very light and cool-feeling to me. There followed a series of little sounds. David was pulling the heavy velvet draperies closed over the windows, which he had not bothered to

do all winter. He was fussing with the cloth so that there would be no seams of light.

"Lestat," he whispered. "Let me take you down into the cellar, where you'll surely be safe."

"Doesn't matter, David. May I stay here in this room?"

"Yes, of course, you may stay." Such solicitude.

"Thank you, David." I started to sleep again, and snow was blowing through the window of my room in the castle, but then it was wholly different. I saw the little hospital bed once more, and the child was in it, and thank God that nurse wasn't there but had gone to stop the one who was crying. Oh, such a terrible, terrible sound. I hated it. I wanted to be … where? Home in the deep French winter, of course.

This time the oil lamp was being lighted, instead of going out.

"I told you it wasn't time." Her dress was so perfectly white, and look, how very tiny her pearl buttons! And what a fine band of pretty roses around her head.

"But why?" I asked.

"What did you say?" David asked.

"Talking to Claudia," I explained. She was sitting in the petit-point armchair with her legs straight out before her, toes together and pointed at the ceiling. Were those satin slippers? I grabbed her ankle and kissed it, and when I looked up I saw her chin and her eyelashes as she threw back her head and laughed. Such an exquisite full-throated laugh.

"There are others out there," David said.

I opened my eyes, though it hurt to do it, hurt to see the dim shapes of the room. Sun almost coming. I felt the claws of the tiger under my fingers. Ah, precious beast. David stood at the window. He was peering through a tiny seam between the two panels of drapery.

"Out there," he went on. "They've come to see that you're all right."

Imagine that. "Who are they?" I couldn't hear them, didn't want to hear them. Was it Marius? Surely not the very ancient ones. Why would they care about such a thing?

"I don't know," he said. "But they are there."

"You know the old story," I whispered. "Ignore them and they'll go away." Almost sunrise anyway. They have to go. And they certainly won't hurt you, David.

"I know."

"Don't read my mind if you won't let me read yours," I said.

"Don't be cross. No one will come into this room or disturb you."

"Yes, I can be a danger even in repose …" I wanted to say more, to warn him further, but then I realized he was the one mortal who did not require such a warning. Talamasca. Scholars of the paranormal. He knew.

"Sleep now," he said.

I had to laugh at that. What else can I do when the sun rises? Even if it shines full upon my face. But he sounded so firm and reassuring.

To think, in the olden times, I always had the coffin, and sometimes I would polish it slowly until the wood had a great luster to it, and then I'd shine the tiny crucifix on top of it, smiling at myself, at the care with which I buffed the little twisted body of the massacred Christ, the Son of God. I'd loved the satin lining of the box. I'd loved the shape, and the twilight act of rising from the dead. But no more …

The sun was truly coming, the cold winter sun of England. I could feel it for certain, and suddenly I was afraid. I could feel the light stealing over the ground outside and striking the windows. But the darkness held on this side of the velvet curtains.

I saw the little flame in the oil lamp rise. It scared me, just because I was in such pain and it was a flame. Her small rounded fingers on the golden key, and that ring, that ring I gave her with the tiny diamond set in pearls. What about the locket? Should I ask her about the locket? *Claudia, was there ever a gold locket …?*

Turning the flame higher and higher. That smell again. Her dimpled hand. All through the long flat in the Rue Royale, one could catch the scent of the oil. Ah, that old wallpaper, and the pretty handmade furniture, and Louis writing at his desk, sharp smell of the black ink, dull scratch of the quill pen …

Her little hand was touching my cheek, so deliciously cold, and that vague thrill that passes through me when one of the others touches me, *our skin*.

"Why would anyone want *me* to live?" I asked. At least that was what I started to ask … and then I was simply gone.

FOUR

Twilight. The pain was still very great. I didn't want to move. The skin on my chest and on my legs was tightening and tingling and this only gave variation to the pain.

Even the blood thirst, raging fiercely, and the smell of the blood of the servants in the house couldn't make me move. I knew David was there, but I didn't speak to him. I thought if I tried to speak, I would weep on account of the pain.

I slept and I know that I dreamed, but I couldn't remember the dreams when next I opened my eyes. I would see the oil lamp again, and the light still frightened me. And so did her voice.

Once I woke talking to her in the darkness. "Why you of all people? Why you in my dreams? Where's your bloody knife?"

I was grateful when the dawn came. I had sometimes deliberately clamped my mouth shut not to cry out over the pain.

When I woke the second night, the pain was not very great. My body was sore all over, perhaps what mortals call raw. But the agony was clearly past. I was lying still on the tiger, and the room felt just a little uncomfortably cold.

There were logs stacked in the stone fireplace, set way back under the broken arch, against the blackened bricks. The kindling was all there, with a bit of rumpled newspaper. All in readiness. Hmmm. Someone had come dangerously close to me in my sleep. I hoped to heaven I had not reached out, as we sometimes do in our trance, and pinioned this poor creature.

I closed my eyes and listened. Snow falling on the roof, snow tumbling down into the chimney. I opened my eyes again and saw the gleaming bits of moisture on the logs.

Then I concentrated, and felt the energy leap out from me like a long thin tongue and touch the kindling, which burst at once into tiny dancing flames. The thick crusted surface of the logs began to warm and then blister. The fire was on its way.

I felt a sudden flush of exquisite pain in my cheeks and on my

forehead as the light grew brighter. Interesting. I climbed to my knees and stood up, alone in the room. I looked at the brass lamp beside David's chair. With a tiny soundless mental twist, I turned it on.

There were clothes on the chair, a pair of new pants of thick soft dark flannel, a white cotton shirt, and a rather shapeless jacket of old wool. All these clothes were a little too big. They had been David's clothes. Even the fur-lined slippers were too big. But I wanted to be dressed. There were some undistinguished cotton undergarments also, of the kind everyone wears in the twentieth century, and a comb for my hair.

I took my time with everything, noting only a throbbing soreness as I pulled the cloth over my skin. My scalp hurt when I combed my hair. Finally I simply shook it until all the sand and dust was out of it, tumbling down into the thick carpet, and disappearing conveniently enough from view. Putting on the slippers was very nice. But what I wanted now was a mirror.

I found one in the hallway, an old dark mirror in a heavy gilded frame. Enough light came from the open library door for me to see myself fairly well.

For a moment, I could not quite believe what I beheld. My skin was smooth all over, as completely unblemished as it had ever been. But it was an amber color now, the very color of the frame of the mirror, and gleaming only slightly, no more than that of a mortal who had spent a long luxurious sojourn in tropical seas.

My eyebrows and eyelashes shone brightly, as is always the case with the blond hair of such sun-browned individuals, and the few lines of my face, left to me by the Dark Gift, were a little bit more deeply etched than before. I refer here to two small commas at the corners of my mouth, the result of smiling so much when I was alive; and to a few very fine lines at the corners of my eyes, and the trace of a line or two across my forehead. Very nice to have them back for I had not seen them in a long time.

My hands had suffered more. They were darker than my face, and very human-looking, with many little creases, which put me in mind at once of how many fine wrinkles mortal hands do have.

The nails still glistened in a manner that might alarm humans, but it would be a simple thing to rub a bit of ash over them. My eyes, of course, were another matter. Never had they seemed so bright and so

iridescent. But a pair of smoke-colored glasses was all that I needed there. The bigger mask of black glasses was no longer necessary to cover up the shining white skin.

Ye gods, how perfectly wonderful, I thought, staring at my own reflection. You look almost like a man! Almost like a man! I could feel a dull ache all over in these burnt tissues, but that felt good to me, as if it were reminding me of the shape of my body, and its human limits.

I could have shouted. Instead I prayed. May this last, and if it doesn't I'd go through it all again.

Then it occurred to me, rather crushingly—I was supposed to be destroying myself, not perfecting my appearance so that I could move around better among men. I was supposed to be dying. And if the sun over the Gobi Desert hadn't done it … if all the long day of lying in the sun, and then the second sunrise …

Ah, but you coward, I thought, you could have found some way to stay above the surface for that second day! Or could you?

"Well, thank God you chose to come back."

I turned and saw David coming down the hall. He had only just returned home, his dark heavy coat was wet from the snow, and he hadn't even removed his boots.

He came to an abrupt halt and inspected me from head to toe, straining to see in the shadows. "Ah, the clothes will do," he said. "Good Lord, you look like one of those beachcombers, those surf people, those young men who live eternally in resorts."

I smiled.

He reached out, rather bravely, I thought, and took my hand and led me into the library, where the fire was quite vigorously burning by now. He studied me once again.

"There's no more pain," he said tentatively.

"There is sensation, but it's not exactly what we call pain. I'm going out for a little while. Oh, don't worry. I'll be back. I'm thirsting. I have to hunt."

His face went blank, but not so blank that I didn't see the blood in his cheeks, or all the tiny vessels in his eyes.

"Well, what did you think?" I asked. "That I'd given it up?"

"No, of course not."

"Well, then, care to come and watch?"

He said nothing, but I could see I'd frightened him.

"You must remember what I am," I said. "When you help me, you help the devil." I made a little gesture to his copy of *Faust*, still lying on the table. And there was that Lovecraft story. Hmmm.

"You don't have to take life to do it, do you?" he asked quite seriously.

But what a crude question.

I made a short derisive noise. "I like to take life," I said. I gestured to the tiger. "I'm a hunter as you were once. I think it's fun."

He looked at me for a long moment, his face full of a sort of troubled wonder and then he nodded slowly as if accepting this. But he was very far from accepting it.

"Have your supper while I'm gone," I said. "I can tell you're hungry. I can smell meat cooking somewhere in this house. And you can be certain that I intend to have my supper before I come back."

"You're quite determined that I'm to know *you*, aren't you?" he asked. "That there's to be no sentimentality or mistake."

"Exactly." I drew back my lips and showed him my fangs for a second. They are very small, actually, nothing compared to the leopard and the tiger, with which he kept company so obviously by choice. But this grimace always frightens mortals. It does more than frighten them. It actually shocks them. I think it sends some primal message of alarm through the organism which has little to do with its conscious courage or sophistication.

He blanched. He stood quite motionless, looking at me, and then gradually the warmth and the expression returned to his face.

"Very well," he said. "I'll be here when you come back. If you don't come back, I'll be furious! I won't speak to you again, I swear it. You vanish on me tonight, you'll never get another nod from me. It will be a crime against hospitality. You understand?"

"All right, all right!" I said with a shrug, though I was secretly touched that he wanted me here. I hadn't really been so sure, and I'd been so rude to him. "I'll come back. Besides, I want to know."

"What?"

"Why you aren't afraid of dying."

"Well, *you* aren't afraid of it, are you?"

I didn't answer. I saw the sun again, the great fiery ball becoming earth and sky, and I shuddered. Then I saw that oil lamp in my dream.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I *am* afraid of dying," I said with a nod for emphasis. "All my illusions are being shattered."

"You have illusions?" he asked quite honestly.

"Of course I do. One of my illusions was that no one could really refuse the Dark Gift, not knowingly …"

"Lestat, must I remind you that you refused it yourself?"

"David, I was a boy. I was being forced. I fought instinctively. But that had nothing to do with knowing."

"Don't sell yourself short. I think you would have refused even if you had fully understood."

"Now we're speaking about your illusions," I said. "I'm hungry. Get out of my way or I'll kill you."

"I don't believe you. You had better come back."

"I will. This time I'll keep the promise I made in my letter. You can say all you have to say."

I hunted the back streets of London. I was wandering near Charing Cross Station, looking for some petty cutthroat that would yield a mouthful even if his narrow little ambitions did sour my soul. But it didn't quite turn out that way.

There was an old woman walking there, shuffling along in a soiled coat, her feet bound with rags. Mad and bitter cold she was, and almost certain to die before morning, having stolen out of the back door of some place where they'd tried to lock her up, or so she bawled to the world in general, determined never to be caught again.

We made grand lovers! She had a name for me and a great warm cluster of memories, and there we were dancing in the gutter together, she and I, and I held her a long time in my arms. She was very well nourished, as so many beggars are in this century where food is so plentiful in the Western countries, and I drank slowly, oh, so slowly, savoring it, and feeling a rush all through my burnt skin.

When it was finished, I realized that I was experiencing the cold very keenly and had been all along. I was feeling all fluctuations of temperature with greater acuity. Interesting.

The wind was lashing me and I hated it. Maybe something of my flesh

had actually been burnt off. I didn't know. I felt the wet cold in my feet, and my hands hurt so much I had to bury them in my pockets. I caught those memories again of the French winter of my last year at home, of the young mortal country lord with a bed of hay, and only the dogs for companions. All the blood in the world seemed not enough suddenly. Time to feed again, and again.

They were derelicts, all of them, lured into the icy darkness from their shacks of trash and cardboard, and doomed, or so I told myself, moaning and feasting amid the stench of rancid sweat and urine, and phlegm. But the blood was blood.

When the clocks struck ten, I was still thirsting, and victims were still plentiful, but I was tired of it, and it didn't matter anymore.

I traveled for many blocks, into the fashionable West End, and there entered a dark little shop, full of smart, finely cut garments for gentlemen—ah, the ready-made wealth of these years—and outfitted myself to my taste in gray tweed pants and belted coat, with a thick white wool sweater, and even a pair of very pale green tinted glasses with delicate gold frames. Then off I wandered, back into the chill night full of swirling snowflakes, singing to myself and doing a little tap dance under the street lamp just as I used to do for Claudia and—

Slam! Bang! Up stepped this fierce and beautiful young tough with wine on his breath, divinely sleazy, who drew a knife on me, all set to murder me for the money I didn't have, which reminded me that I was a miserable thief for having just stolen a wardrobe of fine Irish clothes. Hmmm. But I was lost again in the tight hot embrace, crushing the bastard's ribs, sucking him dry as a dead rat in a summer attic, and he went down in amazement and ecstasy, one hand clutching painfully, to the very last, at my hair.

He did have some money in his pockets. What luck. I put that in the clothier's for the garments I'd taken, which seemed more than adequate when I did my arithmetic, at which I am not so good, preternatural powers or no. Then I wrote a little note of thanks, unsigned, of course. And I locked up the shop door tight with a few little telepathic twists, and off I went again.

FIVE

It was striking midnight when I reached Talbot Manor. It was as if I had never seen the place before. I had time now to roam the maze in the snow, and to study the pattern of clipped shrubbery, and imagine what the garden would be come spring. Beautiful old place.

Then there were the close dark little rooms themselves, built to hold out the cold English winters, and the little lead-mullioned windows, many of which were full of light now, and most inviting in the snowy dark.

David had finished his supper, obviously, and the servants—an old man and woman—were at work still in the kitchen belowstairs while the lord changed his clothes in his bedroom on the second floor.

I watched him as he put on, over his pajamas, a long black dressing gown with black velvet lapels and sash that made him look very much like a cleric, though it was far too ornately patterned to be a cassock, especially with the white silk scarf tucked in at the neck.

Then he made his way down the stairs.

I entered by my favorite door at the end of the passage and came up beside him in the library as he bent to rake the fire.

"Ah, you did come back," he said, trying to conceal his delight. "Good Lord, but you come and go so quietly!"

"Yes, it's very annoying, isn't it?" I looked at the Bible on the table, the copy of *Faust*, and the little short story by Lovecraft, still stapled, but smoothed out. There was David's decanter of Scotch also and a pretty thick-bottomed crystal glass.

I stared at the short story, the memory of the anxious young man coming back to me. So odd the way he moved. A vague tremor passed through me at the thought of his having spotted me in three distinctly different places. I'd probably never lay eyes on him again. On the other hand … But there was time to deal with this pest of a mortal. David was on my mind now, and the delicious awareness that we had the night to talk to each other.

"Wherever did you get those handsome clothes?" David asked. His eyes

passed over me slowly, lingeringly, and he seemed not to notice my attention to his books.

"Oh, a little shop somewhere. I never steal the garments of my victims, if that's what you mean. And besides, I'm too addicted to lowlife and they don't dress well enough for that sort of thing."

I settled in the chair opposite his, which was my chair now, I supposed. Deep, pliant leather, creaking springs, but very comfortable, with a high winged back and broad substantial arms. His own chair did not match it but was just as good, and a little more creased and worn.

He stood before the flames, still studying me. Then he sat down too. He took the glass stopper from the crystal decanter, filled his glass, and lifted it in a little salute.

He took a deep swallow and winced slightly as the liquid obviously warmed his throat.

Suddenly, vividly, I remembered that particular sensation. I remembered being in the loft of the barn on my land in France, and drinking cognac just like that, and even making that grimace, and my mortal friend and lover, Nicki, snatching the bottle greedily from my hand.

"I see you are yourself again," David said with sudden warmth, lowering his voice slightly as he peered at me. He sat back, with the glass resting on the right arm of his chair. He looked very dignified, though far more at ease than I had ever seen him. His hair was thick and wavy, and had become a beautiful shade of dark gray.

"Do I seem myself?" I asked.

"You have that mischievous look in your eye," he answered under his breath, still scanning me intently. "There's a little smile on your lips. Won't leave for more than a second when you speak. And the skin—it makes a remarkable difference. I pray you're not in pain. You aren't, are you?"

I made a small dismissive gesture. I could hear his heartbeat. It was ever so slightly weaker than it had been in Amsterdam. Now and then it was irregular as well.

"How long will your skin stay dark like this?" he asked.

"Years, perhaps, seems one of the ancient ones told me so. Didn't I write about it in *The Queen of the Damned?*" I thought of Marius and how angry he was with me in general. How disapproving he would be of

what I'd done.

"It was Maharet, your ancient red-haired one," David said. "In your book, she claimed to have done the very thing merely to darken her skin."

"What courage," I whispered. "And you don't believe in her existence, do you? Though I am sitting right here with you now."

"Oh, I do believe in her. Of course I do. I believe everything you've written. But I *know* you! Tell me—what actually happened in the desert? Did you really believe you would die?"

"You would ask that question, David, and right off the bat." I sighed. "Well, I can't claim that I did really believe it. I was probably playing my usual games. I swear to God I don't tell lies to others. But I lie to myself. I don't think I can die now, at least not in any way that I myself could contrive."

He let out a long sigh.

"So why aren't *you* afraid of dying, David? I don't mean to torment you with the old offer. I honestly can't quite figure it out. You're really, truly not afraid to die, and that I simply do not understand. Because you *can* die, of course."

Was he having doubts? He didn't answer immediately. Yet he seemed powerfully stimulated, I could see that. I could all but hear his brain working, though of course I couldn't hear his thoughts.

"Why the *Faust* play, David? Am I Mephistopheles?" I asked. "Are you Faust?"

He shook his head. "I may be Faust," he said finally, taking another drink of the Scotch, "but you're not the devil, that's perfectly clear." He gave a sigh.

"I have wrecked things for you, though, haven't I? I knew it in Amsterdam. You don't stay in the Motherhouse unless you have to. I'm not driving you mad, but I've had a very bad effect, have I not?"

Again, he didn't answer right away. He was looking at me with his large prominent black eyes, and obviously considering the question from all angles. The deep lines of his face—the creases in his forehead, the lines at the corners of his eyes and around the edges of his mouth—reinforced his genial and open expression. There was not a sour note to this being, but there was unhappiness beneath the surface, and it was tangled with deep considerations, going back through a long life.

“Would have happened anyway, Lestat,” he said finally. “There are reasons why I’m no longer so good at being the Superior General. Would have happened anyway, I’m relatively certain of that.”

“Explain it to me. I thought you were in the very womb of the order, that it was your life.”

He shook his head. “I was always an unlikely candidate for the Talamasca. I’ve mentioned how I spent my youth in India. I could have lived my life that way. I’m no scholar in the conventional sense, never was. Nevertheless I *am* like Faust in the play. I’m old, and I haven’t cracked the secrets of the universe. Not at all. I thought I had when I was young. The first time I saw … a vision. The first time I knew a witch, the first time I heard the voice of a spirit, the first time I called up a spirit and made it do my bidding. I thought I had! But that was nothing. Those are earthbound things … earthbound mysteries. Or mysteries I’ll never solve, at any rate.”

He paused, as if he wanted to say something more, something in particular. But then he merely lifted the glass and drank almost absently, and this time without the grimace, for that obviously had been for the first drink of the night. He stared at the glass, and refilled it from the decanter.

I hated it that I couldn’t read his thoughts, that I caught not the slightest flickering emanations behind his words.

“You know why I became a member of the Talamasca?” he asked. “It had nothing to do with scholarship at all. Never dreamed I’d be confined to the Motherhouse, wading through papers, and typing files into the computer, and sending faxes off all over the world. Nothing like that at all. It started with another hunting expedition, a new frontier, so to speak, a trip to far-off Brazil. That's where I discovered the occult, you might say, in the little crooked streets of old Rio, and it seemed every bit as exciting and dangerous as my old tiger hunts had ever been. That's what drew me—the danger. And how I came to be so far from it, I don’t know.”

I didn’t reply, but something came clear to me, that there was obviously a danger in his knowing me. He must have liked the danger. I had thought he was possessed of a scholar’s naïveté about it, but now this didn’t seem to be the case.

“Yes,” he said at once, his eyes growing wide as he smiled. “Exactly.

Although I can't honestly believe you'd ever harm me."

"Don't deceive yourself," I said suddenly. "And you do, you know. You commit the old sin. You believe in what you see. I am not what you see."

"How so?"

"Ah, come now. I look like an angel, but I'm not. The old rules of nature encompass many creatures like me. We're beautiful like the diamond-backed snake, or the striped tiger, yet we're merciless killers. You do let your eyes deceive you. But I don't want to quarrel with you. Tell me this story. What happened in Rio? I'm eager to know."

A little sadness came over me as I spoke these words. I wanted to say, if I cannot have you as my vampire companion, then let me know you as a mortal. It thrilled me, softly and palpably, that we sat there together, as we did.

"All right," he said, "you've made your point and I acknowledge it. Drawing close to you years ago in the auditorium where you were singing, seeing you the very first time you came to me—it did have the dark lure of danger. And that you tempt me with your offer—that, too, is dangerous, for I am only human, as we both know."

I sat back, a little happier, lifting my leg and digging my heel into the leather seat of the old chair. "I like people to be a little afraid of me," I said with a shrug. "But what happened in Rio?"

"I came full in the face of the religion of the spirits," he said. "Candomble. You know the word?"

Again I gave a little shrug. "Heard it once or twice," I said. "I'll go there sometime, maybe soon." I thought in a flash of the big cities of South America, of her rain forests, and of the Amazon. Yes, I had quite an appetite for such an adventure, and the despair that had carried me down into the Gobi seemed very far away. I was glad I was still alive, and quietly I refused to be ashamed.

"Oh, if I could see Rio again," he said softly, more to himself than to me. "Of course, she isn't what she was in those days. She's a world of skyscrapers now and big luxury hotels. But I would love to see that curving shoreline again, to see Sugar Loaf Mountain, and the statue of Christ atop Corcovado. I don't believe there is a more dazzling piece of geography on earth. Why did I let so many years go by without returning to Rio?"

"Why can't you go anytime that you wish?" I asked. I felt a strong

protectiveness for him suddenly. “Surely that bunch of monks in London can’t keep you from going. Besides, you’re the boss.”

He laughed in the most gentlemanly manner. “No, they wouldn’t stop me,” he said. “It’s whether or not I have the stamina, both mental and physical. But that’s quite beside the point here, I wanted to tell you what happened. Or perhaps it is the point, I don’t know.”

“You have the means to go to Brazil if you want to?”

“Oh, yes, that has never been an issue. My father was a clever man when it came to money. As a consequence I’ve never had to give it much thought.”

“I’d put the money in your hands if you didn’t have it.”

He gave me one of his warmest, most tolerant smiles. “I’m old,” he said, “I’m lonely, and something of a fool, as any man must be if he has any wisdom at all. But I’m not poor, thank heaven.”

“So what happened to you in Brazil? How did it begin?”

He started to speak, then fell silent.

“You really mean to remain here? To listen to what I have to say?”

“Yes,” I said immediately. “Please.” I realized I wanted nothing more in all the world. I had not a single plan or ambition in my heart, not a thought for anything else but being here with him. The simplicity of it stunned me somewhat.

Still he seemed reluctant to confide in me. Then a subtle change came over him, a sort of relaxation, a yielding perhaps.

Finally he began.

“It was after the Second World War,” he said. “The India of my boyhood was gone, simply gone. And besides, I was hungry for new places. I got up a hunting expedition with my friends for the Amazon jungles. I was obsessed with the prospect of the Amazon jungles. We were after the great South American jaguar—” He gestured to the spotted skin of a cat I had not noticed before, mounted upon a stand in a corner of the room. “How I wanted to track that cat.”

“Seems that you did.”

“Not immediately,” he said with a short ironic laugh. “We decided to preface our expedition with a nice luxurious holiday in Rio, a couple of weeks to roam Copacabana Beach, and all the old colonial sites—the monasteries, churches, and so forth. And understand, the center of the city was different in that time, a warren of little narrow streets, and

wonderful old architecture! I was so eager for it, for the sheer alien quality of it! That's what sends us Englishmen into the tropics. We have to get away from all this propriety, this tradition—and immerse ourselves in some seemingly savage culture which we can never tame or really understand."

His whole manner was changing as he spoke; he was becoming even more vigorous and energetic, eyes brightening and words flowing more quickly in that crisp British accent, which I so loved.

"Well, the city itself surpassed all expectations, of course. Yet it was nothing as entrancing as the people. The people in Brazil are like no people I've ever seen. For one thing, they're exceptionally beautiful, and though everyone agrees on this point, no one knows why. No, I'm quite serious," he said, when he saw me smile. "Perhaps it's the blending of Portuguese and African, and then toss in the Indian blood. I honestly can't say. The fact is, they are extraordinarily attractive and they have extremely sensuous voices. Why, you could fall in love with their voices, you could end up kissing their voices; and the music, the bossa nova, that's their language all right."

"You should have stayed there."

"Oh, no!" he said, taking another quick sip of the Scotch. "Well, to continue. I developed a passion, shall we say, for this boy, Carlos, the very first week. I was absolutely swept away; all we did was drink and make love for days and nights on end in my suite in the Palace Hotel. Quite truly obscene."

"Your friends waited?"

"No, laid down the law. Come with us now, or we leave you. But it was perfectly fine with them if Carlos came along." He made a little gesture with his right hand. "Ah, these were all sophisticated gentlemen, of course."

"Of course."

"But the decision to take Carlos proved to be a dreadful mistake. His mother was a Candomble priestess, though I hadn't the slightest idea of it. She didn't want her boy going off into the Amazon jungles. She wanted him going to school. She sent the spirits after me."

He paused, looking at me, perhaps trying to gauge my reaction.

"That must have been wonderful fun," I said.

"They pummeled me in the darkness. They picked up the bed off the

floor and dumped me out! They turned the taps in the shower so that I was nearly scalded. They filled my teacups with urine. After a full seven days, I thought I was going out of my mind. I'd gone from annoyance and incredulity to sheer terror. Dishes flew off the table in front of me. Bells rang in my ears. Bottles went crashing from the shelves. Wherever I went, I saw dark-faced individuals watching me."

"You knew it was this woman?"

"Not at first. But Carlos finally broke down and confessed everything. His mother didn't intend to remove the curse until I left. Well, I left that very night.

"I came back to London, exhausted and half mad. But it didn't do any good. They came with me. Same things started to happen right here in Talbot Manor. Doors slamming, furniture moving, the bells ringing all the time in the servants' pantry belowstairs. Everyone was going mad. And my mother—my mother had been more or less of a spiritualist, always running to various mediums all over London. She brought in the Talamasca. I told them the whole story, and they started explaining Candomble and spiritism to me."

"They exorcised the demons?"

"No. But after about a week's intense study in the library of the Motherhouse and extensive interviews with the few members who had been to Rio, I was able to get the demons under control myself. Everyone was quite surprised. Then when I decided to go back to Brazil, I astonished them. They warned me this priestess was plenty powerful enough to kill me.

" 'That's exactly it,' I said to them. 'I want that sort of power myself. I'm going to become her pupil. She's going to teach me.' They begged me not to go. I told them I'd give them a written report on my return. You can understand how I felt. I'd seen the work of these invisible entities. I'd felt them touch me. I'd seen objects hurtling through the air. I thought the great world of the invisible was opening up to me. I *had* to go there. Why, nothing could have discouraged me from it. Nothing at all."

"Yes, I see," I said. "It *was* as exciting as hunting big game."

"Precisely." He shook his head. "Those were the days. I suppose I thought if the war hadn't killed me, nothing could kill me." He drifted off suddenly, into his memories, locking me out.

“You confronted the woman?”

He nodded.

“Confronted her and impressed her, and then bribed her beyond her wildest dreams. I told her I wanted to become her apprentice. I swore on my knees to her that I wanted to learn, that I wouldn’t leave until I’d penetrated the mystery, and learned all that I could.” He gave a little laugh. “I’m not sure this woman had ever encountered an anthropologist, even an amateur, and I suppose that is what I might have been called. Whatever, I stayed a year in Rio. And believe you me, that was the most remarkable year of my life. I only left Rio finally, because I knew if I didn’t, I never would. David Talbot the Englishman would have been no more.”

“You learned how to summon the spirits?”

He nodded. Again, he was remembering, seeing images I couldn’t see. He was troubled, faintly sad. “I wrote it all down,” he said finally. “It’s in the files at the Motherhouse. Many, many have read the story over the years.”

“Never tempted to publish it?”

“Can’t do it. It’s part of being in the Talamasca. We never publish outside.”

“You’re afraid you’ve wasted your life, aren’t you?”

“No. I’m not, really … Though what I said earlier is true. I haven’t cracked the secrets of the universe. I’ve never even passed the point I reached in Brazil. Oh, there were shocking revelations afterwards. I remember the first night I read the files on the vampires, how incredulous I was, and then those strange moments when I went down into the vaults and picked through the evidence. But in the end it was like Candomble. I only penetrated so far.”

“Believe me, I know. David, the world is meant to remain a mystery. If there is any explanation, we are not meant to hit upon it, of that much I’m sure.”

“I think you’re right,” he said sadly.

“And I think you’re more afraid of death than you will admit. You’ve taken a stubborn tack with me, a moral one, and I don’t blame you. Maybe you’re old enough and wise enough to really know you don’t want to be one of us. But don’t go talking about death as if it’s going to give you answers. I suspect death is awful. You just stop and there’s no

more life, and no more chance to know anything at all."

"No. I can't agree with you there, Lestat," he said. "I simply can't." He was gazing at the tiger again, and then he said, "Somebody formed the fearful symmetry, Lestat. Somebody had to. The tiger and the lamb … it couldn't have happened all by itself."

I shook my head. "More intelligence went into the creation of that old poem, David, than ever went into the creation of the world. You sound like an Episcopalian. But I know what you're saying. I've thought it from time to time myself. Stupidly simple. There has to be something *to* all this. There has to be! So many missing pieces. The more you consider it, the more atheists begin to sound like religious fanatics. But I think it's a delusion. It is all process and nothing more."

"Missing pieces, Lestat. Of course! Imagine for a moment that I made a robot, a perfect replica of myself. Imagine I gave him all the encyclopedias of information that I could—you know, programmed it into his computer brain. Well, it would only be a matter of time before he'd come to me, and say, 'David, where's the rest of it? The explanation! How did it all start? Why did you leave out the explanation for why there was ever a big bang in the first place, or what precisely happened when the minerals and other inert compounds suddenly evolved into organic cells? What about the great gap in the fossil record?' "

I laughed delightedly.

"And I'd have to break it to the poor chap," he said, "that there was no explanation. That I didn't have the missing pieces."

"David, nobody has the missing pieces. Nobody ever will."

"Don't be so sure."

"That's your hope, then? That's why you're reading the Bible? You couldn't crack the occult secrets of the universe, and now you've gone back to God?"

"God *is* the occult secret of the universe," David said, thoughtfully, almost as if brooding upon it, face very relaxed and almost young. He was staring at the glass in his hand, maybe liking the way the light collected in the crystal. I didn't know. I had to wait for him to speak.

"I think the answer might be in Genesis," he said finally, "I really do."

"David, you amaze me. Talk about missing pieces. Genesis is a bunch of fragments."

“Yes, but telling fragments remain to us, Lestat. God created man in his own image and likeness. I suspect that that is the key. Nobody knows what it really means, you know. The Hebrews didn’t think God was a man.”

“And how can it be the key?”

“God is a creative force, Lestat. And so are we. He told Adam, ‘Increase and multiply.’ That’s what the first organic cells did, Lestat, increased and multiplied. Not merely changed shape but replicated themselves. God is a creative force. He made the whole universe out of himself through cell division. That’s why the devils are so full of envy—the bad angels, I mean. They are *not* creative creatures; they have no bodies, no cells, they’re spirit. And I suspect it wasn’t envy so much as a form of suspicion—that God was making a mistake in making another engine of creativity in Adam, so like Himself. I mean the angels probably felt the physical universe was bad enough, with all the replicating cells, but thinking, talking beings who could increase and multiply? They were probably outraged by the whole experiment. That was their sin.”

“So you’re saying God isn’t pure spirit.”

“That’s right. God has a body. Always did. The secret of cell-dividing life lies within God. And all living cells have a tiny part of God’s spirit in them, Lestat, that’s the missing piece as to what makes life happen in the first place, what separates it from nonlife. It’s exactly like your vampiric genesis. You told us that the spirit of Amel—one evil entity—infused the bodies of all the vampires … Well, men share in the spirit of God in the same way.”

“Good Lord, David, you’re going out of your mind. We’re a mutation.”

“Ah, yes, but you exist in our universe, and your mutation mirrors the mutation that we are. Besides, others have struck upon the same theory. God is the fire, and we are all tiny flames; and when we die, those tiny flames go back into the fire of God. But the important thing is to realize that God Himself is Body *and* Soul! Absolutely.

“Western civilization has been founded upon an inversion. But it is my honest belief that in our daily deeds we know and honor the truth. It is only when we talk religion that we say God is pure spirit and always was and always will be, and that the flesh is evil. The truth is in Genesis, it’s there. I’ll tell you what the big bang was, Lestat. It was when the cells of God began to divide.”

“This really is a lovely theory, David. Was God surprised?”

“No, but the angels were. I’m quite serious. I’ll tell you the superstitious part—the religious belief that God is perfect. He’s obviously not.”

“What a relief,” I said. “It explains so much.”

“You’re laughing at me now. I don’t blame you. But you’re absolutely right. It explains everything. God has made many mistakes. Many, many mistakes. As surely God Himself knows! And I suspect the angels tried to warn Him. The Devil became the Devil because he tried to warn God. God is love. But I’m not sure God is absolutely brilliant.”

I was trying to suppress my laughter, but I couldn’t do it entirely. “David, if you keep this up, you’ll be struck by lightning.”

“Nonsense. God does want us to figure it out.”

“No. That I can’t accept.”

“You mean you accept the rest?” he said with another little laugh. “No, but I’m quite serious. Religion is primitive in its illogical conclusions. Imagine a perfect God allowing for the Devil to come into existence. No, that’s simply never made sense.

“The entire flaw in the Bible is the notion that God is perfect. It represents a failure of imagination on the part of the early scholars. It’s responsible for every impossible theological question as to good and evil with which we’ve been wrestling through the centuries. God is good, however, wondrously good. Yes, God is love. But no creative force is perfect. That’s clear.”

“And the Devil? Is there any new intelligence about him?”

He regarded me for a moment with just a touch of impatience. “You are such a cynical being,” he whispered.

“No, I’m not,” I said. “I honestly want to know. I have a particular interest in the Devil, obviously. I speak of him much more often than I speak of God. I can’t figure out really why mortals love him so much, I mean, why they love the idea of him. But they do.”

“Because they don’t believe in him,” David said. “Because a perfectly evil Devil makes even less sense than a perfect God. Imagine, the Devil never learning anything during all this time, never changing his mind about being the Devil. It’s an insult to our intellect, such an idea.”

“So what’s your truth behind the lie?”

“He’s not purely unredeemable. He’s merely part of God’s plan. He’s a

spirit allowed to tempt and try humans. He disapproves of humans, of the entire experiment. See, that was the nature of the Devil's Fall, as I see it. The Devil didn't think the idea would work. But the key, Lestat, is understanding that God is matter! God is physical, God is the Lord of Cell Division, and the Devil abhors the excess of letting all this cell division run wild."

Again, he went into one of his maddening pauses, eyes widening again with wonder, and then he said:

"I have another theory about the Devil."

"Tell me."

"There's more than one of them. And nobody appointed much likes the job." This he said almost in a murmur. He was distracted, as if he wanted to say more, but didn't.

I laughed outright.

"Now *that* I can understand," I said. "Who would like the job of being the Devil? And to think that one can't possibly win. And especially considering that the Devil was an angel at the start of it all, and supposed to be very smart."

"Exactly." He pointed his finger at me. "Your little story about Rembrandt. The Devil, if he had a brain, should have acknowledged the genius of Rembrandt."

"And the goodness of Faust."

"Ah, yes, you saw me reading *Faust* in Amsterdam, didn't you? And you purchased your own copy as a consequence."

"How did you know that?"

"The proprietor of the bookstore told me the next afternoon. A strange blond-haired young Frenchman came in moments after I'd left, bought the very same book, and stood in the street reading it for half an hour without moving. Whitest skin the man had ever seen. Had to be you, of course."

I shook my head and smiled. "I do these clumsy things. It's a wonder some scientist hasn't scooped me up in a net."

"That's no joke, my friend. You were very careless in Miami several nights ago. Two victims drained entirely of blood."

This created such instant confusion in me that at first I said nothing, then only that it was a wonder the news had reached him on this side of the sea. I felt the old despair touch me with its black wing.

“Bizarre killings make international headlines,” he answered. “Besides, the Talamasca receives reports of all sorts of things. We have people who clip for us in cities everywhere, sending in items on all aspects of the paranormal for our files. ‘Vampire Killer Strikes Twice in Miami.’ Several sources sent it along.”

“But they don’t really believe it was a vampire, you know they don’t.”

“No, but you keep it up and they might come to believe it. That’s what you wanted to happen before with your little rock music career. You wanted them to catch on. It’s not inconceivable. And this sport of yours with the serial killers! You’re leaving quite a trail of those."

This truly astonished me. My hunting of the killers had taken me back and forth across continents. I had never thought anyone would connect these widely scattered deaths, except Marius, of course.

“How did you come to figure it out?”

“I told you. Such stories always come into our hands. Satanism, vampirism, voodoo, witchcraft, sightings of werewolves; it all comes across my desk. Most of it goes into the trash, obviously. But I know the grain of truth when I see it. And your killings are very easy to spot.

“You’ve been going after these mass murderers for some time now. You leave their bodies in the open. You left this last one in a hotel, where he was found only an hour after his death. As for the old woman, you were equally careless! Her son found her the following day. No wounds for the coroner to find on either victim. You’re a nameless celebrity in Miami, quite overshadowing the notoriety of the poor dead man in the hotel.”

“I don’t give a damn,” I said angrily. But I did, of course. I deplored my own carelessness, yet I did nothing to correct it. Well, this must surely change. Tonight, had I done any better? It seemed cowardly to plead excuses for such things.

David was watching me carefully. If there was one dominant characteristic to David, it was his alertness. “It’s not inconceivable,” he said, “that you could be caught.”

I gave a scornful, dismissive laugh.

“They *could* lock you up in a laboratory, study you in a cage of space-age glass.”

“That’s impossible. But what an interesting thought.”

“I knew it! You want it to happen.”

I shrugged. “Might be fun for a little while. Look, it’s a sheer impossibility. The night of my one appearance as a rock singer, all manner of bizarre things happened. The mortal world merely swept up afterwards and closed its files. As for the old woman in Miami, that was a terrible mishap. Should never have happened—” I stopped. What about those who died in London this very night?

“But you enjoy taking life,” he said. “You said it was fun.”

I felt such pain suddenly I wanted to leave. But I’d promised I wouldn’t. I just sat there, staring into the fire, thinking about the Gobi Desert, and the bones of the big lizards and the way the light of the sun had filled up the entire world. I thought of Claudia. I smelled the wick of the lamp.

“I’m sorry, I don’t mean to be cruel to you,” he said.

“Well, why the hell not? I can’t think of a finer choice for cruelty. Besides, I’m not always so kind to you.”

“What do you really want? What is your overriding passion?”

I thought of Marius, and Louis, who had both asked me that same question many a time.

“What could redeem what I’ve done?” I asked. “I meant to put an end to the killer. He was a man-eating tiger, my brother. I lay in wait for him. But the old woman—she was a child in the forest, nothing more. But what does it matter?” I thought of those wretched creatures whom I’d taken earlier this evening. I’d left such carnage in the back alleys of London. “I wish I could remember that it doesn’t matter,” I said. “I meant to save her. But what good would one act of mercy be in the face of all I’ve done? I’m damned if there is a God or a Devil. Now why don’t you go on with your religious talk? The odd thing is, I find talk of God and the Devil remarkably soothing. Tell me more about the Devil. He’s changeable, surely. He’s smart. He must feel. Why ever would he remain static?”

“Exactly. You know what it says in the Book of Job.”

“Remind me.”

“Well, Satan is there in heaven, with God. God says, where have you been? And Satan says, roaming around the earth! It’s a regular conversation. And they begin arguing about Job. Satan believes Job’s goodness is founded entirely upon his good fortune. And God agrees to let Satan torment Job. This is the most nearly true picture of the

situation which we possess. God doesn't know everything. The Devil is a good friend of his. And the whole thing is an experiment. And this Satan is a far cry from being *the* Devil as we know him now, worldwide."

"You're really speaking of these ideas as if they were real beings …"

"I think they are real," he said, his voice trailing off slightly as he fell into his thoughts. Then he roused himself. "I want to tell you something. Actually I should have confessed it before now. In a way, I'm as superstitious and religious as the next man. Because all this is based on a vision of sorts—you know, the sort of revelation that affects one's reason."

"No, I don't know. I have dreams but without revelation," I said. "Explain, please."

He sank back into reverie again, looking at the fire. "Don't shut me out," I said softly.

"Hmmm. Right. I was thinking how to describe it. Well, you know I am a Candomble priest still. I mean I can summon invisible forces: the pest spirits, the astral tramps, whatever one wants to call them … the poltergeist, the little haunts. That means I must have always had a latent ability to see spirits."

"Yes. I suppose …"

"Well, I did see something once, something inexplicable, before I ever went to Brazil."

"Yes?"

"Before Brazil, I'd pretty much discounted it. In fact, it was so disturbing, so perfectly unaccountable, that I'd put it out of my mind by the time I went to Rio. Yet now, I think of it all the time. I can't stop myself from thinking of it. And that's why I've turned to the Bible, as if I'll find some wisdom there."

"Tell me."

"Happened in Paris right before the war. I was there with my mother. I was in a café on the Left Bank, and I don't even remember now which café it was, only that it was a lovely spring day and a simply grand time to be in Paris, as all the songs say. I was drinking a beer, reading the English papers, and I realized I was overhearing a conversation." He drifted away again. "I wish I knew what really happened," he murmured under his breath.

He sat forward, gathered up the poker in his right hand, and jabbed at

the logs, sending a plume of fiery sparks up the dark bricks.

I wanted desperately to pull him back, but I waited. At last he went on.

"I was in this café, as I said."

"Yes."

"And I realized I was overhearing this strange conversation … and it wasn't in English and it wasn't in French … and gradually I came to know that it wasn't in any language really, and yet it was fully understandable to me. I put down my paper, and began to concentrate. On and on it went. It was a sort of argument. And suddenly I didn't know whether or not the voices were audible in any conventional sense. I wasn't sure anyone else could actually hear this! I looked up and slowly turned around.

"And there they were … two beings, seated at the table talking to each other, and just for a moment, it seemed normal—two men in conversation. I looked back at my paper, and this swimming feeling came over me. I had to anchor myself to something, to fix on the paper for a moment and then the tabletop, and make the swimming cease. The noise of the café came back like a full orchestra. And I knew I'd just turned and looked at two individuals who weren't human beings.

"I turned around again, forcing myself to focus tightly, to be aware of things, keenly aware. And there they were still, and it was painfully clear they were illusory. They simply weren't of the same fabric as everything else. Do you know what I'm saying? I can break it down into parts. They weren't being illuminated by the same light, for instance, they existed in some realm where the light was from another source."

"Like the light in Rembrandt."

"Yes, rather like that. Their clothes and their faces were smoother than those of human beings. Why, the whole vision was of a different texture, and that texture was uniform in all its details."

"Did they see you?"

"No. I mean to say, they didn't look at me, or acknowledge me. They looked at each other, they went on talking, and I picked up the thread again instantly. It was God talking to the Devil and telling the Devil that he must go on doing the job. And the Devil didn't want to do it. He explained that his term had already been too long. The same thing was happening to him that had happened to all the others. God said that He

understood, but the Devil ought to know how important he was, he couldn't simply shirk his duties, it wasn't that simple, God needed him, and needed him to be strong. And all this was very amicable."

"What did they look like?"

"That's the worst part of it. I don't know. At the time I saw two vague shapes, large, definitely male, or assuming male form, shall we say, and pleasant-looking—nothing monstrous, nothing out of the ordinary really. I wasn't aware of any absence of particulars—you know, hair color, facial features, that sort of thing. The two figures seemed quite complete. But when I tried to reconstruct the event afterwards, I couldn't recall any details! I don't think the illusion *was* that nearly complete. I think I was satisfied by it, but the sense of completeness sprang from something else."

"From what?"

"The content, the meaning, of course."

"They never saw you, never knew you were there."

"My dear boy, they had to know I was there. They must have known. They must have been doing it for my benefit! How else could I have been allowed to see it?"

"I don't know, David. Maybe they didn't mean for you to see. Maybe it's that some people can see, and some people can't. Maybe it was a little rip in the other fabric, the fabric of everything else in the café."

"That could be true. But I fear it wasn't. I fear I was meant to see it and it was meant to have some effect on me. And that's the horror, Lestat. It didn't have a very great effect."

"You didn't change your life on account of it."

"Oh, no, not at all. Why, two days later I doubted I'd even seen it. And with each telling to another person, with each little verbal confrontation —'David, you've gone crackers'—it became ever more uncertain and vague. No, I never did anything about it."

"But what was there to do? What can anybody do on account of any revelation but live a good life? David, surely you told your brethren in the Talamasca about the vision."

"Yes, yes, I told them. But that was much later, after Brazil, when I filed my long memoirs, as a good member should do. I told them the whole story, such as it was, of course."

"And what did they say?"

“Lestat, the Talamasca never says much of anything, that’s what one has to face. ‘We watch and we are always there.’ To tell the truth, it wasn’t a very popular vision to go talking about with the other members. Speak of spirits in Brazil and you have an audience. But the Christian God and His Devil? No, I fear the Talamasca is subject somewhat to prejudices and even fads, like any other institution. The story raised a few eyebrows. I don’t recall much else. But then when you’re talking to gentlemen who have seen werewolves, and been seduced by vampires, and fought witches, and talked to ghosts, well, what do you expect?”

“But God and the Devil,” I said, laughing. “David, that's the big time. Maybe the other members envied you more than you realized.”

“No, they didn’t take it seriously,” he said, acknowledging my humor with a little laugh of his own. “I’m surprised that you’ve taken it seriously, to be quite frank.”

He rose suddenly, excitedly, and walked across the room to the window, and pushed back the drape with his hand. He stood trying to see out into the snow-filled night.

“David, what could these apparitions have meant for you to do?”

“I don’t know,” he said, in a bitter discouraged voice. “That’s my point. I’m seventy-four, and I don’t know. I'll die without knowing. And if there is no illumination, then so be it. That in itself is an answer, whether I am conscious enough to know it or not.”

“Come back and sit down, if you will. I like to see your face when you talk.”

He obeyed, almost automatically, seating himself and reaching for the empty glass, eyes shifting to the fire again.

“What do you think, Lestat, really? Inside of you? Is there a God or a Devil? I mean truly, what do you believe?”

I thought for a long time before I answered. Then:

“I do think God exists. I don’t like to say so. But I do. And probably some form of Devil exists as well. I admit—it’s a matter of the missing pieces, as we’ve said. And you might well have seen the Supreme Being and his Adversary in that Paris café. But it’s part of their maddening game that we can never figure it out for certain. You want a likely explanation for their behavior? Why they let you have a little glimpse? They wanted to get you embroiled in some sort of religious response! They play with us that way. They throw out visions and miracles and

bits and pieces of divine revelation. And we go off full of zeal and found a church. It's all part of their game, part of their ongoing and endless talk. And you know? I think your view of them—an imperfect God and a learning Devil—is just about as good as anyone else's interpretation. I think you've hit on it."

He was staring at me intently, but he didn't reply.

"No," I continued. "We aren't meant to know the answers. We aren't meant to know if our souls travel from body to body through reincarnation. We aren't meant to know if God made the world. If He's Allah or Yahweh or Shiva or Christ. He plants the doubts as He plants the revelations. We're all His fools."

Still he didn't answer.

"Quit the Talamasca, David," I said. "Go to Brazil before you're too old. Go back to India. See the places you want to see."

"Yes, I think I should do that," he said softly. "And they'll probably take care of it all for me. The elders have already met to discuss the entire question of David and his recent absences from the Motherhouse. They'll retire me with a nice pension, of course."

"Do they know that you've seen me?"

"Oh, yes. That's part of the problem. The elders have forbidden contact. Very amusing really, since they are so desperate to lay eyes upon you themselves. They know when you come round the Motherhouse, of course."

"I know they do," I said. "What do you mean, they've forbidden contact?"

"Oh, just the standard admonition," he said, eyes still on the burning log. "All very medieval, really, and based upon an old directive: 'You are not to encourage this being, not to engage in or prolong conversation; if he persists in his visits, you are to do your best to lure him to some populated place. It is well known that these creatures are loath to attack when surrounded by mortals. And never, never are you to attempt to learn secrets from this being, or to believe for one moment that any emotions evinced by him are genuine, for these creatures dissemble with remarkable ability, and have been known, for reasons that cannot be analyzed, to drive mortals mad. This has befallen sophisticated investigators as well as hapless innocents with whom the vampires come in contact. You are warned to report any and all meetings, sightings,

etc., to the elders without delay.' "

"Do you really know this by heart?"

"I wrote the directive myself," he said, with a little smile. "I've given it to many other members over the years."

"They know I'm here now?"

"No, of course not. I stopped reporting our meetings to them a long time ago." He fell into his thoughts again, and then: "Do you search for God?" he asked.

"Certainly not," I answered. "I can't imagine a bigger waste of time, even if one has centuries to waste. I'm finished with all such quests. I look to the world around me now for truths, truths mired in the physical and in the aesthetic, truths I can fully embrace. I care about your vision because you saw it, and you told me, and I love you. But that's all."

He sat back, gazing off again into the shadows of the room. "Won't matter, David. In time, you'll die. And probably so shall I."

His smile was warm again as though he could not accept this except as a sort of joke.

There was a long silence, during which he poured a little more Scotch and drank it more slowly than he had before. He wasn't even close to being intoxicated. I saw that he planned it that way. When I was mortal I always drank to get drunk. But then I'd been very young, and very poor, castle or no castle, and most of the brew was bad.

"You search for God," he said, with a little nod.

"The hell I do. You're too full of your own authority. You know perfectly well that I am not the boy you see here."

"Ah, I must be reminded of that, you're correct. But you could never abide evil. If you've told the truth half the time in your books, it's plain that you were sick of evil from the beginning. You'd give anything to discover what God wants of you and to do what He wants."

"You're in your dotage already. Make your will."

"Oooh, so cruel," he said with his bright smile.

I was going to say something else to him, when I was distracted. There was a little pulling somewhere in my consciousness. Sounds. A car passing very slowly on the narrow road through the distant village, in a blinding snow.

I scanned, caught nothing, merely the snow falling, and the car edging its way along. Poor sad mortal to be driving through the country at this

hour. It was four of the clock.

"It's very late," I said. "I have to leave now. I don't want to spend another night here, though you've been most kind. It's nothing to do with anyone knowing. I simply prefer …"

"I understand. When will I see you again?"

"Perhaps sooner than you think," I said. "David, tell me. The other night, when I left here, hell-bent on burning myself to a crisp in the Gobi, why did you say that I was your only friend?"

"You are."

We sat there in silence for a moment.

"You are my only friend as well, David," I said.

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know. Back to London, perhaps. I'll tell you when I go back across the Atlantic. Is that all right?"

"Yes, do tell me. Don't … don't ever believe that I don't want to see you, don't ever abandon me again."

"If I thought I was good for you, if I thought your leaving the order and traveling again was good for you …"

"Oh, but it is. I don't belong anymore in the Talamasca. I'm not even sure I trust it any longer, or believe in its aims."

I wanted to say more—to tell him how much I loved him, that I'd sought shelter under his roof and he'd protected me and that I would never forget this, and that I would do anything he wished of me, anything at all.

But it seemed pointless to say so. I don't know whether he would have believed it, or what the value would have been. I was still convinced that it was not good for him to see me. And there wasn't very much left to him in this life.

"I know all this," he said quietly, gracing me with that smile again.

"David," I said, "the report you made of your adventures in Brazil. Is there a copy here? Could I read this report?"

He stood up and went to the glass-doored bookshelf nearest his desk. He looked through the many materials there for a long moment, then removed two large leather folders from the shelf.

"This is my life in Brazil—what I wrote in the jungles after, on a little rattletrap portable typewriter at a camp table, before I came home to England. I did go after the jaguar, of course. Had to do it. But the hunt

was nothing compared to my experiences in Rio, absolutely nothing. That was the turning point, you see. I believe the very writing of this was some desperate attempt to become an Englishman again, to distance myself from the Candomble people, from the life I'd been living with them. My report for the Talamasca was based upon the material here."

I took it from him gratefully.

"And this," he said, holding the other folder, "is a brief summary of my days in India and Africa."

"I would like to read that too."

"Old hunting stories mostly. I was young when I wrote this. It's all big guns and action! It was before the war."

I took this second folder as well. I stood up, in slow gentlemanly fashion.

"I've talked the night away," he said suddenly. "That was rude of me. Perhaps you had things to say."

"No, not at all. It was exactly what I wanted." I offered my hand and he took it. Amazing the sensation of his touch against the burnt flesh.

"Lestat," he said, "the little short story here … the Lovecraft piece. Do you want it back, or shall I save it for you?"

"Ah, that, now that's a rather interesting tale—I mean how I came in possession of *that*."

I took the story from him and shoved it in my coat. Perhaps I'd read it again. My curiosity returned, and along with it a sort of fearful suspicion. Venice, Hong Kong, Miami. How had that strange mortal spotted me in all three places, and managed to see that I had spotted him!

"Do you care to tell me about it?" David asked gently.

"When there's more time," I said, "I shall tell you." Especially if I ever see that guy again, I thought. How ever did he do it?

I went out in a civilized manner, actually making a little bit of deliberate noise as I closed the side door of the house.

It was close to dawn when I reached London. And for the first time in many a night, I was actually glad of my immense powers, and the great feeling of security which they conveyed. I needed no coffins, no dark hiding places, merely a room completely isolated from the rays of the

sun. A fashionable hotel with heavy curtains would provide both the peace and the comfort.

And I had a little time to settle in the warm light of a lamp and begin David's Brazilian adventure, which I looked forward to, with inordinate delight.

I had almost no money with me, thanks to my recklessness and madness, so I used my considerable powers of persuasion with the clerks of venerable old Claridge's so that they accepted the number of my credit account, though I had no card to verify it, and upon my signature —Sebastian Melmoth, one of my favorite aliases—I was shown to a lovely upper suite crowded with charming Queen Anne furniture and fitted with every convenience I could wish.

I put out the polite little printed notice that I wasn't to be disturbed, left word with the desk I must not be bothered until well after sunset, then latched all the doors from the inside.

There really wasn't time to read. The morning was coming behind the heavy gray sky and the snow drifting down still in large soft wet flakes. I closed all the draperies, save one, so that I might look at the sky, and I stood there, at the front of the hotel, waiting for the spectacle of the light to come, and still a little afraid of its fury, and the pain in my skin growing a little worse from that fear, more than anything else.

David was much on my mind; I hadn't ceased to think about our conversation for a second since I'd left him. I kept hearing his voice and trying to imagine his fragmentary vision of God and the Devil in the café. But my position on all this was simple and predictable. I thought David in possession of the most comforting delusions. And soon he'd be gone from me. Death would have him. And all I would have would be these manuscripts of his life. I couldn't force myself to believe he would know anything more at all when he was dead.

Nevertheless it was all very surprising, really, the turn the conversation had taken, and his energy, and the peculiar things he'd said.

I was comfortable in these thoughts, watching the leaden sky and the snow piling on the sidewalks far below, when I suddenly experienced a bout of dizziness—in fact, a complete moment of disorientation, as though I were falling asleep. It was very pleasurable, actually, the subtle

vibratory sensation, accompanied by a weightlessness, as though I were indeed floating out of the physical and into my dreams. Then came that pressure again which I'd felt so fleetingly in Miami—of my limbs constricting, indeed of my whole form pressing inwards upon me, narrowing me and compressing me, and the sudden frightening image of myself being forced through the very top of my head!

Why was this happening? I shuddered as I had done on that lonely dark Florida beach when it happened before. And at once the feeling was dissipated. I was myself again and vaguely annoyed.

Was something going wrong with my handsome, godlike anatomy? Impossible. I didn't need the old ones to assure me of such a truth. And I had not made up my mind whether I should worry about this or forget it, or indeed, try to induce it again myself, when I was brought out of my preoccupation by a knock at the door.

Most irritating.

"A message for you, sir. The gentleman requested I put it in your hands."

Had to be some mistake. Nevertheless I opened the door.

The young man gave me an envelope. Fat, bulky. For one second I could only stare at it. I had a one-pound note still in my pocket, from the little thief I'd chomped on earlier, and I gave this to the boy, and locked the door again.

This was exactly the same kind of envelope I'd been given in Miami by that lunatic mortal who'd come running towards me across the sand. And the sensation! I'd experienced that bizarre sensation right at the moment my eyes had fallen on that creature. Oh, but this was not possible …

I tore open the envelope. My hands were suddenly shaking. It was another little printed short story, clipped out of a book exactly as the first one had been, and stapled at the upper-left-hand corner in precisely the same way!

I was dumbfounded! How in the hell had this being tracked me here? No one knew I was here! David didn't even know I was here! Oh, there were the credit card numbers involved, but dear God, it would have taken hours for any mortal to locate me that way, even if such a thing were possible, which it really was not.

And what had the sensation to do with it—the curious vibratory

feeling and the pressure which seemed to be inside my own limbs?

But there was no time to consider any of this. It was almost morning!

The danger in the situation made itself immediately apparent to me. Why the hell hadn't I seen it before? This being did most definitely have some means of knowing where I was—even where I chose to conceal myself during daylight! I had to get out of these rooms. How perfectly outrageous!

Trembling with annoyance, I forced myself to scan this story, which was only a few pages in length. "Eyes of the Mummy" was the title, author Robert Bloch. A clever little tale, but what could it possibly mean to me? I thought of the Lovecraft, which had been much longer and seemed wholly different. What on earth could all this signify? The seeming idiocy of it further maddened me.

But it was too late to think about it anymore. I gathered up David's manuscripts, and left the rooms, rushing out of a fire exit and going up to the roof. I scanned the night in all directions. I couldn't find the little bastard! Lucky for him. I would surely have destroyed him on sight. When it comes to protecting my daylight lair, I have little patience or restraint.

I moved upwards, covering the miles with the greatest speed I could attain. At last I descended in a snow-covered wood far, far north of London and there I dug my own grave in the frozen earth as I had done so many times before.

I was in a fury for having to do so. A positive fury. I'm going to kill this son of a bitch, I thought, whoever the hell he is. How dare he come stalking me, and shoving these stories in my face! Yes, I shall do that, kill him as soon as I catch him.

But then the drowsiness came, the numbness, and very soon nothing mattered …

Once again I was dreaming, and she was there, lighting the oil lamp, and saying, "Ah, the flame doesn't frighten you anymore …"

"You're mocking me," I said, miserably. I'd been weeping.

"Ah, but, Lestat, you do have a way of recovering from these cosmic fits of despair awfully fast. There you were dancing under the street lamps in London. Really!"

I wanted to protest, but I was crying, and I couldn't talk …

In one last jolt of consciousness, I saw that mortal in Venice—under

the arches of San Marco—where I'd first noticed him—saw his brown eyes and smooth youthful mouth.

What do you want? I demanded.

Ah, but it is what you *want,* he seemed to reply.

SIX

I wasn't so angry with the little fiend when I woke up. Actually, I was powerfully intrigued. But then the sun had set and I had the upper hand.

I decided upon a little experiment. I went to Paris, making the crossing very quickly and on my own.

Now let me digress here for a moment, only to explain that in recent years I had avoided Paris utterly, and indeed, I knew nothing of it as a twentieth-century city at all. The reasons for this are probably obvious. I had suffered much there in ages past, and I guarded myself against the visions of modern buildings rising around *Père-Lachaise* cemetery or electrically lighted Ferris wheels turning in the Tuileries. But I had always secretly longed to return to Paris, naturally. How could I not?

And this little experiment gave me courage and a perfect excuse. It deflected the inevitable pain of my observations, for I had a purpose. But within moments of my arrival, I realized that I was very truly in Paris—that this could be no place else—and I was overwhelmed with happiness as I walked on the grand boulevards, and inevitably past the place where the Theatre of the Vampires had once stood.

Indeed a few theatres of that period had survived into modern times, and there they were—imposing and ornate and still drawing in their audiences, amid the more modern structures on all sides.

I realized as I wandered the brilliantly lighted Champs Élysées—which was jammed with tiny speeding cars, as well as thousands of pedestrians—that this was no museum city, like Venice. It was as alive now as it had ever been in the last two centuries. A capital. A place of innovation still and courageous change.

I marveled at the stark splendour of the Georges Pompidou Center, rising so boldly within sight of the venerable flying buttresses of Notre Dame. Oh, I was glad I had come.

But I had a task, did I not?

I didn't tell a soul, mortal or immortal, that I was there. I did not call my Paris lawyer, though it was most inconvenient. Rather I acquired a great deal of money in the old familiar manner of taking it from a couple

of thoroughly unsavory and well-heeled criminal victims in the dark streets.

Then I headed for the snow-covered Place Vendôme, which contained the very same palaces which it had in my day, and under the alias of Baron Van Kindergarten, ensconced myself in a lavish suite at the Ritz.

There for two nights, I avoided the city, enveloped in a luxury and style that was truly worthy of Marie Antoinette's Versailles. Indeed it brought tears to my eyes to see the excessive Parisian decoration all around me, the gorgeous Louis XVI chairs, and the lovely embossed paneling of the walls. Ah, Paris. Where else can wood be painted gold and still look beautiful!

Sprawled on a tapestried directoire daybed, I set at once to reading David's manuscripts, only now and then breaking off to walk about the silent parlour and bedroom, or to open a real French window, with its encrusted oval knob, and gaze out at the back garden of the hotel, so very formal and quiet and proud.

David's writing captivated me. I soon felt closer to him than ever before.

What was plain was that David had been wholly a man of action in his youth, and drawn into the realm of books only when they spoke of action, and that he'd always found his greatest pleasure in the hunt. He taken down his first game when he was only ten years old. His descriptions of shooting the big Bengal tigers were infused with the excitement of the pursuit itself and the risks he ultimately endured. Always drawing very close to the beast before he fired his gun, he had almost been killed more than once.

He had loved Africa as well as India, hunting elephants in the days when no one ever dreamed the species would be in danger of dying out. Again, he had been charged innumerable times by the big bulls before he had brought them down. And in hunting the lions of the Serengeti Plain he had courted similar risks.

Indeed, he had gone out of his way to hike arduous mountain trails, to swim in dangerous rivers, to lay his hand upon the tough hide of the crocodile, to overcome his inveterate revulsion for snakes. He had loved to sleep in the open; to scribble entries in his diary by the light of oil lanterns or candles; to eat only the meat of the animals he killed, even when there was very little of it; and to skin his kills without aid.

His power of description was not so very great. He was not patient with written words, especially not when he was young. Yet one could feel the heat of the tropics in this memoir; one heard the buzz of the gnats. It seemed inconceivable that such a man had ever enjoyed the wintry comforts of Talbot Manor, or the luxury of the Motherhouses of the order, to which he was somewhat addicted now.

But many another British gentleman had known such choices and done what he thought appropriate to his position and his age.

As for the adventure in Brazil, it might as well have been written by a different man. There was the same sparse and precise vocabulary, and there was the same lust for danger, naturally, but with the turning to the supernatural, a far more clever and cerebral individual had come to the fore. Indeed, the vocabulary itself changed, incorporating many baffling Portuguese and African words for concepts and physical feelings which David felt plainly at a loss to describe.

But the gist was that the deep telepathic powers of David's brain had been developed through a series of primitive and terrifying encounters with Brazilian priestesses, and spirits as well. And the body of David had become a mere instrument for this psychic power, thereby paving the way for the scholar who had emerged in the years that followed.

There was much physical description in this Brazilian memoir. It told of small wooden rooms in the country where the Candomble believers gathered, lighting candles before their plaster statues of Catholic saints and Candomble gods. It told of the drums and the dancing; and the inevitable trances as various members of the group became unconscious hosts to the spirits and took on the attributes of a certain deity for long spells of unremembered time.

But the emphasis was now entirely upon the invisible—upon the perception of inner strength and the battle with the forces outside. The adventurous young man who had sought truth purely in the physical—the smell of the beast, the jungle path, the crack of the gun, the fall of the prey—was gone.

By the time David had left the city of Rio de Janeiro he was a different being. For though his narrative had been tightened and polished later, and undoubtedly edited, it nevertheless included much of his diary written at the very time. There was no doubt that he had been on the verge of madness in the conventional sense. He no longer saw streets

and buildings and people everywhere he looked; he saw spirits, gods, invisible powers emanating from others, and various levels of spiritual resistance upon the part of humans, both conscious and unconscious, to all such things. Indeed, if he had not gone into the jungles of the Amazon, if he had not forced himself to become the British game hunter again, he might have been lost forever from his old world.

For months, he had been a gaunt, sunburnt creature in shirtsleeves and soiled pants, wandering Rio in search of ever greater spiritual experience, having no contact whatsoever with his countrymen no matter how they badgered him for such contact. And then he'd outfitted himself in his proper khaki, taken up his big guns, laid up a store of the best British provisions for a camping trip, and gone off to recover himself as he brought down the spotted jaguar, and skinned and gutted the carcass of the beast with his own knife.

Body and soul!

It really wasn't so incredible that in all these years he had never returned to Rio de Janeiro, for if he had ever made the journey back there, perhaps he could not have left.

Yet obviously, the life of the Candomble adept was not enough for him. Heroes seek adventure, but the adventure itself does not swallow them whole.

How it sharpened my love for him to know of these experiences, and how it saddened me to think that he had spent his life in the Talamasca ever since. It did not seem worthy of him, or no, it did not seem the best thing to make him happy, no matter how he insisted that he had wanted it. It seemed the very wrong thing.

And of course, this deepening knowledge of him made me ache for him all the more. I considered again that in my dark preternatural youth, I had made companions for myself who could never really be companions—Gabrielle, who had no need of me; Nicolas, who had gone mad; Louis, who could not forgive me for having seduced him into the realm of the undead, even though he had wanted it himself.

Only Claudia had been the exception—my intrepid little Claudia, companion hunter and slayer of random victims—vampire par excellence. And it had been her alluring strength which caused her ultimately to turn upon her maker. Yes, she had been the only one who had been like me really—as they say in this day and age. And that might

have been the reason that she was haunting me now.

Surely there was some connection to my love of David! And I had failed to see it before. How I loved him; and how deep had been the emptiness when Claudia turned against me, and was my companion no more.

These manuscripts more fully illuminated another point for me as well. David was the very man to refuse the Dark Gift, and to the bitter end. This man feared nothing really. He didn't like death, but he didn't fear it. He never had.

But I had not come to Paris merely to read this memoir. I had another purpose in mind. I left the blessed and timeless isolation of the hotel and began to wander—slowly, visibly—about.

In the Rue Madeleine, I purchased fine clothes for myself, including a dark blue double-breasted coat of cashmere wool. Then I spent hours on the Left Bank, visiting its bright and inviting cafés, and thinking of David's story of God and the Devil, and wondering what on earth he had really seen. Of course, Paris would be a fine place for God and the Devil but …

I traveled the underground Metro for some time, studying the other passengers, trying to determine what was so different about Parisians. Was it their alertness, their energy? The way they avoided eye contact with others? I could not determine it. But they were very different from Americans—I had seen it everywhere—and I realized I understood them. I liked them.

That Paris was such a rich city, so filled with expensive fur coats and jewels and boutiques beyond counting, left me faintly amazed. It seemed richer even than the cities of America. It had seemed no less rich perhaps in my time with its glass coaches and white-wigged ladies and gentlemen. But the poor had been there too, everywhere, even dying in the very streets. And now I saw only the rich, and at moments, the entire city with its millions of motorcars and countless stone town houses, hotels and mansions seemed almost beyond belief.

Of course I hunted. I fed.

At twilight the next night, I stood on the top floor of the Pompidou under a sky as purely violet as any in my beloved New Orleans, watching all the lights of the great sprawling city come to life. I gazed at the distant Eiffel Tower, rising so sharply in the divine gloom.

Ah, Paris, I knew I would come back here, yes, and soon. Some night in the future I would make a lair for myself on the Île St. Louis, which I had always loved. To hell with the big houses of the Avenue Foch. I would find the building where once Gabrielle and I had worked the Dark Magic together, mother leading her son to make her his daughter, and mortal life had released her as if it were a mere hand I'd grabbed by the wrist.

I would bring Louis back with me—Louis, who had loved this city so much before he lost Claudia. Yes, he must be invited to love it again.

Meantime I'd walk slowly over to the Café de la Paix in the great hotel where Louis and Claudia had lodged during that tragic year in the reign of Napoleon III, and I would sit there with my glass of wine, untouched, forcing myself to think calmly of all that—and that it was done.

Well, I had been strengthened by my ordeal in the desert, that was plain. And I was ready for something to happen …

… And finally in the early hours of the morning, when I had become a bit melancholy and was grieving a little for the old tumbledown buildings of the 1780s, and when the mists were hanging over the half-frozen river, and I was leaning on the high stone ledge of the bank very near the bridge to the Île de la Cité, I saw my man.

First came that sensation, and this time I recognized it right off for what it was. I studied it as it was happening to me—the faint disorientation which I allowed without ever losing control; and soft delicious ripples of vibration; and then the deep constriction which included my entire form—fingers, toes, arms, legs, trunk—as before. Yes, as if my entire body, while retaining its exact proportions, was growing smaller and smaller, and I was being forced out of this dwindling shape! At the very moment when it seemed damned nigh impossible to remain within myself, my head cleared, and the sensations came to a halt.

This was precisely what had happened both times before. I stood at the bridge, considering this, and memorizing the details.

Then I beheld a battered little car jerking to a stop on the far side of the river, and out he climbed—the young brown-haired one—awkwardly as before, and rising to his full height tentatively and fixing me with his ecstatic and glittering eyes.

He'd left the motor of his little machine running. I smelled his fear as I had before. Of course he knew that I had seen him, there could be no

mistake of that. I'd been here a full two hours, waiting for him to find me, and I suppose he realized this as well.

Finally he screwed up his courage and came across the bridge through the fog, an immediately impressive figure in a long greatcoat, with a white scarf about the neck, half walking, half running, and stopping a few feet away from me, as I stood there with my elbow on the rail, staring at him coldly. He thrust at me another little envelope. I grabbed his hand.

"Don't be hasty, Monsieur de Lioncourt!" he whispered desperately. British accent, upper-class, very like David's, and he'd got the French syllables very close to perfect. He was near perishing with fear.

"Who the hell are you!" I demanded.

"I have a proposition for you! You'd be a fool if you didn't listen. It's something you'll want very much. And no one else in this world can offer it to you, be assured!"

I let him go and he sprang back, nearly toppling over, hand flung out to catch the stone rail. What was it about this man's gestures? He was powerfully built, but he moved as if he were a thin, tentative creature. I couldn't figure it out.

"Explain this proposition now!" I said, and I could hear his heart come to a stop inside his broad chest.

"No," he said. "But we shall talk very soon." Such a cultured voice, a polished voice.

Far too refined and careful for the large glazed brown eyes, and the smooth robust young face. Was he some hothouse plant grown to prodigious proportions in the company of elderly people, never having seen a person his own age?

"Don't be hasty!" he shouted again, and off he ran, stumbling, then catching himself, and then forcing his tall, clumsy body into the small car, and driving off through the frozen snow.

Indeed, he was going so fast as he disappeared into St. Germain, I thought he would have a wreck and kill himself.

I looked down at the envelope. Another damned short story, no doubt. I tore it open angrily, not sure I should have let him go, and yet somehow enjoying this little game, and even enjoying my own indignation at his cleverness and capacity for tracking me.

I saw that, indeed, it was a video tape of a recent film. *Vice Versa* was

the title. What on earth …? I flipped it over, and scanned the advertisement. A comic piece.

I returned to the hotel. There was yet another package waiting for me. Another video tape. *All of Me* was the name of it, and once again, the description on the back of the plastic case gave a fair idea of what it was about.

I went to my rooms. No video player! Not even in the Ritz. I rang David, though it was now very near dawn.

"Would you come to Paris? I'll have everything arranged for you. See you at dinner, eight o'clock tomorrow in the dining room downstairs."

Then I did call my mortal agent, rousing him from bed and instructing him to arrange David's ticket, limousine, suite, and whatever else he should need. There should be cash waiting for David; there should be flowers; and chilled champagne. Then I went out to find a safe place to sleep.

But an hour later—as I stood in the dark dank cellar of an old abandoned house—I wondered if the little mortal bastard couldn't see me even now, if he didn't know where I slept by day, and couldn't come bring in the sun upon me, like some cheap vampire-hunter in a bad movie, with no respect for the mysterious at all.

I dug deep beneath the cellar. No mortal alone could have found me there. And even in my sleep, I might have strangled him if he had, without my ever knowing it.

"So what do you think it all means?" I said to David. The dining room was exquisitely decorated and half empty. I sat there in the candlelight, in black dinner jacket and boiled shirt, with my arms folded before me, enjoying the fact that I needed only the pale-violet tinted glasses now to hide my eyes. How well I could see the tapestried portieres, and the dim garden beyond the windows.

David was eating lustily. He'd been utterly delighted to come to Paris, loved his suite over the Place Vendôme, with its velvet carpets and gilded furnishings, and had spent all afternoon in the Louvre.

"Well, you can see the theme, can't you?" he replied.

"I'm not sure," I said. "I do see common elements, of course, but these little stories are all different."

"How so?"

"Well, in the Lovecraft piece, Asenath, this diabolical woman, switches bodies with her husband. She runs about the town using his male body, while he is stuck at home in her body, miserable and confused. I thought it was a hoot, actually. Just wonderfully clever, and of course Asenath isn't Asenath, as I recall, but her father, who has switched bodies with her. And then it all becomes very Lovecraftian, with slimy half-human demons and such."

"That may be the irrelevant part. And the Egyptian story?"

"Completely different. The moldering dead, which still possess life, you know …"

"Yes, but the plot."

"Well, the soul of the mummy manages to get possession of the body of the archaeologist, and he, the poor devil, is put in the rotted body of the mummy—"

"Yes?"

"Good Lord, I see what you're saying. And then the film *Vice Versa*. It's about the soul of a boy and the soul of a man who switch bodies! All hell breaks loose until they are able to switch back. And the film *All of Me*, it's about body switching as well. You're absolutely right. All four stories are about the same thing."

"Exactly."

"Christ, David. It's all coming clear. I don't know why I didn't see it. But …"

"This man is trying to get you to believe that he knows something about this body switching. He's trying to entice you with the suggestion that such a thing can be done."

"Good Lord. Of course. That explains it, the way he moves, walks, runs."

"What?"

I sat there stunned, reenvisioning the little beast before I answered, bringing up to mind every image of him from every conceivable angle which memory would allow. Yes, even in Venice, he'd had that obvious awkwardness about him.

"David, he *can* do it."

"Lestat, don't jump to such a mad conclusion! He may think that he can do it. He may want to try it. He may be living entirely in a world of

delusions—"

"No. That's his proposition, David, the proposition he says that I will want to hear! He *can* switch bodies with people!"

"Lestat, you can't believe—"

"David, that's what's wrong with him! I've been trying to figure it since I saw him on the beach in Miami. That isn't his body! That's why he can't use its musculature or its … its height. That's why he almost falls when he runs. He can't control those long powerful legs. Good God, that man is in someone else's body. And the voice, David, I told you about his voice. It's not the voice of a young man. Oh, that explains it! And you know what I think? I think he chose that particular body because I'd notice it. And I'll tell you something else. He's already tried this switching trick with me and it's failed."

I couldn't continue. I was too dazzled by the possibility.

"How do you mean, tried?"

I described the peculiar sensations—the vibration and the constriction, the sense that I was being forced quite literally out of my physical self.

He didn't reply to what I'd said, but I could see the effect this had upon him. He sat motionless, his eyes narrow, his right hand half closed and resting idly beside his plate.

"It was an assault upon me, wasn't it? He tried to get me out of my body! Maybe so that he could get in. And of course he couldn't do it. But why would he risk mortally offending me with such an attempt?"

"Has he mortally offended you?" David asked.

"No, he's merely made me all the more curious, powerfully curious!"

"There you have your answer. I think he knows you too well."

"What?" I heard what he said but I couldn't reply just now. I drifted into remembering the sensations. "That feeling was so strong. Oh, don't you see what he's doing? He's suggesting that he can switch with me. He's offering me that handsome young mortal frame."

"Yes," David said coldly. "I think you're right."

"Why else would he stay in that body?" I said. "He's clearly very uncomfortable in it. He wants to switch. He's saying that he can switch! That's why he's taken this risk. He must know it would be easy for me to kill him, squash him like a little bug. I don't even like him—the manner, I mean. The body is excellent. No, that's it. He can do it, David, he knows how."

"Snap out of it! You can't put it to the test."

"What? Why not? You're telling me it can't be done? In all those archives you have no records …? David, I know he's done it. He just can't force me into it. But he's switched with another mortal, that I know."

"Lestat, when it happens we call it possession. It's a psychic accident! The soul of a dead person takes over a living body; a spirit possessing a human being; it has to be persuaded to let go. Living people don't go around doing it deliberately and in concerted agreement. No, I don't think it *is* possible. I don't think we do have any such cases! I …" He broke off, clearly in doubt.

"You know you have such cases," I said. "You must."

"Lestat, this is very dangerous, too dangerous for any sort of trial."

"Look, if it can happen by accident, it can happen this way too. If a dead soul can do it, why not a living soul? I know what it means to travel outside my body. You know. You learned it in Brazil. You described it in fine detail. Many, many human beings know. Why, it was part of the ancient religions. It's not inconceivable that one could return to another body and hold on to it while the other soul struggles in vain to recapture it."

"What an awful thought."

I explained again about the sensations and how powerful they had been. "David, it's possible he stole that body!"

"Oh, that's just lovely."

Again, I was remembering the feeling of constriction, the terrific and strangely pleasurable feeling that I was being squeezed out of myself through the top of my head. How strong it had been! Why, if he could make me feel that, surely he could make a mortal man rise out of himself, especially if that mortal man did not have the slightest idea of what was being done.

"Calm yourself, Lestat," David said a little disgustedly. He laid his heavy fork upon the half-empty plate. "Now think this through. Perhaps such a switch could be achieved for a few minutes. But anchoring in the new body, remaining inside it, and functioning day in and day out? No. This would mean functioning when you are asleep as well as awake. You're talking about something entirely different and obviously dangerous. You can't experiment with this. What if it worked?"

“That’s the whole point. If it works, then I can get into that body.” I paused. I could scarcely speak it and then I did. I said it. “David, I can be a mortal man.”

It took my breath away. A moment of silence passed as we stared at each other. The look of vague dread in his eyes did nothing to still my excitement.

“I’d know how to use that body,” I said, half in a whisper. “I’d know how to use those muscles and those long legs. Oh, yes, he chose that body because he knew I would consider it a possibility, a real possibility —”

“Lestat, you can’t pursue this! He’s speaking of trading here, switching! You can’t let this suspect individual have your body in return! The idea’s monstrous. You inside that body is quite enough!”

I fell into stunned silence.

“Look,” he said, trying to bring me back to him. “Forgive me for sounding like the Superior General of a religious order, but this is something you simply cannot do! First off, where *did* he get that body? What if he did, in fact, steal it? Surely no handsome young man cheerfully gave it over without so much as a qualm! This is a sinister being, and must be recognized as such. You can’t deliver to him a body as powerful as your own.”

I heard all this, I understood it, but I couldn’t absorb it. “Think of it, David,” I said, knowing that I sounded mad and only barely coherent. “David, I could be a mortal man.”

“Would you kindly wake up and pay attention to me, please! This is not a matter of comical stories and Lovecraftian pieces of gothic romance.” He wiped his mouth with his napkin, and crossly slugged down a swallow of wine, and then reached across the table and took hold of my wrist.

I should have let him lift it and clasp it. But I didn’t yield and he realized within a second that he could no more move my wrist away from the table than he could move that of a statue made of granite.

“That’s it, right there!” he declared. “You can’t play with this. You can’t take the risk that it will work, and this fiend, whoever he is, will have possession of your strength.”

I shook my head. “I know what you’re saying, but, David, think of it. I have to talk to him! I have to find him and find out whether this can be

done. He himself is unimportant. It's the process that's important. Can it be done?"

"Lestat, I'm begging you. Don't explore this any further. You're going to make another ghastly mistake!"

"What do you mean?" It was so hard to pay attention to what he was saying. Where was that wily fiend right now? I thought of his eyes, how beautiful they would be if *he* were not looking out of them. Yes, it was a fine body for this experiment! Wherever *did* he get it? I had to find out.

"David, I'm going to leave you now."

"No, you're not! Stay right where you are, or so help me God I'll send a legion of hobgoblins after you, every filthy little spirit I trafficked with in Rio de Janeiro! Now listen to me."

I laughed. "Keep your voice down," I said. "We'll be thrown out of the Ritz."

"Very well, we'll strike a bargain. I'll go back to London and hit the computer. I'll boot up every case of body switching in our files. Who knows what we'll discover? Lestat, maybe he's in that body and it's deteriorating around him, and he can't get out or stop the deterioration. Did you think of that?"

I shook my head. "It's not deteriorating. I would have caught the scent. There's nothing wrong with that body."

"Except maybe he stole it from its rightful owner and that poor soul is stumbling around in *his* body, and what that looks like, we haven't a clue."

"Calm down, David, please. You go on back to London, and hit the files, as you described. I'm going to find this little bastard. I'm going to hear what he has to say. Don't worry! I won't proceed without consulting you. And if I do decide—"

"You won't decide! Not until you talk to me."

"All right."

"This is a pledge?"

"On my honor as a bloodthirsty murderer, yes."

"I want a phone number in New Orleans."

I stared at him hard for a moment. "All right. I've never done this before. But here it is." I gave him the phone number of my French Quarter rooftop rooms. "Aren't you going to write it down?"

"I've memorized it."

“Then farewell!”

I rose from the table, struggling, in my excitement, to move like a human. Ah, move like a human. Think of it, to be inside a human body. To see the sun, really see it, a tiny blazing ball in a blue sky! “Oh, and, David, I almost forgot, everything’s covered here. Call my man. He’ll arrange for your flight …”

“I don’t care about that, Lestat. Listen to me. Set an appointment to speak with me about this, right now! You dare vanish on me, I’ll never —”

I stood there smiling down at him. I could tell I was charming him. Of course he wouldn’t threaten never to speak to me again. How absurd. “Ghastly mistakes,” I said, unable to stop smiling. “Yes, I do make them, don’t I?”

“What will they do to you—the others? Your precious Marius, the older ones, if you do such a thing?”

“They might surprise you, David. Maybe all they want is to be human again. Maybe that’s all any of us want. Another chance." I thought of Louis in his house in New Orleans. Dear God, what would Louis think when I told him about all this?

David muttered something under his breath, angry and impatient, yet his face was full of affection and concern.

I blew him a little kiss and was gone.

Scarcely an hour had passed before I realized I couldn’t find the wily fiend. If he was in Paris, he was cloaked so that I couldn’t pick up the faintest shimmer of his presence. And nowhere did I catch an image of him in anyone else’s mind.

This didn’t mean he wasn’t in Paris. Telepathy is extremely hit or miss; and Paris was a vast city, teeming with citizens of all the countries of the world.

At last I came back to the hotel, discovered David had already checked out, leaving all his various phone numbers with me for fax, computer, and regular calls.

“Please contact me tomorrow evening,” he’d written. “I shall have some information for you by then.”

I went upstairs to prepare for the journey home. I couldn’t wait to see

this lunatic mortal again. And Louis—I had to lay it all before Louis. Of course he wouldn't believe it was possible, that would be the first thing he'd say. But he would understand the lure. Oh, yes, he would.

I hadn't been in the room a minute, trying to determine if there was anything here I needed to take with me—ah, yes, David's manuscripts—when I saw a plain envelope lying on the table beside the bed. It was propped against a great vase of flowers. "Count van Kindergarten" was written on it in a firm, rather masculine script.

I knew the minute I saw it that it was a note from him. The message inside was handwritten, in the same firm, heavily engraved style.

> Don't be hasty. And don't listen to your fool friend from the Talamasca either. I shall see you in New Orleans tomorrow night. Don't disappoint me. Jackson Square. We shall then make an appointment to work a little alchemy of our own. I think you understand now what's at stake.
>
> Yours sincerely,
> Raglan James

"Raglan James." I whispered the name aloud. Raglan James. I didn't like the name. The name was like him.

I dialed the concierge.

"This fax system which has just been invented," I said in French, "you have it here? Explain it to me, please."

It was as I suspected, a complete facsimile of this little note could be sent from the hotel office over a telephone wire to David's London machine. Then David would not only have this information, he would have the handwriting, for what it was worth.

I arranged to have this done, picked up the manuscripts, stopped by the desk with the note of Raglan James, had it faxed, took it back, and then went to Notre Dame to say good-bye to Paris with a little prayer.

I was mad. Absolutely mad. When had I ever known such pure happiness! I stood in the dark cathedral, which was now locked on account of the hour, and I thought of the first time I'd ever stepped into it so many, many decades ago. There had been no great square before the church doors, only the little Place de Grève hemmed in with crooked buildings; and there had been no great boulevards in Paris such as there

are now, only broad mud streets, which we thought so very grand.

I thought of all those blue skies, and what it had felt like to be hungry, truly hungry for bread and for meat, and to be drunk on good wine. I thought of Nicolas, my mortal friend, whom I'd loved so much, and how cold it had been in our little attic room. Nicki and I arguing the way that David and I had argued! Oh, yes.

It seemed my great long existence had been a nightmare since those days, a sweeping nightmare full of giants and monsters and horrid ghastly masks covering the faces of beings who menaced me in the eternal dark. I was trembling. I was weeping. To be human, I thought. To be human again. I think I said the words aloud.

Then a sudden whispered laugh startled me. It was a child somewhere in the darkness, a little girl.

I turned around. I was almost certain I could see her—a small gray form darting up the far aisle towards a side altar, and then out of sight. Her footsteps had been barely audible. But surely this was some mistake. No scent. No real presence. Just illusion.

Nevertheless I cried out: "Claudia!"

And my voice came tumbling back to me in a harsh echo. No one there, of course.

I thought of David: "You're going to make another ghastly mistake!"

Yes, I have made ghastly mistakes. How can I deny it? Terrible, terrible errors. The atmosphere of my recent dreams came back to me, but it wouldn't deepen, and there remained only a evanescent sense of being with her. Something about an oil lamp and her laughing at me.

I thought again of her execution—the brick-walled air well, the approaching sun, how small she had been; and then the remembered pain of the Gobi Desert mingled with it and I couldn't bear it any longer. I realized I had folded my arms around my chest, and was trembling, my body rigid, as though being tormented with an electric shock. Ah, but surely she hadn't suffered. Surely it had been instantaneous for one so tender and little. Ashes to ashes …

This was pure anguish. It wasn't those times I wanted to remember, no matter how long I'd lingered in the Café de la Paix earlier, or how strong I imagined I had become. It was my Paris, before the Theatre of the Vampires, when I'd been innocent and alive.

I stayed a while longer in the dark, merely looking at the great

branching arches above me. What a marvelous and majestic church this was—even now with the pop and rattle of motorcars beyond. It was like a forest made of stone.

I blew a kiss to it, as I had to David. And I went off to undertake the long journey home.

SEVEN

New Orleans.

I arrived quite early in the evening for I had gone backwards in time against the turning of the world. It was cold and crisp, but not cruelly so, though a bad norther was on its way. The sky was without a cloud and full of small and very distinct stars.

I went at once to my little rooftop apartment in the French Quarter, which for all its glamour is not very high at all, being on the top of a four-storey building, erected long before the Civil War, and having a rather intimate view of the river and its beautiful twin bridges, and which catches, when the windows are open, the noises of the happily crowded Café du Monde and of the busy shops and streets around Jackson Square.

It was not until tomorrow night that Mr. Raglan James meant to meet me. And impatient as I was for this meeting, I found the schedule comfortable, as I wanted to find Louis right away.

But first I indulged in the mortal comfort of a hot shower, and put on a fresh suit of black velvet, very trim and plain, rather like the clothes I'd worn in Miami, and a pair of new black boots. And ignoring my general weariness—I would have been asleep in the earth by now, had I been still in Europe—I went off, walking like a mortal, through the town.

For reasons of which I wasn't too certain, I took a turn past the old address in the Rue Royale where Claudia and Louis and I had once lived. Actually I did this rather often, never allowing myself to think about it, until I was halfway there.

Our coven had endured for over fifty years in that lovely upstairs apartment. And surely this factor ought to be considered when I'm being condemned, either by myself or by someone else, for my errors. Louis and Claudia had both been made by me, and for me, I admit that. Nevertheless, ours had been a curiously incandescent and satisfying existence before Claudia decided I should pay for my creations with my life.

The rooms themselves had been crammed with every conceivable

ornament and luxury which the times could provide. We'd kept a carriage, and a team of horses at the nearby stables, and servants had lived beyond the courtyard in back. But the old brick buildings were now somewhat faded, and neglected, the flat unoccupied of late, except for ghosts, perhaps, who knows, and the shop below was rented to a bookseller who never bothered to dust the volumes in the window, or those on his shelves. Now and then he procured books for me—volumes on the nature of evil by the historian Jeffrey Burton Russell, or the marvelous philosophical works of Mircea Eliade, as well as vintage copies of the novels I loved.

The old man was in there reading, in fact, and I watched him for a few minutes through the glass. How different were the citizens of New Orleans from all the rest of the American world. Profit meant nothing to this old gray-haired being at all.

I stood back and looked up at the cast-iron railings above. I thought of those disturbing dreams—the oil lamp, her voice. Why was she haunting me so much more relentlessly than ever before?

When I closed my eyes, I could hear her again, talking to me, but the substance of her words was gone. I found myself thinking back once more on her life and her death.

Gone now without a trace was the little hovel in which I'd first seen her in Louis's arms. A plague house it had been. Only a vampire would have entered. No thief had dared even to steal the gold chain from her dead mother's throat. And how ashamed Louis has been that he had chosen a tiny child as his victim. But I had understood. No trace remained, either, of the old hospital where they'd taken her afterwards. What narrow mud street had I passed through with that warm mortal bundle in my arms, and Louis rushing after me, begging to know what I meant to do.

A gust of cold wind startled me suddenly.

I could hear the dull raucous music from the taverns of the Rue Bourbon only a block away; and people walking before the cathedral—laughter from a woman nearby. A car horn blasting in the dark. The tiny electronic throb of a modern phone.

Inside the bookstore, the old man played the radio, twisting the dial from Dixieland to classical and finally to a mournful voice singing poetry to the music of an English composer …

Why had I come to this old building, which stood forlorn and indifferent as a tombstone with all its dates and letters worn away?

I wanted no more delay, finally.

I'd been playing with my own mad excitement at what had only just happened in Paris, and I headed uptown to find Louis and lay it all before him.

Again, I chose to walk. I chose to feel the earth, to measure it with my feet.

In our time—at the end of the eighteenth century—the uptown of the city didn't really exist. It was country upriver; there were plantations still, and the roads were narrow and hard to travel, being paved only with dredged shells.

Later in the nineteenth century, after our little coven had been destroyed, and I was wounded and broken, and gone to Paris to search for Claudia and Louis, the uptown with all its small towns was merged with the great city, and many fine wooden houses in the Victorian style were built.

Some of these ornate wooden structures are vast, every bit as grand in their own cluttered fashion as the great antebellum Greek Revival houses of the Garden District, which always put me in mind of temples, or the imposing town houses of the French Quarter itself.

But much of uptown with its small clapboard cottages, as well as big houses, still retains for me the aspect of the country, what with the enormous oaks and magnolias sprouting up everywhere to tower over the little roofs, and so many streets without sidewalks, along which the gutters are no more than ditches, full of wildflowers flourishing in spite of the winter cold.

Even the little commercial streets—a sudden stretch here and there of attached buildings—remind one not of the French Quarter with its stone facades and old-world sophistication, but rather of the quaint "main streets" of rural American towns.

This is a great place for walking in the evening; you can hear the birds sing as you will never hear them in the Vieux Carré; and the twilight lasts forever over the roofs of the warehouses along the ever-curving river, shining through the great heavy branches of the trees. One can

happen upon splendid mansions with rambling galleries and gingerbread decoration, houses with turrets and gables, and widow's walks. There are big wooden porch swings hanging behind freshly painted wooden railings. There are white picket fences. Broad avenues of clean well-clipped lawns.

The little cottages display an endless variation; some are neatly painted in deep brilliant colors according to the current fashion; others, more derelict but no less beautiful, have the lovely gray tone of driftwood, a condition into which a house can fall easily in this tropical place.

Here and there one finds a stretch of street so overgrown one can scarce believe one is still within a city. Wild four-o'clocks and blue plumbago obscure the fences that mark property; the limbs of the oak bend so low they force the passerby to bow his head. Even in its coldest winters, New Orleans is always green. The frost can't kill the camellias, though it does sometimes bruise them. The wild yellow Carolina jasmine and the purple bougainvillea cover fences and walls.

It is in one such stretch of soft leafy darkness, beyond a great row of huge magnolia trees, that Louis made his secret home.

The old Victorian mansion behind the rusted gates was unoccupied, its yellow paint almost all peeled away. Only now and then did Louis roam through it, a candle in his hand. It was a cottage in back—covered with a great shapeless mountain of tangled pink Queen's Wreath—which was his true dwelling, full of his books and miscellaneous objects he'd collected over the years. Its windows were quite hidden from the street. In fact, it's doubtful anyone knew this house existed. The neighbors could not see it for the high brick walls, the dense old trees, and oleander growing wild around it. And there was no real path through the high grass.

When I came upon him, all the windows and doors were open to the few simple rooms. He was at his desk, reading by the light of a single candle flame.

For a long moment, I spied upon him. I loved to do this. Often I followed him when he went hunting, simply to watch him feed. The modern world doesn't mean anything to Louis. He walks the streets like a phantom, soundlessly, drawn slowly to those who welcome death, or seem to welcome it. (I'm not sure people really ever welcome death.)

And when he feeds, it is painless and delicate and swift. He must take life when he feeds. He does not know how to spare the victim. He was never strong enough for the "little drink" which carries me through so many nights; or did before I became the ravenous god.

His clothes are old-fashioned always. As so many of us do, he finds garments which resemble the styles of his time in mortal life. Big loose shirts with gathered sleeves and long cuffs please him, and tight-fitting pants. When he wears a coat, which is seldom, it is fitted like the ones I choose—a rider's jacket, very long and full at the hem.

I bring him these garments sometimes as presents, so that he doesn't wear his few acquisitions right to rags. I had been tempted to straighten up his house, hang the pictures, fill the place with finery, sweep him up into heady luxury the way I had in the past.

I think he wanted me to do this, but he wouldn't admit it. He existed without electricity, or modern heat, wandering in chaos, pretending to be wholly content.

Some of the windows of this house were without glass, and only now and then did he bolt the old-fashioned louvered shutters. He did not seem to care if the rain came in on his possessions because they weren't really possessions. Just junk heaped here and there.

But again, I think he wanted me to do something about it. It's amazing how often he came to visit me in my overheated and brilliantly illuminated rooms downtown. There he watched my giant television screen for hours. Sometimes he brought his own films for it on disk or tape. *The Company of Wolves,* that was one which he watched over and over. *Beauty and the Beast,* a French film by Jean Cocteau, also pleased him mightily. Then there was *The Dead,* a film made by John Huston from a story by James Joyce. And please understand this film has nothing to do with our kind whatsoever; it is about a fairly ordinary group of mortals in Ireland in the early part of this century who gather for a convivial supper on Little Christmas night. There were many other films which delighted him. But these visits could never be commanded by me, and they never lasted very long. He often deplored the "rank materialism" in which I "wallowed" and turned his back on my velvet cushions and thickly carpeted floor, and lavish marble bath. He drifted off again, to his forlorn and vine-covered shack.

Tonight, he sat there in all his dusty glory, an ink smudge on his white

cheek, poring over a large cumbersome biography of Dickens, recently written by an English novelist, turning the pages slowly, for he is no faster at reading than most mortals. Indeed of all of us survivors he is the most nearly human. And he remains so by choice.

Many times I've offered him my more powerful blood. Always, he has refused it. The sun over the Gobi Desert would have burnt him to ashes. His senses are finely tuned and vampiric, but not like those of a Child of the Millennia. He cannot read anyone's thoughts with much success. When he puts a mortal into a trance, it's always a mistake.

And of course I cannot read his thoughts because I made him, and the thoughts of the fledgling and master are always closed to each other, though why, no one of us knows. My suspicion is that we know a great deal of each other's feelings and longings; only the amplification is too loud for any distinct image to come clear. Theory. Someday perhaps they *will* study us in laboratories. We will beg for live victims through the thick glass walls of our prisons as they ply us with questions, and extract samples of blood from our veins. Ah, but how do that to Lestat who can burn another to cinders with one decisive thought?

Louis didn't hear me in the high grass outside his little house.

I slipped into the room, a great glancing shadow, and was already seated in my favorite red velvet bergère—I'd long ago brought it there for myself—opposite him when he looked up.

"Ah, you!" he said at once, and slammed the book shut.

His face, quite thin and finely drawn by nature, an exquisitely delicate face for all its obvious strength, was gorgeously flushed. He had hunted early, I'd missed it. I was for one second completely crushed.

Nevertheless it was tantalizing to see him so enlivened by the low throb of human blood. I could smell the blood too, which gave a curious dimension to being near him. His beauty has always maddened me. I think I idealize him in my mind when I'm not with him; but then when I see him again I'm overcome.

Of course it was his beauty which drew me to him, in my first nights here in Louisiana, when it was a savage, lawless colony, and he was a reckless, drunken fool, gambling and picking fights in taverns, and doing what he could to bring about his own death. Well, he got what he thought he wanted, more or less.

For a moment, I couldn't understand the expression of horror on his

face as he stared at me, or why he suddenly rose and came towards me and bent down and touched my face. Then I remembered. My sun-darkened skin.

"What have you done?" he whispered. He knelt down and looked up at me, resting his hand lightly on my shoulder. Lovely intimacy, but I wasn't going to admit it. I remained composed in the chair.

"It's nothing," I said, "it's finished. I went into a desert place, I wanted to see what would happen …"

"You wanted to see what would happen?" He stood up, took a step back, and glared at me. "You meant to destroy yourself, didn't you?"

"Not really," I said. "I lay in the light for a full day. The second morning, somehow or other I must have dug down into the sand."

He stared at me for a long moment, as if he would explode with disapproval, and then he retreated to his desk, sat down a bit noisily for such a graceful being, composed his hands over the closed book, and looked wickedly and furiously at me.

"Why did you do it?"

"Louis, I have something more important to tell you," I said. "Forget about all this." I made a gesture to include my face. "Something very remarkable has happened, and I have to tell you the whole tale." I stood up, because I couldn't contain myself. I began to pace, careful not to trip over all the heaps of disgusting trash lying about, and maddened slightly by the dim candlelight, not because I couldn't see in it, but because it was so weak and partial and I like light.

I told him everything—how I'd seen this creature, Raglan James, in Venice and in Hong Kong, and then in Miami, and how he'd sent me the message in London and then followed me to Paris as I supposed he would. Now we were to meet near the square tomorrow night. I explained the short stories and their meaning. I explained the strangeness of the young man himself, that he was not in his body, that I believed he could effect such a switch.

"You're out of your mind," Louis said.

"Don't be so hasty," I answered.

"You quote this idiot's words to me? Destroy him. Put an end to him. Find him tonight if you can and do away with him."

"Louis, for the love of heaven …"

"Lestat, this creature can find you at will? That means he knows where

you lie. You've led him here now. He knows where I lie. He's the worst conceivable enemy! Mon Dieu, why do you go looking for adversity? Nothing on earth can destroy you now, not even the Children of the Millennia have the combined strength to do it, and not even the sun at midday in the Gobi Desert—so you court the one enemy who has power over you. A mortal man who can walk in the light of day. A man who can achieve complete dominion over you when you yourself are without a spark of consciousness or will. No, destroy him. He's far too dangerous. If I see him, I'll destroy him."

"Louis, this man can give me a human body. Have you listened to anything that I've said."

"Human body! Lestat, you can't become human by simply taking over a human body! You weren't human when you were alive! You were born a monster, and you know it. How the hell can you delude yourself like this."

"I'm going to weep if you don't stop."

"Weep. I'd like to see you weep. I've read a great deal about your weeping in the pages of your books but I've never seen you weep with my own eyes."

"Ah, that makes you out to be a perfect liar," I said furiously. "You described my weeping in your miserable memoir in a scene which we both know did not take place!"

"Lestat, kill this creature! You're mad if you let him come close enough to you to speak three words."

I was confounded, utterly confounded. I dropped down in the chair again and stared into space. The night seemed to breathe with a soft lovely rhythm outside, the fragrance of the Queen's Wreath just barely touching the moist cool air. A faint incandescence seemed to come from Louis's face, from his hands folded on the desk. He was veiled in stillness, waiting for my response, I presumed, though why, I had no idea.

"I never expected this from you," I said, crestfallen. "I expected some long philosophical diatribe, like the trash you wrote in your memoir, but this?"

He sat there, silent, peering at me steadily, the light sparking for an instant in his brooding green eyes. He seemed tormented in some deep way, as if my words had caused him pain. Certainly it wasn't my insult

to his writing. I insulted his writing all the time. That was a joke. Well, sort of a joke.

I couldn't figure what to say or do. He was working on my nerves. When he spoke his voice was very soft.

"You don't really want to be human," he said. "You don't believe that, do you?"

"Yes, I believe it!" I answered, humiliated by the feeling in my voice. "How could *you* not believe it?" I stood up and commenced my pacing again. I made a circuit of the little house, and wandered out into the jungle garden, pushing the thick springy vines out of my way. I was in such a state of confusion I couldn't speak to him anymore.

I was thinking of my mortal life, vainly trying not to mythologize it, but I could not drive away from me those memories—the last wolf hunt, my dogs dying in the snow. Paris. The boulevard theatre. Unfinished! *You don't really want to be human.* How could he say such a thing?

It seemed an age I was out in the garden, but finally, for better or worse, I wandered back inside. I found him still at his desk, looking at me in the most forlorn, almost heartbroken way.

"Look," I said, "there are only two things which I believe—the first is that no mortal can refuse the Dark Gift once he really knows what it is. And don't speak to me about David Talbot refusing me. David is not an ordinary man. The second thing I believe is that all of us would be human again if we could. Those are my tenets. There's nothing else."

He made a little weary accepting gesture and sat back in his chair. The wood creaked softly beneath his weight, and he lifted his right hand languidly, wholly unconscious of the seductive quality of this simple gesture, and ran his fingers back through his loose dark hair.

The memory pierced me suddenly of the night I had given him the blood, of how he had argued with me at the last moment that I must not do it, and then he'd given in. I had explained it all to him beforehand—while he was still the drunken feverish young planter in the sickbed with the rosary wound around the bedpost. But how can such a thing be explained! And he'd been so convinced that he wanted to come with me, so certain that mortal life held nothing for him—so bitter and burnt out and so young!

What had he known then? Had he ever read a poem by Milton, or listened to a sonata by Mozart? Would the name Marcus Aurelius have

meant anything to him? In all probability, he would have thought it a fancy name for a black slave. Ah, those savage and swaggering plantation lords with their rapiers and their pearl-handled pistols! They did appreciate excess; I shall, in retrospect, give them that.

But he was far from those days now, wasn't he? The author of *Interview with the Vampire*, of all preposterous titles! I tried to quiet myself. I loved him too much not to be patient, not to wait until he spoke again. I'd fashioned him of human flesh and blood to be my preternatural tormentor, had I not?

"It can't be undone that easily," he said now, rousing me from memory, dragging me back into this dusty room. His voice was deliberately gentle, almost conciliatory or imploring. "It can't be that simple. You can't change bodies with a mortal man. To be candid, I don't even think it's possible, but even if it were—"

I didn't answer. I wanted to say, But what if it can be done! What if I can know again what it means to be alive.

"And then what about your body," he said, pleading with me, holding his anger and outrage in check so skillfully. "Surely you can't place all your powers at the disposal of this creature, this sorcerer or whatever he is. The others have told me that they cannot even calculate the limits of your power. Ah, no. It's an appalling idea. Tell me, how does he know how to find you! That's the most significant part."

"That's the least significant part," I replied. "But clearly, if this man can switch bodies, then he can leave his body. He can navigate as a spirit for long enough to track me and find me. I must be very visible to him when he's in this state, given what I am. This is no miracle in itself, you understand."

"I know," he said. "Or so I read and so I hear. I think you've found a truly dangerous being. This is worse than what we are."

"How so worse?"

"It implies another desperate attempt at immortality, switching bodies! Do you think this mortal, whoever he is, plans to grow old in this or any other body, and allow himself to die!"

I had to confess I followed his meaning. Then I told him about the man's voice, the sharp British accent, the cultured sound of it, and how it didn't seem the voice of a young man.

He shuddered. "He probably comes from the Talamasca," he said.

“That’s probably where he found out about you.”

“All he had to do was buy a paperback novel to find out about me.”

“Ah, but not to *believe*, Lestat, not to believe it was true.”

I told him that I had spoken to David. David would know if this man was from his own order, but as for myself I didn’t believe it. Those scholars would never have done such a thing. And there was something sinister about this mortal. The members of the Talamasca were almost tiresome in their wholesomeness. Besides, it didn’t matter. I would talk to this man and discover everything for myself.

He grew reflective again and very sad. It almost hurt me to look at him. I wanted to grab him by the shoulders and shake him, but that would only have made him furious.

“I love you,” he said softly.

I was amazed.

“You’re always looking for a way to triumph,” he continued. “You never give in. But there is no way to triumph. This is purgatory we’re in, you and I. All we can be is thankful that it isn’t actually hell.”

“No, I don’t believe it,” I said. “Look, it doesn’t matter what you say or what David said. I’m going to talk to Raglan James. I want to know what this is about! Nothing’s going to prevent that.”

“Ah, so David Talbot has also warned you against him.”

“Don’t choose your allies among my friends!”

“Lestat, if this human comes near me, if I believe that I am in danger from him, I will destroy him. Understand.”

“Of course, I do. He wouldn’t approach you. He’s picked me, and with reason.”

“He’s picked you because you are careless and flamboyant and vain. Oh, I don’t say this to hurt you. Truly I don’t. You long to be seen and approached and understood and to get into mischief, to stir everything up and see if it won’t boil over and if God won’t come down and grab you by the hair. Well, there is no God. You might as well be God.”

“You and David … the same song, the same admonitions, though he claims to have seen God and you don’t believe He exists.”

“David has seen God?” he asked respectfully.

“Not really,” I murmured with a scornful gesture. “But you both scold in the same way. Marius scolds in the same way.”

“Well, of course, you pick the voices that scold you. You always have,

in the same manner in which you pick those who will turn on you and stick the knife right into your heart."

He meant Claudia, but he couldn't bear to speak her name. I knew I could hurt him if I said it, like flinging a curse in his face. I wanted to say, You had a hand in it! You were there when I made her, and there when she lifted the knife!

"I don't want to hear any more!" I said. "You'll sing the song of limitations all your long dreary years on this earth, won't you? Well, I am not God. And I am not the Devil from hell, though I sometimes pretend to be. I am not the crafty cunning Iago. I don't plot ghastly scenarios of evil. And I can't quash my curiosity or my spirit. Yes, I want to know if this man can really do it. I want to know what will happen. And I won't give up."

"And you'll sing the song of victory eternally though there is none to be had."

"Ah, but there is. There must be."

"No. The more we learn, the more we know there are no victories. Can't we fall back on nature, do what we must to endure and nothing more?"

"That is the most paltry definition of nature I have ever heard. Take a hard look at it—not in poetry but in the world outside. What do you see in nature? What made the spiders that creep beneath the damp floorboards, what made the moths with their multicolored wings that look like great evil flowers in the dark? The shark in the sea, why does it exist?" I came towards him, planted my hands on his desk and looked into his face. "I was so sure you would understand this. And by the way, I wasn't born a monster! I was a born a mortal child, the same as you. Stronger than you! More will to live than you! That was cruel of you to say."

"I know. It was wrong. Sometimes you frighten me so badly I hurl sticks and stones at you. It's foolish. I'm glad to see you, though I dread admitting it. I shiver at the thought that you might have really brought an end to yourself in the desert! I can't bear the thought of existence now without you! You infuriate me! Why don't you laugh at me? You've done it before."

I drew myself up and turned my back on him. I was looking out at the grass blowing gently in the river wind, and the tendrils of the Queen's

Wreath reaching down to veil the open door.

"I'm not laughing," I said. "But I'm going to pursue this, no sense in lying about that to you. Lord God, don't you see? If I'm in a mortal body for five minutes only, what I might learn?"

"All right," he said despairingly. "I hope you discover the man's seduced you with a pack of lies, that all he wants is the Dark Blood, and that you send him straight to hell. Once more, let me warn you, if I see him, if he threatens me, I shall kill him. I haven't your strength. I depend upon my anonymity, that my little memoir, as you always call it, was so very far removed from the world of this century that no one took it as fact."

"I won't let him harm you, Louis," I said. I turned and threw an evil glance at him. "I would never ever have let anyone harm you." And with this I left.

Of course, this was an accusation, and he felt the keen edge of it, I'd seen that to my satisfaction, before I turned again and went out.

The night Claudia rose up against me, he had stood there, the helpless witness, abhorring but not thinking to interfere, even as I called his name.

He had taken what he thought to be my lifeless body and dumped it in the swamp. Ah, naive little fledglings, to think you could so easily get rid of me.

But why think of it now? He had loved me then whether or not he knew it; of my love for him and for that wretched angry child, I had never the slightest doubt.

He had grieved for me, I'll give him that much. But then he is so good at grieving! He wears woe as others wear velvet; sorrow flatters him like the light of candles; tears become him like jewels.

Well, none of that trash works with me.

I went back to my rooftop quarters, lighted all my fine electric lamps, and lay about wallowing in rank materialism for a couple of hours, watching an endless parade of video images on the giant screen, and then slept for a little while on my soft couch before going out to hunt.

I was weary, off my clock from wandering. I was thirsty too.

It was quiet beyond the lights of the Quarter, and the eternally illuminated skyscrapers of downtown. New Orleans sinks very fast into dimness, either in the pastoral streets I've already described or amid the more forlorn brick buildings and houses of the central town.

It was through these deserted commercial areas, with their shut-up factories and warehouses and bleak little shotgun cottages, that I wandered to a wondrous place near the river, which perhaps held no significance for any other being than myself.

It was an empty field close to the wharves, stretching beneath the giant pylons of the freeways which led to the high twin river bridges which I have always called, since the first moment I beheld them, the Dixie Gates.

I must confess these bridges have been given some other, less charming name by the official world. But I pay very little attention to the official world. To me these bridges will always be the Dixie Gates, and I never wait too long after returning home before I go to walk near them and admire them, with all their thousands of tiny twinkling lights.

Understand they are not fine aesthetic creations such as the Brooklyn Bridge, which incited the devotion of the poet Hart Crane. They do not have the solemn grandeur of San Francisco's Golden Gate.

But they are bridges, nevertheless, and all bridges are beautiful and thought-provoking; and when they are fully illuminated as these bridges are, their many ribs and girders take on a grand mystique.

Let me add here that the same great miracle of light occurs in the black southern nighttime countryside with the vast oil refineries and electric power stations, which rise in startling splendour from the flat invisible land. And these have the added glories of smoking chimneys and ever-burning gas flames. The Eiffel Tower is now no mere scaffold of iron but a sculpture of dazzling electric light.

But we are speaking of New Orleans, and I wandered now to this riverfront wasteland, bounded on one side by dark drab cottages, and on the other by the deserted warehouses, and at the northern end by the marvelous junkyards of derelict machinery and chain-link fences overgrown with the inevitable copious and beautiful flowering vines.

Ah, fields of thought and fields of despair. I loved to walk here, on the soft barren earth, amid the clumps of high weeds, and scattered bits of broken glass, to listen to the low pulse of the river, though I could not see it, to gaze at the distant rosy glow of downtown.

It seemed the essence of the modern world, this awful horrid forgotten place, this great gap amid picturesque old buildings, where only now and then did a car creep by, on the deserted and supposedly dangerous streets.

And let me not fail to mention that this area, in spite of the dark paths which led up to it, was itself never really dark. A deep steady flood of illumination poured down from the lamps of the freeways, and came forth from the few street lights, creating an even and seemingly sourceless modern gloom.

Makes you want to rush there, doesn't it? Aren't you just dying to go prowl around there in the dirt?

Seriously, it is divinely sad to stand there, a tiny figure in the cosmos, shivering at the muffled noises of the city, of awesome machines groaning in faraway industrial compounds, or occasional trucks rumbling by overhead.

From there it was a stone's throw to a boarded-up tenement, where in the garbage-strewn rooms I found a pair of killers, their feverish brains dulled by narcotics, upon whom I fed slowly and quietly, leaving them both unconscious but alive.

Then I went back to the lonely empty field, roaming with my hands in my pockets, kicking the tin cans I found, and circling for a long time beneath the freeways proper, then leaping up and walking out on the northern arm of the nearer Dixie Gate itself.

How deep and dark my river. The air was always cool above it; and in spite of the dismal haze hanging over all, I could still see a wealth of cruel and tiny stars.

For a long time I lingered, pondering everything Louis had said to me, everything David had said to me, and still wild with excitement to meet the strange Raglan James the following night.

At last I became bored even with the great river. I scanned the city for the crazy mortal spy, and couldn't find him. I scanned uptown and could not find him. But still I was unsure.

As the night wore away, I made my way back to Louis's house—which

was dark and deserted now—and I wandered the narrow little streets, more or less still searching for the mortal spy, and standing guard. Surely Louis was safe in his secret sanctuary, safe within the coffin to which he retreated well before every dawn.

Then I walked back down to the field again, singing to myself, and thought how the Dixie Gates with all their lights reminded me of the pretty steamboats of the nineteenth century, which had looked like great wedding cakes decked with candles, gliding by. Is that a mixed metaphor? I don't care. I heard the music of the steamboats in my head.

I tried to conceive of the next century, and what forms it would bring down upon us, and how it would shuffle ugliness and beauty with new violence, as each century must. I studied the pylons of the freeways, graceful soaring arches of steel and concrete, smooth as sculpture, simple and monstrous, gently bending blades of colorless grass.

And here came the train finally, rattling along the distant track before the warehouses, with its tedious string of dingy boxcars, disruptive and hideous and striking deep alarms with its shrieking whistle, within my all too human soul.

The night snapped back with utter emptiness after the last boom and clatter had died away. No visible cars moved on the bridges, and a heavy mist traveled silently over the breadth of the river, obscuring the fading stars.

I was weeping again. I was thinking of Louis, and of his warnings. But what could I do? I knew nothing of resignation. I never would. If that miserable Raglan James did not come tomorrow night, I'd search the world for him. I didn't want to talk to David anymore, didn't want to hear his warnings, couldn't listen. I knew I would follow this through.

I kept staring at the Dixie Gates. I couldn't get the beauty of the twinkling lights out of my head. I wanted to see a church with candles—lots of small flickering candles like the candles I'd seen in Notre Dame. Fumes rising from their wicks like prayers.

An hour till sunrise. Enough time. I headed slowly downtown.

The St. Louis Cathedral had been locked all night, but these locks were nothing to me.

I stood in the very front of the church, in the dark foyer, staring at the bank of candles burning beneath the statue of the Virgin. The faithful made their offerings in the brass coin box before lighting these candles.

Vigil lights, they called them.

Often I'd sat in the square in the early evening, listening to these people come and go. I liked the smell of the wax; I liked the small shadowy church which seemed to have changed not one whit in over a century. I sucked in my breath and then I reached into my pockets, drew out a couple of crumpled dollars, and put them through the brass slot.

I lifted the long wax wick, dipped it into an old flame, and carried the fire to a fresh candle, watched the little tongue grow orange and bright.

What a miracle, I thought. One tiny flame could make so many other flames; one tiny flame could set afire a whole world. Why, I had, with this simple gesture, actually increased the sum total of light in the universe, had I not?

Such a miracle, and for this there will never be an explanation, and there are no Devil and God speaking together in a Paris café. Yet David's crazed theories soothed me when I thought of them in reverie. "Increase and multiply," said the Lord, the great Lord, Yahweh—from the flesh of the two a multitude of children, like a great fire from only two little flames …

There was a noise suddenly, sharp, distinct, ringing through the church like a deliberate footfall. I froze, quite astonished that I hadn't known someone was there. Then I remembered Notre Dame, and the sound of the child's steps on the stone floor. A sudden fear swept over me. She was there, wasn't she? If I looked around the corner, I would see her this time, maybe with her bonnet on, and her curls straggling from the wind, and her hands wrapped in woolen mittens, and she'd be looking up at me with those immense eyes. Golden hair and beautiful eyes.

There came a sound again. I hated this fear!

Very slowly I turned, and I saw Louis's unmistakable form emerging from the shadows. Only Louis. The light of the candles slowly revealed his placid and slightly gaunt face.

He had on a dusty sad coat, and his worn shirt was open at the collar, and he looked faintly cold. He approached me slowly and clasped my shoulder with a firm hand.

"Something dreadful's going to happen to you again," he said, the light of the candles playing exquisitely in his dark green eyes. "You're going to see to it. I know."

“I’ll win out,” I said with a little uneasy laugh, a tiny giddy happiness at seeing him. Then a shrug. “Don’t you know that by now? I always do.”

But I was amazed that he’d found me here, that he had come so close to dawn. And I was trembling still from all my mad imaginings, that she had come, come as she had in my dreams, and I had wanted to know why.

I was worried for him suddenly; he seemed so fragile with his pallid skin and long delicate hands. And yet I could feel the cool strength emanating from him as I always had, the strength of the thoughtful one who does nothing on impulse, the one who sees from all angles, who chooses his words with care. The one who never plays with the coming sun.

He drifted back away from me, abruptly, and he slipped silently out the door. I went after him, failing to lock the door behind me, which was unforgivable, I suppose, for the peace of churches should never be disturbed, and I watched him walk through the cold black morning, along the sidewalk near the Pontalba Apartments, across from the square.

He was hurrying in his subtle graceful way, with long easy strides. The light was coming, gray and lethal, giving a dull gleam to the shopwindows beneath the overhanging roof. I could stand it for another half hour, perhaps. He could not.

I realized I didn’t know where his coffin was hidden, and how far he had to go to reach it. I had not the slightest idea.

Before he reached the corner nearest the river, he turned around. He gave a little wave to me, and in that gesture there was more affection than in anything he had said.

I went back to close up the church.

EIGHT

The next night, I went at once to Jackson Square.

The terrible norther had finally come down into New Orleans, bringing with it a freezing wind. This sort of thing can happen at any time during the winter months, though some years it happens not at all. I'd stopped at my rooftop flat to put on a heavy wool overcoat, delighted as before that I had such feeling now in my newly bronzed skin.

A few tourists braved the weather to visit the cafés and bakeries still open near the cathedral; and the evening traffic was noisy and hurried. The greasy old Café du Monde was crowded behind its closed doors.

I saw him immediately. What luck.

They had chained the gates of the square, as they always did now at sunset, a dreadful annoyance, and he was outside, facing the cathedral, looking anxiously about.

I had a moment to study him before he realized I was there. He was a little taller than I am, six feet two, I figured, and he was extremely well built, as I'd seen before. I'd been right about the age. The body couldn't have been more than twenty-five years old. He was clad in very expensive clothes—a fur-lined raincoat, very well tailored, and a thick scarlet cashmere scarf.

When he saw me, a spasm passed through him, of pure anxiety and mad delight. That awful glittering smile came over him and vainly trying to conceal his panic, he fixed his eyes upon me as I made a slow, humanlike approach.

"Ah, but you do look like an angel, Monsieur de Lioncourt," he whispered breathlessly, "and how splendid your darkened skin. What a lovely enhancement. Forgive me for not saying so before."

"So you're here, Mr. James," I said, raising my eyebrows. "What's the proposition? I don't like you. Talk fast."

"Don't be so rude, Monsieur de Lioncourt," he said. "It would be a dreadful mistake to offend me, really it would." Yes, a voice exactly like David's voice. Same generation, most likely. And something of India in it, no doubt.

“You’re quite right on that,” he said. “I spent many years in India too. And a little time in Australia and Africa as well.”

“Ah, so you can read my thoughts very easily,” I said.

“No, not as easily as you might think, and now probably not at all.”

“I’m going to kill you,” I said, “if you don’t tell me how you’ve managed to follow me and what you want.”

“You know what I want,” he said, laughing mirthlessly and anxiously under his breath, his eyes fixing on me and then veering away. “I told you through the stories, but I can’t talk here in the freezing cold. This is worse than Georgetown, which is where I live, by the way. I was hoping to escape this sort of weather. And why ever did you drag me to London and Paris at this time of year?” More dry anxious spasms of laughter. Obviously he couldn’t stare at me for more than a minute before glancing away as if I were a blinding light. “It was bitter cold in London. I hate cold. This is the tropics, is it not? Ah, you with your sentimental dreams of winter snow.”

This last remark stunned me before I could conceal it. I was enraged for one silent instant, and then I regained my control.

“Come, the café,” I said, pointing to the old French Market at the other side of the square. I hurried ahead along the pavement. I was too confused and excited to risk another word.

The café was extremely noisy but warm. I led the way to a table in the farthest corner from the door, ordered the famous café au lait for both of us, and sat there in rigid silence, faintly distracted by the stickiness of the little table, and grimly fascinated by him, as he shivered, unwound his red scarf anxiously, then put it on again, and finally pulled off his fine leather gloves, and stuffed them in his pockets, and then took them out again, and put on one of them, and laid the other one on the table and then snatched it up again, and put it on as well.

There was something positively horrible about him, about the way this alluringly splendid body was pumped up with his devious, jittery spirit, and cynical fits of laughter. Yet I couldn’t take my eyes off him. In some devilish way I enjoyed watching him. And I think he knew it.

There was a provocative intelligence lurking behind this flawless, beautiful face. He made me realize how intolerant I had become of anyone truly young.

Suddenly the coffee was set down before us, and I wrapped my naked

hands around the warm cup. I let the steam rise in my face. He watched this, with his large clear brown eyes, as if he were the one who was fascinated, and now he tried to hold my gaze steadily and calmly, which he found very hard. Delicious mouth, pretty eyelashes, perfect teeth.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" I asked.

"You know. You've figured it out. I'm not fond of this body, Monsieur de Lioncourt. A body thief has his little difficulties, you know."

"Is that what you are?"

"Yes, a body thief of the first rank. But then you knew that when you agreed to see me, did you not? You must forgive me my occasional clumsiness. I have been for most of my life a lean if not emaciated man. Never in such good health." He gave a sigh, the youthful face for a moment sad.

"But those chapters are closed now," he said with sudden discomfort. "Let me come to the point immediately, out of respect for your enormous preternatural intellect and vast experience—"

"Don't mock me, you little pissant!" I said under my breath. "You play with me, I'll tear you apart slowly. I told you I don't like you. Even your little title for yourself I don't like."

That shut him up. He calmed down altogether. Perhaps he lost his temper, or was frozen with terror. I think it was simply that he stopped being so fearful and became coldly angry instead.

"All right," he said softly, and soberly, without all the frenzy. "I want to trade bodies with you. I want yours for a week. I'll see to it that you have this body. It's young, it's in perfect health. You like the look of it, obviously. I shall show you various certificates of health if you wish. The body was quite thoroughly tested and examined right before I took possession of it. Or stole it. It's quite strong; you can see that. Obviously, it's strong, quite remarkably strong—"

"How can you do it?"

"We do it together, Monsieur de Lioncourt," he said very politely, his tone becoming more civil and courteous with each sentence he spoke. "There can be no question of body theft when I'm dealing with a creature such as you."

"But you've tried, haven't you?"

He studied me for a moment, clearly unsure as to how he should answer. "Well, you can't blame me for that now, can you?" he said

imploringly. “Any more than I can blame you for drinking blood.” He smiled as he said the word “blood.” “But really I was simply trying to get your attention, which isn’t an easy thing to do.” He seemed thoughtful, utterly sincere. “Besides, cooperation is always involved on some level, no matter how submerged that level may be.”

“Yes,” I said, “but what are the actual mechanics, if that isn’t too crude a word. How do we cooperate with each other! Be specific with me. I don’t believe this can be done.”

“Oh, come now, of course you do,” he suggested gently, as if he were a patient teacher. It seemed almost an impersonation of David, without David’s vigor. “How else would I have managed to take ownership of this body?” He made a little illustrative gesture as he continued. “We will meet at an appropriate place. Then we will rise out of our bodies, which you know very well how to do and have so eloquently described in your writing, and then we will take possession of each other’s bodies. There’s nothing to it really, except complete courage and an act of will.” He lifted the cup, his hand trembling violently, and he drank a mouthful of the hot coffee. “For you, the test will be the courage, nothing more.”

“What will keep me anchored in the new body?”

“There’ll be no one in there, Monsieur de Lioncourt, to push you out. This is entirely different from possession, you understand. Oh, possession is a battle. When you enter into this body, there will be not the slightest resistance from it. You can remain until you choose to disengage.”

“It’s too puzzling!” I said, with obvious annoyance. “I know reams have been written on these questions, but something doesn’t quite …”

“Let me try to put it in perspective,” he said, voice hushed and almost exquisitely accommodating. “We’re dealing here with science, but it is science which has not yet been fully codified by scientific minds. What we have are the memoirs of poets and occult adventurers, quite incapable of anatomizing what takes place.”

“Exactly. As you pointed out, I’ve done it myself, traveled out of the body. Yet I don’t know what takes place. Why doesn’t the body die when one leaves it? I don’t understand.”

“The soul has more than one part, as does the brain. Surely you know that a child can be born without a cerebellum, yet the body can live if it has what is called the brain stem.”

“Dreadful thought.”

“Happens all the time, I assure you. Victims of accidents in which the brain is damaged irretrievably can still breathe and even yawn in their slumber, as the lower brain carries on.”

“And you can possess such bodies?”

“Oh, no, I need a healthy brain in order to take full possession, absolutely must have all those cells in good working order and able to lock into the invading *mind*. Mark my words, Monsieur de Lioncourt. Brain is not mind. But again, we are not talking of possession, but of something infinitely finer than that. Allow me to continue, please.”

“Go ahead.”

“As I was saying, the soul has more than one part, in the same manner as the brain. The larger part of it—identity, personality, consciousness, if you will—this is what springs loose and travels; but a small residual soul remains. It keeps the vacant body animate, so to speak, for otherwise vacancy would mean death, of course.”

“I see. The residual soul animates the brain stem; that is what you mean.”

“Yes. When you rise out of your body, you will leave a residual soul there. And when you come into this body, you will find the residual soul there as well. It’s the very same residual soul I found when I took possession. And that soul will lock with any higher soul eagerly and automatically; it wants to embrace that higher soul. Without it, it feels incomplete.”

“And when death occurs both souls leave?”

“Precisely. Both souls go together, the residual soul and the larger soul, in a violent evacuation, and then the body is a mere lifeless shell and begins its decay.” He waited, observing me with the same seemingly sincere patience, and then he said: “Believe me, the force of actual death is much stronger. There’s no danger at all in what we propose to do.”

“But if this little residual soul is so damned receptive, why can’t I, with all my power, jolt some little mortal soul right out of its skin, and move in?”

“Because the larger soul would try to reclaim its body, Monsieur de Lioncourt, even if there were no understanding of the process, it would try again and again. Souls do not want to be without a body. And even though the residual soul welcomes the invader, something in it always recognizes the particular soul of which it was once a part. It will choose

that soul if there is a battle. And even a bewildered soul can make a powerful attempt to reclaim its mortal frame."

I said nothing, but much as I suspected him, indeed reminded myself to be on guard, I found a continuity in all he said.

"Possession is always a bloody struggle," he reiterated. "Look what happens with evil spirits, ghosts, that sort of thing. They're always driven out eventually, even if the victor never knows what took place. When the priest comes with his incense and his holy-water mumbo jumbo, he is calling on that residual soul to oust the intruder and draw the old soul back in."

"But with the cooperative switch, both souls have new bodies."

"Precisely. Believe me, if you think you can hop into a human body without my assistance, well, give it a try, and you'll see what I mean. You'll never really experience the five senses of a mortal as long as the battle's raging inside."

His manner became even more careful, confidential. "Look at this body again, Monsieur de Lioncourt," he said with beguiling softness. "It can be yours, absolutely and truly yours." His pause seemed as precise suddenly as his words. "It was a year ago you first saw it in Venice. It's been host to an intruder without interruption for all of that time. It will play host to you."

"Where did you get it?"

"Stole it, I told you," he said. "The former owner is dead."

"You have to be more specific."

"Oh, must I, really? I do so hate to incriminate myself."

"I'm not a mortal officer of the law, Mr. James. I'm a vampire. Speak in words I can understand."

He gave a soft faintly ironic laugh. "The body was carefully chosen," he said. "The former owner had no mind left. Oh, there was nothing organically wrong with him, absolutely nothing. As I told you, he'd been quite thoroughly tested. He'd become a great quiet laboratory animal of sorts. He never moved. Never spoke. His reason had been hopelessly shattered, no matter how the healthy cells of the brain continued to pop and crackle along, as they are wont to do. I accomplished the switch in stages. Jolting him out of his body was simple. It was luring him down into my old body and leaving him there which took the skill."

"Where is your old body now?"

“Monsieur de Lioncourt, there is simply no way that the old soul will ever come knocking; that I guarantee.”

“I want to see a picture of your old body.”

“Whatever for?”

“Because it will tell me things about you, more perhaps than you yourself are telling me. I demand it. I won’t proceed without it.”

“You won’t?” He retained the polite smile. “What if I get up and leave here?”

“I’ll kill your splendid new body as soon as you try. No one in this café will even notice. They’ll think you’re drunk and that you’ve tumbled into my arms. I do that sort of thing all the time.”

He fell silent, but I could see that he was calculating fiercely, and then I realized how much he was savoring all this, that he had been all along. He was like a great actor, deeply immersed in the most challenging part of his career.

He smiled at me, with startling seductiveness, and then, carefully removing his right glove, he drew a little item out of his pocket and put it in my hand. An old photograph of a gaunt man with thick white wavy hair. I judged him to be perhaps fifty. He wore some sort of white uniform with a little black bow tie.

He was a very nice looking man, actually, much more delicate in appearance than David, but he had the same sort of British elegance about him, and his smile was not unpleasant. He was leaning on the railing of what might have been the deck of a ship. Yes, it was a ship.

“You knew I’d ask for this, didn’t you?”

“Sooner or later,” he said.

“When was this taken?”

“That's of no importance. Why on earth do you want to know?” He betrayed just a little annoyance, but then he covered at once. “It was ten years ago,” he said with a slight sinking of the voice. “Will it do?”

“And so that makes you … what? Mid-sixties, perhaps?”

“I’ll settle for that,” he said with a very broad and intimate smile. “How did you learn all this? Why haven’t others perfected this trick?”

He looked me up and down and a little coldly, and I thought his composure might snap. Then he retreated into his polite manner again. “Many people have done it,” he said, his voice assuming a tone of special confidence. “Your friend David Talbot could have told you that. He

didn't want to. He lies, like all those wizards in the Talamasca. They're religious. They think they can control people; they use their knowledge for control."

"How do you know about them?"

"I was a member of their order," he said, his eyes brightening playfully, as he smiled again. "They kicked me out of it. They accused me of using my powers for gain. What else is there, Monsieur de Lioncourt? What do you use your powers for, if not for gain?"

So, Louis had been right. I didn't speak. I tried to scan him but it was useless. Instead, I received a strong sense of his physical presence, of the heat emanating from him, of the hot fount of his blood. Succulent, that was the word for this body, no matter what one thought of his soul. I disliked the feeling because it made me want to kill him now.

"I found out about you through the Talamasca," he said, assuming the same confidential tone as before. "Of course I was familiar with your little fictions. I read all that sort of thing. That's why I used those short stories to communicate with you. But it was in the archives of the Talamasca that I discovered that your fictions weren't fictions at all."

I was silently enraged that Louis had figured it right.

"All right," I said. "I understand all this about the divided brain and the divided soul, but what if you don't want to give my body back to me after we've made this little switch, and I'm not strong enough to reclaim it; what's to keep you from making off with my body for good?"

He was quite still for a moment, and then said with slow measured words: "A very large bribe."

"Ah."

"Ten million dollars in a bank account waiting for me when I repossess this body." He reached into his coat pocket again and drew out a small plastic card with a thumbnail picture of his new face on it. There was also a clear fingerprint, and his name, Raglan James, and a Washington address.

"You can arrange it, surely. A fortune that can only be claimed by the man with this face and this fingerprint? You don't think I'd forfeit a fortune of that size, do you? Besides, I don't want your body forever. *You* don't even want it forever, do you? You've been far too eloquent on the subject of your agonies, your angst, your extended and noisy descent into hell, etcetera. No. I only want your body for a little while. There are

many bodies out there, waiting for me to take possession of them, many kinds of adventure."

I studied the little card.

"Ten million," I said. "That's quite a price."

"It's nothing to you and you know it. You have billions squirreled away in international banks under all your colorful aliases. A creature with your formidable powers can acquire all the riches of the world. It's only the tawdry vampires of second-rate motion pictures who tramp through eternity living hand to mouth, as we both know."

He blotted his lips fastidiously with a linen handkerchief, then drank a gulp of his coffee.

"I was powerfully intrigued," he said, "by your descriptions of the vampire Armand in *The Queen of the Damned*—how he used his precious powers to acquire wealth, and built his great enterprise, the Night Island, such a lovely name. It rather took my breath away." He smiled, and then went on, the voice amiable and smooth as before. "It wasn't very difficult for me to document and annotate your assertions, you realize, though as we both know, your mysterious comrade has long ago abandoned the Night Island, and has vanished from the realm of computer records—at least as far as I can ascertain."

I didn't say anything.

"Besides, for what I offer, ten million is a bargain. Who else has made you such an offer? There isn't anyone else—at the moment, that is—who can or will."

"And suppose I don't want to switch back at the end of the week?" I asked. "Suppose I want to be human forever."

"That's perfectly fine with me," he said graciously. "I can get rid of your body anytime I want. There are lots of others who'll take it off my hands." He gave me a respectful and admiring smile.

"What are you going to do with my body?"

"Enjoy it. Enjoy the strength, the power! I've had everything the human body has to offer—youth, beauty, resilience. I've even been in the body of a woman, you know. And by the way, I don't recommend that at all. Now I want what *you* have to offer." He narrowed his eyes and cocked his head. "If there were any corporeal angels hanging about, well, I might approach one of them."

"The Talamasca has no record of angels?"

He hesitated, then gave a small contained laugh. “Angels are pure spirit, Monsieur de Lioncourt,” he said. “We are talking bodies, no? I am addicted to the pleasures of the flesh. And vampires are fleshly monsters, are they not? They thrive on blood.” Again, a light came into his eyes when he said the word “blood.”

“What’s your game?” I asked. “I mean really. What’s your passion? It can’t be the money. What’s the money for? What will you buy with it? Experiences you haven’t had?”

“Yes, I would say that’s it. Experiences I haven’t had. I’m obviously a sensualist, for want of a better word, but if you must know the truth—and I don’t see why there should be any lies between us—I’m a thief in every respect. I don’t enjoy something unless I bargain for it, trick someone out of it, or steal it. It’s my way of making something out of nothing, you might say, which makes me like God!”

He stopped as if he were so impressed with what he had just said that he had to catch his breath. His eyes were dancing, and then he looked down at the half-empty coffee cup and gave a long secretive private smile.

“You do follow my drift, don’t you?” he asked. “I stole these clothes,” he said. “Everything in my house in Georgetown is stolen—every piece of furniture, every painting, every little objet d’art. Even the house itself is stolen, or shall we say, it was signed over to me amid a morass of false impressions and false hopes. I believe they call it swindling? All the same thing.” He smiled proudly again, and with such seeming depth of feeling that I was amazed. “All the money I possess is stolen. So is the car I drive in Georgetown. So are the airline tickets I used to chase you around the world.”

I didn’t respond. How strange he was, I thought, intrigued by him and yet still repelled by him, for all his graciousness and seeming honesty. It was an act, but what a nearly perfect act. And then the bewitching face, which seemed with every new revelation to be more mobile and expressive and pliant. I roused myself. There was more I had to know.

“How did you accomplish that, following me about? How did you know where I was?”

“Two ways, to be perfectly frank with you. The first is obvious. I can leave my body for short periods, and during those periods I can search for you over vast distances. But I don’t like that sort of bodiless travel at

all. And of course you are not easy to find. You cloak yourself for long periods; then you blaze away in careless visibility; and of course you move about with no discernible pattern. Often by the time I'd located you, and brought my body to the location, you were gone.

"Then there's another way, almost as magical—computer systems. You use many aliases. I've been able to discover four of them. I'm often not quick enough to catch up with you through the computer. But I can study your tracks. And when you double back again, I know where to close in."

I said nothing, merely marveling again at how much he was enjoying all of this.

"I like your taste in cities," he said. "I like your taste in hotels—the Hassler in Rome, the Ritz in Paris, the Stanhope in New York. And of course the Park Central in Miami, lovely little hotel. Oh, don't get so suspicious. There's nothing to chasing people through computer systems. There's nothing to bribing clerks to show you a credit card receipt, or bullying bank employees to reveal things they've been told not to reveal. Tricks usually handle it perfectly well. You don't have to be a preternatural killer to do it. No, not at all."

"You steal through the computer systems?"

"When I can," he said with a little twist to his mouth. "I steal in any fashion. Nothing's beneath my dignity. But I'm not capable of stealing ten million dollars through any means. If I were, I wouldn't be here, now, would I? I'm not that clever. I've been caught twice. I've been in prison. That's where I perfected the means of traveling out of body, since there wasn't any other way." He made a weary bitter sarcastic smile.

"Why are you telling me all this?"

"Because your friend David Talbot is going to tell you. And because I think we should understand each other. I'm weary of taking risks. This is the big score, your body—and ten million dollars when I give it up."

"What is it with you?" I asked. "This all sounds so petty, so mundane."

"Ten million is mundane?"

"Yes. You've swapped an old body for a new one. You're young again! And the next step, if I consent, will be my body, my powers. But it's the money that matters to you. It's really just the money and nothing else."

"It's both!" he said sourly and defiantly. "They're very similar." With conscious effort he regained his composure. "You don't realize it because

you acquired your wealth and your power simultaneously," he said. "Immortality and a great casket full of gold and jewels. Wasn't that the story? You walked out of Magnus's tower an immortal with a king's ransom. Or is the story a lie? You're real enough, that's plain. But I don't know about all those things you wrote. But you ought to understand what I'm saying. You're a thief yourself."

I felt an immediate flush of anger. Suddenly he was more consummately distasteful than he'd been in that anxious jittering state when we first sat down.

"I'm not a thief," I said quietly.

"Yes, you are," he answered with amazing sympathy. "You always steal from your victims. You know you do."

"No, I never do unless … I have to."

"Have it your way. I think you're a thief." He leant forward, eyes glittering again, as the soothing measured words continued: "You steal the blood you drink, you can't argue with that."

"What actually happened with you and the Talamasca?" I asked.

"I told you," he said. "The Talamasca threw me out. I was accused of using my gifts to gain information for personal use. I was accused of deception. And of stealing, of course. They were very foolish and shortsighted, your friends in the Talamasca. They underestimated me completely. They should have valued me. They should have studied me. They should have begged me to teach them the things I know.

"Instead they gave me the boot. Six months' severance. A pittance. And they refused my last request … for first-class passage to America on the *Queen Elizabeth 2*. It would have been so simple for them to grant my wish. They owed me that much, after the things I'd revealed to them. They should have done it." He sighed, and glanced at me, and then at his coffee. "Little things like that matter in this world. They matter very much."

I didn't reply. I looked down at the picture again, at the figure on the deck of the ship, but I'm not sure he took notice of it. He was staring off into the noisy glare of the café, eyes dancing over walls and ceiling and occasional tourists and taking note of none.

"I tried to bargain with them," he said, voice soft and measured as before. "If they wanted a few items returned or a few questions answered —you know. But they wouldn't hear of it, not them! And money means

nothing to them, no more than it means to you. They were too mean-spirited to even consider it. They gave me a tourist-class plane ticket, and a check for six months' pay. Six months' pay! Oh, I am so very weary of all the little ups and downs!"

"What made you think you could outwit them?"

"I *did* outwit them," he said, eyes flashing with a little smile. "They're not very careful with their inventories. They have no idea really how many of their little treasures I managed to appropriate. They'll never guess. Of course you were the real theft—the secret that you existed. Ah, discovering that little vault full of relics was such a stroke of good luck. Understand, I didn't take anything of your old possessions—rotted frock coats from your very closets in New Orleans, parchments with your fancy signature, why, there was even a locket with a painted miniature of that accursed little child—"

"Watch your tongue," I whispered.

He went quiet. "I'm sorry. I meant no offense, truly."

"What locket?" I asked. Could he hear the sudden racing of my heart? I tried to still it, to keep the warmth from rising again in my face.

How meek he looked as he answered. "A gold locket on a chain, little oval miniature inside. Oh, I didn't steal it. I swear to you. I left it there. Ask your friend Talbot. It's still in the vault."

I waited, commanding my heart to be still, and banishing all images of that locket from my mind. Then: "The point is, the Talamasca caught you and they put you out."

"You don't have to continue insulting me," he said humbly. "It's entirely possible for us to make our little bargain without any unpleasantness. I'm very sorry that I mentioned this locket, I didn't—"

"I want to think over your proposition," I said.

"That might be a mistake."

"Why?"

"Give it a chance! Act quickly. Act now. And remember, please, if you harm me, you'll throw away this opportunity forever. I'm the only key to this experience; use me or you'll never know what it's like to be a human being again." He drew close to me, so close I could feel his breath on my cheek. "You'll never know what it's like to walk in the sunlight, to enjoy a full meal of real food, to make love to a woman or a man."

"I want you to leave here now. Get out of this city and never come

back. I'll come to you at this address in Georgetown when I'm ready. And it won't be for a week this switch. Not the first time at any rate. It will be …"

"May I suggest two days?"

I didn't answer.

"What if we start with one day?" he asked. "If you like it, then we can arrange for a longer time?"

"One day," I said, my voice sounding very strange to me. "One period of twenty-four hours … for the first time."

"One day and two nights," he said quietly. "Let me suggest this coming Wednesday, as soon after sunset as you like. We shall make the second switch early on Friday, before dawn."

I didn't reply.

"You have this evening and tomorrow evening to make your preparations," he said coaxingly. "After the switch you will have all of Wednesday night and the full day Thursday. Of course you'll have Thursday night as well up until … shall we say, two hours before Friday's sunrise? That ought to be comfortable enough."

He studied me keenly, then became more anxious: "Oh, and bring one of your passports with you. I don't care which one. But I want a passport, and a bit of credit plastic, and money in my pockets over and above the ten million. You understand?"

I didn't say anything.

"You know this will work."

Again, I didn't answer.

"Believe me, all I've told you is true. Ask Talbot. I wasn't born this handsome individual you see before you. And this body is waiting right now this very minute for you."

I was quiet.

"Come to me Wednesday," he said. "You'll be very glad that you did." He paused, and then his manner became even softer. "Look, I … feel that I know you," he said, his voice dropping to a whisper. "I know what you want! It's dreadful to want something and not to have it. Ah, but then to know that it's within your grasp."

I looked up slowly into his eyes. The handsome face was tranquil, devoid of any stamp of expression, and the eyes seemed rather miraculous in their fragility and their precision. The skin itself seemed

supple and as if it would feel like satin to my touch. And then came the voice again, in a seductive half whisper, the words touched with sadness.

"This is something only you and I can do," he said. "In a way, it is a miracle which only you and I can understand."

The face appeared monstrous suddenly in its tranquil beauty; even the voice seemed monstrous in its lovely timbre and eloquence, so expressive of empathy and even affection, perhaps even love.

I had the urge to grab the creature by the throat; I had the urge to shake it until it lost its composure and its semblance of deep feeling, but I would not have dreamed of doing so really. I was mesmerized by the eyes and the voice. I was allowing myself to be mesmerized, the way I had allowed those earlier physical sensations of assault to sweep over me. And it occurred to me that I allowed this simply because this being seemed so very fragile and foolish and I was sure of my own strength.

But that was a lie. I wanted to do this thing! I wanted to make this switch.

Only after a long while, he broke away, and let his gaze move over the café. Was he biding his time? What went on inside his clever conniving, and thoroughly concealed soul! A being who could steal bodies! Who could live inside another's flesh.

Slowly, he took a pen from his pocket, tore loose one of the paper napkins, and wrote down the name and address of a bank. He gave this to me and I took it and slipped it into my pocket. I didn't speak.

"Before we switch, I'll give you my passport," he said, studying me with every word. "The one with the correct face on it, of course. I'll leave you comfortable in my house. I assume you'll have money in your pockets. You always do. You'll find it quite cozy, my house. You'll like Georgetown." His words were like soft fingers tapping the back of my hand, annoying yet vaguely thrilling. "It's quite a civilized place, an old place. Of course it is snowing there. You realize it. It's very cold. If you really don't want to do it in a cold climate—"

"I don't mind about the snow," I said under my breath.

"Yes, of course. Well, I'll be sure to leave you quite a few winter garments," he said in the same conciliatory manner.

"None of those details matter," I said. What a fool he was to think that they did. I could feel my heart skipping beats.

"Oh, I don't know about that," he said. "When you're human you might

find that a lot of things matter."

To you, perhaps, I thought. All that matters to me is to be in that body, and to be alive. In my mind's eye, I saw the snow of that last winter in the Auvergne. I saw the sun spilling down on the mountains … I saw the little priest from the village church, shivering in the great hall as he complained to me about the wolves coming down into the village at night. Of course I would hunt down the wolves. It was my duty.

I didn't care whether he'd read these thoughts or not.

"Ah, but don't you want to taste good food? Don't you want to drink good wine? What about a woman, or a man, for that matter? You'll need money and pleasant accommodations, of course."

I didn't reply. I saw the sun on the snow. I let my eyes move slowly to his face. I thought how curiously graceful he seemed in this new mode of persuasiveness, how very like David, indeed.

He was about to go on with his talk of luxuries when I gestured for silence.

"All right," I said. "I think you'll see me on Wednesday. Shall we say an hour after dark? Oh, and I must warn you. This fortune of ten million dollars. It will only be available to you for two hours on Friday morning. You'll have to appear in person to claim it." And here I touched his shoulder lightly. "This person, of course."

"Of course. I'm looking forward to it."

"And you'll need a code word to complete the transaction. And you'll only learn the code word from me when you return my body as agreed."

"No. No code words. The transfer of funds must be complete and irrevocable before the bank closes on Wednesday afternoon. All I have to do the following Friday is appear before the representative, allow him to take my fingerprint if you insist upon it, and then he will sign the money over to me."

I was quiet, thinking it over.

"After all, my handsome friend," he said, "what if you don't like your day as a human being? What if you don't feel you've gotten your money's worth?"

"I'll get my money's worth," I whispered, more to myself than to him.

"No," he said patiently but insistently. "No code words."

I studied him. He smiled at me, and he appeared almost innocent and

truly young. Good Lord, it must have meant *something* to him, this youthful vigor. How could it not have dazzled him, at least for a while? In the beginning, perhaps, he must have thought he'd attained everything that he could ever want.

"Not by a long shot!" he said suddenly, as if he couldn't stop the words from slipping out of his mouth.

I couldn't help but laugh.

"Let me tell you a little secret about youth," he said with sudden coldness. "Bernard Shaw said it was wasted on the young, you remember that clever overrated little remark?"

"Yes."

"Well, it isn't. The young know how difficult and truly dreadful youth can be. Their youth is wasted on everyone else, that's the horror. The young have no authority, no respect."

"You're mad," I said. "I don't think you use what you steal very well. How could you not thrill to the sheer stamina? Glory in the beauty you see reflected in the eyes of those who look at you everywhere you go?"

He shook his head. "That's for you to enjoy," he said. "The body's young the way you've always been young. You will thrill to the stamina of it, as you say. You will glory in all those loving looks." He broke off. He took the final sip of his coffee and stared into the cup.

"No code words," he said politely.

"Very well."

"Ah, good," he said with a full warm smile of amazing brightness. "Remember I offered you a week for this sum," he said. "It's your decision to take one full day. Perhaps after you've had a taste you'll want a much longer time."

"Perhaps so," I said. Again, I was distracted by the sight of him, by the sight of the large warm hand which he covered now with the glove.

"And another switch will cost you another handsome sum," he said merrily, all smiles now, as he arranged his scarf within his lapels. "Yes, of course."

"Money really *doesn't* mean anything to you, does it?" he asked, thoughtfully.

"Nothing at all." How tragic for you, I thought, that it means so much.

"Well, perhaps I should take my leave now, and allow you to make your preparations. I shall see you Wednesday as planned."

“Don’t try to run out on me,” I said in a low voice, leaning forward slightly, and then lifting my hand and touching his face.

The gesture clearly startled him; he became motionless, like an animal in the wood who suddenly sensed danger where there had been none before. But his expression remained calm, and I let my fingers rest against his smoothly shaven skin.

Then I moved them down slowly, feeling the firmness of his jawbone, and then I placed my hand on his neck. Here, too, the razor had passed, leaving its faint dark shadow; the skin was firm, surprisingly muscular, and a clean, youthful scent rose from it as I saw the sweat break out on his forehead, as I saw his lips move in a surprisingly graceful smile.

“Surely you enjoyed being young just a little,” I said under my breath.

He smiled, as if he knew just how radiant and seductive the smile could be.

“I dream the dreams of the young,” he said. “And they are always dreams of being older, and richer, and wiser, and stronger, don’t you think?”

I gave a little laugh.

“I’ll be there Wednesday night,” he said with the same silver-tongued sincerity. “You can be certain of it. Come. It will happen, I promise you.” He leant forward and whispered. “You will be inside this body!” And once again, he smiled in the most charming and ingratiating fashion. “You’ll see.”

“I want you to leave New Orleans now.”

“Ah, yes, immediately,” he said. And without another word, he stood up, moving back away from me, and then tried to conceal his sudden fear. “I have my ticket already,” he said. “I don’t like your filthy little Caribbean backwater.” He made a little self-deprecating laugh, an almost pretty laugh. Then he went on as if he were a wise teacher scolding a student. “We’ll talk more when you come to Georgetown. And don’t try to spy on me in the meantime. I’ll know it if you do. I’m too good at picking up that sort of thing. Even the Talamasca was amazed at my powers. They should have kept me in the fold! They should have studied me!” He broke off.

“I’ll spy on you anyway,” I said, echoing his low key and careful tone. “I don’t really care whether or not you know.”

He laughed again, in a low, subdued, and slightly smoldering fashion,

and then gave me a little nod and rushed towards the door. He was once again the awkward, ungainly being, full of crazed excitement. And how tragic it seemed, for surely that body could move like a panther with another soul inside.

I caught him on the sidewalk, startling him, indeed scaring him half out of his powerful little psychic mind. We were almost eye-to-eye.

"What do you want to do with my body?" I asked. "I mean, besides flee from the sun every morning as if you were a nocturnal insect or a giant slug?"

"What do you think?" he said, once again playing the charming English gentleman with utter sincerity. "I want to drink blood." His eyes grew very wide, and he leaned closer. "I want to take life when I drink it. That's the point, isn't it? It's not merely the blood you steal from them, it's their lives. I've never stolen anything that valuable from anyone." He gave me a knowing smile. "The body, yes, but not the blood and the life."

I let him go, backing away from him as sharply as he'd backed away from me only a moment before. My heart was pounding, and I could feel a tremor passing through me as I stared at him, at his handsome and seemingly innocent face.

He continued to smile. "You are a thief par excellence," he said. "Every breath you take is stolen! Oh, yes, I must have your body. I must experience this. To invade the vampire files of the Talamasca was a triumph, but to possess your body, and to steal blood whilst in it! Ah, that is beyond all my finest accomplishments! You are the ultimate thief."

"Get away from me," I whispered.

"Oh, come now, don't be so fastidious," he said. "You hate it when other people do it to you. You're quite privileged, Lestat de Lioncourt. You've found what Diogenes was searching for. An honest man!" Another broad smile, and then a low volley of simmering laughter, as if he couldn't contain it any longer. "I shall see you Wednesday. And you must come early. I want as much of the night as I can have."

He turned and hurried into the street, waving frantically for a taxi, and then bolting against the traffic to force his way into a cab which had just come to a stop, quite obviously, for someone else. A little argument ensued, but he won out immediately, slamming the door in the other fellow's face as the cab sped off. I saw him wink at me through the dirty

window, and wave. And then he and his taxi were gone.

I was sick with confusion. I stood there unable to move. The night for all its coldness was busy and full of the mingled voices of the passing tourists, of cars slowing as they passed the square. Without intent, without words, I tried to see it as it might be in the sunshine; I tried to imagine the heavens over this spot that shocking vague blue.

Then slowly I turned up the collar of my coat.

I walked for hours. I kept hearing that beautiful cultured voice in my ears.

It's not merely the blood you steal from them, it's their lives. I've never stolen anything that valuable from anyone. The body, yes, but not the blood and the life.

I couldn't have faced Louis. I couldn't bear the thought of talking to David. And if Marius learned of this, I was finished before I'd begun. Who knew what Marius would do to me for even entertaining such an idea? And yet Marius, with all his vast experience, would know if this was truth or fancy! Ye gods, had Marius never wanted to do it himself?

At last, I went back to my apartment, and turned out the lights and sat sprawled on the soft velvet sofa, before the darkened glass wall, peering out at the city below.

Remember, please, if you harm me, you'll throw away this opportunity forever … Use me or you'll never know what it's like to be a human being again … You'll never know what it's like to walk in the sunlight, to enjoy a full meal of real food, to make love to a woman or a man.

I thought about the power of rising out of one's material form. I didn't like this power, and it did not happen to me spontaneously, this astral projection, as it was called, this spirit traveling. Indeed, I had used it so few times I could have counted them on one hand.

And in all my suffering in the Gobi, I had not tried to leave my material form, nor had I been propelled out of it, nor had I even thought of such a possibility.

Indeed, the idea of being disconnected from my body—of floating about, earthbound, and unable to find a door to heaven or hell—was absolutely terrifying to me. And that such a traveling, disembodied soul could not pass through the gates of death at will had been plain to me the very first time I'd ever experimented with this little trick. But to go into the body of a mortal! To anchor there, to walk, to feel, to see, as a

mortal, ah, I could not contain my excitement. It was becoming pure pain.

After the switch you will have all of Wednesday night and the full day Thursday. The full day Thursday, the full day …

Finally, sometime before morning, I called my agent in New York. This man had no knowledge of my Paris agent at all. He knew me under two names only. And I had not used either of these in many a moon. It was very unlikely Raglan James had any knowledge of these identities and their various resources. It seemed the simplest route to pursue.

"I have some work for you, very complicated work. And it must be done immediately."

"Yes, sir, always, sir."

"All right, this is the name and address of a bank in the District of Columbia. I want you to write it down …"

NINE

The following evening I completed all the necessary papers for this transfer of ten million in American dollars, and sent these papers by messenger to the bank in Washington, along with Mr. Raglan James's photo-identification card, and a full reiteration of instructions in my own hand, and with the signature of Lestan Gregor, which for various reasons, was the best name to be used for the entire affair.

My New York agent also knew me by another alias, as I have indicated, and we agreed that this other name would in no way figure in this transaction, and that should I need to contact my agent, this other name, and a couple of new code words, would empower him to make transfers of money on verbal instructions alone.

As for the name Lestan Gregor, it was to disappear utterly from record as soon as this ten million went into the possession of Mr. James. All the remaining assets of Mr. Gregor were now transferred to my other name —which by the way was Stanford Wilde, for all that it matters now.

All of my agents are used to such bizarre instructions—shifts of funds, collapsing of identities, and the authority to wire funds to me anywhere I might be in the world on the basis of a telephone call. But I tightened the system. I gave bizarre and difficult-to-pronounce code words. I did everything I could, in short, to improve security surrounding my identities, and to fix the terms of the transfer of the ten million as firmly as I could.

As of Wednesday noon, the money would be in a trust account at the Washington bank, from which it could only be claimed by Mr. Raglan James, and only between the hours of ten and twelve on the following Friday. Mr. James would verify his identity by physical conformity to his picture, and by fingerprint, and by signature, before the money would be placed in his account. At one minute after twelve noon, the entire transaction would be null and void, and the money would be sent back to New York. Mr. James was to be presented with all these terms on Wednesday afternoon at the very latest, and with the assurance that nothing could prevent this transfer if all the instructions were followed

as laid out.

It seemed an ironclad arrangement, as far as I could figure, but then I wasn't a thief, contrary to what Mr. James believed. And knowing that he was, I examined all aspects of the deal over and over, rather compulsively, in order to deny him the upper hand.

But why was I still deceiving myself, I wondered, that I would not go through with this experiment? For surely I intended to do exactly that.

Meantime, the phone in my apartment was ringing over and over again, as David tried desperately to reach me, and I sat there in the dark, thinking things over, and refusing to answer, vaguely annoyed by the ringing, and finally unplugging the cord.

This was despicable, what I meant to do. This varmint would use my body, no doubt, for the most sinister and cruel crimes. And I was going to allow this to happen, merely so that I could be human? How impossible to justify, in any light whatever, to anyone whom I knew.

Every time I thought of the others discovering the truth—*any* of them —I shuddered, and put the thought completely from my mind. Pray they were busy throughout the vast hostile world, with their own inevitable pursuits.

How much better to think about the entire proposition with pounding excitement. And Mr. James was right about the matter of money, of course. Ten million meant absolutely nothing to me. I had carried through the centuries a great fortune, increasing it by various offhand means until even I myself did not know its true size.

And much as I understood how very different the world was for a mortal being, I still could not quite comprehend why the money was so important to James. After all, we were dealing with questions of potent magic, of vast preternatural power, of potentially devastating spiritual insights, and demonic, if not heroic, deeds. But the money was clearly what the little bastard wanted. The little bastard, for all his insults, did not really see past the money. And perhaps that was just as well.

Think how very dangerous he might be had he truly grand ambitions. But he did not.

And I *wanted* that human body. And that was the bottom line.

The rest was rationalization at best. And as the hours passed, I did quite a bit of that.

For example, was the surrender of my powerful body really so

despicable? The little creep couldn't even use the human body he had. He'd turned into the perfect gentleman for half an hour at the café table, then blown it with his awkward graceless gestures, as soon as he'd stood up. He'd never be able to use my physical strength. He wouldn't be able to direct my telekinetic powers either, no matter how psychic he claimed to be. He might do all right with the telepathy, but when it came to entrancing or spellbinding, I suspected he would not even begin to use those gifts. I doubted he would be able to move very fast. Indeed, he'd be clumsy and slow and ineffective. Actual flight probably wouldn't be a possibility for him. And he might even get himself into a terrible scrape.

Yes, it was all well and good that he was such a small-souled miserable little schemer. Better that than a god on a rampage, certainly. As for me, what did I plan to do?

The house in Georgetown, the car, these things meant nothing! I'd told him the truth. I wanted to be alive! Of course I would need some money for food and drink. But seeing the light of day cost nothing. Indeed, the experience need not involve any great material comfort or luxury. I wanted the spiritual and physical experience of being mortal flesh again. I saw myself as wholly unlike the miserable Body Thief!

But I had one remaining doubt. What if ten million wasn't enough to bring this man back with my body? Perhaps I should double the amount. To such a small-minded person, a fortune of twenty million would truly be an enticement. And in the past, I had always found it effective to double the sums which people charged for their services, thereby commanding a loyalty from them of which they had not even conceived.

I called New York again. Double the sum. My agent, naturally enough, thought I was losing my mind. We used our new code words to confirm the authority of the transaction. Then I hung up.

It was time now to talk to David or go to Georgetown. I had made a promise to David. I sat very still, waiting for the phone to ring, and when it did, I picked it up.

"Thank God you're there."

"What is it?" I asked.

"I recognized the name Raglan James immediately, and you're absolutely right. The man is not inside his own body! The person you're dealing with is sixty-seven years old. He was born in India, grew up in London, and has been in prison five times. He's a thief known to every

law enforcement agency in Europe, and what they call in America a confidence man. He's also a powerful psychic, a black magician—one of the most crafty we've ever known."

"So he told me. He worked his way into the order."

"Yes, he did. And this was one of the worst mistakes we've ever made. But Lestat, this man could seduce the Blessed Virgin, and steal a pocket watch from the Living Lord. Yet he was his own undoing within a matter of months. That's the crux of what I'm trying to tell you. Now, please do listen. This sort of black witch or sorcerer always brings evil upon himself! With his gifts he should have been able to deceive us forever; instead he used his skill to fleece the other members, and to steal from the vaults!"

"He told me that. What about this whole question of body switching? Can there be any doubt?"

"Describe the man as you've seen him."

I did. I emphasized the height and the robust nature of the physical frame. The thick glossy hair, the uncommonly smooth and satinlike skin. The exceptional beauty.

"Ah, I'm looking at a picture of this man right now."

"Explain."

"He was confined briefly in a London hospital for the criminally insane. Mother an Anglo-Indian, which may explain the exceptionally beautiful complexion you're describing, and which I can see here plainly enough. Father a London cabbie who died in jail. The fellow himself worked in a garage in London, specializing in extremely expensive cars. Dealt in drugs as a sideline so that he could afford the cars himself. One night he murdered his entire family—wife, two children, brother-in-law and mother—and then gave himself up to the police. A frightening mix of hallucinogenic drugs was found in his blood, along with a great deal of alcohol. These were the very same drugs he often sold to the neighborhood youths."

"Derangement of the senses but nothing wrong with the brain."

"Precisely, the entire murderous tantrum was drug induced as far as the authorities could see. The man himself never spoke a word after the incident. He remained steadfastly immune to any stimulus until three weeks after his commitment to hospital, at which time he mysteriously escaped, leaving the body of a slain orderly in his room. Can you guess

who this slain orderly turned out to be?"

"James."

"Exactly. Positive identification made postmortem through fingerprints, and confirmed through Interpol and Scotland Yard. James had been working in the hospital under an assumed name for a month before the incident, no doubt waiting for just such a body to arrive!"

"And then he cheerfully murdered his own body. Steely little son of a bitch to do that."

"Well, it was a very sick body—dying of cancer to be precise. The autopsy revealed he wouldn't have survived another six months. Lestat, for all we know, James may have contributed to the commission of the crimes which placed the young man's body at his disposal. If he hadn't stolen this body, he would have hit upon another in a similar state. And once he'd dealt the death blow to his old body, it went into the grave, don't you see, carrying James's entire criminal record with it."

"Why did he give me his real name, David? Why did he tell me he'd belonged to the Talamasca?"

"So I could verify his story, Lestat. Everything he does is calculated. You don't understand how clever this creature is. He wants you to know that he can do what he says he can do! And that the former owner of that young body is quite unable to interfere."

"But, David, there are still aspects to this which are baffling. The soul of the other man. Did it die in that old body? Why didn't it … get out!"

"Lestat, the poor being probably never knew such a thing was possible. Undoubtedly James manipulated the switch. Look, I have a file here of testimony from other members of the order pertaining to how this character jolted them right out of the physical and took possession of their bodies for short periods of time.

"All the sensations you experienced—the vibration, the constriction—were reported by these people as well. But we are speaking here of educated members of the Order of the Talamasca. This garage mechanic had no training in such things.

"His entire experience with the preternatural had to do with drugs. And God knows what ideas were mixed up with it. And throughout, James was dealing with a man in a severe state of shock."

"What if it's all some sort of clever ruse," I said. "Describe James to me, the man you knew."

“Slender, almost emaciated, very vibrant eyes, and thick white hair. Not a bad-looking man. Beautiful voice, as I recall.”

“That’s our man.”

“Lestat, the note you faxed to me from Paris—it leaves no doubt. It’s James’s writing. It’s his signature. Don’t you realize that he found out about you through the order, Lestat! That is the most disturbing aspect of this to me, that he located our files.”

“So he said.”

“He entered the order to gain access to such secrets. He cracked the computer system. There’s no telling what he might have discovered. Yet he couldn’t resist stealing a silver wristwatch from one of the members, and a diamond necklace from the vaults. He played reckless games with the others. He robbed their rooms. You can’t entertain any further communication with this person! It’s out of the question.”

“You sound like the Superior General, now, David.”

“Lestat, we’re speaking of switching here! That means putting your body, with all its gifts, at the disposal of this man.”

“I know.”

“You cannot do it. And let me make a shocking suggestion. If you do enjoy taking life, Lestat, as you’ve told me, why not murder this revolting individual as soon as you can?”

“David, this is wounded pride talking. And I *am* shocked.”

“Don’t play with me. There’s no time for it here. You realize that this character is plenty clever enough to be counting upon your volatile nature in this little game? He has picked you for this switch just as he picked the poor mechanic in London. He has studied the evidence of your impulsiveness, your curiosity, your general fearlessness. And he can fairly well assume that you won’t listen to a word of warning from me.”

“Interesting.”

“Speak up; I can’t hear you.”

“What else can you tell me?”

“What else do you require!”

“I want to understand this.”

“Why?”

“David, I see your point about the poor befuddled mechanic; nevertheless, why didn’t his soul pop loose from the cancer-riddled body when James dealt it one fine blow to the head?”

“Lestat, you said it yourself. The blow was to the head. The soul was already enmeshed with the new brain. There was no moment of clarity or will in which it could have sprung free. Even with a clever sorcerer like James, if you damage the tissues of the brain severely before the soul has a chance to disengage, it cannot do it, and physical death will follow, taking the entire soul with it out of this world. If you do decide to put an end to this miserable monster, by all means take him by surprise, and see to it that you smash his cranium as you might a raw egg.”

I laughed. “David, I've never heard you so incensed."

“That's because I know you, and I think you mean to do this switch, and you must not!”

“Answer a few more of my questions. I want to think this through.”

“No.”

“Near-death experiences, David. You know, those poor souls that suffer a heart attack, go up through a tunnel, see a light, and then come back to life. What's happening with them?"

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

“I don't believe you.” I reported James's talk of the brain stem and the residual soul, as best I could. “In these near-death experiences, has a little bit of the soul remained behind?”

“Perhaps, or maybe these individuals do confront death—they actually do cross over—and yet the soul, whole and entire, is sent back. I don't know.”

“But whatever the case, you can't simply die by going out of your body, can you? If in the Gobi Desert, I had gone up and out of my body, I couldn't have found the gateway, could I? It wouldn't have been there. It opens only for the whole soul.”

“Yes. As far as I know, yes.” He paused. Then: “Why do you ask me this? Do you still dream of dying? I don't believe it. You're too desperately fond of being alive.”

“I've been dead for two centuries, David. What about ghosts? The earthbound spirits?”

“They've failed to find that gateway, even though it opened. Or they refused to go through. Look, we can talk about all this some night in the future, roaming the alleyways of Rio, or wherever you like. The important thing is, you must swear to me not to deal with this sorcerer

any longer, if you won't go so far as to follow my suggestion that you put an end to him as soon as you can."

"Why are you so afraid of him!"

"Lestat, you must understand how destructive and vicious this individual can be. You can't give your body over to him! And that is just what you mean to do. Look, if you meant to possess a mortal body for a while, I'd be dead against it, for that is diabolical and unnatural enough! But to give your body to this madman! Ye gods, will you please come here to London? Let me talk you out of this. Don't you owe me as much!"

"David, you investigated him before he became a member of the order, did you not? What sort of man is he … I mean how did he become this wizard of sorts?"

"He deceived us with elaborate fabrications and counterfeit records on a scale you wouldn't believe. He loves that sort of connivance. And he's something of a computer genius. Our real investigation took place after he'd gone."

"So? Where did it all start?"

"Family was rich, merchant class. Lost its money before the war. Mother was a famous medium, apparently quite legitimate and dedicated, and charged a pittance for her services. Everybody in London knew her. I remember hearing of her, long before I was ever interested in that sort of thing. The Talamasca pronounced her genuine on more than one occasion, but she refused to be studied. She was a fragile creature, and very much loved her only son."

"Raglan," I said.

"Yes. She died of cancer. Terrible pain. Her only daughter became a seamstress, still works for a bridal shop in London. Simply exquisite work. She's deeply grieved over the death of her troublesome brother, but relieved he's gone. I talked to her this morning. She said her brother had been destroyed when he was quite young, by their mother's death."

"Understandable," I said.

"Father worked almost all his life for Cunard shipping, spending his last years as a cabin steward in first class on the *Queen Elizabeth 2*. Very proud of his record. Great scandal and disgrace not so many years ago, when James was also hired, thanks to the influence of his father, and promptly robbed one of the passengers of four hundred pounds in cash. Father disowned him, was reinstated by Cunard before he died. Never

spoke to his son again."

"Ah, the photograph on the ship," I said.

"What?"

"And when you expelled him, he had wanted to sail on that very vessel back to America … first class, of course."

"He told you that? It's possible. I didn't really handle the particulars myself."

"Not important, go on. How did he get into the occult?"

"He was highly educated, spent years at Oxford, though at times he had to live like a pauper. Started dabbling in mediumship even before his mother died. Didn't come into his own until the fifties, in Paris, where he soon acquired an enormous following, then started bilking his clients in the most crude and obvious ways imaginable, and went to jail.

"Same thing happened later in Oslo, more or less. After a series of odd jobs, including very menial work, he started some sort of a spiritualist church, swindled a widow out of her life savings, and was deported. Then Vienna, where he worked as a waiter in a first-class hotel until he became a psychic counselor to the rich within a matter of weeks. Soon a hasty departure. He barely escaped arrest. In Milan, he bilked a member of the old aristocracy out of thousands before he was discovered, and had to leave the city in the middle of the night. His next stop was Berlin, where he was arrested but talked himself out of custody, and then back to London, where he went to jail again."

"Ups and downs," I said, remembering his words.

"That's always the pattern. He rises from the lowest employment to living in extravagant luxury, running up ludicrous accounts for fine clothing, motorcars, jet excursions here and there, and then it all collapses in the face of his petty crimes, treachery, and betrayal. He can't break the cycle. It *always* brings him down."

"So it seems."

"Lestat, there is something positively stupid about this creature. He speaks eight languages, can invade any computer network, and possess other people's bodies long enough to loot their wall safes—he is obsessed with wall safes, by the way, in an almost erotic fashion!—and yet he plays silly tricks on people and ends up with handcuffs on his wrists! The objects he took from our vaults were nearly impossible for him to sell. He ended up dumping them on the black market for a pittance. He's

really something of an arch fool."

I laughed under my breath. "The thefts are symbolic, David. This is a creature of compulsion and obsession. It's a game. That's why he cannot hang on to what he steals. It's the process that counts with him, more than anything else."

"But, Lestat, it's an endlessly destructive game."

"I understand, David. Thank you for this information. I'll call you soon."

"Wait just a minute, you can't ring off, I won't allow it, don't you realize—"

"Of course I do, David."

"Lestat, there is a saying in the world of the occult. Like attracts like. Do you know what it means?"

"What would I know about the occult, David? That's your territory, not mine."

"This is no time for sarcasm."

"I'm sorry. What does it mean?"

"When a sorcerer uses his powers in a petty and selfish fashion, the magic always rebounds upon him."

"Now you're talking superstition."

"I am talking a principle which is as old as magic itself."

"He isn't a magician, David, he's merely a creature with certain measurable and definable psychic powers. He can possess other people. In one case of which we know, he effected an actual switch."

"It's the same thing! Use those powers to try to harm others and the harm comes back to oneself."

"David, I am the extant proof that such a concept is false. Next you will explain the concept of karma to me and I will slowly drop off to sleep."

"James is the quintessential evil sorcerer! He's already defeated death once at the expense of another human being; he must be stopped."

"Why didn't you try to stop *me*, David, when you had the opportunity? I was at your mercy at Talbot Manor. You could have found some way."

"Don't push me away with your accusations!"

"I love you, David. I will contact you soon." I was about to put down the phone, when I thought of something. "David," I said. "There's something else I'd like to know."

“Yes, what?” Such relief that I hadn’t hung up.

“You have these relics of ours—old possessions in your vaults.”

“Yes.” Discomfort. This was an embarrassment to him, it seemed.

“A locket,” I said, “a locket with a picture of Claudia, you have seen such a thing?”

“I believe I have,” he said. “I verified the inventory of all of those items after you first came to me. I believe there was a locket. I’m almost certain, in fact. I should have told you this, shouldn’t I, before now?”

“No. Doesn’t matter. Was it a locket on a chain, such as women wear?”

“Yes. Do you want me to look for this locket? If I find it, I shall give it to you, of course.”

“No, don’t look for it now. Perhaps sometime in the future. Good-bye, David. I’ll come to you soon.”

I hung up, and removed the small phone plug from the wall. So there had been a locket, a woman’s locket. But for whom had such a thing been made? And why did I see it in my dreams? Claudia would not have carried her own image with her in a locket. And surely I would remember it if she had. As I tried to envision it, or remember it, I was filled with a peculiar combination of sadness and dread. It seemed I was very near a dark place, a place full of actual death. And as so often happens with my memories, I heard laughter. Only it wasn’t Claudia’s laughter this time. It was mine. I had a sense of preternatural youth and endless possibility. In other words I was remembering the young vampire I’d been in the old days of the eighteenth century before time had dealt its blows.

Well, what did I care about this damned locket? Maybe I’d picked up the image from James’s brain as he pursued me. It had been for him merely a tool to ensnare me. And the fact was, I’d never even seen such a locket. He would have done better to pick some other trinket that had once belonged to me.

No, that last explanation seemed too simple. The image was too vivid. And I’d seen it in my dreams before James had made his way into my adventures. I grew angry suddenly. I had other things to consider just now, did I not? Get thee behind me, Claudia. Take your locket, please, ma chérie, and go.

For a very long time, I sat still in the shadows, conscious that the clock was ticking on the mantel, and listening to the occasional noise of traffic from the street.

I tried to consider the points David had made to me. I tried. But all I was thinking was … so James can do it, really do it. He is the white-haired man in the photograph, and he did switch with the mechanic in the hospital in London. It can be done!

Now and then I saw the locket in my mind's eye—I saw the miniature of Claudia painted so artfully in oils. But no emotion came to me, no sorrow, no anger, no grief.

It was James upon whom my entire heart was fastened. James can do it! James isn't lying. I can live and breathe in that body! And when the sun rises over Georgetown on that morning, I shall see it with those eyes.

It was an hour after midnight when I reached Georgetown. A heavy snow had been falling all evening long, and the streets were filled with deep white drifts of it, clean and beautiful; and it was banked against the doors of the houses, and etching in white the fancy black iron railings and the deep window ledges here and there.

The town itself was immaculate and very charming—made up of graceful Federal-style buildings, mostly of wood, which had the clean lines of the eighteenth century, with its penchant for order and balance, though many had been built in the early decades of the nineteenth. I roamed for a long time along deserted M Street, with its many commercial establishments, and then through the silent campus of the nearby university, and then through the cheerfully lighted hillside streets.

The town house of Raglan James was a particularly fine structure, made of red brick and built right on the street. It had a pretty center doorway and a hefty brass knocker, and two cheerful flickering gas lamps. Old-fashioned solid shutters graced the windows, and there was a lovely fanlight over the door.

The windows were clean, in spite of the snow on the sills, and I could see into the bright and orderly rooms. There was a smart look to the interior—trim white leather furnishings of extreme modern severity and

obvious expense. Numerous paintings on the walls—Picasso, de Kooning, Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol—and intermingled with these multimillion dollar canvases, several large expensively mounted photographs of modern ships. Indeed there were several replicas of large ocean liners in glass cases in the lower hall. The floors gleamed with plastic lacquer. Small dark Oriental rugs of geometric design were everywhere, and the many ornaments gracing glass tables and inlaid teak cabinets were almost exclusively Chinese.

Meticulous, fashionable, costly, and highly individual—that was the personality of the place. It looked to me the way the dwellings of mortals always did—like a series of pristine stage sets. Quite impossible to believe I could be mortal, and belong in such a house, even for an hour or more.

Indeed, the small rooms were so polished it seemed impossible that anyone actually inhabited them at all. The kitchen was full of gleaming copper pots, and black glass-doored appliances, cabinets without visible handles to open them, and bright red ceramic plates.

In spite of the hour, James himself was nowhere to be found.

I entered the house.

A second storey held the bedroom, with a low modern bed, no more than a wooden frame with a mattress inside it, and covered with a quilt of bright geometric pattern, and numerous white pillows—as austere and elegant as all the rest. The closet was crammed with expensive garments, and so were the drawers of the Chinese bureau and another small hand-carved chest by the bed.

Other rooms lay empty, but nowhere was there evidence of neglect. I saw no computers here either. No doubt he kept these someplace else.

In one of these rooms, I concealed a great deal of money for my later use, hiding it inside the chimney of the unused fireplace.

I also concealed some money in an unused bathroom, behind a mirror on the wall.

These were simple precautions. I really couldn't conceive of what it would be like to be human. I might feel quite helpless. Just didn't know.

After I made these little arrangements, I went up on the roof. I could see James at the base of the hill, just turning the corner from M Street, a load of parcels in his arms. He'd been up to thievery, no doubt, for there was no place to shop in these slow hours before dawn. I lost sight of him

as he started his ascent.

But another strange visitor appeared, without making the slightest sound that a mortal could hear. It was a great dog, seeming to materialize out of nowhere, which made its way back the alleyway and to the rear yard.

I'd caught its scent as soon as it approached, but I did not see the animal until I came over the roof to the back of the house. I'd expected to hear from it before this time, for surely it would pick up my scent, know instinctively that I wasn't human, and then begin to sound its natural alarm of growls and barks.

Dogs had done that enough to me over the centuries, though they don't always. Sometimes I can entrance them and command them. But I feared the instinctive rejection and it always sent a pain through my heart.

This dog had not barked or given any clue that he knew I was there. He was staring intently at the rear door of the house and the butter-yellow squares of light falling from the window of the door onto the deep snow.

I had a good chance to study him in undisturbed silence, and he was, very simply, one of the most handsome dogs I had ever beheld.

He was covered in deep, plush fur, beautifully golden and gray in places, and overlaid with a faint saddle of longer black hairs. His overall shape was that of a wolf, but he was far too big to be a wolf, and there was nothing furtive and sly about him, as is the case with wolves. On the contrary, he was wholly majestic in the way that he sat staring motionless at the door.

On closer inspection, I saw that he most truly resembled a giant German shepherd, with the characteristic black muzzle and alert face.

Indeed, when I drew close to the edge of the roof, and he at last looked up at me, I found myself vaguely thrilled by the fierce intelligence gleaming in his dark almond-shaped eyes.

Still he gave no bark, no growl. There seemed a near-human comprehension in him. But how could that explain his silence? I had done nothing to enthrall him, to lure or befuddle his dog mind. No. No instinctive aversion at all.

I dropped down into the snow in front of him, and he merely continued to look at me, with those uncanny and expressive eyes.

Indeed, so large was he and so calm and sure of himself, that I laughed to myself with delight as I looked at him. I couldn't resist reaching out to touch the soft fur between his ears.

He cocked his head to one side as he continued to look at me, and I found this very endearing, and then to my further amazement he lifted his immense paw and stroked my coat. His bones were so big and heavy he put me in mind of my mastiffs of long ago. He had their slow heavy grace as he moved. I reached out to embrace him, loving his strength and his heaviness, and he reared back on his hind legs and threw his huge paws up on my shoulders, and ran his great ham-pink tongue over my face.

This produced in me a wonderful happiness, really near to weeping, and then some giddy laughter. I nuzzled him, and held him, and stroked him, loving his clean furry smell, and kissing him all over his black muzzle, and then looking him in the eye.

Ah, this is what Little Red Riding Hood saw, I thought, when she beheld the wolf in her grandmother's nightcap and gown. It was too funny, really, the extraordinary and keen expression in his dark face.

"Why don't you know me for what I am?" I asked. And then as he sank back down to a majestic sitting position, and looked up at me almost obediently, it struck me that this was an omen, this dog.

No, "omen" is not the proper word. This did not come from anyone, this gift. It was merely something which put me more in mind of what I meant to do and why I meant to do it, and how little I really cared about the risks involved.

I stood beside the dog, petting him and stroking him and moments passed. It was a small garden, and the snow was falling again, deepening around us, and the cold pain in my skin was growing deeper too. The trees were bare and black in the silent storm. Whatever flowers or grass there might have been was of course not visible; but a few garden statues of darkened concrete and a sharp, thick shrubbery—now nothing but bare twigs and snow—marked a clear rectangular pattern to the whole.

I must have been there with the dog perhaps three minutes before my hand discovered the round silver disk dangling from his chain-link collar, and finally I gathered this up and held it to the light.

Mojo. Ah, I knew this word. Mojo. It had to do with voodoo, gris-gris,

charms. Mojo was a good charm, a protective charm. I approved of it as a name for a dog; it was splendid, in fact, and when I called him Mojo he became faintly excited and once again stroked me slowly with his big eager paw.

"Mojo, is it?" I said again. "That's very beautiful." I kissed him and felt the leathery black tip of his nose. There was something else written on the disk, however. It was the address of this house.

Very suddenly the dog stiffened; it moved slowly and gracefully out of the sitting position and into an alert stance. James was coming. I heard his crunching steps in the snow. I heard the sound of his key in the lock of his front door. I sensed him realize suddenly that I was very near.

The dog gave a deep fierce growl and moved slowly closer to the rear door of the house. There came the sound of the boards inside creaking under James's heavy feet.

The dog gave a deep angry bark. James opened the door, fixed his fierce crazy eyes on me, smiled, and then hurled something heavy at the animal which it easily dodged.

"Glad to see you! But you're early," he said.

I didn't answer him. The dog was growling at him in the same menacing fashion and he gave his attention to the animal again, with great annoyance.

"Get rid of it!" he said, purely furious. "Kill it!"

"You're talking to me?" I asked coldly. I laid my hand on the animal's head again, stroking it, and whispering to it to be still. It drew closer to me, rubbing its heavy flank against me and then seated itself beside me.

James was tense and shivering as he watched all this. Suddenly he pushed up his collar against the wind, and folded his arms. The snow was blowing all over him, like white powder, clinging to his brown eyebrows and his hair.

"It belongs to this house, doesn't it?" I said coldly. "This house which you stole."

He regarded me with obvious hatred, and then flashed one of those awful evil smiles. I truly wished he'd lapse back into being the English gentleman. It was so much easier for me when he did. It crossed my mind that it was absolutely base to have to deal with him. I wondered if Saul had found the Witch of Endor so distasteful. But the body, ah, the body, how splendid it was.

Even in his resentment, with his eyes fixed upon the dog, he could not wholly disfigure the beauty of the body.

"Well, it seems you've stolen the dog too," I said.

"I'll get rid of it," he whispered, looking at it again with fierce contempt. "And you, where do things stand with you? I won't give you forever to make up your mind. You've given me no certain answer. I want an answer now."

"Go to your bank tomorrow morning," I said. "I'll see you after dark. Ah, but there is one more condition."

"What is it!" he asked between his clenched teeth.

"Feed the animal. Give it some meat."

Then I made my exit so swiftly he couldn't see it, and when I glanced back, I could see Mojo gazing up at me, through the snowy darkness, and I smiled to think that the dog had seen my movement, fast as it was. The last sound I heard was James cursing to himself ungracefully as he slammed the back door.

An hour later, I lay in the dark waiting for the sun above, and thinking again of my youth in France, of the dogs lying beside me, of riding out on that last hunt with those two huge mastiffs, picking their way slowly through the deep snow.

And the face of the vampire peering at me from the darkness in Paris, calling me "Wolfkiller" with such reverence, such crazed reverence, before he sank his fangs into my neck.

Mojo, an omen.

So we reach into the raging chaos, and we pluck some small glittering thing, and we cling to it, and tell ourselves it has meaning, and that the world is good, and we are not evil, and we will all go home in the end.

Tomorrow night, I thought, if that bastard has been lying, I shall split open his chest and tear out his beating heart, and feed it to that big beautiful dog.

Whatever happens, I shall keep this dog.

And I did.

And before this story moves any further, let me say something about this dog. He isn't going to do anything in this book.

He won't save a drowning baby, or rush into a burning building to rouse the inhabitants from near-fatal sleep. He isn't possessed by an evil spirit; he isn't a vampire dog. He's in this narrative simply because I

found him in the snow behind that town house in Georgetown, and I loved him, and from that first moment, he seemed somehow to love me. It was all too true to the blind and merciless laws I believe in—the laws of nature, as men say; or the laws of the Savage Garden, as I call them myself. Mojo loved my strength; I loved his beauty. And nothing else ever really mattered at all.

TEN

"I want the details," I said, "of how you pushed him out of his body, and how you managed to force him into yours."

Wednesday at last. Not a half hour had passed since the sun had set. I had startled him when I appeared on the back steps.

We were sitting now in the immaculate white kitchen, a room curiously devoid of mystery for such an esoteric meeting. A single bulb in a handsome copper fixture flooded the table between us with a soft rosy illumination, which lent a deceiving coziness to the scene.

The snowfall continued, and beneath the house the furnace gave a low continuous roar. I'd brought the dog in with me, much to the annoyance of the lord of the house, and after some reassurance, the beast lay quietly now like an Egyptian sphinx, looking up at us, front legs stretched straight before him on the waxed floor. Now and then James glanced at him uneasily, and with reason. The dog looked as if he had the devil inside him and the devil knew the whole tale.

James was far more relaxed now than he had been in New Orleans. He was entirely the English gentleman, which set off the tall, youthful body to powerful advantage. He wore a gray sweater, stretched fetchingly tight over his big chest, and a pair of dark pants.

There were silver rings on his fingers. And a cheap watch on his wrist. I hadn't remembered these items. He was studying me with a little twinkle in his eye, much easier to endure than those horrid glaring smiles. I couldn't take my eyes off him, off this body which might soon become mine.

I could smell the blood in the body, of course, and this ignited some low smoldering passion in me. The more I looked at him, the more I wondered what it would be like to drink his blood and be done with it here and now. Would he try to escape the body and leave me holding a mere breathing shell?

I looked at his eyes, and thought, *sorcerer*, and a rare and unfamiliar excitement completely obliterated the common hunger. I'm not sure I believed he could do it, however. I thought that the evening might end

in a tasty feast and no more.

I clarified my question for him. “How did you find this body? How did you get the soul to go into yours?”

“I’d been searching for just such a specimen—a man psychologically shocked out of all will and capacity for reason, yet sound of limb and brain. Telepathy is quite an aid in such matters, for only a telepath could have reached the remnants of intelligence still buried within him. I had to convince him on the deepest unconscious level, so to speak, that I had come to be of help, that I knew he was a good person, that I was on his side. And once I'd reached that rudimentary core, it was fairly easy to plunder his memories and manipulate him into obedience.” He gave a little shrug. “The poor chap. His responses were entirely superstitious. I suspect he thought I was his guardian angel at the end.”

“And you lured him out of his body?”

“Yes, by a series of bizarre and rather ornate suggestions, that’s exactly what I did. Again telepathy is a powerful ally. One has to be psychic, really, to manipulate others in such a way. The first time he rose perhaps a foot or two, then slam, back into the flesh he went. More of a reflex than a decision. But I was patient, oh, very patient. And when I finally lured him out for the space of several seconds, that was sufficient for me to pop inside of him, and at once focus my intense energy upon shoving him down into what was left of the old me.”

“How nicely you put it.”

“Well, we are body and soul, you know,” he said with a placid smile. “But why go all through this now? You know how to rise out of your body. This isn’t going to be difficult for *you*.”

“I might surprise you. What happened to him after he was in your body? Did he realize what had taken place?”

“Not at all. You must understand the man was deeply psychologically crippled. And, of course, he was an ignorant fool.”

“And you didn’t give him even a moment’s time, did you? You killed him.”

“Monsieur de Lioncourt, what I did was a mercy to him! How dreadful to have left him in that body, confused as he was! He wasn’t going to recover, you realize, no matter what body he was inhabiting. He’d murdered his entire family. Even the baby in the crib.”

“Were you part of that?”

“What a low opinion you have of me! Not at all. I was watching the hospitals for such a specimen. I knew one would come along. But why these last questions? Didn’t David Talbot tell you there are numerous documented cases of switching in the Talamasca files.”

David had not told me this. But then I could scarcely blame him.

“Did they all involve murder?” I asked.

“No. Some involved bargains such as you and I have struck.”

“I wonder. We are oddly paired, you and I.”

“Yes, but well paired, you must admit. This is a very nice body I have for you," he said of himself, placing an open hand on his broad chest. “Not as beautiful as yours, of course. But very nice! And exactly what you ought to require. As for your body, what more can I say? I hope you didn’t listen to David Talbot about me. He’s made so many tragic mistakes.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s a slave to that wretched organization,” he said sincerely. “They completely control him. If only I could have spoken to him at the end, he would have seen the significance of what I had to offer, what I could teach. Did he tell you of his escapades in old Rio? Yes, an exceptional person, a person I should like to have known. But I can tell you, he’s no one to cross.”

“What’s to stop you from killing me as soon as we switch bodies? That’s just what you did to this creature you lured into your old body, with one swift blow to the head.”

“Ah, so you have talked to Talbot,” he said, refusing to be rattled. “Or did you merely do the research on your own? Twenty million dollars will stop me from killing you. I need the body to go to the bank, remember? Absolutely marvelous of you to double the sum. But I would have kept the bargain for ten. Ah, you’ve liberated me, Monsieur de Lioncourt. As of this Friday, at the very hour when Christ was nailed to the cross, I shall never have to steal again.”

He took a sip of his warm tea. Whatever his facade, he was becoming increasingly anxious. And something similar and more enervating was building in me. *What if this does work?*

“Oh, but it will work,” he said in that grave heartfelt manner. “And there are other excellent reasons why I wouldn’t attempt to harm you. Let’s talk them through.”

“By all means.”

“Well, you could get out of the mortal body if I attacked it. I’ve already explained you must cooperate.”

“What if you were too fast?”

“It’s academic. I wouldn’t try to harm you. Your friends would know if I did. As long as you, Lestat, are here, inside a healthy human body, your companions wouldn’t think of destroying your preternatural body, even if I’m at the controls. They wouldn’t do that to you, now, would they? But if I killed you—you know, smashed your face or whatever before you could disentangle yourself … and God knows, this is a possibility, I myself am keenly aware of it, I assure you!—your companions would find me sooner or later for an impostor, and do away with me very quickly, indeed. Why, they would probably feel your death when it happened. Don’t you think?”

“I don’t know. But they would discover everything eventually.”

“Of course!”

“It’s imperative that you stay away from them while you’re in my body, that you don’t go near New Orleans, that you keep clear of any and all blood drinkers, even the very weak: Your skill at cloaking yourself, you must use it, you realize …”

“Yes, certainly. I’ve considered the entire enterprise, please be assured. If I were to burn up your beautiful Louis de Pointe du Lac, the others would know immediately, wouldn’t they? And I might be the next torch burning brightly in the dead of night myself.”

I didn’t answer. I felt anger moving through me as if it were a cold liquid, driving out all anticipation and courage. But I wanted this! I wanted it, and it was near at hand!

“Don’t go troubling yourself about such nonsense,” he pleaded. His manner was so like David Talbot’s. Perhaps it was deliberate. Maybe David was the model. But I thought it more a matter of similar breeding, and some instinct for persuasiveness which even David did not possess. “I’m not really a murderer, you know,” he said with sudden intensity. “It’s acquisition that means everything. I want comfort, beauty around me, every conceivable luxury, the power to go and live where I please.”

“You want any instructions?”

“As to what?”

“What to do when you’re inside my body.”

"You've already given me my instruction, dear boy. I have read your books." He flashed me a broad smile, dipping his head slightly and looking up at me as if he were trying to lure me into his bed. "I've read all the documents in the Talamasca archives as well."

"What sort of documents?"

"Oh, detailed descriptions of vampire anatomy—your obvious limits, that sort of thing. You ought to read them for yourself. Perhaps you'd laugh. The earliest chapters were penned in the Dark Ages and are filled with fanciful nonsense that would have made even Aristotle weep. But the more recent files are quite scientific and precise."

I didn't like this line of discussion. I didn't like anything that was happening. I was tempted to finish it now. And then quite suddenly, I knew I was going to go through with this. I knew.

A curious calm descended on me. Yes, we were going to do this in a matter of minutes. And it was going to work. I felt the color drain from my face—an imperceptible cooling of the skin, which was still hurting from its terrible ordeal in the sun.

I doubt he noted this change, or any hardening of my expression, for he went right on talking as before.

"The observations written in the 1970s after the publication of *Interview with the Vampire* are most interesting. And then the very recent chapters, inspired by your fractured and fanciful history of the species—my word! No, I know all about your body. I know more about it perhaps than you do. Do you know what the Talamasca really wants? A sample of your tissue, a specimen of your vampiric cells! You'd be wise to see that they never acquire such a specimen. You've been too free with Talbot, really. Perhaps he pared your fingernails or cut off a lock of your hair while you slept beneath his roof."

Lock of hair. Wasn't there a lock of blond hair in that locket? It had to be vampire hair! Claudia's hair. I shuddered, drawing deeper into myself and shutting him away. Centuries ago there had been a dreadful night when Gabrielle, my mortal mother and newborn fledgling, had cut off her vampire hair. Through the long hours of the day, as she lay in the coffin, it had all grown back. I did not want to remember her screams when she discovered it—those magnificent tresses once again luxuriant and long over her shoulders. I did not want to think of her and what she might say to me now about what I meant to do. It had been years since I

had laid eyes upon her. It might be centuries before I saw her again.

I looked again at James, as he sat there radiant with expectation, straining to appear patient, face glowing in the warm light.

"Forget the Talamasca," I said under my breath. "Why do you have such a hard time with this body? You're clumsy. You're only comfortable when you're sitting in a chair and you can leave matters entirely to your voice and your face."

"Very perceptive," he said, with unshakable decorum.

"I don't think so. It's rather obvious."

"It's simply too big a body," he said calmly. "It's too muscular, too … shall we say, athletic? But it's perfect for you."

He paused, looked at the teacup thoughtfully and then up at me again. The eyes seemed so wide, so innocent.

"Lestat, come now," he said. "Why are we wasting time with this conversation? I don't intend to dance with the Royal Ballet once I'm inside you. I simply mean to enjoy the whole experience, to experiment, to see the world through your eyes." He glanced at his watch. "Well, I'd offer you a little drink to screw up your courage, but that would be self-defeating in the long run, wouldn't it? Oh, and by the way, the passport. Were you able to obtain it? You remember I asked you to provide me with a passport. I do hope you remembered, and of course I have a passport for you. I fear you won't be going anywhere, on account of this blizzard—"

I laid my passport on the table before him. He reached up under his sweater, and withdrew his own from his shirt pocket and put it in my hand.

I examined it. It was American and a fake. Even the issue date of two years ago was fake. Raglan James. Age twenty-six. Correct picture. Good picture. This Georgetown address.

He was studying the American passport—also a fake—which I had given him.

"Ah, your tanned skin! You had this prepared specially … Must have been last night."

I didn't bother to answer.

"How very clever of you," he said, "and what a good picture." He studied it. "Clarence Oddbody. Wherever did you come up with a name like that?"

“A little private joke. What does it matter? You’ll have it only tonight and tomorrow night.” I shrugged.

“True. Very true.”

“I’ll expect you back here early Friday morning, between the hours of three and four.”

“Excellent.” He started to put the passport into his pocket and then caught himself with a sharp laugh. Then his eyes fixed on me and a look of pure delight passed over him. “Are you ready?”

“Not quite.” I took a wallet of money out of my pocket, opened it, and slipped out about half of the bills inside and gave them to him.

“Ah, yes, the petty cash, how considerate of you to remember,” he said. “I’m forgetting all the important details in my excitement. Inexcusable and you are such a gentleman.”

He gathered up the bills and once again caught himself before he could stuff them in his pockets. He put them back on the table and smiled.

I laid my hand on the wallet. “The rest is for me, once we make the switch. I trust you’re comfortable with the amount I’ve given you? The little thief in you won’t be tempted to scoop up what’s left?”

“I’ll do my best to behave myself,” he said good-naturedly. “Now, do you want me to change clothes? I stole these garments especially for you.”

“They’re fine.”

“Should I empty my bladder, perhaps? Or would you like the privilege?”

“I would.”

He nodded. “I’m hungry. I thought you’d like it that way. There’s an excellent restaurant down the street. Paolo’s. Good spaghetti carbonara. Even in the snow you can walk it.”

“Marvelous. I’m not hungry. I thought that would be easier for you. You spoke of a car. Where is the car?”

“Oh, yes, the car. Outside, to the left of the front steps. Red Porsche roadster, thought you’d like that. Here are the keys. But be careful …”

“Of what?”

“Well, the snow obviously, you might not be able to move it at all.”

“Thanks for the warning.”

“Don’t want you to be hurt. It could cost me twenty million if you’re

not here Friday as planned. Nevertheless the driver's license with the correct picture is in the desk in the living room. What's the matter?"

"Clothes for you," I said. "I forgot to provide them, other than what I have on."

"Oh, I thought of that a long time ago, when I was snooping about in your hotel room in New York. I have my wardrobe, you needn't worry, and I like that black velvet suit. You do dress beautifully. Always did, didn't you? But then you come from a time of such lavish costumes. This age must seem awfully dreary to you. Are those antique buttons? Ah, well, I'll have time to examine them."

"Where will you be going?"

"Where I want to go, of course. Are you losing your nerve?"

"No."

"Know how to drive the car?"

"Yes. If I didn't, I'd figure it out."

"Think so? Think you'll have your preternatural intelligence when you're in this body? I wonder. I'm not sure you will. The little synapses in the mortal brain might not fire off so fast."

"I don't know anything about synapses," I said.

"All right. Let's begin, then," he said.

"Yes, now, I think." My heart turned to a small, tight knot inside me, but his manner became completely authoritative and commanding at once.

"Listen closely," he said. "I want you to rise out of your body, but not till I'm finished speaking. You'll move up. You've done it before. When you are close to the ceiling and looking directly down on both of us at this table, you will make a concentrated effort to move into this body. You must not think of anything else. You must not let fear interrupt your concentration. You must not wonder as to how this is being done. You want to descend into this body, you want to connect completely and instantaneously with every fiber and cell. Picture it as you do it! Imagine yourself already inside."

"Yes, I follow you."

"As I've told you, there is something invisible in it, something left from the original occupant, and that something is hungry to be complete again—with your soul."

I nodded. He went on.

“You may be prey to a variety of unpleasant sensations. This body will feel very dense to you, and constricting as you slide in. Don’t waver. Imagine your spirit invading the fingers of each hand, the toes of each foot. Look through the eyes. That is most important. Because the eyes are part of the brain. When you look through them, you are anchoring within the brain. Now you won’t shake loose, you can be sure of it. Once you’re in, it will take quite a bit of effort to get out.”

“Will I see you in spirit form while we’re changing?”

“No, you won’t. You could, but that would take a great deal of concentration away from your immediate goal. You don’t want to see anything but this body; you want to get in it and start moving it and breathing through it, and seeing through it, as I’ve said.”

“Yes.”

“Now, one thing which will frighten you is the sight of your own body, lifeless, or inhabited finally by me. Don’t allow this to get the better of you. Here a certain trust and humility must play a part. Believe me when I say that I shall accomplish the possession without injury to your body, and then I shall leave immediately, so as to relieve you of that constant reminder of what we’ve done. You won’t see me again until Friday morning, as we’ve agreed. I won’t speak to you, because the sound of my voice coming out of your mouth would upset you, distract you. You understand?”

“How will your voice sound? How will my voice sound?”

Once more he looked at his watch, then back at me. “There’ll be differences,” he said. “The size of the voice box is different. This man, for example, gave a slight depth to my voice which I don’t ordinarily possess. But you’ll keep your rhythm, your accent, your patterns of speech, of course. Only the timbre will be different. Yes, that’s the word.”

I took a long careful look at him.

“Is it important that I believe this can be done?”

“No,” he said with a broad smile. “This isn’t a séance. You needn’t stoke the fire for the medium with your faith. You’ll see in an instant. Now what else is there to say?” He tensed, coming forward in the chair.

The dog gave a sudden deep growl.

I quieted him with my outstretched hand.

“Go on!” said James sharply, voice dropping to a whisper. “Go out of

your body now!"

I sat back, gesturing again for the dog to be still. Then I willed myself to rise, and felt a sudden total vibration through my entire frame. Then came the marvelous realization that I was indeed rising, a spirit form, weightless and free, my manly shape still visible to me with its arms and legs, stretching out just below the white ceiling, so that I did indeed look down and see the astounding spectacle of my own body seated still in the chair. Oh, what a glorious feeling, as if I could go anywhere in an instant! As if I had no need of the body, and my link to it had been a deception from the moment of birth.

The physical body of James slumped forward ever so slightly, and his fingers began to move outward on the white tabletop. I mustn't become distracted. The switch was the thing!

"Down, down into that body!" I said aloud, but there was no voice audible, and then without words I forced myself to plummet and merge with that new flesh, that physical form.

A loud rushing filled my ears, and then a sense of constriction, as if my entire self were being forced through a narrow, slippery tube. Excruciating! I wanted freedom. But I could feel myself filling the empty arms and legs, the flesh heavy and tingling as it closed over me, as a mask of similar sensations closed over my face.

I struggled to open my eyes before I even realized what I was doing, that I was flexing the lids of this mortal body, that indeed, I was blinking, staring through mortal eyes into the dimly lighted room, staring at my old body exactly opposite, at my old blue eyes peering back at me through the violet-colored glasses, staring at my old tanned skin.

I felt I would suffocate—I had to escape this!—but it hit me, I was in! I was in the body! The switch had been done. Irresistibly I took a deep hoarse heavy breath, moving this monstrous encasement of flesh as I did so, and then I slapped my hand to my chest, appalled at its thickness, and heard the heavy wet sloshing of the blood through my heart.

"Dear God, I'm in it," I cried out, struggling to clear away the darkness that surrounded me, the shadowy veil which stopped me from seeing more clearly the brilliant form opposite, which now sprang to life.

My old body jerked upward, arms thrown up as if in horror, one hand crashing into the overhead light and exploding the bulb, as the chair

below clattered to the floor. The dog leapt to his feet and gave out a loud, menacing riff of deep-throated barks.

"No, Mojo, down, boy," I heard myself crying from this thick tight mortal throat, still straining to see in the darkness, and unable to do it, and realizing that it was *my* hand grabbing for the dog's collar and jerking him backwards before he could attack the old vampire body, which stared down at the dog in utter amazement, blue eyes glittering fiercely, and very wide and blank.

"Ah, yes, kill it!" came the voice of James, roaring at horrific volume out of my old preternatural mouth.

My hands shot to my ears to protect me from the sound. The dog rushed forward again, and once again, I grabbed him by the collar, fingers curling painfully around the chain links, appalled at his strength and how little there seemed to be in my mortal arms. Ye gods, I had to make this body work! This was only a dog, and I was a strong mortal man!

"Stop, Mojo!" I pleaded with him as he dragged me right out of the chair and painfully onto my knees. "And you, get out of here!" I bellowed. The pain in my knees was dreadful. The voice was puny and opaque. "Get out!" I yelled again.

The creature that had been me danced past me, arms flailing still, and crashed into the back door, shattering the windowpanes, and letting in a cold gust of wind. The dog was maddened and now almost impossible for me to control.

"Get out!" I screamed again, and watched in consternation as the creature backed straight through the door now, shattering wood and all remaining glass, and rose off the porch boards into the snow-filled night.

I saw him for one last instant, suspended in midair above the back steps, a hideous apparition, the snow swirling about him, his limbs moving now in concert as though he were a swimmer in an invisible sea. His blue eyes were still wide and senseless, as if he couldn't work the preternatural flesh around them into an expression, and glittering like two incandescent gems. His mouth—my old mouth—was spread wide in a meaningless grin.

Then he was gone.

The breath went out of me. The room was freezing as the wind gusted into every corner, knocking about the copper pots on their fancy rack

and pushing against the dining room door. And suddenly the dog became quiet.

I realized I was sitting on the floor beside him, and that my right arm was locked around his neck, and my left around his furry chest. Each breath I took hurt me, I was squinting against the snow, which flew right into my eyes, and I was trapped in this strange body padded with lead weights and mattress ticking, and the cold air was stinging my face and my hands.

"Good God, Mojo," I whispered in his soft pink ear. "Good God, it's happened. I'm a mortal man."

ELEVEN

"All right," I said stupidly, again amazed at the weak, contained sound of it, low as the voice was. "It's begun, now get ahold of yourself." And that idea made me laugh.

The cold wind was the worst part. My teeth were chattering. The stinging pain in my skin was wholly different from the pain I felt as a vampire. Had to repair this door, but I had no idea whatsoever how to do it.

Was there anything left of the door? I couldn't tell. It was like trying to see through a cloud of noxious smoke. Slowly I climbed to my feet, at once aware of the increase in height and feeling very top-heavy and unsteady.

Every bit of warmth had fled the room. Indeed, I could hear the whole house rattling with the wind that was pouring in. Slowly and carefully, I stepped out on the porch. Ice. My feet went sliding to the right of me, flinging me back against the doorframe. Panic seized me, but I managed to grab hold of the moist wood with these large trembling fingers, and keep myself from going down the steps. Again I strained to see through the darkness, and couldn't make out anything clearly at all.

"Just calm down," I said to myself, aware that my fingers were sweating and growing numb at the same time, and that my feet were becoming painfully numb also. "There's no artificial light here, that's all, and you're looking through mortal eyes. Now do something intelligent about all this!" And stepping very carefully, and nearly slipping again, I moved back inside.

I could see the dim outline of Mojo seated there, watching me, panting noisily, and there was a tiny splinter of light in one of his dark eyes. I spoke to him gently.

"It's me, Mojo Man, okay? It's me!" And I stroked the soft hair between his ears gently. I reached for the table, and sat down in the chair very awkwardly, astonished again at the sheer thickness of my new flesh, and the sloshiness of it, and I clamped my hand over my mouth.

It really has happened, you fool, I thought. There's no doubt of it. It's a

lovely miracle, that's what it is. You are actually free of that preternatural body! You are a human being. You are a human man. Now be done with this panic. Think like the hero you pride yourself on being! There are practical matters at hand. The snow's coming in on you. This mortal body is freezing, for the love of heaven. Now attend to things as you must!

Yet all I did was open my eyes wider, and stare at what seemed to be the snow piling up in little sparkling crystals on the white surface of the table, expecting every moment that this vision would become more distinct, when of course it would not.

That was spilt tea, wasn't it? And broken glass. Don't cut yourself on the broken glass, you won't heal! Mojo moved closer to me, big warm furry flank welcome against my trembling leg. But why did the feeling seem so distant, as if I were wrapped in layers of flannel? Why could I not smell his wondrous clean woolly smell? All right, senses are limited. You should have expected that.

Now, go look in a mirror; see the miracle. Yes, and just close off this entire room.

"Come on, boy," I said to the dog, and we went out of the kitchen into the dining room—each step I took feeling awkward and slow and lumbering—and with fumbling, very inexact fingers, I closed the door. The wind banged against it, and seeped around the edges of it, but the door held.

I turned around, off balance for a second, then righting myself. Shouldn't be so hard to get the knack of this, for the love of heaven! I settled back on my feet, and then looked down at them, amazed at how very large they were, and then at my hands, which were quite big too. But not bad-looking, no, not bad-looking. Don't panic! The watch was uncomfortable, but I needed it. All right, keep the watch. But the rings? Definitely didn't want them on my fingers. Itching. Wanted to pull them off. Couldn't! They wouldn't come. Lord God.

Now, stop. You're going to go mad because you can't pull these rings off your fingers. That's foolish. Just slow down. There's such a thing as soap, you know. Soap your hands, these big dark freezing-cold hands, and off the rings will come.

I crossed my arms and eased my hands around my sides, appalled at the feeling of the slippery human sweat beneath my shirt, nothing like

blood sweat, and then I took a slow deep breath, ignoring the heavy ponderous feeling of my chest, the raw feeling of the very act of inhaling and exhaling, and I forced myself to look at the room.

This was not the time to scream in terror. Now, just look at the room.

It was very dim. One floor lamp burned, in a far corner, and another tiny lamp on the mantel, but it was still terribly dim. It seemed I was under water and the water was murky, maybe even clouded with ink.

This is normal. This is mortal. This is how they see. But how grim it all looked, how partial, having nothing of the open spatial qualities of the rooms through which a vampire moved.

How hideously gloomy, the dark gleaming chairs, the table barely visible, the dull gold light creeping up into the corners, the plaster moldings at the tops of the walls vanishing into shadow, impenetrable shadow, and how frightening the empty blackness of the hall.

Anything could have been hiding in these shadows—a rat, anything. There might have been another human being in that hall. I looked down at Mojo and was amazed again at how very indistinct he looked, how mysterious in a wholly different way. That was it, things lost their contours in this sort of dimness. Impossible really to gauge their full texture or size.

Ah, but there was the mirror above the mantel.

I went to it, frustrated by the heaviness of my limbs and by a sudden fear of stumbling, and a need to look more than once at my feet. I moved the little lamp under the mirror, and then I looked at my face.

Ah, yes. I was behind it now, and how amazingly different it looked. Gone were the tightness, and the awful nervous glitter of the eyes. There was a young man staring at me, and he looked more than a little afraid.

I lifted my hand and felt of the mouth and the eyebrows, of the forehead, which was a little higher than mine, and then of the soft hair. The face was very pleasing, infinitely more pleasing than I had realized, being square and without any heavy lines, and very well proportioned, and with dramatic eyes. But I didn't like the look of fear in the eyes. No, not at all. I tried to see a different expression, to claim the features from within and let them express the wonder I felt. But this wasn't easy. And I'm not sure I was feeling any wonder. Hmmm. I couldn't see anything in this face that was coming from inside.

Slowly I opened my mouth and spoke. I said in French that I was

Lestat de Lioncourt in this body, and that everything was fine. The experiment had worked! I was in the very first hour of it, and the fiend James was gone, and everything had worked! Now something of my own fierceness showed in the eyes; and when I smiled I saw my own mischievous nature at least for a few seconds before the smile faded and I looked blank and amazed.

I turned and looked at the dog, who was right beside me, and gazing up at me, as was his habit, perfectly content.

"How do you know I'm in here?" I asked. "Instead of James?"

He cocked his head, and one ear gave a tiny movement.

"All right," I said. "Enough of all this weakness and craziness, let's go!" I started forward towards the dark hallway, and suddenly my right leg went out from under me, and I slid down heavily, left hand skidding along the floor to break my fall, my head slamming against the marble fireplace, and my elbow striking the marble hearth with a sudden violent explosion of pain. With a clatter, the fireplace tools came down upon me, but that was nothing. I'd struck the nerve in the elbow, and the pain was like a fire rushing up my arm.

I turned over on my face, and just held still for a moment waiting for the pain to pass. Only then did I realize my head was throbbing from being slammed against the marble. I reached up, and felt the wetness of blood in my hair. Blood!

Ah, beautiful. Louis would be so amused by this, I thought. I climbed up, the pain shifting and moving to the right behind my forehead, as if it were a weight which had slipped to the front of my head, and I steadied myself as I held the mantel shelf.

One of those many fancy little rugs lay snagged on the floor before me. The culprit. I kicked it out of the way, and turned and very slowly and carefully walked into the hall.

But where was I going? What did I mean to do? The answer came to me all of a sudden. My bladder was full, and the discomfort had grown worse when I'd fallen. I had to take a piss.

Wasn't there a bathroom down here somewhere? I found the hall light switch and turned on the overhead chandelier. For a long moment I stared at all the tiny bulbs—and there must have been twenty of them—realizing that this was quite a bit of light, no matter what I thought of it, but no one had said I couldn't turn on every lamp in the house.

I set out to do this. I went through the living room, the little library, and the back hall. Again and again, the light disappointed me, the sense of murkiness would not leave me, the indistinctness of things left me faintly alarmed and confused.

Finally, I made my way carefully and slowly up the stairs, fearful every moment of losing my balance, or tripping, and annoyed at the faint ache in my legs. Such long legs.

When I looked back down the stairway, I was stunned. You could fall and kill yourself here, I said to myself.

I turned and entered the cramped little bathroom, quickly finding the light. I had to piss, I simply had to, and I had not done this in over two hundred years.

I unzipped these modern pants, and removed my organ, which immediately astonished me by its limpness and size. The size was fine, of course. Who doesn't want these organs to be large? And it was circumcised, which was a nice touch. But this limpness, it felt remarkably repulsive to me, and I didn't want to touch the thing. I had to remind myself, this organ happens to be mine. Jolly!

And what about the smell coming from it, and the smell rising from the hair around it? Ah, that's yours too, baby! Now make it work.

I closed my eyes, exerted pressure very inexactly and perhaps too forcefully, and a great arc of stinking urine shot out from the thing, missing the toilet bowl altogether and splashing on the white seat.

Revolting. I backed up, correcting the aim, and watched with sickened fascination as the urine filled the bowl, as bubbles formed on the surface, and as the smell grew stronger and stronger and more nauseating until I couldn't bear it anymore. At last the bladder was empty. I shoved this flaccid, disgusting thing back in my pants, zipped them up, and slammed down the toilet lid. I pulled on the handle. Away went the urine, except for all the splatters which had struck the toilet seat and floor.

I tried to take a deep breath but the disgusting smell was all around me. I lifted my hands and realized that it was on my fingers as well. At once, I turned on the water in the lavatory, snatched up the soap, and went to work. I lathered my hands over and over, but could reach no assurance that they were actually clean. The skin was far more porous than my preternatural skin; it felt dirty, I realized; and then I started to

pull on the ugly silver rings.

Even amid all these soapsuds, the rings wouldn't come off. I thought back. Yes, the bastard had been wearing them in New Orleans. He probably couldn't get them off either, and now I was stuck with them! Past all patience, but there was nothing to be done until I could find a jeweler who knew how to remove them with some tiny saw or pliers or some other instrument. Just thinking about it made me so anxious that all my muscles were tensing and then releasing with painful spasms. I commanded myself to stop.

I rinsed my hands, over and over, ridiculously, and then I snatched up the towel and dried them, repulsed again by their absorbent texture, and by bits of dirt around the nails. Good God, why didn't this fool properly clean his hands?

Then I looked in the mirrored wall at the end of the bathroom and saw reflected in it a truly disgusting sight. A great patch of moisture on the front of my pants. That stupid organ hadn't been dry when I shoved it inside!

Well, in the old days, I'd never worried about that, had I? But then I'd been a filthy country lord who bathed in summer, or when he took it in his head to plunge into a mountain spring.

This patch of urine on my pants was out of the question! I went out of the bathroom, passing the patient Mojo with only a little pat on the head, and went into the master bedroom, tore open the closet and found another pair of pants, a better pair, in fact, of gray wool, and at once slipped off my shoes, and made the change.

Now, what should I do? Well, go get something to eat, I thought. And then I realized I was hungry! Yes, that was the precise nature of the discomfort I'd been feeling, along with the full bladder, and a general overall heaviness, since this little saga commenced.

Eat. But if you eat, you know what will happen? You'll have to go back in that bathroom again, or some bathroom, and relieve yourself of all the digested food. The thought almost made me gag.

In fact, I grew so nauseated even picturing human excrement coming from my body that for a moment I thought I would indeed vomit. I sat still, on the foot of the low modern bed, and tried to get my emotions under control.

I told myself that these were the simplest aspects of being human; I

must not allow them to obscure the larger questions. And that, further, I was behaving like a perfect coward, and not the dark hero whom I claimed to be. Now, understand, I don't really believe I *am* a hero to the world. But I long ago decided that I must live as if I were a hero—that I must pass through all the difficulties which confront me, because they are only my inevitable circles of fire.

All right, this was a small and ignominious circle of fire. And I must stop the cowardice at once. Eat, taste, feel, see—that was the name of this trial! Oh, but what a trial this was going to be.

At last I climbed to my feet, taking a slightly longer stride to accommodate these new legs, and I went back to the closet and found to my amazement that there really weren't very many clothes here. A couple of pairs of wool pants, two fairly light wool jackets, both new, and a stack of perhaps three shirts on a shelf.

Hmmm. What had happened to all the rest? I opened the top drawer of the bureau. Empty. Indeed all of the drawers were empty. And so was the little chest by the bed.

What could this mean? He'd taken these clothes with him, or sent them on to someplace where he'd gone? But why? They wouldn't fit his new body, and he claimed to have taken care of all that. I was deeply troubled. *Could this mean that he wasn't planning to come back?*

That was absurd. He wouldn't pass up the sum of twenty million. And I could not spend my precious time as a mortal worrying hour by hour about such a thing!

I proceeded down the perilous staircase, Mojo padding softly beside me. I was controlling the new body fairly effortlessly now, heavy and uncomfortable though it was. I opened the hall closet. An old coat remained on a hanger. A pair of galoshes. Nothing else.

I went to the desk in the living room. He had told me that I might find the driver's license here. Slowly I opened the top drawer. Empty. Everything was empty. Ah, but there were some papers in one of the drawers. Seemed to have something to do with this house, and nowhere did the name Raglan James appear. I struggled to understand what these papers were. But the official lingo baffled me. I wasn't receiving an immediate impression of meaning, as I did when I had looked at things with my vampire eyes.

I recalled what James had said about synapses. Yes, my thinking was

slower. Yes, it had been difficult to read each word.

Ah, well, what did it matter? There was no driver's license here. And what I needed was money. Ah, yes, money. I'd left the money on the table. Good Lord, it might have blown out into the yard.

At once I went back to the kitchen. It was now freezing cold in the room, and indeed the table and the stove and the hanging copper pots were covered with a thin layer of white frost. The wallet with the money was not on the table. The car keys were not on the table. And the light, of course, had been smashed.

I got down on my knees in the dark and began to feel about on the floor. I found the passport. But no wallet. No keys. Only bits of glass from the exploded light bulb, which stung my hands, and cut through the skin in two places. Tiny specks of blood on my hands. No fragrance. No real taste. I tried to see without feeling. No wallet. I went out on the step again, careful not to slip this time. No wallet. I couldn't see in the deep snow of the yard.

Ah, but it was useless, wasn't it? The wallet and the keys were far too heavy to have blown away. He'd taken them! Possibly he'd even come back for them! The petty little monster, and when I realized that he'd been in my body, my splendid powerful preternatural body, when he did this, I was absolutely paralyzed with rage.

All right, you thought this might happen, didn't you? It was in his nature. And you're freezing again, you're shivering. Get back into the dining room and close the door.

I did just that, though I had to wait on Mojo, who took his time, as if he were utterly indifferent to the snowy wind. Now the dining room was cold from my having left the door open. Indeed, as I hurried back upstairs, I realized that the temperature of the entire house had been lowered by this little trip to the kitchen. I had to remember to shut doors.

I went into the first of the unused rooms, where I'd hidden the money in the chimney, and as I reached up, I felt not the envelope which I'd lodged there, but a single sheet of paper. I removed it, already in a fury, before I even turned on the light so that I could see the words:

> You really are a silly fool to think that a man of my abilities wouldn't find your little stash. One does not have

> to be a vampire to detect a bit of telltale moisture on the floor and on the wall. Have a pleasant adventure. I shall see you Friday. Take care of yourself! Raglan James.

I was too angry for a moment to move. I was positively fuming. My hands were knotted into fists. “You petty little miscreant!” I said in this miserable, heavy, opaque, brittle voice.

I went into the bathroom. Of course the second stash of money wasn’t behind the mirror. There was only another note.

> What is human life without difficulty? You must realize I cannot resist such little discoveries. It’s like leaving bottles of wine around for an alcoholic. I shall see you Friday. Please walk carefully on the icy sidewalks. Wouldn’t want you to break a leg.

Before I could stop myself I slammed my fist into the mirror! Ah, well. There was a blessing for you. Not a great gaping hole in the wall, as it would have been if Lestat le Vampire had done it; just a lot of broken glass. And bad luck, bad luck for seven years!

I turned around, went downstairs, and back into the kitchen, bolting the door behind me this time, and opened the refrigerator. Nothing inside! Nothing!

Ah, this little devil, what I was going to do to him! How could he think he would get away with this? Did he think I was incapable of giving him twenty million dollars and then wringing his neck? What in the world was he thinking …

Hmmm.

Was it as hard to figure out as all that? He wasn’t coming back, was he? Of course he wasn’t.

I went back into the dining room. There was no silver or china in the glass-doored cabinet. But certainly there had been silver and china last night. I went into the hallway. There were no paintings on the walls. I checked the living room. No Picasso, Jasper Johns, de Kooning, or Warhol. All gone. Even the photographs of the ships were gone.

The Chinese sculptures were gone. The bookshelves were half empty. And the rugs. There were precious few of them left—one in the dining

room, which had almost caused me to kill myself! And one at the foot of the steps.

This house had been emptied out of all its true valuables! Why, half the furniture was missing! The little bastard wasn't going to return! It was never part of his plan.

I sat down in the armchair nearest the door. Mojo, who'd been following me faithfully, took the opportunity to stretch out at my feet. I dug my hand into his fur and tugged at it, and smoothed it, and thought what a comfort it was that the dog was there.

Of course James was a fool to pull this. Did he think I couldn't call on the others?

Hmmm. Call on the others for help—what a perfectly gruesome idea. It did not take any great feat of imagination to guess what Marius would say to me if I told him what I'd done. In all probability he knew, and was smoldering with disapproval. As for the older ones, I shuddered to think on it at all. My best hope from any standpoint was that the body switch would go unnoticed. I'd realized that from the start.

The salient point here was that James didn't know how angry the others would be with me on account of this experiment. He couldn't know. And James didn't know, either, the limits of the power he now possessed.

Ah, but all this was premature. The theft of my money, the looting of the house—this was James's idea of an evil joke, no more, no less. He couldn't leave the clothes and money here for me. His thieving petty nature wouldn't allow it. He had to cheat a little, that was all. Of course he planned to come back and claim his twenty million. And he was counting on the fact that I wouldn't hurt him because I'd want to try this experiment again, because I would value him as the only being who could successfully pull it off.

Yes, that was his ace in the hole, I figured—that I wouldn't harm the one mortal who could effect the switch when I wanted to do it again.

Do this again! I had to laugh. I did laugh, and what a strange and alien sound it was. I shut my eyes tight, and sat there for a moment, hating the sweat clinging to my ribs, hating the ache in my belly and in my head, hating the heavy padded feeling of my hands and feet. And when I opened my eyes again all I beheld was this bleary world of indistinct edges and pallid colors …

Do this again? Oooh! Get a grip on yourself, Lestat. You've clenched your teeth so hard that you've hurt yourself! You've cut your tongue! You are making your own mouth bleed! And the blood tastes like water and salt, nothing but water and salt, water and salt! For the love of hell, get a grip on yourself. Stop!

After a quiet few moments, I stood up and went on a systematic search for a phone.

There was none in the entire house.

Beautiful.

How foolish I'd been not to plan sufficiently for this entire experience. I'd been so carried away with the larger spiritual issues, I'd made no sensible provisions for myself at all! I should have had a suite at the Willard, and money in the hotel safe! I should have arranged for a car.

The car. What about the car?

I went to the hall closet, removed the overcoat, noted a rip in the lining—probably the reason he didn't sell it—put it on, despairing that there were no gloves in the pockets, and went out the back way, after carefully securing the dining room door. I asked Mojo if he wanted to join me or stay there. Naturally he wanted to come along.

The snow in the alley was about a foot deep. I had to slosh my way through it and when I reached the street, I realized it was deeper still.

No red Porsche, of course. Not to the left of the front steps, nor anywhere on this block. Just to be certain, I made my way to the corner and then turned around and came back. My feet were freezing and so were my hands, and the skin of my face positively ached.

All right, I must set out on foot, at least until I located a public phone. The snow was blowing away from me, which was something of a blessing, but then I didn't know where I was going, did I?

As for Mojo he appeared to love this sort of weather, plowing ahead steadily, the snow tumbling and glistening in tiny flakes from his long plush gray coat. I should have switched bodies with the dog, I thought. And then the thought of Mojo inside my vampiric body started me to laughing. I went into one of my regular fits. I laughed and laughed and laughed, turning in circles, and then finally stopped because I was truly freezing to death.

But all this was terribly funny. Here I was a human being, the priceless event I'd dreamed of since my death, and I hated it to the marrow of

these human bones! I felt a hunger pang in my noisy, churning stomach. And then another, which I could only call a hunger cramp.

"Paolo's, I have to find Paolo's but how am I going to get any food? I *need* food too, don't I? I can't simply go without food. I'll get weak if I don't have food."

When I came to the corner of Wisconsin Avenue, I saw lights and people down the hill. The street had been cleared of snow, and was definitely open to traffic. I could see the people moving busily back and forth under the street lamps, but all this was maddeningly dim, of course.

I hurried on, my feet painfully numb now, which is not a contradiction in terms, as you well know if you have ever walked in snow, and finally I saw the lighted window of a café. Martini's. All right. Forget Paolo's. Martini's will have to do. A car had stopped out front; a handsome young couple climbed out of the back and hurried to the door of the place and went inside. I drew up slowly to the door, and saw a fairly pretty young woman at the high wooden desk gathering up a pair of menus for the young couple, whom she then led into the shadows beyond. I glimpsed candles, checkered tablecloths. And I realized suddenly that the awful, nauseating smell that was filling my nostrils was the smell of burnt cheese.

I would not have liked this smell as a vampire, no, not in the least; but it wouldn't have sickened me quite this much. It would have been outside of me. But now it seemed connected to the hunger in me; it seemed to tug on the muscles inside my throat. In fact, the smell seemed suddenly to be inside my guts and to be nauseating me with a pressure, rather than a mere smell.

Curious. Yes, have to note all these things. This is being alive.

The pretty young woman had come back. I saw her pale profile as she looked down at the paper on her little wooden desk, and lifted her pen to make a mark. She had long wavy dark hair, and very pale skin. I wished I could see her better. I struggled to pick up her scent, but I couldn't. I only caught the scent of the burnt cheese.

I opened the door, ignoring the heavy stench that hit me, and moved through it, until I was standing in front of the young woman, and the blessed warmth of the place was wrapping itself around me, smells and all. She was painfully young, with rather small sharp features, and long

narrow black eyes. Her mouth was large, exquisitely rouged, and she had a long beautifully shaped neck. The body was twentieth century—all bones beneath her black dress.

"Mademoiselle," I said, deliberately thickening my French accent, "I am very hungry, and it's very cold outside. Is there anything I can do to earn a plate of food? I shall wash the floors if you wish, scrub the pots and pans, do whatever I must."

She stared at me blankly for a moment. Then she stood back, tossed her long wavy hair, and rolled her eyes, and looked at me again coldly, and said: "Get out." Her voice sounded tinny and flat. It wasn't, of course, it was merely my mortal hearing. The resonance detected by a vampire could not be detected by me.

"May I have a piece of bread?" I asked. "A single piece of bread." The smells of food, bad as they were, tormented me. I couldn't actually remember what food tasted like. I couldn't remember texture and nourishment together, but something purely human was taking over. I was desperate for food.

"I'm going to call the police," she said, her voice quavering slightly, "if you don't get out."

I tried to scan her. Nothing. I looked around, squinting in the dark. Tried to scan the other humans. Nothing. Didn't have the power in this body. Oh, but that's not possible. I looked at her again. Nothing. Not even a glimmer of her thoughts. Not even an instinct really as to what sort of human she was.

"Ah, very well," I said, giving her the gentlest smile I could manage, with no idea of how it appeared or what its effect might be. "I hope you burn in hell for your lack of charity. But God knows, I don't deserve any more than this." I turned and was about to leave when she touched my sleeve.

"Look," she said, trembling slightly in her anger and discomfort, "you can't come here and expect people to give you food!" The blood was pulsing in her white cheeks. I couldn't smell it. But I could smell a sort of musky perfume rising from her, part human, part commercial scent. And suddenly I saw two tiny nipples sticking against the fabric of the dress. How amazing. Again, I tried to read her thoughts. I told myself I must be able to do this, it was an innate power. But it was no good.

"I told you I'd work for the food," I said, trying not to look at her

breasts. “I’d do anything you asked. Look, I’m sorry. I don’t want you to burn in hell. What a dreadful thing to say. It’s only that I’m down on my luck now. Bad things have happened to me. Look, that’s my dog there. How am I to feed him?”

“That dog!” She looked through the glass at Mojo, who sat majestically in the snow. “You must be joking,” she said. What a shrill voice she had. Utterly without character. So many sounds coming at me had that very quality. Metallic and thin.

“No, he is my dog,” I said with faint indignation. “I love him very much.”

She laughed. “That dog eats here every night at the back kitchen door!”

“Ah, well, marvelous. One of us will eat. I’m so happy to hear it, mademoiselle. Maybe I should go to the back kitchen door. Perhaps the dog will leave something for me.”

She gave a little chilly and false laugh. She was observing me, quite obviously, looking with interest at my face and my clothes. Whatever did I look like to her? I didn’t know. The black overcoat was not a cheap garment, but neither was it stylish. The brown hair of this head of mine was full of snow.

She herself had a sort of scrawny, fine-toned sensuality. Very narrow nose, very finely shaped eyes. Very beautiful bones.

“All right,” she said, “sit down up there at the counter. I’ll have them bring you something. What do you want?”

“Anything, I don’t care. I thank you for your kindness.”

“All right, sit down.” She opened the door, and shouted to the dog: “Go around to the back.” She made a quick gesture.

Mojo did nothing but sit there, a patient mountain of fur. I went back out into the freezing wind, and told him to go to the kitchen door. I gestured to the side alley. He looked at me for a long moment and then he rose and moved slowly down the alley and disappeared.

I went back inside, grateful for a second time to be out of the cold, though I realized that my shoes were full of melted snow. I moved into the darkness of the interior of the restaurant, stumbling on a wooden stool that I didn’t see, and nearly falling, and then seating myself on the stool. A place had already been set on the wooden counter, with a blue cloth mat and a heavy steel fork and knife. The smell of cheese was

stifling. There were other smells—cooked onions, garlic, burnt grease. All revolting.

I was most uncomfortable sitting on this stool. The round hard edge of the wooden seat cut into my legs, and once again, I was bothered that I couldn't see in the dark. The restaurant appeared very deep, indeed to have several more rooms in a long chain. But I couldn't see all the way back there. I could hear frightful noises, like big pots being banged on metal, and they hurt my ears just a little, or more truly I resented them.

The young woman reappeared, smiling prettily as she set down a big glass of red wine. The smell was sour and potentially sickening.

I thanked her. And then I picked up the glass, and took a mouthful of the wine, holding it and then swallowing. At once I began to choke. I couldn't figure what had happened—whether I had swallowed in some wrong way, or it was irritating my throat for some reason, or what. I only knew I was coughing furiously, and I snatched up a cloth napkin from beside the fork and put it over my mouth. Some of the wine was actually caught in the back of my nose. As for the taste, it was weak and acidic. A terrible frustration rose in me.

I shut my eyes, and leaned my head against my left hand, the hand itself closed around the napkin in a fist.

"Here, try it again," she said. I opened my eyes and saw her filling the glass once more from a large carafe.

"All right," I said, "thank you." I was thirsty, powerfully thirsty. In fact, the mere taste of the wine had greatly increased this thirst. But this time, I reasoned, I wouldn't swallow so hard. I lifted the glass, took a small mouthful, tried to savor it, though there seemed almost nothing there to savor, and then I swallowed, slowly, and it went down the correct way. Thin, so thin, so totally different from a luscious filling swallow of blood. I must get the hang of this. I drank the rest of the contents of the glass. Then I lifted the carafe and filled it again, and drank that down too.

For a moment, I felt only frustration. Then gradually I began to feel a little sick. Food will come, I thought. Ah, there is food—a canister of bread sticks, or so they appear to be.

I lifted one, smelled it carefully, ascertaining that it was bread, and then I nibbled at it very fast until it was gone. It was like sand to the last tiny bit. Just like the sand of the Gobi Desert which had gotten into my mouth. Sand.

“How do mortals eat this?” I asked.

“More slowly,” said the pretty woman and she let out a little laugh. “You’re not mortal? Which planet are you from?”

“Venus,” I answered, smiling at her again. “The planet of love.”

She was studying me unreservedly, and a little flush came back to her sharp white little cheeks. “Well, stick around until I get off, why don’t you? You can walk me home.”

“I shall definitely do that,” I said. And then the realization of what this could mean settled over me, with the most curious effect. I could bed this woman, perhaps. Ah, yes, that was definitely a possibility as far as she was concerned. My eyes drifted down to the two tiny nipples, protruding so enticingly through the black silk of the dress. Yes, bed her, I thought, and how smooth was the flesh of her neck.

The organ was stirring between my legs. Well, something is working, I mused. But how curiously local was this feeling, this hardening and swelling, and the odd way that it consumed all my thoughts. The need for blood was never local. I stared blankly before me. I did not look down when a plate of Italian spaghetti and meat sauce was set down at my place. The hot fragrance went up my nostrils—moldering cheese, burnt meat, and fat.

Go down, I was saying to the organ. This is not the time yet for that.

Finally I lowered my gaze to the plate. The hunger ground in me as if someone had my intestines in both hands and was wringing them out. Did I remember such a feeling? God knows I had been hungry enough in my mortal life. Hunger was like life itself. But the memory seemed so distant, so unimportant. Slowly I picked up the fork, which I had never used in those times, for we had none—only spoons and knives in our crude world—and I shoved the tines under the mess of wet spaghetti and lifted a heap of it to my mouth.

I knew it was too hot before it touched my tongue, but I didn’t stop quickly enough. I was badly burnt and let the fork drop. Now, this is plain stupidity, I thought, and it was perhaps my fifteenth act of plain stupidity. What must I do to approach things with more intelligence, and patience and calm?

I sat back on the uncomfortable stool, as well as one can do such a thing without tumbling to the floor, and I tried to think.

I was trying to run this new body, which was full of uncommon

weakness and sensation—painfully cold feet, for instance, wet feet in a draught running along the floor—and I was making understandable but stupid mistakes. Should have taken the galoshes. Should have found a phone before coming in here and called my agent in Paris. Not reasoning, behaving stubbornly as if I were a vampire when I was not.

Nothing of the temperature of this steaming food would have burnt me in my vampire skin, obviously. But I wasn't in my vampire skin. That's why I should have taken the galoshes. Think!

But how far was this experience from what I had expected. Oh, ye gods. Here I was talking about thinking when I'd thought I would be enjoying! Ah, I'd thought I would be immersed in sensations, immersed in memories, immersed in discoveries; and now all I could do was think how to hold back!

The truth was, I'd envisioned pleasure, a variety of pleasures—eating, drinking, a woman in my bed, then a man. But none of what I'd experienced was even vaguely pleasurable so far.

Well, I was to blame for this shameful situation, and I could make it change. I wiped my mouth now with my napkin, a coarse bit of artificial fiber, no more absorbent than a bit of oilcloth might have been, and then I picked up the wineglass and emptied it once more. A wave of sickness passed over me. My throat tightened and then I even felt dizzy. Good God, three glasses and I was getting drunk?

Once again, I lifted the fork. The sticky goo was cooler now, and I shoveled a heap of it into my mouth. Again, I almost choked! My throat locked convulsively, as if to prevent this mass of slop from smothering me. I had to stop, breathe slowly through my nostrils, tell myself this wasn't poison, I wasn't a vampire, and then chew the mess carefully so as not to bite my tongue.

But I'd bit my tongue earlier, and now that patch of sore skin began to hurt. The hurt filled my mouth, and was far more perceptible than the food. Nevertheless I continued to chew the spaghetti, and began to reflect on its tastelessness, its sourness, its saltiness, and its general awful consistency and then I swallowed it, feeling a painful tightening again, and then a hard knot lower in my chest.

Now, if Louis were going through this—if you were your old smug vampire self, sitting opposite, watching him, you would condemn him for everything that he was doing and thinking, you would abhor him for

his timidity, and his wasting of this experience, for his failure to perceive.

Again, I lifted the fork. I chewed another mouthful, swallowed it. Well, there was a sort of taste. It simply wasn't the pungent delicious taste of blood. It was much tamer, and grainier, and stickier. Okay, another mouthful. You can get to like this. And besides, maybe this just isn't very good food. Another mouthful.

"Hey, slow down," said the pretty woman. She was leaning against me but I couldn't feel her juicy softness through the coat. I turned and looked up into her eyes again, marveling at her long curving black lashes, and how sweet her mouth looked as she smiled. "You're bolting your food."

"I know. Very hungry," I said. "Listen to me, I know this sounds dreadfully ungrateful. But do you have something that is not a great coagulated mass such as this? You know, something tougher—meat, perhaps?"

She laughed. "You are the strangest man," she said. "Really where are you from?"

"France, the countryside," I said.

"All right, I'll bring you something else."

As soon as she'd gone, I drank another glass of the wine. I was definitely getting dizzy, but I also felt a warmth that was sort of nice. I also felt like laughing suddenly, and I knew that I was partially intoxicated, at least.

I decided to study the other humans in the room. It was so weird not being able to pick up their scents, so weird not being able to hear their thoughts. I couldn't even really hear their voices, only a lot of racket and noise. And it was so weird to be both cold and hot here, my head swimming in the overheated air, and my feet freezing in the draught that ran along the floor.

The young woman set a plate of meat before me—veal, she called it. I picked up some small sliver, which seemed to amaze her—I should have used the knife and fork—and bit into it and found it to be rather tasteless like the spaghetti; but it was better. Cleaner, it seemed. I chewed it fairly lustily.

"Thank you, you've been kind to me," I said. "You are really lovely, and I regret my harsh words earlier, I really do."

She seemed fascinated, and of course I was playacting somewhat. I was pretending to be gentle, which I am not.

She left me so that she might take the payment from a couple who were leaving, and I returned to my meal—my first meal of sand and glue and bits of leather full of salt. I laughed to myself. More wine, I thought, it's like drinking nothing, but it's having an effect.

After she'd cleared the plate, she gave me another carafe. And I sat there, in my wet shoes and socks, cold and uncomfortable on the wooden stool, straining to see in the dark, and getting drunker and drunker as an hour passed, and then she was ready to go home.

I was no more comfortable at that point than I'd been when this all began. And as soon as I stood up off the stool, I realized I could hardly walk. There was no sensation in my legs at all. I had to look down to be certain they were there.

The pretty woman thought it very funny. I wasn't so sure. She helped me along the snowy sidewalk, calling to Mojo, whom she addressed simply as "Dog," with great respectful emphasis, and assured me that she lived only "a few steps up the street." The only good aspect of all this was that the cold did bother me less.

I was really off balance. My limbs were now totally leaden. Even the most brightly illuminated objects were out of focus. My head was aching. I thought sure I was going to fall. Indeed the fear of falling was becoming a panic.

But mercifully we reached her door, and she led me up a narrow carpeted flight of steps—a climb which left me so exhausted that my heart was pounding and my face was veiled with sweat. I could see almost nothing! It was madness. I heard her putting her key in the door.

A new dreadful stench assaulted my nostrils. The grim little apartment appeared to be a warren of pasteboard and plywood, with undistinguished printed posters covering the walls. But what could account for this smell? I realized suddenly that it came from the cats she kept in this place, which were allowed to relieve themselves in a box of earth. I saw the box of earth, full of cat excrement, sitting on the floor of a small open bathroom, and I really thought it was all over, I was going to die! I stood still, straining to keep myself from vomiting. There was a grinding pain in my stomach again, not hunger this time, and my belt felt painfully tight.

The pain grew sharper. I realized I had to perform a similar duty to that already performed by the cats. Indeed, I had to do it now or disgrace myself. And I had to go into that very same chamber. My heart came up in my throat.

"What's wrong?" she said. "Are you sick?"

"May I use this room?" I asked, gesturing to the open door.

"Of course," she said. "Go ahead."

Ten minutes, perhaps more, passed before I emerged. I was so powerfully disgusted by the simple process of elimination—by the smell of it, and the feel of doing it, and the sight of it—that I couldn't speak. But it was finished, done. Only the drunkenness remained now, the graceless experience of reaching for the light switch and missing it, of trying to turn the knob and having my hand—this big dark hand—miss.

I found the bedroom, very warm, and crowded with mediocre modern furniture of cheap laminate and no particular design.

The young woman was now entirely naked and sitting on the side of the bed. I tried to see her clearly in spite of the distortions created by the nearby lamp. But her face was a mass of ugly shadows, and her skin looked sallow. The stale smell of the bed surrounded her.

All I could conclude about her was that she was foolishly thin, as women tend to be in these times, and all the bones of her ribs showed through the milky skin, and that her breasts were almost freakishly small with tiny delicate pink nipples, and her hips weren't there. She was like a wraith. And yet she sat there smiling, as if this was normal, with all her pretty wavy hair hanging down her back, and hiding the small shadow of her pubis beneath one limp hand.

Well, it was perfectly obvious which marvelous human experience was meant to come now. But I could feel nothing for her. Nothing. I smiled, and I began to take off my clothes. I peeled off the overcoat, and was immediately cold. Why wasn't she cold? I then took off the sweater and was immediately horrified by the smell of my own sweat. *Lord God, was it really like this before?* And this body of mine had looked so clean.

She didn't seem to notice. I was grateful for that. I then removed my shirt and my shoes and my socks and my pants. My feet were still cold. Indeed, I was cold and naked, very naked. I didn't know whether or not I liked this at all. I suddenly saw myself in the mirror over her dressing table, and I realized that this organ was of course utterly drunk and

asleep.

Again, she didn't seem surprised.

"Come here," she said. "Sit down."

I obeyed. I was shivering all over. Then I began to cough. The first cough was a spasm, catching me completely by surprise. Then a whole series of coughs followed, uncontrollably, and the last was so violent that it made a circle of pain around my ribs.

"I'm sorry," I said to her.

"I love your French accent," she whispered. She stroked my hair, and let her nails lightly scratch my cheek.

Now, this was a pleasant sensation. I bent my head and kissed her throat. Yes, this was nice also. It was nothing as exciting as closing on a victim, but it was nice. I tried to remember what it had been like two hundred years ago when I was the terror of the village girls. Seems some farmer was always at the castle gates, cursing me and swinging his fist at me and telling me that if his daughter was with child by me, I'd have to do something about it! It had all seemed such wonderful fun at the time. And the girls, oh the lovely girls.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Nothing," I said. I kissed her throat again. I could smell sweat on her body too. I didn't like it. But why? These smells were nothing as sharp, any of them, as they were to me in my other body. But they connected with something in this body—that was the ugly part. I felt no protection against these smells; they seemed not artifacts but something which could invade me and contaminate me. For instance, the sweat from her neck was now on my lips. I knew it was, I could taste it and I wanted to be away from her.

Ah, but this is madness. She was a human being, and I was a human being. Thank God this would be over Friday. But what right had I to thank God!

Her little nipples brushed against my chest, very hot and nubby and the flesh behind them was squashy and tender. I slipped my arm around her small back.

"You're hot, I think you have a fever," she said in my ear. She kissed my neck the way I'd been kissing hers.

"No, I'm all right," I said. But I didn't have the slightest idea of whether or not this was true. This was hard work!

Suddenly her hand touched my organ, startling me, and then bringing about an immediate excitement. I felt the organ lengthen and grow hard. The sensation was entirely concentrated, and yet it galvanized me. When I looked at her breasts now, and down at the small fur triangle between her legs, my organ grew even more hard. Yes, I remember this all right; my eyes are connected to it, and nothing else matters now, hmmm, all right. Just get her down on the bed.

"Whoa!" she whispered. "Now that's a piece of equipment!"

"Is it?" I looked down. The monstrous thing had doubled in size. It did seem grossly out of proportion to everything else. "Yes, I suppose it is. Should have known James would have checked it out."

"Who's James?"

"No, doesn't matter," I mumbled. I turned her face towards me and kissed her wet little mouth this time, feeling her teeth through her thin lips. She opened her mouth for my tongue. This was good, even if her mouth was bad tasting. Didn't matter. But then my mind raced ahead to blood. Drink her blood.

Where was the pounding intensity of drawing near the victim, of the moment right before my teeth pierced the skin and the blood spilled all over my tongue?

No, it's not going to be that easy, or that consuming. It's going to be between the legs and more like a shiver, but this is some shiver, I'll say that.

Merely thinking of the blood had heightened the passion, and I shoved her roughly down on the bed. I wanted to finish, nothing else mattered but finishing.

"Wait a minute," she said.

"Wait for what?" I mounted her, and kissed her again, pushing my tongue deeper into her. No blood. Ah, so pale. No blood. My organ slid between her hot thighs, and I almost spurted then. But it wasn't enough.

"I said wait!" she screamed, her cheeks coloring. "You can't do it without a condom."

"What the hell are you saying?" I murmured. I knew the meaning of these words, yet they didn't make much sense. I pushed my hand down, felt the hairy opening, and then the juicy wet crack, which seemed deliciously small.

She screamed at me to get off of her, and she shoved at me with the

heels of her hands. She looked very flushed and beautiful to me suddenly in her heat and rage, and when she nudged me with her knee, I slammed down against her, then drew up only long enough to ram the organ into her, and feel that sweet hot tight envelope of flesh close around me, making me gasp.

"Don't! Stop it! I said stop it!" she screamed.

But I couldn't wait. What the hell made her think this was the time to discuss such a thing, I wondered, in some vague crazed fashion. Then, in a moment of blinding spasmodic excitement I came. Semen came roaring out of the organ!

One moment it was eternal; the next it was finished, as if it had never begun. I lay exhausted on top of her, drenched with sweat, of course, and faintly annoyed by the stickiness of the whole event, and her panic-stricken screams.

At last I fell over onto my back. My head was aching, and all the evil smells of the room thickened—a soiled smell from the bed itself, with its sagging, lumpy mattress; the nauseating smell of the cats.

She leapt out of the bed. She appeared to have gone mad. She was crying and shivering, and she snatched up a blanket from the chair and covered herself with it and began screaming at me to get out, get out, get out.

"Whatever is the matter with you?" I asked.

She let loose with a volley of modern curses. "You bum, you miserable stupid bum, you idiot, you jerk!" That sort of thing. I could have given her a disease, she said. Indeed she rattled off the names of several; I could have gotten her pregnant. I was a creep, a prick, a putz! I was to clear out of here at once. How dare I do this to her? Get out before she called the police.

A wave of sleepiness passed over me. I tried to focus upon her, in spite of the darkness. Then came a sudden nausea sharper than I'd ever felt. I struggled to keep it under control, and only by a severe act of will managed not to vomit then and there.

Finally, I sat up and then climbed to my feet. I looked down at her as she stood there, crying, and screaming at me, and I saw suddenly that she was wretched, that I had really hurt her, and indeed there was an ugly bruise on her face.

Very slowly it came clear to me what had happened. She had wanted

me to use some form of prophylactic, and I'd virtually forced her. No pleasure in it for her, only fear. I saw her again at the moment of my climax, fighting me, and I realized it was utterly inconceivable to her that I could have enjoyed the struggle, enjoyed her rage and her protests, enjoyed conquering her. But in a paltry and common way, I think I had.

The whole thing seemed overwhelmingly dismal. It filled me with despair. The pleasure itself had been nothing! I can't bear this, I thought, not a moment longer. If I could have reached James, I would have offered him another fortune, just to return at once. Reached James … I'd forgotten altogether about finding a phone.

"Listen to me, ma chère," I said. "I'm so sorry. Things simply went wrong. I know. I'm sorry."

She moved to slap me but I caught her wrist easily and brought her hand down, hurting her a little.

"Get out," she said again. "Get out or I'll call the police."

"I understand what you're saying to me. It's been forever since I did it. I was clumsy. I was bad."

"You're worse than bad!" she said in a deep raw voice.

And this time she did slap me. I wasn't quick enough. I was astonished by the force of the slap, how it stung. I felt of my face where she'd hit me. What an annoying little pain. It was an insulting pain.

"Go!" she screamed again.

I put on my clothes, but it was like lifting sacks of bricks to do it. A dull shame had come over me, a feeling of such awkwardness and discomfort in the slightest gesture I made or smallest word I spoke that I wanted simply to sink into the earth.

Finally, I had everything buttoned and zipped properly, and I had the miserable wet socks on my feet again, and the thin shoes, and I was ready to go.

She sat on the bed crying, her shoulders very thin, with the tender bones in her back poking at her pale flesh, and her hair dripping down in thick wavy clumps over the blanket she held to her breast. How fragile she looked—how sadly unbeautiful and repulsive.

I tried to see her as if I were really Lestat. But I couldn't do it. She appeared a common thing, utterly worthless, not even interesting. I was vaguely horrified. Had it been that way in my boyhood village? I tried to

remember those girls, those girls dead and gone for centuries, but I couldn't see their faces. What I remembered was happiness, mischief, a great exuberance that had made me forget for intermittent periods the deprivation and hopelessness of my life.

What did that mean in this moment? How could this whole experience have been so unpleasant, so seemingly pointless? Had I been myself I would have found her fascinating as an insect is fascinating; even her little rooms would have appeared quaint to me, in their worst, most uninspiring details! Ah, the affection I always felt for all sad little mortal habitats. But why was that so!

And she, the poor being, she would have been beautiful to me simply because she was alive! I could not have been sullied by her had I fed on her for an hour. As it was, I felt filthy for having been with her, and filthy for being cruel to her. I understood her fear of disease! I, too, felt contaminated! But where lay the perspective of truth?

"I am so sorry," I said again. "You must believe me. It wasn't what I wanted. I don't know what I wanted."

"You're crazy," she whispered bitterly without looking up.

"Some night I'll come to you, soon, and I'll bring you a present, something beautiful that you really want. I'll give it to you and perhaps you'll forgive me."

She didn't answer.

"Tell me, what is it you really want? Money doesn't matter. What is it you want that you cannot have?"

She looked up, rather sullenly, her face blotched and red and swollen, and then she wiped at her nose with the back of her hand.

"You know what I wanted," she said in a harsh, disagreeable voice, which was almost sexless it was so low.

"No, I don't. Tell me what."

Her face was so disfigured and her voice so strange that she frightened me. I was still woozy from the wine I'd drunk earlier, yet my mind was unaffected by the intoxication. It seemed a lovely situation. This body drunk, but not me.

"Who are you?" she asked. She looked very hard now, hard and bitter. "You're somebody, aren't you … you're not just …" But her voice trailed off.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

She turned her head even more sharply to the side, studying me as if it was all going to come to her suddenly. She'd have it figured out. I couldn't imagine what was going on in her mind. I knew only that I felt sorry for her, and I did not like her. I didn't like this dirty messy room with its low plaster ceiling, and the nasty bed, and the ugly tan carpet and the dim light and the cat box reeking in the other room.

"I'll remember you," I said miserably yet tenderly. "I'll surprise you. I'll come back and I'll bring something wonderful for you, something you could never get for yourself. A gift as if from another world. But right now, I have to leave you."

"Yes," she said, "you'd better go."

I turned to do exactly that. I thought of the cold outside, of Mojo waiting in the hallway, and of the town house with its back door shattered off the hinges, and no money and no phone.

Ah, the phone.

She had a phone. I'd spied it on the dresser.

As I turned and went towards it, she screamed at me, and hurled something at me. I think that it was a shoe. It struck my shoulder, but caused no pain. I picked up the receiver and punched the zero twice for long distance, and called my New York agent collect.

On and on it rang. No one there. Not even his machine. Most strange, and damned inconvenient.

I could see her in the mirror, staring at me in stiff and silent outrage, the blanket pulled around her like a sleek modern dress. How pathetic was all of this, down to the last jot.

I called Paris. Again it rang and rang, but finally there came the familiar voice—my agent roused from sleep. Quickly in French I told him I was in Georgetown, that I needed twenty thousand dollars, no, best send thirty, and I must have it now.

He explained that it was just sunrise in Paris. He would have to wait until the banks opened, but he would wire the money as soon as he could. It might be noon in Georgetown before it reached me. I memorized the name of the agency where I was to collect it, and I implored him to be prompt and see that he did not fail. This was an emergency, I was penniless. I had obligations. He gave me assurance that all would be handled at once. I put down the phone.

She was staring at me. I don't think she had understood the phone

call. She could not speak French.

"I'll remember you," I said. "Please, forgive me. I'll go now. I've caused trouble enough."

She didn't answer. I stared at her, trying for the last time to fathom it, why she seemed so coarse and uninteresting. What had been my vantage point before that all life seemed so beautiful to me, all creatures but variations on the same magnificent theme? Even James had had a horrid glittering beauty like a great palmetto bug or a fly.

"Good-bye, ma chère," I said, "I'm very sorry—truly I am."

I found Mojo sitting patiently outside the apartment, and I hurried past him, snapping my fingers for him to come, which he did. And down the steps we went and out in the cold night.

In spite of the wind gusting into the kitchen, and creeping around the dining room door, the other rooms of the town house were still quite warm. A stream of heated air came from the little brass grilles in the floors. How kind of James not to have turned off the heat, I thought. But then he plans to leave this place immediately that he has the twenty million. The bill will never be paid.

I went upstairs and through the master bedroom into the master bath. A pleasant room of new white tile and clean mirrors and a deep shower stall with doors of shining glass. I tried the water. Hot and strong. Quite deliciously hot. I peeled off all the damp and smelly clothes, laying the socks on the furnace grille and neatly folding the sweater for it was the only one I had, and then I stood in the hot shower for a long time.

With my head back against the tile, I might have actually fallen asleep standing up. But then I began to weep, and then just as spontaneously, to cough. I felt an intense burning in my chest, and the same burning deep inside my nose.

Finally I got out, toweled off, and looked again at this body in the mirror. I could not see a scar or a flaw anywhere in it. The arms were powerful but smoothly muscled, as was the chest. The legs were well formed. The face was truly beautiful, the dark skin quite nearly perfect, though there was nothing of the boy left in the structure of it, as there was in my own face. It was very much the face of a man—rectangular, a little hard, but pretty, very pretty, perhaps on account of the large eyes.

It was also slightly rough. Beard coming in. Have to shave. Nuisance.

"But really, this ought to be splendid," I said aloud. "You've the body of a twenty-six-year-old male in perfect condition. But it's been a nightmare. You've made one stupid error after another. Why can't you meet this challenge? Where is your will and your strength?"

I felt chilled all over. Mojo had gone to sleep on the floor at the foot of the bed. I shall do that, sleep, I thought. Sleep like a mortal, and when I wake, the light of day will be coming into this room. Even if the sky is gray, it will be wondrous. It will be day. You will see the world of day as you've longed to see it all these years. Forget all this abysmal struggle and trivia and fear.

But a dreadful suspicion was coming over me. Hadn't my mortal life been nothing but abysmal struggle and trivia and fear? Wasn't that the way it was for most mortals? Wasn't that the message of a score of modern writers and poets—that we wasted our lives in foolish preoccupation? *Wasn't this all a miserable cliché?*

I was bitterly shaken. I tried to argue with myself once more, the way I'd been doing all along. But what was the use?

It felt terrible to be in this sluggish human body! It felt terrible not to have my preternatural powers. And the world, look at it, it was dingy and shabby, frayed at the edges and full of accidents. Why, I couldn't even see most of it. What world?

Ah, but tomorrow! Oh, Lord, another miserable cliché! I started laughing and another fit of coughing caught me. This time the pain was in my throat and quite considerable, and my eyes were watering. Best to sleep, best to rest, better to prepare for my one precious day.

I snapped off the lamp, and pulled back the covers of the bed. It was clean, I was thankful for that. I laid my head on the down pillow, brought up my knees close to my chest, drew the covers up to my chin, and went to sleep. I was vaguely sensible that if the house burned, I would die. If gas fumes came up out of the furnace grilles, I would die. Indeed, someone might come in the open back door to kill me. Indeed, all kinds of disasters were possible. But Mojo was there, wasn't he? And I was tired, so tired!

Hours later, I woke.

I was coughing violently and bitterly cold. I needed a handkerchief, found a box of paper tissue that would do well enough, and blew my

nose perhaps a hundred times. Then, able to breathe again, I fell back into a strange feverish exhaustion, and the deceptive feeling that I was floating as I lay firmly on the bed.

Just a mortal cold, I thought. The result of letting myself become so miserably chilled. It will mar things, but it is also an experience, an experience I must explore.

The next time I woke up, the dog was standing beside the bed, and he was licking my face. I put out my hand, felt his furry nose, and laughed at him, then coughed again, throat burning, and realized I'd been coughing for some time.

The light was awfully bright. Wonderfully bright. Thank God, a bright lamp in this murky world at last. I sat up. For a moment, I was too dazed to rationally acknowledge what I saw.

The sky in the tops of the windows was perfectly blue, vibrantly blue, and the sunlight was pouring in on the polished floor, and all the world appeared glorious in the brightness—the bare tree branches with their white trimming of snow, and the snow-covered roof opposite, and the room itself, full of whiteness and lustrous color, light glancing off the mirror, and the crystal glass on the dresser, off the brass knob of the bathroom door.

"Mon Dieu, look at it, Mojo," I whispered, throwing back the covers and rushing to the window and shoving it all the way up. The cold air hit me, but what did it matter? Look at the deep color of the sky, look at the high white clouds traveling to the west, look at the rich and beautiful green of the tall pine tree in the neighboring yard.

Suddenly I was weeping uncontrollably, and coughing painfully once more.

"This is the miracle," I whispered. Mojo nudged me, giving a little high-pitched moan. The mortal aches and pains didn't matter. This was the biblical promise which had gone unfulfilled for two hundred years.

TWELVE

Within moments of leaving the town house, of stepping out into the glorious daylight, I knew that this experience would be worth all of the trials and the pain. And no mortal chill, with all its debilitating symptoms would keep me from frolicking in the morning sun.

Never mind that my overall physical weakness was driving me mad: that I seemed to be made of stone as I plodded along with Mojo, that I couldn't jump two feet in the air when I tried, or that pushing open the door of the butcher shop took a colossal effort; or that my cold was growing steadily worse.

Once Mojo had devoured his breakfast of scraps, begged from the butcher, we were off together to revel in the light everywhere, and I felt myself becoming drunk on the vision of the sunlight falling upon windows and wet pavements, on the gleaming tops of brightly enameled automobiles, on the glassy puddles where the snow had melted, upon the plate-glass shopwindows, and upon the people—the thousands and thousands of happy people, scurrying busily about the business of the day.

How different they were from the people of the night, for obviously, they felt safe in the daylight, and walked and talked in a wholly unguarded fashion, carrying on the many transactions of daytime, which are seldom performed with such vigor after dark.

Ah, to see the busy mothers with their radiant little children in tow, piling fruit into their grocery baskets, to watch the big noisy delivery trucks park in the slushy streets as powerfully built men lugged great cartons and cases of merchandise through back doors! To see men shoveling snow and cleaning off windows, to see the cafés filled with pleasantly distracted creatures consuming great quantities of coffee and odoriferous fried breakfasts as they pored over the morning newspapers or fretted over the weather or discussed the day's work. Enchanting to watch gangs of schoolchildren, in crisp uniforms, braving the icy wind to organize their games in a sun-drenched asphalt yard.

A great optimistic energy bound all these beings together; one could

feel it emanating from the students rushing between buildings on the university campus, or gathered together in close, warm restaurants to take lunch.

Like flowers to the light, these humans opened themselves, accelerating their pace, and their speech. And when I felt the heat of the sun itself upon my face and hands, I, too, opened as if I were a flower. I could feel the chemistry of this mortal body responding, despite the congestion in my head and the tiresome pain in my freezing hands and feet.

Ignoring the cough, which was growing worse by the hour, and a new blurriness of vision, which was a real nuisance, I took Mojo with me along noisy M Street into Washington, the capital of the nation proper, wandering about the marble memorials and monuments, the vast and impressive official buildings and residences, and up through the soft sad beauty of Arlington Cemetery with its thousands of tiny identical headstones, and to the handsome and dusty little mansion of the great Confederate general Robert E. Lee.

I was delirious by this time. And very possibly all my physical discomfort added to my happiness—giving me a drowsy, frenzied attitude rather like that of a person drunk or drugged. I don't know. I only know I was happy, very happy, and the world by light was not the world by dark.

Many, many tourists braved the cold as I did to see the famous sights. I reveled silently in their enthusiasm, realizing that all of these beings were affected by the broad open vistas of the capital city as I was affected by them—that it gladdened them and transformed them to see the vast blue sky overhead, and the many spectacular stone memorials to the accomplishments of humankind.

"I'm one of them!" I realized suddenly—not Cain forever seeking the blood of his brother. I looked about me in a daze. "I'm one of you!"

For a long moment I gazed down upon the city from the heights of Arlington, shivering with cold, and even crying a little at the astonishing spectacle of it—so orderly, so representative of the principles of the great Age of Reason—wishing that Louis were with me, or that David were here, and aching in my heart that they would so surely disapprove of what I had done.

But, oh, this was the true planet I beheld, the living earth born of

sunshine and warmth, even under its shimmering mantle of winter snow.

I went down the hill finally, Mojo now and then running ahead and then circling back to accompany me, and I walked along the bank of the frozen Potomac, wondering at the sun reflected in the ice and melting snow. It was fun even to watch the melting snow.

Sometime in midafternoon I ended up once more in the great marble Jefferson Memorial, an elegant and spacious Greek pavilion with the most solemn and moving words engraved on its walls. My heart was bursting as I realized that for these precious hours I wasn't cut off from the sentiments expressed here. Indeed, for this little while I mingled with the human crowd, quite indistinguishable from anyone else.

But this was a lie, wasn't it? I carried my guilt within me—in the continuity of my memory, in my irreducible individual soul: Lestat the killer, Lestat the prowler of the night. I thought of Louis's warning: "You can't become human by simply taking over a human body!" I saw the stricken and tragic look on his face.

But Lord God, what if the Vampire Lestat hadn't ever existed, what if he were merely the literary creation, the pure invention, of the man in whose body I now lived and breathed! What a beautiful idea!

I remained for a long time on the steps of the memorial, my head bowed, the wind tearing at my clothes. A kind woman told me I was ill and must button up my coat. I stared into her eyes, realizing that she saw only a young man there before her. She was neither dazzled nor afraid. No hunger lurked in me to end her life so that I might better enjoy mine. Poor lovely creature of pale blue eyes and fading hair! Very suddenly I caught her small wrinkled hand and kissed it, and I told her in French that I loved her, and I watched the smile spread over her narrow withered face. How lovely she appeared to me, as lovely as any human I'd ever gazed upon with my vampire eyes.

All the sordid shabbiness of last night was erased in these daylight hours. I think my greatest dreams of this adventure had been fulfilled.

But the winter was heavy and hard all around me. Even cheered by the blue sky, people spoke to one another of a worse storm yet to come. Shops were closing early, streets would again become impassable, the airport had been shut down. Passersby warned me to lay in candles, as the city might lose electric power. And an old gentleman, with a thick wool cap pulled down over his head, scolded me for not wearing a hat. A

young woman told me that I looked sick and should hurry home.

Only a cold, I answered. A good cough tonic or whatever they call it now would be perfectly fine. Raglan James would know what to do when he reclaimed this body. He wouldn't be too happy about it, but he could console himself with his twenty million. Besides I had hours still to dose myself with commercial remedies and rest.

For the time being, I was too relentlessly uncomfortable overall to worry about such a thing. I'd wasted enough time upon such petty distractions. And of course help for all the petty annoyances of life—ah, real life—was at hand.

Indeed, I'd forgotten all about the time, hadn't I? My money should be at the agency, waiting for me. I caught a glimpse of a clock in a store window. Half past two. The big cheap watch on my wrist said the same thing. Why, I had only about thirteen hours left.

Thirteen hours in this awful body, with a throbbing head and sore limbs! My happiness vanished in a sudden cold thrill of fear. Oh, but this day was too fine to be ruined by cowardice! I simply put that out of my mind.

Bits of remembered poetry had come to me … and now and then a very dim memory of that last mortal winter, of crouching by the hearth in the great hall of my father's house, and trying desperately to warm my hands by a waning fire. But in general, I had been locked to the moment in a way that was entirely unfamiliar to my feverish, calculating, and mischievous little mind. So enchanted had I been by what was going on around me, that for hours I had experienced no preoccupation or distraction of any kind.

This was extraordinary, absolutely extraordinary. And in my euphoria, I was certain that I would carry with me forever the memory of this simple day.

The walk back to Georgetown seemed at times an impossible feat. Even before I'd left the Jefferson Memorial, the sky had begun to cloud over and was fast becoming the color of dull tin. The light was drying up as if it were liquid.

Yet I was loving it in its more melancholy manifestations. I was mesmerized by the sight of anxious mortals locking up storefronts and hurrying against the wind with sacks of groceries, of lighted headlamps flashing brightly and almost cheerily in the deepening gloom.

There would be no twilight, I realized that. Ah, very sad indeed. But as a vampire I often beheld the twilight. So why should I complain? Nevertheless, just for one second I regretted that I had spent my precious time in the teeth of the bitter winter. But for reasons I could scarce explain to myself, it had been just what I wanted. Winter bitter as the winters of my childhood. Bitter as that time in Paris when Magnus had carried me to his lair. I was satisfied. I was content.

By the time I reached the agency, even I knew that the fever and chills were getting the best of me and I must seek shelter and food. I was happy to discover that my money had arrived. A new credit card had been imprinted for me under one of my Paris aliases, Lionel Potter, and a wallet of traveler's checks had been prepared. I shoved all these in my pockets, and as the horrified clerk watched in silence, I shoved the thirty thousand dollars into my pockets as well.

"Somebody's going to rob you!" he whispered, leaning towards me across the counter. He said something I could scarce follow about getting to the bank with the money before it closed. And then I should go to the emergency room, immediately before the blizzard came in. Lots of people with the flu out there, practically an epidemic every winter it seemed.

For the sake of simplicity I agreed to everything, but I hadn't the slightest intention of spending my remaining mortal hours in the clutches of doctors. Besides, such a step wasn't required. All I needed was hot food, I thought, and some hot beverage, and the peace of a soft hotel bed. Then I could return this body to James in tolerable condition, and shoot cleanly back into my own.

But first I must have a change of clothes. It was only three-fifteen, and I had some twelve hours to go and could not bear for a moment longer these dirty and miserable rags!

I reached the great fancy Georgetown Mall just as it was closing so that people could flee the blizzard, but I managed to talk my way into a fancy clothier's, where I quickly made a pile for the impatient clerk of everything I thought I would need. A wave of dizziness caught me as I gave him the small plastic card. It amused me that he had now lost all impatience and was trying to sell me random scarves and ties. I could scarce understand what he was saying to me. Ah, yes, ring it up. We'll give all this to Mr. James at three a.m. Mr. James likes to get things for

nothing. Sure, the other sweater, and why not, the scarf too.

As I managed to escape with my heavy load of shiny boxes and sacks, another wave of dizziness hit me. Indeed a blackness was rising all around me; it would have been very easy to sink to my knees and pass out on the floor. A lovely young woman came to my rescue. “You look like you’re going to faint!” I was sweating profusely now, and even in the warmth of the mall I was cold.

What I needed was a taxi, I explained to her, but none was to be found. Indeed the crowds were very thin on M Street, and the snow had begun to fall once more.

I had spied a handsome brick hotel only a few blocks away, with the lovely romantic name The Four Seasons, and to that point I hurried, waving good-bye to the beautiful and kind young creature, and bowing my head as I burrowed into the fierce wind. I’d be warm and safe in The Four Seasons, I thought merrily, loving to speak the meaningful name aloud. I could dine there, and need not go back to the awful town house until the hour for the exchange drew near.

When I finally reached the lobby of the place, I found it more than satisfactory, and laid down a large deposit in guarantee that Mojo would be as clean and gentlemanly during our stay as I would be myself. The suite was sumptuous, with large windows over the Potomac, seemingly endless stretches of pale carpet, bathrooms fit for a Roman emperor, television sets and refrigerators concealed in handsome wood cabinets, and other little contraptions galore.

At once I ordered a feast for myself and Mojo, then I opened the small bar, which was stuffed with candies and other tasty tidbits as well as spirits, and helped myself to the best Scotch. Absolutely ghastly taste! How the hell could David drink this? The chocolate bar was better. Damned fantastic! I gobbled all of it, then called back the restaurant and added every chocolate dessert on the menu to my order of only moments ago.

David, I must call David, I thought. But it seemed an impossibility to climb out of the chair and move to the phone on the desk. And there was so much I wanted to consider, to fix in my mind. Discomforts be damned, this had been a hell of an experience! I was even getting used to these enormous hands hanging an inch below where they ought to be, and this porous dark skin. Mustn’t fall asleep. What a waste …

Then the bell startled me! I had been sleeping. A full half hour of mortal time had passed. I struggled to my feet, as if I were hefting bricks with every step, and managed somehow to open the door for the room service attendant, an attractive older female with light yellow hair, who wheeled a linen-draped table, laden with food, into the living room of the suite.

I gave the steak to Mojo, having already laid down a bath towel for a dog tablecloth, and he set about to chewing lustily, lying down as he did so, which only the very large dogs do, and which made him look all the more monstrous, like a lion lazily gnawing upon a Christian pinned helplessly between his huge paws.

I at once drank the hot soup, unable to taste anything much in it, but that was to be expected with such a miserable cold. The wine was marvelous, much better than the vin ordinaire of the last night, and though it still tasted very thin compared to blood, I downed two glasses of it, and was about to devour the pasta, as they called it here, when I looked up and realized that the fretful female attendant was still there.

"You're sick," she said, "you're very, very sick."

"Nonsense, ma chère," I said, "I have a cold, a mortal cold, no more and no less." I fished in my shirt pocket for my wad of bills, gave her several twenties, and told her to go. She was very reluctant.

"That's quite a cough," she said. "I think you're really sick. You've been outside a long time, haven't you?"

I stared at her, absolutely weakened by her concern, and realizing that I was in true danger of bursting stupidly into tears. I wanted to warn her that I was a monster, that this body was merely stolen. How tender she was, how obviously habitually kind.

"We're all connected," I said to her, "all humankind. We must care for each other, mustn't we?" I figured she would be horrified by these sloppy sentiments, issued with such thick drunken emotion, and that she would now take her leave. But she did not.

"Yes, we are," she said. "Let me call a doctor for you before the storm gets any worse."

"No, dearest, go now," I said.

And with one last worried look at me, she did at last go out.

After I'd consumed the plate of fancy cheese-sauced noodles, another bit of salt and tastelessness, I began to wonder if she wasn't right. I went

into the bathroom and switched on the lights. The man in the mirror did look dreadful, his eyes bloodshot, his entire body shivering, and his naturally dark skin rather yellowish if not downright pale.

I felt of my forehead, but what good did that do? Surely I can't die of this, I thought. But then I wasn't so sure. I remembered the expression on the face of the attendant, and the concern of the people who'd spoken to me in the street. Another fit of coughing overcame me.

I must take action, I thought. But what action? What if the doctors gave me some powerful sedative which so numbed me that I couldn't return to the town house? And what if their drugs affected my concentration so that the switch could not be made? Good Lord, I had not even tried to rise up out of this human body, a trick I knew so well in my other form.

I didn't want to try it either. What if I couldn't get back! No, wait for James for such experiments, and stay away from doctors with needles!

The bell sounded. It was the tenderhearted female attendant, and this time she had a sackful of medicines—bottles of bright red and green liquids, and plastic containers of pills. "You really ought to call a doctor," she said, as she placed all of these on the marble dresser in a row. "Do you want for us to call a doctor?"

"Absolutely not," I said, pushing more money at her, and guiding her out the door. But wait, she said. Would I let her take the dog out, please, as he had just eaten?

Ah, yes, that was a marvelous idea. I pushed more bank notes into her hand. I told Mojo to go with her, and do whatever she said. She seemed fascinated by Mojo. She murmured something to the effect that his head was larger than her own.

I returned to the bathroom and stared at the little bottles which she had brought. I was leery of these medicines! But then it wasn't very gentlemanly of me to return a sick body to James. Indeed, what if James didn't want it. No, not likely. He'd take the twenty million *and* the cough and the chills.

I drank a revolting gulp of the green medicine, fighting a convulsion of nausea, and then forced myself into the living room, where I collapsed at the desk.

There was hotel stationery there and a ballpoint pen which worked fairly well, in that slippery skittery fashion of ballpoint pens. I began to

write, discovering that it was very difficult for me with these big fingers, but persevering, describing in hurried detail all that I had felt and seen.

On and on I wrote, though I could scarce keep my head up, and scarce breathe for the thickening of the cold. Finally, when there was no more paper and I could not read my own scrawl any longer, I stuffed these pages into an envelope, licked it and sealed it, and addressed it to myself care of my apartment in New Orleans, and then stuffed it into my shirt pocket, secure beneath my sweater, where it would not be lost.

Finally I stretched out on the floor. Sleep must take me now. It must cover many of the mortal hours remaining to me, for I had no strength for anything more.

But I did not sleep very deeply. I was too feverish, and too full of fear. I remember the gentle female attendant coming with Mojo, and telling me again that I was ill.

I remember a night maid wandering in, who seemed to fuss about for hours. I remember Mojo lying down beside me, and how warm he felt, and how I snuggled against him, loving the smell of him, the good woolly wonderful smell of his coat, even if it was nothing as strong as it would have been to me in my old body, and I did for one moment think I was back in France, in those old days.

But the memory of those old days had been in some way obliterated by this experience. Now and then I opened my eyes, saw an aureole about the burning lamp, saw the black windows reflecting the furnishings, and fancied I could hear the snow outside.

At some point, I climbed to my feet, and made for the bathroom, striking my head hard upon the doorframe, and falling to my knees. Mon Dieu, these little torments! How do mortals endure it? How did I ever endure it? What a pain! Like liquid spreading under the skin.

But there were worse trials ahead. Sheer desperation forced me to use the toilet, as was required of me, to clean myself carefully afterwards, disgusting! And to wash my hands. Over and over, shivering with disgust, I washed my hands! When I discovered that the face of this body was now covered with a really thick shadow of rough beard, I laughed. What a crust it was over my upper lip and chin and even down into the collar of my shirt. What did I look like? A madman; a derelict. But I couldn't shave all this hair. I didn't have a razor and I'd surely cut my own throat if I did.

What a soiled shirt. I'd forgotten to put on any of the clothes I'd purchased, but wasn't it too late now for such a thing? With a dull woozy amazement, I saw by my watch that it was two o'clock. Good Lord, the hour of transformation was almost at hand.

"Come, Mojo," I said, and we sought the stairs rather than the elevator, which was no great feat as we were only one floor above the ground, and we slipped out through the quiet and near-deserted lobby and into the night.

Deep drifts of snow lay everywhere. The streets were clearly impassable to traffic, and there were times when I fell on my knees again, arms going deep into the snow, and Mojo licked my face as though he were trying to keep me warm. But I continued, struggling uphill, whatever my state of mind and body, until at last I turned the corner, and saw the lights of the familiar town house ahead.

The darkened kitchen was now quite filled with deep, soft snow. It seemed a simple matter to plow through it until I realized that a frozen layer—from the storm of the night before—lay beneath it, which was quite slick.

Nevertheless I managed to reach the living room safely, and lay down shivering on the floor. Only then did I realize I'd forgotten my overcoat, and all the money stuffed in its pockets. Only a few bills were left in my shirt. But no matter. The Body Thief would soon be here. I would have my own form back again, all my powers! And then how sweet it would be to reflect on everything, safe and sound in my digs in New Orleans, when illness and cold would mean nothing, when aches and pains would exist no more, when I was the Vampire Lestat again, soaring over the rooftops, reaching with outstretched hands for the distant stars.

The place seemed chilly compared to the hotel. I turned over once, peering at the little fireplace, and tried to light the logs with my mind. Then I laughed as I remembered I wasn't Lestat yet, but that James would soon arrive.

"Mojo, I can't endure this body a moment longer," I whispered. The dog sat before the front window, panting as he looked out into the night, his breath making steam on the dim glass.

I tried to stay awake, but I couldn't. The colder I became, the drowsier I became. And then a most frightening thought took hold of me. What if I couldn't rise out of this body at the appointed moment? If I couldn't

make fire, if I couldn't read minds, if I couldn't …

Half wrapped in dreams, I tried the little psychic trick. I let my mind sink almost to the edge of dreams. I felt the low delicious vibratory warning that often precedes the rise of the spirit body. But nothing of an unusual nature happened. Again, I tried. "Go up," I said. I tried to picture the ethereal shape of myself tearing loose and rising unfettered to the ceiling. No luck. Might as well try to sprout feathered wings. And I was so tired, so full of pain. Indeed, I lay anchored in these hopeless limbs, fastened to this aching chest, scarce able to take a breath without a struggle.

But James would soon be here. The sorcerer, the one who knew the trick. Yes, James, greedy for his twenty million, would surely guide the whole process.

When I opened my eyes again, it was to the light of day.

I sat bolt upright, staring before me. There could be no mistake. The sun was high in the heavens and spilling in a riot of light through the front windows and onto the lacquered floor. I could hear the sounds of traffic outside.

"My God," I whispered in English, for *Mon Dieu* simply doesn't mean the same thing. "My God, my God, my God."

I lay back down again, chest heaving, and too stunned for the moment to form a coherent thought or attitude, or to decide whether it was rage I felt or blind fear. Then slowly I lifted my wrist so that I might read the watch. Eleven forty-seven in the a.m.

Within less than fifteen minutes the fortune of twenty million dollars, held in trust at the downtown bank, would revert once more to Lestan Gregor, my pseudonymous self, who had been left here in this body by Raglan James, who had obviously not returned to this town house before morning to effect the switch which was part of our bargain and now, having forfeited that immense fortune, was very likely never to come back.

"Oh, God help me," I said aloud, the phlegm at once coming up in my throat, and the coughs sending deep stabs of pain into my chest. "I knew it," I whispered. "I knew it." What a fool I'd been, what an extraordinary fool.

You miserable wretch, I thought, you despicable Body Thief, you will not get away with it, damn you! How dare you do this to me, how dare you! And this body! This body in which you've left me, which is all I have with which to hunt you down, is truly truly sick.

By the time I staggered out into the street, it was twelve noon on the dot. But what did it matter? I couldn't remember the name or the location of the bank. I couldn't have given a good reason for going there anyway. Why should I claim the twenty million which in forty-five seconds would revert to me anyway? Indeed where was I to take this shivering mass of flesh?

To the hotel to reclaim my money and my clothing?

To the hospital for the medicine of which I was sorely in need?

Or to New Orleans to Louis, Louis who had to help me, Louis who was perhaps the only one who really could. And how was I to locate that miserable conniving self-destructive Body Thief if I did not have the help of Louis! Oh, but what would Louis do when I approached him? What would his judgment be when he realized what I'd done?

I was falling. I'd lost my balance. I reached for the iron railing too late. A man was rushing towards me. Pain exploded in the back of my head as it struck the step. I closed my eyes, clenching my teeth not to cry out. Then opened them again, and I saw above me the most serene blue sky.

"Call an ambulance," said the man to another beside him. Just dark featureless shapes against the glaring sky, the bright and wholesome sky.

"No!" I struggled to shout, but it came out a hoarse whisper. "I have to get to New Orleans!" In a rush of words I tried to explain about the hotel, the money, the clothing, would someone help me up, would someone call a taxi, I had to leave Georgetown for New Orleans at once.

Then I was lying very quietly in the snow. And I thought how lovely was the sky overhead, with the thin white clouds racing across it, and even these dim shadows that surrounded me, these people who whispered to one another so softly and furtively that I couldn't hear. And Mojo barking, Mojo barking and barking. I tried, but I couldn't speak, not even to tell him that everything would be fine, just perfectly fine.

A little girl came up. I could make out her long hair, and her little puff sleeves and a bit of ribbon blowing in the wind. She was looking down at me like the others, her face all shadows and the sky behind her gleaming frightfully, dangerously.

“Good Lord, Claudia, the sunlight, get out of it!” I cried.

“Lie still, mister, they’re coming for you.”

“Just lie quiet, buddy.”

Where was she? Where had she gone? I shut my eyes, listening for the click of her heels on the pavement. Was that laughter I heard?

The ambulance. Oxygen mask. Needle. And I *understood*.

I was going to die in this body, and it would be so simple! Like a billion other mortals, I was going to die. Ah, this was the reason for all of it, the reason the Body Thief had come to me, the Angel of Death to give me the means which I had sought with lies and pride and self-deception. I was going to die.

And I didn’t want to die!

“God, please, not like this, not in this body.” I closed my eyes as I whispered. “Not yet, not now. Oh, please, I don’t want to! I don’t want to die. Don’t let me die.” I was crying, I was broken and terrified and crying. Oh, but it was perfect, wasn’t it? Lord God, had a more perfect pattern ever revealed itself to me—the craven monster who had gone into the Gobi not to seek the fire from heaven but for pride, for pride, for pride.

My eyes were squeezed shut. I could feel the tears running down my face. “Don’t let me die, please, please, don’t let me die. Not now, not like this, not in this body! Help me!”

A small hand touched me, struggling to slip into mine, and then it was done, holding tight to me, tender and warm. Ah, so soft. So very little. And you know whose hand it is, you know, but you’re too scared to open your eyes.

If she’s there, then you are really dying. I can’t open my eyes. I’m afraid, oh, so afraid. Shivering and sobbing, I held her little hand so tight that surely I was crushing it, but I wouldn’t open my eyes.

Louis, she’s here. She’s come for me. Help me, Louis, please. I can’t look at her. I won’t. I can’t get my hand loose from her! And where are you? Asleep in the earth, deep beneath your wild and neglected garden, with the winter sun pouring down on the flowers, asleep until the night comes again.

“Marius, help me. Pandora, wherever you are, help me. Khayman, come and help me. Armand, no hatred between us now. I need you! Jesse, don’t let this happen to me.”

Oh, the low and sorry murmur of a demon's prayer beneath the wailing of the siren. Don't open your eyes. Don't look at her. If you do, it's finished.

Did you call out for help in the last moments, Claudia? Were you afraid? Did you see the light like the fire of hell filling the air well, or was it the great and beautiful light filling the entire world with love?

We stood in the graveyard together, in the warm fragrant evening, full of distant stars and soft purple light. Yes, all the many colors of darkness. Look at her shining skin, the dark blood bruise of her lips, and deep color of her eyes. She was holding her bouquet of yellow and white chrysanthemums. I shall never forget that fragrance.

"Is my mother buried here?"

"I don't know, petite chérie. I never even knew her name." She was all rotted and stinking when I came upon her, the ants were crawling all over her eyes and into her open mouth.

"You should have found out her name. You should have done that for me. I would like to know where she is buried."

"That was half a century ago, chérie. Hate me for the larger things. Hate me, if you will, because you don't lie now at her side. Would she keep you warm if you did? Blood is warm, chérie. Come with me, and drink blood, as you and I know how to do. We can drink blood together unto the end of the world."

"Ah, you have an answer for everything." How cold her smile. In these shadows one can almost see the woman in her, defying the permanent stamp of child sweetness, with the inevitable enticement to kiss, to hold, to love.

"We are death, ma chérie, death is the final answer." I gathered her up in my arms, felt her tucked against me, kissed her, kissed her, and kissed her vampire skin. "There are no questions after that."

Her hand touched my forehead.

The ambulance was speeding, as if the siren were chasing it, as if the siren were the force driving it on. Her hand touched my eyelids. *I won't look at you!*

Oh, please, help me … the dreary prayer of the devil to his cohorts, as he tumbles deeper and deeper towards hell.

THIRTEEN

"Yes, I know where we are. You've been trying to bring me back here from the beginning, to the little hospital." How forlorn it looked now, so crude with its clay walls, and wooden shuttered windows, and the little beds lashed together out of barely finished wood. Yet she was there in the bed, wasn't she? I know the nurse, yes, and the old round-shouldered doctor, and I see you there in the bed—that's you, the little one with the curls on the top of the blanket, and Louis there …

All right, why am I here? I know this is a dream. It's not death. Death has no particular regard for people.

"Are you sure?" she said. She sat on the straight-back chair, golden hair done up in a blue ribbon, and there were blue satin slippers on her small feet. So that meant she was there in the bed, and there on the chair, my little French doll, my beauty, with the high rounded insteps, and the perfectly shaped little hands.

"And you, you're here with us and you're in a bed in the Washington, D.C., emergency room. You know you're dying down there, don't you?"

"*Severe hypothermia, very possibly pneumonia. But how do we know what infections we he got? Hit him with antibiotics. There's no way we can get this man on oxygen now. If we send him to University, he'd end up in the hall there too.*"

"*Don't let me die. Please … I'm so afraid.*"

"*We're here with you, we're taking care of you. Can you tell me your name? Is there some family whom we can notify?*"

"Go ahead, tell them who you really are," she said with a little silvery laugh, her voice always so delicate, so very pretty. I can feel her tender little lips, just to look at them. I used to like to press my finger against her lower lip, playfully, when I kissed her eyelids, and her smooth forehead.

"Don't be such a little smarty!" I said between my teeth. "Besides, who am I down there?"

"Not a human being, if that's what you mean. Nothing could make you human."

“All right, I’ll give you five minutes. Why did you bring me here? What do you want me to say—that I’m sorry about what I did, taking you out of that bed and making you a vampire? Well, do you want the truth, the rock-bottom deathbed truth? I don’t know if I am. I’m sorry you suffered. I’m sorry anybody has to suffer. But I can’t say for certain that I’m sorry for that little trick.”

“Aren’t you the least little bit afraid of standing by yourself like this?”

“If the truth can’t save me, nothing can.” How I hated the smell of sickness around me, of all those little bodies, feverish and wet beneath their drab coverings, the entire dingy and hopeless little hospital of so many decades ago.

“My father who art in hell, Lestat be your name.”

“And you? After the sun burnt you up in the air well in the Theatre of the Vampires, did you go to hell?”

Laughter, such high pure laughter, like glittering coins shaken loose from a purse.

“I'll never tell!”

“Now, I know this is a dream. That’s all it’s been from the beginning. Why would someone come back from the dead to say such trivial and inane things.”

“Happens all the time, Lestat. Don’t get so worked up. I want you to pay attention now. Look at these little beds, look at these children suffering.”

“I took you away from it,” I said.

“Aye, the way that Magnus took you away from your life, and gave you something monstrous and evil in return. You made me a slayer of my brothers and my sisters. All my sins have their origin in that moment, when you reached for me and lifted me from that bed."

“No, you can’t blame it all on me. I won’t accept it. Is the father parent to the crimes of his child? All right, so what if it is true. Who is there to keep count? That’s the problem, don’t you see? There is no one.”

“So is it right, therefore, that we kill?”

“I gave you *life*, Claudia. It wasn’t for all time, no, but it was life, and even our life is better than death."

“How you lie, Lestat. ‘Even our life,’ you say. The truth is, you think our accursed life is *better* than life itself. Admit it. Look at you down there in your human body. How you’ve hated it."

"It's true. I do admit it. But now, let's hear you speak from your heart, my little beauty, my little enchantress. Would you really have chosen death in that tiny bed rather than the life I gave you? Come now, tell me. Or is this like a mortal courtroom, where the judge can lie and the lawyers can lie, and only those on the stand must tell the truth?"

So thoughtfully she looked at me, one chubby hand playing with the embroidered hem of her gown. When she lowered her gaze the light shone exquisitely on her cheeks, on her small dark mouth. Ah, such a creation. The vampire doll.

"What did I know of choices?" she said, staring forward, eyes big and glassy and full of light. "I hadn't reached the age of reason when you did your filthy work, and by the way, Father, I've always wanted to know: Did you enjoy letting me suck the blood from your wrist?"

"That doesn't matter," I whispered. I looked away from her to the dying waif beneath the blanket. I saw the nurse in a ragged dress, hair pinned to the back of her neck, moving listlessly from bed to bed. "Mortal children are conceived in pleasure," I said, but I didn't know anymore if she was listening. I didn't want to look at her. "I can't lie. It doesn't matter if there is a judge or jury. I …"

"*Don't try to talk. I've given you a combination of drugs that will help you. Your fever's going down already. We're drying up the congestion in your lungs.*"

"*Don't let me die, please don't. It's all unfinished and it's monstrous. I'll go to hell if there is one, but I don't think there is. If there is, it's a hospital like this one, only it's filled with sick children, dying children. But I think there's just death.*"

"*A hospital full, of children?*"

"Ah, look at the way she's smiling at you, the way she puts her hand on your forehead. Women love you, Lestat. She loves you, even in that body, look at her. Such love."

"Why shouldn't she care about me? She's a nurse, isn't she? And I'm a dying man."

"And such a beautiful dying man. I should have known you wouldn't do this switch unless someone offered you a beautiful body. What a vain, superficial being you are! Look at that face. Better looking than your own face."

"I wouldn't go that far!"

She gave me the most sly smile, her face glowing in the dim, dreary room.

"*Don't worry, I'm with you. I'll sit right here with you until you're better.*"

"*I've seen so many humans die. I've caused their deaths. It's so simple and treacherous, the moment when life goes out of the body. They simply slip away.*"

"*You're saying crazy things.*"

"*No, I'm telling you the truth, and you know it. I can't say I'll make amends if I live. I don't think it's possible. Yet I'm scared to death of dying. Don't let go my hand.*"

"Lestat, why are we here?"

Louis?

I looked up. He was standing in the door of the crude little hospital, confused, faintly disheveled, the way he'd looked from the night I'd made him, not the wrathful blinded young mortal anymore, but the dark gentleman with the quiet in his eyes, with the infinite patience of a saint in his soul.

"Help me up," I said, "I have to get her from the little bed."

He put out his hand, but he was so confused. Didn't he share in that sin? No, of course not, because he was forever blundering and suffering, atoning for it all even as he did it. I was the devil. I was the only one who could gather her from the little bed.

Time now to lie to the doctor. "The child there, that is my child."

And he'd be oh, so glad to have one less burden.

"Take her, monsieur, and thank you." He looked gratefully at the gold coins as I tossed them on the bed. Surely I did that. Surely I didn't fail to help them. "Yes, thank you. God bless you."

I'm sure he will. He always has. I bless him too.

"*Sleep now. As soon as there's a room available, we'll move you into it, you'll be more comfortable.*"

"*Why are there so many here? Please don't leave me.*"

"*No, I'll stay with you. I'll sit right here.*"

Eight o'clock. I was lying on the gurney, with the needle in my arm, and the plastic sack of fluid catching the light so beautifully, and I could see the clock perfectly. Slowly I turned my head.

A woman was there. She wore her coat now, very black against her white stockings and her thick soft white shoes. Her hair was in a thick

coil on the back of her head, and she was reading. She had a broad face, of very strong bones and clear skin, and large hazel eyes. Her eyebrows were dark and perfectly drawn, and when she looked up at me, I loved her expression. She closed the book soundlessly and smiled.

"You're better," she said. A rich, soft voice. A bit of bluish shadow beneath her eyes.

"Am I?" The noise hurt my ears. So many people. Doors swooshing open and shut.

She stood up and came across the corridor, and took my hand in hers.

"Oh, yes, much better."

"Then I'll live?"

"Yes," she said. But she wasn't sure. Did she mean for me to see that she wasn't sure?

"Don't let me die in this body," I said, moistening my lips with my tongue. They felt so dry! Lord God, how I hated this body, hated the heave of the chest, hated even the voice coming from my lips, and the pain behind my eyes was unbearable.

"There you go again," she said, her smile brightening.

"Sit with me."

"I am. I told you I wouldn't leave. I'll stay here with you."

"Help me and you help the devil," I whispered.

"So you told me," she said.

"Want to hear the whole tale?"

"Only if you stay calm as you tell me, if you take your time."

"What a lovely face you have. What is your name?"

"Gretchen."

"You're a nun, aren't you, Gretchen?"

"How did you know that?"

"I could tell. Your hands, for one thing, the little silver wedding band, and something about your face, a radiance—the radiance of those who believe. And the fact that you stayed with me, Gretchen, when the others told you to go on. I know nuns when I see them. I'm the devil and when I behold goodness I know it."

Were those tears hovering in her eyes?

"You're teasing me," she said kindly. "There's a little tag here on my pocket. It says I'm a nun, doesn't it? Sister Marguerite."

"I didn't see it, Gretchen. I didn't mean to make you cry."

"You're better. Much better. I think you're going to be all right."

"I'm the devil, Gretchen. Oh, not Satan himself, Son of Morning, ben Sharar. But bad, very bad. Demon of the first rank, certainly."

"You're dreaming. It's the fever."

"Wouldn't that be splendid? Yesterday I stood in the snow and tried to imagine just such a thing—that all my life of evil was but the dream of a mortal man. No such luck, Gretchen. The devil needs you. The devil's crying. He wants you to hold his hand. You're not afraid of the devil, are you?"

"Not if he requires an act of mercy. Sleep now. They're coming to give you another shot. I'm not leaving. Here, I'll bring the chair to the side of the bed so you can hold my hand."

"*What are you doing, Lestat?*"

We were in our hotel suite now, much better place than that stinking hospital—I'll take a good hotel suite over a stinking hospital anytime—and Louis had drunk her blood, poor helpless Louis.

"*Claudia, Claudia, listen to me. Come round, Claudia … You're ill, do you hear me? You must do as I tell you to get well.*" *I bit through the flesh of my own wrist, and when the blood began to spill, I put it to her lips.* "*That's it, dear, more …*"

"Try to drink a little of this." She slipped her hand behind my neck. Ah, the pain when I lifted my head.

"It tastes so thin. It's not like blood at all."

Her lids were heavy and smooth over her downcast eyes. Like a Grecian woman painted by Picasso, so simple she seemed, large-boned and fine and strong. Had anybody ever kissed her nun's mouth?

"People are dying here, aren't they? That's why the corridors are crowded. I hear people crying. It's an epidemic, isn't it?"

"It's a bad time," she said, her virginal lips barely moving. "But you'll be all right. I'm here."

Louis was so angry.

"*But why, Lestat?*"

Because she was beautiful, because she was dying, because I wanted to see if it would work. Because nobody wanted her and she was there, and I picked her up and held her in my arms. Because it was something I could accomplish, like the little candle flame in the church making another flame and still retaining its own light—my way of creating, my only way, don't you

see? One moment there were two of us, and then we were three.

He was so heartbroken, standing there in his long black cloak, yet he could not stop looking at her, at her polished ivory cheeks, her tiny wrists. Imagine it, a child vampire! One of us.

"*I understand.*"

Who spoke? I was startled, but it wasn't Louis, it was David, David standing near with his copy of the Bible. Louis looked up slowly. He didn't know who David was.

"*Are we close to God when we create something out of nothing? When we pretend we are the tiny flame and we make other flames?*"

David shook his bead. "*A bad mistake.*"

"*And so is the whole world, then. She's our daughter—*"

"*I'm not your daughter. I'm my mama's daughter.*"

"*No, dear, not anymore.*" *I looked up at David.* "*Well, answer me.*"

"*Why do you claim such high aims for what you did?*" *he asked, but he was so compassionate, so gentle. Louis was still horrified, staring at her, at her small white feet. Such seductive little feet.*

"And then I decided to do it, I didn't care what he did with my body if he could put me into this human form for twenty-four hours so that I could see the sunlight, feel what mortals feel, know their weakness and their pain." I pressed her hand as I spoke.

She nodded, wiping my forehead again, feeling my pulse with her firm warm fingers.

"… and I decided to do it, simply do it. Oh, I know it was wrong, wrong to let him go with all the power, but can you imagine, and now you see, I can't die in this body. The others won't even know what's happened to me. If they knew, they'd come …"

"The other vampires," she whispered.

"Yes." And then I was telling her all about them, about my search so long ago to find the others, thinking that if I only knew the history of things, it would explain the mystery … On and on I talked to her, explaining us, what we were, all about my trek through the centuries, and then the lure of the rock music, the perfect theatre for me, and what I'd wanted to do, about David and God and the Devil in the Paris café, and David by the fire with the Bible in his hand, saying God is not perfect. Sometimes my eyes were closed; sometimes they were open. She was holding my hand all the while.

People came and went. Doctors argued. A woman was crying. Outside it was light again. I saw it when the door opened, and that cruel blast of cold air swept through the corridor. “How are we going to bathe all these patients?” a nurse asked. “That woman should be in isolation. Call the doctor. Tell him we have a case of meningitis on the floor.”

“It’s morning again, isn’t it? You must be so tired, you’ve been with me all through the afternoon and the night. I’m so scared, but I know you have to go.”

They were bringing in more sick people. The doctor came to her and told her they would have to turn all these gurneys so that their heads were against the wall.

The doctor told her she ought to go home. Several new nurses had just come on duty. She ought to rest.

Was I crying? The little needle hurt my arm, and how dry my throat was, how dry my lips.

“We can’t even officially admit all these patients.”

“Can you hear me, Gretchen?” I asked. “Can you follow what I’m saying?”

“You’ve asked me that over and over again,” she said, “and each time I’ve told you that I can hear, that I can understand. I’m listening to you. I won’t leave you.”

“Sweet Gretchen. Sister Gretchen.”

“I want to take you out of here with me.”

“What did you say?”

“To my house, with me. You’re much better now, your fever’s way down. But if you stay here …” Confusion in her face. She put the cup to my lips again and I drank several gulps.

“I understand. Yes, please take me, please.” I tried to sit up. “I’m afraid to stay.”

“Not just yet,” she said, coaxing me back down on the gurney. Then she pulled the tape off my arm and extracted that vicious little needle. Lord God, I had to piss! Was there no end to these revolting physical necessities? What in the hell was mortality? Shitting, pissing, eating, and then the same cycle all over again! Is this worth the vision of the sunshine? It wasn’t enough to be dying. I had to piss. But I couldn’t bear using that bottle again, even though I could scarce remember it.

“Why aren’t you afraid of me?” I asked. “Don’t you think I’m insane?”

"You only hurt people when you're a vampire," she said simply, "when you're in your rightful body. Isn't that true?"

"Yes," I said. "That's true. But you're like Claudia. You're not afraid of anything."

"*You are playing her for a fool,*" *said Claudia.* "*You're going to hurt her too.*"

"*Nonsense, she doesn't believe it,*" *I said. I sat down on the couch in the parlour of the little hotel, surveying the small fancy room, feeling very at home with these delicate old gilded furnishings. The eighteenth century, my century. Century of the rogue and the rational man. My most perfect time.*

Petit-point flowers. Brocade. Gilded swords and the laughter of drunken men in the street below.

David was standing at the window, looking out over the low roofs of the colonial city. Had be ever been in this century before?

"*No, never!*" *be said in awe.* "*Every surface is worked by hand, every measurement is irregular. How tenuous the hold of created things upon nature, as if it could slide back to the earth so easily.*"

"*Leave, David,*" *said Louis,* "*you don't belong here. We have to remain. There's nothing we can do.*"

"*Now, that's a bit melodramatic,*" *said Claudia.* "*Really.*" *She wore that soiled little gown from the hospital. Well, I would soon fix that. I would sack the shops of laces and ribbons for her. I would buy silks for her, and tiny bracelets of silver, and rings set with pearls.*

I put my arm around her. "*Ah, how nice to hear someone speak the truth,*" *I said.* "*Such fine hair, and now it will be fine forever.*"

I tried to sit up again, but it seemed impossible. They were rushing an emergency case through the corridor, two nurses on either side, and someone struck the gurney and the vibration moved through me. Then it was quiet, and the hands on the big clock moved with a little jerk. The man next to me moaned, and turned his head. There was a huge white bandage over his eyes. How naked his mouth looked.

"We have to get these people into isolation," said a voice.

"Come on, now, I'm taking you home."

And Mojo, what had become of Mojo? Suppose they'd come to take him away? This was a century in which they incarcerated dogs, simply for being dogs. I had to explain this to her. She was lifting me, or trying to do it, slipping her arm around my shoulders. Mojo barking in the

town house. Was he trapped?

Louis was sad. "There's plague out there in the city."

"But that can't hurt you, David," I said.

"You're right," he said. "But there are other things …"

Claudia laughed. "She's in love with you, you know."

"You would have died of the plague," I said.

"Maybe it was not my time."

"Do you believe that, that we have our time?"

"No, actually I don't," she said. "Maybe it was just easier to blame you for everything. I never really knew right from wrong, you see."

"You had time to learn," I said.

"So have you, much more time than I ever had."

"Thank God you're taking me," I whispered. I was standing on my feet. "I'm so afraid," I said. "Just plain ordinary afraid."

"One less burden to the hospital," Claudia said with a ringing laugh, her little feet bobbing over the edge of the chair. She had on the fancy dress again, with the embroidery. Now that was an improvement.

"Gretchen the beautiful," I said. "It makes a flame in your cheeks when I say that."

She smiled as she brought my left arm over her shoulder now, and kept her right arm locked around my waist. "I'll take care of you," she whispered in my ear. "It isn't very far."

Beside her little car, in the bitter wind, I stood holding that stinking organ, and watching the yellow arc of piss, steam rising from it as it struck the melting snow. "Lord God," I said. "That feels almost good! What are human beings that they can take pleasure in such dreadful things!"

FOURTEEN

At some point I began drifting in and out of sleep, aware that we were in a little car, and that Mojo was with us, panting heavily by my ear, and that we were driving through wooded snow-covered hills. I was wrapped in a blanket, and feeling miserably sick from the motion of the car. I was also shivering. I scarcely remembered our return to the town house, and the finding of Mojo, waiting there so patiently. I was vaguely sensible that I could die in this gasoline-driven vehicle if another vehicle collided with it. It seemed painfully real, real as the pain in my chest. And the Body Thief had tricked me.

Gretchen's eyes were set calmly on the winding road ahead, the dappled sunlight making a soft lovely aureole about her head of all the fine little hairs which had come loose from her thick coiled braid of hair, and the smooth pretty waves of hair growing back from her temples. A nun, a beautiful nun, I thought, my eyes closing and opening as if of their own volition.

But why is this nun being so good to me? Because she is a nun?

It was quiet all around us. There were houses in the trees, set upon knolls, and in little valleys, and very close to one another. A rich suburb, perhaps, with those small-scale wooden mansions rich mortals sometimes prefer to the truly palatial homes of the last century.

At last we entered a drive beside one of these dwellings, passing through a copse of bare-limbed trees, and came to a gentle halt beside a small gray-shingled cottage, obviously a servants' quarters or guesthouse of sorts, at some remove from the main residence.

The rooms were cozy and warm. I wanted to sink down into the clean bed, but I was too soiled for that, and insisted that I be allowed to bathe this distasteful body. Gretchen strongly protested. I was sick, she said. I couldn't be bathed now. But I refused to listen. I found the bathroom and wouldn't leave it.

Then I fell asleep again, leaning against the tile as Gretchen filled the tub. The steam felt sweet to me. I could see Mojo lying by the bed, the wolflike sphinx, watching me through the open door. Did she think he

looked like the devil?

I felt groggy and impossibly weak and yet I was talking to Gretchen, trying to explain to her how I had come to be in this predicament, and how I had to reach Louis in New Orleans so that he could give me the powerful blood.

In a low voice, I told her many things in English, only using French when for some reason I couldn't find the word I wanted, rambling on about the France of my time, and the crude little colony of New Orleans where I had existed after, and how wondrous this age was, and how I'd become a rock star for a brief time, because I thought that as a symbol of evil I'd do some good.

Was this human to want her understanding, this desperate fear that I would die in her arms, and no one would ever know who I'd been or what had taken place?

Ah, but the others, they knew, and they had not come to help me.

I told her all about this too. I described the ancients, and their disapproval. What was there that I did not tell her? But she must understand, exquisite nun that she was, how much I'd wanted as the rock singer to do good.

"That's the only way the literal Devil can do good," I said. "To play himself in a tableau to expose evil. Unless one believes that he is doing good when he is doing evil, but that would make a monster out of God, wouldn't it?—the Devil is simply part of the divine plan."

She seemed to hear these words with critical attention. But it didn't surprise me when she answered that the Devil had not been part of God's plan. Her voice was low and full of humility. She was taking my soiled clothes off me as she spoke, and I don't think she wanted to speak at all, but she was trying to calm me. The Devil had been the most powerful of the angels, she said, and he had rejected God out of pride. Evil could not be part of God's plan.

When I asked her if she knew all the arguments against this, and how illogical it was, how illogical all of Christianity was, she said calmly that it didn't matter. What mattered was doing good. That was all. It was simple.

"Ah, yes, then you understand."

"Perfectly," she said to me.

But I knew that she did not.

“You are good to me,” I said. I kissed her gently on the cheek, as she helped me into the warm water.

I lay back in the tub, watching her bathe me and noting that it felt good to me, the warm water against my chest, the soft strokes of the sponge on my skin, perhaps better than anything I had endured so far. But how long the human body felt! How strangely long my arms. An image came back to me from an old film—of Frankenstein’s monster lumbering about, swinging his hands as if they didn’t belong at the ends of his arms. I felt as if I were that monster. In fact, to say that I felt entirely monstrous as a human is to hit the perfect truth.

Seems I said something about it. She cautioned me to be quiet. She said that my body was strong and fine, and not unnatural. She looked deeply worried. I felt a little ashamed, letting her wash my hair, and my face. She explained it was the sort of thing which a nurse did all the time.

She said she had spent her life in the foreign missions, nursing the sick, in places so soiled and ill equipped that even the overcrowded Washington hospital seemed like a dream compared to them.

I watched her eyes move over my body, and then I saw the flush in her cheeks, and the way that she looked at me, overcome with shame, and confusion. How curiously innocent she was.

I smiled to myself, but I feared she would be hurt by her own carnal feelings. What a cruel joke on us both that she found this body enticing. But there was no doubt that she did, and it stirred my blood, my human blood, even in my fever and exhaustion. Ah, this body was always struggling for something.

I could barely stand as she dried me all over with the towel, but I was determined to do it. I kissed the top of her head, and she looked up at me, in a slow vague way, intrigued and mystified. I wanted to kiss her again, but I hadn’t the strength. She was very careful in drying my hair, and gentle as she dried my face. No one had touched me in this manner in a very long time. I told her I loved her for the sheer kindness of it.

“I hate this body so much; it’s hell to be in it.”

“It’s that bad?” she asked. “To be human?”

“You don’t have to humor me,” I said. “I know you don’t believe the things I’ve told you.”

“Ah, but our fantasies are like our dreams,” she said with a serious

little frown. “They have meaning.”

Suddenly, I saw my reflection in the mirror of the medicine cabinet—this tall caramel-skinned man with thick brown hair, and the large-boned soft-skinned woman beside him. The shock was so great, my heart stopped.

“Dear God, help me,” I whispered. “I want my body back.” I felt like weeping.

She urged me to lie down against the pillows of the bed. The warmth of the room felt good. She began to shave my face, thank God! I hated the feeling of the hair on it. I told her I'd been clean-shaven, as all men of fashion were, when I died, and once we were made vampires we remained the same forever. We grew whiter and whiter, that was true, and stronger and stronger; and our faces became smoother. But our hair was forever the same length, and so were our fingernails and whatever beard we had; and I had not had that much to begin with.

“Was this transformation a painful thing?" she asked.

“It was painful because I fought. I didn't want it to happen. I didn't really know what was being done to me. It seemed some monster out of the medieval past had captured me, and dragged me out of the civilized city. You must remember in those years that Paris was a wonderfully civilized place. Oh, you would think it barbaric beyond description if you were spirited there now, but to a country lord from a filthy castle, it was so exciting, what with the theatres, and the opera, and the balls at court. You can’t imagine. And then this tragedy, this demon coming out of the dark and taking me to his tower. But the act itself, the Dark Trick? It isn’t painful, it’s ecstasy. And then your eyes are opened, and all humanity is beautiful to you in a way that you never realized before."

I put on the clean skivvy shirt which she gave to me, and climbed under the covers, and let her bring the covers up to my chin. I felt as if I were floating. Indeed, this was one of the most pleasant feelings I'd experienced since I'd become mortal—this feeling like drunkenness. She felt my pulse and my forehead. I could see the fear in her, but I didn't want to believe it.

I told her that the real pain for me as an evil being was that I understood goodness, and I respected it. I had never been without a conscience. But all my life—even as a mortal boy—I had always been required to go against my conscience to obtain anything of intensity or

value.

"But how? What do you mean?" she asked.

I told her that I had run off with a band of actors when I was a boy, committing an obvious sin of disobedience. I had committed the sin of fornication with one of the young women of the troupe. Yet those days, acting on the village stage and making love, had seemed of inestimable value! "You see, that's when I was alive, merely alive. The trivial sins of a boy! After I was dead, every step I took in the world was a commitment to sin, and yet at every turn I saw the sensual and the beautiful."

How could this be, I asked her. When I'd made Claudia a child vampire, and Gabrielle, my mother, into a vampire beauty, I'd been reaching again for an intensity! I'd found it irresistible. And in those moments no concept of sin made sense.

I said more, speaking again of David and his vision of God and the Devil in the café, and of how David thought that God was not perfect, that God was learning all the time, and that, indeed, the Devil learned so much that he came to despise his job and beg to be let out of it. But I knew I had told her all these things before in the hospital when she'd been holding my hand.

There were moments when she stopped her fussing with the pillows, and with pills and glasses of water, and merely looked at me. How still her face was, how emphatic her expression, the dark thick lashes surrounding her paler eyes, her large soft mouth so eloquent of kindness.

"I know you are good," I said. "I love you for it. Yet I would give it to you, the Dark Blood, to make you immortal—to have you with me in eternity because you are so mysterious to me and so strong."

There was a layer of silence around me, a dull roaring in my ears, and a veil over my eyes. I watched motionless as she lifted a syringe, tested it apparently by squirting a tiny bit of silver liquid into the air, and then put the needle into my flesh. The faint burning sensation was very far away, very unimportant.

When she gave me a large glass of orange juice I drank this greedily. Hmmm. Now this was something to taste, thick like blood, but full of sweetness and strangely like devouring light itself.

"I'd forgotten all about such things," I said. "How good it tastes, better than wine, really. I should have drunk it before. And to think I would

have gone back without knowing it." I sank down into the pillow and looked up at the bare rafters of the low sloping ceiling. Nice clean little room, very white. Very simple. Her nun's cell. Snow was falling gently outside the little window. I counted twelve little panes of glass.

I was slipping in and out of sleep. I vaguely recall her trying to make me drink soup and that I couldn't do it. I was shaking, and terrified that those dreams would come again. I didn't want Claudia to come. The light of the little room burnt my eyes. I told her about Claudia haunting me, and the little hospital.

"Full of children," she said. Hadn't she remarked on this before. How puzzled she looked. She spoke softly of her work in the missions … with children. In the jungles of Venezuela and in Peru.

"Don't speak anymore," she said.

I knew I was frightening her. I was floating again, in and out of darkness, aware of a cool cloth on my forehead, and laughing again at this weightless feeling. I told her that in my regular body I could fly through the air. I told her how I had gone into the light of the sun above the Gobi Desert.

Now and then, I opened my eyes with a start, shaken to discover myself here. Her small white room.

In the burnished light, I saw a crucifix on the wall, with a bleeding Christ; and a statue of the Virgin Mary atop a small bookcase—the old familiar image of the Mediatrix of All Graces, with her bowed head and outstretched hands. Was that Saint Rita there with the red wound in her forehead? Ah, all the old beliefs, and to think they were alive in this woman's heart.

I squinted, trying to read the larger titles on the books on her shelves: Aquinas, Maritain, Teilhard de Chardin. The sheer effort of interpreting these various names to mean Catholic philosophers exhausted me. Yet I read other titles, my mind feverish and unable to rest. There were books on tropical diseases, childhood diseases, on child psychology. I could make out a framed picture on the wall near the crucifix, of veiled and uniformed nuns together, perhaps at a ceremony. If she was one of them, I couldn't tell, not with these mortal eyes, and hurting the way they were. The nuns wore short blue robes, and blue and white veils.

She held my hand. I told her again I had to go to New Orleans. I had to live to reach my friend Louis, who would help me recover my body. I

described Louis to her—how he existed beyond the reach of the modern world in a tiny unlighted house behind his ramshackle garden. I explained that he was weak, but he could give me the vampiric blood, and then I'd be a vampire again, and I'd hunt the Body Thief and have my old form restored to me. I told her how very human Louis was, that he would not give me much vampiric strength, but I could not find the Body Thief unless I had a preternatural body.

"So this body will die," I said, "when he gives the blood to me. You are saving it for death." I was weeping. I realized I was speaking French, but it seemed that she understood, because she told me in French that I must rest, that I was delirious.

"I am with you," she said in French, very slowly and carefully. "I will protect you." Her warm gentle hand was over mine. With such care, she brushed the hair back from my forehead.

Darkness fell around the little house.

There was a fire burning in the little hearth, and Gretchen was lying beside me. She had put on a long flannel gown, very thick and white; and her hair was loose, and she was holding me as I shivered. I liked the feel of her hair against my arm. I held on to her, frightened I'd hurt her. Over and over again, she wiped my face with a cool cloth. She forced me to drink the orange juice or cold water. The hours of the night were deepening and so was my panic.

"I won't let you die," she whispered in my ear. But I heard the fear which she couldn't disguise. Sleep rolled over me, thinly, so that the room retained its shape, its color, its light. I called upon the others again, begging Marius to help me. I began to think of terrible things—that they were all there as so many small white statues with the Virgin and with Saint Rita, watching me, and refusing to help.

Sometime before dawn, I heard voices. A doctor had come—a tired young man with sallow skin and red-rimmed eyes. Once again, a needle was put into my arm. I drank greedily when the ice water was given me. I could not follow the doctor's low murmuring, nor was I meant to understand it. But the cadences of the voice were calm and obviously reassuring. I caught the words "epidemic" and "blizzard" and "impossible conditions."

When the door shut, I begged her to come back. "Next to your beating heart," I whispered in her ear as she lay down at my side. How sweet

this was, her tender heavy limbs, her large shapeless breasts against my chest, her smooth leg against mine. Was I too sick to be afraid?

"Sleep now," she said. "Try not to worry." At last a deep sleep was coming to me, deep as the snow outside, as the darkness.

"Don't you think it's time you made your confession?" asked Claudia. "You know you really are hanging by the proverbial thread." She was sitting in my lap, staring up at me, hands on my shoulders, her little upturned face not an inch from mine.

My heart shrank, exploding in pain, but there was no knife, only these little hands clutching me, and the perfume of crushed roses rising from her shimmering hair.

"No. I can't make my confession," I said to her. How my voice trembled. "Oh, Lord God, what do you want of me!"

"You're not sorry! You've never been sorry! Say it. Say the truth! You deserved the knife when I put it through your heart, and you know it, you've always known it!"

"No!"

Something in me broke as I stared down at her, at the exquisite face in its frame of fine-spun hair. I lifted her, and rose, placing her in the chair before me and I dropped to my knees at her feet.

"Claudia, listen to me. I didn't begin it. I didn't make the world! It was always there, this evil. It was in the shadows, and it caught me, and made me part of it, and I did what I felt I must. Don't laugh at me, please, don't turn your head away. I didn't make evil! I didn't make myself!"

How perplexed she was, staring at me, watching me, and then her small full mouth spread beautifully in a smile.

"It wasn't all anguish," I said, my fingers digging into her little shoulders. "It wasn't hell. Tell me it wasn't. Tell me there was happiness. Can devils be happy? Dear God, I don't understand."

"You don't understand, but you always *do* something, don't you?"

"Yes, and I'm not sorry. I'm not. I would roar it from the rooftops right up into the dome of heaven. Claudia, I would do it again!" A great sigh passed out of me. I repeated the words, my voice growing louder. "*I would do it again!*"

Stillness in the room.

Her calm remained unbroken. Was she enraged? Surprised? Impossible to know as I looked into her expressionless eyes.

"Oh you are evil, my father," she said in a soft voice. "How can you abide it?"

David turned from the window. He stood over her shoulder, looking down at me as I stayed there on my knees.

"I am the ideal of my kind," I said. "I am the perfect vampire. You are looking at the Vampire Lestat when you look at me. No one outshines this figure you see before you—no one!" Slowly I rose to my feet. "I am not time's fool, nor a god hardened by the millennia; I am not the trickster in the black cape, nor the sorrowful wanderer. I have a conscience. I know right from wrong. I know what I do, and yes, I do it. I am the Vampire Lestat. That's your answer. Do with it what you will."

Dawn. Colorless and bright over the snow. Gretchen slept, cradling me.

She didn't wake when I sat up and reached for the glass of water. Tasteless, but cool.

Then her eyes opened, and she sat up with a start, her dark blond hair tumbling down around her face, dry and clean and full of thin light.

I kissed her warm cheek, and felt her fingers on my neck, and then again across my forehead.

"You brought me through it," I said, my voice hoarse and shaky. Then I lay back down on the pillow, and I felt the tears once more on my cheeks, and closing my eyes, I whispered, "Good-bye, Claudia," hoping that Gretchen wouldn't hear.

When I opened my eyes again, she had a big bowl of broth for me, which I drank, finding it almost good. There were apples and oranges cut open and glistening upon a plate. I ate these hungrily, amazed at the crispness of the apples, and the chewy fibrous quality of the oranges. Then came a hot brew of strong liquor and honey and sour lemon, which I loved so much that she hurried to make more of it for me.

I thought again how like the Grecian women of Picasso she was, large and fair. Her eyebrows were dark brown and her eyes light—almost a pale green—which gave her face a look of dedication and innocence. She was not young, this woman, and that, too, enhanced her beauty very much for me.

There was something selfless and distracted in her expression, in the way that she nodded and told me I was better when I asked.

She looked perpetually deep in thought. For a long moment, she remained, looking down at me as if I puzzled her, and then very slowly she bent and pressed her lips to mine. A raw vibration of excitement passed through me.

Once more I slept.

No dreams came to me.

It was as if I'd always been human, always in this body, and oh, so grateful for this soft clean bed.

Afternoon. Patches of blue beyond the trees.

In a trance, it seemed, I watched her build up the fire. I watched the glow on her smooth bare feet. Mojo's gray hair was covered with light powdery snow, as he ate quietly and steadily from a plate between his paws, now and then looking up at me.

My heavy human body was simmering still in its fever, but cooler, better, its aches less acute, its shivering gone now entirely. Ah, why has she done all this for me? Why? And what can I do for her, I thought. I wasn't afraid of dying anymore. But when I thought of what lay ahead—the Body Thief must be caught—I felt a stab of panic. And for another night I would be too ill to leave here.

Again, we lay wrapped in each other's arms, dozing, letting the light grow dim outside, the only sound that of Mojo's labored breathing. The little fire blazed. The room was warm and still. All the world seemed warm and still. The snow began to fall; and soon the soft merciless darkness of the night came down.

A wave of protectiveness passed over me when I looked at her sleeping face, when I thought of the soft distracted look I had seen in her eyes. Even her voice was tinged with a deep melancholy. There was something about her which suggested a profound resignation. Whatever happened, I would not leave her, I thought, until I knew what I could do to repay her. Also I liked her. I liked the darkness inside her, the

concealed quality of her, and the simplicity of her speech and movements, the candor in her eyes.

When I woke next, the doctor was there again—the same young fellow with the sallow skin and tired face, though he did look somewhat rested, and his white coat was very clean and fresh. He had put a tiny bit of cold metal against my chest, and was obviously listening to my heart or lungs or some other noisy internal organ for a bit of significant information. His hands were covered with slick ugly plastic gloves. And he was speaking to Gretchen in a low voice, as if I weren't there, about the continuing troubles at the hospital.

Gretchen was dressed in a simple blue dress, rather like a nun's dress, I thought, except that it was short, and beneath it she wore black stockings. Her hair was beautifully mussed and straight and clean and made me think of the hay which the princess spun into gold in the tale of Rumpelstiltskin.

Again came the memory of Gabrielle, my mother, of the eerie and nightmarish time after I'd made her a vampire, and she had cut her yellow hair, and it had all grown back within the space of a day while she slept the deathlike sleep in the crypt, and she'd almost gone mad when she realized it. I remembered her screaming and screaming before she could be calmed. I didn't know why I thought of it, except that I loved this woman's hair. She was nothing like Gabrielle. Nothing.

At last the doctor was finished with his poking and prodding and listening, and went away to confer with her. Curse my mortal hearing. But I knew I was almost cured. And when he stood over me again, and told me I would now be "fine" and needed only a few more days' rest, I said quietly that it was Gretchen's nursing which had done it.

To this he gave an emphatic nod and a series of unintelligible murmurs, and then off he went into the snow, his car making a faint grinding noise outside as he passed through the driveway.

I felt so clearheaded and good that I wanted to cry. Instead I drank some more of the delicious orange juice, and I began to think of things … remember things.

"I need to leave you for only a little while," Gretchen said. "I have to get some food."

"Yes, and I shall pay for this food," I said. I laid my hand on her wrist. Though my voice was still weak and hoarse, I told her about the hotel,

that my money was there in my coat. It was enough money for me to pay her for my care as well as for the food, and she must get it. The key must be in my clothes, I explained.

She had put my clothes on hangers, and now she did find the key in the shirt pocket.

“See?” I said with a little laugh. “I have been telling you the truth about everything.”

She smiled, and her face was filled with warmth. She said she would go to the hotel and get my money for me, if I would agree to lie quiet. It wasn't such a good idea to leave money lying about, even in a fine hotel.

I wanted to answer, but I was so sleepy. Then, through the little window, I saw her walking through the snow, towards the little car. I saw her climb inside. What a strong figure she was, very sturdy of limb, but with fair skin and a softness to her that made her lovely to behold and most embraceable. I was frightened, however, on account of her leaving me.

When I opened my eyes again, she was standing there with my overcoat over her arm. Lots of money, she said. She’d brought it all back. She’d never seen so much money in packets and wads. What a strange person I was. There was something like twenty-eight thousand dollars there. She’d closed out my account at the hotel. They'd been worried about me. They had seen me run off in the snow. They had made her sign a receipt for everything. This bit of paper she gave to me, as if it was important. She had my other possessions with her, the clothing I had purchased, which was still in its sacks and boxes.

I wanted to thank her. But where were the words? I would thank her when I came back to her in my own body.

After she had put away all the clothing, she fixed us a simple supper of broth again and bread with butter. We ate this together, with a bottle of wine, of which I drank much more than she thought permissible. I must say that this bread and butter and wine was about the best human food I’d tasted so far. I told her so. And I wanted more of the wine, please, because this drunkenness was absolutely sublime.

“Why did you bring me here?” I asked her.

She sat down on the side of the bed, looking towards the fire, playing with her hair, not looking at me. She started to explain again about the overcrowding at the hospital, the epidemic.

“No, why did you do it? There were others there.”

“Because you’re not like anyone I’ve ever known,” she said. “You make me think of a story I once read … about an angel forced to come down to earth in a human body.”

With a flush of pain, I thought of Raglan James telling me that I looked like an angel. I thought of my other body roaming the world, powerful and under his loathsome charge.

She gave a sigh as she looked at me. She was puzzled.

“When this is finished, I’ll come back to you in my real body,” I said. “I’ll reveal myself to you. It may mean something to you to know that you were not deceived; and you are so strong, I suspect the truth won’t hurt you.”

“The truth?”

I explained that often when we revealed ourselves to mortals we drove them mad—for we were unnatural beings, and yet we did not know anything about the existence of God or the Devil. In sum, we were like a religious vision without revelation. A mystic experience, but without a core of truth.

She was obviously enthralled. A subtle light came into her eyes. She asked me to explain how I appeared in the other form.

I described to her how I had been made a vampire at the age of twenty. I’d been tall for those times, blond, with light-colored eyes. I told her again about burning my skin in the Gobi. I feared the Body Thief intended to keep my body for good, that he was probably off someplace, hidden from the rest of the tribe, trying to perfect his use of my powers.

She asked me to describe flying to her.

“It’s more like floating, simply rising at will—propelling yourself in this direction or that by decision. It’s a defiance of gravity quite unlike the flight of natural creatures. It’s frightening. It’s the most frightening of all our powers; and I think it hurts us more than any other power; it fills us with despair. It is the final proof that we aren’t human. We fear perhaps we will one night leave the earth and never touch it again.”

I thought of the Body Thief using this power. I had seen him use it.

“I don’t know how I could have been so foolish as to let him take a body as strong as mine,” I said. “I was blinded by the desire to be human.”

She was merely looking at me. Her hands were clasped in front of her

and she was looking at me steadily and calmly with large hazel eyes.

"Do you believe in God?" I asked. I pointed to the crucifix on the wall. "Do you believe in these Catholic philosophers whose books are on the shelf?"

She thought for a long moment. "Not in the way you ask," she said.

I smiled. "How then?"

"My life has been one of self-sacrifice ever since I can remember. That is what I believe in. I believe that I must do everything I can to lessen misery. That is all I can do, and that is something enormous. It is a great power, like your power of flight."

I was mystified. I realized that I did not think of the work of a nurse as having to do with power. But I saw her point completely.

"To try to know God," she said, "this can be construed as a sin of pride, or a failure of imagination. But all of us know misery when we see it. We know sickness; hunger; deprivation. I try to lessen these things. It's the bulwark of my faith. But to answer you truly—yes, I do believe in God and in Christ. So do you."

"No, I don't," I said.

"When you were feverish you did. You spoke of God and the Devil the way I've never heard anyone else speak of them."

"I spoke of tiresome theological arguments," I said.

"No, you spoke of the irrelevance of them."

"You think so?"

"Yes. You know good when you see it. You said you did. So do I. I devote my life to trying to do it."

I sighed. "Yes, I see," I said. "Would I have died had you left me in the hospital?"

"You might have," she said. "I honestly don't know."

It was very pleasurable merely to look at her. Her face was large with few contours and nothing of elegant aristocratic beauty. But beauty she had in abundance. And the years had been gentle with her. She was not worn from care.

I sensed a tender brooding sensuality in her, a sensuality which she herself did not trust or nurture.

"Explain this to me again," she said. "You spoke of being a rock singer because you wanted to do good? You wanted to be good by being a symbol of evil? Talk of this some more."

I told her yes. I told her how I had done it, gathering the little band, Satan's Night Out, and making them professionals. I told her that I had failed; there had been a war among our kind, I myself had been taken away by force, and the entire debacle had happened without a rupture in the rational fabric of the mortal world. I had been forced back into invisibility and irrelevance.

"There's no place for us on earth," I said. "Perhaps there was once, I don't know. The fact that we exist is no justification. Hunters drove wolves from the world. I thought if I revealed our existence that hunters would drive us from the world too. But it wasn't to be. My brief career was a string of illusions. No one believes in us. And that's how it's meant to be. Perhaps we are to die of despair, to vanish from the world very slowly, and without a sound.

"Only I can't bear it. I can't bear to be quiet and be nothing, and to take life with pleasure, and to see the creations and accomplishments of mortals all around me, and not to be part of them, but to be Cain. The lonely Cain. That's the world to me, you see—what mortals do and have done. It isn't the great natural world at all. If it was the natural world, then maybe I would have had a better time of it being immortal than I did. It's the accomplishments of mortals. The paintings of Rembrandt, the memorials of the capital city in the snow, great cathedrals. And we are cut off eternally from such things, and rightfully so, and yet we see them with our vampire eyes."

"Why did you change bodies with a mortal man?" she asked.

"To walk in the sun again for one day. To think and feel and breathe like a mortal. Maybe to test a belief."

"What was the belief?"

"That being mortal again was what we all wanted, that we were sorry that we'd given it up, that immortality wasn't worth the loss of our human souls. But I know now I was wrong."

I thought of Claudia suddenly. I thought of my fever dreams. A leaden stillness came over me. When I spoke again, it was a quiet act of will.

"I'd much rather be a vampire," I said. "I don't like being mortal. I don't like being weak, or sick, or fragile, or feeling pain. It's perfectly awful. I want my body back as soon as I can get it from that thief."

She seemed mildly shocked by this. "Even though you kill when you are in your other body, even though you drink human blood, and you

hate it and you hate yourself."

"I don't hate it. And I don't hate myself. Don't you see? That's the contradiction. I've never hated myself."

"You told me you were evil, you said when I helped you I was helping the devil. You wouldn't say those things if you didn't hate it."

I didn't answer. Then I said, "My greatest sin has always been that I have a wonderful time being myself. My guilt is always there; my moral abhorrence for myself is always there; but I have a good time. I'm strong; I'm a creature of great will and passion. You see, that's the core of the dilemma for me—how can I enjoy being a vampire so much, how can I enjoy it if it's evil? Ah, it's an old story. Men work it out when they go to war. They tell themselves there is a cause. Then they experience the thrill of killing, as if they were merely beasts. And beasts do know it, they really do. The wolves know it. They know the sheer thrill of tearing to pieces the prey. I know it."

She seemed lost in her thoughts for a long time. I reached out and touched her hand.

"Come, lie down and sleep," I said. "Lie beside me again. I won't hurt you. I can't. I'm too sick." I gave a little laugh. "You're very beautiful," I said. "I wouldn't think of hurting you. I only want to be near you. The late night's coming again, and I wish you would lie with me here."

"You mean everything you say, don't you?"

"Of course."

"You realize you are like a child, don't you? You have a great simplicity to you. The simplicity of a saint."

I laughed. "Dearest Gretchen, you're misunderstanding me in a crucial way. But then again, maybe you aren't. If I believed in God, if I believed in salvation, then I suppose I would have to be a saint."

She reflected for a long time, then she told me in a low voice that she had taken a leave of absence from the foreign missions only a month ago. She had come up from French Guiana to Georgetown to study at the university, and she worked only as a volunteer at the hospital. "Do you know the real reason why I took the leave of absence?" she asked me.

"No; tell me."

"I wanted to know a man. The warmth of being close to a man. Just once, I wanted to know it. I'm forty years old, and I've never known a man. You spoke of moral abhorrence. You used those words. I had an

abhorrence for my virginity—of the sheer perfection of my chastity. It seemed, no matter what one believed, to be a cowardly thing."

"I understand," I said. "Surely to do good in the missions has nothing to do, finally, with chastity."

"No, they are connected," she said. "But only because hard work is possible when one is single-minded, and married to no one but Christ."

I confessed I knew what she meant. "But if the self-denial becomes an obstacle to work," I said, "then it's better to know the love of a man, isn't it?"

"That is what I thought," she said. "Yes. Know this experience, and then return to God's work."

"Exactly."

In a slow dreamy voice, she said: "I've been looking for the man. For the moment."

"That's the answer, then, as to why you brought me here."

"Perhaps," she said. "God knows, I was so frightened of everyone else. I'm not frightened of you." She looked at me as if her own words had left her surprised.

"Come, lie down and sleep. There's time for me to heal and for you to be certain it's what you really want. I wouldn't dream of forcing you, of doing anything cruel to you."

"But why, if you're the devil, can you speak with such kindness?"

"I told you, that's the mystery. Or it's the answer, one or the other. Come, come lie beside me."

I closed my eyes. I felt her climbing beneath the covers, the warm pressure of her body beside me, her arm slipping across my chest.

"You know," I said, "this is almost good, this aspect of being human."

I was half asleep when I heard her whisper:

"I think there's a reason you took *your* leave of absence," she said. "You may not know it."

"Surely you don't believe me," I murmured, the words running together sluggishly. How delicious it was to slip my arm around her again, to tuck her head against my neck. I was kissing her hair, loving the soft springiness of it against my lips.

"There is a secret reason you came down to earth," she said, "that you came into the body of a man. Same reason that Christ did it."

"And that is?"

“Redemption,” she said.

“Ah, yes, to be saved. Now wouldn’t that be lovely?”

I wanted to say more, how perfectly impossible it was to even consider such a thing, but I was sliding away, into a dream. And I knew that Claudia would not be there.

Maybe it wasn’t a dream after all, only a memory. I was with David in the Rijksmuseum and we were looking at the great painting by Rembrandt.

To be saved. What a thought, what a lovely, extravagant, and impossible thought … How nice to have found the one mortal woman in all the world who would seriously think of such a thing.

And Claudia wasn’t laughing anymore. Because Claudia was dead.

FIFTEEN

Early morning, just before the sun comes. The time when in the past I was often in meditation, tired, and half in love with the changing sky.

I bathed slowly and carefully, the small bathroom full of dim light and steam around me. My head was clear, and I felt happiness, as if the sheer respite from sickness was a form of joy. I shaved my face slowly, until it was perfectly smooth, and then, delving into the little cabinet behind the mirror, I found what I wanted—the little rubber sheaths that would keep her safe from me, from my planting a child within her, from this body giving her some other dark seed that might harm her in ways I could not foresee.

Curious little objects, these—gloves for the organ. I would love to have thrown them away, but I was determined that I would not make the mistakes I had made before.

Silently, I shut the little mirror door. And only then did I see a telegram message taped above it—a rectangle of yellowed paper with the words in pale indistinct print:

> GRETCHEN, COME BACK, WE NEED YOU. NO QUESTIONS ASKED. WE ARE WAITING FOR YOU.

The date of the communication was very recent—only a few days before. And the origin was Caracas, Venezuela.

I approached the bed, careful not to make a sound, and I laid the small safety devices on the table in readiness, and I lay with her again, and began to kiss her tender sleeping mouth.

Slowly, I kissed her cheeks, and the flesh beneath her eyes. I wanted to feel her eyelashes through my lips. I wanted to feel the flesh of her throat. Not for killing, but for kissing; not for possession, but for this brief physical union that will take nothing from either one of us; yet bring us together in a pleasure so acute it is like pain.

She waked slowly under my touch.

“Trust in me,” I whispered. “I won’t hurt you.”

“Oh, but I want you to hurt me,” she said in my ear.

Gently, I pulled the flannel gown off her. She lay back looking up at me, her breasts as fair as the rest of her, the areolas of her nipples very small and pink and the nipples themselves hard. Her belly was smooth, her hips broad. A lovely dark shadow of brown hair lay between her legs, glistening in the light coming through the windows. I bent down and kissed this hair. I kissed her thighs, parting her legs with my hand, until the warm inside flesh was open to me, and my organ was stiff and ready. I looked at the secret place there, folded and demure and a dark pink in its soft veil of down. A coarse warm excitement went through me, further hardening the organ. I might have forced her, so urgent was the feeling.

But no, not this time.

I moved up, beside her, turning her face to me, and accepting her kisses now, slow and awkward and fumbling. I felt her leg pressed against mine, and her hands moving over me, seeking the warmth beneath my armpits, and the damp nether hair of this male body, thick and dark. It was my body, ready for her and waiting. This, my chest, which she touched, seeming to love its hardness. My arms, which she kissed as if she prized their strength.

The passion in me ebbed slightly, only to grow hot again instantly, and then to die down again, waiting, and then to rise once more.

No thoughts came to me of the blood drinking; no thought at all of the thunder of the life inside her which I might have consumed, a dark draught, at another time. Rather the moment was perfumed with the soft heat of her living flesh. And it seemed vile that anything could harm her, anything mar the common mystery of her—of her trust and her yearning and her deep and common fear.

I let my hand slip down to the little doorway; how sorry and sad that this union would be so partial, so brief.

Then, as my fingers gently tried the virgin passage, her body caught fire. Her breasts seemed to swell against me, and I felt her open, petal by petal, as her mouth grew harder against my mouth.

But what of the dangers: didn't she care about them? In her new passion, she seemed heedless, and completely under my command. I forced myself to stop, to remove the little sheath from its packet, and to roll it up and over the organ, as her passive eyes remained fixed on me,

as if she no longer had a will of her own.

It was this surrender that she needed, it was what she required of herself. Once again, I fell to kissing her. She was moist and ready for me. I could keep it back no longer, and when I rode her now, it was hard. The little passage was snug and maddeningly heated as its juices flowed. I saw the blood come up into her face as the rhythm quickened; I bent my lips to lick at her nipples, to claim her mouth again. When the final moan came out of her, it was like the moan of pain. And there it was again, the mystery—that something could be so perfectly finished, and complete, and have lasted such a little while. Such a precious little while.

Had it been union? Were we one with each other in this clamorous silence?

I don't think that it was union. On the contrary, it seemed the most violent of separations: two contrary beings flung at each other in heat and clumsiness, in trust and in menace, the feelings of each unknowable and unfathomable to the other—its sweetness terrible as its brevity; its loneliness hurtful as its undeniable fire.

And never had she looked so frail to me as she did now, her eyes closed, her head turned into the pillow, her breasts no longer heaving but very still. It seemed an image to provoke violence—to beckon to the most wanton cruelty in a male heart.

Why was this so?

I didn't want any other mortal to touch her!

I didn't want her own guilt to touch her. I didn't want regret to hurt her, or for any of the evils of the human mind to come near her.

And only now did I think of the Dark Gift again, and not of Claudia, but of the sweet throbbing splendour in the making of Gabrielle. Gabrielle had never looked back from that long-ago moment. Clad in strength and certainty, she had begun her wandering, never suffering an hour's moral torment as the endless complexities of the great world drew her on.

But who could say what the Dark Blood would give to any one human soul? And this, a virtuous woman, a believer in old and merciless deities, drunk on the blood of martyrs and the heady suffering of a thousand saints. Surely she would never ask for the Dark Gift or accept it, any more than David would.

But what did such questions matter until she knew the words I spoke were true? And what if I could never prove their truth to her? What if I never had the Dark Blood again inside me to give anyone and I remained forever trapped in this mortal flesh? I lay quiet, watching the sunlight fill the room. I watched it strike the tiny body of the crucified Christ above her bookshelf; I watched it fall upon the Virgin with her bowed head.

Snuggled against each other, we slept again.

SIXTEEN

Noon. I was dressed in the clean new clothes which I had bought on that last fateful day of my wandering—soft white pullover shirt with long sleeves, fashionably faded denim pants.

We had made a picnic of sorts before the warm crackling little fire—a white blanket spread out on the carpet, on which we sat having our late breakfast together, as Mojo dined sloppily and greedily in his own fashion on the kitchen floor. It was French bread and butter again, and orange juice, and boiled eggs, and the fruit in big slices. I was eating hungrily, ignoring her warnings that I was not entirely well. I was plenty well enough. Even her little digital thermometer said so.

I ought to be off to New Orleans. If the airport was open, I could have been there by nightfall, perhaps. But I didn't want to leave her just now. I asked for some wine. I wanted to talk. I wanted to understand her, and I was also afraid to leave her, afraid of being alone without her. The plane journey struck a cowardly fear in my soul. And besides, I liked being with her …

She'd been talking easily about her life in the missions, of how she'd loved it from the very beginning. The first years she'd spent in Peru, then she'd gone on to the Yucatán. Her most recent assignment had been in the jungles of French Guiana—a place of primitive Indian tribes. The mission was St. Margaret Mary—six hours' journey up the Maroni River by motorized canoe from the town of St. Laurent. She and the other sisters had refurbished the concrete chapel, the little whitewashed schoolhouse, and the hospital. But often they had to leave the mission itself and go directly to the people in their villages. She loved this work, she said.

She laid out for me a great sweep of photographs—small rectangular colored pictures of the crude little mission buildings, and of her and her sisters, and of the priest who came through to say Mass. None of these sisters wore veils or habits out there; they were dressed in khaki or white cotton, and their hair was free—real working sisters, she explained. And there she was in these pictures—radiantly happy, none of

the brooding melancholy evident in her. In one snapshot she stood surrounded by dark-faced Indians, before a curious little building with ornate carvings on its walls. In another she was giving an injection to a wraith of an old man who sat in a brightly painted straight-back chair.

Life in these jungle villages had been the same for centuries, she said. These people had existed long before the French or Spanish ever set foot on the soil of South America. It was difficult to get them to trust the sisters and the doctors and the priests. She herself did not care whether or not they learnt their prayers. She cared about inoculations, and the proper cleaning of infected wounds. She cared about setting broken limbs so that these people would not be crippled forever.

Of course they wanted her to come back. They'd been very patient with her little leave of absence. They needed her. The work was waiting for her. She showed me the telegram, which I had already seen, tacked to the wall above the bathroom mirror.

"You miss it, obviously you do," I said.

I was studying her, watching for signs of guilt over what we had done together. But I didn't see this in her. She did not seem racked with guilt over the telegram either.

"I'm going back, of course," she said simply. "This may sound absurd, but it was a difficult thing to leave in the first place. But this question of chastity; it had become a destructive obsession."

Of course I understood. She looked at me with large quiet eyes.

"And now you know," I said, "that it's not really so very important at all whether or not you sleep with a man. Isn't that what you found out?"

"Perhaps," she said, with a faint simple smile. How strong she seemed, sitting there on the blanket, her legs demurely folded to one side, her hair loose still, and more like a nun's veil here in this room than in any photograph of her.

"How did it begin for you?" I asked.

"Do you think that's important?" she asked. "I don't think you'll approve of my story if I tell you."

"I want to know," I answered.

She'd grown up, the daughter of a Catholic schoolteacher and an accountant in the Bridgeport section of Chicago, and very early on exhibited a great talent for playing the piano. The whole family had sacrificed for her lessons with a famous teacher.

“Self-sacrifice, you see,” she said, smiling faintly again, “even from the beginning. Only it was music then, not medicine.”

But even then, she had been deeply religious, reading the lives of the saints, and dreaming of being a saint—of working in the foreign missions when she grew up. Saint Rose de Lima, the mystic, held a special fascination for her. And so did Saint Martin de Porres, who had worked more in the world. And Saint Rita. She had wanted to work with lepers someday, to find a life of all-consuming and heroic work. She’d built a little oratory behind her house when she was a girl, and there she would kneel for hours before the crucifix, hoping that the wounds of Christ would open in her hands and feet—the stigmata.

“I took these stories very seriously,” she said. “Saints are real to me. The possibility of heroism is real to me.”

“Heroism,” I said. My word. But how very different was my definition of it. I did not interrupt her.

“It seemed that the piano playing was at war with my spiritual soul. I wanted to give up everything for others, and that meant giving up the piano, above all, the piano.”

This saddened me. I had the feeling she had not told this story often, and her voice was very subdued when she spoke.

“But what about the happiness you gave to people when you played?” I asked. “Wasn’t that something of real value?”

“Now, I can say that it was,” she said, her voice dropping even lower, and her words coming with painful slowness. “But then? I wasn’t sure of it. I wasn’t a likely person for such a talent. I didn’t mind being heard; but I didn’t like being seen.” She flushed slightly as she looked at me. “Perhaps if I could have played in a choir loft, or behind a screen it would have been different.”

“I see,” I said. “There are many humans who feel this way, of course.”

“But you don’t, do you?”

I shook my head.

She explained how excruciating it was for her to be dressed in white lace, and made to play before an audience. She did it to please her parents and her teachers. Entering the various competitions was an agony. But almost invariably she won. Her career had become a family enterprise by the time she was sixteen.

“But what about the music itself. Did you enjoy it?”

She thought for a moment. Then: “It was absolute ecstasy,” she answered. “When I played alone … with no one there to watch me, I lost myself in it completely. It was almost like being under the influence of a drug. It was … it was almost erotic. Sometimes melodies would obsess me. They’d run through my head continuously. I lost track of time when I played. I still cannot really listen to music without being swept up and carried away. You don’t see any radio here or tape player. I can’t have those things near me even now.”

“But why deny yourself this?” I looked around. There was no piano in this room either.

She shook her head dismissively. “The effect is too engulfing, don’t you see? I can forget everything else too easily. And nothing is accomplished when this happens. Life is on hold, so to speak.”

“But, Gretchen, is that true?” I asked. “For some of us such intense feelings *are* life! We seek ecstasy. In those moments, we … we transcend all the pain and the pettiness and the struggle. That’s how it was for me when I was alive. That’s how it is for me now.”

She considered this, her face very smooth and relaxed. When she spoke, it was with quiet conviction.

“I want more than that,” she said. “I want something more palpably constructive. But to put it another way, I cannot enjoy such a pleasure when others are hungry or suffering or sick.”

“But the world will always include such misery. And people need music, Gretchen, they need it as much as they need comfort or food.”

“I’m not sure I agree with you. In fact, I’m fairly sure that I don’t. I have to spend my life trying to alleviate misery. Believe me, I have been through all these arguments many times before.”

“Ah, but to choose nursing over music,” I said. “It’s unfathomable to me. Of course nursing is good.” I was too saddened and confused to continue. “How did you make the actual choice?” I asked. “Didn’t the family try to stop you?”

She went on to explain. When she was sixteen, her mother took ill, and for months no one could determine the cause of her illness. Her mother was anemic; she ran a constant fever; finally it was obvious she was wasting away. Tests were made, but the doctors could find no explanation. Everyone felt certain that her mother was going to die. The atmosphere of the house had been poisoned with grief and even

bitterness.

"I asked God for a miracle," she said. "I promised I would never touch the piano keys again as long as I lived, if God would only save my mother. I promised I would enter the convent as soon as I was allowed—that I would devote my life to nursing the sick and the dying."

"And your mother was cured."

"Yes. Within a month she was completely recovered. She's alive now. She's retired, she tutors children after school—in a storefront in a black section of Chicago. She has never been sick since, in any way."

"And you kept the promise?"

She nodded. "I went into the Missionary Sisters when I was seventeen and they sent me to college."

"And you kept this promise never to touch the piano again?"

She nodded. There was not a trace of regret in her, nor was there a great longing or need for my understanding or approval. In fact, I knew my sadness was obvious to her, and that, if anything, she felt a little concerned for me.

"Were you happy in the convent?"

"Oh, yes," she said with a little shrug. "Don't you see? An ordinary life is impossible for someone like me. I have to be doing something hard. I have to be taking risks. I entered this religious order because their missions were in the most remote and treacherous areas of South America. I can't tell you how I love those jungles!" Her voice became low and almost urgent. "They can't be hot enough or dangerous enough for me. There are moments when we're all overworked and tired, when the hospital's overcrowded and the sick children are bedded down outside under lean-tos and in hammocks and I feel so alive! I can't tell you. I stop maybe long enough to wipe the sweat off my face, to wash my hands, to perhaps drink a glass of water. And I think: I'm alive; I'm here. I'm doing what matters."

Again she smiled. "It's another kind of intensity," I said, "something wholly unlike the making of music. I see the crucial difference."

I thought of David's words to me about his early life—how he had sought the thrill in danger. She was seeking the thrill in utter self-sacrifice. He had sought the danger of the occult in Brazil. She sought the hard challenge of bringing health to thousands of the nameless, and the eternally poor. This troubled me deeply.

“There’s a vanity in it too, of course,” she said. “Vanity is always the enemy. That’s what troubled me the most about my … my chastity,” she explained, “the pride I felt in it. But you see, even coming back like this to the States was a risk. I was terrified when I got off the plane, when I realized I was here in Georgetown and nothing could stop me from being with a man if I wanted it. I think I went to work at the hospital out of fear. God knows, freedom isn’t simple.”

“This part I understand,” I said. “But your family, how did they respond to this promise you made, to your giving up the music?”

“They didn’t know at the time. I didn’t tell them. I announced my vocation. I stuck to my guns. There was a lot of recrimination. After all, my sisters and brothers had worn secondhand clothes so I could have piano lessons. But this is often the case. Even in a good Catholic family, the news that a daughter wants to be a nun is not always greeted with cheers and accolades.”

“They grieved for your talent,” I said quietly.

“Yes, they did,” she said with a slight lift of her eyebrows. How honest and tranquil she seemed. None of this was said with coldness or hardness. “But I had a vision of something vastly more important than a young woman on a concert stage, rising from the piano bench to collect a bouquet of roses. It was a long time before I told them about the promise.”

“Years later?”

She nodded. “They understood. They saw the miracle. How could they help it? I told them I’d been more fortunate than anyone I knew who had ever gone into the convent. I’d had a clear sign from God. He had resolved all conflicts for all of us.”

“You believe this.”

“Yes. I do,” she said. “But in a way, it doesn’t matter whether it’s true or not. And if anyone should understand, you should.”

“Why is that?”

“Because you speak of religious truths and religious ideas and you know that they matter even if they are only metaphors. This is what I heard in you even when you were delirious.”

I sighed. “Don’t you ever want to play the piano again? Don’t you ever want to find an empty auditorium, perhaps, with a piano on the stage, and just sit down and …”

“Of course I do. But I can’t do it, and I won’t do it.” Her smile now was truly beautiful.

“Gretchen, in a way this is a terrible story,” I said. “Why, as a good Catholic girl couldn’t you have seen your musical talent as a gift from God, a gift not to be wasted?”

“It was from God, I knew it was. But don’t you see? There was a fork in the road; the sacrifice of the piano was the opportunity that God gave me to serve Him in a special way. Lestat, what could the music have meant compared to the act of helping people, hundreds of people?”

I shook my head. “I think the music can be seen as equally important.”

She thought for a long while before she answered. “I couldn’t continue with it,” she said. “Perhaps I used the crisis of my mother’s illness, I don’t know. I had to become a nurse. There was no other way for me. The simple truth is—I cannot live when I am faced with the misery in the world. I cannot justify comfort or pleasure when other people are suffering. I don’t know how anyone can.”

“Surely you don’t think you can change it all, Gretchen.”

“No, but I can spend my life affecting many, many individual lives. That’s what counts.”

This story so upset me that I couldn’t remain seated there. I stood up, stretching my stiff legs, and I went to the window and looked out at the field of snow.

It would have been easy to dismiss it had she been a sorrowful or mentally crippled person, or a person of dire conflict and instability. But nothing seemed farther from the truth. I found her almost unfathomable.

She was as alien to me as my mortal friend Nicolas had been so many, many decades ago, not because she was like him. But because his cynicism and sneering and eternal rebellion had contained an abnegation of self which I couldn’t really understand. My Nicki—so full of seeming eccentricity and excess, yet deriving satisfaction from what he did only because it pricked others.

Abnegation of self—that was the heart of it.

I turned around. She was merely watching me. I had the distinct feeling again that it didn’t matter much to her what I said. She didn’t require my understanding. In a way, she was one of the strongest people I’d encountered in all my long life.

It was no wonder she took me out of the hospital; another nurse might

not have assumed such a burden at all.

"Gretchen," I asked, "you're never afraid that your life has been wasted—that sickness and suffering will simply go on long after you've left the earth, and what you've done will mean nothing in the larger scheme?"

"Lestat," she said, "it is the larger scheme which means nothing." Her eyes were wide and clear. "It is the small act which means all. Of course sickness and suffering will continue after I'm gone. But what's important is that I have done all I can. That's my triumph, and my vanity. That's my vocation and my sin of pride. That is my brand of heroism."

"But, chérie, it works that way only if someone is keeping score—if some Supreme Being will ratify your decision, or you'll be rewarded for what you've done, or at least upheld."

"No," she said, choosing her words thoughtfully as she proceeded. "Nothing could be farther from the truth. Think of what I've said. I'm telling you something that is obviously new to you. Maybe it's a religious secret."

"How so?"

"There are many nights when I lie awake, fully aware that there may be no personal God, and that the suffering of the children I see every day in our hospitals will never be balanced or redeemed. I think of those old arguments—you know, how can God justify the suffering of a child? Dostoevsky asked that question. So did the French writer Albert Camus. We ourselves are always asking it. But it doesn't ultimately matter.

"God may or may not exist. But misery is real. It is absolutely real, and utterly undeniable. And in that reality lies my commitment—the core of my faith. I have to do something about it!"

"And at the hour of your death, if there is no God …"

"So be it. I will know that I did what I could. The hour of my death could be now." She gave a little shrug. "I wouldn't feel any different."

"This is why you feel no guilt for our being there in the bed together."

She considered. "Guilt? I feel happiness when I think of it. Don't you know what you've done for me?" She waited, and slowly her eyes filled with tears. "I came here to meet you, to be with you," she said, her voice thickening. "And I can go back to the mission now."

She bowed her head, and slowly, silently regained her calm, her eyes clearing. Then she looked up and spoke again.

"When you spoke of making this child, Claudia … when you spoke of

bringing your mother, Gabrielle, into your world … you spoke of reaching for something. Would you call it a transcendence? When I work until I drop in the mission hospital, I transcend. I transcend doubt and something … something perhaps hopeless and black inside myself. I don't know."

"Hopeless and black, yes, that's the key, isn't it? The music didn't make this go away."

"Yes, it did, but it was false."

"Why false? Why was doing that good—playing the piano—false?"

"Because it didn't do enough for others, that's why."

"Oh, but it did. It gave them pleasure, it had to."

"Pleasure?"

"Forgive me, I'm choosing the wrong tack. You've lost yourself in your vocation. When you played the piano, you were yourself—don't you see? You were the unique Gretchen! It was the very meaning of the word 'virtuoso.' And you wanted to lose yourself."

"I think you're right. The music simply wasn't my way."

"Oh, Gretchen, you frighten me!"

"But I shouldn't frighten you. I'm not saying the other way was wrong. If you did good with your music—your rock singing, this brief career you described—it was the good you could do. I do good my way, that's all."

"No, there's some fierce self-denial in you. You're hungry for love the way I starve night after night for blood. You punish yourself in your nursing, denying your carnal desires, and your love of music, and all the things of the world which are like music. You *are* a virtuoso, a virtuoso of your own pain."

"You're wrong, Lestat," she said with another little smile, and a shake of her head. "You know that's not true. It's what you want to believe about someone like me. Lestat, listen to me. If all you've told me is true, isn't it obvious in light of that truth that you were meant to meet me?"

"How so?"

"Come here, sit with me and talk to me."

I don't know why I hesitated, why I was afraid. Finally I came back to the blanket and sat down opposite, crossing my legs. I leaned back against the side of the bookcase.

"Don't you see?" she asked. "I represent a contrary way, a way you

haven't ever considered, and one which might bring you the very consolation you seek."

"Gretchen, you don't believe for a moment that I've told the truth about myself. You can't. I don't expect you to."

"I do believe you! Every word you've said. And the literal truth is unimportant. You seek something that the saints sought when they renounced their normal lives, when they blundered into the service of Christ. And never mind that you don't believe in Christ. It's unimportant. What is important is that you have been miserable in the existence you've lived until now, miserable to the point of madness, and that my way would offer you an alternative."

"You're speaking of this for me?" I asked.

"Of course I am. Don't you see the pattern? You come down into this body; you fall into my hands; you give me the moment of love I require. But what have I given you? What is my meaning for you?"

She raised her hand for quiet.

"No, don't speak of larger schemes again. Don't ask if there is a literal God. Think on all I've said. I've said it for myself, but also for you. How many lives have you taken in this otherworldly existence of yours? How many lives have I saved—literally saved—in the missions?"

I was ready to deny the entire possibility, when suddenly it occurred to me to wait, to be silent, and merely to consider.

The chilling thought came to me again that I might never recover my preternatural body, that I might be trapped in this flesh all my life. If I couldn't catch the Body Thief, if I couldn't get the others to help me, the death I said I wanted would indeed be mine in time. I had fallen back into time.

And what if there was a scheme to it? What if there was a destiny? And I spent that mortal life working as Gretchen worked, devoting my entire physical and spiritual being to others? What if I simply went with her back to her jungle outpost? Oh, not as her lover, of course. Such things as that were not meant for her, obviously. But what if I went as her assistant, her helper? What if I sank my mortal life into that very frame of self-sacrifice?

Again, I forced myself to remain quiet, to see it.

Of course there was an added capability of which she knew nothing—the wealth I could bestow upon her mission, upon missions like it. And

though this wealth was so vast some men could not have calculated it, I could calculate it. I could see in a large incandescent vision its limits, its effects. Whole village populations fed and clothed, hospitals stocked with medicines, schools furnished with books and blackboards and radios and pianos. Yes, pianos. Oh, this was an old, old tale. This was an old, old dream.

I remained quiet as I considered it. I saw the moments of each day of my mortal life—my possible mortal life—spent along with every bit of my fortune upon this dream. I saw this as if it were sand sliding through the narrow center of an hourglass.

Why, at this very minute, as we sat here in this clean little room, people starved in the great slums of the Eastern world. They starved in Africa. Worldwide, they perished from disease and from disaster. Floods washed away their dwellings; drought shriveled their food and their hopes. The misery of even one country was more than the mind could endure, were it described in even vague detail.

But even if everything I possessed I gave to this endeavor, what would I have accomplished in the final analysis?

How could I even know that modern medicine in a jungle village was better than the old way? How could I know that the education given a jungle child spelt happiness for it? How could I know that any of this was worth the loss of myself? How could I make myself care whether it was or not! That was the horror.

I didn't care. I could weep for any individual soul who suffered, yes, but about sacrificing my life to the nameless millions of the world, I couldn't care! In fact, it filled me with dread, terrible dark dread. It was sad beyond sad. It seemed no life at all. It seemed the very opposite of transcendence.

I shook my head. In a low stammering voice I explained to her why this vision frightened me so much.

"Centuries ago, when I first stood on the little boulevard stage in Paris —when I saw the happy faces, when I heard applause—I felt as if my body and soul had found their destiny; I felt as if every promise in my birth and childhood had begun its fulfillment at last.

"Oh, there were other actors, worse and better; other singers; other clowns; there have been a million since and a million will come after this moment. But each of us shines with his own inimitable power; each

of us comes alive in his own unique and dazzling moment; each of us has his chance to vanquish the others forever in the mind of the beholder, and that is the only kind of accomplishment I can really understand: the kind of accomplishment in which the self—this self, if you will—is utterly whole and triumphant.

"Yes, I could have been a saint, you are right, but I would have had to found a religious order or lead an army into battle; I would have had to work miracles of such scope that the whole world would have been brought to its knees. I am one who must dare even if I'm wrong—completely wrong. Gretchen, God gave me an individual soul and I cannot bury it."

I was amazed to see that she was still smiling at me, softly and unquestioningly, and that her face was full of calm wonder.

"Better to reign in hell," she asked carefully, "than to serve in heaven?"

"Oh, no. I would make heaven on earth if I could. But I must raise my voice; I must shine; and I must reach for the very ecstasy that you've denied—the very intensity from which you fled! That to me is transcendence! When I made Claudia, blundering error that it was—yes, it was transcendence. When I made Gabrielle, wicked as it seemed, yes, it was transcendence. It was a single, powerful, and horrifying act, which wrung from me all my unique power and daring. They shall not die, I said, yes, perhaps the very words you use to the village children.

"But it was to bring them into my unnatural world that I uttered these words. The goal was not merely to save, but to make of them what I was—a unique and terrible being. It was to confer upon them the very individuality I cherished. We shall live, even in this state called living death, we shall love, we shall feel, we shall defy those who would judge us and destroy us. That was my transcendence. And self-sacrifice and redemption had no part in it."

Oh, how frustrating it was that I could not communicate it to her, I could not make her believe it in literal terms. "Don't you see, I survived all that has happened to me because I am who I am. My strength, my will, my refusal to give up—those are the only components of my heart and soul which I can truly identify. This ego, if you wish to call it that, is my strength. I am the Vampire Lestat, and nothing … not even this mortal body … is going to defeat me."

I was amazed to see her nod, to see her totally accepting expression.

“And if you came with me,” she said gently, “the Vampire Lestat would perish—wouldn’t he?—in his own redemption.”

“Yes, he would. He would die slowly and horribly among the small and thankless tasks, caring for the never-ending hordes of the nameless, the faceless, the eternally needy.”

I felt so sad suddenly that I couldn’t continue. I was tired in an awful mortal way, the mind having worked its chemistry upon this body. I thought of my dream and of my speech to Claudia, and now I had told it again to Gretchen, and I knew myself as never before.

I drew up my knees and rested my arms on them, and I put my forehead on my arms. “I can’t do it,” I said under my breath. “I can’t bury myself alive in such a life as you have. And I don’t want to, that’s the awful part. I don’t want to do it! I don’t believe it would save my soul. I don’t believe it would matter.”

I felt her hands on my arms. She was stroking my hair again, drawing it back from my forehead.

“I understand you,” she said, “even though you’re wrong.”

I gave a little laugh as I looked up at her. I took a napkin from our little picnic and I wiped my nose and my eyes.

“But I haven’t shaken your faith, have I?”

“No,” she said. And this time her smile was different, more warm and more truly radiant. “You’ve confirmed it,” she said in a whisper. “How very strange you are, and how miraculous that you came to me. I can almost believe your way is right for you. Who else could be you? No one.”

I sat back, and drank a little sip of wine. It was now warm from the fire, but still it tasted good, sending a ripple of pleasure through my sluggish limbs. I drank some more of it. I set down the glass and looked at her.

“I want to ask you a question,” I said. “Answer me from your heart. If I win my battle—if I regain my body—do you want me to come to you? Do you want me to show you that I’ve been telling the truth? Think carefully before you answer.

“I want to do it. I really do. But I’m not sure that it’s the best thing for you. Yours is almost a perfect life. Our little carnal episode couldn’t possibly turn you away from it. I was right—wasn’t I?—in what I said before. You know now that erotic pleasure really isn’t important to you,

and you're going to return to your work in the jungle very soon, if not immediately."

"That's true," she said. "But there's something else you should know, also. There was a moment this morning when I thought I could throw away everything—just to be with you."

"No, not you, Gretchen."

"Yes, me. I could feel it sweeping me away, the way the music once did. And if you were to say 'Come with me,' even now, I might go. If this world of yours really existed …" She broke off with another little shrug, tossing her hair a little and then smoothing it back behind her shoulder. "The meaning of chastity is not to fall in love," she said, her focus sharpening as she looked at me. "I could fall in love with you. I know I could."

She broke off, and then said in a low, troubled voice, "You could become my god. I know that's true."

This frightened me, yet I felt at once a shameless pleasure and satisfaction, a sad pride. I tried not to yield to the feeling of slow physical excitement. After all, she didn't know what she was saying. She couldn't know. But there was something powerfully convincing in her voice and in her manner.

"I'm going back," she said in the same voice, full of certitude and humility. "I'll probably leave within a matter of days. But yes, if you win this battle, if you recover your old form—for the love of God, come to me. I want to … I want to *know!*"

I didn't reply. I was too confused. Then I spoke the confusion.

"You know, in a horrible way, when I do come to you and reveal my true self, you may be disappointed."

"How could that be?"

"You think me a sublime human being for the spiritual content of all I've said to you. You see me as some sort of blessed lunatic spilling truth with error the way a mystic might. But I'm not human. And when you know it, maybe you'll hate it."

"No, I could never hate you. And to know that all you've said is true? That would be … a miracle."

"Perhaps, Gretchen. Perhaps. But remember what I said. We are a vision without revelation. We are a miracle without meaning. Do you really want that cross along with so many others?"

She didn't answer. She was weighing my words. I could not imagine what they meant to her. I reached for her hand, and she let me take it, folding her fingers gently around mine, her eyes still constant as she looked at me.

"There is no God, is there, Gretchen?"

"No, there isn't," she whispered.

I wanted to laugh and to weep. I sat back, laughing softly to myself and looking at her, at the calm, statuesque manner in which she sat there, the light of the fire caught in her hazel eyes.

"You don't know what you've done for me," she said. "You don't know how much it has meant. I am ready—ready to go back now."

I nodded.

"Then it won't matter, will it, my beautiful one, if we get into that bed together again. For surely we should do it."

"Yes, we should do that, I think," she answered.

It was almost dark when I left her quietly to take the phone by its long cord into the little bath and call my New York agent. Once again, the number rang and rang. I was just about to give up, and turn again to my man in Paris, when a voice came on the line, and slowly let me know in halting awkward terms that my New York representative was indeed no longer alive. He had died by violence several nights ago in his office high above Madison Avenue. Robbery had now been affirmed as the motive for the attack; his computer and all his files had been stolen.

I was so stunned that I could make no answer to the helpful voice on the phone. At last I managed to collect myself sufficiently to put a few questions.

On Wednesday night, about eight o'clock, the crime had occurred. No, no one knew the extent of damage done by the theft of the files. Yes, unfortunately the poor man had suffered.

"Awful, awful situation," said the voice. "If you were in New York, you couldn't avoid knowing about it. Every paper in town had the story. They were calling it a vampire killing. The man's body was entirely drained of blood."

I hung up the phone, and for a long moment sat there in rigid silence. Then I rang Paris. My man there answered after only a small delay.

Thank God I had called, said my man. But please, I must identify myself. No, the code words weren't enough. What about conversations which had taken place between us in the past? Ah, yes, yes, that was it. Talk, talk, he said. I at once poured out a litany of secrets known only to me and this man, and I could hear his great relief as he at last unburdened himself.

The strangest things had been happening, he said. He'd been contacted twice by someone claiming to be me, who obviously wasn't. This individual even knew two of our code words used in the past, and gave an elaborate story as to why he did not know the latest ones. Meantime, several electronic orders had come in for shifts of funds, but in every case, the codes were wrong. But not entirely wrong. Indeed, there was every indication that this person was in the process of cracking our system.

"But, Monsieur, let me tell you the simplest part. This man does not speak the same French that you do! I don't mean to insult you, Monsieur, but your French is rather … how shall I say, unusual? You speak old-fashioned words. And you put words in unusual order. I know when it is you."

"I understand exactly," I said. "Now believe me when I say this. You must not talk to this person anymore. He is capable of reading your mind. He is trying to get the code words from you telepathically. We are going to set up a system, you and I. You will make one transfer to me now … to my bank in New Orleans. But everything must be locked up tight after that. And when I contact you again, I shall use three old-fashioned words. We won't agree on them … but they will be words you've heard me use before and you will know them."

Of course this was risky. But the point was, this man knew me! I went on to tell him that the thief in question was most dangerous, that he had done violence to my man in New York, and every conceivable personal protection must be taken. I should pay for all this—guards of any number, round the clock. He must err on the side of excess. "You'll hear from me again, very soon. Remember, old-fashioned words. You'll know me when you speak to me."

I put down the phone. I was trembling with rage, unsupportable rage! Ah, the little monster! It is not enough for him to have the body of the god, he must ransack the god's storehouses. The little fiend, the little

imp! And I had been so foolish not to realize that this would happen!

"Oh, you are human all right," I said to myself. "You are a human idiot!" And oh, to think of the denunciations Louis would heap upon my head before he consented to help me!

And what if Marius knew! Oh, that was too awful to contemplate. Just reach Louis as fast as you can.

I had to obtain a valise, and get to the airport. Mojo would undoubtedly have to travel by crate, and this, too, must be obtained. My farewell to Gretchen would not be the graceful, slow leave-taking I had envisioned. But surely she would understand.

Much was happening within the complex delusionary world of her mysterious lover. It was time to part.

SEVENTEEN

The trip south was a small nightmare. The airport, only just reopened after the repeated storms, had been jammed to overflowing with anxious mortals waiting for their long-delayed flights or come to find their arriving loved ones.

Gretchen gave way to tears, and so did I. A terrible fear had seized her that she would never see me again, and I could not reassure her sufficiently that I would come to her at the Mission of St. Margaret Mary in the jungles of French Guiana, up the Maroni River from St. Laurent. The written address was carefully placed in my pocket along with all numbers relevant to the motherhouse in Caracas, from which the sisters could direct me should I be unable to find the place on my own. She had already booked a midnight flight for the first leg of her return.

"One way or another, I must see you again!" she said to me in a voice that was breaking my heart.

"You will, ma chère," I said, "that I promise you. I'll find the mission. I'll find you."

The flight itself was hellish. I did little more than lie there in a stupor, waiting for the plane to explode and for my mortal body to be blown to pieces. Drinking large amounts of gin and tonic did not alleviate the fear; and when I did free my mind from it for a few moments at a time, it was only to become obsessed with difficulties facing me. My rooftop apartment, for example, was full of clothes which did not fit me. And I was used to going in through a door on the roof. I had no key now to the street stairway. Indeed, the key was in my nocturnal resting place beneath the Lafayette Cemetery, a secret chamber I could not possibly reach with only a mortal's strength, for it was blocked with doors at several points which not even a gang of mortal men might have opened.

And what if the Body Thief had been to New Orleans before me? What if he had sacked my rooftop rooms, and stolen all the money hidden there? Not likely. No, but if he had stolen all the files of my poor unfortunate mortal agent in New York … Ah, better to think about the plane exploding. And then there was Louis. What if Louis were not

there? What if … And so on it went for the better part of two hours.

At last, we made our rattling, roaring, cumbersome, and terrifying descent, amid a rainstorm of biblical proportions. I collected Mojo, discarding his crate, and leading him boldly into the back of the taxi. And off we drove into the unabated storm, with the mortal driver taking every conceivable risk available to him, as Mojo and I were flung into each other's arms, more or less, over and over again.

It was near midnight when we finally reached the narrow tree-lined streets of uptown, the rain falling so heavily and steadily that the houses behind their iron fences were scarcely visible. When I saw the dismal, abandoned house of Louis's property, crowded by the dark trees, I paid the driver, snatched up the valise, and led Mojo out of the cab into the downpour.

It was cold, yes, very cold, but not as bad as the deep, freezing air of Georgetown. Indeed, even in this icy rain, the dark rich foliage of the giant magnolias and the evergreen oaks seemed to make the world more cheerful and bearable. On the other hand, I had never beheld with mortal eyes a dwelling as forlorn as the great massive abandoned house which stood before Louis's hidden shack.

For one moment as I shaded my eyes from the rain and looked up at those black and empty windows, I felt a terrible irrational fear that no being dwelt in this place, that I was mad, and destined to remain in this weak human body forever.

Mojo leapt the small iron fence just as I leapt it. And together we plowed through the high grass, around the ruins of the old porch, and back into the wet and overgrown garden. The night was full of the noise of the rain, thundering against my mortal ears, and I almost wept when I saw the small house, a great gleaming hulk of wet vines, standing there before me.

In a loud whisper I called Louis's name. I waited. No sound came from within. Indeed the place seemed on the verge of collapse in its decay. Slowly I approached the door. "Louis," I said again. "Louis, it is I, Lestat!"

Cautiously I stepped inside amid the heaps and stacks of dusty objects. Quite impossible to see! Yet I made out the desk, the whiteness of the paper, and the candle standing there, and a small book of matches beside it.

With trembling wet fingers, I struggled to strike a match, and only

after several efforts succeeded. At last I touched it to the wick, and a thin bright light filled all the room, shining upon the red velvet chair which was mine, and the other worn and neglected objects.

A powerful relief coursed through me. I was here! I was almost safe! And I was not mad. This was my world, this awful cluttered unbearable little place! Louis would come. Louis would have to come before long; Louis was almost here. I all but collapsed in the chair in sheer exhaustion. I laid my hands on Mojo, scratching his head, and stroking his ears.

"We've made it, boy," I said. "And soon we'll be after that devil. We'll find a way to deal with him." I realized I was shivering again, indeed, I was feeling the old telltale congestion in my chest. "Good Lord, not again," I said. "Louis, come for the love of heaven, come! Wherever you are, come back here now. I need you."

I was just about to reach into my pocket for one of the many paper handkerchiefs Gretchen had forced upon me, when I realized that a figure was standing exactly at my left, only an inch from the arm of the chair, and that a very smooth white hand was reaching for me. In the same instant, Mojo leapt to his feet, giving forth his worst, most menacing growls, and then appeared to charge the figure.

I tried to cry out, to identify myself, but before my lips were even open, I'd been hurled against the floor, deafened by Mojo's barking, and I felt the sole of a leather boot pressed to my throat, indeed, to the very bones of my neck, crushing them with such force that surely they were about to be broken.

I couldn't speak, nor could I free myself. A great piercing cry came from the dog, and then he, too, fell silent, and I heard the muffled sounds of his large body sinking to the floor. Indeed I felt the weight of him on my legs, and I struggled frantically and helplessly in pure terror. All reason left me as I clawed at the foot pinning me down, as I pounded the powerful leg, as I gasped for breath, only hoarse inarticulate growls coming from me.

Louis, it's Lestat. I'm in the body, the human body.

Harder and harder the foot pressed. I was strangling as the bones were about to be crushed, yet I couldn't utter one syllable to save myself. And above me in the gloom, I saw his face—the subtle gleaming whiteness of the flesh that did not seem at all to be flesh, the exquisitely symmetrical

bones, and the delicate half-closed hand, which hovered in the air, in a perfect attitude of indecision, as the deep-set eyes, fired with a subtle and incandescent green, looked down upon me without the slightest palpable emotion.

With all my soul I cried the words again, but when had he ever been able to divine the thoughts of his victims? I could have done that, but not he! Oh, God help me, Gretchen help me, I was screaming in my soul.

As the foot increased its pressure, perhaps for the final time, all indecision cast aside, I wrenched my head to the right, sucked in one desperate tiny breath, and forced from my constricted throat one hoarse word: "Lestat!" all the while desperately pointing to myself with my right hand and first finger.

It was the last gesture of which I was capable. I was suffocating, and the darkness came rolling over me. Indeed it was bringing a total strangling nausea with it, and just at the moment when I ceased to care in the most lovely light-headed fashion, the pressure ceased, and I found myself rolling over and rising up on my hands, one frantic cough tearing loose from me after another.

"For the love of God," I cried, spitting the words in between my hoarse painful choking breaths, "I'm Lestat. I'm Lestat in this body! Couldn't you have given me a chance to speak? Do you kill any hapless mortal who blunders into your little house? What of the ancient laws of hospitality, you bloody fool! Why the hell don't you put iron bars on your doors!" I struggled to my knees, and suddenly the nausea won out. I vomited a filthy stream of spoiled food into the dirt and the dust, and then shrank back from it, chilled and miserable, staring up at him.

"You killed the dog, didn't you? You monster!" I flung myself forward on Mojo's inert body. But he wasn't dead, merely unconscious, and at once, I felt the slow pumping of his heart. "Oh, thank God, if you'd done that, I would never, never, never have forgiven you."

A faint moan came from Mojo, and then his left paw moved, and then slowly his right. I laid my hand between his ears. Yes, he was coming back. He was unhurt. But oh, what a wretched experience this had been! Here of all places to come to the very brink of mortal death! Enraged again, I glared up at Louis.

How still he was as he stood there, how quietly astonished. The pounding of the rain, the dark lively sounds of the winter night—all

seemed to evaporate suddenly as I looked at him. Never had I seen him with mortal eyes. Never had I beheld this wan, phantom beauty. How could mortals believe this was a human when their eyes passed over him? Ah, the hands—like those of plaster saints come to life in shadowy grottoes. And how utterly devoid of feeling the face, the eyes not windows of the soul at all, but fine jewel-like snares of illumination.

"Louis," I said. "The worst has happened. The very worst. The Body Thief made the switch. But he's stolen my body and has no intention of giving it back to me."

Nothing palpable quickened in him as I spoke. Indeed so lifeless and menacing did he seem, that I suddenly broke into a stream of French, pouring forth every image and detail which I could recall in the hopes of wringing recognition from him. I spoke of our last conversation in this very house, and the brief meeting at the foyer of the Cathedral. I recalled his warning to me that I must not speak to the Body Thief. And I confessed that I had found the man's offer impossible to resist, and had gone north to meet with him, and to accept his proposal.

Still, nothing of vitality sparked the merciless face, and suddenly, I fell silent. Mojo was trying to stand, occasional little moans coming from him, and slowly I wrapped my right arm around his neck, and leaned against him, struggling to catch my breath, and telling him in a soothing voice that everything was fine now, we were saved. No more harm would come to him.

Louis shifted his gaze slowly to the animal, then back to me. Then gradually, the set of his mouth softened ever so slightly. And then he reached for my hand, and pulled me up—quite without my cooperation or consent—to a standing position.

"It really is you," he said in a deep, raw whisper.

"You're damned right it's me. And you nearly killed me, you realize that! How many times will you try that little trick before all the clocks of the earth tick to the finish? I need your help, damn you! And, *once again*, you try to kill me! Now, will you please close whatever shutters still hang on these damned windows, and make a fire of some sort in that miserable little hearth!"

I flopped down again in my red velvet chair, still laboring for breath, and a strange lapping sound suddenly distracted me. I looked up. Louis had not moved. Indeed he was staring at me, as if I were a monster. But

Mojo was patiently and steadily devouring all of the vomit I had spilt upon the floor.

I gave a little delighted laugh, which threatened to become a fit of perfect hysteria.

“Please, Louis, the fire. Make the fire,” I said. “I’m freezing in this mortal body! Move!”

“Good God,” he whispered. “What have you done now!”

EIGHTEEN

It was two by the watch on my wrist. The rain had slackened beyond the broken shutters which covered both doors and windows, and I sat huddled in the red velvet chair, enjoying the little blaze from the brick fireplace, yet badly chilled again, and suffering the same old racking cough. But the moment was at hand, surely, when such a thing would no longer be of concern.

I had poured out the whole tale.

In a frenzy of mortal candor, I had described each and every dreadful and bewildering experience, from my conversations with Raglan James to the very last sad farewell to Gretchen. I had told even of my dreams, of Claudia and me in the long-ago little hospital, of our conversation in the fantasy parlour of the eighteenth-century hotel suite, and of the sad terrible loneliness I'd felt in loving Gretchen, for I knew that she believed at heart that I was mad, and only for that reason had she loved me. She had seen me as some sort of beatific idiot, and no more.

It was finished and done. I had no idea where to find the Body Thief. But I must find him. And this search could only begin when I was once again a vampire, when this tall powerful body was pumped with preternatural blood.

Weak as I would be with only the power Louis could give me, I would nevertheless be some twenty times stronger than I was now, and capable perhaps of summoning help from the others, for who knew what manner of fledgling I would become. Once the body was transformed, surely I'd have some telepathic voice. I could beg Marius for his help; or call out to Armand, or even Gabrielle—as yes, my beloved Gabrielle—for she would no longer be my fledgling, and she could hear me, which in the ordinary scheme of things—if such a word can be used—she could not.

He sat at his desk, as he had the entire time, oblivious to the draughts, of course, and the rain splattering on the slats of the shutters, and listening without a word as I'd spoken, watching with a pained and amazed expression as I'd climbed to my feet and paced in my excitement, as I had rambled on and on.

“Judge me not for my stupidity,” I implored him. I told him again of my ordeal in the Gobi, of my strange conversations with David, and David's vision in the Paris café. “I was in a state of desperation when I did this. You know why I did it. I don’t have to tell you. But now, it must be undone.”

I was now coughing almost continuously, and blowing my nose frantically with those miserable little paper handkerchiefs.

“You cannot imagine how absolutely revolting it is to be in this body,” I said. “Now, please, do it quickly, do it with your greatest skill. It's been a hundred years since you did it last. Thank God for that. The power is not dissipated. I'm ready now. There need be no preparations. When I regain my form, I'll fling him into this one and burn him to a cinder.”

He made no reply.

I stood up, pacing again, this time to keep warm and because a terrible apprehension was taking hold of me. After all, I was about to die, was I not, and be born again, as it had happened over two hundred years ago. Ah, but there would be no pain. No, no pain … only those awful discomforts which were nothing compared to the chest pain I felt now, or the chill knotted in my fingers, or in my feet.

“Louis, for the love of God, be quick,” I said. I stopped and looked at him. “What is it? What's the matter with you.”

In a very low and uncertain voice he answered:

“I cannot do this.”

“What!”

I stared at him, trying to fathom what he meant, what possible doubt he could have, what possible difficulty we must now dispose of. And I realized what a dreadful change had come over his narrow face—that all its smoothness had been lost, and that indeed it was a perfect mask of sorrow. Once again, I realized that I was seeing him as human beings saw him. A faint red shimmer veiled his green eyes. Indeed, his entire form, so seemingly solid and powerful, was trembling.

“I cannot do it, Lestat,” he said again, and all his soul seemed to come out in the words. “I can’t help you!”

“What in the name of God are you saying to me!” I demanded. “I made you. You exist tonight because of me! You love me, you spoke those very words to me. Of course you will help me.”

I rushed towards him, slamming my hands down on the desk and

looking into his face.

"Louis, answer me! What do you mean, you can't do it!"

"Oh, I don't blame you for what you've done. I don't. But can't you see what's happened? Lestat, you have done it. You have been reborn a mortal man."

"Louis, this is no time to sentimentalize the transformation. Don't throw my own words back at me! I was wrong."

"No. You weren't wrong."

"What are you trying to tell me! Louis, we are wasting time. I have to go after that monster! He has my body."

"Lestat, the others will deal with him. Perhaps they already have."

"Already have! What do you mean, already have!"

"Don't you think they know what's happened?" He was deeply distressed but also angry. How the human lines of expression appeared and disappeared in his supple flesh as he spoke. "How could such a thing have taken place without their knowing?" he said, as if he were pleading with me to understand. "You spoke of this Raglan James as a sorcerer. But no sorcerer can veil himself entirely from creatures as powerful as Maharet or her sister, as powerful as Khayman and Marius, or even Armand. And what a clumsy sorcerer—to murder your mortal agent in such a bloody and cruel way." He shook his head, his hands suddenly pressed to his lips. "Lestat, they know! They must know. And it could well be that your body has already been destroyed."

"They wouldn't do that."

"Why wouldn't they? You surrendered an engine of destruction to this demon—"

"But he didn't know how to use it! It was only for thirty-six hours of mortal time! Louis, whatever the case, you must give me the blood. Lecture me afterwards. Work the Dark Trick and I'll find the answers to all these questions. We're wasting precious minutes, hours."

"No, Lestat. We are not. That's my entire point! The question of this Body Thief and the body he stole from you isn't what must concern us here. It's what's happening to you—your soul—in this body now."

"All right. Have it your way. Now make this body a vampire now."

"I can't. Or more truly, I will not."

I rushed at him. I couldn't prevent myself. And in an instant I had both hands on the lapels of his miserable dusty black coat. I pulled at the

cloth, ready to tear him up and out of the chair, but he remained absolutely unmovable, looking at me quietly, his face still stricken and sad. In impotent fury, I let go of him, and stood there, trying to still the confusion in my heart.

"You can't mean what you're saying!" I pleaded, slamming my fists again on the desk in front of him. "How can you deny me this?"

"Will you let me be one who loves you now?" he asked, his voice once again infused with emotion, his face still deeply and tragically sad. "I wouldn't do it no matter how great your misery, no matter how strongly you pleaded, no matter what awful litany of events you set down before me. I wouldn't do it because I will not make another one of us for any reason under God. But you have brought me no great misery! You are not beset by any awful litany of disasters!" He shook his head, overcome as if he couldn't continue, and then: "You have triumphed in this as only you could."

"No, no, you're not understanding …"

"Oh, yes, I am. Do I need to push you in front of a mirror?" He rose slowly from behind the desk and faced me eye-to-eye. "Must I sit you down and make you examine the lessons of the tale I've heard from your own lips? Lestat, you have fulfilled our dream! Don't you see it. You have done it. You have been reborn a mortal man. A strong and beautiful mortal man!"

"No," I said. I backed away from him, shaking my head, my hands up to implore him. "You're mad. You don't know what you're saying. I loathe this body! I loathe being human. Louis, if you have an ounce of compassion in you throw aside these delusions and listen to my words!"

"I've heard you. I've heard it all. Why can't you hear it? Lestat, you've won. You're free from the nightmare. You're alive again."

"I'm miserable!" I cried at him. "Miserable! Dear God, what must I do to convince you?"

"There is nothing. It is I who must convince you. What have you lived in this body? Three? Four days? You speak of discomforts as if they were deathly afflictions; you talk of physical limits as if they were malicious and punitive restraints.

"And yet through all your endless complaining, you yourself have told me that I must refuse you! You yourself have implored me to turn you away! Lestat, why did you tell me the story of David Talbot and his

obsessions with God and the Devil? Why tell me all the things that the nun Gretchen said to you? Why describe the little hospital you saw in your fever dream? Oh, I know it wasn't Claudia who came to you. I don't say God put this woman Gretchen in your path. But you love this woman. By your own admission, you love her. She's waiting for you to return. She can be your guide through the pains and annoyances of this mortal life—"

"No, Louis, you've misunderstood everything. I don't want her to guide me. I don't want this mortal life!"

"Lestat, can't you see the chance you've been given? Can't you see the path laid out for you and the light ahead?"

"I'm going to go mad if you don't stop saying these things …"

"Lestat, what can any of us do to redeem ourselves? And who has been more obsessed with this very question than you?"

"No, no!" I threw my arms up and crossed them, back and forth, repeatedly, as if trying to head off this dump truck of mad philosophy which was driving right down upon me. "No! I tell you, this is false. This is the worst of all lies."

He turned away from me, and again I rushed at him, unable to stop myself, and would have grabbed him by the shoulders and shaken him, but with a gesture too quick for my eye, he hurled me backwards against the chair.

Stunned, one ankle painfully twisted, I fell down on the cushions, and then made my right hand into a fist and drove it into the palm of my left. "Oh, no, not sermons, not now." I was almost weeping. "Not platitudes and pious recommendations."

"Go back to her," he said.

"You're mad!"

"Imagine it," he went on, as if I hadn't spoken, his back turned to me, his eyes fixed perhaps on the distant window, his voice almost inaudible, his dark form outlined against the running silver of the rain. "All the years of inhuman craving, of sinister and remorseless feeding. And you are reborn. And there—in that little jungle hospital you could conceivably save a human life for every one you've ever taken. Oh, what guardian angels look over you. Why are they so merciful? And you come to me and you beg me to bring you back into this horror, yet with every word you affirm the splendour of all you've suffered and seen."

“I bare my soul to you and you use it against me!”

“Oh, I do not, Lestat. I seek to make you look into it. You are begging me to drive you back to Gretchen. Am I perhaps the only guardian angel? Am I the only one who can confirm this fate?”

“You miserable bastard son of a bitch! If you don’t give me the blood …”

He turned around, his face like that of ghost, eyes wide and hideously unnatural in their beauty. “I will not do it. Not now, not tomorrow, not ever. Go back to her, Lestat. Live this mortal life.”

“How dare you make this choice for me!” I was on my feet again, and finished with whining and begging.

“Don’t come at me again,” he said patiently. “If you do, I shall hurt you. And that I don’t wish to do.”

“Ah, you’ve killed me! That’s what you’ve done. You think I believe all your lies! You’ve condemned me to this rotting, stinking, aching body, that’s what you’ve done! You think I don’t know the depth of hatred in you, the true face of retribution when I see it! For the love of God, speak the truth.”

“It isn’t the truth. I love you. But you are blind with impatience now, and overwrought with simple aches and pains. It is you who will never forgive me if I rob you of this destiny. Only it will take time for you to see the true meaning of what I’ve done.”

“No, no, please.” I came towards him, only this time not in anger. I approached slowly, until I could lay my hands on his shoulders and smell the faint fragrance of dust and the grave that clung to his clothes. Lord God, what was our skin that it drew the light to itself so exquisitely? And our eyes. Ah, to look into his eyes.

“Louis,” I said. “I want you to take me. Please, do as I ask you. Leave the interpretations of all my tales to me. Take me, Louis, look at me.” I snatched up his cold, lifeless hand and laid it on my face. “Feel the blood in me, feel the heat. You want me, Louis, you know you do. You want me, you want me in your power the way I had you in my power so long, long ago. I’ll be your fledgling, your child, Louis. Please, do this. Don’t make me beg you on my knees.”

I could sense the change in him, the sudden predatory glaze that covered his eyes. But what was stronger than his thirst? His will.

“No, Lestat,” he whispered. “I can’t do it. Even if I’m wrong and you

are right, and all your metaphors are meaningless, I can't do it."

I took him in my arms, oh, so cold, so unyielding, this monster which I had made out of human flesh. I pressed my lips against his cheek, shuddering as I did so, my fingers sliding around his neck.

He didn't move away from me. He couldn't bring himself to do it. I felt the slow silent heave of his chest against mine.

"Do it to me, please, beautiful one," I whispered in his ear. "Take this heat into your veins, and give me back all the power that I once gave to you." I pressed my lips to his cold, colorless mouth. "Give me the future, Louis. Give me eternity. Take me off this cross."

In the corner of my eye, I saw his hand rise. Then I felt the satin fingers against my cheek. I felt him stroke my neck. "I can't do it, Lestat."

"You can, you know you can," I whispered, kissing his ear as I spoke to him, choking back the tears, my left arm slipping around his waist. "Oh, don't leave me in this misery, don't do it."

"Don't beg me anymore," he said sorrowfully. "It's useless. I'm going now. You won't see me again."

"Louis!" I held fast to him. "You can't refuse me."

"Ah, but I can and I have."

I could feel him stiffening, trying to withdraw without bruising me. I held him ever more tightly, refusing to back away.

"You won't find me again here. But you know where to find her. She's waiting for you. Don't you see your own victory? Mortal again, and so very, very young. Mortal again, and so very, very beautiful. Mortal again, with all your knowledge and with the same indomitable will."

Firmly and easily he removed my arms and pushed me back, closing his hands over mine as he held me away from him.

"Good-bye, Lestat," he said. "Perhaps the others will come to you. In time, when they feel you've paid enough."

I gave one last cry, trying to free my hands, trying to fix upon him, for I knew full well what he meant to do.

In a dark flash of movement, he was gone, and I was lying on the floor.

The candle had fallen over on the desk and had gone out. Only the light of the dying fire filled the little room. And the shutters of the door stood open, and the rain was falling, thin and quiet, yet steady. And I knew I was completely alone.

I had fallen to one side, my hands out before me to break the fall. And as I rose now, I cried out to him, praying that somehow he could hear me, no matter how far away he'd gone.

"Louis, help me. I don't want to be alive. I don't want to be mortal! Louis, don't leave me here! I can't bear it! I don't want it! I don't want to save my soul!"

How long I repeated these themes I don't know. Finally, I was too exhausted to continue; and the sounds of this mortal voice and all its desperation were hurtful to my own ears.

I sat on the floor, one leg crooked beneath me, my elbow resting on my knee, my fingers in my hair. Mojo had come forward, fearfully, and lay now beside me, and I leaned down and pressed my forehead into his fur.

The little fire was almost gone out. The rain hissed and sighed and redoubled its strength, but falling straight from the heavens without a breath of hateful wind.

Finally I looked up at this dark, dismal little place, at its jumble of books and old statues, at the dust and filth everywhere, and at the glowing embers heaped in the little hearth. How weary I was; how seared from my own anger; how close to despair.

Had I ever in all my misery been this completely without hope?

My eyes moved sluggishly to the doorway, and to the steady downpour, and the menacing darkness which lay beyond. Yes, go out in it, you and Mojo, who will of course love it as he loved the snow. You have to go out in it. You have to get out of this absymal little house, and find some comfortable shelter where you can rest.

My rooftop apartment, surely there was some way I could break into it. Surely … some way. And then the sun was coming in a few hours, wasn't it? Ah, this my lovely city, beneath the warm light of the sun.

For God's sake, don't start weeping again. You need to rest and to think.

But first, before you go, why don't you burn down his house! Let the big Victorian alone. He doesn't love it. But burn his little shack!

I could feel myself breaking into an irresistible and malicious smile, even as the tears still hovered in my eyes.

Yes, burn it down! He deserves it. And of course he's taken his writings with him, yes, indeed he has, but all his books will go up in

smoke! And that's exactly what he deserves.

At once I gathered up the paintings—a gorgeous Monet, a couple of small Picassos, and a ruby-red egg tempera panel of the medieval period, all deteriorating badly, of course—and I rushed out and into the old empty Victorian mansion, and stashed these in a darkened corner which seemed both safe and dry.

Then I went back into the little house, snatched up his candle, and thrust it into the remains of the fire. At once the soft ashes exploded with tiny orange sparks; and the sparks fastened themselves upon the wick.

"Oh, you deserve this, you treacherous ungrateful bastard!" I seethed as I put the flame to the books piled against the wall, carefully ruffling their pages to get them going. And then to an old coat thrown over a wooden chair, which went up like straw, and then to the red velvet cushions of the chair that had been mine. Ah, yes, burn it, all of it.

I kicked a pile of moidering magazines beneath his desk and ignited them. I touched the flame to one book after another, and tossed these like flaming coals into all parts of the little house.

Mojo edged away from these little bonfires, and finally went out into the rain, where he stood at a distance, gazing at me through the open door.

Ah, but things were moving too slowly. And Louis has a drawer full of candles; how could I have forgotten them—curse this mortal brain!—and now I drew them out, some twenty of them, and started setting the wax to burning fiercely, never mind the wick, and flinging them into the red velvet chair to make a great heat. I hurled them at the heaps of debris that remained, and I flung burning books at the wet shutters, and ignited the old fragments of curtain which here and there hung forgotten and neglected from old rods. I kicked out holes in the rotted plaster and threw the burning candles in upon the old lathing, and then I leant down and set afire the worn threadbare rugs, wrinkling them to let the air move underneath.

Within minutes the place was full of raging blazes, but the red chair and the desk were the greatest of all. I ran out into the rain, and I saw the fire flickering through the dark broken slats.

A damp ugly smoke rose as the fire licked at the wet shutters, as it curled up and out of the windows into the wet mass of the Queen's

Wreath! Oh, cursed rain! But then as the blaze of the desk and chair grew ever brighter, the entire little building exploded with orange flames! Shutters were blown into the darkness; a great hole burst in the roof.

"Yes, yes, burn!" I shouted, the rain pelting my face, my eyelids. I was practically jumping up and down with joy. Mojo backed towards the darkened mansion, lowering his head. "Burn, burn," I declared. "Louis, I wish I could burn you! I'd do it! Oh, if only I knew where you lie by day!"

But even in my glee I realized I was weeping. I was wiping at my mouth with the back of my hand, and crying. "How could you leave me like this! How could you do it! I curse you." And dissolving into tears, I went down on my knees again against the rainy earth.

I sank back on my heels, hands folded in front of me, beaten and miserable and staring at the great fire. Lights were snapping on in distant houses. I could hear the thin scream of a siren coming. I knew I should go.

Yet still I knelt there, and I felt almost stuporous when Mojo suddenly roused me with one of his deep, most menacing growls. I realized he had come to stand beside me, and was pressing his wet fur to my very face, and that he was peering off towards the burning house.

I moved to catch hold of his collar and was about to retreat when I made out the source of his alarm. It was no helpful mortal. But rather an unearthly and dim white figure standing still as an apparition near the burning building, luridly illuminated by the blaze.

Even with these weak mortal eyes, I saw it was Marius! And I saw the expression of wrath stamped on his face. Never have I seen such a perfect reflection of fury, and there was not the slightest doubt that it was what he meant for me to see.

My lips parted but my voice had died in my throat. All I could do was stretch out my arms to him, to send from my heart a silent plea for mercy and for help.

Again the dog gave his fierce warning and seemed about to spring.

And as I watched helplessly, and trembling uncontrollably, the figure turned its back slowly, and giving me one last angry, disdainful look, disappeared.

It was then that I sprang to life, crying his name. "Marius!" I rose to

my feet, calling louder and louder. “Marius, don’t leave me here. Help me!” I reached up into the skies. “Marius,” I roared.

But it was useless and I knew it.

The rain soaked through my coat. It soaked into my shoes. My hair was slick and wet with it, and it didn’t matter now whether or not I’d been crying, because the rain had washed away the tears.

“You think I’m defeated,” I whispered. What need was there to shout for him? “You think you’ve passed your judgment, and that’s the end of it. Oh, you think it is as simple as that. Well you are wrong. I shall never have vengeance for this moment. But you will see me again. You will see me again.”

I bowed my head.

The night was full of mortal voices, the sounds of running feet. A great noisy engine had come to a halt on the distant corner. I had to force these miserable mortal limbs to move.

I motioned for Mojo to follow, and off we crept past the ruins of the little house, still burning merrily, and over a low garden wall and through an overgrown alley and away.

Only later did I think how close we had probably come to capture—the mortal arsonist and his menacing dog.

But how could such a thing matter? Louis had cast me out, and so had Marius—Marius, who might find my preternatural body before I did, and destroy it on the spot. Marius, who might already have destroyed it so that I was left forever within this mortal frame.

Oh, if ever I’d known such misery in my mortal youth, I didn’t remember it. And if I had, it would have been little consolation to me now. As for my fear, it was unspeakable! Reason couldn’t compass it. Round and round I went with my hopes and feeble plans.

“I have to find the Body Thief, I have to find him and you must give me time, Marius, if you will not help me, you must grant me that much.”

Over and over I said it like the Hail Mary of a rosary as I trudged on through the bitter rain.

Once or twice I even shouted my prayers in the darkness, standing beneath a high dripping oak tree, and trying to see the approaching light coming down through the wet sky.

Who in all the world would help me?

David was my only hope, though what he could do to help me, I couldn't even imagine. David! And what if he, too, turned his back on me?

NINETEEN

I was sitting in the Café du Monde as the sun came up, thinking, how shall I get into my rooftop rooms? This little problem was preventing me from losing my mind. Was that the key to mortal survival? Hmmm. How to breach my luxurious little apartment? I myself had fitted the entry to the roof garden with an impassable iron gate. I myself secured the doors of the penthouse itself with numerous and complex locks. Indeed, the windows were barred against intruding mortals, though how they could have possibly reached the windows, I never truly considered before.

Ah, well, I shall have to get through the gate. I shall work some verbal magic on the other tenants of the building—all tenants of the blond Frenchman Lestat de Lioncourt, who treats them very well, I might add. I shall convince them I am a French cousin of the landlord, sent to take care of the penthouse in his absence, and that I must be allowed in at all costs. Never mind that I must use a crowbar! Or an ax! Or a buzz saw. Only a technicality, as they say in this age. I must get in.

And then what will I do? Pick up a kitchen knife—for the place has such things, though God knows I never had need of a kitchen—and slit my mortal throat?

No. Call David. There is no one else in this world to whom you can turn, and oh, think of the dreadful things David is going to say!

When I ceased to think of all this, I fell immediately into the crushing despair.

They had cast me out. Marius. Louis. In my worst folly, they had refused me help. Oh, I had mocked Marius, true. I had refused his wisdom, his company, his rules.

Oh, yes, I had asked for it, as mortals so often declare. And I had done this despicable thing of letting loose the Body Thief with my powers. True. Guilty again of spectacular blunders and experiments. But had I ever dreamed of what it would truly mean to be stripped utterly of my powers and on the outside looking in? The others knew; they must know. And they had let Marius come to render the judgment, to let me know that for what I had done, I was cast out!

But Louis, my beautiful Louis, how *could* he have spurned me! I would have defied heaven to help Louis! I had so counted upon Louis, I had so counted upon waking this night with the old blood running powerful and true in my veins.

Oh, Lord God—I was no longer one of them. I was not anything but this mortal man, sitting here in the smothering warmth of the café, drinking this coffee—ah, yes, nice-tasting coffee, of course—and munching on the sugar doughnuts with no hope of ever regaining his glorious place in the dark Elohim.

Ah, how I hated them. How I wished to harm them! But who was to blame for all this? Lestat—now six feet two inches tall, with brown eyes and rather dark skin and a nice mop of wavy brown hair; Lestat, with muscular arms and strong legs, and another severe mortal chill sickening and weakening him; Lestat, with his faithful dog, Mojo—Lestat pondering how in the world he would catch the demon who had run off, not with his soul as so often happens, but with his body, a body which might have already been—don't think of it—destroyed!

Reason told me it was a little too early to plot anything. Besides, I have never had a deep interest in revenge. Revenge is the concern of those who are at some point or other beaten. I am not beaten, I told myself. No, not beaten. And victory is far more interesting to contemplate than revenge.

Ah, best to think of little things, things which can be changed. David had to listen to me. He had at least to give me his advice! But what else could he give? How could two mortal men go after that despicable creature. Ahhh …

And Mojo was hungry. He was looking up at me with his large clever brown eyes. How people in the café stared at him; what a wide berth they gave him, this ominous furry creature with his dark muzzle, tender pink-lined ears, and enormous paws. Really ought to feed Mojo. After all, the old cliché was true. This great hunk of dog flesh was my only friend!

Did Satan have a dog when they hurled him down into hell? Well, the dog would probably have gone with him, that much I knew.

"How do I do it, Mojo?" I asked. "How does a mere mortal catch the Vampire Lestat? Or have the old ones burnt my beautiful body to ashes? Was that the meaning of Marius's visit, to let me know it was done?

Oooooh, God. What does the witch say in that ghastly film? How could you do this to my beautiful wickedness. Aaah, I have a fever again, Mojo. Things are going to take care of themselves. I'M GOING TO DIE!"

But Lord in heaven, behold the sun crashing down silently on the dirty pavements, look at my shabby and charming New Orleans waking to the beauteous Caribbean light.

"Let's go, Mojo. Time to break and enter. And then we can be warm and we can rest."

Stopping by the restaurant opposite the old French Market, I bought a mess of bones and meat for him. Surely it would do. Indeed, the kindly little waitress filled a sack with scraps from last night's garbage, with the lusty little affirmation that the dog was going to like that a lot! What about me? Didn't I want some breakfast? Wasn't I hungry on a beautiful winter morning like this?

"Later, darling." I placed a large bill in her hand. I was still rich, that was one consolation. Or at least I thought I was. I wouldn't know for certain until I reached my computer, and tracked the activities of the loathsome swindler for myself.

Mojo consumed his meal in the gutter without a single solitary complaint. That's a dog for you. Why wasn't I born a dog?

Now, where the hell was my penthouse apartment! I had to stop and to think, and then to wander two blocks out of my way, and back again before I found it, getting colder by the minute, though the sky was blue and the sun very bright now, for I almost never entered the building from the street.

Getting into the building was very easy. Indeed the door on Dumaine Street was very simple to force and then slam shut. Ah, but that gate, that will be the worst part, I thought, as I dragged my heavy legs up the stairs, one flight after another, Mojo waiting kindly at the landings for me to catch up.

At last I saw the bars of the gate, and the lovely sunlight streaming into the stairwell from the roof garden, and the flutter of the large green elephant ears, which were only a little bruised at the edges from the cold.

But this lock, how would I ever break this lock? I was in the process of estimating what tools I would need—how about a small bomb?—when I realized that I was looking at the door to my apartment some fifty feet

away, and that it was not closed.

"Ah, God, the wretch has been here!" I whispered. "Damn him, Mojo, he's sacked my lair."

Of course that might be construed as a hopeful sign. The wretch still lived; the others hadn't done away with him. And I could still catch him! But how. I kicked the gate, sending a riot of pain through my foot and leg.

Then I grabbed hold of it and rattled it mercilessly but it was as secure in its old iron hinges as I had designed it to be! A weak revenant such as Louis couldn't have broken it, let alone a mortal man. Undoubtedly the fiend had never even touched it but made his entry as I did, out of the skies.

All right, stop this. Obtain some tools and do it quickly, and discover the extent of the damage which the fiend has done.

I turned to go, but just as I did so, Mojo stood at attention and gave his warning growl. Someone was moving inside the apartment. I saw a bit of shadow dance on the foyer wall.

Not the Body Thief, that was impossible, thank God. But who?

In an instant the question was answered. David appeared! My beautiful David, dressed in a dark tweed suit and overcoat and peering at me with his characteristic expression of curiosity and alertness over the length of the garden path. I don't think I have ever been so glad to see another mortal being in all my long accursed life.

I called his name at once. And then in French declared that it was I, Lestat. Please open the gate.

He did not immediately respond. Indeed, never had he seemed so dignified, self-possessed and so truly the elegant British gentleman as he stood there, staring at me, his narrow heavily lined face registering nothing but mute shock. He stared at the dog. Then he stared at me again. And then once more at the dog.

"David, it's Lestat, I swear to you!" I cried in English. "This is the body of the mechanic! Remember the photograph! James did it, David. I'm trapped in this body. What can I tell you to make you believe me? David, let me in."

He remained motionless. Then all of a sudden, he came forward with swift determined steps, his face quite unreadable as he stopped before the gate.

I was near to fainting with happiness. I clung to the bars still, with both hands as if I were in prison, and then I realized I was staring directly into his eyes—that for the first time we were the same height.

"David, you don't know how glad I am to see you," I said, lapsing into French again. "How did you ever get in? David, it's Lestat. It's me. Surely you believe me. You recognize my voice. David, God and the Devil in the Paris café! Who else knows but me!"

But it was not my voice to which he responded; he was staring into my eyes, and listening as if to distant sounds. Then quite suddenly his entire manner was altered and I saw the clear signs of recognition in his face.

"Oh, thank heaven," he said with a small, very polite British sigh.

He reached into his pocket for a small case, quickly removing from it a thin piece of metal which he inserted into the lock. I knew enough of the world to realize this was a burglar's tool of some sort. He swung the gate back for me, and then opened his arms.

Our embrace was long and warm and silent, and I fought furiously not to give way to tears. Only very seldom in all this time had I ever actually touched this being. And the moment was charged with an emotion which caught me somewhat off guard. The drowsy warmth of my embraces with Gretchen came back to me. I felt safe. And just for an instant, perhaps, I did not feel so utterly alone.

But there was no time now to enjoy this solace.

Reluctantly, I drew back, and thought again how splendid David looked. Indeed, so impressive was he to me that I could almost believe I was as young as the body I now inhabited. I needed him so.

All the little flaws of age which I naturally saw in him through my vampire eyes were invisible. The deep lines of his face seemed but part of his great expressive personality, along with the quiet light in his eyes. He looked entirely vigorous as he stood there in his very proper attire, the little gold watch chain glittering on his tweed waistcoat—so very solid and resourceful and grave.

"You know what the bastard's done," I said. "He's tricked me and abandoned me. And the others have also abandoned me. Louis, Marius. They've turned their backs on me. I'm marooned in this body, my friend. Come, I have to see if the monster has robbed my rooms."

I hurried towards the apartment door, scarce hearing the few words he

uttered, to the effect that he thought the place was quite undisturbed.

He was right. The fiend had not rifled the apartment! Everything was exactly as I'd left it, down to my old velvet coat hanging on the open closet door. There was the yellow pad on which I'd made notes before my departure. And the computer. Ah, I had to go into the computer immediately and discover the extent of his thievery. And my Paris agent, the poor man might still be in danger. I must contact him at once.

But I was distracted by the light pouring through the glass walls, the soft warm splendour of the sun spilling down upon the dark couches and chairs, and on the lush Persian carpet with its pale medallion and wreaths of roses, and even upon the few large modern paintings—furious abstracts all—which I had long ago chosen for these walls. I felt myself shudder at the sight of it, marveling again that electric illumination could never produce this particular sense of well-being which filled me now.

I also noted that there was a blazing fire going in the large white-tiled fireplace—David's doing, no doubt—and the smell of coffee coming from the nearby kitchen, a room I had scarce entered in the years I had inhabited this place.

At once David stammered an apology. He hadn't even checked into his hotel, so anxious was he to find me. He'd come here direct from the airport, and only gone out for a few little provisions so that he might spend a comfortable night keeping watch that I might come or think to call.

"Wonderful, very glad that you did," I said, a little amused by his British politeness. I was so glad to see him, and here he was apologizing for making himself at home.

I tore off the wet overcoat and sat down at the computer.

"This will take only a moment," I said, keying in the various commands, "and then I'll tell you about everything. But what made you come? Did you suspect what happened!"

"Of course I did," he said. "Don't you know of the vampire murder in New York? Only a monster could have wrecked those offices. Lestat, why didn't you call me? Why didn't you ask my help?"

"One moment," I said. Already the little letters and figures were coming up on the screen. My accounts were in order. Had the fiend been into this system, I would have seen preprogrammed signals of invasion

throughout. Of course there was no way to know for certain that he hadn't attacked my accounts in European banks until I went into their files. And damn, I couldn't remember the code words, and in fact, I was having a difficult time managing the simplest commands.

"He was right," I muttered. "He warned me my thinking processes wouldn't be the same." I switched from the finances program into Wordstar, my means of writing, and immediately typed out a communication to my Paris agent, sending it through the phone modem, asking him for an immediate status report, and reminding him to take the utmost personal care as to his own safety. Over and out.

I sat back, heaving a deep breath, which immediately brought on a little fit of coughing, and realized that David was staring at me as if the sight were too shocking for him to absorb. Indeed, it was almost comical the way he was looking at me. Then again, he looked at Mojo, who was inspecting the place silently and a little sluggishly, eyes turning to me over and over for some command.

I snapped my fingers for Mojo to come to me and gave him a deep strong hug. David watched all this as if it were the weirdest thing in the world.

"Good Lord, you are really in that body," he whispered. "Not just hovering inside, but anchored into the cells."

"You're telling me," I said disgustedly. "It's dreadful, the whole mess. And the others won't help, David. I'm cast out." I gritted my teeth in rage. "Cast out!" I went into a seething growl which inadvertently excited Mojo so that he at once licked my face.

"Of course I deserve it," I said, stroking Mojo. "That's the simplest thing about dealing with me, apparently. I always deserve the worst! The worst disloyalty, the worst betrayal, the worst abandonment! Lestat the scoundrel. Well, they have left this scoundrel entirely on his own."

"I've been frantic to reach you," he said, his voice at once controlled and subdued. "Your agent in Paris swore he couldn't help me. I was going to try that address in Georgetown." He pointed to the yellow pad on the table. "Thank God you're here."

"David, my worst fear is that the others have destroyed James and my body with him. This may be the only body I now possess."

"No, I don't think so," he said with convincing equanimity. "Your little body borrower has left quite a trail. But come, get out of these wet

clothes. You're catching cold."

"What do you mean, trail?"

"You know we keep track of such crimes. Now, please, the clothes."

"More crimes after New York?" I asked excitedly. I let him coax me towards the fireplace, immediately glad of the warmth. I pulled off the damp sweater and shirt. Of course there was nothing to fit me in my various closets. And I realized I had forgotten my valise somewhere on Louis's property last night. "New York was Wednesday night, was it not?"

"My clothes will fit you," David said, immediately snatching the thought from my mind. He headed for a mammoth leather suitcase in the corner.

"What's happened? What makes you think it's James?"

"Has to be," he answered, popping open the suitcase and removing several folded garments, and then a tweed suit very like his own, still on its hanger, which he laid over the nearest chair. "Here, change into these. You're going to catch your death."

"Oh, David," I said, continuing to undress. "I've almost caught my death repeatedly. In fact, I've spent my whole brief mortal life nearly dying. The care of this body is a revolting nuisance; how do living people endure this endless cycle of eating, pissing, sniveling, defecating, and then eating again! When you mix in fever, headache, attacks of coughing, and a runny nose, it becomes a penitential sentence. And prophylactics, good Lord. Removing the ugly little things is worse than having to put them on! Whatever made me think I wanted to do this! The other crimes—when did they take place! When is more important than where."

He had fallen into staring at me again, too purely shocked to answer. Mojo was giving him the eye now, sizing him up more or less, and offering a friendly lick of his pink tongue to David's hand. David petted him lovingly, but continued to stare blankly at me.

"David," I said, as I took off the wet socks. "Speak to me. The other crimes! You said that James had left a trail."

"It's so wildly uncanny," he said in a stunned voice. "I have a dozen pictures of this face. But to see you inside it. Oh, I simply couldn't imagine it. Not at all."

"When did this fiend strike last?"

"Ah … The last report was from the Dominican Republic. That was, let

me see, two nights ago."

"Dominican Republic! Why in the world would he go there?"

"Exactly what I would like to know. Before that he struck near Bal Harbour in Florida. Both times it was a high-rise condominium, and entry was the same as in New York—through the glass wall. Furniture smashed to pieces at all three crime scenes; wall safes ripped from their moorings; bonds, gold, jewelry taken. One man dead in New York, a bloodless corpse, of course. Two women left drained in Florida, and a family killed in Santo Domingo, with only the father drained in classic vampire style."

"He can't control his strength. He's blundering about like a robot!"

"Exactly what I thought. It was the combination of destructiveness and sheer force which first alerted me. The creature's unbelievably inept! And the whole operation is so stupid. But what I can't figure is why he's chosen these locations for his various thefts." Suddenly he broke off and turned away, almost shyly.

I realized I had stripped off all the garments and was standing there naked, and this had produced in him a strange reticence, and a near blush to his face.

"Here, dry socks," he said. "Don't you know better than to go about in soaking wet garments?" He tossed the socks to me without looking up.

"I don't know much of anything," I said. "That's what I've discovered. I see what you mean about the locations. Why in the world would he journey to the Caribbean when he might steal to his heart's content in the suburbs of Boston or New York?"

"Yes. Unless the cold is giving him considerable discomfort, but does that make sense?"

"No. He doesn't feel it that keenly. It's just not the same."

It felt good to pull on the dry shirt and pants. And these garments did fit, though they were loose in a rather old-fashioned way—not the slim tailored clothes more popular with the young. The shirt was heavy broadcloth, and the tweed pants were pleated, but the waistcoat felt snug and warm.

"Here, I can't tie this tie with mortal fingers," I declared. "But why am I dressing up like this, David? Don't you ever go around in anything casual, as the expression goes? Good Lord, we look like we're going to a funeral. Why must I wear this noose around my neck?"

“Because you’ll look foolish in a tweed suit without it,” he answered in a slightly distracted voice. “Here, let me help you.” Once again, he had that shy look about him as he drew close to me. I realized that he was powerfully drawn to this body. In the old one, I had amazed him; but this body truly ignited his passion. And as I studied him closely, as I felt the busy work of his fingers on the knot of the tie—that keen little pressure—I realized that I was powerfully attracted to him.

I thought of all the times I’d wanted to take him, enfold him in my arms, and sink my teeth slowly and tenderly into his neck, and drink his blood. Ah, now I might have him in a sense without having him—in the mere human tangling with his limbs, in whatever combination of intimate gestures and delectable little embraces he might like. And I might like.

The idea paralyzed me. It sent a soft chill over the surface of my human skin. I felt *connected* to him, connected as I had been to the sad unfortunate young woman whom I’d raped, to the wandering tourists of the snow-covered capital city, my brothers and sisters—connected as I had been to my beloved Gretchen.

Indeed so strong was this awareness—of being human and being with a human—that I feared it suddenly in all its beauty. And I saw that the fear was part of the beauty.

Ah, yes, I was mortal now as he was. I flexed my fingers, and slowly straightened my back, letting the chill become a deep erotic sensation.

He broke away from me abruptly, alarmed and vaguely determined, picked up the jacket from the chair, and helped me to put it on.

“You have to tell me all that’s happened to you,” he said. “And within an hour or so we may have news from London, that is, if the bastard has struck again.”

I reached out and clamped my weak, mortal hand on his shoulder, drew him to me, and kissed him softly on the side of his face. Once again, he backed away.

“Stop all this nonsense,” he said, as if reproving a child. “I want to know everything. Now, have you had breakfast? You need a handkerchief. Here.”

“How will we get this news from London?”

“Fax from the Motherhouse to the hotel. Now come, let’s have something to eat together. We have a day of work ahead to figure this all

out."

"If he isn't already dead," I said with a sigh. "Two nights ago in Santo Domingo." I was again filled with a crushing and black despair. The delicious and frustrating erotic impulse was threatened.

David removed a long wool scarf from the suitcase. He placed this around my neck.

"Can't you call London again now by phone?" I asked.

"It's a bit early, but I'll give it a try."

He found the phone beside the couch, and was in fast conversation with someone across the sea for about five minutes. No news yet.

Police in New York, Florida, and Santo Domingo were not in communication with each other, apparently, as no connections regarding these crimes had yet been made.

At last he hung up. "They'll fax information to the hotel as soon as they receive it. Let's go there, shall we? I myself am famished. I've been here all night long, waiting. Oh, and that dog. What will you do with that splendid dog?"

"He's had breakfast. He'll be happy in the roof garden. You're very anxious to be out of these rooms, aren't you? Why don't we simply get into bed together? I don't understand."

"You're serious?"

I shrugged. "Of course." Serious! I was beginning to be obsessed with this simple little possibility. Making love before anything else happened. Seemed like a perfectly marvelous idea!

Again, he fell to staring at me in maddening trancelike silence.

"You do realize," he said, "that this is an absolutely magnificent body, don't you? I mean, you aren't insensible to the fact that you've been deposited in a … a most impressive piece of young male flesh."

"I looked it over well before the switch, remember? Why is it you don't want to …"

"You've been with a woman, haven't you?"

"I wish you wouldn't read my mind. It's rude. Besides, what does that matter to you?"

"A woman you loved."

"I have always loved both men and women."

"That's a slightly different use of the word 'love.' Listen, we simply can't do it now. So behave yourself. I must hear everything about this

creature James. It's going to take us time to make a plan."

"A plan. You really think we can stop him?"

"Of course I do!" He beckoned for me to come.

"But how?" I asked. We were going out the door.

"We must look at the creature's behavior. We must assess his weaknesses and his strengths. And remember there are two of us against him. And we have a powerful advantage."

"But what advantage?"

"Lestat, clear your mortal brain of all these rampant erotic images and come. I can't think on an empty stomach, and obviously you're not thinking straight at all."

Mojo came padding to the gate to follow us, but I told him to stay.

I kissed him tenderly on the side of his long black nose, and he lay down on the wet concrete, and merely peered at me in solemn disappointed fashion as we went down the stairs.

It was only a matter of several blocks to the hotel, and the walk beneath the blue sky was not intolerable, even with the biting wind. I was too cold, however, to begin my story, and also the sight of the sunlighted city kept tearing me out of my thoughts.

Once again, I was impressed with the carefree attitudes of the people who roamed by day. All the world seemed blessed in this light, regardless of the temperature. And a sadness was growing in me as I beheld it, because I really didn't want to remain in this sunlighted world no matter how beautiful it was.

No, give me back my preternatural vision, I thought. Give me back the dark beauty of the world by night. Give me back my unnatural strength and endurance, and I shall cheerfully sacrifice this spectacle forever. The Vampire Lestat—*c'est moi.*

Stopping at the hotel desk, David left word that we would be in the coffee shop, and any fax material which came in must be brought to us at once.

Then we settled at a quiet white-draped table in the corner of the vast old-fashioned room with its fancy plaster ceiling and white silk draperies, and commenced to devour an enormous New Orleans breakfast of eggs, biscuits, fried meats, gravy, and thick buttery grits.

I had to confess that the food situation had improved with the journey south. Also I was better at eating now, and wasn't choking so much, or scraping my tongue on my own teeth. The thick syrupy coffee of my home city was past perfection. And the dessert of broiled bananas and sugar was enough to bring any sensible human being to his knees.

But in spite of these tantalizing delights, and my desperate hope that we would soon have a report from London, my main concern was that of pouring out for David the entire woeful tale. Again, and again, he pushed for details, and interrupted me with questions, so it became in fact a far more thorough account than I had ever given Louis, and one that wrung from me considerably more pain.

It was agony to relive my naive conversation with James in the town house, to confess that I had not cared sufficiently to be suspicious of him, that I'd been too satisfied that a mere mortal could never trick me.

And then came the shameful rape, the poignant account of my time with Gretchen, the awful nightmares of Claudia, and the parting from Gretchen to come home to Louis, who misunderstood all that I laid before him, and insisted upon his own interpretation of my words as he refused to give me what I sought.

No small part of the pain was that my anger had left me, and I felt only the old crushing grief. I saw Louis again in my mind's eye, and he was not my tender, embraceable lover any longer, so much as an unfeeling angel who had barred me from the Dark Court.

"I understand why he refused," I said dully, barely able to speak about it. "Perhaps I should have known. And very truly, I can't believe he will hold out against me forever. He's simply carried away with this sublime idea of his that I ought to go save my soul. It's what he would do, you see. And yet, in a way, he himself would never do it. And he's never understood me. Never. That's why he described me so vividly yet poorly in his book over and over again. If I am trapped in this body, if it becomes quite plain to him that I don't intend to go off into the jungles of French Guiana with Gretchen, I think he will give in to me eventually. Even though I did burn his house. It might take years, of course! Years in this miserable—"

"You're getting furious again," said David. "Calm down. And what in the world do you mean—you burnt his house."

"I was angry!" I said in a tense whisper. "My God. Angry. That isn't

even the word."

I thought I had been too unhappy to be angry. I realized this wasn't so. But I was too unhappy to carry the point further. I took another bracing swallow of the thick black coffee and as best I could, I went on to describe how I had seen Marius by the light of the burning shack. Marius had wanted for me to see him. Marius had rendered a judgment, and I did not know truly what that judgment was.

Now the cold despair did come over me, obliterating the anger quite completely, and I stared listlessly at the plate before me, at the half-empty restaurant with its shining silver and napkins folded at so many empty places like little hats. I looked beyond to the muted lights of the lobby, with that awful gloom closing upon everything, and then I looked at David, who for all his character, his sympathy, and his charm was not the marvelous being he would have been to me with my vampire eyes, but only another mortal, frail and living on the edge of death as I did.

I felt dull and miserable. I could say no more.

"Listen to me," said David. "I don't believe that your Marius has destroyed this creature. He would not have revealed himself to you if he'd done such a thing. I can't imagine the thoughts or feelings of such a being. I can't even imagine yours, and I know you as I know my dearest and oldest friends. But I don't believe he would do it. He came to display his anger, to refuse assistance, and that was his judgment, yes. But I wager he's giving you time to recover your body. And you must remember: however you perceived his expression, you saw it through a human being's eyes."

"I've considered this," I said listlessly. "To tell the truth, what else can I do but believe that my body is still there to be reclaimed?" I shrugged. "I don't know how to give up."

He smiled at me, a lovely deep warm smile.

"You've had a splendid adventure," he said. "Now before we plot to catch this glorified purse snatcher, allow me to ask you a question. And don't lose your temper, please. I can see that you don't know your own strength in this body any more than you did in the other."

"Strength? What strength! This is a weak, flopping, sloshy, repulsive collection of nerves and ganglia. Don't even mention the word 'strength.' "

"Nonsense. You're a big strapping healthy young male of some one

hundred and ninety pounds, without an ounce of spare fat on you! You have fifty years of mortal life ahead of you. For the love of heaven, realize what advantages you possess."

"All right. All right. It's jolly. So happy to be alive!" I whispered, because if I hadn't whispered, I would have howled. "And I could be smashed by a truck outside in the street at half past noon today! Good God, David, don't you think I despise myself that I cannot endure these simple trials? I hate it. I hate being this weak and cowardly creature!"

I sat back in the chair, eyes roving the ceiling, trying not to cough or sneeze or weep or make a fist out of my right hand which I might drive through the tabletop or perhaps the nearby wall. "I loathe cowardice!" I whispered.

"I know," he said kindly. He studied me for a few quiet moments, and then blotted his lips with his napkin, and reached for his coffee. Then he spoke again. "Assuming that James is still running about in your old body, you are absolutely certain that you want to make the switch back into it—that you *do* want to be Lestat in his old body again."

I laughed sadly to myself. "How can I make that any plainer?" I asked wearily. "*How* in the hell *can* I make the switch again! That is the question upon which my sanity depends."

"Well, first we must locate James. We shall devote our entire energy to finding him. We shall not give up until we are convinced that there is no James to be found."

"Again, you're making it sound so simple! How can such a thing be done?"

"Shhh, you're attracting needless attention," he said with quiet authority. "Drink the orange juice. You need it. I'll order some more."

"I don't need the orange juice and I don't need any more nursing," I said. "Are you seriously suggesting that we have a chance of catching this fiend?"

"Lestat, as I told you before—think on the most obvious and unchangeable limitation of your former state. A vampire cannot move about in the day. A vampire is almost entirely helpless in the day. Granted, there is a reflex to reach out for and harm anyone disturbing his rest. But otherwise, he is helpless. And for some eight to twelve hours he must remain in one place. That gives us the traditional advantage, especially since we know so much about the being in question. And all

we require is an opportunity to confront the creature, and confuse him sufficiently for the switch to be made."

"We can force it?"

"Yes, I know that we can. He can be knocked loose from that body long enough for you to get in."

"David, I must tell you something. In this body I have no psychic power at all. I didn't have any when I was a mortal boy. I don't think I can … rise out of this body. I tried once in Georgetown. I couldn't budge from the flesh."

"Anyone can do this little trick, Lestat; you were merely afraid. And some of what you learned in the vampiric body, you now carry with you. Obviously the preternatural cells gave you an advantage, but the mind itself does hot forget. Obviously James took his mental powers from body to body. You must have taken some part of your knowledge with you as well."

"Well, I was frightened. I've been afraid to try since—afraid I'd get out and then couldn't get back in."

"I'll teach you how to rise out of the body. I'll teach you how to make a concerted assault upon James. And remember, there are two of us, Lestat. You and I together will make the assault. And I do have considerable psychic power, to use the simplest descriptive words for it. There are many things which I can do."

"David, I shall be your slave for eternity in exchange for this. Anything you wish I will get for you. I shall go to the ends of the earth for you. If only this can be done."

He hesitated as if he wanted to make some small jesting comment, but then thought the better of it. And went right on.

"We will begin with our lessons as soon as we can. But the more I consider it, I think it's best I jolt him out of the body. I can do it before he even realizes that you are there. Yes, that must be our game plan. He won't suspect me when he sees me. I can veil my thoughts from him easily enough. And that's another thing you must learn, to veil your thoughts."

"But what if he recognizes you. David, he knows who you are. He remembers you. He spoke of you. What's to stop him from burning you alive the minute he sees you?"

"The place where the meeting occurs. He won't risk a little

conflagration too near his person. And we shall be sure to ensnare him where he would not dare to show his powers at all. We may have to lure him into position. This requires thinking. And until we know how to find him, well, that part can wait."

"We approach him in a crowd."

"Or very near to sunrise, when he cannot risk a fire near his lair."

"Exactly."

"Now, let's try to make a fair assessment of his powers from the information we have in hand."

He paused as the waiter swooped down upon the table with one of those beautiful heavy silver-plated coffeepots which hotels of quality always possess. They have a patina like no other silver, and always several tiny little dents. I watched the black brew coming out of the little spout.

Indeed, I realized I was watching quite a few little things as we sat there, anxious and miserable though I was. Merely being with David gave me hope.

David took a hasty sip of the fresh cup as the waiter went away, and then reached into the pocket of his coat. He placed in my hand a little bundle of thin sheets of paper. "These are newspaper stories of the murders. Read them carefully. Tell me anything that comes to your mind."

The first story, "Vampire Murder in Midtown," enraged me beyond words. I noted the wanton destruction which David had described. Had to be clumsiness, to smash the furniture so stupidly. And the theft—how silly in the extreme. As for my poor agent, his neck had been broken as he'd been drained of his blood. More clumsiness.

"It's a wonder he can use the power of flight at all," I said angrily. "Yet here, he went through the wall on the thirtieth floor."

"That doesn't mean he can use the power over really great distances," David replied.

"But how then did he get from New York to Bal Harbour in one night, and more significantly, why? If he is using commercial aircraft, why go to Bal Harbour instead of Boston? Or Los Angeles, or Paris, for heaven's sakes. Think of the high stakes for him were he to rob a great museum, an immense bank? Santo Domingo I don't understand. Even if he has mastered the power of flight, it can't be easy for him. So why on earth

would he go there? Is he merely trying to scatter the kills so that no one will put together all the cases?"

"No," said David. "If he really wanted secrecy, he wouldn't operate in this spectacular style. He's blundering. He's behaving as if he's intoxicated!"

"Yes. And it does feel that way in the beginning, truly it does. You're overcome by the effect of your heightened senses."

"Is it possible that he is traveling through the air and merely striking wherever the winds carry him?" David asked. "That there is no pattern at all?"

I was considering the question as I read the other reports slowly, frustrated that I could not scan them as I would have done with my vampire eyes. Yes, more clumsiness, more stupidity. Human bodies crushed by "a heavy instrument," which was of course simply his fist.

"He likes to break glass, doesn't he?" I said. "He likes to surprise his victims. He must enjoy their fear. He leaves no witnesses. He steals everything of obvious value. And none of it is very valuable at all. How I hate him. And yet … I have done things as terrible myself."

I remembered the villain's conversations with me. How I had failed to see through his gentlemanly manner! But David's early descriptions of him, of his stupidity, and his self-destructiveness, also came back. And his clumsiness, how could I ever forget that?

"No," I said, finally. "I don't believe he can cover these distances. You have no idea how terrifying this power of flight can be. It's twenty times more terrifying than out-of-body travel. All of us loathe it. Even the roar of the wind induces a helplessness, a dangerous abandon, so to speak."

I paused. We know this flight in our dreams, perhaps because we knew it in some celestial realm beyond this earth before we were ever born. But we can't conceive of it as earthly creatures, and only I could know how it had damaged and torn my heart and soul.

"Go on, Lestat. I'm listening. I understand."

I gave a little sigh. "I learnt this power only because I was in the grip of one who was fearless," I said, "for whom it was nothing. There are those of us who never use this power. No. I can't believe he's mastered it. He's traveling by some other means and then taking to the air only when the prey is near at hand."

"Yes, that would seem to square with the evidence, if only we knew—"

He was suddenly distracted. An elderly hotel clerk had just appeared in the distant doorway. He came towards us with maddening slowness, a genial kindly man with a large envelope in his hand.

At once David brought a bill out of his pocket, and held it in readiness.

"Fax, sir, just in."

"Ah, thank you so much."

He tore open the envelope.

"Ah, here we are. News wire via Miami. A hilltop villa on the island of Curaçao. Probable time early yesterday evening, not discovered till four a.m. Five persons found dead."

"Curaçao! Where the hell is that?"

"This is even more baffling. Curaçao is a Dutch island—very far south in the Caribbean. Now, that really makes no sense at all."

We scanned the story together. Once again robbery was apparently the motive. The thief had come crashing through a skylight, and had demolished the contents of two rooms. The entire family had been killed. Indeed, the sheer viciousness of the crime had left the island in the grip of terror. There had been two bloodless corpses, one that of a small child.

"Surely the devil isn't simply moving south!"

"Even in the Caribbean there are far more interesting places," said David. "Why, he's overlooked the entire coast of Central America. Come, I want to get a map. Let's have a look at this pattern flat out. I spied a little travel agent in the lobby. He's bound to have some maps for us. We'll take everything back to your rooms."

The agent was most obliging, an elderly bald-headed fellow with a soft cultured voice, who groped about in the clutter of his desk for several maps. Curaçao? Yes, he had a brochure or two on the place. Not a very interesting island, as the Caribbean islands go.

"Why do people go there?" I asked.

"Well, in the main they don't," he confessed, rubbing the top of his bald head. "Except for the cruise ships, of course. They've been stopping there again these last few years. Yes, here." He placed a little folder in my hand for a small ship called the *Crown of the Seas*, very pretty in the picture, which meandered all through the islands, its final stop Curaçao before it started home.

“Cruise ships!” I whispered, staring at the picture. My eyes moved to the giant posters of ships which lined the office walls. “Why, he had pictures of ships all over his house in Georgetown,” I said. “David, that's it. He’s on some sort of ship! Don’t you remember what you told me. His father worked for some shipping company. He himself said something about wanting to sail to America aboard a great ship.”

“My God,” David said. “You may be right. New York, Bal Harbour …” He looked at the agent. “Do cruise ships stop at Bal Harbour?”

“Port Everglades,” said the agent. “Right near it. But not very many start from New York.”

“What about Santo Domingo?” I asked. “Do they stop there?”

“Yes, that’s a regular port all right. They all vary their itineraries. What sort of ship do you have in mind?”

Quickly David jotted down the various points and the nights upon which the attacks had happened, without an explanation, of course.

But then he looked crestfallen.

“No,” he said, “I can see it's impossible, myself. What cruise ship could possibly make the journey from Florida all the way to Curaçao in three nights?”

“Well, there is one,” said the agent, “and as a matter of fact, she sailed from New York this last Wednesday night. It’s the flagship of the Cunard Line, the *Queen Elizabeth 2*.”

“That’s it,” I said. “The *Queen Elizabeth 2*. David, it was the very ship he mentioned to me. You said his father—”

“But I thought the *QE2* makes the transatlantic crossing,” said David.

“Not in winter,” said the agent, agreeably. “She’s in the Caribbean until March. And she’s probably the fastest ship sailing any sea anywhere. She can do twenty-eight knots. But here, we can check the itinerary right now.”

He went into another seemingly hopeless search through the papers on his desk, and at last produced a large handsomely printed brochure, opening it and flattening it with his right hand.

“Yes, left New York Wednesday. She docked at Port Everglades Friday morning, sailed before midnight, then on to Curaçao, where she arrived yesterday morning at five a.m. But she didn’t stop in the Dominican Republic, I’m afraid, can’t help you there.”

“Never mind that, she passed it!” David said. “She passed the Dominican Republic the very next night! Look at the map. That’s it, of course. Oh, the little fool. He all but told you himself, Lestat, with all his mad obsessive chatter! He’s on board the *QE2*, the ship which mattered so much to his father, the ship upon which the old man spent his life.”

We thanked the agent profusely for the maps and brochures, then headed for the taxis out front.

“Oh, it’s so bloody typical of him!” David said as the car carried us towards my apartment. “Everything is symbolic with this madman. And he himself was fired from the *QE2* amid scandal and disgrace. I told you this, remember? Oh, you were so right. It’s all a matter of obsession, and the little demon gave you the clue himself.”

“Yes. Oh, definitely yes. And the Talamasca wouldn’t send him to America on the *Queen Elizabeth 2*. He never forgave you for that.”

“I hate him,” David whispered, with a heat that amazed me even given the circumstances in which we were involved.

“But it isn’t really so foolish, David,” I said. “It’s devilishly clever, don’t you see? Yes, he tipped his hand to me in Georgetown, chattering away about it, and we can lay that down to his self-destructiveness, but I don’t think he expected me to figure it out. And frankly, if you hadn’t laid out the news stories for me of the other murders, maybe I never would have thought of it on my own.”

“Possibly. I think he wants to be caught.”

“No, David. He’s hiding. From you, from me, and from the others. Oh, he’s very smart. Here we have this beastly sorcerer, capable of cloaking himself entirely, and where does he conceal himself—amid a whole teeming little world of mortals in the womb of a fast-moving ship. Look at this itinerary! Why, every night she’s sailing. Only by day does she remain in port.”

“Have it your way,” said David, “but I prefer to think of him as an idiot! And we’re going to catch him! Now you told me you gave him a passport, did you not?”

“Clarence Oddbody was the name. But surely he didn’t use it.”

“We’ll soon find out. My suspicion is that he boarded in New York in the usual way. It would have been crucial to him to be received with all due pomp and consideration—to book the finest suite and go parading

up to the top deck, with stewards bowing to him. Those suites on the Signal Deck are enormous. No problem whatsoever for him to have a large trunk for his daylight hiding place. No cabin steward would trouble such a thing."

We had come around again to my building. He pulled out some bills to pay the driver, and up the stairs we went.

As soon as we reached the apartment, we sat down with the printed itinerary and the news stories and worked out a schedule of how the killings had been done.

It was plain the beast had struck my agent in New York only hours before the ship sailed. He'd had plenty of time to board before eleven p.m. The murder near Bal Harbour had been committed only hours before the ship docked. Obviously he covered a small distance by the power of flight, returning to his cabin or other hiding place before the sun rose.

For the Santo Domingo murder, he had left the ship for perhaps an hour, and then caught up with her on her journey south. Again, these distances were nothing. He did not even need preternatural sight to spot the giant *Queen Elizabeth 2* steaming across the open sea. The murders on Curaçao had taken place only a little while after the ship sailed. He'd probably caught up with the ship within less than an hour, laden with his loot.

The ship was now on her way north again. She had docked at La Guaira, on the coast of Venezuela, only two hours ago. If he struck tonight in Caracas or its environs, we knew we had him for certain. But we had no intention of waiting for further proof.

"All right, let's think this out," I said. "Dare we board this vessel ourselves?"

"Of course, we must."

"Then we should have fake passports for this. We may leave behind a great deal of confusion. David Talbot mustn't be implicated. And I can't use the passport he gave me. Why, I don't know where that passport is. Perhaps still in the town house in Georgetown. God knows why he used his own name on it, probably to get me in trouble first time I went through customs."

"Absolutely right. I can take care of the documents before we leave New Orleans. Now, we can't get to Caracas before the ship leaves at five o'clock. No. We'll have to board her in Grenada tomorrow. We'll have until five p.m. Very likely there are cabins available. There are always last-minute cancellations, sometimes even deaths. In fact, on a ship as expensive as the *QE2* there are always deaths. Undoubtedly James knows this. He can feed anytime he wishes if he takes the proper care."

"But why? Why deaths on the *QE2?*"

"Elderly passengers," David said. "It's a fact of cruise life. The *QE2* has a large hospital for emergencies. This is a floating world, a ship of this size. But no matter. Our investigators will clarify everything. I'll get them on it at once. We can easily make Grenada from New Orleans, and we have time to prepare for what we must do.

"Now, Lestat, let's consider this in detail. Suppose we confront this fiend right before sunup. And suppose we send him right straight back into this mortal body, and cannot control him after that. We need a hiding place for you … a third cabin, booked under a name which is in no way connected with either one of us."

"Yes, something deep in the center of the ship, on one of the lower decks. Not the very lowest. That would be too obvious. Something in the middle, I should think."

"But how fast can you travel? Can you make it within seconds to a lower deck?"

"Without question. Don't even worry about such a thing. An inside cabin, that's important, and one large enough to include a trunk. Well, the trunk isn't really essential, not if I've fitted a lock to the door beforehand, but the trunk would be a fine idea."

"Ah, I see it. I see it all. I see now what we must do. You rest, drink your coffee, take a shower, do whatever you wish. I'm going in the next room and make the calls I must make. This is Talamasca, and you must leave me alone."

"You're not serious," I said. "I want to hear what you're—"

"You'll do as I say. Oh, and find someone to care for that beautiful canine. We can't take him with us! That's patently absurd. And a dog of such character mustn't be neglected."

Off he hurried, closing me out of the bedroom, so that he might make

all these exciting little calls alone.

"And just when I was beginning to enjoy this," I said.

I sped off to find Mojo, who was sleeping in the cold wet roof garden as if it were the most normal thing in the world. I took him down with me to the old woman on the first floor. Of all my tenants she was the most agreeable, and could certainly use a couple of hundred dollars for boarding a gentle dog.

At the mere suggestion, she was beside herself with joy. Mojo could use the courtyard behind the building, and she needed the money and the company, and wasn't I a nice young man? Just as nice as my cousin, Monsieur de Lioncourt, who was like a guardian angel to her, never bothering to cash the checks she gave him for her rent.

I went back up to the apartment, and discovered that David was still at work, and refusing to let me listen. I was told to make coffee, which of course I didn't know how to make. I drank the old coffee and called Paris.

My agent answered the phone. He was just in the process of sending me the status report I'd requested. All was going well. There had been no further assaults from the mysterious thief. Indeed the last had occurred on Friday evening. Perhaps the fellow had given up. An enormous sum of money was waiting for me now at my New Orleans bank.

I repeated all my cautions to the man, and told him that I would call soon again.

Friday evening. That meant James had tried his last assault before the *Queen Elizabeth 2* left the States. He had no means while at sea to consider his computer thievery. And surely he had no intention of hurting my Paris agent. That is, if James was still content with his little vacation on the *Queen Elizabeth 2*. There was nothing to stop him from jumping ship whenever he pleased.

I went into the computer again and tried to access the accounts of Lestan Gregor, the alias who had wired the twenty million to the Georgetown bank. Just as I suspected. Lestan Gregor still existed but he was virtually penniless. Bank balance zero. The twenty million wired to Georgetown for the use of Raglan James had indeed reverted back to Mr. Gregor at Friday noon, and then been immediately withdrawn from his

account. The transaction assuring this withdrawal had been set up the preceding night. By one p.m. on Friday, the money was gone on some untraceable path. The whole story was there, embedded in various numerical codes and general bank gibberish, which any fool could see.

And surely there was a fool staring at this computer screen right now.

The little beast had warned me that he could steal through computers. No doubt he'd wheedled information from the people at the Georgetown bank, or raped their unsuspecting minds with his telepathy, to gain the codes and numbers he required.

Whatever the case he had a fortune at his disposal which had once been my fortune. I hated him all the more. I hated him for killing my man in New York. I hated him for smashing all the furniture when he did it, and for stealing everything else in the office. I hated him for his pettiness and his intellect, his crudeness and his nerve.

I sat drinking the old coffee, and thinking about what lay ahead.

Of course I understood what James had done, stupid though it seemed. From the very first I'd known that his stealing had to do with some profound hunger in his soul. And this *Queen Elizabeth 2* had been the world of his father, the world from which he, caught in an act of thievery, had been *cast out*.

Oh, yes, cast out, the way the others had cast me out. And how eager he must have been to return to it with his new power and his new wealth. He'd probably planned it down to the very hour, as soon as we'd agreed upon a date for the switch. No doubt if I had put him off, he would have picked up the ship at some later harbour. As it was, he was able to begin his journey only a short distance from Georgetown, and strike my mortal agent before the ship sailed.

Ah, the way he'd sat in that grimly lighted little Georgetown kitchen, staring again and again at his watch. I mean, this watch.

At last David emerged from the bedroom, notebook in hand. Everything had been arranged.

"There is no Clarence Oddbody on the *Queen Elizabeth 2*, but a mysterious young Englishman named Jason Hamilton booked the lavish Queen Victoria Suite only two days before the ship sailed from New York. For the moment we must assume that this is our man. We'll have more information about him before we reach Grenada. Our investigators

are already at work.

"We ourselves are booked out of Grenada in two penthouse suites on the same deck as our mysterious friend. We must board anytime tomorrow before the ship sails at five p.m.

"The first of our connecting flights leaves New Orleans in three hours. We will need at least one of those hours to obtain a pair of false passports from a gentleman who's been highly recommended for this sort of transaction and is in fact waiting for us now. I have the address here."

"Excellent. I've plenty of cash on hand."

"Very good. Now, one of our investigators will meet us in Grenada. He's a very cunning individual and I've worked with him for years. He's already booked the third cabin—inside, deck five. And he will manage to smuggle a couple of small but sophisticated firearms into that cabin, as well as the trunk we will need later on."

"Those weapons will mean nothing to a man walking around in my old body. But of course afterwards …"

"Precisely," said David. "After the switch, I will need a gun to protect myself against this handsome young body here." He gestured to me. "Now, to continue. My investigator will slip off the ship after he has officially boarded, leaving the cabin and the guns to us. We ourselves will go through the regular boarding process with our new identification. Oh, and I've selected our names already. Afraid I had to do it. I do hope you don't mind. You're an American named Sheridan Blackwood. And I'm a retired English surgeon named Alexander Stoker. It's always best to pose as a doctor on these little missions. You'll see what I mean."

"I'm thankful you didn't pick H. P. Lovecraft," I said with an exaggerated sigh of relief. "Do we have to leave now?"

"Yes, we do. I've already called the taxi. We must get some tropical clothing before we go, or we'll look perfectly ridiculous. There isn't a moment to lose. Now, if you will use those strong young arms of yours to help me with this suitcase, I shall be forever obliged."

"I'm disappointed."

"In what?" He stopped, stared at me, and then almost blushed as he had earlier that day. "Lestat, there is no time for that sort of thing."

"David, assuming we succeed, it may be our last chance."

“All right,” he said, “there is plenty of time to discuss it at the beachside hotel in Grenada tonight. Depending of course on how quick you are with your lessons in astral projection. Now, do please show some youthful vim and vigor of a constructive sort, and help me with this suitcase. I’m a man of seventy-four.”

“Splendid. But I want to know something before we go.”

“What?”

“Why are you helping me?”

“Oh, for the love of heaven, you know why.”

“No, I don’t.”

He stared at me soberly for a long moment, then said, “I care for you! I don’t care what body you’re in. It’s true. But to be perfectly honest, this ghastly Body Thief, as you call him, frightens me. Yes, frightens me to the marrow of my bones.

“He’s a fool, and he always brings about his own ruin, that’s true. But this time I think you’re right. He’s not at all eager to be apprehended, if in fact he ever was. He's planning on a long run of success, and he may tire of the *QE2* very soon. That’s why we must act. Now pick up this suitcase. I nearly killed myself hauling it up those stairs.”

I obeyed.

But I was softened and saddened by his words of feeling, and plunged into a series of fragmentary images of all the little things we might have done in the large soft bed in the other room.

And what if the Body Thief had jumped ship already? Or been destroyed this very morning—after Marius had looked upon me with such disdain?

“Then we’ll go on to Rio,” said David, leading the way to the gate. “We’ll be in time for the carnival. Nice vacation for us both.”

“I’ll die if I have to live that long!” I said, taking the lead down the stairs. “Trouble with you is you’ve gotten used to being human because you’ve done it for so damned long.”

“I was used to it by the time I was two years old,” he said dryly.

“I don’t believe you. I’ve watched two-year-old humans with interest for centuries. They’re miserable. They rush about, fall down, and scream almost constantly. They hate being human! They know already that it’s some sort of dirty trick.”

He laughed to himself but didn’t answer me. He wouldn’t look at me

either.

The cab was already waiting for us when we reached the front door.

TWENTY

The plane ride would have been another absolute nightmare, had I not been so tired that I slept. A full twenty-four hours had passed since my last dreamy rest in Gretchen's arms, and indeed I fell so deep into sleep now that when David roused me for the change of planes in Puerto Rico, I scarce knew where we were or what we were doing, and for an odd moment, it felt entirely normal to be lugging about this huge heavy body in a state of confusion and thoughtless obedience to David's commands.

We did not go outside the terminal for this transfer of planes. And when at last we did land in the small airport in Grenada, I was surprised by the close and delicious Caribbean warmth and the brilliant twilight sky.

All the world seemed changed by the soft balmy embracing breezes which greeted us. I was glad we had raided the Canal Street shop in New Orleans, for the heavy tweed clothes felt all wrong. As the cab bounced along the narrow uneven road, carrying us to our beachfront hotel, I was transfixed by the lush forest around us, the big red hibiscus blooming beyond little fences, the graceful coconut palms bending over the tiny tumbledown hillside houses, and eager to see, not with this dim frustrating mortal night vision, but in the magical light of the morning sun.

There had been something absolutely penitential about my undergoing the transformation in the mean cold of Georgetown, no doubt of it at all. Yet when I thought of it—that lovely white snow, and the warmth of Gretchen's little house, I couldn't truly complain. It was only that this Caribbean island seemed the true world, the world for real living; and I marveled, as I always did when in these islands, that they could be so beautiful, so warm, and so very poor.

Here one saw the poverty everywhere—the haphazard wooden houses on stilts, the pedestrians on the borders of the road, the old rusted automobiles, and the total absence of any evidence of affluence, making of course for a quaintness in the eye of the outsider, but something of a hard existence perhaps for the natives, who had never gathered together

enough dollars to leave this place, even perhaps for a single day.

The evening sky was a deep shining blue, as it is often in this part of the world, as incandescent as it can be over Miami, and the soft white clouds made the same clean and dramatic panorama on the far edge of the gleaming sea. Entrancing, and this is but one tiny part of the great Caribbean. Why do I ever wander in other climes at all?

The hotel was in fact a dusty neglected little guesthouse of white stucco under a myriad complex of rusted tin roofs. It was known only to a few Britishers, and very quiet, with a rambling wing of rather old-fashioned rooms looking out over the sands of Grand Anse Beach. With profuse apologies for the broken air-conditioning machines, and the crowded quartets—we must share a room with twin beds, I almost burst into laughter, as David looked to heaven as if to say silently that his persecution would never end!—the proprietor demonstrated that the creaky overhead fan created quite a breeze. Old white louvered shutters covered the windows. The furniture was made of white wicker, and the floor was old tile.

It seemed very charming to me, but mostly on account of the sweet warmth of the air around me, and the bit of jungle creeping down around the structure, with its inevitable snaggle of banana leaf and Queen's Wreath vine. Ah, that vine. A nice rule of thumb might be: Don't ever live in a part of the world which will not support that vine.

At once we set about to changing clothes. I stripped off the tweeds, and put on the thin cotton pants and shirt I'd bought in New Orleans before we left, along with a pair of white tennis shoes, and deciding against an all-out physical assault upon David, who was changing with his back turned to me, I went out under the graceful arching coconut palms, and made my way down onto the sand.

The night was as tranquil and gentle as any night I've ever known. All my love of the Caribbean came back to me—along with painful and blessed memories. But I longed to see this night with my old eyes. I longed to see past the thickening darkness, and the shadows that shrouded the embracing hills. I longed to turn on my preternatural hearing and catch the soft songs of the jungles, to wander with vampiric speed up the mountains of the interior to find the secret little valleys and waterfalls as only the Vampire Lestat could have done.

I felt a terrible, terrible sadness for all my discoveries. And perhaps it

hit me in its fullness for the first time—that all of my dreams of mortal life had been a lie. It wasn't that life wasn't magical; it wasn't that creation was not a miracle; it wasn't that the world was not fundamentally good. It was that I had taken my dark power so for granted that I did not realize the vantage point it had given me. I had failed to assess my gifts. And I wanted them back.

Yes, I had failed, hadn't I? Mortal life should have been enough!

I looked up at the heartless little stars, such mean guardians, and I prayed to the dark gods who don't exist to understand.

I thought of Gretchen. Had she already reached her rain forests, and all the sick ones waiting for the consolations of her touch? I wished I knew where she was.

Perhaps she was already at work in a jungle dispensary, with gleaming vials of medicine, or trekking to nearby villages, with miracles in a pack on her back. I thought of her quiet happiness when she'd described the mission. The warmth of those embraces came back to me, the drowsy sweetness of it, and the comfort of that small room. I saw the snow falling once more beyond the windows. I saw her large hazel eyes fixed on me, and heard the slow rhythm of her speech.

Then again I saw the deep blue evening sky above me; I felt the breeze that was moving over me as smoothly as if it were water; and I thought of David, David who was here with me now.

I was weeping when David touched my arm.

For a moment, I couldn't make out the features of his face. The beach was dark, and the sound of the surf so enormous that nothing in me seemed to function as it ought to do. Then I realized that of course it was David standing there looking at me, David in a crisp white cotton shirt and wash pants and sandals, managing somehow to look elegant even in this attire—David asking me gently to please come back to the room.

"Jake's here," he said, "our man from Mexico City. I think you should come inside."

The ceiling fan was going noisily and cool air moved through the shutters as we came into the shabby little room. A faint clacking noise came from the coconut palms, a sound I rather liked, rising and falling with the breeze.

Jake was seated on one of the narrow saggy little beds—a tall lanky individual in khaki shorts and a white polo shirt, puffing on an

odoriferous little brown cigar. All of his skin was darkly tanned, and he had a shapeless thatch of graying blond hair. His posture was one of complete relaxation, but beneath this facade, he was entirely alert and suspicious, his mouth a perfectly straight line.

We shook hands as he disguised only a little the fact that he was looking me up and down. Quick, secretive eyes, not unlike David's eyes, though smaller. God only knows what he saw.

"Well, the guns won't be any problem," he said with an obvious Australian accent. "There are no metal detectors at ports such as this. I'll board at approximately ten a.m., plant your trunk and your guns for you in your cabin on Five Deck, then meet you in the Café Centaur in St. George's. I do hope you know what you're doing, David, bringing firearms aboard the *Queen Elizabeth 2*."

"Of course I know what I'm doing," said David very politely, with a tiny playful smile. "Now, what do you have for us on our man?"

"Ah, yes. Jason Hamilton. Six feet tall, dark tan, longish blond hair, piercing blue eyes. Mysterious fellow. Very British, very polite. Rumors as to his true identity abound. He's an enormous tipper, and a day sleeper, and apparently doesn't bother to leave the ship when she's in port. Indeed he gives over small packages to be mailed to his cabin steward every morning, quite early, before he disappears for the day. Haven't been able to discover the post box but that's a matter of time. He has yet to appear in the Queens Grill for a single meal. It's rumored he's seriously ill. But with what, no one knows. He's the picture of health, which only adds to the mystery. Everyone says so. A powerfully built and graceful fellow with a dazzling wardrobe, it seems. He gambles heavily at the roulette wheel, and dances for hours with the ladies. Seems in fact to like the very old ones. He'd arouse suspicion on that account alone if he weren't so bloody rich himself. Spends a lot of time simply roaming the ship."

"Excellent. This is just what I wanted to know," said David. "You have our tickets."

The man gestured to a black leather folder on the wicker dressing table. David checked the contents, then gave him an approving nod.

"Deaths on the *QE2* so far?"

"Ah, now that's an interesting point. They have had six since they left

New York, which is a little more than usual. All very elderly women, and all apparent heart failure. This is the sort of thing you want to know?"

"Certainly is," said David.

The "little drink," I thought.

"Now you ought to have a look at these firearms," said Jake, "and know how to use them." He reached for a worn little duffel bag on the floor, just the sort of beat-up sack of canvas in which one would hide expensive weapons, I presumed. Out came the expensive weapons—one a large Smith & Wesson revolver. The other a small black automatic no bigger than the palm of my hand.

"Yes, I'm quite familiar with this," David said, taking the big silver gun and making to aim it at the floor. "No problem." He pulled out the clip, then slipped it back in. "Pray I don't have to use it, however. It will make a hell of a noise."

He then gave it to me.

"Lestat, get the feel of it," he said. "Of course there's no time to practice. I asked for a hair trigger."

"And that you have," said Jake, looking at me coldly. "So please watch out."

"Barbarous little thing," I said. It was very heavy. A nugget of destructiveness. I spun the cylinder. Six bullets. It had a curious smell.

"Both the guns are thirty-eights," said the man, with a slight note of disdain. "Those are man-stoppers." He showed me a small cardboard box. "You'll have plenty of ammunition available to you for whatever it is that you are going to do on this boat."

"Don't worry, Jake," said David firmly. "Things will probably go without a hitch. And I thank you for your usual efficiency. Now, go have a pleasant evening on the island. And I shall see you at the Centaur Café before noon."

The fellow gave me a deep suspicious look, then nodded, gathered up the guns and the little box of bullets, put them back in his canvas bag, and offered his hand again to me and then to David, and out he went.

I waited until the door had closed.

"I think he dislikes me," I said. "Blames me for involving you in some sort of sordid crime."

David gave a short little laugh. "I've been in far more compromising situations than this one," he said. "And if I worried about what our

investigators thought of us, I would have retired a long time ago. What do we know now from this information?"

"Well, he's feeding on the old women. Probably stealing from them also. And he's mailing home what he steals in packages too small to arouse suspicion. What he does with the larger loot we'll never know. Probably throws it into the ocean. I suspect there's more than one post box number. But that's no concern of ours."

"Correct. Now lock the door. It's time for a little concentrated witchcraft. We'll have a nice supper later on. I have to teach you to veil your thoughts. Jake could read you too easily. And so can I. The Body Thief will pick up your presence when he's still two hundred miles out to sea."

"Well, I did it through an act of will when I was Lestat," I said. "I haven't the faintest idea how to do it now."

"Same way. We're going to practice. Until I can't read a single image or random word from you. Then we'll get to the out-of-body travel." He looked at his watch, which reminded me of James suddenly, in that little kitchen. "Slip that bolt. I don't want any maid blundering in here later on."

I obeyed. Then I sat on the bed opposite David, who had assumed a very relaxed yet commanding attitude, rolling up the stiff starched cuffs of his shirt, which revealed the dark fleece of his arms. There was also quite a bit of dark hair on his chest, bubbling up through the open collar of the shirt. Only a little gray mixed in with it, like the gray that sparkled here and there in his heavy shaven beard. I found it quite impossible to believe he was a man of seventy-four.

"Ah, I caught that," he said with a little lift of the eyebrows. "I catch entirely too much. Now. Listen to what I say. You must fix it in your mind that your thoughts remain within you, that you are not attempting to communicate with other beings—not through facial expression or body language of any sort; that indeed you are impenetrable. Make an image of your sealed mind if you must. Ah, that's good. You've gone blank behind your handsome young face. Even your eyes have changed ever so slightly. Perfect. Now I'm going to try to read you. Keep it up."

By the end of forty-five minutes, I had learned the trick fairly painlessly, but I could pick up nothing of David's thoughts even when he tried his hardest to project them to me. In this body, I simply did not

have the psychic ability which he possessed. But the veiling we had achieved, and this was a crucial step. We would continue to work on all this throughout the night.

"We're ready to begin on the out-of-body travel," he said.

"This is going to be hell," I said. "I don't think I can get out of this body. As you can see, I just don't have your gifts."

"Nonsense," he said. He loosened his posture slightly, crossing his ankles and sliding down a bit in the chair. But somehow, no matter what he did, he never lost the attitude of the teacher, the authority, the priest. It was implicit in his small, direct gestures and above all in his voice.

"Lie down on that bed, and close your eyes. And listen to every word I say."

I did as I was told. And immediately felt a little sleepy. His voice became even more directive in its softness, rather like that of a hypnotist, bidding me to relax completely, and to visualize a spiritual double of this form.

"Must I visualize myself with this body?"

"No. Doesn't matter. What matters is that you—your mind, your soul, your sense of self—are linked to the form you envision. Now picture it as congruent with your body, and then imagine that you want to lift it up and out of the body—that *you* want to go up!"

For some thirty minutes David continued this unhurried instruction, reiterating in his own fashion the lessons which priests had taught to their initiates for thousands of years. I knew the old formula. But I also knew complete mortal vulnerability, and a crushing sense of my limitations, and a stiffening and debilitating fear.

We had been at it perhaps forty-five minutes when I finally sank into the requisite and lovely vibratory state on the very cusp of sleep. My body seemed in fact to have become this delicious vibratory feeling, and nothing more! And just when I realized this, and might have remarked upon it, I suddenly felt myself break loose and begin to rise.

I opened my eyes; or at least I thought I did. I saw I was floating directly above my body; in fact, I couldn't even see the real flesh-and-blood body at all. "Go up!" I said. And instantly I traveled to the ceiling with the exquisite lightness and speed of a helium balloon! It was nothing to turn completely over and look straight down into the room.

Why, I had passed through the blades of the ceiling fan! Indeed, it was

in the very middle of my body, though I could feel nothing. And down there, under me, was the sleeping mortal form I had inhabited so miserably all of these strange days. Its eyes were closed, and so was its mouth.

I saw David sitting in his wicker chair, right ankle on his left knee, hands relaxed on his thighs, as he looked at the sleeping man. Did he know I had succeeded? I couldn't hear a word he was speaking. Indeed, I seemed to be in a totally different sphere from these two solid figures, though I felt utterly complete and entire and real myself.

Oh, how lovely this was! This was so near to my freedom as a vampire that I almost began to weep again. I felt so sorry for the two solid and lonely beings down there. I wanted to pass up through the ceiling and into the night.

Slowly I went up, and then out over the roof of the hotel, until I was hovering above the white sand.

But this was enough, wasn't it? Fear gripped me, the fear I'd known when I did this little trick before. What in the name of God was keeping me alive in this state! I needed my body! At once I plummeted, blindly, back into the flesh. I woke up, tingling all over, and staring at David as he sat staring back at me.

"I did it," I said. I was shocked to feel these tubes of skin and bone enclosing me again, and to see my fingers moving when I told them to do it, to feel my toes come alive in my shoes. Lord God, what an experience! And so many, many mortals had sought to describe it. And so many more, in their ignorance, did not believe that such a thing could be.

"Remember to veil your thoughts," David said suddenly. "No matter how exhilarated you become. Lock your mind up tight!"

"Yes, sir."

"Now let's do it all again."

By midnight—some two hours later—I had learned to rise at will. Indeed, it was becoming addictive—the feeling of lightness, the great swooshing ascent! The lovely ease of passing through walls and ceiling; and then the sudden and shocking return. There was a deep throbbing pleasure to it, pure and shining, like an eroticism of the mind.

"Why can't a man die in this fashion, David? I mean why can't one simply rise into the heavens and leave the earth?"

“Did you see an open doorway, Lestat?” he asked.

“No,” I said sadly. “I saw this world. It was so clear, so beautiful. But it was this world.”

“Come now, you must learn to make the assault.”

“But I thought you would do it, David. You’d jolt him and knock him out of his body and …”

“Yes, and suppose he spots me before I can do it, and makes me into a nice little torch. What then? No, you must learn the trick as well.”

This was far more difficult. Indeed it required the very opposite of the passivity and relaxation which we had employed and developed before. I had now to focus all my energy upon David with the avowed purpose of knocking him out of his body—a phenomenon which I could not hope to see in any real sense—and then go into his body myself. The concentration demanded of me was excruciating. The timing was critical. And the repeated efforts produced an intense and exhausting nervousness rather like that of a right-handed person trying to write perfectly with the left hand.

I was near to tears of rage and frustration more than once. But David was absolutely adamant that we must continue and that this could be done. No, a stiff drink of Scotch wouldn’t help. No, we couldn’t eat until later. No, we couldn’t break for a walk on the beach or a late swim.

The first time I succeeded, I was absolutely aghast. I went speeding towards David, and felt the impact in the same purely mental fashion in which I felt the freedom of the flight. Then I was inside David, and for one split second saw myself—slack-jawed and staring dully—through the dim lenses of David’s eyes.

Then I felt a dark shuddering disorientation, and an invisible blow as if someone had placed a huge hand on my chest. I realized that he had returned and pushed me out. I was hovering in the air, and then back in my own sweat-drenched body, laughing near hysterically from mad excitement and sheer fatigue.

“That’s all we need,” he said. “Now I know we can pull this off. Come, once again! We’re going to do it twenty times if we have to, until we know that we can achieve it without fail.”

On the fifth successful assault, I remained in his body for a full thirty seconds, absolutely mesmerized by the different feelings attendant to it—the lighter limbs, the poorer vision, and the peculiar sound of my

voice coming out of his throat. I looked down and saw his hands—thin, corded with blood vessels, and touched on the backs of the fingers with dark hair—and they were my hands! How hard it was to control them. Why, one of them had a pronounced tremour which I had never noticed before.

Then came the jolt again, and I was flying upwards, and then the plummet, back into the twenty-six-year-old body once more.

We must have done it twelve times before the slave driver of a Candomble priest said it was time for him to really fight my assault.

"Now, you must come at me with much greater determination. Your goal is to claim the body! And you expect a fight."

For an hour we battled. Finally, when I was able to jolt him out and keep him out for the space of ten seconds, he declared that this would be enough.

"He told you the truth about your cells. They will know you. They will receive you and strive to keep you. Any adult human knows how to use his own body much better than the intruder. And of course you know how to use those preternatural gifts in ways of which he can't possibly even dream. I think we can do it. In fact, I'm certain now that we can."

"But tell me something," I said. "Before we stop, don't you want to jolt me out of this body and go into it? I mean, just to see what it's like?"

"No," he said quietly. "I don't."

"But aren't you curious?" I asked him. "Don't you want to know …"

I could see that I was taxing his patience.

"Look, the real truth is, we don't have time for that experience. And maybe I don't want to know. I can remember my youth well enough. Too well, in fact. We aren't playing little games here. You can make the assault now. That's what counts." He looked at his watch. "It's almost three. We'll have some supper and then we'll sleep. We've a full day ahead, exploring the ship and confirming our plans. We must be rested and in full control of our faculties. Come, let's see what we can rustle up in the way of food or drink."

We went outside and along the walk until we reached the little kitchen —a funny, damp, and somewhat cluttered room. The kindly proprietor had left two plates for us in the rusted, groaning refrigerator, along with a bottle of white wine. We sat down at the table and commenced to devour every morsel of rice, yams, and spiced meat, not caring at all that

it was very cold.

"Can you read my thoughts?" I asked, after I'd consumed two glasses of wine.

"Nothing, you've got the trick."

"So how do I do it in my sleep? The *Queen Elizabeth 2* can't be more than a hundred miles out now. She's to dock in two hours."

"Same way you do it when you're awake. You shut down. You close up. Because, you see, no one is ever completely asleep. Not even those in a coma are completely asleep. Will is always operative. And will is what this is about."

I looked at him as we sat there. He was obviously tired, but he did not look haggard or in any way debilitated. His thick dark hair obviously added to the impression of vigor; and his large dark eyes had the same fierce light in them which they always had.

I finished quickly, shoved the dishes into the sink, and went out on the beach without bothering to say what I meant to do. I knew he would say we had to rest now, and I didn't want to be deprived of this last night as a human being under the stars.

Going down to the lip of the water, I peeled off the cotton clothes, and went into the waves. They were cool but inviting, and then I stretched out my arms and began to swim. It was not easy, of course. But it wasn't hard either, once I resigned myself to the fact that humans did it this way—stroke by stroke against the force of the water, and letting the water buoy the cumbersome body, which it was entirely willing to do.

I swam out quite far, and then rolled over on my back and looked at the sky. It was still full of fleecy white clouds. A moment of peace came over me, in spite of the chill on my exposed skin, and the dimness all around me, and the strange feeling of vulnerability I experienced as I floated on this dark treacherous sea. When I thought of being back in my old body, I could only be happy, and once again, I knew that in my human adventure, I had failed.

I had not been the hero of my own dreams. I had found human life too hard.

Finally I swam back into the shallows and then walked up onto the beach. I picked up my clothes, shook off the sand, slung them over my shoulder, and walked back to the little room.

Only one lamp burned on the dressing table. David was sitting on his

bed, closest to the door, and dressed only in a long white pajama shirt and smoking one of those little cigars. I liked the scent of it, dark and sweet.

He looked his usual dignified self, arms folded, eyes full of normal curiosity as he watched me take a towel from the bath and dry off my hair and my skin.

"Just called London," he said.

"What's the news?" I wiped my face with the towel, then slung it over the back of the chair. The air felt so good on my naked skin, now that it was dry.

"Robbery in the hills above Caracas. Very similar to the crimes in Curaçao. A large villa full of artifacts, jewels, paintings. Much was smashed; only small portables were stolen; three people dead. We should thank the gods for the poverty of the human imagination—for the sheer meanness of this man's ambitions—and that our opportunity to stop him has come so soon. In time, he would have wakened to his monstrous potential. As it is, he is our predictable fool."

"Does any being use what he possesses?" I asked. "Perhaps a few brave geniuses know their true limits. What do the rest of us do but complain?"

"I don't know," he said, a sad little smile passing over his face. He shook his head and looked away. "Some night, when this is all over, tell me again how it was for you. How you could be in that beautiful young body and hate this world so much."

"I'll tell you, but you'll never understand. You're on the wrong side of the dark glass. Only the dead know how terrible it is to be alive."

I pulled a loose cotton T-shirt out of my little suitcase, but I didn't put it on. I sat down on the bed beside him. And then I bent down and kissed his face again gently, as I had in New Orleans, liking the feel of his roughly shaven beard, just as I liked that sort of thing when I was really Lestat and I would soon have that strong masculine blood inside.

I moved closer to him, when suddenly he grasped my hand, and I felt him gently push me away.

"Why, David?" I asked him.

He didn't answer. He lifted his right hand and brushed my hair back out of my eyes.

"I don't know," he whispered. "I can't. I simply can't."

He got up gracefully, and went outside into the night.

I was too furious with pure stymied passion to do anything for a moment. Then I followed him out. He had gone down on the sand a ways and he stood there alone, as I had done before.

I came up behind him.

"Tell me, please, why not?"

"I don't know," he said again. "I only know I can't. I want to. Believe me, I do. But I can't. My past is … so close to me." He let out a long sigh, and for a while was silent again. Then he went on. "My memories of those days are so clear. It's as if I'm in India again, or Rio. Ah, yes, Rio. It's as if I am that young man again."

I knew I was to blame for this. I knew it, and that it was useless to say apologetic words. I also sensed something else. I was an evil being, and even when I was in this body, David could sense that evil. He could sense the powerful vampiric greed. It was an old evil, brooding and terrible. Gretchen hadn't sensed it. I had deceived her with this warm and smiling body. But when David looked at me, he saw that blond blue-eyed demon whom he knew very well.

I said nothing. I merely looked out over the sea. Give me back my body. Let me be that devil, I thought. Take me away from this paltry brand of desire and this weakness. Take me back into the dark heavens where I belong. And it seemed suddenly that my loneliness and my misery were as terrible as they had ever been before this experiment, before this little sojourn into more vulnerable flesh. Yes, let me be outside it again, please. Let me be a watcher. How could I have been such a fool?

I heard David say something to me, but I didn't really catch the words. I looked up slowly, pulling myself out of my thoughts, and I saw that he had turned to face me, and I realized that his hand was resting gently on my neck. I wanted to say something angry—Take your hand away, don't torment me—but I didn't speak.

"No, you're not evil, that's not it," he whispered. "It's me, don't you understand. It's my fear! You don't know what this adventure has meant to me! To be here again in this part of the great world—and with you! I *love* you. I love you desperately and insanely, I love the soul inside you, and don't you see, it's not evil. It's not greedy. But it's immense. It overpowers even this youthful body because it is your soul, fierce and indomitable and outside time—the soul of the true Lestat. I can't give in

to it. I can't … do it. I'll lose myself forever if I do it, as surely as if … as if …"

He broke off, too shaken obviously to go on. I'd hated the pain in his voice, the faint tremour undermining its deep firmness. How could I ever forgive myself? I stood still, staring past him into the darkness. The lovely pounding of the surf and the faint clacking of the coconut palms were the only sounds. How vast were the heavens; how lovely and deep and calm these hours just before dawn.

I saw Gretchen's face. I heard her voice.

There was a moment this morning when I thought I could throw up everything—just to be with you … I could feel it sweeping me away, the way the music once did. And if you were to say "Come with me," even now, I might go … The meaning of chastity is not to fall in love … I could fall in love with you. I know I could.

And then beyond this burning image, faint yet undeniable, I saw the face of Louis, and I heard words spoken in his voice that I wanted to forget.

Where was David? Let me wake from these memories. I don't want them. I looked up and I saw him again, and in him the old familiar dignity, the restraint, the imperturbable strength. But I saw the pain too.

"Forgive me," he whispered. His voice was still unsteady, as he struggled to preserve the beautiful and elegant facade. "You drank from the fountain of youth when you drank the blood of Magnus. Really you did. You'll never know what it means to be the old man that I am now. God help me, I loathe the word, but it's true. I'm old."

"I understand," I said. "Don't worry." I leant forward and kissed him again. "I'll leave you alone. Come on, we should sleep. I promise. I'll leave you alone."

TWENTY-ONE

"Good Lord, look at it, David." I had just stepped out of the taxi onto the crowded quai. The great blue and white *Queen Elizabeth 2* was far too big to come into the little harbour. She rested at anchor a mile or two out—I could not gauge—so monstrously large that she seemed the ship out of a nightmare, frozen upon the motionless bay. Only her row upon row of myriad tiny windows prevented her from seeming the ship of a giant.

The quaint little island with its green hills and curved shore reached out towards her, as if trying to shrink her and draw her nearer, all in vain.

I felt a spasm of excitement as I looked at her. I had never been aboard a modern vessel. This part was going to be fun.

A small wooden launch, bearing her name in bold painted letters, and obviously laden with but one load of her many passengers, made its way to the concrete dock as we watched.

"There's Jake in the prow of the launch," said David. "Come on, let's go into the café."

We walked slowly under the hot sun, comfortable in our short-sleeve shirts and dungarees—a couple of tourists—past the dark-skinned vendors with their seashells for sale, and rag dolls, and tiny steel drums, and other souvenirs. How pretty the island appeared. Its forested hills were dotted with tiny dwellings, and the more solid buildings of the town of St. George's were massed together on the steep cliff to the far left beyond the turn of the quai. The whole prospect had almost an Italian hue to it, what with so many dark and stained reddish walls and the rusted roofs of corrugated tin which in the burning sun looked deceptively like roofs of baked tile. It seemed a lovely place to go exploring—at some other time.

The dark café was cool inside with only a few brightly painted tables and straight-back chairs. David ordered bottles of cold beer, and within minutes Jake came sauntering in—wearing the very same khaki shorts and white polo shirt—and carefully chose a chair from which he might watch the open door. The world out there seemed made of glittering

water. The beer tasted malty and rather good.

"Well, the deed is done," Jake said in a low voice, his face rather rigid and abstracted as though he were not with us at all, but deep in thought. He took a gulp from the brown beer bottle, and then slipped a couple of keys across the table to David. "She's carrying over one thousand passengers. Nobody will notice that Mr. Eric Sampson doesn't reboard. The cabin's tiny, inside as you requested, right off the corridor, midship, Five Deck, as you know."

"Excellent. And you obtained two sets of keys. Very good."

"The trunk's open, with half the contents scattered on the bed. Your guns are inside the two books inside the trunk. Hollowed them out myself. The locks are there. You ought to be able to fit the big one to the door easily enough but I don't know if the staff will care much for it when they see it. Again, I wish you the best of luck. Oh, and you heard the news about the robbery this morning on the hill? Seems we have a vampire in Grenada. Maybe you should plan to stay here, David. Sounds like just your sort of thing."

"This morning?"

"Three o'clock. Right up there on the cliff. Big house of a rich Austrian woman. Everyone murdered. Quite a mess. The whole island's talking about it. Well, I'm off."

It was only after Jake had left us that David spoke again.

"This is bad, Lestat. We were standing out on the beach at three this morning. If he sensed even a glimmer of our presence, he may not be on the ship. Or he may be ready for us when the sun sets."

"He was far too busy this morning, David. Besides, if he'd sensed our presence, he would have made a bonfire of our little room. Unless he doesn't know how to do it, but that we simply cannot know. Let's board the bloody ship now. I'm tired of waiting. Look, it's starting to rain."

We gathered up our luggage, including the monstrous leather suitcase David had brought from New Orleans, and hurried to the launch. A crowd of frail elderly mortals seemed to appear from everywhere—out of taxis and nearby sheds and little shops—now that the rain was really coming down, and it took us some minutes to get inside the unsteady little wooden boat, and take a seat on the wet plastic bench.

As soon as she turned her prow towards the *Queen Elizabeth 2*, I felt a giddy excitement—fun to be riding this warm sea in such a small craft. I

loved the movement as we gained speed.

David was quite tense. He opened his passport, read the information for the twenty-seventh time, and then put it away. We had gone over our identities this morning after breakfast, but hoped that we would never need to use the various details.

For what it was worth, Dr. Stoker was retired and on vacation in the Caribbean but very concerned about his dear friend Jason Hamilton, who was traveling in the Queen Victoria Suite. He was eager to see Mr. Hamilton, and so he would tell the cabin stewards of the Signal Deck, though cautioning them not to let Mr. Hamilton know of this concern.

I was merely a friend he'd met at the guesthouse the night before, and with whom he'd struck up an acquaintance on account of our sailing together on the *Queen Elizabeth 2*. There was to be no other connection between us, for James would be in this body once the switch was done, and David might have to vilify him in some fashion if he could not be controlled.

There was more to it, in the event we were questioned about any sort of row that might occur. But in general, we did not think our plan could possibly lead to such a thing.

Finally the launch reached the ship, docking at a broad opening in the very middle of the immense blue hull. How utterly preposterously enormous the vessel appeared from this angle! She really did take my breath away.

I scarce noticed as we gave over our tickets to the waiting crew members. Luggage would be handled for us. We received some vague directions as to how we were to reach the Signal Deck, and then we were wandering down an endless corridor with a very low ceiling and door after door on either side of us. Within minutes, we realized we were quite lost.

On we walked until suddenly we reached a great open place with a sunken floor and, of all things, a white grand piano, poised on its three legs as if ready for a concert, and this within the windowless womb of this ship!

"It's the Midships Lobby," said David, pointing to a great colored diagram of the vessel in a frame upon the wall. "I know where we are now. Follow me."

"How absurd all this is," I said, staring at the brightly colored carpet,

and the chrome and plastic everywhere I looked. “How utterly synthetic and hideous.”

“Shhh, the British are very proud of this ship, you’re going to offend someone. They can’t use wood anymore—it has to do with fire regulations.” He stopped at an elevator and pushed the button. “This will take us up to the Boat Deck. Didn’t the man say we must find the Queens Grill Lounge there?”

“I have no idea,” I said. I was like a zombie wandering into the elevator. “This is unimaginable!”

“Lestat, there have been giant liners like this one since the turn of the century. You’ve been living in the past.”

The Boat Deck revealed an entire series of wonders. The ship housed a great theatre, and also an entire mezzanine of tiny elegant shops. Below the mezzanine was a dance floor, with a small bandstand, and a sprawling lounge area of small cocktail tables and squat comfortable leather chairs. The shops were shut up since the vessel was in port, but it was quite easy to see their various contents through the airy grilles which closed them off. Expensive clothing, fine jewelry, china, black dinner jackets and boiled shirts, sundries, and random gifts were all on display in the shallow little bays.

There were passengers wandering everywhere—mostly quite old men and women dressed in scant beach clothing, many of whom were gathered in the quiet daylighted lounge below.

“Come on, the rooms,” said David, pulling me along.

It seems the penthouse suites, to which we were headed, were somewhat cut off from the great body of the ship. We had to slip into the Queens Grill Lounge, a long narrow pleasantly appointed bar reserved entirely for the top-deck passengers, and then find a more or less secret elevator to take us to these rooms. This bar had very large windows, revealing the marvelous blue water and the clear sky above.

This was all the province of first class on the transatlantic crossing. But here in the Caribbean it lacked this designation, though the lounge and restaurant locked out the rest of the little floating world.

At last we emerged on the very top deck of the ship, and into a corridor more fancily decorated than those below. There was an art deco feel to its plastic lamps, and the handsome trim on the doors. There was also a more generous and cheerful illumination. A friendly cabin steward

—a gentleman of about sixty—emerged from a small curtained galley and directed us to our suites near the far end of the hall.

“The Queen Victoria Suite, where is it?” asked David.

The steward answered at once in a very similar British accent, that indeed, the Victoria Suite was only two cabins away. He pointed to the very door.

I felt the hair rise on my neck as I looked at it. I knew, absolutely knew, that the fiend was inside. Why would he bother with a more difficult hiding place? No one had to tell me. We would find a large trunk sitting near the wall in that suite. I was vaguely conscious of David using all his poise and charm upon the steward, explaining that he was a physician and how he meant to have a look at his dear friend Jason Hamilton as soon as he could. But he didn't want to alarm Mr. Hamilton.

Of course not, said the cheerful steward, who volunteered that Mr. Hamilton slept throughout the day. Indeed, he was asleep in there now. Behold the “Do Not Disturb” sign hanging on the doorknob. But come, didn't we want to settle into our rooms? Here was our luggage coming right along.

Our cabins surprised me. I saw both as the doors were opened, and before I retired into my own.

Once again, I spied only synthetic materials, looking very plastic and lacking altogether the warmth of wood. But the rooms were quite large, and obviously luxurious, and opened to each other with a connecting door to make one grand suite. This door was now closed.

Each room was furnished identically except for small differences of color, and rather like streamlined hotel rooms, with low king-sized beds, draped in soft pastel bedspreads, and narrow dressing tables built into the mirrored walls. There was the de rigueur giant television set, and the cleverly concealed refrigerator, and even a small sitting area with pale tastefully shaped little couch, coffee table, and upholstered chair.

The real surprise, however, was the verandas. A great glass wall with sliding doors opened upon these small private porches, which were wide enough to contain a table and chairs of their own. What a luxury it was to walk outside, and stand at the railing and look out upon the lovely island and its sparkling bay. And of course this meant the Queen Victoria Suite would have a veranda, through which the morning sun would very brightly shine!

I had to laugh to myself remembering our old vessels of the nineteenth century, with their tiny portholes. And though I much disliked the pale, spiritless colors of the decor, and the total absence of any vintage surface materials, I was beginning to understand why James had remained fascinated with this very special little realm.

Meantime I could plainly hear David talking away to the cabin steward, their lilting British accents seeming to sharpen in response to one another, their speech becoming so rapid that I couldn't entirely follow what was being said.

Seems it all had to do with poor ailing Mr. Hamilton, and that Dr. Stoker was eager to slip in and have a look at him as he slept but the steward was terribly afraid to allow such a thing. In fact, Dr. Stoker wanted to obtain and keep a spare key to the suite, so that he might keep a very close watch on his patient just in case …

Only gradually, as I unpacked my suitcase, did I realize that this little conversation with all its lyrical politeness was moving towards the question of a bribe. Finally David said in the most courteous and considerate fashion that he understood the man's discomfort, and look, he wanted the good fellow to have a supper at his expense first time he went into port. And if things did go wrong and Mr. Hamilton was upset, well, David would take the entire blame. He'd say he'd taken the key from the galley. The steward wouldn't be implicated at all.

It seemed the battle was won. Indeed, David seemed to be using his near-hynotic power of persuasion. Yet there followed some polite and very convincing nonsense about how sick Mr. Hamilton was, on how Dr. Stoker had been sent by the family to look after him, and how important it was for him to have a look at the man's skin. Ah, yes, the skin. Undoubtedly the steward inferred a life-threatening ailment. And finally, he confessed that all the other stewards were at lunch, he was alone on the Signal Deck just now, and yes, he'd turn his back, if Dr. Stoker was absolutely sure …

"My dear man, I take responsibility for everything. Now, here, you must take this for all the trouble I've caused you. Have supper in some nice … No, no, now don't protest. Now leave things to me."

Within seconds the narrow bright corridor was deserted. With a tiny triumphant smile David beckoned for me to come out and join him. He held up the key to the Queen Victoria Suite. We crossed the passage and

he fitted it into the lock.

The suite was immense, and split between two levels separated by four or perhaps five carpeted steps. The bed rested upon the lower level, and was quite mussed, with pillows plumped up beneath the covers to make it appear that indeed someone was there fast asleep with a hood of covers carelessly drawn over his head.

The upper level contained the sitting area and the doors to the veranda, over which the thick draperies had been pulled, admitting almost no visible light. We slipped into the suite, snapped on the overhead lamp, and closed the door.

The pillows piled on the bed made an excellent ruse for anyone peeking in from the hallway, but on closer inspection did not appear to be a contrivance at all. Merely a messy bed.

So where was the devil? Where was the trunk?

"Ah, there," I whispered. "On the far side of the bed." I had mistaken it for some sort of table, as it was almost entirely draped with a decorative cloth. Now I could see that it was a large black metal locker, trimmed in brass, and very shiny, and easily big enough to accommodate a man with his knees crooked and lying upon his side. The thick drapery of decorative fabric was no doubt held in place upon the lid with a bit of glue. In the old century, I had often used this trick myself.

Everything else was quite immaculate, though the closets veritably bulged with fine clothes. A quick search of the dresser drawers revealed no documents of importance. Obviously he carried what few papers he required on his person, and his person was concealed inside that trunk. There were no jewels or gold hidden in this room as far as we could determine. But we found the stack of prestamped mailing envelopes which the fiend was using to get rid of the stolen treasures, and these were quite thick and large.

"Five post boxes," I said, as I went through them. David noted all the numbers in his small leatherbound book, then slipped it back in his pocket and looked at the trunk.

I warned him in a whisper to be careful. The fiend can sense danger even in his sleep. Don't think of touching the lock.

David nodded. He knelt down silently beside the trunk and gently laid his ear against the lid, and then he drew back rather fast and stared at it with a fierce and excited expression on his face.

“He’s in there all right,” he said, eyes still fixed on the trunk.

“What did you hear?”

“His heartbeat. Go listen for yourself if you wish. It’s your heart.”

“I want to see him,” I said. “Stand over there, out of the way.”

“I don’t think you should do this.”

“Ah, but I want to. Besides, I must assess that lock just in case.” I approached the trunk and realized as soon as I saw it closely that the lock had not even been turned. He either could not do it telepathically or had never bothered. Standing well to one side, I reached down with my right hand and jerked at the brass edge of the lid. Then I threw it back against the wall.

It struck the paneling with a dull sound, remaining open, and I realized that I was looking at a mass of soft black fabric, folded loosely and completely hiding the contents below. Nothing stirred beneath this fabric.

No powerful white hand suddenly reached for my throat!

Standing as far back as I could, I reached out and snatched up the cloth and drew it back in a great black flash of silk. My mortal heart was pounding miserably, and I almost lost my balance as I put several feet of space between myself and the trunk. But the body which lay there, quite visibly, with its knees drawn up just as I’d imagined, and its arms folded around its knees, did not move.

Indeed, the sunburnt face was as still as that of a mannequin, with its eyes closed and its familiar profile burning against the funereal padding of white silk beneath it. My profile. My eyes. My body dressed in formal evening black—a vampire’s black, if you will—with stiff white shirtfront and shining black tie at the neck. My hair, loose and full and golden in the dim light.

My body!

And I, standing there in a trembling mortal frame, with this bolt of loose black silk hanging like a matador’s cape from my trembling hand.

“Hurry!” David whispered.

Even as the syllables left his lips, I saw the crooked arm inside the trunk begin to move. The elbow tightened. The hand was sliding loose from its grip on the bent knee. At once I hurled the fabric back over the body, seeing it slip into the same shapeless covering it had been before. And with a quick swipe of my left fingers, I threw the lid up away from

the wall so that it fell shut with a dull sound.

Thank God the fancy outer cloth did not catch in it, but tumbled down into place, covering the unsnapped lock. I moved backwards away from the locker, almost sick with fear and amazement, and felt the reassuring pressure of David's hand on my arm.

Together we stood there silent for a long moment until we were certain that the preternatural body was at rest again.

Finally, I had collected myself sufficiently to take one more quiet look about. I was still trembling, but powerfully excited by the tasks that lay ahead.

Even with their thick layer of synthetic materials, these quarters were sumptuous by any standards. They represented the sort of luxury and privilege which very few mortals can ever attain. How he must have reveled in it. Ah, and to look at all those fine evening clothes. Black velvet dinner jackets as well as the more familiar style, and even an opera cape, he had indulged himself in that as well. There were shiny shoes galore on the floor of the closet, and a great wealth of expensive liquor exposed upon the bar.

Did he lure the women here for cocktails as he took his little drink?

I looked at the large stretch of glass wall, quite visible on account of the seam of light at the top and bottom edges of the draperies. Only now did I realize that this room was facing the southeast.

David squeezed my arm. Wasn't it safe now to go?

We left the Signal Deck immediately without encountering the steward again. David had the key in his inside pocket.

Down we went now to Five Deck, which was the very last deck of cabins, though not of the ship itself, and we found the little inside stateroom of Mr. Eric Sampson, who did not exist, and where another trunk was waiting to be occupied by that body upstairs when it once again belonged to me.

Nice small, windowless chamber. Of course it had the regular lock, but what of the others, which Jake had brought aboard at our request?

They were entirely too cumbersome for our purposes. But I saw that the door could be made quite impassable if I pushed the trunk against it. That would keep out any troublesome steward, or James if he managed to be prowling about after the switch. He could not possibly move the door back. Indeed, if I wedged the trunk between the door and the end

of the bunk, no one could move it. Excellent. So that part of the plan was complete.

Now to plot a route from the Queen Victoria Suite to this deck. As diagrams of the ship were hung in every small lobby and foyer, this was not difficult at all.

I quickly realized that Stairway A was the best interior route. Indeed it was perhaps the only stairway which went directly from the deck below ours all the way to Five Deck without a break. As soon as we reached the foot of this stairway, I knew that it would be nothing for me to drop from the very top of it, down through the well of turning railings to this very spot. Now, I must climb it to the Sports Deck, and see how to reach it from our deck above.

"Ah, you can do that, my dear young fellow," said David. "I'm taking the elevator up those eight flights."

By the time we met again in the quiet sunlight of the Queens Grill Lounge, I had plotted every step. We ordered a couple of gin and tonics —a drink that I found fairly tolerable—and went over the entire scheme in final detail.

We'd wait the night in hiding until James decided to retire for the approaching day. If he came early, we would wait until the crucial moment before we moved in upon him, throwing back the lid of his trunk.

David would have the Smith & Wesson leveled upon him as we both attempted to jolt his spirit out of the body, at which point I would rush in. Timing was crucial. He would be feeling the danger of the sunlight, and knowing that he could not possibly remain in the vampiric body; but he must not have sufficient opportunity to harm either of us.

If the first assault failed, and an argument did ensue, we would make plain to him the vulnerability of his position. If he tried to destroy either of us, our inevitable shouts or screams would bring help at once. And any dead body would be left lying in James's stateroom. Where at the eleventh hour was James to go himself? It was very doubtful he knew how long he could remain conscious as the sun was rising. Indeed, I was sure he had never pushed it to the limit, as I had done many a time.

Surely given his confusion, a second assault upon him would be successful. And then as David held the large revolver on the mortal body of James, I would dart with preternatural swiftness down the corridor of

the Signal Deck, down the interior stairway to the deck below, then run the length of it, passing out of the narrow corridor and into a wider one behind the Queens Grill Restaurant, where I would find the top of Stairway A, and then drop eight floors to Five Deck, rush down the corridor, and enter the small inside cabin and bolt the door. The trunk would then be shoved between bed and door, and I would climb inside it, bringing down the lid.

Even if I encountered a horde of sluggish mortals in my path it would take me no more than a few seconds, and almost all of that time I should be safe within the interior of the ship, insulated from the sun's light.

James—back in this mortal body and no doubt furious—would have no clue as to where I'd gone. Even if he overpowered David, he could not conceivably locate my cabin without an exhaustive search which would be quite beyond his ability to undertake. And David would be rousing security against him, accusing him of all sorts of sordid crimes.

Of course David had no intention of being overpowered. He would keep the powerful Smith & Wesson trained on James until the ship docked in Barbados, at which time he would escort the man to the gangway and invite him to go ashore. David would then take up his watch to see that James did not return. At sunset I would rise from the trunk and meet David, and we would enjoy the night's voyage to the next port.

David sat back in the pale green armchair, drinking the remainder of his gin and tonic, and obviously pondering the plan.

"You realize of course that I cannot execute the little devil," he said. "Gun or no gun."

"Well, you can't do it on board, that's for certain," I said. "The shot would be heard."

"And what if he realizes it? What if he goes for the weapon?"

"Then he finds himself in the same predicament. Surely he's smart enough to know that."

"I'll shoot him if I have to. That's the thought he can read from me with all his psychic skill. I will do it if I have to. Then I'll make the appropriate accusations. He was trying to rob your cabin. I was waiting for you when he came in."

"Look, suppose we make this switch soon enough before sunrise for me to hurl him over the side."

"No good. There are officers and passengers everywhere. He's sure to be seen by someone and it will be 'Man overboard' and mayhem all around."

"Of course I could crush his skull."

"Then I would have to conceal the body. No, let's hope the little monster realizes his good luck and cheerfully goes ashore. I don't want to have to … I don't like the thought of …"

"I know, I know, but you could simply shove him into that trunk. Nobody would find him."

"Lestat, I don't want to frighten you, but there are excellent reasons why we mustn't try to kill him! He told you those reasons himself. Don't you recall? Threaten that body and he'll rise out of it and make another assault. In fact, we'd be giving him no choice. And we'd be prolonging the psychic battle at the worst possible moment. It isn't inconceivable that he could follow you on your path to Five Deck, and try to get in again. Of course he'd be foolish to do it with no hiding place. But suppose he does have an alternative hiding place. Think on that."

"You're probably right on that."

"And we don't know the extent of his psychic power," he said. "And we must remember that this is his specialty—switching and possession! No. Don't try to drown him or crush him. Let him climb back into that mortal body. I'll keep the gun on him until you've had time to vanish from the scene altogether, and he and I shall have a round of conversation about what lies ahead."

"I see your point."

"Then if I do have to shoot him, very well. I'll do it. I'll put him into the trunk, and hope the sound of the shot goes unnoticed. Who knows? It might."

"God, I'm leaving you with this monster, you realize it? David, why don't we move on him as soon as the sun sets."

"No. Absolutely not. That means an all-out psychic battle! And he can hold the body sufficiently to take flight and simply leave us on board this ship, which will be at sea for the entire night. Lestat, I've thought all this through. Every part of the plan is crucial. We want him at his weakest, just before dawn, with the ship about to dock so that once he is in his mortal body, he can cheerfully and gratefully disembark. Now, you must trust that I'll handle this fellow. You don't know how much I

despise him! If you did, perhaps you wouldn't worry at all."

"Be assured I shall kill him when I find him."

"All the more reason for him to willingly go ashore. He'll want a head start, and I shall advise him to be quick."

"The Big-Game Hunt. I shall love it. I'll find him—even if he hides in another body. What a lovely game it will be."

David fell quiet for a moment.

"Lestat, there is one other possibility, of course …"

"What? I don't understand you."

He looked away as if he were trying to choose just the right words. Then he looked directly at me. "We could destroy that thing, you know."

"David, are you mad to even …?"

"Lestat, the two of us could do it. There are ways. Before sunset, we could destroy that thing, and you would be …"

"Say no more!" I was angry. But when I saw the sadness in his face, the concern, the obvious moral confusion, I sighed and sat back and took a softer tone. "David," I said, "I'm the Vampire Lestat. That's my body. We're going to get it back for me."

For a moment he didn't respond, and then he nodded rather emphatically and said in a half whisper, "Yes. Correct."

A pause fell between us, during which time I began to go over each and every step of the plan.

When I looked at him again, he seemed similarly thoughtful, in fact rather deeply engaged.

"You know I think it will go smoothly," he said. "Especially when I remember your descriptions of him in that body. Awkward, uncomfortable. And of course we must remember what sort of human he is—his true age, his old modus operandi, so to speak. Hmmm. He isn't going to get that gun away from me. Yes, I think it's all going to work as planned."

"So do I," I said.

"And all things considered," he added, "well, it's the only chance we've got!"

TWENTY-TWO

For the next two hours we went exploring the ship. It was imperative that we be able to hide in it during the nighttime hours when James might be roaming the various decks. For this, we had to know it, and I must confess that my curiosity about the vessel was extreme.

We wandered out of the quiet and narrow Queens Grill Lounge, and back into the main body of the vessel, past many cabin doors before we reached the circular mezzanine with its village of fancy shops. Then down a large circular stairway we went and across a vast polished dance floor through the main lounge, and off to other darkened bars and lounges, each with its own great spread of dizzying carpet and throbbing electronic music, and then past an indoor pool around which hundreds lunched at large circular tables, and then outside to yet another pool in the open, where countless passengers sunned themselves in beach chairs, snoozing or reading their folded papers or little paperback books.

Eventually we came upon a small library, full of quiet patrons, and a darkened casino, not to be opened until the ship had left the port. Here stood banks of somber darkened slot machines, and tables for blackjack and roulette.

At one point, we peeked into the darkened theatre, and found it to be enormous, though only some four or five people were watching the film upon a giant screen.

Then there was another lounge, and yet another, some with windows, and some utterly dark, and a fine fancy restaurant for passengers of middle rank, reached by a winding stairs. Yet a third—also quite handsome—served the patrons of the very lowest decks. Down we went, past my secret cabin hiding place. And there we discovered not one but two health spas, with their machines for building muscles and rooms for cleansing the pores of the skin with jets of steam.

Somewhere we stumbled upon the small hospital, with nurses in white uniforms, and tiny brightly lighted rooms; at another juncture a large windowless chamber full of computers at which several persons were working quietly away. There was a beauty salon for women, and a

similar grooming establishment for men. We came upon a travel desk at one time, and at another what seemed a sort of bank.

And always we were walking in narrow corridors to which we could not quite see the end. The dull beige walls and ceilings were forever close around us. One hideous color of carpet gave way to another. Indeed, sometimes the garish modern patterns met with such violence at various doorways that I all but laughed out loud. I lost count of the many stairways with their shallow padded steps. I could not distinguish one bank of elevators from another. Everywhere I looked there were numbered cabin doors. The framed pictures were bland and indistinguishable one from another. I had again and again to seek the diagrams to determine where exactly I had been and might be going now, or how to escape some circular path in which I found myself wandering for the fourth or fifth time.

David thought it powerfully amusing, especially since we encountered other passengers who were lost at almost every turn. At least six different times, we helped these very old individuals find their way to a certain place. And then became lost ourselves again.

Finally, by some miracle, we found our way back through the narrow Queens Grill Lounge and up to the secret Signal Deck and to our cabins. It was only an hour before sunset, and the giant engines were already roaring.

As soon as I had on my clothes for the evening—a white turtle-neck and light seersucker suit—I headed out on the veranda to see the smoke pouring from the great chimney above. The entire ship had begun to vibrate with the power of the engines. And the soft Caribbean light was waning over the distant hills.

A fierce churning apprehension gripped me. It was as if my entrails had been caught by the vibration of the engine. But it had nothing to do with such things. I was merely thinking that I should never see this brilliant natural light again. I should see the light of only moments from now—twilight—but never this splash of the dying sun on the tessellated water, never this gleam of gold in distant windows, or the blue sky shining so clear in its last hour, above the rolling clouds.

I wanted to cling to the moment, to savor every soft and subtle change. Then again, I did not. Centuries ago, there had been no farewell to the daylight hours. As the sun set on that last fateful day, I had not

even dreamed that I would never see it until this time. Never even dreamed!

Surely I should stand here, feeling the last of its sweet warmth, enjoying these precious moments of wholesome light.

But I really didn't want to. I really didn't care. I had seen it at moments far more precious and wondrous. It was over, wasn't it? I would soon be the Vampire Lestat again.

I passed slowly back through the stateroom. I looked at myself in the large mirror. Oh, this would be the longest night of my existence, I thought—longer even than that awful night of cold and sickness in Georgetown. And what if we fail!

David was waiting for me in the corridor, looking his very proper self in white linen. We must get away from here, he said, before the sun went down below the waves. I wasn't so anxious. I didn't think that slovenly idiot creature would hop right from the trunk into the burning twilight as I so loved to do. On the contrary, he would probably lie there fearfully in the dark for some time before he emerged.

Then what would he do? Open the draperies to his veranda and leave the ship by that means to rob some doomed family on the distant shore? Ah, but he had struck Grenada. Maybe he meant to rest.

We couldn't know.

We slipped off down to the Queens Grill Lounge again and then out onto the windy deck. Many passengers had come outside to see the ship leave port. The crew was making ready. Thick gray smoke poured from the chimney into the waning light of the sky.

I leant my arms against the rail and looked out towards the distant curve of land. The infinitely changing waves caught and held the light with a thousand different shades and degrees of opacity. But how much more varied and translucent it would appear to my eyes when tomorrow night came! Yet as I looked at it, I lost all thought of the future. I lost myself in the sheer majesty of the sea, and the firey pink light now suffusing and changing the azure of the endless sky.

All around me, mortals seemed subdued. There was little talk. People were gathered up on the windy prow to pay homage to this moment. The breeze here was silken and fragrant. The dark orange sun, visible as a peeping eye on the horizon, suddenly sank beyond sight. A glorious explosion of yellow light caught the underside of the great stacks of

blowing clouds. A rosy light moved up and up into the limitless and shining heavens, and through this glorious mist of color came the first twinkling glimmer of the stars.

The water darkened; the waves struck the hull below with greater violence. I realized the big ship was moving. And suddenly a deep violent throbbing whistle broke from her, a cry striking both fear and excitement in my bones. So slow and steady was her movement that I had to keep my eyes on the far shore to gauge it. We were turning to the west and into the dying light.

I saw that David's eyes were glazed over. With his right hand, he gripped the railing. He looked at the horizon, at the rising clouds and the deep pink sky beyond.

I wanted to say something to him—something fine and important, and indicative of the deep love I felt. My heart seemed to be breaking with it suddenly, and I turned slowly to him, and laid my left hand upon his right, which held the rail.

"I know," he whispered. "Believe me, I know. But you must be clever now. Keep it locked inside."

Ah, yes, bring down the veil. Be one among the countless hundreds, shut off and silent and alone. Be alone. And this my last day as a mortal man, had come to a close.

Once again the great throbbing whistle sounded.

The ship had almost completed her about-face. She was moving towards open sea. The sky was now darkening swiftly and it was time for us to retreat to the lower decks, and find some corner of a noisy lounge where we would not be observed.

I took one last look at the sky, realizing that all the light had now fled, utterly and completely, and my heart grew cold. A dark chill passed over me. But I couldn't regret the loss of the light. I couldn't. All I wanted with my whole monstrous soul was to have my vampire powers once more. Yet the earth itself seemed to demand something finer—that I weep for what was forsworn.

I couldn't do it. I felt sadness, and the crushing failure of my human venture weighed upon me in the silence as I stood there motionless, feeling the warm tender breeze.

I felt David's hand, tugging gently at my arm.

"Yes, let's go on in," I said, and I turned my back on the soft Caribbean

sky. Night had already fallen. And my thoughts were with James and James alone.

Oh, how I wished I could glimpse the fool when he rose from his silken hiding place. But it was far too risky. There was no vantage point from which we could watch in safety. Our only move was to conceal ourselves now.

The ship itself changed with the fall of darkness.

The small glittering shops of the mezzanine were doing a busy and noisy trade as we passed them. Men and women clad in shiny fabrics for evening were already taking their places in the Theatre Lounge below.

The slot machines had come alive with flashing lights in the casino; there was a crowd around the roulette table. And the elderly couples were dancing to the soft slow music of a band in the vast shadowy Queens Room.

Once we had found a likely little corner in the dark Club Lido, and ordered a pair of drinks to keep us company, David commanded me to stay there as he ventured up to the Signal Deck alone.

"Why? What do you mean, stay here?" I was instantly furious.

"He'll know you the minute he sees you," he said dismissively, as if he were talking to a child. He fitted a pair of dark glasses over his face. "He's not likely to notice me at all."

"All right, boss," I said disgustedly. I was outraged to have to wait here in silence while he went adventuring about!

I slumped back in the chair, drank another deep cold antiseptic swallow of my gin and tonic, and strained to see through the annoying darkness as several young couples moved out over the flashing lights of the electrically illuminated dance floor. The music was intolerably loud. But the subtle vibratory movement of the giant ship was delicious. She was already tearing along. Indeed, when I looked to the far left out of this little pit of contrived shadows, and through one of the many vast glass windows, I could see the cloud-filled sky, still luminous with the light of early evening, simply flying by.

A mighty ship, I thought. I must give her that. For all her flashy little lights and ugly carpet, her oppressively low ceilings and endlessly boring public rooms, she is a mighty ship indeed.

I was reflecting upon it, trying not to go mad with impatience, and attempting in fact to see it from the point of view of James, when I was

distracted by the distant appearance, in the far corridor, of a magnificently handsome blond-haired young man. He was dressed all in evening clothes, except for an incongruous pair of violet-tinted glasses, and I was drinking up his appearance in characteristic fashion when I suddenly realized with stultifying horror that I was gazing at myself!

It was James in his black dinner jacket and boiled shirt, scanning the place from behind those fashionable lenses, and making his way slowly to this lounge.

The tightening in my chest was unbearable. Every muscle of my frame began to spasm in my anxiety. Very slowly I lifted my hand to support my forehead and bowed my head just a little, looking again to the left.

But how could he not see me with those sharp preternatural eyes! This darkness was nothing to him. Why, surely he could pick up the scent of fear that emanated from me as the sweat poured down beneath my shirt.

But the fiend did not see me. Indeed, he had settled at the bar with his back to me, and turned his head to the right. I could make out only the line of his cheek and his jaw. And as he fell into a state of obvious relaxation, I realized that he was posing as he sat there, his left elbow leaning on the polished wood, his right knee crooked ever so slightly, his heel hooked into the brass rail of the stool upon which he sat.

He moved his head gently with the rhythm of the slow, woozy music. And a lovely pride emanated from him, a sublime contentment in what and where he was.

Slowly I took a deep breath. Far across the spacious room, and well beyond him, I saw the unmistakable figure of David stop for an instant in the open door. Then the figure moved on. Thank God, he had seen the monster, who must have looked to all the world as completely normal now—except for his excessive and flashy beauty—as he did to me.

When the fear crested in me again, I deliberately imagined a job I did not have, in a town where I had never lived. I thought of a fiancée named Barbara, most beautiful and maddening, and an argument between us which of course had never taken place. I cluttered my mind with such images, and thought of a million other random things—tropical fish I should like to have in a little tank someday, and whether or not I should go to the Theatre Lounge and see the show.

The creature took no notice of me. Indeed, I soon realized he was taking no notice of anyone. There was something almost poignant in the

way he sat there, face slightly uplifted, apparently enjoying this dark and fairly ordinary and certainly ugly little place.

He loves it here, I thought. These public rooms with their plastic and tinsel represent some pinnacle of elegance, and he is silently thrilled merely to be here. He does not even need to be noticed. He takes no notice of anyone who might notice. He is a little world unto himself as this ship is such a world, speeding along so very fast through the warm seas.

Even in my fear, I found it heartbreaking suddenly and tragic. And I wondered had I not seemed the very same tiresome failure to others when I was in that shape? Had I not seemed just as sad?

Trembling violently, I picked up the glass and downed the drink as if it were medicine, receding behind those contrived images again, cloaking my fear with them, and even humming a little with the music, watching almost absently the play of the soft-colored lights on that lovely head of golden hair.

Suddenly he slipped off the stool and, turning to the left, walked very slowly through the dark bar, and past me without seeing me, and into the brighter lights around the enclosed pool. His chin was lifted; his steps so slow and careful as to seem painful, his head turning from right to left as he surveyed the space through which he passed. Then with the same careful manner, indeed a manner more indicative of weakness than strength, he pushed open the glass door to the outer deck and slipped into the night.

I had to follow him! I shouldn't and I knew it, but I was on my feet before I could stop myself, my head thick with the same cloud of false identity as I moved after him, and then stopped inside the door. I could see him very far away at the very end of the deck itself, arms leaning on the railing, wind blowing hard through his loose hair. He was looking heavenward as he stood there, and once again he seemed lost in pride and in contentment, loving the wind and the darkness, perhaps, and swaying just a little, as blind musicians sway when they play their music, as if he relished every ticking second in that body, simply swimming in pure happiness as he stood on that spot.

The heartbreaking sense of recognition passed over me again. Did I seem the same wasteful fool to those who had known me and condemned me? Oh, pitiful, pitiful creature to have spent his

preternatural life in this of all places, so painfully artificial, with its old and sad passengers, in unremarkable chambers of tawdry finery, insulated from the great universe of true splendours that lay beyond.

Only after a great while did he bow his head just a little, and run the fingers of his right hand slowly down his jacket lapel. A cat licking its own fur had never looked more relaxed or self-indulgent. How lovingly he stroked this bit of unimportant cloth! It was more eloquent of the whole tragedy than any other single thing he had done.

Then, rolling his head to one side and then the other, and seeing only a couple of passengers to his far right, who were facing an entirely different direction, he suddenly rose off the boards and immediately disappeared!

Of course, no such thing had really happened. He had merely taken to the air. And I was left shuddering inside the glass door, the sweat breaking out all over my face and back as I looked at the empty place beyond, and felt David's quick whisper in my ear.

"Come, old chap, let's go on to the Queens Grill and have our supper."

I turned and saw the forced expression on his face. Of course James was still within range to hear both of us! To hear anything out of the ordinary without so much as a deliberate scan.

"Yes, the Queens Grill," I said, trying not to consciously think of Jake's words of last night that the fellow had yet to appear for a meal in that room. "I'm not really hungry, but it's awfully tiresome, isn't it, hanging around here?"

David, too, was trembling. But he was powerfully excited, as well.

"Oh, I must tell you," he said, carrying on the same false manner, as we walked back through the lounge and towards the nearby stairway. "They're all in black tie up there, but they have to serve us, as we've just come aboard."

"I don't care if they're all naked. It's going to be a hell of a night."

The famous first-class dining room was a bit more subdued and civilized than other rooms through which we'd passed. All done in white upholstery and black lacquer, it was quite pleasant with its generous blaze of warm light. The decor had a hard brittle quality to it, but then so did everything aboard the vessel; it wasn't at all ugly, however, and the carefully prepared food was quite good.

When some twenty-five minutes had passed since the dark bird had

flown, I ventured several quick remarks. “He can’t use a tenth of his strength! He’s terrified of it.”

“Yes, I agree with you. So frightened is he that he actually moves as if he were drunk.”

“Ah, that’s it, you have it. And he wasn’t twenty feet away from me, David. And he had absolutely no sense that I was there.”

“I know, Lestat, believe me, I know. My God, there’s so much I haven’t taught you. I stood there watching you, terrified he’d try some telekinetic mischief, and I hadn’t given you the slightest instruction on how to fend him off.”

“David, if he really uses his power, nothing can fend him off. But you see, he can’t use it. And if he had taken a stab, I’d draw on instinct, because that’s all you’ve been teaching me to do.”

“Yes, that’s true. It’s all a matter of the same tricks which you knew and understood in the other form. I had the feeling last night that you achieved the surest victories when you forgot you were mortal and lapsed into behaving as if you were your old self.”

“Perhaps so,” I said. “1 honestly don’t know. Oh, just the sight of him in my body!”

“Shhh, eat your last meal, and keep your voice down.”

“My last meal.” I gave a little chuckle. “I’ll make a meal of him when I finally catch him.” Then I stopped, realizing with distaste that I was speaking of my own flesh. I looked down at the long dark-skinned hand which was holding the silver knife. Did I feel any affection for this body? No. I wanted my own body, and I could not bear the thought that we had some eight hours to wait before it would again be mine.

We didn’t see him again until well past one o’clock.

I knew enough to avoid the little Club Lido, as it was the best place for dancing, which he liked to do, and it was also comfortably dark. Instead I hung about in the larger lounge areas, dark glasses securely in place, and hair plastered back with a thick dollop of grease which a confused young steward had obligingly given me upon request. I didn’t mind looking so dreadful. I felt more anonymous and safe.

When we spotted him he was again in one of the outer corridors, moving this time into the casino. It was David who went after him to

watch and principally because he couldn't resist.

I wanted to remind him that we didn't have to follow the monster. All we had to do was move upon the Queen Victoria Suite at the appropriate time. The ship's little newspaper, which had already been issued for the following morning, gave the exact time of sunrise as 6:21 a.m. I laughed when I saw it, but then I couldn't tell such a thing so easily now, could I? Well, by 6:21 a.m. I would be myself again.

At last David returned to his chair beside me and picked up the newspaper he'd been doggedly reading by the small table light.

"He's at the roulette wheel and he's winning. The little beast is using his telekinetic power to win! How stupid he is."

"Yes, you keep saying that," I said. "Shall we talk now about our favorite films? Haven't seen anything with Rutger Hauer lately. I miss that chap."

David gave a little laugh. "Yes, I'm rather fond of that Dutch actor myself."

We were still talking quietly at twenty-five minutes past three when we happened to see the handsome Mr. Jason Hamilton pass by again. So slow, so dreamy, so doomed. When David moved to follow, I laid my hand on his.

"No need, old boy. Just three more hours. Tell me the plot of that old film, *Body and Soul*, you remember it, the one about the boxer, and isn't there a line in it about the tyger from Blake?"

At ten past six, the milky light was already filling the sky. This was exactly the moment when I usually sought my resting place, and I couldn't imagine that he had not already sought his. We should find him in his shiny black trunk.

We had not seen him since a little past four o'clock when he'd been dancing in his slow drunken fashion on the little floor of the deserted Club Lido with a smallish gray-haired woman in a lovely soft red gown. We'd stood some distance away, outside the bar, our backs to the wall, listening to the brisk flow of his oh, so proper British voice. Then we had both fled.

Now the moment was at hand. No more running from him. The long night was coming to its close. It occurred to me several times that I

might perish within the next few minutes, but never in my life had such a thought stopped me from doing anything. If I thought of David being hurt, I would entirely lose my nerve.

David had never been more determined. He had only just taken the big silver gun from the cabin on Five Deck, and was carrying it in the pocket of his coat. We had left the trunk open there in readiness for me; and the door wore its little "Do Not Disturb" sign to keep the stewards out. We had also determined that I could not carry the black gun with me, for after the switch the weapon would then be in the hands of James. The little cabin was left unlocked. Indeed the keys were inside it, for I could not risk carrying these either. If some helpful steward did lock the door, I should have to move the lock with my mind, which would not be difficult for the old Lestat at all.

What I did carry on my person now was the bogus Sheridan Blackwood passport in my coat pocket along with enough money for the fool to get out of Barbados and to whatever part of the world he wished to flee. The ship was already making its way into the harbour of Barbados. God willing, it would not take her too long to dock.

As we'd hoped, the broad brightly lighted passage of the Signal Deck was deserted. I suspected that the steward was behind the galley curtains, catching a little sleep.

Quietly we proceeded to the door of the Queen Victoria Suite, and David slipped the key in the lock. Immediately we were inside. The trunk lay open and empty. The lamps were burning. The fiend had not yet come.

Without a word, I turned off these lights one by one and went to the veranda doors and drew back the drapes. The sky was still the shining blue of night but growing paler by the second. A gentle and pretty illumination filled the room. It would burn his eyes when he saw it. It would bring an immediate flush of pain to his exposed skin.

No doubt he was on his way here now, he had to be, unless he did have another hiding place of which we didn't know.

I went back to the door, and stood to the left of it. He would not see me when he entered, for the door itself would cover me from view when he pushed it back.

David had moved up the steps, to the raised sitting room, and was turned with his back to the glass wall, and facing the cabin door, the big

gun held firmly in both hands.

Suddenly, I heard the rapid steps drawing nearer and nearer. I didn't dare signal to David, but I could see that he, too, heard the approach. The creature was almost running. His daring surprised me. Then David lifted the gun and aimed it, as the key ground in the lock.

The door swung back against me and then slammed as James all but staggered into the room. His arm was up to shade his eyes from the light coming through the glass wall, and he uttered a half-strangled curse, clearly damning the stewards for not having closed the draperies as they'd been told to do.

In the usual awkward fashion, he turned towards the steps, and then came to a halt. He saw David above, holding the gun on him, and then David cried out:

"Now!"

With my whole being, I made the assault upon him, the invisible part of me flying up and out of my mortal body and hurtling towards my old form with incalculable force. Instantly, I was thrown backwards! I went down into my mortal body again with such speed that the body itself was slammed in defeat against the wall.

"Again!" David shouted, but once more I was repelled with dizzying rapidity, struggling to regain control of my heavy mortal limbs and scramble to my feet.

I saw my old vampire face looming over me, blue eyes reddened and squinting as the light grew ever more bright throughout the room. Ah, I knew the pain he suffered! I knew the confusion. The sun was searing that tender skin, which had never completely healed from the Gobi! His limbs were probably already growing weak with the inevitable numbness of the coming day.

"All right, James, the game's over," David said in obvious fury. "Use your clever little brain!"

The creature turned as if jerked to attention by David's voice, and then shrank back against the night table, crumpling the heavy plastic material with a loud ugly noise, his arm thrown up again to shield his eyes. In panic, he saw the destruction he'd wrought, and then tried to look again at David, who stood with his back to the coming sun.

"Now what do you mean to do?" demanded David. "Where can you go? Where can you hide? Harm us and the cabin will be searched as soon as

the bodies are discovered. It's over, my friend. Give it up now."

A deep growl came from James. He ducked his head as if he were a blind bull about to charge. I felt absolutely desperate as I saw his hands curl into fists.

"Give it up, James," David shouted.

And as a volley of oaths came from the being, I made for him once more, panic driving me as surely as courage and plain mortal will. The first hot ray of the sun cut across the water! Dear God, it was now or never and I couldn't fail. I couldn't. I collided with him full force, feeling a paralytic electric shock as I passed through him and then I could see nothing and I was being sucked as if by a giant vacuum down and down into the darkness, crying, "Yes, into him, into me! Into my body, yes!" Then I was staring directly into a blaze of golden light.

The pain in my eyes was unbearable. It was the heat of the Gobi. It was the great and final illumination of hell. But I'd done it! I was inside my own body! And that blaze was the sun rising, and it was scalding my lovely priceless preternatural face and my hands.

"David, we've won!" I shouted, and the words leapt out at freakish volume. I sprang up from the floor where I'd fallen, possessed once more of all my delicious and glorious quickness and strength. In a blind rush, I made for the door, catching one flickering glimpse of my old mortal body struggling on hands and knees towards the steps.

The room veritably exploded with heat and light as I gained the passage. I could not remain there one second longer, even though I heard the powerful gun go off with a deafening crack.

"God help you, David," I whispered. I was instantly at the foot of the first flight of steps. No sunlight penetrated this inside passage, thank heaven, but my strong familiar limbs were already growing weak. By the time the second shot was fired, I'd vaulted the railing of Stairway A, and plunged all the way down to Five Deck, where I hit the carpet at a run.

I heard yet another shot before I reached the little cabin. But it was oh, so faint. The dark sunburnt hand which snatched open the door was almost incapable of turning the knob. I was struggling against a creeping cold again as surely as if I were wandering in the Georgetown snows. But the door was jerked open, I fell on my knees inside the little room. Even if I collapsed I was safe from the light.

With one last thrust of sheer will, I slammed the door, and shoved the

open trunk into place and toppled into it. Then it was all I could do to reach up for the lid. I could feel nothing any longer as I heard it fall into place. I was lying there motionless, a ragged sigh escaping my lips.

"God help you, David," I whispered. Why had he fired? Why? And why so many shots from that great powerful gun? How could the world have not heard that big noisy gun!

But no power on earth could enable me to help him now. My eyes were closing. And then I was floating in the deep velvet darkness I had not known since that fateful meeting in Georgetown. It was over, it was finished. I was the Vampire Lestat again, and nothing else mattered. Nothing.

I think my lips formed the word "David" one more time as if it were a prayer.

TWENTY-THREE

As soon as I awoke, I sensed that David and James were not on the ship.

I'm not certain how I knew. But I did.

After straightening my clothes somewhat and indulging myself in a few moments of giddy happiness as I looked in the mirror, and flexed my marvelous fingers and toes, I went out to make certain that the two men were not on board. James I did not hope to And. But David. What had happened to David after firing that gun?

Surely three bullets would have killed James! And of course all this had happened in *my* cabin—indeed I found *my* passport with the name of Jason Hamilton securely in my pocket—and so I proceeded to the Signal Deck with the greatest of care.

The cabin stewards were rushing to and fro, delivering evening cocktails, and straightening the rooms of those who had already ventured out for the night. I used my utmost skill to move swiftly along the passage and into the Queen Victoria Suite without being seen.

The suite had obviously been put in order. The black lacquered locker which James had used as his coffin was closed, with the cloth smoothed over the lid. The battered and broken bedside table had been cleared away, leaving a scar upon the wall.

There was no blood on the carpet. Indeed, there was no evidence of any kind that the horrific struggle had taken place. And I could see through the glass windows to the veranda that we were moving out of Barbados harbour under a glorious and shining veil of twilight, towards the open sea.

I stepped outside on the veranda for a moment, just to look up into the limitless night and feel the joy of my old true vampiric vision once again. On the distant glittering shores I saw a million tiny details which no mortal could ever see. I was so thrilled to feel the old physical lightness, the sense of dexterity and grace, that I wanted to start dancing. Indeed, it would be lovely to do a little tap dance up one side the ship and down the other, snapping my fingers and singing songs all the while.

But there was no time for all this. I had to find out what had happened to David at once.

Opening the door to the passage, I quickly and silently worked the lock on David's cabin across the way. Then in a little spurt of preternatural speed I entered it, unseen by those moving down the hall.

Everything was gone. Indeed, the cabin had been sanitized for a new passenger. Obviously David had been forced to leave the ship. He might now be in Barbados! And if he was, I could find him quickly enough.

But what about the other cabin—the one that had belonged to my mortal self? I opened the connecting door without touching it, and I found that this cabin had also been emptied and cleaned.

How to proceed. I didn't want to remain on this ship any longer than I had to, for certainly I would be the center of attention as soon as I was discovered. The debacle had taken place in my suite.

I heard the easily identifiable tread of the steward who had been of such service to us earlier, and I opened the door just as he meant to pass by. When he saw me he was powerfully confused and excited. I beckoned for him to come inside.

"Oh, sir, they are looking for you! They thought you'd left the ship in Barbados! I must contact security at once."

"Ah, but tell me what happened," I said, peering directly into his eyes, and beyond his words. I could see the charm working on him as he softened and fell into a complete state of trust.

There had been a dreadful incident in my cabin at sunrise. An elderly British gentleman—who had earlier claimed to be my physician, by the way—had fired several shots at a young assailant who—he claimed—had tried to murder him, but none of these shots had struck the mark. Indeed, no one had ever been able to locate the young assailant. On the basis of the elderly gentleman's description, it was determined that the young man had occupied this very cabin in which we were now standing, and that he had boarded the ship under an assumed name.

Indeed so had the elderly British gentleman. In fact, the confusion of names was no small part of the entire affair. The steward really didn't know all that had taken place, except that the elderly British gentleman had been held in custody until he was finally escorted ashore.

The steward was puzzled. "I think they were rather relieved to have him off the ship. But we must call the security officer, sir. They are very

concerned about your welfare. It's a wonder they didn't stop you when you came aboard again in Barbados. They've been searching for you all day."

I wasn't at all sure that I wanted to endure any close scrutiny on the part of the security officers, but the matter was quickly decided for me when two men in white uniforms appeared before the door of the Queen Victoria Suite.

I thanked the steward and approached these two gentlemen, inviting them into the suite, and moving deeply into the shadows as was my custom during such encounters, and begging them to forgive me for not turning on the lights. Indeed, the light coming through the veranda doors was quite enough, I explained, considering the poor condition of my skin.

Both these men were deeply troubled and suspicious, and once again I did my best to work the persuasive charm on them as I spoke.

"What has happened to Dr. Alexander Stoker?" I asked. "He is my personal physician, and I'm deeply concerned."

The younger of the two men, a very red-faced man with an Irish accent, clearly did not believe what I was saying to him, and he could sense that something was very wrong with my manner and my speech. My only hope was to sink this individual into confusion so that he remained quiet.

But the other, the tall and educated Englishman, was much easier to spellbind, and he began to pour out the whole tale without guile.

Seems Dr. Stoker was not really Dr. Stoker, but a man from England named David Talbot, though why he had used the assumed name, he refused to say.

"You know, this Mr. Talbot had a gun on board this vessel, sir!" said the tall officer, while the other continued to stare at me in deep inarticulate distrust. "Of course this organization in London, this Talamasca, or whatever it is, was most apologetic, and eager to make things right. It was settled with the captain finally, and some persons at the home offices of Cunard. No charges were brought against Mr. Talbot when Mr. Talbot agreed to pack his belongings and allow himself to be escorted ashore and to a plane leaving immediately for the United States."

"To where in the United States?"

“Miami, sir. In fact, I saw him to the flight myself. He insisted upon giving me a message for you, sir, that you should meet him in Miami, at your convenience. At the Park Central Hotel? He gave me this message any number of times.”

“I see,” I answered. “And the man who attacked him? The man at whom he fired the gun?”

“We haven’t found any such person, sir, though undoubtedly this man was seen on this ship earlier by any number of persons, and in the company of Mr. Talbot, it seems! As a matter of fact, that is the young gentleman's cabin over there, and I believe you were in it, talking to the steward, when we arrived?”

“The whole thing is most puzzling,” I said in my most intimate and confiding manner. “You think this brown-haired young man is no longer on the ship?”

“We’re fairly certain of it, sir, though of course it’s quite impossible to engage in an all-out search of a vessel such as this. The young man’s belongings were still in the cabin when we opened it. We did have to open it, of course, what with Mr. Talbot insisting he’d been assaulted by the young man, and that the young man was also traveling under an assumed name! We have his luggage in safekeeping, of course. Sir, if you would come with me to the captain's office, I think perhaps you could shed some light upon—”

I quickly averred that I knew nothing about all this, really. I hadn’t been in the cabin at the time. Indeed, I’d gone ashore yesterday in Grenada without ever knowing that either man was boarding the vessel. And I had disembarked this morning in Barbados for a day of sightseeing without ever knowing this shooting incident had taken place.

But all this calm clever chatter on my part was a cover for the persuasion I continued to use on both of them—that they must leave me now, so that I might change clothes and have some rest.

When I shut the door on them, I knew they were on their way to the captain’s quarters, and that I had only minutes before they returned. It didn’t really matter. David was safe; he’d left the ship and gone on to Miami, where I was to meet him. That was all I wanted to know. Thank God he’d gotten an immediate flight out of Barbados. For God only knew where James might be at this time.

As for Mr. Jason Hamilton, whose passport I was carrying in my

pocket, he still had a closet full of clothes in this suite and I intended to avail myself of some of them at once. I stripped off the rumpled dinner jacket, and other nighttime finery—vampire drag, par excellence!—and found a cotton shirt, decent linen jacket, and pants. Of course everything was exquisitely tailored for this body. Even the canvas shoes were a comfortable fit.

I took along the passport with me, and a sizable sum of American dollars which I had found in the old clothes.

Then I went back out on the veranda and stood still in the sweet caressing breeze, eyes moving dreamily over the deeply blue and luminous sea.

The *Queen Elizabeth 2* was now thundering along at her famed twenty-eight knots, the bright translucent waves crashing into her mighty bow. The island of Barbados had completely disappeared from view. I looked up at the great black smokestack, which seemed in its immensity to be the very chimney of hell. It was a splendid sight to see the thick gray smoke gushing from it, and then arching back and down to the very water in the continuous blast of the wind.

I looked again at the distant horizon. All the world was filled with fine and beauteous azure light. Beyond a thin haze which mortals could not have detected I saw the tiny twinkling constellations, and the somber shining planets drifting ever so slowly by. I stretched my limbs, loving the feel of them, and the sweet ripples of sensation which moved down my shoulders and back. I shook myself all over, loving the feel of my hair on the back of my neck, and then I rested my arms upon the rail.

"I'll catch up with you, James," I whispered. "You can be certain of it. But I have other things I must do now. For the moment plot your little schemes in vain."

Then I went upwards slowly—indeed as slowly as I could manage it—until I was very high over the vessel, and I gazed down at her, admiring her many decks stacked one atop the other, and trimmed in so many tiny yellow lights. How festive she looked, and how removed from all care. Bravely she advanced through the rolling sea, mute and powerful and carrying her whole little realm with her of dancing and dining and chattering beings, of busy security officers and rushing stewards, of hundreds upon hundreds of happy creatures who knew not at all that we had ever been there to trouble them with our little drama, or that we

were gone as swiftly as we had come, leaving only the smallest bit of confusion in our wake. Peace to the happy *Queen Elizabeth 2*, I thought, and then again, I knew why the Body Thief had loved her, and hidden himself within her, sad and tawdry though she was.

After all, what is our entire world to the stars above? What do they think of our tiny planet, I wondered, full of mad juxtaposition, happenstance, and endless struggle, and the deep crazed civilizations sprawled upon the face of it, and held together not by will or faith or communal ambition but by some dreamy capacity of the world's millions to be oblivious to life's tragedies and again and again sink into happiness, just as the passengers of that little ship sank into it—as if happiness were as natural to all beings as hunger or sleepiness or love of warmth and fear of the cold.

I rose higher and higher until I could no longer see the ship at all. Clouds raced across the face of the world below me. And above, the stars burned through in all their cold majesty, and for once I didn't hate them; no, I couldn't hate them; I could hate nothing; I was too full of joy and dark bitter triumph. I was Lestat, drifting between hell and heaven, and content to be so—*perhaps for the first time*.

TWENTY-FOUR

The rain forest of South America—great deep tangle of woods and jungle that covers miles upon miles of the continent, blanketing mountain slopes and crowding into deep valleys, and breaking only for broad glittering rivers and shimmering lakes—soft and verdant and lush and seemingly harmless when seen through the drifting clouds from high above.

The darkness is impenetrable when one stands upon the soft, moist ground. The trees are so high there is no heaven above them. Indeed, creation is nothing but struggle and menace amid these deep moist shadows. It is the final triumph of the Savage Garden, and not all the scientists of civilization will ever classify every species of painted butterfly or speckled cat or flesh-eating fish or giant coiling snake, which thrives in this place.

Birds with feathers the color of the summer sky or the burning sun streak through the wet branches. Monkeys scream as they reach out with their tiny clever little hands for vines as thick as hemp rope. Sleek and sinister mammals of a thousand shapes and sizes crawl in remorseless search of one another over monstrous roots and half-buried tubers, under giant rustling leaves and up the twisted trunks of saplings dying in the fetid darkness, even as they suck their last nourishment from the reeking soil.

Mindless and endlessly vigorous is the cycle of hunger and satiation, of violent and painful death. Reptiles with eyes as hard and shining as opals feast eternally upon the writhing universe of stiff and crackling insects as they have since the days when no warm-blooded creature ever walked the earth. And the insects—winged, fanged, pumped with deadly venom, and dazzling in their hideousness and ghastly beauty, and beyond all cunning—ultimately feast upon all.

There is no mercy in this forest. No mercy, no justice, no worshipful appreciation of its beauty, no soft cry of joy at the beauty of the falling rain. Even the sagacious little monkey is a moral idiot at heart.

That is—there was no such thing until the coming of man.

How many thousands of years ago that was, no one can tell you for certain. The jungle devours its bones. It quietly swallows up sacred manuscripts as it gnaws on the more stubborn stones of the temple. Textiles, woven baskets, painted pots, and even ornaments of hammered gold ultimately dissolve on its tongue.

But the small-bodied, dark-skinned peoples have been there for many centuries, that is beyond question, forming their friable little villages of palm-frond huts and smoky cooking fires, and hunting the abundant and lethal game with their crude spears and their deadly poison-tipped darts. In some places they make their orderly little farms as they have always done, to grow thick yams, or lush green avocados, red peppers, and corn. Lots of sweet, tender yellow corn. Little hens peck at the dust outside the small carefully constructed houses. Fat, glossy pigs snuffle and snuggle in their pens.

Are these humans the best thing in this Savage Garden, warring as they have done so long upon one another? Or are they simply an undifferentiated part of it, no more complex ultimately than the crawling centipede or the slinky satin-skinned jaguar or the silent big-eyed frog so very toxic that one touch of his spotted back brings certain death?

What have the many towers of great Caracas to do with this endless sprawling world that comes so close to it. Wence came this metropolis of South America, with its smog-filled skies and its vast teeming hillside slums? Beauty is beauty where you find it. At night, even these *ranchitos* as they call them—the thousands upon thousands of shacks that cover the steep slopes on either side of the roaring freeways—are beautiful, for though they have no water, and no sewerage, and they are crowded beyond all modern questions of health or comfort, they are nevertheless strung with bright, shining electric lights.

Sometimes it seems that light can transform anything! That it is an undeniable and irreducible metaphor for grace. But do the people of the *ranchitos* know this? Is it for beauty that they do it? Or do they merely want a comfortable illumination in their little shacks?

It doesn't matter.

We can't stop ourselves from making beauty. We can't stop the world.

Look down upon the river that flows past the small outpost of St. Laurent, a ribbon of light glimpsed here and there for an instant from

the treetops as it makes its way deeper and deeper into the forest, coming at last upon the little Mission of St. Margaret Mary—a gathering of dwellings in a clearing around which the jungle patiently waits. Isn't it beautiful, this little cluster of tin-roofed buildings, with their whitewashed walls and crude crosses, with their small lighted windows, and the sound of a single radio playing a thin song of Indian lyrics and merrily beating drums?

How pretty the deep porches of the little bungalows, with their scattering of painted wooden swings and benches and chairs. The screens over the windows give the rooms a soft drowsy prettiness, for they make a tiny tight grid of fine lines over the many colors and shapes and thereby somehow sharpen them and render them more visible and vibrant, and make them look more deliberate—like the interiors in an Edward Hopper painting, or in a child's bright picture book.

Of course there is a way to stop the rampant spread of beauty. It has to do with regimentation, conformity, assembly-line aesthetics, and the triumph of the functional over the haphazard.

But you won't find much of that here!

This is Gretchen's destiny, from which all the subtleties of the modern world have been eliminated—a laboratory for a single repetitive moral experiment—Doing Good.

The night sings its song of chaos and hunger and destruction in vain around this little encampment. What matters here is the care of a finite number of humans who have come for vaccination, surgery, antibiotics. As Gretchen herself has said—to think about the larger picture is a lie.

For hours, I wandered in a great circle through the dense jungle, carefree and strong as I moved through impassable foliage, as I climbed over the high fantastical roots of the rain trees, as I stood still here and there to listen to the deep tangled chorus of the savage night. So tender the wet waxen flowers growing in the higher more verdant branches, slumbering in the promise of the morning light.

Once again, I was beyond all fear at the wet, crumbling ugliness of process. The stench of decay in the pocket of swamp. The slithering things couldn't harm me and therefore they did not disgust me. Oh, let the anaconda come for me, I would love to feel that tight, swiftly moving embrace. How I savored the deep, shrill cry of the birds, meant surely to strike terror in a simpler heart. Too bad the little hairy-armed

monkeys slept now in the darkest hours, for I should have loved to catch them long enough to bestow kisses upon their frowning foreheads or their lipless chattering mouths.

And those poor mortals, slumbering within the many small houses of the clearing, near to their neatly tilled fields, and to the school, and the hospital, and the chapel, seemed a divine miracle of creation in every tiny common detail.

Hmmm. I missed Mojo. Why was he not here, prowling this jungle with me? I had to train him to become the vampire's dog. Indeed, I had visions of him guarding my coffin during the daylight hours—an Egyptian-style sentinel, commanded to tear the throat out of any mortal intruder who ever found his way down the sanctuary stairs.

But I would see him soon enough. The whole world waited beyond these jungles. When I closed my eyes and made of my body a subtle receiver, I could hear over the miles the dense noisy traffic of Caracas, I could hear the sharp accents of her amplified voices, I could hear the thick pounding music of those dark air-conditioned dens where I draw the killers to me, like the moths to the bright candle, so that I might feed.

Here peace reigned as the hours ticked away in the soft purring tropic silence. A shimmer of rain fell from the low and cloudy sky, tamping down the dust of the clearing, speckling the clean-swept steps of the schoolhouse, tapping ever so lightly upon the corrugated tin roofs.

Lights winked off in the small dormitories, and in the outlying houses. Only a dull red illumination flickered deep inside the darkened chapel, with its low tower and big shiny silent bell. Small yellow bulbs in their rounded metal shades shone upon the clean paths and whitewashed walls.

Lights went dim in the first of the little hospital buildings, where Gretchen worked alone.

Now and then I saw her profile against the window screens. I caught a glimpse of her just inside the doorway, seated at a desk long enough to scratch some notes on paper, her head bent, her hair gathered at the nape of her neck.

Finally I moved silently towards the doorway, and slipped into the small, cluttered office, with its one glaring lamp, and to the door of the ward itself.

Children's hospital! They were all small beds. Crude, simple, in two rows. Was I seeing things in this deep semidarkness? Or were the beds made of crude wood, lashed at the joints, and hung with netting? And on the small colorless table, was that not a stub of candle on a small plate?

I felt dizzy suddenly; the great clarity of vision left me. *Not this hospital!* I blinked, trying to tear loose the timeless elements from those that made sense. Plastic sacks of intravenous food glistening on their chrome racks at bedside, weightless nylon tubing shining as it descended to the tiny needles stuck in thin fragile little arms!

This wasn't New Orleans. This wasn't that little hospital! Yet look at the walls! Are they not stone? I wiped the thin sheen of blood sweat from my forehead, staring at the stain on the handkerchief. Was that not a blond-haired child lying in that distant little bed? Again, the dizziness swept over me. I thought I heard a dim, high-pitched laughter, full of gaiety and easy mockery. But that was a bird surely in the great outer darkness. There was no old female nurse in homespun skirts to her ankles, and kerchief about her shoulders. She'd been gone for centuries, along with that little building.

But the child was moaning; the light gleamed on her small rounded head. I saw her chubby hand against the blanket. Again, I tried to clear my vision. A deep shadow fell over the floor beside me. Yes, look, the apnea alarm with its tiny glowing digits, and the glass-doored cabinets of medicines! Not that hospital, but this hospital.

So you've come for me, Father? You said you would do it again.

"No, I won't hurt her! I don't want to hurt her." Was I whispering aloud?

Far, far down at the end of the narrow room, she sat on the small chair, her little feet kicking back and forth, her hair in fancy curls against her puff sleeves.

Oh, you've come for her. You know you have!

"Shhh, you'll wake the children! Go away. You're not there!"

Everyone knew you would be victorious. They knew you'd beat the Body Thief. And here you are … come for her.

"No, not to hurt her. But to lay the decision in her hands."

"Monsieur? May I help you?"

I looked up at the old man standing in front of me, the doctor, with the stained whiskers and the tiny spectacles. No, not this doctor! Where

had he come from? I stared at the name tag. This is French Guiana. That's why he's speaking French. And there is no child at the end of the ward, sitting in any chair.

"To see Gretchen," I whispered. "Sister Marguerite." I had thought she was in this building, that I'd glimpsed her through the windows. I knew she was here.

Dull noises at the far end of the ward. He can't hear them but I can hear them. She's coming. I caught her scent suddenly, mingled with the scent of the children, of the old man.

But even with these eyes, I couldn't see in the intolerable gloom. Where was the light in this place coming from? She had just extinguished the tiny electric lamp at the far door, and she came now down the length of the ward past bed after bed, her steps quick though dogged, her head bowed. The doctor made a little weary gesture, and shuffled past me.

Don't stare at the stained whiskers; don't stare at the spectacles, or the rounded hump of his bent back. Why, you saw the plastic name tag on his pocket. He is no ghost!

The screen door thumped softly behind him, as he shambled away.

In the thin darkness, she stood. How beautiful her wavy hair, pulled back from her smooth forehead and her large steady eyes. She saw my shoes before she saw me. Sudden awareness of the stranger, the pale soundless figure—not so much as a breath comes from me—in the absolute stillness of the night, where he does not belong.

The doctor had vanished. It seemed the shadows had swallowed him, but surely he was out there somewhere in the dark.

I stood against the light from the office. Her scent was overpowering me—blood and the clean perfume of a living being. God, to see her with this vision—to see the glistening beauty of her cheeks. But I was blocking the light, wasn't I, for the door was very small. Could she see the features of my face clearly enough? Could she see the eerie unnatural color of my eyes?

"Who are you?" It was a low, wary whisper. She stood far away from me, stranded in the aisle, looking up at me from beneath her dark knitted brows.

"Gretchen," I answered. "It's Lestat. I've come as I promised I would come."

Nothing stirred in the long narrow ward. The beds appeared frozen behind their veils of netting. Yet the light moved in the sparkling sacks of fluid, like so many silvery little lamps glimmering in the dull close dark. I could hear the faint, steady respiration of the small sleeping bodies. And a dull rhythmic sound like a child playfully thumping the leg of chair over and over with the back of her tiny heel.

Slowly, Gretchen raised her right hand and laid her fingers instinctively and protectively against her chest, at the base of her throat. Her pulse quickened. I saw her fingers close as if over a locket, and then I saw the light glinting on the thin little thread of gold chain.

"What is that around your neck?"

"Who are you?" she asked again, her whisper scraping bottom, her lips trembling as she spoke. The dim light from the office behind me caught in her eyes. She stared at my face, my hands.

"It's me, Gretchen. I won't hurt you. It's the farthest thing from my mind to hurt you. I've come because I promised I would come."

"I … I don't believe you." She backed away on the wooden floor, her rubber heels making the softest sound.

"Gretchen, don't be frightened of me. I wanted you to know that what I told you was true." I spoke so softly. Could she hear me?

I could see her struggling to clear her vision as only seconds ago I had struggled to clear my own. Her heart beat fiercely inside her, breasts moving beautifully beneath the stiff white cotton, the rich blood rising suddenly in her face.

"I'm here, Gretchen. I've come to thank you. Here, let me give you this for your mission."

Stupidly, I reached into my pockets; I withdrew the lucre of the Body Thief in thick handfuls and held it out, my fingers trembling as her fingers trembled, the money looking soiled and foolish, like so much rubbish.

"Take it, Gretchen. Here. It will help the children." I turned and saw the candle again—that same candle! Why the candle? I laid the money down beside it, hearing the boards creak under my weight as I stepped to the little table.

As I turned to look back at her, she came towards me, fearfully, eyes wide.

"Who are you?" she whispered for the third time. How large her eyes,

how dark the pupils, as they danced over me, like fingers drawn to something that would burn them. "I'm asking you again to tell me the truth!"

"Lestat, whom you nursed in your own house, Gretchen. Gretchen, I've recovered my true form. I came because I promised you I would come."

I could scarcely bear it, my old anger kindling as the fear intensified in her, as her shoulders stiffened and her arms came tightly together, and the hand clenching the chain at her neck began to shake.

"I don't believe you," she said, in the same strangled whisper, her entire body recoiling though she did not even take a step.

"No, Gretchen. Don't look at me in fear or as if you despise me. What have I done to you that you should look at me that way? You know my voice. You know what you did for me. I came to thank you—"

"*Liar!*"

"No, that's not true. I came because … because I wanted to see you again."

Lord God, was I weeping? Were my emotions now as volatile as my power? And she would see the blood in streaks on my face and it would scare her even more. I could not bear the look in her eyes.

I turned, and stared at the little candle. I struck the wick with my invisible will and saw the flame leap up, a tiny yellow tongue. *Mon Dieu, that same play of shadow on the wall.* She gasped as she stared at it and back at me, as the illumination spread around us and she saw for the first time very clearly and unmistakably the eyes that were fixed upon her, the hair that framed the face which looked at her, the gleaming fingernails of my hands, the white teeth just visible perhaps behind my parted lips.

"Gretchen, don't be afraid of me. In the name of truth, look at me. You made me promise I would come. Gretchen, I didn't lie to you. You saved me. I am here, and there is no God, Gretchen, you told me so. From anyone else it wouldn't have mattered, but you said it yourself."

Her hands went to her lips as she drew back, the little chain falling loose so that I saw the gold cross in the candle's light. Oh, thank God, a cross not a locket! She stepped back again. She could not stop the impulsive motion.

Her words came in a low faltering whisper:

"Get away from me, unclean spirit! Get out of this house of God!"

“I won’t hurt you!”

“Get away from these little ones!”

“Gretchen. I won’t hurt the children.”

“In the name of God, get away from me … go.” Her right hand groped again for the cross and she held it towards me, her face flushed and her lips wet and loose and trembling in her hysteria, her eyes devoid of reason as she spoke again. I saw it was a crucifix with the tiny twisted body of the dead Christ.

“Go out of this house. God himself protects it. He protects the children. Go.”

“In the name of truth, Gretchen,” I answered, my voice as low as hers, and as full of feeling. “I lay with you! I am here.”

“Liar,” she hissed. “Liar!” Her body was shaking so violently, it seemed she would lose her balance and fall.

“No, it’s the truth. If nothing else is true, it’s true. Gretchen, I won’t hurt the children. I won’t hurt you.”

In another instant, surely, she would lose her reason altogether, helpless screams would break from her, and the whole night would hear her, and every poor soul of the compound would come outdoors to heed her, to take up perhaps the very same cry.

But she remained there, shaking all over, and only dry sobs came suddenly from her open mouth.

“Gretchen, I’ll go now, I’ll leave you if that’s what you really want. But I kept my promise to you! Is there nothing more I can do?”

A little cry came from one of the beds behind her, and then a moan from another, and she turned her head frantically this way and that.

Then she bolted towards me, and past me through the small office, papers flying off the desk as she brushed past it, the screen door banging behind her as she ran out into the night.

I heard her distant sobbing as, in a daze, I turned around.

I saw the rain falling in a thin soundless mist. I saw her far across the clearing already and racing towards the chapel doors.

I told you you would hurt her.

I turned back and looked down the shadowy length of the ward.

“You’re not there. I’m done with you!” I whispered.

The light of the candle showed her clearly now even though she remained at the far end of the room. She was swinging her white-

stockinged leg still, heel of her black slipper striking the leg of the chair.

"Go away," I said as gently as I could. "It's over." The tears *were* running down my face, blood tears. Had Gretchen seen them?

"Go away," I said again. "It's finished and I'm going too."

It seemed she smiled, but she did not smile. Her face became the picture of all innocence, the face of the dream locket. And in the stillness, as I stood transfixed, looking at her, the entire image remained but ceased altogether to move. Then it dissolved.

I saw only an empty chair.

Slowly I turned back to the door. I wiped at my tears again, hating them, and put the handkerchief away.

Flies buzzed against the screen of the door. How clear the rain was, pelting the earth now. There came that soft swelling sound as the rain came down harder, as if the sky had slowly opened its mouth and sighed. Something forgotten. What was it? The candle, ah, blow out the candle, lest a fire start and hurt these tender little ones!

And look at the far end—the little blond child in the oxygen tent, the sheet of crinkled plastic flashing as if made up of bits and pieces of light. How could you have been so foolish as to make a flame in this room?

I put out the light with a pinch of my fingers. I emptied all my pockets. I laid down all the soiled and curling bills, hundreds upon hundreds of dollars, and the few coins I found as well.

And then I went out, and I walked slowly past the chapel with its open doors. Through the gentle downpour, I heard her praying, her low rapid whispers, and then through the open entrance, I saw her kneeling before the altar, the reddened fire of a candle flickering beyond her, as she held her arms outstretched in the form of a cross.

I wanted to go. It seemed in the depths of my bruised soul I wanted nothing more. But something again held me. I had smelled the sharp unmistakable scent of fresh blood.

It came from the chapel, and it was not the blood pumping within her, it was blood that was flowing free from a new wound.

I drew closer, careful not to make the slightest noise, until I stood in the chapel door. The smell grew stronger. And then I saw the blood dripping from her outstretched hands. I saw it on the floor, flowing in rivulets from her feet.

"Deliver me from Evil, O Lord, take me to you, Sacred Heart of Jesus,

gather me into your arms …"

She did not see or hear me as I drew closer. A soft glow suffused her face, made of the light of the flickering candle, and of the radiance from inside her, the great consuming rapture which held her now, and removed her from all around her, including the dark figure at her side.

I looked at the altar. I saw the giant crucifix high above it, and below, the tiny gleaming tabernacle, and the burning candle deep in its red glass which meant the Blessed Sacrament was there. A gust of breeze moved through the open chapel doors. It caught the bell above and a faint tinny peal broke from it, barely audible above the sound of the breeze itself.

I looked down at her again, at her upturned face with its blind eyes at half mast, and her mouth so slack though the words still came from it.

"Christ, my beloved Christ, gather me into your arms."

And through the haze of my tears, I watched the red blood welling and flowing red and thick and copious from her open palms.

There were hushed voices in the compound. Doors opened and closed. I heard the sound of people running on the packed earth. When I turned I saw that dark shapes had gathered at the entrance—a cluster of anxious female figures. I heard a whispered word in French which meant "stranger." And then the muffled cry:

"Devil!"

Down the aisle I went, right towards them, forcing them perhaps to scatter, though I never touched them or looked at them, and hurried past them and out into the rain.

Then I turned and looked back. I saw her kneeling still, as they gathered around her, and I heard their soft reverent cries of "Miracle!" and "Stigmata!" They were making the Sign of the Cross and dropping to their knees around her, as the prayers continued to fall in that dull trancelike voice from her lips.

"And the Word was with God, and the Word was God, and the Word was made flesh."

"Good-bye, Gretchen," I whispered.

And then I was gone, free and alone, into the warm embrace of savage night.

TWENTY-FIVE

I should have gone on to Miami that night. I knew that David might need me. And of course I had no idea where James might be.

But I had no heart for it—I was far too badly shaken—and I found myself before morning quite far east of the little country of French Guiana, yet still in the hungry sprawling jungles, and thirsting, but with no hope of satisfaction on that account.

About an hour before dawn I came upon an ancient temple—a great rectangle of pitted stone—so overgrown with vines, and other rankled foliage that it was perhaps altogether invisible even to mortals who might pass a few feet away. But as there was no road or even a footpath through this part of the jungle, I sensed that no one had passed here in centuries. It was my secret, this place.

Except for the monkeys, that is, who had waked with the coming light. A veritable tribe of them had laid siege to the crude building, whooping and screeching and swarming all over the long flat roof, and the sloping sides. In a dull listless fashion I watched them, even smiling, as they went about their antics. Indeed, the whole jungle had gone into a rebirth. The chorus of the birds was much louder than it had been in the hours of total darkness, and as the sky paled, I saw myriad shades of green all around me. And with a shock I realized I wasn't going to see the sun.

My stupidity on this count surprised me somewhat. But what creatures of habit we are. Ah, but wasn't this early light enough? It was pure joy to be in my old body …

… unless I remembered the look of pure revulsion on Gretchen's face.

A thick mist rose from the floor of the jungle, catching this precious illumination and diffusing it even to the tiniest nooks and crannies beneath shuddering flowers and leaves.

My sadness deepened as I looked around me; or more truly I felt raw and as if I'd been skinned alive. "Sadness" is too mild and sweet a word. I thought again and again of Gretchen, but only in wordless images. And when I thought of Claudia I felt a numbness, a silent obdurate

remembrance of the words I'd spoken to her in my fever dreams.

Like a nightmare the old doctor with the stained whiskers. The doll-child in the chair. No, not there. Not there. Not there.

And what did it matter if they had been? It didn't matter at all.

Beneath these deep enervating emotions, I was not unhappy; and to be aware of this, to know it truly, was perhaps a wondrous thing. Ah, yes, just my old self again.

Had to tell David all about this jungle! David must go to Rio before he returned to England. I would go with him, perhaps.

Perhaps.

I found two doors in the temple. The first was blocked with heavy irregular stones. But the other lay open, for the stones had long ago fallen away into a shapeless heap. Climbing over them, I made my way down a deep staircase, and then through several passages, until I came upon chambers to which no light penetrated at all. It was in one of these, very cool and utterly removed from the noises of the jungle, that I lay down to sleep.

Tiny slithering things dwelt there. As I laid my face against the damp cool floor, I felt these little creatures moving around the tips of my fingers. I heard their rustling. And then the heavy silken weight of a snake moved across my ankle. All this made me smile.

How my old mortal body would have cringed and shaken. But then my mortal eyes could have never seen into this deep place.

I began to tremble suddenly, to cry again softly, thinking of Gretchen. I knew there would never again be a dream of Claudia.

"What did you want of me?" I whispered. "Did you really think I could save my soul?" I saw her as I had in my delirium, in that old New Orleans hospital when I'd taken her by the shoulders. Or had we been in the old hotel? "I told you I would do it again. I told you."

Something had been saved at that moment. The dark damnation of Lestat had been saved, and was now forever intact.

"Good-bye, darlings," I whispered again.

And then I slept.

TWENTY-SIX

Miami—ah, my beautiful southern metropolis, lying under the polished sky of the Caribbean, no matter what say the various maps! The air seemed sweeter even than in the islands—sweeping gently over the inevitable crowds of Ocean Drive.

Hurrying through the fancy art deco lobby of the Park Central, and to the rooms I kept there, I stripped off my jungle-worn clothes, and went into my own closets for a white turtleneck shirt, belted khaki jacket and pants, and a pair of smooth brown leather boots. It felt good to be free of clothing purchased by the Body Thief, well fitted or not.

Then I immediately rang the desk and discovered that David Talbot had been in the hotel since yesterday and was now waiting for me on the porch of Bailey's Restaurant down the street.

I had no spirit for crowded public places. I'd persuade him to come back to my rooms. Surely he was still exhausted from the whole ordeal. The table and chairs here before the front windows would be a much better place for us to talk, as we were surely meant to do.

Out I went and up the busy sidewalk north until I saw Bailey's with the inevitable sign in fancy neon script above its handsome white awnings, and all its little tables draped in pink linen and set with candles, already busy with the first wave of the evening crowd. There was the familiar figure of David in the farthest corner of the porch, very proper in the suit of white linen he'd worn on the ship. He was watching for my approach with the usual quick and curious expression on his face.

In spite of my relief, I deliberately took him by surprise, slipping into the chair opposite so quickly that he gave a little start.

"Ah, you devil," he whispered. I saw a little stiffening about his mouth for a minute as though he were really annoyed, but then he smiled. "Thank God you're all right."

"You really think that's appropriate?" I asked.

When the handsome young waiter appeared I told him I wanted a glass of wine, just so that he would not continue to ask me about such things as the time passed. David had already been served some

loathsome-colored exotic drink.

"What in the hell actually happened?" I asked, leaning in a little closer over the table to shut out some of the general noise.

"Well, it was mayhem," he said. "He tried to attack me, and I had no choice but to use the gun. He got away, over the veranda, as a matter of fact, because I couldn't hold the bloody gun steady. It was simply too big for these old hands." He gave a sigh. He seemed tired, frayed at the edges. "After that, it was really a matter of calling the Motherhouse, and having them bail me out. Calls back and forth to Cunard in Liverpool." He made a dismissive gesture. "I was on a plane for Miami at noon. Of course I didn't want to leave you unattended aboard the vessel, but there really was no choice."

"I was never in the slightest danger," I said. "I feared for you. I told you not to fear for me."

"Well, that's what I thought would be the case. I sent them after James, of course, hoping to drive him from the ship. It became plain they could not even consider undertaking a cabin-by-cabin search of the vessel. So I thought you'd be left alone. I'm almost certain James disembarked right after the melee. Otherwise they would have apprehended him. I gave them a full description of course."

He stopped, took a gingerly little sip of his fancy drink, and then laid it down.

"You don't really like that, do you? Where's your disgusting Scotch?"

"The drink of the islands," he said. "No, I don't like it, but it doesn't matter. How did it go with you?"

I didn't answer. I was of course seeing him with my old vision, and his skin was more translucent, and all the little infirmities of his body were plain. Yet he possessed the aura of the marvelous as do all mortals to a vampire's eyes.

He seemed weary, racked with nervous tension. Indeed, his eyes were red around the edges, and again I saw that stiffness about his mouth. I also noted a sagging to his shoulders. Had this awful ordeal aged him further? I couldn't bear to see this in him. But his face was full of concern now as he looked at me.

"Something bad has happened with you," he said, softening even more and reaching across the table and laying his fingers on my hand. How warm they felt. "I can see this in your eyes."

“I don’t want to talk here,” I said. “Come up to my rooms at the hotel.”

“No, let’s stay here,” he said very gently. “I feel anxious after all that’s happened. It was quite an ordeal, really, for a man my age. I’m exhausted. I hoped you would come last night.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t. I should have. I knew this was a terrible trial for you, even though you enjoyed it so much when it was going on.”

“You thought so?” He gave a slow sad smile. “I need another drink. What did you say? Scotch?”

“What did *I* say? I thought that was your favorite drink.”

“Now and then,” he said. He gestured to the waiter. “Sometimes it’s a bit too serious.” He asked for a single malt if they had it. They didn’t. Chivas Regal would be fine. “Thank you for indulging me. I like it here. I like the quiet commotion. I like the open air.”

Even his voice sounded tired; it lacked some bright spark. This was hardly the time to suggest a trip to Rio de Janeiro, obviously. And it was all my fault.

“Anything you wish,” I said.

“Now, tell me what happened,” he said, solicitously. “I can see it’s weighing on your soul.”

And then I realized how much I wanted to tell him about Gretchen, that indeed, this is why I’d rushed here as much as any concern I felt for him. I was ashamed, and yet I couldn’t prevent myself from telling him. I turned towards the beach, my elbow on the table, and my eyes sort of misted so that the colors of the evening world became muted and more luminescent than before. I told him that I’d gone to Gretchen because I’d promised to do it, though deep within myself, I was hoping and praying to take her into my world with me. And then I explained about the hospital, the pure strangeness of it—the similarity of the doctor to the one of centuries ago, and the little ward itself, and that mad, crazy notion that Claudia was there.

“It was baffling,” I whispered. “I never dreamed that Gretchen would turn me away. You know what I thought? It sounds so foolish now. I thought she would find me irresistible! I thought it couldn’t possibly be any other way. I thought when she looked into my eyes—my eyes now, not those mortal eyes!—she’d see the true soul which she’d loved! I never imagined that there would be revulsion, or that it could be so total—both moral and physical—and that in the very moment of

understanding what we are, she would recoil completely and turn away. I can't understand how I could have been foolish, how I persist in my illusions! Is it vanity? Or am I simply mad? You've never found me repellent, have you, David? Or am I deluded on that score as well?"

"You are beautiful," he whispered, the words softened with feeling. "But you are unnatural, and that is what this woman saw." How deeply distressed he seemed. He had never sounded more solicitous in all his patient talks with me. Indeed, he looked as if he felt the pain I felt—acutely and totally. "She was no fit companion for you, don't you see?" he said kindly.

"Yes, I see. I see." I rested my forehead against my hand. I wished we were in the quiet of my rooms, but I didn't push the matter. He was being my friend again, as no other being on earth had ever been, really, and I would do as he wished. "You know you are the only one," I said suddenly, my own voice sounding ragged and tired. "The only one who will let me be my defeated self without turning away."

"How so?"

"Oh. All the others must damn me for my temper, my impetuosity, my will! They enjoy it. But when I show the weakness in myself, they shut me out." I thought then of Louis's rejection, and that I would very soon see him again, and an evil satisfaction filled me. Ah, he would be so very surprised. Then a little fear came over me. How would I forgive him? How would I keep my precious temper from exploding like a great wanton flame?

"We would make our heroes shallow," he answered, the words very slow and almost sad. "We would make them brittle. It is they who must remind us of the true meaning of strength."

"Is that it?" I asked. I turned, and folded my arms on the table, facing him, staring at the finely turned glass of pale yellow wine. "Am I truly strong?"

"Oh, yes, strength you've always had. And that's why they envy you and despise you and become so cross with you. But I needn't tell you these things. Forget about the woman. It would have been wrong, so very wrong."

"And what about you, David? It wouldn't be wrong with you." I looked up, and to my surprise, I saw his eyes were moist now, and truly reddened, and again came that stiffening of his mouth. "What is it,

David?" I asked.

"No, it wouldn't be wrong," he said. "I do not think now that it would be wrong at all."

"You're saying …?"

"Bring me into it, Lestat," he whispered, and then he pulled back, the proper English gentleman, shocked and disapproving of his own emotions, and he looked out over the milling crowd and towards the distant sea.

"You mean this, David? You're certain?" In truth I didn't want to ask. I didn't want to speak another word. And yet why? Why had he come to this decision? What had I done to him with this mad escapade? I wouldn't be the Vampire Lestat now if it weren't for him. But what a price he must have paid.

I thought of him on the beach in Grenada, and how he had refused the simple act of making love. He was in pain now as he had been then. And it seemed no mystery at all suddenly that he had come to this. I had brought him to it with our little adventure together to defeat the Body Thief.

"Come," I said to him. "It *is* time to go now, away from all this and to where we can be alone." I was trembling. How many times had I dreamed of this moment.

And yet it had come so quickly, and there were so many questions I should ask.

A sudden terrible shyness fell over me. I couldn't look at him. I thought of the intimacy we would soon experience, and I couldn't meet his gaze. My God, I was acting the way he had in New Orleans when I'd been in that strapping mortal body and pelting him with my rampant desire.

My heart was hammering with expectation. David, David in my arms. The blood of David passing into me. And mine into David, and then we would stand on the edge of the sea together as dark immortal brothers. I could scarce speak or even think.

I got up without looking at him, and I walked across the porch and down the steps. I knew he was following me. I was like Orpheus. One backward glance and he'd be torn away from me. Perhaps the glaring lights of a passing car would flash on my hair and eyes in such a way that he would suddenly be paralyzed with fear.

I led the way back down the pavement, past the sluggish parade of mortals in their beach finery, past the little sidewalk tables of the cafés. I went directly into the Park Central and through the lobby again with all its sparkling high-toned glamour and up the stairs to my rooms.

I heard him close the door behind me.

I stood at the windows, looking out again at that shining evening sky. My heart, be quiet! Do not hurry it. It is too important that each step be made with care.

Look at the clouds scudding so quickly away from paradise. Stars mere specks of glitter struggling in the pale flood of evening light.

There were things I must tell him, things I must explain. He would be the same for all time as he was at this moment; was there any small physical thing he wished to change? Shave the beard closer; trim the hair.

"None of that matters," he said, in that soft cultured English voice. "What's wrong?" So kind, as if I were the one who needed reassurance. "Isn't it what you wanted?"

"Oh, yes, truly yes. But you have to be sure you want it," I said, and only now I turned around.

He stood there in the shadows, so composed in his trim white linen suit, pale silk tie properly knotted at the neck. The light from the street shone brightly on his eyes, and flashed for one instant on the tiny gold stud in the tie.

"I can't explain it," I whispered. "It's happened so quickly, so suddenly, when I was sure it wouldn't. I'm afraid for you. Afraid you're making a terrible mistake."

"I want it," he said, but how strained his voice was, how dark, how without that bright lyric note. "I want it more than you can know. Do it now, please. Don't prolong my agony. Come to me. What can I do to invite you? To assure you? Oh, I've had longer than you know to brood on this decision. Remember how long I've known your secrets, all of you."

How strange his face looked, how hard his eyes, and how stiff and bitter his mouth.

"David, something is wrong," I said. "I know it is. Listen to me. We must talk it out together. It is the most crucial conversation perhaps that we will ever have. What's happened to make you want it? What was it?

Our time on the island together? Spell it out for me. I must understand."

"You waste time, Lestat."

"Oh, but for this, one must take time, David, it's the very last time that time really matters."

I drew closer to him, deliberately letting his scent fill my nostrils, deliberately letting the scent of his blood come to me, and awaken the desire in me which cared little who he was or what I was—the sharp hunger for him that wanted only his death. The thirst twisted and snapped inside me like a great whip.

He stepped backwards. I saw fear in his eyes.

"No, don't be frightened. You think I would hurt you? How could I have beaten that stupid little Body Thief if it hadn't been for you?"

His face stiffened all over, eyes becoming smaller, his mouth stretching in what seemed a grimace. Why, how dreadful and unlike himself he looked. What in God's name was going on in his mind? Everything was wrong about this moment, this decision! There was no joy, no intimacy. It was wrong.

"Open to me!" I whispered.

He shook his head, eyes flashing as they narrowed again. "Won't it happen when the blood flows?" Brittle, his voice!

"Give me an image, Lestat, to hold in mind. An image to hold against fear."

I was confused. I wasn't sure I knew what he meant.

"Shall I think of you and how beautiful you are," he said tenderly, "and that we shall be together, companions always? Will that bring me through?"

"Think of India," I whispered. "Think of the mangrove forest, and when you were most happy …"

I wanted to say more, I wanted to say, no, not that, but I didn't know why! And the hunger surged in me, and the burning loneliness mingled with it, and once again I saw Gretchen, saw the pure horror in her face. I moved closer to him. David, David at last … *Do it!* and be done with talking, what do the images matter, do it! What's wrong with you that you fear to do it?

And this time I caught him firmly in my embrace.

There came his fear again, a spasm, but he did not truly struggle against me, and I savored it for one moment, this lush physical intimacy,

the tall regal body in my arms. I let my lips move over his dark gray hair, breathing in the familiar fragrance, I let my fingers cradle his head. And then my teeth broke through the surface of the skin before I meant to do it and the hot salted blood flowed over my tongue and filled my mouth.

David, David at last.

In a torrent the images came—the great forests of India, and the great gray elephants thundering past, knees lifted awkwardly, giant heads wagging, tiny ears flapping like loose leaves. Sunlight striking the forest. *Where is the tiger? Oh, dear God, Lestat, you are the tiger! You've done it to him! That's why you didn't want him to think of this!* And in a flash I saw him staring at me in the sunlit glade, David of years ago in splendid youth, smiling, and suddenly, for a split second, superimposed upon the image, or springing from within it like an unfolding flower, there appeared another figure, another man. It was a thin, emaciated creature with white hair, and cunning eyes. And I knew, before it vanished once more into the faltering and lifeless image of David, that it had been James!

This man in my arms was James!

I hurled him backwards, hand up to wipe the spilling blood from my lips.

"James!" I roared.

He fell against the side of the bed, eyes dazed, blood trickling onto his collar, one hand flung out against me. "Now don't be hasty!" he cried in that old familiar cadence of his own, chest heaving, sweat gleaming on his face.

"Damn you into hell," I roared again, staring at those frenzied glittering eyes in David's face.

I lunged at him, hearing a sudden spurt from him of desperate crazed laughter, and more slurred and hurried words.

"You fool! It's Talbot's body! You don't want to hurt Talbot's—"

But it was too late. I tried to stop myself but my hand had closed around his throat, and I'd already flung the body at the wall!

In horror, I saw him slam into the plaster. I saw the blood splatter from the back of his head, and I heard the ugly crunch of the broken wall behind him, and when I reached out to catch him, he fell directly into my arms. In a wide bovine stare he looked at me, his mouth

working desperately to make the words come out.

"Look what you've done, you fool, you idiot. Look what … look what …"

"Stay in that body, you little monster!" I said between my clenched teeth. "Keep it alive!"

He was gasping. A thin tiny stream of blood poured out of his nose and down into his mouth. His eyes rolled. I held him up, but his feet were dangling as if he were paralyzed. "You … you fool … call Mother, call her … Mother, Mother, Raglan needs you … Don't call Sarah. Don't tell Sarah. Call Mother—" And then, he lost consciousness, head flopping forward as I held him and then laid him down on the bed.

I was frantic. What was I to do! Could I heal his wounds with my blood! No, the wound was inside, in his head, in his brain! Ah, God! The brain. David's brain!

I grabbed up the telephone, stammered the number of the room and that there was an emergency. A man was badly hurt. A man had fallen. A man had had a stroke! They must get an ambulance for this man at once.

Then I put down the phone and went back to him. David's face and body lying helplessly there! His eyelids were fluttering, and his left hand opened, and then closed, and opened again. "Mother," he whispered. "Get Mother. Tell her Raglan needs her … Mother."

"She's coming," I said, "you must wait for her!" Gently, I turned his head to the side. But in truth what did it matter? Let him fly up and out of it if he could! This body wasn't going to recover! This body could be no fit host to David ever again!

And where the hell was David!

Blood was spreading all over the coverlet of the bed. I bit into my wrist. I let the drops fall on the puncture wounds in the neck. Maybe a few drops on the lips would help somehow. But what could I do about the brain! Oh, God, how could I have done it …

"Foolish," he whispered, "so foolish. Mother!"

The left hand began to flop from side to side on the bed. Then I saw that his entire left arm was jerking, and indeed, the left side of his mouth was pulling to the side over and over again in the same repetitive pattern, as his eyes stared upwards and pupils ceased to move. The blood continued to flow from the nose and down into the mouth and

over the white teeth.

"Oh, David, I didn't mean to do it," I whispered. "Oh, Lord God, he's going to die!"

I think he said the word "Mother" once more.

But I could hear the sirens now, screaming towards Ocean Drive. Someone was pounding on the door. I slipped to the side as it was flung open, and I darted from the room, unseen. Other mortals were rushing up the stairway. They saw no more than a quick shadow as I passed. I stopped once in the lobby, and in a daze I watched the clerks scurrying about. The awful scream of the siren grew louder. I turned and all but stumbled out the doors and down into the street.

"Oh, Lord God, David, what have I done?"

A car horn startled me, then another blast jogged me loose from my stupor. I was standing in the very middle of the traffic. I backed away, and up onto the sand.

Suddenly a large stubby white ambulance came rattling to a halt directly before the hotel. One hulking young man jumped from the front seat and rushed into the lobby, while the other went to throw open the rear doors. Someone was shouting inside the building. I saw a figure at the window of my room above.

I backed further away, my legs trembling as if I were mortal, my hands clutching stupidly at my head as I peered at the horrid little scene through the dim sunglasses, watching the inevitable crowd gather as people stopped in their meandering, as they rose from the tables of the nearby restaurants and approached the hotel doors.

Now it was quite impossible to see anything in normal fashion, but the scene materialized before me as I snatched the images from mortal minds—the heavy gurney being carried through the lobby, with David's helpless body strapped to it, the attendants forcing people to the side.

The doors of the ambulance were slammed shut. Again the siren began its frightful peal, and off the vehicle sped, carrying David's body inside it to God only knows where!

I had to do something! But what could I do? Get into that hospital; work the change upon the body! What else can save it? And then you have James inside it? Where is David? Dear God, help me. But why should you?

At last I sprang into action. I hurried up the street, sprinting easily

past the mortals who could scarcely see me, and found a glass-walled phone booth and slipped into it and slammed the door.

"I have to reach London," I told the operator, spilling out the information: the Talamasca, collect. Why was it taking so long! I pounded upon the glass with my right fist in my impatience, the receiver pressed to my ear. At last one of those kindly patient Talamasca voices accepted the call.

"Listen to me," I said, blurting out my name in full as I began. "This isn't going to make sense to you, but it's dreadfully important. The body of David Talbot has just been rushed to a hospital in the city of Miami. I don't even know which hospital! But the body is badly wounded. The body may die. But you must understand. David is not inside this body. Are you listening? David is someplace …"

I stopped.

A dark shape had appeared in front of me on the other side of the glass. And as my eyes fell on it, fully prepared to dismiss it—for what did I care if some mortal man were pressing me to hurry?—I realized it was my old mortal body standing there, my tall young brown-haired mortal body, in which I had lived long enough to know every small particular, every weakness and strength. I was staring into the very face I had seen in the mirror only two days ago! Only it was now two inches taller than I. I was looking up into those familiar brown eyes.

The body wore the same seersucker suit with which I had last clothed it. Indeed, there was the same white turtleneck shirt that I had pulled over its head. And one of those familiar hands was lifted now in a calm gesture, calm as the expression on the face, giving me the unmistakable command to hang up the phone.

I put the receiver back into its hook.

In a quiet fluid movement, the body came around to the front of the booth and opened the door. The right hand closed on my arm, drawing me out with my full cooperation onto the sidewalk and into the gentle wind.

"David," I said. "Do you know what I've done?"

"I think so," he said with a little lift to the eyebrows, the familiar English voice issuing confidently from the young mouth. "I saw the ambulance at the hotel."

"David, it was a mistake, a horrible, horrible mistake!"

“Come on, let’s get away from here,” he said. And this *was* the voice I remembered, truly comforting and commanding and soft.

“But, David, you don’t understand, your body …”

“Come, you can tell me all about it,” he said.

“It’s dying, David.”

“Well, there isn’t much we can do about it, then, is there?”

And to my utter amazement, he put his arm around me, and leant forward in his characteristic authoritative manner, and pressed me to come along with him, down the pavement to the corner, where he put up his hand to signal a cab.

“I don’t know which hospital,” I confessed. I was still shaking violently all over. I couldn’t control the tremours in my hands. And the sight of him looking down at me so serenely was shocking me beyond endurance, especially when the old familiar voice came again from the taut, tanned face.

“We’re not going to the hospital,” he said, as if deliberately trying to calm a hysterical child. He gestured to the taxi. “Please get in.”

Sliding onto the leather seat beside me, he gave the driver the address of Grand Bay Hotel in Coconut Grove.

TWENTY-SEVEN

I was still in a pure mortal state of shock as we entered the large marble-tiled lobby. In a haze, I saw the sumptuous furnishings, the immense vases of flowers, and the smartly dressed tourists drifting past. Patiently, the tall brown-haired man who had been my former self guided me to the elevator, and we went up in swooshing silence to a high floor.

I was unable to tear my eyes off him, yet my heart was throbbing from what had only just taken place. I could still taste the blood of the wounded body in my mouth!

The suite we entered now was spacious and full of muted colors, and open to the night through a great wall of floor-length windows which looked out upon the many lighted towers along the shores of dark serene Biscayne Bay.

"You do understand what I've been trying to tell you," I said, glad to be alone with him at last, and staring at him as he settled opposite me at the small round wooden table. "I hurt him, David, I hurt him in a rage. I … I flung him at the wall."

"You and your dreadful temper, Lestat," he said, but again it was the voice one uses to calm an overwrought child.

A great warm smile fired the beautifully molded face with its clear graceful bones, and broad serene mouth—David's unmistakable smile.

I couldn't respond. Slowly, I lowered my eyes from the radiant face to the powerful straight shoulders settling against the back of the chair, and the entire relaxed form.

"He led me to believe he was you!" I said, trying to focus again. "He pretended to be you. Oh, God, I poured out all my woe to him, David. He sat there listening to me, suckering me on. And then he asked for the Dark Gift. He told me he'd changed his mind. He lured me up to the rooms to give it to him, David! It was ghastly. It was everything I had wanted, and yet I knew something wasn't right! Something about him was so sinister. Oh, and there were clues, and I didn't see them! What a fool I was."

"Body and soul," said the smooth-skinned, poised young man opposite.

He removed the seersucker jacket, tossing it on the nearby chair, and sat back again, folding his arms across his chest. The fabric of the turtleneck shirt showed his muscles to great advantage, and the clean white cotton made his skin seem all the more richly colored, almost a dark golden brown.

"Yes, I know," he said, the lovely British voice flowing naturally. "It's quite shocking. I had the very same experience, only a few days ago in New Orleans, when the only friend I have in the world appeared before me in this body! I sympathize completely. And I do understand—you needn't ask me again—that my old body is probably dying. It's just I don't know what either of us can do."

"Well, we can't go near it, that's certain! If you were to come within a few feet of it, James might sense your presence and focus sufficiently to get out."

"You think James is still in the body?" he asked, the eyebrows lifting again, precisely as David always lifted them when he spoke, the head tipping forward ever so slightly, and the mouth on the edge of a smile.

David in that face! The timbre of the voice was almost exactly the same.

"Ah … what … oh, yes, James. Yes, James is in the body! David, it was a blow to the head! You remember our discussion. If I was to kill him, it ought to be a swift blow to the head. He was stammering something about his mother. He wanted her. He kept saying to tell her that Raglan needed her. He was in that body when I left the room."

"I see. This means the brain is functioning but the brain is severely impaired."

"Exactly! Don't you see? He thought he would stop me from hurting him because it was your body. He had taken refuge in your body! Oh, he figured wrong! Wrong! And to try to lure me into the Dark Trick! What vanity! He should have known better. He should have confessed his little scheme the moment he saw me. Damn him. David, if I haven't killed your body, I've wounded it beyond repair."

He had drifted into his thoughts precisely the way he always did in the midst of conversation, the eyes soft and wide and looking off into the distance through the floor-length windows, and over the dark bay.

"I must go to the hospital, mustn't I?" he whispered.

"For God's sakes, no. Do you want to be plunged into that body as it

dies! You can't be serious."

He climbed to his feet with an easy grace, and moved to the windows. He stood there staring out into the night, and I saw the characteristic posture in him, I saw the unmistakable expression of David in troubled reflection in the new face.

What absolute magic it was to see this being with all his poise and wisdom shining from within this young form. To see the soft intelligence behind the clear young eyes as he looked down at me again.

"My death's waiting for me, isn't it?" he whispered.

"Let it wait. It was an accident, David. It's not an inevitable death. Of course there is one alternative. We both know what it is."

"What?" he asked.

"We go there together. We get into the room somehow by bewitching a few medical persons of various rank. You push him out of the body, and you go into it, and then I give you the blood. I bring you to me. There is no conceivable injury that the full infusion of blood won't heal."

"No, my friend. You should know better by now than to suggest it. That I cannot do."

"I knew you'd say it," I said. "Then don't go near the hospital. Don't do anything to rouse him from his stupor!"

And then we both fell silent, looking at one another. The alarm was fast draining out of me. I was no longer trembling. And I realized quite suddenly that he had never been alarmed.

He wasn't alarmed now. He did not even look sad. He was looking at me, as if asking me silently to understand. Or perhaps he wasn't thinking of me at all.

Seventy-four years old he was! And he had gone out of a body full of predictable aches and pains and dulling vision and into this hardy and beautiful form.

Why, I could have no idea at all of what he was really feeling! I'd swapped a god's body for those limbs! He had swapped the body of an aged being, with death ever present at his shoulder, a man for whom youth was a collection of painful and tormenting memories, a man so shaken by those memories that his peace of mind was fast crumbling away entirely, threatening to leave him bitter and discouraged in the few years he had left.

Now he had been given back his youth! He might live another whole

lifetime! And it was a body that he himself had found enticing, beautiful, even magnificent—a body for which he himself had felt carnal desire.

And here I'd been crying anxiously about the aged body, battered and losing its life drop by drop, in a hospital bed.

"Yes," he said, "I'd say that is the situation, exactly. And yet I know that I should go to that body! I know that it is the proper home of this soul. I know that every moment I wait, I risk the unimaginable—that it will expire, and I will have to remain in this body. Yet I brought you here. And here is exactly where I intend to remain."

I shuddered all over, staring at him, blinking as if to wake myself from a dream, and then shuddering again. Finally I laughed, a crazed ironic laugh. And then I said:

"Sit down, pour yourself some of your bloody miserable Scotch and tell me how this came about."

He wasn't ready to laugh. He appeared mystified, or merely in a great state of passivity, peering at me and at the problem and at the whole world from within that marvelous frame.

He stood a moment longer at the windows, eyes moving over the distant high-rises, so very white and clean looking with their hundreds of little balconies, and then at the water stretching on to the bright sky.

Then he went to the small bar in the corner, without the slightest awkwardness, and picked up the bottle of Scotch, along with a glass, and brought these back to the table. He poured himself a good thick swallow of the stinking stuff, and drank half of it, making that lovely little grimace with his tight new facial skin, exactly the way he had with the older, softer face, and then he flashed his irresistible eyes on me again.

"Well, he was taking refuge," he said. "It was exactly what you said. I should have known he would do it! But damn, it never occurred to me. We had our hands full, so to speak, dealing with the switch. And God knows, I never thought he'd try to seduce you into the Dark Trick. What made him think he could fool you when the blood started to flow?"

I made a little desperate gesture.

"Tell me what happened," I said. "He knocked you out of your body!"

"Completely. And for a moment I couldn't imagine what had happened! You can't conceive of his power! Of course he was desperate, as were we all! Of course I tried to reclaim myself at once, but he repelled me and then he started firing that gun at you!"

“At me? He couldn’t have hurt me with it, David!”

“But I didn’t know that for certain, Lestat. Suppose one of those bullets had struck you in the eye! I didn’t know but that he might shock your body with one good shot and somehow manage to get back into it himself! And I can’t claim to be an experienced spirit traveler. Certainly not on a level with him. I was in a state of plain fear. Then you were gone, and I still couldn’t recapture my own body, and he turned that gun on the other, lying on the floor.

“I didn’t even know if I could take possession of it. I’ve never done this. I wouldn’t even attempt it when you invited me to do so. Possession of another body. It’s as morally loathsome to me as deliberately taking human life. But he was about to blow the head off that body—that is, if he could get proper control of the gun. And where was I? And what was to happen to me? That body was my only chance of reentrance into the physical world.

“I went into it exactly the way I’d instructed you to enter your own. And I had it up and on its feet instantly, knocking him backwards, and almost dislodging the gun from his hand. By that time the passage outside was full of panic-stricken passengers and stewards! He fired another bullet as I fled over the veranda and dropped down to the lower deck.

“I don’t think I realized what had happened until I hit those boards. The fall would have broken my ankle in my old body! Probably even my leg. I was prepared for that inevitable splitting pain, and suddenly I realized I wasn’t hurt at all, that I’d climbed to my feet almost effortlessly, and I ran down the length of the deck and into the door to the Queens Grill Lounge.

“And of course that was the very wrong way to go. The security officers were on their way through that room to the Signal Deck stairs. I had no doubt they would apprehend him. They had to. And he’d been so awkward with that gun, Lestat. It was the way you described him before. He really doesn’t know how to move in these bodies he steals. He remains too much himself!”

He stopped, took another drink of the Scotch, and then filled the glass again. I was mesmerized watching him, and listening to him—to the authoritative voice and manner combined with the glistening and innocent face. Indeed, late adolescence had only just completed itself in

this young male form, though I hadn't thought about it before. It was in every sense only just finished, like a coin with the first clear impression stamped upon it and not a single tiny scratch of true wear.

"You don't get as drunk in this body, do you?" I asked.

"No," he said. "I don't. Nothing is the same, actually. Nothing. But let me go on. I didn't mean to leave you on the ship. I was frantic for your safety. But I had to."

"I told you not to worry on my account," I said. "Oh, Lord God, those are almost the same words I used to him … when I thought he was you. But go on. What happened then?"

"Well, I stepped back out into the hallway behind the Queens Grill Lounge, where I could still see inside through the little glass window in the door. I figured they had to bring him down that way. I didn't know of any other way. And I had to know if he had been caught. Understand, I'd made no decision as to what to do. Within seconds, a whole contingent of officers appeared, with me—David Talbot—in the very midst of them, and they ushered him—the old me—hastily and grimly through the Queens Grill itself and towards the front of the ship. And oh, to see him struggling to preserve his dignity, talking at them rapidly and almost cheerfully, as if he were a gentleman of great wealth and influence, caught up in some sordid annoying little affair."

"I can imagine it."

"But what is his game, I thought. I didn't realize of course that he was thinking of the future, how to take refuge from you. All I could think was, What is he up to now? Then it occurred to me that he would send them to search for me. He'd blame me for the entire incident, of course.

"At once, I checked my pockets. I had the passport of Sheridan Blackwood, the money you'd left to help him get clear of the boat, and the key to your old cabin upstairs. I was trying to think what I should do. If I went to that cabin they would come to look for me. He didn't know the name on the passport. But the cabin stewards would put it all together, of course.

"I was still utterly confused when I heard his name coming over the loudspeakers. A quiet voice was asking for Mr. Raglan James to report to any available officer of the ship at once. So he had implicated me, believing me to have that passport which he gave to you. And it would only be a matter of time before the name Sheridan Blackwood was

connected to it. He was probably giving them a physical description of me now.

"I didn't dare go down to Five Deck to try to see if you'd made your hiding place safely. I might be leading them there if I tried. There was only one thing I could do, as I saw it, and that was to hide somewhere until I knew that he was off the ship.

"It seemed entirely logical to me that he'd be taken into custody in Barbados on account of the firearm. And then he probably didn't know what name was on his passport, and they would have a look at it before he could pull it out.

"I went down to the Lido Deck, where the great majority of the passengers were having breakfast, got myself a cup of coffee, and crept into a corner, but within minutes I knew this wasn't going to work. Two officers appeared and were obviously looking for someone. I barely escaped notice. I started talking to two kindly women next to me, and more or less slipped into their little group.

"Within seconds after these officers moved on, but another announcement came over the public address system. This time they had the name right. Would Mr. Sheridan Blackwood report to any officer of the ship at once? And another dreadful possibility occurred to me! I was in the body of this London mechanic who'd murdered his entire family and escaped from a madhouse. The fingerprints of this body were probably on file. James wasn't past making that known to the authorities. And here we were docking now in British Barbados! Not even the Talamasca could get this body out of custody if I were taken. Much as I feared to leave you, I had to try to get off the ship."

"You should have known I'd be all right. But why didn't they stop you at the gangway?"

"Ah, they almost did, but it was sheer confusion. Bridgetown harbour is quite large, and we were properly docked at the pier. No need for the little launch. And it had taken so long for the customs officials to clear the ship for disembarkation that there were hundreds waiting in the aisles of the lower deck to go ashore.

"The officers were checking boarding passes as best they could, but I managed again to slip in with a little group of English ladies, and I began talking quite loudly to them about the sights of Barbados and the lovely weather, and I managed to get through.

“I walked right down and onto the concrete wharf and towards the customs building. My next fear was that they would check my passport in that building before I’d be allowed through.

“And of course you have to remember, I’d been in this body for less than an hour! Every step felt completely strange to me. Over and over I looked down and saw these hands, and there came the shock—Who am I? I would look into people’s faces, as if peering out of two holes in a blank wall. I couldn’t imagine what they saw!”

“I know, believe me.”

“Oh, but the strength, Lestat. That you cannot know. It was as if I’d drunk some overwhelming stimulant which had saturated every fiber! And these young eyes, ah, how far and how clearly they can see.”

I nodded.

“Well, to be perfectly frank,” he said, “I was scarcely reasoning at all. The customs building was very crowded. There were several cruise ships in port, as a matter of fact. The *Wind Song* was there, and so was the *Rotterdam*. And I think the *Royal Viking Sun* was also tied up, just across from the *Queen Elizabeth 2*. Whatever, the place was swarming with tourists, and I soon realized that passports were being checked only for those returning to their ships.

“I went into one of the little shops—you know the sort, full of horrible merchandise—and I bought a big pair of mirrored sunglasses, the kind you used to wear when your skin was so pale, and a hideous shirt with a parrot on it.

“Then taking off my jacket and turtleneck, I put on that horrible shirt, and the glasses, and I took up a station from which I could see the length of the wharf through the open doors. I didn’t know what else to do. I was terrified that they would start searching the cabins! What would they do when they couldn’t open that little door on Five Deck, or if they did find your body in that trunk? Then on the other hand, how could they make such a search? And what would prompt them to do it? They had the man with the gun.”

He paused again to take another swallow of the Scotch. He looked truly innocent in his distress as he described all this, innocent in the way he never could have looked in the older flesh.

“I was mad, absolutely mad. I tried to use my old telepathic powers, and it took me some time to discover them, and the body was more

involved with it than I would have thought."

"No surprise to me," I said.

"And then all I could pick up were various thoughts and pictures from passengers nearest me. It was no good at all. But fortunately my agony came abruptly to an end.

"They brought James ashore. He had the same enormous contingent of officers with him. They must have thought him the most dangerous criminal in the Western world. And he had my luggage with him. And again he was the very image of British propriety and dignity, chatting away with a gay smile, even though the officers were obviously deeply suspicious and profoundly uncomfortable as they ushered him to the customs people and laid his passport in their hands.

"I realized that he was being forced to permanently leave the ship. They even searched his luggage before the party was allowed to go through.

"All this time I was cleaving to the wall of the building, a young bum, if you will, with my jacket and shirt over my arm, staring at my old dignified self through those awful glasses. What is his game, I thought. Why does he want that body! As I told you, it simply never occurred to me what a clever move it had been.

"I followed the little troop outside, where a police car was waiting, into which they put his luggage as he stood rattling on and shaking hands now with those officers who were to stay behind.

"I drew near enough to hear his profuse thanks and apologies, the dreadful euphemisms and meaningless language, and his enthusiastic statements as to how much he'd enjoyed his brief voyage. How he seemed to enjoy this masquerade."

"Yes," I said dismally. "That's our man."

"Then the strangest of all moments occurred. He stopped all this chatter as they held the door of the car open for him, and turned around. He looked directly at me, as if he'd known I was there all along. Only he disguised this gesture quite cleverly, letting his eyes drift over the crowds coming and going through the enormous entrances, and then he looked at me again, very quickly, and he smiled.

"Only when the car drove off did I realize what had occurred. He had willingly driven away in my old body, leaving me with this twenty-six-year-old hunk of flesh."

He lifted the glass again, took a sip, and stared at me.

"Maybe the switch at such a moment would have been absolutely impossible. I really don't know. But the fact was, he wanted that body. And I was left standing there, outside the customs building, and I was … a young man again!"

He stared fixedly at the glass, obviously not seeing it at all, and then again his eyes looked into mine.

"It was *Faust*, Lestat. I'd bought youth. But the strange part was … I hadn't sold my soul!"

I waited as he sat there in confounded silence, and shook his head a little, and seemed on the verge of beginning again. Finally he spoke:

"Can you forgive me for leaving then? There was no way I could return to the ship. And of course James was on his way to jail, or so I believed."

"Of course I forgive you. David, we knew this might happen. We expected you might be taken into custody just as he was! It's absolutely unimportant. What *did* you do? Where did you go?"

"I went into Bridgetown. It wasn't even really a decision. A young very personable black cabdriver came up to me, thinking I was a cruise passenger, which of course I was. He offered me a tour of the city at a good price. He'd lived for years in England. Had a nice voice. I don't even think I answered him. I simply nodded and climbed into the back seat of the little car. For hours he drove me around the island. He must have thought me a very strange individual, indeed.

"I remember we drove through the most beautiful sugarcane fields. He said the little road had been built for the horse and carriage. And I thought that these fields probably looked the way they did two hundred years ago. Lestat could tell me. Lestat would know. And then I'd look down at my hands again. I'd move my foot, or tense my arms, or any small gesture; and I'd feel the sheer health and vigor of this body! And I'd fall back into a state of wonder, utterly oblivious to the poor man's voice or the sights we passed.

"Finally we came to a botanical garden. The gentlemanly black driver parked the little car and invited me to go in. What did it matter to me? I bought the admission with some of the money you'd so kindly left in your pockets for the Body Thief, and then I wandered into the garden and soon found myself in one of the most beautiful places I had ever

seen in all the world.

"Lestat, all this was like a potent dream!

"I must take you to this place, you must see it—you who love the islands so very much. In fact, all I could think of … was you!

"And I must explain something to you. Never in all this time since you first came to me, never once have I ever looked into your eyes or heard your voice, or even thought of you, without feeling pain. It's the pain connected to mortality, to realizing one's age and one's limits, and what one will never have again. Do you see my meaning?"

"Yes. And as you walked around the botanical garden, you thought of me. And you didn't feel the pain."

"Yes," he whispered. "I didn't feel the pain."

I waited. He sat in quiet, drinking the Scotch again in a deep greedy gulp, and then he pushed the glass away. The tall muscular body was completely controlled by his elegance of spirit, moving with his polished gestures, and once again there came the measured, even tones of his voice.

"We must go there," he said. "We must stand on that hill over the sea. You remember the sound of the coconut palms in Grenada, that clicking sound as they moved in the wind? You've never heard such music as you will hear in that garden in Barbados, and oh, those flowers, those mad savage flowers. It's your Savage Garden, and yet so tame and soft and safe! I saw the giant traveler's palm with its branches seemingly braided as they came out of the stalk! And the lobster claw, a monstrous and waxen thing; and the ginger lilies, oh, you must see them. Even in the light of the moon it must all be beautiful, beautiful to your eyes.

"I think I would have stayed there forever. It was a busload of tourists which shook me out of my dreams. And do you know, they were from our ship? They were the folks from the *QE2*." He gave a bright laugh and the face became too exquisite to describe. The whole powerful body shook with soft laughter. "Oh, I got out of there then very fast indeed.

"I went back out, found my driver, and then let him take me down to the west coast of the island, past the fancy hotels. Lots of British people there on vacation. Luxury, solitude—golf courses. And then I saw this one particular place—a resort right on the water that was everything I dream of when I want to get away from London and jet across the world to some warm and lovely spot.

“I told him to take me up the drive so that I might have a look. It was a rambling place of pink stucco, with a charming dining room under a bungalow roof and open all along the white beach. I thought things over as I roamed about, or rather I tried to, and I decided I would stay for the time being in this hotel.

“I paid off the driver, and checked into a fine little beachfront room. They took me through the gardens to reach it, and then admitted me to a small building, and I found myself inside with the doors open to a small covered porch from which a little path went right down to the sand. Nothing between me and the blue Caribbean but the coconut palms and a few great hibiscus shrubs, covered with unearthly red blooms.

“Lestat, I began to wonder if I’d died and all this wasn’t the mirage before the curtain drops at last!” I nodded in understanding.

“I sank down on the bed, and you know what happened? I went to sleep. I lay there in this body and I went to sleep.”

“It’s no wonder,” I said, with a little smile.

“Well, it’s a wonder to me. It really is. But how you would love that little room! It was like a silent shell turned to the trade winds. When I woke in the middle of the afternoon the water was the very first thing I saw.

“Then came the shock of realizing I was still in this body! I realized I’d feared all along that James would find me and push me out of it, and that I’d end up roaming around, invisible and unable to find a physical home. I was sure something like that would happen. It even occurred to me that I would simply become unanchored on my own.

“But there I was, and it was past three o’clock by this ugly watch of yours. I called London at once. Of course they had believed James was David Talbot when he’d called earlier, and only by listening patiently did I piece together what had happened—that our lawyers had gone at once to Cunard headquarters and straightened out everything for him, and that he was indeed on the way to the United States. Indeed, the Motherhouse thought I was calling from the Park Central Hotel in Miami Beach, to say that I had arrived safely and received their wire of emergency funds.”

“We should have known he would think of that.”

“Oh, yes, and such a sum! And they’d sent it right on, because David Talbot is still Superior General. Well, I listened to all this, patiently, as I

said, then asked to speak to my trusted assistant, and told him more or less what was actually going on. I was being impersonated by a man who looked exactly like me and could imitate my voice with great skill. Raglan James was the very monster, but if and when he called again they were not to let on that they were wise to him, but rather pretend to do whatever he asked.

"I don't suppose there is another organization in the entire world where such a story, coming even from the Superior General, would be accepted as fact. Indeed, I had to do some heavy convincing myself. But really it was a lot simpler than one would suppose. There were so many little things known only to me and my assistant. Identification was no real problem. And then of course I didn't tell him that I was firmly ensconced in the body of a twenty-six-year-old man.

"I did tell him I needed to obtain a new passport immediately. I had no intention of trying to leave Barbados with the name Sheridan Blackwood stamped on my picture. My assistant was instructed to call good old Jake in Mexico City, who would of course supply me with the name of a person in Bridgetown who could do the necessary work that very afternoon. And then I needed some money myself.

"I was about to ring off when my assistant told me the impostor had left a message for Lestat de Lioncourt—that he was to meet him at the Park Central in Miami as soon as possible. The impostor had said that Lestat de Lioncourt would surely call for this message. That it must be given to him without fail."

He broke off again, and this time with a sigh.

"I know I should have gone on to Miami. I should have warned you that the Body Thief was there. But something occurred in me when I received this information. I knew that I could reach the Park Central Hotel, and confront the Body Thief, probably before you could, if I were to move on it right away."

"And you didn't want to do it."

"No. I didn't."

"David, it's all entirely understandable."

"Is it?" He looked at me.

"You're asking a little devil like me?"

He gave a wan smile. And then shook his head again, before going on:

"I spent the night on Barbados, and half of this day. The passport was

ready well in time yesterday for the last flight to Miami. But I didn't go. I stayed in that beautiful seaside hotel. I dined there, and I wandered in the little city of Bridgetown. I didn't leave until noon today."

"I told you, I understand."

"Do you? What if the fiend had assaulted you again?"

"Impossible! We both know that. If he could have done it successfully with force, he would have done it the first time around. Stop tormenting yourself, David. I didn't come last night myself, though I thought you might need me. I was with Gretchen." I made a little sad shrug. "Stop worrying about what does not matter. You know what matters. It's what's happening to your old body right now. It hasn't penetrated to you, my friend. I've dealt a death blow to that body! No, I can see that you haven't grasped it. You think you have, but you're still in a daze."

These words must have struck him hard.

It broke my heart to see the pain in his eyes, to see them clouded, and see the sharp lines of distress in this new and unmarred skin. But once again, the mix of a vintage soul and a youthful form was so wondrous and beguiling that I could only stare at him, thinking vaguely of the way he had stared at me in New Orleans and how impatient with it I had become.

"I have to go there, Lestat. To that hospital. I have to see what's taken place."

"I'll go. You can come with me. But I alone will go into the hospital room itself. Now where is the phone? I must call the Park Central and find out where they took Mr. Talbot! And again, they're probably looking for me. The incident happened in my room. Perhaps I should simply call the hospital."

"No!" He reached out and touched my hand. "Don't. We should go there. We should … see … for ourselves. I should see for myself. I have … I have a feeling of foreboding."

"So do I," I said. But it was more than foreboding. After all, I had seen that old man with the iron-gray hair passing into silent convulsions on the bloodstained bed.

TWENTY-EIGHT

It was a vast general hospital to which all emergency cases were taken, and even at this late hour of the night, the ambulances were busy at its entrances, and white-jacketed doctors were hard at work as they received the victims of traffic violence, sudden heart attack, the bloody knife or the common gun.

But David Talbot had been taken quite far away from the glaring lights and the relentless noise, to the silent precincts on a higher floor known simply as Intensive Care.

"You wait here," I said to David firmly, directing him into a sterile little parlour with dismal modern furnishings and a scattering of tattered magazines. "Don't move from this place."

The broad corridor was absolutely silent. I walked towards the doors at the far end.

It was only a moment later that I returned. David sat staring into space, long legs crossed before him, arms folded once more across his chest.

As if waking from a dream, he finally looked up.

I began to tremble again all over, almost uncontrollably, and the serene quiet of his face only worsened my dread and the awful agonizing remorse.

"David Talbot's dead," I whispered, struggling to made the words plain. "He died half an hour ago."

He registered no visible response whatever. It was as if I hadn't spoken at all. And all I could think was, I made this decision for you! I did it. I brought the Body Thief into your world, though you warned me against it. And it was I who struck down that other body! And God knows what you will feel when you realize what's happened. You don't really know.

Slowly he climbed to his feet.

"Oh, but I do know," he said in a small and reasonable voice. He came towards me and placed his hands on my shoulders, his entire demeanor so much that of his old self that it was as if I were looking at two beings who had been fused into one. "It's *Faust*, my beloved friend," he said.

“And you weren’t Mephistopheles. You were only Lestat, striking out in anger. And now it’s done!”

He took a slow step backwards, and stared off in that dazed fashion again, his face at once losing its marks of distress. He was immersed in his thoughts, isolated, and cut off from me, as I stood there trembling, trying to regain control, trying to believe it was what he wanted.

And then again, I saw it from his perspective. How could he not want it? And I knew something else as well.

I’d lost him forever. He would never, never consent to come with me now. Any remnant of a chance had been blown completely away by this miracle. How could that not be so? I felt it penetrate, deeply and silently. I thought of Gretchen again, and the expression on her face. And for one flashing moment I was in the room again with the false David, and he was looking at me with those dark beautiful eyes and saying that he wanted the Dark Gift.

A shimmer of pain passed through me, and then it grew brighter and stronger, as if my body were suffering a ghastly and all-consuming inner fire.

I said nothing. I stared at the ugly fluorescent lights embedded in the tiled ceiling; I stared at the meaningless furniture, with its stains and its torn threads; at a soiled magazine with a grinning child on its cover. I stared at him. Slowly the pain died away into a dull ache. I waited. I could not have spoken a word for any reason, not just then.

After a long time of musing in silence, he appeared to wake from a spell. The quiet feline grace of his movements bewitched me again as it had all along. He said in a murmur that he must see the body. Surely that could be done.

I nodded.

Then he reached into his pocket and drew out a little British passport —the fake he’d obtained on Barbados, no doubt—and he looked at it as if he were trying to fathom a small but very important mystery. Then he held it out to me, though why, I couldn’t imagine. I saw the handsome young face with all its quiet attributes of knowledge; why must I see the picture? But I looked at it, as he obviously wanted me to do, and I saw there—beneath the new face—the old name.

David Talbot.

He had used his own name on the false document, as if …

“Yes,” he said, “as if I knew I would never, never be the old David Talbot again.”

The deceased Mr. Talbot had not yet been taken to the morgue, for a dear friend was on his way from New Orleans—a man named Aaron Lightner, coming by chartered plane, who should arrive very soon.

The body lay in a small immaculate room. An old man with full dark gray hair, still, as if sleeping, with his large head on a plain pillow, and his arms at his sides. Already the cheeks were a little sunken, elongating the face, and the nose in the yellow light of the lamp appeared slightly sharper than it really was, and hard as if made not of cartilage but of bone.

They had removed the linen suit from the body, washed it and groomed it and clothed it in a simple cotton gown. The covers were laid over it, the hem of pale blue sheet covering the edge of the white blanket and perfectly smooth across the chest. The eyelids were molded too closely over the eyes, as if the skin were already flattening and even melting. To a vampire’s keen senses, it already gave off the fragrance of death.

But this David would not know, nor catch that scent.

He stood at the bedside looking down at the body, at his own still face with the skin faintly yellow, and the crust of beard looking somehow soiled and unkempt. With an uncertain hand he touched his own gray hair, letting his fingers linger on the curling strands just before the right ear. Then he drew back and stood collected, merely looking, as though he were at a funeral and paying his respects.

“It’s dead,” he murmured. “Really and truly dead.” He gave a deep sigh and his eyes moved over the ceiling and the walls of the little chamber, over the window with its drawn blinds and then over the dull linoleum tile of the floor. “I sense no life in it or near it,” he said, with the same subdued voice.

“No. There’s nothing,” I answered. “The process of decay has already begun.”

“I thought he’d be here!” he whispered. “Like a bit of smoke in this room. I thought surely I’d feel him near me, struggling to get back in.”

“Perhaps he is here,” I said. “And he cannot do it. How ghastly even for

him."

"No," he said. "There's no one here." Then he stared at his old body as if he could not tear his eyes away.

Minutes ticked by. I watched the subtle tension in his face, the fine plastic skin infused with the expression of emotion, and then smoothing itself again. Was he resigned now? He was as closed to me as he had ever been, and seemed even more deeply lost in this new body, even though his soul shone through with such fine light.

Again, he sighed, and drew back, and we walked together out of the room.

We stood in the dull beige corridor together, beneath the grim and yellowish fluorescent lights. Beyond the glass window, with its thin dark screen, Miami flickered and blazed; a dull roar came from the nearby freeway, its cascade of burning headlamps sliding perilously close before the road swerved and rose again on its long thin concrete legs and shot away.

"You realize you've lost Talbot Manor," I said. "It belonged to that man there."

"Yes, I've thought of that," he answered listlessly. "I'm the sort of Englishman who would. And to think it goes to such a dreary little cousin, who will only want to put it on the market at once."

"I shall buy it back for you."

"The order may do it. They are in my will for most of the estate."

"Don't be so sure. Even the Talamasca might not be ready for this! And besides, humans can be perfect beasts when it comes to money. Call my agent in Paris. I'll instruct him to give you absolutely anything that you wish. I'll see to it your fortune is restored to you, to the very last pound, and most definitely the house. You can have anything that is mine to give."

He looked faintly surprised. And then deeply moved.

I couldn't help but wonder, Had *I* had ever seemed so completely at ease in this tall limber body? Surely my movements had been more impulsive and even a little violent. Indeed, the strength had wrung from me a certain carelessness. He seemed on the other hand to have assimilated a knowledge of every sinew and bone.

I saw him in my mind's eye, old David, striding through the narrow cobblestone streets of Amsterdam, sidestepping the whizzing bicycles.

He'd had the same poise even then.

"Lestat, you are not responsible for me now," he said. "You didn't cause this to happen."

How miserable I was suddenly. But there were words, weren't there, which had to be said.

"David," I began, trying not to show the soreness. "I couldn't have beaten him if it hadn't been for you. I told you in New Orleans I would be your slave for eternity if only you helped me to get my body away from him. And that you did." My voice was quavering. I hated it. But why not say it all now? Why prolong the pain? "Of course I know I've lost you forever, David. I know you'll never take the Dark Gift from me now."

"But why say you've lost me, Lestat?" he said in a low fervent voice. "Why must I die to love you?" He pressed his lips together, trying to suppress his sudden surge of feeling. "Why that price, especially now when I am alive as never before? Lord God, surely you grasp the magnitude of what's taken place! I've been reborn."

He placed his hand on my shoulder, fingers trying to close on the hard alien body which barely felt his touch, or rather felt it in such a wholly different way that he would never know. "I love you, my friend," he said in the same ardent whisper. "Please, don't leave me now. All this has brought us so close."

"No, David. It has not. In these last few days, we were close because we were both mortal men. We saw the same sun and the same twilight, we felt the same pull of the earth beneath our feet. We drank together and broke bread together. We might have made love together, if you had only allowed such a thing. But that's all changed. You have your youth, yes, and all the dizzying wonder that accompanies the miracle. But I still see death when I look at you, David. I see one who walks in the sun with death right at his shoulder. I know now I cannot be your companion, and you cannot be mine. It simply costs me too much pain."

He bowed his head, silently and valiantly struggling to maintain an inner control. "Don't leave me yet," he whispered. "Who else in all the world can understand?"

I wanted suddenly to plead with him. *Think, David, immortality in this beautiful young form.* I wanted to tell him of all the places we might go, immortals together, and the wonders we might see. I wanted to describe

to him that dark temple I'd discovered in the very depths of the rain forest, and tell him of what it had been like to roam the jungle, fearless, and with a vision that could penetrate the darkest corners … Oh, all this threatened to break loose from me in a rush of words, and I made no effort to veil my thoughts or my feelings. Oh, yes, you are young again, and now you can be young for all time. It is the finest vehicle for your travel into darkness that anyone could have fashioned; it is as if the dark spirits had done all this to prepare you! Wisdom and beauty are both yours. Our gods have worked the charm. Come, come with me now.

But I didn't speak. I didn't plead. As I stood silent in the corridor, I let myself breathe the blood scent rising from him, the scent that rises from all mortals, and which is different with each in its own way. How it tormented me to mark this new vitality, this sharper heat, and the sounder, slower heartbeat which I could hear as if the body itself were speaking to me in a manner in which it could not speak to him.

In that café in New Orleans, I had caught the same sharp scent of life from this physical being, but it had *not* been the same. No, not at all the same.

It was a simple thing to shut this off. I did it. I shrank back into the brittle lonely quiet of an ordinary man. I avoided his eyes. I didn't want to hear any more apologetic and imperfect words.

"I'll see you soon," I said. "I know you will need me. You'll need your only witness when the horror and mystery of all this is too much. I'll come. But give me time. And remember. Call my man in Paris. Don't rely upon the Talamasca. Surely you don't mean to give them this life too?"

As I turned to go, I heard the distant muffled sound of the elevator doors. His friend had come—a smallish white-haired man, dressed as David had so often dressed, in a proper old-fashioned suit, complete with vest. How concerned he looked as he came towards us with quick sprightly steps, and then I saw his eyes close on me, and he slowed his pace.

I hurried away, ignoring the annoying realization that the man knew me, knew what I was and who I was. So much the better, I thought, for he will surely believe David when David begins his strange tale.

The night was waiting for me as always. And my thirst could wait no longer. I stood for a moment, head thrown back, eyes closed, and mouth open, feeling the thirst, and wanting to roar like a hungry beast. Yes,

blood again when there is nothing else. When the world seems in all its beauty to be empty and heartless and I myself am utterly lost. Give me my old friend, death, and the blood that rushes with it. The Vampire Lestat is here, and he thirsts, and tonight of all nights, he will not be denied.

But I knew as I sought the dingy back streets, in search of the cruel victims I so loved, that I had lost my beautiful southern city of Miami. At least for a little while.

I kept seeing again in my mind's eye that smart little room in the Park Central, with its windows open to the sea, and the false David telling me he wanted the Dark Gift from me! And Gretchen. Would I ever think of those moments that I didn't remember Gretchen, and pouring out my story of Gretchen to the man I believed to be David before we climbed those steps to that chamber, as my heart had knocked inside me, and I had thought: At last! At last!

Bitter, and angry, and empty, I never wanted to see the pretty hotels of South Beach again.

II

ONCE
OUT OF NATURE

The Dolls

by W. B. Yeats

A doll in the doll-maker's house
Looks at the cradle and bawls:
“That is an insult to us."
But the oldest of all the dolls,
Who had seen, being kept for show,
Generations of his sort,
Out-screams the whole shelf: “Although
There's not a man can report
Evil of this place,
The man and the woman bring
Hither, to our disgrace,
A noisy and filthy thing."
Hearing him groan and stretch
The doll-maker's wife is aware
Her husband has heard the wretch,
And crouched by the arm of his chair,
She murmurs into his ear,
Head upon shoulder leant:
“My dear, my dear, O dear,
It was an accident."

TWENTY-NINE

It was two nights later that I returned to New Orleans. I'd been wandering in the Florida Keys, and through quaint little southern cities, and walking for hours on southern beaches, even wriggling my naked toes in the white sand.

At last I was back, and the cold weather had been blown away by the inevitable winds. The air was almost balmy again—my New Orleans—and the sky was high and bright above the racing clouds.

I went immediately to my dear old lady tenant, and called to Mojo, who was in the back courtyard sleeping, for he found the little apartment too warm. He gave no growl when I stepped into the courtyard. But it was the sound of my voice which triggered recognition. As soon as I said his name he was mine again.

At once he came to me, leaping up to throw his soft heavy paws on my shoulders and lick my face again with his great ham-pink tongue. I nuzzled him and kissed him and buried my face in his sweet shining gray fur. I saw him again as I had that first night in Georgetown—his fierce stamina and his great gentleness.

Had ever a beast looked so frightening yet been so full of calm, sweet affection? It seemed a wondrous combination. I knelt down on the old flags, wrestling with him, rolling him over on his back, and burying my head in the big collar of fur on his chest. He gave forth all those little growls and squeaks and high-pitched sounds that dogs give when they love you. And how I loved him in return.

As for my tenant, the dear old woman, who watched all this from the kitchen doorway, she was in tears to have him gone. At once we struck a bargain. She would be his keeper, and I should come for him through the garden gate whenever I wished. How perfectly divine, for surely it was not fair to him to expect him to sleep in a crypt with me, and I had no need of such a guardian, did I, no matter how graceful the image now and then seemed.

I kissed the old woman tenderly and quickly, lest she sense she was in close proximity to a demon, and then away I went with Mojo, walking

the narrow pretty streets of the French Quarter and laughing to myself at how mortals stared at Mojo, and gave him a wide berth and seemed indeed to be terrified of him, when guess who was the one to fear?

My next stop was the building on Rue Royale where Claudia and Louis and I had spent those splendid, luminous fifty years of earthly existence together in the early half of the old century—a place partially in ruins, as I have described.

A young man had been told to meet me on the premises, a clever individual with a great reputation for turning dismal houses into palatial mansions, and I led him now up the stairs and into the decayed flat.

"I want it all as it was over a hundred years ago," I said to him. "But mind you, nothing American, nothing English. Nothing Victorian. It must be entirely French." Then I led him on a merry march through room after room, as he scribbled hastily in his little book, scarce able to see in the darkness, while I told him what wallpaper I should want here, and which shade of enamel on this door, and what sort of bergère he might round up for this corner, and what manner of Indian or Persian carpet he must acquire for this or that floor.

How keen my memory was.

Again and again, I cautioned him to write down every word I spoke. "You must find a Greek vase, no, a reproduction will not do, and it must be this high and have upon it dancing figures." Ah, wasn't it the ode by Keats which had inspired that long-ago purchase? Where had the urn gone? "And that fireplace, that is not the original mantel. You must find one of white marble, with scrollwork like so, and arched over the grate. Oh, and these fireplaces, they must be repaired. They must be able to burn coal.

"I will live here again as soon as you are finished," I said to him. "So you must hurry. And, another caution. Anything you find in these premises—hidden in the old plaster—you must give to me."

What a pleasure it was to stand beneath these high ceilings, and what a joy it would be to see them when the soft crumbling moldings were once more restored. How free and quiet I felt. The past was here, but it wasn't here. No whispering ghosts anymore, if there had ever been.

Slowly I described the chandeliers I wanted; when the proper labels eluded me, I drew pictures in words for him of what had once been there. I would have oil lamps here and there, also, though of course

there must be limitless electricity, and we would conceal the various television screens in handsome cabinets, not to mar the effect. And there, a cabinet for my videotapes and laser disks, and again, we should find something suitable—a painted Oriental press would do the trick. Hide the telephones.

"And a facsimile machine! I must have one of those little marvels! Find someplace to conceal it as well. Why, you can use that room as an office, only make it gracious and beautiful. Nothing must be visible which is not made of polished brass, fine wool, or lustrous wood, or silk or cotton lace. I want a mural in that bedroom. Here, I shall show you. But look, see the wallpaper? That's the very mural. Bring in a photographer and record every inch and then begin your restoration. Work diligently but very fast."

Finally we were finished with the dark damp interior. It was time to discuss the courtyard in the back with its broken fountain, and how the old kitchen must be restored. I would have bougainvillea and the Queen's Wreath, how I love the Queen's Wreath, and the giant hibiscus, yes, I had just seen this lovely flower in the Caribbean, and the moonflower, of course. Banana trees, give me those as well. Ah, the old walls are tumbling. Patch them. Shore them up. And on the back porch above, I want ferns, all manner of delicate ferns. The weather's warming again, isn't it? They will do well.

Now, upstairs, once more, through the long brown hollow of the house and to the front porch.

I broke open the French doors and went out on the rotted boards. The fine old iron railings were not so badly rusted. The roof would have to be remade of course. But I would soon be sitting out here as I did now and then in the old days, watching the passersby on the other side of the street.

Of course the faithful and zealous readers of my books would spot me here now and then. The readers of Louis's memoir, come to find the flat where we had lived, would surely recognize the house.

No matter. They believed in it, but that's different from believing it. And what was another young blond-faced man, smiling at them from a high balcony, his arms resting on the rail? I should never feed upon those tender, innocent ones—even when they bare their throats at me and say, "Lestat, right here!" (This has happened, reader, in Jackson

Square, and more than once.)

"You must hurry," I told the young man, who was still scribbling, and taking measurements, and murmuring about colors and fabrics to himself, and now and then discovering Mojo beside him, or in front of him, or underfoot, and giving a start. "I want it finished before summer." He was in quite a dither when I dismissed him. I remained behind in the old building with Mojo, alone.

The attic. In the olden times, I'd never gone there. But there was an old staircase hidden off the rear porch, just beyond the back parlour, the very room where Claudia had once sliced through my thin fledgling white skin with her great flashing knife. I went there now and climbed up into the low rooms beneath the sloping roof. Ah, it was high enough for a man of six feet to walk here, and the dormer windows on the very front let in the light from the street.

I should make my lair here, I thought, in a hard plain sarcophagus with a lid no mortal could hope to move. Easy enough to build a small chamber beneath the gable, fitted with thick bronze doors which I should design myself. And when I rise, I shall go down into the house and find it as it was in those wondrous decades, save I shall have everywhere about me the technological marvels I require. The past will not be recovered. The past will be perfectly eclipsed.

"Won't it, Claudia?" I whispered, standing in the back parlour. Nothing answered me. No sounds of a harpsichord or the canary singing in its cage. But I should have songbirds again, yes, many of them, and the house would be full of the rich rampaging music of Haydn or Mozart.

Oh, my darling, wish you were here!

And my dark soul is happy again, because it does not know how to be anything else for very long, and because the pain is a deep dark sea in which I would drown if I did not sail my little craft steadily over the surface, steadily towards a sun which will never rise.

It was past midnight now; the little city was humming softly around me, with a chorus of mingled voices, and the soft clickety-clack of a distant train, with the low throb of a whistle on the river, and the rumble of traffic on the Rue Esplanade.

I went into the old parlour, and stared at the pale luminous patches of light falling through the panes of the doors. I lay down on the bare wood, and Mojo came to lie down beside me, and there we slept.

I dreamed no dreams of her. So why was I weeping softly when it came time finally to seek the safety of my crypt? And where was my Louis, my treacherous and stubborn Louis? Pain. Ah, and it would get worse, wouldn't it, when I saw him soon enough?

With a start, I realized that Mojo was lapping the blood tears from my cheeks. "No. That you must never do!" I said, closing my hand over his mouth. "Never, never that blood. That evil blood." I was badly shaken. And he was at once obedient, backing off just a little from me in his unhurried and dignified way.

How perfectly demonic his eyes seemed as he gazed at me. What a deception! I kissed him again, on the tenderest part of his long, furry face, just beneath his eyes.

I thought again of Louis, and the pain hit me as if I'd been dealt a hard blow by one of the ancients, right in the chest.

Indeed, my emotions were so bitter, and so beyond my control, that I felt frightened and for a moment thought of nothing and felt nothing but this pain.

In my mind's eye, I saw all the others. I brought up their faces as if I were the Witch of Endor standing over the cauldron invoking the images of the dead.

Maharet and Mekare, the red-haired twins, I beheld together—the oldest of us, who might not have even known of my dilemma, so remote were they in their great age and wisdom, and so deeply wrapped in their own inevitable and timeless concerns; Eric and Mael and Khayman I pictured, who held scant interest for me even if they had knowingly refused to come to my aid. They had never been my companions. What did I care for them? Then I saw Gabrielle, my beloved mother, who surely could not have known of my terrible jeopardy, who was no doubt wandering some distant continent, a ragged goddess, communing only with the inanimate, as she had always done. I did not know if she fed any longer on humans; some dim memory came to me of her describing the embrace of some dark woodland beast. Was she mad, my mother, wherever she had gone? I did not think so. That she existed still, I was certain. That I could never find her, I had no doubt.

It was Pandora I pictured next. Pandora, the lover of Marius, might have perished long ago. Made by Marius in Roman times, she had been on the verge of despair when last I saw her. Years ago, she had

wandered away, without warning, from our last true coven on the Night Island—one of the first to depart.

As for Santino, the Italian, I knew almost nothing of him. I had expected nothing. He was young. Perhaps my cries had never reached him. And why should he listen if they had?

Then I envisioned Armand. My old enemy and friend Armand. My old adversary and companion Armand. Armand, the angelic child who had created the Night Island, our last home.

Where was Armand? Had Armand deliberately left me to my own devices? And why not?

Let me turn now to Marius, the great ancient master who had made Armand in love and tenderness so many centuries ago; Marius, for whom I'd searched so many decades; Marius, the true child of two millennia, who had led me down into the depths of our meaningless history, and bid me worship at the shrine of Those Who Must Be Kept.

Those Who Must Be Kept. Dead and gone as was Claudia. For kings and queens among us can perish as surely as tender childlike fledglings.

Yet I go on. I am here. I am strong.

And Marius, like Louis, had known of my suffering! He'd known and he'd refused to help.

The rage in me grew stronger, ever more dangerous. Was Louis somewhere near in these very streets? I clenched my fists, struggling against this rage, struggling against its helpless and inevitable expression.

Marius, you turned your back on me. That came as no surprise, really. You were always the teacher, the parent, the high priest. I don't despise you for it. But Louis! My Louis, I could never deny you anything, and you turned me away!

I knew I could not remain here. I did not trust myself to lay eyes on him. Not yet.

An hour before dawn, I took Mojo back to his little garden, kissed him good-bye, and then I walked fast to the outskirts of the old city, and through the Faubourg Marigny, and finally into the swamplands, and then I raised my arms towards the stars, swimming so brilliant beyond the clouds, and I went up, and up, and up until I was lost in the song of the wind and tumbling on the thinnest currents, and the joy I felt in my gifts filled my entire soul.

THIRTY

It must have been a full week that I traveled the world. First I'd gone to snowy Georgetown and found that frail, pathetic young woman whom my mortal self had so unforgivably raped. Like an exotic bird, she looked to me now, struggling to see me well in the smelly dark of the quaint little mortal restaurant, not wanting to admit that this encounter with "my French friend" had ever happened, and then stunned as I placed an antique rosary made of emeralds and diamonds in her hand. "Sell it, if you like, chérie," I said. "He wanted you to have it for whatever purpose you wish. But tell me one thing. Did you conceive a child?"

She shook her head and whispered the word "no." I wanted to kiss her, she was beautiful again to me. But I dared not risk it. It wasn't only that I would have frightened her, it was that the desire to kill her was almost overpowering. Some fierce purely male instinct in me wanted to claim her now simply because I had claimed her in another way before.

I was gone from the New World within hours, and night after night, I wandered, hunting in the seething slums of Asia—in Bangkok and Hong Kong and Singapore—and then in the dreary and frozen city of Moscow, and in the charming old cities of Vienna and Prague. I went to Paris for a short time. I did not go to London. I pushed my speed to the limits; I rose and plunged in the darkness, sometimes alighting in towns of which I did not know the name. I fed ceaselessly among the desperate and the vicious and, now and then, the lost and the mad and the purely innocent who fell under my gaze.

I tried not to kill. I tried not to. Except when the subject was damn near irresistible, an evildoer of the first rank. And then the death was slow and savage, and I was just as hungry when it was over, and off to find another before the sun rose.

I had never been so at ease with my powers. I had never risen so high into the clouds, nor traveled so fast.

I walked for hours among mortals in the narrow old streets of Heidelberg, and of Lisbon, and of Madrid. I, passed through Athens and Cairo and Marrakesh. I walked on the shores of the Persian Gulf and the

Mediterranean and the Adriatic Sea.

What was I doing? What was I thinking? That the old cliché was true —*the world was mine*.

And everywhere I went I let my presence be known. I let my thoughts emanate from me as if they were notes played on a lyre.

The Vampire Lestat is here. The Vampire Lestat is passing. Best give way.

I didn't want to see the others. I didn't really look for them, or open my mind or my ears to them. I had nothing to say to them. I only wanted them to know that I had been there.

I did pick up the sound of nameless ones in various places, vagabonds unknown to us, random creatures of the night who had escaped the late massacre of our kind. Sometimes it was a mere mental glimpse of a powerful being who, at once, veiled his mind. Other times it was the clear sound of a monster plodding through eternity without guile or history or purpose. Maybe such things will always be there!

I had eternity now to meet such creatures, if ever the urge came over me. The only name on my lips was Louis.

Louis.

I could not for a moment forget Louis. It was as if someone else were chanting his name in my ear. What would I do if ever again I laid eyes on him? How could I curb my temper? Would I even try?

At last I was tired. My clothes were rags. I could stay away no longer. I wanted to be home.

THIRTY-ONE

I was sitting in the darkened cathedral. Hours ago it had been locked, and I had entered surreptitiously through one of the front doors, quieting the protective alarms. And left it open for him.

Five nights had passed since my return. Work was progressing wonderfully well on the flat in the Rue Royale, and of course he had not failed to notice it. I'd seen him standing under the porch opposite, staring up at the windows, and I'd appeared on the balcony above for only an instant—not even enough for a mortal eye to see.

I'd been playing cat and mouse with him since.

Tonight, I'd let him see me near the old French Market. And what a start it gave him, to actually lay eyes upon me, and to see Mojo with me, to realize as I gave him a little wink that it was truly Lestat whom he saw.

What had he thought in that first instant? That it was Raglan James in my body come to destroy him? That James was making a home for himself in the Rue Royale? No, he'd known it was Lestat all along.

Then I had walked slowly towards the church, Mojo coming along smartly at my side. Mojo, who kept me anchored to the good earth.

I wanted him to follow me. But I wouldn't so much as turn my head to see whether or not he was coming.

It was warm this night, and it had rained earlier enough to darken the rich, rose-colored walls of the old French Quarter buildings, to deepen the brown of the bricks, and to leave the flags and the cobblestones with a fine and lovely sheen. A perfect night for walking in New Orleans. Wet and fragrant, the flowers blooming over the garden walls.

But to meet with him again, I needed the quiet and silence of the darkened church.

My hands were shaking a little, as they had been off and on since I had come back into my old form. There was no physical cause for it, only my anger coming and going, and long spells of contentment, and then a terrifying emptiness which would open around me, and then the happiness coming again, quite complete, yet fragile, as though it were

but a thin fine veneer. Was it fair to say I didn't know the full state of my soul? I thought of the unbridled rage with which I'd smashed the head of David Talbot's body, and I shuddered. Was I still afraid?

Hmmm. Look at these dark sunburnt fingers with their gleaming nails. I felt the tremour as I pressed the tips of my right fingers to my lips.

I sat in the dark pew, several rows back from the railing before the altar, looking at the dark statues, and the paintings, and all the gilded ornament of this cold and empty place.

It was past midnight. The noise from the Rue Bourbon was as loud as ever. So much simmering mortal flesh there. I'd fed earlier. I would feed again.

But the sounds of the night were soothing. Throughout the narrow streets of the Quarter, in her small apartments, and atmospheric little taverns, in her fancy cocktail lounges, and in her restaurants, happy mortals laughed and talked, and kissed and embraced.

I slumped back comfortably in the pew, and stretched out my arms on the back of it as if it were a park bench. Mojo had already gone to sleep in the aisle near me, long nose resting on his paws.

Would that I were you, my friend. Looking like the very devil, and full of big lumbering goodness. Ah, yes, goodness. It was goodness that I felt when I locked my arms around him, and buried my face in his fur.

But now *he* had come into the church.

I sensed his presence though I could pick up no glimmer of thought or feeling from him, or even hear his step. I had not heard the outer door open or close. Somehow I knew he was there. Then I saw the shadow moving in the corner of my left eye. He came into the pew and sat beside me, a little distance away.

We sat there in silence for many long moments, and then he spoke.

"You burnt my little house, didn't you?" he asked in a small, vibrant voice.

"Can you blame me?" I asked with a smile, eyes still on the altar. "Besides, I was a human when I did that. It was human weakness. Want to come and live with me?"

"This means you've forgiven me?"

"No, it means I'm playing with you. I may even destroy you for what you did to me. I haven't made up my mind. Aren't you afraid?"

"No. If you meant to do away with me, it would already be done."

“Don’t be so certain. I’m not myself, and yet I am, and then I am not again.”

Long silence, with only the sounds of Mojo breathing hoarsely and deeply in his sleep.

“I’m glad to see you,” he said. “I knew you would win. But I didn’t know how.”

I didn’t answer. But I was suddenly boiling inside. Why were both my virtues and my faults used against me?

But what was the use of it—to make accusations, to grab him and shake him and demand answers from him? Maybe it was better not to know.

“Tell me what happened,” he said.

“I will not,” I replied. “Why in the world do you want to know?”

Our hushed voices echoed softly in the nave of the church. The wavering light of the candles played upon the gilt on the tops of the columns, on the faces of the distant statues. Oh, I liked it here in this silence and coolness. And in my heart of hearts I had to admit I was so very glad that he had come. Sometimes hate and love serve exactly the same purpose.

I turned and looked at him. He was facing me, one knee drawn up on the pew and his arm resting on the back of it. He was pale as always, an artful glimmer in the dark.

“You were right about the whole experiment,” I said. At least my voice was steady, I thought.

“How so?” No meanness in his tone, no challenge, only the subtle desire to know. And what a comfort it was—the sight of his face, and the faint dusty scent of his worn garments, and the breath of fresh rain still clinging to his dark hair.

“What you told me, my dear old friend and lover,” I said. “That I didn’t really want to be human. That it was a dream, and a dream built upon falsehood and fatuous illusion and pride.”

“I can’t claim that I understood it,” he said. “I don’t understand it now.”

“Oh, yes, you did. You understand very well. You always have. Maybe you lived long enough; maybe you have always been the stronger one. But you knew. I didn’t want the weakness; I didn’t want the limitations; I didn’t want the revolting needs and the endless vulnerability; I didn’t want the drenching sweat or the searing cold. I didn’t want the blinding

darkness, or the noises that walled up my hearing, or the quick, frantic culmination of erotic passion; I didn't want the trivia; I didn't want the ugliness. I didn't want the isolation; I didn't want the constant fatigue."

"You explained this to me before. There must have been something … however small … that was good!"

"What do you think?"

"The light of the sun."

"Precisely. The light of the sun on snow; the light of the sun on water; the light of the sun … on one's hands and one's face, and opening up all the secret folds of the entire world as if it were a flower, as if we were all part of one great sighing organism. The light of the sun … on snow."

I stopped. I really didn't want to tell him. I felt I had betrayed myself.

"There were other things," I said. "Oh, there were many things. Only a fool would not have seen them. Some night, perhaps, when we're warm and comfortable together again as if this never happened, I'll tell you."

"But they were not enough."

"Not for me. Not now."

Silence.

"Maybe that was the best part," I said, "the discovery. And that I no longer entertain a deception. That I know now I truly love being the little devil that I am."

I turned and gave him my prettiest, most malignant smile.

He was far too wise to fall for it. He gave a long near-silent sigh, his lids lowered for a moment, and then he looked at me again.

"Only you could have gone there," he said. "And come back."

I wanted to say this wasn't true. But who else would have been fool enough to trust the Body Thief? Who else would have plunged into the venture with such sheer recklessness? And as I thought this over, I realized what ought to have been plain to me already. That I'd known the risk I was taking. I'd seen it as the price. The fiend told me he was a liar; he told me he was a cheat. But I had done it because there was simply no other way.

Of course this wasn't really what Louis meant by his words; but in a way it was. It was the deeper truth.

"Have you suffered in my absence?" I asked, looking back at the altar.

Very soberly he answered, "It was pure hell." I didn't reply.

"Each risk you take hurts me," he said. "But that is my concern and my

fault."

"Why do you love me?" I asked.

"You know, you've always known. I wish I could be you. I wish I could know the joy you know all the time."

"And the pain, you want that as well?"

"Your pain?" He smiled. "Certainly. I'll take your brand of pain anytime, as they say."

"You smug, cynical lying bastard," I whispered, the anger cresting in me suddenly, the blood even rushing into my face. "I needed you and you turned me away! Out in the mortal night you locked me. You refused me. You turned your back!"

The heat in my voice startled him. It startled me. But it was there and I couldn't deny it, and once again my hands were trembling, these hands that had leapt out and away from me at the false David, even when all the other lethal power in me was kept in check.

He didn't utter a word. His face registered those small changes which shock produces—the slight quiver of an eyelid, the mouth lengthening and then softening, a subtle clabbering look, vanishing as quickly as it appeared. He held my accusing glance all through it, and then slowly looked away.

"It was David Talbot, your mortal friend, who helped you, wasn't it?" he asked.

I nodded.

But at the mere mention of the name, it was as if all my nerves had been touched by the tip of a heated bit of wire. There was enough suffering here as it was. I couldn't speak anymore of David. I wouldn't speak of Gretchen. And I suddenly realized that what I wanted to do most in the world was to turn to him and put my arms around him and weep on his shoulder as I'd never done.

How shameful. How predictable! How insipid. And how sweet.

I didn't do it.

We sat there in silence. The soft cacophony of the city rose and fell beyond the stained-glass windows, which caught the faint glow from the street lamps outside. The rain had come again, the gentle warm rain of New Orleans, in which one can walk so easily as if it were nothing but the gentlest mist.

"I want you to forgive me," he said. "I want you to understand that it

wasn't cowardice; it wasn't weakness. What I said to you at the time was the truth. I couldn't do it. I can't bring someone into this! Not even if that someone is a mortal man with you inside him. I simply could not."

"I know all that," I said.

I tried to leave it there. But I couldn't. My temper wouldn't cool, my wondrous temper, the temper which had caused me to smash David Talbot's head into a plaster wall.

He spoke again. "I deserve whatever you have to say."

"Ah, more than that!" I said. "But this is what I want to know." I turned and faced him, speaking through my clenched teeth. "Would you have refused me forever? If they'd destroyed my body, the others—Marius, whoever knew of it—if I'd been trapped in that mortal form, if I'd come to you over and over and over again, begging you and pleading with you, would you have shut me out forever! Would you have held fast?"

"I don't know."

"Don't answer so quickly. Look for the truth inside yourself. You do know. Use your filthy imagination. You do know. Would you have turned me away?"

"I don't know the answer!"

"I despise you!" I said in a bitter, harsh whisper. "I ought to destroy you—finish what I started when I made you. Turn you into ashes and sift them through my hands. You know that I could do it! Like that! Like the snap of mortal fingers, I could do it. Burn you as I burnt your little house. And nothing could save you, nothing at all."

I glared at him, at the sharp graceful angles of his imperturbable face, faintly phosphorescent against the deeper shadows of the church. How beautiful the shape of his wide-set eyes, with their fine rich black lashes. How perfect the tender indentation of his upper lip.

The anger was acid inside me, destroying the very veins through which it flowed, and burning away the preternatural blood.

Yet I couldn't hurt him. I couldn't even conceive of carrying out such awful, cowardly threats. I could never have brought harm to Claudia. Ah, to make something out of nothing, yes. To throw up the pieces to see how they will fall, yes. But vengeance. Ah, arid awful distasteful vengeance. What is it to me?

"Think on it," he whispered. "Could you make another, after all that's passed?" Gently he pushed it further. "Could you work the Dark Trick

again? Ah—*you* take *your* time before answering. Look deep inside you for the truth as you just told me to do. And when you know it, you needn't tell it to me."

Then he leant forward, closing the distance between us, and pressed his smooth silken lips against the side of my face. I meant to pull away, but he used all his strength to hold me still, and I allowed it, this cold, passionless kiss, and he was the one who finally drew back like a collection of shadows collapsing into one another, with only his hand still on my shoulder, as I sat with my eyes on the altar still.

Finally I rose slowly, stepping past him, and motioned for Mojo to wake and come.

I moved down the length of the nave to the front doors of the church. I found that shadowy nook where the vigil candles burn beneath the statue of the Virgin, an alcove full of wavering and pretty light.

The scent and sound of the rain forest came back to me, the great enclosing darkness of those powerful trees. And then the vision of the little whitewashed chapel in the clearing with its doors thrown open, and the eerie muted sound of the bell in the vagrant breeze. And the scent of blood coming from the wounds in Gretchen's hands.

I lifted the long wick that lay there for the lighting of candles, and I dipped it into an old flame, and made a new one burst into being, hot and yellow and finally steady, giving off the sharp perfume of burnt wax.

I was about to say the words "For Gretchen," when I realized that it was not for her at all that I had lighted the candle. I looked up at the face of the Virgin. I saw the crucifix above Gretchen's altar. Again, I felt the peace of the rain forest around me, and I saw that little ward with those small beds. For Claudia, my precious beautiful Claudia? No, not for her either, much as I loved her …

I knew the candle was for me.

It was for the brown-haired man who had loved Gretchen in Georgetown. It was for the sad lost blue-eyed demon I had been before I became that man. It was for the mortal boy of centuries ago who went off to Paris with his mother's jewels in his pocket, and only the clothes on his back. It was for the wicked impulsive creature who had held the dying Claudia in his arms.

It was for all those beings, and for the devil who stood here now, because he loved candles, and he loved the making of light from light.

Because there was no God in whom he believed, and no saints, and no Queen of Heaven.

Because he had kept his bitter temper and he had not destroyed his friend.

Because he was alone, no matter how near to him that friend. And because happiness had returned to him, as if it were an affliction he'd never fully conquer, the impish smile already spreading on his lips, the thirst leaping inside him, and the desire in him rising just to step outside again and wander in the slick and shining city streets.

Yes. For the Vampire Lestat, that little candle, that miraculous tiny candle, increasing by that small amount all the light in the universe! And burning in an empty church the night long among those other little flames. It would be burning on the morrow when the faithful came; when the sun shone through these doors.

Keep your vigil, little candle, in darkness and in sunshine.

Yes, for me.

THIRTY-TWO

Did you think the story was finished? That the fourth installment of the Vampire Chronicles had come to a close?

Well, the book should be ended. It really should have ended when I lit that small candle, but it didn't. I realized that the following night when I first opened my eyes.

Pray continue to Chapter Thirty-three to discover what happened next. Or you can quit now, if you like. You may come to wish that you had.

THIRTY-THREE

Barbados.

He was still there when I caught up with him. In a hotel by the sea.

Weeks had passed, though why I let so much time go by, I don't know. Kindness was no part of it, nor cowardice either. Nevertheless I had waited. I had watched the splendid little flat in the Rue Royale being restored, step by step, until there were at least some exquisitely furnished rooms in which I could spend my time, thinking about all that had happened, and which might yet take place. Louis had returned to take up residence with me, and was busy searching for a desk very like the one which had once stood in the parlour over a hundred years before.

David had left many messages with my man in Paris. He would be leaving soon for the carnival in Rio. He missed me. He wished I would come join him there.

All had gone well with the settlement of his estate. He was David Talbot, a young cousin of the older man who had died in Miami, and the new owner of the ancestral home. The Talamasca had accomplished these things for him, restoring to him the fortune he had left to them, and settling upon him a generous pension. He was no longer their Superior General, though he maintained his quarters in the Motherhouse. He would be forever under their wing.

He had a small gift for me, if I wanted it. It was the locket with the miniature of Claudia. He'd found it. Exquisite portrait; fine gold chain. He had it with him, and would send it to me if I liked. Or would I not come to see him, and accept it from his hands myself?

Barbados. He had felt compelled to return to the scene of the crime, so to speak. The weather was beautiful. He was reading *Faust* again, he wrote to me. He had so many questions he wanted to ask me. When would I come?

He had *not* seen God or the Devil again, though he had, before leaving Europe, spent a long time in various Paris cafés. He wasn't going to spend this lifetime searching for God or the Devil either. "Only you can

know the man I am now," he wrote. "I miss you, I want to talk to you. Can you not remember that I helped you, and forgive me everything else?"

It was that seaside resort he'd described to me, of handsome pink stucco buildings, and great sprawling bungalow roofs, and soft fragrant gardens, and endless vistas of the clean sand and the sparkling translucent sea.

I didn't go there until I'd been in the gardens up the mountain, and had stood on those very cliffs he had visited, looking out over the forested mountains, and listening to the wind in the branches of the noisy clacking coconut palms.

Had he told me about the mountains? That you could look immediately down into the deep soft valleys and that the neighboring slopes seemed so close you thought you could touch them, though they were far, far away?

I don't think so, but he had described well the flowers—the shrimp plant with its tiny blossoms, and the orchid tree and the ginger lilies, yes, those fierce red lilies with their delicate shivering petals, and the ferns nestled in the deep glades, and the waxen bird-of-paradise and the tall stiff pussy willows, and the tiny yellow-throated blossoms of the trumpet vine.

We should walk there together, he had said.

Well, that we would do. Soft the crunch of the gravel. And oh, never had the high swaying coconut palms looked so beautiful as on these bluffs.

I waited until it was past midnight before I made my descent upon the sprawling seaside hotel. The courtyard was as he had said, full of pink azaleas and large waxen elephant ears and dark glossy shrubs.

I passed through the empty darkened dining room and its long open porches and went down on the beach. I went far out in the shallows, so that I might look back from a distance upon the bungalow rooms with their roofed verandas. I found him at once.

The doors to the little patio were completely pulled back, and the yellow light spilled out on the small paved enclosure with its painted table and chairs. Inside, as if on a lighted stage, he sat at a small desk, facing the night and the water, typing away on a small portable computer, the tight small clicking of the keys carrying in the silence,

even over the whisper of the lazy softly foaming surf.

He was naked except for a pair of white beach shorts. His skin was very darkly golden as though he spent his days sleeping in the sun. Streaks of yellow shone in his dark brown hair. There was a glow to his naked shoulders and smooth, hairless chest. Very firm muscles at his waist. A slight golden sheen came from the down on his thighs and legs and the very scant bits of hair on the backs of his hands.

I hadn't even noticed that hair when I was alive. Or maybe I hadn't liked it. Didn't really know. I liked it now well enough. And that he seemed a little more slender than I had been in that frame. Yes, all the bones of the body were more visible, conforming I suppose to some modern style of health which says we must be fashionably underfed. It suited him; it suited the body; I suppose it suited them both.

The room was very neat behind him and rustic in the style of the islands with its beamed ceiling and rose-tiled floor. The bed was covered in a gay pastel fabric printed with a jagged geometric Indian design. The armoire and chests were white and decorated with brightly painted flowers. The many simple lamps gave off a generous light.

I had to smile though that he sat amid all this luxury, typing away—David the scholar, dark eyes dancing with the ideas inside his head.

Drawing nearer, I noted that he was very clean-shaven. His nails had been trimmed and buffed, perhaps by a manicurist. His hair was still the same full wavy mop I'd worn so carelessly when I'd been in this body, but it, too, had been trimmed and had an altogether more pleasing shape. There lay his copy of Goethe's *Faust* beside him, open, a pen lying across it, and many of the pages folded, or marked with small silver paper clips.

I was still taking my time with this inspection—noting the bottle of Scotch beside him, and the thick-bottomed crystal glass, and the pack of small thin cigars—when he looked up and saw me there.

I stood on the sand, well outside the little porch with its low cement railing, but quite visible in the light.

"Lestat," he whispered. His face brightened beautifully. He rose at once and came towards me with the familiar graceful stride. "Thank God you've come."

"You think so?" I said. I thought of that moment in New Orleans when I'd watched the Body Thief scurrying out of the Café du Monde and

thought that body could move like a panther with someone else inside.

He wanted to take me in his arms, but when I stiffened and moved just a little away, he stood still, and folded his arms across his chest—a gesture that seemed to belong entirely to this body, as I couldn't remember ever seeing him do it before we'd met in Miami. These arms were heavier than his old arms. The chest was broader too.

How naked it looked. How darkly pink the nipples. How fierce and clear his eyes.

"I've missed you," he said.

"Really? Surely you haven't been living as a recluse here?"

"No, I've seen too much of others, I think. Too many little supper parties in Bridgetown. And my friend Aaron has come and gone several times. Other members have been here." He paused. "I can't bear to be around them, Lestat. I can't bear to be at Talbot Manor among the servants, pretending to be a cousin of my old self. There's something really appalling about what's happened. Sometimes I can't bear to look in the mirror. But I don't want to talk about that side of it."

"Why not?"

"This is a temporary period, one of adjustment. These shocks will eventually pass. I have so much to do. Oh, I'm so glad you've come. I had a feeling you would. I almost left for Rio this morning, but I had the distinct feeling I'd see you tonight."

"Is that so."

"What's the matter? Why the dark face? Why are you angry?"

"I don't know. I don't really require a reason to be angry these days. And I ought to be happy. I will be soon. Always happens, and after all—it's an important night."

He stared at me, trying to figure what I meant by these words, or more properly what was the right thing for him to reply.

"Come inside," he said finally.

"Why not sit here on the porch in the shadows? I like the breeze."

"Certainly, as you say."

He went into the little room to take up the bottle of Scotch, pour himself a drink, and then he joined me at the wooden table. I had just seated myself in one of the chairs and was looking directly out over the sea.

"So what *have* you been doing?" I asked.

“Ah, where do I begin?” he asked. “I’ve been writing about it continuously—trying to describe all the little sensations, the new discoveries.”

“Is there any doubt that you’re securely anchored in the body?”

“None.” He took a deep drink of his Scotch. “And there seems to be no deterioration of any kind. You know, I feared that. I feared it even when you were in this body, but I didn’t want to say it. We had enough to worry about, didn’t we?” He turned and looked at me, and quite suddenly he smiled. In a low stunned voice he said, “You’re looking at a man you know from the inside out."

“No, not really,” I said. “Tell me, how do you deal with the perception of strangers … those who don’t guess. Do women invite you into their bedrooms? What about young men?”

He looked out to the sea, and there was a little bitterness in his face suddenly. “You know the answer. I can’t make a vocation of those encounters. They mean nothing to me. I don’t say I haven’t enjoyed a few safaris into the bedroom. I have more important things to do, Lestat, far more important things to do.

“There are places I want to go—lands and cities I always dreamt I would visit. Rio is only the beginning. There are mysteries I must solve; things I must find out.”

“Yes, I can imagine.”

“You said something very important to me when we were together last. You said, surely you won’t give the Talamasca this life too. Well, I won’t give it to them. What’s paramount in my mind is that I must not waste it. That I must do something of absolute importance with it. Of course the direction won’t come to me all at once. There has to be a period of traveling, of learning, of evaluation, before I make a decision as to direction. And as I engage in my studies, I write. I write everything down. Sometimes the record itself seems the goal.”

“I know.”

“There are many things I want to ask you. I’ve been plagued with questions.”

“Why? What sort of questions?”

“About what you experienced those few days, and whether you have the slightest regret that we ended the venture so soon.”

“What venture? You mean my life as a mortal man?”

"Yes."

"No regret."

He started to speak again, and then broke off. Then again he spoke. "What did you take back with you?" he asked in a low fervent voice.

I turned and looked at him again. Yes, the face was definitely more angular. Was it personality which had sharpened it and given it more definition. Perfect, I thought.

"I'm sorry, David, my mind wandered. Ask me this question again."

"What did you take back with you?" he said, with his old familiar patience. "What lesson?"

"I don't know that it was a lesson," I said. "And it may take time for me to understand whatever I learnt."

"Yes, I see, of course."

"I can tell you that I'm aware of a new lust for adventure, for wandering, the very things you describe. I want to go back to the rain forests. I saw them so briefly when I went to visit Gretchen. There was a temple there. I want to see it again."

"You never told me what happened."

"Ah, yes, I told you but you were Raglan at the time. The Body Thief witnessed that little confession. Why on earth would he want to steal such a thing? But I'm drifting off the point. There are so many places that I, too, want to go."

"Yes."

"It's a lust again for time and for the future, for the mysteries of the natural world. For being the watcher that I became that long-ago night in Paris, when I was forced into it. I lost my illusions. I lost my favorite lies. You might say I revisited that moment and was reborn to darkness of my own free will. And such a will!"

"Ah, yes, I understand."

"Do you? That's good if you do."

"Why do you speak that way?" He lowered his voice and spoke slowly. "Do you need my understanding as much as I need yours?"

"You've never understood me," I said. "Oh, it's not an accusation. You live with illusions about me, which make it possible for you to visit with me, to speak with me, even to shelter me and help me. You couldn't do that if you really knew what I was. I tried to tell you. When I spoke of my dreams …"

"You're wrong. That's your vanity talking," he said. "You love to imagine you're worse than you are. What dreams? I don't remember your ever speaking to me of dreams."

I smiled. "You don't? Think back, David. My dream of the tiger. I was afraid for you. And now the menace of the dream will be fulfilled."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm going to do it to you, David. I'm going to bring you to me."

"What?" His voice dropped to a whisper. "What are you saying to me?" He leant forward, trying to see clearly the expression on my face. But the light was behind us, and his mortal vision wasn't sharp enough for that.

"I just told you. I'm going to do it to you, David."

"Why, why are you saying this?"

"Because it's true," I said. I stood up and pushed the chair aside with my leg.

He stared up at me. Only now did his body register the danger. I saw the fine muscles of his arms tense. His eyes were fixed on mine.

"Why are you saying this? You couldn't do this to me," he said.

"Of course I could. And I shall. Now. All along I've told you I was evil. I've told you I'm the very devil. The devil in your *Faust*, the devil of your visions, the tiger in my dream!"

"No, that's not true." He climbed to his feet, knocking the chair over behind him, and almost losing his balance. He stepped back into the room. "You're not the devil, and you know that you're not. Don't do this to me! I forbid it!" He clenched his teeth on the last words. "You are in your own heart as human as I am. And you will not do it."

"The hell I won't," I said. I laughed. I couldn't help it suddenly. "David the Superior General," I said. "David the Candomble priest."

He backed across the tiled floor, the light fully illuminating his face, and the tense powerful muscles of his arms.

"Want to fight me? It's useless. There's no force on earth that can stop me from doing this."

"I'll die first," he said, in a low strangled voice. His face was darkening, flushed with blood. Ah, David's blood.

"I won't let you die. Why don't you call on your old Brazilian spirits? You don't remember how to do it, do you? Your heart's not in it. Well, it wouldn't do you the slightest good if you did."

"You can't do this," he said. He was struggling for calm. "You can't

repay me in this fashion."

"Oh, but this is how the devil repays his helpers!"

"Lestat, I helped you against Raglan! I helped you recover this body, and what was your pledge to me of loyalty! What were your words?"

"I lied to you, David. I lie to myself and to others. That's what my little excursion in the flesh taught me. I lie. You surprise me, David. You're angry, so very angry, but you're not afraid. You're like me, David—you and Claudia—the only ones who really have my strength."

"Claudia," he said, with a little nod. "Ah, yes, Claudia. I have something for you, my dear friend." He moved away, deliberately turning his back on me, letting me see the fearlessness of this gesture, and he went slowly, refusing to hurry, to the chest beside the bed. When he turned around again he had a small locket in his hands. "From the Motherhouse. The locket you described to me."

"Oh, yes, the locket. Give it to me."

Only now did I see how his hands shook as he struggled with the little oval gold case. And the fingers, he did not know them so very well, did he? At last he had it opened and he thrust it at me, and I looked down at the painted miniature—her face, her eyes, her golden curls. A child staring back at me out of the mask of innocence. Or was this a mask?

And slowly, out of the vast dim vortex of memory, came the moment when I had first laid eyes upon that trinket and upon its golden chain … when in the dark muddy street, I had happened upon the plague-ridden hovel where her mother lay dead, and the mortal child herself had become food for the vampire, a tiny white body shivering helplessly in Louis's arms.

How I'd laughed at him, how I'd pointed my finger, and then snatched up from the stinking bed the body of the dead woman—Claudia's mother—and danced with it round and round the room. And there gleaming on her throat had been the golden chain and the locket, for not even the boldest thief would have entered that hovel to steal the bauble from the very maw of the plague.

With my left hand I'd caught it, just as I let the poor body drop. The clasp had broken, and I'd swung the chain over my head as if waving a little trophy of the moment and then dropped it in my pocket as I stepped over the body of the dying Claudia and ran after Louis through the street.

It had been months after that I'd found it in that same pocket, and I'd held it to the light. The living child she'd been when that portrait was painted, but the Dark Blood had given her the very saccharine perfection of the artist. It was my Claudia, and in a trunk I'd left it, and how it came to be with the Talamasca, or anywhere, I did not know.

I held it in my hands. I looked up. It was as though I'd just been there, back in that ruined place, and now I was here, and staring at him. He'd been speaking to me but I hadn't heard him, and now his voice came clear:

"You would do it to me?" he demanded, the timbre betraying him now as his trembling hands betrayed him. "Look at her. You would do it to me?"

I looked at her tiny face, and back to him.

"Yes, David," I said. "I told her I would do it again. And I will do it to you."

I pitched the locket out of the room, over the porch, past the sand, and into the sea. The tiny chain was like a scratch of gold on the fabric of the sky for an instant then it disappeared as if into the luminous light.

He drew back with a speed that astonished me, cleaving to the wall.

"Don't do this, Lestat."

"Don't fight me, old friend. You waste your effort. You have a long night of discovery ahead."

"You won't do it!" he cried, voice so low it was a guttural roar. He lunged at me, as if he thought he could knock me off balance, and both his fists struck my chest, and I did not move. Back he fell, bruised from his efforts and staring at me with pure outrage in his watering eyes. Once again the blood had flooded into his cheeks, darkening his entire visage. And only now, as he saw for himself the sheer hopelessness of defense, did he try to flee.

I grabbed him by the neck before he reached the porch. I let my fingers massage the flesh as he struggled wildly, like an animal, to tear my grip away and pull himself loose. Slowly I lifted him, and cradling the back of his head effortlessly with my left hand, I drove my teeth through the fine, fragrant young skin of his neck, and caught the first bubbling jet of blood.

Ah, David, my beloved David. Never had I descended into a soul I knew so well. How thick and wondrous the images that enveloped me:

the soft beautiful sunlight slicing through the mangrove forest, the crunch of the high grass on the veldt, the boom of the great gun, and the shiver of the earth beneath the elephant's pounding feet. It was all there: all the summer rains washing endlessly through the jungles, and the water swimming up the pilings and over the boards of the porch, and the sky flashing with lightning—and his heart pounding beneath it with rebellion, with recrimination, you betray me, you betray me, you take me against my will—and the deep rich salty heat of the blood itself.

I flung him backwards. That was enough for the first drink. I watched him struggle to his knees. What had he seen in those seconds? Did he know now how dark and willful was my soul?

"You love me?" I said. "I am your only friend in this world?"

I watched him crawl across the tiles. He grabbed for the footboard of the bed and raised himself, then fell back, dizzy, to the floor. Again, he struggled.

"Ah, let me help you!" I said. I spun him around and lifted him and sank my teeth in those very same tiny wounds.

"For love of God, stop, don't do it. Lestat, I'm begging you, don't do it."

Beg in vain, David. Oh, how scrumptious this young body, these hands shoving at me, even in the trance, what a will you have, my beautiful friend. And now we are in old Brazil, are we not, we are in the tiny room, and he is calling the names of the Candomble spirits, he is calling, and will the spirits come?

I let him go. Again he sank on his knees, then keeled over on his side, eyes staring forward. That's enough for the second assault.

There was a faint rattling sound in the room. A faint knocking.

"Oh, do we have company? We have little invisible friends? Yes, look, the mirror is wobbling. It's going to fall!" And then it hit the tiles and exploded like so many pieces of light coming loose from the frame.

He was trying to get up again.

"You know what they feel like, David? Can you hear me? They are like many silk banners unfurled around me. That weak."

I watched as he gained his knees again. Once more he was crawling across the floor. Suddenly he rose, pitching forward. He snatched up the book from beside the computer, and turning, hurled it at me. It fell at my feet. He was reeling. He could scarce keep standing, his eyes clouded.

And then he turned and almost fell forward into the little porch, stumbling over the rail and towards the beach.

I came behind him, following him as he staggered down the slope of white sand. The thirst rose, knowing only that the blood had come seconds before, and that it must have more. When he reached the water, he stood there, tottering, only an iron will keeping him from collapse.

I took him by the shoulder, tenderly, embracing him with my right arm.

"No, damn you, damn you into hell. No," he said. With all his waning strength he struck at me, shoving at my face with his doubled fist, tearing the flesh of the knuckles as it struck the unyielding skin.

I twisted him around, watching as he kicked at my legs, as he struck me again and again with those soft impotent hands; and again I nuzzled in against his neck, licking it, smelling it, and then sinking my teeth for the third time. Hmmm … this is ecstasy. Could that other body, worn with age, have ever yielded such a feast? I felt the heel of his hand against my face. Oh, so strong. So very strong. Yes, fight me, fight me as I fought Magnus. So sweet that you are fighting me. I love it. I do.

And what was it this time as I went into the swoon? The purest of prayers coming from him, not to gods we didn't believe in, not to a crucified Christ or an old Virgin Queen. But prayers to me. "Lestat, my friend. Don't take my life. Don't. Let me go."

Hmmm. I slipped my arm ever more tightly around his chest. Then drew back, licking at the wounds.

"You choose your friends badly, David," I whispered, licking the blood from my lips, and looking down into his face. He was almost dead. How beautiful these strong even white teeth of his, and the tender flesh of the lip. Only the whites showed beneath his eyelids. And how his heart fought—this young, flawless mortal heart. Heart that had sent the blood pumping through my brain. Heart that had skipped and stopped when I knew fear, when I saw the approach of death.

I laid my ear against his chest, listening. I heard the ambulance screaming through Georgetown. "Don't let me die."

I saw him in that dream hotel room of long ago with Louis and with Claudia. Are we all but random creatures in the devil's dreams?

The heart was slowing. The moment had almost come. One more little drink, my friend.

I lifted him and carried him up the beach and back into the room. I kissed the tiny wounds, licking at them and sucking them with my lips, and then letting my teeth go in again. A spasm passed through him, a little cry escaped his lips.

"I love you," he whispered.

"Yes, and I love you," I answered, words smothered against the flesh, as the blood spurted hot and irresistible once again.

The heartbeat came ever more slowly. He was tumbling through memories, back to the very cradle, beyond the sharp distinct syllables of language, and moaning to himself as if to the old melody of a song.

His warm heavy body was pressed against me, arms dangling, head held in my left fingers, eyes closed. The soft moaning died away, and the heart raced suddenly with tiny, muffled beats.

I bit into my tongue, until I couldn't stand the pain. Again and again I made the punctures with my own fang teeth, moving my tongue to the right and to the left, and then I locked my mouth to his, forcing his lips open, and let the blood flow onto his tongue.

It seemed that time stood still. There came that unmistakable taste of my own blood leaking into my own mouth, as it leaked into his. Then suddenly his teeth snapped closed on my tongue. They snapped down upon it menacingly and sharply, with all the mortal strength in his jaws, and scraped at the preternatural flesh, scraping the blood out of the gash I'd made, and biting so hard that it seemed they would sever the tongue itself if they could.

The violent spasm shot through him. His back arched against my arm. And when I drew back now, my mouth full of pain, my tongue hurting, he drew up, hungering, eyes still blind. I tore my wrist. Here it comes, my beloved. Here it comes, not in little droplets, but from the very river of my being. And this time when the mouth clamped down upon me, it was a pain that reached all the way down to the roots of my being, tangling my heart in its burning mesh.

For you, David. Drink deep. Be strong.

It could not kill me now, no matter how long it lasted. I knew it, and memories of those bygone times when I had done it in fear seemed clumsy and foolish, fading even as I recollected them, and leaving me here alone with him.

I knelt on the floor, holding him, letting the pain spread through every

vein and every artery as I knew it must. And the heat and the pain grew so strong in me that I lay down slowly with him in my arms, my wrist sealed against his mouth, my hand still beneath his head. A dizziness came over me. The beating of my own heart grew perilously slow. On and on he pulled, and against the bright darkness of my closed eyes I saw the thousands upon thousands of tiny vessels emptied and contracted and sagging like the fine black filaments of a spider's wind-torn web.

We were in the hotel room again in old New Orleans, and Claudia sat quietly on the chair. Outside, the little city winked here and there with its dull lamps. How dark and heavy the sky overhead, with no hint of the great aurora of the cities to come.

"I told you I would do it again," I said to Claudia.

"Why do you bother to explain to me," she asked. "You know perfectly well that I never asked you any questions about it. I've been dead for years and years."

I opened my eyes.

I lay on the cold tiled floor of the room, and he was standing over me, looking down at me, and the electric light was shining on his face. And now his eyes were brown no longer; they were filled with a soft dazzling golden light. An unnatural sheen had already invaded his sleek dark skin, paling it ever so slightly and rendering it more perfectly golden, and his hair had already taken on that evil, gorgeous luster, all the illumination gathered to him and reflected off him and playing around him as if it found him irresistible—this tall angelic man with the blank and dazed expression on his face.

He didn't speak. And I could not read his expression. Only I knew the wonders that he beheld. I knew when he looked around him—at the lamp, at the broken fragments of mirror, at the sky outside—what he saw.

Again he looked at me.

"You're hurt," he whispered.

I heard the blood in his voice!

"Are you? Are you hurt?"

"For the love of God," I answered in a raw, torn voice. "How can you care if I'm hurt?"

He shrank back away from me, eyes widening, as if with each passing

second his vision expanded, and then he turned and it was as if he'd forgotten that I was there. He kept staring in the same enchanted fashion. And then, doubling over with pain, grimacing with it, he turned and made his way out over the little porch and to the sea.

I sat up. The entire room shimmered. I had given him every drop of blood that he could take. The thirst paralyzed me, and I could scarce remain steady. I wrapped my arm around my knee and tried to sit there without falling down again in sheer weakness on the floor.

I held my left hand up so that I might see it in the light. The little veins were raised on the back of it, yet they were smoothing out as I watched.

I could feel my heart pumping lustily. And keen and terrible though the thirst was, I knew that it could wait. I knew no more than a sick mortal as to why I was healing from what I had done. But some dark engine inside me was working busily and silently upon my restoration, as if this fine killing machine must be cured of all weakness so that it may hunt again.

When I finally climbed to my feet, I was myself. I had given him far more blood than ever I had given the others I'd made. It was finished. I'd done it right. He'd be so very strong! Lord God, he'd be stronger than the old ones.

But I had to find him. He was dying now. I had to help him, even if he tried to drive me away.

I found him waist deep in the water. He was shuddering, and in such pain that small gasps were coming from him, though he tried to keep quiet. He had the locket, and the gold chain was wrapped round his clenched hand.

I put my arm around him to steady him. I told him it would not last very long at all. And when it was gone, it would be gone forever. He nodded his head.

After a little while, I could feel his muscles loosening. I urged him to follow me into the shallow waves, where we could walk more easily, no matter what our strength, and together we walked down the beach.

"You're going to have to feed," I said. "Do you think you can do that alone?"

He shook his head no.

"All right, I'll take you and show you all you need to know. But first

the waterfall up there. I can hear it. Can you hear it? You can wash yourself clean."

He nodded, and followed me, his head bowed, his arm still locked around his waist, his body now and then tensing with the last of the violent cramps which death always brings.

When we reached the waterfall, he stepped over the treacherous rocks easily and stripped away his shorts, and stood naked under the great rushing downpour, and let it pass over his face and all his body and his wide-open eyes. There was a moment when he shook himself all over, and spit out the water which had come accidentally into his mouth.

I watched, feeling stronger and stronger as the seconds passed. Then I leapt up, high above the waterfall, and landed upon the cliff. I could see him down there, a tiny figure, standing back, with the spray covering him, gazing up at me.

"Can you come to me?" I said softly.

He nodded. Excellent that he had heard it. He stood back and made a great leap, springing out of the water, and landing on the sloped face of the cliff only several yards below me, hands easily clutching the wet slippery rocks. Over these he climbed without once looking down until he stood at my side.

I was quite frankly astonished at his strength. But it was not merely his strength. It was his utter fearlessness. And he himself seemed to have forgotten about it entirely. He was merely looking off again, at the rolling clouds, and the soft shimmering sky. He was looking at the stars, and then inland at the jungle running down over the cliffs above.

"Can you feel the thirst?" I asked. He nodded, looking at me only in passing, and then looking out to the sea.

"All right, now we go back to your old rooms, and you dress properly to prowl the mortal world and we go into town."

"That far?" he asked. He pointed to the horizon. "There's a little boat out that way."

I scanned for it, and saw it through the eyes of a man on board. A cruel unsavory creature. It was a smuggling venture. And he was bitter that he'd been left by drunken cohorts to do it alone.

"All right," I said. "We'll go together."

"No," he said. "I think I should go … alone."

He turned without waiting for my answer, and quickly and gracefully

descended to the beach. He moved out like a streak of light through the shallows and dove into the waves and began to swim with powerful swift strokes.

I walked down the edge of the cliff, found a small rugged path, and followed it listlessly until I reached the room. I stared at the wreckage—the broken mirror, the table overturned and the computer lying on its side, the book fallen on the floor. The chair lying on its back on the little porch.

I turned and went out.

I went back up to the gardens. The moon was risen very high, and I walked up the gravel path to the very edge of the highest point and stood there looking down on the thin ribbon of white beach and the soft soundless sea.

At last I sat down, against the trunk of a great dark tree with branches spreading over me in an airy canopy, and I rested my arm on my knee and my head on my arm.

An hour passed.

I heard him coming, walking up the gravel path fast and light, with a footfall no mortal ever made. When I looked up I saw he was bathed and dressed, and even his hair was combed, and the scent of the blood he'd drunk was lingering, perhaps coming from his lips. He was no weak and fleshly creature like Louis, oh, no, he was far stronger than that. And the process had not finished. The pains of his death had finished, but he was hardening even as I looked at him, and the soft golden gleam of his skin was enchanting to behold.

"Why did you do it?" he demanded. What a mask was this face. And then it flashed with anger as he spoke again. "Why did you do it?"

"I don't know."

"Oh, don't give me that. And don't give me those tears! Why did you do it!"

"I tell you the truth. I don't know. I could give you all the many reasons, but I don't know. I did it because I wanted to do it, because I wanted to. Because I wanted to see what would happen if I did it, I wanted to … and I couldn't not do it. I knew that when I went back to New Orleans. I … waited and I waited, but I couldn't not do it. And now it's done."

"You miserable, lying bastard. You did it from cruelty and meanness!

You did it because your little experiment with the Body Thief went wrong! And out of it came this miracle to me, this youth, this rebirth, and it infuriated you that such a thing could happen, that I should profit when you had suffered so!"

"Maybe that's true!"

"It is true. Admit it. Admit the pettiness of it. Admit the meanness, that you couldn't bear to let me slip into the future with this body which you hadn't the courage to endure!"

"Perhaps so."

He drew in close and tried to drag me to my feet with a firm, insistent grip on my arm. Nothing happened, of course. He could not move me an inch.

"You're still not strong enough to play those games," I said. "If you don't stop, I'll hit you and knock you flat on your back. You won't like it. You're too dignified to like it. So leave off with the cheap mortal fisticuffs, please."

He turned his back on me, folding his arms, bowing his head. I could hear the small desperate noises that came from him, and I could almost feel the anguish. He walked away, and I buried my face again in my arm.

But then I heard him coming back.

"Why? I want something from you. I want an admission of some kind."

"No," I said.

He reached out and snatched at my hair, tangling his fingers in it, and jerking my head up as the pain shot over the surface of my scalp.

"You're really pushing it, David," I growled at him, pulling myself loose. "One more little trick like that and I'm going to drop you at the bottom of the cliff."

But when I saw his face, when I saw the suffering in him, I grew quiet.

He went down on his knees before me so that we were almost eye-to-eye.

"Why, Lestat?" he asked, and his voice was torn and sad, and it broke my heart.

Overcome with shame, overcome with misery, I pressed my closed eyes again on my right arm, and brought up my left to cover my head. And nothing, not all his pleas or curses or cries against me or his final quiet departure, could make me look up again.

Well before morning I went to search for him. The little room was now straightened, and his suitcase lay on the bed. The computer had been folded up, and the copy of *Faust* lay upon its smooth plastic case.

But he was not there. I searched all about the hotel for him, but I couldn't find him. I searched the gardens, and then the woodlands in one direction and another, but with no luck.

At last I found a small cave high on the mountain, and dug down deep into it and slept.

What is the use of describing my misery? Of describing the dull dark pain I felt? What is the use of saying I knew the full measure of my injustice, my dishonor, and my cruelty? I knew the magnitude of what I'd done to him.

I knew myself and all my evil to the fullest and I expected nothing back from the world now except the very same evil in kind.

I woke as soon as the sun had gone into the sea. On a high bluff I watched the twilight and then went down into the streets of the town to hunt. It wasn't too long before the usual thief tried to lay hands on, me and rob me, and I carried him with me into a little alleyway and there drained him slowly and very enjoyably, only steps from the tourists passing by. I concealed his body in the very depths of the alley and went on my way.

And what was my way?

I went back to the hotel. His possessions were still there but he was not. Once again, I searched, fighting an awful fear that he had already done away with himself, and then realizing that he was far too strong for that to be a simple thing. Even if he had lain out in the fury of the sun, which I strongly doubted, he could not have been wholly destroyed.

Yet I was plagued by every conceivable fear: Perhaps, he had been so burnt and crippled that he could not help himself. He had been discovered by mortals. Or perhaps the others had come, and stolen him completely away. Or he would reappear and curse me again. I feared that too.

Finally I made my way back down to Bridgetown, unable to leave the island until I knew what had become of him.

I was still there an hour before dawn.

And the next night I did not find him. Nor the night after that.

At last, bruised in mind and soul, and telling myself I deserved nothing but misery, I went home.

The warmth of spring had come to New Orleans, finally, and I found her swarming with the usual tourists beneath a clear and purple evening sky. I went first to my old house to take Mojo from the care of the old woman, who was not at all glad to give him up, save that he had obviously missed me very much.

Then he and I together proceeded to the Rue Royale.

I knew the flat wasn't empty even before I reached the top of the back stairs. I paused for a moment, looking down on the restored courtyard with its scrubbed flagstones and romantic little fountain, complete with cherubs and their great cornucopia-style shells pouring forth a splash of clean water into the basin below.

A bed of dark sweet flowers had been planted against the old brick wall, and a stand of bananas was already thriving in the corner, long graceful knifelike leaves nodding in the breeze.

This gladdened my vicious selfish little heart beyond words.

I went inside. The back parlour had finally been finished, and beautifully laid out with the fine antique chairs I'd selected for it, and the thick pale Persian carpet of faded red.

I looked up and down the length of the hallway, past the fresh wallpaper of gold and white stripes, and over the yards of dark carpet, and I saw Louis standing in the front parlour door.

"Don't ask me where I've been or what I've done," I said. I walked towards him, brushed him aside, and went into the room. Ah, it surpassed all my expectations. There were a very replica of his old desk between the windows, and the camelback sofa of silver damask, and the oval table inlaid with mahogany. And the spinet against the far wall.

"I know where you've been," he said, "and I know what you've done."

"Oh? And what's to follow? Some stultifying and endless lecture? Tell me now. So I can go to sleep."

I turned around to face him, to see what effect this stiff rebuff had had, if any, and there stood David beside him, dressed very well in black fine-combed velvet, and with his arms folded across his chest, and leaning against the frame of the door.

They were both looking at me, with their pale, expressionless faces, David presenting the darker, taller figure, but how amazingly similar

they appeared. It only penetrated to me slowly that Louis had dressed for this little occasion, and for once, in clothes which did not look as if they'd come from an attic trunk.

It was David who spoke first.

"The carnival starts tomorrow in Rio," he said, the voice even more seductive than it had ever been in mortal life. "I thought we might go."

I stared at him with obvious suspicion. It seemed a dark light infused his expression. There was a hard luster to his eyes. But the mouth was so gentle, without a hint of malevolence, or bitterness. No menace emanated from him at all.

Then Louis roused himself from his reverie and quietly moved away down the hall and into his old room. How I knew that old pattern of faintly creaking boards and steps!

I was powerfully confused, and a little breathless.

I sat down on the couch, and beckoned for Mojo to come, who seated himself right in front of me, leaning his heavy weight against my legs.

"You mean this?" I asked. "You want us to go there together?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "And after that, the rain forests. What if we should go there? Deep into those forests." He unfolded his arms and, bowing his head, began to pace with long slow steps. "You said something to me, I don't remember when … Maybe it was an image I caught from you before it all happened, something about a temple which mortals didn't know of, lost in the depths of the jungle. Ah, think of how many such discoveries there must be."

Ah, how genuine the feeling, how resonant the voice.

"Why have you forgiven me?" I asked.

He stopped his pacing, and looked at me, and I was so distracted by the evidence of the blood in him, and how it had changed his skin and hair and eyes, that I couldn't think for a moment. I held up my hand, begging him not to speak. Why did I never get used to this magic? I dropped my hand, allowing him, nay, bidding him, to go on.

"You knew I would," he said, assuming his old measured and restrained tone. "You knew when you did it that I'd go on loving you. That I'd need you. That I would seek you out and cling to you of all the beings in this world."

"Oh, no. I swear I didn't," I whispered.

"I went off awhile to punish you. You're past all patience, really you

are. You are the damnedest creature, as you've been called by wiser beings than I. But you knew I'd come back. You knew I'd be here."

"No, I never dreamt it."

"Don't start weeping again."

"I like to weep. I must. Why else would I do it so much?"

"Well, stop!"

"Oh, it's going to be fun, isn't it? You think you are the leader of this little coven, don't you, and you're going to start bossing me around."

"Come again?"

"You don't even look like the elder of the two of us anymore, and you never were the elder. You let my beautiful and irresistible visage deceive you in the simplest and most foolish way. I'm the leader. This is my house. I shall say if we go to Rio."

He began to laugh. Slowly at first, and then more deeply and freely. If there was menace in him it was only in the great flashing shifts of expression, the dark glint in his eyes. But I wasn't sure there was any menace at all.

"You are the leader?" he asked scornfully. The old authority.

"Yes, I am. So you ran off … you wanted to show me you could get along without me. You could hunt for yourself; you could find a hiding place by day. You didn't need me. But here you are!"

"Are you coming with us to Rio or not?"

"Coming with us! Did you say 'us'?"

"I did."

He walked over to the chair nearest the end of the couch and sat down. It penetrated to me that obviously he was already in full command of his new powers. And I, of course, couldn't gauge how strong he truly was merely by looking at him. The dark tone of his skin concealed too much. He crossed his legs and fell into an easy posture of relaxation, but with David's dignity intact.

Perhaps it was a matter of the way his back remained straight against the chair behind him, or the elegant way his hand rested on his ankle, and the other arm molded itself to the arm of the chair.

Only the thick wavy brown hair betrayed the dignity somewhat, tumbling down on his forehead so that finally he gave a little unconscious toss to his head.

But quite suddenly his composure melted; his face bore all the sudden

lines of serious confusion, and then pure distress.

I couldn't stand it. But I forced myself to be silent.

"I tried to hate you," he confessed, the eyes widening even as the voice nearly died away. "I couldn't do it; it's as simple as that." And for one moment there was the menace, the great preternatural anger, glaring out of him, before the face became perfectly miserable and then merely sad.

"Why not?"

"Don't play with me."

"I've never played with you! I mean these things when I say them. How can you not hate me?"

"I'd be making the same mistake you made if I hated you," he said, eyebrows raised. "Don't you see what you've done? You've given me the gift, but you spared me the capitulation. You've brought me over with all your skill and all your strength, but you didn't require of me the moral defeat. You took the decision from me, and gave me what I could not help but want."

I was speechless. It was all true, but it was the damnedest lie I'd ever heard. "Then rape and murder are our paths to glory! I don't buy it. They are filthy. We are all damned and now you are too. And that's what I've done to you."

He bore that as if it were a series of soft slaps, merely flinching just a little and then fixing his eyes on me again.

"It took you two hundred years to learn that you wanted it," he said. "I knew the moment I woke out of the stupor and saw you lying there on the floor. You looked like an empty shell to me. I knew you'd gone too far with it. I was in terror for you. And I was seeing you with these new eyes."

"Yes."

"Do you know what went through my mind? I thought you'd found a way to die. You'd given me every drop of blood in you. And now you yourself were perishing before my very eyes. I knew I loved you. I knew I forgave you. And I knew with every breath I took and with every new color or shape I saw before me that I wanted what you'd given me—the new vision and life, which none of us can really describe! Oh, I couldn't admit it. I had to curse you, fight you for a little while. But that's all it was in the end—a little while."

"You're much smarter than I am," I said softly.

“Well, of course, what did you expect?”

I smiled. I settled back on the couch.

“Ah, this is the Dark Trick,” I whispered. “How right they were, the old ones, to give it that name. I wonder if the trick’s on me. For this is a vampire sitting here with me, a blood drinker of enormous power, my child, and what are old emotions to him now?”

I looked at him, and once more I felt the tears coming. They never let me down.

He was frowning, and his lips were slightly parted, and it seemed now I truly had dealt him a terrible blow. But he didn’t speak to me. He seemed puzzled, and then he gave a little shake of his head as though he couldn’t reply.

I realized that it wasn’t vulnerability I saw in him now so much as compassion, and blatant concern for me.

He left the chair suddenly, dropping to his knees in front of me, and putting his hands on my shoulders, completely ignoring my faithful Mojo, who stared at him with indifferent eyes. Did he realize this was how I’d faced Claudia in my fever dream?

“You’re the same,” he said. He shook his head. “The very same.”

“The same as what?”

“Oh, every time you ever came to me, you touched me; you wrung from me a deep protectiveness. You made me feel love. And it’s the same now. Only you seem all the more lost and in need of me now. I’m to take you forward, I see it clearly. I’m your link with the future. It’s through me that you’ll see the years ahead.”

“You’re the same too. An absolute innocent. A bloody fool.” I tried to brush his hand off my shoulder, but didn’t succeed. “You’re headed for great trouble. Just wait and see.”

“Oh, how exciting. Now, come, we must go to Rio. We must not miss anything of the carnival. Though of course we can go again … and again … and again … But come.”

I sat very still, looking at him for the longest time, until finally he became concerned again. His fingers were quite strong as they pressed my shoulders. Yes, I had done well with him in every step.

“What is it?” he asked timidly. “Are you grieving for me?”

“Perhaps, a little. As you’ve said, I’m not as clever as you are at knowing what I want. But I think I’m trying to fix this moment in my

mind. I want to remember it always—I want to remember the way you are now, here with me … before things start to go wrong."

He stood up, pulling me suddenly to my feet, with scarcely any effort at all. There was a soft triumphant smile on his face as he noted my amazement.

"Oh, this is going to be really something, this little tussle," I said. "Well, you can fight with me in Rio, while we are dancing in the streets."

He beckoned for me to follow him. I wasn't sure what we would do next or how we would make this journey, but I was wondrously excited, and I honestly didn't care about the small aspects of it at all.

Of course Louis would have to be persuaded to come, but we would gang up on him, and somehow lure him into it, no matter how reticent he was.

I was about to follow him out of the room, when something caught my eye. It was on Louis's old desk.

It was the locket of Claudia. The chain was coiled there, catching the light with its tiny gold links, and the oval case itself was open and propped against the inkwell, and the little face seemed to be peering directly at me.

I reached down and picked up the locket, and looked very closely at the little picture. And a sad realization came to me.

She was no longer the real memories. She had become those fever dreams. She was the image in the jungle hospital, a figure standing against the sun in Georgetown, a ghost rushing through the shadows of Notre Dame. In life she'd never been my conscience! Not Claudia, my merciless Claudia. What a dream! A pure dream.

A dark secret smile stole over my lips as I looked at her, bitter and on the edge, once more, of tears. For nothing had changed in the realization that I had given her the words of accusation. *The very same thing was true*. There had been the opportunity for salvation—and I had said no.

I wanted to say something to her as I held the locket; I wanted to say something to the being she had been, and to my own weakness, and to the greedy wicked being in me who had once again triumphed. For I had. I had won.

Yes, I wanted to say something so terribly much! And would that it were full of poetry, and deep meaning, and would ransom my greed and my evil, and my lusty little heart. For I was going to Rio, wasn't I, and

with David, and with Louis, and a new era was beginning …

Yes, say something—for the love of heaven and the love of Claudia—to darken it and show it for what it is! Dear God, to lance it and show the horror at the core.

But I could not.

What more *is* there to say, really?

The tale is told.

Lestat de Lioncourt
New Orleans
1991

For my parents,
Howard and Katherine O'Brien.
Your dreams and your courage will be with me
all of my days.

Anne Rice

Memnoch the Devil

A BALLANTINE e BOOK

MEMNOCH THE DEVIL

The Vampire Chronicles

Anne Rice

BALLANTINE BOOKS • NEW YORK

A Ballantine Book
Published by The Random House Publishing Group

Copyright © 1995 by Anne O'Brien Rice

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Published in the United States by The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, and simultaneously in Canada by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto.

The poems "What God Did Not Plan On," "The Offering," and "Duet on Iberville Street" by Stan Rice are reprinted by permission of Stan Rice.

Ballantine and colophon are registered trademarks of Random House, Inc.

www.ballantinebooks.com

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 97-93327

eISBN: 978-0-307-57587-6

v3.0_r1

Contents

Master Table of Contents

Cover
Title Page
Copyright
Prologue

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26

Dedication

WHAT GOD DID NOT PLAN ON

Sleep well,
Weep well,
Go to the deep well
As often as possible.
Bring back the water,
Jostling and gleaming.
God did not plan on consciousness
Developing so
Well. Well,
Tell Him our
Pail is full
And He can
Go to Hell.

Stan Rice
24 June 93

THE OFFERING

To the somethingness
Which prevents the nothingness
Like Homer's wild boar
From thrashing this way and that
Its white tusks
Through human beings
Like crackling stalks
And to nothing less
I offer this suffering of my father

Stan Rice
16 Oct 93

DUET ON IBERVILLE STREET

The man in black leather
Buying a rat to feed his python
Does not dwell on particulars.

Any rat will do.
While walking back from the pet store
I see a man in a hotel garage
Carving a swan in a block of ice
With a chain saw.

Stan Rice
30 Jan 94

Prologue

Lestat here. You know who I am? Then skip the next few paragraphs. For those whom I have not met before, I want this to be love at first sight.

Behold: your hero for the duration, a perfect imitation of a blond, blue-eyed, six-foot Anglo-Saxon male. A vampire, and one of the strongest you'll ever encounter. My fangs are too small to be noticed unless I want them to be; but they're very sharp, and I cannot go for more than a few hours without wanting human blood.

Of course, I don't need it that often. And just how often I do need it, I don't know, because I've never put it to the test.

I'm monstrously strong. I can take to the air. I can hear people talking on the other side of the city or even the globe. I can read minds; I can bind with spells.

I'm immortal. I've been virtually ageless since 1789.

Am I unique? By no means. There are some twenty other vampires in the world of whom I know. Half of these I know intimately; one half of those I love.

Add to this twenty a good two hundred vagabonds and strangers of whom I know nothing but now and then hear something; and for good measure another thousand secretive immortals, roaming about in human guise.

Men, women, children—any human being can become a vampire. All it takes is a vampire willing to bring you into it, to suck out most of your blood, and then let you take it back, mixed with his or her own. It's not all that simple; but if you survive, you'll live forever. While you're young, you'll thirst unbearably, probably have to kill each night. By the time you're a thousand years old, you'll look and sound wise, even if you were a kid when you started, and you will drink and kill because you cannot resist it, whether you need it anymore or not.

If you live longer than that, and some do, who knows? You'll get tougher, whiter, ever more monstrous. You'll know so much about

suffering that you will go through rapid cycles of cruelty and kindness, insight and maniacal blindness. You'll probably go mad. Then you'll be sane again. Then you may forget who you are.

I myself combine the best of vampiric youth and old age. Only two hundred years old, I have been for various reasons granted the strength of the ancients. I have a modern sensibility but a dead aristocrat's impeccable taste. I know exactly who I am. I am rich. I am beautiful. I can see my reflection in mirrors. And in shopwindows. I love to sing and to dance.

What do I do? Anything that I please.

Think about it. Is it enough to make you want to read my story? Have you perhaps read my stories of the vampires before?

Here's the catch: it doesn't matter here that I'm a vampire. It is not central to the tale. It's just a given, like my innocent smile and soft, purring French-accented voice and graceful way of sauntering down the street. It comes with the package. But what *happened* here could have happened to a human being; indeed, it surely has happened to humans, and it will happen to them again.

We have souls, you and I. We want to know things; we share the same earth, rich and verdant and fraught with perils. We don't—either of us—know what it means to die, no matter what we might say to the contrary. It's a cinch that if we did, I wouldn't be writing and you wouldn't be reading this book.

What does matter very much, as we go into this story together, is that I have set for myself the task of being a hero in this world. I maintain myself as morally complex, spiritually tough, and aesthetically relevant—a being of blazing insight and impact, a guy with things to say to you.

So if you read this, read it for that reason—that Lestat is talking again, that he is frightened, that he is searching desperately for the lesson and for the song and for the raison d'être, that he wants to understand his own story and he wants you to understand it, and that it is the very best story he has right now to tell.

If that's not enough, read something else.

If it is, then read on. In chains, to my friend and my scribe, I dictated these words. Come with me. Just listen to me. Don't leave me alone.

One

I saw him when he came through the front doors. Tall, solidly built, dark brown hair and eyes, skin still fairly dark because it had been dark when I'd made him a vampire. Walking a little too fast, but basically passing for a human being. My beloved David.

I was on the stairway. The grand stairway, one might say. It was one of those very opulent old hotels, divinely overdone, full of crimson and gold, and rather pleasant. My victim had picked it. I hadn't. My victim was dining with his daughter. And I'd picked up from my victim's mind that this was where he always met his daughter in New York, for the simple reason that St. Patrick's Cathedral was across the street.

David saw me at once—a slouching, blond, long-haired youth, bronze face and hands, the usual deep violet sunglasses over my eyes, hair presentably combed for once, body tricked out in a dark-blue, double-breasted Brooks Brothers suit.

I saw him smile before he could stop himself. He knew my vanity, and he probably knew that in the early nineties of the twentieth century, Italian fashion had flooded the market with so much shapeless, hangy, bulky, formless attire that one of the most erotic and flattering garments a man could choose was the well-tailored navy-blue Brooks Brothers suit.

Besides, a mop of flowing hair and expert tailoring are always a potent combination. Who knows that better than I?

I didn't mean to harp on the clothes! To hell with the clothes. It's just I was so proud of myself for being spiffed up and full of gorgeous contradictions—a picture of long locks, the impeccable tailoring, and a regal manner of slumping against the railing and sort of blocking the stairs.

He came up to me at once. He smelled like the deep winter outside, where people were slipping in the frozen streets, and snow had turned to filth in the gutters. His face had the subtle preternatural gleam which only I could detect, and love, and properly appreciate, and eventually kiss.

We walked together onto the carpeted mezzanine.

Momentarily, I hated it that he was two inches taller than me. But I was so glad to see him, so glad to be near him. And it was warm in here, and shadowy and vast, one of the places where people do not stare at others.

"You've come," I said. "I didn't think you would."

"Of course," he scolded, the gracious British accent breaking softly from the young dark face, giving me the usual shock. This was an old man in a young man's body, recently made a vampire, and by me, one of the most powerful of our remaining kind.

"What did you expect?" he said, tête-à-tête. "Armand told me you were calling me. Maharet told me."

"Ah, that answers my first question." I wanted to kiss him, and suddenly I did put out my arms, rather tentatively and politely so that he could get away if he wanted, and when he let me hug him, when he returned the warmth, I felt a happiness I hadn't experienced in months.

Perhaps I hadn't experienced it since I had left him, with Louis. We had been in some nameless jungle place, the three of us, when we agreed to part, and that had been a year ago.

"Your first question?" he asked, peering at me very closely, sizing me up perhaps, doing everything a vampire can do to measure the mood and mind of his maker, because a vampire cannot read his maker's mind, any more than the maker can read the mind of the fledgling.

And there we stood divided, laden with preternatural gifts, both fit and rather full of emotion, and unable to communicate except in the simplest and best way, perhaps—with words.

"My first question," I began to explain, to answer, "was simply going to be: Where have you been, and have you found the others, and did they try to hurt you? All that rot, you know—how I broke the rules when I made you, et cetera."

"All that rot," he mocked me, the French accent I still possessed, now coupled with something definitely American. "What rot."

"Come on," I said. "Let's go into the bar there and talk. Obviously no one has done anything to you. I didn't think they could or they would, or that they'd dare. I wouldn't have let you slip off into the world if I'd thought you were in danger."

He smiled, his brown eyes full of gold light for just an instant.

“Didn’t you tell me this twenty-five times, more or less, before we parted company?”

We found a small table, cleaving to the wall. The place was half crowded, the perfect proportion exactly. What did we look like? A couple of young men on the make for mortal men or women? I don’t care.

“No one has harmed me,” he said, “and no one has shown the slightest interest in it.”

Someone was playing a piano, very tenderly for a hotel bar, I thought. And it was something by Erik Satie. What luck.

“The tie,” he said, leaning forward, white teeth flashing, fangs completely hidden, of course. “This, this big mass of silk around your neck! This is not Brooks Brothers!” He gave a soft teasing laugh. “Look at you, and the wing-tip shoes! My, my. What’s going on in your mind? And what is this all about?”

The bartender threw a hefty shadow over the small table, and murmured predictable phrases that were lost to me in my excitement and in the noise.

“Something hot,” David said. It didn’t surprise me. “You know, rum punch or some such, whatever you can heat up.”

I nodded and made a little gesture to the indifferent fellow that I would take the same thing.

Vampires always order hot drinks. They aren’t going to drink them; but they can feel the warmth and smell them if they’re hot, and that is so good.

David looked at me again. Or rather this familiar body with David inside looked at me. Because for me, David would always be the elderly human I’d known and treasured, as well as this magnificent burnished shell of stolen flesh that was slowly being shaped by his expressions and manner and mood.

Dear Reader, he switched human bodies before I made him a vampire, worry no more. It has nothing to do with this story.

“Something’s following you again?” he asked. “This is what Armand told me. So did Jesse.”

“Where did you see them?”

“Armand?” he asked. “A complete accident. In Paris. He was just walking on the street. He was the first one I saw.”

“He didn’t make any move to hurt you?”

“Why would he? Why were you calling to me? Who’s stalking you? What is all this?”

“And you’ve been with Maharet.”

He sat back. He shook his head. “Lestat, I have pored over manuscripts such as no living human has seen in centuries; I have laid my hands on clay tablets that …”

“David, the scholar,” I said. “Educated by the Talamasca to be the perfect vampire, though they never had an inkling that that is what you’d become.”

“Oh, but you must understand. Maharet took me to these places where she keeps her treasures. You have to know what it means to hold in your hands a tablet covered in symbols that predate cuneiform. And Maharet herself, I might have lived how many centuries without ever glimpsing her.”

Maharet was really the only one he had ever had to fear. I suppose we both knew it. My memories of Maharet held no menace, only the mystery of a survivor of Millennia, a living being so ancient that each gesture seemed marble made liquid, and her soft voice had become the distillation of all human eloquence.

“If she gave you her blessing, nothing else much matters,” I said with a little sigh. I wondered if I myself would ever lay eyes upon her again. I had not hoped for it nor wanted it.

“I’ve also seen my beloved Jesse,” said David.

“Ah, I should have thought of that, of course.”

“I went searching for my beloved Jesse. I went crying out from place to place, just the way you sent out the wordless cry for me.”

Jesse. Pale, bird-boned, red-haired. Twentieth-century born. Highly educated and psychic as a human. Jesse he had known as a human; Jesse he knew now as an immortal. Jesse had been his human pupil in the order called the Talamasca. Now he was the equal of Jesse in beauty and vampiric power, or very near to it. I really did not know.

Jesse had been brought over by Maharet of the First Brood, born as a human before humans had begun to write their history at all or barely knew that they had one. The Elder now, if there was one, the Queen of the Damned was Maharet and her mute sister, Mekare, of whom no one spoke anymore much at all.

I had never seen a fledgling brought over by one as old as Maharet. Jesse had seemed a transparent vessel of immense strength when last I saw her. Jesse must have had her own tales to tell now, her own chronicles and adventures.

I had passed onto David my own vintage blood mixed with a strain even older than Maharet's. Yes, blood from Akasha, and blood from the ancient Marius, and of course my own strength was in my blood, and my own strength, as we all knew, was quite beyond measure.

So he and Jesse must have been grand companions, and what had it meant to her to see her aged mentor clothed in the fleshly raiment of a young human male?

I was immediately envious and suddenly full of despair. I'd drawn David away from those willowy white creatures who had drawn him into their sanctuary somewhere far across the sea, deep in a land where their treasures might be hidden from crisis and war for generations. Exotic names came to mind, but I could not for the moment think where they had gone, the two red-haired ones, the one ancient, the one young. And to their hearth, they had admitted David.

A little sound startled me and I looked over my shoulder. I settled back, embarrassed to have appeared so anxious, and I focused silently for a moment on my Victim.

My Victim was still in the restaurant very near us in this hotel, sitting with his beautiful daughter. I wouldn't lose him tonight. I was sure enough of that.

I sighed. Enough of him. I'd been following him for months. He was interesting, but he had nothing to do with all this. Or did he? I might kill him tonight, but I doubted it. Having spied the daughter, and knowing full well how much the Victim loved her, I had decided to wait until she returned home. I mean, why be so mean to a young girl like that? And how he loved her. Right now, he was pleading with her to accept a gift, something newly discovered by him and very splendid in his eyes. However, I couldn't quite see the image of the gift in her mind or his.

He was a good victim to follow—flashy, greedy, at times good, and always amusing.

Back to David. And how this strapping immortal opposite me must have loved the vampire Jesse, and become the pupil of Maharet. Why didn't I have any respect for the old ones anymore? What did I want, for

the love of heaven? No, that was not the question. The question was … did something want me right now? Was I running from it?

He was politely waiting for me to look at him again. I did. But I didn't speak. I didn't begin. And so he did what polite people often do, he talked slowly on as if I were not staring at him through the violet glasses like one with an ominous secret.

"No one has tried to hurt me," he said again in the lovely calm British manner, "no one has questioned that you made me, all have treated me with respect and kindness, though everyone of course wanted to know all the details firsthand of how you survived the Body Thief. And I don't think you know quite how you alarmed them, and how much they love you."

This was a kindly reference to the last adventure which had brought us together, and driven me to make him one of us. At the time, he had not sung my praises to Heaven for any part of it.

"They love me, do they?" I said of the others, the remnants of our revenant species around the world. "I know they didn't try to help me." I thought of the defeated Body Thief.

Without David's help, I might never have won that battle. I could not think of something that terrible. But I certainly didn't want to think of all my brilliant and gifted vampiric cohorts and how they'd watched from afar and done nothing.

The Body Thief himself was in Hell. And the body in question was opposite me with David inside it.

"All right, I'm glad to hear I had them a little worried," I said. "But the point is, I'm being followed again, and this time it's no scheming mortal who knows the trick of astral projection and how to take possession of someone else's body. I'm being *stalked*."

He studied me, not so much incredulous as striving perhaps to grasp the implications.

"Being stalked," he repeated thoughtfully.

"Absolutely." I nodded. "David, I'm frightened. I'm actually frightened. If I told you what I think this thing is, this thing that's stalking me, you'd laugh."

"Would I?"

The waiter had set down the hot drinks, and the steam did feel glorious. The piano played Satie ever so softly. Life was almost worth

living, even for a son of a bitch of a monster like myself. Something crossed my mind.

In this very bar, I'd heard my victim say to his daughter two nights ago, "You know I sold my soul for places just like this."

I'd been yards away, quite beyond mortal hearing, yet hearing every word that fell from my Victim's lips, and I was enthralled with the daughter. Dora, that was her name. Dora. She was the one thing this strange and succulently alluring Victim truly loved, his only child, his daughter.

I realized David was watching me.

"Just thinking about the victim who brought me here," I said. "And his daughter. They're not going out tonight. The snow's too deep and the wind too cruel. He'll take her back up to their suite, and she'll look down on the towers of St. Patrick's. I want to keep my victim in my sights, you know."

"Good heavens, have you fallen in love with a couple of mortals?"

"No. Not at all. Just a new way of hunting. The man's unique, a blaze of individual traits. I adore him. I was going to feed on him the first time I saw him, but he continues to surprise me. I've been following him around for half a year."

I flashed back on them. Yes, they were going upstairs, just as I thought. They had just left their table in the restaurant. The night was too wretched even for Dora, though she wanted to go to the church and to pray for her father, and beg him to stay there and pray too. Some memory played between them, in their thoughts and fragmentary words. Dora had been a little girl when my Victim had first brought her to that cathedral.

He didn't believe in anything. She was some sort of religious leader. Theodora. She preached to television audiences on the seriousness of values and nourishment of the soul. And her father? Ah, well, I'd kill him before I learnt too much more, or end up losing this big trophy buck just for Dora's sake.

I looked back at David, who was watching me eagerly, shoulder resting against the dark satin-covered wall. In this light, no one could have known he wasn't human. Even one of us might have missed it. As for me, I probably looked like a mad rock star who wanted all the world's attention to crush him slowly to death.

“The victim’s got nothing to do with it,” I said. “I’ll tell you all that another time. It’s just we’re in this hotel because I followed him here. You know my games, my hunts. I don’t need blood any more than Maharet does, but I can’t stand the thought of not having it!”

“And so what is this new sort of game?” he said politely in British.

“I don’t look so much for simple, evil people, murderers, you know, so much as a more sophisticated kind of criminal, someone with the mentality of an Iago. This one’s a drug dealer. Highly eccentric. Brilliant. An art collector. He loves to have people shot, loves to make billions in a week off cocaine through one gateway and heroin through another. And then he loves his daughter. And she, she has a televangelist church.”

“You’re really enthralled with these mortals.”

“Look right now, past me, over my shoulder. See the two people in the lobby moving towards the elevators?” I asked.

“Yes.” He stared at them fixedly. Perhaps they’d paused in just the right spot. I could feel, hear, and smell both of them, but I couldn’t know precisely where they were unless I turned around. But they were there, the dark smiling man with his pale-faced eager and innocent little girl, who was a woman-child of twenty-five if I had reckoned correctly.

“I know that man’s face,” said David. “He’s big time. International. They keep trying to bring him up on some charges. He pulled off an extraordinary assassination, where was it?”

“The Bahamas.”

“My God, how did you happen on him? Did you really see him in person somewhere, you know, like a shell you found on the beach, or did you see him in the papers and the magazines?”

“Do you recognize the girl? Nobody knows they’re connected.”

“No, I don’t recognize her, but should I? She’s so pretty, and so sweet. You’re not going to feed on her, are you?”

I laughed at his gentlemanly outrage at such a suggestion. I wondered if David asked permission before sucking the blood of his victims, or at least insisted that both parties be properly introduced. I had no idea what his killing habits were, or how often he fed. I’d made him plenty strong. That meant it didn’t have to be every night. He was blessed in that.

“The girl sings for Jesus on a television station,” I said. “Her church will someday have its headquarters in an old, old convent building in

New Orleans. Right now she lives there alone, and tapes her programs out of a studio in the French Quarter. I think her show goes through some ecumenical cable channel out of Alabama."

"You're in love with her."

"Not at all, just very eager to kill her father. Her television appeal is peculiar. She talks theology with gripping common sense, you know, the kind of televangelist that just might make it all work. Don't we all fear that someone like that will come along? She dances like a nymph or a temple virgin, I suppose I should say, sings like a seraph, invites the entire studio audience to join with her. Theology and ecstasy, perfectly blended. And all the requisite good works are recommended."

"I see," he said. "And this makes it more exciting for you, to feast on the father? By the way, the father is hardly an unobtrusive man. Neither seem disguised. Are you sure no one knows they're connected?"

The elevator door had opened. My Victim and his daughter were rising floor after floor into the sky.

"He slips in and out of here when he wants. He's got bodyguards galore. She meets him on her own. I think they set it up by cellular phone. He's a computer cocaine giant, and she's one of his best-protected secret operations. His men are all over the lobby. If there'd been anyone nosing around, she would have left the restaurant alone first. But he's a wizard at things like that. There'll be warrants out for him in five states and he'll show up ringside for a heavyweight match in Atlantic City, right in front of the cameras. They'll never catch him. I'll catch him, the vampire who's just waiting to kill him. And isn't he beautiful?"

"Now, let me get this clear," David said. "You're being stalked by something, and it's got nothing to do with this victim, this, er, drug dealer, or whatever, or this televangelist girl. But something is following you, something frightening you, but not enough to make you stop tracking this dark-skinned man who just got into the elevator?"

I nodded, but then I caught myself in a little doubt. No, there couldn't be any connection.

Besides, this thing that had me rattled to the bone had started before I saw the Victim. It had "happened" first in Rio, the stalker, not long after I'd left Louis and David and gone back to Rio to hunt.

I hadn't picked up this Victim until he'd walked across my path in my own city of New Orleans. He'd come down there on a whim to see Dora

for twenty minutes; they'd met in a little French Quarter bar, and I had been walking past and seen him, sparkling like a fire, and her white face and large compassionate eyes, and wham! It was fatal hunger.

"No, it's got nothing to do with him," I said. "What's stalking me started months before. He doesn't know I'm following him. I didn't catch on right away myself that I was being followed by this thing, this…."

"This what?"

"Watching him and his daughter, it's like my miniseries, you know. He's so intricately evil."

"So you said, and what *is* stalking you? Is this a thing or a person or …?"

"I'll get to that. This Victim, he has killed so many people. Drugs. Such people wallow in numbers. Kilos, kills, coded accounts. And the girl, the girl of course turned out not to be some dim-witted little miracle worker telling diabetics she can cure them with the laying on of hands."

"Lestat, your mind's wandering. What's the matter with you? Why are you afraid? And why don't you kill this victim and get that part over?"

"You want to go back to Jesse and Maharet, don't you?" I asked suddenly, a feeling of hopelessness descending on me. "You want to study for the next hundred years, among all those tablets and scrolls, and look into Maharet's aching blue eyes, and hear her voice, I know you do. Does she still always choose blue eyes?"

Maharet had been blind—eyes torn out—when she was made a vampire queen. She took eyes from her victims and wore them until they could see no more, no matter how the vampiric blood tried to preserve them. That was her shocking feature—the marble queen with the bleeding eyes. Why had she never wrung the neck of some vampire fledgling and stolen his or her eyes? It had never occurred to me before. Loyalty to our own kind? Maybe it wouldn't work. But she had her scruples, and they were as hard as she was. A woman that old remembers when there was no Moses and no Hammurabi's Code. When only the Pharaoh got to walk through the Valley of Death….

"Lestat," David said. "Pay attention. You must tell me what you are talking about. I've never heard you admit so readily that you were afraid. You did say afraid. Forget about me for the moment. Forget that victim and the girl. What's up, my friend? Who's after you?"

"I want to ask you some more questions first."

“No. Just tell me what’s happened. You’re in danger, aren’t you? Or you think you are. You sent out the call for me to come to you here. It was an unabashed plea.”

“Are those the words Armand used, ‘unabashed plea’? I hate Armand.”

David only smiled and made a quick impatient gesture with both hands. “You don’t hate Armand and you know you don’t.”

“Wanna bet?”

He looked at me sternly and reprimandingly. English schoolboy stuff probably.

“All right,” I said. “I’ll tell you. Now, first, I have to remind you of something. A conversation we had. It was when you were alive still, when we last talked together in your place in the Cotswolds, you know, when you were just a charming old gentleman, dying in despair—”

“I remember,” he said patiently. “Before you went into the desert.”

“No, right after, when we knew I couldn’t die as easily as I thought I could, when I’d come back burnt. You cared for me. Then you started talking about yourself, your life. You said something about an experience you’d had before the war, you said, in a Paris café. You remember? You know what I’m talking about?”

“Yes. I do. I told you that when I was a young man I thought I’d seen a vision.”

“Yes, something about the fabric of life ripping for a moment so you glimpsed things you shouldn’t have seen.”

He smiled. “You’re the one who suggested that, that the fabric had ripped somehow and I’d seen through the rip accidentally. I thought then and I still think now that it was a vision I was meant to see. But fifty years have passed since then. And my memory, my memory is surprisingly dim of the whole affair.”

“Well, that’s to be expected. As a vampire, you will remember everything that happens to you from now on vividly, but the details of mortal life will slip rather fast, especially anything that had to do with the senses, you’ll find yourself chasing after it—what did wine taste like?”

He motioned for me to be quiet. I was making him unhappy. I hadn’t meant to do this.

I picked up my drink, savored the fragrance. It was some sort of hot Christmas punch. I think they called it wassail in England. I set down the

glass. My hands and face were still dark from that excursion into the desert, that little attempt to fly into the face of the sun. That helped me pass for human. What an irony. And it made my hand a little more sensitive to the warmth.

A ripple of pleasure ran through me. Warmth! Sometimes I think I get my money out of everything! There's no way to cheat a sensualist like me, somebody who can die laughing for hours over the pattern of the carpet in a hotel lobby.

I became aware again of his watching me.

He seemed to have collected himself somewhat or forgiven me for the one thousandth time for having put his soul into a vampire's body without his permission, indeed against his will. He looked at me, almost lovingly suddenly, as if I needed that reassurance.

I took it. I did.

"In this Paris café, you heard two beings talking to each other," I said, going back to his vision of years before. "You were a young man. It all happened gradually. But you realized they weren't 'really' there, the two, in a material sense, and the language they were speaking was understandable to you even though you didn't know what it was."

He nodded. "That's correct. And it sounded precisely like God and the Devil talking to each other."

I nodded. "And when I left you in the jungles last year, you said I wasn't to worry, that you weren't going off on any religious quest to find God and the Devil in a Paris café. You said you'd spent your mortal life looking for such things in the Talamasca. And now you would take a different turn."

"Yes, that's what I said," he admitted agreeably. "The vision's dimmer now than it was when I told you. But I remember it. I still remember it, and I still believe I saw and heard something, and I'm as resigned as ever that I'll never know what it was."

"You're leaving God and the Devil to the Talamasca, then, as you promised."

"I'm leaving the Devil to the Talamasca," he said. "I don't think the Talamasca as a psychic order was ever that interested in God."

All this was familiar verbal territory. I acknowledged it. We both kept our eye on the Talamasca, so to speak. But only one member of that devout order of scholars had ever known the true fate of David Talbot,

the former Superior General, and now that human being was dead. His name had been Aaron Lightner. This had been a great sadness to David, the loss of the one human who knew what he was now, the human who had been his knowing mortal friend, as David had been mine.

He wanted to pick up the thread.

"You've seen a vision?" he asked. "That's what's frightening you?"

I shook my head. "Nothing as clear as that. But the Thing is stalking me, and now and then it lets me see something in the blink of an eye. I hear it mostly. I hear it sometimes talking in a normal conversational voice to another, or I hear its steps behind me on the street, and I spin around. It's true. I'm terrified of it. And then when it shows itself, well, I usually end up so disoriented, I'm sprawled in the gutter like a common drunk. A week will pass. Nothing. Then I'll catch that fragment of conversation again.…"

"And what are the words?"

"Can't give the fragments to you in order. I'd been hearing them before I realized what they were. On some level, I knew I was hearing a voice from some other locale, so to speak, you knew it wasn't a mere mortal in the next room. But for all I knew, it could have had a natural explanation, an electronic explanation."

"I understand."

"But the fragments are things like two people talking, and one says —*the one*, that is—says, 'Oh, no, he's perfect, it has nothing to do with vengeance, how could you think I wanted mere vengeance?' " I broke off, shrugged. "It's, you know, the middle of a conversation."

"Yes," he said, "and you feel this Thing is letting you hear a little of it … just the way I thought the vision in the café was meant for me."

"You've got it exactly right. It's tormenting me. Another time, this was only two days ago, I was in New Orleans; I was sort of spying on the Victim's daughter, Dora. She lives there in the convent building I mentioned. It's an old 1880s convent, unoccupied for years, and gutted, so that it's like a brick castle, and this little sparrow of a girl, this lovely little woman, lives there fearlessly, completely alone. She walks about the house as if she were invincible.

"Well, anyway, I was down there, and I had come into the courtyard of this building—it's, you know, a shape as old as architecture, main building, two long wings, inner courtyard."

"The rather typical late-nineteenth-century brick institution."

"Exactly, and I was watching through the windows, the progress of that little girl walking by herself through the pitch-black corridor. She was carrying a flashlight. And she was singing to herself, one of her hymns. They're all sort of medieval and modern at the same time."

"I believe the phrase is 'New Age,' " David suggested.

"Yes, it's somewhat like that, but this girl is on an ecumenical religious network. I told you. Her program is very conventional. Believe in Jesus, be saved. She's going to sing and dance people into Heaven, especially the women, apparently, or at least they'll lead the way."

"Go on with the story, you were watching her…."

"Yes, and thinking how brave she was. She finally reached her own quarters; she lives in one of the four towers of the building; and I listened as she threw all the locks. And I thought, not many mortals would like to go prowling about this dark building, and the place wasn't entirely spiritually clean."

"What do you mean?"

"Little spirits, elementals, whatever, what did you call them in the Talamasca?"

"Elementals," he said.

"Well, there are some gathered about this building, but they're no threat to this girl. She's simply too brave and strong.

"But not the Vampire Lestat, who was spying her. He was out in the courtyard, and he heard the voice right next to his ear, as if Two Men were talking at his right shoulder and the other one, the one who is not following me, says quite plainly, 'No, I don't see him in the same light.' I turned round and round trying to find this Thing, close in on it mentally and spiritually, confront it, bait it, and then I realized I was shaking all over, and you know, the elementals, David, the little pesky spirits … the ones I could feel hanging about the convent … I don't think they even realized this person, or whoever he was, had been talking in my ear."

"Lestat, you do sound as if you've lost your immortal mind," he said. "No, no, don't get angry. I believe you. But let's backtrack. Why were you following the girl?"

"I just wanted to see her. My Victim, he's worried—about who he is, what's he done, what the officials know about him. He's afraid he'll blemish her when the final indictment comes and all the newpaper

stories. But the point is, he'll never be indicted. I'm going to kill him first."

"You are. And then it actually might save her church, is that not right? Your killing him speedily, so to speak. Or am I mistaken?"

"I wouldn't hurt her for anything on this earth. Nothing could persuade me to do that." I sat silent for a moment.

"Are you sure you are not in love? You seem spellbound by her."

I was remembering. I had fallen in love only a short time ago with a mortal woman, a nun. Gretchen had been her name. And I had driven her mad. David knew the whole story. I'd written it; written all about David, too, and he and Gretchen had passed into the world in fictional form. He knew that.

"I would never reveal myself to Dora as I did with Gretchen," I said. "No. I won't hurt Dora. I learnt my lesson. My only concern is to kill her father in such a way that she experiences the least suffering and the maximum benefit. She knows what her father is, but I'm not sure she's prepared for all the bad things that could happen on account of him."

"My, but you are playing games."

"Well, I have to do something to keep my mind off this Thing that's following me or I'll go mad!"

"Shhhh … what's the matter with you? My God, but you're rattled."

"Of course I am," I whispered.

"Explain more about the Thing. Give me more fragments."

"They're not worth repeating. It's an argument. It's about me, I tell you. David, it's like God and the Devil are arguing about *me*."

I caught my breath. My heart was hurting me, it was beating so fast, no mean feat for a vampiric heart. I rested back against the wall, let my eyes range over the bar—middle-aged mortals mostly, ladies in old-style fur coats, balding men just drunk enough to be loud and careless and almost young.

The pianist had moved on into something popular, from the Broadway stage, I think. It was sad and sweet, and one of the old women in the bar was rocking slowly to the music, and mouthing the words with her rouged lips as she puffed on a cigarette. She was from that generation that had smoked so much that stopping now was out of the question. She had skin like a lizard. But she was a harmless and beautiful being. All of them were harmless and beautiful beings.

My victim? I could hear him upstairs. He was still talking with his daughter. Would she not take just one more of his gifts? It was a picture, a painting perhaps.

He would move mountains for his daughter, this victim, but she didn't want his gift, and she wasn't going to save his soul.

I found myself wondering how late St. Patrick's stayed open. She wanted so badly to go there. She was, as always, refusing his money. It's "unclean," she said to him now. "Roge, I want your soul. I can't take the money for the church! It comes from crime. It's filthy."

The snow fell outside. The piano music grew more rapid and urgent. Andrew Lloyd Webber at his best, I thought. Something from *Phantom of the Opera.*

There was that noise again out in the lobby, and I turned abruptly in my chair and looked over my shoulder, and then back at David. I listened. I thought I heard it again, like a footstep, an echoing footstep, a deliberately terrifying footstep. I did hear it. I knew I was trembling. But then it was gone, over. There came no voice in my ear.

I looked at David.

"Lestat, you're petrified, aren't you?" he asked, very sympathetically.

"David, I think the Devil's come for me. I think I'm going to Hell."

He was speechless. After all, what could he say? What does a vampire say to another vampire on such subjects? What would I have said if Armand, three hundred years older than me, and far more wicked, had said the Devil was corning for him? I would have laughed at him. I would have made some cruel joke about his fully deserving it and how he'd meet so many of our kind down there, subject to a special sort of vampiric torment, far worse than mere damned mortals ever experienced. I shuddered.

"Good God," I said under my breath.

"You said you've seen it?"

"Not quite. I was … somewhere, it's not important. I think New York again, yes, back here with him—"

"The victim."

"Yes, following him. He had some transaction at an art gallery. Midtown. He's quite a smuggler. It's all part of his peculiar personality, that he loves beautiful and ancient objects, the sort of things you love, David. I mean, when I finally do make a meal of him, I might bring you

one of his treasures."

David said nothing, but I could see this was distasteful to him, the idea of purloining something precious from someone whom I had not yet killed but was surely to kill.

"Medieval books, crosses, jewelry, relics, that's the sort of thing he deals in. It's what got him into the dope, ransoming church art that had been lost during the Second World War in Europe, you know, priceless statues of angels and saints that had been pillaged. He's got his most valued treasures stashed in a flat on the Upper East Side. His big secret. I think the dope money started as a means to an end. Somebody had something he wanted. I don't know. I read his mind and then I tire of it. And he's evil, and all those relics have no magic, and I'm going to Hell."

"Not so fast," he said. "The Stalker. You said you saw something. What did you see?"

I fell silent. I had dreaded this moment. I had not tried to describe these experiences even to myself. But I had to continue. I had called David here for help. I had to explain.

"We were outside, out there on Fifth Avenue; he—the Victim—was traveling in a car, uptown, and I knew the general direction, the secret flat where he keeps his treasures.

"I was merely walking, human style. I stopped at a hotel. I went inside to see the flowers. You know, in these hotels you can always find flowers. When you think you're losing your mind on account of winter, you can go into these hotels and find lavish bouquets of the most overwhelming lilies."

"Yes," he said with a little soft, halfhearted sigh. "I know."

"I was in the lobby. I was looking at this huge bouquet. I wanted to … to, ah … leave some sort of offering, as if it were a church … to those who'd made this bouquet, something like that, and I was thinking to myself, Maybe I should kill the Victim, and then … I swear this is the way it was, David—

"—the ground was gone. The hotel was gone. I wasn't anywhere or anchored to anything, and yet I was surrounded by people, people howling and chattering and screaming and crying, and laughing, yes, actually laughing, and all this was happening simultaneously, and the light, David, the light was blinding. This wasn't darkness, this wasn't the clichéd flames of the inferno, and I reached out. I didn't do this with my

arms. I couldn't find my arms. I reached out with everything, every limb, every fiber, just trying to touch something, to regain equilibrium, and then I realized I was standing on terra firma, and this Being was in front of me, its shadow was falling over me. Look, I don't have any words for this. It was horrific. It was very certainly the worst thing I've ever seen! The light was shining behind it, and it stood between me and this light and it had a face, and the face was dark, extremely dark, and as I looked at it I lost all control. I must have roared. Yet I have no idea if in the real world I made a sound.

"When I came to my senses, I was still there, in the lobby. Everything looked ordinary, and it was as if I'd been in that other place for years and years, and all sorts of fragments of memory were slipping away from me, flying away from me, so fast that I couldn't catch any one thought or finished proposition or suggestion.

"All I could remember with any certainty is what I just told you. I stood there. I looked at the flowers. Nobody in the lobby noticed me. I pretended everything was normal. But I kept trying to remember, kept chasing these fragments, beset by bits and pieces of talk, or threat or description, and I kept seeing very clearly this truly ugly dark Being before me, exactly the sort of demon you'd create if you wanted to drive someone right out of his reason. I kept seeing this face and…."

"Yes?"

"… I've seen him twice again."

I realized I was mopping my forehead with the little napkin the waiter had given me. He'd come again. David placed an order. Then he leant close to me.

"You think you've seen the Devil."

"There's not much else that could frighten me, David," I said. "We both know that. There isn't a vampire in existence who could really frighten me. Not the very oldest, not the wisest, not the cruelest. Not even Maharet. And what do I know of the supernatural other than us? The elementals, the poltergeists, the little addlebrained spirits, we all know and see … the things you called up with Candomble witchcraft."

"Yes," he said.

"This was *The Man Himself*, David."

He smiled, but it was by no means unkind or unsympathetic. "For you, Lestat," he teased softly, seductively, "for you, it would have to be the

Devil Himself."

We both laughed. Though I think it was what writers call a mirthless laugh. I went on.

"The second time it was in New Orleans. I was near home, our flat in the Rue Royale. Just walking. And I started to hear those steps behind me, like something deliberately following me and letting me know it. Damn it, I've done this to mortals myself and it's so vicious. God! Why was I ever created! And then the third time, the Thing was even closer. Same scenario. Huge, towering over me. Wings, David. Either it has wings or I in my fear am endowing it with wings. It is a Winged Being, and it is hideous, and this last time, I kept hold of the image long enough to run from it, to flee, David, like a coward. And then I woke up, as I always do, in some familiar place, where I started actually, and everything's just the way it was. Nobody has a hair out of place."

"And it doesn't talk to you when it appears like this?"

"No, not at all. It's trying to drive me crazy. It's trying to … to make me do something, perhaps. Remember what you said, David, that you didn't know why God and the Devil had let you see them."

"Hasn't it occurred to you that it *is* connected with this victim you're tracking? That perhaps something or someone does not want you to kill this man?"

"That's absurd, David. Think of the suffering in the world tonight. Think of those dying in Eastern Europe, think of the wars in the Holy Land, think of what's happening in this very city. You think God or the Devil gives a damn about one man? And our kind, our kind preying for centuries on the weak and the attractive and the unlucky. When has the Devil ever interfered with Louis, or Armand, or Marius, or any of us? Oh, would that it were so easy to summon his august presence and know once and for all!"

"Do you want to know?" he asked earnestly.

I waited, thought about it. Shook my head. "Could be something explainable. I detest being afraid of it! Maybe this is madness. Maybe that's what Hell is. You go mad. And all your demons come and get you just as fast as you can think them up."

"Lestat, it is evil, you are saying that?"

I started to answer and then stopped. Evil.

"You said it was hideous; you described intolerable noise, and a light.

Was it evil? Did you feel evil?"

"Well, actually, no. I didn't. I felt the same thing I feel when I hear those bits of conversation, some sort of sincerity, I suppose is the word for it, sincerity and purpose, and I'll tell you something, David, about this Being, this Being who's stalking me—he has a sleepless mind in his heart and an insatiable personality."

"What?"

"A sleepless mind in his heart," I insisted, "and an insatiable personality," I had blurted out. But I knew it was a quote. I was quoting it from something, but what I had no idea, some bit of poetry?

"What do you mean?" he asked patiently.

"I don't know. I don't even know why I said it. I don't even know why those words came into my mind. But it's true. He does have a sleepless mind in His heart, and He has an insatiable personality. He's not mortal. He's not human!"

" 'A sleepless mind in his heart,' " David quoted the words. " 'Insatiable personality.' "

"Yes. That's The Man, all right, the Being, the male Thing. No, wait, stop, I don't know if it's male; I mean … why, I don't know what gender it is … it's not distinctly female, let's put it that way, and not being distinctly female, it seems therefore … to be male."

"I understand."

"You think I've gone mad, don't you? You hope so, don't you?"

"Of course I don't."

"You ought to," I said. "Because if this being doesn't exist inside my head, if he exists outside, then he can get you too."

This made him very obviously thoughtful and distant and then he said strange words to me I didn't expect.

"But he doesn't want me, does he? And he doesn't want the others, either. He wants you."

I was crestfallen. I am proud, I am an egomaniac of a being; I do love attention; I want glory; I want to be wanted by God and the Devil. I want, I want, I want, I want.

"I'm not upbraiding you," he said. "I'm merely suggesting that this thing has not threatened the others. That in all of these hundreds of years, none of the others … none that we know has ever spoken of such a thing. Indeed, in your writing, in your books, you've been most explicit

that no vampire had ever seen the Devil, have you not?"

I admitted it with a shrug. Louis, my beloved pupil and fledgling, had once crossed the world to find the "eldest" of the vampires, and Armand had stepped forward with open arms to tell him that there was no God or Devil. And I, half a century before that, had made my own journey for the "eldest" and it had been Marius, made in the days of Rome, who had said the very same thing to me. No God. No Devil.

I sat still, conscious of stupid discomforts, that the place was stuffy, that the perfume was not really perfume, that there were no lilies in these rooms, that it was going to be very cold outside, and I couldn't think of rest until dawn forced me to it, and the night was long, and I was not making sense to David, and I might lose him … and that Thing might come, that Thing might come again.

"Will you stay near me?" I hated my own words.

"I'll stand at your side, and I'll try to hold on to you if it tries to take you."

"You will?"

"Yes," he said.

"Why?"

"Don't be foolish," he said. "Look, I don't know what I saw in the café. Never again in my life did I ever see anything like that or hear it. You know, I told you my story once. I went to Brazil, I learned the Candomble secrets. The night you … you came after me, I tried to summon the spirits."

"They came. They were too weak to help."

"Right. But … what is my point? My point is simply that I love you, that we're linked in some way that none of the others is linked. Louis worships you. You're some sort of dark god to him, though he pretends to hate you for having made him. Armand envies you and spies on you far more than you might think."

"I hear Armand and I see him and I ignore him," I said.

"Marius, he hasn't forgiven you for not becoming his pupil, I think you know that, for not becoming his acolyte, for not believing in history as some sort of redemptive coherence."

"Well put. That is what he believes. Oh, but he's angry with me for much greater things than that, you weren't one of us when I woke the Mother and the Father. You weren't there. But that's another tale."

“I know all of it. You forget your books. I read your work as soon as you write it, as soon as you let it loose into the mortal world.”

I laughed bitterly. “Maybe the Devil’s read my books too,” I said. Again, I loathed being afraid. It made me furious.

“But the point is,” he said, “I’ll stand with you.” He looked down at the table, drifting, the way he so often had when he was mortal, when I could read his mind yet he could defeat me, consciously locking me out. Now it was simply a barrier. I would never again know what his thoughts felt like.

“I'm hungry,” I whispered.

“Hunt.”

I shook my head. “When I’m ready, I’ll take the Victim. As soon as Dora leaves New York. Soon as she goes back to her old convent. She knows the bastard’s doomed. That’s what she will think after I’ve done it, that one of his many enemies got him, that his evil came back on him, very Biblical, when all the time it was just a species of killer roaming the Savage Garden of the Earth, a vampire, looking for a juicy mortal, and her father had caught my eye, and it’s going to be over, just like that.”

“Are you planning to torture this man?”

“David. You shock me. What an impolite question.”

“Will you?” he asked more timidly, more imploringly.

“I don’t think so. I just want to….” I smiled. He knew now well enough. Nobody had to tell him anymore about drinking the blood, the soul, the memory, the spirit, the heart. I wouldn’t know that wretched mortal creature until I took him, held him against my chest, opened up the only honest vein in his body, so to speak. Ah, too many thoughts, too many memories, too much anger.

“I’m going to stay with you,” he said. “Do you have rooms here?”

“Nothing proper. Find something for us. Find it close to … close to the cathedral.”

“Why?”

“Well, David, you should know why. If the Devil starts chasing me down Fifth Avenue, I’ll just run into St. Patrick’s and run to the High Altar and fall on my knees before the Blessed Sacrament and beg God to forgive me, not to sink me into the river of fire up to my eyes.”

“You are on the verge of being truly mad.”

“No, not at all. Look at me. I can tie my shoelaces. See? And my tie.

Takes some care, you know, to get it all around your neck and into your shirt and so forth, and not look like a lunatic with a big scarf around your neck. I'm together, as mortals so bluntly state it. Can you find us some rooms?"

He nodded.

"There's a glass tower, right over there somewhere, beside the cathedral. Monstrous building."

"The Olympic Tower."

"Yes, could you get us some rooms there? Actually I have mortal agents who can do this sort of thing, I don't know why in the world I'm whining like a fool in this place, asking you to take care of humiliating particulars…."

"I'll take care of it. It's probably too late tonight, but I can swing it tomorrow evening. It will be under the name David Talbot."

"My clothes. There's a stash of them here under the name Isaac Rummel. Just a suitcase or two, and some coats. It's really winter, isn't it?" I gave him the key to the room. This was humiliating. Rather like making a servant of him. Perhaps he'd change his mind and put our new lodgings under the name of Renfield.

"I'll take care of it all. We'll have a palatial base of operations by tomorrow. I'll see that keys are left for you at the desk. But what are you going to be doing?"

I waited, I was listening for the Victim. Still talking to Dora. Dora was leaving in the morning.

I pointed upwards. "Killing that bastard. I think I'll do it tomorrow right after sunset if I can zone in on him quickly enough. Dora will be gone. Oh, I am so hungry. I wish she'd take a midnight plane out of here. Dora, Dora."

"You really like this little girl, don't you?"

"Yes. Find her on television sometime, you'll see. Her talent's rather spectacular, and her teaching has that dangerous emotional grip to it."

"Is she really gifted?"

"With everything. Very white skin, short black hair, bobbed, long thin yet shapely legs, and she dances with such abandon, arms flung out, rather makes one think of a whirling dervish or the Sufis in their perfection, and when she speaks it's not humble precisely, it's full of wonder and all very, very benign."

“I should think so.”

“Well, religion isn’t always, you know. I mean she doesn’t rant about the coming Apocalypse or the Devil corning to get you if you don’t send her a check.”

He reflected for a moment, then said meaningfully, “I see how it is.”

“No, you don’t. I love her, yes, but I’ll soon forget her completely. It’s just that … well, there’s a convincing version of something there, and delicacy, and she really believes in it; she thinks Jesus walked on this earth. She thinks it happened.”

“And this thing that's following you, it’s not connected in any way with this choice of victim, her father?”

“Well, there is a way to find out,” I said.

“How?”

“Kill the son of a bitch tonight. Maybe I’ll do it after he leaves her. My Victim won’t stay here with her. He’s too scared of bringing danger to her. He never stays in the same hotel with her. He has three different apartments here. I'm surprised he’s stayed this long.”

“I’m staying with you.”

“No, go on, I have to finish this one. I need you, I really need you. I needed to tell you, and to have you with me, the age-old venerable human needs, but I don’t need you at my side. I know you’re thirsting. I don’t have to read your mind to feel that much. You starved as you came here, so that you wouldn’t disappoint me. Go prowl the city.” I smiled. “You’ve never hunted New York, have you?”

He shook his head in the negative gesture. His eyes were changing. It was the hunger. It was giving him that dull look, like a dog who had caught the scent of the bitch in heat. We all get that look, the bestial look, but we are nothing as good as bestial, are we? Any of us.

I stood up. “The rooms in the Olympic Tower,” I said. “You’ll get them so that they look down on St. Patrick’s, won’t you? Not too high up, low if you can do it, so that the steeples are close.”

“You are out of your brilliant preternatural mind.”

“No. But I’m going out into the snow now. I hear him up there. He’s planning to leave her, he's kissing her, chaste and loving kisses. His car is prowling around out front. He’ll go way uptown to that secret place of his where the relics are kept. He thinks his enemies in crime and government know nothing of it, or believe it’s just the junk shop of a

friend. But I know of it. And what all those treasures mean to him. If he goes up there, I'll follow.… No more time, David."

"I've never been so completely confused," he said. "I wanted to say God go with you."

I laughed. I leant to give him a quick kiss on the forehead, so swift others would not make anything of it if they saw it, and then swallowing the fear, the instantaneous fear, I left him.

In the rooms high above, Dora cried. She sat by the window watching the snow and crying. She regretted refusing his new present for her. If only.… She pushed her forehead against the cold glass and prayed for her father.

I crossed the street. The snow felt rather good, but then I'm a monster.

I stood at the back of St. Patrick's, watching as my handsome Victim came out, hurriedly through the snow, shoulders hunched, and plunged into the backseat of his expensive black car. I heard him give the address very near to that junk-shop flat where he kept his treasures. All right, he'd be alone up there for a while. Why not do it, Lestat?

Why not let the Devil take you? Go ahead! Refuse to enter Hell in fear. Just go for it.

Two

I reached his house on the Upper East Side before he did. I'd tracked him here numerous times. I knew the routine. Hirelings lived on the lower and upper floors, though I don't think they knew who he was. It wasn't unlike a vampire's usual arrangement. And between those two flats was his long chain of rooms, the second storey of the town house, barred like a prison, and accessible by him through a rear entrance.

He never had a car let him out in front of the place. He'd get out on Madison and cut deep into the block to his back door. Or sometimes he got out on Fifth. He had two routes, and some of the surrounding property was his. But nobody—none of his pursuers—knew of this place.

I wasn't even sure that his daughter, Dora, knew the exact location. He'd never brought her there in all the months I'd been watching him, savoring and licking my lips over his life. And I'd never caught from Dora's mind any distinct image of it.

But Dora knew of his collection. In the past, she had accepted his relics. She had some of them scattered about the empty convent castle in New Orleans. I'd sensed a glimmer or two of these fine things the night when I'd pursued her there. And now my Victim was still lamenting that she'd refused the latest gift. Something truly sacred, or so he thought.

I got into the flat simply enough.

One could hardly call it a flat, though it did include a small lavatory, dirty in the way barren, unused places become dirty, and then room after room was crammed with trunks, statues, bronze figures, heaps of seeming trash that no doubt concealed priceless discoveries.

It felt very strange to be inside, concealed in the small rear room, because I had never done more than look through the windows. The place was cold. When he came, he would create heat and light simply enough.

I sensed he was only halfway up Madison in a crush of traffic, and I began to explore.

At once, a great marble statue of an angel startled me. I came round out of the door and almost ran smack into it. It was one of those angels

that used to stand inside church doors, offering holy water in half shells. I had seen them in Europe and in New Orleans.

It was gigantic, and its cruel profile stared blindly into the shadows. Far down the hall, the light came up from the busy little street that ran into Fifth. The usual New York songs of traffic were corning through the walls.

This angel was poised as if he had just landed from the skies to offer his sacred basin. I slapped his bent knee gently and went around him. I didn't like him. I could smell parchment, papyrus, various kinds of metal. The room opposite appeared to be filled with Russian icons. The walls were veritably covered with them and the light was playing on the halos of the sad-eyed Virgins or glaring Christs.

I went on to the next room. Crucifixes. I recognized the Spanish style, and what appeared to be Italian Baroque, and very early work which surely must have been very rare—the Christ grotesque and poorly proportioned yet suffering with appropriate horror on the worm-eaten cross.

Only now did I realize the obvious. It was *all* religious art. There was nothing that wasn't religious. But then it's rather easy to say that about all art from the end of the last century backwards, if you think about it. I mean, the great majority of art is religious.

The place was utterly devoid of life.

Indeed, it stank of insecticide. Of course, he had saturated it to save his old wooden statues, he would have had to do that. I could not hear or smell rats, or detect any living thing at all. The lower flat was empty of its occupants, though a small radio chattered the news in a bathroom.

Easy to blot out that little sound. On the floors above, there were mortals, but they were old, and I caught a vision of a sedentary man, with earphones on his head, swaying to the rhythm of some esoteric German music, Wagner, doomed lovers deploring the "hated dawn" or some heavy, repetitive, and distinctly pagan foolishness. Leitmotiv be damned. There was another person up there, but she was too feeble to be of any concern, and I could catch only one image of her and she appeared to be sewing or knitting.

I didn't care enough about any of this to bring it into loving focus. I was safe in the flat, and He'd be coming soon, filling all these rooms with the perfume of his blood, and I'd do my damnedest not to break his

neck before I'd had every drop. Yes, this was the night.

Dora wouldn't find out until she got home tomorrow anyway. Who would know that I'd left his corpse here?

I went on into the living room. This was tolerably clean; the room where he relaxed and read and studied and fondled his objects. There were his comfortable bulky couches, fitted with heaps of pillows, and halogen lamps of black iron so delicate and light and modern and easy to maneuver that they looked like insects poised on tables and on the floor itself, and sometimes on top of cardboard boxes.

The crystal ashtray was full of butts, which confirmed he preferred safety to cleanliness, and I saw scattered glasses in which the liquor had long ago dried to a glaze that was now flaked like lacquer.

Thin, rather frowsy drapes hung over the windows, making the light soiled and tantalizing.

Even this room was jammed with statues of saints—a very lurid and emotional St. Anthony holding a chubby Child Jesus in the crook of his arm; a very large and remote Virgin, obviously of Latin American origin. And some monstrous angelic being of black granite which even with my eyes I could not fully examine in the gloom, something resembling more a Mesopotamian demon than an angel.

For one split second this granite monster sent the shivers through me. It resembled … no, I should say its wings made me think of the creature I'd glimpsed, this Thing that I thought was following me.

But I didn't hear any footsteps here. There was no rip in the fabric of the world. It was a statue of granite, that's all, a hideous ornament perhaps from some gruesome church full of images of Hell and Heaven.

Lots of books lay on the tables. Ah, he did love books. I mean, there were the fine ones, made of vellum and very old and all that, but current books, too, titles in philosophy and religion, current affairs, memoirs of currently popular war correspondents, even a few volumes of poetry.

Mircea Eliade, history of religions in various volumes, might have been Dora's gift, and there, a brand-new *History of God*, by a woman named Karen Armstrong. Something else on the meaning of life —*Understanding the Present*, by Bryan Appleyard. Hefty books. But fun, my kind, anyway. And the books had been handled. Yes, it was his scent on these books, heavily his scent, not Dora's.

He had spent more time here than I ever realized.

I scanned the shadows, the objects, I let the air fill my nostrils. Yes, he'd come here often and with someone else, and that person … that person had died here! I hadn't realized any of this before, of course, and it was just more preparation for the meal. So the murderer drug dealer had loved a young man in these digs once, and it hadn't been all clutter. I was getting flashes of it in the worst way, more emotion than image, and I found myself fairly fragile under the onslaught. This death hadn't occurred all that long ago.

Had I passed this Victim in those times, when his friend was dying, I would never have settled on him, just let him go on. But then he was so flashy!

He was coming up the back steps now, the inner secret stairway, cautiously taking each step, his hand on the handle of his gun inside his coat, very Hollywood style, though there wasn't much else about him that was predictable. Except, of course, that many who deal in cocaine are eccentric.

He reached the back door, saw that I'd opened it. Rage. I slipped over into the corner opposite that overbearing granite statue, and I stood back between two dusty saints. There wasn't enough light for him to see me right off. He'd have to turn on one of the little halogens, and they were spots.

Right now, he listened, he sensed. He hated it that someone had broken open his door; he was murderous and had no intention of not investigating, alone; a little court case was held in his mind. No, no one could possibly know about this place, the judge decided. Had to be a petty thief, goddamn it, and those words were heaped in rage upon the accidental.

He slipped the gun out, and he started going through his rooms, through rooms I'd skipped. I heard the light switch, saw the flash in the hall. He went on to another and another.

How on earth could he tell this place was empty? I mean, anyone could be hiding in this place. I knew it was empty. But what made him so sure? But maybe that's how he'd stayed alive all this time, he had just the right mixture of creativity and carelessness.

At last came the absolutely delicious moment. He was satisfied he was alone.

He stepped into the living-room door, his back to the long hall, and

slowly scanned the room, failing to see me, of course, and then he put his large nine-millimeter gun back in his shoulder holster, and he slipped off his gloves very slowly.

There was enough light for me to note everything I adored about him.

Soft black hair, the Asian face that you couldn't clearly identify as Indian or Japanese, or Gypsy; could even have been Italian or Greek; the cunning black eyes, and the remarkably perfect symmetry of the bones—one of the very few traits he'd passed on to his daughter, Dora. She was fair skinned, Dora. Her mother must have been milk white. He was my favorite shade, caramel.

Suddenly something made him very uneasy. He turned his back to me, eyes quite obviously locked to some object that had alarmed him. Nothing to do with me. I had touched nothing. But his alarm had thrown up a wall between my mind and his. He was on full alert, which meant he wasn't thinking sequentially.

He was tall, his back very straight, the coat long, his shoes those Savile Row handmade kind that takes the English shops forever. He took a step away from me, and I realized immediately from a jumble of images that it was the black granite statue that had startled him.

It was perfectly obvious. He didn't know what it was or how it had gotten here. He approached, very cautious, as though someone might be hiding in the vicinity of the thing, then pivoted, scanned the room, and slowly drew out his gun again.

Possibilities were passing through his mind in rather orderly fashion. He knew one art dealer who was stupid enough to have delivered the thing and left the door unlocked, but that dealer would have called him before ever coming.

And this thing? Mesopotamian? Assyrian? Suddenly, impulsively, he forgot all practical matters and put his hand out and touched the granite. God, he loved it. He loved it and he was acting stupid.

I mean, there could have been one of his enemies here. But then why would a gangster or a federal investigator come bearing a gift such as that?

Whatever the case, he was enthralled by the piece. I still couldn't see it clearly. I would have slipped off the violet glasses, which would have helped enormously, but I didn't dare move. I wanted to see this, this adoration of his for the object that was new. I could feel his

uncompromising desire for this statue, to own it, to have it here … the very sort of desire which had first attracted him to me.

He was thinking only about it, the fine carving, that it was recent, not ancient, for obvious stylistic reasons, seventeenth century perhaps, a fleshed-out rendering of a fallen angel.

Fallen angel. He did everything but step on tiptoe and kiss the thing. He put his left hand up and ran it all over the granite face and the granite hair. Damn, I couldn't see it! How could he put up with this darkness? But then he was smack up against it, and I was twenty feet away and stuffed between two saints, without a good perspective.

Finally, he turned and switched on one of the halogen lamps. Thing looked like a preying mantis. He moved the thin black iron limb so the beam shone up on the statue's face. Now I could see both profiles beautifully!

He made little noises of lust. This was unique! The dealer was of no importance, the back door forgiven, the supposed danger fled. He slipped the gun in the holster again, almost as if he wasn't even thinking about it, and he did go up on tiptoe, trying to get eye level with this appalling graven image. Feathered wings. I could see that now. Not reptilian, feathered. But the face, classical, robust, the long nose, the chin … yet there was a ferocity in the profile. And why was the statue black? Maybe it was only St. Michael pushing devils into hell, angry, righteous. No, the hair was too rank and tangled for that. Armour, breastplate, and then of course I saw the most telling details. That it had the legs and feet of a goat. Devil.

Again there came a shiver. *Like the thing I'd seen.* But that was stupid! And I had no sense of the Stalker being near me now. No disorientation. I wasn't even really afraid. It was just a frisson, nothing more.

I held very still. Now take your time, I thought. Figure this out. You've got your Victim and this statue is just a coincidental detail that further enriches the entire scenario. He turned another halogen beam on the thing. It was almost erotic the way he studied it. I smiled. Erotic the way I was studying him—this forty-seven-year-old man with a youth's health and a criminal's poise. Fearlessly he stood back, having forgotten any threat of any kind, and looked at this new acquisition. Where had it come from? Whom? He didn't give a damn about the price. If only Dora. No, Dora wouldn't like this thing. Dora. Dora, who had cut him to the

heart tonight refusing his gift.

His entire posture changed; he didn't want to think about Dora again, and all the things Dora had said—that he had to renounce what he did, that she'd never take another cent for the church, that she couldn't help but love him and suffer if he did go to court, that she didn't want the veil.

What veil? Just a fake, he'd said, but one of the best he'd found so far. Veil? I suddenly connected his hot little memory with something hanging on the far wall, a framed bit of fabric, a painted Christface. Veil. Veronica's veil.

And just an hour ago he'd said to Dora, "Thirteenth century, and so beautiful, Dora, for the love of heaven. Take it. If I can't leave these things to you, Dora…."

So this Christface had been his precious gift?

"I won't take them anymore, Daddy, I told you. I won't."

He had pressed her with the vague scheme that this new gift could be exhibited for the public. So could all his relics. They could raise money for the church.

She had started to cry, and all this had been going on back at the hotel, whilst David and I had been in the bar only yards from them.

"And say these bastards do manage to pick me up, some warrant, something I haven't covered, you're telling me you won't take these things? You'll let strangers take them?"

"Stolen, Daddy," she had cried. "They are not clean. They are tainted."

He really could not understand his daughter. It seemed he'd been a thief ever since he was a child. New Orleans. The boardinghouse, the curious mixture of poverty and elegance and his mother drunk most of the time. The old captain who ran the antique shop. All this was going through his mind. Old Captain had had the front rooms of the house, and he, my Victim, had brought the breakfast tray each morning to Old Captain, before going on to school. Boardinghouse, service, elegant oldsters, St. Charles Avenue. The time when the men sat on the galleries in the evening and the old ladies did, too, with their hats. Daylight times I'd never know again.

Such reverie. No, Dora wouldn't like this. And he wasn't so sure he did either, suddenly. He had standards which were often difficult to explain to people. He began some defense as though talking to the dealer who'd

brought this. “It’s beautiful, yes, but it’s too Baroque! It lacks that element of distortion that I treasure.”

I smiled. I loved this guy's mind. And the smell of the blood, well. I took a deliberate breath of it, and let it turn me into a total predator. Go slowly, Lestat. You’ve waited for months. Don’t rush it. And he’s such a monster himself. He’d shot people in the head, killed them with knives. Once in a small grocery he had shot both his enemy and the proprietor’s wife with utter indifference. Woman in the way. And he had coolly walked out. Those were early New York days, before Miami, before South America. But he remembered that murder, and that’s why I knew about it.

He thought a lot about those various deaths. That’s why I thought about them.

He was studying the hoofed feet of this thing, this angel, devil, demon. I realized its wings reached the ceiling. I could feel that shiver again if I let myself. But again, I was on firm ground, and there was nothing from any other realm in this place.

He slipped off his coat now, and stood in shirtsleeves. That was too much. I could see the flesh of his neck, of course, as he opened his collar. I could see that particularly beautiful place right below his ear, that special measure between the back of the neck of a human and the lobe of his ear, which has so much to do with male beauty.

Hell, I had not invented the significance of necks. Everyone knew what those proportions meant. He was all over pleasing to me, but it was the mind, really. To hell with his Asian beauty and all that, even his vanity which made him glow for fifty feet in all directions. It was the mind, the mind that was locked onto the statue, and had for one merciful moment let thoughts of Dora go.

He reached for another one of the little halogen spots and clamped his hand over the hot metal and directed it full on the demon’s wing, the wing I could best see, and I too saw the perfection he was thinking about, the Baroque love of detail; no. He did not collect this sort of thing. His taste was for the grotesque, and this thing was only grotesque by accident. God, it was hideous. It had a ferocious mane of hair, and a scowl on its face that could have been designed by William Blake, and huge rounded eyes that fixed on him in seeming hatred.

“Blake, yes!” he said suddenly. He turned around. “Blake. The damned

thing looks like one of those drawings by Blake."

I realized he was staring at me. I had projected the thought, carelessly, yes, obviously with purpose. I felt a shock of connection. He saw me. He saw the glasses perhaps, and the light, or maybe my hair.

Very slowly I stepped out, with my arms at my sides. I wanted nothing so vulgar as his reaching for his gun. But he hadn't reached for it. He merely looked at me, blinded perhaps by the bright little lights so near to him. The halogen beam threw the shadow of the angel's wing on the ceiling. I came closer.

He said absolutely nothing. He was afraid. Or rather, let me say, he was alarmed. He was more than alarmed. He felt this might very well be his last confrontation. Someone had gotten by him totally! And it was too late to be reaching for guns, or doing anything so literal, and yet he wasn't actually in fear of me.

Damned if he didn't know I wasn't human.

I came swiftly towards him, and took his face in both my hands. He went into a sweat and tremble, naturally, yet he reached up and pulled the glasses off my eyes and they fell on the floor.

"Oh, it's gorgeous, finally," I whispered, "to be so very close to you!"

He couldn't form words. No mortal in my grip like this could have been expected to utter anything but prayers, and he had no prayers! He stared right into my eyes, and then very slowly took my measure, not daring to move, his face still fixed in both my cold, cold hands, and he knew. Not human.

It was the strangest reaction! Of course I'd confronted recognition before, in lands the world over; but prayer, madness, some desperate atavistic response, something always accompanied it. Even in old Europe where they believed in the nosferatu, they'd scream out a prayer before I sank my teeth.

But this, what was this, his staring at me, this comical criminal courage!

"Going to die like you lived?" I whispered.

One thought galvanized him. *Dora.* He went into a violent struggle, grabbing at my hands, realizing they felt like stone, and then convulsing, as he tried to pull himself loose, held mercilessly by the face. He hissed at me.

Some inexplicable mercy came over me. Don't torture him like this. He

knows too much. Understands too much. God, you've had months of watching him, you don't have to stretch this out. On the other hand, when will you find another kill like this one!

Well, hunger overcame judgment. I pressed my forehead against his neck first, shifting my hand to the back of his head, let him feel my hair, heard him draw in his breath, and then I drank.

I had him. I had the gush, and him and Old Captain in the front room, the streetcar crashing past outside, and him saying to Old Captain, "You ever show it to me again or ask me to touch it and I won't ever come near you." And Old Captain swearing he never would. Old Captain taking him to the movies, and to dinner at the Monteleone, and on the plane to Atlanta, having vowed never to do it again, "Just let me be around you, son, just let me be near you, I'll never, I swear." His mother drunk in the doorway, brushing her hair. "I know your game, you and that old man, I know just what you're doing. He bought you those clothes? You think I don't know." And then Terry with the bullet hole in the middle of her face, a blond-haired girl turning to the side and crumpling to the floor, the fifth murder and it has to be you, Terry, you. He and Dora were in the truck. And Dora knew. Dora was only six and she knew. Knew he'd shot her mother, Terry. *And they'd never, never spoken a word about it.* Terry's body in a plastic sack. Ah, God, plastic. And him saying, "Mommy's gone." Dora hadn't even asked. Six years old, she knew. Terry screaming, "You think you can take my daughter from me, you son of a bitch, you think you can take my child, I'm leaving tonight with Jake and she's going with me." Bang, you're dead, honey. I couldn't stand you anyway. In a heap on the floor, the very flashy cute kind of common girl with very oval pale pink nails, and lipstick that always looks extraordinarily fresh, and hair from a bottle. Pink shorts, little thighs.

He and Dora driving in the night, and they never had spoken a word.

What are you doing to me! You are killing me! You are taking my blood, not my soul, you thief, you … what in the name of God?

"You talking to me?" I drew back, blood dripping from my lips. Good God, he *was* talking to me! I bit down again, and this time I did break his neck, but he wouldn't stop.

Yes, you, what are you? Why, why this, the blood? Tell me, damn you into hell! Damn you!

I had crushed the bones of his arms, twisted his shoulder out of the socket, the last blood I could get was there on my tongue. I stuck my tongue into the wound, give me, give me, give me.…

But what, what is your name, under God, who are you?

He was dead. I dropped him and stepped back. Talking to me! Talking to me during the kill? Asking *me* who I was? Piercing the swoon?

"Oh, you are so full of surprises," I whispered. I tried to clear my head. I was warmly full of blood. I let it stay in my mouth. I wanted to pick him up, tear open his wrist, drink anything that was left, but that was so ugly, and the truth was, I had no intention of touching him again! I swallowed and ran my tongue along my teeth, getting the last taste, he and Dora in the truck, she six years old, Mommy dead, shot in the head, with Daddy now forever.

"That was the fifth killing!" he'd said aloud to me, I'd heard him. "Who are you?"

"Talking to me, you bastard!" I looked down at him, ooh, the blood was just flooding my fingertips finally and moving down my legs; I closed my eyes, and I thought, Live for this, just for this, for this taste, this feeling, and his words came back to me, words to Dora in a fancy bar, "I sold my soul for places like this."

"Oh, for Godsakes, die, damn it!" I said. I wanted the blood to keep burning, but enough of him, hell, six months was plenty for a love affair between vampire and human! I looked up.

The black thing wasn't a statue at all. It was alive. And it was studying me. It was living and breathing and watching me under its furious shining black scowl, looking down at me.

"No, not true," I said aloud. I tried to fall into the deep calm that danger often produces in me. *Not true*.

I nudged his dead body on the floor deliberately just to be sure I was still there, and not going mad, and in terror of the disorientation, but it didn't come, and then I screamed.

I screamed like any kid.

And I ran out of there.

I tore out of there, down the hall, out of the back and into the wide night.

I went up over the rooftops, and then in sheer exhaustion slipped down in a narrow alley, and lay against the bricks. No, that couldn't

have been true. That was some last image he projected, my Victim; he threw that image out in death, a sweet vengeance. Making that statue look alive, that big dark winged thing, that goat-legged.…

"Yeah," I said. I wiped my lips. I was lying in dirty snow. There were other mortals in this alley. Don't bother us. I won't. I wiped my lips again. "Yeah, vengeance; all his love," I whispered aloud, "for all the things in that place, and he threw that at me. He knew. He knew what I was. He knew how.…"

And besides, the Thing that stalked me had never been so calm, so still, so reflective. It had always been swelling and rising like so much thick, stinking smoke and those voices … That had been a mere statue standing there.

I got up, furious with myself, absolutely furious for having fled, for having passed up the last little trick involved in the whole kill. I was furious enough to go back there, and kick his dead body and kick that statue, which no doubt returned to granite the instant that conscious life went completely out of the dying brain of its owner.

Broken arms, shoulders. As if from the bloody heap I'd made of him, he'd called up that thing.

And Dora will hear about this. Broken arms, shoulders. Neck broken.

I went out onto Fifth Avenue. I walked into the wind.

I stuffed my hands in the pockets of my wool blazer, which was far too light to look appropriate in this quiet blizzard, and I walked and walked. "All right, damn it, you knew what I was, and for a moment, you made that thing look alive."

I stopped dead still, staring over the traffic at the dark snow-covered woods of Central Park.

"If it *is* all connected, come for me." I was talking not to him now, or the statue, but to the Stalker. I simply refused to be afraid. I was just completely out of my head.

And where was David? Hunting somewhere? Hunting … as he had so loved to do as a mortal man in the Indian jungles, hunting, and I'd made him the hunter of his brothers forever.

I made a decision.

I was going back at once to the flat. I'd look at the damned statue, and see for myself that it was utterly inanimate, and then I'd do what I ought to do for Dora—that is, get rid of her father's corpse.

It took me only moments to get back, to be going up the narrow pitch-dark back stairs again, and into the flat. I was past all patience with my fear, simply furious, humiliated and shaken, and at the same time curiously excited—as I always am by the unknown.

Stench of his freshly dead body. Stench of wasted blood.

I could hear or sense nothing else. I went into a small room which had once been an active kitchen and still contained the remnants of housekeeping from the time of that dead mortal whom the Victim had loved. Yes, just what I wanted under the sink pipes where mortals always shove it, a box of green plastic garbage sacks, just perfect for his remains.

It suddenly hit me that he had chucked his murdered wife, Terry, into such a bag, I'd seen it, smelled it, when I was feasting on him. Oh, hell with it. So he'd given me the idea.

There were a few pieces of cutlery around, though nothing that would allow a surgical or artistic job. I took the largest of the knives, carbon-steel blade, and went into the living room, deliberately without hesitation, and turned and looked at the mammoth statue.

The halogens were still shining; bright, deliberate beams in the shadowy clutter.

Statue; goat-legged angel.

You idiot, Lestat.

I went up to it and stood before it, looking coldly at the details. Probably *not* seventeenth-century. Probably contemporary, executed by hand, yes, but it had the utter perfection of something contemporary, and the face did have the William Blake sublime expression—an evil, scowling, goat-legged being with the eyes of Blake's saints and sinners, full of innocence as well as wrath.

I wanted it suddenly, would liked to have kept it, gotten it down some way to my rooms in New Orleans as a keepsake for practically falling down dead in fear at its feet. Cold and solemn it stood before me. And then I realized that all these relics might be lost if I didn't do something with them. As soon as his death was known, all this would be confiscated, that was his whole point with Dora, that this, his true wealth, would pass into indifferent hands.

And Dora had turned her narrow little back to him and wept, a waif consumed with grief and horror and the worst frustration, the inability

to comfort the one she most loved.

I looked down. I was standing over his mangled body. He still looked fresh, wrecked, murdered by a slob. Black hair very soft and mussed, eyes half open. His white shirtsleeves were stained an evil pinkish color from the little blood that oozed out of the wounds I'd accidentally inflicted, crushing him. His torso was at a hideous angle in relation to his legs. I'd snapped his neck, and snapped his spine.

Well, I'd get him out of here. I'd get rid of him, and then for a long time no one would know. No one would know he was dead; and the investigators couldn't pester Dora, or make her miserable. Then I'd think about the relics, perhaps spiriting them away for her.

From his pockets I took his identification. All bogus, nothing with his real name.

His real name had been Roger.

I knew that from the beginning, but only Dora had called him Roger. In all his dealings with others, he'd had exotic aliases, with odd medieval sounds. This passport said Frederick Wynken. Now that amused me. Frederick Wynken.

I gathered all identifying materials and put them in my pockets to be totally destroyed later.

I went to work with the knife. I cut off both his hands, rather amazed at their delicacy and how well-manicured were his nails. He had loved himself so much, and with reason. And his head, I hacked that off, more through brute strength forcing the knife through tendon and bone than any sort of real skill. I didn't bother to close his eyes. The stare of the dead holds so little fascination, really. It mimics nothing living. His mouth was soft without emotion, and cheeks smooth in death. The usual thing. These—the head, and the hands—I put into two separate green sacks, and then I folded up the body, more or less, and crammed it into the third sack.

There was blood all over the carpet, which I realized was only one of many, many carpets layering this floor, junk-shop style, and that was too bad. But the point was, the body was on its way out. Its decay wouldn't bring mortals from above or below. And without the body, no one might ever know what had become of him … best for Dora, surely, than to have seen great glossy photographs of a scene such as I had made here.

I took one last look at the scowling countenance of the angel, devil, or

whatever he was with his ferocious mane and beautiful lips and huge polished eyes. Then, hefting the three sacks like Santa Claus, I went out to get rid of Roger piece by piece.

This was not much of a problem.

It gave me merely an hour to think as I dragged myself along through the snowy, empty black streets, uptown, searching for bleak chaotic construction sites, and heaps of garbage, and places where rot and filth had accumulated and were not likely to be examined anytime soon, let alone cleared away.

Beneath a freeway overpass, I left his hands buried in a huge pile of trash. The few mortals hovering there, with blankets and a little fire going in a tin can, took no notice of what I did at all. I shoved the plastic-wrapped hands so deep in the rubble no one could conceivably try to retrieve them. Then I went up to the mortals, who didn't so much as look up at me, and I dropped a few bills down by the fire. The wind almost caught the money. Then a hand, a living hand, of course, the hand of one of these bums, flashed out in the firelight and caught the bills and drew them back into the breathing darkness.

"Thanks, brother."

I said, "Amen."

The head I deposited in a similar manner much farther away. Back door Dumpster. Wet garbage of a restaurant. Stench. I took no last look at the head. It embarrassed me. It was no trophy. I would never save a man's head as a trophy. The idea seemed deplorable. I didn't like the hard feel of it through the plastic. If the hungry found it, they'd never report it. Besides, the hungry had been here for their share of the tomatoes and lettuce and spaghetti and crusts of French bread. The restaurant had closed hours ago. The garbage was frozen; it rattled and clattered when I shoved his head deep into the mess.

I went back downtown, still walking, still with this last sack over my shoulder, his miserable chest and arms and legs. I walked down Fifth, past the hotel of the sleeping Dora, past St. Patrick's, on and on, past the fancy stores. Mortals rushed through doorways beneath awnings; cabbies blew their horns in fury at hulking, slow limousines.

On and on I walked. I kicked at the sludge and I hated myself. I could smell him and hated this too. But in a way, the feast had been so divine that it was just to require this aftermath, this cleaning up.

The others—Armand, Marius, all my immortal cohorts, lovers, friends, enemies—always cursed me for not "disposing of the remains." All right, this time Lestat was being a good vampire. He was cleaning up after himself.

I was almost to the Village when I found another perfect place, a huge warehouse, seemingly abandoned, its upper floors filled with the pretty sparkle of broken windows. And inside it, refuse of every description, in a massive heap. I could smell decayed flesh. Someone had died in there weeks ago. Only the cold kept the smell from reaching human nostrils. Or maybe no one cared.

I went farther into the cavernous room—smell of gasoline, metal, red brick. One mountain of trash stood as big as a mortuary pyramid in the middle of the room. A truck was there, parked perilously close to it, the engine still warm. But no living beings were here.

And there was decayed flesh aplenty in the largest pile. I reckoned by scent at least three dead bodies, scattered through the rubble. Perhaps there were more. The smell was utterly loathsome to me, so I didn't spend a great deal of time anatomizing the situation.

"Okay, my friend, I give you over to a graveyard," I said. I shoved the sack deep, deep among the broken bottles, smashed cans, bits of stinking fruit, heaps and stacks of cardboard and wood and trash. I almost caused an avalanche. Indeed there was a small trash quake or two and then the clumsy pyramid re-formed itself quietly. The only sounds were the sounds of rats. A single beer bottle rolled on the floor, a few feet free of the monument, gleaming, silent, alone.

For a long moment, I studied the truck; battered, anonymous, warm engine, smell of recent human occupants. What did I care what they did here? The fact is they came and went through the big metal doors, ignoring or occasionally feeding this charnel heap. Most likely ignoring it. Who would park next to one's own murder victims?

But in all these big dense modern cities, I mean the big-time cities, the world-class dens of evil—New York, Tokyo, Hong Kong—you can find the strangest configurations of mortal activity. Criminality had begun to fascinate me in its many facets. That's what had brought me to him.

Roger. Good-bye, Roger.

I went out again. The snow had stopped falling. It was desolate here, and sad. A bare mattress lay on the corner of the block, the snow

covering it. The streetlamps were broken, I wasn't certain precisely where I was.

I walked in the direction of the water, to the very end of the island, and then I saw one of those very ancient churches, churches that went back to the Dutch days of Manhattan, with a little fenced graveyard attached to it with stones that would read awesome statistics such as 1704, or even 1692.

It was a Gothic treasure of a building, a tiny bit of the glory of St. Patrick's, and possibly even more intricate and mysterious, a welcome sight for all its detail and organization and conviction amid the big-city blandness and wastes.

I sat on the church steps, rather liking the carved surfaces of the broken arches, rather liking to sink back in the darkness against sanctified stone.

I realized very carefully that the Stalker was nowhere about, that tonight's deeds had brought me no visits from another realm, or horrifying footsteps, that the great granite statue had been inanimate, and that I still had Roger's identification in my pocket, and this would give Dora weeks, perhaps even months, before her peace of mind was disturbed by her father's disappearance, and she would now never know the details.

So much for that. The end of the adventure. I felt better, far better than when I'd spoken with David. Going back, looking at that monstrous granite thing, it had been the perfect thing to do.

Only problem was that Roger's stench clung to me. Roger. He'd been "the Victim" until when? Now I was calling him Roger. Was that emblematic of love? Dora called him Roger and Daddy and Roge and Dad. "Darling, this is Roge," he'd say to her from Istanbul. "Can you meet me in Florida, just for a few days. I have to talk to you.…"

I pulled out the phony identification. The wind was harsh and cold, but no more snow, and the snow that was on the ground was hardening. No mortal would have sat here like this, in this shallow high broken arch of a church door, but I liked it.

I looked at this fake passport. Actually it was a complete set of false papers, some of which I didn't understand. There was a visa for Egypt. Smuggling from there, no doubt! And the name Wynken made me smile again because it is one of those names that makes even children laugh

when they hear it. Wynken, Blinken, and Nod. Wasn't that the poem?

It was a simple matter to tear all this into tiny fragments, and let it blow away into the night, over the tiny upright stones of the small graveyard. What a gust. It went like ashes, as if his identity had been cremated and the final tribute was being paid.

I felt weary, full of blood, satisfied, and foolish now for having been so afraid when I talked to David. David no doubt thought I was a fool. But what had I really ascertained? Only that the Thing stalking me wasn't particularly protective of Roger, the Victim, or had nothing to do with Roger. Hadn't I already known this? It didn't mean the Stalker was gone.

It just meant the Stalker chose his own moments and maybe they had nothing to do with what I did.

I admired the little church. How priceless and ornate and incongruous among the other buildings of lower Manhattan, except that nothing in this strange city is exactly incongruous anymore because the mix of Gothic and ancient and modern is so very thick. The nearby street sign said Wall Street.

Was I at the very foot of Wall Street? I rested back against the stones, closed my eyes. David and I would confer tomorrow night. And what of Dora? Did Dora sleep like an angel in her bed in the hotel opposite the cathedral? Would I forgive myself if I took one last secret, safe, forlorn peek at Dora in her bed before letting go of the whole adventure? Over.

Best to get the idea of the little girl out of my mind; forget the figure moving through the huge dark corridors of that empty New Orleans convent with the electric torch in hand, brave Dora. Not at all like the last mortal woman I'd loved. No, forget about it. Forget about it, Lestat, you hear me?

The world was full of potential victims, when you began to think in terms of an entire life pattern, an ambience to an existence, a complete personality, so to speak. Maybe I'd go back down to Miami if I could get David to go with me. Tomorrow night David and I could talk.

Of course he might be thoroughly annoyed that I'd sent him to seek refuge in the Olympic Tower and was now ready to move south. But then maybe we wouldn't move south.

I became acutely aware that if I heard those footsteps now, if I sensed the Stalker, I'd be trembling tomorrow night in David's arms. The Stalker didn't care where I went. And the Stalker was real.

Black wings, the sense of something dark accumulating, thick smoke, and the light. Don't dwell on it. You have done enough gruesome thinking for one night, haven't you?

When would I spot another mortal like Roger? When would I see another light shining that bright? And the son of a bitch talking to me through it all, talking through the swoon! Talking to *me!* And managing to make that statue look alive somehow with some feeble telepathic impulse, damn him. I shook my head. Had I brought that on? Had I done something different?

By tracking Roger for months had I come to love him so much that I was talking to him as I killed him, in some soundless sonnet of devotion? No. I was just drinking and loving him, and taking him into myself. Roger in me.

A car came slowly through the darkness, stopping beside me. Mortals who wanted to know if I needed shelter. I gave a wave of my head, turned, crossed the little graveyard, stepping on grave after grave as I made my way through the headstones, and was off towards the Village, moving so fast probably they could not have even seen me go.

Imagine it. They see this blond young man in a double-breasted navy-blue blazer, with a flaming scarf around his neck, sitting in the cold on the steps of the quaint little church. And then the figure vanishes. I laughed out loud, loving the sound of it as it went up the brick walls. Now I was near music, people walking arm in arm, human voices, the smell of cooking. There were young people about, healthy enough to think that bitter winter could be fun.

The cold had begun to annoy me. To be almost humanly painful. I wanted to go inside.

Three

I walked on only a few steps, saw revolving doors, pushed into the lobby of someplace or other, a restaurant I think, and found myself sitting at the bar. Just what I wanted, half empty, very dark, too warm, bottles glittering in the center of the circular counter. Some comforting noise from the diners beyond the open doors.

I put my elbows on the bar, my heels hooked on the brass rail. I sat there on the stool shivering, listening to mortals talk, listening to nothing, listening to the inevitable sloth and stupidity of a bar, head down, sunglasses gone—damn, I had lost my violet glasses!—yes, nice and dark here, very, very dark, a kind of late-night languor lying over everything, a club of some sort? I didn't know, didn't care.

"Drink, sir?" Lazy, arrogant face.

I named a mineral water. And as soon as he set down the glass, I dipped my fingers into it and washed them. He was gone already. Wouldn't have cared if I had started baptizing babies with the water. Other customers were scattered at tables in the darkness … a woman crying in some far-off corner and a man telling her harshly that she was attracting attention. She wasn't. Nobody gave a damn.

I washed my mouth off with the napkin and water.

"More water," I said. I pushed the polluted glass away from me. Sluggishly, he acknowledged my request, young blood, bland personality, ambitionless life, then drifted off.

I heard a little laugh nearby … the man to my right, two stools away, perhaps, who'd been there when I came in, youngish, scentless. Utterly scentless, which was most strange.

In annoyance I turned and looked at him.

"Going to run again?" he whispered. It was the Victim.

It was Roger, sitting there on the stool.

He wasn't broken or battered or dead. He was complete with his head and his hands. He wasn't there. He only appeared to be there, very solid and very quiet, and he smiled at me, thrilled by my terror.

"What's the matter, Lestat?" he asked in that voice I so loved after six

months of listening to it. “No one in all these centuries has ever come back to haunt you?”

I said nothing. Not there. No, not there. Material, but not the same material as anything else. David’s word. Different fabric. I stiffened. That’s a pathetic understatement. I was rigid with incredulity and rage.

He got up and moved over onto the stool close to me. He was getting more distinct and detailed by the second. Now I could catch something like a sound coming from him, a sound of something alive, or organized, but certainly no breathing human being.

“And in a few minutes more I'll be strong enough perhaps to ask for a cigarette or a glass of wine,” he said.

He reached into his coat, a favorite coat, not the one in which I’d killed him, another coat made for him in Paris, that he liked, and he drew out his flashy little gold lighter and made the flame shoot up, very blue and dangerous, butane.

He looked at me. I could see that his black curly hair was combed, his eyes very clear. Handsome Roger. His voice sounded exactly the way it had when he was alive: international, originless, New Orleans-born and world-traveled. No British fastidiousness, and no Southern patience. His precise, quick voice.

“I’m quite serious,” he said. “You mean in all these years, not one single victim has ever come back to haunt you?”

“No,” I said.

“You’re amazing. You really won’t tolerate being afraid for a moment, will you?”

“No.”

Now he appeared completely solid. I had no idea whether anyone else could see him. No idea, but I suspected they could. He looked like anyone might look. I could see the buttons on his white cuffs, and the soft white flash of his collar at the back of the neck, where the fine hair came down over it. I could see his eyelashes, which had always been extraordinarily long.

The bartender returned and set down the water glass for me, without looking at him. I still wasn't sure. The kid was too rude for that to be proof of anything except that I was in New York.

“How are you doing this?” I asked.

“The same way any other ghost does it,” he said. “I’m dead. I’ve been

dead for over an hour and a half now, and I have to talk to you! I don't know how long I can stay here, I don't know when I'll start to … God knows what, but you have to listen to me."

"Why?" I demanded.

"Don't be so nasty," he whispered, appearing truly hurt. "You murdered me."

"And you? The people you've killed, Dora's mother? She ever come back to demand an audience with you?"

"Ooh, I knew it. I knew it!" he said. He was visibly shaken. "You know about Dora! God in Heaven, take my soul to Hell, but don't let him hurt Dora."

"Stop being absurd. I wouldn't hurt Dora. It was you I was after. I've followed you around the world. If it hadn't been for a passing respect for Dora, I would have killed you long before now."

The bartender had reappeared. This brought the most ecstatic smile to my companion's lips. He looked right at the kid.

"Yes, my dear boy, let me see, the very last drink unless I'm very badly mistaken, make it bourbon. I grew up in the South. What do you have? No, I'll tell you what, son, just make it Southern Comfort." His laugh was private and convivial and soft.

The bartender moved on, and Roger turned his furious eyes on me. "You have to listen to me, whatever the Hell you are, vampire, demon, devil, I don't care, you cannot hurt my daughter."

"I don't intend to hurt her. I would never hurt her. Go on to hell, you'll feel better. Good night."

"You smug son of a bitch. How many years do you think I had?" Droplets of sweat were breaking out on his face. His hair was moving a little in the natural draft through the room.

"I couldn't give less of a damn!" I said. "You were a meal worth waiting for."

"You've got quite a swagger, don't you?" he said acidly. "But you're nothing as shallow as you pretend to be."

"Oh, you don't think so? Try me. You may find me 'as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal.' "

That gave him pause.

It gave me pause too. Where did those words come from? Why did they roll off my tongue like that? I was not likely to use that sort of

imagery!

He was absorbing all this, my preoccupation, my obvious self-doubt. How did it manifest itself, I wonder? Did I sag or fade slightly as some mortals do, or did I merely look confused?

The bartender gave him the drink. Very tentatively now, he was trying to put his fingers around it and lift it. He managed and got it to his lips and took a taste. He was amazed, and thankful, and suddenly so full of fear that he almost disintegrated. The illusion was almost completely dispersed.

But he held firm. This was so obviously the person I had just killed, hacked to pieces and buried all over Manhattan, that I felt physically sick staring at him. I realized only one thing was saving me from panic. He was talking to me. What had David said once, when he was alive, about talking to me? That he wouldn't kill a vampire because the vampire could talk to him? And this damned ghost was talking to me.

"I have to talk to you about Dora," he said.

"I told you I will never hurt her, or anyone like her," I said. "Look, what are you doing here with me! When you appeared, you didn't even know that I knew about Dora! You wanted to tell me about Dora?"

"Depth, I've been murdered by a being with depth, how fortunate, someone who actually keenly appreciated my death, no?" He drank more of the sweet-smelling Southern Comfort. "This was Janis Joplin's drink, you know," he said, referring to the dead singer whom I, too, had loved. "Look, listen to me out of curiosity, I don't give a damn. But listen. Let me talk to you about Dora and about me. I want you to know. I want you to really know who I was, not what you might think. I want you to look out for Dora. And then there's something back at the flat, something I want you.…"

"Veronica's veil in the frame?"

"No! That's trash. I mean, it's four centuries old, of course, but it's a common version of Veronica's veil, if you have enough money. You did look around my place, didn't you?"

"Why did you want to give that veil to Dora?" I asked.

This sobered him appropriately. "You heard us talking?"

"Countless times."

He was conjecturing, weighing things. He looked entirely reasonable, his dark Asian face evincing nothing but sincerity and great care.

“Did you say ‘look out for Dora’?” I asked. “Is that what you asked me to do? Look out for her? Now that’s another proposition and why the hell do you want to tell me the story of your life! You’re running through your personal afterdeath judgment with the wrong guy! I don’t care how you got the way you were. The things at the flat, why would a ghost care about such things?”

This was not wholly honest on my part. I was being far too flippant and we both knew it. Of course he cared about his treasures. But it was Dora that had made him rise from the dead.

His hair was a deeper black now, and the coat had taken on more texture. I could see the weave of the silk and the cashmere in it. I could see his fingernails, professionally manicured, very neat and buffed. Same hands I threw in the garbage! I don’t think all these details had been visible moments ago.

“Jesus Christ,” I whispered.

He laughed. “You’re more afraid than I am.”

“Where are you?”

“What are you talking about?” he asked. “I’m sitting next to you. We’re in a Village bar. What do you mean, where am I? As for my body, you know where you dumped the pieces of it as well as I.”

“That’s why you’re haunting me.”

“Absolutely not. Couldn’t give less of a damn about that body. Felt that way the moment I left it. You know all this!”

“No, no, I mean, what realm are you in now, what is it, where are you, what did you see when you went … what.…”

He shook his head with the saddest smile.

“You know the answer to all that. I don’t know where I am. Something’s waiting for me, however. I’m fairly certain of that. Something’s waiting. Perhaps it’s merely dissolution. Darkness. But it seems personal. It’s not going to wait forever. But I don’t know how I know.

“And I don’t know why I’m being allowed to get through to you, whether it’s sheer will, my will, I mean, of which I have a great deal by the way, or whether it’s some sort of grant of moments, I don’t know! But I went after you. I followed you from the flat and back to it and then out with the body and I came here and I have to talk to you. I’m not going to go without a struggle, until I’ve spoken with you.”

“Something’s waiting for you,” I whispered. This was awe. Plain and simple. “And then, after we’ve had our chat, if you don’t dissolve, where exactly are you going to go?”

He shook his head and glared at the bottle on the center rack, flood of light, color, labels.

“Tiresome,” he said crossly. “Shut up.”

It had a sting to it. Shut up. Telling me to shut up.

“I can’t go looking out for your daughter,” I said.

“What do you mean?” He threw an angry glance at me, and took another sip of his drink, then gestured to the bartender for another.

“Are you going to get drunk?” I asked.

“I don’t think I can. You *have* to look out for her. It’s all going to go public, don’t you see? I have enemies who’ll kill her, for no other reason than that she was my child. You don’t know how careful I’ve been, and you don’t know how rash she is, how much she believes in Divine Providence. And then there’s the government, the hounds of government, and my things, my relics, my books!”

I was fascinated. For about three seconds, I’d utterly forgotten that he was a ghost. Now my eyes gave me no evidence of it. None. But he was scentless, and the faint sound of life that emanated from him still had little to do with real lungs or a real heart.

“All right, let me be blunt,” he said. “I’m afraid for her. She has to get through the notoriety; enough time has to pass that my enemies forget about her. Most of them don’t know about her. But somebody might. Somebody’s bound to know, if you knew.”

“Not necessarily. I’m not a human being.”

“You have to guard her.”

“I can’t do such a thing. I won’t.”

“Lestat, will you listen to me?”

“I don’t want to listen. I want you to go.”

“I know you do.”

“Look, I never meant to kill you, I’m sorry, it was all a mistake, I should have picked someone….” My hands were shaking. Oh, how fascinating all this would sound later, and right now I begged God, of all people, please make this stop, all of it, stop.

“You know where I was born, don’t you?” he asked. “You know that block of St. Charles near Jackson?”

I nodded. “The boardinghouse,” I said. “Don’t tell me the story of your life. There’s no reason. Besides, it’s over. You had your chance to write it down when you were alive, just like anyone else. What do you expect me to do with it?”

“I want to tell you the things that count. Look at me! Look at me, please, try to understand me and to love me and to love Dora for me! I’m begging you.”

I didn’t have to see his expression to understand this keen agony, this protective cry. Is there anything under God that can be done to us that will make us suffer as badly as seeing our child suffer? Our loved ones? Those closest to us? Dora, tiny Dora walking in the empty convent. Dora on a television screen, arms flung out, singing.

I must have gasped. I don’t know. Shivered. Something. I couldn’t clear my head for a moment, but it was nothing supernatural, only misery, and the realization that he was there, palpable, visible, expecting something from me, that he had come across, that he had survived long enough in this ephemeral form to demand a promise of me.

“You do love me,” he whispered. He looked serene and intrigued. Way beyond flattery. Way beyond me.

“Passion,” I whispered. “It was your passion.”

“Yes, I know. I’m flattered. I wasn’t run down by a truck in the street, or shot by a hit man. You killed me! You, and you must be one of the best of them.”

“Best of what?”

“Whatever you call yourself. You’re not human. Yet you are. You sucked my blood out of my body, took it into your own. You’re thriving on it now. Surely you’re not the only one.” He looked away. “Vampires,” he said. “I saw ghosts when I was a boy in our house in New Orleans.”

“Everybody in New Orleans sees ghosts.”

He laughed in spite of himself, a very short, quiet laugh. “I know,” he said, “but really I did and I have, and I’ve seen them in other places. But I never believed in God or the Devil or Angels or Vampires or Werewolves, or things like that, things that could affect fate, or change the course of some chaotic-seeming rhythm that governed the universe.”

“You believe in God now?”

“No. I have the sneaking suspicion that I’ll hold firm as long as I can in this form—like all the ghosts I’ve ever glimpsed—then I’ll start to fade.

I'll die out. Rather like a light. That's what's waiting for me. Oblivion. And it isn't personal. It just feels that way because my mind, what's left of it, what's clinging to the earth here, can't comprehend anything else. What do you think?"

"It terrifies me either way or any way." I was *not* going to tell him about the Stalker. I was *not* going to ask him about the statue. I knew now he had had nothing to do with the statue seeming animate. He had been dead, going up.

"Terrifies you?" he asked respectfully. "Well, it's not happening to you. You make it happen to others. Let me explain about Dora."

"She's beautiful. I'll … I'll try to look out for her."

"No, she needs something more from you. She needs a miracle."

"A miracle?"

"Look, you're alive, whatever you are, but you're not human. You can make a miracle, can't you? You could do this for Dora, it would be no problem for a creature of your abilities at all!"

"You mean some sort of fake religious miracle?"

"What else? She's never going to save the world without a miracle and she knows it. You could do it!"

"You're remaining earthbound and haunting me in this place to make a sleazy proposition like this!" I said. "You're unsalvageable. You are dead. But you're still a racketeer and a criminal. Listen to yourself. You want me to fake some spectacle for Dora? You think Dora would want that?"

He was flabbergasted, clearly. Much too much so to be insulted.

He put the glass down and sat there, composed and calm, appearing to scan the bar. Looking dignified and about ten years younger than he had been when I killed him. I don't guess anyone wants to come back as a ghost except in beautiful form. It was only natural. And I felt a deepening of my inevitable and fatal fascination, this, my Victim. *Monsieur, your blood is inside me!*

He turned.

"You're right," he said in the most torn whisper. "You're absolutely right. I can't make some deal with you to fake miracles for her. It's monstrous. She'd hate it."

"Now you're talking like the Grateful Dead," I said.

He gave another little contemptuous laugh. Then with a low sombre

emotion, he said, “Lestat, you have to take care of her … for a while.”

When I didn’t answer, he persisted gently:

“Just for a little while, until the reporters have stopped, and the horror of it is over; until her faith is restored, and she’s whole and Dora after all, and back to her life. She has her life, yet. She can’t be hurt because of me, Lestat, not because of me, it’s not fair.”

“Fair?”

“Call me by my name,” he said. “Look at me.”

I looked at him. It was exquisitely painful. He was miserable. I didn’t know whether human beings could express this same intensity of misery. I actually didn’t know.

“My name’s Roger,” he said. He seemed even younger now, as though he were traveling backwards in time, in his mind, or merely becoming innocent, as if the dead, if they are going to stick around, have a right to remember their innocence.

“I know your name,” I said. “I know everything about you, Roger. Roger, the Ghost. And you never let Old Captain touch you; you just let him adore you, and educate you, and take you places, and buy you beautiful things, and you never even had the decency to go to bed with him.”

I said those things, about the images I’d drunk with his blood, but without malice. I was just talking in wonder of how bad we all are, the lies we tell.

He said nothing for the moment.

I was overwhelmed. It was grief veritably blinding me, and bitterness and a deep ugly horror for what I had done to him, and to others, and that I had ever harmed any living creature. Horror.

What was Dora’s message? How were we to be saved? Was it the same old canticle of adoration?

He watched me. He was young, committed, a magnificent semblance of life. Roger.

“All right,” he said, the voice soft and patient, “I didn’t sleep with Old Captain, you’re right, but he never really wanted that of me, you see, it wasn’t like that, he was far too old. You don’t know what it was really like. You might know the guilt I feel. But you don’t know later how much I regretted not having done it. Not having known that with Old Captain. And that’s not what made me go wrong. It wasn’t that. It wasn’t

the big deception or heist that you imagine it to be. I loved the things he showed me. He loved me. He lived two, three more years, probably because of me. Wynken de Wilde, we loved Wynken de Wilde together. It should have turned out different. I was with Old Captain when he died, you know. I never left the room. I'm faithful that way when I am needed by those I loved."

"Yeah, you were with your wife, Terry, too, weren't you?" It was cruel of me to say this, but I'd spoken without thinking, seeing her face again as he shot her. "Scratch that, if you will," I said. "I'm sorry. Who in the name of God is Wynken de Wilde?"

I felt so utterly miserable. "Dear God, you're haunting me," I said. "And I'm a coward in my soul! A coward. Why did you say that strange name? I don't want to know. No, don't tell me—This is enough for me. I'm leaving. You can haunt this bar till doomsday if you want. Get some righteous individual to talk to you."

"Listen to me," he said. "You love me. You picked me. All I want to do is fill in the details."

"I'll take care of Dora, somehow or other, I'll figure some way to help her, I'll do something. And I'll take care of all the relics, I'll get them out of there and into a safe place and hold on to them for Dora, until she feels she can accept them."

"Yes!"

"Okay, let me go."

"I'm not holding you," he said.

Yes, I did love him. I did want to look at him. I did want him to tell me everything, every last little detail! I reached out and touched his hand. Not alive. Not human flesh. Something with vitality, however. Something burning and exciting.

He merely smiled.

He reached across with his right hand and clamped his fingers around my right wrist and drew near. I could feel his hair touching my forehead, teasing my skin, just a loose wisp of hair. Big dark eyes looking at me.

"Listen to me," he said again. Scentless breath.

"Yes…."

He started talking to me in a low, rushed voice. He began to tell me the tale.

Four

The point is, Old Captain was a smuggler, a collector. I spent years with him. My mother had sent me to Andover, then brought me home, couldn't live without me; I went to Jesuit, I didn't belong with anyone or anywhere, and maybe Old Captain was the perfect person. But Wynken de Wilde, that started with Old Captain and the antiques he sold through the Quarter, usually small, portable things.

"And I'll tell you right now, Wynken de Wilde amounts to nothing, absolutely nothing, except a dream I had once, a very perverse plan. I mean my lifelong passion—aside from Dora—has been Wynken de Wilde, but if you don't care about him after this conversation, no one will. Dora does not."

"What was this Wynken de Wilde all about?"

"Art, of course. Beauty. But I got it mixed up in my head when I was seventeen that I was going to start a new religion, a cult—free love, give to the poor, raise one's hand against no one, you know, a sort of fornicating Amish community. This was of course 1964, the time of the flower children, marijuana, Bob Dylan seeming to be singing all the time about ethics and charity, and I wanted a new Brethren of the Common Life, one in tune with modern sexual values. Do you know who the Brethren were?"

"Yes, popular mysticism, late Middle Ages, that anyone could know God."

"Yes! Ah, that you know such a thing."

"You didn't have to be a priest or monk."

"Exactly. And so the monks were jealous, but my concept of this as a boy was all wound up with Wynken, whom I knew to have been influenced by German mysticism and all those popular movements, Meister Eckehart, et cetera, though he worked in a scriptorium and still did old-fashioned parchment prayer books of devotion by hand. Wynken's books were completely different from those of others. I thought if I could find all Wynken's books I'd have it made."

"Why Wynken, what made him different?"

“Let me tell it my way. See, this is how it happened, the boardinghouse was shabby-elegant, you know the kind, my mother didn’t get her own hands dirty, she had three maids and an old colored man who did everything; the old people, the boarders—they were on hefty private incomes, limousines garaged around the Garden District, three meals a day, red carpets. You know the house. Henry Howard designed it. Late Victorian. My mother had inherited it from her mother.”

“I know it, I’ve seen it, I’ve seen you stop in front of it. Who owns it now?”

“I don’t know. I let it slip away. I ruined so many things. But picture this: drowsy summer afternoon there, I’m fifteen and lonely, and Old Captain invites me in, and there on the table in the second parlour—he rents the two front parlours—he lives in a sort of wonderland of collectibles and brass and such—”

“I see it.”

“—and there are these books on the table, medieval books! Tiny medieval prayer books. Of course, I know a prayer book when I see it; but a medieval codex, no; I was an altar boy when I was very little, went to Mass every day for years with my mother, knew liturgical Latin as was required. The point is, I recognize these books as devotional and rare, and something that Old Captain is inevitably going to sell.

“ ‘You can touch them, Roger, if you’re careful,’ he tells me. For two years, he had let me come and listen to his classical records, and we’d taken walks together. But I was just becoming sexually interesting to him, though I didn’t know it, and it’s got nothing to do with what I have to say until later on.

“He was on the phone talking to somebody about a ship in the harbour.

“Within a few minutes we were off to the ship. We used to go on these ships all the time. I never knew what we were doing. It had to be smuggling. All I remember is Old Captain sitting at a big round table with all the crew, they were Dutch, I think, and some nice officer with a heavy accent giving me a tour of the engine room, the map room, and the radio room. I never tired of it. I loved the ships. The New Orleans wharves were active then, full of rats and hemp.”

“I know.”

“Do you remember those long ropes that ran from the ships to the dock, how they had the round steel rat shields on them—disks of steel that the rats couldn’t climb over?”

“I remember.”

“We get home that night and instead of going to bed as I would have done, I beg him to let me come in and see those books. I have to see them before he sells them. My mother wasn’t in the hallway, so I supposed she’d gone to bed.

“Let me give you an image of my mother and this boardinghouse. I told you it was elegant, didn’t I? You can imagine the furnishings, heavy Renaissance revival, machine-made pieces, the kind that junked up mansions from the 1880s on.”

“Yes.”

“The house has a glorious staircase, winding, set against a stained-glass window, and at the foot of the stairs, in the crook of it, this masterpiece of a stairs of which Henry Howard must have been profoundly proud—in the stairwell—stood my mother's enormous dressing table, imagine, and she’d sit there in the main hall, at the dressing table, brushing her hair! All I have to do is think of that and my head aches. Or it used to when I was alive. It was such a tragic image, and I knew it, even though I grew up seeing it every day; that a dressing table of marble and mirrors and sconces and filigree, and an old woman with dark hair, does not belong in a formal hallway….”

“And the boarders just took it in?” I asked.

“Yes, because the house was gobbled up for this one and that one, Old Mister Bridey, living in what had once been a servants' porch, and Blind Miss Stanton in the little fainting room upstairs! And four apartments carved out of the servants' quarters in back. I am keenly sensitive to disorder; you find around me either perfect order or the neglected clutter of the place in which you killed me.”

“I realize that.”

“But if I were to inhabit that place again…. Ah, this is not important. The point I’m trying to make is that I believe in order and when I was young I used to dream about it. I wanted to be a saint, well, a sort of secular saint. Let me return to the books.”

“Go on.”

“I hit the sacred books on the table. One of them I took from its own

little sack. I was charmed by the tiny illustrations. I examined each and every book that night, planning to thereafter take my time. Of course the Latin was unreadable to me in that form."

"Too dense. Too many pen strokes."

"My, you do know things, don't you?"

"Maybe we're surprising each other. Go on."

"I spent the week thoroughly examining all of them. I cut school all the time. It was so boring. I was way ahead of everybody, and wanted to do something exciting, you know, like commit a major crime."

"A saint or a criminal."

"Yes, I suppose that does seem a contradiction. Yet it's a perfect description."

"I thought it was."

"Old Captain explained things about the books. The book in the sack was a girdle book. Men carried such books with them. And this particular one was a prayer book, and another of the illuminated books, the biggest and thickest, was a Book of the Hours, and then there was a Bible in Latin, of course. He was casual about all of it.

"I was incredibly drawn to these books, can't tell you why. I have always been covetous of things that are shining and bright and seemingly valuable, and here was the most condensed and seemingly unique version of such I'd ever beheld."

I smiled. "Yes, I know exactly."

"Pages full of gold, and red, and tiny beautiful little figures. I took out a magnifying glass and started to study the pictures in earnest. I went to the old library at Lee Circle—remember it?—and I studied up on the entire question. Medieval books. How the Benedictines had done them. Do you know Dora owns a convent? It isn't based on the plan of St. Gall, but it's just about the nineteenth-century equivalent."

"Yes, I saw it, I saw her there. She's brave and doesn't care about the darkness or the aloneness."

"She believes in Divine Providence to the point of idiocy and she can make something of herself only if she isn't destroyed. I want another drink. I know I'm talking fast. I have to."

I gestured for the drink. "Continue, what happened, who's Wynken de Wilde?"

"Wynken de Wilde was the author of two of these precious books that

Old Captain had in his possession. I didn't figure that out for months. I was going over the little illustrations, and gradually I determined two of the books were done by the same artist, and then in spite of Old Captain insisting that there would be no signature, I found his name, in several places in both books. Now you know Captain sold these types of things. I told you. He dealt in them through a shop on Royal Street."

I nodded.

"Well, I lived in terror of the day he was going to have to sell these two books! These books weren't like the other books. First off, the illustrations were exceedingly detailed. One page might contain the motif of a flowering vine, with blossoms from which birds drank, and in these blossoms there were human figures intertwined, as if in a bower. Also, these were books of psalms. When you first examined them you thought they were psalms of the Vulgate, you know, the Bible we accept as canonical."

"Yes.…"

"But they weren't. They were psalms that never appeared in any Bible. I figured that much out, simply by comparing them to other Latin reprints of the same period that I got out of the library. This was some sort of original work. Then the illustrations, the illustrations contained not only tiny animals and trees and fruit but naked people, and the naked people were doing all sorts of things!"

"Bosch."

"Exactly, like Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*, that kind of luscious sensuous paradise! Of course, I hadn't seen Bosch's painting yet in the Prado. But it was here in miniature in these books. Little figures frolicking beneath the abundant trees. Old Captain said, 'Garden of Eden imagery,' that it was very common. But two books full of it? No. This was different. I had to crack these books, get an absolutely clear translation of every word.

"And then Old Captain did the kindest thing for me he'd ever done, the thing that might have made a great religious leader out of me, and may still make one in Dora, though hers is wholly another creed."

"He gave you the books."

"Yes! He gave me the books. And let me tell you more. That summer, he took me all over the country to look at medieval manuscripts! We went to the Huntington Library in Pasadena, and the Newbury Library in

Chicago. We went to New York. He would have taken me to England, but my mother said no.

"I saw all types of medieval books! And I came to know that Wynken's were unlike any others. Wynken's were blasphemous and profane. And nobody, nobody at any of these libraries had a book by Wynken de Wilde, but the name was known!

"Captain still let me keep the books! And I set to work on translating them right away. Old Captain died in the front room, the first week of my senior year. I didn't even start school till after he was buried. I refused to leave him. I sat there with him. He slipped into a coma. By the third day of the coma, you could not have told who he was, his face had so changed. He didn't close his eyes anymore, and didn't know they were open, and his mouth was just a slack sort of oval, and his breath came in even gasps. I sat there. I told you."

"I believe you."

"Yes, well, I was seventeen, my mother was very sick, there wasn't any money for college, which every other senior boy at Jesuit was talking about, and I was dreaming of flower children in the Haight Ashbury of California, listening to the songs of Joan Baez, and thinking that I would go to San Francisco with the message of Wynken de Wilde, and found a cult.

"This was what I knew then through translation. And in that regard I had had the help of an old priest at Jesuit for quite some time, one of those genuinely brilliant Latin scholars who has to spend half the day making boys behave. He had done the translation for me gladly, and of course there was a little of the usual promise in it of my proximity and intimacy, he and I being alone and close for hours."

"So you were selling yourself again, even before Old Captain died?"

"No. Not really. Not the way you think. Well, sort of. Only this priest was a genuine celibate, Irish, almost impossible to understand now, this sort of priest. They never did anything to anyone. I doubt they even masturbated. It was all being near boys and occasionally breathing heavily or something. Nowadays religious life doesn't attract that particular kind of robust and completely repressed individual. A man like that could no more molest a child than he could get up on the altar at Mass and start to shout."

"He didn't know he felt an attraction for you, that he was giving you

special favors."

"Precisely, and so he spent hours with me translating Wynken. He kept me from going crazy. He always stopped in to visit with Old Captain. If Old Captain had been Catholic, Father Kevin would have given him the Last Rites. Try to understand this, will you? You can't judge people like Old Captain and Father Kevin."

"No, and not boys like you."

"Also, my mother had a disastrous new boyfriend that last year, a sugar-coated mock gentleman, actually, one of those people who speaks surprisingly well, has overly bright eyes, and is obviously rotten inside, and from a totally unconvincing background. He had too many wrinkles in his youngish face; they looked like cracks. He smoked du Maurier cigarettes. I think he thought he was going to marry my mother for the house. You follow me?"

"Yes, I do. So after Old Captain died, you had only the priest."

"Right. Now you get it. Father Kevin and I worked a lot at the boardinghouse, he liked that. He'd drive up, park his car on Philip Street and come around and we'd go up to my room. Second floor, front bedroom. I had a great view of the parades on Mardi Gras. I grew up thinking that was normal, for an entire city to go mad two weeks out of every year. Anyway, we were up there during one of the night parades, ignoring it as natives can do, you know, once you've seen enough papier-mâché floats and trinkets and flambeaux—"

"Horrible, lurid flambeaux."

"Yes, you said it." He stopped. The drink had come and he was gazing at it.

"What is it?" I asked him. I was alarmed because he was alarmed. "Look at me, Roger. Don't start fading, keep talking. What did the translation of the books reveal? Were they profane? Roger, talk to me!"

He broke his frigid meditative stillness. He picked up the drink, tossed down half of it. "Disgusting and I adore it. Southern Comfort was the first thing I ever drank when I was a boy."

He looked at me, directly.

"I'm not fading," he assured me. "It's just I saw and smelled the house again. You know? The smell of old people's rooms, the rooms in which people die. But it was so lovely. What was I saying? All right, it was during Proteus, one of the night parades, that Father Kevin made the

incredible breakthrough that both these books had been dedicated by Wynken de Wilde to Blanche de Wilde, his patron, and that she was obviously the wife to his good brother, Damien; it was all embedded in the designs of the first few pages. And that threw an entirely different light on the psalms. The psalms were filled with lascivious invitations and suggestions and possibly even some sort of secret codes for clandestine meetings. Over and over again there appeared paintings of the same little garden—understand we're talking miniatures here—"

"I've seen many examples."

"And in these little tiny pictures of the garden there would always be one naked man and five women dancing around a fountain within the walls of a medieval castle, or so it seemed. Magnify it five times and it was just perfect. And Father Kevin began to laugh and laugh.

" 'No wonder there isn't a single saint or biblical scene in any of this,' Father Kevin said, laughing. 'Your Wynken de Wilde was a raving heretic! He was a witch or a diabolist. And he was in love with this woman, Blanche.' He wasn't shocked so much as amused.

" 'You know, Roger,' he said, 'if you did get in touch with one of the auction houses, very likely these books could put you through Loyola, or Tulane. Don't think of selling them down here. Think about New York; Butterfield and Butterfield, or Sotheby's.'

"He had in the last two years copied out by hand about thirty-five different poems for me in English, the best sort of translation—straight prose from the Latin—and now we went over them, tracing repetitions and imagery, and a story began to emerge.

"First thing we realized was that there had been many books originally, and what we possessed were the first and third. By the third, the psalms reflected not mere adoration for Blanche, who was again and again compared to the Virgin Mary in her purity and brightness, but also answers to some sort of correspondence about what the lady was suffering at the hands of her spouse.

"It was clever. You have to read it. You have to go back to the flat where you killed me and get those books."

"Which means you didn't sell them to go to Loyola or Tulane?"

"Of course not. Wynken, having orgies with Blanche and her four friends! I was fascinated. Wynken was my saint by virtue of his talent, and sexuality was my religion because it had been Wynken's and in

every philosophical word he wrote he encoded a love of the flesh! You have to realize I didn't believe any orthodox creed really, I never had. I thought the Catholic Church was dying. And that Protestantism was a joke. It was years before I understood that the Protestant approach is fundamentally mystic, that it is aiming for the very oneness with God that Meister Eckehart would have praised or that Wynken wrote about."

"You are being generous to the Protestant approach. And Wynken *did* write about oneness with God?"

"Yes, through union with the women! It was cautious but clear; 'In thine arms I have known the Trinity more truly than men can teach,' like that. Oh, this was the new way, I was sure. But then I knew Protestantism only as materialism, sterility and Baptist tourists who got drunk on Bourbon Street because they could not dare do it in their hometowns."

"When did you change your opinion?" I asked.

"I'm speaking in broad generalities. I mean, I saw no hope for religions in existence in the West at our time. Dora feels very much the same, but we'll come to Dora."

"Did you finish the entire translation?"

"Yes, just before Father Kevin was transferred. I never saw him again. He did write to me later, but by that time I had run away from home.

"I was in San Francisco. I'd left without my mother's blessing, and taken the Trailways Bus because it was a few cents cheaper than the Greyhound. I didn't have seventy-five dollars in my pocket. I'd squandered everything Captain ever gave me. And when he died, did those relatives of his from Jackson, Mississippi, ever clean out those rooms!

"They took everything. I always thought Captain had left something for me, you know. But I didn't care. The books were his greatest gift and all those luncheons at the Monteleone Hotel when we had had gumbo together, and he let me break up all my saltine crackers in the gumbo till it was porridge. I just loved it.

"What was I saying? I bought the ticket to California and saved a small balance for pie and coffee at each stop. A funny thing happened. We came to a point of no return. That is, when we passed through some town in Texas I realized I didn't have enough money to go back home, even if I wanted to. It was the middle of the night. I think it was El Paso!

Anyway, then I knew there was no going back.

"But I was headed for San Francisco and the Haight Ashbury, and I was going to found a cult based on the teachings of Wynken in praise of love and union and claiming that sexual union was godlike union and I would show his books to my followers. It was my dream, though to tell you the truth, I had no personal feeling about God at all.

"Within three months, I had discovered that my credo was by no means unique. The entire city was full of hippies who believed in free love, and panhandling, and though I gave regular lectures to large loose circles of friends on Wynken, holding up the books and reciting the psalms—these are very tame, of course—"

"I can imagine."

"—my principal job was that of business manager and boss of three rock musicians who wanted to become famous and were too stoned to remember their bookings, or collect the proceeds at the door. One of them, Blue, we called him, could really sing well. He had a high tenor, and quite a range. The band had a sound. Or at least we thought it did.

"Father Kevin's letter found me when I was living up in the attic of the Spreckles Mansion on Buena Vista Park, do you know that house?"

"I do know it. It's a hotel."

"Exactly, and it was a private home in those days, and the top floor had a ballroom with bath and kitchenette. This was well before any restoration. Nobody had invented 'bed and breakfast,' and I just rented the ballroom and the musicians played there and we all used the filthy bath and kitchen, and in the day, when they were asleep all over the floor, I'd dream about Wynken and think about Wynken and wonder how I would ever find out more about this man and what these love poems were. I had all sorts of fantasies about him.

"That attic, I wonder about it now. It had windows at three points of the compass, and deep window seats with tattered old velvet cushions. You could see San Francisco in every direction but east as I remember, but I don't have a good sense of direction. We loved to sit in those window alcoves and talk and talk. My friends loved to hear about Wynken. We were going to write some songs based on Wynken's poems. Well, that never happened."

"Obsessed."

"Completely. Lestat, you must go back for those books, no matter what

you believe of me when we're finished here. All of them are in the flat. Every single one that Wynken ever did. It was my life's work to get those books. I got into dope for those books. Even back in the Haight.

"I was telling you about Father Kevin. He wrote me a letter, said that he had looked up Wynken de Wilde in some manuscripts and found that Wynken had been the executed leader of a heretical cult. Wynken de Wilde had a religion of strictly female followers, and his works were officially condemned by the church. Father Kevin said all that was 'history,' and I ought to sell the books. He'd write more later. He never did. And two months later I committed multi-murder completely on the spur of the moment, and it changed the course of things."

"The dope you were dealing?"

"Sort of, only I wasn't the one who made the slipup. Blue dealt more than me. Blue carried around grass in suitcases. I was into little sacks of it, you know, it made just about as much as the band made for me. But Blue bought by the kilo and lost two kilos. Nobody knew what happened to them. He actually lost them in a taxi, we figured, but we never knew.

"There were a lot of stupid kids walking around then. They would get into 'dealing' never realizing that the supply was originating with some vicious individual who thought nothing of shooting people in the head. Blue thought he could talk his way out of it, he'd make some explanation, he'd been ripped off by friends, that sort of thing. His connections trusted him, he said, they'd even given him a gun.

"The gun was in the kitchen drawer, and they'd told him they might need him to use it sometime, but of course he would never do that. I guess when you are that stoned, you think everybody else is stoned. These men, he said, they were just heads like us, nothing to worry about, that had been just talk. We would all be as famous as Big Brother and the Holding Company and Janis Joplin very soon.

"They came for him during the day. I was the only one home, except for him.

"He was in the big room, the ballroom, at the front door, giving these two men the runaround. I was out of sight in the kitchen, hardly listening. I might have been studying Wynken, I'm not sure. Anyway, very gradually I realized what they were talking about out there in the ballroom.

"These two men were going to kill Blue. They kept telling him in very

flat voices that everything was okay, and please come with them, and come on, they had to go, and no, he had to come now, and no, he had to come along quickly. And then one of them said in a very low, vicious voice, 'Come on, man!' And for the first time Blue stopped jabbering in hippie platitudes, like it will all come around, man, and I have done no evil, man, and there was this silence, and I knew they were going to take Blue and shoot him and dump him. This had already happened to kids! It had been in the papers. I felt the hair stand up on the back of my neck. I knew Blue didn't have a chance.

"I didn't think about what I was doing. I completely forgot about the gun in the kitchen drawer. This surge of energy overtook me. I walked into the big room. Both these men were older, hard-looking guys, not hippies, nothing hippified about them. They weren't even Hell's Angels. They were just killers. And both sort of visibly sagged when they discovered there was an impediment to dragging my friend out of the room.

"Now, you know me, that I am as vain as you are probably, and then I was truly convinced of my special nature and destiny, and I came glistening and flashing towards these two men, you know, throwing off sparks, making a dance out of the walk. If I had any idea in my head, it was this: If Blue could die, that would mean I could die. And I couldn't let something like that be proven to me then, you know?"

"I can see it."

"I started talking to these characters very fast, chattering in a kind of intense, pretentious manner, as if I were a psychedelic philosopher, throwing out four-syllable words and walking right towards them all the time, lecturing them on violence, and implying that they had disturbed me and 'all the others' in the kitchen. We were having a class out there, me and the others.

"And suddenly one of them reached into his coat and pulled out his gun. I think he thought it would be a slam dunk. I can remember this so distinctly. He simply pulled out the gun and pointed it at me. And by the time he had it aimed, I had both hands on it, and I yanked it away from him, kicked him as hard as I could, and shot and killed both men."

Roger paused.

I didn't say anything. I was tempted to smile. I liked it. I only nodded. Of course it had begun that way with him, why hadn't I realized it? He

hadn't instinctively been a killer; he would never have been so interesting if that had been the case.

"That quick, I was a killer," he said. "That quick. And a smashing success at it, no less, imagine."

He took another drink and looked off, deep into the memory of it. He seemed securely anchored in the ghost body now, revved up like an engine.

"What did you do then?" I asked.

"Well, that's when the course of my life changed. First I was going to go to the police, going to call the priest, going to go to hell, phone my mother, my life was over, call Father Kevin, flush all the grass down the toilet, life finished, scream for the neighbors, all of that.

"Then I just closed the door and Blue and I sat down and for about an hour I talked. Blue said nothing. I talked. I prayed, meanwhile, that nobody had been in a car outside waiting for those two, but if there came a knock I was ready because I had their gun now, and it had lots of bullets, and I was sitting directly opposite the door.

"And as I talked and waited and watched and let the two bodies lie there, and Blue simply stared into space as if it had been a bad LSD trip, I talked myself into getting the hell out of there. Why should I go to jail for the rest of my life for those two? Took about an hour of expressed logic."

"Right."

"We cleaned out that pad immediately, took everything that had belonged to us, called the other two musicians, got them to pick up their stuff at the bus station. Said it was a drug bust coming down. They never knew what happened. The place was so full of fingerprints from all our parties and orgies and late-night jam sessions, nobody would ever find us. None of us had ever been printed. And besides, I kept the gun.

"And I did something else, too, I took the money off the men. Blue didn't want any of it, but I needed bucks to get out of there.

"We split up. I never saw Blue again. I never saw Ollie or Ted, the other two. I think they went to L.A. to make it big. I think Blue probably became a drug crazy. I'm not sure. I went on. I was totally different from the instant it happened. I was never the same again."

"What made you different?" I asked. "What was the source of the change in you, I mean, what in particular? That you'd enjoyed it?"

“No, not at all. It was no fun. It was a success. But it wasn’t fun. I’ve never found it fun. It’s work, killing people, it’s messy. It’s hard work. It’s fun for *you* to kill people, but then you’re not human. No, it wasn’t that. It was the fact that it had been possible to do it, to just walk up to that son of a bitch and make the most unexpected gesture, to just take that gun from him like that, because it was the last thing he ever expected could happen, and then to kill them both without hesitation. They must have died with surprise.”

“They thought you were kids.”

“They thought we were dreamers! And I was a dreamer, and all the way to New York I kept thinking, I do have a great destiny, I am going to be great, and this power, this power to simply shoot down two people had been the epiphany of my strength!”

“From God, this epiphany.”

“No, from fate, from destiny. I told you I never really had any feeling for God. You know they say in the Catholic Church that if you don’t feel a devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, well, they fear for your soul. I never had any devotion to her. I never had any devotion to any real personal deity or saint. I never felt it. That’s why Dora’s development surprised me in that particular, that Dora is so absolutely sincere. But we’ll get to that. By the time I got to New York, I knew my cult was to be of this world, you know, lots of followers and power and lavish comforts and the licentiousness of this world.”

“Yes, I see.”

“That had been Wynken’s vision. Wynken had communicated this to his women followers, that there was no point in waiting until the next world. You had to do everything now, every kind of sin … this was a common conception of heretics, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, of some. Or so their enemies said.”

“The next killing I did purely for money. It was a contract. I was the most ambitious boy in town. I was managing some other band again, a bunch of no-accounts, we weren’t making it, though other rock stars were making it overnight. I was into dope again, and was being a hell of a lot smarter about it, and developing a personal distaste for it. This was the real early days, when people flew the grass across the border in little planes, and it was almost like cowboy adventures.

“And the word came down that this particular man was on the shit list

of a local power broker who'd pay anyone thirty thousand dollars for the killing. The guy himself was particularly vicious. Everybody was scared of him. He knew they wanted to kill him. He was walking around in broad daylight and everyone was scared to make a move.

"I guess everybody else figured that somebody else would do it. How connected these people were to what and to whom I had no idea. I just knew the guy was game, you know? I made sure.

"I figured a way to do it. I was nineteen by then. I dressed up like a college boy in a crew-neck sweater, a blazer, flannel slacks, had my hair cut Princeton style, and carried a few books with me. I found out where the man lived on Long Island, and walked right up to him in his back driveway as he got out of his car one evening, and shot him dead five feet from where his wife and kids were eating dinner inside."

He paused again, and then said with perfect gravity, "It takes a special kind of animal to do something so vicious. And not to feel any remorse."

"You didn't torture him the way I tortured you," I said softly. "You know everything you've done, don't you? You really understand! I didn't get the whole picture when I was following you. I imagined you were more intimately perverse, wrapped up in your own romance. An arch self-deceiver."

"Was that torture, what you did to me?" he asked. "I don't remember pain being involved in it, only fury that I was going to die. Whatever the case, I killed this man in Long Island for money. It meant nothing to me. I didn't even feel relief afterwards, only a kind of strength, you know, of accomplishment, and I wanted to test it again soon and I did."

"And you were on your way."

"Absolutely. And in my style too. The word was out. If the task seems impossible, get Roger. I could get into a hospital dressed like a young doctor, with a name tag on my coat and a clipboard in my hand, and shoot some marked guy dead in his bed before anyone was the wiser. I did that, in fact.

"But understand, I didn't make myself rich as a hit man. It was heroin first, and then cocaine, and with the cocaine it was going back to some of the very same cowboys I'd known in the beginning, who flew the cocaine over the border same fashion, same routes, same planes! You know the history of it. Everyone does today. The early dope dealers were crude in their methods. It was 'cops and robbers' with the government

guys. The planes would outrun the government planes, and when the planes landed, sometimes they were so stuffed with cocaine the driver couldn't wriggle out of the cockpit, and we'd run out and get the stuff, and load it up and get the hell out of there."

"So I've heard."

"Now there are geniuses in the business, people who know how to use cellular phones and computers and laundering techniques for money which no one can trace. But then? I was the genius of the dopers! Sometimes the whole thing was as cumbersome as moving furniture, I tell you. And I went in there, organizing, picking my confidants and my mules, you know, for crossing the borders, and even before cocaine ever hit the streets, so to speak, I was doing beautifully in New York and L.A. with the rich, you know, the kind of customers to whom you deliver personally. They never have to even leave their palatial homes. You get the call. You show up. Your stuff is pure. They like you. But I had to move out from there. I wasn't going to be dependent upon that.

"I was too clever. I made some real-estate deals that were pure brilliance on my part, and having the cash on hand, and you know those were the days of hellish inflation. I really cleaned up."

"But how did Terry get involved in it, and Dora?"

"Pure fluke. Or destiny. Who knows? Went home to New Orleans to see my mother, brushed up against Terry and got her pregnant. Damned fool.

"I was twenty-two, my mother was really dying this time. My mother said, 'Roger, please come home.' That stupid boyfriend with the cracked face had died. She was all alone. I'd been sending her plenty of money all along.

"The boardinghouse was now her private home, she had two maids and a driver to take her around town in a Cadillac whenever she felt the desire. She'd enjoyed it immensely, never asking any questions about the money, and of course I'd been collecting Wynken. I had two more books of Wynken by that time and my treasure storehouse in New York already, but we can get to that later on. Just keep Wynken in the back of your mind.

"My mother had never really asked me for anything. She had the big bedroom upstairs now to herself. She said she talked to all the others who had gone on ahead, her poor old sweet dead brother Mickey, and

her dead sister, Alice, and her mother, the Irish maid—the founder of our family, you might say—to whom the house had been willed by the crazy lady who lived there. My mother was also talking a lot to Little Richard. That was a brother that died when he was four. Lockjaw. Little Richard. She said Little Richard was walking around with her, telling her it was time to come.

"But she wanted me to come home. She wanted me there in that room. I knew all this. I understood. She had sat with boarders that were dying. I had sat with others than Old Captain. So I went home.

"Nobody knew where I was headed, or what my real name was, or where I came from. So it was easy to slip out of New York. I went to the house on St. Charles Avenue and sat in the sickroom with her, holding the Utile vomit cup to her chin, wiping her spittle, and trying to get her on the bedpan when the agency didn't have a nurse to send. We had help, yes, but she didn't want the help, you know. She didn't want the colored girl, as she called her. Or that horrible nurse. And I made the amazing discovery that these things didn't disgust me much. I washed so many sheets. Of course there was a machine to put them in, but I changed them over and over for her. I didn't mind. Maybe I was never normal. In any event, I simply did what had to be done. I rinsed out that bedpan a thousand times, wiped it off, sprinkled powder on it, and set it by the bed. There is no foul smell which lasts forever after all."

"Not on this earth at least," I murmured. But he didn't hear me, thank God.

"This went on for two weeks. She didn't want to go to Mercy Hospital. I hired nurses round the clock just for backup, you know, so they could take her vital signs when I got frightened. I played music for her. All the predictable things, said the rosary but loud with her. Usual deathbed scene. From two to four in the afternoon she tolerated visitors. Old cousins came. 'Where is Roger?' I stayed out of sight."

"You weren't torn to pieces by her suffering."

"I wasn't crazy about it, I can tell you that. She had cancer all through her and no amount of money could save her. I wanted her to hurry, and I couldn't bear watching it, no, but there has always been a deep ruthless side to me that says, Do what you have to do. And I stayed in that room without sleep day in and day out and all night till she died.

"She talked a lot to the ghosts, but I didn't see them or hear them. I

just kept saying, 'Little Richard, come get her. Uncle Mickey, if she can't come back, come get her.'

"But before the end came Terry, a practical nurse, as they called them then, who had to fill in when we could not get the registered nurse because they were in such demand. Terry, five foot seven, blonde, the cheapest and most alluring piece of goods I had ever laid eyes on. Understand. This is a question of everything fitting together precisely. The girl was a shining perfect piece of trash."

I smiled. "Pink fingernails, and wet pink lipstick." I had seen her sparkle in his mind.

"Every detail was on target with this kid. The chewing gum, the gold anklet, the painted toenails, the way she slipped off her shoes right there in the sickroom to let me see the toenails, the way the cleavage showed, you know, under her white nylon uniform. And her stupid, heavy-lidded eyes beautifully painted with Maybelline eye pencil and mascara. She'd file her nails in there in front of me! But I tell you, never have I seen something that was so completely realized, finished, ah, ah, what can I say! She was a masterpiece."

I laughed, and so did he, but he went on talking.

"I found her irresistible. She was a hairless little animal. I started doing it with her every chance I had. While Mother slept, we did it in the bathroom standing up. Once or twice we went down the hall to one of the empty bedrooms; we never took more than twenty minutes! I timed us! She'd do it with her pink panties around her ankles! She smelled like Blue Waltz perfume."

I gave a soft laugh.

"Do I ever know what you're saying," I mused. "And to think you knew it, you fell for her and you knew it."

"Well, I was two thousand miles away from my New York women and my boys and all, and all that trashy power that goes along with dealing, you know, the foolishness of bodyguards scurrying to open doors for you, and girls telling you they love you in the backseat of the limousine just because they heard you shot somebody the night before. And so much sex that sometimes right in the middle of it, the best oral job you've ever had, you can't keep your mind on it anymore."

"We are more alike than I ever dreamed. I've lived a lie with the gifts given me."

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“There isn’t time. You don’t need to know about me. What about Terry? How did Dora happen?”

“I got Terry pregnant. She was supposed to be on the Pill. She thought I was rich! It didn’t matter whether I loved her or she loved me. I mean this was one of the dumbest and most simple-minded humans I have ever known, Terry. I wonder if you bother to feed upon people that ignorant and that dull.”

“Dora was the baby.”

“Yeah. Terry wanted to get rid of it if I didn’t marry her. I made a bargain. One hundred grand when we marry (I used an alias, it was never legal except on paper and that was a blessing because Dora and I are in no way legally connected) and one hundred grand when the baby was born. After that I’d give her her divorce and all I wanted was my daughter.”

“ ‘Our daughter,’ she said.

“ ‘Sure, our daughter,’ I said. What a fool I was. What I didn’t figure on, the very obvious and simple thing, what I didn’t figure on was that this woman, this little nail-filing, gum-chewing, mascara-wearing nurse in her rubber-soled shoes and diamond wedding ring, would naturally feel for her own child. She was stupid, but she was a mammal, and she had no intention of letting anybody take her baby. Like hell. I wound up with visitation rights.

“Six years I flew in and out of New Orleans every chance I had just to hold Dora in my arms, talk to her, go walking with her in the evenings. And understand, this child was mine! I mean she was flesh of my flesh from the start. She started running towards me when she saw me at the end of the block. She flew into my arms.

“We’d take a taxi to the Quarter and go through the Cabildo; she adored it; the cathedral, of course. Then we’d go for muffaletas at the Central Grocery. You know, or maybe you don’t, the big sandwiches full of olives—”

“I know.”

“—She’d tell me everything that had happened in the week since I’d been there. I’d dance with her in the street. Sing to her. Oh, what a beautiful voice she had from the beginning. I don’t have a good voice. My mother had a good voice, and so did Terry. And this child got the

voice. And the mind she had. We'd ride the ferry together over the river and back, and sing, as we stood by the rail. I took her shopping at D. H. Holmes and bought her beautiful clothes. Her mother never minded that, the beautiful clothes, and of course I was smart enough to pick up something for Terry, you know, a brassiere dripping with lace or a kit of cosmetics from Paris or some perfume selling for one hundred dollars an ounce. Anything but Blue Waltz! But Dora and I had so much fun. Sometimes I thought, I can stand anything if I can just see Dora within a few days."

"She was verbal and imaginative, the way you were."

"Absolutely, full of dreams and visions. Dora is no naif, now, you have to understand. Dora's a theologian. That's the amazing part. The desire for something spectacular? That I engendered in her, but the faith in God, the faith in theology? I don't know where that came from."

Theology. The word gave me pause.

"Meantime, Terry and I began to hate each other. When schooltime came, so did the fights. The fights were hell. I wanted Sacred Heart Academy for Dora, dancing lessons, music lessons, two weeks away with me in Europe. Terry hated me. I wasn't going to make her little girl into a snot. Terry had already moved out of the St. Charles Avenue house, calling it old and creepy, and settled for a shack of a ranch-style tract home on some naked street in the soggy suburbs! So my kid was already snatched from the Garden District and all those colors, and settled in a place where the nearest architectural curiosity was the local 7-Eleven.

"I was getting desperate and Dora was getting older, old enough perhaps to be stolen effectively from her mother, whom she did love in a very protective and kind way. There was something silent between those two, you know, talking had nothing to do with it. And Terry was proud of Dora."

"And then this boyfriend came into the picture."

"Right. If I had come to town a day later, my daughter and my wife would have been gone. She was skipping out on me! To hell with my lavish checks. She was going with this bankrupt electrician boyfriend of hers to Florida!

"Dora knew from nothing and was outside playing down the block. They were all packed! I shot Terry and the boyfriend, right in that stupid little tract house in Metairie where Terry had chosen to bring up my

daughter rather than on St. Charles Avenue. Shot them both. Got blood all over her polyester wall-to-wall carpet, and her Formica-top kitchen breakfast bar."

"I can imagine it."

"I dumped both of them in the swamps. It had been a long time since I'd handled something like this directly, but no matter, it was easy enough. The electrician's truck was in the garage anyway, and I bagged them up, and I took them out that way, into the back of the truck. I took them way out somewhere, out Jefferson Highway, I don't even know where I dumped them. No, maybe it was out Chef Menteur. Yeah, it was Chef Menteur. Somewhere around one of the old forts on the Rigules River. They just disappeared in the muck."

"I can see it. I've been dumped in the swamps myself."

He was too excited to hear my mumblings. He continued.

"Then I went back for Dora, who was by then sitting on the steps with her elbows on her knees wondering why nobody was home, and the door was locked so she couldn't get in, and she started screaming, 'Daddy! I knew you'd come. I knew you would!' the minute she saw me. I didn't risk going inside to get her clothes. I didn't want her to see the blood. I put her with me in the boyfriend's pickup truck and out of New Orleans we drove, and we left the truck in Seattle, Washington. That was my cross-country odyssey with Dora.

"All those miles, insanity, just the two of us together talking and talking. I think I was trying to tell Dora everything that I had learned. Nothing evil and self-destructive, nothing that would ever bring the darkness near her, only the good things, what I had learned about virtue and honesty and what corrupts people, and what was worthwhile.

" 'You can't just simply do nothing in this life, Dora,' I kept saying, 'you can't just leave this world the way you found it.' I even told her how when I was young I was going to be a religious leader, and what I did now was collect beautiful things, church art from all over Europe and the Orient. I dealt in it, to keep the few pieces I wanted. I led her to believe, of course, that is what had made me rich, and by then, oddly enough, it was partly true."

"And she knew you'd killed Terry."

"No. You got the wrong idea on that one. All those images were tumbling in my mind. I felt it when you were taking my blood. That

wasn't it. She knew I'd gotten rid of Terry, or I'd freed her from Terry, and now she could be with Daddy forever, and fly away with Daddy when Daddy flew away. That's a different thing from knowing Daddy murdered Terry. That she does not know. Once when she was twelve, she called, sobbing, and said, 'Daddy, will you please tell me where Mother is, where did she and that guy go when they went to Florida.' I played it off, that I hadn't wanted to tell her that Terry was dead. Thank God for the phone. I do very well on the phone. I like it. It's like being on the radio.

"But back to Dora of six years old. Daddy took Dora to New York and got a suite at the Plaza. After that, Dora had everything Daddy could buy."

"She cry for Terry even then?"

"Yes. And she was probably the only one who ever did. Before the wedding, Terry's mother had told me Terry was a slut. They hated each other. Terry's father had been a policeman. He was an okay guy. But he didn't like his daughter either. Terry wasn't a nice person. Terry was mean by nature; Terry wasn't even a good person to bump into in the street, let alone to know or to need or to hold.

"Her family back there thought she'd run off to Florida and abandoned Dora to me. That's all they ever knew till the day the old man and woman died, Terry's parents. There's some cousins. They still believe that. But they don't know who I am, really, it's all rather difficult to explain. Of course by now maybe they've seen the articles in the papers and magazines. I don't know, that's not important. Dora cried for her mother, yes. But after that big lie I told her when she was twelve, she never asked about anything again.

"But Terry's devotion to Dora had been as perfect as that of any mammalian mother! Instinctive; nurselike; antiseptic. She'd feed Dora from the four food groups. She'd dress Dora up in beautiful clothes, take her to dancing school, and sit there and gossip with the other mothers. She was proud of Dora. But she rarely ever spoke to Dora. I think they could go for days without their eyes meeting. It was mammalian. And for Terry, probably everything was like that."

"This is rather funny, that you should get mixed up with a person like this, you know."

"No, not funny. Fate. We made Dora. She gave the voice to Dora, and

the beauty. And there is something in Dora from Terry which is like hardness, but that's too unkind a word. Dora is a mixture of us, really, an optimum mixture."

"Well, you gave her your own beauty too."

"Yes, but something far more interesting and marketable happened when the genes collided. You've seen my daughter. My daughter is photogenic, and beneath the flash and dash I gave her, there is the steadiness of Terry. She converts people over the airwaves. 'And what is the true message of Christ!' she declares, staring right into the camera. 'That Christ is in every stranger you meet, the poor, the hungry, the sick, the people next door!' And the audience believes it."

"I've watched. I've seen her. She could just rise to the top."

He sighed.

"I sent Dora to school. By this time I was making big, big money. I had to put lots of miles between me and my daughter. I switched Dora among three schools overall before graduation, which was hard for her, but she didn't question me about these maneuvers, or the secrecy surrounding our meetings. I led her to believe I was always on the verge of having to rush to Florence to save a fresco from being destroyed by idiots, or to Rome to explore a catacomb that had just been found.

"When Dora began to take a serious interest in religion, I thought it was spiritually elegant, you know. I thought my growing collection of statues and books had inspired her. And when she told me at eighteen that she had been accepted to Harvard and that she meant to study comparative religion, I was amused. I made the usual sexist assumption: study what you want and marry a rich man. And let me show you my latest icon or statue.

"But Dora's fervor and theological bent were developing far beyond anything I had ever experienced. Dora went to the Holy Land when she was nineteen. She went back twice before she graduated. She spent the next two years studying religions all over the world. Then she proposed the entire idea of her television program: she wanted to talk to people. Cable had made possible all these religion channels. You could tune in to this minister or that Catholic priest.

" 'You serious about this?' I asked. I hadn't known she believed it all. But she was out to be true to ideals that I had never fully understood myself yet somehow passed on to her.

“ ‘Dad, you get me one hour on television three times a week, and the money to use it the way I want,’ she said, ‘and you’ll see what happens.’ She began to talk about all kinds of ethical questions, how we could save our souls in today’s world. She envisioned short lectures or sermons, punctuated by ecstatic singing and dancing. The abortion issue—she makes impassioned logical speeches that both sides are right! She explains how each life is sacrosanct yet a woman must have dominion over her own body.”

“I’ve seen the program.”

“You realize seventy-five different cable networks have picked up this program! You realize what news of my death may do to my daughter’s church?”

He paused, thinking, then resumed as rapid-fire as before.

“You know, I don’t think I ever had a religious aspiration, a spiritual goal, so to speak, that wasn’t drenched in something materialistic and glamorous, do you know what I mean?”

“Of course.”

“But with Dora, it’s different. Dora really doesn’t care about material things. The relics, the icons, what do they mean to Dora? Dora believes against impossible psychological and intellectual odds that God exists.” He stopped again, shaking his head with regret.

“You were right in what you said to me earlier. I am a racketeer. Even for my beloved Wynken I had an angle, what they call now an agenda. Dora is no racketeer.”

I remembered his remark in the barroom, “I think I sold my soul for places like this.” I had known what he was talking about when he said it. I knew it now.

“Let me get back to the story. Early on, as I told you, I gave up that idea of a secular religion. By the time Dora started in earnest, I hadn’t thought about those ambitions in years. I had Dora. And I had Wynken as my obsession. I chased down more of Wynken’s books, and managed through my various connections to purchase five different letters of the period which made clear mention of Wynken de Wilde and Blanche de Wilde and her husband, Damien, as well. I had searchers digging for me in Europe and America. Rhineland mysticism, dig into it.

“My researchers found a capsule version of Wynken’s story in a couple of German texts. Something about women practicing the rites of Diana,

witchcraft. Wynken dragged out of the monastery and publicly accused. The record of the trial, however, was lost.

"It had not survived the Second World War. But in other places there were other documents, caches of letters. Once you had the code word Wynken—once you knew what to look for—you were on the way.

"When I had a tree hour I sat down and looked at Wynken's little naked people, and I memorized his poems of love. I knew his poems so that I could sing them. When I saw Dora for weekends—and we met somewhere whenever possible—I would recite them to Dora and maybe even show her my latest find.

"She tolerated my 'Burnt-out hippie version of free love and mysticism,' as she called it. 'I love you, Roge,' she'd say. 'But you're so romantic to think this bad priest was some sort of saint. All he did was sleep with these women, didn't he? And the books were ways of communicating among the others … when to meet.'

" 'Ah, but Dora,' I would say, 'there was not a vicious or ugly word in the work of Wynken de Wilde. You see for yourself.' Six books I had by then. It was all about love. My present translator, a professor at Columbia, had marveled at the mysticism of the poetry, how it was a blending of love of God and the flesh. Dora didn't buy it. But Dora was already obsessed with her own religious questions. Dora was reading Paul Tillich and William James and Erasmus and lots of books on the state of the world today. That's Dora's obsession, the State of the World Today."

"And Dora won't care about those books of Wynken's if I get them to her."

"No, she won't touch *any* of my collection, not now!" he said.

"Yet you want *me* to protect all these things," I said.

"Two years ago," he sighed. "A couple of news articles! No connection to her, you understand, but with her, my cover was blown forever. She'd been suspecting. It was inevitable, she said, that she'd figure out my money wasn't clean."

He shook his head. "Not clean," he said again. He went on. "The last thing she let me do was buy the convent for her. One million for the building. And one million to gut it of all the modern desecrations and leave it the way it had been for the nuns in the 1880s, with chapel and refectory and dormitory rooms and wide corridors.…

“But even that, she took with reluctance. As for the artwork, forget it. She may never take from me the money she needs to educate her followers there, her order or whatever the hell a televangelist calls it. The cable TV connection is nothing compared to what I could have made it, fixing up that convent as the base. And the collection—the statues, icons—imagine it. ‘I could make you as big as Billy Graham or Jerry Falwell, darling,’ I said to her. ‘You can’t turn away from my money, not for Jesus’ sake.’ ”

He shook his head despairingly. “She meets with me now out of compassion, and of that my beautiful daughter has an endless supply. Sometimes she’ll take a little gift. Tonight, she would not. Once when the program almost went under, she accepted just enough to get it over the hump. But my saints and angels, she won’t touch them. My books, my treasures, she won’t look at them.

“Of course, we both knew the threat to her reputation. You’ve helped by eliminating me. But there’ll be news of my disappearance soon, has to be. ‘Televangelist financed by cocaine king.' How long can her secrecy last? It has to survive my death and she has to survive my death. At all costs! Lestat, you hear what I’m saying.”

“I am listening to you, Roger, to every word you say. They aren’t on to her yet, I can assure you.”

“My enemies are a ruthless lot. And the government … who knows who the hell the government is or what the hell the government does.”

“She’s afraid of this scandal?”

“No. Brokenhearted, yes, afraid of scandal, never. She’d take what would come. What she wanted was for me to give it all up! That became her attack. She didn’t care that the world might find out we were father and daughter. She wanted me to renounce everything. She was afraid for me, like a gangster’s daughter would be, like a gangster’s wife.

“ ‘Just let me build the church,’ I kept pleading. ‘Take the money.’ The television show has proved her mettle. But no more … things are in ruins around her. She’s a little one-hour program three times a week. The ladder to heaven is hers alone to climb. I’m out of it. She’s relying on her audience to bring the millions needed to her.

“And the female mystics she quotes, you’ve heard her read from them, Hildegard of Bingen, and Julian of Norwich. Teresa of Avila. You’ve read any of those women?”

“All of them,” I said.

“Smart females who want to hear smart females listen to her. But she’s beginning to attract everyone. You cannot make it in this world if you speak to only one gender. That isn’t possible. Even I know that, the marketeer in me knows that, the Wall Street genius, and I am that, too, have no doubt. She attracts everyone. Oh, if I only had those last two years to do over, if only I could have launched the church before she discovered—”

“You’re looking at this all wrong. Stop regretting. If you’d made the church big, you would have precipitated your exposure and the scandal.”

“No, once the church was big enough, the scandal wouldn’t have mattered. That’s just the catch. She stayed small, and when you’re small, a scandal can do you in!” He shook his head again, angrily. He was becoming too agitated, but the image of him only grew stronger. “I cannot be allowed to destroy Dora….” His voice drifted off again. He shuddered. He looked at me:

“What does if come to, Lestat?” he asked.

“Dora herself must survive,” I said. “She has to hang on to her faith after your death is discovered!”

“Yes. I’m her biggest enemy, dead or alive. And her church, you know, she walks a thin line; she’s no puritan, my daughter. She thinks Wynken’s a heretic, but she doesn’t know how much her own modern compassion for the flesh is just what Wynken was talking about.”

“I get it. But what about Wynken, am I supposed to save Wynken too? What do I do with Wynken?”

“She is a genius in her own way, actually,” he went on, ignoring me. “That’s what I meant when I called her a theologian. She’s done the near impossible thing of mastering Greek and Latin and Hebrew, even though she was not bilingual as a small child. You know how hard it is.”

“Yes, it’s not that way for us, but….” I stopped. A horrible thought had occurred to me with full force.

The thought interrupted everything.

It was too late to make Roger immortal. He was dead!

I hadn’t even realized that I was assuming all this time, all this time, as we talked and his story poured out, that I could, if I wanted to, actually bring him to me, and keep him here, and stop him from going on. But suddenly I remembered with a ferocious shock that Roger was a

ghost! I was talking to a man who was already dead.

The situation was so hideously painful and frustrating and utterly abnormal that I was thunderstruck and might have begun to groan, if I hadn't had to cover it up so that he would go on.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked.

"Nothing. Talk more about Dora to me. Tell me the sort of things Dora says."

"She talks about the sterility of now, and how people need the ineffable. She points to rampant crime and goalless youth. She's going to make a religion where nobody hurts anybody else. It's the American dream. She knows Scripture inside and out, she's covered all the Pseudepigrapha, Apocrypha, the works of Augustine, Marcion, Moses Maimonides; she's convinced that the prohibition against sex destroyed Christianity, which is hardly original with her, of course, and certainly appeals to the women who listen to her, you know…."

"Yes, I understand all that, but she must have felt some sympathy for Wynken."

"Wynken's books weren't a series of visions to her as they are to me."

"I see."

"And by the way, Wynken's books are not merely perfect, they are unique in a number of ways. Wynken did his work in the last twenty-five years before the Gutenberg printing press. Yet Wynken did everything. He was scribe, rubicator, that is, the maker of the fancy letters, and also the miniaturist who added all the naked people frolicking in Eden and the ivy and vine crawling over every page. He had to do every step himself at a time when scriptoria divided up these functions.

"Let me finish Wynken. You have Dora now in your mind. Let me go to Wynken. Yeah, you have to get those books."

"Great," I said dismally.

"Let me bring you right up to date. You're going to love those books, even if Dora never does. I have all twelve of his books, as I think I told you. He was Rhineland Catholic, forced into the Benedictines as a young man, and was in love with Blanche de Wilde, his brother's wife. She ordered the books done in the scriptorium and that's how it all started, her secret link with her monk lover. I have letters between Blanche and her friend Eleanor. I have some incidents decoded from the poems themselves.

“Most sad of all, I have the letters Blanche wrote to Eleanor after Wynken was put to death. She had the letters smuggled out to Eleanor, and then Eleanor sent them on to Diane, and there was another woman in it, but there are very few extant fragments of anything in her hand.

“This is what went down. They used to meet in the garden of the De Wilde castle to perform their rites. It wasn’t the monastery garden at all, as I’d once supposed. How Wynken got there I don’t know, but there are a few mentions in some of the letters that indicate he simply slipped out of the monastery and followed a secret way into his brother's house.

“And this made sense, of course. They'd wait till Damien de Wilde was off doing whatever such counts or dukes did, and then they’d meet, do their dance around the fountain, and make love. Wynken bedded each of the women in turn; or sometimes they celebrated various patterns. All this is recorded more or less in the books. Well, they got caught.

“Damien castrated and stabbed Wynken in front of the women and put them to rout. He kept the remains! Then, after days of interrogation, the frightened women were bullied into confessing to their love for Wynken and how he had communicated through the books; and the brother took all those books, all twelve of the books of Wynken de Wilde, everything this artist had ever created, you understand—”

“His immortality,” I whispered.

“Exactly, his progeny! His books! And Damien had them buried with Wynken’s body in the castle garden by the fountain that appears in all the little pictures in the books! Blanche could look out on it every day from her window, the place in the ground where Wynken had been laid to rest. No trial, no heresy, no execution, nothing like that. He just murdered his brother, it was as simple as that. He probably paid the monastery huge amounts of money. Who knows if it was even necessary? Did the monastery love Wynken? The monastery is a ruin now where tourists come to snap pictures. As for the castle, it was obliterated in the bombing of the First World War.”

“Ah. But what happened after that, how did the books get out of the coffin? Do you have copies? Are you speaking of….”

“No, I have the originals of every one. I have come across copies, crude copies, made at the behest of Eleanor, Blanche’s cousin and confidante, but as far as I know they stopped this practice of copies. There were only twelve books. And I don’t know how they surfaced. I

can only guess."

"And what is your guess?"

"I think Blanche went out in the night with the other women, dug up the body, and took the books out of the coffin, or whatever poor Wynken's remains had been placed in, and put everything back right the way it was."

"You think they'd do that?"

"Yes, I think they did it. I can see them doing it, by candlelight in the garden, see them digging, the five women together. Can't you?"

"Yes."

"I think they did it because they felt the way I do! They loved the beauty and the perfection of those books. Lestat, they knew they were treasures, and such is the power of obsession and such is the power of love. And who knows, maybe they wanted the bones of Wynken. It's conceivable. Maybe one woman took a thigh bone and another the bones of his fingers and, ah, I don't know."

It seemed a ghastly picture suddenly, and it put me in mind, without a second's hesitation, of Roger's hands, which I had chopped off sloppily with a kitchen knife and dumped, wrapped in a plastic sack. I stared at the image of these hands before me, busy, fretting with the edge of the glass, tapping the bar in anxiety.

"How far back can you trace the journey of the books?" I asked.

"Not very far at all. But that's often the case in my profession, I mean antiquities. The books have turned up one, maybe two at a time. Some from private collections, two from museums bombed during the wars. Once or twice I've paid almost nothing for them. I knew what they were the minute I laid eyes on them, but other people didn't. And understand, everywhere I went I put out the search for this sort of medieval codex. I am an expert in this field. I know the language of the medieval artist! You have to save my treasures, Lestat. You can't let Wynken get lost again. I'm leaving you with my legacy."

"So it seems. But what can I do with these, and all the other relics, if Dora will have no part of it?"

"Dora's young. Dora will change. See, I still have this vision—that maybe somewhere in my collection—forget about Wynken—that maybe somewhere among all the statues and relics is a central artifact that can help Dora with her new church. Can you gauge the value of what you

saw in that flat? You have to make Dora touch those things again, examine them, catch the scent of them! You have to make her realize the potency of the statues and paintings, that they are expressions of the human quest for truth, the very quest that obsesses her. She just doesn't know yet."

"But you said Dora never cared for the paint and the plaster."

"Make her care."

"Me? How! I can conserve all this, yes, but how am I to make Dora love a work of art? Why would you even suggest such a thing, I mean—my having contact with your precious daughter?"

"You'll love my daughter," he said in a low murmur.

"Come again?"

"Find something miraculous in my collection for her."

"The Shroud of Turin?"

"Oh, I like you. I really do. Yes, find her something that's significant, something that will transform her, something that I, her father, bought and cherished, that will help her."

"You're as insane dead as you were alive, you know it? Are you still racketeering, trying to buy your way into salvation with a hunk of marble or a pile of parchment? Or do you really believe in the sanctity of all you've collected?"

"Of course I believe in the sanctity of it. It's *all* I believe in! That's my point, don't you see? It's all you believe in too … what glitters and what is gold."

"Ah, but you do take my breath away."

"That's why you murdered me there, among the treasures. Look, we have to hurry. We don't know how much time we have. Back to the mechanics. Now, with my daughter, your trump card is her ambition.

"She wanted the convent for her own female missionaries, her own Order, which was to teach love, of course, with the same unique fire as other missionaries have taught it; she would send her women into the poor neighborhoods and into the ghettoes and into the working districts, and they would hold forth on the importance of starting a movement of love from the core of the people that would reach eventually to all governments in power, so that injustice would end."

"What would distinguish these women from other such orders or missionaries, from Franciscans or any sort of preachers …?"

“Well, one that they would be women, and preaching women! Nuns have been nurses, teachers for little children, servants, or locked in the cloister to bray at God like so many boring sheep. Her women would be doctors of the church, you see! Preachers. They would work up the crowds with personal fervor; they would turn to the women, the impoverished and the depotentiated women, and help them to reform the world.”

“A feminist vision, but coupled with religion.”

“It had a chance. It had as much of a chance as any such movement. Who knows why one monk in the 1300s became a crazy? And another one a saint? Dora has ways to show people how to think. I don’t know! You have to figure this all out, you have to!”

“And meanwhile save the church decorations,” I said.

“Yes, until she will accept them or until she can turn them to some good. That’s how you get her. Talk about good.”

“That’s how you get anybody,” I said sadly. “That’s how you’re getting me.”

“Well, you’ll do it, won’t you? Dora thinks I was misguided. She said, ‘Don’t think you can save your soul after all you’ve done by passing on these church objects to me.’ ”

“She loves you,” I affirmed. “I saw that every time I saw her with you.”

“I know. I need no such assurances. There’s no time now to go into all the arguments. But Dora’s vision is immense, remember that. She’s small-time now, but wants to change the entire world. I mean, she isn’t satisfied to have a cult the way I wanted it, you know, to be a guru with a retreat full of pliant followers. She really wants to change the world. She thinks somebody has to change the world.”

“Doesn’t every religious person believe that?”

“No. They don’t dream of being Mohammed or Zoroaster.”

“And Dora does.”

“Dora knows that that is what’s required.”

He shook his head, took another little bit of the drink, and looked off over the half-empty room. Then he made a little frown as if pondering it still.

“She said, ‘Dad, religion doesn’t come from relics and texts. They are the expression of it.’ She went on and on. After all her studying of Scripture, she said it was the inner miracle that counted. She put me to

sleep. Don't make any cruel jokes!"

"Not for the world."

"What's going to happen to my daughter!" he whispered desperately. He wasn't looking at me. "Look at her heritage. See it in her father. I'm fervent and extremist and gothic and mad. I can't tell you how many churches I've taken Dora to, how many priceless crucifixes I've shown to her, before turning them around for a profit. The hours Dora and I have spent looking at the ceilings of Baroque churches in Germany alone! I have given Dora magnificent relics of the true cross embedded in silver and rubies. I have bought many veils of Veronica, magnificent works that would take your breath away. My God."

"Was there ever—with Dora, I mean—a concept of atonement in all of this, a guilt?"

"You mean, for letting Terry disappear without explanation, for never asking, until years later? I thought of that. If it was there in the beginning, Dora's passed it a long time ago. Dora thinks the world needs a new revelation. A new prophet. But you just don't become a prophet! She says her transformation must come with seeing and feeling; but it's no Revival Tent experience."

"Mystics never think it's a Revival Tent experience."

"Of course not."

"Is Dora a mystic? Would you say that?"

"Don't you know? You followed her, you watched her. No, Dora hasn't seen the face of God or heard His voice and would never lie about it, if that's what you mean. But Dora's looking for it. She's looking for the moment, for the miracle, for the revelation!"

"For the angel to come."

"Yes, exactly."

We were both quiet suddenly. He was probably thinking of his initial proposition; so was I, that I fake a miracle, I, the evil angel that had once driven a Catholic nun to madness, to bleeding from her hands and feet in the Stigmata.

Suddenly he made the decision to continue, and I was relieved.

"I made my life rich enough," he said, "that I stopped caring about changing the world if ever I really thought of it; I made a life, you see, you know, a world unto itself. But she really has opened her soul in a sophisticated way to … to something. My soul's dead."

“Apparently not,” I said. The thought that he would vanish, had to, sooner or later, was becoming intolerable to me, and far more frightening than his initial presence had ever been.

“Let’s get back to the basics. I’m getting anxious.…” he said.

“Why?”

“Don’t freak on me, just listen. There is money put aside for Dora that has no connection to me. The government can’t touch it, besides, they never got an indictment against me let alone a conviction, you saw to that. The information’s in the flat. Black leather folders. File cabinet. Mixed right in with sales slips for all sorts of paintings and statues. And you have to save all that somewhere for Dora. My life’s work, my inheritance. It’s in your hands for her. You can do it, can’t you? Look, there’s no hurry, you’ve done away with me in a rather clever way.”

“I know. And you’re asking me now to function as a guardian angel, to see that Dora receives this inheritance untainted.…”

“Yes, my friend, that’s precisely what I’m begging you to do. And you can do it! And don’t forget about my Wynken! If she won’t take those books, you keep those books!”

He touched my chest with his hand. I felt it, the little knock upon the door of the heart.

He continued. “When my name drops out of the papers, assuming it ever makes it from the FBI files to the wire service, you get the money to Dora. Money can still create Dora’s church. Dora is magnetic. Dora can do it all by herself, if she has the money! You follow me? She can do it the way Francis did it or Paul or Jesus. If it wasn’t for her theology, she would have become the charismatic celebrity long ago. She has all the assets. She thinks too much. Her theology is what sets her apart.”

He took a breath. He was talking very rapidly, and I was beginning to shiver. I could hear his fear like a low emanation from him. *Fear of what?*

“Here,” he said. “Let me quote something to you. She told me this last night. We’ve been reading a book by Bryan Appleyard, a columnist for the papers in England, you’ve heard of him? He wrote some tome called *Understanding the Present*. I have the copy she gave me. And in it he said things that Dora believed … such as that we are ‘spiritually impoverished.’ ”

“Agreed.”

"But it was something else, something about our dilemma, that you can invent theologies, but for them to work they have to come from some deeper place inside a person … I know what she called it … Appleyard's words … 'a totality of human experience.' " He stopped. He was distracted.

I was desperate to reassure him that I understood this. "Yes, she's looking for this, courting it, she's opening herself for it."

I suddenly realized that I was holding on to him as tightly as he was holding on to me.

He was staring off.

I was filled with a sadness so awful that I couldn't speak. I'd killed this man! Why had I done it? I mean, I knew he'd been interesting and evil, but Christ, how could I have … but then what if he stayed with me the way he was! What if he could become my friend exactly the way he was.

Oh, this was too childish and selfish and avaricious! We were talking about Dora, about theology. Of course I understood Appleyard's point. *Understanding the Present.* I pictured the book. I'd go back for it. I filed it in my preternatural memory. Read at once.

He hadn't moved or spoken.

"Look, what are you scared of?" I asked. "Don't fade on me!" I clung to him, very raw, and small, and almost crying, thinking that I had killed him, taken his life, and now all I wanted to do was hold on to his spirit.

He gave no response. He looked afraid.

I wasn't the ossified monster I thought I was. I wasn't in danger of being inured to human suffering. I was a damned jibbering empath!

"Roger? Look at me. Go on talking."

He only murmured something about maybe Dora would find what he had never found.

"What?" I demanded.

"Theophany," he whispered.

Oh, that lovely word. David's word. I'd only heard it myself a few hours ago. And now it slipped from his lips.

"Look, I think they're coming for me," he said suddenly. His eyes grew wide. He didn't look afraid now so much as puzzled. He was listening to something. I could hear it too. "Remember my death," he said suddenly, as if he'd just thought of it most distinctly. "Tell her how I died. Convince her my death has cleansed the money! You understand. That's

the angle! I paid with my death. The money is no longer unclean. The books of Wynken, all of it, it's no longer unclean. Pretty it up. I ransomed it all with my blood. You know, Lestat, use your clever tongue. Tell her!"

Those footsteps.

The distinct rhythm of Something walking, slowly walking.… and the low murmur of the voices, the singing, the talking, I was getting dizzy. I was going to fall. I held on to him and on to the bar.

"Roger!" I shouted aloud. Surely everybody in the bar heard it. He was looking at me in the most pacific manner, I don't even know if his face was animate anymore. He seemed puzzled, even amazed.…

I saw the wings rise up over me, over him. I saw the immense obliterating darkness shoot up as if from a volcanic rip in the very earth and the light rise behind it. Blinding, beautiful light.

I know I cried out. "Roger!"

The noise was deafening, the voices, the singing, the figure growing larger and larger.

"Don't take him. It's my fault." I rose up against It in fury; I would tear It to pieces if I had to, to make It let him go! But I couldn't see him clearly. I didn't know where I was. And It came rolling, like smoke again, thick and powerful and absolutely unstoppable, and in the midst of all this, looming above him as he faded, and towards me, the face, the face of the granite statue for one second, the only thing visible, his eyes —

"Let him go!"

There was no bar, no Village, no city, no world. Only all of them!

And perhaps the singing was no more than the sound of a breaking glass.

Then blackness. Stillness.

Silence.

Or so it seemed, that I had been unconscious in a quiet place for some time.

I woke up outside on the street.

The bartender was standing there, shivering, asking me in the most annoyed and nasal tone of voice, "Are you all right, man?" There was snow on his shoulders, on the black shoulders of his vest, and on his white sleeves.

I nodded, and stood up, just so he'd go away. My tie was still in place. My coat was buttoned. My hands were clean. There was snow on my coat.

The snow was falling very lightly all around me. The most beautiful snow.

I went back through the revolving door into the tiled hallway and stood in the door of the bar. I could see the place where we had talked, see his glass still there. Otherwise the atmosphere was unchanged. The bartender was talking in a bored way to someone. He hadn't seen anything, except me bolt, probably, and stumble out into the street.

Every fiber in me said, Run. But where will you run? Take to the air? Not a chance, it will get you in an instant. Keep your feet on the cold earth.

You took Roger! Is that what you followed me for? Who are you!

The bartender looked up over the empty, dusty distance. I must have said something, done something. No, I was just blubbering. A man crying in a doorway, stupidly. And when it is this man, so to speak, that means blood tears. Make your exit quick.

I turned and walked out into the snow again. It was going to be morning soon, wasn't it? I didn't have to walk in the miserable punishing cold until the sky brightened, did I? Why not find a grave now, and go to sleep?

"Roger!" I was crying, wiping my tears on my sleeve. "What are you, damn it!" I stood and shouted, voice rolling off the buildings. "Damn it!" It came back to me suddenly in a flash. I heard all those mingled voices, and I fought it. The face. It has a face! *A sleepless mind in its heart and an insatiable personality*. Don't get dizzy, don't try to remember. Somebody in one of the buildings opened a window and shouted at me to move on. "Stop screaming out there." Don't try to reconstruct. You'll lose consciousness if you do.

I suddenly envisioned Dora and thought I might collapse where I was, shuddering and helpless and jabbering nonsense to anyone who came to help me.

This was bad, this was the worst, this was simply cosmically awful!

And what in God's name had been the meaning of Roger's expression in that last moment? Was it even an expression? Was it peace or calm or understanding, or just a ghost losing his vitality, a ghost giving up the

ghost!

Ah! I had been screaming. I realized it. Lots of mortals around me, high up in the night, were telling me to be quiet.

I walked on and on.

I was alone. I cried quietly. There was no one in the empty street to hear.

I crept on, bent nearly double, crying out loud. I never noticed anyone now who saw or heard or stopped or took note. I wanted to reenact it in my mind, but I was terrified it would knock me flat on my back if I did it. And Roger, Roger … Oh, God, I wanted in my monstrous selfishness to go to Dora and go down on my knees. I did this, I killed, I.…

Midtown. I suppose. Mink coats in a window. The snow was touching my eyelids in the tenderest way. I took off the scarf tie, wiped my face thoroughly so there was no blood from the tears on it.

And then I blundered into a small bright hotel.

I paid for the room in cash, extra tip, don't disturb me for twenty-four hours, went upstairs, bolted the door, pulled the curtains, shut off the bothersome stinking heat, and crawled under the bed and went to sleep.

The last strange thought that passed through my mind before I went into mortal slumber—it was hours before sunrise, and plenty of time for dreaming—was that David was going to be angry about all this somehow, but that Dora, Dora might believe and understand …

I must have slept a few hours at least. I could hear the night sounds outside.

When I woke, the sky was lightening. The night was almost up. Now would come oblivion. I was glad. Too late to think. Go back into the deep vampire sleep. Dead with all the other Undead wherever they were, covering themselves against the coming light.

A voice startled me. It spoke to me very distinctly:

"It's not going to be that simple."

I rose up in one motion, overturning the bed, on my feet, staring in the direction from which the voice had come. The little hotel room was like a tawdry trap.

A man stood in the corner, a simple man. Not particularly tall, or small, or beautiful like Roger, or flashy like me, not even very young, not even very old, just a man. A rather nice-looking man, with arms folded and one foot crossed over the other.

The sun had just come up over the buildings. The fire hit the windows. I was blinded. I couldn't see anything.

I went down towards the floor, just a little burnt and hurt, the bed falling down upon me to protect me.

Nothing else. Whoever or whatever it was, I was powerless once the sun had come into the sky, no matter how white and thick the veil of winter morning.

Five

"Very well," said David. "Sit down. Stop pacing. And I want you to go over every detail again. If you need to feed before you do this, then we'll go out and—"

"I have told you! I am past that. I don't need to feed. I don't need blood. I crave it. I love it. And I don't want any now! I feasted on Roger last night like a gluttonous demon. Stop talking about blood."

"Would you take your place there at the table?"

Across from him, he meant.

I was standing at the glass wall, looking right down on the roof of St. Patrick's.

He'd gotten us perfect rooms in the Olympic Tower and we were only just above the spires. An immense apartment far in excess of our needs but a perfect domicile nevertheless. The intimacy with the cathedral seemed essential. I could see the cruciform of the roof, the high piercing towers. They looked as if they could impale you, they seemed so sharply pointed at heaven. And heaven as it had been the night before was a soft soundless drift of snow.

I sighed.

"Look, I'm sorry. But I don't want to go all over it again. I can't. Either you accept it as I told you, or I … I … go out of my mind."

He remained sitting calmly at the table. The place had come "turnkey," or furnished. It was the snazzy substantial style of the corporate world—lots of mahogany and leather and shades of beige and tan and gold that could offend no one, conceivably. And flowers. He had seen to flowers. We had the perfume of flowers.

The table and chairs were harmoniously Oriental, the fashionable infusion of Chinese. I think there was a painted urn or two also.

And below we had the Fifty-first Street side of St. Patrick's, and people down there on Fifth going and corning on the snowy steps. The quiet vision of the snow.

"We don't have that much time," I said. "We have to get uptown, and I have to secure that place or move all of those precious objects. I'm not

allowing some accident to happen to Dora's inheritance."

"We can do that, but before we go, try this for me. Describe the man again … not Roger's ghost, or the living statue, or the winged one, but the man you saw standing in the corner of the hotel room, when the sun came up."

"Ordinary, I told you, very ordinary. Anglo-Saxon? Yes, probably. Distinctly Irish or Nordic? No. Just a man. Not a Frenchman, I don't think. No, a routine flavor of American. A man of good height, my height, but not overwhelmingly tall like you. I couldn't have seen him for more than five seconds. It was sunrise. He had me trapped there. I couldn't flee. I went blank. The mattress covered me, and when I woke, no man. Gone, as if I'd imagined it. But I didn't imagine it!"

"Thank you. The hair?"

"Ash blond, almost gray. You know how ash blond can fade to where it's really truly a … a graying brown color, or colorless almost, just sort of deep gray."

He gave a little gesture that he understood.

Cautiously I leant on the glass. With my strength it would have been a simple thing to have accidentally shattered the wall. The last thing I wanted was a blunder.

Obviously he wanted me to say more, and I was trying. I could recall the man fairly distinctly. "An agreeable face, very agreeable. He was the kind of man who doesn't impress one with size or physicality so much as a sort of alertness, a poise and intelligence, I suppose you'd call it. He looked like an interesting man."

"Clothes."

"Not noticeable. Black I think, maybe even a bit dusty? I think I would remember jet black, or beautiful black, or fancy black."

"Eyes distinctive?"

"Only for the intelligence. They weren't large or deeply colored. He looked normal, smart. Dark eyebrows but not terribly heavy or anything like that. Normal forehead, full hair, nice hair, combed, but nothing dandified like mine. Or yours."

"And you believe he spoke the words?"

"I'm sure he did. I heard him. I jumped up. I was awake, you understand, fully awake. I saw the sun. Look at my hand."

I was not as pale as I had been before I went into the Gobi desert,

before I had tempted the sun to kill me in the recent past. But we could both see the burn where the rays of the sun had struck my hand. And I could feel the burn on the right side of my face, though it wasn't visible there because I'd probably turned my head.

"And you woke and you were under the bed, and it was askew, and had been thrown over and had fallen back down."

"No question of it. A lamp was overturned. I had not dreamed it any more than I dreamed Roger or anything else. Look, I want you to come uptown with me. I want you to see this place. Roger's things."

"Oh, I want to," he said. He stood up. "I wouldn't miss this for the world. It's just I wanted you to take your ease a little longer, to try to…."

"What? Get calm? After talking to the ghost of one of my victims? After seeing this man standing in my room! After seeing this thing take Roger, this thing which has been stalking me all over the world, this herald of madness, this—"

"But you didn't really see it take Roger, did you?"

I thought about it for a moment.

"I'm not sure. I'm not sure Roger's image was animated anymore. He looked completely calm. He faded. Then the face of the creature or being or whatever it was—the face was visible for an instant. By that time, I was completely lost—no sense of balance or locality, nothing. I don't know whether Roger was just fading as it took him or whether he accepted it and went along."

"Lestat, you don't know that either thing happened. You only know Roger's ghost disappeared and this thing appeared. That's all you know."

"I suppose that's true."

"Think about it this way. Your Stalker chose to make himself manifest. And he obliterated your ghostly companion."

"No. They were connected. Roger heard him coming! Roger knew he was coming even before I heard the footsteps. Thank God for one thing."

"Which is what?"

"That I can't communicate the fear to you. That I can't make you feel how bad it was. You believe me, which is more than sufficient for the moment, but if you really knew, you wouldn't be calm and collected and the perfect British gentleman."

"I might be. Let's go. I want to see this treasure-house. I believe you're absolutely correct that you can't let all these objects slip out of the

possession of the girl."

"Woman, young woman."

"And we should check on her whereabouts, immediately."

"I did that on the way here."

"In the state you were in?"

"Well, I certainly snapped out of it long enough to go into the hotel and make certain she'd left. I had to do that much. A limousine had taken her to La Guardia at nine a.m. this morning. She reached New Orleans this afternoon. As for the convent, I have no idea how to reach her there. I don't even know if she has the wiring in it for a phone. For now, she's as safe as she ever was while Roger was living."

"Agreed. Let's go uptown."

* * *

Sometimes fear is a warning. It's like someone putting a hand on your shoulder and saying Go No Farther.

As we entered the flat, I felt that for a couple of seconds. Panic. Go No Farther.

But I was too proud to show it and David too curious, proceeding before me into the hallway, and noting, no doubt, as I did, that the place was without life. The recent death? He could smell it as well as I could. I wondered if it was less noxious to him since it had not been his kill.

Roger! The fusion of the mangled corpse and Roger the Ghost in memory was suddenly like a sharp kick in the chest.

David went all the way to the living room while I lingered, looking at the big white marble angel with its shell of holy water and thinking how like the granite statue it was. Blake. William Blake had known. He had seen angels and devils and he'd gotten their proportions right. Roger and I could have talked about Blake.…

But that was over. I was here, in the hallway.

The thought that I had to walk forward, put one foot before the other, reach the living room, and look at that granite statue was suddenly a little more than I could accept.

"It's not here," David said. He hadn't read my mind. He was merely stating the obvious. He was standing in the living room some fifty feet away, looking at me, the halogens throwing just a little of their

dedicated light on him, and he said again, “There is no black granite statue in this room.”

I gave a sigh. “I'm going to hell,” I whispered.

I could see David very distinctly, but no mortal could have. His image was too shadowy. He looked tall and very strong, standing there, back to the dingy light of the windows, the halogens making sparkles on his brass buttons.

“The blood?”

“Yes, the blood, and your glasses. Your violet glasses. A nice piece of evidence.”

“Evidence of what!”

It was too stupid of me to stand here at the back door talking to him over this distance. I walked down the hall as if going cheerfully to the guillotine, and I came into the room.

There was only an empty space where the statue had stood, and I wasn’t even sure it was big enough. Clutter. Plaster saints. Icons, some so old and fragile they were under glass. Last night I hadn’t noticed so very many, sparkling all over the walls in the splinters of light that escaped the directed lamps.

“Incredible!” David whispered.

“I knew you’d love it,” I said dismally. I would have loved it, too, if I were not shaken to the bone.

He was studying the objects, eyes moving back and forth over the icons and then the saints. “Absolutely magnificent objects. This is … is an extraordinary collection. You don’t know what any of this is, do you?”

“Well, more or less,” I said. “I’m not an artistic illiterate.”

“The series of pictures on the wall,” he said. He gestured to a long row of icons, the most fragile.

“Those? Not really.”

“Veronica’s veil,” he said. “These are early copies of the famous mandilion—the veil itself—which supposedly vanished from history centuries ago. Perhaps during the Fourth Crusade. This one’s Russian, flawless. This one? Italian. And look there, on the floor, in stacks, those are the Stations of the Cross.”

“He was obsessed with finding relics for Dora. Besides, he loved the stuff himself. That one, the Russian Veil of Veronica—he had just brought that here to New York to Dora. Last night they quarreled over it,

but she wouldn't take it."

It was quite fine. How he had tried to describe it to her. God, I felt as if I had known him from my youth and we had talked about all of these objects, and every surface for me was layered with his special appreciation and complex of thoughts.

The Stations of the Cross. Of course I knew the devotion, what Catholic child did not? We would follow the fourteen different stations of Christ's passion and journey to Calvary through the darkened church, stopping at each on bended knee to say the appropriate prayers. Or the priest and his altar boys would make the procession, while the congregation would recite with them the meditation on Christ's suffering at each point. Hadn't Veronica come up at the sixth station to wipe the face of Jesus with her veil?

David moved from object to object. "Now, this crucifix, this is really early, this could make a stir."

"But couldn't you say that about all the others?"

"Oh, yes, but I'm not speaking of Dora and her religion, or whatever that's about, simply that these are fabulous works of art. No, you're right, we cannot leave all this to fate, not possible. Here, this little statue could be ninth century, Celtic, unbelievably valuable. And this, this probably came from the Kremlin."

He paused, gripped by an icon of a Madonna and Child. Deeply stylized, of course, as are they all, and this one very familiar, for the Christ child was losing one of his sandals as He clung to his mother, and one could see angels tormenting Him with little symbols of his coming passion, and the Mother's head was tenderly inclined to the son. Halo overlapped halo. The child Jesus running from the future, into his Mother's protective arms.

"You understand the fundamental principle of an icon, don't you?" David asked.

"Inspired by God."

"Not made by hands," said David. "Supposedly directly imprinted upon the background material by God Himself."

"You mean like Jesus' face was imprinted on Veronica's veil?"

"Exactly. All icons fundamentally were the work of God. A revelation in material form. And sometimes a new icon could be made from another simply by pressing a new cloth to the original, and a magic

transfer would occur."

"I see. Nobody was supposed to have painted it."

"Precisely. Look, this is a jewel-framed relic of the True Cross, and this, this book here … my God, these can't be the … No, this is a famous Book of the Hours that was lost in Berlin in the Second World War."

"David, we can make our loving inventory later. Okay? The point is, what do we do now?" I had stopped being so afraid, though I did keep looking at the empty place where the granite devil had stood.

And he had been the Devil, I knew he was. I'd start trembling if we did not go into action.

"How do we save all this for Dora, and where?" David said. "Come on, the cabinets and the notebooks, let's put things in order, find the Wynken de Wilde books, let's make a decision and a plan."

"Don't think about bringing your old mortal allies into this," I said suddenly, suspiciously, and unkindly, I have to admit.

"You mean the Talamasca?" he asked. He looked at me. He was holding the precious Book of the Hours in his hand, its cover as fragile as piecrust.

"It all belongs to Dora," I said. "We have to save it for her. And Wynken's mine if she never wants Wynken."

"Of course, I understand that," he said. "Good heavens, Lestat, do you think I still maintain contact with the Talamasca? They could be trusted in that regard, but I don't want any contact with my old mortal allies, as you call them. I never want any contact with them again. I don't want my file in their archive the way you wanted yours, remember. 'The Vampire Lestat.' I don't want to be remembered by them, except as their Superior General who died of old age. Now come on."

There was a bit of disgust in his voice, and grief, also. I recalled that the death of Aaron Lightner, his old friend, had been "the final straw" with him and his Talamasca. Some sort of controversy had surrounded Lightner's death, but I never knew what it was.

The cabinet was in a room before the parlour, along with several other boxes of records. Immediately I found the financial papers, and went through them while David surveyed the rest.

Having vast holdings of my own, I'm no stranger to legal documents and the tricks of international banks. Yes, Dora had a legacy from unimpeachable sources, I could see that, which could not be touched by

those seeking retribution for Roger's crimes. It was all connected to her name, Theodora Flynn, which must have been her legal name, as the result of Roger's nuptial alias.

There were too many different documents for me to assess the full value, only that it had been accumulated over time. It seemed Dora might have started a new Crusade to take back Istanbul from the Turks had she wanted to. There were some letters … I could pinpoint the exact date two years ago when Dora had refused all further assistance from the two trusts of which she had knowledge. As for the rest, I wondered if she had any idea of the scope.

Scope is everything when it comes to money. Imagination and scope. You lack either of these two things and you can't make moral decisions, or so I've always thought. It sounds contemptible, but think about it. It's not contemptible. Money is power to feed the hungry. To clothe the poor. But you have to know that. Dora had trusts and trusts, and trusts to pay taxes on all the trusts.

I thought in a moment's sorrow of how I had meant to help my beloved Gretchen—Sister Marguerite—and how the mere sight of me had ruined everything, and I'd retreated from her life, with all my gold still in the coffers. Didn't it always turn out like that? I was no saint. I didn't feed the hungry.

But Dora! Quite suddenly it dawned on me—she had become my daughter! She had become my saint just as she'd been Roger's. Now she had another rich father. She had me!

"What is it?" David asked with alarm. He was going through a carton of papers. "You've seen the ghost again?"

For one moment, I almost went into one of my major tremours, but I got a grip. I didn't say anything, but I saw it ever more clearly.

Watch out for Dora! Of course I would watch out for Dora, and somehow I'd convince her to accept everything. Maybe Roger hadn't known the proper arguments. And Roger was now a martyr for all his treasures. Yes, his last angle had been the right angle. He'd ransomed his treasures. Maybe with Dora, if properly explained.…

I was distracted. There they were, the twelve books. Each in a neat thin film of plastic, lined up on the top shelf of a small desk, right near the file cabinet. I knew what they were. I knew. And then there were Roger's labels on them, his fancy scribbling on a small white sticker, "W

de W."

"Look," David said, rising from his knees and wiping the dust from his pants. "These are all simple legal papers on the purchases, everything here is clean, apparently, or has been laundered; there are dozens of receipts, certificates of authentication. I say we take all of this out of here now."

"Yes, but how, and to where?"

"Think, what's the safest place? Your rooms in New Orleans are certainly not safe. We can't trust these things to a warehouse in a city like New York."

"Exactly. I do have rooms here at a little hotel across from the park but that…."

"Yes, I remember, that's where the Body Thief followed you. You mean you didn't change that address?"

"Doesn't matter. It wouldn't hold all this."

"But you realize that our sizable quarters in the Olympic Tower would hold all this," he said.

"You serious?" I asked.

"Of course I am. What could be more secure? Now we've work to do. We can't have any mortal connections with this. We're going to do all this toiling ourselves."

"Ah!" I gave a disgusted sigh. "You mean wrap all this and move it?"

He laughed. "Yes! Hercules had to do such things, and so have angels. How do you think Michael felt when he had to go from door to door in Egypt slaying the First Born of every house? Come on. You don't realize how simple it is to cushion all these items with modern plastics. I say we move it ourselves. It will be a venture. Why not go over the roofs."

"Ah, there is nothing more irritating than the energy of a fledgling vampire," I said wearily. But I knew he was right. And our strength was incalculably greater than that of any mortal helper. We could have all this cleared out perhaps within the night.

Some night!

I will say in retrospect that labor is an antidote for angst and general misery, and the fear that the Devil is going to grab you by the throat at any moment and bring you down into the fiery pit!

We amassed a huge supply of an insulating material made with bubbles of air trapped in plastic, which could indeed bind the most

fragile relic in a harmless embrace. I removed the financial papers and the books of Wynken, carefully examining each to make sure I was right about what I had, and then we proceeded to the heavy labor.

Sack by sack we transported all the smaller objects, going over the rooftops as David had suggested, unnoticed by mortals, two stealthy black figures flying as witches might to the Sabbath.

The larger objects we had to take more lovingly, each of us toting one at a time in our arms. I deliberately avoided the great white marble angel. But David loved it, talking to it all the way until we reached our destination. And all this was slipped into the secure rooms of the Olympic Tower in a rather proper way through the freight stairways, with the obligatory mortal pace.

Our little clocks would wind down as we touched the mortal world, and we would pass into it quickly, gentlemen furnishing their new digs with appropriately and securely wrapped treasures.

Soon the clean, carpeted rooms above St. Patrick's housed a wilderness of ghostly plastic packages, some looking all too much like mummies, or less carefully embalmed dead bodies. The white marble angel with her seashell holy water basin was perhaps the largest. The books of Wynken, wrapped and bound, lay on the Oriental dining table. I hadn't really had a chance to look at them, but now was not the moment.

I sank down in a chair in the front room, panting from sheer boredom and fury that I had had to do anything so utterly menial. David was jubilant.

"The security's perfect here," David said enthusiastically. His young male body seemed inflamed with his own personal spirit. When I looked at him, sometimes I saw both merged—the elderly David, the young strapping Anglo-Indian male form. But most of the time, he was merely starkly perfect. And surely the strongest fledgling I had ever produced.

That wasn't due only to the strength of my blood or my own trials and tribulations before I'd brought him over. I'd given him more blood than I'd ever given title others when I made him. I'd risked my own survival. But no matter—

I sat there loving him, loving my own work. I was full of dust.

I realized that everything had been taken care of. We had even brought the rugs last, in rolls. Even the rug soaked with Roger's blood. Relic of the martyred Roger. Well, I would spare Dora that detail.

“I have to hunt,” David said in a whisper, waking me from my calculations.

I didn’t reply.

“You coming?”

“You want me to?” I asked.

He stood there regarding me with the strangest expression, dark youthful face without any palpable condemnation or even disgust.

“Why don’t you? Don’t you enjoy seeing it, even if you don’t want it?”

I nodded. I’d never dreamed he would let me watch. Louis hated it when I watched. When we’d been together last year, the three of us, David had been far too reticent and suspicious to suggest such a thing.

We went down into the thick snowy darkness of Central Park. Everywhere one could hear the park’s nighttime occupants, snoring, grumbling, tiny whiffs of conversation, smoke. These are strong individuals, individuals who know how to live in the wild in the midst of a city that is itself notoriously fatal to its unlucky ones.

David found what he wanted quickly—a young male with a skullcap, his bare toes showing through his broken shoes, a walker in the night, lone and drugged and insensible to the cold and talking aloud to people of long ago.

I stood back under the trees, wet with snow and uncaring. David reached out for the young man’s shoulder, brought him gently around and embraced him. Classic. As David bent to drink, the young man began to laugh and talk simultaneously. And then went quiet, transfixed, until at last the body was gently laid to rest at the foot of a leafless tree.

The skyscrapers of New York glowed to the south of us, the warmer, smaller lights of the East and the West Side hemmed us in. David stood very still, thinking what, I wondered?

It seemed he’d lost the ability to move. I went towards him. He was no calm, diligent archivist at the moment. He looked to be suffering.

“What?” I asked.

“You know what,” he whispered. “I won’t survive that long.”

“You serious? With the gifts I gave you—”

“Shhhh, we’re too much in the habit of saying things to each other which we know are unacceptable to each other. We should stop.”

“And speak only the truth? All right. This is the truth. Now, you feel as if you can’t survive. Now. When his blood is hot and swirling through

you. Of course. But you won't feel that way forever. That's the key. I don't want to talk anymore about survival. I took a good crack at ending my life; it didn't work, and besides, I have something else to think about —this thing that's following me, and how I can help Dora before it closes in on me."

That shut him up.

We started walking, mortal fashion, through the dark park together, my feet crunching deep into the snow. We wandered in and out of the leafless groves, pushing aside the wet black branches, the looming buildings of midtown never quite out of sight.

I was on edge for the sound of the footsteps. I was on edge and a dreary thought had come to me—that the monstrous thing that had been revealed, the Devil himself or whoever it was, had merely been after Roger….

But then what of the man, the anonymous and perfectly ordinary man? That is what he had become in my mind, the man I'd glimpsed before dawn.

We drew near to the lights of Central Park South, the buildings rising higher, with an arrogance that Babylon could not have thrown in the face of heaven. But there were the comforting sounds of the well-heeled, and the committed, coming and going, and the never-ending push and shove of taxis adding to the din.

David was brooding, stricken.

Finally I said, "If you'd seen the thing that I saw, you wouldn't be so eager to jump to the next stage." I gave a sigh. I wasn't going to describe the winged thing to either one of us again.

"I'm quite inspired by it," he confessed. "You can't imagine."

"Going to Hell? With a Devil like that?"

"Did you feel it was hellish? Did you sense evil? I asked you that before. Did you feel evil when the thing took Roger? Did Roger give any indication of pain?"

Those questions seemed to me a bit hairsplitting.

"Don't get overly optimistic about death," I said. "I'm warning you. My views are changing. The atheism and nihilism of my earlier years now seems shallow, and even a bit cocky."

He smiled, dismissively, as he used to do when he was mortal and visibly wore the laurels of venerable age.

“Have you ever read the stories of Hawthorne?” he asked me softly. We had reached the street, crossed, and were slowly skirting the fountain before the Plaza.

“Yes,” I said. “At some time or other.”

“And you remember Ethan Brand’s search for the unpardonable sin?”

“I think so. He went off to search for it and left his fellow man behind.”

“Recall this paragraph,” he said gently. We made our way down Fifth, a street that is never empty, or dark. He quoted the lines to me:

“ ‘He had lost his hold of the magnetic chain of humanity. He was no longer a brother-man, opening the chambers or the dungeons of our common nature by the key of holy sympathy, which gave him a right to share in all its secrets; he was now a cold observer, looking on mankind as the subject of his experiment, and, at length, converting man and woman to be his puppets, and pulling the wires that moved them to such degrees of crime as were demanded for his study.’ ”

I said nothing. I wanted to protest, but it was not an honest thing to do. I wanted to say that I would never, never treat humans like puppets. All I had done was watch Roger, damn it all, and Gretchen in the jungles. I had pulled no strings. Honesty had undone her and me together. But then he wasn’t speaking of me with these words. He was talking about himself, the distance he felt now from the human. He had only begun to be Ethan Brand.

“Let me continue a little farther,” he asked respectfully, then began to quote again. “ ‘Thus Ethan Brand became a fiend. He began to be so from the moment that his moral nature had ceased to keep the pace of improvement with his intellect—’ ” He broke off.

I didn’t reply.

“That’s our damnation,” he whispered. “Our moral improvement has reached its finish, and our intellect grows by leaps and bounds.”

Still I said nothing. What was I to say? Despair was so familiar to me; it could be banished by the sight of a beautiful mannikin in the window. It could be dispelled by the spectacle of lights surrounding a tower. It could be lifted by the great ghostly shape of St. Patrick's coming into view. And then despair would come again.

Meaningless, I almost said, aloud, but what came from my lips was completely different.

“I have Dora to think of,” I said.
Dora.
“Yes, and thanks to you,” he said, “I have Dora too, now don’t I?”

Six

How and when and what to tell Dora? That was the question. The journey we made to New Orleans early the next night.

There was no sign of Louis at the town house in the Rue Royale, but this was by no means unusual. Louis took to wandering more and more often, and he had been seen once by David in the company of Armand in Paris. The town house was spotless, a dream set out of time, full of my favorite Louis XV furnishings, luscious wallpaper, and the finest carpets to be found.

David, of course, was familiar with the place, though he hadn't seen it in over a year. One of the many picture-perfect bedrooms, drenched in saffron silks and outrageous Turkish tables and screens, still held the coffin in which he had slept during his brief and first stay here as one of the Undead.

Of course, this coffin was heavily disguised. He had insisted that it be the real thing—as fledglings almost invariably do, unless they are nomads by nature—but it was cleverly enough concealed within a heavy bronze chest, which Louis had chosen for it afterwards—a great hulking rectangular object as defeating as a square piano, with no perceivable opening in it, though of course, if you knew the right places to touch, the lid rose at once.

I had made my resting place as I had promised myself, when restoring this house in which Claudia and Louis and I had once lived. Not in my old bedroom, which now housed only the de rigueur heavy four-poster and dressing table, but in the attic, beneath the eave, I had made a cell of metal and marble.

In sum, we had a comfortable base immediately, and I was frankly relieved that Louis was not there to tell me he didn't believe me when I described the things that I'd seen. His rooms were in order; new books had been added. There was a vivid and arresting new painting by Matisse. Otherwise, things were the same.

As soon as we had settled in, checked all security, as immortals always do, with a breezy scan and a deep resistance to having to do anything

mortals have to do, we decided that I should go uptown and try to catch a glimpse of Dora alone.

I had seen or heard nothing of the Stalker, though not much time had passed, of course, and I had seen nothing of The Ordinary Man.

We agreed that either might appear at any moment.

Nevertheless, I broke from the company of David, leaving him to explore the city as he wished.

Before leaving the Quarter for uptown, I called upon Mojo, my dog. If you are unacquainted with Mojo from *The Tale of the Body Thief*, let me tell you only what you need to know—that he is a giant German shepherd, is kept for me by a gracious mortal woman in a building of which I retain ownership, and that Mojo loves me, which I find irresistible. He is a dog, no more, or less, except that he is immense in size, with an extremely thick coat, and I cannot stay long away from him.

I spent an hour or two with him, wrestling, rolling around with him on the ground in the back garden, and talking to him about everything that happened, then debated as to whether I should take him with me uptown. His dark, long face, wolflike and seemingly evil, was full of the usual gentleness and forbearance. God, why didn't you make us all dogs?

Actually, Mojo created a sense of safety in me. If the Devil came and I had Mojo.… But that was the most absurd idea! I'd fend off Hell on account of a flesh-and-blood dog. Well, humans have believed stranger things, I suppose.

Just before I'd left David, I'd asked, "What do you think is happening, I mean with this Stalker and this Ordinary Man?" And David had answered without hesitation, "You're imagining both of them, you punish yourself relentlessly; it's the only way you know how to go on having fun."

I should have been insulted. But I wasn't.

Dora was real.

Finally, I decided I had to take leave of Mojo. I was going to spy upon Dora. And had to be fleet of foot. I kissed Mojo and left him. Later we would walk in our favorite wastelands beneath the River Bridge, amid the grass and the garbage, and be together. That I would have for as long as nature let me have it. For the moment it could wait.

Back to Dora.

Of course Dora didn't know Roger was dead. There was no way that she could know, unless—perhaps—Roger had appeared to her. But I hadn't gathered from Roger that such was even possible. Appearing to me had apparently consumed all his energy. Indeed, I thought he had been far too protective of Dora to have haunted her in any practical or deliberate way.

But what did I know about ghosts? Except for a few highly mechanical and indifferent apparitions, I'd never spoken to a ghost until I'd spoken to Roger.

And now I would carry with me forever the indelible impression of his love for Dora, and his peculiar mixture of conscience and supreme self-confidence. In retrospect, even his visit seemed to me to exhibit extraordinary self-assurance. That he could haunt, that was not beyond probability since the world is filled with impressive and credible ghost stories. But that he could detain me in conversation—that he could make me his confidant—that had indeed involved an enormous and almost dazzling pride.

I walked uptown in human fashion, breathing the river air, and glad to be back with my black-barked oaks, and the sprawling, dimly lighted houses of New Orleans, the intrusions everywhere of grass and vine and flower; home.

Too soon, I reached the old brick convent building on Napoleon Avenue where Dora was lodged. Napoleon Avenue itself is a rather beautiful street even for New Orleans; it has an extraordinarily wide median where once streetcars used to run. Now there are generous shade trees planted on it, just as there were all around the convent that faced it.

It was the leafy depth of Victorian uptown.

I drew close to the building slowly, eager to imprint its details on my mind. How I'd changed since last I'd spied on Dora.

Second Empire was the style of the convent, due to a mansard roof which covered the central portion of the building and its long wings. Old slates had, here and there, fallen away from the sloping mansard, which was concave on the central part and quite unusual on account of that fact. The brickwork itself, the rounded arched windows, the four corner towers of the building, the two-storey plantation-house porch on the front of the central building—with its white columns and black iron

railings—all of this was vaguely New Orleans Italianate, and gracefully proportioned. Old copper gutters clung to the base of the roofs. There were no shutters, but surely there had once been.

The windows were numerous, high, rounded at the tops on the second and third storeys, trimmed in faded white.

A great sparse garden covered the front of the building as it looked out over the avenue, and of course I knew of the immense courtyard inside. The entire city block was dominated by this little universe in which nuns and orphans, young girls of all ages, had once dwelt. Great oaks sprawled over the sidewalks. A row of truly ancient crape myrtles lined the side street to the south.

Walking round the building, I surveyed the high stained-glass windows of the two-storey chapel, noted the flickering of a light inside, as though the Blessed Sacrament were present—a fact that I doubted—and then coming to the rear I went over the wall.

The building did have some locked doors, but not very many. It was wrapped in silence, and in the mild but nevertheless real winter of New Orleans, it was chillier within than without.

I entered the lower corridor cautiously, and at once found myself loving the proportions of the place, the loftiness and the breadth of the corridors, the intense smell of the recently bared brick walls, and the good wood scent of the bare yellow pine floors. It was rough, all this, the kind of rough which is fashionable among artists in big cities who live in old warehouses, or call their immense apartments lofts.

But this was no warehouse. This had been a habitation and something of a hallowed one. I could feel it at once. I walked slowly down the long corridor towards the northeast stairs. Above to my right lived Dora in the northeast tower, so to speak, of the building, and her living quarters did not begin until the third floor.

I sensed no one in the building. No scent nor sound of Dora. I heard the rats, the insects, something a little larger than a rat, possibly a raccoon feeding away somewhere up in an attic, and then I felt for the elementals, as David called them—those things which I prefer to call spirits, or poltergeists.

I stood still, eyes closed. I listened. It seemed the silence gave back dim emanations of personalities, but they were far too weak and too mingled to touch my heart or spark a thought in me. Yes, ghosts here,

and here … but I sensed no spiritual turbulence, no unresolved tragedy or hanging injustice. On the contrary, there seemed a spiritual stillness and firmness.

The building was whole and itself.

I think the building liked having been stripped to its nineteenth-century essentials; even the naked beamed ceilings, though never built for exposure, were nevertheless beautiful without plaster, their wood dark and heavy and level because all the carpentry of those years had been done with such care.

The stairway was original. I had walked up a thousand such built in New Orleans. This building had at least five. I knew the gentle curve to each tread, worn down by the feet of children, the silky feel of the banister which had been waxed countless times for a century. I knew the landing which cut directly against an exterior window, ignoring the shape or existence of the window, and simply bisecting the light which came from the street outside.

When I reached the second floor, I realized I was at the doorway of the chapel. It had not seemed such a large space from outside.

It was in fact as large as many a church I'd seen in my years. Some twenty or so pews were in neat rows on either side of its main aisle. The plastered ceiling was coved and crowned with fancy molding. Old medallions still held firmly in the plaster from which, no doubt, gasoliers had once hung. The stained-glass windows, though without human figures, were nevertheless very well executed, as the streetlamp showed to good advantage. And the names of the patrons were beautifully lettered on the lower panes of each window. There was no sanctuary light, only a bank of candles before a plaster Regina Maria, that is, a Virgin wearing an ornate crown.

The place must have been much as the Sisters had left it when the building was sold. Even the holy water fount was there, though it had no giant angel to hold it. It was only a simple marble basin on a stand.

I passed beneath a choir loft as I entered, somewhat amazed at the purity and symmetry of the entire design. What was it like, living in a building with your own chapel? Two hundred years ago I had knelt more than once in my father's chapel. But that had been no more than a tiny stone room in our castle, and this vast place, with its old oscillating electric fans for breeze in summer, seemed no less authentic than my

father's little chapel had been.

This was more the chapel of royalty, and the entire convent seemed suddenly a palazzo—rather than an institutional building. I imagined myself living here, not as Dora would have approved, but in splendour, with miles of polished floors before me as I made my way each night into this great sanctuary to say my prayers.

I liked this place. It flamed into my mind. Buy a convent, make it your palace, live within its safety and grandeur in some forgotten spot of a modern city! I felt covetous, or rather, my respect for Dora deepened.

Countless Europeans still lived in such buildings, multi-storeyed, wings facing each other over expensive private courts. Paris had its share of such mansions, surely. But in America, it presented a lovely picture, the idea of living here in such luxury.

But that had not been Dora's dream. Dora wanted to train her women here, her female preachers who would declare the Word of God with the fire of St. Francis or Bonaventure.

Well, if her faith were suddenly swept away by Roger's death, she could live here in splendour.

And what power had I to affect Dora's dream? Whose wishes would be fulfilled if I somehow positioned her so that she accepted her enormous wealth and made herself a princess in this palace? One happy human being saved from the misery which religion can so effortlessly generate?

It wasn't an altogether worthless idea. Just typical of me. To think in terms of Heaven on Earth, freshly painted in pastel hues, floored in fine stone, and centrally heated.

Awful, Lestat.

Who was I to think such things? Why, we could live here like Beauty and the Beast, Dora and I. I laughed out loud. A shiver ran down my back, but I didn't hear the footsteps.

I was suddenly quite alone. I listened. I bristled.

"Don't you dare come near me now," I whispered to the Stalker who was not there, for all I knew. "I'm in a chapel. I am safe! Safe as if I were in the cathedral."

I wondered if the Stalker was laughing at me. *Lestat, you imagined it all.*

Never mind. Walk up the marble aisle towards the Communion Rail. Yes, there was still a Communion Rail. Look at what is before you, and

don't think just now.

Roger's urgent voice was at the ear of my memory. But I loved Dora already, didn't I? I was here. I would do something. I was merely taking my time!

My footsteps echoed throughout the chapel. I let it happen. The Stations of the Cross, small, in deep relief in plaster, were still fixed between the stained-glass windows, making the usual circuit of the church, and the altar was gone from its deep arched niche—and there stood instead a giant Crucified Christ.

Crucifixes always fascinate me. There are numerous ways in which various details can be rendered, and the art of the Crucified Christ alone fills much of the world's museums, and those cathedrals and basilicas that have become museums. But this, even for me, was a rather impressive one. It was huge, old, very realistic in the style of the late nineteenth century, Christ's scant loincloth coiling in the wind, his face hollow-cheeked and profoundly sorrowful.

Surely it was one of Roger's finds. It was too big for the altar niche, for one thing, and of impressive workmanship, whereas the scattered plaster saints who remained on their pedestals—the predictable and pretty St. Therese of Lisieux in her Carmelite robes, with her cross and her bouquet of roses; St. Joseph with his lily; and even the Maria Regina with her crown at her shrine beside the altar—were all more or less routine. They were life-size; they were carefully painted; they were not fine works of art.

The Crucified Christ pushed one to some sort of resolution. Either "I loathe Christianity in all its bloodiness," or some more painful feeling, perhaps for a time in youth when one had imagined one's hands systematically pierced with those particular nails. Lent. Meditations. The Church. The Priest's voice entoning the words. *Our Lord.*

I felt both the loathing and the pain. Hovering near in the shadows, watching outside lights flicker and flare in the stained glass, I felt boyhood memories near me, or maybe I tolerated them. Then I thought of Roger's love for his daughter, and the memories were nothing, and the love was everything. I went up the steps that had once led to the altar and tabernacle. I reached up and touched the foot of the crucified figure. Old wood. Shimmer of hymns, faint and secretive. I looked up into the face and saw not a countenance twisted in agony, but wise and still,

perhaps in the final seconds before death.

A loud echoing noise sounded somewhere in the building. I stepped back almost too fast, and lost my footing stupidly and found myself facing the church. Someone moved in the building, someone walking at a moderate pace on the lower floor and towards the same stairway up which I'd come to the chapel door.

I moved swiftly to the entrance of the vestibule. I could hear no voice and detect no scent! No scent. My heart sank. "I won't take any more of this!" I whispered. I was already shaking. But some mortal scents don't come that easily; there is the breeze to consider, or rather the draughts, which in this place were considerable.

The figure was mounting the stairs.

I leant back behind the chapel door so I might see it turn at the landing. And if it was Dora I meant to hide at once.

But it wasn't Dora, and it came walking so fast right up the stairs, lightly and briskly towards me, that I realized who it was as he came to a stop in front of me.

The Ordinary Man.

I stood stock-still, staring at him. Not quite my height; not quite my build; regular in every respect as I remembered. Scentless? No, but the scent was not right. It was mingled with blood and sweat and salt and I could hear a faint heartbeat.…

"Don't torment yourself," he said, in a very civil and diplomatic voice. "I'm debating. Should I make my offer now, or before you get mixed up with Dora? I'm not sure what's best."

He was four feet away at the moment.

I slouched arrogantly against the doorframe of the vestibule and folded my arms. The whole flickering chapel was behind me. Did I look frightened? Was I frightened? Was I about to perish of fright?

"Are you going to tell me who you are," I asked, "and what you want, or am I supposed to ask questions and draw this out of you?"

"You know who I am," he said in the same reticent, simple manner.

Something struck me suddenly. What was outstanding were the proportions of his figure and his face. The regularity itself. He was rather a generic man.

He smiled. "Exactly. It's the form I prefer in every age and place, because it doesn't attract very much attention." Again the voice was

good-natured. “Going about with black wings and goat’s feet, you know—it overwhelms mortals instantly.”

“I want you to get the hell out of here before Dora comes!” I said. I was suddenly sputtering crazy.

He turned, slapped his thigh, and laughed.

“You are a brat, Lestat,” he said in his simple, unimposing voice. “Your cohorts named you properly. You can’t give me orders.”

“I don’t know why not. What if I throw you out?”

“Would you like to try? Shall I take my other form? Shall I let my wings….” I heard the chatter of voices, and my vision was clouding.

“No!” I shouted.

“All right.”

The transformation came to a halt. The dust settled. I felt my heart knock against my chest like it wanted to get out.

“I’ll tell you what I’m going to do,” he said. “I’ll let you handle things with Dora, since you seem obsessed with it. And I won’t be able to distract you from it. And then when you've finished with all this, this girl and her dreams and such, we can talk together, you and I.”

“About what?”

“Your soul, what else?”

“I’m ready to go to Hell,” I said, lying through my teeth. “But I don’t believe you’re what you claim to be. You’re something, something like me for which there aren’t scientific explanations, but behind it all, there’s a cheap little core of facts that will eventually lay bare everything, even the texture of each black feather of your wings.”

He frowned slightly, but he wasn’t angry.

“We won’t continue at this pace,” he said. “I assure you. But for now, I’ll let you think about Dora. Dora’s on her way home. Her car has just pulled into the courtyard. I’m going, with regular footsteps, the way I came. And I give you one piece of advice, for both of us.”

“Which is what?” I demanded.

He turned his back on me and started down the stairway, as quick and spry as he had come up. He didn’t turn around till he reached the landing. I had already caught Dora’s scent.

“What advice?” I demanded.

“That you leave Dora alone completely. Turn her affairs over to worldly lawyers. Get away from this place. We have more important

things to discuss. This is all so distracting."

Then he was gone with a clatter down the lower stairs, and presumably out a side door. I heard it open and close.

And almost immediately following, I heard Dora come through the main rear entrance into the center of the building, the way I had entered, and the way he had entered, and she began her progress down the hall.

She sang to herself as she came, or hummed, I should say. The sweet aroma of womb blood came from her. Her menses. Maddeningly, it amplified the succulent scent of the whole child moving towards me.

I slipped back into the shadows of the vestibule. She wouldn't see me or have any knowledge of me as she went by and on up the next stairway to her third-floor room.

She was skipping steps when she reached the second floor. She had a backpack slung over her shoulders and wore a pretty, loose old-fashioned dress of flowered cotton with long, white lace-trimmed sleeves.

She swung round to go up when she suddenly stopped. She turned in my direction. I froze. She could not possibly see me in this light.

Then she came towards me. She reached out. I saw her white fingers touch something on the wall; it was a light switch. A simple plastic light switch, and suddenly a flood came from the bulb above.

Picture this: the blond male intruder, eyes hidden by the violet sunglasses, now nice and clean, with no more of her father's blood, black wool coat and pants.

I threw up my hands as if to say "I won't hurt you!" I was speechless.

I disappeared.

That is, I moved past her so swiftly she couldn't see it; I brushed her about like the air would brush her. That's all. I made the two flights to an attic, and went through an open door in the dark spaces above the chapel, where only a few windows in the mansard let in a tiny light from the street. One of the windows was broken out. A quick way to make an exit. But I stopped. I sat down very still in the corner. I shrank up into the corner. I drew up my knees, pushed my glasses up on my nose, and looked across the width of the attic towards the door through which I'd come.

I heard no screams. I heard nothing. She had not gone into hysterics;

she was not running madly through the building. She had sounded no alarms. Fearless, quiet, having seen a male intruder. I mean, next to a vampire, what in the world is as dangerous to a lone woman as a young human male?

I realized my teeth were chattering. I put my right hand into a fist and pushed it into my left palm. Devil, man, who the hell are you, waiting for me, telling me not to talk to her, what tricks, don't talk to her, I was never going to talk to her, Roger, what the hell am I to do now? I never meant for her to see me like this!

I should never, never have come without David. I needed the anchor of a witness. And the Ordinary Man, would he have dared to come up if David had been here? I loathed him! I was in a whirlpool. I wasn't going to survive.

Which meant what? What was going to kill me?

Suddenly I realized that she was coming up the stairs. This time she walked slowly, and very quietly. A mortal couldn't have heard her. She had her electric torch with her. I hadn't noticed it before. But now she had it, and the beam came through the open attic door and ran along the sloping dark boards of the inner roof.

She stepped into the attic and switched off the torch. She looked around very cautiously, her eyes filling with the white light coming through the round windows. It was possible to see things fairly distinctly here because of those round windows, and because the streetlamps were so close.

Then she found me with her eyes. She looked right at me in the corner.

"Why are you frightened?" she asked. Her voice was soothing.

I realized I was jammed into the corner, legs crossed, knees beneath my chin, arms locked around my legs, looking up at her.

"I … I am sorry…." I said. "I was afraid … that I had frightened you. I was ashamed that I had caused you distress. I felt that I'd been unforgivably clumsy."

She stepped towards me, fearlessly. Her scent filled the attic slowly, like the vapor from a pinch of burning incense.

She looked tall and lithesome in the flowered dress, with the lace at her cuffs. Her short black hair covered her head like a little cap with curls against her cheeks. Her eyes were big and dark, and made me think

of Roger.

Her gaze was nothing short of spectacular. She could have unnerved a predator with her gaze, the light striking the bones of her cheeks, her mouth quiet and devoid of all emotion.

"I can leave now if you like," I said tremulously. "I can simply get up very slowly and leave without hurting you. I swear it. You must not be alarmed."

"Why you?" she asked.

"I don't understand your question," I said. Was I crying? Was I just shivering and shaking? "What do you mean, why me?"

She came in closer and looked down at me. I could see her very distinctly.

Perhaps she saw a mop of blond hair and the glint of light in my glasses and that I seemed young.

I saw her curling black eyelashes, her small but firm chin, and the way that her shoulders so abruptly sloped beneath her lace and flowered dress that she seemed hardly to have shoulders at all—a long sketch of a girl, a dream lily woman. Her tiny waist beneath the loose fabric of the waistless dress would be nothing in one's arms.

There was something almost chilling about her presence. She seemed neither cold nor wicked, but just as frightening as if she were! Was this sanctity? I wondered if I had ever been in the presence of a true saint. I had my definitions for the word, didn't I?

"Why did *you* come to tell me?" she asked tenderly.

"Tell you what, dearest?" I asked.

"About Roger. That he's dead." She raised her eyebrows very lightly. "That's why you came, wasn't it? I knew it when I saw you. I knew that Roger was dead. But why did *you* come?"

She came down on her knees in front of me.

I let out a long groan. So she'd read it from my mind! My big secret. My big decision. Talk to her? Reason with her? Spy on her? Fool her? Counsel her? And my mind had slapped her abruptly with the good news: Hey, honey, Roger's dead!

She came very close to me. Far too close. She shouldn't. In a moment she'd be screaming. She lifted the dead electric torch.

"Don't turn on your flashlight," I said.

"Why don't you want me to? I won't shine it in your face, I promise. I

just want to see you."

"No."

"Look, you don't frighten me, if that's what you're thinking," she said simply, without drama, her thoughts stirring wildly beneath her words, her mind embracing every detail in front of her.

"And why not?"

"Because God wouldn't let something like you hurt me. I know that. You're a devil or an evil spirit. You're a good spirit. I don't know. I can't know. If I make the Sign of the Cross you might vanish. But I don't think so. What I want to know is, why are you so frightened of me? Surely it's not virtue, is it?"

"Wait just a second, back up. You mean you know that I'm not human?"

"Yes. I can see it. I can feel it! I've seen beings like you before. I've seen them in crowds in big cities, just glimpses. I've seen many things. I'm not going to say I feel sorry for you, because that's very stupid, but I'm not afraid of you. You're earthbound, aren't you?"

"Absolutely," I said. "And hoping to stay that way indefinitely. Look, I didn't mean to shock you with the news. I loved your father."

"You did?"

"Yes. And … and he loved you very much. There are things he wanted me to tell you. But above all, he wanted me to look out for you."

"You don't seem capable of that. You're like a frightened elf. Look at you."

"You're not the one I'm terrified of, Dora!" I said with sudden impatience. "I don't know what's happening! I am earth-bound, yes, that's true. And I … and I killed your father. I took his life. I'm the one who did that to him. And he talked to me afterwards. He said, 'Look out for Dora.' He came to me and told me to look out for you. Now there it is. I'm not terrified of you. It's more the situation, never having been in such circumstances, never having faced such questions!"

"I see!" She was stunned. Her whole white face glistened as if she'd broken into a sweat. Her heart was racing. She bowed her head. Her mind was unreadable. Absolutely unreadable to me. But she was full of sorrow, anyone could see that, and the tears were sliding down her cheeks now. This was unbearable.

"Oh, God, I might as well be in Hell," I muttered. "I shouldn't have

killed him. I … I did it for the simplest reasons. He was just … he crossed my path. It was a hideous mistake. But he came to me afterwards. Dora, we spent hours talking together, his ghost and me. He told me all about you and the relics and Wynken."

"Wynken?" She looked at me.

"Yes, Wynken de Wilde, you know, the twelve books. Look, Dora, if I touch your hand just to try to comfort you, perhaps it will work. But I don't want you to scream."

"Why did you kill my father?" she asked. It meant more than that. She was asking, Why did someone who talks the way you do, do such a thing?

"I wanted his blood. I feed on the blood of others. That's how I stay youthful and alive. Believe in angels? Then believe in vampires. Believe in me. There are worse things on earth."

She was appropriately stunned.

"Nosferatu," I said gently. "Verdilak. Vampire. Lamia. Earthbound." I shrugged, shook my head. I felt utterly helpless. "There are other species of things. But Roger, Roger came with his soul as a ghost to talk to me afterwards, about you."

She started to shake and to cry. But this wasn't madness. Her eyes went small with tears and her face crumpled with sadness.

"Dora, I won't hurt you for anything under God, I swear it. I won't hurt you.…"

"My father's really dead, isn't he?" she asked, and suddenly she broke down completely, her face in her hands, her little shoulders trembling with sobs. "My God, God help me!" she whispered. "Roger," she cried. "Roger!"

And she did make the Sign of the Cross, and she sat there, sobbing and unafraid.

I waited. Her tears and sorrow fed upon themselves. She was becoming more and more miserable. She leant forward and collapsed on the boards. Again, she had no fear of me. It was as if I weren't there.

Very slowly I slipped out of the corner. It was possible to stand up easily in this attic, once you were out of the corner. I moved around her, and then very gently reached to take her by the shoulders.

She gave no resistance; she was sobbing, and her head rolled as if she were drunk with sorrow; her hands moved but only to rise and grasp for

things that weren't there. "God, God, God," she cried. "God … Roger!"

I picked her up. She was as light as I had suspected, but nothing like that could matter anyway to one as strong as me. I took her out of the attic. She fell against my chest.

"I knew it, I knew when he kissed me," she said through her sobbing, "I knew I would never lay eyes on him again. I knew it.…" This was hardly intelligible. She was so crushably small, I had to be most careful, and when her head fell back, her face was blanched and so helpless as to make a devil weep.

I went down to the door of her room. She lay against me, still like a rag doll tossed into my arms, without resistance. There was warmth coming from her room. I pushed open the door.

Having once been a classroom perhaps, or even a dormitory, the room was very large, set in the very corner of the building, with lofty windows on two sides and full of the brighter light from the street.

The passing traffic illuminated it.

I saw her bed against the far wall, an old iron bed, rather plain, perhaps once a convent bed, narrow like that, with the high rectangular frame intact for the mosquito netting, though none hung from it now. White paint flaked from the thin iron rods. I saw her bookcases everywhere, stacks of books, books open with markers, propped on makeshift lecterns, and her own relics, hundreds of them perhaps, pictures, and statues, and maybe things Roger had given her before she knew the truth. Words were written in cursive on the wooden frames of doors and windows in black ink.

I took her to the bed and laid her down on it. She sank gratefully, it seemed, into the mattress and the pillow. Things here were clean in the modern way, fresh, and so repeatedly and thoroughly laundered that they looked almost new.

I handed her my silk handkerchief. She took it, then looked at it and said, "But it's too good."

"No, use it, please. It's nothing. I have hundreds."

She regarded me in silence, then began to wipe her face. Her heart was beating more slowly, but the scent of her had been made even stronger by her emotions.

Her menses. It was being neatly collected by a pad of white cotton between her legs. I let myself think of it now because the menses was

heavy and the smell was overpoweringly delicious to me. It began to torture me, the thought of licking this blood. This isn't pure blood, you understand, but blood is its vehicle and I felt the normal temptation that vampires do in such circumstances, to lick the blood from her nethermouth between her legs, a way of feeding on her that wouldn't harm her.

Except under the circumstances it was a perfectly outrageous and impossible thought.

There was a long silent interval.

I merely sat there on a wooden straight-backed chair. I knew she was beside me, sitting up, legs crossed, and that she'd found a box of tissue which provided a world of comfort to her, and she was blowing her nose and wiping her eyes. My silk handkerchief was still clutched in her hand.

She was extremely excited by my presence but still unafraid, and far too sunk in sorrow to enjoy this confirmation of thousands of beliefs, a pulsing nonhuman with her, that looked and talked as if it were human. She couldn't let herself embrace this right now. But she couldn't quite get over it. Her fearlessness was true courage. She wasn't stupid. She was someplace so far beyond fear that cowards could never even grasp it.

Fools might have thought her fatalistic. But it wasn't that. It was the ability to think ahead, and thereby banish panic utterly. Some mortals must know this right before they die. When the game's up, and everyone has said farewell. She looked at everything from that fatal, tragic, unerring perspective.

I stared at the floor. No, don't fall in love with her.

The yellow pine boards had been sanded, lacquered, and waxed. The color of amber. Very beautiful. The whole palazzo might have this look one day. Beauty and the Beast. And as Beasts go, I mean, really, I'm quite a stunner.

I hated myself for having such a good time in a miserable moment like this, thinking of dancing with her through the corridors. I thought of Roger, and that brought me back quick enough, and the Ordinary Man, ah, that monster waiting for me!

I looked at her desk, two telephones, the computer, more books in stacks, and somewhere in the corner a little television, merely for study, apparently, the screen no bigger than four or five inches across though it was connected to a long coiling and winding black cable, which I knew

connected it to the wide world.

There was lots of other blinking electronic equipment. It was no nun's cell. The words scrawled on the white framework of the doors and windows were actually in phrases, such as "Mystery opposes Theology." And "Commotion Strange." And, of all things, "Darkling, I listen."

Yes, I thought, mystery does oppose theology, that was something Roger was trying to say, that she had not caught on as she should because the mystical and the theological were mixed in her, and it wasn't working with the proper fire or magic. He had kept saying she was a theologian. And he thought of his relics as mysterious, of course. And they were.

Again a dim boyhood memory returned to me, of seeing the crucifix in our church at home in the Auvergne and being awestruck by the sight of the painted blood running from the nails. I must have been very small. I was bedding village girls in the back of that church by the time I was fifteen—something of a prodigy for the times, but then the lord's son was supposed to be a perfect billygoat in our village. Everyone expected it. And my brothers, such a conservative bunch, they had more or less disappointed the local mythology by always behaving themselves. It's a wonder that the crops hadn't suffered from their paltry virtue. I smiled. I had certainly made up for it. But when I had looked at the crucifix I must have been six or seven at most. And I had said, What a horrible way to die! I had blurted it out, and my mother had laughed and laughed. My father had been so humiliated!

The traffic on Napoleon Avenue made small, predictable, and slightly comforting noises.

Well, comforting to me.

I heard Dora sigh. And then I felt her hand on my arm, tight and delicate for only an instant, but fingers pressing through the armour of my clothing, wanting the texture beneath.

I felt her fingers graze my face.

For some reason, mortals do that when they want to be sure of us, they fold their fingers inward and they run their knuckles against our faces. Is that a way of touching someone without seeming to be touched oneself? I suppose the palm of the hand, the soft pad of the fingers, is too intimate.

I didn't move. I let her do it as if she were a blind woman and it was a

courtesy. I felt her fingers move to my hair. I knew there was plenty enough light to make it fiery and pretty the way I counted upon it to be, shameless vain preening, selfish, confused, and temporarily disoriented being that I was.

She made the Sign of the Cross again. But she had never been actually afraid. She was just confirming something, I suppose. Though precisely what is really open to question, if you think of it. Silently she prayed.

"I can do that too," I said. I did it. "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen." I repeated the entire performance, doing it in Latin.

She regarded me with a still, amazed face, and then she let slip a tiny, gentle laugh.

I smiled. This bed and chair—where we sat so close to each other—were in the corner. There was a window over her shoulder, and one behind me. Windows, windows, it was a palazzo of windows. The dark wood of the ceiling must have been fifteen feet above us. I adored the scale of it. It was European, to say the least, and felt normal. It had not been sacrificed to modern dimensions.

"You know," I said, "the first time I walked into Notre Dame, after I'd been made into this, a vampire, that is, and it wasn't my idea, by the way, I was completely human and younger than you are now, the whole thing was forced, completely, I don't remember specifically if I prayed when it was happening, but I fought, that I vividly remember and have preserved in writing. But … as I was saying, the first time I walked into Notre Dame, I thought, well, why doesn't God strike me dead?"

"You must have your place in the scheme of things."

"You think? You really believe that?"

"Yes. I never expected to come upon something like you face to face, but it never seemed impossible or even improbable. I've been waiting all these years for a sign, for some confirmation. I would have lived out my life without it, but there was always the feeling … that it was going to come, the sign."

Her voice was small and typically feminine, that is, the pitch was without mistake feminine, but she spoke with terrific self-confidence now, and so her words seemed to have authority, rather like those of a man.

"And now you come, and you bring the news that you've killed my

father. And you say that he spoke to you. No, I'm not one for simply dismissing such things out of hand. There's an allure to what you say, there is an ornate quality. Do you know, when I was a young girl, the very first reason I believed in the Holy Bible was because it had an ornate quality! I have perceived other patterns in life. I'll tell you a secret. One time I wished my mother dead, and do you know on that very day, within the very hour, she disappeared out of my life forever? I could tell you other things. What you must understand is I want to learn from you. You walked into Notre Dame Cathedral and God didn't strike you dead."

"I'll tell you something that I found amusing," I said. "This was two hundred years ago. Paris before the Revolution. There were vampires living in Paris then, in Les Innocents, the big cemetery, it's long gone, but they lived there in the catacombs beneath the tombs, and they were afraid to go into Notre Dame. When they saw me do it, they, too, thought God would strike me dead."

She was looking at me rather placidly.

"I destroyed their faith for them," I said. "Their belief in God and the Devil. And they were vampires. They were earthbound creatures like me, half demon, half human, stupid, blundering, and they believed that God would strike them dead."

"And before you, they had really had a faith?"

"Yes, an entire religion, they really did," I said. "They thought themselves servants of the Devil. They thought it was a distinction. They lived as vampires, but their existence was miserable and deliberately penitential. I was, you might say, a prince. I came swaggering through Paris in a red cloak lined with wolf fur. But that was my human life, the cloak. Does that impress you, that vampires would be believers? I changed it all for them. I don't think they've ever forgiven me, that is, those few who survive. There are not, by the way, very many of us."

"Stop a minute," she said. "I want to listen to you, but I must ask you something first."

"Yes?"

"My father, how did it happen, was it quick and…."

"Absolutely painless, I assure you," I said, turning to her, looking at her. "He told me himself. No pain."

She was owl-like with such a white face and big dark eyes, and she

was actually slightly scary herself. I mean, she might have scared another mortal in this place, the way she looked, the strength of it.

"It was in a swoon that your father died," I said. "Ecstatic perhaps, and filled with various images, and then a loss of consciousness. His spirit had left his body before the heart ceased to beat. Any physical pain I inflicted he never felt; once the blood is being sucked, once I've … no, he didn't suffer."

I turned and looked at her more directly. She'd curled her legs under her, revealing white knees beneath her hem.

"I talked with Roger for two hours afterwards," I said. "Two hours. He came back for one reason, to make certain I'd look out for you. That his enemies didn't get you, and the government didn't get you, and all these people he's connected with, or was. And that, and that his death didn't … hurt you more than it had to."

"Why would God do this?" she whispered.

"What has God got to do with it? Listen, darling, I don't know anything about God. I told you. I walked into Notre Dame and nothing happened, and nothing ever has.…"

Now, that was a lie, wasn't it? What about *Him?* Coming here in the guise of the Ordinary Man, letting that door slam, arrogant bastard, how dare he?

"How can this be God's plan?" she asked.

"You're perfectly serious, aren't you? Look, I could tell you many stories. I mean, the one about the Paris vampires believing in the Devil is just the beginning! Look, there … there.…" I broke off.

"What is it?"

That sound. Those slow, measured steps! No sooner had I thought of him, insultingly and angrily, than the steps had begun.

"I … was going to say.…" I struggled to ignore him.

I could hear them approaching. They were faint, but it was the unmistakable walk of the winged being, letting me know, one heavy footfall after another, as though echoing through a giant chamber in which I existed quite apart from my existence in this room.

"Dora, I've got to leave you."

"What is it?"

The footsteps were coming closer and closer. "You dare come to me while I'm with her!" I shouted. I was on my feet.

“What is it?” she cried. She was up on her knees on the bed. I backed across the room. I reached the door. The footsteps were growing fainter.

“Damn you to hell!” I whispered.

“Tell me what it is,” she said. “Will you come back? Are you leaving me now forever?”

“No, absolutely not. I’m here to help you. Listen, Dora, if you need me, call to me.” I put my ringer to my temple. “Call and call and call! Like prayer, you understand. It won’t be idolatry, Dora, I’m no evil god. Do it. I have to go.”

“What is your name?”

The footsteps came on, distant but loud, without location in the immense building, only pursuing me.

“Lestat.” I pronounced my name carefully for her—Le- stät—primary stress on the second syllable, sounding the final “t” distinctly. “Listen. Nobody knows about your father. They won’t for a while. I did everything he asked of me. I have his relics.”

“Wynken’s books?”

“All of it, everything he held sacred … A fortune for you, and all he possessed that he wanted you to have. I’ve got to go.”

Were the steps fading? I wasn’t certain. But I couldn’t take the risk of remaining.

“I’ll come again as soon as I can. You believe in God? Hang on to it, Dora, because you just might be right about God, absolutely right!”

I was out of there like particles of light, up the stairways, through the broken attic window, and up above the rooftop, moving fast enough that I could hear no footfall, and the city below had become a beguiling swirl of lights.

Seven

In moments, I stood in my own courtyard in the French Quarter behind the town house in the Rue Royale, looking up at my own lighted windows, windows that had been mine for so long, hoping and praying that David was there, and afraid he wasn't.

I hated running from this Thing! I had to stand there a moment and let my usual rage cool. Why had I run? Not to be humiliated in front of Dora, who might have seen nothing more than me terrified by the Thing and thrown backwards onto the floor?

Maybe Dora could have seen it!

Every instinct in me told me I'd done the proper thing, gotten away, and kept that thing away from Dora. That thing was after me. I had to protect Dora. I now had a very good reason to fight that thing, for another's sake, not my own.

Only now did the full goodness of Dora take a contained shape in my mind, that is, only now did I get a full impression of her, untangled from the blood smell between her legs and her owl-like face peering at me. Mortals tumble through life, from cradle to grave. Once in a century or two perhaps, one crosses the path of a being like Dora. An elegant intelligence and concept of goodness, precisely, and the other thing Roger had struggled to describe, the magnetism which had not burst free as yet from the tangle of faith and scripture.

The night was warm and receptive.

My courtyard banana trees had not been touched by a freeze this winter, and grew thick and drowsing as ever against the brick walls. The wild impatiens and lantana were glowing in the overgrown beds, and the fountain, the fountain with its cherub, was making its crystalline music as the water splashed from the cherub's horn into the basin.

New Orleans, scents of the Quarter.

I ran up the back steps from the courtyard to the rear door of my flat.

I went inside, pounding down the hall, a man in a state of visible and ostentatious confusion. I saw a shadow cross the living room.

"David!"

“He’s not here.”

I came to a halt in the doorframe.

It was the Ordinary Man.

He stood with his back to Louis’s desk between the two front windows, arms folded loosely, face evincing a patient intellect and a sort of unbreakable poise.

“Don’t run again,” he said without rancour. “I’ll go after you. I asked you to please leave that girl out of it. Didn’t I? I was only trying to get you to cut it short.”

“I've never run from you!” I said, quite unsure of myself and determined to make that the truth from this moment on. “Well, not really! I didn’t want you near Dora. What do you want?”

“What do you think?”

“I told you,” I said, gathering all my strength, “if you are here to take me, I am ready to go to Hell.”

“You’re drenched in blood sweat,” he said, “look at you, you’re so afraid. You know, this is what it takes for me to get through to someone like you.” His voice was reasonable, easy to hear. “Now a mortal?” he asked. “I could have simply appeared once and said what I had to say. But you, no, that’s a different matter, you’ve already transcended too many stages, you’ve got too much to bargain with, that’s why you’re worth everything to me just now.”

“Bargain? You mean I can get out of this? We are not going to Hell? We can have a trial of some sort? I can find a modern Daniel Webster to plead for me?” There was mockery and impatience in all of this, and yet it was the logical question to which I wanted the logical answer at once.

“Lestat,” he said with characteristic forbearance, loosening his folded arms and taking a leisurely step towards me. “It goes back to David and his vision in the café. The little story he told you. I *am* the Devil. And I need you. I am not here to take you by force to Hell, and you don’t know the slightest thing about Hell anyway. Hell isn’t what you imagine. I am here to ask your help! I’m tired and I need you. And I’m winning the battle, and it’s crucial that I don’t lose.”

I was dumbstruck.

For a long moment he regarded me and then deliberately began to change; his form appeared to swell in size, to darken, the wings to rise once more like smoke curling towards the ceiling, and the din of voices

to begin and fast grow deafening, and the light suddenly rose behind him. I saw the hairy goat legs move towards me. My feet had no place to stand, my hands nothing to touch but him as I screamed. I could see the gleam of the black feathers, the arch of the wings rising higher and higher! And the din seemed a mixture of almost exquisite music with the voices!

"No, not this time, no!" I hurled myself right at him. I grabbed for him and saw my fingers wrap around his jet-black wrist. I stared right into his immense face, the face of the granite statue, only fully animate and magnificently expressive, the horrific noise of chant and song and howl swelling and drowning out my words. I saw his mouth open, the great eyebrows scowl, the huge innocent almond-shaped eyes grow immense and fill with light.

I held fast with my left hand clutching at his powerful arm, certain he was trying to get away from me and he couldn't! Aha! He couldn't! And then I slammed my right fist into his face. I felt the hardness, preternatural hardness, as if striking another of my own kind. But this was no solid vampiric form.

The entire figure blinked even in its density and defensiveness; the image recoiled and redressed itself and began to grow again; I gave him one last full shove in the chest with every bit of strength I had in me, my fingers splayed out against his black armour, the stammering ornamented breastplate, my eyes so close in the first instant that I saw the carvings on it, the writing in the metal, and then the wings flapped above me as if to terrify me. He was far from me, suddenly, gigantic, yes, still, but I'd thrown him back, damn him. One fine blow that had been. I gave a war cry before I could stop myself and flew at him, though propelling myself from what base and by what force I couldn't have said.

There came a swirl of black feathers, sleek and stalling, and then I was falling; I wouldn't scream, I didn't give a damn, I wouldn't. Falling.

Plummeting. As if through a depth that only nightmare can fathom. An emptiness so perfect we can't conceive of it. And falling fast.

Only the Light remained. The Light obliterated everything visible and was so beautiful suddenly that I lost all sense of my own limbs or parts or organs or whatever I am created of. I had no shape or weight. Only the momentum of my fall continued to terrify, as though gravity

remained to ensure utter ruin. There was one great surge of the voices.

"They *are* singing!" I cried out.

Then I lay still.

Slowly I felt the floor beneath me. The slightly rough surface of the carpet. Scent of dust, wax, my home. I knew we were in the same room.

He had taken Louis's chair at the desk, and I lay there on my back, staring at the ceiling, my chest bursting with pain.

I sat up, crossed my legs, and looked at him defiantly.

He was puzzled. "It makes perfect sense," he said.

"And what's that?"

"You're as strong as one of us."

"No, I don't think so," I said furiously. "I can't grow wings; I can't make music."

"Yes, you can, you've made images before for mortals. You know you can. You've wrapped them in spells. You are as strong as we are. You have achieved a very interesting stage in your development. I knew I was right about you all along. I'm in awe of you."

"In awe of what? My independence? Look, let me tell you something, Satan, or whoever you are."

"Don't use that name, I hate it."

"That's likely to make me pepper my speeches with it."

"My name is Memnoch," he said calmly, with a small pleading gesture. "Memnoch the Devil. I want you to remember it that way."

"Memnoch the Devil."

"Aye." He nodded. "That is how I sign my name when I sign it."

"Well, let me tell you, Your Royal Highness of Darkness. I'm not helping you with anything! I don't serve you!"

"I think I can change your mind," he said calmly. "I think you will come to understand things very well from my point of view."

I felt a sudden sagging, a complete exhaustion, and a despair.

Typical.

I rolled over on my face and tucked my arm under my head and started crying like a child. I was perishing from exhaustion. I was worn and miserable and I loved crying. I couldn't do anything else. I gave in to it fully. I felt that profound release of the utterly grief-stricken. I didn't give a damn who saw or heard. I cried and cried.

Do you know what I think about crying? I think some people have to

learn to do it. But once you learn, once you know how to really cry, there's nothing quite like it. I feel sorry for those who don't know the trick. It's like whistling or singing.

Whatever the case, I was too miserable to take much consolation just from feeling good for a moment in a welter of shudders and salted, bloodstained tears.

I thought of years and years ago, when I had walked into Notre Dame and those fiendish little vampires had lain in wait for me, Servants of Satan, I thought of my mortal self, I thought of Dora, I thought of Armand in those days, the immortal boy leader of Satan's Elect beneath the cemetery, who had made himself a dark saint, sending forth his ragged blood drinkers to torment mortals, to bring death, to spread fear and death like pestilence. I was choking with sobs.

"It is not true!" I think I said. "There is no God or Devil. It is not true."

He didn't answer. I rolled over and sat up. I wiped my face on my sleeve. No handkerchief. Of course, I'd given it to Dora. A faint perfume of Dora rose from my clothes, my chest against which she'd lain, blood sweetness. Dora. I should never have left Dora in such distress. Dear God, I was bound to look out for the sanity of Dora! Damn.

I looked at him.

He was still sitting there, his arm resting on the back of Louis's chair, and he was simply watching me.

I sighed. "You're not going to leave me alone, are you?"

He was taken aback. He laughed. His face was marvelously friendly, rather than neutral.

"No, of course not," he said in a low voice, as if careful not to unbalance me any further. "Lestat, I've been waiting for someone like you for centuries. I've been watching *you yourself* for centuries. No, I'm afraid I'm not going to leave you alone. But I don't want you to be miserable. What can I do to calm you? Some small miracle, gift, anything, so that we can proceed?"

"And how in hell will we proceed?"

"I'll tell you everything," he said with a slight shrug, his hands open, "and then you'll understand why I have to win."

"The implication … it's that I can refuse to cooperate with you, isn't it?"

"Absolutely. Nobody can really help me who doesn't choose to do it.

And I'm tired. I'm tired of the job. I need help. That part your friend David heard correctly when he experienced that accidental epiphany."

"Was David's epiphany accidental? What happened to that other word? What had it been … I don't remember. David wasn't meant to see you or hear you and God talking together?"

"That's almost impossible to explain."

"Did I upset some plan of yours by taking David, making him one of us?"

"Yes and no. But the point is, David heard that part correctly. My task is hard and I'm tired! Some of the rest of David's ideas about that little vision, well—" He shook his head. "The point is, you are the one I want now and it's terribly important you see everything before you make up your mind."

"I'm that bad, am I?" I whispered, lips trembling. I was going to bawl again. "In all the world, with all the things humans have done, all the unspeakable horrors men have visited on other men, the unthinkable suffering of women and children worldwide at the hands of mankind, and I'm that bad! You want me! David was too good, I suppose. He didn't become as consummately evil as you thought he would. Is that it?"

"No, of course you're not that bad," he said soothingly. "That's the very point." He gave a little sigh again.

I was beginning to notice more distinct details of his appearance, not because they were becoming more vivid as had happened with the apparition of Roger, but because I was growing more calm. His hair was a dark ashen blond, and rather soft and curling. And his eyebrows were the same shade, not distinctly black at all, but very carefully drawn to maintain an expression that contained no closed vanity or arrogance. He didn't look stupid either, of course. The clothes were generic. I don't believe they were really clothes. They were material, but the coat was too plain and without buttons, and the white shirt was too simple.

"You know," he said, "you always have had a conscience! That's precisely what I'm after, don't you see? Conscience, reason, purpose, dedication. Good Lord, I couldn't have overlooked you. And I'll tell you something. It was as though you sent for me."

"Never."

"Come on, think of all the challenges you've flung out to the Devil."

"That was poetry, or doggerel, depending on one's point of view."

“Not so. And then think of all the things you did, waking that ancient one Akasha and almost loosing her on humanity.” He gave a short laugh. “As if we don’t have enough monsters created by evolution. And then your adventure with the Body Thief. Coming into the flesh again, having that chance, and rejecting it for what you were before. You know your friend Gretchen is a saint in the jungles, don’t you?”

“Yes. I’ve seen mentions of it in the papers. I know.”

Gretchen, my nun, my love when I’d been so briefly mortal, had never spoken one word since the night she fled from me into her missionary chapel and fell on her knees before the crucifix. She remained in prayer night and day in that jungle village, taking almost no nourishment, and on Fridays people journeyed miles through the jungle, and sometimes even came from Caracas and Buenos Aires just to see her bleed from her hands and her feet. That had been the end of Gretchen.

Although it suddenly struck me for the very first time, in the middle of all this: maybe Gretchen really was with Christ!

“No, I don’t believe it,” I said coldly. “Gretchen lost her mind; she’s fixed in a state of hysteria and it’s my fault. So the world has another mystic who bleeds like Christ. There have been a thousand.”

“I didn’t place any judgment upon the incident,” he said. “If we can go back to what I was saying. I was saying that you did everything but ask me to come! You challenged every form of authority, you sought every experience. You’ve buried yourself alive twice, and once tried to rise into the very sun to make yourself a cinder. What was left for you—but to call on me? It is as if you yourself said it: ‘Memnoch, what more can I do now?’ ”

“Did you tell God about this?” I asked coldly, refusing to be drawn in. Refusing to be this curious and this excited.

“Yes, of course,” he said.

I was too surprised to say anything.

I could think of nothing clever. Certain little theological brain twisters flitted through my mind, and sticky little questions, like “Why didn’t God already know?” and so forth. But we were beyond that point, obviously.

I had to think, to concentrate on what my senses were telling me.

“You and Descartes,” he said. “You and Kant.”

“Don’t lump me with others,” I said. “I am the Vampire Lestat, the one and only.”

“You’re telling me,” he said.

“How many of us are there now, vampires, I mean, in the whole world? I'm not speaking now of other immortals and monsters and evil spirits and things, whatever you are, for instance, but vampires? There aren’t a hundred, and none of them is quite like me. Lestat.”

“I completely agree. I want you. I want you for my helper.”

“Doesn’t it gall you that I don’t really respect you, believe in you, or fear you, not even after all this? That we’re in my flat and I’m making fun of you? I don’t think Satan would put up with this sort of thing. I don’t usually put up with it; I've compared myself to you, you know. Lucifer, Son of Morning. I have told my detractors and inquisitors that I was the Devil or that if I ever happened upon Satan himself I’d set him to rout.”

“Memnoch,” he corrected me. “Don’t use the name Satan. Please. Don’t use any of the following: Lucifer, Beelzebub, Azazel, Sammael, Marduk, Mephistopheles, et cetera. My name is Memnoch. You’ll soon find out for yourself that the others represent various alphabetical or scriptural compromises. Memnoch is for this time and all time. Appropriate and pleasing. Memnoch the Devil. And don’t go look it up in a book because you’ll never find it.”

I didn’t answer. I was trying to figure this. He could change shapes, but there had to be an invisible essence. Had I come against the strength of the invisible essence when I’d smashed his face? I’d felt no real contour, only strength resisting me. And were I to grab him now, would this man-form be filled with the invisible essence so that it could fight me off with strength equal to that of the dark angel?

“Yes,” he said. “Imagine trying to convince a mortal of these things. But that really isn’t why I chose you. I chose you not so much because it would be easier for you to comprehend everything but because you’re perfect for the job.”

“The job of helping the Devil.”

“Yes, of being my right-hand instrument, so to speak, being in my stead when I’m weary. Being my prince.”

“How could you be so mistaken? You find the self-inflicted suffering of my conscience amusing? You think I like evil? That I think about evil when I look at something beautiful like Dora’s face!”

“No, I don’t think you like evil,” he said. “Any more than do I.”

"You don't like evil," I repeated, narrowing my eyes.

"Loathe it. And if you don't help me, if you let God keep doing things His way, I tell you evil—which is nothing really—just might destroy the world."

"It's God's will," I asked slowly, "that the world be destroyed?"

"Who knows?" he asked coldly. "But I don't think God would lift a finger to stop it from happening. I don't will it, that I know. But my ways are the right ways, and the ways of God are bloody and wasteful and exceedingly dangerous. You know they are. You have to help me. I am winning, I told you. But this century has been damn near unendurable for us all."

"So you are telling me that you're not evil.…"

"Exactly. Remember what your friend David asked of you? He asked you if in my presence you had sensed evil, and you had to answer that you had not."

"The Devil is a famous liar."

"My enemies are famous detractors. Neither God nor I tell lies per se. But look, I don't expect for a moment that you should accept me on faith. I didn't come here to convince you of things through conversation. I'll take you to Hell and to Heaven, if you like, you can talk to God for as long as He allows, and you desire. Not God the Father, precisely, not *En Sof*, but … well, all of this will become clear to you. Only there's no point if I cannot count upon your willing intent to see the truth, your willing desire to turn your life from aimlessness and meaninglessness into a crucial battle for the fate of the world."

I didn't answer. I wasn't sure what I could say. We were leagues from the point at which we had begun this discussion.

"See Heaven?" I whispered, absorbing all of it slowly. "See Hell?"

"Yes, of course," he said with level patience. "I want a full night to think it over."

"What!"

"I said I want a night to think it over."

"You don't believe me. You want a sign."

"No, I am beginning to believe you," I said. "That's why I have to think. I have to weigh all of this."

"I'm here to answer any question, to show you anything now."

"Then leave me alone for two nights. Tonight and tomorrow night.

That's a simple enough request, isn't it? Leave me alone."

He was obviously disappointed, maybe even a little suspicious. But I meant every word of it. I couldn't say anything but what I had said. I knew the truth as I spoke it, so fast were thought and word wedded in my mind.

"Is it possible to deceive you?" I asked.

"Of course," he answered. "I rely upon my gifts such as they are, just as you rely on yours. I have my limits. You have yours. You can be deceived. So can I."

"What about God?"

"Ach!" he said with disgust. "If you only knew how irrelevant that question is. You cannot imagine how much I need you. I'm tired," he said with a faint rise of emotion. "God is … beyond being deceived, that much I can say with charity. I'll give you tonight and tomorrow night. I won't bother you, stalk you, as you put it. But may I ask what you mean to do?"

"Why? Either I have the two nights or I don't!"

"You're known to be unpredictable," he said. He smiled broadly. It was very pleasant. And something else, quite obvious, struck me about him. Not only were his proportions perfect, there were no visible flaws in him anywhere; he was a paragon of the Ordinary Man.

He showed no response to this estimation, whether he could read it from my mind or not. He merely waited on me, courteously.

"Dora," I said. "I have to go back to Dora."

"Why?"

"I refuse to explain further."

Again, he was surprised by my answer.

"Well, aren't you going to try to help her with all this confusion regarding her father? Why not explain something as simple as that? I only meant to ask you how deeply you intended to commit yourself, how much you planned to reveal to this woman. I'm thinking of the fabric of things, to use David's phrase. That is, how will it be with this woman, after you've come with me?"

I said nothing.

He sighed. "All right, I've waited for your like for centuries. What is another two nights, such as the case may be. We are speaking of only tomorrow night, really, aren't we? At the sunset of the following

evening, after that I shall come for you."

"Right."

"I'll give you a little gift that will help you believe in me. It's not so simple to me to fix your level of understanding. You're full of paradox and conflict. Let me give you something unusual."

"Agreed."

"So this is the gift. Call it a sign. Ask Dora about Uncle Mickey's eye. Ask her to tell you the truth that Roger never knew."

"This sounds like a Spiritualist parlour game."

"Think so? Ask her."

"All right. The truth about Uncle Mickey's eye. Now let me ask you one last question. You are the Devil. Yes. But you're not evil? Why?"

"Absolutely irrelevant question. Or let me put it a little more mysteriously. It's completely unnecessary for me to be evil. You'll see. Oh, this is so frustrating for me because you have so much to see."

"But you're opposed to God!"

"Oh, absolutely, a total adversary! Lestat, when you see everything that I have to show you, and hear all that I have to say, when you've spoken with God and better see it from His perspective, and from my point of view, you will join me as His adversary. I'm sure you will."

He stood up from the chair. "I'm going now. Should I help you up off the floor?"

"Irrelevant and unnecessary," I said crossly. "I'm going to miss you." The words surprised me as they came out.

"I know," he answered.

"I have all of tomorrow night," I said. "Remember."

"Don't you realize," he answered, "that if you come with me now there is no night and day?"

"Oh, that's very tempting," I said. "But that's what Devils do so well. Tempt. I need to think about this, and consult others for advice."

"Consult others?" He seemed genuinely surprised.

"I'm not going off with the Devil without telling anyone," I said. "You're the Devil! Goddamn it, why should I trust the Devil? That's absurd! You're playing by rules, somebody's rules. Everybody always is. And I don't know the rules. Well. You gave me the choice, and this is my choice. Two full nights, and not before then. Leave me alone all that time! Give me your oath."

“Why?” he asked politely, as if dealing with an ornery child. “So you won’t have to fear the sound of my footsteps?”

“Possibly.”

“What good is an oath on this if you don’t accept the truth of all the rest that I’ve said?” He shook his head as if I were being foolishly human.

“Can you swear an oath or not?”

“You have my oath,” he said, laying his hand on his heart, or where his heart should have been. “With complete sincerity, of course.”

“Thank you, I feel much better,” I said.

“David won’t believe you," he said gently.

“I know,” I said.

“On the third night,” he said with an emphatic nod, “I shall come back for you here. Or wherever you happen to be at the time.”

And with a final smile, as bright as the earlier one, he disappeared.

It was not the way I tended to do it, by making off with such swiftness no human could track it.

He actually vanished on the spot.

Eight

I stood up shakily, brushed off my clothes, and noted without surprise that the room was as perfect as it had been when we entered it. The battle obviously had been fought in some other realm. But what was that realm?

Oh, if only I could find David. I had less than three hours before the winter dawn and set off at once to search.

Now, being unable to read David's mind, or to call to him, I had but one telepathic tool at my command, and that was to scan the minds of mortals at random for some image of David as he passed in some recognizable place.

I hadn't walked three blocks when I realized that not only was I picking up a strong image of David, but that it was coming to me from the mind of another vampire.

I closed my eyes, and tried with my entire soul to make some eloquent contact. Within seconds, the pair acknowledged me, David through the one who stood beside him, and I saw and recognized the wooded place where they were.

In my days, the Bayou Road had led through this area into country, and it had been very near here once that Claudia and Louis, having attempted my murder, had left my remains in the waters of the swamp.

Now the area was a great combed park, filled by day, I supposed, with mothers and children, containing a museum of occasionally very interesting paintings, and providing in the dark of night a dense wood.

Some of the oldest oaks of New Orleans lay within the bounds of this area, and a lovely lagoon, long, serpentine, seemingly endless, wound under a picturesque bridge in the heart of it.

I found them there, the two vampires communing with one another in dense darkness, far from the beaten path. David was as I expected, his usual properly attired self.

But the sight of the other astonished me.

This was Armand.

He sat on the stone park bench, boylike, casual, with one knee

crooked, looking up at me with the predictable innocence, dusty all over, naturally, hair a long, tangled mess of auburn curls.

Dressed in heavy denim garments, tight pants, and a zippered jacket, he surely passed for human, a street vagabond maybe, though his face was now parchment white, and even smoother than it had been when last we met.

In a way, he made me think of a child doll, with brilliant faintly red-brown glass eyes—a doll that had been found in an attic. I wanted to polish him with kisses, clean him up, make him even more radiant than he was.

"That's what you always want," he said softly. His voice shocked me. If he had any French or Italian accent left, I couldn't hear it. His tone was melancholy and had no meanness in it at all. "When you found me under Les Innocents," he said, "you wanted to bathe me with perfume and dress me in velvet with great embroidered sleeves."

"Yes," I said, "and comb your hair, your beautiful russet hair." My tone was angry. "You look good to me, you damnable little devil, good to embrace and good to love."

We eyed each other for a moment. And then he surprised me, rising and coming towards me just as I moved to take him in my arms. His gesture wasn't tentative, but it was extremely gentle. I could have backed away. I didn't. We held each other tight for a moment. The cold embracing the cold. The hard embracing the hard.

"Cherub child," I said. I did a bold thing, maybe even a defiant thing. I reached out and mussed his snaggled curls.

He is smaller than me physically, but he didn't seem to mind this gesture.

In fact, he smiled, shook his head, and reclaimed his hair with a few casual strokes of his hand. His cheeks went apple-perfect suddenly, and his mouth softened, and then he lifted his right fist, and teasingly struck me hard on the chest.

Really hard. Show-off. Now it was my turn to smile and I did.

"I can't remember anything bad between us," I said.

"You will," he responded. "And so will I. But what does it matter what we remember?"

"Yes," I said, "we're both still here."

He laughed outright, though it was very low, and he shook his head,

flashing a glance on David that implied they knew each other very well, maybe too well. I didn't like it that they knew each other at all. David was my David, and Armand was my Armand.

I sat down on the bench.

"So David's told you the whole story," I said, glancing up at Armand and then over at David.

David gave a negative shake of the head.

"Not without your permission, Brat Prince," David said, a little disdainfully. "I would never have taken the liberty. But the only thing that's brought Armand here is worry for you."

"Is that so?" I said. I raised my eyebrows. "Well?"

"You know damned good and well it is," said Armand. His whole posture was casual; he'd learned, beating about the world, I guess. He didn't look so much like a church ornament anymore. He had his hands in his pockets. Little tough guy.

"You're looking for trouble again," he went on, in the same slow manner, without anger or meanness. "The whole wide world isn't enough for you and never will be. This time I thought I'd try to speak to you before the wheel turns."

"Aren't you the most thoughtful of guardian angels?" I said sarcastically.

"Yes, I am," he said without so much as blinking. "So what are you doing, want to let me know?"

"Come, I want to go deeper into the park," I said, and they both followed me as we walked at a mortal pace into a thicket of the oldest oaks, where the grass was high and neglected, and not even the most desperate homeless heart would seek to rest.

We made our own small clearing, among the volcanic black roots and rather cool winter earth. The breeze from the nearby lake was brisk and clean, and for a moment there seemed little scent of New Orleans, of any city; we three were together, and Armand asked again: "Will you tell me what you're doing?" He bent close to me, and suddenly kissed me, in a manner that seemed entirely childlike and also a bit European. "You're in deep trouble. Come on. Everyone knows it." The steel buttons of his denim jacket were icy cold, as though he had come from some far worse winter in a very few moments of time.

We are never entirely sure about each other's powers. It's all a game. I

would no more have asked him how he got here, or in what manner, than I would ask a mortal man how precisely he made love to his wife.

I looked at him a long time, conscious that David had settled down on the grass, leaning back on his elbow, and was studying us both.

Finally I spoke: "The Devil has come to me and asked me to go with him, to see Heaven and Hell."

Armand didn't answer. Then he frowned just a little.

"This is the same Devil," said I, "which I told you I didn't believe in, when you did believe in him centuries ago. You were right at least on one point. He exists. I've met him." I looked at David. "He wants me as his assistant. He's given me tonight and tomorrow night to seek advice from others. He will take me to Heaven and then to Hell. He claims he is not evil."

David looked off into the darkness. Armand simply stared at me, rapt and silent.

I went on. I told them everything then. I repeated the story of Roger for Armand, and of Roger's ghost, and then I told them both in detail about my blundering visit to Dora, about my exchanges with her, and how I'd left her, and then how the Devil had come pursuing me and annoying me, and we'd had our brawl.

I put down every detail. I opened my mind, without calculation, letting Armand see whatever he could for himself.

Finally I sat back.

"Don't say things to me that are humiliating," I averred. "Don't ask me why I fled from Dora, or blurted out to her all this about her father. I can't get rid of the presence of Roger, the sense of Roger's friendship for me and love for her. And this Memnoch the Devil, this is a reasonable and mild-mannered individual, and very convincing. As for the battle, I don't know what happened, except I gave him something to think about. In two nights, he's coming back, and if memory serves me correctly, which it invariably does, he said he'd come for me wherever I was at the time."

"Yes, that's clear," Armand said sotto voce.

"You aren't enjoying my misery, are you?" I admitted with a little sigh of defeat.

"No, of course not," Armand said, "only, as usual, you don't really seem miserable. You're on the verge of an adventure, and just a little more

cautious this time than when you let that mortal run off with your body and you took his."

"No, not more cautious. Terrified. I think this creature, Memnoch, is the Devil. If you had seen the visions, you would think he was the Devil too. I'm not talking about spellbinding. You can do spellbinding, Armand, you've done it to me. I was battling that thing. It has some essence which can inhabit actual bodies! It's objective and bodiless itself, of that I'm sure. The rest? Maybe all that was spells. He implied he could make spells and so could I."

"You're describing an angel, of course," said David offhandedly, "and this one claims to be a fallen angel."

"The Devil himself," mused Armand. "What are you asking of us, Lestat? You are asking our advice? I would not go with this spirit of my own will, if I were you."

"What makes you say this?" David asked before I could get out a word.

"Look, we know there are earthbound beings," Armand said, "that we ourselves can't classify, or locate, or control. We know there are species of immortals, and types of mammalian creatures which look human but are not. This creature might be anything. And there is something highly suspicious in the manner in which he courts you … the visions, and then the politeness."

"Either that," said David, "or it simply makes perfect sense. He is the Devil, he is reasonable, the way you always supposed, Lestat—not a moral idiot, but a true angel, and he wants your cooperation. He doesn't want to keep doing things to you by force. He's used force as his introduction."

"I would *not* believe him," said Armand. "What does this mean—he wants you to help him? That you would begin to exist simultaneously on this earth and in Hell? No, I would shun him for his imagery, if nothing else, for his vocabulary. For his name. Memnoch. It sounds evil."

"Oh, all these are things," I admitted, "that I once said, more or less, to you."

"I've never seen the Prince of Darkness with my own eyes," said Armand. "I've seen centuries of superstition, and the wonders done by demonic beings such as ourselves. You've seen a little more than I have. But you're right. That is what you told me before and I'm telling it to you now. Don't believe in the Devil, or that you are his child. And that is

what I told Louis, once when he came to me seeking explanations of God and the universe. I believe in no Devil. So I remind you. Don't believe him. Turn your back."

"As for Dora," said David quietly, "you've acted unwisely, but it's possible that that breach of preternatural decorum can somehow be healed."

"I don't think so."

"Why?" he asked.

"Let me ask you both … do you believe what I'm telling you?"

"I know you're telling the truth," said Armand, "but I told you, I don't believe this creature is the Devil himself or that he will take you to Heaven or Hell. And very frankly, if it is true … well, that's all the more reason perhaps that you shouldn't go."

I studied him for a long moment, fighting the darkness I had deliberately sought, trying to draw from him some impression of his complete disposition on this, and I realized he was sincere. There was no envy in him, or old grudge against me; there was no hurt, or trickery, or anything. He was past all these things, if ever they had obsessed him. Perhaps they'd been fantasies of mine.

"Perhaps so," he said, answering my thoughts directly. "But you are correct in that I am speaking to you directly and truly, and I tell you, I would not trust this creature, or trust the proposition that you must in some way verbally cooperate."

"A medieval concept of pact," said David.

"Which means what?" I asked. I hadn't meant it to be so rude.

"Making a pact with the Devil," said David, "you know, agreeing to something with him. That's what Armand is telling you not to do. Don't make a pact."

"Precisely," said Armand. "It arouses my deepest suspicions that he makes such a moral issue of your agreement." His young face was sorely troubled, his pretty eyes very vivid for a second in the shadows. "Why do you have to agree?"

"I don't know if that's on the mark or not," I said. I was confused. "But you're right. I said something to him myself, something about this being played by rules."

"I want to talk with you about Dora," said David in a low voice. "You must heal what you've done there very quickly, or at least promise us

that you won't.…"

"I'm not going to promise you anything about Dora. I can't," I said.

"Lestat, don't destroy this young mortal woman!" said David forcefully. "If we are in a new realm, if the spirits of the dead can plead with us, then maybe they can hurt us, have you ever thought of that?"

David sat up, disconcerted, angry, the lovely British voice straining to maintain decency as he spoke: "Don't hurt the mortal girl. Her father asked you for a species of guardianship, not that you shake her sanity to the foundations."

"David, don't go on with your speech. I know what you're saying. But I tell you right now, I am alone in this. I am alone. I am alone with this being Memnoch, the Devil; and you both have been friends to me. You've been kindred. But I don't think anyone can advise me what to do, except for Dora."

"Dora!" David was aghast.

"You mean to tell her this entire tale?" Armand asked timidly.

"Yes. That's exactly what I mean to do. Dora's the only one who believes in the Devil. Dear God, I need a believer right now, I need a saint, and I may need a theologian, and to Dora I'm going."

"You are perverse, stubborn, and innately destructive!" said David. It had the tone of a curse. "You will do what you will!" He was furious. I could see it. All his reasons for despising me were being heated from within, and there really was nothing I could say in my defense.

"Wait," said Armand with gentleness. "Lestat, this is mad. It's like consulting the Sibyl. You want the girl to act as an oracle for you, to tell you what she, a mortal, thinks you must do?"

"She's no mere mortal, she's different. She has no fear of me whatsoever. None. And she has no fear of anything. It's as though she's a different species, but she's the human species. She's like a saint, Armand. She's like Joan of Arc must have been when she led the army. She knows something about God and the Devil that I don't know."

"You're talking about faith, and it's very alluring," said David, "just as it was with your nun companion, Gretchen, who is now stark raving mad."

"Stark mutely mad," I said. "She doesn't say anything but prayers, or so say the papers. But before I came along, Gretchen didn't really believe in God, keep that in mind. Belief and madness, for Gretchen, are one and

the same."

"Do you never learn!" said David.

"Learn what?" I asked. "David, I'm going to Dora. She's the only person I can go to. And besides, I can't leave things with her as I did! I have to go back, and I am going back. Now from you, Armand, a promise, the obvious thing. Around this Dora, I've thrown a protective light. None of us can touch her."

"That goes without saying. I won't hurt your little friend. You wound me." He looked genuinely put out.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I know. But I know what blood is and innocence and how delicious both can be. I know how much the girl tempts me."

"Then you must be the one to give in to that temptation," said Armand crossly. "I never choose my victims anymore, you know this. I can stand before a house as always, and out of the doors will come those who want to be in my arms. Of course I won't hurt her. You do hold old grudges. You think I live in the past. You don't understand that I actually change with every era, I always have as best I can. But what in the world can Dora tell you that will help you?"

"I don't know," I said. "But I'm going directly tomorrow night. If there were time left, I'd go now. I'm going to her. David, if something happens to me, if I vanish, if I … you have all Dora's inheritance."

He nodded. "You have my word of honor on the girl's best interests, but you must not go to her!"

"Lestat, if you need me—" Armand said. "If this being tries to take you by force!"

"Why do you care about me?" I asked. "After all the bad things I did to you? Why?"

"Oh, don't be such a fool," he begged gently. "You convinced me long ago that the world was a Savage Garden. Remember your old poetry? You said the only laws that were true were aesthetic laws, that was all you could count on."

"Yes, I remember all that. I fear it's true. I've always feared it was true. I feared it when I was a mortal child. I woke up one morning and I believed in nothing."

"Well, then, in the Savage Garden," said Armand, "you shine beautifully, my friend. You walk as if it is your garden to do with as you please. And in my wanderings, I always return to you. I always return to

see the colors of the garden in your shadow, or reflected in your eyes, perhaps, or to hear of your latest follies and mad obsessions. Besides, we are brothers, are we not?"

"Why didn't you help me last time, when I was in all that trouble, having switched bodies with a human being?"

"You won't forgive me if I tell you," he said.

"Tell me."

"Because I hoped and prayed for you, that you would remain in that mortal body and save your soul. I thought you had been granted the greatest gift, that you were human again, my heart ached for your triumph! I couldn't interfere. I couldn't do it."

"You are a child and a fool, you always were."

He shrugged. "Well, it looks like you're being given another chance to do *something* with your soul. You'd best be at your very strongest and most resourceful, Lestat. I distrust this Memnoch, far worse than any human foe you faced when you were trapped in the flesh. This Memnoch sounds very far from Heaven. Why should they let you in with him?"

"Excellent question."

"Lestat," said David, "don't go to Dora. Will you remember that my advice last time might have saved you misery!"

Oh, there was too much to comment on there, for his advice might have prevented him from ever being what he was now, in this fine form, and I could not, I could not regret that he was here, that he had won the Body Thief's fleshly trophy. I couldn't. I just couldn't.

"I can believe the Devil wants you," said Armand.

"Why?" I asked.

"Please don't go to Dora," said David seriously.

"I have to, and it's almost morning now. I love you both."

Both of them were staring at me, perplexed, suspicious, uncertain.

I did the only thing I could. I left.

Nine

The next night, I rose from my attic hiding place and went directly out in search of Dora. I didn't want to see or hear any more of David or Armand. I knew I couldn't be prevented from what I had to do.

How I meant to do it, that was the question. They had unwittingly confirmed something for me. I was not totally mad. I was not imagining everything that was happening around me. Some of it, perhaps, I was imagining, but not all.

Whatever the case, I decided upon a radical course of action with Dora, and one which neither David nor Armand could conceivably have approved.

Knowing more than a little about her habits and her whereabouts, I caught up with Dora as she was coming out of the television studio on Chartres Street in the Quarter. She'd spent the entire afternoon taping an hour-long show, and then visiting with her audience afterwards. I waited in the doorway of a nearby shop as she said farewell to the last of her "sisters" or seeming worshippers. They were young women, though not girls, and very firm believers in changing the world with Dora, and had about them a careless, nonconformist air.

They hurried off, and Dora went the other way towards the square and towards her car. She wore a slender black wool coat and wool stockings with heels that were very high, her very favorites for dancing on her program, and with her little cap of black hair she looked extremely dramatic and fragile, and horribly vulnerable in a world of mortal males.

I caught her around the waist before she knew what was happening. We were rising so fast, I knew she could not see or understand anything, and I said very close to her ear,

"You're with me, and you're safe." Then I wrapped her totally in my arms, so that no harm at all could come to her from the wind or the speed we were traveling, and I went up just as high as I dared to go with her, uncovered and vulnerable and depending upon me, listening keenly beneath the howl of the wind for the proper functioning of her heart and her lungs.

I felt her relaxing in my arms, or more truly, she simply remained trusting. It was as surprising as everything else about her. She had buried her face in my coat, as though too afraid to try to look around her, but this was really more a practical matter in the cold than anything else. At one point, I opened my coat, and covered her with one side of it, and we went on.

The journey took longer than I had supposed; I simply could not take a fragile human being up that high into the air. But it was nothing as tedious or dangerous as it might have been had we taken a fuming and stinking and highly explosive jet plane.

Within less than an hour, I was standing with her inside the glass doors of the Olympic Tower. She awoke in my arms as if from a deep sleep. I realized this had been inevitable. She'd lost consciousness, for a series of physical and mental reasons, but she came to herself at once, her heels striking the floor, and looked at me with huge owl eyes, and then out at the side of St. Patrick's rising in all its obdurate glory across the street.

"Come on," I said, "I'm taking you to your father's things." We made for the elevators.

She hurried after me, eagerly, the way that vampires dream mortals will do it, which never, never happens, as if all this were wondrous and there was no reason under Heaven to be afraid.

"I don't have much time," I said. We were in the elevator speeding upwards. "There is something chasing me and I don't know what it wants of me. But I had to bring you here. And I'll see that you get home safe."

I explained that I knew of no rooftop entrances to this building; indeed, the whole place was new to me, or I would have brought her in that way, and I explained this now, embarrassed that we would cover a continent in an hour and then take a rattling, sucking, and stammering elevator that seemed only slightly less marvelous than the gift of vampiric flight.

The doors opened onto the correct floor. I put the key in her hand, and guided her towards the apartment. "You open it, everything inside is yours."

She looked at me for a moment, a slight frown on her forehead, then she stroked carelessly at her wind-torn hair, and put the key in the lock and opened the door.

“Roger’s things,” she said with the first breath she took.

She knew them by the smell as any antiquarian might have known them, these icons and relics. Then she saw the marble angel, poised in the corridor, with the glass wall way beyond it, and I thought she was going to faint in my arms.

She slumped backwards as if counting upon me to catch her and support her. I held her with the tips of my fingers, as afraid as ever that I might accidentally bruise her.

“Dear God,” she said under her breath. Her heart was racing, but it was hearty and very young and capable of tremendous endurance. “We are here, and you’ve been telling me true things.”

She sprang loose from me before I could answer and walked briskly past the angel and into the larger front room of the place. The spires of St. Patrick’s were visible just below the level of the window. And everywhere were these cumbersome packages of plastic through which one could detect the shape of a crucifix or saint. The books of Wynken were on the table, of course, but I wasn’t going to press her on that just now.

She turned to me, and I could feel her studying me, assessing me. I am so sensitive to this sort of appraisal that I actually think my vanity is rooted in each of my cells.

She murmured some words in Latin, but I didn’t catch them, and no automatic translation came up in my mind.

“What did you say?”

“Lucifer, Son of Morning,” she whispered, staring at me with frank admiration. Then she plopped down into a large leather chair. It was one of the many tiresome furnishings of the place, meant for businessmen but completely comfortable. Her eyes were still locked on me.

“No, that’s not who I am,” I said. “I’m only what I told you and nothing more. But that’s who’s after me.”

“The Devil?”

“Yes. Now listen, I’m going to tell you everything, and then you must give me your advice. Meantime—” I turned around, yes, there was the file cabinet. “Your inheritance, everything, money you have now that you don’t know about, clean and taxed and proper, it’s all explained in black folders in those files. Your father died wanting you to have this for your church. If you turn away from it, don’t be so sure it’s God’s will.

Remember, your father is dead. His blood cleansed the money."

Did I believe this? Well, it sure as hell was what Roger wanted me to tell her.

"Roger said to say this," I added, trying to sound extremely sure of myself.

"I understand you," she said. "You're worrying about something that doesn't really matter now. Come here, please, let me hold you. You're shivering."

"I'm shivering!"

"It's warm in here, but you don't seem to feel it. Come."

I knelt down in front of her and suddenly took her in my arms the way I had Armand. I laid my head against hers. She was cold but would never even on the day of her burial be as cold as I was, nothing human could be that cold. I had sopped up the winter's worst as though I were porous marble, which I suppose I was.

"Dora, Dora, Dora," I whispered. "How he loved you, and how much he wanted everything to be right for you, Dora."

Her scent was strong, but so was I.

"Lestat, explain about the Devil," she said.

I sat down on the carpet so that I could look up at her. She was perched on the edge of her chair, knees bare, black coat carelessly open now, and a streak of gold scarf showing, her face pale but very flushed, in a way that made her radiant and at the same time a little enchanted, as though she were no more human than me.

"Even your father couldn't really describe your beauty," I said. "Temple virgin, nymph of the wood."

"My father said that to you?"

"Yes. But the Devil, ah, the Devil told me to ask you a question. To ask you the truth about Uncle Mickey's eye!" I had just remembered it. I had not remembered to tell either David or Armand about this, but what difference could that possibly make?

She was surprised by these words, and very impressed. She sank back a little into the chair. "The Devil told you these words?"

"He gave it to me as a gift. He wants me to help him. He says he's not evil. He says that God is his adversary. I'll tell you everything, but he gave me these words as some sort of little extra gift, what do we call it in New Orleans, lagniappe? To convince me that he is what he says he

is."

She gave a little gesture of confusion, hand flying to her temple as she shook her head. "Wait. The truth about Uncle Mickey's eye, you're sure he said that? My father didn't say anything about Uncle Mickey?"

"No, and I never caught any such image from your father's heart or soul, either. The Devil said Roger didn't know the truth. What does it mean?"

"My father *didn't* know the truth," she said. "He never knew. His mother never told him the truth. It was his uncle Mickey, my grandmother's brother. And it was *my* mother's people who told me the real story—Terry's people. It was like this, my father's mother was rich and had a beautiful house on St. Charles Avenue."

"I know the place, I know all about it. Roger met Terry there."

"Yes, exactly, but my grandmother had been poor when she was young. Her mother had been a maid in the Garden District, like many an Irish maid. And Roger's Uncle Mickey was one of those easygoing characters who made nothing of himself in anyone's eyes at all.

"My father never knew about the real life of Uncle Mickey. My mother's mother told me to show me what airs my father put on, and what a fool he was, and how humble his origins had been."

"Yes, I see."

"My father had loved Uncle Mickey. Uncle Mickey had died when my father was a boy. Uncle Mickey had a cleft palate and a glass eye, and I remember my father showing me his picture and telling me the story of how Uncle Mickey lost his eye. Uncle Mickey had loved fireworks, and once he'd been playing with firecrackers and one had gone off in a tin can, and wham, the can hit him in the eye. That's the story I always believed about Uncle Mickey. I knew him only from the picture. My grandmother and my great-uncle were dead before I was born."

"Right. And then your mother's people told you different."

"My mother's father was a cop. He knew all about Roger's family, that Roger's grandfather had been a drunk and so had Uncle Mickey, more or less. Uncle Mickey had also been a tout for a bookie when he was young. And one time, he held back on a bet. In other words, he kept the money rather than placing the bet as he should have, and unfortunately the horse won."

"I follow you."

“Uncle Mickey, very young and very scared I imagine, was in Corona’s Bar in the Irish Channel.”

“On Magazine Street,” I said. “That bar was there for years and years. Maybe a century.”

“Yes, and the bookie’s henchmen came in and dragged Uncle Mickey to the back of the bar. My mother’s father saw it all. He was there, but he couldn’t do anything about it. Nobody could. Nobody would. Nobody dared. But this is what my grandfather saw. The men beat and kicked Uncle Mickey. They were the ones who hurt the roof of his mouth so he talked as if something were wrong with him. And they kicked out his eye. They kicked it across the floor. And the way my grandfather said it every time he told it was, ‘Dora, they could have saved that eye, except those guys stepped on it. They deliberately stepped on it with those pointed shoes.’ ”

She stopped.

“And Roger never knew this.”

“Nobody knows it who is alive,” she said. “Except for me, of course. My grandfather’s dead. For all I know, everyone who was ever there is dead. Uncle Mickey died in the early fifties. Roger used to take me out to the cemetery to visit his grave. Roger had always loved him. Uncle Mickey with his hollow voice and his glass eye. Everybody sort of loved him, the way Roger told it. And even my mother’s people said that too. He was a sweetheart. He was a night watchman before he died. He rented rooms on Magazine Street right over Baer’s Bakery. He died of pneumonia in the hospital before anyone even knew he was ill. And Roger never knew the truth about Uncle Mickey’s eye. We would have spoken of it if he had, naturally.”

I sat there pondering, or rather picturing what she had described. No images came from her, she was closed tight, but her voice had been effortlessly generous. I knew Corona’s. So did anyone who had ever walked Magazine Street in those famous blocks of the Irish heyday. I knew the criminals with their pointed shoes. Crushing the eye.

“They just stepped on it and squashed it,” said Dora, as though she could read my thoughts. “My grandfather always said, ‘They could have saved it, if they hadn’t stepped on it the way they did with those pointed shoes.’ ”

A silence fell between us.

“This proves nothing,” I said.

“It proves your friend, or enemy, knows secrets, that’s what it proves.”

“But it doesn’t prove he’s the Devil,” I said, “and why would he choose such a story, of all things?”

“Maybe he was there,” she said with a bitter smile.

We both gave that a little laugh.

“You said this was the Devil but he wasn’t evil,” she prompted me. She looked persuasive and trusting and thoroughly in command.

I had the feeling that I had been absolutely correct in seeking her advice. She was regarding me steadily.

“Tell me what this Devil has done,” she said.

I told her the whole tale. I had to admit how I stalked her father, and I couldn’t remember if I had told her that before. I told her about the Devil stalking me in similar fashion, going through it all, just as I had for David and Armand, and found myself finishing with those puzzling words, “And I’ll tell you this about him, whatever he is, he has a sleepless mind in his heart, and an insatiable personality! And that’s true. When I first used those words to describe him, they just occurred to me as if from nowhere. I don’t know what part of my mind intuited such a thing. But it’s true.”

“Say again?” she asked.

I did.

She lapsed into total silence. Her eyes became tiny and she sat with one hand curled under her chin.

“Lestat, I’m going to make an absurd request of you. Send for some food. Or get me something to eat and drink. I have to ponder this.”

I found myself leaping to my feet. “Anything you wish,” I said.

“Doesn’t matter at all. Sustenance. I haven’t eaten since yesterday. I don’t want my thoughts distorted by an accidental fast. You go, get something for nourishment and bring it back here. And I want to be alone here, to pray, to think, and to walk back and forth among Father’s things. Now, there is no chance this demon will take you sooner than promised?”

“I don’t know any more than I told you. I don’t think so. Look, I’ll get you good food and drink.”

I went on the errand immediately, leaving the building in mortal fashion and seeking out one of those crowded midtown restaurants from

which to purchase a whole meal for her that could be packed up and kept hot until I returned. I brought her several bottles of some pure, brand-name water, since that's what mortals seem to crave in these times, and then I took my time going back up, the bundle in my arms.

Only as the elevator opened on our floor did I realize how unusual my actions had been. I, two hundred years old, ferocious and proud by nature, had just gone on an errand for a mortal girl because she asked me very directly to do it.

Of course there were mediating circumstances! I'd kidnapped her and brought her over hundreds of miles! I needed her. Hell, I loved her.

But what I'd learnt from this simple incident was this: She did have a power, which saints often have, to make others obey. Without question, I'd gone to get the food for her. Cheerfully gone myself, as though there were grace in it.

I brought the meal inside the apartment and set it down for her on the table.

The apartment was now flooded with her mingling aromas, including that of her menses, that special, perfumed blood collecting neatly between her legs. The place breathed with her.

I ignored the predictable raging desire to feast on her till she dropped.

She was sitting crouched over in the chair, hands locked together, staring before her. I saw that the black leather folders were open all over the floor. She knew about her inheritance or had some idea of it.

She wasn't looking at that, however, and she seemed absolutely unsurprised by my return.

She drifted towards the table now, as though she couldn't break out of her reverie. Meantime, I stirred about in the kitchen drawers of the apartment for plates and utensils for her, found some mildly inoffensive stainless-steel forks and knives and a china plate. I set these down for her, and laid out the cartons of steaming food—meat and vegetables and such, and some sort of sweet concoction, all of it as alien to me as it had always been, as if I hadn't recently been in a mortal body and tasted real food. I didn't want to think about that experience!

"Thank you," she said absently, without so much as looking at me. "You are a darling for having done it." She opened a bottle of the water and drank it all greedily.

I watched her throat as she did this. I didn't let myself think about her

in any way except lovingly, but the scent of her was enough to drive me out of the place.

That's it, I vowed. If you feel you cannot control this desire, then you leave!

She ate the food indifferently, almost mechanically, and then looked up at me.

“Oh, forgive me, do sit down, please. You can’t eat, can you? You can’t take this kind of nourishment.”

“No,” I said. “But I can sit down.”

I sat next to her, trying not to watch her or breathe her scent any more than I had to. I looked directly across the room, out the glass at the white sky. If snow was falling now, I couldn’t tell, but it had to be. Because I couldn’t see anything but the whiteness. Yes, that meant that either New York had disappeared without a trace, or that it was snowing outside.

It took her less than six and one half minutes to devour the meal. I’ve never seen anyone eat so fast. She stacked up everything and took it into the kitchen. I had to draw her away from the chores, and bring her back into the room. This gave me a chance both to hold her warm, fragile hands and to be very close to her.

“What is your advice?”

She sat down and pondered, or drew together her thoughts.

“I think you have little to lose by cooperating with this being. It’s perfectly obvious he could destroy you anytime he wanted. He has many ways. You slept in your house, even after you knew that he, the Ordinary Man, as you call him, knew the location. Obviously you aren’t afraid of him on any material level. And in his realm, you were able to exert sufficient force to push him away from you. What do you risk by cooperating? Suppose he can take you to Heaven or Hell. The implication is that you can still refuse to help him, can’t you? You can still say, to use his own fine language, ‘I don’t see things from your point of view.’ ”

“Yes.”

“What I'm saying is, if you open yourself to what he wants to show you, that does not mean you have accepted him, does it? On the contrary, the obligation lies with him to make you see from his perspective, or so it seems. Besides, the point is, you break the rules

whatever they are."

"He can't be tricking me into Hell, you mean."

"You serious? You think God would let people be tricked into Hell?"

"I'm not people, Dora. I'm what I am. I don't mean to draw any parallels with God in my repetitive epithets. I only mean I'm evil. Very evil. I know I am. I have been since I started to feed on humans. I'm Cain, the slayer of his brothers."

"Then God could put you in Hell anytime he wanted. Why not?"

I shook my head. "I wish I knew. I wish I knew why He hasn't. I wish I knew. But what you're saying is that there is power involved here on both sides."

"Clearly."

"And to believe in some sort of trickery is almost superstitious."

"Precisely. If you go to Heaven, if you speak with God…." She stopped.

"Would you go if he were asking you to help him, if he were telling you he wasn't evil, but that he was the adversary of God, that he could change your mind on things?"

"I don't know," she said. "I might. I would maintain my free will throughout the experience, but I very well might."

"That's just it. Free will. Am I losing my will and my mind?"

"You seem to be in full possession of both and an enormous amount of supernatural strength."

"Do you sense the evil in me?"

"No, you're too beautiful for that, you know it."

"But there must be something rotten and vicious inside me that you can feel and see."

"You're asking for consolation and I can't give that to you," she said. "No, I don't sense it. I believe the things you've told me."

"Why?"

She thought for a long time. Then she stood up and went to the glass wall.

"I have put a question to the supernatural," she said, looking down, perhaps at the roof of the cathedral. I could not see it from where I stood. "I have asked it to give me a vision."

"And you think I might be the answer."

"Possibly," she said, turning and looking at me again. "That is not to say that all of this is happening because of Dora and what Dora wants. It

is, after all, happening to you. But I have asked for a vision, and I've been given a series of miraculous incidents, and yes, I believe you, as surely as I believe in the existence of and the goodness of God."

She came towards me, stepping carefully through the scattered folders.

"You know, none of us can say why God allows evil."

"Yes."

"Or whence it came into the world. But the world over, there are millions of us—People of the Book—Moslem, Jew, Catholic, Protestant—descendants of Abraham—and over and over we keep being drawn into tales and schemes in which evil is present, in which there is a Devil, in which there is some element that God allows, some adversary, to use your friend's word."

"Yes. Adversary. That's exactly what he said."

"I trust in God," she said.

"And you're saying I should do that too?"

"What could you possibly lose by doing it?" she said.

I didn't answer.

She walked about, thinking, her black hair falling forward in a curl against her cheek, her long black-clad legs looking painfully thin yet graceful as she paced. She had let go of the black coat a long time ago, and I realized now that she wore only a thin black silk dress. I smelled her blood again, her secret, fragrant, female blood.

I looked away from her.

She said, "I know what I have to lose in such matters. If I believe in God, and there is no God, then I can lose my life. I can end up on a deathbed realizing I've wasted the only real experience of the universe I'll ever be permitted to have."

"Yes, exactly, that's what I thought when I was alive. I wasn't going to waste my life believing in something that was unprovable and out of the question. I wanted to know what I was permitted to see and feel and taste in my life."

"Exactly. But you see, your situation is different. You are a vampire. You are, theologically speaking, a demon. You are powerful in your own way, and you cannot die naturally. You have an edge."

I thought about it.

"Do you know what happened today in the world," she said, "just this one day? We always begin our broadcast with such reports; do you know

how many people died in Bosnia? In Russia? In Africa? How many skirmishes were fought or murders committed?"

"I know what you're saying."

"What I'm saying is, it's highly unlikely this thing has the power to trick you into anything. So go with it. Let it show you what it promises. And if I'm wrong … if you're tricked into Hell, then I've made a horrible mistake."

"No, you haven't. You've avenged your father's death, that's all. But I agree with you. Trickery is too petty to be involved here. I'm going by instincts. And I'll tell you something else about Memnoch, the Devil, something maybe that will surprise you."

"That you like him? I know that. I understood that all along."

"How is that possible? I don't like myself, you know. I love myself, of course, I'm committed to myself till my dying day. But I don't like myself."

"You told me something last night," she said. "You said that if I needed you I was to call to you with my thoughts, my heart."

"Yes."

"You do the same. If you go with this creature, and you need me, call to me. Let me say it this way: If you cannot pull away of your own volition and you need my intercession, then send out your call! I'll hear you. And I'll cry out to the heavens for you. Not for justice but for mercy. Will you make me that promise?"

"Of course."

"What will you do now?" she asked.

"Spend the remaining hours with you, taking care of your affairs. Making sure, through my numerous mortal alliances, that nothing can hurt you in terms of all these possessions."

"My father's done it," she said. "Believe me. He's covered it very cleverly."

"Are you sure?"

"He did it with his usual brilliance. He left more money to fall into the hands of his enemies than the fortune he left to me. They have no need to go looking for anyone. Once they realize he is dead, they will begin to snatch his available assets right and left."

"You are certain of all this."

"Without question. Put your affairs in order tonight. You don't need to

worry about mine. Take care of yourself, that you are ready to embark on this."

I watched her for a long time. I was still seated at the table. She stood with her back to the glass. It struck me that she had been drawn against it in black ink except for her white face.

"Is there a God, Dora?" I whispered. I had spoken these same words so many times! I had asked this question of Gretchen when I was flesh and blood in her arms.

"Yes, there is a God, Lestat," Dora answered. "Be assured of it. Maybe you've been praying to Him so loud and so long that finally He has paid attention. Sometimes I wonder if that isn't the disposition of God, not to hear us when we cry, to deliberately shut His ears!"

"Shall I leave you here or take you home?"

"Leave me. I don't ever want to make a journey like that again. I will spend a good part of the rest of my life trying to remember it precisely and failing to do so. I want to stay here in New York with my father's things. With regard to the money? Your mission has been accomplished."

"And you accept the relics, the fortune."

"Yes, of course, I accept them. I'll keep Roger's precious books until such time as they can be properly offered for others to see—his beloved heretical Wynken de Wilde."

"Do you require anything further of me?" I asked.

"Do you think … do you think you love God?"

"Absolutely not."

"Why do you say that?"

"How could I?" I asked. "How could anyone love Him? What did you just tell me yourself about the world? Don't you see, everybody hates God now. It's not that God is dead in the twentieth century. It's that everybody hates Him! At least I think so. Maybe that's what Memnoch is trying to say."

She was amazed. She frowned with disappointment and yearning. She wanted to say something. She gestured, as though trying to take invisible flowers from the air to show me their beauty, who knows?

"No, I hate Him," I said.

She made the Sign of the Cross and put her hands together. "Are you praying for me?"

"Yes," she said. "If I never lay eyes on you again after tonight, if I

never come across a single shred of evidence that you really exist or were here with me, or that any of these things were said, I'll still be transformed by you as I am now. You are my miracle of sorts. You're greater proof than millions of mortals have ever been given. You're proof not only of the supernatural and the mysterious and the wondrous, you're proof of *exactly what I believe!*"

"I see." I smiled. It was all so logical and symmetrical. And true. I smiled, truly smiled, and shook my head. "I hate to leave you," I said.

"Go," she said, and then she clenched her fists. "Ask God what He wants of us!" she said furiously. "You're right. We hate Him!" The anger blazed in her eyes, and then subsided, and she stared at me, her eyes looking larger and brighter because they were wet now with salt and tears.

"Good-bye, my darling," I said. This was so extraordinary and painful.

I went out into the heavy, drifting snow.

The doors of the great cathedral of St. Patrick's were closed and bolted, and I stood at the foot of the stone steps looking up at the high Olympic Tower, wondering if Dora could see me as I stood here, freezing in the cold, and letting the snow strike my face, softly, persistently, harmfully, and with beauty.

"All right, Memnoch," I said aloud. "No need to wait any longer. Come now, please, if you will."

Immediately I heard the footsteps!

It was as though they were echoing in the monstrous hollow of Fifth Avenue, among the hideous Towers of Babel, and I had cast my lot with the whirlwind.

I turned round and round. There was not a mortal in sight!

"Memnoch the Devil!" I shouted. "I'm ready!"

I was perishing with fear.

"Prove your point to me, Memnoch. You have to do that!" I called.

The steps were getting louder. Oh, he was up to his finest tricks.

"Remember, you have to make me see it from your point of view! That's what you promised!"

A wind was collecting, but from where I couldn't tell. All of the great metropolis seemed empty, frozen, my tomb. The snow swirled and thickened before the cathedral. The towers faded.

I heard his voice right beside me, bodiless and intimate. "All right, my

beloved one," he said. "We'll begin now."

Ten

We were in the whirlwind and the whirlwind was a tunnel, but between us there fell a silence in which I could hear my own breath. Memnoch was so close to me, his arm locked around me, that I could see his dark face in profile, and feel the mane of his hair against the side of my own face.

He was not the Ordinary Man now, but indeed the granite angel, the wings rising out of my focus, and folded around us, against the force of the wind.

As we rose, steadily, without the slightest reference to any sort of gravity, two things became apparent to me at once. The first was that we were surrounded by thousands upon thousands of individual souls. I say souls! What did I see? I saw shapes in the whirlwind, some completely anthropomorphic, others merely faces, but surrounding me, everywhere, were distinct spiritual entities or individuals, and very faintly I heard their voices—whispers, cries, and howls—mingling with the wind.

The sound couldn't hurt me now, as it had in the prior apparitions, nevertheless I heard this throng as we shot upwards, turning as if on an axis, the tunnel narrowing suddenly so that the souls seemed to touch us, and then widening, only to narrow again.

The second thing which I instantly realized was that the darkness was fading or being drained utterly from Memnoch's form. His profile was bright and even translucent; so were his shapeless unimportant garments. And the goat legs of the dark Devil were now the legs of a large man. In sum, the entire turbid and smokelike presence had been replaced by something crystalline and reflective, but which felt pliant and warm and alive.

Words came back to me, snatches of scripture, of visions and prophetic claims and poetry; but there was no time to evaluate, to analyze, to seal into memory.

Memnoch spoke to me in a voice that may not have been technically audible, though I heard the familiar accentless speech of the Ordinary Man.

“Now, it is difficult to go to Heaven without the slightest preparation, and you will be stunned and confused by what you see. But if you don’t see this first, you’ll hunger for it throughout our dialogue, and so I’m taking you to the very gates. Be prepared that the laughter you hear is not laughter. It is joy. It will come through to you as laughter because that is the only way such ecstatic sound can be physically received or perceived.”

No sooner had he finished the last syllable than we found ourselves standing in a garden, on a bridge across a stream! For one moment, the light so flooded my eyes that I shut them, thinking the sun of our solar system had found me and was about to burn me the way I should have been burnt: a vampire turned into a torch and then forever extinguished.

But this sourceless light was utterly penetrating and utterly benign. I opened my eyes, and realized that we were once again amid hundreds of other individuals, and on the banks of the stream and in all directions I saw beings greeting each other, embracing, conversing, weeping, and crying out. As before, the shapes were in all degrees of distinctness. One man was as solid as if I’d run into him in the street of the city; another individual seemed no more than a giant facial expression; while others seemed whirling bits and pieces of material and light. Others were utterly diaphanous. Some seemed invisible, except that I knew they were there! The number was impossible to determine.

The place was limitless. The waters of the stream itself were brilliant with the reflected light; the grass so vividly green that it seemed in the very act of becoming grass, of being born, as if in a painting or an animated film!

I clung to Memnoch and turned to look at him in this new light form. He was the direct opposite now of the accumulating dark angel, yet the face had the very same strong features of the granite statue, and the eyes had the same tender scowl. Behold the angels and devils of William Blake and you’ve seen it. It’s beyond innocence.

“Now we’re going in,” he said.

I realized I was clinging to him with both hands.

“You mean *this* isn’t Heaven!” I cried, and my voice came out as direct speech, intimate, just between us.

“No,” he said, smiling and guiding me across this bridge. “When we get inside, you must be strong. You must realize you are in your earthbound

body, unusual as it is, and your senses will be overwhelmed! You will not be able to endure what you see as you would if you were dead or an angel or my lieutenant, which is what I want you to become."

There was no time to argue. We had passed swiftly across the bridge; giant gates were opening before us. I couldn't see the summit of the walls.

The sound swelled and enveloped us, and indeed it was like laughter, waves upon waves of shimmering and lucid laughter, only it was canorous, as though all those who laughed also sang canticles in full voice at the same time.

What I saw, however, overwhelmed me as much as the sound.

This was very simply the densest, the most intense, the busiest, and the most profoundly magnificent place I'd ever beheld. Our language needs endless synonyms for beautiful; the eyes could see what the tongue cannot possibly describe.

Once again, people were everywhere, people filled with light, and of distinct anthropomorphic shape; they had arms, legs, beaming faces, hair, garments of all different kinds, yet no costume of any seemingly great importance, and the people were moving, traveling paths in groups or alone, or coming together in patterns, embracing, clasping, reaching out, and holding hands.

I turned to the right and to the left, and then all around me, and in every direction saw these multitudes of beings, wrapped in conversation or dialogue or some sort of interchange, some of them embracing and kissing, and others dancing, and the clusters and groups of them continuing to shift and grow or shrink and spread out.

Indeed, the combination of seeming disorder and order was the mystery. This was not chaos. This was not confusion. This was not a din. It seemed the hilarity of a great and final gathering, and by final I mean it seemed a perpetually unfolding resolution of something, a marvel of sustained revelation, a gathering and growing understanding shared by all who participated in it, as they hurried or moved languidly (or even in some cases sat about doing very little), amongst hills and valleys, and along pathways, and through wooded areas and into buildings which seemed to grow one out of another like no structure on earth I'd ever seen.

Nowhere did I see anything specifically domestic such as a house, or

even a palace. On the contrary, the structures were infinitely larger, filled with as bright a light as the garden, with corridors and staircases branching here and there with perfect fluidity. Yet ornament covered everything. Indeed, the surfaces and textures were so varied that any one of them might have absorbed me forever.

I cannot convey the sense of simultaneous observation that I felt. I have to speak now in sequence. I have to take various parts of this limitless and brilliant environment, in order to shed my own fallible light on the whole.

There were archways, towers, halls, galleries, gardens, great fields, forests, streams. One area flowed into another, and through them all I was traveling, with Memnoch beside me, securely holding me in a solid grip. Again and again, my eyes were drawn to some spectacularly beautiful sculpture or cascade of flowers or a giant tree reaching out into the cloudless blue, only to have my body turned back around by him as if I were being kept to a tightrope from which I might fatally fall.

I laughed; I wept; I did both, and my body was convulsing with the emotions. I clung to him and tried to see over his shoulder and around him, and spun in his grip like an infant, turning to lock eyes with this or that person who happened to glance at me, or to look for a steady moment as the groups and the parliaments and congregations shifted and moved.

We were in a vast hall suddenly. “God, if David could see this!” I cried; the books and scrolls were endless, and there seemed nothing illogical or confusing in the manner in which all these documents lay open and ready to be examined.

“Don’t look, because you won’t remember it,” Memnoch said. He snatched at my hand as if I were a toddler. I had tried to catch hold of a scroll that was filled with an absolutely astonishing explanation of something to do with atoms and photons and neutrinos. But he was right. The knowledge was gone immediately, and the unfolding garden surrounded us as I lost my balance and fell against him.

I looked down at the ground and saw flowers of complete perfection; flowers that were the flowers that our flowers of the world might become! I don’t know any other way to describe how well realized were the petals and the centers and the colors. The colors themselves were so distinct and so finely delineated that I was unsure suddenly that our

spectrum was even involved.

I mean, I don't think our spectrum of color was the limit! I think there was some other set of rules. Or it was merely an expansion, a gift of being able to see combinations of color which are not visible chemically on earth.

The waves of laughter, of singing, of conversation, became so loud as to overwhelm my other senses; I felt blinded by sound suddenly; and yet the fight was laying bare every precious detail.

"Sapphirine!" I cried out suddenly, trying to identify the greenish blue of the great leaves surrounding us and gently waving to and fro, and Memnoch smiled and nodded as if in approval, reaching again to stop me from touching Heaven, from trying to grab some of the magnificence I saw.

"But I can't hurt it if I touch, can I?" It seemed unthinkable suddenly that anyone could bruise anything here, from the walls of quartz and crystal with their ever-rising spires and belfries, to the sweet, soft vines twining upwards in the branches of trees dripping with magnificent fruits and flowers. "No, no, I wouldn't want to hurt it!" I said.

My own voice was distinct to me, though the voices of all those around me seemed to overpower it.

"Look!" said Memnoch. "Look at them. Look!" And he turned my head as if to force me not to cower against his chest but to stare right into the multitudes. And I perceived that these were alliances I was witnessing, clans that were gathering, families, groups of kindred, or true friends, beings whose knowledge of each other was profound, creatures who shared similar physical and material manifestations! And for one brave moment, one brave instant, I saw that all these beings from one end of this limitless place to the other were connected, by hand or fingertip or arm or the touch of a foot. That, indeed, clan slipped within the womb of clan, and tribe spread out to intersperse amongst countless families, and families joined to form nations, and that the entire congregation was in fact a palpable and visible and interconnected configuration! Everyone impinged upon everyone else. Everyone drew, in his or her separateness, upon the separateness of everyone else!

I blinked, dizzy, near to collapsing. Memnoch held me.

"Look again!" he whispered, holding me up.

But I covered my eyes; because I knew that if I saw the

interconnections again, I would collapse! I would perish inside my own sense of separateness! Yet each and every being I saw was separate.

"They are all themselves!" I cried. My hands were clapped on my eyes. I could hear the raging and soaring songs more intensely; the long riffs and cascades of voices. And beneath all there came such a sequence of flowing rhythms, lapping one over the other, that I began to sing.

I sang with everyone! I stood still, free of Memnoch for a moment, opened my eyes, and heard my voice come out of me and rise as if into the universe itself.

I sang and I sang; but my song was full of longing and immense curiosity and frustration as well as celebration. And it came home to me, thudded into me, that nowhere around me was there anyone who was unsafe or unsatisfied, was there anything approximating stasis or boredom; yet the word "frenzy" was in no way applicable to the constant movement and shifting of faces and forms that I saw.

My song was the only sad note in Heaven, and yet the sadness was transfigured immediately into harmony, into a form of psalm or canticle, into a hymn of praise and wonder and gratitude.

I cried out. I think I cried the single word "God." This was not a prayer or an admission, or a plea, but simply a great exclamation.

We stood in a doorway. Beyond appeared vista upon vista, and I was vaguely sensible suddenly that over the nearby balustrade there lay below the world.

The world as I had never seen it in all its ages, with all its secrets of the past revealed. I had only to rush to the railing and I could peer down into the time of Eden or Ancient Mesopotamia, or a moment when Roman legions had marched through the woods of my earthly home. I would see the great eruption of Vesuvius spill its horrid deadly ash down upon the ancient living city of Pompeii.

Everything there to be known and finally comprehended, all questions settled, the smell of another time, the taste of it—

I ran towards the balustrade, which seemed to be farther and farther away. Faster and faster I headed towards it. Yet still the distance was impossible, and suddenly I became intensely aware that this vision of Earth would be mingled with smoke and fire and suffering, and that it might utterly demolish in me the overflowing sense of joy. I had to see, however. I was not dead. I was not here to stay.

Memnoch reached out for me. But I ran faster than he could.

An immense light rose suddenly, a direct source infinitely hotter and more illuminating than the splendid light that already fell without prejudice on everything I could see. This great gathering magnetic light grew larger and larger until the world down below, the great dim landscape of smoke and horror and suffering, was turned white by this light, and rendered like an abstraction of itself, on the verge of combusting.

Memnoch pulled me back, throwing up his arms to cover my eyes. I did the same. I realized he had bowed his head and was hiding his own eyes behind me.

I heard him sigh, or was it a moan? I couldn't tell. For one second the sound filled the universe; all the cries and laughter and singing; and something mournful from the depths of Earth—all this sound—was caught in Memnoch's sigh.

Suddenly I felt his strong arms relaxed and releasing me.

I looked up, and in the midst of the flood of light I saw again the balustrade, and against it stood a single form.

It was a tall figure who stood with his hands on the railing, looking over it and down. This appeared to be a man. He turned around and looked at me and reached out to receive me.

His hair and eyes were dark, brownish, his face perfectly symmetrical and flawless, his gaze intense; and the grasp of his fingers very tight.

I drew in my breath. I felt my body in all its solidity and fragility as his fingers clung to me. I was on the verge of death. I might have ceased to breathe at that moment, or ceased to move with the commitment to life and might have died!

The being drew me towards himself, a light flooding from him that mingled with the light behind him and all around him, so his face grew brighter yet more distinct and more detailed. I saw the pores of his darkening golden skin, I saw the cracks in his lips, the shadow of the hair that had been shaved from his face.

And then he spoke loudly, pleadingly to me, in a heartbroken voice, a voice strong and masculine and perhaps even young.

"You would never be my adversary, would you? You wouldn't, would you? Not you, Lestat, no, not you!"

My God.

In utter agony, I was torn out of His grip, out of His midst, and out of His milieu.

The whirlwind once again surrounded us. I sobbed and beat on Memnoch's chest. Heaven was gone!

"Memnoch, let go of me! God, it was God!"

Memnoch tightened his grip, straining with all his force to carry me downwards, to make me submit, to force me to begin the descent.

We plummeted, that awful falling, which struck such fear in me that I couldn't protest or cling to Memnoch or do anything except watch the swift currents of souls all around us ascending, watching, descending, the darkness corning again, everything growing dark, until suddenly we traveled through moist air, full of familiar and natural scents, and then came to a soft and soundless pause.

It was a garden again. It was still and beautiful. But it was Earth. I knew it. My earth; and it was no disappointment in its intricacy or scents or substance. On the contrary, I fell on the grass and let my fingers dig into the earth itself. I felt it soft and gritted under my fingernails. I sobbed. I could taste the mud.

The sun was shining down on us, both of us. Memnoch sat looking at me, his wings immense and then slowly fading, until we became two manlike figures; one prone and crying like a child, and the other a great Angel, musing and waiting, his hair a mane of gradually settling light.

"You heard what He said to me!" I cried. I sat up. My voice should have been deafening. But it seemed only loud enough to be perfectly understood. "He said, 'You wouldn't ever be my adversary!' You heard Him! He called me by name."

Memnoch was completely calm, and of course infinitely more seductive and enchanting in this pale angelic shape than ever he could have been as the Ordinary Man.

"Of course he called you by name," he said, his eyes widening with emphasis. "He doesn't want you to help me. I told you. I'm winning."

"But what were we doing there! How could we get into Heaven and yet be his adversaries!"

"Come with me, Lestat, and be my lieutenant, and you can come and go there whenever you like."

I stared at him in astonished silence.

"You mean this? Come and go there?"

“Yes. Anytime. As I told you. Don’t you know the Scriptures? I’m not claiming an authenticity for the fragments that remain, or even the original poetry, but of course you can come and go. You won’t be of that place until you are redeemed and in it. But you can certainly get in and out, once you’re on my side.”

I tried to realize what he was saying. I tried to picture again the galleries, the libraries, the long, long rows of books, and realized suddenly it had become insubstantial; the details were disappearing. I was retaining a tenth of what I’d beheld; perhaps even less. What I have described here in this book is what I could remember then and now. And there had been so much more!

“How is that possible, that He would let us into Heaven!” I said. I tried to concentrate on the Scriptures, something David had said once a long time ago, about the Book of Job, something about Satan flying around and God saying, almost casually, Where have you been? Some explanation of the *bene ha elohim* or the court of heaven—

“We are his children,” said Memnoch. “Do you want to hear how it all started, the entire true story of Creation and the Fall, or do you want to go back and just throw yourself into His arms?”

“What more is there!” I asked. But I knew. There was understanding of what Memnoch was saying. And there was also something required to get in there! I couldn’t just go, and Memnoch knew it. I had choices, yes, and they were these, either to go with Memnoch or return to the earth. But admission to Heaven was hardly automatic. The remark had been sarcastic. I couldn’t go back and throw myself in His arms.

“You’re right,” he said. “And you’re also very wrong.”

“I don’t want to see Hell!” I said suddenly. I drew myself up. I recoiled. I looked around us. This was a wild garden, this was my Savage Garden, of thorny vines and hunkering trees, of wild grass, and orchids clinging to the mossy knuckles of branches, of birds streaking high above through webs of leaves. “I don’t want to see Hell!” I cried. “I don’t want to, I don’t!…”

Memnoch didn’t answer. He seemed to be considering things. And then he said, “Do you want to know the why of all of it, or not? I was so sure you would want to know, you of all creatures. I thought you would want every little bit of information!”

“I do!” I cried. “Of course I want to know,” I said. “But I … I don’t think

I can."

"I can tell you as much as I know," he said gently, with a little shrug of his powerful shoulders.

His hair was smoother and stronger than human hair, the strands were perhaps thicker, and certainly more incandescent. I could see the roots of his hair at the top of his smooth forehead. His hair was tumbling soundlessly into some sort of order, or just becoming less disheveled. The flesh of his face was equally smooth and apparently pliant all over, the long, well-formed nose, the full and broad mouth, the firm line of the jaw.

I realized his wings were still there, but they had become almost impossible to see. The pattern of the feathers, layer after layer of feathers, was visible, but only if I squinted my eyes and tried to make out the details against something dark behind him, like the bark of the tree.

"I can't think," I said. "I see what you think of me, you think you've chosen a coward! You think you've made a terrible mistake. But I tell you, I can't reason. I … I saw Him. He said, 'You wouldn't be my adversary!' You're asking me to do it! You took me to Him and away from Him."

"As He Himself has allowed!" Memnoch said with a little rise to his eyebrows.

"Is that so?"

"Of course!" he answered.

"Then why did He plead with me! Why did He look that way!"

"Because He was God Incarnate, and God Incarnate suffers and feels things with His human form, and so He gave you that much of Himself, that's all! Suffering! Ah, suffering!"

He looked to heaven and shook his head. He frowned a little, thoughtfully. His face in this form could not appear wrathful or twisted with any ugly emotion. Blake had seen into Heaven.

"But it was God," I said.

He nodded, with his head to the side. "Ah, yes," he said wearily, "the Living Lord."

He looked off into the trees. He didn't seem angry or impatient or even weary. Again, I didn't know if he could. I realized he was listening to sounds in the soft garden, and I could hear them too.

I could smell things—animals, insects, the heady perfume of jungle flowers, those overheated, mutated blooms that a rain forest can nourish either in the depths or in its leafy heights. I caught the scent of humans suddenly!

There were people in this forest. We were in an actual place.

"There are others here," I said.

"Yes," he said. And now he smiled at me very tenderly. "You are not a coward. Shall I tell you everything, or simply let you go? You know now more than millions ever glimpse in their lifetimes. You don't know what to do with that knowledge, or how to go on existing, or being what you are … but you have had your glimpse of Heaven. Shall I let you go? Or don't you want to know why I need you so badly?"

"Yes, I do want to know," I said. "But above all, more than anything else, I want to know how you and I can stand there side by side, adversaries, and how you can look as you look and be the Devil, and how … and how …" I laughed. "… and how I can look like I look and be the Devil I've been! That's what I want to know. I have never in my whole existence seen the aesthetic laws of the world broken. Beauty, rhythm, symmetry, those are the only laws I've ever witnessed that seemed natural.

"And I've always called them the Savage Garden! Because they seemed ruthless and indifferent to suffering—to the beauty of the butterfly snared in the spiderweb! To the wildebeest lying on the veldt with its heart still beating as the lions come to lap at the wound in its throat."

"Yes, how well I understand and respect your philosophy," he said. "Your words are my words."

"But I saw something more up there!" I said. "I saw Heaven. I saw the perfected Garden that was no longer Savage. I saw it!" I began to weep again.

"I know, I know," he said, consoling me.

"All right." I drew myself up again, ashamed. I searched in my pockets, found a linen handkerchief, pulled it out and wiped my face. The linen smelled like my house in New Orleans, where jacket and handkerchief both had been kept until sunset this night, when I'd taken them out of the closet and gone to kidnap Dora from the streets.

Or was it the same night?

I had no idea.

I pressed the handkerchief to my mouth. I could smell the scent of New Orleans dust and mold and warmth.

I wiped my mouth.

"All right!" I declared breathlessly. "If you haven't become completely disgusted with me—"

"Hardly!" he said, as politely as David might have said.

"Then tell me the Story of Creation. Tell me everything. Just go on! Tell me! I…."

"Yes …?"

"I *have* to know!"

He rose to his feet, shook the grass from his loose robe, and said:

"That's what I've been waiting for. Now, we can truly begin."

Eleven

"Let's move through the forest as we talk," he said. "If you don't mind the walking."

"No, not at all," I said.

He brushed a little more of the grass from his garment, a fine spun robe that seemed neutral and simple, a garment that might have been worn either yesterday or a million years ago. His entire form was slightly bigger all over than mine, and bigger perhaps than that of most humans; he fulfilled every mythic promise of an angel, except that the white wings remained diaphanous, retaining their shape under some sort of cloak of invisibility, more it seemed for convenience than anything else.

"We're not in Time," he said. "Don't worry about the men and the women in the forest. They can't see us. No one here can see us, and for that reason I can keep my present form. I don't have to resort to the dark devilish body which He thinks is appropriate for earthly maneuvers, or to the Ordinary Man, which is my own unobtrusive choice."

"You mean you couldn't have appeared to me on Earth in your angelic form?"

"Not without a lot of argument and pleading, and frankly I didn't want to do it," he said. "It's too overwhelming. It would have weighted everything too much in my favor. In this form, I look too inherently good. I can't enter Heaven without this form; He doesn't want to see the other form, and I don't blame Him. And frankly, on Earth, it's easiest to go about as the Ordinary Man."

I stood up shakily, accepting his hand, which was firm and warm. In fact, his body seemed as solid as Roger's body had seemed near the very end of Roger's visitation. My body felt complete and entire and my own.

It didn't surprise me to discover my hair was badly tangled. I ran a comb through it hastily for comfort, and brushed off my own clothes—the dark suit I had put on in New Orleans, which was full of tiny specks of dust, and some grass from the garden, but otherwise unharmed. My shirt was torn at the collar, as if I myself had ripped it open hastily in an effort to breathe. Otherwise, I was the usual dandy, standing amid a

thick and verdant forest garden, which was not like anything I'd ever seen.

Even a casual inspection indicated that this was no rain forest, but something considerably less dense, yet as primitive.

"Not in Time," I said.

"Well, moving through it as we please," he said, "we are only a few thousand years before your time, if you must know it. But again, the men and women roaming here won't see us. So don't worry. And the animals can't harm us. We are watchers here but we affect nothing. Come, I know this terrain by heart, and if you follow me, you'll see we have an easy path through this wilderness. I have much to tell you. Things around us will begin to change."

"And this body of yours? It's not an illusion? It's complete."

"Angels are invisible, by nature," he said. "That is, we are immaterial in terms of earth material, or the material of the physical universe, or however you would like to describe matter for yourself. But you were right in your early speculation that we have an essential body; and we can gather to ourselves sufficient matter from a whole variety of sources to create for ourselves a complete and functioning body, which we can later shatter and disperse as we see fit."

We walked slowly and easily through the grass. My boots, heavy enough for the New York winter, found the uneven ground no problem at all.

"What I'm saying," Memnoch continued, looking down at me—he was perhaps three inches taller—with his huge almond-shaped eyes—"is that this isn't a borrowed body, nor is it strictly speaking a contrived body. It's my body when surrounded and permeated with matter. In other words, it's the logical result of my essence drawing to it all the various materials it needs."

"You mean you look this way because you look this way."

"Precisely. The Devilish body is a penance. The Ordinary Man is a subterfuge. But this is what I look like. There were angels like me throughout Heaven. Your focus was mainly on human souls in Heaven. But the angels were there."

I tried to remember. Had there been taller beings, winged beings? I thought so, and yet I wasn't certain. The beatific thunder of Heaven beat in my ears suddenly. I felt the joy, the safety, and above all the

satisfaction of all those thriving in it. But angels, no, I had not noticed.

"I take my accurate form," Memnoch continued, "when I am in Heaven, or outside of Time. When I am on my own, so to speak, and not bound to the earth. Other angels, Michael, Gabriel, any of those can appear in their glorified form on earth if they want to. Again, it would be natural. Matter being drawn to them by their magnetic force shapes them to look their most beautiful, the way God created them. But most of the time they don't let this happen. They go about as Ordinary Men or Ordinary Women, because it's simply much easier to do so. Continuously overwhelming human beings do not serve our purposes—neither our Lord's nor mine."

"And that is the question. What is the purpose? What are you doing, if you're not evil?"

"Let me start with the Creation. And let me tell you right now that I know nothing of where God came from, or why, or how. No one knows this. The mystic writers, the prophets of Earth, Hindu, Zoroastrian, Hebrew, Egyptian—all recognized the impossibility of understanding the origin of God. That's not really the question for me and never has been, though I suspect that at the end of Time we will know."

"You mean God hasn't promised that we will know where He came from."

"You know what?" he said, smiling. "I don't think God knows. I think that's the whole purpose of the physical universe. He thinks through watching the universe evolve, He's going to find out. What He has set in motion, you see, *is* a giant Savage Garden, a giant experiment, to see if the end result produces beings like Himself. We are made in His image, all of us—He is anthropomorphic, without question, but again He is not material."

"And when the light came, when you covered your eyes in Heaven, that was God."

He nodded. "God, the Father, God, the Essence, Brahma, the Aten, the Good God, *En Sof*, Yahweh, God!"

"Then how can He be anthropomorphic?"

"His essence has a shape, just as does mine. We, His first creations, were made in His image. He told us so. He has two legs, two arms, a head. He made us invisible images of the same. And then set the universe into motion to explore the development of that shape through

matter, do you see?"

"Not quite."

"I believe God worked backwards from the blueprint of Himself. He created a physical universe whose laws would result in the evolution of creatures who resembled Him. They would be made of matter. Except for one striking and important difference. Oh, but then there were so many surprises. You know my opinion already. Your friend David hit upon it when he was a man. I think God's plan went horribly wrong."

"Yes, David did say that, that he thought angels felt God's plan for Creation was all wrong."

"Yes. I think He did it originally to find out what it would have been like had He been Matter. And I think He was looking for a clue as to how He got where He is. And why He is shaped like He is, which is shaped like me or you. In watching man evolve, He hopes to understand His own evolution, if such a thing in fact occurred. And whether this has worked or not to His satisfaction, well, only you can judge that for yourself."

"Wait a minute," I said. "But if He is spiritual and made of light, or made of nothing—then what gave Him the idea for matter in the first place?"

"Ah, now that is the cosmic mystery. In my opinion, His imagination created Matter, or foresaw it, or longed for it. And I think the longing for it was a most important aspect of His mind. You see, Lestat, if He Himself did originate in Matter … then all this is an experiment to see when Matter can evolve into God again.

"If He didn't originate Matter, if He proceeded and it is something He imagined and desired and longed for, well, the effects upon Him are basically the same. He wanted Matter. He wasn't satisfied without it. Or He wouldn't have made it. It was no accident, I can assure it.

"But let me caution you, not all the angels agree on this interpretation, some feel the need for no interpretation, and some have completely different theories. This is my theory, and since I am the Devil, and have been for centuries, since I am the Adversary, the Prince of Darkness, the Ruler of the World of Men and of Hell, I think my opinion is worth stating. I think it's worth believing in. So you have my article of faith.

"The design of the universe is immense, to use a feeble word, but the whole process of evolution was His calculated experiment, and we, the

angels, were created long before it began."

"What was it like before Matter began?"

"I can't tell you. I know, but I don't, strictly speaking, remember. The reason for this is simple: When Matter was created, so was Time. All angels began to exist not only in heavenly perfection with God but to witness and be drawn into Time.

"Now we can step out of it, and I can to some extent recall when there was no lure of Matter or Time; but I can't really tell you what that early stage was like anymore. Matter and Time changed everything totally. They obliterated not only the pure state that preceded them, they upstaged it; they overshadowed it; they, how shall I say …?"

"Eclipsed it."

"Exactly. Matter and Time eclipsed the Time before Time."

"But can you remember being happy?"

"Interesting question. Dare I say this?" he asked himself as he continued to speculate. "Dare I say, I remember the longing, the incompleteness, more than I remember complete happiness? Dare I say there was less to understand?

"You cannot underestimate the effect upon us of the creation of the physical universe. Think for one moment, if you can, what Time means, and how miserable you might be without it. No, that's not right. What I mean is, without Time you could not be conscious of yourself, either in terms of failure or achievement, or in terms of any motion backwards or forwards, or any effect."

"I see it. Rather like the old people who've lost so much intelligence that they have no memory moment to moment. They're vegetative, wide-eyed, but they are no longer human with the rest of the race because they have no sense of anything … themselves or anyone else."

"A perfect analogy. Though let me assure you such aged and wounded individuals still have souls, which will at some point cease to be dependent upon their crippled brains."

"Souls!" I said.

We walked slowly but steadily, and I tried not to be distracted by the greenery, and the flowers; but I have always been seduced by flowers; and here I saw flowers of a size which our world would surely find impractical and impossible to support. Yet these were species of trees I knew. This was the world as it had once been.

"Yes, you're correct on that. Can you feel the warmth around you? This is a time of lovely evolutionary development on the planet. When men speak of Eden or Paradise, they 'remember' this time."

"The Ice Age is yet to come."

"The second Ice Age is coming. Definitely. And then the world will renew itself, and Eden will come again. All through the Ice Age, men and women will develop. But realize of course that even by this point, life as we know it had existed for millions of years!"

I stopped. I put my hands to my face. I tried to think it through again. (If you want to do this, just reread the last two pages.)

"But He knew what Matter was!" I said.

"No, I'm not sure He did," said Memnoch. "He took that seed, that egg, that essence and He cast it in a form which became Matter! But I don't know how truly He foresaw what that would mean. You see, that's our big dispute. I don't think He sees the consequences of His actions! I don't think He pays attention! That's what the big fight is about!"

"So He created Matter perhaps by discovering what it was as He did it."

"Yes, Matter and energy, which are interchangeable as you know, yes, He created them, and I suspect that the key to Him lies within the word 'energy,' that if human anatomy ever reaches the point where angels and God can be satisfactorily explained in human language, energy will be the key."

"So He was energy," I said, "and in making the universe, He caused some of that energy to be changed into Matter."

"Yes, and to create a circular interchange independent of himself. But of course nobody said all this to us at the beginning. He didn't say it. I don't think He knew it. We certainly didn't know it. All we knew was that we were dazzled by His creations. We were absolutely astonished by the feel and taste and heat and solidity and gravitational pull of Matter in its battle with energy. We knew only what we saw."

"Ah, and you saw the universe unfolding. You saw the Big Bang."

"Use that term with skepticism. Yes, we saw the universe come into existence; we saw everything set into motion, as it were. And we were overawed! That's why almost every early religion on earth celebrates the majesty, the grandeur, the greatness and genius of the Creator; why the earliest anthems ever put into words on Earth sing the glories of God.

We were impressed, just as humans later would come to be impressed, and in our angelic minds, God was Almighty and Wondrous and Beyond Comprehension before man came into being.

"But let me remind you, especially as we walk through this magnificent garden, that we witnessed millions of explosions and chemical transformations, upheavals, all of which involved nonorganic molecules before 'life' as we call it ever came to exist."

"The mountain ranges were here."

"Yes."

"And the rains?"

"Torrents upon torrents of rain."

"Volcanos erupted."

"Continuously. You can't conceive of how enthralled we were. We watched the atmosphere thicken and develop, watching it change in composition.

"And then, and then, came what I will call for you the Thirteen Revelations of Physical Evolution. And by revelation, I mean what was revealed in the process to the angels, to those of us who Watched, to *us*.

"I could tell you in greater detail, take you inside every basic species of organism that ever thrived in this world. But you wouldn't remember it. I'm going to tell you what you can remember so that you can make your decision while you're still alive."

"Am I alive?"

"Of course. Your soul has never suffered physical death; it's never left the earth, except with me by special dispensation for this journey. You know you are alive. You're Lestat de Lioncourt, even though your body has been mutated by the invasion of an alien and alchemic spirit, whose history and woes you have recorded yourself."

"To come with you … to decide to follow you … I have to die then, don't I?"

"Of course," he said.

I found myself stopped still again, hands locked to the side of my head. I stared down at the grass underneath my boots. I sensed the swarm of insectile light gathered in the sun falling on us. I looked at the reflection of radiance and verdant forest in Memnoch's eyes.

He lifted his hand very slowly, as if giving me full opportunity to move away from him, and then he laid his hand on my shoulder. I loved

this sort of gesture, the respectful gesture. I tried so often to make this sort of gesture myself.

"You have the choice, remember? You can return to being exactly what you are now."

I couldn't answer. I knew what I was thinking. *Immortal material earthbound, vampire*. But I didn't speak the words. How could anyone return from this? And again, I saw His face and heard His words. *You would never be my adversary, would you?*

"You are responding very well to what I tell you," he said warmly. "I knew you would, for several reasons."

"Why?" I asked. "Tell me why. I need a little reassurance. I'm too shattered by all my past weeping and stammering, though I have to confess, I'm not too interested in talking about myself."

"What you are is part of what we are doing," he said. We had come to an enormous spiderweb, suspended over our broad path by thick, shimmering threads. Respectfully, he ducked beneath it rather than destroy it, drawing his wings downward around him, and I followed his lead.

"You're curious, that's your virtue," he said. "You want to know. This is what your ancient Marius said to you, that he, having survived thousands of years, or well, nearly … would answer your questions as a young vampiric creature, because your questions were truly being asked! You wanted to know. And this is what drew me to you also.

"Through all your insolence, you wanted to know! You have been horribly insulting to me and to God continuously, but then so is everyone in your time. That's nothing unusual, except with you there was tremendous genuine curiosity and wonder behind it. You saw the Savage Garden, rather than simply assuming a role there. So this has to do with why I have picked you."

"All right," I said with a sigh. It made sense. Of course I remembered Marius revealing himself to me. I remembered him saying the very things to which Memnoch referred. And I knew, too, that my intense love of David, and of Dora, revolved around very similar traits in both beings: an inquisitiveness which was fearless and willing to take the consequence of the answers!

"God, my Dora, is she all right?"

"Ah, it's that sort of thing which surprises me, the ease with which you

can be distracted. Just when I think I've really astonished you and I have you locked in, you step back and demand to be answered on your own terms. It's not a violation of your curiosity, but it is a means of controlling the inquiry, so to speak."

"Are you telling me that I must, for the moment, forget about Dora?"

"I'll go you one better. There is nothing for you to worry about. Your friends, Armand and David, have found Dora, and are looking out for her, without revealing themselves to her."

He smiled reassuringly, and gave a little doubtful, maybe scolding, shake of the head.

"And," he said, "you must remember your precious Dora has tremendous physical and mental resources of her own. You may well have fulfilled what Roger asked of you. Her belief in God set her apart from others years ago; now what you've shown her has only intensified her commitment to all that she believes. I don't want to talk anymore about Dora. I want to go on describing Creation."

"Yes, please."

"Now, where were we? There was God; and we were with Him. We had anthropomorphic shapes but we didn't call them that because we had never seen our shapes in material form. We knew our limbs, our heads, our faces, our forms, and a species of movement which is purely celestial, but which organizes all parts of us in concert, fluidly. But we knew nothing of Matter or material form. Then God created the Universe and Time.

"Well, we were astonished, and we were also enthralled! Absolutely enthralled.

"God said to us, 'Watch this, because this will be beautiful and will exceed your conceptions and expectations, as it will Mine.' "

"God said this."

"Yes, to me and the other angels. Watch. And if you go back to scripture in various forms, you will find that one of the earliest terms used for us, the angels, is the Watchers."

"Oh, yes, in Enoch and in many Hebrew texts."

"Right. And look to the other religions of the world, whose symbols and language are less familiar to you, and you will see a cosmology of similar beings, an early race of godlike creatures who looked over or preceded human beings. It's all garbled, but in a way—it's all there. We

were the witnesses of God's Creation. We preceded it, and therefore did not witness our own. But we were there when He made the stars!"

"Are you saying that these other religions, that they contain the same validity as the religion to which we are obviously referring? We are speaking of God and Our Lord as though we were European Catholics—"

"It's all garbled, in countless texts throughout the world. There are texts which are irretrievable now which contained amazingly accurate information about cosmology; and there are texts that men know; and there are texts that have been forgotten but which can be rediscovered in time."

"Ah, in time."

"It's all essentially the same story. But listen to my point of view on it and you will have no difficulty reconciling it with your own points of reference, and the symbology which speaks more clearly to you."

"But the validity of other religions! You're saying that the being I saw in Heaven wasn't Christ."

"I *didn't* say that. As a matter of fact, I said that He was God Incarnate. Wait till we get to that point!"

We had come out of the forest and stood now on what seemed the edge of a veldt. For the first time I caught sight of the humans whose scent had been distracting me—a very distant band of scantily clothed nomads moving steadily through the grass. There must have been thirty of them, perhaps less.

"And the Ice Age is yet to come," I repeated. I turned round and round, trying to absorb and memorize the details of the enormous trees. But even as I did so, I realized the forest had changed.

"But look carefully at the human beings," he said. "Look." He pointed. "What do you see?"

I narrowed my eyes and called upon my vampiric powers to observe more closely. "Men and women, who look very similar to those of today. Yes, I would say this is *Homo sapiens sapiens*. I would say, they are our species."

"Exactly. What do you notice about their faces?"

"That they have distinct expressions that seem entirely modern, at least readable to a modern mind. Some are frowning; some are talking; one or two seem deep in thought. The shaggy-haired man lagging behind, he seems unhappy. And the woman, the woman with the huge

breasts—are you sure she can't see us?"

"She can't. She's merely looking in this direction. What differentiates her from the men?"

"Well, her breasts, clearly, and the fact that she is beardless. The men have beards. Her hair is longer of course, and well, she's pretty; she's delicate of bone; she's feminine. She isn't carrying an infant, but the others are. She must be the youngest, or one who hasn't given birth."

He nodded.

It did seem that she could see us. She was narrowing her gaze as I did mine. Her face was longish, oval, what an archaeologist would call Cro-Magnon; there was nothing apelike about her, or about her kin. She wasn't fair, however; her skin was dark golden, rather like that of the Semitic or Arab peoples, like His skin in Heaven Above. Her dark hair lifted exquisitely in the wind as she turned and moved forward.

"These people are all naked."

Memnoch gave a short laugh.

We moved back into the forest; the veldt vanished. The air was thick and moist and fragrant around us.

Towering over us were immense conifers and ferns. Never had I seen ferns of this size, their monstrous fronds bigger by far than the blades of banana trees, and as for the conifers, I could only compare them to the great, barbaric redwoods of the western California forests, trees which have always made me feel alone and afraid.

He continued to lead us, oblivious to this swarming tropical jungle through which we made our way. Things slithered past us; there were muted roars in the distance. The earth itself was layered over with green growth, velvety, ruckled, and sometimes seemingly with living rocks!

I was aware of a rather cool breeze suddenly, and glanced over my shoulder. The veldt and the humans were long gone. The shadowy ferns rose so thickly behind us that it took me a moment to realize that rain was falling from the sky, high above, striking the topmost greenery and only touching us with its soft, soothing sound.

There had been no humans in this forest ever, that was certain, but what manner of monsters were there, which might step from the shadows?

"Now," Memnoch said, easily moving aside the dense foliage with his right arm as we continued to walk. "Let me get to the specifics, or what I

have organized into the Thirteen Revelations of Evolution as the angels perceived them and discussed them with God. Understand, throughout we will speak of this world only—planets, stars, other galaxies, these have nothing to do with our discussion."

"You mean, we are the only life in the entire universe."

"I mean my world and my heaven and my God are all that I know."

"I see."

"As I told you, we witnessed complex geological processes; we saw the mountains rise, we saw the seas created, we saw the continents shift. Our anthems of praise and wonder were endless. You cannot imagine the singing in Heaven; you heard a mere taste of it in a Heaven filled with human souls. Then we were only the celestial choirs, and each new development prompted its psalms and canticles. The sound was different. Not better, no, but not the same.

"Meantime, we were very busy, descending into the atmosphere of earth, oblivious to its composition, and losing ourselves in contemplation of various details. The minutiae of life involved a demand on our focus which did not exist in the celestial realm."

"You mean everything there was large and clear."

"Precisely and fully illuminated, the Love of God was in no way enhanced or enlarged or complicated by any question of tiny details."

We had come now to a waterfall, thin, fierce, and descending into a bubbling pool. I stood for a moment, refreshed by the mist of water on my face and hands. Memnoch seemed to enjoy the same.

For the first time I realized his feet were bare. He let his foot slip into the water itself, and watched the water swirl around his toes. The nails of his toes were ivory, perfectly trimmed.

As he looked down into the churning, bubbling water, his wings became visible, rising straight up suddenly to great peaks above him, and I could see the moisture glittering as it coated the feathers. There was a commotion; the wings appeared to close, exactly like those of a bird, and to fold back behind him, and then to disappear.

"Imagine now," he said, "the legions of angels, the multitudes of all ranks—and there are ranks—coming down to this earth to fall in love with something as simple as the bubbling water we see before us or the changing color of sunlight as it pierces the gases surrounding the planet itself."

“Was it more interesting than Heaven?”

“Yes. One has to say yes. Of course, on reentry, one feels complete satisfaction in Heaven, especially if God is pleased; but the longing returns, the innate curiosity, thoughts seemed to collect inside our minds. We became aware of having a mind in this fashion, but let me move on to the Thirteen Revelations.

“The First Revelation was the change of inorganic molecules to organic molecules … from rock to tiny living molecule, so to speak. Forget this forest. It didn’t exist then. But look to the pool. It was in pools such as this, caught in the hands of the mountain, warm, and busy, and full of gases from the furnaces of the earth, that such things started—the first organic molecules appeared.

“A clamour rose to Heaven. ‘Lord, look what Matter has done.’ And the Almighty gave His usual beaming smile of approval. ‘Wait and Watch,’ He said again, and as we watched, there came the Second Revelation: Molecules commenced to organize themselves into three forms of Material: cells, enzymes, and genes. Indeed, no sooner had the one-celled form of such things appeared than the multicellular forms began to appear; and what we had divined with the first organic molecules was now fully apparent; some spark of life animated these things; they had a crude form of purpose, and it was as if we could see that spark of life and recognize it as a tiny, tiny evidence of the essence of life which we in abundance possessed!

“In sum, the world was full of commotion of a new kind altogether; and as we watched these tiny multicelled beings drift through water, collecting to form the most primitive algae, or fungi, we saw these green living things then take hold upon the land itself! Out of the water climbed the slime which had clung for millions of years to its shores. And from these creeping green things sprang the ferns and the conifers which you see around us, rising finally until they attained massive size.

“Now angels have size. We could walk beneath these things on the green-covered world. Again, listen, if you will, in your imagination, to the anthems of praise that rose to heaven; listen if you will to the joy of God, perceiving all this through His own Intellect and through the choruses and tales and prayers of his angels!

“Angels began to spread out all over the earth; they began to delight in certain places; some preferred the mountains; others the deep valleys,

some the waters, some the forest of green shadow and shade."

"So they became like the water spirits," I said, "or the spirits of the woods—all the spirits that men later came to worship."

"Precisely. But you jump way ahead!

"My response to these very first Two Revelations was like that of many of my legions; as quickly as we sensed a spark of life emanating from these multicelled plant organisms, we also began to sense the death of that spark, as one organism devoured another, or overran it and took its food from it; indeed we saw multiplicity and destruction!

"What had been mere change before—exchange of energy and matter—now took on a new dimension. We began to see the beginning of the Third Revelation. Only it did not come home to us until the first animal organisms distinguished themselves from plants.

"As we watched their sharp, determined movement, with their seemingly greater variety of choices, we sensed that the spark of life they evinced was *indeed very similar* to the life inside ourselves. And what was happening to these creatures? To these tiny animals and to plants?

"They died, that's what was happening. They were born, lived and died, and began to decay. And that was the Third Revelation of Evolution: Death and Decay."

Memnoch's face became the darkest I'd ever seen it. It retained the innocence, and the wonder, but it was clouded with something terrible that seemed a mixture of fear and disappointment; maybe it was only the naive wonder that perceives a horrible conclusion.

"The Third Revelation was Death and Decay," I said. "And you found yourself repelled by it."

"Not repelled! I just assumed it had to be a mistake! I went soaring to heaven! 'Look,' I said to God, 'these tiny things can cease to live, the spark can go out—as it could never go out of You or us, and then what is left behind them in matter rots.' I wasn't the only angel who went flying into the face of God with this great cry.

"But I think my anthems of wonder were more colored by suspicion and fear. Fear had been born in my heart. I didn't know it, but it had come to me with the perception of decay and death; and the perception felt punitive to my mind."

He looked at me. "Remember, we are angels. Until this time, there had

been nothing punitive to our minds; nothing that made suffering in our thoughts! You grasp? And I suffered; and fear was a tiny component of it."

"And what did God say?"

"What do you think He said?"

"That it was all part of the plan,"

"Exactly. 'Watch. Watch, and look, and you will see that essentially nothing new is happening; there is the same interchange of energy and matter.' "

"But what about the spark?" I cried.

" 'You are living creatures,' said God. 'It is a credit to your fine intellect that you perceive such a thing. Now watch. More is to come.' "

"But suffering, the punitive quality…."

"It was all resolved in a Great Discussion. Discussion with God involves not only coherent words but immense love of God, the light you saw, surrounding and permeating us all. What God gave us was reassurance, and perhaps the reassurance that this inkling of suffering in me required—that there was Nothing To Fear."

"I see."

"Now comes the Fourth Revelation, and remember my organization of these revelations is arbitrary. I cannot take you through the minutiae, as I've said. The Fourth Revelation I call the Revelation of Color, and it began with flowering plants. The creation of flowers; the introduction of an entirely more extravagant and visibly beautiful means of mating between organisms. Now understand mating had always taken place. Even in the one-celled animals there had been a mating.

"But flowers! Flowers introduced in profusion colors which had never been before in nature, except in the rainbow! Colors we had known in Heaven and thought to be purely celestial and now we saw they were not purely celestial but could develop in this great laboratory called earth for natural reasons.

"Let me say at this time that spectacular colors were also developing in sea creatures, in fishes in warm waters. But the flowers struck me in particular as exquisitely beautiful, and when it became obvious that the species would be numberless, that the patterns of petals should be endless, our anthems again rose to Heaven in such music that everything before seemed lesser, or not so deep.

“This music had of course already been tinged with something dark … dare I say it—the hesitation or the shadow produced in us by the Revelation of Death and Decay. And now with the flowers, this dark element grew even stronger in our songs and exclamations of wonder and gratitude, for when the flowers died, when they lost their petals, when they fell to the earth, it seemed a terrible loss.

“The spark of life had emanated most powerfully from these flowers, and from the larger trees and plants that were growing everywhere in profusion; and so the song took on its sombre notes.

“But we were more than ever enthralled with the earth. In fact, I would say at this time that the character of Heaven had been changed utterly. All of Heaven, God, the angels in all ranks, were now focused on the Earth. It was impossible to be in Heaven merely singing to God as before. The song would have to have something in it about Matter and process and beauty. And of course those angels who make the most complex songs did wind together these elements—death, decay, beauty —into more coherent anthems than those which came from me.

“I was troubled. I had a sleepless mind in my soul, I think. I had something in me which had already become insatiable.…”

“Those words, I spoke those words to David when I spoke of you, when you first stalked me,” I said.

“They come from an old poem that was sung of me, written in Hebrew and now rarely found in translation anywhere in the world. Those were the words of the Sibylline Oracle when she described the Watchers … we angels whom God had sent to observe. She was right. I liked her poetry, so I remember it. I adopted it in my definition of myself. God only knows why other angels are more nearly content.”

Memnoch’s whole manner had become sombre. I wondered if the music of Heaven which I had heard included this sombre quality he was describing to me, or whether its pure joy had been restored.

“No, you hear now the music of human souls in heaven as well as angels. The sounds are completely different. But let me go on quickly through the Revelations, because I know that they aren’t easy to grasp except as a whole.

“The Fifth Revelation was that of Encephalization. Animals had differentiated themselves in the water from plants some time ago, and now these gelatinous creatures were beginning to form nervous systems

and skeletons and with this formation came the process of encephalization. Creatures began to develop heads!

"And it did not escape our notice for one divine instant that we, as angels, had heads! The thinking processes of these evolving organisms were centered in the head. So it was with us, obviously! No one had to tell us. Our angelic intelligence knew how we were organized. The eyes were the giveaway. We had eyes, and these eyes were part of our brains and sight led us in our movements, and in our responses, and in our search for knowledge more than any other sense.

"There was a tumult in heaven. 'Lord,' I said, 'what is happening? These creatures are developing shapes … limbs … heads.' And once again the anthems rose, but this time mingled with confusion as well as ecstasy, fear of God that such things could happen, that from Matter things could spring which had heads.

"Then even before the reptiles began to crawl out of the sea into the land, even before that happened, there came the Sixth Revelation, which struck nothing short of horror in me. These creatures, with their heads and their limbs, no matter how bizarre, or various in their structures, these things had faces! Faces like ours. I mean the simplest anthropoid had two eyes, a nose, and a mouth. This is a face, such as I have! First the head, now the face, the expression of intelligence within the mind!

"I was aghast! I raised the worst arguments. 'Is this something you want to happen? Where will this end? What are these creatures? The spark of life from them grows stronger, flares hotter, and dies hard! Are you paying attention!' Some of my fellow angels were horrified.

"They said, 'Memnoch, you are pushing God too far! Obviously there is a kinship between us, magnificent as we are, the Sons of God, the inhabitants of the *bene ha elohim*, and these creatures. The head, the face, yes, it's evident. But how dare you challenge the plan of God?'

"I couldn't be comforted. I was too full of suspicion, and so were those who agreed with me. We were puzzled, and back down to Earth we went, persuaded by the earth to wander, to walk. I could now measure myself in size by the scale of things as I earlier mentioned, and I could lie amongst soft bowers of plants, listening to them grow and thinking about them, and letting their colors fill my eyes.

"Yet, still the promise of disaster haunted me. Then an exceptional thing happened. God came to me.

“God doesn’t leave Heaven when He does this. He merely extends Himself, so to speak; His tight came down and took me in where I was, rolled me up into it and against Him, and He began to talk to me.

“Of course this was immediately comforting. I had denied myself the bliss of Heaven for long periods, and now to have this bliss come down and enfold me in perfect love and quiet, I was satisfied. All my arguments and doubts left me. Pain left me. The punitive effect upon my mind of death and decay was eased.

“God spoke. I was of course fused with Him and had no sense of my form in this moment; we had been so close many a time in the past, and we were this close when I had been made, and came forth out of God. But nevertheless it was a profound, merciful gift for it to happen now.

“ ‘You see more than other angels,’ He said. ‘You think in terms of the future, a concept which they are just beginning to learn. They are as mirrors reflecting the magnificence of each step; whereas you have your suspicions. You do not trust in me.’

“These words filled me with sorrow. ‘You do not trust in me.’ I had not thought of it as distrust, my fears. And no sooner had I realized this than that realization was sufficient for God, and He called me back to Heaven and said that now I should watch more often from that vantage point and not go so deep into the foliage of the world.”

I could only stare at Memnoch as he explained all these things. We stood on the bank of the stream still. He didn’t seem comforted now as he told me about this comfort. Only eager to go on with his tale.

“I did go back to Heaven, but as I told you, the entire composition of Heaven was now changed. Heaven was focused on Earth. Earth was the Heavenly Discourse. And never was I so aware of it as on this return. I went to God, I knelt in adoration, I poured out my heart, my doubts, above all my gratitude that He had come to me as He had. I asked if I was free again to return to the World below.

“He gave one of His sublime noncommittal answers, meaning, ‘You are not forbidden. You are a Watcher and your duty is to Watch.’ So I went down—”

“Wait,” I said. “I want to ask you a question.”

“Yes,” he answered patiently. “But come, let’s continue on our journey. You can step on the rocks as you cross the stream.”

I followed him this way easily enough, and within minutes we had left

the sound of the water behind us, and we were in an even denser forest alive, I think, with creatures, though I couldn't tell.

"My question," I pressed, "was this. Was Heaven boring compared to Earth?"

"Oh, never, it's just that the Earth was the focus. One could not be in Heaven and forget about Earth because everybody in Heaven was watching Earth and singing about it. That's all. No, Heaven was as fascinating and blissful as ever; in fact, the sombre note which had been introduced, the solemn acknowledgment of decay and death had added to the infinite variation of things which might be said and sung and dwelt upon in Heaven."

"I see. Heaven expanded with these revelations."

"Always! And remember the music, never, never think that that is a cliché of religion. The music was reaching new heights all the time in its celebration of wonder. It would be millennia before physical instruments would reach a level where they could make even a pale imitation of the sounds of the music of the angels—their voices, mingling with the beat of their wings, and some interplay with the winds that rose from Earth."

I nodded.

"What is it?" he asked. "What do you want to say?"

"I can't put it in words! Only that our understanding of Heaven fails again and again because we are not taught this, that Heaven is focused upon the earth. Why, all my life, I've heard nothing but the contrary, the denigration of matter, and that it is a prison for the soul."

"Well, you saw Heaven for yourself," he said. "But let me continue:

"The Seventh Revelation was that the animals came out of the sea. That they came into the forests which now covered the land and they found ways to live in it. The Reptiles were born. They became great lizards, monsters, things of such size that even the strength of angels couldn't have stopped them. And these things had heads and faces, and now they not only swam with their legs—legs like ours—but they walked upon them, and some walked on two legs instead of four, holding against their chests two tiny legs like our arms.

"I watched this happen as someone watches a fire grow. From the tiny blaze, giving warmth, I now saw a conflagration!

"Insects in all forms developed. Some took to the air with a form of flight very different and monstrous compared to our own. The world

swarmed with all these new species of the living and mobile and the hungry, for creature fed upon creature just as it had always been, but now with the animals, the feasting and killing was far more obvious and happened not merely in minuscule but with giant skirmishes amongst lizards who tore each other to pieces, and great reptilian birds who could glide down upon the lesser crawling things and carry them away to their nests.

"The form of propagation began to change. Things were born in eggs. Then some spawn came live from the mother.

"For millions of years I studied these things, talking to God about them, more or less absently, singing when I was overwhelmed with beauty, going up to the heavens, and generally finding my questions disturbing to everyone as before. Great debates happened. Should we question nothing? Look, the spark of life flares monstrous and hot from the giant lizard as he dies! And again and again into the womb of God I was taken, just when I thought my agitation would give me no peace.

" 'Look at the scheme more closely. You are deliberately seeing only parts of it,' He said to me. He pointed out as He had from the beginning that waste was unheard of in the universe, that decay became food for others, that the means of interchange was now Kill and Devour, Digest and Excrete.

" 'When I'm with you,' I told Him, 'I see the beauty of it. But when I go down there, when I roll in the high grass, I see differently.'

" 'You are my angel and my Watcher. Overcome that contradiction,' He said.

"I went back down to the Earth. And then came the Eighth Revelation of Evolution: the appearance of warm-blooded birds *with feathered wings!*"

I smiled. It was partly the expression on his face, the knowing, patient expression, and the emphasis with which he had described the wings.

"Feathered wings!" he said. "First we see our faces on the heads of insects, of lizards and monsters! And now behold, there is a warm-blooded creature, a creature completely more fragile and pulsing with precarious life and it has feathered wings! It flies as we fly. It rises, it spreads its wings, it soars.

"Well, for once mine was not the only outcry in heaven. Angels by the thousands were astonished to discover that little beings of matter had

wings so like our own. Feathers, such as the feathers that covered ours, made them soft and made them move through the wind … all this now had its corollary in the material world!

"Heaven was stormy with songs, exclamations, outcries. Angels took flight after birds, surrounding them in the air, and then following them and imitating them and following them to their nests and watching as chicks were born from these eggs and grew to full size.

"Now, you know we had seen this entire question of birth, growth, maturity in other creatures, but in nothing that so resembled ourselves."

"God was silent?" I asked.

"No. But this time He called us all together and He asked us why we had not learnt enough by now that we were not insulated from such horror and pride. Pride, he said, is what we suffered; we were outraged that such puny, tiny-headed things, things that had really very limited faces, actually, had feathered wings. He gave us a stern lesson and warning: 'Once again, I tell you, this process will continue and you will see things that will astonish you, and you are my angels and you belong to me, and your trust is mine!'

"The Ninth Revelation of Evolution was painful for all angels. It was filled with horror for some, and fear for others; indeed it was as if the Ninth Revelation mirrored for us the very emotions it produced in our hearts. This was the coming of mammals upon the earth, mammals whose hideous cries of pain rose higher to Heaven than any noise of suffering and death that any other animal had ever made! Ooooh, the promise of fear that we had seen in death and decay was now hideously fulfilled.

"The music rising from Earth was transformed; and all we could do in our fear and suffering was sing in even greater amazement, and the song darkened, and became more complex. The countenance of God, the light of God, remained undisturbed.

"At last the Tenth Revelation of Evolution. The apes walked upright! Was not God Himself mocked! There it was, in hairy, brutal form, the two-legged, two-armed upright creature in whose image we had been made! It lacked our wings, for the love of Heaven; indeed the winged creatures never even came close to it in development. But there it lumbered upon the earth, club in hand, brutal, savage, tearing the flesh of enemies with its teeth, beating, biting, stabbing to death all that

resisted it—the image of God and the proud Sons of God, his angels—in hairy material form and wielding tools!

"Thunderstruck, we examined its hands. Had it thumbs? Almost. Thunderstruck, we surrounded its gatherings. Was speech corning from its mouth, the audible eloquent expression of thoughts? Almost! What could be God's plan? Why had He done this? Would this not rouse His anger?

"But the light of God flowed eternal and unceasingly, as if the scream of the dying ape could not reach it, as if the monkey torn to pieces by its larger assailants had no witness to the great flaring spark that sputtered before it died.

" 'No, no, this is unthinkable, this is unimaginable,' I said. I flew in the face of Heaven again, and God said, very simply, and without consolation, 'Memnoch, if I am not mocked by this being, if it is my creation, how can you be mocked? Be satisfied, Memnoch, and enjoy amazement in your satisfaction, and trouble me no more! Anthems rise all around you which tell me of every detail my Creation has accomplished. You come with questions that are *accusations*, Memnoch! No more!'

"I was humbled. The word 'accusations' frightened or caused a long pause in my thoughts. Do you know that Satan means in Hebrew 'the accuser'?"

"Yes," I said.

"Let me continue. To me this was a wholly new concept and yet I realized that I had been flinging accusations at God all along. I had insisted that this evolutionary process could not be what He wanted or intended.

"Now He told me plainly to stop, and to examine further. And He also gave me to know again, in wide perspective, the immensity and diversity of the developments I witnessed. In sum, He visited upon me a flash of His perspective, which mine could never be.

"As I said, I was humbled. 'May I join with you, Lord?' I asked. And He said, 'But of course.' We were reconciled, and slumbering in the divine light, yet I kept waking as an animal might wake, ever on alert for its lurking enemy, waking and fearing, *But what is happening now down there!*

"Lo and behold! Are those the words I should use, or shall I speak like

J, the author of the book of Genesis, and say 'Look!' with all its fierce power. The hairy upright ones had begun a strange ritual. The hairy upright ones had begun all kinds of different patterns of complex behavior. Allow me for the moment to skip over to the most significant. The hairy upright ones had begun to bury their dead."

I narrowed my eyes, looking at Memnoch, puzzled. He was so deeply invested in this tale that he looked for the first time convincingly unhappy, and yet his face retained its beauty. You couldn't say unhappiness distorted him. Nothing could.

"Was this then the Eleventh Revelation of Evolution?" I asked. "That they should bury their dead?"

He studied me a long time, and I sensed his frustration, that he couldn't begin to get across to me all that he wanted me to know.

"What did it mean?" I pressed, impatient and eager to know. "What did it mean, they buried their dead?"

"Many things," he whispered, shaking his finger emphatically, "for this ritual of burying came along with a kinship we had seldom if ever witnessed in any other species for more than a moment—the caring for the weak by the strong, the helping and the nourishing of the crippled by the whole, and finally the burial with flowers. Lestat, *flowers*! Flowers were laid from one end to the other of the body softly deposited in the earth, so that the Eleventh Revelation of Evolution was that Modern Man had commenced to exist. Shaggy, stooped, awkward, covered with apelike hair, but with faces more than ever like our faces, modern man walked on the earth! And modern man knew affection such as only angels had known in the universe, angels and God who made them, and modern man showered that affection upon his kindred, and modern man loved flowers as we had, and *grieved* as—with flowers—he buried his dead."

I was silent for a long time, considering it, and considering above all Memnoch's starting point—that he and God and the angels represented the ideal towards which this human form was evolving before their very eyes. I had not considered it from such a perspective. And again came the image of Him, turning from the balustrade, and the voice asking me with such conviction, *You would never be my adversary, would you?*

Memnoch watched me. I looked away. I felt the strongest loyalty to him already, rising out of the tale he was telling me and the emotions

invested in it, and I was confused by the words of God Incarnate.

"And well you should be," said Memnoch. "For the question you must ask yourself is this: Knowing you, Lestat, as surely He must, why He does not already consider you His adversary? Can you guess?"

Stunned.

Quiet.

He waited until I was ready for him to continue, and there were moments there when I thought that point might never come. Drawn to him as I was, totally enthralled as I was, I felt a sheer mortal desire to flee from something overwhelming, something that threatened the structure of my reasoning mind.

"When I was with God," Memnoch continued, "I saw as God sees—I saw the humans with their families; I saw the humans gathered to witness and assist the birth; I saw the humans cover the graves with ceremonial stones. I saw as God sees, and I saw as if Forever and in All Directions, and the sheer complexity of every aspect of creation, every molecule of moisture, and every syllable of sound issuing from the mouths of birds or humans, all seemed to be nothing more than the product of the utter Greatness of God. Songs came from my heart which I have never equaled.

"And God told me again, 'Memnoch, stay close to me in Heaven. Watch now from afar.'

" 'Must I, Lord?' I asked. 'I want so badly to watch them and watch over them. I want with my invisible hands to feel their softening skin.'

" 'You are my angel, Memnoch. Go then and watch, and remember that all you see is made and willed by me.'

"I looked down once before leaving Heaven, and I do speak now in metaphor, we both know this, I looked down and I saw the Creation teeming with Watcher angels, I saw them everywhere engaged in their various fascinations as I have described, from forest to valley to sea.

"But there seemed something in the atmosphere of Earth that had changed it; call it a new element; a thin swirl of tiny particles? No, that suggests something greater than what it was. But it was there.

"I went to Earth, and immediately the other angels confirmed for me that they, too, had sensed this new element in the atmosphere of Earth, though it was not dependent upon the air as was every other living thing.

“ ‘How can this be?’ I asked.

“ ‘Listen,’ said the Angel Michael. ‘Just listen. You can hear it.’

“And Raphael said, ‘This is something invisible but living! And what is there under Heaven that is invisible and lives but us!’

“Hundreds of other angels gathered to discuss this thing, to speak of their own experience of this new element, this new presence of invisibility which seemed to swarm about us, unaware of our presence yet making some vibration, or that is, inaudible sound, which we struggled to hear.

“ ‘You’ve done it!’ said one of the angels to me, and let him remain nameless. ‘You’ve disappointed God with all your accusing and all your rages, and He has made something else other than us that is invisible and has our powers! Memnoch, you have to go to Him and find out if He means to do away with us, and let this new invisible thing rule.’

“ ‘How can that be so?’ asked Michael. Michael is, of all the angels, one of the most calm and reasonable. Legend tells you this; so does Angelology, folklore, the whole kit and caboodle. It’s true. He is reasonable. And he pointed out now to the distressed angels that these tiny invisible presences of which we were aware could not conceivably equal our power. They could scarcely make themselves known to us, and we were angels, from whom nothing on earth could possibly hide!

“ ‘We have to find out what this is,’ I said. ‘This is bound to the earth and part of it. This is not celestial. It is here, dwelling close to the forests and hills.’

“Everyone agreed. We were beings from whom the composition of nothing was secret. You might take thousands of years to understand cynobacteria, or nitrogen, but we understood them! But we didn’t understand this. Or let me say, we could not recognize this for what it was.”

“Yes, I understand.”

“We listened; we reached out our arms. We perceived that it was bodiless and invisible, yes, but that it had to it a continuity, an individuality, indeed, what we perceived were a multitude of individualities. And they were weeping, and very gradually, that sound was heard within our own realm of invisibility, and by our own spiritual ears.”

He paused again.

“You see the distinction I make?” he asked.

“They were spiritual individuals,” I said.

“And as we pondered, as we opened our arms and sang and tried to comfort them, while stepping invisibly and artfully through the material of Earth, something momentous made itself known to us, shocking us out of our explorations. Before our very eyes, the Twelfth Revelation of Physical Evolution was upon us! It struck us like the light from Heaven; it distracted us from the cries of the covert invisible! It shattered our reason. It caused our songs to become laughter and wails.

“The Twelfth Revelation of Evolution was that the female of the human species had begun to look more distinctly different from the male of the human species by a margin so great that no other anthropoid could compare! The female grew pretty in our eyes, and seductive; the hair left her face, and her limbs grew graceful; her manner transcended the necessities of survival; and she became beautiful as flowers are beautiful, as the wings of birds are beautiful! Out of the couplings of the hairy ape had risen a female tender-skinned and radiant of face. And though we had no breasts and she had no wings, she looked like US!!!!”

We stood facing each other in the stillness.

Not for one second did I fail to grasp.

Not for one second did I seek to understand. I knew. I looked at him, at his large beautiful face and streaming hair, at his smooth limbs, and his tender expression, and I knew that he was right, of course. One need not have been a student of evolution to realize that such a moment had surely come to pass with the refinement of the species, and he did embody the empowered feminine if ever a creature could. He was as marble angels, as the statues of Michelangelo; the absolute preciseness and harmony of the feminine was in his physique.

He was agitated. He was on the verge it seemed of wringing his hands. He looked at me intently, as if he would look into me and through me.

“And in short order,” he said, “the Thirteenth Revelation of Evolution made itself known. Males mated with the loveliest of the females, and those who were most lithe, and smooth to touch, and tender of voice. And from those matings came males themselves who were as beautiful as the females. There came humans of different complexions; there came red hair and yellow hair as well as black hair and locks of brown and startling white; there came eyes of infinite variety—gray, brown, green,

or blue. Gone was the man's brooding brow and hairy face and apish gait, and he, too, shone with the beauty of an angel just as did his female mate."

I was silent.

He turned away from me, but it seemed impersonal. It seemed he required of himself a pause, and a renewal of his own strength. I found myself staring at the high arched wings, drawn close together, their lower tips just above the ground where we stood, each feather still faintly iridescent. He turned around to face me, and unfolding out of the angelic shape, his face was a graceful shock.

"There they stood, male and female, He created them, and except for that, Lestat, except for—that one was male and one was female, they were made in the Image of God and of His Angels! It had come to this! To this! God split in Two! Angels split in Two!

"I don't know how long the other angels held me but finally they could no longer, and I went up to Heaven, ablaze with thoughts and doubts and speculations. I knew wrath. The cries of suffering mammals had taught me wrath. The screams and roars of wars amongst apelike beings had taught me wrath. Decay and death had taught me fear. Indeed all of God's Creation had taught all I needed to speed before him and say, 'Is this what you wanted! Your own image divided into male and female! The spark of life now blazing huge when either dies, male or female! This grotesquerie; this impossible division; this monster! Was this the plan?'

"I was outraged. I considered it a disaster! I was in a fury. I flung out my arms, calling on God to reason with me, to forgive me, and save me with reassurance and wisdom, but nothing came from God. Nothing. Not light. Not words. Not punishment. Not judgment.

"I realized I stood in Heaven surrounded by angels. All of them were watching and waiting.

"Nothing came from Almighty God but the most tranquil light. I was weeping. 'Look, tears such as their tears,' I said to the others, though of course my tears were nonmaterial. And as I wept, and as they watched me, I realized I wasn't weeping alone.

"Who was with me? I turned round and round looking at them: I saw all the choruses of angels, the Watchers, the Cherubim, the Seraphim, the Ophanim, all. Their faces were rapt and mysterious, and yet I heard

a weeping!

“ ‘Where is the weeping coming from!’ I cried.

“And then I knew. And they knew. We came together, wings folded, heads bowed, and we listened, and rising from the earth we heard the voices of those invisible spirits, those invisible individualities; it was they—the immaterial ones—who wept! And their crying reached to Heaven as the Light of God Shone on Eternal, without change upon us all.

“ ‘Come now and witness,’ said Raphael. ‘Come watch as we have been directed.’

“ ‘Yes, I have to see what this is!’ I said, and down I went into the earth’s air, and so did all of us, driving in a whirlwind these tiny wailing, weeping things that we could not even see!

“Then human cries distracted us! Human cries mingled with the cries of the invisible!

“Together, we drew in, condensed and still a multitude, invisibly surrounding a small camp of smooth and beautiful human beings.

“In their midst one young man lay dying, twisting in his last pain on the bed they’d made for him of grass and flowers. It was the bite of some deadly insect which had made his fever, all part of the cycle, as God would have told us had we asked.

“But the wailing of the invisible ones hovered over this dying victim. And the lamentations of the human beings rose more terrible than I could endure.

“Again I wept.

“ ‘Be still, listen,’ said Michael, the patient one.

“He directed us to look beyond the tiny camp, and the thrashing body of the feverish man, and to see in thin air the spirit voices gathering and crying!

“And with our eyes we saw these spirits for the first time! We saw them clustering and dispersing, wandering, rolling in and falling back, each retaining the vague shape in essence of a human being. Feeble, fuddled, lost, unsure of themselves, they swam in the very atmosphere, opening their arms now to the man who lay on the bier about to die. And die that man did.”

Hush. Stillness.

Memnoch looked at me as if I must finish it.

“And a spirit rose from the dying man,” I said. “The spark of life flared and did not go out, but became an invisible spirit with all the rest. The spirit of the man rose in the shape of the man and joined those spirits who had come to take it away.”

“Yes!”

He gave a deep sigh and then threw out his arms. He sucked in his breath as if he meant to roar. He looked heavenward through the giant trees.

I stood paralyzed.

The forest sighed in its fullness around us. I could feel his trembling, I could feel the cry that hovered just inside him and might burst forth in some terrible clarion. But it only died away as he bowed his head.

The forest had changed again. The forest was our forest. These were oaks and the dark trees of our times; and the wildflowers, and the moss I knew, and the birds and tiny rodents who darted through the shadows.

I waited.

“The air was thick with these spirits,” he said, “for once having seen them, once having detected their faint outline and their ceaseless voices, we could never again not see them, and like a wreath they surrounded the earth! The spirits of the dead, Lestat! The spirits of the human dead.”

“Souls, Memnoch?”

“Souls.”

“Souls had evolved from matter?”

“Yes. In His image. Souls, essences, invisible individualities, souls!”

I waited again in silence. He gathered himself together.

“Come with me,” he said. He wiped his face with the back of his hand. As he reached for mine, I felt his wing, distinctly for the first time, brush the length of my body, and it sent a shiver through me akin to fear, but not fear at all.

“Souls had come out of these human beings,” he said. “They were whole and living, and hovered about the material bodies of the humans from whose tribe they had come.

“They could not see us; they could not see Heaven. Whom could they see but those who had buried them, those who had loved them in life, and were their progeny, and those who sprinkled the red ochre over their bodies before laying them carefully, to face the east, in graves lined with ornaments that had been their own!”

“And those humans who believed in them,” I said, “those who worshipped the ancestors, did they feel their presence? Did they sense it? Did they suspect the ancestors were still there in spirit form?”

“Yes,” he answered me.

I was too absorbed to say anything else.

It seemed my consciousness was flooded with the smell of the wood and all its dark colors, the endlessly rich variations of brown and gold and deep red that surrounded us. I peered up at the sky, at the shining light fractured and gray and sullen yet grand.

Yet all I could think and consider was the whirlwind, and the souls who had surrounded us in the whirlwind as though the air from the earth to Heaven were filled with human souls. Souls drifting forever and ever. Where does one go in such darkness? What does one seek? What can one know?

Was Memnoch laughing? It sounded small and mournful, private and full of pain. He was perhaps singing softly, as if the melody were a natural emanation of his thoughts. It came from his thinking as scent rises from flowers; song, the sound of angels.

“Memnoch,” I said. I knew he was suffering but I couldn’t stand it any longer. “Did God know it?” I asked. “Did God know that men and women had evolved spiritual essences? Did he know, Memnoch, about their souls?”

He didn’t answer.

Again I heard the faint sound, his song. He, too, was looking up at the sky, and he was singing more clearly now, a sombre and humbling canticle, it seemed, alien to our own more measured and organized music, yet full of eloquence and pain.

He watched the clouds moving above us, as heavy and white as any clouds I’d ever beheld.

Did this beauty of the forest rival what I had seen in Heaven? Impossible to answer. But what I knew with perfect truth is that heaven had not made this beauty dim by comparison! And that was the wonder. This Savage Garden, this possible Eden, this ancient place was miraculous in its own right and in its own splendid limitations. I suddenly couldn’t bear to look on it, to see the small leaves flutter downwards, to fall into loving it, without the answer to my question. Nothing in the whole of my life seemed as essential.

“Did God know about the souls, Memnoch!” I said. “Did He know!”

He turned to me.

“How could He not have known, Lestat!” he answered. “How could He not have known! And who do you think flew to the very heights of Heaven to tell Him? And had He ever been surprised, or caught unawares, or increased or decreased, or enlightened, or darkened, by anything I had ever brought to His Eternal and Omniscient attention?”

He sighed again, and seemed on the verge of a tremendous outburst, one that would make all his others look small. But then he was calm again and musing.

We walked on. The forest shifted, mammoth trees giving way to slender, more gracefully branching species, and here and there were patches of high, waving grass.

The breeze had the smell of water in it. I saw it lift his blond hair, heavy as this hair was, and smooth it back from the side of his face. I felt it cool my head and my hands, but not my heart.

We peered into an open place, a deep, wild valley. I could see distant mountains, and green slopes, a ragged and rambling wood breaking here and there for spaces of blowing wheat or some other form of wild grain. The woods crept up into the hills and into the mountains, sending its roots deep into the rock; and as we grew closer to the valley, through the branches I would see the glitter and twinkling light of a river or sea.

We emerged from the older forest. This was a marvelous and fertile land. Flowers of yellow and blue grew in profusion, caught this way and that in dancing gusts of color. The trees were olive trees and fruit trees, and had the low, twisted branches of trees from which food has been gathered for many generations. The sunlight poured down upon all.

We walked through tall grasses—the wild wheat perhaps—to the edge of the water, where it lapped very gently without a tide, I think, and it was clear and shimmering as it shrank back, exposing the extraordinary array of pebbles and stones.

I could see no end to this water either to the right or to the left, but I could see the far bank and the rocky hills growing down towards it as if they were as alive as the roots of the straggling green trees.

I turned around. The landscape behind us now was the same. The rocky hills, rising eventually to mountains, with miles upon miles of scalable slopes, copses of fruit trees, black, open mouths of caves.

Memnoch said nothing.

He was stricken and sad and staring down at the waters, and to the far horizon where the mountains came as if to close in the waters, only to be forced to let the waters flow out and beyond our sight.

"Where are we?" I asked gently.

He took his time to answer. Then he said, "The Revelations of Evolution are, for the time being, finished. I've told you what I saw—the thin outline of all you'll know once you die.

"Now what is left is the heart of my story, and I should like to tell it here. Here in this beautiful place, though the rivers themselves are long gone from the earth and so are the men and women who roamed at this time. And to answer your question, 'Where are we?' Let me say: Here is where He finally flung me down from Heaven. Here is where I Fell."

Twelve

“God said: ‘wait!’ so I found myself stopped at the gates of Heaven, along with all my companions, the angels who generally went and did what I did, and Michael and Gabriel and Uriel, though not among my companions, were there too.

“ ‘Memnoch, my accuser,' said God, and the words were spoken with the characteristic gentleness and a great effulgence of light. ‘Before you come into Heaven, and you begin your diatribe, go back down to the Earth and study all you have seen thoroughly and with respect—by this I mean humankind—so that when you come to me, you have given yourself every chance to understand and to behold all I have done. I tell you now that Humankind is part of Nature, and subject to the Laws of Nature which you have seen unfold all along. No one should understand better than you, save I.

“ ‘But go, see again for yourself. Then, and only then, will I call together a convocation in Heaven, of all angels, of all ranks and all endowments, and I will listen to what you have to say. Take with you those who seek the same answers you seek and leave me those angels who have never cared, nor taken notice, nor thought of anything but to live in My Light.’ ”

Memnoch paused.

We walked slowly along the bank of the narrow sea until we came to a place where several boulders made a natural place to sit and to rest. I wasn’t feeling weariness in any real physical sense, but the change of posture seemed to sharpen all my fears, and concentration, and eagerness to hear what he said. He sat beside me, turned to me slightly on his left, and his wings once again faded. But first they rose, and stretched out, the left far above my head and the whole wingspan startling me. But then they disappeared. There simply wasn’t room for them when Memnoch was seated, at least not for them to be folded behind him, so they were gone.

He continued: “Immediately following these words,” he said, “there was a great commotion in Heaven over who wanted to go down and

examine the Creation with me and who did not. Now understand, angels were all over Creation as it was, as I've told you, and many had already been years on Earth, and fallen in love with creeks, and valleys, and even the deserts which had begun to appear. But this was a special message the Lord had given me—Go and Learn All You Can About Mankind—and there was some question as to who was as interested or as passionate about the mysteries of the human race as was I."

"Wait a minute," I interrupted. "If you forgive me. How many angels are there? You quoted God as *saying* 'all ranks,' and 'all endowments.' "

"Surely you've heard some of the truth," he answered, "from the lore. God created us first—the archangels—Memnoch, Michael, Gabriel, Uriel, and many others whose names have never been discovered—either inadvertently or deliberately—so I would rather not say. The whole number of archangels? Fifty. And we were the First Made as I said, though who exactly came before whom has become a hysterical subject of argument in Heaven, and one in which I lost interest a long time ago. Besides, I'm convinced I am the first anyway. But it doesn't matter.

"We are those who communicate in the most direct way with God, and also with Earth. That's why we have been labeled Guardian Angels, as well as Archangels, and sometimes in the religious literature we are given a low rank. We don't have a low rank. What we have is the greatest personality and the greatest flexibility, between God and man."

"I see. And Raziel? And Metatron? And Remiel?"

He smiled. "I knew these names would be familiar to you," he said. "They all have their place among the Archangels, but I cannot possibly explain all of this to you now. You'll know when you're dead. And also it's almost too much for a human mind, even a vampiric mind, such as your own, to comprehend."

"Very well," I said. "But what you're saying is the names refer to actual entities. Sariel is an entity."

"Yes."

"Zagzagel."

"Yes, an entity. Now let me continue. Let me stick with the schemes. We, as I told you, are God's Messengers, and Most Powerful Angels, and I was fast becoming God's Accuser, as you can see!"

"And Satan means accuser," I said. "And all those other dreadful names you don't like are in some way connected with that idea. Accuser."

"Exactly," he replied. "And the early religious writers, knowing only bits and pieces of the truth, thought it was man whom I accused, not God; but there are reasons for this, as you'll soon see. You might say I have become the Great Accuser of everybody." He seemed mildly exasperated, but then his voice resumed, very calm and measured. "But my name is Memnoch," he reminded me, "and there is no angel more powerful or clever than I am and there never was."

"I see," I said, meaning this to be polite. And also because I actually didn't question this statement at all. Why should I?

"The Nine Choirs?" I asked.

"All there," he said. "The Nine Choirs, of course, making up the *bene ha elohim*. And very well described by Hebrew and Christian scholars, thanks to times of revelation and perhaps disaster, though one would be hard put to determine the nature of each event. The First Triad is made of Three Choirs, the Seraphim, Cherubim, and Thrones or Ophanim, as I prefer to call them. And this First Triad is in general locked to the glory of God. They are in His thrall, thrive in the light which can blind or dazzle others, and almost never get very far from the light at all.

"At times when I am angry and making speeches to all of Heaven, I accuse them … if you'll pardon the expression again—of being held to God as if by a magnet and not having a free will or personality such as we possess. But they have these things, they do, even the Ophanim, who are in general the least articulate or eloquent—in fact, Ophanim are likely to say nothing for eons—and any of these First Triad can be sent by God to do this and that, and have appeared on Earth, and some of the Seraphim have made rather spectacular appearances to men and women as well. To their credit, they adore God utterly, they experience without reserve the ecstasy of His presence, and He fills them completely so that they do not ask questions of Him and they are more docile, or more truly aware of God, depending on one's point of view.

"The Second Triad has Three Choirs which have been given the names by men of Dominations, Virtues, and Powers. But to tell the truth, there is very little difference between these angels and the First Triad. The Second Triad is a little farther from the Light of God and perhaps as close as it can come, given its endowments, and perhaps it is not so clever when it comes to logic or questions. Who knows? Certainly the Second is more docile altogether; but then there is more coming and

going from the Second Triad, from Earth to Heaven, than from the devoted and magnetized and sometimes arrogant Seraphim. You can see how this could lead to much discussion."

"I think I understand it."

"Both triads sing continuously when they are in Heaven, and most of the time when they are on Earth; their songs rise to Heaven spontaneously and continuously; they don't erupt with the deliberate jubilation of my song or the songs of those like me. Nor do they fall silent for long periods as my kind—Archangels—are apt to do.

"When you're dead you'll be able to hear the song of all these triads. It would destroy you now if you did. I've let you hear part of the Din of Heaven, but that's all it can be to you, a din—the sound of song and mingled laughter, and seemingly erratic eruptions of beautiful sound."

I nodded. It had been both painful and gorgeous to hear it.

"The Lowest Triad is supposed to include Principalities, Archangels, and Angels," he continued, "but this is misleading, as I said. For we, the Archangels, are in fact the most powerful and the most important, have the most personality, and are the most questioning and concerned.

"The other angels think we are flawed on that account. It does not occur to the average Seraph to plead for mercy for mankind.

"But here you have the rough scheme of things. The angels are innumerable. And there is mobility among angels, some drifting closer to God than others, and then away when the majesty is too great for them, and they choose to slip back and sing a softer song. It's continuous.

"Now, the important thing is that the Guardian Angels of Earth, the Watchers, those who became intent upon the Creation, came from all these ranks! Even from the very Seraphim there have come Guardians who have spent millions of years on Earth and then gone Home. Going and coming is common. The disposition I describe is innate but not fixed.

"Angels aren't perfect. You can see that already. They are Created Beings. They don't know everything God knows, that's obvious to you and everyone else. But they know a great deal; they know all that can be known in Time *if they wish to know it;* and that is where angels differ, you see. Some wish to know everything in Time, and some care only for God and God's reflection in those of His most devoted souls."

"I see, then. What you're saying is everybody's right about it, and

everybody's sort of wrong."

"More right than wrong. Angels are individuals, that is the key. We Who Fell are no single species, unless being the brightest, the most clever, and the most comprehending makes us a species, which I don't think it does."

"Go on."

He laughed. "You think I'm going to stop now?"

"I don't know," I said. "Where do I fit in? I don't mean me, Lestat de Lioncourt, I mean what I am … the vampire I am."

"You're an earthbound phenomenon, just like a ghost. We'll get to that in a moment. When God sent us down to Earth to Watch, specifically to observe all Mankind, we were as curious about the dead as the living—this wreath of souls we could see and hear, gathered about the world, and which we called Sheol immediately because it seemed to us that the realm of these weeping souls was the realm of pure gloom. 'Sheol' means gloom."

"And the spirit that made the vampires—"

"Wait. It's very simple. Let me present it, however, *as it came to me*. If I don't do that, how can you understand my position? What I ask of you—to be my lieutenant—is so personal and so total that you can't fully grasp it unless you listen."

"Please go on."

"All right. A gathering of Angels decided to go with me, to draw as close as possible to Matter in order to pull together for ourselves our entire knowledge, to better comprehend, as God had asked us to do. Michael came with me. And so did a host of other archangels. There were a few Seraphim. There were a few Ophanim. And some of the lower orders which are the least intelligent angels, but nevertheless angels, and much in love with Creation and curious as to what was making me so angry with God.

"I can't give you the number of how many we were. But when we reached the earth, we went our separate ways to perceive things, and came together often and instantly and agreed upon what we had seen.

"What united us was our interest in the statement of God that Humankind was part of Nature. We just couldn't see how this was true. We went exploring.

"Very quickly, I learnt that men and women lived now in large groups,

very unlike the other primates, that they built shelters for themselves, that they painted their bodies with various colors, that the women often lived separate from the men, and that they believed in something invisible. Now what was that? Was it the souls of the ancestors, the dearly departed who were still locked in the air of Earth, disembodied and confused?

"Yes, it was the souls of ancestors, but the humans worshipped other entities as well. They imagined a God who had made the Wild Beasts and to him they made blood sacrifice on Altars, thinking this aspect of Almighty God to be a personality of very distinct limits and rather easy to please or displease.

"Now, I can't say all this was a big surprise to me. I'd seen the early signs of it. After all, I telescoped millions of years for you in my Revelations. But when I drew near to these altars, when I heard the specific prayer to the God of the Wild Animals; when I began to see the care and deliberation of the sacrifice—the slaying of a ram or a deer—I was much struck by the fact that not only had these humans come to look like Angels, but they had guessed at the truth.

"They had come upon it instinctively! There was a God. They knew. They didn't know what He was like but they knew. And this instinctive knowledge seemed to spring from the same essence as did their surviving spiritual souls. Let me be even clearer.

"Self-consciousness, and the awareness of one's own death—this had created a sense of distinct individuality in humans, and this individuality feared death; feared annihilation! Saw it, knew what it was, saw it happening. And prayed for a God that He would not let such a thing have no meaning in the world.

"And it was this very same tenacity—the tenacity of this individuality—that made the human soul stay alive after it left the body, imitating the shape of the body, holding itself together, so to speak, clinging to life, as it were, perpetuating itself, by shaping itself according to the only world it knew."

I didn't speak. I was wound up in the story and only wanted for him to continue. But naturally I thought of Roger. I thought very distinctly of Roger because Roger was the only ghost I'd ever known. And what Memnoch had just described was a highly organized and very willful version of Roger.

“Oh, yes, precisely,” said Memnoch, “which is probably why it is just as well that he came to you, though at the time I regarded it as one of the greatest annoyances in the world.”

“You didn’t want Roger to come to me?”

“I watched. I listened. I was amazed, as you were, but I have been amazed by other ghosts before him. It wasn’t that extraordinary, but no, it certainly wasn’t something orchestrated by me, if that’s what you mean.”

“But it happened so close to your corning! It seems connected.”

“Does it? What’s the connection? Look for it inside yourself. Don’t you think the dead have tried to speak before? Don’t you think the ghosts of your victims have come howling after you? Admittedly, the ghosts of your victims usually pass in total bliss and confusion, unaware of you as the instrument of their death. But that’s not always the case. Maybe what has changed is you! And as we know, you loved this mortal man, Roger, you admired him, you understood his vanity and love of the sacred and the mysterious and the costly, because you have these traits within yourself.”

“Yes, all of that’s true, without doubt,” I said. “I still think you had something to do with his coming.”

He was shocked. He looked at me for a long moment as if he were going to become angry, and then he laughed.

“Why?” he asked. “Why would I bother with such an apparition? You know what I’m asking of you! You know what it means! You’re no stranger to the mystical or the theological revelation. You knew when you were a living man—the boy back in France who realized he might die without knowing the meaning of the universe and ran to the village priest to demand of the poor fellow, ‘Do you believe in God?’ ”

“Yes, but it just all happened at the same time. And when you claim there’s no connection, I just … I don’t believe it,” I said.

“You are the damnedest creature! You really are!” he said. His exasperation was mild and patient but still there. “Lestat, don’t you see that what impelled you towards the complexity of Roger and his daughter, Dora, was the same thing that compelled me to come to you? You had come to a point where you were reaching out for the supernatural. You were crying to Heaven to be laid waste! Your taking David, that was perhaps your first real step towards utter moral peril!

You could forgive yourself for having made the child vampire Claudia, because you were young and stupid.

"But to bring David over, against his will! To take the soul of David and make it vampiric? That was a crime of crimes. That was a crime that cries to Heaven, for the love of God. David, whom we had allowed to glimpse us once, so much did we feel an interest in him and whatever path he might take."

"Ah, so the appearance to David was deliberate."

"I thought I said so."

"But Roger and Dora, they were simply in the way."

"Yes. Of course, you chose the brightest and most alluring victim! You chose a man who was as good at what he did—his criminality, his racketeering, his thieving—as you are good at what you are. It was a bolder step. Your hunger is growing. It becomes ever more dangerous to you and those around you. You don't take the downfallen and the bereft and the cutthroats any longer. When you reached for Roger, you reached for the power and the glory, but so what?"

"I'm torn," I whispered.

"Why?"

"Because I feel love for you," I said, "and that's something I always pay attention to, as we both know. I feel drawn into you. I want to know what else you have to tell me! And yet I think you're lying about Roger. And about Dora. I think it is all connected. And when I think of God Incarnate—" I broke off, unable to continue.

I was flooded by the sensations of Heaven, or what I could still remember, what I could still feel, and the breath did leave me in a sorrow that was far greater than any I ever expressed in tears.

I must have closed my eyes. Because when I opened them, I realized Memnoch was holding both my hands in his. His hands felt warm and very strong and uncommonly smooth. How cold my own must have felt to him. His hands were larger; flawless. My hands were … my strange white, slender, glittering hands. My fingernails flashed like ice in the sun as they always do.

He drew away, and it was excruciating. My hands remained rigid, clasped, and utterly alone.

He was standing yards away from me, his back to me, looking out over the narrow sea. His wings were apparent, huge, and moving

uneasily, as if an inner tension caused him to work the invisible muscular apparatus to which they were attached. He looked perfect, irresistible, and desperate.

"Maybe God is right!" he said with rage in his low voice, staring not at me but at the sea.

"Right about what?" I stood up.

He wouldn't look at me.

"Memnoch," I said, "please go on. There are moments when I feel I'll collapse beneath the things being made known to me. But go on. Please, please go on."

"That's your way of apologizing, isn't it?" he asked gently. He turned around, towards me. The wings vanished. He walked slowly up to me, and past me, and sat down again on my right. His robe was hemmed in dust from the ground. I absorbed the detail before I actually thought about it. There was a tiny bit of leaf, green leaf, caught in the long flowing tangles of his hair.

"No, not really," I said. "It wasn't an apology. I usually say exactly what I mean."

I studied his face—the sculpted profile, the utter absence of hair on otherwise magnificently human-looking skin. Indescribable. If you turn and look at a statue in a Renaissance church, and you see it is bigger all over than you are, that it is perfect, you don't get frightened because it's stone. But this was alive.

He turned as if he'd just noticed I was looking at him. He stared down into my eyes. Then he bent forwards, his eyes very clear, and filled with myriad colors, and I felt his lips, smooth, evenly and modestly moist, touch my cheek. I felt a burn of life through the hard coldness of my self. I felt a raging flame that caught every particle of me, as only blood can do it, living blood. I felt a pain in my heart. I might have laid my finger on my chest in the very place.

"What do *you* feel!" I asked, refusing to be ravaged.

"I feel the blood of hundreds," he whispered. "I feel a soul who has known a thousand souls."

"Known? Or merely destroyed?"

"Will you send me away out of hatred for yourself?" he asked. "Or shall I continue with my story?"

"Please, please go on."

“Man had invented or discovered God,” he said. His voice was calm now and back to the same polite and almost humble instructive manner. “And in some instances, tribes worshipped more than one such deity who was perceived to have created this or that part of the world. And yes, humans knew of the souls of the dead surviving; and they did reach out to these souls and make offerings to them. They brought offerings to their graves. They cried out to these dead souls. They begged for their help in the hunt, and in the birthing of a child, in all things.

“And as we angels peered into Sheol, as we passed into it, invisible, our essence causing no disturbance in a realm that was purely souls at that point … souls and nothing but souls … we realized these souls were strengthened in their survival by the attentions of those living on earth, by the love being sent to them by humans, by the thoughts of them in human minds. It was a process.

“And just as with angels, these souls were individuals with varying degrees of intellect, interest, or curiosity. They were hosts as well to all human emotions, though in many, mercifully, all emotion was on the wane.

“Some souls, for example, knew they were dead, and sought to respond to the prayers of their children, and actively attempted to advise, speaking with all the power they could muster in a spiritual voice. They struggled to appear to their children. Sometimes they broke through for fleeting seconds, gathering to themselves swirling particles of matter by the sheer force of their invisible essence. Other times they made themselves visible in dreams, when the soul of the sleeping human was opened to other souls. They told their children of the bitterness and darkness of death, and that they must be brave and strong in life. They gave their children advice.

“And they seemed, in some instances at least, to know that the belief and attention of their sons and daughters strengthened them. They requested offerings and prayers, they reminded the children of their duty. These souls were to some extent the least confused, except for one thing. They thought they had seen all there was to be seen,”

“No hint of Heaven?” I asked.

“No, and no light from Heaven penetrated Sheol, nor any music. From Sheol one saw the darkness and the stars, and the people of Earth.”

“Unbearable.”

“Not if you think you are a god to your children and can still derive strength from the mere sight of the libations they pour on your grave. Not if you feel pleasure in those who hearken to your advice and anger at those who don’t, and not if you can communicate occasionally, sometimes with spectacular results.”

“I see, of course. And gods they seemed to their children.”

“Ancestral gods of a certain kind. Not the Creator of All. Human beings had distinct ideas on both questions, as I’ve said.

“I became greatly absorbed with this whole question of Sheol. I traveled the length and breadth of Sheol. Some of these souls didn’t know they were dead. They knew only they were lost and blind and miserable and they cried all the time like infant humans. They were so weak I don’t even think they felt the presence of other souls.

“Other souls were clearly deluded. They thought they were still alive! They chased after their kindred, trying vainly to get the oblivious son or daughter to listen, when of course the kindred could not hear or see them; and these, these who thought they were still living, well, these had no presence of mind to gather matter to make themselves appear or to come to the living in a dream, because they didn’t know they were dead.”

“Yes.”

“To continue, some souls knew they were ghosts when they came to mortals. Others thought they were alive and the whole world had turned against them. Others simply drifted, seeing and hearing the sounds of other living beings but remote from this as if in a stupor or dream. And some souls died.

“Before my very eyes, some died. And soon I realized many were dying. The dying soul would last a week, perhaps a month in human time, after its separation from the human body, retaining its shape, and then begin to fade. The essence would gradually disperse, just as did the essence inside an animal upon its death. Gone into the air, returned perhaps to the energy and essence of God.”

“That’s what happened?” I asked desperately. “Their energy went back into the Creator; the light of a candle returned to the eternal fire?”

“I don’t know. And that I didn’t see, little flames wafted to Heaven, drawn aloft by a mighty and loving blaze. No, I saw nothing of the kind.

“From Sheol the Light of God was not visible. For Sheol, the

consolation of God did not exist. Yet these were spiritual beings, made in our image and His image, and clinging to that image and hungering for a life beyond death. That was the agony. The hunger for the life beyond death."

"If that was absent at the time of the death, would the soul simply be extinguished?" I asked.

"No, not at all. The hunger seemed innate. The hunger had to die out in Sheol before the soul would disintegrate. Indeed, souls went through many, many experiences in Sheol, and those who had become the strongest were those who perceived themselves as gods, or humans passed into the realm of the good God, and attentive to humans; and these souls gained power even to sway the others and strengthen them sometimes and keep them from fading away."

He paused as if not sure how to proceed. Then, he went on:

"There were some souls who understood things in a different way. They knew they weren't gods. They knew they were dead humans. They knew they didn't really have the right to change the destiny of those who prayed to them; they knew that the libations essentially were symbolic. These souls understood the meaning of the concept symbolic. They knew. And they knew they were dead and they perceived themselves to be lost. They would have reentered the flesh if they could have. For there in the flesh was all the light and warmth and comfort that they had ever known and could still see. And sometimes these souls managed to do exactly that!

"I witnessed it in various different fashions. I saw these souls deliberately descend and take possession of a stupefied mortal, take over his limbs and brain and live in him until the man gained the strength to throw the soul off. You know these things. All men do—what is involved in possession. You have possessed a body that wasn't yours, and your body has been possessed by another soul."

"Yes."

"But this was the dawn of such invention. And to watch these clever souls learn the rules of it, to see them grow ever more powerful, was something to behold.

"And what I could not fail to be frightened by, being the Accuser as I am, and horrified by Nature, as God calls it, what I could not ignore was that these souls did have an effect on living women and men! There

were those living humans already who had become oracles. They would smoke or drink some potion to render their own minds passive, so that a dead soul might speak with their voice!

"And because these powerful spirits—for I should call them spirits now—because these powerful spirits knew only what Earth and Sheol could teach them, they might urge human beings on to terrible mistakes. I saw them order men into battle; I saw them order executions. I saw them demand blood sacrifice of human beings."

"You saw the Creation of Religion out of Man," I said.

"Yes, insofar as Man can Create anything. Let us not forget Who Created us all."

"The other angels, how did they fare with these revelations?"

"We gathered, exchanged stories in amazement, then went off again on our own explorations; we were more entangled with the earth than we had ever been. But essentially, the reactions of angels varied. Some, the Seraphim mainly, thought the whole process was downright marvelous; that God deserved a thousand anthems in praise that his Creation should lead to a being who could evolve an invisible deity from itself who would then command it to ever greater efforts at survival or war.

"Then there were those who thought, 'This is an error, this is an abomination! These are the souls of humans pretending to be Gods! This is unspeakable and must be stopped immediately.'

"And then there was my passionate reaction: 'This is really ghastly and it is headed for worse and worse disasters! This is the beginning of an entirely new stage of human life, bodiless, yet purposeful and ignorant, which is gaining momentum every second, and filling the atmosphere of the world with potent interfering entities as ignorant as the humans round whom they swirled.' "

"Surely some of the other angels agreed with you."

"Yes, some were as vehement, but as Michael said, Trust in God, Memnoch, Who has done this. God knows the Divine Scheme.'

"Michael and I had the most extensive dialogues. Raphael and Gabriel and Uriel had not come down, by the way, as part of this mission. And the reason for that is fairly simple. Almost never do all of those four go the same way. It's a law with them, a custom, a … a vocation, that two are always on hand in heaven for the call of God; and never do all four leave at once. In this instance, Michael was the only one who wanted to

come."

"Does this Archangel Michael still exist now?"

"Of course he exists! You'll meet him. You could meet him now if you wish, but no, he wouldn't come now. He wouldn't. He's on the side of God. But you'll be no stranger to him if you join with me. In fact, you might be surprised by how sympathetic Michael can be to my endeavors. But my endeavors are not unreconcilable to heaven, surely, or I would not be allowed to do what I do."

He looked sharply at me.

"All those of the *bene ha elohim* whom I describe to you are alive now. They are immortal. How could you think it would be any other way? Now, there were souls in Sheol at that time who no longer exist, not in any form I know of, but perhaps they do in some form known to God."

"I understand. It was a stupid-sounding question," I admitted. "As you watched all this, as it filled you with fear, how did you relate it to God's statement about nature? That you would see humankind were part of nature."

"I couldn't except in terms of the endless exchange of energy and Matter. The souls were energy; yet they retained a knowledge from Matter. Beyond that, I could not reconcile it. But for Michael, there was another view. We were on a stairway, were we not? The lowest molecules of inorganic matter constituted the lowest steps. These disembodied souls occupied the step above man yet below angels. It was all one flowing procession to Michael, but then again, Michael trusted that God was doing all this deliberately and wanted it this way.

"I could not believe this! Because the *suffering* of the souls horrified me. It hurt Michael too. He covered his ears. And the *death* of the souls horrified me. If souls could live, then why not let all know! And were they doomed forever to exist in this gloom? What else in nature remained so static? Had they become as sentient asteroids forever orbiting the planet, moons that could scream and cry and weep?

"I asked Michael, 'What will happen? Tribes pray to different souls. These souls become their gods. Some are stronger than others. Look at the war everywhere, the battle.'

" 'But Memnoch,' he said, 'primates did this before they had souls. Everything in Nature eats and is eaten. This is what God has been trying to tell you since you first began to cry out in protest at the sound of

suffering from the Earth. These soul-god-spirits are expressions of humans, and part of humankind, born of humans and sustained by humans, and even if these spirits grow in strength to where they can manipulate living people exquisitely, they are nevertheless born out of Matter and part of Nature as God said.'

" 'So nature is this unspeakable unfolding horror,' I said. 'It is not enough that a shark swallows whole the infant dolphin and that the butterfly is crushed in the teeth of the wolf who chews it up, oblivious to its beauty. It's not enough. Nature must go further, and spin from matter these spirits in torment. Nature comes this close to Heaven, but is so far short of it that only Sheol will do for the name of this place.'

"This speech was too much for Michael. One cannot speak this way to the Archangel Michael. Just doesn't work. So at once he turned away from me, not angrily, not in cowardice that God's thunderbolt might miss me by a fraction and shatter his left wing. But he turned away in silence, as if to say, Memnoch you are impatient and unwise. Then he turned and mercifully said, 'Memnoch, you do not look deep enough. These souls have only begun their evolution. Who knows how strong they may become? Man has stepped into the invisible. What if he is meant to become as we are?'

" 'But how is that to happen, Michael?' I demanded. 'How are these souls to know what are angels and what is Heaven? Do you think if we made ourselves visible to them and told them that they …' I stopped. Even I knew this was unthinkable. I wouldn't have dared. Not in millions of years would I have dared.

"But no sooner had this thought occurred to us, had we begun brooding over it, than other angels gathered with us, and said, 'Look, living people know that we are here.'

" 'How so?' I demanded. As sorry as I felt for humanity, I didn't consider mortal men and women very smart. But these angels explained immediately.

" 'Some have sensed our presence. They sense it as they sense the presence of a dead soul. It is the same part of the brain which perceives other things invisible; I tell you we have been glimpsed and we shall now be imagined by these people. You will see.'

" 'This can't be God's wish,' said Michael. 'I say we return to Heaven at once.'

“The majority agreed with him instantly, the way angels agree, without a sound. I stood alone looking at the entire multitude.

“ ‘Well?’ I said. ‘God has given me my mission. I cannot go back until I understand,’ I insisted. ‘And I don’t understand.’

“There ensued a huge argument. But finally Michael kissed me as angels always kiss, tenderly on the lips and cheeks, and went up to Heaven, and the whole league ascended with him.

“And I remained, standing on the earth alone. I did not pray to God; I did not look to men; I looked into myself and I thought, What shall I do? I do not wish to be seen as an angel. I do not wish to be worshipped like these surviving souls. I do not wish to anger God; but I have to fulfill His commandment to me. I have to understand. Now, I am invisible. But what if I can do what these clever souls do—that is, gather matter to me to make for myself a body—gather sufficient tiny particles from all the world—and who knows better than I do what a man is made of, having seen him evolve from his earliest stages, who knows better the makeup of tissue and cell and bone and fiber and brain matter than I know? Except God?

“So I did it. I focused my entire will and strength upon constructing for myself a living sheath of human flesh, complete in all parts, and I chose —without even thinking about it—to be male. Does this require an explanation?”

“Not really,” I said. “I would imagine you had seen enough of rape, childbirth, and helpless struggle to make the wiser choice. I know I have.”

“Correct. But sometimes I wonder. Sometimes I wonder if things would have been entirely different if I had chosen to be female. I could have. The females resemble us more, truly. But if we are both, then surely we are more male than female. It is not in equal parts.”

“From what you’ve shown me of yourself, I tend to agree.”

“So. I became sheathed in flesh. It took a little longer than one might suppose. I had to consciously evoke every bit of knowledge in my angelic memory; I had to construct the body, and then insert my essence in it exactly in the manner in which the natural life essence would have been inside it; and I had to surrender, that is, encase myself within this body, really go into it, and fill out its limits and not panic. Then I had to look through its eyes.”

I nodded quietly with a trace of a smile. Having given up my vampire body for a human one, I could perhaps imagine a small particle of what Memnoch had experienced. I wasn't about to boast that I understood.

"The process involved no pain," he said. "Only submission. And for no good reason, really, or I should say from simple Nature, to use God's favorite word, I sheathed my own self, my own essence in flesh. Only the wings did I leave out of the scheme altogether, and so I stood as tall as an angel, and as I walked to the water of a clear pool near me and looked down in it, I saw Memnoch for the first time in material form. I saw exactly myself, my fair hair, my eyes, my skin, all the gifts God had given me in invisible form made manifest in flesh.

"I realized immediately that this was too much! I was too large all over; I was blazing with the essence inside me! This would not work. And so instantly I began to reshape and scale down the entire body until it resembled more myself the size of a man.

"You'll know how to do all this once you're with me," he said, "if you choose to come, and die, and be my lieutenant. But let me say for now that this is neither impossible nor terribly simple. It is not like pressing the keys of a complex computer program and sitting back and watching the machine execute the commands one by one. On the other hand, it is not cumbersome and overly conscious. It merely takes angelic knowledge, angelic patience, and angelic will.

"Now a man stood beside the pool, naked, blond of hair and light of eye, very similar to many of those who inhabited the region, though perhaps more nearly perfect, and endowed with physical organs of reasonable but not splendid size.

"Now as my essence went into these organs, into the scrotum and the penis, to be specific, I felt something which had been utterly unknown to me as an angel. Utterly unknown. It was compounded of many realizations. I knew gender, I knew maleness; I knew a certain human vulnerability firsthand now rather than from watching and sensing; and I was very surprised at how powerful I felt.

"I had expected to be quaking with humility in this form! To be shivering with indignity at the mere smallness of myself, and my immobility and a host of other things—things you felt when you swapped your vampire body for that of a man."

"I remember vividly."

“But I didn’t feel this. I had never been material. I had never, never thought about doing it. I had never, never even thought of wanting to see what I might look like in an earthly mirror. I knew my image from its reflection in the eyes of other angels. I knew my parts because I could see them with my angelic eyes.

“But now I was a man. I felt the brain inside my skull. I felt its wet, intricate, and near-chaotic mechanics; its layers and layers of tissue, involving as it does the earliest stages of evolution, and wedding them to a wealth of higher cells in the cortex in a manner that seemed utterly illogical and yet totally natural—natural if you knew what I, as an angel, knew.”

“Such as what?” I asked, making it as polite as I could.

“Such as that emotions stirred in the limbic part of my brain could take hold of me without having first made themselves known to my consciousness,” he said. “That can’t happen with an angel. Our emotions cannot slip by our conscious minds. We cannot feel irrational terror. At least I don’t think so. And whatever the case, I certainly didn't think so then when I stood on the earth, in the flesh of a man.”

“Could you have been wounded, or killed, in this form?” I asked.

“No. I’ll get to that in a minute, as a matter of fact. But as I was in a wild, wooded area, as I was in this very valley which is Palestine, if you would know it, before it was ever called Palestine, as I was here, I was aware that this body was food for wild animals, and so I did create around myself, of angelic essence, an extremely strong shield. It behaved electrically. That is, when an animal approached me, which happened almost immediately, it was repulsed by this shield.

“And thus shielded, I decided to start walking all through the nearby settlements of men and to look at things, knowing full well no one could hurt me or push me or attack me or anything else. Yet I would not appear miraculous. On the contrary, I would seem to dodge the blows if any were dealt, and I would seek to behave in such a manner that nobody noticed me at all.

“I waited for nightfall, and went to the nearest encampment, which was the largest in the area and had grown so in strength that it now exacted tribute from other encampments nearby. This was a huge circular walled gathering place, full of individual huts in which men and women lived. Fires burnt in each hut. There was a central place where

everyone gathered. There were gates to be locked at night.

"I slipped inside, slumped down beside a hut, and watched for hours what the people of this encampment did in the twilight and then by dark. I crept from place to place. I peered inside the little doorways. I watched many things.

"The next day, I watched from the forest. I tracked a band of hunters, so that they did not see me, but I could see them. When I was glimpsed, I ran, which seemed the acceptable and predictable behavior. Nobody chased me.

"I hung around the thriving life of these humans for three days and three nights, and during this time, I knew their limits, I knew their bodily needs and aches, and I had gradually come to know their lust, because all of a sudden, I discovered it flaming inside of me.

"This is how it happened. Twilight. The third day. I had come to an entire score of conclusions as to why these people were not part of Nature. I had an entire case to make to God. I was almost about to leave.

"But one thing which has always fascinated angels, and which I had not experienced in the flesh, was sexual union. Now as an invisible angel one can come quite close to those coupled, and see into their half-shut eyes, and hear their cries, and touch the flushed flesh of the woman's breast and feel her heart race.

"Countless times I'd done this. And I realized now that passionate union—a true experience of it—could be crucial to my case. I knew thirst, I knew hunger, I knew pain, I knew weariness, I knew about how these people lived and felt and thought and talked to each other. But I really didn't know what happened in sexual union.

"And at twilight on the third day, as I stood by this very sea, here, far, far from the encampment, looking towards it miles to our right, there came towards me as if out of nowhere a beautiful woman—a daughter of man.

"Now, I had seen scores of beautiful women! As I told you, when I first beheld the beauty of women … before men had become quite so smooth and hairless … it had been one of the shocks of Physical Evolution for me. And of course during these three days, I had from afar studied many beautiful women. But, in my subterfuge, I hadn't dared to go very close. After all, I was in the flesh and trying to go unnoticed.

"But three days, mark me, I had had this body. And the organs of this

body, being perfectly made, responded at once to the sight of this woman, who came walking boldly along the banks of the sea, a rebel woman, without a guardian male or other females, a young, bold, slightly angry, longhaired and beautiful girl.

"Her garment was no more than a coarse animal skin, with a chewed leather belt around it, and she was barefoot and her legs were naked from the knee down. Her hair was long and dark, and her eyes blue—a beguiling combination. And her face very youthful yet full of the character imparted to a face by anger and rebellion—a girl filled with pain and recklessness and some desire to do herself harm.

"She saw me.

"She stopped, realizing her vulnerability. And I, never having bothered with garments, stood naked, looking at her. And the organ in me wanted her, wanted her immediately and violently; and I felt the first promise of what that union might be like. That is, the first stirring of real desire. For three days, I had lived by the mind as an angel. Now the body spoke and I listened with an angel's ears.

"She meantime did not run from me, but took several steps closer; and in her reckless heart made a resolution, based upon what experience I couldn't know, but she made it; that she would open her arms to me if I wanted her. And with the smoothest, most graceful movement of her hips, and with a gesture of her right hand, lifting her hair and then dropping it, she let me know.

"I went to her and she took my hand and led me up those rocks, there, to where the cave is, you can see it, just over your left shoulder and up the slope. She took me there, and by the time we reached the entrance, I realized that she was flaming for me as I was flaming for her.

"She was no virgin, this girl. Whatever her story, she was not ignorant of passion. She knew what it was, and she wanted it, and the lunge of her hips towards me was deliberate, and when she kissed me and put her tongue into my mouth, she knew what she sought.

"I was overcome. For one instant I held her back, merely to look at her, in her mysterious material beauty, a thing of flesh and decay that nevertheless rivaled any angel I'd ever seen, and then I gave her back her kisses, brutally, making her laugh and push her breasts against me.

"Within seconds, we had fallen down together on the mossy floor of the cave as I had seen mortals do a thousand times. And when my organ

went inside of her, when I felt the passion, I knew then what no angel could possibly know! It had nothing to do with reason, or observation, or sympathy, or listening, or learning, or trying to grasp. I was in her flesh and consumed with lust, and so was she, and the tender muscles of her hairy little vaginal mouth clamped down upon me as if she meant to devour me, and as I thrust inside of her, again and again, she went blood-red in her consummation, and her eyes rolled back into her head and her heart stood still.

"I came at the same moment. I felt the ejaculate shoot from my body into her. I felt it fill the warm, tight cavity. My body continued to writhe with the same rhythm, and then the feeling, the indescribable and wholly new feeling, slowly ebbed and went away.

"I lay exhausted beside her, my arm over her, and my mouth sought the side of her face and kissed her, and I said in her language, in a rush of words, 'I love you, I love you, I love you, sweet and beautiful creature, I love you!'

"And to this she gave a yielding and respectful smile, and snuggled close to me, and then seemed about to weep. Her carelessness had led her to a tenderness! Her soul suffered inside her, and I felt it through the palms of her hands!

"But in me there was a tumult of knowledge! I had felt the orgasm! I had felt the highly developed physical sensations that come to fulfillment when humans sexually mate! I stared at the ceiling of the cave, unable to move, unable to speak.

"Then very gradually, I realized something had startled her. She clung to me, then she rose on her knees, and she ran away.

"I sat up. The light had come down from Heaven! It was coming down from Heaven and it was God's light and it was looking for me! I rushed to my knees and to my feet and ran out into the light.

" 'Here I am, Lord!' I cried. 'Lord, I am full of joy! Lord, God, what I have felt, Lord!' And I let out a great anthem, and as I did so the material particles of my body dissolved about me, shorn off by me, almost as if by the power of my angel voice, and I rose to my full height and spread my wings and sang in thanks to Heaven, for what I had known in this woman's arms.

"The voice of God came quiet yet full of wrath.

" 'Memnoch!' He said. 'You are an Angel! What is an Angel, a Son of

God, doing with a Daughter of Men!'

"Before I could answer, the light had withdrawn and left me with the whirlwind, and turning, my wings caught in it, I saw the mortal woman was only there, at the bank of the sea, and that she had seen and heard something inexplicable to her, and now in terror she fled.

"She ran and I was carried upwards to the very gates of Heaven, and then those gates for the first time took on height and shape for me as they had for you, and they were slammed shut against me, and the Light struck me and down I went, forced down, plummeting as you plummeted in my arms, only I was alone, alone as I was slammed again, invisible, but bruised and broken and crying, against the wet earth.

" 'You, my Watcher, what have you done!' said the voice of God, small and certain by my ear.

"I started to weep, uncontrollably. 'Lord, God, this is a terrible misunderstanding. Let me … let me lay my case before you …'

" 'Stay with the mortals you love so much!' He said. 'Let them minister to you, for I will not listen until my anger is cooled. Embrace the flesh you crave, and with which you are polluted. You won't come into my sight again until I send for you, and that shall be by my choice.'

"The wind rose again, swirling, and as I turned over on my back, I realized I was wingless, and in the flesh once more and the size of a man.

"I was in the body I had created for myself, generously reassembled for me by the Almighty, down to the last cell, and I lay hurting and aching and weak on the ground, moaning, and sad.

"I had never heard myself cry before with a human voice. I was not loud. I was not full of challenge or desperation. I was too sure of myself still as an Angel. I was too sure God loved me. I knew He was angry, yes, but He'd been angry with me many, many times before.

"What I felt was the agony of separation from Him! I could not at will ascend to Heaven! I could not leave this flesh. And as I sat up and lifted my arms, I realized I was trying to do this with my whole being, and I couldn't do it, and then sadness came over me, so great, so lonely, and so total that I could only bow my head.

"The night had begun. The stars filled the firmament and were as distant from me as if I had never known Heaven at all. I closed my eyes, and I heard the souls of Sheol wailing. I heard them pressing near me,

asking me what I was, what had they witnessed, whence had I been thrown to the earth? Before I had gone unnoticed, my transformation having been quiet and secret, but when God had thrust me downwards, I had fallen spectacularly as an angel and immediately into the shape of a man.

“All Sheol was crying in curiosity and foment.

“ ‘Lord, what do I say to them? Help me!’ I prayed.

“And then came the perfume of the woman near me. I turned and I saw her creeping towards me cautiously, and, when she saw my face, when she saw my tears and my distress, she came boldly towards me, slipping her warm breasts against my chest again, and clasping in her trembling hands my head.”

Thirteen

She took me back to the encampment. She brought me inside the gates. Men and women rose from the campfires and children ran towards me. I knew that I possessed angelic beauty, and their admiring glances didn't surprise me. But I did wonder what in the name of Heaven they meant to do.

"I was seated, and given food and drink. This I needed. For three days I'd drunk nothing but water, and eaten only a few berries gathered here and there in the woods.

"I sat down cross-legged with them and ate the cooked meat they gave me, and she, my woman, my Daughter of Men, crushed up against me, as if daring anyone to challenge the pair of us, and then she spoke.

"She stood up, threw up her arms, and in a loud voice told them what she had seen. Her language was simple. But she had plenty enough words to describe it—how she had come upon me on the banks of the sea and seen that I was naked and she had given herself to me in sanctity and worship, knowing I could not be a man of the earth.

"No sooner had my seed come into her than a magnificent light from above had filled the cave. She had rushed in fear from it, but I had walked out into it, fearless, knowing it, and before her eyes I changed so that she could see through me, yet still she saw me. And I was grown tall, with immense white feathered wings! This vision—this creature through whom she could see as if through water—she saw only for an instant. Then I vanished. I was gone as surely as I sit here now. She had hovered, shivering, watching, praying to the ancestors, to the Creator, to the Demons of the Desert, to all powers for protection, when suddenly she had seen me again—transparent, to summarize her simple words, but visible, falling—winged and enormous—smashing towards earth in a fall that would have killed a man, though that is what I became—a man, solid as everyone could see, sitting in the dust.

" 'God,' I prayed. 'What do I do? What this woman has said is true! But I am no God. You are God. What do I do?'

"No answer came from Heaven, not to my ears, not to my heart, not to

my cumbersome and elaborate brain.

"As for the crowd of listeners, whom I judged to be about thirty-five, exclusive of all the children, no one spoke. Everyone was considering this. No one was quick to accept it. No one was going to jump forward and challenge it either. Something in my manner and posture held them aloof.

"No surprise. I certainly didn't cower or shiver or evince what I was suffering. I had not learnt to express angelic suffering through flesh. I merely sat there, aware that by their measure I was young, comely, and a mystery; and they were not brave enough to try to hurt me as they so often hurt others, to stab, or pierce, or burn me as I had seen them do enough times to their enemies, and to their own despised.

"Suddenly the whole group burst into murmuring. A very old man rose to his feet. His words were even simpler than hers. I would say he had perhaps half of her working vocabulary. But this was enough to express himself and he asked of me simply: 'What do you have to say for yourself?'

"The others reacted as if this question were an expression of sheer genius. Maybe it was. The woman pulled very close to me at that moment. She sat down beside me and with an imploring look, she embraced me.

"I realized something—that her fate was connected to mine. She was slightly afraid of all these people, her kindred. And she wasn't afraid of me! Interesting. That is what tenderness and love can do, and marvels also, I thought. And God says these people are part of Nature!

"I hung my head, but not for long. Finally, I rose to my feet, bringing her up with me, my mate, as it were, and, using all the words known in her language, some even that the children had been adding already in this generation that the adults didn't yet know, I said:

" 'I mean you no harm. I came from Heaven. I came to learn about you and to love you. And I wish you only all good things under God!'

"There was a great clamour, a happy clamour, with people clapping their hands, and rising to their feet, and the little ones jumping up and down. It seemed a consensus emerged that Lilia, the woman I had been with, could now return to the group. She had been cast out to die when she had come upon me. But she was now surely upheld. And she had returned with a god, a deity, a sky being … they aimed for it with many

syllables and combinations of syllables.

“ ‘No!’ I declared. ‘I am not a god. I did not make the world. I worship, just as you do, the God who did.'

“This, too, was accepted in jubilation. Indeed, the frenzy began to alarm me. I felt the limits of my body keenly with all these others dancing and screaming and shouting and kicking at the wood in the fire, and this lovely Lilia clinging to me.

“ ‘I must sleep now!’ I said suddenly. And this was no more or less than the perfect truth. I had scarce slept an hour or more at any one time in my three days in the flesh and was bone weary and bruised and cast out of Heaven. I wanted to turn to this woman, and bury my sorrow in her arms.

“Everyone gave their approval. A hut was prepared for us. People ran hither and thither gathering the finest skins and furs for us, and the softest chewed leather, and we were ushered into this place in silence, and I lay back down on the fur beneath me, the skin of a mountain goat, long and soft.

“ ‘God, what do you want me to do!’ I asked aloud. There came no answer. There was only the silence and the darkness in the hut, and then the arms of a Daughter of Men around me, luscious and loving and full of tenderness and passion, that mystery, that combination, that purely living miracle, tenderness and lust rolling and rolling into one.”

Memnoch stopped. He seemed exhausted suddenly. He rose and again walked to the bank of the sea. He stood in the soft sand and pebbles. I saw the outline of his wings flash for a moment, perhaps exactly the way the woman had seen it, and then he was merely the large figure, with his shoulders hunched as he stood with his back to me, his face apparently buried in his hands.

“Memnoch, what happened!” I said. “Surely God didn’t leave you there! What did you do? What happened the next morning when you woke up?”

He gave a sigh and turned around finally. He walked slowly back to the boulder, and sat down again.

“By morning, I had known her a half dozen times and lay half dead, and that in itself was another lesson. But I had no thought whatsoever on what I might do. While she’d slept, I had prayed to God, I had prayed to Michael and to the other angels. I had prayed and prayed, asking

what I should do.

"Can you guess who answered me?" he asked.

"The souls in Sheol," I said.

"*Yes*, precisely! Those are the spirits who answered. How could you know? Those are the spirits—the strongest souls of Sheol who heard my prayers to the Creator and heard the impetus and essence of my cries and my excuses and my pleas for mercy and forgiveness and understanding—heard all of it, absorbed it, drank it up, as they did the spiritual yearnings of their human and living children. And by the time the sun rose, by the time all the men of the group had started to gather, I knew one thing only:

"Whatever happened to me, whatever was the will of God, the souls of Sheol would never be the same! They had learnt too much from the voice of this Angel fallen into Matter who had thoughtlessly cried to Heaven and to God.

"Of course the full impact didn't hit me. I didn't sit there reasoning it out. The strongest souls had had their first glimpse of Paradise. They knew now of a Light which made an Angel weep and beg in desperation, because he was afraid he would never see that Light again. I didn't think of it. No.

"God had left me here. That is what I thought. God had left me. I went out into the crowd. The encampment was overflowing. In fact, men and women were coming from all the nearby encampments to see me.

"And we had to leave the enclosure and go out into the open, into one of the fields. Look down to the right, where the land slopes? You see down there where the field spreads out and the water turns…."

"Yes."

"That's where we gathered. And it was soon clear that all of these men and women were expecting something of me, that I speak, that I work marvels, that I sprout wings, something, but what I didn't know. As for Lilia, she clung to me as ever, enticing and beautiful, and filled with vague wonder.

"Together we climbed onto that rock … you see there, the boulders left there by the glaciers millions of years ago. There. We climbed up and she sat down and I stood before these people, and then I looked to Heaven and I opened my arms.

"With all my heart, I begged God to forgive me, to take me back, to

climax this intrusion with my merciful disappearance, that is, to let me take my angelic shape, invisible, and rise. I willed it, I pictured it, I tried in every conceivable way to assume my former nature. No luck.

"In the heavens above I saw what men saw. I saw the blue of the sky, and the willowy white clouds blowing eastward, and I saw the faint daytime moon. The sun hurt my shoulders. It hurt the top of my head. And something became known to me then in all its horror: that I was probably going to die in this body! That I had forfeited my immortality! God had made me mortal and turned his back.

"I thought this over a long time. I'd suspected it from the first moment, but now with the haste of a man I became convinced of it. And in me a deep anger rose. I looked at all these men and women. I thought of God's words to me, to go with those I had chosen, with the flesh I preferred to Heaven. And a decision came into my head.

"If this was to be my finish, if I was to die in this mortal body as all men die, if some days or weeks or even years were left to me—whatever this body could hope to survive amid the perils of life—then I must do with it the very finest thing that I knew. I must offer to God my finest. I must go out like an Angel, if going out is what I had to do!

" 'I love you, my Lord,' I said aloud. And I racked my brain for the greatest acts I could perform.

"What came to me was immediate and logical, and perhaps obvious. I would teach these people everything I knew! I wouldn't just tell them about Heaven and God and Angels, because what good would that do? Though of course I would tell them, and tell them to look for a peaceful death and peace in Sheol, for that they could attain.

"But that would be the least of what I would do. For that was nothing! What was better was this—I'd teach them everything about *their world* that I could perceive logically but which had not yet become known to them.

"Immediately I started speaking to them. I led them to the mountains and took them into the caves and showed them the veins of ore, and told them that when this metal was hot it bubbled forth from the earth in liquid, and that if they could heat it again they could make it soft and make things out of it.

"Returning to the sea, I picked up the soft earth and shaped it into little people to show them how simple this was to do! Picking up a stick,

I drew a circle in the sand, and spoke to them of symbols. How we might make a symbol for Lilia that resembled the flower for which she was named which they called the lily. And how we might make a symbol for what I was … a man with wings. I drew pictures everywhere, showing them how easy it was to do it, to connect an image with a concept or a concrete thing.

"By evening, I had gathered around me all the women, and was showing them ways to tie their thongs of chewed leather, which had never occurred to them, elaborate ways of plaiting it, and making it into big pieces of one fabric. All logical. All simply what I inferred from what I knew as an Angel about the whole world.

"Now, these people already knew the seasons of the moon, but they didn't know the calendar of the sun. I told them all this. How many days to a year there should be according to how the sun and the planets moved, and I told them how they could write all this down with symbols. And soon we took the clay from the banks of the sea and we made flat plates of it, and on these plates with sticks I made little pictures of stars and heaven and Angels. And these plates or tablets were then allowed to dry in the sun.

"For days and nights, I remained with my people. I began to teach them more and more and more. When one group was tired and could take no more lessons, I turned to another, and examined what they were doing, and tried to improve their ways.

"Many things they would figure out for themselves, I knew. Weaving was very soon to occur to them, and then they would make better garments. That was all well and good. I showed them pigments similar to the red ochre they already used. I took things out of the raw earth that would make different colors for them. Every thought that occurred to me, every advance of which I could conceive, I imparted to them, greatly expanding their language in the process, obviously teaching them writing, and then I also taught them music of a wholly new kind. I taught them songs. And the women came to me, over and over again, the women—and Lilia stepped back—that the seed of the Angel might go into many, many women, 'the comely Daughters of Men.' "

He paused again. His heart seemed broken, remembering. His eyes were distant and totally reflecting the pale blue of the sea.

I spoke up very softly, cautiously, and from memory and ready at any

sign from him to break off. I quoted from the Book of Enoch:

" 'And Azazel … made known to them the metals, and the art of working them, and bracelets and ornaments, and the use of antimony, and the beautifying of eyelids, and all kinds of costly stones, and all colored tinctures.' "

He turned to look at me. He seemed almost unable to speak. His voice came softly, almost as softly as mine had as he spoke the next lines of the book of Enoch, " 'And there arose much godlessness, and they committed fornication, and they were led astray.…' " Again he paused and then resumed, " 'And as men perished, they cried, and their cry went up to heaven.' " He stopped again, smiling slowly and bitterly. "And what is the rest of it, Lestat, and what lies in between the lines you've spoken and the lines I've spoken! Lies! I taught them civilization. I taught them knowledge of Heaven and Angels! *That's all I taught them*. There was no blood, no lawlessness, no monstrous giants in the earth. It's lies and lies, fragments and fragments buried in lies!"

I nodded, fearlessly, and rather certain of it, and seeing it perfectly, and seeing it from the point of view of the Hebrews who later believed so firmly in the purification and law, and had seen it as uncleanness and evil … and told again and again of these Watchers, these teachers, these Angels who had fallen in love with the Daughters of Men.

"There was no magic," Memnoch said quietly. "There were no enchantments. I didn't teach them to make swords! I didn't teach them war. If there was knowledge amongst another people on Earth, and I knew of that, I told them. That in the valley of another river, men knew how to gather wheat with scythes! That there were Ophanim in Heaven, Angels who were round, Angels who were wheels, and that if this shape was imitated in matter, if a simple piece of wood connected two rounded pieces, one could make an object which would roll upon these wheels!"

He gave a sigh. "I was sleepless, I was crazed. As the knowledge poured forth from me, as they were worn down by it, and struggled under the burden of it, I went to the caves and carved my symbols on the walls. I carved pictures of Heaven and Earth and angels. I carved the light of God. I worked tirelessly until every mortal muscle in me ached.

"And then, unable to endure their company anymore, satiated with beautiful women, and clinging to Lilia for comfort, I went off into the forest, claiming I needed to talk to my God in silence, and there I

collapsed.

"I lay in perfect stillness, comforted by the silent presence of Lilia, and I thought of all that had taken place. I thought of the case I had meant to lay before God, and how what I had learnt since had only fitted neatly into the case I had meant to make! Nothing I had seen in men could incline me to think differently. That I had offended God, that I had lost Him forever, that I had Sheol to look forward to, for all eternity, these things were real and I knew them, and they beat on my soul and heart. But I couldn't change my mind!

"The case I had meant to lay before the Almighty was that these people were above Nature and beyond Nature and demanded more of Him, and all that I had seen only upheld me in what I believed. How they had taken to celestial secrets. How they suffered, and sought for some meaning to justify that suffering! If only there were a Maker and the Maker had his reasons … Oh, it was agony. And at the heart of it blazed the secret of lust.

"In the orgasm, as my seed had gone into the woman, I had felt an ecstasy that was like the joy of Heaven, I had felt it and felt it only in connection with the body that lay beneath me, and for one split second or less than that I had known, known, known that men were not part of Nature, no, they were better, they belonged with God and with us!

"When they came to me with their few confused beliefs—were there not invisible monsters everywhere?—I told them no. Only God and the Heavenly Court which ordained everything, and the souls of their own in Sheol.

"When they asked if bad men and women—who did not obey their laws—were not thrown at death into fire forever—an idea very current amongst them and others—I was horrified, and told them that God would never allow such a thing. A wee newborn soul to be punished in fire forever? Atrocity, I told them. Once again, I said to them that they should venerate the souls of the Dead to ease their own pain and the pain of those Souls, and that when death came they should not be afraid but go easily in the gloom and keep their eyes on the brilliant light of Life on Earth.

"I said most of these things because I simply didn't know what to say.

"Oh, blasphemy. I had done it, I had really done it. And now what would be my fate? I would grow old and die, a venerated teacher, and

before I did—or before some pestilence or wild beast cut off my life sooner—I would engrave into stone and clay everything I could. And then into Sheol I would go, and I would begin to draw the souls to me, and I would say: 'Cry, cry to Heaven!' I would teach them to look upwards. I would say the Light is there!"

He took a breath, as if each word burnt him with pain.

I spoke again softly from the Book of Enoch. " 'And now, behold the souls of those who have died are crying and making suit to the gates of heaven.' "

"Yes, you know your scriptures like a good Devil," he said bitterly, but his face was so stricken with sadness and compassion, and this mockery was said with such feeling, that it had no sting. "And who knew what might happen?" he asked. "Who knew! Yes, yes, I would strengthen Sheol until those cries battered Heaven's gates and brought them down. If you have souls and your souls can grow, then you can be as angels! That was the only hope I had, to rule amongst the forgotten of God."

"But God didn't let this happen, did he? He didn't let you die in that body."

"No. And he didn't send the Flood either. And all that I had taught was not washed in a Deluge. What remained, what worked its way into myth and scripture was that I had been there, and that those things had been taught, and it was within the compass of a man to have done it; it was within logic, and not magic, and even the secrets of Heaven were what the souls would on their own perhaps have come to see. Sooner or later, the souls would have seen."

"But how did you get out of it? What happened to Lilia?"

"Lilia? Ah, Lilia. She died venerated, the wife of a god. Lilia." His whole face brightened and he laughed. "Lilia," he said again, memory lifting her out of the story and bringing her close, obviously. "My Lilia. Cast out, and casting her lot with a god."

"God had taken you by that time?" I asked. "He had put a stop to what you were doing?"

We gazed at each other for a moment. "Not quite so simple. I'd been there three months perhaps when I woke up and discovered Michael and Raphael had come for me, and said very distinctly: 'God wants you now.'

"And I being Memnoch, the unredeemable, said, 'Oh? Why then doesn't He pick me up and take me out of here, or do what He wishes?'

“At this point, Michael looked miserable on my behalf and he said, ‘Memnoch, for the love of God, go willingly back into your proper form. Feel your body grow in stature; let your wings carry you to Heaven. He wants you only if you want to come! Now, Memnoch, think before you. …’

“ ‘No, you don’t have to caution me, beloved,’ I said to Michael. ‘I’m coming, with tears in my eyes, I come.’ I knelt down and kissed the sleeping Lilia. She looked up at me. ‘This is farewell, my mate, my teacher,’ I said. I kissed her, and then, turning, became the Angel, visible to her, letting the matter define me so that she, sitting up on her elbows and crying, would see this last vision and hold it to her heart perhaps when she needed it.

“And then, invisible, I joined Michael and Raphael and went Home.

“In the first moments I could scarce believe it; when I passed through Sheol, the souls screamed in agony and I threw my hands out in consolation. ‘I will not forget you! I swear it. I take your suit to Heaven,’ and then on and up I went, the light coming down to meet me and envelop me, and the warm love of God—whether prelude to judgment or punishment or forgiveness, I did not know—surrounded me and upheld me. The cries of joy in Heaven were deafening even to my ears.

“All the angels of the *bene ha elohim* were gathered. The Light of God pulsed from the center.

“ ‘Am I to be punished?’ And all I could feel was thanks that I had seen this light, if only for moments, once again.

“I couldn’t look into the light. I had to put my hands up. And as always happens at a meeting of all of Heaven, the Seraphim and the Cherubim closed around God so that the light came in rays from behind them, glorious, and a brightness that we could bear.

“The voice of God was immediate and total.

“ ‘I have a word for you, my brave one, my arrogant one,’ He said. ‘I have a concept for you to ponder in your angelic wisdom. It is the concept of Gehenna, of hell.’ This word unfolded to me in all its implications. ‘Fire and torment eternal,’ said God, ‘the inverse of Heaven. Tell me, Memnoch, from your heart. Would that be the appropriate punishment for you—the very opposite of the glory you forsook for the Daughters of Men? Would it be the appropriate sentence—suffering everlasting or until Time is no more?’ ”

Fourteen

“It didn’t take a second to answer,” Memnoch said. He raised his eyebrows slightly as he looked at me. “I said, ‘No, Lord, you wouldn’t do that to anyone. We are all your creatures. That is a horror too terrible for anyone or anything that has been deliberately made. No, Lord. When the men and the women of earth told me they had dreamed of such torments for those who had been bad and caused them pain and misery, I assured them no such place existed or ever would.’

“Laughter rang out in heaven. Laughter from one end of the skies to the other. Every single angel was laughing, and of course the laughing was melodic and filled with delight and wonder as always, but laughter it was, and not song.

“Only one being wasn’t laughing. Memnoch. I. I stood there, having spoken with perfect seriousness and utter amazement that they were laughing at what I had said.

“But the strangest phenomenon had occurred. God, too, had laughed, and was laughing, softly, with them, in unison, or in a leading rhythm, and only as His laughter slowly died away, so did theirs.

“ ‘So you told them that, Memnoch. That there would never be a Hell of Eternal Punishment of the Bad; never; that such a place would never exist.’

“ ‘Yes, Lord, I did,’ I said. ‘I couldn’t imagine why they had thought of it. Except they get so angry sometimes with their enemies.…’

“The laughter began again, but God silenced it.

“God said, ‘Memnoch, have you left all your mortal cells on earth? You are in possession of all your angelic faculties? You are not still acting the simpleton out of habit?’

“I spoke loud over the continuing laughter. ‘No, Lord. I dreamt of this moment. Separation from you was agony. I did what I did out of love, isn’t it so? Surely you know better than I.’

“ ‘I fear you did,’ He answered. ‘It was love, yes, that much is true.’

“ ‘Lord, I dreamt you would let me come before you and explain the entire thing, make the case I had meant to make when I first saw a

Daughter of Men and went to her. Is this to be granted?'

"Silence.

"I could hear nothing from the Divine Presence, but I realized suddenly that some among the *bene ha elohim* had drawn close to me. At first I thought no, they are merely shifting and spreading their wings in the light, but I realized now that close behind me stood a small legion or group of angels, and that they had been at the edges of the crowd all the time and were now being pushed towards me.

"These angels I knew of course, some much more intimately through debate and argument than others, and they came from all ranks. I looked at them in confusion and then towards the Divine Presence.

" 'Memnoch,' said the Lord suddenly. 'These behind you, your cohorts, are also asking that you be granted your wish, to make your case, in the hopes that you can make it for them too.'

" 'I don't understand, Lord.' But in a twinkling I did. I saw now the sorrow on their faces, and the way they cleaved to me as if I were their protector. I knew in an instant what had happened, that ranging over the whole earth, these angels had done as I had done.

" 'Not with such a flourish or with such invention,' said the Lord God. 'But they, too, saw the heat and mystery between the coupled man and woman; and they, too, found the Daughters of Men to be fair, and took them as wives.'

"There came again a great uproar. Some were laughing still in that light gay manner as if all of this was splendid and novel entertainment and others were amazed, and those Watchers who clung to me, who seemed in comparison to the *bene ha elohim* a small number, looked to me desperately, and some even accusingly, and there came a whisper from their midst.

" 'Memnoch, we saw you do it.'

"Was God laughing? I couldn't hear it. The light poured out in its immense rays beyond the heads and shoulders and shaded forms of the Seraphim and Cherubim, and the wealth of love seemed eternal and constant as it had always been.

" 'In tribes throughout the world, my Sons of Heaven have gone down to know the flesh as you would know it, Memnoch, though as I have already said, with far less flair and desire to stir the thick atmosphere of Nature and so deliberately disturb my Divine Plan.'

“ ‘Lord, God, forgive me,’ I whispered. And from the legion with me came the same hushed and respectful chorus.

“ ‘But tell me, you who stand behind Memnoch, what do you have to say for yourselves as to why you did this and what you discovered, and what case would you put before the Heavenly Court?’

“The answer was silence. These angels fell prostrate before the Lord, asking only forgiveness with such total abandon that no eloquence was required. I alone stood there.

“ ‘Ah,’ I said, ‘it seems, Lord, that I stand alone.’

“ ‘Haven’t you always? My Son of Heaven, my angel who does not trust the Lord.’

“ ‘Lord, God, I do trust you!’ I said at once, angry suddenly. ‘I do! But I don’t understand these things, and I cannot still my mind or my personality, it’s impossible for me. No, not impossible, but it does not … it does not seem right to be silent. It seems right to make the case. It seems that the greatest thing I can do is to make the case, and the greatest thing I can do is to please God.’

“There seemed great divisions amongst the others—not the Watchers, who didn’t dare to climb to their invisible feet, and had their wings folded over them as if they were birds afraid in the nest—but among the entire Court. There were murmurings, and little songs, and riffs of melody and laughter, and deep, soft questions, and many faces turned on me with eyes full of curiosity and even tinged with anger so that their eyebrows made a scowl.

“ ‘Make your case!’ said the Lord. ‘But before you begin, remind yourself, for my sake and the sake of everyone present, that I know all things. I know humankind as you can never know it. I have seen its bloody altars, and its rain dances, and its reeking sacrifices, and I have heard the cries of the wounded, the afflicted, the slowly annihilated. I see Nature in Humankind as I see it in the savagery of the seas or the forests. Don’t waste my Time, Memnoch. Or to put it more clearly so that you will understand it, don’t waste the Time you have with me.’

“So the moment had come. I stood quietly preparing myself. Never in all my existence had I felt the importance or significance of an event as I felt the meaning of this one now. It is what you would call excitement, perhaps, or exhilaration. I had my audience. And I did not know how to doubt myself! But I was already furious with all the legion behind me

lying on their faces and saying nothing! And suddenly in my fury I realized that as long as they lay there, leaving me alone in the open before God and his court, I wasn't going to speak a word. I folded my arms and stood there.

"God started to laugh, a slow, gentle rising laugh, and then all of Heaven joined in it irresistibly. And God said to the Fallen ones, the Watchers, 'Stand up, my sons, or we will all be here until the End of Time.'

" 'Mockery, Lord, I deserve it,' I said. 'But I thank you.'

"In a great shuffling of wings and gowns, I heard them rising behind me to stand at least as tall and as straight as brave humans could stand on the earth below.

" 'Lord, my case is simple,' I said, 'but surely you cannot ignore it. And I shall state it as simply and as finely as I can.

" 'Up until a point in his development, the primate below was part of Nature, and bound by all its laws. And with his larger brain, he grew ever more cunning, and his battles with other animals became as fierce and bloody as the Heavenly Court has ever seen. This is all true. And with this intelligence there came also an increase in the ways and means that Humankind could inflict upon its own great pain.

" 'But never in all that I have Watched in war, and execution, and even the laying waste of whole settlements and villages have I seen anything to surpass the sheer violence of the insect Kingdom or the Kingdom of the Reptiles, or of the Lower Mammals, who blindly and senselessly struggle to do only two things—survive and make more of their own kind.'

"I stopped, out of courtesy and also for effect. The Lord said nothing. I went on.

" 'Then there came a point, however, when these primates, who had, by then, come to strongly resemble Your Own Image as we perceive it in Ourselves, diverged from the rest of Nature, in a marked way. And it was no mere moment of Self Awareness, Lord, when the logic of Life and Death became apparent to them. It was nothing as simple as that. On the contrary, the Self Awareness grew from a new and totally unnatural capacity to love.

" 'And it was then that humankind broke itself into tight families and clans and tribes, bound together by intimate knowledge of the

individuality of each other, rather than sheer recognition of species, and were held together, through suffering and happiness, by the bond of love.

“ ‘Lord, the human family is beyond Nature. If you were to go down and—’

“ ‘Memnoch, take care!’ God whispered.

“ ‘Yes, Lord,’ I said, nodding, and clasped my hands behind me so as not to make ferocious gestures. ‘What I should have said was that when I went down and I looked into the family, here and there and all over the World which you have Created, which you have allowed to unfold magnificently, I saw the family as a new and unprecedented flower, Lord, a blossom of emotion and intellect that in its tenderness was cut loose from the stems of Nature from which it had taken its nourishment, and was now at the mercy of the wind. Love, Lord, I saw it, I felt Love of Men and Women for one another and for their Children, and the willingness to sacrifice for one another, and to grieve for those who were dead, and to seek for their souls in the hereafter, and to think, Lord, of a hereafter where they might be reconciled with those souls again.

“ ‘It was out of this love and the family, it was out of this rare and unprecedented bloom—so Creative, Lord, that it seemed in your Image of your Creations—that the souls of these beings remained alive after death! What else in Nature can do this, Lord? All gives back to the Earth what it has taken. Your Wisdom is Manifest throughout; and all those that suffer and die beneath the canopy of your heavens are mercifully bathed in brutal ignorance of the scheme which ultimately involved their own deaths.

“ ‘Man, not so! Woman, not so! And in their hearts, loving one another as they do, mate with mate, and family with family, they have imagined Heaven, Lord. They have imagined it; the time of the reunion of souls when their kin will be restored to them and to each other, and all will sing in bliss! They have imagined eternity because their love demands it, Lord. They have conceived of these ideas as they conceive of fleshly children! This I, the Watcher, have seen.’

“Another silence. All of heaven was so still that the only sounds came from the earth below, the purring of the wind, and the dim stirring of the seas, and the cries, the pale faraway cries of souls on earth as well as souls in Sheol.

“ ‘Lord,’ I said, ‘they long for Heaven. And imagining eternity, or immortality, I know not which, they suffer injustice, separation, disease, and death, as no other animal could possibly suffer it. And their souls are great. And in Sheol they reach out beyond the love of self and the service of self in the name of Love. Love goes back and forth between Earth and Sheol eternally. Lord, they have made a lower tier of the invisible court! Lord, they seek to propitiate your wrath, because they know You are Here! And Lord, they want to know everything about You. And about themselves. They know and they want to know!’

“This was the heart of my case, and I knew it. But again, there came from God no response or interruption.

“ ‘I couldn’t see this,’ I said, ‘as anything less than Your greatest accomplishment, the self-aware human, conceiving of Time, with a brain vast enough already for learning that is coming so fast we Watchers could scarce keep track of all of it. But the suffering, the torment, the curiosity—it was a lamentation seemingly made for the ears of Angels, and of God, if I may dare to say.

“ ‘The case I came to make was, Lord, can these souls, either in the flesh, or in Sheol, not be given some part of our light? Can they not be given Light as animals are given water when they thirst? And will not these souls, once taken into Divine Confidence, be worthy perhaps to take some small place in this Court which is without End?’

“The quiet seemed dreamy and eternal, like the Time before Time.

“ ‘Could it be tried, Lord? For if it is not tried, what is to be the fate of these invisible surviving souls except to grow stronger and more entangled with the flesh in ways that give rise not to revelations of the true Nature of things, but corrupted ideas based on fragmentary evidence and instinctive fear?’

“This time, I gave up on the idea of a polite pause and immediately forged ahead.

“ ‘Lord, when I went into the flesh; when I went with the woman, it was because she was fair, yes, and resembled us, and offered a species of pleasure in the flesh which to us is unknown. Granted, Lord, that pleasure is immeasurably small compared to your magnificence, but Lord, I tell you, in the moment when I lay with her, and she with me, and we knew that pleasure together, that small flame did roar with a sound very like the songs of the Most High!

“ ‘Our hearts stopped together, Lord. We knew in the flesh eternity, the man in me knew that the woman knew it. We knew something that rises above all earthly expectations, something that is purely Divine.’

“I fell silent. What more could I say? I would be embroidering my case with examples, for Someone Who knew all things. I folded my arms and looked down, respectfully, musing and listening to the souls in Sheol, and for one second their faint faraway cries distracted me, drew me right out of the heavenly presence for an instant of realization that they were calling on me and reminding me of my promise and hoping for my return.

“ ‘Lord God, forgive me,’ I said. ‘Your wonders have snared me. And I am wrong if that was not your plan.’

“Once again the silence was thunderous and soft and utterly empty. It was an emptiness of which those on Earth cannot conceive. I stood my ground because I could do nothing but what I had done, and I felt in my heart that every word I’d spoken had been true and untainted by fear. It occurred to me very clearly that if the Lord threw me out of Heaven, that whatever He did, really, I would deserve it. I was His Created Angel, and His to Command. And His to destroy if He wished it. And once again, I heard the cries of Sheol in my memory, and I wondered, as a human might, if He would send me there soon or do something far more fearful, for in Nature there were countless examples of excruciating destruction and catastrophe, and I as an Angel could be made by God to suffer whatever He wanted me to suffer, I knew.

“ ‘I trust in you, Lord,’ I said suddenly, thinking and speaking simultaneously. ‘Or else I would have fallen on my face as have the other Watchers. And that is not to say that they do not trust. But only to say that I believe you want me to understand Goodness, that your essence is Goodness, and you will not suffer these souls to cry in gloom and ignorance. You will not suffer the ingenious Humankind to continue without any inkling of the Divine.’

“For the first time, he spoke very softly and offhandedly.

“ ‘Memnoch, you’ve given them more than an inkling.’

“ ‘Yes, Lord, it is so. But Lord, the souls of the dead have given them much inspiration, and encouragement, and those souls are out of Nature, as we have beheld it, and growing stronger by the day. If there is a species of energy, Lord, natural and complicated beyond my

understanding, then I am totally taken by surprise. For it seems they are made of what we are made of, Lord, the invisible, and each is individual and has its own will.'

"Silence again. Then the Lord spoke:

" 'Very well. I have heard your case. Now I have for you a question. For all that you gave Humankind, Memnoch, what precisely did they give you?'

"I was startled by the question.

" 'And don't speak to me of love now, Memnoch,' He added. 'Of their capacity to love one another. On this the Heavenly Court is well informed and totally agreed. But what did they give you, Memnoch? What did you get in return for the risks you took by entering into their realm?'

" 'Confirmation, Lord,' I said hastily, reaching for the deepest truth without distortion. 'They knew an Angel when they saw one. Just as I supposed they would.'

" 'Ah!' A great roar of laughter came from the Heavenly Throne and once again it swept up Heaven, so loud I'm sure that it must have reached the weak and struggling ears of Sheol. The Whole Heavens were rocking with laughing and singing.

"At first I didn't dare to speak or do anything, and then suddenly, angrily perhaps, or should I say, willfully, I raised my hand. 'But I mean this in all seriousness, Lord! I was not some being beyond their dreams! Lord, did you plant the seed for this when you Created the Universe, that these beings would raise their voices to you? Will you tell me? One way or the other, can I know?'

"The angels quieted down in little groups and pockets at first and then the laughter tapered off altogether, and something else replaced it, a soft singing of tribute to God in his patience, a soft acknowledgment of his patience with me.

"I didn't join in this song. I looked to the great outer stretches of the rays of Light that came from God, and the mystery of my own stubbornness and my own anger and my own curiosity subdued me somewhat, but did not throw me for one second into despair.

" 'I trust in you, Lord. You know what you're doing. You have to. Otherwise we are … lost.'

"I broke off, stunned at what I had just said. It far exceeded any

challenge I'd thrown at God so far, it far exceeded any suggestion that I had made. And in horror, I looked at the Light, and thought, What if He doesn't know what He's doing and never has!

"My hands went to my face to stop my lips from saying something rash and thereby tell my brain to stop with its rash and blasphemous thoughts. I knew God! God was There. And I stood before Him. How dare I think such a thing, and yet He had said, 'You do not trust me,' and that was exactly what He had meant.

"It seemed the Light of God grew infinitely brighter; it expanded; the shapes of the Seraphim and Cherubim grew small and utterly transparent, and the light filled me and filled the recesses of all angels, and I felt in communion with them that all of us were so totally loved by God that we could never long for or imagine anything more.

"Then the Lord spoke, the words wholly different now, for they competed with this effulgence of Love which overpowered the thinking mind. Nevertheless, I heard them and they penetrated to my heart.

"And everyone else heard them too.

" 'Memnoch, go into Sheol,' He said, 'and find there but ten souls who are worthy, of all those millions, to join us in Heaven. Say what you will to them as you examine them; but find Ten who you believe are worthy to live with us. Then bring those souls back to me, and we will continue from there on.'

"I was ecstatic. 'Lord, I can do it, I know I can!' I cried out.

"And suddenly I saw the faces of Michael and Raphael and Uriel, who had been almost obscured by the light of God, which was now receding within more endurable bounds. Michael looked frightened for me and Raphael was weeping. Uriel seemed merely to watch, without emotion, neither on my side or for me, or for the souls, or for anyone. It was the face that Angels used to have before Time began.

" 'I can go now?' I said. 'And when must I return?'

" 'When you will,' said the Lord, 'and when you can.'

"Ah, I understood it. If I didn't find those ten souls I wasn't coming back.

"I nodded, lovely logic. I understood it. I accepted it.

" 'Years pass on Earth as we speak, Memnoch. Your settlement and those visited by others have grown into cities; the world spins in the Light of Heaven. What can I say to you, my beloved one, except that you

should go now to Sheol and return with those Ten Souls as soon as you possibly can.'

"I was about to speak, to ask, What of the Watchers, this little legion of meek, flesh-educated angels behind me, when the Lord answered.

" 'They will wait in the proper place in Heaven for your return. They will not know my decision, nor their fate, until you bring these souls to me, Memnoch, souls that I shall find worthy to be in my Heavenly Home.'

" 'I understand, Lord, I'm leaving with your permission!'

"And asking nothing further, broaching no questions as to restrictions or limitations, I, Memnoch, the Archangel and the Accuser of God, left Heaven immediately and descended into the great airy mists of Sheol."

Fifteen

"But, Memnoch," I interrupted. "He gave you no criteria! How were you to evaluate these souls? How could you know?"

Memnoch smiled. "Yes, Lestat, that's exactly what He did and how He did it, and believe me, I knew, and no sooner had I entered Sheol than the question of the Criteria for Entrance into Heaven became my full focus and desperate obsession. It is exactly the way He does things, no?"

"I would have asked," I said.

"No, no. I had no intention of it. I got out of there and started to work! As I said, this was His way and I knew that my only hope was to come up with a Criterion of my own and make a case for it, don't you see?"

"I think I do."

"You know you do," he said. "All right. Picture this. The population of the world has swelled to millions, and cities have risen though not in very many places, and mostly in that very valley where I had descended and left my marks on the walls of caves. Humankind had wandered north and south as far as it could on the planet; settlements and towns and forts existed in various stages of development. The land of the cities is called Mesopotamia now, I think, or is it Sumer, or will it be Ur? Your scholars uncover more with every passing day.

"Man's wild imaginings of immortality and reunion with the dead had everywhere given rise to religion. In the Nile Valley, a civilization of astonishing stability had developed, while war was waged all the time in the land we call the Holy Land.

"So I come to Sheol, which I have only observed from outside before, and which is now enormous, containing still some of the first souls that ever sputtered with enduring life, and now millions of souls whose creeds and yearnings for the eternal have brought them to this place with great ferocity. Mad expectations have pitched countless ones into confusion. Others have grown so strong they exert a sort of rulership amongst the others. And some have learnt the trick of going down to Earth, escaping from the pull of other invisible souls altogether, and for wandering close to the flesh they would possess again, or influence, or

harm, or love as the case might be.

"The world is populated by spirits! And some, having no memory anymore at all of being human, have become what men and women will for eternity call demons, prowling about, eager to possess, wreak havoc, or make mischief, as their developments allow."

"And one of those," I said, "passed into the vampiric mother and father of our kind."

"Yes, precisely. Amel created that mutation. But it was not the only one. There are other monsters on earth, existing twixt the visible and the invisible; but the great thrust of the world was and always has been the fate of its millions of Humankind."

"The mutations have never influenced history."

"Well, yes, and no. Is a mad soul screaming from the mouth of a flesh-and-blood prophet an influence, if this prophet's words are recorded in five different languages and for sale today on the shelves of stores in New York? Let's say that the process which I had seen and described to God had continued; some souls died; some grew strong; some managed to actually return in new bodies, though by what knack I did not at that time know."

"Do you know now?"

"Reincarnation isn't by any stretch common. Don't think of it. And it gains very little for the souls involved. You can imagine the situations that make it possible. Whether it always involves the extinction of an infant soul when it happens—that is, whether it always involves a replacement in the new body—this varies with individual cases. Those who persistently reincarnate are certainly something that cannot be ignored. But that, like the evolution of vampires and other earthbound immortals, falls into a small realm. Once again, we are talking now about the fate of Humankind as a whole. We are talking about the Whole Human World."

"Yes, I really do understand, perhaps better than you know."

"All right. I have no criteria, but I go into Sheol and I find there a great sprawling replica of earth! Souls have imagined and projected into their invisible existence all manner of jumbled buildings and creatures and monsters; it is a riot of imagination without Heavenly guidance, and as I suspected, there is still an enormous majority of souls who don't know that they are dead.

“Now, I plunge into the very middle of this, trying to make myself as invisible as I possibly can; to conceive of myself as utterly without any discernible form; but this is hard. For this is a realm of the invisible; everything here is invisible. And so there I begin to wander on the dreary roads in semidarkness, among the malformed, the half-formed, the unformed, the moaning and dying, and I am in my angelic form.

“Nevertheless, these confused souls don’t take very much notice of me! It’s as if many can’t see clearly at all. Now, you know this state has been described by human shamans, by saints, by those who have come close to death, passed through it, and then been revived and continued to live.”

“Yes.”

“Well, what human souls see of this is a fragment. I saw the whole. I roamed extensively and fearlessly and regardless of Time, or out of it, though Time always continues to pass, of course, and I went where I chose.”

“A madhouse of souls.”

“Very nearly, but within this great madhouse were many, many mansions, to use the Scriptural words. Souls believing in like faiths had come together in desperation and sought to reinforce each other’s beliefs and still each other’s fears. But the light of Earth was too dim to warm anyone here! And the Light of Heaven simply did not penetrate at all.

“So yes, you are right, a madhouse of sorts, the Valley of the Shadow of Death, the terrible river of monsters over which souls dread to cross to Paradise. And of course, none had ever crossed up to that point.

“The first thing I did was listen: I listened to the song of any soul who would sing to me, that is, speak, in my language; I caught up any coherent declaration or question or supposition that struck my ears. What did these souls know? What had become of them?

“And in short order I discovered that there were tiers to this awful, gloom-filled place, tiers created out of the will of souls to seek others like themselves. The place had become stratified, rather loosely and grimly, but there was an order born out of the degree of each soul’s awareness, acceptance, confusion, or wrath.

“Closest to earth lay the damnedest, those who kept struggling to eat or drink or possess others, or could not accept what had happened or did not understand.

“Just beyond them came a layer of souls who did nothing but fight each other, scream, yell, push, shove, strive to harm or overcome or invade or escape in hopeless confusion. These souls never even saw me. But again, your humans have seen this and described it in many, many manuscripts over the centuries. Nothing I say surely is a surprise.

“And farther from this struggle, nearest to the calm of Heaven—though I don’t speak really of literal directions here—were those who had come to understand that they had passed out of Nature, and were somewhere else. And these souls, some of them having been there since the Beginning, had grown patient in their attitudes, and patient in their watching of Earth, and patient with others around them, whom they sought to help in Love to accept their death.”

“You found the souls who loved.”

“Oh, they all love,” Memnoch said. “All of them. There is no such thing as a soul who loves nothing. He or she loves something, even if it exists only in memory or as an ideal. But yes, I found those most peacefully and serenely expressing love in immense amounts to one another, and to the living below. Some I found who had turned their eyes entirely to earth, and sought nothing but to answer the prayers that rose from the desperate, the needy, and the sick.

“And Earth by this time, as you know, had seen wars unspeakable, and whole civilizations dissolved by volcanic disaster. The variety and possibilities of suffering increased all the time. It wasn’t only in proportion to learning, either, or cultural development. It had become a scheme beyond an angel’s comprehension. When I looked at Earth, I didn’t even try to figure out what ruled the passions of those in one jungle as opposed to the groups in another, or why one population spent generations piling stones upon stones. I knew, of course, more or less everything, but I was not now on an earthly mission.

“The dead had become my realm.

“I drew near to these souls who looked down with mercy and compassion, who sought by thought to influence others for the good. Ten, twenty, thirty, I saw thousands. Thousands, I tell you, in whom all hope of rebirth or great reward was gone; souls in which existed total acceptance; that this was death; this was eternity; souls enamored with the flesh and blood they could see just as we Angels had been enamored and still were.

“I sat amongst these souls and started to talk with them, here and there, where I could get their attention, and it soon became obvious that they were rather indifferent to my form, because they assumed that I had chosen it as they had chosen theirs, and some of them resembled men and women, and some didn’t bother. So I suspect they actually thought me rather new to Sheol in that I had to make such ferocious displays with arms and legs and wings. But they could be distracted from earth, if approached very politely, and I began to question them, remembering to strike for the truth only, but not to be rude.

“I must have talked to millions. I roamed Sheol, talking to souls. And the hardest thing in each instance was to get the attention of the individual either off the earth, or off some phantasm of lost existence, or out of a state of airy contemplation in which concentration was now so alien and required such an effort that it couldn’t be induced.

“The wisest, the most loving souls did not want to bother with my questions. And only gradually would they realize that I was not a mortal man but something of much different substance, and that there was a point to my questions that had to do with a place of reference beyond Earth. You see, this was the dilemma. They had been in Sheol so long that they no longer speculated about the reason for Life or Creation; they no longer cursed a God they didn’t know, or sought a God who hid from them. And when I began to ask my questions, they thought I was way down there with the new souls, dreaming of punishments and rewards which were never to come.

“These wise souls contemplated their past lives in a long wrathless reverie, and sought to answer prayers from below as I have said. They watched over their kindred, their clansmen, their own nations; they watched over those who attracted their attention with accomplished and spectacular displays of religiosity; they watched with sadness the suffering of humans and wished they could help and tried to help by thought when they could.

“Almost none of these very strong and patient souls sought the flesh again. But some of them had in the past. They had gone down and been reborn and discovered in the final analysis that they could not remember from one fleshly life to another, so there was no real reason to keep being born! Better to linger here, in the eternity that was known to them, and to watch the Beauty of Creation, and it did seem very

beautiful to them, as it had seemed to us.

"Well, it was out of these questions, these endless and thoughtful conversations with the dead, that my criteria evolved.

"First, to be worthy of Heaven—to have a ghost of a chance with God, I could say—the Soul had to understand life and death in the simplest sense. I found many souls who did. Next there had to be in this understanding an appreciation of the Beauty of God's work, the harmony of Creation from God's point of view, a vision of Nature wrapped in endless and overlapping cycles of survival and reproduction and evolution and growth.

"Many souls had come to understand this. Many had. But many who thought life was beautiful, felt that death was sad and endless and terrible and they would have chosen never to have been born, had they been given the choice!

"I didn't know what to do in the face of that conviction, but it was very widespread. Why did He make us, Whoever He is, if we are to be here like this forever, out of it and never part of it again, unless we wish to dip down and suffer all that torment all over again, for a few moments of glory, which we won't appreciate any more next time than last time, because we can't take our knowledge with us if we are reborn!

"Indeed, it was at this point which many souls had ceased to develop or change. They felt great concern and mercy for those who were alive, but they knew sorrow, and joy was not something that they could even imagine anymore. They moved towards peace; and peace indeed seemed about the finest state which they could achieve. Peace, broken by the struggle to answer prayers, was particularly difficult, but to me, as an angel, very attractive. And I stayed in the company of these souls for a long, long time.

"Now, if I could only tell them, I thought, if I could begin to instruct them, maybe I could bring them around, prepare them, make them ready for Heaven, but in this state they are not ready, and I don't know if they will believe what I say. And what if they do believe and are filled suddenly with the hunger for Heaven and then God doesn't let them in.

"No, I had to be very careful. I could not proclaim knowledge from atop boulders as I had done in my short time on earth. If I was to intrude on the progress of one of these dead ones, there had to be a very good chance that that soul would follow me to God's Throne.

“Understanding of life and death? That wasn’t enough. Acceptance of death? That wasn’t enough. Indifference to life and death, that wasn’t good enough surely. Quiet confusion and drifting. No. That sort of soul had lost its character. It was as far from an Angel as was the rain that fell on Earth.

“At last I came into a region smaller than the others, and peopled with only a few souls. Now I speak comparatively. Remember, I’m the Devil. I spend a lot of time in Heaven and Hell. So when I say a few, that is to make a picture that is manageable to your mind. For the sake of exposition, let’s say a few thousand or more. But I speak of great numbers. Don’t doubt.”

“I follow you.”

“And these souls absolutely astonished me by their radiance, their tranquility, and the degrees of knowledge which they had attained and retained. First of all, almost every one of them had a full human shape. That is, they had realized their original forms or perhaps ideal forms in the invisible. They looked like angels! They were invisible men, women, and children, and they had about them accoutrements that had been dear in life. Some of them were brand new and had come from death thoughtful and seeking and ready for the mysterious. Others had learned all in Sheol over centuries of watching and fearing to lose their individuality, no matter how terrible things did appear. But all were intensely visible! And anthropomorphic, though of course they were diaphanous, as all spirits are; and some were paler than others; but all essentially could be seen clearly by others and themselves.

“I went amongst them, expecting to be snubbed, but I realized immediately that these souls saw me differently than the others. They saw everything differently. They were more attuned to the subtleties of the invisible because they had accepted its conditions totally. If I wished to be what I was, let me be it, they thought, and they judged me very seriously on how well I succeeded in being this tall creature, winged and long-haired and dressed in flowing robes. Within moments of my arrival, I felt happiness around me. I felt acceptance. I felt a total lack of resistance and a daring curiosity. They knew I was not a human soul. They knew because they had reached a point where they could see this! They could see a lot about every other soul they looked at. And they could see a great deal of the world below.

“One of these souls was in the shape of a woman, and it was not my Lilia at all, by the way, for I never did see her in any form again. But it was a woman who had died I think in midlife having had numerous children, some of whom were with her now, and some of whom were still below. This soul existed in a serenity that was almost becoming bright. That is, its evolution was so high on the invisible level that it was beginning to generate something like the Light of God!

“ ‘What makes you so different?’ I asked this woman. ‘What makes all of you here, clustered together in this place, so very different?’

“With an acuity that astonished me, this woman asked me who I was. Dead souls just usually don’t ask that question. They plunge right into their helpless preoccupations and obsessions. But she said, ‘Who are you and what are you? I have never seen one like you before here. Only when I was alive.’

“ ‘I don’t want to tell you yet,’ I said. ‘But I want to learn from you. Will you tell me why you seem happy? You are happy, aren’t you?’

“ ‘Yes,’ she said, ‘I’m with those I love, and look below, look at all of it.’

“ ‘Then you harbour no questions about all of it?’ I pushed. ‘You don’t long to know why you were born or why you suffered or what happened to you when you died or why you’re here?’

“To my further amazement, she laughed. Laughter I had never heard in Sheol. It was soft, soothing, merry laughter, sweet laughter, laughter like the laughter of angels, and I think I sang to her softly in response, rather naturally, and at this her soul exploded like a blossom, the way fleshly souls had exploded below when they had learnt to love each other! She warmed to me and opened. ‘You are beautiful,’ she whispered respectfully.

“ ‘But why, why are all these others in this place so unhappy, and why are you few here filled with peace and joy? Yes, I know, I have looked below. And you are with those you love. But so are all these others.’

“ ‘We don’t resent God anymore,’ she said. ‘Any of us here. We don’t hate Him.’

“ ‘The others do?’

“ ‘It’s not that they hate Him,’ she said gently, being very careful with me, as if I were easy to bruise. ‘It’s that they can’t forgive Him for all this … for the world, for what’s happened, and for this state of Sheol in

which we languish. But we can. We have forgiven Him. And all of us have done it for various reasons, but forgiveness of God, that we have attained. We accept that our lives have been wondrous experiences, and worth the pain and the suffering, and we cherish now the joy we knew, and the moments of harmony, and we have forgiven Him for not ever explaining it all to us, for not justifying it, not punishing the bad or rewarding the good, or whatever else it is that all these souls, living and dead, expect of Him. We forgive Him. We don't know, but we suspect that maybe He knows a great secret about how all this pain could come to pass and still be good. And if He doesn't want to tell, well, He is God. But whatever, we forgive Him and we Love Him in our forgiveness, even though we know He may never care about any of us, any more than He cares for the pebbles on a beach below.'

"I was speechless. I sat very still, letting these souls of their own volition gather around me. Then one very young soul, the soul of a child, said:

" 'It seemed a terrible thing at first that God would bring us into the world to be murdered as we were, all of us—for you see, we three here died in war—but we have forgiven Him, because we know that if He could make something as beautiful as Life and Death, then he must Understand.'

" 'You see,' said another soul to me, 'it comes to this. We would suffer it all again, if we had to. And we would try to be better to each other and more loving. But it was worth it.'

" 'Yes,' said another. 'It took me all my life on Earth to Forgive God for the world, but I did it before I died, and came to dwell here with these others. And look, if you try hard, you'll see that we have made this something of a garden. It's hard for us. We work only with our minds and wills and memories, and imaginations, but we are making a place where we can remember what was good. And we forgive Him and we love Him that He gave us this much.'

" 'Yes,' said another, 'that He gave us anything at all. We are grateful and full of love for Him. For surely out there in the darkness is a great Nothing, and we have seen so many below who were obsessed with Nothing and with Misery, and they never knew the joys that we knew or know now.'

" 'This isn't easy,' said another soul. 'It's been a great struggle. But to

make love was good, and to drink was good, and to dance and sing was beautiful, and to run drunk through the rain was joyous; and beyond there lies a chaos, an absence, and I am grateful that my eyes opened upon the world below and that I can remember it and see it from here.'

"I thought for a long time without answering any of them, and they continued to talk to me, drawn to me, as if the fight in me, if there was any visible fight, was attracting them. In fact, the more I responded to their questions, the more they opened and seemed to understand their own answers more meaningfully, the denser and more intense the declarations became.

"I soon saw these people had come from all nations and all walks of life. And though kinship bound many of them tightly together, that was not true with them all. In fact, many had lost sight of their dead kin entirely in other realms of Sheol. Others had never even laid eyes on them. While some had been greeted at the moment of death by their lost ones! And these were people of the world and all its beliefs gathered here in this place where light was beginning to shine forth.

" 'Your lives on earth, was there one common thread?' I asked finally. They couldn't answer. They really didn't know. They had not questioned each other about their lives, and as I asked them quick, random questions, it became clear that there had been no thread! Some of these people had been very rich, others poor, some had suffered unspeakably, some had suffered nothing but had known a golden prosperity and leisure in which they had grown to love Creation before they were even dead. But I began to sense that if I wanted to, I could start to count these responses and evaluate them in some way. In other words, all these souls had learnt to forgive God in various ways. But very possibly one way was better for this than another, infinitely more efficient. Perhaps. I couldn't be sure. And for now I couldn't know.

"I wrapped my arms around these souls. I drew them to me. 'I want you to come on a journey with me,' I said to them, having spoken now to each and every one and being completely certain of where we stood. 'I want you to come to Heaven and stand before God. Now it may be brief, and you may see Him for no more than an instant, and possibly He will not allow Himself to be seen by you at all. You may find yourselves returned here, having learnt nothing, but also having suffered nothing. The truth is, I can't guarantee what will happen! No one knows God.'

“ ‘We know,’ they answered.

“ ‘But I invite you to come to God and tell Him what you’ve told me. And now I’ll answer your question to me: I am his Archangel Memnoch, of the very mold of other Angels of whom you heard when you were alive! Will you come?’

“Several were astonished and hesitated. But the majority said in one voice, a mingling of answers that was this answer: ‘We will come. One glimpse of God, the chance of it even, is worth anything. If that’s not so then I don’t remember the smell of the sweet olive tree, or how the fresh grass felt beneath me when I laid on it. I never tasted wine, and I never bedded the ones I loved. We will come.’

“Several refused. It took a few moments before we all realized it but several had totally withdrawn. They saw me now for what I was, an Angel, and they understood what had been withheld from them, and they had lost their peace and lost their power to forgive in that instant. They stared at me in horror or anger or both. The other souls hastened to change their minds, but they wouldn’t be changed. No, they did not want to see this God who had deserted His Creation and left it to rear up gods on altars all over the planet and pray in vain for intervention or final judgment! No, no, no!

“ ‘Come,’ I said to the others. ‘Let’s try to enter Heaven. Let’s give it all our strength! How many are we? A thousand times ten? A million? What does it matter? God said ten but not ten only. God meant at least ten. Come, let’s go!’ ”

Sixteen

In a flash, I shall have my answer, I thought. He will either admit us or cast us back down with His Might the way He once threw me to Earth. He might even dissolve the lot of us, for surely He can make His judgment on my success or failure before I ever reach the gates of Heaven. What had He said in His Infinite Wisdom? He had said, 'Come back as soon as you *can*.'

"I drew these souls to me, tight as I drew you when I took you upwards, and out of Sheol we rose, into the full blasting light of Heaven as it came pouring over the walls and the gates. And once again, those gates, which I had never seen in my early eons, were thrown open, and we found ourselves, one Archangel and a few million human souls, standing once more in the very midst of Heaven before amazed and laughing and pointing and startled and flabbergasted angels who gathered around us in a great circle, crying to get the attention of everyone until Heaven finally fell quiet.

"Well, I thought, so far so good. We're inside. And the human souls! The human souls could see the angels and the human souls were overjoyed. Oh, I can't even remember this moment without dancing. I can't remember it without singing. The souls were jubilant, and when the angels began their great potentially cacophonous singing of questions and exclamations, the human souls began to sing!

"Indeed, Heaven was never going to be the same. I knew it. I knew it instantly. Because this is what took place. These souls brought with them the same powers of projection which they had learnt in Sheol, that is to create around them out of the invisible something of an environment that they wanted, longed for, and to which they were able to give their full wills.

"And the geography of Heaven was changed dramatically and instantly and in an infinite capacity. There rose the towers and castles and mansions which you saw when I took you there, the domed palaces and libraries, and the gardens, oh, the breathtaking projections of flowers in all directions, things that angels simply never thought to bring to

Heaven … well, it was all there. Trees rose in their mature fullness; rain came in whispering gusts, full of fragrance. The sky warmed and colors everywhere expanded or deepened. These souls took the invisible fabric of Heaven, whatever it is—energy, essence, the light of God, the Creative Power of God—and in a twinkling surrounded us all with wondrous constructions representing their curiosity, their concepts of beauty and their desires!

"All that they had learnt on Earth they had brought into Heaven, creating it irresistibly in its most cherished form!

"The commotion was beyond anything I had ever witnessed since the Creation of the Universe itself.

"And nobody appeared more astonished than the Archangel Michael, who was staring at me as if to say, 'Memnoch, you've brought them into Heaven!'

"But before he could get those words out, and as the souls still stood together, only beginning to realize that they could shift and touch the angels and touch the things they envisioned, there came the light of God Himself—En *Sof*—rising and spreading out from behind the figures of the Seraphim and Cherubim, and very gently and considerately falling down upon these human souls, filling each and laying all secrets of each totally open, as angels are open.

"The human souls cried with joy. Anthems rose from the Angels. I began to sing with my arms outstretched, 'Lord, Lord, I have your souls, worthy of Heaven, and look what they have brought to Heaven, Lord, look on your Creation, look on the Souls of those you evolved from the tiniest cells through flesh and blood and Sheol to your very Throne. Lord, we are here! Lord, it's done, it's done. It's happened. I have come back and you have allowed it.'

"And having said more than enough, I fell down on my knees.

"The songs had reached a frenzy, a sound no flesh-and-blood human could endure. Anthems rose from all quarters. The human souls were growing denser, more visible, until they appeared as clearly to us as we did to them and to each other. Some of them were locking hands and jumping up and down like little children. Others were merely crying and screaming and the tears were flooding down their faces.

"And then the light swelled. We knew God was about to speak. We fell silent, en masse. We were all the *bene ha elohim*. And God said:

“ ‘My Children. My beloved Children. Memnoch stands with his Millions, and they are worthy of Heaven.’

“And the voice of God ceased, and the light grew stronger and warmer, and all of Heaven became pure acceptance and pure love.

“I lay down upon the floor of Heaven in weariness, staring upwards into the great firmament of beautiful blue sky and ever-twinkling stars. I heard the souls of the humans rushing hither and thither. I heard the welcoming hymns and incantations of the angels. I heard everything, and then, in imitation of a mortal, I closed my eyes.

“Did God ever sleep? I don’t know. I closed my eyes, and I lay still in the Light of God, and after all those years and years in Sheol I was safe again, and I was warm.

“Finally, I realized that the Seraphim had come to me, three or four of them, I didn’t really notice, and they were standing over me, and looking down on me, their faces almost unendurably bright with reflected light.

“ ‘Memnoch, God wants to speak to you alone,’ they said. “ ‘Yes, at once!’ I sprang to my feet.

“And far from the jubilant throngs, I found myself standing in silence, in quiet, without companions, my arm up over my eyes, my eyes down, and near as I could possibly be to the presence of the Lord.”

Seventeen

“ ‘Uncover your eyes and look at me,’ said the Lord. “Instantly, aware that this might mean my total obliteration, that all might have been folly and misunderstanding, I obeyed.

“The radiance had become uniform, glorious yet tolerable, and in the very midst of it, broadcast in it, I saw distinctly a countenance such as my own. I cannot say that it was a human face. Countenance, person, expression—this is what I beheld, and this Highly Personal Countenance was regarding me directly and fully.

“It was so beautiful that I couldn’t imagine moving or ever turning away from it, but then it began to brighten, it began to force me to blink and to struggle not to cover my eyes rather than imperil my vision forever.

“The light then became muted; it contracted; it became bearable and engulfing, but not blinding to me. And I stood, trembling, very glad I had not reached to cover my face.

“ ‘Memnoch,’ God said. ‘You have done well. You have brought souls from Sheol who are worthy of Heaven; you have increased the joy and the bliss of Heaven; you have done well.’

“I uttered a thanks which was in fact an anthem of adoration, repeating the obvious, that God had made all these souls and that in His mercy He had allowed them to come to Him.

“ ‘This makes you very happy, does it not?’ He asked.

“ ‘Only if it makes you happy, Lord,’ I said, which was a bit of a lie.

“ ‘Rejoin the angels, Memnoch,’ He said. ‘You are forgiven for becoming flesh and blood without my permission, and forgiven for having slept with the Daughters of Men. You are upheld in your hopes for the souls of Sheol. Leave me now and do whatever it is you wish, but interfere no more with Nature, or with humankind, since you insist they are not part of Nature, and on which point you are wrong.’

“ ‘Lord—’ I started timidly.

“ ‘Yes???’

“ ‘Lord, these souls I brought from Sheol, why, they are less than one

one-hundredth of the souls in Sheol; they probably are less than one one-hundredth of souls who have disintegrated or vanished since the beginning of the world. Lord, Sheol is filled with confusion and misunderstanding. These were but the elect.'

" 'I am supposed to be surprised by this information? How could I not know it?' He asked.

" 'Surely, Lord, you'll let me go back to Sheol and to try to advance those souls who haven't reached the level of Heaven. Surely you'll let me try to purge them of whatever keeps them unworthy of heavenly bliss.'

" 'Why?'

" 'Lord, there are millions lost to you for every million saved.'

" 'You know that I know this, do you not?'

" 'Lord, have mercy on them! Have mercy on the humans of the Earth who seek through countless rituals to reach you, know you, and appease you.'

" 'Why?'

"I didn't answer. I was dumbstruck. I thought. And then I said, 'Lord, do you not care for these souls who are drifting in confusion? Who suffer so in darkness?'

" 'Why should I?' He asked.

"Again, I took my time. It was imperative that this answer count. But in the interval he spoke:

" 'Memnoch, can you count for me all of the stars? Do you know their names, their orbits, their destinies in Nature? Can you give me a rough calculation, Memnoch, of the number of grains of sand in the sea?'

" 'No, Lord, I can't.'

" 'Throughout my Creation, there are creatures whose spawn numbers in the thousands, of which only a tiny portion survive—fishes of the sea, turtles of the sea, winged insects of the air. A hundred, a million even, of one species may be born under the arc of one day's sun, with only a handful to survive and reproduce. Don't you know this?'

" 'Yes, Lord, I know. I knew in ages past. I knew when the animals were evolved. I knew.'

" 'So what is it to me that only a handful of souls come to the Gates of Heaven? Maybe I will send you to Sheol again, in Time. I will not say.'

" 'Lord, humankind is sentient and suffering!'

" 'Must we argue again about Nature? Humankind is my creation,

Memnoch, and its development whether you know it or not follows my Laws.'

" 'But, Lord, everything under the sun dies eventually, and these souls have the potential to live forever! *They are outside the cycle!* They are made of invisible will and knowledge. Lord, surely they were meant within the Laws to come to Heaven, how could it not be? I am asking you, Lord, I am asking you to tell me, because as much as I love you, I don't understand.'

" 'Memnoch, the invisible and the willful are embodied in my angels and they obey my laws.'

" 'Yes, Lord, but they don't die. And you talk to us, and you reveal yourself to us, and you love us, and you let us see things.'

" 'You don't think the beauty of Creation reveals my light to Humankind? You don't think these souls, which you yourself have brought here, have not developed out of a perception of the glory of all that has been made?'

" 'Many more could come, Lord, with just a little help. The number here now is so small. Lord, the lower animals, what can they conceive of that they cannot have? I mean, the lion conceives of the meat of the gazelle and he gets it, does he not? Human souls have conceived of Almighty God and are longing for Him.'

" 'You've proved that to me already,' he said. 'You've proved it to all of Heaven.'

" 'But these were a few! Lord, if you were only flesh and blood, if you had only gone down as I did—'

" 'Caution, Memnoch.'

" 'No, Lord, forgive me, but I can't deny you my finest efforts, and my finest efforts at logic tell me that if you went down and became flesh and blood as I did, you would better know these Creatures whom you think you know but you don't!'

"No answer.

" 'Lord, your fight doesn't penetrate human flesh. It mistakes it for animal flesh and always has! Lord, you may know all but you don't know every tiny thing! You can't, or you couldn't leave these souls languishing in Sheol in agony. And you could not allow the suffering of men and women on Earth to go without context. I don't believe it! I don't believe you would do it! I don't believe it.'

“ ‘Memnoch, for me it is only necessary to say something once.’

“I didn’t answer.

“ ‘I’m being gentle with you,’ He said.

“ ‘Yes, you are, but you are wrong, and in that, too, you are wrong, for you would hear your anthems of praise sung over and over without end and forever, and Lord! These souls could come to you and sing those anthems.’

“ ‘I don’t need the anthems, Memnoch,’ He said.

“ ‘Then why do we sing?’

“ ‘You of all my angels are the only one who accuses me! Who does not trust in me. Why, these souls you brought from Sheol trust in me as you do not! That was your standard for selecting them! That they trusted in the Wisdom of God.’

“I couldn’t be silenced:

“ ‘I knew something when I was flesh and blood, Lord, which upheld all that I had suspected before, and which confirms all I have seen since. What can I do, Lord, tell you lies? Speak things with my tongue that are flat-out falsehoods? Lord, in humankind you have made something that even you do not fully comprehend! There can be no other explanation, for if there is, then there is no Nature and there are no Laws.’

“ ‘Get out of my sight, Memnoch. Go down to Earth and get away from me and interfere with Nothing, do you hear?’

“ ‘Put it to the test, Lord. Become flesh and blood as I did. You who can do anything, sheath yourself in flesh—’

“ ‘Silence, Memnoch.’

“ ‘Or if you do not dare to do that, if it is unworthy of the Creator to understand in every cell his Creation, then silence all the anthems of Angels and Men! Silence them, since you say you do not need them, and observe then what your Creation means to you!’

“ ‘I cast you out, Memnoch!’ He declared, and in an instant all of Heaven had reappeared around me, the entire *bene ha elohim* and with it the millions of souls of the saved, and Michael and Raphael were standing before me, watching in horror as I was forced backwards right out of the gates and into the whirlwind.

“ ‘You are merciless to your Creations, my Lord!’ I roared as loud as I could over the din of distressful singing. ‘Those men and women made in your own image are right to despise you, for nine-tenths of them would

be better off if they had never been born!' "

Memnoch stopped.

He made a little frown, just a tiny very perfectly symmetrical scowl for a moment, and then lowered his head as if listening to something. Then slowly he turned to me.

I held his gaze. "It's just what you would have done, isn't it?" he asked.

"God help me," I said, "I really don't know."

The landscape was changing. As we looked at each other, the world around us was filled with new sounds. I realized there were humans in the vicinity, men with flocks of goats and sheep, and far off in the distance I could see the walls of a town, and above on a hill, yet another small settlement. Indeed, we were in a populated world now, ancient, but not that far from our own.

I knew these people couldn't see us, or hear us. I didn't have to be told.

Memnoch continued to stare at me, as if asking me something, and I didn't know what it was. The sun was beating down full on both of us. I realized my hands were moist with blood sweat and I reached up and wiped the sweat from my forehead, and looked at the blood on my hand. He was covered with a faint shimmer, but nothing more than that. He continued to stare at me.

"What happened!" I asked. "Why don't you tell me! What happened? Why don't you go on?"

"You know damned good and well what happened," he said. "Look down at your clothes now. They're robes, and better suited for the desert. I want you to come there, just over those hills … with me."

He stood up, and I at once followed him. We were in the Holy Land, there was no question. We passed dozens upon dozens of small groups of people, fishermen near a small town on the edge of the sea, others tending sheep or goats, or driving small flocks towards nearby settlements or walled enclosures.

Everything looked distinctly familiar. Disturbingly familiar, quite beyond déjà vu or intimations of having lived here before. Familiar as if hardwired into my brain. And I refer to everything now—even a naked man with crooked legs, hollering and raving, as he passed us, not seeing us, one hand bent on a stick of a cane.

Beneath the layers of grit that covered all, I was surrounded by forms

and styles and manners of behavior I knew intimately—from Scripture, from engraving, from embellished illustration, and from film enactment. This was—in all its stripped-down, burning-hot glory—a sacred as well as familiar terrain.

We could see people standing before caves in which they lived high on the hills. Here and there little groups sat in the shade beneath a copse, dozing, talking. A distant pulse came from the walled cities. The air was filled with sand. Sand blew into my nostrils and clung to my tips and my hair.

Memnoch had no wings. His robes were soiled and so were mine. I think we wore linen; it was light and the air passed through it. Our robes were long and unimportant. Our skin, our forms, were unchanged.

The sky was vividly blue, and the sun glared down upon me as it might on any being. The sweat felt alternately good and unbearable. And I thought, fleetingly, how at any other time I might wonder at the sun alone, the marvel of the sun denied to the Children of Night—but all this time I had not even thought of it, not once, because having seen the Light of God, the Sun had ceased to be that Light for me.

We walked up into the rocky hills, climbing steep paths, and crossing over outcroppings of rock and ragged tree, and finally there appeared below and before us a great patch of unwatered sand, burning and shifting slowly in comfortless wind.

Memnoch came to a halt at the very threshold of this desert, so to speak, the place where we would leave the firm ground, rocky and uncomfortable as it was, and pass into the soft drudgery of the sand.

I caught up with him, having fallen a little behind. He put his left arm around me, and his fingers spread out firm and large against my shoulder. I was very glad he did, because I was feeling a predictable apprehension; in fact, a dread was building in me, a premonition as bad as any I'd ever known.

"After He cast me out," Memnoch said, "I wandered." His eyes were on the desert and what seemed the barren, blazing rocky cliffs in the distance, hostile as the desert itself.

"I roamed the way you have often roamed, Lestat. Wingless, and brokenhearted, I drifted along through the cities and nations of the earth, over continents and wastes. Sometime or other I can tell you all of it, if you wish. It's of no consequence now.

“Let me say only what is of consequence, that I did not dare to make myself visible or known to Humankind but rather hid amongst them, invisible, not daring to assume flesh for fear of angering God again; and not daring to join the human struggle under any disguise, for fear of God, and fear of what evil I might bring on humans. On account of the same fears … I didn’t return to Sheol. I wanted in no way to increase the sufferings of Sheol. God alone could free those souls. What hope could I give them?

“But I could see Sheol, I could see its immensity, and I felt the pain of the souls there, and wondered at the new and intricate and ever-changing patterns of confusion created by mortals as they departed one faith or sect or creed after another for that miserable margin of gloom.

“Once a proud thought did come to me—that if I did penetrate Sheol, I might instruct the souls there so thoroughly that they themselves might transform it, create in it forms invented by hope rather than hopelessness, and some garden might be made of it in time. Certainly the elect, the millions I had taken to Heaven, they had transformed their portion of the place. But then what if I failed at this, and only added to the chaos? I didn’t dare. I didn’t dare, out of fear of God and fear of my own inability to accomplish such a dream.

“I formulated many theories in my wanderings but I did not change my mind on anything which I believed or felt or had spoken to God. In fact, I prayed to Him often, though He was utterly silent, telling Him how much I continued to believe that He had deserted His finest creation. And sometimes out of weariness I only sung His praises. Sometimes I was silent. Looking, hearing … watching.…

“Memnoch, the Watcher, the Fallen Angel.

“Little did I know my argument with Almighty God was only begun. But at a certain time, I found myself wandering back to the very valleys which I had first visited, and where the first cities of men had been built.

“This land for me was the land of beginnings, for though great peoples had sprung up in many nations, it was here that I had lain with the Daughters of Men. And here that I had learnt something in the flesh which I still held that God did not Himself know.

“Now, as I came to this place, I came into Jerusalem, which by the way is only six or seven miles west of here, where we now stand.

“And the times were immediately known to me, that the Romans

governed the land, that the Hebrews had suffered a long and terrible captivity, and that those tribes going back to the very first settlements here—who had believed in the One God—were now under the foot of the polytheists who did not take their legends with any seriousness.

"And the Tribes of Monotheists, themselves, were divided on many issues, with some Hebrews being strict Pharisees, and others Sadducees, and still others having sought to make pure communities in caves in those hills beyond.

"If there was one feature which made the times remarkable to me—that is, truly different from any other—it was the might of the Roman Empire, which stretched farther than any empire of the West which I had ever witnessed, and remained somehow in ignorance of the Great Empire of China, as if that were not of the same world.

"Something drew me to this spot, however, and I knew it. I sensed a presence here that was not as strong as a summons; but it was as if someone were crying out to me to come here, and yet would not use the full power of his voice. I must search, I must wander. Maybe this thing stalked and seduced me as I did you. I don't know.

"But I came here, and wandered Jerusalem, listening to what the tongues of men had to say.

"They spoke of the prophets and holy men of the wilderness, of arguments over the law and purification and the will of God. They spoke of Holy Books and Holy Traditions. They spoke of men going out to be 'baptized' in water so as to be 'saved' in the eyes of God.

"And they spoke of a man who had only lately gone into the wilderness after his baptism, because at the moment that he had stepped into the River Jordan and the water had been poured over him, the skies had opened above this man, and Light had been seen from God.

"Of course one could hear stories like this all over the world. It was not unusual, except that it drew me. That this was my country; and I found myself as if directed, wandering out of Jerusalem to the east, into the wasteland, my keen angelic senses telling me that I was near to the presence of something mysterious, something that partook of the sacred in a way that an angel would know upon seeing, and a man might not. My reason rejected it, yet I walked on and on, in the heat of the day, wingless and invisible into the very wastes."

Memnoch drew me with him and we walked into the sand, which was

not as deep as I had imagined, but was hot and full of little stones. We moved on into canyons and up slopes and finally came to a little clearing of sorts where rocks had been gathered, as if others were wont to come here from time to time. It was as natural as the other place we had chosen to remain for so long.

A landmark in the desert, so to speak, a monument to something, perhaps.

I waited on tenterhooks for Memnoch to begin again. My uneasiness was growing. He slowed his pace until we stood well over a stone's throw from this little gathering of rocks.

"Closer and closer I came," he said, "to those markers there that you see, and with my angelic eyes, powerful as are yours, I spied from a long way off a single human man. But my eyes told me this was no human, that on the contrary this man was filled with the fire of God.

"I didn't believe it, and yet I walked on, closer and closer, unable to stop myself, and then stopped where we are now, staring at the figure who sat on that rock before me, looking up at me here.

"It was God! There was no question. He was sheathed in flesh, dark-skinned from the sun, dark-haired, and had the dark eyes of the desert people, but it was God! My God!

"And there he sat in this fleshly body, looking at me with human eyes, and the eyes of God, and I could see the Light totally filling Him and contained within Him and concealed from the outside world by His flesh as if it were the strongest membrane betwixt Heaven and Earth.

"If there was anything more terrible than this revelation, it was that He was looking at me and that He knew me and had been waiting for me, and that all I felt for Him, as I looked at Him, was love.

"We sing over and over again the songs of love. Is that the one song intended for all Creation?

"I looked at Him in terror for His mortal parts, His sunburnt flesh, His thirst, the emptiness of His stomach and the suffering of His eyes in the heat, for the presence of Almighty God inside Him, and I felt overwhelming love.

" 'So, Memnoch,' He said in a man's tongue and with a man's voice. 'I have come.'

"I fell on my face before Him. This was instinctive. I just lay there, reaching out and touching the very tip of the latchet of His sandal. I

sighed and my body shook with the relief of loneliness, the attraction to God and the satisfaction of it, and I began a giddy weeping just to be near Him and see Him and I marveled at what this must mean.

" 'Stand up, come sit near me,' He said. 'I am a man now and I am God, but I am afraid.' His voice was indescribably moving to me, human yet filled with the wisdom of the divine. He spoke with the language and accents of Jerusalem.

" 'Oh, Lord, what can I do to ease your pain?' I said, for the pain was obvious. I stood up. 'What have you done and why?'

" 'I have done exactly what you tempted me to do, Memnoch,' He answered, and His face wore the most dreamlike and engaging smile. 'I have come into the flesh. Only I have done you one better. I was born of a mortal woman, planting the seed myself in her, and for thirty years, I have lived on this Earth as a child and as a man, and for long periods doubting—no, even forgetting and ceasing to believe altogether—that I was really God!'

" 'I see you, I know you. You are the Lord my God,' I said. I was so struck by His face; by the recognition of Him in the mask of skin that covered the bones of His skull. In a shivering instant I recovered the exact feeling of when I'd glimpsed His countenance in the light, and I saw now the same expression in this human face. I went down on my knees. 'You are my God,' I said.

" 'I know that now, Memnoch, but you understand that I allowed myself to be submerged in the flesh utterly, to forget it, so that I could know what it means, as you said, to be human, and what humans suffer, and what they fear and what they long for, and what they are capable of learning either here or above. I did what you told me to do, and I did it better than you ever did it, Memnoch, I did it as God must do it, to the very extremity!'

" 'Lord, I can scarcely bear the sight of you suffering,' I said quickly, unable to rip my eyes off Him and yet dreaming of water and food for Him. 'Let me wipe the sweat from you. Let me get you water. Let me take you to it in an angelic instant. Let me comfort you and wash you and clothe you in a finery fit for God on Earth.'

" 'No,' He said. 'In those days when I thought myself mad, when I could scarce remember that I was God, when I knew I had yielded my omniscience deliberately in order to suffer and to know limitations, you

might have persuaded me that that was the path. I might have seized upon your offer. Yes, make me a King. Let that be my way of revealing myself to them. But not now. I know Who I am and What I am, and I know What Will Happen. And you are right, Memnoch, there are souls in Sheol ready for Heaven and I myself will take them there. I have learnt what you tempted me to learn.'

" 'Lord, you're starving. You're suffering from terrible thirst. Here, turn these stones into bread by your power, that you can eat. Or let me get you food.'

" 'For once will you listen to me!' He said, smiling. 'Stop talking of food and drink. Who is human here? I am! You impossible adversary, you argumentative devil! Hush for now and listen. I am in the flesh. Have pity at least and let me speak my piece.' He laughed at me, His face full of kindness and sympathy.

" 'Here, come into the flesh, too, with me,' He said. 'Be my brother and sit beside me, Son of God and Son of God, and let us talk.'

"I did as He said at once, creating a body thoughtlessly that matched what you see now, as that was as natural to me as thinking was natural, and I gave myself a similar robe, and I realized that I was sitting on that rock there by His side. I was bigger than He was, and had not thought to reduce the scale of my limbs, and now I did it hastily until we were men of equal proportion, more or less. I was fully angelic in my form, and not hungry or thirsty or tired.

" 'How long have you been in this wilderness?' I asked. 'The people in Jerusalem say almost forty days.'

"He nodded. 'That's about the right number,' He answered me. 'And it's time now for me to begin my ministry, which will last three years. I will teach the great lessons that must be learnt for admission to Heaven —awareness of Creation and the Understanding of its deliberate unfolding; an appreciation of its beauty and laws which makes possible an acceptance of suffering and seeming injustice and all forms of pain; I will promise a final glory to those who can attain understanding; to those who can surrender their souls to the understanding of God and what He has done. I will give that to Men and Women, which is precisely, I think, what you wanted me to do.'

"I didn't dare to answer him.

" 'Love, Memnoch, I have learnt to love them as you told me I would. I

have learnt to love and cherish as men and women do, and I have lain with women and I have known that ecstasy, that spark of jubilation of which you spoke so eloquently when I could not conceive of wanting such a tiny thing.

“ ‘I will talk more of love than any other subject. I will say things that men and women can twist and misunderstand. But love, that shall be the message. You convinced me and I have convinced myself that that is what elevates Human above animal, though animal is what Humankind is.'

“ ‘Do you mean to leave them with specific guidance as to how to love? As to how to stop war and come together in one form of worship —'

“ ‘No, not at all. That would be an absurd intervention and would undo the entire grand scheme which I have put into motion. It would stop the dynamics of the unfolding of the universe.

“ ‘Memnoch, to me we human beings are all still part of Nature, as I said, only Humans are better than animals. It's a matter of degrees. Yes, humans cry out against suffering and they are conscious of it when they suffer, but in a sense they behave exactly like the lower animals, in that suffering improves them and drives them towards evolutionary advance. They are quick-witted enough to see its value, where the animals only learn to avoid suffering by instinct. Humans can actually be improved within one lifetime by suffering. But they are part of Nature still. The world will unfold as it always has, full of surprises. Some of those surprises will be horrid, and others wondrous, and some beautiful. But what is known for certain is that the world will continue to grow and Creation will continue to unfold.'

“ ‘Yes, Lord,' I said, ‘but surely suffering is an evil thing.'

“ ‘What did I teach you, Memnoch, when you first came to me saying that decay was wrong, that death was wrong? Don't you understand the magnificence in human suffering?'

“ ‘No,' I said. ‘I see the ruin of hope and love and family; the destruction of peace of mind; I see pain beyond endurance; I see man buckle under this, and fall into bitterness and hate.'

“ ‘You haven't looked deep enough, Memnoch. You are only an angel. You refuse to understand Nature, and that has been your way since the start.

“ ‘I will bring my light into Nature, through the flesh for three years. I will teach the wisest things I can know and say in this flesh-and-blood body and brain; and then I will die.’

“ ‘Die? Why do that? I mean, what do you mean, die? Your soul will leave—’ I broke off, uncertain.

“He smiled.

“ ‘You do have a soul, don’t you, Lord? I mean, you are my God inside this Son of Man, and the light fills every particle of you, but you … you don’t have a soul, do you? You don’t have a human soul!’

“ ‘Memnoch, these distinctions don’t matter. I am God Incarnate. How could I have a human soul? What is important is that I will remain in this body as it is tortured and slain; and my death will be evidence of my Love for those whom I have created and allowed to suffer so much. I will share their pain and know their pain.’

“ ‘Please, Lord, forgive me, but there seems to be something wrong with this whole idea.’

“Again, he seemed amused. His dark eyes were filled with a sympathetic and silent laughter. ‘Wrong? What is wrong, Memnoch, that I shall take the form of the Dying God of the Wood, whom men and women have imagined and dreamed of and sung of since time immemorial, a dying god who symbolizes the very cycle of nature itself in which all that is born must die.

“ ‘I shall die, and I shall rise from the Dead, as that god has risen in every myth of the eternal return of the spring after winter in nations all over the world. I shall be the god destroyed and the god uplifted, only here it will happen literally in Jerusalem, not in ceremony, or with human substitutes. The Son of God himself shall fulfill the myths. I have chosen to sanctify those legends with my literal death.

“ ‘I shall walk out of the Tomb. My resurrection will confirm the eternal return of the spring after winter. It will confirm that in Nature all things that have evolved have their place.

“ ‘But Memnoch, it will be for my death that I am remembered. My death. It’s going to be terrible. It won’t be for my resurrection they’ll remember me, you can be sure of it, for that is something many simply will never see or believe. But my death, my death will spring full blown into a confirmation of mythology, underscored by all the myths which have preceded it, and my death will be a sacrifice *by* God to know His

own Creation. Just what you told me to do.'

" 'No, no, wait, Lord, there's something wrong with this!'

" 'You always forget yourself and to whom you are speaking,' He said kindly, the mixture of human and divine continuing to obsess me as I looked at Him, falling into His beauty and staggered by His divinity, and overcome again and again by my own sure belief that this was all wrong.

" 'Memnoch, I've just told you what no one knows but Me,' He said. 'Don't speak to me as if I can be wrong. Don't waste these moments with the Son of God! Can't you learn from me in the flesh as you learn from humans in flesh? Have I nothing to teach you, my beloved Archangel? Why do you sit here questioning me? What could possibly be the meaning of your word, *wrong?*'

" 'I don't know, Lord, I don't know how to answer. I can't find all the words. I just know this is not going to work. First of all, who will do this torturing and killing?'

" 'The people of Jerusalem,' He said. 'I will succeed in offending everyone, the traditional Hebrews, the callous Romans, everyone will be offended by the blinding message of pure love and what love demands of humans. I will show contempt for the ways of others, for their rituals and their laws. And into the machinery of their justice I will fall.

" 'I will be condemned on charges of treason when I speak of my Divinity, that I am the Son of God, God Incarnate … and for my very message I will be tortured with such embellishment that it will never be forgotten; my death, by crucifixion, is going to be the same.'

" 'By crucifixion? Lord, have you seen men die in this way? Do you know how they suffer? They are nailed to the wood and they suffocate, hanging as they do, weakening, unable to lift their own weight on their nailed feet, and finally strangling in blood and in pain?'

" 'Of course I've seen it. It's a common form of execution. It's filthy and it's very human.'

" 'Oh, no, no,' I cried out. 'This can't be. You don't mean to climax your teachings with such spectacular failure and execution, with such cruelty and death itself!'

" 'This is not failure,' he said. 'Memnoch, I shall be a martyr to what I teach! Blood offerings of the innocent lamb to the good God have been made since Humans began! They instinctively render to God what is of great value to them to show their love. Who knows better than you who

spied on their altars and listened to their prayers and insisted that I listen! Sacrifice and love are connected in them.'

" 'Lord, they sacrifice out of fear! It has nothing to do with love of God, does it? All the sacrifices? The children sacrificed to Baal, and a hundred other hideous rituals the world over. They do it out of fear! Why would love demand sacrifice?'

"I had clamped my hands over my mouth. I couldn't reason further. I was horrified. I could not sort out the thread of my horror from the overall stifling weave. Then I spoke, thinking aloud:

" 'It's all wrong, Lord. That God should be so degraded in human form, that in itself is unspeakable; but that men should be allowed to do this to God … But will they know what they're doing, that you are God? I mean, they couldn't … Lord, it will have to be done in confusion and misunderstanding. That spells chaos, Lord! Darkness!'

" 'Naturally,' He said. 'Who in his right mind would crucify the Son of God?'

" 'Then what does it mean?'

" 'Memnoch, it means I subjected myself to the human for the love of those whom I have made. I am in the flesh, Memnoch. I have been in it for thirty years. Would you explain yourself to me?'

" 'To die like that, it's wrong, Lord. It's a filthy killing, Lord, it's a bloody horrible exemplum to lay before the human race! And you say yourself they will remember you for this? More than for your rising from the death, from the light of God exploding out of your human body and making this suffering fall away?'

" 'The Light won't burst out of this body,' He said. 'This body shall die. I shall know death. I shall pass into Sheol and there for three days remain with those who are dead, and then I shall return to this body and raise it from the Dead. And yes, it will be my Death they will remember, for how can I Rise if I do not Die?'

" 'Just don't do either one,' I pleaded. 'Really, I'm begging you. Don't make yourself this sacrifice. Don't dip down into their most misguided blood rituals. Lord, have you ever drawn near to the stench of their sacrificial altars? Yes, I used to say to you, listen to their prayers, but I never meant that you would dip down from your great height to smell the stink of the blood and the dead animal, or to see the dumb fear in its eyes as its throat is slit! Have you seen the babies heaved into the fiery

God Baal?'

" 'Memnoch, this is the way to God which man himself has evolved. All over the world the myths sing the same song.'

" 'Yes, but that's because you never interfered to stop it, you let it happen, you let this humankind evolve and they looked back in horror on their animal ancestors, they beheld their mortality, and they seek to propitiate a god who has abandoned them to all this. Lord, they look for meaning, but they find none in this. None.'

"He looked at me as if I were mad, truly. He stared at me in silence. 'You disappoint me,' He said softly and gently. 'You wound me, Memnoch, you wound my human heart.' He reached out and put His roughened hands against my face, hands of a man who had worked in this world, labored as I had never labored in my brief visit.

"I shut my eyes. I didn't speak. But something had come to me! A revelation, an insight, a sudden grasping of everything here that was in error, but could I reason it out? Could I speak?

"I opened my eyes again, letting him hold me, feeling the callouses on his fingers, looking into his gaunt face. How he had starved himself; how he had suffered in this desert, and how he had labored these thirty years! Oh, no, this was wrong!

" 'What, my Archangel, what is wrong!' He demanded of me with infinite patience and human consternation.

" 'Lord, they chose these rituals which involve suffering because they cannot avoid suffering in the Natural World. The natural world is what must be overcome! Why must anyone suffer what humans suffer? Lord, their souls come to Sheol distorted, twisted by pain, black as cinders from the heat of loss and misery and violence which they have witnessed. Suffering is evil in this world. Suffering is decay and death. It's terrible. Lord, You can't believe that to suffer like this would do any good to anyone. This suffering, this unspeakable capacity to bleed and to know pain and to know annihilation, is what has to be overcome in this world if anyone is to reach God!'

"He didn't answer. He lowered his hands.

" 'My angel,' He said, 'you draw from me even more affection now that I have a human heart. How simple you are! How alien you are to the vast Material Creation.'

" 'But it was I who urged you to come down! How am I alien? I am the

Watcher! I see what other angels don't dare to look at for fear they'll weep, and it will make you angry with them.'

" 'Memnoch, you simply don't know the flesh. The concept is too complex for you. What do you think taught your souls in Sheol their perfection? Was it not suffering? Yes, they enter perhaps twisted and burnt if they have failed to see beyond suffering on Earth, and some may despair and disappear. But in Sheol, over the centuries of suffering and longing, others are purged and purified.

" 'Memnoch, Life and Death are part of the cycle, and suffering is its by-product. And the human capacity to know it exempts no one! Memnoch, that the illuminated souls you brought from Sheol knew it, that they had learnt to accept its beauty, is what made them worthy to come through the heavenly gates!'

" 'No, Lord, that's not true!' I said. 'You've gotten it wrong. Utterly. Oh, I see what's happened.'

" 'You do? What are you trying to say to me? That I the Lord God, having spent thirty years in this human body, have not struck the truth?'

" 'But that's just it! You've known all along you were God. You mentioned times when you thought you were mad or almost forgot, but those were brief! Too brief! And now as you plot your death, you know Who you are and You won't forget it, will you?'

" 'No, I won't. I must be the Son of God Incarnate to fulfill my ministry, to work my miracles, of course. That's the whole point.'

" 'Then, Lord, you don't know what it means to be flesh!'

" 'How dare you assume that you do, Memnoch.'

" 'When you left me in that fleshly body, when you cast me down for the Daughters of Men to heal and care for, in the early centuries of this very land, I had no promise you would take me back to Heaven. Lord, you're not playing fair in this experiment. You've known all along you're going back, you're going back to be God!'

" 'And who better than I can understand what this flesh feels!' He demanded.

" 'Somebody who doesn't fully rest assured that He is the immortal Creator of the Universe,' I said. 'Any mortal man hanging on a cross now on Golgotha outside Jerusalem would know better than you!'

"His eyes grew wide as He stared at me. But He didn't challenge me. His silence unnerved me. And once again, the power of His expression,

the radiance of God in man dazzled me, and drew upon the angel in me to simply shut up and fall at His feet. But I wouldn't do it!

" 'Lord, even when I went to Sheol,' I said, 'I didn't know whether or not I'd ever come back to Heaven. Don't you see? I don't claim to have your understanding of anything. We wouldn't be talking here if I did. But I didn't have any promise I would be allowed back into Heaven, don't you see? So the suffering and the darkness spoke to me and taught me, because I took the risk that I might never overcome it. Don't you see?'

"He considered this a long time and then He shook His head sadly. 'Memnoch, you are the one who has failed to understand. When is Humankind closest to God than when they suffer for the love of another, when they die so that another might live, when they plunge towards certain death for the protection of those they leave behind or those truths about Life which Creation has taught them?'

" 'But the world doesn't need all that, Lord! No, no, no. It doesn't need the blood, the suffering, the war. That wasn't what taught Humans to love! Animals already did all that bloody, horrible catastrophe to one another. What taught Humans was the warmth and affection of another, the love for a child, the love in a mate's arms, the capacity to understand another's suffering and want to protect that other, to rise above savagery into the formation of family and clan and tribe that would mean peace and security for all!'

"There came a long silence. And then very tenderly He laughed. 'Memnoch, my angel. What you learnt of life you learnt in bed.'

"I didn't answer for a moment. The comment was charged with contempt and humour, of course. Then I spoke:

" 'That's true, Lord. And suffering is so terrible for humans, injustice is so terrible for the balance of their minds that it can destroy those lessons learnt in bed, magnificent as they are!'

" 'Oh, but when love is reached through suffering, Memnoch, it has a power it can never gain through innocence.'

" 'Why do you say that? I don't believe it! I don't think you grasp it. Lord, listen to me. There's one chance for this to be proven my way. One chance.'

" 'If you think for one moment you will interfere with my ministry and my sacrifice, if you think you can turn the tide of the vast forces already

moving towards this event, then you are no more an angel, but a demon!' He said.

" 'I don't ask that,' I said. 'Go through with it. Minister, outrage them; be arrested, tried, and executed on the cross, yes, do all of it. But do it as a man!'

" 'I intend to.'

" 'No, you'll know the whole time you're God. I'm saying Forget that you are God! Bury your divinity in the flesh the way it's been buried intermittently. Bury it, Lord, leaving yourself only your faith and your belief in Heaven, as if it had come to you through Revelation immense and undeniable.

" 'But bury in this desert the true certainty that you are God. Then, you'll suffer it all as a man suffers it. Then you'll know what this suffering is at its heart. Then will all the glory be stripped from agony! And you will see what men see when flesh is ripped, and torn, and blood flows, and it is your own. It's filth!'

" 'Memnoch, men die on Golgotha every day. What is important is that the Son of God knowingly dies on Golgotha in the body of a man.'

" 'Oh, no, no!' I cried out. 'This is disaster.'

"He seemed so sad suddenly that I thought he might weep for me. His lips were parched and cracked from the desert. His hands were so thin I could see the veins. He was not even a great specimen of a man, only an ordinary one, worn down by years of toil.

" 'Look at you,' I said, 'starving, thirsting, suffering, tired, lost in all the darknesses of life, the true spontaneous evils of nature, and dreaming of glory when you exit this body! What kind of lesson can such suffering be? And who will you leave with the guilt for your murder? What will become of all those mere mortals who denied you? No, please, Lord, listen to me. If you won't leave your Divinity, then don't do it. Change this plan.

" 'Don't die. Above all, don't be murdered! Don't hang from a tree like the God of the Wood in the Greek stories. Come with me into Jerusalem; and know women and wine and singing and dancing and the birth of little ones, and all the joy the human heart can contain and express!

" 'Lord, there are times when the hardest men hold infants in their arms, their own children, and the happiness and satisfaction of those moments is so sublime that there is no horror on earth that can destroy

the peace they feel! That is the human capacity for love and understanding! When one can achieve harmony in spite of everything, and men and women do this, Lord. They do. Come, dance with your people. Sing with them. Feast with them. Throw your arms around the women and the men and know them in the flesh!'

" 'I feel pity for you, Memnoch,' He said. 'I pity you as I pity the mortals who will kill me, and those who will inevitably misunderstand my laws. But I dream of those who will be touched to the core by my suffering, and who will never forget it, and will know what love I felt for mortals that I would let myself die among them before opening the gates of Sheol. I pity you. Feeling as you do, your guilt will become too terrible to bear.'

" 'My guilt? What guilt?'

" 'You're the cause of all this, Memnoch. You're the one who said I should come down in the flesh. You're the one who urged me on to do it, who challenged me, and now you fail to see the miracle of my sacrifice.

" 'And when you do see it, when you do see souls perfected by suffering ascending to Heaven, what will you think then of your paltry little discoveries made in the arms of the Daughters of Men? What will you think? Don't you see? I will redeem suffering, Memnoch! I will give it its greatest and fullest potential within the cycle! I will bring it to fruition. I will allow it to sing its own magnificent song!'

" 'No, no, no!' I stood up and railed at Him. 'Lord, just do as I ask. Go through with it, yes, if you must, found this miracle upon a murder, do it that way, if that is your will, but bury your certainty of Divinity, so that you really, really do die, Lord, so that when they drive the nails through your hands and feet you know what a man feels and no more, and when you enter the gloom of Sheol yours is a human soul! Please, Lord, please, I'm begging you. For all humanity, I'm begging you. I can't see the future but I have never been more frightened of it than I am now.' "

Memnoch broke off.

We stood alone in the sands, Memnoch looking into the distance and me beside him, shaken.

"He didn't do it, did he?" I asked. "Memnoch, God died knowing He was God. He died and rose knowing the whole time. The world argues over it and debates and wonders, but He knew. When they drove the nails, He knew He was God."

“Yes,” said Memnoch. “He was man, but that man was never without the power of God.”

Suddenly I was distracted.

Memnoch seemed too shaken to say any more just yet.

Something changed in the landscape. I looked towards the circle of stones, and realized a figure was sitting there, the figure of a dark-skinned, dark-eyed man, emaciated and covered with the sand of the desert, and he was looking at us. And without one fiber of his flesh being other than human, He was obviously God.

I was petrified.

I had lost the map. I didn’t know the way back or the way forward, or what lay to left or to right.

I was petrified, yet I wasn’t frightened, and this man, this dark-eyed one, was merely looking at us with the softest sympathy in his face, and the same unbounded acceptance of us that I had seen in Him in Heaven when He’d turned and taken me by the arms.

The Son of God.

“Come here, Lestat,” he called now softly, over the desert wind, in a human voice. “Come closer.”

I looked at Memnoch. Memnoch was looking at him, too, now and he gave a bitter smile. “Lestat, it is always a good idea, no matter how He is behaving, to do exactly what He says.”

Blasphemy. I turned, shivering.

I went directly towards the figure, conscious of each shuffling step through the boiling sand, the dark thin form corning ever more clear to me, a tired and suffering man. I sank down on my knees in front of Him, looking up into His face.

“The Living Lord,” I whispered.

“I want you to come into Jerusalem,” He said. He reached out and brushed back my hair, and the hand was as Memnoch described it, dry, calloused, darkened from the sun as his brow was darkened. But the voice hovered somewhere between natural and sublime, it struck a timbre beyond the angelic. It was the voice that had spoken to me in Heaven, only confined to human sounds.

I couldn’t answer. I couldn’t do anything. I knew that I would do nothing until I was told. Memnoch stood off, arms folded, watching. And I knelt, looking into the eyes of God Incarnate and I knelt before Him

completely alone.

"Come into Jerusalem," He said. "It won't take you long, no more perhaps than a few moments, but come into Jerusalem with Memnoch, on the day of my death, and glimpse my Passion—see me crowned with thorns and carrying my cross. Do this for Me before you make your decision whether or not to serve Memnoch or the Lord God."

Every part of me knew I couldn't do it. I couldn't stand it! I couldn't watch it. I couldn't. I was paralyzed. Disobedience, blasphemy, those weren't the issues. I couldn't endure the thought of it! I stared at Him, at His sunburnt face, at His soft and loving eyes, at the sand clinging to the edge of His cheek. His dark hair was neglected, wind-torn, swept back from His face.

No! I can't do it! I can't bear it!

"Oh, yes, you can," He said reassuringly. "Lestat, my brave bringer of death to so many. Would you really return to Earth without this glimpse of what I offer? Would you really give up this chance to glimpse me crowned with thorns? When have you ever passed up a challenge, and think what I am offering to you now. No, you wouldn't back off from it, even if Memnoch urged you to do it."

I knew He was right. Yet, I knew I couldn't stand it. I could not go into Jerusalem and see the actual Christ carrying His Cross. I couldn't. I couldn't. I didn't have the strength, I would—I was silent. A riot of thought within me condemned me to utter confusion and continued paralysis. "Can I look at this?" I said. I closed my eyes! Then I opened them and looked at Him again and at Memnoch, who had come near and looked down with a near, cold expression at me, cold as his face could be, which wasn't cold at all so much as serene.

"Memnoch," said God Incarnate. "Bring him, show him the way, let him but glimpse it. You be his guide, and then go on with your examination and your appeal."

He looked at me. He smiled. How frail a vessel He seemed for His own magnificence. A man with lines around his eyes from the hot sun, with worn teeth, a man.

"Remember, Lestat," God said to me. "This is only the world. And you know the world. Sheol awaits. You have seen the World and Heaven but you have not seen Hell."

Eighteen

We were in the city, a city of deep brown and faded yellow stones and clay. Three years had passed. It had to be so. All I knew was that we were in a huge crowd of people, robed and veiled and ragged—that I could smell the human sweat, and the heat of stagnant breath, and stench of human waste and camel dung overpoweringly, and that though no one took notice of us, I could feel the press around us, I could feel unwashed men shoving against me, and brushing in front of me, and the sand salted the air here within the walls of the city, within these narrow streets, just as it had salted the air of the desert.

People clustered in small rounded doorways, peeped from windows above. Soot mingled with the everlasting sand. Women drawing their veils around their faces cleaved to one another, pushing past us. Up ahead I could hear screams and shouting. Suddenly, I realized that the crowd was pressed so tight around us, I couldn't move. Desperately I looked for Memnoch.

He was right beside me, watching all calmly, neither of us shining with any preternatural gleam among these drab and soiled humans, these everyday creatures of this early and harsh time.

"I don't want to do it!" I said, digging in my heels, shoved along by the crowd, yet resisting. "I don't think I can do it! I can't look, Memnoch, no, this is not required of me. No … I don't want to go any farther. Memnoch, let me go!"

"Quiet," he said dourly. "We are almost to the place where He will pass."

With his left arm around me, clutching me protectively, he divided the crowd in front of us, effortlessly it seemed, until we emerged in the front line of those who waited at a broader thoroughfare as the procession advanced. The shouts were deafening. Roman soldiers moved past us, the garments soiled with grit, faces tired, bored even, dreary. Across the way, on the other side of the procession, a beautiful woman, her hair covered by a long white veil, threw up her hands and screamed.

She was looking at the Son of God. He had come into view. I saw the

big crossbar of the crucifix first, on his shoulders sticking out on either side of Him, and then His hands, bound to the beam, dangling from the ropes, already dripping with blood. His head was bowed; the brown hair was matted and dirty and covered over with the crude black crown of spiking thorns; spectators were pressed to walls on either side of Him, some taunting Him, others silent.

There was barely room for Him to walk with his burden, His robes torn, His knees bruised and bleeding, but walk He did. The stench of urine was overpowering from the nearby walls.

He trudged towards us, face hidden, then fell, one knee going down into the stones of the street. Behind Him I saw others carrying the long post of the cross which would be planted in the ground.

At once the soldiers beside Him pulled Him up. They steadied the crossbar on his shoulders. His face was visible, not three feet from where we stood, and He looked at us both. Sunburnt, cheeks hollow, mouth open and shuddering, dark eyes wide and fixed on us, He looked, without expression, without appeal. The blood poured down from the black thorns sticking into His forehead; it ran in tiny streams into His eyelids and down His cheeks. His chest was naked under the open rag of robe which He wore, and it was covered with the ripe, red stripes of the lash!

"My God!" Again I had lost all volition; Memnoch held me upright as we both stared into God's face. And the crowd, the crowd went on screaming and cursing, and shouting and pushing; little children peeped through; women wailed. Others laughed; a great horrid stinking multitude beneath the relentless sun that sent its rays amongst the close urine-stained walls!

Closer He came! Did He know us? He shuddered in His agony, the blood ran down his face into his shivering lips. He gave a gasp as if He would strangle, and I saw that the robe over His shoulders, beneath the rough wood of the beam, was soaked with blood from the scourging. He could not endure another instant, and yet they pushed Him, and He stood directly before us, eyes down, face wet with sweat and the blood swimming in it, and then slowly He turned and looked at me.

I was weeping uncontrollably. What did I witness? A brutality unspeakable in any time and place, but the legends and prayers of my childhood fired with grotesque vitality; I could smell the blood. I could

smell it. The vampire in me smelled it. I could hear my sobs, I threw out my arms. “My God!”

Silence fell over the whole world. People shouted and pushed, but not in the realm in which we stood. He stood there staring at me and at Memnoch, stepped out of time and holding the moment in its fullness, in its agony, as He looked at us both.

“Lestat,” He said, His voice so feeble and torn I could scarce hear it. “You want to taste it, don’t you?”

“Lord, what are you saying?” I cried, my words so full of tears I could scarce control them.

“The blood. Taste it. Taste the Blood of Christ.” And a terrible smile of resignation came over him, almost a grimace, his body convulsing beneath the immense beam, and the blood trickling freshly as if with each breath He took the thorns tore deeper into his face and the stripes on His chest began to swell into seams through which the blood leaked.

“No, my God!” I cried out, and I reached for Him and felt His fragile arms, bound to the huge crossbar, His aching, thin arms beneath the torn sleeves, and the blood blazed in front of me.

“The Blood of God, Lestat,” He whispered. “Think of all the human blood that has flowed into your lips. Is my blood not worthy? Are you afraid?”

Sobbing, I cupped His neck with both hands, my knuckles against the crossbar, and I kissed His throat, and then my mouth opened without will or struggle and my teeth pierced the flesh. I heard Him moan, a long echoing moan that seemed to rise up and fill the world with its sound, and the blood flooded into my mouth.

The cross, the nails driven through His wrists, not His hands, His body twisting and turning as if in the last moments, He would escape, and His head bashed down on the crossbar, so that the thorns went into His scalp, and then the nails through His feet, and His eyes rolling, the pound and the pound of the hammer, and then the Light, the immense Light rising as it had risen over the balustrade of Heaven, and filling the world, and obliterating even this warm, solid, luscious glut of blood that sank into me. The Light, the light itself and the being within it, *In His Image!* The light receded, swift, soundless, and leaving behind a long tunnel or path, and I knew the path was straight from Earth to the Light.

Pain! The Light was disappearing. The separation was unspeakable! A

swift blow struck my entire body with full force.

I was flung back into the crowd. Sand stung my eyes. The screams rose all around me. The blood was on my tongue. It flowed from my lips. Time pressed in with suffocating heat. And He was before us, staring at us, and tears spilled down out of His eyes, through the blood that already covered Him.

"My God, my God, my God!" I cried, swallowing the last of the blood; I sobbed.

The woman across the way blazed into visibility. Suddenly her voice rose above the babble and the cursing, the horrid cacophony of coarse and feelingless humans everywhere struggling to witness.

"My God!" she screamed, and her voice was like a trumpet. She stepped into his path.

She stood before Him and drew the fine white veil from her hair, and put it up with both hands before His face.

"Lord, God, this is Veronica," she cried. "Remember Veronica. Twelve years I suffered a flow of blood, and when I touched the hem of your garment, I was healed."

"Unclean, filth!" came the cries.

"Lawbreaker, blasphemer!"

"Son of God, you dare!"

"Unclean, unclean, unclean!"

The cries grew frantic. People reached out for her, yet seemed loath to touch her. Pebbles and stones rained in the air towards her. The soldiers were undecided, baffled, and belligerent.

But God Incarnate, shoulders bent under the beam, only looked at her, and then He said, "Yes, Veronica, gently, your veil, my beloved, your veil."

The white cloth, virgin and fine, she spread over His face, to blot the blood, the sweat, to soothe, to comfort, His profile clear beneath its whiteness for an instant, and then, as she meant to wipe gently, the soldiers drew her back and she stood, holding up the veil for all to see in both hands.

His Face was on it!

"Memnoch, look!" I cried. "Look at the veil of Veronica!"

The face had been transferred, flawlessly and perfectly, sealed into the cloth as no painter could have rendered it, as if the veil had taken the

perfect print of Christ's countenance like a modern camera, only even more vivid, as if a thin layer of flesh had made the flesh in the picture, and blood had made the blood, and the eyes had blazed into the cloth their duplicates, and the lips had left their incarnate imprint as well.

Everyone nearest it saw the likeness. People shoved and pushed against us to see it. Screams rose.

The hand of Christ slipped loose from the rope that bound it to the crossbar, and reached out and took the veil from her, and she fell on her knees crying, her hands to her face. The soldiers were stupefied, confused, shoving at the crowd with their elbows, snarling at those who pressed in.

Christ turned and handed the veil to me.

"Take it, keep it! Hide it, take it with you!" He whispered.

I grasped the cloth, terrified that I might damage or smear the image. Hands reached for it. I closed it tight against my chest.

"He's got the veil," someone shouted. I was shoved backwards.

"Get the veil!" An arm struggled to snatch it from me.

Those who lunged towards us were blocked suddenly by those who came from behind to see the spectacle and shoved us thoughtlessly out of their path. We were pushed backwards by the sheer swell, tumbling through the filthy ragged bodies, through the din and the shouts and the curses.

All sight of the procession was gone; the cries of "the veil" were hopelessly distant.

I folded it, tight, and turned and ran.

I didn't know where Memnoch was; I didn't know where I was going. I ran down the narrow street and through another and another and another, people streaming by me, indifferent to me, on the way to the crucifixion, or simply trudging their accustomed path.

My chest burnt from my running, my feet were bruised and torn, I tasted His blood again and saw the Light in a blinding flash. Unable to see, I clutched the cloth. I lifted it and shoved it inside my robe and clutched it tight there. No one would get it. No one.

A terrible wailing came from my lips. I looked upwards. The sky shifted; the blue sky over Jerusalem, the sand-filled air shifted; the whirlwind had mercifully surrounded me, and the Blood of Christ sank into my chest and my heart, circling my heart, the Light filling my eyes,

both my hands pressed tight to the folded veil.

The whirlwind carried me in silence and stillness. With all my will I forced myself to look down, to reach inside my robe, which was not my robe now, but my coat and my shirt—the suit I'd worn in the snows of New York, and under the cloth of my vest, next to my shirt, I felt the folded veil! It seemed the wind would tear off my clothes! It would rip the hair from my head. But I clutched tight to the folded cloth that lay safe against my heart.

Smoke rose from the earth. Cries and screams again. Were they more terrible than the cries surrounding Christ on the road to Calvary?

With a hard, shattering blow, I struck a wall and a floor. Horses went by, the hooves barely missing my head, sparks flying from the stones. A woman lay bleeding and dying before me, her neck obviously broken, blood pouring out of her nose and ears. People fled in all directions. Again the smell of excrement mixed with blood.

It was a city at war, the soldiers looting and dragging the innocents from out of archways, screams echoing as if off endless ceilings, the flames coming so close they singed my hair.

"The veil, the veil!" I said, and felt it with my hand, secure, still tucked between my vest and shirt. A soldier's foot came up and kicked the side of my face hard. And I went sprawling on the stones.

I looked up. I wasn't in a street at all. I was in a huge domed church, with gallery upon gallery of Roman arches and columns. All around me, against the glitter of gold mosaics, men and women were being cut down. Horses were trampling them. The body of a child struck the wall above me, the skull crushed and the tiny limbs dropping like debris at my feet. Horsemen slashed at those fleeing, with broadswords hacking through shoulders and arms. A violent explosion of flames made it as light as midday. Through the portals men and women fled. But the soldiers went after them. Blood soaked the ground. Blood soaked the world.

All around and high above, the golden mosaics blazed with faces which seemed now transfixed in horror as they beheld this slaughter. Saints and saints and saints. Flames rose and danced. Piles of books were burning! Icons were smashed into pieces, and statuary lay in heaps, smoldering and blackened, the gold gleaming as it was eaten by the flames.

“Where are we!” I cried out.

Memnoch’s voice was right beside me. He was sitting, collected, against the stone wall.

“Hagia Sophia, my friend,” he said. “It’s nothing, really. It’s only the Fourth Crusade.”

I reached out with my left hand for him, unwilling to let go of the veil with my right.

“What you see is the Roman Christians slaughtering the Greek Christians. That’s all there is to it. Egypt and the Holy Land have for the moment been forgotten. The Venetians have been given three days to loot the city. It was a political decision. Of course they were all here to win back the Holy Land, where you and I have lately been, but the battle wasn’t in the cards, and so the authorities have let the troops loose on the town. Christian slaughters Christian. Roman against Greek. Do you want to walk outside? Would you like to see more of it? Books by the millions are being lost now forever. Manuscripts in Greek and Syriac and Ethiopian and Latin. Books of God and books of men. Do you want to walk among the convents where the nuns are being dragged out of their cells by fellow Christians and raped? Constantinople is being looted. It’s nothing, believe me, nothing at all.”

I lay against the ground, crying, trying to close my eyes and not see, but unable not to see—flinching at the clang of the horses’ hooves so perilously close, choking on the reek of the blood of the dead baby who lay against my leg heavy and limp like something wet from the sea. I cried and cried. Near me lay the body of a man with his head half severed from his neck, the blood pooling on the stones. Another figure tumbled over him, knee twisted, bloody hand grasping for anything that would give him purchase, and finding only the naked pink child’s body which he threw aside. Its little head was now nearly broken off.

“The veil,” I whispered.

“Oh, yes, the precious veil,” he said. “Would you like a change of scenery? We can move on. We can go to Madrid and treat ourselves to an auto-da-fé, do you know what that is, when they torture and burn alive the Jews who won’t convert to Christ? Perhaps we should go back to France and see the Cathars being slaughtered in the Languedoc? You must have heard those legends when you were growing up. The heresy was wiped out, you know, the whole heresy. Very successful mission on

the part of the Dominican Fathers, who will then start on the witches, naturally. There are so many choices. Suppose we go to Germany and see the martyrdom of the Anabaptists. Or to England to watch Queen Mary burn those who had turned against the Pope during the reign of her father, Henry. I'll tell you an extraordinary scene that I have often revisited. Strasbourg, 1349. Two thousand Jews will be burned there in February of that year, blamed for the Black Death. Things like that will happen all over Europe.…"

"I know the history," I cried, trying to catch my breath. "I know!"

"Yes, but seeing it is a little different, isn't it? As I said, this is small potatoes. All this will do is divide Greek and Roman Catholics forever.

"And as Constantinople weakens, then the new People of the Book, the Moslems, will pour past the weakened defenses into Europe. Do you want to see one of those battles? We can go directly to the twentieth century if you like. We can go to Bosnia or Herzegovina, where Moslems and Christians are fighting now. Those countries, Bosnia and Herzegovina, are names on the lips of people today in the streets of New York.

"And while we are considering all the People of the Book—Moslems, Jews, Christians—why not go to southern Iraq and listen to the cry of the starving Kurds whose marshes have been drained and whose people are being exterminated? If you want, we could just concentrate on the sack of holy places—mosques, cathedrals, churches. We could use that method to travel right up to the present time.

"Mind you, not one suggestion I've made has involved people who don't believe in God or Christ. People of the Book, that's what we're talking about, the Book which starts with the One God and keeps changing and growing.

"And today and tonight, documents of inestimable value go up in flames. It is the unfolding of Creation; it is Evolution; it is sanctified suffering on somebody's part surely, because all these people you see here worship the same God."

I made no answer.

Mercifully his voice stopped, but the battle didn't. There was an explosion. The flames roared so high that I could see the saints on the very dome. In one flash the entire magnificent scope of the basilica blazed around me—its great oval, its rows upon rows of columns, the

great half-arches supporting the dome above. The light dimmed, exploded again, as cries rang out with renewed vigor.

Then I closed my eyes and lay still, ignoring the kicks and the feet that even ran over me, crushing down on my back for a moment as they moved on. I had the veil and I was lying there, still.

"Can hell be worse than this?" I asked. My voice was small and I didn't think he could hear me over the noise of battle.

"I actually don't know," he said, in the same intimate tone as if whatever bound us together carried our messages between each other effortlessly.

"Is it Sheol?" I asked. "Can souls get out?"

He didn't answer.

"Do you think I would wage this battle with Him on any terms if souls couldn't?" he asked, as if the very idea of an eternal hell offended him.

"Get me out of here, please," I whispered. My cheek was resting on the stone floor. The stench of the manure of the horses was mingled with urine and blood. But the cries were the worst. The cries and the incessant clatter of metal!

"Memnoch, get me out of here! Tell me what this battle is about between you and Him! Tell me the rules!"

I struggled to sit up, drawing my legs in, wiping at my eyes with my left hand, the right still clutching the veil. I began to choke on the smoke. My eyes burned.

"Tell me, what did you mean when you said you needed me, that you were winning the battle? What *is* the battle between you and Him! What do you want me to do? How are you his adversary! What in the name of God am I supposed to do!"

I looked up. He sat relaxed, one knee up, arms folded, face clear one moment in a flash of flame and pale the next. He was soiled all over, and seemed rather limp and in a strange misery of ease. His expression was neither bitter nor sarcastic, only thoughtful—fixed with an enduring expression just as the faces on the mosaics were fixed as they bore lifeless witness to the same events.

"So we pass so many wars? We leave behind so many massacres? We have passed over so much martyrdom," he said. "But then you do not lack imagination, Lestat."

"Let me rest, Memnoch. Answer my questions. I am not an angel, only

a monster. Please let's go."

"All right," he said. "We'll go now. You've been brave, actually, just as I thought you would be. Your tears are plentiful and they come from the heart."

I didn't answer. My chest was heaving. I held on to the veil. I put my left hand over my ear. How could I move? Did I expect him to take us in the whirlwind? Had I limbs any longer that would obey commands?

"We'll go, Lestat," he said again. I heard the wind rising. It was the whirlwind, and the walls had already flown backwards. I pressed my hand against the veil. I heard his voice in my ear:

"Rest now."

The souls whirled around us in the dimness. I felt my head against his shoulder, the wind ripping at my hair. I closed my eyes and I saw the Son of God enter a great vast dark and gloomy place. The rays of Light emanated from his small distinct figure in all directions, illuminating hundreds of struggling human forms, soul forms, ghost forms.

"Sheol," I struggled to say. But we were in the whirlwind, and this was an image against the blackness of my closed eyes only. Again the Light grew brighter, the rays merging in one great blaze as if I were in its very presence, and songs rose, louder and clearer, drowning out the wailing souls around us, until the mingling of wail and song became the nature of the vision and the nature of the whirlwind. And they were one.

Nineteen

I was lying still somewhere, in an open place, on the rocky ground. I had the veil. I could feel the bulk of it, but I didn't dare to reach inside and draw it out or examine it.

I saw Memnoch standing some distance away, in full glorified form, his wings high and stiffly drawn down behind him, and I saw God Incarnate, risen, the wounds still red on His ankles and on His wrists, but He had been bathed and cleaned, and His body was on the same scale as that of Memnoch, that is, greater than human. His robes were white and fresh and His dark hair still richly colored with dried blood, but beautifully combed. It seemed more light seeped through the epidermal cells of His body than it had before His crucifixion, and He gave off a powerful radiance, which rendered the radiance of Memnoch slightly dim by comparison. But the two did not fight each other, and were basically the same kind of light.

I lay there, looking up, and listening to them argue. And only out of the corner of my eye—before their voices became distinct to me—did I see this was a battlefield littered with the dead. It wasn't the same time as the Fourth Crusade. No one had to tell me. This was an earlier epic, and the bodies wore the armour and the clothes that I might connect, if asked, to the third century perhaps, though I could not be certain. These were early, early times.

The dead stank. The air was filled with feasting insects, and even some lowering, awkward vultures, which had come to tear at the swollen hideous flesh of the soldiers, and far off, I heard the nasty argument, in growls and barking—of contending wolves.

"Yes, I see!" declared Memnoch angrily. He was speaking in a tongue that wasn't English or French, but I understood him perfectly. "The gateway is open to Heaven for all those who die with Understanding and Acceptance of the Harmony of Creation and the Goodness of God! But what about the others! What about the millions of others!"

"And once again, I ask you," said the Son of God, "why I should care about the others! Those who die without understanding and acceptance

and knowledge of God. Why? What are they to me?"

"Your Created children, that's what they are! With the capacity for Heaven if only they could find the way! And the number of the lost exceeds by billions those few who have the wisdom, the guidance, the experience, the insight, the gift. And you know it! How can you let so many vanish into the shadows of Sheol once more, or disintegrate, or hug the earth becoming evil spirits? Didn't you come to save them all?"

"I came to save those who would be saved!" He said. "Again, I tell you it is a cycle, it is Natural, and for each soul that goes now unimpeded into the Light of Heaven, thousands of others must fail. Of what value is it to Understand, to Accept, to Know, to See the Beauty? What would you have me do?"

"Help the souls who are lost! Help them. Don't leave them in the whirlwind, don't leave them in Sheol struggling for millennia to gain understanding by what they can still see on Earth! You've made things worse, that's what you've done!"

"How dare you!"

"You've made it worse! Look at this battlefield, and Your Cross appeared in the sky before this battle, and now Your Cross becomes the emblem of the empire! Since the death of the witnesses who saw your Risen Body, only a trickle of the dead has gone into the Light from Earth, and multitudes have been lost in argument, and battle, and misunderstanding, languishing in darkness!"

"My Light is for those who would receive it."

"That's not good enough!"

God Incarnate struck Memnoch hard across the face. Memnoch staggered back, wings unfolding, as if reflexively so that he could take flight. But they settled once again, a few graceful white feathers swirling in the air, and Memnoch raised his hand to the imprint of God's hand which blazed on the side of his face. I could see the imprint of the hand distinctly, blood-red as the wounds in the ankles and in the hands of Christ.

"Very well," said God Incarnate. "Since you care more for those lost souls than for your God, let your lot be to collect them! Let Sheol be your Kingdom! Gather them there by the millions and tutor them for the Light. I say none shall dissolve or disintegrate beyond your power to draw them back into being; I say none shall be lost, but all shall be your

responsibility, your students, your followers, your servants.

"And until such a day as Sheol is empty! Until such a day as all souls go directly to the Heavenly Gates, you are my Adversary, you are my Devil, you are Damned to spend no less than one third of your existence on Earth which you love so much, and no less than one third in Sheol or Hell, whichever you choose to call it, your Kingdom. And only now and then by my grace may you come into Heaven, and see to it that when you do you have your angelic form!

"On the Earth, let them see you as the demon! The Beast God—the God of the dance and the drink and the feast and the flesh and all the things *you* love enough to challenge *Me*. Let them see you as that, if you would have power, and your wings shall be the color of soot and ashes, and your legs shall be as a goat's legs, as if you were Pan himself! Or as a man only, yes, I give you that mercy, that you may be a man among them, since you think it is such a worthy enterprise to be human. But an Angel among them, no! Never!

"You will not use your Angelic form to confuse and mislead them, to dazzle them or humble them. You and your Watchers did that enough. But see that when you come through my gates, you are attired properly for me, that your wings are like snow, and so are your robes. Remember to be yourself in my realm!"

"I can do it!" Memnoch said. "I can teach them; I can guide them. You let me run Hell as I choose to run it and I can reclaim them for Heaven; I can undo all that your Natural Cycle has done to them on Earth."

"Fine, then, I should like to see you do it!" said the Son of God. "Send me more souls then, through your purgation. Go ahead. Increase my Glory. Increase the *bene ha elohim*. Heaven is endless and welcomes your efforts.

"But you don't come home forever until the task is finished, until the passage from Earth to Heaven includes all those who die, or until the world itself is destroyed—until evolution has unfolded to the point where Sheol, for one reason or another, is empty, and mark my words, Memnoch, that time may never come! I have promised no ending to the unfolding of the universe! So you have a long tenure among the Damned."

"And on earth? What are my powers? Goat God or Man, what can I do?"

“What you should do! Warn humans. Warn them so that they come to me and not to Sheol.”

“And I can do that my way? By telling them what a merciless God you are, and that to kill in your name is wicked, and that suffering warps and twists and damns its victims more often than redeems them? I can tell them the truth? That if they would go to you, they would abandon your religions and your holy wars and your magnificent martyrdom? They would seek to understand what the mystery of the flesh tells them, the ecstasy of love tells them? You give me permission? You give me permission to tell them the truth?”

“Tell them what you will! And in each case that you draw them away from my churches, my revelations, misunderstood and garbled though they may be—in every case that you turn them away, you risk another pupil in your hellish school, another soul which you must reform. Your hell will be crammed to overflowing!”

“Not through my doings, Lord,” Memnoch said. “It will be full to overflowing, but that will be thanks to you!”

“You dare!”

“Let it unfold, My Lord, as you have said it always should. Only now I am part of it, and Hell is part of it. And will you give to me those angels who believe as I do and will work for me, and endure the same darkness with me?”

“No! I will not give you one angelic spirit! Recruit your helpers from the earthbound souls themselves. Make those your demons! The Watchers who fell with you are contrite. I will not give you anyone. You are an Angel. Stand alone.”

“Very well, I stand alone. Hobble me in my earthly form if you will, but still I will triumph. I will bring more souls through Sheol to Heaven than you will bring by your direct Gate. I will bring more reformed souls singing of Paradise than you will ever gather through your narrow tunnel. It is I who will fill Heaven and magnify your glory. You will see.”

They fell silent, Memnoch in a fury, and God Incarnate in a fury or so it seemed, the two figures facing each other, both of equal size, except that Memnoch’s wings spread back and out in the semblance of a form of power, and from God Incarnate came the more powerful, heartrendingly beautiful Light.

Suddenly, God Incarnate smiled.

“Either way I triumph, don’t I?” God asked.

“I curse you!” said Memnoch.

“No, you don’t,” said God sadly and gently. He reached out and He touched Memnoch’s face and the imprint of His angry hand vanished off the angelic skin. God Incarnate leant forward and kissed Memnoch on the mouth.

“I love you, my brave adversary!” He said. “It is good that I made you, as good as all else I’ve made. Bring souls to me. You are only part of the cycle, part of Nature, as wondrous as a bolt of lightning or the eruption of a great volcano, as a star exploding suddenly, miles and miles out in the galaxies so that thousands of years pass before those on earth see its light.”

“You’re a merciless God,” Memnoch said, refusing to give an inch. “I shall teach them to forgive you what you are—Majestic, Infinitely Creative, and Imperfect.”

God Incarnate laughed softly and kissed Memnoch again on the forehead.

“I am a wise God and a patient God,” He said. “I am the One who made you.”

The images vanished. They did not even fade. They simply disappeared.

I lay on the battlefield alone.

The stench was a layer of gases hanging over me, poisoning every breath I drew.

For as far as I could see were dead men.

A noise startled me. The thin, panting figure of a wolf drew near to me, bearing down on me with its lowered head. I stiffened. I saw its narrow uptilted eyes as it pushed its snout arrogantly at me. I smelt its hot, rank breath. I turned my face away. I heard it sniff at my ear, my hair. I heard a deep growl come out of it. I just shut my eyes and with my right hand in my coat, I felt the veil.

Its teeth grazed my neck. Instantly, I turned, rose and knocked the wolf backwards, and sent it tumbling and yelping and finally scuttling away from me. Off it ran over the bodies of the dead.

I took a deep breath. I realized the sky overhead was the daytime sky of Earth and I looked at the white clouds, the simple white clouds and the dim faraway horizon beneath them, and I listened to the storm of the

insects—the gnats and the flies rising and swirling here and there over the bodies—and the big humpish ugly vultures, tiptoeing through the feast.

From far away came the sound of human weeping.

But the sky was magnificently clear. The clouds moved so that they released the sun in all its power, and down came the warmth on my hands and face, on the gaseous and exploding bodies around me.

I think I must have lost consciousness. I wanted to. I wanted to fall backwards again on the earth and roll over and lie with my forehead against it, and slip my hand into my coat and feel that the veil was there.

Twenty

The Garden of Waiting. The tranquil and radiant place before the Heavenly Gates. A place from which souls return from time to time, when death brings them into it, and they are then told that it is not the moment, and they can go home again.

In the distance, beneath the shining cobalt sky, I saw the Newly Dead greet the Older Dead. Gathering after gathering. I saw the embraces, heard the exclamations. Out of the corner of my eyes, I saw the dizzyingly high walls of Heaven, and Heaven's gates. This time I saw the angels, less solid than all the rest, chorus after chorus, moving through the skies, unbound and dipping down at will into the little crowds of mortals crossing the bridge. Shifting between visibility and invisibility, the angels moved, watched, drifted upwards to fade into the inexhaustible blue of the sky.

The sounds of Heaven were faint and achingly seductive as they came from beyond the walls. I could close my eyes and almost see the sapphirine colors! All songs sang the same refrain: "Come in, come here, come inside, be with us. Chaos is no more. This is Heaven."

But I was far from all this, in a little valley. I sat amid wildflowers, tiny white and yellow wildflowers, on the grass bank of the stream which all souls cross to get into Heaven, only here it seemed no more than any magnificent rushing stream. Or rather, it sang a song that said —after smoke and war, after soot and blood, after stench and pain—All streams are as magnificent as this stream.

Water sings in multiple voices as it slides over rocks and down through tiny gullies and rushes abruptly over rises in the earth so that it may again tumble in a mingling of fugue and canon. While the grass bends its head to watch.

I rested against the trunk of a tree, what the peach tree might be if she bloomed forever, both blossoms and fruit, so that she was never bare of either, and her limbs hung down not in submission, but with this richness, this fragrance, this offering, this fusion of two cycles into one eternal abundance. Above, amid fluttering petals, the supply of which

seemed inexhaustible and never alarming, I saw the fleeting movement of tiny birds. And beyond that, angels, and angels, and angels, as if they were made of air, the light luminous glittering spirits so faint as to vanish at times in one brilliant breath of the sky.

The Paradise of murals; the Paradise of mosaics. Only no form of art can touch this. Question those who have come and gone. Those whose hearts have stopped on an operating table, so that their souls flew to this garden, and then were brought back down into articulate flesh. Nothing can touch it.

The cool, sweet air surrounded me, slowly removing, layer by layer, the soot and filth that clung to my coat and my shirt.

Suddenly, as if waking to life again from nightmare, I reached inside my shirt and drew out the veil. I unfolded it and held it by its two edges.

The face burned in it, the dark eyes staring at me, the blood as brilliantly red as before, the skin the perfect hue, the depth almost holographic, though the whole expression moved very faintly as the veil moved on the breeze. Nothing had been smeared, torn, or lost.

I felt myself gasp, and my heart speeded dangerously. The heat flooded to my own face.

The brown eyes were steady in their gaze as they had been at that moment, not closing for the soft finely woven fabric. I drew the whole veil close to me, then folded it up again, almost in a panic, and shoved it tight against my skin this time, inside my shirt. I struggled to restore all the buttons to their proper holes. My shirt was all right. My coat was filthy though intact, but all its buttons were gone, even the buttons that had graced the sleeves and had been no longer of any use and were merely decorative. I looked down at my shoes; they were broken and tattered and barely held together anymore. How strange they looked, how unlike anything I had seen of late, made as they were of such fancy leather.

Petals fell in my hair. I reached up and brushed loose a small shower of them, pink and white, as they fell on my pants and shoes.

"Memnoch!" I said suddenly. I looked around me. Where was he? Was I here alone? Far, far away moved the procession of happy souls across the bridge. Did the gates open and close or was that an illusion?

I looked to the left, to a copse of olive trees, and saw standing beneath it first a figure I didn't recognize, and then realized it was Memnoch as

the Ordinary Man. He stood collected, looking at me, face grim and set; then the image began to grow and spread, to sprout its huge black wings, and twisted goat legs, and cloven feet, and the angel face gleamed as if in living black granite. Memnoch, my Memnoch, the Memnoch I knew once again clothed as the demon.

I made no resistance. I didn't cover my face. I studied the details of his robed torso, the way the cloth came down over the hideous fur-covered legs. The cloven feet dug into the ground beneath him, but his hands and arms were his own beautiful hands and arms. His hair was the flowing mane, only jet black. And in all the Garden he was the only pure absence of color, opaque, or at least visible to me, seemingly solid.

"The argument is simple," he said. "Do you have any trouble now understanding it?"

His black wings came in close, hugging the body, lower tips curved forward, near his feet, so that they did not scrape the ground. He walked towards me, a horrid animalian advance carrying the overwhelmingly perfect torso and head, a hobbled being, thrust into a human conception of evil.

"Right you are," he said, and slowly, almost painfully, seated himself, the wings once more fading because they could never have allowed it; and there he sat, the goat god glaring at me, hair tangled, but face as serene as always, no harsher, no sweeter, no wiser or more cruel, because it was graven out of blackness instead of the shimmering image of flesh.

He began to talk:

"You see, what He actually did was this. He said over and over to me, 'Memnoch, everything in the universe is used … made use of … you understand?' And He came down, suffered, died, and rose from the Dead to consecrate human suffering, to enshrine it as a means to an end; the end was illumination, superiority of the soul.

"But the myth of the suffering and Dying God—whether we speak of Tammuz of Sumer or Dionysus of Greece, or any other deity the world over, whose death and dismemberment preceded Creation—this was a Human idea! An idea conceived by Humans who could not imagine a Creation from nothing, one which did not involve a sacrifice. The Dying God who gives birth to Man was a young idea in the minds of those too primitive to conceive of anything absolute and perfect. So He grafted

himself—God Incarnate—upon human myths that try to explain things as if they had meaning, when perhaps they don't."

"Yes."

"Where was His sacrifice in making the world?" Memnoch asked. "He was not Tiamat slain by Marduk. He is not Osiris chopped into pieces! What did He, Almighty God, give up to make the material universe? I do not remember seeing anything taken from Him. That it came out of Him, this is true, but I do not remember Him being lessened, or decimated, or maimed, or decreased by the act of Physical Creation! He was, after the Creation of the planets and the stars, the same God! If anything He was increased, or seemed to be in the eyes of His angels, as they sang of new and varying aspects of His Creation. His very nature as Creator grew and expanded in our perceptions, as evolution took His path.

"But when He came as God Incarnate, He imitated myths that men had made to try to sanctify all suffering, to try to say that history is not horror, but has meaning. He plunged down into man-made religion and brought His Divine Grace to those images, and He sanctified suffering by His death, whereas it had *not* been sanctified in His Creation, you understand?"

"It was a bloodless Creation and without sacrifice," I said. My voice was dull but my mind had never been more alert. "That is what you're saying. But He does believe suffering is sacrosanct or can be. Nothing is wasted. All things are used."

"Yes. But my position is that He took the awful flaw in His cosmos—human pain, misery, the capacity to suffer unspeakable injustice—and He found a place for it, using the worst superstitious beliefs of Men."

"But when people die—what happens? Do His believers find the tunnel and the Light and Loved ones?"

"In the places where they have lived in peace and prosperity, generally, yes. They rise without hate or resentment directly into Heaven. And so do some who have no belief in Him whatsoever or His teachings."

"Because they too are Illuminated."

"Yes. And this gratifies Him and expands His Heaven, and Heaven is ever enhanced and enriched by these new souls from all quarters of the world."

"But Hell is also full of souls."

“Hell so far exceeds the size of Heaven as to be laughable. Where on the planet has He ruled where there has not been self-sacrifice, injustice, persecution, torment, war! Every day my confused and embittered pupils are increased in number. There are times of such privation and horror that few souls ascend to Him in peace at all.”

“And He does not care.”

“Precisely. He says that suffering of sentient beings is like decay; it fertilizes the growth of their souls! He looks from His lofty height upon a massacre and He sees magnificence. He sees men and women never loving so much as when they lose their loved ones, never loving so much as when they sacrifice for others for some abstract notion of Him, never loving so much as when the conquering army comes down to lay waste the hearth, divide the flock, and catch up the bodies of infants on their spears.

“His justification? It’s in Nature. It’s what He created. And if battered and embittered souls must fall into my hands first and suffer my tutelage in Hell, so much the greater will they become!”

“And your job grows heavier all the time.”

“Yes and no. I am winning. But I have to win on His terms. Hell is a place of suffering. But let’s go over it carefully. Look at it; what He did:

“When He threw open the gates of Sheol, when He went down into the gloom of Sheol, like the god Tammuz into the Sumerian hell, the souls flocked to Him and saw His redemption and saw the wounds in His Hands and Feet, and that He should die for them gave a focus to their confusion, and of course they flooded with Him into the Gates of Heaven —for everything they had suffered seemed suddenly to have a meaning.

“But *did* it have a meaning? Can you give a sacred meaning to the cycle of Nature simply by immersing your Divine Self in it? Is that enough?

“What about the souls who shrink in bitterness, who never flower as the heels of warriors walk over them, what about the souls warped and twisted by unspeakable injustice, who go into eternity cursing, what about a whole modern world which is personally angry with God, angry enough to curse Jesus Christ and God Himself as Luther did, as Dora did, as you have done, as all have done.

“People in your modern world of the late twentieth century have never stopped believing in Him. It’s that they hate Him; they resent Him; they

are furious with Him. They feel … they feel.…"

"Superior to Him," I said quietly, keenly aware that he was saying now some of the very words I myself had said to Dora. We hate God. We hate Him.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, you feel superior to Him."

"And *you* feel superior."

"Yes. I can't show them His wounds in Hell. That isn't going to win them over, these victims, these grieving, furious sufferers of pain beyond His imagining. I can just tell them that it was the Dominican Fathers in His Name who burnt their bodies alive, thinking them witches. Or that when their families and clans and villages were annihilated by Spanish soldiers, it was all right because His bleeding Hands and Feet were on the banner which the men carried to the New World. You think that would get somebody out of Hell, finding out that He let it happen? And lets other souls ascend without suffering one drop of pain?

"If I were to begin their education with that image—Christ has Died for You—how long do you think the Hellish education of a soul would take?"

"You haven't told me what Hell is or how you do teach there."

"I run it my way, of that I can assure you.

"I have put my throne above His throne—as the poets and the redactors of Scripture say it—because I know that for souls to attain Heaven, suffering was never necessary, that full understanding and receptivity to God never required a fast, a scourging, a crucifixion, a death. I know that the human soul transcended Nature, and needed no more than an eye for beauty to do this! Job was Job before he suffered! Just as after! What did the suffering teach Job that he didn't know before?"

"But how do you make up for it in Hell?"

"I don't begin by telling them that for Him, the human eye expresses the perfection of creation when it looks with horror upon a maimed body, just as it expresses the perfection of Creation when it looks in peace upon a garden.

"And He persists that it's all there. Your Savage Garden, Lestat, *is* His version of Perfection. It all evolved from the same seed, and I, Memnoch, the Devil, fail to see it. I have an angel's simple mind."

"How do you fight Him in Hell and still win Heaven for the damned,

then? How?"

"What do you think Hell is?" he asked. "You must have a surmise by now."

"First of all, it is what we call purgatory," I said. "No one is beyond redemption. I understood from your argument on the battlefield. So what must the souls of Hell suffer to be fully qualified for Heaven?"

"What do you think they should suffer?"

"I don't know. I'm frightened. We're about to go there, aren't we?"

"Yes, but I'd like to know what you expect."

"I don't know what to expect. I know that creatures who have robbed others of life—as I have—should suffer for it."

"Suffer or pay for it?"

"What would be the difference?"

"Well, suppose you had a chance to forgive Magnus, the vampire who brought you into this, suppose he stood before you and said, 'Lestat, forgive me for taking you out of your mortal life and putting you outside Nature, and making you drink blood to live. Do with me what you will so that you can forgive me.' What would you do?"

"You chose a bad example," I said. "I don't know that I haven't forgiven him. I don't think he knew what he was doing. I don't care about him. He was mad. He was an Old World monster. He started me on the Devil's Road on some warped, impersonal impulse. I don't even think about him. I don't care about him. If he has to seek forgiveness from someone, then let it be from the mortals he killed when he was in existence.

"In his tower was a dungeon filled with slain mortal men—young men who resembled me, men he'd brought there to test, apparently, and then killed rather than initiated. I remember them still. But it's just one form of massacre—heaps of bodies of young men, all with blond hair and blue eyes. Young beings robbed of potential and of life itself. His forgiveness would have to come from all those whom he robbed of life in any fashion—he would have to gain the forgiveness of each one."

I was beginning to tremble again. My anger was so familiar to me. And how angry I had become many a time when others had accused me of my various flamboyant attacks upon mortal men and women. And children. Helpless children.

"And you?" he said to me. "For you to get into Heaven, what do you

think would be necessary?"

"Well, apparently working for you will do it," I said defiantly. "At least I think it would from what you've said to me. But you haven't really told me precisely what you do! You've told me the story of Creation and the Passion, of Your Way and His Way, you've described how you oppose Him on Earth, and I can imagine the ramifications of that opposition—we are both sensualists, we are both believers in the wisdom of the flesh."

"Amen to that."

"But you have not gotten to a full explanation of what you do in Hell. And how can you be winning? Are you sending them speedily to His arms?"

"Speedily and with powerful acceptance," he said. "But I am not speaking to you now about my offer to you, or my Earthly opposition to Him; I'm asking you this: Given all that you have seen—*What do you think Hell should be!*"

"I'm afraid to answer. Because I belong there."

"You're never really that afraid of anything. Go on. Make a statement. What do you think Hell ought to be, what should a soul have to endure to be worthy of Heaven? Is it enough to say 'I believe in God'; Jesus, 'I believe in Your Suffering'? Is it enough to say, 'I'm sorry for all my sins because they offend thee, my God'? Or to say, 'I'm sorry because when I was on Earth, I really didn't believe in You and now I know it's true, and wham, bang, one look at this infernal place, and I'm ready! I wouldn't do anything the same way, and please let me into Heaven quick.'

I didn't answer.

"Should everyone just go to Heaven?" he asked. "I mean, should everyone go?"

"No. That can't be," I said. "Not creatures like me, not creatures who have tortured and killed other creatures, not people who have deliberately duplicated through their actions punishments as severe as disease, or fire, or earthquake—that is, not people who have done wrongs that hurt others just as much or worse than natural disasters. It can't be right for them to go to Heaven, not if they don't know, not if they don't understand, not if they haven't begun to comprehend what they've done! Heaven would be Hell in no time if every cruel, selfish, vicious soul went to Heaven. I don't want to meet the unreformed

monsters of Earth in Heaven! If it's that easy, then the suffering of this world is damned near…."

"Damn near what?"

"Unforgivable," I whispered.

"What *would* be forgivable—from the point of view of a soul who died in pain and confusion? A soul who knew that God didn't care?"

"I don't know," I said. "When you described the elect of Sheol, the first million souls you took through the Heavenly Gates, you didn't speak of reformed monsters; you spoke of people who had forgiven God for an unjust world, didn't you?"

"That's right, I did. That's what I found. That's what I took with me with certainty to Heaven's Gates, yes."

"But you spoke entirely as if these people had been victims of God's injustice. You didn't touch upon the souls of the guilty? Those like me—the transgressors, those who were the doers of injustice?"

"Don't you think they have their story?"

"Some may have their excuses, engrained in their stupidity and their simplicity and their fear of authority. I don't know. But many, many evildoers must be just like me. They know how bad they are. They don't care. They do what they do because … because they love it. I love making vampires. I love drinking blood. I love taking life. I always have."

"Is that really why you drink blood? Just because you love it? Or isn't it because you were made into a perfect preternatural mechanism for craving blood eternally, and thriving only on blood—snatched out of life and made a gleaming Child of the Night by an unjust world that cared no more for you and your destiny than it cared for any infant who starved that night in Paris?"

"I don't justify what I do or what I am. If you think I do, if that's why you want me to run Hell with you, or accuse God … then you picked the wrong person. I deserve to pay for what I've taken from people. Where are their souls, those I've slain? Were they ready for Heaven? Have they gone to Hell? Did those souls loosen in their identity and are they still in the whirlwind between Hell and Heaven? Souls are there, I know, I saw them, souls who have yet to find either place."

"Yes, true."

"I could have sent souls into the whirlwind. I am the embodiment of

greed and cruelty. I devoured the mortals I've killed like so much food and drink. I cannot justify it."

"Do you think I want you to justify it?" Memnoch asked. "What violence have I justified so far? What makes you think I would like you if you justified or defended your actions? Have I ever defended anyone who made anyone else suffer?"

"No, you haven't."

"Well, then?"

"What is Hell, and how can you run it? You don't want people to suffer. You don't even seem to want me to suffer. You can't point to God and say He makes it all Good and Meaningful! You can't. You're His opposition. So what is Hell?"

"What do you think it is?" he asked me again. "What would you morally settle for … before rejecting me out of hand! Before fleeing from me. What sort of Hell could you believe in and would you—if you were in my place—create?"

"A place where people realize what they've done to others; where they face every detail of it, and realize every particle of it, so that they would *never, never* do the same thing again; a place where souls are reformed, literally, by knowledge of what they'd done wrong and how they could have avoided it, and what they should have done. When they *understand*, as you said of the Elect of Sheol, when they *can forgive* not only God for this big mess, but themselves for their own failures, their own horrible angry reactions, their own spite and meanness, when they love everyone totally in complete forgiveness, then they would be worthy of Heaven. *Hell would have to be where they see the consequences of their actions, but with a full merciful comprehension of how little they themselves knew.*"

"Precisely. To know what has hurt others, to realize that you didn't know, that nobody gave you the knowledge, yet still you had the power! And to forgive that, and forgive your victims, and forgive God and forgive yourself."

"Yes. That would be it. That would terminate my anger, my outrage. I couldn't shake my fist anymore, if only I could forgive God and others and myself."

He didn't say anything. He sat with his arms folded, eyes wide, his dark smooth brow barely touched with the moisture of the air.

"That's what it is, isn't it?" I asked fearfully. "It's … it's a place where

you learn to understand what you've done to another being … where you come to realize the suffering you've inflicted on others!"

"Yes, and it is terrible. I created it and I run it to make whole again the souls of the just and the unjust, those who had suffered and those who had done cruelty. And the only lesson of that Hell is Love."

I was frightened, as frightened as I had been when we went into Jerusalem.

"He loves my souls when they come to Him," said Memnoch. "And He sees each one as a justification of His Way!"

I smiled bitterly.

"War is magnificent to Him, and disease is like the color purple in His eyes, and self-sacrifice seems to Him a personal magnification of His Glory! As if He's ever done it! He tries to overwhelm me with numbers. In the name of the cross, more injustice has been perpetrated than for any other single cause or emblem or philosophy or creed on Earth.

"And I empty Hell so fast, soul by soul, by speaking truth about what humans suffer and humans know and what humans can do that my souls go flooding through His gates.

"And who do you think comes into Hell feeling most cheated? Most angry and unforgiving? The child who died in a gas chamber in an extermination camp? Or a warrior with blood up to his elbows who was told that if he exterminated the enemies of the state he would find his place in Valhalla, Paradise, or Heaven?"

I didn't answer. I was quiet, listening to him, watching him.

He sat forward, commanding my attention even more deliberately, and as he did he changed, changed before my eyes from the Devil, goat-legged, cloven-hoofed beast-man, to the angel, Memnoch, Memnoch in his loose and unimportant robe, his fair eyes beaming at me beneath his golden scowling brows.

"Hell is where I straighten things out that He has made wrong," he said. "Hell is where I reintroduce a frame of mind that might have existed had suffering never destroyed it! Hell is where I teach men and women that they can be better than He is.

"But that's my punishment, Hell—for arguing with Him, that I must go there and help the souls to fulfill their cycle as He sees it, that I must live there with them! And that if I don't help them, if I don't school them, they may be there forever!

“But Hell is not my battlefield.

“The earth is my battlefield. Lestat, I fight Him not in Hell but on Earth. I roam the world seeking to tear down every edifice He has erected to sanctify self-sacrifice and suffering, to sanctify aggression and cruelty and destruction. I lead men and women from churches and temples to dance, to sing, to drink, to embrace one another with license and love. I do everything I can to show up the lie at the heart of His religions! I try to destroy the lies He’s allowed to grow as the Universe Unfolds Itself.

“He is the only one who can enjoy suffering with impunity! And that’s because He’s God and He doesn’t know what it means and He never has known. He’s created beings more conscientious and loving than Himself. And the final victory over all human evil will come only when He is dethroned, once and for all, demystified, ignored, repudiated, thrown aside, and men and women seek for the good and the just and the ethical and the loving in each other and for all.”

“They’re trying to do that, Memnoch! They are!” I said. “That’s what they mean when they say they hate Him. That’s what Dora meant when she said ‘Ask Him why He allows all this!’ When she made her hands into fists!”

“I know. Now, do you want to help me fight Him and his Cross or not?

“Will you go with me from Earth to Heaven to that filthy Hell of painful recognition, filthy with its obsession with His suffering! You will not serve me in one place or the other or the other. But in all three. And like me, you may soon come to find Heaven just about as unbearable in its pitch as Hell. Its bliss will make you eager to heal the evil He has done, you will seek Hell to work on those tortured confused souls, to help them up from the morass and into the Light. When you’re in the Light you can’t forget them! That’s what it means to serve me.”

He paused, then he asked:

“Do you have the courage to see it?”

“I want to see it.”

“I warn you, it’s Hell.”

“I am just beginning to imagine.…”

“It won’t exist forever. The day will come when either the world itself is blown to pieces by His human worshippers or when all who die are Illuminated and surrender to Him, and go straight into His arms.

“A perfect world, or a world destroyed, one or the other—someday will come the end of Hell. And then I shall go back to Heaven, content to stay there for the first moment of my existence, since the beginning of Time.”

“Take me with you into Hell, please. I want to see it now.”

He reached out and stroked my hair, put his two hands on the sides of my face. They felt evenly warm and caressing. A sense of tranquility came over me.

“So many times in the past,” he said, “I almost had your soul! I saw it almost spring loose from your body, and then the strong preternatural flesh, the preternatural brain, the hero’s courage, would hold together the entire monster and the soul would flicker and blaze inside, beyond my grasp. And now, now I risk plunging you into it before you need to go, plunging you into it when you can choose to go or come, in the hope that you can endure what you see and hear and return and be with me and help me.”

“Was there ever a time when my soul would have soared to Heaven, past you, past the whirlwind?”

“What do you think?”

“I remember … once, when I was alive.…”

“Yes?”

“A golden moment, when I was drinking and talking with my good friend, Nicolas, and we were in an inn together in my village in France. And there came this golden moment when everything seemed tolerable and independently beautiful of any horror that could be or ever had been done. Just a moment, a drunken moment. I described it once in writing; I tried to reinvoke it. It was a moment in which I could have forgiven anything, and given anything, and perhaps when I didn’t even exist: when all I saw was beyond me, outside me. I don’t know. Maybe if death had come at that very moment—”

“But fear came, fear when you realized that even if you died you might not understand anything, that there might be nothing.…”

“… yes. And now I fear something worse. That there is something, certainly, and it may be worse than nothing at all.”

“You’re right to think so. It doesn’t take much of a thumb-screw or the nails or the fire to make men and women wish for oblivion. Not much at all. Imagine, to wish that you had never lived.”

“I know the concept. I fear knowing the feeling again.”

“You’re wise to fear, but you’ve never been more ready for what I have to reveal.”

TWENTY-ONE

The wind swept the rocky field, the great centrifugal force dissolving and releasing those souls who struggled to be free of it at last as they assumed distinct human shape and pounded on the Gates of Hell, or wandered along the impossibly high walls, amid the flicker of fires within, reaching out for and imploring each other.

All voices were lost in the sound of the wind. Souls in human shape fought and struggled, others roamed as if in search of something small and lost and then lifted their arms and let the whirlwind once again take hold of them.

The shape of a woman, thin and pale, reached out to gather a wandering, weeping flock of baby souls, some not old enough yet to walk on two legs. The spirits of children wandered, crying piteously.

We drew near the gates, near narrow broken arches rising as black and fine as onyx worked by medieval craftsmen. The air was filled with soft and bleating cries. Everywhere spirit hands reached to take hold of us; whispers covered us like the gnats and flies of the battlefield. Ghosts tore at my hair and coat.

Help us, let us in, damn you, curse you, cursed, take me back, free me, I curse you forever, damn you, help me, help … a rising roar of opprobrium.

I struggled to clear the way for my eyes. Tender faces drifted before me, mouths issuing hot and mournful gasps against my skin.

The gates weren't solid gates at all but gateways.

And beyond stood the Helpful Dead, seemingly more solid, only more vividly colored and distinct, but diaphanous still, beckoning to the lost souls, calling to them by name, howling over the fierce wind that they must find the way inside, that this was not Perdition.

Torches were held high; lamps burnt atop the walls. The sky was torn with streaks of lightning, and the great mystic shower of sparks that comes from cannons both modern and ancient. The smell of gunpowder and blood filled the air. Again and again the lights flared as if in some magical display to enchant a Chinese court of old, and then the blackness rolled back, thin and substanceless and cold all around us.

“Come inside,” sang the Helpful Dead, the well-formed, well-proportioned ghosts—ghosts as determined as Roger had been, in garbs of all times and all nations, men and women, children, old ones, no body opaque, yet none weak, all reaching past us into the valley beyond, trying to assist the struggling, the cursing, the foundering. The Helpful Dead of India in their silk saris, of Egypt in cotton robes, of kingdoms long gone bequeathing jeweled and magnificent courtly garments; costumes of all the world, the feathered confections we call savage, the dark robes of priests, self-conceptions of all the world, from the crudest to the most magnificent.

I clung to Memnoch. Was this beautiful, or was it not hideous, this throng of all nations and times? The naked, the black, the white, the Asian, those of all races, reaching out, moving with confidence through the lost and confused souls!

The ground itself hurt my feet; blackened, rocky marl strewn with shells. Why this? Why?

In all directions slopes rose or gently fell away, to run into sheer cliffs rising beyond or opening into chasms so deep and filled with smoky dissolving gloom they seemed the abyss itself.

Doorways flickered and flashed with light; stairways wound precipitously up and down the stark, steep walls, leading out of sight, to vales I could only glimpse, or to gushing streams golden and steaming and red with blood.

“Memnoch, help me!” I whispered. I dared not let go of the veil. I couldn’t cover both ears. The howls were picking at my soul as if they were axes that could tear away pieces of it. “Memnoch, this is unbearable!”

“We will all help you,” cried the Helpful Ghosts, a cluster of them closing in on all sides to kiss and to embrace me, their eyes wide with concern. “Lestat has come. Lestat is here. Memnoch’s brought him back. Come into Hell.”

Voices rose and fell and overlapped, as if a multitude said the Rosary, each from a different starting point, voices having become chant.

“We love you.”

“Don’t be afraid. We need you.”

“Stay with us.”

“Shorten our time.”

I felt their soft sweet soothing touch even as the lurid light terrified me, and the explosions blazed across the sky and the smell of smoke rose in my nostrils.

"Memnoch!" I clung to his blackened hand as he pulled me along, his profile remote, his eyes seeming to sternly survey his kingdom.

And there below us, as the mountain was cleft, lay the plains without end, covered with wandering and arguing dead, with the weeping and lost, and seeking, and afraid, with those being led and gathered and comforted by the Helpful Ghosts, and others running headlong as if they could escape, only to find themselves tumbling through the spirit multitudes, in hopeless circles.

From where did this hellish light come, this magnificent and relentless illumination? Showers of sparks, sudden bursts of burning red, flames, comets arching over the peaks.

Howls rose, echoing off the cliffs. Souls wailed and sang. The Helpful Dead rushed to aid the fallen to their feet, to usher those who would at last come to this or that stairs or gate or cave mouth or pathway.

"I curse Him, I curse Him, I curse Him!" It echoed off the mountains and through the valleys.

"No justice, not after what was done!"

"You cannot tell me…."

"… someone has to make right…."

"Come, I have your hand," Memnoch said, and on he walked, the same stern look on his face as he led me quickly down an echoing stairs, steep, dangerously narrow, and winding about the cliff.

"I can't bear this!" I cried out. But my voice was snatched away. My right hand plunged into my coat again to feel the bulk of the veil, and then I reached out for the pitted and crumbling wall. Were these carvings in the rocks? Were these places where other hands had clawed or tried to climb? The screaming and the wails blotted out my reason. We had come again to yet another valley.

Or was it a world, as vast and complex in its own right as Heaven? For here were myriad palaces and towers and arches as before, in colors of sombre brown, and burnt sienna, and ochre, and burnished if not blackened gold, and rooms filled with spirits of all ages and nations again, engaged in argument, discourse, struggle, or even song, some holding each other like newfound friends in the midst of woe, uniformed

soldiers of ancient wars and modern wars, women in the shapeless draped black of the Holy Land, the souls of the modern world in their store-made finery now covered with dust and soot, so that all that blazed was muted in the blaze, as if no color could shine forth itself in its more baleful glory. They wept and patted each other's faces, and others nodded as they screamed their wrath, fists clenched.

Souls in ragged monks' habits of coarse brown, nuns with the stiff white wimples intact, princes in puffed sleeves of velvet, naked men who walked as though they had never known clothes, dresses of gingham and old lace, of modern glittering silks and chemical fabrics sheer and thick, soldiers' olive green coats, or armour of gleaming bronze, peasants' tunics of crude cloth, or fine tailored wool suits of modern fashion, gowns of silver; hair of all colors tangled and mingled in the wind; faces of all colors; the old knelt with hands clasped, bald heads pink and tenderly wrinkled at the neck, and the thin white soul-bodies of those who had starved in life drank out of the streams as dogs might do it, with their mouths, and others lay back, eyes half shut against the rocks and gnarled trees, singing and dreaming, and praying.

My eyes grew more accustomed to the gloom with every second. More details leapt into my vision, more comprehension clarified each square inch or foot of what I beheld! For around each true soul, a dozen figures that danced or sang or wailed were no more than images projected from that soul and to that soul for it to commune with.

The horrid figure of a woman consumed in flames was no more than a chimera for the howling souls who plunged into the fire, seeking to free her from the stake, to stamp out the flames that ate her hair, to rescue her from her unspeakable agony! It was the Witches Place. They were all burning! Save them! Oh, God, her hair is on fire!

Indeed the soldiers stoking the cannon and covering their ears now as they made the shot were but an illusion for those true legions weeping on their knees, and a hulk of a giant wielding an ax was but a phantom for those who stared at him in recognition and stupefaction, seeing in him themselves.

"I cannot … I cannot look!"

Monstrous images of murder, torture, flashed before me so hot they burnt my face. Phantoms were dragged to their deaths in pots of boiling pitch, soldiers sank on their knees, eyes wide, a prince of some lost

Persian kingdom screamed and leapt into the air, his arms out, his black eyes full of reflected fire.

The wails, the whispers, took on the urgency of protest, and question, and discovery. All around were particular voices if only one had the courage to hear, to pick the themes fine as steel thread from the raging dirge.

"Yes, yes, and I thought, and I knew …"

"… my darlings, my little ones …"

"… into your arms, because you didn't, you never …"

"… and I all the time I thought and you …"

"Love you, love you, love you, yes, and always … and no, you didn't know. You didn't know, you didn't know."

"… and always thought that it was what I should, but I knew, I felt …"

"… the courage to turn and say that it wasn't …"

"We didn't know! We didn't know."

It was blended finally into that one incessant cry.

We Did Not Know!

Before me the wall of a mosque rose, crowded with those screaming and covering their heads as the plaster came down upon them, the roar of the artillery deafening. Phantoms all.

We didn't know, we didn't know, the voices of the souls wailed. The Helpful Dead gathered on their knees, tears streaming down their faces … "Yes, we understand, you understand."

"And that year, just to go home then and be with …"

"Yes …"

I fell forward, my foot striking a rock, and pitching me into the middle of a swarm of soldiers on their hands and knees, weeping as they clutched at one another and the wraithlike phantoms of the conquered, the slain, the starved, all rocking and crying together in one voice.

There came a chain of explosions, each more violent than the one before, such as only the modern world can make. The sky was light as day if day could be colorless and merciless and then dissolve into flickering darkness.

Darkness Visible.

"Help, help me out of this," I cried, but they didn't seem to hear or notice my screams, and when I looked for Memnoch, I saw only a pair of elevator doors slide open suddenly, and before me loomed a great

modern room full of elaborate chandeliers and buffed floors and carpets without end. The hard polished glitter of our machine-made world. Roger came running towards me.

Roger, in all his dandified finery of purple silk jacket and tightly tailored pants, of perfumed hair, and manicured hands.

"Lestat," he cried. "Terry is here, they are here. Lestat." He clung to my coat, the very eyes I'd seen in the ghost and in the human in my arms, staring at me, breath on my face, the room dissolving into smoke, the dim spirit of Terry with her bright bottle-blond hair, throwing her arms about his neck, her face open with amazement, her pink lips speechless, Memnoch's wing touching down, shutting me off from them, the floor cracking open.

"I wanted to tell him about the veil…." I insisted. I struggled. Memnoch held me.

"This way!"

The heavens opened with another fiery shower of sparks and the clouds burst above, clashing together, the lightning touching down over our heads, and on came a thunderous deluge of cold and chilling rain.

"Oh God, oh, God, oh God!" I cried. "This cannot be your school! God! I say no!"

"Look, *look*!"

He pointed to the figure of Roger on his hands and knees, turning like a dog, amongst those he'd slain, men imploring him with outstretched arms, women tearing open the cloth of their dresses to show the wounds, the chatter of voices rising perilously as if the sound of Hell itself would suddenly explode, and Terry—the very same Terry—with her arms still around his neck. Roger lay on the ground, his shirt torn open, his feet naked, the jungle rising around him. Shots rang out in the dark. Crack of automatic guns spitting their numberless fatal bullets in unstinted fury. The lights of a house flickered among vines, amid monstrous trees. Roger turned to me, trying to rise, sinking back on his leg, crying, the tears streaming down his face.

"… and each and every act, in its own way, Lestat, and I didn't know … I didn't know…."

Distinct and ghastly and demanding, he rose before me only to recede into the countless others.

In all directions I saw them. The others.

Scenario lapping into scenario, ashen colors brightening, or dying in a murky haze, and rising here and there from the horrid furious turbulent fields of Hell, the Purified Souls. There came the beat of drums, there came the piercing shrieks of some unendurable torture; a mass of men in crude white robes shoved into the blazing logs, their arms appealing to the souls who shrank and howled and screamed in remorse, in awful recognition.

"My God, my God, we are both forgiven!"

What was this sudden whirl of the filthy, stinking wind?

Upward souls went with arms out, garments suddenly stripped or faded away into the indistinguishable robes of the Saved, the Tunnel opening.

I saw the Light, saw the myriad spirits flying loose up the Tunnel towards the celestial blaze, the Tunnel perfectly round, and widening as they rose and for one blessed moment, one blessed tiny instant, the songs of Heaven resounded down the tunnel as if its curves were not made of wind but of something solid that could echo these ethereal songs, and their organized rhythm, their heartbreaking beauty piercing the catastrophic suffering of this place.

"I didn't know, I didn't know!" The voices rose. The Tunnel closed.

I stumbled, turning this way and that. Here soldiers tortured a young woman with their spears, while others wept and sought to throw themselves between her writhing form and her tormentors. Here babies ran on chubby legs with little hands outstretched to be gathered in the arms of weeping fathers, mothers, murderers.

And pinned to the ground, his body covered in armour, his beard long and red, his mouth open in a howl, lay one cursing God cursing the Devil and cursing all Fate. "*I will not, I will not, I will not!*"

"And who stands behind those doors," said a sombre Helpful Ghost, her beautiful hair shimmering around her in ethereal whiteness, her soft hand on my face. "See there—" The double doors about to open, the walls lined with books. "Your dead, my beloved, your dead, all those you've killed!"

I stared at the soldier on his back, roaring from his red-bearded mouth, "Never, never will I say it was right, never, never.…"

"Not my dead," I cried. I turned and ran. I stumbled and fell again on my face in the soft press of bodies. Beyond, the ruins of a city withered

in fire; walls crumbled on all sides, the cannon exploded again, and once more, a noxious gas filled the air, people fell coughing and choking for breath, the chorus of I DID NOT KNOW blended all in one instant of order that was worse than none!

"HELP ME!" I cried and cried. I never knew such release in screaming, such pure and abandoned cowardice, to shout to High Heaven in this Godforsaken place where cries were the very air itself, and no one heard, no one but the smiling Helpful Dead.

"Learn, my dearest."

"Learn." Whispers like kisses. A wraith, an Indian man, turbaned head, darkened face. "Learn, my young one."

"Look up, see the blossoms, see the sky…." A Helpful Ghost danced in circles, her white dress passing in and out of the clouds and spurts of soot and filth, her feet sinking into the marl but turning still with certainty.

"Don't fool me, there is no garden here!" I shouted. I was on my knees. My clothes were torn, but in my shirt I had the veil! I *had* it.

"Take my hands…."

"No, let me go!" I slipped my hand in my coat to cover the veil. Staggering towards me a dim figure rose, hand outstretched, "You, you cursed boy, you filthy boy, you in the Paris streets, like Lucifer Himself full of golden light, you! Think what you did to me!"

The tavern took form, the boy falling backwards from the blow of my mortal fist, the barrels going over and the growl of the disheveled and drunken men who closed in on me.

"No, stop it," I roared. "Get him away from me. I don't remember him. I never killed him. I don't remember, I tell you, I can't….

"Claudia, where are you? Where are *you*, the one I wronged! Claudia! Nicolas, help me!"

But were they here, lost in this torrent, or gone, long gone through the Tunnel to the blazing glory above, to the blessed songs that wove the silence into their very chords and melodies? Pray gone, pray there, above.

My own cries had lost all dignity and yet how defiant they sounded in my own ears. "Help me, someone! Help!"

"Must you die first to serve me?" Memnoch asked. He rose before me, the granite angel of darkness, wings outstretched. Oh yes, blot out the

horrors of Hell, please, even in this most monstrous of forms! “You scream in Hell as you sang in Heaven. This is my kingdom, this is our work. Remember the Light!”

I fell back on my shoulder, hurting my left arm, but refusing to pull my right hand free of the veil. I saw the blue sky above in a flash and the peach blossoms blowing from the green leaves of the tree even as the luscious fruit itself clung to the branches.

Smoke stung my eyes. A woman on her knees said to me:

“I know now that no one can forgive me but myself, but how could I have done those things to her, and she so small, how could I.…”

“I thought it was the other things,” whispered a young girl who had hold of my neck, her nose touching mine as she spoke, “but you know that kindness, that just holding his hand and he.…”

“Forgive!” Memnoch said, and parted the way, gently pushing the souls aside. But the crowd crushed in; pale figures raced over me as if towards a respite I couldn’t see, or some source of alarm.

“Forgive!” Memnoch whispered.

He snatched up the monk covered with blood, his brown robes shredded, his feet blistered and burnt from deliberate fire. “In your heart, the power!” said Memnoch. “Be better than Him, better than Him, set Him an example.”

“I love … even Him.…” came the whisper from the soul’s lips as it suddenly dissolved. “Yes, He couldn’t have meant for us to suffer so … He couldn’t.”

“Did he pass the test!” I demanded. “Did that soul pass muster in this hellish place, what he just said? Was that enough! Ignorance of God, was that enough! Or is he here scrambling somewhere else in all this filth, or did the Tunnel take him up! Memnoch! Help me.”

Everywhere, I looked for the monk with the burnt feet. I looked and looked.

An explosion ripped the towers of the city and they tumbled. Was that the tolling of a bell! The huge mosque had collapsed. A man with a gun fired on those who fled. Veiled women cried out as they fell to the ground.

Louder and louder pealed the bell.

“Good God, Memnoch, a bell tolling, listen, more than one bell.”

“The bells of Hell, Lestat, and they are not toiling for anyone! They are

ringing for us, Lestat!"

He clutched my collar as if he'd lift me off my feet.

"Remember, your own words, Lestat, Hell's Bells, you hear the call of Hell's Bells!"

"No, let me go. I didn't know what I was saying. It was poetry. It was stupidity. Let me go. I can't stand it!"

Around the table under the lamp a dozen people argued over the map, some embracing each other as they pointed to various areas marked in dull colors. A head was turned. A man? A face. "You!"

"Let me go." I turned and was thrown against a wall of bookshelves, spines gleaming in the light, books tumbling, striking me on the shoulders, dear God, my limbs couldn't take any more. My fist went through the glittering globe of the world, mounted on its fancy arc of wood. A child with bent knees sat staring up at me with empty eye sockets.

I saw the doorway and ran.

"No, let me go. I cannot. I will not. I will not."

"Will not?" Memnoch caught me by my right arm, dark scowl looming over me, the wings flexing and rising, blotting out the light again as they closed to enfold me as though I were his own. "Will you not help me to empty this place, to send these souls to Heaven?"

"I can't do it!" I cried. "I won't do it!" Suddenly my fury rose. I felt it obliterate all fear and trembling and doubt; I felt it rush through my veins like molten metal. The old anger, the resolve of Lestat. "*I will not be part of this, not for you, not for Him, not for them, not for anyone!*"

I staggered backwards, glaring at him. "No, not this. Not for a God as blind as He, and not for one who demands what you demand of me. You're mad, the two of you! I won't help you. I won't. I refuse."

"You would do this to me, you would abandon me?" he cried, stricken, dark face convulsed with pain, tears shimmering on his shining black cheeks. "You would leave me with this, and not lift your hands to help me after all that you have done, Cain, slayer of Brothers, slayer of the Innocents, you cannot help me—?"

"Stop it, stop it. I won't. I can't support this. I can't help this to happen! I cannot create this! I cannot endure it! *I cannot teach in this school!*"

My throat was hoarse and burning, and the din seemed to swallow my

words but he heard them.

"No, no, I will not, not this fabric, not these rules, not this design, never, never, never!"

"Coward," he roared, the almond-shaped eyes immense, the fire flickering on the hard black forehead and cheeks. "I have your soul in my hands, I hand you your salvation at a price that those who have suffered here for millennia would beg for!"

"Not me. I won't be part of this pain, no, not now, not ever … Go to Him, change the rules, make it make sense, make it better, but not this, this is beyond human endurance, this is unfair, unfair, unfair, this is unconscionable."

"This is Hell, you fool! What did you expect? That you'd serve the Lord of Hell while suffering nothing?"

"I won't do it to them!" I screamed. "To hell with you and with me." My teeth were clenched. I seethed and stormed with my own conviction. "I will not participate in this with them! Don't you see? I cannot accept this! I cannot commit to it. I cannot abide it. I'm leaving you now, you gave me the choice, I'm going home! Release me!"

I turned.

He grabbed my arm again and this time the fury in me knew no bounds. I hurled him backwards over the dissolving and tumbling souls. The Helpful Dead turned here and there to witness and cry out, their pale oval faces full of alarm and distress.

"You go now," Memnoch swore, even as he lay still on the ground where I had thrown him. "And as God is my witness you come back my pupil and my student on your knees at death, and never again this offer to make you my prince, my helper!"

I froze, staring over my shoulder at him, at his fallen figure, his elbow digging into the soft black underdown of his wing as he rose to his cloven feet and came at me again, in that hobbled monstrous walk.

"Do you hear me!"

"I cannot serve you!" I roared at the top of my lungs. "I cannot do it."

Then I turned for the last time, knowing I would not look back, with only one thought in my mind, Escape! I ran and ran, sliding down the loose marl and the slippery bank, and stomping through the shallow streams and through the clumps of astonished Helpful Dead, and over wailing souls.

“Where is the stairs? Where are the gates? You can’t deny it to me. You have no right. Death has not taken me!” I shouted but I never looked back and I never stopped running.

“Dora! David, help me!” I called.

And there came Memnoch’s voice almost at my ear. “Lestat, don’t do this thing, don’t go. Don’t return. Lestat, don’t do it, it’s folly, don’t you see, please, for the love of God, if you can love Him at all and love them, help me!”

“NO!” I turned and gave him a great shove, seeing him stumble backwards down the steep stairs, the dazed figure amid the huge fluttering wings awkward and grotesque. I pivoted, turning my back on him. Ahead, I could see the light at the very top, the open door.

I ran for it.

“Stop him!” Memnoch cried. “Don’t let him out. Don’t let him take the veil with him.”

“He has Veronica’s veil!” cried one of the Helpful Dead lunging at me through the gloom.

My foot nearly slipped, yet on I ran, step after step, bounding, legs aching. I could feel them closing in, the Helpful Dead.

“Stop him.”

“Don’t let him go!”

“Stop him!”

“Get the veil from him,” Memnoch cried, “inside his shirt, the veil, the veil must not go with him!”

I waved my left hand, driving the Helpful Dead in a soft shapeless clatter against the cliff. High above loomed the door. I could see the light. I could see the light and I knew it was the light of Earth, brilliant and natural.

Memnoch’s hands clamped on my shoulders and he spun me around.

“No, you don’t!” I snarled. “God forgive me. You forgive me, but you’re not taking me or the veil!” I roared.

I raised my left arm to stave off his reaching, clawing hands, and shoved him again, but against me he flew as if his wings now came to his aid, and he almost pressed me back against the steps. I felt his fingers plunge into my left eye! I felt them drive open the lids, smashing my eye back into my head in an explosion of pain, and then the gelatinous mass slipped down my cheek, through my trembling fingers.

I heard Memnoch gasp.

"Oh no…." he wailed, his fingers to his lips, staring in horror at the same object at which I stared.

My eye, my round blue eye, shivering and gleaming on the stair. All the Helpful Dead stared at the eye.

"Step on it, crush it," cried one of the Helpful Dead and rushed forward. "Yes, crush it, step on it, smear it!" cried another, swooping down upon the sight.

"No, don't do that, don't! Stop, all of you!" Memnoch wailed. "Not in my kingdom, you will not!"

"Step on the eye!"

That was my moment, that was my chance.

I flew upwards, feet scarcely touching the steps, I felt my head and shoulders plunge through the light and the silence and into the snow.

And I was free.

I was on earth. My feet struck the frozen ground, the slippery sludge of snow.

I was running, one-eyed and bleeding, with the veil in my shirt, running through the driving storm, through the drifts of snow, my cries echoing up the buildings I knew, the dark, obdurate skyscrapers of the city I knew. Home, Earth.

The sun had only just set behind the dark gray veil of the descending storm, the winter twilight eaten up in darkness by the whiteness of the snow.

"Dora, Dora, Dora!"

On and on I ran.

Shadowy mortals slouched through the storm; shadowy humans hurried through small slippery paths, automobiles crawled through the blizzard, beams searching the rising, collecting whiteness. The snow was in such thick drifts that I fell and then scrambled to my knees; yet on I went.

The arches and the spires of St. Patrick's rose before me. St. Patrick's.

And beyond, the wall of the Olympic Tower driving upwards, its glass like polished stone, seemingly invincible, its height monstrous as if like the Tower of Babel it was trying to reach directly to Heaven.

I stopped, my heart about to burst.

"Dora! Dora!"

I reached the doors of the lobby, the dizzying lights, the slick floors, the press of mortals, solid mortals everywhere, turning to see what moved too swiftly to be seen. Woozy music and lulling lights, the gush of artificial warmth!

I found the stairwell and rose like a cinder going up a chimney in my flight, and crashed through the wooden door of the apartment, staggering into the room.

Dora.

I saw her, smelled her, smelled the blood from between her legs again, saw her tender little face, white and stricken, and on either side of her like goblins out of nursery rhymes and tales of hell, Armand and David, vampires, monsters, both staring at me in the same stark wonder.

I struggled to open the left eye that was no longer there, then turned my head this way and that to see the three of them distinctly with the one eye, the right eye, that I still had. I could feel a sharp tiny pain like so many needles in the empty tissues where my left eye had been.

Oh, the horror on Armand's face. In his old finery, he stood, heavy shopwindow velvet coat, modern lace, boots spiffed like glass. His face, the Botticelli angel still, torn with pain as he looked at me.

And David, the pity, the sympathy. Both figures transfixed in one, the elder Englishman and the young fine body into which he'd been locked, smothered in the tweed and cashmere garments of winter.

Monsters clothed as men but earthbound, real!

And the shining gamine figure of my Dora, my slender, yearning Dora with her huge black eyes.

"Darling, darling," Dora cried, "I am here!" Her small warm arms went round my aching shoulders, oblivious to the snow falling from my hair, from my clothes. I went down on my knees, my face buried in her skirts, near to the blood between her legs, the blood of the living womb, the blood of Earth, the blood of Dora that the body could give, and then I fell backwards onto the floor.

I could neither speak nor move. I felt her lips touch mine.

"You're safe now, Lestat," she said.

Or was it David's voice?

"You're with us," she said.

Or was it Armand?

"We're here."

"Look, look at his feet. He's got only one shoe left."

"… at his coat, torn … the buttons are gone."

"Darling, darling." She kissed me.

I rolled her over gently, careful not to press her with my weight, and I pulled up her skirt, and I lay my face against her hot naked thighs. The smell of the blood flooded my brain.

"Forgive me, forgive me," I whispered, and my tongue broke through the thin cotton of her panties, tearing the cloth back from the soft down of pubic hair, pushing aside the blood-stained pad she wore, and I lapped at the blood just inside her young pink vaginal lips, just coming from the mouth of her womb, not pure blood, but blood from her, blood from her strong, young body, blood all over the tight hot cells of her vaginal flesh, blood that brought no pain, no sacrifice, only her gentle forbearance with me, with my unspeakable act, my tongue going deep into her, drawing out the blood that was yet to come, gently, gently, lapping the blood from the soft hair on her pubic lips, sucking each tiny droplet of it.

Unclean, unclean. They cried on the road to Golgotha, when Veronica had said: "Lord, I touched the hem of your garment and my hemorrhage was healed." *Unclean, unclean.*

"Unclean, thank God, unclean," I whispered, my tongue licking at the secret bloodstained place, taste and smell of blood, her sweet blood, a place where blood flows free and no wound is made or ever needs to be made, the entrance to her blood open to me in her forgiveness.

Snow beat against the glass. I could hear it, smell it, the blinding white snow of a terrible blizzard for New York, a deep white winter, freezing all beneath its mantle.

"My darling, my angel," she whispered.

I lay panting against her. The blood was all gone inside me now. I had drawn all of it from her womb that was meant to come. I had licked away even what had collected on the pad that had lain against her skin.

She sat up, modestly covering me with her crossed arms, bending forward as if to shield me from their eyes—David's, Armand's—never once having pushed at me, or cried out, or recoiled, and she held my head now as I cried.

“You’re safe,” she said again. They said we were safe. They all said Safe, as if it had a magic charm. Safe, safe, safe.

“Oh, no,” I cried. I wept. “No, none of us are safe. And we will never be, never, ever again, ever….”

Twenty-two

I wouldn't let them touch me. I mean, I wouldn't give up anything just yet, not my torn shoe, nothing. Keep away your combs, your towels, your comfort. I clung to the secret inside my coat.

A shroud, that's what I asked for, some heavy thing to wrap about myself. They found it, a blanket, soft, woolen, didn't matter.

The place was almost empty.

They had been steadily moving Roger's treasures south. They told me. Mortal agents had been entrusted with this task, and most of the statues and the icons were gone down to the orphanage in New Orleans, and housed there in the empty chapel I had seen, where only the Crucified Christ had been. Some omen!

They had not quite finished these tasks. A few precious things remained, a trunk or two, boxes of papers. Files.

I'd been gone the space of three days. The news was filled with tales of Roger's death. Though they would not tell me how it had been discovered. The scramble for power in the world of the dark, criminal drug cartels was well under way. The reporters had stopped calling the TV station about Dora. No one knew about this place. No one knew she was here.

Few knew about the big orphanage to which she planned to return, when all Roger's relics had been moved.

The cable network had canceled her show. The gangster's daughter preached no more. She had not seen or spoken to her followers. In newspaper columns and in bites on television, she learnt that the scandal had made her vaguely mysterious. But in the main, she was considered a dead end, a small-time television evangelist with no knowledge of her father's doings.

But in the company of David and Armand, she had lost all contact with her former world, living here in New York, as the worst winter in fifty years came down, a snow from Heaven—living here among the relics and listening to them, their soft comfort, their wondrous tales, uncertain of what she meant to do, believing still in God.…

All that was the latest news.

I took the blanket from them and walked, one shoe gone, through the flat.

I went into the small room. I wrapped the blanket around me. The window here was covered. No sun would come.

"Don't come near me," I said. "I need to sleep a mortal's sleep. I need to sleep the night through and the day and then I'll tell you everything. Don't touch me, don't come near me."

"May I sleep in your arms?" Dora asked, a white and vibrant blood-filled thing standing in the doorway, her vampiric angels behind her.

The room was dark. Only a chest was left with some relics in it. But there were statues still in the hall.

"No. Once the sun rises, my body will do whatever it will to protect itself from any mortal intrusion. You can't come with me into that sleep. It's not possible."

"Then let me lie with you now."

The other two stared over her shoulders at my empty left eyelids fluttering painfully against each other. There must have been blood. But our blood is staunched fast. The eye had been torn out by the root. What was its root? I could still smell the soft delicious blood I had from her. It laid on my lips, her blood.

"Let me sleep," I said.

I locked the door and lay on the floor, knees drawn up, warm and safe in the thick folds of the blanket, smelling the pine needles and the soil that clung to my clothes, and the smoke, and the bits and pieces of dried excrement, and the blood, of course, the human blood, blood from battlefields, and blood from Hagia Sophia when the dead infant had fallen on me, and the smell of the horse manure, and the smell of the marl of Hell.

All of it was wrapped up with me in this blanket, my hand on the bulk of the unfolded veil against my bare chest.

"Don't come near me!" I whispered one more time for the ears of the immortals outside, who were so confounded and confused.

Then I slept.

Sweet rest. Sweet darkness.

Would that death were like this. Would that one would sleep and sleep and sleep forever.

Twenty-three

I remained unconscious the full twenty-four hours, waking only as the sun died behind the winter sky the next evening. There was a fine outlay of my own good clothes for me displayed on the wooden chest, and a pair of my own shoes.

I tried to imagine who had made this selection from amongst all that David had earlier sent here for me from the nearby hotel. Surely he was the logical choice. And I smiled, thinking of how often in our lives David and I had been utterly entangled in the adventure of clothes.

But you see, if a vampire leaves out details like clothes, the story doesn't make sense. Even the most grandiose mythic characters—if they are flesh and blood—do have to worry about the latchets on sandals.

It struck me with full force that I was back from the realm where clothes changed shape through the will of the clothed. That I was covered in dirt and did have only one shoe.

I stood up, fully alert, removed the veil carefully without unfolding it or chancing to look at it, though I thought I could see the dark image through the cloth. I removed all my garments with care, and then stacked them together on the blanket, so that not one pine needle would be lost that didn't have to be lost. And then I went into the nearby bathroom—the customary chamber of tile and ferocious steam—and bathed like a man being baptized in the Jordan. David had laid out for me all the requisite toys—combs, brushes, scissors. Vampires need almost nothing else, really.

All the while I had the door of the bathroom open. Had anyone dared to step into the bedroom I would have leapt from the steamy downpour and ordered that person out.

At last I myself emerged, wet and clean, combed my hair, dried carefully, and put on all of my own fresh garments from the inside out, that is from silk shorts and undershirt and black socks, to the clean wool pants, shirt, vest, and double-breasted blazer of a blue suit.

Then I bent down and picked up the folded veil. I held it, not daring to open it.

But I could see the darkness on the other side of the fabric. This time I was sure. I put the veil inside my vest, buttoning the vest tight.

I looked in the mirror. It was a madman in a Brooks Brothers suit, a demon with wild, frenzied blond locks, his collar open, staring with one horrible eye at himself in the mirror.

The eye, good God, the eye!

My fingers moved up to examine the empty socket, the slightly wrinkled lids that tried to close it off. What to do, what to do. If only I had a black patch, a gentleman's patch. But I didn't.

My face was desecrated by the missing eye. I realized I was shaking violently. David had left for me one of my broad, scarflike ties, of violet silk, and this I wrapped around my collar, making it stand up like a collar of old, very stiff, the scarf surrounding it with layer after layer as one might see in some portrait of Beethoven.

I tucked the tails of the scarf down into the vest. In the mirror, my eye burnt violet with the violet of the scarf. I saw the blackness on the left side, made myself look at it, rather than simply compensate for it.

I slipped on my shoes, stared back at the ruined clothes, picked up a few bits of dust and dried leaf, and laid all that carefully on the blanket, so that as little as possible would be lost, and then I went outside into the hallway.

The flat was sweetly warm, and full of a popular but not overpowering incense—something that made me think of Catholic churches of old, when the altar boy swung the silver censer at the end of his chain.

As I came into the living room, I saw the three of them very distinctly, ranged about the cheerfully lighted space, the even illumination making a mirror of the nightwalls beyond which the snow continued to descend upon New York. I wanted to see the snow. I walked past them and put my eye up against the glass. The whole roof of St. Patrick's was white with fresh snow, the steep spires shaking off as much as they could, though every speck of ornament was decorated in white. The street was an impassable valley of white. Had they ceased to plow it?

People of New York moved below. Were these only the living? I stared with my right eye. I could see only what seemed to be the living. I scanned the roof of the church in a near panic, suddenly, expecting to see a gargoyle wound into the artwork and discover that the gargoyle was alive and watching me.

But I had no feeling of anyone except those in the room, whom I loved, who were patiently waiting upon me and my melodramatic and self-indulgent silence.

I turned around. Armand had once again decked himself out in high-fashion velvet and embroidered lace, the kind of "romantic new look" one could find at any of the shops in the deep crevasse below us. His auburn hair was free and uncut and hung down in the way it used to do in ages long past, when as Satan's saint of the vampires of Paris, he would not have allowed himself the vanity to cut one lock of it. Only it was clean, shining clean, auburn in the light, and against the dark blood-red of his coat. And there were his sad and always youthful eyes looking at me, the smooth boyish cheeks, the angel's mouth. He sat at the table, reserved, filled with love and curiosity, and even a vague kind of humility which seemed to say:

Put aside all our disputes. I am here for you.

"Yes," I said aloud. "Thank you."

David sat there, the robust brown-haired young Anglo-Indian, juicy and succulent to behold as he had been since the night I made him one of us. He wore his English tweed, with leather-patched elbows, and a vest as tightly buttoned as my own, and a cashmere scarf protecting his neck from the cold to which perhaps, for all his strength, he wasn't yet really accustomed.

It's strange how we feel cold. You can ignore it. And then very suddenly, you can take it personally.

My radiant Dora sat next, opposite Armand, and David sat facing me between them. This left me the chair with its back to the glass and the sky if I wanted it. I stared at it. Such a simple object, a black lacquered chair, Oriental design, vaguely Chinese, mostly functional, obviously expensive.

Dora rose, her legs seeming to unfold beneath her. She wore a thin, long gown of burgundy silk, just a simple dress, the artificial warmth surrounding her obviously and keeping her safe. Her arms were bare and white. Her face was filled with worry, her cap of shiny black hair making two points on either side of her face, mid-cheek, the fashionable bob of eighty years ago and of today. Her eyes were the owl eyes, and full of love.

"What happened, Lestat?" she said. "Oh, please, please tell us."

“Where is the other eye?” asked Armand. It was just the sort of question he would ask. He had not risen to his feet. David, the Englishman, had risen, simply because Dora had risen, but Armand sat there looking up at me, asking the direct question. “What happened to it? Do you still have it?”

I looked at Dora. “They could have saved that eye,” I said, quoting her story of Uncle Mickey and the gangsters and the eye, “if only those gangsters hadn’t stepped on it!”

“What are you saying?” she said.

“I don’t know if they stepped on my eye,” I said, irritated by the tremour in my voice. The drama of my voice. “They weren’t gangsters, they were ghosts, and I fled, and I left my eye. It was my only chance. I left it on the step. Maybe they smashed it flat, or smeared it like a blob of grease, I don’t know. Was Uncle Mickey buried with his glass eye?”

“Yes, I think so,” Dora said in a daze. “No one ever told me.

I could sense the other two scanning her, Armand scanning me, their picking up the images of Uncle Mickey, kicked half to death in Corona’s Bar on Magazine Street, and the gangster with the pointed shoe squashing Uncle Mickey’s eye.

Dora gasped.

“What happened to you?”

“You’ve moved Roger’s things?” I asked. “Almost all of them?”

“Yes, they’re in the chapel at St. Elizabeth’s, safe,” Dora said. “St. Elizabeth’s.” That was the name of the orphanage in its lifetime. I had never heard her say it before. “No one will even think to look for them there. The press doesn’t care about me anymore. His enemies circle his corporate connections like vultures; they zero in on his bank accounts and floating bank drafts, and safe-deposit boxes, murdering for this or that key. Among his intimates, his daughter has been declared incidental, unimportant, ruined. No matter.”

“Thank God for that,” I said. “Did you tell them he was dead? Will it all end soon, his story, and what part you have to play in it?”

“They found his head,” said Armand quietly.

In a muted voice he explained. Dogs had dragged the head from a heap of garbage, and were fighting over it beneath a bridge. For an hour, an old man watched, warming himself by a fire, and then gradually he realized it was a human head that the dogs were fighting over and

gnawing at, and they brought the head to the proper authorities, and through the genetic testing of his hair and skin discovered that it was Roger. Dental plates didn't help. Roger's teeth had been perfect. All that remained was for Dora to identify it.

"He must have wanted it found," I said.

"What makes you say that?" asked David. "Where have you been?"

"I saw your mother," I said to Dora. "I saw her bottle-blond hair and her blue eyes. It won't be long before they're in Heaven."

"What on earth are you saying, my darling?" she asked. "My angel? What are you telling me?"

"Sit down, all of you. I'll tell you the whole tale. Listen to everything I say without interrupting. No, I don't want to sit, not with my back to the sky and the whirlwind and the snow and the church. No, I'll walk back and forth, listen to what I have to tell you.

"Remember this. Every word of this happened to me! I could have been tricked. I could have been deceived. But this is what I saw with my eyes, and heard with my ears!"

I told them everything, from the very, very beginning, some things each of them had already heard, but which all of them together had never heard—from my first fatal glimpse of Roger and my love for his brazen white-toothed smile and guilty, gleaming black eyes—all the way to the moment I had pitched myself through the door of the flat last night.

I told them everything. Every word spoken by Memnoch and God Incarnate. Everything I had seen in Heaven and in Hell and on Earth. I told them about the smell and the colors of Jerusalem. I told them and told them and told them.…

The story devoured the night. It ate the hours, as I paced, raving, repeating those parts I wanted to get exactly right, the stages of Evolution which had shocked the angels, and the vast libraries of Heaven, and the peach tree with both bloom and fruit, and God, and the soldier lying on his back in Hell, refusing to give in. I described to them the details of the interior of Hagia Sophia. I talked about the naked men on the battlefield. Over and over I described Hell. I described Heaven. I repeated my final speech, that I couldn't help Memnoch, I couldn't teach in this school!

They stared at me in utter silence.

“Do you have the veil?” Dora asked, her lip quivering. “Do you still have it?”

So tender was the tilt of her head, as if she’d forgive me in an instant if I said, No, I lost it in the street, I gave it to a beggar!

“The veil proves nothing,” I said. “Whatever is on the veil means nothing! Anyone who can make illusions like that can make a veil! It proves neither truth nor lies, neither trickery nor witchery nor theophany.”

“When you were in Hell,” she asked, so kindly, so gently, her white face shining in the warmth of the lamp, “did you tell Roger you had the veil?”

“No, Memnoch wouldn’t let me. And I only saw him for a minute, you see, one second it was one way, and then it was another. But he’s going up, I know he is, he’s going because he’s clever and he’s figured it out, and Terry will go with him! They will be in the arms of God unless God is a cheap magician and all of this was a lie, but a lie for what? For what purpose?”

“You don’t believe what Memnoch asked of you?” asked Armand.

Only at this moment did I realize how shaken he was, how like the boy he must have been when made a vampire, how young and full of earthly grace. He wanted it to be true!

“Oh, yes, I do!” I said. “I believed him, but it *could all be a lie*, don’t you see?”

“Didn’t you feel it was true,” asked Armand, “that he needed you?”

“What?” I demanded. “Are we back to that, arguing whether or not when we serve Satan we serve God? You and Louis arguing about that in the Theater of the Vampires, if we are children of Satan, are we children of God?”

“Yes!” said Armand. “Did you believe him?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t know!” I shouted it. “I hate God as much as I ever did. I resent them both, damn them!”

“And Christ?” Dora asked, her eyes filled with tears. “Was He sorry for us?”

“Yes, in His own way. Yes. Perhaps. Maybe. Who knows! But He didn’t go through the Passion as a man alone, as Memnoch had begged Him to do, He carried His cross as God Incarnate. I tell you their rules are not our rules! We have conceived of better rules! We are in the hands of mad

things!"

She broke into soft, sorrowful cries.

"Why are we never, never to know?" she cried.

"I don't know!" I declared. "I know they were there, that they appeared to me, that they let me see them. And still I don't know!"

David was scowling, scowling rather like Memnoch could scowl, deep in thought. Then he asked:

"And if it was all a series of images and tricks, things drawn from your heart and your mind, what was the purpose? If it was not a straight proposition that you become his lieutenant or prince, then what could have been the motive?"

"What do you think?" I asked. "They have my eye! I tell you not a word of it is a lie from me. They've got my bloody eye, damn it. I don't know what it was all about, unless it was true, absolutely true to the last syllable."

"We know you believe it's true," said Armand. "Yes, you believe it completely. You bore witness. I believe it's true. All of my long wandering through the valley of death, I've believed it was true!"

"Don't be a common fool," I said bitterly.

But I could see the flame in Armand's face; I could see the ecstasy and the sorrow in his eyes. I could see the entire galvanization of his form with belief, with conversion.

"The clothes," said David thoughtfully, calmly, "in the other room. You've gathered them all up, and the evidence will tell some scientific tale."

"Stop thinking like a scholar. These are Beings who play at a game only they can understand. What is it to them to make pine needles and dirt cling to my clothes, but yes, I saved those relics, yes, I've saved everything but my goddamned eye, which I left on the steps of Hell so I could get out. I, too, want to analyze the evidence on those clothes. I, too, want to know what forest it was where I walked and listened to him!"

"They let you get out," said David.

"If you could have seen his face when he saw that eye on the step," I said.

"What was it in his face?" Dora asked.

"Horror, horror that such a thing had happened. You see, when he

reached for me, I think that his two fingers, like this, went into the eye socket, overshooting the mark. He had merely meant to grab me by the hair. But when his fingers plunged into the socket, he tried in horror to draw them out, and out came the eye, spilling down my face, and he was horror-stricken!"

"You love him," said Armand in a hushed voice.

"I love him. Yes, I think he's right about everything. But I don't believe in anything!"

"Why didn't you accept?" asked Armand. "Why didn't you give him your soul?"

Oh, how innocent he sounded, how it came from his heart, ancient and childlike, a heart so preternaturally strong that it had taken hundreds of years to render it safe to beat in the company of mortal hearts.

Little Devil, Armand!

"Why didn't you accept!" he implored.

"They let you escape, and they had a purpose," said David. "It was like the vision I saw in the café."

"Yes, and they had a purpose," I said. "But did I defeat their purpose?" I looked to him for the answer, he the wise one, the old one in human years. "David, did I defeat them when I took you out of life? Did I defeat them somehow some other way? Oh, if only I could remember, their voices in the beginning. Vengeance. Someone said that it wasn't simple vengeance. But it was those fragments. I can't remember now What's happened! Will they come back for me?"

I fell to crying again. Stupid. I fell to describing Memnoch again, in all his forms, even the Ordinary Man, who had been so extraordinary in his proportions, the haunting footsteps, the wings, the smoke, the glory of Heaven, the singing of angels … "Sapphiric …" I whispered. "Those surfaces, all the things the prophets saw and sprinkled throughout their books with words like topaz and beryl and fire and gold and ice and snow, and it was all there … and He said, 'Drink my Blood!' I did it!"

They drew close to me. I'd scared them. I'd been too loud, too crazed, too possessed. They stood around me, their arms against me, her fiery white human arms, the warmest, the sweetest of all, and David's dark brow pushed against my face.

"If you let me," said Armand, his fingers slipping up to my collar, "if

you let me drink, then I'll know…."

"No, all you'll know is that I believe what I saw, that's all!" I said.

"No," he said, shaking his head. "I'll know the blood of Christ if I taste it."

I shook my head. "Back away from me. I don't even know what the veil will look like. Will it look like something with which I wiped my blood sweat in my sleep as I dreamt? Back away."

They obeyed. They were a loose triangle. I had my back to the inner wall so that I could see the snow on my left side, though I had to turn my head to the left now to do it. I looked at them. My right hand fumbled inside my vest, it drew out the thick wad, and I felt something, something tiny and strange which I could not explain to them, or put into words even for myself, I felt the weave, that weave of cloth, that ancient weave!

I drew out the veil, not looking myself, and held it up as if I were Veronica showing it to the crowd.

A silence gripped the room. A motionlessness.

Then I saw Armand go down on his knees. And Dora let out her long, keening cry.

"Dear God," said David.

Shivering, I lowered the veil, still held wide open with both hands, and turned it so I could see the reflection of the veil in the dark glass against the snow, as if it was the Gorgon and was going to kill me.

His Face! His Face blasted into the veil. I looked down. God Incarnate staring at me from the most minute detail, burnt into the cloth, not painted or stained, or sewn or drawn, but blasted into the very fibers, His Face, the Face of God in that instant, dripping with blood from His Crown of Thorns.

"Yes," I whispered. "Yes, yes." I fell on my knees. "Oh, yes, so very complete, down to the last detail."

I felt her take the veil. I would have snatched it back if either of them had tried. But into her small hand, I entrusted it, and she held it up now turning round and round, so that all of us could see His dark eyes shining from the cloth!

"It's God!" she screamed. "It's Veronica's Veil!" Her cry grew triumphant and then filled with joy. "Father, you've done it! You have given me the Veil!"

And she began to laugh, as one who had seen all the visions one can endure to see, dancing round and round, with the veil held high, singing one syllable over and over again.

Armand was shattered, broken, on his knees, the blood tears running straight down his cheeks, horrid streaks on the white flesh.

Humbled and confounded, David merely watched. Keenly, he studied the veil as it moved through the air, her hands still stretching it wide. Keenly, he studied my face. He studied the slumped, broken, sobbing figure of Armand, the lost child in his exquisite velvet and lace now stained with his tears.

"Lestat," Dora cried, tears gushing, "you have brought me the Face of my God! You have brought it to all of us. Don't you see? Memnoch lost! Memnoch was defeated. God won! God used Memnoch for his own ends, he led Memnoch into the labyrinth of Memnoch's own design. God has triumphed!"

"No, Dora, no! You can't believe that," I shouted. "What if it isn't the truth? What if it was all a pack of tricks. Dora!"

She shot past me down the corridor and out the door. We three stood stunned. We could hear the elevator descending. She had the veil!

"David, what is she going to do? David, help me."

"Who can help us now?" asked David, but it was without conviction or bitterness, only that pondering, that endless pondering. "Armand, take hold of yourself. You cannot surrender to this," he said. His voice was sad.

But Armand was lost.

"Why?" Armand asked. He was just a child now on his knees. "Why?"

This is how he must have looked centuries ago when Marius had come to free him from his Venetian captors, a boy kept for lust, a boy brought into the palace of the Undead.

"Why can't I believe it? Oh, my God, I *do* believe it. It is the face of Christ!"

He climbed to his feet, drunkenly, and then he moved slowly, doggedly, step by step, after her.

By the time we reached the street, she stood screaming before the doors of the cathedral.

"Open the doors! Open the church. I have the veil." She kicked the bronze doors with her right foot. All around her gathered mortals,

murmuring.

"The Veil, the Veil!" They stared at it, as she stopped to turn and show it once more. Then all pounded on the doors.

The sky above grew light with the coming sun, far, far off in the maw of the winter, but nevertheless rising in its inevitable path, to bring its fatal white light down on us if we didn't seek shelter.

"Open the doors!" she screamed.

From all directions, humans came, gasping, falling on their knees when they saw the Veil.

"Go," said Armand, "seek shelter now, before it's too late. David, take him, go."

"And you, what will you do?" I demanded.

"I will bear witness. I will stand here with my arms outstretched," he cried, "and when the sun rises, my death shall confirm the miracle."

The mighty doors were being opened at last. The dark-clad figures drew back in astonishment. The first gleam of silver light illuminated the Veil, and then came the warmer, yellow electric lights from within, the lights of candles, the rush of the heated air.

"The Face of Christ!" she screamed.

The priest fell down on his knees. The older man in black, brother, priest, whatever he was, stood openmouthed looking up at it.

"Dear God, dear God," he said, making the Sign of the Cross. "That in my lifetime, God … it's the Veronica!"

Humans rushed past us, stumbling and jostling to follow her into the church. I heard their steps echoing up the giant nave.

"We have no time," David said in my ear. He had lifted me off my feet, strong as Memnoch, only there was no whirlwind, only the risen winter dawn, and the falling snow, and more and more shouts and howls and cries as men and women flooded towards the church, and the bells above in the steeples began to ring.

"Hurry, Lestat, with me!"

We ran together, already blinded by the light, and behind me I heard Armand's voice ring out over the crowd.

"Bear witness, this sinner dies for Him!" The scent of fire came in a fierce explosion! I saw it blaze against the glass walls of the towers as we fled. I heard the screams.

"Armand!" I cried out. David pulled me along, down metal steps,

echoing and chiming like the bells pealing from the cathedral above.

I went dizzy; I surrendered to him. I gave up my will to him. In my grief, crying, “Armand, Armand.”

Slowly I made out David’s figure in the dark. We were in a damp icy place, a cellar beneath a cellar, beneath the high shrieking hollow of an empty wind-torn building. He was digging through the broken earth.

“Help me,” he cried, “I’m losing all feeling, the light’s coming, the sun is risen, they’ll find us.”

“No, they won’t.”

I kicked and dug out the grave, carrying him with me deeper and deeper, and closing the soft clods of earth behind us. Not even the sounds of the city above could penetrate this darkness. Not even the bells of the church.

Had the Tunnel opened for Armand? Had his soul gone up? Or was he wandering through the Gates of Hell?

“Armand,” I whispered. And as I closed my eyes, I saw Memnoch’s stricken face: *Lestat, help me!*

With my last bit of feeling, I reached to make sure the Veil was there. But no, the Veil was gone. I’d given Dora the Veil. Dora had the Veil and Dora had taken it into the church.

You would never be my adversary!

TWENTY-FOUR

We sat together on the low wall, Fifth Avenue, edge of Central Park. Three nights had passed like this. We had watched.

For as far as we could see uptown the line formed, five and six deep, men and women and children, singing, stamping their feet to keep warm, nuns and priests hurrying back and forth offering hot chocolate and tea to those who were freezing. Fires burned in large drums at intervals of so many feet. As far as the eye could see.

And downtown, on and on it went, past the glittering displays of Bergdorf Goodman and Henri Bendel, the furriers, the jewelers, the bookstores of midtown, until it wound its way into the cathedral.

David stood with folded arms, barely leaning on the wall, his ankles crossed. I was the one who sat like a kid, with my knee up, my ravaged one-eyed face upturned, my chin on my knuckled fist, resting my elbow on my knee, just listening to them.

Far ahead one could hear screams and shouts. Someone else had no doubt touched a clean napkin to the Veil, and once again the image had been transferred! And so it would be again sometime tomorrow night, and maybe once the night after and how many times nobody knew, except that the icon made the vera-icon out of the cloth touched to it, and the face blazed from cloth to cloth, like flame touched from wick to wick.

"Come on," David said. "We're getting cold here. Come, let's walk."

We walked.

"Why?" I asked. "Up there, to see the same thing we saw last night, and the night before? So that I can struggle to get to her again, knowing that any show of force, any preternatural gift only confirms the entire miracle! She won't listen to me ever again. You know she won't. And who is gathered on the steps now, who will immolate himself at dawn to confirm the miracle?"

"Mael is there."

"Ah, yes, the Druid priest, once a priest, always a priest. And so this will be his morning to fall like Lucifer in a blaze."

Last night it had been some ragged vagabond blood drinker, come from God knows where, unknown to us, but becoming a preternatural torch at dawn for the banks of video cameras and newspaper photographers. The papers were filled with the pictures of the blaze. Filled with the pictures of the Veil itself.

"Here, wait," I said. We had come to Central Park South. The crowd here was all singing in concert that old solemn, militant hymn:

Holy God, we praise thy Name
Lord of All, we bow before thee!

I stood staring at them, dazed. The pain in my left eye socket seemed worse but what could be changing there, except that with each passing hour I felt the depth.

"You're fools, all of you!" I shouted. "Christianity is the bloodiest religion that ever existed in the world. I can bear witness!"

"Hush now, and do as I tell you," David said, pulling me along, so that we vanished amongst the ever-shifting people on the icy sidewalks before anyone could have turned to look. Over and over he had restrained me this way. He was weary of it. I didn't blame him.

Once, policemen had laid hands on me.

They had caught me and tried to pull me out of the cathedral as I was trying to talk to her, and then when they had me outside, slowly they had all backed away. They had sensed I wasn't alive, the way mortals do. They had sensed, and they had muttered about the Veil and the miraculous, and there it had been, my impotence.

Policemen were all over. Policemen everywhere stood on guard to help, to give out the warm tea, to put their pale shivering hands out over the flames in the drums.

Nobody noticed us. Why should they? We were just two men, drab, part of the crowd, our gleaming skin was nothing much in this blinding whiteness of snow amid these ecstatic pilgrims, wandering from valley to valley of song.

The bookstore windows were piled with Bibles, books on Christology. There was a huge pyramid of a lavender-covered book called *Veronica and Her Cloth* by Ewa Kuryluk, and another stack of *Holy Faces, Secret Places* by Ian Wilson.

People sold pamphlets on the street, or even gave them away. I could hear accents from all parts of the country—from Texas, and Florida and Georgia and California.

Bibles, Bibles, Bibles, being sold and given away.

A group of nuns gave out holy pictures of St. Veronica. But the hottest items were the color photographs of the Veil itself, snapped in the church by photographers and then reprinted by the thousands.

"Amazing grace, amazing grace.…" sang one group in unison, rocking back and forth as they held their places in line.

"Gloria, in excelsus deum!" burst from a long-bearded man with his arms outstretched.

As we drew nearer the church, we could see little clusters and crowds engaged in seminars everywhere. In the midst of one, a young man spoke, rapid, sincere:

"In the fourteenth century, she was officially recognized as a saint, Veronica, and it was believed that the Veil was lost during the Fourth Crusade when the Venetians stormed Hagia Sophia." He stopped to push his glasses back on his nose. "Of course the Vatican will take its time to rule on this, as it always does, but seventy-three icons have already been derived from the original icon, and this before the eyes of countless witnesses who are prepared to testify before the Holy See."

In another place, there were several dark-clad men, priests perhaps, I couldn't tell, and around them rings of those listening, eyes squinting against the snow.

"I'm not saying the Jesuits cannot come," said one of the men. "I just said that they aren't coming in here and taking over. Dora has asked that the Franciscans be the custodians of the Veil, if and when it leaves the cathedral."

And behind us, two women rapidly concurred that tests had already been done, the age of the cloth was beyond dispute.

"They don't even grow that kind of flax anymore in the world; you couldn't find a new piece of such fabric, the fabric itself in its newness and cleanness is a miracle."

"… all bodily fluids, every part of the image, derived from fluids of a human body. They have not had to hurt the Veil to discover this! This is … this.…"

"… enzyme action. But you know how these things get distorted."

“No, not *The New York Times. The New York Times* isn’t going to say that three archaeologists have ruled it authentic.”

“Not authentic, my friend, just beyond present scientific explanation.”

“God and the Devil are idiots!” I said.

A group of women turned to stare at me. “Accept Jesus as your Savior, son,” said one of the women. “Go look for yourself at the Veil. He died for our sins.”

David pulled me away. No one paid us any mind. The little schools continued far and wide, the clumps of philosophers and witnesses, and those waiting for the spellbound to stumble down the steps from the church, with tears running down their faces.

“I saw it, I saw it, it was the Face of Christ.”

And back against the arch, cleaved to it, like a tall spidery shadow, the figure of the vampire Mael, almost invisible to them perhaps, waiting to step into the light of dawn with his arms outstretched in the form of a cross.

Once again, he looked at us with sly eyes.

“You too!” he said, under his breath to us, sending his preternatural voice secretly to our ears. “Come, face the sun, with your arms outstretched! Lestat, God chose you as his Messenger.”

“Come,” David said. “We’ve seen enough for this night and many nights hereafter.”

“And where do we go?” I asked. “Stop, stop pulling my arm. David? Did you hear me?”

“I’ve stopped,” he said politely, lowering his voice as if to instruct me to lower mine. The snow fell so softly now. Fire crackled in the nearby black iron drum.

“The books, what happened to them?” How in God's name could I have forgotten.

“What books?” he asked. And he pulled me out of the way of the passersby, against a shopwindow, behind which a little crowd stood, enjoying the private warmth inside, looking towards the church.

“The books of Wynken de Wilde. Roger’s twelve books! What happened to them?”

“They’re there,” he said. “Up there in the tower. She left them for you. Lestat, I’ve explained this to you. Last night, she spoke to you.”

“In the presence of all those others, it was impossible to speak the

truth."

"She told you the relics were yours now."

"We have to get the books!" I said. Oh, what a fool I was to forget those beautiful books.

"Be calm, Lestat, be quiet. Stop making them stare at you. The flat is the same, I told you. She hasn't told anyone about it. She has surrendered it to us. She will not tell them that we were ever there. She has promised me. She has given the deed to the Orphanage to you, Lestat, don't you see? She has cut all ties with her former life. Her old religion is dead, abolished. She is reborn, the custodian of the Veil."

"But we don't know!" I roared. "We'll never know. How can she accept it when we don't know and we can't know!" (He pushed me against the wall.) "I want to go back and get the books," I said.

"Of course, we will do this if you wish." How tired I was.

On the pavements the people sang: " 'And He walks with me, and He talks with me, and lets me call Him by name.' "

The apartment was undisturbed.

As far as I could tell, she had never returned. None of us had. David had come to check, and David had been telling the truth. All was as it had been.

Except, in the tiny room where I had slept there stood only the chest. My clothes and the blanket on which they'd lain, covered with the same dirt and pine needles from an ancient forest floor, were all gone.

"Did you take them?"

"No," he said. "I believe she did. They are the tattered relics of the angelic messenger. The Vatican officials have them, as far as I know."

I laughed. "And they'll analyze all that material, the bits of organic matter from the forest floor."

"The clothes of the Messenger of God, it was already in the papers," he said. "Lestat, you must come to your senses. You cannot blunder through the mortal world like this. You are a risk to yourself, to others. You are a risk to everything out there. You must contain your power."

"Risk? After this, what I've done, creating a miracle, like this, a new infusion of blood into the very religion that Memnoch loathed. Oh God!"

"Sssssshhhh. Quiet," he said. "The chest, there. The books are in the chest."

Ah, so the books had been in this little room, where I had slept. I was

consoled, so consoled. I sat there, my legs crossed, rocking back and forth, crying. Oh, this is so weird to cry with one eye! God, are tears coming out of the left eye? I don't think so. I think he ripped away the ducts, what do you think?

David stood in the hallway. The light from the distant glass wall made his profile icy and calm.

I reached over and opened the lid of the chest. It was made of wood, a Chinese chest, carved deep with many figures. And there were the twelve books, each wrapped as we had wrapped them so carefully, and all padded and safe and dry. I didn't have to open them to know.

"I want us to leave now," David said. "If you begin crying out again, if you begin trying to tell people again…."

"Oh, I know how tired you are, my friend," I said. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." From riot after riot, he'd torn me and dragged me out of the sight of mortal eyes.

I thought about those policemen again. I hadn't even been resisting them. I thought about the way they backed off one by one, as if from something so inherently unwholesome that their molecules told them to do it. Back off.

And she spoke of a Messenger from God. She was so certain.

"We have to leave it now," he said. "It's done. Others are coming. I don't want to see the others. Do you? Do you want to answer the questions of Santino or Pandora or Jesse or whoever might come! What more can we do? I want to leave now."

"You believe I was his fool, don't you?" I asked, looking up at him.

"Whose fool? God's or the Devil's?"

"That's just it," I said. "I don't know. You tell me what you believe."

"I want to go," he said, "because if I do not go now, I will join them this morning on the church steps—Mael and whoever else is there. And there are others coming. I know them. I see them."

"No, you can't do that! What if every particle of it was a he! What if Memnoch wasn't the Devil, and God wasn't God, and the whole thing was some hideous hoax worked on us by monsters who are no better than we are! You can't ever think of joining them on the church steps! The earth is what we have! Cling to it! You don't know. You don't know about the whirlwind and Hell. You don't know. Only He knows the rules. Only He is supposed to speak the truth! And Memnoch over and over

described Him as if He were Mad, a Moral Idiot."

He turned slowly, the light playing with the shadows of his face. Softly he asked, "His blood, Lestat, could it truly be inside you?"

"Don't start believing it!" I said. "Not you! No. Don't believe. I refuse to play. I refuse to take either side! I brought the Veil back so you and she would believe what I said, that's all I did, and this, this madness has happened!"

I swooned.

I saw the Light of Heaven for an instant, or it seemed I did. I saw Him standing at the balustrade. I smelled that fierce horrid smell that had arisen so often from the earth, from battlefields, from the floors of Hell.

David knelt beside me, holding me by my arms.

"Look at me, don't fade out on me now!" he said. "I want us to leave here, we're to go away. You understand? We'll go back home. And then I want you to tell me the whole story again, dictate it to me, word for word."

"For what?"

"In the words we'll find the truth, in the details and in the plot we'll discover who did what for whom. Whether God used you, or Memnoch did! Whether Memnoch was lying the whole time! Whether God.…"

"Ah, it makes your head ache, doesn't it? I don't want you to write it down. There will only be a version if you write it down, a version, and there are already so many versions, what has she told them of her night visitors who brought her the Veil, her benign demons who brought her the Veil? And they took my clothes! What if there is tissue from my skin on those clothes?"

"Come now, take the books, here, I'll help you, here, there are three sacks here but we need only two, you put this bundle in yours, and I'll take the other."

I obeyed his orders. We had the books in the two sacks. We could go now.

"Why did you leave them here when you sent all the other things back?"

"She wanted you to have them," he said. "I told you. She wanted me to see that they were put in your hands. And she's given you all the rest. All ties are cut for her. This is a movement drawing fundamentalist and fanatic, cosmic Christians and Christians from East and West."

“I have to try to get near her again.”

“No. Impossible. Come. Here. I have a heavy coat. You must put this on.”

“Are you going to care for me forever?” I asked.

“Perhaps.”

“Why don’t I go to her now in the church and burn up the Veil! I could do it. I could do it with the power of my mind, make the Veil explode.”

“Then why don’t you?”

I shuddered. “I … I.…”

“Go ahead. You don’t even have to go in the church. Your powers go before you. You could burn it up, maybe. It would be interesting if it didn’t burn, wouldn’t it? But suppose it did, suppose it just went black and burnt up like the wood in a grate when you light it with the telekinetic power of your mind. What then?”

I broke into weeping. I couldn’t do such a thing. I couldn’t do it. I didn’t know for sure! I just didn’t. And if I had been the dupe of God, was that God’s will for all of us?

“Lestat!” He glared at me, or rather I should say, he fixed me with his authoritative gaze. “I’m telling you now, listen to what I say. Don’t get that close to them again! Don’t make any more miracles for them. There is nothing more that you can do. Let her tell the tale her way with her angel messenger. It’s passed into history already.”

“I want to talk one more time to the reporters!”

“No!”

“This time I’ll be soft-voiced, I promise, I won’t frighten anyone, I swear I won’t, David.…”

“In time, Lestat, if you still want … in time.…” He bent down and smoothed my hair. “Now come with me. We’re going.”

Twenty-five

The orphanage was cold. Its thick brick walls, bare of all insulation, held the cold, and made it colder within than the winter outside. Seems I remembered that from before. Why had she given it to me? Why? She had given over the deed to me, and all his relics. What did it mean? Only that she was gone like a comet across the sky.

Was there a country on earth where the news networks had not carried her face, her voice, her Veil, her story?

But we were home, this was our city, New Orleans, our little land, and there was no snow falling here, only the soft scent of the sweet olive trees, and the tulip magnolias in the old neglected convent garden throwing off their pink petals. Look at that, pink petals on the ground.

So quiet here. No one knew of this place. So now the Beast could have his palace and remember Beauty and ponder forever whether Memnoch was weeping in Hell, or whether both of them—the Sons of God—were laughing in Heaven!

I walked into the chapel.

I had thought to find drapery and heaps and cartons and crates.

Rather, it was a completed sanctuary. Everything was placed properly as it should be, unwrapped, and dusted, and standing there in the gloom. Statues of St. Anthony, St. Lucy with her eyes on a plate, the Infant Jesus of Prague in his Spanish finery, and the icons hanging on the walls, between the windows, look, all neatly hung.

"But who has done this?"

David was gone. Where? He'd be back. It didn't matter. I had the twelve books. I needed a warm place to sit, perhaps on the altar steps, and I needed light. With this one eye, I needed just a little more than the night's light leaking in through the tall stained-glass windows.

A figure stood in the vestibule. Scentless. Vampire. My fledgling. Has to be. Young. Louis. Inevitable.

"Did you do all of this?" I asked. "Arrange things here in the church so beautifully?"

"It seemed the right thing to do," he said. He walked towards me. I

saw him clearly, though I had to turn my head to focus the one eye on him, and stop trying to open a left eye which wasn't there.

Tall, pale, starved a bit. Black hair short. Green eyes very soft. Graceful walk of one who does not like to make noise, or make a fuss, or be seen. Plain black clothes, clothes like the Jews in New York who had gathered outside the cathedral, watching the whole spectacle, and like the Amish who had come by train, plain and simple, like the expression on his face.

"Come home with me," he said. Such a human voice. So kind. "There's time to come here and reflect. Wouldn't you rather be home, in the Quarter, amongst our things?"

If anything in the world could have truly comforted me, he would have been the thing—with just the beguiling tilt of his narrow head or the way that he kept looking at me, protecting me obviously with a confidential calm from what he must have feared for me, and for him, and perhaps for all of us.

My old familiar gentleman friend, my tender enduring pupil, educated as truly by Victorian ways of courtesy as ever by me in the ways of being a monster. What if Memnoch had called upon him? Why didn't Memnoch do that!

"What have I done?" I asked. "Was it the will of God?"

"I don't know," he said. He laid his soft hand on mine. His slow voice *was* a balm to my nerves. "Come home. I've listened for hours, to the radio, to the television, to the story of the angel of the night who brought the Veil. The Angel's tattered clothes have been given over to the hands of priests and scientists. Dora is laying on hands. The Veil has made cures. People are pouring into New York from all over the world. I'm glad you're back. I want you here."

"Did I serve God? Is that possible? A God I still hate?"

"I haven't heard your tale," he said. "Will you tell me?" Just that direct, without emotion. "Or is it too much of an agony to say it all again?"

"Let David write it down," I said. "From memory." I tapped my temple. "We have such good memories. I think some of the others can remember things that never actually happened."

I looked around. "Where are we? Oh, my God, I forgot. We're in the chapel. There's the angel with the basin in its hands, and that Crucifix, that was there already."

How stiff and lifeless it looked, how unlike the shining Veil.

"Do they show the Veil on the evening news?"

"Over and over." He smiled. No mockery. Only love.

"What did you think, Louis, when you saw the Veil?"

"That it was the Christ I once believed in. That it was the Son of God I knew when I was a boy and this was swampland." His voice was patient. "Come home. Let's go. There are … things in this place."

"Are there?"

"Spirits? Ghosts?" He didn't seem afraid. "They're small, but I feel them, and you know, Lestat, I don't have your powers." Again came his smile. "So you must know. Don't you feel them?"

I shut my eyes. Or, rather, my eye. I heard a strange sound like many, many children walking in ranks. "I think they're singing the times tables."

"And what are those?" Louis asked. He squeezed my arm, bending close. "Lestat, what are the times tables?"

"Oh, you know, the way they used to teach them multiplication in those days, they must have sung it in the classrooms, two times two makes four, two times three makes six, two times four makes eight … isn't that how it goes … They're singing it."

I stopped. Someone was there, in the vestibule, right outside the chapel, between the doors to the hall and the doors to the chapel, in the very shadows where I had hidden from Dora.

It was one of our kind. It had to be. And it was old, very old. I could feel the power. Someone was there who was so ancient that only Memnoch and God Incarnate would have understood, or.… Louis, maybe, Louis, if he believed his memories, his brief glimpses, his brief shattering experiences with the very ancient, perhaps.…

Still, he wasn't afraid. He was watching me, on guard, but basically fearless.

"Come on, I'm not standing in dread of it!" I said. And I walked towards it. I had the two sacks of books slung over my right shoulder, the fabric tight in my left hand. That allowed my right hand to be free. And my right eye. I still had that. Who was this visitor?

"That's David there," said Louis in a simple placating voice, as if to say, See? You have nothing to worry about.

"No, next to him. Look, look more deeply into the blackness. See, the

figure of a woman, so white, so hard, she might as well be a statue in this place?

"Maharet!" I said.

"I am here, Lestat," she said.

I laughed.

"And wasn't that the answer of Isaiah when the Lord called? 'I am here, Lord'?"

"Yes," she said. Her voice was barely audible, but clear and cleaned by time, all the thickness of the flesh long gone from it.

I drew closer, moving out of the chapel proper and into the little vestibule. David stood beside her, like her anointed Second in Command, as if he would have done her will in an instant, and she the eldest, well, almost the eldest, the Eve of Us, the Mother of Us All, or the only Mother who remained, and now as I looked at her, I remembered the awful truth again, about her eyes, that when she was human, they had blinded her, and the eyes through which she looked now were always borrowed, human.

Bleeding in her head, human eyes, lifted from someone dead or alive, I couldn't know, and put into her sockets to thrive on her vampiric blood as long as they could. But how weary they seemed in her beautiful face. What had Jesse said? She is made of alabaster. And alabaster is a stone through which light can pass.

"I won't take a human eye," I said under my breath.

She said nothing. She had not come to judge, to recommend. Why had she come? What did she want?

"You want to hear the tale too?"

"Your gentle English friend says that it happened as you described it. He says the songs they sing on the televisions are true; that you are the Angel of the Night, and you brought her the Veil, and that he was there, and he heard you tell."

"I am no angel! I never meant to give her the Veil! I took the Veil as proof. I took the Veil because…."

My voice had broken.

"Because why?" she asked.

"Because Christ gave it to me!" I whispered. "He said, 'Take it,' and I did."

I wept. And she waited. Patient, solemn. Louis waited. David waited.

Finally I stopped.

"Write down every word, David, if you write it, every ambiguous word, you hear me? I won't write it myself. I won't. Well, maybe … if I don't think you're getting it exactly right, I'll write it, I'll write it one time through. What do you want? Why have you come? No, I won't write it. Why are you here, Maharet, why have you shown yourself to me? Why have you come to the Beast's new castle, for what? Answer me."

She said nothing. Her long, pale-red hair went down to her waist. She wore some simple fashion that could pass unnoticed in many lands, a long, loose coat, belted around her tiny waist, a skirt that covered the tops of her small boots. The blood scent of the human eyes in her head was strong. And blazing in her head, these dead eyes looked ghastly to me, unsupportable.

"I won't take a human eye!" I said. But I had said that before. Was I being arrogant or insolent? She was so powerful. "I won't take a human *life,*" I said. That had been what I meant. "I will never, never, never as long as I live and endure and starve and suffer, take a human life, nor raise my hand against a fellow creature, be he human or one of us, I do not care, I won't … I am … I will … with my last strength, I won't.…"

"I'm going to keep you here," she said. "As a prisoner. For a while. Until you're quieter."

"You're mad. You're not keeping me anywhere."

"I have chains waiting for you. David, Louis—you will help me.

"What is this? You two, you dare? Chains, we are talking about chains? What am I, Azazel cast into the pit? Memnoch would get a good laugh at this, if he hadn't turned his back on me forever!"

But none of them had moved. They stood motionless, her immense reservoir of power totally disguised by her slender white form. And they were suffering. Oh, I could smell the suffering.

"I have this for you," she said. She extended her hand. "And when you read it you will scream and you will weep, and we'll keep you here, safe and quiet, until such time as you stop. That's all. Under my protection. In this place. You will be my prisoner."

"What! What is it?" I demanded.

It was a crumpled piece of parchment.

"What the hell is this!" I said. "Who gave you this?" I didn't want to

touch it.

She took my left hand with her absolutely irresistible strength, forcing me to drop the books in their sacks, and she placed the little crumpled bundle of parchment in my palm.

"It was given to me for you," she said.

"By whom?" I demanded.

"The person whose writing you will find inside. Read it."

"What the hell!" I swore. With my right fingers I tore open the crumpled vellum.

My eye. My eye shone there against the writing. This little package contained my eye, my eye wrapped in a letter. My blue eye, whole and alive.

Gasping, I picked it up and pushed it into my face, into the sore aching socket, feeling its tendrils reach back into the brain, tangling with the brain. The world flared into full vision.

She stood staring at me.

"Scream, will I?" I cried. "Scream, why? What do you think I see? I see only what I saw before!" I cried. I looked from right to left, the appalling patch of darkness gone, the world complete, the stained glass, the still trio watching me. "Oh, thank you, God!" I whispered. But what did this mean? Was it a prayer of thanks, or merely an exclamation!

"Read," she said, "what is written on the vellum."

An archaic hand, what was this? An illusion! Words in a language that was no language at all, yet clearly articulated so that I could pick them out of the swarming design, written in blood and ink and soot:

To My Prince,

My Thanks to you for a job
perfectly done.

with Love,

Memnoch
the Devil

I started to roar. "Lies, lies, lies!" I heard the chains. "What metal is it

you think can bind me, cast me down! Damn you. Lies! You didn't see him. He didn't give you this!"

David, Louis, her strength, her inconceivable strength, strength, since the time immemorial, before the first tablets had been engraved at Jericho—it surrounded me, enclosed me. It was she more than they; I was her child, thrashing and cursing at her.

They dragged me through the darkness, my howls echoing off the walls, into the room they had chosen for me with its bricked-up windows, lightless, a dungeon, the chains going round and round as I thrashed.

"It's lies, it's lies, it's lies! I don't believe it! If I was tricked it was by God!" I roared and roared. "He did it to me. It's not real unless He did it, God Incarnate. Not Memnoch. No, never, never. Lies!"

Finally I lay there, helpless. I didn't care. There was a comfort in being chained, in being unable to batter the walls with my fists till they were pulp, or smash my head against the bricks, or worse.…

"Lies, lies, it's all a great big panorama of lies! That's all I saw! One more circus maximus of lies!"

"It's not all lies," she said. "Not all of it. That's the age-old dilemma."

I fell silent. I could feel my left eye growing deeper and stronger into my brain. I had that. I had my eye. And to think of his face, his horror-stricken face when he looked at my eye, and the story of Uncle Mickey's eye. I couldn't grasp it. I'd start howling again.

Dimly I thought I heard Louis's gentle voice, protesting, pleading, arguing. I heard locks thrown, I heard nails going through wood. I heard Louis begging.

"For a while, just a little while.…" she said. "He is too powerful for us to do anything else. It is either that, or we do away with him."

"No," Louis cried.

I heard David protest, no, that she couldn't. "I will not," she said calmly. "But he will stay here until I say that he can leave."

And they were gone.

"Sing," I whispered. I was talking to the ghosts of the children. "Sing. …"

But the convent was empty. All the little ghosts had fled. The convent was mine. Memnoch's servant; Memnoch's prince. I was alone in my prison.

TWENTY-SIX

Two nights, three nights. Outside in the city of the modern world the traffic ran along the broad avenue. Couples passed, whispering in the evening shadows. A dog howled.

Four nights, five nights?

David sat by me reading me the manuscript of my story word for word, all I had said, as he remembered this, stopping over and over again, to ask if this was correct, if these were the very words I'd used, if this was the image. And she would answer.

From her place in the corner, she would say, "Yes, that is what he saw, that is what he told you. That is what I see in his mind. Those are his words. That is what he felt."

Finally, it must have been after a week, she stood over me and asked if I thirsted for blood. I said, "I will never drink it again. I will dry up like something hard made of limestone. They will throw me into a kiln."

One night Louis came, with the quiet ease of a chaplain into a jail, immune to the rules yet presenting no threat to them.

Slowly, he sat down beside me and folded his legs, and looked off as though it was not polite to stare at me, the prisoner, wrapped in chains and rage.

He laid his fingers on my shoulder. His hair had a reasonable and fashionable look to it—that is, it was clipped and combed and not full of dust. His clothes were clean and new, too, as if he had perhaps dressed for me.

I smiled to myself at that, his dressing for me. But from time to time he did, and when I saw that the shirt had antique buttons of gold and pearl, I knew that he had, and I accepted that the way a sick man accepts a cool cloth on his forehead.

His fingers pressed me just a little harder, and I liked this too. But I didn't have the slightest interest in saying so.

"I've been reading Wynken's books," he said. "You know, I picked them up. I went back for them. We'd left them in the chapel." And now, he did glance at me very respectfully and simply.

“Oh, thank you for that,” I said. “I dropped the books in the dark. I dropped them when I reached for the eye, or did she take my hand? Whatever, I let the sacks fall with the books. I can’t budge these chains. I can’t move.”

“I’ve taken the books home to our place in the Rue Royale. They’re there, like so many jewels strewn out for us to gaze at.”

“Yes. Have you looked at the tiny pictures, I mean, really looked?” I asked. “I’ve never really looked. I just … it was all happening so quickly, and I didn’t really open the books. But if you could have seen his ghost in the bar and heard the way he described them.”

“They are glorious. They are magnificent. You will love them. You have years of pleasure ahead with them and the light at your side. I’ve only begun to look at them and to read. With a magnifying glass. But you won’t need the glass. Your eyes are stronger than mine.”

“We can read them perhaps … you and I … together.”

“Yes … all his twelve books,” he said. He talked softly of many miraculous little images, of tiny humans, and beasts and flowers, and the lion lying down with the lamb.

I closed my eyes. I was grateful. I was content. He knew I didn’t want to talk anymore.

“I’ll be down there, in our rooms,” he said, “waiting for you. They can’t keep you here much longer.”

What is longer?

It seemed the weather grew warm.

David might have come.

Sometimes I shut my eyes and my ears and I refused to listen to any sound that was deliberately directed to me. I heard the cicadas singing when the sky was red still from the sun, and other vampires were asleep. I heard the birds swooping down on the limbs of the oaks on Napoleon Avenue. I heard the children!

The children did come. Singing. And sometimes some one or two speaking in a rapid whisper, as if exchanging confidences beneath a tent made from a sheet. And feet on the stairs.

And then from beyond the walls, the blaring, amplified noise of the electric night.

One evening I opened my eyes and the chains were gone.

I was alone and the door was open.

My clothes were in tatters, but I didn't care. I stood up, creakily, achingly, and for the first time in a fortnight, perhaps, I put my hand to my eye and felt it secure there, though of course I'd always seen through it. And I'd stopped thinking about it long ago.

I walked out of the orphanage, through the old courtyard. For one moment I thought I saw a set of iron swings, the kind they made for children on old playgrounds. I saw the A-frames at each end, the crossbar, and the swings themselves, and the children swinging, little girls with blowing hair, and I could hear them laughing. I looked up, dazed, at the stained-glass windows of the chapel.

The children were gone. The courtyard was empty. My palace now. She'd cut all ties. She was long gone to her great, great victory.

I walked a long time down St. Charles Avenue.

I walked under oaks I knew, on old pavements and stretches of brick, past houses new and old, and on across Jackson Avenue into the curious mix of taverns and neon signs, of boarded-up buildings and ruined houses and fancy shops, the garish waste that stretches to downtown.

I came to an empty store that had once sold expensive automobiles. For fifty years, they'd sold those fancy cars in this place, and now it was a big, hollow room with glass walls. I could see my reflection perfectly in the glass. My preternatural vision was mine again, flawless, with both blue eyes.

And I saw myself.

I want you to see me now. I want you to look at me, as I present myself, and as I swear to this tale, as I swear on every word of it, from my heart.

I am the Vampire Lestat. This is what I saw. This is what I heard. This is what I know! This is *all* I know.

Believe in me, in my words, in what I have said and what has been written down.

I am here, still, the hero of my own dreams, and let me please keep my place in yours.

I am the Vampire Lestat.

Let me pass now from fiction into legend.

THE END

9:43 February 28, 1994
Adieu, mon amour

For
Stan Rice, Christopher Rice
and
Michele Rice

For
John Preston

For
Howard and Katherine Allen O'Brien

For
Katherine's brother John Allen,
Uncle Mickey
and for
Uncle Mickey's son, Jack Allen,
and all the descendants
of Jack

And for
Uncle Marian Leslie,
who was in Corona's Bar on that night

With love for you
and for
all our kith and kin
this book
is
dedicated

Anne Rice

The Vampire Armand

A BALLANTINE e BOOK

THE VAMPIRE ARMAND

THE VAMPIRE CHRONICLES

by

ANNE RICE

Ballantine Books • New York

A Ballantine Books Trade Paperback Edition Published by The Random House Publishing Group

Copyright © 1983 by Anne O'Brien Rice *A Conversation with Anne Rice* copyright © 1999 by Anne O'Brien Rice and The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc.

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Ballantine Books, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc.

Ballantine and colophon are registered trademarks of Random House, Inc.

www.ballantinebooks.com

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 99-90163

eISBN: 978-0-345-46453-8

This edition published by arrangement with Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

v3.1

Contents

Master Table of Contents

Cover
Title Page
Copyright

Part I: Body and Blood
- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Chapter 3
- Chapter 4
- Chapter 5
- Chapter 6
- Chapter 7
- Chapter 8
- Chapter 9
- Chapter 10
- Chapter 11
- Chapter 12
- Chapter 13
- Chapter 14
- Chapter 15

Part II: The Bridge of Sighs
- Chapter 16

Part III: Appassionata
- Chapter 17

Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25

Dedication
Conversation with Anne Rice author of The Vampire Armand

Jesus, speaking to Mary Magdalene:

Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not;
for I am not yet ascended to my Father:
but go to my brethren, and say unto them,
I ascend unto my Father, and your Father;
and to my God, and your God.

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST. JOHN 20:17

PART I

BODY and BLOOD

1

They said a child had died in the attic. Her clothes had been discovered in the wall.

I wanted to go up there, and to lie down near the wall, and be alone.

They'd seen her ghost now and then, the child. But none of these vampires could see spirits, really, at least not the way that I could see them. No matter. It wasn't the company of the child I wanted. It was to be in that place.

Nothing more could be gained from lingering near Lestat. I'd come. I'd fulfilled my purpose. I couldn't help him.

The sight of his sharply focused and unchanging eyes unnerved me, and I was quiet inside and full of love for those nearest me—my human children, my dark-haired little Benji and my tender willowy Sybelle—but I was not strong enough just yet to take them away.

I left the chapel.

I didn't even take note of who was there. The whole convent was now the dwelling place of vampires. It was not an unruly place, or a neglected place, but I didn't notice who remained in the chapel when I left.

Lestat lay as he had all along, on the marble floor of the chapel in front of the huge crucifix, on his side, his hands slack, the left hand just below the right hand, its fingers touching the marble lightly, as if with a purpose, when there was no purpose at all. The fingers of his right hand curled, making a little hollow in the palm where the light fell, and that too seemed to have a meaning, but there was no meaning.

This was simply the preternatural body lying there without will or animation, no more purposeful than the face, its expression almost defiantly intelligent, given that months had passed in which Lestat had not moved.

The high stained-glass windows were dutifully draped for him before sunrise. At night, they shone with all the wondrous candles scattered

about the fine statues and relics which filled this once sanctified and holy place. Little mortal children had heard Mass under this high coved roof; a priest had sung out the Latin words from an altar.

It was ours now. It belonged to him—Lestat, the man who lay motionless on the marble floor.

Man. Vampire. Immortal. Child of Darkness. Any and all are excellent words for him.

Looking over my shoulder at him, I never felt so much like a child.

That's what I am. I fill out the definition, as if it were encoded in me perfectly, and there had never been any other genetic design.

I was perhaps seventeen years old when Marius made me into a vampire. I had stopped growing by that time. For a year, I'd been five feet six inches. My hands are as delicate as those of a young woman, and I was beardless, as we used to say in that time, the years of the sixteenth century. Not a eunuch, no, not that, most certainly, but a boy.

It was fashionable then for boys to be as beautiful as girls. Only now does it seem something worthwhile, and that's because I love the others —my own: Sybelle with her woman's breasts and long girlish limbs, and Benji with his round intense little Arab face.

I stood at the foot of the stairs. No mirrors here, only the high brick walls stripped of their plaster, walls that were old only for America, darkened by the damp even inside the convent, all textures and elements here softened by the simmering summers of New Orleans and her clammy crawling winters, green winters I call them because the trees here are almost never bare.

I was born in a place of eternal winter when one compares it to this place. No wonder in sunny Italy I forgot the beginnings altogether, and fashioned my life out of the present of my years with Marius. "I don't remember." It was a condition of loving so much vice, of being so addicted to Italian wine and sumptuous meals, and even the feel of the warm marble under my bare feet when the rooms of the palazzo were sinfully, wickedly heated by Marius's exorbitant fires.

His mortal friends … human beings like me at that time … scolded constantly about these expenditures: firewood, oil, candles. And for Marius only the finest candles of beeswax were acceptable. Every fragrance was significant.

Stop these thoughts. Memories can't hurt you now. You came here for

a reason and now you have finished, and you must find those you love, your young mortals, Benji and Sybelle, and you must go on.

Life was no longer a theatrical stage where Banquo's ghost came again and again to seat himself at the grim table.

My soul hurt.

Up the stairs. Lie for a little while in this brick convent where the child's clothes were found. Lie with the child, murdered here in this convent, so say the rumormongers, the vampires who haunt these halls now, who have come to see the great Vampire Lestat in his Endymionlike sleep.

I felt no murder here, only the tender voices of nuns.

I went up the staircase, letting my body find its human weight and human tread.

After five hundred years, I know such tricks. I could frighten all the young ones—the hangers-on and the gawkers—just as surely as the other ancient ones did it, even the most modest, uttering words to evince their telepathy, or vanishing when they chose to leave, or now and then even making the building tremble with their power—an interesting accomplishment even with these walls eighteen inches thick with cypress sills that will never rot.

He must like the fragrances here, I thought. Marius, where is he? Before I had visited Lestat, I had not wanted to talk very much to Marius, and had spoken only a few civil words when I left my treasures in his charge.

After all, I had brought my children into a menagerie of the Undead. Who better to safeguard them than my beloved Marius, so powerful that none here dared question his smallest request.

There is no telepathic link between us naturally—Marius made me, I am forever his fledgling—but as soon as this occurred to me, I realized without the aid of this telepathic link that I could not feel the presence of Marius in the building. I didn't know what had happened in that brief interval when I knelt down to look at Lestat. I didn't know where Marius was. I couldn't catch the familiar human scents of Benji or Sybelle. A little stab of panic paralyzed me.

I stood on the second story of the building. I leaned against the wall, my eyes settling with determined calm on the deeply varnished heart pine floor. The light made pools of yellow on the boards.

Where were they, Benji and Sybelle? What had I done in bringing them here, two ripe and glorious humans? Benji was a spirited boy of twelve, Sybelle, a womanling of twenty-five. What if Marius, so generous in his own soul, had carelessly let them out of his sight?

"I'm here, young one." The voice was abrupt, soft, welcome.

My Maker stood on the landing just below me, having come up the steps behind me, or more truly, with his powers, having placed himself there, covering the preceding distance with silent and invisible speed.

"Master," I said with a little trace of a smile. "I was afraid for them for a moment." It was an apology. "This place makes me sad."

He nodded. "I have them, Armand," he said. "The city seethes with mortals. There's food enough for all the vagabonds wandering here. No one will hurt them. Even if I weren't here to say so, no one would dare."

It was I who nodded now. I wasn't so sure, really. Vampires are by their very nature perverse and do wicked and terrible things simply for the sport of it. To kill another's mortal pet would be a worthy entertainment for some grim and alien creature, skirting the fringes here, drawn by remarkable events.

"You're a wonder, young one," he said to me smiling. Young one! Who else would call me this but Marius, my Maker, and what is five hundred years to him? "You went into the sun, child," he continued with the same legible concern written on his kind face. "And you lived to tell the tale."

"Into the sun, Master?" I questioned his words. But I myself did not want to reveal any more. I did not want to talk yet, to tell of what had happened, the legend of Veronica's Veil and the Face of Our Lord emblazoned upon it, and the morning when I had given up my soul with such perfect happiness. What a fable it was.

He came up the steps to be near me, but kept a polite distance. He has always been the gentleman, even before there was such a word. In ancient Rome, they must have had a term for such a person, infallibly good mannered, and considerate as a point of honor, and wholly successful at common courtesy to rich and poor alike. This was Marius, and it had always been Marius, insofar as I could know.

He let his snow-white hand rest on the dull satiny banister. He wore a long shapeless cloak of gray velvet, once perfectly extravagant, now downplayed with wear and rain, and his yellow hair was long like

Lestat's hair, full of random light and unruly in the damp, and even studded with drops of dew from outside, the same dew clinging to his golden eyebrows and darkening his long curling eyelashes around his large cobalt-blue eyes.

There was something altogether more Nordic and icy about him than there was about Lestat, whose hair tended more to golden, for all its luminous highlights, and whose eyes were forever prismatic, drinking up the colors around him, becoming even a gorgeous violet with the slightest provocation from the worshipful outside world.

In Marius, I saw the sunny skies of the northern wilderness, eyes of steady radiance which rejected any outside color, perfect portals to his own most constant soul.

"Armand," he said. "I want you to come with me."

"Where is that, Master, come where?" I asked. I too wanted to be civil. He had always, even after a struggle of wits, brought such finer instincts out of me.

"To my house, Armand, where they are now, Sybelle and Benji. Oh, don't fear for them for a second. Pandora's with them. They are rather astonishing mortals, brilliant, remarkably different, yet alike. They love you, and they know so much and have come with you rather a long way."

I flushed with blood and color; the warmth was stinging and unpleasant, and then as the blood danced back away from the surface of my face, I felt cooler and strangely enervated that I felt any sensations at all.

It was a shock being here and I wanted it to be over.

"Master, I don't know who I am in this new life," I said gratefully. "Reborn? Confused?" I hesitated, but there was no use stopping it. "Don't ask me to stay here just now. Maybe some time when Lestat is himself again, maybe when enough time has passed—. I don't know for certain, only that I can't accept your kind invitation now."

He gave me a brief accepting nod. With his hand he made a little acquiescent gesture. His old gray cloak had slipped off one shoulder. He seemed not to care about it. His thin black wool clothes were neglected, lapels and pockets trimmed in a careless gray dust. That was not right for him.

He had a big shock of white silk at his throat that made his pale face

seem more colored and human than it otherwise would. But the silk was torn as if by brambles. In sum, he haunted the world in these clothes, rather than was dressed in them. They were for a stumbler, not my old Master.

I think he knew I was at a loss. I was looking up at the gloom above me. I wanted to reach the attic of this place, the half-concealed clothing of the dead child. I wondered at this story of the dead child. I had the impertinence to let my mind drift, though he was waiting.

He brought me back with his gentle words:

"Sybelle and Benji will be with me when you want them," he said. "You can find us. We aren't far. You'll hear the *Appassionata* when you want to hear it." He smiled.

"You've given her a piano," I said. I spoke of golden Sybelle. I had shut out the world from my preternatural hearing, and I didn't want just yet to unstop my ears even for the lovely sound of her playing, which I already missed overly much.

As soon as we'd entered the convent, Sybelle had seen a piano and asked in a whisper at my ear if she could play it. It was not in the chapel where Lestat lay, but off in another long empty room. I had told her it wasn't quite proper, that it might disturb Lestat as he lay there, and we couldn't know what he thought, or what he felt, or if he was anguished and trapped in his own dreams.

"Perhaps when you come, you'll stay for a while," Marius said. "You'll like the sound of her playing my piano, and maybe then we'll talk together, and you can rest with us, and we can share the house for as long as you like."

I didn't answer.

"It's palatial in a New World sort of way," he said with a little mockery in his smile. "It's not far at all. I have the most spacious gardens and old oaks, oaks far older than those even out there on the Avenue, and all the windows are doors. You know how I like it that way. It's the Roman style. The house is open to the spring rain, and the spring rain here is like a dream."

"Yes, I know," I whispered. "I think it's falling now, isn't it?" I smiled.

"Well, I'm rather spattered with it, yes," he said almost gaily. "You come when you want to. If not tonight, then tomorrow …"

"Oh, I'll be there tonight," I said. I didn't want to offend him, not in

the slightest, but Benji and Sybelle had seen enough of white-faced monsters with velvet voices. It was time to be off.

I looked at him rather boldly, enjoying it for a moment, overcoming a shyness that had been our curse in this modern world. In Venice of old, he had gloried in his clothes as men did then, always so sharp and splendidly embellished, the glass of fashion, to use the old graceful phrase. When he crossed the Piazza San Marco in the soft purple of evening, all turned to watch him pass. Red had been his badge of pride, red velvet—a flowing cape, and magnificently embroidered doublet, and beneath it a tunic of gold silk tissue, so very popular in those times.

He'd had the hair of a young Lorenzo de' Medici, right from the painted wall.

"Master, I love you, but now I must be alone," I said. "You don't need me now, do you, Sir? How can you? You never really did." Instantly I regretted it. The words, not the tone, were impudent. And our minds being so divided by intimate blood, I was afraid he'd misunderstand.

"Cherub, I want you," he said forgivingly. "But I can wait. Seems not long ago I spoke these same words when we were together, and so I say them again."

I couldn't bring myself to tell him it was my season for mortal company, how I longed just to be talking away the night with little Benji, who was such a sage, or listening to my beloved Sybelle play her sonata over and over again. It seemed beside the point to explain any further. And the sadness came over me again, heavily and undeniably, of having come to this forlorn and empty convent where Lestat lay, unable or unwilling to move or speak, none of us knew.

"Nothing will come of my company just now, Master," I said. "But you will grant me some key to finding you, surely, so that when this time passes …" I let my words die.

"I fear for you!" he whispered suddenly, with great warmth.

"Any more than ever before, Sir?" I asked.

He thought for a moment. Then he said, "Yes. You love two mortal children. They are your moon and stars. Come stay with me if only for a little while. Tell me what you think of our Lestat and what's happened. Tell me perhaps, if I promise to remain very quiet and not to press you, tell me your opinion of all you've so recently seen."

"You touch on it delicately, Sir, I admire you. You mean why did I

believe Lestat when he said he had been to Heaven and Hell, you mean what did I see when I looked at the relic he brought back with him, Veronica's Veil."

"If you want to tell me. But more truly, I wish you would come and rest."

I put my hand on top of his, marveling that in spite of all I'd endured, my skin was almost as white as his.

"You will be patient with my children till I come, won't you?" I asked. "They imagine themselves so intrepidly wicked, coming here to be with me, whistling nonchalantly in the crucible of the Undead, so to speak."

"Undead," he said, smiling reprovingly. "Such language, and in my presence. You know I hate it."

He planted a kiss quickly on my cheek. It startled me, and then I realized that he was gone.

"Old tricks!" I said aloud, wondering if he were still near enough to hear me, or whether he had shut up his ears to me as fiercely as I shut mine to the outside world.

I looked off, wanting the quiet, dreaming of bowers suddenly, not in words but in images, the way my old mind would do it, wanting to lie down in garden beds among growing flowers, wanting to press my face to earth and sing softly to myself.

The spring outside, the warmth, the hovering mist that would be rain. All this I wanted. I wanted the swampy forests beyond, but I wanted Sybelle and Benji, too, and to be gone, and to have some will to carry on.

Ah, Armand, you always lack this very thing, the will. Don't let the old story repeat itself now. Arm yourself with all that's happened.

Another was nearby.

It seemed so awful to me suddenly, that some immortal whom I didn't know should intrude here on my random private thoughts, perhaps to make a selfish approximation of what I felt.

It was only David Talbot.

He came from the chapel wing, through the bridge rooms of the convent that connect it to the main building where I stood at the top of the staircase to the second floor.

I saw him come into the hallway. Behind him was the glass of the door that led to the gallery, and beyond that the soft mingled gold and white

light of the courtyard below.

"It's quiet now," he said. "And the attic's empty and you know that you can go there, of course."

"Go away," I said. I felt no anger, only the honest wish to have my thoughts unread and my emotions left alone.

With remarkable self-possession he ignored me, then said:

"Yes, I am afraid of you, a little, but then terribly curious too."

"Oh, I see, so that excuses it, that you followed me here?"

"I didn't follow you, Armand," he said. "I live here."

"Ah, I'm sorry then," I admitted. "I hadn't known. I suppose I'm glad of it. You guard him. He's never alone." I meant Lestat of course.

"Everyone's afraid of you," he said calmly. He had taken up a position only a few feet away, casually folding his arms. "You know, it's quite a study, the lore and habits of the vampires."

"Not to me," I said.

"Yes, I realize that," he said. "I was only musing, and I hope you'll forgive me. It was about the child in the attic, the child they said was murdered. It's a tall story, about a very small little person. Maybe if your luck is better than that of everyone else, you'll see the ghost of the child whose clothes were shut up in the wall."

"Do you mind if I look at you?" I said. "I mean if you're going to dip your beak into my mind with such abandon? We met some time ago before all this happened—Lestat, the Heavenly Journey, this place. I never really took stock of you. I was indifferent, or too polite, I don't know which."

I was surprised to hear such heat in my voice. I was volatile, and it wasn't David Talbot's fault.

"I'm thinking of the conventional knowledge about you," I said. "That you weren't born in this body, that you were an elderly man when Lestat knew you, that this body you inhabit now belonged to a clever soul who could hop from living being to living being, and there set up shop with his own trespassing soul."

He gave me a rather disarming smile.

"So Lestat said," he answered. "So Lestat wrote. It's true, of course. You know it is. You've known since you saw me before."

"Three nights we spent together," I said. "And I never really questioned you. I mean I never really even looked directly into your

eyes."

"We were thinking of Lestat then."

"Aren't we now?"

"I don't know," he said.

"David Talbot," I said, measuring him coldly with my eyes, "David Talbot, Superior General of the Order of Psychic Detectives known as the Talamasca, had been catapulted into the body in which he now walks." I didn't know whether I paraphrased or made it up as I went along. "He'd been entrenched or chained inside it, made a prisoner by so many ropey veins, and then tricked into a vampire as a fiery unstanchable blood invaded his lucky anatomy, sealing his soul up in it as it transformed him into an immortal—a man of dark bronzed skin and dry, lustrous and thick black hair."

"I think you have it right," he said with indulgent politeness.

"A handsome gent," I went on, "the color of caramel, moving with such cadike ease and gilded glances that he makes me think of all things once delectable, and now a potpourri of scent: cinnamon, clove, mild peppers and other spices golden, brown or red, whose fragrances can spike my brain and plunge me into erotic yearnings that live now, more than ever, to play themselves out. His skin must smell like cashew nuts and thick almond creams. It does."

He laughed. "I get your point."

I had shocked myself. I was wretched for a moment. "I'm not sure I get myself," I said apologetically.

"I think it's plain," he said. "You want me to leave you alone."

I saw the preposterous contradictions in all this at once.

"Look," I whispered quickly. "I'm deranged," I whispered. "My senses cross, like so many threads to make a knot: taste, see, smell, feel. I'm rampant."

I wondered idly and viciously if I could attack him, take him, bring him down under my greater craft and cunning and taste his blood without his consent.

"I'm much too far along the road for that," he said, "and why would you chance such a thing?"

What self-possession. The older man in him did indeed command the sturdier younger flesh, the wise mortal with an iron authority over all things eternal and supernaturally powerful. What a blend of energies!

Nice to drink his blood, to take him against his will. There is no such fun on Earth like the raping of an equal.

"I don't know," I said, ashamed. Rape is unmanly. "I don't know why I insult you. You know, I wanted to leave quickly. I mean I wanted to visit the attic, and then be out of here. I wanted to avoid this sort of infatuation. You are a wonder, and you think me a wonder, and it's rich."

I let my eyes pass over him. I'd been blind to him when we met last, that was most true.

He dressed to kill. With the cleverness of olden times, when men could preen like peacocks, he'd chosen golden sepia and umber colors for his clothes. He was smart and clean and fretted all over with careful bits of pure gold, in a wristband timepiece and buttons and a slender pin for his modern tie, that tailored spill of color men wear in this age, as if to let us grab them all the more easily by its noose. Stupid ornament. Even his shirt of polished cotton was tawny and full of something of the sun and the warmed earth. Even his shoes were brown, glossy as beetles' backs.

He came towards me.

"You know what I'm going to ask," he said. "Don't wrestle with these unarticulated thoughts, these new experiences, all this overwhelming understanding. Make a book out of it for me."

I couldn't have predicted that this would be his question. I was surprised, sweetly so, but nevertheless taken off guard.

"Make a book? I? Armand?"

I went towards him, turned sharply and fled up the steps to the attic, skirting the third floor and then entering the fourth.

The air was thick and warm here. It was a place daily baked by the sun. All was dry and sweet, the wood like incense and the floors splintery.

"Little girl, where are you?" I asked.

"Child, you mean," he said.

He had come up behind me, taking a bit of time for courtesy's sake.

He added, "She was never here."

"How do you know?"

"If she were a ghost, I could call her," he said.

I looked over my shoulder. "You have that power? Or is this just what you want to say to me right now? Before you venture further, let me

warn you that we almost never have the power to see spirits."

"I'm altogether new," David said. "I'm unlike any others. I've come into the Dark World with different faculties. Dare I say, we, our species, vampires, have evolved?"

"The conventional word is stupid," I said. I moved further into the attic. I spied a small chamber with plaster and peeling roses, big floppy prettily drawn Victorian roses with pale fuzzy green leaves. I went into the chamber. Light came from a high window out of which a child could not have seen. Merciless, I thought.

"Who said that a child died here?" I said. All was clean beneath the soil of years. There was no presence. It seemed perfect and just, no ghost to comfort me. Why should a ghost come from some savory rest for my sake?

So I could cuddle up perhaps to the memory of her, her tender legend.

How are children murdered in orphanages where only nuns attend? I never thought of women as so cruel. Dried up, without imagination perhaps, but not aggressive as we are, to kill.

I turned round and round. Wooden lockers lined one wall, and one locker stood open, and there the tumbled shoes were, little brown Oxfords, as they called them, with black strings, and now I beheld, where it had been behind me, the broken and frayed hole from which they'd ripped her clothes. All fallen there, moldy and wrinkled they lay, her clothes.

A stillness settled on me as if the dust of this place were a fine ice, coming down from the high peaks of haughty and monstrously selfish mountains to freeze all living things, this ice, to close up and stop forever all that breathed or felt or dreamed or lived.

He spoke in poetry:

" 'Fear no more the heat of the sun,' " he whispered. " 'Nor the furious winter's rages. Fear no more …' "

I winced with pleasure. I knew the verses. I loved them.

I genuflected, as if before the Sacrament, and touched her clothes. "And she was little, no more than five, and she didn't die here at all. No one killed her. Nothing so special for her."

"How your words belie your thoughts," he said.

"Not so, I think of two things simultaneously. There's a distinction in being murdered. I was murdered. Oh, not by Marius, as you might think,

but by others."

I knew I spoke soft and in an assuming way, because this wasn't meant for pure drama.

"I'm trimmed in memories as if in old furs. I lift my arm and the sleeve of memory covers it. I look around and see other times. But you know what frightens me the most—it is that this state, like so many others with me, will prove the verge of nothing but extend itself over centuries."

"What do you really fear? What did you want from Lestat when you came here?"

"David, I came to see him. I came to find out how it was with him, and why he lies there, unmoving. I came—." I wasn't going to say any more.

His glossy nails made his hands look ornamental and special, caressive, comely and lovely with which to be touched. He picked up a small dress, torn, gray, spotted with bits of mean lace. Everything dressed in flesh can yield a dizzying beauty if you concentrate on it long enough, and his beauty leapt out without apology.

"Just clothes." Flowered cotton, a bit of velvet with a puffed sleeve no bigger than an apple for the century of bare arms by day and night. "No violence at all surrounding her," he said as if it were a pity. "Just a poor child, don't you think, and sad by nature as well as circumstance."

"And why were they walled up, tell me that! What sin did these little dresses commit?" I sighed. "Good God, David Talbot, why don't we let the little girl have her romance, her fame? You make me angry. You say you can see ghosts. You find them pleasant? You like to talk with them. I could tell you about a ghost—."

"When will you tell me? Look, don't you see the trick of a book?" He stood up, and dusted off his knee with his right hand. In his left was her gathered dress. Something about the whole configuration bothered me, a tall creature holding a little girl's crumpled dress.

"You know, when you think of it," I said, turning away, so I wouldn't see the dress in his hand, "there's no good reason under God for little girls and little boys. Think of it, the other tender issue of mammals. Among puppies or kittens or colts, does one find gender? It's never an issue. The half-grown fragile thing is sexless. There is no determination. There is nothing as splendid to look at as a little boy or girl. My head is

so full of notions. I rather think I'll explode if I don't do something, and you say make a book for you. You think it's possible, you think …"

"What I think is that when you make a book, you tell the tale as you would like to know it!"

"I see no great wisdom in that."

"Well, then think, for most speech is a mere issue of our feelings, a mere explosion. Listen, note the way that you make these outbursts."

"I don't want to."

"But you do, but they are not the words you want to read. When you write, something different happens. You make a tale, no matter how fragmented or experimental or how disregarding of all conventional and helpful forms. Try this for me. No, no, I have a better idea."

"What?"

"Come down with me into my rooms. I live here now, I told you. Through my windows you can see the trees. I don't live like our friend Louis, wandering from dusty corner to dusty corner, and then back to his flat in the Rue Royale when he's convinced himself once more andfor the thousandth time that no one can harm Lestat. I have warm rooms. I use candles for old light. Come down and let me write it, your story. Talk to me. Pace, and rant if you will, or rail, yes, rail, and let me write it, and even so, the very fact that I write, this in itself will make you make a form out of it. You'll begin to …"

"What?"

"To tell me what happened. How you died and how you lived."

"Expect no miracles, perplexing scholar. I didn't die in New York that morning. I almost died."

He had me faintly curious, but I could never do what he wanted. Nevertheless he was honest, amazingly so, as far as I could measure, and therefore sincere.

"Ah, so, I didn't mean literally. I meant that you should tell me what it was like to climb so high into the sun, and suffer so much, and, as you said, to discover in your pain all these memories, these connecting links. Tell me! Tell me."

"Not if you mean to make it coherent," I said crossly. I gauged his reaction. I wasn't bothering him. He wanted to talk more.

"Make it coherent? Armand, I'll simply write down what you say." He made his words simple yet curiously passionate.

“Promise?”

I flashed on him a playful look. Me! To do that.

He smiled. He wadded up the little dress and then dropped it carefully so it might fall in the middle of the pile of her old clothes.

“I’ll not alter one syllable,” he said. “Come be with me, and talk to me, and be my love.” Again, he smiled.

Suddenly he came towards me, much in the aggressive manner in which I’d thought earlier to approach him. He slipped his hands under my hair, and felt of my face, and then he gathered up the hair and he put his face down into my curls, and he laughed. He kissed my cheek.

“Your hair’s like something spun from amber, as if the amber would melt and could be drawn from candle flames in long fine airy threads and let to dry that way to make all these shining tresses. You’re sweet, boylike and pretty as a girl. I wish I had one glimpse of you in antique velvet the way you were for him, for Marius. I wish I could see for one moment how it was when you dressed in stockings and wore a belted doublet sewn with rubies. Look at you, the frosty child. My love doesn’t even touch you.”

This wasn’t true.

His lips were hot, and I could feel the fangs under them, feel the urgency suddenly in his fingers pressing against my scalp. It sent the shivers through me, and my body tensed and then shuddered, and it was sweet beyond prediction. I resented this lonely intimacy, resented it enough to transform it, or rid myself of it utterly. I’d rather die or be away, in the dark, simple and lonely with common tears.

From the look in his eyes, I thought he could love without giving anything. Not a connoisseur, just a blood drinker.

“You make me hungry,” I whispered. “Not for you but for one who is doomed and yet alive. I want to hunt. Stop it. Why do you touch me? Why be so gentle?”

“Everyone wants you,” he said.

“Oh, I know. Everyone would ravage a guilty cunning child! Everyone would have a laughing boy who knows his way around the block. Kids make better food than women, and girls are all too much like women, but young boys? They’re not like men, are they?”

“Don’t mock me. I meant I wanted only to touch you, to feel how soft you are, how eternally young.”

“Oh, that’s me, eternally young,” I said. “You speak nonsense words for one so pretty yourself. I’m going out. I have to feed. And when I’ve finished with that, when I’m full and hot, then I’ll come and I’ll talk to you and tell you anything you want.” I stepped back just a little from him, feeling the quivers through me as his fingers released my hair. I looked at the empty white window, peering too high for the trees.

“They could see nothing green here, and it’s spring outside, southern spring. I can smell it through the walls. I want to look just for a moment on flowers. To kill, to drink blood and to have flowers.”

“Not good enough. Want to make the book,” he said. “Want to make it now and want you to come with me. I won’t hang around forever.”

“Oh, nonsense, of course you will. You think I’m a doll, don’t you? You think I’m cute and made of poured wax, and you’ll stay as long as I stay.”

“You’re a bit mean, Armand. You look like an angel, and talk like a common thug.”

“Such arrogance! I thought you wanted me.”

“Only on certain terms.”

“You lie, David Talbot,” I said.

I headed past him for the stairs. Cicadas sang in the night as they often do, to no clock, in New Orleans.

Through the nine-pane windows of the stairwell, I glimpsed the flowering trees of spring, a bit of vine curling on a porch top.

He followed. Down and down we went, walking like regular men, down to the first floor, and out the sparkling glass doors and into the broad lighted space of Napoleon Avenue with its damp, sweet park of green down the middle, a park thick with carefully planted flowers and old gnarled and humble, bending trees.

The whole picture moved with the subtle river winds, and wet mist swirled but would not fall into rain itself, and tiny green leaves drifted down like wilting ashes to the ground. Soft soft southern spring. Even the sky seemed pregnant with the season, lowering yet blushing with reflected light, giving birth to the mist from all its pores.

Strident perfume rose from the gardens right and left, from purple Four O’Clocks, as mortals call them here, a rampant flower like unto weed, but infinitely sweet, and the wild irises stabbing upwards like blades out of the black mud, throaty petals monstrously big, battering

themselves on old walls and concrete steps, and then as always there were roses, roses of old women and roses of the young, roses too whole for the tropical night, roses coated with poison.

There had been streetcars here once on this center strip of grass. I knew it, that the tracks had run along this wide deep green space where I walked ahead of him, slumward, riverward, deathward, bloodward. He came after me. I could close my eyes as I walked, never losing a step, and see the streetcars.

"Come on, follow me," I said, describing what he did, not inviting him.

Blocks and blocks within seconds. He kept up. Very strong. The blood of an entire Royal Vampire court was inside him, no doubt of it. Count on Lestat to make the most lethal of monsters, that is, after his initial seductive blunders—Nicolas, Louis, Claudia—not a single one of the three able to take care of themselves alone, and two perished, and one lingering and perhaps the weakest vampire yet walking in the great world.

I looked back. His tight, polished brown face startled me. He looked lacquered all over, waxed, buffed, and once again I thought of spicy things, of the meat of candied nuts, and delicious aromas, of chocolates sweet with sugar and dark rich butterscotch, and it seemed a good thing suddenly to maybe grab ahold of him.

But this was no substitute for one rotten, cheap, ripe and odoriferous mortal. And guess what? I pointed. "Over there."

He looked as I directed him. He saw the sagging line of old buildings. Mortals everywhere lurked, slept, sat, dined, wandered, amid tiny narrow stairs, behind peeling walls and under cracked ceilings.

I had found one, most perfect in his wickedness, a great flurry of hateful embers, of malice and greed and contempt smoldering as he waited for me.

We'd come to Magazine Street and passed it, but we were not at the river, only almost, and this was a street I had no recollection of, or knowledge of, in my wanderings of this city—their city, Louis's and Lestat's—just a narrow street with these houses the color of driftwood under the moon and windows hung with makeshift coverings, and inside there was this one slouching, arrogant, vicious mortal fixed to a television set and guzzling malt from a brown bottle, ignoring the

roaches and the pulsing heat that pressed in from the open window, this ugly, sweating, filthy and irresistible thing, this flesh and blood for me.

The house was so alive with vermin and tiny despicable things that it seemed no more than a shell surrounding him, crackling and friable and the same color in all its shadows as a forest. No antiseptic modern standards here. Even the furniture rotted in the trashy clutter and damp. Mildew covered the grinding white refrigerator.

Only the reeky personal bed and rags gave off the clue to reigning domesticity.

It was a proper nest in which to find this fowl, this ugly bird, thick rich pluckable, devourable sack of bones and blood and shabby plumage.

I pushed the door to one side, the human stench rising like a swirl of gnats, and thereby put it off its hinges, but not with much sound.

I walked on newspapers strewn on painted wood. Orange peels turned to brownish leather. Roaches running. He didn't even look up. His swollen drunken face was blue and eerie, black eyebrows thick and unkempt, and yet he looked quite possibly a bit angelic, due to the light from the tube.

He flicked the magic plastic twanger in his hand to make the channels change, and the light flared and flickered soundlessly, and then he let the song rise, a band playing, a travesty, people clapping.

Trashy noises, trashy images, like the trash all around him. All right, I want you. No one else does.

He looked up at me, a boy invader, David too far off for him to see, waiting.

I pushed the television set to the side. It teetered, then fell onto the floor, its parts breaking, like so many jars of energy were inside, and now splinters of glass.

A momentary fury overcame him, charging his face with sluggish recognition.

He rose up, arms out, and came at me.

Before I sank my teeth, I noticed that he had long tangled black hair. Dirty but rich. He wore it back by means of a knotted bit of rag at the base of his neck and then straggling down his checkered shirt in a thick tail.

Meantime, he had enough syrupy and beer-besotted blood in him for two vampires, delicious, ugly, and a raging lighting heart, and so much

bulk it was like riding a bull to be on him.

In the midst of the feed, all odors rise to sweetness, even the most rancid. I thought I would quietly die of joy, as always.

I sucked hard enough to fill my mouth, letting the blood roll over my tongue, and then to fill my stomach, if I have one, but above all just to stanch this greedy dirty thirst, but not hard enough to slow him down.

He swooned and fought, and did the stupid thing of tearing at my fingers, and then the most dangerous and clumsy thing of trying to find my eyes. I shut them tight and let him press with his greasy thumbs. It did him no good. I am an impregnable little boy. You can not blind the blind. I was too full of blood to care. Besides it felt good. Those weak things that would scratch you do only stroke you.

His life went by as if everyone he ever loved were riding a roller coaster under snazzy stars. Worse than a Van Gogh painting. You never know the palette of the one you kill until the mind disgorges its finest colors.

Soon enough he sank down. I went with him. I had my left arm all the way around him now, and I lay childlike against his big muscular belly, and I drew the blood out now in the blindest gushes, pressing everything he thought and saw and felt down into only color, just give me color, pure orange, and just for a second, as he died—as the death passed me by, like a big rolling ball of black strength which turns out to be nothing actually, nothing but smoke or something even less than that—as this death came into me and went out again like the wind, I thought, Do I by crushing everything that he is deprive him of a final knowing?

Nonsense, Armand. You know what the spirits know, what the angels know. The bastard is going home! To Heaven. To Heaven that would not have you, and might never.

In death, he looked most excellent.

I sat beside him. I wiped my mouth, not that there was a drop to wipe. Vampires slobber blood only in motion pictures. Even the most mundane immortal is far too skilled to spill a drop. I wiped my mouth because his sweat was on my lips and on my face, and I wanted it to go away.

I admired him, however, that he was big and wondrously hard for all his seeming roundness. I admired the black hair clinging to his wet chest where the shirt had been so inevitably torn away.

His black hair was something to behold. I ripped the knotted cloth

that tied it. It was as full and thick as a woman's hair.

Making sure he was dead, I wrapped its length around my left hand and purposed to pull the whole mass from his scalp.

David gasped. "Must you do this?" he asked me.

"No," I said. Even then a few thousand strands had ripped loose from the scalp, each with only its tiny blooded root winking in the air like a tiny firefly. I held the mop for a moment and then let it slip out of my fingers and fall down behind his turned head.

Those unanchored hairs fell sloppily over his coarse cheek. His eyes were wet and wakeful-seeming, dying jelly.

David turned and went out into the little street. Cars roared and clattered by. A ship on the river sang with a steam calliope.

I came up behind him. I wiped the dust off me. One blow and I could have set the whole house to falling down, just caving in on the putrid filth within, dying softly amid other houses so no one indoors here would even know, all this moist wood merely caving.

I could not get the taste and smell of this sweat gone.

"Why did you so object to my pulling out his hair?" I asked. "I only wanted to have it, and he's dead and beyond caring and no one else will miss his black hair."

He turned with a sly smile and took my measure.

"You frighten me, the way you look," I said. "Have I so carelessly revealed myself to be a monster? You know, my blessed mortal Sybelle, when she is not playing the Sonata by Beethoven called the *Appassionata*, watches me feed all the time. Do you want me to tell my story now?"

I glanced back at the dead man on his side, his shoulder sagging. On the windowsill beyond and above him stood a blue glass bottle and in it was an orange flower. Isn't that the damnedest thing?

"Yes, I do want your story," David said. "Come, let's go back together. I only asked you not to take his hair for one reason."

"Yes?" I asked. I looked at him. Rather genuine curiosity. "What was the reason then? I was only going to pull out all his hair and throw it away."

"Like pulling off the wings of a fly," he offered seemingly without judgment.

"A dead fly," I said. I deliberately smiled. "Come now, why the fuss?"

“I wanted to see if you’d listen to me,” he said. “That’s all. Because if you did then it might be all right between us. And you stopped. And it is.” He turned around and took my arm.

“I don’t like you!” I said.

“Oh, yes, you do, Armand,” he answered. “Let me write it. Pace and rail and rant. You’re very high and mighty right now because you have those two splendid little mortals hanging on your every gesture, and they’re like acolytes to a god. But you want to tell me the story, you know you do. Come on!”

I couldn’t stop myself from laughing. “Have these tactics worked for you in the past?”

Now it was his turn to laugh and he did, good-naturedly. “No, I suppose not,” he said. “But let me put it to you this way, write it for them.”

“For whom?”

“For Benji and Sybelle.” He shrugged. “No?”

I didn’t answer.

Write the story for Benji and Sybelle. My mind raced forwards, to some cheerful and wholesome room, where we three would be gathered years hence—I, Armand, unchanged, boy teacher—and Benji and Sybelle in their mortal prime, Benji grown into a sleek tall gentleman with an Arab’s ink-eyed allure and his favorite cheroot in his hand, a man of great expectation and opportunity, and my Sybelle, a curvaceous and full regal-bodied woman by then, and an even greater concert pianist than she could be now, her golden hair framing a woman’s oval face and fuller womanish lips and eyes full of *entsagang* and secret radiance.

Could I dictate the story in this room and give them the book? This book dictated to David Talbot? Could I, as I set them free from my alchemical world, give them this book? Go forth my children, with all the wealth and guidance I could bestow, and now this book I wrote so long ago for you with David.

Yes, said my soul. Yet I turned, and ripped the black scalp of hair from my victim and stomped on it with a Rumpelstiltskin foot.

David didn’t flinch. Englishmen are so polite.

“Very well,” I said. “I’ll tell you my story.”

His rooms were on the second floor, not far from where I’d paused at the top of the staircase. What a change from the barren and unheated

hallways! He'd made a library for himself and with tables and chairs. A brass bed was there, dry and clean.

"These are her rooms," he said. "Don't you remember?"

"Dora," I said. I breathed her scent suddenly. Why, it was all around me. But all her personal things were gone.

These were his books, they had to be. They were new spiritual explorers—Dannion Brinkley, Hilarion, Melvin Morse, Brian Weiss, Matthew Fox, the Urantia book. Add to this old texts—Cassiodorus, St. Teresa of Avila, Gregory of Tours, the Veda, Talmud, Torah, Kama Sutra—all in original tongues. He had a few obscure novels, plays, poetry.

"Yes." He sat down at the table. "I don't need the light. Do you want it?"

"I don't know what to tell you."

"Ah," he said. He took out his mechanical pen. He opened a notebook with startlingly white paper scored with fine green lines. "You will know what to tell me." He looked up at me.

I stood hugging myself, as it were, letting my head fall as if it could drop right off me and I would die. My hair fell long about me.

I thought of Sybelle and Benjamin, my quiet girl and exuberant boy.

"Did you like them, David, my children?" I asked.

"Yes, the first moment I saw them, when you brought them in. Everyone did. Everyone looked lovingly and respectfully at them. Such poise, such charm. I think we all dream of such confidants, faithful mortal companions of compelling grace, who aren't screaming mad. They love you, yet they are neither terrified nor entranced."

I didn't move. I didn't speak. I shut my eyes. I heard in my heart the swift, bold march of the *Appassionata*, those rumbling, incandescent waves of music, full of throbbing and brittle metal, *Appassionata*. Only it was in my head. No golden long-limbed Sybelle.

"Light the candles that you have," I said timidly. "Will you do that for me? It would be sweet to have many candles, and look, Dora's lace is hanging still on the windows, fresh and clean. I am a lover of lace, that is Brussels point de gaze, or very like it, yes, I'm rather mad for it."

"Of course, I'll light the candles," he said.

I had my back to him. I heard the sharp delicious crack of a small wooden match. I smelt it burn, and then came the liquid fragrance of the nodding wick, the curling wick, and the light rose upwards, finding the

cypress boards of the stripped wooden ceiling above us. Another crack, another series of tiny sweet soft crackling sounds, and the light swelled and came down over me and fell just short of brightness along the shadowy wall.

"Why did you do it, Armand?" he said. "Oh, the Veil has Christ on it, in some form, no doubt of it, it did seem to be the Holy Veil of Veronica, and God knows, thousands of others believed it, yes, but why in your case, why? It was blazingly beautiful, yes, I grant you that, Christ with His thorns and His blood, and His eyes gazing right at us, both of us, but why did you believe it so completely, Armand, after so long? Why did you go to Him? That's what you tried to do, didn't you?"

I shook my head. I made my words soft and pleading.

"Back up, scholar," I said, turning around slowly. "Mind your page. This is for you, and for Sybelle. Oh, it's for my little Benji too. But in a way, it's my symphony for Sybelle. The story begins a long time ago. Maybe I've never truly realized how long ago, until this very moment. You listen and write. Let me be the one to cry and to rant and to rail."

2

I look at my hands. I think of the phrase “not made by human hands.” I know what this means, even though every time I ever heard the phrase said with emotion it had to do with what had come from my hands.

I′d like to paint now, to pick up a brush and try it the way I did it then, in a trance, furiously, once and for only, every line and mass of color, each blending, each decision final.

Ah, I′m so disorganized, so browbeaten by what I remember.

Let me choose a place to begin.

Constantinople—newly under the Turks, by that I mean a Moslem City for less than a century when I was brought there, a slave boy, captured in the wild lands of his country for which he barely knew the proper name: the Golden Horde.

Memory had already been choked out of me, along with language, or any capacity to reason in a consistent way. I remember the squalid rooms that must have been Constantinople because other people talked, and for the first time in forever, since I′d been ripped out of what I couldn′t remember, I could understand what people said.

They spoke Greek, of course, these traders who dealt in slaves for brothels in Europe. They knew no religious allegiance, which was all I knew, pitifully devoid of detail.

I was thrown down on a thick Turkey carpet, the fancified rich floor covering one saw in a palace, a display rug for high-priced goods.

My hair was wet and long; someone had brushed it enough to hurt me. All those personal things that were mine had been stripped from me and from my memory. I was naked beneath an old frayed tunic of gold cloth. It was hot and damp in the room. I was hungry, but having no hope of food, I knew this to be a pain that would spike and then, of its own, die away. The tunic must have given me a castoff glory, the shimmer of a fallen angel. It had long bell sleeves and came to my knees.

When I got to my feet, which were bare of course, I saw these men

and knew what they wanted, that this was vice, and despicable, and the price of it was Hell. Curses of vanished elders echoed down on me: too pretty, too soft, too pale, eyes far too full of the Devil, ah, the devilish smile.

How intent these men were on their argument, their bargaining. How they looked at me without ever looking into my eyes.

Suddenly I laughed. Things here were being done so hastily. Those who had delivered me had left me. Those who had scrubbed me had never left the tubs. I was a bundle thrown down on the carpet.

For one moment, I had an awareness of myself as having been sharp-tongued once and cynical, and keenly aware of the nature of men in general. I laughed because these merchants thought I was a girl.

I waited, listening, catching these bits and pieces of talk.

We were in a broad room, with a low canopied ceiling, the silk of it sewn with tiny mirrors and the curlicues so loved by the Turks, and the lamps, though smoky, were scented and filled the air with a dusky hazy soot that burned my eyes.

The men in their turbans and caftans weren't unfamiliar to me any more than the language. But I only caught dashes of what they said. My eyes looked for an escape. There was none. There were heavy, brooding men slouching near the entrances. A man far off at a desk used an abacus for counting. He had piles and piles of gold coins.

One of the men, a tall lean one, all cheekbones and jaw, with rotted-out teeth, came towards me and felt of my shoulders and my neck. Then he lifted up the tunic. I stood stock-still, not enraged or consciously fearful, merely paralyzed. This was the land of the Turks, and I knew what they did to boys. Only I had never seen a picture, nor heard a real story of it, or known anyone who had ever really lived in it, penetrated it and come back home.

Home. Surely I must have wanted to forget who I was. I must have. Shame must have made it mandatory. But at that moment, in the tentlike room with its flowered carpet, among the merchants and slave traders, I strained to remember as if, discovering a map in myself, I could follow it out of here and back to where I belonged.

I did recollect the grasslands, the wild lands, lands where you don't go, except for—. But that was a blank. I'd been in the grasslands, defying fate, stupidly but not unwillingly. I'd been carrying something of the

utmost importance. I got off my horse, ripped this big bundle loose from the leather harness and ran with the bundle clutched against my chest.

"The trees!" he shouted, but who was he?

I knew what he had meant, however, that I had to reach the copse and put this treasure there, this splendid and magical thing that was inside the bundle, "not made by human hands."

I never got that far. When they grabbed hold of me, I dropped the bundle and they didn't even go after it, at least not as I saw. I thought, as I was hoisted into the air: It isn't supposed to be found like that, wrapped in cloth like that. It has to be placed in the trees.

They must have raped me on the boat because I don't remember coming to Constantinople. I don't remember being hungry, cold, outraged or afraid.

Now here for the first time, I knew the particulars of rape, the stinking grease, the squabbling, the curses over the ruin of the lamb. I felt a hideous unsupportable powerlessness.

Loathsome men, men against God and against nature.

I made a roar like an animal at the turbaned merchant, and he struck me hard on the ear so that I fell to the ground. I lay still looking up at him with all the contempt I could bring into my gaze. I didn't get up, even when he kicked me. I wouldn't speak.

Thrown over his shoulder I was carried out, taken through a crowded courtyard, past wondrous stinking camels and donkeys and heaps of filth, out by the harbor where the ships waited, over the gangplank and into the ship's hold.

It was filth again, the smell of hemp, the rustling of the rats on board. I was thrown on a pallet of rough cloth. Once again, I looked for the escape and saw only the ladder by which we'd descended and above heard the voices of too many men.

It was still dark when the ship began to move. Within an hour I was so sick, I wanted simply to die. I curled up on the floor and lay as still as possible, hiding myself entirely under the soft clinging fabric of the old tunic. I slept for the longest time.

When I awoke an old man was there. He wore a different style of dress, less frightening to me than that of the turbaned Turks, and his eyes were kindly. He bent near me. He spoke a new language which was uncommonly soft and sweet, but I couldn't understand him.

A voice speaking Greek told him that I was a mute, had no wits and growled like a beast.

Time to laugh again, but I was too sick.

The same Greek told the old man I hadn't been torn or wounded. I was marked at a high price.

The old man made some dismissing gestures as he shook his head and talked a song in the new speech. He laid his hands on me and gently coaxed me to my feet.

He took me through a doorway into a small chamber, draped all in red silk.

I spent the rest of the voyage in this chamber, except for one night.

On that one night—and I can't place it in terms of the journey—I awoke, and finding him asleep beside me, this old man who never touched me except to pat or console me, I went out, up the ladder, and stood for a long time looking up at the stars.

We were at anchor in a port, and a city of dark blue-black buildings with domed roofs and bell towers tumbled down the cliffs to the harbor where the torches turned beneath the ornamented arches of an arcade.

All this, the civilized shore, looked probable to me, appealing, but I had no thought that I could jump ship and get free. Men wandered beneath the archways. Beneath the arch nearest to me, a strangely garbed man in a shiny helmet, with a big broad sword dangling on his hip, stood guard against the branching fretted column, carved so marvelously to look like a tree as it supported the cloister, like the remnant of a palace into which this channel for ships had been rudely dug.

I didn't look at the shore much after this first long and memorable glimpse. I looked up at Heaven and her court of mythical creatures fixed forever in the all powerful and inscrutable stars. Ink black was the night beyond them, and they so like jewels that old poetry came back to me, the sound even of hymns sung only by men.

As I recall it, hours passed before I was caught, beaten fiercely with a leather thong and dragged back down in the hold. I knew the beating would stop when the old man saw me. He was furious and trembling. He gathered me to him, and we bedded down again. He was too old to ask anything of me.

I didn't love him. It was clear to the witless mute that this man

regarded him as something quite valuable, to be preserved for sale. But I needed him and he wiped my tears. I slept as much as I could. I was sick every time the waves were rough. Sometimes the heat alone sickened me. I didn't know real heat. The man fed me so well that sometimes I thought I was a being kept by him like a fatted calf to be sold for food.

When we reached Venice, it was late in the day. I had no hint of the beauty of Italy. I'd been locked away from it, down in this grime pit with the old keeper, and being taken up into the city I soon saw that my suspicions about the old keeper were perfectly right.

In a dark room, he and another man fell into bitter argument. Nothing could make me speak. Nothing could make me indicate that I understood anything that was happening to me. I did, however, understand. Money changed hands. The old man left without looking back.

They tried to teach me things. The soft caressing new language was all around me. Boys came, sat beside me, tried to coax me with soft kisses and embraces. They pinched the nipples on my chest and tried to touch the private parts which I'd been taught not even to look at on account of the bitter occasion of sin.

Several times I resolved to pray. But I discovered I couldn't remember the words. Even the images were indistinct. Lights had gone out forever which had guided me through all my years. Every time I drifted deep into thought, someone struck me or yanked at my hair.

They always came with ointments after they hit me. They were careful to treat the abraded skin. Once, when a man struck me on the side of the face, another shouted and grabbed his upraised hand before he could land the second blow.

I refused food and drink. They couldn't make me take it. I couldn't take it. I didn't choose to starve. I simply couldn't do anything to keep myself alive. I knew I was going home. I was going home. I would die and go home. It would be an awful painful passage. I would have cried if I'd been alone. But I was never alone. I'd have to die in front of people. I hadn't seen real daylight in forever. Even the lamps hurt my eyes because I was so much in unbroken darkness. But people were always there.

The lamp would brighten. They sat in a ring around me with grimy little faces and quick pawlike hands that wiped my hair out of my face or shook me by the shoulder. I turned my face to the wall.

A sound kept me company. This was to be the end of my life. The sound was the sound of water outside. I could hear it against the wall. I could tell when a boat passed and I could hear the wood pylons creaking, and I lay my head against the stone and felt the house sway in the water as if we were not beside it but planted in it, which of course we were.

Once I dreamed of home, but I don't remember what it was like. I woke, I cried, and there came a volley of little greetings from the shadows, wheedling, sentimental voices.

I thought I wanted to be alone. I didn't. When they locked me up for days and nights in a black room without bread or water, I began to scream and pound on the walls. No one came.

After a while, I fell into a stupor. It was a violent jolt when the door was opened. I sat up, covering my eyes. The lamp was a menace. My head throbbed.

But there came a soft insinuating perfume, a mixture of the smell of sweet burning wood in snowing winter and that of crushed flowers and pungent oil.

I was touched by something hard, something made of wood or brass, only this thing moved as if it were organic. At last I opened my eyes and saw that a man held me, and these inhuman things, these things that felt so like stone or brass, were his white fingers, and he looked at me with eager, gentle blue eyes.

"Amadeo," he said.

He was dressed all in red velvet and splendidly tall. His blond hair was parted in the middle in a saintly fashion and combed richly down to his shoulders where it broke over his cloak in lustrous curls. He had a smooth forehead without a line to it, and high straight golden eyebrows dark enough to give his face a clear, determined look. His lashes curled like dark golden threads from his eyelids. And when he smiled, his lips were flushed suddenly with a pale immediate color that made their full careful shape all the more visible.

I knew him. I spoke to him. I could have never seen such miracles in the face of anyone else.

He smiled so kindly at me. His upper lip and chin were all clean shaven. I couldn't even see the scantest hair on him, and his nose was narrow and delicate though large enough to be in proportion to the

other magnetic features of his face.

"Not the Christ, my child," he said. "But one who comes with his own salvation. Come into my arms."

"I'm dying, Master." What was my language? I can't say even now what it was. But he understood me.

"No, little one, you're not dying. You're coming now into my protection, and perhaps if the stars are with us, if they are kind to us, you'll never die at all."

"But you are the Christ. I know you!"

He shook his head, and in the most common human way he lowered his eyes as he did, and he smiled. His generous lips parted, and I saw only a human's white teeth. He put his hands beneath my arms, lifted me and kissed my throat, and the shivers paralyzed me. I closed my eyes and felt his fingers on top of them, and heard him say into my ear, "Sleep as I take you home."

When I awoke, we were in a huge bath. No Venetian ever had such a bath as this, I can tell you that now from all the things I saw later, but what did I know of the conventions of this place? This was a palace truly; I had seen palaces.

I climbed up and out of the swaddling of velvet in which I lay—his red cloak if I'm not mistaken—and I saw a great curtained bed to my right and, beyond, the deep oval basin of the bath itself. Water poured from a shell held by angels into the basin, and steam rose from the broad surface, and in the steam my Master stood. His white chest was naked and the nipples faintly pink, and his hair, pushed back from his smooth straight forehead, looked even thicker and more beautifully blond than it had before.

He beckoned to me.

I was afraid of the water. I knelt at the edge and put my hand into it.

With amazing speed and grace, he reached for me and brought me down into the warm pool, pushing me until the water covered my shoulders and then tilting back my head.

Again I looked up at him. Beyond him the bright-blue ceiling was covered in startlingly vivid angels with giant white feathery wings. I had never seen such brilliant and curly angels, leaping as they did, out of all restraint and style, to flaunt their human beauty in muscled limbs and swirling garments, in flying locks. It seemed a bit of madness this, these

robust and romping figures, this riot of celestial play above me to which the steam ascended, evaporating in a golden light.

I looked at my Master. His face was right before me. Kiss me again, yes, do it, that shiver, kiss—. But he was of the same ilk as those painted beings, one of them, and this some form of heathen Heaven, a pagan place of Soldiers' gods where all is wine, and fruit, and flesh. I had come to the wrong place.

He threw back his head. He gave way to ringing laughter. He lifted a handful of water again and let it spill down my chest. He opened his mouth and for a moment I saw the flash of something very wrong and dangerous, teeth such as a wolf might have. But these were gone, and only his lips sucked at my throat, then at my shoulder. Only his lips sucked at the nipple as I sought too late to cover it.

I groaned for all this. I sank against him in the warm water, and his lips went down my chest to my belly. He sucked tenderly at the skin as if he were sucking up the salt and the heat from it, and even his forehead nudging my shoulder filled me with warm thrilling sensations. I put my arm around him, and when he found the sin itself, I felt it go off as if an arrow had been shot from it, and it were a crossbow; I felt it go, this arrow, this thrust, and I cried out.

He let me lie for a while against him. He bathed me slowly. He had a soft gathered cloth with which he wiped my face. He dipped me back to wash my hair.

And then when he thought I had rested enough, we began the kisses again.

Before dawn, I woke against his pillow. I sat up and saw him as he put on his big cloak and covered his head. The room was full of boys again, but these were not the sad, emaciated tutors of the brothel. These boys were handsome, well fed, smiling and sweet, as they gathered around the bed.

They wore brightly colored tunics of effervescent colors, with fabrics carefully pleated and tight belts that gave them a girlish grace. All wore long luxuriant hair.

My Master looked at me and in a tongue I knew, I knew perfectly, he said that I was his only child, and he would come again that night, and by such time as that I would have seen a new world.

"A new world!" I cried out. "No, don't leave me, Master. I don't want

the whole world. I want you!"

"Amadeo," he said in this private tongue of confidence, leaning over the bed, his hair dry now and beautifully brushed, his hands softened with powder. "You have me forever. Let the boys feed you, dress you." You belong to me, to Marius De Romanus, now.

He turned to them and gave them their commands in the soft singing language.

And you would have thought from their happy faces that he had given them sweets and gold.

"Amadeo, Amadeo," they sang as they gathered around me. They held me so that I couldn't follow him. They spoke Greek to me, fast and easily, and Greek for me was not so easy. But I understood.

Come with us, you are one of us, we are to be good to you, we are to be especially good to you. They dressed me up hastily in castoffs, arguing with one another about my tunic, was it good enough, and these faded stockings, well, it was only for now! Put on the slippers; here, a jacket that was too small for Riccardo. These seemed the garments of kings.

"We love you," said Albinus, the second in command to Riccardo, and a dramatic contrast to the black-haired Riccardo, for his blond hair and pale green eyes. The other boys, I couldn't quite distinguish, but these two were easy to watch.

"Yes, we love you," said Riccardo, pushing back his black hair and winking at me, his skin so smooth and dark compared to the others. His eyes were fiercely black. He clutched my hand and I saw his long thin fingers. Here everyone had thin fingers, fine fingers. They had fingers like mine, and mine had been unusual among my brethren. But I couldn't think of this.

An eerie possibility suggested itself to me, that I, the pale one, the one who made all the trouble, the one with the fine fingers, had been spirited away to the good land where I belonged. But that was altogether too fabulous to believe. My head ached. I saw wordless flashes of the stubby horsemen who had captured me, of the stinking hold of the ship in which I'd been brought to Constantinople, flashes of gaunt, busy men, men fussing as they had handled me there.

Dear God, why did anyone love me? What for? Marius De Romanus, why do you love me?

The Master smiled as he waved from the door. The hood was up around his head, a crimson frame for his fine cheekbones and his curling lips.

My eyes filled with tears.

A white mist swirled around the Master as the door closed behind him. The night was going. But the candles still burned.

We came into a large room, and I saw that it was full of paints and pots of color and brushes standing in earthen jars ready to be used. Great white squares of cloth—canvas—waited for the paint.

These boys didn't make their colors with the yolk of an egg in the time-honored manner. They mixed the bright fine ground pigments directly with the amber-colored oils. Great glossy gobs of color awaited me in little pots. I took the brush when they gave it to me. I looked at the stretched white cloth on which I was to paint.

"Not from human hands," I said. But what did these words mean? I lifted the brush and I began to paint him, this blond-haired man who had rescued me from darkness and squalor. I threw out the hand with the brush, dipping the bristles into the jars of cream and pink and white and slapping these colors onto the curiously resilient canvas. But I couldn't make a picture. No picture came!

"Not by human hands!" I whispered. I dropped the brush. I put my hands over my face.

I searched for the words in Greek. When I said them, several of the boys nodded, but they didn't grasp the meaning. How could I explain to them the catastrophe? I looked at my fingers. What had become of—. There all recollection burnt up and I was left suddenly with Amadeo.

"I can't do it." I stared at the canvas, at the mess of colors. "Maybe if it was wood, not cloth, I could do it."

What had it been that I could do? They didn't understand.

He was not the Living Lord, my Master, the blond one, the blond one with the icy blue eyes.

But he was my Lord. And I could not do this thing that was meant to be done.

To comfort me, to distract me, the boys took up their brushes and quickly astonished me with pictures that ran like a stream out of their quick applications of the brush.

A boy's face, cheeks, lips, eyes, yes, and reddish-golden hair in

profusion. Good Lord, it was I … it was not a canvas but a mirror. It was this Amadeo. Riccardo took over to refine the expression, to deepen the eyes and work a sorcery on the tongue so I seemed about to speak. What was this rampant magic that made a boy appear out of nothing, most natural, at a casual angle, with knitted brows and streaks of unkempt hair over his ear?

It seemed both blasphemous and beautiful, this fluid, abandoned fleshly figure.

Riccardo spelled the letters out in Greek as he wrote them. Then he threw the brush down. He cried:

"A very different picture is what our Master has in mind." He snatched up the drawings.

They pulled me through the house, the "palazzo" as they called it, teaching me the word with relish.

The entire place was filled with such paintings—on its walls, its ceilings, on panels and canvases stacked against each other—towering pictures full of ruined buildings, broken columns, rampant greenery, distant mountains and an endless stream of busy people with flushed faces, their luxuriant hair and gorgeous clothing always rumpled and curling in a wind.

It was like the big platters of fruit and meats that they brought out and set before me. A mad disorder, an abundance for the sake of itself, a great drench of colors and shapes. It was like the wine, too sweet and light.

It was like the city below when they threw open the windows, and I saw the small black boats—gondolas, even then—in brilliant sunlight coursing through the greenish waters, when I saw the men in their sumptuous scarlet or gold cloaks hurrying along the quays.

Into our gondolas we piled, a troop of us, and suddenly we traveled in graceful darting silence among the facades, each huge house as magnificent as a Cathedral, with its narrow pointed arches, its lotus windows, its covering of gleaming white stone.

Even the older, sorrier dwellings, not too ornate but nevertheless monstrous in size, were plastered in colors, a rose so deep it seemed to come from crushed petals, a green so thick it seemed to have been mixed

from the opaque water itself.

Out into the Piazza San Marco we came, amid the long fantastically regular arcades on both sides.

It seemed the very gathering place of Heaven as I stared at the hundreds milling before the distant golden domes of the church.

Golden domes. Golden domes.

Some old tale had been told to me of golden domes, and I had seen them in a darkling picture, had I not? Sacred domes, lost domes, domes in flames, a church violated, as I had been violated. Ah, ruin, ruin was gone, laid waste by the sudden eruption all around me of what was vital and whole! How had all this been born out of wintry ashes? How had I died among snows and smoking fires and come to rise here beneath this caressing sun?

Its warm sweet light bathed beggars and tradesmen; it shone on princes passing with pages to carry their ornate velvet trains behind them, on the booksellers who spread their books beneath scarlet canopies, lute players who vied for small coins.

The wares of the wide diabolical world were displayed in the shops and market stalls—glassware such as I have never beheld, including goblets of all possible colors, not to mention little figurines of glass including animals and human beings and other filmy shining trinkets. There were marvelously bright and beautifully turned beads for rosaries; magnificent laces in grand and graceful patterns, including even snowy white pictures of actual church towers and little houses with windows and doors; great feathery plumes from birds I couldn't name; other exotic species flapping and screeching in gilt cages; and the finest and most magnificently worked multicolored carpets only too reminiscent of the powerful Turks and their capital from which I'd come. Nevertheless, who resists such carpets? Forbidden by law to render human beings, Moslems rendered flowers, arabesques, labyrinthian curlicues and other such designs with bold dyes and awe-inspiring exactitude. There were oils for lamps, tapers, candles, incense, and great displays of glistering jewels of indescribable beauty and the most delicate work of the goldsmiths and silversmiths, in plate and ornamental items both newly made and old. There were shops that sold only spices. There were shops that sold medicines and cures. There were bronze statues, lion heads, lanterns and weapons. There were cloth merchants with the silks of the

East, the finest woven wools dyed in miraculous tints, cotton and linen and fine specimens of embroidery, and ribbons galore.

Men and women here appeared immensely wealthy, feasting casually on fresh meat tarts in the cookshops, drinking clear red wine and eating sweet cakes full of cream.

There were booksellers offering the new printed books, of which the other apprentices told me eagerly, explaining the marvelous invention of the printing press, which had only lately made it possible for men far and wide to acquire not only books of letters and words but books of drawn pictures as well.

Venice already had dozens of small print shops and publishers where the presses were hard at work producing books in Greek as well as Latin, and in the vernacular tongue—the soft singing tongue—which the apprentices spoke amongst themselves.

They let me stop to glut my eyes on these wonders, these machines that made pages for books.

But they did have their chores, Riccardo and the others—they were to scoop up the prints and engravings of the German painters for our Master, pictures made by the new printing presses of old wonders by Memling, Van Eyck, or Hieronymus Bosch. Our Master was always in the market for them. Such drawings brought the north to the south. Our Master was a champion of such wonders. Our Master was pleased that over one hundred printing presses filled our city, that he could throw away his coarse inaccurate copies of Livy and Virgil and have now corrected printed texts.

Oh, it was such a load of information.

And no less important than the literature or paintings of the universe was the matter of my clothes. We had to get the tailors to stop everything to dress me properly according to small chalk drawings which the Master had made.

Handwritten letters of credit had to be taken to the banks. I was to have money. Everyone was to have money. I had never touched such a thing as money.

Money was pretty—Florentine gold or silver, German florins, Bohemian groschens, fancy old coins minted under the rulers of Venice who were called the Doges, exotic coins from the Constantinople of old. I was given a little sack of my own clinking clanking money. We tied our

“purses” to our belts.

One of the boys bought me a small wonder because I stared at it. It was a ticking watch. I couldn’t grasp the theory of it, this tiny ticking thing, all encrusted with jewels, and not all the hands pointed at the sky would teach me. At last with a shock I realized: It was, beneath its filigree and paint, its strange glass and bejeweled frame, a tiny clock!

I closed my hand on it and felt dizzy. I had never known clocks to be anything but great venerable things in bell towers or on walls.

“I carry time now,” I whispered in Greek, looking to my friends.

“Amadeo,” said Riccardo. “Count the hours for me.”

I wanted to say that this prodigious discovery meant something, something personal. It was a message to me from some other too hastily and perilously forgotten world. Time was not time anymore and never would be. The day was not the day, nor the night the night. I couldn’t articulate it, not in Greek, nor any tongue, nor even in my feverish thoughts. I wiped the sweat from my forehead. I squinted into the brilliant sun of Italy. My eyes clapped upon the birds who flew in great flocks across the sky, like tiny pen strokes made to flap in unison. I think I whispered foolishly, “We are in the world.”

“We are in the center of it, the greatest city of it!” Riccardo cried, urging me on into the crowds. “We shall see it before we get locked up in the tailor’s, that’s for damned sure.”

But first it was time for the sweetshop, for the miracle of chocolate with sugar, for syrupy concoctions of unnameable but bright red and yellow sweets.

One of the boys showed to me his little book of the most frightening printed pictures, men and women embraced in carnality. It was the stories of Boccaccio. Riccardo said he would read them to me, that it was in fact an excellent book to teach me Italian. And that he would teach me Dante too.

Boccaccio and Dante were Florentines, said one of the other boys, but all in all the two weren’t so bad.

Our Master loved all kinds of books, I was told, you couldn’t go wrong spending your money on them, he was always pleased with that. I’d come to see that the teachers who came to the house would drive me crazy with their lessons. It was the *studia humanitatis* that we must all learn, and it included history, grammar, rhetoric, philosophy and ancient

authors … all of this so much dazzling words that only revealed its meaning to me as it was often repeated and demonstrated in the days to come.

We could not look too good for our Master either, that was another lesson I must learn. Gold and silver chains, necklaces with medallions and other such trinkets were bought for me and laid over my neck. I needed rings, jeweled rings. We had to bargain fiercely with the jewelers for these, and I came out of it wearing a real emerald from the new world, and two ruby rings carved with silver inscriptions which I couldn't read.

I couldn't get over the sight of my hand with a ring. To this very night of my life, some five hundred years after, you see, I have a weakness for jeweled rings. Only during those centuries in Paris when I was a penitent, one of Satan's discalced Children of the Night, during that long slumber only, did I give up my rings. But we'll come to that nightmare soon enough.

For now, this was Venice, I was Marius's child and romped with his other children in a manner that would be repeated for years ahead.

On to the tailor.

As I was measured and pinned and dressed, the boys told me stories of all those rich Venetians who came to our Master seeking to have even the smallest piece of his work. As for our Master, he, claiming that he was too wretched, sold almost nothing but occasionally did a portrait of a woman or man who struck his eye. These portraits almost always worked the person into a mythological subject—gods, goddesses, angels, saints. Names I knew and names I'd never heard of tripped off the boys' tongues. It seemed here all echoes of sacred things were swept up in a new tide.

Memory would jolt me only to release me. Saints and gods, they were one and the same? Wasn't there a code to which I should remain faithful that somehow dictated these were but artful lies? I couldn't get it clear in my head, and all around me was such happiness, yes, happiness. It seemed impossible that these simple shining faces could mask wickedness. I didn't believe it. Yet all pleasure to me was suspect. I was dazzled when I could not give in, and overcome when I did surrender, and as the days followed I surrendered with ever greater ease all the time.

This day of initiation was only one of hundreds, nay, thousands that were to follow, and I don't know when I started to understand with any preciseness what my boy companions said. That time came, however, and rather quickly. I do not remember being the naive one very long.

On this first excursion, it was magic. And high above the sky was the perfect blue of cobalt, and the breeze from the sea was fresh and moist and cool. There above were massed the scudding clouds I had seen so wondrously rendered in the paintings of the palazzo, and there came my first hint that the paintings of my Master were no He.

Indeed when we entered, by special permission, the Doges' chapel, San Marco, I was caught by the throat by its splendor—its walls of gleaming tessellated gold. But another shock followed hard upon my finding myself virtually entombed in light and in riches. Here were stark, somber figures, figures of saints I knew.

These were no mystery to me, the almond-eyed tenants of these hammered walls, severe in their straight careful drapery, their hands infallibly folded in prayer. I knew their halos, I knew the tiny holes made in the gold to make it glitter ever more magically. I knew the judgment of these bearded patriarchs who gazed impassively on me as I stopped, dead in my tracks, unable to go on.

I slumped to the stone floor. I was sick.

I had to be taken from the church. The noise of the piazza rose over me as if I were descending to some awful denouement. I wanted to tell my friends it was inevitable, not their fault.

The boys were in a fluster. I couldn't explain it. Stunned, sweating all over and lying limp at the base of a column, I listened dully as they explained to me in Greek that this church was only part of all I had seen. Why should it frighten me so? Yes, it was old, yes, it was Byzantine, as so much in Venice was. "Our ships have traded with Byzantium for centuries. We are a maritime empire." I tried to grasp it.

What came clear in my pain was only that this place had not been a special judgment upon me. I had been taken from it as easily as I had been brought into it. The sweet-voiced boys with the gentle hands who surrounded me, who offered me cool wine to drink and fruit to eat that I might recover, they did not hold this place in any terrible dread.

Turning to the left of me, I glimpsed the quays, the harbor. I ran towards it, thunderstruck by the sight of the wooden ships. They stood at

anchor four and five deep, but beyond them was enacted the greatest miracle: great galleons of deep ballooning wood, their sails collecting the breeze, their graceful oars chopping the water as they moved out to sea.

Back and forth the traffic moved, the huge wooden barks dangerously close to one another, slipping in and out of the mouth of Venice, while others no less graceful and impossible at anchor disgorged abundant goods.

Leading me stumbling to the Arsenale, my companions comforted me with the sight of the ships being built by ordinary men. In days to come I would hang about at the Arsenale for hours, watching the ingenious process by which human beings made such immense barks that to my mind should rightly sink.

Now and then in snatches I saw images of icy rivers, of barges and flatboats, of coarse men reeking of animal fat and rancid leather. But these last ragged tidbits of the winter world from which I'd come faded.

Perhaps had this not been Venice, it would have been a different tale.

In all my years in Venice, I never tired of the Arsenale, of watching the ships being built. I had no problem gaining access by means of a few kind words and coins, and it was ever my delight to watch these fantastical structures being constructed of bowed ribs, bent wood and piercing masts. Of this first day, we were rushed through this yard of miracles. It was enough.

Yes, well, it was Venice, this place that must erase from my mind, at least for a while, the clotted torment of some earlier existence, some congestion of all truths I would not face.

My Master would never have been there, had it not been Venice.

Not a month later he would tell me matter-of-factly what each of the cities of Italy had to offer him, how he loved to watch Michelangelo, the great sculptor, hard at work in Florence, how he went to listen to the fine teachers in Rome.

"But Venice has an art of a thousand years," he said as he himself lifted his brush to paint the huge panel before him. "Venice is in itself a work of art, a metropolis of impossible domestic temples built side by side like waxen honeycombs and maintained in ever flowing nectar by a population as busy as bees. Behold our palaces, they alone are worthy of the eye."

As time passed he would school me in the history of Venice, as did the

others, dwelling on the nature of the Republic, which, though despotic in its decisions and fiercely hostile to the outsider, was nevertheless a city of "equal" men. Florence, Milan, Rome—these cities were falling under the power of small elites or powerful families and individuals, while Venice, for all her faults, remained governed by her Senators, her powerful merchants and her Council of Ten.

On that first day, an everlasting love for Venice was born in me. It seemed singularly devoid of horrors, a warm home even for its well-dressed and clever beggars, a hive of prosperity and vehement passion as well as staggering wealth.

And in the tailor shop, was I not being made up into a prince like my new friends?

Look, had I not seen Riccardo's sword? They were all noblemen.

"Forget all that has gone before," said Riccardo. "Our Master is our Lord, and we are his princes, we are his royal court. You are rich now and nothing can hurt you."

"We are not mere apprentices in the ordinary sense," said Albinus. "We are to be sent to the University of Padua. You'll see. We are tutored in music and dance and manners as regularly as in science and literature. You will have time to see the boys who come back to visit, all gentlemen of means. Why, Giuliano was a prosperous lawyer, and one of the other boys was a physician in Torcello, an island city nearby.

"But all have independent means when they leave the Master," explained Albinus. "It's only that the Master, like all Venetians, deplores idleness. We are as well off as lazy lords from abroad who do nothing but sample our world as though it were a dish of food."

By the end of this first sunlighted adventure, this welcome into the bosom of my Master's school and his splendid city, I was combed, trimmed and dressed in the colors he would forever choose for me, sky blue for the stockings, a darker midnight blue velvet for a short belted jacket, and a tunic of an even fairer shade of azure embroidered with tiny French fleur-de-lis in thick gold thread. A bit of burgundy there might be for trimming and fur; for when the sea breezes grew strong in winter, this paradise would be what these Italians called cold.

By nightfall, I pranced on the marble tile with the others, dancing for a while to the lutes played by the younger boys, accompanied by the fragile music of the Virginal, the first keyboard instrument I had ever

seen.

When the last of twilight had died beautifully into the canal outside the narrow pointed arched windows of the palazzo, I roamed about, catching random glances of myself in the many dark mirrors that rose up from the marble tile to the very ceiling of the corridor, the salon, the alcove, or whatever beautifully appointed room I should find.

I sang new words in unison with Riccardo. The great state of Venice was called the Serenissima. The black boats of the canals were gondolas. The winds that would come soon to make us all crazy were called the Sirocco. The most high ruler of this magical city was the Doge, our book tonight with the teacher was Cicero, the musical instrument which Riccardo gathered up and played with his plucking fingers was the lute. The great canopy of the Master's regal bed was a baldaquin trimmed each fortnight with new gold fringe.

I was ecstatic.

I had not merely a sword but a dagger.

Such trust. Of course I was lamblike to these others, and pretty much a lamb to myself. But never had anyone entrusted to me such bronze and steel weapons. Again, memory played its tricks. I knew how to throw a wooden spear, how to … Alas, it became a wisp of smoke, and there lay in the air around it that I'd been committed not to weapons, but to something else, something immense which exacted all I could give it. Weapons were forbidden for me.

Well, no more. No more, no more, no more. Death had swallowed me whole and thrown me forth here. In the palazzo of my Master, in a salon of brilliantly painted battle scenes, with maps upon the ceiling, with windows of thick molded glass, I drew my sword with a great singing sound and pointed it at the future. With my dagger, after examining the emeralds and rubies of its handle, I sliced an apple in two with a gasp.

The other boys laughed at me. But it was all friendly, kind.

Soon the Master would come. Look. From room to room the youngest fellows among us, little boys who had not come out with us, now moved quickly, lifting their tapers to torches and candelabra. I stood in the door, looking to yet another and another and another. Light burst forth soundlessly in each of these rooms.

A tall man, very shadowy and plain, came in with a tattered book in his hand. His long thin hair and plain wool robe were black. His small

eyes were cheerful, but his thin mouth was colorless and belligerently set.

The boys all groaned.

High narrow windows were closed against the cooler night air.

In the canal below, men sang as they drove their long narrow gondolas, voices seeming to ring, to splash up the walls, delicate, sparkling, then dying away.

I ate the apple to the last juicy speck of it. I had eaten more in this day of fruit, meat, bread, sweets and candy than a human being could possibly eat. I wasn't human. I was a hungry boy.

The teacher snapped his fingers, then took from his belt a long switch and cracked it against his own leg. "Come now," he said to the boys.

I looked up as the Master appeared.

All the boys, big and tall, babyfied and manly, ran to him and embraced him and clung to his arms as he made his inspection of the painting they had done by the long day.

The teacher waited in silence, giving the Master a humble bow.

Through the galleries we walked, the entire company, the teacher trailing behind.

The Master held out his hands, and it was a privilege to feel the touch of his cold white fingers, a privilege to catch a part of his long thick trailing red sleeves.

"Come, Amadeo, come with us."

I wanted one thing only, and it came soon enough.

They were sent off with the man who was to read Cicero. The Master's firm hands with their flashing fingernails turned me and directed me to his private rooms.

It was private here, the painted wooden doors at once bolted, the burning braziers scented with incense, perfumed smoke rising from the brass lamps. It was the soft pillows of the bed, a flower garden of stenciled and embroidered silk, floral satin, rich chenille, intricately patterned brocade. He pulled the scarlet bed curtains. The light made them transparent. Red and red and red. It was his color, he told me, as blue was to be mine.

In a universal tongue he wooed me, feeding me the images:

"Your brown eyes are amber when the fire catches them," he whispered. "Oh, but they are lustrous and dark, two glossy mirrors in

which I see myself even as they keep their secrets, these dark portals of a rich soul."

I was too lost in the frigid blue of his own eyes, and the smooth gleaming coral of his lips.

He lay with me, kissed me, pushing his fingers carefully and smoothly through my hair, never pulling a curl of it, and brought the shivers from my scalp and from between my legs. His thumbs, so hard and cold, stroked my cheeks, my lips, my jaw so as to make the flesh quicken. Turning my head from right to left, he pressed his half-formed kisses with a dainty hunger to the inner shells of my ears.

I was too young for a wet pleasure.

I wonder if it was more what women feel. I thought it couldn't end. It became an agony of rapture, being caught in his hands, unable to escape, convulsing and twisting and feeling this ecstasy again and again and again.

He taught me words in the new language afterwards, the word for the cold hard tile on the floor which was Carrara marble, the word for the curtains which was spun silk, the names of the "fishes" and "turtles" and the "elephants" embroidered onto the pillows, the word for the lion sewn in tapestry on the heavy coverlet itself.

As I listened, rapt, to all details both large and small, he told me the provenance of the pearls sewn into my tunic, of how they had come from the oysters of the sea. Boys had dived into the depths to bring these precious round white treasures up to the surface, carrying them in their very mouths. Emeralds came from mines within the earth. Men killed for them. And diamonds, ah, look at these diamonds. He took a ring from his finger and put it on mine, his fingertips stroking my finger gently as he made sure of the fit. Diamonds are the white light of God, he said. Diamonds are pure.

God. What is God! The shock went through my body. It seemed the scene about me would wither.

He watched me as he spoke, and it seemed now and then I heard him clearly, though he had not moved his lips or made a sound.

I grew agitated. God, don't let me think of God. Be my God.

"Give me your mouth, give me your arms," I whispered. My hunger startled and delighted him.

He laughed softly as he answered me with more fragrant and harmless

kisses. His warm breath came in a soft whistling flood against my groin.

"Amadeo, Amadeo, Amadeo," he said.

"What does this name mean, Master?" I asked. "Why do you give it to me?" I think I heard an old self in my voice, but maybe it was only this newborn princeling gilded and wrapped in fine goods that had chosen this soft respectful but nevertheless bold voice.

"Beloved of God," he said.

Oh, I couldn't bear to hear this. God, the inescapable God. I was troubled, panic-stricken.

He took my outstretched hand and bent my finger to point to a tiny winged infant etched in glittering beads on a worn square cushion that lay beside us. "Amadeo," he said, "beloved of the God of love."

He found the ticking watch in the heap of my clothes at bedside. He picked it up and smiled as he looked at it. He had not seen many of these at all. Most marvelous. They were expensive enough for Kings and Queens.

"You shall have everything you want," he said.

"Why?"

Again came his laughter in answer.

"For reddish locks such as these," he said caressing my hair, "for eyes of the deepest and most sympathetic brown. For skin like the fresh cream of the milk in the morning; for lips indistinguishable from the petals of a rose."

In the small hours, he told me tales of Eros and Aphrodite; he lulled me with the fantastic sorrow of Psyche, beloved by Eros and never allowed to see him by the day's light.

I walked beside him through chilly corridors, his fingers clasping my shoulders, as he showed me the fine white marble statues of his gods and goddesses, all lovers—Daphne, her graceful limbs turned into the branches of the laurel as the god Apollo desperately sought her; Leda helpless within the grip of the mighty swan.

He guided my hands over the marble curves, the sharply chiseled and highly polished faces, the taut calves of nubile legs, the ice-cold clefts of half-opened mouths. And then to his own face he lifted my fingers. He did seem the very living and breathing statue, more marvelously made than any other, and even as he lifted me with powerful hands, a great heat came out of him, a heat of sweet breath in sighs and murmured

words.

By the end of the week, I couldn't even remember one word of my Mother Tongue.

In a storm of proffered adjectives I stood in the piazza and watched spellbound as the Great Council of Venice marched along the Molo, as the High Mass was sung from the altar of San Marco, as the ships moved out on the glassy waves of the Adriatic, as the brushes dipped to gather up their colors and mix them in the earthen pots—rose madder, vermilion, carmine, cerise, cerulean, turquoise, viridian, yellow ocher, burnt umber, quinacridone, citrine, sepia, Caput Mortuum Violet—oh, too lovely—and of a thick lacquer, the name Dragon's blood.

At dancing and fencing, I excelled. My favorite partner was Riccardo, and I fast realized I was close to this elder in all skills, even surpassing Albinus, who had held that place until I came, though now he showed me no ill will.

These boys were like my brothers to me.

They took me to the home of the slender and beautiful courtesan, Bianca Solderini, a lithesome and incomparable charmer, with Botticelli-style wavy locks and almond-shaped gray eyes and a generous and kindly wit. I was the fashion in her house whenever I wanted to be, among the young women and men there who spent hours reading poetry, talking of the foreign wars, which seemed endless, and of the latest painters and who would get what commission next.

Bianca had a small, childlike voice which matched her girlish face and tiny nose. Her mouth was a mere budding rose. But she was clever, and indomitable. She turned away possessive lovers coldly; she preferred that her house be full of people at all hours. Anyone in proper dress, or carrying a sword, was admitted automatically. Almost no one but those who wanted to own her were ever turned away.

Visitors from France and Germany were common at the home of Bianca, and all there, both from afar and from home, were curious about our Master, Marius, a man of mystery, though we had been schooled never to answer idle questions about him, and could only smile when asked if he intended to marry, if he would paint this or that portrait, if he would be home on such and such a date for this person or that to call.

Sometimes I fell asleep on the pillows of the couch at Bianca's or even on one of the beds, listening to the hushed voices of the noblemen who

came there, dreaming to the music which was always of the most lulling and soothing kind.

Now and then, on the most rare occasions, the Master himself appeared there to collect me and Riccardo, always causing a minor sensation in the portego, or main salon. He would never take a chair. He stood always with his hooded cloak over his head and shoulders. But he smiled graciously to all the entreaties put to him, and did sometimes offer a tiny portrait that he had done of Bianca.

I see these now, these many *tiny* portraits that he gave her over the years, each encrusted with jewels.

"You capture my likeness so keenly from memory," she said as she went to kiss him. I saw the reserve with which he held her aloof from his cold hard chest and face, planting kisses on her cheeks that conveyed the spell of softness and sweetness which the real touch of him would have destroyed.

I read for hours with the aid of the teacher Leonardo of Padua, my voice perfectly in time with his as I grasped the scheme of Latin, then Italian, then back to Greek. I liked Aristotle as much as Plato or Plutarch or Livy or Virgil. The truth was, I didn't much comprehend any of them. I was doing as the Master directed, letting the knowledge accumulate in my mind.

I saw no reason to talk endlessly, as Aristotle did, about things that were made. The lives of the ancients that Plutarch told with such spirit made excellent stories. I wanted to know people of the now, however. I preferred to doze on Bianca's couch rather than argue about the merits of this or that painter. Besides, I knew my Master was the best.

This world was one of spacious rooms, decorated walls, generous fragrant light and a regular parade of high fashion, to which I grew accustomed completely, never seeing much of the pain and misery of the poor of the city at all. Even the books I read reflected this new realm in which I had been so securely fixed that nothing could take me back to the world of confusion and suffering that had gone before.

I learned to play little songs on the Virginal. I learned to strum the lute and to sing in a soft voice, though I would only sing sad songs. My Master loved these songs.

We made a choir now and then, all the boys together, and presented the Master with our own compositions and sometimes our own dances as

well.

In the hot afternoon, we played cards when we were supposed to be napping. Riccardo and I slipped out to gamble in taverns. We drank too much once or twice. The Master knew it and put a stop to it at once. He was particularly horrified that I'd fallen drunk into the Grand Canal, necessitating a clumsy and hysterical rescue. I could have sworn he went pale at the account, that I saw the color dance back from his whitening cheeks.

He whipped Riccardo for it. I was full of shame. Riccardo took it like a soldier without cries or comment, standing still at a large fireplace in the library, his back turned to receive the blows on his legs. Afterwards, he knelt and kissed the Master's ring. I vowed I'd never get drunk again.

I got drunk the next day, but I had the sense to stagger into Bianca's house and climb under her bed, where I could fall asleep without risk. Before midnight the Master pulled me out. I thought, Now I'll get it. But he only put me to bed, where I fell asleep before I could apologize. When I woke once it was to see him at his writing desk, writing as swiftly as he could paint, in some great book which he always managed to hide before he left the house.

When others did sleep, including Riccardo, during the worst afternoons of summer, I ventured out and hired a gondola. I lay on my back in it staring skyward, as we floated down the canal and to the more turbulent breast of the gulf. I closed my eyes as we made our way back so that I might hear the smallest cries from the quiet siesta-time buildings, the lap of the rank waters on rotting foundations, the cry of seagulls overhead. I didn't mind the gnats or the smell of the canals.

One afternoon I didn't go home for work or lessons. I wandered into a tavern to listen to musicians and singers, and another time happened upon an open drama on a trestle stage in a square before a church. No one was angry with me for my comings and goings. Nothing was reported. There were no tests of my learning or anyone else's.

Sometimes I slept all day, or until I was curious. It was an extreme pleasure to wake up and find the Master at work, either in the studio, walking up and down the scaffolding as he painted his larger canvas, or just near me, at his table in the bedroom, writing away.

There was always food everywhere, glistening bunches of grapes, and ripe melons cut open for us, and delicious fine-grained bread with the

freshest oil. I ate black olives, slices of pale soft cheese and fresh leeks from the roof garden. The milk came up cool in the silver pitchers.

The Master ate nothing. All knew this. The Master was always gone by day. The Master was never spoken of without reverence. The Master could read a boy's soul. The Master knew good from evil, and he knew deceit. The boys were good boys. There was some hushed mention now and then of bad boys who had been banished from the house almost at once. But no one ever spoke even in a trivial way about the Master. No one spoke about the fact that I slept in the Master's bed.

At noon each day, we dined together formally on roasted fowl, tender lamb, thick juicy slabs of beef.

Three and four teachers came at any one time to instruct the various small groups of apprentices. Some worked while others studied.

I could wander from the Latin class to the Greek class. I could leaf through the erotic sonnets and read what I could until Riccardo came to the rescue and drew a circle of laughter around his reading, for which the teachers had to wait.

In this leniency I prospered. I learnt quickly, and could answer all the Master's casual questions, offering thoughtful questions of my own.

The Master painted four out of the seven nights a week, and usually from after midnight until his disappearance at dawn. Nothing interrupted him on these nights.

He climbed the scaffold with amazing ease, rather like a great white monkey, and, letting his scarlet cloak drop carelessly, he snatched up the brush from the boy who held it for him and painted in such a fury that the paint splattered on all of us as we watched aghast. Under his genius whole landscapes came to life within hours; gatherings of people were drawn with the greatest detail.

He hummed aloud as he worked; he announced the names of the great writers or heroes as he painted their portraits from his memory or his imagination. He drew our attention to his colors, the lines he chose, the tricks with perspective that plunged his groupings of palpable and enthusiastic subjects into real gardens, rooms, palaces, halls.

Only the fill-in work was left to the boys to do by morning—the coloring of drapery, the tinting of wings, the broad spaces of flesh to which the Master would come again to add the modeling while the oily paint was still mobile, the shining flooring of sometime palaces which

after his final touches looked like real marble receding beneath the flushed chubby feet of his philosophers and saints.

The work drew us naturally, spontaneously. There were dozens of unfinished canvases and walls within the palazzo, all so lifelike they seemed portals to another world.

Gaetano, one of the youngest of us, was the most gifted. But any of the boys, except me, could match the apprentice painters of any man's workshop, even the boys of Bellini.

Sometimes there was a receiving day. Bianca was then jubilant as she would receive for the Master, and came with her servants to be lady of the house. Men and women from the finest houses in Venice came to view the Master's paintings. People were astonished at his powers. Only from listening to them on these days did I realize my Master sold almost nothing, but filled his palazzo with his own work, and that he had his own versions of most famous subjects, from the school of Aristotle to the Crucifixion of Christ. Christ. This was the curly-haired, ruddy, muscular and human-looking Christ, their Christ. The Christ who was like Cupid or Zeus.

I didn't mind that I couldn't paint as well as Riccardo and the others, that I was half the time content to hold the pots for them, to wash the brushes, to wipe clean the mistakes that had to be corrected. I did not want to paint. I did not want to. I could feel my hands cramp at the thought of it, and there would come a sickness in my belly when I thought of it.

I preferred the conversation, the jokes, the speculation as to why our fabulous Master took no commissions, though letters came to him daily inviting him to compete for this or that mural to be painted in the Ducal Palace or in one or another of the thousand churches of the isle.

I watched the color spreading out by the hour. I breathed in the fragrance of varnishes, the pigments, the oils.

Now and then a stuporous anger overcame me, but not at my lack of skill.

Something else tormented me, something to do with the humid, tempestuous postures of the painted figures, with their glistening pink cheeks and the boiling sweep of cloudy sky behind them, or the fleecy branches of the dark trees.

It seemed madness, this, this unbridled depiction of nature. My head

hurting, I walked alone and briskly along the quays until I found an old church, and a gilded altar with stiff, narrow-eyed saints, dark and drawn and rigid: the legacy of Byzantium, as I had seen it in San Marco on my first day. My soul hurt and hurt and hurt as I gazed worshipfully at these old proprieties. I cursed when my new friends found me. I knelt, stubborn, refusing to show that I knew they were there. I covered my ears to shut out the laughter of my new friends. How could they laugh in the hollow of the church where the tortured Christ bled tears like black beetles leaping from His fading hands and feet?

Now and then I fell asleep before antique altars. I had escaped my companions. I was solitary and happy on the damp cold stones. I fancied I could hear the water beneath the floor.

I took a gondola to Torcello and there sought out the great old Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta, famous for its mosaics which some said were as splendid in the antique way as the mosaics of San Marco. I crept about under the low arches, looking at the ancient gold Iconostasis and the mosaics of the apse. High above, in the back curve of the apse there stood the great Virgin, the Theotokos, the bearer of God. Her face was austere, almost sour. A tear glistened on her left cheek. In her hands she held the infant Jesus, but also a napkin, the token of the Mater Dolorosa.

I understood these images, even as they froze my soul. My head swam and the heat of the island and the quiet Cathedral made me sick in my stomach. But I stayed there. I drifted about the Iconostasis and prayed.

I thought sure no one could find me here. Towards dusk, I became truly sick. I knew I had a fever, but I sought a corner of the church and took comfort in only the cold of the stone floor against my face and my outstretched hands. Before me, if I raised my head I could see terrifying scenes of the Last Judgment, of souls condemned to Hell. I deserve this pain, I thought.

The Master came for me. I don't remember the journey back to the palazzo. It seemed that somehow in a matter of moments he had put me in bed. The boys bathed my forehead with cool cloths. I was made to drink water. Someone said that I had "the fever" and someone else said, "Be quiet."

The Master kept watch with me. I had bad dreams which I couldn't bring with me into my waking state. Before dawn, the Master kissed me

and held me close to him. I had never loved so much the chill hardness of his body as I did in this fever, wrapping my arms around him, pushing my cheek against his.

He gave me something hot and spiced to drink from a warm cup. And then he kissed me, and again came the cup. My body was filled with a healing fire.

But by the time he returned that night my fever was bad again. I did not dream so much as I wandered, half asleep, half awake, through terrible dark corridors unable to find a place that was either warm or clean. There was dirt beneath my fingernails. At one point, I saw a shovel moving, and saw the dirt, and feared the dirt would cover me, and I started to cry.

Riccardo kept watch, holding my hand, telling me it would soon be nightfall, and that the Master would surely come.

"Amadeo," the Master said. He hoisted me up as if I were truly still a small child.

Too many questions formed in my mind. Would I die? Where was the Master taking me now? I was wrapped in velvet and furs and he carried me, but how?

We were in a church in Venice, amid new paintings of our time. The requisite candles burned. Men prayed. He turned me in his arms and told me to look up at the giant altarpiece before me.

Squinting, my eyes hurting, I obeyed him and saw the Virgin on high being crowned by her beloved Son, Christ the King.

"Look at the sweetness of her face, the natural expression to her," the Master whispered. "She sits there as one might sit here in the church. And the angels, look at them, the happy boys clustered around the columns beneath her. Look at the serenity and the gentleness of their smiles. This is Heaven, Amadeo. This is goodness."

My sleepy eyes moved over the high painting. "See the Apostle who whispers so naturally to the one beside him, as men might at such a ceremony. See above, God the Father, gazing down so contentedly on all."

I tried to form questions, to say it was not possible, this combination of the fleshly and the beatific, but I couldn't find eloquent words. The nakedness of the boy angels was enchanting and innocent, but I could not believe it. It was a lie of Venice, a lie of the West, a lie of the Devil

himself.

"Amadeo," he continued, "there is no good that is founded in suffering and cruelty; there is no good that must root itself in the privation of little children. Amadeo, out of the love of God grows beauty everywhere. Look at these colors; these are the colors created by God."

Secure in his arms, my feet dangling, my arms about his neck, I let the details of the immense altarpiece sink into my consciousness. I went back and forth, back and forth, over those small touches I loved.

I raised my finger to point. The lion there, just sitting so calmly at the feet of St. Mark, and look, the pages of St. Mark's book, the pages are actually in motion as he turns them. And the lion is tame and gentle as a friendly fireside dog.

"This is Heaven, Amadeo," he said to me. "Whatever the past has hammered into your soul, let it go."

I smiled, and slowly, gazing up at the saints, the rows and rows of saints, I began to laugh softly and confidentially in the Master's ear.

"They're all talking, murmuring, talking amongst themselves as if they were the Venetian Senators."

I heard his low, subdued laughter in answer. "Oh, I think the Senators are more decorous, Amadeo. I've never seen them in such informality, but this is Heaven, as I said."

"Ah, Master, look there. A saint holds an ikon, a beautiful ikon. Master, I have to tell you—." I broke off. The fever rose and the sweat broke out on me. My eyes felt hot, and I couldn't see. "Master," I said. "I am in the wild lands. I'm running. I have to put it in the trees." How could he know what I meant, that I spoke of that long-ago desperate flight out of coherent recollection and through the wild grasses with the sacred bundle in my keep, the bundle that had to be unwrapped and placed in the trees. "Look, the ikon."

Honey filled me. It was thick and sweet. It came from a cold fount, but it didn't matter. I knew this fount. My body was like a goblet stirred so that all that was bitter dissolved in the fluids of it, dissolved in a vortex to leave only honey and a dreamy warmth.

When I opened my eyes, I was in our bed. I was cool all over. The fever was gone. I turned over and pulled myself up.

My Master sat at his desk. He was reading over what he had apparently just written. He had tied back his blond hair with a bit of

cord. His face was very beautiful, unveiled as it were, with its chiseled cheekbones and smooth narrow nose. He looked at me, and his mouth worked the miracle of the ordinary smile.

"Don't chase these memories," he said. He said it as if we'd been talking all the while that I slept. "Don't go to the church of Torcello to find them. Don't go to the mosaics of San Marco. In time all these harmful things will come back."

"I'm afraid to remember," I said.

"I know," he answered.

"How can you know?" I asked him. "I have it in my heart. It's mine alone, this pain." I was sorry for sounding so bold, but whatever my guilt, the boldness came more and more often.

"Do you really doubt me?" he asked.

"Your endowments are beyond measure. We all know it, and we never speak of it, and you and I never speak of it."

"So why then don't you put your faith in me instead of things you only half recall?"

He got up from the desk and came to the bed.

"Come," he said. "Your fever's broken. Come with me."

He took me into one of the many libraries of the palazzo, messy rooms in which the manuscripts lay helter-skelter, and the books in stacks. Seldom if ever did he work in these rooms. He threw his purchases there to be cataloged by the boys, taking what he needed back to the writing desk in our room.

He moved among the shelves now until he found a portfolio, a big flopping thing of old yellowed leather, frayed at the edges. His white fingers smoothed a large page of vellum. He laid it down on the oak study table for me to see.

A painting, antique.

I saw there drawn a great church of gilded domes, so beautiful, so majestic. Letters were blazoned there. I knew these letters. But I couldn't make the words come to my mind or my tongue.

"Kiev Rus," he said. *Kiev Rus*.

An unsupportable horror came over me. Before I could stop myself, I said, "It's ruined, burnt. There is no such place. It's not alive like Venice. It's ruined, and all is cold, and filthy and desperate. Yes, that's the very word." I was dizzy. I felt I saw an escape from desolation, only it was

cold and dark, this escape, and it led by twists and turns into a world of eternal darkness where the raw earth gave the only smell to one's hands, one's skin, one's clothes.

I pulled back and ran from the Master.

I ran the full length of the palazzo.

I ran down the stairs, and through the dark lower rooms that opened on the canal. When I came back, I found him alone in the bedroom. He was reading as always. He had his favorite book of late, *The Consolation of Philosophy* by Boethius, and he looked up from it patiently when I came in.

I stood thinking of my painful memories.

I couldn't catch them. So be it. They scurried into the nothingness rather like the leaves in the alleyways, the leaves that sometimes tumble down and down the stained green walls from the little gardens whipped in the wind up there on the rooftops.

"I don't want to," I said again.

There was but one Living Lord. My Master.

"Some day it will all come clear to you, when you have the strength to use it," he said. He shut his book. "For now, let me comfort you."

Ah, yes, I was all too ready for this.

3

Oh, how long the days could be without him. By nightfall, I clenched my fists as the candles were lighted.

There came nights when he didn't appear at all. The boys said he had gone on most important errands. The house must run as if he were there.

I slept in his empty bed, and no one questioned me. I searched the house for any personal trace of him. Questions plagued me. I feared he would never come back.

But he always came back.

When he came up the stairs, I flew into his embrace. He caught me, held me, kissed me and only then let me fall gently against his hard chest. My weight was nothing to him, though I seemed to grow taller and heavier every day.

I would never be anything but the seventeen-year-old boy you see now, but how could a man so slight as he heft me with such ease? I am not a waif and never have been. I am a strong child.

I liked it best—if I had to share with the others—when he read to us aloud.

Surrounding himself with candelabra, he spoke in a hushed and sympathetic voice. He read *The Divine Comedy* by Dante, the *Decameron* by Boccaccio, or in French *The Romance of the Rose* or the poems of François Villon. He spoke of the new languages we must understand as well as we understood Greek and Latin. He warned us that literature would no longer be confined to the classic works.

We sat in silence around him, on pillows, or on the naked tile. Some of us stood near him. Others rested back on their heels.

Sometimes Riccardo played the lute for us and sang those melodies he'd learned from his teacher, or even the wilder ribald tunes he'd picked up in the streets. He sang mournfully of love and made us weep over it. The Master watched him with loving eyes.

I had no jealousy. I alone shared the Master's bed.

Sometimes, he even had Riccardo sit outside the bedroom door and play for us. Obedient Riccardo never asked to come inside.

My heart raced as the curtains closed around us. The Master pulled open my tunic, sometimes even ripping it playfully, as if it were no more than a castoff thing.

I sank into the satin quilted down beneath him; I opened my legs and let my knees caress him, numbed and vibrating from the graze of his knuckles against my lips.

Once I lay half asleep. The air was rosy and golden. The place was warm. I felt his lips on mine, and his cold tongue move serpentlike into my mouth. A liquid filled my mouth, a rich and burning nectar, a potion so exquisite that I felt it roll through my body to the very tips of my outstretched fingers. I felt it descend through my torso and into the most private part of me. I burned. I burned.

"Master," I whispered. "What is this trick now which is sweeter than kissing?"

He laid his head down on the pillow. He turned away.

"Give it to me again, Master," I said.

He did, but only when he chose, in droplets, and with red tears he now and then let me lick from his eyes.

I think a whole year passed before I came home one evening, flushed from the winter air, dressed in my very finest dark blue for him, with sky blue stockings and the most expensive gold enameled slippers that I could find in all the world, a year before I came in that night and threw my book into the corner of the bedroom with a great world-weary gesture, putting my hands on my hips and glaring at him as he sat in his high thick arch-back chair looking at the coals in the brazier, putting his hands over them, watching the flames.

"Well, now," I said cockily and with my head back, a very man of the world, a sophisticated Venetian, a prince in the Marketplace with an entire court of merchants to wait on him, a scholar who had read too much.

"Well, now," I said. "There's a great mystery here and you know it. It's time you told me."

"What?" he asked obligingly enough.

"Why do you never … Why do you never feel anything! Why do you handle me as if I were a poppet? Why do you never …?"

For the first time ever I saw his face redden; I saw his eyes gloss and narrow and then widen with reddish tears.

"Master, you frighten me," I whispered.

"What is it you want me to feel, Amadeo?" he said.

"You're like an angel, a statue," I said, only now I was chastened and trembling. "Master, you play with me and I'm the toy that feels all things." I drew nearer. I touched his shirt, sought to unlace it. "Let me —."

He took my hand. He took my fingers and put them to his lips, and drew my fingers inside his mouth, caressing them with his tongue. His eyes moved so that he was looking up at me.

Quite enough, said his eyes. I feel quite enough.

"I'd give you anything," I said imploringly. I put my hand between his legs. Oh, he was wonderfully hard. That was not uncommon, but he must let me take him further; he must trust me.

"Amadeo," he said.

With his unaccountable strength he drew me back with him to the bed. You could hardly say he'd risen from the chair. It seemed we were there one moment and now fallen amongst our familiar pillows. I blinked. It seemed the curtains closed around us without his touching them, some trick of the breeze from the open windows. Yes, listen to the voices from the canal below. How voices sing out and up the walls in Venice, the city of palaces.

"Amadeo," he said, his lips on my throat as they'd come a thousand times, only this time there came a sting, sharp, swift and gone. A thread stitched into my heart was jerked all of a sudden. I had become the thing between my legs, and was nothing but that. His mouth nestled against me, and again that thread snapped and again.

I dreamed. I think I saw another place. I think I saw the revelations of my sleeping hours which never stayed for me when I awoke. I think I trod a road into those bursting fantasies I knew in sleep and sleep alone.

This is what I want of you.

"And you must have it," I said, words propelled to the near forgotten present as I floated against him, feeling him tremble, feeling him thrill to it, feeling him shudder, feeling him whip these threads from inside me, quickening my heart and making me nearly cry out, feeling him love it, and stiffen his back and let his fingers tremble and dance as he writhed

against me. Drink it, drink it, drink it.

He broke loose and lay to the side.

I smiled as I lay with closed eyes. I felt my lips. I felt the barest bit of that nectar still gathered on my lower lip, and my tongue took it up and I dreamed.

His breathing was heavy and he was somber. He shivered still, and when his hand found me it was unsteady.

"Ah," I said smiling still, and kissing his shoulder.

"I hurt you!" he said.

"No, no, not at all, sweet Master," I answered. "But I hurt you! I have you, now!"

"Amadeo, you play the devil."

"Don't you want me to, Master? Didn't you like it? You took my blood and it made you my slave!"

He laughed. "So that's the twist you put on it, isn't it?"

"Hmmm. Love me. What does it matter?" I asked.

"Never tell the others," he said. There was no fear or weakness or shame in it.

I turned over and drew up on my elbows and looked at him, at his quiet profile turned away from me.

"What would they do?"

"Nothing," he answered. "It's what they would think and feel that matters. And I have no time or place for it." He looked at me. "Be merciful and wise, Amadeo."

For a long time I said nothing. I merely looked at him. Only gradually did I realize I was frightened. For one moment it seemed that fear would obliterate the warmth of the moment, the soft glory of the radiant light swelling in the curtains, of the polished planes of his ivory face, the sweetness of his smile. Then some higher graver concern overruled the fear.

"You're not my slave at all, are you?" I whispered.

"Yes," he said, almost laughing again. "I am, if you must know."

"What happened, what did you do, what was it that—."

He laid his finger on my lips.

"Do you think me like other men?" he asked.

"No," I said, but the fear rose in the word and strangled out the wound. I tried to stop myself, but before I could I embraced him and

tried to push my face into his neck. He was too hard for such things, though he cradled my head and kissed the top of it, though he gathered back my hair, and let his thumb sink into my cheek.

"Some day I want you to leave here," he said. "I want you to go. You'll take wealth with you and all the learning I've been able to give you. You'll take your grace with you, and all the many arts you've mastered, that you can paint, that you can play any music I ask of you—that you can do already—that you can so exquisitely dance. You'll take these accomplishments and you'll go out in search of those precious things that you want—."

"I want nothing but you."

"—and when you think back on this time, when in half-sleep at night you remember me as your eyes close on your pillow, these moments of ours will seem corrupt and most strange. They'll seem like sorcery and the antics of the mad, and this warm place might become the lost chamber of dark secrets and this might bring you pain."

"I won't go."

"Remember then that it was love," he said. "That this indeed was the school of love in which you healed your wounds, in which you learnt to speak again, aye, even to sing, and in which you were born out of the broken child as if he were no more than an eggshell, and you the angel, ascending out of him with widening, strengthening wings."

"And what if I never go of my own free will? Will you pitch me from some window so that I must fly or fall? Will you bolt all shutters after me? You had better, because I'll knock and knock and knock until I fall down dead. I'll have no wings that take me away from you."

He made a study of me for the longest time. I never had such an unbroken feast on his eyes myself, and had never been let to touch his mouth with my prying fingers for such a spell.

Finally he rose up next to me and pressed me gently down. His lips, always softly pink like the inner petals of blushing white roses, turned slowly red as I watched. It was a gleaming seam of red that ran between his lips and then flowed through all the fine lines of which his lips were made, perfectly coloring them, as wine might do, only it was so brilliant, this fluid, that his lips shimmered, and when he parted them, the red burst as if it were a curled tongue.

My head was lifted. I caught it with my own mouth.

The world moved out from under me. I listed and drifted, and my eyes opened and saw nothing as he shut his mouth over mine.

"Master, I die from this!" I whispered. I tossed under him, seeking to find some firm place in this dreamy intoxicating void. My body churned and rolled with pleasure, my limbs tightening then floating, my whole body issuing from him, from his lips, through my lips, my body his very breath and his sigh.

There came the sting, there came the blade, tiny and sharp beyond measure, puncturing my soul. I twisted on it as if I'd been skewered. Oh, this could teach the gods of love what love was. This was my deliverance if I could but survive.

Blind and shaking I was wed to him. I felt his hand cover my mouth, and only then heard my cries as they were muffled away.

I wrapped my hand around his neck, pressing him against my throat all the harder, "Do it, do it, do it, do it!"

When I awoke, it was day.

He was long gone, as was his infallible custom. I lay alone. The boys had not yet come.

I climbed out of bed and went to the high narrow window, the kind of window which is everywhere in Venice, locking out the fierce heat of summer and sealing off the cold Adriatic winds when they inevitably come.

I unbolted the thick glass panels and looked out on the walls across from my safe place as I had often done.

A common serving woman shook her cloth mop from a far balcony above. Across the canal, I watched her. Her face seemed livid and crawling, as if some tiny species of life covered her, some rampage of ants. She didn't know! I laid my hands on the sill and looked ever more keenly. It was only the life inside her, the workings of the flesh in her that made the mask of her face seem to move.

But horrid her hands seemed, knuckled and swollen, and the dust from her broom engraving every line.

I shook my head. She was too far from me for these observations.

In a faraway room, the boys talked. Time for work. Time to get up, even in the palazzo of the night Lord who never checks or prods by day. Too far away for me to hear them.

And this velvet now, this curtain made of the Master's favorite fabric,

this was like fur to my touch, not velvet, I could see each tiny fiber! I dropped it. I went for the looking glass.

The house had dozens of them, great ornate mirrors, all with fancified frames and most replete with tiny cherubs. I found the tall mirror in the anteroom, the alcove behind warped yet beautifully painted doors where I kept my clothes.

The light of the window followed me. I saw myself. But I was not a seething corrupt mass, such as this woman had seemed. My face was baby smooth and starkly white.

"I want it!" I whispered. I knew.

"No," he told me.

This is when he came that night. I ranted and paced and cried out to him.

He didn't give me long explanations, no sorcery or science, either of which would have been so easy for him. He told me only I was a child still, and there were things to be savored which would be lost forever.

I cried. I didn't want to work or paint or study or do anything in the world.

"It's lost its savor for a little while," he said patiently. "But you'd be surprised."

"At what?"

"At how much you'll lament it when it's gone utterly, when you are perfect and unchangeable like me, and all those human mistakes can be triumphantly supplanted by a new and more stunning series of failures. Don't ask for this, not again."

I would have died then, curled up, black and furious and too bitter for words.

But he wasn't finished.

"Amadeo," he said, his voice thick with sorrow. "Say nothing. You don't have to. I'll give it to you quickly enough when I think the time has come."

At that I went to him, running, childlike, flinging myself at his neck, kissing his icy cheek a thousand times despite his mock-disdainful smile.

At last his hands became like iron. There was to be no blood play this night. I must study. I must make up the lessons I had scorned by day.

He had to see to his apprentices, to his tasks, to the giant canvas on which he'd been working, and I did as he said.

But well before morning, I saw him change. The others had long gone to bed. I was turning the pages of the book obediently when I saw him staring, beastlike, from his chair, as if some ravener had come into him and banished all his civilized faculties and left him thus, hungry, with glazed eyes and reddening mouth, the glittering blood finding its myriad little paths over the silky margin of his lips.

He rose, a drugged thing, and came towards me with a rhythm of movements that was alien and struck the coldest terror in my heart.

His fingers flashed, closed, beckoned.

I ran to him. He lifted me in both hands, clutching my arms ever so gently, and tucked his face against my neck. From the soles of my feet up my back through my arms and my neck and scalp, I felt it.

Where he flung me I didn't know. Was it our bed or some hasty cushions he found in another closer salon? "Give it to me," I said sleepily, and when it came into my mouth, I was gone.

4

He said that I must go to the brothels, learn what it meant to couple properly—not merely in play, as we did among the boys.

Venice had many such places, very well run and devoted to pleasure in the most luxurious environment. It was firmly held that such pleasures were little more than a venial sin in the eyes of the Christ, and the young men of fashion frequented these establishments without hiding it.

I knew of a house of particularly exquisite and skilled women, where there were tall, buxom, very pale-eyed beauties from the North of Europe, some whose blond hair was almost white, deemed to be somewhat different from the shorter Italian women's which we saw every day. I don't know that difference was such a high priority with me, as I'd been somewhat dazzled by the beauty of Italian boys and women since I had come. Swan-necked Venetian girls in their fancy cushion-head dresses with abundant translucent veils were very nearly irresistible to me. But then the brothel had all kinds of women, and the name of the game was to mount as many as I could.

My Master took me to this place, paid for me, a fortune in ducats, and told the buxom enchanting mistress that he would collect me in a matter of days.

Days!

I was pale with jealousy and on fire with curiosity, as I watched him take his leave—the usual regal figure in his familiar crimson robes, climbing into the gondola and giving me his clever wink as the boat took him away.

I spent three days, as it turned out, in the house of the most voluptuous available maidens in Venice, sleeping late in the morning, comparing olive skin to blond skin and indulging myself in leisurely examinations of the nether hair of all beauties, distinguishing the more silken from the wiry and more tightly curled.

I learned little niceties of pleasure, such as how sweet it was to have one's nipples bitten (lightly, and these weren't vampires) and to have the hair under one's arms, of which I had just a little, tugged affectionately at the appropriate moments. Golden honey was painted on my nether parts only to be licked away by giggling angels.

There were other more intimate tricks, of course, including bestial acts which were strictly speaking crimes but which were in this house merely various extra accouterments to overall wholesome and tantalizing feasts. All was done with grace, the steamy hot perfumed baths came frequently in large deep wooden tubs, flowers floating on the surface of the rose-tinted water, and I lay back sometimes at the mercy of a bevy of soft-voiced women who cooed over me like birds in the eaves as they licked me like so many kittens and combed my hair around their fingers to make curls.

I was the little Ganymede of Zeus, an angel tumbled out of Botticelli's more ribald paintings (many of which by the way were in this brothel, having been rescued from the Bonfires of the Vanities erected in Florence by the adamant reformer Savonarola, who had urged the great Botticelli to just … burn up his beautiful work!), a little cherub fallen off the ceiling of a Cathedral, a Venetian prince (of which there were none in the Republic technically) delivered into their hands by his enemies to be rendered helpless with desire.

I grew hotter in desire. If one had to be human for the rest of one's life, this was great fun, tumbling among Turkish cushions with nymphs such as most men only glimpse through magical forests in their dreams. Each soft and downy cleft was a new and exotic envelope for my romping spirit.

The wine was delicious and the food quite marvelous, including sugared and spiced dishes from the Arabs, and being altogether more extravagant and more exotic than the fare served by my Master at home.

(When I told him, he hired four new chefs.)

I wasn't awake, apparently, when my Master arrived to collect me, and I was spirited home by him, in his mysterious and infallible manner, and found myself again in my bed.

I knew I wanted only him when my eyes opened. And it seemed the fleshy repasts of the last few days had only made me more hungry, more inflamed and more eager to see if his enchanted white body would

respond to the more tender tricks I'd learned. I threw myself on him when he finally came in behind the curtains, and I unloosed his shirt and sucked his nipples, discovering that for all their disturbing whiteness and coldness they were soft and obviously intimately connected in a seemingly natural way to the root of his desires.

He lay there, graceful and quiet, letting me play with him as my women teachers had played with me. When he finally gave me the blood kisses, all memories of human contact were obliterated, and I lay helpless as always in his arms. It seemed our world then was not merely one of the flesh, but of a mutual spell to which all natural laws gave way.

Towards morning on the second night, I sought him out where he was painting by himself in the studio, the scattered apprentices fallen asleep like the unfaithful Apostles in Gethsemane.

He wouldn't stop for my questions. I stood behind him and locked my arms around him and, climbing on tiptoe, I whispered my questions in his ear.

"Tell me, Master, you must, how did you gain this magic blood inside you?" I bit his earlobes and ran my hands through his hair. He wouldn't stop painting. "Were you born into this state, am I so wrong about this as to suppose that you were transformed …"

"Stop it, Amadeo," he whispered, and continued to paint. He worked furiously on the face of Aristotle, the bearded, balding elder of his great painting, *The Academy*.

"Is there ever a loneliness in you, Master, that pushes you to tell someone, anyone, to have a friend of your own mettle, to confide your heart to one who can comprehend?"

He turned, startled for once by my questions.

"And you, spoiled little angel," he said, lowering his voice to maintain its gentleness, "you think you can be that friend? You're an innocent! You'll be an innocent all of your days. You have the heart of an innocent. You refuse to accept truth that doesn't correspond with some deep raging faith in you which makes you ever the little monk, the acolyte—."

I stepped backwards, as angry as I'd ever been with him. "No, I won't be such!" I declared. "I'm a man already in the guise of a boy, and you know it. Who else dreams of what you are, and the alchemy of your

powers? I wish I could drain a cupful of your blood from you and study it as the doctors might and determine what is its makeup and how it differs from the fluid that runs through my veins! I am your pupil, yes, your student, yes, but to be that, I must be a man. When would you tolerate innocence? When we bed together, you call that innocence? I am a man."

He burst into the most amazed laughter. It was a treat to see him so surprised.

"Tell me your secret, Sir," I said. I put my arms around his neck and laid my head on his shoulder. "Was there a Mother as white and strong as you were who brought you forth, the God-Bearer, from her celestial womb?"

He took my arms and moved me back away from him, so that he could kiss me, and his mouth was insistent and frightening to me for a moment. Then it moved over my throat, sucking at my flesh and causing me to become weak and, with all my heart, willing to be anything he wished.

"Of the moon and the stars, yes, I'm made, of that sovereign whiteness which is the substance of clouds and innocence alike," he said. "But no Mother gave birth to me, you know that's so; I was a man once, a man moving on in his years. Look—." He lifted my face with both hands and made me study his face. "You see here remnants of the lines of age which once marked me, here at the corners of my eyes."

"Merely nothing, Sir," I whispered, thinking to console him if this imperfection troubled him. He shone in his brilliance, his polished smoothness. The simplest expressions flashed in his face in luminescent heat.

Imagine a figure of ice, as perfectly made as Pygmalion's Galatea, thrown into the fire, and sizzling, and melting, and yet the features all wondrously intact still … well, such was my Master when human emotions infected him, as they did now.

He crushed my arms deliciously and kissed me again.

"Little man, manikin, elf," he whispered. "Would you be so for eternity? Haven't you lain with me often enough to know what I can and cannot enjoy?"

I won him over, captive to me, for the last hour before he was off.

But the next night he dispatched me to a more clandestine and even

more luxurious house of pleasure, a house which kept for the passions of others only young boys.

It was got up in Eastern style, and I think it blended the luxuries of Egypt with those of Babylon, its small cells made up of golden latticework, and colonnettes of brass studded with lapis lazuli holding up the salmon-colored drapery of the ceilings over tasseled couches of gilt wood and damask-covered down. Incense made the air heavy, and the lights were soothingly low.

The naked boys, well fed, nubile, smooth and rounded of limb, were eager, strong, tenacious, and brought to the games their own rampant male desires.

It seemed my soul was a pendulum that swung between the hearty pleasure of conquest and the swooning surrender to stronger limbs, and stronger wills, and stronger hands that tossed me tenderly about.

Captive between two skilled and willful lovers, I was pierced and suckled, pummeled and emptied until I slept as soundly as ever I had without the Master's magic at home.

It was only the beginning.

Sometime in my drunken sleep, I woke to find myself surrounded by beings that seemed neither male nor female. Only two of them were eunuchs, cut with such skill they could raise their trusty weapons as well as any boy. The others merely shared the taste of their companions for paint. All had eyes lined in black and shaded in purple, with lashes curled and glazed to give their expressions an eerie fathomless aloofness. Their rouged lips seemed tougher than those of women and more demanding, pushing at me in their kisses as if the male element which had given them muscles and hard organs had given them as well a virility to their very mouths. They had the smiles of angels. Gold rings decorated their nipples. Their nether hair was powdered with gold.

I made no protest when they overcame me. I feared no extreme, and even let them bind my wrists and ankles to the bed, so they could better work their craft. It was impossible to fear them. I was crucified with pleasure. Their insistent fingers would not even allow me to close my eyes. They stroked my lids, they forced me to look. They brought soft thick brushes down over my limbs. They rubbed oils into all my skin. They sucked from me, as if it were nectar, the fiery sap I gave forth, over and over, until I cried out vainly that I could give no more. A count was

kept of my “little deaths” with which to taunt me playfully, and I was turned over and cuffed and pinioned as I tumbled down into rapturous sleep.

When I awoke I knew no time or worry. The thick smoke of a pipe rose into my nostrils. I took it and sucked on it, savoring the dark familiar smell of hemp.

I stayed there for four nights.

Again, I was delivered.

This time I found myself, groggy and in dishabille, barely covered by a thin torn cream-colored silk shirt. I lay on a couch brought from the very brothel, but this was my Master’s studio, and there he sat, not far away, painting my picture obviously, at a small easel from which he took his eyes only to dart glances at me.

I asked the time of day and what night it was. He didn’t answer.

“And so you’re angry that I enjoyed it?” I asked.

“I told you to lie still,” he said.

I lay back, cold all over, and hurt suddenly, lonely perhaps, and wanting like a child to hide in his arms.

Morning came and he left me, having said nothing else. The painting was a gleaming masterpiece of the obscene. I was in my sleeping posture cast down on a riverbank, a fawn of sorts, over which a tall shepherd, the Master himself, in priestly robes stood watch. The woods around us were thick and richly realized with the peeling tree trunks and their clustered dusty leaves. The water of the stream seemed wet to the touch, so clever was the realism of it, and my own figure appeared guileless and lost in sleep, my mouth half-open in a natural way, my brow obviously troubled by uneasy dreams.

I threw it on the floor, in a rage, meaning to smear it.

Why had he said nothing? Why did he force me to these lessons which drove us apart? Why his anger at me for merely doing what he had told me? I wondered if the brothels had been a test of my innocence, and his admonitions to me to enjoy all of it had been lies.

I sat at his desk, picked up his pen and scribbled a message to him.

> You are the Master. You should know all things. It’s unsupportable to be Mastered by one who cannot do it. Make clear the way, shepherd, or lay down your staff.

The fact was, I was wrung out from the pleasure, from the drink, from the distortion of my senses, and lonely just to be with him and for his guidance and his kindness and his reassurance that I was his.

But he was gone.

I went out roaming. I spent all day in the taverns, drinking, playing cards, deliberately enticing the pretty girls who were fair game, to keep them at my side as I played the various games of chance.

Then when night came, I let myself be seduced, ho-hum, by a drunken Englishman, a fair freckle-skinned noble of the oldest French and English titles, of which this one was the Earl of Harlech, who was traveling in Italy to see the great wonders and utterly intoxicated with its many delights, including buggery in a strange land.

Naturally, he found me a beautiful boy. Didn't everyone? He was not at all ugly himself. Even his pale freckles had a kind of prettiness to them, especially given his outrageous copper hair.

Taking me back to his rooms in an overstuffed and beautiful palazzo, he made love to me. It was not all bad. I liked his innocence and his clumsiness. His light round blue eyes were a marvel; he had wondrously thick and muscular arms and a pampered but deliciously rough-pointed orange beard.

He wrote poems to me in Latin and in French, and recited them to me with great charm. After an hour or two of playing the vanquishing brute, he had let on that he wanted to be covered by me. And this I had very much enjoyed. We played it that way after that, my being the conquering soldier and he the victim on the battlefield, and sometimes I whipped him lightly with a doubled-up leather belt before I took him, which sent us both into a tidy froth.

From time to time, he implored me to confess who I really was and where he might afterwards find me, which of course I wouldn't.

I stayed there for three nights with him, talking about the mysterious islands of England with him, and reading Italian poetry aloud to him, and even sometimes playing the mandolin for him and singing any number of the soft love songs I knew.

He taught me a great deal of rank gutter-tramp English, and wanted to take me home. He had to regain his wits, he said; he had to return to his duties, his estates, his hateful wicked adulterous Scottish wife whose father was an assassin, and his innocent little child whose paternity he

was most certain of, due to its orange curly hair so like his own.

He would keep me in London in a splendid house he had there, a present from His Majesty King Henry VII. He could not now live without me, the Harlechs to a man had to have what they must have, and there was nothing for me to do but yield to him. If I was the son of a formidable nobleman I should confess it, and this obstacle would be dealt with. Did I hate my Father, perchance? His was a scoundrel. All the Harlechs were scoundrels and had been since the days of Edward the Confessor. We would sneak out of Venice this very night.

"You don't know Venice, and you don't know her noblemen," I said kindly. "Think on all this. You'll be cut to pieces for giving it a try."

I now perceived that he was fairly young. Since all older men seemed old to me, I had not thought about it before. He couldn't have been more than twenty-five. He was also mad.

He leapt on the bed, his bushy copper hair flying, and pulled his dagger, a formidable Italian stiletto, and stared down into my upturned face.

"I'll kill for you," he said confidentially and proudly, in the Venetian dialect. Then he drove the dagger into the pillow and the feathers flew out of it. "I'll kill you if I have to." The feathers went up into his face.

"And then you'll have what?" I asked.

There was a creaking behind him. I felt certain someone was at the window, beyond the bolted wooden shutters, even though we were three stories above the Grand Canal. I told him so. He believed me.

"I come from a family of murderous beasts," I lied. "They'll follow you to the ends of the Earth if you think of taking me out of here; they'll dismantle your castles stone by stone, chop you in half and cut out your tongue and your private parts, wrap them in velvet and send them to your King. Now calm down."

"Oh, you bright, saucy little demon," he said, "you look like an angel and hold forth like a tavern knave in that sweet crooning mannish voice."

"That's me," I said gaily.

I got up, dressed hastily, warning him not to kill me just yet, as I would return as soon as I possibly could, longing to be nowhere but with him, and kissing him hastily, I made for the door.

He hovered in the bed, his dagger still tightly clutched in his hand, the

feathers having settled on his carrot-colored head and on his shoulders and on his beard. He looked truly dangerous.

I'd lost count of the nights of my absence.

I could find no churches open. I wanted no company.

It was dark and cold. The curfew had come down. Of course the Venetian winter seemed mild to me after the snowy lands of the north, where I'd been born, but it was nevertheless an oppressive and damp winter, and though cleansing breezes purified the city, it was inhospitable and unnaturally quiet. The illimitable sky vanished in thick mists. The very stones gave forth the chill as if they were blocks of ice.

On a water stairs, I sat, not caring that it was brutally wet, and I burst into tears. What had I learned from all this?

I felt very sophisticated on account of this education. But I had no warmth from it, no lasting warmth, and it seemed my loneliness was worse than guilt, worse than the feeling of being damned.

Indeed it seemed to replace that old feeling. I feared it, being utterly alone. As I sat there looking up at the tiny margin of black Heaven, at the few stars that drifted over the roofs of the houses, I sensed how utterly terrible it would be to lose both my Master and my guilt simultaneously, to be cast out where nothing bothered to love me or damn me, to be lost and tumbling through the world with only those humans for companions, those boys and those girls, the English lord with his dagger, even my beloved Bianca.

It was to her house that I went. I climbed under her bed, as I'd done in the past, and wouldn't come out.

She was entertaining a whole flock of Englishmen, but not, fortunately, my copper-haired lover, who was no doubt still stumbling around in the feathers, and I thought, Well, if my charming Lord Harlech shows up, he won't risk shame before his countrymen in making a fool out of himself. She came in, looking most lovely in her violet silk gown with a fortune of radiant pearls around her neck. She knelt down and put her head near mine.

"Amadeo, what's the matter with you?"

I had never asked for her favors. To my knowledge no one did such a thing. But in my particular adolescent frenzy, nothing seemed more appropriate than that I should ravage her.

I scrambled out from under the bed and went to the doors and shut

them, so the noise of her guests would leave us alone.

When I turned around she knelt on the floor, looking at me, her golden eyebrows knotted and her peach-soft lips open in a vague wondering expression that I found enchanting. I wanted to smash her with my passion, but not all that hard, of course, assuming all the while that she'd come back together again afterwards as if a beautiful vase, broken into pieces, could pull itself together again from all the tiniest shards and particles and be restored to its glory with an even finer glaze.

I pulled her up by the arms and threw her down on her bed. It was quite an affair, this marvelous coffered thing in which she slept alone, as far as all men knew. It had great gilded swans at its head, and columns rising to a framed canopy of painted dancing nymphs. Its curtains were spun gold and transparent. It had no winter aspect to it, like my Master's red velvet bed.

I bent down and kissed her, maddened by her sharp, pretty eyes which stared coolly at me as I did it. I held her wrists and then, swinging her left wrist over with her right, entrapped both her hands in one so that I was free to rip open her fine dress. I ripped it carefully so that all the little pearl buttons flew off the side of it, and her girdle was opened and underneath was her fine whalebone and lace. This I broke open as if it were a tight shell.

Her breasts were small and sweet, far too delicate and youngish for the brothel where voluptuousness had been the order of the day. I meant to pillage them nevertheless. I crooned against her, humming a bit of a song to her, and then I heard her sigh. I swooped down, still clutching her wrists firmly, and I sucked hard at her nipples in quick order and then drew back. I slapped her breasts playfully, from left to right until they turned pink.

Her face was flushed and she had her little golden frown still, the wrinkles almost incongruous in her smooth white forehead.

Her eyes were like two opals, and though she blinked slowly, near sleepily, she didn't flinch.

I finished my work on her fragile clothes. I ripped open the ties of her skirt and pushed it down away from her and found her splendidly and daintily naked as I had supposed she would be. I really had no idea what was beneath the skirts of a respectable woman in the way of obstacles. There was nothing except the small golden nest of her pubic hair, all

feathery beneath her very slightly rounded little belly, and a dampness gleaming on her inner thighs.

I knew at once she favored me. She was hardly helpless. And the sight of the glittering down on her legs drove me mad. I plunged into her, amazed at her smallness and the way that she cringed, for she was not very well used, and it hurt her just a little.

I worked her hard, delighting to see her blush. My own weight I held up above her with my right arm, because I wouldn't let go of her wrists. She tossed and turned, and her blond tresses worked themselves out of her pearl and ribbon coif, and she became moist all over and pink and gleaming, like the inner curve of a great shell.

At last I couldn't contain myself any longer, and it seemed when I would give up the timing, she gave herself up to the final sigh. I spent with it, and we rocked together, as she closed her eyes, turned blood red as if she were dying and tossed her head in a final frenzy before going limp.

I rolled over and covered my face with both my arms, as if I were about to be slapped.

I heard her little laughter, and she did slap me suddenly, hard on my arms. It was nothing. I made as if I were weeping with shame.

"Look what you've done to my beautiful gown, you dreadful little satyr, you secret conquistador! You vile precocious child!"

I felt her weight leave the bed. I heard her dressing. She sang to herself.

"What's your Master going to think of this, Amadeo?" she asked.

I removed my arms and looked to find her voice. She dressed behind her painted paneled screen, a gift from Paris, if I recalled, given her by one of her favorite French poets. She appeared quickly, clothed as splendidly as before in a dress of pale spring green, embroidered with the flowers of the field. She seemed a very garden of delight with these tiny yellow and pink blooms so carefully made in rich thread over her new bodice and her long taffeta skirts.

"Well, tell me, what is the great Master going to say when he finds out his little lover is a veritable god of the wood?"

"Lover?" I was astonished.

She was very gentle in her manner. She sat down and began to comb out her tousled hair. She wore no paint and her face was unmarred by

our games, and her hair came down around in a glorious hood of rippling gold. Her forehead was smooth and high.

"Botticelli made you," I whispered. I often said this to her, because she was so like his beauties. Indeed everyone thought so, and they would bring her small copies of this famous Florentine's paintings from time to time.

I thought on it, I thought on Venice and this world in which I lived. I thought on her, a courtesan, receiving those chaste yet lascivious paintings as if she were a saint.

Some echo came to me of old words that I had been told long ago, when I knelt in the presence of old and burnished beauty, and thought myself at the pinnacle, that I must take up my brush and I must paint only "what represented the world of God."

There was no tumult in me, only a great mixing of currents, as I watched her braid her hair again, stringing the fine ropes of pearls in with it, and the pale green ribbons, the ribbons themselves sewn with the same pretty little flowers that decorated her gown. Her breasts were blushing, half-covered beneath the press of her bodice. I wanted to rip it open again.

"Pretty Bianca, what makes you say this, that I'm his lover?"

"Everyone knows it," she whispered. "You are his favorite. Do you think you've made him angry?"

"Oh, if only I could," I said. I sat up. "You don't know my Master. Nothing makes him lift his hand to me. Nothing makes him even raise his voice. He sent me forth to learn all things, to know what men can know."

She smiled and nodded. "So you came and hid under the bed."

"I was sad."

"I'm sure," she said. "Well, sleep now, and when I come back, if you're still here, I'll keep you warm. But need I tell you, my rambunctious one, that you will never utter one careless word of what happened here? Are you so young that I have to tell you this?" She bent down to kiss me.

"No, my pearl, my beauty, you needn't tell me. I won't even tell *him*."

She stood and gathered up her broken pearls and wrinkled ribbons, the remnants of the rape. She smoothed the bed. She looked as lovely as a human swan, a match for the gilded swans of her boatlike bed.

“Your Master will know,” she said. “He’s a great magician.”

“Are you afraid of him? I mean in general, Bianca, I don’t mean on account of me?”

“No,” she said. “Why should I fear him? Everyone knows not to anger him or offend him or break his solitude or question him, but it’s not fear. Why do you cry, Amadeo, what’s wrong?”

“I don’t know, Bianca.”

“I’ll tell you then,” she said. “He has become the world to you as only such a great being can. And you are out of it now and longing to return to it. A man such as that becomes all things to you, and his wise voice becomes the law by which everything is measured. All that lies beyond has no value because he doesn’t see it, and he doesn’t declare that it is valuable. And so you have no choice but to leave the wastes that lie outside his light and return to it. You must go home.”

She went out, closing the doors. I slept, refusing to go home.

The next morning, I breakfasted with her, and spent all day with her. Our intimacy had given me a radiant sense of her. No matter how much she talked of my Master, I had eyes only for her just now, in these quarters of hers which were perfumed with her and full of all her private and special things.

I will never forget Bianca. Never.

I told her, as one can do with a courtesan, all about the brothels to which I’d been. Perhaps I remember them in such detail because I told her. I told her with delicate words, of course. But I told her. I told her how my Master wanted me to learn everything and had taken me to these splendid academies himself.

“Well, that’s fine, but you can’t linger here, Amadeo. He’s taken you to places where you’ll have the pleasure of much company. He may not want you to remain in the company of one.”

I didn’t want to go. But when nightfall came, and the house filled with her English and French poets, and the music started, and the dancing, I didn’t want to share her with all the admiring world.

For a while I watched her, confusingly conscious that I had had her in her secret chamber as none of these, her admirers, had or might have, but it gave me no solace.

I wanted something from my Master, something final and conclusive and obliterating, and maddened by this desire, suddenly fully aware of

it, I got drunk in a tavern, drunk enough to be nervy and nasty, and I went blundering home.

I felt bold and defiant and very independent for having stayed away from my Master and all his mysteries for so long.

He was painting furiously when I returned. He was high on the scaffold, and I figured he was attending to the faces of his Greek philosophers, working the alchemy by which vivid countenances came out of his brush, as though uncovered rather than applied.

He wore a bedraggled gray tunic that hung down to his feet. He didn't turn to look at me when I came in. Every brazier in the house it seemed had been crammed into the room to give him the light he wanted.

The boys were frightened at the speed with which he covered the canvas.

I soon realized, as I staggered into the studio, that he wasn't painting on his Greek Academy.

He was painting a picture of me. I knelt in this picture, a boy of our time, with my familiar long locks and a quiet suit of clothing as if I had taken leave of the high-toned world, and seemingly innocent, my hands clasped in prayer. Around me were gathered angels, gentle-faced and glorious as they always appeared, only these had been graced with black wings.

Black wings. Great black feathery wings. Hideous they seemed, the more I looked upon this canvas. Hideous, and he had almost completed it. The auburn-haired boy seemed real as he looked unchallengingly to Heaven, and the angels appeared avid yet sad.

But nothing therein was as monstrous as the spectacle of my Master painting this, of his hand and brush whipping across the picture, realizing sky, clouds, broken pediment, angel wing, sunlight.

The boys clung to one another, certain of his madness or his sorcery. Which was it? Why did he so carelessly reveal himself to those whose minds had been at peace?

Why did he flaunt our secret, that he was no more a man than the winged creatures he painted! Why had he the Lord lost his patience in such a manner as this?

Suddenly in a rage, he threw a pot of paint at the far corner of the room. A splatter of dark green disfigured the wall. He cursed and cried in a language none of us knew.

He hurled the pots down, and the paint spilt in great shiny splashes from the wooden scaffold. He sent the brushes flying like arrows.

"Get out of here, go to your beds, I don't want to see you, innocents. Go. Go."

The apprentices ran from him. Riccardo reached out to gather to him the smaller boys. All hurried out the door.

High up on the scaffold, he sat down, his legs dangling, and merely looked at me as I stood beneath him, as if he didn't know who I was.

"Come down, Master," I said.

His hair was disheveled and matted here and there with paint. He showed no surprise that I was there, no start at the sound of my voice. He had known I was there. He knew all such things. He could hear words spoken in other rooms. He knew the thoughts of those around him. He was pumped full of magic, and when I drank from that magic, I reeled.

"Let me comb your hair out for you," I said. I was insolent, I knew it.

His tunic was stained and filthy. He'd wiped his brush on it over and over again.

One of his sandals fell with a clatter to the marble. I picked it up.

"Master, come down. Whatever I said to worry you, I won't say it again."

He wouldn't answer me.

Suddenly all my rage came up in me, my loneliness to have been separated from him for days on end, obeying his injunctions, and now to come home and find him staring at me wild and unconfiding. I would not tolerate his staring off, ignoring me as if I weren't there. He must admit that I was the cause of his anger. He must speak.

I wanted suddenly to cry.

His face became anguished. I couldn't watch this; I couldn't think that he felt pain as I did, as the other boys did. I was in wild revolt.

"You frighten everyone selfishly, Lord and Master!" I declared.

Without regarding me, he vanished in a great flurry, and I heard his footsteps rushing through the empty rooms.

I knew he had moved with a speed men couldn't master. I hurried after him, only to hear the bedroom doors slammed shut against me, to hear the lock slid closed before I reached out to grab the latch.

"Master, let me in," I cried. "I went only because you told me to." I

turned around and around. It was quite impossible to break these doors. I pounded on them with my fists and kicked them. “Master, you sent me to the brothels. You sent me on damnable errands.”

After a long time, I sat down at the foot of the door, my back against it, and wept and wailed. I made a riotous amount of noise. He waited until I stopped.

“Go to sleep, Amadeo,” he said. “My rages have nothing to do with you.”

Impossible. A lie! I was infuriated and insulted, and hurt and cold! This whole house was damnably cold.

“Then let your peace and calm have to do with me, Sir!” I said. “Open the damned door.”

“Go to bed with the others,” he said quietly. “You belong with the others, Amadeo. They are your loved ones. They are your kind. Don’t seek the company of monsters.”

“Ah, is that what you are, Sir?” I asked contemptuously and crossly. “You that can paint like Bellini or Mantegna, who can read all words and speak all tongues, who has love without end and patience to match it, a monster! Is that it? A monster spreads the roof over our head and feeds us our daily supper from the kitchens of the gods! Oh, indeed, a monster.”

He didn’t answer.

I was further enraged. I went down to the lower floor. I took a great battle-ax from the wall. It was one of many weapons on display in the house which I’d scarcely ever noticed. Well, it was time for it, I thought. I’ve had enough of this coldness. I can’t stand it. I can’t stand it.

I went upstairs and heaved the battle-ax at the door. Of course it went through the brittle wood, shattering the painted panel, cracking through the old lacquer and the pretty yellow and red roses. I pulled it back and smashed it into the door again.

This time the lock was broken. I kicked the shattered frame with my foot and it fell back.

In utter amazement he sat in his large dark oak chair looking at me, his hands clutching the two lion’s head arms. Behind him loomed the massive bed with its rich red baldaquin trimmed in gold.

“How dare you!” he said.

He stood before me in an instant, took the ax and hurled it with ease

so that it crashed into the stone wall opposite. Then he picked me up and threw me towards the bed. The entire bed shivered, baldaquin and draperies as well. No man could have made me span that distance. But he had done it. With arms and legs flying, I landed on the pillows.

"Despicable monster!" I said. I turned over, steadied myself and drew up on my left side, glaring at him, one knee crooked.

He stood with his back to me. He had been about to close the inner doors of the apartment, which had been open before and therefore were not broken. But he stopped. He turned. A playful expression came over him.

"Oh, what a vile temper we have for such an angelic countenance," he said mildly.

"If I'm an angel," I said, drawing back from the edge of the bed, "paint me with black wings. "

"You dare knock down my door." He folded his arms. "Need I tell you why I will not tolerate such from you, or from anyone?"

He stood gazing at me with raised eyebrows.

"You torture me," I said.

"Oh, indeed, how and since when?"

I wanted to bawl. I wanted to say, "I love only you."

Instead I said, "I detest you."

He couldn't help but laugh. He lowered his head, his fingers curled under his chin, as he stared at me.

Then he extended his hand and snapped his fingers.

I heard a rustling from the rooms beyond. I sat up petrified with amazement.

I saw the long switch of the teacher come slithering along the floor as if a wind had sent it hither, and then it twisted and turned and rose and dropped into his waiting hand.

Behind him, the inner doors slammed shut and the bolt slipped into place with a loud metallic clatter.

I drew back in the bed.

"It's going to be a pleasure to whip you," he said, smiling sweetly, his eyes almost innocent. "You may chalk it up as another human experience, rather like cavorting with your English lord."

"Do it. I hate you," I said. "I'm a man and you deny it."

He looked superior and gentle but not amused.

He came towards me, and grabbed at my head, and threw me face down on the bed.

"Demon!" I said.

"Master," he replied calmly.

I felt the nudge of his knee in the small of my back and then down came the switch across my thighs. Of course I wasn't wearing anything but the thin stockings that fashion decreed, so I might as well have been naked.

I cried out in pain and then shut my mouth tight. When the next few blows came, walloping my legs, I swallowed all noise, furious to hear myself make a careless impossible groan.

Again and again, he brought the switch down, whipping my thighs and then my lower legs as well. Enraged, I struggled to get up, pushing vainly on the covers with the heels of my hands. I couldn't move. I was pinioned by his knee, and he whacked away without the slightest deterrent.

Suddenly as rebellious as I'd ever been, I decided to play games with this. I'd be damned if I'd lie there crying, and the tears were coming up in my eyes. I closed my eyes shut, gritted my teeth and decided that each blow was the divine color red and that I liked, and that the hot crashing pain I felt was red, and that the warmth swelling up in my leg after was golden and sweet.

"Oh, that's lovely!" I said.

"You make a fool's bargain, little boy!" he said.

He whipped me harder and faster. I couldn't keep my pretty visions. It hurt, it bloody hurt.

"I'm not a boy!" I cried.

I felt a wetness on my leg. I knew I was bleeding.

"Master, you mean to disfigure me?"

"There's nothing worse than for a fallen saint to be a horrid devil!"

More blows. I knew I was bleeding from more than one place. I would surely be bruised all over. I wouldn't be able to walk.

"I don't know what you mean! Stop!"

To my astonishment, he did. I curled my arm up under my face and I sobbed. I sobbed for a long moment, and my legs burned as if the switch were still hitting them. It seemed the blows were being laid on over and over, but they weren't. I kept hoping, Let this pain die away to

something warm again, something tingling and nice, the way it felt the first couple of times. That would be all right, but this is terrible. I hate it!

Suddenly I felt him cover me. I felt the sweet tickling of his hair on my legs. I felt his fingers as he grabbed the torn cloth of the stockings and ripped it, tearing it off both my legs very quickly, leaving them bare. He reached up under my tunic and tore loose the remnants of the hose.

The pain throbbed, grew worse, then a little better. The air was cool on my bruises. When his fingers touched them, I felt such terrible pleasure that all I could do was moan.

"You going to break down my door again?"

"Never," I whispered.

"You going to defy me in any way in particular?"

"Never in any way ever."

"Further words?"

"I love you."

"I'm sure."

"But I do," I said sniffling.

The stroking of his fingers on my hurt flesh was insupportably delicious. I didn't dare raise my head. I pressed my cheek against the scratchy embroidered coverlet, against the great picture of the lion stitched into it, and I sucked in my breath and let my tears flow. I felt calm all over; this pleasure robbed me of any control of my limbs.

I closed my eyes, and there came his lips on my leg. He kissed one of the bruises. I thought I would die. I would go to Heaven, that is, some other higher more delicious Heaven even than this Venetian Heaven. Beneath me, my groin was alive with thankful and desperate and isolated strength.

The burning blood flowed over the bruise. The slightly rough stroke of his tongue touched it, lapped at it, pressed it, and the inevitable tingling made a fire in my closed eyes, a blazing fire across a mythical horizon in the darkness of my blind mind.

To the next bruise he went, and there came the trickles of the blood and the lap of his tongue, and the hideous pain departed and there was nothing but a throbbing sweetness. And as he went to the next, I thought, I cannot bear this, I will simply die.

He moved fast, from bruise to bruise, depositing his magical kiss and the stroke of his tongue, and I quivered all over and moaned.

“Some punishment!” I suddenly said with a gasp.

It was a dreadful thing to say! Instantly, I regretted it, the sassiness of it.

But his hand had already come down with a fierce slap on my backside.

“I didn’t mean it,” I said. “I mean, I didn’t mean it to sound so ungrateful. I mean, I’m sorry I said it!” But there was another slap as hot as the first.

“Master, have pity on me. I’m mixed up!” I cried.

His hand lay on me, on the warm surface that he had slapped, and I thought, Oh, now he’s going to beat me till I’m unconscious.

But his fingers only gently clasped the skin, which was not broken, only warm as the first welts from the switch had been.

I felt his lips again on the calf of my left leg, and the blood, and his tongue. The pleasure moved all through me, and helpless, I let the air escape my lips in a rosary of sighs.

“Master, Master, Master, I love you.”

“Yes, well, that’s not so unusual,” he whispered. He didn’t stop his kissing. He lapped at the blood. I writhed under the weight of his hand on my backside. “But the question is, Amadeo, why do I love you? Why? Why did I have to go into that stinking brothel and look upon you? I am strong by nature … whatever my nature …”

He greedily kissed a large bruise on my thigh. I could feel his sucking at it, and then the tongue lapping it, eating the blood, and then his blood coming down into it. The pleasure sent shock after shock through me. I saw nothing, though I thought that my eyes were now open. I struggled to make certain that my eyes were open, but nothing came visible, only a golden haze.

“I love you, I do love you,” he said. “And why? Quick-witted, yes, beautiful, yes, and inside you, the burnt-up relics of a saint!”

“Master, I don’t know what you’re saying to me. I was never a saint, never, I don’t claim to be a saint. I’m a wretched disrespectful and ungrateful being. Oh, I adore you. It’s so delicious to be helpless and at your mercy.”

“Stop mocking me.”

“But I don’t,” I said. “I want to speak, the truth, I want to be a fool for the truth, a fool for—. I want to be a fool for you.”

“No, I don’t guess you do mean to mock me. You mean it. You don’t realize the absurdity of it.”

He had finished his progress. My legs had lost any shape they possessed in my mist-filled mind. I could only he there, my whole body vibrating from his kisses. He laid his head on my hips, against the warm place that he had smacked with his hand, and I felt his fingers come up under me and touch the most private part of me.

My organ hardened in his fingers, hardened with the infusion of his searing blood, but all the more with the young male in me who had so often mingled pleasure with pain at his will.

Harder and harder I grew, and bucked and pumped beneath his head and shoulders as he lay on my backside, as he held tight to the organ, and then into his slippery fingers I gave forth in violent unsurpassed spasms a great gush.

I rose on my elbow and looked back at him. He was sitting up, staring at the pearly white semen that clung to his fingers.

“Good God, is that what you wanted?” I asked. “To see the viscous whiteness in your hand?”

He looked at me with anguish. Oh, such anguish.

“Doesn’t it mean,” I asked, “that the time has come?”

The misery in his eyes was too much for me to question him anymore.

Drowsy and blind, I felt him turn me over and rip off my tunic and jacket. I felt him lift me and then came the sting of his assault into my neck. A fierce pain gathered itself around my heart, slackening just when I feared it, and then I sank down beside him into the perfumed cleft of the bed; and against his chest, warm under covers that he pulled up over us, I slept.

It was still thick and heavy night when I opened my eyes. I had learnt with him to feel the coming of morning. And morning was not yet really near.

I looked around for him. I saw him at the foot of the bed. He was dressed in his finest red velvet. He wore a jacket with slashed sleeves and a heavy tunic with a high collar. This cloak of red velvet was trimmed in ermine.

His hair was thoroughly brushed and very slightly oiled so that it gave off its most civilized and artful shimmer, swept back from his clean straight hairline and turning in mannered curls on his shoulders. He

looked sad.

"Master, what is it?"

"I have to go for a few nights. No, it's not out of anger at you, Amadeo. It's one of those journeys I have to make. I'm long overdue for it."

"No, Master, not now, please. I'm sorry, I beg you, not now! What I —."

"Child. I go to see Those Who Must Be Kept. I have no choice in this."

For a moment I said nothing. I tried to understand the denotation of the words he'd spoken. His voice had dropped, and he had said the words halfheartedly.

"What is that, Master?" I asked.

"Some night perhaps I'll take you with me. I'll ask permission …" His voice trailed off.

"For what, Master? When have you ever needed anyone's permission for anything?"

I had meant this to be simple and candid, but I knew now it had an impertinent sound.

"It's all right, Amadeo," he said. "I ask permission now and then from my Elders, that's all. Who else?" He looked weary. He sat beside me and leaned down next to me and kissed my lips.

"Elders, Sir? You mean Those Who Must Be Kept—these are creatures like you?"

"You be kind to Riccardo and the others. They worship you," he said. "They wept for you the whole time you were away. They didn't quite believe me when I told them you were coming home. Then Riccardo spied you with your English lord and was terrified I'd break you in little pieces, yet afraid the Englishman would kill you. He has quite the reputation, your English lord, slamming down his knife on the board in any tavern he chooses. Do you have to consort with common murderers? You have a nonpareil here when it comes to those who take life. When you went to Bianca, they didn't dare to tell me, but made fancy pictures in their minds so I couldn't read their thoughts. How docile they are with my powers."

"They love you, my Lord," I said. "Thank God that you forgive me for the places I went. I'll do whatever you wish."

"Good night then." He rose to go.

"Master, how many nights?"

"Three at most," he said over his shoulder. He made for the door, a tall gallant figure in his cloak.

"Master."

"Yes."

"I'll be very good, a saint," I said. "But if I'm not will you whip me again, please?"

The moment I saw the anger in his face I regretted this. What made me say such things!

"Don't tell me you didn't mean it!" he said, reading my mind and hearing the words before I could get them out.

"No. It's just I hate it when you go. I thought maybe if I taunted you, you wouldn't."

"Well, I will. And don't taunt me. As a matter of policy, don't taunt me."

He was out the door before he changed his mind and returned. He came towards the bed. I expected the worst. He was going to slap me and then not be around to kiss the bruise.

But he didn't.

"Amadeo, while I'm gone, *think on it*" he said.

I was sobered, looking at him. His very manner made me reflect before I uttered a word.

"On everything, Sir?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. Then he came again to kiss me. "Will you be this forever?" he asked. "This man, this young man, that you are now?"

"Yes, Master! Forever, and with you!" I wanted to tell him that there was nothing I couldn't do that a man could do, but this seemed most unwise, and also it would not seem true to him.

He laid his hand fondly on my head, pushing my hair back.

"For two years, I've watched you grow," he said. "You've reached your full height, but you're small, and your face is a baby's face, and for all your good health, you're slight and not the robust man yet that you are surely meant to be."

I was too enthralled to interrupt him. When he paused, I waited.

He sighed. He looked off as if he couldn't find words.

"When you were gone, your English lord drew his dagger on you, but you weren't afraid. Do you remember? It wasn't two days ago."

"Yes, Sir, it was stupid."

"You could easily have died then," he said with a raise of his eyebrow. "Easily."

"Sir, please open up these mysteries to me," I said. "Tell me how you came to your powers. Entrust these secrets to me. Lord, make it so that I can be with you forever. I don't care anything for my own judgment of such things. I yield to yours."

"Ah, yes, you yield if I fulfill your request."

"Well, Sir, that is a form of yielding, to give myself up to you, your will and your power, and yes, I would have it and be like you. Is that what you promise, Master, is that what you hint at, that you can make me like you? You can fill me with this blood of yours that makes a slave out of me, and it will be accomplished? It seems at times I know this, Master, that you can do it, and yet I wonder if I know it only because you know it, and you are lonely to do it to me."

"Ah!" He put his hands to his face, as though I had displeased him totally.

I was at a loss.

"Master, if I offended, hit me, beat me, do anything to me but don't turn away. Don't cover your eyes that would look on me, Master, because I can't live without your gaze. Explain it to me. Master, take away what divides us; if it be only ignorance then take away that."

"Oh, I will, I will," he said. "You are so clever and deceiving, Amadeo. You would be the fool for God all right, as you were told a long time ago that a saint should be."

"You lose me, Sir. I am no saint, and a fool, yes, because I conjecture it's a form of wisdom and I want it because you prize wisdom."

"I mean that you appear simple, and out of your simplicity comes a clever grasp. I am lonely. Oh, yes, I am lonely, and lonely to tell my woes if nothing else. But who would burden one so young as you with my woes? Amadeo, what age do you think I am? Gauge my age with your simplicity."

"You have none, Sir. You neither eat nor drink, nor change with time. You need no water to wash you clean. You are smooth and resistant to all things of nature. Master, we all know this. You are a clean and fine and whole thing."

He shook his head. I was distressing him when I wanted just the

opposite.

"I have done it already," he whispered.

"What, my Lord, what have you done?"

"Oh, brought you to me, Amadeo, for now—." He stopped. He frowned, and his face was so soft and wondering that it made me ache. "Ah, but these are just self-serving delusions. I could take you, with a heap of gold, and plant you down in a distant city where—."

"Master, kill me. Kill me before you do this, or make sure your city is beyond the compass of the known world, because I will journey back! I will spend the last ducat of your heap of gold to journey here and beat on your doors."

He looked wretched, more a man than I'd ever seen him, in pain and trembling as he looked off, deep into the endless dark divide that separated us.

I clung to his shoulder and kissed him. There was a stronger, more virile intimacy due to my crude act of hours ago.

"No, no time for such comforts," he said. "I have to be gone. Duty calls me. Ancient things call to me, things which have been my burden for so very long. I am so weary!"

"Don't go tonight. When the morning comes, take me with you, Master, take me to where you conceal yourself from the sun. It is from the sun that you must hide, isn't it, Master, you who paint blue skies and the light of Phoebus more brilliantly than those who see it, you never see it—."

"Stop," he begged me, pressing his fingers about my hand. "Stop your kisses and your reason, and do as I say."

He took a deep breath, and for the first time in all my life with him, I saw him take a handkerchief from his coat and pat the moisture on his own forehead and his lips. The cloth was faintly red. He looked at it.

"I want to show you something before I go," he said. "Dress yourself, quickly. Here, I'll help you."

I was fully dressed for the cold winter night in less than a few minutes. He put a black cape over my shoulders, and gave me gloves trimmed in miniver, and put a black velvet cap on my head. The shoes he chose were black leather boots, which he never wanted me to wear before. To him the ankles of the boys were beautiful, and he did not favor boots, though he did not mind if we wore them by day when he could not see.

He was so troubled, so distressed, and all his face, despite its blanched cleanliness, was so infused with it, that I couldn't keep from embracing him and kissing him, just to make his lips part, just to feel his mouth locking onto mine.

I closed my eyes. I felt his hand cover up my face and cover my eyelids.

There was a great noise around me, as of the flapping of the wooden doors, and the flying about of the broken fragments of that door I'd shattered, and of draperies billowed and snapped.

The cold air of outside surrounded me. He set me down, blind, and I knew my feet were on the quay. I could hear the water of the canal near me, lapping, lapping, as the winter wind stirred it and drove the sea into the city, and I could hear a wooden boat knocking persistently against a dock.

He let slip his fingers, and I opened my eyes.

We were far from the palazzo. I was abashed to see us at such a distance, though I was not really surprised. He could do wonders, and so he let me know this now. We were in back alleyways. We stood on a small landing by a narrow canal. I had never ventured into this mean district where workmen lived.

I saw only the back porches of houses, and their ironclad windows, and a general squalor and blindness, and a rankness as refuse floated on the water of the dipping, splashing winter-blown canal.

He turned and drew me with him away from the water's edge, and for a moment I couldn't see. His white hand flashed out. I beheld one finger pointed and then I beheld a man sleeping in a long rotted gondola that had been drawn up out of the water and set on workmen's blocks. The man stirred and threw back his covering. I saw his hulking fussing shape as he grumbled and cursed at us that we dared to disturb his sleep.

I reached for my dagger. I saw the flash of his blade. The white hand of the Master, glowing like quartz, seemed only to touch the man's wrist and send the weapon flying and rolling on the stones. Befuddled and enraged, the man charged my Master in a great clumsy bid to knock my Master off his feet.

My Master caught him easily, as if he were no more than a great swaddling of evil-smelling wool. I saw my Master's face. His mouth opened. There came two tiny sharp teeth, like daggers unto themselves,

as he bit down into the man's throat. I heard the man cry out, but only for an instant, and then his stinking body went still.

Astonished and enthralled, I watched as my Master closed his smooth eyes, his golden eyelashes seeming silvery in the dimness, and I heard a low wet sound, barely audible but horribly suggestive of the flow of something, and that something had to be the man's blood. My Master pressed himself ever more closely to his victim, his plainly visible white fingers coaxing the life fluid from the dying body, as he gave off a long sweet savoring sigh. He drank. He drank, and there was no mistaking it. He even twisted his head a little as if to bring the last draught all the more quickly, and at this the man's form, now seemingly frail and plastic, shuddered all over, as if the man had gone into a final convulsion, and then was still.

The Master drew himself up and ran his tongue over his lips. There was not a drop of blood to be seen. But the blood was visible. It was visible inside my Master. His face took on a florid gleam. He turned and looked at me, and I could make out the vivid flush of his cheeks, the ruddy glister of his lips.

"This is where it comes from, Amadeo," he said. He shoved the corpse towards me, the filthy clothes brushed all against me, and as the heavy head fell back in death, he pushed it even closer so that I had to look down at the doomed man's coarse and lifeless face. He was young, he was bearded, he was not beautiful, and he was pale and he was dead.

A seam of white showed beneath each limp and expressionless eyelid. A greasy spittle hung from his decaying yellowed teeth, his breathless and colorless mouth.

I was speechless. Fear, loathing, these things had no part in it. I was simply amazed. If I thought, I thought it was wondrous.

In a sudden fit of seeming anger, my Master hurled the man's body to his left and out into the water where it fell with a dull splashing and bubbling sound.

He snatched me up, and I saw the windows falling past me. I almost screamed as we rose above the roofs. His hands clamped over my mouth. He moved so swiftly it was as if something propelled him or thrust him upwards.

We spun round or so it must have been, and when I opened my eyes we stood in a familiar room. Long golden curtains settled around us. It

was warm here. In the shadows I saw the glinting outline of a golden swan.

It was Bianca's room, her private sanctuary, her very own room.

"Master!" I said in fear and revulsion, that we should come like this, into her chamber, without so much as a word.

From the closed doors a tiny seam of light laid itself out upon her parqueted floor and its thick Persian carpet. It laid itself upon the deep-carved feathers of her swan bed.

Then came her footsteps hastily, emerging from an airy cloud of voices, so that she might investigate alone the noise she heard.

The cold wind swept into the room from the open window as she opened her doors. Against the draught she slammed them shut, such a fearless creature, and she reached out with unerring accuracy and raised the wick of her nearby lamp. The flame rose and I saw her staring at my Master, though she had seen me as well, for sure.

She was herself, as I had left her a world of hours ago, in gold velvet and silk tissue, her braid coiled about the back of her head to weigh down her voluminous tresses which fell in their rippled splendor over her shoulders and down her back.

Her small face was quick with questioning and alarm.

"Marius," she said. "How now, my Lord, do you come here like this, into my private room? How now, you come by the window, and with Amadeo? What is this, jealousy of me?"

"No, only I would have a confession," my Master said. His very voice trembled. He held me tight by my hand as if I were a mere child as he approached her, his long finger flying out to accuse her … "Tell him, my darling angel, tell him what lies behind your fabulous face."

"I don't know what you mean, Marius. But you anger me. And I order you out of my house. Amadeo, what do you say to this abuse?"

"I don't know, Bianca," I murmured. I was totally in fear. Never had I heard my Master's voice tremble, and never had I heard anyone address him so familiarly by name.

"Get out of my house, Marius. Go now. I speak to the honorable man in you."

"Ah, and how then did your friend Marcellus go, the Florentine, the one you were told to lure here with your clever words, the one whose drink you laced with enough poison to kill twenty men?"

My damsel's face grew brittle but never really hard. She seemed a porcelain princess as she appraised my angry, trembling Master.

"What is this to you, my Lord?" she asked. "Have you become the Grand Council or the Council of Ten? Take me up before the courts on charges, if you will, you stealthy sorcerer! Prove your words."

There was a great high-strung dignity to her. She craned her neck and raised her chin.

"Murderess," my Master said. "I see it now within the solitary cell of your mind, a dozen confessions, a dozen cruel and importunate acts, a dozen crimes—."

"No, you cannot judge me! A magician you might be, but you are no angel, Marius. Not you with your boys."

He dragged her forward, and once again I saw his mouth open. I saw his deadly teeth.

"No, Master, no!" I ripped loose of his slack neglected hand and flew at him with my fists, crashing my body between hers and his and pounding on him with all my might. "You can't do it, Master. I don't care what she's done. You seek these reasons for what. Call her importunate? Her! And what is it with you?"

She fell backwards against her bed and struggled up onto it, her legs bent. She drew back into the shadows.

"You are the Fiend from Hell himself," she whispered. "You are a monster, and I have seen it. Amadeo, he'll never let me live."

"Let her live, my Lord, or I die with her!" I said. "She's no more than a lesson here, and I will not see her die."

My Master was wretched. He was dazed. He pushed me away from him, steadying me so that I didn't fall. He moved towards the bed, but not in pursuit of her. He sat down beside her. She recoiled ever deeper against the headboard, her hand reaching out vainly for the sheer gold drapery as if it could save her.

She was wan and small, and her fierce blue eyes remained fixed and wide.

"We are killers together, Bianca," he whispered to her. He reached out.

I rushed forward, but only to be stopped casually by his right hand, and with his left he smoothed her few tiny loose curls back from her forehead. He rested his hand on her as if he were a priest giving a

blessing.

"Of rude necessity, Sir, all of it," she said. "What choice after all did I have?" How brave she was, how strong like fine silver suffused with steel. "Once given the commissions, what am I to do, for I know what is to be done and for whom? How clever they were. It was a brew which took days to kill its victim far from my warm rooms."

"Call your oppressor here, child, and poison him, instead of those he points out."

"Yes, that ought to do it," I said hastily. "Kill the man who put you up to it."

She seemed in truth to think on this and then to smile. "And what of his guards, his kinsmen? They would strangle me for the grand betrayal."

"I'll kill him for you, sweet," said Marius. "And for that, you'll owe me no high crimes, only your gentle forgetfulness of the appetite you have seen tonight in me."

For the first time, her courage seemed to waver. Her eyes filled with clear pretty tears. A tiny weariness showed itself in her. She hung her head for a moment. "You know who he is, you know where he lodges, you know that he is in Venice now."

"He's a dead man, my beautiful lady," my Master said.

I slipped my arm around his neck. I kissed his forehead. He kept his eyes on her.

"Come, then, cherub," he said to me while he still looked at her. "We'll go to rid the world of this Florentine, this banker, who uses Bianca to dispatch those who have given him accounts in secret."

This intelligence amazed Bianca, but once again she made a soft, knowing smile. How graceful she was, how devoid of pride and bitterness. How these horrors were cast aside.

My Master held me fast to him with his right arm. He reached inside his jacket with his left and took out of it a large beautiful pear-shaped pearl. It seemed a priceless thing. He gave it to Bianca, who took it only with hesitation, watching it drop into her lazy, open hand.

"Let me kiss you, darling princess," he said.

To my astonishment, she allowed it, and he covered her now with feathery kisses, and I watched her pretty golden eyebrows pucker, and I saw her eyes become dazzled, and her body go limp. She lay back on her

pillows and then fell into a fast sleep.

We withdrew. I thought I heard the shutters close behind us. The night was wet and dark. My head was pressed to my Master's shoulder. I couldn't have looked up or moved if I wanted to.

"Thank you, my beloved Lord, that you didn't kill her," I whispered.

"She is more than a practical woman," he said. "She is unbroken still. She has the innocence and cunning of a duchess or a queen."

"But where do we go now? "

"We are there, Amadeo. We are on the roof. Look about you. Do you hear the din below?"

It was tambourines and drums and flutes playing.

"Ah, so, they will die at their banquet," my Master said thoughtfully. He stood at the edge of the roof, holding to the stone railing. The wind blew his cloak back, and he turned his eyes up to the stars.

"I want to see it all," I said.

He shut his eyes as if I'd struck him a blow.

"Don't think me cold, Sir," I said. "Don't think me tired and used to things brutal and cruel. I am only the fool, Sir, the fool for God. We don't question, if memory serves me right. We laugh and we accept and we turn all life into joy."

"Come down with me, then. There are a crowd of them, these crafty Florentines. Oh, but I am so hungry. I have starved myself for a night such as this."

5

Perhaps mortals feel this way when they hunt the big beasts of the forest and of the jungle.

For me, as we went down the stairs from the ceiling into the banquet room of this new and highly decorated palazzo, I felt a rabid excitement. Men were going to die. Men would be murdered. Men who were bad, men who had wronged the beautiful Bianca, were going to be killed without risk to my all-powerful Master, and without risk to anyone whom I knew or loved.

An army of mercenaries could not have felt less compassion for these individuals. The Venetians in attacking the Turks perhaps had more feeling for their enemy than I.

I was spellbound; the scent of blood was already in me insofar as it was symbolic. I wanted to see blood flow. I didn't like Florentines anyway, and I certainly didn't understand bankers, and I most definitely wanted swift vengeance, not only for those who had bent Bianca to their will but on those who had put her in the path of my Master's thirst.

So be it.

We entered a spacious and impressive banquet hall where a party of some seven men was gorging itself on a splendid supper of roast pork. Flemish tapestries, all very new and with splendid hunting scenes of lords and ladies with their horses and hounds, were hung from great iron rods all through the room, covering even the windows and falling heavily to the very floor.

The floor itself was a fine inlay of multicolored marble, fashioned in pictures of peacocks, complete with jewels in their great fanlike tails.

The table was very broad, and three men sat behind the table all on one side, virtually slobbering over heaps of gold plates Uttered with the sticky bones of fish and fowl, and the roasted pig himself, poor swollen creature, whose head remained, ignominiously grasping the inevitable apple as though it were the ultimate expression of his final wish.

Three of the other men—all young and somewhat pretty and most athletic, by the look of their beautifully muscled legs—were busy dancing in an artful circle, hands meeting in the center, as a small gathering of boys played the instruments whose pounding march we had heard on the roof.

All appeared somewhat greasy and stained from the feast. But not a member of the company lacked long thick fashionable hair, and ornate, heavily worked silk tunics and hose. There was no fire for heat, and indeed none of these men needed any such, and all were tricked out in velvet jackets with trimmings of powdered ermine or miniver or silver fox.

The wine was being slopped from the pitcher into the goblets by one who seemed quite unable to manage such a gesture. And the three who danced, though they had a courtly design to enact, were also roughhousing and shoving one another in some sort of deliberate mockery of the dance steps that all knew.

I saw at once that the servants had been dismissed. Several goblets had spilled. Tiny gnats, despite the winter, had congregated over the shiny half-eaten carcasses and the heaps of moist fruit.

A golden haze hung over the room which was the smoke from the tobacco of the men which they smoked in a variety of different pipes. The background of the tapestries was invariably a dark blue, and this gave the whole scene a warmth against which the rich varicolored clothes of the boy musicians and the dinner guests shone brilliantly.

Indeed, as we entered the smoky warmth of the room, I felt intoxicated by the atmosphere, and when my Master bid me sit down at one end of the table, I did so out of weakness, though I shrank from touching even the top of the table, let alone the edge of the various plates.

The red-faced, bawling merrymakers took no notice of us. The thumping din of the musicians was sufficient to render us invisible, because it overpowered the senses. But the men were far too drunk to have seen us in perfect silence. Indeed, my Master, after planting a kiss on my cheek, went to the very center of the table, to a space left there, presumably by one of those cavorting to the music, and he stepped over the padded bench and sat down.

Only then did the two men on either side of him, who had been

shouting at one another adamantly about some point or other, take notice of this resplendent scarlet-clad guest.

My Master had let the hood of his cape fall, and his hair was wondrously shaped in its prodigious length. He looked the Christ again at the Last Supper with his lean nose and mild full mouth, and the blond hair parted so cleanly in the middle, and the whole mass of it alive from the damp of the night.

He looked from one to the other of these guests, and to my astonishment as I looked down the table at him, he plunged into their conversation, discussing with them the atrocities visited upon those Venetians left in Constantinople when the twenty-one-year-old Turk, Sultan Mehmet II, had conquered the city.

It seemed there was some argument as to how the Turks actually breached the sacred capital, and one man was saying that had not the Venetian ships sailed away from Constantinople, deserting her before the final days, the city might have been saved.

No chance at all, said the other, a robust red-haired man with seemingly golden eyes. What a beauty! If this was the rogue who misled Bianca, I could see why. Between red beard and mustache, his lips were a lush Cupid's bow, and his jaw had the strength of Michelangelo's superhuman marble figure.

"For forty-eight days, the cannons of the Turk had bombarded the walls of the city," he declared to his consort, "and eventually they broke through. What could be expected? Have you ever seen such guns?"

The other man, a very pretty dark-haired olive-skinned fellow with rounded cheeks very close to his small nose and large velvet black eyes, became farious and said that the Venetians had acted like cowards, and that their supported fleet could have stopped even the cannons if they had ever come. With his fist he rattled the plate in front of him. "Constantinople was abandoned!" he declared. "Venice and Genoa did not help her. The greatest empire on Earth was allowed on that horrible day to collapse."

"Not so," said my Master somewhat quietly, raising his eyebrows and tilting his head slightly to one side. His eyes swept slowly from one man to the other. "There were in fact many brave Venetians who came to the rescue of Constantinople. I think, and with reason, that even if the entire Venetian fleet had come, the Turks would have continued. It was the

dream of the young Sultan Mehmet II to have Constantinople and he would never have stopped."

Oh, this was most interesting. I was ready for such a lesson in history. I had to hear and see this more clearly, so I jumped up and went round the table, pulling up a light cross-legged chair with a comfortable red leather sling seat, so that I might have a good vantage point on all of them. I put it at an angle so that I might better see the dancers, who even in their clumsiness made quite a picture, if only because of their long ornate sleeves flapping about and the slap of their jeweled slippers on the tile floor.

The red-haired one at table, tossing back his long richly curling mane, was most encouraged by my Master, and gave him a wild adoring look.

"Yes, yes, here is a man who knows what happened, and you lie, you fool," he said to the other man. "And you know the Genoese fought bravely, right to the end. Three ships were sent by the Pope; they broke through the blockade of the harbor, slipping right by the Sultan's evil castle of Rumeli Hisar. It was Giovanni Longo, and can you imagine the bravery?"

"Frankly, no!" said the black-haired one, leaning forward in front of my Master as if my Master were a statue.

"It was brave," said my Master casually. "Why do you say nonsense you don't believe? You know what had happened to the Venetian ships caught by the Sultan, come now."

"Yes, speak up on that. Would you have gone into that harbor?" demanded the red-haired Florentine. "You know what they did to the Venetian ships they caught six months before? They beheaded every man on board."

"Except the man in charge!" cried out a dancer who had turned to join the conversation, but went on so as not to lose his step. "They impaled him on a stake. This was Antonio Rizzo, one of the finest men there ever was." He went on dancing with an offhand contemptuous gesture over his shoulder. Then he slipped as he pivoted and almost fell. His dancing companions caught him.

The black-haired man at the table shook his head.

"If it had been a full Venetian fleet—," cried the black-haired man. "But you Florentines and you Venetians are all the same, treacherous, hedging your bets."

My Master laughed as he watched the man.

"Don't you laugh at me," declared the black-haired man. "You're a Venetian; I've seen you a thousand times, you and that boy!"

He gestured to me. I looked at my Master. My Master only smiled. Then I heard him whisper distinctly to me, so that it struck my ear as if he were next to me rather than so many feet away. "Testimony of the dead, Amadeo."

The black-haired man picked up his goblet, slopped some wine down his throat and spilt as much down his pointed beard. "A whole city of conniving bastards!" he declared. "Good for one thing, and that's borrowing money at high interest when they spend everything they've got on fancy clothes."

"You should talk," said the red-haired one. "You look like a goddamned peacock. I ought to cut off your tail. Let's get back to Constantinople since you're so damned sure it could have been saved!"

"You are a damned Venetian yourself now."

"I'm a banker; I'm a man of responsibility," said the redhead. "I admire those who do well by me." He picked up his own goblet, but instead of drinking the wine, he threw it in the face of the black-haired man.

My Master did not bother to lean back, so undoubtedly some of the wine spilled on him. He looked from one to the other of the ruddy sweating faces on either side of him.

"Giovanni Longo, one of the bravest Genoese ever to captain a ship, stayed in that city during the entire siege," cried the red-haired man. "That's courage. I'll put money on a man like that."

"I don't know why," cried the dancer again, the same one as before. He broke from the circle long enough to declare, "He lost the battle, and besides, your Father had plenty enough sense not to bank on any of them."

"Don't you dare!" said the red-haired man. "Here's to Giovanni Longo and the Genoese who fought with him." He grabbed the pitcher, all but knocking it over, showered wine on his goblet and the table, then took a deep gulp. "And here's to my Father. May God have mercy on his immortal soul. Father, I have slain your enemies, and I'll slay those who make of ignorance a pastime."

He turned, jammed his elbow into my Master's clothes and said, "That

boy of yours is a beauty. Don't be hasty. Think this over. How much?"

My Master burst out laughing more sweetly and naturally than I'd ever heard him laugh.

"Offer me something, something I might want," said my Master as he looked at me, with a secretive, glittering shift of his eyes.

It seemed every man in the room was taking my measure, and understand, these were not lovers of boys; these were merely Italians of their time, who, fathering children as was required of them and debauching women any chance they got, nevertheless appreciated a plump and juicy young man, the way that men now might appreciate a slice of golden toast heaped with sour cream and the finest blackest caviar.

I couldn't help but smile. Kill them, I thought, slaughter them. I felt fetching and even beautiful. Come on, somebody, tell me I make you think of Mercury chasing away the clouds in Botticelli's *Primavera*, but the red-haired man, fixing me with an impish playful glance, said:

"Ah, he is Verrocchio's *David*, the very model for the bronze statue. Don't try to tell me he is not. And immortal, ah, yes, I can see it, immortal. He shall never die." Again he lifted his goblet. Then he felt of the breast of his tunic, and pulled up out of the powdered ermine trim of his jacket a rich gold medallion with a table diamond of immense size. He ripped the chain right off his neck and extended this proudly to my Master, who watched it spin on the dangle in front of him as if it were an orb with which he was to be spellbound.

"For all of us," said the black-haired man, turning and looking hard at me. There was laughter from the others. The dancers cried, "Yes, and for me," "Unless I go second with him, nothing" and "Here, to go first, even before you."

This last was said to the red-haired man, but the jewel the dancer tossed at my Master, a carbuncle ring of some glittering purple stone, I didn't know.

"A sapphire," said my Master in a whisper, with a teasing looking to me. "Amadeo, you approve?"

The third dancer, a blond-haired man, somewhat shorter than anyone present and with a small hump on his left shoulder, broke free of the circle and came towards me. He took off all his rings, as if shearing himself of gloves, and tossed them all clattering at my feet.

“Smile sweetly on me, young god,” he said, though he panted from the dance and the velvet collar was drenched. He wobbled on his feet and almost turned over but managed to make fun of it, twirling heavily back into his dance.

The music thumped on and on, as if the dancers thought it meet to drown out the very drunkenness of their Masters.

“Does anybody care about the siege of Constantinople?” asked my Master.

“Tell me what became of Giovanni Longo,” I asked in a small voice. All eyes were on me.

“It’s the siege of … Amadeo, was it?… Yes, Amadeo, that I have in mind!” cried the blond-haired dancer.

“By and by, Sir,” I said. “But teach me some history.”

“You little imp,” said the black-haired man. “You don’t even pick up his rings.”

“My fingers are covered with rings,” I said politely, which was true.

The red-haired man immediately went back into the battle. “Giovanni Longo stayed for forty days of bombardment. He fought all night when the Turk breached the walls. Nothing frightened him. He was carried to safety only because he was shot.”

“And the guns, Sir?” I asked. “Were they so very big?”

“And I suppose you were there!” cried the black-haired man to the redhead, before the redhead could answer me.

“My Father was there!” said the redhead man. “And lived to tell it. He was with the last ship that slipped out of the harbor with the Venetians, and before you speak, Sir, mind you, you don’t speak ill of my Father or those Venetians. They carried the citizenry to safety, Sir, the battle was lost …”

“They deserted, you mean,” said the black-haired man.

“I mean slipped out carrying the helpless refugees after the Turks had won. You call my Father a coward? You know no more about manners than you know about war. You’re too stupid to fight with, and too drunk.”

“Amen,” said my Master.

“Tell him,” said the red-haired man to my Master. “You, Marius De Romanus, you tell him.” He took another slobbering gulp. “Tell him about the massacre, what happened. Tell him how Giovanni Longo

fought on the walls until he was hit in the chest. Listen, you crackbrained fool!" he shouted at his friend. "Nobody knows more about all of it than Marius De Romanus. Sorcerers are clever, so says my whore, and here is to Bianca Solderini." He drained his glass.

"Your whore, Sir?" I demanded. "You say that of such a woman and here in the presence of drunken disrespectful men?"

They paid no mind to me, not the red-haired man, who was again draining his goblet, or the others.

The blond-haired dancer staggered over to me. "They're too drunk to remember you, beautiful boy," he said. "But not I."

"Sir, you stumble at your dance," I said. "Don't stumble in your rounds with me."

"You miserable little whelp," said the man, and fell towards me, losing his balance. I darted out of the chair to the right. He slipped over the chair and fell to the floor.

There was uproarious laughter from the others. The two remaining dancers gave up their patterned steps.

"Giovanni Longo was brave," my Master said calmly, surveying everything and then returning his cool glance to the red-haired man. "They were all brave. But nothing could save Byzantium. Her hour had come. Time had run out for the Emperors and chimney sweeps. And in the holocaust that followed, so much was irretrievably lost. Libraries by the hundreds were burnt. So many sacred texts with all their imponderable mysteries went up in smoke."

I backed away from the drunk attacker, who rolled over on the floor.

"You lousy little lapdog!" the sprawling man shouted at me. "Give me your hand, I tell you."

"Ah, but Sir," I said, "I think you want more than that."

"And I'll have it!" he said, but he only skidded and fell back down again with a miserable groan.

One of the other men at table—handsome but older, with long thick wavy gray hair and a beautifully lined face, a man who had been gorging himself in silence on a greasy joint of mutton—looked up at me over the joint and at the fallen, twisting man who struggled to get to his feet.

"Hmmm. So Goliath falls, little David," he said, smiling up at me. "Mind your tongue, little David, we are not all stupid giants, and your

stones are not for throwing just yet."

I smiled back at him. "Your jest is as clumsy as your friend, Sir. As for my stones, as you put it, they'll stay right where they are in their pouch and wait for you to stumble in the way of your friend."

"Did you say the books, Sir," asked the red-haired man of Marius, completely oblivious to this little exchange. "The books were burnt in the fall of the greatest city in the world?"

"Yes, he cares about books, this fellow," said the black-haired man. "Sir, you better look to your little boy. He's a goner, the dance has changed. Tell him not to mock his elders."

The two dancers came towards me, both as drunk as the man who had fallen. They made to caress me, simultaneously becoming with great odoriferous and heavy breathing a beast with four arms.

"You smile at our friend rolling around on the ground?" one of them asked, sticking his knee between my legs.

I backed up, barely escaping the rude blow. "Seemed the kindest thing I could do," I answered. "Being that my worship was the cause of his fall. Don't plunge into such devotions, yourself, Sirs. I haven't the slightest inclination to answer your prayers."

My Master had risen.

"I tire of this," he said in a cold, clear voice that echoed through the tapestries off the walls. It had a chilling sound to it.

All looked at him, even the struggling man on the floor.

"Indeed!" said the black-haired man, looking up. "Marius De Romanus, is it? I've heard of you. I don't fear you."

"How merciful for you," said my Master in a whisper with a smile. He placed his hand on the man's head and the man whipped himself back and away, almost falling off the bench, but now he was most definitely afraid.

The dancers took their measure of my Master, no doubt trying to gauge whether he would be easy to overwhelm.

One of them turned on me again. "Prayers, Hell!" he said.

"Sir, mind my Master. You weary him, and in weariness he is a perfect crank." I snatched back my arm as he meant to take it.

I backed away even further, into the very midst of the boy musicians so that the music rose about me like a protective cloud.

I could see panic in their faces, yet they played all the faster, ignoring

the sweat on their brows.

"Sweet, sweet, gentlemen," I said. "I like it. But play a requiem, if you will."

They gave me desperate glances but no other regard. The drum beat on and the pipe made its snaky melody and the room throbbed with the strumming of the lutes.

The blond-haired man on the floor screamed for help, as he absolutely couldn't get up, and the two dancers went to his aid, though one shot his watchful darts at me.

My Master looked down at the black-haired challenger and then pulled him straight up from the bench with one hand and went to kiss his neck. The man hung in my Master's grip. He froze like a small tender mammal in the teeth of a great beast, and I almost heard the great draught of blood run out of him as my Master's hair shivered and fell down to cover the fatal repast.

Quickly, he let the man drop. Only the red-haired fellow observed all this. And he seemed in his intoxication not to know what to make of it. Indeed he raised one eye, wondering, and drank again from his filthy sloppy cup. He licked the fingers of his right hand, one by one, as if he were a cat, as my Master dropped his black-haired companion facedown on the table, indeed, right into a plate of fruit.

"Drunken idiot," said the red-haired man. "No one fights for valor, or honor, or decency."

"Not many in any event," said my Master looking down at him.

"They broke the world in half, those Turks," said the red-haired man, still staring at the dead one, who surely stared stupidly at him from the smashed plate. I couldn't see the dead man's face, but it excited me tremendously that he was dead.

"Come now, gentlemen," said my Master, "and you, Sir, come here, you who gave my child so many rings."

"Is he your son, Sir?" cried the blond humpback, who was finally on his feet. He pushed his friends away from him. He turned and went to the summons. "I'll father him better than you ever did."

My Master appeared suddenly and without a sound on our side of the table. His garments settled at once, as if he had only taken a step. The red-haired man did not even seem to see it.

"Skanderbeg, the great Skanderbeg, I raise a toast to him," said the

red-haired man, to himself apparently. “He’s been dead too long, and give me but five Skanderbegs and I’d raise a new Crusade to take back our city from the Turks.”

“Indeed, who wouldn’t with five Skanderbegs,” said the elderly man further down the table, the one nibbling and tearing at the joint. He wiped his mouth with his naked wrist. “But there is no general like unto Skanderbeg, and there never was, save the man himself. What’s the matter with Ludovico? You fool!” He stood up.

My Master had put his arm around the blond one, who pushed at him, quite dismayed that my Master was immovable. Now as the two dancers offered my Master pushes and shoves to free their companion, my Master again planted his fatal kiss. He lifted the chin of the blond one and went right for the big artery in the neck. He swung the man around and appeared to draw up the blood from him in one great draught. In a flash, he closed the man’s eyes with two white fingers and let the body slip to the floor.

“It is your time to die, good Sirs,” he said to the dancers who now backed away from him.

One of them pulled his sword.

“Don’t be so stupid!” shouted his companion. “You’re drunk. You’ll never—.”

“No, you won’t,” said my Master with a little sigh. His lips were more pink than I had ever seen them, and the blood he’d drunk paraded in his cheeks. Even his eyes had a greater gloss, and a greater gleam.

He closed his very hand over the man’s sword and with the press of his thumb snapped the metal, so that the man held only a fragment in his hand.

“How dare you!” cried the man.

“How did you is more to the point!” sang out the red-haired man at the table. “Cracked in half, is it? What kind of steel is that?”

The joint nibbler laughed very loud and threw back his head. He tore more meat from the bone.

My Master reached out and plucked from time and space the wielder of the broken sword, and now to bare the vein, broke the man’s neck with a loud snap.

It seemed the other three had heard it—the one who ate the joint, the wary dancer and the man with the red hair.

It was the last of the dancers whom my Master embraced next. He caught the man's face in his hands as if it were love, and drank again, grasping the man's throat so that I saw the blood just for an instant, a veritable deluge of it, which my Master then covered with his mouth and his bent head.

I could see the blood pump into my Master's hand. I couldn't wait for him to raise his head, and this he did very soon, sooner even than he had left his last victim, and he looked at me dreamily and his countenance was all afire. He looked as human as any man in the room, even crazed with his special drink, as they were with their common wine.

His vagrant blond curls were plastered to his forehead by the sweat that rose in him, and I saw it was a fine sheen of blood.

The music abruptly stopped.

It was not the mayhem but the sight of my Master which had stopped it, as he let this last victim slip, a loose sack of bones, to the floor.

"Requiem," I said again. "Their ghosts will thank you, kind Gentlemen."

"Either that," said Marius to the musicians as he drew close, "or fly the room."

"I say fly the room," whispered the lute player. At once they all turned and made for the doors. They pulled and pulled upon the latch in their haste, cursing and shouting.

My Master backed up and gathered the jeweled rings from around the chair where I'd been seated before.

"My boys, you go without payment," he said.

In their helpless whining fear, they turned and beheld the rings being tossed to them, and stupidly and eagerly and full of shame, they each caught a single treasure as my Master aimed it.

Then the doors flew open and cracked against the walls.

Out they went, all but scraping the doorframe, and the doors then shut.

"That's clever!" remarked the man with the joint which he laid aside at last, as all the meat was gone. "How you'd do it, Marius De Romanus? I hear tell you're a powerful magician. Don't know why the Great Council doesn't call you up on charges of witchcraft. Must be all the money you have, no?"

I stared at my Master. Never had I seen him so lovely as now when he was flushed with this new blood. I wanted to touch him. I wanted to go into his arms. His eyes were drunken and soft as he looked at me.

But he broke off his seductive stare and went back to the table, and around it properly, and stood beside the man who had feasted on the joint.

The gray-haired man looked up at him and then glanced at his red-haired companion. "Don't be a fool, Martino," he said to the redhead. "It's probably perfectly legal to be a witch in the Veneto as long as a man pays his tax. Put your money in Martino's bank, Marius De Romanus."

"Ah, but I do," said Marius De Romanus, my Master, "and it earns me quite a good return."

He sat down again between the dead man and the red-haired man, who seemed quite delighted and exhilarated to have him return.

"Martino," said my Master. "Let's talk some more of the fall of Empires. Your Father, why was he with the Genoese?"

The red-haired man, now quite aflame with the whole discussion, declared with pride that his Father had been the representative of the family bank in Constantinople, and that he had died afterwards due to the wounds he'd suffered on that last and awful day.

"He saw it," said the red-haired man, "he saw the women and children slaughtered. He saw the priests torn from the altars of Santa Sofia. He knows the secret."

"The secret!" scoffed the elderly man. He moved down the table and, with a big swipe of his left arm, shoved the dead man off over the bench so that he fell back on the floor.

"Good God, you heartless bastard," said the red-haired man. "Did you hear his skull crack? Don't treat my guest in that manner, not if you want to live."

I came closer to the table.

"Yes, do come on, pretty one," said the redhead. "Sit down." He turned on me his blazing golden eyes. "Sit here, opposite me. Good God, look at Francisco there. I swear I heard his skull crack."

"He's dead," said Marius softly. "It's all right for the moment, don't worry on it." His face was all the more bright from the blood he'd drunk. Indeed the color was even now, and radiant overall, and his hair

seemed all the fairer against his blushing skin. A tiny spider's web of veins lived within each of his eyes, not detracting one jot from their awesome lustrous beauty.

"Oh, all right, fine, they're dead," said the redhead, with a shrug. "Yes, I was telling you, and you damned well better mark my words because I know. The priests, the priests picked up the sacred chalice and the Sacred Host and they went into a hiding place in Santa Sofia. My Father saw this with his own eyes. I know the secret."

"Eyes, eyes, eyes," said the elderly man. "Your Father must have been a peacock to have had so many eyes!"

"Shut up or I'll slit your throat," said the red-haired man. "Look what you did to Francisco, knocking him over like that. Good God!" He made the Sign of the Cross rather lazily. "There's blood coming from the back of his head."

My Master turned and, leaning down, swept up five fingerfuls of this blood. He turned to me slowly and then to the redhead. He sucked the blood off one finger. "Dead," he said with a little smile. "But it's plenty warm and thick." He smiled slowly.

The red-haired man was as fascinated as a child at a puppet show.

My Master extended his bloody fingers, palm up, and made a smile as if to say, "You want to taste it?"

The red-haired man grabbed Marius's wrist and licked the blood off his forefinger and thumb. "Hmmm, very good," he said. "All my companions are of the best blood."

"You're telling me," said my Master. I couldn't rip my eyes off him, off his changing face. It seemed now his cheeks did darken, or maybe it was only their curve as he smiled. His lips were rosy.

"And I'm not finished, Amadeo," he whispered. "I've only begun."

"He's not bad hurt!" insisted the elderly man. He studied the victim on the floor. He was worried. Had he killed him? "It's just a mere cut on the back of his head, that's all. Isn't it?"

"Yes, a tiny cut," said Marius. "What's this secret, my dear friend?" He had his back to the gray-haired man, speaking to the redhead with much more interest as he had been all along.

"Yes, please," I said. "What's the secret, Sir?" I asked. "Is that the secret, that the priests ran?"

"No, child, don't be dense!" said the red-haired man looking across

the table at me. He was powerfully beautiful. Had Bianca loved him? She never said.

"The secret, the secret," he said. "If you don't believe in this secret, then you'll believe nothing, nothing sacred or otherwise."

He lifted his goblet. It was empty. I picked up the pitcher and filled it with the dark lovely-smelling red wine. I considered taking a taste of it, then a revulsion filled me.

"Nonsense," whispered my Master. "Drink to their passing. Go ahead. There's a clean goblet."

"Oh, yes, forgive me," said the redhead. "I haven't even offered you a cup. Good God, to think I threw a mere table diamond on the board for you, when I would have your love." He picked up the goblet, a rich fancy thing of inlaid silver with tiny stones. I saw now that all the goblets were a set, all carved with tiny delicate figures and set with these same bright little stones. He set down this goblet for me with a clonk. He took the pitcher from me and filled the goblet and then thrust it at me.

I thought I would become so sick I'd vomit on the floor. I looked up at him, at his near sweet face and his pretty blazing red hair. He gave a boyish smile, showing small but perfect white teeth, very pearly, and he seemed to dote on me and to drift, not uttering a word.

"Take it, drink," said my Master. "Yours is a dangerous road, Amadeo, drink for knowledge and drink for strength."

"You don't mock me now, Sir, do you?" I asked, staring at the red-haired man though I spoke to Marius.

"I love you, Sir, as I always have," said my Master, "but you do see something in what I say, for I'm coarsened by human blood. It's always the fact. Only in starvation do I find an ethereal purity."

"Ah, and you turn me from penance at every juncture," I said, "towards the senses, towards pleasure."

The red-haired man and I had locked eyes. Yet I heard Marius answer me.

"It's a penance to kill, Amadeo, that's the rub. It's a penance to slay for nothing, nothing, not 'honor, not valor, not decency,' as our friend says here."

"Yes!" said "our friend," who turned to Marius and then back to me. "Drink!" He thrust the goblet at me.

“And when it’s all done, Amadeo, gather up these goblets for me and bring them home so I might have a trophy of my failure and my defeat, for they will be one and the same, and a lesson for you as well. Seldom is it all so rich and clear as it is to me now.”

The red-haired man leaned forward, deep into the flirt, and put the goblet right against my lip. “Little David, you’ll grow up to be the King, remember? Oh, I would worship you now, tender-cheeked little man that you are, and beg for one psalm from your harp, just one, were it given with your own will.”

My Master whispered low, “Can you grant a man’s dying request?”

“I think he is dead!” said the gray-haired man with obnoxious loudness. “Look, Martino, I think I did kill him; his head’s bleeding like a damned tomato. Look!”

“Oh, shut up about him!” said Martino, the redhead, without taking his eyes off mine. “Do grant a dying man’s request, little David,” he went on. “We are all dying, and I for you, and that you die with me, just a little, Sir, in my arms? Let us make a little game of it. It will amuse you, Marius De Romanus. You’ll see I ride him and stroke him with one artful rhythm, and you’ll behold a sculpture of flesh that becomes a fountain, as what I pump into him comes forth from him in my hand.”

He cupped his hand as if he had my organ already in it. He kept his eyes on me. Then in a low whisper, he said, “I’m too soft to make my sculpture. Let me drink it from you. Have mercy on the parched.”

I snatched the goblet out of his wavering hand and drank down the wine. My body tightened. I thought the wine would come back up and spew. I made it go down. I looked at my Master.

“This is ugly, I hate it.”

“Oh, nonsense,” he said, barely moving his lips. “There’s beauty all around!”

“Damned if he isn’t dead,” said the gray-haired man. He kicked the body of Francisco on the floor. “Martino, I’m out of here.”

“Stay, Sir,” said Marius. “I would kiss you good night.” He clapped his hand over the gray-haired man’s wrist and lunged at his throat, but what did it look like to the red-haired one, who gave it only a bleary glance before he continued his worship? He filled my goblet again.

A moan came from the gray-haired man, or was it from Marius?

I was petrified. When he turned from his victim, I would see even

more blood teeming in him, and I would have given all the world to see him white again, my marble god, my graven Father in our private bed.

The red-haired man rose before me as he leant over the table and put his wet lips on mine. "I die for you, boy!" he said.

"No, you die for nothing," said Marius.

"Master, not him, please!" I cried.

I fell back, nearly losing my balance on the bench. My Master's arm had come between us, and his hand covered the red-haired man's shoulder.

"What's the secret, Sir?" I cried frantically, "the secret of Santa Sofia, the one we must believe?"

The red-haired man was utterly befuddled. He knew he was drunk. He knew things around him didn't make sense. But he thought it was because he was drunk. He looked at Marius's arm across his chest, and he even turned and looked at the fingers clutching his shoulder. Then he looked at Marius and so did I.

Marius was human, utterly human. There was no trace of the impermeable and indestructible god left. His eyes and his face simmered in the blood. He was flushed as a man from running, and his lips were bloody, and when he licked them now, his tongue was ruby red. He smiled at Martino, the last of them, the only one left alive.

Martino pulled his gaze away from Marius and looked at me. At once he softened and lost his alarm. He spoke with reverence.

"In the midst of the siege, as the Turks stormed the church, some of the priests left the altar of Santa Sofia," he said. "They took with them the chalice and the Blessed Sacrament, our Lord's Body and Blood. They are hidden this very day in the secret chambers of Santa Sofia, and on the very moment that we take back the city, on the very moment when we take back the great church of Santa Sofia, when we drive the Turks out of our capital, those priests, those very priests will return. They'll come out of their hiding place and go up the steps of the altar, and they will resume the Mass at the very point where they were forced to stop."

"Ah," I said, sighing and marveling at it. "Master," I said softly. "That's a good enough secret to save a man's life, isn't it?"

"No," said Marius. "I know the story, and he made our Bianca a whore."

The red-haired man strained to follow our words, to fathom the depth

of our exchange.

"A whore? Bianca? A murderer ten times over, Sir, but not a whore. Nothing so simple as a whore." He studied Marius as though he thought this heated passionately florid man was beautiful, indeed. And well he was.

"Ah, but you taught her the art of murder," said Marius almost tenderly, his fingers massaging the man's shoulder, while with his left arm he reached around Martino's back, until his left hand might lock on the man's shoulder with his right. He bent his forehead to touch Martino's temple.

"Hmmm," Martino shook himself all over. "I've drunk too much. I never taught her any such thing."

"Ah, but you did, you taught her, and to kill for such paltry sums."

"Master, what is it to us?"

"My son forgets himself," said Marius, still looking at Martino. "He forgets that I am bound to kill you on behalf of our sweet lady, whom you so finagled into your dark, sticky plots."

"She rendered me a service," said Martino. "Let me have the boy!"

"Beg pardon?"

"You mean to kill me, so do it. But let me have the boy. A kiss, Sir, that's all I ask. A kiss, that is the world. I'm too drunk for anything else!"

"Please, Master, I can't endure this," I said.

"Then, how will you endure eternity, my child? Don't you know that's what I mean to give you? What power under God is there that can break me?" He threw a fierce angry glance at me, but it seemed more artifice than true emotion.

"I've learnt my lessons," I said. "I only hate to see him die."

"Ah, yes, then you have learnt. Martino, kiss my child if he'll allow it, and mark you, be gentle when you do."

It was I who leant across the table now and planted my kiss on the man's cheek. He turned and caught my mouth with his, hungry, sour with wine, but enticingly, electrically hot.

The tears sprang to my eyes. I opened my mouth to him and let his tongue come into me. And with my eyes shut, I felt it quiver, and his lips become tight, as if they had been turned to hard metal clamped to me and unable to close.

My Master had him, had his throat, and the kiss was frozen, and I, weeping, put out my hand blindly to find the very place in his neck where my Master's evil teeth had driven in. I felt my Master's silky lips, I felt the hard teeth beneath them, I felt the tender neck.

I opened my eyes and pulled myself away. My doomed Martino sighed and moaned and closed his lips, and sat back in my Master's grip with his eyes half-mast.

He turned his head slowly towards my Master. In a small raw drunken voice, he spoke. "For Bianca …"

"For Bianca," I said. I sobbed, muffling it with my hand.

My Master drew up. With his left hand, he smoothed back Martino's damp and tangled hair. "For Bianca," he said into his ear.

"Never … never should have let her live," came the last sighing words from Martino. His head fell forward over my Master's right arm.

My Master kissed the back of his head, and let him slip down onto the table.

"Charming to the last," said he. "Just a real poet to the bottom of your soul."

I stood up, pushing the bench away behind me, and I moved out into the center of the room. I cried and cried, and couldn't muffle it with my hand. I dug into my jacket for a handkerchief, and just as I went to wipe my tears, I stumbled backwards over the dead humpbacked man and almost fell. I cried out, a terrible weak and ignominious cry.

I moved back away from him and away from the bodies of his companions until I felt behind me the heavy, scratchy tapestry, and smelled its dust and threads.

"Ah, so this was what you wanted of me," I sobbed. I veritably sobbed. "That I should hate it, that I should weep for them, fight for them, beg for them."

He sat at the table still, Christ of the Last Supper, with his neatly parted hair, his shining face, his ruddy hands folded one on top of the other, looking with his hot and swimming eyes at me.

"Weep for one of them, at least one!" he said. His voice grew wrathful. "Is that too much to ask? That one death be regretted among so many?" He rose from the table. He seemed to quake with his rage.

I pushed the handkerchief over my face, sobbing into it.

"For a nameless beggar in a makeshift boat for a bed we have no

tears, do we, and would not our pretty Bianca suffer because we've played the young Adonis in her bed! And of some of those, we weep for none but that one, the very most evil without question, because he flatters us, is it not so?"

"I knew him," I whispered. "I mean, in this short time I knew him, and …"

"And you would have them run from you, anonymous as foxes in the brush!" He pointed to the tapestries blazoned with the Courtly Hunt. "Behold with a man's eyes what I show you."

There was a sudden darkening of the room, a flutter of all the many candles. I gasped, but it was only he, come to stand right in front of me and look down at me, a feverish, blushing being whose very heat I could feel as if every pore of him gave forth warm breath.

"Master" I cried, swallowing my sobs. "Are you happy with what you've taught me or not? Are you happy with what I've learnt or not! Don't you play with me over this! I'm not your puppet, Sir, no, never that! What would you have me be, then? Why this anger?" I shuddered all over, the tears veritably flooding from my eyes. "I would be strong for you, but I … I knew him."

"Why? Because he kissed you?" He leant down and picked up my hair in his left hand. He yanked me towards him.

"Marius, for the love of God!"

He kissed me. He kissed me as Martino had, and his mouth was as human and as hot. He slipped his tongue into mine, and I felt not blood but manly passion. His finger burnt against my cheek.

I broke away. He let me break away. "Oh, come back to me, my cold white one, my god," I whispered. I lay my face on his chest. I could hear his heart. I could hear it beating. I had never before heard it, never heard a pulse within the stone chapel of his body. "Come back to me, most dispassionate teacher. I don't know what you want."

"Oh, my darling," he sighed. "Oh, my love." And there came the old demon shower of his kisses, not the mock of a passionate man, but his affection, petal soft, so many tributes laid upon my face and hair. "Oh, my beautiful Amadeo, oh, my child," he said.

"Love me, love me, love me," I whispered. "Love me and take me into it with you. I am yours."

In stillness, he held me. I drowsed on his shoulders.

A little breeze came, but it did not move the heavy tapestries in which the French lords and ladies drifted in their eternal and leafy green forest among hounds that would forever bay and birds that would always sing.

Finally, he released me and he stepped back.

He walked away from me, his shoulders hunched, his head down.

Then with a lazy gesture he beckoned for me to come, and yet he moved out of the room too fast.

I ran after him, down the stone stairs to the street. The doors were open when I got there. The cold wind washed away my tears. It washed away the evil heat of the room. I ran and ran along the stone quays, over the bridges, and after him towards the square.

I didn't catch him until I reached the Molo, and there he was walking, a tall man in a red hood and cape, past San Marco and towards the harbor. I ran after him. The wind from the sea was icy and very strong. It blasted me, and I felt doubly cleansed.

"Don't leave me, Master," I called out. My words were swallowed up, but he heard.

He came to a stop, as if it really were my doing. He turned and waited for me to catch up with him, and then he picked up my outstretched hand.

"Master, hear my lesson," I said. "Judge my work." I caught my breath in haste and went on. "I saw you drink from those who were evil, convicted in your heart of some gross crime. I saw you feast as it is your nature; I saw you take the blood with which you must live. And all about you lies this evil world, this wilderness of men no better than beasts who will yield up a blood as sweet and rich for you as innocent blood. I see it. That's what you meant for me to see, and it's done."

His face was impassive. He merely studied me. It seemed the burning fever in him was already dying away. The distant torches along the arcades shone on his face, and it was whitening and as ever hard. The ships creaked in the harbor. There came distant murmurs and cries from those, perhaps, who cannot or never sleep.

I glanced up at the sky, fearful I would see the fatal light. He'd be gone.

"If I drink such as that, Master, the blood of the wicked and those whom I overpower, will I become like you?"

He shook his head. "Many a man has drunk another's blood,

Amadeo," he said in a low but calm voice. His reason had come back to him, his maimers, his seeming soul. "Would you be with me, and be my pupil and my love?"

"Yes, Master, always and forever, or for so long as nature gives to you and me."

"Oh, it isn't fanciful the words I spoke. We are immortal. And only one enemy can destroy us—it's the fire that burns in that torch there, or in the rising sun. Sweet to think on it, that when we are at last weary of all this world there is the rising sun."

"I am yours, Master." I hugged him close and tried to vanquish him with kisses. He endured them, and even smiled, but he didn't move.

But when I broke off, and made a fist of my right hand as if to hit him, which I could never have done, to my amazement he began to yield.

He turned and took me in his powerful and ever careful embrace.

"Amadeo, I can't go on without you," he said. His voice was desperate and small. "I meant to show you evil, not sport. I meant to show you the wicked price of my immortality. And that I did. But in so doing, I saw it myself, and my eyes are dazzled and I am hurt and tired."

He laid his head against my head, and he held tight to me.

"Do what you will to me, Sir," I said. "Make me suffer and long for it, if that's what you want. I am your fool. I am yours."

He released me and kissed me formally.

"Four nights, my child," he said. He moved away. He kissed his fingers and planted that last kiss on my lips, and then he was gone. "I go now to an ancient duty. Four nights. Till then."

I stood alone in the earliest chill of the morning. I stood alone beneath a paling sky. I knew better than to look for him.

In the greatest dejection, I walked back through the alleys, cutting across little bridges to wander into the depth of the waking city, for what I didn't know.

I was half-surprised when I realized I had returned to the house of the murdered men. I was surprised when I saw their doorway still open, as if a servant would at any moment appear.

No one appeared.

Slowly the sky above ripened to a pale white and then to a faint blue. Mist crawled along the top of the canal. I went over the small bridge to the doorway, and again went up the stairs.

A powdery light came in from the loosely slatted windows. I found the banquet room where the candles still burnt. The smell of tobacco and wax and of pungent food was close and hanging in the air.

I walked inside, and I inspected the dead men, who lay as we had left them, disheveled, and now slightly yellowed and waxen and a prey to the gnats and the flies.

There was no sound but the humming of the flies.

The spilt wine had dried on the table in pools. The corpses were clean of all the rampant marks of death.

I was sick again, sick to trembling, and I took a deep breath that I shouldn't retch. Then I realized why I had come.

Men in those days wore short cloaks on their jackets, sometimes affixed, as you probably know. I needed one of these, and took it, ripping it loose from the humpback man, who lay almost on his face. It was a flaring coat of canary yellow with white fox for its border and a lining of heavy silk. I tied knots in it and made a thick deep sack of it, and then I went up and down the table, gathering up the goblets, dashing out the contents first, and then putting them in my sack.

Soon my sack was red with drops of wine and grease from where I'd rested it on the board.

I stood when finished, making certain that no goblet had escaped. I had them all. I studied the dead men—my sleeping red-haired Martino, his face on the bare marble in a puddle of the slopped wine, and Francisco, from whose head did leak a small bit of darkened blood.

The flies buzzed and droned over this blood as they did over the grease pooled around the remnants of the roasted pig. A battalion of little black beetles had come, most common in Venice, for they are carried by the water, and it made its way over the table, towards Martino's face.

A quiet warming light came in through the open doorway. The morning had come.

With one sweeping glance that imprinted on my mind the details of this scene for all time, I went out and home.

The boys were awake and busy when I arrived. An old carpenter was already there, fixing the door which I had shattered with the ax.

I gave to the maid my bulky sack of clanking cups, and she, sleepy and having just arrived, took it without a remark.

I felt a tightening inside me, a sickening, a sudden feeling that I would burst. My body seemed too small, too imperfect an enclosure for all I knew and felt. My head throbbed. I wanted to lie down, but before that I had to see Riccardo. I had to find him and the older boys.

I had to.

I went walking through the house until I came to them, all gathered for a lesson with the young lawyer who came from Padua only once or twice a month to begin our instructions in the law. Riccardo saw me in the door and motioned for me to be quiet. The teacher was speaking.

I had nothing to say. I only leant against the door and looked at my friends. I loved them. Yes, I did love them. I would die for them! I knew it, and with a terrible relief I began to cry.

Riccardo saw me turn away, and slipping out, he came to me.

"What is it, Amadeo?" he asked.

I was too delirious with my own torment. I saw again the slaughtered dinner party. I turned to Riccardo and wound him in my arms, so comforted by his warmth and his human softness compared to the Master, and then I told him that I would die for him, die for any of them, die for the Master too.

"But why, what is this, why vow this to me now?" he asked.

I couldn't tell him about the slaughter. I couldn't tell him of the coldness in me that had watched the men die.

I went off into my Master's bedchamber, and I lay down and tried to sleep.

In late afternoon, when I woke to find the doors had been closed, I climbed out of the bed and went to the Master's desk. To my astonishment I saw his book was there, the book that was always hidden when out of his sight.

Of course I could not turn a page of it, but it was open, and there lay a page covered in writing, in Latin, and though it seemed a strange Latin, and hard for me, there was no mistaking the final words:

> How can so much beauty hide such a bruised and steely heart, and why must I love him, why must I lean in my weariness upon his irresistible yet indomitable strength? Is he not the wizened funereal spirit of a dead man in a child's clothes?

I felt a strange prickling over my scalp and over my arms.

Is this what I was? A bruised and steely heart! The wizened funereal spirit of a dead man in a child's clothes? Oh, but I couldn't deny it; I couldn't say it wasn't true. And yet how hurtful, how positively cruel it seemed. No, not cruel, merely merciless and accurate, and what right had I to expect anything else?

I started to cry.

I lay down in our bed, as was my custom, and plumped the softest pillows to make a nest for my crooked left arm and my head.

Four nights. How should I endure it? What did he want of me? That I go forth to all the things I knew and loved and take my leave of them as a mortal boy. That is what he would instruct. And that I should do.

Only a few hours were allowed to me by fate.

I was awakened by Riccardo, who shoved a sealed note in my face

"Who's sent this?" I asked sleepily. I sat up, and I pushed my thumb beneath the folded paper and broke the wax seal.

"Read it and you tell me. Four men came to deliver it, a company of four. Must be some damned important thing."

"Yes," I said unfolding it, "and to make you look so fearful too."

He stood there with his arms folded.

I read:

Dearest darling one,

Stay indoors. Do not on any account leave the house and bar any who seek to enter. Your wicked English lord, the Earl of Harlech, has discovered your identity through the most unscrupulous nosing about, and in his madness vows to take you back with him to England or leave you in fragments at your Master's door. Confess all to your Master. Only his strength can save you. And do send me something in writing, lest I too lose my wits over you, and over the tales of horror which are cried out this morning in every canal and piazza for every ear.

Your devoted Bianca

"Well, damn it," I said folding up the letter. "Four nights Marius will be gone, and now this. Am I to hide for these crucial four nights under this roof?"

"You had better," said Riccardo.

"Then you know the story."

"Bianca told me. The Englishman, having traced you there and heard

tell of you being there all the time, would have torn her lodgings to pieces if her guests had not stopped him en masse."

"And why didn't they kill him, for the love of God," I said disgustedly.

He looked most worried and sympathetic.

"I think they count on our Master to do it," he said, "as it is you that the man wants. How can you be certain the Master means to stay away for four nights? When has he ever said such things? He comes, he goes, he warns no one."

"Hmmm, don't argue with me," I answered patiently. "Riccardo, he isn't coming home for four nights, and I will not stay cooped up in this house, and not while Lord Harlech stirs up dirt."

"You'd better stay here!" Riccardo answered. "Amadeo, this Englishman is famous with his sword. He practices with a fencing master. He's the terror of the taverns. You knew that when you picked up with him, Amadeo. Think on what you do! He's famous for everything bad and nothing good."

"So then come with me. You need only distract him and I'll take him."

"No, you're good with your sword, true enough, but you can't take a man who's been practicing with the blade since before you were born."

I lay back down on the pillow. What should I do? I was on fire to go out into the world, on fire to gaze at things with my great sense of the drama and significance of my last days among the living, and now this! And the man who had been worth a few nights' riotous roughhouse pleasure was no doubt advertising far and wide his discontent.

It was bitter, but it seemed I had to stay at home. There was nothing to do. I wanted very much to kill this man, kill him with my own dagger and sword, and even thought I had a good chance of it, but what was this petty adventure to what lay before me when my Master returned?

The fact was, I had already left the world of regular things, the world of regular scores to be settled, and could not be drawn now into a foolish blunder that might be my forfeit of the strange destiny towards which I moved.

"All right, and Bianca is safe from this man?" I asked Riccardo.

"Quite safe. She has more admirers than can fit in the door of her house, and she's marshaled all against this man and for you. Now write her something of gratitude and common sense, and swear to me as well that you'll remain indoors."

I got up and went to the Master's writing desk. I picked up the pen.

I was stopped by an awful clatter, and then a series of piercing irritaring cries. They echoed through the stone rooms of the house. I heard people running. Riccardo leapt to attention and put his hand on the hilt of his sword.

I gathered up my own weapons, unsheathing my light rapier and my dagger, both.

"Good Lord Jesus, the man can't be in the house."

A horrid scream drowned out the others.

The smallest of us all, Giuseppe, appeared in the door, his face a luminous white, and his eyes big and round.

"What the hell's the matter," Riccardo demanded, catching hold of him.

"He's been stabbed. Look, he's bleeding!" I said.

"Amadeo, Amadeo!" It rang loudly from the stone stairwell. It was the Englishman's voice.

The boy doubled over in his pain. The wound was in the pit of his stomach, utterly cruel.

Riccardo was beside himself.

"Shut the doors!" he shouted.

"How can I," I cried, "when the other boys may blunder right into his path?"

I ran out and into the big salon and into the portego, the great room of the house.

Another boy, Jacope, lay crumpled on the floor, pushing at it with his knees. I saw the blood running on the stones.

"Oh, this is beyond all fairness; this is a slaughter of innocents!" I shouted. "Lord Harlech, show yourself. You're about to die."

I heard Riccardo cry out behind me. The little boy was obviously dead.

I ran towards the stairs. "Lord Harlech, I'm here!" I called out. "Come out, you brutish coward, you slayer of children! I have a millstone ready for your neck!"

Riccardo spun me around. "There, Amadeo," he whispered. "I'm with you." His blade sang out as he drew it. He was much better than me with the sword, but this battle was mine.

The man was at the far end of the portego. I had hoped he would be staggering drunk, but no such luck. I saw in a moment that any dream

he might have had of taking me away by force was now gone; he had slain two boys, and he knew his lust had led him to a final stand. This was hardly an enemy crippled by love.

"Jesus in Heaven, help us!" whispered Riccardo.

"Lord Harlech," I cried. "You dare make a shambles of my Master's house!" I stepped aside from Riccardo to give us both room, as I motioned Riccardo to come forward, away from the head of the steps. I felt the weight of the rapier. Not heavy enough. I wished to God I had practiced with it more.

The Englishman came towards me, a taller man than I had ever noted, with a great reach to his arm that would be a powerful advantage, his cape flapping, his feet sheathed in heavy boots, his rapier raised and his long Italian dagger ready in the other hand. At least he didn't have a true and heavy sword.

Dwarfed by the great room, he was nevertheless big of stature and had a head of roaring British copper hair. His blue eyes were stewed in blood, but he was steady in his walk and in his murderous gaze. His face was wet with bitter tears.

"Amadeo," he called out over the vast room as he came on. "You cut my heart out of my chest while I lived and breathed, and you took it with you! We shall be together this night in Hell."

6

The high long portego of our house, the entrance hall, was a perfectly wonderful place to die. There was nothing in it to mar its gorgeous mosaic floors with their circles of colored marble stones, and their festive pattern of winding flowers and tiny wild birds.

We had the entire field upon which to fight, with not a chair in the way to stop us from killing each other.

I advanced on the Englishman before I had time to really admit that I wasn't very good with the sword yet, had never shown an instinct for it, and I had no inkling of just what my Master would have me do just now, that is, what he would advise if he were here.

I made several bold thrusts at Lord Harlech, which he parried so easily that I should have lost heart. But just when I thought I'd catch my breath and maybe even run, he swept in with his dagger and slashed my left arm. The cut stung me and infuriated me.

I went after him again, this time managing with considerable luck to get him across the throat. It was just a scratch, but it bled furiously down his tunic, and he was as angry as I was to be cut.

"You horrid damnable little devil," he said. "You made me adore you so you could draw and quarter me at your pleasure. You promised me you'd come back!"

In fact, he kept up this sort of verbal barrage the entire time we fought. He seemed to need it, rather like a goading battle drum and fife.

"Come on, you despicable little angel, I'll tear your wings off!" he said.

He drove me back with a fast volley of thrusts. I stumbled, lost my balance and fell but managed to scramble up again, using the low position to stab dangerously close to his scrotum as I did so, which gave him a start. I ran at him, knowing now there was nothing to be gained by drawing this out.

He dodged my blade, laughed at me and caught me with the dagger,

this time on the face.

"Pig!" I growled before I could stop myself. I hadn't known I was so completely vain. My face, no less. He'd cut it. My face. I felt the blood gushing as it does from face wounds, and I rushed at him again, this time forgetting all the rules of the encounter and thrashing the air with my sword in a fierce crazy series of circles. Then as he parried frantically left and right, I ducked and caught him with the dagger in the belly and ripped upward, stopped by the thick gold-encrusted leather of his belt.

I backed up as he sought to slaughter me with both his weapons, and then he dropped them and grabbed, as men do, for the belching wound.

He fell down on his knees.

"Finish him!" shouted Riccardo. He stood back, a man of honor already. "Finish him now, Amadeo, or I do it. Think what he's done under this roof."

I lifted my sword.

The man suddenly grabbed up his own with his bloody hand and flashed it at me, even as he groaned and winced with his pain. He rose up and ran at me in one gesture. I jumped back. He fell to his knees. He was sick and shivering. He dropped the sword, feeling again for his wounded belly. He didn't die, but he couldn't fight on.

"Oh, God," said Riccardo. He clutched his dagger. But he obviously couldn't bring himself to hack away at the unarmed man.

The Englishman went over on his side. He drew his knees up. He grimaced and he laid his head down on the stone, his face formal as he took a deep breath. He fought terrible pain and the certainty that he would die.

Riccardo stepped forward and laid the tip of his sword on Lord Harlech's cheek.

"He's dying, let him die," I said. But the man continued to breathe.

I wanted to kill him, I really wanted to, but it was impossible to kill someone who lay there so placid and so brave.

His eyes took on a wise, poetical expression. "And so it ends here," he said in a small voice that perhaps Riccardo didn't even hear.

"Yes, it ends," I said. "End it nobly."

"Amadeo, he slew the two children!" said Riccardo.

"Pick up your dagger, Lord Harlech!" I said. I kicked the weapon at him. I pushed it right at his hand. "Pick it up, Lord Harlech," I said. The

blood was running down my face and down my neck, tickling and sticky. I couldn't stand it. I wanted more to wipe my own wounds than to bother with him.

He turned over on his back. The blood came out of his mouth and out of his gut. His face was wet and shiny, and his breathing became very labored. He seemed young again, young as he had when he threatened me, an overgrown boy with a big mop of flaming curls.

"Think about me when you begin to sweat, Amadeo," he said, his voice still small, and now hoarse. "Think about me when you realize that your life, too, is finished."

"Run him through," said Riccardo in a whisper. "He could take two days to die with that wound."

"And you won't have two days," said Lord Harlech from the floor, panting, "with the poisoned cuts I gave you. Feel it in your eyes? Your eyes burn, don't they, Amadeo? The poison goes into the blood, and it strikes the eyes first. Are you dizzy?"

"You bastard," said Riccardo. He stabbed the man with his rapier right through his tunic, once, twice, then three times. Lord Harlech grimaced. His eyelids fluttered, and out of his mouth came a final gout of blood. He was dead.

"Poison?" I whispered. "Poison on the blade?" Instinctively, I felt my arm where he had cut me. My face, however, bore the deeper wound. "Don't touch his sword or dagger. Poison!"

"He was lying, come, let me wash you," said Riccardo. "There's no time to waste."

He tried to pull me from the room.

"What are we going to do with him, Riccardo! What can we do! We're here alone without the Master. There are three dead in this house, maybe more."

As I spoke I heard steps at both ends of the great room. The little boys were coming out of their hiding places, and I saw one of the teachers with them, who had apparently been keeping them out of the way.

I had mixed feelings on this score. But these were all children, and the teacher an unarmed man, a helpless scholar. The older boys had all gone out, as was the custom in the morning. Or so I thought.

"Come on, we have to get them all to a decent place," I said. "Don't touch the weapons." I signaled for the little ones to come. "We'll carry

him to the best bedchamber, come on. And the boys as well."

As the little ones struggled to obey, some of them began to cry.

"You, give us a hand!" I said to the teacher. "Watch out for the poisoned weapons." He stared at me wildly. "I mean it. It's poison."

"Amadeo, you're bleeding all over!" he cried shrilly in a panic. "What poisoned weapons? Dear God save us all!"

"Oh, stop it!" I said. But I could stand this situation no longer, and as Riccardo took charge of the moving of the bodies, I rushed into my Master's bedroom to attend to my wounds.

I dumped the whole pitcherful of water into the basin in my haste, and grabbed up a napkin with which to catch the blood that was flowing down my neck and into my shirt. Sticky, sticky mess, I cursed. My head swam, and I almost fell. Grabbing the edge of the table, I told myself not to be Lord Harlech's fool. Riccardo had been right. Lord Harlech had made up that lie about the poison! Poison the blade, indeed!

But as I told myself this story, I looked down and saw for the first time a scratch, apparently made by his rapier on the back of my right hand. My hand was swelling as if this were an insect's venomous work.

I felt my arm and my face. The wounds there were swelling, great welts forming behind the cuts. Again, there came the dizziness. The sweat dripped off me right into the basin, which was now full of red water that looked like wine.

"Oh, my God, the Devil's done this to me," I said. I turned and the entire room began to tilt and then to float. I rocked on my feet.

Someone caught me. I didn't even see who it was. I tried to say Riccardo's name, but my tongue was thick in my mouth.

Sounds and colors mingled in a hot, pulsing blur. Then with astonishing clarity I saw the embroidered baldaquin of the Master's bed, over my head. Riccardo stood over me.

He spoke to me rapidly and somewhat desperately, but I couldn't make out what he said. Indeed, it seemed he spoke a foreign tongue, a pretty one, very melodious and sweet, but I couldn't understand a word of it.

"I'm hot," I said. "I'm burning, I'm so hot that I can't bear it. I have to have water. Put me in the Master's bath."

He didn't seem to have heard me at all. On and on he went with his obvious pleading. I felt his hand on my forehead and it burned me,

positively burned me. I begged him not to touch me, but this he didn't hear, and neither did I! I wasn't even speaking. I wanted to speak, but my tongue was too heavy and too big. *You'll get the poison*, I wanted to cry. I could not.

I closed my eyes. Mercifully I drifted. I saw a great sparkling sea, the waters off the island of the Lido, crenelated and beautiful beneath the noonday sun. I floated on this sea, perhaps in a small bark, or maybe just on my back. I couldn't feel the water itself, but there seemed nothing between me and its gentle tossing waves that were big and slow and easy and carried me up and then down. Far off, a great city gleamed on the shore. At first I thought it was Torcello, or even Venice, and that I had been turned around somehow and was floating towards the land. Then I saw it was much bigger than Venice, with great piercing reflective towers, as if it had been made entirely of brilliant glass. Oh, it was so lovely.

"Am I going there?" I asked.

The waves seemed then to fold over me, not with a suffocating wetness, but merely a quiet blanket of heavy light. I opened my eyes. I saw the red of the taffeta baldaquin above. I saw the golden fringe sewn on the velvet bed curtains, and then I saw Bianca Solderini there above me. She had a cloth in her hand.

"There wasn't enough poison on those blades to kill you," she said. "It's merely made you sick. Now, listen to me, Amadeo, you must take each breath with quiet force and resolve to fight this sickness and to get well. You must ask the very air itself to make you strong, and be confident of it, that's it, you must breathe deeply and slowly, yes, exactly, and you must realize that this poison is being sweated out of you, and you must not believe in this poison, and you must not fear."

"The Master will know," said Riccardo. He looked drawn and miserable, and his lips quivered. His eyes were flooded with his tears. Oh, ominous sign, certainly. "The Master will know somehow. He knows all things. The Master will break his journey and come home."

"Wash his face," said Bianca calmly. "Wash his face and be quiet." How brave she was.

I moved my tongue but I couldn't form words. I wanted to say that they must tell me when the sun sank, for then and only then might the Master come. There was surely a chance. Then and only then. He might

appear.

I turned my head to the side, away from them. The cloth was burning me.

"Softly, quietly," said Bianca. "Take in the air, yes, and do not be afraid."

A long time passed as I lay there, hovering just below perfect consciousness, and thankful that their voices were not sharp, and their touch was not so terrible, but the sweating was awful, and I despaired utterly of being cool.

I tossed and tried to get up once, only to feel terribly sick, sick unto vomiting. With a great relief I realized they had laid me back down.

"Hold on to my hands," said Bianca, and I felt her fingers grasping mine, so small and too hot, hot like everything else, hot like Hell, I thought, but I was too sick to think of Hell, too sick to think of anything but vomiting up my insides into a basin, and getting to somewhere cool. Oh, just open the windows, open them on the winter; I don't care, open them!

It seemed quite a nuisance that I might die, and nothing more. Feeling better was of far greater importance, and nothing troubled me as to my soul or any world to come.

Then abruptly all things changed.

I felt myself rise upwards, as if someone had yanked me by my head out of the bed and sought to pull me up through the red cloth baldaquin and through the ceiling of the room. Indeed, I looked down, and to my utter amazement I saw myself lying on the bed. I saw myself as if there were no baldaquin above my body to block the view.

I looked far more beautiful than I ever imagined myself to be. Understand, it was utterly dispassionate. I did not feel an exultation in my own beauty. I only thought, What a beautiful young boy. How gifted he has been by God. Look at his long delicate hands, how they lie beside him, and look at the deep russet of his hair. And that was me all the time, and I didn't know it or think of it, or think what effect it had on those who saw me as I moved through life. I didn't believe their blandishments. I had only scorn for their passion. Indeed, even the Master had seemed before to be a weak and deluded being for ever desiring me. But I understood now why people had somewhat taken leave of their senses. The boy there, dying on the bed, the boy who was

the cause of weeping all around in this large chamber, the boy seemed the very embodiment of purity and the very embodiment of youth on the verge of life.

What did not make sense to me was the commotion in the room. Why did everyone weep? I saw a priest in the doorway, a priest I knew from the nearby church, and I could see that the boys argued with him and feared to let him near me as I lay on the bed, lest I be afraid. It all seemed a pointless imbroglio. Riccardo should not wring his hands. Bianca should not work so hard, with her damp cloth and her soft but obviously desperate words.

Oh, poor child, I thought. You might have had a little more compassion for everyone if you had known how beautiful you were, and you might have thought yourself a little bit stronger and more able to gain something for yourself. As it was, you played sly games on those around you, because you did not have faith in your own self or even know what you were.

It seemed very clear, the error in all this. But I was leaving this place! The same draught that had pulled me up out of the pretty young body that lay on the bed was pulling me upwards into a tunnel of fierce, noisy wind.

The wind swirled around me, enclosing me completely and tightly in this tunnel, yet I could see in it other beings who looked on even as they were caught in it and moved by the incessant fury of this wind. I saw eyes looking on me; I saw mouths open as if in distress. I was pulled higher and higher through this tunnel. I didn't feel fear, but I felt a fatality. I could not help myself.

That was your error when you were that boy down there, I found myself thinking. But this is indeed hopeless. And just as I concluded, so I came to the end of this tunnel; it dissolved. I stood on the shore of that lovely sparkling sea.

I wasn't wet from the waves, but I knew them, and I said out loud, "Oh, I'm here, I've come to the shore! Look, there are the towers of glass."

As I looked up, I saw that the city was far away, over a series of deep green hills, and that a path led to it, and that flowers bloomed richly and gorgeously on either side of the path. I had never seen such flowers, never seen such shapes and petal formations, and never never beheld

such colors in all my life. There were no names in the artistic canon for these colors. I couldn't call them by the few weak inadequate labels which I knew.

Oh, would the painters of Venice ever be astonished at these colors, I thought, and to think how they would transform our work, how they would set ablaze our paintings if only they could be discovered in some source that might be ground into pigment and blended with our oils. But what a pointless thing to do. No more painting was needed. All the glory that could be accomplished by color was here in this world revealed. I saw it in the flowers; I saw it in the variegated grass. I saw it in the boundless sky that rose up and over me and behind the distant blinding city, and it too flashed and glowed with this great harmony of colors, blending and twinkling and shimmering as if the towers of this city were made of a miraculous thriving energy rather than a dead or earthly matter or mass.

A great gratitude flowed out of me; my whole being gave itself up to this gratitude. "Lord, I see now," I said aloud. "I see and I understand." It did at that moment seem very clear to me, the implications of this varied and ever increasing beauty, this pulsing, radiant world. It was so very pregnant with meaning that all things were answered, all things were utterly resolved. I whispered the word "Yes" over and over. I nodded, I think, and then it seemed quite absurd to bother to say anything in words at all.

A great force emanated from the beauty. It surrounded me as if it were air or breeze or water, but it was none of these. It was far more rarefied and pervasive, and though it held me with a formidable strength it was nevertheless invisible and without pressure or palpable form. The force was love. Oh, yes, I thought, it is love, it is complete love, and in its completeness it makes all that I have ever known meaningful, for every disappointment, every hurt, every misstep, every embrace, every kiss was but a foreshadowing of this sublime acceptance and goodness, for the bad steps had told me what I lacked, and the good things, the embraces, had shown me a glimpse of what love could be.

All my life this love made meaningful, sparing nothing, and as I marveled at this, accepting it completely and without urgency or questioning, a miraculous process began. All my life came to me in the form of all those I had ever known.

I saw my life from the very first moments and up until the moment that had brought me here. It was not a terribly remarkable life; it contained no great secret or twist or pregnant matter that changed my heart. On the contrary, it was but a natural and common string of myriad tiny events, and these events involved all the other souls whom I had ever touched; I saw now the hurts I'd inflicted, and the words of mine which had brought solace, and I saw the result of the most casual and unimportant things I had done. I saw the banquet hall of the Florentines, and again in the midst of them, I saw the blundering loneliness with which they stumbled into death. I saw the isolation and the sadness of their souls as they had fought to stay alive.

What I could not see was my Master's face. I could not see who he was. I could not see into his soul. I could not see what my love meant to him, or what his love meant for me. But this was of no importance. In fact, I only realized it afterwards when I tried to recount the entire event. What mattered now was only that I understood what it meant to cherish others and to cherish life itself. I realized what it had meant when I painted pictures, not the ruby-red bleeding and vibrant pictures of Venice, but old pictures in the antique Byzantine style, which had once flowed so artlessly and perfectly from my brush. I knew then I had painted wondrous things, and I saw the effects of what I had painted … and it seemed then a great crowd of information inundated me. Indeed, there was such a wealth of it, and it was so easy to comprehend, that I felt a great light joy.

The knowledge was like the love and like the beauty; indeed, I realized with a great triumphant happiness that they were all—the knowledge, the love, and the beauty—they were all one.

"Oh, yes, how could one not see it. It's so simple!" I thought.

If I had had a body with eyes, I would have wept, but it would have been a sweet weeping. As it was, my soul was victorious over all small and enervating things. I stood still, and the knowledge, the facts, as it were, the hundreds upon hundreds of small details which were like transparent droplets of magical fluid passing through me and into me, filling me and vanishing to make way for more of this great shower of truth—all this seemed suddenly to fade.

There beyond stood the glass city, and beyond it a blue sky, blue as a sky at midday, only one which was now filled with every known star.

I started out for the city. Indeed, I started with such impetuosity and such conviction that it took three people to hold me back.

I stopped. I was quite amazed. But I knew these men. These were priests, old priests of my homeland, who had died long before I had even come to my calling, all of which was quite clear to me, and I knew their names and how they had died. They were in fact the saints of my city, and of the great house of catacombs where I had lived.

"Why do you hold me?" I asked. "Where's my Father? He's here now, is he not?" No sooner had I asked this than I saw my Father. He looked exactly as he had always looked. He was a big, shaggy man, dressed in leather for hunting, with a full grizzled beard and thick long auburn hair the same color as my own. His cheeks were rosy from the cold wind, and his lower lip, visible between his thick mustache and his gray-streaked beard, was moist and pink as I remembered. His eyes were the same bright china blue. He waved at me. He gave his usual, casual, hearty wave, and he smiled. He looked just like he was going off into the grasslands, in spite of everyone's advice, and everyone's caution to hunt, with no fear at all of the Mongols or the Tatars swooping down on him. After all, he had his great bow with him, the bow only he could string, as if he were a mythical hero of the great grassy fields, and he had his own sharpened arrows, and his big broadsword with which he could hack off a man's head with one blow.

"Father, why are they holding me?" I asked.

He looked blank. His smile simply faded and his face lost all expression, and then to my sadness, to my terrible shocking sadness, he faded in his entirety and he wasn't there.

The priests beside me, the men with their long gray beards and their black robes, spoke to me in soft sympathetic whispers and they said, "Andrei, it's not time for you to come."

I was deeply distressed, deeply. Indeed, I was so sad that I could form no words of protest. Indeed, I understood that no protest I might make mattered, and then one of the priests took my hand.

"No, this is always the way with you," he said. "Ask."

He didn't move his lips when he spoke, but it wasn't necessary. I heard him very clearly, and I knew that he meant no personal malice to me. He was incapable of such a thing.

"Why, then," I asked, "can't I stay? Why can't you let me stay when I

want to, and when I've come this far."

"Think on all you've seen. You know the answer."

And I had to admit that in an instant I did know the answer. It was complex and yet profoundly simple, and it had to do with all the knowledge I had gained.

"You can't take this back with you," said the priest. "You'll forget all the particular things you learned here. But remember the overall lesson, that your love for others, and their love for you, that the increase of love in life itself around you, is what matters."

It seemed a marvelous and comprehensive thing! It seemed no simple small cliché. It seemed so immense, so subtle, yet so total that all mortal difficulties would collapse in the face of its truth.

I was at once returned to my body. I was at once the auburn-haired boy dying in the bed. I felt a tingling in my hands and feet. I twisted, and a wretched pain flamed down my back. I was all afire, sweating and writhing as before, only now my lips were badly cracked and my tongue was cut and blistered against my teeth.

"Water," I said, "please, water."

A soft sobbing came from those around me. It was mingled with laughter and expressions of awe.

I was alive, and they had thought me dead. I opened my eyes, and I looked at Bianca.

"I won't die now," I said.

"What is it, Amadeo?" she asked. She bent down and put her ear to my lips.

"It isn't time," I said.

They brought me cool white wine. It was mixed with honey and lemon. I sat up and I drank gulp after gulp of it. "It's not enough," I said softly, weakly, but I was falling asleep.

I went down into the pillows, and I felt Bianca's cloth wipe my forehead and my eyes. What a sweet mercy it was, and how very grand to give that small comfort, which was all the world to me. All the world. All the world.

I had forgotten what I had seen on the other side! My eyes snapped open. Recover it, I thought desperately. But I remembered the priest, vividly as though I had just talked to him in another room. He had said I couldn't remember. And there was so much more to it, infinitely more,

such things as only my Master might understand.

I closed my eyes. I slept. Dreams couldn't come to me. I was too ill, too feverish, but in my own way, stretched thin upon a consciousness of the moist hot bed and the sluggish air beneath the baldaquin, upon the blurred words of the boys and Bianca's sweet insistence, I did sleep. The hours ticked. I knew them, and gradually some comfort came to me in that I got used to the sweat that smothered my skin, and the thirst that hurt my throat, and I lay without protest, drifting, waiting for my Master to come.

I have so many things to tell you, I thought. You will know about the glass city! I must explain that I was once … but I couldn't quite remember. A painter, yes, but what sort of painter, and how, and my name? Andrei? When had I been so called?

7

Slowly over my consciousness of the sickbed and the humid room there dropped the dark veil of Heaven. Spread out in all directions were the sentinel stars, splendid as they shone above the glinting towers of the glass city, and in this half-sleep, now aided by the most tranquil and blissful of illusions, the stars sang to me.

Each from its fixed position in constellation and in void gave forth a precious glimmering sound, as if great chords were struck inside each flaming orb and by means of its brilliant gyrations broadcast through all the universal world.

Such sounds I had never heard with my earthly ears. But no disclaimer can approximate this airy and translucent music, this harmony and symphony of celebration.

> Oh, Lord, if Thou wert music, this then would be Thy voice, and no discord could ever prevail against Thee. Thou wouldst cleanse the ordinary world of every troubling noise with this, the fullest expression of Thy most intricate and wondrous design, and all triviality would fade away, overwhelmed by this resounding perfection.

This was my prayer, my heartfelt prayer, coming in an ancient tongue, most intimate and effortless as I lay slumbering.

Stay with me, beauteous stars, I begged, and let me never seek to fathom this fusion of light and sound, but only give myself to it utterly and unquestionably.

The stars grew large and infinite in their cold majestic light, and slowly all the night was gone and there remained one great glorious and sourceless illumination.

I smiled. I felt my smile with blind fingers on my lips, and as the light grew brighter still and ever closer, as though it were an ocean of itself, I felt a great saving coolness over all my limbs.

“Don’t fade, don’t go away, don’t leave me.” My own whisper was a woeful small thing. I pressed my throbbing head into the pillow.

But it had spent its time, this grand and overriding light, and now must fade and let the common blink of candles move against my half-closed eyes, and I must see the burnished gloom around my bed, and simple things, such as a rosary laid across my right hand with ruby beads and golden cross, and there a prayer book open to my left, its pages gently folding in a small stir of breeze that moved as well the smooth taffeta in ripples overhead in its wood frame.

How lovely it all did seem, these plain and ordinary things that made up this silent and elastic moment. Where had they gone, my lovely swan-necked nurse and my weeping comrades? Had night worn them down to where they slept, so that I might cherish these quiet moments of unobserved wakefulness? My mind was gently crowded with a thousand lively recollections.

I opened my eyes. All were gone, save one who sat beside me on the bed, looking down at me with eyes both dreamy and remote and coldly blue, far paler than a summer sky and filled with a near faceted light as they fixed so idly and indifferently upon me.

My Master here, with hands folded in his lap, a seeming stranger viewing all as if it could not touch his chiseled grandeur. The smileless expression set upon his face seemed made there forever.

"Merciless!" I whispered.

"No, oh, no," he said. His lips did not move. "But tell me once again the whole tale. Describe this glassy city."

"Ah, yes, we've talked of it, have we not, of those priests who said I must come back, and those old paintings, so antique, which I thought so very beautiful. Not made by human hands, you see, but by the power invested in me, which passed through me, and I had only to take up the brush and there the Virgin and the Saints were mine to discover."

"Don't cast those old forms away," he said, and once again his lips showed no sign of the voice I heard so distinctly, a voice that pierced my very ears as any human voice might do, with his tone, his very timbre. "For forms change, and reason now is but tomorrow's superstition, and in that old restraint there lay a great sublime intent, an indefatigable purity. But tell me once again about the glassy city."

I sighed. "You've seen the molten glass, as I have," I said, "when taken from the furnace, a glowing blob of horrifying heat upon a spear of iron, a thing that melts and drips so that the artist's wand may pull

and stretch it, or fill it full of breath to form the perfect rounded vessel. Well, it was as if that glass came up out of the moist Mother Earth herself, a molten torrent spewing to the clouds, and out of these great liquid jets were born the crowded towers of the glassy city—not imitating any form built by men, but perfect as the heated force of Earth had naturally ordained, in colors unimaginable. Who lived in such a place? How far away it seemed, yet utterly attainable. But one short walk over hills sweet with willowing green grass and leafy fluttering flowers of the same fantastical hues and tints, a quiet thunderous and impossible apparition."

I looked at him, because I had been looking off and back into my vision.

"Tell me what these things mean," I asked. "Where is this place, and why was I allowed to see it?"

He gave a sad sigh and looked away himself and now back at me, his face as aloof and unbending as before, only now I saw the thick blood in it, that once again, as it had been the night before, was pumped full of human heat from human veins, which had no doubt been his late repast this same evening.

"Won't you even smile now as you say farewell?" I asked. "If this bitter coldness now is all you feel, and you would let me die of this rampant fever? I'm sick unto death, you know it. You know the nausea that I feel, you know the hurt inside my head, you know the ache in all my joints and how these cuts burn in my skin with their indisputable poison. Why are you so very far away, yet here, come home, to sit beside me and feel nothing?"

"I feel the love I've always felt when I look at you," he said, "my child, my son, my sweet enduring one. I feel it. It's walled up inside where it should stay, perhaps, and let you die, for yes, you will, and then perhaps your priests will take you, for how can they not when there is no returning?"

"Ah, but what if there are many lands? What if on the second fall, I find myself on yet another shore, and sulfur rises from the boiling earth and not the beauty first revealed to me? I hurt. These tears are scalding. So much is lost. I can't remember. It seems I say those same words so much. I can't remember!"

I reached out. He didn't move. My hand grew heavy and dropped on

the forgotten prayer book. I felt the stiff vellum pages beneath my fingers.

"What's killed your love? Was it the things I did? That I brought the man here who slew my brothers? Or that I died and saw such wonders? Answer me."

"I love you still. I will all my nights and all my slumbering days, forever. Your face is as a jewel given me, which I can never forget, though I may foolishly lose it. Its glister will torture me forever. Amadeo, think on these things again, open your mind as if it were a shell, and let me see the pearl of all they taught you."

"Can you, Master? Can you understand how love and love alone could mean so very much, and all the world be made of it? The very blades of grass, the leaves of trees, the fingers of this hand that reaches for you? Love, Master. Love. And who will believe such simple and immense things when there are dexterous and labyrinthian creeds and philosophies of manmade and ever seductive complexity? Love. I heard the sound of it. I saw it. Were these the delusions of a feverish mind, a mind afraid of death?"

"Perhaps," he said, his face still feelingless and motionless. His eyes were narrow, prisoners of their own shrinking from what they saw. "Ah, yes," he said. "You die and I let you, and I think there might be for you but one shore, and there you'll find again your priests, your city."

"It's not my time," I said. "I know it. And such a statement cannot be undone by a mere handful of hours. Smash the ticking clock. They meant, by a soul's incarnate life, it wasn't time. Some destiny carved in my infant hand will not be so soon fulfilled or easily defeated."

"I can tip the odds, my child," he said. This time his lips moved. The pale sweet coral brightened in his face, and his eyes grew wide and unguarded, the old self I knew and cherished. "I can so easily take the last strength left in you." He leant over me. I saw the tiny variegations in the pupils of his eyes, the bright deep-pointed stars behind the darkening irises. His lips, so wondrously decorated with all the tiny lines of human lips, were rosy as if a human kiss resided there. "I can so easily take one last fatal drink of your child's blood, one last quaff of all the freshness I so love, and in my arms I'll hold a corpse so rich in beauty that all who see it will weep, and that corpse will tell me nothing. You are gone, that much I'll know, and no more."

“Do you say these things to torture me? Master, if I cannot go there, I want to be with you!”

His lip worked in plain desperation. He seemed a man, and only that, the red blood of fatigue and sadness hovering on the borders of his eyes. His hand, out now to touch my hair, was trembling.

I caught it as if it were the high waving branch of a tree above me. I gathered his fingers to my lips like so many leaves and kissed them. Turning my head I laid them on my wounded cheek. I felt the throb of the venomous cut beneath them. But more keenly still, I felt a strong tremor within them.

I blinked my eyes. “How many died tonight to feed you?” I whispered. “And how can this be, and love be the very thing the world is made of? You are too beautiful to be overlooked. I’m lost. I cannot understand it. But could I, if I were to live from this moment on, a simple mortal boy, could I forget it?”

“You cannot live, Amadeo,” he said sadly. “You cannot live!” His voice broke. “The poison’s traveled in you too deep, too far and wide, and little draughts of my blood cannot overtake it.” His face was filled with anguish. “Child, I can’t save you. Close your eyes. Take my farewell kiss. There is no friendship between me and those on the far shore, but they must take what dies so naturally.”

“Master, no! Master, I cannot try it alone. Master, they sent me back, and you are here, and were bound to be, and how could they not have known it?”

“Amadeo, they didn’t care. The guardians of the dead are powerfully indifferent. They speak of love, but not of centuries of blundering ignorance. What stars are these that sing so beautifully when all the world is languishing in dissonance? I would you would force their hand, Amadeo.” His voice all but broke in his pain. “Amadeo, what right have they to charge me with your fortune?”

I laughed a weak sad little laugh.

My fever shook me. A great wave of sickness overcame me. If I moved or spoke I would suffer a dread dry nausea that would shake me to no advantage. I’d rather die than feel this.

“Master, I knew you would give it some powerful analysis,” I said. I tried not to make a bitter or sarcastic smile, but to seek the simple truth. My breath was now so hard for me. It seemed I could leave off breathing

with no hardship at all. All Bianca's stern encouragements came back to me. "Master," I said, "there is no horror in this world that is without final redemption."

"Yes, but for some," he pressed, "what is the price of such salvation? Amadeo, how dare they requisition me to their obscure designs! I pray they were illusions. Don't speak anymore about their marvelous light. Don't think on it."

"No, Sir? And for whose comfort do I sweep my mind so clean? Who is dying here!"

He shook his head.

"Go ahead, wring the blood tears from your eyes," I said. "And for what death do you hope yourself, Sir, for you told me that it wasn't impossible for even you to die? Explain to me, that is, if there's time left before all the light I shall ever know winks out on me, and the Earth devours the incarnate jewel that you found wanting!"

"Never wanting," he whispered.

"Come now, where will you go, Sir? More comfort, please. How many minutes do I have?"

"I don't know," he whispered. He turned away from me and bowed his head. I had never seen him so forlorn.

"Let me see your hand," I said weakly. "There are closeted witches who in the shadows of the taverns of Venice have taught me how to read the lines in it. I'll tell you when you are like to die. Give it to me." I could scarcely see. A haze had come down over all things. But I meant my words.

"You come too late," he replied. "There are no lines left." He held up his palm for me to see. "Time has erased what men call fate. I have none."

"I am sorry that you come at all," I said. I turned away from him. I turned away against the clean cool linen of the pillow. "Would you leave me now, my beloved teacher? I would rather the company of a priest, and my old nurse if you haven't sent her home. I have loved you with my whole heart, but I don't want to die in your superior company."

Through a haze I saw the shape of him as he grew nearer to me. I felt his hands cup my face and turn it towards him. I saw the glimmer of his blue eyes, wintry flames, indistinct yet burning fiercely.

"Very well, beautiful one. This is the moment. Would you come with

me, and be like me?" His voice was rich and soothing, though it was full of pain.

"Yes, always and forever yours."

"Forever to thrive in secret on the blood of the evildoer, as I thrive, and to abide with these secrets until the end of the world, if need be."

"I shall. I want it."

"To learn from me all the lessons I can give."

"Yes, all of them."

He picked me up from the bed. I tumbled against him, my head spinning and the pain in it so sharp, I cried out softly.

"Only a little while, my love, my young and tender love," he said in my ear.

I was lowered into the warm water of the bath, my clothes softly stripped away, my head laid back against the tiled edge ever so carefully. I let my arms float in the water. I felt it lap around my shoulders.

He broke up handfuls of water to bathe me. He bathed first my face and then all of me. His hard satiny fingertips moved over my face.

"Not a vagrant hair yet of your beard, and yet you have the nether endowments of a man, and must now rise above the pleasures you have so loved."

"I do, I will," I whispered. A terrible burning lashed my cheek. The cut was spread wide. I struggled to touch it. But he held my hand. It was only his blood fallen into the festering wound. And as the flesh tingled and burnt I felt it closing. He did the same with the scratch on my arm, and then with the small scratch on the back of my hand. With my eyes closed, I surrendered to the eerie paralyzing pleasure of it.

His hand touched me again, running smoothly down my chest, past my private parts, examining first one leg and then the other, searching out the smallest break or flaw in the skin, perhaps. Again the rich throbbing chills of pleasure overcame me.

I felt myself lifted from the water, warmly wrapped, and then there came that shock of moving air that meant he carried me, that he moved more swiftly than any spying eye could see. I felt the marble floor before my bare feet, and in my fever, this jolting cold was very good to me.

We stood in the studio. We had our backs to the painting on which he'd worked only nights ago, and faced another masterly canvas of

immense size, on which beneath a brilliant sun and cobalt sky a great copse of trees surrounded two rushing windblown figures.

The woman was Daphne, her upstretched arms changing into the branches of the laurel, already thick with leaves, her feet grown into roots that sought the deep brown earth beneath her. And behind her, the desperate and beautiful god Apollo, a champion of golden hair and finely muscled limbs, come too late to stop her frantic magical escape from his threatening arms, her fatal metamorphosis.

"See the indifferent clouds above," my Master whispered in my ear. He pointed to the great streaks of sun he had painted with more skill than the men who daily beheld them.

He spoke words I confided to Lestat so long ago when I told him my story, words that he salvaged so mercifully from the few images of these times which I was able to give him.

I hear Marius's voice when I repeat these words, the last I was ever to hear as a mortal child:

"This is the only sun that you will ever see again. But a millennium of nights will be yours to see light as no mortal has ever seen it, to snatch from the distant stars, as if you were Prometheus, an endless illumination by which to understand all things."

And I, who had beheld a far more wondrous celestial light in that realm from which I'd been turned away, longed only for him to eclipse it now forever.

8

The master's private salons: a string of rooms in which he had covered the walls with flawless copies of the works of those mortal painters he so admired—Giotto, Fra Angelico, Bellini.

We stood in the room of Benozzo Gozzoli's great work, from the Medici Chapel in Florence: *The Procession of the Magi*.

In the middle of the century, Gozzoli had created this vision, wrapping it around three walls of that small sacred chamber.

But my Master, with his supernatural memory and skill, had spread out the great work, rendering the whole flat from end to end on one great side of this immense and broad gallery.

Perfect as Gozzoli's original it loomed, with its hordes of beautifully dressed young Florentines, each pale face a study in thoughtful innocence, astride a cavalry of gorgeous horses following the exquisite figure of the young Lorenzo de' Medici himself, a youth with soft curling brownish-blond hair to his shoulders, and a carnal blush in his white cheeks. With a tranquil expression he appeared to gaze indifferently at the viewer of the painting as he sat, regal in his fur-trimmed gold jacket with its long slashed sleeves, on a beautifully caparisoned white horse. No detail of the painting was unworthy of another. Even the horse's bridle and fittings were of beautifully worked gold and velvet, a match for the tight sleeves of Lorenzo's tunic and his red velvet knee-high boots.

But the enchantment of the painting arose most powerfully from the faces of the youths, as well as the few old men who made up the immense crowded procession, all with small quiet mouths and eyes drifting to the sides as if a forward glance would have broken the spell. On and on they came past castles and mountains, winding their way to Bethlehem.

To illuminate this masterpiece, dozens of silver branching candelabra had been lighted up and down both sides of the room. The thick white

candles of the purest beeswax gave off a luxurious illumination. High above a glorious wilderness of painted clouds surrounded an oval of floating saints who touched each other's outstretched hands as they looked down benevolently and contentedly upon us.

No furniture covered the rosy Carrara marble tiles of the highly polished floor. A wandering border pattern of green leafy vine marked off in great squares these tiles, but the floor was otherwise plain and deeply lustrous, and silken smooth to bare feet.

I found myself staring with the fascination of a feverish brain into this hall of glorious surfaces. *The Procession of the Magi*, rising as it did to fill the entire wall to the right of me, seemed to give off a soft plethora of real sounds … the muted crunch of the hoofs of the horses, the shuffling steps of those who walked beside them, the rustling of the red-flowered shrubbery beyond them and even the distant cries of the hunters who, with their lean hounds, streaked along the mountain paths beyond.

My Master stood in the very center of the hall. He had taken off his familiar red velvet. He wore only an open robe of gold tissue, with long bell sleeves down to his wrists, his hem just skirting his bare white feet.

His hair seemed to make for him a halo of yellow brilliance, hanging softly to his shoulders.

I wore a gown of the same sheerness and simplicity.

"Come, Amadeo," he said.

I was weak, thirsting for water, barely able to stand. He knew this however, and no excuse seemed appropriate. I took my faltering steps one after another until I reached his outstretched arms.

His hands slid about the back of my head.

He bent his lips. A sense of dreadful awesome finality swept over me.

"You will die now to be with me in life eternal," he whispered in my ear. "Never for a moment must you really fear. I will hold your heart safe in my hands."

His teeth cut into me, deeply, cruelly with the precision of twin daggers, and I heard my heart thud in my ears. My very bowels contracted, and my stomach was knotted in pain. Yet a savage pleasure swept through all my veins, a pleasure which coursed towards the wounds in my neck. I could feel my blood rush towards my Master, towards his thirst and my inevitable death.

Even my hands were transfixed with vibrant sensation. Indeed, I

seemed suddenly to be but a puppet map of circuitry, all of it aglow, as with a low, obvious and deliberate sound, my Master drank my life's blood. The sound of his heart, slow, steady, a deep reverberating pounding, filled my ears.

The pain in my intestines was alchemized to a soft sheer rapture; my body lost all weight, all knowledge of itself in space. The throb of his heart was within me. My hands felt the long satin locks of his hair, but I did not hold to them. I floated, supported only by the insistent heartbeat and thrilling current of all my swiftly flowing blood.

"I die now," I whispered. This ecstasy could not endure.

Abruptly the world died.

I stood alone on the desolate and windy shore of the sea.

It was the land to which I'd journeyed before, but how different it was now, devoid of its shining sun and abundant flowers. The priests were there, but their robes were dusty and dark and reeked of the earth. I knew these priests, I knew them well. I knew their names. I knew their narrow bearded faces, their thin greasy hair and the black felt hats that they wore. I knew the dirt in their fingernails, and I knew the hungry hollow of their sunken gleaming eyes.

They beckoned for me to come.

Ah, yes, back to where I belonged. We climbed higher and higher until we stood on the bluff of the glass city, and it lay to the far left of us, and how forlorn and empty it was.

All the molten energy which had lighted its multitudinous and translucent towers was now dead and gone, turned off at the source. Nothing remained of the blazing colors except a deep dull residue of tints beneath the featureless span of hopeless gray sky. Oh, sad, sad, to see the glass city without its magic fire.

A chorus of sounds rose from it, a tinkling, as of glass dully striking glass. There was no music in it. There was only a bleary luminous despair.

"Walk on, Andrei," said one of the priests to me. His soiled hand with its thin bits of caked mud touched me and pulled at me, hurting my fingers. I looked down to see that my fingers were thin and luridly white. My knuckles shone as though the flesh had already been stripped away, but it had not.

All my skin merely cleaved to me, hungry and loose as their skin.

Before us came the water of the river, filled with ice sloughs and great tangles of blackened driftwood, covering the flatlands with a murky lake. We had to walk through it, and its coldness hurt us. Yet on we went, the four of us, the three priest guides and me. Above loomed the once golden domes of Kiev. It was our Santa Sofia, standing still after the horrid massacres and conflagrations of the Mongols who had laid waste our city and all her riches and all her wicked and worldly women and men.

"Come, Andrei."

I knew this doorway. It was to the Monastery of the Caves. Only candles illuminated these catacombs, and the smell of the earth overpowered all, even the stench of dried sweat on soiled and diseased flesh.

In my hands, I held the rough wooden handle of a small shovel. I dug into the heap of earth. I opened up the soft wall of rubble, until my eyes fell on a man not dead but dreaming as the dirt covered his face.

"Still alive, Brother?" I whispered, to this soul buried up to his neck.

"Still alive, Brother Andrei, give me only what will sustain me," said the cracked lips. The white eyelids were never lifted. "Give me only that much, so that our Lord and Savior, Christ Himself, will choose the time that I am to come home."

"Oh, Brother, how courageous you are," I said. I put a jug of water to his lips. The mud streaked them as he drank. His head rested back in soft rubble.

"And you, child," he said with labored breaths, turning ever so slightly from the proffered jug, "when will you have the strength to choose your earthen cell among us, your grave, and wait for Christ to come?"

"Soon, I pray, Brother," I answered. I stepped back. I lifted the shovel.

I dug into the next cell, and soon a dreadful unmistakable stench assailed me. The priest beside me stayed my hand.

"Our Good Brother Joseph is finally with the Lord," he said. "That's it, uncover his face so that we may see for ourselves that he died at peace."

The stench grew thicker. Only dead human beings reek this strongly. It's the smell of desolate graves and carts coming from those districts where the plague is at its worst. I feared I would be sick. But I continued

to dig, until at last we uncovered the dead man's head. Bald, a skull encased in shrunken skin.

Prayers rose from the brothers behind me. "Close it up, Andrei."

"When will you have the courage, Brother? Only God can tell you when—."

"The courage to what!" I know this booming voice, this big-shouldered man who barrels his way down the catacomb. No mistaking his auburn hair and beard, his leather jerkin and his weapons hung on his leather belt.

"This is what you do with my son, the ikon painter!"

He grabbed me by the shoulder, as he'd done a thousand times, with the same huge paw of a hand that had beaten me senseless.

"Let go of me, please, you impossible and ignorant ox," I whispered. "We're in the house of God."

He dragged me so that I fell on my knees. My robe was tearing, black cloth ripping.

"Father, stop it and go away," I said.

"Deep in these pits to bury a boy who can paint with the skill of the angels!"

"Brother Ivan, stop your shouting. It's for God to decide what each of us will do."

The priests ran behind me. I was dragged into the workroom. Ikons in rows hung from the ceiling, covering all of the far wall. My Father flung me down in the chair at the large heavy table. He lifted the iron candlestick with its fluttering, protesting candle to light all the tapers around.

The illumination made a fire on his huge beard. Long gray hairs sprung from his thick eyebrows, combed upwards, diabolical.

"You behave like the village idiot, Father," I whispered. "It's a wonder I'm not a slobbering idiot beggar myself."

"Shut up, Andrei. Nobody's taught you any manners here, that's clear enough. You need me to beat you."

He slammed his fist into the side of my head. My ear went numb.

"I thought I'd beaten you enough before I brought you here, but not so," he said. He smacked me again.

"Desecration!" cried the priest, looming above me. "The boy's consecrated to God."

“Consecrated to a pack of lunatics,” said my Father. He took a packet out of his coat. “Your eggs, Brothers!” he said with contempt. He lay back the soft leather and removed an egg. “Paint, Andrei. Paint to remind these lunatics that you have the gift from God Himself.”

“And God Himself it is who paints the picture,” cried the priest, the eldest of them, whose sticky gray hair was so soiled in time with oil that it was near black. He pushed his way between my chair and my Father.

My Father set down all but one egg. Leaning over a small earthen bowl on the table, he broke the shell of the egg, carefully gathering the yolk in one side, and letting all the rest spill into his leather cloth. “There, there, pure yolk, Andrei.” He sighed, and then threw the broken shell on the floor.

He picked up the small pitcher and poured the water into the yolk.

“You mix it, mix your colors and work. Remind these—.”

“He works when God calls him to work,” declared the Elder, “and when God calls him to bury himself within the Earth, to live the life of the reclusive, the hermit, then will he do that.”

“Like Hell,” said my Father. “Prince Michael himself has asked for an Ikon of the Virgin. Andrei, paint! Paint three for me that I may give the Prince the Ikon for which he asks, and take the others to the distant castle of his cousin, Prince Feodor, as he has asked.”

“That castle’s destroyed, Father,” I said contemptuously. “Feodor and all his men were massacred by the wild tribes. You’ll find nothing out there in the wild lands, nothing but stones. Father, you know this as well as I do. We’ve ridden plenty far enough to see for ourselves.”

“We’ll go if the Prince wants us to go,” said my Father, “and we’ll leave the ikon in the branches of the nearest tree to where his brother died.”

“Vanity and madness,” said the Elder. Other priests came into the room. There was much shouting.

“Speak clearly to me and stop the poetry!” cried my Father. “Let my boy paint. Andrei, mix your colors. Say your prayers, but begin.”

“Father, you humiliate me. I despise you. I’m ashamed that I’m your son. I’m not your son. I won’t be your son. Shut your filthy mouth or I’ll paint nothing.”

“Ah, that’s my sweet boy, with the honey rolling off his tongue, and the bees that left it there left their sting too.”

Again, he struck me. This time I became dizzy, but I refused to lift my hands to my head. My ear throbbed.

"Proud of yourself, Ivan the Idiot!" I said. "How can I paint when I can't see or even sit in the chair?"

The priests shouted. They argued amongst one another.

I tried to focus on the small row of earthen jars ready for the yolk and the water. Finally I began to mix the yolk and the water. Best to work and shut them all out. I could hear my Father laugh with satisfaction.

"Now, show them, show them what they mean to wall up alive in a lot of mud."

"For the love of God," said the Elder.

"For the love of stupid idiots," said my Father. "It isn't enough to have a great painter. You have to have a saint."

"You do not know what your son is. It was God who guided you to bring him here."

"It was money," said my Father. Gasps rose from the priests.

"Don't lie to them," I said under my breath. "You know damned good and well it was pride."

"Yes, pride," said my Father, "that my son could paint the Face of Christ or His Blessed Mother like a Master! And you, to whom I commit this genius, are too ignorant to see it."

I began to grind the pigments I needed, the soft brownish-red powder, and then to mix it over and over with the yolk and water until every tiny fragment of pigment was broken up and the paint was smooth and perfectly thin and clear. On to the yellow, and then to the red.

They fought over me. My Father lifted his fist to the Elder, but I didn't bother to look up. He wouldn't dare. He kicked my leg in his desperation, sending a cramp through my muscle, but I said nothing. I went on mixing the paint.

One of the priests had come round to my left, and he slipped a clean whitewashed panel of wood in front of me, primed and ready for the holy image.

At last I was ready. I bowed my head. I made the Sign of the Cross in our way, touching my right shoulder first, not my left.

"Dear God, give me the power, give me the vision, give my hands the tutelage which only your love can give!" At once I had the brush with no consciousness of having picked it up, and the brush began to race,

tracing out the oval of the Virgin's face, and then the sloping lines of her shoulders and then the outline of her folded hands.

Now when their gasps came, they were tributes to the painting. My Father laughed in gloating satisfaction.

"Ah, my Andrei, my sharp-tongued, sarcastic, nasty ungrateful little genius of God."

"Thank you, Father," I whispered bitingly, right from the middle of my trancelike concentration, as I myself watched the work of the brush in awe. There her hair, cleaving close to the scalp and parted in the middle. I needed no instrument to make the outline of her halo perfectly round.

The priests held the clean brushes for me. One held a clean rag in his hands. I snatched up a brush for the red color which I then mixed with white paste, until it was the appropriate color of flesh.

"Isn't that a miracle!"

"That's just the point," said the Elder between clenched teeth. "It's a miracle, Brother Ivan, and he will do what God wills."

"He won't wall himself up in here, damn you, not as long as I'm alive. He's coming with me into the wild lands."

I burst out laughing. "Father," I said sneering at him. "My place is here."

"He's the best shot in the family, and he's coming with me into the wild lands," said my Father to the others, who had flown into a flurry of protests and negations all around.

"Why do you give Our Blessed Mother that tear in her eye, Brother Andrei?"

"It's God who gives her the tear," said one of the others.

"It is the Mother of All Sorrows. Ah, see the beautiful folds of her cloak."

"Ah, look, the Christ child!" said my Father, and even his face was reverent. "Ah, poor little baby God, soon to be crucified and die!" His voice was for once subdued and almost tender. "Ah, Andrei, what a gift. Oh, but look, look at the child's eyes and his little hand, at the flesh of his thumb, his little hand."

"Even you are touched with the light of Christ," said the Elder. "Even such a stupid violent man as you, Brother Ivan."

The priests pressed in close around me in a circle. My Father held out

a palmful of small twinkling jewels. “For the halos, Andrei. Work fast, Prince Michael has ordained that we go.”

“Madness, I tell you!” All voices were set to babbling at once. My Father turned and raised his fist.

I looked up, reached for a fresh, clean panel of wood. My forehead was wet with sweat. I worked on and on.

I had done three ikons.

I felt such happiness, such pure happiness. It was sweet to be so warm in it, so aware of it, and I knew, though I said nothing, that my Father had made it possible, my Father, so cheerful and ruddy-cheeked and overpowering with his big shoulders and his glistening face, this man I was supposed to hate.

The Sorrowful Mother with her Child, and the napkin for her tears, and the Christ Himself. Weary, bleary-eyed, I sat back. The place was intolerably cold. Oh, if there were only a little fire. And my hand, my left hand was cramped from the cold. Only my right hand was all right because of the pace at which I had done my work. I wanted to suck the fingers of my left hand, but this would not do, not here at this moment, when all gathered to coo over the ikons.

“Masterly. The Work of God.”

An awful sense of time came over me, that I had traveled far from this moment, far from this the Monastery of the Caves to which I had vowed my life, far from the priests who were my brethren, far from my cursing, stupid Father, who was in spite of his ignorance so very proud.

Tears flowed from his eyes. “My son,” he said. He clutched my shoulder proudly. He was beautiful in his own way, such a fine strong man, afraid of nothing, a prince himself when among his horses and his dogs and his followers, of which I, his son, had been one.

“Let me alone, you thick-skulled oaf,” I said. I smiled up at him to further outrage him. He laughed. He was too happy, too proud, to be provoked.

“Look what my son has done.” His voice had a telltale thickness to it. He was going to cry. And he wasn’t even drunk.

“Not by human hands,” said the priest.

“No, naturally not!” boomed my Father’s scornful voice. “Just by my son Andrei’s hands, that’s all.”

A silken voice said in my ear, “Would you place the jewels into the

halos yourself, Brother Andrei, or shall I perform this task?"

Behold, it was done, the paste applied, the stones set, five in the Ikon of Christ. The brush was in my hand again to stroke the brown hair of the Lord God, which was parted in the middle and brought back behind His ears, with only part of it to show on either side of His neck. The stylus appeared in my hand to thicken and darken the black letters on the open book which Christ held in His left hand. The Lord God stared, serious and severe, from the panel, His mouth red and straight beneath the horns of His brown mustache.

"Come now, the Prince is here, the Prince has come."

Outside the entrance of the Monastery, the snow fell in cruel gusts. The priests helped me with my leather vest, my jacket of shearling. They buckled my belt. It was good to smell this leather again, to breathe the fresh cold air. My Father had my sword. It was heavy, old, taken from his long-ago fighting against the Teutonic Knights in lands far to the east, the jewels long ago chipped out of its handle, but a fine, fine battle sword.

Through the snowy mist a figure appeared, on horseback. It was Prince Michael himself, in his fur hat and far-lined cape and gloves, the great Lord who ruled Kiev for our Roman Catholic conquerors, whose faith we would not accept but who let us keep to our own. He was decked out in foreign velvet and gold, a fancy figure fit for royal Lithuanian courts, of which we heard fantastical tales. How did he endure Kiev, the ruined city?

The horse reared up on its hind legs. My Father ran to catch the reins, and threaten the animal as he threatened me.

The Ikon for Prince Feodor was wrapped thickly in wool for me to carry.

I placed my hand on the hilt of my sword.

"Ah, you will not take him on this Godless mission," cried the Elder. "Prince Michael, Your Excellency, our mighty ruler, tell this Godless man that he can not take our Andrei."

I saw the face of the Prince through the snow, square and strong, with gray eyebrows and beard and huge hard blue eyes. "Let him go, Father," he cried out to the priest. "The boy has hunted with Ivan since he was four years old. Never has anyone provided such bounty for my table, and for yours, Father. Let him go."

The horse danced backwards. My Father pulled down on the reins. Prince Michael blew the snow from off his lips.

Our horses were led to the fore, my Father's powerful stallion with the gracefully curved neck and the shorter gelding which had been mine before I had come to the Monastery of the Caves.

"I'll be back, Father," I said to the Elder. "Give me your blessing. What can I do against my gentle, sweet-tempered and infinitely pious Father when Prince Michael himself commands?"

"Oh, shut your lousy little mouth," said my Father. "You think I want to listen to this all the way to the Castle of Prince Feodor?"

"You'll hear it all the way to Hell!" declared the Elder. "You take my finest novice to his death."

"Novice, novice to a hole in the dirt! You take the hands that have painted these marvels—

"God painted them," I said in a biting whisper, "and you know it, Father. Will you please stop making a display of your Godlessness and belligerence."

I was on the back of my horse. The Ikon was strapped in wool to my chest.

"I don't believe my brother Feodor is dead!" the Prince said, trying to control his mount, to bring it in line with that of my Father. "Perhaps these travelers saw some other ruin, some old—."

"Nothing survives in the grasslands now," pleaded the Elder. "Prince, don't take Andrei. Don't take him."

The priest ran alongside of my horse. "Andrei, you will find nothing; you will find only the wild blowing grass and the trees. Put the Ikon in the branches of a tree. Place it for the will of God, so that when it is found by the Tatars they will know His Divine power. Place it there for the pagans. And come home."

The snow came down so fierce and thick I couldn't see his face.

I looked up at the stripped and barren domes of our Cathedral, that remnant of Byzantine glory left to us by Mongol invaders, who now exacted their greedy tribute through our Catholic Prince. How bleak and desolate was this, my homeland. I closed my eyes and longed for the mud cubicle of the cave, for the smell of the earth close around me, for the dreams of God and His Goodness which would come to me, once I was half-entombed.

Come back to me, Amadeo. Come back. Do not let your heart stop!

I spun around. "Who calls to me?" The thick white veil of the snow broke to reveal the distant glass city, black and glimmering as if heated by hellish fires. Smoke rose to feed the ominous clouds of the darkening sky. I rode towards the glass city.

"Andrei!" This was my Father's voice behind me.

Come back to me, Amadeo. Don't let your heart stop!

The Ikon fell from my left arm as I struggled to bridle my mount. The wool had come undone. On and on we rode. The Ikon fell downhill beside us, turning over and over, corner bouncing upon corner, as it tumbled, the swaddling of wool falling loose. I saw the shimmering face of Christ.

Strong arms caught me, pulled me upwards as if from a whirlwind. "Let me go!" I protested. I looked back. Against the frozen earth lay the Ikon, and the staring, questioning eyes of the Christ.

Firm fingers pressed my face on either side. I blinked and opened my eyes. The room was filled with warmth and light. There loomed the familiar face of my Master right above me, his blue eyes shot with blood. "Drink, Amadeo," he said. "Drink from me."

My head fell forward against his throat. The blood fount had started; it bubbled out of his vein, flowing thickly down onto the neck of his golden tissue robe. I closed my mouth over it. I lapped at it.

I let out a cry as the blood inflamed me.

"Draw it from me, Amadeo. Draw it hard!"

My mouth filled with blood. My lips closed against his silky white flesh so that not a drop would be lost. Deeply I swallowed. In a dim flash I saw my Father riding through the grasslands, a powerful leather-clad figure, his sword tied firmly to his belt, his leg crooked, his cracked and worn brown boot firmly in the stirrup. He turned to the left, rising and falling gracefully and perfectly with the huge strides of his white horse.

"All right, leave me, you coward, you impudent and miserable boy! Leave me!" He looked before him. "I prayed for it, Andrei, I prayed they wouldn't get you for their filthy catacombs, their dark earthen cells. Well, so my prayer is answered! Go with God, Andrei. Go with God. Go with God!"

My Master's face was rapt and beautiful, a white flame against the wavering golden light of countless candles. He stood over me.

I lay on the floor. My body sang with the blood. I climbed to my feet, my head swimming. “Master.”

At the far end of the room he stood, his bare feet composed on the glowing rose-colored floor, his arms outstretched. “Come to me, Amadeo, walk towards me, come to me, to take the rest.”

I struggled to obey him. The room raged with colors around me. I saw the Procession of the searching Magi. “Oh, that it’s so vivid, so utterly alive!”

“Come to me, Amadeo.”

“I’m too weak, Master, I’m fainting, I’m dying in this glorious light.”

I took one step after another, though it seemed impossible. I placed one foot before the other, drawing ever closer to him. I stumbled.

“On your hands and knees, then, come. Come to me.”

I clung to his robe. I had to climb this great height if I wanted it. I reached up and took hold of the crook of his right arm. I lifted myself, feeling the gold cloth against me. I straightened my legs until I stood. Once again, I embraced him; once again I found the fount. I drank, and drank, and drank.

In a gilded gush the blood went down into my bowels. It went through my legs and my arms. I was a Titan. I crushed him under me. “Give it to me,” I whispered. “Give it to me.” The blood hovered on my lips and then flooded down my throat.

It was as if his cold marble hands had seized my heart. I could hear it struggling, beating, the valves opening and closing, the wet sound of his blood invading it, the swoosh and flap of the valves as they welcomed it, utilizing it, my heart growing ever larger and more powerful, my veins becoming like so many invincible metallic conduits of this most potent fluid.

I lay on the floor. He stood above me, and his hands were open to me. “Get up, Amadeo. Come, come up, into my arms. Take it.”

I cried. I sobbed. My tears were red, and my hand was stained with red. “Help me, Master.”

“I do help you. Come, seek it out for yourself.”

I was on my feet with this new strength, as if all human limitations had been loosened, as if they were bonds of rope or chain and had fallen away. I sprang at him, pulling back his robe, the better to find the wound.

"Make a new wound, Amadeo."

I bit into the flesh, puncturing it, and the blood squirted over my lips. I clapped my mouth against it. "Flow into me."

My eyes closed. I saw the wild lands, the grass blowing, the sky blue. My Father rode on and on with the small band behind him. Was I one of them?

"I prayed you'd escape!" he called out to me, laughing, "and so you have. Damn you, Andrei. Damn you and your sharp tongue and your magical painter's hands. Damn you, you foul-mouthed whelp, damn you." He laughed and laughed, and rode on, the grass bending and falling for him.

"Father, look!" I struggled to shout. I wanted him to see the stony ruins of the castle. But my mouth was full of blood. They had been right. Prince Feodor's fortress was destroyed, and he himself long gone. My Father's horse reared up suddenly as it came to the first heap of vine-covered stones.

With a shock, I felt the marble floor beneath me, so wondrously warm. I lay with both hands against it. I lifted myself. The swarming rosy pattern was so dense, so deep, so wondrous, it was like water frozen to make the finest stone. I could have looked into its depths forever.

"Rise up, Amadeo, once more."

Oh, it was easy to make this climb, to reach for his arm and then his shoulder. I broke the flesh of his neck. I drank. The blood washed through me, once again revealing my entire form with a shock against the blackness of my mind. I saw the boy's body that was mine, of arms and legs, as with this form I breathed in the warmth and light around me, as if all of me had become one great multipored organ for seeing, for hearing, for breathing. I breathed with millions of minute and strong tiny mouths.

The blood filled me so that I could take no more.

I stood before my Master. In his face I saw but the hint of weariness, but the smallest pain in his eyes. I saw for the first time the true lines of his old humanity in his face, the soft inevitable crinkles at the corners of his serenely folded eyes.

The drapery of his robe glistened, the light traveling on it as the cloth moved with his small gesture. He pointed. He pointed to the painting of *The Procession of the Magi*.

"Your soul and your physical body are now locked together forever," he said. "And through your vampiric senses, the sense of sight, and of touch, and of smell, and of taste, you'll know all the world. Not from turning away from it to the dark cells of the Earth, but through opening your arms to endless glory will you perceive the absolute splendor of God's creation and the miracles wrought, in His Divine Indulgence, by the hands of men."

The silk-clad multitudes of *The Procession of the Magi* appeared to move. Once more I heard the horses' hooves on the soft earth, and the shuffle of booted feet. Once more I thought I saw the distant hounds leap on the mountainside. I saw the masses of flowered shrubbery wobble with the press of the gilded procession against them; I saw petals fly from the flowers. Marvelous animals frolicked in the thick wood. I saw the proud Prince Lorenzo, astride his mount, turn his youthful head, just as my Father had done, and look at me. On and on went the world beyond him, the world with its white rocky cliffs, its hunters on their brown steeds and its leaping prancing dogs.

"It's gone forever, Master," I said, and how rounded and resonant was my voice, responding to all that I beheld.

"What is that, my child?"

"Russia, the world of the wild lands, the world of those dark terrible cells within the moist Mother Earth."

I turned around and around. Smoke rose from the wilderness of burning candles. Wax crawled and dripped over the chased silver that held them, dripping even to the spotless and shimmering floor. The floor was as the sea, so transparent suddenly, so silken, and high above the painted clouds in illimitable sweetest blue. It seemed a mist emanated from these clouds, a warm summer mist made up of mingling land and sea.

Once again, I looked at the painting. I moved towards it and threw out my hands against it, and stared upwards at the white castles atop the hills, at the delicate groomed trees, at the fierce sublime wilderness that waited so patiently for the sluggish journey of my crystal-clear gaze.

"So much!" I whispered. No words could describe the deep colors of brown and gold in the beard of the exotic magus, or the shadows at play in the painted head of the white horse, or in the face of the balding man who led him, or the grace of the arch-necked camels or the crush of rich

flowers beneath soundless feet.

"I see it with all of me," I sighed. I closed my eyes and lay against it, recalling perfectly all aspects as the dome of my mind became this room itself, and the wall was there colored and painted by me. "I see it without any omission. I see it," I whispered.

I felt my Master's arms around my chest. I felt his kiss on my hair.

"Can you see again the glassy city?" he asked.

"I can make it!" I cried. I let my head roll back against his chest. I opened my eyes, and drew out of the riot of painting before me the very colors I wanted, and made this metropolis of bubbling, leaping glass rise in my imagination, until its towers pierced the sky. "It's there, do you see it?"

In a torrent of tumbling, laughing words I described it, the glittering green and yellow and blue spires that sparkled and wavered in the Heavenly light. "Do you see it?" I cried out.

"No. But you do," said my Master. "And that is more than enough."

In the dim chamber, we dressed in the black morn.

Nothing was difficult, nothing had its old weight and resistance. It seemed I only needed to run my fingers up the doublet to have it buttoned.

We hurried down the steps, which seemed to disappear beneath my feet, and out into the night.

To climb the slimy walls of a palazzo was nothing, to anchor my feet over and over in the chinks of the stone, to poise on a tuft of fern and vine as I reached for the bars of a window and finally pulled open the grate, it was nothing, and how easily I let the heavy metal grid drop into the glistening green water below. How sweet to see it sink, to see the water splash around the descending weight, to see the glimmer of the torches in the water.

"I fall into it."

"Come."

Inside the chamber, the man rose from his desk. Against the cold, he had wrapped his neck in wool. His dark blue robe was banded in pearly gold. Rich man, banker. Friend of the Florentine, not mourning his loss over these many pages of vellum, smelling of black ink but calculating the inevitable gains, all partners murdered by the blade and by poison, it seemed, in a private banquet room.

Did he guess now that we had done it, the red-cloaked man and the auburn-haired boy who came through his high fourth-story window in this frozen winter night?

I caught him as if he were the love of my young life, and unwound the wool from around the artery where I would feed.

He begged me to stop, to name my price. How still my Master looked, watching only me, as the man begged and I ignored him, merely feeling for this large pulsing, irresistible vein.

"Your life, Sir, I must have it," I whispered. "The blood of thieves is strong, isn't it, Sir?"

"Oh, child," he cried, all resolve shattering, "does God send His justice in such an unlikely form?"

It was sharp, pungent and strangely rank this human blood, spiked with the wine he'd drunk and the herbs of the foods he'd eaten, and almost purple in the light of his lamps as it flowed over my fingers before I could lap them with my tongue.

At the first draught I felt his heart stop.

"Ease up, Amadeo," whispered my Master.

I let go and the heart recovered.

"That's it, feed on it slowly, slowly, letting the heart pump the blood to you, yes, yes, and gently with your fingers that he not suffer unduly, for he suffers the worst fate he can know and that is to know that he dies."

We walked along the narrow quay together. No need anymore to keep my balance, though my gaze was lost in the depths of the singing, lapping water, gaining its movement through its many stonewalled connections from the faraway sea. I wanted to feel the wet green moss on the stones.

We stood in a small piazza, deserted, before the angled doors of a high stone church. They were bolted now. All windows were blinded, all doors locked. Curfew. Quiet.

"Once more, lovely one, for the strength it will give you," said my Master, and his lethal fangs pierced me, as his hands held me captive.

"Would you trick me? Would you kill me?" I whispered, as I felt myself again helpless, no preternatural effort that I could summon strong enough to escape his grasp.

The blood was pulled out of me in a tidal wave that left my arms

dangling and shaking, my feet dancing as if I were a hanged man. I struggled to remain conscious. I pushed against him. But the flow continued, out of me, out of all my fibers and into him.

"Now, once again, Amadeo, take it back from me."

He dealt one fine blow to my chest. I almost toppled off my feet. I was so weak, I fell forward, only at the last grasping for his cloak. I pulled myself up and locked my left arm around his neck. He stepped back, straightening, making it hard for me. But I was too determined, too challenged and too determined to make a mockery of his lessons.

"Very well, sweet Master," I said as I tore at his skin once again. "I have you, and will have every drop of you, Sir, unless you are quick, most quick." Only then did I realize! I too had tiny fangs!

He started to laugh softly, and it heightened my pleasure, that this which I fed upon should laugh beneath these new fangs.

With all my might I sought to tug his heart out of his chest. I heard him cry out and then laugh in amazement. I drew and drew on his blood, swallowing with a hoarse disgraceful sound.

"Come on, let me hear you cry out again!" I whispered, sucking the blood greedily, widening the gash with my teeth, my sharpened, lengthened teeth, these fang teeth that were now mine and made for this slaughter. "Come on, beg for mercy, Sir!"

His laughter was sweet.

I took his blood swallow after swallow, glad and proud at his helpless laughing, at the fact that he had fallen down on his knees in the square and that I had him still, and he must now raise his arm to push me away.

"I can't drink anymore!" I declared. I lay back on the stones.

The frozen sky was black and studded with the white blazing stars. I stared at it, deliciously aware of the stone beneath me, of the hardness under my back and my head. No care now about the soil, the damp, the threat of disease. No care now whether the crawling things of the night came near. No care now what men might think who peeped from their windows. No care now for the lateness of the hour. Look at me, stars. Look at me, as I look at you.

Silent and glistering, these tiny eyes of Heaven.

I began to die. A withering pain commenced in my stomach, then moved to my bowels.

“Now, all that’s left of a mortal boy will leave you,” my Master said. “Don’t be afraid.”

“No more music?” I whispered. I rolled over and put my arms around my Master, who lay beside me, his head resting on his elbow. He gathered me to him.

“Shall I sing to you a lullaby?” he said softly.

I moved away from him. Foul fluid had begun to flow from me. I felt an instinctive shame, but this quite slowly vanished. He picked me up, easily as always, and pushed my face into his neck. The wind rushed around us.

Then I felt the cold water of the Adriatic, and I found myself tumbling on the unmistakable swell of the sea. The sea was salty and delicious and held no menace. I turned over and over, and finding myself alone, tried to get my bearings. I was far out, near to the island of the Lido. I looked back to the main island, and I could see through the great congregation of ships at anchor the blazing torches of the Palazzo Ducale, with a vision that was awesomely clear.

The mingled voices of the dark port rose, as if I were secretly swimming amongst the ships, though I was not.

What a remarkable power, to hear these voices, to be able to hone in on one particular voice and hear its early-morning mumblings, and then to pitch my hearing to yet another and let other words sink in.

I floated under the sky for a while, until all the pain was gone from me. I felt cleansed, and I didn’t want to be alone. I turned over and effortlessly swam towards the harbor, moving under the surface of the water when I neared the ships.

What astonished me now was that I could see beneath the water! There was enough life for my vampiric eyes to see the huge anchors lodged in the mushy bottom of the lagoon, and to see the curved bottoms of the galleys. It was an entire underwater universe. I wanted to explore it further, but I heard my Master’s voice—not a telepathic voice, as we would call it now, but his audible voice—calling me very softly to return to the piazza where he waited for me.

I peeled off my rank clothes and climbed out of the water naked, hurrying to him in the cold darkness, delighted that the chill itself meant little. When I saw him I spread out my arms and smiled.

He held a far cloak in his arms, which he opened now to receive me,

rubbing my hair dry with it and winding it around me.

"You feel your new freedom. Your bare feet are not hurt by the deep cold of the stones. If you're cut, your resilient skin will heal instantly, and no small crawling creature of the dark will produce revulsion in you. They can't hurt you. Disease can't hurt you." He covered me with kisses. "The most pestilential blood will only feed you, as your preternatural body cleanses it and absorbs it. You are a powerful creature, and deep in here? In your chest, which I touch now with my hand, there is your heart, your human heart."

"Is it really so, Master?" I asked. I was exhilarated, I was playful. "Why so human still?"

"Amadeo, have you found me inhuman? Have you found me cruel?"

My hair had shaken off the water, drying almost instantly. We walked now, arm in arm, the heavy fur cloak covering me, out of the square.

When I didn't answer, he stopped and embraced me again and began his hungry kisses.

"You love me," I said, "as I am now, even more than before."

"Oh, yes," he said. He hugged me roughly and kissed my throat all over, and my shoulders, and began to kiss my chest. "I can't hurt you now, I can't snuff out your life with an accidental embrace. You're mine, of my flesh and of my blood."

He stopped. He was crying. He didn't want me to see. He turned away when I tried to catch his face with my impertinent hands.

"Master, I love you," I said.

"Pay attention," he said brushing me off, obviously impatient with his tears. He pointed to the sky. "You'll always know when morning's coming, if you pay attention. Do you feel it? Do you hear the birds? There are in all parts of the world those birds who sing right before dawn."

A thought came to me, dark and horrid, that one of the things I had missed in the deep Monastery of the Caves under Kiev was the sound of birds. Out in the wild grasses, hunting with my Father, riding from copse to copse of trees, I had loved the song of the birds. We had never been too long in the miserable riverside hovels of Kiev without those forbidden journeys into the wild lands from which so many didn't return.

But that was gone. I had all of sweet Italy around me, the sweet

Serenissima. I had my Master, and the great voluptuous magic of this transformation.

"For this I rode into the wild lands," I whispered. "For this he took me out of the Monastery on that last day."

My Master looked at me sadly. "I hope so," he said. "What I know of your past, I learnt from your mind when it was open to me, but it's closed now, closed because I've made you a vampire, the same as I am, and we can never know each other's minds. We're too close, the blood we share makes a deafening roar in our ears when we try to talk in silence to one another, and so I let go forever of those awful images of that underground Monastery which flashed so brilliantly in your thoughts, but always with agony, always with near despair."

"Yes, despair, and all that is gone like the pages of a book torn loose and thrown into the wind. Just like that, gone."

He hurried me along. We were not going home. It was another way through the back alleys.

"We go now to our cradle," he said, "which is our crypt, our bed which is our grave."

We entered an old dilapidated palazzo, tenanted only with a few sleeping poor. I didn't like it. I had been brought up by him on luxury. But we soon entered a cellar, a seeming impossibility in rank and watery Venice, but a cellar it was, indeed. We made our way down stone stairs, past thick bronze doors, which men alone could not open, until in the inky blackness we had found the final room.

"Here's a trick," my Master whispered, "which some night you yourself will be strong enough to work."

I heard a riot of crackling and a small blast, and a great flaring torch blazed in his hand. He had lighted it with no more than his mind.

"With each decade you'll grow stronger, and then with each century, and you will discover many times in your long life that your powers have made a magical leap. Test them carefully, and protect what you discover. Use cleverly all that you discover. Never shun any power, for that's as foolish as a man shunning his strength."

I nodded, staring spellbound at the flames. I had never seen such colors in simple fire before, and I felt no aversion to it, though I knew that it was the one thing that could destroy me. He had said so, had he not?

He made a gesture. I should regard the room.

What a splendid chamber it was. It was paved in gold! Even its ceiling was of gold. Two stone sarcophagi stood in the middle of it, each graced with a carved figure in the old style, that is, severe and more solemn than natural; and as I drew closer, I saw that these figures were helmeted knights, in long tunics, with heavy broadswords carved close to their flanks, their gloved hands clasped in prayer, their eyes closed in eternal sleep. Each had been gilded, and plated with silver, and set with countless tiny gems. The belts of the knights were set with amethyst. Sapphires adorned the necks of their tunics. Topaz gleamed in the scabbards of their swords.

"Is this not a fortune to tempt a thief?" I asked. "Lying as it does here beneath this ruined house?"

He laughed outright.

"You're teaching me to be cautious already?" he asked, smiling. "What back talk! No thief can gain access here. You didn't measure your own strength when you opened the doors. Look at the bolt I've closed behind us, since you are so concerned. Now see if you can lift the lid of that coffin. Go ahead. See if your strength meets your nerve."

"I didn't mean it to be back talk," I protested. "Thank God you're smiling." I lifted the lid and then moved the lower part of it to one side. It was nothing to me, yet I knew this was heavy stone. "Ah, I see," I said meekly. I gave him a radiant and innocent smile. The inside was cushioned in damask of royal purple.

"Get into this crib, my child," he said. "Don't be afraid as you wait for the rise of the sun. When it comes you'll sleep soundly enough."

"Can I not sleep with you?"

"No, here in this bed which I have long ago prepared for you, this is where you belong. I have my own narrow place there next to you, which is not big enough for two. But you are mine now, mine, Amadeo. Vouchsafe me one last bevy of kisses, ah, sweet, yes, sweet—."

"Master, don't let me ever make you angry. Don't let me ever—."

"No, Amadeo, be my challenger, be my questioner, be my bold and ungrateful pupil." He looked faintly sad. He pushed me gently. He gestured to the coffin. The purple satin damask shimmered.

"And so I he in it," I whispered, "so young."

I saw the shadow of pain in his face after I'd said this. I regretted it. I

wanted to say something to undo it, but he gestured that I must go on.

Oh, how cold this was, cushions be damned, and how hard. I moved the lid into place above me and lay still, listening, listening to the sound of the torch snuffed, and to the grinding of stone on stone as he opened his own grave.

I heard his voice:

"Good night, my young love, my child love, my son," he said.

I let my body go limp. How delicious was this simple relaxation. How new were all things.

Far away in the land of my birth, the monks chanted in the Monastery of the Caves.

Sleepily, I reflected on all I'd remembered. I had gone home to Kiev. I had made of my memories a tableau to teach me all that I might know. And in the last moments of nighttime consciousness, I said farewell to them forever, farewell to their beliefs and their restraints.

I envisaged *The Procession of the Magi* splendidly glowing on the Master's wall, the procession which would be mine to study when the sun set again. It seemed to me in my wild and passionate soul, in my newborn vampiric heart, that the Magi had come not only for Christ's birth but for my rebirth as well.

9

If I had thought my transformation into a vampire meant the end of my tutelage or apprenticeship to Marius, I was quite wrong. I wasn't immediately set free to wallow in the joys of my new powers.

The night after my metamorphosis, my education began in earnest. I was to be prepared now not for a temporal life but for eternity.

My Master gave me to know that he had been created a vampire almost fifteen hundred years ago, and that there were members of our kind all over the world. Secretive, suspicious and often miserably lonely, the wanderers of the night, as my Master called them, were often ill prepared for immortality and made nothing of their existence but a string of dreary disasters until despair consumed them and they immolated themselves through some ghastly bonfire, or by going into the light of the sun.

As for the very old, those who like my Master had managed to withstand the passage of empires and epochs, they were for the most part misanthropes, seeking for themselves cities in which they could reign supreme among mortals, driving off fledglings who attempted to share their territory, even if it meant destroying creatures of their own kind.

Venice was the undisputed territory of my Master, his hunting preserve, and his own private arena in which he could preside over the games which he had chosen as significant for him in this time of life.

"There is nothing that will not pass," he said, "except you yourself. You must listen to what I say because my lessons are first and foremost lessons in survival; the garnishes will come later on."

The primary lesson was that we slay only "the evildoer." This had once been, in the foggiest centuries of ancient time, a solemn commission to blood drinkers, and indeed there had been a dim religion surrounding us in antique pagan days in which the vampires had been worshiped as bringers of justice to those who had done wrong.

“We shall never again let such superstition surround us and the mystery of our powers. We are not infallible. We have no commission from God. We wander the Earth like the giant felines of the great jungles, and have no more claim upon those we kill than any creature that seeks to live.

“But it is an infallible principle that the slaying of the innocent will drive you mad. Believe me when I tell you that for your peace of mind you must feed on the evil, you must learn to love them in all their filth and degeneracy, and you must thrive on the visions of their evil that will inevitably fill your heart and soul during the kill.

“Kill the innocent and you will sooner or later come to guilt, and with it you will come to impotence and finally despair. You may think you are too ruthless and too cold for such. You may feel superior to human beings and excuse your predatory excesses on the ground that you do but seek the necessary blood for your own life. But it won’t work in the long run.

“In the long run, you will come to know that you are more human than monster, all that is noble in you derives from your humanity, and your enhanced nature can only lead you to value humans all the more. You’ll come to pity those you slay, even the most unredeemable, and you will come to love humans so desperately that there will be nights when hunger will seem far preferable to you than the blood repast.”

I accepted this wholeheartedly, and quickly plunged with my Master into the dark underbelly of Venice, the wild world of taverns and vice which I had never, as the mysterious velvet-clad “apprentice” of Marius De Romanus, really seen before. Of course I knew drinking places, I knew fashionable courtesans such as our beloved Bianca, but I really didn’t know the thieves and murderers of Venice, and it was on these that I fed.

Very soon, I understood what my Master meant when he said that I must develop a taste for evil and maintain it. The visions from my victims became stronger for me with every kill. I began to see brilliant colors when I killed. In fact, I could sometimes see these colors dancing around my victims before I ever even closed in. Some men seem to walk in red-tinged shadows, and others to emanate a fiery orange light. The anger of my meanest and most tenacious victims was often a brilliant yellow which blinded me, searing me, as it were, both when I first

attacked and while I drank the victim dry of all blood.

I was at the onset a dreadfully violent and impulsive killer. Having been set down by Marius in a nest of assassins, I went to work with a clumsy fury, drawing out my prey from the tavern or the flophouse, cornering him on the quay and then tearing open his throat as if I were a wild dog. I drank greedily often rupturing the victim's heart. Once the heart is gone, once the man is dead, there is nothing to pump the blood into you. And so it is not so good.

But my Master, for all his lofty speeches on the virtues of humans, and his adamant insistence on our own responsibilities, nevertheless taught me to kill with finesse.

"Take it slowly," he said. We walked along the narrow banks of the canals where such existed. We traveled by gondola listening with our preternatural ears for conversation that seemed meant for us. "And half the time, you needn't enter a house in order to draw out a victim. Stand outside of it, read the man's thoughts, throw him some silent bait. If you read his thoughts, it is almost a certainty that he can receive your message. You can lure without words. You can exert an irresistible pull. When he comes out to you, then take him.

"And there is never any need for him to suffer, or for blood actually to be spilt. Embrace your victim, love him if you will. Fondle him slowly and sink your teeth with caution. Then feast as slowly as you can. This way his heart will see you through.

"As for the visions, and these colors you speak of, seek to learn from them. Let the victim in his dying tell you what he can about life itself. If images of his long life trip before you, observe them, or rather savor them. Yes, savor them. Devour them slowly as you do his blood. As for the colors, let them pervade you. Let the entire experience inundate you. That is, be both active and utterly passive. Make love to your victim. And listen always for the actual moment when the heart ceases to beat. You will feel an undeniably orgiastic sensation at this moment, but it can be overlooked.

"Dispose of the body after, or make certain that you have licked away all sign of the puncture wounds in the victim's throat. Just a little bit of your blood on the tip of your tongue will accomplish this. In Venice dead bodies are common. You need not take such pains. But when we hunt in the outlying villages, then often you may have to bury the

remains."

I was eager for all these lessons. That we hunted together was a magnificent pleasure. I came to realize quickly enough that Marius had been clumsy in the murders he had committed for me to witness before I'd been transformed. I knew then, as perhaps I've made plain in this story, that he wanted me to feel pity for these victims; he wanted me to experience horror. He wanted me to see death as an abomination. But due to my youth, my devotion to him and the violence done me in my short mortal life, I had not responded as he hoped.

Whatever the case, he was now a much more skilled killer. We often took the same victim, together, I drinking from the throat of our captive, while he fed from the man's wrist. Sometimes he delighted in holding the victim tightly for me while I drank all of the blood.

Being new, I was thirsty every night. I could have lived for three or more without killing, yes, and sometimes I did, but by the fifth night of denying myself—this was put to the test—I was too weak to rise from the sarcophagus. So what this meant was that, when and if I were ever on my own, I must kill at least every fourth night.

My first few months were an orgy. Each kill seemed more thrilling, more paralyzingly delicious than the one which had gone before. The mere sight of a bared throat could bring about in me such a state of arousal that I became like an animal, incapable of language or restraint. When I opened my eyes in the cold stony darkness, I envisioned human flesh. I could feel it in my naked hands and I wanted it, and the night could have no other events for me until I had laid my powerful hands on that one which would be the sacrifice to my need.

For long moments after the kill, sweet throbbing sensations passed through me as the warm fragrant blood found all the corners of my body, as it pumped its magnificent heat into my face.

This, and this alone, was enough to absorb me utterly, young as I was.

But Marius had no intention of letting me wallow in blood, the hasty young predator, with no other thought but to glut himself night after night.

"You must really begin to learn history and philosophy and the law in earnest," he told me. "You are not destined for the University of Padua now. You are destined to endure."

So after our stealthy missions were completed, and we returned to the

warmth of the palazzo, he forced me to my books. He wanted some distance between me and Riccardo and the others anyway, lest they become suspicious of the change that had occurred.

In fact, he told me they "knew" about the change whether they realized it or not. Their bodies knew that I was no longer human, though it might take their minds some time to accept the fact.

"Show them only courtesy and love, only complete indulgence, but keep your distance," Marius told me. "By the time they realize the unthinkable is the fact, you will have assured them that you are no enemy to them, that you are indeed Amadeo still, whom they love, and that though you have been changed, you yourself have not changed towards them."

I understood this. At once I felt a greater love for Riccardo. I felt it for all of the boys.

"But Master," I asked, "don't you ever become impatient with them, that they think more slowly, that they are so clumsy? I love them, yes, but surely you see them in a more pejorative light even than I do."

"Amadeo," he said softly, "they are all going to die." His face was charged with grief.

I felt it immediately and totally, which was always the way with feelings now. They came on in a torrent and taught their lessons at once.

They are all going to die. Yes, and I am immortal.

After that, I could only be patient with them, and indeed, I indulged myself in the manner in which I looked at them and studied them, never letting them know it, but glorying in all the details of them as if they were exotic because … they were going to die.

There is too much to describe, too much. I can't find a way to put down all that became clear to me in the first few months alone. And there was nothing made known to me in that time which was not deepened afterwards.

I saw process everywhere I looked; I smelled corruption, but I also beheld the mystery of growth, the magic of things blossoming and ripening, and in fact all process, whether towards maturity or towards the grave, delighted and enthralled me, except, that is, the disintegration of the human mind.

My study of government and law was more of a challenge. Though reading was accomplished with infinitely greater speed and near

instantaneous comprehension of syntax, I had to force myself to be interested in such things as the history of Roman Law from ancient times, and the great code of the Emperor Justinian, called the *Corpus Juris Civilis*, which my Master thought to be one of the finest codes of law ever written.

"The world is only getting better," Marius instructed me. "With each century, civilization becomes more enamored of justice, ordinary men make greater strides towards sharing the wealth which was once the booty of the powerful, and art benefits by every increase in freedom, becoming ever more imaginative, ever more inventive and ever more beautiful."

I could understand this only theoretically. I had no faith or interest in law. In fact, I had a total contempt in the abstract for my Master's ideas. What I mean is, I didn't have contempt for him, but I had an underlying contempt for law and for legal institutions and governmental institutions that was so total that I did not even understand it myself.

My Master said that he understood it.

"You were born in a dark savage land," he said. "I wish I could take you back two hundred years in time to the years before Batu, the son of Genghis Khan, sacked the magnificent city of Kiev Rus, to the time when indeed the domes of its Santa Sofia were golden, and its people full of ingenuity and hope."

"I heard ad nauseam of that old glory," I said quietly, not wanting to anger him. "I was stuffed with tales of the olden times when I was a boy. In the miserable wooden house in which we lived, only yards from the frozen river, I listened to that rot as I shivered by the fire. Rats lived in our house. There was nothing beautiful in it but the ikons, and my Father's songs. There was nothing but depravity there, and we speak now, as you know, of an immense land. You cannot know how big Russia is unless you have been there, unless you have traveled as I did with my Father into the bitter-cold northern forests to Moscow, or to Novgorod, or east to Cracow." I broke off. "I don't want to think of those times or that place," I said. "In Italy one cannot dream of enduring such a place."

"Amadeo, the evolution of law, of government, is different in each land and with each people. I chose Venice, as I told you long ago, because it is a great Republic, and because its people are firmly

connected to the Mother Earth by the simple fact that they are all merchants and engaged in trade. I love the city of Florence because its great family, the Medici, are bankers, not idle titled aristocrats who scorn all effort in the name of what they believe has been given them by God. The great cities of Italy are made by men who work, men who create, men who do, and on account of this, there is a greater compassion to all systems, and infinitely greater opportunity for men and women in all walks of life."

I was discouraged by all this talk. What did it matter?

"Amadeo, the world now is yours," my Master said. "You must look at the larger movements of history. The state of the world will begin in time to oppress you, and you will find, as all immortals do, that you cannot simply shut your heart on it, especially not you."

"Why so?" I asked a little crossly. "I think I can shut my eyes. What do I care if a man is a banker or a merchant? What do I care whether I live in a city which builds its own merchant fleet? I can look forever on the paintings in this palazzo, Master. I have not yet begun to see all the details in *The Procession of the Magi*, and there are so many others. And what of all the paintings in this city?"

He shook his head. "The study of painting will lead you to the study of man, and the study of man will lead you to lament or celebrate the state of the world of men."

I didn't believe it, but I was not allowed to change the curriculum. I studied as I was told.

Now, my Master had many gifts which I did not possess, but which he told me I would develop in time. He could make fire with his mind, but only if conditions were optimum—that is, he could ignite a torch already prepared with pitch. He could scale a building effortlessly with only a few quick handholds on its windowsills, propelling himself upwards with graceful darting motions, and he could swim to any depth of the sea.

Of course his vampiric vision and his hearing were far more acute and powerful than my own, and while voices intruded upon me, he knew how to emphatically shut them out. I had to learn this, and indeed I worked at it desperately, for there were times when all Venice seemed nothing but a cacophony of voices and prayers.

But the one great power he possessed which I did not possess was that he could take to the air and cover immense distances with great speed.

This had been demonstrated to me many times, but almost always, when he had lifted me and carried me, he had made me cover my face, or he had forced my head down so that I couldn't see where we went and how.

Why he was so reticent about it, I couldn't understand. Finally, one night when he refused to transport us as if by magic to the Island of the Lido so that we could watch one of the nighttime ceremonies of fireworks and torch-lit ships on the water, I pressed the question.

"It's a frightening power," he said coolly. "It's frightening to be unanchored from the Earth. In the early stages, it is not without its blunders and disasters. As one acquires skill, rising smoothly into the highest atmosphere, it becomes chilling not only to the body but to the soul. It seems not preternatural, but supernatural." I could see he suffered over this. He shook his head. "It is the one talent which seems genuinely inhuman. I cannot learn from humans how best to use it. With every other talent, humans are my teacher. The human heart is my school. Not so with this. I become the magician; I become the witch or the warlock. It's seductive, and one could become its slave."

"But how so?" I asked him.

He was at a loss. He didn't even want to talk about it. Finally he became just a little impatient.

"Sometimes, Amadeo, you grill me with your questions. You ask if I owe you this tutelage. Believe me, I do not."

"Master you made me, and you insist on my obedience. Why would I read Abelard's *History of My Calamities* and the writings of Duns Scotus of Oxford University if you didn't make me do it?" I stopped. I remembered my Father and how I never stopped throwing acidic words at him, fast answers and slurs.

I became discouraged. "Master," I said. "Just explain it to me."

He made a gesture as if to say "Oh, so simple, eh?"

"All right," he went on. "It's this way. I can go very high in the air, and I can move very fast. I cannot often penetrate the clouds. They're frequently above me. But I can travel so fast that the world itself becomes a blur. I find myself in strange lands when I descend. And I tell you, for all its magic, this is a deeply jarring and disturbing thing. I am lost sometimes, dizzy, unsure of my goals or my will to live, after I make use of this power. Transitions come too quickly; that's it, perhaps. I

never spoke of this to anyone, and now I speak to you, and you're a boy, and you can't begin to understand."

I didn't.

But within a very short time, it was his wish that we undertake a longer journey than any we'd made before. It was only a matter of hours, but to my utter astonishment, we traveled between sundown and early evening to the far city of Florence itself.

There, set down in a wholly different world than that of the Veneto, walking quietly amongst an entirely different breed of Italian, into churches and palaces of a different style, I understood for the first time what he meant.

Understand, I'd seen Florence before, traveling as Marius's mortal apprentice, with a group of the others. But my brief glimpse was nothing to what I saw as a vampire. I had the measuring instruments now of a minor god.

But it was night. The city lay under the usual curfew. And the stones of Florence seemed darker, more drab, suggestive of a fortress, the streets narrow and gloomy, as they were not brightened by luminescent ribbons of water as were our own. The palaces of Florence lacked the extravagant Moorish ornament of Venice's showplaces, the high-gloss fantastical stone facades. They enclosed their splendor, as is more common to Italian cities. Yet the city was rich, dense and full of delights for the eye.

It was after all Florence—the capital of the man called Lorenzo the Magnificent, the compelling figure who dominated Marius's copy of the great mural which I had seen on the night of my dark rebirth, a man who had died only a few years before.

We found the city unlawfully busy, though it was quite dark, with groups of men and women lingering about in the hard paved streets, and a sinister quality of restlessness hung about the Piazza della Signoria, which was one of the most important of all the many squares of the town.

An execution had taken place that day, hardly an uncommon occurrence in Florence, or Venice for that matter. It had been a burning. I smelled wood and charred flesh though all the evidence had been cleared before night.

I had a natural distaste for such things, which not everyone has, by the

way, and I edged towards the scene cautiously, not wishing with these heightened senses to be jarred by some horrible remnant of cruelty.

Marius had always cautioned us as boys not to "enjoy" these spectacles, but to place ourselves mentally in the position of the victim if we were to learn the maximum from what we saw.

As you know from history, the crowds at executions were often merciless and unruly, taunting the victim sometimes, I think, out of fear. We, the boys of Marius, had always found it terribly difficult to cast our mental lot with the man being hanged or burnt. In sum, he'd taken all the fun out of it for us.

Of course, as these rituals happened almost always by day, Marius himself had never been present.

Now, as we moved into the great Piazza della Signoria, I could see that he was displeased by the thin ash that still hung in the air, and the vile smells.

I also noticed that we slipped past others easily, two dark-draped swiftly moving figures. Our feet scarce made a sound. It was the vampiric gift that we could move so stealthily, shifting quickly out of sudden and occasional mortal observation with an instinctive grace.

"It's as though we're invisible," I said to Marius, "as if nothing can hurt us, because we don't really belong here and will soon take our leave." I looked up at the grim battlements that fronted on the Square.

"Yes, but we are not invisible, remember it," he whispered.

"But who died here today? People are full of torment and fear. Listen. There is satisfaction, and there is weeping."

He didn't answer.

I grew uneasy.

"What is it? It can't be any common thing," I said. "The city is too vigilant and unquiet."

"It's their great reformer, Savonarola," Marius said. "He died on this day, hanged, and then burnt here. Thank God, he was already dead before the flames rose."

"You wish mercy for Savonarola?" I asked. I was puzzled. This man, a great reformer in the eyes of some perhaps, had always been damned by all I knew. He had condemned all pleasures of the senses, denying any validity to the very school in which my Master thought all things were to be learnt.

“I wish mercy for any man,” said Marius. He beckoned for me to follow, and we moved towards the nearby street.

We headed away from the grisly place.

“Even this one, who persuaded Botticelli to heap his own paintings on the Bonfires of the Vanities?” I asked. “How many times have you pointed to the details of your own copies of Botticelli’s work to show me some graceful beauty you wanted me to never forget?”

“Are you going to argue with me until the end of the world!” said Marius. “I’m pleased that my blood has given you new strength in every aspect, but must you question every word that falls from my lips?” He threw me a furious glance, letting the light of nearby torches fully illuminate his half-mocking smile. “There are some students who believe in this method, and that greater truths rise out of the continued strife between teacher and pupil. But not me! I believe you need to let my lessons settle in quiet at least for the space of five minutes in your mind before you begin your counterattack.”

“You try to be angry with me but you can’t.”

“Oh, what a muddle!” he said as if he were cursing. He walked fast ahead of me.

The small Florentine street was dreary, like a passageway in a great house rather than a city street. I longed for the breezes of Venice, or rather, my body did, out of habit. I was quite fascinated to be here.

“Don’t be so provoked,” I said. “Why did they turn on Savonarola?”

“Give men enough time and they’ll turn on anyone. He claimed to have been a prophet, divinely inspired by God, and that these were the Last Days, and this is the oldest most tiresome Christian complaint in the world, believe you me. The Last Days! Christianity is a religion based on the notion that we are living in the Last Days! It’s a religion fueled by the ability of men to forget all the blunders of the past, and get dressed once more for the Last Days.”

I smiled, but bitterly. I wanted to articulate a strong presentiment, that we were always in the Last Days, and it was inscribed in our hearts, because we were mortals, when quite suddenly and totally I realized that I was no longer mortal, except insofar as the world itself was mortal.

And it seemed I understood more viscerally than ever the atmosphere of purposeful gloom which had overhung my childhood in far-off Kiev. I saw again the muddy catacombs, and the half-buried monks who had

cheered me on to become one of them.

I shook it off, and now how bright Florence seemed as we came into the broad torch-lighted Piazza del Duomo—before the great Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore.

"Ah, my pupil does listen now and then," Marius was saying to me in an ironic voice. "Yes, I am more than glad that Savonarola is no more. But to rejoice at the end of something is not to approve the endless parade of cruelty that is human history. I wish it were otherwise. Public sacrifice becomes grotesque in every respect. It dulls the senses of the populace. In this city, above all others, it's a spectacle. The Florentines enjoy it, as we do our Regattas and Processions. So Savonarola is dead. Well, if any mortal man asked for it, it was Savonarola, predicting as he did the end of the world, damning princes from his pulpit, leading great painters to immolate their works. The hell with him."

"Master, look, the Baptistery, let's go, let's look at the doors. The piazza's almost empty. Come on. It's our chance to look at the bronzes." I tugged on his sleeve.

He followed me, and he stopped his muttering, but he was not himself.

What I wanted so to see is work that you can see in Florence now, and in fact, almost every treasure of this city and of Venice which I've described here you can see now. You have only to go there. The panels in the door which were done by Lorenzo Ghiberti were my delight, but there was also older work done by Andrea Pisano, portraying the life of St. John the Baptist, and this, I didn't intend to overlook.

So keen was the vampiric vision that as I studied these various detailed bronze pictures, I could hardly keep from sighing with pleasure.

This moment is so clear. I think that I believed, then, that nothing ever could hurt me or make me sad again, that I had discovered the balm of salvation in the vampiric blood, and the strange thing is, that as I dictate this story now, I think the same thing once more.

Though unhappy now, and possibly forever, I believe again in the paramount importance of the flesh. My mind wanders to the words of D. H. Lawrence, the twentieth-century writer, who in his writings on Italy, recalled Blake's image of the "Tyger, Tyger, burning bright / In the forests of the night." Lawrence's words are:

> This is the supremacy of the flesh, which devours all, and becomes transfigured into a

magnificent brindled flame, a burning bush indeed.

This is one way of transfiguration into the eternal flame, the transfiguration through ecstasy in the flesh.

But I have done a risky thing here for a storyteller. I have left my plot, as I'm sure The Vampire Lestat (who is more skilled perhaps than I am, and so in love with the image of William Blake's tiger in the night, and who has, whether he cares to admit it or not, used the tiger in his work in the very same way) would point out to me, and I must speedily return to this moment in the Piazza del Duomo, where I left myself of long ago standing, side by side with Marius, looking at the burnished genius of Ghiberti, as he sings in bronze of Sybils and saints.

We took our time with these things. Marius said softly that next to Venice, Florence was the city of his choice, for here so much had magnificently flowered.

"But I can't be without the sea, not even here," he confided. "And as you see all around you, this city hugs her treasures close with shadowy vigilance, whereas in Venice, the very facades of our palaces are offered up in gleaming stone beneath the moon to Almighty God."

"Master, do we serve Him?" I pressed. "I know you condemn the monks who brought me up, you condemn the ravings of Savonarola, but do you mean to guide me by another route back to the Very Same God?"

"That's just it, Amadeo, I do," said Marius, "and I don't mean as the pagan I am to admit it so easily, lest its complexity be misunderstood. But I do. I find God in the blood. I find God in the flesh. I find it no accident that the mysterious Christ should reside forever for His followers in the Flesh and Blood within the Bread of the Transubstantiation."

I was so moved by these words! It seemed the very sun I had forever forsworn had come again to brighten the night.

We slipped into the side door of the darkened Cathedral called the Duomo. I stood gazing over the long vista of its stone floor, towards the altar.

Was it possible that I could have the Christ in a new way? Perhaps I had not after all renounced Him forever. I tried to speak these troubled thoughts to my Master. Christ … in a new way. I couldn't explain it, and said finally:

"I stumble with my words."

"Amadeo, we all stumble, and so do all those who enter history. The concept of a Great Being stumbles down the centuries; His words and those principles attributed to Him do tumble after Him; and so the Christ is snatched up in His wandering by the preaching puritan on one side, the muddy starving hermit on the other, the gilded Lorenzo de' Medici here who would celebrate his Lord in gold and paint and mosaic stone."

"But is Christ the Living Lord?" I whispered.

No answer.

My soul hit a pitch of agony. Marius took my hand, and said that we go now, stealthily to the Monastery of San Marco.

"This is the sacred house that gave up Savonarola," he said. "We'll slip into it unbeknownst to its pious inhabitants."

We again traveled as if by magic. I felt only the Master's strong arms, and did not even see the frame of the doors as we exited and made our way to this other place.

I knew he meant to show me the work of the artist called Fra Angelico, long dead, who had labored all his life in this very Monastery, a painter monk, as I perhaps had been destined to be, far away in the lightless Monastery of the Caves.

Within seconds, we sat down soundlessly on the moist grass of the square cloister of San Marco, the serene garden enclosed by Michelozzo's loggias, secure within its walls.

At once I heard many prayers reach my inner vampiric hearing, desperate agitated prayers of the brothers who had been loyal or sympathetic to Savonarola. I put my hands to my head as if this foolish human gesture could signal to the Divine that I had had more than I could bear.

My Master broke the current of thought reception with his soothing voice.

"Come," he said, grasping my hand. "We'll slip into the cells one by one. There is enough light for you to see the works of this monk."

"You mean that Fra Angelico painted the very cells where monks go to sleep?" I had thought his works would be in the chapel, and in the other public or communal rooms.

"That's why I want you to see this," said my Master. He led me up a stairs and into a wide stone corridor. He made the first door spring open,

and gently we moved inside, fleet and silent, not disturbing the monk who lay curled on his hard bed, his head sweating against the pillow.

"Don't look at his face," said my Master gently. "If you do you'll see the troubled dreams he suffers. I want you to look at the wall. What do you see, now, look!"

I understood at once. This art of Fra Giovanni, called Angelico in honor of his sublime talent, was a strange mixture of the sensuous art of our time with the pious and forswearing art of the past.

I gazed on the bright, elegant rendering of the arrest of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane. The slender flattened figures resembled very much the elongated and elastic images of the Russian ikon, and yet the faces were softened and plastic with genuine and touching emotion. It seemed a kindness infused all beings here, not merely Our Lord Himself, condemned to be betrayed by one of His own, but the Apostles, who looked on, and even the unfortunate soldier, in his tunic of mail, who reached out to take the Lord away, and the soldiers watched.

I was transfixed by this unmistakable kindness, this seeming innocence that infected everyone, this sublime compassion on the part of the artist for all players in this tragic drama which had prefaced the salvation of the world.

Into another cell I was taken immediately. Once again the door gave way at Marius's command, and the sleeping occupant of the cell never knew that we were there.

This painting showed again the Garden of Agony, and Christ, before the arrest, alone among His sleeping Apostles, left to beg His Heavenly Father for strength. Once again I saw the comparison to the old styles in which I, as a Russian boy, had felt so sure. The folds in the cloth, the use of arches, the halo for each head, the discipline of the whole—all was connected to the past, and yet there shone again the new Italian warmth, the undeniable Italian love of the humanity of all included, even Our Lord Himself.

We went from cell to cell. Backwards and forwards through the Life of Christ we traveled, visiting the scene of the First Holy Communion, in which, so touchingly, Christ gave out the bread containing His Body and Blood as if it were the Host at Mass, and then the Sermon on the Mount, in which the smooth pleated rocks around Our Lord and His listeners seemed made of cloth as surely as his graceful gown.

When we came to the Crucifixion, in which Our Lord gave over to St. John His Blessed Mother, I was heart-struck by the anguish in the Lord's face. How thoughtful in her distress was the face of the Virgin, and how resigned was the saint beside her, with his soft fair Florentine face, so like that of a thousand other painted figures in this city, barely fringed with a light brown beard.

Just when I thought I understood my Master's lessons perfectly, we happened upon another painting, and I would feel yet a stronger connection with the long-ago treasures of my boyhood and the quiet incandescent splendor of the Dominican monk who had graced these walls. Finally we left this clean, lovely place of tears and whispered prayers.

We went out into the night and back to Venice, traveling in cold and noisy darkness, and arriving at home in time to sit a while in the warm light of the sumptuous bedchamber and talk.

"Do you see?" Marius pressed me. He was at his desk with his pen in hand. He dipped it and wrote even as he talked, turning back the large vellum page of his diary. "In far off Kiev, the cells were the earth itself, moist and pure, but dark and omnivorous, the mouth that eats all life finally, that would bring to ruin all art."

I shivered. I sat rubbing the backs of my arms, looking at him.

"But there in Florence, what did this subtle teacher Fra Angelico bequeath to his brothers? Magnificent pictures to put them in mind of the Suffering of Our Lord?"

He wrote several lines before he resumed.

"Fra Angelico never scorned to delight your eye, to fill your vision with all the colors God has given you the power to see, for you were given by him two eyes, Amadeo, and not to be … not to be shut up in the dark earth."

I reflected for a long time. To know these things theoretically had been one thing. To have passed through the hushed and sleeping rooms of the Monastery, to have seen my Master's principles there emblazoned by a monk himself—this was something else.

"It is a glorious time, this," Marius said softly. "That which was good among the ancients is now rediscovered, and given a new form. You ask me, is Christ the Lord? I say, Amadeo, that He can be, for He never taught anything Himself but love, or so His Apostles, whether they know

it or not, have led us to believe …"

I waited on him, as I knew he wasn't finished. The room was so sweetly warm and clean and bright. I have near my heart forever a picture of him at this moment, the tall fair-haired Marius, his red cloak thrown back to free his arm for the pen he held, his face smooth and reflecting, his blue eyes looking, beyond that time and any other in which he had lived, for the truth. The heavy book was propped on a low portable lectern for him, to give it a comfortable angle. The little ink pot was set inside a richly embellished silver holder. And the heavy candelabra behind him, with its eight thick melting candles, was made up of numberless engraved cherubs half-embedded in the deeply worked silver, with wings struggling, perhaps, to fly loose, and tiny round-cheeked faces turned this way and that with large contented eyes beneath loose serpentine curls.

It seemed an audience of little angels to watch and listen as Marius spoke, so many, many tiny faces peering indifferently forth from the silver, quite immune to the falling rivulets of pure, melted wax.

"I cannot live without this beauty," I said suddenly, though I had meant to wait. "I cannot endure without it. Oh, God, you have shown me Hell and it lies behind me, surely in the land where I was born."

He heard my little prayer, my little confession, my desperate plea.

"If Christ is the Lord," he said, returning to his point, returning us both to the lesson, "if Christ is the Lord, then what a beautiful miracle it is, this Christian mystery—." His eyes filmed with tears. "That the Lord Himself should come to Earth and clothe Himself in flesh the better to know us and to comprehend us. Oh, what God, ever made in the image of Man by His fancy, was ever better than one who would become Flesh? Yes, I would say to you, yes, your Christ, their Christ, the Christ even of the Monks of Kiev, He is the Lord! Only mark forever the lies they tell in His Name, and the deeds they do. For Savonarola called on His Name when he praised a foreign enemy bearing down on Florence, and those who burnt Savonarola as a false prophet, they too, as they lit the faggots beneath his dangling body, they too called on Christ the Lord."

I was overcome with tears.

He sat in silence, respecting me perhaps, or only collecting his thoughts. Then he dipped his pen again and wrote for a long time, much faster than men do, but deftly and gracefully, and never marking out a

word.

At last, he set down the pen. He looked at me and he smiled.

"I set out to show you things, and it's never as I plan. I wanted you tonight to see the dangers in this power of flight, that we can too easily transport ourselves to other places, and that this feeling of slipping in and out so easily is a deception of which we must beware. But look, how differently it has all gone."

I didn't answer him.

"I wanted you," he said, "to be a little afraid."

"Master," I said, wiping my nose with the back of my hand, "count on me to be properly frightened when the time comes. I'll have this power, I know it. I can feel it now. And for now, I think it's splendid, and because of it, this power, one dark thought falls over my heart."

"What is that?" he asked in the kindest way. "You know, I think your angelic face is no more fit for sad things than those faces painted by Fra Angelico. What's this shadow I see? What is this dark thought?"

"Take me back there, Master," I said. I trembled, yet I said it. "Let us use your power to cover miles and miles of Europe. Let us go north. Take me back to see that cruel land that has become a Purgatorio in my imagination. Take me back to Kiev."

He was slow in giving his answer.

The morning was coming. He gathered up his cloak and robe, rose from the chair and took me with him up the stairs to the roof.

We could see the distant already paling waters of the Adriatic, twinkling under the moon and stars, beyond the familiar forest of the masts of the ships. Tiny lights flickered on the distant islands. The wind was mild and full of salt and sea freshness, and a particular deliciousness that comes only when one has lost all fear of the sea.

"Yours is a brave request, Amadeo. If you really wish it, tomorrow night we'll begin the journey."

"Have you ever traveled so far before?"

"In miles, in space, yes, many times," he said. "But in another's quest for understanding? No, never so very far."

He embraced me and took me to the palazzo where our tomb lay hidden. I was cold all over by the time we reached the soiled stone stairway, where so many of the poor slept. We picked our way among them, until we reached the entrance to the cellar.

“Light the torch for me, Sir,” I said. “I am shivering. I want to see the gold around us, if I may.”

“There, you have it,” he said. We stood in our crypt with the two ornate sarcophagi before us. I lay my hand on the lid of the one which was mine, and quite suddenly there came over me another presentiment, that all I loved would endure for a very brief time.

Marius must have seen this hesitation. He passed his right hand through the very fire of the torch, and touched his warmed fingers to my cheek. Then he kissed me where this warmth hovered, and his kiss was warm.

10

It took us four nights to reach Kiev.

Only in the early hours before dawn did we hunt.

We made our graves in actual burial places, the dungeon vaults of old neglected castles and in the sepulchers beneath forlorn and ruined churches where the profane were wont now to stash their livestock and their hay.

There are tales I could tell of this journey, of those brave fortresses we roamed near morning, of those wild mountain villages where we found the evildoer in his rude den.

Naturally, Marius saw lessons in all this, teaching me how easy it was to find hiding places and approving the speed with which I moved through the dense forest, and had no fear of the scattered primitive settlements which we visited on account of my thirst. He praised me that I didn't shrink from the dark dusty nests of bones in which we lay down by day, reminding me that these burial places, having already been pillaged, were the least likely for men to trouble even in the light of the sun.

Our fancy Venetian clothes were soon streaked with dirt, but we were provided with thick fur-lined cloaks for the journey, and these covered all. Even in this Marius saw a lesson, that we must remember what fragile and meaningless protection our garments provide. Mortal men forget how to wear their garments lightly and that they are a mere covering for the body and no more. Vampires must never forget it, for we are far less dependent upon our raiment than men.

By the last morning before our arrival in Kiev, I knew the rocky northern woods only too well. The dread winter of the north was all around us. We had come upon one of the most intriguing of all my memories: the presence of snow.

"It no longer hurts me to hold it," I said, gathering the soft delicious cold snow in my hands and pressing it to my face. "It no longer chills me

to see it, and indeed how beautiful it is, covering the poorest of towns and hovels with its blanket. Master, look, look how it throws back the light even of the weakest stars."

We were on the edge of the land that men call the Golden Horde—the southern steppes of Russia, which for two hundred years, since the conquest of Genghis Khan, had been too dangerous for the farmer, and often the death of the army or the knight.

Kiev Rus had once included this fertile and beautiful prairie, stretching far to the East, almost to Europe, as well as south of the city of Kiev, where I had been born.

"The final stretch will be nothing," my Master told me. "We make it tomorrow night so that you will be rested and fresh when you catch the first sight of home."

As we stood on a rocky crag looking out at the wild grass, flowing in the winter wind beneath us, for the first time in the nights since I'd become a vampire, I felt a terrible longing for the sun. I wanted to see this land by the light of the sun. I didn't dare confess it to my Master. After all, how many blessings can a being want?

On the final night, I awoke just after sunset. We had found a hiding place beneath the floor of a church in a village where no one lived now at all. The horrid Mongol hordes, which had destroyed my homeland over and over again, had long ago burnt this town to nothing, or so Marius had told me, and this church did not even possess a roof. There had been no one left here to pull the stones of the floor away for profit or building, and so we had gone down a forgotten stairway to lie with monks buried here some thousand years ago.

Rising from the grave, I saw high above a rectangle of sky where my Master had removed a marble paving block, an inscribed tombstone no doubt, for me to make my ascent. I propelled myself upwards. That is, I bent my knees and, using all my strength, shot upwards, as if I could fly, and passed through this opening to land on my feet.

Marius, who invariably rose before me, was sitting nearby. He immediately gave out the expected appreciative laugh.

"Have you been saving that little trick for such a moment?" he said.

I was dazed by the snow, as I looked around me. How afraid I was, merely looking at the frozen pines that had everywhere sprung up on the ruins of the village. I could scarce speak.

“No,” I managed to say. “I didn’t know I could do it. I don’t know how high I can leap, or how much strength I have. You’re pleased, however?”

“Yes, why shouldn’t I be? I want you to be so strong that no one can ever hurt you.”

“And who would, Master? We travel the world, but who even knows when we go and when we come?”

“There are others, Amadeo. And there are others here. I can hear them if I want to, but there is a good reason for not hearing them.”

I understood. “You open your mind to hear them, and they know you are there?”

“Yes, clever one. Are you ready now to go home?”

I closed my eyes. I made the Sign of the Cross in our old way, touching the right shoulder before the left. I thought of my Father. We were in the wild fields and he stood high in his stirrups with his giant bow, the bow only he could bend, like unto the mythical Ulysses, shooting arrow after arrow at the raiders who thundered down on us, riding as if he were one of the Turks or Tatars himself, so great was his skill. Arrow after arrow, drawn out with a swift snap from the pouch on his back, went into the bow and was shot across the high blowing grass even as his horse galloped at full speed. His red beard was blowing in the fierce wind, and the sky was so blue, so richly blue that—.

I broke off this prayer and almost lost my balance. My Master held me.

“Pray, you’ll be finished with all this very quickly,” he said.

“Give me your kisses,” I said, “give me your love, give me your arms as you always have, I need them. Give me your guidance. But give me your arms, yes. Let me rest my head against you. I need you, yes. Yes, I want it to be quick and done, and all its lessons in here, in my mind, to be taken back home.”

He smiled. “Home is Venice now? You’ve made the decision so soon?”

“Yes, I know it even at this moment. What lies beyond is the birth land, and that’s not always home. Shall we go?”

Gathering me in his arms, he took to the air. I shut my eyes, even forfeiting my last glimpse of the motionless stars. I seemed to sleep against him, dreamlessly and fearlessly.

Then he set me down on my feet.

At once I knew this great dark hill, and the leafless oak forest with its

frozen black trunks and skeletal branches. I could see the gleaming strip of the Dnieper River far below. My heart scudded inside me. I looked about for the bleak towers of the high city, the city we called Vladimir's City, which was old Kiev.

Piles of rubble which had once been city walls were only yards from where I stood.

I led the way, easily climbing over them and wandering among the ruined churches, churches which had been of legendary splendor when Batu Khan had burnt the city in the year 1240.

I had grown up among this jungle of ancient churches and broken monasteries, often hurrying to hear Mass in our Cathedral of Santa Sofia, one of the few monuments which the Mongols had spared. In its day, it had been a spectacle of golden domes, dominating all those of the other churches, and was rumored to be more grand than its namesake in faraway Constantinople, being larger and packed with treasures.

What I had known was a stately remnant, a wounded shell.

I didn't want to enter the church now. It was enough to see it from the outside, because I knew now, from my happy years in Venice, just what the glory of this church had once been. I understood from the splendid Byzantine mosaics and paintings of San Marco, and from the old Byzantine church on the Venetian island of Torcello what glory had once been here for all to see. When I thought of the lively crowds of Venice, her students, scholars, lawyers, merchants, I could paint a dense vitality on this bleak and wasted scene.

The snow was deep and thick, and few Russians were out in it this frigid early evening. So we had it to ourselves, walking through it with ease, not having to pick our way as mortals would.

We came to a long stretch of ruined battlement, a shapeless guardrail now beneath the snow, and standing there, I looked down on the lower city, the city we called Podil, the only real city of Kiev that remained, the city where in a rough timber and clay house only a few yards from the river, I had grown up. I looked down on deep-pitched roofs, their thatch covered in cleansing snow, their chimneys smoking, and on narrow crooked snow-filled streets. A great grid of such houses and other buildings had long ago formed against the river and managed to survive fire after fire and even the worst Tatar raids.

It was a town made up of traders and merchants and craftsmen, all

bound to the river and the treasures she brought from the Orient, and the money some would pay for the goods she took south into the European world.

My Father, the indomitable hunter, had traded bear skins which he himself had brought back singlehanded from the interior of the great forest which spread towards the north. Fox, martin, beaver, sheep, all these skins he had dealt in, so great was his strength and luck, that no man or woman of our household ever sold their handiwork or wanted for food. If we starved, and we had starved, it was because the winter ate the food, and the meat was gone, and there was nothing for my Father's gold to buy.

I caught the stench of Podil as I stood on the battlements of Vladimir's City. I caught the stench of rotting fish, and livestock, of soiled flesh, and river mud.

I pulled my fur cloak around me, blowing the snow off the fur when it came up to my lips, and I looked back up at the dark domes of the Cathedral against the sky.

"Let's walk on, let's go past the castle of the Voievoda," I said. "You see that wooden building, you would never call it a palace or a castle in fair Italy. That is a castle here."

Marius nodded. He made a little soothing gesture. I owed him no explanation of this alien place from which I'd come.

The Voievoda was our ruler, and in my time it had been Prince Michael of Lithuania. I didn't know who it would be now.

I surprised myself that I used the proper word for him. In my deathly dream vision, I had no consciousness of language, and the strange word for ruler, "voievoda," had never passed my lips. But I had seen him clearly then in his round black fur hat, his dark thick velvet tunic and his felt boots.

I led the way.

We approached the squat building, which seemed more a fortress than anything else, built as it was out of such enormous logs. Its walls had a graceful slope as they ascended; its many towers had four-tiered roofs. I could see its central roof, a great five-sided wooden dome of sorts, in stark outline against the starry sky. Torches blazed at its huge doorways and along the outer walls of its enclosures. All its windows were sealed against the winter and the night.

Time was when I thought it was the grandest building yet standing in Christendom.

It was no task at all to dazzle the guards with a few swift soft words and darting movements, to pass them and to enter the castle itself.

We found our way in by means of a rear storage room, and quietly made our way to a vantage point where we could spy upon the small crowd of fur-trimmed nobles or lords who clustered in the Great Room, beneath the bare beams of a wooden ceiling around the roaring fire.

On a great sprawling mass of brilliant Turkey rugs they sat, in huge Russian chairs whose geometrical carvings were no mystery to my eye. They drank from gold goblets, the wine being provided by two leather-clad serving boys, and their long belted robes were the colors of blue and red and gold as bright as the many designs in the rugs.

European tapestries covered the rudely stuccoed walls. Same old scenes of the hunt in the never-ending woodlands of France or England or Tuscany. On a long board set with blazing candles sat a simple meal of joints and fowl.

So cold was the room that these lords wore their Russian fur hats.

How exotic it had looked to me in boyhood when I'd been brought with my Father to stand before Prince Michael, who was eternally grateful for my Father's feats of bravery in bringing down delicious game in the wild fields, or delivering bundles of valuables to the allies of Prince Michael in the Lithuanian forts to the west.

But these were Europeans. I had never respected them.

My Father had taught me too well that they were but lackeys of the Khan, paying for the right to rule us.

"No one goes up against those thieves," my Father had said. "So let them sing their songs of honor and valor. It means nothing. You listen to the songs that I sing."

And my Father could sing some songs.

For all his stamina in the saddle, for all his dexterity with the bow and arrow, and his blunt brute force with the broadsword, he had the ability with his long fingers to pluck out music on the strings of an old harp and sing with cleverness the narrative songs of the ancient times when Kiev had been a great capital, her churches rivaling those of Byzantium, her riches the wonder of all the world.

Within a moment, I was ready to go. I took one last memorial glance

at these men, huddled as they were over their golden wine cups, their big fur-trimmed boots resting on fancy Turkish foot rests, their shoulders hunkered, their shadows crowding the walls. And then, without their ever having known we were there, we slipped away.

It was time now to go to the other hilltop city, the Pechersk, under which lay the many catacombs of the Monastery of the Caves.

I trembled at the mere thought of it. It seemed the mouth of the Monastery would swallow me and I should burrow through the moist Mother Earth, forever seeking the light of the stars, never to find my way out.

But I went there, trudging through the mud and snow, and again with a vampire's silky ease, I gained access, this time leading the way, snapping the locks silently with my superior strength and lifting the doors as I opened them so no weight would fall upon their creaky hinges, and dashing swiftly across rooms so that mortal eyes perceived no more than cold shadows, if they perceived anything at all.

The air was warm and motionless here, a blessing, but memory told me it had not been so terribly warm for a mortal boy. In the Scriptorium, by the smoky light of cheap oil, several brothers were bent over their slanted desks, working on their copying, as if the printing press were of no concern to them, and surely it was not.

I could see the texts on which they worked and I knew them—the Paterikon of the Kievan Caves Monastery, with its marvelous tales of the Monastery's founders and its many colorful saints.

In this room, laboring over that text, I had learned fully to read and write. I crept now along the wall until my eyes could fall on the page which one monk copied, his left hand steadying the crumbling model from which he worked.

I knew this part of the Paterikon by heart. It was the Tale of Isaac. Demons had fooled Isaac; they had come to him as beautiful angels, and even pretending to be Christ Himself. When Isaac had fallen for their tricks, they had danced with glee and taunted him. But after much meditation and penance, Isaac stood up to these demons.

The monk had just dipped his pen and he wrote now the words with which Isaac spoke:

When you deceived me in the form of Jesus Christ and the angels, you were unworthy of

that rank. But now you appear in your true colors—

I looked away. I didn't read the rest. Cleaving there so well to the wall I might have gone on unseen forever. Slowly I looked at the other pages which the monk had copied, which were being let to dry. I found an earlier passage which I'd never forgotten, describing Isaac as he lay, withdrawn from all the world, motionless, and without food for two years:

> For Isaac was weakened in mind and body and could not turn over on his side, stand up, or sit down; he just lay there on one side, and often worms collected under his thighs from his excrement and urine.

The demons had driven Isaac to this, with their deception. Such temptations, such visions, such confusion and such penance I myself had hoped to experience for the rest of my life when I entered here as a child.

I listened to the pen scratch on the paper. I withdrew, unseen, as if I'd never come.

I looked back at my scholarly brethren.

All were emaciated, dressed in cheap black wool, reeking of old sweat and dirt, and their heads were all but shaved. Their long beards were thin and uncombed.

I thought I knew one of them, had loved him somewhat even, but this seemed remote and not worth considering anymore.

To Marius, who stood beside me as faithfully as a shadow, I confided that I could not have endured it, but we both knew this was a lie. In all likelihood I would have endured it, and I would have died without ever knowing any other world.

I moved into the first of the long tunnels where the monks were buried, and, closing my eyes and cleaving to the mud wall, I listened for the dreams and prayers of those who lay entombed alive for the love of God.

It was nothing but what I could imagine, and exactly as I recalled. I heard the familiar, no longer mysterious words whispered in the Church Slavonic. I saw the prescribed images. I felt the sputtering flame of true devotion and true mysticism, kindled from the weak fire of lives of utter denial.

I stood with my head bowed. I let my temple rest against the mud. I wished to find the boy, so pure of soul, who had opened these cells to bring the hermits just enough food and drink to keep them alive. But I couldn't find the boy. I couldn't. And I felt only a raging pity for him that he had ever suffered here, thin and miserable, and desperate, and ignorant, oh, so terribly ignorant, having but one sensuous joy in life and that was to see the colors of the ikon catch fire.

I gasped. I turned my head and fell stupidly into Marius's arms.

"Don't cry, Amadeo," he said tenderly in my ear.

He brushed my hair from my eyes, and with his soft thumb he even wiped away my tears.

"Tell it all farewell now, son," he said.

I nodded.

In a twinkling we stood outside. I didn't speak to him. He followed me. I headed down the slope towards the waterfront city.

The smell of the river grew stronger, the stench of humans grew stronger, and finally I came to the house that I knew had been my own. What madness this seemed suddenly! What was I seeking? To measure all this by new standards? To confirm for myself that as a mortal child I had never had the slightest chance?

Dear God, there was no justification for what I was, an impious blood drinker, feeding off the luxurious stews of the wicked Venetian world, I knew it. Was this all a vain exercise in self-justification? No, something else pulled me towards the long rectangular house, like so many others, its thick clay walls divided by rough timbers, its four-tiered roof dripping with icicles, this large and crude house that was my home.

As soon as we reached it, I crept around the sides. The slush of the snow had here turned to water, and indeed, the water of the river leaked down the street and into everywhere as it had when I was a child. The water leaked into my fine-stitched Venetian boots. But it could not paralyze my feet as it had once done, because I drew my strength now from gods unknown here, and creatures for whom these filthy peasants, of which I had been one, had no name.

I lay my head against the rough wall, just as I had done in the Monastery, cleaving to the mortar as if the solidity would protect me and transmit to me all that I wanted to know. I could see through a tiny hole in the broken clumps of clay that were forever crumbling, and I

beheld in the familiar blaze of candles, and the brighter light of lamps, a family gathered around the warmth of the large brick stove.

I knew them all, these people, though some of their names were gone from my mind. I knew that they were kindred, and I knew the atmosphere that they shared.

But I had to see beyond this little gathering. I had to know if these people were well. I had to know if after that fateful day, when I'd been kidnapped, and my Father no doubt murdered in the wild lands, they had managed to go on with their usual vigor. I had to know, perhaps, what they prayed when they thought of Andrei, the boy with the gift to make ikons so perfectly, ikons not made by human hands.

I heard the harp inside, I heard singing. The voice was that of one of my uncles, one so young he might have been my brother. His name was Borys, and he had since early childhood been good with singing, memorizing easily the old dumys, or sagas, of the knights and heroes, and it was one of them, very rhythmical and tragic, which he was singing now. The harp was small and old, my Father's harp, and Borys strummed the strings in time with his phrases as he all but spoke the story of a lusty and fatal battle for ancient and great Kiev.

I heard the familiar cadences that had been passed down by our people from singer to singer for hundreds of years. I put my fingers up and broke loose a bit of mortar. I saw through the tiny opening the Ikon corner—directly opposite the family gathering around the shimmering fire in the open stove.

Ah, what a spectacle! Amid dozens of little candle stubs and earthen lamps full of burning fat, there stood propped some twenty or more ikons, some very old and darkened in their gold frames, and some radiant, as though only yesterday they'd come alive through the power of God. There were painted eggs stuffed amongst the pictures, eggs beautifully decorated and colored with patterns I could well recall, though even with my vampire eyes I was too far away to see them now. Many times I had watched the women decorating these sacred eggs for Easter, applying the hot melting wax to them with their wooden pens to mark the ribbons or the stars or the crosses or the lines which meant the ram's horns, or the symbol which meant the butterfly or the stork. Once the wax had been applied, the egg would be dipped in cold dye of amazingly deep color. It had seemed there was an endless variety, and

endless possibility for meaning, in these simple patterns and signs.

These fragile and beautiful eggs were kept for curing the sick, or for protection against the storm. I had hidden such eggs in an orchard for good luck with the coming harvest. I had placed one once over the door of the house in which my sister went to live as a young bride.

There was a beautiful story about these decorated eggs, that as long as the custom was followed, as long as such eggs existed, then the world would be safe from the monster of Evil who wanted always to come and devour all that was.

It was sweet to see these eggs placed there in the proud corner of the Ikons, as always, among the Holy Faces. That I had forgotten this custom seemed a shame and a warning of tragedy to come.

But the Holy Faces caught me suddenly and I forgot all else. I saw the Face of Christ blazing in the firelight, my brilliant scowling Christ, as I had so often painted Him. I had done so many of these pictures, and yet how like the one lost that day in the high grasses of the wild lands was this very one!

But that was impossible. How could anyone have recovered the ikon I had dropped when the raiders took me prisoner? No, it must surely be another, for as I said, I had done so many before my parents had ever gotten up the courage to take me to the monks. Why, all through this town were my ikons. My Father had even brought them to Prince Michael as proud gifts, and it was the Prince who had said that the monks must see my skill.

How stern Our Lord looked now compared to the recollection of the tender musing Christs of Fra Angelico or the noble sorrowful Lord of Bellini. And yet He was warm with my love! He was the Christ in our style, the old style, loving in severe lines, loving in somber color, loving in the manner of my land. And He was warm with the love that I believed He gave to me!

A sickness rose up in me. I felt my Master's hands on my shoulders. He didn't pull me back as I feared. He merely held me and put his cheek against my hair.

I was about to go. It was enough, was it now? But the music broke off. A woman there, my Mother, was she? No, younger, my sister Anya, grown into a woman, talked wearily of how my Father could sing again if somehow they could hide all the liquor from him and make him come

back to himself.

My Uncle Borys sneered. Ivan was hopeless, said Borys. Ivan would never see another sober night or day, and would soon die. Ivan was poisoned with liquor, both with the fine spirits he got from the traders by selling off what he stole from this very house, and from the peasant brew he got from those he battered and bullied, still being the terror of the town.

I bristled all over. Ivan, my Father, alive? Ivan, alive to die again in such dishonor? Ivan not slain in the wild fields?

But in their thick skulls, the thoughts of him and the words of him stopped together. My uncle sang another song, a dancing song. No one would dance in this house, where all were tired from their labor, and the women half-blind as they continued to mend the clothes that lay piled in their laps. But the music cheered them and one of them, a boy younger than I had been when I died, yes, my little brother, whispered a soft prayer for my Father, that my Father would not freeze to death tonight, as he had almost done so many times, falling down drunk as he did in the snow.

"Please bring him home," came the little boy's whisper.

Then behind me, I heard Marius say, seeking to put it in order and to calm me:

"Yes, it seems it is true, beyond doubt. Your Father is alive."

Before he could caution me, I went around and opened the door. It was a fierce thing to do, a reckless thing to do, and I ought to have asked Marius's permission, but I was, as I've told you, an unruly pupil. I had to do this.

The wind gusted through the house. The huddled figures shivered and pushed their thick furs up around their shoulders. The fire deep in the mouth of the brick stove flared beautifully.

I knew that I should remove my hat, which in this case was my hood, and that I should face the Ikon corner and cross myself, but I couldn't do this.

In fact, to conceal myself, I pulled my hood up over my head as I shut the door. I stood alone against it. I held the fur cloak up against my mouth, so that nothing was visible of my face except my eyes, and perhaps a shock of reddish hair.

"Why has the drink gotten Ivan?" I whispered, the old Russian tongue

coming back to me. “Ivan was the strongest man in this city. Where is he now?”

They were wary and angry at my intrusion. The fire in the stove crackled and danced from its feast of fresh air. The Ikon corner seemed a group of perfect radiant flames unto itself, with its brilliant images and random candles, another fire of a different and eternal sort. The Face of Christ was clear to me in the fluttering light, the eyes seeming to fix me as I stood against the door.

My uncle rose and shoved the harp into the arms of a younger boy I didn’t know. I saw in the shadows the children sitting up in their heavily draped beds. I saw their shining eyes looking at me in the dark. The others in the firelight clumped together and faced me.

I saw my Mother, wizened and sad as if centuries had passed since I left her, a veritable crone in the corner, clinging to the rug that covered her lap. I studied her, trying to fathom the cause of her decay. Toothless, decrepit, her knuckles big and chafed and shiny from work, perhaps she was merely a woman being worked too rapidly towards her grave.

A great collection of thoughts and words struck me, as if I were being pelted with blows. Angel, devil, night visitor, terror from the dark, what are you? I saw hands raised, hastily making the Sign of the Cross. But the thoughts came clear in answer to my query.

Who does not know that Ivan the Hunter had become Ivan the Penitent, Ivan the Drunkard, Ivan the Mad, on account of the day in the wild lands when he couldn’t stop the Tatars from kidnapping his beloved son, Andrei?

I shut my eyes. It was worse than death what had happened to him! And I had never so much as wondered, never so much as dared to think of him alive, or cared enough to hope that he was, or thought what his fate might be had he lived? All over Venice were the shops in which I might have penned a letter to him, a letter that the great Venetian traders could have carried to some port where it might have been delivered over the famous post roads of the Khan.

I knew all this. Selfish little Andrei knew all this, the details that might have sealed the past for him neatly so that he could have forgotten it. I might have written:

Family, I live and am happy, though I can never come home. Take this money I send to you

for my brothers and sisters and my Mother—.

But then I hadn't really ever known. The past had been misery and chaos.

Whenever the most trivial picture had become vivid, then torment had reigned.

My uncle stood before me. He was as big as my Father, and was well dressed in a belted leather tunic and felt boots. He looked down at me calmly but severely.

"Who are you that comes into our house in this manner?" he asked. "What is this Prince that stands before us? You carry a message for us? Then speak, and we will forgive you that you broke the lock on our door."

I drew in my breath. I had no more questions. I knew that I could find Ivan the Drunkard. That he was in the tavern with the fishermen and the fur traders, for that was the only enclosed place he'd ever loved other than his home.

With my left hand, I reached over and found the purse that I always carried, tied, as it should be, to my belt. I ripped it loose, and I handed it to this man. He merely looked at it. Then he drew himself up, offended, and he stepped back.

He seemed then to become part of a deliberate picture with the house. I saw the house. I saw the hand-carved furniture, the pride of the family which had done it, the hand-carved wooden crosses and candlesticks which held the many candles. I saw the painted symbols decorating the wood frames of the windows, and the shelves on which fine homemade pots, kettles and bowls were displayed.

I saw them all in their pride, then, the entire family, the women with the embroidery, as well as those with mending, and I remembered with a lulling comfort the stability and the warmth of their daily life.

Yet it was sad, oh, woefully sad, compared to the world I knew!

I stepped forward and I held out the purse again to him, and I said in a muffled voice, still veiling my face:

"I beg you to take this as a kindness to me and that I might save my soul. It's from your nephew, Andrei. He is far, far away in the land to which the slave traders took him, and he will never come home. But he is well and must share some of what he has with his family. He bids me

to tell him which of you lives and which of you is dead. If I do not give you this money, and if you don't take it, I will be damned to Hell."

There came no response from them verbally. But I had what I wanted from their minds. I had all of it. Yes, Ivan was alive, and now I, this strange man, was saying that Andrei lived too. Ivan mourned for a son who not only lived but prospered. Life is a tragedy, one way or another. What is certain is that you die.

"I beg you," I said.

My uncle took the proffered purse but with misgivings. It was full of gold ducats, which would buy anywhere.

I let my cloak drop and I pulled off my left glove, and then the rings that covered every finger of my left hand. Opal, onyx, amethyst, topaz, turquoise. I moved past the man and the boys, to the far side of the fire, and laid these respectfully in the lap of the old woman who had been my Mother as she looked up.

I could see that, in a moment, she would know who I was. I covered my face again, but with my left hand, I took my dagger from my belt. It was only a short Misericorde, that little dagger which a warrior takes into battle to dispatch his victims if they are too far gone for salvation and yet not dead. It was a decorative thing, an ornament more than a weapon, and its gold-plated scabbard was thickly lined with perfect pearls.

"For you," I said. "For Andrei's Mother, who always loved her necklace of river pearls. Take this for Andrei's soul." I laid the dagger at my Mother's feet.

And then I made a deep, deep bow with my head almost touching the floor, and I went out, without looking back, closing the door behind me, and hovering near, to hear them as they jumped up and crowded about to see the rings and the dagger, and some to see to the lock.

For a moment, I was weak with emotion. But nothing was going to stop me from what I meant to do. I didn't turn to Marius, because it would have been craven to ask his support in this, or assent to it. I went on down the muddy snowy street, through the sludge, towards the tavern nearest to the river, where I thought my Father might be.

I had rarely entered this place as a child, and then only to summon my Father home. I had no real memory of it, except as a place where foreign people drank and cursed.

It was a long building, made of the same rude unfinished logs as my house, with the same mud for mortar, and the same inevitable seams and cracks to let in the dreadful cold. Its roof was very high, with some six tiers to shed the weight of the snow, and its eaves too dripped with icicles, as had those of my house.

It marveled me that men could live like this, that the cold itself did not push them to make something more permanent and more sheltering, but it had always been the way of this place, it seemed to me, of the poor and the sick and overburdened and the hungry, that the brutal winter took too much from them, and that the short spring and summer gave them too little, and that resignation became their greatest virtue in the end.

But I might have been wrong then about all of it, and I might be wrong now. What is important is this—it was a place of hopelessness, and though it was not ugly, for wood and mud and snow and sadness are not ugly, it was a place without beauty except for the ikons, and perhaps for the distant outline of the graceful domes of Santa Sofia, high on the hill, against the star-studded sky. And that was not enough.

When I entered the tavern, I counted some twenty men at a glance, all of them drinking and talking to one another with a conviviality that surprised me, given the Spartan nature of this place, which was no more than a shelter against the night which kept them safely ranged round the big fire. There were no ikons here to comfort them. But some of them were singing, and there was the inevitable harp player strumming his little stringed instrument, and another blowing on a small pipe.

There were many tables, some covered with linen, and others bare at which these fellows gathered, and some of the men were foreigners, as I had recalled. Three were Italian, I heard this instantly, and figured them to be Genoese. There were more foreigners indeed than I had expected. But these were men drawn by the trade of the river, and perhaps Kiev did not do so poorly just now.

There were plenty of kegs of beer and wine behind the counter, where the bartender sold his stock by the cup. I saw too many bottles of Italian wine, quite expensive no doubt, and crates of Spanish sack.

Lest I attract notice, I moved forward and far off to the left, into the depth of the shadows, where perhaps a European traveler clad in rich fur might not be noticed, for, after all, fine fur was one thing they did

indeed seem to have.

These people were much too drunk to care who I was. The bartender tried to get excited about the idea of a new customer, but then went back to snoozing on the palm of his upturned hand. The music continued, another one of the dumy, and this one much less cheerful than the one my uncle had been singing at home, because I think the musician was very tired.

I saw my Father.

He lay on his back, full length, on a broad crude greasy bench, dressed in his leather jerkin and with his biggest heaviest fur cloak folded neatly over him, as though the others had done the honors with it after he had passed out. This was bearskin, his cloak, which marked him as a pretty rich man.

He snored in his drunken sleep, and the fumes of the drink rose from him, and he didn't stir when I knelt right beside him and looked down into his face.

His cheeks though thinner were still rosy, but there were hollows beneath the bones, and there were streaks of gray, most prominent in his mustache and long beard. It seemed to me that some of the hair of his temples was gone, and that his fine smooth brow was steeper, but this may have been an illusion. The flesh all around his eyes was tender-looking and dark. His hands, clutched together beneath the cloak, were not visible to me, but I could see that he was still strong, of powerful build, and his love of drink had not destroyed him yet.

I had a disturbing sense of his vitality suddenly; I could smell the blood of him and the life of him, as though of a possible victim stumbling across my path. I put all this away from my mind and stared at him, loving him and thinking only that I was so glad that he was alive! He had come out of the wild grasses. He had escaped that party of raiders, who had seemed then the very heralds of death itself.

I pulled up a stool so that I might sit quietly beside my Father, studying his face.

I had not put on my left glove.

I laid my cold hand now on his forehead, lightly, not wanting to take liberties, and slowly he opened his eyes. They were murky yet still beautifully bright, despite the broken blood vessels and the wetness, and he looked at me softly and wordlessly for a while, as if he had no cause

to move, as if I were a vision near to his dreams.

I felt the hood fall back from my head and I did nothing to stop it. I couldn't see what he saw, but I knew what it was—his son, with a cleanshaven face, such as his son had had when this man knew him, and long loose auburn hair in snow-dusted waves.

Beyond, their bodies mere bulky outlines against the huge blaze of the fire, the others sang or talked. And the wine flowed.

Nothing came between me and this moment, between me and this man who had tried hard to bring down the Tatars, who had sent one arrow after another sailing at his enemies, even as their arrows rained down upon him in vain.

"They never wounded you," I whispered. "I love you and only now do I know how strong you were." Was my voice even audible?

He blinked as he looked at me, and then I saw his tongue roll out along his lips. His lips were bright, like coral, shining through the heavy red fringe of mustache and beard.

"They wounded me," he said in a low voice, small but not weak. "They got me, twice they got me, in the shoulder and in the arm. But they didn't kill me, and they didn't let go of Andrei. I fell off my horse. I got up. They never got me in the legs. I ran after them. I ran and ran and I kept shooting. I had a cursed arrow sticking right out of my right shoulder here."

His hand appeared from beneath the fur and he placed it up on the dark curve of his right shoulder.

"I kept shooting. I didn't even feel it. I saw them ride away. They took him. I don't even know if he was alive. I don't know. Would they have bothered to take him if they had shot him? There were arrows everywhere. The sky rained arrows! There must have been fifty of them. They killed every other man! I told the others, You have to keep shooting, don't stop even for an instant, don't cower, shoot and shoot and shoot, and when you have no more arrows, bring up your sword and go for them, ride straight into them, get down, get down close to your horse's head and ride into them. Well, maybe they did. I don't know."

He lowered his lids. He glanced around. He wanted to get up, and then he looked at me.

"Give me something to drink. Buy me something decent. The man has Spanish sack. Get me some of that, a bottle of sack. Hell, in the old days,

I laid in wait for the traders out there in the river, and I never had to buy anything from any man. Get me a bottle of sack. I can see you're rich."

"Do you know who I am?" I asked.

He looked at me in plain confusion. This hadn't even occurred to him, this question.

"You come from the castle. You speak with the accent of the Lithuanians. I don't care who you are. Buy me some wine."

"With the accent of the Lithuanians?" I asked softly. "What a dreadful thing. I think it's the accent of a Venetian, and I'm ashamed."

"Venetian? Well, don't be. God knows they tried to save Constantinople, they tried. Everything's gone to Hell. The world will end in flame. Get me some sack before it ends, all right?"

I stood up. Did I have some more money? I was puzzling over it when the dark silent figure of my Master loomed over me and he handed me the bottle of Spanish sack, uncorked and ready for my Father to drink.

I sighed. The smell of it meant nothing to me now, but I knew that it was fine good stuff, and besides it was what he wanted.

He had meantime sat up on the bench, staring straight at the bottle as it hung from my hand. He reached out for it, and took it and drank it as thirstily as I drink blood.

"Take a good look at me," I said.

"It's too dark in here, idiot," he said. "How can I take a good look at anything? Hmmm, but this is good. Thank you."

Suddenly, he paused with the bottle just beneath his lips. It was a Strange thing the way in which he paused. It was as if he were in the forest, and he'd just sensed a bear coming up on him, or some other lethal beast. He froze, as it were, with the bottle in hand, and only his eyes moved as he looked up at me.

"Andrei," he whispered.

"I'm alive, Father," I said gently. "They didn't kill me. They took me for booty and sold me for profit. And I was taken by ship south and north again and up to the city of Venice, and that is where I live now."

His eyes were calm. Indeed, a beautiful serenity settled over him. He was far too drunk for his reason to revolt or for cheap surprise to delight him. On the contrary, the truth stole in and over him in a wave, subduing him, and he understood all of its ramifications, that I had not

suffered, that I was rich, I was well.

"I was lost, Sir," I said in the same gentle whisper, which surely was only audible to him. "I was lost, yes, but found by another, a kindly man, and was restored, and have never suffered since. I've journeyed a long time to tell you this, Father. I never knew you were alive. I never dreamed. I mean, I thought you'd died that day when all the world died for me. And now I'm come here to tell you that you must never, never grieve for me."

"Andrei," he whispered, but there was no change in his face. There was only the sedate wonder. He sat still, both hands on the bottle which he had lowered to his lap, his huge shoulders very straight, and his flowing red and gray hair as long as I'd ever seen it, melting into the fur of his cloak.

He was a beautiful, beautiful man. I needed a monster's eyes to know it. I needed a demon's vision to see the strength in his eyes coupled with the power in his giant frame. Only the bloodshot eyes gave him away in his weakness.

"Forget me now, Father," I said. "Forget me, as if the monks had sent me away. But remember this, on account of you, I shall never be buried in the muddy graves of the Monastery. No, other things may befall me. But that, I won't suffer. Because of you, that you wouldn't have it, that you came that day and demanded I ride out with you, that I be your son."

I turned to go. He shot forward, clasping the bottle by the neck in his left hand and clamping his powerful right hand over my wrist. He pulled me down to him, as if I were a mere mortal, with his old strength and he pressed his lips against my bowed head.

Oh, God, don't let him know! Don't let him sense any change in me! I was desperate. I closed my eyes.

But I was young, and not so hard and cold as my Master, no, not even by half or a half of that half. And he felt only the softness of my hair, and perhaps a cold icy softness, redolent of winter, to my skin.

"Andrei, my angel child, my gifted and golden son!"

I turned around and clasped him firmly with my left arm. I kissed him all over his head in a way I would never, never have done as a child. I held him to my heart.

"Father, don't drink anymore," I said in his ear. "Get up and be the

hunter again. Be what you are, Father."

"Andrei, no one will ever believe me."

"And who are they to say that to you if you are yourself again, man?" I asked.

We looked into each other's eyes. I kept my lips sealed that he should never, never see the sharp teeth in my mouth that the vampiric blood had given me, the tiny evil vampire's teeth as a man as keen as himself, the natural hunter, might very definitely see.

But he was looking for no such disqualification here. He wanted only love, and love we gave one another.

"I have to go, I have no choice," I said. "I stole this time to come to you. Father, tell my Mother that it was I who came to the house earlier, and that it was I who gave her the rings and gave your brother the purse."

I drew back. I sat down on the bench beside him, for he had placed his feet on the floor. I pulled off my right glove and I looked at the seven or eight rings I wore, all of them made of gold or silver and rich with jewels, and then I slipped them off one by one, over his loud groan of protest, and I deposited the handful of them into his hand. How soft and hot was his hand, how flushed and alive.

"You take them because I have a world of them. And I will write to you and send you more, more so that you will never need to do anything but what you want to do—ride and hunt, and tell the tales of old times by the fire. Buy a fine harp with this, buy books if you will for the little ones, buy what you will."

"I don't want this; I want you, my son."

"Yes, and I want you, my Father, but this little power is all we may have."

I took his head in both my hands, displaying my strength, perhaps unwisely, but making him stay still while I gave him my kisses, and then with one long warm embrace, I rose to go.

I was out of the room so fast, he couldn't have seen anything but the door swinging shut.

The snow was coming down. I saw my Master several yards away, and I went to meet him and together we started up the hill. I didn't want for my Father to come out. I wanted to get away as fast as I could.

I was about to ask that we take to vampire speed and get clear of Kiev

when I saw that a figure was hurrying towards us. It was a small woman, her long heavy furs trailing in the wet snow. She had something bright in her arms.

I stood fixed, my Master waiting on me. It was my Mother who had come to see me. It was my Mother who was making her way to the tavern, and in her arms, facing me, was an ikon of the scowling Christ, the one I looked at so long through the chink in the wall of the house.

I drew in my breath. She lifted the ikon by either side and she presented it to me.

"Andrei," she whispered.

"Mother," I said. "Keep it for the little ones, please." I embraced her and kissed her. How much older, how miserably older she seemed. But childbearing had done that to her, pulling the strength out of her, if only for babies to be buried in small plots in the ground. I thought of how many babies she had lost during my youth, and how many were still counted before I was born. She had called them her angels, her little babies, not big enough to live.

"Keep it," I said to her. "Keep it for the family here."

"All right, Andrei," she said. She looked at me with pale, suffering eyes. I could see that she was dying. I understood suddenly that it wasn't mere age that worked on her, nor the hardship of children. She was diseased from within, and would soon truly die. I felt such a terror, looking at her, such a terror for the whole mortal world. It was just a tiresome, common and inevitable disease.

"Goodbye, darling angel," I said.

"And goodbye to you, my darling angel," she answered. "My heart and soul are happy that you are a proud Prince. But show me, do you make the Sign of the Cross in the right way?"

How desperate she sounded. She meant these words. She meant simply, Had I gotten all this apparent wealth by converting to the church of the West? That is what she meant.

"Mother, you put a simple test to me." I made the Sign of the Cross for her, in our way, the Eastern Way, from right shoulder to left, and I smiled.

She nodded. Then she took something carefully from inside her heavy wool shift coat and she gave it to me, only releasing it when I had made a cradle for it with my hand. It was a dark ruby-red painted Easter egg.

Such a perfect and exquisitely decorated egg. It was banded with long lengthwise ribbons of yellow, and in a center created by them was painted a perfect rose or eight-pointed star.

I looked down at it and then I nodded to her.

I took out a handkerchief of fine Flemish linen and wrapped the egg in this, padding it over and over, and I slipped the little burden faithfully into the folds of my tunic beneath my jacket and cloak.

I bent over and kissed her again on her soft dry cheek. "Mother," I said, "the Joy of All Sorrows, that is what you are to me!"

"My sweet Andrei," she answered. "Go with God if you must go."

She looked at the ikon. She wanted me to see it. She turned the ikon around so that I could look at the gleaming golden Face of God, as waxen and fine as the day I'd painted it for her. Only I hadn't painted it for her. No, it was the very ikon which I had taken that day on our march into the wild lands.

Oh, what a marvel, that my Father had brought it back with him, all the way from the scene of such loss. And yet why not? Why not would such a man as he have done such a thing?

The snow fell onto the painted ikon. It fell on the stern Face of Our Savior, which had come ablaze under my racing brush as if by magic, a face which with its stern and smooth lips and slightly furrowed brow meant love. Christ, my Lord, could look even more stern peering out from the mosaics of San Marco. Christ, my Lord, could look as stern in many an old painting. But Christ, my Lord, in any manner and in any style, was full of unstinting love.

The snow came in flurries and seemed to melt when it touched His Face.

I feared for it, this fragile panel of wood, and this glistering lacquered image, meant to shine for all time. But she thought of this too, and she quickly shielded the ikon from the wetness of the melting snow with her cloak.

I never saw it again.

But is there anyone who needs now to ask me what an ikon means to me? Is there anyone who needs now to know why, when I saw the Face of Christ before me on the Veil of Veronica, when Dora held it high, this Veil, brought back from Jerusalem and the hour of Christ's passion, by Lestat himself, through Hell and into the world, that I fell down on my

knees, and cried, “It is the Lord”?

11

The journey from Kiev seemed a journey forwards in time, towards the place where I truly belonged.

All of Venice, upon my return, seemed to share the shimmer of the gold-plated chamber in which I made my grave. In a daze, I spent my nights roaming, with or without Marius, drinking up the fresh air of the Adriatic and perusing the splendid houses and government palaces to which I'd grown accustomed over the last few years.

Evening church services drew me like honey draws flies. I drank up the music of the choirs, the chanting of the priests and above all the joyous sensual attitude of the worshipers, as if all this would be a healing balm to those parts of me that were skinned and raw from my return to the Monastery of the Caves.

But in my heart of hearts I reserved a tenacious and heated flame of reverence for the Russian monks of the Monastery of the Caves. Having glimpsed a few words of the sainted Brother Isaac, I walked in the living memory of his teachings—Brother Isaac, who had been a Fool for God, and a hermit, and a seer of spirits, the victim of the Devil and then his Conqueror in the name of Christ.

I had a religious soul, there was no doubt of it, and I had been given two great modes of religious thought, and now in surrendering to a war between these modes, I made war on myself, for though I had no intention of giving up the luxuries and glories of Venice, the ever shining beauty of Fra Angelico's lessons and the stunning and gilded accomplishments of all those who followed him, making Beauty for Christ, I secretly beatified the loser in my battle, the blessed Isaac, whom I imagined, in my childish mind, to have taken the true path to the Lord.

Marius knew of my struggle, he knew of the hold which Kiev had upon me, and he knew of the crucial importance of all this to me. He understood better than anyone I've ever known that each being wars with his own angels and devils, each being succumbs to an essential set

of values, a theme, as it were, which is inseparable from living a proper life.

For us, life was the vampiric life. But it was in every sense life, and sensuous life, and fleshly life. I could not escape into it from the compulsions and obsessions I'd felt as a mortal boy. On the contrary, they were now magnified.

Within the month after my return, I knew I had set the tone for my approach to the world around me. I should wallow in the luscious beauty of Italian painting and music and architecture, yes, but I would do it with the fervor of a Russian saint. I would turn all sensuous experiences to goodness and purity. I would learn, I would increase understanding, I would increase in compassion for the mortals around me, and I would never cease to put a pressure upon my soul to be that which I believed was good.

Good was above all kind; it was to be gentle. It was to waste nothing. It was to paint, to read, to study, to listen, even to pray, though to whom I prayed I wasn't sure, and it was to take every opportunity to be generous to those mortals whom I did not kill.

As for those I killed, they were to be dispatched mercifully, and I was to become the absolute master of mercy, never causing pain and confusion, indeed snaring my victims as much as I could by spells induced by my soft voice or the depths of my eyes offered for soulful looks, or by some other power I seemed to possess and seemed able to develop, a power to thrust my mind into that of the poor helpless mortal and to assist him in the manufacture of his own comforting images so that the death became the flicker of a flame in a rapture, and then silence most sweet.

I also concentrated on enjoying the blood, on moving deeper, beneath the turbulent necessity of my own thirst, to taste this vital fluid of which I robbed my victim, and to feel most fully that which it carried with it to ultimate doom, the destiny of a mortal soul.

My lessons with Marius were broken off for a while. But at last he came to me gently and told me it was time to study again in earnest, that there were things that we must do.

"I make my own study," I said. "You know it well enough. You know I haven't been idle in my wanderings, and you know my mind is as hungry as my body. You know it. So leave me alone."

“That’s all well and good, little Master,” he said to me kindly, “but you must come back into the school I keep for you. I have things which you must know.”

For five nights I put him off. Then, as I was dozing on his bed sometime after midnight, having spent the earlier evening in the Piazza San Marco at a great festival, listening to musicians and watching the jugglers, I was startled to feel his switch come crashing down on the back of my legs.

“Wake up, child,” he said.

I turned over and looked up. I was startled. He stood, holding the long switch, with his arms folded. He wore a long belted tunic of purple velvet and his hair was tied back at the base of his neck.

I turned away from him. I figured he was being dramatic and that he would go away. The switch came crashing down again and this time there followed a volley of blows.

I felt the blows in a way I’d never felt them when mortal. I was stronger, more resistant to them, but for a split second each blow broke through my preternatural guard and caused a tiny exquisite explosion of pain.

I was furious. I tried to climb up off the bed, and probably would have struck him, so angry was I to be treated in this manner. But he placed his knee on my back and whipped me over and over with the switch, until I cried out.

Then he stood up and dragged me up by the collar. I was shaking with rage and with confusion.

“Want some more?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I said, throwing off his arm, which he allowed with a little smile. “Perhaps so! One minute my heart is of the greatest concern to you, and the next I’m a schoolboy. Is that it?”

“You’ve had enough time to grieve and to weep,” he said, “and to reevaluate all you’ve been given. Now it’s back to work. Go to the desk and prepare to write. Or I’ll whip you some more.”

I flew into a tirade. “I’m not going to be treated this way; there’s absolutely no necessity for this. What should I write? I’ve written volumes in my soul. You think you can force me into the dreary little mold of an obedient pupil, you think this is appropriate to the cataclysmic thoughts that I have to ponder, you think—.”

He smacked me across the face. I was dizzy. As my eyes cleared, I looked into his.

"I want your attention again. I want you to come out of your meditation. Go to the desk and write for me a summary of what your journey to Russia meant to you, and what you see now here that you could not see before. Make it concise, use your finest similes and metaphors and write it cleanly and quickly for me."

"Such crude tactics," I muttered. But my body was throbbing from the blows. It was altogether different from the pain of a mortal body, but it was bad, and I hated it.

I sat down at the desk. I was going to write something really churlish such as "I've learned that I'm the slave of a tyrant." But when I looked up and saw him standing there with the switch in his hand, I changed my mind.

He knew it was the perfect moment to come to me and kiss me. And he did this, and I realized I had lifted my face for his kiss before he bent his head. This didn't stop him.

I felt the overwhelming happiness of giving in to him. I put my arm up and around his shoulders.

He let me go after a long sweet moment, and then I did write out many sentences, pretty much describing what I've explained above. I wrote about the battle in me between the fleshly and the ascetic; I wrote of my Russian soul as seeking after the highest level of exaltation. In the painting of the ikon I had found it, but the ikon had satisfied the need for the sensual because the ikon was beautiful. And as I wrote, I realized for the first time that the old Russian style, the antique Byzantine style, embodied a struggle in itself between the sensual and the ascetic, the figures suppressed, flattened, disciplined, in the very midst of rich color, the whole giving forth pure delight to the eyes while representing denial.

While I wrote, my Master went away. I was aware of it, but it didn't matter. I was deep into my writing, and gradually I slipped out of my analysis of things, and began to tell an old tale.

> In the old days, when the Russians didn't know Jesus Christ, the great Prince Vladimir of Kiev—and in those days Kiev was a magnificent city—sent his emissaries to study the three religions of the Lord: the Moslem religion, which these men found to be frantic and foul-smelling; the religion of Papal Rome, in which these men did not find any glory; and finally

the Christianity of Byzantium. In the city of Constantinople, the Russians were led to see the magnificent churches in which the Greek Catholics worshiped their God, and they found these buildings so beautiful that they didn't know whether they were in Heaven or still on Earth. Never had the Russians seen anything so splendid; they were certain then that God dwelt among men in the religion of Constantinople, and so it was this Christianity which Russia embraced. It was beauty therefore that gave birth to our Russian Church.

In Kiev once men could find what Vladimir sought to recreate, but now that Kiev is a ruin and the Turks have taken Santa Sofia of Constantinople, one must come to Venice to see the great Theotokos, the Virgin who is the God-Bearer, and her Son when He becomes the Pantokrator, the Divine Creator of All. In Venice, I have found in sparkling gold mosaics and in the muscular images of a new age the very miracle which brought the Light of Christ Our Lord to the land where I was born, the Light of Christ Our Lord which burns still in the lamps of the Monastery of the Caves.

I put down the pen. I pushed the page aside, and I laid my head down on my arms and cried softly to myself in the quiet of the shadowy bedroom. I didn't care if I was beaten, kicked or ignored.

Finally, Marius came for me to take me to our crypt, and I realize now, centuries later, as I look back, that his forcing me to write on this night caused me to remember always the lessons of those times.

The next night, after he'd read what I had written, he was contrite about having hit me, and he said that it was difficult for him to treat me as anything but a child, but that I was not a child. Rather I was some spirit like unto a child—naive and maniacal in my pursuit of certain themes. He had never expected to love me so much.

I wanted to be aloof and distant, on account of the whipping, but I couldn't be. I marveled that his touch, his kisses, his embraces meant more to me than they had when I was human.

12

I wish I could slip away now from the happy picture of Marius and me in Venice and take up this tale in New York City, in modern times. I want to go to the moment in the room in New York City when Dora held up Veronica's Veil, the relic brought back by Lestat from his journey into the Inferno, for then I would have a tale told in two perfect halves—of the child I had been and of the worshiper I became, and of the creature I am now.

But I cannot fool myself so easily. I know that what happened to Marius and to me in the months that followed my journey to Russia is part and parcel of my life.

There is nothing to do but cross The Bridge of Sighs in my life, the long dark bridge spanning centuries of my tortured existence which connects me to modern times. That my time in this passage has been described so well already by Lestat doesn't mean that I can escape without adding my own words, and above all my own acknowledgment of the Fool for God that I was to be for three hundred years.

I wish I had escaped this fate. I wish that Marius had escaped what happened to us. It is plain now that he survived our separation with far greater insight and strength than I survived it. But then he was already centuries old and a wise being, and I was still a child.

Our last months in Venice were unmarred by any premonition of what was to come. Vigorously, he taught me the essential lessons.

One of the most important of these was how to pass for human in the midst of human beings. In all the time since my transformation, I had not kept good company with the other apprentices, and I had avoided altogether my beloved Bianca, to whom I owed a vast debt of gratitude not merely for past friendship but for nursing me when I was so ill.

Now, I had to face Bianca, or so Marius decreed. I was the one who had to write a polite letter to her explaining that on account of my illness I had not been able to come to her before.

Then, one evening early, after a brief hunt in which I drank the blood of two victims, we set out to visit her, laden with gifts for her, and found her surrounded by her English and Italian friends.

Marius had dressed for the occasion in smart dark blue velvet, with a cloak of the same color for once, which was unusual for him, and he had urged me to dress in sky blue, his favorite color for me. I carried the wine figs and sweet tarts in a basket for her.

We found her door open as always, and we entered unobtrusively, but she saw us at once.

The moment I saw her I felt a heartbreaking desire for a certain kind of intimacy, that is, I wanted to tell her everything that had happened! Of course this was forbidden, and that I could love her without confiding in her—this was something that Marius insisted I learn.

She got up and came to me, and put her arms around me, accepting the usual ardent kisses. I realized at once why Marius had insisted on two victims for this evening. I was warm and flushed with blood.

Bianca felt nothing that frightened her. She slipped her silken arms around my neck. She was radiant in a dress of yellow silk tissue and dark-green velvet, the underdress of yellow, powdered with embroidered roses, and her white breasts were barely covered as only a courtesan would have them.

When I began to kiss her, careful to conceal my tiny fanged teeth from her, I felt no hunger because the blood of my victims had been more than enough. I kissed her with love and love only, my mind quickly plunging into heated erotic memories, my body surely demonstrating the urgency that it had had with her in the past. I wanted to touch her all over, as a blind man might touch a sculpture, the better to see each curve of her with his hands.

"Oh, you're not only well, you're splendid," Bianca said. "You and Marius, come in, come, let's go into the next room." She made a careless gesture to her guests, who were all busy anyway, talking, arguing, playing cards in small groups. She drew us with her into her more intimate parlor adjacent to the bedroom, a room cluttered with frightfully expensive damask chairs and couches, and told me to sit down.

I remembered the candles, that I must never get too close to them, but must use the shadows so no mortal would have an optimum opportunity

to study my changed and more perfect skin.

This wasn't so hard as, in spite of her love of light and her penchant for luxury, she had the candelabra scattered for the mood.

The lack of light would also make the sparkle of my eyes less noticeable; I knew this too. And the more I spoke, the more animated I became, the more human I would appear.

Stillness was dangerous for us when we were among mortals, Marius had taught me, for in stillness we appear flawless and unearthly and finally even faintly horrible to mortals, who sense that we are not what we seem.

I followed all these rules. But I was overcome with anxiety that I could never tell her what had been done to me. I started to talk. I explained that the illness had abated entirely, but that Marius, wiser by far than any physician, had ordered solitude and rest. When I had not been in bed, I had been alone, struggling to regain my strength.

"Make it as near to the truth as you can, the better to make it a lie," Marius had taught. Now I followed these words.

"Oh, but I thought I'd lost you," she said. "When you sent word, Marius, that he was recovering, I didn't at first believe you. I thought you meant to soften the inevitable truth."

How lovely she was, a perfect flower. Her blond hair was parted in the middle, and a thick lock on either side was wound with pearls and bound back with a clasp encrusted with them. The rest of her hair fell down à la Botticelli, in rivulets of shining yellow over her shoulders.

"You had cured him as completely as any human being could," Marius told her. "My task was to give him some old remedies of which only I know. And then to let the remedies do their work." He spoke simply, but to me he seemed sad.

A terrible sadness gripped me. I couldn't tell her what I was, or how different she seemed now, how richly opaque with human blood she seemed compared to us, and how her voice had taken on for me a new timbre that was purely human, and which gently nudged my senses if she but said one word.

"Well, you are both here, and you must both come often," she said. "Don't ever let such a separation occur again. Marius, I would have come to you, but Riccardo told me you wanted peace and quiet. I would have nursed Amadeo in any state."

“I know you would have, my darling,” Marius said. “But as I said, it was solitude he needed, and your beauty is an intoxicant, and your words a stimulus more intense perhaps than you realize.” It had no tone of flattery but sounded like a sincere confession.

She shook her head a little sadly. “I’ve discovered that Venice is not my home unless you’re here.” She looked cautiously towards the front parlor, and then she lapsed into a low voice. “Marius, you freed me from those who had a hold on me.”

“That was simple enough,” he said. “It was a pleasure, in fact. How rank those men were, cousins of yours, if I’m not mistaken, and eager to use you and your great reputation for beauty in their twisted financial affairs.”

She blushed, and I lifted my hand to beg him to go easy with what he said. I knew now that during the slaughter of the Florentine banquet chamber, he had read from the victims’ minds all kinds of things which were unknown to me.

“Cousins? Perhaps,” she said. “I have conveniently forgotten that. That they were a terror to those whom they lured into expensive loans and dangerous opportunities, that I can say without a doubt. Marius, the strangest things have happened, things upon which I never counted.”

I loved the look of seriousness on her delicate features. She seemed too beautiful to have a brain.

“I find myself richer,” she said, “as I can keep the larger portion of my own income, and others—this is the strange part—others, in gratitude that our banker and our extortionist is gone, have lavished on me countless gifts of gold and jewels, yes, even this necklace, look, and you know these are all sea pearls and matched in size, and this is a veritable rope of them, see, and all this is given me, though I have averred a hundred times that I never had the deed done.”

“But what of blame?” I asked. “What of the danger of a public accusation?”

“They have no defenders or mourners,” she said quickly. She planted another little bouquet of kisses on my cheek. “And earlier today, my friends among the Great Council were here as always, to read a few new poems to me and settle in quiet where they could know peace from clients and the endless demands of their families. No, I don’t think anyone is going to accuse me of anything, and as everyone knows, on

the night of the murders, I was here in company with that awful Englishman, Amadeo, the very one who tried to kill you, who has of course …"

"Yes, what?" I asked.

Marius narrowed his eyes as he looked at me. He made a light gesture of tapping the side of his head with his gloved finger. Read her mind, he meant. But I couldn't think of such a thing. Her face was too pretty.

"The Englishman," she said, "who has disappeared. I suspect he's drowned somewhere, that, staggering drunk about the town, he fell into one of the canals or, worse yet, into the lagoon."

Of course my Master had told me that he had taken care of all our difficulties on account of the Englishman, but I had never asked in what particular way.

"So they think you hired killers to dispatch the Florentines?" Marius asked her.

"Seems so," she said. "And there are even those who think that I had the Englishman dispatched as well. I've become a rather powerful woman, Marius."

Both of them laughed, his laugh the deep but metallic laugh of a preternatural being, and her laugh higher yet thicker with the sound of her human blood.

I wanted to go into her mind. I tried but cast away the idea at once. I was inhibited, just as I was with Riccardo and the boys closest to me. In fact, it seemed such a terrible invasion of the privacy of the person that I used this power only in hunting to find those who were evil and whom I might kill.

"Amadeo, you blush, what is it?" Bianca asked. "Your cheeks are scarlet. Let me kiss them. Oh, you are hot as if the fever has come back."

"Look into his eyes, angel," said Marius. "They are clear."

"You're right," she said, peering into my eyes with such a sweet frank curiosity that she became irresistible to me.

I pushed back the yellow cloth of her underdress and the heavy velvet of her dark-green sleeveless overgarment and kissed her bare shoulder.

"Yes, you're well," she cooed into my ear, her lips moist against it.

I was blushing still as I drew back.

I looked at her, and I went into her mind; it seemed I had loosened the gold clasp beneath her breasts and parted her voluminous dark-green

velvet skirts. I stared at the well between her half-exposed breasts. Blood or no blood, I could remember hot passion for her, and I felt it now in a strange overall manner, not localized in the forgotten organ as it had been before. I wanted to take her breasts in my hands and suckle them slowly, arousing her, making her moist and fragrant for me and making her head fall back. Yes, I blushed. A dim sweet swoon came over me.

I want you, I want you now, you and Marius both in my bed, together, a man and a boy, a god and a cherub. This is what her mind was saying to me, and she was remembering me. I saw myself as if in a smoky mirror, a boy naked except for a full-sleeved open shirt, seated on the pillows beside her, displaying the half-erect organ, ever ready to be completely aroused by her tender lips or her long graceful white hands.

I banished all this. I focused my gaze only on her beautiful tapering eyes. She studied me, not suspiciously but in fascination. Her lips were not rouged in any vulgar manner but deeply pink by nature, and her long lashes, darkened and curled only with a clear pomade, looked like the points of stars around her radiant eyes.

I want you, I want you now. These were her thoughts. They struck my ears. I bowed my head and put my hands up.

"Angel darling," she said. "Both of you!" she whispered to Marius. She took my hands. "Come in with me."

I was certain he would put a stop to it. He had cautioned me to avoid close scrutiny. But he only rose from his chair and moved towards her bedchamber, pushing back the two painted doors.

From the distant parlors came the steady sound of conversation and laughter. Singing had been added. Someone played the Virginal. All this went on.

We slipped into her bed. I was shaking all over. I saw that my Master had adorned himself in a thick tunic and beautiful dark blue doublet which I'd hardly noticed before. He wore soft sleek dark blue gloves over his hands, gloves which perfectly cleaved to his fingers, and his legs were covered by thick soft cashmere stockings all the way to his beautiful pointed shoes. He has covered all the hardness, I thought.

Having settled against the headboard of the bed, he had no compunction about helping Bianca to sit directly next to him. I looked across from him as I took my place beside her. As she turned to me, putting her hands on my face and kissing me eagerly again, I saw him

perform a small act which I hadn't seen before.

Lifting her hair, he appeared to kiss her on the back of the neck. This she neither felt nor acknowledged. When he drew back, however, his lips were bloody. And lifting the finger of his gloved hand, he smoothed this blood, her blood, but a few droplets of it from a shallow scratch, undoubtedly, all over his face. It appeared to me as a living sheen, and to her it would look very different.

It quickened the pores in his skin, which had become all but invisible, and it deepened a few lines around his eyes and his mouth which otherwise were lost. It gave him a more human look, overall, and served as a barrier to her gaze, which was now so close.

"I have my two, as I always dreamed," she said softly.

Marius came round in front of her, tucking his arm behind her and began to kiss her as greedily as I had ever done. I was astonished for a moment, and jealous, but then her free hand found me and pulled me down close to her, and she turned from Marius, dazed with desire, and kissed me as well.

Marius reached over and brought me close to her, so that I was against her soft curves, feeling all the warmth rising from her voluptuous thighs.

He lay on top of her, but lightly, not letting his weight hurt her, and with his right hand he drew up her skirt and moved his fingers between her legs.

It was so bold. I lay against her shoulder, looking at the swell of her breasts, and beyond that the tiny, down-covered mound of her sex which he clasped in his entire hand.

She was past all decorum. He laid kisses on her neck and on her breasts as he embraced her lower down with his fingers, and she began to writhe with undisguised longing, her mouth open, her eyelids fluttering, her body suddenly moist all over and fragrant with this new heat.

That was the miracle, I realized, that a human could be brought to this higher temperature, and thereby give forth all of her sweet scents and even a strong invisible shimmer of emotions; it was rather like stoking a fire until it became a blaze.

The blood of my victims teemed in my face as I kissed her. It seemed to become living blood again, heated by my passion, and yet my passion had no demonic focus. I pressed my open mouth to the skin of her

throat, covering the place where the artery showed like a blue river moving down from her head. But I didn't want to hurt her. I felt no need to hurt her. Indeed, I felt only pleasure as I embraced her, as I slipped my arm between her and Marius, so that I could cradle her tightly as he continued to toy with her, his fingers lifting and falling on the tender little mound of her sex.

"You tease me, Marius," she whispered, her head tossing. The pillow was damp beneath her and drenched with the perfume of her hair. I kissed her lips. They locked to my mouth. To keep her tongue from discovering my vampiric teeth, I drove my tongue into her. Her nether mouth couldn't have been sweeter, tighter, more moist.

"Ah, then this, my sweet," said Marius tenderly, his fingers sliding inside her.

She lifted her hips, as though the fingers were lifting her as she would have them do.

"Oh, Heaven help me," she whispered, and then came the fullness of her passion, her face darkening with blood, and the rosy fire spreading down her breasts. I pushed back the cloth and saw the redness consume her bosom, her nipples standing rigid in tiny raisinlike points.

I closed my eyes and lay beside her. I let myself feel the passion rock her, and then the heat was lessened in her, and she seemed to become sleepy. She turned her head away. Her face was still. Her eyelids were beautifully molded over her closed eyes. She sighed and her pretty lips parted in a natural way.

Marius brushed her hair back from her face, smoothing the tiny unruly ringlets that were caught in the moisture, and then he kissed her forehead.

"Sleep now, knowing you're safe," he said to her. "I'll take care of you forever. You saved Amadeo," he whispered. "You kept him alive until I could come."

Dreamily she turned to look up at him, her eyes glossy and slow.

"Am I not beautiful enough for you to love me for that alone?" she asked.

I realized suddenly that what she said was bitter, and that she was bestowing a confidence on him. I could feel her thoughts!

"I love you whether or not you dress in gold or wear pearls, whether or not you speak wittily and quickly, whether or not you make a well-

lighted and elegant place in which I can rest, I love you for the heart here inside you, which came to Amadeo when you knew there was danger that those who knew or loved the Englishman might hurt you, I love you for courage and for what you know of being alone."

Her eyes widened for a moment. "For what I know of being alone? Oh, I know very well what it means to be utterly alone."

"Yes, brave one, and now you know I love you," he whispered. "You always knew that Amadeo loved you."

"Yes, I do love you," I whispered, lying next to her, holding her.

"Well, now you know I love you as well."

She studied him as best she could in her languor. "There are so many questions on the tip of my tongue," she said.

"They don't matter," Marius said. He kissed her and I think he let his teeth touch her tongue. "I take all your questions and I cast them away. Sleep now, virginal heart," he said. "Love whom you will, quite safe in the love we feel for you."

It was the signal to withdraw.

As I stood at the foot of the bed, he placed the embroidered covers over her, careful to fold the fine Flemish linen sheet over the edge of the rougher white wool blanket, and then he kissed her again, but she was like a little girl, soft and safe, and fast asleep.

Outside, as we stood on the edge of the canal, he lifted his gloved hand to his nostrils, and he savored the fragrance of her on it.

"You've learnt much today, haven't you? You cannot tell her anything of who you are. But do you see now how close you might come?"

"Yes," I said. "But only if I want nothing in return."

"Nothing?" he asked. He looked at me reprovingly. "She gave you loyalty, affection, intimacy; what more could you want in return?"

"Nothing now," I said. "You've taught me well. But what I had before was her understanding, that she was a mirror in which I could study my reflection and thereby judge my own growth. She can't be that mirror now, can she?"

"Yes, in many ways she can. Show her by gestures and simple words what you are. You needn't tell her tales of blood drinkers that would only drive her mad. She can comfort you marvelously well without ever knowing what hurts you. And you, you must remember that to tell her everything would be to destroy her. Imagine it."

I was silent for a long moment.

"Something's occurred to you," he said. "You have that solemn look. Speak."

"Can she be made into what we—."

"Amadeo, you bring me to another lesson. The answer is no."

"But she'll grow old and die, and—."

"Of course she will, as she is meant to do. Amadeo, how many of us can there be? And on what grounds would we bring her over to us? And would we want her as our companion forever? Would we want her as our pupil? Would we want to hear her cries if the magic blood were to drive her mad? It is not for any soul, this blood, Amadeo. It demands a great strength and a great preparation, all of which I found in you. But I do not see it in her."

I nodded. I knew what he meant. I didn't have to think over all that had befallen me, or even think back to the rude cradle of Russia where I'd been nursed. He was right.

"You will want to share this power with them all," he said. "Learn that you cannot. Learn that with each one you make there comes a terrible obligation, and a terrible danger. Children rise against their parents, and with each blood drinker made by you you make a child that will live forever in love for you or hate. Yes, hate."

"You needn't say any more," I whispered. "I know. I understand."

We went home together, to the brightly lighted rooms of the palazzo.

I knew then what he wanted of me, that I mingle with my old friends among the boys, that I show kindness in particular to Riccardo, who blamed himself, I soon realized, for the death of those few undefended ones whom the Englishman had murdered on that fateful day.

"Pretend, and grow strong with each pretense," he whispered in my ear. "Rather, draw close and be loving and love, without the luxury of complete honesty. For love can bridge all."

13

In the following months, I learned more than I can ever recount here. I studied vigorously, and paid attention even to the government of the city, which I thought basically as tiresome as any government, and read voraciously the great Christian scholars, completing my time with Abelard, Duns Scotus and other thinkers whom Marius prized.

Marius also found for me a heap of Russian literature so that for the first time I could study in writing what I had only known from the songs of my uncles and my Father in the past. At first I deemed this too painful for a serious inquiry, but Marius laid down the law and wisely. The inherent value of the subject matter soon absorbed my painful recollections and a greater knowledge and understanding was the result.

All of these documents were in Church Slavonic, the written language of my childhood, and I soon fell into reading this with extraordinary ease. *The Lay of Igor's Campaigns* delighted me, but I also loved the writings, translated from the Greek, of St. John Chrysostom. I also reveled in the fantastical tales of King Solomon and of the Descent of the Virgin into Hell, works which were not part of the approved New Testament but which were very evocative of the Russian soul. I read also our great chronicle, *The Tale of Bygone Years*. I read also *Orison on the Downfall of Russia* and the *Tale of the Destruction of Riasan*.

This exercise, the reading of my native stories, helped me to put them in perspective alongside the other learning which I acquired. In sum, it lifted them from the realm of personal dreams.

Gradually, I saw the wisdom of this. I made my reports to Marius with more enthusiasm. I asked for more of the manuscripts in Church Slavonic, and I soon had for reading the *Narrative of the Pious Prince Dovmont and His Courage* and *The Heroic Deeds of Mercurius of Smolensk*. Finally, I came to regard the works in Church Slavonic to be a pure pleasure, and I kept them for the hours after official study when I might pore over the old tales and even make up from them my own mournful

songs.

I sang these sometimes to the other apprentices when they went to sleep. They thought the language very exotic, and sometimes the pure music and my sad inflection could make them cry.

Riccardo and I, meantime, became close friends again. He never asked why I was now a creature of night like the Master. I never sounded the depths of his mind. Of course I would do it if I had to for my safety and for Marius's safety, but I used my vampiric wits to gloss him in another way, and I always found him devoted, unquestioning and loyal.

Once I asked Marius what Riccardo thought of us.

"Riccardo owes me too great a debt to question anything I do," Marius answered, but without any haughtiness or pride.

"Then he is far better bred than I am, isn't he? For I owe you the same debt and I question everything you say."

"You're a smart, devil-tongued little imp, yes," Marius conceded with a small smile. "Riccardo was won in a card game from his drunken Father by a beastly merchant who worked him night and day. Riccardo detested his Father, which you never have. Riccardo was eight years old when I bought him for the price of a gold necklace. He'd seen the worst of men whom children don't move to natural pity. You saw what men will do with the flesh of children for pleasure. It's not as bad. Riccardo, unable to believe that a tender little one could move anyone to compassion, believed in nothing until I wrapped him in safety and filled him with learning, and told him in terms on which he could count that he was my prince.

"But to answer you more in the way you ask the question, Riccardo thinks that I am a magician, and that with you I've chosen to share my spells. He knows that you were on death's door when I bestowed on you my secrets, and that I do not tease him or the others with this honor, but regard it rather as something of dire consequence. He doesn't seek after our knowledge. And will defend us with his life."

I accepted this. I didn't have the need in me to confide in Riccardo as I had with Bianca.

"I feel the need to protect him," I said to my Master. "Pray he should never have to protect me."

"So I feel also," said Marius. "I feel this for them all. God granted your Englishman a great mercy that he was not alive when I came home to

find my little ones slain by him. I don't know what I would have done. That he had injured you was bad enough. That he had laid out two child sacrifices at my door to his pride and bitterness, this was even more despicable. You had made love to him, and you could fight him. But they were innocents who stood in his path."

I nodded. "What did happen to his remains?" I asked.

"Such a simple thing," he said with a shrug. "Why do you want to know? I can be superstitious too. I broke him into fragments and scattered those fragments to the wind. If the old tales are true that his shade will pine for the restoration of his body, then his soul wanders the winds."

"Master, what will become of our shades if our bodies are destroyed?"

"God only knows, Amadeo. I despair of knowing. I have lived too long to think of destroying myself. My fate is perhaps the same fate of the whole physical world. That we could have come from nothing and return to nothing, this is entirely possible. But let us enjoy our illusions of immortality, as mortals enjoy theirs."

Good enough.

My Master was absent from the palazzo twice, when he went on those mysterious journeys which he wouldn't explain to me any more now than he had before.

I hated these absences, but I knew that they were tests of my new powers. I had to rule within the house gently and unobtrusively, and I had to hunt on my own and make some account, upon Marius's return, of what I had done with my leisure time.

After the second journey, he came home weary and uncommonly sad. He said, as he had said once before, that "Those Who Must Be Kept" seemed to be at peace.

"I hate it what these creatures are!" I said.

"No, never say such a thing to me, Amadeo!" he burst out. In a flash I'd seen him more angry and uncomposed than ever in our lives. I'm not sure I'd ever seen him really angry in our lives.

He approached me and I shrank back, actually afraid. But by the time he struck me, hard across the face, he'd recovered himself, and it was just the usual brain-jarring blow.

I accepted it, and then threw him one exasperated searing glance. "You act like a child," I said, "a child playing Master, and so I must

master my feelings and put up with this."

Of course it took all my reserves to say this, especially when my head was swimming, and I made my face such an obdurate mask of contempt that suddenly he burst out laughing.

I started to laugh too.

"But really, Marius," I said, feeling very cheeky, "what are these creatures you speak of?" I made my wisdom nice and reverent. My question was, after all, sincere. "You come home miserable, Sir. You know you do. So what are they, and why must they be kept?"

"Amadeo, don't ask me anymore. Sometimes just before morning, when my fears are at their worst, I imagine that we have enemies among the blood drinkers, and they're close."

"Others? As strong as you?"

"No, those who have come in past years are never as strong as me, and that is why they're gone."

I was enthralled. He had hinted at this before, that he kept our territory clean of others, but he wouldn't elaborate, and now he seemed softened up with unhappiness and willing to talk.

"But I imagine that there are others, and that they'll come to disturb our peace. They won't have a good reason. They never do. They'll want to hunt the Veneto, or they will have formed some willful little battalion, and they'll try to destroy us out of sheer sport. I imagine … but the point is, my child—and you are my child, smart one!—I don't tell you any more about the ancient mysteries than you need to know. That way, no one can pick your apprentice mind for its deepest secrets, either with your cooperation or without your knowledge, or against your will."

"If we have a history worth knowing, Sir, then you should tell me. What ancient mysteries? You wall me up with books on human history. You've made me learn Greek, and even this miserable Egyptian script which no one else knows, and you question me all the time on the fate of ancient Rome and ancient Athens, and the battles of every Crusade ever sent from our shores to the Holy Land. But what of us?"

"Always here," he said, "I told you. Ancient as mankind itself. Always here, and always a few, and always warring and best when alone and needing the love only of one other or two at most. That's the history, plain and simple. I will expect you to write it out for me in all five languages you now know."

He sat down on the bed, disgruntled, letting his muddy boot dig into the satin. He fell back on the pillows. He was really raw and strange and seemingly young.

"Marius, come on now," I coaxed. I was at the desk. "What ancient mysteries? What are Those Who Must Be Kept?"

"Go dig into our dungeons, child," he said, lacing his voice with sarcasm. "Find the statues there I have from so-called pagan days. You'll find things as useful as Those Who Must Be Kept. Leave me alone. I'll tell you some night, but for now, I give you what counts. In my absence you were supposed to study Tell me now what you learnt."

He had in fact demanded that I learn all of Aristotle, not from the manuscripts which were common currency in the piazza, but from an old text of his own which he said was purer Greek. I'd read it all.

"Aristotle," I said. "And St. Thomas Aquinas. Ah, well, great systems give comfort, and when we feel ourselves slipping into despair, we should devise great schemes of the nothing around us, and then we will not slip but hang on a scaffold of our making, as meaningless as nothing, but too detailed to be so easily dismissed."

"Well done," he said with an eloquent sigh. "Maybe some night in the far distant future, you'll take a more hopeful approach, but as you seem as animated and full of happiness as you can be, why should I complain?"

"We must come from somewhere," I said, pushing the other point.

He was too crestfallen to answer.

Finally, he rallied, climbing up off the pillows and coming towards me. "Let's go out. Let's find Bianca, and dress her up as a man for a while. Bring your finest. She needs to be freed of those rooms for a spell."

"Sir, this may come as a rude shock to you, but Bianca, like many women, already has that habit. In the guise of a boy, she slips out all the time to make the rounds of the city."

"Yes, but not in our company," he said. "We shall show her the worst places!" He made a dramatic comical face. "Come on."

I was excited.

As soon as we told the little plan to her, she was excited too.

We came bursting in with an armful of fine clothes, and she immediately slipped away with us to get dressed.

“What have you brought me? Oh, I’m to be Amadeo tonight, splendid,” she said. She shut the doors on her company, who as usual carried on without her, several men singing around the Virginal and others arguing heatedly over their dice.

She stripped off her clothes and stepped out of them, naked as Venus from the sea. We both dressed her in blue leggings and tunic and doublet. I pulled her belt tight, and Marius caught her hair up in a soft velvet hat.

“You’re the prettiest boy in the Veneto,” he said stepping back. “Something tells me I’ll have to protect you with our life.”

“Are you really going to take me to the worst haunts? I want to see dangerous places!” She threw up her arms. “Give me my stiletto. You don’t expect me to go unarmed.”

“I have all the proper weapons for you,” Marius said. He had brought a sword with a beautiful diamond-studded diagonal belt which he clasped at her hip. “Try to draw this. It’s no dancing rapier. It’s a war sword. Come on.”

She took the handle with both hands and brought it forth in a wide sure sweep. “I wish I had an enemy,” she cried out, “who was ready to die.”

I looked at Marius. He looked at me. No, she couldn’t be one of us.

“That would be too selfish,” he whispered in my ear.

I couldn’t help but wonder, if I had not been dying after my fight with the Englishman, if the sweating sickness had not taken me over, would he have ever made me a vampire?

The three of us hurried down the stone steps to the quay. There was our canopied gondola waiting. Marius gave the address.

“Are you sure you want to go there, Master?” asked the gondolier, shocked because he knew the district where the worst of the foreign seamen congregated and drank and fought.

“Most sure of it,” he said.

As we moved off in the black waters, I put my arm around tender Bianca. Leaning back on the cushions, I felt invulnerable, immortal, certain that nothing would ever defeat me or Marius, and in our care Bianca would always be safe.

How very wrong I was.

Nine months perhaps we had together after our trip to Kiev. Nine or

maybe ten, I cannot mark the climax by any exterior event. Let me say only, before I proceed to bloody disaster, that Bianca was always with us in those last months. When we were not spying upon the carousers, we were in our house, where Marius painted her portraits, devising her as this or that goddess, as the Biblical Judith with the head of the Florentine for her Holofernes, or as the Virgin Mary staring rapt at a tiny Christ child, as perfectly rendered by Marius as any image he ever made.

Those pictures—perhaps some of them endure to this very day.

One night, when all slept except for the three of us, Bianca, about to give up on a couch as Marius painted, sighed and said, "I like your company too much. I don't ever want to go home."

Would that she had loved us less. Would that she had not been there on the fatal evening in 1499, just before the turn of the century, when the High Renaissance was in its glory, ever to be celebrated by artists and historians, would that she had been safe when our world went up in flames.

14

If you've read *The Vampire Lestat* you know what happened, for I showed it all to Lestat in visions two hundred years ago. Lestat set down in writing the images I made known to him, the pain I shared with him. And though I now propose to relive these horrors, to flesh out the tale in my own words, there are points where I cannot improve on his words, and may from time to time freely call them up.

It began suddenly. I awoke to find that Marius had lifted back the gilded cover of the sarcophagus. A torch blazed behind him on the wall.

"Hurry, Amadeo, they're here. They mean to burn our house."

"Who, Master? And why?"

He snatched me from the shining coffin box, and I rushed after him up the decaying stairs to the first floor of the ruined dwelling.

He wore his red cape and hood, and he moved so fast it took all my power to keep up with him.

"Is it Those Who Must Be Kept?" I asked. He slung his arm around me, and off we went to the rooftop of our own palazzo.

"No, child, it's a pack of foolish blood drinkers, bent on destroying all the work I've done. Bianca is there, at their mercy, and the boys too."

We entered by the roof doors and went down the marble steps. Smoke rose from the lower floors.

"Master, the boys, they're screaming!" I shouted.

Bianca came running to the foot of the stairs far below.

"Marius! Marius, they are demons. Use your magic!" she cried out, her hair streaming from the couch, her garments undone. "Marius!" Her wail echoed up the three floors of the palazzo.

"Dear God, the rooms are everywhere on fire!" I cried out. "We must have water to put this out. Master, the paintings!"

Marius dropped down over the railing and appeared, suddenly below, at her side. As I ran to join him, I saw a crowd of black-robed figures close in on him, and to my horror, try to set his clothes afire with the

torches they brandished, as they gave forth horrid shrieks and hissed curses from beneath their hoods.

From everywhere these demons came. The cries of the mortal apprentices were terrible.

Marius knocked his assailants away, turning his arm in a great arc, the torches rolling on the marble floor. He closed his cloak about Bianca.

"They mean to kill us!" she screamed. "They mean to burn us, Marius, they've slaughtered the boys, and others they've taken prisoner!"

Suddenly more of the black figures came running before the first attackers could climb to their feet. I saw what they were. All had the same white faces and hands as we had; all possessed the magic blood.

They were creatures such as we!

Again, Marius was attacked, only to fling off all of them. The tapestries of the great hall were ignited. Dark odoriferous smoke belched forth from the adjacent rooms. Smoke filled the stairwell above. An infernal flickering light suddenly made the place as bright as day.

I pitched myself into battle with the demons, finding them amazingly weak. And picking up one of their torches I rushed at them, driving them back, away from me, just as the Master did.

"Blasphemer, heretic!" came a hiss from one. "Demon idolator, pagan!" cursed another. They came on, and I fought them again, setting their robes afire so that they screamed and fled to the safety of the waters of the canal.

But there were too many of them. More poured into the hall even as we fought.

Suddenly, to my horror, Marius shoved Bianca away from him towards the open front doors of the palazzo.

"Run, darling, run. Get clear of the house."

Savagely he fought those who would follow her, running after her, to bring them down one by one as they tried to stop her, until I saw her vanish through the open doors.

There was no time to make certain she had reached safety. More of them had closed in on me. The flaming tapestries fell from their rods. Statues were overturned and smashed on the marble. I was nearly dragged down by two of the little demons who clutched at my left arm, until I drove my torch into the face of one, and set the other completely alight.

“To the roof, Amadeo, come!” Marius shouted.

“Master, the paintings, the paintings in the storage rooms!” I cried.

“Forget the paintings. It’s too late. Boys, run from here, get out now, save yourselves from the fire.”

Knocking the attackers back, he shot up the stairwell and called down to me from the uppermost railing. “Come, Amadeo, fight them off, believe in your strength, child, fight.”

Reaching the second floor, I was everywhere surrounded, and no sooner did I set one ablaze than another was on me, and not seeking to burn me they grabbed my arms and my legs. All my limbs were caught by them, until finally the torch was wrenched from my hand.

“Master, leave me, get away!” I called. I turned, kicking and writhing, and looked up to see him high above, and again surrounded, and this time a hundred torches were plunged into his ballooning red cloak, a hundred fiery brands were beating against his golden hair and his furious white face. It was as a swarm of blazing insects, and so by such numbers and such tactics the swarm rendered him first motionless; and then, with a great loud gust, his entire body went up in flames.

“Marius!” I screamed and screamed, unable to take my eyes off him, warring still with my captors, jerking loose my legs only to have them caught again by cold, hurting fingers, shoving with my arms, only to be pinioned once more. “Marius!” This cry came out of me with all my worst anguish and terror.

It seemed that nothing I had ever feared could be so unspeakable, so unendurable as the sight of him, high above, at the stone banister, completely engulfed in flame. His long slender form became a black outline but for one second, and it seemed I saw his profile, head thrown back, as his hair exploded and his fingers were like black spiders clawing up out of the fire for air.

“Marius!” I cried. All comfort, all goodness, all hope was burning in this black figure which my eyes would not let go, even as it dwindled, and lost all perceptible form.

Marius! My will died.

What remained was a remnant of it, and the remnant, as if commanded by a secondary soul made up of magic blood and power, fought mindlessly on.

A net was thrown over me, a net of steel mesh so heavy and so fine

that I could see nothing suddenly, only feel myself bound up in it, rolled over and over in it, by enemy hands. I was being carried out of the house. I could hear screams all around me. I could hear the running feet of those who carried me, and when the wind howled past us, I knew we had come to the shore.

Down into the bowels of a ship I was carried, my ears still full of mortal wails. The apprentices had been taken prisoner with me. I was thrown down among them, their soft frantic bodies heaped on me and beside me, and I, tightly bound in the net, could not even speak to utter words of comfort, and had no words to give them besides.

I felt the oars rise and fall, heard the inevitable splash in the water, and the great wooden galley shivered and moved out towards the open sea. It gained speed as if there were no night to fight its passage, and on and on plowed the oarsmen with a force and strength that mortal men could not have commanded, driving the ship south.

"Blasphemer," came a whisper near my ear.

The boys sobbed and prayed.

"Stop your impious prayers," said a cold preternatural voice, "you servants of the pagan Marius. You will die for your Master's sins, all of you."

I heard a sinister laughter, rumbling like low thunder over the moist soft sounds of their anguish and suffering. I heard a long, dry cruel laugh.

I closed my eyes, I went deep deep inside myself. I lay in the dirt of the Monastery of the Caves, a wraith of myself, tumbled back into safest and most terrible memories.

"Dear God," I whispered without moving my lips, "save them, and I swear to You I shall bury myself alive among the monks forever, I shall give up all pleasures, I shall do nothing hour by hour but praise Your Holy Name. Lord, God, deliver me. Lord, God—." But as the madness of panic took over, as I lost all sense of time and place, I called out for Marius. "Marius, for the love of God, Marius!"

Someone struck me. A leather-clad foot struck my head. Another struck my ribs, and yet another crushed my hand. All around me were these wicked feet, kicking me and bruising me. I went soft. I saw the shocks of the blows as so many colors, and I thought to myself bitterly, ah, what beautiful colors, yes, colors. Then came the increased wails of

my brothers. They too must suffer this, and what mental refuge did they have, these fragile young students, each so well loved and so well taught and groomed for the great world, to find themselves now at the mercy of these demons whose purpose was unknown to me, whose purpose lay beyond anything of which I could conceive.

"Why do this to us?" I whispered.

"To punish you!" came a gentle whisper. "To punish you for all your vain and blasphemous deeds, for the worldly and Godless life you've lived. What is Hell to this, young one?"

Ah, so the executioners of the mortal world said a thousand times when they led heretics to the stake. "What are the fires of Hell to this brief suffering?" Oh, such self-serving and arrogant lies.

"Do you think so?" came the whisper. "Lay a caution on your thoughts, young one, for there are those who can pick your mind barren of all its thoughts. There may be no Hell for you, child, but there will be suffering eternal. Your nights of luxury and lasciviousness are over. The truth awaits you now."

Once again, I retreated into my deepest mental hiding place. I had no body anymore. I lay in the Monastery, in the earth, unfeeling of my body. I put my mind at work on the tone of the voices near me, such sweet and pitiable voices. I picked out the boys by name and slowly made a count of them. Over half our little company, our splendid cherubic company, was in this abominable prison.

I did not hear Riccardo. But then, when our captors had finished their abuse for a while, I did hear Riccardo.

He intoned a litany in Latin, in a raw and desperate whisper. "Blessed be God." The others were quick to answer. "Blessed be His Holy Name." And so on it went, the prayers, the voice gradually becoming weak in the silence until Riccardo alone prayed.

I did not give the responses.

Yet on he went, now that his charges mercifully slept, praying to comfort himself, or perhaps merely for the glory of God. He moved from the litany into the *Pater Noster*, and from then into the comforting age-old words of the *Ave* which he said over and over, as if making a rosary, all alone, as he lay imprisoned in the bottom of the ship.

I spoke no words to him. I did not even let him know that I was there. I couldn't save him. I couldn't comfort him. I couldn't even explain this

terrible fate which had befallen us. I couldn't above all reveal what I had seen: the Master perishing, the great one gone into the simple and eternal agony of fire.

I had slipped into a shock near to despair. I let my mind recover the sight of Marius burning, Marius a living torch, turning and twisting in the fire, his fine fingers reaching heavenward like spiders in the orange flame. Marius was dead; Marius was burned. There had been too many of them for Marius. I knew what he would have said if he had come to me a comforting specter. "There were simply too many of them, Amadeo, too many. I couldn't stop them, though I tried."

I slipped into tormented dreams. The ship bore on through the night, carrying me away from Venice, away from the ruin of all that I believed in, all that I held dear.

I awoke to the sounds of singing and to the smell of the earth, but it was not Russian earth.

We were no longer at sea. We were imprisoned on land.

Still bound in the net, I listened to hollow preternatural voices chanting with a villainous gusto the awful hymn, *Dies Irae*, or Day of Wrath.

A low drum carried on the zesty rhythm as if it were a song for dancing rather than a terrible lament of the Final Days. On and on went the Latin words speaking of the day when all the world would be turned to ashes, when the great trumpets of the Lord would blast to signal the opening of all graves. Death itself and nature would both shudder. All souls would be brought together, no soul able anymore to hide anything from the Lord. Out of His book, every sin would be read aloud. Vengeance would fall upon everyone. Who was there to defend us, but the Judge Himself, Our Majestic Lord? Our only hope was the pity of Our God, the God who had suffered the Cross for us, who would not let His sacrifice be in vain.

Yes, beautiful old words, but they issued from an evil mouth, the mouth of one who did not even know their meaning, who tapped at his eager drum as if ready for a feast.

A night had passed. We were entombed and now being released from our prison, as the dreaded little voice sang on to its spirited little drum.

I heard the whispers of the older boys, seeking to give the young ones comfort, and the steady voice of Riccardo assuring all of them that

surely they would soon discover what these creatures wanted, and perhaps be allowed to go free.

Only I heard the rustling, impish laughter everywhere. Only I knew how many preternatural monsters lurked about us, as we were brought into a light of a monstrous fire.

The net was torn from me. I rolled over, clutching at the grass. I looked up and saw that we were in a great clearing beneath high and indifferent bright stars. It was the summery air, and great towering green trees surrounded us. But the blast of the raging bonfire distorted everything. The boys, chained together, their clothes torn, their faces scratched and streaked with blood, cried out frantically when they saw me, yet I was snatched away from them and held, a bevy of little hooded demons fastened to both my hands.

"I can't help you!" I cried. It was selfish and terrible. It came from my pride. It made only panic among them.

I saw Riccardo, as badly beaten as the rest, turn from right to left, trying to quiet them, his hands bound before him, his doublet almost torn off his back.

He turned his glance to me, and then together we looked around us at the great wreath of dark-dressed figures that enclosed us. Could he see the whiteness of their faces and hands? Did he, on an instinctive level, know what they were?

"Be quick if you mean to kill us!" he called out. "We've done nothing. We don't know who you are or why you've taken us. We are innocent, to a one."

I was touched by his bravery, and I pulled my thoughts together. I must stop shrinking in horror from my last memory of the Master, but imagine him living, and think what he would tell me to do.

We were outnumbered, that was obvious, and I could now detect smiles on the faces of the hooded figures, who though they draped their eyes in shadow, revealed their long twisted mouths.

"Where is the leader here?" I demanded, raising my voice above the level of human power. "Surely you see these boys are nothing but mortals! Your argument must be with me!"

The long string of surrounding black-robed figures caved in to whispering and murmuring amongst themselves at this. Those clustered about the band of enchained boys tightened their ranks. And as others

whom I could scarce see threw more and more wood and pitch onto the great fire, it seemed the enemy prepared for action.

Two couples placed themselves before the apprentices who seemed not in their wailing and crying to realize what this meant.

I realized it at once.

"No, you must speak with me, reason with me!" I shouted, straining against those who held me. To my horror, they only laughed.

Suddenly drums began again, some one-hundredfold louder than before, as if an entire circle of drummers surrounded us and the hissing, spitting fire.

They took up that steady beat of the *Dies Irae* hymn, and suddenly the wreath of figures all to a one straightened and locked hands. They began to sing the words in Latin of the terrible day of woe. Each figure began to rock playfully, lifting knees in playful march as a hundred voices spit out the words to the obvious rhythm of a dance. It made an ugly mockery of the piteous words.

The drums were joined by the shrill squeal of pipes, and the repeated slam of tambourines, and suddenly the entire wreath of dancers, still hand in hand, was moving, bodies swaying side to side from the waist up, heads bobbing, mouths grinning. "Dee-eees—a—ray, dee-ees–eee—raw!" they sang.

I panicked. But I couldn't shake loose of my captors. I screamed.

The first pair of robed beings before the boys had broken out the first of them who was to suffer and tossed his struggling body high in the air. The second pair of figures caught it, and, with great preternatural thrusts, hurled the helpless child in an arc into the great fire.

With piteous shrieks, the boy fell into the flames and vanished, and the other apprentices, now certain of their fate, went wild with crying and sobbing and screaming, but to no avail.

One after another, boys were disentangled from the others and hurled into the flames.

I thrashed back and forth, kicking at the ground and at my opponents. Once I broke one arm loose only to have it imprisoned by three other figures with hard pinching fingers. I sobbed:

"Don't do this, they're innocent. Don't kill them. Don't."

No matter how loud I cried out I could hear the dying cries of the boys who burned, *Amadeo, save us*, whether there were words to the final

terror or no. Finally all the living took up this chant. "*Amadeo, save us!*" but their band was not halved and soon only a fourth remained, squirming and struggling, as they were finally heaved up to the unspeakable death.

The drums played on, with the mocking chink, chink, chink of the tambourines and the whining melody of the horns. The voices made a fearful chorus, each syllable sharpened with venom as the hymn was sung out.

"So much for your cohorts!" hissed the figure nearest me. "So you sob for them, do you? When you should have made a meal of them each and every one for the love of God!"

"The love of God!" I cried. "How dare you speak of the love of God! You slaughter children!" I managed to turn and kick at him, wounding him far worse than he expected, but as ever, three more guards took his place.

Finally in the lurid blast of the fire, only three white-faced children were left, the very youngest of our household, and none of them made a sound. It was eerie their silence, their little faces wet and quivering, as they were given up, their eyes dull and unbelieving, into the flames.

I called their names. At the top of my lungs, I called out: "In Heaven, my brothers, in Heaven, you go into the arms of God!"

But how could their mortal ears hear over the deafening song of the chanters.

Suddenly, I realized Riccardo had not been among them. Riccardo had either escaped or been spared, or been saved for something worse. I knotted my brows in a tight frown to help me lock these thoughts in my mind, lest these preternatural beasts remember Riccardo.

But I was yanked from my thoughts and dragged towards the pyre.

"Now you, brave one, little Ganymede of the blasphemers, you, you willful, brazen cherub."

"No!" I dug in my heels. It was unthinkable. I couldn't die like this; I couldn't go into the flames. Frantically I reasoned with myself, "But you have just seen your brothers die, why not you?" and yet I couldn't accept this as possible, no, not me, I was immortal, no!

"Yes, you, and fire will make a roast of you as it has of them. Do you smell their flesh roasting? Do you smell their burnt bones?"

I was thrown high in the air, high enough by their powerful hands to

feel the very breeze catch hold of my hair, and then to peer down into the fire, as its annihilating blast struck my face, my chest, my outstretched arms.

Down, down, down into the heat I went, sprawled out, in the thunder of crackling wood and dancing orange flames. *So I die!* I thought if I thought anything, but I think that all I knew was panic, and surrender, surrender to what would be unspeakable pain.

Hands clutched me, burning wood tumbled and roared beneath me. I was being dragged off the fire. I was being dragged across the ground. Feet stomped on my burning clothes. My burning tunic was ripped off me. I gasped for air. I felt pain all over my body, the dread pain of burnt flesh, and I deliberately rolled my eyes up into my head to seek oblivion. *Come, Master, come if there is a paradise for us, come to me*. I pictured him, burnt, a black skeleton, but he put out his arms to receive me.

A figure stood over me. I lay on the moist Mother Earth, thank God, the smoke still rising from my scorched hands and face and my hair. The figure was big-shouldered, tall, black-haired.

He lifted two strong thick-knuckled white hands and drew his hood back off his head, revealing a huge mass of shining black hair. His eyes were large with pearly whites and pupils of jet, and his eyebrows, though very thick, were beautifully arched and curved over his eyes. He was a vampire, as were the others, but he was one of unique beauty and immense presence, looking down at me as though he were more interested in me than himself, though he expected to be the center of all eyes.

A tiny shiver of thanks passed through me, that he seemed by virtue of these eyes and his smooth Cupid's bow mouth to be possessed of the semblance of human reason.

"Will you serve God?" he asked. His voice was cultured and gentle, and his eyes held no mockery. "Answer me, Will you serve God, for if you will not, you will be thrown back into the fire."

I felt pain in all my frame. No thought came to me except that the words he spoke were impossible, they made no sense, and I could therefore make no response.

At once, his vicious helpers lifted me again, laughing, and chanting in time with the loud singing of the hymn which had never ceased, "Into the fire, into the fire!"

“No!” the leader cried out. “I see in him the pure love of our Savior.” He lifted his hand. The others released their grip, though they held me suspended, my legs and arms spread out, in the air.

“You are good?” I whispered desperately to the figure. “How can this be?” I wept.

He drew nearer. He leant over me. What beauty he possessed! His thick mouth was the perfect Cupid’s bow, as I have said, but only now did I see its rich dark color, natural to it, and the even shadow of beard, shaven away for the last time in mortal life no doubt, that covered all his lower face, giving it the strong mask of a man. His high broad forehead seemed made of pure white bone only by comparison, with full rounded temples and a peaked hairline, from which his dark curls fell back gracefully to make a striking frame for his face.

But it was the eyes, yes, as always with me, the eyes that held me, the large oval and shimmering eyes.

“Child,” he whispered. “Would I suffer such horrors if it were not for God?”

I wept all the more.

I was no longer afraid. I didn’t care that I was in pain. The pain was red and golden as the flames had been and ran through me as if it were fluid, but though I felt it, it didn’t hurt me, and I didn’t care.

Without protest, I was carried, my eyes closed, into a passage, where the shuffling feet of those who carried me made a soft, crumbling echo against low ceiling and walls.

Let loose to roll over on the ground, I turned my face to it, sad that I lay on a nest of old rags because I couldn’t feel the moist Mother Earth when I needed her, and then this too was of no import whatsoever, and I laid my cheek on the soiled linen and drifted, as if I had put there to sleep.

My scalded skin was a part from me, and not a part of me. And I let a long sigh come out of me, knowing, though I didn’t form words in my mind, that all my poor boys were safely dead. The fire could not have tortured them for long, no. Its heat was too great, and surely their souls had fled Heavenward like nightingales that had drifted into the smoky blast.

My boys were of the Earth no more and no one could do them harm. All the fine things which Marius had done for them, the teachers, the

skills they'd been taught, the lessons they'd learned, their dancing, their laughter, their singing, the works they had painted—all of this was gone, and the souls went Heavenward on soft white wings.

Would I have followed? Would God have received the soul of a blood drinker into his golden cloudy Heaven? Would I have left the awful sound of these demons chanting Latin for the realm of angels' song?

Why did those near me allow these thoughts in me, for surely they read them from my mind. I could feel the presence of the leader, the black-eyed one, the powerful one. Perhaps I was here with him alone. If he could make sense of this, if he could lend it meaning and thereby contain its monstrousness, then he would be some saint of God. I saw soiled and starving monks in caves.

I rolled over on my back, luxuriating in the splashy red and yellow pain that bathed me, and I opened my eyes.

15

A mellow and comforting voice spoke to me, directly to me:

"Your Master's vain works are all burnt; nothing but ashes remain now of his paintings. God forgive him, that he used his sublime powers not in the service of God but in the service of the World, the Flesh and the Devil, yes, I say the Devil, though the Devil is our standard bearer, for the Evil One is proud of us and satisfied with our pain; but Marius served the Devil with no regard to the wishes of God, and the mercies granted us by God, that rather than burn in the flames of Hell, we rule in the shadows of the Earth."

"Ah," I whispered. "I see your twisted philosophy."

There came no admonition.

Gradually, though I had rather hear only the voice, my eyes began to focus. There were human skulls, bleached and covered with dust, pressed in the domed earth over my head. Skulls pressed into the earth with mortar so that they formed the entire ceiling, like clean white shells from the sea. Shells for the brain, I thought, for what is left of them, as they protrude from the mortared soil behind them, but the dome that covers the brain and the round black holes where once the jellied eyes were poised, acute as dancers, ever vigilant to report the splendors of the world to the carapaced mind.

All skulls, a dome of skulls, and where the dome came down to meet the walls, a lacing of thigh bones all around it, and below that the random bones of the mortal form, making no pattern, any more than random stones do when they are similarly pressed in mortar to make a wall.

All bones, this place, and lighted with candles. Yes, I smelled the candles, purest beeswax, as for the rich.

"No," said the voice, thoughtfully, "rather for the church, for this is God's church, though the Devil is our Superior General, the founding saint of our Order, so why not beeswax? Leave it to you, a vain and a

worldly Venetian, to think it luxury, to confuse it with the wealth in which you wallowed rather like the pig in his slops."

I laughed softly. "Give me more of your generous and idiotic logic," I said. "Be the Aquinas of the Devil. Speak on."

"Don't mock me," he said imploringly and sincerely. "I saved you from the fire."

"I would be dead now if you had not."

"You want to burn?"

"No, not to suffer so, no, I can't bear the thought of it, that I or anyone should suffer so. But to die, yes."

"And what do you think will be your destination if you do die? Are the fires of Hell not fifty times as hot as the fires we lighted for you and your friends? You are Hell's child; you were from the first moment that the blasphemer Marius infused you with our blood. No one can reverse this judgment. You are kept alive by blood that is cursed and unnatural and pleasing to Satan, and pleasing to God only because He must have Satan to show forth His goodness, and to give mankind a choice to be good or bad."

I laughed again, but as respectfully as I could. "There are so many of you," I said. I turned my head. The numerous candles blinded me, but it wasn't unpleasant. It was as if a different species of flame danced on the wicks, than the species that had consumed my brothers.

"Were they your brothers, these spoilt and pampered mortals?" he asked. His voice was unwavering.

"Do you believe all the rot you're talking to me?" I asked, imitating his tone.

He laughed now, and it was a decently churchly laugh as though we were whispering together about the absurdity of a sermon. But the Blessed Sacrament was not here as it would be in a consecrated church, so why whisper?

"Dear one," he said. "It would be so simple to torture you, to turn your arrogant little mind inside out, and make you nothing but an instrument for raucous screams. It would be nothing to wall you up so that your screams would not be too loud for us, but merely a pleasing accompaniment to our nightly meditation. But I have no taste for such things. That is why I serve the Devil so well; I have never come to like cruelty or evil. I despise them, and would that I could look upon a

Crucifix, I would do so and weep as I did when I was a mortal man."

I let my eyes close, forsaking all the dancing flames that besprinkled the gloom. I sent my strongest most stealthy power into his mind, but came upon a locked door.

"Yes, that is my image for shutting you out. Painfully literal for such an educated infidel. But then your dedication to Christ the Lord was nourished among the literal and the naive, was it not? But here, someone comes with a gift for you which will greatly hasten our agreement."

"Agreement, Sir, and what agreement will that be?" I asked.

I too heard the other. A strong and terrible odor penetrated my nostrils. I did not move or open my eyes. I heard the other one laughing in that low rumbling fashion so perfected by the others who had sung the *Dies Irae* with such lewd polish. The smell was noxious, the smell was that of human flesh burnt or something thereof. I hated it. I began to turn my head and tried to stop myself. Sound and pain I could endure, but not this terrible, terrible odor.

"A gift for you, Amadeo," said the other.

I looked up. I stared into the eyes of a vampire formed like a young man with whitish-blond hair and the long lean frame of a Norseman. He held up a great urn with both hands. And then he turned it.

"Ah, no, stop!" I threw up my hands. I knew what it was. But it was too late.

The ashes came down in a torrent on me. I choked and cried, and turned over. I couldn't get them out of my eyes and my mouth.

"The ashes of your brothers, Amadeo," said the Norse vampire. He gave way to a wild peal of laughter.

Helpless, lying on my face, my hands up to the sides of my face, I shook myself all over, feeling the hot weight of the ashes. At last I turned over and over, and then sprang up to my knees, and to my feet. I backed into the wall. A great iron rack of candles went over, the little flames arcing in my blurred vision, the tapers themselves thudding in the mud. I heard the clatter of bones. I flung my arms up in front of my face.

"What's happened to our pretty composure?" asked the Norse vampire. "We are a weeping cherub, aren't we? That is what your Master called you, cherub, no? Here!" He pulled at my arm, and with the other hand tried to smear the ashes on me.

“You damnable fiend!” I cried. I went mad with fury and indignation. I grabbed his head with both my hands, and using all my strength turned it around on his neck, snapping all the bones, and then I kicked him hard with my right foot. He sank down on his knees, moaning, living still with his broken neck, but not in one piece would he live, I vowed, and kicking at him with the full weight of my right foot, I tore his head from him, the skin ripping and snapping, and the blood pouring out of the gaping trunk, I yanked the head free.

“Ah, look at you now, Sir!” I said, staring down into his frantic eyes. The pupils still danced. “Oh, die, will you, for your own sake.” I buried my left fingers tight in his hair, and turning this way and that, I found a candle with my right hand, ripped it from the iron nail that held it and jammed it into his eye sockets one after the other, until he saw no more.

“Ah, then it can be done this way as well,” I said looking up and blinking in the dazzle of the candles.

Slowly, I made out his figure. His thick curly black hair was free and tangled, and he sat at an angle, black robes flowing down around his stool, facing slightly away from me, but regarding me so that I could trace the lineaments of his face easily in the light. A noble and beautiful face, with the curling lips as strong as the huge eyes.

“I never liked him,” he said softly, raising his eyebrows, “though I must say, you do impress me, and I did not expect to see him gone so soon.”

I shuddered. A horrible coldness seized me, a soulless ugly anger, routing sorrow, routing madness, routing hope.

I hated the head I held and wanted to drop it, but the thing still lived. The bleeding sockets quivered, and the tongue darted from side to side out of the mouth. “Oh, this is a revolting thing!” I cried.

“He always said such unusual things,” said the black-haired one. “He was a pagan, you see. That you never were. I mean he believed in the gods of the north forest, and in Thor ever circling the world with his hammer …”

“Are you going to talk forever?” I asked. “I must burn this thing even after this, mustn’t I?” I asked.

He threw me the most charming innocent smile.

“You are a fool to be in this place,” I whispered. My hands shook uncontrollably.

Not waiting for a response, I turned and snatched up another candle, having so thoroughly snuffed the other, and set fire to the dead being's hair. The stench sickened me. I made a sound like a boy crying.

I dropped the flaming head into the robed and headless body. I threw the candle down into the flames, so that the wax might feed it. Gathering up the other candles I had knocked down, I fed them to the fire and stepped back as a great heat rose from the dead one.

The head appeared to roll about in the flames, more than was likely, so I grabbed up the iron candelabra I had knocked over, and using this like a rake, I plunged it into the burning mass to flatten and crush what lay beneath the fire.

At the very last his outstretched hands curled, fingers digging into the palms. Ah, to have life in this state, I thought wearily, and with the rake I knocked the arms against the torso. The fire reeked of rags and human blood, blood he'd drunk no doubt, but there was no other human scent to it, and with despair I saw that I had made a fire of him right in the middle of the ashes of my friends.

Well, it seemed appropriate. "You are revenged in one of them," I said with a defeated sigh. I threw down the crude candleholder rake. I left him there. The room was large. I walked dejectedly, my feet bare from the fire having burned off my felt slippers, to another broad place among iron candelabra, where the moist good earth was black and seemingly clean, and there I lay down again, as I had before, not caring that the black-haired one had a very good view of me there, as I was more in front of him than even before.

"Do you know that Northern worship?" he asked, as if nothing dreadful had happened. "Oh, that Thor is forever circling with his hammer, and the circle grows smaller and smaller, and beyond lies chaos, and we are here, doomed within the dwindling circle of warmth. Have you ever heard it? He was a pagan, made by renegade magicians who used him to murder their enemies. I am glad to be rid of him, but why do you cry?"

I didn't answer. This was beyond all hope, this horrid domed chamber of skulls, the myriad candles illuminating only remnants of death, and this being, this beautiful powerfully built black-haired being ruling amid all this horror and feeling nothing on the death of one who had served him, who was now a pile of smoldering stinking bones.

I imagined I was home. I was safe within my Master's bedchamber. We sat together. He read from a Latin text. It did not matter what the words were. All around us were the accouterments of civilization, sweet and pretty things, and the fabrics of the room had all been worked by human hands.

"Vain things," said the black-haired one. "Vain and foolish, but you'll come to see it. You are stronger than I reckoned. But then he was centuries old, your Maker, nobody even tells of a time when there wasn't Marius, the lone wolf, who abides no one in his territory, Marius, the destroyer of the young."

"I never knew him to destroy any but those who were evil," I said in a whisper.

"We are evil, aren't we? All of us are evil. So he destroyed us without compunction. He thought he was safe from us. He turned his back on us! He considered us not worthy of his attentions, and look, how he has lavished all his strength on a boy. But I must say you are a most beautiful boy."

There was a noise, an evil rustling, not unfamiliar. I smelled rats.

"Oh, yes, my children, the rats," he said. "They come to me. Do you want to see? Turn over and look up at me, if you will? Think no more on St. Francis, with his birds and squirrels and the wolf at his side. Think on Santino, with his rats."

I did look. I drew in my breath. I sat up in the dirt and stared at him. A great gray rat sat on his shoulder, its tiny whiskered snout just kissing his ear, its tail curling behind his head. Another rat had come to sit sedately, as if spellbound, in his lap. There were others gathered at his feet.

Seeming loath to move lest they startle, he carefully dipped his right hand into a bowl of dried bread crumbs. I caught the scent only now, mingled with that of the rats. He offered a handful of crumbs to the rat on his shoulder, who ate from it gratefully and with strange delicacy, and then he dropped some of the bread in his lap, where three rats came to feast at once.

"Do you think I love such things?" he said. He looked intently at me, his eyes widening with the emphasis on his words. His black hair was a dense tangled veil on his shoulders, his forehead very smooth and shining white in the candlelight.

"Do you think I love to live here in the bowels of the world," he asked sadly, "under the great city of Rome, where the earth seeps waste from the foul throng above, and have these, the vermin, as my familiars? Do you think I was never flesh and blood, or that, having undergone this change for the sake of Almighty God and His Divine Plan, I don't long for the life you lived with your greedy Master? Have I not eyes to see the brilliant colors which your Master spread over his canvases? Do I not like the sounds of ungodly music?" He gave a soft agonizing sigh.

"What has God made or ever suffered to be made that is distasteful in itself?" he continued. "Sin is not repulsive in itself; how absurd to think so. No one comes to love pain. We can only hope to endure it."

"Why all this?" I asked. I was sick unto vomiting, but I held it back. I breathed as deeply as I could to let all the smells of this horror chamber flood my lungs and cease to torment me.

I sat back, crossing my legs so that I could study him. I wiped the ashes out of my eye. "Why? Your themes are entirely familiar, but what is this realm of vampires in black monkly robes?"

"We are the Defenders of Truth," he said sincerely.

"Oh, who is not the defender of truth, for the love of Heaven," I said bitterly. "Look, the blood of your brother in Christ is stuck all over my hands! And you sit, the freakish blood-stuffed replicant of a human being staring on all this as if it were so much chitchat among the candles!"

"Ah, but you have a fiery tongue for one with such a sweet face," he said in cool wonder. "So pliant you seem with your soft brown eyes and dark autumnal red hair, but you are clever."

"Clever? You burnt my Master! You destroyed him. You burnt up his children! I am your prisoner here, am I not? What for? And you talk of the Lord Jesus Christ to me? You? You? Answer me, what is this morass of filth and fancy, molded out of clay and blessed candles!"

He laughed. His eyes crinkled at the edges, and his face was cheerful and sweet. His hair, for all its filth and tangles, kept its preternatural luster. How fine he would have been if freed from the dictates of this nightmare.

"Amadeo," he said. "We are the Children of Darkness," he explained patiently. "We vampires are made to be the scourge of man, as is pestilence. We are part of the trials and tribulations of this world; we drink blood, and we kill for the glory of God who would test his human

creatures."

"Don't speak horrors." I put my hands over my ears. I cringed.

"Oh, but you know it's true," he insisted without raising his voice. "You know it as you see me in my robes and you look about my chamber. I am restrained for The Living Lord as were the monks of old before they learned to paint their walls with erotic paintings."

"You talk madness, and I don't know why you do it." I would not remember the Monastery of the Caves!

"I do it because I have found my purpose here and the purpose of God, and there is nothing Higher. Would you be damned and alone, and selfish and without purpose? Would you turn your back on a design so magnificent that not one tiny child is forgotten! Did you think you could live forever without the splendor of that great scheme, struggling to deny the handiwork of God in every beautiful thing which you coveted and made your own?"

I fell silent. Don't think on the old Russian saints. Wisely, he did not press. On the contrary, very softly, without the devilish lilt, he began to sing the Latin hymn …

Dies irae, dies illa
Solvet saeclum in favilla
Teste David cum Sibylla
Quantus tremor est futurus …

That day of wrath, that day will turn the earth to ashes.
As both David and Sybelle have foretold
How great a tremor there will be …

"And on that Day, that Final Day, we shall have duties for Him, we His Dark Angels shall take the Evil souls down into the inferno as is His Divine Will."

I looked up at him again. "And then the final plea of this hymn, that He have mercy on us, was His Passion not for us?"

I sang it softly in Latin:

Recordare, Jesu pie,
Quod sum causa tuae viae …

Remember, merciful Jesus,

I pressed on, scarcely having the spirit for it, to fully acknowledge the horror. "What monk was there in the Monastery of my childhood who didn't hope one day to be with God? What do you say to me now, that we, the Children of Darkness, serve Him with *no hope of ever being with Him*?"

He looked broken suddenly.

"Pray there is some secret that we don't know," he whispered. He looked off as if he were in fact praying. "How can He not love Satan when Satan has done so well? How can He not love us? I don't understand, but I am what I am, which is this, and you are the same." He looked at me, eyebrows rising gently again to underscore his wonder. "And we must serve Him. Otherwise we are lost."

He slipped from the stool and came down towards me, settling on the floor opposite me, cross-legged, and putting his long arm out to place his hand on my shoulder.

"Splendid being," I said, "and to think God made you as he made the boys you destroyed tonight, the perfect bodies you rendered to the fire."

He was in deep distress. "Amadeo, take another name and come with us, be with us. We need you. And what will you do alone?"

"Tell me why you killed my Master."

He let go of me and let his hand fall in the lap made by his black robe stretched across his knees.

"It's forbidden to us to use our talents to dazzle mortals. It is forbidden us to trick them with our skills. It is forbidden us to seek the solace of their company. It is forbidden us to walk in the places of light."

Nothing in this surprised me.

"We are monks as pure at heart as those of Cluny," he said. "We make our Monasteries strict and holy, and we hunt and we kill to perfect the Garden of Our Lord as a Vale of Tears." He paused, and then making his voice all the more soft and wondering, he continued. "We are as the bees that sting, and the rats that steal the grain; we are as the Black Death come to take young or old, beautiful or ugly, that men and women shall tremble at the power of God."

He looked at me, imploring me for understanding.

"Cathedrals rise from dust," he said, "to show man wonder. And in

the stones men carve the Danse Macabre to show that life is brief. We carry scythes in the army of the robed skeleton who is carved on a thousand doorways, a thousand walls. We are the followers of Death, whose cruel visage is drawn in a million tiny prayer books which the rich and the poor alike hold in their hands." His eyes were huge and dreamy. He looked about us at the grim domed cell in which we sat. I could see the candles in the black pupils of his eyes. His eyes closed for a moment, and then opened, clearer, more bright.

"Your Master knew these things," he said regretfully. "He knew. But he was of a pagan time, obdurate and angry, and refusing ever the grace of God. In you, he saw God's grace, because your soul is pure. You are young and tender and open like the moonflower to take the light of the night. You hate us now, but you will come to see."

"I don't know that I will ever see anything again," I said. "I'm cold and small and have no understanding now of feeling, of longing, even of hate. I don't hate you, when I should. I'm empty. I want to die."

"But it's God's will when you die, Amadeo," he said. "Not your own." He stared hard at me, and I knew I couldn't hide from him any longer my recollection—the monks of Kiev, starving slowly in their earthen cells, saying they must take sustenance for it was God's will when they should die.

I tried to hide these things, I drew these tiny pictures to myself and locked them up. I thought of nothing. One word came to my tongue: horror. And then the thought that before this time I had been a fool.

Another came into the room. It was a female vampire. She entered through a wooden door, letting it close carefully behind her as a good nun might do, in order that no unnecessary noise be made. She came up to him and stood behind him.

Her full gray hair was tangled and filthy, as was his, and it too had formed a shapely veil of beauteous weight and density behind her shoulders. Her clothes were antique rags. She wore the low hip belt of women of olden times adorning a shapely dress that revealed her small waist and gently flaring hips, the courtly costume one sees graven on the stone figures of rich sarcophagi. Her eyes, like his, were huge as if to summon every precious particle of light in gloom. Her mouth was strong and full, and the fine bones of her cheeks and jaw shone well for the thin layer of silvery dust that covered her. Her neck and bosom were almost

bare.

"Will he be one of us?" she asked. Her voice was so lovely, so comforting, that I felt I'd been touched by it. "I have prayed for him. I have heard him weeping inside though he makes no sound."

I looked away from her, bound to be disgusted by her, my enemy, who had slain those I loved.

"Yes," said Santino, the dark-haired one. "He'll be one of us, and he can be a leader. He has such strength. He slew Alfredo there, you see? Oh, it was wonderful to behold how he did it, with such rage and with such a baby's scowl on his face."

She looked beyond me, at the ruin of what that vampire had been, and I didn't know myself what was left. I didn't turn to look at it.

A deep bitter sorrow softened her expression. How beautiful she must have been in life; how beautiful still if the dust were taken away from her.

Her eyes shot to me suddenly, accusingly, and then became mild.

"Vain thoughts, my child," she said. "I don't live for looking glasses, as your Master did. I need no velvet or silks to serve my Lord. Ah, Santino, such a newborn thing he is, look at him." She spoke of me. "In centuries gone by I might have penned verses in honor of such beauty, that it should come to us to grace God's sooted fold, a lily in the dark he is, a fairy's child planted by moonlight in a milkmaid's cradle to thrall the world with his girlish gaze and manly whisper."

Her flattery enraged me, but I could not bear in this Hell to lose the sheer beauty of her voice, its deep sweetness. I didn't care what she said. And as I looked at her white face in which many a vein had become a ridge in stone, I knew she was far too old for my impetuous violence. Yet kill, yes, yank head from body, yes, and stab with candles, yes. I thought of these things with clenched teeth, and him, how I would dispatch him for he was not so old, not nearly by half with his olive skin, but these compulsions died like weeds sprung from my mind stung by a northern wind, the deep frozen wind of my will dying inside of me.

Ah, but they were beautiful.

"You will not renounce all beauty," she said kindly, having drunk up my thoughts perhaps, despite all my devices for concealing them. "You will see another variant of beauty—a harsh and variegated beauty—when you take life and see that marvelous corporeal design become a

blazing web as you do suck it dry, and dying thoughts do fall on you like wailing veils to dim your eyes and make you but the school of those poor souls you hasten to glory or perdition—yes, beauty. You will see beauty in the stars that can forever be your comfort. And in the earth, yes, the earth itself, you will find a thousand shades of darkness. This will be your beauty. You do but forswear the brash colors of mankind and the defiant light of the rich and the vain."

"I forswear nothing," I said.

She smiled, her face filling with a warm and irresistible warmth, her huge long mat of white hair curling here and there in the ardent flicker of the candles.

She looked to Santino. "How well he understands the things we say," she said. "And yet he seems the naughty boy who mocks all things in ignorance."

"He knows, he knows," the other answered with surprising bitterness. He fed his rats. He looked at her and me. He seemed to muse and even to hum the old Gregorian chant again.

I heard others in the dark. And far away the drums still beat, but that was unendurable. I looked to the ceiling of this place, the blinded mouthless skulls that looked on all with limitless patience.

I looked at them, the seated figure of Santino brooding or lost in thought, and behind him and above him, her statuesque form in its ragged raiment, her gray hair parted in the middle, her face ornamented by the dust.

"Those Who Must Be Kept, child, who were they?" she asked suddenly.

Santino raised his right hand and made a weary gesture.

"Allesandra, of that he does not know. Be sure of it. Marius was too clever to tell him. And what of it, this old legend we've chased for countless years? Those Who Must Be Kept. If They are such that They must be kept, then They are no more, for Marius is no more to keep Them."

A tremor ran through me, a terror that I would break into uncontrollable weeping, that I should let them see this, no, an abomination. Marius no more …

Santino hastened to go on, as if in fear for me.

"God willed it. God has willed that all edifices should crumble, all

texts be stolen or burnt, all eyewitnesses to mystery be destroyed. Think on it, Allesandra. Think. Time has plowed under all those words written in the hand of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and Paul. Where is there one parchment scroll left which bears the signature of Aristotle? And Plato, would that we had one scrap he threw into the fire when feverishly working—?"

"What are those things to us, Santino?" she asked reprovingly, but her hand touched his head as she looked down. She smoothed his hair as though she were his Mother.

"I meant to say that it is the way of God," Santino said, "the way of His creation. Even what is writ in stone is washed away by time, and cities lie beneath the fire and ash of roaring mountains. I meant to say the Earth eats all, and now it's taken him, this legend, this Marius, this one so much older than any we ever knew by name, and with him go his precious secrets. So be it."

I locked my hands together to stop their trembling. I said nothing.

"There was a town in which I lived," he went on, murmuring. He held a fat black rat now in his arms, stroking its fur as if it were the prettiest of cats, and it with its tiny eye seemed unable to move, its tail a great curved scythe turned downward. "A lovely town it was, with high thick walls, and such a Fair each year; words can't describe where all the merchants showed their wares and all the villages both far and near sent young and old to buy, to sell, to dance, to feast … it seemed a perfect place! And yet the plague took it. The plague came, respecting no gate or wall or tower, invisible to the Lord's men, and to the Father in the field and the Mother in her kitchen garden. The plague took all, all it seemed except the most wicked. In my house they walled me up, with bloating corpses of my brothers and sisters. It was a vampire found me out, for foraging there he found no other blood to drink but mine. And there had been so many!"

"Do we not give up our mortal history for the love of God?" Allesandra asked but most carefully. Her hand worked on his hair and brushed it back from his forehead.

His eyes were huge with thought and memory, yet as he spoke again he looked at me, perhaps not even seeing me.

"There are no walls there now. It's gone to trees and blowing grass and piles of rubble. And in castles far away one finds the stones which

once made up our lord's keep, our finest hard-paved street, our proudest houses. It is the very nature of this world that all things are devoured and time is a mouth as bloody as any other."

A silence fell. I could not stop my shivering. My body quaked. A moan broke from my lips. I looked from right to left and bowed my head, my hands tight to my neck to stop from screaming.

When I looked up again, I spoke.

"I won't serve you!" I whispered. "I see your game. I know your scriptures, your piety, your love of resignation! You're spiders with your dark and intricate webs, no more than that, and breed for blood is all you know, all you know round which to weave your tiresome snares, as wretched as the birds that make their nests in filth on marble casements. So spin your lies. I hate you. I will not serve you!"

How lovingly they both looked at me.

"Oh, poor child," Allesandra said with a sigh. "You have only just begun to suffer. Why must it be for pride's sake and not for God?"

"I curse you!"

Santino snapped his fingers. It was such a small gesture. But out of the shadows, through doorways like secretive dumb mouths in the mud walls, there came his servants, hooded, robed, as before. They gathered me up, securing my limbs, but I didn't struggle.

They dragged me to a cell of iron bars and earthen walls. And when I sought to dig my way out of it, my clawing fingers came upon iron-bound stone, and I could dig no more.

I lay down. I wept. I wept for my Master. I didn't care if anyone heard or mocked. I didn't care. I knew only loss and in that loss the very size of my love, and in knowing the size of love could somehow feel its splendor. I cried and cried. I turned and groveled in the earth. I clutched at it, and tore at it, and then lay still with only silent tears flowing.

Allesandra stood with her hands on the bars. "Poor child," she whispered. "I will be with you, always with you. You have only to call my name."

"And why is that? Why?" I called out, my voice echoing off the stony walls. "Answer me."

"In the very depths of Hell," she said, "do not demons love one another?"

An hour passed. The night was old.

I thirsted.

I burned with it. She knew it. I curled up on the floor, my head bowed, sitting back on my heels. I would die before I would drink blood again. But it was all that I could see, all that I could think of, all that I could want. Blood.

After the first night, I thought I would die of this thirst.

After the second, I thought I would perish screaming.

After the third, I only dreamed of it in weeping and in desperation, licking at my own blood tears on my fingertips.

After six nights of this when I could bear the thirst no longer, they brought a struggling victim to me.

Down the long black passage I smelled the blood. I smelled it before I saw their torchlight.

A great stinking muscular youth who was dragged towards my cell, who kicked at them and cursed them, growling and drooling like a madman, screaming at the very sight of the torch with which they bullied him, forcing him towards me.

I climbed to my feet, too weak almost for this effort, and I fell on him, fell on his succulent hot flesh and tore open his throat, laughing and weeping as I did it, as my mouth was choked with blood.

Roaring and stammering, he fell beneath me. The blood bubbled up out of the artery over lips and my thin fingers. How like bones they looked, my fingers. I drank and drank and drank until I could contain no more, and all the pain was gone from me, and all the despair was gone in the pure satisfaction of hunger, the pure greedy hateful selfish devouring of the blessed blood.

To this gluttonous, mindless, mannerless feast they left me.

Then falling aside, I felt my vision clear again in the dark. The walls around me sparkled once more with tiny bits of ore like a starry firmament. I looked and saw that the victim I had taken was Riccardo, my beloved Riccardo, my brilliant and goodhearted Riccardo—naked, wretchedly soiled, a fattened prisoner, kept all this while in some stinking earthen cell just for this.

I screamed.

I beat at the bars and bashed my head against them. My white-faced warders rushed to the bars and then backed away in fear and peered at me across the dark corridor. I fell down on my knees crying.

I grabbed up the corpse. “Riccardo, drink!” I bit into my tongue and spit the blood on his greasy staring face. “Riccardo!” But he was dead and empty, and they had gone, leaving him there to rot in this place with me, to rot beside me.

I began to sing *“Dies irae, dies illa“* and to laugh as I sang it.

Three nights later, screaming and cursing, I tore the reeking corpse of Riccardo limb from limb so I could hurl the pieces out of the cell. I could not endure it! I flung the bloated trunk at the bars again and again and fell down, sobbing, unable to drive my fist or foot into it to break its bulk. I crawled into the farthest corner to get away from it.

Allesandra came. “Child, what can I say to comfort you?” A bodiless whisper in the darkness.

But there was another figure there, Santino. Turning I saw by some errant light which only a vampire’s eyes could gather that he put his finger to his lip and he shook his head, gently correcting her. “He must be alone now,” Santino said.

“Blood!” I screamed. I flew at the bars, my arm stretched out so that both were affrighted and rushed away from me.

At the end of seven more nights, when I was starved to the point where even the scent of the blood didn’t rouse me, they laid the victim —a small boy child of the streets crying for pity—directly in my arms.

“Oh, don’t be afraid, don’t,” I whispered, sinking my teeth quickly into his neck. “Hmmmmm, trust in me,” I whispered, savoring the blood, drinking it slowly, trying not to laugh with delight, my blood tears of relief falling down on his little face. “Oh, dream, dream sweet and pretty things. There are saints who will come; do you see them?”

Afterwards I lay back, satiated, and picking from the muddy ceiling over my head those infinitesimal stars of hard bright stone or flinty iron that lay embedded in the earth. I let my head roll to the side, away from the corpse of the poor child which I had arranged carefully, as for the shroud, against the wall behind me.

I saw a figure in my cell, a small figure. I saw its gauzy outline against the wall as it stood gazing at me. Another child? I rose up, aghast. No scent came from it. I turned and stared at the corpse. It lay as before. Yet there, against the far wall, was the very boy himself, small and wan and lost, looking at me.

“How is this?” I whispered.

But the wretched little thing couldn't speak. It could only stare. It was clothed in the very same white shift that its corpse wore, and its eyes were large and colorless and soft with musing.

A distant sound came into my hearing. It was of a shuffling step in the long catacomb that led to my little prison. This was no vampire's step. I drew up, my nostrils flaring ever so slightly as I tried to catch the scent of this being. Nothing changed in the damp musty air. Only the scent of death was the aroma of my cell, of the poor broken little body.

I fixed my eyes on the tenacious little spirit.

"Why do you linger here?" I asked it desperately in a whisper. "Why can I see you?"

It moved its little mouth as if it meant to speak, but it only shook its head ever so slightly, piteously eloquent of its confusion.

The steps came on. And once again I struggled to catch the scent. But there was nothing, not even the dusty reek of a vampire's robes, only this, the approach of this shuffling sound. And finally there came to the bars the tall shadowy figure of a haggard woman.

I knew that she was dead. I knew. I knew she was as dead as the little one who hovered by the wall.

"Speak to me, please, oh, please, I beg you, I pray you, speak to me!" I cried out.

But neither phantom could look away from the other. The child with a quick soft tread hurried into the woman's arms, and she, turning, with her babe restored, began to fade even as her feet once again made the dry scraping sound on the hard mud floor which had first announced her.

"Look at me!" I begged in a low voice. "Just one glance."

She paused. There was almost nothing left of her. But she turned her head and the dim light of her eye fixed on me. Then soundlessly, totally, she vanished.

I lay back, and flung out my arm in careless despair and felt the child's corpse, still faintly warm beside me.

I did not always see their ghosts.

I did not seek to master the means of doing so.

They were no friends to me—it was a new curse—these spirits that would now and then collect about the scene of my bloody destruction. I saw no hope in their faces when they did pass through those moments of

my wretchedness when the blood was warmest in me. No bright light of hope surrounded them. Was it starvation that had brought about this power?

I told no one about them. In that damned cell, that cursed place where my soul was broken week after week without so much as the comfort of an enclosing coffin, I feared them and then grew to hate them.

Only the great future would reveal to me that other vampires, in the main, never see them. Was it a mercy? I didn't know. But I get ahead of myself.

Let me return to that intolerable time, that crucible.

Some twenty weeks were passed in this misery.

I didn't even believe anymore that the bright and fantastical world of Venice had ever existed. And I knew my Master was dead. I knew it. I knew that all I loved was dead.

I was dead. Sometimes I dreamt I was home in Kiev in the Monastery of the Caves, a saint. Then I awoke to anguish.

When Santino and the gray-haired Allesandra came to me, they were gentle as ever, and Santino shed tears to see me as I was, and said:

"Come to me, come now, come study with me in earnest, come. Not even those as wretched as we should suffer as you suffer. Come to me."

I entrusted myself to his arms, I opened my lips to his, I bowed my head to press my face to his chest, and as I listened to his beating heart, I breathed deep, as if the very air had been denied me until that moment.

Allesandra laid her cool, soft hands so gently on me.

"Poor orphan child," she said. "Wandering child, oh, such a long road you've traveled to come to us."

And what a wonder it was that all they had done to me should seem but a thing we shared, a common and inevitable catastrophe.

Santino's cell.

I lay on the floor in the arms of Allesandra, who rocked me and stroked my hair.

"I want you to hunt with us tonight," said Santino. "You come with us, with Allesandra and with me. We won't let the others torment you. You are hungry. You are so very hungry, are you not?"

And so my tenure with the Children of Darkness began.

Night after night I did hunt in silence with my new companions, my new loved ones, my new Master and my new Mistress, and then I was ready to begin my new apprenticeship in earnest, and Santino, my teacher, with Allesandra to help him now and then, made me his own pupil, a great honor in the coven, or so the others were quick to tell me when they had the chance.

I learnt what Lestat has already written from what I revealed to him, the great laws.

One, that we were formed in Covens throughout the world, and each Coven would have its leader, and I was destined to be such a one, like unto the Superior of a convent, and that all matters of authority would be in my hands. I and I alone should determine when a new vampire should be made to join us; I and I alone would see to it that the transformation was made in the proper way.

Two, the Dark Gift, for that is what we called it, must never be given to those who were not beautiful, for the enslaving of the beautiful with the Dark Blood was more pleasing to a Just God.

Three, that never should an ancient vampire make the new fledgling, for our powers increase with time and the power of the old ones is too great for the young. Witness the tragedy of myself, made by the last of the known Children of the Millennia, the great and terrible Marius. I had the strength of a demon in the body of a child.

Four, that no one among us can destroy another among us, save the coven leader, who must at any time be prepared to destroy the disobedient of his flock. That all vagabond vampires, belonging to no coven, must be destroyed by that leader on sight.

Five, no vampire must ever reveal his identity or his magical strengths to a mortal and thereafter be let to live. No vampire must ever write any words that reveal these secrets. Indeed no vampire's name was ever to be known in the mortal world, and any evidence of our existence which ever escaped into that realm must at all costs be eradicated, along with those who allowed such a terrible violation of God's will.

There were other things. There were rituals, there were incantations, there was a folklore of sorts.

"We do not enter churches, for God should strike us dead if we do," declared Santino. "We do not look upon the crucifix, and its mere presence on a chain about the neck of a victim is sufficient to save that

mortal's life. We turn our eyes and fingers from the medals of the Virgin. We cower before the images of the saints.

"But we strike with a holy fire those who go unprotected. We feast when and where we will and with cruelty, and upon the innocent and upon those most blessed with beauty and riches. But we make no boast to the world of what we do, nor boast to one another.

"The great castles and courtrooms of the world are shut to us, for we must never, never, meddle in the destiny which Christ Our Lord had ordained for those made in His Image, any more than do the vermin, or the blazing fire, or the Black Death.

"We are a curse of the shadows; we are a secret. We are eternal.

"And when our work is done for Him, we gather without the comfort of riches or luxuries, in those places blessed by us underground for our slumber, and there with only fire and candles for light, we come together to say the prayers and sing the songs and dance, yes, dance about the fire, thereby to strengthen our will, thereby to share with our sisters and brothers our strength."

Six long months passed during which I studied these things, during which I ventured forth into the back alleys of Rome to hunt with the others, to gorge myself upon the abandoned of fate who fell so easily into my hands.

No more did I search the mind for a crime that justified my predatory feasting. No more did I practice the fine art of drinking without pain to the victim, no more did I shield the wretched mortal from the horror of my face, my desperate hands, my fangs.

One night, I awoke to find myself surrounded by my brothers. The gray-haired woman helped me from my coffin of lead and told me that I should come with them.

Out under the stars we went together. The bonfire had been built high, as it had been on the night my mortal brothers had died.

The air was cool and full of the scent of spring flowers. I could hear the nightingale singing. And far off the whisperings and murmurings of the great crowded city of Rome. I turned my eyes towards the city. I saw her seven hills covered over with soft flickering lights. I saw the clouds above, tinged with gold, as they bore down on these scattered and beautiful beacons, as if the darkness of the sky were full with child.

I saw the circle had formed around the fire. Two and three deep were

the Children of Darkness. Santino, in a costly new robe of black velvet, ah, such a violation of our strict rubrics, came forward to kiss me on either cheek.

"We are sending you far away, to the north of Europe," he said, "to the city of Paris, where the Coven leader has gone, as we all go sooner or later, into the fire. His children wait for you. They have heard tales of you, of your gentleness and your piety and your beauty. You will be their leader and their saint."

My brothers one by one came to kiss me. My sisters, who were few in number, planted their kisses on my cheeks as well.

I said nothing. I stood quiet, listening still for the song of the birds in the nearby pines, my eyes drifting now and then to the lowering Heavens and wondering if the rain would come, the rain which I could smell, so clean and pure, the only cleansing water allowed to me now, the sweet Roman rain, gentle and warm.

"Do you take the solemn vow to lead the Coven in the Ways of Darkness as Satan would have it and his Lord and Creator, God, would have it?"

"I do."

"Do you vow to obey all orders sent to you from the Roman Coven?"

"I do …"

Words and words and words.

Wood was heaped on the fire. The drums had begun. The solemn tones.

I began to cry.

Then came the soft arms of Allesandra, the soft mass of her gray hair against my neck.

"I will go with you north, my child," she said.

I was overwhelmed with gratitude. I threw my arms around her, I held her hard cold body close to me, and I shook with sobs.

"Yes, dear, dear little one," she said. "I will stay with you. I am old and I will stay with you until it is time for me to go to God's Justice, as we all must."

"Then we dance in jubilation!" cried Santino. "Satan and Christ, brothers in the House of the Lord, we give you this perfected soul!"

He threw up his arms.

Allesandra stepped back from me, her eyes bright with tears. I could

think of nothing but only my gratitude that she would be with me, that I would not make this awful terrible journey alone. With me, Allesandra, with me. Oh, Fool for Satan and the God Who made him!

She stood beside Santino, tall as he was, majestic as she too threw up her arms and swung her hair from side to side.

"Let the dancing begin!" she cried.

The drums became a thunder, the horns wailed, and the thump of the tambourines filled my ears.

A long low cry rose from the huge thick circle of vampires, and all at once, locking hands, they began to dance.

I was pulled back into the chain they made about the raging bonfire. I was jerked from left to right as the figures turned this way, then that, then broke free and leapt spinning into the air.

I felt the wind on the back of my neck as I turned, as I leapt. I reached out with perfect accuracy to receive the hands on either side of me, then to sway to the right and to the left again.

Above, the silent clouds thickened, curled and sailed across the darkling sky. The rain came, its soft roar lost in the cries of the mad dancing figures, in the crackle of fire and the torrent of drums.

I heard it. I turned and leapt high into the air and received it, the silvery rain floating down to me like the blessing of the dark Heavens, the baptismal waters of the damned.

The music surged. A barbarous rhythm broke loose everywhere, the orderly chain of dancers forgotten. In rain and in the unquenchable blaze of the giant fire, the vampires threw out their arms, howling, writhing, their limbs constricting so that they stomped with backs bent, heels pounded into the earth, and then sprang free, arms outstretched, mouths open, hips churning as they whirled and leapt, and caught in raucous open-throated volume the hymn came again, *Dies irae, dies illa*. Oh, yes, oh, yes, day of woe, oh, day of fire!

Afterwards, when the rain came down solemnly and steadily, when the bonfire was no more but a black wreckage, when they all had gone off to hunt, when only a few milled the dark ground of the Sabbat, chanting their prayers in anguished delirium, I lay still, the rain washing me, as I put my face against the ground.

It seemed the monks were there from the old Monastery in Kiev. They laughed at me, but gently. They said, "Andrei, what made you think you

could escape? Didn't you know that God had called you?"

"Get away from me, you are not here, and I am nowhere; I am lost in the dark wastes of a winter without end."

I tried to picture Him, His Holy Face. But there was only Allesandra, come to help me to my feet. Allesandra, who promised to tell me of dark times, long before Santino was made, when she had been given the Dark Gift in the forests of France to which we now would be going together.

"Oh Lord, Lord hear my prayer," I whispered. If I could but see the Holy Face.

But we were forbidden such things. We could never, never look upon His Image! Until the end of the world, we would work without that comfort. Hell is the absence of God.

What can I say in defense of myself now?

What can I say?

Others have told the tale, how for centuries I was the stalwart leader of the Paris Coven, how I lived out those years in ignorance and shadow, obeying old laws until there was no more any Santino or Roman Coven to send them to me, how in rags and quiet despair, I clung to the Old Faith and the Old Ways as others went into the fire to destroy themselves, or simply wandered away.

What can I say in defense of the convert and the saint that I became?

For three hundred years I was the vagabond angel child of Satan, I was his baby-faced killer, his lieutenant, his fool. Allesandra was always with me. When others perished or deserted, there was Allesandra who kept the faith. But it was my sin, it was my journey, it was my terrible folly, and I alone must carry the burden of it for as long as I exist.

That last morning in Rome, before I was to leave for the north, it was decided that my name must be changed.

Amadeo, containing the very word for God, was most unseemly for a Child of Darkness, especially one meant to lead the Paris Coven.

From various choices given me, Allesandra chose the name Armand.

So I became Armand.

PART II

The BRIDGE of SIGHS

16

I refuse to discuss the past another moment. I don't like it. I don't care about it. How can I tell you about something that doesn't interest me? Is it supposed to interest you?

The problem is that too much has been written about my past already. But what if you haven't read those books? What if you haven't wallowed in The Vampire Lestat's florid descriptions of me and my alleged delusions and errors?

All right, all right. A little bit more, but only to bring me to New York, to the moment when I saw Veronica's Veil, so that you don't have to go back and read his books, so that my book will be enough.

All right. We must continue to cross this Bridge of Sighs.

For three hundred years, I was faithful to the Old Ways of Santino, even after Santino himself had disappeared. Understand, this vampire was by no means dead. He turned up in the modern era, quite healthy, strong, silent and without apology for the credos he had stuffed down my throat in the year 1500 before I was sent north to Paris.

I was mad during those times. Lead the Coven I did, and of its ceremonies, his fanciful dark litanies and bloody baptisms, I became the architect and the master. My physical strength increased with each year, as is the case with all vampires, and drinking greedily from my victims, for it was the only pleasure of which I could dream, I fed my vampiric powers.

Spells I could make around those I killed, and choosing the beautiful, the promising, the most audacious and splendid for my feast, I nevertheless conveyed upon them fantastical visions to blunt their fear or suffering.

I was mad. Denied the places of light, the comfort of entering the smallest church, bent on perfection in the Dark Ways, I wandered as a dusty wraith through the blackest alleyways of Paris, turning her noblest poetry and music into a din by the wax of piety and bigotry by which I

stopped my ears, blind to the soaring majesty of her cathedrals or palaces.

The Coven took all my love, with chatter in the dark of how we might best be Satan's saints, or whether a beautiful and bold poisoner should be offered our demonic pact and made one of us.

But sometimes I went from an acceptable madness to a state of which I alone knew the dangers. In my earthen cell in the secret catacombs beneath the great Paris Cemetery of Les Innocents where we made our lair, I dreamt night after night of one strange and meaningless thing: What had become of that fine little treasure my mortal Mother had given me? What had become of that strange artifact of Podil which she'd taken from the Ikon corner and put in my hands, that painted egg, that crimson painted egg with the star so beautifully painted on it? Now, where could it be? What had become of it? Had I not left it, wrapped thickly in fur in a golden coffin in which I'd once lodged, ah, had all that really ever taken place, that life I thought I recalled from a city of brilliant white-tiled palaces and glittering canals and a great sweet gray sea full of swift and graceful ships, plying their long oars in perfect unison as if they were living things, those ships, those beautifully painted ships, so often decked with flowers, and with the whitest sails, oh, that could not have been real, and to think, a golden chamber with a golden coffin in it, and this special treasure, this fragile and lovely thing, this painted egg, this brittle and perfect egg, whose painted covering locked inside to utter perfection a moist, mysterious concoction of living fluids—oh, what strange imaginings. But what had happened to it! Who had found it!

Somebody had.

Either that or it was still there, hidden far below a palazzo in that floating city, hidden in a waterproof dungeon built deep into the oozing earth beneath the waters of the lagoon. No, never. Not so, not there. Don't think of it. Don't think of profane hands getting that thing. And you know, you lying treacherous little soul, you never, never went back to any such place as the low city with the icy water in its streets, where your Father, a thing of myth and nonsense to be sure, drank wine from your hands and forgave you that you had gone to become a dark and strong winged bird, a bird of the night soaring higher even than the domes of Vladimir's City, as if someone had broken that egg, that

meticulously and wondrously painted egg which your Mother so cherished as she gave it you, broken that egg with a vicious thumb, cracked right into it, and out of that rotten fluid, that stinking fluid, you had been born, the night bird, flying high over the smoking chimneys of Podil, over the domes of Vladimir's Town, higher and farther and farther away over the wild lands and over the world and into this dark wood, this deep and dark and endless forest from which you will never escape, this cold and comfortless wilderness of the hungry wolf and the chomping rat and the crawling worm and the screaming victim.

Allesandra would come. "Wake, Armand. Wake. You dream the sad dreams, the dreams that precede madness, you cannot leave me, my child, you cannot, I fear death more than I fear this and will not be alone, you cannot go into the fire, you cannot go and leave me here."

No. I couldn't. I did not have the passion for such a step. I did not have the hope for anything, even though no word of the Roman Coven had come in decades.

But there came an end to my long centuries of Satan's service.

Clad in red velvet it came, the very covering my old Master had so loved, the dream king, Marius. It came swaggering and camping through the lighted streets of Paris as though God had made it.

But it was a vampire child, the same as I, son of the seventeen hundreds, as they reckoned the time to be then, a blazing, brash, bumbling, laughing and teasing blood drinker in the guise of a young man, come to stomp out whatever sacred fire yet burnt in the cleft scar tissue of my soul and scatter the ashes.

It was The Vampire Lestat. It wasn't his fault. Had one of us been able to strike him down one night, break him apart with his own fancy sword and set him ablaze, we might have had a few more decades of our wretched delusions.

But nobody could. He was too damned strong for us.

Created by a powerful and ancient renegade, a legendary vampire by the name of Magnus, this Lestat, aged twenty in mortal years, an errant and penniless country aristocrat from the wild lands of Auvergne, who had thrown over custom and respectability and any hope of court ambitions, of which he had none anyway since he couldn't even read or write, and was too insulting to wait on any King or Queen, who became a wild blond-haired celebrity of the boulevard gutter theatricals, a lover

of men and women, a laughing happy-go-lucky blindly ambitious self-loving genius of sorts, this Lestat, this blue-eyed and infinitely confident Lestat, was orphaned on the very night of his creation by the ancient monster who made him, bequeathed to him a fortune in a secret room in a crumbling medieval tower, and then went into the eternal comfort of the ever devouring flames.

This Lestat, knowing nothing of Old Covens and Old Ways, of soot covered gangsters who thrived under cemeteries and believed they had a right to brand him a heretic, a maverick and a bastard of the Dark Blood, went strutting about fashionable Paris, isolated and tormented by his supernatural endowments yet glorying in his new powers, dancing at the Tuileries with the most magnificently clad women, reveling in the joys of the ballet and the high court theater and roaming not only in the Places of Light, as we called them, but meandering mournfully in Notre Dame de Paris itself, right before the High Altar, without the lightning of God striking him where he stood.

He destroyed us. He destroyed me.

Allesandra, mad by then as most of the old ones were in those times, had one merry argument with him after I dutifully arrested him and dragged him to our underground Court to stand trial, and then she too went into the flames, leaving me with the obvious absurdity: that Our Ways were finished, our superstitions obviously laughable, our dusty black robes ludicrous, our penance and self-denial pointless, our beliefs that we served God and the Devil self-serving, naive and stupid, our organization as preposterous in the gay atheistic Parisian world of the Age of Reason as it might have seemed to my beloved Venetian Marius centuries before.

Lestat was the smasher, the laughing one, the pirate who, worshiping nothing and no one, soon left Europe to find his own safe and agreeable territory in the colony of New Orleans in the New World.

He had no comforting philosophy for me, the baby-faced deacon who had come forth out of the darkest prison, shorn of all belief, to put on the fashionable clothes of the age and walk once again on its high streets as I had done over three hundred years ago in Venice.

And my followers, those few whom I could not overpower and bitterly consign to the flames, how helplessly they blundered in their new freedom—free to pick the gold from the pockets of their victims and don

their silks and their white-powdered wigs, and sit in marvelous astonishment before the glories of the painted stage, the lustrous harmony of a hundred violins, the antics of versifying actors.

What was to be our fate, as with dazzled eyes we made our way through crowded early evening boulevards, fancy mansions and grandly decorated ballrooms?

In satin-lined boudoirs we fed, and against the damask cushions of gilded carriages. We bought fine coffins for ourselves, full of fancy carvings and padded velvet, and were closeted for the night in gilded mahogany-paneled cellars.

What would have become of us, scattered, my children fearful of me, and I uncertain of when the fopperies and frenzy of the French City of Light might drive them to rash or hideously destructive antics?

It was Lestat who gave me the key, Lestat who gave me the place where I could lodge my crazed and pounding heart, where I could bring my followers together for some semblance of newfangled sanity.

Before leaving me stranded in the waste of my old ways, he bequeathed to me the very boulevard theater in which he had once been the young swain of the Commedia dell'Arte. All its human players were gone. Nothing remained but the elegant and inviting husk, with its stage of gaily painted backdrops and gilded proscenium arch, its velvet curtains and empty benches just waiting for a clamoring audience again. In it we found our safest refuge, so eager to hide behind the mask of greasepaint and glamour that flawlessly disguised our polished white skin and fantastical grace and dexterity.

Actors we became, a regular company of immortals bound together to perform cheerfully decadent pantomimes for mortal audiences who never suspected that we white-faced mummers were more monstrous than any monster we ever presented in our little farces or tragedies.

The Théâtre des Vampires was born.

And worthless shell that I was, dressed up like a human with less claim to that title than ever in all my years of failure, I became its mentor.

It was the least I could do for my orphans of the Old Faith, giddy and happy as they were in a gaudy and Godless world on the verge of political revolution.

Why I governed this palladian theater so long, why I remained year

after long year with this Coven of sorts, I know not except that I needed it, needed it as surely as I'd ever needed Marius and our household in Venice, or Allesandra and the Coven beneath the Paris Cemetery of Les Innocents. I needed a place to turn my steps before sunrise where I knew others of my kind were safely at rest.

And I can say truthfully that my vampire followers needed me.

They needed to believe in my leadership, and when worst came to worst I did not fail them, exercising some restraint upon those careless immortals who now and then endangered us by public displays of supernatural power or extreme cruelty, and by managing with the arithmetical skill of an idiot savant our business affairs with the world.

Taxes, tickets, handbills, heating fuel, foot lamps, the fostering of ferocious fabulists, I managed it all.

And now and then, I took exquisite pride and pleasure in it.

With the seasons we grew, as did our audiences, crude benches giving way to velvet seats, and penny pantomimes to more poetical productions.

Many a night as I took my place alone in my velvet-curtained box, a gentleman of obvious means in the narrow trousers of the age, with fitted waistcoat of printed silk and close-cut coat of bright wool, my hair combed back beneath a black ribbon or finally trimmed above my high stiff white collar, I thought upon those lost centuries of rancid ritual and demonic dreams as one might think back on a long painful illness in a lightless room amid bitter medicines and pointless incantations. It could not have been real, all that, the ragged plague of predatory paupers that we were, singing of Satan in the rimy gloom.

And all the lives I'd lived, and worlds I'd known, seemed even less substantial.

What lurked beneath my fancy frills, behind my quiet unquestioning eyes? Who was I? Had I no remembrance of a warmer flame than that which gave its silvery glow to my faint smile at those who asked it of me? I remembered no one who had ever lived and breathed within my quietly moving form. A crucifix with painted blood, a saccharine Virgin on a prayer book page or made of pastel-painted bisque, what were these things but vulgar remnants of a coarse, unfathomable time when powers now dismissed had hovered in the chalice of gold, or blazed most fearfully inside a face above a glowing altar.

I knew nothing of such things. The crosses snatched from virgin necks were melted down to make my golden rings. And rosaries cast aside with other paste as thieving fingers, mine, tore off a victim's diamond buttons.

I developed in those eight decades of the Théâtre des Vampires—we weathered the Revolution with amazing resiliency, the public clamoring to our seemingly frivolous and morbid entertainments—and maintained, long after the theatre was gone, into the late twentieth century a silent, concealed nature, letting my childlike face deceive my adversaries, my would-be enemies (I rarely took them seriously) and my vampire slaves.

I was the worst of leaders, that is, the indifferent cold leader who strikes fear into the hearts of everyone but bothers to love no one, and I maintained the Théâtre des Vampires, as we called it well into the 1870s, when Lestat's child Louis came wandering into it, seeking the answers which his cocky insolent maker had never given him to the age-old questions: Where do we vampires come from? Who made us and for what?

Ah, but before I discourse on the coming of the famous and irresistible vampire Louis, and his small exquisite paramour, the vampire Claudia, let me relate one tiny incident that happened to me in the earlier years of the nineteenth century. It may mean nothing; or perhaps it is the betrayal of another's secret existence. I don't know. I relate it only because it touches fancifully, if not certainly, upon one who has played a dramatic role in my tale.

I cannot mark the year of this little event. Let me say only that Chopin's lovely, dreamy piano music was well revered in Paris, that the novels of George Sand were the rage, and that women had already given up the slender lascivious gowns of the Empire to wear the huge heavy-skirted, small-waisted taffeta dresses in which they appear so often in old shining daguerrotypes.

The theatre was booming as one would say in modern parlance, and I, the manager, having grown tired of its performances, was wandering alone one night in the wooded land just beyond the glow of Paris, not far from a country house full of merry voices and blazing chandeliers.

It was there that I came upon another vampire.

I knew her immediately by her silence, lack of scent and the near divine grace with which she made her way through the wild brush,

managing a full flowing cape and abundant skirt with small pale hands, her goal the nearby brilliantly lighted and beckoning windows.

She realized my presence almost as quickly as I sensed hers; quite alarming to me at my age and with my powers. She froze without turning her head.

Though the vicious vampire players of the theatre maintained their right to do away with mavericks or intruders among the Undead, I, the leader, after my years as deluded saint, did not give a damn for such things.

I meant the creature no harm, and, carelessly, I tossed out in a soft casual voice, speaking in French, a warning.

"Ravaged territory, my dear. No game unbespoken here. Make for a safer city before sunup."

No human ear could have heard this.

The creature made no reply, her taffeta hood drooping as she had obviously bowed her head. Then, turning, she revealed herself to me in the long shafts of golden light falling from the multipaned glass windows beyond her.

I knew this creature. I knew her face. I knew it.

And in a dreadful second—a fateful second—I perceived that she might not know me, not with my hair nightly clipped short for these times, not in these sombre trousers and dull coat, not in this tragic moment when I posed as a man, so utterly transformed from the lushly adorned child she'd known, she couldn't.

Why didn't I cry out? Bianca!

But I couldn't grasp it, couldn't believe in it, couldn't rouse my dulled heart to triumph in what my eyes told me to be true, that the exquisite oval face surrounded by its golden hair and taffeta hood was hers, most definitely, framed exactly as it might have been in those days, and it was she, she whose face had been etched into my fevered soul before and after any Dark Gift had ever been given me.

Bianca.

She was gone! For less than a second I saw her wide wary eyes, full of vampiric alarm, more urgent and menacing than any human could ever evince, and then the figure was vanished, disappeared from the wood, gone from the environs, gone from all the large rambling gardens that I searched, sluggishly, shaking my head, mumbling to myself, saying, No,

couldn't be, no, of course, not. No.

I never saw her again.

I do not know at this very moment whether or not this creature was Bianca. But I believe in my soul now, now as I dictate this tale, I believe in a soul that is healed and no stranger to hope, that it was Bianca! I can picture her too perfectly as she turned on me in the wooded garden, and in that picture lies one last detail which confirms it for me—because on that night outside of Paris, she had in her blond hair pearls interwoven.

Oh, how Bianca had loved pearls, and how she had loved to weave them in her hair. And I had seen them in the light of the country house, beneath the shadow of her hood, ropes of tiny pearls wound in her blond hair, and within that frame was the Florentine beauty I could never forget—as delicate in vampiric whiteness as it had been when filled with Fra Filippo Lippi's colors.

It did not hurt me then. It did not shake me. I was too pale of soul, too numbed, too used to seeing all things as figments in a series of unconnected dreams. Very likely, I could not allow myself to believe such a thing.

Only now do I pray it was she, my Bianca, and that someone, and you can guess very well who that might be, someone might tell me whether or not it was my darling courtesan.

Did some member of the hateful murderous Roman Coven, chasing her out into the Venetian night, fall under her spell so that he deserted his Dark Ways, and made her his lover forever? Or did my Master, surviving the horrid fire, as we know he did, seek her out for sustaining blood and bring her over into immortality to assist him in his recovery?

I cannot bring myself to ask Marius this question. Perhaps you will. And perhaps I prefer to hope that it was she, and not to hear denials that render it less likely.

I had to tell you this. I had to tell you. I think it was Bianca.

Let me return now to the Paris of the 1870s—some decades after—to the moment when the young New World vampire, Louis, came through my door, seeking so sadly the answers to the terrible questions of why we are here, and for what purpose.

How sad for Louis that he should put those questions to me. How sad for me.

Who could have scoffed more coldly than I at the whole idea of a

redemptive framework for the creatures of the night who, once having been human, could never be absolved of fratricide, their feasting on human blood? I had known the dazzling, clever humanism of the Renaissance, the dark recrudescence of asceticism in the Roman Coven and the bleak cynicism of the Romantic era.

What did I have to tell this sweet-faced vampire, Louis, this all too human creation of the stronger and brasher Lestat, except that in the world Louis would find enough beauty to sustain him, and that in his soul he must find the courage to exist, if indeed it was his choice to go on living, without looking to images of God or the Devil to give him an artificial or short-lived peace.

I never imparted to Louis my own bitter history; I confessed to him the awful anguishing secret, however, that as of the year 1870, having existed for some four hundred years among the Undead, I knew of no blood drinker older than myself.

The very avowal brought me a crushing sense of loneliness, and when I looked into Louis′s tortured face, when I followed his slim, delicate figure as it picked its way through the clutter of nineteenth-century Paris, I knew that this black-clad dark-haired gentleman, so lean, so finely sculpted, so sensitive in all his lineaments, was the alluring embodiment of the misery I felt.

He mourned the loss of grace of one human lifetime. I mourned the loss of the grace of centuries. Amenable to the styles of the age which had shaped him—given him his flaring black frock coat, and fine waistcoat of white silk, his high priestly-looking collar and frills of immaculate linen—I fell in love with him hopelessly, and leaving the Théâtre des Vampires in ruins (he burnt it to the ground in a rage for a very good reason), I wandered the world with him until very late in this modern age.

Time eventually destroyed our love for one another. Time withered our gentle intimacy. Time devoured whatever conversation or pleasures we once agreeably shared.

One other horrible inescapable and unforgettable ingredient went into our destruction. Ah, I don′t want to speak of it, but who among us is going to let me be silent on the matter of Claudia, the child vampire whom I am accused for all time by all of having destroyed?

Claudia. Who among us today for whom I dictate this narrative, who

among the modern audience who reads these tales as palatable fiction does not have in mind a vibrant picture of her, the golden-curled child vampire made by Louis and Lestat one wicked and foolish night in New Orleans, the child vampire whose mind and soul became as immense as that of an immortal woman while her body remained that of a precious all too perfect painted bisque French bébé doll?

For the record, she was slain by my Coven of mad demon actors and actresses, for, when she surfaced at the Théâtre des Vampires with Louis as her mournful, guilt-ridden protector and lover, it became all too clear to too many that she had tried to murder her principal Maker, The Vampire Lestat. It was a crime punishable by death, the murdering of one's creator or the attempt at it, but she herself stood among the condemned the moment she became known to the Paris Coven, for she was a forbidden thing, a child immortal, too small, too fragile for all her charm and cunning to survive on her own. Ah, poor blasphemous and beauteous creature. Her soft monotone voice, issuing from diminutive and ever kissable lips, will haunt me forever.

But I did not bring about her execution. She died more horribly than anyone has ever imagined, and I have not the strength now to tell the tale. Let me say only that before she was shoved out into a brick-lined air well to await the death sentence of the god Phoebus, I tried to grant her fondest wish, that she should have the body of a woman, a fit shape for the tragic dimension of her soul.

Well, in my clumsy alchemy, slicing heads from bodies and stumbling to transplant one to another, I failed. Some night when I am drunk on the blood of many victims, and more accustomed than I am now to confession, I will recount it, my crude and sinister operations, conducted with a sorcerer's willfulness and a boy's blundering, and describe in grim and grotesque detail the writhing jerking catastrophe that rose from beneath my scalpel and my surgical needle and thread.

Let me say here, she was herself again, hideously wounded, a botched reassemblage of the angelic child she'd been before my attempts, when she was locked out in the brutal morning to meet her death with a clear mind. The fire of Heaven destroyed the awful unhealed evidence of my Satanic surgery as it turned her to a monument in ash. No evidence remained of her last hours within the torture chamber of my makeshift laboratory. No one need ever have known what I say now.

For many a year, she haunted me. I could not strike from my mind the faltering image of her girlish head and tumbling curls fixed awkwardly with gross black stitching to the flailing, faltering and falling body of a female vampire whose discarded head I'd thrown into the fire.

Ah, what a grand disaster was that, the child-headed monster woman unable to speak, dancing in a frenetic circle, the blood gurgling from her shuddering mouth, her eyes rolling, arms flapping like the broken bones of invisible wings.

It was a truth I vowed to conceal forever from Louis de Pointe du Lac and all who ever questioned me. Better let them think that I had condemned her without trying to effect her escape, both from the vampires of the theatre and from the wretched dilemma of her small, enticing, flat-chested and silken-skinned angelic form.

She was not fit for deliverance after the failure of my butchery; she was as a prisoner subjected to the cruelty of the rack who can only smile bitterly and dreamily as she is led, torn and miserable, to the final horror of the stake. She was as a hopeless patient, in the reeking antiseptic death cubicle of a modern hospital, freed at last from the hands of youthful and overzealous doctors, to give up the ghost on a white pillow alone.

Enough. I won't relive it.

I will not.

I never loved her. I didn't know how.

I carried out my schemes in chilling detachment and with fiendish pragmatism. Being condemned and therefore being nothing and no one, she was a perfect specimen for my whim. That was the horror of it, the secret horror which eclipsed any faith I might have pleaded later in the high-blown courage of my experiments. And so the secret remained with me, with Armand, who had witnessed centuries of unspeakable and refined cruelties, a story unfit for the tender ears of a desperate Louis, who could never have borne such descriptions of her degradation or suffering, and who did not truly, in his soul, survive her death, cruel as it was.

As for the others, my stupid cynical flock, who listened so lasciviously at my door to the screaming, who maybe guessed the extent of my failed wizardry, those vampires died by Louis's hand.

Indeed the entire theatre paid for his grief and his rage, and justly so

perhaps.

I can make no judgment.

I did not love those decadent and cynical French mummers. Those I had loved, and those who I could love, were, save for Louis de Pointe du Lac, utterly beyond my grasp.

I must have Louis, that was my injunction. I knew no other. So I did not interfere when Louis incinerated the Coven and the infamous theatre, striking, at the risk of his own life, with flame and scythe at the very hour of dawn.

Why did he come away with me afterwards?

Why did he not abhor the one whom he blamed for Claudia's death? "You were their leader; you could have stopped them." He did say those words to me.

Why did we wander for so many years together, drifting like elegant phantoms in our lace and velvet cerements into the garish electric lights and electronic noise of the modern age?

He remained with me because he had to do it. It was the only way that he could go on existing, and for death he has never had the courage, and never will.

And so he endured after the loss of Claudia, just as I had endured through the dungeon centuries, and through the years of tawdry boulevard spectacle, but in time he did learn to be alone.

Louis, my companion, dried up of his own free will, rather like a beautiful rose skillfully dehydrated in sand so that it retains its proportions, nay, even its fragrance and even its tint. For all the blood he drank, he himself became dry, heartless, a stranger to himself and to me.

Understanding all too well the limits of my warped spirit, he forgot me long before he dismissed me, but I too had learnt from him.

For a short time, in awe of the world and confused by it, I too went on alone—perhaps for the first time really and truly alone.

But how long can any of us endure without another? For me at my darkest hours there had been the ancient nun of the Old Ways, Allesandra, or at least the babble of those who thought I was a little saint.

Why in this final decade of the twentieth century do we seek each other out if only for occasional words and exchanges of concern? Why

are we here gathered in this old and dusty convent of so many brick-walled empty rooms to weep for The Vampire Lestat? Why have the very ancient among us come here to witness the evidence of his most recent and terrifying defeat?

We can't stand it, to be alone. We cannot bear it, any more than the monks of old could bear it, men who though they had renounced all else for Christ's sake, nevertheless came together in congregations to be with one another, even as they enforced upon themselves the harsh rules of single solitary cells and unbroken silence. They couldn't bear to be alone.

We are too much men and women; we are yet formed in the image of the Creator, and what can we say of Him with any certainty except that He, whoever He may be—Christ, Yahweh, Allah—He made us, did He not, because even He in His Infinite Perfection could not bear to be alone.

In time I conceived another love naturally, a love for a mortal boy Daniel, to whom Louis had poured out his story, published under the absurd title *Interview with the Vampire*, whom I later made into a vampire for the same reasons that Marius had made me so long ago: the boy, who had been my faithful mortal companion, and only sometimes an intolerable nuisance, was about to die.

That is no mystery unto itself, the making of Daniel. Loneliness will always inevitably press us to such things. But I was a firm believer that those we make ourselves will always despise us for it. I cannot claim that I have never despised Marius, both for making me and never returning to me to assure me that he had survived the horrible fire created by the Roman Coven. I had sought Louis rather than create others. And having created Daniel I saw at last my fear realized within a short time.

Daniel, though alive and wandering, though civil and gentle, can no more stand my company than I can stand his. Equipped with my powerful blood, he can contend with any who should be foolish enough to interrupt his plans for an evening, a month or a year, but he cannot contend with my continuous company, and I cannot contend with his.

I turned Daniel from a morbid romantic into a true killer; I made real in his natural blood cells the horror that he so fancied he understood in mine. I pushed his face into the flesh of the first young innocent he had to slaughter for his inevitable thirst, and thereby fell off the pedestal on

which he'd placed me in his demented, overimaginative, feverishly poetical and ever exuberant mortal mind.

But I had others around me when I lost Daniel, or rather when gaining Daniel as a fledgling, I lost him as a mortal lover and gradually began to let him go.

I had others because I had again, for reasons that I cannot explain to myself or anyone, made yet another Coven—another successor to the Paris Coven of Les Innocents, and the Théâtre des Vampires, and this was a swank, modern hiding place for the most ancient, the most learned, the most enduring of our kind. It was a honeycomb of luxurious chambers hidden in that most concealing of edifices—a modern resort hotel and shopping palace on an island off the coast of Miami, Florida, an island on which the lights never went out and the music never ceased to play, an island where men and women came by the thousands in small boats from the mainland to browse the expensive boutiques, or to make love in opulent, decadent, magnificent and always fashionable hotel suites and rooms.

"The Night Island," that was my creation, with its own copter pad and marina, its secret illegal gambling casinos, its mirror-lined gymnasiums and overheated swimming pools, its crystal fountains, its silver escalators, its emporium of dazzling consumables, its bars, taverns, lounges and theaters where I myself, decked out in smart velvet jackets, tight denim pants and heavy black glasses, hair clipped each night (for it grows back to its Renaissance length each day), could roam in peace and anonymity, swimming in the soft caressing murmurs of the mortals around me, searching out when thirst prompted it that one individual who truly wanted me, that one individual who for reasons of health or poverty or sanity or insanity wanted to be taken into the tentative and never overpowering arms of death and sucked free of all blood and all life.

I didn't go hungry. I dropped my victims in the deep warm clean waters of the Caribbean. I opened my doors to any of the Undead who would wipe their boots before entering. It was like the old days of Venice, with Bianca's palazzo open to all ladies and gentlemen, indeed, to all artists, poets, dreamers and schemers who dared to present themselves, had come again.

Well, they had not come again.

It took no bunch of black-robed tramps to disperse the Coven of The Night Island. Indeed those who were couched there for a short while simply wandered off on their own. Vampires do not really want the company of other vampires. They want the love of other immortals, yes, always, and they need it, and they need the deep bonds of loyalty which inevitably grow amongst those who refuse to become enemies. But they don't want the company.

And my splendid glass-walled drawing rooms on The Night Island were soon empty, and I myself had long before that started to wander for weeks, even months on my own.

It is there still, The Night Island. It is there, and now and then I do go back, and I find there some lone immortal who has checked in, as we say in the modern age, to see how it goes with the rest of us, or with some other who might be visiting as well. The great enterprise I sold for a mortal fortune—but I maintain my ownership of the four-story villa (a private club: name, II Villagio), with its deep secret underground crypts to which all of our kind are welcome to come.

All of our kind.

There are not so many. But let me tell you now who they were. Let me tell you now who has survived the centuries, who has resurfaced after hundreds of years of mysterious absence, who has come forward to be counted in the unwritten census of the modern Living Dead.

There is Lestat, first and foremost, the author of four books of his life and his adventures comprising everything you could ever possibly want to know about him and some of us. Lestat, ever the maverick and the laughing trickster. Six feet tall, a young man of twenty when made, with huge warm blue eyes and thick flashy blond hair, square of jaw, with a generous beautifully shaped mouth and skin darkened by a sojourn in the sun which would have killed a weaker vampire, a ladies' man, an Oscar Wildean fantasy, the glass of fashion, the most bold and disregarding dusty vagabond on occasion, loner, wanderer, heart-breaker and wise guy, dubbed the "Brat Prince" by my old Master—yes, imagine it, my Marius, yes, my Marius, who did indeed survive the torches of the Roman Coven—dubbed by Marius the "Brat Prince," though in whose Court and by whose Divine Right and whose Royal Blood I should like to know. Lestat, stuffed with the blood of the most ancient of our kind, indeed the very blood of the Eve of our species, some five to seven

thousand years the survivor of her Eden, a perfect horror who, emerging from the deceptive poetical title of Queen Akasha of Those Who Must Be Kept, almost destroyed the world.

Lestat, not a bad friend to have, and one for whom I would lay down my immortal life, one for whose love and companionship I have ofttimes begged, one whom I find maddening and fascinating and intolerably annoying, one without whom I cannot exist.

So much for him.

Louis de Pointe du Lac, already described above but always fun to envisage: slender, slightly less tall than Lestat, his maker, black of hair, gaunt and white of skin, with amazingly long and delicate fingers, and feet that do not make a sound. Louis, whose green eyes are soulful, the very mirror of patient misery, soft-voiced, very human, weak, having lived only two hundred years, unable to read minds, or to levitate, or to spellbind others except inadvertently, which can be hilarious, an immortal with whom mortals fall in love. Louis, an indiscriminate killer, because he cannot satisfy his thirst without killing, though he is too weak to risk the death of the victim in his arms, and because he has no pride or vanity which would lead him to a hierarchy of intended victims, and therefore takes those who cross his path, regardless of age, physical endowments, or blessings bestowed by nature or fate. Louis, a deadly and romantic vampire, the kind of night creature who hovers in the deep shadows at the Opera House to listen to Mozart's Queen of the Night give forth her piercing and irresistible song.

Louis, who has never vanished, who has always been known to others, who is easy to track and easy to abandon, Louis who will not make others after his tragic blunders with vampiric children, Louis who is past questing for God, for the Devil, for Truth or even for love.

Sweet, dusty Louis, reading Keats by the light of one candle. Louis standing in the rain on a slick deserted downtown street watching through the store window the brilliant young actor Leonardo DiCaprio as Shakespeare's Romeo kissing his tender and lovely Juliet (Claire Danes) on a television screen.

Gabrielle. She's around now. She was around on The Night Island. Everyone hates her. She is Lestat's Mother, and abandons him for centuries, and somehow doesn't manage to heed Lestat's periodic and inevitable frantic cries for help, which though she could not receive

them, being his fledgling, could certainly learn of them from other vampiric minds which are on fire with the news round the world when Lestat is in trouble. Gabrielle, she looks just like him, except she's a woman, totally a woman, that is, sharper of feature, small-waisted, big-breasted, sweet-eyed in the most unnerving and dishonest fashion, gorgeous in a black ball gown with her hair free, more often dusty, genderless, sheathed in supple leather or belted khaki, a steady walker, and a vampire so cunning and cold that she has forgotten what it ever meant to be human or in pain. Indeed, I think she forgot overnight, if she ever knew it. She was in mortal life one of those creatures who always wondered what the others were carrying on about. Gabrielle, low-voiced, unintentionally vicious, glacial, forbidding, ungiving, a wanderer through snowy forests of the far north, a slayer of giant white bears and white tigers, an indifferent legend to untamed tribes, something more akin to a prehistoric reptile than a human. Beautiful, naturally, blond hair in a braid down her back, almost regal in a chocolate-colored leather safari jacket and a small droopy brimmed rain hat, a stalker, a quick killer, a pitiless and seemingly thoughtful but eternally secretive thing. Gabrielle, virtually useless to anyone but herself. Some night she'll say something to someone, I suppose.

Pandora, child of two millennia, consort to my own beloved Marius a thousand years before I was ever born. A goddess, made of bleeding marble, a powerful beauty out of the deepest and most ancient soul of Roman Italy, fierce with the moral fiber of the old Senatorial class of the greatest Empire the Western world has ever known. I don't know her. Her oval face shimmers beneath a mantle of rippling brown hair. She seems too beautiful to hurt anyone. She is tender-voiced, with innocent, imploring eyes, her flawless face instantly vulnerable and warm with empathy, a mystery. I don't know how Marius could ever have left her. In a short shift of filmy silk, with a snake bracelet on her bare arm, she is too ravishing for mortal males and the envy of females. In her longer concealing gowns, she moves as a wraith through the rooms around her as if they are not real to her, and she, the ghost of a dancer, seeks for some perfect setting that she alone can find. Her powers certainly rival those of Marius. She has drunk from the Eden fount, that is, the blood of Queen Akasha. She can kindle crisp dry objects into fire with the power of her mind, levitate and vanish in the dark sky, slay the young blood

drinkers if they menace her, and yet she seems harmless, forever feminine though indifferent to gender, a wan and plaintive woman whom I want to close in my arms.

Santino, the old saint of Rome. He has wandered into the disasters of the modern era with all his beauty unblemished, still the big-shouldered, strong-chested one, olive skin paler now with the workings of the fierce magical blood, huge head of black curling hair often clipped each night at sunset for the sake of anonymity perhaps, unvain, perfectly dressed in black. He says nothing to anyone. He looks at me silently as if we never talked together of theology and mysticism, as if he never broke my happiness, burnt my youth to cinders, drove my Maker into century-long convalescence, divided me from all comfort. Perhaps he fancies us as fellow victims of a powerful intellectual morality, an infatuation with the concept of purpose, two lost ones, veterans of the same war.

At times he looks shrewd and even hateful. He knows plenty. He doesn't underestimate the powers of the ancient ones, who, eschewing the social invisibility of centuries past, now walk among us with perfect ease. When he looks at me, his black eyes are unflinching and passive. The shadow of his beard, fixed forever into the tiny cut-off dark hairs embedded in his skin, is beautiful as it always was. He is all in all conventionally virile, crisp white shirt open at the throat to show the portion of the thick curly black hair that covers his chest, a similar enticing black fleece covering the visible flesh of his arms at the wrists. He favors sleek but sturdy black coats lapeled in leather or fur, low-slung black cars that move at two hundred miles an hour, a golden cigarette lighter reeking of combustible fluid, which he lights over and over again just to peer into the flame. Where he actually lives, and when he will surface, nobody knows.

Santino. I know no more about him than that. We keep a gentle-manly distance from one another. I suspect his own suffering has been terrible; I do not seek to break the shiny black fashionable carapace of his demeanor to discover some raw bloody tragedy beneath it. To know Santino, there is always time.

Now let me describe for the most virginal of readers my Master, Marius, as he is now. So much time and experience divide us now that it is like a glacier between us, and we stare at each other across the glowing whiteness of that impassable waste, able only to speak in lulled

and polite voices, so mannerly, the young creature I appear to be, too sweet-faced for casual belief, and he, ever the worldly sophisticate, the scholar of the moment, the philosopher of the century, ethicist of the millennium, historian for all time.

He walks tall as he always did, imperial still in his subdued twentieth-century fashion, carving his coats out of old velvet that they may give some faint clue of the magnificence that was once his nightly dress. On occasions now he clips the long flowing yellow hair which he wore so proudly in old Venice. He is ever quick of wit and tongue and eager for reasonable solutions, possessed of infinite patience and unquenchable curiosity and a refusal to give up on the fate of himself, or of us, or of this world. No knowledge can defeat him; tempered by fire and time, he is too strong for the horrors of technology or the spells of science. Neither microscopes nor computers shake his faith in the infinite, though his once solemn charges—Those Who Must Be Kept, who held such promise of redemptive meaning—have long been toppled from their archaic thrones.

I fear him. I don't know why. Perhaps I fear him because I could love him again, and loving him, I would come to need him, and needing him, I would come to learn from him, and learning from him, I would be again his faithful pupil in all things, only to discover that his patience for me is no substitute for the passion which long ago blazed in his eyes.

I need that passion! I need it. But enough of him. Two thousand years he had survived, slipping in and out of the very mainstream of human life without compunction, a great practitioner of the art of being human, carrying with him forever the grace and quiet dignity of the Augustan Age of seemingly invincible Rome, in which he was born.

There are others who are not here now with me, though they have been on The Night Island, and I will see them again. There are the ancient twins, Mekare and Maharet, custodians of the primal blood fount from which our life flows, the roots of the vine, so to speak, upon which we so stubbornly and beautifully bloom. They are our Queens of the Damned.

Then there is Jesse Reeves, a twentieth-century fledgling made by Maharet, the very eldest and therefore a dazzling monster, unknown to me, but greatly admired. Bringing with her into the world of the Undead an incomparable education in history, the paranormal, philosophy and

languages, she is the unknown. Will the fire consume her, as it has so many others who, weary of life, cannot accept immortality? Or will her twentieth-century wit give her some radical and indestructible armor for the inconceivable changes that we now know must lie ahead?

Ah, there are others. There are wanderers. I can hear their voices from time to time in the night. There are those far away who know nothing of our traditions and have styled us, in hostility to our writings and in amusement at our antics, "The Coven of the Articulate," strange "unregistered" beings of various ages, strengths, attitudes, who sometimes seeing on a paperback rack a copy of *The Vampire Lestat* tear it loose and grind the small book to powder within their powerful and scornful hands.

They may lend their wisdom or their wit to our unfolding chronicle in some unpredictable future. Who knows?

For now, there is but one more player who must be described before my tale can be advanced.

That one is you, David Talbot, whom I scarcely know, you, who write with furious speed all the words that come slowly tumbling from me as I watch you, mesmerized on some level by the mere fact that these sentiments so long allowed to burn inside of me are now recorded on the seemingly eternal page.

What are you, David Talbot—over seven decades old in mortal education, a scholar, a deep and loving soul? How can one tell? That which you were in life, wise in years, strengthened by routine calamity and deepened by the full four seasons of a man's span upon the Earth, was transported with all memory and learning intact into the splendid body of a younger man. And then that body, a precious chalice for the Grail of your very self, who knew so well the value of both elements, was then assaulted by your closest of friends, the loving monster, the vampire who would have you as his fellow traveler in eternity whether or not you gave him leave, our beloved Lestat.

I cannot imagine such a rape. I stand too far from all humanity, never having been a full man. In your face I see the vigor and beauty of the dark golden-skinned Anglo-Hindi whose body you enjoy, and in your eyes the calm and dangerously well-tempered soul of the old man.

Your hair is black and soft and handily trimmed below your ears. You dress with high vanity submitted to a staunch British sense of style. You

look at me as though your curiosity will put me off guard, when nothing of the sort is true.

Hurt me and I'll destroy you. I don't care how strong you are, or what blood Lestat gave you. I know more than you do. Because I show you my pain, I do not of necessity love you. I do this for myself and for others, for the very idea of others, for any who would know, and for my mortals, those two I've gathered to me so recently, those two precious ones who have become the ticking clock of my capacity to go on.

Symphony for Sybelle. That might as well be the name of this confession. And having done my best for Sybelle, I do my best for you as well.

Is this not enough of the past? Is this not enough prologue to the moment in New York when I saw Christ's Face in the Veil? There begins the final chapter of my life of late. There is nothing more to it. You have all the rest, and what must needs come now is but the brief harrowing account of what has brought me here.

Be my friend, David. I didn't mean to say such terrible things to you. My heart aches. I need you just to tell me that I may rush on. Help me with your experience. Isn't this enough? May I go on? I want to hear Sybelle's music. I want to talk of beloved rescuers. I can't measure the proportions of this story. I only know I am ready … I have reached the far side of The Bridge of Sighs.

Ah, but it's my decision, yes, and you wait to write what I will say.

Well, let me go now to the Veil.

Let me go now to the Face of Christ, as if I were walking uphill in the long-ago snowy winter in Podil, beneath the broken towers of Vladimir's City, to seek within the Monastery of the Caves the paint and the wood on which to see it take form before me: His Face. Christ, yes, the Redeemer, the Living Lord once more.

PART III

APPASSIONATA

17

I didn't want to go to him. It was winter, and I was contented in London, haunting the theatres to see the plays of Shakespeare, and reading the plays and the sonnets the whole night long. I had no other thoughts just now but Shakespeare. Lestat had given him to me. And when I'd had a bellyful of despair, I'd opened the books and begun to read.

But Lestat was calling. Lestat was, or so he claimed, afraid.

I had to go. The last time he'd been in trouble, I hadn't been free to rush to his rescue. There is a story to that, but nothing as important as this one which I tell now.

Now I knew that my hard-won peace of mind might be shattered by the mere contact with him, but he wanted me to come, so I went.

I found him first in New York, though he didn't know it and he couldn't have led me into a worse snowstorm if he'd tried. He slew a mortal that night, a victim with whom he'd fallen in love, as was his custom of late—to pick these celebrities of high crimes and horrid murders—and to stalk them before the night of the feast.

So what did he want of me, I wondered. You were there, David. You could help him. Or so it seemed. Being his fledgling you hadn't heard his call directly, but he'd reached you somehow, and the two of you, such proper gentlemen, came together to discuss in low, sophisticated whispers Lestat's latest fears.

When next I caught up with him he was in New Orleans. And he put it to me plain and simple. You were there. The Devil had come to him in the guise of a man. The Devil could change shapes, being at one moment horrific and ghastly with webbed wings and hoofed feet; and then next, the Devil could be an ordinary man. Lestat was wild with these stories. The Devil had offered him a dreadful proposition, that he, Lestat, become the Devil's helper in the service of God.

Do you remember how calmly I responded to his story, his questions, his pleading for our advice? Oh, I told him firmly it was madness to

follow this spirit, to believe that any discarnate thing was bound to tell him the truth.

But only now do you know the wounds he opened with this strange and marvelous fable. So the Devil would make him a hellish helper and thereby a servant of God? I might have laughed outright, or wept, throwing it in his face that I had once believed myself a saint of evil, shivering in rags as I stalked my victims in the Parisian winter, all for the honor and glory of God.

But he knew all this. There was no need to wound him further, to shift from him the limelight of his own tale, which Lestat, being the bright star, must always have.

Under moss-hung oaks we talked in civilized voices. You and I begged him to be cautious. Naturally, he ignored all we said.

It was all mixed up with the entrancing mortal Dora, who was living then in this very building, this old brick convent, the daughter of the man Lestat had stalked and slain.

When he bound us to look out for her, I was angry, but only mildly so. I have fallen in love with mortals. I have those tales to tell. I am in love now with Sybelle and Benjamin, whom I call my children, and I had been a secret troubadour to other mortals in the dim past.

All right, he was in love with Dora, he'd laid his head on a mortal breast, he wanted the womb blood of her that would be no loss to her, he was smitten, crazed, goaded by the ghost of her Father and courted by the Prince of Evil Himself.

And she, what shall I say of her? That she possessed the power of a Rasputin behind the face of a nunnery postulant, when in fact she is a practiced theologian and not a mystic, a ranting raving leader, not a visionary, whose ecclesiastical ambitions would have dwarfed those of Saints Peter and Paul put together, and that of course, she is like any flower Lestat ever gathered from the Savage Garden of this world: a most fine and fetching little creature, a glorious specimen of God's Creation—with raven hair, a pouty mouth, cheeks of porcelain and the dashing limbs of a nymph.

Of course I knew the very moment that he left this world. I felt it. I was in New York already, very near to him and aware that you were there as well. Neither of us meant to let him out of our sight if at all possible. Then came the moment when he vanished in the blizzard,

when he was sucked out of the earthly atmosphere as if he'd never been there.

Being his fledgling you couldn't hear the perfect silence that descended when he vanished. You couldn't know how completely he'd been withdrawn from all things minuscule yet material which had once echoed with the beating of his heart.

I knew, and I think it was to distract us both that I proposed we go to the wounded mortal who must have been shattered by her Father's death at the hands of a blond-haired handsome blood-swilling monster who'd made her his confidant and a friend.

It was not difficult to help her in the short event-filled nights that followed, when horror was heaped upon horror, her Father's murder discovered, his sordid life at once made by media magic the madcap conversation of the wide world.

It seems a century ago, not merely so short a time, that we moved south to these rooms, her father's legacy of crucifixes and statues, of ikons which I handled so coolly as if I'd never loved such treasures at all.

It seems a century ago that I dressed decently for her, finding in some fashionable Fifth Avenue shop a shapely coat of old red velvet, a poet's shirt, as they call it now, of starched cotton and ample flopping lace, and to set this off, pegged-leg trousers of black wool and shiny boots that buckled at the ankle, all this the better to accompany her to identify her Father's severed head under the leeching fluorescent lights of some immense and overcrowded morgue.

One good thing about this final decade of the twentieth century is that a man of any age can wear his hair at any length.

It seems a century ago that I combed out mine, full and curly and clean for once, just for her.

It seems a century ago we stood so staunchly beside her, indeed even held her, this long-necked, short-haired, spellbinding witchlet, in our very arms as she wept over the death of her Father and pelted us with feverish and maniacally intelligent and dispassionate questions about our sinister nature, as if a great crash course in the anatomy of the vampire could somehow close the cycle of horror threatening her wholesomeness and her sanity and somehow bring her wicked conscienceless Father back.

No, it wasn't the return of Roger, actually, that she prayed for; she

believed too totally in the omniscience and mercy of God. Besides, seeing a man's severed head is a bit of a shock, even if the head is frozen, and a dog had chomped on Roger a bit before he'd been discovered, and what with the strict "no touch" rules of modern forensics, he was—for me even—quite a sight. (I remember the coroner's assistant saying soulfully to me that I was awfully young to have to see such a thing. She thought I was Dora's little brother. What a sweet woman she was. Perhaps it's worth it to make a foray into the official mortal world once in a while in order to be called "a real trouper" instead of a Botticelli angel, which has become my tag line among the Undead.)

It was the return of Lestat Dora dreamed of. What else would ever allow her to break free of our enchantment but some final blessing from the crowned prince himself?

I stood at the dark glass windows of the high-rise apartment, looking out over the deep snows of Fifth Avenue, waiting and praying with her, wishing the great Earth were not so empty of my old enemy and thinking in my foolish heart that in time this mystery of his disappearance would be resolved, as were all miracles, with sadness and small losses, with no more than little revelations that would leave me as I had always been left since that long-ago night in Venice when my Master and I were divided forever, simply a little more clever at pretending that I was still alive.

I didn't fear for Lestat, not really. I had no hopes for his adventure, except that he would appear sooner or later and tell us some fantastical yarn. It would be regular Lestat talk, for nobody aggrandizes as he does his preposterous adventures. This is not to say that he hasn't switched bodies with a human. I know that he has. This is not to say that he didn't wake our fearsome goddess Mother, Akasha; I know that he did. This is not to say that he didn't smash my old superstitious Coven to bits and pieces in the garish years before the French Revolution. I've already told you so.

But it's the way he describes things that happen to him that maddens me, the way that he connects one incident to another as though all these random and grisly occurrences were in fact links in some significant chain. They are not. They are capers. And he knows it. But he must make a gutter theatrical out of stubbing his toe.

The James Bond of the Vampires, the Sam Spade of his own pages! A rock singer wailing on a mortal stage for all of two hours and, on the strength of that, retiring with a slew of recordings that feed him filthy lucre still from human agencies to this very night.

He has a knack for making tragedy of tribulation, and forgiving himself for anything and everything in every confessional paragraph he pens.

I can't fault him, really. I cannot help but hate it that he lies now in a coma on the floor of his chapel here, staring into a self-contained silence, despite the fledglings that circle him—for precisely the same reason as I did, to see for themselves if the blood of Christ has transformed him somehow and he does not represent some magnificent manifestation of the miracle of the Transubstantiation. But I'll come to that soon enough.

I've ranted myself into a little corner. I know why I resent him so, and find it so soothing to hammer at his reputation, to beat upon his immensity with both my fists.

He has taught me too much. He has brought me to this very moment, here, where I stand dictating to you my past with a coherence and calm that would have been impossible before I came to his assistance with his precious Memnoch the Devil and his vulnerable little Dora.

Two hundred years ago he stripped me of illusions, lies, excuses, and thrust me on the Paris pavements naked to find my way back to a glory in the starlight that I had once known and too painfully lost.

But as we waited finally in the handsome high-rise apartment above St. Patrick's Cathedral, I had no idea how much more he could strip from me, and I hate him only because I cannot imagine my soul without him now, and, owing him all that I am and know, I can do nothing to make him wake from his frigid sleep.

But let me take things one at a time. What good is it to go back down now to the chapel here and lay my hands on him again and beg him to listen to me, when he lies as though all sense has truly left him and will never return.

I can't accept this. I won't. I've lost all patience; I've lost the numbness that was my consolation. I find this moment intolerable—.

But I have to tell you things.

I have to tell you what happened when I saw the Veil, and when the

sun struck me and, more wretchedly for me, what I saw when finally I reached Lestat and drew so close to him that I could drink his blood.

Yes, stay on course. I know now why he makes the chain. It isn't pride, is it? It's the necessity. The tale can't be told without one link being connected to the other, and we poor orphans of ticking time know no other means of measure but those of sequence. Dropped into the snowy blackness, into a world worse than a void, I reached for a chain, did I not? Oh, God, what I would have given in that awful descent to grasp the firmness of a metal chain!

He came back so suddenly—to you and Dora and me.

It was the third morning, and not long enough before dawn. I heard the doors slam far below us in the glass tower, and then that sound, that sound which gains in eerie volume each year, the beating of his heart.

Who was first to rise from the table? I was still with fear. He came too fast, and there were those wild fragrances whirling about him, of woodland and raw earth. He crashed through all barriers as if he were pursued by those who'd stolen him away, and yet there was no one behind him. He came alone into the apartment, slamming the door in his wake and then standing before us, more horrible than I could ever have imagined, more ruined than I had ever seen him in any of his former little defeats.

With absolute love Dora ran to him, and in a desperate need that was all too human he clutched at her so fiercely that I thought he would destroy her.

"You're safe now, darling," she cried, struggling so as to make him understand.

But we had only to look at him to know it wasn't finished, though we murmured the same hollow words in the face of what we beheld.

18

He had come from the maelstrom. One shoe was left to him, the other foot bare, his coat torn, his hair wild and snagged with thorns and dried leaves and bits of errant flowers.

In his arms, to his chest he clutched a flat bundle of folded cloth as if it carried the whole fate of the world embroidered on it.

But the worst, the very worst horror of all, was that one eye had been torn from his beautiful face, and the socket of vampiric lids puckered and shuddered, seeking to close, refusing to acknowledge this horrid disfigurement to the body rendered perfect for all time when he'd been made immortal.

I wanted to take him in my arms. I wanted to comfort him, to tell him wherever he'd gone and whatever had taken place, he was now safe again with us, but nothing could quiet him.

A deep exhaustion saved us all from the inevitable tale. We had to seek our dark corners away from the prying sun, we had to wait until the following night when he would come out to us and tell us what had happened.

Still clutching the bundle, refusing all help, he closeted himself up with his wound. I had no choice but to leave him.

As I sank down that morning into my own resting place, secure in clean modern darkness, I cried and cried like a child on account of the sight of him. Oh, why had I come to his aid? Why must I see him brought low like this when it had taken so many painful decades to cement my love for him forever?

Once before, a hundred years ago, he'd come stumbling into the Théâtre des Vampires on the trail of his renegade fledglings, sweet gentle Louis and the doomed child, and I hadn't pitied him then, his skin scored with scars from Claudia's foolish and clumsy attempt to kill him.

Loved him then, yes, I had, but this had been a bodily disaster which his evil blood would heal, and I knew from our old lore that in the

healing he would gain even greater strength than serene time itself would have given him.

But what I'd seen now was a devastation of the soul in his anguished face, and the vision of the one blue eye, shining so vividly in his streaked and wretched face, had been unbearable.

I don't remember that we spoke, David. I remember only that the morning hastened us away, and if you cried too, I never heard you, I never thought to listen. As for the bundle he had carried in his arms, what could it have possibly been? I do not even think I thought of it.

The next night:

He came quietly into the parlor of the apartment as the darkness clambered down, starry for a few precious moments before the dreary descent of snow. He was washed and dressed, his torn and bleeding foot no doubt healed. He wore new shoes.

But nothing could lessen the grotesque picture of his torn face where the cuts of a claw or fingernails surrounded the gaping, puckering lids. Quietly he sat down.

He looked at me, and a faint charming smile brightened his face. "Don't fear for me, little devil Armand," he said. "Fear for all of us. I am nothing now. I am nothing."

In a low voice I whispered to him my plan. "Let me go down into the streets, let me steal from some mortal, some evil being who has wasted every physical gift that God ever gave, an eye for you! Let me put it here in the empty socket. Your blood will rush into it and make it see. You know. You saw this miracle once with the ancient one, Maharet, indeed, with a pair of mortal eyes swimming in her special blood, eyes that could see! I'll do it. It won't take me but a moment, and then I'll have the eye in my hand and be the doctor myself and place it here. Please."

He only shook his head. He kissed me quickly on the cheek.

"Why do you love me after all I've done to you?" he asked. There was no denying the beauty of his smooth poreless sun-darkened skin, and even as the dark slit of the empty socket seemed to peer at me with some secret power to relay its vision to his heart. He was handsome and radiant, a darkish ruddy glow coming from his face as though he'd seen some powerful mystery.

"Yes, but I have," he said, and now began to cry. "I have, and I must tell you everything. Believe me, as you believe what you saw last night,

the wildflowers clinging still to my hair, the cuts—look, my hands, they heal but not fast enough—believe me."

You intervened then, David. "Tell us, Lestat. We would have waited here forever for you. Tell us. Where did this demon Memnoch take you?" How comforting and reasonable your voice sounded, just as it does now. I think you were made for this, for reasoning, and given to us, if I may speculate, to force us to see our catastrophes in the new light of modern conscience. But we can talk of those things for many nights hereafter.

Let me return to the scene, the three of us gathered in the black-lacquered Chinese chairs around the thick glass table, and Dora coming in, at once struck by the presence of him, of which her mortal senses hadn't given her a clue, a pretty picture with her short gleaming knavish black hair, cut high to show the fragile nape of her swanlike neck, her long supple body clad in a loose ungirdled gown of purple red tissue that folded itself about her small breasts and slender thighs exquisitely. Ah, what an angel of the Lord, this, I thought musing, this heiress of the druglord Father's severed head. She teaches doctrines with every step that would make the pagan gods of lust canonize her with glee.

About her pale sweet throat she wore a crucifix so tiny it seemed a gilded gnat suspended from a weightless chain of minuscule links woven by fairies. What are such holy objects now, tumbling on milky bosoms with such ease, but trinkets of the marketplace? My thoughts were merciless, but I was but an indifferent cataloger of her beauty. Her swelling breasts, their shadowy cleft quite visible against the simple stitching of her dark low-cut dress, told more of God and Divinity.

But her greatest adornment in these moments was the tearful and eager love for him, her lack of fear of his mutilated face, the grace of her white arms as she enclosed him again, so sure of herself and so grateful for the gentle yielding of his body in towards her. I was so thankful that she loved him.

"So the Prince of Lies had a tale to tell, did he?" she asked. She could not kill the quaver in her voice. "So he's taken you to his Hell and sent you back?" She took Lestat's face in her hands and turned it towards her. "Then tell us what it was, this Hell, tell us why we must be afraid. Tell us why you are afraid, but I think it's something far worse than fear that I see now in you."

He nodded his head to say that it was. He pushed back the Chinese chair, and wringing his hands he began to pace, the inevitable prelude to his tale telling.

"Listen to all I say, before you judge," he declared, fixing us now, the three who crowded about the table, an anxious little audience willing to do whatever he asked of us. His eyes lingered on you, David, you, the English scholar in your manly tweed, who in spite of love abundantly clear beheld him with a critical eye, ready to evaluate his words with a wisdom natural to you.

He began to talk. Hour by hour he talked. Hour by hour the words streamed out of him, heated and rushing and sometimes tumbling over one another so that he had to stop and catch his breath, but he never really paused, as he poured it out over the long night, this tale of his adventure.

Yes, Memnoch the Devil had taken him to Hell, but it was a Hell of Memnoch's devising, a Purgatorial place in which the souls of all who had ever lived were welcome to come of their own accord from the whirlwind of death which had inherited them. And in that Purgatorial Hell, confronted with all the deeds they'd ever done, they learnt the most hideous lesson of all, the endless consequences of every action ever committed by them. Murderer and Mother alike, vagrant children slaughtered in seeming innocence and soldiers bathed in blood from battlefields, all were admitted to this awful place of smoke and sulfurous fire, but only to see the gaping wounds in others made by their wrathful or unwitting hands, to plumb the depths of other souls and hearts which they had injured!

All horror was an illusion in this place, but the worst horror of all was the person of God Incarnate, who had allowed this Final School for those who would be worthy to enter His Paradise. And this too Lestat had seen, the Heaven glimpsed a million times by saints and deathbed victims, of ever blooming trees and flowers eternally sweet and endless crystal towers of happy, happy beings, shorn of all flesh and one at last with countless choirs of singing angels.

It was an old tale. It was too old. It had been told too many times, this tale—of Heaven with her open gates, and God Our Maker sending forth His endless light to those who climbed the mythic stairs to join the celestial court forever.

How many mortals waking from a near death sleep have struggled to describe these same wonders!

How many saints have claimed to have glimpsed this indescribable and eternal Eden?

And how cleverly this Devil Memnoch had laid out his case to plead for mortal compassion for his sin, that he and he alone had opposed a merciless and indifferent God, to beg that Deity to look down with compassionate eyes on a fleshly race of beings who had by means of their own selfless love managed to engender souls worthy of His interest?

This, then, was the fall of Lucifer like the Star of Morning from the sky —an angel begging for the Sons and Daughters of Men that they had now the countenances and hearts of angels.

"Give them Paradise, Lord, give it to them when they have learnt in my school how to love all that you have created."

Oh, a book has been filled with this adventure. *Memnoch the Devil* cannot be condensed here in these few unjust paragraphs.

But this was the sum of what fell on my ears as I sat in this chilly New York room, gazing now and then past Lestat's frantic, pacing figure at the white sky of ever falling snow, shutting out beneath his roaring narrative the rumble of the city far below, and struggling with the awful fear in myself that I must at the climax of his tale disappoint him. That I must remind him that he had done no more than shape the mystic journey of a thousand saints in a new and palatable fashion.

So it is a school that replaces those rings of eternal fire which the poet Dante described in such degree as to sicken the reader, and even the tender Fra Angelico felt compelled to paint, where naked mortals bathed in flame were meant to suffer for eternity.

A school, a place of hope, a promise of redemption great enough perhaps to welcome even us, the Children of the Night, who counted murders among their sins as numerous as those of ancient Huns or Mongols.

Oh, this was very sweet, this picture of the life hereafter, the horrors of the natural world laid off upon a wise but distant God, and the Devil's folly rendered with such keen intelligence.

Would that it were true, would that all the poems and paintings of the world were but a mirror of such hopeful splendor.

It might have saddened me; it might have broken me down to where I hung my head and couldn't look at him.

But a single incident from his tale, one which to him had been a passing encounter, loomed large for me beyond all the rest and locked itself to my thoughts, so that as he went on and on, I couldn't banish this from my mind: that he, Lestat, had drunk the very blood of Christ on the road to Calvary. That he, Lestat, had spoken to this God Incarnate, who by His own will had walked towards this horrible Death on Golgotha. That he, Lestat, a fearful and trembling witness had been made to stand in the narrow dusty streets of ancient Jerusalem to see Our Lord pass, and that this Lord, Our Living Lord, had, with the crossbeam of the crucifix strapped to His shoulders, offered His throat to Lestat, the chosen pupil.

Ah, such fancy, this madness, such fancy. I had not expected to be so hurt by anything in this tale. I had not expected this to make a burning in my chest, a tightness in my throat from which no words could escape. I had not wanted this. The only salvation of my wounded heart was to think how quaint and foolish it was that such a tableau—Jerusalem, the dusty street, the angry crowds, the bleeding God, now scourged and limping beneath His wooden weight—should include a legend old and sweet of a woman with a Veil outstretched to wipe the bloody Face of Christ in comfort, and thereby to receive for all time His Image.

It does not take a scholar, David, to know such saints were made by other saints in centuries to come as actors and actresses chosen for a Passion Play in a country village. Veronica! Veronica, whose very name means True Ikon.

And our hero, our Lestat, our Prometheus, with that Veil given him by the very hand of God, had fled this great and ghastly realm of Heaven and Hell and the Stations of the Cross, crying No! and I will not! and come back, breathless, running like a madman through the snows of New York, seeking only to be with us, turning his back on all of it.

My head swam. There was a war inside of me. I couldn't look at him.

On and on he went, going over it, talking again of the sapphiric Heavens and the angels' song, arguing with himself and with you and with Dora, and the conversation seemed like so much shattered glass. I couldn't bear it.

The Blood of Christ inside him? The Blood of Christ passing his lips,

his unclean lips, his Undead lips, the Blood of Christ making of him a monstrous Ciborium? The Blood of Christ?

"Let me drink!" I cried out suddenly. "Lestat, let me drink, from you, let me drink your blood that has His blood inside it!" I couldn't believe my own earnestness, my own wild desperation. "Lestat, let me drink. Let me look for the blood with my tongue and my heart. Let me drink, please; you can't deny me that one moment of intimacy. And if it was Christ … if it was …" I couldn't finish it.

"Oh, mad and foolish child," he said. "All you'll know if you sink your teeth into me is what we learn from the visions we see with all our victims. You'll learn what I think I saw. You'll learn what I think was made known to me. You'll learn that my blood runs in my veins, which you know now. You'll learn that I believe it was Christ, but no more than that."

He shook his head in disappointment as he glared at me.

"No, I'll know," I said. I rose from the table, my hands quivering. "Lestat, give me this one embrace and I'll never ask another thing of you for all eternity. Let me put my lips to your throat, Lestat, let me test the tale, let me do it!"

"You break my heart, you little fool," he said with tears welling. "You always did."

"Don't judge me!" I cried.

He went on, speaking to me alone, from his mind as much as with his voice. I couldn't tell if anyone else there could even hear him. But I heard him. I would not forget a single word.

"And what if it was the Blood of God, Armand," he asked, "and not part and parcel of some titanic lie, what would you find in me? Go out to the early morning Mass and snatch your victims from those just come from the Communion Rail! What a pretty game that would be, Armand, to feed forever only on Holy Communicants! You can have your Blood of Christ from any one of them. I tell you, I do not believe these spirits, God, Memnoch, these liars; I tell you, I refuse! I wouldn't stay, I fled their damned school, I lost my eye as I battled them, they snatched it from me, wicked angels clawing at me when I ran away from them! You want the Blood of Christ, then go down now in the dark church to the fisherman's Mass and knock the sleepy priest aside from the Altar, if you will, and grab the Chalice from his consecrated hands. Go ahead, do it!

“Blood of Christ!” he continued, his face one great eye fixing me in its merciless beam. “If it was ever in me, this sacred blood, then my body has dissolved it and burnt it up like candle wax devours the wick. You know this. What’s left of Christ in the belly of His faithful when they leave the church?”

“No,” I said. “No, but we are not humans!” I whispered, seeking somehow in softness to drown out his angry vehemence. “Lestat, I’ll know! It was His blood, not transubstantiated bread and wine! His blood, Lestat, and I’ll know if it’s inside of you. Oh, let me drink, I beg you. Let me drink so I can forget every damned thing you’ve told us, let me drink!”

I could scarcely keep myself from laying hands on him, from forcing him to my will, never mind his legendary strength, his gruesome temper. I’d lay hold of him and make him submit. I’d take the blood—.

But these thoughts were foolish and vain. His whole tale was foolish and vain, and yet I turned around, and in a fury I spit the words at him:

“Why didn’t you accept? Why didn’t you go with Memnoch if he could have taken you from this awful living Hell we share, why didn’t you?”

“They let you escape,” you said to him, David. You broke in, quieting me with a small pleading gesture of your left hand.

But I had no patience for analysis or inevitable interpretation. I couldn’t get the image out of my mind, Our Bloody Lord, Our Lord with the crossbeam bound to His shoulders, and she, Veronica, this sweet figment with the Veil in her hands. Oh, how is it such a fantasy could get its hook so deep?

“Back away from me, all of you,” he cried. “I have the Veil. I told you. Christ gave it to me. Veronica gave it to me. I took it with me out of Memnoch’s Hell, when all his imps tried to take it from me.”

I scarcely heard. Veil, the actual Veil, what trick is this? My head ached. The fisherman’s Mass. If there was such a thing in St. Patrick’s below, I wanted to go there. I was weary of this glass-walled tower room, cut off from the taste of the wind and the wild refreshing wetness of the snow.

Why did Lestat back up against the wall? What did he take out of his coat? The Veil! Some gaudy trick to seal this whole masterpiece of mayhem?

I looked up, my eyes roaming over the snowy night beyond the glass and only slowly finding their mark: the opened cloth which he held up in his hands, his own head bowed, the cloth revealed as reverently as it might have been by Veronica.

"My Lord!" I whispered. All the world was gone in curls of weightless sound and light. I saw Him there. "My Lord." I saw His Face, not painted, printed or otherwise daintily tricked into the tiny fibers of the fine white cloth, but blazing with a flame that would not consume the vehicle that bore the heat of it. My Lord, my Lord the Man, my Lord, my Christ, the Man with black and sharpened crown of thorns, and long twisted brown hair so fearfully clotted with blood, and great wondering dark eyes that stared straight at me, the sweet and vivid portals of the Soul of God, so radiant their immeasurable love that all poetry dies before it, and a soft and silken mouth of unquestioning and unjudging simplicity, open to take a silent and agonizing breath at the very moment the Veil had come to soothe this hideous suffering.

I wept. I clamped my hand to my mouth, but I couldn't stop my words.

"Oh, Christ, my tragic Christ!" I whispered. "Not made by human hands!" I cried out. "Not made by human hands!" How wretched my words, how feeble, how filled with sorrow. "This Man's Face, this Face of God and Man. He bleeds. For the love of Almighty God, look at it!"

But not a sound had come from me. I couldn't move. I couldn't breathe. I'd fallen down on my knees in my shock and in my helplessness. I never wanted to take my eyes from it. I never wanted anything anymore again ever. I wanted only to look at it. I wanted only to look at Him, and I saw Him, and I saw back, back over the centuries, back to His Face in the light of the earthen lamp burning in the house in Podil, His Face gazing at me from the panel between my quivering fingers amid the candles of the Scriptorium of the Monastery of the Caves, His Face as I had never seen it on those glorious walls of Venice or Florence where I had for so long and so desperately sought it.

His Face, His manly Face infused with the Divine, my tragic Lord gazing at me from my Mother's arms in the frozen sludge of the long-ago street of Podil, my loving Lord in bloody Majesty.

I didn't care what Dora said.

I didn't care that she screamed His Holy Name. I didn't care. I knew.

And as she declared her faith, as she snatched the Veil from Lestat's very hands and ran with it out of this apartment, I followed, moving after her and after the Veil—though in the sanctuary of my heart I never moved.

I never stirred.

A great stillness had overtaken my mind, and my limbs no longer mattered.

It did not matter that Lestat fought with her, and cautioned her that she must not believe this thing, and that the three of us stood on the steps of the Cathedral and that the snow fell like some splendid blessing from the invisible and fathomless Heavens.

It did not matter that the sun was soon to rise, a fiery silver ball beyond the canopy of melting clouds.

I could die now.

I had seen Him, and all the rest—the words of Memnoch and his fanciful God, the pleas of Lestat that we come away, that we hide ourselves before the morning devoured us all—it did not matter.

I could die now.

"Not made by human hands," I whispered.

A crowd gathered around us at the doors. The warm air came out of the church in a deep delicious gust. It didn't matter.

"The Veil, the Veil," they cried. They saw! They saw His Face.

Lestat's desperate imploring cries were dying away.

The morning came down in its thunderous white-hot light, rolling over roofs and curdling the night in a thousand glassy walls and slowly unleashing its monstrous glory.

"Bear witness," I said. I held up my open arms to the blinding light, this molten silvery death. "This sinner dies for Him! This sinner goes to Him."

Cast me into Hell, Oh Lord, if that is Your will. You have given me Heaven. You have shown me Your Face.

And Your Face was human.

19

I shot upwards. The pain I felt was total, scalding away all will or power to choose momentum. An explosion inside me sent me skyward, right into the pearly snowy light which had come in a sudden flood, as it always does, from a threatening eye one moment, sending its endless rays over the cityscape, to a tidal wave of weightless molten illumination, rolling over all things great and small.

Higher and higher I went, spinning as if the force of the interior explosion would not stop its intensity, and in my horror I saw that my clothes had been burnt away, and a smoke veered off my limbs into the whirling wind.

I caught one full glimpse of my limbs, my naked outstretched arms and splayed legs, silhouetted against the obliterating light. My flesh was burnt black already, shiny, sealed to the sinews of my body, collapsed to the intricate tangle of muscles which encased my bones.

The pain reached the zenith of what I could bear, but how can I explain that it didn't matter to me; I was on the way to my own death, and this seemingly endless torture was nothing, nothing. I could endure all things, even the burning in the eyes, the knowledge that they would soon melt or explode in this furnace of sunlight, and that all that I was would pass out of flesh.

Abruptly the scene changed. The roar of the wind was gone, my eyes were quiet and focused, and all around there arose a great familiar chorus of hymns. I stood at an altar, and as I looked up I beheld a church before me thronged with people, its painted columns rising like so many ornate tree trunks out of the wilderness of singing mouths and wondering eyes. Everywhere, to right and to left, I saw this immense and endless congregation. The church had no walls to bind it, and even the rising domes, decorated in the purest and most glittering gold with the hammered saints and angels, gave way to the great ever thinning and never ending blue sky.

Incense filled my nostrils. Around me, the tiny golden bells rang in unison, and with one riff of delicate melody tumbling fast upon another. The smoke burnt my eyes but so sweetly, as the fragrance of the incense filled my nostrils and made my eyes water, and my vision become one with all I tasted and touched and heard.

I threw out my arms, and I saw long golden-trimmed white sleeves covering them, falling back from wrists which were covered with the soft fleecy down of a man's natural hair. These were my hands, yes, but my hands years past the mortal point where life had been fixed in me. They were the hands of a man.

Out of my mouth there came a song, echoing loudly and singly over the congregation, and then their voices rose in answer, and once again I intoned my conviction, the conviction that had overcome me to the marrow of my bones:

"Christ is come. The Incarnation is begun in all things and in all men and women, and will go on forever!" It seemed a song of such perfection that the tears flowed from me, and as I bowed my head and clasped my hands I looked down to see the bread and the wine in front of me, the rounded loaf waiting to be blessed and broken and the wine in the golden chalice there to be transformed.

"This is the Body of Christ, and this is Blood shed for us now and before and forever, and in every moment of which we are alive!" I sang out. I laid my hands on the loaf and lifted it, and a great stream of light poured forth out of it, and the congregation gave forth their sweetest loudest hymn of praise.

In my hands I held the chalice. I held it high as the bells pealed from the towers, towers and towers that crowded near the towers of this grand church, stretching for miles in all directions, the whole world having become this great and glorious wilderness of churches, and here beside me the little golden bells chimed.

Once again came the gusts of incense. Setting down the chalice I looked at the sea of faces stretching before me. I turned my head from left to right, and then I looked Heavenward at the disappearing mosaics which became one with the rising, roiling white clouds.

I saw gold domes beneath Heaven.

I saw the endless rooftops of Podil.

I knew it was Vladimir's City in all its glory, and that I stood in the

great sanctuary of Santa Sofia, all screens having been taken away that would have divided me from the people, and all those other churches which had been but ruins in my long-ago dim childhood were now restored to magnificence, and the golden domes of Kiev drank the light of the sun and gave it back with the power of a million planets basking eternal in the fire of a million stars.

"My Lord, my God!" I cried out. I looked down at the embroidered splendor of my vestments, the green satin and its threads of pure metallic gold.

On either side of me stood my brothers in Christ, bearded, eyes glowing as they assisted me, as they sang the hymns which I sang, as our voices mingled, pressing on from anthem to anthem in notes that I could almost see rising before me to the airy firmament above.

"Give it to them! Give it to them because they are hungry," I cried. I broke the loaf of bread in my hands. I broke it into halves, and then into quarters, and tore these hastily into small morsels which crowded the shining golden plate.

En masse, the congregation mounted the steps, tender pink little hands reaching for the morsels, which I gave out as fast as I could, morsel after morsel, not a crumb spilling, the bread divided among dozens, and then scores, and then hundreds, as they pressed forward, the newcomers barely allowing those who had been fed to make their way back.

On and on they came. But the hymns did not cease. Voices, muted at the altar, silenced as the bread was devoured, soon burst forth loud and jubilant again.

The bread was eternal.

I tore its soft thick crust again and again and put it into the outstretched palms, the gracefully cupped fingers.

"Take it, take the Body of Christ!" I said.

Dark wavering shadowy forms rose around me, rising up out of the gleaming gold and silver floor. They were trunks of trees, and their limbs arched upward and then down towards me, and leaves and berries fell from these branches, down onto the altar, onto the golden plate and onto the sacred bread now in a great mass of fragments.

"Gather them up!" I cried. I picked up the soft green leaves and the fragrant acorns and I gave these too to the eager hands. I looked down and I saw grain pouring through my fingers, grain which I offered to

opened lips, grain which I poured into open mouths.

The air was thick with the soundless falling of the green leaves, so much so that the soft brilliant shade of green tinted all around it, broken suddenly everywhere by the flight of tiny birds. A million sparrows flushed Heavenward. A million finches soared, the brilliant sun flitting on their tiny outstretched wings.

"Forever, ongoing, always in every cell and every atom," I prayed. "The Incarnation," I said. "And the Lord has dwelt among us." My words rang out again as if a roof covered us, a roof that could echo my song, though our roof was now the roofless sky alone.

The crowd pressed in. They surrounded the altar. My brothers had slipped away, thousands of hands tugging gently at their vestments, pulling them back from the table of God. All around me there pressed these hungry ones who took the bread as I gave it, who took the grain, who took the acorns by the handful, who took even the tender green leaves.

There stood my Mother beside me, my beautiful and sad-faced Mother, a fine embroidered headdress gracing her thick gray hair, with her wrinkled little eyes fastened on me, and in her trembling hands, her dried and fearful fingers, she held the most splendid of offerings, the painted eggs! Red and blue, and yellow and golden, and decorated with bands of diamonds and chains of the flowers of the field, the eggs shimmered in their lacquered splendor as if they were giant polished jewels.

And there in the very center of her offering, this offering which she held up with shivering wrinkled arms, there lay the very egg which she had once so long ago entrusted to me, the light, raw egg so gorgeously decorated in brilliant ruby red with the star of gold in the very center of the framed oval, this precious egg which had surely been her finest creation, the finest achievement of her hours with the burning wax and boiling dye.

It wasn't lost. It had never been lost. It was there. But something was happening. I could hear it. Even under the great swelling song of the multitudes I could hear it, the tiny sound inside the egg, the tiny fluttering sound, the tiny cry.

"Mother," I said. I took it. I held it in both hands and brought my thumbs down against the brittle shell.

“No, my son!” she cried. She wailed. “No, no, my son, no!”

But it was too late. The lacquered shell was smashed beneath my thumbs and out of its fragments had risen a bird, a beautiful and fullgrown bird, a bird of snow-white wings and tiny yellow beak and brilliant black eyes like bits of jet.

A long full sigh came out of me.

Out of the egg, it rose, unfolding its perfectly feathered white wings, its tiny beak open in a sudden shrill cry. Up it flew, this bird, freed of the broken red shell, up and up, over the heads of the congregation, and up through the soft swirling rain of the green leaves and fluttering sparrows, up through the glorious clamour of the pealing bells, it flew.

The bells of the towers rang out so loud that they shook the swirling leaves in the atmosphere, so loud that the soaring columns quivered, that the crowd rocked and sang all the more heartily as if to be in perfect unison with the great resounding golden-throated peals.

The bird was gone. The bird was free.

“Christ is born,” I whispered. “Christ is risen. Christ is in Heaven and on Earth. Christ is with us.”

But no one could hear my voice, my private voice, and what did it matter, for all the world sung the same song?

A hand clutched me. Rudely, meanly, it tore at my white sleeve. I turned. I drew in my breath to scream and froze in terror.

A man, come out of nowhere, stood beside me, so close that our faces almost touched. He glared down at me. I knew his red hair and beard, his fierce and impious blue eyes. I knew he was my Father, but he was not my Father but some horrific and powerful presence infused into my Father’s visage, and there, planted beside me, a colossus beside me, glaring down at me, mocking me by his power and his height.

He reached out and slammed the back of his hand against the golden chalice. It wobbled and fell, the consecrated wine staining the morsels of bread, staining the altar cloth of woven gold.

“But you can’t!” I cried. “Look what you’ve done!” Could nobody hear me over the singing? Could no one hear me above the peal of the bells?

I was alone.

I stood in a modern room. I stood beneath a white plaster ceiling. I stood in a domestic room.

I was myself, a smallish man figure with my old tousled shoulder-length curls and the purple-red coat of velvet and the ruff of layered white lace. I leant against the wall. Stunned and still, I leant there, knowing only that every particle of this place, every particle of me, was as solid and real as it had been a split second before.

The carpet beneath my feet was as real as the leaves which had fallen like snowflakes throughout the immense Cathedral of Santa Sofia, and my hands, my hairless boyish hands, were as real as the hands of the priest I'd been a moment before, who had broken the bread.

A terrible sob rose in my throat, a terrible cry that I myself could not bear to hear. My breath would stop if I didn't release it, and this body, damned or sacred, mortal or immortal, pure or corrupt, would surely burst.

But a music comforted me. A music slowly articulated itself, clean and fine, and wholly unlike the great seamless and magnificent chorus which I had only just heard.

Out of the silence there leapt these perfectly formed and discrete notes, this multitude of cascading sounds that seemed to speak with crispness and directness, as if in beautiful defiance of the inundation of sound which I had so loved.

Oh, to think that ten fingers alone could draw these sounds from a wooden instrument in which the hammers, with a dogged rigid motion, would strike upon a bronze harp of tautly stretched strings.

I knew it, I knew this song, I knew the piano Sonata, and had loved it in passing, and now its fury paralyzed me. *Appassionata.* Up and down the notes rang in gorgeous throbbing arpeggios, thundering downward to rumble in a staccato drumming, only to rise and race again. On and on went the sprightly melody, eloquent, celebratory and utterly human, demanding to be felt as well as heard, demanding to be followed in every intricate twist and turn.

Appassionata.

In the furious torrent of notes, I heard the resounding echo of the wood of the piano; I heard the vibration of its giant taut bronze harp. I heard the sizzling throb of its multitudinous strings. Oh, yes, on, and on, and on, and on, and on, louder, harder, ever pure and ever perfect, ringing out and wrung back as if a note could be a whip. How can human hands make this enchantment, how can they pound out of these

ivory keys this deluge, this thrashing, thundering beauty?

It stopped. So great was my agony I could only shut my eyes and moan, moan for the loss of those racing crystalline notes, moan for the loss of this pristine sharpness, this wordless sound that had nevertheless spoken to me, begged me to bear witness, begged me to share and understand another's intense and utterly demanding furor.

A scream jolted me. I opened my eyes. The room around me was large and jammed with rich and random contents, framed paintings to the ceiling, flowered carpets running rampant beneath the curly legs of modern chairs and tables, and there the piano, the great piano out of which had come this sound, shining in the very middle of this mayhem, with its long strip of grinning white keys, such a triumph of the heart, the soul, the mind.

Before me on the floor a boy knelt praying, an Arab boy of glossy close-cropped curls and a small perfectly fitted djellaba, that is, a cotton desert robe. His eyes were shut, his round little face pointed upwards, though he didn't see me, his black eyebrows knit and his lips moving frantically, the words tumbling in Arabic:

"Oh, come some demon, some angel and stop him, oh, come something out of the darkness I care not what, something of power and vengeance, I care not what, come, come out of the light and out of the will of the gods who won't stand to see the oppression of the wicked. Stop him before he kills my Sybelle. Stop him, this is Benjamin, son of Abdulla, who calls upon you, take my soul in forfeit, take my life, but come, come, that which is stronger than me and save my Sybelle."

"Silence!" I shouted. I was out of breath. My face was wet. My lips were shuddering uncontrollably. "What do you want, tell me?"

He looked at me. He saw me. His round little Byzantine face might have come wonder-struck from the church wall, but he was here and real and he saw me and I was what he wanted to see.

"Look, you angel!" he shouted, his youthful voice sharpened with its Arab accent. "Can't you see with your big beautiful eyes!"

I saw.

The whole reality of it came down at once. She, the young woman, Sybelle, was lighting to cling to the piano, not to be snatched off the bench, her hands out struggling to reach the keys, her mouth shut, and a terrible groan pushing up against her sealed lips, her yellow hair flying

about her shoulders. And the man who shook her, who pulled at her, who screamed at her, suddenly dealing her one fine blow with his fist that sent her over backwards, falling off the piano bench so that a scream escaped from her and she fell over herself, an ungainly tangle of limbs on the carpeted floor.

"Appassionata, Appassionata," he growled at her, a bear of a creature in his megalomaniacal temper. "I won't listen to it, I will not, I will not, you will not do this to me, to my life. It's my life!" He roared like a bull. "I won't let you go on!"

The boy leapt up and grabbed me. He clutched at my wrists and when I shook him off, staring at him in bafflement, he clutched my velvet cuffs.

"Stop him, angel. Stop him, devil! He cannot beat her anymore. He will kill her. Stop him, devil, stop him, she is good!"

She crawled to her knees, her hair a shredded veil concealing her face. A great smear of dried blood covered the side of her narrow waist, a stain sunk deep into the flowered fabric.

Incensed, I watched as the man withdrew. Tall, his head shaven, his eyes bulging, he put his hands to his ears, and he cursed her: "Mad stupid bitch, mad mad selfish bitch. Do I have no life? Do I have no justice? Do I have no dreams?"

But she had flung her hands on the keys again. She was racing right into the Second Movement of the *Appassionata* as though she had never been interrupted. Her hands beat on the keys. One furious volley of notes after another rose, as if written for no other purpose than to answer him, to defy him, as if to cry out, I will not stop, I will not stop —.

I saw what was to happen. He turned around and glared at her, but it was only to let the rage rise to its full power, his eyes wide, his mouth twisted in anguish. A lethal smile formed on his lips.

Back and forth she rocked on the piano bench, her hair flying, her face lifted, her mind having no need to see the keys she struck, to plot the course of her hands that raced from right to left, that never lost control of the torrent.

Out of her sealed lips there came a low humming, a grinding humming right in tune with the melodies that gushed from the keys. She arched her back and lowered her head, her hair falling down on the

backs of her racing hands. On she went, on into thunder, on into certainty, on into refusal, on into defiance, on into affirmation, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes.

The man made his move for her.

The frantic boy, leaving me in desperation, darted to come between them, and the man slammed him aside with such fury that the boy was knocked flat and sprawling on the floor.

But before the man's hands could reach her shoulders, before he could so much as touch her—and she went now into the First Movement again, ah, ah aaaah! the *Appassionata* all over again in all its power—I had hold of him, and spun him round to face me.

"Kill her, will you?" I whispered. "Well, we shall see."

"Yes!" he cried out, face sweating, protuberant eyes glistening. "Kill her! She's vexed me to utter madness, that's what she's done, and she'll die!" Too incensed even to question my presence, he tried to push me aside, his sights fixed already once again on her. "Damn you, Sybelle, stop that music, stop it!"

Her melody and chords were in the mode of thunder again. Flinging her hair from side to side, she charged onward.

I forced him backwards, my left hand catching his shoulder, my right pushing his chin up out of my way as I nuzzled in against his throat, tore it open and let the blood come into my mouth. It was scalding and rich and full of his hatred, full of bitterness, full of his blasted dreams and vengeful fancies.

Oh, the heat of it. I took it in in deep draughts, seeing it all, how he had loved her, nourished her, she his talented sister, he the clever, vicious-tongued and tone-deaf brother, guiding her towards the pinnacle of his precious and refined universe, until a common tragedy had broken her ascent and left her mad, turning from him, from memory, from ambition, locked forever in mourning for the victims of that tragedy, their loving and applauding parents, struck down on a winding road through a dark and distant valley in the very nights before her greatest triumph, her debut as full-fledged genius of the piano for all the wide world.

I saw their car rattling and plummeting through the darkness. I heard the brother in the back seat chattering, his sister beside him fast asleep. I saw the car strike the other car. I saw the stars above in cruel and silent

witness. I saw the bruised and lifeless bodies. I saw her stunned face as she stood unharmed, her clothes torn, by the side of the road. I heard him cry out in horror. I heard him curse in disbelief. I saw the broken glass. Broken glass everywhere glittering beautifully in the light of headlamps. I saw her eyes, her pale blue eyes. I saw her heart close.

My victim was dead. He slipped out of my grasp.

He was as lifeless as his parents had been in that hot desert place.

He was dead and crumpled and could never hurt her again, could never pull her long yellow hair, or beat her; or stop her as she played.

The room was sweetly still except for her playing. She had come again to the Third Movement, and she swayed gently with its quieter beginning, its polite and measured steps.

The boy danced for joy. In his fine little djellaba, his feet bare, his round head covered with thick black curls, he was the Arab angel leaping into the air, dancing, crying out, "He's dead, he's dead, he's dead." He clapped his hands, he rubbed them together, he clapped them again, he flung them up. "He's dead, he's dead, he's dead, he'll never hurt her, he'll never vex her, he's double-vexed forever, he's dead, he's dead."

But she didn't hear him. On she played, making her way through these slumberish low notes, humming softly and then parting her lips to make a monosyllabic song.

I was full with his blood. I felt it washing through me. I loved it, I loved every drop of it. I regained my breath from the effort of having so quickly consumed it, and then I walked slowly, quietly as I could, as if she could hear when she could not, and stood at the end of the piano looking at her.

What a small tender face she had, so girlish with deep-set, huge and pale blue eyes. But look at the bruises on her face. Look at the blood-red scratches on her cheek. Look at the field of tiny red bleeding pinpoint wounds on her temple where a shock of her hair had been ripped right out by the roots.

She didn't care. The greenish-black bruises on her bare arms meant nothing to her. She played on.

How delicate her neck was, even with the blackish swelling imprint of his fingers, and how graceful her small bony shoulders, barely holding up the sleeves of her thin flowered cotton dress. Her strong ashen

eyebrows came together in the sweetest frown of concentration as she gazed before her at nothing but her lilting, peaking music, her long clean fingers alone evincing her titanic and indomitable strength.

She let her gaze drift to me, and she smiled as if she had seen something that momentarily pleased her; she bowed her head once, twice, three times in rapid time with the music, but as though she were nodding to me.

"Sybelle," I whispered. I put my fingers to my lips and kissed them and blew the kiss to her, as her fingers marched on.

But then her vision misted, and she was off again, the Movement demanding speed from her, her head jerked back with the effort of her assault on the keys. And the Sonata sprang once again into its most triumphant life.

Something more powerful than the light of the sun engulfed me. It was a power so total that it utterly surrounded me and sucked me up out of the room, out of the world, out of the sound of her playing, out of my senses.

"Noooo, don't take me now!" I screamed. But an immense and empty blackness swallowed the sound.

I was flying, weightless, with my burnt black limbs outstretched, and in a Hell of excruciating pain. This cannot be my body, I sobbed, seeing the black flesh sealed to my muscles like leather, seeing every tendon of my arms, my fingernails bent and blackened like bits of burnt horn. No, not my body, I cried, Oh, Mother help me, help me! Benjamin, help me …

I began to fall. Oh, there was no one who could help me now but one Being.

"God, give me the courage," I cried. "God if it's begun, give me the courage, God, I can't give up my reason, God, let me know where I am, God, let me understand what is happening, God, where is the church, God, where is the bread and the wine, God, where is she, God help me, help me."

Down and down I fell, past spires of glass, past grids of blind windows. Past rooftops and pointed towers. I fell through the harsh and wild wailing of the wind. I fell through the stinging torrent of snow. I fell and I fell. I fell past the window where the unmistakable figure of Benjamin stood with his tiny hand on the drape, his black eyes fixed on me for one

split second, his mouth open, tiny Arab angel. I fell down and down, the skin shriveling and tightening on my legs so that I couldn't bend them, tightening on my face so that I couldn't open my mouth, and with an agonizing explosion of raw pain, I struck hard-packed snow.

My eyes were open and fire flooded them.

The sun had fully risen.

"I shall die now. I shall die!" I whispered. "And in this last moment of burning paralysis, when all the world is gone and there is nothing left, I hear her music! I hear her playing the final notes of the *Appassionata*! I hear her. I hear her tumultuous song."

20

I didn't die. Not by any means.

I awoke to hear her playing, but she and her piano were very far away. In the first few hours after twilight, when the pain was at its worst, I used the sound of her music, used the search for it, to keep myself from screaming in madness because nothing could make the pain stop.

Deeply encased in snow, I couldn't move and couldn't see, save what my mind could see if I chose to use it, and wishing to die, I used nothing. I only listened to her playing the *Appassionata*, and sometimes I sang along with her in my dreams.

All the first night and the second, I listened to her, that is, when she was disposed to play. She would stop for hours, to sleep perhaps. I couldn't know. Then she would begin again and I'd begin with her.

I followed her Three Movements until I knew them, as she must know them, by heart. I knew the variations she worked into her music; I knew how no two musical phrases she played were ever the same.

I listened to Benjamin calling for me, I heard his crisp little voice, speaking very rapidly and very much in New York style, saying, "Angel, you've not done with us, what are we to do with him? Angel, come back. Angel, I'll give you cigarettes. Angel, I have plenty of good cigarettes. Come back. Angel, that's just a joke. I know you can get your own cigarettes. But this is really vexing, you leaving this dead body, Angel. Come back."

There were hours when I heard nothing of either of them. My mind hadn't the strength to reach out telepathically to them, just to see them, one through the eyes of the other. No. That kind of strength was gone.

I lay in mute stillness, burnt as much by all that I'd seen and felt as by any sunlight, hurt and empty inside, and dead of mind and heart, save for my love for them. It was easy enough, wasn't it, in blackest misery to love two pretty strangers, a mad girl and a mischievous streetwise boy

who cared for her? There was no history to it, my killing her brother. Bravo, and finished. There was five hundred years of history to the pain of everything else.

There were hours when only the city talked to me, the great clattering, rolling, rustling city of New York, with its traffic forever clanking, even in the thickest snow, with its layers upon layers of voices and lives rising up to the plateau on which I lay, and then beyond it, vastly beyond it in towers such as the world before this time has never beheld.

I knew things but I didn't know what to make of them. I knew that the snow covering me was growing ever deeper, and ever harder, and I didn't understand how such a thing as ice could keep away from me the rays of the sun.

Surely, I must die, I thought. If not this coming day, then the next. I thought of Lestat holding up the Veil. I thought of His Face. But the zeal had left me. All hope had left me.

I will die, I thought. Morning by morning, I will die.

But I didn't.

In the city far below, I heard others of my kind. I didn't really try to hear them, and so it was not their thoughts that came to me, but now and then their words. Lestat and David were there, Lestat and David thought that I was dead. Lestat and David mourned for me. But far worse horrors plagued Lestat because Dora and the world had taken the Veil, and the city was now crowded with believers. The Cathedral could scarce control the multitudes.

Other immortals came, the young, the feeble and sometimes, most horribly, the very ancient, wanting to view this miracle, slipping into the nighttime Church among the mortal worshipers and looking with crazed eyes on the veil.

Sometimes they spoke of poor Armand or brave Armand or St. Armand, who in his devotion to the Crucified Christ had immolated himself at this very Church door!

Sometimes they did the same. And just before the sun was to rise again, I'd have to hear them, hear their last desperate prayers as they waited for the lethal light. Did they fare better than I? Did they find their refuge in the arms of God? Or were they screaming in agony, agony such as I felt, unendurably burnt and unable to break away from it, or were they lost as I was, remnants in alleyways or on distant roofs? No,

they came and they went, whatever their fate.

How pale it all was, how far away. I felt so sad for Lestat that he had bothered to weep for me, but I was to die here. I was to die sooner or later. Whatever I had seen in that moment when I'd risen into the sun didn't matter. I was to die. That was all there was.

Piercing the snowy night, electronic voices spoke of the miracle, that Christ's Face upon a Veil of linen had cured the sick and left its imprint on other cloths pressed to it. Then came an argument of clergymen and skeptics, a perfect din.

I followed the sense of nothing. I suffered. I burned. I couldn't open my eyes, and when I tried, my eyelashes scratched my eyes and the agony was too much to bear. In darkness, I waited for her.

Sooner or later, without fail, there came her magnificent music, with all its new and wondrous variations, and nothing mattered to me then, not the mystery of where I was, or what I might have seen, or what it was that Lestat and David meant to do.

It was not until the seventh night perhaps that my senses were fully restored to me, and the full horror of my state was understood.

Lestat was gone. So was David. The Church had been shut up. From the murmurings of mortals I soon realized that the Veil had been taken away.

I could hear the minds of all the city, a din that was unsupportable. I shut myself off from it, fearing the vagrant immortal who'd home in on me if he caught but one spark from my telepathic mind. I couldn't endure the thought of some attempted rescue by immortal strangers. I couldn't endure the thought of their faces, their questions, their possible concern or merciless indifference. I hid myself from them, coiled up in my cracked and tightened flesh. Yet I heard them, as I heard the mortal voices around them, speaking of miracles and redemption and the love of Christ.

Besides, I had enough to think about to figure my present predicament and how it had come to be.

I was lying on a roof. That is where my fall had left me, but not under the open sky, as I might have hoped or supposed. On the contrary, my body had tumbled down a slope of metal sheeting, to lodge beneath a torn and rusted overhang, where it had been repeatedly buried in the wind-stirred snow.

How had I gotten here? I could only suppose.

By my own will, and with the first explosion of my blood in the light of the morning sun, I had been driven upwards, as high perhaps as I could go. For centuries I'd known how to climb to airy heights and how to move there, but I'd never pushed it to a conceivable limit, but with my zeal for death, I had strained with all my available strength to move Heavenward. My fall had been from the greatest height.

The building beneath me was empty, abandoned, dangerous, without heat or light.

Not a sound issued from its hollow metal stairwells or its battered, crumbling rooms. Indeed the wind played the structure now and then as if it were a great pipe organ, and when Sybelle was not at her piano it was to this music I listened, shutting out the rich cacophony of the city above, beyond and below.

Now and then mortals crept inside the lower floors of the building. I felt a sudden wrenching hope. Would one be fool enough to wander to this rooftop where I might lay hands on him and drink the blood I needed merely to crawl free of the overhang which protected me and thereby give myself unsheltered to the sun? As I lay now, the sun could scarce reach me. Only a dull white light scorched me through the snowy shroud in which I was wound, and with the lengthening of each night this newly inflicted pain would mellow into the rest.

But nobody ever came up here.

Death would be slow, very slow. It might have to wait until the warm weather came and the snow melted.

And so each morning, as I longed for death, I came to accept that I would wake, more burnt perhaps than ever, but all the more concealed by the winter blizzard, as I had been concealed all along, from the hundreds of lighted windows that looked down upon this roof from above.

When it was deadly quiet, when Sybelle slept and Benji had ceased praying to me and talking to me at the window, the worst happened. I thought, in a cold listless broken way, of those strange things that had befallen me when I'd been tumbling through space, because I could think of nothing else.

How utterly real it had been, the altar of Santa Sofia and the bread I'd broken in my hands. I'd known things, so many things, things which I

couldn't recall any longer or put into words, things which I could not articulate here in this narrative even as I sought to relive the tale.

Real. Tangible. I had felt the altar cloth and seen the wine spill, and before that the bird rise out of the egg. I could hear the sound of the cracking of the shell. I could hear my Mother's voice. And all the rest.

But my mind didn't want these things anymore. It didn't want them. The zeal had proved fragile. It was gone, gone like the nights with my Master in Venice, gone like the years of wandering with Louis, gone like the festive months on The Night Island, gone like those long shameful centuries with the Children of Darkness when I had been a fool, such a pure fool.

I could think of the Veil, I could think of Heaven, I could think of my standing at the Altar and working the miracle with the Body of Christ in my hands. Yes, I could think of all of it. But the totality had been too terrible, and I was not dead, and there was no Memnoch pleading with me to become his helper, and no Christ with arms outstretched against the backdrop of God's unending light.

It was sweeter by far to think of Sybelle, to remember that her room of rich red and blue Turkey carpets and darkly varnished overblown paintings had been every bit as real as Santa Sofia of Kiev, to think of her oval white face when she'd turned to glance at me, to think of the sudden brightness of her moist, quick eyes.

One evening, as my eyes actually opened, as the lids truly drew back over the orbs of my eyes so that I could see through the white cake of ice above me, I realized I was healing.

I tried to flex my arms. I could raise them ever so slightly, and the encasing ice shattered; what an extraordinary electric sound.

The sun simply couldn't reach me here, or not enough to work against the preternatural fury of the powerful blood my body contained. Ah, God, to think of it, five hundred years of growing ever stronger and stronger, and born from the blood of Marius in the first place, a monster from the start who never knew his own strength.

It seemed for a moment that my rage and despair could grow no greater. It seemed the fiery pain in all my body could be no worse.

Then Sybelle started to play. She began to play the *Appassionata*, and nothing else mattered.

It wouldn't matter again until her music had stopped. The night was

warmer than usual; the snow had melted slightly. There seemed no immortals anywhere near. I knew that the Veil had been spirited away to the Vatican in Rome. No cause now, was there, for immortals to come here?

Poor Dora. The nightly news said that her prize had been taken from her. Rome must examine this Veil. Her tales of strange blond-haired angels were the stuff of tabloids, and she herself was no longer here.

In a moment of daring, I fastened my heart upon Sybelle's music, and with an aching straining head, sent out my telepathic vision as if it were a fleshly part of me, a tongue requiring stamina, to see through Benjamin's eyes, the room where they were both lodged.

In a lovely golden haze, I saw it, saw the walls covered with the heavy framed paintings, saw my beautiful one herself, in a fleecy white gown with worn slippers, her fingers hard at work. How grand the sweep of the music. And Benjamin, the little worrier, frowning, puffing on a black cigarette, with hands folded behind his back, pacing in his bare feet and shaking his head as he mumbled to himself.

"Angel, I have told you to come back!"

I smiled. The creases in my cheeks hurt as if someone had made them with the point of a sharp knife. I shut my telepathic eye. I let myself slumber in the rushing crescendos of the piano. Besides, Benjamin had sensed something; his mind, unwarped by Western sophistication, had picked up some glimmer of my prying. Enough.

Then another vision came to me, very sharp, very special and unusual, something that would not be ignored. I turned my head again and made the ice crackle. I held my eyes open. I could see a blur of lighted towers high above.

Some immortal down there in the city was thinking of me, someone far away, many blocks from the closed-up Cathedral. In fact, I sensed in an instant the distant presence of two powerful vampires, vampires I knew, and vampires who knew of my death and lamented it bitterly as they went about some important task.

Now there was a risk to this. Try to see them and they might catch much more than the glimmer of me which Benjamin had been so quick to catch. But the city was empty of blood drinkers save for them, for all I could figure, and I had to know what it was that caused them to move with such deliberation and such stealth.

An hour passed perhaps. Sybelle was silent. They, the powerful vampires, were still at their work. I decided to chance it.

I drew in close with my disincarnate vision, and quickly realized that I could see one through the eyes of the other, but that it did not work for me the other way around.

The reason was plain. I sharpened my sight. I was looking through the eyes of Santino, my old Roman Coven Master, Santino, and the other whom I saw was Marius, my Maker, whose mind was locked to me for all time.

It was a vast official building in which they made their careful progress, both dressed as gentlemen of the moment in trim dark blue clothes, even to starched white collars and thin silk ties. Both had trimmed their hair in deference to corporate fashion. But this was no corporation in which they prowled, clearly putting into harmless thrall any mortal who tried to disturb them. It was a medical building. And I soon guessed what their errand must be.

It was the forensics laboratory of the city through which they wandered. And though they had taken their time in gathering up documents for their heavy briefcases, they were quick now with agitation as they pulled from refrigerated compartments the remains of those vampires who, following my example, had turned themselves over to the mercy of the sun.

Of course, they were confiscating what the world now had on us. They were scooping up the remains. Into simple glistening plastic sacks they put the residue, out of coffinlike drawers and off shining steel trays. Whole bones, ashes, teeth, ah, yes, even teeth, they swept into their little sacks. And now from a series of filing cabinets they withdrew the plastic-wrapped samples of clothing that remained.

My heart quickened. I stirred in the ice and the ice spoke back to me again. Oh, heart be still. Let me see. It was my lace, my very lace, the thick Venetian Rose Point, burnt at the edges, and with it a few shredded rags of purple-red velvet! Yes, my pitiful clothes which they took from the labeled compartment of the filing drawer and slipped into their bags.

Marius stopped. I turned my head and my mind elsewhere. Do not see me. See me and come here, and I swear to God I will … I will what? I have no strength even to move. I have no strength to escape. Oh, Sybelle, please, play for me, I have to escape this.

But then, remembering that he was my Master, remembering that he could trace me only through the weaker more muddled mind of his companion, Santino, I felt my heart go quiet.

From the bank of recent memory, I took her music, I framed it with numbers and figures and dates, all the little detritus I had brought with me over the centuries to her: that Beethoven had written her sweet masterpiece, that it was Sonata No. 23 in F Minor, Opus 57. Think on that. Think on Beethoven. Think on a make-believe night in cold Vienna, make-believe for I knew nothing really about it, think on him writing music with a noisy scratchy quill, which he himself perhaps could not hear. Think on him being paid in pittances. And think with a smile, yes, a painful cutting smile that makes your face bleed, of how they brought him piano after piano, so powerful was he, so demanding, so fiercely did he bang away.

And she, pretty Sybelle, what a fine daughter to him she was, her powerful fingers striking the keys with terrifying power that would surely have delighted him had he ever seen in the distant future, amid all his frenzied students and worshipers, just this particular maniacal girl.

It was warmer tonight. The ice was melting. There was no denying it. I pressed my lips together and again lifted my right hand. A cavity existed now in which I could move my right fingers.

But I couldn't forget about them, the unlikely pair, the one who'd made me and the one who'd tried to destroy him, Marius and Santino. I had to check back. Cautiously I sent out my weak and tentative beam of probing thought. And in an instant, I'd fixed them.

They stood before an incinerator in the bowels of the building and heaved into a fiery mouth all the evidence which they had brought together, sack after sack curling and crackling in the flames.

How odd. Didn't they themselves want to look at these fragments under microscopes? But then surely others of our kind had done this, and why look at the bones and teeth of those who have been baked in Hell when you can carve pale white tissue from your own hand, and place this on the glass slide while your hand heals itself miraculously, as I was healing even now?

I lingered on the vision. I saw the hazy basement round about them. I saw the low beams above their heads. Grathering all my power into my

projected gaze, I saw Santino's face, so troubled, soft, the very one who had shattered the only youth I might have ever had. I saw my old Master gazing almost wistfully at the flames. "We're finished," Marius said in his quiet, commanding voice, speaking Italian perfectly to the other. "I cannot think of another thing that we should do."

"Break apart the Vatican, and steal the veil from them," answered Santino. "What right have they to claim such a thing?"

I could only see Marius's reaction, his sudden shock and then his polite and poised smile. "Why?" he asked, as if he held no secrets. "What's the Veil to us, my friend? You think it will bring him back to his senses? Forgive me, Santino, but you are so very young."

His senses, bring him back to his senses. This had to mean Lestat. There was no other possible meaning. I pushed my luck. I scanned Santino's mind for all he knew, and found myself recoiling in horror, but holding fast to what I saw.

Lestat, my Lestat—for he was never theirs, was he?—my Lestat was crazed and railing as the result of his awful saga, and held prisoner by the very oldest of our kind on the final decree that if he did not cease to disturb the peace, which meant of course our secrecy, he would be destroyed, as only the oldest could accomplish, and no one could plead for him on any account.

No, that could not happen! I writhed and twisted. The pain sent its shocks through me, red and violet and pulsing with orange light. I hadn't seen such colors since I'd fallen. My mind was coming back, and coming back for what? Lestat to be destroyed! Lestat imprisoned, as I had once been centuries ago under Rome in Santino's catacombs. Oh, God, this is worse than the sun's fire, this is worse than seeing that bastard brother strike the little plum-cheeked face of Sybelle and knock her away from her piano, this is murderous rage I feel.

But the smaller damage was done. "Come, we have to get out of here," said Santino. "There's something wrong, something I sense that I can't explain. It's as if someone is right near us yet not near us; it's as if someone as powerful as myself has heard my footfall over miles and miles."

Marius looked kindly, curious, unalarmed. "New York is ours tonight," he said simply. And then with faint fear he looked into the mouth of the furnace one last time. "Unless something of spirit, so tenacious of life,

clung still to his lace and to the velvet he wore."

I closed my eyes. Oh, God, let me close my mind. Let me shut it up tight.

His voice went on, piercing the little shell of my consciousness where I had so softened it.

"But I have never believed such things," he said. "We're like the Eucharist itself, in some measure, don't you think? Being Body and Blood of a mysterious god only so long as we hold to the chosen form. What's strands of reddish hair and scorched and tattered lace? He's gone."

"I don't understand you," Santino confessed gently. "But if you think I never loved him, you are very very wrong."

"Let's go then," Marius said. "Our work's done. Every trace of every one is now obliterated. But promise me in your old Roman Catholic soul, you won't go seeking the Veil. A million pairs of eyes have looked on it, Santino, and nothing's changed. The world is the world, and children die in every quadrant under Heaven, hungry and alone."

I could risk no more.

I veered away, searching the night like a high beam, casting about for the mortals who might see them leave the building in which they'd done their all-important work, but their retreat was too secret, too swift for that.

I felt them go. I felt the sudden absence of their breath, their pulse, and knew the winds had taken them away.

At last when another hour had ticked, I let my eye roam the same old rooms where they had wandered.

All was quiet with those poor muddled technicians and guards whom white-faced specters from another realm had gently spellbound as they went about their gruesome task.

By morning, the theft and all the missing work would be discovered, and Dora's miracle would suffer yet another dreary insult, receding ever more swiftly out of current time.

I was sore; I wept a dry, hoarse weeping, unable even to muster tears.

I think that once in the glimmering ice I saw my hand, a grotesque claw, more like a thing flayed than burnt, and shiny black as I had remembered it or seen it.

Then a mystery began to prey upon me. How could I have killed the

evil brother of my poor love? How could it have been anything but an illusion, that swift horrible justice, when I had been rising and falling beneath the weight of the morning sun?

And if that had not happened, if I had not sucked dry that awful vengeful brother, then they too were a dream, my Sybelle and my little Bedouin. Oh, please, was that the final horror?

The night struck its worst hour. Dim clocks chimed in painted plastered rooms. Wheels churned the crunching snow. Again, I raised my hand. There came the inevitable crack and snap. Tumbling all around me was the broken ice like so much shattered glass!

I looked above on pure and sparkling stars. How lovely this, these guardian glassy spires with all their fast and golden squares of light cut in ranks run straight across and sharply down to score the airy blackness of the winter night, and here now comes the tyrant wind, whistling through crystalline canyons down across this small neglected bed where one forgotten demon lies, gazing with the larcenous vision of a great soul at the city's emboldened lights on clouds above. Oh, little stars, how much I've hated you, and envied you that in the ghastly void you can with such determination plot your dogged course.

But I hated nothing now. My pain was as a purgative for all unworthy things. I watched the sky cloud over, glisten, become a diamond for a still and gorgeous moment, and then again the white soft limitless haze took up the golden glow of city lamps and sent in answer the softest lightest fall of snow.

It touched my face. It touched my outstretched hand. It touched me all over as it melted in its tiny magical flakes.

"And now the sun will come," I whispered, as if some guardian angel held me close, "and even here beneath this twisted little awning of tin, it will find me through this broken canopy and take my soul to further depths of pain."

A voice cried out in protest. A voice begged that it not be so. My own, I thought, of course, why not this self-deception? I am mad to think that I can bear the burning that I've suffered and that I could willingly endure it once again.

But it wasn't my voice. It was Benjamin, Benjamin at his prayers. Flinging out my disembodied eyes, I saw him. He knelt in the room as she lay sleeping like a ripe and succulent peach amid her soft tangled

bedcovers. “Oh, angel, Dybbuk, help us. Dybbuk, you came once. So come again. You vex me that you don’t come!”

How many hours is it till sunrise, little man? I whispered this to his little seashell ear, as if I didn’t know.

“Dybbuk,” he cried out. “It’s you, you speak to me. Sybelle, wake up, Sybelle.”

Ah, but think before you wake her. It’s a horrid errand. I’m not the resplendent being you saw who sucked your enemy dry of blood and doted on her beauty and your joy. It’s a monster you come to collect if you mean to pay your debt to me, an insult to your innocent eyes. But be assured, little man, that I’ll be yours forever if you do me this kindness, if you come to me, if you succor me, if you help me, because my will is leaving me, and I’m alone, and I would be restored now and cannot help myself and my years mean nothing now, and I’m afraid.

He scrambled to his feet. He stood staring at the distant window, the window through which I had seen him in a dream glimpse me with his mortal eyes, but through which he could not possibly see me now, as I lay on a roof far far below the fine apartment which he shared with my angel. He squared his little shoulders, and now with black eyebrows in their perfect serious frown he was the very image off the Byzantine wall, a cherub smaller than myself.

“Name it, Dybbuk, I come for you!” he declared, and made his mighty little right hand into a fist. “Where are you, Dybbuk, what do you fear that we cannot conquer together! Sybelle, wake up, Sybelle! Our Divine Dybbuk has come back and he needs us!”

21

They were coming for me. It was the building beside their own, a derelict heap. Benjamin knew it. In a few faint telepathic whispers I'd begged him to bring a hammer and a pick to break up the ice such as remained and to have big soft blankets with which to wrap me.

I knew I weighed nothing. Painfully twisting my arms, I broke up more of the transparent covering. I felt with my clawlike hand that my hair had come back, thick and red-brown as ever. I held up a lock to the light, and then my arm could stand the scalding pain no more and I let it drop, unable to close or move my dried and twisted fingers.

I had to throw a spell, at least when they first came. They could not see the thing that I was, this black leathery monster. No mortal could bear the sight of this, no matter what words came from my lips. I had to shield myself somehow.

And having no mirror, how could I know how I looked or what I must do precisely? I had to dream, dream of the old Venetian days when I had been a beauty well known to myself from the tailor's glass, and project that vision right into their minds even if it took all the strength I possessed; yes, that, and I must give them some instructions.

I lay still, gazing up into the soft warm snowfall of tiny flakes, so unlike the terrible blizzards that had come earlier. I didn't dare to use my wits to track their progress.

Suddenly I heard the loud crash of breaking glass. A door slammed far below. I heard their uneven steps rushing up the metal stairs, clambering over the landings.

My heart beat hard, and with each little convulsion, the pain was pumped through me, as if my blood itself were scalding me.

Suddenly, the steel door on the roof was flung back. I heard them rushing towards me. In the faint dreamy light of the high towers all around, I saw their two small figures, she the fairy woman, and he the child of no more than twelve years perhaps, hurrying towards me.

Sybelle! Oh, she came out on the roof without a coat, hair streaming, the terrible pity of it, and Benjamin no better in his thin linen djellaba. But they had a big velvet comforter to cover me, and I had to make a vision.

Give me the boy I was, give the finest green satin and ruff upon ruff of fancy lace, give me stockings and braided boots, and let my hair be clean and shining.

Slowly I opened my eyes, looking from one to the other of their small pale and rapt faces. Like two vagrants of the night they stood in the drifting snow.

"Oh, but Dybbuk, you had us so very worried," said Benjamin, in his wildly excited voice, "and look at you, you are beautiful."

"No, don't think it's what you see, Benjamin," I said. "Hurry with your tools, chop at the ice, and lay the cover over me."

It was Sybelle who took up the wooden-handled iron hammer and with both hands slammed it down, fracturing the soft top layer of ice immediately. Benjamin chopped at it all with the pick as if he had become a small machine, thrusting to left and to right over and over, sending the shards flying.

The wind caught Sybelle's hair and whipped around into her eyes. The snow clung to her eyelids.

I held the image, a helpless satin-clad child, with soft pinkish hands upturned and unable to help them.

"Don't cry, Dybbuk," declared Benjamin, grabbing a giant thin slab of ice with both hands. "We'll get you out, don't cry, you're ours now. We have you."

He threw aside the shining jagged broken sheets, and then he himself appeared to freeze, more solid than any ice, staring at me, his mouth a perfect O of amazement.

"Dybbuk, you are changing colors!" he cried. He reached to touch my illusory face.

"Don't do it, Benji," said Sybelle.

It was the first time I'd heard her voice, and now I saw the deliberate brave calm of her blanched face, the wind making her eyes tear, though she herself remained staunch. She picked the ice from my hair. A terrible chill came over me, quelling the heat, yes, but sending the tears down my face. Were they blood? "Don't look at me," I said. "Benji, Sybelle,

look away. Just put the cover into my hands."

Her tender eyes squinted as she stared, disobediently, steadily, one hand up to close the collar of her flimsy cotton bed gown against the wind, the other poised above me.

"What's happened to you since you came to us?" she asked in the kindest voice. "Who's done this to you?"

I swallowed hard, and made the vision come again. I pushed it up from all my pores, as if my body were one agency of breath.

"No, don't do it anymore," said Sybelle. "It weakens you and you suffer terribly."

"I can heal, my sweet," I said, "I promise I can. I won't be like this always, not even soon. Only take me off this roof. Take me out of this cold, and take me where the sun can't get to me again. It's the sun that did this. Only the sun. Take me, please. I can't walk. I can't crawl. I'm a night thing. Hide me in the darkness."

"Enough, don't say any more," cried Benji.

I opened my eyes to see a huge wave of brilliant blue settle over me as though a summer sky had come down to be my wrapping. I felt the soft pile of the velvet, and even this was pain, pain on the blazing skin, but it was pain that could be borne because their ministering hands were on me, and for this, for their touch, for their love, I would have endured anything.

I felt myself lifted. I knew that I was light, and yet how dreadful it was to be so helpless, as they wrapped me.

"Am I not light enough to carry?" I asked. My head had fallen back, and I could see the snow again, and I fancied that when I sharpened my gaze I could see the stars too, high above, biding their time beyond the haze of one tiny planet.

"Don't be afraid," whispered Sybelle, her lips close to the covers.

The smell of their blood was suddenly rich and thick as honey.

Both of them had me, hoisted in their arms, and they ran together over the roof. I was free of the hurtful snow and ice, almost free forever. I couldn't let myself think about their blood. I couldn't let this ravenous burnt body have its way. That was unthinkable.

Down through the metal stairwell we went, making turn after turn, their feet strumming the brittle steel treads, my body shocked and throbbing with agony. I could see the ceiling above, and then the smell

of their blood, mingling together, overpowered me, and I shut my eyes and clenched my burnt fingers, hearing the leathery flesh crack as I did so. I dug my nails into my palms.

I heard Sybelle at my ear. "We have you, we're holding you tight, we won't let you go. It isn't far. Oh, God, but look at you, look what the sun's done to you."

"Don't look!" said Benji crossly. "Just hurry! Do you think such a powerful Dybbuk doesn't know what you think? Be wise, hurry up."

They had come to the lower floor and to the broken window. I felt the arms of Sybelle lift me beneath my head and beneath my crooked knees, and I heard Benji's voice from beyond, no longer echoing on enclosing walls.

"That's it, now give him to me, I can hold him!" How furious and excited he sounded, but she had come through the window with me, I could tell this much, though my clever Dybbuk's mind was utterly spent, and I knew nothing, nothing but pain and the blood and the pain again and the blood and that they were running through a long dark alleyway from which I could see nothing of Heaven.

But how sweet it was. The rocking motion, the swinging of my burnt legs and the soft touch of her soothing fingers through the blanket, all this was wickedly wondrous. It wasn't pain anymore, it was merely sensation. The cover fell over my face.

On they hurried, feet crunching in the snow, Benji sliding once with a loud cry, and Sybelle grabbing hold of him. He caught his breath.

What labor it was for them in this cold. They must get out of it.

We entered the hotel in which they lived. The pungent warm air rushed out to take hold of us even as the doors were pulled open and before they fell shut, the hallway echoing with the sharp steps of Sybelle's little shoes and the quick shuffle of Benji's sandals.

With a sudden burst of agony through my legs and back, I felt myself doubled, knees brought up and head tipped towards them, as we crowded into the elevator. I bit down on the scream in my throat. Nothing could matter less. The elevator, smelling of old motors and tried and true oil, began its swaying jerking progress upwards.

"We're home, Dybbuk," whispered Benji with his hot breath on my cheek, his little hand grasping for me through the cover and pushing painfully against my scalp. "We are safe now, we have captured you and

we have you."

Click of locks, feet on hardwood floors, the scent of incense and candles, of a woman's rich perfume, of rich polish for fine things, of old canvases with cracked oil paint, of fresh and overpoweringly sweet white lilies.

My body was laid down gently into the bed of down, the blanket loosened so that I sank into layers of silk and velvet, the pillows seeming to melt beneath me.

It was the very disheveled nest in which I'd glimpsed her with my mind's eye, golden and sleeping in her white gown, and she had given it over to such a horror.

"Don't pull away the cover," I said. I knew that my little friend wanted so to do it.

Undaunted, he gently pulled it away. I struggled with my one recovering hand to catch it, to bring it back, but I couldn't do any more than flex my burnt fingers.

They stood beside the bed, gazing down at me. The light swirled around them, mingled with warmth, these two fragile figures, the gaunt porcelain girl, the bruises gone from her milk-white skin, and the little Arab boy, the Bedouin boy, for I realized now that that is what he truly was. Fearlessly they stared at what must be unspeakable to behold for human eyes.

"You are so shiny!" said Benji. "Does it hurt you?"

"What can we do!" said Sybelle, so muted, as if her very voice might injure me. Her hands covered her lips. The unruly wisps of her full straight pale hair moved in the light, and her arms were blue from the cold outside, and she could not help but shiver. Poor spare being, so delicate. Her nightdress was crumpled, thin white cotton, stitched with flowerets and trimmed with thin sturdy lace, a thing for a virgin. Her eyes brimmed with sympathy.

"Know my soul, my angel," I said. "I'm an evil thing. God wouldn't take me. And the Devil wouldn't either. I went into the sun so they could have my soul. It was a loving thing, without fear of Hellfire or pain. But this Earth, this very Earth has been my purgatorial prison. I don't know how I came to you before. I don't know what power it was that gave me those brief seconds to stand here in your room and come between you and death that was looming like a shadow over you."

“Oh, no,” she whispered fearfully, her eyes glistering in the dim lights of the room. “He would never have killed me.”

“Oh, yes, he would!” I said, and Benjamin said the very same exact words in concert with me.

“He was drunk and he didn’t care what he did,” said Benji in instant rage, “and his hands were big and clumsy and mean, and he didn’t care what he did, and after the last time he hit you, you lay still like the dead in this very bed for two hours without moving! Do you think a Dybbuk kills your own brother for nothing?”

“I think he’s telling you the truth, my pretty girl,” I said. It was so hard to talk. With each word I had to lift my chest. In crazy desperation, suddenly I wanted a mirror. I tossed and turned on the bed, and went rigid with pain.

The two were thrown into a panic.

“Don’t move, Dybbuk, don’t!” Benji pleaded. “Sybelle, the silk, all the silk scarves, get them out, wind them around him.”

“No!” I whispered. “Put the cover up over me. If you must see my face, then leave it bare, but cover the rest of me. Or …”

“Or what, Dybbuk, tell me?”

“Lift me so that I can see myself and how I look. Stand me before a long mirror.”

They fell silent in perplexity. Sybelle’s long yellow hair lay flaxen and flat down over her large breasts. Benji chewed at his little lip.

All the room swam with colors. Behold the blue silk sealed to the plaster of the walls, the heaps of richly embellished pillows all around me, look at the golden fringe, and there beyond, the wobbling baubles of the chandelier, filled with the glistering colors of the spectrum. I fancied I heard the tinkling song of the glass as these baubles touched. It seemed in my feeble deranged mind that I had never seen such simple splendor, that I had forgotten in all my years just how shining and exquisite the world was.

I closed my eyes, taking with me to my heart an image of the room. I breathed in, lighting the scent of their blood, the sweet clean fragrance of the lilies. “Would you let me see those flowers?” I whispered. Were my lips charred? Could they see my fang teeth, and were they yellowed from the fire? I floated on the silks beneath me. I floated and it seemed that I could dream now, safe, truly safe. The lilies were close. I reached

up again. I felt the petals against my hand, and the tears came down my face. Were they pure blood? Pray not, but I heard Benji's frank little gasp, and Sybelle making her soft sound to hush him.

"I was a boy of seventeen, I think, when it happened," I said. "It was hundreds of years ago. I was too young, really. My Master, he was a loving one; he didn't believe we were evil things. He thought we could feed off the badlings. If I hadn't been dying, it wouldn't have been done so soon. He wanted me to know things, to be ready."

I opened my eyes. They were spellbound! They saw again the boy I'd been. I had done it without intention.

"Oh, so handsome," said Benji. "So fine, Dybbuk."

"Little man," I said with a sigh, feeling the fragile illusion about me crumble to air, "call me by my name from now on; it's not Dybbuk. I think you picked up that one from the Hebrews of Palestine."

He laughed. He didn't flinch as I faded back into my horrid self.

"Then tell me your name," he said.

I did.

"Armand," said Sybelle. "Tell us, what can we do? If not silk scarves, ointments then, aloe, yes, aloe will heal your burns."

I laughed but only in a small soft way, meant to be purely kindly.

"My aloe is blood, child. I need an evil man, a man who deserves to die. Now, how will I find him?"

"What will this blood do?" asked Benji. He sat right down beside me, leaning over me as though I were the most fascinating specimen. "You know, Armand, you are black as pitch, you are made out of black leather, you are like those people they fish from the bogs in Europe, all shiny with all of you sealed inside. I could take a lesson in muscles from looking at you."

"Benji, stop," said Sybelle, struggling with her disapproval and her alarm. "We have to think how to get an evil man."

"You serious?" he said, looking up and across the bed at her. She stood with her hands clasped as if in prayer. "Sybelle, that's nothing. It's how to get rid of him afterwards that's so hard." He looked at me. "Do you know what we did with her brother?"

She put her hands over her ears and bowed her head. How many times had I done that very thing myself when it seemed a stream of words and images would utterly destroy me.

"You are so glossy, Armand," said Benji. "But I can get you an evil man, like that, it's nothing. You want an evil man? Let's make a plan." He bent down over me, as though trying to peer into my brain. I realized suddenly that he was looking at my fangs.

"Benji," I said, "don't come any closer. Sybelle, take him away."

"But what did I do?"

"Nothing," she said. She dropped her voice, and said desperately, "He's hungry."

"Lift the covers off again, will you do that?" I asked. "Lift them off and look at me and let me look into your eyes, and let that be my mirror. I want to see how very bad it is."

"Hmmm, Armand," said Benji. "I think you are crazy mad or something."

Sybelle bent down and with her two careful hands peeled the cover back and down, exposing the length of my body.

I went into her mind.

It was worse than I had ever imagined.

The glossy horror of a bog corpse, as Benji had said, was perfectly true, save for the horror of the full head of red-brown hair and huge, lidless bright brown eyes, and the white teeth arrayed perfectly below and above lips that had shriveled to nothing. Down the tightly drawn wrinkled black leather of the face were heavy red streaks of blood that had been my tears.

I whipped my head to the side and deep into the downy pillow. I felt the covers come up over me.

"This cannot go on for you, even if it could go on for me," I said. "It's not what I would have you see another moment, for the longer you live with this, the more like you are to live with anything. No. It cannot continue."

"Anything," Sybelle said. She crouched down beside me. "Is my hand cool if I lay it on your forehead? Is it gentle if I touch your hair?"

I looked at her from one narrow-slitted eye.

Her long thin neck was part of her shivering and emaciated loveliness. Her breasts were voluptuous and high. Beyond her in the lovely warm glow of the room, I saw the piano. I thought of these long gentle fingers touching the keys. I could hear in my head the throb of the *Appassionata*.

There came a loud flick, a crackle, a snap, and then the rich fragrance

of fine tobacco.

Benji strode back and forth beyond her, with his black cigarette on his lip.

"I have a plan," he declared, effortlessly holding forth with the cigarette firmly grasped between his half-open lips. "I go down to the streets. I meet a bad, bad guy in no time. I tell him I'm alone here in this apartment, up here in the hotel, with a man who is drunk and drooling and crazy and we have all this cocaine to sell and I don't know what to do and I need help with it."

I started to laugh in spite of the pain.

The little Bedouin shrugged his shoulders and held up his palms, puffing away on the black cigarette, the smoke curling about him like a magical cloud.

"What you think? It will work. Look, I'm a good judge of character. Now, you, Sybelle, you get out of the way, and let me lead this miserable sack of filth, this bad guy whom I lure into my trap, right to the very bed, and pitch him down on his face, like this, I trip him with my foot, like this, and he falls, boink, right into your arms, Armand, what do you think of it? "

"And if it goes wrong?" I asked.

"Then my beautiful Sybelle cracks him over the head with her hammer."

"I have a better thought," I said, "though God knows that what you've just devised is unsurpassingly brilliant. You tell him of course that the cocaine is under the coverlet in neat little plastic sacks all stretched out, but if he doesn't take this bait and come here to see for himself, then let our beautiful Sybelle simply throw back the cover, and when he sees what truly lies in this bed, he'll be out of here with no thought to harm anyone!"

"That's it!" Sybelle cried. She clapped her hands together. Her pale luminous eyes were wide.

"That's perfect," Benji agreed.

"But mark, don't carry a copper penny into the streets with you. If only we had but a little bit of the evil white powder with which to bait the beast."

"But we do," said Sybelle. "We have just that, a little bit which we took from my brother's pockets." She looked down at me thoughtfully,

not seeing me but running the plan through the tight coils of her soft and yielding mind. “We took everything out so that when we left him to be found, they’d find nothing with him. There are so many who are left that way in New York. Of course it was an unspeakable chore to drag him.”

“But we have that evil white powder, yes!” said Benji, clasping her shoulder suddenly and then bolting out of my sight to return within the instant with a small flat white cigarette case.

“Put it here, where I can smell what’s inside,” I said. I could see that neither of them knew for certain.

Benji snapped open the lid of the thin silver box. There, nestled in a small plastic bag, folded with impeccable neatness, was the powder with the very exact smell that I wanted it to have. I needn’t put it to my tongue, on which sugar would have tasted just as alien.

“That’s fine. Only empty out half of that at once down a drain, so that there’s just a little left, and leave the silver case here, lest you run into some fool who’ll kill you for it.”

Sybelle shivered with obvious fear. “Benji, I’ll go with you.”

“No, that would be most unwise,” I said. “He can get away from anyone much faster without you.”

“Oh, so right you are!” said Benji, taking the last drag from his cigarette and then crushing it out in a big glass ashtray beside the bed, where a dozen other little white butts were curled waiting for it. “And how many times do I tell her that when I go out for cigarettes in the middle of the night? Does she listen?”

He was off without waiting for an answer. I heard the rush of water from the tap. He was washing away half the cocaine. I let my eyes roam the room, veering away from the soft blood-filled guardian angel.

“There are people innately good,” I said, “who want to help others. You are one of them, Sybelle. I won’t rest as long as you live. I’ll be at your side. I’ll be there always to guard you and to repay you.”

She smiled.

I was astonished.

Her lean face, with its well-shaped pale lips, broke into the freshest and most robust smile, as if neglect and pain had never gnawed at her.

“You’ll be a guardian angel to me, Armand?” she asked.

“Always.”

"I'm off," Benji declared. With a crackle and snap, he lit another cigarette. His lungs must have been charcoal sacks. "I'm going out into the night. But what if this son of a bitch is sick or dirty or—."

"Means nothing to me. Blood's blood. Just bring him here. Don't try this fancy tripping with your foot. Wait till you have him right here beside the bed, and as he reaches to lift the cover, you, Sybelle, pull it back, and you, Benji, push on him with all your might, so the side of the bed trips his shins, and he'll fall into my arms. And after that, I'll have him."

He headed for the door.

"Wait," I whispered. What was I thinking of in my greed? I looked up at her mute smiling face, and then at him, the little engine puffing away on the black cigarette, with nothing on for the fierce winter outside but the damned djellaba.

"No, it has to be done," said Sybelle with wide eyes. "And Benji will choose a very bad man, won't you, Benji? An evil man who wants to rob and kill you."

"I know where to go," said Benji with a little twisted smile. "Just play your cards when I come back, both of you. Cover him up, Sybelle. Don't look at the clock. Don't worry about me!"

Off he went with the slam of the door, the big heavy lock slipping shut behind him automatically.

So it was coming. Blood, thick red blood. It was coming. It was coming, and it would be hot and delicious, and there would be a manful of it, and it was coming, it was coming within seconds.

I closed my eyes, and opening them, I let the room take shape again with its sky-blue draperies on every window, hanging down in rich folds to the floor, and the carpet a great writhing oval of cabbage roses. And she, this stalk of a girl staring at me and smiling her simple sweet smile, as if the crime of the night would be nothing to her.

She came down on her knees next to me, perilously close, and again she touched my hair with delicate hand. Her soft unfettered breasts touched my arm. I read her thoughts as if I read her palm, pushing back through layer after layer of her conscious, seeing the dark winding road again whipping and turning through the Jordan Valley, and the parents driving too fast for the pitch dark and the hairpin curves and the Arab drivers who came on plunging at even greater speed so that each

meeting of headlamps became a grueling contest.

"To eat the fish from the Sea of Galilee," she said, her eyes drifting away from me. "I wanted it. It was my idea we go there. We had one more day in the Holy Land, and they said it's a long drive from Jerusalem to Nazareth, and I said, 'But He walked on the water.' It was to me always the strangest tale. You know it?"

"I do," I said.

"That He was walking right on the water, as if He'd forgotten the Apostles were there or that anyone might see Him, and they from the boat, said, 'Lord!' and He was startled. Such a strange miracle, as if it was all … accidental. I was the one who wanted to go. I was the one who wanted to eat the fresh fish right out of the sea, the same water that Peter and the others had fished. It was my doing. Oh, I don't say it was my fault that they died. It was my doing. And we were all headed home for my big night at Carnegie Hall, and the record company was set up to record it, live. I'd made a recording before, you know. It had done much better than anyone ever expected. But that night … this night that never happened, that is, I was going to play the *Appassionata*. It was all that mattered to me. The other sonatas I love, the *Moonlight*, the *Pathétique*, but really for me … it was the *Appassionata*. My Father and Mother were so proud. But my brother, he was the one who always fought, always got me the time, the space, the good piano, the teachers I needed. He was the one who made them see, but then of course, he didn't have any life at all, and all of us saw what was coming. We'd talk about it round the table at night, that he had to get a life of his own, it was no good his working for me, but then he'd say that I would need him for years to come, I couldn't even imagine. He'd manage the recordings and the performances and the repertoire, and the fees we asked. The agents couldn't be trusted. I had no idea, he said, of how high I'd rise."

She paused, cocking her head to one side, her face earnest yet still simple.

"It wasn't a decision I made, you understand," she said. "I just wouldn't do anything else. They were dead. I just wouldn't go out. I just wouldn't answer the phone. I just wouldn't play anything else. I just wouldn't listen to what he said. I just wouldn't plan. I just wouldn't eat. I just wouldn't change my clothes. I just played the *Appassionata*."

"I understand," I said softly.

"He brought Benji back with us to take care of me. I always wondered how. I think Benji was bought, you know, bought with cold cash?"

"I know."

"I think that's what happened. He couldn't leave me alone, he said, not even at the King David, that was the hotel—."

"Yes."

"—because he said I'd stand in the window without my clothes, or I wouldn't let the maid come in, and I'd play the piano in the middle of the night and he couldn't sleep. So he got Benji. I love Benji."

"I know."

"I'd always do what Benji said. He never dared to hit Benji. Only towards the end he started to really hurt me. Before that it was slaps, you know, and kicks. Or he'd pull my hair. He'd grab me by the hair, all my hair in one hand, and he'd throw me down on the floor. He did that often. But he didn't dare to hit Benji. He knew if he hit Benji I'd scream and scream. But then sometimes, when Benji would try to make him stop —. But I'm not so sure about that because I would be so dizzy. My head would ache."

"I understand," I said. Of course, he had hit Benji.

She mused, quietly, her eyes large still, and so bright without tears or puckering.

"We're alike, you and I," she whispered, looking down at me. Her hand lay close to my cheek, and she very lightly pressed the soft: upper part of her forefinger against me.

"Alike?" I asked. "What in the world can you be thinking of?"

"Monsters," she said. "Children."

I smiled. But she didn't smile. She looked dreamy.

"I was so glad when you came," she said. "I knew he was dead. I knew when you stood at the end of the piano and you looked at me. I knew when you stood there listening to me. I was so happy that there was someone who could kill him."

"Do this for me," I said.

"What?" she asked. "Armand, I'll do anything."

"Go to the piano now. Play it for me. Play the *Appassionata.*"

"But the plan," she asked in a small wondering voice. "The evil man, he's coming."

"Leave this to Benji and me. Don't turn around to look. Just play the

Appassionata."

"No, please," she asked gently.

"But why not?" I said. "Why must you put yourself through such an ordeal?"

"You don't understand," she said with the widest eyes. "I want to see it!"

22

Benji had just returned below. The distant sound of his voice, quite inaudible to Sybelle, instantly drove back the pain from all the surfaces of my limbs.

"That's what I mean, you see," he was talking away, "it's all underneath the dead body, and we don't wanna lift it, the dead body, and you being a cop, you know, you being Drug Enforcement, they said you would know how to take care of it …"

I started to laugh. He had really done himself proud. I looked again at Sybelle, who was staring at me with a quiet resolute expression, one of profound intelligence and reflection.

"Push this cover up over my face," I said, "and move away, far away. He's bringing us a regular prince of rogues. Hurry."

She snapped into action. I could smell the blood of this victim already, though he was still in the ascending elevator, talking to Benji in low guarded terms.

"And all this you just happen to have in this apartment, you and she, and there's nobody else in on this?"

Oh, he was a beauty. I heard the murderer in his voice.

"I told you everything," Benji said in the most natural of little voices. "You just help with this, you know, I can't have the police coming in here!" Whisper. "This is a fine hotel. How did I know this guy was going to die here! We don't use this stuff, you take the stuff, just get the body out of here. Now let me tell you—."

The elevator opened to our floor.

"—this body is pretty messed up, so don't go all slobbering on me when you see it."

"Slobbering on you," growled the victim under his breath. Their shoes made soft hastening sounds on the carpet.

Benji fumbled with his keys, pretending to be mixed up.

"Sybelle," he called out in warning. "Sybelle, open the door."

"Don't do it," I said in a low voice.

"Of course not," came her velvety answer.

The barrels of the big lock turned.

"And this guy just happens to come up here and die on you with all this stuff."

"Well, not exactly," said Benji, "but you made a bargain with me, no, I expect you to stick to it."

"Look, you little guttersnipe, I didn't make any bargain with you."

"Okay, then maybe I call the regular police then. I know you. Everybody in the bar knows you, who you are, you're always around. What are you going to do, big shot? Kill me?"

The door closed behind them. The smell of the man's blood flooded the apartment. He was besotted with brandy and had the poison cocaine in his veins as well, but none of this would make a particle of difference to my cleansing thirst. I could scarce contain myself. I felt my limbs tighten and try to flex beneath the coverlet.

"Well, isn't she the perfect princess," he said, his eyes obviously having fallen on Sybelle. Sybelle made no answer.

"Never mind her, you look there, under the covers. Sybelle, you come here by me. Come on, Sybelle."

"Under there? You're telling me the body's under there, and the cocaine is under the body?"

"How many times I have to tell you?" asked Benji, no doubt with his characteristic shrug. "Look, what part don't you understand, I'd like to know. You don't want this cocaine? I give it away. I'll be very popular in your favorite bar. Come on, Sybelle, this man says he will help, then he won't help, talk, talk, talk, typical government sleaze."

"Who are you calling a sleaze, kid?" demanded the man with mock gentleness, the fragrance of the brandy thickening. "That's some big vocabulary you have for such a little body. How old are you, kid? How the Hell did you get into this country? You go around in that nightgown all the time?"

"Yeah, sure, just call me Lawrence of Arabia," said Benji. "Sybelle, come over here."

I didn't want her to come. I wanted her as far away from this as possible. She didn't move, and I was very glad of it.

"I like my clothes," Benji chattered on. Puff of sweet cigarette smoke.

“I should dress like kids in this place, I suppose, in blue jeans? As if. My people dressed like this when Mohammed was in the desert.”

“Nothing like progress,” said the man with a deep throaty laugh.

He approached the bed with quick crisp steps. The scent of blood was so rich I could feel the pores of my burnt skin opening for it.

I used the tiniest part of my strength to form a telepathic picture of him through their eyes—a tall brown-eyed man, sallow white skin, gaunt cheeks, receding brown hair, in a handmade Italian suit of shining black silk with flashing diamond cufflinks on his rich linen. He was antsy, fingers working at his sides, almost unable to stand still, his brain a riot of dizzy humor, cynicism and crazed curiosity. His eyes were greedy and playful. The ruthlessness underscored all, and there seemed in him a strong streak of genuine drug-nourished insanity. He wore his murders as proudly as he wore his princely suit and the shiny brown boots on his feet.

Sybelle came near the bed, the sharp sweet scent of her pure flesh mingling with the heavier richer scent of the man. But it was his blood I savored, his blood that brought the juices up into my parched mouth. I could barely keep from making a sigh beneath the covers. I felt my limbs about to dance right out of their painful paralysis.

The villain was sizing up the place, glancing left and right through open doors, listening for other voices, debating whether he should search this fancy overstuffed and rambling hotel apartment before he did anything else. His fingers would not be still. In a flash of wordless thought, I caught the quick realization that he’d snorted the cocaine Benji had brought, and he wanted more immediately.

“My, but you are a beautiful young lady,” he said to Sybelle.

“Do you want me to lift the cover?” she asked.

I could smell the small handgun that was jammed in his high black leather boot, and the other gun, very fancy and modern, a distinctly different collection of metallic scents, in the holster under his arm. I could smell cash on him too, that unmistakable stale smell of filthy paper money.

“Come on, you chicken, buster?” asked Benji. “You want me to pull back the cover? Say when. You’re gonna be real surprised, believe me!”

“There’s no body under there,” he said with a sneer. “Why don’t we sit down and have a little talk? This isn’t really your place, is it? I think

you children need a little paternal guidance."

"The body's all burnt up," said Benji. "Don't get sick now."

"Burnt up!" said the man.

It was Sybelle's long hand that suddenly whipped the coverlet back. The cool air skidded across my skin. I stared up at the man who drew back, a half-strangled growl caught in his throat.

"For the love of God!"

My body sprang up, drawn by the plump fountain of blood like a hideous puppet on a score of whipping strings. I flailed against him, then anchored my burnt fingernails hard into his neck and wrapped the other arm around him in an agonizing embrace, my tongue flashing at the blood that spilled from the claw marks as I drew in and, ignoring the blazing pain in my face, opened my mouth wide and sank my fangs.

Now I had him.

His height, his strength, his powerful shoulders, his huge hands clamping to my hurt flesh, none of this could help him. I had him. I drew up the first thick swallow of blood and thought I would swoon. But my body wasn't about to allow it. My body had locked to him as if I were a thing of voracious tentacles.

At once, his crazed and luminous thoughts drew me down into a glitzy swirl of New York images, of careless cruelty and grotesque horror, of rampant drug-driven energy and sinister hilarity. I let the images flood me. I couldn't go for the quick death. I had to have every drop of blood inside him, and for that the heart must pump and pump; the heart must not give up.

If I had ever tasted blood this strong, this sweet and salty, I had no memory of it; there was no way in which memory could record such deliciousness, the absolute rapture of thirst slaked, of hunger cured, of loneliness dissolved in this hot and intimate embrace, in which the sound of my own seething, straining breath would have horrified me if I had cared about it.

Such a noise I made, such a dreadful feasting noise. My fingers massaged his thick muscles, my nostrils were pressed into his pampered soap-scented skin.

"Hmmm, love you, wouldn't hurt you for the world, you feel it, it's sweet, isn't it?" I whispered to him over the shallows of gorgeous blood. "Hmmm, yes, so sweet, better than the finest brandy, hmmm …"

In his shock and disbelief, he suddenly let go utterly, surrendering to the delirium that I stoked with each word. I ripped at his neck, widening the wound, rupturing the artery more fully. The blood gushed anew.

An exquisite shiver ran down my back; it ran down the backs of my arms, and down my buttocks and legs. It was pain and pleasure commingled as the hot and lively blood forced itself into the microfibers of my shriveled flesh, as it plumped the muscles beneath the roasted skin, as it sank into the very marrow of my bones. More, I had to have more.

"Stay alive, you don't want to die, no, stay alive," I crooned, rubbing my fingers up through his hair, feeling that they were fingers now, not the pterodactyl digits they'd been moments before. Oh, they were hot; it was the fire all over again, it was the fire blazing in my scorched limbs, this time death had to come, I couldn't bear this any longer, but a pinnacle had been reached, and now it was past and a great soothing ache rushed through me.

My face was pumped and teeming, my mouth full again and again, and my throat now swallowing without effort.

"Ah, yes, alive, you're so strong, so wonderfully strong …" I whispered. "Hmmm, no, don't go … not yet, it's not time."

His knees buckled. He sank slowly to the carpet, and I with him, pulling him gently over with me against the side of the bed, and then letting him fall beside me, so that we lay like lovers entangled. There was more, much more, more than ever I could have drunk in my regular state, more than ever I could have wanted.

Even on those rare occasions when I was a fledgling and greedy and new, and had taken two or three victims a night, I had never drunk so deeply from any one of them. I was now into the dark tasty dregs, pulling out the very vessels themselves in sweet clots that dissolved on my tongue.

"Oh, you are so precious, yes, yes."

But his heart could take no more. It was slowing to a lethal irretrievable pace. I closed my teeth on the skin of his face and ripped it open over his forehead, lapping at the rich tangle of bleeding vessels that covered his skull. There was so much blood here, so much blood behind the tissues of the face. I sucked up the fibers, and then spit them out bloodless and white, watching them drop to the floor like so much

slop.

I wanted the heart and the brain. I had seen the ancients take it. I knew how. I'd seen the Roman Pandora once reach right into the chest.

I went for it. Astonished to see my hand fully formed though dark brown in color, I made my fingers rigid like a deadly spade and drove it into him, tearing linen and cracking breastbone, and then reaching his soft entrails until I had the heart and held it as I'd seen Pandora hold it. I drank from it. Oh, it had plenty of blood. This was magnificent. I sucked it to pulp and then let it fall.

I lay as still as he, at his side, my right hand on the back of his neck, my head bowed against his chest, my breath coming in heavy sighs. The blood danced in me. I felt my arms and legs jerking. Spasms ran through me, so that the sight of his white dead carcass blinkered in my gaze. The room flashed on and off.

"Oh, what a sweet brother," I whispered. "Sweet, sweet brother." I rolled on my back. I could hear the roar of his blood in my very ears, feel it moving over my scalp, feel it tingling in my cheeks and in the palms of my hands. Oh, good, too good, too lusciously good.

"Bad guy, hmmm?" It was Benji's voice, far away in the world of the living.

Far away in another realm where pianos ought to be played, and little boys should dance, they stood, the two like painted cutout figures against the swimming light of the room, merely gazing at me, he the little desert rogue with his fancy black cigarette, puffing away and smacking his lips and raising his eyebrows, and she merely floating it seemed, resolute and thoughtful as before, unshocked, untouched perhaps.

I sat up and pulled up my knees. I rose to my feet, with only a quick handhold on the side of the bed to steady myself. I stood naked looking at her.

Her eyes were filled with a deep rich gray light, and she smiled as she looked at me.

"Oh, magnificent," she whispered.

"Magnificent?" I said. I lifted my hands and pushed my hair back off my face. "Show me to the glass. Hurry. I'm thirsting. I'm thirsting again already."

It had begun, this was no lie. In a stupor of shock I stared into the

mirror. I had seen such ruined specimens as this before, but each of us is ruined in our own way, and I, for alchemical reasons I couldn't proclaim, was a dark brown creature, the very perfect color of chocolate, with remarkably white opal eyes set with reddish-brown pupils. The nipples of my chest were black as raisins. My cheeks were painfully gaunt, my ribs perfectly defined beneath my shiny skin, and the veins, the veins that were so full of sizzling action, stood like ropes along my arms and the calves of my legs. My hair, of course, had never seemed so lustrous, so full, so much a thing of youth and natural beneficence.

I opened my mouth. I ached with thirst. All the awakened flesh sang with thirst or cursed me with it. It was as if a thousand crushed and muted cells were now chanting for blood.

"I have to have more. I have to. Stay away from me." I hurried past Benji, who all but danced at my side.

"What do you want, what can I do? I'll get another one."

"No, I'll get him for myself." I fell on the victim and slipped loose his silk tie. I quickly undid the buttons of his shirt.

Benji fell at once to unbuckling his belt. Sybelle, on her knees, tugged at his boots.

"The gun, beware of the gun," I said in alarm. "Sybelle, back away from him."

"I see the gun," she said reprovingly. She laid it aside carefully, as if it were a freshly caught fish and might flop from her hands. She peeled off his socks. "Armand, these clothes," she said, "they're too big."

"Benji, you have shoes?" I asked. "My feet are small."

I stood up and hastily put on the shirt, fastening the buttons with a speed that dazzled them.

"Don't watch me, get the shoes," I said. I pulled on the trousers, zipped them up, and with Sybelle's quick fingers to help, buckled the flapping leather belt. I pulled it as tight as I could. This would do.

She crouched before me, her dress a huge flowered circle of prettiness around her, as she rolled the pant legs over my brown bare feet.

I had slipped my hands through his fancy linked shirt cuffs without ever disturbing them.

Benji threw down the black dress shoes, fine Bally pumps, never even worn by him, divine little wretch. Sybelle held one sock for my foot. Benji gathered up the other.

When I put on the coat it was done. The sweet tingling in my veins had stopped. It was pain again, it was beginning to roar, as if I were threaded with fire, and the witch with the needle pulled on the thread, hard, to make me quiver.

"A towel, my dears, something old, common. No, don't, not in this day and age, don't think of it."

Full of loathing I gazed down at his livid flesh. He lay staring dully at the ceiling, the soft tiny hair in his nostrils very black against his drained and awful skin, his teeth yellow above his colorless lip. The hair on his chest was a matted swarm in the sweat of his death, and against the giant gaping slit lay the pulp that had been his heart, ah, this was the evil evidence which must be shut from the eyes of the world on general principles.

I reached down and slipped the ruins of his heart back into the cavity of his chest. I spit upon the wound and rubbed it with my fingers.

Benji gasped. "Look at it heal, Sybelle," he cried.

"Just barely," I said. "He's too cold, too empty." I looked about. There lay the man's wallet, papers, a bag in leather, lots of green bills in a fancy silver clip. I gathered all this up. I stuffed the folded money in one pocket, and all else in the other. What else did he have? Cigarette, a deadly switchblade knife, and the guns, ah, yes, the guns.

Into my coat pockets I put these items.

Swallowing my nausea, I reached down and scooped him up, horrid flaccid white man in his pitiable silk shorts and fancy gold wristwatch. My old strength was indeed coming back. He was heavy, but I could easily heave him over my shoulder.

"What will you do, where will you go?" Sybelle cried. "Armand, you can't leave us."

"You'll come back!" said Benji. "Here, gimme that watch, don't throw away that man's watch."

"Sshhh, Benji," Sybelle whispered. "You know damned good and well I've bought you the finest watches. Don't touch him. Armand, what can we do now to help you?" She drew close to me. "Look!" she said pointing to the dangling arm of the corpse which hung just below my right elbow. "He has manicured nails. How amazing."

"Oh, yeah, he always took very good care of himself," said Benji. "You know the watch is worth five thousand dollars."

"Hush up about the watch," she said. "We don't want his things." She looked at me again. "Armand, even now you're still changing. Your face, it's getting fuller."

"Yes, and it hurts," I said. "Wait for me. Prepare a dark room for me. I'll come back as soon as I've fed. I have to feed now, feed and feed to heal the scars that are left. Open the door for me."

"Let me see if there's anyone out there," said Benji with a quick dutiful rush to the door.

I went out into the hallway, easily carrying the poor corpse, its white arms hanging down, swinging and banging against me just a little.

What a sight I was in these big clothes. I must have looked like a mad poetical schoolboy who had raided the thrift stores for the finest threads and was off now in fancy new shoes to search out the rock bands.

"There isn't anyone out here, my little friend," I said. "It's three of the clock and the hotel's asleep. And if reason serves me right, that's the door of the fire stairs there, at the very end of the hall, correct? There isn't anyone in the fire stairs either."

"Oh, clever Armand, you delight me!" he said. He narrowed his little black eyes. He jumped up and down soundlessly on the hallway carpet. "Give me the watch!" he whispered.

"No," I said. "She's right. She's rich, and so am I, and so are you. Don't be a beggar."

"Armand, we'll wait for you," said Sybelle in the doorframe. "Benji, come inside immediately."

"Oh, listen to her now, how she wakes up! How she talks! 'Benji, come inside,' she says. Hey, sweetheart, don't you have something to do just now, like perhaps play the piano?"

She gave a tiny burst of laughter in spite of herself. I smiled. What a strange pair they were. They did not believe their own eyes. But that was typical enough in this century. I wondered when they would start to see, and having seen, start screaming.

"Goodbye, sweet loves," I said. "Be ready for me."

"Armand, you will come back." Her eyes were full of tears. "You promise me."

I was stunned. "Sybelle," I said. "What is it that women want so often to hear and wait so long to hear it? I love you."

I left them, racing down the stairs, hefting him to the other shoulder

when the weight on the one side became too hurtful. The pain passed over me in waves. The shock of the outside cold air was scalding.

"Feed," I whispered. And what was I to do with him? He was far too naked to carry down Fifth Avenue.

I slipped off his watch because it was the only identification on him left, and almost vomiting with revulsion from my closeness to these fetid remains, I dragged him by one hand after me very fast through the back alley, and then across a small street, and down another sidewalk.

I ran into the face of the icy wind, not stopping to observe those few hulking shapes that hobbled by in the wet darkness, or to take stock of the one car that crept along on the shining wet asphalt.

Within seconds I had covered two blocks, and finding a likely alleyway, with a high gate to keep out the beggars of the night, I quickly mounted the bars and flung his carcass to the very far end of it. Down into the melting snow he fell. I was rid of him.

Now I had to have blood. There was no time for the old game, the game of drawing out those who wanted to die, those who truly craved my embrace, those in love already with the far country of death of which they knew nothing.

I had to shuffle and stumble along, the mark, in my floppy silk jacket and rolled pants, long hair veiling my face, poor dazzled kid, perfect for your knife, your gun, your fist.

It didn't take long.

The first was a drunken, sauntering wretch who plied me with questions before he revealed the flashing blade and went to sink it into me. I pushed him up against the side of the building, and fed like a glutton.

The next was a common desperate youth, full of festering sores, who had killed twice before for the heroin he needed as badly as I needed the doomed blood inside him.

I drank more slowly.

The thickest worst scars of my body yielded with much defense, itching, throbbing and only slowly melting away. But the thirst, the thirst would not stop. My bowels churned as if devouring themselves. My eyes pulsed with pain.

But the cold wet city, so full of rankling hollow noise, grew ever brighter before me. I could hear voices many blocks away, and small

electronic speakers in high buildings. I could see beyond the breaking clouds the true and numberless stars.

I was almost myself again.

So who will come to me now, I thought, in this barren desolate hour before dawn, when the snow is melting in the warmer air, and neon lights have all died out, and the wet newspaper blows like leaves through a stripped and frozen forest?

I took all the precious articles which had belonged to my first vietim, and dropped them here and there into deep hollow public trash cans.

One last killer, yes, please, fate, do give me this, while there's time, and indeed he came, blasted fool, out of a car as behind him the driver waited, the motor idling.

"What's taking you so damn long?" said the driver at last.

"Nothing," I said, dropping his friend. I leaned in to look at him. He was as vicious and stupid as his companion. He threw up his hand, but helplessly and too late. I pushed him over on the leather seat and drank now for rank pleasure, pure sweet crazed pleasure.

I walked slowly through the night, my arms out, my eyes directed Heavenward.

From the scattered black grates of the gleaming street there gushed the pure white steam of heated places below. Trash in shiny plastic sacks made a fantastical modern and glittering display on the curbs of the slate-gray sidewalks.

Tiny tender trees, with little year-round leaves like short pen strokes of bright green in the night, bent their stemlike trunks with the whining wind. Everywhere the high clean glass doors of granite-faced buildings contained the radiant splendor of rich lobbies. Shop windows displayed their sparkling diamonds, lustrous furs and smartly cut coats and gowns on grandly coiffed and faceless pewter mannequins.

The Cathedral was a lightless, soundless place of frost-rimmed turrets and ancient pointed arches, the pavement clean where I had stood on the morning when the sun caught me.

Lingering there, I closed my eyes, trying perhaps to recall the wonder and the zeal, the courage and the glorious expectation.

There came instead, clear and shining through the dark air, the pristine notes of the *Appassionata*. Roiling, rumbling, racing on, the crashing music came to call me home. I followed it.

The clock in the hotel foyer was striking six. The winter dark would break up in moments like the very ice that had once imprisoned me. The long polished desk was deserted in the muted lights.

In a wall mirror of dim glass framed in rococo gold, I saw myself, paled and waxen, and unblemished. Oh, what fun the sun and ice had had with me in turns, the fury of the one quick-frozen by the merciless grip of the other. Not a scar remained of where the skin had burnt to muscle. A sealed and solid thing with seamless agony within, I was, all of a piece, restored, with sparkling clear white fingernails, and curling lashes round my clear brown eyes, and clothes a wretched heap of stained, misfitted finery on the old familiar rugged cherub.

Never before had I been thankful to see my own too youthful face, too hairless chin, too soft and delicate hands. But I could have thanked the gods of old for wings at this moment.

Above, the music carried on, so grand, so legible of tragedy and lust and dauntless spirit. I loved it so. Who in the whole wide world could ever play that same Sonata as she did, each phrase as fresh as songs sung all their livelong life by birds who know but one such set of patterns.

I looked about. It was a fine, expensive place, of old wainscoting and a few deep chairs, and door keys ranged up a wall in tiny dark-stained wooden boxes.

A great vase of flowers, the infallible trademark of the vintage New York hotel, stood boldly and magnificently in the middle of the space, atop a round black marble table. I skirted the bouquet, snapping off one big pink lily with a deep red throat and petals curling to yellow at the outside, and then I went silently up the fire stairs to find my children.

She did not stop her playing when Benji let me in.

"You're looking really good, Angel," he said.

On and on she went, her head moving unaffectedly and perfectly with the rhythm of the Sonata.

He led me through a chain of finely decorated plastered chambers. Mine was too sumptuous by far, I whispered, seeing the tapestry spread and pillows of old gracious threadbare gold. I needed only perfect darkness.

"But this is the least we have," he said with a little shrug.

He had changed to a fresh white linen robe lined with a fine blue stripe, a kind I'd often seen in Arab lands. He wore white socks with his

brown sandals. He puffed his little Turkish cigarette, and squinted up at me through the smoke.

"You brought me back the watch, didn't you!" He nodded his head, all sarcasm and amusement.

"No," I said. I reached into my pocket. "But you may have the money. Tell me, since your little mind is such a locket and I have no key, did anyone see you bring that badge-carrying, gun-toting villain up here?"

"I see him all the time," he said with a little weary wave of his hand. "We left: the bar separately. I killed two birds with one stone. I'm very smart."

"How so?" I asked. I put the lily in his little hand.

"Sybelle's brother bought from him. That cop was the only guy ever missed him." He gave a little laugh. He tucked the lily in the thick curls above his left ear, then pulled it down and twirled its tiny ciborium in his fingers. "Clever, no? Now nobody asks where he is."

"Oh, indeed, two birds with one stone, you're quite right," I said. "Though I'm sure there's a great deal more to it."

"But you'll help us now, won't you?"

"I will indeed. I'm very rich, I told you. I'll patch things up. I have an instinct for it. I owned a great playhouse in a faraway city, and after that an island of fancy shops, and other such things. I am a monster in many realms, it seems. You'll never, ever have to fear again."

"You're truly beauty full, you know," he said raising one eyebrow and then giving me a quick wink. He drew on his tasty-looking little cigarette and then offered it to me. His left hand kept the lily safe.

"Can't. Only drink blood," I said. "A regular vampire out of the book in the main. Need deep darkness in the light of day, which is coming very soon. You mustn't touch this door."

"Ha!" he laughed with impish delight. "That's what I told her!" He rolled his eyes and glanced in the direction of the living room. "I said we had to steal a coffin for you right away, but she said, no, you'd think of that."

"How right she was. The room will do, but I like coffins well enough. I really do."

"And can you make us vampires too?"

"Oh, never. Absolutely not. You're pure of heart and too alive, and I don't have such a power. It's never done. It can't be."

Again, he shrugged. “Then who made you?” he asked.

“I was born out of a black egg,” I said. “We all are.”

He gave a scoffing laugh.

“Well, you’ve seen all the rest,” I said. “Why not believe the best part of it?”

He only smiled and puffed his smoke, and looked at me most knavishly.

The piano sang on in crashing cascades, the rapid notes melting as fast as they were born, so like the last thin snowflakes of the winter, vanishing before they strike the pavements.

“May I kiss her before I go to sleep?” I asked.

He cocked his head, and shrugged. “If she doesn’t like it, she’ll never stop playing long enough to say so.”

I went back into the parlor. How clear it all was, the grand design of sumptuous French landscapes with their golden clouds and cobalt skies, the Chinese vases on their stands, the massed velvet tumbling from the high bronze rods of the narrow old windows. I saw it all of a piece, including the bed where I had lain, now heaped with fresh down-filled coverlets and pillowed with embroidered antique faces.

And she, the center diamond of it all, in long white flannel, flounced at wrists and hem with rich old Irish lace, playing her long lacquered grand with agile unerring fingers, her hair a broad smooth yellow glow about her shoulders.

I kissed her scented locks, and then her tender throat, and caught her girlish smile and gleaming glance as she played on, her head tilting back to brush my coat front.

Down around her neck, I slipped my arms. She leant her gentle weight against me. With crossed arms, I clasped her waist. I felt her shoulders moving against my snug embrace with her darting fingers.

I dared in whisper-soft tones with sealed lips to hum the song, and she hummed with me.

“Appassionata,” I whispered in her ear. I was crying. I didn’t want to touch her with blood. She was too clean, too pretty. I turned my head.

She pitched forward. Her hands pounded into the stormy finish.

A silence fell, abrupt, and crystalline as the music before it.

She turned and threw her arms around me, and held me tight and said the words I’d never heard a mortal speak in all my long immortal life:

“Armand, I love you.”

23

Need I say they are the perfect companions?

Neither of them cared about the murders. I could not for the life of me understand it. They cared about other things, such as world peace, the poor suffering homeless in the waning winter cold of New York, the price of medicines for the sick, and how dreadful it was that Israel and Palestine were forever in battle with each other. But they did not care one whit about the horrors they'd beheld with their own eyes. They did not care that I killed every night for blood, that I lived off it and nothing else, and that I was a creature wed by my very nature to human destruction.

They did not care one whit about the dead brother (his name was Fox, by the way, and the last name of my beautiful child is best left unmentioned).

In fact if this text ever sees the light of the real world, you're bound to change both her first name and that of Benjamin.

However, that's not my concern now. I can't think of the fate of these pages, except that they are very much for her, as I mentioned to you before, and if I'm allowed to title them I think it will be *Symphony for Sybelle*.

Not, please understand, that I love Benji no less. It's only that I haven't the same overwhelming protective feeling for him. I know that Benji will live out a great and adventurous life, no matter what should befall me or Sybelle, or even the times. It's in his flexible and enduring Bedouin nature. He is a true child of the tents and the blowing sands, though in his case, the house was a dismal cinder block hovel on the outskirts of Jerusalem where he induced tourists to pose for overpriced pictures with him and a filthy snarling camel.

He'd been flat out kidnapped by Fox under the felonious terms of a long-term lease of bondage for which Fox paid Benji's father five thousand dollars. A fabricated emigration passport was thrown into the

bargain. He'd been the genius of the tribe, without doubt, had mixed feelings about going home and had learnt in the New York streets to steal, smoke and curse, in that order. Though he swore up and down he couldn't read, it turned out that he could, and began to do so obsessively just as soon as I started throwing books at him.

In fact, he could read English, Hebrew and Arabic, having read all three in the newspapers of his homeland since before he could remember.

He loved taking care of Sybelle. He saw to it that she ate, drank milk, bathed and changed her clothes when none of these routine tasks interested her. He prided himself on the fact that he could by his wits obtain for her whatever she needed, no matter what happened to her.

He was the front man for her with the hotel, tipping the maids, making normal talk at the front desk, which included remarkably finespun lies about the whereabouts of the dead Fox, who had become in Benji's never ending saga a fabulous world traveler and amateur photographer; he handled the piano tuner, who was called as often as once a week because the piano stood by the window, exposed to sun and cold, and also because Sybelle did indeed pound it with the fury that would indeed have impressed the great Beethoven. He spoke on the phone to the bank, all of whose personnel thought he was his older brother, David, pronounced Dahveed, and then made the requisite calls at the teller's window for cash as little Benjamin.

I was convinced within nights of talking with him that I could give him as fine an education as Marius had ever given me, and that he would end up having his choice of universities, professions or amateur pursuits of mind-engaging substance. I didn't overplay my hand. But before the week was out I was dreaming of boarding schools for him from which he might emerge a gold-buttoned blue blazer-wearing American East Coast social conquistador.

I love him enough to tear limb from limb anyone who so much as lays a finger on him.

But between me and Sybelle there lies a sympathy which sometimes eludes mortals and immortals for the space of their entire lives. I know Sybelle. I know her. I knew her when I first heard her play, and I know her now, and I wouldn't be here with you if she were not under the protection of Marius. I will during the space of Sybelle's life never be

parted from her, and there is nothing she can ever ask of me that I shall not give.

I will endure unspeakable anguish when Sybelle inevitably dies. But that has to be borne. I have no choice now in the matter. I am not the creature I was when I laid eyes on Veronica's Veil, when I stepped into the sun.

I am someone else, and that someone else has fallen deeply and completely in love with Sybelle and Benjamin and I cannot go back on it.

Of course I am keenly conscious that I thrive in this love; being happier than I have ever been in my entire immortal existence, I have gained great strength from having these two as my companions. The situation is too nearly perfect to be anything but utterly accidental.

Sybelle is not insane. She is nowhere near it, and I fancy that I understand her perfectly. Sybelle is obsessed with one thing, and that is playing the piano. From the first time she laid her hands on the keys she has wanted nothing else. And her "career," as so generously planned for her by her proud parents and by the burningly ambitious Fox, never meant much of anything to her.

Had she been poor and struggling perhaps recognition would have been indispensable to her love affair with the piano, as it would have given her the requisite escape from life's dreary domestic traps and routines. But she was never poor. And she is truly, in the very root of her soul, indifferent as to whether people hear her play her music or not.

She needs only to hear it herself, and to know that she is not disturbing other people.

In the old hotel, mostly full of rooms rented by the day, with only a handful of tenants rich enough to be lodged there year by year, as was Sybelle's family, she can play forever without disturbing anyone.

And after her parents' tragic death, after she lost the only two witnesses who had been intimate to her development, she simply could not cooperate with Fox's plans for her career any further.

Well, all this I understood, almost from the beginning. I understood it in her incessant repetition of the Sonata No. 23, and I think if you were to hear it, you would understand it too. I want you to hear it.

Understand, it will not at all faze Sybelle if other people do gather to listen to her. It won't bother her one whit if she's recorded. If other

people enjoy her playing and tell her so, she's delighted. But it's a simple thing with her. "Ah, so you too love it," she thinks. "Isn't it beautiful?" This is what she said to me with her eyes and her smiles the very first time I ever approached her.

And I suppose before I go any further—and I do have more to put down about my children—I should address this question: How did I approach her? How did I come to be in her apartment on that fateful morning, when Dora stood in the Cathedral crying to the crowds about the miraculous Veil, and I, the blood in my veins having combusted, was in fact rocketing skyward?

I don't know. I have rather tiresome supernatural explanations that read like tomes by members of the Society for the Study of Psychic Phenomena, or the scripts for Mulder and Scully on the television show called *The X-Files*. Or like a secret file on the case in the archives of the order of psychic detectives called the Talamasca.

Bluntly, I see it this way. I have most-powerful abilities to cast spells, to dislocate my vision, and to transmit my image over distances, and to affect matter both at close range and matter which is out of sight. I must somehow, in this morning journey towards the clouds, have used this power. It might have been drawn from me in a moment of harrowing pain when I was for all purposes deranged and completely unaware of what was happening to me. It might have been a last desperate hysterical refusal to accept the possibility of death, or of the horrible predicament, so close to death, in which I found myself.

That is, having fallen on the roof, burnt and in unspeakable torment, I might have sought a desperate mental escape, projecting my image and my strength into Sybelle's apartment long enough to kill her brother. It certainly is possible for spirits to exert enough pressure on matter to change it. So perhaps that is exactly what I did—project myself in spirit form and lay hands upon the substance that was Fox, and kill him.

But I don't really believe all this. I'll tell you why.

First off, though Sybelle and Benjamin are no experts, for all their savvy and seeming detachment, on the subject of death and its subsequent forensic analysis, they both insisted that Fox's body was bloodless when they got rid of it. The puncture wounds were apparent on his neck. In sum, they believe to this very hour that I was there, in substantial form, and that I did indeed drink Fox's blood.

Now that a projected image cannot do, at least not insofar as I know it. No, it cannot devour the blood of an entire circulatory system and then dissolve itself, returning to the cicatricula of the mind from which it came. No, that is not possible.

Of course, Sybelle and Benji could be wrong. What do they know about blood and bodies? But the fact is, they let Fox lie there, quite dead for some two days, or so they said, while they waited for the return of the Dybbuk or Angel whom they were sure would help them. Now in that time, the blood of a human body sinks down to the very lowest part of the carcass, and such a change would have been visible to these children. They noted no such thing.

Ah, it makes my brain ache! The fact is, I don't know how I got to their apartment, or why. I don't know how it happened. And I do know, as I have already said, that as regards the entire experience—everything I saw and felt in the great restored Cathedral at Kiev, an impossible place—was as real as what I knew in Sybelle's apartment.

There is one other small point, and though it is small it is crucial. After I had slain Fox, Benji did see my burnt body falling from the sky. He did see me, just as I saw him, from the window.

There is one very terrible possibility. It is this. I was going to die that morning. It was going to happen. My ascent was driven by immense will and an immense love of God of which I have no doubt as I dictate these words now.

But perhaps at the crucial moment, my courage failed me. My body failed me. And seeking some refuge from the sun, some way to thwart my martyrdom, I struck upon the predicament of Sybelle and her brother, and feeling her great need of me, I commenced to fall towards the shelter of the roof on which the snow and ice quickly covered me. My visit to Sybelle could have been, according to this interpretation, only a passing illusion, a powerful projection of self, as I've said, a wish fulfillment of the need of this random and vulnerable girl about to be fatally beaten by her brother.

As for Fox, I killed him, without doubt. But he died from fear, from failure of the heart, perhaps, from the pressure of my illusory hands on his fragile throat, from the power of telekinesis or suggestion.

But as I stated before, I don't believe this.

I was there in the Cathedral in Kiev. I broke the egg with my thumbs. I

saw the bird fly free.

I know my Mother stood at my side, and I know that my Father knocked over the chalice. I know because I know there is no part of me that could have imagined such a thing. And I know too because the colors I saw then and the music I heard were not made up of anything I had ever experienced.

Now, there is simply no other dream I have ever had about which I can say this. When I said the Mass in Vladimir's City, I was in a realm made up of ingredients which my imagination simply does not have at its disposal.

I don't want to say any more about it. It's too hurtful and awful to try to analyze it. I didn't will it, not with my conscious heart, and I had no conscious power over it. It simply happened.

I would, if I could, forget it entirely. I am so extraordinarily happy with Sybelle and Benji that surely I want to forget it all for the space of their lifetimes. I want only to be with them, as I have been since the night I described to you.

As you realize, I took my time in coming here. Having returned to the ranks of the dangerous Undead, it was very easy for me to discern from the roaming minds of other vampires that Lestat was safe in his prison here, and indeed was dictating to you the entire story of what had happened to him with God Incarnate and with Memnoch the Devil.

It was very easy for me to discern, without revealing my own presence, that an entire world of vampires mourned for me with greater anguish and tears than I could ever have predicted.

So, being confident of Lestat's safety, being baffled yet relieved by the mysterious fact that his stolen eye had been returned to him, I was at leisure to stay with Sybelle and Benji and I did so.

With Benji and Sybelle I rejoined the world in a way which I had not done since my fledgling, my one and only fledgling, Daniel Molloy, had left me. My love for Daniel had never been entirely honest, and always viciously possessive, and quite entangled with my own hatred of the world at large, and my confusion in the face of the baffling modern times which had begun to open up to me when I emerged in the late years of the Eighteenth Century from the catacombs beneath Paris.

Daniel himself had no use for the world, and had come to me hungering for our Dark Blood, his brain swimming with macabre,

grotesque tales which Louis de Pointe du Lac had told him. Heaping every luxury upon him, I only sickened him with mortal sweets so that finally he turned away from the riches I offered, becoming a vagabond. Mad, roaming the streets in rags, he shut out the world almost to the point of death, and I, weak, muddled, tormented by his beauty, and lusting for the living man and not the vampire he might become, only brought him over to us through the working of the Dark Trick because he would have died otherwise.

I was no Marius to him afterwards. It was too exactly as I supposed: he loathed me in his heart for having initiated him into Living Death, for having made him in one night both an immortal and a regular killer.

As a mortal man, he had no real idea of the price we pay for what we are, and he did not want to learn the truth; he fled from it, in reckless dreams and spiteful wandering.

And so it was as I feared. Making him to be my mate, I made a minion who saw me all the more clearly as a monster.

There was never any innocence for us, there was never any springtime. There was never any chance, no matter how beautiful the twilight gardens in which we wandered. Our souls were out of tune, our desires crossed and our resentments too common and too well watered for the final flowering.

It's different now.

For two months I remained in New York with Sybelle and Benji, living as I've never lived before, not since those long-ago nights with Marius in Venice.

Sybelle is rich, as I think I've told you, but only in a tedious struggling sort of way, with an income that pays for her exorbitant apartment and daily room service meals, with a margin for fine clothes, tickets to the symphony and an occasional spending spree.

I am fabulously rich. So the first thing I did, with pleasure, was lavish upon Sybelle and Benjamin all the riches I had once lavished upon Daniel Molloy to much greater effect.

They loved it.

Sybelle, when she was not playing the piano, had no objections whatsoever to wandering to the picture shows with Benji and me, or to the symphony and the opera. She loved the ballet, and loved to take Benjamin to the finest restaurants, where he became a regular marvel to

the waiters with his crisp enthusiastic little voice and his lilting way of rattling off the names of dishes, French or Italian, and ordering vintage wines which they poured for him, unquestioningly, despite all the good-intentioned laws that prohibit the serving of such strong spirits to children.

I loved all this too, of course, and was delighted to discover that Sybelle also took a sporadic and playful interest in dressing me, in choosing jackets, shirts and such from racks with a quick point of her finger, and in picking out for me from velvet trays all kinds of jeweled rings, cufflinks, neck chains and tiny crucifixes of rubies and gold, solid-gold clips for money and that sort of thing.

It was I who had played this masterly game with Daniel Molloy. Sybelle plays it with me in her own dreamy way, as I take care of the tiresome cash register details.

I in turn have the supreme pleasure of carrying Benji about like a doll and getting him to wear all the Western finery I purchase, at least now and then, for an hour or two.

We make a striking trio, the three of us dining at Lutèce or Sparks (of course I don't dine)—Benji in his immaculate little desert robe, or got up in a finely fitted little suit with narrow lapels, white button-down shirt and flash of tie; me in my highly acceptable antique velvet and chokers of old crumbling lace; and Sybelle in the lovely dresses that spill endlessly out of her closet, confections her Mother and Fox once bought for her, close cut around her large breasts and small waist and always flaring magically about her long legs, hem high enough to reveal the splendid curve of her calf and its tautness when she slips her dark-stockinged feet into dagger-heeled slippers. Benji's close-cropped cap of curls is always the Byzantine halo for his dark enigmatic little face, her flowing waves are free, and my hair is the Renaissance mop again of long unruly curls that used to be my secret vanity.

My deepest pleasure with Benji is education. Right off, we started having powerful conversations about history and the world, and found ourselves stretched out on the carpet of the apartment, poring over maps, as we discussed the entire progress of East and West and the inevitable influences upon human history of climate, culture and geography. Benji gabbles away all during television broadcasts of the news, calling each anchorperson intimately by his or her first name,

slamming his fist in anger at the actions of world leaders and wailing loudly over the deaths of great princesses and humanitarians. Benji can watch the news, talk steadily, eat popcorn, smoke a cigarette and sing intermittently with Sybelle's playing, always on key—all more or less simultaneously.

If I fall to staring at the rain as if I've seen a ghost, it's Benji who beats on my arm and cries, "What shall we do, Armand? We have three splendid movies to see tonight. I'm vexed, I tell you, vexed, because if we go to any of these, we'll miss Pavarotti at the Met and I'll go pasty-white with sickness."

Many times the two of us dress Sybelle, who looks at us as if she doesn't know what we're doing. We always sit talking with her when she bathes, because if we don't she's likely to go to sleep in the bathtub, or simply stay in there for hours, sponging the water over her beautiful breasts.

Sometimes the only words she says all night are things like, "Benji, tie your shoes," or "Armand, he's stolen the silverware. Make him put it back," or with sudden astonishment, "It's warm, isn't it?"

I have never told anyone my life story as I've told it to you here and now, but in conversation with Benji I have caught myself telling him many things which Marius told me—about human nature, and the history of the law, about painting and even about music.

It was in these conversations, more than in anything else, that I came to realize in the last two months that I was a changed being.

Some stifling dark terror is gone from me. I do not see history as a panorama of disasters, as once I think I did; and often I find myself remembering Marius's generous and beautifully optimistic predictions—that the world is ever improving; that war, for all the strife we see around us, has nevertheless gone out of fashion with those in power, and will soon pass from the arenas of the Third World as it has passed from the arenas of the West; and we will truly feed the hungry and shelter the homeless and take care of those who need love.

With Sybelle, education and discussion are not the substance of our love. With Sybelle it is intimacy. I don't care if she never says anything. I don't go inside her mind. She doesn't want anybody to do that.

As completely as she accepts me and my nature, I accept her and her obsession with the *Appassionata*. Hour after hour, night after night, I

listen to Sybelle play, and with each fresh start I hear the minute changes of intensity and expression which pour forth in her playing. Gradually, on account of this, I have become the only listener of whom Sybelle has ever been conscious.

Gradually, I have become part of Sybelle's music. I am there with her and the phrases and movements of the *Appassionata*. I am there and I am one who has never asked anything of Sybelle except that she do what she wants to do, and what she can do so perfectly.

That's all Sybelle ever has to do for me—is what she will.

If or when she wants to rise in "fortune and men's eyes," I'll clear the way for her. If or when she wants to be alone, she will not see or hear me. If or when she wants anything, I will get it for her.

And if or when she loves a mortal man or mortal woman, I'll do what she wants me to do. I can live in the shadows. Doting on her, I can live forever in gloom because there is no gloom when I am near her.

Sybelle often goes with me when I hunt. Sybelle likes to see me feed and kill. I don't think I have ever allowed a mortal to do that. She tries to help me dispose of the remains or confuse the evidence of the cause of death, but I'm very strong and swift and capable at this, so she is mostly the witness.

I try to avoid taking Benji on these escapades because he becomes wildly and childishly excited, and it does him no good. To Sybelle it simply does nothing.

There are other things I could tell you—how we handled the details of her brother's disappearance, how I transferred immense sums of money into her name and set up the appropriate and unbreakable trust funds for Benji, how I bought for her a substantial interest in the hotel in which she lives, and have put into her apartment, which is very huge for a hotel apartment, several other fine pianos which she enjoys, and how I have set aside for myself a safe distance from the apartment a lair with a coffin which is unfindable, unbreachable and indestructible, and to which I go on occasion, though I am more accustomed to sleeping in the little chamber they first gave to me, in which velvet curtains have been fitted tightly over the one window to the airwell.

But the hell with all that.

You know what I want you to know.

What remains for us but to bring it to the moment, to sunset on this

night when I came here, entering the very den of the vampires with my brother and with my sister, one on either side to see Lestat at last.

24

This is all a little too simple, isn't it? I mean by that, my transformation from the zealous child who stood on the porch of the Cathedral to the happy monster making up his mind one spring night in New York City that it was time to journey south and look in on his old friend.

You know why I came here.

Let me begin at the start of this evening. You were there in the chapel when I arrived.

You greeted me with undisguised good will, so pleased to see I was alive and unharmed. Louis almost wept.

Those others, those raggedy young ones who were clustered about, two boys, I believe, and a girl, I don't know who they were, and still don't, only that later they drifted off.

I was horrified to see him undefended, lying on the floor, and his mother, Gabrielle, far off in the corner merely staring at him, coldly, the way she stares at everything and everyone as though she never knew a human feeling for what it was.

I was horrified that the young tramps were about, and felt instantly protective of Sybelle and Benji. I had no fear of their seeing the classics among us, the legends, the warriors—you, beloved Louis, even Gabrielle, and certainly not Pandora or Marius, who were all there.

But I hadn't wanted my children to look on common trash infused with our blood, and I wondered, arrogantly and vainly perhaps, as I always do at such moments, how these roguish sophomoric slob vampires ever came to be. Who made them and why and when?

At such times, the fierce old Child of Darkness wakes in me, the "Coven Master beneath the Paris Cemetery who decreed when and how the Dark Blood should be given and, above all, to whom. But that old habit of authority is fraudulent and just a nuisance at best.

I hated these hangers-on because they were there looking at Lestat as though he were a Carnival Curiosity, and I wouldn't have it. I felt a

sudden temper, an urge to destroy.

But there are no rules among us now that authorize such rash actions. And who was I to make a mutiny here under your roof? I didn't know you lived here then, no, but you certainly had custody of the Master of the Place, and you allowed it, the ruffians, and the three or four more of them that came shortly after and dared to circle him, none of them, I noticed, getting any too close.

Of course everyone was most curious about Sybelle and Benjamin. I told them quietly to stay directly beside me and not to stray. Sybelle couldn't get it out of her mind that the piano was so near at hand, and it would have a whole new sound for her Sonata. As for Benji, he was striding along like a little Samurai, checking out monsters all around, with his eyes like saucers though his mouth was very puckered up and stern and proud.

The chapel struck me as beautiful. How could it not? The plaster walls are white and pure, and the ceiling is gently coved, as in the oldest churches, and there is a deep coved shell where once the altar stood, which makes a well for sound, so that one footfall there echoes softly throughout the entire place.

The stained glass I'd seen brilliantly lighted from the street. Unfigured, it was nevertheless lovely with its vivid colors of blue and red and yellow, and its simple serpentine designs. I liked the old black lettering of the mortals long gone in whose memory each window had been erected. I liked the old plaster statues scattered about, which I had helped you to clear from the New York apartment and send south.

I had not looked at them much; I had shielded myself from their glass eyes as if they were basilisks. But I certainly looked at them now.

There was sweet suffering St. Rita in her black habit and white wimple, with the fearful awful sore in her forehead like a third eye. There was lovely, smiling Thérèse of Lisieux, the Little Flower of Jesus with His Crucifix and the bouquet of pink roses in her arms.

There was St. Teresa of Avila, carved out of wood and finely painted, with her eyes turned upwards, the mystic, and the feather quill in her hand that marked her as a Doctor of the Church.

There was St. Louis of France with his royal crown; St. Francis, of course, in humble brown monk's robes, with his gathering of tamed animals; and some others whose names I'm ashamed to say I didn't

know.

What struck me more perhaps even than these scattered statues, standing like so many guardians of an old and sacred history, were the pictures on the wall that marked Christ's road to Calvary: the Stations of the Cross. Someone had put them all in the proper order, maybe even before our coming into the world of this place.

I divined that they were painted in oil on copper, and they had a Renaissance style to them, imitative certainly, but one which I find normal and which I love.

Immediately, the fear that had been hovering inside me during all my happy weeks in New York came to the fore. No, it was not fear so much as it was dread.

My Lord, I whispered. I turned and looked up at the Face of Christ on the high Crucifix above Lestat's head.

This was an excruciating moment. I think the image on Veronica's Veil overlaid what I saw there in the carved wood. I know it did. I was back in New York, and Dora was holding up the cloth for us to see.

I saw His dark beautifully shadowed eyes perfectly fixed on the cloth, as though part of it but not in any way absorbed by it, and the dark streaks of His eyebrows and, above His steady unchallenging gaze, the tricklets of blood from His thorns. I saw His lips partway open as if He had volumes to speak.

With a shock, I realized that from far off by the altar steps Gabrielle had fixed her glacial gray eyes on me, and I locked up my mind and digested the key. I wouldn't have her touch me or my thoughts. And I felt a bristling hostility for all those gathered in the room.

Louis came then. He was so happy that I had not perished. Louis had something to say. He knew I was concerned and he was anxious about the presence of the others. He looked his usual ascetic self, got up in tired black clothes of beautiful cut but impossible dustiness and a shirt so thin and worn that it seemed an elfin web of threads rather than true lace and cloth.

"We let them in because if we don't, they circle like jackals, and wolves, and won't go away. As it is, they come, they see and they leave here. You know what they want."

I nodded. I didn't have the courage to admit to him that I wanted exactly the same thing. I had never stopped thinking about it, not really,

not for one moment, beneath the grand rhythm of all that had befallen me since I'd spoken to him on that last night of my old life.

I wanted his blood. I wanted to drink it. Calmly, I let Louis know.

"He'll destroy you," Louis whispered. He was flushed suddenly with terror. He looked questioningly at gentle silent Sybelle, who held fast to my hand, and Benjamin, who was studying him with enthusiastic bright eyes. "Armand, you can't chance it. One of them got too close. He smashed the creature. The motion was quick, automatic. But it has an arm like living stone and he blasted the creature to fragments there on the floor. Don't go near him, don't try it."

"And the elders, the strong ones, have they never tried?"

Pandora spoke then. She had been watching us all the while, playing in the shadows. I'd forgotten how very beautiful she was in a downplayed and very basic way.

Her long rich brown hair was combed back, a shadow behind her slender neck, and she looked glossy and pretty because she had smoothed into her face a fine dark oil to make herself more passably human. Her eyes were bold and flaming. She put her hand on me with a woman's liberty. She too was happy to see me alive.

"You know what Lestat is," she said pleadingly. "Armand, he's a furnace of power and no one knows what he might do."

"But have you never thought of it, Pandora? Has it never even entered your mind, to drink the blood from his throat and search for the vision of Christ when you drank it? What if inside him there is the infallible proof that he drank the blood of God?"

"But Armand," she said. "Christ was never my god."

It was so simple, so shocking, so final.

She sighed, but only out of concern for me. She smiled. "I wouldn't know your Christ if He were inside Lestat," she said gently.

"You don't understand," I said. "Something happened, something happened to him when we went with this spirit called Memnoch, and he came back with that Veil. I saw it. I saw the … power in it."

"You saw the illusion," said Louis kindly.

"No, I saw the power," I answered. Then in a moment I totally doubted myself. The long corridors of history wound back and away from me, and I saw myself plunged into darkness, carrying a single candle, searching for the ikons I had painted. And the pity of it, the

triviality, the sheer hopelessness of it crushed my soul.

I realized I had frightened Sybelle and Benji. They had their eyes fastened on me. They had never seen me as I was now.

I closed my arms around them both and pulled them towards me. I had hunted before I'd come to them tonight, to be at my strongest, and I knew my skin was pleasingly warm. I kissed Sybelle on her pale pink lips, and then kissed Benji's head.

"Armand, you vex me, truly you do," said Benji. "You never told me that you believed in this Veil."

"And you, little man," I said in a hushed voice, not wishing to make a spectacle of us to the others. "Did you ever go into the Cathedral and look at it when it was on display there?"

"Yes, and I say to you what this great lady said." He shrugged, of course. "He was never my god."

"Look at them, prowling," said Louis softly. He was emaciated and shivering a little. He had neglected his own hunger to be here on guard. "I should throw them out now, Pandora," he said in a voice that couldn't have threatened the most timid soul.

"Let them see what they came for," she said coolly under her breath. "They may not have so long to enjoy their satisfaction. They make the world harder for us, and disgrace us, and do nothing for anything living or dead."

I thought it a lovely threat. I hoped she would clean out the lot of them, but I knew of course that many a Child of the Millennia thought the very same thing about those such as me. And what an impertinent creature I was to bring, without anyone's permission, my children to see my friend who lay on the floor.

"These two are safe with us," Pandora said, obviously reading my fretting mind. "You realize they are glad to see you, young and old," she said making a small gesture to include the entire room. "There are some who don't want to step out from the shadows, but they know of you. They didn't want for you to be gone."

"No, no one wanted it," said Louis rather emotionally. "And like a dream, you've come back. We all had inklings of it, wild whispers that you'd been seen in New York, as handsome and vigorous as you ever were. But I had to lay eyes on you to believe it."

I nodded in thanks for these kind words. But I was thinking of the

Veil. I looked up at the wooden Christ on the tree again, and then down at the slumbering figure of Lestat.

It was then that Marius came. He was trembling. “Unburnt, whole,” he whispered. “My son.”

He had that wretched neglected old gray cloak over his shoulders, but I didn’t notice then. He embraced me at once, which forced my girl and my boy to step away. They didn’t go far, however. I think they were reassured when they saw me put my arms around him and kiss him several times on the face and mouth, as we had always done so many years ago. He was so splendid, so softly full of love.

“I’ll keep these mortals safe if you’re determined to try,” he said. He had read the whole script from my heart. He knew I was bound to do it. “What can I say to prevent you?” he asked.

I only shook my head. Haste and anticipation wouldn’t let me do anything else. I gave Benji and Sybelle to his care.

I went over to Lestat and I walked up in front of him, that is, on the left side of him as he lay there to my right. I knelt down quickly, surprised at how cold the marble was, forgetting, I suppose, how very damp it is here in New Orleans and how stealthy the chills can be.

I knelt with my hands before me on the floor and I looked at him. He was placid, still, both blue eyes equally clear as if one had never been torn from his face. He stared through me, as we say, and on and on, and out of a mind that seemed as empty as a dead chrysalis.

His hair was mussed and full of dust. Not even his cold, hateful Mother had combed it, I supposed, and it infuriated me, but then in a frosty flash of emotion, she said hissingly:

“He will not let anyone touch him, Armand.” Her distant voice echoed deeply in the hollow of the chapel. “If you try it, you will soon find out for yourself.”

I looked up at her. She had her knees drawn up in a careless clasp of her arms, and her back against the wall. She wore her usual thick and frayed khaki, the narrow pants and the British safari coat for which she was more or less famous, stained from the wild outdoors, her blond hair as yellow and bright as his, braided and lying down her back.

She got up suddenly, angrily, and she came towards me letting her plain leather boots echo sharply and disrespectfully on the floor.

“What makes you think the spirits he saw were gods?” she demanded.

“What makes you think the pranks of any of those lofty beings who play with us are any more than capers, and we no more than beasts, from the lowest to the very highest that walk the Earth?” She stood a few feet from him. She folded her arms. “He tempted something or someone. That entity could not resist him. And what was the sum of it? Tell me. You ought to know.”

“I don’t,” I said in a soft voice. “I wish you would leave me alone.”

“Oh, do you, well, let me tell you what was the sum of it. A young woman, Dora by name, a leader of souls as they call it, who preached for the good that comes of tending to the weak who need it, was thrown off course! That was the sum of it—her preachings, grounded in charity and sung to a new tune so that people could hear them, were obliterated by the bloody face of a bloody god.”

My eyes filled with tears. I hated that she saw it so clearly, but I couldn’t answer her and I couldn’t shut her up. I rose to my feet.

“Back to the cathedrals they flocked,” she said scornfully, “the lot of them, and back to an archaic and ludicrous and utterly useless theology which it seems that you have plainly forgot.”

“I know it well enough,” I said softly. “You make me miserable. What do I do to you? I kneel beside him, that’s all.”

“Oh, but you mean to do more, and your tears offend me,” she said.

I heard someone behind me speak out to her. I thought perhaps it was Pandora, but I was unsure. In a sudden evanescent flash I was aware of all those who made a recreation of my misery, but then I didn’t care.

“What do you expect, Armand?” she asked me cunningly and mercilessly. Her narrow oval face was so like his and yet so not. He had never been so divorced from feeling, never so abstract in his anger as she was now. “You think you’ll see what he saw, or that the Blood of Christ will still be there for you to savor on your tongue? Shall I quote the catechism for you?”

“No need, Gabrielle,” I said again in a meek voice. My tears were blinding me.

“The bread and wine are the Body and Blood as long as they remain that species, Armand; but when it’s bread and wine no more then no more is it Body and Blood. So what do you think of the Blood of Christ in him, that it has somehow retained its magical power, despite the engine of his heart that devours the blood of mortals as if it were mere

air that he breathed?"

I didn't answer. I thought quietly in my soul. *It was not the bread and the wine; it was His Blood, His Sacred Blood and He gave it on the road to Calvary, and to this being who lies here.*

I swallowed hard on my grief and my fury that she had made me commit myself in these terms. I wanted to look back for my poor Sybelle and Benji, for I knew by their scent they were still in the room. Why didn't Marius take them away! Oh, but it was plain enough. Marius wanted to see what I meant to do.

"Don't tell me," Gabrielle said slurringly, "that it's a matter of faith." She sneered and shook her head. "You come like doubting Thomas to thrust your bloody fangs in the very wound."

"Oh, stop, please, I beg you," I whispered. I put up my hands. "Let me try, and let him hurt me, and then be satisfied, and turn away."

I only meant it as I said it, and I felt no power in it, only meekness and unutterable sadness.

But it struck her hard, and for the first time her face became absolutely and totally sorrowful, and she too had moist and reddening eyes, and her lips even pressed together as she looked at me.

"Poor lost child, Armand," she said. "I am so sorry for you. I was so glad that you had survived the sun."

"Then that means I can forgive you, Gabrielle," I said, "for all the cruel things you've said to me."

She raised her eyebrows thoughtfully, and then slowly nodded in silent assent. Then putting up her hands, she backed away without a sound and took up her old station, sitting on the altar step, her head leaning back against the Communion rail. She brought up her knees as before, and she merely looked at me, her face in shadow.

I waited. She was still and quiet, and not a sound came from the occupants scattered about the chapel. I could hear the steady beat of Sybelle's heart and the anxious breath of Benji, but they were many yards away.

I looked down on Lestat, who was unchanged, his hair fallen as before, a little over his left eye. His right arm was out, and his fingers curling upwards, and there came from him not the slightest movement, not even a breath from his lungs or a sigh from his pores.

I knelt down beside him again. I reached out, and without flinching or

hesitating, I brushed his hair back from his face.

I could feel the shock in the room. I heard the sighs, the gasps from the others. But Lestat himself didn't stir.

Slowly, I brushed his hair more tenderly, and I saw to my own mute shock one of my tears fall right onto his face.

It was red yet watery and transparent and it appeared to vanish as it moved down the curve of his cheekbone and into the natural hollow below.

I slipped down closer, turning on my side, facing him, my hand still on his hair. I stretched my legs out behind me, and alongside of him, and I lay there, letting my face rest right on his outstretched arm.

Again there came the shocked gasps and sighs, and I tried to keep my heart absolutely pure of pride and pure of anything but love.

It was not differentiated or defined, this love, but only love, the love I could feel perhaps for one I killed or one I succored, or one whom I passed in the street, or for one whom I knew and valued as much as him.

All the burden of his sorrows seemed unimaginable to me, and in my mind a notion of it expanded to include the tragedy of all of us, those who kill to live, and thrive on death even as the very Earth decrees it, and are cursed with consciousness to know it, and know by what inches all things that feed us slowly anguish and at last are no more. Sorrow. Sorrow so much greater than guilt, and so much more ready for accounting, sorrow too great for the wide world.

I climbed up. I rested my weight on my elbow, and I sent my right fingers slipping gently across his neck. Slowly I pressed my lips to his whitened silky skin and breathed in the old unmistakable taste and scent of him, something sweet and undefinable and utterly personal, something made up of all his physical gifts and those given him afterwards, and I pressed my sharp eyeteeth through his skin to taste his blood.

There was no chapel then for me, or outraged sighs or reverential cries. I heard nothing, and yet knew what was all around. I knew it as if the substantial place was but a phantasm, for what was real was his blood.

It was as thick as honey, deep and strong of taste, a syrup for the very angels.

I groaned aloud drinking it, feeling the searing heat of it, so unlike to

any human blood. With each slow beat of his powerful heart there came another small surge of it, until my mouth was filled and my throat swallowed without my bidding, and the sound of his heart grew louder, ever louder, and a reddish shimmer filled my vision, and I saw through this shimmer a great swirling dust.

A wretched dreary din rose slowly out of nothingness, commingled with an acid sand that stung my eyes. It was a desert place, all right, and old and full of rank and common things, of sweat and filth and death. The din was voices crying out, and echoing up the close and grimy walls. Voices crowded upon voices, taunts and jeers and cries of horror, and gruff riffs of foul indifferent gossip rushing over the most poignant and terrible cries of outrage and alarm.

Against sweating bodies I was pressed, struggling, the slanting sun burning on my outstretched arm. I understood the babble all around me, the ancient tongue hollered and wailed in my ears as I fought to get ever closer to the source of all the wet and ugly commotion that swamped me and tried to hold me back.

It seemed they'd crush the very life out of me, these ragged, rough-skinned men and veiled women in their coarse homespun, thrusting elbows at me and stepping on my feet. I couldn't see what lay before me. I flung my arms out, deafened by the cries and the wicked boiling laughter, and suddenly, as if by decree, the crowd parted, and I beheld the lurid masterpiece itself.

He stood in His torn and bloody white robe, this very Figure whose Face I'd seen imprinted into the fibers of the Veil. Arms bound up with thick uneven iron chains to the heavy and monstrous crossbeam of His crucifix, He hunched beneath it, hair pouring down on either side of His bruised and lacerated face. The blood from the thorns flowed into His open and unflinching eyes.

He looked at me, quite startled, even faintly amazed. He stared with wide and open gaze as if the multitude didn't surround Him, and a whip did not crack over His very back and then His bowed head. He stared past the tangle of his clotted hair and from beneath His raw and bleeding lids.

"Lord!" I cried.

I must have reached out for Him, for those were my hands, my smallish and white hands that I saw! I saw them struggling to reach His

Face.

"Lord!" I cried again.

And back He stared at me, unmoving, eyes meeting my eyes, hands dangling from the iron chains and mouth dripping with blood.

Suddenly a fierce and terrible blow struck me. It pitched me forward. His Face filled all my sight. Before my eyes it was the very measure of all that I could possibly see—His soiled and broken skin, the wetted, darkened tangle of His eyelashes, the great bright orbs of His dark-pupiled eyes.

Closer and closer it came, the blood flowing down and into His thick eyebrows, and dripping down His gaunt cheeks. His mouth opened. A sound came out of Him. It was a sigh at first and then a dull rising breath that grew louder and louder as His Face became even larger, losing its very lineaments, and became the sum of all its swimming colors, the sound now a positive and deafening roar.

In terror, I cried out. I was thrust back. Yet even as I saw His familiar Figure and the ancient frame of His Face with its Thorny Crown, the Face grew ever larger and larger and utterly indistinct and seemed again to bear down on me, and then suddenly to suffocate all my face with its immense and total weight.

I screamed. I was helpless, weighdess, unable to draw breath.

I screamed as I've never in all my miserable years screamed, the scream so loud that it shut out the roar that filled my ears, but the vision pressed on, a great driving inescapable mass that had been His Face.

"Oh, Lord!" I screamed with all the power of my burning lungs. The very wind rushed in my ears.

Something struck the back of my head so hard that it cracked my skull. I heard the crack. I felt the wet splash of blood.

I opened my eyes. I was staring forward. I was far across the chapel, sprawled against the plaster wall, my legs out in front of me, my arms dangling, my head on fire with the pain of the great concussion where I had struck the wall.

Lestat had never moved. I knew he hadn't.

No one had to tell me. It was not he who threw me back.

I tumbled over onto my face, pulling my arm up under my head. I knew there were feet gathered all around me, that Louis was near, and that even Gabrielle had come, and I knew too that Marius was taking

Sybelle and Benjamin away.

I could hear in the ringing silence only Benjamin's small sharp mortal voice. "But what happened to him. What happened? The blond one didn't hit him. I saw it. It didn't happen. He didn't—."

My face hidden, my face soaked with tears, I covered my head with my trembling hands, my bitter smile unseen, though my sobs were heard.

I cried and cried for a long time, and then gradually, as I knew it would, my scalp began to heal. The evil blood mounted to the surface of my skin and, tingling there, did its evil ministrations, sewing up the flesh like a little laser beam from Hell.

Someone gave me a napkin. It had the faint scent of Louis on it, but I couldn't be sure. It was a long long time, perhaps even so long as an hour before I finally clasped it and wiped all the blood off my face.

It was another hour, an hour of quiet and of people respectfully slipping away, before I turned over and rose and sat back against the wall. My head no longer hurt, the wound was gone, the blood that had dried there would soon flake away.

I stared at him for a long and quiet time.

I was cold and solitary and raw. Nothing anyone murmured penetrated my hearing. I did not note the gestures or the movements around me.

In the sanctum of my mind I went over, mostly slowly, exactly, what I had seen, what I had heard—all that I've told you here.

I rose finally. I went back to him and I looked down at him.

Gabrielle said something to me. It was harsh and mean. I didn't actually hear it. I heard only the sound of it, the cadence, that is, as if her old French, so familiar to me, was a language I didn't know.

I knelt down and I kissed his hair.

He didn't move. He didn't change. I wasn't the slightest bit afraid that he would, or hopeful that he would either. I kissed him one more time on the side of his face, and then I got up, and I wiped my hands on the napkin which I still had, and I went out.

I think I stood in a torpor for a long while, and then something came back to me, something Dora had said a long long time ago, about a child having died in the attic, about a little ghost and about old clothes.

Grasping that, clutching it tight, I managed to propel myself towards

the stairs.

It was there that I met you a short time afterwards. Now you know, for better or worse, what I did or didn't see.

And so my symphony is finished. Let me write my name to it. When you're finished with your copying, I will give my transcript to Sybelle. And Benji too perhaps. And you may do with the rest what you will.

25

This is no epilogue. It is the last chapter to a tale I thought was finished. I write it in my own hand. It will be brief, for I have no drama left me and must manipulate with the utmost care the bare bones of the tale.

Perhaps in some later time the proper words will come to me to deepen my depiction of what happened, but for now to record is all that I can do.

I did not leave the convent after I inscribed my name to the copy which David had so faithfully written out. It was too late.

The night had spent itself in language, and I had to retire to one of the secret brick chambers of the place which David showed me, a place where Lestat had once been imprisoned, and there sprawled on the floor in perfect darkness, overexcited by all that I'd told David, and, more completely exhausted than I'd ever been, I went into immediate sleep with the rise of the sun.

At twilight, I rose, straightened out my clothes and returned to the chapel. I knelt down and gave Lestat a kiss of unreserved affection, just as I had the night before. I took no notice of anyone and did not even know who was there.

Taking Marius at his word, I walked away from the convent, in a wash of early evening violet light, my eyes drifting trustingly over the flowers, and I listened for the chords of Sybelle's Sonata to lead me to the proper house.

Within seconds I heard the music, the distant but rapid phrases of the *Allegro assai*, or the First Movement, of Sybelle's familiar song.

It was played with an unusual ringing preciseness, indeed, a new languid cadence which gave it a powerful and ruby-red authority which I immediately loved.

So I hadn't scared my little girl out of her mind. She was well and prospering and perhaps falling in love with the drowsy humid loveliness of New Orleans as so many of us have.

I sped at once to the location, and found myself standing, only a little mussed by the wind, in front of a huge three-story redbrick house in Metairie, a countrified suburb of New Orleans which is actually very close to the city, with a feel that can be miraculously remote.

The giant oaks which Marius described were all around this new American mansion, and, as he had promised, all his French doors of shining clean panes were open to the early breeze.

The grass was long and soft beneath my shoes, and a splendid light, so very precious to Marius, poured forth from every window as did the music of the *Appassionata* now, which was just moving with exceptional grace into the Second Movement, *Andante con moto,* which promises to be a tame segment of the work but quickly works itself into the same madness as all the rest.

I stopped in my tracks to listen to it. I had never heard the notes quite as limpid and translucent, quite as flashing and exquisitely distinct. I tried for sheer pleasure to divine the differences between this performance and so many I'd heard in the past. They were all different, magical and profoundly affecting, but this was passing spectacular, helped in slight measure by the immense body of what I knew to be a concert grand.

For a moment, a misery swept over me, a terrible, gripping memory of what I'd seen when I drank Lestat's blood the night before. I let myself relive it, as we say so innocently, and then with a positive blush of pleasant shock, I realized that I didn't have to tell anyone about it, that it was all dictated to David and that when he gave me my copies, I could entrust them to whomever I loved, who would ever want to know what I'd seen.

As for myself, I wouldn't try to figure it out. I couldn't. The feeling was too strong that whom I had seen on the road to Calvary, whether He was real or a figment of my own guilty heart, had not wanted me to see Him and had monstrously turned me away. Indeed the feeling of rejection was so total that I could scarce believe that I had managed to describe it to David.

I had to get the thoughts out of my mind. I banished all reverberations of this experience and let myself fall into Sybelle's music again, merely standing under the oaks, with the eternal river breeze, which can reach you anywhere in this place, cooling me and soothing me and making me

feel that the Earth itself was filled with irrepressible beauty, even for someone such as I.

The music of the Third Movement built to its most brilliant climax, and I thought my heart would break.

It was only then, as the final bars were played out, that I realized something which should have been obvious to me from the start.

It wasn't Sybelle playing this music. It couldn't be. I knew every nuance of Sybelle's interpretations. I knew her modes of expression; I knew the tonal qualities that her particular touch invariably produced. Though her interpretations were infinitely spontaneous, nevertheless I knew her music, as one knows the writing of another or the style of a painter's work. This wasn't Sybelle.

And then the real truth dawned on me. It was Sybelle, but Sybelle was no longer Sybelle.

For a second I couldn't believe it. My heart stopped in my chest.

Then I walked into the house, a steady furious walk that would have stopped for nothing but to find the truth of what I believed.

In an instant I saw it with my own eyes. In a splendid room, they were gathered together, the beautifid lithe figure of Pandora in a gown of brown silk, girdled at the waist in the old Grecian style, Marius in a light velvet smoking jacket over silk trousers, and my children, my beautiful children, radiant Benji in his white gown, dancing barefoot and wildly around the room with his fingers flung out as if to grasp the air in them, and Sybelle, my gorgeous Sybelle, with her arms bare too in a dress of deep rose silk, at the piano, her long hair swept back over her shoulders, just striding into the First Movement again.

All of them vampires, every one.

I clenched my teeth hard, and covered my mouth lest my roars wake the world. I roared and roared into my collapsed hands.

I cried out the single defiant syllable No, No, No, over and over again. I could say nothing else, scream nothing else, do nothing else.

I cried and cried.

I bit down so hard with my teeth that my jaw ached, and my hands shuddered like wings of a bird that wouldn't let me shut up my mouth tight enough, and once again the tears streamed out of my eyes as thickly as they had when I kissed Lestat.

No, No, No, No!

Then suddenly I flung out my hands, coiling them into fists, and the roar would have got loose, it would have burst from me like a raging stream, but Marius took hold of me with great force and flung me against his chest and buried my face against himself.

I struggled to get free. I kicked at him with all of my strength, and I beat at him with my fists.

"How could you do it!" I roared.

His hands enclosed my head in a hopeless trap, and his lips kept covering me with kisses I hated and detested and fought off with desperate flinging gestures.

"How could you? How dare you? How could you?"

At last I gained enough leverage to smash his face with blow after blow.

But what good did it do me? How weak and meaningless were my fists against his strength. How helpless and foolish and small were my gestures, and he stood there, bearing it all, his face unspeakably sad, and his own eyes dry yet full of caring.

"How could you do it, how could you do it!" I demanded. I would not cease.

But suddenly Sybelle rose from the piano, and with her arms out ran to me. And Benji, who had been watching all the while, rushed to me also, and they imprisoned me gently in their tender arms.

"Oh, Armand, don't be angry, don't be, don't be sad," Sybelle cried softly against my ear. "Oh, my magnificent Armand, don't be sad, don't be. Don't be cross. We're with you forever."

"Armand, we are with you! He did the magic," cried Benji. "We didn't have to be born from black eggs, you Dybbuk, to tell us such a tale! Armand, we will never die now, we will never be sick, and never hurt and never afraid again." He jumped up and down with glee and spun in another mirthful circle, astonished and laughing at his new vigor, that he could leap so high and with such grace. "Armand, we are so happy."

"Oh, yes, please," cried Sybelle softly in her deeper gentler voice. "I love you so much, Armand, I love you so very very much. We had to do it. We had to. We had to do it, to always and forever be with you."

My fingers hovered about her, wanting to comfort her, and then, as she ground her forehead desperately into my neck, hugging me tight around the chest, I couldn't not touch her, couldn't not embrace her,

couldn't not assure her.

"Armand, I love you, I adore you, Armand, I live only for you, and now with you always," she said.

I nodded, I tried to speak. She kissed my tears. She began to kiss them rapidly and desperately. "Stop it, stop crying, don't cry," she kept saying in her urgent low whisper. "Armand, we love you."

"Armand, we are so happy!" cried Benji. "Look, Armand, look! We can dance together now to her music. We can do everything together. Armand, we have hunted already." He dashed up to me and bent his knees, poised to spring with excitement as if to emphasize his point. Then he sighed and flung out his arms to me again, "Ah, poor Armand, you are all wrong, all filled with wrong dreams. Armand, don't you see?"

"I love you," I whispered in a tiny voice into Sybelle's ear. I whispered it again, and then my resistance broke completely, and I crushed her gently to me and with rampant fingers felt her silky white skin and the zinging fineness of her shining hair.

Still holding her to me, I whispered, "Don't tremble, I love you, I love you."

I clasped Benji to me with my left hand. "And you, scamp, you can tell me all of it in time. Just let me hold you now. Let me hold you."

I was shivering. I was the one shivering. They enclosed me again with all their tenderness, seeking to keep me warm.

Finally, patting them both, taking my leave of them with kisses, I shrank away and fell down exhausted into a large old velvet chair.

My head throbbed and I felt my tears coming again, but with all my force I swallowed my tears for their sake. I had no choice.

Sybelle had gone back to the piano, and striking the keys she began the Sonata again. This time she sang out the notes in a beautiful low monosyllabic soprano, and Benji began dancing again, whirling, and prancing, and stomping with his bare feet, in lovely keeping with Sybelle's time.

I sat forward with my head in my hands. I wanted my hair to come down and hide me from all eyes, but for all its thickness it was only a head of hair.

I felt a hand on my shoulder and I stiffened, but I could not say a word, lest I'd start crying again and cursing with all my might. I was

silent.

"I don't expect you to understand," he said under his breath.

I sat up. He was beside me, seated on the arm of the chair. He looked down at me.

I made my face pleasant, all smiles even, and my voice so velvet and placid that no one could have thought I was talking to him of anything but love.

"How could you do it? Why did you do it? Do you hate me so much? Don't lie to me. Don't tell me stupid things that you know I will never, never believe. Don't lie to me for Pandora's sake or their sake. I'll care for them and love them forever. But don't lie. You did it for vengeance, didn't you, Master, you did it for hate?"

"How could I?" he asked in the same voice, expressive of pure love, and it seemed the very genuine voice of love talking to me from his sincere and pleading face. "If ever I did anything for love, I have done this for it. I did it for love and for you. I did it for all the wrongs done you, and the loneliness you've suffered, and the horrors that the world put upon you when you were too young and too untried to know how to fight them and then too vanquished to wage a battle with a full heart. I did it for you."

"Oh, you lie, you lie in your heart," I said, "if not with your tongue. You did it for spite, and you have just revealed it all too plainly to me. You did it for spite because I wasn't the fledgling you wanted to make of me. I wasn't the clever rebel who could stand up to Santino and his band of monsters, and I was the one, after all those centuries, that disappointed you yet again and horribly because I went into the sun after I saw the Veil. That's why you did it. You did it for vengeance and you did it for bitterness and you did it for disappointment, and the crowning horror is you don't know it yourself. You couldn't bear it that my heart swelled to burst when I saw His Face on the Veil. You couldn't bear it that this child you plucked from the Venetian brothel, and nursed with your own blood, this child you taught from your own books and with your hands, cried out to Him when he saw His Face on the Veil."

"No, that is so very very far from the truth it breaks my heart." He shook his head. And tearless and white as he was, his face was a perfect picture of sorrow as though it was a painting he had done with his own hands. "I did it because they love you as no one has ever loved you, and

they are free and have within their generous hearts a deep cunning which doesn't shrink from you and all that you are. I did it because they were forged in the same furnace as myself, the two of them, keen to reason and strong to endure. I did it because madness had not defeated her, and poverty and ignorance had not defeated him. I did it because they were your chosen ones, utterly perfect, and I knew that you would not do it, and they would come to hate you for this, hate you, as you once hated me for withholding it, and you would lose them to alienation and death before you would give in.

"They are yours now. Nothing separates you. And it's my blood, ancient and powerful, that's filled them to the brim with power so that they can be your worthy companions and not the pale shadow of your soul which Louis always was.

"There is no barrier of Master and Fledgling between you, and you can learn the secrets of their hearts as they learn the secrets of yours."

I wanted to believe it.

I wanted to believe it so badly that I got up and left him, and making the gentlest smile at my Benjamin and kissing her silkily in passing, I withdrew to the garden and stood alone beneath and between a pair of massive oaks.

Their thunderous roots rose up out of the ground, forming hillocks of hard dark blistering wood. I rested my feet in this rocky place and my head against the nearer of the two trees.

The branches came down and made a veil for me, as I had wanted the hair of my own head to do. I felt shielded and safe in the shadows. I was quiet in my heart, but my heart was broken and my mind was shattered, and I had only to look through the open doorway into the brilliant glory of the light at my two white vampire angels for me to start crying again.

Marius stood for a long time in a distant door. He didn't look at me. And when I looked to Pandora, I saw her coiled up as if to defend herself from some terrible pain—possibly only our quarrel—in another large old velvet chair.

Finally Marius drew himself up and came towards me, and I think it took a force of will for him to do it. He seemed suddenly just a little angry and even proud.

I didn't give a damn.

He stood before me but he said nothing, and it seemed he was there to

face whatever I had yet to say.

"Why didn't you let them have their lives!" I said. "You, of all people, whatever you felt for me and my follies, why didn't you let them have what nature gave them? Why did you interfere?"

He didn't answer, but I didn't allow for it. Softening my tone so as not to alarm them, I went on.

"In my darkest times," I said, "it was always your words that upheld me. Oh, I don't mean during those centuries when I was in bondage to a warped creed and morbid delusion. I mean long afterwards, after I had come out of the cellar, at Lestat's challenge, and I read what Lestat wrote of you, and then heard you for myself. It was you, Master, who let me see what little I could of the marvelous bright world unfolding around me in ways I couldn't have imagined in the land or time in which I was born."

I couldn't contain myself. I stopped for breath and to listen to her music, and realizing how lovely it was, how plaintive and expressive and newly mysterious, I almost cried again. But I couldn't allow such to happen. I had a great deal more to say, or so I thought.

"Master, it was you who said we were moving in a world where the old religions of superstition and violence were dying away. It was you who said we lived in a time when evil no longer aspired to any necessary place. Remember it, Master, you told Lestat that there was no creed or code that could justify our existence, for men knew now what was real evil, and real evil was hunger, and want, and ignorance and war, and cold. You said those things, Master, far more elegantly and fully than I could ever say them, but it was on this great rational basis that you argued, you, with the worst of us, for the sanctity and the precious glory of this natural and human world. It was you who championed the human soul, saying it had grown in depth and feeling, that men no longer lived for the glamour of war but knew the finer things which had once been the forte only of the richest, and could now be had by all. It was you who said that a new illumination, one of reason and ethics and genuine compassion, had come again, after dark centuries of bloody religion, to give forth not only its light but its warmth."

"Stop, Armand, don't say any more," he said. He was gentle but very stern. "I remember those words. I remember all of them. But I don't believe those things anymore."

I was stunned. I was stunned by the awesome simplicity of this disavowal. It was sweeping beyond my imagination, and yet I knew him well enough to know that he meant every word. He looked at me steadily.

"I believed it once, yes. But you see, it was not a belief based on reason and on observation of mankind as I told myself it was. It was never that, and I came to realize it and when I did, when I saw it for what it was—a blind desperate irrational prejudice—I felt it suddenly and completely collapse.

"Armand, I said those things because I had to hold them to be true. They were their own creed, the creed of the rational, the creed of the atheistic, the creed of the logical, the creed of the sophisticated Roman Senator who must turn a blind eye to the nauseating realities of the world around him, because if he were to admit what he saw in the wretchedness of his brothers and sisters, he would go mad."

He drew in his breath and continued, turning his back to the bright room as if to shield the fledglings from the heat of his words, as surely as I wanted him to do it.

"I know history, I read it as others read their Bibles, and I will not be satisfied until I have unearthed all stories that are written and knowable, and cracked the codes of all cultures that have left me any tantalizing evidence that I might pry loose from earth or stone or papyrus or clay.

"But I was wrong in my optimism, I was ignorant, as ignorant as I accused others of being, and refusing to see the very horrors that surrounded me, all the worse in this century, this reasonable century, than ever before in the world.

"Look back, child, if you care to, if you would argue the point. Look back to golden Kiev, which you knew only in songs after the raging Mongols had burnt its Cathedrals and slaughtered its population like so much cattle, as they did all through the Kiev Rus for two hundred years. Look back to the chronicles of all Europe and see the wars waged everywhere, in the Holy Land, in the forests of France or Germany, up and down the fertile soil of England, yes, blessed England, and in every Asian corner of the globe.

"Oh, why did I deceive myself for so long? Did I not see those Russian grasslands, those burnt cities. Why, all of Europe might have fallen to

Ghenghis Khan. Think of the great English Cathedrals torn down to rubble by the arrogant King Henry.

"Think of the books of the Mayas heaved into the flames by Spanish priests. Incas, Aztecs, Olmec—peoples of all nations ground to oblivion —.

"It's horrors, horrors upon horrors, and it always was, and I can pretend no longer. When I see millions gassed to death for the whims of an Austrian madman, when I see whole African tribes massacred till the rivers are stuffed with their bloated bodies, when I see rank starvation claim whole countries in an age of gluttonous plenty, I can believe all these platitudes no more.

"I don't know what single event it was that destroyed my self-deception. I don't know what horror it was that ripped the mask from my lies. Was it the millions who starved in the Ukraine, imprisoned in it by their own dictator, or the thousands after who died from the nuclear poisoning spewing into the skies over the grasslands, unprotected by the same governing powers who had starved them before? Was it the monasteries of noble Nepal, citadels of meditation and grace that had stood for thousands of years, older even than myself and all my philosophy, destroyed by an army of greedy grasping militarists who waged war without quarter upon monks in their saffron robes, and priceless books which they heaved into the fire, and ancient bells which they melted down no more to call the gentle to prayer? And this, this within two decades of this very hour, while the nations of the West danced in their discos and swilled their liquor, lamenting in casual tones for the poor sad fate of the distant Dalai Lama, and turning the television dial.

"I don't know what it was. Perhaps it was all the millions—Chinese, Japanese, Cambodian, Hebrew, Ukrainian, Polish, Russian, Kurdish, oh, God, the litany goes on without end. I have no faith, I have no optimism, I have no firm conviction in the ways of reason or ethics. I have no reproof for you as you stand on the Cathedral steps with your arms out to your all-knowing and all-perfect God.

"I know nothing, because I know too much, and understand not nearly enough and never will. But this you taught me as much as any other I've ever known, that love is necessary, as much as rain to the flowers and the trees, and food to the hungry child, and blood to the starving

thirsting predators and scavengers that we are. Love we need, and love can make us forget and forgive all savagery, as perhaps nothing else can.

"And so I took them out of their fabulous promising modern world with its diseased and desperate masses. I took them out and gave them the only might I possess, and I did it for you. I gave them time, time perhaps to find an answer which those mortals living now may never know.

"That was it, all of it. And I knew you would cry, and I knew you would suffer, but I knew you would have them and love them when it was finished, and I knew that you needed them desperately. So there you are … joined now with the serpent and the lion and the wolf, and far superior to the worst of men who have proved themselves in this time to be colossal monsters, and free to feed with care upon a world of evil that can swallow every bit of pruning they care to do."

A silence fell between us.

I thought for a long while, rather than plunge into my words.

Sybelle had stopped her playing, and I knew that she was concerned for me and needed me, I could feel it, feel the strong thrust of her vampire soul. I would have to go to her and soon.

But I took my time to say a few more words:

"You should have trusted them, Master, you should have let them have their chance. Whatever you thought of the world, you should have let them have their time with it. It was their world and their time."

He shook his head as though he was disappointed in me, and a little weary, and as he had resolved all these matters long ago in his mind, perhaps before I had even appeared last night, he seemed willing to let it all go.

"Armand, you are my child forever," he said with great dignity. "All that is magical and divine in me is bounded by the human and always was."

"You should have let them have their hour. No love of me should have written their death warrant, or their admission to our strange and inexplicable world. We may be no worse than humans in your estimation, but you could have kept your counsel. You could have let them alone."

It was enough.

Besides, David had appeared. He had a copy already of the transcript

we'd labored on, but this was not his concern. He approached us slowly, announcing his presence obviously to give us the chance to become silent, which we did.

I turned to him, unable to restrain myself. "Did you know this was to happen? Did you know when it did?"

"No, I did not," he said solemnly.

"Thank you," I said.

"They need you, your young ones," David said. "Marius may be the Maker but they are utterly yours."

"I know," I said. "I'm going. I'll do what I'm bound to do."

Marius put his hand out and touched my shoulder. I realized suddenly that he was truly on the verge of losing his self-control.

When he spoke his voice was tremulous and lustrous with feeling. He hated the storm inside himself and he was overcome by my sorrow. I knew this plainly enough. It gave me no satisfaction at all.

"You despise me now, and perhaps you're right. I knew you would weep, but in a very profound way, I misjudged you. I didn't realize something about you. Perhaps I never have."

"What's that, Master," I said with acidic drama.

"You loved them selflessly," he whispered. "For all their strange faults, and wild evil, they were not compromised for you. You loved them perhaps more respectfully than I … than I ever loved you."

He seemed so amazed.

I could only nod. I wasn't so sure he was right. My need for them had never been tested, but I didn't want to tell him so.

"Armand," he said. "You know you can stay here as long as you like."

"Good, because I just might," I said. "They love it, and I'm weary. So thank you very much for that."

"But one thing more," he went on, "and I mean this with all my heart."

"What is it, Master?" I said.

David stood by, and I was happy for that, for it seemed to act as a certain curb upon my tears.

"I honestly don't know the answer to this, and I ask you in humility," Marius said. "When you saw the Veil, what was it you really saw? Oh, I don't mean was it Christ, or was it God, or was it a miracle. What I mean is this. There was the face of a being, drenched in blood, who had given

birth to a religion guilty of more wars and more cruelty than any creed the world has ever known. Don't be angry with me, please, just explain to me. What was it you saw? Was it only a magnificent reminder of the ikons you once painted? Or was it truly something drenched in love and not in blood? Tell me. If it was love and not blood, I would honestly like to know."

"You ask an old and simple question," I said, "and from where I stand you don't really know a thing. You wonder how He could have been my Lord, given this world as you describe it, and knowing what you know of the Gospels and the Testaments printed in His name. You wonder how I could have believed all that because you don't believe it, isn't that so?"

He nodded. "Yes, I do wonder. Because I know you. And I know that faith is something which you simply do not have."

I was startled. But instantly I knew he was right.

I smiled. I felt a sort of tragic thrilling happiness suddenly.

"Well, I see what you mean," I said. "And I'll tell you my answer. I saw Christ. A kind of bloody light. A personality, a human, a presence that I felt I knew. And He wasn't the Lord God Father Almighty and He wasn't the maker of the universe and the whole world. And He wasn't the Savior or the Redeemer for sins inscribed on my soul before I was born. He wasn't the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, and He wasn't the Theologian expounding from the Holy Mount. He wasn't those things for me. Maybe for others, but not for me."

"But who was He, then, Armand?" David asked. "I have your story, full of marvels and suffering, yet I don't know. What *was* the concept of the *Lord* when you spoke the word?"

"*Lord*," I repeated it. "It doesn't mean what you think. It's spoken with too much intimacy and too much warmth. It's like a secret and sacred name. Lord." I paused, and then continued:

"He is the Lord, yes, but only because He is the symbol of something infinitely more accessible, something infinitely more meaningful than a ruler or king or lord can ever be."

Again, I hesitated, wanting to find the right words since they were so sincere.

"He was … *my brother*." I said. "Yes. That is what He was, my brother, and the symbol of all brothers, and that is why He was the Lord, and that is why His core is simply love. You scorn it. You look askance at

what I say. But you don't grasp the complexity of what He was. It's easy to feel, perhaps, but not so easy to really see. He was another man like me. And maybe for many of us, millions upon millions, that's all He's ever been! We're all somebody's sons and daughters and He was somebody's son. He was human, whether He was God or not, and He was suffering and He was doing it for things He thought were purely and universally good. And that meant that His blood might as well have been my blood too. Why, it had to be. And maybe that is the very source of His magnificence for thinkers such as me. You said I had no faith. I don't. Not in tides or in legends or in hierarchies made by other beings like ourselves. He didn't make a hierarchy, not really. He was *the very thing*. I saw in Him magnificence for simple reasons. There was flesh and blood to what He was! And it could be bread and wine to feed the whole Earth. You don't get it. You can't. Too many lies about Him swim in your ken. I saw Him before I heard so much about Him. I saw Him when I looked at the ikons in my house, and when I painted Him long before I even knew all His names. I can't get Him out of my head. I never have. I never will."

I had no more to say.

They were very amazed but not particularly respecting, pondering the words in all the wrong ways, perhaps, I couldn't absolutely know. It didn't matter what they felt anyway. It wasn't really so good that they had asked me or that I had tried so hard to tell them my truth. I saw the old ikon in my mind, the one my Mother had brought to me in the snow. *Incarnation*. Impossible to explain in their philosophy. I wondered. Perhaps the horror of my own life was that, no matter what I did or where I went, I always understood. *Incarnation*. A kind of bloody light.

I wanted to be left alone by them now.

Sybelle was waiting, which was of far greater importance, and I went to take her in my arms.

For many hours we talked together, Sybelle and Benji and me, and finally Pandora, who was very distraught but would say nothing of it, came to talk casually and gaily with us too. Marius joined us and also David.

We were gathered in a circle on the grass under the stars. For the young ones, I put on the bravest of faces and we spoke of beautiful things, and places we would wander, and wonders which Marius and

Pandora had seen, and we argued now and then amiably about trivial things.

About two hours before dawn, we had broken up, with Sybelle sitting by herself deep in the garden, looking at one flower after another with great care. Benji had discovered that he could read at preternatural speed and was tearing through the library, which was very impressive indeed.

David, seated at Marius's desk, corrected his misspellings and abbreviations in the typescript, painstakingly correcting the copy he had made for me in haste.

Marius and I sat very close together against the same oak tree, my shoulder against his. We didn't talk. We were watching things, and listening perhaps to the same songs of the night.

I wanted Sybelle to play again. I had never known her to go so long without playing, and I wanted badly to hear her play the Sonata again.

It was Marius who first heard an unusual sound, and stiffened with alarm, only to give it up and rest back beside me again.

"What was it?" I asked.

"Only a little noise. I couldn't … I couldn't read it," he said. He rested his shoulder against me as he had before.

Almost immediately I saw David look up from his work. And then Pandora appeared, walking slowly but warily towards one of the lighted doors.

Now I heard the sound. And so did Sybelle, for she too looked in the direction of the garden gate. Even Benji had finally deigned to notice it, and he dropped his book in mid-sentence and came marching with a very stern little scowl to the door to take stock of this new situation and get it firmly under control.

At first I thought my eyes had deceived me, but very quickly I realized the identity of the figure who appeared as the gate opened and closed quietly behind his stiff and ungainly arm.

He limped as he approached, or seemed rather the victim of a weariness and a loss of practice at the simple act of walking as he came into the light that fell on the grass before our feet.

I was astonished. No one knew his intentions. No one moved.

It was Lestat, and he was tattered and dusty as he had been on the chapel floor. No thoughts emanated from his mind as far as I could

figure, and his eyes looked vague and full of exhausting wonder. He stood before us, merely staring, and then as I rose to my feet, scrambled in fact, to embrace him; he came near to me, and whispered in my ear.

His voice was faltering and weak from lack of use, and he spoke very softly, his breath just touching my flesh.

"Sybelle," he said.

"Yes, Lestat, what is it, what about her, tell me," I said. I held his hands as firmly and lovingly as I could.

"Sybelle," he said again. "Do you think she would play the Sonata for me if you asked her? The *Appassionata*?"

I drew back and looked into his vague drifting blue eyes.

"Oh, yes," I said, near breathless with excitement, with overflowing feeling. "Lestat, I'm sure she would. Sybelle!"

She had already turned. She watched him in amazement as he made his way slowly across the lawn and into the house. Pandora stepped back for him, and we all watched in respectful silence as he sat down near the piano, his back to the front right leg of it, and his knees brought up and his head resting wearily on his folded arms. He closed his eyes.

"Sybelle," I asked, "would you play it for him? The *Appassionata*, again, if you would."

And of course, she did.

THE END

8:12 a.m.
January 6, 1998
Little Christmas

For
Brandy Edwards,
Brian Robertson
and
Christopher and Michele Rice

A Conversation with
Anne Rice
author of
THE VAMPIRE ARMAND

Q: One of the vampires in *The Vampire Armand* lives among humans disguised as a painter. Why did you decide to make him an artist?

A: Marius, Armand's mentor, did live in sixteenth-century Venice as a painter among mortals. I first mentioned this in *Interview with the Vampire*. Of course, at that time, I had not delved into the character of Marius. The exploration of Marius came later when, in *The Vampire Lestat,* he explained to Lestat how he, Marius, enters and withdraws from the human world. At that time in his existence, the late 1700s, Marius thought he would always be living in this rhythm—enjoying a mortal life, then sleeping for a long time, only to emerge to live another seemingly mortal life.

But now, as I reach *The Vampire Armand*, I have found myself discovering a greater secretive depth to Marius. He does not find immortality as simple as he would like to find it. On the contrary, he has suffered some hideous defeats, and it is the task of Armand in this new novel to describe in detail what happened when Marius was struck down by the evil Roman coven of religious vampires who believed Marius to be profane.

Making Marius a painter probably derives directly from my love of painting, from my obsession with the Renaissance, which I've enjoyed since I was a little girl. One of the first books I ever completed was a biography of Leonardo da Vinci. Marius lives right in the heart of sixteenth-century Venice and paints with all the fervor and technique he can muster—only to have his achievements destroyed.

Marius's ambitions gave me a way of living out my dreams of being a painter myself.

Q: Did you consult with your husband, Stan, an accomplished artist and poet, to help you create this character?

A: No, I didn't consult Stan in creating Marius. Stan is a continuous influence on my work. His recent paintings have overwhelmed me with their intense use of color, and their violent narratives and images. However, it was decided by me long ago that Marius would be a painter. I wrote of this in the mid 1980s before Stan had devoted himself completely to painting. I think Stan and I share an obsession with painting. But one thing I should note; Stan has taught me more about modern art than any other teacher I've ever had. Yet modern art still locks me out. Marius reflects an age that is easier for me to embrace.

Q: *The Vampire Armand* is the sixth and latest book in the Vampire Chronicles. What led you back to the series?

A: I can't resist the vampires. In 1976 I had no idea that I would still be in the world of the vampires over twenty years later. But the simple fact is that when I slip into the character of Armand, or Louis, or Lestat, or any of these immortals, I find myself in possession of a crystal-clear lens through which to see my own time, and any lessons I have learned.

Going back to Armand was natural, because he was one of a trio with Louis and Lestat, and though their stories have been told in the first person, Armand has always remained a mysterious and maligned character, estranged from the other two, yet intimately involved.

In earlier books, I allowed myself to be intoxicated by Armand without knowing all the answers to the questions about him as a character. I was enthralled with his beauty and his seeming coldness, as if I had not created him. It was as if he had walked into the book on his own. It's often this way with me and characters.

I let Armand become brighter and brighter as he hovered in the shadows. Though I was deep into the persona of Lestat when I wrote from Lestat's point of view, I knew that Lestat didn't understand Armand.

At the heart of the Chronicles is my love of playing with misunderstanding. My real plunge into opposing points of view began with *The Vampire Lestat*, when Lestat turned the tables on the Louis of *Interview with the Vampire*. So to go on now to this third heroic demonic being is natural and more or less inevitable.

Q: Why did you focus on Armand, who first appeared in *Interview with the Vampire?*

A: It was really Armand's turn. The only other character of great importance in *Interview with the Vampire* who has not told her own story is Claudia, and Claudia is not with us now. Armand is. He is still part of the Chronicles. And with his point of view, I could bring the readers up-to-date on the vampire Lestat and what has been happening to him. It all

felt rather natural.

Q: *The Vampire Armand* travels across time and place, from ancient Constantinople, to Venice during the Renaissance, to nineteenth-century Paris and contemporary New Orleans. Why did you choose these settings?

A: Passion is the only basis I have for the choice of settings. I go where I want to be in my imagination; I go where I want to study or understand. I am fascinated by old Russia. I am in love with Italy. As for New Orleans, I live here now full time and my childhood love grows stronger every day. I do think my settings reflect my hunger for the exotic, the intense, the rich, the sensuous. But like everything else in my work, they derive from instinct and not from logic or intellectual intent.

Q: How did you research the book?

A: Research for *The Vampire Armand was* extensive. I did much more reading on Kiev and the Monastery of the Caves in Kiev than I ever needed for the book. But it gave me a deep experience of Russia or the Ukraine, as we call this part of the world now. As for Italy, I have been there four times now—I went right after completing *Armand* just to see certain paintings I had mentioned in the book—and I continue my study unendingly. I read, read, read. When I can get on a plane and go, I do. I didn't feel I could go to Russia. But I got as close as I could through history and through gazing at reproductions of the icons so magnificently created in Russia.

Q: What are your work habits for a novel?

A: Once I truly begin to write, I work obsessively, in twelve-hour days, punctuated by days of long sleep and vivid dreaming. Starting time and ending time are no longer important. I might begin at 9 A.M., or after

noon or at eight in the evening. I go from there. I turn on the computer and write, write, write.

My room is a mess. Notes are scribbled on the walls so that I can look up at them at the appropriate moments and insert the date, the name, whatever, when I need it. Books are stacked so high that people have to search for me when they come into the room. Opened books with marked-up pages are stacked on top of one another.

I become suicidal. I go through a horrid despair some time or other before the final page, during which everything seems meaningless—from the dawn of history to the very hour in which I am writing. I'm intolerable to live with. But I spread myself thin over a number of loved ones and staff members so that no one person has to put up with how intense, hysterical, and miserable I am.

When I get elated and talk fast and furiously about wonderful aspects of history or the characters, or good developments in the story, people run away from me. I don't blame them.

While the novel is being written, I try to avoid dressing for outdoors. No one can make you go out if you don't have shoes on. Not even in the south. I wear long velvet robes and soft velvet slippers. I refuse to go out. All food is brought in. I eat hamburgers because they are easy to hold with one hand while reading and holding the book with the other hand.

In the middle of the night I read, sometimes on the carpeted floor of the bathroom, just because it's warm. I am wretched. I don't care anymore about being abnormal. Writing is everything. Everything. It seems impossible to write the book. It seems impossible to lift a hairbrush to brush my hair. But I do it. I put on mascara every day that I write.

This period of intense work lasts about six weeks. It's best that way. My imagination is overheated, and my memory clogged with data of varying importance. If I go over six weeks, I begin to forget things; I feel the loss of intensity and information and I become all the more self-destructive and obsessed.

The end of the book is a big event for me. A big event. I start screaming. I put the hour and the date at the end of the last page. I expect everybody to understand, at least a little. It's a triumph! The

darkness of destiny has been driven back for a brief while. I celebrate. I scream, eat chocolate, and sleep.

Right near the end of writing *The Vampire Armand*, I realized I had to return to Italy, especially to Florence, and at once I began to make preparations for the trip. As soon as the novel was finished and off to the publisher's, as soon as it could be accomplished, I flew to Italy. That gave me hope, a way out of a life threatening darkness that often follows the climax of a book. But I still ate chocolate and screamed.

While writing, I don't want to rest. I don't want to sleep. Why sleep? It seems stupid, except when weariness overcomes me like a giant cloud of poisonous vapor. Then I sleep fifteen to twenty hours. I tell people to go in and out of the bedroom and ignore me lying there, as if I were dead. I won't talk on the phone. I won't open my eyes if I don't have to. I dream terrible, upsetting dreams. I want to kill myself. But I can't. I can't do it to other people, and I have work that must be done, novels that must be written. So I don't kill myself. Besides, I don't think it's good to kill oneself. It's a horrible idea. It has a horrible effect even on acquaintances. I think a lot about people I loved who are dead. I think of how dead they are, year after year, ever more dead.

On the structure of the novel itself, I used to outline heavily. I don't now. I can't bear to know everything about what horrors await the characters. I don't want to know. I want—for this phase of my life—to write without knowledge of what is going to happen next. I want to be born again every day at the computer keyboard. I do envision an ending and a reason why the novel exists—a justification for the tale. But it's all vague. I want it that way.

I won't pre-write anymore. I refuse. I'll read and read and look and look in preparation. I'll see my character, his name, his general fate. But I won't pre-write. No notes for scenes. No bits and pieces of dialogue. No. It's too agonizing to move the characters toward a fate that has already been suffered by me in my mind. I'm fresher and better if I don't know for sure what is going to happen.

Heavily outlined and prewritten novels of mine include *Cry to Heaven*, parts of *The Vampire Lestat*, very little of *The Witching Hour*, all of *Violin*, *Memnoch the Devil, The Tale of the Body Thief*, and the last fourth of *The Feast of All Saints*.

The most spontaneous novels I've ever written were *Taltos* and *The*

Vampire Armand. Almost all of *Interview with the Vampire*, and most of *The Vampire Lestat*, were utterly spontaneously written. The first part of *The Witching Hour*, the first few chapters, were heavily prewritten. But then *The Witching Hour* became a runaway spontaneous novel with hundreds of pages taking shape before my eyes. I like it this way now.

I write on a state-of-the-art computer, with the fastest hard drive imaginable, and the greatest amount of memory. I use the old program Wordstar because I know it so well. I print out the work of the day when I finish every day no matter what the hour. I have a super-fast printer that can cough up a whole novel in no time. I always have a hard copy of all the work to date right beside the computer. If I move back to an earlier chapter, which I often do, I throw the old draft in a Ziploc plastic bag marked "old chapter no. whatever" and print out the new draft of the chapter and stick it with the others. I use lots of Ziploc plastic bags. I don't write by hand.

If a revelation comes to me when I'm too tired to really write, I scribble this on the wall of the bathroom or on the wall of my office, using a black Sharpie pen. With a black Sharpie, I write all over the computer, the keyboard edges, and the edges of the monitor.

I do keep a diary by hand. I've been keeping it since 1970.

Anne Rice

Merrick

A BALLANTINE e BOOK

Merrick

A novel by

Anne Rice

Ballantine Books

A Ballantine Book

Published by the Random House Publishing Group

Copyright © 2000 by Anne O'Brien Rice

All Rights Reserved.

Published in the United States by Ballantine Books, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York.

Ballantine and colophon are registered trademarks of Random House, Inc.

eISBN: 978-0-375-41270-7

This edition published by arrangement with Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

www.ballantinebooks.com

v3.1

CONTENTS

Master Table of Contents

Cover

Title Page

Copyright

Proem

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Dedication

T H E T A L A M A S C A

Investigators of the Paranormal

We watch

And we are always here.

LONDON AMSTERDAM ROME

Proem

My name is David Talbot.

Do any of you remember me as the Superior General of the Talamasca, the Order of psychic detectives whose motto was “We watch and we are always here”?

It has a charm, doesn’t it, that motto?

The Talamasca has existed for over a thousand years.

I don’t know how the Order began. I don’t really know all the secrets of the Order. I do know however that I served it most of my mortal life.

It was in the Talamasca Motherhouse in England that the Vampire Lestat first made himself known to me. He came into my study one winter night and caught me quite unawares.

I learnt very quickly that it was one thing to read and write about the supernatural and quite another to see it with your own eyes.

But that was a long time ago.

I’m in another physical body now.

And that physical body has been transformed by Lestat’s powerful vampiric blood.

I’m among the most dangerous of the vampires, and one of the most trusted. Even the wary vampire Armand revealed to me the story of his life. Perhaps you’ve read the biography of Armand which I released into the world.

When that story ended, Lestat had wakened from a long sleep in New Orleans to listen to some very beautiful and seductive music.

It was music that lulled him back again into unbroken silence as he retreated once more to a convent building to lie upon a dusty marble floor.

There were many vampires then in the city of New Orleans—vagabonds, rogues, foolish young ones who had come to catch a glimpse of Lestat in his seeming helplessness. They menaced the mortal population. They annoyed the elders among us who wanted invisibility

and the right to hunt in peace.

All those invaders are gone now.

Some were destroyed, others merely frightened. And the elders who had come to offer some solace to the sleeping Lestat have gone their separate ways.

As this story begins, only three of us remain in New Orleans. And we three are the sleeping Lestat, and his two faithful fledglings—Louis de Pointe du Lac, and I, David Talbot, the author of this tale.

1

"Why do you ask me to do this thing?"

She sat across the marble table from me, her back to the open doors of the café.

I struck her as a wonder. But my requests had distracted her. She no longer stared at me, so much as she looked into my eyes.

She was tall, and had kept her dark-brown hair loose and long all her life, save for a leather barrette such as she wore now, which held only her forelocks behind her head to flow down her back. She wore gold hoops dangling from her small earlobes, and her soft white summer clothes had a gypsy flare to them, perhaps because of the red scarf tied around the waist of her full cotton skirt.

"And to do such a thing for such a being?" she asked warmly, not angry with me, no, but so moved that she could not conceal it, even with her smooth compelling voice. "To bring up a spirit that may be filled with anger and a desire for vengeance, to do this, you ask me,—for Louis de Pointe du Lac, one who is already beyond life himself?"

"Who else can I ask, Merrick?" I answered. "Who else can do such a thing?" I pronounced her name simply, in the American style, though years ago when we'd first met, she had spelled it Merrique and pronounced it with the slight touch of her old French.

There was a rough sound from the kitchen door, the creak of neglected hinges. A wraith of a waiter in a soiled apron appeared at our side, his feet scratching against the dusty flagstones of the floor.

"Rum," she said. "St. James. Bring a bottle of it."

He murmured something which even with my vampiric hearing I did not bother to catch. And away he shuffled, leaving us alone again in the dimly lighted room, with all its long doors thrown open to the Rue St. Anne.

It was vintage New Orleans, the little establishment. Overhead fans churned lazily, and the floor had not been cleaned in a hundred years.

The twilight was softly fading, the air filled with the fragrances of the Quarter and the sweetness of spring. What a kind miracle it was that she had chosen such a place, and that it was so strangely deserted on such a divine evening as this.

Her gaze was steady but never anything but soft.

"Louis de Pointe du Lac would see a ghost now," she said, musing, "as if his suffering isn't enough."

Not only were her words sympathetic, but also her low and confidential tone. She felt pity for him.

"Oh, yes," she said without allowing me to speak. "I pity him, and I know how badly he wants to see the face of this dead child vampire whom he loved so much." She raised her eyebrows thoughtfully. "You come with names which are all but legend. You come out of secrecy, you come out of a miracle, and you come close, and with a request."

"Do it, then, Merrick, if it doesn't harm you," I said. "I'm not here to bring harm to you. God in Heaven help me. Surely you know as much."

"And what of harm coming to your Louis?" she asked, her words spoken slowly as she pondered. "A ghost can speak dreadful things to those who call it, and this is the ghost of a monster child who died by violence. You ask a potent and terrible thing."

I nodded. All she said was true.

"Louis is a being obsessed," I said. "It's taken years for his obsession to obliterate all reason. Now he thinks of nothing else."

"And what if I do bring her up out of the dead? You think there will be a resolution to the pain of either one?"

"I don't hope for that. I don't know. But anything is preferable to the pain Louis suffers now. Of course I have no right to ask this of you, no right to come to you at all.

"Yet we're all entangled—the Talamasca and Louis and I. And the Vampire Lestat as well. It was from the very bosom of the Talamasca that Louis de Pointe du Lac heard a story of the ghost of Claudia. It was to one of our own, a woman named Jesse Reeves—you'll find her in the archives—that this ghost of Claudia supposedly first appeared."

"Yes, I know the story," said Merrick. "It happened in the Rue Royale. You sent Jesse Reeves to investigate the vampires. And Jesse Reeves came back with a handful of treasures that were proof enough that a child named Claudia, an immortal child, had once lived in the flat."

“Quite right,” I answered. “I was wrong to send Jesse. Jesse was too young. Jesse was never—.” It was difficult for me to finish. “Jesse was never quite as clever as you.”

“People read it among Lestat’s published tales and think it’s fancy,” she said, musing, thinking, “all that about a diary, a rosary, wasn’t it, and an old doll. And we have those things, don’t we? They’re in the vault in England. We didn’t have a Louisiana Motherhouse in those days. You put them in the vault yourself.”

“Can you do it?” I asked. “Will you do it? That’s more to the point. I have no doubt that you can.”

She wasn’t ready to answer. But we had made a great beginning here, she and I.

Oh, how I had missed her! This was more tantalizing than I’d ever expected, to be locked once more in conversation with her. And with pleasure I doted upon the changes in her: that her French accent was completely gone now and that she sounded almost British, and that from her long years of study overseas. She’d spent some of those years in England with me.

“You know that Louis saw you,” I said gently. “You know that he sent me to ask you. You know that he knew of your powers from the warning he caught from your eyes?”

She didn’t respond.

“ ‘I’ve seen a true witch,’ ” he said when he came to me. ‘She wasn’t afraid of me. She said she’d call up the dead to defend herself if I didn’t leave her alone.’ ”

She nodded, regarding me with great seriousness.

“Yes, all that’s the truth,” she answered under her breath. “He crossed my path, you might say.” She was mulling it over. “But I’ve seen Louis de Pointe du Lac many a time. I was a child when I first saw him, and now you and I speak of this for the first time.”

I was quite amazed. I should have known she would surprise me at once.

I admired her immensely. I couldn’t disguise it. I loved the simplicity of her appearance, her white cotton scoop neck blouse with its simple short sleeves and the necklace of black beads around her neck.

Looking into her green eyes, I was suddenly overcome with shame for what I’d done, revealing myself to her. Louis had not forced me to

approach her. I had done this of my own accord. But I don't intend to begin this narrative by dwelling on that shame.

Let me say only that we'd been more than simple companions in the Talamasca together. We'd been mentor and pupil, I and she, and almost lovers, once, for a brief while. Such a brief while.

She'd come as a girl to us, a vagrant descendant of the clan of the Mayfairs, out of an African American branch of that family, coming down from white witches she scarcely knew, an octoroon of exceptional beauty, a barefoot child when she wandered into the Motherhouse in Louisiana, when she said, "I've heard of you people, I need you. I can see things. I can speak with the dead."

That had been over twenty years ago, it seemed to me now.

I'd been the Superior General of the Order, settled into the life of a gentlemanly administrator, with all the comforts and drawbacks of routine. A telephone call had wakened me in the night. It had been from my friend and fellow scholar, Aaron Lightner.

"David," he'd said, "you have to come. This is the genuine article. This is a witch of such power I've no words to describe it. David, you must come.…"

There was no one in those days whom I respected any more deeply than Aaron Lightner. I've loved three beings in all my years, both as human and vampire. Aaron Lightner was one of them. Another was, and is, the Vampire Lestat. The Vampire Lestat brought me miracles with his love, and broke my mortal life forever. The Vampire Lestat made me immortal and uncommonly strong for it, a nonpareil among the vampires.

As for the third, it was Merrick Mayfair, though Merrick I had tried my damndest to forget.

But we are speaking of Aaron, my old friend Aaron with his wavy white hair, quick gray eyes, and his penchant for southern blue-and-white-striped seersucker suits. We are speaking of her, of the long ago child Merrick, who seemed as exotic as the lush tropical flora and fauna of her home.

"All right, old fellow, I'm coming, but couldn't this have waited till morning?" I remembered my stodginess and Aaron's good-natured laughter.

"David, what's happened to you, old man?" he'd responded. "Don't

tell me what you're doing now, David. Let me tell you. You fell asleep while reading some nineteenth-century book on ghosts, something evocative and comforting. Let me guess. The author's Sabine Baring-Gould. You haven't been out of the Motherhouse in six months, have you? Not even for a luncheon in town. Don't deny it, David, you live as if your life's finished."

I had laughed. Aaron spoke with such a gentle voice. It wasn't Sabine Baring-Gould I'd been reading, but it might have been. I think it had been a supernatural tale by Algernon Blackwood. And Aaron had been right about the length of time since I'd stepped outside of our sanctified walls.

"Where's your passion, David? Where's your commitment?" Aaron had pressed. "David, the child's a witch. Do you think I use such words lightly? Forget the family name for a moment and all we know about them. This is something that would astound even our Mayfairs, though she'll never be known to them if I have my say in matters. David, this child can summon spirits. Open your Bible and turn to the Book of Samuel. This is the Witch of Endor. And you're being as cranky as the spirit of Samuel when the witch raised him from his sleep. Get out of bed and cross the Atlantic. I need you here now."

The Witch of Endor. I didn't need to consult my Bible. Every member of the Talamasca knew that story only too well.

King Saul, in fear of the might of the Philistines, goes, before the dreaded battle, to "a woman with a familiar spirit" and asks that she raise Samuel the Prophet from the dead. "Why has thou disquieted me, to bring me up?" demands the ghostly prophet, and in short order he predicts that King Saul and both his sons will join him in death on the following day.

The Witch of Endor. And so I had always thought of Merrick, no matter how close to her I'd become later on. She was Merrick Mayfair, the Witch of Endor. At times I'd addressed her as such in semi-official memos and often in brief notes.

In the beginning, she'd been a tender marvel. I had heeded Aaron's summons, packing, flying to Louisiana, and setting foot for the first time in Oak Haven, the splendid plantation home which had become our refuge outside of New Orleans, on the old River Road.

What a dreamy event it had been. On the plane I had read my Old

Testament: King Saul's sons had been slain in battle. Saul had fallen on his sword. Was I superstitious after all? My life I'd given to the Talamasca, but even before I'd begun my apprenticeship I'd seen and commanded spirits on my own. They weren't ghosts, you understand. They were nameless, never corporeal, and wound up for me with the names and rituals of Brazilian Candomble magic, in which I'd plunged so recklessly in my youth.

But I'd let that power grow cold inside me as scholarship and devotion to others claimed me. I had abandoned the mysteries of Brazil for the equally wondrous world of archives, relics, libraries, organization, and tutelage, lulling others into dusty reverence for our methods and our careful ways. The Talamasca was so vast, so old, so loving in its embrace. Even Aaron had no clue as to my old powers, not in those days, though many a mind was open to his psychic sensibility. I would know the girl for what she was.

It had been raining when we reached the Motherhouse, our car plunging into the long avenue of giant oaks that led from the levee road to the immense double doors. How green had been this world even in darkness, with twisted oak branches dipping into the high grass. I think the long gray streaks of Spanish moss touched the roof of the car.

The electric power had gone out that night with the storm, they told me.

"Rather charming," Aaron had said as he greeted me. He'd been white-haired already by then, the consummate older gentleman, eternally good-natured, almost sweet. "Lets you see things as they were in the old days, don't you think?"

Only oil lamps and candles illuminated the large square rooms. I had seen the flicker in the fanlight above the entranceway as we approached. Lanterns swayed in the wind in the deep galleries that wrapped the great square house about on its first and second floors.

Before entering, I had taken my time, rain or no rain, to inspect this marvelous tropical mansion, impressed with its simple pillars. Once there had been sugarcane for miles all around it; out back beyond the flower beds, still vaguely colored in the downpour, were weathered outbuildings where once slaves had lived.

She came down barefoot to meet me, in a lavender dress covered with pink flowers, scarcely the witch at all.

Her eyes couldn't have been more mysterious had she worn the kohl of a Hindu princess to set off the color. One saw the green of the iris, and the dark circle around it, as well as the black pupil within. A marvelous eye, all the more vivid due to her light-tan creamy skin. Her hair had been brushed back from her forehead, and her slender hands merely hung at her sides. How at ease she'd seemed in the first moments.

"David Talbot," she had said to me almost formally. I'd been enchanted by the confidence in her soft voice.

They couldn't break her of the barefoot habit. It had been dreadfully enticing, those bare feet on the wool carpet. She'd grown up in the country, I thought, but no, they said, it was merely in an old tumbledown part of New Orleans where there were no sidewalks anymore and the weather-beaten houses were neglected and the blossoming and poisonous oleander grew as big as trees.

She had lived there with her godmother, Great Nananne, the witch who'd taught her all the things that she knew. Her mother, a powerful seer, known to me then only by the mysterious name of Cold Sandra, had been in love with an explorer. There was no father of memory. She'd never gone to a real school.

"Merrick Mayfair," I'd said warmly. I took her in my arms.

She had been tall for her fourteen years, with beautifully shaped breasts quite natural under her simple cotton shift, and her soft dry hair had been loose down her back. She might have been a Spanish beauty to anyone outside of this bizarre part of the Southland, where the history of the slaves and their free descendants was so full of complex alliances and erotic romance. But any New Orleanean could see African blood in her by the lovely café au lait of her skin.

Sure enough, when I poured the cream into the thick chicory coffee that they gave me, I understood those words.

"All my people are colored," she said, with the French in her voice then. "Those that pass for white leave and go north. That's been happening forever. They don't want Great Nananne to visit. They don't want anyone to know. I could pass for white. But what about the family? What about all that's been handed down? I would never leave Great Nananne. I came here 'cause she told me to come."

She had a temptress's poise as she sat there, small in the great winged

chair of oxblood leather, a tiny tantalizing gold chain around her ankle, another with a small diamond-studded cross around her neck.

"See these pictures?" she said invitingly. She had them in a shoe box which rested in her lap. "There's no witchcraft in them. You can look as you please."

She laid them out on the table for me, daguerreotypes—stark clear photographs on glass, each one fitted into a crumbling little case of gutter perche, heavily embossed with rings of flowers or grapevines, many of which could be closed and clasped shut like little books.

"They come from the 1840s," she said, "and they're all our people. One of our own took these pictures. He was known for taking portraits. They loved him. He left some stories—I know where they are. They're all written with beautiful handwriting. They're in a box in the attic of Great Nananne's house."

She had moved to the edge of the chair, her knees poking out from under her skimpy hem. Her hair made a big mass of shadows behind her. Her hairline was clean and her forehead smooth and beautiful. Though the night had been only cool, there was a fire in the fireplace, and the room, with its shelves of books and its random Grecian sculptures, had been fragrant and comfortable, conducive to a spell.

Aaron had been watching her proudly, yet full of concern.

"See, these are all my people from the old days." She might have been laying out a deck of cards. The flash of the shadows was lovely on her oval face and the distinct bones of her cheeks. "You see, they kept together. But as I said, the ones that could pass are long gone. Look what they gave up, just think of it, so much history. See this?"

I studied the small picture, glinting in the light of the oil lamp.

"This is Lucy Nancy Marie Mayfair, she was the daughter of a white man, but we never knew much about him. All along there would be white men. Always white men. What these women did for white men. My mother went to South America with a white man. I went with them. I remember the jungles." Had she hesitated, picking up something from my thoughts, perhaps, or merely my doting face?

I would never forget my own early years of exploration in the Amazon. I suppose I didn't want to forget, though nothing had made me more painfully conscious of my old age than to think of those adventures with gun and camera, lived on the bottom side of the world. I never

dreamt then that I would return to uncharted jungles with her.

I had stared again at the old glass daguerreotypes. Not a one among any of these individuals looked anything but rich—top hats and full taffeta skirts against studio backdrops of drapery and lavish plants. Here was a young woman beautiful as Merrick was now, sitting so prim and upright, in a high-backed Gothic chair. How to explain the remarkably clear evidence of African blood in so many of them? It seemed no more in some than an uncommon brightness of the eye against a darkened Caucasian face, yet it was there.

"Here, this is the oldest," she said, "this is Angelique Marybelle Mayfair." A stately woman, dark hair parted in the middle, ornate shawl covering her shoulders and full sleeves. In her fingers she clasped a barely visible pair of spectacles and a folded fan.

"She's the oldest and finest picture that I have. She was a secret witch, that's what they told me. There's secret witches and witches people come to. She was the secret kind, but she was smart. They say she was lovers with a white Mayfair who lived in the Garden District, and he was by blood her own nephew. I come down from her and from him. Oncle Julien, that was his name. He let his colored cousins call him Oncle Julien, instead of Monsieur Julien, the way the other white men might have done."

Aaron had tensed but sought to hide it. Perhaps he could hide it from her, but not from me.

So he's told her nothing of that dangerous Mayfair family. They haven't spoken of it—the dreadful Garden District Mayfairs, a tribe with supernatural powers, whom he had investigated for years. Our files on the Mayfairs went back for centuries. Members of our Order had died at the hands of the Mayfair Witches, as we were wont to call them. But this child mustn't know about them through us, I had realized quite suddenly, at least not until Aaron had made up his mind that such an intervention would serve the good of both parties, and do no harm.

As it was, such a time never came to pass. Merrick's life was complete and separate from that of the white Mayfairs. There is nothing of their story in these pages that I now write.

But on that long ago evening, Aaron and I had sought rather desperately to make our minds blank for the little witch who sat before us.

I don't remember whether or not Merrick had glanced at us before she went on.

"There are Mayfairs living in that Garden District house even now," she had said matter-of-factly, "—white people, who never had much to do with us, except through their lawyers." How worldly her little laugh had sounded—the way people laugh when they speak of lawyers.

"The lawyers would come back of town with the money," she said with a shake of her head. "And some of those lawyers were Mayfairs too. The lawyers sent Angelique Marybelle Mayfair north to a fine school, but she came home again to live and die right here. I would never go to those white people." The remark had been almost off-handed. She went on.

"But Great Nananne talks about Oncle Julien just as if he was living now, and they all said it when I was growing up, that Oncle Julien was a kind man. Seems he knew all his colored relations, and they said that man could kill his enemies or yours with the look in his eye. He was a *houn'gan* if there ever was one. I have more to say about him by and by."

She had glanced quite suddenly at Aaron and I'd seen him glance away from her almost shyly. I wonder if she had seen the future—that the Talamasca File on the Mayfair Witches would swallow Aaron's life, as surely as the Vampire Lestat had swallowed mine.

I wondered what she thought about Aaron's death even now, as we sat at the café table, as I spoke softly to the handsome and well-defended woman whom that little girl had become.

The feeble old waiter brought her the fifth of rum she had requested, the St. James from Martinique, dark. I caught the powerful scent of it as he filled her small, heavy octagonal glass. Memories flooded my mind. Not the beginning with her, but other times.

She drank it just the way I knew she would, in the manner I remembered, as if it were nothing but water. The waiter shuffled back to his hiding place. She lifted the bottle before I could do it for her, and she filled the glass again.

I watched her tongue move along the inside of her lip. I watched her large searching eyes look up again into my face.

"Remember drinking rum with me?" she asked, almost smiling, but not quite. She was far too tense, too alert for that just yet. "You

remember," she said. "I'm talking about those brief nights in the jungle. Oh, you are so right when you say that the vampire is a human monster. You're still so very human. I can see it in your expression. I can see it in your gestures. As for your body, it's totally human. There isn't a clue.…"

"There are clues," I said, contradicting her. "And as time passes you'll see them. You'll become uneasy, and then fearful and, finally, accustomed. Believe me, I know."

She raised her eyebrows, then accepted this. She took another sip and I imagined how delicious it was for her. I knew that she did not drink every day of her life, and when she did drink she enjoyed it very much.

"So many memories, beautiful Merrick," I whispered. It seemed paramount that I not give in to them, that I concentrate on those memories which most certainly enshrined her innocence and reminded me of a sacred trust.

To the end of Aaron's life, he had been devoted to her, though he seldom spoke of it to me. What had she learnt of the tragic hit-and-run accident that had caught Aaron unawares? I had been already gone out of the Talamasca, out of Aaron's care, and out of life.

And to think we had lived such long mortal lives as scholars, Aaron and I. We should have been past all mishap. Who would have dreamt that our research would ensnare us and turn our destiny so dramatically from the dedication of those long loyal years? But hadn't the same thing happened to another loyal member of the Talamasca, my beloved student Jesse Reeves?

Back then, when Merrick had been the sultry child and I the amazed Superior General, I had not thought my few remaining years held any great surprise.

Why had I not learnt from the story of Jesse? Jesse Reeves had been my student even more surely than Merrick ever became, and the vampires had swallowed Jesse whole and complete.

With great devotion Jesse had sent me one last letter, thick with euphemisms, and of no real value to anyone else, letting me know that she would never see me again. I had not taken Jesse's fate as a caution. I had thought only that for the intense study of the vampire, Jesse Reeves had been too young.

It was all past. Nothing remained of that heartbreak. Nothing remained of those mistakes. My mortal life had been shattered, my soul

soaring and then fallen, my vampire life erasing all the small accomplishments and consolations of the man I'd once been. Jesse was among *us* and I knew her secrets, and that she'd always be quite faraway from me.

What mattered now was the ghost that Jesse had only glimpsed during her investigations, and the ghost story that haunted Louis, and the bizarre request which I now made to my beloved Merrick that she call the ghost of Claudia with all her uncommon skill.

2

In the still café, I watched Merrick take another deep drink of the rum. I treasured the interval in which she let her eyes pass slowly over the dusty room.

I let my mind return to that long ago night at Oak Haven, as the rain struck the windowpanes. The air had been warm and heavy with the scent of the oil lamps and the busy fire on the hearth. Spring was upon us but the storm had cooled the air. She'd been speaking of the white family named Mayfair of whom she knew so little, she said.

"None of us with any sense would do that," she continued, "go to those white cousins, expecting anything from any of them on account of a name." She had brushed it all aside. "I'm not going to white people and try to tell them that I'm their own."

Aaron had looked at me, his quick gray eyes concealing even his tenderest emotions, but I knew that he wanted me to respond.

"There's no need, child," I had said. "You are ours now, if you choose to be. We are your own. Why, it's already understood. This is your home forever. Only you can change things, if you wish."

A chill had come over me, of something momentous and meaningful, when I'd spoken those words to her. I had indulged the pleasure. "We'll always take care of you." I had underscored it, and I might have kissed her had she not been so ripe and pretty, with her bare feet on the flowered carpet and her breasts naked beneath her shift.

She had not replied.

"All gentlemen and ladies, it seems," Aaron had said, perusing the daguerreotypes. "And in such excellent condition, these little portraits." He had sighed. "Ah, what a wonder it must have been in the 1840s when they learnt to take these pictures."

"Oh, yes, my great-great uncle wrote all about it," she had said. "I don't know if anyone can read those pages anymore. They were crumbling to bits when Great Nananne first showed them to me. But as I

was saying, these are all his pictures. Here, the tintypes, he did those too." She had a woman's weariness in her sigh, as though she'd lived it all. "He died very old, they say, with a house full of pictures, before his white nephews came and actually broke them up—but I'll come to that."

I had been shocked and bruised by such a revelation, unable to excuse it. Broken daguerreotypes. Faces lost forever. She had gone on, lifting the small rectangles of tin, many unframed yet clear, from her cardboard treasure chest.

"I open boxes sometimes from Great Nananne's rooms, and the paper is all little bits and pieces. I think the rats come and they eat the paper. Great Nananne says rats will eat your money and that's why you have to keep it in an iron box. Iron's magical, you know that. The sisters—I mean the nuns—they don't know that. That's why in the Bible you couldn't build with an iron shovel, because iron was mighty and you couldn't put the iron shovel above the bricks of the Lord's temple, not then, and not now."

It seemed a bizarre intelligence, though she had been most technically correct.

She'd let her words wander. "Iron and shovels. It goes way back. The King of Babylon held a shovel in his hand with which he laid the bricks of the temple. And the Masons, now they keep that idea in their Order, and on the one-dollar bill you see that broken pyramid of bricks."

It had amazed me, the ease with which she touched on these complex concepts. What had she known in her life, I wondered. What sort of woman would she prove to be?

I remember that she'd been looking at me, as she'd said those words, gauging my reaction, perhaps, and it had only then become clear to me how much she needed to talk of the things she'd been taught, of the things she thought, of the things she'd heard.

"But why are you so good?" she had asked, searching my face rather politely. "I know with priests and nuns why they're good to us. They come and bring food and clothes to us. But you, why are you good? Why did you let me in and give me a room here? Why do you let me do what I want? All day Saturday I looked at magazines and listened to the radio. Why do you feed me and try to get me to wear shoes?"

"Child," Aaron had interjected. "We're almost as old as the Church of Rome. We're as old as the orders of the sisters and the priests who've

visited you. Yes, older, I would say, than almost all."

Still she had looked to me for an explanation.

"We have our beliefs and our traditions," I had said. "It's common to be bad, to be greedy, to be corrupt and self-seeking. It's a rare thing to love. We love."

Again, I had enjoyed our sense of purpose, our commitment—that we were the inviolate Talamasca, that we cared for the outcast, that we harbored the sorcerer and the seer, that we had saved witches from the stake and reached out even to the wandering spirits, yes, even to the shades whom others fear. We had done it for well over a thousand years.

"But these little treasures—your family, your heritage," I'd hastened to explain. "They matter to us because they matter to you. And they will always be yours."

She'd nodded. I had got it right.

"Witchcraft's my calling card, Mr. Talbot," she'd said shrewdly, "but all this comes with me too."

I had enjoyed the fleeting enthusiasm which had illuminated her face.

And now, some twenty years after, what had I done, seeking her out, finding her old house in New Orleans deserted, and spying upon her at Oak Haven, walking the broad upstairs galleries of Oak Haven like an old Penny Dreadful Vampire, looking into her very bedroom until she sat up and spoke my name in the darkness.

I had done her evil, I knew it, and it was exciting, and I needed her, and I was selfish, and I missed her, and it was as plain as that.

It had been only a week ago that I wrote to her.

Alone in the town house in the Rue Royale, I'd written by hand in a style that hadn't changed with my fortunes:

> Dear Merrick,
>
> Yes, it was I whom you saw on the porch outside your room. It was not my intention to frighten you but merely to solace myself by looking at you, playing the guardian angel, I must confess, if you will forgive me, as I hovered outside the window for the better part of the night.
>
> I have a request for you, which I make from my soul to yours. I cannot tell you what it is in this letter. I ask that you meet me in some place that is public, where you will feel safe from me, a

place that you yourself choose. Answer at this post box, and I'll be prompt in replying. Merrick, forgive me. If you advise the Elders or the Superior General of this contact, they will in all likelihood forbid you to meet with me. Please give me this little while to speak with you before you take such a step.

Yours in the Talamasca forever,

David Talbot.

What audacity and egoism to have written such a note and delivered it into the iron mailbox at the end of the drive in the hours before dawn.

She'd written back, a note rather tantalizing in its details, full of undeserved affection.

I cannot wait to talk with you. Be assured, whatever shocks this meeting will hold in store for me, I seek you inside the mystery —David, whom I have always loved. You were my Father when I needed you, and my friend ever after. And I have glimpsed you since your metamorphosis, perhaps more often than you know.

I know what happened to you. I know of those with whom you live. The Café of the Lion. Rue St. Anne. Do you remember it? Years ago, before we ever went to Central America, we ate a quick lunch there. You were so wary of us setting out for those jungles. Do you remember how you argued? I think I used a witch's charms to persuade you. I always thought you knew. I'll come early each evening for several nights in hopes that you'll be there.

She had signed the note exactly as I had signed my own:

"Yours in the Talamasca forever."

I had put myself before my love of her, and my duty to her. I was relieved that the deed was done.

Back then, when she'd been the orphan in the storm, such a thing had been unthinkable. She *was* my duty, this little wanderer who had come so surprisingly, on her own, one evening to knock on our door.

"Our motives are the same as your motives," Aaron had said to her most directly on that long ago night at Oak Haven. He'd reached out and

lifted her soft brown hair back from her shoulder, as if he were her elder brother. "We want to preserve knowledge. We want to save history. We want to study and we hope to understand."

He had made another soft sigh, so unlike him.

"Ah, those white cousins, the Garden District Mayfairs, as you called them, and most correctly, yes, we know of them," he had admitted, surprising me, "but we keep our secrets unless prompted by duty to reveal them. What is their long history to you just now? Their lives are interconnected like thorny vines forever circling and recircling the same tree. Your life might have nothing to do with that bitter struggle. What concerns us here now is what we can do for you. I don't speak idle words when I tell you that you may rely upon us forever. You are, as David has said, our own."

She had reflected. It had not been simple for her to accept all of this, she was too used to being alone with Great Nananne—yet something strong had impelled her to trust us before she'd ever come.

"Great Nananne trusts you," she had said, as if I'd asked her. "Great Nananne said that I was to come to you. Great Nananne had one of her many dreams and woke up before daylight and rang her bell for me to come. I was sleeping on the screen porch and I came in and found her standing up in her white flannel gown. She's cold all the time, you know; she always wears flannel, even on the hottest night. She said for me to come sit down and listen to what she had dreamed."

"Tell me about it, child," Aaron had asked. Had they not spoken of this completely before I'd come?

"She dreamed of Mr. Lightner, of you," she'd said, looking to Aaron, "and in the dream you came to her with Oncle Julien, white Oncle Julien from the clan uptown. And the two of you sat by her bed.

"Oncle Julien told her jokes and stories and said he was happy to be in her dream. She said that. Oncle Julien said that I was to go to you, you here, Mr. Lightner, and that Mr. Talbot would come. Oncle Julien spoke French and you yourself were sitting in the cane-backed chair and smiling and nodding to her, and you brought her in a cup of coffee and cream the way she likes it, with half a cup of sugar and one of her favorite silver spoons. In and out of her dreams, Great Nananne has a thousand silver spoons." The dream continued:

"You sat on her bed, finally, on her best quilt beside her, and you took

her hand, and she had all her best rings on her hand, which she doesn't wear anymore, you know, and you said in the dream, 'You send me little Merrick,' and you said you'd take care of me, and you told her that she was going to die."

Aaron had not heard this strange recounting, and he'd seemed quite taken, amazed. Lovingly, he'd answered:

"It must have been Oncle Julien who said such a thing in the dream. How could I have known such a secret?"

I'd never forgotten his protest, because it had been very unlike him to commit himself even to ignorance, and to press so hard upon such a point.

"No, no, you told her," the fairy child had said. "You told her the day of the week and the hour of the clock, and it's yet to come." She had looked thoughtfully once more at her pictures. "Don't worry about it. I know when it's going to happen." Her face had been suddenly full of sadness. "I can't keep her forever. *Les mystères* will not wait."

Les mystères. Did she mean the ancestors, the Voodoo gods, or merely the secrets of fate? I'd been unable to penetrate her thoughts to any degree whatsoever.

"St. Peter will be waiting," she'd murmured as the visible sadness had slowly receded behind her veil of calm.

Quite suddenly, she'd flashed her glance on me and murmured something in French. Papa Legba, god of the crossroads in Voodoo, for whom a statue of St. Peter with his keys to Heaven might do quite well.

I had noted that Aaron could not bring himself to question her further on the matter of his role in the dream, the date of Great Nananne's imminent death. He had nodded, however, and once again, with both hands he'd lifted her hair back from her damp neck where a few errant tendrils had clung to her soft creamy skin.

Aaron had regarded her with honest wonder as she had gone on with her tale.

"First thing I knew after that dream, there was an old colored man and a truck ready to take me, and he said, 'You don't need your bag, you just come as you are,' and I climbed up into the truck with him, and he drove me all the way out here, not even talking to me, just listening to some old Blues radio station and smoking cigarettes the whole way. Great Nananne knew it was Oak Haven because Mr. Lightner told her in

the dream.…

"Great Nananne knew of Oak Haven of the old days, when it was a different kind of house with a different name. Oncle Julien told her lots of other things, but she didn't tell me what they were. She said, 'Go to them, The Talamasca; they'll take care of you, and it will be the way for you and all the things that you can do.' "

It had chilled: *all the things that you can do.* I remember Aaron's sad expression. He had only given a little shake of his head. Don't worry her now, I'd thought a bit crossly, but the child had not been perturbed.

Oncle Julien of Mayfair fame was no stranger to my memory; I had read many chapters on the career of this powerful witch and seer, the one male in his bizarre family to go against the goad of a male spirit and his female witches over many hundreds of years. Oncle Julien—mentor, madman, cocksman, legend, father of witches—and the child had said that she had come down from him.

It had to be powerful magic, but Oncle Julien had been Aaron's field, not mine.

She had watched me carefully as she spoke.

"I'm not used to people believing me," she'd said, "but I am used to making people afraid."

"How so, child?" I had asked. But she had frightened me quite enough with her remarkable poise and the penetration of her gaze. What could she do? Would I ever know? It had been worth pondering on that first evening, for it was not our way to encourage our orphans to give full vent to their dangerous powers; we had been devoutly passive in all such respects.

I had banished my unseemly curiosity and set to memorizing her appearance, as was my custom in those days, by looking very carefully at every aspect of her visage and form.

Her limbs had been beautifully molded; her breasts were already too fetching, and the features of her face were large, all of them—with no unique hint of the African—large her well-shaped mouth, and large her almond eyes and long nose; her neck had been long and uncommonly graceful, and there had been a harmony to her face, even when she had fallen into the deepest thought.

"Keep your secrets of those white Mayfairs," she had said. "Maybe someday we can swap secrets, you and me. They don't even know in

these times that we are here. Great Nananne said that Oncle Julien died before she was born. In the dream, he didn't say a word about those white Mayfairs. He said for me to come here." She had gestured to the old glass photographs. "These are my people. If I'd been meant to go to those white Mayfairs, Great Nananne would have seen it long before now." She'd paused, thoughtfully. "Let's us just talk of those old times."

She'd spaced the daguerreotypes lovingly on the mahogany table. She made a neat row, wiping away the crumbly fragments with her hand. And at some moment, I'd noted that all the little figures were upside down from her point of view, and right side up for Aaron and for me.

"There've been white people kin to me that have come down here and tried to destroy records," she said, "You know, tear the page right out of the church register that says their great-grandmother was colored. *Femme de couleur libre,* that's what some old records say in French.

"Imagine tearing up that much history, the page right out of the church register with all those births and deaths and marriages, and not wanting to know. Imagine going into my great-great oncle's house and breaking up those pictures, pictures that ought to be someplace safe for lots of people to see."

She had sighed, rather like a weary woman, gazing down into the worn shoe box and its trophies.

"Now I have these pictures. I have everything, and I'm with you, and they can't find me, and they can't throw all these things away."

She had dipped her hand into the shoe box again and taken out the *cartes de visite*—old photographs on cardboard from the last decades of the old century. I could see the high slanted letters in faded purple on the backs of these latest pictures as she turned them this way and that.

"See, this here is Oncle Vervain," she said. I had looked at the thin, handsome black-haired young man with the dark skin and light eyes like her own. It was rather a romantic portrait. In a finely tailored three-piece suit, he stood with his arm on a Greek column before a painted sky. The picture was in rich sepia. The African blood was plainly present in the man's handsome nose and mouth.

"Now, this is dated 1920." She turned it over once, then back again, and laid it down for us to see. "Oncle Vervain was a Voodoo Doctor," she said, "and I knew him well before he died. I was little, but I'll never forget him. He could dance and spit the rum from between his teeth at

the altar, and he had everybody scared, I can tell you."

She took her time, then found what she wanted. Next picture.

"And you see here, this one?" She had laid down another old photograph, this time of an elderly gray-haired man of color in a stately wooden chair. "The Old Man is what they always called him. I don't even know him by any other name. He went back to Haiti to study the magic, and he taught Oncle Vervain all he knew. Sometimes I feel Oncle Vervain is talking to me. Sometimes I feel he's outside our house watching over Great Nananne. I saw the Old Man once in a dream."

I had wanted so badly to ask questions, but this had not been the time.

"See here, this is Pretty Justine," she had said, laying down perhaps the most impressive portrait of all—a studio picture on thick cardboard inside a sepia cardboard frame. "Pretty Justine had everybody afraid of her." The young woman was indeed pretty, her breasts flat in the style of the 1920s, her hair in a bob, her dark skin quite beautiful, her eyes and mouth slightly expressionless, or perhaps evincing a certain pain.

Now came the modern snapshots, thin and curling, the work of common enough hand-held cameras of the present time.

"They were the worst—his sons," she had said as she pointed to the curling black-and-white picture. "They were Pretty Justine's grandchildren, all white and living in New York. They wanted to get their hands on anything that said they were colored and tear it up. Great Nananne knew what they wanted. She didn't fall for their soft manners and the way they took me downtown and bought me pretty clothes. I still have those clothes. Little dresses nobody ever wore and little shoes with clean soles. They didn't leave us an address when they left. See, look at them in the picture. Look how anxious they are. But I did bad things to them."

Aaron had shaken his head, studying the strange tense faces. As the pictures had disquieted me, I had kept my eyes on the womanish child.

"What did you do, Merrick?" I had asked without biting my tongue wisely.

"Oh, you know, read their secrets in their palms and told them bad things they'd always tried to cover up. It wasn't kind to do that, but I did it, just to make them go away. I told them our house was full of spirits. I made the spirits come. No, I didn't make them come. I called them and they came as I asked. Great Nananne thought it was funny.

They said, 'Make her stop,' and Great Nananne said, 'What makes you think I can do that?' as if I was some wild creature that she couldn't control."

Again there had come that little sigh.

"Great Nananne's really dying," she said looking up at me, her green eyes never wavering. "She says there is no one now, and I have to keep these things—her books, her clippings. See, look here, at these clippings. The old newspaper is so brittle it's falling apart. Mr. Lightner's going to help me save these things." She glanced at Aaron. "Why are you so afraid for me, Mr. Talbot? Aren't you strong enough? You don't think it's so bad to be colored, do you? You're not from here, you're from away."

Afraid. Was I really feeling it so strongly? She'd spoken with authority, and I'd searched for the truth in it, but come quick to my own defense and perhaps to hers as well.

"Read my heart, child," I said. "I think nothing of the sort about being colored, though maybe there were times when I've thought that it might have been bad luck in a particular case." She'd raised her eyebrows slightly, thoughtfully. I'd continued, anxious, perhaps, but not afraid. "I'm sad because you say you have no one, and I'm glad because I know that you have us."

"That's what Great Nananne says, more or less," she answered. And for the first time, her long full mouth made a true smile.

My mind had drifted, remembering the incomparable dark-skinned women I'd seen in India, though she was a marvel of different tones, the rich mahogany hair and the pale eyes so visible and so meaningful. I'd thought again that to many she must have looked exotic, this barefoot girl in the flowered shift.

Then had come a moment of pure feeling, which had made its indelible and irrational impression. I'd perused the many faces laid out upon the table, and it had seemed they were all gazing at me. It was a marked impression. The little pictures had been alive all along.

It must be the firelight and the oil lamps, I'd thought dreamily, but I'd been unable to shake the feeling; the little people had been laid out to look at Aaron and to look at me. Even their placement seemed deliberate and sly, or wondrously meaningful, I'd conjectured, as I went smoothly from suspicion to a lulled and tranquil feeling that I was in an audience

with a host of the dead.

"They do seem to be looking," Aaron had murmured, I remember, though I'm sure I hadn't spoken. The clock had stopped ticking and I'd turned to look at it, uncertain where it was. On the mantle, yes, and its hands had been frozen, and the window-panes had given that muffled rattle that they do when the wind nudges them, and the house had wrapped me securely in its own atmosphere of warmth and secrets, of safety and sanctity, of dreaminess and communal might.

It seemed a long interval had transpired in which none of us had spoken, and Merrick had stared at me, and then at Aaron, her hands idle, her face glistening in the light.

I'd awakened sharply to realize nothing had changed in the room. Had I fallen asleep? Unforgivable rudeness. Aaron had been beside me as before. And the pictures had become once more inert and sorrowful, ceremonial testimony to mortality as surely as if she'd laid out a skull for my perusal from a graveyard fallen to ruin. But the uneasiness I'd experienced then stayed with me long after we'd all gone up to our respective rooms.

Now—after twenty years and many other strange moments—she sat across from me at this café table in the Rue St. Anne, a beauty gazing at a vampire, and we talked over the flickering candle, and the light was too much like the light of that long ago evening at Oak Haven, though tonight the late spring evening was only moist, not wet with a coming storm.

She sipped the rum, rolling it around a bit before she swallowed it. But she didn't fool me. She'd soon start drinking it fast again. She set the glass aside and let her fingers spread wide apart on the soiled marble. Rings. Those were Great Nananne's many rings, beautiful gold filigree with various wondrous stones. She'd worn them even in the jungles, when I'd thought it so unwise. She'd never been prone to fear of any sort.

I thought of her in those hot tropical nights. I thought of her during those steamy hours under the high canopy of green. I thought of the trek through the darkness of the ancient temple. I thought of her climbing ahead of me, in the steam and roar of the waterfall up the gentle slope.

I'd been far too old for it, our great and secret adventure. I thought of precious objects made of jade as green as her eyes.

Her voice brought me out of my selfish reverie:

"Why are you asking me to do this magic?" She put the question to me again. "I sit here and I look at you, David, and with every passing second, I become more aware of what you are and what's happened to you. I put all kinds of pieces together from your open mind—and your mind's as open as it ever was, David, you know that, don't you?"

How resolute was her voice. Yes, the French was utterly gone. Ten years ago it had been gone. But now there was a clipped quality to her words, no matter how soft and low they came.

Her large eyes widened easily with her expressive verbal rhythms.

"You couldn't even be quiet of mind on the porch the other night," she scolded. "You woke me. I heard you, just as if you'd been tapping on the panes. You said, 'Merrick, can you do it? Can you bring up the dead for Louis de Pointe du Lac?' And do you know what I heard underneath it? I heard 'Merrick, I need you. I need to talk to you. Merrick, my destiny is shattered. Merrick, I reach for understanding. Don't turn me aside.' "

I felt an acute pain in my heart.

"It's true what you're saying," I confessed.

She drank another big swallow of the rum, and the heat danced in her cheeks.

"But you want this thing for Louis," she said. "You want it enough to overcome your own scruples and come to my window. Why? You, I understand. Of him, I know other people's stories and just the little I've seen with my own eyes. He's a dashing young man, that one, isn't he?"

I was too confused to answer, too confused to will courtesy to build a temporary bridge of polite lies.

"David, give me your hand, please," she asked suddenly. "I have to touch you. I have to feel this strange skin."

"Oh, darling, if only you could forego that," I murmured.

Her large golden earrings moved against the nest of her black hair and the long line of her beautiful neck. All the promise of the child had been fulfilled in her. Men admired her enormously. I had known that a long time ago.

She reached out to me gracefully. Boldly, hopelessly, I gave her my hand.

I wanted the contact. I wanted the intimacy. I was powerfully

stimulated. And treasuring the sensation, I let her fingers linger as she looked into my palm.

"Why read this palm, Merrick?" I asked. "What can it tell you? This body belonged to another man. Do you want to read the map of his broken fate? Can you see there that he was murdered and the body stolen? Can you see there my own selfish invasion of a body that ought to have died?"

"I know the story, David," she answered. "I found it all in Aaron's papers. Body switching. Highly theoretical as regards the official position of the Order. But you were a grand success."

Her fingers sent the thrills up my spine and through the roots of my hair.

"After Aaron's death, I read the whole thing," she said, as she moved her fingertips across the pattern of deeply etched lines. She recited it:

" 'David Talbot is no longer in his body. During an ill-fated experiment with astral projection he was ousted from his own form by a practiced Body Thief and forced to claim the youthful trophy of his opponent, a body stolen from a shattered soul which has, as far as we can know, moved on.' "

I winced at the old familiar Talamasca style.

"I wasn't meant to find those papers," she continued, her eyes still fixed on my palm. "But Aaron died here, in New Orleans, and I had them in my hands before anyone else. They're still in my possession, David; they have never been filed with the Elders and maybe they never will be filed. I don't know."

I was amazed at her audacity, to have held back such secrets from the Order to which she still devoted her life. When had I ever had such independence, except perhaps at the very end?

Her eyes moved quickly back and forth as she examined my palm. She pressed her thumb softly against my flesh. The chills were unbearably enticing. I wanted to take her in my arms, not feed from her, no, not harm her, only kiss her, only sink my fangs a very little, only taste her blood and her secrets, but this was dreadful and I wouldn't let it go on.

I withdrew my outstretched hand.

"What did you see, Merrick?" I asked quickly, swallowing the hunger of body and mind.

"Disasters large and small, my friend, a life line that goes on as long as

any, stars of strength, and a brood of offspring."

"Stop it, I don't accept it. The hand's not mine."

"You have no other body now," she countered. "Don't you think the body will conform to its new soul? The palm of a hand changes over time. But I don't want to make you angry. I didn't come here to study you. I didn't come here to stare in cold fascination at a vampire. I've glimpsed vampires. I've even been close to them, in these very streets. I came because you asked me and because I wanted … to be with you."

I nodded, overcome and unable for the moment to speak. With quick gestures I pleaded for her silence.

She waited.

Then at last:

"Did you ask permission of the Elders for this meeting?"

She laughed but it wasn't cruel. "Of course I did not."

"Then know this," I said. "It started the same way with me and the Vampire Lestat. I didn't tell the Elders. I didn't let them know how often I saw him, that I brought him into my house, that I conversed with him, traveled with him, taught him how to reclaim his preter-natural body when the Body Thief tricked him out of it."

She tried to interrupt me but I would have none of it.

"And do you realize what's happened to me?" I demanded. "I thought I was too clever for Lestat ever to seduce me. I thought I was too wise in old age for the seduction of immortality. I thought I was morally superior, Merrick, and now you see what I am."

"Aren't you going to swear to me that you'll never hurt me?" she asked, her face beautifully flushed. "Aren't you going to assure me that Louis de Pointe du Lac would never bring me harm?"

"Of course I am. But there's a bit of decency left in me, and that decency compels me to remind you that I'm a creature of supernatural appetite."

Again she tried to interject, but I wouldn't allow it.

"My very presence, with all its signals of power, can erode your own tolerance for living, Merrick; it can eat away your faith in a moral order, it can hurt your willingness to die an ordinary death."

"Ah, David," she said, chiding me for my official tone. "Speak plainly. What's in your heart?" She sat up straight in the chair, her eyes looking me up and down. "You look boyish and wise in this young body. Your

skin's darkened like mine! Even your features have the stamp of Asia. But you're more David than you ever were!"

I said nothing.

I watched through dazed eyes as she drank more of the rum. The sky darkened behind her, but bright, warm electric lights filled up the outside night. Only the café itself was veiled in dreary shadow, what with its few dusty bulbs behind the bar.

Her cool confidence chilled me. It chilled me that she had so fearlessly touched me, that nothing in my vampire nature repelled her, but then I could well remember how Lestat in all his subdued glory had attracted me. Was she attracted? Had the fatal fascination begun?

She kept her thoughts half concealed as she always had.

I thought of Louis. I thought of his request. He wanted desperately for her to work her magic. But she was right. I needed her. I needed her witness and her understanding.

When I spoke, my words were full of heartbreak and wonder, even to myself.

"It's been magnificent," I said. "And unendurable. I am most truly out of life and can't escape from it. I have no one to whom I can give what I learn."

She didn't argue with me or question me. Her eyes seemed suddenly to be full of sympathy, her mask of composure to be gone. I'd seen such sharp changes in her many times. She concealed her emotions except for such silent and eloquent moments.

"Do you think," she asked, "that if you hadn't taken up life in the young body, that Lestat would have forced you as he did? If you'd still been old—our David, our *blessed David,* aged seventy-four, wasn't it?—do you think if you'd still been our honorable Superior General that Lestat would have brought you over?"

"I don't know," I said shortly, but not without feeling. "I've often asked myself the same question. I honestly don't know. These vampires … ah, I mean, we … we vampires, we love beauty, we feed on it. Our definition of beauty expands enormously, you can't quite imagine how much. I don't care how loving your soul, you can't know how much we find beautiful that mortals don't find beautiful, but we do propagate by beauty, and this body has beauty which I've used to evil advantage countless times."

She lifted her glass in a small salute. She drank deeply.

"If you'd come up to me with no preamble," she said, "whispering in a crowd as you touched me—I would have known you, known who you were." A shadow fell over her face for a moment, and then her expression became serene. "I love you, old friend," she said.

"You think so, my darling?" I asked. "I have done many things to feed this body; not so very lovely to think about that at all."

She finished the glass, set it down, and, before I could do it for her, she reached for the bottle again.

"Do you want Aaron's papers?" she asked.

I was completely taken aback.

"You mean you're willing to give them to me?"

"David, I'm loyal to the Talamasca. What would I be if it weren't for the Order?" She hesitated, then: "But I'm also deeply loyal to you." For a few seconds she was musing. "You *were* the Order for me, David. Can you imagine what I felt when they told me you were dead?"

I sighed. What could I say in answer?

"Did Aaron tell you how we grieved for you, all those of us who weren't entrusted with a speck of the truth?"

"From my soul, I'm sorry, Merrick. We felt we kept a dangerous secret. What more can I say?"

"You died here in the States, in Miami Beach, that was the story. And they'd flown the remains back to England before they even called to tell me you were gone. You know what I did, David? I made them hold the casket for me. It was sealed shut when I got to London but I made them open it. I made them do it. I screamed and carried on until they gave in to me. Then I sent them out of the room and I stayed alone with that body, David, that body all powdered and prettied up and nestled in its satin. I stayed there for an hour perhaps. They were knocking on the door. Then finally I told them to proceed."

There was no anger in her face, only a faint wondering expression.

"I couldn't let Aaron tell you," I said, "not just then, not when I didn't know whether I'd survive in the new body, not when I didn't understand what life held for me. I couldn't. And then, then it was too late."

She raised her eyebrows and made a little doubting gesture with her head. She sipped the rum.

"I understand," she said.

"Thank God," I answered. "In time, Aaron would have told you about the body switching," I insisted. "I know he would have. The story of my death was never meant for you."

She nodded, holding back the first response that came to her tongue.

"I think you have to file those papers of Aaron's," I said. "You have to file them directly with the Elders and no one else. Forget the Superior General of the moment."

"Stop it, David," she responded. "You know it is much easier to argue with you now that you are in the body of a very young man."

"You never had difficulty arguing with me, Merrick," I retorted. "Don't you think Aaron would have filed the papers, had he lived?"

"Maybe," she said, "and maybe not. Maybe Aaron would have wanted more that you be left to your destiny. Maybe Aaron wanted more that whatever you had become, you'd be left alone."

I wasn't sure what she was saying. The Talamasca was so passive, so reticent, so downright unwilling in interfere in anyone's destiny, I couldn't figure what she meant.

She shrugged, took another sip of rum, and rolled the rim of the glass against her lower lip.

"Maybe it doesn't matter," she said. "I only know that Aaron never filed the pages himself." She went on speaking:

"The night after he was killed I went down to his house on Esplanade Avenue. You know he married a white Mayfair, not a witch by the way, but a resilient and generous woman—Beatrice Mayfair is her name, she's still living—and at her invitation I took the papers marked 'Talamasca.' She didn't even know what they contained.

"She told me Aaron had once given her my name. If anything happened, she was to call me, and so she'd done her duty. Besides, she couldn't read the documents. They were all in Latin, you know, Talamasca old style.

"There were several files, and my name and number were written on the front of each, in Aaron's hand. One file was entirely devoted to you, though only the initial, D, was used throughout. The papers on you, I translated into English. No one's ever seen them. No one," she said with emphasis. "But I know them almost word for word."

It seemed a comfort suddenly to hear her speaking of these things, these secret Talamasca things, which had once been our stock in trade.

Yes, a comfort, as if the warm presence of Aaron were actually with us again.

She stopped for another sip of the rum.

"I feel you ought to know these things," she said. "We never kept anything from each other, you and I. Not that I knew of, but then of course my work was in the study of magic, and I did roam far and wide."

"How much did Aaron know?" I asked. I thought my eyes were tearing. I was humiliated. But I wanted her to go on. "I never saw Aaron after the vampiric metamorphosis," I confessed dully. "I couldn't bring myself to do it. Can you guess why?" I felt a sharp increase in mental pain and confusion. My grief for Aaron would never go away, and I'd endured it for years without a word to either of my vampire companions, Louis or Lestat.

"No," she said. "I can't guess why. I can tell you …," and here she hesitated politely so that I might stop her, but I did not. "I can tell you that he was disappointed and forgiving to the end."

I bowed my head. I pressed my forehead into my cold hand.

"By his own account he prayed each day that you would come to him," she explained slowly, "that he'd have a chance for one last conversation with you—about all you'd endured together and what had finally occurred to drive you apart."

I must have winced. I deserved the misery, however, deserved it more than she could know. It had been indecent not to have written to him! Lord God, even Jesse, when she'd vanished out of the Talamasca, had written to me!

Merrick went on speaking. If she read my mind at all, she gave no clue.

"Of course Aaron wrote all about your Faustian Body Switching, as he called it. He described you in the young body and made many references to some investigation of the body, something you'd engaged in together, asserting that the soul had certainly gone on. You experimented, didn't you, you and Aaron, with trying to reach the rightful soul, even at the risk of your own death?"

I nodded, unable to speak, feeling desperate and ashamed.

"As for the wretched Body Thief, the little devil Raglan James who'd started the whole supernatural spectacle, Aaron was convinced his soul

was gone into eternity, as he put it, quite utterly beyond reach."

"That's true," I concurred. "The file on him is closed, I'm quite convinced of it, whether it's incomplete or not."

A darkness crept into her sad respectful expression. Some raw feeling had come to the surface, and for the moment she broke off.

"What else did Aaron write?" I asked her.

"He referred to the Talamasca having unofficially helped 'the new David' reclaim his substantial investments and property," she answered. "He felt strongly that no File on David's Second Youth must ever be created or committed to the archives in London or in Rome."

"Why didn't he want the switch to be studied?" I asked. "We had done everything we could for the other souls."

"Aaron wrote that the whole question of switching was too dangerous, too enticing; he was afraid the material would fall into the wrong hands."

"Of course," I answered, "though in the old days we never had such doubts."

"But the file was unfinished," she continued. "Aaron felt certain he would see you again. He thought that at times he could sense your presence in New Orleans. He found himself searching crowds for your new face."

"God forgive me," I whispered. I almost turned away. I bowed my head and shielded my eyes for a long moment. My old friend, my beloved old friend. How could I have abandoned him so coldly? Why does shame and self-loathing become cruelty to the innocent? How is that so often the case?

"Go on, please," I said, recovering. "I want you to tell me all these things."

"Do you want to read them for yourself?"

"Soon," I answered.

She continued, her tongue somewhat loosened by the rum, and her voice more melodic, with just a little of the old New Orleans French accent coming back.

"Aaron had seen the Vampire Lestat in your company once. He described the experience as harrowing, a word that Aaron rather loved but seldom used. He said it was the night he came to identify the old body of David Talbot and to see that it was properly buried. There you

were, the young man, and the vampire stood beside you. He'd known you were on intimate terms with one another, you and this creature. He had been afraid for you as much then as ever in his life."

"What more?" I asked.

"Later on," she said, her voice low and respectful, "when you disappeared quite completely, Aaron was certain that you'd been forcibly changed by Lestat. Nothing short of that could explain your sudden break in communication, coupled with the clear intelligence from your banks and agents that you were most definitely still alive. Aaron missed you desperately. His life had been consumed with the problems of the white Mayfairs, the Mayfair Witches. He needed your advice. He wrote many times in many ways that he was certain you never asked for the vampiric blood."

For a long time I couldn't speak to answer her. I didn't weep because I don't. I looked off, eyes roaming the empty café until they saw nothing, except perhaps the blur of the tourists as they crowded the street outside on their way to Jackson Square. I knew perfectly well how to be alone in the midst of a terrible moment, no matter where it actually occurred. I was alone now.

Then I let my mind drift back to him, my friend Aaron, my colleague, my companion. I seized on memories far larger than any one incident. I envisioned him, his genial face and clever gray eyes. I saw him strolling along the brightly lit Ocean Avenue in Miami Beach, looking wonderfully out of place and richly like a splendid ornament to the bizarre scenery, in his three-piece cotton pinstripe suit.

I let the pain have me. Murdered for the secrets of the Mayfair Witches. Murdered by renegade beings in the Talamasca. Of course he had not given up to the Order his report on me. It had been a time of troubles, hadn't it, and he had ultimately been betrayed by the Order; and so my story would, within the fabled archives, remain forever incomplete.

"Was there more?" I asked Merrick finally.

"No. Only the same song with different rhythms. That was all." She took another drink. "He was terribly happy at the end, you know."

"Tell me."

"Beatrice Mayfair, he loved her. He never expected to be happily married, but it had happened. She was a beautiful highly social woman,

rather like three or four people rolled into one. He told me he'd never had so much fun in his life as he had with Beatrice, and she wasn't a witch, of course."

"I'm so very glad to hear it," I said, my voice tremulous. "So Aaron became one of them, you might say."

"Yes," she answered. "In all respects."

She shrugged, the empty glass in her hand. Why she waited to take more, I wasn't certain; perhaps to impress me that she wasn't the famous drunk that I knew her to be.

"But I don't know anything about those white Mayfairs," she said finally. "Aaron always kept me away from them. My work for the last few years had been in Voodoo. I've made trips to Haiti. I've written pages. You know I'm one of the few members of the Order who is studying her own psychic power, with a license from the Elders to use the damnable magic, as the Superior General calls it now."

I hadn't known this. It had never even occurred to me that she'd returned to Voodoo, which had cast its generous shadow over her youth. We had never in my time encouraged a witch to practice magic. Only the vampire in me could tolerate such a thought.

"Look," she said, "it doesn't matter that you didn't write to Aaron."

"Oh, doesn't it?" I asked in a sharp whisper. But then I explained: "I simply couldn't write to him. I simply couldn't speak on the phone. As for seeing him, or letting him see me, it was out of the question!" I whispered.

"And it took five years," she said, "for you to finally come to me."

"Oh, right to the point!" I responded. "Five years or more to do it. And had Aaron lived on, who knows what I would have done? But the crucial factor was this: Aaron was old, Merrick. He was old and he might have asked me for the blood. When you're old and you're afraid, when you're weary and you're sick, when you've begun to suspect that your life means nothing … Well, that's when you dream of vampiric bargains. That's when you think that somehow the vampiric curse can't be so very dreadful, no, not in exchange for immortality; that's when you think that if only you had the chance, you could become some premier witness to the evolution of the world around you. You cloak your selfish desires in the grandiose."

"And you think I never will think such thoughts?" She raised her

eyebrows, her green eyes large and full of light.

"You're young and beautiful," I said, "you were born and bred on courage. Your organs and limbs are as sound as your mind. You've never been defeated, not by anything, and you're in perfect health."

I was trembling all over. I couldn't endure much more of this. I'd dreamt of solace and intimacy, and this was intimacy, but at a terrible price.

How much easier it was to spend hours in the company of Lestat, who never spoke anymore, who lay still in a half sleep, listening to music, having been waked by it and now lulled by it, a vampire who craved nothing more?

How much easier to roam the city in the company of Louis, my weaker and ever charming companion, seeking out victims and perfecting the "little drink" so that we left our prey dazzled and unharmed? How much easier to remain within the sanctuary of the French Quarter town house, reading with a vampire's speed all the volumes of history or art history over which I'd labored so slowly when a mortal man?

Merrick merely looked at me with obvious sympathy, and then she reached out for my hand.

I avoided her touch because I wanted it so much.

"Don't back away from me, old friend," she said.

I was too confused to speak.

"What you want me to know," she said, "is that neither you nor Louis de Pointe du Lac will ever give me the blood, not even if I beg you for it; that it can't be part of any bargain between us."

"Bargain. It would be no bargain!" I whispered.

She took another drink. "And you'll never take my life," she said. "That's what makes it a bargain, I suppose. You won't ever hurt me as you might some other mortal woman who crossed your path."

The question of those who crossed my path was too troubling to me for any good response. For the first time since we had come together, I truly tried to divine her thoughts, but I could read nothing. As a vampire, I had great power in this respect. Louis had almost none. Lestat was the master.

I watched her drink the rum more slowly, and I saw her eyes become glazed with the pleasure of it, and her face soften wonderfully as the rum worked in her veins. Her cheeks were reddening slightly. Her

complexion looked perfect.

Chills ran through me again, through my arms and shoulders and up the side of my face.

I had fed before I'd come here, or else the fragrance of her blood would have clouded my judgment even more than the excitement of this intimacy clouded it. I had not taken life, no, it was too simple to feed without doing it, attractive though it was. I prided myself on that. I felt clean for her, though it was becoming increasingly simple for me to "seek the evildoer," as Lestat had once instructed—to find some unwholesome and cruel individual whom I could fancy to be worse than myself.

"Oh, I wept so many tears for you," she said, her voice more heated. "And then for Aaron, for all of your generation, leaving us suddenly and too soon, one after another." She suddenly hunched her shoulders and leant forward as though she were in pain.

"The young ones in the Talamasca don't know me, David," she said quickly. "And you don't come to me just because Louis de Pointe du Lac asked you to do it. You don't come to me just to raise the child vampire's ghost. You want me, David, you want my witness, David, and I want yours."

"You're right on all counts, Merrick," I confessed. The words spilled from me. "I love you, Merrick, I love you the way I loved Aaron, and the way I love Louis and Lestat."

I saw the flash of acute suffering in her face, as though it were the flash of a light from within.

"Don't be sorry you came to me," she said as I reached out to take hold of her. She caught my hands and held them in her own, her clasp moist and warm. "Don't be sorry. I'm not. Only promise me you won't lose heart and leave me without explanation. Don't break away from me hurriedly. Don't give in to some skewed sense of honor. If you did, my sanity might actually break."

"You mean I mustn't leave you the way I left Aaron," I said thickly. "No, I promise you, my precious darling. I won't do it. It's already much too late for such a thing."

"Then, I love you," she announced in a whisper. "I love you as I always have. No, more than that, I think, because you bring this miracle with you. But what of the spirit that lives within?"

“What spirit?” I asked her.

But she’d already gone deep into her own thoughts. She drank another swallow directly from the bottle.

I couldn’t bear the table between us. I stood slowly, lifting her hands until she stood beside me, and then I took her warmly into my arms. I kissed her lips, her old familiar perfume rising to my nostrils, and I kissed her forehead, and then I held her head tightly against my beating heart.

“You hear it?” I whispered. “What spirit could there be except my spirit? My body is changed, and no more.”

I was overcome with desire for her, the desire to know her utterly through the blood. Her perfume maddened me. But there wasn’t the slightest chance that I’d give in to my desire.

But I kissed her again. And it wasn’t chaste.

For several long moments we remained locked together, and I think I covered her hair with small sacred kisses, her perfume crucifying me with memories. I wanted to endow her with protection against all things as sordid as myself.

She backed away from me, finally, as if she had to do it, and she was a little unsteady on her feet.

“Never in all those years did you ever touch me in this way,” she said under her breath. “And I wanted you so badly. Do you remember? Do you remember that night in the jungle when I finally got my wish? Do you remember how drunk you were, and how splendid? Oh, it was over way too soon.”

“I was a fool, but all such things are past remembering,” I whispered. “Now, don’t let’s spoil what’s happened. Come, I’ve gotten a hotel room for you, and I’ll see that you’re safely there for the night.”

“Why on earth? Oak Haven is exactly where it’s always been,” she said dreamily. She shook her head to clear her vision. “I’m going home.”

“No, you’re not. You drank even more rum than I predicted. Look, you drank over half the bottle. And I know you’ll drink the rest of the bottle as soon as you get in the car.”

She laughed a small scornful laugh. “Still the consummate gentleman,” she said. “And the Superior General. You can escort me to my old house here in town. You know perfectly well where it is.”

“That neighborhood, even at this hour? Absolutely not. Besides, your

friendly old caretaker there is an incompetent idiot. My precious darling, I'm taking you to the hotel."

"Foolish," she said as she half stumbled. "I don't need a caretaker. I'd rather go to my house. You're being a nuisance. You always were."

"You're a witch and a drunk," I said politely. "Here, we'll just cap this bottle." I did it. "And we'll put it in this canvas purse of yours and I'll walk with you to the hotel. Take my arm."

For a small second she looked playful and defiant, but then she made a languid shrug, smiling faintly, and gave up her purse to my insistence and wrapped her arm around mine.

3

We had no sooner begun our walk than we gave in to rather frequent and fervent embraces. Merrick's old favorite Chanel perfume enchanted me, carrying me back years again; but the blood scent from her living veins was the strongest goad of all.

My desires were commingled in a torment. By the time we reached the Rue Decateur, scarcely a block and a half from the café, I knew we needed a taxi. And once inside of the car, I gave myself up to kissing Merrick all over her face and her throat, luxuriating in the fragrance of the blood inside her and the heat coming from her breasts.

She herself was rather past the point of return, and pressed me in confidential whispers as to whether or not I could still make love in the manner of an ordinary man. I told her it wouldn't do for me, that she had to remember, drunk or sober, that I was, by nature, a predator and nothing more.

"Nothing more?" she said, stopping this glorified love play to take another deep drink from her bottle of rum. "And what happened in the jungles of Guatemala? Answer me. You haven't forgotten. The tent, the village, you remember. Don't lie to me, David. I know what's inside you. I want to know what you've become."

"Hush, Merrick," I said, but I couldn't restrain myself. I let my teeth touch her flesh with each kiss. "What happened in the jungles of Guatemala," I struggled to say, "was a mortal sin."

I covered her mouth, kissing her and devouring her tongue but not letting my evil teeth harm her. I felt her wipe my brow with a soft cloth, possibly her scarf or a handkerchief, but I pushed it away.

"Don't do that," I told her. I feared that a few beads of blood sweat might have appeared. She went back to kissing me and whispering her words of Come Hither against my skin.

I was miserable. I wanted her. I knew that even the smallest drink of her blood would prove too risky for me utterly; I'd feel I possessed her

after that, and she, in spite of all her seeming innocence on the matter, might well find herself my slave.

Elder vampires had warned me on just about every aspect of what could happen to me. And Armand and Lestat had both been adamant that the "little drink" must not be conceived of as harmless. I was furious suddenly.

I reached to the back of her head and ripped the leather barrette out of her thick brown hair, letting the barrette and its cross-pin fall carelessly, and I ran my fingers deep against her scalp and kissed her lips again. Her eyes were closed.

I was immensely relieved when we reached the spacious entrance of the Windsor Court Hotel. She took another drink of her rum before the doorman helped her out of the cab, and in the manner of most experienced drinkers seemed sober on her feet when in fact she was not sober at all.

Having obtained the suite for her earlier, I took her directly to it, unlocked the door, and set her down on the bed.

The suite was quite fine, perhaps the finest in town, with its tasteful traditional furnishings and muted lights. And I had ordered bountiful vases of flowers for her.

It was nothing, however, that a member of the Talamasca wouldn't expect. We were never known for economy with our traveling members. And all my many memories of her encircled me like vapor, and wouldn't let me loose.

She appeared to notice nothing. She drank the rest of the rum without ceremony and settled back against the pillows, her bright green eyes closing almost at once.

For a long time I merely looked at her. She appeared to have been tossed on the thick velvet counterpane and its nest of cushions, her white cotton clothes thin and friable, her long slender ankles and leather-sandaled feet rather Biblical, her face with its high cheekbones and soft jawline exquisite in sleep.

I could not be sorry that I had made this friendship. I could not. But I reiterated my vow: David Talbot, you will not harm this creature. Somehow Merrick will be better for all this; somehow knowledge will enhance Merrick; somehow Merrick's soul will triumph no matter how badly Louis and I fail.

Then, seeing further to the suite—that the flowers ordered had indeed been properly set out on the coffee table before the parlor sofa, on the desk, on her dressing table; that the bath held abundant cosmetics for her comfort; that a great thick terry cloth robe and slippers were in their proper place in the closet; and that a full bar of small bottles awaited her, along with a fifth of her rum which I had provided—I kissed her, left a set of keys on the night table, and went out.

A brief stop at the concierge's desk, with the requisite offering, assured she'd be undisturbed for as long as she wished to stay at the hotel and that she might have anything that she liked.

I then made up my mind to walk to our flat in the Rue Royale.

However, before I left the beautifully lighted and somewhat busy lobby of the hotel a faint dizziness surprised me and I was assaulted by the peculiar sensation that everyone in the place was taking notice of me, and that their notice was not kind.

I stopped immediately, fishing in my pocket as though I were a man about to step aside for a cigarette, and glanced about.

There was nothing unusual about the lobby or about the crowd. Nevertheless, as I went outside the sensation overcame me again—that those in the driveway were looking at me, that they had penetrated my mortal disguise, which was by no means easy, and that they knew what I was and what evil things I might be about.

Again, I checked. Nothing of the sort was happening. Indeed, the bell boys gave me rather cordial smiles when our eyes met.

On I went towards the Rue Royale.

Once more, the sensation occurred. In fact, it seemed to me that not only were people everywhere taking notice of me, but that they had come to the doors and windows of the shops and restaurants especially for the purpose; and the dizziness which I seldom, if ever, felt as a vampire increased.

I was most uncomfortable. I wondered if this was the result of intimacy with a mortal being, because I'd never felt so exposed before. In fact, due to my bronze skin I could move about the mortal world with total impunity. All my supernatural attributes were veiled by the dark complexion, and my eyes, though too bright, were black.

Nevertheless, it seemed people stared at me surreptitiously all along the route which I took towards home.

Finally, when I was about three blocks from the flat I shared with Louis and Lestat, I stopped and leant against a black iron lamppost, much as I had seen Lestat do in the old nights when he still moved about. Scanning the passersby I was reassured again.

But then something startled me so that I began to tremble violently in spite of myself. There stood Merrick in a shop door with her arms folded. She looked quite steadily and reprovingly at me, and then disappeared.

Of course it wasn't really Merrick at all, but the solidity of the apparition was horrifying.

A shadow moved behind me. I turned awkwardly. There again went Merrick, clothed in white, casting her long dark glance at me, and the figure appeared to melt into the shadows of a shop door.

I was dumbfounded. It was witchcraft obviously, but how could it assault the senses of a vampire? And I was not only a vampire, I was David Talbot who had been a Candomble priest in his youth. Now, as a vampire, I have seen ghosts and spirits and I knew the spirits and the tricks they could play, and I knew a great deal about Merrick, but never had I witnessed or experienced a spell just like this.

In a cab which crossed the Rue Royale, there was Merrick once again, looking up at me from the open window, her hair loosened as I had left it. And when I turned around, quite certain she was behind me, I saw her unmistakable figure on a balcony above.

The posture of the figure was sinister. I was trembling. I disliked this. I felt a fool.

I kept my eyes on the figure. In fact nothing could have moved me. The figure faded and was gone. All around me the Quarter suddenly seemed quite desolate, though in fact there were tourists everywhere in great numbers, and I could hear the music from the Rue Bourbon. Never had I seen so many flowerpots spilling their blooms over the iron lace railings. Never had so many pretty vines climbed the weathered facades and the old stuccoed walls.

Intrigued and slightly angry, I went into the Rue Ste. Anne to see the café in which we'd met, and as I suspected it was full to overflowing with diners and drinkers, and the wraith of a waiter seemed overwhelmed.

There sat Merrick in the very middle of it, full white skirt flaring, stiff, as though she'd been cut from cardboard; then of course the apparition

melted, as the others had done.

But the point was the café was now crowded, as it should have been when we'd been there! How had she kept people away during our meeting? And what was she doing now?

I turned around. The sky above was blue, as the southern sky is so often in the evening, sprinkled with faint stars. There was gay conversation and happy laughter all about. This was the reality of things, a mellow spring night in New Orleans, when the flagstone sidewalks seem soft to the step of your foot, and the sounds sweet to your ears.

Yet there again came the sensation that everyone nearby was watching me. The couple crossing at the corner made a point of it. And then I saw Merrick quite some distance down the street, and this time the expression on her face was distinctly unpleasant, as though she were enjoying my discomfort.

I drew in my breath as the apparition melted away.

"How could she be doing this, that's the question!" I muttered aloud. "And why is she doing it?"

I walked fast, heading for the town house, not certain as to whether I would go into it, with this manner of curse all around me, but as I approached our carriageway—a large arched gate fitted into a frame of brickwork—I then saw the most frightening image of all.

Behind the bars of the gate stood the child Merrick of many years ago, in her same skimpy lavender shift, her head slightly to the side as she nodded to confidences whispered in her ear by an elderly woman whom I knew for a certainty to be her long-dead grandmother Great Nananne.

Great Nananne's thin mouth was smiling faintly and she nodded as she spoke.

At once the presence of Great Nananne deluged me with memories and remembered sensations. I was terrified, then angry. I was all but disoriented, and had to pull myself up.

"Don't you vanish, don't you go!" I cried out, darting towards the gate, but the figures melted as if my eyes had lost focus, as if my vision had been flawed.

I was past all patience. There were lights in our home above, and there came the enchanting sound of harpsichord music, Mozart, if I was not mistaken, no doubt from Lestat's small disc player beside his four-

poster bed. This meant he had graced us with a visit this evening, though all he would do would be to lie on his bed and listen to recordings till shortly before dawn.

I wanted desperately to go up, to be in our home, to let the music soothe my nerves, to see Lestat and see to him, and to find Louis and tell him all that had occurred.

Nothing would do, however, except that I go back to the hotel at once. I could not enter our flat while under this "spell," and must stop it at the source.

I hurried to the Rue Decateur, found a cab, and vowed to look at nothing and no one until I had faced Merrick herself. I was becoming more and more cross.

Deep in my thoughts, I found myself mumbling protective charms, calling upon the spirits to protect me rather than to injure me, but I had little faith in these old formulae. What I did believe in were the powers of Merrick, which I'd long ago witnessed and would never forget.

Hurrying up the stairs to Merrick's suite, I put my key into the lock of her door.

As soon as I stepped into the parlor, I saw the flicker of candlelight and smelled another very pleasant smell which I had connected with Merrick in years past. It was the scent of Florida water, redolent of fresh cut oranges—a scent loved by the Voodoo goddess Ezili, and by the Candomble goddess of a similar name.

As for the candle, I saw it atop a handsome bombe chest just opposite the door.

It was a votive light, sunk deep and safe inside a water glass, and behind it, looking down upon it, was a fine plaster statue of St. Peter with his golden keys to Heaven, a figure about a foot and a half in height. The complexion of the statue was dark, and it had pale amber glass eyes.

It was clothed in a soft green tunic etched with gold, and a cloak of purple on which the gold was fancier still. He held not only the proverbial keys to the Kingdom of Heaven, but also, in the right hand, a large book.

I was shocked all over. The hair came up on the back of my neck.

Of course I knew it was not only St. Peter, this statue, it was Papa Legba in Voodoo, the god of the crossroads, the god who must unlock

the spiritual realms if you are to obtain anything with your magic.

Before you begin a spell, a prayer, or a sacrifice you honor Papa Legba first. And whoever had made this statue realized these things. How else explain the deliberately darkened complexion of the saint who appeared now to be a man of color, or the mysterious book?

He had his complement in Candomble, whom I had so often saluted. This was the orisha, or god, by the name of Exu. And any Candomble temple would have begun its ceremonies by first saluting him.

As I stared at the statue and the candle, the very scents of those Brazilian temples with their hard-packed dirt floors came back to me. I heard the drums. I smelled the cooked foods laid out in offerings. Indeed, I let the sensations come.

There came back other memories, memories of Merrick, as well.

"Papa Legba," I whispered aloud. I'm certain that I bowed my head ever so slightly and felt a rush of blood to my face. "Exu," I whispered. "Don't be offended by anything that I do here."

I uttered a small prayer, more formulaic in the Portuguese that I had long ago learnt, asking that whatever realm he had just opened, he not deny me entrance, as my respect was as strong as that of Merrick.

The statue of course remained motionless, its pale glass eyes staring quite directly into mine, but I had seldom beheld something which seemed so animate in a sly and unexplainable way.

"I'm going slightly mad," I thought. But then I had come to Merrick to work magic, had I not? And I knew Merrick, didn't I? But then, I had never expected these tricks!

I beheld in my mind the temple in Brazil once more, where I had trained for months learning the proper leaves for offering, learning the myths of the gods, learning finally, after months and months of struggle, to dance clockwise with the others, saluting each deity with our gestures and dance steps, until a frenzy was reached, until I myself felt the deity enter into me, possess me … and then there was the waking after, remembering nothing, being told I had been mightily possessed, the sublime exhaustion.

Of course … What had I thought we were doing here if not inviting those old powers? And Merrick knew my old strengths and weaknesses if anybody did. I could scarcely tear my gaze off the face of the statue of St. Peter. But I finally managed it.

I backed away as anyone might do when leaving a shrine, and darted silently into the bedroom.

Again, I breathed in the bright citrus fragrance of the Florida water, and also the scent of rum.

Where was her favorite perfume, the Chanel No. 22? Had she ceased to wear it? The Florida water was very strong.

Merrick lay asleep on the bed.

She looked as if she'd never moved. It struck me now and only now how much her white blouse and skirt resembled the classic dress of the Candomble women. All she needed was a turban for her head to make the image complete.

The new bottle of rum was open on the table beside her, and about a third of it consumed. Nothing else had changed that I could ascertain. The scent was powerful, which meant she might have sprayed it through her teeth into the air, an offering to the god.

In sleep she looked perfect, as people often do when they relax utterly; she seemed the girl of herself. And it struck me that were she to be made a vampire, she would have this flawless countenance.

I was filled with fear and abhorrence. I was filled also—for the first time in these many years—with the full realization that I, and I without the help of anyone else, could grant this magic, the transformation into a vampire, to her, or to any human. For the first time, I understood its monstrous temptation.

Of course nothing of this sort would befall Merrick. Merrick was my child. Merrick was my … daughter.

"Merrick, wake up!" I said sharply. I touched her shoulder. "You're going to explain these visions to me. Wake up!"

No response. She appeared to be dead drunk.

"Merrick, wake up!" I said again, very crossly. And this time I lifted her shoulders with both hands, but her head tumbled back. The scent of the Chanel perfume rose from her. Ah, that was precisely what I so loved.

I became painfully conscious of her breasts, quite visible in the scoop neck of her cotton blouse. Down into the pillows I let her fall.

"Why did you do these things?" I demanded of the inert body of the beautiful woman lying on the bed. "What did you mean with all this? Do you think I'm to be frightened away?"

But it was useless. She wasn't pretending. She was out cold. I could divine no dreams or subterranean thoughts in her. And quickly examining the little hotel wet bar, I saw that she'd drunk a couple of little bottles of gin.

"Typical Merrick," I said with faint anger.

It had always been her way to drink to excess at specific times. She'd work very hard at her studies or in the field for months on end, and then announce that she was "going to the Moon," as she called it, at which time she would lay in liquor and drink for several nights and days. Her favorite drinks were those with sweetness and flavor—sugercane rum, apricot brandy, Grand Marnier, ad infinitum.

She was introspective when drunk, did a lot of singing and writing and dancing about during such periods, and demanded to be left alone. If no one crossed her, she was all right. But an argument could produce hysterics, nausea, disorientation, an attempt to regain sobriety desperately, and finally, guilt. But this rarely happened. Usually, she just drank for a week, unmolested. Then she'd wake one morning, order breakfast with strong coffee, and within a matter of hours return to work, not to repeat her little vacation for perhaps another six to nine months.

But even on social occasions if she drank, she drank to get drunk. She'd swill her rum or sweet liquor in fancy mixed drinks. She had no desire for drink in moderation. If we had a great dinner at the Motherhouse, and we did have many, she either abstained or continued drinking on her own until she passed out. Wine made her impatient.

Well, she was passed out now. And even if I did succeed in waking her, there might be a pitched battle.

I went again to look at St. Peter, or Papa Legba, in the makeshift Voodoo shrine. I had to eliminate my fear of this little entity or graven image or whatever I perceived to be there.

Ah, I was stunned as I considered the statue for a second time. My pocket handkerchief was spread out beneath the statue and the candle, and beside it lay my own old-fashioned fountain pen! I hadn't even seen them before.

"Merrick!" I swore furiously.

And hadn't she wiped my forehead in the car? I glared at the handkerchief. Sure enough there were tiny smears of blood—the sweat

from my forehead! And she had it for her spell.

"Ah, not merely satisfied with an article of my clothing, my handkerchief, but you had to take the fluids from my skin."

Marching back into the bedroom, I made another very ungentlemanly attempt to rouse her from her torpor, ready for a brawl, but it was no good. I laid her back down tenderly, brushing her hair with my fingers, and observed, in spite of my anger, how truly pretty she was.

Her creamy tan skin was beautifully molded over her cheekbones and her eyelashes were so long that they made distinct tiny shadows on her face. Her lips were dark, without rouge. I took off her plain leather sandals and laid them beside the bed, but this was just another excuse to touch her, not something generous.

Then, backing away from the bed, with a glance through the door to the shrine in the parlor, I looked about for her purse, her large canvas bag.

It had been flung on a chair and it gaped open, revealing, as I had hoped, a bulging envelope with Aaron's unmistakable writing on the outside.

Well, she'd stolen my handkerchief and my pen, hadn't she? She'd retrieved my blood, my very blood, which must never fall into the hands of the Talamasca, hadn't she? Oh, it wasn't for the Order, no. She stole it for herself and her charms, but she stole it, didn't she? And I'd been kissing her all the while like a schoolboy.

So I had every right to inspect this envelope in her purse. Besides, she had asked me if I wanted these papers. So I would take them. It was her intention to give them to me, was it not?

At once I snatched up the envelope, opened it, confirmed that it was all Aaron's papers concerning me and my adventures, and resolved to take it with me. As for the rest of the contents of Merrick's bag, it contained her own journal, which I had no right to read, and which would most likely be written in impossible French code, a handgun with a pearl handle, a wallet full of money, an expensive cigar labeled Montecristo, and a thin small bottle of the Florida water cologne.

The cigar gave me pause. Certainly it was not for her. It was for that little Papa Legba, that cigar. She had brought with her the statue, the Florida water, and the cigar. She had come prepared for some sort of conjuring. Ah, it infuriated me, but what right had I to preach against it?

I went back into the parlor, and, avoiding the eyes of the statue and its seeming expression, snatched up my fountain pen from the makeshift altar. I located the hotel stationery in the middle drawer of a fancy French desk, sat down, and wrote a note:

> All right, my dear, I'm impressed. You've learnt even more tricks since last we met. But you must explain the reasons for this spell. I've taken the pages written by Aaron. I've retrieved my handkerchief and fountain pen as well. Stay in the hotel as long as you like.
>
> David.

It was short, but I did not feel particularly effusive after this little misadventure. Also, I had the unpleasant sensation that Papa Legba was glaring at me from the violated shrine. In a fit of pique, I added a postscript.

"It was Aaron who gave me this pen!" Enough said.

Now, with considerable apprehension, I went back to the altar.

I spoke rapidly in Portuguese first, and then in Latin, once again greeting the spirit in the statue, the opener of the spiritual realm. Open my understanding, I prayed, and take no offense at what I do, for I want only knowledge, and mean no disrespect. Be assured of my understanding of your power. Be assured that I am a sincere soul.

I dug deep into my memory now for sensation as well as fact. I told the spirit in the statue that I was dedicated to the orisha, or god, called Oxalá, lord of creation. I explained that I had been faithful in my own way always to that deity, though I had not done all the little things that others had prescribed to be done. Nevertheless, I loved this god, I loved his stories, and his personality, I loved all I could know of him.

A bad feeling crept over me. How could a blood drinker be faithful to the lord of creation? Was not every act of blood drinking a sin against Oxalá? I pondered this. But I didn't retreat. My emotions belonged to Oxalá, just as they had many many decades ago in Rio de Janeiro. Oxalá was mine, and I was his.

"Protect us in what we mean to do," I whispered.

Then, before I could lose heart, I snuffed out the candle, lifted the statue, and, retrieving the handkerchief, set the statue back with care. I

said, “Goodbye Papa Legba” to the statue and prepared to leave the suite.

I found myself quite motionless, my back to the altar, facing the door to the corridor outside. I couldn’t move. Or rather it seemed I shouldn’t move.

Very slowly, my mind became rather empty. Focused upon my physical senses, if anything, I turned and looked towards the bedroom doorway through which I’d only just come.

It was the old woman, of course, the wizened little Great Nananne, with her fingers on the doorjamb, staring at me, and her thin lipless mouth working as if she were whispering to herself or to someone unseen, her head tilted just a little to one side.

I sucked in my breath and stared at her. She showed no signs of weakening, this wee apparition, this tiny old woman who regarded me rather directly in spite of moving lips. She was clothed in a faintly flowered nightgown of flannel that was stained all over with coffee, perhaps, or long-faded blood. Indeed, I became intensely conscious that her image was becoming all the more solid and detailed.

Her feet were bare and her toenails the color of yellowed bone. Her gray hair was now quite visible and distinct, as if a light were being brightened upon her, and I saw the veins moving up the sides of her head, and the veins on the back of the one hand which dangled at her side. Only very old people looked as she looked. And of course this woman looked exactly as she had when I’d seen her ghost in the carriageway earlier this evening, and exactly as she had on the day of her death. Indeed, I remembered the nightgown. I remembered the stains upon it. I remembered that on her dying body it had been stained but fresh and clean.

I broke into a true sweat as I stared at her, and I could not move a muscle, except to speak.

“You think I’ll harm her?” I whispered.

The figure did not change. The little mouth continued to work, but I could hear only a faint dry rustling noise, as from an old woman telling her rosary in church.

“You think I mean to do something wrong?” I said.

The figure was gone. It was gone past tense. I was talking to no one.

I turned on my heel and glared at the statue of the saint. It seemed to

be material and nothing more. I seriously considered smashing it, but my mind was full of confusion as to my intentions and their implications, when quite suddenly there came a deafening knock on the hallway door.

Well, it seemed to be deafening. I suspect it was ordinary. I was violently startled. Regardless I opened the door and said crossly:

"What in hell do you want?"

To my astonishment and his astonishment also, I was addressing one of the ordinary and innocent attendants who worked in the hotel.

"Nothing, Sir, excuse me," he said in his slow southern manner, "just this for the lady." He lifted a small plain white envelope and I took it out of his hand.

"Oh, wait, please," I said, as I fumbled to retrieve a ten-dollar bill from my pocket. I had put several in my suit just for this purpose and gave one over to him, with which he seemed pleased.

I shut the door. The envelope contained the two-piece leather hair barrette which I had taken off Merrick so carelessly in the cab. There was an oval of leather, and then a long pin covered with leather with which she gathered and fixed her hair in place.

I was trembling all over. This was too dreadful.

How in the hell had this come to be here? It seemed quite impossible that the cabby had retrieved it. But then how was I to know? At the time, I'd been aware that I ought to pick it up and pocket it, but I'd fancied myself to be under duress.

I went to the altar, laid the barrette in front of Papa Legba, avoiding his eyes as I did so, and I went straight out of the suite, down the stairs and out of the lobby, and out of the hotel.

This time, I vowed to observe nothing, to look for nothing, and I went directly to our home.

If there were spirits along the way, I did not see them, keeping my eyes on the ground, moving as swiftly as I could safely move without causing a stir among mortals, and going directly through the carriageway, back to the courtyard, and then up the iron steps into the flat.

4

The flat was dark, which I hadn't expected, and I did not find Louis in either the front parlor or the back, or in his room. As for Lestat, the door of his room was closed, and the harpsichord music, very rapid and very beautiful, seemed to emanate from the very walls, as is so often the case with modern compact disc recordings.

I lighted all the lamps in the front parlor and settled on the couch, with Aaron's pages in hand. I told myself I had important business.

It was no good thinking about Merrick and her charms and her spirits, and no good at all dwelling upon the old woman with her unintelligible whispers and her small wrinkled face.

As for my thoughts on my orisha, Oxalá, they were grim. The long ago years I had spent in Rio were ones of severe dedication. I had believed in Candomble insofar as I, David Talbot, could believe in anything. I had given myself over to the religion insofar as I could be abandoned to anything. And I had become Oxalá's follower and worshiper. I had been possessed by him many a time with little or no memory of the trance, and I had scrupulously followed his rules.

But all that had been a detour in my life, an intermezzo. I was, after all, a British scholar, before and after. And once I had entered the Talamasca, the power of Oxalá or any orisha over me had been broken forever. Nevertheless, I felt confusion and guilt now. I had come to Merrick to discuss magic, imagining that I could control what happened! And the very first night had been chastening, indeed.

However, I had to get my mind clear. Indeed, I owed it to Aaron, my old friend, to pull myself together at once and look at his papers. Everything else could wait, I told myself.

However, I couldn't get the old woman out of my head. I longed for Louis to come. I wanted to discuss these matters. It was important that Louis understand things about Merrick, but where Louis might be at this hour, I had no idea.

The harpsichord music was something of a comfort, as Mozart always is, with his merriment, no matter what the composition, but nevertheless, I felt restless and unsafe in these warm rooms where I was accustomed to spend many hours in comfort alone or with Louis or Louis and Lestat.

I determined to shrug it off.

Indeed, it was absolutely the best time to read Aaron's pages.

I took off my jacket, seated myself at the large writing desk which faced into the room quite conveniently (as none of us liked to work with our back to the room), and opened the envelope and drew out the pages that I meant to read.

There wasn't very much at all, and a quick perusal indicated that Merrick had given me a complete picture of Aaron's thoughts at the end. Nevertheless, I owed it to Aaron to read these writings, word by word.

It took me only a few moments to forget everything about me, as I found myself hearing Aaron's familiar voice in English in spite of the fact that all he'd written was in Latin. It was as if he were there, reviewing it all with me, or reading me his report so that I might comment before he sent it on to the Elders.

Aaron described how he had come to meet me in Florida, where he had found the aged body of his friend David Talbot dead and in need of proper burial, while the soul of David was firmly ensconced in the body of an anonymous young man.

The young man was Anglo-Indian in background, six feet four in height, had wavy dark-brown hair, bronze skin, and extremely large sympathetic dark-brown eyes. The young man was in excellent health and physical condition. The young man had very acute hearing and a good sense of balance. The young man seemed devoid of any spirit whatsoever save that of David Talbot.

Aaron went on to describe our days together in Miami, during which time I had frequently projected my spirit out of the host body, only to recapture the body perfectly with no unseen resistance from any known or unknown realm.

Finally, after a month or so of such experiments, I'd been convinced that I could remain in the youthful body and I had set about gathering what information I could about the soul which had previously reigned within it.

Those particulars I will not relate here insofar as they have to do with persons in no way connected with this narrative. It is sufficient to say that Aaron and I were satisfied that the soul which had once governed my new body was gone beyond reprieve. Hospital records pertaining to the last months of that soul's life on earth made it more than clear that "the mind" of the individual had been destroyed by psychological disasters and the bizarre chemistry of certain drugs which the man had ingested, though there had been no damage to the cells of the brain.

I, David Talbot, in full possession of the body, sensed no damage to the brain.

Aaron had been very full in his descriptions of things, explaining how clumsy I'd been with my new height for the first few days, and how he had watched this "strange body" gradually "become" his old friend David, as I took to sitting in chairs with my legs crossed, or to folding my arms across my chest, or to hunching over my writing or reading materials in familiar fashion.

Aaron remarked that the improved vision of the new eyes had been a great blessing to David Talbot, as David had suffered poor vision in his last years. Ah, that was so true, and I hadn't even thought of it. And now of course, I saw as a vampire and could not even remember those key gradations of mortal vision in my brief Faustian youth.

Aaron then laid down his feelings that the full report on this incident must not be placed in the Files of the Talamasca, which were open to all.

"It is plain to see from David's transformation," he wrote in so many words, "that body switching is entirely possible when one is dealing with skilled individuals, and what arouses my horror is not David's present occupation of this splendid young body, but the manner in which the body was stolen from its original owner by that one whom we shall call the Body Thief, for sinister purposes of the thief's own."

Aaron went on to explain that he would endeavor to put these pages directly into the hands of the Elders of the Talamasca.

But for tragic reasons, obviously, this had never been done.

There came a final series of paragraphs comprising about three pages, handwritten a little more formally than what had gone before.

David's Disappearance was written at the top. Lestat was referred to merely as TVL. And this time, Aaron's phrasing reflected considerably more caution and some sadness.

He described how I had vanished on the island of Barbados, without leaving any message for anyone, abandoning my suitcases, typewriter, books, and pages, which he, Aaron, had gone to retrieve.

How dreadful that must have been for Aaron, picking up the trash of my life, with no word of apology from me.

"Were I not so busy with the matters of the Mayfair Witches," he wrote, "perhaps this disappearance would never have occurred. I might have been more attentive to D. during his time of transition. I might have held him more firmly in my affections and thereby earned more surely his complete trust. As it is, I can only surmise what has become of him, and I fear that he has met with spiritual catastrophe quite against his will.

"Undoubtedly he will contact me. I know him too well to think otherwise. He will come to me. He will—whatever his state of mind, and I cannot possibly imagine it—come to me to give me some solace, if nothing else."

It hurt me so deeply to read this that I stopped and put the pages aside. For a moment, I was aware only of my own failing, my own terrible failing, my own cruel failing.

But there were two more pages, and I had to read them. Finally I picked them up and read Aaron's last notes.

> I wish that I could appeal to the Elders directly for help. I wish that after my many years in the Talamasca I had complete faith in our Order, and complete faith that the authority of the Elders is for the best. However, our Order, insofar as I know, is made up of fallible mortal men and women. And I cannot appeal to anyone without placing in his or her hands knowledge which I do not want to share.
>
> The Talamasca in recent months has had its internal troubles aplenty. And until the whole question of the identity of the Elders, and the certainty of communication with them, has been resolved, this report must remain in my hands.
>
> Meanwhile nothing can shake my faith in D., or my belief in his basic goodness. Whatever corruption we might have suffered in the Talamasca never tainted David's ethics, or those of many like him, and though I cannot yet confide in them, I do

take comfort from the fact that David may appear to them if not to me.

Indeed, my faith in David is so great that sometimes my mind plays tricks on me, and I think I see him though I soon realize I am wrong. I search crowds for him in the evening. I have gone back to Miami to look for him. I have sent out my call to him telepathically. And I have no doubt that one night very soon, David will respond, if only to say farewell.

The pain I felt was crushing. Moments passed in which I did nothing but allow myself to feel the immensity of the injustice done to Aaron.

At last, I forced myself to move my limbs.

I folded up the pages properly, put them back into the envelope, and sat quiet again for a long time, my elbows on the desk, my head bowed.

The harpsichord music had stopped some time ago, and much as I'd loved it, it did interfere with my thoughts somewhat, so I treasured the quiet.

I was as bitterly sad as I have ever been. I was as without hope as I have ever been. The mortality of Aaron seemed as real to me as his life had ever seemed. And indeed both seemed miraculous in the extreme.

As for the Talamasca, I knew it would heal its wounds by itself. I had no real fear for it, though Aaron had been right to be suspicious of things with the Elders until questions of their identity and authority had been resolved.

When I had left the Order, the question of the identity of the Elders had been hotly debated. And incidents pertaining to secrets had caused corruption and betrayal. Aaron's murder had become part of it. The famous Body Thief who seduced Lestat had been one of our own.

Who were the Elders? Were they themselves corrupt? I hardly thought so. The Talamasca was ancient, and authoritarian, and it moved slowly on eternal matters, rather on a Vatican clock. But it was all quite closed to me now. Human beings had to go on cleansing and reforming the Talamasca, as they had already begun to do. I could do nothing to help in such an endeavor.

But to the best of my knowledge, internal difficulties had been solved. How precisely, and by whom, I did not know and really didn't want to know.

I knew only that those I loved, including Merrick, seemed at peace within the Order, though it did seem to me that Merrick, and those upon whom I'd spied now and then in other places, had a more "realistic" view of the Order and its problems than I had ever had.

And of course, what I'd done in speaking to Merrick, that had to remain secret between Merrick and me.

But how was I to have a secret with a witch who'd cast a spell on me with such promptness, effectiveness, and abandon? It made me cross again to think of it. I wish I'd taken the statue of St. Peter with me. That would have served her right.

But what had been Merrick's purpose in the whole affair—to warn me of her power, to impress upon me the realization that Louis and I, as earthbound creatures, were hardly immune to her, or that our plan was indeed a dangerous plan?

I felt sleepy suddenly. As I've already mentioned, I'd fed before I ever met with Merrick, and I had no need of blood. But I had a great desire for it, kindled by the physical touch of Merrick, and very much caught up with wordless fantasies of her, and now I felt drowsy from the struggle, drowsy from my grief for Aaron, who had gone to the grave with no words of comfort at all from me.

I was about to lie down on the couch, when I heard a very pleasant sound which I at once recognized, though I hadn't heard it at close range for years. It was the sound of a canary, singing, and making a little bit of a metallic ruckus in a cage. I heard the motion of the wings, the creak of the little trapeze or swing or whatever you call it, the creak of the cage on its hinge.

And there came the harpsichord music again, very rapid, indeed far more rapid than any human could possibly desire. It was rippling and mad, and full of magic, this music, as though a preternatural being had set upon the keys.

I realized at once that Lestat was not in the flat, and had never been, and these sounds—this music and the gentle commotion of the birds—were not coming from his closed room.

Nevertheless, I had to make a check.

Lestat, being as powerful as he is, can mask his presence almost completely, and I, being his fledgling, can pick up nothing from his mind.

I rose to my feet, heavily, sleepily, amazed at my exhaustion, and made my way down the passage to his room. I knocked respectfully, waited a decent interval, and then opened his door.

All was as it should be. There stood the giant plantation-style four-poster of tropical mahogany with its dusty canopy of rose garlands and the drapery of dark-red velvet, the color which Lestat prefers above all else. Dust overlay the bedside table and the nearby desk and the books in the bookshelf. And there was no machine for making music in sight.

I turned, meaning to go back to the parlor, to write down all of this in my diary, if I could find it, but I felt so heavy and so drowsy and it seemed a better idea to sleep. Then there was the matter of the music and the birds. Something about the birds struck me. What was it? Something Jesse Reeves had written in her report of being haunted decades ago in the ruin of this very house. Little birds.

"Then it's begun?" I whispered. I felt so weak, so deliciously weak, actually. I wondered if Lestat would mind so very terribly if I were to lie down for a little while on his bed? He might yet come this evening. We never knew, did we? It wasn't very proper to do such a thing. And drowsy as I was, I was moving my right hand rapidly with the music. I knew this sonata by Mozart, it was lovely, it was the first one that the boy genius had ever written, and how excellent it was. No wonder the birds were so happy, it must have been a kindred sound to them, but it was important that this music not speed on so precipitously, no matter how clever the performer, no matter how clever the child.

I made my way out of the room as if I were moving through water, and went in search of my own room where I had my own bed, quite comfortable, and then it seemed imperative that I seek my coffin, my hiding place, because I could not remain conscious until dawn.

"Ah, yes, it's vital that I go," I said aloud, but I couldn't hear my words on account of the thunder of the tripping music, and I realized, with great distress, that I had entered the back parlor of the flat, the one which looked out upon the courtyard, and I had settled there on the couch.

Louis was with me. Louis was helping me to a seat on the couch, as a matter of fact. Louis was asking me what was wrong.

I looked up, and it seemed to me that he was a vision of male perfection, dressed in a snow white silk shirt and a finely cut black

velvet jacket, his curly black hair very properly and beautifully combed back over his ears and curling above his collar in the most lively and fetching style. I loved looking at him, rather as I loved looking at Merrick.

It struck me how different were his green eyes from hers. His eyes were darker. There was no distinct circle of blackness around the irises and, indeed, the pupils did not stand out so clearly. Nevertheless, they were beautiful eyes.

The flat went absolutely quiet.

For a moment I could say or do nothing.

Then I looked at him as he seated himself in a rose-colored velvet chair near to me, and his eyes were filled with the light from the nearby electric lamp. Whereas Merrick had something of a mild challenge in even her most casual expression, his eyes were patient, restful, like the eyes in a painting, fixed and reliable.

"Did you hear it?" I asked.

"What, precisely?" he asked.

"Oh, my God, it's started," I said softly. "You remember. Think back, man. You remember, what Jesse Reeves told you. Think."

Then it came out of me in a bit of a gush—the harpsichord music and the sound of the birds. Decades ago it had come upon Jesse, on the night she'd found Claudia's diary in a secret place in a broken wall. It had come upon her with a vision of oil lamps and moving figures. And in terror she had fled the flat, taking with her a doll, a rosary, and the diary, and never coming back.

The ghost of Claudia had pursued her to a darkened hotel room. And from there Jesse had been taken ill, sedated, hospitalized, and finally taken home to England, never to return to this place, insofar as I knew.

Jesse Reeves had become a vampire due to her destiny, not through the mistakes or failings of the Talamasca. And Jesse Reeves herself had told Louis this tale.

It was all quite familiar to both of us, but I had no recollection of Jesse ever identifying the piece of music which she'd heard in the shadows.

It was up to Louis to state now in a soft voice that, yes, his beloved Claudia had loved the early sonatas of Mozart, that she had loved them because he composed them while he'd still been a child.

Suddenly an uncontrollable emotion seized Louis and he stood up and

turned his back to me, looking out, apparently, through the lace curtains, to whatever sky lay beyond the rooftops and the tall banana trees that grew against the courtyard walls.

I watched him in polite silence. I could feel my energy returning. I could feel the usual preternatural strength upon which I'd always counted since the first night that I'd been filled with the blood.

"Oh, I know it must be tantalizing," I said, finally. "It's so easy to conclude that we're coming close."

"No," he said, turning to me politely. "Don't you see, David? You heard the music. I haven't heard it. Jesse heard the music. I've never heard it. Never. And I've been years waiting to hear it, asking to hear it, wanting to hear it, but I never do."

His French accent was sharp and precise, as always happened when he was emotional, and I loved the richness it gave to his speech. I think we are wise, we English speakers, to savor accents. They teach us things about our own tongue.

I rather loved him, loved his lean graceful movements, and the way in which he responded wholeheartedly to things, or not at all. He had been gracious to me since the first moment we met, sharing this, his house, with me, and his loyalty to Lestat was without a doubt.

"If it's any consolation to you," I hastened to add, "I've seen Merrick Mayfair. I've put the request to her, and I don't think she means to turn us down."

His surprise amazed me. I forget how completely human he is, being the very weakest of us, and that he cannot read minds at all. I had assumed also that he'd been watching me of late, keeping his distance, but spying as only a vampire or an angel can, to see when this meeting would take place.

He came back around and sat down again.

"You must tell me about the whole thing," he said. His face flushed for an instant. It lost the preternatural whiteness and he seemed a young man of twenty-four—with sharply defined and beautiful features, and gaunt well-modeled cheeks. He might have been made by God to be painted by Andrea del Sarto, so deliberately perfect did he seem.

"David, please let me know everything," he pressed, due to my silence.

"Oh, yes, I mean to. But let me have a few moments more. Something

is going on, you see, and I don't know if it's her general wickedness."

"Wickedness?" he asked in utter innocence.

"I don't mean it so seriously. You see, she's such a strong woman and so strange in her ways. Let me tell you everything, yes."

But before I began I took stock of him once more, and made myself note that no one among us, that is, no one of the vampires or immortal blood drinkers whom I had encountered, was anything like him.

In the years since I'd been with him, we'd witnessed wonders together. We had seen the very ancient of the species and been thoroughly humbled by these visitations, which had made a weary mockery of Louis's long nineteenth-century quest for answers which did not exist.

During our recent convocations, many of the old ones had offered Louis the power of their ancient blood. Indeed, the very ancient Maharet, who was now perceived to be the twin of the absolute Mother of us all, had pressed Louis in the extreme to drink from her veins. I had watched this with considerable apprehension. Maharet seemed offended by one so weak.

Louis had refused her offer. Louis had turned her away. I shall never forget the conversation.

"I don't treasure my weaknesses," he'd explained to her. "Your blood conveys power, I don't question that. Only a fool would. But I know from what I've learnt from all of you that the ability to die is key. If I drink your blood I'll become too strong for a simple act of suicide just as you are now. And I cannot allow that. Let me remain the human one among you. Let me acquire my strength slowly, as you once did, from time and from human blood. I wouldn't become what Lestat has become through his drinking from the ancients. I would not be that strong and that distant from an easy demise."

I had been amazed at Maharet's obvious displeasure. Nothing about Maharet is simple precisely because everything is. By that I mean that she is so ancient as to be divorced utterly from the common expression of tender emotions, except perhaps by deliberate merciful design.

She had lost all interest in Louis when he'd refused her, and to the best of my knowledge she never looked at him, or mentioned him, ever again. Of course she didn't harm him, and she had plenty of opportunity. But he was no longer a living being for her, no longer one of *us,* for her.

Or so I had divined.

But then who was I to judge such a creature as Maharet? That I had seen her, that I'd heard her voice, that I'd visited with her for a time in her own sanctuary—all that was reason for thanks.

I myself had felt a great respect for Louis's disinclination to drink the absolute elixir of the dark gods. Louis had been made a vampire by Lestat when Lestat had been very young, indeed. And Louis was considerably stronger than humans, well able to spell-bind them, and could outmaneuver the most clever mortal opponent with ease. Though he was still bound by the laws of gravity to a far greater extent than I was, he could move about the world very rapidly, attaining a brand of invisibility which he very much enjoyed. He was no mind reader, and no spy.

However, Louis would very likely die if exposed to sunlight, though he was well past the point where sunlight would reduce him to pure ash, as it had done Claudia only seventy years or so after her birth. Louis still had to have blood every night. Louis could very probably seek oblivion in the flames of a pyre.

I shuddered now, as I reminded myself of this creature's deliberate limitations, and of the wisdom he seemed to possess.

My own blood was quite remarkably strong because it came from Lestat who had drunk not only from the elder Marius, but from the Queen of the Damned, the progenital vampire herself. I didn't know precisely what I might have to do to terminate my existence, but I knew it would not be an easy thing. As for Lestat, when I thought of his adventures and his powers, it seemed impossible by any means for him to exit this world.

These thoughts so disturbed me that I reached out and clasped Louis's hand.

"This woman is very powerful," I said, as I made to begin. "She's been playing a few tricks on me this evening, and I'm not sure why or how."

"It has you exhausted," he said considerately. "Are you sure you don't want to rest?"

"No, I need to talk to you," I said. And so I began by describing our meeting in the café, and all that had passed between us, including my memories of the child Merrick from years ago.

5

Indeed I told him everything which I have told you so far.

I described even my scant memories of my first meeting with the girl Merrick, and my repressed fear when I was quite certain that the ancestors in the daguerreotypes had been passing approval on Aaron and me.

He was very startled when I laid down this part of the story, but wouldn't have me pause just yet but encouraged me to go on.

I told him briefly of how the meeting had triggered other, more erotic memories of Merrick, but that Merrick had not refused his request.

Merrick had seen him, I explained to him, and she knew who he was and what he was long before any intelligence on the vampires had been given to her by the Talamasca. In fact, to the best of my knowledge *no* information on the vampires had *ever* been given to Merrick.

"I remember more than one encounter with her," he said. "I should have told you, but by now you must know my manner."

"How do you mean?"

"I tell only what's necessary," he said with a little sigh. "I want to believe in what I say, but it's hard. Well, in truth I did have an encounter with Merrick. That's true. And yes, she did fling a curse at me. It was more than sufficient for me to turn away from her. However, I wasn't afraid. I'd misunderstood something about her altogether. If I could read minds as you can read them, the misunderstanding would never have occurred."

"But you must explain this to me," I said.

"It was in a back street, rather dangerous," he said. "I thought she wanted to die. She was walking alone in utter darkness, and when she heard my deliberate footfall behind her, she didn't even bother to glance over her shoulder or speed her pace. It was very reckless behavior and unusual for any woman of any sort at all. I thought she was weary of life."

"I understand you."

"But then, when I drew close to her," he said, "her eyes flashed on me violently, and she sent out a warning that I heard as distinctly as a spoken voice: 'Touch me and I'll shatter you.' That's about the best translation of it from the French that I can make. She uttered other curses, names, I'm not sure what they meant. I didn't withdraw from her in fear. I simply didn't challenge her. I had been drawn to her in my thirst because I thought she wanted death."

"I see," I said. "It checks with what she told me. Other times, I believe she's seen you from afar."

He pondered this for a moment. "There was an old woman, a very powerful old woman."

"Then you knew of her."

"David, when I came to you to ask you to speak with Merrick, I knew something of her, yes. But that was a while ago that the old woman was alive, and the old woman did sometimes see me, most definitely, and the old woman knew what I was." He paused for a moment, then resumed. "Way back before the turn of the last century, there were Voodooiennes about who always knew us. But we were quite safe because no one believed what they said."

"Of course," I responded.

"But you see, I never much believed in those women. When I encountered Merrick, well, I sensed something immensely powerful and alien to my understanding. Now, please, do go on. Tell me what happened tonight."

I recounted how I'd taken Merrick back to the Windsor Court Hotel, and how the spell had then descended upon me with numerous apparitions, the most unwholesome and frightening of which was most definitely that of the dead grandmother, Great Nananne.

"If you could have seen the two figures speaking to one another in the carriageway, if you could have seen their absorbed and somewhat secretive manner, and the casual fearless way in which they regarded me, it would have given you chills."

"No doubt of it," he said. "And you do mean you actually saw them, as though they were truly there. It wasn't simply an idea."

"No, my dear fellow, I saw them. They looked real. Of course they didn't look entirely like other people, you must understand. But they

were there!"

I went on to explain my return to the hotel, the altar, Papa Legba, and then my coming home, and, once again, I described the music of the harpsichord and the singing of the caged birds.

Louis grew visibly sad at this, but again, he did not interrupt.

"As I told you before," I said, "I recognized the music. It was Mozart's first sonata. And the playing was unrealistic and full of—."

"Tell me."

"But you must have heard it. It was haunting. I mean a long, long time ago you must have heard such music, when it was first played here, for hauntings only repeat what occurred once upon a time."

"It was full of anger," he said softly, as though the very word "anger" made him hush his tone.

"Yes, that was it, anger. It was Claudia playing, was it not?"

He didn't respond. He seemed stricken by his memories and considerations. Then finally he spoke.

"But you don't know that Claudia made you hear these sounds," he said. "It might have been Merrick and her spell."

"You're right on that score, but you see, we don't know that Merrick caused all the other things, either. The altar, the candle, even my blood upon the handkerchief—these things don't prove that Merrick sent the spirits after me. We have to think about the ghost of Great Nananne."

"You mean this ghost might have interfered with us, entirely on her own?"

I nodded. "What if this ghost wants to protect Merrick? What if this ghost does not want her granddaughter to conjure the soul of a vampire? How can we know?"

He seemed on the edge of total despair. He remained poised and somewhat collected, but his face was badly stricken, and then he seemed to pull himself together, and he looked to me to speak, as if no words could express what he felt.

"Louis, listen to me. I have only a tenuous understanding of what I'm about to say, but it's most important."

"Yes, what is it?" He seemed at once animated and humble, sitting upright in the chair, urging me to go on.

"We're creatures of this earth, you and I. We are vampires. But we're material. Indeed, we are richly entangled with Homo sapiens in that we

thrive on the blood of that species alone. Whatever spirit inhabits our bodies, governs our cells, enables us to live—whatever spirit that does all those things is mindless and might as well be nameless, insofar as we know. You do agree on these points.…"

"I do," he said, obviously eager for me to go on.

"What Merrick does is magic, Louis. It is from another realm."

He made no response.

"It's magic that we're asking her to do for us. Voodoo is magic, so is Candomble. So is the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass."

He was taken aback, but fascinated.

"God is magic," I continued, "and so are the saints. Angels are magic. And ghosts, if they be truly the apparitions of souls who once lived on earth, are magic as well."

He absorbed these words respectfully and remained silent.

"You understand," I continued, "I don't say that all these magical elements are equal. What I am saying is that what they have in common is that they are divorced from materiality, divorced from the earth, and from the flesh. Of course they interact with matter. They interact with the flesh. But they partake of the realm of pure spirituality where other laws—laws unlike our physical earthly laws—might exist."

"I see your meaning," he said. "You're warning me that this woman can do things that will baffle us as easily as they might baffle mortal men."

"Yes, that is my intent here, partly," I answered. "However, Merrick may do more than simply baffle us, you understand me. We must approach Merrick and what she will do with the utmost respect."

"I do understand you," he said. "But if human beings have souls that survive death, souls that can manifest as spirits to the living, then human beings have magical components as well."

"Yes, a magical component, and you and I still possess this magical component, along with some additional vampiric component, but when a soul truly leaves its physical body? Then it is in the realm of God."

"You believe in God," he murmured, quite amazed.

"Yes, I think so," I answered. "Indeed, I know so. What's the point of hiding it as if it were an unsophisticated or foolish frame of mind?"

"Then you do indeed have great respect for Merrick and her magic," he said. "And you believe that Great Nananne, as you call her, might be

a very powerful spirit indeed."

"Precisely," I said.

He settled back in the chair, and his eyes moved back and forth a little too rapidly. He was quite excited by all I'd told him, but his general disposition was one of profound sorrow, and nothing made him look happy or glad.

"Great Nananne might be dangerous, that's what you're saying," he murmured. "Great Nananne might want to protect Merrick from … you and me."

He looked rather splendid in his sorrow. Again he made me think of the paintings of Andrea del Sarto. There was something lush in his beauty, for all the sharp and clear well-drawn lines of his eyes and mouth.

"I don't expect my faith to make a particle of difference to you," I said. "But I want to emphasize these feelings, because this Voodoo, this matter of spirits, is indeed a dangerous thing."

He was perturbed but hardly frightened, perhaps not even cautious. I wanted to say more. I wanted to tell him of my experiences in Brazil, but it wasn't the time or place.

"But David, on the matter of ghosts," he said finally, again maintaining a respectful tone, "surely there are all kinds of ghosts."

"Yes, I think I know what you mean," I responded.

"Well, this Great Nananne, if indeed she appeared of her own volition, from where precisely did she come?"

"We can't expect to know that, Louis, about any ghost."

"Well surely some ghosts are manifestations of earthbound spirits, don't students of the occult maintain this truth?"

"They do."

"If these ghosts are the spirits of the dead who are earthbound, how can we say they are purely magical? Aren't they still within the atmosphere? Aren't they struggling to reach the living? Aren't they divorced from God? How else can one interpret Claudia's haunting of Jesse? If it was Claudia, then Claudia has not gone on into a purely spiritual realm. Claudia is not a partaker of the laws beyond us. Claudia is not at peace."

"Ah, I see," I answered. "So that is why you want to attempt the ritual." I felt foolish for not having seen it all along. "You believe that

Claudia's suffering."

"I think it's entirely possible," he said, "if Claudia did appear to Jesse as Jesse seemed to think." He looked miserable. "And frankly, I hope that we can't rouse Claudia's spirit. I hope that Merrick's power doesn't work. I hope that if Claudia had an immortal soul, that soul has gone to God. I hope for things in which I can't believe."

"So this is why the story of Claudia's ghost has so tormented you. You don't want to speak to her. You want to know that she's at peace."

"Yes, I want to do this thing because she may be a restless and tormented spirit. I can't know from the stories of others. I myself have never been haunted, David. As I've told you, I have never heard this harpsichord music, nor the singing of caged birds here. I have never witnessed anything to indicate that Claudia exists anywhere in any form any longer at all. I want to try to reach Claudia so that I will know."

This confession had cost him dearly, and he sat back again and looked away, perhaps into some private corner of his soul.

Finally, his eyes still fixed on some invisible spot in the shadows, he spoke:

"If only I had seen her, I could make some assessment, no matter how poor that assessment might be. I tell myself no vagrant spirit could ever fool me into believing it was Claudia, but I've never seen a vagrant spirit, either. I have never seen anything like it. I have only Jesse's story of what happened, which Jesse herself sought to soften on account of my feelings, and of course Lestat's ramblings, that he was sure Claudia came to him, that past experiences quite literally engulfed him when he was suffering his adventures with the Body Thief."

"Yes, I've heard him talk of it."

"But with Lestat, one never knows …" he said. "Lestat may have been characterizing his conscience in those stories. I don't know. What I do know is that I want desperately for Merrick Mayfair to try to raise Claudia's spirit, and I'm prepared for whatever might come."

"You think you're prepared," I said hastily, perhaps unfairly.

"Oh, I know. The spell tonight has shaken you."

"You can't imagine," I said.

"Very well, I admit it. I can't imagine. But tell me this. You speak of a realm beyond the earth and that Merrick is magical when she reaches for it. But why does it involve blood? Surely her spells will involve blood."

He went on, a little angrily. “Voodoo almost always involves blood,” he averred. “You speak of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass as magical, and I understand you, because if the Bread and Wine are transformed into the Holy Sacrifice of the Crucifixion, it is magical, but why does it involve blood? We are earthly beings, yes, but a small component of us is magical, and why does that component demand blood?”

He became quite heated as he finished, his eyes fixing on me severely almost, though I knew his emotions had little to do with me.

“What I’m saying is, we might compare rituals the world over in all religions and all systems of magic, forever, but they always involve blood. Why? Of course I know that human beings can not live without blood; I know that ‘the blood is the life,’ saith Dracula; I know that humankind speaks in cries and whispers of blood-drenched altars, of bloodshed and blood kin, and blood will have blood, and those of the finest blood. But why? What is the quintessential connection that binds all such wisdom or superstition? And above all, why does God want blood?”

I was taken aback. Surely I wasn’t going to hazard a hasty answer. And I didn’t have one, besides. His question went too deep. Blood was essential to Candomble. It was essential to real Voodoo as well.

He went on:

“I don’t speak of your God in particular,” he said kindly, “but the God of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass has demanded blood, and indeed the Crucifixion has come down to us as one of the most renowned blood sacrifices of all time. But what of all the other gods, the gods of old Rome for whom blood had to be shed in the arena as well as on the altar, or the gods of the Aztecs who were still demanding bloody murder as the price of running the universe when the Spanish arrived on their shores?”

“Maybe we’re asking the wrong question,” I said finally. “Maybe blood does not matter to the gods. Maybe blood matters to us. Maybe we’ve made it the vehicle of Divine transmission. Maybe that’s something which the world can move beyond.”

“Hmmm, it’s not a mere anachronism,” he said. “It’s a genuine mystery. Why should the natives of ancient South America have but one word in their language for both flowers and blood?”

He rose from the chair again, looking altogether restless, and went to

the window once more and looked out through the lace.

"I have my dreams," he said in a whisper. "I dream she will come, and she will tell me that she is at peace and she will show me the courage to do what I must do."

These words saddened and disturbed me.

"The Everlasting has not fixed his canon against *my* self-slaughter," he said, paraphrasing Shakespeare, "because all I need do to accomplish it is not seek shelter at the rising of the sun. I dream she may warn me of hellfires and of the need for repentance. But then, this is a little miracle play, isn't it? If she comes, she may be groping in darkness. She may be lost among the wandering dead souls whom Lestat saw when he traveled out of this world."

"Absolutely anything is possible," I answered.

A long interval occurred during which I went quietly up to him and laid my hand on his shoulder, to let him know in my way that I respected his pain. He didn't acknowledge this tiny intimacy. I made my way back to the sofa and I waited. I had no intention of leaving him with such thoughts in his mind.

At last he turned around.

"Wait here," he said quietly, and then he went out of the room and down the passage. I heard him open a door. Within a brief moment he was back again with what appeared to be a small antique photograph in his hand.

I was immensely excited. Could it be what I thought?

I recognized the small black gutter perche case into which it was fitted, so like the ones that framed the daguerreotypes belonging to Merrick. It appeared intricate and well preserved.

He opened the case and looked at the image, and then he spoke:

"You mentioned those family photographs of our dearly beloved witch," he said reverently. "You asked if they were not vehicles for guardian souls."

"Yes, I did. As I told you, I could have sworn those little pictures were looking at Aaron and at me."

"And you mentioned that you could not imagine what it had meant to us to see daguerreotypes—or whatever they might be called—for the first time so many years ago."

I was filled with a sort of amazement as I listened to him. He had been

there. He had been alive and a witness. He had moved from the world of painted portraits to that of photographic images. He had drifted through those decades and was alive now in our time.

"Think of mirrors," he said, "to which everyone is accustomed. Think of the reflection suddenly frozen forever. That is how it was. Except the color was gone from it, utterly gone, and there lay the horror, if there was one; but you see, no one thought it was so remarkable, not while it was happening, and then it was so common. We didn't really appreciate such a miracle. It went popular too very fast. And of course when it first started, when they first set up their studios, it was not for us."

"For us?"

"David, it had to be done in daylight, don't you see? The first photographs belonged to mortals alone."

"Of course, I didn't even think of it."

"She hated it," he said. He looked again at the image. "And one night, unbeknownst to me, she broke the lock of one of the new studios—and there were many of them—and she stole all the pictures she could find. She broke them, smashed them in a fury. She said it was ghastly that we couldn't have our pictures made. 'Yes, we see ourselves in mirrors, and old tales would have it not,' she screamed at me. 'But what about this mirror? Is this not some threat of judgment?' I told her absolutely it was not.

"I remember Lestat laughed at her. He said she was greedy and foolish and ought to be happy with what she had. She was past all tolerance of him, and didn't even answer him. That's when he had the miniature painted of her for his locket, the locket you found for him in a Talamasca vault."

"I see," I answered. "Lestat never told me such a story."

"Lestat forgets many things," he said thoughtfully and without judgment. "He had other portraits of her painted after that. There was a large one here, very beautiful. We took it with us to Europe. We took trunks of our belongings, but that time I don't want to remember. I don't want to remember how she tried to hurt Lestat."

I was silent out of respect.

"But the photographs, the daguerreotypes, that's what she wanted, the real image of herself on glass. She was furious, as I told you. But then years later, when we reached Paris, in those lovely nights before we ever

happened upon the Théâtre des Vampires and the monsters who would destroy her, she found that the magic pictures could be taken at night, with artificial light!"

He seemed to be reliving the experience painfully. I remained quiet.

"You can't imagine her excitement. She had seen an exhibit by the famous photographer Nadar of pictures from the Paris catacombs. Pictures of cartloads of human bones. Nadar was quite the man, as I'm sure you know. She was thrilled by the pictures. She went to his studio, by special appointment, in the evening, and there this picture was made."

He came towards me.

"It's a dim picture. It took an age for all the mirrors and the artificial lamps to do their work. And Claudia stood still for so long, well, only a vampire child might have worked such a trick. But she was very pleased with it. She kept it on her dressing table in the Hotel Saint-Gabriel, the last place that we ever called our home. We had such lovely rooms there. It was near to the Opera. I don't think she ever unpacked the painted portraits. It was this that mattered to her. I'd actually thought she would come to be happy in Paris. Maybe she would have been … But there wasn't time. This little picture, she felt it was only the beginning, and planned to return to Nadar with an even lovelier dress."

He looked at me.

I stood up to receive the picture, and he placed it in my hands most carefully, as though it were about to shatter of its own accord.

I was dumbfounded. How small and innocent she seemed, this irretrievable child of fair locks and chubby cheeks, of darkened Cupid's bow lips and white lace. Her eyes veritably blazed from the shadowy glass as I looked at her. And there came back that very suspicion of years ago, that I'd suffered so strongly with Merrick's pictures, that the image was gazing at me.

I must have made some small sound. I don't know. I shut the little case. I even worked the tiny gold clasp into the lock.

"Wasn't she beautiful?" he asked. "Tell me. It's past a matter of opinion, isn't it? She was beautiful. One cannot deny that simple fact."

I looked at him, and I wanted to say that she was, indeed she was, she was lovely, but no sound would come out of my mouth.

"We have this," he said, "for Merrick's magic. Not her blood, nor an

article of clothing, nor a lock of hair. But we have this. After her death, I went back to the hotel rooms where we'd been happy and I retrieved it, and all the rest I left."

He opened his coat and slipped the picture into his breast pocket. He looked a little shocked, his eyes purposefully blank, and then he gave a little shake of the head.

"Don't you think it will be powerful for the magic?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. There were so many comforting words tumbling through my mind, but all seemed poor and stiff.

We stood looking at one another, and I was surprised at the feeling in his expression. He seemed altogether human and passionate. I could scarce believe the despair with which he endured.

"I don't really want to see her, David," he said. "You must believe me on that score. I don't want to raise her ghost, and frankly, I don't think we can."

"I believe you, Louis," I said.

"But if she does come, and she is in torment …"

"Then Merrick will know how to guide her," I said quickly. "I'll know how to guide her. All mediums in the Talamasca know how to guide such spirits. All mediums know to urge such spirits to seek the light."

He nodded. "I was counting on it," he said. "But you see, I don't think Claudia would ever be lost, only wanting to remain. And then, it might take a powerful witch like Merrick to do the convincing that beyond this pale there lies an end to pain."

"Precisely," I said.

"Well, I've troubled you enough for one evening," he said. "I have to go out now. I know that Lestat is uptown in the old orphanage. He's listening to his music there. I want to make certain that no intruders have come in."

I knew this was fanciful. Lestat, regardless of his frame of mind, could defend himself against almost anything, but I tried to accept the words as a gentleman should.

"I'm thirsting," he added, glancing at me, with just the trace of a smile. "You're right on that account. I'm not really going to see to Lestat. I've already been to St. Elizabeth's. Lestat is alone with his music as he chooses to be. I'm thirsting very much. I'm going to feed. And I have to go about it alone."

“No,” I said softly. “Let me go with you. After Merrick’s spell, I don’t want you to go alone.”

This was most decidedly not Louis’s way of doing things; however, he agreed.

6

We went out together, walking quite rapidly until we were well away from the lighted blocks of the Rue Bourbon and the Rue Royale.

New Orleans soon opened up her underbelly to us, and we went deep into a ruined neighborhood, not unlike the neighborhood in which I'd long ago met Merrick's Great Nananne. But if there were any great witches about, I found no hint of them on this night.

Now, let me say here a few words about New Orleans and what it was to us.

First and foremost it is not a monstrous city like Los Angeles or New York. And even though it has a sizable underclass of dangerous individuals, it is, nevertheless, a small place.

It cannot really support the thirst of three vampires. And when great numbers of blood drinkers are drawn to it, the random blood lust creates an unwanted stir.

Such had recently happened, due to Lestat publishing his memoirs of Memnoch the Devil, during which time many of the very ancient came to New Orleans, as well as rogue vampires—creatures of powerful appetite and little regard for the species and the subterranean paths which it must follow to survive in the modern world.

During that time of coming together, I had managed to persuade Armand to dictate his life story to me; and I had circulated, with her permission, the pages which the vampire Pandora had given me sometime before.

These stories attracted even more of the maverick blood drinkers—those creatures who, being masterless and giving out lies as to their beginnings, often taunt their mortal prey and seek to bully them in a way that can only lead to trouble for all of us.

The uneasy convocation did not last long.

But though Marius, a child of two millennia, and his consort, the lovely Pandora, disapproved of the young blood drinkers, they would

not lift a hand against them to put them to death or to flight. It was not in their nature to respond to such a catastrophe, though they were outraged by the conduct of these baseborn fiends.

As for Lestat's mother, Gabrielle, one of the coldest and most fascinating individuals whom I have ever encountered, it was of absolutely no concern to her at all, as long as no one harmed her son.

Well, it was quite impossible for anyone to harm her son. He is unharmable, as far as we all know. Or rather, to speak more plainly, let me say that his own adventures have harmed Lestat far more than any vampire might. His trip to Heaven and Hell with Memnoch, be it delusion or supernatural journey, has left him stunned spiritually to such a point that he is not ready to resume his antics and become the Brat Prince whom we once adored.

However, with vicious and sordid blood drinkers breaking down the very doors of St. Elizabeth's and coming up the iron stairs of our very own town house in the Rue Royale, it was Armand who was able to rouse Lestat and goad him into taking the situation in hand.

Lestat, having already waked to listen to the piano music of a fledgling vampire, blamed himself for the tawdry invasion. It was he who had created the "Coven of the Articulate," as we had come to be called. And so, he declared to us in a hushed voice, with little or no enthusiasm for the battle, that he would put things right.

Armand—given in the past to leading covens, and to destroying them—assisted Lestat in a massacre of the unwelcome rogue vampires before the social fabric was fatally breached.

Having the gift of fire, as the others called it—that is, the means to kindle a blaze telekinetically—Lestat destroyed with flames the brash invaders of his own lair, and all those who had violated the privacy of the more retiring Marius and Pandora, Santino, and Louis and myself. Armand dismembered and obliterated those who died at his hand.

Those few preternatural beings who weren't killed fled the city, and indeed many were overtaken by Armand, who showed no mercy what soever to the misbegotten, the heartlessly careless, and the deliberately cruel.

After that, when it was plain to one and all that Lestat had returned to his semi-sleep, absorbed utterly in recordings of the finest music provided for him by me and by Louis, the elders—Marius, Pandora,

Santino, and Armand, with two younger companions—gradually went their way.

It was an inevitable thing, that parting, because none of us could really endure the company of so many fellow blood drinkers for very long.

As it is with God and Satan, humankind is our subject matter. And so it is that, deep within the mortal world and its many complexities, we choose to spend our time.

Of course, we will all come together at various times in the future. We know well how to reach one another. We are not above writing letters. Or other means of communication. The eldest know telepathically when things have gone terribly wrong with the young ones, and vice versa. But for now, only Louis and Lestat and I hunt the streets of New Orleans, and so it will be for some time.

That means, strictly speaking, that only Louis and I hunt, for Lestat simply does not feed at all. Having the body of a god, he has subsumed the lust which still plagues the most powerful, and lies in his torpor as the music plays on.

And so New Orleans, in all her drowsy beauty, is host to only two of the Undead. Nevertheless, we must be very clever. We must cover up the deeds that we do. To feed upon the evildoer, as Marius has always called it, is our vow; however, the blood thirst is a terrible thing.

But before I return to my tale—of how Louis and I went out on this particular evening, allow me a few more words about Lestat.

I personally do not think that things are as simple with him as the others tend to believe. Above, I have given you pretty much "the party line," as the expression goes, as to his coma-like slumber and his music. But there are very troubling aspects to his presence which I cannot deny or resolve.

Unable to read his mind, because he made me a vampire and I am therefore his fledgling and far too close to him for such communication, I, nevertheless, perceive certain things about him as he lies by the hour listening to the brilliant and stormy music of Beethoven, Brahms, Bach, Chopin, Verdi, and Tchaikovsky, and the other composers he loves.

I've confessed these "doubts" about his well-being to Marius and to Pandora and to Armand. But no one of them could penetrate the veil of preternatural silence which he has drawn about his entire being, body

and soul.

"He's weary," say the others. "He'll be himself soon." And "He'll come around."

I don't doubt these things. Not at all. But to put it plainly, something is more wrong with him than anyone has guessed. There are times when he is not *there* in his body.

Now this may mean that he is projecting his soul up and out of his body in order to roam about, in pure spirit form, at will. Certainly Lestat knows how to do this. He learnt it from the most ancient of the vampires; and he proved that he could do it, when with the evil Body Thief he worked a switch.

But Lestat does not like that power. And no one who has had his body stolen is likely to use it for more than a very short interval in any one night.

I feel something far more grave is wrong there, that Lestat is not always in control of either body or soul, and we must wait to discover the terms and outcome of a battle which might still be going on.

As for Lestat's appearance, he lies on the Chapel floor, or on the four-poster bed in the town house, with his eyes open, though they appear to see nothing. And for a while after the great cleansing battle, he did periodically change his clothes, favoring the red velvet jackets of old, and his lace-trimmed shirts of heavy linen, along with slim pants and plain black boots.

Others have seen this attention to wardrobe as a good sign. I believe Lestat did these things so that we would leave him alone.

Alas, I have no more to say on the subject in this narrative. At least I don't think so. I can't protect Lestat from what is happening, and no one really has ever succeeded in protecting him or stopping him, no matter what the circumstances of his distress.

Now, let me return to my record of events.

Louis and I had made our way deep into a forlorn and dreadful part of the city where many houses stood abandoned, and those few which still showed evidence of habitation were locked up tight with iron bars upon their windows and doors.

As always happens with any neighborhood in New Orleans, we came within a few blocks to a market street, and there we found many desolate shops which had long ago been shut up with nails and boards.

Only a “pleasure club,” as it was called, showed signs of habitation and those inside were drunk and gambling the night away at card games and dice.

However, as we continued on our journey, I following Louis, as this was Louis’s hunt, we soon came to a small dwelling nestled between the old storefronts, the ruins of a simple shotgun house, whose front steps were lost in the high weeds.

There were mortals inside, I sensed it immediately, and they were of varying dispositions.

The first mind which made itself known to me was that of an aged woman, keeping watch over a cheap little bassinet with a baby inside of it, a woman who was actively praying that God deliver her from her circumstances, those circumstances pertaining to two young people in a front room of the house who were entirely given over to drink and drugs.

In a quiet and efficient manner, Louis led the way back to the overgrown alley to the rear of this crooked little shack, and without a sound he peered through the small window, above a humming air conditioner, at the distraught woman, who wiped the face of the infant, who did not cry.

Again and again I heard this woman murmur aloud that she didn’t know what she would do with those young people in the front room, that they had destroyed her house and home and left her this miserable little infant who would starve to death or die of other neglect if the young mother, drunk and dissolute, was forced to care for the child alone.

Louis seemed an angel of death come to this window.

On closer inspection over Louis’s shoulder, I gained a better perspective on the old one, and discovered that she was not only caring for the infant, but ironing clothes on a low board which allowed her to sit as she did it, and reach again and again to comfort the baby in its wicker crib.

The smell of the freshly ironed clothes was somewhat delicious, a burnt smell but a good one, of heat against cotton and linen.

And I saw now that the room was full of these garments, and conjectured that this woman did this work for hire.

“God help me,” she muttered in a little singsong voice, shaking her

head as she ironed, “I wish you would take that girl from me, take herand her friends. God help me, I wish you would deliver me from this Valley, O Lord, where I have been for so long.”

The room itself had comfortable furnishings and touches of domestic care, such as lace doilies on the backs of its chairs and a clean linoleum floor which shone as though it had been recently waxed.

The woman herself was heavy of build and wore her hair in a knot on the back of her head.

As Louis passed on to view the back rooms of the house, the old woman was quite unaware of it, and her singsong prayers for deliverance went on.

The kitchen, also immaculate, revealed the same shining linoleum and all its dishes washed and set out to drain beside the sink.

The front rooms of the house were another story. Here the young people reigned in positive squalor, one stretched out on a bed without a sheet to cover its dirty mattress, and the other pitiful creature, alone, in the living room, so full of narcotics as to be in a swoon.

Both these hopeless beings were women, though one could not tell this at first glance. On the contrary, their brutally clipped hair, their emaciated bodies, and their denim-clad limbs gave them a desolate sexless appearance. And the piles of clothing strewn everywhere about them gave no clue of a predilection for either feminine or masculine attire.

I found this spectacle unendurable.

Of course, Marius had cautioned us in no uncertain terms before he departed New Orleans that if we did not hunt the evildoer almost exclusively, we would very soon go mad. To feed upon the innocent is sublime, but leads inevitably to such a love of human life that the vampire who does it cannot endure for very long.

I am not sure I agree with Marius on this score, and I do think that other blood drinkers have survived very well by feeding on the innocent. But the idea of hunting the evildoer is one which I personally embraced for my own peace of mind. The intimacy with evil is something which I must bear.

Louis made his way into the house by means of a side door, one which is quite typical in shotgun houses of this kind which have no hallway but merely a chain of rooms.

I remained in the fresher air of the weedy garden, glancing at the stars now and then for comfort, and overcome suddenly by the unwelcome reek of vomit and feces which came from the house's small bathroom, another miracle of order and cleanliness except for the recent filth deposited on the floor.

Indeed, the two young women were in need of immediate intervention, it seemed, were they to be saved from themselves, but Louis had not come to provide such, but as a vampire, so hungry that even I could feel it, and he made his way into the bedroom first, and seated himself beside the wraith of a being on the stripped mattress, and very quickly, ignoring her giggles at the sight of him, embraced her with his right arm, and sank his teeth for the fatal drink.

On and on, the old woman prayed in the back room.

I had thought Louis would be finished with the place, but no such luck.

As soon as the scrawny body of the woman had been allowed to fall to one side and against the mattress, he rose and stood for a moment in the light of the room's few scattered lamps.

He looked splendid with the light glinting on his black curly hair and flaring in his dark-green eyes. The blood inside him had colored his face naturally and brilliantly. In the buff-colored velvet coat with its gold buttons, he appeared an apparition among the soiled tints and roughened textures of the place.

It took my breath away to see him focus his eyes slowly and then walk into the front room.

The remaining woman gave a whooping cry of dazed merriment when she saw him, and for a long moment he stood merely regarding her as she slumped in an overstuffed chair, with her legs wide apart and her naked arms, covered in sores, dangling at her sides.

It seemed he was quite undecided as to what to do. But then I saw his seemingly thoughtful face grow blank with hunger. I watched him approach, losing all the grace of a contemplative human, appearing to be driven only by hunger, and lift up this ghastly young creature, and close his lips against her neck. No glimpse of teeth, no moment of cruelty. Merely the final kiss.

There followed the swoon, which I could more fully appreciate while peering through the front window. It lasted only a few moments; then

the woman was dead. He laid her down again on her soiled chair, positioning her limbs with some care. I watched as he used his blood to seal up the puncture wounds in her throat. No doubt he had done the same for the victim in the other room.

I felt a wave of sorrow come over me. Life seemed simply unendurable. I had the feeling I would never know safety or happiness again. I had no right to either. But for what it was worth, Louis was feeling what the blood could give a monster, and he had chosen his victims well.

He stepped out of the front door of the house, which was unlatched and unattended in any way, and came round to meet me in the side yard. The transformation of his face was now complete. He appeared the handsomest of men, his eyes utterly unclouded and almost fierce, and his cheeks beautifully flushed.

It would all seem routine to the authorities, the deaths of these two unfortunates, that they had died by the drugs they were ingesting. As for the old woman in the back room, she continued with her prayers, though she was making them now into a song for the baby, who had begun to utter small cries.

"Leave her something for the funerals," I said in a hushed voice to Louis. This seemed to confuse him.

I quickly went around to the front door, slipped inside, and left a substantial offering of money on the top of a broken table which was littered with overflowing ashtrays and glasses half filled with stale wine. I put some more money atop an old bureau as well.

Louis and I made our way home. The night was warm and damp, yet felt clean and lovely, and the smell of ligustrum filled my lungs.

We were soon walking back towards the lighted streets we loved.

His step was brisk and his manner entirely human. He stopped to pick the flowers that grew over the fences or out of the little gardens. He sang to himself something soft and unobtrusive. Now and then he looked up at the stars.

All of this was pleasant to me, though I wondered how in the name of Heaven I would have the courage to feed upon the evildoer only, or to answer a prayer as Louis had just done. I saw the fallacy in all of it. Another wave of desolation passed over me, and I felt a terrible need to explain my various points of view, but this did not seem the time.

It struck me very heavily that I had lived to an old age as a mortal man, and so had ties with the human race that many another blood drinker simply did not possess. Louis had been twenty-four when he had struck his bargain with Lestat for the Dark Blood. How much can a man learn in that time, and how much can he later forget?

I might have continued to think in this vein and indeed to start some conversation with Louis, however I was once again bothered by something outside of myself, and that is that a black cat, a very huge black cat, shot out of the shrubbery ahead of us and stopped in our path.

I stopped in my tracks. So did Louis, only because I had.

A passing car then sent its beams into the eyes of the cat, and for a moment they were purely golden; then the animal, truly one of the largest domestic cats I've ever beheld, and a most unwholesome specimen, shot away into the shadows as swiftly as it had come.

"Surely you don't take that as a bad omen," said Louis, smiling at me, almost teasing me. "David, you're not superstitious, as mortals would say."

I loved the bit of levity in his voice. I loved seeing him so full of the warm blood that he might have been human. But I couldn't respond to the words.

I didn't like the cat at all. I was furious at Merrick. I could have blamed the rain on Merrick had it started to pour. I felt challenged by Merrick. I was working myself up to a little fit of pique. I didn't say a word.

"When will you let me meet Merrick?" he asked.

"First her story," I said, "or that part of it which I know. Tomorrow, feed early, and when I come to the flat I'll tell you the things you need to know."

"And then we speak of a meeting?"

"Then you can make up your mind."

7

The following night, I rose to find the sky uncommonly clear and full of visible stars. A good omen to all those in a state of grace. This is not the normal thing for New Orleans, as the air is very filled with moisture, and frequently the sky has a veiled appearance and little spectacle of cloud and light.

Having no need to feed, I went directly to the Windsor Court Hotel, once again entering its very lovely modern lobby, a space which has all the usual elegance of an older establishment, and went up to Merrick's suite.

She had only just left, I was informed, and a maid was engaged in preparing the rooms for a next guest.

Ah, she had stayed longer than I had expected, but not as long as I'd hoped. However, imagining her to be safely on her way back to Oak Haven, I checked with the desk to see if she had left any message for me. She had.

I waited until I was alone outside to read the short note:

"Have gone to London to retrieve from the vault those few items which we know are connected with the child."

So things had progressed so far!

Of course, she was referring to a rosary and a diary which our field-worker Jesse Reeves had found in the flat in the Rue Royale over ten years before. And if memory served me correctly, there were a few other things which had been collected a century earlier from an abandoned hotel room in Paris where rumor had led us to believe that vampires had lodged.

I was alarmed.

But what had I expected? That Merrick would resist my request? Nevertheless, I'd never anticipated that she would act so quickly. Of course I knew that she could obtain the items in question. She was quite powerful within the Talamasca. She had unlimited access to the vaults.

It occurred to me to try to call her at Oak Haven, to tell her that we must discuss the matter a little further. But I couldn't risk it.

The members of the Talamasca there were only a small number, but each was gifted psychically and in a different way. The phone can be a powerful connecter between souls, and I simply could not have someone there sensing something "strange" about the voice on the other end of the line.

There I left the matter, and I set out for our flat in the Rue Royale.

As I entered the carriageway, something soft moved past my leg. I stopped and searched the darkness until I made out the shape of another giant black cat. Surely it had to be another. I couldn't imagine the creature I had seen the night before having followed us home with no incentive of food or milk.

The cat vanished in the rear courtyard garden and was gone when I reached the back iron stairs. But I didn't like this. I didn't like this cat. No, not at all. I took my time in the garden. I walked about the fountain, which had recently been cleaned and stocked with large goldfish, and I spent more than a few moments gazing at the faces of the stone cherubs, with their conches held high, now quite overrun with lichen, and then looking about at the overgrown flower patches along the brick walls.

The yard was kept, yet out of hand, its flagstones swept, but its plants gone wild. Lestat probably wanted it that way, insofar as he cared. And Louis loved it.

Suddenly, when I had just about resolved to go upstairs, I saw the cat again, a huge black monster of a thing in my book, but then I don't like cats, creeping on the high wall.

A multitude of thoughts crowded my mind. I felt an ever increasing excitement about this project with Merrick and a certain foreboding which seemed a necessary price. It frightened me suddenly that she had left so abruptly for London, that I had worked such a distraction upon her that she had abandoned whatever projects in which she might have been engaged.

Should I tell Louis what she had set out to do? It would certainly bring about a finality to our plans.

Entering the flat, I turned on all the electric lights in every room, a detail which was our custom by this time, and one upon which I depended heavily for some sense of normality, no matter that it was a

mere illusion, but then, perhaps normality is always an illusion. Who am I to say?

Louis arrived almost immediately after, coming up the rear stairs with his usual silken step. It was the heartbeat I heard in my alert state, not the footfall at all.

Louis found me in the rear parlor, the one more distant from the noises of the tourists in the Rue Royale, and with its windows open to the courtyard below. I was in fact looking out the window, looking for the cat again, though I didn't tell myself so, and observing how our bougainvillea had all but covered the high walls that enclosed us and kept us safe from the rest of the world. The wisteria was also fierce in its growth, even reaching out from the brick walls to the railing of the rear balcony and finding its way up to the roof.

I could never quite take for granted the lush flowers of New Orleans.

Indeed, they filled me with happiness whenever I stopped to really look at them and to surrender to their fragrance, as though I still had the right to do so, as though I still were part of nature, as though I were still a mortal man.

Louis was carefully and thoughtfully dressed, as he had been the night before. He wore a black linen suit of exquisite cut around the waist and the hips, an unusual thing with linen, and another pristine white shirt and dark silk tie. His hair was the usual mass of waves and curls, and his green eyes were uncommonly bright.

He had fed already this evening, it was plain. And his pale skin was once more suffused with the carnal color of blood.

I wondered at all this seductive attention to detail, but I liked it. It seemed to betoken some sort of inner peace, this fastidious dressing, or at least the cessation of inner despair.

"Sit down there on the couch, if you will," I said.

I took the chair which had been his last night.

The little parlor surrounded us with its antique glass lamps, the vivid red of its Kirman carpet, and the glinting polish of its floor. I was vaguely aware of its fine French paintings. It seemed the smallest details were a solace.

It struck me that this was the very room in which Claudia had tried to murder Lestat well over a century ago. But Lestat himself had recently reclaimed this space, and for several years we were wont to gather here,

and so it did not seem to matter so very much.

Quite suddenly I realized that I had to tell Louis that Merrick had gone to England. I had to tell him that which made me most uncomfortable, that the Talamasca, in the 1800s, had gathered his possessions from the Hotel Saint-Gabriel in Paris, which he himself had abandoned, as he'd described last night.

"You knew of our presence in Paris?" he asked. I saw the blood flash in his cheeks.

I reflected for a long moment before answering.

"We didn't really know," I said. "Oh, we knew of the Théâtre des Vampires, yes, and we knew that the players weren't human. As for you and Claudia, it was more or less the supposition of a lone investigator that you were connected. And when you abandoned everything in your hotel, when you were seen leaving Paris one evening in the company of another vampire, we moved in cautiously to purchase all that you'd left behind."

He accepted this quietly. Then he spoke up.

"Why did you never try to harm or expose the vampires of the theater?" he asked.

"We would have been laughed at if we'd tried to expose them," I said. "Besides, that is simply not what we do. Louis, we've never really talked of the Talamasca. For me, it's like speaking of a country to which I've become a traitor. But surely you must understand, the Talamasca watches, truly watches, and counts its own survival over the centuries as its primary goal."

There was a brief pause. His face was composed and appeared only a little sad.

"So Claudia's clothing, well, Merrick will have it when she returns."

"Insofar as we took ownership of it, yes. I myself am not certain what's in the vault." I stopped. I had once brought Lestat a present from the vault. But I'd been a man then. I could not conceive of trying to rob the Talamasca of anything just now.

"I've often wondered about those archives," Louis said. Then again in the most tender voice: "I've never wanted to ask. It's Claudia I want to see, not those things which we left behind."

"I understand your meaning."

"But it counts for magic, doesn't it?" he asked.

“Yes. You’ll understand that better perhaps when I tell you about Merrick.”

“What do you want me to know about Merrick?” he asked earnestly. “I’m eager to hear it. You told me last night about your first meeting. You told me how she’d showed you the daguerreotypes—.”

“Yes, that was the very first encounter. But there is much, much more. Remember what I said last night. Merrick is a magician of sorts, a witch, a veritable Medea, and we can be as overwhelmed by magic as any earthly creature can.”

“My desires are singular and pure,” Louis said. “I only want to see Claudia’s ghost.”

I couldn’t help but smile. I think I wounded him. I was immediately sorry.

“Surely you must recognize some danger is opening the way to the supernatural,” I insisted. “But let me tell you what I know of Merrick, what I feel I can tell.”

I began to recount to him my recollections in order.

Only a few days after Merrick had come to Oak Haven, some twenty years ago, Aaron and I had set out with Merrick to drive to New Orleans and to visit Merrick’s Great Nananne.

My memories were vivid.

The last cool days of spring had passed and we were plunged into a hot and damp weather, which, loving the tropics as I did, and do, had been very pleasing to me. I had no regrets about having left London at all.

Merrick still had not revealed to us the day of Great Nananne’s death as it had been confided to her by the old woman. And Aaron, though he’d been the personage in the dream who gave the fatal date to Great Nananne, had no knowledge whatever of this dream.

Though Aaron had prepared me for the old section of New Orleans to which we were going, I had nevertheless been astonished to see the neighborhood of tumbledown houses of all different sizes and styles, steeped in its overgrown oleander, which bloomed profusely in the moist heat, and most surprised of all to come upon the old raised cottage of a house which belonged to Great Nananne.

The day, as I’ve said, was close and warm, with violent and sudden showers of rain, and though I have been a vampire now for five years, I

can vividly remember the sunshine coming through the rain to strike the narrow broken pavements, and everywhere the weeds rising out of gutters which were in fact no more than open ditches, and the snarls of oak and rain tree, and cottonwood, which sprang up all around us as we made our way to the residence which Merrick was now to leave behind.

At last we came to a high iron picket fence, and a house much larger than those around it, and of much earlier date.

It was one of those Louisiana houses which stands upon brick foundation post pillars of about five feet in height, with a central wooden stair rising to its front porch. A row of simple square pillars held up its Greek Revival porch roof, and the central door was not unlike the grander doors of Oak Haven in that it had a small fanlight intact above.

Long windows went from floor to ceiling on the front of the house, but these were all pasted over with newspaper, which made the house look derelict and uninhabited. The yew trees, stretching their scrawny limbs to Heaven on either side of the front porch, added a note of grimness, and the front hall into which we entered was empty and shadowy, though it went clear through to an open door at the back. There were no stairs to the attic, and an attic there must have been, I conjectured, for the main body of the house had a deeply pitched roof. Beyond that rear open door all was tangled and green.

The house was three rooms in depth from front to back, giving it six rooms in all on the main floor, and in the first of these, to the left of the hallway, we found Great Nananne, under a layer of hand-sewn quilts in an old plantation four-poster, without a canopy, of simple mahogany design. I say plantation bed when I refer to this species of furniture because the pieces are so huge, and so often crammed into small city rooms that one immediately envisions more space in the country for which this kind of furnishing must have been designed. Also, the mahogany posts, though artfully tapered, were otherwise plain.

As I looked at the little woman, dried-up upon the heavily stained pillow, her frame completely invisible beneath the worn quilts, I thought for a moment she was dead.

In fact, I could have sworn by all I knew of spirits and humans that the dried little body in the bed was empty of its soul. Maybe she'd been dreaming of death and wanted it so badly she'd left her mortal coil for but a few moments.

But when little Merrick stood in the doorway, Great Nananne came back, opening her small crinkled and yellow eyes. Her ancient skin had a beautiful gold color to it, faded though she must have been. Her nose was small and flat, and her mouth fixed in a smile. Her hair was wisps of gray.

Electric lamps, quite shabby and makeshift, were the only illumination save for a wealth of candles on an immense nearby shrine. I could not quite make out the shrine, as it seemed shrouded in dimness, being against the papered shut windows of the front of the house. And the people drew my attention at first.

Aaron brought up an old cane-backed chair, to sit beside the woman in the bed.

The bed reeked of sickness and urine.

I saw that newspapers and large brilliantly colored Holy Pictures papered all of the decaying walls. Not a bit of plaster was left bare save for the ceiling, which was full of cracks and chipped paint and seemed a threat to us all. Only the side windows had their curtains, but much glass was broken out and here and there newspaper patches had been applied. Beyond loomed the eternal foliage.

"We'll bring nurses for you, Great Nananne," said Aaron, in a kindly and sincere voice. "Forgive me that it took me so long to come." He leant forward. "You must trust in me implicitly. We'll send for the nurses as soon as we leave you this afternoon."

"Come?" asked the old woman sunk down into the feather pillow. "Did I ever ask you—either of you—to come?" She had no French accent. Her voice was shockingly ageless, low in pitch and strong. "Merrick, sit by me here for a little while, *chérie,*" she said. "Be still, Mr. Lightner. Nobody asked you to come."

Her arm rose and fell like a branch on the breeze, so lifeless in shape and color, fingers curled as they scratched at Merrick's dress.

"See what Mr. Lightner bought for me, Great Nananne?" said Merrick beside her, gesturing with open arms as she looked down on her new clothes.

I had not noticed before that she was in Sunday Best, with a dress of white pique and black patent leather shoes. The little white socks looked incongruous on such a developed young woman, but then Aaron saw her completely as an innocent child.

Merrick leant over and kissed the old woman's small head. "Don't you be afraid of anything on my account any longer," she said. "I'm home now with them, Great Nananne."

At that point, a priest came into the room, a tall sagging man as old as Nananne was, it seemed to me, slow moving and scrawny in his long black cassock, the thick leather belt drooping over shrunken bones, rosary beads knocking softly against his thigh.

He seemed blind to our presence, only nodding at the old woman, and he slipped away without a word. As to what his feelings might have been about the shrine to the left of us, against the front wall of the house, I couldn't guess.

I felt an instinctive wariness, and an apprehension that he might try to prevent us—with good reason—from taking the child Merrick away.

One never knew which priest might have heard of the Talamasca, which priest might have feared it or despised it, under the guidance of Rome. To those within the hierarchy of the Church, we were alien and mysterious. We were maverick and controversial. Claiming to be secular, yet ancient, we could never hope for the cooperation or the understanding of the Church of Rome.

It was after this man disappeared, and as Aaron continued his polite and subdued conversation with the old woman, that I had a chance to view the shrine in full.

It was built up of bricks, from the floor, in stair steps to a high wide altar where perhaps special offerings were placed. Huge plaster saints crowded the top of it in long rows to the left and right.

At once I saw St. Peter, the Papa Legba of Haitian Voodoo, and a saint on a horse who appeared to be St. Barbara, standing in for Chango of Xango in Candomble, for whom we had always used St. George. The Virgin Mary was there in the form of Our Lady of Carmel, standing in for Ezilie, a goddess of Voodoo, with heaps of flowers at her feet and perhaps the most candles before her, all of them aflicker in their deep glasses as a breeze stirred the room.

There stood St. Martin de Porres, the black saint of South America, with his broom in hand, and beside him, St. Patrick stood gazing down, his feet surrounded by fleeing snakes. All had their place in the underground religions which the slaves of the Americas had nourished for so long.

There were all kinds of obscure little mementos on the altar before these statues, and the steps below were covered with various objects, along with plates of birdseed, grain, and old cooked food which had begun to rot and to smell.

The more I studied the entire spectacle, the more I saw things, such as the awesome figure of the Black Madonna with the white Infant Jesus in her arms. There were many little sacks tied shut and kept there, and several expensive-looking cigars still in their wrapping, perhaps held for some future offering, I couldn't know for sure. At one end of the altar stood several bottles of rum.

It was certainly one of the largest such altars I'd ever seen, and it did not surprise me that the ants had overrun some of the old food. It was a frightening and disturbing sight, infinitely more than Merrick's recent little makeshift offering in the hotel. Even my Candomble experiences in Brazil did not make me immune to the solemn and savage spectacle of it. On the contrary, I think these experiences in every regard make me more afraid.

Perhaps without realizing I was doing it, I came deeper into the room, close to the altar, so that the woman and her sickbed were out of my sight, behind my back.

Suddenly the voice of the woman in the bed startled me out of my studies.

I turned to see that she had sat up, which seemed almost impossible due to her frailty, and that Merrick had adjusted her pillows so that she might rest in this position as she spoke.

"Candomble priest," she said to me, "sacred to Oxalá." There it was, the very mention of my god.

I was too astonished to respond.

"I didn't see you in my dream, English man," she went on. "You've been in the jungles, you've hunted treasure."

"Treasure, Madam?" I responded, thinking only as quickly as I spoke. "Indeed not treasure in the conventional sense. No, never that at all."

"I follow my dreams," said the old woman, her eyes fixed on me in a manner that suggested menace, "and so I give you this child. But beware of her blood. She comes down from many magicians far stronger than you."

Once again I was amazed. I stood opposite her. Aaron had forsaken his

chair to get out of the way.

"Call up The Lonely Spirit, have you?" she asked me. "Did you frighten yourself in the jungles of Brazil?"

It was quite impossible that this woman could have had this intelligence of me. Not even Aaron knew all of my story. I had always passed over my Candomble experiences as though they were slight.

As for "The Lonely Spirit," of course I knew her meaning. When one calls The Lonely Spirit, one is calling some tortured soul, a soul in Purgatory, or earthbound in misery, to ask that soul for its help in reaching gods or spirits who are further on. It was an old legend. It was as old as magic under other names and in other lands.

"Oh, yes, you are some scholar," said the old woman, smiling at me so that I could see her perfect false teeth, yellow as she was, her eyes seemingly more animate than before. "What is the state of your own soul?"

"We are not here to deal with such a matter," I fired back, quite shaken. "You know I want to protect your godchild. Surely you see that in my heart."

"Yes, Candomble priest," she said again, "and you saw your ancestors when you looked into the chalice, didn't you?" She smiled at me. The low pitch of her voice was ominous. "And they told you to go home to England or you would lose your English soul."

All this was true and untrue. Suddenly I blurted out as much.

"You know something but not everything," I declared. "One has to have a noble use for magic. Have you taught Merrick as much?" There was anger in my voice, which this old woman did not deserve. Was I jealous of her power suddenly? I couldn't control my tongue. "How has your magic brought you to this disaster!" I said, gesturing to the room about me. "Is this the place for a beautiful child?"

At once Aaron begged me to be silent.

Even the priest came forward and peered into my eyes. As if minding a child, he shook his head, frowning most sadly, and wagged his finger in my eye.

The old woman laughed a short dry little laugh.

"You find her beautiful, don't you English man," she said. "You English like children."

"Nothing could be further from the truth with me!" I declared,

offended by her suggestion. “You don’t believe what you’re saying. You speak to dazzle others. You sent this girl unaccompanied to Aaron.” At once I regretted it. The priest would certainly come to object when it was time to take Merrick away.

But I saw now he was too shocked by my audacity to protest it further.

Poor Aaron was mortified. I was behaving like a beast.

I had lost all my self-possession and was angry with an old woman who was dying before my eyes.

But when I looked at Merrick I saw nothing but a rather clever amusement in her expression, possibly even a little pride or triumph, and then she locked eyes with the old woman and there was some silent message exchanged there for which all assembled would have to wait.

“You’ll take care of my godchild, I know it,” said the old woman. Her wrinkled lids came down over her eyes. I saw her chest heave beneath the white flannel nightgown, and her hand trembled loosely on the quilt. “You won’t be afraid of what she can do.”

“No, never will I be afraid,” I said reverently, eager to make the peace. I drew closer to the bed. “She’s safe from everyone with us, Madam,” I said. “Why do you try to frighten me?”

It didn’t seem she could open her eyes. Finally she did and once again she looked directly at me.

“I’m in peace here, David Talbot,” she said. I could not recall anyone having given her my name. “I’m as I want to be, and as for this child, she was always happy here. There are many rooms to this house.”

“I’m sorry for what I said to you,” I answered quickly. “I had no right.” I meant it from my heart.

She gave a rattling sigh as she looked at the ceiling.

“I’m in pain now,” she said. “I want to die. I’m in pain all the time. You’d think I could stop it, that I had charms that could stop it. I have charms for others, but for me, who can work the magic? Besides, the time has come, and it’s come in its own fashion. I’ve lived a hundred years.”

“I don’t doubt you,” I said, violently disturbed by her mention of her pain and her obvious veracity. “Please be assured you can leave Merrick with me.”

“We’ll bring you nurses,” said Aaron. It was Aaron’s way to pursue the practical, to deal with what could be done. “We’ll see to it that a

doctor comes this very afternoon. You mustn't be in pain, it isn't necessary. Let me go now to make the proper calls. I won't be long."

"No, no strangers in my house," she said as she looked at him and then up at me. "Take my godchild, both of you. Take her and take all that I have in this house. Tell them, Merrick, everything that I told you. Tell them all your uncles taught, and your aunts, and your great-grandmothers. This one, this tall one with the dark hair—," she looked at me, "—he knows about the treasures you have from Cold Sandra, you trust in him. Tell him about Honey in the Sunshine. Sometimes I feel bad spirits around you, Merrick…." She looked at me. "You keep the bad spirits from her, English man. You know the magic. I see now the meaning of my dream."

"Honey in the Sunshine, what does it mean?" I asked her.

She shut her eyes bitterly and tightened her lips. It was extraordinarily expressive of pain. Merrick appeared to shudder, and for the first time to be about to cry.

"Don't you worry, Merrick," said the old woman finally. She pointed with her finger, but then dropped her hand again as if she was too weak to go on.

I tried suddenly with all of my might and main to penetrate the old woman's thoughts. But nothing came of it, except perhaps that I startled her when she should have been in peace.

Quickly I tried to make up for my little blunder.

"Have faith in us, Madam," I said again adamantly. "You sent Merrick on the right path."

The old woman shook her head.

"You think magic is simple," the old woman whispered. Once more our eyes met. "You think it's something you can leave behind when you cross an ocean. You think *les mystères* aren't real."

"No, I don't."

Once again she laughed, a low and mocking laugh.

"You never saw their full power, English man," she said. "You made things shake and shiver, but that was all. You were a stranger in a strange land with your Candomble. You forgot Oxalá, but he never forgot you."

I was fast losing all composure.

She closed her eyes and her fingers curled around Merrick's small-

boned wrist. I heard the rattle of the priest's rosary, and then came the fragrance of fresh-brewed coffee mingled with the sweetness of newly falling rain.

It was an overwhelming and soothing moment—the close moist air of the New Orleans springtime, the sweetness of the rain coming down all around us, and the soft murmur of thunder far off to the right. I could smell the candle wax and the flowers of the shrine, and then again there came the human scents of the bed. It seemed a perfect harmony suddenly, even those fragrances which we condemn as sour and bad.

The old woman had indeed come to her final hour and it was only natural, this bouquet of fragrances. We must penetrate it and see her and love her. That was what had to be done.

"Ah, you hear it, that thunder?" asked Great Nananne. Once again her little eyes flashed to me. She said, "I'm going home."

Now, Merrick was truly frightened. Her eyes were wild and I could see her hand shaking. In fact, as she searched the old woman's face she appeared terrified.

The old woman's eyes rolled and she appeared to arch her back against the pillow, but the quilts seemed far too heavy for her to gain the space she craved.

What were we to do? A person can take an age to die, or die in one second. I was afraid too.

The priest came in and moved ahead of us so that he could look down at her face. His hand was easily as withered as her own.

"Talamasca," the old woman whispered. "Talamasca, take my child. Talamasca, keep my child."

I thought I myself would give way to tears. I had been at many a deathbed. It is never easy but there is something crazily exciting about it, some way in which the total fear of death kindles excitement, as if a battle were beginning, when indeed, it is coming to an end.

"Talamasca," she said again.

Surely, the priest heard her. But the priest paid no attention at all. His mind was not difficult to penetrate. He was only here to give the rites to a woman he knew and respected. The shrine was no shock to him.

"God's waiting on you, Great Nananne," said the priest softly, in a strong local accent, rather rural sounding. "God's waiting and maybe Honey in the Sunshine and Cold Sandra are there too."

"Cold Sandra," said the old woman with a long sigh and then an unintentional hiss. "Cold Sandra," she repeated as though praying, "Honey in the Sunshine … in God's hands."

This was violently disturbing to Merrick. It was plain from her face. Merrick began to cry. This girl, who had seemed so strong throughout, now appeared quite fragile, as if her heart would be crushed.

The old woman wasn't finished.

"Don't you spend your time looking for Cold Sandra," she said, "or Honey in the Sunshine, either." She gripped Merrick's wrist all the harder. "You leave those two to me. That's a woman who left her baby for a man, Cold Sandra. Don't you cry for Cold Sandra. You keep your candles burning for the others. You cry for me."

Merrick was distraught. She was crying without a sound. She bent down and laid her head on the pillow beside that of the old woman, and the old woman wrapped her withered arm around the child's shoulders, which appeared to droop.

"That's my baby," she said, "my baby girl. Don't you cry over Cold Sandra. Cold Sandra took Honey in the Sunshine with her on the road to Hell."

The priest moved away from the bed. He had begun to pray in a soft voice, the Hail Mary in English, and when he came to the words "Pray for us sinners, *now and at the hour of our death,"* he timidly and gently raised his voice.

"I'll tell you if I find those two," said Great Nananne in a murmur. "St. Peter, let me through the gates. St. Peter, let me through."

I knew she was calling on Papa Legba. Possibly they were one and the same for her, Papa Legba and St. Peter. The priest probably knew all about it too.

The priest drew near again. Aaron stood back out of respect. Merrick remained with her head down on the pillow, her face buried in it, her right hand against the old woman's cheek.

The priest raised his hands to give the blessing in Latin, *In Nomine Patris, et filie, et spiritu sanctum, Amen.*

I felt I should leave, out of decency, but Aaron gave me no signal. What right had I to remain?

I looked again at the gruesome altar, and at the huge statue of St. Peter with his Heavenly keys, very like the one I was to see years later—

only a night ago—in Merrick's hotel suite.

I stepped back and into the hallway. I looked out the back door, though why, I was uncertain, perhaps to see the foliage darkening as the rain fell. My heart was pounding. The big noisy wet drops came in the back door and in the front, and left their mark on the soiled old wooden floor.

I heard Merrick crying aloud. Time stood still, as it can on a warm afternoon in New Orleans. Suddenly, Merrick cried all the more miserably, and Aaron had put his arm around her.

It had been an awakening, to realize that the old woman in the bed had died.

I was stunned. Having known her for less than an hour, having heard her revelations, I was stunned. I could make no sense of her powers, except that too much of my Talamasca experience had been academic, and, faced with true magic, I was as easily shaken as anyone else.

We remained near the door of the bedroom for three quarters of an hour. It seemed that the neighbors wanted to come in.

Merrick was at first against it, leaning against Aaron and crying that she'd never find Cold Sandra, and Cold Sandra ought to have come home.

The child's palpable misery was dreadful to us all, and the priest again and again came to Merrick and kissed her and patted her.

At last, two young women of color, both very fair and with obvious signs of African blood, came in to attend to the body in the bed. One woman took Merrick in hand and told her to close her godmother's eyes. I marveled at these women. It wasn't only their gorgeous colored skin or their pale eyes. It was their old-fashioned formal manner, the way they were dressed in shirtwaist dresses of silk, with jewelry, as if to come calling, and the importance of this little ceremony in their minds.

Merrick went to the bed and did her duty with two fingers of her right hand. Aaron came to stand beside me in the hall.

Merrick came out, asked Aaron through her sobs if he would wait while the women cleaned up Great Nananne and changed the bed, and of course Aaron told her that we would do as she wished.

We went into a rather formal parlor on the other side of the hall. The old woman's proud statements came back to me. This parlor opened by means of an arch into a large dining room, and both rooms contained

many fine and costly things.

There were huge mirrors over the fireplaces, and these had their heavily carved white marble mantels; and the furniture, of rich mahogany, would fetch a good price.

Darkened paintings of saints hung here and there. The huge china cabinet was crowded with old patterned bone china; and there were a few huge lamps with dim bulbs beneath dusty shades.

It would have been rather comfortable except it was suffocatingly hot, and though there were broken windowpanes, only the dampness seemed to penetrate the dusty shadows where we sat down.

At once, a young woman, another rather exotically colored creature, lovely and as primly dressed as the others, came in to cover the mirrors. She had a great deal of folded black cloth with her, and a small ladder. Aaron and I did what we could to assist.

After that she closed the keyboard of an old upright piano which I had not even noticed. Then she went to a large casement clock in the corner, opened the glass, and stopped the hands. I heard the ticking for the first time only when it actually ceased.

A large crowd of people, black, white, and of different racial blending, gathered before the house.

At last the mourners were allowed to come in and there was a very long procession, during which time Aaron and I retired to the sidewalk, as it was perfectly plain that Merrick who had taken up a position at the head of the bed, was no longer so badly shaken, only merely terribly sad.

People stepped into the room, as far as the foot of the bed, and then went out the back door of the house, reappearing again along the side as they opened a small secondary gate to the street.

I remember being very impressed by the sobriety and silence that reigned, and being somewhat surprised as cars began to arrive and smartly dressed people—again, of both races, and of obvious mixture—went up the steps.

My clothes became uncomfortably limp and sticky from the drowsy heat, and several times I went inside the house to assure myself that Merrick was all right. Several window air conditioning units in the bedroom, living room, and dining room had been pressed into service, and the rooms were growing cool.

It was on my third visit that I realized a collection was being taken for

the funeral of Great Nananne. Indeed a china bowl on the altar was overflowing with twenty-dollar bills.

As for Merrick, her face showed little or no emotion as she gave a little nod to each person who came to call. Yet she was obviously numb and miserable.

Hour followed hour. Still people came, drifting in and out in the same respectful silence, only giving in to conversation when they were well away from the house.

I could hear the more formally dressed women of color speaking to one another with the most genteel southern accents, very far from the African which I have heard.

Aaron assured me in a whisper that this was hardly typical of funeral affairs in New Orleans. The crowd was altogether different. It was too quiet.

I could sense the problem with no difficulty. People had been afraid of Great Nananne. People were afraid of Merrick. People made sure that Merrick saw them. People left lots of twenty-dollar bills. There wasn't to be a funeral mass, and people didn't know what to make of it. People thought there ought to be a mass, but Merrick said Great Nananne herself had said no.

At last, as we stood in the alleyway once more, enjoying our cigarettes, I saw a look of concern on Aaron's face. He made a very subtle gesture, that I was to look at an expensive car which had just come to the curb.

Several obviously white persons got out of the car—a rather handsome young man, and an austere woman with a pair of wire-rimmed glasses on her nose. They went directly up the steps, deliberately avoiding the gaze of those who hung about.

"Those are white Mayfairs," said Aaron under his breath. "I can't be noticed here." Together we moved deeper into the alleyway and towards the back of the house. Finally, when the way became impassable due to the magnificent wisteria, we stopped.

"But what does it mean?" I asked. "The white Mayfairs. Why have they come?"

"Obviously, they feel some obligation," said Aaron in a whisper. "Truly, David, you must be quiet. There isn't a member of the family who doesn't have some psychic power. You know I've tried in vain to

make contact. I don't want us to be seen here."

"But who are they?" I pressed. I knew a voluminous file existed on the Mayfair Witches. I knew Aaron had been assigned to it for years. Yes, I knew, but for me as Superior General it was one story among thousands.

And the exotic climate, the strange old house, the clairvoyance of the old woman, the rising weeds, and the sunshiney rainfall had all gone to my head. I was as stimulated as if we were seeing ghosts.

"The family lawyers," he said in a hushed voice, trying to hide his annoyance with me. "Lauren Mayfair and young Ryan Mayfair. They don't know anything, not about Voodoo or witches, here or uptown, but clearly they know the woman is related to them. They don't shirk a family responsibility, the Mayfairs, but I never expected to see them here."

At this juncture, as he cautioned me again to be quiet and stay out of the way, I heard Merrick speaking within. I drew close to the broken windows of the formal parlor. I couldn't make out what was being said.

Aaron, too, was listening. Very shortly the white Mayfairs emerged from the house and went away in their new car.

Only then did Aaron go up to the steps. The last of the mourners was just leaving. Those out on the pavement had already paid their respects. I followed Aaron into Great Nananne's room.

"Those uptown Mayfairs," said Merrick in a low voice, "You saw them? They wanted to pay for everything. I told them we had plenty. Look there, we have thousands of dollars, and the undertaker is already coming. We'll wake the body tonight and tomorrow it will be buried. I'm hungry. I need something to eat."

Indeed the elderly undertaker was also a man of color, quite tall and completely bald. He arrived along with his rectangular basket in which he would place the body of Great Nananne.

As for the house, it was now left to the undertaker's father, a *very* elderly colored man, much the same hue as Merrick, except that he had tight curly white hair. Both of the aforementioned old men had a distinguished air, and wore rather formal clothes, when one considered the monstrous heat.

They also believed that there should be a Roman Catholic mass at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, but Merrick again explained that they didn't need that for Great Nananne.

It was amazing how well this settled the whole affair.

Now Merrick went to the bureau in Great Nananne's room and removed from the top drawer a bundle wrapped in white sheeting, and gestured for us to leave the house.

Off we went to a restaurant, where Merrick, saying nothing, and keeping the bundle on her lap, devoured an enormous fried shrimp sandwich and two diet Cokes. She had obviously grown tired of crying, and had the weary sad-eyed look of those who are deeply and irreparably hurt.

The little restaurant struck me as exotic, having a filthy floor and obviously dirty tables, but the happiest waiters and waitresses as well as clientele.

I was hypnotized by New Orleans, hypnotized by Merrick, though she was saying nothing; but little did I know that stranger things were yet to come.

In a dream, we went back to Oak Haven, to bathe and to change for the wake. There was a young woman there, a good member of the Talamasca whom I shall not name for obvious reasons, who assisted Merrick and saw to it that she was turned out beautifully in a new navy blue dress and broad-brimmed straw hat. Aaron himself gave a quick buffing to her patent leather shoes. Merrick had a rosary with her and a Catholic prayer book with a pearl cover.

But before she would have us return to New Orleans, she wanted to show us the contents of the bundle she had taken from the old woman's room.

We were in the library, where I first met Merrick only a short time before. The Motherhouse was at supper, so we had the room entirely to ourselves, with no special request.

When she unwrapped the sheeting, I was astonished to see an ancient book or codex, with brilliant illustrations on its wooden cover, a thing in tatters, which Merrick handled as carefully as she could.

"This is my book from Great Nananne," she said, looking at the thick volume with obvious respect. She let Aaron lift the book in its swaddling to the table under the light.

Now vellum or parchment is the strongest material ever invented for books, and this one was clearly so old that it would never have survived had it been written on anything else. Indeed, the wooden cover was all

but in pieces. Merrick herself took the initiative to move it to the side so that the title page of the book could be read.

It was in Latin, and I translated it as instantly as any member of the Talamasca could do.

HEREIN LIE ALL SECRETS

OF THE MAGICAL ARTS

AS TAUGHT TO HAM,

SON OF NOAH,

BY THE WATCHERS

AND PASSED DOWN TO HIS ONLY SON,

Mesran

Carefully lifting this page, which was bound as all the others were by three different ties of leather thong, Merrick revealed the first of many pages of magic spells, written in faded but clearly visible and very crowded Latin script.

It was as old a book of magic as I have ever beheld, and of course its claim—the claim of its title page—was to the very earliest of all black magic ever known since the time of The Flood.

Indeed, I was more than familiar with the legends surrounding Noah, and his son, Ham, and the even earlier tale, that the Watcher Angels had taught magic to the Daughters of Men when they lay with them, as Genesis so states.

Even the angel Memnoch, the seducer of Lestat, had revealed a version of this tale in his own fashion, that is, of being seduced during his earthly wanderings by a Daughter of Man. But of course I knew nothing of Memnoch back then.

I wanted to be alone with this book! I wanted to read every syllable of it. I wanted to have our experts test its paper, its ink, as well as peruse its style.

It will come as no surprise to most readers of my narrative that people exist who can tell the age of such a book at a glance. I was not one such person, but I believed firmly that what I held had been copied out in some monastery somewhere in Christendom, somewhere before William the Conqueror had ever come to the English shores.

To put it more simply, the book was probably eighth or ninth century.

And as I leant over to read the opening page I saw that it claimed to be a "faithful copy" of a much earlier text that had come down, of course, from Noah's son, Ham, himself.

There were so many rich legends surrounding these names. But the marvelous thing was that this text belonged to Merrick and that she was revealing it to us.

"This is my book," she said again. "And I know how to work the charms and spells in it. I know them all."

"But who taught you to read it?" I asked, unable to conceal my enthusiasm.

"Matthew," she answered, "the man who took me and Cold Sandra to South America. He was so excited when he saw this book, and the others. Of course I could already read it a little, and Great Nananne could read every word. Matthew was the best of the men my mother ever brought home. Things were safe and cheerful when Matthew was with us. But we can't talk about these matters now. You have to let me keep my book."

"Amen, you shall," said Aaron quickly. I think he was afraid that I meant to spirit away the text but nothing of the sort was true. I wanted time with it, yes, but only when the child would permit.

As for Merrick's mention of her mother, I had been more than curious. In fact, I felt we should question her on that point immediately, but Aaron shook his head sternly when I started to inquire.

"Come on, let's us go back now," said Merrick. "The body will be laid out."

Leaving the precious book in Merrick's upstairs bedroom, back we went to the city of dreams once more.

The body had been brought back in a dove-gray casket lined in satin, and set upon a portable bier in the grim front parlor which I described before. By the light of numerous candles—the overhead chandelier was naked and harsh and therefore turned off—the room was almost beautiful, and Great Nananne was now dressed in a fine gown of white silk with tiny pink roses stitched to the collar, a favorite from her own chifforobe.

A beautiful rosary of crystal beads was wound around her clasped fingers, and above her head, against the satin of the lid of the coffin, there hung a gold crucifix. A prie-dieu of red velvet, furnished no doubt

by the undertaker, stood beside the coffin, and many came up to kneel there, to make the Sign of the Cross, and to pray.

Once again there came hordes of people, and indeed they did tend to break into groups according to race, just as if someone had commanded them to do so, the light of skin clumping together, as well as whites clumped with whites, and blacks with blacks.

Since this time I have seen many situations in the city of New Orleans in which people self-segregate according to color in a most marked way. But then, I didn't know the city. I knew only that the monstrous injustice of Legal Segregation no longer existed, and I marveled at the way color seemed to dominate the separation in this group.

On tenterhooks, Aaron and I waited to be questioned about Merrick, and what was to happen to her, but no one spoke a single word. Indeed, people merely embraced Merrick, kissed her and whispered to her, and then went their way. Once more there was a bowl, and money was put in it, but for what I did not know. Probably for Merrick, because surely people knew she had no mother or father there.

Only as we prepared to go to sleep on cots in a rear room (the body would remain exposed all night), which was totally unfurnished otherwise, did Merrick bring in the priest to speak to us, saying to him in very good and rapid French that we were her uncles and she would live with us.

"So that is the story," I thought. We were uncles of Merrick. Merrick was definitely going away to school.

"It's exactly what I meant to recommend to her," said Aaron. "I wonder how she knew it. I thought she would quarrel with me about such a change."

I didn't know what I thought. This sober, serious, and beautiful child disturbed me and attracted me. The whole spectacle made me doubt my mind.

That night, we slept only fitfully. The cots were uncomfortable, the empty room was hot, and people were going and coming and forever whispering in the hall.

Many times I went into the parlor to find Merrick dozing quietly in her chair. The old priest himself went to sleep sometime near morning. I could see out the back door into a yard shrouded in shadow where distant candles or lamps flickered wildly. It was disturbing. I fell asleep

while there were still a few stars in the sky.

At last, there came the morning, and it was time for the funeral service to begin.

The priest appeared in the proper vestments, and with his altar boy, and intoned the prayers which the entire crowd seemed to know. The English language service, for that is what it was, was no less awe inspiring than the old Latin Rite, which had been cast aside. The coffin was closed.

Merrick began to shake all over and then to sob. It was a dreadful thing to behold. She had pushed away her straw hat, and her head was bare. She began to sob louder and louder. Several well-dressed women of color gathered around her and escorted her down the front steps. They rubbed her arms vigorously and wiped her forehead. Her sobs came like hiccups. The women cooed to her and kissed her. At one point Merrick let out a scream.

To see this composed little girl now near hysterics wrenched my heart.

They all but carried her to the funeral service limousine. The coffin came behind her, accompanied by solemn pallbearers to the hearse, and then off to the cemetery we rode, Aaron and I in the Talamasca car, uncomfortably separated from Merrick but resigned that it was for the best.

The sorrowful theatricality was not diminished as the rain came steadily down upon us, and the body of Great Nananne was carried through the wildly overgrown path of St. Louis No. 1 amid high marble tombs with pointed roofs, to be placed in an oven-like vault of a three-story grave.

The mosquitoes were almost unbearable. The weeds seemed alive with invisible insects, and Merrick, at the sight of the coffin being put in its place, screamed again.

Once more the genteel women rubbed her arms and wiped her head, and kissed her cheeks.

Then Merrick let out a terrible cry in French.

“Where are you, Cold Sandra, where are you, Honey in the Sunshine? Why didn’t you come home!”

There were rosary beads aplenty, and people praying aloud, as Merrick leant against the grave, with her right hand on the exposed coffin.

Finally, having spent herself for the moment, she grew quiet and turned and moved decisively, with the help of the women, towards Aaron and me. As the women patted her, she threw her arms around Aaron and buried her head in his neck.

I could see nothing of the young woman in her now. I felt utter compassion for her. I felt the Talamasca must embrace her with every conceivable element of fantasy that she should ever desire.

The priest meanwhile insisted the cemetery attendants bolt the stone into place NOW, which caused some argument, but eventually this did happen, the stone thereby sealing up the little grave slot and the coffin now officially removed from touch or view.

I remember taking out my handkerchief and wiping my eyes.

Aaron stroked Merrick's long brown hair and told her in French that Great Nananne had lived a marvelous and long life, and that her one deathbed wish—that Merrick be safe—had been fulfilled.

Merrick lifted her head and uttered only one sentence. "Cold Sandra should have come." I remember it because when she said it several of the onlookers shook their heads and exchanged condemnatory glances with one another.

I felt rather helpless. I studied the faces of the men and women around me. I saw some of the blackest people of African blood I have ever beheld in America, and some of the lightest as well. I saw people of extraordinary beauty and others who were merely simple. Almost no one was ordinary, as we understand that word. It seemed quite impossible to guess the lineage or racial history of anyone I saw.

But none of these people were close to Merrick. Except for Aaron and for me, she was basically alone. The well-dressed genteel women had done their duty, but they really did not know her. That was plain. And they were happy for her that she had two rich uncles who were there to take her away.

As for the "white Mayfairs" whom Aaron had spotted yesterday, none had appeared. This was "great luck," according to Aaron. If they had known a Mayfair child was friendless in the wide world, they would have insisted upon filling the need. Indeed, I realize now, they had not been at the wake, either. They had done their duty, Merrick had told them something satisfactory, and they had gone their way.

Now it was back towards the old house.

A truck from Oak Haven was already waiting for the transport of Merrick's possessions. Merrick had no intention of leaving her aunt's dwelling without everything that was hers.

Sometime or other before we reached the house, Merrick stopped crying, and a somber expression settled over her features which I have seen many times.

"Cold Sandra doesn't know," she said suddenly without preamble. The car moved sluggishly through the soft rain. "If she knew, she would have come."

"She is your mother?" Aaron asked reverently.

Merrick nodded. "That what's she always said," she answered, and she broke into a fairly playful smile. She shook her head and looked out the car window. "Oh, don't you worry about it, Mr. Lightner," she said. "Cold Sandra didn't really leave me. She went off and just didn't come back."

That seemed to make perfect sense at the moment, perhaps only because I wanted it to make sense, so that Merrick would not be deeply hurt by some more commanding truth.

"When was the last time you saw her?" Aaron ventured.

"When I was ten years old and we came back from South America. When Matthew was still alive. You have to understand Cold Sandra. She was the only one of twelve children who didn't pass."

"Didn't pass?" asked Aaron.

"For white," I said before I could stop myself.

Once again, Merrick smiled.

"Ah, I see," said Aaron.

"She's beautiful," said Merrick, "no one could ever say she wasn't, and she could fix any man she wanted. They never got away."

"Fix?" asked Aaron.

"To fix with a spell," I said under my breath.

Again, Merrick smiled at me.

"Ah, I see," said Aaron again.

"My grandfather, when he saw how tan my mother was, he said that wasn't his child, and my grandmother, she came and dumped Cold Sandra on Great Nananne's doorstep. Her sisters and brothers, they all married white people. 'Course my grandfather was a white man too. Chicago is where they are all are. That man who was Cold Sandra's

father, he owned a jazz club up in Chicago. When people like Chicago and New York, they don't want to stay down here anymore. Myself, I didn't like either one."

"You mean you've traveled there?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, I went with Cold Sandra," she said. " 'Course we didn't see those white people. But we did look them up in the book. Cold Sandra wanted to set eyes on her mother, she said, but not to talk to her. And who knows, maybe she did her bad magic. She might have done that to all of them. Cold Sandra was so afraid of flying to Chicago, but she was more afraid of driving up there too. And drowning? She had nightmares about drowning. She wouldn't drive across the Causeway for anything in this world. Afraid of the lake like it was going to get her. She was so afraid of so many things." She broke off. Her face went blank. Then, with a small touch of a frown, she went on:

"I don't remember liking Chicago very much. New York had no trees that I ever saw. I couldn't wait to come back home. Cold Sandra, she loved New Orleans too. She always came back, until the last time."

"Was she a smart woman, your mother?" I asked. "Was she bright the way you are?"

This gave her pause for thought.

"She's got no education," said Merrick. "She doesn't read books. I myself, I like to read. When you read you can learn things, you know. I read old magazines that people left lying around. One time I got stacks and stacks of *Time* magazine from some old house they were tearing down. I read everything I could in those magazines, I mean every one of them; I read about art and science and books and music and politics and every single thing till those magazines were falling apart. I read books from the library, from the grocery store racks; I read the newspaper. I read old prayer books. I've read books of magic. I have many books of magic that I haven't even showed you yet."

She gave a little shrug with her shoulders, looking small and weary but still the child in her puzzlement of all that had happened.

"Cold Sandra wouldn't read anything," she said. "You'd never see Cold Sandra watching the six o'clock news. Great Nananne sent her to the nuns, she always said, but Cold Sandra misbehaved and they were always sending her home. Besides, Cold Sandra was plenty light enough to not like dark people herself, you know. You'd think she knew better,

with her own father dumping her, but she did not. Fact is she was the color of an almond, if you see the picture. But she had those light yellow eyes, and that's a dead giveaway, those yellow eyes. She hated it when they started calling her Cold Sandra too."

"How did the nickname come about?" I asked. "Did the children start it?"

We had almost reached our destination. I remember there was so much more I wanted to know about this strange society, so alien to what I knew. At that moment, I felt that my opportunities in Brazil had been largely wasted. The old woman's words had stung me to the heart.

"No, it started right in our house," said Merrick. "That's the worst kind of nickname, I figure. When the neighbors and the children heard it, they said 'Your own Nananne calls you Cold Sandra.' But it stuck on account of the things she did. She used all the magic to fix people, like I said. She put the Evil Eye on people. I saw her skin a black cat once and I never want to see that again."

I must have flinched because a tiny smile settled on her lips for a moment. Then she went on.

"By the time I was six years old, she started calling herself Cold Sandra. She'd say to me, 'Merrick, you come here to Cold Sandra.' I'd jump in her lap."

There was a slight break in her voice as she continued.

"She was nothing like Great Nananne," Merrick said. "And she smoked all the time and she drank, and she was always restless, and when she drank she was mean. When Cold Sandra came home after being gone for a long time, Great Nananne would say, 'What's in your cold heart this time, Cold Sandra? What lies are you going to tell?'

"Great Nananne used to say there was no time for black magic in this world. You could do all you had to do with good magic. Then Matthew came, and Cold Sandra was the happiest she'd ever been."

"Matthew," I said coaxingly, "the man who gave you the parchment book."

"He didn't give me that book, Mr. Talbot, he taught me to read it," she answered. "That book we already had. That book came from Great-Oncle Vervain, who was a terrible Voodoo Man. They called him Dr. Vervain from one end of the city to the other. Everybody wanted his spells. That old man gave me lots of things before he passed on. He was

Great Nananne's older brother. He was the first person I ever saw just up and die. He was sitting at the dining room table with the newspaper in his hand."

I had more questions on the tip of my tongue.

In all of this long unfolding tale there had been no mention of that other name which Great Nananne had uttered: Honey in the Sunshine.

But we had arrived at the old house. The afternoon sun was quite strong but the rain had thinned away.

8

I was surprised to see so many people standing about. Indeed they were everywhere, and a very subdued but attentive lot. I observed at once that not one, but two small paneled trucks had come from the Motherhouse, and that there stood guard a small group of Talamasca acolytes, ready to pack up the house.

I greeted these youngsters of the Order, thanking them in advance for their care and discretion, and told them to wait quietly until they were given the signal to begin their work.

As we went up the stairs and walked through the house, I saw, where the windows permitted me to see anything, that people were loitering in the alleyways, and as we came into the backyard, I noticed many persons gathered far off to the right and to the left beyond the heavy growth of the low-limbed oaks. I could see no fences anywhere. And I do not believe there were any at that time.

All was dimness beneath a canopy of luxuriant leaf, and we were surrounded by the sound of softly dripping water. Wild red hyacinth grew where the sun could penetrate the precious gloom. I saw thin yew trees, the species so sacred to the dead and to the magician. And I saw many lilies lost in the choking grass. It could not have been more lulling and dreamy had it been a purposeful Japanese garden.

As my eyes became accustomed to the light, I realized that we were standing on a flagstone patio of sorts, punctuated by several twisted yet flowering trees, and much cracked and overwhelmed by slippery shining moss. Before us stood a huge open shed with a central pillar holding its corrugated tin roof.

The pillar was brightly painted red to the midpoint and green to the top, and it rose from a huge altar stone quite appropriately heavily stained. Beyond in the darkness stood the inevitable altar, with saints even more numerous and magnificent than those in Great Nananne's bedroom.

There were banks upon banks of lighted candles.

It was, I knew from my studies, a common Voodoo configuration—the central pillar and the stone. One could find it all over the island of Haiti. And this weedy flagstone spot was what a Haitian Voodoo doctor might have called his peristyle.

Cast to the side, among the close and straggling yew trees, I saw two iron tables, small and rectangular in shape, and a large pot or cauldron, as I suppose it is properly called, resting upon a brazier with tripod legs. The cauldron and the deep brazier disturbed me somewhat, possibly more than anything else. The cauldron seemed an evil thing.

A humming sound distracted me somewhat, because I was afraid that it came from bees. I have a very great fear of bees, and like many members of the Talamasca, I fear some secret regarding bees which has to do with our origins, but there is not room enough to explain here.

Allow me to continue by saying only that I quickly realized that the sound came from hummingbirds in this vast overgrown place, and when I stood quite still beside Merrick, I fancied I saw them hovering as they do, near the fiercely sprawling flower-covered vines of the shed roof.

"Oncle Vervain loved them," said Merrick to me in a hushed voice. "He put out the feeders for them. He knew them by their colors and he called them beautiful names."

"I love them, too, child," I said. "In Brazil they had a beautiful name in Portuguese, 'the kisser of flowers,' " I said.

"Yes, Oncle Vervain knew those things," she told me. "Oncle Vervain had been all over South America. Oncle Vervain could see the ghosts in the middle air all around him all the time."

She left off with these words. But I had the distinct feeling that it was going to be very difficult for her to say farewell to this, her home. As for her use of the phrase "ghosts in the middle air," I was suitably impressed, as I had been by so much else. Of course we would keep this house for her, of that I'd make certain. We'd have the place entirely restored if she so wished.

She looked about herself, her eyes lingering on the iron pot on its tripod.

"Oncle Vervain could boil the cauldron," she said softly. "He put coals under it. I can still remember the smell of the smoke. Great Nananne would sit on the back steps to watch him. Everybody else was afraid."

She went forward now and into the shed, and stood before the saints, staring at the many offerings and glittering candles. She made the Sign of the Cross quickly and laid her right two fingers on the naked foot of the tall and beautiful Virgin.

What were we to do?

Aaron and I stood a little behind her, and at her shoulders, like two rather confused guardian angels. There was fresh food in the dishes on the altar. I smelled sweet perfume and rum. Obviously some of those people crowded about in the shrubbery had brought these mysterious offerings. But I shrank back when I realized that one of the curious objects heaped there in seeming disarray was in fact a human hand.

It was cut right before the wrist bone, and it had dried into a dreadful clench of sorts, but that was not the full horror. It was overrun with ants, who had made a little massacre of the entire feast.

When I realized that the loathsome insects were everywhere, I felt a peculiar horror that only ants can bring.

Merrick, much to my amazement, picked up this hand rather daintily in her thumb and forefinger, and shook off the hoodlum ants with several small fierce gestures.

I heard nothing from the audience in the crowd beyond, but it seemed to me that they pressed closer. The humming of the birds was becoming hypnotic, and again there came a low hiss of rain.

Nothing penetrated the canopy. Nothing struck the tin of the roof.

"What do you want us to do with these things?" asked Aaron gently. "You don't want anything left, as I understand it."

"We're going to take it down," said Merrick, "if it's all right with you. It's past its time. This house should be closed up now, if you will keep your promises to me. I want to go with you."

"Yes, we'll have everything dismantled."

She suddenly looked at the shriveled hand which she held in her own. The ants were crawling onto her skin.

"Put it down, child," I said suddenly, startling myself.

She gave it a wring or two again and then did what I said. "It must come with us, everything must," she said. "Some day, I'll take out all these things and I'll see what they are." She brushed off the unwelcome ants.

Her dismissive tone filled me with relief, I must confess it.

"Absolutely," said Aaron. He turned and gave a signal to the Talamasca acolytes who had come as far as the edge of the patio behind us. "They will begin packing everything," he told Merrick.

"There's one thing in this backyard that I have to take myself," she said, glancing at me and then at Aaron. She seemed not purposefully or playfully mysterious as much as troubled.

She backed away from us and moved slowly towards one of the gnarled fruit trees that sprang up in the very middle of the patio flagstones. She dipped her head as she moved under the low green branches, and lifted her arms almost as if she was trying to embrace the tree.

In a moment, I saw her purpose. I should have guessed it. A huge snake had descended, coiling itself about her arms and her shoulders. It was a constrictor.

I felt a helpless shudder and a total revulsion. Not even my years in the Amazon had made me a patient liker of snakes. Quite to the contrary. But I knew what they felt like; I knew that eerie silky weight, and the strange current of feeling they sent through one's skin as they moved very rapidly to encoil one's arms.

I could feel these things as I watched her.

Meanwhile, out of the overgrown tangle of green there came low whispers from those who watched her as well. This is what they had gathered to see. This was the moment. The snake was a Voodoo god, of course. I knew it. But I was still amazed.

"It's definitely harmless," Aaron said to me hastily. As if he knew! "We'll have to feed it a rat or two, I suppose, but to us, it's quite—."

"Never mind," I said with a smile, letting him off the hook. I could see he was quite uncomfortable. And then to tease him a little, and to fend off the deep melancholy of the place, I said, "You know of course the rodents must be alive."

He was appropriately horrified and gave me a reproving glance, as if to say, you needn't have told me that! But he was far too polite to say a word.

Merrick was talking to the snake in a low voice in French.

She made her way back to the altar, and there found a black iron box with barred windows on all sides—I know no other words for it—which she opened with one hand, the hinges of its lid creaking loudly; and into

this box she let the serpent slowly and gracefully settle itself, which fortunately for all of us, it did.

"Well, we'll see what stalwart gentlemen want to carry the snake," Aaron said to the closest of the assistants who stood speechless, watching.

Meanwhile, the crowd had begun to break up and slip away. There was much rustling in the trees. Leaves fell all around us. Somewhere, unseen in the lush garden, the birds continued to hover, beating the air with their tiny busy wings.

Merrick stood for a long moment looking up, as though she'd found a chink in the rooftop of foliage.

"I'll never be coming back here, I don't think," she said softly to both of us or to no one.

"Why do you say that, child?" I asked. "You can do as you like, you can come every day if you wish. There are so many things we must talk over together."

"It's ruined, this whole place," she said, "and besides, if Cold Sandra ever comes back, I don't want her to find me." She looked at me in a level manner. "You see, she is my mother and she could take me away, and I don't want that ever to happen."

"It won't happen," I responded, though no one on earth could give the child such a guarantee against a mother's love, and Merrick knew it. I could only do my best to see that we did what Merrick wanted.

"Now, come," she said, "there are some things up in the attic that only I want to move."

The attic was in fact the second story of the house, a very deep sloped roof affair, as I have described, with four dormer windows, one for each point of the compass, assuming the house was correctly oriented. I had no idea whether it was or not.

We made our way up by a narrow back stairs that doubled once upon itself and then entered a place of such delicious woody fragrances that I was caught off guard. It had a snugness and a cleanness about it, despite the dust.

Merrick turned on a grim electric bulb and we soon found ourselves amid suitcases, ancient trunks, and leather-bound packing cases. It was vintage luggage. An antiques dealer would have loved it. And I, having seen one book of magic, was very much ready for more.

Merrick had but one suitcase that mattered above all else, she explained, and she set this down on the dusty rafters beneath the dangling light.

It was a canvas bag with leathered patched corners. She opened it with ease, as it wasn't locked, and stared down at a series of loosely wrapped cloth bundles. Once again, white sheeting had been used for these items, or perhaps to put it more simply, cotton pillowcases past their time.

It was obvious that the contents of this case were of very special importance, but how special I could not have guessed.

I was astonished now as Merrick, whispering a little prayer, an Ave, if I'm correct, lifted one bundle and moved back the cloth to reveal a startling object—a long green axe blade, heavily incised with figures on both sides.

It was easily two feet in length and quite heavy, though Merrick held it easily. And Aaron and I both could see the likeness of a face in profile carved deeply into the stone.

"Pure jade," said Aaron reverently.

It had been highly polished, this object, and the face in profile wore an elaborate and beautifully realized headdress, which if I'm not mistaken, involved both plumage and ears of corn.

The carved portrait or ritual image, whichever it might be, was as large as a human face.

As Merrick turned the object, I saw that a full figure was etched into the other side. There was a small hole near the narrow tapering end of the object, perhaps to allow suspension from a belt.

"My God," said Aaron under his breath. "It's Olmec, isn't it? It must be priceless."

"Olmec, if I have any guess," I answered. "Never have I seen such a large and exquisitely decorated object outside of a museum."

Merrick showed no surprise.

"Don't say things you don't mean, Mr. Talbot," she said gently. "You have some like this in your own vault." She locked her eyes on me for a long dreamy moment.

I could scarcely breathe. How could she know such a thing? But then I told myself she might have learnt such information from Aaron. Only, a glance at him let me know I was quite wrong.

“Not as beautiful, Merrick,” I answered her quite truthfully. “And ours are fragments, as well.”

When she gave me no reply, when she merely stood there holding the gleaming axe blade with both hands out before her, as if she liked to look at the light on it, I went on.

“It’s worth a fortune, child,” I said, “and I never expected to see such a thing in this place.”

She thought for a long second, and then gave me a solemn forgiving nod.

“In my opinion,” I went on, struggling to redeem myself, “it comes from the oldest known civilization in Central America. And I can feel my heart thumping as I look at it.”

“Maybe even older than Olmec,” she said, looking up at me again. Her wide gaze swept lazily over Aaron. The gold light of the bulb spilled down upon her and the elaborately dressed figure. “That’s what Matthew said after we took it from the cave beyond the waterfall. That’s what Oncle Vervain said when he told me where to look.”

I looked down again on the splendid face of shining green stone with its blank eyes and flattened nose.

“You don’t need me to tell you,” I said, “that it’s all very likely so. The Olmec come from nowhere, or so the textbooks tell us.”

She nodded.

“Oncle Vervain was born from one of those Indians who knew the deepest magic. Colored man and red woman made Oncle Vervain and Great Nananne, and Cold Sandra’s mother was Great Nananne’s grandchild, so it’s inside of me.”

I couldn’t speak. There weren’t any words to express my trust or my wonder.

Merrick set the axe blade to one side, on top of the many bundles, and reached for another with equal care. This was a smaller, longer bundle, and when she unwrapped it, I was again too breathless for words.

It was a tall figure, richly carved, and obviously a god or king, I could not say which. As with the axe blade, the size alone was impressive, not to mention the gloss of the stone.

“Nobody knows,” the child said, speaking to my thoughts very directly. “Only, you see this scepter, it’s magic. If he’s a king, he’s a priest and god too.”

Humbled, I studied the detailed carving. The long narrow figure wore a handsome headdress which came low over his fierce, wide eyes, and down to his shoulders all around. On his naked chest was a disc suspended from the radial collar about his shoulders and neck.

As for the scepter, he seemed about to be striking the open palm of his left hand with it, as though preparing to do violence with it when his enemy or victim approached. It was chilling in its menace and beautiful in its sincerity and intricacy. It was polished and seemed to glow, as did the mask.

"Shall I stand him up or lay him down?" Merrick asked, looking at me. "I don't play with these creatures. No, I would never do such a thing. I can feel the magic in them. I've conjured with them. I don't play. Let me cover him once more so he can be quiet."

Having rewrapped the idol, she reached for yet a third bundle. I could not calculate the number that remained in the closely packed case.

I could see that Aaron was speechless. One did not have to be an expert in Mesoamerican antiquities to realize what these artifacts were.

As for Merrick, she began to talk as she unwrapped this third wonder …

"We went down there, and followed the map that Oncle Vervain had given us. And Cold Sandra kept praying to Oncle Vervain to tell us where to go. It was Matthew and Cold Sandra and me. Cold Sandra kept saying, 'Aren't you happy now, you never went to school? You're always complaining. Well, you're getting to go on a great adventure.' And to tell the truth, that's what it was."

The cloth fell away from the long sharp pointed pick in her hands. It was all of a piece of green jade, and its handle bore the distinct feathers of the hummingbird and two small deeply carved eyes. I had seen its type before in museums, but never such a fine example. And now I understood Oncle Vervain's love of the birds in the yard beyond.

"Yes, sir," said Merrick. "He said those birds were magic. He was the one to put the feeders out. I told you. Who's going to fill the feeders when I leave this place behind?"

"We'll care for the place," said Aaron in his comforting fashion. But I could see he was greatly concerned about Merrick. She went on talking.

"The Aztecs believed in hummingbirds. They hover in the air like magic. They turn this way and that and make another color. There's a

legend that Aztec warriors became hummingbirds when they died. Oncle Vervain said magicians need to know everything. Oncle Vervain said our kind were all magicians, that we came four thousand years before the Aztecs. He told me about the paintings on the cave wall."

"And you know where this cave is?" Aaron asked her. He was quick to clarify his meaning. "Darling, you must tell no one. Men lose common sense over secrets such as these."

"I have Oncle Vervain's pages," Merrick answered in the same dreamy voice. She laid the sharp blade of this knife back down on the bed of cotton parcels. Offhandedly, she laid bare a fourth object, a small squat idol as beautifully carved as the one already revealed. Her hand went back to the perforator with its round, hummingbird handle. "They used this to draw blood in their magic. That's what Oncle Vervain told me I would find, a thing for drawing blood; that's what Matthew said this was."

"This suitcase is filled with such objects, isn't it?" I asked. "These are by no means the most significant of the lot?" I glanced about. "What else is hidden in this attic?"

She shrugged. For the first time she looked hot and uncomfortable under the low roof.

"Come on," she said politely, "let's us pack up the suitcase and go down to the kitchen. Tell your people not to open all those boxes, just to move them to where they will be safe. I'll make you some good coffee. I make the best coffee. I make better coffee than Cold Sandra or Great Nananne. Mr. Talbot, you're about to faint from the heat, and Mr. Lightner, you're too worried. No one's going to break into this house any time ever, and your house has guards all over night and day."

She rewrapped the axe blade, the idol, and the perforator carefully, then closed the suitcase and snapped its two rusted locks. Now, and only now, did I see the withered old cardboard tag on it listing an airport in Mexico, and the stamps that indicated the suitcase had traveled many miles beyond that.

I held my questions until we had come down into the cooler air of the kitchen. I realized that what she'd said about my failing in the heat above had been perfectly true. I was almost ill.

She set the suitcase down, took off her white pantyhose and her shoes, and turned on a rusted round fan above the refrigerator, which oscillated

drowsily, and set to work to make the coffee, as she had said.

Aaron rummaged for sugar, and in the old "ice box," as she called it, found the pitcher of cream still fresh and quite cold. That didn't much matter to Merrick, however, because it was milk she wanted for coffee and she heated it to just below a boil.

"This is the way to do it," she told us both.

At last we were settled at a round oak table, whose white painted surface had been wiped quite clean.

The café au lait was strong and delicious. Five years among the Undead can't kill the memory. Nothing ever will. I piled the sugar into it, just as she did, and I drank it in deep gulps, believing thoroughly that it was a restorative, and then I sat back in the creaky wooden chair.

All around me, the kitchen was in good order, though a relic of former times. Even the refrigerator was some sort of antique with a humming motor on top of it, beneath the creaking fan. The shelves over the stove and along the walls were covered by glass doors, and I could see all the accouterments of a place where people regularly take their meals. The floor was old linoleum and very clean.

Suddenly, I remembered the suitcase. I jumped and looked about. It was right beside Merrick on the empty chair.

When I looked at Merrick I saw tears in her eyes.

"What is it, darling?" I asked. "Tell me and I'll do my level best to make it right."

"It's just the house and everything that ever happened, Mr. Talbot," she answered. "Matthew died in this house."

This was the answer to a rather momentous question, and one which I had not dared to voice. I can't say I was relieved to hear it, but I couldn't help but wonder who might lay claim to the treasures which Merrick regarded as her own.

"Don't you worry about Cold Sandra," said Merrick, directly to me. "If she was going to come back for these things, she would have come back a long time ago. There was never enough money in the world for Cold Sandra. Matthew really loved her, but he had plenty of money, and that made all the difference in the world."

"How did he die, darling?" I asked.

"Of a fever from those jungle places. And he'd made us all get all our shots too. I don't like needles. We got shots for every disease you can

imagine. Yet still he came back sick. Some time afterwards, when Cold Sandra was screaming and hollering and throwing things, she said that the Indians down there in the jungles had put a curse on him, that he never should have gone up the waterfall to the cave. But Great Nananne said it was too strong a fever. He died over there, in the back room."

She pointed to the hallway that separated us from the room in which Aaron and I had spent our uncomfortable night.

"After he was gone and she went away, I took out the furniture. It's in the front bedroom next to Great Nananne's. That's where I've slept ever since."

"I can imagine why," said Aaron comfortingly. "It must have been dreadful for you to lose them both."

"Now Matthew was always good to us all," she continued, "I wish he had been my father, lot of good it would do me now. He was in the hospital and out of it, and then the doctors stopped coming because he was drunk all the time and shouted at them, and then he just choked out his last."

"And had Cold Sandra already gone?" Aaron asked gently. He had laid his hand on the table beside her own.

"She was out all the time at the barroom down on the corner, and after they threw her out of that one, she went to the one on the big street. The night he started to go, I ran down two blocks and over there to get her, and banged on the back screen door for her to come out. She was too drunk to walk.

"She was sitting there with this handsome white man, and he was just in love with her, you know, adoring her. I could see it. And she was so drunk she couldn't stand up. And then it hit me. She didn't want to see Matthew go. She was afraid to be at his side when it happened. She wasn't being hard-hearted. She was just really scared. So I came running back.

"Great Nananne was washing his face and giving him his Scotch, that's what he drank all the time, he wouldn't have any other kind of drink, and he was choking and choking, and we just sat by him till sometime about dawn, the choking stopped, and his breathing got very steady, so steady you could have set a clock by it, just up and down, up and down.

"It was a real relief that he wasn't choking. But Great Nananne shook

her head to mean no good. Then his breathing got so low you couldn't see or hear it. His chest stopped moving. And Great Nananne told me he was dead."

She paused long enough to drink the rest of her coffee, then she stood up, pushing the chair back carelessly, and took the pot from the stove and gave us all some more of the heavy brew to drink.

She sat down again and ran her tongue along her lip, a habit with her. She seemed a child in all these gestures, perhaps because of the convent-school way in which she sat up straight in her chair and folded her arms.

"You know, it's nice having you listen to this," she said looking from me to Aaron. "I never told anyone all about it. Just the little things. He left Cold Sandra plenty of money.

"She came home around noon the next day and demanded to know where they'd taken him, and started screaming and throwing things and saying we never should have called for the morgue to take him away.

" 'And what did you think we were going to do with him?' Great Nananne asked. 'You don't think they have a law in this town about dead bodies? You think we can just take him out and bury him in the backyard?' Turned out his people in Boston came and got him, and soon as Cold Sandra saw that check, you know, the money he'd left her, she was out of this house and gone.

"Of course I didn't know it was going to be the last time I ever saw her. All I knew was that she had packed up some of her clothes in a new red leather suitcase, and she was dressed like a model from a magazine, in a white silk suit. Her hair was pulled back to a bun on the back of her head. She was so beautiful she didn't need any makeup, but she had put some dark-violet eye shadow above her eyelashes and a dark color, like violet, too, I think, on her lips. I knew that dark violet meant trouble. She looked so beautiful.

"She kissed me and she gave me a bottle of Chanel No. 22 perfume. She said that was for me. She told me she'd be coming back for me. She told me she was going out to buy a car, she was driving out of here. She said, 'If I can just get across that spillway without drowning, I can get out of this town.' "

Merrick broke off for a moment, her eyebrows knitted, her mouth slightly open. Then she began again.

" 'The hell you'll come back for her.' That's what Great Nananne told

her. 'You've never done anything except run wild and let that child run wild, well, she's staying here with me, and you go to Hell.' "

Once again, she stopped. Her girlish face grew quiet. I was afraid she was going to cry. I think that she swallowed the tears very deliberately. Then she spoke again, clearing her throat a little. I could hardly make out the words.

"Think she went to Chicago," she said.

Aaron waited respectfully while the silence filled the old kitchen. I picked up my coffee and drank deeply again, savoring the taste of it, as much out of respect for her as for the pleasure.

"You're ours, darling," I said.

"Oh, I know, Mr. Talbot," she answered in a small voice, and, without moving the focus of her eyes from some distant point, she lifted her right hand and laid it on mine. I never forgot the gesture. It was as if she was comforting me.

Then she spoke. "Well, Great Nananne knows now. She knows whether my mother is alive or dead."

"Yes, she knows," I answered, avowing my belief before I could think the better of it. "And whatever she knows, she's at peace."

There was a quiet interval in which I became painfully conscious of Merrick's suffering, and of the noises of the Talamasca acolytes who were moving every object in the place. I heard the grinding noise of the large statues being dragged or pushed. I heard the sound of packing tape being stretched and torn.

"I loved that man, Matthew," said Merrick softly. "I really loved him. He taught me how to read the Book of Magic. He taught me how to read all the books that Oncle Vervain had left. He liked to look at the pictures I showed you. He was an interesting man."

There was another long pause. Something in the atmosphere of the house disturbed me. I was confused by what I was feeling. It had nothing to do with normal noises or activity. And it seemed imperative suddenly that I conceal this disturbance from Merrick, that such a thing, whatever it was, not trouble her at this time.

It was as if someone altogether new and different had entered the house, and one could hear that person's stealthy movements. It was the sense of a coherent presence. I wiped it from my mind, never for a moment fearing it, and keeping my eyes on Merrick, when, in a daze of

sorts, she began to speak rather rapidly and tonelessly again.

"Up in Boston, Matthew had studied history and science. He knew all about Mexico and the jungles. He told me the story of the Olmec. When we were in Mexico City he took me to the museum. He was going to see to it that I went to school. He wasn't afraid in those jungles. He thought those shots protected us. He wouldn't let us drink the water, you know, all of that. And he was rich, like I told you, and he would have never tried to steal these things from Cold Sandra or me."

Her eyes remained steady.

I could still feel this distinct entity within the house, and I realized that she did not feel it. Aaron did not know it was there, either. But it was there. And it was not far from where we sat. With all my soul I listened to Merrick.

"Oncle Vervain left lots of things. I'll show you. Oncle Vervain said we had our roots in the jungle land down there, and in Haiti before our people ever came up here. He said we weren't like American black people, though he never said the word 'black,' he always said colored. He thought it was polite to say colored. Cold Sandra used to laugh at him. Oncle Vervain was a powerful magician, and before him there had been his grandfather, and Oncle Vervain told tales of what the Old Man could do."

I realized her soft speech was becoming more rapid. The history was pouring out from her.

"The Old Man, that's all I ever called him. He was a Voodoo man in the Civil War. He went back to Haiti to learn things and when he came back to this town they said he took it by storm. Of course, they talk about Marie Laveau, but they talk of the Old Man too. Sometimes I can feel them near me, Oncle Vervain and the Old Man, as well as Lucy Nancy Marie Mayfair, who's in the photograph, and another one, a Voodoo queen whom they called Pretty Justine. They said everybody was afraid of Pretty Justine."

"What do you want for yourself, Merrick," I asked her suddenly, desperate to stop the ever increasing speed of her words.

She looked at me sharply, and then she smiled. "I want to be educated, Mr. Talbot. I want to go to school."

"Ah, how marvelous," I whispered.

"I told Mr. Lightner," she continued, "and he said you could do it. I

want to be in a high-quality school where they teach me Greek and Latin and which fork to use for my salad or my fish. I want to know all about magic, the way Matthew did, telling me things out of the Bible, and reading over those old books and saying what was tried and true. Matthew never had to make a living. I expect I will have to make a living. But I want to be educated, and I think you know what I mean."

She fixed her gaze on me. Her eyes were dry and clear, and it was then perhaps more than at any other time that I noticed their beautiful coloration of which I've spoken before. She went on talking, her voice a little slower now, and calmer and almost sweet.

"Mr. Lightner says all your members are educated people. That's what he told me right before you came. I can see those manners in the people at the Motherhouse and I hear the way they talk. Mr. Lightner says it's the tradition of the Talamasca. You educate your members, because it's a lifelong thing to be a member, and you all live under the same roof."

I smiled. It was true. Very true. "Yes," I said, "we do this with all who come to us, insofar as they are willing and able to absorb it, and we'll give it to you."

Merrick leant forward and kissed me on the cheek.

I was quite startled by this affection, and at a loss as to the proper thing to do. I spoke from the heart.

"Darling, we'll give you everything. We have so much to share, it would be our duty if it weren't … if it weren't such a pleasure for us to do."

Something invisible was suddenly gone from the house. I felt it as if a being had snapped its fingers and simply disappeared. Merrick showed no consciousness of this.

"And what will I do for you in exchange?" she asked in a calm sure voice. "You can't give me everything for nothing, Mr. Talbot. Tell me what you want from me."

"Teach us what you know about magic," I answered, "and grow up to be happy, to be strong, and never to be afraid."

9

It was growing dark when we left the house.

Before leaving New Orleans, we dined together at Galatoire's, a venerable old New Orleans restaurant where I found the food to be delicious, but Merrick was by this time so exhausted that she turned quite pale and fell sound asleep in her chair.

The transformation in her was remarkable. She murmured that Aaron and I must care for the Olmec treasures. "Look at them but be careful," she said, as a matter of fact. And then came the sudden slumber which left her pliant but unconscious, as far as I could see.

Aaron and I all but carried her to the car—she could walk in her sleep if propelled—and much as I wanted to talk with Aaron I didn't dare risk it, though Merrick slept between us, quite soundly, during the entire ride home.

When we reached the Motherhouse, that good female member of the Order whom I've mentioned before, and will now for the sake of this account call Mary, helped us to carry Merrick up to her room and lay her on the bed.

Now, I remarked a little while ago that I wanted the Talamasca to envelop her in fantasy, to give her everything that she should desire.

Let me explain that we had already begun this process by creating an upstairs corner bedroom for her, which we believed to be a young woman's dream. The fruit-wood bed, its posts and canopy decorated with carved flowers and trimmed in fancy lace, the dressing table with its little satin bench and huge round mirror, its small fancy twin lamps and myriad bottles, all of this was part of the fantasy, along with a pair of frilly boudoir dolls, as they are called, which had to be moved aside to lay down the poor darling on her pillow for the night.

And lest you believe we were misogynist imbeciles, allow me to explain that one wall of the room, the wall that was not punctuated by floor-length windows to the porch, was filled with a fine general

assortment of books. There was also a corner table and chairs for reading, many other pretty lamps here and there, and a bathroom filled with perfumed soaps, varicolored shampoos, and countless bottles of scented cologne and oil. In fact, Merrick herself had bought any number of products scented with Chanel No. 22, a particularly wonderful scent.

By now, as we left her fast asleep and in the gentle care of Mary, I believe that Aaron and I both had fallen in love with her, completely in a parental sense, and I meant to allow nothing in the Talamasca to distract me from her case.

Of course Aaron, not being the Superior General of the Order, would have the luxury of remaining here with her long after I had been forced back to my desk in London. And I envied him that he would have the pleasure of watching this child meet her first tutors and pick out her own school.

As for the Olmec treasures, we took them now to the small Louisiana vault for safekeeping, and once inside, after some debate, opened the suitcase and examined what was there.

The cache was quite remarkable. There were close to forty idols, at least twelve of the perforator knives, numerous axe blades, and many smaller blade-shaped objects which we commonly call celts. Every single item was exquisite in its own right. There was also a handwritten inventory, apparently the work of the mysterious and doomed Matthew, listing each item and its size. The note was appended:

> There are many more treasures within this tunnel, but they must wait for later excavation. I am already sick and must return home as soon as possible. Honey and Sandra are highly argumentative on this point. They want to take everything out of the cave. But I am getting weaker even as I write. As for Merrick, my illness is scaring her. I need to take her home. It is worth noting while I have the strength in my right hand that nothing else scares any of my ladies, not the jungles, not the villages, not the Indians. I have to go back.

It was more than poignant, these words of the dead man, and my curiosity about “Honey” was all the more strong.

We were in the process of wrapping everything and restoring it to its

old order, when there came a knock on the outside door of the room in which the vault is situated.

"Come quickly," Mary said through the door. "She's become hysterical. I don't know what to do."

Up the stairs we headed, and before we'd reached the second floor we could hear her desperate sobs.

She sat on the bed, still in her navy blue dress from the funeral, her feet bare again, and her hair in tangles, sobbing over and over again that Great Nananne was dead.

It was all entirely understandable, but Aaron had a near magical effect upon people in such states, and he soon quieted her with his words, while Mary assisted when she could.

Merrick then asked through her tears if she could please have a glass of rum.

Of course no one was in favor of this remedy, but on the other hand, as Aaron judiciously pointed out, the liquor would quiet her, and she would go to sleep.

Several bottles were found in the bar downstairs, and Merrick was given a glass of the rum, but asked for more.

"This is a sip," she said through her tears, "I need a glassful." She looked so perfectly unhappy and distraught that we couldn't deny her. At last, after imbibing, her sobs became softer.

"What am I going to do, where will I go?" she asked piteously, and once again we made our assurances, though her grief was something which I felt she had to express with tears.

As for doubts about her future, that was a different matter. I sent Mary out of the room. I sat down on the bed beside Merrick.

"My dear, listen to me," I said to her. "You're rich in your own right. Those books of Oncle Vervain's. They're worth enormous amounts of money. Universities and museums would bid on them at auction. As for the Olmec treasures, I cannot calculate their worth. Of course you don't want to part with these things, and we don't want you to do it, but rest assured you are secure, even without us."

This seemed to quiet her somewhat.

Finally, after she had cried softly against my chest for the better part of an hour, she put her arms around Aaron, laid her head on his shoulder, and said that if she knew we were in the house, that we would

not leave it, then she could go to sleep.

"We'll be waiting for you downstairs in the morning," I told her. "We want you to make that coffee for us. We've been fools, drinking the wrong coffee. We refuse to have breakfast without you. Now you must sleep."

She gave me a grateful and kindly smile, even though the tears were still spilling onto her cheeks. Then, asking no one's permission, she went to the frilly dressing table, where the bottle of rum stood quite incongruously among the other fancy little bottles, and took a good slug of the drink.

As we rose to go, Mary answered my call with a nightgown ready for Merrick, and I took the bottle of rum, nodded to Merrick to make certain that she had seen me do it, so there would be some civil pretense of her permission, and Aaron and I retired to the library below.

I don't remember how long we talked.

Possibly it was an hour. We discussed tutors, schools, programs of education, what Merrick should do.

"Of course there can be no question of asking her to display her psychic powers to us," Aaron said firmly, as though I was going to overrule him. "But they're considerable. I've sensed it all day and yesterday as well."

"Ah, but there's another matter," I said, and I was about to broach the subject of the weird "disturbance" which I had felt in Great Nananne's house while we had sat in the kitchen. But something stopped me from speaking.

I realized that I sensed the same presence now, under our Motherhouse roof.

"What's the matter, man?" asked Aaron, who knew my every facial expression and who could probably read my mind if he really chose to do it.

"Nothing," I said, and then, instinctively, and perhaps selfishly, with some desire to be heroic, I added, "I want you to stay where you are."

I rose and went through the open doors of the library out into the hallway.

From above, from the upstairs rear of the house, there came a sardonic and ringing laugh. It was a woman's laugh, there was no doubt about it, only I could not attach it to Mary or to the female members of the Order

who were then living in the house. Indeed Mary was the only one in the main building. The others had gone to sleep some time ago in the "slave quarters" and cottages which made up part of the outbuildings some distance from the rear doors of the house.

Once again, I heard the laugh. It seemed an answer to my very query.

Aaron appeared at my shoulder. "That's Merrick," he said warily.

This time, I didn't tell him to remain behind. He followed me as I went up the stairs.

The door to Merrick's room was open, and the lights were on, causing a brilliant glow to spill into the long broad center hallway.

"Well, come on in," said a womanish voice as I hesitated, and when I did, I was quite alarmed by what I saw.

In a haze of cigarette smoke, there was a young woman sitting in a highly seductive posture at the dressing table, her youthful and fast-ripening body clothed only in a scant white cotton petticoat, its thin cloth hardly disguising her full breasts and pink nipples, or the dark shadow between her legs.

Of course it was Merrick, but then it wasn't Merrick at all.

With her right hand she put the cigarette to her lips and drew on it, deeply, with the casual air of an accustomed smoker, and let her breath out with ease.

Her eyebrows were raised as she looked at me, and her lips were drawn back in a beautiful sneer. Indeed, the expression was so alien to the Merrick I had come to know that it was very simply terrifying all to itself. One couldn't imagine a skilled actress so successfully altering her features. As for the voice which came out of the body, it was sultry and low.

"Good cigarettes, Mr. Talbot. Rothmans, aren't they?" The right hand toyed with the little box which she had taken from my room. The woman's voice continued, cold, utterly without feeling, and with a faint tone of mockery. "Matthew used to smoke Rothmans, Mr. Talbot. He went to the French Quarter to buy them. You don't find them at the corner store. Smoked them right up until he died."

"Who are you?" I asked.

Aaron said nothing. He relinquished command to me at this moment completely, but he stood his ground.

"Don't be so hasty, Mr. Talbot," came the hard-toned answer. "Ask me

a few questions." She gave more of her weight to the left elbow on the dressing table, and the petticoat gaped to reveal more of her full breasts.

Her eyes positively sparkled in the light of the dressing table lamps. It seemed her lids and eyebrows were governed exclusively by a new personality. She was not even Merrick's twin.

"Cold Sandra?" I asked.

A burst of laughter came out of her that was ominous and shocking. She tossed her black hair and drew on the cigarette again.

"She never told you one word about me, did she?" she asked, and once again came that sneer, beautiful yet full of venom. "She was always jealous. I hated her from the day she was born."

"Honey in the Sunshine," I said calmly.

She nodded, grinning at me, letting go of the smoke.

"That's a name that's always been good enough for me. And there she goes, leaving me out of the story. Well, don't you think I'll settle for so little, Mr. Talbot. Or should I call you David? I think you look like a David, you know, righteous and clean living and all of that." She crushed out the cigarette right into the tabletop. And with one hand now, she took another, and lighted it with the gold lighter which I had also left in my room.

She turned the lighter over now, the cigarette dangling from her lip, and through the little coil of smoke she read the inscription. "To David, my Savior, from Joshua." Her eyes flashed on my face, and she smiled.

The words she'd read cut deep into me, but I would have none of it. I merely stared at her. This would take a little time.

"You're damned right," she said, "it's going to take time. Don't you think I want some of what she's getting. But let's talk about this here, Joshua, he was your lover, wasn't he? You were lovers with him and he died."

The pain I felt was exquisite, and for all my claim to enlightenment and self-knowledge, I was mortified that these words were spoken in Aaron's presence. Joshua had been young, and one of us.

She laughed a low, carnal laugh. "Course you can do women, too, if they're young enough, can't you?" she asked viciously.

"Where do you come from, Honey in the Sunshine?" I demanded.

"Don't call her by name," Aaron whispered.

"Oh, that's good advice, but it don't matter. I'm staying right where I

am. Now let's talk about you and that boy, Joshua. Seems he was mighty young when you—."

"Stop it," I said sharply.

"Don't talk to it, David," said Aaron under his breath. "Don't address it. Every time you talk to it, you give it strength."

A high pealing laughter erupted from the little woman at the dressing table. She shook her head and turned her body to face us completely, the hem of the slip riding up on her naked thighs.

"I'd say he was eighteen maybe," she said, looking at me with blazing eyes as she took the cigarette off her lip. "But you didn't know for sure, did you, David? You just knew you had to have him."

"Get out of Merrick," I said. "You don't belong in Merrick."

"Merrick's my sister!" she flashed. "I'll do what I want with her. She drove me crazy from the cradle, always reading my mind, telling me what I thought, telling me I made my own trouble, always blaming everything on me!"

She scowled at me and leant forward. I could see her nipples.

"You give yourself away for what you are," I said. "Or is it what you were?"

Suddenly she rose from the dressing table, and the left hand, free of the cigarette, swept all the bottles and the lamp off the right side of the table, with one fine blow.

There was a roar of shattered glass. The lamp went out with a loud spark. Two or more of the bottles were broken. The carpet was littered with sharp fragments. The room was filled with a powerful perfume.

She stood before us, her hand on her hip, the cigarette held high. She looked down at the bottles.

"Yeah, she likes those things!" she said.

Her posture became ever more suggestive, mocking. "And you do like what you see, don't you, David? She's just young enough for you. She's got some of the little boy left in her, don't she? Great Nananne knew you and what you wanted. And I know you too."

Her face was full of anger and very beautiful.

"You killed Joshua, didn't you?" she said in a low voice, eyes suddenly narrow, as if she was peering into my soul. "You let him go on that climb in the Himalayas—." She pronounced the word as I would have said it. "And you knew it was dangerous but you loved him so

much, you couldn't say no."

I could say nothing. The pain in me was too intense. I tried to banish all thoughts of Joshua. I tried not to think of the day when they had brought his body back to London. I tried to focus on the girl before me.

"Merrick," I said with all the strength I could muster, "Merrick, drive her out."

"You want me, and so do you, Aaron," she continued, the grin making her cheeks supple, her face flushing. "Either one of you'd tack me to that mattress if you thought you could."

I said nothing.

"Merrick," said Aaron loudly. "Cast her out. She means you no good, darling, cast her out!"

"You know what Joshua was thinking about you when he fell off that cliff?" she said.

"Stop it!" I cried.

"He was hating you for sending him, hating you for saying yes, he could go!"

"Liar!" I said. "Get out of Merrick."

"Don't you shout at me, Mister," she blazed back. She glanced down at the broken glass and tapped her ashes into it. "Now let's just see about fixing her good."

She took a step forward, right into the mess of broken glass and overturned bottles that lay between us.

I advanced on the figure.

"Stay back."

I seized her by the shoulders and forced her backwards. But it took all of my strength. Her skin was moist with sweat, and she squirmed out of my grasp.

"You don't think I can walk on glass in bare feet?" she said right in my face as she struggled to resist me. "You stupid old man," she went on, "now why would I want to cut Merrick's foot?"

I took hold of her, crushing the glass under my shoes.

"You're dead, aren't you, Honey in the Sunshine? You're dead, and you know it, and this is all the life you can get!"

For one moment the beautiful face went blank. The girl appeared to be Merrick. Then the eyebrows were raised again. The lids assumed their languid expression, making the eyes glitter.

"I'm here and I'm staying here."

"You're in the grave, Honey in the Sunshine," I answered. "That is, the body you want is in the grave, and all you've got is a vagrant spirit, now isn't that so!"

A look of fear flittered across her expression, and then the face hardened once more, as she freed herself from my hands.

"You know nothing about me, Mister," she said. She was baffled, as spirits often are. She couldn't keep the cocky expression on Merrick's face. Indeed, the whole body shuddered suddenly. The true Merrick was struggling.

"Come back, Merrick, throw her off, Merrick," I said. I stepped forward once again.

She moved back and towards the foot of the high bed. She turned the cigarette in her hand. She meant to jab me with it.

"You bet your life I do," she said, reading my thoughts. "I wish I had something I could really hurt you with. But I guess I'll have to settle for hurting her!"

She glanced about the room.

It was all I needed. I advanced on her and caught her by the shoulders, desperate to keep hold of her in spite of the sweat that covered her and her writhing to escape.

She shrieked. "You stop that, lemme go!" And she managed to grind the cigarette into the side of my face.

I reached for her hand, grabbed it and twisted it until she dropped the cigarette. She slapped me hard, so that for one moment I felt faint. Nevertheless, I held on to her slippery shoulders.

"That's it," she cried. "Hurt her, break her bones, why don't you just do that? Think it will make Joshua come back? Think he'll be any older for you, David, think it will make everything right?"

"Get out of Merrick!" I shouted. I could still hear the broken glass under my shoes. She was perilously close to it. I shook her hard, her head flopping from side to side.

She convulsed, wrenching free, and again there came a slap of awesome strength that all but knocked me off balance. For one split second I couldn't see.

I lunged at her and lifted her under the arms and threw her back on the bed. I knelt on the bed over her, gripping her still. She was

struggling to reach my face.

"Let her go, David," Aaron cried out behind me. And I heard the voice of Mary, suddenly, that other loyal member, begging me not to twist her wrist so hard.

Her fingers struggled to reach my eyes.

"You're dead, you know you are, you've got no right here," I roared at her. "Say it, you're dead, you're dead, and you've got to let Merrick go."

I felt her knee against my chest.

"Great Nananne, get her out!" I said.

"How dare you!" she screamed. "You think you can use my godmother against me." She caught my hair with her left hand and yanked at it.

Still I shook her.

And then I drew back, I let her go, and I called upon my own spirit, my own soul to make itself into a powerful instrument, and it was with that invisible instrument that I plunged towards her, striking her at the heart so that she lost her breath.

Get out, get out, get out! I commanded her with all the strength of my soul. I felt myself against her. I felt her collective power, as though there were no body to house it. I felt her resist. I had lost all contact with my own body. *Get out of Merrick. Go!*

A sob broke loose from her.

"There's no grave for us, you bastard, you devil," she cried. "There's no grave for me or my mother! You can't make me leave here!"

I looked down into her face, though where my own body had fallen—onto the floor or onto the bed—I didn't know.

Call on God under any name and go towards him! I told her. *Leave those bodies wherever they lie, do you hear me, leave them and go on. Now! It's your chance!*

Suddenly the strength that was resisting me contracted, and I felt its intense pressure dissolve. For one moment I thought I saw it, an amorphous shape rising above me. Then I realized I was lying on the floor.

I was staring up at the ceiling. And I could hear Merrick, our Merrick crying once more.

"They're dead, Mr. Talbot, they're dead, Cold Sandra's dead and so is Honey in the Sunshine, my sister, Mr. Talbot, they're both dead, they've

been dead since they left New Orleans, Mr. Talbot, all those four years of waiting, and they were dead the first night in Lafayette, Mr. Talbot, they're dead, dead, dead."

Slowly I climbed to my feet. There were cuts from the broken glass on my hands. I was physically sick.

The child on the bed had shut her eyes. Her lips weren't sneering, they were stretched back as she continued her plaintive wails.

Mary was quick to lay a thick robe over her. Aaron was at her side. She rolled on her back and made a face suddenly.

"I'm sick, Mr. Talbot," she said hoarsely.

"This way," I turned her over, away from the perilous glass, and lifted her and carried her into the bathroom in my arms. She leant over the sink, and the vomit poured out of her.

I was shuddering all over. My clothes were drenched.

Mary urged me to step aside. It seemed quite outrageous to me for a moment, and then I realized how it must have seemed to Mary.

And so I withdrew.

When I glanced at Aaron I was amazed at the expression on his face. He had seen many cases of possession. They are all terrible, each in its own way.

We waited in the hallway until Mary told us we might come in.

Merrick was dressed in a white cotton gown to receive us, her hair brushed to a marvelous brown luster, and her eyes rimmed in red, but otherwise quite clear. She was in the armchair in the corner, under the light of the tall lamp.

Her feet were safely protected with white satin slippers. But all the glass was gone. Indeed the dressing table looked quite fine with only one lamp and all of its intact bottles.

Merrick was still trembling, however, and when I approached her, she reached out and clasped my hand.

"Your shoulders will hurt for a little while," I said apologetically.

"Here's how they died," she said, looking at me and then at Aaron. "They went with all that money to buy a new car. The man who sold it to them picked them up, you know, and he went with them to Lafayette, and there he killed them for the cash they had. He knocked them both hard over the head."

I shook my head.

“Four years ago, it happened,” she said, going on intently, her mind on her story and nothing else. “It happened the very next day after they left. He beat them in a motel room in Lafayette and put their bodies in that car and drove it into the swamps. That car just filled up with water. If they woke up, they drowned. There’s nothing left of either one of them now.”

“Dear God,” I whispered.

“And all this time,” she said, “I was so guilty for being jealous, jealous that Cold Sandra had taken Honey in the Sunshine and left me behind. I was guilty and jealous, guilty and jealous. Honey in the Sunshine was my older sister. Honey in the Sunshine was sixteen and she was ‘no trouble,’ that’s what Cold Sandra told me. I was too little and she’d come back for me soon.”

She closed her eyes for a moment and took a deep breath.

“Where is she now?” I asked. Aaron let me know he had not been prepared for that. But I had to put the question to her.

For a very long time she made no response. She lay staring, her body shivering violently, and then finally, she said:

“She’s gone.”

“How did she come through?” I demanded.

Mary and Aaron shook their heads. “David, leave her for the moment,” said Aaron as politely as he could. I had no intention of dropping the matter. I had to know.

Again, there was no immediate answer. And then Merrick heaved a sigh and turned to one side.

“How did she come through?” I asked again.

Merrick’s face crumpled. She began very softly to cry.

“Please, Sir,” said Mary, “let her alone just now.”

“Merrick, how did Honey in the Sunshine come through?” I demanded. “Did you know she wanted to come through?”

Mary took a stand to Merrick’s left and glared at me.

I kept my eyes on the shivering girl.

“Did you ask her to come through?” I demanded softly.

“No, Mr. Talbot,” she said softly, her eyes drifting up to me again. “I prayed to Great Nananne. I prayed to her spirit while it was still near earth to hear me.” Her tired voice could barely carry the words. “Great Nananne sent her to tell me. Great Nananne will take care of them

both."

"Ah, I see."

"You know what I did," she continued. "I called on a spirit that had only just died. I called on a soul that was still close enough to help me, and I got Honey, I got more than I ever wanted to get. But that's how it works sometimes, Mr. Talbot. When you call on *les mystères* you don't always know what you're going to get."

"Yes," I responded. "I know. Do you remember all that happened?"

"Yes," she said, "and no. I remember your shaking me and I remember knowing what had happened, but I don't really remember all the time that ticked by while she was in me."

"I see," I said gratefully. "What do you feel now, Merrick?"

"Afraid of myself a little," she answered. "And I'm sorry she hurt you."

"Oh, darling, for the love of Heaven, don't think about me," I answered. "I'm only concerned with you."

"I know that, Mr. Talbot, but if it's any consolation to you, Joshua went into the Light when he died. He didn't hate you when he was falling down the mountain. Honey just made that up."

I was stunned. I could feel Mary's sudden embarrassment. I could see that Aaron was amazed.

"I'm sure of it," Merrick said. "Joshua's in Heaven. Honey just read all those things from your mind."

I couldn't answer her. At the risk of more suspicion and condemnation from the vigilant Mary, I leant over and kissed Merrick on the cheek.

"The nightmare's over," she said. "I'm free of them all. I'm free to begin."

And so our long journey with Merrick began.

10

It had not been easy for me to tell this story to Louis, and it was not finished. I had much more to say.

But as I paused, it was as if I had wakened to the parlor around me, and to Louis's attentive presence, and I felt both immediate comfort and crushing guilt. For a moment I stretched my limbs and I felt my vampiric strength in my veins.

We sat like two wholesome beings together, in the comfort of the glass-shaded lamps.

For the first time since I'd begun the story, I stared up at the paintings along the walls of the room. These were all wonderfully colored Impressionist treasures which Louis had long ago collected and once kept in a small uptown house, where he lived until Lestat burnt that house, and, in reconciliation, begged Louis to come and join him here.

I looked at a painting by Monet—one I'd come to neglect of late due to familiarity—a painting full of sunshine and greenery, of a woman at work on her needlepoint by a window under the limbs of delicate indoor trees. Like so many Impressionist paintings it was both highly intellectual, with its obvious brush strokes, and flagrantly domestic. And I let its stalwart sanctification of the ordinary soothe my suffering heart.

I wanted to feel our domesticity here in the Rue Royale. I wanted to feel morally safe, which of course I would never feel again.

It had exhausted my soul to revisit those times when I was a living mortal being, when I had taken the wet daytime heat of New Orleans for granted, when I'd been a trusted friend to Merrick, for that is what I had been, regardless of what Honey in the Sunshine had condemned me for being—with a boy named Joshua who had lived many, many years before.

As for that matter, Aaron and Mary never questioned me about it. But I knew that neither of them would ever look at me in the same way again. Joshua had been too young and I had been too old for the

relationship. And I had only confessed my transgressions—a precious few nights of love—to the Elders long after Joshua was dead. They had condemned me for it and charged me never to let such a thing occur again.

When I'd been appointed Superior General, the Elders had exacted a confirmation that I was well beyond such breaches of morality, and I had given it, humiliated that it had been mentioned again.

As for Joshua's death, I did blame myself for what happened to him. He had begged me to go on the climb, which itself was not terribly dangerous, to visit a shrine in the Himalayas which had been part of his study in Tibetan lore. Other members of the Order were with him and they came home safe. The fall had been the result of a small but sudden avalanche, as I understood it, and Joshua's body had not been recovered for several months.

Now as I reviewed these things for Louis, now as I pondered that I had approached the woman Merrick in my dark and eternal guise as a vampire, I felt the sharpest and most profound guilt. It wasn't something for which I could ever seek absolution. And it wasn't something that could prevent me from seeing Merrick again.

It had been done. I had asked Merrick to raise Claudia's ghost for us. And I had much more to tell Louis before the two could come together, and more within myself that had to be resolved.

All this while, Louis had listened without saying a word. With his finger curled under his lip, his elbow on the arm of the couch, he had merely studied me as I recounted the memories, and now he was eager for the tale to go on.

"I knew this woman was powerful," he said gently. "What I didn't know was how much you loved her."

I marveled at his customary manner of speaking, the melting quality of his voice and the way his words seemed barely to disturb the air.

"Ah, well, neither did I," I replied. "There were so many of us, bound together by love, in the Talamasca, and each one is a special case."

"But this woman, you truly love her," he pressed gently. "And I've asked you to go against your heart."

"Oh, no, you haven't," I confessed. I faltered. "It was inevitable that I contact the Talamasca," I insisted. "But it should have been contact with the Elders, in writing, and not this."

“Don’t condemn yourself so much for contacting her,” he said with an uncommon self-confidence. He seemed earnest and, as always, forever young.

“Why not?” I asked. “I had thought you were a specialist in guilt?”

He laughed politely at this, and then again made a silent chuckle. He shook his head.

“We have hearts, don’t we?” he replied. He shifted a little against the pillows of the couch. “You tell me you believe in God. That’s more than the others have ever said to me. Quite truly it is. What do you think God has planned for us?”

“I don’t know that God plans anything,” I said a little bitterly. “I know only that He’s there.”

I thought of how much I loved Louis, and had ever since I had become Lestat’s fledgling. I thought of how deeply I depended upon him, and what I would do for him. It was the love of Louis which had at times crippled Lestat, and enslaved Armand. Louis need have no consciousness of his own beauty, of his own obvious and natural charm.

“David, you have to forgive me,” he said suddenly. “I want so desperately to meet this woman myself that I urge you on for selfish reasons, but I mean it when I say that we do have hearts in every sense of the word.”

“Of course, you do,” I replied. “I wonder if angels have hearts,” I whispered. “Ah, but it doesn’t matter, does it? We are what we are.”

He didn’t answer me, but I saw his face darken for a moment and then he fell into reverie, with his habitual expression of curiosity and quiet grace.

“But when it comes to Merrick,” I said, “I have to face that I’ve contacted her because I need her desperately. I could not have gone on for long without contacting her. Every night that I spend in New Orleans, I think of Merrick. Merrick haunts me as though she was a ghost herself.”

“Tell me the rest of your story,” Louis prodded. “And, if when you’re finished you wish to conclude the matter with Merrick—end the contact, so to speak—then I shall accept it without another word.”

11

I went on with my tale, flashing back once more some twenty years, to the summer of Merrick's fourteenth year.

It wasn't hard for the Talamasca to enfold such a friendless orphan as one could easily see.

In the days following Great Nananne's funeral, we discovered that Merrick had no legal identity of any kind, save for a valid passport obtained through the testimony of Cold Sandra that Merrick was her daughter. The last name was an assumed name.

Where and how Merrick's birth might have been recorded eluded our most diligent efforts. No baptism of Merrick Mayfair was recorded in any parish church in New Orleans for the year of Merrick's birth. Few pictures of her existed in the boxes which she had brought with us.

And indeed, no record of Cold Sandra or Honey in the Sunshine existed other than passports which were both under assumed names. Though we calculated a year of death for the two unfortunates, we could find nothing in the newspapers of Lafayette, Louisiana, or anywhere near it to indicate that murdered bodies had been found.

In sum, the Talamasca began with a blank slate for Merrick Mayfair, and using its immense resources it soon created for her the documentation of birth and age which the modern world requires. As for the matter of Catholic baptism, Merrick was adamant that she had indeed been given the sacrament as an infant—Great Nananne had "carried her to church"—and as late as only a few years before I left the Order, Merrick still combed church records, in vain, for proof of this herself.

I never fully understood the significance of this baptism to Merrick, but then there were many things about Merrick which I never came to understand. One thing I can say for certain, however. Magic and Roman Catholicism were completely intermingled for Merrick and this remained so all her life.

As for the gifted and kindhearted man named Matthew, he was not difficult to trace at all.

Matthew had been, in fact, an Olmec archaeologist, and when polite inquiries were made among his survivors in Boston, it was quickly ascertained that a woman named Sandra Mayfair had lured him to New Orleans by means of a letter some five years before regarding some Olmec treasure for which the woman claimed to have directions and a rough hand-drawn map. Cold Sandra claimed to have been given an article about Matthew's amateur adventures by her daughter Merrick, who came upon it in *Time* magazine.

Though Matthew's mother was seriously ill at the time, Matthew had made the journey south with her blessing, and had set out on a private expedition beginning in Mexico. He was never seen by anyone in the family alive again.

As for the expedition, Matthew had kept a journal by means of long impassioned letters addressed to his mother, which he had mailed all in a batch upon his return to the States.

After Matthew's death, in spite of the woman's determined efforts, no scholars in the field of Olmec studies could be interested in what Matthew claimed to have seen or found.

The mother had died, leaving all these papers to her sister, who did not know what to make of "the responsibility" and quickly decided to sell Matthew's papers to us for a liberal sum. Those papers included a small box of vivid color photographs sent to the mother, many of which included Cold Sandra and Honey in the Sunshine, both extraordinarily beautiful women, as well as the ten-year-old child, Merrick, who did not resemble the other two.

As Merrick had risen from a week of torpor and was deep in her studies, and fascinated with her education in etiquette, it was no great pleasure for me to give her these photographs and letters for her private store.

She showed no emotion, however, when confronted with the snapshots of her mother and her sister. And preserving her usual silence on the question of Honey in the Sunshine, who appeared to be about sixteen in the pictures, she put all of this aside.

As for me, I spent some time with the pictures.

Cold Sandra was tall and tawny with very black hair and light eyes. As

for Honey in the Sunshine, she appeared to fulfill all the expectations engendered by that name. Her skin in the photographs did appear to be the color of honey, her eyes were yellow as were her mother's, and her hair, light blond and tightly curly, fell down around her shoulders like foam. Her facial features appeared entirely Anglo-Saxon. The same was true of Cold Sandra.

As for Merrick in the photographs, she appeared very much as she did when she came to our door. She was already the budding woman at the age of ten, and appeared somehow to be of a quieter nature, the other two often hanging upon Matthew and smiling as they embraced him for the eager lens. Merrick was frequently captured with a solemn face, and most often alone.

Of course these pictures revealed much of the rain forest into which they'd penetrated, and there were even poor-quality flash shots of bizarre cave paintings which appeared neither Olmec nor Maya, though my opinion might very well have been wrong. As for the exact location, Matthew refused to reveal it, using terms such as "Village One" and "Village Two."

Given Matthew's lack of specificity, and the bad condition of the photographs, it wasn't difficult to see why archaeologists had not been interested in his claims.

With Merrick's consent, and in secrecy, we enlarged every photograph of any value, but the quality of the originals defeated us. And we lacked concrete information as to how the journey could be made again. But of one thing I was fairly sure. The initial flight might have been to Mexico City, but the cave was not in Mexico at all.

There was a map, yes, drawn with an unsteady hand in black ink on common modern parchment paper, but it gave no place names, only a diagram involving "The City" and the aforementioned Village One and Village Two. We had it copied for preservation's sake, as the parchment paper was badly damaged and torn at the edges. But it was hardly a significant clue.

It was tragic to read the enthusiastic letters which Michael had sent home.

I shall never forget the first letter he wrote to his mother after the discovery. The woman was very ill, and had only just learnt that her case was terminal, news which had reached Matthew somewhere along

the route, though we had no indication of where precisely, and Matthew had begged her please to wait for him to come home. Indeed, it was on that account that he had cut the journey short, taking only some of the treasure, a great deal of which remained.

"If only you'd been with me," he wrote, or words to that effect.

> And can you imagine me, your gangly and awkward son, plunging into the pure darkness of a ruined temple and finding these strange murals which defy classification? Not Maya, certainly not Olmec. But by and for whom? And in the very midst of this, my flashlight slips out of my hands as if someone snatched it from me. And darkness shrouds the most splendid and unusual paintings I've ever seen.
>
> But no sooner had we left the temple, than we must climb the rocks beside the waterfall, with Cold Sandra and Honey leading the way. It was in back of the waterfall that we found the cave, though I suspect it might have been a tunnel, and there was no mistaking it because the mammoth volcanic boulders around it had been carved into a giant face with an open mouth.
>
> Of course we had no light with us—Cold Sandra's flashlight was drenched—and we were near to fainting from the heat when we got inside. Cold Sandra and Honey were fearful of spirits and claimed to be "feeling" them. Merrick has even spoken up on this subject, blaming the spirits for a bad fall she took on the rocks.
>
> Yet tomorrow, we'll be making the entire trek again. For now, let me say again what I saw by the sunshine that made its way into temple and cave. Unique paintings, I tell you, in both places, which must be studied at once. But in the cave there were also hundreds of glistening jade objects, just waiting for a scoop of the hand.
>
> How in the world such treasures have survived the usual thievery in these parts, I can't guess. Of course the local Maya deny all knowledge of such a place, and I'm not eager to enlighten them. They are kind to us, offering us food and drink and hospitality. But the shaman appears angry with us, but will not tell us the reason. I live and breathe only to go back.

Matthew never did go back. During the night he had grown feverish and his very next letter recorded the regret with which he set out for civilization, thinking his illness was something that could easily be cured.

How awful it was that this curious and generous man had fallen ill.

A mysterious insect bite had been the culprit, but that was not discovered until he'd reached "The City," as he called it, careful to use no key description or name. His last batch of letters was written from the hospital in New Orleans, and mailed by the nurses at his request.

"Mother, there is nothing that can be done. No one is even certain of the nature of the parasite, except that it has made its way throughout my internal organs, and has proved itself refractory to every medicine known to man. I wonder sometimes if the local Maya might have helped me with this ailment. They were so very kind. But then the natives have probably long been immune."

His very last letter was completed on the day he prepared to return to Great Nananne's house. The script had degenerated, as Matthew was suffering one violent chill after another, but obviously determined to write. His news was marked by the same strange mixture of resignation and denial which so often afflicts the dying:

"You cannot believe the sweetness of Sandra and Honey and Great Nananne. Of course, I've done everything I can to lighten their burden. All of those artifacts which we discovered on the expedition are by right the property of Sandra, and I will attempt a revised catalog once I reach the house. Perhaps Great Nananne's nursing will work some miracle. I'll write to you when I have good news."

The only remaining letter in the collection was from Great Nananne. It was in beautiful convent script, written with a fountain pen, and stated that Matthew had died "with the Sacraments," and that his suffering had not been very great at the end. She signed herself Irene Flaurent Mayfair.

Tragic. I can find no better word.

Indeed, there seemed a ring of tragedy surrounding Merrick, what with the murders of Cold Sandra and Honey, and I could well understand why Matthew's collected papers did not tear her away from her studies, or away from her frequent lunches and shopping trips in town.

She was also indifferent to the renovation of Great Nananne's old

house, which did indeed belong to Great Nananne with proper title, and was passed on to Merrick by means of a handwritten will, which was handled for us by a skilled local lawyer with no questions asked.

The renovation was historically accurate and quite extensive, involving two expert contractors in the field. Merrick did not want to visit the house at all. The house, to my knowledge, does belong to Merrick officially, right now.

By the end of that long ago summer, Merrick had an immense wardrobe, though she was growing taller with every passing day. She favored expensive well-made dresses with lots of stitching, and visibly worked fabrics such as the white pique which I already described. When she began to appear at supper in graceful high heeled shoes, I was personally and secretly distraught.

I am not a man who loves women of any age, but the sight of her foot, its arch so delicately stretched by the height of the heel, and of her leg, so taut from the pressure, was quite enough to send the most unwelcome and erotic thoughts through my brain.

As for her Chanel No. 22, she had begun to wear it daily. Even those who claimed to be annoyed by perfume rather liked it and came to associate it with her ever genial presence, her questions and steady conversation, her hunger for knowledge about all things.

She had a wondrous grasp of the fundamentals of grammar, which greatly assisted her in learning to read and write French, after which learning Latin was something of a snap. As for mathematics, she detested it, and suspected it somewhat—the theory was simply beyond her—but she was clever enough to absorb the fundamentals. Her enthusiasm for literature was as great as that of anyone I've ever known. She ripped through Dickens and Dostoyevsky, talking about the characters with easy familiarity and endless fascination as though they lived down the street from her house. As for magazines, she was enthralled by the art and archaeology periodicals to which we subscribed routinely, and went on to devour the standards of pop culture, as well as the news magazines she'd always loved.

Indeed, Merrick remained convinced all her young years, as I knew her, that reading was the key to all things. She claimed to understand England simply because she read the London *Times* every day. As for the history of Mesoamerica, she fell in love with it, though she never asked

to see the suitcase of her own treasures at all.

With her own writing she made wondrous progress, soon developing something of an old-fashioned hand. It was her aim to shape her letters as Great Nananne had shaped hers. And Merrick succeeded, being able to keep copious diaries with ease.

Understand, she was not a genius of a child, but merely one of considerable intelligence and talent, who after years of frustration and boredom had seized her opportunity at last. There was no impediment in her to knowledge. She resented no one's seeming superiority. Indeed, she absorbed every influence that she could.

Oak Haven, having no other child in its midst, delighted in her. The giant boa constrictor became a favorite pet.

Aaron and Mary took Merrick into the city frequently to the local municipal museum, and often made the short flight to Houston to expose her to the splendid museums and galleries of that southern capital as well.

As for me, I had to go back to England several times during that fateful summer. I much resented it. I had come to love the New Orleans Motherhouse, and I did seek every excuse to remain. I wrote long reports to the Elders of the Talamasca, admitting to this weakness, but explaining, well, pleading perhaps, that I needed to become better acquainted with this strange part of America which didn't seem American at all.

The Elders were indulgent. I had plenty of time to spend with Merrick. However, one letter from them cautioned me not to become overly fond of this "little girl." This stung me because I misinterpreted it. I made an avowal of my purity. The Elders wrote back: "David, we don't doubt your purity; children can be fickle; we were thinking of your heart."

Aaron, meantime, cataloged all Merrick's possessions and eventually established a full room in one of the outbuildings to contain the statues which had been taken from her shrines.

Not one but several medieval codices made up the legacy of Oncle Vervain. There was no explanation as to how he had acquired these books. But there was evidence that he had used them, and in some we found his notes in pencil along with certain dates.

In one carton from Great Nananne's attic were a whole cache of printed books on magic, all published in the 1800s, when the

“paranormal” had been such the rage in London and on the Continent, what with mediums and séances and such. These had their pencil markings as well.

We found also a great disintegrating scrapbook crammed with brittle yellowed newspaper clippings, all from New Orleans, which told tales of Voodoo attributed to “the local Doctor of much renown, Jerome Mayfair,” whom Merrick identified for us as Oncle Vervain’s grandfather, The Old Man. Indeed, all of New Orleans had known about him and there were many quaint little stories of Voodoo meetings broken up by the local police at which many “white ladies” were arrested, as well as women of color, and blacks.

The most tragic of all discoveries, however, and the one which was of the least use to us as an Order of Psychic Detectives—if that is what we are—was the diary of the colored daguerreotypist who was too far back in the lineage for a direct connection in Merrick’s account. It was a quiet, friendly document, created by one Laurence Mayfair, mentioning, among other things, the daily weather in the city, the number of customers at the studio, and other small local events.

It recorded a happy life, I felt certain, and we took the time to copy it very carefully and send that copy to the local university, where such a document by a man of color before the Civil War would be given its just due.

In time, many similar documents, as well as copies of photographs, were sent on to various Southern universities, but such steps were always taken—for Merrick’s sake—with great care.

Merrick was absent from the accompanying letters. She really did not want the material traced to her personally because she did not want to explain her family to those outside the Order, and I think she feared, and perhaps rightly, that her presence with us might be questioned as well.

“They need to know about our people,” she’d say at table, “but they don’t need to know about me.”

She was greatly relieved that we did what we did, but she was launched now into another world. She would never be that tragic child again who had showed the daguerreotypes to me the first evening.

She was Merrick the student who pored over her books for hours, Merrick the passionate arguer of politics, before, during, and after the television news. She was Merrick who owned seventeen pairs of shoes,

and changed them three times a day. She was Merrick, the Catholic, who insisted on going to Mass every Sunday even if a Biblical inundation were falling upon the plantation and the nearby church.

Of course I was pleased to see these things, though I knew many recollections lay dormant inside her and must someday be resolved.

Finally, it was late fall, and I had no choice but to return to London for good. Merrick had another six months of study planned before she'd be sent to Switzerland, and our parting was tearful to say the least.

I was no longer Mr. Talbot, but David, as I was to many other members, and, as we waved goodbye to each other at the doorway of the plane, I saw Merrick cry again for the first time since that awful night when she'd cast off the ghost of Honey in the Sunshine and broken into sobs.

It was dreadful. I couldn't wait for the plane to land so that I could write her a letter.

And for months her frequent letters were the most interesting aspect of my life.

By February of the following year, Merrick was on a plane with me for Geneva. Though the weather made her hopelessly forlorn, she studied diligently at school, dreaming of summers spent in Louisiana, or of the many vacation trips which took her to the tropics which she loved.

One year she went back to Mexico, during the worst of all seasons, to see the Maya ruins, and it was that summer that she confided to me that we had to make the return trip to the cave.

"I'm not ready to retrace my steps," she said, "but the moment will come. I know that you've saved everything that Matthew wrote on the subject, and understand that I may be guided on that journey by others besides Matthew. But do not worry. It's too soon for us to go."

The next year she visited Peru, then after that Rio de Janeiro, and always back to school when fall came. She did not make friends easily in Switzerland, and we did all we could to convey upon her a sense of normality, but the very nature of the Talamasca is unique and secretive and I'm not sure we were always successful at making her feel at ease with others at school.

At age eighteen, Merrick informed me by official letter that she was more than positive that she wished to spend her life in the Talamasca, even though we assured her that we would educate her no matter what

her choice. She was admitted as a postulant, which is for us a very young member, and she went to Oxford to begin her university years.

I was thrilled to have her in England. I met her plane and was astonished by the tall graceful young woman who flew into my arms. She lodged at the Motherhouse every weekend. Once again the chilly weather oppressed her dreadfully, but she wanted to remain.

On weekends we would take side trips to Canterbury Cathedral or Stonehenge or Glastonbury, whatever her fancy. It was interesting talk all the way. Her New Orleans accent—I call it that for want of a better term—had left her completely, she had surpassed me utterly in her knowledge of the Classics, her Greek was perfect, and she could speak Latin with other members of the Order, a rare talent in one of her time.

She became a specialist in Coptic, translating volumes of Coptic magical texts which the Talamasca had owned for centuries. She was deep into the history of magic, assuring me of the obvious, that magic all over the world and in every era is pretty much the same.

She often fell asleep in the Motherhouse library, her face on her book on the table. She'd lost her interest in clothes except for a few very pretty and ultrafeminine garments, and, intermittently, she bought and wore those fatal very high heeled shoes.

As for her liking for Chanel No. 22, nothing ever inhibited her from wearing a great deal of the scent in her hair and on her skin and her clothing. Most of us found it very delicious, and no matter where I was in the Motherhouse, I knew, by the rise of this delightful scent, when Merrick had come through the front door.

On her twenty-first birthday, my personal gift to Merrick was a triple string of natural and perfectly matched white pearls. Of course it cost a fortune, but I didn't care. I had a fortune. She was deeply touched by it, and to all important functions within the Order she always wore the necklace, whether attired in a black silk shirtwaist dress of magnificent angles and fullness—her favorite for such evenings—or a more casual dark wool suit.

Merrick was by this time a famous beauty, and the young members were always falling in love with her and complaining bitterly that she repelled their advances and even their praise. Merrick never spoke of love, or of men who were interested in her. And I had come to suspect that she was enough of a mind reader to feel very much isolated and

alienated, even within our hallowed halls.

I was hardly immune to her appeal. At times, I found it downright difficult to be in her presence, so fresh and lovely and inviting did she seem. She had a way of looking luscious in austere garments, her breasts large and high, her legs rounded and tapered exquisitely beneath her modest hem.

There was one trip to Rome on which I became miserable in my desire for her. I cursed the fact that age had not yet delivered me from such torment, and did all that I could so that she might never guess. I think she knew it, however, and in her own way, she was merciless.

She once let slip, after a sumptuous dinner at the Hassler Hotel, that she found me the only truly interesting man in her life.

"Bad luck, wouldn't you say, David?" she had asked me pointedly. The return to the table of two other Talamasca comrades had cut the conversation short. I was flattered but deeply disturbed. I couldn't have her, it was quite out of the question, and that I wanted her so much came as a terrible surprise.

At some point, after that Roman trip, Merrick devoted some time in Louisiana to recording the entire history of her family—that is, what she knew of her people, quite apart from their occult powers, and, together with quality copies of all of her daguerreotypes and photographs, she made this available to several universities for whatever use they might desire. Indeed, the family history—without Merrick's name, and indeed minus several key names—is now part of several important collections concerning the "*gens de couleur libres,*" or the history of black families in the south.

Aaron told me that the project exhausted Merrick emotionally, but she had said *les mystères* were haunting her, and it had to be done. Lucy Nancy Marie Mayfair demanded it; indeed so did Great Nananne. So did white Oncle Julien Mayfair from uptown. But when Aaron prodded as to whether she was really being haunted, or merely respect-ful, Merrick said nothing except that it was time to go back to work overseas.

As for her own Afro-American blood, Merrick was always quite frank about it and sometimes surprised others by discussing it. But almost without exception, in every situation, she passed for white.

For two years, Merrick studied in Egypt. Nothing could lure her away from Cairo, until she began an impassioned investigation of Egyptian

and Coptic documents throughout the museums and libraries of the globe. I remember going through the dim and grimy Cairo Museum with her, loving her inevitable infatuation with Egyptian mystery, and that trip ended with her getting completely drunk and passing out after supper in my arms. Fortunately I was almost as drunk as she was. I think we woke up together, each properly dressed, lying side by side on her bed.

In fact, Merrick had already become something of a famous though occasional drunk. And more than once she had wrapped her arms around me and kissed me in a way that thoroughly invigorated me and left me in despair.

I refused her seeming invitations. I told myself, and probably rightly so, that I was partly imagining her desire. Besides, I was old then obviously, and for a young person to think that she wants you when you're old is one thing; to actually follow through with it is quite another affair. What had I to offer her but a host of minor inevitable physical debilities? I did not dream then of Body Thieves who would bequeath to me the form of a young man.

And I must confess that, years later, when I did find myself in possession of this young man's corpus, I did think of Merrick. Oh, indeed, I did think of Merrick. But by then I was in love with a supernatural being, our inimitable Lestat, and he blinded me even to memories of Merrick's charms.

Enough said on that damned subject! Yes, I desired her, but my task is to return to the story of the woman I know today. Yes, Merrick, the brave and brilliant member of the Talamasca, that is the story I have to tell:

Long before computers were so very common, she had mastered them for her own writing and was soon heard to be tapping away at fantastical speed on her keyboard late into the night. She published hundreds of translations and articles for our members, and many, under a pseudonym, in the outside world.

Of course we are very careful in sharing all such learning. It is not our purpose to be noticed; but there are things which we do not feel we can keep to ourselves. We would never have insisted on a pseudonym, however; but Merrick was as secretive about her own identity as ever she was as a child.

Meanwhile, as regards the "uptown Mayfairs" of New Orleans, she showed little interest in them personally, hardly bothering with the few records we recommended that she read. They were never her people, really, no matter what she might have thought of "Oncle Julien" appearing in Great Nananne's dream. Also, no matter what one might observe about the "powers" of those Mayfairs, they have in this century almost no interest at all in "ritual magic," and that was Merrick's chosen field.

Of course nothing of Merrick's possessions had ever been sold. There was no reason to sell anything. It would have been absurd.

The Talamasca is so very rich that the expenses of one person, such as Merrick, mean virtually nothing, and Merrick, even when she was very young, was devoted to the projects of the Order and worked of her own free will in the archives to update records, make translations, and identify and label articles very similar to those Olmec treasures which belonged to her.

If ever a member of the Talamasca earned her own way, it was Merrick, almost to a degree which put us to shame. Therefore, if Merrick wanted a shopping spree in New York or Paris, no one was likely to deny it. And when she chose a black Rolls Royce sedan as her personal car, soon establishing a small worldwide collection of them, no one thought it a bad idea at all.

Merrick was some twenty-four years old before she approached Aaron about taking stock of the occult collection she had brought to the Order ten years before.

I remember it because I remember Aaron's letter.

"Never has she shown the slightest interest," he wrote:

> and you know how this has worried me. Even when she made her family history and sent it off to various scholars, she did not touch upon the occult heritage at all. But this afternoon she confided to me that she has had several "important" dreams about her childhood, and that she must return to Great Nananne's house. Together with our driver we made the trip back to the old neighborhood, a sad journey indeed.
>
> The district has sunk considerably lower, I think, than she could have imagined, and I believe the shattered ruin of the

"corner bar" and the "corner store" took her quite by surprise. As for the house, it has been splendidly maintained by the man who lives on the premises, and Merrick spent almost an hour, alone by choice, in the rear yard.

There the caretaker had made a patio, and the shed is virtually empty. Nothing remains of the temple, naturally, except the brightly painted center post.

She said nothing to me afterwards, absolutely refusing to discuss these dreams of hers in any detail.

She expressed extreme gratitude to me that we'd kept the house for her, during her period of "negligence," and I hoped this might be the end of it.

But at supper, I was quite astonished to hear that she planned to move back into the house and spend part of her time there from now on. She wanted all the old furniture, she told me. She'd supervise the arrangements herself.

"What about the neighborhood?" I found myself asking weakly, to which she replied with a smile, "I was never afraid of the neighbors. You'll soon discover, Aaron, that the neighbors will become afraid of me." Not to be outdone, I quipped, "And suppose some stranger should try to murder you, Merrick," to which she fired back, "Heaven help the man or woman who would attempt such a thing."

Merrick was as good as her word, and did move back to the "old neighborhood," but not before building a caretaker's quarters above the old shed.

The two miserably rundown houses which flanked the house were purchased and demolished, and brick walls went up around three sides of the enormous lot and along the front, coming to meet the high iron picket fence directly before the facade. There was always to be a man on the property; some sort of alarm system was installed; flowers were planted. Feeders were put out for the hummingbirds once more. It all sounded quite wholesome, and natural, but having once seen that house, I was still chilled by frequent stories of how Merrick came and went.

The Motherhouse remained her true home, but many afternoons, according to Aaron, she disappeared into New Orleans and did not

return for several days.

"The house is now quietly spectacular," Aaron wrote to me. "All the furniture was of course repaired and refinished, and Merrick has claimed Great Nananne's mammoth four-poster for her own. The floors of heart pine have been beautifully redone, giving the house a rather amber glow. Nevertheless, it worries me dreadfully that Merrick secludes herself there for days on end."

Naturally, I myself wrote to Merrick, broaching the subject of the dreams that had motivated her return to the house.

"I want to tell you about these things but it is too soon," Merrick replied immediately.

> Let me say only that in these dreams it is Great-Oncle Vervain who talks with me. Sometimes I'm a child again as I was on the day he died. Other times we are adults together. And it seems, though I cannot with uniform success remember everything, in one dream we were both young.
>
> For now, you mustn't worry. You must realize that it was inevitable that I should return to my childhood home. I am of an age when people become curious about the past, especially when it has been sealed off so successfully and abruptly as was mine.
>
> Understand, I do not feel guilt for having abandoned the house where I grew up. It is only that my dreams are telling me that I must return. They tell me other things as well.

These letters worried me, but Merrick gave only brief responses to my queries.

Aaron had also become concerned. Merrick was spending less and less time at Oak Haven. Often he made the drive into New Orleans to call upon her at the old house, that is, until Merrick asked to be left alone.

Of course, such a manner of living is not uncommon among Talamasca members. Frequently they divide their time between the Motherhouse and a private family home. I had and still do have a home in the Cotswolds in England. But it is not a good sign when a Member absents herself from the Order for long periods of time. In Merrick's case it was particularly disturbing due to her frequent and cryptic mentions of her

dreams.

During the fall of that fateful year, her twenty-fifth, Merrick wrote to me about a journey to the cave.

Let me continue with my reconstruction here of her words:

"David, I no longer sleep through the night without a dream of my Great-Oncle Vervain. Yet less and less am I able to recall the substance of these dreams. I know only that he wants me to return to the cave I visited in Central America when I was a child. David, I must do this. Nothing can prevent it. The dreams have become a form of obsession, and I ask that you not bombard me with logical objections to what you know I must do."

She went on to talk about her treasure.

> I have been through all of the so-called Olmec treasures, and I know now they are not Olmec at all. In fact, I can't identify them, though I have every published book or catalog on antiquities in that part of the world. As for the destination itself, I have what I remember, and some writings by my Oncle Vervain, and the papers of Matthew Kemp, my beloved stepfather of years ago.
>
> I want you to make this journey with me, though certainly we cannot attempt it without others. Please answer me as quickly as you can as to whether you are willing. If not, I will organize a party on my own.

Now, I was almost seventy years of age when I received this letter, and her words presented quite a challenge to me, and one which I didn't welcome at all. Though I longed for the jungles, longed for the experience, I was quite concerned that it was beyond my ability to make such a trip.

Merrick went on to explain that she had spent many hours going through the artifacts retrieved on her girlhood journey.

"They are indeed older," she wrote, "than those objects which archaeologists call Olmec, though they undoubtedly share many common traits with that civilization and would be called Olmec-oid due to their style. Elements we might call Asian or Chinese proliferate in these artifacts, and then there is the matter of the alien cave-paintings

which Matthew managed to photograph as best he could. I must investigate these things personally. I must try to arrive at some conclusion regarding the involvement of my Oncle Vervain in this part of the world."

I called her that night from London.

"Look, I'm entirely too old to go off into that jungle," I said, "if it's even still there. You know they're cutting down the rain forests. It might be farmland by now. Besides, I'd slow you down no matter what the terrain."

"I want you to come with me," she said softly, coaxingly. "David, please do this. We can move at your pace, and when it comes time to make the climb in the waterfall, I can do that part alone.

"David, you were in the jungles of the Amazon years ago. You know this sort of experience. Imagine us now with every microchip convenience. Cameras, flashlights, camping equipment; we'll have every luxury. David, come with me. You can remain in the village if you like. I'll go on to the waterfall alone. With a modern four-wheel drive vehicle, it will be nothing at all."

Well it wasn't nothing at all.

A week later I arrived in New Orleans, determined to argue her out of the excursion. I was driven directly to the Motherhouse, a little disturbed that neither Aaron nor Merrick had come to meet my plane.

12

Aaron greeted me at the door.

"Merrick's at her house in New Orleans. The caretaker says she's been drinking. She will not talk to him. I've called every hour since morning. The phone simply rings and rings."

"Why didn't you tell me this was happening?" I demanded. I was deeply concerned.

"Why? So you'd worry about it all the way across the Atlantic? I knew you were coming. I know you're the only one who can reason with her when she's in this state."

"Whatever in the world makes you think so?" I argued. But it was true. Sometimes I could talk Merrick into ending her binges. But not always.

Whatever the case, I bathed, changed clothes, as the early winter weather was unseasonably warm, and set out in a drowsy evening shower, with the car and driver, for Merrick's house.

It was dark when I got there, but even so, I could see that the neighborhood had deteriorated beyond my wildest speculation. It seemed as if a war had been lost in the district, and the survivors had no choice but to live among hopeless wooden ruins tumbling down into the eternal giant weeds. Here and there was a well-kept shotgun house with a bright coat of paint and some gingerbread trim beneath its roof. But dim lights shone through heavily barred windows. Abandoned cottages were being dismantled by the rampant greenery. The area was derelict and obviously dangerous as well.

It seemed to me that I could sense people prowling about in the darkness. I detested the feeling of fear which had been so uncommon in me in my youth. Old age had taught me to respect danger. As I said, I hated it. I remember hating the thought that I wouldn't ever be able to accompany Merrick on this insane journey to the Central American jungles, and I'd be humiliated as the result.

At last the car stopped at Merrick's house.

The lovely old raised cottage, painted a fresh shade of tropical pink with white trim, appeared rather wonderful behind the high iron picket fence. The new brick walls were thick and very high as they embraced the property on either side. A bank of densely flowering oleander behind the iron pickets shielded the house somewhat from the squalor of the street.

As the caretaker greeted me, and brought me up the front steps, I saw that Merrick's long windows were well barred also, in spite of their white lace curtains and shades, and that lights were on throughout the house.

The porch was clean; the old square pillars were solid; the leaded glass sparkled within the twin windows of the polished double doors. A wave of remembrance passed over me, nevertheless.

"She won't answer the bell, Sir," said the caretaker, a man I scarcely noticed in my haste. "But the door's unlocked for you. I took her some supper at five o'clock."

"She asked for her supper?" I inquired.

"No, Sir, she never said anything. But she ate the food. I picked up the dishes at six."

I opened the door and found myself in the comfortable air-cooled front hall. I saw at once that the old parlor and dining room to my right had been splendidly refurnished with rather bright Chinese carpets. A modern sheen covered the old furniture. The old mirrors above the white marble mantels were as dark as they had ever been.

To my left lay the front bedroom; Great Nananne's bed was dressed with an ivory white canopy and a counterpane of heavy crocheted lace.

In a polished wooden rocking chair before the bed, facing the front windows, sat Merrick, a wobbling light easily illuminating her thoughtful face.

There was a bottle of Flor de Cañ a rum on the little candlestand table beside her.

She lifted the glass to her lips, drank from it, and then sat back, continuing to stare off as if she didn't know that I was there.

I stopped at the threshold.

"Darling," I said, "aren't you going to offer me a drink?"

Without so much as turning her head, she smiled.

“You never liked straight rum, David,” she said softly. “You’re a Scotch man like my old stepfather, Matthew. It’s in the dining room. How about some Highland Macallan? Twenty-five years old. That good enough for my beloved Superior General?”

“I should say so, gracious lady,” I replied. “But never mind that just now. May I step into your boudoir?”

She uttered a small pretty laugh. “Sure, David,” she said, “come on in.”

I was startled as soon as I looked to my left. A large marble altar had been erected between the two front windows, and I saw there the old multitude of sizable plaster saints. The Virgin Mary wore her crown and the vestments of Mount Carmel, holding the radiant Baby Jesus beneath her innocent smile.

Some elements had been added. I realized they were the Three Magi of Christian scripture and lore. The altar was no Christmas crèche, you understand. The Magi or Wise Men had merely been included in a large panoply of sacred figures, more or less on their own terms.

I spied several of the mysterious jade idols among the saints, including one very mean little idol which held its scepter quite ready for duty or attack.

Two other rather vicious little characters flanked the large statue of St. Peter. And there before them lay the green jade hummingbird perforator, or knife, one of the most beautiful artifacts in Merrick’s large cache.

The gorgeous axe of obsidian which I had seen years ago was given a place of prominence between the Virgin Mary and the Arc Angel Michael. It had a lovely luster in the dim light.

But perhaps the most surprising contents of the altar were the daguerreotypes and old photographs of Merrick’s people, ranged thickly as any display upon a parlor piano, the multitude of faces lost in the gloom.

A double row of candles burned before the entire array, and there were fresh flowers aplenty, in numerous vases. Everything appeared dusted and quite clean. That is, until I realized that the shriveled hand had its place among the offerings. It stood out against the white marble, curled and hideous, very much as it had seemed when I first saw it long ago.

“For old times’ sake?” I asked, gesturing to the altar.

“Don’t be absurd,” she said under her breath. She lifted a cigarette to her lips. I saw by the box on the little table that it was Rothmans, Matthew’s old brand. My old brand as well. I knew her to be a smoker now and then, rather like I was myself.

Nevertheless, I found myself looking hard at her. Was she really my beloved Merrick? My skin had begun to crawl, as they say, a feeling I detest.

“Merrick?” I asked.

When she looked up at me, I knew it was she and no one else inside her handsome young body, and I knew that she wasn’t very drunk at all.

“Sit down, David, my dear,” she said sincerely, almost sadly. “The armchair’s comfortable. I’m really glad you came.”

I was much relieved by the familiarity of her tone. I crossed the room, in front of her, and settled in the armchair from which I could easily see her face. The altar loomed over my right shoulder, with all those tiny photographic faces staring at me, as they had long ago. I found that I did not like it, did not like the many indifferent saints and the subdued Wise Men, though I had to admit that the spectacle was dazzling to my eyes.

“Why must we go off to these jungles, Merrick?” I asked. “Whatever made you decide to drop everything for such an idea?”

She didn’t answer immediately. She took a drink of rum from her glass, her eyes focused on the altar.

This gave me time to note that a huge portrait of Oncle Vervain hung on the far wall beside the door through which I’d entered the room.

I knew it at once to be an expensive enlargement of the likeness Merrick had revealed to us years ago. The processing had been true to the sepia tones of the portrait, and Oncle Vervain, a young man in his prime, resting his elbow comfortably on the Greek column, appeared to be staring directly at me with bold brilliant light eyes.

Even in the shuddering gloom, I could see his handsome broad nose and beautifully shaped full lips. As for the light eyes, they gave the face a certain frightening aspect, though I wasn’t certain whether or not I ought to have felt such a thing.

“I see you came to continue the argument,” Merrick said. “There can be no argument for me, David. I have to go and now.”

“You haven’t convinced me. You know very well I won’t let you journey into that part of the world without the support of the Talamasca,

but I want to understand—."

"Oncle Vervain is not going to leave me alone," she said quietly, her eyes large and vivid, her face somewhat dark against the low light of the distant hall. "It's the dreams, David. Truth is, I've had them for years, but never the way they come now. Maybe I didn't want to pay attention. Maybe I played, even in the dreams themselves, as if I didn't understand."

It seemed to me that she was three times as fetching as I had remembered. Her simple dress of violet cotton was belted tightly at the waist, and the hem barely covered her knees. Her legs were lean and exquisitely shaped. Her feet, the toenails painted a bright shiny violet to match the dress, were bare.

"When precisely did the onslaught of dreams begin?"

"Spring," she replied a little wearily. "Oh, right after Christmas. I'm not even sure. Winter was bad here. Maybe Aaron told you. We had a hard freeze. All the beautiful banana trees died. Of course they came right back up as soon as the spring warmth arrived. Did you see them outside?"

"I didn't notice, darling. Forgive me," I replied.

She resumed as if I hadn't answered.

"And that's when he came to me the most clearly," she said. "There was no past or future in the dream, then, only Oncle Vervain and me. We were in this house together, he and I, and he was sitting at the dining room table—." She gestured to the open door and the spaces beyond it, "—and I was with him. And he said to me, 'Girl, didn't I tell you to go back there and get those things?' He went into a long story. It was about spirits, awful spirits that had knocked him down a slope so that he cut his head. I woke up in the night and wrote down everything I remembered, but some of it was lost and maybe that was meant to be."

"Tell me what else you remember now."

"He said it was his mother's great-grandfather who knew of that cave," she responded. "He said that the old man took him there, though he himself was scared of the jungle. Do you know how many years back that would be? He said he never got to go back there. He came to New Orleans and got rich off Voodoo, rich as anybody can get off Voodoo. He said you give up your dreams the longer you live, until you've got nothing."

I think I winced at those choice and truthful words.

"I was seven years old," she said, "when Oncle Vervain died under this roof. His mother's great-grandfather was a *brujo* among the Maya. You know, that's a witch doctor, a priest of sorts. I can still remember Oncle Vervain using that word."

"Why does he want you to go back?" I asked her.

She had not removed her eyes from the altar. I glanced in that direction and realized that a picture of Oncle Vervain was there too. It was small, frameless, merely propped at the Virgin's feet.

"To get the treasure," she said in her low, troubled voice. "To bring it here. He says there's something there that will change my destiny. But I don't know what he means." She gave one of those characteristic sighs of hers. "He seems to think I'll need it, this object, this thing. But what do spirits know?"

"What *do* they know, Merrick?" I asked.

"I can't tell you, David," she replied raggedly. "I can only tell you that he haunts me. He wants me to go there and bring back those things."

"You don't want to do this," I said. "I can tell by your entire manner. You're being haunted."

"It's a strong ghost, David," she said, her eyes moving over the distant statues. "They're strong dreams." She shook her head. "They're so full of his presence. God, how I miss him." She let her eyes drift. "You know," she said, "when he was very old, his legs were bad. The priest came; he said Oncle Vervain didn't have to go to Sunday Mass anymore. It was too hard. Yet every Sunday, Oncle Vervain got dressed in his best three-piece suit, and always with his pocket watch, you know, the little gold chain in front and the watch in the little pocket—and he sat in the dining room over there listening to the broadcast of Mass on the radio and whispering his prayers. He was such a gentleman. And the priest would come and bring him Holy Communion in the afternoon.

"No matter how bad his legs were, Oncle Vervain knelt down for Holy Communion. I stood in the front door until the priest was gone and the altar boy. Oncle Vervain said that our church was a magic church because Christ's Body and Blood was in Holy Communion. Oncle Vervain said I was baptized: Merrick Marie Louise Mayfair—consecrated to the Blessed Mother. They spelled it the French way, you know: M-e-r-r-i-q-u-e. I know I was baptized. I know."

She paused. I couldn't bear the suffering in her voice or in her expression. If only we had located that baptismal certificate, I thought desperately, we might have prevented this obsession.

"No, David," she said aloud, sharply correcting me. "I dream of him, I tell you. I see him holding that gold watch." She settled back into her reverie, though it gave her no consolation. "How I loved that watch, that gold watch. I was the one who wanted it, but he left it to Cold Sandra. I used to beg him to let me look at it, to let me turn its hands to correct it, to let me snap it open, but no, he said, 'Merrick, it doesn't tick for you, *chérie,* it ticks for others.' And Cold Sandra got it. Cold Sandra took it with her when she left."

"Merrick, these are family ghosts. Don't we all have family ghosts?"

"Yes, David, but it's my family, and my family was never very much like anyone else's family, was it, David? He comes in the dreams and tells me about the cave."

"I can't bear to see you hurt, my darling," I said. "In London, behind my desk, I isolate myself emotionally from the Members all over the world. But from you? Never."

She nodded. "I don't want to cause you pain, either, boss," she said, "but I need you."

"You won't give up on this, will you?" I replied as tenderly as I could.

She said nothing. Then:

"We have a problem, David," she said, her eyes fixed on the altar, perhaps deliberately avoiding me.

"And what is that, darling?" I asked.

"We don't know exactly where to go."

"I'm hardly surprised," I responded, trying to remember what I could of Matthew's vague letters. I tried not to sound cross or pompous. "All Matthew's letters were mailed from Mexico City in a batch as I understand it, when you were making your way home."

She nodded.

"But what of the map that Oncle Vervain gave you? I know it has no names, but when you touched it, what happened?"

"Nothing happened when I touched it," she said. She smiled bitterly. She was silent for a long time. Then she gestured to the altar.

It was then that I saw the small rolled parchment, tied in black ribbon, sitting beside the small picture of Oncle Vervain.

“Matthew had help getting there,” she said in a strange, almost hollow voice. “He didn’t figure it out from that map, or on his own in any fashion.”

“You’re referring to sorcery,” I said.

“You sound like a Grand Inquisitor,” she replied, her eyes still very distant from me, her face devoid of feeling, her tone flat. “He had Cold Sandra to help him. Cold Sandra knew things from Oncle Vervain that I don’t know. Cold Sandra knew the whole lay of the land. So did Honey in the Sunshine. She was six years older than me.”

She paused. She was obviously deeply troubled. I don’t think I had ever seen her so troubled in all her adult years.

“Oncle Vervain’s mother’s people had the secrets,” she said. “I see so many faces in my dreams.” She shook her head as if trying to clear her mind. On her voice went in a near whisper. “Oncle Vervain used to talk to Cold Sandra all the time. If he hadn’t died when he did, maybe Cold Sandra would have been better, but then he was so old, it was his time.”

“And in the dreams, Oncle Vervain doesn’t tell you where the cave is located?”

“He tries,” she answered sadly. “I see images, fragments. I see the Maya *brujo,* the priest, going up to a rock by the waterfall. I see a big stone carved with facial features. I see incense and candles, feathers from the wild birds, beautifully colored feathers and offerings of food.”

“I understand,” I responded.

She rocked a little in the chair, her eyes moving slowly from side to side. Then she took another drink of the rum in her glass. “Of course I remember things from the journey,” she said in a slow voice.

“You were only ten years old,” I said sympathetically. “And you mustn’t think that because of these dreams you should go back now.”

She ignored me. She drank her rum and she stared at the altar.

“There are so many ruins, so many highland basins,” she said. “So many waterfalls, so many cloud forests. I need one more piece of information. Two pieces, really. The city to which we flew from Mexico City, and the name of the village where we camped. We took two planes to reach that city. I can’t remember those names, if I ever knew them. I don’t think I was paying attention. I was playing in the jungles. I was off by myself. I scarcely knew why we were there.”

“Darling, listen to me—,” I started.

"Don't. Forget it. I have to go back," she said sharply.

"Well, I assume you've combed all your books on the jungle terrain. You've made lists of towns and villages?" I broke off. I had to remember I didn't want this dangerous trip to take place.

She didn't immediately respond to me, and then she stared at me very deliberately and her eyes appeared uncommonly hard and cold. The candlelight and the light of the lamps made them gorgeously green. I noticed that her fingernails were painted the same shade of shiny violet as her toes. Once again she seemed the incarnation of all I'd ever desired.

"Of course I've done that," she said to me gently. "But now I have to find the name of that village, the last real outpost, and the name of the city to which we flew on the plane. If I had that, I could go." She sighed. "Especially that village with the *brujo,* that's been there for centuries, inaccessible and waiting for us—if I had that, I'd know the way."

"How, precisely?" I asked her.

"Honey knows it," she answered. "Honey in the Sunshine was sixteen when we made that journey. Honey will remember. Honey will tell it to me."

"Merrick, you can't try to call up Honey!" I said. "You know that's far too dangerous, that's utterly reckless, you can't …"

"David, *you're* here."

"I can't protect you if you call up this spirit, good God."

"But you must protect me. You must protect me because Honey will be as dreadful as she ever was. She'll try to destroy me when she comes through."

"Then don't do it."

"I have to do it. I have to do it and I have to go back to that cave. I promised Matthew Kemp when he was dying I'd report those discoveries. He didn't know he was talking to me. He thought he was talking to Cold Sandra, or maybe even Honey, or maybe his mother, I couldn't tell. But I promised. I promised I would tell the world about that cave."

"The world does not care about one more Olmec ruin!" I said. "There are universities aplenty working all through the rain forests and jungles. There're ancient cities all over Central America! What does it matter now?"

“I promised Oncle Vervain,” she said earnestly. “I promised him I’d get all the treasure. I promised I’d bring it back. ‘When you grow up,’ he said to me, and I promised.”

“Sounds to me as if Cold Sandra promised,” I said sharply. “And perhaps Honey in the Sunshine promised. You were what, seven years old when the old man died?”

“I have to do it,” she said solemnly.

“Listen,” I insisted, “we’re going to stop this entire plan. It’s too dangerous politically to go to those Central American jungles anyway,” I declared. “I won’t approve the trip. I’m the Superior General. You can’t go over my head.”

“I don’t intend to,” she said, her tone softening. “I need you with me. I need you now.”

She stopped, and, leaning to one side, crushed out her cigarette, and refilled her glass from the bottle. She took a deep drink and settled back again in the chair.

“I have to call Honey,” she whispered.

“Why not call Cold Sandra!” I demanded desperately.

“You don’t understand,” she said. “I’ve kept it locked in my soul all these years, but I have to call Honey. And Honey’s near me. Honey’s always near me! I’ve felt her near me. I’ve fended her off with my power. I’ve used my charms and my strength to protect myself. But she never really goes away.” She took a deep drink of the rum. “David,” she said, “Oncle Vervain loved Honey in the Sunshine. Honey’s in these dreams too.”

“I think it’s your gruesome imagination!” I declared.

She gave a high sparkling laugh at this, full of true amusement. It startled me. “Listen to you, David, next you’ll tell me there are no ghosts or vampires. And that the Talamasca is just a legend, such an Order doesn’t exist.”

“Why do you have to call Honey?”

She shook her head. She rested back in the chair, and her eyes filled with visible tears. I could see them in the flicker of the candles. I was becoming genuinely frantic.

I stood up, marched into the dining room, found the bottle of twenty-five-year-old Macallan Scotch and the lead crystal glasses on the sideboard, and poured myself a good drink. I returned to her. Then I

went back and got the bottle. I brought it with me, settled in the chair, and put it on the nightstand to my left.

The Scotch tasted wonderful. I didn't drink on the plane at all, wanting to be alert for my reunion, and it took the edge off my nerves beautifully.

She was still crying.

"All right, you're going to call up Honey, and you think for some reason Honey knows the name of the town or the village."

"Honey liked those places," she said, unperturbed by my urgent voice. "Honey liked the name of the village from which we hiked to the cave." She turned to me. "Don't you see, these names are like jewels embedded in her conscious; she's there with all she ever knew! She doesn't have to remember like a living being. The knowledge is in her and I have to make her give it to me."

"All right, I see, I understand everything. I maintain that it's too dangerous, and besides, why hasn't the spirit of Honey gone on?"

"She can't until I tell her what she wants to know."

This baffled me completely. What could Honey want to know?

Suddenly Merrick rose from the chair, rather like a slumbering cat instantly propelled into predatory action, and she closed the door to the hall. I heard her turn the key.

I was on my feet. But I stood back, uncertain of what she meant to do. Certainly she wasn't drunk enough to be interfered with in any dramatic authoritarian fashion, and I wasn't surprised when she abandoned her glass for the bottle of rum and took it with her into the center of the room.

Only then did I realize there was no carpet. Her naked feet were soundless on the polished floor, and, with the bottle clutched in her right hand to her breast, she began to turn in a circle, humming and throwing back her head.

I pressed myself against the wall.

Round and round she spun, the violet cotton skirt flaring and the bottle sloshing rum into the air. She paid no attention to the spilt liquor, and, slowing her turns only for a moment, she took another deep drink and then turned so fast that her garments slapped against her legs.

Stopping dead as she faced the altar, she spit the rum between her teeth into a fine spray at the waiting saints.

A high-pitched wail came out of her clenched teeth as she continued to issue the rum from her mouth.

Once again she began to dance, almost deliberately slapping her feet and murmuring. I couldn't catch the language or the words. Her hair was tangled over her face. Again a swallow, again the rum flying, the candles sputtering and dancing as they caught the tiny droplets and ignited them.

Suddenly she hurled a stream of rum from the bottle all over the candles, and the flames went up before the saints in a dangerous flare. Mercifully the fire went out.

Head back, she screamed between her teeth in French:

"Honey, I did it! Honey, I did it. Honey, I did it!"

The room seemed to shake as she bent her knees and circled, pounding her feet in a loud dance.

"Honey, I put the curse on you and Cold Sandra!" she screamed. "Honey, I did it."

Suddenly she lunged at the altar, never letting go of her bottle, and, grabbing the green jade perforator in her left hand, she slashed a long cut into her right arm.

I gasped. What could I do to stop her, I thought, what could I do that wouldn't enrage her?

The blood streamed down her arm and she bowed her head, licked at it, drank the rum, and sprayed the offering on the patient saints once again.

I could see the blood flowing down her hand, over her knuckles. Her wound was superficial but the amount of blood was awful.

Again she lifted the knife.

"Honey, I did it to you and Cold Sandra. I killed you, I put the curse on you!" she screamed.

I resolved to grab hold of her as she went to cut herself again. But I couldn't move.

As God is my witness, I couldn't move. I was rooted to the spot. I tried with all my resources to overcome the paralysis, but it was useless. All I could do was cry to her,

"Stop it, Merrick!"

She slashed at her arm across the first cut, and again the blood flowed.

"Honey, come to me, Honey, give me your rage, give me your hatred,

Honey, I killed you, Honey, I made the dolls of you and Cold Sandra, Honey, I drowned them in the ditch the night you left. Honey, I killed you. Honey, I sent you to the swamp water, Honey, I did it," she was screaming.

"For the love of Heaven, Merrick, let go!" I cried. Then suddenly, unable to watch her slash her arm again, I began to pray frantically to Oxalá:

"Give me the power to stop her, give me the power to divert her before she harms herself, give me the power, I beg you, Oxalá, I'm your loyal David, give me the power." I shut my eyes. The floor was trembling beneath me.

Suddenly the noise of her screams and her bare feet stopped.

I felt her against me. I opened my eyes. She stood in my embrace, both of us facing the doorway, which was indisputably open, and the shadowy figure who stood with her back to the light of the hall.

It was a graceful young girl with long tightly curling blond hair lathered all over her shoulders, her face veiled in shadow, her yellow eyes piercing in the candle glow.

"I did it!" Merrick whispered. "I killed you."

I felt Merrick's whole pliant body against me. I wrapped my arms tightly around her. Again, but silently, I prayed to Oxalá.

Protect us from this spirit if evil is the intent of this Spirit. Oxalá, you who made the world, you who rule in high places, you who are among the clouds, protect us, do not look at my faults as I call on you, but give me your mercy, protect us if this spirit would do us harm.

Merrick wasn't trembling, she was quaking, her body covered in sweat, as it had been during the possession so many years before.

"I put the dolls in the ditch, I drowned them in the ditch, I did it. I drowned them. I did it. I prayed, 'Let them die!' I knew from Cold Sandra that she was going to buy that car, I said, 'Let it go off a bridge, let them drown.' I said, 'When they drive across the lake, let them die.' Cold Sandra was so afraid of that lake, I said, 'Let them die.' "

The figure in the doorway appeared as solid as anything I'd ever beheld. The shadowy face showed no expression, but the yellow eyes remained fixed.

Then a voice issued from it, low, and full of hatred.

"Fool, you never caused it!" said the voice. "Fool, you think you

caused that to happen to us? You never caused anything. Fool, you couldn't make a curse to save your soul!"

I thought Merrick would lose consciousness, but somehow she remained standing, though my arms were ready to hold her should she fail.

She nodded. "Forgive me that I wanted it," she said in a hoarse whisper that seemed entirely her own. "Forgive me, Honey, that I wanted it. I wanted to go with you, forgive me."

"Go to God to get your forgiveness," came the low voice from the darkened countenance. "Don't come to me."

Again Merrick nodded. I could feel the stickiness of her spilt blood coming down over my right fingers. Again I prayed to Oxalá! But my words were coming automatically. I was riveted heart and soul to the being in the doorway, who neither moved nor dissolved.

"Get down on your knees," said the voice. "Write in blood what I tell you."

"Don't do it!" I whispered.

Merrick sprang forward, falling on her knees on the floor that was wet and slippery with blood and spilt rum.

Once again, I tried to move, but I couldn't. It was as if my feet had been nailed to the boards.

Merrick's back was to me, but I knew she was pressing her left fingers to the wounds to make them bleed ever more deeply, and then I heard the creature in the doorway give two names.

I heard the first distinctly, "Guatemala City, there's where you land," said the spirit, "and Santa Cruz del Flores is as close as you can get to the cave."

Merrick sat back on her heels, her body heaving, her breaths coming rapid and hoarse as she squeezed the blood onto the floor and began to write with her right first finger the names now repeated from her own lips.

On and on I prayed for strength against the figure, but I cannot claim that it was my prayers which made the being begin to fade.

A horrid scream broke from Merrick:

"Honey, don't leave me!" she cried. "Honey, don't go. Honey, come back, please, please, come back," she sobbed. "Honey in the Sunshine, I love you. Don't leave me here alone."

But the spirit was gone.

13

Merrick's cuts were not deep, though the flood of blood had been quite terrifying. I was able to bandage her up fairly decently, and then take her to the nearest hospital, where she was given the proper treatment for the wounds.

I don't remember what nonsense we told the attending physician, except that we convinced him that though the wounds had been self-inflicted, Merrick was in her right mind. Then I insisted we return to the Motherhouse, and Merrick, who was at that time in some sort of daze, agreed. I went back for the Scotch, I'm ashamed to say, but then one tends to remember the flavor of a twenty-five-year-old single-malt Highland Scotch like Macallan.

Besides, I'm not sure *I* was in my right mind. I remember drinking in the car, which I never do, and Merrick falling asleep against my shoulder, her right hand clamped to my wrist.

You can well imagine my state of mind.

The visible spirit of Honey in the Sunshine had been one of the more ominous ghosts I'd ever beheld. I was used to shadows, interior voices, and even possession; but to see the seemingly solid form of Honey in the Sunshine standing in the doorway was utterly shattering. The voice alone had been terrifying, but the shape, its apparent solidity and duration, the manner in which the light had played upon it, the eyes being so very reflective—all of this was a little more than I could easily bear.

Then there was the question of my own paralysis during this experience. How had Merrick accomplished this thing? In sum, I was badly shaken but very deeply impressed.

Of course Merrick was not going to say how she had done any part of it. In fact, Merrick didn't want to speak of it at all. At the mere mention of Honey's name, she began to cry. As a man, I found that maddening and unfair. But there was nothing I could do about it. Merrick would

wipe her tears, and at once turned the subject to our jungle venture.

As for my opinion of the ritual she had used to summon Honey, I had found it simple, its chief component Merrick's own personal power, and the sudden dreadful connection with a spirit who apparently was not at rest.

Whatever, that night and on the following day, all Merrick wanted to talk about was the jungle trip. She had become a mono-maniac of sorts. She'd bought her khaki garments. She'd even ordered mine! We must go to Central America directly. We must have the finest camera equipment and all the support which the Talamasca could provide.

She wanted to return to the cave because there were other items there, and she wanted to see the land which had been important to her ancient Oncle Vervain. Oncle Vervain would not be haunting her if there were not substantial treasure there which he wanted for her to possess. Oncle Vervain was not going to let her alone.

For two days afterwards, while imbibing ridiculous quantities of the delicious full-bodied Macallan Scotch, of which she had laid in several bottles, I tried to control Merrick, to prevent the journey from taking place. But it was quite useless. I was getting drunk over and over again, and Merrick was determined. If I did not give Talamasca authority and support, she would take off on her own.

But the fact was, though I advised against everything, I felt young again on account of these experiences. I felt the curious excitement of one who has seen a ghost firsthand. And I also did not want to go to my grave without ever seeing a tropical jungle again. Even the arguments with Merrick had a wildly stimulating effect. That this beautiful and strong young woman wanted me to go with her, this went to my head.

"We're going," said Merrick, who was poring over a map in the Talamasca library. "Look, I know the way now. Honey's given me the only keys I required. I remember the landmarks and I know that part of the jungle's still unexplored. I've been through all the recent books on the territory."

"But you haven't found Santa Cruz del Flores in your books, have you?" I protested.

"Never mind. It's there. It's simply too small to be on the maps we purchase here. They'll know it when we reach northern Guatemala. Leave it to me. There simply isn't enough money for every ruin to be

studied, and there are a nest of ruins in that part of the jungle, possibly a temple complex or even a city. You said this to me yourself.

"I remember seeing a spectacular temple. Don't you want to see it with your own eyes?" She was as cross and unpretentious as a child. "David, please do spring into life as Superior General, or whatever, and arrange everything for us both at once."

"But why do you think Honey in the Sunshine gave you the answers to your questions so easily?" I asked. "Has that not aroused your suspicion?"

"David, that's simple," said Merrick. "Honey wanted to say something of value, because Honey wants me to call her again."

The obvious truth of that statement shocked me somewhat.

"God knows, Merrick, you're strengthening this spirit. Certainly it should be encouraged to move towards the Light."

"Of course I urge her to go," Merrick answered, "but Honey's not leaving me. I told you that evening, I told you I've been feeling Honey's presence for years. All this time I've been pretending there was no Honey, there was no jungle, I didn't have to go back to these painful memories, I could bury myself in academic studies. You know that.

"But I've completed the basic academic portion of my life. And now I must go back. Now, stop mentioning Honey; for the love of Heaven, you think I want to think about what I did?" Then back she went to the maps again, sending for another bottle of Macallan for me, and telling me that we would need tent equipment on this trip, and I should be starting the arrangements now.

At last I pleaded that it was the rainy season in those jungles and we should wait until Christmas when the rains had stopped. She was ready for that objection; the rains were over; she had checked the reports daily. We could go now.

There was nothing to be done except to proceed with the journey. If I had condemned the plan as Superior General, Merrick would have taken off for Central America alone. As a full-fledged member of the Order, she had drawn a large allowance for several years and she had banked every penny of it. She could go off on her own and she told me as much.

"Look," she said, "it will break my heart to go against your wishes, but I will if I must."

And so it was that we arranged to have four Talamasca field assistants

accompany us, both to handle all camp equipment and to carry firearms in case we encountered bandits where we meant to go.

Now let me explain briefly about these field assistants for anyone reading this story who might be curious on their account. The Talamasca has many such field assistants throughout the world. They are not full-fledged members of the Order, they have no access to the archives and certainly no access to or knowledge of the Talamasca's vaults. They do not take vows as do true members of the Order. They do not need or have psychic ability. They are not committed for any number of years or for life.

Indeed, they are employees of the Talamasca under its various corporate names, and their prime purpose is to accompany members on archaeological or exploratory expeditions, to assist us in foreign cities and countries, and in general to do what they are asked to do. They are expert in obtaining passports, visas, and the right to carry arms in other countries. Many have a background in law, as well as the armed services of different nations. They are reliable to a remarkable degree.

Were we to find this cave and its treasure, it was the field assistants who would arrange for the artifacts to be legally and securely transported out of the country with all appropriate permissions obtained and fees paid. Now, whether this latter type of activity would involve anything that wasn't legal, I honestly didn't know. It was the field assistants' department, so to speak.

These people do have some vague knowledge that the Talamasca is a tightly organized Order of psychic investigators, but in general they like what they do, enjoying enormous salaries, and they never seek to penetrate or fathom the Order at all. Many of them are seasoned soldiers of fortune. Their work for us almost never involves deliberate violence. And they cherish the opportunity to receive good pay from a relatively benign source.

At last the day came for us to leave. Aaron was past all patience with both of us, and, having never been a jungle traveler, he was greatly agitated, but he accompanied us agreeably to the plane.

We flew south, to Guatemala City, where we confirmed the existence and the location of the Maya village of Santa Cruz del Flores to the northeast. Merrick was wonderfully excited.

A small plane took us to a lovely northern city closer to our

destination. And from there we set out with the field assistants in two well-stocked jeeps.

I loved the warmth, the sound of the soft rain, the lilt of Spanish and the native Amerindian voices; and the sight of so many Amerindians in their beautiful white clothes and with their gentle faces made me feel wonderfully drenched in the cultural riches of a foreign and still unspoiled place.

Actually there is plenty of trouble in that part of the world, but we were able to stay well away from it. And my eyes were for the pleasant detail.

No matter. I found myself extraordinarily happy. It was as if I were young again, and the sight of Merrick in her khaki safari jacket and short culottes was as marvelously stimulating as her air of command was soothing to my nerves.

Merrick drove our jeep rather like a maniac, but as long as the second car in our little caravan kept up with us, I didn't complain. I chose not to think about the gallons of petrol we were carrying, and how it might explode were we to crash into a chicle tree. I merely trusted that any woman who could evoke a ghost could drive a jeep on a dangerous road.

The jungle was breathtaking. Banana and citrus trees all but blocked our way on both sides of the winding uphill drive; here and there were giant mahogany trees soaring to a hundred and fifty feet; and out of the high canopy above came the frightening but unmistakable roar of the howler monkeys and the cry of countless species of exotic bird.

Our little world was drenched in green, but again and again we found ourselves on a high promontory from which we could view the canopy of the jungle as it spread out on the volcanic slopes below.

Very soon it became apparent that we had entered a cloud forest, and again and again we experienced that marvelous sensation when the clouds truly enveloped us and the sweet dampness penetrated the coverless windows of the jeep and settled on our skin.

Merrick knew I was loving it.

"I promise you," she said, "the last part won't be hard."

At last we reached Santa Cruz del Flores, a jungle village, so small and so out of the way that the recent political strife in the country had not touched it at all.

Merrick announced that it was very much as she remembered it—a

small grouping of brightly painted thatched-roof buildings, and a small but remarkably beautiful old stone Spanish church. There were pigs, chickens, and turkeys roaming about everywhere. And I spied some cornfields cut from the jungle, but not very much. The town plaza was beaten dirt.

When our two jeeps pulled in, the gentle local inhabitants came out to greet us quite sympathetically, enforcing my opinion that the native Maya Indians are some of the most enchanting people in the world. They were for the most part women, dressed in pretty white garments with remarkable embroidery on them. I saw faces about me which reminded me immediately of the ancient countenances of Central America preserved in Maya, and possibly Olmec, art.

Most of the men of the village had gone off to work on the distant sugarcane plantations, or at the nearest chicle ranch, I was told. I wondered if it were forced labor, and decided it was best not to ask. As for the women, they often walked many miles in a day to offer their skillfully woven baskets and embroidered linens for sale at a big native market. They were thankful for a chance to display their wares at home.

There was no hotel of any sort whatsoever, indeed no post office, no phone, and no telegraph—but there were several old women who would eagerly give us lodgings in their houses. Our dollars were welcome. There were lovely local crafts for sale and we purchased freely. There was plenty of food to be had.

I at once wanted to see the church, and was informed by one of the locals in Spanish that I must not enter by the front door without first asking permission of the deity who governed that entrance. Of course, I could go in by the side, if I wished.

Not wishing to offend anyone, I took the side entrance and found myself in a simple white-walled building amid ancient Spanish wooden statues and the usual flickering candles, a very comforting place indeed.

I think I prayed the way I had in the old days, in Brazil. I prayed to all those benevolent deities unseen to be with us and protect us from any form of harm.

Merrick joined me a few moments later—making the Sign of the Cross and kneeling at the Communion Rail for long moments of prayer. Eventually I went outside to wait.

There I spied a somewhat wrinkled old man, short of stature, and with

shoulder-length black hair. He was dressed simply in a machine-made shirt and pants. I knew at once that he was the local shaman. I gave him a respectful bow, and though his eyes lingered on me with no hint of menace, I went my way.

I was hot but I was supremely happy. The village was fringed with coconut palms and there were even some pine trees due to the elevation, and for the first time in my life, as I walked about the bordering jungles I saw many exquisite butterflies in the dappled gloom.

There were moments when I was so purely happy that I could have given way to tears. I was secretly grateful to Merrick for this journey. And I concluded in my heart of hearts that no matter what happened from here on out, the experience had been well worth it for me.

When it came to our lodging, we chose a compromise.

Merrick sent the four field assistants to live in the village homes, after they had pitched and stocked a tent for us just behind the most far-flung village house. All of this seemed perfectly reasonable to me until I realized we were an unmarried man and woman residing in this tent, and it wasn't very proper at all.

Never mind. Merrick was powerfully stimulated by our adventure, as was I, and I was eager for her company alone. The Talamasca assistants outfitted the tent with cots, lanterns, camp desks, and chairs; made certain Merrick had ample batteries for her laptop computer; and, after a wonderful supper—tortillas, beans, and delicious wild turkey meat—we were left alone as night fell, in marvelous privacy, to discuss what we meant to do the following day.

"I don't intend taking the others with us," Merrick averred. "We're way beyond the danger of bandits, and, as I told you, it isn't far. I remember one small settlement along the way. It's tiny compared to this one. The people will leave us alone."

She was more excited than I'd ever known her to be.

"Of course we can cover some of the road with the jeep before we start walking, and you'll see Maya ruins around us just as soon as we set out. We're going to drive through those, and walk where the trails gives out."

She settled back on her cot, resting on one elbow, and drank her dark Flor de Caña rum, which she'd bought in the city before we set out.

"Wooh! This is good," she told me, and of course this struck

predictable terror in me that she meant to go on a bender here in the jungle.

"Don't worry about it, David," she said. "Fact is, you ought to take a drink of this yourself."

I suspected her motives, but nevertheless succumbed. I was really in Heaven, I have to confess.

What I remember of that evening still produces in me a certain amount of guilt. I did drink far too much of the delicious aromatic rum. At some point, I remember lying back on my bed and looking up into the face of Merrick, who had come to sit beside me. Then Merrick leant down to kiss me and I pulled her very close, responding a little more rashly perhaps than she had expected. But she was not displeased.

Now, I was a person for whom sexuality had pretty much lost its appeal. When I had been occasionally aroused, during those last twenty years of my mortal life, it was almost always by a young man.

But the attraction of Merrick seemed somehow to have nothing to do with gender. I found myself overly excited and eager to consummate what had so haphazardly begun. Only as I shifted to let her lie beneath me, where I wanted her to be, did I gain some control over myself, and rise from the cot.

"David," she whispered. I heard my name echo: David, David. I couldn't move.

I saw her shadowy form there waiting for me. And for the first time I realized that the lanterns had been put out. A little light came from the nearest house, barely penetrating the fabric of the tent, and of course it was quite sufficient for me to see that she had taken off her clothes.

"Damn it, I can't do this," I said. But in truth I was afraid that I couldn't finish it. I was afraid that I was too old.

She rose with that same suddenness which had startled me when she began to summon Honey in her little séance, and she wrapped her naked arms around me and began to kiss me in earnest, her skilled hand going directly to the root of my desire.

I do believe I hesitated, but that I don't recall. What is vivid still is that we lay together and that, though I failed myself morally, I did not fail her at all. I did not fail the two of us as a man and a woman, and there was afterwards both a drowsiness and a sense of exultation that left no room for shame.

It seemed, as I drifted off to sleep with my arms around her, that this had been building all of the years during which I'd known her. I belonged to her now, quite completely. I was drenched with the scent of her perfume and her rum, of her skin and her hair. I wanted nothing but to be with her and to sleep beside her, and that the warmth of her would penetrate my inevitable dreams.

When I awoke in the morning, right at dawn, I was too shocked by everything that had taken place to know quite what to do. She was sleeping soundly, in a marvelously disheveled state, and I, humiliated that I had so dreadfully betrayed my position as Superior General, ripped my eyes off her, bathed, dressed, reached for my journal, and went out and into the little Spanish church so that I could write about my sins.

Once again I spied the shaman, who was standing to one side of the church building and watching me as though he knew everything that had taken place. His presence made me extremely uncomfortable. I no longer thought him to be innocent or quaint. And of course I despised myself utterly, but I had to admit I was invigorated, as is always the case with this kind of encounter, and, naturally, oh yes, naturally, I felt very young.

In the quiet and cool of the little church with its sloped roof and its uncritical saints, I wrote for perhaps an hour.

Then Merrick came in, said her prayers, and came to sit beside me, as if nothing at all had happened, and then whispered to me excitedly that we should go.

"I've betrayed your trust, young woman," I whispered immediately.

"Don't be so foolish," she fired back. "You did exactly what I wanted you to do. Do you think I wanted to be humiliated? Of course not!"

"You're putting the wrong meaning on everything," I argued.

She reached for the back of my neck, held my head as firmly as she could, and kissed me.

"Let's go," she said, as if speaking to a child. "We're wasting time. Come on."

14

In the jeep, we managed an hour before the road gave out. Then, hefting our machetes, we proceeded to follow the trail on foot.

There was very little conversation between us, all of our energy being given over to the difficult and steady assent. But again that sense of bliss descended upon me, and the sight of Merrick's forceful slim body up ahead of me was a constant guilty delight.

The jungle now seemed impenetrable, regardless of the altitude, and again there came the clouds with their wondrous sweetness and damp.

I had my eye out all the time for ruins of any sort, and indeed we saw them, on both sides of us, but whether they were temples or pyramids or whatever, I was not meant to know. Merrick dismissed them out of hand, and insisted that we press doggedly on.

The heat ate through my clothing. My right arm ached from the weight of the machete. The insects became an unendurable nuisance, but I would not have been in any other place just then for anything in the world.

Quite suddenly Merrick stopped, and motioned for me to come to her side.

We had come upon a clearing of sorts, or the remains of one, I should say, and I saw decayed plaster hovels where there had once been houses, and one or two shelters which still maintained their old thatched roofs.

"The little village is gone," Merrick said as she surveyed the disaster.

I remembered Matthew Kemp's mention of Village One and Village Two on his map and in his letters of years ago.

She stood for a long moment staring into the remnants of the place and then she spoke in a secretive voice. "Do you feel anything?"

I had not felt anything until she asked me, but no sooner did I hear the question than I was aware of something spiritually turbulent in the air. I resolved to apply all my senses to it. It was quite strong. I cannot say I felt personalities or an attitude. I felt a commotion. For one moment I

felt menace, and then nothing at all.

"What do you make of it?" I asked her.

Her very stillness made me uneasy.

"It's not the spirits of this village," she answered. "And I'll bet you anything that whatever we're feeling is precisely what caused the villagers to move on." She started off again, and I had no choice but to follow her. I was almost as obsessed as she.

Once we had circled the entangled village ruin, the trail appeared again.

However, the jungle soon became denser; we had to hack our way all the more fiercely, and at times I felt a dreadful pain in my chest.

Quite suddenly, as if it had appeared by magic, I saw the huge bulk of a pale stone pyramid looming before us, its steps covered by scrub growth and dense vine.

Someone at some time had cleared it, and much of its strange carving was visible, as well as its flight of steep steps. No, it wasn't Maya, at least not insofar as I could see.

"Ah, let me savor this," I said to Merrick.

She didn't answer me. She seemed to be listening for an important sound. I too listened and there came again that awareness that we were not alone. Something moved in the atmosphere, something pushed against us, something sought with great determination to move against gravity and affect my body as I stood there, machete in hand.

Merrick suddenly veered to the left, and began hacking her way around the side of the pyramid and onward in the same direction that we'd taken before.

There was no trail now. There was nothing but the jungle, and I soon realized that another pyramid loomed to our left, and that it was much higher than the building to our right. We were in a small alley way before the two immense monuments, and we had to make our way through cumbersome rubble, as someone had done digging here at some time before.

"Thieves," she said, as if reading my thoughts. "They've plundered the pyramids many times."

That was hardly uncommon with regard to Maya ruins. So why should it not happen to these strange alien buildings as well?

"Ah, but look," I said, "at what they've left behind. I want to climb

one of these. Let's tackle the smaller one. I want to see if I can make it to the platform on top."

She knew as well as I did that that is where a thatched-roof temple might have stood in ancient times.

As for the age of these monuments, I had no indication. They might have been built before the Birth of Christ or a thousand years after. Whatever, they seemed marvelous to me and they maddened my already boyish sense of adventure. I wanted to get out my camera.

Meantime, the spiritual tumult continued. It was wondrously intriguing. It was as if the air were whipped by the spirits. The sense of menace was strong.

"Good Lord, Merrick, how they're trying to stop us," I whispered. The jungle gave forth its chorus of cries, as if answering me. Something moved in the brush.

But Merrick, after stopping for only a few moments, pressed on.

"I have to find the cave," she said in a dull flat voice. "They didn't stop us last time and they're not going to stop you and me now." On she went, the jungle closing all too readily behind her.

"Yes," I cried out. "It's not one soul, it's many. They don't want us near these pyramids."

"It's not the pyramids," she insisted, chopping at the vines and pushing through the undergrowth. "It's the cave, they know we are going to the cave."

I did my best to keep up with her, and to aid her, but she was definitely the one clearing our path.

We had gone some yards when it seemed the jungle grew impossibly thick and that the light was suddenly altered, and I realized we had come to the blackened doorway of an immense edifice, which spread its sloping walls to our right and our left. It was a temple, surely, and I could see the impressive carvings on either side of the entrance, and also above as the wall rose to a great apron of stone with intricate carvings visible in the scarce high rays of the desperate sun.

"Lord, Merrick, wait," I called out. "Let me photograph this." I struggled to reach my small camera, but I would have to remove my backpack and my arms were simply too tired.

The airy turbulence grew extremely intense. I felt something similar to the light tap of fingers against my eyelids and my cheeks. It was

altogether different from the constant barrage of the insect world. I felt something touch the back of my hands, and it seemed that I almost lost my grip on the machete, but I quickly recovered.

As for Merrick, she stood staring into the darkness of the hallway or passage in front of her.

"My God," she whispered. "They're much stronger than they were before. They don't want us to go inside."

"And why would we do that?" I asked quickly. "We're searching for a cave."

"They know that's what we're doing," she said. "The cave is on the other side of the temple. The simplest way is straight through."

"God in Heaven," I said. "This is the way you went before?"

"Yes," she answered. "The villagers wouldn't go with us. Some never made it as far. We went on, through there."

"And what if the ceiling of this passage collapses on us?" I asked.

"I'm going through it," she answered. "The temple's built of solid limestone. Nothing's changed, and nothing will."

She removed her small flashlight from her belt and sent the beam into the opening. I could see the stone floor in spite of the few pallid plants which had struggled to cover it. I could make out lavish paintings on the walls!

Her flashlight hit great rich figures of dark skin and golden clothes proceeding against a backdrop of vivid blue. Above, as the walls rose to a vaulted ceiling, I saw another procession against the deep shade of Roman red.

The entire chamber seemed some fifty feet in length and her feeble light struck a bit of greenery at the other end.

Again, there came those spirits, swarming around me, silent yet nevertheless intensely active, trying once more to strike my eyelids and my cheeks.

I saw Merrick flinch. "Get away from me!" she whispered. "You have no power over me!"

There was an immense response. The jungle around us appeared to tremble, as if an errant breeze had worked its way down to us, and a shower of leaves fell at our feet. Once again I heard the unearthly roar of the howler monkeys high in the trees. It seemed to give voice to the spirits.

“Come on, David,” Merrick said; but as she meant to go forward something invisible appeared to stop her, because she stepped back off-balance and raised her left hand as if to shield herself. Another volley of leaves descended upon us.

“Not good enough!” she said aloud and plunged into the vaulted chamber, her light growing brighter and fuller so that we found ourselves surrounded by some of the most vivid murals which I’ve ever seen.

Everywhere around us there rose splendid processional figures, tall and thin, complete with ornate kilts, earrings, and lavish headdresses. I could not mark the style as Maya or Egyptian. It was like nothing I’d ever studied or seen. Matthew’s old photographs had failed to capture one tenth of the vibrancy or detail. A lovely detailed black-and-white border ran along the floor on either sides.

On and on we went, our every footfall echoing off the walls as we proceeded, but the air had grown intolerably hot. Dust rose in my nostrils. I felt the touch of fingers all over me. Indeed there came the grip of hands on my upper arm, and a muffled blow against my face.

I reached out for Merrick’s shoulder, both to hurry her and to stay with her.

We were in the very middle of the passage when she came to a standstill and flinched as if receiving a shock.

“Get away from me, you won’t stop me!” she whispered. And then in a long stream of French she called on Honey in the Sunshine to make the way.

We hurried on. I wasn’t at all sure that Honey would do anything of the sort. It seemed far more likely that Honey would bring the temple down on our heads.

At last we came out in the jungle once more, and I coughed to clear my throat. I looked back at the edifice. Less was visible on this side than on the front. I felt the spirits all around us. I felt threats without language. I felt myself pushed and shoved by weak creatures desperate to stop my advance.

I needed my handkerchief for the millionth time, to wipe the insects off my face.

Merrick immediately moved on.

The path went steeply upwards. And I beheld the sparkle of the

waterfall before I heard its music. There came a narrow place where the water ran deep, and Merrick crossed over to the right bank as I followed, my machete working as hard as hers.

The climb up the waterfall was not difficult at all. But the activity of the spirits became increasingly stronger. Again and again Merrick cursed under her breath. I called on Oxalá to show the way.

"Honey, get me there," Merrick said.

Quite abruptly I perceived, just beneath an overhang, where the waterfall jetted forward, a monstrous open-mouthed face carved deep into the volcanic rock that surrounded an obvious cave. It was precisely as the doomed Matthew had described it. His camera had been ruined by moisture before he could photograph it, however, and its size was something of a shock.

Now, you can well imagine my satisfaction that we had reached this mythic place. For years I had heard tell of it, it was inextricably bound up in my mind with Merrick, and now we were there. Though the spirits kept up their assault, the gentle mist from the waterfall was cooling my hands and face.

I made my way up to stand beside Merrick, when suddenly the spirits exerted immense pressure against my body, and I felt my left foot go out from under me.

Though I never cried out, but merely reached for purchase, Merrick turned and grabbed hold of me by the loose shoulder of my jacket. That was all I needed to recover my footing and climb the remaining few feet to be at the flattened entrance of the cave.

"Look at the offerings," Merrick said, putting her left hand on my right.

The spirits redoubled their efforts, but I held firm and so did Merrick, though twice she swiped at something near to her face.

As for "the offerings," what I beheld was a giant basalt head. It struck me as similar to the Olmec, but that was all I could say. Did it resemble the murals in the temple? Impossible to judge. Whatever it was, I loved it. It was helmeted and tilted upwards so that the face with its open eyes and unique smiling mouth received the rain that inevitably fell here, and at its uneven base, amid piles of blackened stones, stood an amazing array of candles, feathers, and wilted flowers, as well as pottery. I could smell the incense where I stood.

The blackened rocks testified to many years of candles, but the last of these offerings could not have been more than two or three days old.

I felt something change in the air around us. But Merrick seemed as distressed by the spirits as before. She made another involuntary gesture, as though to drive something unseen away.

"So nothing stopped them from coming," I said quickly, looking at the offering. "Let me try something." I reached into my jacket pocket and took out a pack of Rothmans, which I was keeping for the inevitability that I would smoke.

I opened them hastily, lighted one with my butane lighter, in spite of the incessant spray of the waterfall, drew in the smoke, and then put the cigarette before the immense head. I put the entire pack with it. Silently I said the prayers to the spirits, asking them to allow us access to this place.

I felt no change in the assault of the spirits. I felt them pushing on me with renewed energy in a way that was beginning to unnerve me, certain though I might be that they would never gain very much strength.

"They know our motives," said Merrick, gazing at the giant upturned head and its withered flowers. "Let's go into the cave."

We used our large flashlights, and at once the silence from the waterfall descended upon us, along with the smell of dry earth and ash.

Immediately, I saw the paintings, or what I perceived to be paintings. They were well inside, and we walked upright and swiftly towards them, ignoring the spirits which had now produced a whistling sound near my ears.

To my utter shock, I saw that these splendidly colored wall coverings were in fact mosaics made with millions of tiny chips of semi-precious stones! The figures were far simpler than those of temple murals, which argued perhaps for a more ancient date.

The spirits had gone quiet.

"This is marvelous," I whispered, because I had to say something. And again I tried to reach for my camera, but the pain in my arm was simply too sharp. "Merrick, we must take photographs," I told her. "Look, darling, there's writing. We must photograph it. I'm sure those are glyphs."

She didn't answer. She stared at the walls as I did. She seemed entranced.

I could not quite make out a procession, or indeed attribute any activity to the tall slender figures, except to say that they appeared to be in profile, to wear long garments, and to be carrying important objects in their hands. I did not see bloody victims struggling. I did not see clear figures of priests.

But as I struggled to make out the intermittent and glittering splendor, my foot struck something hollow. I looked down at a wealth of richly colored pottery gleaming before us as far as we could see.

"This isn't a cave at all, is it?" Merrick said. "I remember Matthew saying it was a tunnel. It *is* a tunnel. It's been carved out entirely by man."

The stillness was shocking.

Stepping as carefully as she could, she went on, and I behind her, though I had to reach down several times to move some of the small vessels out of my way.

"This is a burial place, that's what it is, and all these are offerings," I said.

At that I felt a sharp blow to the back of my head. I spun around and shone my flashlight on nothing. The light from the cave entrance hurt my eyes.

Something pushed my left side and then my right shoulder. It was the spirits coming at me again. I saw that Merrick was jerking and moving to the side, as if something were striking her also.

I uttered a prayer to Oxalá again, and heard Merrick issuing her own refusals to back down.

"This is as far as we got last time," said Merrick, turning to look at me, her face dark above her flashlight, which she politely directed to the ground. "We took everything we found here. Now I'm going on."

I was right with her, but the assault of the spirits grew stronger. I saw her pushed to one side. But quickly she steadied herself. I heard the crunch of pottery beneath her feet.

"You've made us angry," I said to the spirits. "Maybe we don't have any right here. And maybe we do!"

At this I received a heavy silent blow to the stomach, but it was not sufficient to cause pain. I felt a sharp increase in my exhilaration suddenly.

"Go on, do your damndest," I said. "Oxalá, who is buried here?

Would he or she have it remain secret forever? Why did Oncle Vervain send us to this place?"

Merrick, who was several yards ahead of me, let out a gasp.

I caught up with her at once. The tunnel had opened into a great hollow round chamber where the mosaics ascended the low dome. Much had fallen away from age or dampness, I knew not which, but it was a glorious room nevertheless. Round both walls the figures proceeded, until there stood one individual whose facial features had long ago been broken away.

On the floor of the room, in its very center, surrounded by clear circles of pottery offerings and fine jade statues, lay a beautiful arrangement of ornaments in a nest of dust.

"Look, the mask, the mask in which he was buried," Merrick said, her light falling upon the most glorious polished green jade image, which lay as it had been placed perhaps thousands of years before, the body of the wearer having long since melted away.

Neither of us dared take a step. The precious articles surrounding the burial were too beautifully arranged. We could see the ear ornaments now, glinting, as the soft moldering earth nearly swallowed them, and across the would-be chest of the being we saw a long richly carved scepter, which perhaps he had held in his hand.

"Look at all the debris," she said. "No doubt he was wrapped in fabric full of precious amulets and sacrifices. Now the fabric's gone and only the stone objects remain."

There was a loud noise behind us. I could hear pottery smashing. Merrick gave a short cry, as though something had struck her.

Then willfully, indeed, as if driven, she plunged forward, dropped to her knees, and picked up the brilliant green mask. She darted back with it, away from the remains of the corpse.

A flying stone struck me on the forehead. Something shoved at my back.

"Come on, let's leave the rest for the archaeologists," she said. "I have what I came for. It's what Oncle Vervain told me to get."

"The mask? You mean you knew all the time there was a mask in this tunnel, and that's what you wanted?"

She was already on her way to the outside air.

Scarcely had I caught up with her when she was pushed backwards.

“I’m taking it, I have to have it,” she declared.

As we both tried to continue, something unseen blocked our path. I reached out. I could touch it. It was like a soft silent wall of energy.

Merrick suddenly gave over her flashlight to me and in both hands she held the mask.

At any other time of my life, I would have been admiring it, for it had an immense amount of expression and detail. Though there were holes for eyes and a gash for the mouth, all features were deeply contoured and the gloss of the thing was beautiful in itself.

As it was, I moved with all my strength against this force that sought to block me, lifting both flashlights as if they were clubs.

Merrick again startled me with a gasp. She held the mask to her face, and as she turned to look at me it appeared brilliant and faintly ghastly in the light. It seemed suspended in the darkness, for I could scarce make out her hands or her body at all.

She turned it away from me, still holding it to her face. And again there came a gasp from her.

The air in the cave fell silent and still.

All I could hear was her breathing and then my own. It seemed she began to whisper something in a foreign tongue, though I didn’t know what tongue it was.

“Merrick?” I asked gently. In the abrupt and welcome stillness, the air of the cave felt moist and sweetly cool. “Merrick,” I said again, but I could not rouse her. She stood with the mask over her face, peering ahead of us, and then, with a surprising gesture, she ripped the thing away and gave it over to me.

“Take it, look through it,” she whispered.

I shoved my flashlight through my belt loop, gave hers back to her, and took the mask in both hands. I remember those little gestures because they were so ordinary, and I didn’t know yet what I thought about the stillness around us or the dimness in which we stood.

Far, far away was the greenery of the jungle, and everywhere above us and around us the coarse but beautiful mosaics glittered with their tiny bits of stone.

I lifted the mask as she had directed me. A swimming sensation overcame me. I took several steps backwards, but whatever else I did, I don’t know. The mask remained in place and my hands remained on it,

and all else had subtly changed.

The cave was full of flaring torches, there was the sound of someone chanting in a low and repetitive manner, and before me in the dimness there stood a figure, wavering as if he were not entirely solid, but rather made of silk, and left to the mercy of the scant draught from the entrance of the cave.

I could see his expression clearly, though not define it entirely or say what feature conspired in his young male face to evince what emotion or how. He was begging me in dumb eloquence to get out of the cave and to leave the mask behind.

"We can't take it," I said. Or rather I heard myself say this. The chanting grew louder. More shapes closed in around the one waver-ing but determined figure. It seemed he stretched out his arms to beseech me.

"We can't take it," I said again. His arms were a golden brown and covered with gorgeous stone bracelets. His face was oval and his eyes dark and quick. I saw tears on his cheeks.

"We can't take it," I said, and then I felt myself falling. "We must leave it. We must bring back the things that were taken before!"

An overwhelming sadness and grief swallowed me; I wanted to lie on the ground; so great was this emotion and so right was it that I felt it and expressed it with my entire form.

Yet no sooner had I hit the ground—at least I think I did—than I was jerked upright, and the mask was ripped away. One moment I felt it in my fingers and against my face, and the next I felt nothing and saw nothing but the distant light flickering in the green leaves.

The figure was gone, the chanting had stopped, the grief was broken. Merrick was pulling me with all her strength:

"David, come on!" she said. "Come on!" She would not be denied.

And I myself felt an overwhelming desire to get out of the cave with her, and to take the mask; to steal this magic, this indescribable magic which had enabled me to see the spirits of the place with my own eyes. Boldly, wretchedly, without any excuse whatsoever, I reached down, without losing a pace, and caught up a handful of brilliant glinting stone artifacts from the thick moldering floor, stuffing them into my pockets as I went on.

We were in the open jungle in a matter of moments. We ignored the

unseen hands that assailed us, the volleys of leaves, and the urgent cries of the howler monkeys, as though they'd joined in the assault. A slender banana tree crashed down into our path, and we moved over it, hacking the others that seemed to be bowing to strike us in the face.

We made remarkable time, moving through the hallway of the temple. We were almost running when we found the remnants of the trail. The spirits sent more of the banana trees flapping towards us. There was a rain of coconuts, which did not strike us. From time to time small pebbles came in a little gale.

But as we continued, the assault gradually fell away. At last there was nothing but a soundless howling. I was crazed. I was a perfect devil. I didn't care. She had the mask. She had the mask which enabled a person to see spirits. She had it. Oncle Vervain hadn't been strong enough to get it, I knew it. And neither had been Cold Sandra nor Honey nor Matthew. The spirits had driven them out.

Silently, Merrick clutched the mask to her chest and kept going. Neither of us stopped, no matter how bad the ground under us, no matter how bad the heat, until we reached the jeep.

Only then did she open her backpack and put the mask inside of it. She threw the jeep into reverse, backed up into the jungles, turned the car around, and headed for Santa Cruz del Flores at a boisterous and furious speed.

I remained silent until we were alone together in our tent.

15

Merrick flopped down on her cot and for a moment did and said nothing. Then she reached for the bottle of Flor de Caña rum and drank a deep gulp.

I preferred water for the moment, and though we'd been driving for a considerable time, my heart was still pounding, and I felt my age miserably as I sat there trying to catch my breath.

Finally, when I started to say something about what we'd done and how we'd done it, when I raised my voice in an attempt to put things in some sort of perspective, Merrick gestured for me to be quiet.

Her face was flushed. She sat as if her heart too were giving her the worst, though I knew better, and then she took another sizable drink of her rum.

Her cheeks were blazing as she looked across at me as I sat on my cot facing her. Her face was wet with sweat.

"What did you see?" she asked, "when you looked through it?"

"I saw them!" I said. "I saw a weeping man, a priest, perhaps, perhaps a king, perhaps a nobody, except that he was beautifully dressed. He wore fine bracelets. He wore long robes. He pleaded with me. He was grieving and miserable. He let me know it was a dreadful thing. He let me know the dead of the place weren't gone!"

She sat back, resting on both her arms, her breasts thrust forward, her eyes fixed on the top of the tent.

"And you?" I asked. "What did you see?"

She wanted to answer, but she seemed unable. She sat forward again and reached for her backpack, her eyes moving from side to side, her expression what is aptly called wild.

"Did you see the same thing?" I asked her.

She nodded. Then she opened the backpack and removed the mask so carefully one would have thought it was made of glass. It was now, in the dim daylight of the tent and the gold light of the one lantern, that I

perceived how carefully and deeply the features were carved. The lips were thick and long and spread back as if in a scream. The eye ridges gave no surprise to the expression, only a sense of calm.

"Look," she said, putting her fingers through an opening at the top of the forehead, and then pointing out an opening over each ear. "It was strapped to his face with leather, most likely. It wasn't merely laid over his bones."

"And what do you think it means?"

"That it was his, for looking at spirits. That it was his, and he knew the magic wasn't intended for just anyone; that he knew it was magic that could give harm."

She turned over the mask and lifted it. She wanted clearly to put it over her face again but something stopped her. At last she stood up and went to the door of the tent. There was an open seam there through which she could peer out and along the mud street to the little plaza, and she seemed to be doing this, holding the mask below her face.

"Go on, do it," I said, "or give it to me and I will."

Hesitantly she pursued her course. She lifted the mask and held it firm over her face for a long moment, and then jerked it roughly away. She sat down exhausted on the cot, as though the entire little enterprise of only a few precious moments had tapped her strength at the core. Once again, her pupils danced wildly. Then she looked at me, and she grew a little calm.

"What did you see?" I asked. "Spirits of the village?"

"No," she answered. "I saw Honey in the Sunshine. I saw her watching me. I saw Honey. Oh, dear God, I saw Honey. Don't you see what's she done?"

I didn't immediately respond, but of course I saw. I let her speak the words.

"She's led me here, led me to a mask through which I can see her; she's brought me to a means by which she can come through!"

"Listen to me, darling," I said, and I reached out and took her wrist. "Fight this spirit. It has no claim on you any more than any other spirit. Life belongs to those who are alive, Merrick, and life is to be honored over death! You didn't drown Honey in the Sunshine, you have that from her own lips."

She didn't answer me. She put her elbow on her knee and rested her

forehead in her right hand. The mask she held with her left. I think she was staring at it but I couldn't be sure. She began to tremble.

Gently, I took the mask from her. I laid it carefully on my cot. Then I remembered the objects I'd collected before leaving the cave. I reached inside my pocket to retrieve them. They were four perfectly carved little Olmecoid figures, two of bald, somewhat fat, creatures, the other two of lean scowling gods. A shiver passed through me as I looked at these small faces. I could have sworn I heard a chorus of voices for an instant, as though someone had turned up the dial on a piece of amplified music. Then the silence rushed at me as if it were palpable. I broke out in a sweat.

These little creatures, these little gods, had the same luster as the mask.

"We're taking this all back with us," I declared. "And as far as I'm concerned, I want to revisit the cave as soon as I've regained my strength."

She looked up at me.

"You can't be serious," she said. "You would challenge those spirits?"

"Yes, I'd challenge them. I don't say we take the mask back to the cave to look through. Dear God, I wouldn't dream of such a thing. But I can't leave behind such an unexplored mystery. I have to go back. What I want to do is examine what's there as carefully as I can. Then I think we must contact one of the universities active here and let them know of just what we found. I don't mean to speak of the mask, you understand. At least not until we've made certain that it's ours to keep beyond any dispute."

It was a tangled question, this matter of universities and digs and claims to antiquities, and I was in no mood for it just then. I felt hot all over. My stomach was heaving, which almost never happens to me. "I've got to see that cave again. God help me, I know why you came back here. I understand everything. I want to go back at least once, maybe twice, how do I know—." I broke off. The wave of sickness passed.

She was staring at me as if she were in grave and secret distress. She looked as sick as I felt. With both her hands, she clawed at her thick hair and drew it back from her lovely forehead. Her green eyes appeared hot.

"Now, you know," I said, "that we have four men with us that can get this mask out of the country and back to New Orleans with no difficulty.

Shall I give it to them now?"

"No, don't do anything with it just yet," she said. She stood up. "I'm going to the church."

"What for?" I asked her.

"To pray, David!" she said impatiently, glowering down at me. "Don't you believe in anything really?" she demanded. "I'm going into the church to pray." And on her way she went.

She'd been gone for about twenty minutes when I finally poured myself a glass of the rum. I was so thirsty. It was strange to be thirsty and sick at the same time. Except for the sound of a few chickens or turkeys, I didn't honestly know which, the village was quiet, and no one came to disturb my solitude in the tent.

I stared at the mask, and I realized that my head was aching terribly, that indeed a throbbing had commenced behind my eyes. I didn't think too much about it, as headaches have never been a torment to me, until I realized that the mask was becoming a blur in my sight.

I tried to refocus. I couldn't. Indeed, I felt hot all over, and every tiny insect bite which I'd suffered began to make itself known.

"This is nonsense," I said aloud, "I've had every damned injection known to modern medicine, including several that weren't known when Matthew got his fever." Then I realized I was talking to myself. I poured another good shot of the rum and drank it down straight. It seemed to me, rather vaguely, that I would feel much better if the tent weren't so crowded, and I wished that all the people would leave.

Then I realized that there couldn't be people in the tent with me. No one had come in. I tried to regain a consistent memory of the last few moments, but something had been lost. I turned and looked at the mask again and then I drank some of the rum, which by now tasted marvelous, and I put down the glass and picked up the mask.

It seemed as light as it was precious, and I held it up so that the light shone through it, and it seemed for a moment to be quite definitely alive. A voice was whispering to me rather feverishly as to all manner of small things which I had to worry about, and someone said:

"Others will come when thousands of years have passed." Only the words I heard were not in a language which I understood. "But I do understand you," I said aloud, and then the whispering voice said something that seemed a curse and an ominous prediction. It had to do

with the fact that certain things were best left unexplored.

The tent seemed to be moving. Rather, the place where I was seemed to be moving. I put the mask against my skin and I felt steadier. But the entire world had changed. I had changed.

I was standing on a high pavilion and I could see the beautiful mountains all around me, the lower portions of the slopes covered in deep green forest, and the sky itself was brightly blue.

I looked down and I saw a crowd of thousands surrounding the pavilion. Over on the tops of other pyramids there stood huge masses of people. The people were whispering and shouting and chanting. And there was a small group on my pavilion, all of them faithfully at my side.

"You will call down the rain," said the voice in my ear, "and it will come. But one day, the snow will come instead of the rain, and on that day, you will die."

"No, that will never happen!" I said. I realized I was growing dizzy. I was going to fall from the pavilion. I turned around and reached out for the hands of my fellows. "Are you priests, tell me, what you are." I asked. "I'm David and I demand that you tell me, I'm not the person you believe me to be!"

I realized that I was in the cave. I had all but fallen to the thick soft floor. Merrick was shouting at me to get up. Before me stood the weeping spirit.

"The Lonely Spirit, how many times have you called me?" said the tall being sadly. "How many times have you, the magician, reached out for the lonely soul? You have no right to call those between life and death. Leave the mask behind you. The mask is wrong, don't you understand what I'm telling you!"

Merrick cried my name. I felt the mask ripped from my face. I looked up. I was lying down on my cot, and she was standing over me.

"Good God, I'm sick," I told her. "I'm very sick. Get me the shaman. No, there's no time for the shaman. We must set out for the airport now."

"Quiet, be quiet, lie still," said Merrick. But her face was dark with fear. I heard her thoughts clearly. *It's happening all over again, just as it happened to Matthew. It's happening to David. I myself have some deep immunity, but it's happening to David.*

I grew very quiet within myself. I'll fight it, I resolved, and I let my

head roll to one side on the pillow, hoping that the pillow would be cool against my cheek. Though I heard Merrick crying out for the men to come to the tent immediately, I saw another person sitting on her cot.

It was a tall lean man with brown skin and a narrow face, and arms covered with jade bracelets. He had a high forehead and shoulder-length black hair. He was looking at me in a quiet manner. I saw the dark red of his long gown, and the gleam of his toenail in the light.

"It's you again," I said. "You think you're going to kill me. You think you can reach out from your ancient grave to take my life?"

"I don't want to kill you," he whispered, with little or no change in his placid expression. "Give back the mask for your own sake and for hers."

"No," I said. "You must realize I can't do it. I can't leave such a mystery. I can't simply turn my back. You had your time and now is my time, and I'm taking the mask back with me. She's taking it with her, really. But even if she surrendered, I would do it on my own."

I went on pleading with him, in a low reasonable voice, that he should understand. I said, "Life belongs to those who are alive." But by then the tent was truly crowded with the men who had come with us. Someone had asked me to keep a thermometer under my tongue. And Merrick was saying, "I can't get a pulse."

Of the journey to Guatemala City, I remember nothing.

As for the hospital, it might have been a medical facility anywhere in the world.

Repeatedly I turned my head and I found myself alone with the bronze-skinned man with the oval face and the jade bracelets, though more often than not he did not speak. When I tried to speak, others answered, and the man simply melted as another world seemed to supplant that which I'd left behind.

When I was fully conscious, which wasn't often, I seemed convinced that people in Guatemala would know more of the tropical illness from which I suffered. I wasn't afraid. I knew from the expression of my bronze-skinned visitor that I wasn't dying. And I do not remember being transferred to a hospital in New Orleans at all.

The visitor never appeared after the return to New Orleans.

By that time I was on the mend, and when days did begin to connect with one another, I was running only a low grade temperature, and the

“toxin” was completely gone. Soon I no longer required intravenous nourishment. My strength was coming back.

My case was nothing exceptional. It had to do with a species of amphibian which I must have encountered in the brush. Even touching this creature can be fatal. My contact must have been indirect.

Merrick and the others were not afflicted, that was soon made clear to me, and I was much relieved, though in my state of confusion, I had to confess I had not thought of them as I should.

Merrick spent a great deal of time with me, but Aaron was almost always there as well. As soon as I would start to address an important question to Merrick, a nurse or a doctor came into the room. At other times I was confused as to the order of events and didn’t want to reveal that confusion. And occasionally, very occasionally, I would wake in the night, convinced I’d been back in the jungles in my dreams.

At last, though I was still technically sick, I was brought by ambulance to Oak Haven and moved into the upstairs left front room.

This is one of the more gracious and lovely bedrooms in the house, and, in my robe and slippers, I was walking out on the front porch by the evening of that day. It was winter, but wondrously green all around me, and the breeze off the river was welcome.

At last, after two days of “small talk,” which was threatening to drive me out of my mind, Merrick came to my room alone. She wore a nightgown and robe and she appeared exhausted. Her rich brown hair was held back from her temples by two amber combs. I could see the relief in her face as she looked at me.

I was in bed, with pillows propped and a book on the Maya people open in my lap.

“I thought you were going to die,” she said plainly. “I prayed for you in a way I’ve never prayed before.”

“Do you think God heard your prayers?” I asked. Then I realized she hadn’t mentioned praying to God at all. “Tell me,” I asked, “was I ever in real danger?”

She seemed shocked by the question. Then she fell quiet, as though debating what she might say. I already had part of my answer, purely from her reaction to the question, so I waited patiently until she meant to speak.

“There were times in Guatemala,” she said, “when they told me you

were not likely to make it much longer. I sent them away, insofar as they'd listen, and I put the mask over my face. I could see your spirit just above your body; I could see it struggling to rise and free itself from your body. I could see it stretched over you, the double of you, rising, and I put out my hand and I pressed on it, and made it go back into its place."

I felt a dreadful overwhelming love for her.

"Thank God you did it," I said.

She repeated my words from the jungle village.

"Life belongs to those who are alive."

"You remember me saying it?" I asked her, or rather I expressed to her my gratitude.

"You said it often," she replied. "You thought you were talking to someone, the someone we'd both seen in the mouth of the cave before we'd made our escape. You thought you were engaged in a debate with him. And then one morning, very early, when I woke up in the chair and found you conscious, you told me you'd won."

"What are we going to do with the mask?" I asked. "I see myself becoming enthralled with it. I see myself testing it on others, but in secret. I see myself becoming its unwholesome slave."

"We won't let that happen," she said. "Besides, others aren't affected in the same way."

"How do you know?" I asked.

"The men in the tent, when you were getting sicker and sicker, they picked it up, they thought it was a curio, of course. One of them thought we'd bought it from the village people. He was the first to look through it. He saw nothing. Then another one of the men did the same thing. So forth and so on."

"What about here in New Orleans?"

"Aaron saw nothing through it," she said. And then in something of a sad voice she added: "I didn't tell him all that happened. That's for you to do, if you wish."

"And you?" I pressed. "What do you see when you look through the mask now?"

She shook her head. She looked off a bit, desperately biting into her lip, and then she looked at me.

"I see Honey when I look through it. Almost always. I see Honey in

the Sunshine, and that's all. I see her in the oaks outside of the Motherhouse. I see her in the garden. I see her whenever I look through the mask. The world is as it is around her. But she's always there." There was a passage of time and then she confessed:

"I believe it was all Honey's doing. Honey goaded me with nightmares. Oncle Vervain was never really there. It was always Honey in the Sunshine, greedy for life, and how can I blame her? She sent us back there to get the mask so that she could come through. I've vowed I won't let her do it. I mean, I won't let her grow stronger and stronger through me. I won't be used and destroyed by her. It's like you said. Life belongs to those who are alive."

"Would it do no good to speak to her? Would it do no good to tell her that she's dead?"

"She knows," said Merrick sadly. "She's a powerful and crafty spirit. If you tell me as Superior General that you want to attempt an exorcism, and that you want me to communicate with her, I'll do it—but on my own, never, never will I give in to her. She's too clever. She's too strong."

"I'll never ask you to do such a thing," I said quickly. "Come, sit beside me here. Let me hold you. I'm too weak to do you any harm."

Now that I look back on these things, I'm not sure why I didn't tell Merrick all about the spirit with the oval face and how he had continued to appear to me throughout my illness, and especially when I was close to death. Perhaps we had exchanged confidences about my visions when I was feverish. I only know that we did not discuss them in detail when we took stock of the whole event.

As for my personal reaction to the spirit, I was afraid of him. I had robbed a place that was precious to him. I had done it fiercely and selfishly, and though the illness had burnt away much of my desire to explore the mystery of the cave, I feared the spirit's return.

As a matter of fact, I did see this spirit again.

It was many years later. It was on the night in Barbados when Lestat came to see me, and decided to make me a vampire against my will.

As you well know, I was no longer the elder David. It was after our dreadful ordeal with the Body Thief. I felt invincible in my new young body and I had no thought to ask Lestat for eternal life. When it was clear that he meant to force me, I fought him with all I had.

At some point in this vain attempt to save myself from the vampiric blood, I called on God, the angels, anyone who might help me. I called on my orisha, Oxalá, in the old Portuguese Candomble tongue.

I don't know if my prayers were heard by my orisha, but the room was suddenly assailed by small spirits, none of whom could frighten or hinder Lestat in any way. And as he drained my blood to the very point of death, it was the bronze-skinned spirit of the cave whom I glimpsed as my eyes closed.

It seemed to me, as I was losing the battle to live, let alone the battle to be mortal, that I saw the cave spirit standing near me with his arms out, and I saw pain in his face.

The figure was wavering, yet fully realized. I saw the bracelets on his arms. I saw his long red robe. I saw the tears on his cheeks.

It was only an instant. The world of solid things and spiritual things flickered and went out.

I fell into a stupor. I remember nothing until the moment when Lestat's supernatural blood flooded my mouth. By then, I saw only Lestat and I knew my soul was entering on yet another adventure, one which would carry me forward beyond my most appalling dreams.

I never saw the cave spirit again.

But let me finish my tale of Merrick. There is not a great deal more to be said.

After a week of convalescence in the New Orleans Motherhouse, I dressed in my usual tweed suit and came downstairs for breakfast, with the other members assembled there.

Later, Merrick and I walked in the garden, which was filled with lush beautiful dark-leafed camillias, which thrive in the winter, even through light frost. I saw blossoms of pink and red and white which I never forgot. Giant green elephant ear and purple flowering orchid plants were growing everywhere. How beautiful Louisiana can be in winter. How verdant and vigorous and remote.

"I've put the mask into the vault, in a sealed box, under my name," Merrick told me. "I suggest we leave it there."

"Absolutely," I said. "But you must promise me, that if you ever change your mind about the mask, you'll call me before you take even the simplest steps."

"I don't want to see Honey anymore!" she said under her breath. "I

told you. She wants to use me, and that I won't allow. I was ten years old when she was murdered. I'm tired, oh so tired of grieving for Honey. You'll never have to worry. I won't touch the mask again if I can help it, believe me."

Insofar as I ever knew, Merrick was faithful to her vow.

After we completed a detailed letter regarding our expedition, for a university of our choice, we sealed the records and the mask permanently, along with the idols, the perforator that Merrick had used in her magic, all of Michael's original papers, and the remnants of Oncle Vervain's map. All was kept in storage at Oak Haven, with access only allowed to Merrick or to me.

In the spring, I got a call from America, from Aaron, telling me that investigators in the area of Lafayette, Louisiana, had found the wreck of Cold Sandra's car.

Apparently Merrick had led them to a portion of the swamp where the vehicle had been submerged years before. Enough remained of the corpses to ascertain that two women had been in the vehicle at the time that it sank. The skull bones of both showed severe and potentially life-threatening fractures. But no one could determine whether or not either victim had survived the blows long enough to be drowned.

Cold Sandra was identified by the remnants of a plastic purse and the random objects inside of it, most particularly a gold pocket watch in a small leather pouch. Merrick had recognized the pocket watch immediately, and the inscription had born her out.

"To my beloved son, Vervain, from your Father, Alexias André Mayfair, 1910."

As for Honey in the Sunshine, the remaining bones supported the identification of a sixteen-year-old girl. No more could be known.

Immediately I packed a bag. On the telephone, I told Merrick I was on my way.

"Don't come, David," she said calmly. "It's all over. They've both been buried in the family grave in the St. Louis Cemetery. There's no more to be done. I'm going back to Cairo to work, just as soon as you give me leave."

"My darling, you can go immediately. But surely you must stop in London."

"Wouldn't think of going on without seeing you," she said. She was

about to ring off when I stopped her.

"Merrick, the gold pocket watch is yours now. Clean it. Repair it. Keep it. No one can deny it to you now."

There was a disturbing silence on the other end.

"I told you, David, Oncle Vervain always said I didn't need it," she replied. "He said it ticked for Cold Sandra and Honey. Not for me."

I found those words a little frightening.

"Honor their memories, Merrick, and honor your wishes," I insisted. "But life, and its treasures, belong to those who are alive."

A week later, we had lunch together. She looked as fresh and inviting as ever, her brown hair drawn back in the leather barrette that I'd come to love.

"I didn't use the mask to find those bodies," she explained at once. "I want you to know that." She continued on. "I went out to Lafayette and I went on instinct and prayers. We dredged in several areas before we got lucky. Or you might say Great Nananne helped me find the bodies. Great Nananne knew how much I wanted to find them. As for Honey, I can still feel her near me. Sometimes I feel so sad for her, sometimes I get weak—."

"No, you're talking about a spirit," I interjected, "and a spirit is not necessarily the person you knew or loved."

After that, she spoke of nothing but her work in Egypt. She was happy to be headed back there. There had been some new discoveries in the desert, due to aerial photography, and she had a meeting scheduled which might lead to her seeing a new, previously undocumented tomb.

It was marvelous to see her in such fine form. As I paid the check, she brought out Oncle Vervain's gold pocket watch.

"I almost forgot about this," she said. It was quite well polished and it opened at the touch of her finger with an audible snap. "It can't really be repaired, of course," she explained as she held it lovingly. "But I like having it. See? Its hands are fixed at ten minutes before eight."

"Do you think it has some connection," I asked gingerly, "I mean, to the time that they met their deaths?"

"I don't think so," she said with a light shrug. "I don't think Cold Sandra ever remembered to wind it. I think she carried it in her purse for sentimental reasons. It's a wonder she didn't pawn it. She pawned other things." She put it back into her purse and gave me a reassuring smile.

I took the long drive with her out to the airport and walked her to the plane.

Everything was calm until the final moments. We were two civilized human beings, saying goodbye, who meant to see each other soon again.

Then something broke inside me. It was sweet and terrible and too immense for me. I took her in my arms.

"My darling, my love," I said to her, feeling the fool dreadfully, and wanting her youth and her devotion with my whole soul. She was utterly unresisting, giving way to kisses that broke my heart.

"There never will be anyone else," she whispered in my ear.

I remember pushing her aside and holding her by her shoulders, and then I turned, without so much as a backwards glance, and I walked swiftly away.

What was I doing to this young woman? I had just passed my seventieth birthday. And she had not yet reached her twenty-fifth.

But on the long drive back to the Motherhouse, I realized that, try as I might I could not plunge myself into the requisite state of guilt.

I had loved Merrick the way I had once loved Joshua, the young boy who had thought me the most marvelous lover in the world. I had loved her through temptation and through giving in to that temptation, and nothing would ever make me deny that love to myself, to her, or to God.

For all the remaining years that I knew her, Merrick remained in Egypt, going home via London to New Orleans perhaps twice a year.

Once I dared to ask her boldly why she was not interested in Maya lore.

I think the question irritated her. She didn't like to think of those jungles, let alone speak of them. She thought I ought to know that, but she answered me in a civil manner nevertheless.

She explained clearly that she met with too many obstacles in studying Mesoamerica, in particular the question of the dialects, of which she knew nothing, and of archaeological experience in the field, of which she had none. Her learning had led her to Egypt, where she knew the writing, knew the story, knew the history. It was where she meant to stay.

"Magic is the same everywhere," she said more than often. But that didn't deter her from making it her life's work.

There is one more piece to the puzzle of Merrick which I possess.

While Merrick was working in Egypt that year after our trip to the jungles, Aaron wrote me a strange missive which I'll never forget.

He told me that the license plates of the car found in the swamp had led the authorities to the used-car salesman who had murdered his young customers Cold Sandra and Honey. Indeed, the man was a drifter with a long criminal record, and it had not been difficult to trace him at all. Belligerent and somewhat cruel by nature, the miscreant had gone back several times over the years to work at the very car lot where he'd met his victims, and his identity was well known to any number of people who could connect him to the car found in the swamps.

A confession to the crimes was not long in coming, though the man was judged to be insane.

"The authorities have advised me that the fellow is terrified," wrote Aaron. "He insists that he is being hounded by a spirit, and that he would do anything to expiate his guilt. He begs for drugs to render him unconscious. I do believe he will be placed in a mental hospital, in spite of the clear viciousness of the crimes."

Naturally, Merrick was advised of the whole affair. Aaron sent her a pack of newspaper clippings, as well as what court records he could obtain.

But much to my great relief, Merrick did not wish to go back to Louisiana at that time.

"There is no need for me to confront this person," she wrote to me. "I'm sure, from all that Aaron's told me, that justice has been done."

Less than two weeks later, Aaron advised me by letter that the murderer of Cold Sandra and Honey had died by his own hand.

I called Aaron at once:

"Have you told Merrick?" I asked.

After a long pause, Aaron said, quite calmly:

"I suspect that Merrick knows."

"Why on earth do you say that?" I asked immediately. I was always too impatient with Aaron's reticence. However, this time he was not to keep me in the dark.

"The spirit who haunted this fellow," said Aaron, "was a tall woman with brown hair and green eyes. Now that does not square with our pictures of Cold Sandra or Honey in the Sunshine, does it?"

I answered no, that it did not.

“Well, he’s dead now, poor fool,” said Aaron. “And maybe Merrick can continue her work in peace.”

That is exactly what Merrick did: continue her work in peace.

And now:

Now, after all these years, I have come back to her, asking her to raise the soul of the Dead Child Claudia for Louis, and for me.

I have asked her in so many words to use her magic, which might surely mean using the mask, which I know to be in her possession at Oak Haven, as it had always been, the mask which could let her see spirits between life and death.

I have done that, I who know what she has suffered, and what a good and happy person she could be, and is.

16

It was an hour before dawn when I finished the story.

Louis had listened all of this time in silence, never bringing a question, never making a distraction, but merely absorbing my words.

Out of respect for me, he remained silent, but I could see a flood of emotion in his face. His dark-green eyes made me think of Merrick's, and for one moment I felt such a desire for her, such a horror of what I'd done, that I couldn't speak.

Finally Louis explained the very perceptions and sensations that were overwhelming me as I thought about all I'd said.

"I never realized how much you loved this woman," he said. "I never realized how very different you are from me."

"I love her, yes, and perhaps I myself didn't realize how much until I told you the history. I made myself see it. I made myself remember. I made myself experience my union with her again. But when you speak of you and me being different, you must tell me what you mean."

"You're wise," he said, "wise in ways that only an elderly human being can be. You experienced old age in a way that none of the rest of us has ever known. Not even the great mother, Maharet, knew infirmity before she was made a vampire centuries ago. Certainly, Lestat has never grasped it, in spite of all his injuries. And I? I've been too young for too long."

"Don't condemn yourself for it. Do you think human beings are meant to know the bitterness and loneliness I knew in my last mortal years? I don't think so. Like all creatures, we're made to live until our prime. All the rest is spiritual and physical disaster. Of that I'm convinced."

"I can't agree with you," he said modestly. "What tribe on earth has not had elders? How much of our art and our knowledge comes from those who've lived into old age? You sound like Lestat when you say such things, speaking of his Savage Garden. The world has never seemed a hopelessly savage place to me."

I smiled.

"You believe so many things," I said. "One has only to press you to discover them, yet you deny the value of everything you've learned, in your constant melancholy. You do, you know."

He nodded. "I can't make sense of things, David," he said.

"Maybe we're not meant to, any of us, whether we're old or very young."

"Possibly so," he said. "But what's very important now is that we both make a solemn vow. We will not injure this vital and unique woman. Her strength won't blind us. We will feed her curiosity and be just to her, and protective of her, but we will not bring her any harm."

I nodded. I knew his meaning quite plainly. Oh, how I knew it.

"Would that I could say," he whispered, "that we would withdraw our request. Would that I could endure without Merrick's magic. Would that I could leave this world without ever seeing Claudia's ghost."

"Don't talk of ending it, please, I can't listen to it," I hastened to say.

"Oh, but I must talk of it. It's all I think about."

"Then think of those words I spoke to the spirit in the cave. Life belongs to those who are alive. You are alive."

"At such a price," he said.

"Louis, we are both of us desperate to live," I said. "We look to Merrick's magic for consolation. We dream of looking through the mask ourselves, don't we? We want to see something that does make it all come together, is that not so?"

"I don't know that I'm so deliberate, David," he responded. His face was dark with worry, heavy with fine lines at the corners of his eyes and mouth, lines that vanished whenever his face was still. "I don't know what I want," he confessed. "Oh, but to see spirits as Merrick has seen them, as you've seen them. Oh, if only I could hear the ghostly harpsichord that others hear in this place. Oh, if I could talk to a spirit with the strength of Honey in the Sunshine, what that would mean to me."

"Louis, what can make you want to continue?" I asked. "What could make you see that we are privileged witnesses of what the world has to offer on all sides?"

He laughed, a short polite but contemptuous laugh.

"A clear conscience, David," he replied. "What else?"

“Then take the blood I have to give,” I said to him. “Take the blood Lestat has offered you more than once. Take the blood that you’ve refused so many times, and be strong enough to live by the ‘little drink’ and push death out of your way.”

I was a bit surprised at the vehemence with which I recommended this, because before this conversation—before this long night of storytelling—I had thought his decision to refuse the powerful blood to be very wise.

As I’ve stated in this narrative, he was weak enough that the sun might easily destroy him, and in that lay an immense consolation which Lestat and I did not share.

Now, he studied me with a look of interest. I saw no condemnation in his eyes.

I rose and walked slowly about the room. Once again, I looked at the bright and confident painting by Monet. All my life seemed close to me suddenly; all my determination was to live.

“No, I can’t die by my own will,” I murmured, “not even if it’s as simple as going into the sunlight. That I cannot do. I want to know what happens! I want to know when and if Lestat wakes from his dreamy sleep. I want to know what will become of Merrick! I want to know what will become of Armand. That I can live forever? Oh, how I cherish it! I cannot pretend to be the mortal who once refused Lestat. I cannot reach back and claim that being’s unimaginative heart.”

I turned and it seemed the room was pulsing violently around me, all its color coalescing, as though Monet’s spirit had infected the very fabric of the solid matter and the air. All the objects of the room seemed arbitrary and symbolic. And beyond lay the savage night—Lestat’s Savage Garden—and random unanswerable stars.

As for Louis, he was captivated as only he can become, yielding as men almost never yield, no matter in what shape or form the male spirit may be clothed.

“You’re all so very strong,” he said in a low, reverent, and sad voice. “All so very strong.”

“But we’ll make that vow, old friend,” I said, “with regard to Merrick. There will come a time when Merrick will want this magic and reproach us with our selfishness, that we have begged for hers while refusing her our own.”

Louis seemed almost on the edge of tears.

"Don't underestimate her, David," he said in a raw voice. "Perhaps she's quite as invincible as you were, in her own way. Perhaps she has shocks in store for us, of which we're unaware."

"Have I lead you to believe so?" I asked. "With all I've said?"

"You've given me her picture in deep and enduring detail," he answered. "Don't you think she knows my misery? Don't you think she will feel it when we meet?" He hesitated, then continued, "She won't want to share our existence. Why should she when she can make herself appear to others, when she can look through a jade mask and see her sister's ghost. From all you've said, I've drawn the conclusion that she won't be at all eager to give up forever the sight of the Egyptian sand in the noonday sun."

I smiled. I couldn't stop myself. I thought he was completely wrong.

"I don't know, old friend," I said, straining for courtesy. "I simply don't know. I know only I'm committed to our wretched purpose. And all that I've deliberately recalled has not taught me to be wary or kind."

He rose from his chair slowly, silently, and walked to the door of the room. I realized it was time for him to go now and find his coffin, and that shortly I should do the same thing.

I followed him, and we went out of the town house together, down the back iron steps and through the wet garden and to the front gate.

I did see the black cat for one instant on the top of the rear wall, but I made no mention of it, determined that cats were simply common in New Orleans and I was being just a bit of a fool.

At last it came time for us to part.

"I'll spend the next few evenings with Lestat," Louis said quietly. "I want to read to him. He doesn't respond but he doesn't stop me. You'll know where to find me when Merrick returns."

"Does he never say anything to you?" I asked, regarding Lestat.

"Sometimes he speaks, just a little. He'll ask for Mozart perhaps, or that I read him some old poetry. But in the main, he's as you see him yourself, unchanged." He paused, then looked directly at the sky. "I want to be alone with him for a few nights, I suppose, before Merrick comes back."

His tone had a finality to it, and a sadness that touched me to the quick. He was saying farewell to Lestat, that's what he was doing, and I

knew that Lestat's slumber was so deep and so troubled, that even such a dreadful message from Louis might not rouse him at all.

I watched Louis walk away as the sky grew ever more lighter. I could hear the morning birds singing. I thought of Merrick, and I wanted her. I wanted her purely as a man might want her. And as a vampire I wanted to drain her soul and have her eternally there for my visits, always safe. I was alone with her again for one precious instant in the tent in Santa Cruz del Flores, and I felt that mercurial pleasure connect my orgasmic body and brain.

It was a curse to bring too many mortal memories into vampiric existence. To have been old did mean sublime experience and knowledge. And the curse had richness to it, and a splendor I could not deny.

And it occurred to me, if Louis does end his life, if he does bring his supernatural journey to a conclusion, how will I ever answer for it to Lestat or Armand, or myself?

IT WAS A WEEK before I received a handwritten letter from Merrick. She was back in Louisiana.

> Beloved David,
>
> Come to my old house tomorrow evening as soon as you can. The caretaker will be safely off the property. And I will be alone in the front room.
>
> It's my desire to meet Louis and hear from his own lips what he wants for me to do.
>
> As to those items which once belonged to Claudia, I have the rosary, the diary, and the doll.
>
> All the rest can be arranged.

I could scarce contain my exhilaration. Waiting till tomorrow would be a torment. I went at once to St. Elizabeth's, the building where Lestat spent his lonely hours sleeping on the old chapel floor.

Louis was there, seated on the marble beside Lestat, reading in a hushed voice from an old book of English poetry when I came in.

I read the letter to Louis.

There was no change whatsoever in Lestat's demeanor.

"I know where the house is," said Louis. He was extremely excited,

though I think he struggled to conceal it. “I’ll be there. I suppose I should have asked your permission. But I went to find it last night.”

“Perfect,” I responded. “I’ll meet you there tomorrow evening. But listen, you must—.”

“Go on, say it,” he coaxed me gently.

“You must remember, she’s a powerful woman. We’ve vowed to protect her, but don’t for a moment think of her as weak.”

“And so we go back and forth about her,” he said patiently. “I understand you. I know your meaning. When I vowed to take this path, I braced myself for disaster. And tomorrow night, I shall brace myself as completely as I can.”

Lestat showed not the slightest sign of having heard our discourse. He lay as before, his red velvet coat creased and dusty, his yellow hair a tangled mass.

I knelt down and laid a reverent kiss on Lestat’s cheek. He continued to gaze into the gloom before him. Once again, I had the distinct impression that his soul was not in his body, not in the way that we believed it to be. I wanted so to tell him of our enterprise, but then again, I wasn’t sure that I wanted him to know.

It struck me quite completely that if he knew what we meant to do he would stop us. How far from us his thoughts must have been.

As I left, I heard Louis continue to read in a low, melodious, and faintly passionate voice.

17

On the evening of the appointed meeting, the sky was very clear except for a few distinct and brightly white clouds. The stars were small but I could see them, faint comfort that they were. The air itself was not so terribly humid, yet it was delightfully warm.

Louis came to meet me at the carriageway gate in the Rue Royale, and in my excitement, I noticed very little about his appearance except that he was uncommonly well dressed.

As I've mentioned before, his clothes are not usually very well chosen, but he had of late been enjoying a certain improvement, and on this evening he had clearly gone out of his way.

To repeat, I was too interested in our meeting with Merrick to pay it much attention. Having observed that he was not thirsting, indeed that he seemed quite flushed and human—a confirmation that he had already fed—I set out with him at once for Merrick's house.

As we made our way through the desolate and godforsaken old neighborhood, neither of us spoke a word.

Many thoughts tumbled through my mind. My telling of the tale of Merrick had brought me much closer to her than I had been on the night of our meeting in the café in the Rue St. Anne, and my desire to see Merrick again, under any and all circumstances, was more powerful than I cared to admit.

But the subject of Merrick's recent spell tormented me. Why had she sent visions of herself to dazzle me? I wanted to ask her directly, and felt that it must be settled before we could go on.

When we reached the restored house, with its high black picket fence, I insisted that Louis wait patiently for a moment until I walked around the place.

At once I surmised that the little houses on either side of Merrick's large property were in utter ruin. And the property itself, as I've mentioned, was bounded on three sides and in part of the front by very

high brick walls.

I could see a thick forest of trees in Merrick's yard, of which two were immense oaks and another a high sprawling pecan tree, trying to free itself of the rampant yew trees which crowded against the walls. There was a shuddering light emanating upwards against the foliage and its entanglement of branches. I could smell incense and the wax of candles. Indeed, I caught many scents but not the scent of an intruder, and that is what mattered just now.

As for the rear upstairs apartment of the caretaker, it was empty and locked up. This pleased me mightily, as I did not want to deal with this mortal at all.

With regard to Merrick, I could easily sense her presence, walls or no walls, so I quickly made my way back to Louis, who stood before the iron gate which separated the front garden from the street.

Merrick's oleanders were not in bloom yet, but they created a mighty evergreen shrubbery, and many other flowers were growing wild, especially the bright-red African hibiscus and the purple Althea with its stiff branches, and thick rampant white calla lilies with waxy spear-shaped leaves.

The magnolia trees which I scarcely remembered had grown hugely in the past decade, and they now composed a group of impressive sentinels for the front porch.

Louis stood patiently, staring at the leaded glass of the front doors as though he was madly excited. The house was entirely dark except for the front parlor, the room in which Great Nananne's coffin had been set so long ago. I could detect the flicker of candles in the front bedroom, but I doubt a mortal eye could have seen it through the drawn drapes.

Quickly we went in the gate, rattling the ominous shrubbery, and up the steps and rang the bell. I heard Merrick's soft voice from the interior:

"David, come in."

We found ourselves in the shadowy front hall. A great shiny Chinese rug covered the polished floor in flashy modern splendor, and the large new crystal chandelier above was dark, and looked as if it were made of so much intricate ice.

I escorted Louis into the parlor, and there sat Merrick clothed in a shirtwaist dress of white silk, quite relaxed, in one of Great Nananne's old mahogany chairs.

The dim light of a stand-up lamp fell wonderfully upon her. At once we locked eyes, and I felt a rush of love for her. I wanted her to know somehow that I'd revisited all our memories, that I'd chosen the prerogative of confiding them in one whom I trusted completely, and that I loved her as much as I did.

I also wanted her to know that I disliked intensely the visions she'd so recently sent after me, and if she had had any doings with the pesty black cat, that I was not amused!

I think she knew it. I saw her smile faintly at me as we moved further into the room.

I was about to take up the subject of her evil magic. But something stopped me.

It was, very simply, the expression on her face when her eyes fell upon Louis as he stepped into the light.

Though she was as poised and clever as always, there came about a complete change in her face.

She rose to her feet to meet him, which surprised me, and her countenance was smooth and open with utter shock.

It was then that I realized how skillfully Louis had attired himself in a finely tailored suit of thin black wool. He wore a shirt of a cream-colored silk with a small gold pin beneath his rose-colored tie. Even his shoes were deliberately perfect, buffed to a high luster, and his rich black curly hair was combed neatly and entirely. But the glory of his appearance was, of course, his keen features and his lustrous eyes.

I need not repeat that they are a dark-green color, because it was not the color of his eyes which mattered so much. Rather, it was the expression with which he gazed at Merrick, the seeming awe that settled over him, and the way that his well-shaped mouth slowly relaxed.

He had seen her before, yes, but he was not prepared to find her so very interesting and comely at the same time.

And she, with her long hair brushed straight back to the leather barrette, looked utterly inviting in her sharp-shouldered white silk dress, with its small fabric belt and its loose shimmering skirt.

Around her neck, over the fabric of the dress, she wore pearls, in fact, the triple strand of pearls that I myself had long ago given her, and in her ears were pearls, and on the ring finger of her right hand she wore a stunning pearl as well.

I recite these details because I sought to find some sanity in them, but what I was experiencing, what humbled me and made me livid was that the two of them were so impressed with each other, that, for the moment, I was not there.

It was undeniable, the fascination with which she stared at Louis. And there was not the slightest question about the overwhelming awe in which he held her.

"Merrick, my darling," I said softly, "let me present Louis." But I might as well have been babbling. She never heard a single syllable I uttered. She was silently transported, and I could see in her face a provocative expression which up until this time I had never beheld in her except when she was looking at me.

Quickly, obviously struggling to disguise her immense response, she reached out for his hand.

With a vampire's reluctance, he met her gesture, and then, to my complete consternation, he bent down and kissed her—not on the hand which he gripped so tenaciously—but on both her lovely cheeks.

Why in the world hadn't I foreseen this? Why had I thought that she would not see him except as an unapproachable wonder? Why hadn't I realized that I was bringing into her presence one of the most alluring beings I've ever known?

I felt the fool for having not foreseen it, and I also felt the fool for caring so very much.

As he settled in the chair closest to hers, as she sat down and turned her attention to him, I found a place on the sofa across the room. Her eyes never left him, not for a second, and then I heard his voice come low and rich, with his French accent as well as the feeling with which he always spoke.

"You know why I've come to you, Merrick," he said as tenderly as if he was telling her that he loved her. "I live in torment thinking of one creature, one creature I once betrayed and then nurtured, and then lost. I come because I believe you can bring that creature's spirit to speak with me. I come to you because I believe I can determine through you whether that spirit is at rest."

Immediately she answered.

"But what is unrest for spirits, Louis," she said familiarly. "Do you believe in a purgatory, or is it merely a darkness in which spirits

languish, unable to seek a light that would lead them on?"

"I'm not convinced of anything," Louis said in answer. His face was full of vehement eloquence. "If ever a creature was earthbound, it's the vampire. We're wed, soul and body, hopelessly. Only the most painful death by fire can rip that bond. Claudia was my child. Claudia was my love. Claudia died by fire, the fire of the sun. But Claudia has appeared to others. Claudia may come if you call her. That's what I want. That's my extravagant dream."

Merrick was lost to him, utterly lost to him. I knew it. Her mind, insofar as I could read it, was ravaged. She was deeply affected by his seeming pain. Nothing of her sympathies was reserved.

"Spirits exist, Louis," she said, her voice slightly tremulous, "they exist, but they tell lies. One spirit can come in the guise of another. Spirits are sometimes greedy and depraved."

It was quite exquisite, the way that he frowned and put the back of his finger to his lip before he answered. As for her, well, I was furious with her, and saw not the slightest physical or mental fault in her. She was the woman to whom I'd surrendered passion, pride, and honor a long time before.

"I'll know her, Merrick," said Louis. "I can't be deceived. If you can call her, and if she comes, I'll know her. I have no doubt."

"But what if I doubt, Louis?" she responded. "What if I tell you that we've failed? Will you at least try to believe what I say?"

"It's all settled, isn't it?" I blurted out. "We mean to do it, then, don't we?"

"Yes, oh, yes," Louis answered, looking across the room at me considerately enough, though his large inquisitive eyes shot right back to Merrick. "Let me beg your forgiveness, Merrick, that we've troubled you for your power. I tell myself in my most awful moments that you'll take away from us some valuable knowledge and experience, that perhaps we'll confirm your faith—in God. I tell myself these things because I can't believe we've merely ruptured your life with our very presence. I hope it's so. I beg you to understand."

He was using the very words that had come to my mind in my many feverish ruminations. I was furious with him as well as her, suddenly. Detestable that he should say these things, and the hell he couldn't read minds. I had to get myself in hand.

She smiled, suddenly, one of the most magnificent smiles I'd ever seen. Her creamy cheeks, her dramatic green eyes, her long hair—all her charms conspired to make her irresistible, and I could see the effect of her smile upon Louis, as if she'd rushed into his arms.

"I have no doubts or regrets, Louis," she told me. "Mine is a great and unusual power. You've given me a reason to use it. You speak of a soul that may be in torment; indeed, you speak of long, long suffering, and you suggest that we might somehow bring that soul's torment to a close."

At this point, his cheeks colored deeply and he leant over and clasped her hand again tightly.

"Merrick, what can I give you in exchange for what you mean to do?"

This alarmed me. He should not have said it! It led too directly to the most powerful and unique gift that we had to give. No, he shouldn't have said it, but I remained silent, watching these two creatures become ever more enthralled with each other, watching them quite definitely fall in love.

"Wait until it's done, and let us talk then of such things," she said, "if we ever talk of them at all. I need nothing in return, really. As I've said, you are giving me a way to use my power and that in itself is quite enough. But again, you must assure me, you will listen to my estimation of what happens. If I think we have raised something which is not from God I will say so, and you must at least try to believe what I say."

She rose and went directly past me, with only a faint smile for me as she did so, into the open dining room behind me to fetch something, it seemed, from the sideboard along the distant wall.

Of course, Louis, the consummate gentleman, was on his feet. Again I noticed the splendid clothing, and how lean and feline were his simplest gestures, and how stunningly beautiful his immaculate hands.

She reentered the light before me as if reentering a stage.

"Here, this is what I have from your darling," she said. She held a small bundle, wrapped in velvet. "Sit down, Louis, please," she resumed. "And let me put these items into your hands." She took her chair again, beneath the lamp facing him, the precious goods in her lap.

He obeyed her with the open radiance of a schoolboy before a miraculous and brilliant teacher. He sat back as though he would yield to her slightest command.

I watched her in profile and nothing filled my mind so much as pure, utter, base jealousy! But loving her as I did, I was wise enough to acknowledge some genuine concern as well.

As for him, there was little doubt that he was completely as interested in her as he was in the things which had belonged to Claudia.

"This rosary, why did she have it?" asked Merrick, extracting the sparkling beads from her little bundle. "Surely she didn't pray."

"No, she liked it for the look of it," he said, his eyes full of a dignified plea that Merrick should understand. "I think I bought it for her. I don't think I ever even told her what it was. Learning with her was strange, you see. We thought of her as a child, when we should have realized, and then the outward form of a person has such a mysterious connection with the disposition."

"How so?" Merrick asked.

"Oh, you understand," he said shyly, almost modestly. "The beautiful know they have power, and she had, in her diminutive charm, a certain power of which she was always casually aware." He hesitated. It seemed he was painfully shy. "We fussed over her; we gloried in her. She looked no more than six or seven at most." The light in his face went out for a moment, as if an interior switch had shut it off.

Merrick reached forward again and took his hand. He let her have it. He bowed his head just a little, and he lifted the hand she held, as if saying, Give me a moment. Then he resumed.

"She liked the rosary," he said. "Maybe I did tell her the prayers. I don't remember. She liked sometimes to go with me to the Cathedral. She liked to hear the music of the evening ceremonies. She liked all things that were sensual and which involved beauty. She was girlish in her enthusiasms for a long time."

Merrick let his hand go but very reluctantly.

"And this?" she asked. She lifted the small white leather-bound diary. "A long time ago, this was found in the flat in the Rue Royale, in a hiding place. You never knew that she kept it."

"No," he said. "I gave it to her as a gift, that I well recall. But I never saw her write in it. That she kept it came as something of a surprise. She was quite the reader of books, that I can tell you. She knew so much poetry. She was always quoting this or that verse in an off-handed manner. I try to remember the things she quoted, the poets she loved."

He gazed at the diary now as if he were reticent to open it, or even to touch it. As if it still belonged to her.

Merrick withdrew it, and lifted the doll.

"No," Louis said adamantly, "she never liked them. They were always a mistake. No, that doesn't matter, that doll. Although if recollection serves me right, it was found with the diary and the rosary. I don't know why she saved it. I don't know why she put it away. Maybe she wanted someone in the far distant future to find it and mourn for her, to know that she herself had been locked in a doll's body; wanted some one lone individual to shed tears for her. Yes, I think that's how it must have been."

"Rosary, doll, diary," said Merrick delicately. "And the diary entries, do you know what they say?"

"Only one, the one Jesse Reeves read and related to me. Lestat had given her the doll on her birthday and she'd hated it. She'd tried to wound him; she'd mocked him; and he'd answered her with those lines from an old play which I can't forget."

He bowed his head, but he wouldn't give in to his sadness, not entirely. His eyes were dry for all the pain in them as he recited the words:

Cover her face;
mine eyes dazzle;
she died young.

I winced at the recollection. Lestat had been condemning himself when he'd spoken those words to her, he'd been offering himself up to her rage. She'd known it. That's why she'd recorded the entire incident —his unwelcome gift, her weariness of playthings, her anger at her limitations, and then his carefully chosen verse.

Merrick allowed for a small interval, and then, letting the doll rest in her lap, she offered Louis the diary once more.

"There are several entries," she said. "Two are of no importance, and for one of these I'll ask you to work my magic. But there is another telling one, and that you must read before we go on."

Still Louis did not reach for the diary. He looked at her respectfully, as before, but he didn't reach for the little white book.

"Why must I read it?" he asked Merrick.

"Louis, think of what you've asked me to do. And yet you can't read the words she herself wrote here?"

"That was long ago, Merrick," he said. "It was years before she died that she concealed that diary. Isn't what we do of much greater importance? Yes, take a page if you need it. Take any page of the diary, it doesn't matter, use it as you will, only don't ask that I read a word."

"No, you must read it," Merrick said with exquisite gentleness. "Read it to me and to David. I know what is written there, and you must know, and David is here to help both of us. Please, the last entry: read it aloud."

He stared hard at her, and now there came the faint film of red tears to his eyes, but he gave a tiny, near imperceptible, shake of his head, and then he took the diary from her outstretched hand.

He opened it, gazing down at it, having no need as a mortal might to move the page into the light.

"Yes," said Merrick coaxingly. "See, that one is unimportant. She says only that you went to the theater together. She says that she saw *Macbeth,* which was Lestat's favorite play."

He nodded, turning the small pages.

"And that one, that one is not significant," she went on, as though leading him through the fire with her words. "She says that she loves white chrysanthemums, she says she purchased some from an old woman, she says they are the flowers for the dead."

Again he seemed on the very brink of losing his composure utterly, but he kept his tears to himself. Again he turned the pages.

"There, that one. You must read it," said Merrick, and she laid her hand on his knee. I could see her fingers stretched out and embracing him in that age-old gesture. "Please, Louis, read it to me."

He looked at her for a long moment, and then down at the page. His voice came tenderly in a whisper, but I knew that she could hear it as well as I.

> "September 21, 1859
>
> It has been so many decades since Louis presented me with this little book in which I might record my private thoughts. I have not been successful, having made only a few entries, and

whether these have been written for my benefit I am unsure.

Tonight, I confide with pen and paper because I know which direction my hatred will take me. And I fear for those who have aroused my wrath.

By those I mean, of course, my evil parents, my splendid fathers, those who have led me from a long forgotten mortality into this questionable state of timeless 'bliss.'

To do away with Louis would be foolish, as he is without question the more malleable of the pair."

Louis paused as though he couldn't continue.

I saw Merrick's fingers tighten on his knee.

"Read it, please, I beg you," she said gently. "You must go on."

Louis began again, his voice soft as before, and quite deliberately smooth.

"Louis will do as I wish, even unto the very destruction of Lestat, which I plan in every detail. Whereas Lestat would never cooperate with my designs upon Louis. So there my loyalty lies, under the guise of love even in my own heart.

"What mysteries we are, human, vampire, monster, mortal, that we can love and hate simultaneously, and that emotions of all sorts might not parade for what they are not. I look at Louis and I despise him totally for the making of me, and yet I do love him. But then I love Lestat every bit as well.

"Perhaps in the court of my heart, I hold Louis far more accountable for my present state than ever I could blame my impulsive and simple Lestat. The fact is, one must die for this or the pain in me will never be sealed off, and immortality is but a monstrous measurement of what I shall suffer till the world revolves to its ultimate end. One must die so that the other will become ever more dependent upon me, ever more completely my slave. I would travel the world afterwards; I would have my way; I cannot endure either one of them unless that one becomes my servant in thought, word, and deed.

"Such a fate is simply unthinkable with Lestat's ungovernable and irascible character. Such a fate seems made for my

> melancholy Louis, though the destroying of Lestat will open new passages for Louis into the labyrinthian Hell in which I already wander with every new thought that comes in my mind.
>
> "When I shall strike and how, I know not, only that it gives me supreme delight to watch Lestat in his unguarded gaiety, knowing that I shall humiliate him utterly in destroying him, and in so doing bring down the lofty useless conscience of my Louis, so that his soul, if not his body, is the same size at last as my own."

It was finished.

I could tell this merely by the blank expression of pain on his face, the way that his eyebrows quivered for one moment, and then the way he drew back in the chair, and closed the little book, and held it idly as if he'd forgotten it altogether, in his left hand. He looked neither to me nor to Merrick.

"Do you still want to communicate with this spirit?" Merrick asked reverently. She reached for the small diary, and he gave it over without objection.

"Oh, yes," he said in a long sigh. "I want it above anything else."

I wanted so to comfort him, but there were no words to touch such a private pain.

"I can't blame her for what she expressed," he resumed in a frail voice. "It always goes so tragically wrong with us." His eyes moved feverishly to Merrick. "The Dark Gift, imagine calling it that, when it goes so very wrong in the end." He drew back as if struggling against his emotions.

"Merrick," he said, "where do they come from, the spirits? I know the conventional wisdom and how foolish it can be. Tell me your thoughts."

"I know less now than I ever did," answered Merrick. "I think when I was a girl I was very sure of such things. We prayed to the untimely dead because we believed they hovered close to earth, vengeful or confused, and thereby could be reached. From time immemorial, witches have frequented cemeteries looking for those angry, muddled spirits, calling upon them to find the way to greater powers whose secrets might be revealed. I believed in those lonely souls, those suffering lost ones.

Perhaps in my own way, I believe in them still.

"As David can tell you, they seem to hunger for the warmth and the light of life; they seem to hunger even for blood. But who knows the true intentions of any spirit? From what depth did the prophet Samuel rise in the Bible? Are we to believe Scripture, that the magic of the Witch of Endor was strong?"

Louis was fastened to her every word.

He reached out suddenly and took her hand again, letting her curl her fingers around his thumb.

"And what do you see, Merrick, when you look at David and at me? Do you see the spirit that inhabits us, the hungry spirit that makes us vampires?"

"Yes, I see it, but it's mute and mindless, utterly subordinate to your brains and hearts. It knows nothing now, if it ever did, except that it wants the blood. And for the blood it slowly works its spell on your tissues, it slowly commands your every cell to obey. The longer you live, the more it thrives, and it is angry now, angry insofar as it can choose any emotion, because you blood drinkers are so few."

Louis appeared mystified, but surely it wasn't so difficult to understand.

"The massacres, Louis, the last here in New Orleans. They clear away the rogues and baseborn. And the spirit shrinks back into those who remain."

"Yes," said Merrick, with a passing glance at me. "That's precisely why your thirst now is doubly terrible, and why you are so far from being satisfied with the 'little drink.' You asked a moment ago: what do I want from you? Let me say what I want *of* you. Let me be so bold as to answer you now."

He said nothing. He merely gazed at her as if he could refuse her nothing. She went on.

"Take the strong blood David can give you," she said. "Take it so you can exist without killing, take it so you can cease your heated search for the evildoer. Yes, I know, I use your language, perhaps too freely and too proudly. Pride is always a sin with those of us who persevere in the Talamasca. We believe we have seen miracles; we believe we have worked miracles. We forget that we know nothing; we forget that there may be nothing to find out."

“No, there is something, there’s more than something,” he insisted, gently moving her hand with his emphasis. “You and David have convinced me, even though it was never your intention, either of you. There are things to know. Tell me, when can we move to speak to Claudia’s spirit? What more do you require of me before you’ll make the spell?”

“Make the spell?” she asked gently. “Yes, it will be a spell. Here, take this diary,” she gave it over to him, “rip a page from it, whatever page you feel is strongest or whatever part you are most willing to give up.”

He took it with his left hand, unwilling to let her go.

“What page do you want me to tear out?” he insisted.

“You make the choice. I’ll burn it when I’m ready. You’ll never see those particular words again.”

She released him, and urged him on with a small gesture. He opened the book with both hands. He sighed again, as if he couldn’t endure this, but then he commenced to read in a low unhurried voice:

“ ‘And tonight, as I passed the cemetery, a lost child wandering dangerously alone for all the world to pity me, I bought these chrysanthemums, and lingered for some time within the scent of the fresh graves and their decaying dead, wondering what death life would have had for me had I been let to live it. Wondering if I could have hated as a mere human as much as I hate now? Wondering if I could have loved as much as I love now?’ ”

Carefully, pressing the book to his leg with his left hand, he tore the page with his right hand, held it under the light for a moment, then gave it over to Merrick, his eyes following it as though he were committing a terrible theft.

She received it respectfully and placed it carefully beside the doll in her lap.

“Think well now,” she said, “before you answer. Did you ever know the name of her mother?”

“No,” he said at once, and then hesitated, but then shook his head and said softly that he did not.

“She never spoke the name?”

“She spoke of Mother; she was a little girl.”

“Think again,” she said. “Go back, go back to those earliest nights with her; go back to when she babbled as children babble, before her

womanly voice replaced those memories in your heart. Go back. What is the name of her mother? I need it."

"I don't know it," he confessed. "I don't think she ever—. But I didn't listen, you see, the woman was dead. That's how I found her, alive, clinging to the corpse of her mother." I could see that he was defeated. Rather helplessly he looked at Merrick.

Merrick nodded. She looked down and then she looked to him again, and her voice was especially kind as she spoke.

"There is something else," she said. "You're holding something back."

Again, he seemed exceedingly distressed.

"How so?" he asked abjectly. "What can you mean?"

"I have her written page," said Merrick. "I have the doll she kept when she might have destroyed it. But you hold on to something else."

"Oh, but I can't," he said, his dark brows knotting. He reached into his coat and brought out the small daguerreotype in its gutter perche case. "I can't give it over to be destroyed, I can't," he whispered.

"You think you'll cherish it afterwards?" asked Merrick in a consoling voice. "Or you think our magic fire will fail?"

"I don't know," he confessed. "I know only that I want it." He moved the tiny clasp and opened the small case and looked down until he seemed unable to bear what he saw, and then he closed his eyes.

"Give it to me for my altar," said Merrick. "I promise it will not be destroyed."

He didn't move or answer. He simply allowed her to take the picture from his hands. I watched her. She was amazed by it, the ancient image of a vampire, captured forever so dimly in the fragile silver and glass.

"Ah, but she was lovely, wasn't she?" asked Louis.

"She was many things," said Merrick. She shut the little gutter perche case, but she did not move the small gold clasp. She laid the daguerreotype in her lap with the doll and the page from the diary, and with both hands reached for Louis's right hand again.

She opened his palm beneath the lamplight.

She drew up as if she was shocked.

"Never have I seen a life line such as this," she whispered. "It's deeply graven, look at it, there is no end to it really," she turned his hand this way and that, "and all the small lines have long ago melted away."

"I can die," he answered with a polite defiance. "I know I can," he

said sadly. “I shall when I’ve got the courage. My eyes will close forever, like those of every mortal of my time who ever lived.”

She didn’t answer. She looked down into his open palm again. She felt of the hand, and I could see her loving its silky skin.

“I see three great loves,” she whispered, as if she needed his permission to say it aloud. “Three deep loves in all this time. Lestat? Yes. Claudia. Most assuredly. And who is the other? Can you tell me that?”

He was in a state of complete confusion as he looked at her, but he hadn’t the strength to answer. The color flared in his cheeks and his eyes seemed to flash as if a light inside them had increased its incandescence.

She let his hand go, and she blushed.

Quite suddenly, he looked to me, exactly as if he’d suddenly remembered me again and he needed me desperately. I had never seen him so agitated or seemingly vital. No one entering the room would have known him to be anything but a compelling young man.

“Are you for it, old friend?” he asked. “Are you ready for it to begin?”

She looked up, her own eyes watering faintly, and she seemed to pick me out of the shadows and then to give the smallest, most trusting smile.

“What’s your counsel, Superior General?” she asked in a muted voice, filled with conviction.

“Don’t mock me,” I said, because it made me feel good to say it. I was not surprised to see the quick flash of pain in her eyes.

“I don’t mock you, David. I ask if you’re ready.”

“I’m ready, Merrick,” I said, “as ready as I ever was in all my life to call a spirit in whom I scarcely believe, in whom I have no trust.”

She held the page in both hands and studied it, perhaps reading the words herself, for her lips moved.

Then she looked at me again, and then at Louis.

“One hour. Come back to me. I’ll be ready by that time. We’ll meet in the rear of the house. The old altar’s been restored for our purpose. The candles are already lighted. The coals will soon be ready. It’s there that we will execute this plan.”

I started to rise.

“But you must go now,” she said, “and bring a sacrifice, because we cannot proceed without that.”

“A sacrifice?” I asked. “Good Lord, what manner of sacrifice?” I was on my feet.

“A human sacrifice,” she answered, her eyes sharpening as she glanced up at me, and then back to Louis, who remained in his chair. “This spirit won’t come for anything less than human blood.”

“You don’t mean it, Merrick,” I said furiously, my voice rising. “Good Lord, woman, would you make yourself a party to murder?”

“Am I not that already?” she answered, her eyes full of honesty and fierce will. “David, how many human beings have you killed since Lestat brought you over? And you, Louis, they’re beyond count. I sit with you and plot with you to attempt this thing. I’m a party to your crimes, am I not? And for this spell, I tell you I need blood. I need to brew a far greater magic than anything I’ve ever attempted before. I need a burnt offering; I need the smoke to rise from heated blood.”

“I won’t do it,” I said. “I won’t bring some mortal here to be slaughtered. You’re being foolish and naive if you think you could tolerate such a spectacle. You’ll be changed forever. What, do you think because we’re pretty to look at that this murder will be fancy and clean?”

“David, do as I say,” she replied, “or I won’t do this thing.”

“I will not,” I responded. “You’ve overreached yourself. A murder there will not be.”

“Let me be the sacrifice,” said Louis suddenly. He rose to his feet and looked down upon her. “I don’t mean that I shall die to do it,” he said compassionately. “I mean, let the blood that flows be mine.” He took her hand again, locking his fingers around her wrist. He bent and kissed her hand, then stood erect, his eyes lovingly fastened to her own.

“Years ago,” he said, “you used your own blood, did you not, in this very house, to call your sister, Honey in the Sunshine. Let us use my blood to call Claudia tonight. I have blood enough for a burnt offering; I have blood enough for a cauldron or a fire.”

Her face was quite tranquil again as she looked at him.

“A cauldron it shall be,” she said. “One hour. The rear yard is filled with its old saints, as I’ve told you. The stones on which my ancestors danced are swept clean for our purpose. The old pot sits on the coals. The trees have witnessed many such a spectacle. There’s only a little more that I need do to prepare now. Go and return to me, as I’ve said.”

18

I was beside myself with anxiety. As soon as we reached the pavement, I grabbed Louis by the shoulders and spun him round to face me.

"We're not going on with this," I said. "I'm going back there to tell her it will not happen."

"No, David, it will happen," he said without raising his voice. "You will not stop it!"

I realized that for the first time since I'd ever set eyes on him, he was passionate and angry, though the anger was not purely for me.

"It will happen," he repeated, clenching his teeth, his face hardening in his quiet fury. "And we will leave her unharmed as we promised! But this will go on."

"Louis, don't you understand what she's feeling?" I asked. "She's falling in love with you! She'll never be the same after this. I can't let this deepen. I can't let it become any worse than it already is."

"She's not in love with me, that's wrong," he declared in an emphatic whisper. "She thinks what mortals always think. We're beautiful to them. We're exotic. We have such exquisite sensitivity! I've seen it before. All I need do is to take a victim in her presence to cure her romantic dreams. And it won't come to that, I promise you. Now, David, listen, this hour of waiting will be the longest of the night. I'm thirsting. I mean to hunt. Let go of me, David. Get out of my way."

Of course I didn't leave him.

"And what about your emotions, Louis?" I walked beside him, determined he wouldn't leave me behind. "Can you tell me you're not completely taken by her?"

"And what if I am, David?" he responded, never slacking in his pace. "David, you didn't describe her truly. You told me how strong she was, how wily, and how clever. But you didn't do justice to her." He gave me a shy passing glance. "You never talked about her simplicity or her sweetness. You didn't tell me she was so inherently kind."

"That's how you see her?"

"That's how she is, my friend." Now he wouldn't look at me. "Some school, the Talamasca, that it produced both of you. She has a patient soul and a knowing heart."

"I want this broken off now," I insisted. "I don't trust either of you. Louis, listen to me."

"David, do you really believe I would hurt her?" he asked sharply. He continued walking. "Do I seek out for my victims those whom I believe to be gentle by nature, humans I believe to be both good and uncommonly strong? She'll be safe with me forever, David, don't you understand that? Only once in my wretched life did I make a fledging and that was over a century ago. Merrick couldn't be safer from any of us than she is from me. Bind me to protect her till the day she dies and I'll probably do it! I'll slip away from her after this is done, I promise you." On he walked. He continued to speak: "I'll find a way to thank her, to satisfy her, to leave her at peace. We'll do that together, David, you and I. Don't harry me now in this matter. I can't be stopped. It's gone too far."

I believed him. I believed him completely. "What am I to do?" I asked dejectedly. "I don't even know my own heart in the matter. I'm afraid for hers."

"You're to do nothing," he said, his voice a little more calm than before. "Let it happen as planned."

We walked on through the ruined neighborhood together.

At last the bent red neon sign of a barroom appeared, blinkering under the rangy branches of an ancient and dying tree. There were hand-painted words of advertisement all over the boarded-up facade, and the light inside was so feeble that scarcely anything could be seen through the dirty glass of the door.

Louis went inside and I followed him, quite amazed at the large crowd of Anglo-Saxon males that chattered and drank at the long mahogany bar, and the myriad dirty little tables. Here and there were denim-clad women, young and old, as were their gentlemen companions. A garish red light shone from covered bulbs near the ceiling. Everywhere I saw naked arms and dirty sleeveless shirts, secretive faces, and cynicism beneath a veil of smiles and flashing teeth.

Louis made his way to the corner of the room, and took the wooden

chair beside a large unshaven and bushy-haired man who sat at a table alone and morosely over his stagnant bottle of beer.

I followed, my nostrils assailed by the stench of sweat and the thick cigarette smoke. The volume of the voices was harsh, and the beat of music beneath it ugly, ugly in words and rhythm, ugly in its hostile chant.

I sat down opposite the same poor degenerate mortal who cast his pale failing eyes on Louis and then on me, as though he were about to have some sport.

"So what do you want, gentlemen," he said in a deep voice. His huge chest heaved under the worn shirt that covered it. He lifted his brown bottle and let the golden beer slide down his throat.

"Come on, gentlemen, tell me," he said thickly, drunkenly. "When men dressed like you come downtown, you want something. Now what is it? Am I saying that you came to the wrong place? Hell no, gentlemen. Somebody else might say so. Somebody else might say you've made a bad mistake. But I'm not saying it, gentlemen. I understand everything. I'm all ears for the both of you. Is it broads you want, or is it a little ticket to fly?" He smiled at both of us. "I've got all kinds of goodies, gentlemen. Let's pretend it's Christmas. Just tell me what's your hearts' desire."

He laughed at himself proudly, then drank from his greasy brown bottle. His lips were pink, and his chin covered in a grizzled beard.

Louis stared at him without answering. I watched in fascination. Louis's face gradually lost all expression, all semblance of feeling. It might have belonged to a dead man as he sat there, as he stared at the victim, as he marked the victim, as he let the victim lose his poor desperate humanity, as the kill passed from possible to probable and finally, to a foregone conclusion.

"I want to kill you," Louis said softly. He leant forward and peered very close into the man's pale and red-rimmed gray eyes.

"To kill me?" said the man, raising one eyebrow. "You think you can do that?" he asked.

"I can do it," said Louis gently. "Just like this." He bent and sank his teeth into the man's thick unshaven neck. I saw the man's eyes brighten for one instant as he stared over Louis's shoulder, then the eyes became fixed, and very gradually they went dull.

The man's cumbersome and bulky body rested against Louis, his thick-fingered right hand quivering before it went limp beside the bottle of beer.

After a long moment, Louis drew back and helped the man to lay his head and shoulders down on the table. Lovingly, he touched the man's thick grayish hair.

On the street, Louis breathed deep of the fresh night air. His face was full of the blood of his victim, and richly colored with the tints of a human. He smiled a sad, bitter smile as he looked up, his eyes seeking the faintest stars.

"Agatha," he said softly, as if it were a prayer.

"Agatha?" I repeated. How I feared for him.

"Claudia's mother," he replied, looking at me. "She said the name once in those first few nights, exactly as Merrick put it. She recited both their names, father and mother, in the manner in which she'd been taught to tell strangers. Agatha was her mother's name."

"I see," I replied. "Merrick will be very pleased with that. It's the style of the old charms, you understand, when calling a spirit, to include its mother's name."

"Pity about that man drinking only beer," he said as we commenced our walk back to Merrick. "I could have used just a little heat in the blood, you know, but then perhaps it's better. Better to have a strong clear mind for what happens. I believe Merrick can do what I want."

19

As we made our way along the side of the house, I saw the candles burning, and when we emerged into the rear yard, I saw the great altar under the shed, with all its tall blessed saints and virgins, and indeed, the Three Magi, and the angels Michael and Gabriel with their spectacular white wings and in their colorful garb.

The scent of incense was strong and delicious to my nostrils. And the trees hung low over the broad clean flagstone terrace with its uneven purple stones.

Far back from the shed, indeed, very near the closest edge of the terrace, there stood the old iron pot atop the brazier tripod, the coals beneath it already glowing. And on either side were long iron tables, rectangular in shape, on which many different objects had been laid out with obvious care.

The complexity of the whole display amazed me faintly, but then I saw, standing on the back steps of the house, only a couple of yards from the tables and the cauldron, the figure of Merrick, her face covered in the green jade mask.

A shock went through my system. The eye holes and mouth opening of the mask appeared empty; only the brilliant green jade was filled with reflected light. Merrick's shadowy hair and body were scarcely visible, though I saw her hand when she lifted it and beckoned for us to come close.

"Here," she said, her voice slightly muffled by the mask as she spoke, "you will stand with me behind the cauldron and the tables. You on my right, Louis, and you on my left, David, and you must promise me now before we commence that you will make no interruption, that you will try no interference in what I mean to do."

She reached out for my arm and guided me into position.

Even at this closeness, the mask was inherently frightening and appeared to float before her lost countenance, perhaps her lost soul.

With an anxious and meddlesome hand I confirmed that the mask was firmly affixed to her head by strong leather thongs.

Louis had stepped behind her, and now stood over the iron table to the right of the cauldron, at her right hand, peering ahead at the glowing altar with its banks of glass-contained candles, and at the eerie but lovely faces of the saints.

I took my place by her left.

"What do you mean, we're not to interrupt?" I asked, though it seemed a terrible irreverence, in the midst of this spectacle which had taken on a high beauty, what with the plaster saints, and tall dark yew trees crowding in upon us, and the low twisted black limbs of the oaks shutting out the stars above.

"Just what I told you," she said in a low voice. "You're not to stop me, whatever happens. You're to stay behind this table, both of you; you're never to move in front of it, no matter what you see or think you may see."

"I understand you," said Louis. "The name you wanted. Claudia's mother. It's Agatha. Of that I'm almost certain."

"Thank you," Merrick replied. She gestured before her. "There, on the stones," she said, "the spirits will come if they're meant to come, but you must not go to them, you must not engage in any struggle with them, you must do only as I say."

"I understand you," Louis repeated.

"David, do I have your word?" she asked calmly.

"Very well, Merrick," I said crossly.

"David, stop your interference!" she declared.

"What can I say, Merrick?" I demanded. "How can I give my inner feelings to this thing? Isn't it enough that I stand here? Isn't it enough that I do as you say?"

"David, trust in me," she said. "You came to me with the request for this magic. Now I give you what you asked for. Trust that it will be for the good of Louis. Trust that I can control what I do."

"To speak of magic," I said softly, "to read of it, and study it—all that is one matter, but to participate, to be in the presence of one who believes in it and knows it—that is quite another thing."

"Govern your heart, please, David," said Louis. "I want this more than anything I have ever wanted. Merrick, please, proceed."

“Give me your word with honesty, David,” said Merrick. “You will not try to interfere with the things I will say and the things I will do.”

“Very well, Merrick,” I said, defeated.

Only then did I have the freedom to inspect the objects covering the two tables. There lay the poor pitiful old doll which had belonged to Claudia, limp as a tiny dead body. And the page of the diary, weighted down by the doll’s round porcelain head. There was the rosary heaped beside it, and the small daguerreotype in its dark case. There was an iron knife.

I also saw a gold chalice, beautifully ornamented and rimmed with inset jewels. There was a tall crystal bottle filled with what appeared to be clear yellow oil. I saw the jade perforator, a wicked and awful thing in my sight, sharp and dangerous, lying close to the cauldron. And then quite suddenly I saw what appeared to be a human skull.

I was furious at this last discovery. Quickly, I considered the contents of the other table, the one before Louis, and saw there a rib bone covered with markings, and that loathsome old shriveled black hand. There were three bottles of rum. There were other items—a fine golden pitcher of honey, which I could smell in its sweetness, another silver pitcher of pure white milk, and a bronze bowl of shining salt.

As for the incense, I realized it had all been distributed and was already burning before the distant unsuspecting saints.

Indeed, a great deal more of the incense, very black and only faintly aglow as its smoke rose in the darkness, had been poured out to make a great circle on the purple flagstone before us, a circle which my eyes only now observed.

I wanted to demand: where did the skull come from? Had Merrick robbed some anonymous grave? A dreadful thought occurred to me and I tried to banish it. I looked at the skull again and saw it was covered with incised writing. It was lurid and awful, and the beauty embracing all of this was seductive, potent, and obscene.

Instead I spoke only of the circle.

“They will appear in it,” I murmured, “and you think the incense will contain them.”

“If I must, I will tell them that the incense contains them,” she said coldly. “Now, you must govern your tongue if you can’t govern your heart. Offer no prayers as you watch this. I am ready for this to begin.”

“What if there isn’t enough incense!” I demanded in a whisper.

“There is plenty of it to burn for hours. Look at the small cones with your clever vampire eyes, and don’t ask me such a foolish question again.”

I resigned myself: I couldn’t stop this. And only now did I feel in my resignation a certain attraction to the entire process as she made to begin.

From beneath the table, she lifted a small bundle of twigs and fed these quickly to the coals in the brazier beneath the iron pot.

“Make this fire hot for our purposes,” she whispered. “May all the saints and angels witness, may the glorious Virgin Mary witness, make this fire burn for us.”

“Such names, such words,” I murmured before I could stop myself. “Merrick, you play with the strongest powers known to us.”

But on she went, poking at the fire until its flames licked the sides of the cauldron. Then she lifted the first bottle of rum, uncapped it, and emptied its acrid contents into the pot. Quickly, she took up the crystal bottle and poured out the pure, fragrant oil.

“Papa Legba!” she called out as the smoke rose before her. “I can begin nothing without your intercession. Look here at your servant Merrick, listen to her voice as she calls you, unlock the doors to the world of the mysteries, that Merrick may have what she desires.”

The dark perfume of the heated concoction overcame me as it rose from the iron pot. I felt as if I ought to be drunk, when I wasn’t, and it seemed my balance had been affected, though why I couldn’t know.

“Papa Legba,” she cried. “Open the way.”

My eyes shot to the distant statue of St. Peter, and only then did I realize he stood in the center of the altar, a fine effigy of wood, his glass eyes glaring back at her, his dark hand wrapped about its golden keys.

It seemed to me that the air changed suddenly about us, but I told myself it was only my raw nerves. Vampire or human, I was susceptible to the tiniest suggestion. Yet the yews began ever so slightly to sway on the outskirts of the garden, and there came through the trees above a soft wind that sent the leaves down all around us, tiny and light, without a sound.

“Open the gates, Papa Legba,” she called out, as her deft hands emptied the second bottle of rum into the cauldron. “Let the saints in

Heaven hear me, let the Virgin Mary hear me, let the angels be unable to turn away their ears."

Her voice was low yet full of certainty.

"Hear me, St. Peter," she declared, "or I shall pray to Him who gave His Only Divine Son for our Salvation that He turns His back on you in Heaven. I am Merrick. I cannot be denied!"

I heard Louis give out a faint gasp.

"Now, you angels, Michael and Gabriel," she said, her voice rising with increasing authority, "I command you, open the way to the eternal darkness, to the very souls whom you yourself may have driven out of Heaven; put your flaming swords to my purpose. I am Merrick. I command you. I cannot be denied. I will call upon all the Celestial hosts to turn their backs on you should you hesitate. I will call upon God The Father to condemn you, I will condemn you, I will loathe you, should you not listen; I am Merrick, I cannot be denied."

There was a low rumbling from the statues in the shed, a sound very like the earth makes when it's shifting—a sound which no one can imitate, but which anyone can hear.

Again came the sound of the rum pouring, from the third bottle.

"Drink from my cauldron, all you angels and saints," said Merrick, "and allow that my words and my sacrifice rise to Heaven. Hear my voice."

I strained in my focus upon the statues. Was I losing my mind? They appeared animate and the smoke rising from the incense and candles seemed thicker. Indeed the whole spectacle intensified, colors becoming richer, and the distance between the saints and us smaller, though we had not moved.

Merrick lifted the perforator with her left hand. Instantly, she cut the inside of her right arm. The blood poured down into the cauldron. Her voice rose above it:

"You Watcher Angels, the first to teach mankind magic, I call upon you now for my purpose, or those spirits that answer to your name.

"Ham, you son of Noah and pupil of the Watchers, I call upon you now for my purpose, or that powerful spirit which answers to your name.

"Mestran, son of Ham, who passed on the secrets of magic to his children and others, I call upon you now for my purpose, or that

powerful spirit which answers to your name."

Again she slashed herself with the knife, the blood sliding down her bare arm and into the cauldron. Again there came that sound, as if from the earth beneath us, a low rumbling that mortal ears perhaps would disregard. I looked helplessly to my feet and to the statues. I saw the faint shiver of the entire altar.

"I give you my own blood as I call you," Merrick said. "Listen to my words, I am Merrick, daughter of Cold Sandra, I cannot be denied.

"Nebrod, son of Mestran, and powerful teacher of magic to those who came after him, bearer of the wisdom of the Watchers, I call upon you for my purpose, or upon that powerful spirit which answers to your name.

"Zoroaster, great teacher and magician, who passed on the mighty secrets of the Watchers, who brought down to himself from the very stars the fire which destroyed his earthly body, I call on you, or that spirit which answers to your name.

"Listen to me, all you who have gone before me, I am Merrick, daughter of Cold Sandra, I cannot be denied.

"I shall cause the Host of Heaven to declare you anathema should you attempt to resist my powers. I shall withdraw my faith and withdraw my blandishments should you not grant the wish that comes from my tongue. I am Merrick, daughter of Cold Sandra; you will bring to me those spirits whom I call."

Again the perforator was lifted. She cut her own flesh. A long gleaming seam of blood flowed into the aromatic brew. The scent of it inflamed me. The smoke from the mixture stung my eyes.

"Yes, I command you," she said, "all of you, most powerful and illustrious ones, I command you that I may achieve what I say, that I may bring forth out of the whirlwind those lost souls who will find Claudia, daughter of Agatha, yield up to me those Purgatorial souls who will, in exchange for my prayers, bring forth the spirit of Claudia. Do as I command!"

The iron altar before me was shivering. I could see the skull moving with the altar. I could not discount what I saw. I could not challenge what I heard, the low rumbling of the ground beneath me. Tiny leaves came down in a swirl, like ashes before us. The giant yew trees had begun to sway as if in the early breezes of an approaching storm.

I tried to see Louis, but Merrick stood between us. Her voice came unceasingly:

"All you powerful ones, command Honey in the Sunshine, restless spirit of my sister, daughter of Cold Sandra, that she bring Claudia, daughter of Agatha, out of the whirlwind. Honey in the Sunshine, I command you. I will turn all Heaven against you if you do not obey me. I will heap infamy upon your name. I am Merrick. I will not be denied."

Even as the blood flowed down over her right hand, she reached with it for the skull beside the smoking cauldron and lifted it up.

"Honey in the Sunshine, I have here your very skull from the grave in which you were buried, and all your names are written upon it in my hand. Honey Isabella, daughter of Cold Sandra, you cannot deny me. I call you and command you to bring Claudia, daughter of Agatha, here now, to answer to me."

It was exactly as I'd suspected. She had done the awful deed of violating Honey's poor pathetic remains. How vicious and how dreadful, and for how long had she kept this secret, that she possessed the skull of her own sister, her own blood kin.

I was revolted yet magnetized. The smoke from the candles grew dense before the statues. It seemed their faces were full of movement, their eyes sweeping the scene before them. Even their drapery appeared alive. The incense burnt bright in the circle on the flagstones, fanned by the breeze that steadily increased.

Merrick laid aside the cursed skull and the perforator.

From the table she lifted the gold pitcher of honey, and poured it into the jeweled chalice. This she lifted with her bloody right hand as she went on:

"Ah, yes, all you lonely spirits, and you, Honey, and you, Claudia, smell this sweet offering—Honey, the very substance after which you in your beauty were named." Into the cauldron she poured the thick sparkling liquid.

Then she lifted the pitcher of milk. Into the chalice it went, and then she lifted the chalice, gathering up the deadly perforator again in her left hand.

"And this, too, I offer you, so delicious to your desperate senses, come here and breathe this sacrifice, drink of this milk and honey, drink it from the smoke that rises from my cauldron. Here, it comes to you

through this chalice which once contained The Blood of Our Lord. Here, partake of it. Do not refuse me. I am Merrick, daughter of Cold Sandra. Come, Honey, I command you, and bring Claudia to me. I will not be denied."

A loud breath came from Louis.

In the circle before the statues, something amorphous and dark had taken shape. I felt my heart skipping as my eyes strained to make it out. It was the form of Honey, it was the very figure which I had seen many years before. It flickered and wavered in the heat as Merrick chanted:

"Come, Honey, come closer, come in answer to me. Where is Claudia, daughter of Agatha? Bring her here to Louis de Pointe du Lac, I command you. I cannot be denied."

The figure was almost solid! I saw the familiar yellow hair, the candlelight behind it rendering it transparent, the white dress more spectral than the solid outline of the body itself. I was too stunned to utter the prayers that Merrick had forbidden. The words never formed on my lips.

Suddenly Merrick laid down the skull. She turned and caught Louis's left arm with her bloodstained hand.

I saw his white wrist above the cauldron. With a swift movement, she slashed at his wrist. I heard him gasp again, and I saw the glittering vampiric blood gushing from the veins into the rising smoke. Again she gashed the white flesh and again the blood flowed, thickly, freely, and more abundantly than her own blood before.

In no way did Louis resist her. Mute, he stared at the figure of Honey.

"Honey, my beloved sister," said Merrick, "bring Claudia. Bring Claudia to Louis de Pointe du Lac. I am Merrick, your sister. I command you. Honey, show your power!" Her voice became low, crooning. "Honey, show your immense strength! Bring Claudia here now."

Again, she cut the wrist, for the preternatural flesh was healing just as soon as she opened it, and she again made the blood flow.

"Savor this blood which is shed for you, Claudia. I call your name and your name only now, Claudia. I would have you here!" Once more the wound was opened.

But now she gave over the perforator to Louis, and she lifted the doll in both her hands.

I glanced from Merrick to the solid image of Honey, so dark, so

distant, so seemingly without human movement.

"Your possessions, my sweet Claudia," Merrick called out, snatching up a twig from the fire and lighting the clothes of the unfortunate doll, which all but exploded in a draught of flames. The little face turned black in the blaze. Still Merrick held it with both hands.

The figure of Honey suddenly began to dissolve.

Into the cauldron Merrick dropped the burning object, and then lifted the page of the diary, as she continued to speak.

"Your words, my sweet Claudia, accept this offering, accept this acknowledgment, accept this devotion." She dipped the page into the fire of the brazier, then held it aloft as it was consumed.

The ashes fell into the cauldron. She took up the perforator once again.

The form of Honey lingered only in shape and then appeared to be blown away by the natural breeze. Again the candles blazed violently before the statues.

"Claudia, daughter of Agatha," said Merrick, "I command you, come forward, become material, answer me from the whirlwind, answer your servant Merrick—all you angels and saints, and Blessed Mother Ever Virgin compel Claudia, compel her to answer my command."

I couldn't take my eyes off the smoky darkness. Honey was gone but something else had taken her place. The very gloom seemed to shape itself into a smaller figure, indistinct but gathering strength as it appeared to extend its small arms and move towards the table behind which we stood. It was above the ground, this small being, the sudden glint of its eye on our level and its feet walking on nothing as it proceeded towards us, its hands becoming clearly visible, as well as its shining golden hair.

It was Claudia, it was the child of the daguerreotype, it was white-faced and delicate, its eyes wide and brilliant, its skin luminous, its loose and flowing white garments soft and ruffled by the wind.

I stepped backwards. I couldn't stop myself, but the figure had stopped; it remained suspended above the ground and its pale arms relaxed and fell naturally at its sides. It was as solid in the dim light as Honey had been so many years before.

Its small stunning features were filled with a look of love and quickening sensibility. It was a child, a living child. It was undeniable. It

was there.

A voice came out of it, fresh and sweet, a girl's natural treble:

"Why have you called me, Louis?" it asked with heartbreaking sincerity. "Why have you roused me from my wandering sleep for your own consolation? Why wasn't memory enough?"

I was weak almost to fainting.

The child's eyes flashed suddenly on Merrick. The voice came again with its tender clarity:

"Stop now with your chants and commands. I do not answer to you, Merrick Mayfair. I come for the one who stands to the right of you. I come demanding why you've called me, Louis; what is it that you would have me give you now? In life did I not give you all my love?"

"Claudia," Louis murmured in a tortured voice. "Where is your spirit? Is it at rest or does it wander? Would you have me come to you? Claudia, I'm ready to do it. Claudia I'm ready to be at your side."

"You? Come to me?" the child asked. The little voice had taken on a dark deliberate coloration. "You, after all those many years of evil tutelage, you think that I in death would be united with you?" The voice went on, its timbre sweet as if saying words of love. "I loathe you, evil Father," it confided. A dark laughter came from the small lips.

"Father, understand me," she whispered, her face infected with the tenderest expression. "I never could find words to tell you truths when I was living." There was the sound of breath, and a visible despair seemed to wrap itself about the creature. "In this measureless place I have no use for such curses," said the voice, with touching simplicity. "What is it to me, the love you lavished on me once in a vibrant and feverish world?"

On she went as if consoling him.

"You want vows from me," she said with seeming wonder, her whisper growing softer. "And from the coldest heart imaginable I condemn you—condemn you that you took my life—" the voice was fatigued, defeated "—condemn you that you had no charity for the mortal I once was, condemn you that you saw in me only what filled your eyes and insatiable veins … condemn you that you brought me over into the lively Hell which you and Lestat so richly shared."

The small solid figure moved closer, the luminous face of plump cheeks and lustrous eyes now directly before the cauldron, the tiny

hands curled but not raised. I lifted my hand. I wanted to touch this shape, so vivid was it. Yet I wanted to back away from it, shield myself somehow from it, shield Louis, as if such a thing could be done.

"Take your life, yes," she said with her relentless tenderness, her eyes large and wondering—"give it up in memory of me, yes, I would have you do it, I would have you give over to me your last breath. Do it with pain for me, Louis, do it with pain that I may see your spirit through the whirlwind, struggling to free itself from your tormented flesh."

Louis reached out for her, but Merrick caught his wrist and pushed him back.

The child continued, her words unhurried, her tone solicitous as she went on:

"Oh, how it will warm my soul to see you suffer, oh, how it will speed me on my endless wanderings. Never would I linger to be with you here. Never would I wish for it. Never would I seek you out in the abyss."

Her face was stamped with the purest curiosity as she looked at him. There was nothing of visible hatred in her expression at all.

"Such pride," she whispered, smiling, "that you would call me out of your habitual misery. Such pride that you would bring me here to answer your common prayers." There came a small chilling laughter.

"How immense is your self-pity," she said, "that you don't fear me, when I—had I the power from this witch or any other—would take your life with my own hands." She lifted her little hands to her face as if she would weep in them, and then let them drop to her sides again.

"Die for me, my doting one," she said tremulously. "I think I shall like it. I shall like it as much as I liked the sufferings of Lestat, which I can scarce remember. I think, yes, that I might know pleasure once again, briefly, in your pain. Now, if you are done with me, done with my toys and your memories, release me that I may return to forgetfulness. I cannot recall the terms of my perdition. I fear I understand eternity. Let me go."

All at once, she moved forward, her small right hand snatching up the jade perforator from the iron table, and with a great lunge, she flew at Louis, thrusting the perforator into his chest.

He fell forward over the makeshift altar, his right hand clutching at the wound in which she ground the jade pick, the cauldron spilling over onto the stones beneath her, Merrick backing up in seeming horror, and

I unable to move.

The blood gushed out of Louis's heart. His face was knotted, his mouth open, his eyes shut.

"Forgive me," he whispered. He gave a soft groan of pure and terrible pain.

"Go back to Hell!" cried Merrick, suddenly. She ran at the floating image, arms out to reach over the cauldron, but the child withdrew with the ease of vapor, and, still clutching the jade pick, she lifted her right hand and knocked Merrick back with it, the frigid little face all the while quite still.

Merrick stumbled on the back steps of the house. I caught her arm and lifted her back on her feet.

Again, the child turned to Louis as she held the dangerous pick in both her small hands. Down the front of her sheer white dress was the dark stain from the boiling fluids of the cauldron. It meant nothing to her.

The cauldron, on its side, poured forth its contents onto the stones.

"Did you think I wasn't suffering, Father?" she asked softly in the same small girlish voice. "Did you think that death had freed me from all my pain?" Her small finger touched the point of the jade instrument. "That's what you thought, wasn't it, Father," she spoke slowly, "and that, if this woman did your will, you'd take away some precious consolation from my very lips. You believed that God would give you that, didn't you? It seemed so very right for you after all your penitential years."

Louis still held his wound, though his flesh was healing and the blood oozed more slowly out of his splayed hand.

"The gates can't be locked to you, Claudia," he said, the tears rising in his eyes. His voice was strong and sure. "That would be too monstrous a cruelty—."

"To whom, Father?" she answered, cutting off his words. "Too monstrous a cruelty to you? I suffer, Father, I suffer and I wander; I know nothing, and all I once knew seems illusory! I have nothing, Father. My senses are not even a memory. I have nothing here at all."

The voice grew weaker, yet it was clearly audible. Her exquisite face was infused with a look of discovery.

"Did you think I'd tell you nursery stories about Lestat's angels?" she asked with a low kindly tone. "Did you think I'd paint a picture of the

glassy heavens with palaces and mansions? Did you think I'd sing to you some song learnt from the Morning Stars? No, Father, you will not draw such ethereal comfort from me."

On went her subdued voice:

"And when you come following me I shall be lost again, Father. How can I promise that I shall be there to witness your cries or tears?"

The image had begun to waver. Her large dark eyes fixed upon Merrick, and then on me. Back to Louis she looked. She was fading. The perforator fell from her white hand and struck the stones, breaking in two.

"Come, Louis," she said faintly, the sound of her invitation mingling with the softly stirring trees, "come into this dreary place with me, and leave behind your comforts—leave behind your wealth, your dreams, your blood-soaked pleasures. Leave behind your ever hungry eyes. Leave it all, my beloved, leave it for this dim and insubstantial realm."

The figure was rigid and flat, the light barely shining upon its uncertain contours. I could scarcely see the small mouth as it smiled.

"Claudia, please, I beg you," said Louis. "Merrick, don't let her go into uncertain darkness. Merrick, guide her!"

But Merrick did not move.

Louis turned frantically from Merrick to the fading image.

"Claudia!" he cried out. With all his soul he wanted to say more, but there was no conviction in him. All was despair. I could feel it. I could read it on his stricken face.

Merrick stood back, staring through the gleaming jade mask, her left hand poised in the air as if to fend off the ghost if it should strike again.

"Come to me, Father," said the child, the voice toneless now, devoid of feeling. The image was transparent, dim.

The outline of the small face slowly evaporated. Only the eyes held their luster.

"Come to me," she whispered, her voice dry and thin. "Come, do it with deep pain, as your offering. You'll never find me. Come."

Only a dark shape remained for a few moments, and then the space was empty, and the yard with its shrine and with its tall forbidding trees was still.

I could see no more of her. The candles, what had happened to them? They had all gone out. The burning incense was so much soot on the

flagstones. The breeze had scattered it. A great shower of tiny leaves came down languidly from the branches, and the air was full of a subtle yet biting cold.

Only the distant gleam of the heavens gave us illumination. The dreadful chill lingered around us. It penetrated my clothes and settled on my skin.

Louis peered into the darkness with a look of inexpressible grief. He began to shiver. The tears didn't flow; they merely stood in his uncomprehending eyes.

Suddenly Merrick ripped off the jade mask and overturned both tables, and the brazier, the contents smashing onto the flags. The mask she cast into the shrubbery by the rear steps.

I stared in horror at the skull of Honey lying in the heap of cast-off instruments. Bitter smoke rose from the wet coals. The burnt remnants of the doll were visible in the flowing liquid. The jeweled chalice rolled on its golden rim.

Merrick took hold of Louis by both arms.

"Come inside," she said, "come out of this awful place now. Come inside with me, where we can light the lamps. Come inside where we'll be safe and warm."

"No, not now, my dear," he answered. "I must leave you. Oh, I promise, I'll see you again. Let me alone for now. Take whatever promises I must give you, to quiet you. Take whatever thanks I can express from my heart. But let me go."

He bent down and retrieved the little picture of Claudia from the wreckage of the altar. Then off he went down the shadowy alley, pushing the young banana leaves out of his path, his steps growing ever faster, until he was gone altogether, vanished on his own path in the familiar and unchanging night.

20

I left her curled up on Great Nananne's bed in the front room.

I went back into the garden, picked up the broken pieces of the jade perforator, and found the mask broken in half. How brittle was this strong jade. How bad had been my intentions, how evil the result.

These things I brought with me into the house. I could not bring myself to lay my superstitious hands upon the skull of Honey in the Sunshine.

I put the collection of jade remnants on the bedroom altar, amid the glass-covered candles, and then I settled next to her, sitting beside her, and I put my arm around her.

She turned and laid her head on my shoulder. Her skin felt feverish and sweet. I wanted to cover her in kisses, but I couldn't give in to this impulse, anymore than I could give in to the darker impulse to bring through the blood the rhythm of her heart in time with my own.

There was dried blood all over her white silk dress, and on the inside of her right arm.

"I should never have done it, never," she said in a hushed and anxious voice, her breasts yielding softly against me. "It was madness. I knew what would happen. I knew his brain would be fodder for disaster. I knew it. And now he's lost; he's wounded and lost to us both."

I lifted her so that I could look into her eyes. As always their brilliant green color startled me, and enthralled me, but I couldn't concern myself with her charms now.

"But you do believe that it was Claudia?" I asked.

"Oh, yes," she said. Her eyes were still red around the edges from her crying. I saw the tears standing there. "It was Claudia," she declared. "Or that thing which now calls itself Claudia, but the words it spoke? They were lies."

"How can you know that?"

"The same way I know when a human being is lying to me. The same

way I know when someone's read another one's mind and is preying upon that other's weakness. The spirit was hostile, once called into our realm. The spirit was confused. The spirit told lies."

"I didn't feel it was lying," I argued.

"Don't you see," she said, "it took Louis's very, very worst fears and morbid thoughts for its matter. His mind was full of the verbal instruments by which he could bring about his own despair. He's found his conviction. And whatever he is—wonder, horror, damnable monster—he's lost now. Lost to us both."

"Why couldn't it have been speaking pure truth?" I asked.

"No spirit speaks pure truth," she insisted. She wiped at her reddened eyes with the back of her hand. I gave her my linen handkerchief. She pressed it to her eyes. Then she looked up at me again. "Not when it's called, it doesn't. It speaks truth only when it comes on its own."

I took this idea into my thoughts. I had heard it before. Every member of the Talamasca had heard it. Spirits who are called are treacherous. Spirits who come on their own possess some guiding will. But no spirit can in fact be trusted. It was old knowledge. It gave neither comfort nor clarity to me just now.

"Then the picture of eternity," I said, "it was false, that's what you're saying."

"Yes," she said, "that's exactly what I'm saying." She wiped her nose with the handkerchief. She began to shiver. "But he will never accept it." She shook her head. "The lies are too near to what he absolutely believes."

I didn't speak. The words of the spirit were too nearly to what I actually believed as well.

She rested her head on my chest again, her arm about me loosely. I held her, staring before me at the smaller altar between the front windows, staring at the patient faces of the different saints.

A quiet and dangerous mood fell over me, in which I saw rather plainly all the long years of my life. One thing remained constant during this journey, whether I was the young man in the Candomble temples of Brazil, or the vampire prowling the streets of New York in the company of Lestat. That constant thing was that, no matter what I'd said to the contrary, I suspected there was nothing beyond this earthly life.

Of course now and then I gladly "believed" otherwise. I made my case

to myself with seeming miracles—spirit winds and vampiric blood flowing. But in the final analysis, I feared there was nothing, nothing perhaps but the "measureless darkness" which this phantom, this vicious and angry phantom, had described.

Yes, I'm saying that I believe we might linger. Of course. Lingering after death for some while is not beyond the realm of science to explain someday—a soul of definable substance detached from the flesh and caught in some energy field that wreaths the planet. It is not beyond imagining, no, not at all. But it doesn't mean immortality. It doesn't mean Paradise or an Inferno. It doesn't mean justice or recognition. It doesn't mean ecstasy or unending pain.

As for the vampires, they were a flashy miracle, but consider how relentlessly materialistic and how very small that miracle is.

Picture the night when one of us is captured and carefully fastened to the table in the laboratory, housed perhaps in a tank of aerospace plastic, safe from the sun, day and night beneath a flickering gush of fluorescent light.

There he would lie, this helpless specimen of the Nosferatu, bleeding into syringes and test tubes, as doctors gave to our longevity, our changelessness, our connection to some binding and ageless spirit—a long Latin scientific name.

Amel, that ancient spirit said by the eldest of us to organize our bodies and connect them—it would one day be classified as some force quite similar to that which organizes the tiny ant in its vast and intricate colony, or the marvelous bees in their exquisite and impossibly sophisticated hive.

If I died, there might be nothing. If I died, there might be lingering. If I died, I might never even know what became of my soul. The lights around me—the warmth of which the child phantom had spoken so tauntingly—the warmth would simply go away.

I bowed my head. I pressed my left fingers hard to my temples, my right arm tightening against Merrick who seemed so precious, so frail.

My mind shot back to the dark spell and the luminous child phantom in the middle of it. It shot back to the moment when her arm was lifted, when Merrick cried out and was thrown back. It shot back to the child's wonderfully realized eyes and lips, and the low musical voice issuing from her. It shot back to the seeming validity of the vision itself.

Of course, it *could have been* Louis's despair which fueled her fount of misery. It might well have been my own. How much did I, myself, want to believe in Lestat's articulate angels or Armand's glimpse of crystalline celestial splendor? How much did I myself project upon the seeming void my own late and grossly lamented conscience, straining again and again to voice love for the maker of the wind, the tides, the moon, the stars?

I could not end my own earthly existence. I was as fearful as any mortal that I might be resigning forever the only magical experience that I'd been privileged to know. And that Louis might perish seemed a simple horror, rather like seeing an exotic and poisonous flower, fallen from its secretive jungle perch and crushed underfoot.

Did I fear for him? I wasn't certain. I loved him, I wanted him with us now in this room. I did. But I wasn't certain that I had the moral stamina to coax him to remain in this world another twenty-four hours. I wasn't certain of anything at all. I wanted him for my companion, mirror of my emotions, witness of my aesthetic progress, yes, all those things. I wanted him to be quiet and gentle Louis, that I knew. And if he did not choose to go on with us, if he did in fact take his own life by walking into the sunlight, then it would be all the harder for me to continue, even with my fear.

Merrick had begun to shake all over. Her tears were not stopping. I gave in to my desire to kiss her, to breathe in the fragrance of her warm flesh.

"There, there, my darling," I whispered.

The handkerchief clutched in her right hand was small and wet.

I lifted her as I stood up. I pulled down the heavy white chenille spread and laid her on the clean sheets. Never mind her soiled dress. She was cold and frightened. Her hair was tangled beneath her. I lifted her head and brought her hair up and over the linen. I saw her sink into the down pillows, and I kissed her eyelids to bid them to close.

"Rest now, precious darling," I said. "You only did what he asked."

"Don't leave me just now," she said in a raw voice, "except if you think you can find him. If you know where he is, then find him. Otherwise stay here with me, just for this little while."

I went down the hall in search of a bathroom and found it to the very rear of the house, a spacious and somewhat lavish arrangement with a

little coal fireplace as well as a great claw-foot tub. There was the usual pile of clean white terry cloth towels one expects amid such luxury. I moistened the end of one of these and brought it back to the front room.

Merrick was on her side, knees curled up, her hands clasped together. I could hear a low whispering coming from her lips.

"Here, let me wipe your face," I said. I did it without any further concessions, and then I wiped the caked blood from her inner arm. The scratches went clear from her palm to the inside of her elbow. But they were very shallow. One began to bleed a little as I cleaned it, but I pressed on it for a moment and the blood ceased to flow.

I found the dry clean end of the towel, and patted Merrick's face with it, and then the wounds, which were now completely clean and healed.

"I can't remain here like this," Merrick said. Her head went from side to side. "I have to get the bones from the rear yard. It was a terrible thing to overturn the altars."

"Be quiet now," I said. "I'll bring them in."

It filled me with revulsion to do this. But I was as good as my word.

I went back to the scene of the crime. The dark rear yard seemed uncommonly still. The dead candles before the saints seemed negligent and evidence of grave sins.

Out of the detritus fallen from the iron tables, I picked up the skull of Honey in the Sunshine. I felt a sudden chill run through my hands, but I put it off to my imagination. I gathered up the rib bone, and I saw again that both of these bore all kinds of deeply incised writing. I refused to read the writing. I brought them back with me into the house and into the front room.

"Put them on the altar," she said. She sat up, pushing the heavy covers off her.

I saw that she had taken off her bloodsoaked dress of white silk, and that it lay in a heap on the floor.

She wore only her silk petticoat, and I could see her large pink nipples through it. There was blood on the petticoat too. Her shoulders were very straight and her breasts high set, and her arms were just rounded enough to be delicious to my sight.

I went to pick up the dress. I wanted to clean her up completely. I wanted her to be all right.

"It's monstrously unfair that you're so frightened," I said.

"No, leave the dress," she answered, reaching out for my wrist. "Let it go, and sit here, beside me. Take my hand and talk to me. The spirit's a liar, I swear it. You must believe what I say."

Once again, I sat down on the bed. I wanted to be close to her. I leant over and kissed her bowed head. I wished I couldn't see so much of her breasts, and I wondered if the younger vampires knew—those brought over early in their manhood—how such carnal details still distracted me. Of course the blood lust rose with this distraction. It was not an easy thing to love her so terribly and not taste of her soul through her blood.

"Why do I have to believe you?" I asked gently.

She dug her fingers into her hair and swept it back behind her shoulders.

"Because you must," she said urgently yet quietly. "You must see that I knew what I was doing, you must believe that I can tell a truth-telling spirit from one who lies. That was something, yes, that being which pretended to be Claudia—something very powerful that it could lift the pick and sink it into Louis's flesh. I'll wager anything that it was a spirit who hated him due to his very nature, that he can be dead and still walk the earth. It was something deeply offended by his very existence. But it was taking its verses from his own thoughts."

"How can you be so sure?" I asked. I shrugged my shoulders. "God knows, I wish you were right. But you yourself called on Honey; is not Honey lost in the same realm that this spirit of Claudia described? Doesn't Honey's presence prove there's nothing better for either one of them? You saw the shape of Honey out there before the altar—."

She nodded.

"—and you went on to call Claudia from the same realm."

"Honey wants to be called," she declared, looking up at me, her fingers driven into her hair, tugging it cruelly back, away from her tormented face. "Honey's always there. Honey's waiting for me. That's how I knew for certain that I could call on Honey. But what about Cold Sandra? What about Great Nananne? What about Aaron Lightner? When I opened the door none of those spirits came through. They've long since gone on into the Light, David. If they hadn't they would have long ago let me know. I would have felt them the way I feel Honey. I would have hints of them, as Jesse Reeves had of Claudia when she heard the music in the Rue Royale."

I was puzzled by this last statement. Very puzzled. I shook my head in an emphatic no.

"Merrick, you're holding back from me," I said, deciding I must address it directly. "You have called Great Nananne. You think I don't remember what happened only a few nights ago, the night we met in the café in the Rue St. Anne?"

"Yes? What about that night?" she asked. "What are you trying to say?"

"Maybe you don't know what happened," I said. "Is that possible? You called down a spell and didn't know how strong it was yourself?"

"David, talk straight to me," she responded. Her eyes were clearing and she had stopped trembling. Of this I was glad.

"That night," I said, "after we met and spoke together, you put a spell on me, Merrick. On my way back to the Rue Royale, I kept seeing you everywhere; to the right of me, and to the left of me, Merrick. And then I saw Great Nananne."

"Great Nananne?" she asked in a subdued voice, but one which couldn't conceal her disbelief. "What do you mean, you saw Great Nananne?"

"When I reached the carriageway of my town house," I said, "I saw two spirits behind the iron bars—one in the image of you, a girl of ten, the way you were when I first met you, and the other, Great Nananne in her nightgown, as she was on the only day I was ever to know her, the day of her death. These two spirits stood in the carriageway and spoke together, intimately, tête à tête, their eyes fixed on me. And when I approached them, they disappeared."

For a moment, she said nothing. Her eyes were narrow and her lips slightly parted, as if she was pondering this with extreme concentration.

"Great Nananne," she said again.

"Just as I've told you, Merrick," I said. "Am I to understand now that you yourself didn't call her? You know what happened next, don't you? I went back to the Windsor Court, to the suite where I'd left you. I found you dead drunk on the bed."

"Don't use such a charming expression for it," she whispered crossly. "You came back, yes, and you wrote me a note."

"But after I wrote that note, Merrick, I saw Great Nananne there in the hotel, standing in the door of your bedroom. She was challenging me,

Merrick. She was challenging me by her very presence and posture. It was a dense and undeniable apparition. It endured for moments—chilling moments, Merrick. Am I to understand this wasn't part of your spell?"

Merrick sat silent for a long moment, her hands still splayed in her hair. She lifted her knees and drew them close to her breasts. Her sharp gaze never left me.

"Great Nananne," she whispered. "You're telling me the truth. Of course you are. And you thought that I called my godmother? You thought I could call her and make her appear like that?"

"Merrick, I saw the statue of St. Peter. I saw my own handkerchief beneath it with the drops of blood on it. I saw the candle you'd lighted. I saw the offerings. You had cast a spell."

"Yes, my darling," she said quickly, her right hand clutching mine to quiet me. "I fixed you, yes, I put a little fixing spell on you to make you want me, to make you quite unable to think of anything else but me, to make you come back if by the slightest chance you had decided never to come to me again. Just a fixing spell, David, you know what I'm saying. I wanted to see if I could do it now that you were a vam-pire. And you see what happened? You didn't feel love or obsession, David, you saw images of me instead. Your strength came to the fore, David, that's all that happened. And you wrote your sharp little note to me, and when I read it, I think I might have even laughed."

She broke off, deeply troubled, her eyes large as she stared in front her, perhaps into her own thoughts.

"And Great Nananne?" I pressed. "You didn't call her?"

"I can't call my godmother," she said, her tone serious, her eyes narrow as she looked at me again. "I pray to my godmother, David, don't you realize that, as I pray to Cold Sandra, as I pray to Oncle Vervain. They're no longer near us, any of them, my ancestors. I pray to them in Heaven as I would to the angels and the saints."

"I'm telling you I saw her spirit."

"And I'm telling you I've never seen it," she whispered. "I'm telling you I'd give anything I possess if only I could."

She looked at my hand, the one which she held in her own, and then she pressed it warmly and she let it go. Her hands went up to her temples again and her fingers found their way again into her hair.

"Great Nananne's in the Light," she said, as though she were arguing with me, and perhaps she was. But her gaze was lost to me. "Great Nananne's in the Light, David," she said again. "I tell you I know she is." She looked up into the airy semi-darkness, and then her eyes drifted to the altar and the candles in their long flickering rows.

"I don't believe she came," she whispered. "I don't believe they're all in some 'insubstantial realm!' No, I tell you, I don't believe it," she said. She put her hands on her knees. "I don't believe anything so absolutely awful—that all the souls of the 'faithful departed' are lost in darkness. No, I can't believe such a thing."

"Very well, then," I said, wanting for the moment only to comfort her, and remembering too keenly the spirits at the gate once more, old woman and young girl. "Great Nananne came of her own accord. It's as you indicated earlier—you said that spirits only tell the truth if they come of their own accord. Great Nananne didn't want me near you, Merrick. Great Nananne has told me that. And maybe she'll come again if I don't somewhat repair the damage I've done to you, and leave you alone."

She appeared to be thinking this over.

A long interval ensued during which I watched her intently, and she gave me no clue of her feelings or her intentions, and then finally, she took my hand again. She drew it up to her lips and she kissed it. It was painfully sweet.

"David, my beloved David," she said, but her eyes were secretive. "Leave me now."

"No, I won't even think of it, until I have to do it."

"No, I want you to go," she said. "I'll be quite all right on my own."

"Call the caretaker," I said. "I want him here before I leave the property at dawn."

She reached over to the night table and produced one of those small modern cellular phones that is no bigger than a man's wallet. She punched in a series of numbers. I heard the appropriate voice on the other end, "Yes, Ma'am, coming directly."

I was satisfied.

I stood up. I took several steps towards the center of the room, and then the most desolate feeling descended upon me.

I turned around and looked at her as she sat there, her knees up close

to her breasts, her head resting on her knees, her arms locked around her legs.

"Am I fixed now with a spell, Merrick?" I asked her, my voice even more gentle than I meant for it to be. "I don't want to leave you, my precious darling," I said. "I can't bear the thought of it, but I know that we have to part from one another, you and I. One more meeting, perhaps two. No more than two."

She looked up, startled, and her face was touched with fear.

"Bring him back to me, David," she said imploringly. "In the name of God, you have to do that. I must see Louis and talk to him again." She waited a moment, during which time I didn't answer her. "As for you and me, don't talk as if we can simply say goodbye to one another. David, I can't bear that just now. You must assure me—."

"It won't be abrupt," I said, cutting her off, "and it won't be without your knowledge. But we can't go on, Merrick. If we try to go on, you'll lose faith in yourself and everything that matters to you. Believe me, I know."

"But it never happened to you, dearest," she said, with strong confidence, as though she'd thought through this very matter. "You were happy and independent when the Vampire Lestat brought you over. You told me so. Don't you give me credit for that much, David? Each of us is different."

"Know that I love you, Merrick," I said softly.

"Don't try to say farewell, David. Come here and kiss me and come back to me tomorrow night."

I went to the bed, and I took her in my arms. I kissed her on both cheeks. And then in a sinful, wretchedly strong-willed manner, I kissed her unresisting breasts, kissed both her nipples, and I drew back, full of her scent and furious with myself.

"For now, darling," I said.

And I went out and home to the Rue Royale.

21

Louis was home when I reached the flat. I could sense his presence even as I came up the stairs. Only a few hours remained of the night for both of us, but I was so glad to see him that I went directly into the front parlor where he stood at the window, looking out over the Rue Royale below.

The room was full of lighted lamps, and the paintings of Matisse and Monet seemed to be singing on the walls.

He had taken off his bloodsoiled clothes, and wore now a simple turtleneck shirt of black cotton, and black pants. His shoes were old and tattered, but had once been very fine.

He turned as I entered the room, and I took him in my arms. With him, I could give vent to the affection I'd held so severely in check with Merrick. I held him to myself and kissed him as men might do with other men when they are alone. I kissed his dark black hair and kissed his eyes, and then I kissed his lips.

For the first time in our existence together, I felt a great outpouring of affection from him, a deep affinity, yet something else made him stiffen suddenly, against his will.

It was the pain in his chest from the wound.

"I should have come with you," I confessed. "I should never have let you go off, but I felt she needed me. And I remained with her. It was what I had to do."

"Of course, you did," he said, "and I wouldn't have allowed you to leave her. She needed you much more than I did. Never mind this wound; it's already healing. I've decades enough behind me on the Devil's Road that it will heal in a few nights."

"Not so, and you know it," I said. "Let me give you my blood, my blood's infinitely stronger. Don't turn away from me, man, listen to me. If you won't drink from me, then let me put my blood to the wound."

He was deeply distressed. He sat down in a chair and put his elbows

on his knees. I couldn't see his face. I took the chair nearby and I waited.

"It will heal, I told you," he said softly.

I let the matter drop. What else could I do? Yet I could see that the wound was hurting him powerfully. I could tell it by his slightest gestures—how they began in utter fluidity, and were suddenly cut short.

"And the spirit, what did you make of it, yourself?" I asked. "Let me hear it from your lips before I tell you what Merrick felt, and what I saw."

"I know what you both think," he said. He looked up finally and sat back gingerly in the chair. For the first time I saw the darkness of the blood on his shirt. The wound was wretched. I didn't like it. I didn't like seeing blood on him any more than I liked seeing it on Merrick. It struck me hard how much I loved them both.

"You both think the spirit preyed upon my fears," he said calmly. "I knew it was what you'd say even before we ever began. But you see, I remember her too vividly. I know her French, I know her cadences, I know the very rhythm of her speech. And it was Claudia, and she had come out of darkness just as she confided, she had come from a terrible place where she's not at rest."

"You know my arguments," I said, shaking my head. "What will you do now? Whatever your plan, you can't go forward without telling me what it is."

"I know, *mon ami,* I'm aware of that," he answered. "And you must know now I won't be with you for very long."

"Louis, I beg you—."

"David, I'm weary," he said, "and I would swap one pain for another. There was something she said, you see, which I can't forget. She asked if I would give up my comforts for her? Do you remember?"

"No, old man, you've got it wrong. She asked if you'd give up your comforts for death, but she never promised that she would be there! That's just the point. She won't be. Good Lord, how many years in the Talamasca did I study the history of apparitions and their messages, how many years did I pore over first person accounts of those who'd trafficked with ghosts and recorded their wisdom. You can choose what you will believe about the hereafter. It doesn't matter. But once you choose death, Louis, you can't choose life again. Belief ends. Don't make that choice, I implore you. Stay for me, if you won't for any other

reason. Stay for me, because I need you, and stay for Lestat, because he needs you as well."

Of course my words didn't surprise him. He put his left hand to his chest and pressed on the wound lightly, and a grimace, for one moment, disfigured his face.

He shook his head.

"For you and Lestat, yes, I've thought of that. And what of her? What of our lovely Merrick? What does she need from me too?"

It seemed he had a great deal more to say, but suddenly he fell silent, and his brows were knitted, and he looked young and impossibly innocent as his head quickly turned to the side.

"David, do you hear it?" he asked with mounting excitement. "David, listen!"

I heard nothing but the noises of the city.

"What is it, man?" I asked.

"David, listen to it. It's all around us." He rose to his feet, his left hand still pressed to the pain he felt. "David, it's Claudia, it's the music, it's the harpsichord. I hear it all around us. David, she wants me to come. I know it."

I was on my feet in a second. I took hold of him.

"You're not going to do it, friend, you can't do it without a farewell to Merrick, without a farewell to Lestat, and there are not enough hours left in this night for that."

He was gazing off, mesmerized and comforted, and his eyes were glazed and his face was softened and unchallenging. "I know that sonata. I remember it. And yes, she loved it, she loved it because Mozart had written it when he was only a child. You can't hear, can you? But you did once, think back on it. It's so very lovely, and how fast she plays, my Claudia."

He made a dazed laugh. The tears thickened; his eyes were veiled in blood.

"I hear the birds singing. Listen. I hear them in their cage. The others —all our kind who know of her—they think of her as heartless, but she wasn't heartless. She was only aware of things which I didn't learn till so many decades had passed. She knew secrets that only suffering can teach.…"

His voice trailed off. He pulled back gracefully from my grasp and he

walked to the center of the room. He turned about as though the music were truly surrounding him.

"Don't you see what a kindness she's done?" he whispered. "It's going on and on, David, it's getting all the more rapid. Claudia, I'm listening to you." He broke off, and turned again, his eyes moving over everything yet seeing nothing. "Claudia, I'll be with you very soon."

"Louis," I said, "it's almost morning. Come with me now."

He stood still with his head bowed. His hands had dropped to his sides. He seemed infinitely sad and infinitely defeated.

"Has it stopped?" I asked.

"Yes," he whispered. Slowly he looked up, lost for the moment, then getting his bearings. He looked at me. "Two nights won't matter, will it? And then I can thank Merrick. I can give her the picture. The Talamasca may want it." He gestured to the nearby table, the low oval table which stood before the couch.

I saw the daguerreotype open on the table. Claudia's image jarred me as I met its gaze. I wanted to close the little case, but never mind. I knew that I could never allow the picture to fall into the hands of the Talamasca. I could never allow such a contact, let alone the possession of such a potent object by seers as powerful as Merrick. I could never allow such evidence to remain for the Talamasca to investigate whatever we had all seen this night.

But I didn't say this thing.

As for him, he stood as before, elegant in his faded black, a man dreaming, the blood dried in his eyes and giving him a dreadful look, as he stared off again, distant from my heated compassion, cutting himself off from any solace I could bring.

"You'll meet me tomorrow," I said.

He nodded. "The birds are gone now," he whispered. "I can't even hum the music inside my head." He seemed unbearably distressed.

"All is stillness in the place she described," I said rather desperately. "Think on that, Louis. And meet me tomorrow night."

"Yes, my friend, I've already promised," he said in a dazed manner. He frowned as if trying to remember something in particular. "I have to thank Merrick, and you of course, you, old friend, who did everything that I asked."

We went out of the town house together.

He went off to the place where he lies by day, the location of which I didn't know.

I had more time than he had. Like Lestat, my powerful maker, I was not hounded by the first hint of dawn to the grave. The sun would have to come over the horizon for me to feel the paralytic vampire sleep.

Indeed, I had an hour or more perhaps, though the morning birds were singing in the few trees of the Quarter, and when I reached uptown the sky had turned from a deep dark blue to a faint purple twilight color, which I lingered to enjoy before I went inside the dusty building and up the stairs.

Nothing stirred in the old convent. Even the rats were gone from it. Its thick brick walls were chilly, though it was spring. My footfalls echoed as always. I allowed that. It was respectful to Lestat to allow it, to mark my coming before I entered his vast and simple domain.

The great yawning courtyard was empty. The birds sang loudly in the lush trees of Napoléon Avenue. I stopped to glance out from one of the upstairs windows. I wished I could sleep by day high in the branches of the nearby oak. What a mad thought, but perhaps somewhere, far away from all the pain we'd experienced here, there was some deep uninhabited forest where I could build a dark and thick cocoon for hiding among the branches, like an evil insect, dormant before it rises to bring death to its prey.

I thought of Merrick. I couldn't know what the coming day would be like for her. I feared for her. I despised myself. And I wanted Merrick terribly. I wanted Louis. I wanted them as my companions, and it was utterly selfish, and yet it seemed a creature could not live without the simple companionship which I had in mind.

At last I went in the great white-walled chapel. All the stained-glass windows were still draped in black serge, as was required now, for Lestat could no longer easily be moved to shelter with the rising sun.

No candles burnt before these random and stately saints.

I found Lestat as he always was, on his left side, a man resting, his violet eyes open, the lovely piano music pouring out of the black machine which had been set to play the small disc recording over and over without end.

The usual dust had settled on Lestat's hair and shoulders. It horrified me to see the dust, even on his face. But would I disturb him if I sought

to clean it away? I didn't know, and my sorrow was leaden and terrible.

I sat down beside him.

I sat where he might see me. And then boldly I turned off the music. And in a hurried voice, a voice more full of agitation than ever I imagined it would be, I poured out the tale.

I told him all of it—of my love for Merrick and of her powers. I told him of Louis's request. I told him of the phantom that had come to us. I told him of Louis, listening to Claudia's music. I told him of Louis's resolve to leave us in a matter of nights.

"What can stop him now I don't know," I said. "He won't wait for you to wake, my dearest friend. He's going. And there's nothing I can do really to change his mind. I can plead that he must wait until you've recovered, but I don't think he wants to lose his nerve again. That's what it's all about, you see, his nerve. He has the nerve to end it. And that is what's been lacking for so long."

I went back over the details. I described Louis as he listened to the music that I couldn't hear. I described the séance once more. Perhaps I told things now which I'd left out before.

"Was it really Claudia?" I asked. "Who can tell us whether or not it was?"

And then I leant over and I kissed Lestat and I said to him:

"I need you so much now. I need you if only to say farewell to him."

I drew back and inspected the sleeping body. There was no change in awareness or posture that I could detect.

"You woke once," I declared. "You woke when Sybelle played her music for you, but then, taking the music back with you, you returned to your selfish sleep. That's what it is, Lestat, selfish, because you've left behind those you made—Louis and me. You've left us, and it's not fair of you to do it. You must come out of it, my beloved Master, you must rouse yourself for Louis and for me."

No change in the expression on his smooth face. His large violet eyes were too open for those of a dead man. But the body gave no other sign of life.

I leant down. I pressed my ear to his cold cheek. Though I couldn't read his thoughts as a fledging, surely I could divine something of what went on in his soul.

But nothing came to me. I turned on the music once more.

I kissed him and left him there, and went to my lair, more ready for oblivion perhaps than I had ever been before.

22

The following night, I went in search of Merrick.

Her home in the derelict neighborhood was dark and uninhabited. Only the caretaker remained on the property. And it was no problem for me to climb up to the second story window over the shed to see that the old fellow was contentedly inside, drinking his beer and watching his monstrous color TV.

I was dreadfully disconcerted. I felt that Merrick had all but promised to meet me, and where else if not in the old house?

I had to find her. I searched the city for her tirelessly, using every ounce of telepathic ability which I possessed.

As for Louis, he was also absent. I returned to the flat in the Rue Royale more than four times during my search for Merrick. And at no time did I find Louis or the simplest evidence that he'd been there.

At last, very much against my better judgment, but desperate, I approached Oak Haven, the Motherhouse, to see if I could spy Merrick within.

The discovery took only a matter of minutes. As I stood in the thick oak forest to the far north of the building, I could see her tiny figure in the library.

Indeed Merrick sat in the very oxblood leather chair which she'd claimed for her own as a child when we first met. Nestled in the cracked old leather, she appeared to be sleeping, but as I drew closer my fine vampiric senses confirmed that she was drunk. I could make out the bottle of Flor de Caña rum beside her, and the glass. Both were empty.

As for the other members, one was busy in the very same room, going over the shelves for some seemingly routine matter, and several others were at home upstairs.

I couldn't conceivably approach Merrick where she was. And I was keenly aware that Merrick might have planned this. And if she had planned it, it might have been for her own mental safety, a cause of

which I highly approved.

Once released from that tidy little spectacle—Merrick out cold with no regard for what the other members thought of her—I resumed my search for Louis from one end of the town to the next with no luck.

The hours before dawn found me striding back and forth before the slumbering figure of Lestat in the darkened chapel, explaining to him that Merrick had delivered herself into hiding and that Louis appeared to be gone.

At last I sat down on the cold marble floor, as I had done the night before.

"I'd know it, wouldn't I?" I demanded of my sleeping master. "If Louis has put an end to himself, isn't that so? I'd feel it somehow, wouldn't I? If it happened at dawn yesterday, I would have felt it before I ever closed my eyes."

Lestat gave no answer and there was no promise in his posture or facial expression that he ever would.

I felt as if I were speaking fervently to one of the statues of the saints.

When the second night went in exactly the same fashion, I was thoroughly unnerved.

Whatever Merrick had done by day, I couldn't imagine, but once again she was drunk in the library, a slouched figure, quite alone now, in one of her splendid silk shirtwaist dresses, this one a vivid red. While I watched from a safe distance, one of the members, an old man whom I once knew and loved dearly, came into the library and covered up Merrick with a white wool blanket that looked quite soft.

I sped off lest I be detected.

As for Louis, as I prowled those portions of the city which were always his favorites, I cursed myself that I'd been so respectful of his mind that I'd never learnt to read it, so respectful of his privacy that I'd never learnt to scan for his presence; cursed myself that I'd not bound him to a strong promise to meet me in the flat in the Rue Royale at a certain time.

At last the third night came.

Having given up on Merrick to do anything but intoxicate herself thoroughly with rum in her typical fashion, I went directly to the flat in the Rue Royale with the purpose of writing a note for Louis, should it be that he was stopping in when I was not there.

I was filled with misery. It now seemed entirely possible to me that Louis no longer existed in his earthly form. It seemed entirely reasonable that he had let the morning sun cremate him precisely as he wanted, and that I was writing words in this note that would never be read.

Nevertheless, I sat down at Lestat's fancy desk in the back parlor, the desk which faces the room, and I wrote hastily.

" 'You must talk with me. You must let me talk with you. It's unfair for you not to do this. I am so anxious on your behalf. Remember, L., that I did what you asked of me. I cooperated with you completely. Of course I had my motives. I'm willing to admit them candidly. I missed her. My heart was breaking for her. But you must let me know how things go with you.' "

I had scarcely finished writing the initial "D," when I looked up and saw Louis standing in the hallway door.

Quite unharmed, his black curly hair combed, he stood looking at me searchingly, and I, pleasantly shocked, sat back and gave a deep sigh.

"Look at you, and here I've been racing around like a madman," I said. I surveyed his handsome gray velvet suit, and the dark-violet tie he wore with it. In amazement I noted the jeweled rings on his hands.

"Why all this unusual attention to your person?" I asked. "Talk to me, man. I'm quite ready to go out of my mind."

He shook his head, and gestured quickly with his longer slender hand for me to be quiet. He sat down on the couch across the room and stared at me.

"I've never seen you so fancily dressed," I said. "You're positively dapper. What's happened?"

"I don't know what's happened," he said almost sharply. "You have to tell me." He gestured urgently. "Come here, David, take your old chair here, sit close to me."

I did as I was asked.

He wasn't only handsomely turned out, he wore a faint masculine perfume.

His eyes flashed on me with a nervous energy.

"I can't think of anything but her, David. I tell you, it's as if I never loved Claudia," he confessed, his voice breaking. "I mean it, it's as if I never knew love or grief before I met Merrick. It's as if I'm Merrick's slave. No matter where I go, no matter what I do, I think of Merrick," he

declared. “When I feed, the victim turns to Merrick in my very arms. Hush, don’t say anything till I’m finished. I think of Merrick when I lie in my coffin before the coming sunlight. I think of Merrick when I wake up. I must go to Merrick, and as soon as I’ve fed, I go to where I can see her, David, yes, near the Motherhouse, the place you long ago forbade us ever to trouble. I go there. I was there last night when you came to spy on her. I saw you. The night before, I was there as well. I live for her, and the sight of her through those long windows only inflames me, David. I want her. If she doesn’t come out of that place soon, I tell you, whether I mean to or not, I’m going in after her, though what I want of her, except to be with her, I swear to you, I can’t say.”

“Stop it, Louis, let me explain what’s happened—.”

“How the hell can you explain such a thing? Let me pour it out, man,” he said. “Let me confess that it all began when I laid eyes on her. You knew it. You saw it. You tried to warn me. But I had no idea that the feelings would become so very intense. I was certain I could control them. Good Lord, how many mortals have I resisted over these two centuries, how many times have I turned my back on some random soul who drew me so painfully that I had to weep?”

“Stop it, Louis, listen to me.”

“I won’t hurt her, David,” he said, “I swear it. I don’t want to hurt her. I can’t bear the thought of feeding from her as I once did from Claudia, oh, that awful awful mistake, the making of Claudia. I won’t hurt her, I swear it, but I must see her, I must be with her, I must hear her voice. David, can you get her out of Oak Haven? Can you make her meet with me? Can you make her stop her love affair with her rum and come to her old house? You must be able to do it. I tell you, I’m losing my mind.”

He had scarcely paused when I broke in and would not be silenced.

“She’s fixed you, Louis!” I declared. “It’s a spell. Now, you must be quiet and listen to me. I know her tricks. And I know magic. And hers is a magic as old as Egypt, as old as Rome and Greece. She’s fixed you, man, made you fall in love with her through witchcraft. Damn, I should have never let her keep that bloodstained dress. No wonder she wouldn’t let me touch it. It had your blood on it. Oh, what a fool I was not to see what she was doing. We even talked of such charms together. Oh, she is beyond all patience. I let her keep that bloodstained silk dress, and she’s

used it to make an age-old charm."

"No, that's not possible," he said caustically. "I simply won't accept it. I love her, David. You force me to use the words that will hurt you most of all. I love her, and I want her; I want her company, I want the wisdom and the kindness that I saw in her. It's no spell."

"It is, man, believe me," I said. "I know her and I know magic. She used your blood to do it. Don't you see, this woman not only believes in magic, she understands it. Perhaps a million mortal magicians have lived and died during the past millennia, but how many of them were the genuine article? She knows what she's doing! Your blood was in the weave of her own garment. She's cast a spell on you that I don't know how to break!"

He was silent but not for very long.

"I don't believe you," he said. "No, it can't be true. I feel this too completely."

"Think back, Louis, on what I told you of her, of the visions of her I had after our first contact only a few nights ago. You remember, I told you I saw her everywhere—."

"This is not the same. I'm speaking of my heart, David—."

"It is the same, man," I insisted. "I saw her everywhere, and after we saw the vision of Claudia, Merrick admitted to me that those visions of her were part of a spell. I told you all this, Louis. I told you about her little altar in the hotel room, the way she'd gotten my handkerchief with my blood on it from the sweat of my brow. Louis, pay attention."

"You're vilifying her," he said as gently as he could, "and I won't have it. I don't see her in that manner. I think of her and want her. I want the woman I saw in that room. What will you tell me next? That Merrick wasn't beautiful? That Merrick wasn't filled with innate sweetness? That Merrick wasn't the one mortal in thousands whom I might come to love?"

"Louis, do you trust yourself in her presence?" I demanded.

"Yes, I trust myself," he answered righteously. "You think I would harm her?"

"I think you have learnt the meaning of the word 'desire.' "

"The desire is to be in her company, David. It's to be close to her. It's to talk with her about what I saw. It's …" His voice trailed off. He shut his eyes tight for a moment. "It's unbearable, this need of her, this

longing for her. And she hides in that huge house in the country, and I can't be near to her without hurting the Talamasca, without rupturing the delicate privacy on which our very existence depends."

"Thank God you have that much sense," I said forcefully. "I tell you it is a spell, and if you trust yourself with her, then as soon as she leaves that house, we'll go together and ask her! We'll demand the truth from her. Demand from her whether or not this is nothing but a spell."

"Nothing," he repeated the word contemptuously, "nothing, you say, *nothing but a spell?*" He peered into my eyes accusingly. Never had I seen him so hostile. In fact, never had I seen him hostile at all. "You don't want me to love her, do you? It's just as simple as all that."

"No, it isn't, truly it isn't. But say for instance that you're right, that there is no spell, and only your heart's speaking to you; do I want this love of her to increase in you? No, definitely not. We made a vow, you and I, that this woman wouldn't be hurt by us, that we wouldn't destroy her fragile mortal world with our desires! Keep to that vow if you love her so damned much, Louis. That's what loving her means, you realize. It means leaving her completely alone."

"I can't do it," he whispered. He shook his head. "She deserves to know what my heart is telling me. She deserves that truth. Nothing will ever come of it, nothing can, but she ought to know it. She ought to know that I'm devoted to her, that she's supplanted a grief in me which could have destroyed me, which may destroy me still."

"This is intolerable," I said. I was so angry with Merrick. "I propose we approach Oak Haven. But you must allow me to direct what we do there. If I can, I'll draw close to the window, and I'll try to wake her. It's possible, in the small hours, that she'll be alone on the main floor. I might possibly be able to go inside. Nights ago I would have considered such an act unconscionable. But remember, you must leave such a gesture to me."

He nodded. "I want to be near her. But I must feed first. I can't be thirsting when I see her. That would be foolish. Come with me to hunt. And then, after midnight, well after midnight, we'll approach."

It didn't take us long to find our victims.

It was the hour of two a.m. when we drew close to Oak Haven, and, as I'd hoped, the house was darkened throughout. No one remained awake. It took me only a few moments to survey the library.

Merrick wasn't there. Her rum and her glass weren't there, either. And when I went along the upper galleries, as quietly as I could, I did not find her in her room.

I came back to Louis in the thick of the oaks, as he waited.

"She's not at Oak Haven. I feel we've miscalculated. She must be at her home in New Orleans. She's probably there waiting, waiting for her little spell to do its work."

"You can't go on despising her for all this," Louis said angrily. "David, for the love of Heaven, allow me to go to her alone."

"Not a chance of it," I answered.

We proceeded towards the city.

"You can't approach her with this contempt for her," said Louis. "Let me talk to her. You can't prevent it. You have no right."

"I will be there when you talk to her," I said coldly. And I meant to keep my word.

When we reached the old house in New Orleans, I knew immediately that Merrick was at home.

Bidding Louis to wait, I went around the property, as I had several nights ago, made certain the caretaker had been sent off, and indeed, he had been, and then I returned to Louis, and I said we could approach the door.

As for Merrick, I knew she was in the front bedroom. The parlor didn't mean much to her. It was Great Nananne's room that she loved.

"I want to go alone," said Louis. "You can wait here, if you wish."

He was on the porch before I'd moved, but I quickly caught up with him. He opened the unlocked front door, its leaded glass glinting in the light.

Once inside he went into the large front bedroom. I was just behind him.

I saw Merrick, as lovely as ever in a dress of red silk, rise from her rocking chair and fly into his arms.

Every particle of my being was on alert for danger, and my heart was breaking in two. The room was dreamy and sweet with its vigilant candles.

And they loved each other, this pair of beings, Louis and Merrick, there was no denying it. I watched silently as Louis kissed Merrick repeatedly, as he ran his long white fingers through her hair. I watched

as he kissed her long throat.

He drew back and he let out a long sigh.

"A spell, is it?" he asked her, but the question was really meant for me. "That I can think of nothing but you, no matter where I go, or what I do? That in each victim I take, I find you? Oh, yes, think on it, Merrick, think on what I do to survive, don't please live in dreams. Think of the awful price of this power. Think of the Purgatory in which I live."

"Am I with you in that Purgatory?" asked Merrick. "Do I give you some consolation in the very midst of the fire? My days and nights without you have been Purgatory. I understand your suffering. I did before we ever looked into each other's eyes."

"Tell him the truth, Merrick," I said. I stood apart from them, near the door. "Speak true words, Merrick. He'll know if you're lying. Is this a spell you've put over him? Don't lie to me, either, Merrick."

She broke away from him for the moment. She looked at me.

"What did I give *you* with my spell, David?" she said. "What was it but random visions? Did you feel desire?" She looked again at Louis. "What do you want from me, Louis? To hear that my soul is your slave as surely as your soul is mine? If that's a spell, we've fixed each other with it, Louis. David knows I speak the truth."

Try as I might, I could find no lie in her. What I found were secrets, and I couldn't crack them open. Her thoughts were too well guarded.

"You play a game," I said. "What is it you want?"

"No, David, you mustn't speak to her in that manner," said Louis, "I won't tolerate it. Go now and let me talk to her. She's safer with me than Claudia ever was or any mortal I've ever touched. Go now, David. Let me alone with her. Or I swear, man, it will be a battle between you and me."

"David, please," said Merrick. "Let me have these few hours with him; then the rest will be as you wish. I want him here with me. I want to talk to him. I want to tell him that the spirit was a liar. I need to do that slowly, I need an atmosphere of intimacy and trust."

She came towards me, the red silk rustling as she walked. I caught her perfume. She put her arms around me and I felt the warmth of her naked breasts beneath the thin cloth.

"Go now, David, please," she said, her voice full of gentle emotion, her face compassionate as she looked into my eyes.

Never in all my years of knowing her, wanting her, missing her—had anything hurt so much as this simple request.

"Go." I repeated the word in a small voice. "Leave you both together? Go?"

I looked into her eyes for a long moment. How she seemed to suffer, how she seemed to implore me. And then I turned to Louis, who watched with an innocent anxious expression, as if his fate was in my hands.

"Harm her and I swear to you," I said, "your wish for death will be granted." My voice was low and too full of malice. "I tell you I'm strong enough to destroy you in precisely the way you fear."

I saw the terrible dismay in his expression.

"It will be by fire," I said, "and it will be slowly, if you harm her." I paused. Then: "I give you my word."

I saw him swallow hard and then he nodded. It seemed there was much he wanted to say to me, and his eyes were sad and eloquent of a deeper pain. At last he murmured in answer:

"Trust me, my brother. You needn't make such terrible threats to one you cherish, and I needn't hear them, not when both of us love this mortal woman so very much."

I turned to her. Her eyes were on Louis. She was as distant from me in these moments as she had ever been. I kissed her tenderly. She scarcely looked at me, returning my kisses as if she must remind herself to do it, as smitten with Louis as he was with her.

"Goodbye for now, my precious," I whispered, and I went out of the house.

For one moment, I considered remaining, concealed in the shrubbery, spying upon both of them as they talked to each other inside the front room. It seemed the wise thing to do, to remain nearby, for her protection; and it seemed the very thing she would hate.

She would know I was there more surely than Louis could ever know it—know as she had known that night when I came to her window at Oak Haven, know with a witch's sensibility that was stronger than his vampiric powers, know and condemn me utterly for what I tried to do.

When I thought of the possibility of her coming out to accuse me, when I thought of the humiliation I might risk with such a choice, I left the house behind me and walked fast, and alone, uptown.

Once again, in the desolate chapel of St. Elizabeth's Orphanage, Lestat was my confidant.

And once again, I was certain that no spirit occupied his body. To my woes he gave no ear.

I only prayed that Merrick would be safe, that Louis would not risk my rage, and that some night Lestat's soul would return to his body, because I needed him. I needed him desperately. I felt alone with all my years and all my lessons, with all my experiences and all my pain.

The sky was growing dangerously light when I left Lestat and made my way to the secret place, below an abandoned building where I kept the iron coffin in which I lie.

This is no unusual configuration among our kind—the sad old building, my title to it, or the cellar room cut off from the world above by iron doors no mortal could independently seek to lift.

I had lain down in the frigid darkness, the cover of the casket in its place, when I was suddenly overcome with the strangest panic. It was as if someone were speaking to me, demanding that I listen, seeking to tell me that I had made a dreadful error, and that I would pay for it with my conscience; that I had done a foolish and vain thing.

It was too late for me to respond to this lively mixture of emotion. The morning crept over me, stealing all warmth and life from me. And the last thought I remember was that I had left the two of them alone out of vanity, because they had excluded me. I had behaved like a schoolboy out of vanity, and I would pay as the result.

Inevitably the sunset followed on the sunrise, and, after some unmeasured sleep, I woke to the new evening, my eyes open, my hands reaching at once for the lid of the coffin and then withdrawing and falling to my sides.

Something kept me from opening the coffin just yet. Even though I hated its stifling atmosphere, I remained in this, the only true blackness ever bequeathed to my powerful vampire eyes.

I remained, because last night's panic had come back to me—that keen awareness that I'd been a proud fool to leave Merrick and Louis alone. It seemed some turbulence in the very air surrounded me, indeed, penetrated the iron of the coffin so that I might breathe it into my lungs.

Something has gone horridly wrong, yet it was inevitable, I thought dismally, and I lay motionless, as if fixed by one of Merrick's ruthless

spells. But it was not a spell of her doing. It was grief and regret—terrible, harrowing regret.

I had lost her to Louis. Of course I'd find her unharmed, for nothing on earth could make Louis give her the Dark Blood, I reasoned, nothing, not even Merrick's own pleas. And as for her, she would never request it, never be fool enough to relinquish her brilliant and unique soul. No, it was grief because they loved each other, those two, and I'd brought them together, and now they would have whatever might have belonged to Merrick and me.

Well, I could not mourn for it. It was done, and I must go and find them now, I reasoned. I must go and find them together, and see the manner in which they looked at each other, and I must wring more promises from them, which was nothing more than a means of interposing myself between them, and then I must accept that Louis had become the brilliant star for Merrick, and by that light I shone no more.

Only after a long while did I open the coffin, the lid creaking loudly, and step out of it, and begin my assent, up through the steps of the damp old cellar, towards the dreary rooms above.

At last I came to a stop in a great unused brick-walled room which had once many years ago served as a department store. Nothing remained now of its former glory except a few very dirty display cases and broken shelves, and a thick layer of soil on its old uneven wooden floor.

I stood in the spring heat and in the soft dust, breathing in the scent of the mold and the red bricks around me, and peering towards the unwashed show windows, beyond which the street, now much neglected, gave forth its few persistent and sorrowful lights.

Why was I standing here?

Why had I not gone directly out to meet Louis and Merrick? Why had I not gone to feed, if it was blood I wanted, and indeed, I did thirst, I knew that much. Why did I stand alone in the shadows, waiting, as if for my grief to be redoubled, as if for my loneliness to be sharpened, so that I would hunt with the fine-tuned senses of a beast?

Then, gradually, the awareness stole over me, separating me totally from the melancholy surroundings, so I tingled in every portion of my being as my eyes saw what my mind wanted desperately to deny.

Merrick stood before me in the very red silk of last night's brief meeting, and all her physiognomy was changed by the Dark Gift.

Her creamy skin was almost luminous with vampiric powers; her green eyes had taken on the iridescence so common to Lestat, Armand, Marius, yes, yes, and yes again, yes, all of the rest. Her long brown hair had its unholy luster, and her beautiful lips their inevitable, eternal, and perfect unnatural sheen.

"David," she cried out, even her distinctive voice colored by the blood inside her, and she flew into my arms.

"Oh, dear God in Heaven, how could I have let it happen!" I was unable to touch her, my hands hovering above her shoulders, and suddenly I gave in to the embrace with all my heart. "God forgive me. God forgive me!" I cried out even as I held her tight enough to harm her, held her close to me as if no one could ever pry her loose. I didn't care if mortals heard me. I didn't care if all the world knew.

"No, David, wait," she begged as I went to speak again. "You don't understand what's happened. He's done it, David, he's gone into the sun. He did it at dawn, after he'd taken me and hidden me away, and showed me everything he could, and promised me that he would meet me tonight. He's done it, David. He's gone, and there's nothing left of him now that isn't burnt black."

The terrible tears flooding down her cheeks were glittering with unwholesome blood.

"David, can't you do anything to rescue him? Can't you do anything to bring him back? It's all my fault that it happened. David, I knew what I was doing, I led him into it, I worked him so skillfully. I did use his blood and I used the silk of my dress. I used every power natural and unnatural. I'll confess to more when there's time for it. I'll pour it all out to you. It's my fault that he's gone, I swear it, but can't you bring him back?"

23

He had done a most careful thing.

He had brought his coffin, a relic of venerable age and luster, to the rear courtyard of the town house in the Rue Royale, a most secluded and high-walled place.

He had left his last letter on the desk upstairs, a desk which all of us—I, Lestat, and Louis—had at one time used for important writings of our own. Then he had gone down into the courtyard, and he had removed the lid from the coffin, and he had laid down in it to receive the morning sun.

He had addressed to me his candid farewell.

> If I am correct I will be cremated by the sunlight. I am not old enough to remain as one severely burned, or young enough to bequeath bloody flesh to those who come to carry off what is left. I shall be ashes as Claudia once was ashes, and you, my beloved David, must scatter those ashes for me.
>
> That you will oversee my final release is quite beyond doubt, for by the time you come upon what is left of me, you will have seen Merrick and you will know the measure of my treachery and the measure of my love.
>
> Yes, I plead love in the matter of what I've done in creating Merrick a vampire. I cannot lie to you on this score. But if it matters at all, let me assure you that I imagined I meant only to frighten her, to bring her close to death so as to deter her, to force her to beg to be saved.
>
> But once begun, the process was brought by me to a speedy conclusion, with the purest ambition and the purest yearning I've ever known. And now—being the romantic fool I have always been, being the champion of questionable actions and little endurance, being quite unable as always to live with the

price of my will and my desires, I bequeath to you this exquisite fledgling, Merrick, whom I know you will love with an educated heart.

Whatever your hatred of me, I ask that you give to Merrick the few jewels and relics I possess. I ask that you give over to her also all those paintings which I have collected so haphazardly over the centuries, paintings which have become masterpieces in my eyes and in the eyes of the world. Anything of worth should be hers if only you concur.

As for my sweet Master, Lestat, when he wakes, tell him that I went into the darkness without hoping for his terrifying angels, that I went into the darkness expecting only the whirlwind, or the nothingness, both of which he has in his own words so often described. Ask him to forgive me that I could not wait to take my leave of him.

Which brings me now to you, my friend. I do not hope for your forgiveness. Indeed, I do not even ask.

I don't believe you can bring me back from the ashes to torment me, but if you think you can, and you succeed with it, your will be done. That I have betrayed your trust is beyond doubt. No talk from Merrick of her potent spells can excuse my actions, though in fact, she does indeed claim to have brought me to her with magic I cannot understand.

What I understand is that I love her, and cannot think of existence without her. Yet existence is no longer something which I can contemplate at all.

I go now to what I regard as a certainty; the form of death which took my Claudia—relentless, inescapable, absolute.

That was the letter, written in his archaic hand on new parchment paper, the letters tall yet deeply impressed.

And the body?

Had he guessed correctly, and had he become ashes like the child he'd lost to bitter fortune so long ago?

Quite simply, no.

In the lidless coffin, open to the night air, there lay a burnt black replica of the being I had known as Louis, as seemingly solid as any

ancient mummy stripped of its wrappings, flesh closed securely over all visible bone. The clothes were severely scorched yet intact. The coffin was blackened around the gruesome figure. The face and hands—indeed, the entire form—was untouched by the wind and included the most minute detail.

And there beside it, on her knees on the cold paving stones, was Merrick, gazing down at the coal-black body, her hands clasped in grief.

Slowly, ever so slowly, she reached forward, and with her tender first finger touched the back of Louis's burnt hand. At once, she drew back in horror. I saw no impression made in the blackened flesh.

"It's hard as coal, David," she cried. "How can the wind scatter these remains unless you take them from the coffin and trample them underfoot? You can't do it, David. Tell me you cannot."

"No, I can't do it!" I declared. I began to pace frantically. "Oh, what a thankless and miserable legacy," I whispered. "Louis, I would I could bury you as you were."

"That could be the most dreadful cruelty," she said imploringly. "David, can he still be living in this form? David, you know the stories of the vampires better than I do. David, can he still be alive in this form?"

Back and forth I went past her, without answering her, past the lifeless effigy in its charred clothing, and I looked up listlessly, miserably, to the distant stars.

Behind me, I heard her crying softly, giving full vent to emotions which now raged inside her with a new vigor, passions that would sweep over her so totally no human could gauge what she felt.

"David," she called out to me. I could hear her weeping.

Slowly I turned to look down on her as she knelt beside him, appealing to me as if I were one of her saints.

"David, if you cut your wrist, if you let the blood flow down onto him, what will happen, will he come back?"

"That's just it, my darling, I don't know. I know only he's done as he wished and he's told me what he would have me do."

"But you can't let him go so easily," she protested. "David, please …" Helplessly, her voice died away.

A faint stirring of the air caught the banana trees. I turned and looked at the body in terror. All the garden around us whispered and sighed against the brick walls. But the body remained intact, immobile, safe in

its burnt sanctuary.

But another breeze would come, something stronger. Maybe even the rain would come, as it did so often on these warm spring nights, and it would wash away the face, with its closed eyes, which was so visible still.

I couldn't find words to stop her crying. I couldn't find words to confess my heart. Was he gone, or was he lingering? And what would he have me do now—not last night when in the safety of the morning twilight he'd written his brave letter, but now, now, if he were locked in the form in the burnt wooden box.

What had been his thoughts when the sun had risen, when he'd felt the fatal weakness and then the inevitable fire? He hadn't the strength of the great ones to climb from his coffin and bury himself deep under fresh earth. Had he regretted his actions? Did he feel intolerable pain? Could I not learn something merely from studying his still burnt face or his hands?

I came back to the side of the coffin. I saw that his head was laid there as properly as that of any body to be formally interred. I saw that his hands were clasped loosely over his chest, as an undertaker might have placed them. He had not reached to shield his eyes. He had not tried to turn his back on death.

But what did these aspects of the matter really mean?

Perhaps he hadn't had the strength to do those things in the final moments. He had been numb with the coming of the light until it filled his eyes and made him shut them. Did I dare to touch the fragile blackened flesh? Did I dare to see if the eyes were still there?

I was lost in these hideous thoughts, lost and wanting only some other sound except that of Merrick's soft tears.

I went to the iron steps, which came down in a curve from the upstairs balcony. And I sat down on the step which provided for me the most comfortable rest. I put my face in my hands.

"Scatter the remains," I whispered. "If only the others were here."

At once, as if in answer to my pathetic prayer, I heard the creak of the carriageway gate. I heard the low shriek of its old hinges as it was thrown open, and then the click as it was closed once more, iron upon iron.

No scent of a mortal signaled an intruder. In fact, I knew the step that

was approaching. I had heard it so many times in my life both mortal and preternatural. Yet I didn't dare to believe in such a rescue from my misery, until the unheralded figure appeared in the courtyard, his velvet coat dusty, his yellow hair tangled, his violet eyes looking at once to the grim and appalling visage of Louis:

It was Lestat.

With an awkward step, as though his body, so long unused, revolted against him, he made his way closer to Merrick, who turned her tear-stained face to him as if she too were seeing a Savior come in answer to her directionless prayers.

She sat back, a low sigh escaping her lips.

"So it's come to this, has it?" Lestat asked. His voice was hoarse, as it had been when he was waked by Sybelle's music, the very last time he'd abandoned his endless sleep.

He turned and looked to me, his smooth face devoid of warmth or expression, the thin light from the distant street illuminating his fierce eyes as he looked away and back to the body in the coffin on the stones. I think his eyes quivered. I think his whole body shivered ever so slightly as though the simplest movements were exhausting him, as if he longed to rub the backs of his own arms and beat a hasty retreat.

But he was not about to abandon us.

"Come here, David," he said, appealing to me kindly in the same hoarse whisper. "Come, and listen. I can't hear him. I made him. Listen, and tell me if he's there."

I obeyed him. I stood beside him.

"He's like coal, Lestat," I answered quickly. "I haven't dared to touch him. Should we do it?"

Slowly, languidly, Lestat turned to look down again at the painful sight.

"His skin feels firm, I tell you," Merrick said quickly. She rose to her feet and backed away from the coffin, inviting Lestat to take her place. "Test it yourself, Lestat," she said. "Come, touch him." Her voice was full of suppressed pain.

"And you?" Lestat asked reaching out for her, clasping her shoulder with his right hand. "What do you hear, *chérie*?" he asked in his raw whisper.

She shook her head. "Silence," she said, her lips trembling, the blood

tears having left their streaks on her pale cheeks. “But then he brought me over. I charmed him, I seduced him. He had no chance against my plan. And now this, this for my interference, this, and I can hear the mortals whispering in the houses near to us, but I hear nothing from him.”

“Merrick,” he pressed. “Listen as you’ve always been able to listen. Be the witch now, still, if you can’t be the vampire. Yes, I know, he made you. But a witch you were before that.” He looked from one to the other of us, some little visible emotion quickening in him. “Tell me if he wants to come back.”

The tears came to her eyes again. Grieving, miserable, she looked down at the seeming corpse.

“He could be crying for life,” she said, “but I can’t hear it. The witch in me hears nothing but silence. And the human being in me knows only remorse. Lestat, give your blood to him. Bring him back.”

Lestat turned from her to me.

She reached out for his arm, and forced him to look again at her.

“Work your magic,” she said in a low heated and insistent tone. “Work your magic and believe in it as I worked mine.”

He nodded, covering her hand gently as if to soothe her, most certainly to soothe her.

“Speak to me, David,” he said in his roughened voice. “What does *he want,* David? Did he do this thing because he made Merrick, and he thought for that he should pay with his life?”

How could I answer? How could I be faithful now to all my companion had confided over so many nights?

“I hear nothing,” I said. “But then it is an old habit, not spying on his thoughts, not ravaging his soul. It is an old habit letting him do what he wishes, only now and then offering him the strong blood, never challenging his weaknesses. I hear nothing. I hear nothing, but what does it mean that I hear nothing? I walk in the cemeteries of this city at night and I hear nothing. I walk among mortals and sometimes I hear nothing. I walk alone and I hear nothing, as if I myself had no inner voice.”

I looked down at his blackened face again. I could see the perfect image of his mouth there. And now I realized that even the hairs of his head remained intact.

"I hear nothing," I said, "and yet I see spirits. Many a time I have seen spirits. Many a time they've come to me. Is there a spirit lurking there in those remains? I don't know."

Lestat appeared to stagger, as if from a constitutional weakness, then he forced himself to remain upright. I felt ashamed when I saw the gray dust coating the velvet of his long sleeves. I felt ashamed when I saw the knots and dirt in his thick flowing hair. But these things didn't matter to him.

Nothing mattered to him but the figure in the coffin, and, as Merrick wept, he reached out almost absently and put his right arm around her, gathering her against his powerful body, and saying in a hoarse whisper,

"There, there, *chérie.* He did what he wanted."

"But it's gone wrong!" she answered. The words spilled out of her. "He's too old for one day's fire to end it. And he may be locked inside these charred remains in fear of what's to come. He might, like a dying man, hear us in his fatal trance and be unable to respond." She moaned plaintively as she continued: "He may be crying for us to help him, and we stand here and we argue and we pray."

"And if I spill my blood down into this coffin now," Lestat asked her, "what do you think will come back? Do you think it will be our Louis that will rise in these burnt rags? What if it's not, *chérie,* what if it's some wounded revenant that we must destroy?"

"Choose life, Lestat," she said. She turned to him, pulled loose of him, and appealed to him. "Choose life, no matter in what form. Choose life and bring him back. If he would die, it can be finished afterwards."

"My blood's too strong now, *chérie,*" said Lestat. He cleared his throat and wiped at the dust on his own eyelids. He ran his hand into his hair and pulled it roughly out of his face. "My blood will make a monster of what's there."

"Do it!" she said. "And if he wants to die, if he asks again, then I will be his servant in his extremity, I promise you." How seductive were her eyes, her voice. "I'll make a brew that he can swallow, of poisons in the blood of animals, the blood of wild things. I'll feed him such a potion that he'll sleep as the sun rises." Her voice became more impassioned. "He'll sleep, and should he live again to sunset, I'll be his guardian through the night until the sun rises again."

For a long time, Lestat's brilliant violet eyes were fastened to her, as

though he were considering her will, her plan, her very commitment, and then slowly he turned his eyes to me.

"And you, beloved one? What would you have me do?" he asked. His face had now a livelier aspect to it, for all his sorrow.

"I can't tell you," I said, shaking my head. "You've come and it's your decision, yours by right, because you are the eldest and I'm thankful that you're here." Then I found myself prey to the most awful and grim considerations, and I looked down at the dark figure again, and up once more to Lestat.

"If I had tried and failed," I said, "I would want to come back."

What was it that made me give voice to such a sentiment? Was it fear? I couldn't say. But it was true, and I knew it, as if my lips had sought to instruct my heart.

"Yes, if I had seen the sun rise," I said, "and I had lived past it, I might well have lost my courage, and courage he very much required."

Lestat seemed to be considering these things. How could he not? Once, he himself had gone into the sunlight in a distant desert place, and, having been burnt again and again, without release, he came back. His skin was still golden from this hurtful and terrible disaster. He would carry that imprint of the sun's power for many years to come.

Straightaway, he stepped in front of Merrick, and as both of us watched, he knelt down beside the coffin, and he moved very close to the figure, and then he drew back. With his fingers, quite as delicately as she had done it, he touched the blackened hands, and he left no mark. Slowly, lightly, he touched the forehead, and once more, he left no mark.

He drew back, kneeling up, and, lifting his right hand to his mouth, he gashed his wrist with his own teeth before either Merrick or I knew what he meant to do.

At once a thick stream of blood poured down onto the perfectly molded face of the figure in the coffin, and as the vein sought to heal itself, again Lestat gashed it and let the blood flow.

"Help me, Merrick. Help me, David!" he called out. "What I've begun I'll pay for, but do not let it fail. I need you now."

At once, I went to join him, pushing back my awkward cotton cuff and tearing the flesh of my wrist with my eye teeth. Merrick knelt at the very foot of the coffin, and from her tender fledgling wrist the blood had

begun to flow.

A pungent smoke rose from the remains in front of us. The blood appeared to seep into every pore of the figure. It drenched the burnt clothing. And, tearing aside this fabric, Lestat gave yet another gush of blood to his frantic work.

The smoke was a thick layer above the bloody remains before us. I couldn't see through it. But I could hear a faint murmuring, a terrible agonized groan. On and on I let the blood flow, my preternatural skin seeking to heal and halt the operation, and my teeth coming to my rescue again and again.

Suddenly a cry came from Merrick. I saw before me in the haze the figure of Louis sitting up from the coffin, his face a mass of tiny lines and wrinkles. I saw Lestat reach out for him and take hold of his head and press it to his throat.

"Drink now, Louis," he commanded.

"Don't stop, David," said Merrick. "The blood, he needs it, every part of his body is drinking it."

I obeyed, only then realizing that I was growing weaker and weaker, that I could not remain steady, and that she herself was tumbling forward yet still determined to go on.

I saw below me a naked foot, and then the outline of a man's leg, and then, quite visible in the semi-darkness, the hard muscles of a man's chest.

"Harder, yes, take it from me," came Lestat's low insistent command. He spoke in French now. "Harder, more of it, take it, take all that I have to give."

My vision was hopeless. It seemed the entire courtyard was full of a pungent vapor, and the two forms—Louis and Lestat—shimmered for a moment before I felt myself lie down on the cool soothing stones, before I felt Merrick's soft body snuggled beside me, before I smelled the sweet lovely perfume of Merrick's hair. My head rolled on the stones as I tried to raise my hands, but could not.

I closed my eyes. I saw nothing, and then when I opened them, Louis stood there, naked and restored and gazing down at me, his figure covered in a thin film of blood, as though he were a newborn, and I saw the green of his eyes, and the white of his teeth.

I heard Lestat's sore voice again. "More, Louis," he said. "More, take

it."

"But David and Merrick—," said Louis.

And Lestat answered, "David and Merrick will be all right."

24

We bathed him and dressed him, all of us together, in the upstairs rooms.

His skin had a white sheen to it, due to the near omnipotent blood of Lestat which had so restored him, and it was plain as we helped him with the smallest articles of clothing that he was not the same Louis whom we had so often dared to pity in the strength of our love.

At last, when he was comfortably covered in a loose black turtleneck shirt and cotton pants, his shoes tied, and his thick black hair combed, he sat down with us in the back parlor—that gathering place which had been witness to so many agreeable discussions in my brief preternatural life.

His eyes would now have to be masked with sunglasses, for they'd taken on the iridescence which had always burdened Lestat. But what of the inner being? What had he to say to us as we all looked at him, as we all waited for him to share his thoughts?

He settled more deeply into the dark velvet chair and looked about himself as if he were a monstrous newborn, dropped whole and entire into life, by myth or legend. And only gradually did his sharp green eyes move to us.

Lestat had by this time brushed off the cumbersome covering of dust he wore, and taken from his own closet a new coat of dark-brown velvet, and fresh linen, so that he wore his usual thick and faintly discolored old lace. He had shaken out his hair and combed it, and put on new boots.

In sum, we made a fine picture, the four of us, though Merrick, in her customary shirtwaist of silk, bore some few stains of blood. The dress was red, however, and showed little or nothing to the eye, and about her neck she wore—and had worn all evening, of course—my gift to her of years ago, the triple-strand necklace of pearls.

I suppose I found some solace in these details, and so I record them. But that detail which had the most salubrious effect upon me was the

calm, wondering expression on Louis's face.

Let me add that Merrick had been greatly weakened by the blood she'd given to our communal effort, and I could see that shortly she must go out to be the vampire in the most dark and dangerous streets of the city, and it was my vow that I would go at her side.

I had too well rehearsed in my imagination what it might mean to have her with us for me to claim now some rigid moral shock. As for her beauty, Louis's gentle blood of nights past had greatly enhanced it, and her green eyes were all the more vivid, though she could still pass for human with comparative ease.

The resurrection of Louis had taken all of her heart's reserve, it seemed, and she settled on the settee beside the comely figure of Lestat, as though she might like nothing better than to fall asleep.

How well she concealed the thirst she must be feeling, I thought to myself, only to see her raise her head and glance at me. She had read my thoughts.

"Only a glimmer," she said. "I don't want to know more than that."

I made a concerted effort to conceal whatever I was feeling, thinking it best for all of us to follow such a rule, as Louis and Lestat and I had followed it in the past.

At last it was Lestat who broke the silence.

"It's not complete," he said, staring sharply at Louis. "It requires more blood." His voice was strong now and wonderfully familiar to my ears. He was speaking his usual American English. "It requires," he said, "that you drink from me, Louis, and that I give the blood back. It requires no less than that to give you all the strength that's mine to give and not lose. I want you to take it now without argument, as much for my sake, perhaps, as your own."

Just for a moment Lestat's face became haggard again, as if he were the sleepwalker he'd been when last he rose. But within a split second his vitality returned, and he went on to the purpose, addressing me:

"And you, David, take Merrick with you, and go out now and feed to replenish what you've lost. Teach her, David, what she needs to know, though I think she is well versed in everything already. I think that Louis, in the little time he had last night, has instructed her rather well."

I was certain that Louis would rouse himself from his solemn silence and protest against Lestat's domination, but he did nothing of the sort.

In fact, I detected in him a visible self-confidence which he had not possessed in the past.

"Yes, do it, give me all you can," he said in a low vigorous tone. "And what of Merrick? Will you give your potent blood to her as well?"

Lestat was even surprised at such an easy victory. He rose to his feet. I took Merrick by the hand and made to go.

"Yes," Lestat answered, pushing back his blond hair from his face. "I'll give my blood to Merrick if Merrick wants it. Merrick, it's what I want above anything else, I assure you. But it is your choice whether or not you take the Dark Gift from me again. Once you drink from me, you'll be quite as strong as David and Louis. Once you drink from me, we will all be fit companions for each other. And that's precisely my desire."

"Yes, I want it," she answered. "But I need to hunt first, do I not?"

He nodded, and made a small eloquent gesture for us to leave him with Louis alone.

I took her with me quickly down the iron steps and out and away from the Quarter.

We walked in silence except for the tantalizing click of her heels on the pavement. At once we came to the blighted and shabby neighborhood where her old house stood.

We did not go to her house, however. We pushed on.

Finally a sweet laugh escaped her lips, and she stopped me long enough for her to deposit a kiss on my cheek. She had things to say but she was cut off.

A large American automobile came crawling close to us, and we could hear from behind its thick windows the deep bass of the radio, and the nasty words of a hateful song. It seemed like so much of modern music, a din to drive human beings mad.

The car stopped only a few feet ahead of us, and we continued on. I knew the two mortals in the car meant to hurt us; I sang their requiem. Perhaps I smiled. It is a sinister thing, but I believe I smiled.

What I did not expect was the quick snap of a gun, and the shining streak of a bullet before my eyes. Merrick's laugh came again, for she too had seen its brilliant arc before us.

The door of the car opened, and a dark shape moved towards Merrick, and she turned, extending her slender arms in welcome, and caught her victim in midstep. I saw the man freeze as she sank her teeth; I saw him

go limp; I saw her arms easily hold his bulk. I smelled the blood, and I was nothing if not the vampire.

Out of the car came the driver, abandoning his running engine and outraged by the little scheme of rape or robbery gone wrong. Once again the gun gave its loud crack, but the bullet was lost in the blackness.

I rushed the assailant and caught him as simply as she had caught her prey. My teeth were swift and the taste of the blood magnificent. Never have I drunk so greedily, so urgently. Never have I played it out, swimming for elastic moments in the desperate memories and dreams of this sad individual before I quietly flung his remains away from me and out of sight in the high grass of an abandoned lot.

Swiftly, Merrick deposited her dying victim in the same overgrown patch of earth.

"You healed the puncture wounds?" I questioned her. "You did it so as not to leave any trace of how he died?"

"Of course I did," she answered.

"Why didn't you kill him?" I asked. "You should have killed him."

"Once I drink from Lestat, I can kill them," she answered. "Besides, he can't live. He'll be dead by the time we return to the flat."

We turned for home.

She walked on beside me. I wondered if she knew what I felt. I felt that I had betrayed her and destroyed her. I felt that I had done every conceivable evil to her that I had sworn to avoid. When I looked back on our plan, that she should raise a ghost for me and for Louis, I saw there the seeds of all that had come to pass. I was broken, a man humiliated by his own failure and enduring it with a vampire's cold passivity, which can coexist so dreadfully with human pain.

I wanted to tell her how sorry I was that her full measure of mortal life had not been enjoyed. I wanted to tell her that destiny had marked her for great things, perhaps, and I had broken that destiny with my careless selfishness, with an ego that couldn't be restrained.

But why spoil these precious moments for her? Why place a shroud over all the splendor she saw around her, her vampire eyes feasting as surely as she herself had feasted, on all that we saw? Why take from her the few virgin nights in which force and menace would seem sacred and righteous? Why try to turn it with grief and pain? They would come soon enough.

Perhaps she read my thoughts. I certainly didn't try to prevent it. But when she spoke, there was no evidence in her words:

"All my life," she said in a sweet confidential voice, "I've been afraid of things, as a child and a woman must be. I lied about it naturally. I fancied myself a witch and walked in dark streets to punish myself for my doubts. But I knew what it meant to be afraid.

"And now, in this darkness, I fear nothing. If you were to leave me here, I would feel nothing. I would walk as I am walking now. As a man, you can't know what I mean by what I say. You can't know a woman's vulnerability. You can't know the sense of power that belongs to me now."

"I think I know something of it," I answered in a conciliatory tone. "I was old, you must remember, and when I was old, I knew a fear I'd never experienced when I was young."

"Yes, then you do understand perhaps the wariness a woman carries always in her heart. Then you do know the force which is so glorious to me now."

I put my arm around her. I gently turned her to kiss me and I felt her cool preternatural skin beneath my lips. Her perfume now seemed something alien to her, not belonging to her deeply, though it was sweet still, and abundantly caught in the long dark tresses which I felt so lovingly with both hands.

"Know I love you," I said, and I could hear the terrible remorse, the terrible plea for penance in my own voice.

"Don't you understand, I'm with you now forever?" she asked. "Why should any one of us break away from the others?"

"It happens. In time, it happens," I answered. "Don't ask me why."

Gradually our wanderings led us to Merrick's house.

She went inside alone, bidding me wait patiently for her, and came out carrying her old familiar canvas purse. My keen senses detected a strange scent from it, something acrid and chemical, something utterly alien to all I knew.

It did not really matter to me, this scent, and so as we walked on together, I forgot about it, or grew accustomed to it, or stopped noticing it at all. I had no taste for lesser mysteries. My misery and my happiness were too immense.

When we returned to the flat, we found Louis once more dramatically

changed.

Sitting quietly again in the rear parlor with Lestat beside him, he was now so bleached and sculpted by the increased blood that he seemed, like his maker, a thing of marble rather than flesh and bone. He would have to crush ashes between his palms and spread them over his skin if he wanted to walk in places of light.

His eyes had an even greater luster than I'd observed before.

But what of his soul? What had he to say to us? Was he the same being in his heart?

I took a chair, as did Merrick, dropping her canvas bag near her feet. And I think we both agreed to wait until Louis would speak.

A long interval found us still together, still waiting, Lestat's eyes returning again and again to Merrick out of an understandable fascination, and then Louis finally began to talk:

"My heartfelt thanks go to all of you that you brought me back." It was the old cadence, the old sincerity. Maybe there was something of the old timidity as well. "All my long life among the Undead, I searched for something which I had come to believe I would never possess. Over a century ago, I went to the Old World in search of this. And after a decade, found myself in Paris, searching for this thing."

He continued, his tone rich with the old feeling.

"What I searched for was a place, a place somewhere in which I would be a part of something greater than myself. It was to be other than a perfect outcast. It was to be with those who would enclose me in a group to which I truly belonged. But nowhere did I find this, until now."

He looked at me pointedly and then to Merrick, and I saw the love come up warmly into his face.

"I'm as strong as you are now, David. And soon Merrick will be the same." He turned his steady eyes on Lestat. "I'm almost as strong as you are now, my blessed Maker. For better or for worse I feel that I am one of you all."

There came from his glistening white face a long drawn-out sigh then, which was all too characteristic of him and had always been.

"Thoughts," he said, "I hear them. Music from faraway, I hear it. Those who come and go in the streets outside, I hear them. I catch their scent and it's sweet and welcoming. I look out at the night and I see far."

A great wondering relief came over me. I did my best to express it by my gestures and the warmth of the expression on my face.

I felt Merrick shared it. Her love for Louis was palpable. It was infinitely more aggressive and demanding than the love she felt for me.

Lestat, somewhat weakened perhaps from all he'd endured, and his long fast of the past months, merely nodded at these words.

He looked to Merrick as if he had a task before him, and I was eager myself for that task to be done. It would be difficult for me to see Lestat take Merrick in his arms. Perhaps it would be private, as the blood exchange had been with Louis. I was ready enough to be sent away again to walk, with only the comfort of my thoughts, in the night.

But I sensed that our small company was by no means ready to disband.

Merrick sat forward in her chair. She made it quite evident that she meant to address all of us.

"I have something which must be said," she began, her eyes hesitating respectfully on me for a long moment before she looked at the other two. "There is much guilt here on the part of Louis and David that I'm now one of you. And perhaps there are questions in your mind, Lestat, as well.

"Hear me out, then, for all your sakes, and decide what your feelings should be when you know the key parts of the tale. I am here because I chose to be here a long time ago.

"It has been years since David Talbot, our revered Superior General, disappeared out of the warm protective arms of the Talamasca, and I was by no means mollified by lies about how he had come to the end of his mortal life.

"As David knows, I learnt the secrets of the body switch that had removed David from the elderly body in which I'd always loved him with all my heart. But I didn't need a secret narrative written by my friend Aaron Lightner to tell me what had become of David's soul.

"I learnt the truth when I flew to London, after the death of that elderly body, that body which we called David Talbot, to pay my respects, alone with the body in the coffin before it was forever sealed. I knew when I touched the body that David had not suffered death in it, and at that unique moment my ambitions began.

"Only a short time later, I found Aaron Lightner's papers, which made

it clear that David had indeed been the happy victim of a Faustian Switch, and that something unforgivable in Aaron's mind had taken David, within the young body, out of our world.

"Of course I knew it was the vampires. I didn't need popular fictions masking facts to figure how Lestat had had his way with David at last.

"But by the time I read those curious pages, with all their euphemism and initials, I had already made a potent and age-old spell. I had made it to bring David Talbot, whatever he was—young man, vampire, even ghost—back to me, back to the warmth of my affection, back to his old sense of responsibility for me, back to the love we'd once shared."

She stopped speaking, and reached down and drew up a small cloth-wrapped parcel from her bag. There came the acrid smell again, which I could not classify, and then she opened the cloth to reveal what appeared to be a yellowish and somewhat molded human hand.

It was not that old blackened hand I had more than once seen on her altar. It was something altogether more recently alive, and I realized what my nostrils had failed to tell me. Before it had been severed, it had been embalmed. It was the fluid that caused the faint noxious odor. But the fluid had long since dried up and left the hand as it was, fleshly, shrunken, and curled.

"Do you recognize it, David?" she asked me gravely.

I was chilled as I stared at her.

"I took it from your body, David," she said. "I took it because I wouldn't let you go."

Lestat gave a small laugh that was tender and full of easy pleasure. I think that Louis was too stunned to speak.

As for me, I could say nothing. I only stared at the hand.

In the palm was engraved a whole series of small words. I knew the tongue to be Coptic, which I could not read.

"It's an old spell, David; it binds you to come to me, it binds the spirits who listen to me to drive you towards me. It binds them to fill your dreams and your waking hours with thoughts of me. As the spell builds in power it presses out all other considerations, and finally there is one obsession, that you come to me, and nothing else will do."

Now it was Louis's turn for a small smile of recognition.

Lestat sat back, merely regarding the remarkable object with a raised eyebrow and a rueful smile.

I shook my head.

"I don't accept it!" I whispered.

"You had no chance against it, David," she insisted. "You're blameless, blameless, as Louis was blameless for what ultimately happened to me."

"No, Merrick," said Louis gently. "I've known too much genuine love in my years to doubt what I feel for you."

"What does it say, this scribble!" I demanded angrily.

"What it says," she answered, "is a particle of what I have recited countless times as I called my spirits, the very spirits I called for you and Louis the other night. What it says is:

" 'I command you to drench his soul, his mind, his heart with a heat for me, to inflict upon his nights and days a relentless and torturous longing for me; to invade his dreams with the images of me; to let there be nothing that he eats or drinks that will solace him as he thinks of me, until he returns to me, until he stands in my presence, until I can use every power at my command on him as we speak together. Do not for a moment let him be quiet; do not for a moment let him turn away.' "

"It wasn't like that," I insisted.

She went on, her voice lower, kinder:

" 'May he be a slave to me, may he be the faithful servant of my designs, may he have no power to refuse what I have confided to you, my great and faithful spirits. May he fulfill that destiny which I choose of my own accord.' "

She let the silence fill the room again. I heard nothing for the moment, except a low secretive laughter from Lestat.

But it was not mocking, this laughter. It was simply eloquent of astonishment, and then Lestat spoke:

"And so you are absolved, gentlemen," he said. "Why don't you accept it, accept it as an absolutely priceless gift which Merrick has the right to give?"

"Nothing can ever absolve me," said Louis.

"Let it be your choice, then, both of you," answered Merrick, "if you wish to believe you are responsible. And this, this remnant of your corpse I'll return to the earth. But let me say, before I put a seal on the subject for both of your hearts, that the future was foretold."

"By whom? How?" I demanded.

“An old man,” she said, addressing me most particularly, “who used to sit in the dining room of my house listening to Sunday Mass on the radio, an old man with a gold pocket watch which I coveted, a watch which he told me, simply, was not ticking for me.”

I winced. “Oncle Vervain,” I whispered.

“Those were his only words on the matter,” she said with soft humility. “But he sent me to the jungles of Central America to find the mask I would use to raise Claudia. He had sent me earlier, with my mother and my sister, to find the perforator with which I would slash Louis’s wrist to get the blood from him, not only for my raising of a spirit, but for the spell with which I brought Louis to me.”

The others said nothing. But Louis and Lestat understood her. And it was the pattern, the intricate pattern which won me over to accept her utterly, rather than keep her at a remove, the evidence of my awful guilt.

It was now close to morning. We had only a couple of hours left. Lestat wanted to use this time to give Merrick his power.

But before we disbanded, Lestat turned to Louis and asked a question which mattered to us all.

“When the sun rose,” he said, “when you saw it, when it burnt you before you were unconscious, what did you see?”

Louis stared at Lestat for some few minutes, his face blank, as it always becomes when he is in a state of high emotion, and then his features softened, his brows knitted, and there came the dreaded tears to his eyes.

“Nothing,” he said. He bowed his head, but then he looked up helplessly. “Nothing. I saw nothing and I felt that there was nothing. I felt it—empty, colorless, timeless. Nothing. That I had ever lived in any shape seemed unreal.” His eyes were shut tight, and he brought up his hand to hide his face from us. He was weeping. “Nothing,” he said. “Nothing at all.”

25

No amount of blood from Lestat could make Merrick his equal. No amount could make any of us his equal. But by the relentless blood exchange, Merrick was immensely enhanced.

And so we formed a new coven, lively, and delighted in each other's company, and excusing each other all past sins. With every passing hour, Lestat became more the old creature of action and impulse which I had loved for so long.

Do I believe that Merrick brought me to herself with a spell? I do not. I do not believe that my reason is so susceptible, but what am I to make of Oncle Vervain's designs?

Quite deliberately, I put the matter away from my thoughts, and I embraced Merrick as truly as I ever had, even though I had to endure the sight of her fascination for Louis, and the fascination which he held for her.

I had Lestat again, did I not?

It was two nights later—nights of no remarkable events or achievements, except for Merrick's ever increasing experience—that I put the question to him that had so troubled me about his long sleep.

He was in the beautifully appointed front parlor in the Rue Royale, looking quite wonderful in his sleekly cut black velvet, what with cameo buttons, no less, and his handsome yellow hair shimmering as it ought to do in the familiar light of his numerous lamps.

"Your long slumber frightened me," I confessed. "There were times when I could have sworn you were no longer in the body. Of course I talk again of a form of hearing denied to me as your pupil. But I speak of a human instinct in me which is quite strong."

I went on telling him how it had so completely unnerved me to see him thus, to be unable to rouse him, and to fear that his soul had taken to wandering and might not return.

He was silent for some moments, and I thought for a split second that I

saw a shadow fall over his face. Then he gave me a warm smile and gestured for me to worry no more.

"Maybe some night I'll tell you about it," he said. "For now let me say that there was some truth in your conjecture. I wasn't always there." He broke off, thinking, even whispering something which I couldn't hear. Then he went on. "As for where I was, I can't now explain it. But again, maybe some night, to you, above all others, I will try."

My curiosity was dreadfully aroused and for a moment I was maddened by him, but when he began to laugh at me, I remained silent.

"I won't go back to my slumber," he said finally. He became quite sober and convincing. "I want you all to be assured of it. Years have passed since Memnoch came to me. You might say it took all my reserve to weather that terrible ordeal. As for the time when I was waked before by Sybelle's music, I was more nearly close to all of you than I came to be some time later on."

"You tease me with hints that something happened to you," I said.

"Perhaps it did," he answered, his vacillations and his playful tone infuriating me. "Perhaps it did not. David, how am I to know? Be patient. We have each other now again, and Louis has ceased to be the emblem of our discontent. Believe me, I'm happy for that."

I smiled and I nodded, but the mere thought of Louis brought to mind the gruesome sight of his burnt remains in the casket. It had been the living proof that the quiet omnipotent glory of the daily sun would never shine upon me again. It had been the living proof that we can perish so very easily, that all the mortal world is a lethal enemy during those hours between dawn and dusk.

"I've lost so much time," Lestat remarked in his habitual energetic fashion, eyes moving about the room. "There are so many books I mean to read, and things I mean to see. The world's around me again. I'm where I belong."

I suppose we might have spent a quiet evening after that, both of us reading, both of us enjoying the comfort of those lushly domestic Impressionist paintings, if Merrick and Louis had not come so suddenly up the iron stairs and down the corridor to the front room.

Merrick had not given up her penchant for shirtwaisted dresses and she looked splendid in her dark-green silk. She led the way, the more reticent Louis coming behind her. They both sat upon the brocade sofa

opposite, and straightaway Lestat asked:

"What's wrong?"

"The Talamasca," said Merrick. "I think it's wise to leave New Orleans. I think we should do it at once."

"That's sheer nonsense," said Lestat immediately. "I won't hear of it." At once his face was flushed with expression. "I've never been afraid of mortals in my life. I have no fear of the Talamasca."

"Perhaps you should have," said Louis. "You must listen to the letter which Merrick has received."

"What do you mean, 'received?' " asked Lestat crossly. "Merrick, you didn't go back to the Motherhouse! Surely you knew such a thing couldn't be done."

"Of course I didn't, and my loyalty to the rest of you is total, don't question it," she fired back. "But this letter was left at my old house here in New Orleans. I found it this evening, and I don't like it, and I think it's time that we reconsider everything, though you may lay it down as my fault."

"I won't reconsider anything," said Lestat. "Read it."

As soon as she drew it out of her canvas bag, I saw it was a hand-delivered missive from the Elders. It was written on a true parchment meant to stand the test of centuries, though a machine had no doubt printed it for when did the Elders ever put their own hands to what they wrote?

> "Merrick,
>
> We have learnt with great dismay about your recent experiments in the old house in which you were born. We order you to leave New Orleans as soon as you possibly can. Have no further discourse with your fellow members in the Talamasca, or with that select and dangerous company which has so obviously seduced you, and come to us in Amsterdam directly.
>
> Your room is already prepared for you in the Motherhouse, and we expect these instructions to be obeyed.
>
> Please understand that we want, as always, to learn with you from your recent and ill-advised experiences, but there can be no miscalculation as to our admonitions. You are to break off your relations with those who can never have our sanction and

you are to come to us at once."

She laid it down in her lap.

"It bears the seal of the Elders," she said.

I could see this wax stamp plainly.

"Why are we to care that it bears their seal," demanded Lestat, "or the seal of anyone else? They can't force you to come to Amsterdam. Why do you even entertain such an idea?"

"Be patient with me," she spoke up immediately. "I'm not entertaining any such idea. What I'm saying is that we've been carefully watched."

Lestat shook his head. "We've always been carefully watched. I've masqueraded as one of my own fictions for over a decade. What do I care if I'm carefully watched? I defy anyone to harm me. I always have in my fashion. I've rarely … rarely … been wrong."

"But Lestat," said Louis, leaning forward and looking him directly in the eyes. "This means the Talamasca has made what they believe to be a sighting of us—David and me—on Merrick's premises. And that's dangerous, dangerous because it can make enemies for us among those who truly believe in what we are."

"They don't believe it," declared Lestat. "No one believes it. That's what always protects us. No one believes in what we are but us."

"You're wrong," said Merrick before I could speak up. "They do believe in you—."

"And so 'they watch and they are always here,' " said Lestat, mocking the old motto of the Order, the very motto printed on the calling cards I once carried when I walked the earth as a regular man.

"Nevertheless," I said quickly, "we should leave for now. We cannot go back to Merrick's house, any of us. As for here in the Rue Royale, we cannot remain."

"I won't give in to them," said Lestat. "They won't order me about in this city which belongs to me. By day we sleep in hiding—at least the three of you choose to sleep in hiding—but the night and the city belong to us."

"How so does the city belong to us?" asked Louis with near touching innocence.

Lestat cut him off with a contemptuous gesture. "For two hundred

years I've lived here," he said in a passionate low voice. "I won't leave because of an Order of scholars. How many years ago was it, David, that I came to visit you in the Motherhouse in London? I was never afraid of you. I challenged you with my questions. I demanded you make a separate file for me among your voluminous records."

"Yes, Lestat, but I think now things might be different." I was looking intently at Merrick. "Have you told us everything, darling?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, staring before her as if at the workings of the very problem. "I've told you everything, but you see, this was written some days ago. And now everything's changed." She looked up at me, finally. "If we're being watched, as I suspect we are, then they know just how much everything has changed."

Lestat rose to his feet.

"I don't fear the Talamasca," he declared with heavy emphasis. "I don't fear anyone. If the Talamasca had wanted me it might have come for me during all the years I've slept in the dust at St. Elizabeth's."

"But you see, that's just it," said Merrick. "They didn't want you. They wanted to watch you. They wanted to be close, as always, privy to knowledge which no one else possessed, but they didn't want to touch you. They didn't want to turn your considerable power against themselves."

"Ah, that's well put," he said. "I like that. My considerable power. They'd do well to think on that."

"Please, I beg you," I said, "don't threaten the Talamasca."

"And why not threaten them?" he asked of me.

"You can't think of actually doing harm to members of the Talamasca," I said, speaking a bit too sharply, in my concern. "You can't do this out of respect for Merrick and for me."

"You're being threatened, aren't you?" asked Lestat. "We're all being threatened."

"But you don't understand," said Merrick. "It's too dangerous for you to do anything to the Talamasca. They are a large organization, an ancient organization—."

"I don't care," Lestat said.

"—and they do know what you are," she replied.

"Lestat, sit down again, please," said Louis. "Don't you see the point? It isn't merely their considerable age and power. It isn't merely their

resources. It's who they truly are. They know of us, they can resolve to interfere with us. They can resolve to cause us great harm wherever we might go, anywhere in this world."

"You're dreaming, handsome friend," Lestat said. "Think on the blood I've shared with you. Think on it, Merrick. And think on the Talamasca and its stodgy ways. What did it do when Jesse Reeves was lost to the Order? There were no threats then."

"I do think of their ways, Lestat," Merrick said forcefully. "I think we should leave here. We should take with us all evidence that would feed their investigation. We should go."

Lestat glared at each and every one of us, and then stormed out of the flat.

All that long night, we didn't know where he was. We knew his feelings, yes, and we understood them and we respected them, and in some unspoken fashion we resolved that we would do what he said. If we had a leader, it was Lestat. As dawn approached we took great care in going to our hiding places. We shared the common sentiment that we were no longer concealed by the human crowd.

After sunset the following evening, Lestat returned to the flat in the Rue Royale.

Merrick had gone down to receive another letter from a special courier, a letter of which I was in dread, and Lestat appeared in the front parlor of the flat just before her return.

Lestat was windblown and flushed and angry, and he walked about with noisy strides, a bit like an archangel looking for a lost sword.

"Please get yourself in hand," I said to him adamantly. He glared at me, but then took a chair, and, looking furiously from me to Louis, he waited for Merrick to come into the room.

At last Merrick appeared with the opened envelope and the parchment paper in her hand. I can only describe the expression on her face as one of astonishment, and she looked to me before she glanced at the others, and then she looked to me again.

Patiently, gesturing to Lestat to be still, I watched her take her place on the damask sofa, at Louis's side. I couldn't help but notice that he made no attempt to read the letter over her shoulder. He merely waited, but he was as anxious as I.

"It's so very extraordinary," she said in a halting manner. "I've never

known the Elders to take such a stand. I've never known anyone in our Order to be so very explicit. I've known scholarship, I've known observation, I've known endless reports of ghosts, witchcraft, vampires, yes, even vampires. But I've never seen anything quite like this."

She opened the single page and with a dazed expression read it aloud:

> "We know what you have done to Merrick Mayfair. We advise you now that Merrick Mayfair must return to us. We will accept no explanations, no excuses, no apologies. We do not mean to traffic in words with regard to this matter. Merrick Mayfair must return and we will settle for nothing else."

Lestat laughed softly. "What do they think you are, *chérie,*" he said, "that they tell us to give you over to them? Do they think you're a precious jewel? My, but these mossbacked scholars are misogynist. I've never been such a perfect brute myself."

"What more does it say?" I asked quickly. "You haven't read it all."

She seemed to wake from her daze, and then to look down again at the paper.

> "We are prepared to abandon our passive posture of centuries with regard to your existence. We are prepared to declare you an enemy which must be exterminated at all costs. We are prepared to use our considerable power and resources to see that you are destroyed.
>
> Comply with our request and we will tolerate your presence in New Orleans and its environs. We will return to our harmless observations. But if Merrick Mayfair does not return at once to the Motherhouse called Oak Haven, we will take steps to make of you a quarry in any part of the world to which you might go."

Only now did Lestat's face lose its stamp of anger and contempt. Only now did he become quiet and thoughtful, which I did not interpret altogether as a good sign.

"It's quite interesting actually," he said, raising his eyebrows. "Quite interesting indeed."

A long silence gripped Merrick, during which time I think Louis asked some question about the age of the Elders, their identity, hitting upon things of which I knew nothing, and about which I had grave doubts. I think I managed to convey to him that no one within the Order knew who the Elders were. There were times when their very communications had been corrupted, but in the main they ruled the Order. It was authoritarian and always had been since its cloudy origins, of which we knew so little, even those of us who had spent our lives within the Order's walls.

Finally Merrick spoke.

"Don't you see what's happened?" she said. "In all my selfish plotting, I've thrown down a gauntlet to the Elders."

"Not you alone, darling," I was quick to add.

"No, of course not," she said, her expression still one of shock, "but only insomuch as I was responsible for the spells. But we've gone so far in these last few nights that they can no longer ignore us. Long ago it was Jesse. Then it was David, and now it's Merrick. Don't you see? Their long scholarly flirtation with the vampires has led to disaster, and now they're challenged to do something that—as far as we know—they've never done before."

"Nothing will come of this," said Lestat. "You mark my words."

"And what of the other vampires?" said Merrick softly, looking at him as she spoke. "What will *your* own elders say when they learn of what's been done here? Novels with fancy covers, vampire films, eerie music—these things don't rouse a human enemy. In fact, they make a comforting and flexible disguise. But what we've done has now roused the Talamasca, and it doesn't declare war on us alone, it declares war on our species, and that means others, don't you see?"

Lestat looked both stymied and infuriated. I could all but see the little wheels turning in his brain. There crept into his expression something utterly hostile and mischievous which I had certainly seen in years past.

"Of course, if I go to them," said Merrick, "if I give myself over to them—."

"That's unthinkable," said Louis. "Even they must know that themselves."

"That's the worst thing you could do," I interjected.

"Put yourself in their hands?" asked Lestat sarcastically, "in this era of

a technology that could probably reproduce your cells within your own blood in a laboratory? No. Unthinkable. Good word."

"I don't want to be in their hands," said Merrick. "I don't want to be surrounded by those who share a life I've lost completely. That was never, never my plan."

"And you won't be," said Louis. "You'll be with us, and we're leaving here. We should be making preparations, destroying any evidence with which they can back their designs for the rank and file."

"Will the old ones understand why I didn't go to them," she asked, "when they find their peace and solitude invaded by a new type of scholar? Don't you see what's involved?"

"You underestimate us all," I said calmly. "But I think we are spending our last night in this flat; and to all these various objects which have been such a solace, I'm saying my farewell, as should we all."

We looked to Lestat, each of us, studying his knotted angry face. Finally, he spoke.

"You do realize, don't you?" he asked me directly, "that I can easily wipe out the very members who made the observations that are threatening us now."

At once Merrick protested, and so did I. It was all a matter of desperate gestures, and then I gave in to a rapid plea.

"Don't do this thing, Lestat," I said. "Let's leave here. Let's kill their faith, not them. Like a small retreating army, we'll burn all evidence which might have become their trophies. I cannot endure the thought of turning against the Talamasca. I cannot. What more can I say?"

Merrick nodded, though she remained quiet.

Finally, Lestat spoke up.

"All right then," he said with vengeful finality. "I give in to you all because I love you. We'll go. We'll leave this house which has been my home for so many years; we'll leave this city which we all love; we'll leave all this, and we'll find someplace where no one can pick us out of the multitudes. We'll do it, but I tell you, I don't like it, and for me the members of the Order have lost by these very communications any special protective shield they might have once possessed."

It was settled.

We went to work, swiftly, silently, making certain that noth-ing remained which contained the potent blood which the Talamasca would

seek to examine as soon as it could.

The flat was soon clean of all that might have been claimed as evidence, and then the four of us went over to Merrick's house and carried out the same thorough cleansing, burning the white silk dress of the terrible séance, and destroying her altars as well.

I had then to visit my erstwhile study at St. Elizabeth's and burn the contents of my many journals and essays, a task for which I had no taste at all.

It was tiresome, it was defeating, it was demoralizing. But it was done.

And so, on the very next night, we came to leave New Orleans. And well before morning, the three—Louis and Merrick and Lestat—went ahead.

I remained behind in the Rue Royale, at the desk in the back parlor, to write a letter to those whom I had once trusted so very much, those I had once so dearly loved.

In my own hand I wrote it, so that they might recognize that the writing was of special significance to me, if to no one else.

> To my beloved Elders, whoever you might truly be,
>
> It was unwise of you to send to us such caustic and combative letters, and I fear that some night you might—some of you—have to pay dearly for what you've done.
>
> Please understand, this is no challenge. I am leaving, and by the time you claim this letter by means of your questionable procedures, I will be well beyond your reach.
>
> But know this. Your threats have greatly roused the tender pride of the strongest among us, one who had for some time now regarded you as quite beyond his eager reach.
>
> By your ill-chosen words and threats you have forfeited the formidable sanctuary which enshrined you. You are now as exquisitely vulnerable to those whom you thought to frighten as any other mortal woman or man.
>
> Indeed, you have made another rather grievous error, and I advise you to think on it long and well before plotting any further action in regard to the secrets we both share.
>
> You have made yourselves an interesting adversary to one who loves challenges, and it will require all of my considerable

influence to protect you individually and collectively from the avid lust which you have so foolishly aroused.

I had read this over carefully, and was in the act of affixing my signature when I felt Lestat's cold hand on my shoulder, pressing firmly on my flesh.

He repeated the words "an interesting adversary," and there came from him a sly laugh.

"Don't hurt them, please," I whispered.

"Come on, David," he said confidently, "it's time for us to leave here. Come. Prompt me to tell you about my ethereal wanderings, or perhaps give you some other tale."

I bent over the paper, completing my signature carefully, and it occurred to me that I had no count of the many documents I had written for, and in, the Talamasca, and that once more, to one such document, a document which would go into their files, I had put my name.

"All right, old friend, I'm ready," I said. "But give me your word."

We walked down the long corridor to the back of the flat together, his hand heavy but welcome on my shoulder, his clothes and hair smelling of the wind.

"There are tales to be written, David," he said. "You won't keep us all from that, will you? Surely we can go on with our confessions and maintain our new hiding place as well."

"Oh, yes," I answered. "That we can do. The written word belongs to us, Lestat. Isn't that enough?"

"I'll tell you what, old boy," he said, stopping on the rear balcony and throwing a passing glance over the flat which he had so loved. "Let's leave it up to the Talamasca, shall we? I'll become the very saint of patience for you, I promise, unless they raise the stakes. Is that not fair enough?"

"Fair enough," I answered.

And so I close this account of how Merrick Mayfair came to be one of us. So I close the account of how we left New Orleans and went to lose ourselves in the great world.

And for you, my brothers and sisters in the Talamasca, as well as for a multitude of others, I have penned this tale.

4:30 p.m.

Sunday
July 25, 1999

F O R

Stan Rice

A N D

Christopher Rice

A N D

Nancy Rice Diamond

Anne Rice

Blood and Gold

A BALLANTINE e BOOK

Blood and Gold

A novel by

Anne Rice

Ballantine Books

A Ballantine Book
Published by the Random House Publishing Group
Copyright © 2001 by Anne O'Brien Rice

All Rights Reserved.

Published in the United States by Ballantine Books, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York.

Ballantine and colophon are registered trademarks of Random House, Inc.

eISBN: 978-0-375-41421-3

This edition published by arrangement with Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

www.ballantinebooks.com

v3.1

Contents

Master Table of Contents

Cover
Title Page
Copyright

Part 1

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4

Part 2

Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20

Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Chapter 35

Part 3

Chapter 36

Dedication

THE LISTENER

1

His name was Thorne. In the ancient language of the runes, it had been longer—Thornevald. But when he became a blood drinker, his name had been changed to Thorne. And Thorne he remained now, centuries later, as he lay in his cave in the ice, dreaming.

When he had first come to the frozen land, he had hoped he would sleep eternally. But now and then the thirst for blood awakened him, and using the Cloud Gift, he rose into the air, and went in search of the Snow Hunters.

He fed off them, careful never to take too much blood from any one so that none died on account of him. And when he needed furs and boots he took them as well, and returned to his hiding place.

These Snow Hunters were not his people. They were dark of skin and had slanted eyes, and they spoke a different tongue, but he had known them in the olden times when he had traveled with his uncle into the land to the East for trading. He had not liked trading. He had preferred war. But he'd learnt many things on those adventures.

In his sleep in the North, he dreamed. He could not help it. The Mind Gift let him hear the voices of other blood drinkers.

Unwillingly he saw through their eyes, and beheld the world as they beheld it. Sometimes he didn't mind. He liked it. Modern things amused him. He listened to far-away electric songs. With the Mind Gift he understood such things as steam engines and railroads; he even understood computers and automobiles. He felt he knew the cities he had left behind though it had been centuries since he'd forsaken them.

An awareness had come over him that he wasn't going to die. Loneliness in itself could not destroy him. Neglect was insufficient. And so he slept.

Then a strange thing happened. A catastrophe befell the world of the blood drinkers.

A young singer of sagas had come. His name was Lestat, and in his electric songs, Lestat broadcast old secrets, secrets which Thorne had never known.

Then a Queen had risen, an evil and ambitious being. She had claimed to have within her the Sacred Core of all blood drinkers, so that, should she die, all the race would perish with her.

Thorne had been amazed.

He had never heard these myths of his own kind. He did not know that he believed this thing.

But as he slept, as he dreamt, as he watched, this Queen began, with the Fire Gift, to destroy blood drinkers everywhere throughout the world. Thorne heard their cries as they tried to

escape; he saw their deaths in so far as others saw such things.

As she roamed the earth, this Queen came close to Thorne but she passed over him. He was secretive and quiet in his cave. Perhaps she didn't sense his presence. But he had sensed hers and never had he encountered such age or strength except from the blood drinker who had given him the Blood.

And he found himself thinking of that one, the Maker, the red-haired witch with the bleeding eyes.

The catastrophe among his kind grew worse. More were slain; and out of hiding there came blood drinkers as old as the Queen herself, and Thorne saw these beings.

At last there came the red-haired one who had made him. He saw her as others saw her. And at first he could not believe that she still lived; it had been so long since he'd left her in the Far South that he hadn't dared to hope she was still alive. The eyes and ears of other blood drinkers gave him the infallible proof. And when he looked on her in his dreams, he was overwhelmed with a tender feeling and a rage.

She thrived, this creature who had given him the Blood, and she despised the Evil Queen and she wanted to stop her. Theirs was a hatred for each other which went back thousands of years.

At last there was a coming together of these beings—old ones from the First Brood of blood drinkers, and others whom the blood drinker Lestat loved and whom the Evil Queen did not choose to destroy.

Dimly, as he lay still in the ice, Thorne heard their strange talk, as round a table they sat, like so many powerful Knights, except that in this council, the women were equal to the men.

With the Queen they sought to reason, struggling to persuade her to end her reign of violence, to forsake her evil designs.

He listened, but he could not really understand all that was said among these blood drinkers. He knew only that the Queen must be stopped.

The Queen loved the blood drinker Lestat. But even he could not turn her from disasters, so reckless was her vision, so depraved her mind.

Did the Queen truly have the Sacred Core of all blood drinkers within herself? If so, how could she be destroyed?

Thorne wished the Mind Gift were stronger in him, or that he had used it more often. During his long centuries of sleep, his strength had grown, but now he felt his distance and that he was weak.

But as he watched, his eyes open, as though that might help him to see, there came into his vision another red-haired one, the twin sister of the woman who had loved him so long ago. It astonished him, as only a twin can do.

And Thorne came to understand that the Maker he had loved so much had lost this twin thousands of years ago.

The Evil Queen was the mistress of this disaster. She despised the red-haired twins. She had divided them. And the lost twin came now to fulfill an ancient curse she had laid on the Evil Queen.

As she drew closer and closer to the Queen, the lost twin thought only of destruction. She did not sit at the council table. She did not know reason or restraint.

"We shall all die," Thorne whispered in his sleep, drowsy in the snow and ice, the eternal arctic night coldly enclosing him. He did not move to join his immortal companions. But he watched. He listened. He would do so until the last moment. He could do no less.

Finally, the lost twin reached her destination. She rose against the Queen. The other blood drinkers around her looked on in horror. As the two female beings struggled, as they fought as two warriors upon a battlefield, a strange vision suddenly filled Thorne's mind utterly, as though he lay in the snow and he were looking at the heavens.

What he saw was a great intricate web stretching out in all directions, and caught within it many pulsing points of light. At the very center of this web was a single vibrant flame. He knew the flame was the Queen; and he knew that the other points of light were all the other blood drinkers. He himself was one of those tiny points of light. The tale of the Sacred Core was true. He could see it with his own eyes. And now came the moment for all to surrender to darkness and silence. Now came the end.

The far-flung complex web grew glistening and bright; the core appeared to explode; and then all went dim for a long moment, during which he felt a sweet vibration in his limbs as he often felt in simple sleep, and he thought to himself, Ah, so, now we are dying. And there is no pain.

Yet it was like Ragnarok for his old gods, when the great god, Heimdall, the World Brightener, would blow his horn summoning the gods of Aesir to their final battle.

"And we end with a war as well," Thorne whispered in his cave. But his thoughts did not end.

It seemed the best thing that he live no more, until he thought of her, his red-haired one, his Maker. He had wanted so badly to see her again.

Why had she never told him of her lost twin? Why had she never entrusted to him the myths of which the blood drinker Lestat sang? Surely she had known the secret of the Evil Queen with her Sacred Core.

He shifted; he stirred in his sleep. The great sprawling web had faded from his vision. But with uncommon clarity he could see the red-haired twins, spectacular women.

They stood side by side, these comely creatures, the one in rags, the other in splendor. And through the eyes of other blood drinkers he came to know that the stranger twin had slain the Queen, and had taken the Sacred Core within herself.

"Behold, the Queen of the Damned," said his Maker twin as she presented to the others her long-lost sister. Thorne understood her. Thorne saw the suffering in her face. But the face of the stranger twin, the Queen of the Damned, was blank.

In the nights that followed the survivors of the catastrophe remained together. They told their tales to one another. And their stories filled the air like so many songs from the bards of old, sung in the mead hall. And Lestat, leaving his electric instruments for music, became once more the chronicler, making a story of the battle that he would pass effortlessly into the mortal world.

Soon the red-haired sisters had moved away, seeking a hiding place where Thorne's distant eye could not find them.

Be still, he had told himself. Forget the things that you have seen. There is no reason for you to rise from the ice, any more than there ever was. Sleep is your friend. Dreams are your unwelcome guests.

Lie quiet and you will lapse back into peace again. Be like the god Heimdall before the battle call, so still that you can hear the wool grow on the backs of sheep, and the grass grow far away in the lands where the snow melts.

But more visions came to him.

The blood drinker Lestat brought about some new and confusing tumult in the mortal world. It was a marvelous secret from the Christian past that he bore, which he had entrusted to a mortal girl.

There would never be any peace for this one called Lestat. He was like one of Thorne's people, like one of the warriors of Thorne's time.

Thorne watched as once again, his red-haired one appeared, his lovely Maker, her eyes red with mortal blood as always, and finely glad and full of authority and power, and this time come to bind the unhappy blood drinker Lestat in chains.

Chains that could bind such a powerful one?

Thorne pondered it. What chains could accomplish this, he wondered. It seemed that he had to know the answer to this question. And he saw his red-haired one sitting patiently by while the blood drinker Lestat, bound and helpless, fought and raved but could not get free.

What were they made of, these seemingly soft shaped links that held such a being? The question left Thorne no peace. And why did his red-haired Maker love Lestat and allow him to live? Why was she so quiet as the young one raved? What was it like to be bound in her chains, and close to her?

Memories came back to Thorne; troubling visions of his Maker when he, a mortal warrior, had first come upon her in a cave in the North land that had been his home. It had been night and he had seen her with her distaff and her spindle and her bleeding eyes.

From her long red locks she had taken one hair after another and spun it into thread, working with silent speed as he approached her.

It had been bitter winter, and the fire behind her seemed magical in its brightness as he had stood in the snow watching her as she spun the thread as he had seen a hundred mortal women do.

“A witch,” he had said aloud.

From his mind he banished this memory.

He saw her now as she guarded Lestat who had become strong like her. He saw the strange chains that bound Lestat who no longer struggled.

At last Lestat had been released.

Gathering up the magical chains, his red-haired Maker had abandoned him and his companions.

The others were visible but she had slipped out of their vision, and slipping from their vision, she slipped from the visions of Thorne.

Once again, he vowed to continue his slumber. He opened his mind to sleep. But the nights passed one by one in his icy cave. The noise of the world was deafening and formless.

And as time passed he could not forget the sight of his long-lost one; he could not forget that she was as vital and beautiful as she had ever been, and old thoughts came back to him with bitter sharpness.

Why had they quarreled? Had she really ever turned her back on him? Why had he hated so much her other companions? Why had he begrudged her the wanderer blood drinkers who, discovering her and her company, adored her as all talked together of their journeys in the Blood.

And the myths—of the Queen and the Sacred Core—would they have mattered to him? He didn’t know. He had had no hunger for myths. It confused him. And he could not banish from his mind the picture of Lestat bound in those mysterious chains.

Memory wouldn’t leave him alone.

It was the middle of winter when the sun doesn’t shine at all over the ice, when he realized that sleep had left him. And he would have no further peace.

And so he rose from the cave, and began his long walk South through the snow, taking his time as he listened to the electric voices of the world below, not certain of where he would enter it again.

The wind blew his long thick red hair; he pulled up his fur-lined collar over his mouth, and he wiped the ice from his eyebrows. His boots were soon wet, and so he stretched out his arms, summoning the Cloud Gift without words, and began his ascent so that he might travel low over the land, listening for others of his kind, hoping to find an old one like himself, someone who might welcome him.

Weary of the Mind Gift and its random messages, he wanted to hear spoken words.

2

Several sunless days and nights of midwinter he traveled. But it didn't take him long to hear the cry of another. It was a blood drinker older than he, and in a city that Thorne had known centuries before.

In his nocturnal sleep he had never really forgotten this city. It had been a great market town with a fine cathedral. But on his long journey North so many years ago, he had found it suffering with the dreaded plague, and he had not believed it would endure.

Indeed, it had seemed to Thorne that all the peoples of the world would die in that awful plague, so terrible had it been, so merciless.

Once again, sharp memories tormented him.

He saw and smelled the time of the pestilence when children wandered aimlessly without parents, and bodies had lain in heaps. The smell of rotting flesh had been everywhere. How could he explain to anyone the sorrow he had felt for humankind that such a disaster had befallen them?

He didn't want to see the cities and the towns die, though he himself was not of them. When he fed upon the infected he knew no infection himself. But he could not cure anyone. He had gone on North, thinking perhaps that all the wondrous things that humankind had done would be covered in snow or vine or the soft earth itself in final oblivion.

But all had not died as he had then feared; indeed people of the town itself had survived, and their descendants lived still in the narrow cobbled medieval streets through which he walked, more soothed by the cleanliness here than he had ever dreamt he would be.

Yes, it was good to be in this vital and orderly place.

How solid and fine the old timber houses, yet the modern machines ticked and hummed within. He could feel and see the miracles that he had only glimpsed through the Mind Gift. The televisions were filled with colorful dreams. And people knew a safety from the snow and ice which his time had never given anyone.

He wanted to know more of these wonders for himself, and that surprised him. He wanted to see railroad trains and ships. He wanted to see airplanes and cars. He wanted to see computers and wireless telephones.

Maybe he could do it. Maybe he could take the time. He had not come to life again with any such goal, but then who said that he must hurry upon his errand? No one knew of his existence except perhaps this blood drinker who called to him, this blood drinker who so easily opened his

own mind.

Where was the blood drinker—the one he had heard only hours ago? He gave a long silent call, not revealing his name, but pledging only that he offered friendship.

Quickly an answer came to him. With the Mind Gift he saw a blond-haired stranger. The creature sat in the back room of a special tavern, a place where blood drinkers often gathered.

Come join me here.

The direction was plain and Thorne hastened to go there. Over the last century he had heard the blood drinker voices speak of such havens. Vampire taverns, blood drinker bars, blood drinker clubs. They made up the Vampire Connection. Such a thing! It made him smile.

In his mind's eye, he saw the bright disturbing hallucination again of the great web with so many tiny pulsing lights caught within it. That vision had been of all the blood drinkers themselves connected to the Sacred Core of the Evil Queen. But this Vampire Connection was an echo of such a web, and it fascinated him.

Would they call to each other on computers, these modern blood drinkers, forsaking the Mind Gift altogether? He vowed that nothing must dangerously surprise him.

Yet he felt shivers through all his flesh remembering his vague dreams of the disaster.

He hoped and prayed that his newfound friend would confirm the things he'd seen. He hoped and prayed that the blood drinker would be truly old, not young and tender and bungling.

He prayed that this blood drinker would have the gift of words. For he wanted to hear words more than anything. He himself could seldom find the right words. And now, more than anything, he wanted to listen.

He was almost to the bottom of the steep street, the snow coming down lightly around him, when he saw the sign of the tavern: The Werewolf.

It made him laugh.

So these blood drinkers play their reckless games, he mused. In his time it had been wholly different. Who of his own people had not believed that a man could change into a wolf? Who of his own people would not have done anything to prevent this very evil from coming upon him?

But here it was, a plaything, the concept, with this painted sign swinging on its hinges in the cold wind, and the barred windows brightly lighted beneath it.

He pulled the handle of the heavy door and at once found himself in a crowded room, warm, and full of the smell of wine and beer and human blood.

The warmth alone was overwhelming. In truth, he had never felt anything quite like it. The warmth was everywhere. It was even and wondrous. And it crossed his mind that not a single mortal here realized how truly marvelous this warmth was.

For in olden times such warmth had been impossible, and bitter winter had been the common curse of all.

There was no time however for such thinking. He reminded himself, Do not be surprised.

But the inundating chatter of mortals paralyzed him. The blood around him paralyzed him. For one moment his thirst was crippling. In this noisy indifferent crowd he felt he would run rampant, taking hold of this one and that one, only to be discovered, the monster among the throng who would then be hounded to destruction.

He found a place against the wall and leant against it, his eyes closed.

He remembered those of his clan running up the mountain, searching for the red-haired witch whom they would never find. Thorne alone had seen her. Thorne had seen her take the eyes from the dead warrior and put them into her own sockets. Thorne had seen her return through the light snow to the cave where she lifted her distaff. Thorne had seen her winding the golden red thread on the spindle. And the clan had wanted to destroy her, and wielding his ax he had been among them.

How foolish it all seemed now, because she had wanted Thorne to see her. She had come North for a warrior such as Thorne. She had chosen Thorne, and she had loved his youth and his strength and his pure courage.

He opened his eyes.

The mortals in this place took no notice of him, even though his clothes were badly worn. How long could he go unseen? He had no coins in his pockets to purchase a place at a table or a cup of wine.

But the voice of the blood drinker came again, coaxing him, reassuring him.

You must ignore the crowd. They know nothing of us, or why we keep this place. They are pawns. Come to the rear door. Push it with all your strength and it will give for you.

It seemed impossible that he could cross this room, that these mortals wouldn't know him for what he was.

But he must overcome this fear. He must reach the blood drinker who was summoning him.

Bowing his head, bringing his collar up over his mouth, he pushed through the soft bodies, trying not to meet the gaze of those who glanced at him. And when he saw the door without a handle, at once he pushed it as he'd been told to do.

It gave upon a large dimly lighted chamber with thick candles set upon each of its scattered wooden tables. The warmth was as solid and good as that of the outer room.

And the blood drinker was alone.

He was a tall fair creature whose yellow hair was almost white. He had hard blue eyes, and a delicate face, covered with a thin layer of blood and ash to make him look more human to the mortal eye. He wore a bright-red cloak with a hood, thrown back from his head, and his hair was finely combed and long.

He looked most handsome to Thorne, and well mannered, and rather like a creature of books than a man of the sword. He had large hands but they were slender and his fingers were fine.

It occurred to Thorne that he had seen this being with the Mind Gift, seated at the council

table with the other blood drinkers before the Evil Queen had been brought down.

Yes, he had seen this very one. This one had tried so hard to reason with the Queen, though inside him there lurked a dreadful anger and an unreasonable hate.

Yes, Thorne had seen this very one struggling with words, finely chosen words, to save everyone.

The blood drinker gestured for him to take a seat to the right, against the wall.

He accepted this invitation, and found himself on a long leather cushion, the candle flame dancing wickedly before him, sending its playful light into the other blood drinker's eyes. He could smell blood now in the other blood drinker. He realized that the blood drinker's face was warm with it, and so were his long tapering hands.

Yes, I have hunted tonight, but I will hunt with you again. You need this.

"Yes," said Thorne. "It's been so long you can't imagine it. To suffer in the snow and ice was simple. But they're all around me now, these tender creatures."

"I understand," said the other blood drinker. "I know."

These were the first words Thorne had spoken aloud to anyone in years and years, and he closed his eyes so that he might treasure this moment. Memory was a curse, yes, he thought, but it was also the greatest gift. Because if you lost memory you lost everything.

A bit of his old religion came back to him—that for memory, the god Odin had given his eye, and hung upon the sacred tree for nine days. But it was more complex than that. It was not only memory which Odin gained, it was the mead which enabled him to sing poetry.

Once years ago Thorne had drunk that poet's mead, given him by the priests of the sacred grove, and he had stood in the middle of his father's house singing the poems about her, the red-haired one, the blood drinker, whom he had seen with his own eyes.

And those around him had laughed and mocked him. But when she began to slay the members of the clan they mocked him no more. Once they had seen the pale bodies with their eyes plucked out, they had made him their hero.

He shook himself all over. The snow fell from his hair and from his shoulders. With a careless hand he wiped the bits of ice from his eyebrows. He saw the ice melt on his fingers. He rubbed hard at the frost on his face.

Was there no fire in this room? He looked about. The heat came magically through small windows. But how good it was, how consuming. He wanted to strip off his clothes suddenly and bathe in this heat.

I have a fire in my house. I'll take you there.

As if from a trance, he woke to look at the blood drinker stranger. He cursed himself that he had been sitting here clumsy and mute.

The blood drinker spoke aloud: "It's only to be expected. Do you understand the tongue I speak?"

"It's the tongue of the Mind Gift," said Thorne. "Men all over the world speak it." He stared at the blood drinker again. "My name is Thorne," he said. "Thor was my god." Hastily he reached inside his worn leather coat and pulled out from the fur the amulet of gold which he wore on a chain. "Time can't rust such a thing," he said. "It's Thor's hammer."

The blood drinker nodded.

"And your gods?" Thorne asked. "Who were they? I don't speak of belief, you understand, I speak of what we lost, you and I. Do you catch my meaning?"

"The gods of old Rome, those are the gods I lost," said the stranger. "My name is Marius."

Thorne nodded. It was too marvelous to speak aloud and to hear the voice of another. For the moment, he forgot the blood he craved and wanted only a flood of words.

"Speak to me, Marius," he said. "Tell me wondrous things. Tell me all that you would have me know." He tried to stop himself but he couldn't do it.

"Once I stood speaking to the wind, telling the wind all things that were in my mind and in my heart. Yet when I went North into the ice, I had no language." He broke off, staring into Marius's eyes. "My soul is too hurt. I have no true thoughts."

"I understand you," said Marius. "Come with me to my house. You're welcome to the bath, and to the clothes you need. Then we'll hunt and you'll be restored, and then comes talk. I can tell you stories without end. I can tell you all the stories of my life that I want to share with another."

A long sigh escaped Thorne's lips. He couldn't prevent himself from smiling in gratitude, his eyes moist and his hands trembling. He searched the stranger's face. He could find no evidence of dishonesty or cunning. The stranger seemed wise, and simple.

"My friend," Thorne said and then he bent forward and offered the kiss of greeting. Biting deep into his tongue, he filled his mouth with blood, and opened his lips over those of Marius.

The kiss did not take Marius by surprise. It was his own custom. He received the blood and obviously savored it.

"Now we can't quarrel over any small thing," said Thorne. He settled back against the wall greatly confused suddenly. He wasn't alone. He feared that he might give way to tears. He feared that he hadn't the strength to go back out into the dreadful cold and accompany this one to his house, yet it was what he needed to do so terribly.

"Come," said Marius, "I'll help you."

They rose from the table together.

This time the agony of passing through the crowd of mortals was even greater. So many bright glistening eyes fastened on him, though it was only for a moment.

Then they were in the narrow street again, in the gentle swirling snow, and Marius had his arm tight around him.

Thorne was gasping for breath, because his heart had been so quickened. He found himself

biting at the snow as it came in gusts into his face. He had to stop for a moment and gesture for his new friend to have patience.

"So many things I saw with the Mind Gift," he said. "I didn't understand them."

"I can explain, perhaps," said Marius. "I can explain all I know and you can do with it what you will. Knowledge has not been my salvation of late. I am lonesome."

"I'll stay with you," Thorne said. This sweet camaraderie was breaking his heart.

A long time they walked, Thorne becoming stronger again, forgetting the warmth of the tavern as if it had been a delusion.

At last they came to a handsome house, with a high peaked roof, and many windows. Marius put his key into the door, and they left the blowing snow behind, stepping into a broad hallway.

A soft light came from the rooms beyond. The walls and ceiling were of finely oiled wood, the same as the floor, with all corners neatly fitted.

"A genius of the modern world made this house for me," Marius explained. "I've lived in many houses, in many styles. This is but one way. Come inside with me."

The great room of the house had a rectangular stone fireplace built into its wooden wall. And there the fire was stacked waiting to be lighted. Through glass walls of remarkable size, Thorne saw the lights of the city. He realized that they were on the edge of the hill, and that a valley lay below them.

"Come," said Marius, "I must introduce you to the other who lives here with me."

This startled Thorne, because he had not detected the presence of anyone else, but he followed Marius through a doorway out of the great room into another chamber on the left, and there he saw a strange sight which mystified him.

Many tables filled the room, or perhaps it was one great broad table. But it was covered all over with a small landscape of hills and valleys, towns and cities. It was covered with little trees, and even little shrubbery, and here and there was snow, as if one town lay under winter and another lay under spring or summer.

Countless houses crowded the landscape, many with twinkling lights, and there were sparkling lakes made of some hard substance to imitate the gleam of water. There were tunnels through the mountains. And on curving iron tracks through this little wilderness there ran little railroad trains, seemingly made out of iron, like those of the great modern world.

Over this tiny world, there presided a blood drinker who didn't bother to look up at Thorne as he entered. The blood drinker had been a young male when he was made. He was tall, but very slight of build, with very delicate fingers. His hair was the faded blond more common among Englishmen than Norsemen.

He sat near the table, where before him was a cleared space devoted to his paintbrushes, and to several bottles of paint, while with his hands he painted the bark of a small tree, as if in readiness to put it into the world that stretched out all over the room, surrounding and almost

enclosing him.

A rush of pleasure passed through Thorne as he looked over this little world. It struck him suddenly that he could have spent an hour inspecting all of the tiny buildings. It was not the harsh great world outside, but something precious and protected, and even slightly enchanting.

There was more than one small black train which ran along upon the wandering tracks, and a small droning noise came from these trains as if from bees in a hive. The trains had lights inside their tiny windows.

All the myriad details of this small wonderland seemed to be correct.

"I feel I'm the frost giant in this room," Thorne whispered reverently.

It was an offering of friendship to the youngish male who continued to apply the brown paint to the bark of the tiny tree which he held so delicately between his left fingers. But the youngish male blood drinker did not respond.

"These tiny cities and towns are full of pretty magic," Thorne said, his voice a little more timid.

The youngish male seemed to have no ears.

"Daniel?" said Marius gently to his friend, "do you want to greet Thorne who is our guest tonight?"

"Welcome, Thorne," said Daniel without looking up. And then as if neither Thorne nor Marius were there, Daniel stopped the painting of his tree, and dipping another brush into another bottle, he made a dampened spot for the tree in the great world before him. He set the tree down hard upon that spot and the tree stood firm as though rooted.

"This house is full of many rooms like this," said Marius in an even voice, his eyes looking at Thorne gently. "Look below. One can purchase thousands of little trees, and thousands of little houses." He pointed to stacks upon stacks of small containers on the floor beneath the table. "Daniel is very good at putting together the houses. See how intricate they are? This is all that Daniel does now."

Thorne sensed a judgment in Marius's voice but it was soft, and the youngish blood drinker paid no attention. He had taken up another small tree, and was examining the thick green portion which made up its leafy upper limbs. To this he soon applied his little paintbrush.

"Have you ever seen one of our kind under such a spell?" Marius asked.

Thorne shook his head, No, he had not. But he understood how such a thing could happen.

"It occurs sometimes," said Marius. "The blood drinker becomes enthralled. I remember centuries ago I heard the story of a blood drinker in a Southern land whose sole passion was for finding beautiful shells along the shore, and this she did all night long until near morning. She did hunt and she did drink, but it was only to return to the shells, and once she looked at each, she threw it aside and went on searching. No one could distract her from it.

"Daniel is enthralled in the same way. He makes these small cities. He doesn't want to do

anything else. It's as if the small cities have caught him. You might say I look after him."

Thorne was speechless, out of respect. He couldn't tell whether Marius's words affected the blood drinker who continued to work upon his world. Thorne felt a moment of confusion.

Then a low genial laugh came from the youngish blood drinker.

"Daniel will be this way for a while," said Marius, "and then his old faculties will come back to him."

"The ideas you have, Marius," Daniel said with another little easy laugh. It was hardly more than a murmur. Daniel dipped the brush again into the paste that would make his little tree stick to the green grass, and he pressed the tree down with appropriate force. Then out of a box beside him, he drew another.

All the while the small railroad trains moved on, winding their way noisily through hill and valley, past snow-covered church and house. Why, this tiny world even contained small detailed people!

"Might I kneel to look at this?" asked Thorne respectfully.

"Yes, please do," said Marius. "It would give him pleasure."

Thorne went down on both knees and drew himself up to the small village with its cluster of little buildings. He saw delicate signs on them but he didn't know the meaning of them.

He was struck dumb by the wonder of it—that rising and confronting the great world, he was to come here and stumble upon this little universe.

A finely made little train, its engine roaring, its cars loosely connected, came rattling past him on the track. He thought he glimpsed small figures inside it.

For a second, he forgot all else. He imagined this handmade world to be real, and understood the spell, though it frightened him.

"Beautiful," he said in thanks. He stood up.

The young blood drinker neither moved nor spoke in acknowledgment.

"Have you hunted, Daniel?" asked Marius.

"Not tonight, Marius," said the youngish one without looking up, but then suddenly his eyes flashed on Thorne, and Thorne was surprised by their violet color.

"Norseman," Daniel said with a little note of pleasant surprise. "Red hair like the hair of the twins." He laughed, a light laugh as if he were a little mad. "Made by Maharet. Strong one."

The words caught Thorne completely off guard. He reeled, scarcely able to keep his balance.

He wanted to strike the careless young one. He almost lifted his fist. But Marius held his arm firmly.

Images crowded into Thorne's mind. The twins—his beloved Maker and her lost sister. He saw them vividly. *The Queen of the Damned.* Once more he saw the helpless blood drinker Lestat with the chains around him. Chains of metal could never have held him. From what had his red-haired Maker created those chains?

He tried to banish these thoughts, and anchor himself within the moment.

Marius held tight to his arm, and went on speaking to the blood drinker Daniel:

"Let me guide you, if you want to hunt."

"I have no need," said Daniel. He had gone back to his work. He drew a large bundle from beneath the table, and he held it up for Marius to see. On the cover was painted, or printed, Thorne could not tell, the picture of a house with three stories and many windows. "I want to assemble this house," Daniel said. "It's more difficult than anything you see here, but with my vampiric blood it will be simple."

"We'll leave you now," said Marius, "but don't try to leave here without me."

"I would never do that," said Daniel. He was already tearing at the sheer wrapping of the bundle. Bits and pieces of wood were inside. "I'll hunt with you tomorrow night and you can treat me as though I am a child as you love to do."

Marius kept his friendly grip on Thorne's arm. He led him out of the room and closed the door.

"When he wanders by himself," said Marius, "he gets into trouble. He gets lost, or thirsty beyond the point where he can hunt on his own. I have to search for him. He was that way as a man before he was ever made a blood drinker. The blood didn't change him except for a little while. And now he's enslaved to these tiny worlds he creates. All he requires is space for them, and the packages of buildings and trees and such which he purchases through the computer."

"Ah, you have those strange engines of the mind," said Thorne.

"Yes, under this roof there are very fine computers. I have all I need," said Marius. "But you're tired. Your clothes are old. You need refreshment. We'll talk of all this later."

He led Thorne up a short echoing wooden staircase and into a large bedchamber. All the wood of the walls and the doors was painted here in colors of green and yellow, and the bed itself was fitted into a great carved cabinet with only one side open. It struck him as a safe and curious place without a surface untouched by human hands. Even the wooden floor was polished.

Through a broad door they entered an immense bath which was paneled in roughened wood with a floor of stone, and many candles for its illumination. The color of the wood was beautiful in the subtle light and Thorne felt himself becoming dizzy.

But it was the bath itself which amazed him. There before another glass wall stood a huge wooden tub of steaming hot water. Made like a great cask, the tub was easily big enough for several to bathe together. On a small stool beside the tub there stood a stack of what appeared to be towels. On other stools there stood bowls of dried flowers and herbs which Thorne could smell with his acute blood drinker senses. There were also bottles of oil and jars of what might have been ointments.

That Thorne might wash himself in this seemed to him a miracle.

"Take off the soiled clothes," said Marius. "Let me discard them. What else do you have that you would save other than your necklace?"

"Nothing," said Thorne. "How can I ever repay you for this?"

"But you already have," said Marius. He himself removed his leather coat, and then pulled off his wool tunic. His naked chest was without hair. He was pale as all old blood drinkers are pale. And his body was strong and naturally beautiful. He'd been taken in the prime of his life, that was plain. But his true age, either in mortal life long ago, or in blood drinker time now? Thorne could not guess it.

Marius took off his leather boots and his long wool pants, and not waiting for Thorne—only making a gesture that Thorne should follow—he stepped into the huge tub of hot water.

Thorne ripped at his fur-lined jacket. He tore it in his haste. His fingers trembled as he stripped away the pants that were almost ragged. In a moment he was as naked as the other, and in awkward haste he gathered the ruin of his clothes in a small bundle. He looked about.

"Don't worry about such things," said Marius. The steam was rising all around him. "Come into the tub with me. Be warm for now."

Thorne followed, first stepping into the tub and then sinking down in the hot water on his knees. He finally seated himself so that the water came to his neck. The shock of the heat was overwhelming and utterly blessed. He uttered a little prayer of thanks, something old and small which he had learnt as a child to say when something purely good happens.

Marius put his hand into the bowl of dried flowers and herbs, and gathering up quite a bit of this mixture he let it loose into the hot water.

It was a deep good perfume of the outdoors in summer.

Thorne closed his eyes. That he had risen, that he had come this far, that he had found this pure and luxurious bath seemed almost impossible to him. He would wake soon, a victim of the Mind Gift, back in his hopeless cave, prisoner of his own exile, only dreaming of others.

Slowly he bowed his head and lifted a double handful of the cleansing hot water to his face. He lifted more and more of the water, and then finally as if it required courage, he dipped his head into the tub completely.

When he rose again he was warm as if he'd never been cold, and the sight of the lights beyond the glass amazed him. Even through the steam, he could see the snow falling beyond, and he was deliciously conscious that he was so near and yet so far from it.

Suddenly he wished that he had not risen for such a dark purpose.

Why could he not serve only what was good? Why could he not live for what was pleasurable? But that had never been his way.

No matter, it was important to keep that secret to himself for now. Why trouble his friend with dark thoughts? Why trouble himself with guilty confessions?

He looked at his companion.

Marius sat back against the side of the wooden tub with his arms out resting upon the edge. His hair was wet and clinging to his neck and shoulders. He didn't stare at Thorne, but he was

obviously conscious of him.

Thorne dipped his head again; he moved forward and lay down in the water, rising suddenly and turning over, letting the water run off him. He gave a little laugh of delight. He ran his fingers through the hair on his own chest. He dipped his head back until the water lapped at his face. He rolled over again and again to wash his full head of hair before he rose and sat back contented.

He took the same posture as Marius and the two looked at each other.

"And you live this way," said Thorne, "in the very midst of mortals, and you are safe from them?"

"They don't believe in us now," said Marius. "No matter what they see they don't believe. And wealth buys anything." His blue eyes seemed earnest and his face was calm as if he had no evil secrets inside, as though he had no hatred for anyone. But he did.

"Mortals clean this house," said Marius. "Mortals take the money I give them for all that's needed here. Do you understand enough of the modern world to grasp how such a place is heated and cooled and kept safe from intruders?"

"I understand," said Thorne. "But we're never safe as we dream, are we?"

A bitter smile came over Marius's face. "I have never been harmed by mortals," he said.

"You speak of the Evil Queen and all those she's slain, don't you?"

"Yes, I speak of that and other horrors," Marius answered.

Slowly without words Marius used the Mind Gift to let Thorne know that he himself hunted only the Evil Doer.

"That is my peace with the world," he said. "That is how I manage to go on. I use the Mind Gift to hunt those mortals who kill. In the big cities I can always find them."

"And mine is the Little Drink," said Thorne. "Be assured. I need no greedy feast. I take from many so that no one dies. For centuries I've lived this way among the Snow People. When I was first made I hadn't the skill. I would drink too fast and too recklessly. But then I learned. No one soul belongs to me. And I could go like the bee goes from flower to flower. It was my habit to enter into taverns where many are close together, and to take from one after another."

Marius nodded. "That's a good style," he said with a little smile. "For a child of Thor, you're merciful." His smile broadened. "That's merciful indeed."

"Do you despise my god?" asked Thorne politely.

"I don't think that I do," said Marius. "I told you that I lost the gods of Rome, but in truth I never had them. I was too cold of temperament to have gods. And not having had any true gods of my own, I speak of all gods as if they were poetry. The poetry of Thor was a poetry of war, was it not, a poetry of battles without cease, and of noise in Heaven?"

This delighted Thorne. He couldn't conceal his pleasure. The Mind Gift never brought this kind of keen communication with another, and the words that Marius spoke were not only impressing

him, they were confusing him slightly, which was wonderful.

"Yes, that was Thor's poetry," he said, "but nothing was as clear and certain as the sound of the thunder in the mountains when he wielded his hammer. And alone at night when I went out of my father's house into the rain and wind, when I climbed the wet mountain fearlessly to hear that thunder, I knew the god was there, and I was far from poetry." He stopped. He saw his homeland in his mind. He saw his youth. "There were other gods I heard," he said quietly. He didn't look at Marius. "It was Odin leading the Wild Hunt through the skies that made the loudest noise; and I saw and heard those spirits pass. I never forgot them."

"Can you see them now?" asked Marius. It was not a challenge. He spoke only with curiosity. Indeed it had a bit of respect in it. "I hope you can," he hastened to add as if there might be some doubt as to the interpretation.

"I don't know," said Thorne. "It was so long ago. I never thought that I might recover those things."

But they were keen in his mind now. Though he sat in this warm bath, his blood soothed, all the cruel cold driven from his limbs, he could see the wintry valley. He could hear the storm, and see the phantoms flying high above, all those lost dead following the god Odin through the sky.

"Come," Thorne had said to his companions, the young ones, who'd crept out of the hall with him, "let's go to the grove, let's stand in the very grove as the thunder rolls on." They'd been frightened of the holy ground, but they couldn't show it.

"You were a Viking child," said Marius quietly.

"Oh, so the Britons called us," said Thorne. "I don't think we used that name for ourselves. We learnt it from our enemies. I remember their screams when we climbed their walls, when we stole the gold from the altars of the churches." He paused. He let his eyes rest calmly on Marius for a moment. "What a tolerant one you are. You truly want to listen."

Marius nodded. "I listen with my whole soul." He gave a little sigh and he looked out through the immense glass. "I'm weary of being alone, my friend," he said. "I cannot bear the company of those whom I know most intimately. And they cannot bear mine on account of things I've done."

Thorne was surprised by this sudden confession. Thorne thought of the blood drinker Lestat and his songs. He thought of all those gathered at the council when the Evil Queen had come. He knew all had survived. And he knew that this blond one, Marius, had talked with reason more potently than any other.

"Go on with your story," Marius said. "I didn't mean to interrupt you. You meant to make a point."

"It was only that I slew many men before I ever became a blood drinker," said Thorne. "I swung Thor's hammer as well as my sword and my ax. I fought as a boy at my father's side. I fought after I buried him. And he died no straw death, I can assure you, but with his sword in his

hand as he wanted it." Thorne paused. "And you, my friend?" he asked. "Were you a soldier?"

Marius shook his head. "A Senator," he said, "a maker of laws, something of a philosopher. I went to war, yes, for some time because my family wished it, and I had a high place in one of the legions, but my time wasn't very long and I was home and back in my library. I loved books. I still do. There are rooms of this house which are full of them, and I have houses elsewhere that are full of them. I never really knew battle."

Marius stopped. He leant forward and brought the water up to his face as Thorne had done before, and he let the water run down over his eyelids.

"Come," he said, "let's be done with this pleasure and go for another. Let's hunt. I can feel your hunger. I have new clothes for you here. I have all you need. Or would you stay longer in this warm water?"

"No, I'm ready," said Thorne. It had been so long since he had fed that he was ashamed to admit it. Once again he rinsed his face and hair. He ducked down into the water, and came up, pushing his wet hair back from his forehead.

Marius had already climbed out of the tub, and held out for Thorne a large white towel.

It was thick and roughened and perfect for mopping the water off his blood drinker skin which never absorbs anything. The air of the room seemed chilled for one moment as he stood on the stone floor, but very soon he was warm again, rubbing fiercely at his hair to press the last droplets out of it.

Marius had finished with the task and now took a fresh towel from the stack and began to rub Thorne's back and shoulders. This familiarity sent the chills through Thorne's limbs. Marius rubbed hard at Thorne's head, and then he began to comb the wet hair free of tangles.

"Why is there no red beard, my friend?" asked Marius, as the two faced each other. "I remember the Norsemen with their beards. I remember them when they came to Byzantium. Does that name mean anything to you?"

"Oh, yes," said Thorne. "I was taken to see that wondrous city." He turned around and accepted the towel from Marius's hands. "My beard was thick and long, even when I was very young, let me assure you, but it was shaved the night that I became a blood drinker. I was groomed for the magical blood. It was the will of the creature who made me."

Marius nodded. But he was far too polite to say her name, though the other young one had brashly spoken it.

"You know it was Maharet," said Thorne. "You didn't need to hear it from your young friend. You caught it from my thoughts, didn't you?" Thorne paused, then went on. "You know it was the vision of her that brought me out of the ice and snow. She stood against the Evil Queen. She bound the vampire, Lestat, in chains. But to speak of her just now takes the breath out of me. When will I ever be able to speak of her? I can't know now. Let's hunt, and then we can really talk to one another."

He was solemn, holding the towel against his chest. In his secret heart, he tried to feel love for the one who made him. He tried to draw from the centuries a wisdom that would quench anger. But he couldn't do it. All he could do was be silent, and hunt with Marius now.

3

In a large painted wooden room full of many painted cabinets and chests, Marius offered the clothes—fine leather jackets with small buttons of bone, many lined with silvery fur, and close-fitting pants of wool so soft Thorne couldn't see the weave of it.

Only the boots were a little too small, but Thorne felt he could endure this. How could such a thing matter? Not satisfied, Marius continued to search until he found a large pair, and these proved more than serviceable.

As for the costume of the times it wasn't so different from Thorne's old habit of dress—linen for the fine shirt next to the skin, wool and leather for the outer garments. The tiny buttons on the shirt intrigued Thorne, and though he knew that the stitching had been done by machines and was a common thing, nevertheless it delighted him.

He had a dawning sense of how much delight awaited him. Never mind his dark mission.

As Marius dressed, he chose red once more for his jacket and for his hooded cloak. It intrigued Thorne, though he had seen garments such as these on Marius in the vampire tavern. Nevertheless the colors seemed bright for hunting.

"It's my common way to wear red," Marius said to Thorne's unspoken interest. "You do as you like. Lestat, my sometime pupil, also loves it which annoys me mightily but I endure it. I think we appear to be Master and Apprentice when his shade of clear red comes so close to mine."

"And so you love him as well?" Thorne said.

Marius said nothing. He gestured to the clothes.

For Thorne, it was dark brown leather, more concealing, yet silken to the touch, and his feet went naked into the fur-lined boots on account of the size of them. He needed no cloak. He felt it would encumber him.

From a silver dish on a cabinet, Marius took ashes on his fingertips, and mingling these with blood from his mouth, he made the thin paste to cover his face entirely. It darkened him; it made the old lines of his face appear. It gave a graven character to his eyes. In fact, it rendered him entirely more visible to Thorne while no doubt disguising him for mortals.

Marius made a gesture that Thorne might do as well, but something prevented Thorne from accepting. Perhaps it was merely that he had never done this.

Marius offered him gloves, but these he refused as well. He did not like the feel of things through gloves. After so long in the ice, he wanted to touch everything.

"I like gloves," said Marius. "I'm never without them. Our hands frighten mortals when they

take the time to look. And gloves feel warm which we never do."

Marius filled his pockets with paper money. He offered handfuls of this to Thorne, but Thorne refused, thinking it greedy to take this from his host.

Marius said, "It's all right. I'll take care of you. But if we become separated somehow, simply return here. Come round to the back of the house, and you'll find the door there open."

Separated? How might that happen? Thorne was dazed by all that was taking place. The smallest aspect of things gave him pleasure.

They were all but ready to take their leave when the young Daniel came in and stared at both of them.

"Do you want to join us?" Marius asked. He was pulling his gloves very tight so that they showed his very knuckles.

Daniel didn't answer. He appeared to be listening, but he said nothing. His youthful face was deceiving, but his violet eyes were truly wonderful.

"You know that you can come," said Marius.

The younger one turned and went back, presumably to his small kingdom.

Within minutes they were on their way in the falling snow, Marius's arm around Thorne as though Thorne needed the reassurance.

And I shall drink soon.

When they came at last to a large inn, it was into a cellar that they went where there were hundreds of mortals. Indeed the size of the room overwhelmed Thorne.

Not only did glittering noisy mortals eat and drink in this place, in dozens of little groups, they danced to the music of several diligent players. At big green tables with wheels they played at games of chance with loud raucous cries and easy laughter. The music was electric and loud; the flashing lights were horrid, the smell of food and blood was overpowering.

The two blood drinkers went utterly unnoticed, except for the tavern girl who accompanied them unquestioningly to a small table in the very midst of things. Here they could see the twisting dancers, who seemed one and all to be dancing alone rather than with anyone else, each moving to the music in a primitive way as though drunk on it.

The music hurt Thorne. He didn't think it beautiful. It was like so much confusion. And the flashing lights were ugly.

Marius leant over to whisper in Thorne's ear:

"Those lights are our friend, Thorne. They make it difficult to see what we are. Try to bear with them."

Marius gave an order for hot drinks. The little tavern girl turned her bright flirtatious eyes on Thorne. She made some quick remark as to his red hair and he smiled at her. He wouldn't drink from her, not if all the other mortals of the world were dried up and taken away from him.

He cast his eyes around the room, trying to ignore the din that pounded at his ears, and the

overwhelming smells that almost sickened him.

"The women, see, near the far wall," said Marius. "They want to dance. That's why they're here. They're waiting to be asked. Can you do it as you dance?"

"I can," said Thorne almost solemnly, as if to say, Why do you ask me? "But how do I dance?" he asked, watching the couples who crowded the designated floor. He laughed for the first time since he'd ever gone North. He laughed, and in the din he could barely hear his own laughter. "I can drink, yes, without any mortal ever knowing it, even my victim, but how can I dance in this strange way?"

He saw Marius smile broadly. Marius had thrown his cloak back over the chair. He appeared so calm amid this awful unendurable combination of illumination and music.

"What do they do but move about clumsily together?" Thorne asked.

"Do the same," said Marius. "Move slowly as you drink. Let the music and the blood talk to you."

Thorne laughed again. Suddenly with a wild bit of nerve he rose and made his way around the edges of the crowded dance floor to the women who were already looking eagerly towards him. He chose the dark-haired of the three, because women with dark eyes and dark hair had always fascinated him. Also she was the eldest and least likely to be chosen by a man, and he did not mean to leave her harmed by his interest.

At once she rose, and he held her small limp hands in his and guided her out onto the polished floor, the relentless music suggesting nothing but an easy senseless rhythm, which she took up immediately and awkwardly, her fine delicate shoes clicking on the wood.

"Oh, but your hands are cold!" she said.

"I'm so sorry!" he declared. "You must forgive me. I've been in the snow too long."

Yea gods, he must be careful not to hurt her. What a simple trusting being she was, with her eyes and mouth sloppily painted, and her cheeks rouged, her breasts thrust forward and held in place by tight straps beneath her black silk dress.

Boldly she pressed against him. And he, enfolding her as gently as he could, bent down to sink his tiny fangs most secretively into her neck. *Dream, my precious one, dream of beautiful things. I forbid you to be afraid or to remember.*

Ah, the blood. After so long, it came, the blood pumped by her urgent little heart, her defenseless little heart! He lost the thread of her swoon and entered his own. He saw his red-haired Maker. And in a hushed moan he actually spoke aloud to the woman in his grip. *Give me all.* But this was wrong and he knew it.

Quickly he pulled away, only to find that Marius stood beside him with a hand on his shoulder.

As he let the woman go, she looked at him with glossy drowsy eyes, and he turned her in a rapid circle, laughing again, ignoring the course of blood through his veins, ignoring the

weakness for more blood that overtook him. On and on they danced, as clumsy as the other couples. But he was so thirsty for more.

At last she wanted to return to her little table. She was sleepy. She couldn't think why. He must forgive her. He bowed and nodded, and he kissed her hand innocently.

Only one woman of the trio remained. Marius was now dancing with the other. Thorne offered his hand to that last of the three women, and vowed that this time he would need no guardian.

She was stronger than her friend. Her eyes were lined in black like an Egyptian, and she wore a deeper red on her lips, and her blond hair was full of silver.

"Are you the man of my dreams?" she asked him, raising her voice boldly over the music. She would have taken him with her upstairs in the inn at this moment.

"Perhaps so," he said, "if you let me kiss you," and caressing her tightly, he sank his teeth quickly into her neck, drinking hard and fast, and then letting her go, watching her drift and smile, cunning, yet sweet, unaware of what had happened to her.

There was no getting much blood from these three. They were too gentle. Round and round he turned her in the dance, wanting desperately to steal another drink but not daring to do it.

He felt the blood pounding inside him, but it wanted more blood. His hands and feet were now painfully cold.

He saw that Marius was seated again at their table and talking to a hulking heavily dressed mortal who sat beside him. Marius had his arm over the creature's shoulder.

Finally Thorne took the pretty woman back to her place. How tenderly she looked at him.

"Don't go," she said. "Can't you stay with me?"

"No, my dearest," he said. He felt the monster in him as he gazed down at her. And backing away, he turned and made his way to Marius.

The music made him wobbly on his feet. How dreary it was, how persistent.

Marius was drinking from the man as the man bent over near him as if listening to whispered secrets. At last Marius released him and righted him in his chair.

"It will take too many here," said Thorne.

His words were inaudible in the din of the electric music but he knew that Marius could hear him.

Marius nodded. "Then we seek the Evil Doer, friend, and we feast," said Marius. He sat still as he scanned the room, as if listening to each and every mind.

Thorne did the same, probing steadily with the Mind Gift, but all he could hear was the electric confusion of the music makers, and the desperate need of the pretty woman who still looked at him. How much he wanted her. But he could not take such an innocent creature, and his friend would forsake him if he did, and that was more important perhaps than his own conscience.

"Come," said Marius. "Another place."

Out into the night they went again. It was only a few short paces to a large gambling den, this one filled with the green tables on which men play the game of craps, and on which the wheels spun for the all-important winning numbers.

"There, you see," said Marius, pointing with his gloved finger at a tall gaunt black-haired young man who had withdrawn from the game, holding his cold glass of ale in his hand, only watching. "Take him into the corner. There are so many places along the wall."

Immediately Thorne went to it. With a hand on the young man's shoulder he looked into his eyes. He must be able now to use the old Spell Gift which so many blood drinkers were lacking. "You come with me," he said. "You've been waiting for me." It reminded him of old hunts and old battles.

He saw the mist in the young man's eyes, he saw the memory vanish. The young man went with him to the bench along the wall, and there they sat together. Thorne massaged the neck with thumb and fingers before he drank, thinking quietly within himself, Now your life will be mine, and then he sank his teeth deep and he drew easily and slowly with all his power.

The flood poured into his soul. He saw the dingy images of rampant crime, of other lives snuffed out by his victim with no thought of judgment or punishment. *Give me only your blood.* He felt the heart inside the man burst. And then he released the body, and let it lie back against the wall. He kissed the wound, letting a bit of his own blood heal it.

Waking from the dream of the feast, he gazed about the dim smoky room, so full of strangers. How alien all humans seemed, and how hopeless their plight. Cursed as he was, he could not die, but death was breathing on all of them.

Where was his Marius? He couldn't find him! He rose from the bench, eager to get away from the victim's soiled and ugly body, and he moved into the press again, stumbling full on a hard-faced, cruel man who took the nudge as an opportunity for a quarrel.

"You pushing me, man?" said the mortal with narrow hateful eyes as he gazed at Thorne.

"Come now," said Thorne, probing the mind, "have you killed men just for pushing you?"

"I have," said the other, his mouth in a cruel sneer. "I'll kill you too, if you don't get out of here."

"But let me give you my kiss," said Thorne, and clutching this one by the shoulders he bent to sink his teeth as the others around him, totally unaware of the secret fangs, laughed at this intimate and puzzling gesture. He drew a rich draught. Then licked the place artfully.

The hateful stranger was baffled and weakened, and tottered on his feet. His friends continued to laugh.

Quickly Thorne made his way out of the place and into the snow, and there he found Marius waiting for him. The wind was stronger than before, but the snow itself had stopped falling.

"The thirst is so strong now," said Thorne. "When I slept in the ice, I kept it like a beast chained up, but now it rules me. Once begun, I can't stop. I want more even now."

"Then more you'll have. But kill you can't. Not even in such a city as large as this. Come, follow me."

Thorne nodded. He had already killed. He looked at Marius, confessing this crime silently. Marius shrugged his shoulders. Then he put his arm around Thorne as they walked on.

"We've many places to visit."

It was almost dawn when they returned to the house.

Down into the wood-lined cellar they went, and there Marius showed Thorne to a chamber cut into the stone. The walls of it were cold, but a large sumptuous bed had been made inside the chamber, hung with brightly colored linen draperies, and heaped with intricately sewn covers. The mattress looked thick and so did the many pillows.

It was startling to Thorne that there was no crypt, no true hiding place. Anyone could find him here. It seemed as simple as his cave in the North, but far more inviting, far more luxurious. He was so tired in all his limbs that he could scarce speak. Yet he was anxious.

"Who is to disturb us here?" asked Marius. "Other blood drinkers go to their rest in this strange darkness just as we do. And there is no mortal who can enter here. But if you are afraid, I understand if we must seek some other shelter for you."

"Do you sleep in this way, unguarded?" Thorne asked.

"Even more so, in the bedroom above, like a mortal man, sprawled on my mattress in the cabinet bed among my comforts. The only enemy who has ever harmed me was a swarm of blood drinkers. They came when I was fully awake and aware as must needs be. If you like, I shall tell you that awful story."

Marius's face had gone dark, as though the mere mention of this disaster was evocative of terrible pain.

And Thorne understood something suddenly. It was that Marius wanted to tell this story. Marius needed to speak in a long flow of words as much as Thorne needed to hear words. Marius and Thorne had come upon each other in the proper moment.

But that would be tomorrow night. This night was ended.

Marius drew himself up and went on with his reassurance.

"The light won't come as you know, and no one will trouble you here. Sleep and dream as you must. And we'll talk on the morrow. Now let me take my leave. Daniel, my friend, is young. He falls on the floor by his little empire. I have to make him retire to a comfortable place, though I wonder sometimes if it matters."

"Will you tell me one thing before you go?" asked Thorne.

"If I can," said Marius gently, though suddenly he looked overwhelmingly hesitant. He looked as though he contained heavy secrets which he must tell and yet he feared to do it.

"The blood drinker who walked on the seashore," said Thorne, "looking at the pretty shells one by one, what became of her?"

Marius was relieved. He gave Thorne a long look and then in careful words he answered.

"They said that she gave herself up to the sun. She was not so old. They found her one evening in the moonlight. She'd drawn a great circle around herself of shells so they knew that her death was deliberate. There were only ashes there, and in fact, some had already been scattered by the wind. Those who loved her stood nearby and they watched as the wind took the rest. It was all finished by morning."

"Ah, what a dreadful thing," said Thorne. "Had she no pleasure in being one of us?"

Marius seemed struck by Thorne's words. Gently he asked:

"Do you take any pleasure in being one of us?"

"I think … I think I do again," said Thorne hesitantly.

4

He was awakened by the good smell of an oak fire. He turned over in the soft bed, not knowing where he was for the moment, but completely unafraid. He expected the ice and the loneliness. But he was someplace good, and someone was waiting for him. He had only to climb to his feet, to go up the steps.

Quite suddenly it all came clear. He was with Marius, his strange and hospitable friend. They were in a new city of promise and beauty built upon the ruins of the old. And good talk awaited him.

He stood up, stretching his limbs in the easy warmth of the room, and looked about himself, realizing that the illumination came from two old oil lamps, made of glass. How safe it seemed here. How pretty the painted wood of the walls.

There was a clean linen shirt for him on the chair. He put it on, having much difficulty with the tiny buttons. His pants were fine as they were. He wore woolen stockings but no shoes. The floors were smooth and polished and warm.

He let his tread announce him as he went up the stairs. It seemed very much the proper thing to do in this house, to let Marius know that he was coming, and not to be accused of boldness or stealth.

As he came to the door to the chamber where Daniel made his wondrous cities and towns, he paused, and very reticently glanced inside to see the boyish blond-haired Daniel at his work as though he had never retired for the day at all. Daniel looked up, and quite unexpectedly, gave Thorne an open smile as he greeted him.

"Thorne, our guest," he said. It had a faint tone of mockery, but Thorne sensed it was a weaker emotion.

"Daniel, my friend," said Thorne, glancing again over the tiny mountains and valleys, over the fast-running little trains with their lighted windows, over the thick forest of trees which seemed Daniel's present obsession.

Daniel turned his eyes back to his work as though they hadn't spoken. It was green paint now that he dabbed onto the small tree.

Quietly, Thorne moved to go but as he did so, Daniel spoke:

"Marius says it's a craft, not an art that I do." He held up the tiny tree.

Thorne didn't know what to say.

"I make the mountains with my own hands," said Daniel. "Marius says I should make the

houses as well."

Again Thorne found himself unable to answer.

Daniel went on talking.

"I like the houses that come in the packages. It's difficult to assemble them, even for me. Besides, I would never think of so many different types of houses. I don't know why Marius has to say such disparaging things."

Thorne was perplexed. Finally he said simply,

"I have no answer."

Daniel went quiet.

Thorne waited for a respectful interval and then he went into the great room.

The fire was going on a blackened hearth within a rectangle of heavy stones, and Marius was seated beside it, slumped in his large leather chair, rather in the posture of a boy than a man, beckoning for Thorne to take his place on a big leather couch opposite.

"Sit there if you will, or here if you prefer," said Marius kindly. "If you mind the fire, I'll damp it down."

"And why would I mind it, friend?" asked Thorne, as he seated himself. The cushions were thick and soft.

As his eyes moved over the room, he saw that almost all the wood paneling was painted in gold or blue, and there were carvings on the ceiling beams above, and on the beams over the doorways. These carvings reminded him of his own times. But it was all new—as Marius had said, it was made by a modern man, this place, but it was made well and with much thought and care to it.

"Sometimes blood drinkers fear the fire," said Marius, looking at the flames, his serene white face full of light and shadow. "One never knows. I've always liked it, though once I suffered dreadfully on account of it, but then you know that story."

"I don't think I do know it," said Thorne. "No, I've never heard it. If you want to tell it, I want to hear."

"But first there are some questions you want answered," said Marius. "You want to know if the things you saw with the Mind Gift were entirely real."

"Yes," said Thorne. He remembered the net, the points of light, the Sacred Core. He thought of the Evil Queen. What had shaped his vision of her? It had been the thoughts of the blood drinkers who had gathered around her council table.

He realized he was looking directly into Marius's eyes, and that Marius knew his thoughts completely.

Marius looked away, and into the fire, and then he said offhandedly:

"Put your feet up on the table. All that matters here is comfort."

Marius did this with his own feet, and Thorne stretched his legs out, crossing his feet at his

ankles.

"Talk as you please," said Marius. "Tell me what you know, if you wish; tell me what you would know." There seemed a touch of anger in his voice but it wasn't anger for Thorne. "I have no secrets," Marius said. He studied Thorne's face thoughtfully, and then he continued: "There are the others—the ones you saw at that council table, and even more, scattered to the ends of the world."

He gave a little sigh and then a shake of his head, then he went on speaking.

"But I'm too alone now. I want to be with those I love but I cannot." He looked at the fire. "I come together with them for a short while and then I go away …

"… I took Daniel with me because he needed me. I took Daniel because it's unendurable to me to be utterly alone. I sought the North countries because I was tired of the beautiful South lands, even tired of Italy where I was born. I used to think no mortal nor blood drinker could ever grow tired of bountiful Italy, but now I'm tired, and want to look on the pure whiteness of snow."

"I understand," said Thorne. The silence invited him to continue. "After I was made a blood drinker," he said, "I was taken South and it seemed Valhalla. In Rome I lived in a palace and looked out on the seven hills each night. It was a dream of soft breezes and fruit trees. I sat in a window high above the sea and watched it strike the rocks. I went down to the sea, and the sea was warm."

Marius smiled a truly kind and trusting smile. He nodded. "Italy, my Italy," he said softly.

Thorne thought the expression on his face was truly wondrous, and he wanted Marius to keep the smile but very quickly it was gone.

Marius had become sober and was looking into the flames again as though lost in his own sadness. In the light of the fire, his hair was almost entirely white.

"Talk to me, Marius," said Thorne. "My questions can wait. I want the sound of your voice. I want your words." He hesitated. "I know you have much to tell."

Marius looked at him as if startled, and warmed somewhat by this. Then he spoke.

"I'm old, my friend," he said. "I'm a true Child of the Millennia. It was in the years of Caesar Augustus that I became a blood drinker. It was a Druid priest who brought me to this peculiar death, a creature named Mael, mortal when he wronged me, but a blood drinker soon after, and one who still lives though he tried not long ago to sacrifice his life in a new religious fervor. What a fool.

"Time has made us companions more than once. How perfectly odd. It's a lie that I hold him high in my affections. My life is full of such lies. I don't know that I've ever forgiven him for what he did—taking me prisoner, dragging me out of my mortal life to a distant grove in Gaul, where an ancient blood drinker, badly burnt, yet still imagining himself to be a god of the Sacred Grove, gave me the Dark Blood."

Marius stopped. "Do you follow my meaning?"

"Yes," said Thorne. "I remember those groves and the whispers among us of gods who had lived in them. You are saying that a blood drinker lived within the Sacred Oak."

Marius nodded. He went on.

" 'Go to Egypt,' he charged me, this badly burnt god, this wounded god, 'and find the Mother. Find the reason for the terrible fire that has come from her, burning us far and wide.' "

"And this Mother," said Thorne. "She was the Evil Queen who carried within her the Sacred Core."

"Yes," said Marius, his steady blue eyes passing over Thorne gently. "She was the Evil Queen, friend, no doubt of it …

"… But in that time, two thousand years ago, she was silent and still and seemed the most desperate of victims. Four thousand years old they were, the pair of them—she and her consort Enkil. And she did possess the Sacred Core, there was no doubt of it, for the terrible fire had come to all blood drinkers on the morning when an exhausted elder blood drinker had abandoned the King and Queen to the bright desert sun.

"Blood drinkers all over the world—gods, creatures of the night, lamias, whatever they called themselves—had suffered agony, some obliterated by terrible flames, others merely darkened and left with a meager pain. The very oldest suffered little, the youngest were ashes.

"As for the Sacred Parents—that is the kind thing to call them, I suppose—what had they done when the sun rose? Nothing. The Elder, severely burnt for all his efforts to make them wake or speak or run for shelter, found them as he had left them, unmovable, heedless, and so, fearing more suffering for himself he had returned them to a darkened chamber, which was no more than a miserable underground prison cell."

Marius stopped. He paused so completely it seemed that the memories were too hurtful to him. He was watching the flames as men do, and the flames did their reliable and eternal dance.

"Please tell me," said Thorne. "You found her, this Queen, you looked upon her with your own eyes that long ago?"

"Yes, I found her," Marius said softly. His voice was serious but not bitter. "I became her keeper. 'Take us out of Egypt, Marius,' that is what she said to me with the silent voice—what you call the Mind Gift, Thorne—never moving her lips.

"And I took her and her lover Enkil, and sheltered them for two thousand years as they remained still and silent as statues.

"I kept them hidden in a sacramental shrine. It was my life; it was my solemn commission.

"Flowers and incense I put before them. I tended to their clothes. I wiped the dust from their motionless faces. It was my sacred obligation to do these things, and all the while to keep the secret from vagrant blood drinkers who might seek to drink their powerful blood, or even take them captive."

His eyes remained on the fire, but the muscles in his throat tightened, and Thorne could see

the veins for a moment against the smoothness of his temples.

"All the while," Marius went on, "I loved her, this seeming divinity whom you so rightly call our Evil Queen; that's perhaps the greatest lie I've ever lived. I loved her."

"How could you not love such a being?" Thorne asked. "Even in my sleep I saw her face. I felt her mystery. The Evil Queen. I felt her spell. And she had her silence to precede her. When she came to life it must have seemed as if a curse were broken, and she was at last released."

These words seemed to have a rather strong effect on Marius. His eyes moved over Thorne a bit coldly and then he looked back at the fire.

"If I said something wrong I am sorry for it," Thorne said. "I was only trying to understand."

"Yes, she was like a goddess," Marius resumed. "So I thought and so I dreamt, though I told myself and everyone else otherwise. It was part of my elaborate lie."

"Do we have to confess our loves to everyone?" asked Thorne softly. "Can we not keep some secrets?" With overwhelming pain he thought of his Maker. He did nothing to disguise these thoughts. He saw her again seated in the cave with the blazing fire behind her. He saw her taking the hairs from her own head and weaving them into thread with her distaff and her spindle. He saw her eyes rimmed in blood, and then he broke from these memories. He pushed them deep down inside his heart.

He looked at Marius.

Marius had not answered Thorne's question.

The silence made Thorne anxious. He felt he should fall silent and let Marius go on. Yet the question came to his lips.

"How did the disaster come to pass?" Thorne asked. "Why did the Evil Queen rise from her throne? Was it the Vampire Lestat with his electric songs who waked her? I saw him in human guise, dancing for humans, as if he were one of them. I smiled in my sleep, as I saw the modern world enfold him, unbelieving, amused, and dancing to his rhythms."

"That's what happened, my friend," said Marius, "at least with the modern world. As for her? Her rising from her throne? His songs had much to do with it.

"For we have to remind ourselves that for thousands of years she had existed in silence. Flowers and incense, yes, these things I gave her in abundance, but music? Never. Not until the modern world made such a thing possible, and then Lestat's music came into the very room where she sat shimmering in her raiment. And it did wake her, not once, but twice.

"The first time was as shocking to me as the later disaster, though it was mended soon enough. It was two hundred years ago—on an island in the Aegean Sea—this little surprise, and I should have taken a hard lesson from it, but this in my pride I failed to do."

"What took place?"

"Lestat was a new blood drinker and having heard of me, he sought me out, and with an honest heart. He wanted to know what I had to reveal. All over the world he'd sought me, and

then there came a time when he was weak and broken by the very gift of immortality, a time of his going into the earth as you went into the ice of the Far North.

"I brought him to me; I talked with him as I'm talking to you now. But something curious happened with him which caught me quite off guard. I felt a sudden surge of pure devotion to him and this combined with an extraordinary trust.

"He was young but he wasn't innocent. And when I talked, he listened perfectly. When I played the teacher, there came no argument. I wanted to tell him my earliest secrets. I wanted to reveal the secret of our King and Queen.

"It had been a long, long time since I'd revealed that secret. I'd been alone for a century among mortals. And Lestat, so absolute in his devotion to me, seemed completely worthy of my trust.

"I took him down to the underground shrine. I opened the door upon the two seated figures.

"For the first few moments, he believed the Sacred Parents were statues, but quite suddenly he became aware that both were alive. He realized in fact that they were blood drinkers, and that they were greatly advanced in age, and that in them, he could see his destiny were he to endure for so many thousands of years.

"This is a terrifying realization. Even to the young who look on me, it is a difficult realization that they might become as pale and hard as I am. With the Mother and Father, it was horrifying, and Lestat was overcome with fear.

"Nevertheless, he managed to bridle his fear and approach the Queen, and even to kiss her on the lips. It was a bold thing to do, but as I watched him I realized it was quite natural to him, and as he withdrew from her, he confessed to me that he knew her name.

"Akasha. It was as if she'd spoken it. And I could not deny that she had given it to him through his mind. Out of her centuries of silence had come her voice once more with this seductive confession.

"Understand how young he was. Given the blood at twenty, he had been a blood drinker for perhaps ten years, no more than that.

"What was I to make of this kiss and this secret revelation?

"I denied my love and my jealousy completely. I denied my crushing disappointment. I told myself, "You are too wise for such. Learn from what's happened. Maybe this young one will bring something magnificent from her. Is she not a goddess?'

"I took Lestat to my salon, a room as comfortable as this, though in another style, and there we talked until early morn. I told him the tale of my making, of my journey to Egypt. I played the teacher with great earnestness and generosity, and something of pure self-indulgence. Was it for Lestat or for me that I wanted him to know everything? I don't know. But those were splendid hours for me, I know that much.

"The following night, however, while I was about tending to the mortals who lived on my

island and believed me to be their lord, Lestat did a dreadful thing.

"Taking from his own luggage a violin which was most precious to him—a musical instrument of uncanny power—he went down into the shrine.

"Now it is plain to me, as it was then, that he could not have done this without the aid of the Queen, who with the Mind Gift opened the many doors for him that lay between him and her.

"Indeed as Lestat tells it, she may have even put the very idea of playing the instrument into his mind. I don't think so. I think she opened the doors and summoned him, but it was he who brought the violin.

"Calculating that it would make a sound totally unfamiliar and quite wonderful to her, he set out to mimic those he'd seen playing the instrument, because in fact he didn't know how to play it.

"Within moments, my beautiful Queen had risen from the throne and was moving towards him. And he in his terror had dropped the violin which she crushed with her foot. No matter. She took him in her arms. She offered her blood to him, and then there happened something so remarkable that it's painful for me to reveal it. Not only did she allow him to drink from her, *she also drank from him.*

"It seems a simple thing, but it is not. For in all my centuries of coming to her, of taking blood from her, I had never felt the press of her teeth against me.

"Indeed, I know of no supplicant whose blood she ever drank. Once there was a sacrifice, and yes, she drank from that victim, and that victim was destroyed. But from her supplicants? Never. She was the fount, the giver, the healer of blood gods, and burnt children, but she did not drink from them.

"Yet she drank from Lestat.

"What did she see in those moments? I cannot imagine, yet it must have been a glimpse into the years of that time. It must have been a glimpse into Lestat's soul. Whatever it was, it was momentary, for her consort Enkil soon rose and moved to stop it, and by this time, I had arrived, and was trying desperately and successfully to prevent Lestat from being destroyed by Enkil who seemed to have no other purpose.

"The King and Queen returned to their throne, besmirched and bloody and finally silent. But for the rest of the night Enkil was restless, destroying the vases and braziers of the shrine.

"It was a terrifying display of power. And I realized that for his safety, indeed, even for my own, I must say farewell at once to Lestat, which caused me excruciating pain, and so we parted the following night."

Marius fell silent again, and Thorne waited patiently. Then Marius began to speak once more.

"I don't know what caused me the worst pain—the loss of Lestat, or my jealousy that she had *given and taken* with him. I'm unable to know my own mind. You understand I felt I possessed her. I felt she was my Queen." His voice dropped to a whisper. "When I revealed her to him, I

was displaying a possession! You see what a liar I was?" he asked. "And then to lose him, to lose this young one with whom I felt such utter communion. Ah, that was such rich pain. Rather like the music of the violin, I think, just as deeply colored, such terrible pain."

"What can I do to ease your sorrow now?" asked Thorne. "For you carry it, as if she were here still."

Marius looked up, and suddenly an expression of pure surprise brightened his face. "You're right," he said. "I carry the obligation, as if she were still with me, as if even now I had to go and spend my hours in her shrine."

"Can't you be glad that it's over?" asked Thorne. "It seemed when I lay in my cave of ice, when I saw these things in dreams that there were others who were at peace when it was finished. Even the red-haired twins whom I saw standing before everyone seemed to have a sense that it was done."

Marius nodded. "They do all share this," said Marius, "except perhaps for Lestat." He looked wondering at Thorne.

"Tell me now how she was wakened finally," said Thorne, "how she became the slayer of her children. I felt her pass me, close and with a searching eye, yet somehow I was not found."

"Others as well escaped her," said Marius, "though how many no one knows. She tired of her slaughter and she came to us. I think she thought that she had time to finish. But her end came swiftly enough.

"As for the second resurrection, it was Lestat again, but I am as much to blame myself.

"This is what I believe happened. I brought the inventions of the modern world to her as offerings. At first it was the machines that played music, and then came those which would show moving pictures. At last, I brought the most powerful of all, the television that would play constantly. I set it in her shrine as though it were a sacrifice."

"And she fed upon this thing," said Thorne, "as gods are wont to do when they come down to their altars."

"Yes, she fed upon it. She fed upon its terrible electric violence. Lurid colors flashed over her face, and images accosted her. It might have wakened her with the sheer clamor. And I wonder sometimes if the endless public talk of the great world could not have in itself inspired an imitation of a mind in her."

"An imitation of a mind?"

"She awoke with a simple ugly sense of purpose. She would rule this world."

Marius shook his head. His attitude was one of profound sadness.

"She would outwit its finest human minds," he said sorrowfully. "She would destroy the vast majority of this world's male children. In a female paradise, she could create and enforce peace. It was nonsense—a concept drenched in violence and blood.

"And those of us who tried to reason with her had to take great care with our words not to

insult her. Where could she have gotten these notions, except from the bits and pieces of electric dreams that she watched on the giant screen I'd provided for her? Fictions of all kinds, and what the world calls News, all this had inundated her. I had loosed the flood."

Marius's gaze flashed on Thorne as he continued:

"Of course she saw the vivid video songs of The Vampire Lestat." Marius smiled again, but it was a sad smile, and it brightened his face as sad songs brighten a face. "And Lestat presented in his video films the very image of her on her throne as he had seen her centuries ago. Breaking faith with me, he told the secrets I had confided to him."

"Why didn't you destroy him for this!" said Thorne, before he could stop himself. "I would have done so."

Marius only shook his head.

"I think I've chosen to destroy myself instead," he said. "I've chosen to let my heart break inside me."

"Why, explain this thing to me."

"I can't, I can't explain it to myself," said Marius. "Perhaps I understand Lestat only too well. He couldn't endure the vow of silence he'd given me. Not in this world you see around you with all its wonders. He felt driven to reveal our history." The heat danced in Marius's face. His fingers gripped the arms of his chair with only a little restlessness. "He tore loose from all bonds that connected us," he said, "friend and friend, teacher and student, old and young, watcher and searching one."

"Outrage," said Thorne, "what else could you feel but fury?"

"Yes, in my heart I did. But you see, I lied to them, the other blood drinkers, our brothers, our sisters. Because once the Queen had risen, they needed me.…"

"Yes," said Thorne, "I saw it."

"They needed the wise one to reason with her, and deflect her from her course. There was no time for quarreling. Lestat's songs had brought her forth a monster. I told the others there was no wound. I took Lestat in my arms. And as for my Queen, ah, my Queen, how I denied that I had ever loved her. And all this for the company of a small band of immortals. And I tell the truth to you."

"Does it feel good to you to say it?"

"Oh, yes, it feels good," Marius answered.

"How was she destroyed?"

"Thousands of years ago a curse had been put on her by one whom she had treated with cruelty and that one came to settle the score. A single blow decapitated our beautiful Queen, and then from her body the Sacred Core of the blood drinkers was promptly taken into the avenger, either from brain or heart, I know not which, for during those fatal moments I was as blind as all the others.

"I know only the one who slew the Queen now carries the Sacred Core within her and where she's gone or how I can't tell you."

"I saw the red-haired twins," said Thorne. "They stood beside her body. 'The Queen of the Damned,' said my Maharet. I heard those words. I saw Maharet with her arm around her sister."

Marius said nothing.

Again Thorne felt himself become agitated. He felt the beginnings of pain inside. In memory, he saw his Maker coming towards him in the snow. What fear did he have then, a mortal warrior facing a lone witch whom he could destroy with sword or ax? How frail and beautiful she had seemed, a tall being in a dress of dark-purple wool, her arms out as if welcoming him.

But I have come here for you. It is for you that I linger.

He wouldn't fall under her spell. They wouldn't find his body in the snow, the eyes torn out of his face, as they had found so many others.

He wanted the memory to go away. He spoke.

"She is my Maker, the red-haired one," he said, "Maharet, the sister of the one who took within herself the Sacred Core."

He paused. He could scarcely breathe he felt such pain.

Marius stared at him intently.

"She had come North to find a lover among our people," Thorne said. He paused, his conviction wavering. But then he continued. "She hunted our clan and the others who lived in our valley. She stole the eyes from those whom she slew."

"The eyes and the blood," said Marius to him softly. "And when she made you a blood drinker, you learnt why she needed the eyes."

"Yes, but not the true story—not the tale of the one who had taken her mortal eyes. And of her twin, I knew not an inkling. I loved her completely. I asked few questions. I could not share her company with others. It made me mad."

"It was the Evil Queen who took her eyes," said Marius, "when she was still human; and from her twin sister, the tongue. That was a cruel injustice, that. And one who also possessed the Blood could not endure it, and so he made them both blood drinkers before the Evil Queen divided them and sent each twin to a different side of the world."

Thorne gasped as he thought of it. He tried to feel love inside himself. He saw his Maker again in the brightly lighted cave with her thread and her spindle. He saw her long red hair.

"And so it was finished," said Thorne, "the catastrophe I beheld as I slept in the ice. The Evil Queen is gone, punished forever, and the twins took the Sacred Core, yes, but when I search the world for the visions or the voices of our kind I can't find the twins. I hear nothing of them, though I want to know where they are."

"They have retreated," said Marius. "They know they must hide. They know that someone may try to take the Sacred Core from them. They know that someone, bitter and finished with

this world, may seek to destroy us all."

"Ah, yes," said Thorne. He felt a chill come over his limbs. He wished suddenly that he had more blood in his veins. That he could go out and hunt—but then he didn't want to leave this warm place and these flowing words, not just now. It was too soon.

He felt guilty that he had not told the whole truth of his suffering and his purpose to Marius. He didn't know if he could, and it seemed a terrible thing now to be under this roof, yet he remained there.

"I know your truth," said Marius gently. "You've come forth with one vow and that is to find Maharet and do harm to her."

Thorne winced as though he'd been struck hard in the chest. He made no answer.

"Such a thing," said Marius, "is impossible. You knew it when you left her centuries ago for your sleep in the ice. She is powerful beyond our imagining. And I can tell you, without doubt, that her sister never leaves her."

Thorne could find no words. At last he spoke in a tense whisper.

"Why do I hate her for the form of life she gave me, when I never hated my mortal mother and father?"

Marius nodded and gave a bitter smile.

"It's a wise question," Marius said. "Abandon your hope of harming her. Stop dreaming of those chains in which she once bound Lestat unless you truly wish for her to bind you in them."

It was Thorne's turn to nod.

"But what were those chains?" he asked, his voice tense and bitter as before, "and why do I want to be her hateful prisoner? So that she can know my wrath every night as she keeps me close to her?"

"Chains made of her red hair?" Marius suggested, with a slight shrug of his shoulders, "bound with steel and with her blood?" he mused. "Bound with steel and with her blood and gold, perhaps. I never saw them. I only knew of them, and that they kept Lestat helpless in all his anger."

"I want to know what they were," said Thorne. "I want to find her."

"Forswear that purpose, Thorne," said Marius. "I can't take you to her. And what if she beckoned for you as she did so long ago, and then she destroyed you when she discovered your hatred?"

"She knew of it when I left her," said Thorne.

"And why did you go?" Marius asked. "Was it the simple jealousy of others which your thoughts reveal to me?"

"She took them in favor one at a time. I couldn't endure it. You speak of a Druid priest who became a blood drinker. I know of such a one. Mael was his name, the very name you've spoken. She brought him into her small circle, a welcome lover. He was old in the Blood and had tales to

tell, and she longed for this more than anything. I turned away from her then. I scarce think she saw me retreat. I scarce think she felt my hatred."

Marius was listening intently. Then he spoke.

"Mael," he said, his words gentle and patient. "Tall and gaunt always, with a high bridged nose and deep-set blue eyes and long blond hair from his servitude in the Sacred Grove. That's the Mael who lured your sweet Maharet from you?"

"Yes," said Thorne. He felt the pain in his chest slacken. "And she was sweet, that I can't deny, and she never spurned me. It was I who wandered away, towards the North land. It was I who hated him for his flattery of her and his clever stories."

"Don't seek a quarrel with her," Marius said. "Stay here with me, and by and by, she may come to know that you're here, and she may send you her welcome. Be wise then, I beg you."

Thorne nodded again. It was as if the terrible battle was over. He had confessed his wrath and it was gone, and he sat still and simple near the fire, the warrior no longer. Such was the magic of words, he thought.

Then memory came again. Six centuries ago. He was in the cave, and could see the flicker of the firelight. He was bound and couldn't move. She lay beside him, peering down into his eyes and whispering to him. He couldn't remember those words, because they were part of something larger and more terrible, something as strong as the threads that bound him.

He could break those threads now. He could cut loose of the memories and lodge himself firmly in this room. He could look at Marius.

He gave a long slow sigh.

"But return to your tale, if you will," he asked. "Why after the Queen was destroyed, and after the twins were gone, why then didn't you reveal your rage to the blood drinker Lestat, why didn't you take your vengeance? You'd been betrayed! And disaster had followed upon it."

"Because I wanted to love him still," said Marius, as though he had long known the answer, "and I wanted to be loved, and I could not forfeit my place as the wise and patient one, as I've said. Anger is too painful for me. Anger is too pathetic. I cannot bear it. I cannot act upon it."

"Wait for one moment," said Thorne. "Say this again?"

"Anger is too pathetic," Marius repeated. "It's too much at a disadvantage always. I can't act upon it. I can't make it mine."

Thorne gestured for quiet. He sat back considering, and it seemed a cold air settled on him in spite of the fire.

"Anger is weak," Thorne whispered. It was a new idea to him. In his mind anger and rage had always been akin. And rage had seemed something akin to Wodin's fury. One summoned rage before going into battle. One welcomed rage into one's heart. And in the ice cave, he had let an old rage awaken him.

"Anger is as weak as fear," said Marius. "Can either of us endure fear?"

"No," said Thorne. "But you're speaking of something inside you that's heated and strong."

"Yes, there is something brutal and hurt inside of me, and I wander alone, refusing the cup of anger, choosing silence rather than angry words. And I come upon you in the North land, and you're a stranger to me, and I can bare my soul to you."

"Yes, that you can do," said Thorne. "For the hospitality you have given me, you can tell me anything. I will never break your trust, that I promise. No common words or songs will ever come from me. Nothing can make such a thing happen." He felt his voice grow strong as he spoke. It was because he was honest in what he said. "What has become of Lestat? Why is he silent now? I hear no more songs or sagas from him."

"Sagas, ah yes, that's what he wrote, sagas of our kind," said Marius and again he smiled, almost brightly. "He suffers his own terrible wounds," said Marius. "He's been with angels, or with those beings who claim to be such and they have taken him to Hell and to Heaven."

"You believe these things?"

"I don't know. I can tell you only he wasn't on this Earth while these creatures claim to have had him. And he brought back with him a bloody Veil with the Face of Christ quite beautifully blazoned upon it."

"Ah, and this you saw?"

"I did," said Marius, "as I have seen other relics. It was to see this Veil and to go into the sun and die that our Druid priest Mael was nearly taken from us."

"Why didn't Mael die," asked Thorne. He couldn't conceal his own emotion when he said this name.

"He was too old for such a thing," said Marius. "He was badly burnt and brought low, as can happen with those of us who are very old, and after one day in the sun, he hadn't the courage for more suffering. Back to his companions he went and there he remains."

"And you? Will you tell me now with your full heart; do you truly despise him for what he did to you? Or is it your distaste for anger which makes you turn away from this thing?"

"I don't know. There are times when I can't look on Mael's face. There are times when I want to be in his company. There are times when I can't seek out any of them. I've come here with Daniel alone. Daniel always needs someone to look after him. It suits me to be near Daniel. Daniel doesn't have to speak. That he is here is sufficient."

"I understand you," said Thorne.

"Understand this as well," said Marius. "I want to continue. I am not one who wishes to go into the sun or seek some other form of obliteration. If you have truly come out of the ice to destroy Maharet, to anger her twin—."

Thorne lifted his right hand, gesturing for patience and silence.

Then he spoke:

"I have not," he said. "Those were dreams. They've died in this very place. It will take longer

for memory to die—."

"Then remember her beauty and her power," Marius said. "I asked her once why she had never taken a blood drinker's eyes for her own. Why always the weak and bleeding eyes of a mortal victim? She told me she had never come upon a blood drinker whom she would destroy or even hurt, save for the Evil Queen herself and the Queen's eyes she couldn't take. Pure hatred prevented it."

Thorne thought on this for a long time without replying.

"Always mortal eyes," he whispered.

"And with each pair, as they endure, she sees more than you and I can see," said Marius.

"Yes," said Thorne, "I understand you."

"I want the strength to grow older," Marius said. "I want to find wonders around me as I always have. If I don't, I'll lose the strength to continue and that is what bites into me now. Death has put its hand on my shoulder. Death has come in the form of disappointment and fear of scorn."

"Ah, these things I understand, almost perfectly," said Thorne. "When I went up into the snow, I wanted to flee from these things. I wanted to die and not die, as so many mortals do. I don't think I thought I would endure in the ice or snow. I thought it would devour me, freeze me solid as it would a mortal man. But no such thing ever happened. And as for the pain of the cold I grew used to it, as if it were my daily portion, as if I had no right to anything else. But it was pain that drove me there, and so I understand you. You would fight pain now rather than retreat."

"Yes, I would," said Marius. "When the Queen rose from her underground shrine, she left me buried in ice and indifference. Others came to rescue me and bring me to the council table where we sought to reason with her. Before this happened, I could not have imagined such contempt from the Queen or such injury. I could not have imagined my own patience and seeming forgiveness.

"But at that council table, Akasha met her destruction. The insult to me was avenged with utter finality. This creature whom I had guarded for two thousand years was gone from me. My Queen, gone from me …

"And so I can see now the larger story of my own life, of which my beautiful Queen was only a part, even in her cruelty to me. I can see all the stories of my life. I can pick and choose from among them."

"Let me hear these stories," said Thorne. "Your words flow over me like warm water. They bring me comfort. I hunger for your images. I hunger for all you might say."

Marius pondered this.

"Let me try to tell my stories," Marius said. "Let my stories do what stories always do. Let them keep you from your darker dreams and from your darker journey. Let them keep you here."

Thorne smiled.
“Yes,” he said, “I trust in you. Go on.”

THE STORY

5

As I have told you, I was born in the Roman times, in the age of Augustus when the Roman Empire was immense and powerful, though the Northern tribes of barbarians who would eventually overrun it had long been fighting on its Northern frontiers.

Europe was a world of big and powerful cities just as it is now.

As for me, as I've said I was a bookish individual, and it had been my bad luck to be stolen from my world, taken into Druid precincts and there delivered to a blood drinker who believed himself to be a sacred God of the Grove and gave me nothing but superstition along with the Dark Blood.

My journey to Egypt to find the Mother was for myself. What if this fire described by the blackened and suffering god should come again?

Well, I found the Divine Pair and I stole them from those who had long been their guardians. I did it not only to possess the Sacred Core of the Divine Queen but because of my love of Akasha, my belief that she had spoken to me and commanded me to rescue her, and because she had given me her Precious Blood.

Understand there was nothing as strong as that primal fount. The blood rendered me a formidable blood drinker who could fight off any of the old burnt gods who came after me in the years to come.

But you must also understand: no religious impulse guided me. I had thought the "god" of the Druid woods to be a monster. And I understood that in her own way Akasha was a monster. I was a monster as well. I had no intention of creating a devotion for her. She was a secret. And from the moment she came into my hands she and her consort were most truly Those Who Must Be Kept.

This did not stop me from adoring her in my heart, and creating the most lavish shrine for her, and dreaming that, having spoken to me once with the Mind Gift, she would speak to me again.

The first city to which I took the mysterious pair was Antioch, a most marvelous and interesting place. It was in the East as we said in those days, yet it was a Roman city and had been shaped by the tremendous influence of Hellenism—that is, the philosophy and ideas of the Greeks. It was a city of new and splendid Roman buildings, and it was a city of great libraries and schools of philosophy, and though I haunted it by night, the ghost of my former self, there were brilliant men to be spied upon and wondrous things to be heard.

Nevertheless my first years as the keeper of the Mother and the Father were bitter in my

loneliness, and the silence of the Divine Parents struck me often as particularly cruel. I was pitifully ignorant as to my own nature, and perpetually brooding on my eternal fate.

Akasha's silence struck me as terrifying and confusing. After all, why was I asked by Akasha to take her out of Egypt if she meant only to sit upon her throne in eternal stillness? It seemed sometimes that self-destruction was preferable to the existence I endured.

Then came the exquisite Pandora into my midst, a woman I'd known since her girlhood in Rome. Indeed, I'd once gone to her father to seek her hand in marriage when she'd been only a precocious child. And here she was in Antioch, as lovely in the prime of life as she'd been in her youth, flooding my thoughts with impossible desire.

Our lives became fatally intertwined. Indeed the speed and violence with which Pandora was made a blood drinker left me weak with guilt and confusion. But Pandora believed that Akasha had willed our union; Akasha had hearkened to my loneliness; Akasha had drawn Pandora to me.

If you saw our council table, round which we sat when Akasha rose, then you have seen Pandora, the tall white-skinned beauty with the distinct rippling brown hair, one who is now a powerful Child of the Millennia just as you are and just as I am.

Why am I not with her now, you may ask? What is it in me that will not acknowledge my admiration for her mind, her beauty, her exquisite understanding of all things?

Why can't I go to her!

I don't know. I know only that a terrible anger and pain divides us just as it did so many years ago. I cannot admit how much I have wronged her. I cannot admit how much I have lied about my love of her and my need of her. And this need, perhaps this need is the thing which keeps me at a distance, where I am safe from the scrutiny of her soft and wise brown eyes.

It's also true that she judges me harshly for things I have lately done. But this is too difficult to explain.

In those ancient times, when it was scarce two centuries that we lived together, it was I who destroyed our union in a foolish and dreadful way. We had spent almost every night of our lives quarreling, and I could not admit her advantages, and her victories, and it was as the result of my weakness that I foolishly and impetuously left her when I did.

This was the single worst mistake of all my long years.

But let me tell quickly the little tale of how we came to be divided by my bitterness and pride.

Now as we kept the Mother and the Father, the old gods of the dark groves of the North woods died out. Nevertheless an occasional blood drinker would discover us and come to press his suit for the blood of Those Who Must Be Kept.

Most often such a monster was violent and easily dispatched in the heat of anger, and we would return to our civilized life.

One evening, however, there appeared in our villa outside Antioch a band of newly made blood drinkers, some five in number, all dressed in simple robes.

I was soon amazed to discover that they perceived themselves as serving Satan within a Divine Plan that held the Devil to be equal in power to the Christian God.

They did not know of the Mother and the Father, and understand, the shrine was in that very house, down, beneath the floor. Yet they could hear no inkling of the Divine Parents. They were far too young and too innocent. Indeed, their zeal and sincerity was enough to break one's heart.

But though deeply touched by their mishmash of Christian and Persian ideas, of their wild notions, and by their curious appearance of innocence, I was also horrified by the fact that this was a new religion among the blood drinkers, and they spoke of other adherents. They spoke of a cult.

The human in me was revolted; and the rational Roman was more confused and alarmed than I can express.

It was Pandora who quickly brought me to my senses and gave me to know that we must slaughter the whole band. Were we to let them go, others would come to us, and soon the Mother and Father might fall into their hands.

I, who had slain old pagan blood drinkers with ease, seemed somehow unable to obey her, perhaps because I realized for the first time that if we remained in Antioch, if we maintained our household and our lives, more and more blood drinkers would come and there would be no end to killing them in order to protect our fine secret. And my soul suddenly could not endure this possibility. Indeed I thought once more of death for myself and even for Those Who Must Be Kept.

We slaughtered the zealots. It was a simple thing to do for they were so young. It took only moments with torches and with our swords. We burnt them to ashes and then scattered those ashes as, I'm sure you know, must be done.

But after it was over, I lapsed into a terrible silence and for months would not leave the shrine. I abandoned Pandora for my own suffering. I couldn't explain to her that I had foreseen a grim future, and when she had gone out to hunt the city or to do whatever amused her, I went to Akasha.

I went to my Queen. I knelt before her and I asked her what she meant for me to do.

"After all," I said, "these are your children, are they not? They come in new battalions and they don't know your name. They likened their fangs to those of serpents. They spoke of the Hebrew prophet Moses, holding up the serpent staff in the desert. They spoke of others who might come."

No answer came from Akasha. No real answer was to come from Akasha for two thousand years.

But I was only beginning my awful journey then. And all I knew in those anxious moments was that I had to conceal my prayers from Pandora, that I couldn't let her see me—Marius, the philosopher—on bended knee. I went on with my praying, I went on with my feverish worship.

And as always happens when one prays to an immobile thing, the light played upon the face of Akasha; the light gave some semblance of life.

Meantime, Pandora, as embittered by my silence as I was by Akasha's silence, became utterly distraught.

And one night she hurled at me a simple household insult, "Would that I were rid of them and rid of you."

She left the house and she did not return the next night or the night after that.

As you can see, she was merely playing the same game with me that I had played with her. She refused to be a witness to my hardness. But she could not understand how desperately I needed her presence, and even her vain pleas.

Oh, it was so shamefully selfish of me. It was such a needless disaster, but powerfully angry with her, I took the irrevocable step of arranging for my departure from Antioch by day.

Indeed, by the light of the dim lamp, so as not to arouse my mortal agents, I gave orders for myself and Those Who Must Be Kept to be transported in three immense sarcophaghi to Rome by sea. I abandoned my Pandora. I took with me all that was mine and left her only the empty villa, with her own possessions strewn rather carelessly and insultingly around it. I left the only creature in the world who could have patience with me, who could give me understanding, and who had done so, no matter how often or how hard we had fought.

I left the only being who knew what I was!

Of course I didn't know the consequences. I didn't realize that I would not find Pandora for hundreds of years. I didn't know that she would become a goddess in my mind, a being as powerful in my memory as Akasha was to me night after night.

You see, it was another lie, like unto the lie I've told about Akasha. I loved Pandora and I needed her. But in our verbal combat, I had always, no matter how emotional, played the role of the superior mind who was in no need of her seemingly irrational discourse and always evident affection. I remember the very night that I gave her the Dark Blood how she had argued with me.

She said, "Don't make a religion of reason and logic. Because in the passage of time reason may fail you and when it does, you may find yourself taking refuge in madness." I was so offended by these words coming from the mouth of this beautiful woman whose eyes so entranced me that I could scarce follow her thoughts.

Yet in those months of silence, after we had slain the New Believers, this was precisely what had happened. I had lapsed into a form of madness and refused to speak a word.

And only now can I admit the full folly of it, that my own weakness was unsupportable to me, and that I could not endure having her as the witness of the melancholy which shrouded my soul.

Even now, I cannot have her as a witness to my suffering. I live here alone, with Daniel. I speak to you because you are a new friend and can take from me fresh impressions and fresh

suggestions. You don't look at me with old knowledge and old fear.

But let me go on with my tale.

Our ship arrived at the port of Ostia in good order, and once we had been transported in three sarcophaghi to the city of Rome, I rose from my "grave," made arrangements for an expensive villa just outside the city walls, and arranged an underground shrine for Those Who Must Be Kept in the hills well away from the house.

A great guilt weighed me down that I had placed them at such a distance from the place in which I lived, read my books, and took to my crypt at night. After all, they had been within my very house in Antioch, though safely beneath it, and now they were some miles away.

But I wanted to live close to the great city, and indeed within a few short years, the walls of Rome were built out and around my house so that Rome enclosed it. I had a country villa in town.

It was no safe place for Those Who Must Be Kept. So it proved most wise that I had created their shrine well away from the burgeoning city, and settling into my villa, I played "a Roman gentleman" to those around me, the loving master of several simple-minded and gullible slaves.

Now understand that I had been away from Rome for over two hundred years.

Glorying in the cultural riches of Antioch, a Roman city, yes, but an Eastern city, listening to her poets and teachers in the Forum, roaming her libraries by torchlight, I had been horrified by descriptions of the latest Roman Emperors who had disgraced the title altogether by their antics and inevitably been murdered by their bodyguards or their troops.

But I was far wrong that the Eternal City had fallen into degradation. Great Emperors of the past hundred years there had been such as Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius, and Septimius Severus, and there had been an enormous number of monumental buildings added to the capital as well as a great increase of population. Not even a blood drinker such as myself could have inspected all of Rome's temples, amphitheaters and baths.

Indeed Rome was more than likely the largest and most impressive city in the world. Some two million people made up the populace, many of the plebs, as the poor were called, receiving a daily ration of corn and wine.

I yielded to the spell of the city immediately. And shutting out the horrors of the Imperial quarrels and continuous war along the frontiers, I diverted myself by studying the intellectual and aesthetic handiwork of mankind as I've always done.

Of course I went immediately to play the hovering ghost about the town houses of my descendants, for I had kept some track of them, though never admitting it to Pandora, and I found them to be good members of the old Senatorial class, striving desperately to maintain some order in government, while the army elevated Emperor after Emperor in a desperate attempt to secure power for this or that faction in this or that far-flung place.

It broke my heart actually to see these young men and women whom I knew to have come

down from my uncles and aunts, from my nieces and nephews, and it was during this period that I broke my record of them forever, though why precisely I cannot say.

It was a time for me of breaking all ties. I had abandoned Pandora. I had put Those Who Must Be Kept at some remove from me, and now I came home one night, from spying upon a supper party at the house of one of my many descendants, and I took out of a wooden chest all the scrolls in which I had written the names of these young people, gleaned from letters to various agents, and I burnt them, feeling rather wise in my monstrosity, as though this would prevent me from further vanity and pain.

After that, I haunted the precincts of strangers to gain knowledge. With vampiric dexterity I slipped into shadowy gardens and listened at the open doorways of the dimly lighted villas as those inside talked softly over dinner or listened to the delicate music of a young boy accompanying himself with a lyre.

I found the old conservative Romans very touching, and though the libraries were not as good here as they had become in Antioch, I found much to read. There were of course schools of philosophy in Rome, and though they too were not as impressive as those in Antioch, I was interested in listening to what I could.

But understand, I did not really enter into the mortal world. I made no friendships with mortals. I did not converse with them. I only watched them, as I had always done in Antioch. I did not believe then that I could penetrate with any true success into their natural realm.

As for my blood thirst, I hunted furiously in Rome. I kept to the Evil Doer always, which was a simple matter, I can assure you, but I fed my hunger far more than I needed to feed it. I bared my fangs cruelly to those I killed. The huge population never left me hungry. I was more the blood drinker than ever in my existence up to that time.

It was a challenge to me to do it properly, to sink my teeth but once and cleanly, and to spill not a drop as I took the death along with the blood.

There was no need in such a place as Rome of those times to hide the bodies for fear of discovery. Sometimes I threw them in the Tiber. Sometimes I did nothing but leave them in the street. I loved particularly to kill in taverns which is something I like even now, as you know.

There is nothing like the long passage through the damp dark night, and then the sudden opening of the door of the tavern upon an entire little universe of light and warmth and singing and laughing humans. I found taverns very enticing indeed.

Of course, all this ravening, this endless killing—it was on account of my grief for Pandora, and it was because I was alone. Who was there to restrain me? Who was there to outdo me? No one at all.

And understand, during the first few months, I might have written to her! There was surely a chance that she had remained in Antioch, in our house, waiting for me to come to my senses, but I did no such thing.

A fierce anger, the very anger I fight now, welled up in me, and it made me weak, as I've already told you. I couldn't do what I had to do—bring her back to me. And sometimes my loneliness pushed me to take three and four victims in a night, until I was spilling blood I couldn't drink.

Sometimes in the early hours of the morning my rage was quieted, and I went back to my historical writing, something which I had begun in Antioch and never revealed to a single soul.

I described what I saw in Rome of progress or failure. I described the buildings in ponderous detail. But then there came nights when I thought that everything I'd written was useless. After all, what was the purpose? I could not enter these descriptions, these observations, these poems, these essays, into the mortal world!

They were contaminated in that they came from a blood drinker, a monster who slew humans for his own survival. There was no place for the poetry or history which had come from a greedy mind and heart.

And so I began to destroy not only my fresh writings, but even the old essays which I had written in Antioch in the past. I took the scrolls out of the chests one by one and burnt them as I had burnt the records of my family. Or I merely kept them, locked up tight, and away from my eyes, so that nothing I'd written could spark in me anything new.

It was a great crisis of the soul.

Then something happened which was totally unforeseen.

I came upon another blood drinker—indeed I came upon two of them in dark streets of the late night city as I was coming down a hill.

The moon had gone behind the clouds at that moment, but naturally I could see quite perfectly with my preternatural eyes.

The two creatures were approaching me rapidly with no knowledge that I stood against the wall, trying not to block their path.

At last the first of the pair lifted his head and I recognized the face at once. I knew the hawk nose and deep-set eyes. I knew the gaunt cheeks. In fact I recognized everything about him, the slope of his shoulders, his long blond hair, and even the hand that held the cloak at his throat.

This was Mael, the Druid priest who had long ago captured me and taken me prisoner, and fed me alive to the burnt and dying God of the Grove. This was Mael who had kept me in captivity for months as he prepared me for the Dark Magic. This was Mael, the pure of heart, and the fearless one, whom I had come to know so very well.

Who had made Mael a blood drinker? In what grove had Mael been consecrated to his old religion? Why was he not shut up in some oak tree in Gaul, there to preside over the feasts of his fellow Druids?

Our eyes met, but I experienced no alarm. In fact, I had assessed his strength and found it wanting. He was as old as I was, yes, that was plain, but he had not drunk as I had from Akasha.

I was by far the stronger. There was nothing he could do to me.

And so at this moment, I looked away and to the other blood drinker who was much taller, and infinitely stronger, and whose skin was a dark-brown color, surely from having been burnt in the Terrible Fire.

This one had a large face of rather agreeable and open features, with large questioning black eyes, a thick and well-proportioned mouth, and a head of wavy black hair.

I looked back to this blond-headed one who had taken my mortal life with such religious conviction.

It occurred to me that I could destroy him by ripping his head from his body, and by keeping possession of his head and then placing it somewhere in my garden where the sun would inevitably find it and burn it black. It occurred to me that I ought to do this, that this creature deserved no better. Yet there were other thoughts working in my mind.

I wanted to talk to this being. I wanted to know him. I wanted to know the other being with him, this brown-skinned blood drinker who stared at me with such a mixture of innocence and warmth. This blood drinker was much older. This blood drinker was like no being who had ever come at me in Antioch, crying for the Mother and Father. This being was an entirely new thing.

It was in this moment that I understood perhaps for the first time that anger was weak. Anger had robbed me of Pandora over a sentence of less than twenty words. Anger would rob me of Mael if I destroyed him. Also, I thought, I can always delay the murder. I can talk with Mael now. I can let my mind have this company it craves and I can always kill him later on.

But I'm sure you know such reasoning is false, because once we grow to love a person we are not likely to want that person's death.

As these thoughts raced through my mind, words suddenly spilled from my lips.

"I'm Marius, don't you remember me?" I said. "You took me to the Grove of the Old God, you gave me to him, and I escaped." I was appalled at the hostility with which I'd spoken.

He cloaked his thoughts completely, and I couldn't tell whether he had known me by my appearance or not. He spoke quickly in Latin.

"Yes, you abandoned the grove. You abandoned all those who worshiped you. You took the power given you, and what did you leave for the Faithful of the Forest? What did you give back?"

"And you, my precious Druid priest," I said, "do you serve your old gods? Is that what has brought you to Rome?" My voice was quaking with anger, and I felt the weakness of it. I struggled to regain clarity and strength. "When I knew you, you were pure of heart. Seldom have I ever known any creature more deluded, more given over to comforts and illusions of religion as you were." I stopped. I had to check myself, and I did.

"The old religion is gone," he said furiously. "The Romans have taken even our most secret places. Their cities are everywhere. And thieving barbarians swoop down upon us from across

the Danube. And the Christians, the Christians come into places where the Romans are not. There is no stopping the Christians."

His voice grew louder, even though it had taken on the tone of a whisper.

"But it was you, Marius," he said, "you, who corrupted me. It was you, Marius, who poisoned me, it was you who divided me from the Faithful of the Forest, you who gave me dreams of greater things!"

He was as angry as I was. He was trembling. And as often happens with two people who are quarreling, this anger produced a good calm in me. I was able to sink my enmity down into myself with that little resolve, You can always kill him later, and so I went on.

The other creature looked quite surprised by all this and fascinated with an almost childlike expression on his face.

"What you're saying is nonsense," I answered. "I ought to destroy you. It would be an easy thing for me to do."

"Very well then, try," he answered.

The other one reached from behind and put his hand on that of Mael.

"No, listen to me, both of you," he said in a kindly rather deep voice. "Don't go on with this quarrel. However we came to the Dark Blood, either through lies or violence, it has made us immortal. Are we to be so ungrateful?"

"I'm not ungrateful," I said, "but I owe my debt to fate, not to Mael. Nevertheless, I'm lonely for your company. That's the truth of it. Come to my house. I'll never harm anyone who comes as a guest under my roof."

I had quite surprised myself by this little speech but it was the truth.

"You have a house in this city?" asked Mael. "What do you mean by a house?"

"I have a house, a comfortable house. I bid you to come and talk to me. I have a pleasant garden with beautiful fountains. I have slaves. They are simple-minded. The light is pleasant. The garden is full of night-blooming flowers. Come."

The one with the black hair was openly surprised as he had been before.

"I want to come," he said, glancing at Mael, though he still stood behind him. His voice had an authority to it, a pure strength, though it was soft.

Mael was rigid and helpless in his anger. With his hawk nose and frightful eyes, he reminded me of a wild bird. Men with such noses always do. But in truth, he possessed a rather unusual beauty. His forehead was high and clear, and his mouth was strong.

But to go on with my tale, it was only now that I noticed that both men wore rags like beggars. They were barefoot, and though blood drinkers are never truly soiled, for no soil clings to them, they were unkempt.

Well, I could soon remedy that if they would allow. I had trunks of garments as always. Whether I went out to hunt or to study some fresco in a deserted house, I was a well-dressed

Roman, and often carried dagger and sword.

At last they agreed to come, and with a great act of will, I went ahead, turning my back on them to lead them, using the Mind Gift to maximum effect to watch over them that neither tried to strike out at me.

Of course I was profoundly grateful that Those Who Must Be Kept were not in the house where either of these two might have detected their powerful heartbeats, but I could not allow myself to visualize these beings. On we walked.

Finally, they came into my house, looking about themselves as though they were among miracles when all that I possessed were the simple furnishings of a rich man. They gazed hungrily at the bronze oil lamps that filled the marble-floored rooms with brilliant light, and the couches and chairs they hesitated to touch.

I cannot tell you how often this has happened me over the centuries, that some wandering blood drinker, bereft of all human attachments, has come into my house to marvel at simple things.

This is why I had a bed for you when you came here. That is why I had clothes.

"Sit down," I said to them, "there's nothing here that can't be cleaned or thrown away. I insist that you be comfortable. I wish we had some gesture that I might give, equal to that which mortals make when they offer guests a cup of wine."

The larger taller man was the first to be seated in a chair, rather than a couch. Then I followed taking a chair as well, and bidding Mael please to be seated to my right.

I could see now quite clearly that the bigger blood drinker possessed infinitely more power than Mael. Indeed he was much older. He was older than me. That was why he had healed after the Terrible Fire, though that had been two hundred years ago, I had to admit. But I sensed no menace from this creature, and then quite unexpectedly, indeed, silently, he gave me his name.

"Avicus."

Mael gazed at me with the most venomous expression. He did not sit back as he might have done, but kept himself bitterly erect and ready as if for a brawl.

I sought to read his mind but this was useless.

As for me, I considered myself the consummate master of my hatred and my rage, but when I saw the anxious look on the face of Avicus I thought perhaps I was wrong.

Suddenly, this blood drinker spoke.

"Lay down your hatred, each for the other," he said in Latin, though he spoke with an accent, "and perhaps a battle of words will put all to right."

Mael didn't wait for my agreement to this plan.

"We brought you to the grove," he told me, "because our god told us we must do this. He was burnt and dying, but he would not tell us why. He wanted you to go to Egypt, but he wouldn't tell us why. There must be a new god, he said, but he didn't tell us why."

"Calm yourself," said Avicus softly, "so that your words truly speak for your heart." Even in his rags he looked rather dignified and curious as to what would be said.

Mael gripped the arms of the chair and glared at me, his long blond hair hanging over his face.

"Bring a perfect human for the old god's magic, we were told. And that our legends told us was true. When an old god is weak there must be a new one. And only a perfect man can be given over to the dying god for his magic in the oak."

"And so you found a Roman," I said, "in the prime of life, happy and rich, and dragged him off against his will. Were there no men among you who were fit and right for your own religion? Why come to me with your wretched beliefs?"

Mael wasn't slowed in the slightest. At once he continued.

" 'Bring me one who is fit,' said the god, 'one who knows the languages of all kingdoms!' That was his admonition. Do you know how long we had to search for such a man as you?"

"Am I to feel sorry for you?" I said sharply and foolishly.

He went on.

"We brought you to the oak as we were told to do. Then when you came out of the oak, to preside over our great sacrifice, we saw that you had been made into a gleaming god of shimmering hair and eyes that frightened us.

"And without a word of protest, you raised your arms so that the Great Feast of Sanhaim could begin. You drank the blood of the victims given you. We saw you do it! The magic was restored in you. We felt we would prosper, and it was time to burn the old god as our legends told us we must do.

"It was then that you fled." He sat back in his chair as though this long speech had taken the strength out of him. "You didn't return," he said disgustedly. "You knew our secrets. But you didn't return."

A silence fell.

They didn't know of the Mother and the Father. They knew nothing of the old Egyptian lore. I was too relieved for a long moment to say anything. I felt more calm and controlled than ever. Indeed, it seemed rather absurd that we were having this argument, for as Avicus had said, we were immortal.

But we were human still, each in his own way.

Finally I realized that Mael was looking at me, and his eyes were as charged with rage as before. He looked pale, hungry, wild as I've said.

But both of these creatures were waiting upon me to speak or do something, and it did seem the burden lay with me. At last, I made a decision which seemed to me to be its own form of reckoning, and its own form of triumph.

"No, I didn't come back," I said to Mael squarely. "I didn't want to be the God of the Grove. I cared nothing for the Faithful of the Forest. I made my choice to wander through time. I have no

belief in your gods or your sacrifices. What did you expect of me?"

"You took the magic of our god with you."

"I had no choice," I said. "If I had left the old burnt god without taking his magic, you would have destroyed me, and I didn't want to die. Why should I have died? Yes, I took the magic that he gave me and yes, I presided over your sacrifices and then I fled as anyone of my nature would do."

He looked at me for a long time, as if trying to decide whether or not I wanted to quarrel further.

"And what do I see now in you?" I demanded. "Haven't you fled your Faithful of the Forest? Why do I come upon you in Rome?"

He waited a long moment.

"Our god," he said, "our old burnt god. He spoke of Egypt. He spoke of our bringing him one who could go down into Egypt. Did you go to Egypt? Did you seek there the Good Mother?"

I cloaked my mind as best I could. I made my face severe, and I tried to figure how much I should confess and why.

"Yes, I went to Egypt," I said. "I went to find the cause of the fire that had burnt the gods all through the North lands."

"And what did you find?" he demanded.

I glanced from him to Avicus and I saw that he too waited upon my answer.

"I found nothing," I responded. "Nothing but burnt ones who pondered the same mystery. The old legend of the Good Mother. Nothing further. It is finished. There is no more to tell."

Did they believe me? I couldn't tell. Both seemed to harbor their own secrets, their own choices made long ago.

Avicus looked ever so slightly alarmed for his companion.

Mael looked up slowly and said with anger,

"Oh, that I had never laid eyes upon you. You wicked Roman, you rich Roman with all your splendor and fine words." He looked about the house, at its wall paintings, at its couches and tables, at the marble floors.

"Why do you say this?" I asked.

I tried not to despise him but to see him, and understand him, but my hatred was too great.

"When I took you prisoner," he said, "when I sought to teach you our poetry and our songs, do you remember how you tried to bribe me? You spoke of your beautiful villa on the Bay of Naples. You said that you would take me there if only I would help you escape. Do you remember these awful things?"

"Yes, I remember," I said coldly. "I was your prisoner! You had taken me deep into the forest against my will. What did you expect of me? And had you let me escape, I would have taken you to my house on the Bay of Naples. I would have paid my own ransom. My family would have

paid it. Oh, it's too foolish to speak of these things."

I shook my head. I grew too agitated. My old loneliness beckoned to me. I wanted silence in these rooms again. What need had I of these two?

But the one called Avicus appealed to me silently with his expression. And I wondered who he might be.

"Please, keep your temper," said Avicus. "I'm the cause of his suffering."

"No," said Mael quickly. He glanced at his companion. "That can't be."

"Oh, but it is," declared Avicus, "and always has been, ever since I gave you the Dark Blood. Gain the strength either to remain with me or to leave me. Things cannot remain as they are."

He reached out and put his hand on his companion's arm.

"You've found this strange being, Marius," he said, "and you've told Marius of the last years of your strong belief. You've relived that awful misery. But don't be so foolish as to hate him for what happened. He was right to seek his freedom. As for us, the old faith died. The Terrible Fire destroyed it, and nothing more could be done."

Mael looked as dejected as any creature I've ever seen.

Meantime my heart was fast catching up with my mind. I was thinking: Here are two immortals but we cannot solace one another; we cannot have friendship. We can only part after bitter words. And then I'll be alone again. I'll be proud Marius who left Pandora. I shall have my beautiful house and all my fine possessions to myself.

I realized Avicus was staring at me, trying to probe my mind, but failing though his Mind Gift was quite terrifically strong.

"Why do you live as vagabonds?" I asked.

"We don't know how to live as anything else," said Avicus. "We've never tried. We shy away from mortals, except when we hunt. We fear discovery. We fear fire."

I nodded.

"What do you seek other than blood?"

A miserable expression passed over his face. He was in pain. He tried to hide it. Or perhaps he tried to make the pain go away.

"I'm not sure that we seek anything," he said. "We don't know how."

"Do you want to stay with me," I asked, "and learn?"

I felt the boldness, the presumptuousness of this question, but the words had already been said.

"I can show you the Temples of Rome; I can show you the big palaces, the houses that make this villa appear quite humble indeed. I can show you how to play the shadows so that mortals never see you; how to climb walls swiftly and silently; how to walk the roofs at night all over the city, never touching the ground."

Avicus was amazed. He looked to Mael.

Mael sat slumped, saying nothing.

Then he pulled himself up.

In a weak voice he continued his condemnation.

"I would have been stronger if you hadn't told me all those marvelous things," he said, "and now you ask if we want to enjoy the same pleasures, the pleasures of a Roman."

"It's what I have to offer," I said. "Do what you wish."

Mael shook his head. He began to speak again, for the benefit of whom I don't know.

"When it was plain that you wouldn't return," he said, "they chose me. I was to become the god. But for this to happen we had to find a God of the Grove who had not been burnt to death by the Terrible Fire. After all, we had destroyed our own gentle god foolishly! A creature who had had the magic to make you."

I gestured as if to say, It was indeed a shame.

"We sent word far and wide," he said. "At last an answer came from Britain. A god survived there, a god who was most ancient and most strong."

I looked to Avicus, but there was no change in his expression.

"However we were warned not to go to him. We were told that it was perhaps not something we should do. We were confused by these messages, and at last we set out for we felt that we must try."

"And how did you feel," I asked cruelly, "now that you had been chosen, and you knew that you would be shut up in the oak, never to see the sun again, and only to drink blood during the great feasts and during the full moon?"

He looked straight ahead as if he couldn't give me a decent answer to this, and then he replied.

"You had corrupted me as I told you."

"Ah," I said, "so you were afraid. The Faithful of the Forest couldn't comfort you. And I was to blame."

"Not afraid," he said furiously, clenching his teeth. "Corrupted as I said." He flashed his small deep-set eyes on me. "Do you know what it means to believe absolutely nothing, to have no god, no truth!"

"Yes, of course I know," I answered. "I believe nothing. I consider it wise. I believed nothing when I was mortal. I believe nothing now."

I think I saw Avicus flinch.

I might have said more brutal things, but I saw that Mael meant to go on.

Staring forward in the same manner he told his tale:

"We made our journey," he said. "We crossed the narrow sea to Britain and went North to a land of green woods and there we came upon a band of priests who sang our hymns and knew our poetry and our law. They were Druids as we were Druids, they were the Faithful of the Forest as were we. We fell into each other's arms."

Avicus was watching Mael keenly. My eyes were more patient and cold, I was sure.

Nevertheless the simple narrative drew me, I have to confess.

"I went into the grove," said Mael. "How huge the trees were. How ancient. Any one of them might have been the Great Tree. At last I was led to it. And I saw the door with its many iron locks. I knew the god was inside."

Suddenly Mael glanced anxiously to Avicus, but Avicus gestured for him to go on.

"Tell Marius," he said gently, "and in telling Marius, you tell me."

It had such a soft sound to it, this utterance. I felt a shiver on the surface of my skin, my lonely and perfect skin.

"But these priests," said Mael, "they warned me. "Mael, if there is any lie or imperfection in you, the god will know it. He will merely kill you and you will be a sacrifice and nothing more than that. Think deep because the god sees deep. The god is strong but the god would be feared rather than adored and takes his vengeance, when aroused, with great pleasure.'

"The words shook me. Was I truly prepared for this strange miracle to come upon me?"

He glared savagely at me.

"I thought over everything. Your word pictures came back to me! The beautiful villa on the Bay of Naples. How you had described your rich rooms. How you had described the warm breezes and the sound of the water on the rocky shore. How you had described your gardens. You had spoken of gardens. Ah, could I endure the darkness of the oak, I thought, the drinking of blood, the starvation between sacrifices, for what would this be?"

He paused as if he couldn't continue. Again he glanced at Avicus.

"Go on," said Avicus calmly in his deep voice.

Mael continued:

"Then one of these priests accosted me and took me aside and he said, "Mael, this is an angry god. This is a god who begs for blood when he shouldn't want it. Do you have the strength to present yourself to him?'

"I had no chance to answer him. The sun had just gone down. The grove was full of lighted torches. The Faithful of the Forest had assembled. All my fellow priests who had come with me surrounded me. They were pushing me towards the oak.

"When I reached it, I insisted that they free me. I put my hands upon the bark, and I closed my eyes and in the silent voice, as I had prayed in my home grove, I prayed to this god. I said 'I am of the Faithful of the Forest. Will you give me the Sacred Blood so that I might return home and do what my people wish me to do?' "

Again he stopped speaking. It was as if he was staring at something dreadful that I could not see.

Avicus spoke up again.

"Continue," he said.

Mael sighed.

“There came a silent laugh from inside the oak, a silent laugh and an angry voice! It went inside my head, and I was shaken by it. And the god said to me, ‘Bring me a blood sacrifice first. Then and only then will I have the strength to make you a god.’ ”

Again Mael broke off. Then, “Surely you know, Marius,” he said, “how gentle our god was. When he made you, when he spoke to you there was nothing of anger or hate in him, but this god was full of wrath.”

I nodded.

“I told the priests what the god had said to me. They drew back in a group, all afraid and disapproving.

“ ‘No,’ they said, ‘he has been asking for blood too much. It is not fitting that he should have it. He is to starve now as always between each full moon and until the yearly rituals so that he comes from the oak thin and ravenous, like the dead fields, ready to drink the blood of sacrifice and become plump with it, like the bounty of the coming spring.’

“What was I to say?” asked Mael. “Finally I tried to reason with some of them. ‘To make a god, surely he needs strength,’ I explained. “And he himself is burned from the Terrible Fire, and perhaps the blood helps him and heals him. Why not give him sacrifice? Surely you have a condemned man in one of the villages or settlements who can be brought to the oak?’

“They drew back altogether, and they stared at the tree and its door and its locks. And I realized they were afraid.

“Then a dreadful thing occurred, which changed me utterly. There came from the oak a stream of enmity that I could feel as though someone full of rancor were staring at me!

“I could feel it as though the being looked upon me with all his rage, his sword raised to destroy me. Of course it was the power of the god, using his mind to flood mine with his hatred. But so strong was it that I could not think of what it was, or what to do.

“The other priests ran. They had felt this anger and hatred as well. I couldn’t run. I couldn’t move. I stared at the oak. I think the old magic had caught me. God, poems, songs, sacrifice—those things did not matter to me suddenly. But I knew a powerful creature was inside the oak. And I didn’t run from it. And at that moment my evil plotting soul was born!”

Mael gave another very dramatic sigh. He was silent, his eyes fixed on me.

“How so?” I asked. “What did you plot? You had spoken through the mind with the gentle god of your own grove. You had seen him at the full moon take sacrifice, both before and after the Terrible Fire. You saw me when I was changed. You’ve just said so. What struck you so about this god?”

He looked overwhelmed for a moment.

Finally, gazing ahead of him again as if he had to, he continued.

“This god was more than angry, Marius. This god meant to have his way!”

“Then why weren’t you afraid?”

A silence fell in the room. I was truly a bit perplexed.

I looked at Avicus. I wanted to confirm: Avicus was this god, no? But to ask such a question was crude. It had been said earlier that Avicus gave the Dark Blood to Mael. I waited, as it was proper for me to do.

Finally Mael looked at me in the most sly and strange fashion.

His voice dropped, and he smiled venomously.

"The god wanted to get out of that oak," he said, glaring at me, "and I knew that if I helped him, he would give me the Magic Blood!"

"So," I said smiling, because I couldn't help it. "He wanted to escape the oak. But of course."

"I remembered you when you escaped," Mael said, "the mighty Marius, blooming from blood sacrifice, running so speedily from us! Well, I would run like you! Yes, and yes, and as I thought these things, as I plotted, as I thought, I heard the voice from the oak again, directed soft and secretive, only to me:

" 'Come closer,' it commanded me, and then as I pressed my forehead to the tree it spoke. 'Tell me of this Marius, tell me of his escape,' it said. 'Tell me and I will give you the Dark Blood and we will flee this place together, you and I.' "

Mael was trembling. But Avicus looked resigned to these truths as though he had pondered them many times.

"It does become clearer," I said.

"There is nothing that is not connected with you," Mael said. He shook his fist at me. It reminded me of a child.

"Your own doing," I said. "From the moment you stole me from the tavern in Gaul. You brought us together. Remember that. You kept me prisoner. But your unfolding story calms you. You need to tell us. Tell more."

It seemed for a moment he would fly at me, desperate in his rage, but then there came a change in him. And shaking his head a little, he grew calm, scowling and then went on:

"When this confirmation came to me from the god's own mind," he said, "I was fatally set upon my course. I told the other priests immediately that they were to bring a sacrifice. We had no time for quarreling, and that I should see that the condemned man was given to the god. I should go into the tree with the condemned man. I had no fear to do it. And they must hasten with all things, as the god and I might need the night for our magic to be done.

"It seemed an hour passed before they found the wretched man who was to die in the tree, but at last they brought him forward, bound and weeping, and very fearfully they unlocked the mighty door.

"I could feel the mounting rage of the god inside. I could feel his hunger. And pushing this poor condemned wretch before me, I entered, torch in hand to stand inside the hollowed chamber of the tree."

I nodded with a small smile to say only I know.

Meantime Mael's eyes had shifted to Avicus.

"There stood Avicus much as you see him now," Mael said, still looking at his companion. "And at once, he fell upon the condemned man. He drank the blood of this piteous victim with merciful speed, and then he cast the body away.

"Then Avicus fell upon me, taking the torch from me, hanging it up on the wall so that it seemed dangerously near the wood, and grasping me tight by the shoulders he said,

" 'Tell me of Marius, tell me how he escaped the Sacred Oak. Tell me the story or I'll kill you now.' "

Avicus listened to all this with a calm face. He nodded as if to say, That was how it took place.

Mael turned away from him and looked forward again.

"He was hurting me," Mael said. "If I hadn't said something quickly he would have broken my shoulder, so I spoke up, knowing how well he might search my thoughts, and I said, "Give me the Dark Blood and we shall escape together as you have promised. There is no great secret to what I know. It is a matter of strength and speed. We take to the tree limbs, which they cannot do so easily who follow us, and then we move through the trees.'

" 'But you know the world,' he said to me. 'I know nothing. I have been imprisoned for hundreds of years. I only dimly remember Egypt. I only dimly remember the Great Mother. You must guide me. And so I'll give you the magic and do it well.'

"He was true to his promise. I was made strong from the start. Then together, we listened with minds and ears for the gathered Faithful of the Forest and the Druid priests, and finding them quite unprepared for our departure, we forced the door with our united strength.

"At once we took to the treetops, as you had done, Marius. We put our pursuers far behind us, and before dawn we were hunting a settlement many many miles away."

He sat back as though exhausted by his confession.

And as I sat there, still too patient and too proud to destroy him, I saw how he had woven me into all of it, and I wondered at it, and I looked to Avicus, the god who for so long had lived in the tree.

Avicus looked calmly at me.

"We have been together since that time," Mael said in a more subdued voice. "We hunt the great cities because it is simpler for us, and what do we think of Romans who came as conquerors? We hunt Rome because it is the greatest city of all."

I said nothing.

"Sometimes we meet others," Mael continued. His eyes shot towards me suddenly. "And sometimes we are forced to fight them, for they will not leave us in peace."

"How so?" I asked.

"They are Gods of the Grove, the same as Avicus, and they are badly burnt and weak and they

want our strong blood. Surely you've seen them. They must have found you out. You cannot have been hiding all these years."

I didn't answer.

"But we can defend ourselves," he went on. "We have our hiding places, and with mortals we have our sport, our games. What more is there for me to say?"

He had indeed finished.

I thought of my own existence, my life crowded with so much reading and wandering and with so many questions, and I felt utter pity for him along with my contempt.

Meanwhile the expression on the face of Avicus touched me.

Avicus looked thoughtful and compassionate when he looked at Mael; but then his eyes fell on me and his face quickened.

"And how does the world seem to you, Avicus?" I asked.

At once Mael shot me a glance and then he rose from his chair and came towards me, bending over me, his hand out as if he would strike me.

"This is what you have to say to my story?" he demanded. "You ask of *him* how he sees the world?"

I didn't answer. I saw my blunder, and had to admit to myself that it wasn't deliberate. But I did wish to hurt him, there was no doubt of it. And this I had done.

Avicus had risen to his feet.

He came to Mael and guided him back, away from me.

"Quiet, my beloved one," he said gently to Mael. He drew Mael back to his chair. "Let us talk some more before we part with Marius. We have till morning. Please, be calm."

I realized then what had so infuriated Mael. It was not that he thought I had ignored him. He knew better. It was jealousy. He thought that I was trying to woo away from him his friend.

As soon as Mael had taken his chair again, Avicus looked to me almost warmly.

"The world is marvelous, Marius," he said placidly. "I come to it as a blind man after a miracle. I remember nothing of my mortal life except that it was in Egypt. And that I was not myself from Egypt. I am afraid now to go there. I am afraid old gods linger there. We travel the cities of the Empire, except for the cities of Egypt. And there is much for us to see."

Mael was still suspicious. He drew his ragged and filthy cloak up around him as though he might at any moment take his leave.

As for Avicus he looked more than ever comfortable, though he was barefoot and as dirty as Mael.

"Whenever we have come upon blood drinkers," said Avicus, "which isn't often, I have feared them, that they would know me for a renegade god."

He said this with considerable strength and confidence so it surprised me.

"But this is never the case," he continued. "And sometimes they speak of the Good Mother and

the old worship when the gods would drink the blood of the Evil Doer, but they know less of it than me."

"What *do* you know, Avicus?" I asked boldly.

He considered as if he weren't quite sure that he wanted to answer me with truth. Then he spoke.

"I think I was brought before her," he said, his dark eyes rather open and honest.

Mael turned to him sharply, as if he meant to strike him for his frankness, but Avicus went on.

"She was very beautiful. But my gaze was lowered. I couldn't really see her. And they were saying words, and the chanting was frightening to me. I was a grown man, that much I know, and they humiliated me. They spoke of honors that were curses. I may have dreamt the rest."

"We've been here long enough," said Mael suddenly. "I want to go."

He rose to his feet and quite reluctantly Avicus followed.

There passed between us, Avicus and me, something silent and secretive, which Mael could not interrupt. Mael knew it, I think, and he was in a sustained fury, but he couldn't prevent it. It was done.

"Thank you for your hospitality," said Avicus, reaching out to take my hand. He looked almost cheerful for a moment. "Sometimes I remember little mortal customs. I remember touching hands in this way."

Mael was in a pale rage.

Of course there was much I wanted to say to Avicus but I knew now that such was very simply impossible.

"Remember," I said to both of them, "I live as a mortal man lives, with the same comforts. And I have my studies always, my books here, you see. Eventually I will travel the Empire, but for now Rome, the city of my birth, is my home. What I learn is what matters to me. What I see with these eyes."

I looked from one to the other of them.

"You can live in this way if you like," I said. "Surely you must take fresh garments from me now. I can so easily provide them. And fine sandals for your feet. If you would have a house, a fine dwelling in which to enjoy your leisure hours, I can assist you in obtaining it. Please take this from me."

Mael's eyes were blazing with hatred.

"Oh, yes," he whispered at me, too angry for a full voice. "And why not offer us a villa on the Bay of Naples, with marble balustrades overlooking the blue sea!"

Avicus looked directly at me. He appeared quiet in his heart and genuinely moved by my words.

But what was the use?

I said no more.

My proud calm was suddenly broken. The anger returned along with its weakness. I remembered the hymns of the grove, and I wanted to move against Mael, for all the ugliness of it, to quite literally tear him limb from limb.

Would Avicus move to save him? It was likely. But what if he did not? And what if I proved stronger than both of them, I who had drunk from the Queen?

I looked at Mael. He wasn't afraid of me, which I found interesting.

And my pride returned. I could not stoop to a common physical battle, especially one which might become hideously awkward and ugly, one which I might not win.

No, I was too wise for it. I was too good of heart. I was Marius, who slew the Evil Doer, and this was Mael, a fool.

They made to walk away through the garden and I could find no words to say to them, but Avicus turned to me and said quickly, "Farewell, Marius. I thank you and I will remember you."

And I found myself struck by the words.

"Farewell, Avicus," I answered. And I listened as they disappeared into the night.

I sat there, feeling a crushing loneliness.

I looked at my many bookcases, and at my writing table. I looked at my inkstand. I looked at the paintings on the walls.

I should have tried to make peace with Mael, surely, to have Avicus as my friend.

I should go after them both. I should implore them to remain with me. We had so much more to say to one another. I needed them as they needed each other. As I needed Pandora.

But I lived the lie. I lived it out of anger. This is what I'm trying to tell you. I have lived lies. I have done it again and again. I live lies because I cannot endure the weakness of anger, and I cannot admit the irrationality of love.

Oh, the lies that I have told myself and others. I knew it yet I didn't know.

6

For a full month, I didn't dare to go to the shrine of Those Who Must Be Kept.

I knew that Mael and Avicus still hunted Rome. I caught glimpses of them with the Mind Gift and occasionally I even spied upon their very thoughts. Sometimes I heard their steps.

Indeed it seemed to me that Mael was actually tormenting me with his presence, attempting to ruin my tenure in the great city, and this made me bitter. I contemplated attempting to drive him and his companion away.

I also suffered considerable preoccupation with Avicus, whose face I could not forget. What was the disposition of this strange being, I thought. What would it mean for him to be my companion? I feared I would never know.

Meantime, other blood drinkers occasionally hunted the city. I felt their presence immediately, and there was no doubt on one particular night that a skirmish occurred between a powerful and hostile blood drinker and Avicus and Mael. With the Mind Gift I knew all that took place. Avicus and Mael so frightened the visitor that he was gone before morning, and had even given word in a lowly voice that he would never come to Rome again.

This put me to pondering. Would Avicus and Mael keep the city clean of others, while leaving me alone?

As the months passed this seemed to be the case.

A small band of Christian blood drinkers tried to infest our hunting ground. Indeed they came from the same tribe of snake worshipers who had come to me in Antioch insisting that I had old truths. With the Mind Gift I saw them fervently setting up their temple where they meant to sacrifice mortals. I was deeply repelled.

But once again Avicus and Mael put them to rout, apparently without being contaminated by their extravagant ideas about us serving Satan—a personage for whom Avicus and Mael would have had no use as they were pagans. And the city was ours again.

I did note in watching these activities from afar, however, that neither Mael nor Avicus seemed to know his own strength. They might have escaped the Druids of Britain by using their supernatural skills, but they were unaware of a secret which I had already learnt—that their powers increased with time.

Now I had drunk the blood of the Mother so I fancied myself much stronger than either of them on that account. But quite apart from that, my strength had increased with the centuries. I could now reach the top of a four-story tenement—of which there were many in Rome—with

comparative ease. And no band of mortal soldiers could have ever taken me prisoner. My speed was far too great for that.

Indeed when I took my victims, I already faced the problem of the old ones, to restrain my powerful hands from crushing out the life that pumped the blood into my mouth. And oh, was I ever still thirsty for that blood!

But as I spied upon these various activities—the routing of the Satanic vampires—I stayed away from the shrine of Akasha and Enkil for too long.

Finally one early evening, using my skills at their most powerful to cloak my presence, I did go out into the hills and to the shrine.

I felt that I had to make this visit. Never had I left the Great Pair alone for such a period, and I did not know whether or not there might be consequences for such neglect.

Now I realize such a fear was utterly ridiculous. As the years passed I could neglect the shrine for centuries. It was of no consequence whatsoever. But then I had only begun to learn.

And so I came to the new and barren chapel. I brought with me the requisite flowers and incense, and several bottles of scent with which to sprinkle Akasha's garments, and once I had lighted the lamps and set the incense to burning, once the flowers were in their vases, I felt an overall weakness and went down on my knees.

Let me remind you again that during my years with Pandora, I almost never prayed in this manner. But now Akasha belonged only to me.

I looked up at the unchanged couple, with their long black plaited hair, seated on the throne as I had left them, both freshly dressed in their Egyptian clothes of fine linen, Akasha in her pleated gown, the King in his kilt. Akasha's eyes still wore the imperishable black paint which Pandora had so carefully applied. And around Akasha's head was the glistening gold diadem with its rubies which Pandora had placed there with loving hands. Even the gold snake bracelets on her graceful upper arms had been the gift of Pandora. And on the feet of the two were the sandals which Pandora had fastened with care.

It seemed in the wealth of light that they had grown paler in complexion and I know now, centuries later, that I was right. They were healing rapidly from the Terrible Fire.

On this particular visit, I also paid keen attention to the expression of Enkil. I was too aware of the fact that he did not and had never incited my devotion, and I thought this was unwise.

In Egypt when I had first come to find them—a zealous new blood drinker, inflamed by Akasha's plea to take them out of Egypt—he had moved to block my path to the Queen.

Only with difficulty had he been made to return to his posture of seated King. Akasha had cooperated in that all-important moment, but the movements of both of them had been sluggish and unearthly and dreadful to behold.

That had been three hundred years ago, and the only gesture from either of them since had been the open arm of Akasha to welcome Pandora to herself.

Oh, how Pandora had been blessed in that gesture from Akasha! I would never forget it all my long years.

What were Enkil's thoughts, I asked myself. Was he ever jealous that I addressed my prayers to Akasha? Did he even know?

Whatever the case, I told him in a silent voice that I was devoted to him, that I would always protect him and his Queen.

At last, reason left me as I gazed on them.

I let Akasha know how much I revered her and how dangerous it had been for me to come. Only out of caution had I remained away. I would never on my own have left the shrine deserted. Indeed, I should have been here, using my vampiric skill to create paintings for the walls or to make for them mosaics—for though I never thought of myself as having possessed any skill in this regard—I had used my powers to make passable decorations for the shrine in Antioch, indeed very good ones, whiling away the lonely hours of the night.

But here the walls were simply whitewashed and the abundant flowers I'd brought seemed welcome color indeed.

"My Queen, help me," I prayed. And then as I meant to explain how miserable I was over the nearness of these two fellow blood drinkers, a dreadful and obvious thought came to my mind.

I could never have Avicus for a companion. I could never have anyone. For any blood drinker of even passable skill could learn from my mind the secret of Those Who Must Be Kept.

It had been vain and foolish for me to offer clothing and lodging to Avicus and Mael. I was doomed to be alone.

I felt sickened and cold in my misery. I looked up to the Queen and I could form no prayers with words.

Then quite helplessly I begged: "Bring Pandora back to me. If ever you brought her to me in the first place, bring her back, I beg you, I'll never quarrel with her again. I'll never abuse her again. This is unendurable, this loneliness. I need to hear the sound of her voice. I need to see her."

On and on I went in this manner, until suddenly I became alarmed that Avicus and Mael might be near to me, and I rose to my feet, straightened out my garments and made to take my leave.

"I'll return," I told the Mother and Father. "I'll make this shrine beautiful like the one in Antioch. Only let us wait until they've gone."

I was about to go out when abruptly the thought occurred to me—I needed more of Akasha's powerful blood. I needed it to be stronger than my foes. I needed it to endure what I had to endure.

Now understand, never since the first night that I had drunk from Akasha, had I taken more of her blood. That first night had been in Egypt when she told me with the Mind Gift to take her out of the land. Then and only then had I experienced the blood.

Even when Pandora was made a blood drinker, and she drank from Akasha, I had not dared to approach the Mother. In fact, I knew well how the Mother might strike down those who came by force to steal the Sacred Blood from her, for I'd witnessed such an aborted crime.

Now as I stood before the small dais with its seated royalty, the idea obsessed me. I must again take the Mother's blood.

In silence I begged permission. I waited for a sign. When Pandora had been made, Akasha had lifted her arm to beckon. I had seen it and marveled at it. I wanted such a thing to happen now.

No such sign came to me, however, and yet the obsession raged within me, until I moved forward, quite determined to drink the Divine Blood or die. I found myself suddenly embracing my cold and lovely Akasha with one arm behind her and the other lifted so that my hand held her head.

Closer and closer I came to her neck.

At last my lips were pressed against her cool unresponsive flesh and she had made no move to destroy me. I felt no fatal clasp on the back of my head. Silent as ever she remained in my arms.

Finally my teeth broke the surface of her skin and the thick blood, blood like that of no other among us, came into my mouth. At once I found myself dreamy and cast adrift in an impossible paradise of sunshine and green grass and flowering trees. What a comfort it was, what a balm. It seemed a garden of old Roman myth, one somehow familiar to me, protected forever from winter, and full of the most blessed blooms.

Yes, familiar and forever safe, this verdant place.

The blood ravaged me, and I could feel it hardening me, as it had the very first time it had come into my veins. The sun of the familiar garden grew brighter and brighter until the flowering trees began to disappear in the light. Part of me, some very small and weak part of me was afraid of it, this sun, but the larger part relished it, relished the warmth that was passing into me, and the comfort of what I beheld, and then all at once, as quickly as it had begun, this dream was ended.

I lay on the cold hard floor of the shrine, several yards away from the foot of the dais. I was on my back.

For a moment I was uncertain of what had happened. Was I injured? Was there to be some terrible justice in store? But within seconds, I realized I was as sound of limb as ever, and that the blood had greatly invigorated me just as I'd supposed.

I rose to my knees, and made certain with quick eyes that the Royal Pair remained as before. Why had I been thrown away from Akasha with such violence? Nothing was changed.

Then for a long time I gave my silent thanks for what had taken place. Only when I was certain that nothing further was to happen, I rose to my feet, and declaring that I would be back soon to begin my decorations of the shrine, I left.

I was enormously excited as I returned to my house. My increased agility, and keenness of

mind were more than welcome. I determined to test myself, and taking my dagger, I plunged it all the way through my left hand, and then withdrew it, watching the wound as it immediately healed.

At once I spread out a scroll of the finest parchment and I began to write in my personal code which no other could read, of what had taken place. I didn't know why, after taking the Sacred Blood, I had found myself on the floor of the chapel.

"The Queen has allowed me to drink again from her, and if this is to happen often, if I can take nourishment from our mysterious majesty, I can attain enormous strength. Even the blood drinker Avicus will be no match for me, though this might have been the case before this night."

Indeed, as it turned out I was precisely right about the implications of this incident, and during all the centuries to come, I approached Akasha again and again.

I did this not only when severely injured—a tale I mean to tell you—but I did it at times when the fancy caught hold of me as if she had put it in my mind. But never, never, as I have confessed with bitterness, did she ever press her teeth to my throat and take from me my own blood.

No, that distinction was left for the blood drinker Lestat, as I have said.

In the following months, this new blood served me well. I found that the Mind Gift was stronger in me. I could well detect the presence of Mael and Avicus when they were quite far away, and though such spying opens a mental passage as it were by which they could see me as their observer, I was able, after seeing them, to quickly close myself off.

I was also able to tell quite easily when they were searching for my presence, and of course I heard, positively heard, their footsteps when they were in the precincts of my house.

I also opened my house to humans!

The decision came to me one evening as I lay on the grass in my own garden dreaming. I would have regular banquets. I would invite the notorious and the slandered. I would have music and dim lamps.

I considered the matter from every perspective! I knew that I could arrange it. I knew that I could fool mortals as to my nature; and how their company would soothe my lonely heart! I did not go to my daily rest in my house, but in a hiding place far from it, so what danger could there be in this new decision? None whatsoever!

It could easily be done.

Naturally, I would never feed upon these guests. They would enjoy complete safety and hospitality under my roof, always. I would hunt in far precincts and under cover of darkness. But my house, my house would be full of warmth and music and life.

Well, I went about it, and it proved far simpler than I had ever dreamt.

Having my sweet and good-natured old slaves lay out tables rich with food and drink, I brought in the disreputable philosophers to talk away the night to me, and I listened to them in their rambling, as I did to the old and neglected soldiers who had tales of war to tell which their

own children did not want to hear.

Oh, this was a miracle, the admission of mortals to my very rooms, mortals who thought me to be alive as I nodded and coaxed them in their wine-fed stories. I was warmed by it, and I wished that Pandora were here with me to enjoy it for it was precisely the sort of thing which she would have wanted us to do.

Soon my house was never empty, and I made the amazing discovery that should I become bored in the midst of this heated and drunken company it was a simple matter for me to get up and go into my library and begin writing, for all the drunken guests simply went on with each other, hardly noticing what I did and only rousing themselves to greet me when I returned.

Understand, I did not become a friend to any of these dishonorable or disgraced creatures. I was only a warm-hearted host and spectator who listened without criticism and never—until dawn—turned anyone away.

But it was a far cry from my former solitude, and without the strengthening blood of Akasha, and perhaps without my quarrel with Avicus and Mael, I would never have taken this step.

And so my house became crowded and noisy, and wine sellers sought me out to offer their new vintages, and young men came to me, begging me to listen to their songs.

Even a few fashionable philosophers appeared at my door from time to time, and once in a while a great teacher, and these I enjoyed immensely, making very certain that the lamps were very dim and that the rooms were most shadowy, so frightened was I that the sharp-minded might discover that I was not what I pretended to be.

As for my trips to the shrine and Those Who Must Be Kept, I knew that I traveled in total secrecy for my mind was more securely cloaked than before.

And on certain nights—when the banquet in my house could well do without me—and I held myself to be entirely safe from all intrusion, I went to the shrine and did the work which I supposed would comfort my poor Akasha and Enkil.

During these years, rather than undertake mosaics which had proved very difficult for me in Antioch, though I had succeeded, I made murals on the walls of the common kind seen in so many Roman houses, of frolicking gods and goddesses in gardens of eternal springtime and bounteous flowers and fruit.

I was hard at work one evening, singing to myself, happy among all the pots of paint when I suddenly realized that the garden I was faithfully rendering was in fact the garden I had seen when I drank Akasha's blood.

I stopped, sat still on the floor of the shrine, as if I were a child, with crossed legs, and looked up at the venerable Parents. Was it meant to be?

I had no idea. The garden looked vaguely familiar. Had I seen such a garden long before I had drunk Akasha's blood? I couldn't remember. And I, Marius, prided myself upon my memory. I went on with my work. I covered over a wall and started all over again to render it more nearly

perfect. I made better trees and shrubbery. I painted the sunlight and the effects of it upon green leaves.

When inspiration left me, I would use my blood drinker delicacy to creep into some fashionable villa outside the walls of the enormous and ever expanding city, and by the faintest light peruse the inevitably lush murals for new figures, new dances, new attitudes and smiles.

Of course I could do this easily without waking anyone in the house, and sometimes I need have no worry of waking anyone, for no one was there.

Rome was immense, busy as ever, but with all the wars, with all the shifting politics and scheming plotters and passing Emperors, people were being banished and recalled regularly, and great houses were often empty for me to quietly wander and enjoy.

Meanwhile, in my house, my banquets had become so famous that my rooms were always full. And no matter what my goal for any night, I commenced it among the warm company of drunkards who'd begun their feasting and quarreling before I ever arrived.

"Ah, Marius, welcome!" they would cry out as I came into the room.

How I smiled at them all, my treasured company.

Never did anyone suspect me of anything, and I did grow to love some of these delightful creatures, but always I remembered that I was a predator of men, and could not therefore be loved by them, and so I kept my heart covered as it were.

And so with this mortal comfort, the years passed, whilst I kept myself busy with the energy of a madman, either writing in my journals and subsequently burning them, or painting on the walls of the shrine.

Meantime, the wretched serpent worshiping blood drinkers came again, attempting to establish their absurd temple within one of the neglected catacombs where mortal Christians no longer gathered, and once again, Avicus and Mael drove them away.

I observed all this, immensely relieved that I had not been called upon to do anything, and painfully remembering when I had slaughtered such a band in Antioch and subsequently fallen into the piteous madness that had cost me the love of Pandora apparently for all time.

But no, not for all time; surely she would come to me, I thought. I wrote about it in my journals.

I put down my pen; I closed my eyes. I longed for her. I prayed that she would come to me. I envisioned her with her rippling brown hair and melancholy oval face. I tried to remember with exactitude the shape and the fine color of her dark eyes.

How she had argued with me. How she had known the poets and philosophers. How she had been able to reason. And I, I had mocked her all too much.

I cannot tell you how many years passed in this fashion.

I was aware that even though we did not speak to one another, or even face each other in the street, Avicus and Mael had become companions to me by their very presence. And as for their

keeping Rome clean of other blood drinkers, I was in their debt.

Now, I didn't pay much attention to what was happening with the government of the Empire as I think you can ascertain from all I've said.

But in truth I cared passionately about the fate of the Empire. For the Empire to me was the civilized world. And though I was a secret hunter by night, a filthy killer of humans, nevertheless I was a Roman, and I lived in all other ways a civilized life.

I suppose that I assumed, much like many an old Senator of the time, that sooner or later the endless battles of the Emperors would sort themselves out. A great man, with the strength of Octavian, would rise to unite the entire world once again.

Meantime the armies would patrol the borders, endlessly driving back the barbarian menace, and if the responsibility fell, over and over again to the armies to choose an Emperor, so be it, as long as the Empire remained intact.

As for the Christians who existed everywhere, I did not know what to make of them at all. It was a great mystery to me that this little cult, which had begun in Jerusalem of all places, could have grown to such tremendous size.

Before I'd left Antioch, I'd been amazed by the success of Christianity, of how it was becoming organized, and how it seemed to thrive on division and dissent.

But Antioch was the East as I have said. That Rome was capitulating to the Christians was beyond my wildest dreams. Slaves had everywhere gone over to the new religion, but so had men and women of high position. And persecutions had no effect at all.

Before I continue, however, allow me to point out what other historians have also pointed out, that before Christianity, the entire ancient world lived in a kind of religious harmony. No one persecuted anyone else for religion.

Even the Jews who would associate with no one else were easily infolded by Greeks and Romans and allowed to practice their extremely anti-social beliefs. It was they who rebelled against Rome, not Rome which sought to enslave them. And so this harmony was worldwide.

Of course all of this led me to believe, when I first heard Christians preaching, that there was no chance of this religion gaining ground. It placed far too much responsibility upon the new members to avoid all contact with the revered gods of Greece and Rome, and so I thought the sect would soon die out.

Also there was the constant strife among the Christians as to what they really believed. Surely they would destroy one another, I thought, and the whole body of ideas, or whatever it could be called, would dissolve.

But no such thing happened, and the Rome in which I lived in the three hundreds was thronged with Christians, as I've said. For their apparently magical ceremonies, they met in the catacombs and also in private homes.

Now as I went along, watching all this, and yet ignoring it, there came a couple of events

which stunned me out of my dreams.

Let me explain.

As I have said, the Emperors of Rome were constantly at war. No sooner had the old Roman Senate ratified the appointment of one than he was murdered by another. And troops were always marching across the far-flung provinces of the Empire to establish a new Caesar where another had been put to rout.

In the year of 305, there were two of these sovereigns known as Augusti, and two known as Caesars, and I myself did not know precisely what these titles meant. Or shall I say, I had too much contempt for all involved to know what they meant.

Indeed these so-called "Emperors" more often than I liked were invading Italy and one by the name of Severus in the year 307 had come all the way to the gates of Rome.

Now I, with little more than the greatness of Rome to keep me company, did not want to see my native city sacked!

It soon became clear to me when I started to pay attention that all of Italy as well as Sicily, Corsica, Sardinia and North Africa were all under the rule of the "Emperor" Maxentius, and it was he who had repelled Severus and was now repelling yet another invader, Galerius, whom he chased away in defeat.

This Maxentius who lived only six miles from the city walls was himself a beast. At one extremely unhappy event, he allowed the praetorians, that is, his personal guards, to massacre the people of Rome. And he was very against the Christians whom he persecuted needlessly and cruelly; and the gossip had it that he debauched the wives of outstanding citizens, thereby giving the greater offense. In fact, the Senators suffered a great deal of abuse at his hands, while he let his soldiers run riot in Rome.

None of this meant much to me, however, until I heard that one of the other Emperors—Constantine—was marching on Rome. This was the third threat in recent years to my beloved city; and I was much relieved when Maxentius went out to fight the important battle a great safe distance from the walls. Of course he did this because he knew the Romans would not support him.

But who could have known that this was to be one of the most decisive battles in the history of the Western world?

Of course the battle occurred in the day so that I could know nothing of it until I waked with the setting sun. At once, I rushed up the stairs from my underground hiding place and, coming to my house, I found all my regular philosopher guests drunk, and I went out into the streets to learn what I could from the citizenry of what had taken place.

Constantine was completely the victor. He had massacred the troops of Maxentius and the latter had fallen into the Tiber and drowned. But what was most significant to those congregating everywhere was the rumor that before Constantine went into battle he had seen a sign in the sky

which had come from Jesus Christ.

Indeed the sign had been made manifest right after noon when Constantine had looked up and beheld just above the declining sun, the sign of the cross with the inscription "Conquer with This."

My reaction was incredulity. Could a Roman Emperor possibly have seen a Christian vision? I went rushing back to my desk, wrote down all these particulars in my precarious journal of events and waited to see what history would reveal.

As for the company in my banquet room they were now all awake and arguing about the whole matter. None of us believed it. Constantine a Christian? More wine, please.

At once, to everyone's amazement, but without doubt, Constantine revealed himself to be a Christian man.

Instead of endowing temples to celebrate his great victory, as was the custom, he endowed Christian churches, and sent out word to his governors that they should behave in the same manner as he had done.

Then he presented the Pope of the Christians with a palace on the Coelian Hill. And let me point out that this palace was to remain in the hands of the Popes of Rome for a thousand years. I had once known those who lived in it, and I went myself to see the Vicar of Christ ensconced in it, and speculated as to what all this would mean.

Soon laws were passed which forbade crucifixion as a form of execution, and also forbade the popular gladiatorial games. Sunday became a holiday. And the Emperor extended other benefits to the Christians, and very soon we heard that Christians were petitioning him to take part in their doctrinal disputes!

Indeed, their arguing over matters of doctrine became so serious in African cities that riots broke out in which Christians murdered each other. People wanted the Emperor to intervene.

I think this is a very important thing to understand about Christianity. It was from its very beginnings, it seems, a religion of great quarrels and wars, and it wooed the power of temporal authorities, and made them part of itself in the hope of resolving through sheer force its many arguments.

All this I watched with amazed eyes. Of course my guests argued furiously about it. It seemed some who were dining at my table were Christians and had been all along. Now it was out in the open, yet the wine flowed and the music went on.

Understand, I had no real fear of or inherent distaste for Christianity. As I have said, I witnessed its growth with amazement.

And now—as ten years or more passed during which Constantine shared the Empire uneasily with Lacinius, I saw changes that I did not believe would ever take place. Obviously the old persecutions had been utter failures. Christianity was a marvelous success.

There seemed to me to be a blending of Roman thinking with Christian ideas. Perhaps one

should say it was a blending of styles, and ways of looking at the world.

Finally—when Lacinius was gone, Constantine became the sole ruler of the Empire and we saw all of its provinces united once more. He became obviously more concerned with the disunity of the Christians and we heard word in Rome of huge Christian councils in the East. The first took place at Antioch where I had lived with Pandora and which was still a great city, perhaps in many respects more lively and interesting at this point than Rome.

The Arian heresy was the cause of Constantine's discontent. And the whole thing had to do with something extremely small in the Scriptures which seemed to Constantine to be hardly worth the dispute. Nevertheless certain Bishops were excommunicated from the growing Church, and another more important council was held in Nicaea only two months later, where Constantine presided again.

There the Nicene Creed was adopted, which is recited by Christians even in the present time. The Bishops who signed this Creed effectively again condemned and excommunicated the theorist and Christian writer Arius as a heretic and doomed his writings to be burnt. He himself was to be shut out of his native Alexandria. The judgment was absolute.

But it is worth noting, and I did, that Arius continued his struggle for recognition, even though the council had cast him out.

The other great affair of this council, and a matter which is still rather confusing in Christianity, was the question of the true date of Easter, or the anniversary of the resurrection of Christ. A determination was made as to how this date would be calculated, and it was based upon a Western system. And then the council came to an end.

Now the Bishops who had come to the council were asked to stay and help the Emperor celebrate his twenty years on the throne, and of course they did so, for how could they refuse?

But as soon as word reached Rome of these elaborate festivities, there was much jealousy and discontent. Rome felt ignored in all these goings-on. And so there was considerable relief and happiness when in January of 326, the Emperor headed for our city once again.

Before his arrival, however, terrible deeds became attached to Constantine's name. For reasons nobody could discover, he stopped along the way to put to death both his son Crispus and his stepson, Licinianus, and his own wife, the Empress Fausta. Historians can speculate forever as to why all this happened. The truth is, nobody knows why Constantine committed these acts. There may have been a plot against him. Perhaps there was not.

Let me say here that it cast a cloud over his arrival among the Romans, and that when he did come, it was no great consolation to the old ruling class, because he dressed very much in the extravagant Eastern style, with silk and damask, and would not be part of the important procession to the Temple of Jupiter, as the people had expected him to do.

Of course the Christians adored him. Rich and poor they flocked to see him in his Eastern robes and jewels. They were overwhelmed with his generosity as he laid the ground for more

churches.

And though he had spent almost no time in Rome, he had over the years allowed for the completion of secular buildings begun by Maxentius, and he built a large public bath under his own name.

Then came appalling rumors. Constantine had plans for an entirely new city. Constantine found Rome old and decayed and lacking as a capital. Constantine meant to make a new city for the Empire; he meant to make it in the East, and it would honor his name!

Imagine it, if you can.

Of course the Emperors of the last century had moved all over the provinces of the Empire. They had fought each other, breaking into pairs and tetrarchies, and meeting here and murdering one another there.

But to give up Rome as the capital? To create another great city to be the center of the Empire?

It was unthinkable to me.

I brooded in hatred. I knew despair.

All of my nightly guests shared my misery. The elderly soldiers were broken by the news and one of the old philosophers wept bitterly. Another city to be the capital of the Roman Empire? The younger men were furious, but they could not hide their bitter curiosity, or their grudging guesses as to where this new city might be.

I could not dare weep as I wanted to for my tears would have been full of blood.

I asked the musicians to play old songs, songs I had to teach them for they had never heard them, and there came a strange moment when we sang together—my mortal guests and me—a slow mournful song about Rome's tarnished glory which we would not forget.

The air was cool on that evening. I went out into the garden and looked down over the side of the hill. I could see lights here and there in the darkness. I could hear laughter and conversation from other houses.

"This is Rome!" I whispered.

How could Constantine abandon the city which had been the capital of the Empire for a thousand years of struggle, triumph, defeat, glory? Couldn't someone reason with him? This simply could not come to pass.

But the more I roamed the city, the more I listened to talk both far and wide, the more I roamed outside the walls and into the towns thereabout, I came to see what had motivated the Emperor.

Constantine wanted to begin his Christian Empire in a place of incredible advantage, and could not retreat to the Italian peninsula when so much of the culture of his people lay to the East. Also he had to defend his Eastern borders. The Persian Empire of the East was always a threat. And Rome was not a fit place for a man in supreme power to reside.

Thus Constantine had chosen the distant Greek city of Byzantium to be the site of Constantinople, his new home.

And I should see my home, my sacred city, become now a castoff of a man whom I, as a Roman, could not accept.

There were rumors of the incredible if not miraculous speed with which Constantinople had been mapped out, and with which building was being done.

At once many Romans followed Constantine to the burgeoning new city. At his invitation perhaps, or simply on their own impulse Senators decamped with their families and their wealth to live in this new and shining place, a subject on everyone's lips.

Soon I heard that Senators from all the cities of the Empire were being drawn to Constantinople, and indeed, as baths and meeting halls and circuses were erected in the new capital, beautiful statues were being looted from cities throughout Greece and Asia to adorn the new architectural works.

Rome, my Rome, what will become of you, I thought.

Of course my evening feasts were not really deeply affected. Those who came to dine with Marius were poor teachers and historians who had no means of moving to Constantinople, or curious and reckless young men who had not made the clever choice as yet.

I had plenty of mortal company as always, and indeed, I had inherited a few very quick-witted Greek philosophers who had been left behind by families who had gone to Constantinople where they would no doubt find more brilliant men to tutor their sons.

But this, the company in my house was a small matter.

In truth, as the years passed, my soul was crushed.

And it struck me as more than ever dreadful that I had no other immortal companion who might understand what I felt. I wondered if Mael or Avicus could possibly comprehend what was going on. I knew they still haunted the same streets as I did. I heard them.

And my need of Pandora became so terrible that I could not envision her or think of her anymore.

But still, I thought desperately, if this man Constantine can preserve the Empire, if Christianity can bind it and prevent it from breaking apart, if its disparate provinces can be united, if Constantine can keep back the barbarians who forever pillage without building or preserving anything, who am I to judge him, I, who am outside of life?

I went back to my scribbling on the nights when my mind was feverish. And on those when I was certain that Mael and Avicus were nowhere in the vicinity I went out into the country to visit the shrine.

My work on the walls of the shrine was continuous. As soon as I finished painting the walls of the entire chapel, I covered over a wall and began painting again. I could not make my nymphs and goddesses to suit my standards. Their figures were not slender enough for me, and the arms

not graceful enough. Their hair was not right. And as for the gardens I rendered, there were not enough kinds of flowers for me to include.

Always, there was that sense of familiarity—that I had seen this garden, that I had known it long before I was allowed by Akasha to drink her blood. I had seen the stone benches in it, I had seen the fountains.

I couldn't shake the sensations of being in it as I painted, so strong was the feeling. I'm not sure it aided me in my work. Perhaps it hurt.

But as I gained skill as a painter, and I did indeed gain skill, other aspects of the work disturbed me.

I was convinced that there was something unnatural in it, something inherently ghastly in the manner with which I drew human figures so nearly perfectly, something unnatural in the way I made the colors so unusually bright, and added so many fierce little details. I was particularly repelled by my penchant for decorative details.

As much as I was driven to do this work, I hated it. I composed whole gardens of lovely mythic creatures only to rub them out. Sometimes I painted so fast that I exhausted myself, and fell down on the floor of the shrine, spending the paralytic sleep of the whole day there, helpless, rather than going to my secret resting place—my coffin—which was hidden not far from my house.

We are monsters, that is what I thought whenever I painted or looked on my own painting, and that's what I think now. Never mind that I want to go on existing. We are unnatural. We are witnesses with both too much and too little feeling. And as I thought these things, I had before me the mute witnesses, Akasha and Enkil.

What did it matter to them what I did?

Perhaps twice a year I changed their fancy garments, arranging Akasha's gown with fastidious care. I brought new bracelets for her more often and put these on her cold sluggish arms with slow tender movements so as not to insult her by what I did. I fussed with the gold in the black plaited hair of both Parents. I arranged a handsome necklace around the naked shoulders of the King.

I never spoke to either of them idly. They were too grand for that. I addressed them only in prayer.

I was silent in the shrine as I worked, with my paint pots and brushes. I was silent as I sat there peering in frank disgust at what I'd done.

Then one night, after many years of diligence in the shrine, I stood back and tried to see the whole as never before. My head was swimming. I went to the entrance to take the stance of a man who was new to the place, and forgetting utterly the Divine Pair, I merely looked at the walls.

A truth came clear to me in painful clarity. I had painted Pandora. I had painted her

everywhere. Each nymph, each goddess, was Pandora. Why hadn't I known?

I was amazed and defeated. My eyes are playing tricks on me, I thought. I wiped them, actually wiped them as a mortal might do, to see all the better and looked again. No. It was Pandora, rendered beautifully everywhere that I looked. Dresses changed and style of hair, yes, and other adornments but these creatures were all Pandora, and I had not seen it until now.

Of course the never ending garden looked familiar. Never mind that. Pandora had little or nothing to do with those feelings. Pandora was inescapable and came from some different fount of sensations. Pandora would never leave me. That was the curse.

I concealed all my paints and brushes behind the Divine Parents as I always did—it would have been an insult to the Father and Mother to leave them—and I went back to Rome.

I had before me several hours before dawn in which to suffer, in which to think of Pandora as never before.

The drunken party was winding down a bit as it always did in the small hours, with a few guests asleep in the grass outside, and others singing together in a small group, and no one took notice of me as I went into my library, and sat at my desk.

Through the open doors I looked out at the dark trees and wished that my life were at an end.

It seemed I lacked the courage to go on in the existence which I'd made for myself, and then I turned and decided—simply out of desperation—to look at the paintings on the walls of the room. I had of course approved these paintings and paid to have them refreshed and changed many a time.

But now I took stock of them from my point of view not as Marius the rich man who can have whatever he wishes, but as Marius the monster painter who had rendered Pandora twenty-one times on the four walls of Akasha's shrine.

I saw suddenly how inferior were these paintings, how rigid and pallid the goddesses and nymphs who peopled this world of my study, and quickly I woke my day slaves and told them that they must have everything covered over with fresh paint the following day. Also an entire supply of the best paints must be purchased and brought to the house. Never mind how the walls were to be redecorated. Leave that to me. Cover up all that was there.

They were used to my eccentricities, and after making certain that they understood me, they went back to their sleep.

I didn't know what I meant to do, except I felt driven to make pictures, and I felt if I can cling to that, if I can do that, then I can go on.

My misery deepened.

I laid out vellum for an entry in my erstwhile journal and began to describe the experience of discovering my beloved everywhere around me, and how it seemed to contain an element of sorcery when suddenly I heard an unmistakable sound.

Avicus was at my gate. Indeed he was asking me with a strong current of the Mind Gift

whether or not he might come over the wall and in to visit me.

He was leery of the mortals in my banquet room and in my garden. But might he come in?

At once I gave my silent answer that he could.

It had been years since I had so much as glimpsed him in the back streets, and I was not entirely surprised to see him dressed as a Roman soldier, and to see that he had taken to carrying a dagger and a sword.

He glanced fretfully at the door to the banquet room, but I gestured that he must pay the guests no attention at all.

His rich curling dark hair was well groomed and clean and he had about him an attitude of prosperity and well-being, except that his clothes were dreadfully stained with blood. It was not human blood. I would have smelled human blood. He soon gave me to know by a simple facial expression that he was in dire distress.

"What is it? What can I do for you?" I asked. I tried to cloak my pure loneliness, my pure need to touch his hand.

You are a creature like me, I wanted to say. We are monsters and we can put our arms around each other. What are they, my guests, but tender things? But I said nothing at all.

It was Avicus who spoke.

"Something dreadful has happened. I don't know how to correct it, or even if it can be corrected. I beg you to come."

"Come where, tell me," I said sympathetically.

"It's Mael. He's been grievously wounded and I don't know if the damage can be repaired."

We went out at once.

I followed him into a very crowded quarter of Rome where the newer buildings faced one another sometimes with no more than two feet in between. At last we came to a substantial new house on the outskirts, a rich dwelling, with a heavy gate, and he took me inside, through the entranceway and into the broad beautiful atrium or courtyard within the house.

Let me note here that he was not using his full strength during this little journey, but I did not want to point this out to him, and so at his slow pace, I had followed his lead.

Now, through the atrium, we passed into the main room of the house, the room where mortals would have dined, and there by the light of one lamp, I saw Mael lying in seeming helplessness on the tiled floor.

The light was glinting in his eyes.

I knelt beside him at once.

His head was twisted awkwardly to one side, and one of his arms was turned as though the shoulder were out of joint. His entire body was hideously gaunt, and his skin had a dreadful pallor to it. Yet his eyes fixed on me with neither malice nor supplication.

His clothes, very much like those of Avicus, hung loose on his starved frame, and were deeply

soaked with blood. As for his long blond hair it was clotted with blood also, and his lips shivered as if he were trying to speak but could not.

Avicus gestured to me helplessly with both hands.

I bent closer to have a better look at Mael, while Avicus brought the oil lamp near and held it so that it cast a warm bright light.

Mael made a low, harsh sound, and I saw gradually that there were horrid red wounds on his throat, and on his naked shoulder where the cloth of his tunic had been pushed out of the way. His arm was at the wrong angle to his body, most definitely, and his neck had been horribly twisted so that his head was not right.

In a moment of exquisite horror, I realized that these parts of him—head and arm—had been shifted from their natural place.

"How did this happen?" I asked. I looked up at Avicus. "Do you know?"

"They cut off his head and his arm," said Avicus. "It was a band of soldiers, drunk and looking for trouble. We made to go around them, but they turned on us. We should have gone up over the roofs. We were too sure of ourselves. We thought ourselves so superior, so invincibly strong."

"I see," I answered. I clasped the hand of Mael's good arm. At once, he pressed my hand in return. In truth I was deeply shocked. But I could not let either of them see this, for it would only have made them more afraid.

I had often wondered if we could be destroyed by dismemberment, and now the awful truth was plain to me. It was not sufficient alone to release our souls from this world.

"They surrounded him before I knew what to do," said Avicus. "I fought off those who tried to harm me, but look what they have done to him."

"And you brought him back here," I said, "and you tried to replace both head and arm."

"He was still living!" said Avicus. "They had run off, drunken, stumbling miscreants. And I saw at once that he was still alive. There in the street, though the blood poured out of him, he was looking at me! Why, he was reaching with his good arm for his own head."

He looked at me as though begging me to understand him, or perhaps forgive him.

"He was alive," he repeated. "The blood poured out of his neck, and it poured out of his head. In the street, I put the head on the neck. It was here that I joined the arm to the shoulder. And look what I have done."

Mael's fingers tightened on my hand.

"Can you answer me?" I said to Mael. "Make only a sound if you cannot."

There came that harsh noise again but this time I fancied I heard the syllable Yes.

"Do you want to live?" I asked.

"Oh, don't ask him such a thing," Avicus begged. "He may lack courage just now. Only help me if you know what to do." He knelt down beside Mael and he bent over, carefully holding the lamp to one side, and he pressed his lips to Mael's forehead.

From Mael there had come that same answer again: Yes.

"Bring me more light," I said to Avicus, "but understand before you do. I possess no extraordinary magic in this matter. I think I know what has happened and I know how to undo it. But that is all."

At once Avicus gathered up from about the house a number of oil lamps and lighted them and set them down in an oval around Mael. It looked strangely like the work of a sorcerer marking off a place for magic, but I didn't let my thoughts become distracted by that annoying fact, and when I could finally see with the very best advantage I knelt down and looked at all the wounds, and I looked at the sunken, bloodless and skeletal figure of Mael.

Finally I sat back on my heels. I looked at Avicus who sat opposite me on the other side of his friend.

"Tell me precisely how you accomplished this," I said.

"I fixed the head to the neck as best I could do it, but I was wrong, you see, I did it wrong. How can we know how to do it right?" he demanded. "Do you know?"

"And the arm," I said, "it's badly joined as well."

"What shall we do?"

"Did you force the joining?" I asked.

He reflected before answering me. And then he said, "Yes, I think I did. I see your meaning. I did it with force. I meant these parts to adhere once more. I used too much force."

"Ah, well, we have one chance to repair this, I think, but understand again I possess no secret knowledge. I take my lead from the fact that he is still living. I think we must pull off both head and arm and see if these parts, when placed in correct proximity to the body, will not join at the right angles as they should."

His face brightened only as he slowly understood what I had said.

"Yes," he said. "Perhaps they will join as they are meant to join! If they can join so poorly, they can join in a way that is perfect and right."

"Yes," I said, "but you must do this act. You are the one he trusts."

He looked down at his friend and I could see that this task would be no easy thing. Then slowly he looked up at me.

"We must give him our blood first to strengthen him," he said.

"No, after it's done," I said, "he'll need it for healing. That's when we'll give it." I disliked that I had given my word in this, but I realized quite abruptly that I didn't want to see Mael die. Indeed, so much did I not want to see it that I thought perhaps I ought to take over the entire operation myself.

But I could not step in. It was up to Avicus how the matter went forward.

Quite abruptly, he placed his left hand firmly on Mael's shoulder and pulled Mael's badly joined arm with all his strength. At once the arm was free of the body with bloody ligaments

trembling from it rather like the roots of a tree.

"Now, place it close to him, there, yes, and see if it does not seek its own place."

He obeyed me, but my hand was out to guide the arm quickly, not letting it get too close, but waiting for it to begin to move on its own. Abruptly I felt the spasm in the arm and then let go of it, and saw it quickly joined to the shoulder, the flying ligaments moving as so many little serpents into the body until the rupture was no more.

Alas, I had been right in my suspicions. The body followed its own supernatural rules.

At once, I cut my wrist with my teeth and I let my blood pour down on the wound. I saw it heal before my eyes.

Avicus seemed rather amazed by this simple trick, though surely he must have known it, for this limited curative property of our blood is almost universally known among our kind.

In a moment, I had given all that I wanted to give and the wound had all but disappeared.

I sat back to see Mael's eyes fixed on me as before. His head looked pathetic and grotesque at its incorrect angle. And his expression was hideously empty.

I felt his hand again, and the pressure was returned.

"Are you prepared to do it?" I asked Avicus.

"Hold him well by the shoulders," Avicus answered. "For the love of Heaven, use all your strength."

I put my hands up, and caught Mael as firmly as I could. I would have rested my knees on his chest but he was far too weakened for such a weight and so I kept to one side.

Finally with a loud moan, Avicus pulled on Mael's head with both his hands.

The gush of blood was appalling, and I could swear that I heard the ripping of preternatural flesh. Avicus fell back with the gesture, and toppled to one side, holding the helpless head in his hands.

"At once, place it near to the body!" I cried. I held the shoulders still, though the body had suddenly given a dreadful lurch. Indeed the arms flew up as if in search of the head.

Avicus laid the head down in the gushing blood, pushing it ever closer to the gaping neck, until suddenly the head seemed to move of its own volition, the ligaments once more like so many little snakes as they made to meet with those of the trunk, and the whole body gave another lurch and the head was firmly fixed as it should have been.

I saw Mael's eyes fluttering, and I saw his mouth open, and he cried out,

"Avicus," with all his strength.

Avicus bent over him, cutting his wrist with his teeth as I had done before, only this time it was to let the stream come down into Mael's mouth.

Mael reached for the arm above him, and he brought it down to him, drinking fiercely as his back arched, and his thin miserable legs quivered and went straight.

I drew away from the pair, out of the circle of light. I sat still for a long while in the shadows,

my eyes fixed on them, and then when I could see that Avicus was exhausted, that his heart was tired from giving so much blood, I crept to join the two, and I asked if I might give Mael to drink from me as well.

Oh, how my soul revolted against this gesture. Why ever did I feel compelled to do it? I can give no answer. I don't know any more now than I knew at the time.

Mael was able to sit up. His figure was more robust, but the expression on his face was too dreadful to behold. The blood on the floor was dried and glittering as our blood always is. It would have to be scraped up and burnt.

Mael leant forward and put his arms around me in a terrible intimacy and kissed me on the neck. He didn't dare to sink his teeth.

"Very well, do it," I said, though I was dreadfully hesitant, and I put in my mind images of Rome for him to see as he drank, images of beautiful new temples, Constantine's amazing triumphal arch, and all the wondrous churches which were now erected far and wide. I thought of Christians and their magical ceremonies. I thought of anything to disguise and obliterate all the secrets of my entire life.

A miserable revulsion continued in me as I felt the pull of his hunger and his need. I refused to see anything of his soul with the Mind Gift, and I think my eyes met those of Avicus at one moment, and I was struck by the grave, complex expression on his face.

Finally, it was all finished. I could give no more. It was almost dawn and I needed what strength I had to move quickly towards my hiding place. I rose to my feet.

Avicus spoke up.

"Can we not be friends now?" he asked. "We have been enemies for so many, many years."

Mael was still wretchedly afflicted from what had befallen him, and in no state perhaps to declare on the matter one way or the other, but he looked up at me with his accusing eyes, and said:

"In Egypt you saw the Great Mother, I saw her in your heart when I drank your blood."

I went rigid with shock and fury.

I thought I should kill him. He has been good only for learning—how to put together again blood drinkers who had been dismembered—and it was time now to finish what the drunkards only started earlier this night. But I said and did nothing.

Oh, how cold was my heart.

Avicus was dreadfully disappointed and disapproving.

"Marius, I thank you," he said, sad and weary as he walked me to the gate. "What could I have done if you had refused to come to us? I owe you an immense debt."

"There is no Good Mother," I told him. "I bid you farewell."

As I hurried back over the rooftops of Rome, towards my own house, I resolved in my soul that I'd told them the truth.

7

I was very surprised the next night to find the walls of my library completely painted over. I had forgotten that I'd given such a command to my slaves. As soon as I saw all the pots of fresh paint in any number of colors, I then remembered what I had told them to do.

Indeed, I couldn't think of anything but Mael and Avicus and must confess I was more than fascinated by the mixture of civilized manners and quiet dignity which I found in Avicus and not at all in Mael.

Mael would always be for me a barbarian, unlettered, unrefined, and above all fanatical, for it was due to his fanatic belief in the Gods of the Grove that he had taken my life.

And realizing that the only way I could escape my thoughts of the pair was to paint the newly prepared walls, I set to work at once.

I took no notice of my guests who were already dining of course, and of those going and coming through the garden and the open gate.

Realize, if you will, that by this time I did not have to hunt for blood that often, and though I was still much too much the savage in this respect, I often left it till late in the evening or early in the morning, or did not hunt at all.

So to the painting, I went. I didn't stand back and take stock of what I meant to do. Rather I went at it fiercely, covering the wall in great glaring patches, making the usual garden which obsessed me, and the nymphs and goddesses whose forms were so familiar to my mind.

These creatures had no names for me. They might have come from any verse in Ovid, or from the writing of Lucretius, or indeed from the blind poet, Homer. It was no matter to me. I lost myself in depicting uplifted arms and graceful throats, in painting oval faces and garments blowing gently in the breeze.

One wall I divided with painted columns, and around these I painted vines. Another wall, I worked with stiff borders of stylized greenery. And the third wall I allotted into small panels in which I would feature various gods.

Meantime, the house grew crowded with the ever noisy party, and some of my favorite drunkards drifted inevitably into the library and watched me at work.

I knew enough to slow my pace somewhat so as not to scare them with my unnatural speed. But otherwise, I took no notice, and only when one of the lyre players came in to sing for me did I realize how mad the house must seem.

For there were people dining and drinking everywhere now, and the master of the house in his

long tunic stood painting a wall, the proper work for craftsmen or artists, not Patricians you understand, and there seemed no decent boundary of any kind.

I began to laugh at the absurdity of it.

One of the young guests marveled at my talent.

"Marius, you never told us. We never imagined."

"Neither did I," I said dully, going on with my work, watching the white paint disappear beneath my brush.

For months I went on with my painting, even moving into the banquet room where the guests cheered me on as I worked. Whatever I accomplished it did not please me and it certainly did not amaze them.

They thought it amusing and eccentric that a rich man should decorate his own walls. And all the drunken advice I received did not amount to very much. The learned men knew the mythic tales I depicted and they enjoyed them, and the young men tried to get me in arguments which I refused.

It was the spacious garden I loved to paint above all, with no painted frame to set it apart from our world with its dancing figures and bending laurels. It was the familiar garden. For I imagined that I could escape into it with my mind.

And during that time I did not risk attending to the chapel. Rather I painted all the rooms of my house.

Meantime, the old gods whom I painted were fast disappearing from the Temples of Rome.

At some point or other, Constantine had made Christianity the legal religion of the Empire, and now it was the pagans who couldn't worship as they chose.

I don't think Constantine himself was ever in favor of forcing anybody in religious matters. But that's what had come about.

So I painted poor old Bacchus, the god of wine, with his cheerful followers, and the brilliant Apollo chasing the desperate and lovely Daphne who turned into a laurel tree rather than allow the godly rape.

On and on I worked, happy with mortal company, thinking, Mael and Avicus, please do not search my mind for secrets.

But in truth all during this time I could hear them very near me. My mortal banquet parties puzzled them and frightened them. I could hear them approach my house and then go away every night.

Finally the inevitable night came.

They stood at my gate.

Mael was for coming in without permission, and Avicus kept him back, begging me with the Mind Gift to admit them once more.

I was in my library, painting it over for the third time, and the dinner party that night, thank

the gods, had not spilled over into the room.

I put down my brush. I stared at my unfinished work. It seemed another Pandora had emerged in the unfinished Daphne and it struck a tragic chord in my heart that Daphne had eluded her lover. What a fool I'd been to escape mine.

But for a long self-indulgent moment I looked at what I had painted—this unearthly creature with her rippling brown hair.

You understood my soul, I thought, and now others are coming only to sack my heart of all its riches. What am I to do? We argued, yes, you and I, but it was with loving respect, was it not? I cannot endure without you. Please come to me, from wherever you are.

But there was no time for my solitude. It suddenly seemed rather precious, no matter how much of it I had had in the past years.

I closed off my happy human guests from the library, and then silently, I told the blood drinkers that they might come in.

Both were richly dressed, and their swords and daggers were encrusted with jewels. Their cloaks were fixed at the shoulder with rich clasps and even their sandals were ornamented. They might have been preparing to join the opulently clad citizens of the new capital, Constantinople, where great dreams were still being realized though Constantine was now dead.

It was with mixed feelings that I gestured for them to sit down.

However much I wished that I had allowed Mael to perish, I was drawn to Avicus—to his keen expression and the friendly way in which he regarded me. I had time to observe now that his skin was a lighter brown than it had been, and that its dark tone gave a rather sculpted quality to his strong features, especially his mouth. As for his eyes they were clear and held no cunning or lie.

Both remained standing. They looked anxiously in the direction of the mortal banquet room. Once again, I urged them to be seated.

Mael stood, quite literally looking down his hawk nose at me, but Avicus took the chair.

Mael was still weak and his body emaciated. Quite obviously, it would take many nights of drinking from his victims before the damage done him would be completely healed.

"How have things been with you?" I asked, out of courtesy.

And then out of private desperation I let my mind envision Pandora. I let my mind completely recall her in all her splendid details. I hoped thereby to send the message of her to both of them, so that she, wherever she was, might receive this message somehow, a message which I, on account of the blood I had given her in her making, could not send on my own.

I don't know that either received any impression of my lost love.

Avicus answered my question politely but Mael said not one word.

"Things are better for us," said Avicus. "Mael heals well."

"I want to tell you certain things," I commenced without asking whether or not they wanted

such knowledge. “I don’t believe from what happened that either of you know your own strength. I know from my own experience that power increases with age, as I am now more agile and strong than I was when I was made. You too are quite strong, and this incident with the drunken mortals need not have ever taken place. You could have gone up the wall when you were surrounded.”

“Oh, leave off with this!” said Mael suddenly.

I was aghast at this rudeness. I merely shrugged.

“I saw things,” said Mael in a small hard voice, as though the confidential manner of it would make his words all the more important. “I saw things when I drank from you which you could not prevent me from seeing. I saw a Queen upon a throne.”

I sighed.

His tone was not as venomous as it had been before. He wanted the truth and knew he could not get it by hostile means.

As for me I was so fearful that I dared not move or speak. Naturally I was defeated by this news from him, dreadfully defeated, and I didn’t know what chance I had of preventing everything from becoming known. I stared at my paintings. I wished I had painted a better garden. I might have mentally transported myself into a garden. Vaguely I came to thinking, But you have a beautiful garden right outside through the doors.

“Will you not tell me what you found in Egypt?” Mael asked. “I know that you went there. I know that the God of the Grove wanted to send you there. Will you not have that much mercy as to tell me what you found?”

“And why would I have mercy?” I asked politely. “Even if I had found miracles or mysteries in Egypt. Why would I tell you? You won’t even be seated under my roof like a proper guest. What is there between us? Hatred and miracles?” I stopped. I had become too heated. It was anger. It was weakness. You know my theme.

At this, he took a chair beside Avicus and he stared before him as he had done on that night when he told me how he’d been made.

I saw now as I looked at him more closely that his throat was still bruised from his ordeal. As for his shoulder, his cloak covered it but I imagined it to be the same.

My eyes moved to Avicus and I was surprised to see his eyebrows knit in a strange little frown.

Suddenly he looked to Mael and he spoke.

“The fact is, Marius can’t tell us what he discovered,” he said, his voice calm. “And we mustn’t ask him again. Marius bears some terrible burden. Marius has a secret which has to do with all of us and how long we can endure.”

I was dreadfully aggrieved. I’d failed to keep my mind veiled and they had discovered all but everything. I had little hope of preventing their penetration into the sanctum itself.

I didn’t know precisely what to do. I couldn’t even consider things in their presence. It was too

dangerous. Yes, dangerous as it was, I had an impulse to tell them all.

Mael was alarmed and excited by what Avicus had said.

"Are you certain of this?" he asked Avicus.

"Yes," Avicus answered. "Over the years my mind had grown stronger. Prompted by what I've seen of Marius, I've tested my powers. I can penetrate Marius's thoughts even when I don't want to do it. And on the night when Marius came to help us, as Marius sat beside you, as he watched you heal from your wounds as you drank from me, Marius thought of many mysteries and secrets, and though I gave you blood, I read Marius's mind."

I was too saddened by this to respond to anything said by either of them. My eyes drifted to the garden outside. I listened for the sound of the fountain. Then I sat back in my chair and looked at the various scrolls of my journal which lay about helter-skelter on my desk for anyone to pillage and read. Oh, but you've written everything in code, I thought. And then again, a clever blood drinker might decipher it. What does it all matter now?

Suddenly I felt a strong impulse to try to reason with Mael.

Once again I saw the weakness of anger. I had to put aside anger and contempt and plead with him to understand.

"This is so," I said. "In Egypt, I did find things. But you must believe me that nothing I found matters. If there is a Queen, a Mother as you call her, and mind you, I don't say she exists, imagine for the moment that she is ancient and unresponsive and can give nothing to her children any longer, that so many centuries have passed since our dim beginnings that no one with any reason understands them, and the matter is left quite literally buried for it matters not one jot."

I had admitted far more than I intended, and I looked from one to the other of them for understanding and acceptance of what I'd said.

Mael wore the astonished expression of an innocent. But the look on the face of Avicus was something else.

He studied me as if he wanted desperately to tell me many things. Indeed his eyes spoke in silence though his mind gave me nothing and then he said,

"Long centuries ago, before I was sent to Britain to take up my time in the oak as the god, I was brought before her. You remember I told you this."

"Yes," I said.

"I saw her!" He paused. It seemed quite painful for him to relive this moment. "I was humiliated before her, made to kneel, made to recite my vows. I remember hating those around me. As for her, I thought she was a statue, but now I understand the strange words that they spoke. And then when the Magic Blood was given me, I surrendered to the miracle. I kissed her feet."

"Why have you never told me this!" begged Mael. He seemed more injured and confounded

than angry or outraged.

"I told you part of it," said Avicus. "It's only now that I see it all. My existence was wretched, don't you understand?" He looked to me and then to Mael, and his tone became a little more reasonable and soft. "Mael, don't you see?" he asked. "Marius is trying to tell you. This path in the past is a path of pain!"

"But who is she and what is she?" Mael demanded.

In that fatal instant my mind was decided. Anger did move me and perhaps in the wrong way.

"She is the first of us," I said in quiet fury. "That is the old tale. She and her consort or King, they are the Divine Parents. There's no more to it than that."

"And you saw them," Mael said, as if nothing could make him pause in his relentless questioning.

"They exist; they are safe," I said. "Listen to what Avicus tells you. What was Avicus told?"

Avicus was desperately trying to remember. He was searching so far back that he was discovering his own age. At last he spoke in the same respectful and polite voice as before.

"Both of them contain the seed from which we all spring!" he answered. "They cannot be destroyed on that account for if they were, we would die with them. Ah, don't you see?" He looked at Mael. "I know now the cause of the Terrible Fire. Someone seeking to destroy us burnt them or placed them in the sun."

I was utterly defeated. He had revealed one of the most precious secrets. Would he know the other? I sat in sullen silence.

He rose from the chair and began to walk about the room, incensed by his memories.

"How long did they remain in the fire? Or was it only one day's passage in the desert sand?" He turned to me. "They were white as marble when I saw them. 'This is the Divine Mother,' they said to me. My lips touched her foot. The priest pressed his heel to the back of my neck. When the Terrible Fire came I had been so long in the oak I remembered nothing. I had deliberately slain my memory. I had slain all sense of time. I lived for the monthly blood sacrifice and the yearly Sanhaim. I starved and dreamed as I'd been commanded to do. My life was in rising at Sanhaim to judge the wicked, to look into the hearts of those who were accused and pronounce on their guilt or innocence.

"But now I remember. I remember the sight of them—the Mother and the Father—for I saw both of them before they pressed my lips to her feet. How cold she was. How awful it was. And I was unwilling. I was so filled with anger and fear. *And it was a brave man's fear."*

I winced at his last words. I knew what he meant. What must a brave general feel when he knows the battle has gone against him and nothing remains but death?

Mael looked up at Avicus with a face full of sorrow and sympathy.

But Avicus was not finished. On he went with his walking, seeing nothing before him but memory, his thick black hair falling forward as he dipped his head under the weight of memories

he bore.

His black eyes were lustrous in the light of the many lamps. But his expression was his finest feature.

"Was it the sun, or was it a Terrible Fire?" he asked. "Did someone try to burn them? Did someone believe such a thing could be done? Oh, it's so simple. I should have remembered. But memory is desperate to leave us. Memory knows that we cannot endure its company. Memory would reduce us to fools. Ah, listen to old mortals when they have nothing but memories of childhood. How they go on mistaking those around them for persons long dead, and no one listens. How often I have eavesdropped on them in their misery. How often I have wondered at their long uninterrupted conversations with ghosts in empty rooms."

Still I said nothing.

But he looked at me at last, and asked me:

"You saw them, the King and Queen. You know where they are?"

I waited a long moment before answering. I spoke simply when I answered.

"I saw them, yes. And you must trust me that they are safe. And that you don't want to know where they are." I studied both of them. "If you were to know, then perhaps some night other blood drinkers could take you prisoner and wring the truth from you, and they might strive to claim the King and Queen."

Mael studied me for a long while before he responded. "We fight others who attempt to take Rome from us. You know we've done this. We force them to leave."

"I know you do," I said. "But the Christian vampires continue to come, and they come in numbers, and those numbers grow larger all the time. They are devoted to their Devil, their Serpent, their Satan. They will come again. There will be more and more."

"They mean nothing to us," said Mael disgustedly. "Why would they want this Holy Pair?"

For a moment I said nothing. Then the truth broke from me hatefully, as though I couldn't protect them from it, nor protect myself.

"All right," I said. "Since you know so much, both of you, let me explain the following: many blood drinkers want the Mother and the Father. There are those who come from the Far East who know of them. *They want the Primal Blood. They believe in its strength. It's stronger than any other blood.* But the Mother and Father can move to defend themselves. Yet still thieves will always be in search of them, ready to destroy whoever keeps them in hiding. And such thieves have in the past come to me."

Neither of them spoke. I went on.

"You do not want, either of you," I said, "to know anything further of the Mother and the Father. You do not want rogues to come upon you and try to overpower you for your knowledge. You do not want secrets which can be ripped from your heart."

I glared at Mael as I said these last words. Then I spoke again.

“To know of the Mother and the Father is a curse.”

A silence fell, but I could see that Mael would not allow for it to be very long. A light came into his face, and he said to me in a trembling voice:

“Have you drunk this Primal Blood?” Slowly he became incensed. “You have drunk this blood, haven’t you?”

“Quiet, Mael,” said Avicus. But it was no use.

“You have drunk it,” said Mael in fury. “And you know where the Mother and Father are concealed.”

He rose from the chair and rushed at me, and suddenly clamped his hands on my shoulders.

Now, I am by nature not given to physical combat, but in a rage I pushed him off me with such force that he was thrown across the floor and back against the wall.

“How dare you?” I asked fiercely. I struggled to keep my voice low so as not to alarm the mortals in the banquet room. “I ought to kill you. What peace of mind it would give me to know you were dead. I could cut you into pieces that no sorcerer could reassemble. Damn you.”

I was trembling with this uncharacteristic and humiliating rage.

He gazed at me, his mind unchanged, his will only slightly chastened and then he said with extraordinary fervor:

“You have the Mother and the Father. You have drunk the Mother’s blood. I see it in you. You cannot hide it from me. How will you ever hide it from anyone else?”

I rose from my chair.

“Then you must die,” I said, “isn’t that so? For you know, and you must never tell anyone else.” I made to advance on him.

But Avicus who had been staring at all this in shock and horror rose quickly and came between us. As for Mael, he had drawn his dagger. And he seemed quite ready for the brawl.

“No, Marius, please,” said Avicus, “we must make peace with each other, we cannot keep up this struggle. Don’t fight with Mael. What could be the outcome, but two wounded creatures hating each other even more than now?”

Mael was on his feet. He held his dagger ready. He looked clumsy. I don’t think he knew weapons. As for his supernatural powers, I didn’t think either of them understood fully what they might do. All this, of course, was defensive calculation. I didn’t want this battle any more than Avicus wanted it, yet I looked to Avicus now and said coldly:

“I can kill him. Stay out of the way.”

“But that is the point,” said Avicus, “I cannot do this, and so you will be fighting the two of us, and such a fight you can’t win.”

I stared at him for a long moment during which words failed me completely. I looked to Mael with his uplifted dagger. And then in a moment of utter despair I went to my desk and sat down and rested my head on my elbows.

I thought of the night in the far city of Antioch when Pandora and I had slaughtered that bunch of Christian vampires who had come so foolishly into our house talking about Moses in the desert lifting the Serpent, and secrets from Egypt, and all such seemingly marvelous things. I thought of all that blood and the burning afterwards.

And I thought also how these two creatures, though we didn't speak or see each other, had been my only companions all these years in Rome. I thought of everything perhaps that mattered. My mind sought to organize itself round Mael and Avicus, and I looked up from one to the other, and then out to the garden again.

"I'm ready to fight you," said Mael with his characteristic impatience.

"And what will you achieve? You think you can cut out the secret of the Mother and the Father from my heart?"

Avicus came to my desk. He sat down in the nearest chair before me and looked to me as if he were my client or friend.

"Marius, they are close to Rome. I know it. I have known it for a long time. Many a night you have gone out into the hills to visit some strange and lonely place, and with the Mind Gift I have followed you, wondering what could take you to such a distant spot. I believe now that you go to visit the Mother and the Father. I believe you took them out of Egypt. You can trust me with your secret. You can also trust me with your silence if you wish."

"No," said Mael, coming forward immediately. "Speak, or I'll destroy you, Marius, and Avicus and I will go to the very spot and see the Mother and Father for ourselves."

"Never," said Avicus, becoming for the first time angry. He shook his head. "Not without Marius. You're being foolish," he said to Mael.

"They can defend themselves," I said coldly. "I've warned you. I've witnessed it. They may allow you to drink the Divine Blood. They may refuse you. If they refuse, you will be destroyed." I paused for emphasis then went on.

"Once a strong god from the East came into my house in Antioch," I said. "He forced his way into the presence of the Mother and the Father. He sought to drink from the Mother. And when he made to sink his fangs into her neck, she crushed his head, and sent the lamps of the room to burn his flailing body till there was nothing left. I don't lie to you about these things." I gave a great sigh. I was tired of my own anger. "Having told you that, I'll take you there if you wish."

"But you have drunk her blood," said Mael.

"You are so very rash," I answered. "Don't you see what I'm saying? She may destroy you. I cannot say what she will do. And then there is the question of the King. What is his will? I don't know. I'll take you there, as I've said."

I could see that Mael wanted to go. Nothing would stop him from this, and as for Avicus, he was very fearful and very ashamed of his own fear.

"I must go," said Mael. "I was her priest once. I served her god in the oak. I have no choice but

to go." His eyes were brilliant with his excitement. "I must see her," he said. "I cannot take your warnings. I must be taken to this place."

I nodded. I gestured for them to wait. I went to the doors of the banquet room and opened them. My guests were happy. So be it. A couple of them cheered my sudden presence, but quickly forgot me. The drowsy slave poured the fragrant wine.

I turned and went back to Avicus and Mael.

We went out into the night, the three of us, and as we made for the shrine, I learnt immediately that neither Mael nor Avicus moved at the speed which their strength allowed. I told them both to walk faster, especially when there were no mortals to watch, and very soon I had them silently exhilarated that they were more in possession of their true gifts.

When we came to the granite door of the shrine, I showed them how it was quite impossible for a team of mortals to open it and then I lighted the torch and took them down the stone steps.

"Now, this is Holy Ground," I remarked before opening the bronze doors. "You do not speak irreverently or idly and you don't speak of them as if they cannot hear."

The two were enthralled.

I opened the door, lighted the torch within, and then let them enter and stand before the dais. I held the torch high.

All was perfect as I had assumed it would be. The Queen sat with her hands on her thighs as she always did. Enkil took the same posture. Their faces, framed so beautifully in their black plaited hair, were beautifully empty of thought or woe.

Who could have known from the sight of them that life pumped inside them?

"Mother and Father," I said distinctly, "I have brought two visitors who have begged to see you. They are Mael and Avicus. They've come in reverence and respect."

Mael went down on his knees. He did it as naturally as a Christian. He held out his arms. He began to pray in the language of the Druid priesthood. He told the Queen she was most beautiful. He told tales of the old gods of the oak. And then he begged her for her blood.

Avicus winced, and I suppose, so did I.

But I was sure something quickened in Akasha. Then again perhaps not.

All of us waited in uneasy stillness.

Mael rose and walked towards the dais.

"My Queen," I said calmly, "Mael asks with all respect and all humility, if he may drink from the primal fount."

He stepped up, bent over the Queen lovingly and daringly and bent to drink from her throat.

It seemed nothing would happen. She would allow it. Her glassy eyes stared forward as if it were of no import. Her hands remained on her thighs.

But all of sudden, with monstrous speed, the heavy boned Enkil turned sideways, as if he were a wooden machine worked by wheels and cogs, and he reached out with his right hand.

I sprang forward, threw my arms around Mael and drew him backwards just under the descending arm and all the way to the wall. I flung him into the corner.

"Stay there!" I whispered.

I stood up. Enkil remained turned, his eyes empty, as if he could not find the object of his rage, his hand still poised in the air. How many times, when I'd dressed them or cleaned them, had I seen them in the same attitude of sluggish inattention?

Swallowing my terror, I mounted the dais. I spoke to Enkil coaxingly.

"My King, please, it's finished," I said. I put my trembling hands on his arm, and I gently returned him to his proper place. His face was hideously blank. Then I put my hands on his shoulders and I turned him until he was staring forward as before. Gently I attended to his heavy golden necklace. I arranged his fingers carefully. I smoothed his heavy kilt.

As for the Queen she remained undisturbed. It was as if none of it had ever taken place, or so I thought, until I saw the droplets of blood on the shoulder of her linen gown. I should have to change it when I could.

But this was evidence that she had allowed the kiss, and he had forbidden it. Well, this was most interesting, for I knew now that when I had last drunk from her, it was Enkil who had thrown me back on the chapel floor.

There was no time to ponder it. I had to get Avicus and Mael away from the shrine.

Only when we were back within the confines of my brightly lighted study did I turn my fury on Mael.

"Two times I've saved your miserable life," I said. "And I will suffer for it, I'm sure of that. For by all rights, I should have let you die the night Avicus sought my help for you, and I should have let the King crush you as he would have done tonight. I despise you, understand it. No end of time will change it. You are rash, willful and crazed with your own desires."

Avicus sat with his head down nodding as if to say he agreed.

As for Mael he stood in the corner, his hand on his dagger, regarding me with begrudging silence.

"Get out of my house," I said finally. "And if you want to end your life, then break the peace of the Mother and the Father. For ancient as they are and silent as they are, they will crush you as you have seen for yourself. You know the location of the shrine."

"You don't even know the measure of your crime," Mael answered. "To keep such a secret. How could you dare!"

"Silence, please," said Avicus.

"No, I won't keep silent," said Mael. "You, Marius, you steal the Queen of Heaven and you keep her as if she were your own? You lock her up in a painted chapel as if she were a Roman goddess made of wood? How dare you do such a thing?"

"Fool," I said, "what would you have me do with her! You spit lies at me. What you wanted is

what they all want. You wanted her blood. And what would you do now that you know where she is? Do you mean to set her free and for whom and how and when?"

"Quiet, please," said Avicus again. "Mael, I beg you, let us leave Marius."

"And the snake worshipers who have heard whispers of me and my secret, what would they do?" I demanded, now quite lost in my fury. "What if they were to gain possession of her and take the blood from her, and make themselves an army stronger than us? How then would the human race rise up against our kind with laws and hunts to abolish us? Oh, you cannot begin to conceive of all the ills that would be loosed upon this world were she known to all our kind, you foolish, mad, self-important dreamer!"

Avicus stood before me, imploring me with his upraised hands, his face so sad.

I wouldn't be stopped. I stepped aside and faced the furious Mael.

"Imagine the one who would put them both in the sun again," I declared, "bringing fire on us like the fire which Avicus suffered before! Would you end your life's journey in such agony and by another's hands?"

"Please, Marius," said Avicus. "Let me take him away with me. We will go now. I promise you, no more trouble from us."

I turned my back on them. I could hear Mael leaving, but Avicus lingered. And suddenly I felt his arm enclose me and his lips on my cheek.

"Go," I said softly, "before your impetuous friend tries to stab me in base jealousy."

"It was a very great miracle you revealed," he whispered. "Let him ponder it until he has made its greatness small enough for his mind."

I smiled.

"As for me, I don't wish ever to see it again. It is too sad."

I nodded.

"But allow me to come in the evenings, quietly," he whispered. "Allow me to watch at the garden windows in silence as you paint your walls."

8

The years passed too fast.

The great city of Constantinople in the East was all the talk in Rome. More and more of the honorable Patricians were drained away by its magic. Meanwhile after Constantine the Great there came no end of warring Emperors. And the pressure along the borders of the Empire continued to be intolerable, demanding the complete devotion of anyone elevated to the purple.

A most interesting character proved to be Julian, lately known as the Apostate, who tried to restore paganism and completely failed. Whatever his religious illusions, he proved an able soldier and died on a campaign against the irrepressible Persians many miles from home.

The Empire continued to be invaded by the Goths, the Visigoths, the Germans and the Persians on all sides. Its rich and beautiful cities, with their gymnasiums, theaters, porticoes and temples were overrun by tribes of people who cared nothing for philosophy or manners, poetry, or the old values of the genteel life.

Even Antioch, my old home with Pandora, had been sacked by barbarians—quite an unimaginable spectacle to me, which I could not ignore.

Only the city of Rome itself seemed impervious to such a horror, and indeed, I think the old families, even as houses crumbled around them, believed that the Eternal City could never suffer such a fate.

As for me, I went on with my banquets for the disreputable and despised, and I wrote by the hour in my diaries, and I painted my walls.

When my regular guests inevitably died, I suffered it rather dreadfully. And so I saw to it that the company was always very large.

On I went with the pots of paint no matter who drank or vomited in the garden, and so the house seemed mad with all its lamps and the master filling walls with his illusions, and the guests laughing at him and raising their cups to him, and the music strumming on unto the dawn.

At first I thought it would be a distraction to have Avicus spying upon me, but I grew used to hearing him slip over the wall and come into the garden. I grew used to the nearness of someone who shared these moments as only he could.

I continued to paint my goddesses—Venus, Ariadne, Hera—and gradually I grew resigned that the figment of Pandora would dominate everything I did in that particular, but I worked on the gods as well. Apollo, above all, fascinated me. But then I had time to paint other figures of myth,

such as Theseus, Aeneas, and Hercules, and sometimes I turned to reading Ovid or Homer or Lucretius directly for inspiration. Other times, I made up my own themes.

But always the painted gardens were my comfort for I felt I was living in them in my heart.

Over and over again I covered all the rooms of my house, and as it was built as a villa, not an enclosed house with an atrium, Avicus could wander the garden all around it, seeing all that I did, and I couldn't help but wonder if my work was changed by what he saw.

What moved me more than anything perhaps was that he lingered so faithfully. And that he was silent with so much respect. Seldom did a week pass that he did not come and stay almost the entire night. Often he was there for four or five nights in a row. And sometimes even longer than that.

Of course we never spoke to each other. There was an elegance in our silence. And though my slaves once took notice of him and annoyed me with their alarm, I soon put a stop to that.

On the nights when I went out to Those Who Must Be Kept Avicus didn't follow me. And I must confess that I did feel a sort of freedom when I painted alone in the shrine. But melancholy was also coming down upon me, harder than ever in the past.

Finding a spot behind the dais and the Precious Pair, I often sat dejected in the corner, and then slept the day and even the next night without going out. My mind was empty. Consolation was unimaginable. Thoughts of the Empire and what might happen to it were unspeakable.

And then, I would remember Avicus, and I would rise, shaking off my languor and go back into the city and begin painting the walls of my rooms again.

How many years passed in this way, I can't calculate.

It is far more important to note that a band of Satanic blood drinkers again took up their abode in an abandoned catacomb and began to feast upon the innocent which was their custom, being desperately careless so as to scare humans and to cause tales of terror to spread.

I had hoped that Mael and Avicus would destroy this band, as they were all very weak, and blundering, and it wouldn't have been hard at all.

But Avicus came to me with the truth of the matter which I should have seen long before.

"Always these Satan worshipers are young," he said to me, "and never is there one who is more than thirty or forty years from his mortal life. Always from the East they come, speaking of how the Devil is their Ruler and how through serving him, they serve Christ."

"I know the old story," I said. I was going about my painting, as if Avicus was not standing there, not out of rudeness, but out of weariness with the Satan worshipers, who had cost me Pandora so long ago.

"But you see, Marius, someone very old must surely be sending these deadly little emissaries to us, and it is this old one whom we must destroy."

"And how will you do that?" I asked.

"We mean to lure him to Rome," said Avicus, "and we've come to ask you to join us. Come

down into the catacombs with us tonight and tell these young ones that you are a friend."

"Ah, no, you are mad to suggest this!" I said. "Don't you realize they know about the Mother and the Father? Don't you remember all I've told you?"

"We mean to destroy them to a one," said Mael who stood behind me. "But to make a fine finish we must lure the old one here before the destruction."

"Come, Marius," said Avicus, "we need you and your eloquence. Convince them that you are sympathetic. That they must bring their leader here, and then and only then will you allow them to remain. Mael and I cannot so impress them as you can. This is no vain flattery, be assured."

For a long time I stood with my paintbrush in hand, staring, thinking, Should I do this, and then finally, I confessed that I could not.

"Don't ask it of me," I said to Avicus. "Lure the being yourselves. And when he comes here, let me know of it, and then I promise I will come."

The following night, Avicus returned to me.

"They are such children, these Satanic creatures," he said, "they spoke of their leader so willingly, admitting that he resides in a desert place in the North of Egypt. He was burnt in the Terrible Fire, no doubt of it, and has taught them all about the Great Mother. It will be sad to destroy them, but they rampage about the city, seeking the sweetest mortals for their victims, and it cannot be borne."

"I know," I said quietly. I felt ashamed that I had always allowed Mael and Avicus to drive these creatures from Rome on their own. "But have you managed to lure the leader out of his hiding place? How could such a thing be done?"

"We have given them abundant riches," said Avicus, "so that they may bring their leader here. We have promised him our strong blood in return for his coming, and that he sorely needs to make more priests and priestesses of his Satanic cause."

"Ah, your strong blood, of course," I said. "Why did I not think of it? I think of it in regard to the Mother and Father, but I did not think of it in relation to us."

"I cannot claim to have thought of it myself," said Avicus. "It was one of the Satanic children who suggested it for the leader is so weak that he can never rise from his bed, and survives only to receive victims and to make followers. Of course Mael and I immediately promised. For what are we to these children with our hundreds of years?"

I heard nothing further of the matter for the next several months, except I knew through the Mind Gift that Avicus had slain several of the Satan worshipers for their public crimes which he considered to be so dangerous, and on one mild summer night, when I stood in my garden looking down over the city, I heard Mael rather distantly arguing with Avicus as to whether they should slay all the rest.

At last the band was slain, and the catacomb was empty, and drenched in blood, and Mael and Avicus appeared at my house and begged me to come to it for those returning from Egypt were

expected within the hour and we must strike fast.

I left my warm happy room, carrying my finest weapons, and went with them as I had promised.

The catacomb was so small and tight, I could scarce stand up in it. And I knew it at once to be the burial place of mortal Christians and a place where they had sometimes gathered in the very first years of the sect.

We traveled through it some eighty or ninety feet before we came into an underground place, and there found the old Egyptian blood drinker on his bier, glaring at us, his youthful attendants horrified to find their abode empty and full of ashes of their dead.

The old creature had suffered much. Bald, and thin, black from the Great Fire, he had given himself up utterly to the making of his Satanic children, and so never healed as another blood drinker might. And now he knew himself to be tricked. Those he had sent on to Rome were gone forever, and we stood before him, looking down upon him in judgment, blood drinkers of unthinkable power who felt no pity for him and his cause.

Avicus was the first to raise his sword, but he was stopped as the old creature cried out,

"Do we not serve God?"

"You'll know sooner than I will," Avicus answered him, and with the blade, cut off his head.

The remaining band refused to run away from us. They fell on their knees and met our heavy blows in silence.

And so too it was with the fire that engulfed them all.

The next night and the night after that we went back, the three of us, to gather the remains and burn them over again, until it was finished and we thought that had put an end to the Satanic worshipers once and for all.

Would that it had been so.

I can't say that this awful chapter of our lives brought me together with Avicus and Mael. It was too dreadful, too against my nature, and too bitter for me.

I went back to my house, and gladly resumed my painting.

I rather enjoyed it that none of my guests ever wondered as to my true age, or why I didn't grow old or die. I think the answer lay in the fact that I had so very much company that no one could pay attention to any one thing for very long.

Whatever it was, after the slaughter of the Satanic children, I wanted more music than before, and I painted more relentlessly and with greater invention and design.

Meantime the state of the Empire was dreadful. It was now quite totally divided between East and West. In the West, which included Rome, of course, Latin was the language; while in the East the common language was Greek. The Christians too felt this sharp division and continued to quarrel over their beliefs.

Finally the situation of my beloved city became intolerable.

The Visigoth Ruler Alaric had taken the nearby port of Ostia, and was threatening Rome itself. The Senate seemed powerless to do anything about the impending invasion, and there was talk throughout the city that the slaves would side with the invaders, thereby bringing ruin on us all.

At last, at midnight, the Salarian gate of the city was opened. There was heard the horrifying sound of a Gothic trumpet. And in came the rapacious hordes of Goths and Scythians to sack Rome herself.

I rushed out into the streets to see the carnage all around me.

Avicus was immediately at my side.

Hurrying across the roofs, we saw everywhere that slaves had risen against their masters, houses were forced open, jewels and gold were offered up by frantic victims, who were nevertheless murdered, rich statues were heaped upon wagons in those streets large enough to allow such, and bodies soon lay everywhere as the blood ran in the gutters and as the inevitable flames began to consume all that they could.

The young and the healthy were rounded up to be sold into slavery, but the carnage was often random, and I soon realized I could do nothing to help any mortal whom I saw.

Returning to my house, I discovered with horror that it was already in flames. My guests had either been taken prisoner or had fled. My books were burning! All my copies of Virgil, Petronius, Apuleius, Cicero, Lucretius, Homer, Pliny were lying helpless amid the flames. My paintings were blackening and disintegrating. Foul smoke choked my lungs.

I had scarce time to grab a few important scrolls. Desperately I sought for Ovid, whom Pandora had so loved, and for the great tragedians of Greece. Avicus reached out his arms to help me. I took more, seeking to save my own diaries, but in that fatal instant Goth soldiers poured into my garden with loud shouts, their weapons raised.

At once I pulled my sword and began with fierce speed to decapitate them, shouting as they shouted, allowing my preternatural voice to deafen them and confuse them, as I hacked off random limbs.

Avicus proved even more fierce than I was, perhaps being more accustomed to this kind of battle, and soon the band lay dead at our feet.

But by now my house was completely engulfed in flames. The few scrolls we'd sought to save were burning. There was nothing more to be done. I could only pray that my slaves had sought some refuge, for if they hadn't they would soon be taken for loot.

"To the chapel of Those Who Must Be Kept," I said. "Where else is there to go?"

Quickly, we made to the roofs again, darting in and out of the blazes which everywhere lighted up the night sky. Rome was weeping; Rome was crying out for pity; Rome was dying. Rome was no more.

We reached the shrine in safety, though Alaric's troops were pillaging the countryside as well.

Going down into the cool confines of the chapel, I lighted the lamps quickly and then I fell

down on my knees before Akasha, uncaring of what Avicus might think of such a gesture, and I poured out for her in whispered words the nature of this tragedy which had struck my mortal home.

"You saw the death of Egypt," I said reverently. "You saw it become a Roman province. Well, now Rome dies in its turn. Rome has lasted for eleven hundred years and now it's no more. How will the world survive? Who will tend the thousands of roads and bridges that everywhere bring men and women together? Who will maintain the fabulous cities in which men and women thrive in safe houses, educating their youth to read and write and worship their gods and goddesses with ceremony? Who will drive back these accursed creatures who cannot farm the land which they have burnt and who live only to destroy!"

Of course there was no response from the Blessed Parents.

But I fell forward and my hand went out to touch Akasha's foot. I breathed a deep sigh.

And finally, forgetting all formality, I crept into the corner and sat rather like an exhausted boy.

Avicus came to sit beside me. He clasped my hand.

"And what of Mael?" I asked softly.

"Mael is clever," said Avicus. "Mael loves to fight. He has destroyed many a blood drinker. Mael will never allow himself to be wounded as he was on that long ago night. And Mael knows how to hide when all is lost."

For six nights we remained in the chapel.

We could hear the shouts, the crying, as the looting and pillaging went on. But then Alaric marched out of Rome to wreak havoc on the countryside to the South.

Finally the need for blood caused both of us to go back to the world above.

Avicus bid me farewell and went in search of Mael, while I found myself in the street near my house, coming upon a soldier who was dying with a spear through his chest. He was no longer conscious. I removed the spear, which caused him to moan in his sleep, and then lifting him I opened my mouth over the gushing wound.

The blood was full of scenes of the battle, and quite soon I had enough. I laid him aside, composing his limbs artfully. And then I discovered I was hungry for more.

This time a dying man would not do. I walked on, stepping over rotted and stinking bodies, and passing the gutted ruins of houses, until I found an isolated soldier with a sack of loot over his back. He made to draw his sword, but quickly I overcame him, and bit into his throat. He died too soon for me. But I was satisfied. I let him fall at my feet.

I then came upon my house utterly destroyed.

What a sight was my garden where the dead soldiers lay swollen and reeking.

Not a single book remained unburnt.

And as I wept I realized with a cruel shock that all the Egyptian scrolls I possessed—all the

early tales of the Mother and the Father—had perished in the fire.

These were scrolls I had taken from the old temple in Alexandria on the very night I took the Mother and Father from Egypt. These were scrolls which told the old tale of how an evil spirit had entered into the blood of Akasha and Enkil, and how the race of blood drinkers had come about.

All this was gone now. All this was ashes. All this was lost to me along with my Greek and Roman poets and historians. All this was gone along with all that I had written myself.

It seemed quite impossible that such a thing had happened, and I faulted myself that I had not copied the old Egyptian legends, that I had not saved them in the shrine. After all, in some foreign marketplace I could find Cicero and Virgil, Xenophon and Homer.

But the Egyptian legends? I would never recover the loss.

I wondered: Would my beautiful Queen care that the written stories of her had perished? Would she care that I alone carried the tales in my mind and heart?

I walked into the ruin of my rooms, and looked at the little that did still appear visible of the paintings on the blackened plaster walls. I looked up through the black timbers which might at any moment fall on me. I stepped over piles of burnt wood.

At last I left the place where I had lived for so long. And as I went about, I came to see that the city was already rising from its punishment. Not all had been put to the torch. Rome was far too huge, with far too many buildings of stone.

But what was it to me, this piteous sight of Christians rushing to help their brethren, and naked children crying for parents who were no more? So Rome had not been razed to the ground. It did not matter. There would come more invasions. These people who remained in the city, struggling to rebuild it, would endure a humiliation which I could not endure.

I went back out to the chapel again. And going down the stairs, and into the sanctum, I lay in the corner, satiated and exhausted, and I closed my eyes.

It was to become my first long sleep.

Always in my life as an immortal I had risen at night and spent the allotted time which the darkness gave to me, either to hunt, or to enjoy whatever distractions or pleasures that I could.

But now I paid no attention to the setting of the sun. I became like you, in your cave of ice.

I slept. I knew I was safe. I knew Those Who Must Be Kept were safe. And I could hear too much of the misery from Rome. So I resolved that I would sleep.

Perhaps I was inspired with the story of the Gods of the Grove, that they could starve in the oak for a month at a time, and still rise to receive the sacrifice. I'm not sure.

I did pray to Akasha. I prayed, "Grant me sleep. Grant me stillness. Grant me immobility. Grant me silence from the voices that I hear so strongly. Grant me peace."

How long was my slumber? Many months. And I began to feel the hunger terribly and to dream of blood. Yet stubbornly I lay on the floor of the shrine, eyes closed during the night when

I might have wandered, deaf to intelligence of the outside world.

I could not bear to see my beloved city again. I could think of nowhere to go.

Then a strange moment came. In a dream, it seemed, Mael and Avicus were there, urging me to rise, offering me their blood for strength.

"You're starved, you're weak," said Avicus. How sad he looked. And how gentle he was. "Rome is still there," he maintained. "So it is overrun with Goths and Visigoths. The old Senators remain as always. They humor the crude barbarians. The Christians gather the poor to them and give them bread. Nothing can really kill your city. Alaric is dead, as if he succumbed to a curse for what he did, and his army long gone."

Was I comforted by this? I don't know. I couldn't allow myself to wake. I could not open my eyes. I wanted only to lie where I was and be alone.

They went away. There was nothing more for them to do. And then it seemed that they came at other times, that I would see them by the light of a lamp and that they would talk to me, but it was dreamlike and did not matter at all.

Surely months passed, and then years. I felt light in all my limbs and only the Mind Gift seemed to have strength.

A vision took hold of me. I saw myself lying in the arms of a woman, a beautiful Egyptian woman with black hair. It was Akasha, this woman, and she comforted me, she told me to sleep, and that nothing could hurt me, not even the thirst, because I had drunk her blood. I was not like other blood drinkers. I could starve and then rise again. I would not become fatally weak.

We were in a splendid chamber with silk hangings. We lay on a bed, draped with silk so fine I could see through it. I could see golden columns with lotus leaves at their crowns. I could feel the soft cushions beneath me. But above all I could feel my comforter who held me firmly and warmly and told me to sleep.

After a very long while I rose and went out into the garden and saw that, yes, it was the garden I had painted, only it had been perfected, and I turned round, trying to see the dancing nymphs only they were too quick for me. They were gone before I could see them, and in the distance the singing was too soft for me to hear.

I dreamed of colors. I wanted the pots of paint before me, the pure colors so that I could make the garden come alive.

Yes, sleep.

At last a divine blackness settled over my mind and no thoughts whatsoever could penetrate. I knew that Akasha still held me because I could feel her arms around me and feel her lips against my cheek. That was all I knew.

And the years passed.

The years passed.

Quite suddenly my eyes opened.

A great sense of alarm came over me, giving me to know that I was a living being with a head and arms and legs. I didn't move, but I stared up into the darkness, and then I heard the sound of sharp footfalls, and a light blinded me for a moment.

A voice spoke. It was Avicus.

"Marius, come with us," he said.

I tried to rise from the stone floor but I couldn't do it. I couldn't lift my arms.

Be still, I told myself and think on this matter. Think on what has happened.

In the lamplight, Avicus stood before me once more holding the small flickering bronze lamp. He was dressed in a rich double tunic with an overshirt, rather like a soldier, and the trousers of the Goths.

Mael stood beside him, finely dressed in similar garments, his blond hair swept back and cleanly combed, and all malice was gone from Mael's face.

"We're leaving, Marius," said Mael, his eyes wide and generous. "Come with us. Stop this sleep of the dead and come."

Avicus came down on one knee and put the light behind me so it wouldn't hurt my eyes any longer.

"Marius, we're going to Constantinople. We have our own ship for this journey, our own galley slaves to row it, our own pilot, and well-paid attendants who will not question our nocturnal disposition. You must come with us. There is no reason to remain."

"We must go," said Mael. "Do you know how long you've lain here?"

"Half a century," I said in a small whisper, "and during that time Rome has been laid waste again."

Avicus shook his head. "Far longer than that, old friend," he said, "I can't tell you how many times we've tried to wake you. Marius, the Western Empire is truly no more."

"Come with us to Constantinople," said Mael. "She is the richest city in the world."

"Take my blood," said Avicus and he moved to bite into his wrist to give me to drink. "We can't leave you behind."

"No," I said. "Let me rise of my own accord." I wondered if they could hear my words, so softly were they spoken. I rose slowly on my elbows, and then I realized I was sitting up, and then I rose to my knees and to my feet.

I was dizzy.

My radiant Akasha, so erect on her throne, stared blindly past me. My King was unchanged. However both were covered with a layer of dust, and it seemed a crime unimaginable that they had been so neglected. The withered flowers were like so much hay in their dried vases. But for this who was to blame?

Hesitantly I made my way to the dais. And then I closed my eyes. I felt Avicus catch me as obviously I'd been about to fall.

“Leave me, please,” I said quietly. “Just for a little while. I must say my prayers for the comforts I’ve received while sleeping. I’ll join you soon.” And vowing to stand more firmly I closed my eyes again.

At once there came into my mind the vision of myself on the opulent bed within the extraordinary palace and Akasha, my Queen, embracing me.

I saw the silk hangings wavering in the breeze. It was not my vision. That is, it had not come from me. Rather it had been given, and I knew it could only have come from her.

I opened my eyes again and stared at her hard perfect face. Surely a woman less beautiful could never have endured so long. No blood drinker had ever had the courage to really destroy her. No blood drinker ever would.

But my thoughts were confused suddenly. Avicus and Mael were still there.

“I’ll come with you,” I said to them, “but for now, you must leave me here. You must wait for me above.”

At last they obeyed. I heard their steps as they went up the stairs.

And then I mounted the steps of the dais and bent over my seated Queen once more, as reverently as ever, as bravely as ever, and I gave the kiss that might soon mean my death.

Nothing stirred in the sanctuary. The Blessed Pair remained quiet. Enkil did not raise his arm to strike. I felt no motion in Akasha’s body.

I sank my teeth quickly. I drank deep draughts of the thick blood as fast as I could, and there came the vision of the sunlit garden again, lovely, full of flowering trees and roses, something made for a palace, where every plant is a part of an imperial design. I saw the bedchamber. I saw the golden columns. It seemed I heard a whisper: Marius.

My soul expanded.

I heard it again as if it were echoing through the silk-hung palace. The light in the garden brightened.

Then, with a violent throb I realized I could take no more. I drew back. I saw the tiny puncture wounds contract and vanish. I pressed my lips to them and held the kiss for a long moment.

On my knees I thanked her with my whole heart. I had not the slightest doubt that she had protected me in my sleep. I knew that she had. I knew also that she had caused me to wake. Avicus and Mael could have never done it without her divine intervention. She belonged to me more surely than when we had left Egypt. She was my Queen.

And then I withdrew, powerful, clear-eyed, and ready for the long journey overseas to Byzantium. After all, I had Mael and Avicus to help me with the Divine Parents who must be secured in stone sarcophagi; and there would be many a long night at sea ahead of us during which I could weep for my beautiful Italy, my Italy which was lost.

9

In the nights that followed I could not resist visiting Rome, though Avicus and Mael both advised me not to do it. They feared that I did not know how long I had slept, but I knew. Almost a hundred years had passed.

I found the grand buildings of Imperial glory fallen to ruin, overrun with animals, and being used as quarries for those who came to take the stone. Huge statues had been toppled over and lay in the weeds. My old street was unrecognizable.

And the population had dwindled to no more than a few thousand souls.

Yet, the Christians ministered to their own, and their virtue was most inspiring. And because the invaders had been in some cases Christians, many of the churches had gone unharmed. The Bishop of Rome sought to defend them against their overlords, and maintained strong ties with Constantinople, the city that ruled both East and West.

But for the few old families who remained, there was only humiliation as they sought to serve their new barbarian masters, and to tell themselves that somehow the crude Goths and Vandals could acquire some polish and love of literature and some appreciation of Roman law.

Once again I marveled at the pure resistance of Christianity, that it seemed to feed upon disaster as it had fed upon persecution, and as it prospered during interludes of peace.

I also marveled at the resilience of the old Patricians, who as I said, did not withdraw from public life, but strove to inculcate the old values as best they could.

Everywhere one saw barbarians with mustaches, wearing crude trousers, their hair greasy and unkempt. Many were Arian Christians, holding different ceremonies from their "orthodox" Catholic brothers and sisters. What were they? Goths, Visigoths, Alemmani, Huns? Some I couldn't recognize at all. And the ruler of this great state lived not at Rome but at Ravenna in the North.

I was also to discover that a new nest of the Satanic vampires had settled in a forgotten catacomb of the city, where they held ceremonies to their Serpent Devil before going out to prey upon the innocent and the guilty alike.

Avicus and Mael, puzzled as to the origins of these new zealots, and most weary of them, had resolved to leave them alone.

As I walked through ruined streets and through empty houses, these zealot creatures spied upon me. I loathed them. But I hardly considered them a danger. In my starvation I had grown strong. Akasha's blood was in my veins.

But how wrong I was in my judgment upon the Satanic vampires, oh, how very wrong indeed. But I will come to that in time.

Let me return to those nights when I wandered the broken fragments of classical civilization.

I was not as embittered by it as one might think. Indeed Akasha's blood had not only given me great new physical power, it had enhanced the clarity of my mind, my ability to concentrate, to take to myself what I prized, and to dismiss what was no longer good.

Nevertheless the state of Rome was demoralizing, and it was only likely to get worse. I looked to Constantinople to preserve what I called civilization and I was all too ready for the voyage ahead.

Well, it was time to help Avicus and Mael with the last preparations. And they assisted me in carefully wrapping the Divine Pair as mummies, with all reverence, and placing them in granite sarcophagi which no team of men could open, as had been done in the past by me, and would be done in the future every time that the Divine Parents had to be moved.

This was most frightening for Avicus and Mael—to see the pair moved and then so completely covered with the white strips of linen. They knew nothing of the old prayers in Egyptian which I recited, which were charms for the safety of the journey scavenged from my years of reading, and I don't think this comforted them. But the Divine Couple were my concern.

As I moved to wrap the eyes of Akasha, she closed them, and with Enkil there occurred the same thing. What a strange and momentary indication of consciousness. It sent a chill through me. Yet still I went about my duty, as if I were an old Egyptian wrapping a deceased Pharaoh in the Sacred House of the Dead.

At last Mael and Avicus accompanied me down to Ostia, the port from which we would sail, and we boarded the vessel, having the Divine Parents placed below deck.

As for the slaves that Avicus and Mael had purchased I found them most impressive, all handpicked and excellent even to the galley slaves who knew that they worked for future freedom in the East and rich rewards.

A strong band of soldiers were to sail with us, each heavily armed, highly skilled and quite convinced of the same promise, and I was particularly impressed by the captain of this vessel, a Christian Roman by the name of Clement, a man of cleverness and wit, who would maintain the faith of the others in the final rewards as we made the long voyage.

The ship itself was the largest galley I had ever beheld, with an immense and colorful sail, and it contained a massive and impregnable cabin containing three long chests modestly made of bronze and iron in which Mael, Avicus and I would sleep by day. These chests, like the sarcophagi, were impossible for mortals to open without enormous difficulty and also they were far too heavy for even a gang of men to lift.

At last everything was in readiness, and armed to the teeth against pirates, we set out by night, guiding the ship with our supernatural eyes from floundering on any rocks as we moved swiftly

along the coast.

This frightened our crew and our soldiery somewhat as can be imagined, for in those times ships almost invariably proceeded only by day. It was too dangerous for them to do otherwise, for they couldn't see the coast or the rocky islands they might encounter, and even though they might have good maps and skilled navigators, there was still the danger of a dreadful accident occurring in the dark.

We reversed this age-old wisdom, and by day, our ship was in port so that those who served us might enjoy what the local town had to offer, and our slaves and soldiers were made all the more happy by this, and all the more devoted, while the captain kept a firm grip by allowing only some to go ashore at certain times, and insisting that some remain and keep watch or sleep.

Always we woke and emerged from our cabin to find our servants in high good humor, musicians playing under the moon for the soldiers, and Clement, the captain, delightfully drunk. There was no suspicion among them that we were other than three extremely bizarre human beings of immense wealth. Indeed, sometimes I eavesdropped on their theories about us—that we were Magi from the Far East like unto the Three Kings who had come to lay gifts before the Christ Child, and I was most amused.

Our only real problem was an absurd one. We had to ask for meals to be brought to us, and then to dispense with the food through the windows of our cabin, directly into the sea.

It sent us into peals of laughter, yet I found it undignified.

We did periodically spend a night on shore so that we might feed. Our years had given us great skill in this matter. And we might even have starved for the entire journey, but this we chose not to do.

As for our camaraderie aboard the ship, it was most interesting to me.

I was living more closely with mortals than ever before. I talked with our captain and our soldiers by the hour. And I found I enjoyed it tremendously, and I was very much relieved that, in spite of my very pale skin, it was so easy to do.

I found myself passionately attracted to our Captain Clement. I enjoyed the tales of his youth spent on merchant ships throughout the Mediterranean, and he amused me with descriptions of the ports he'd visited, some of which I had known hundreds of years before, and some of which were wholly new.

My sadness was lifted as I listened to Clement. I saw the world through his eyes, and knew his hope. I looked forward to a lively household in Constantinople where he could call upon me as his friend.

Another great change had taken place. I was now definitely an intimate companion to both Avicus and Mael.

Many a night we spent alone in the cabin, with the full wine cups before us, talking about all that had occurred in Italy and other things as well.

Avicus was of a keen mind as I had always imagined him to be, eager for learning and reading, and had over the centuries taught himself both Latin and Greek. But there was much he didn't understand about my world and its old piety.

He had with him histories by Tacitus, and Livy, and also the True Tales of Lucian, and the biographies written in Greek by Plutarch; but he was not able to understand this work.

I spent many happy hours reading aloud to him as he followed along with me, explaining to him how the text could be interpreted. And I saw in him a great absorption of information. He wanted to know the world.

Mael did not share this spirit; but he was no longer against it as he had been a very long time ago. He listened to all we discussed, and perhaps he profited somewhat from it. It was plain to me that the two—Avicus and Mael—survived as blood drinkers because of each other. But Mael no longer regarded me with fear.

As for me, I rather enjoyed the role of teacher, and it gave me new pleasure to argue with Plutarch as if he were in the room with me, and to comment on Tacitus as if he were there as well.

Both Avicus and Mael had grown paler and stronger with time. Each had, he confessed, at some moment or other felt the threat of despair.

"It was the sight of you, asleep in the shrine," Mael said without enmity, "that kept me from going down into some cellar and resigning myself to the same slumber. I felt I should never awake from it, and Avicus, my companion Avicus, would not allow me to go."

When Avicus had felt weary of the world and unable to continue, it had been Mael who kept him from the fatal sleep.

Both had suffered extreme anguish over my condition, and during the long decades when I lay unresponsive to their pleas, they had been too afraid of the Noble Parents to lay before them flowers, or to burn incense or to do anything to tend the shrine.

"We feared they would strike out at us," said Avicus. "Even to look at their faces filled us with dread."

I nodded to all this.

"The Divine Parents," I said, "have never showed a need of those things. I am the author of such devotions. Darkness may please them as well as burning lamps. Look how they slumber now in their wrappings and in their coffins, side by side beneath the deck."

I felt emboldened by the visions I had had to say these things, though I never spoke of those visions or bragged that I had drunk the Sacred Blood.

All the while we sailed there was the prospect of one great horror which hung over the three of us—that our ship might be attacked either by day or night, and that the Divine Parents might be sunk into the sea. It was far too awful for us to talk of it, and that, perhaps, is why we did not. And whenever I brooded over this, I realized that we should have taken the safer route over land.

Then in the small hours a terrible truth became known to me—that if we did meet disaster, I might rise from the sea, and Those Who Must Be Kept might not. In the mysterious bottom of the great ocean what would become of these Parents? My agony of mind grew too great.

I put aside my anguish. I continued the pleasant talk with my companions. I went out on deck and looked upon the silvery sea and sent my love to Pandora.

Meantime I did not share the enthusiasm of Mael and Avicus for Byzantium. I had lived in Antioch a long time ago, and Antioch was an Eastern city but with great Western influence, and I had left it to return to Rome, for I was a child of the West.

Now we were heading to what I thought to be a purely Eastern capital, and I was afraid that in its great vitality I would find only what I could not possibly embrace.

One must understand: from the Roman point of view, the East—that is, the lands of Asia Minor and Persia—had always been suspect, for their emphasis on luxury and their general softness. It was believed by me and by many Romans that Persia had softened Alexander the Great thereby softening Greek culture. Then Greek culture with its Persian influence had softened Rome.

Of course immense culture and art had come with this softening. Romans embraced Greek knowledge of all sorts.

Nevertheless, I felt, deep in my soul, this age-old suspicion of the East.

Naturally I said nothing to Avicus and Mael. Their enthusiasm for this mighty seat of the Eastern Emperor was something not to be spoilt.

At last after our long voyage, we came early one evening into the shimmering Sea of Marmara and beheld the high ramparts of Constantinople with their myriad torches, and for the first time, I understood the glory of the peninsula which Constantine had chosen so long ago.

Slowly our ship made its way into the magnificent harbor. And I was chosen to be the one to use his “magic” upon the officials of the dock to arrange our arrival and give us time within the port to find some proper lodgings before removing the sacred cargo which we carried, the sarcophagi of venerable ancestors brought back to be buried in their native land. Of course we had mundane questions as to where we might find an agent to help us with our lodgings, and more than one mortal was called to give us advice.

It was a matter of gold and the Spell Gift, and I had no difficulty. And soon we were onshore and ready to explore this mythic place where God had directed Constantine to create the greatest city in the world.

I cannot say I was disappointed that night.

Our first extraordinary surprise was that the merchants of Constantinople were required to put up torches outside their shops so that the streets were beautifully illuminated. And we at once realized that there was a wilderness of great churches for us to explore.

The city held some million inhabitants, and I sensed at once an immense vigor that had gone out of Rome.

I went immediately—leading my two agreeable companions with me—to the great open square called the Augusteum, and where I could gaze on the facade of Hagia Sophia—the Church of the Holy Wisdom—and upon other immense and regal buildings including the splendid public baths of Zeuxippus, which had been decorated with beautifully executed pagan statues taken from various cities of the world.

I wanted to go in all directions at the same time. For here lay the great Hippodrome in which by day thousands witnessed chariot races which were the passion of the populace, and there the indescribably huge and complex royal palace into which we could easily have crept without being seen.

A great street led westward from this square, and constituted the main thoroughfare of the city, in that there were other squares which opened off it, and also other streets, which fed, of course, innumerable lanes.

Mael and Avicus continued to follow me politely as I led them hither and thither, and into the interior of Hagia Sophia to stand between its magnificent walls and beneath its immense dome.

I was overcome by the beauty of the church with its myriad arches and the high ornate and detailed mosaics of Justinian and Theodora which were unbelievably splendid and glittering in the light of countless lamps.

In the nights to come, there would be no end of splendid adventures. My comrades might tire of this, but I would not. I would penetrate the Imperial Court very soon, using my swiftness and cleverness to go about the palace. And for better or for worse I was in a city that was thriving where I would know the comfort of the proximity of many many human souls.

In the weeks that followed we purchased for ourselves a splendid house, quite well fortified, its garden entirely enclosed, and made for ourselves a secret and safe crypt beneath the mosaic floor.

As for the Divine Parents, I was adamant that they must be hidden some distance from the city. I had already heard plenty about the riots in Constantinople and I wanted the chapel to be safe.

However I could find no old vaults or tombs in the countryside like the old Etruscan tomb I had used outside of Rome. And finally I had no choice but to have a sanctuary built beneath our house by a gang of slaves.

This unnerved me. In Antioch and in Rome, I had created the chapels. Now I must rely upon others. At last I pursued an intricate plan.

I designed a series of overlapping passages leading deep down to a large chamber which would require anyone going there to turn first right, then left, then right, then left again with exceedingly debilitating affect. Then I set pairs of heavy bronze doors at certain intervals, each pair having a heavy bolt.

The thick stone blocking the entrance to this winding and doubling passage was not only disguised as part of the mosaic flooring of the house, but was, as I so often say when describing

such things, far too heavy for even a team of mortals to lift. Even the iron grips were so numerous and intricately designed as to seem part of the ornamentation of the overall floor.

Mael and Avicus thought all this quite extreme, but said nothing.

They approved, however, when I had the walls of the chapel covered with gold mosaic of the very kind I saw in all the splendid churches, and the floor laid with the finest marble tile. A broad and gorgeous throne of hammered gold was prepared for the Royal Couple. And lamps were hung from the ceiling on chains.

How was all this work done, you might ask, without compromising the secret of the underground chamber? Did I murder all those who had participated in the creation of this chapel?

No. It was by use of the Spell Gift to confuse those brought to their labor, and by the use at times of simple blindfolds of which the slaves and even the artists could not complain. Gilded words as to "lovers and brides" smoothed over any mortal objections. And money did the rest.

At last came the night when I must take the Royal Parents to their chapel. Avicus and Mael politely confessed that they thought I would want to do this alone.

I had no objections. Like a powerful Christian Angel of Death, I carried first one sarcophagus and then the other down to the fine chapel and set them side by side.

I took the linen wrappings from Akasha first, holding her in my arms as I knelt on the floor. Her eyes were closed. Then quite suddenly, she opened them, looking past me, her expression meaningless and simple as before.

I think I felt a curious deadening disappointment. But I whispered prayers to her to conceal it, as I cleaned away the linen and lifted her, and carried her, my silent bride, and seated her on the throne. There she rested, her clothes rumpled and incomplete, blind as ever, as I took the wrappings from Enkil.

There came the same strange moment when his eyes opened as well.

I dared say nothing aloud to him. I lifted him, found him more pliant, and even almost light, and placed him on the throne beside his queen.

Several nights passed before I could complete their raiment, but it must look perfect to the memories I still had of fine Egyptian garments, and then I sought to locate for them new and interesting jewels. Constantinople was full of such luxuries, and the craftsmen who dealt in them. All of this I did alone and with no difficulty, praying all the while in the most respectful tone.

Finally the chapel was even more beautiful than the first one which I had made in Antioch, and far more lovely than that which had existed outside of Rome. I put in place the usual braziers in which I would burn incense, and I filled the many hanging lamps with sweet-smelling oil.

Only when all this was done did I go back to the matter of the new city, and how things were to be in it, and whether or not Akasha and Enkil were truly safe.

I was very uneasy. I didn't even know the city yet, I realized. I was preoccupied. I wanted to continue visiting the churches and feasting off the beauty of the city; but I did not know whether or not we were the only vampires here.

It seemed extremely doubtful to me. After all, there were other blood drinkers in existence. Why wouldn't they come to the most beautiful city in the world?

As for the Greek quality of Constantinople, I didn't like it. I am rather ashamed to say it, but it was true.

I didn't like that the populace spoke Greek instead of Latin, though I myself could speak Greek very well, of course. And I didn't like all the Christian monasteries in which there seemed a deep mysticism that was more Oriental than Western.

The art I found everywhere was impressive, yes, but it was losing all ties to the classical art of Greece and Rome.

New statues presented men as stocky and crude with very round heads. Eyes were bulbous, faces without expression. And the Ikons or Holy Pictures which had become so common were highly stylized, with scowling faces.

Even the splendid mosaics of Justinian and Theodora—the figures in their long robes floating against the walls of the church—were rigid and dreamlike rather than classical, or beautiful according to standards that I had not learnt.

This was a magnificent place but it was not my place.

For me, there was something inherently repulsive in the gigantic royal palace with its eunuchs and its slaves. When I crept into it and roamed about, visiting its throne rooms, audience halls, gorgeous chapels, immense dining room, and many bedchambers, I saw the licentiousness of Persia, and though I couldn't blame anyone for it, I felt ill at ease.

And the population, though it was huge and vital, could brawl in the streets over the outcome of the chariot races in the Hippodrome, or riot in the very churches, killing one another, over matters of religion as well. In fact, the endless religious quarrels bordered on sheer madness. And doctrinal differences kept the entire Empire in upheaval most of the time.

As for the problems of the Empire's borders they were as continuous as they had been in the time of the Caesars. The Persians perpetually threatened the East and there was simply no end to the barbarians who poured down into the Empire from the West.

Having long identified my own soul with the salvation of the Empire, I felt no consolation in this city. I felt suspicion and profound distaste.

I did however often roam into Santa Sophia to marvel at the enormous dome which seemed to float above with no means of support. Something ineffable had been captured in that grand church which could humble the most proud spirits.

Avicus and Mael were quite happy in this new city. And both seemed absolutely determined that I be their leader, and as I shopped the marketplace for books in the evening, Avicus was

eager to join me, and eager for me to read to him what I found.

Meantime I furnished our house comfortably, and hired artisans to paint the walls. I did not want to become lost in my painted gardens again, and when I thought of my lost Pandora my anguish was worse even than before.

Indeed I searched for Pandora. I told Avicus and Mael a few little stories, harmless and unimportant, of my nights with her, but principally of how I had loved her, so that images of her might exist in their minds in so far as they had the power to keep such images alive.

If Pandora roamed these streets, if she came upon my companions perhaps she could divine from them that I was here and wanted so desperately to be reunited with her.

At once I began to acquire a library, buying whole caskets of scrolls and going through them at my leisure. I set up a fine writing desk and began a rather neutral and impersonal diary of my adventures in the old code I had invented before.

We had been in Constantinople less than six months when it became clear to us that other blood drinkers were coming near to our house.

We heard them in the early morning. They came, apparently to hear of us what they could with the Mind Gift and then they rushed away.

"Why have they taken so long?" I demanded. "They've watched us and they've studied us."

"And perhaps they are the reason," said Avicus, "that we've found no Devil worshipers here."

This was perhaps true, for those who spied on us now were not Devil worshipers. We could tell by the bits and pieces of mental imagery which we were able to glean from their minds.

At last they came at early evening and there was no mistaking their polite invitation to us to come with them to visit their mistress.

I went out of our house to greet them and discovered that there were two of them and that they were pale and beautiful boys.

They couldn't have been more than thirteen when they were made, and they had very clear dark eyes, and had short curly black hair. They were dressed in long Eastern robes of the finest decorated cloth, trimmed in a fringe of red and gold. Their under tunics were of silk, and they wore ornate slippers and many jeweled rings.

Two mortals carried the torches for them, and they appeared to be simple and expensive Persian slaves.

One of the radiant young blood drinker boys placed a small scroll in my hands, which I at once opened to read the beautifully written Greek.

"It is the custom before hunting my city to ask permission of me," it said. "Please come to my palace." It was signed, "Eudoxia."

I did not care for the style of this any more than I had cared for the style of anything else in Constantinople. And I cannot say that it surprised me, but then here was an opportunity to speak with other blood drinkers who were not the fanatical worshipers of the Snake and *that*

opportunity had never come before.

Also allow me to note that in all my years as a blood drinker, I had not seen any two others who were as fine and elegant and beautiful as these boys.

No doubt the groups of Satan worshipers contained such blood drinkers, with fine faces and innocent eyes, but for the large part, as I have described, it was Avicus and Mael who slew them or came to terms with them, not me. Besides they had always been corrupted by their zeal.

There was something else here.

These boys seemed infinitely more interesting by virtue of their dignity and their adornments, and the courage with which they looked at me. As for the name Eudoxia, I was ultimately more curious than afraid.

"Let me go with you," I said immediately. But the boys gestured that Avicus and Mael should come as well.

"Why is this?" I asked protectively. But at once my companions let me know that they wanted to go too.

"How many are you?" I asked the boys.

"Eudoxia will answer your questions," said the boy who had given me the scroll. "Please do come with us without further conversation. Eudoxia has been hearing of you for some time."

We were escorted a long way through the streets, until finally we came to a quarter of the city even richer than that in which we lived, and to a house much larger even than our own. It had the usual harsh stone facade, enclosing no doubt an inner garden and rich rooms.

During this time, the boy blood drinkers cloaked their thoughts very well, but I was able to divine, perhaps because they wanted me to do, that their names were Asphar and Rashid.

We were admitted to the house by another pair of mortal slaves who guided us into a large chamber completely decorated with gold.

Torches burned all about us, and in the center of the room, on a gilded couch with purple silk pillows there reclined a gorgeous blood drinker woman, with thick black curls not unlike those of the boys who had come to us, though she wore them long and fretted with pearls, her damask robe and under dress of silk as fine as anything I'd seen in Constantinople so far.

Her face was small, oval, and as close to perfection as anything I've ever beheld, even though she bore no resemblance to Pandora who was for me perfection itself.

Her eyes were round and extremely large. Her lips were perfectly rouged, and there came a perfume from her that was no doubt made by a Persian magician to drive us out of our wits.

There were numerous chairs and couches scattered about on the mosaic floor where rampant Grecian goddesses and gods were as tastefully represented as they might have been some five hundred years before. I saw similar images on the walls surrounding us, though the slightly crude but ornate columns seemed of later design.

As for the vampire woman's skin it was perfectly white, and so totally without a touch of

humanity that it sent a chill through me. But her expression, which manifested itself almost entirely by a smile, was cordial and curious in the extreme.

Still leaning on her elbow, her arm covered in bracelets, she looked up at me.

"Marius," she said in cultured and perfect Latin, her voice as lovely as her face, "you read my walls and floor as though they were a book."

"Forgive me," I said. "But when a room is so exquisitely decorated, it seems the polite thing to do."

"And you long for old Rome," she said, "or for Athens, or even for Antioch where you once lived."

This was a formidable blood drinker. She'd plucked this knowledge of me from the deepest of my memories. I closed my mind. But I didn't close my heart.

"My name is Eudoxia," she said. "I wish I could say that I bid you welcome to Constantinople, but it is my city and I am not altogether pleased that you are here."

"Can we not come to some understanding with you?" I asked. "We've made a long and arduous journey. The city is vast."

She made some small gesture, and the mortal slaves withdrew. Only Asphar and Rashid remained, as if waiting for her command.

I tried to tell if there were other blood drinkers in this house, but I couldn't do this without her knowing I was doing it, and so my attempt was rather weak.

"Sit down, all of you, please," she said. And at that invitation, the two beautiful boys, Asphar and Rashid, made to bring the couches in closer so that we might gather in a natural way.

At once I asked if I might have a chair. And Avicus and Mael in an uncertain whisper echoed the same request. It was done. We were seated.

"An old Roman," she said with a sudden luminous smile. "You disdain a couch, and would have a chair."

I laughed a small courteous laugh.

But then something quite invisible yet strong caused me to cast a glance at Avicus and to see that he was staring at this splendid female blood drinker as though Cupid had just sent an arrow right into his heart.

As for Mael, he glared at her as he had glared at me in Rome many centuries before.

"Don't worry about your friends," said Eudoxia suddenly, startling me completely. "They're loyal to you and will follow you in whatever you say. It's you and I who must talk now. Understand that though this city is immense and there is blood enough for many, rogue blood drinkers come here often and must be driven away."

"Are we rogues?" I asked gently.

I couldn't help but study her features, her rounded chin with its single dimple, and her small cheeks. She appeared as young in mortal years as the two boys. As for her eyes they were jet

black, with such a fringe of lashes that one might suspect there was Egyptian paint on her face when in fact there was none.

This observation put me suddenly in mind of Akasha, and I felt a panic as I tried to clear my mind. What had I done bringing Those Who Must Be Kept here? I should have stayed in the ruins of Rome. But again, I could not think on this matter now.

I looked directly at Eudoxia, a bit dazzled by the countless jewels of her robe, and the vision of her sparkling fingernails, far brighter than any I'd ever beheld except those of Akasha, and I gathered my strength again and tried to penetrate her mind.

She smiled sweetly at me, and then she said, "Marius, I am far too old in the Blood for what you mean to do, but I will tell you anything you want to know."

"May I call you by the name you've given us?" I asked.

"That was my intent," she replied, "in giving you the name. But let me tell you, I expect honesty from you; otherwise, I will not tolerate you in my realm."

I suddenly felt a wave of anger emanating from Mael. I threw a warning glance to him, and once again I saw that totally entranced expression on the face of Avicus.

I realized suddenly that Avicus had probably never beheld such a blood drinker as this. The young women blood drinkers among the worshipers of Satan were deliberately dirty and disheveled, and here, reclining on her magnificent couch lay a woman who looked like the Empress who reigned over Byzantium.

Indeed, perhaps this was how this creature perceived herself.

She smiled as though all these thoughts were transparent to her, and then with a little movement of her hand she told the two blood drinker boys, Asphar and Rashid, to withdraw.

Then her eyes passed very calmly and slowly over my two companions as though she were drawing from them every single coherent thought which had ever passed through their minds.

I continued my study of her, of the pearls in her hair, and the ropes of pearls about her neck, and the jewels that adorned her naked toes as well as her hands.

At last, she looked to me, and a smile spread itself once more on her features, brightening her entire countenance.

"If I grant you permission to stay—and I am not at all sure that I mean to do it—you must show me loyalty when others come to break the peace that we share. You must never side with them against me. You must keep Constantinople only for us."

"And just what will you do if we don't show you loyalty?" asked Mael with his old anger.

She remained staring at me for a long moment, as though to insult him, and then as though rousing herself from a spell, she looked at Mael.

"What can I do," she asked Mael, "to silence you before you say something foolish again?" Then her eyes returned to me. "Let me make this known to you all. I know that you possess the Mother and the Father. I know that you brought them here for safekeeping and that they are in a

chapel deep beneath your house."

I was brutally stunned.

I felt a wave of grief. Once again, I had failed to keep the secret. Even in Antioch long ago, I had failed to keep the secret. Would I not always fail to keep the secret? Was this not my fate? What was to be done?

"Don't be so quick to draw back from me, Marius," said Eudoxia. "I drank from the Mother in Egypt centuries before you took her away."

This statement stunned me all the more. Yet it held some strange promise. It cast a small light into my soul.

I was wondrously excited suddenly.

Here was one who understood everything about the ancient mysteries, just as Pandora had understood. This one, delicate of face and speech, was a world apart from either Avicus or Mael, and how gentle and reasonable she seemed.

"I'll tell you my story if you want it, Marius," she said. "I have always been a worldly blood drinker, never one given to the old religion of the Blood Gods of Egypt. I was three hundred years old in the Blood before you were born. But I'll tell you all you want to know. It is plain that you move through the world by means of questions."

"Yes," I said. "I do move through the world by means of questions, and too often I've asked those questions in utter silence, or long centuries ago of people who gave me answers that were fragments which I had to piece together as though they were bits of old papyri. I hunger for knowledge. I hunger for what you mean to say to me."

She nodded and this seemed to give her extraordinary pleasure.

"Some of us don't require intimate understanding," she said. "Do you require it, Marius? I can read much in your thoughts, but this is a puzzle. Must you be understood?"

I was baffled.

"Must I be understood," I said, thinking it over, as secretly as I might. Did either Avicus or Mael understand me? No, they did not. But once long long ago the Mother had understood me. Or had she? Just possibly when I'd fallen so in love with her, I had understood her.

"I don't have an answer for you," I said softly. "I think I have come to enjoy loneliness. I think when I was mortal I loved it. I was the wanderer. But why do you put this question to me?"

"Because I don't require understanding," she said, and for the first time there came a cold tone into her voice. "But if you wish it, I'll tell you about my life."

"I want so much to hear your story," I answered. I was infatuated. Again, I thought of my beautiful Pandora. Here was an incomparable woman who seemed to have the same gifts. I wanted so to listen to her, and it was more than essential for our safety that I listen to her. But how could we deal with the uneasiness of Mael, and the obvious obsession of Avicus?

She took the thought from me immediately, looking at Avicus gently and then turning her

attention for a long sober moment on the infuriated Mael.

"You were a priest in Gaul," she said calmly to him, "yet you have the attitude of a dedicated warrior. You would destroy me. Why is this so?"

"I don't respect your authority here," Mael answered, trying to match her quiet tone. "Who are you to me? You say you never respected the old religion. Well, I respected it. And Avicus respected it. Of this we're proud."

"We all want the same thing," she answered. She smiled, revealing her fang teeth. "We want a hunting ground which is not overcrowded. We want the Satanic blood drinkers to be kept out for they multiply insanely and seek to foment trouble in the mortal world. My authority rests on my past triumphs. It's no more than habit. If we can make a peace …" She broke off and in the manner of a man she shrugged her shoulders and opened her hands.

Suddenly Avicus broke in.

"Marius speaks for us," he said. "Marius, make the peace with Eudoxia, please."

"We give you our loyalty," I said, "in so far as we do want the same things, as you've described. But I want very much to speak with you. I want to know how many blood drinkers are here now. As for your history, let me say again that I do want to hear it. One thing we can give to each other is our history. Yes. I want to know yours."

She rose from the couch very gracefully, revealing herself to be a little taller than I had supposed. She had rather broad shoulders for a woman, and she walked very straight, her bare feet not making the slightest sound.

"Come into my library," she said, leading us into a chamber off the main room. "It's better for talking, I believe." Her hair was long down her back, a heavy mass of black curls, and she moved gracefully despite the weight of her beaded and decorated robes.

The library was immense, with shelves for scrolls and codexes, that is, bound volumes such as we have today. There were chairs here and there, and some gathered in the center, and two couches for reclining and tables on which to write. The golden lamps looked Persian to me in their heavy worked designs, but I couldn't be certain of it.

The carpets strewn about were definitely Persian, that much I knew.

Of course the moment I saw the books, I was overcome with pleasure. This always happens with me. I remembered the library in old Egypt in which I had found the Elder who had put the Mother and Father into the sun. I feel foolishly safe with books which can be a mistake.

I thought of all that I had lost in the first siege of Rome. I couldn't help but wonder what Greek and Roman authors were here preserved. For the Christians, though they were kinder to the ancients than people now believe, did not always save the old works.

"Your eyes are hungry," she said, "though your mind is shut. I know you want to read here. You're welcome. Send your scribes to copy what you will. But I go ahead of myself, don't I? We must talk. We must see if we can achieve an agreement. I don't know that we can."

She turned her eyes to Avicus.

“And you, you who are old, you who were given the Blood in Egypt, you are only just learning to love the realm of letters. How strange that it would take you so long.”

I could feel his immense excitement and tender confusion.

“I’m learning,” he said. “Marius is teaching me.” And then the flame rose in his cheeks.

As for Mael, I couldn’t help but note his quiet fury, and it struck me that he had for so long been the author of his own unhappiness, but now something was truly happening which might be a legitimate cause of his pain.

Of course it greatly distressed me that neither of them could keep their minds secret. Long ago in Rome when I had sought to find them they had done a better job of it.

“Let’s be seated,” said Eudoxia, “and let me tell you who I am.”

We took the chairs, which brought us closer together, and she began to tell her story in a quiet tone.

10

“My mortal life isn’t very important,” she said, “but I’ll pass over it quickly. I was from a fine Greek family, one of the first wave of settlers to come from Athens to Alexandria to make it the great city that Alexander wanted when he founded it three hundred years before the birth of the Christ.

“I was brought up like any girl in such a Greek household, extremely protected, and never leaving the house. I did however learn to read and write, because my father wanted me to be able to write letters to him after I was married and he thought that I might read poetry to my children later on.

“I loved him for it, though no one else did, and I took to my education with a passion, neglecting all else.

“An early marriage was prepared for me. I wasn’t fifteen when I was told of it, and frankly I was rather happy about it because I had seen the man, and I’d found him intriguing and somewhat strange. I wondered if marriage to him wouldn’t bring a new existence for me, something more interesting than what I’d had at home. My real mother was dead and I didn’t care for my stepmother. I wanted to be out of her house.”

She paused for a moment and I was of course calculating. She was older than me by many years, she was making that plain to me, twice over, and that is why she appeared so utterly perfect. Time had done its work on the lines of her face, as it was doing its work on my own.

She watched me and hesitated for a moment, but then she went on:

“A month before the nuptials, I was abducted right out of my bed at night, and taken over the walls of the house to a dark and filthy place where I was flung down in the corner, to cower on the stone floor while several men carried on a crude argument, as to who would be paid how much for having stolen me.

“I expected to be murdered. I also knew that my stepmother was behind my ruin.

“But there came into the place a tall thin man with a head of shaggy black hair, and a face and hands as white as the moon, who murdered all of these men, throwing them about as if they were weightless, and holding the last up to his mouth for a long time, as though he were drinking blood from the corpse, or eating part of it.

“I thought I was on the verge of madness.

“As he dropped the body, the white-faced being realized that I was staring at him. I had nothing but a torn and dirty night dress to cover me. But I rose to my feet to face him bravely.

" 'A woman,' he said. I shall never forget. 'A woman' as if that were remarkable."

"Sometimes, it is," I said.

She smiled at me rather tolerantly. She went on with the story.

"After this remark, he gave a strange little laugh and then he came for me.

"Once again, I expected to be murdered. But he made me a blood drinker. There was no ceremony to it, no words, nothing. He simply did it, right then and there.

"Then ripping off the tunic and sandals from one of the men, he dressed me crudely as a boy and we hunted the streets together for the rest of the night. He handled me roughly as we went along, turning me this way and that, pushing me, instructing me as much with shoves as with crude words.

"Before dawn, he took me back to his curious dwelling. It wasn't in the elite Greek quarter where I had been brought up. But I didn't know that at the time. As a matter of fact, I'd never been out of my father's house. My first experience of the city streets had been frankly enthralling.

"Now here I was being carried up the high wall of a three-story dwelling and then brought down into its barren courtyard.

"The place was an immense and disorderly treasure house. In every room there were riches unimaginable.

" 'See, all this!' the blood drinker said to me proudly.

"There was chaos everywhere. There were silk draperies in heaps and beautiful cushions, and these he brought together to make a kind of nest for us. He put heavy necklaces on me and said, 'These will lure your victims. Then you can quickly take hold of them.'

"I was intoxicated and afraid.

"Then he took out his dagger and, grabbing me by the hair, he cut it off, almost all of it, and that sent me into wailing like nothing that had gone before. I had killed. I had drunk blood. I had run through the streets half mad. That did not make me bellow, but the cutting of my hair was too much.

"He didn't seem at all disturbed by my crying, but quite suddenly he snatched me up, and threw me down into a large casket on a hard bed of jewels and gold chains and he shut the lid on me. Little did I know the sun was rising. Again, I thought I would die.

"But next I opened my eyes, he was there, smiling, and in a gruff voice, with no real wit or talent for a turn of phrase he explained that we must sleep all day away from the sun. It was our nature. And we had to drink plenty of blood. Blood was the only thing that mattered to us.

"Maybe to you, I thought, but I didn't dare argue with him.

"And my hair of course had all grown back as it would every day forever, and he once again hacked it off. Within a few nights, to my relief he did acquire an expensive scissors to make this operation easier, but he, no matter what we had to do, would never tolerate my long locks.

“I was with him several years.

“He was never civil or kind, but never terribly cruel either. I was never out of his sight. When I asked if we might acquire better clothes for me, he agreed, though he obviously didn’t care too much about it. As for himself, he wore a long tunic and a cloak, changing only when these became worn, stealing the fresh clothing from one of his victims.

“He often patted me on the head. He had no words for love, and he had no imagination. When I brought back books from the market to read poetry, he laughed at me, if you can call the toneless noise he made a laugh. I read the poetry to him nevertheless, and much of the time after the initial laugh he simply stared at me.

“Once or twice I asked him how he’d been made a blood drinker, and he said it was by a wicked drinker of the blood who had come out of Upper Egypt. ‘They’re all liars, those old ones,’ he said. ‘I call them the Temple Blood Drinkers.’ And that constituted the entire history he bequeathed to me.

“If I went against him in any particular, he hit me. It wasn’t a terribly hard blow, but it was enough to stop me from ever opposing him on any count.

“When I tried to put the household in some sort of order, he stared at me dully, never offering to help but never striking me either. I rolled out some of the Babylonian rugs. I put some of the marble statues along the wall so that they looked respectable. I cleaned up the courtyard.

“Now during this time, I heard other blood drinkers in Alexandria. I even glimpsed them, but never did they come very close.

“When I told him about them, he only shrugged and said that they were no worry of mine. ‘I’m too strong for them,’ he told me, ‘and besides they don’t want any trouble. They know that I know too much about them.’ He didn’t explain further, but he told me I was very blessed in that he’d given me old blood.

“I don’t know what kept me so happy during that time. Perhaps it was hunting different parts of Alexandria, or just reading new books, or swimming in the sea. He and I did go out together and swim in the sea.

“I don’t know if you can imagine this—what the sea meant to me, that I might bathe in it, that I might walk along the shore. A closeted Greek housewife would never have that privilege. And I was a blood drinker. I was a boy. I hunted the ships in the harbor. I walked with brave and evil men.

“One night my Maker failed to cut off my hair, as was the evening custom, and he took me to a strange place. It was in the Egyptian quarter of the city, and once we opened the door, we had to follow a long descending tunnel, before we came into a great room covered with the old picture writing of Egypt. There were huge square pillars supporting the ceiling. It was rather an awe-inspiring place.

“I think it brought to memory a more refined time to me, when I had known things of mystery

and beauty, though I cannot now really say.

"There were several blood drinkers there. They were pale and appeared extremely beautiful, but nothing as white as my Maker and they were clearly afraid of him. I was quite astonished to see all this. But then I remembered his phrase, 'Temple Blood Drinkers,' and I thought, So we are with them.

"He pushed me forward as a little miracle which they had not beheld. There was a quarrel then in their language, which I could just barely understand.

"It seemed they told him that the Mother would make the decision, and then and only then could he be forgiven for his ways. As for him, my Maker, he said that he didn't care whether or not he was forgiven, but he was going off now, and he wanted to be rid of me and if they would take me, that was all he wanted to know.

"I was terrified. I didn't entirely like this gloomy place, grand though it was. And we had spent several years together. And now he was leaving?

"I wanted to ask him, What had I done? I suppose I realized in that moment that I loved him. I would do anything if he would only change his mind.

"The others fell upon me. They took hold of me by both arms and dragged me with unnecessary force into another gigantic room.

"The Mother and the Father were there, resplendent and shining, seated on a huge throne of black diorite, above some six or seven marble steps.

"This was the main room of a temple, and all its columns and walls were decorated beautifully with the Egyptian writing, and the ceiling was covered with plates of gold.

"Naturally I thought, as we all do, that the Mother and the Father were statues, and as I was dragged closer to them, I was mad with resentment that such a thing was taking place.

"I was also curiously ashamed, ashamed that I wore old sandals and a dirty boyish tunic, and that my hair was tumbled down all around me—for on this one night my Maker had failed to hack it off—and I was in no way prepared for what ritual was to take place.

"Akasha and Enkil were of the purest white, and they sat as they have always done, since I have come to know them—as they sit in your underground chapel now."

Mael broke the narrative with an angry question:

"How do you know how the Mother and Father appear in our underground chapel?"

I was deeply disturbed that he had done this.

But Eudoxia remained utterly composed.

"You have no power to see through the minds of other blood drinkers?" she asked. Her eyes were hard, perhaps even a little cruel.

Mael was confused.

And I was keenly aware that he had given away a secret to Eudoxia, the secret being that he didn't have such a power, or that he didn't know that he did, and I wasn't quite sure what I

should do.

Understand he knew that he could find other blood drinkers by hearing their thoughts, but he didn't know how to use this power to even greater advantage, seeing what they saw.

Indeed, all three of us were uncertain of our powers. And I realized how foolish this was.

At this moment, when Eudoxia received no answer to her question, I tried vainly to think of some way to distract her.

"Please," I said to Eudoxia, "will you continue? Tell us your story." I didn't dare to apologize for Mael's rudeness because that might have made him furious.

"Very well," said Eudoxia looking straight at me as though she were dismissing my companions as impossible.

"As I was telling you," she said, "My Maker pushed me forward and told me to kneel before the Father and the Mother. And being exceedingly frightened, I did as I was told.

"I looked up at their faces, as blood drinkers have done since time immemorial and I saw no vitality, no subtlety of expression, only the relaxation of dumb animals, no more.

"But then there came a change in the Mother. Her right hand was raised ever so slightly from her lap and it turned and thereby made the simplest beckoning gesture to me.

"I was astonished by this gesture. So these creatures lived and breathed? Or was it trickery, some form of magic? I didn't know.

"My Maker, ever so crude even at this sacred moment, said, 'Ah, go to her, drink her blood. She is the Mother of us all.' And with his bare foot, he kicked me. 'She is the First One,' he said. 'Drink.'

"The other blood drinkers began to quarrel with him fiercely, speaking the old Egyptian tongue again, telling him that the gesture wasn't clear, that the Mother might destroy me, and who was he to give such a command, and how dare he come to this temple with a pitiful female blood drinker who was as soiled and untutored as he was.

"But he overrode them. 'Drink her blood and your strength will be beyond measure,' he said. Then he lifted me to my feet and all but threw me forward so that I landed with my hands on the marble steps before the throne.

"The other blood drinkers were shocked by his behavior. I heard a low laugh from my Maker. But my eyes were on the King and the Queen.

"I saw that the Queen had moved her hand again, opening her fingers, and though her eyes never changed, the beckoning gesture was certain.

" 'From her neck,' said my Maker. 'Don't be afraid. She never destroys those whom she beckons. Do as I say.' And I did.

"I drank as much from her as I was able to drink. And mark my words, Marius, this was over three hundred years before the Elder ever put the Mother and Father in the Great Fire. And I was to drink from her more than once. Heed my words, more than once, long before you ever came

to Alexandria, long before you took our King and Queen."

She raised her dark black eyebrows slightly as she looked at me, as though she wanted me to understand her point most keenly. She was very very strong.

"But Eudoxia, when I did come to Alexandria," I answered her. "When I came in search of the Mother and Father, and to discover who had put them in the sun, you weren't there in the temple. You weren't in Alexandria. At least you didn't make yourself known to me."

"No," she said, "I was in the city of Ephesus where I had gone with another blood drinker whom the Fire destroyed. Or I should say, I was making my way home to Alexandria, to find the reason for the Fire, and to drink of the healing fount, when you took the Mother and Father away."

She gave me a delicate but cold smile.

"Can you imagine my anguish when I discovered that the Elder was dead and the temple was empty? When the few survivors of the temple told me that a Roman named Marius had come and stolen our King and Queen?"

I said nothing, but her resentment was plain. Her face displayed its human emotions. A shimmer of blood tears rose in her round dark eyes.

"Time has healed me, Marius," she said, "because I contain a great deal of the Queen's blood, and was from the moment of my making very strong. Indeed, the Great Fire only turned me a dark brown color, with small pain. But if you hadn't taken Akasha away from Alexandria, she would have let me drink her blood again, and I would have been healed quickly. It would not have taken so long."

"And would you drink the Queen's blood now, Eudoxia?" I asked. "Is that what you mean to do? For surely you know why I did what I did. Surely you know it was the Elder who put the Mother and the Father in the sun."

She didn't answer. I couldn't tell whether this information surprised her or not. She was perfectly concealed. Then she said:

"Do I need the blood now, Marius? Look at me. What do you see?"

I hesitated to answer. Then I did:

"No, you don't need it, Eudoxia," I said. "Unless such blood is always a blessing."

She looked at me for a long moment and then she nodded her head slowly, almost drowsily and her dark eyebrows came together in a small frown.

"Always a blessing?" she asked, repeating my words. "I don't know if it is always a blessing."

"Will you tell me more of your story? What happened after you first drank from Akasha? After your Maker went his way?" I put these questions gently. "Did you reside in the temple once your Maker had left?"

This seemed to give her the moment of recollection that she required.

"No, I didn't remain there," she said. "Though the priests coaxed me, telling me wild stories of

old worship, and that the Mother was imperishable, save from the sunlight, and should she ever burn, so would we all. There was one among them who made quite a point of this warning, as though the prospect tantalized him—."

"The Elder," I said, "who eventually sought to prove it."

"Yes," she said. "But to me he was no Elder, and I did not heed his words.

"I went out, free of my Maker, and, left with his house and his treasure, I decided upon another way of life. Of course the temple priests often came to me and harried me that I was profane and reckless, but as they did no more than that, I paid them no heed.

"I could easily pass for human then, especially if I covered my skin with certain oils." She sighed. "And I was used to passing for a young man. It was a simple matter for me to make a fine household, to acquire good clothes, that is, to pass from poor to rich in a matter of nights.

"I gave out word in the schools and in the marketplace that I could write letters for people, and that I could copy books, and all this by night when the other copyists had quit and gone home. And arranging a big study in my house, with plenty of light, I set to doing this for human beings, and this was how I came to know them, and came to know what the teachers were teaching by day.

"What an agony it was that I couldn't hear the great philosophers who held forth in the daylight hours, but I did very well with this nocturnal occupation, and I had what I wanted, the warm voices of humans speaking to me. I befriended mortals. And on many an evening my house was filled with banqueting guests.

"I learned of the world from students, poets, soldiers. In the small hours, I slipped into the great library of Alexandria, a place that you should have visited, Marius. It is a wonder that you passed over such a treasure house of books. I did not pass it over."

She paused. Her face was horridly blank, and I knew it was from an excess of emotion. She did not look at any of us.

"Yes, I understand this," I said, "I understand it very very deeply. I feel the same need for mortal voices near me, for mortals smiling on me as though I were their own."

"I know your loneliness," she said in a rather hard voice. And for the first time I had the feeling that the passing expressions on her face were hard as well, that her face was nothing but a beautiful shell for a disturbed soul inside her, of which I knew little from her words.

"I lived well and for a long time in Alexandria," she said. "What greater city was there? And I believed as many blood drinkers do that knowledge alone would sustain me over the decades, that information could somehow stave off despair."

I was quite impressed with these words, but I didn't respond.

"I should have remained in Alexandria," she said, looking off, her voice low and suddenly full of regret. "I began to love a certain mortal, a young man who felt great love for me. One night he made his love known to me, that he would give up all for me—his proposed marriage, his family,

all—if only I would go away with him to Ephesus, the place from which his family had come, and where he wanted to return."

She broke off as if she did not mean to go on.

"It was such love," she said, her words coming more slowly, "and all this while he believed that I was a young man."

I said nothing.

"The night he declared his love, I revealed myself. He was quite horrified by the pretense. And I took my revenge." She frowned as though she wasn't quite sure of the word. "Yes," she said, "my revenge."

"You made him a blood drinker," I said softly.

"Yes," she said, still looking off as though she were back in those times. "I did, and by the most brutal and ungraceful force, and once that was done, he saw me with naked and loving eyes."

"Loving eyes?" I repeated.

She looked pointedly at Avicus and then back to me. Then she looked at Avicus again.

I took my measure of him. I had always thought him rather splendid, and assumed from his beauty that the Gods of the Grove were chosen for their beauty as well as their endurance, but I tried to see him as she saw him now. His skin was golden now, rather than brown, and his thick black hair made a dignified frame for his unusually beguiling face.

I looked back to Eudoxia and saw with a little shock that she was looking at me.

"He loved you again?" I asked, locking in immediately upon her story and its meaning. "He loved you even when the Blood flowed in his veins?"

I could not even guess her inner thoughts.

She gave me a grave nod. "Yes, he loved me again," she said. "And he had the new eyes of the Blood, and I was his teacher, and we all know what charm lies in all that." She smiled bitterly.

A sinister feeling came over me, a feeling that something was very wrong with her, that perhaps she was mad. But I had to bury this feeling within me and I did.

"Off we went to Ephesus," she said, going on with her story, "and though it was no match for Alexandria, it was nevertheless a great Greek city, with rich trade from the East, and with pilgrims always coming for the worship of the great goddess Artemis, and there we lived until the Great Fire."

Her voice became small. Mortals might not have heard it.

"The Great Fire destroyed him utterly," she said. "He was just that age when all the human flesh was gone from him, and only the blood drinker remained, but the blood drinker had only just begun to be strong."

She broke off, as though she could not continue, then she went on:

"There were only ashes left to me of him. Ashes and no more."

She fell silent and I dared not encourage her.

Then she said:

"I should have taken him to the Queen before I ever left Alexandria. But you see, I had no time for the temple blood drinkers and when I had gone to them, it was as a rebel, talking my way in proudly with tales of the Queen's gestures to me so that I might lay flowers before her, and what if I had brought my lover, and the Queen had made no such gesture as that which she had made to me? And so, you see, I had not brought him, and there in Ephesus, I stood with the ashes in my hands."

I remained silent out of respect for her. I couldn't help but glance at Avicus again. He was all but weeping. She had possession of him, heart and soul.

"Why did I go back to Alexandria after this terrible loss?" she asked wearily. "Because the temple blood drinkers had told me that the Mother was the Queen of all. Because they had spoken of the sun and of our burning. And I knew that something must have befallen our Mother, something had caused this Great Fire, and that only those in the temple would know what it was. And there was a pain in my flesh, by no means unbearable, but something which I would have healed by the Mother, if I had found her there."

I said nothing.

In all the years since I'd taken Those Who Must Be Kept, I had never come upon such a creature as this woman. And I should say as well that never had such a blood drinker come upon me.

Never had anyone come armed with such eloquence, or history, or old poetry such as this.

"For centuries," I said, my voice low and gentle, "I kept the Mother and Father in Antioch. Other blood drinkers found me—warlike and violent creatures, creatures badly burnt and bound upon stealing the strong blood. But you, you never came."

She shook her head in negation.

"Never did Antioch enter my thoughts," she confessed. "I believed that you had taken the Mother and Father to Rome. Marius, the Roman, that is what they called you. Marius, the Roman, has taken the Mother and the Father. And so you see, I made a severe error in going to the Imperial City, and after that I went to Crete, and I was never to be close to you, never to find you by the Mind Gift, never to hear tell of where you might be.

"But I was not always searching for the Mother and Father," she said. "I had my passions. I made blood drinkers to be my companions. The centuries healed me as you have seen. I am now far stronger than you are, Marius. I am infinitely stronger than your companions. And though touched by your fine Patrician manners and your old-fashioned Latin, and by the devotion of your friend, Avicus, I must lay down for you some hard terms."

"How so, Eudoxia?" I asked calmly.

Mael was in a rage.

She was quiet for a long moment, during which her small delicate features wore nothing but an expression of sweetness and kindness, and then she said with courtesy:

"Give over the Mother and Father to me, Marius, or I shall destroy you and your companions. You will not be allowed either to stay or to go."

I could see the shock in Avicus. As for Mael he was, thank the gods, dumbfounded. And as for me, I was again stunned.

I waited several moments, and then I asked:

"Why do you want the Mother and Father, Eudoxia?"

"Oh, Marius," she shook her head crossly, "don't play the fool. You know the Mother's blood is the strongest. I've already told you that every time I ever appealed to her, she gave me the welcoming gesture, and allowed me to drink. I want her because I want the power in her. And also because I would not have this King and Queen, who can be burnt again or put in the sun, given over to others who might do such rash things."

"Have you thought this through?" I asked coldly. "How would you keep the shrine secret? From what I've seen of your blood drinker companions, they are almost children both in mortal years and in the Blood. Do you know the weight of this burden?"

"I knew it before you ever existed," she said, her face suffused with anger. "You play with me, Marius. And I won't have it. I know what's in your heart. You won't give up the Mother because you won't give up the blood."

"Perhaps so, Eudoxia," I said, straining to remain civil. "I want time to consider what has been said here."

"No, I give you no time," she said, her voice angry, a blush coming to her cheeks. "Answer me now, or I destroy you."

Her rage was so sudden it caught me off guard. Yet quickly, I recovered.

"And how do you mean to do this?" I asked.

Mael jumped to his feet, and moved behind his chair. I gestured for him to be still. Avicus sat in mute despair. The blood tears had begun to flow from him, and they moved down his face. He was far more disappointed than fearful. In fact, he seemed rather solemnly brave.

Eudoxia turned to Avicus, and at once I sensed a threat in her posture. Her limbs stiffened, and it seemed that her eyes became unusually hard. She meant to do something evil to Avicus, and there was no time for me to wait and see what that might be.

I rose, and rushing at her, took hold of her by both wrists, turning her so that inevitably and furiously she looked up at me.

Of course this physical strength could accomplish little here, but what more could I do? What had my powers become over these years? I didn't know. But there was no time to ponder or experiment. I summoned, from the very depths of my being, all the destructive force I might possess.

I felt a pain in my belly and then in my head, and while Eudoxia went limp in my grasp, with her eyes closed, I felt a dreadful heat come full force against my face and chest. But I was not burnt by it. I repelled it and drove it back whence it had come.

In sum, this was a battle, and I had no idea who might win it. I sought again to bring all the force that I could command into action and again I saw her weaken, felt her weaken, and yet there came the heat once more against me but it had no effect.

I threw her down on the marble floor and I stood over her, gathering the force with all my will and directing it towards her, and she writhed on the marble, her eyes closed, and her hands shuddering. My force held her pinioned. My force would not let her rise.

At last she went still. She breathed deeply and then she opened her eyes, and she looked up at me.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw her acolytes Asphar and Rashid coming to assist her. Both brandished huge glittering swords. I looked desperately about for one of the oil lamps in the hope that I could burn one of them with flaming oil, but then my thoughts went before me with all my strength and with utter rage: *Oh, if I could only burn you!* And Rashid stopped, cried out, and then burst into flames.

With utter horror, I beheld this. I knew I had done it. And so did all present. The boy's bones were visible but for an instant and then they collapsed and the flames leapt and danced on the marble floor.

I had no choice but to turn to Asphar. But Eudoxia cried out.

"Enough." She struggled to rise but she couldn't do it. I took both her hands and lifted her to her feet.

With her head bowed she backed away from me. She turned and looked at the remains of Rashid.

"You've destroyed one who was dear to me," she said, her voice quivering. "And you didn't even know you had the power of Fire."

"And you meant to destroy my Avicus," I said, "and you meant to destroy me." I sighed as I looked at her. "What choice did you give me? You have been my teacher in regard to my powers." I trembled with exhaustion and fury. "We might have all lived here in accord."

I looked at Asphar who didn't dare to come any closer. I looked at Eudoxia who sat weak and useless in her chair.

"I mean to leave now," I said, "and take my two companions with me. If you try to harm any of us, I'll turn my full power on you. And as you said, I do not even know what it is myself."

"You threaten from fear," she said wearily. "And you won't leave here without giving me a life for a life. You burnt Rashid. Give me Avicus. Give him to me now of your own free will."

"I will not," I said coldly. I felt my power gathered inside me. I glared at Asphar. The poor child blood drinker quivered in terror.

Eudoxia sat sullenly in her chair, her head still bowed.

"What a loss there has been here, Eudoxia," I said. "We could have given such riches of mind to each other."

"Stop your golden talk, Marius," she said, looking up angrily, her eyes full of blood tears. "You still fear me. Bring me to the Mother and the Father, and let the Mother decide who shall be her keeper, you or I."

I answered quickly,

"I won't have you under my roof, Eudoxia. But I will take the matter before the Mother and the Father. And after they speak to me, I will speak to you."

I turned to Asphar.

"Lead us out of this place now," I said, "or I'll burn you as I did your companion."

He obeyed without hesitation, and once he had led us speedily to the street, we fled.

11

We fled.

There is no other way to describe it. We were in terror and we fled. As soon as we reached our house we closed off every window and door with its heaviest shutters.

But what did all this matter against a power such as Eudoxia possessed?

Gathering in the inner court, we took stock of the situation. We must discover our own powers. We must know what had been given us by time and blood.

Within a few hours, we had some answers.

Avicus and I could move objects easily without touching them. We could make them fly through the air. As for the Fire Gift, I alone possessed it and we could find no limit to my gift in terms of the space of our house. That meant I could burn wood no matter how far it was from me. And as for living things, I chose the unfortunate vermin for my victims, and ignited them from a great distance with ease.

As for our physical strength it was far greater than we had ever supposed. Again, I excelled in this as in everything. Avicus was second to me, and Mael was third.

But I had sensed something else when I was with Eudoxia, and I tried to explain it to Avicus and Mael.

“When we fought, she sought to burn me with the Fire Gift. (And we did use those words then in one form or another.) Of this I’m certain. I felt the warmth. But I was confronting her with a different power. I was using a pressure against her. And that is something I must come to understand.”

Once again, I chose the unfortunate rats of our dwelling for my exercise, and holding one of these, I exerted the same force I had used when struggling with Eudoxia in my arms. The creature virtually exploded, but there was no fire involved.

I knew then that I possessed a power different from the Fire Gift, which I might call the Killing Gift, which I had used in my defense. Should I use this pressure against a mortal, and I didn’t intend to, the mortal’s internal organs would be exploded and the poor creature would die.

“Now Avicus,” I said, “you being the eldest of us, see if you possess this Killing Gift, for you very well might.”

Having caught a rat, I held it as Avicus directed his thoughts with all due concentration, and within seconds the poor creature bled from its ears and mouth and was quite dead.

This had a sobering effect upon Avicus.

I insisted that Mael attempt the same thing. This time the rat squirmed furiously, letting out terrible little squeaks or cries, but did not die. When I put the little creature down on the mosaic floor of the court, it could not run, or even climb to its small feet, and I, out of mercy for it, put it to death.

I looked at Mael. "The power is growing in you," I said. "The powers are increasing in all of us. We have to be more clever, infinitely more clever, as we face our enemies here."

Mael nodded. "It seems that I might cripple a mortal."

"Or even make him fall," I answered. "But let us turn our attention now to the Mind Gift. We've all used it to locate each other, and sometimes to communicate a silent question or thought, but only in the simplest most self-defensive ways."

We went into the library and seated ourselves in a small triangle, and I sought to put into the mind of Avicus images of what I had seen in the great church of Hagia Sophia, specifically the mosaics which I had most loved.

He was at once able to describe them to me, even down to detail.

Then I became a recipient of his thoughts, which were memories of the long ago year when he was brought North out of Egypt, and up to Britain, to take up his long service in the Grove of the Druids. He had been in chains.

I was shaken by these images. Not only did I see them, I felt a deep physical response. I had to clear my eyes as well as my head. There was something overpoweringly intimate about them, yet something indistinct at the same time. I knew that I would never feel quite the same about Avicus again.

Now it was my turn with Mael. I tried to send him vivid pictures of my former house in Antioch, where I had been so happy—or unhappy—with Pandora. And again, he was able to describe in words the images I'd sent.

When it came his turn to send me images, he allowed me to see the first night in his youth that he had ever been allowed to join the Faithful of the Forest in the ceremonies of the God of the Grove. I disliked these scenes, for obvious reasons, and again I felt jarred by them, and that I knew him now a little better than I desired.

After this, we tried to eavesdrop upon each other mentally, a skill we had always known we possessed. We proved far stronger in this than we had anticipated. And as for cloaking our minds, we could all do it quite near to perfection, even Mael.

We resolved then that we would strengthen our powers in so far as we could do this for ourselves. We would use the Mind Gift more often. We would do all that we could to prepare for Eudoxia and what she meant to do.

At last, having completed our lessons, and having heard no more of Eudoxia or her household, I resolved to go down into the shrine of Those Who Must Be Kept.

Avicus and Mael were hesitant to remain upstairs without me, so I allowed them to come down

and wait near the doorway, but I insisted that I go into the shrine alone.

I knelt down before the Divine Parents, and in a low voice I told them what had taken place. Naturally there was an absurdity to this, for they probably already knew.

Whatever the case, I spoke frankly to Akasha and Enkil of all that Eudoxia had revealed to me, of our terrible struggle, and I told them that I didn't know what to do.

Here was one who laid claim to them, and I did not trust Eudoxia, because she had no respect for me and those I loved. I told them that if they wished to be given over to Eudoxia, all I needed was a sign, but I begged that I and my companions would be saved.

Nothing broke the silence of the chapel except my whispers. Nothing changed.

"I need the blood, Mother," I said to Akasha. "Never have I needed it more. If I am to defend myself this time, I need the blood."

I rose. I waited. I wished that I would see Akasha's hand rise as it had for Eudoxia. I thought of the words of her Maker, "She never destroys those she beckons."

But there was no warm gesture for me. There was only my courage, as I once more embraced Akasha, and pressed my lips to her neck, and then pierced her skin and felt the delicious indescribable blood.

What did I see in my ecstasy? What did I see in this sublime satisfaction? It was the lush and beautiful palace garden, full of carefully tended fruit trees, and the soft dark grass, and the sun shining through the branches. How could I ever forget that fatal and supremely beautiful sun? Beneath my naked foot, I felt the soft waxy petal of a flower. Against my face, I felt soft branches. I drank and drank, slipping out of time, and the warmth paralyzed me.

Is this your sign, Mother? I was walking in the palace garden, and it seemed I held a paintbrush in my hand, and when I looked up, I was painting the very trees that I saw above me, creating the garden on the wall of my house, the garden in which I walked. I understood this paradox perfectly. This was a garden which I had once painted on the walls of the shrine. And now it was mine to have both on a flat wall, and also surrounding me, as if it really existed. And that was the omen. Keep the Mother and the Father. Do not be afraid.

I drew back. I could take no more. I clung to Akasha like a child. I held to her neck with my left hand, my forehead against her heavy black plaits, and I kissed her, over and over again, I kissed her, as though that and only that were the most eloquent gesture in the world.

Enkil did not stir. Akasha did not stir. I sighed and that was the only sound.

Then I withdrew and knelt down before both of them, and I gave my thanks.

How completely and totally I loved her, my shimmering Egyptian goddess. How I believed that she belonged to me.

Then for a long time I pondered this problem with Eudoxia, and I saw it a little more clearly.

It occurred to me that in the absence of a clear sign to Eudoxia, my battle with her would be to the death. She would never allow me to remain in this city, and she meant to take Those Who

Must Be Kept from me, so that I would have to use the Fire Gift against her as best I could. What had happened earlier this night was only the beginning of our little war.

It was dreadfully sad to me, because I admired Eudoxia, but I knew that she had been far too humiliated by our struggle ever to give in.

I looked up at Akasha. "How do I fight this creature to the death?" I asked. "This creature has your blood in her. I have your blood in me. But surely there must be a clearer sign of what you mean for me to do?"

I stayed there for an hour or more, and then finally I went out.

I found Avicus and Mael waiting where I had left them.

"She's given me her blood," I said. "This isn't a boast. I only mean for you to know it. And I believe that that is her sign. But how can I know? I believe that she does not want to be given over to Eudoxia, and she will destroy if provoked."

Avicus looked desperate.

"In all our years in Rome," he said, "we were blessed that no one of great strength ever challenged us."

I agreed with him. "Strong blood drinkers stay away from others like them," I said. "But you must see, surely, that we are challenging her. We could leave as she has asked us to do."

"She has no right to ask this of us," said Avicus. "Why can't she try to love us?"

"Love us?" I asked, repeating his words. "What makes you say such a strange thing? I know that you're enamored of her. Of course. I've seen this. But why should she love us?"

"Precisely because we are strong," he responded. "She has only the weakest blood drinkers around her, creatures no more than half a century in age. We can tell her things, things she may not know."

"Ah, yes, I thought the same things when I first laid eyes on her. But with this one it's not to be."

"Why?" he asked again.

"If she wanted strong ones like us, they would be here," I said. And then I said dejectedly, "We can always go back to Rome."

He had no answer for that. I didn't know whether I meant it myself.

As we went up the steps and through the tunnels to the surface, I took his arm.

"You're mad with thoughts of her," I said. "You must regain your spiritual self. Don't love her. Make it a simple act of will."

He nodded. But he was too troubled to conceal it.

I glanced at Mael, and found him more calm about all this than I had imagined. Then came the inevitable question:

"Would she have destroyed Avicus if you hadn't opposed her?" Mael asked.

"She was going to give it a very good try," I said. "But Avicus is very old, older than you or

me. And possibly older than her. And you've seen his strength tonight."

Uneasy, filled with misgivings, and bad thoughts, we went to our unholy rest.

The following night, as soon as I rose, I knew that there were strangers in our house. I was furious, but had some sense even then that anger renders one weak.

Mael and Avicus came to me immediately, and the three of us went to discover Eudoxia and the terrified Asphar with her, and two other young male blood drinkers whom we had not see before.

All were settled within my library as if they were invited guests.

Eudoxia was dressed in splendid and heavy Eastern robes with long bell sleeves, and Persian slippers, and her thick black curls were gathered above her ears with jewels and pearls.

The room was not as fine as the one in which she had received me, as I had not finished with my furnishings and other such things, and therefore she appeared the most sumptuous ornament in view.

I was struck once more by the beauty of her small face, especially I think by her mouth, though her cold dark eyes were as mesmerizing as before.

I felt sorry for the miserable Asphar who was so afraid of me, and as for the other two blood drinkers, both boys in mortal life, and young in immortality, I felt rather sorry for them too.

Need I say that they were beautiful? They had been grown children when they were taken, that is, splendid beings with adult bodies and chubby boyish cheeks and mouths.

"Why have you come without an invitation?" I asked Eudoxia. "You sit in my chair as though you're my guest."

"Forgive me," she said gently. "I came because I felt compelled to come. I've searched your house through and through."

"You boast of this?" I asked.

Her lips were parted as though she meant to answer but then the tears rose in her eyes.

"Where are the books, Marius?" she said softly. She looked at me. "Where are all the old books of Egypt? The books that were in the temple, the books that you stole?"

I didn't answer. I didn't sit down.

"I came because I hoped to find them," she said, staring forward, her tears falling. "I came here because last night I dreamed of the priests in the temple, and how they used to tell me that I ought to read the old tales."

Still I didn't answer.

She looked up, and then with the back of one hand, she wiped at her tears. "I could smell the scents of the temple, the scent of papyrus," she said. "I saw the Elder at his desk."

"He put the Parents in the sun, Eudoxia," I said. "Don't slide into a dream that makes him innocent. The Elder was evil and guilty. The Elder was selfish and bitter. Would you know his ultimate fate?"

“In my dream, the priests told me that you took the books, Marius. They said that, unopposed, you came into the library of the temple and took all the old scrolls away.”

I said nothing.

But her grief was heartrending.

“Tell me, Marius. Where are those books? If you will let me read them, if you will let me read the old stories of Egypt, then my soul can find some peace with you. Can you do that much for me?”

How bitterly did I draw in my breath.

“Eudoxia,” I said gently. “They’re gone, those books, and all that remains of them is here, in my head.” I tapped the side of my forehead. “In Rome, when the savages from the North breached the city, my house was burnt and my library destroyed.”

She shook her head and put her hands to the side of her face as though she could not bear this.

I went down on my knees beside her and I tried to turn her to me, but she would have none of it. Her tears were shed quietly.

“I’ll write it all out, all that I remember, and there is so much that I remember,” I said. “Or shall I tell it aloud for our scribes? You decide how you will receive it, and I’ll give it to you, lovingly. I understand what you desire.”

This was not the time to tell her that much of what she sought came to nothing, that the old tales had been full of superstition and nonsense and even incantations that meant nothing at all.

Even the wicked Elder had said so. But I had read these scrolls during my years in Antioch. I remembered them. They were inside my heart and soul.

She turned to me slowly. And lifting her left hand, she stroked my hair.

“Why did you steal those books!” she whispered desperately, her tears still flowing. “Why did you take them from a sanctum where they had been safe for so long!”

“I wanted to know what they said,” I answered candidly. “Why didn’t you read them when you had a lifetime to do it?” I asked gently. “Why didn’t you copy them when you copied for the Greeks and the Romans? How can you blame me now for what I did?”

“Blame you?” she said earnestly. “I hate you for it.”

“The Elder was dead, Eudoxia,” I said quietly. “It was the Mother who slew the Elder.”

Her eyes suddenly, for all their tears, grew wide.

“You want me to believe this? That you didn’t do it?”

“I? Slay a blood drinker who was a thousand years old, when I was just born?” I gave a short laugh. “No. It was the Mother who did it. And it was the Mother who asked me to take her out of Egypt. I did only what she asked me to do.”

I stared into her eyes, determined that she must believe me, that she must weigh this final and all-important piece of evidence before she proceeded in her case of hatred against me.

“Look into my mind, Eudoxia,” I said. “See the pictures of this for yourself.”

I myself relived the grim moments when Akasha had crushed the evil Elder underfoot. I myself remembered the lamp, brought magically from its stand, to pour its flaming oil upon his remains. How the mysterious blood had burnt.

"Yes," Eudoxia whispered. "Fire is our enemy, always our enemy. You are speaking the truth."

"With my heart and soul," I said. "It's true. And having been charged with this duty, and having seen the death of the Elder, how could I leave the books behind? I wanted them as you wanted them. I read them when I was in Antioch. I will tell you all they contained."

She thought on this for a long time and then nodded.

I rose to my feet. I looked down at her. She sat still, her head bowed, and then she drew a fine napkin from inside her robes, and she wiped at her blood tears.

Once again, I pressed my promises.

"I'll write down all I remember," I said. "I'll write down all that the Elder told me when first I came to the temple. I'll spend my nights in this labor until everything is told."

She didn't answer me, and I couldn't see her face unless I knelt down again.

"Eudoxia," I said. "We know much that we can give to each other. In Rome, I grew so weary that I lost the thread of life for a century. I am eager to hear all you know."

Was she weighing this? I couldn't tell.

Then she spoke, without raising her face to me.

"My sleep this last day was feverish," she said. "I dreamed of Rashid crying out to me."

What could I say? I felt desperate.

"No, I don't ask for placating words from you," she said. "I only mean to say, my sleep was miserable. And then I was in the temple and the priests were all around me. And I had an awful sense, the purest sense, of death and time."

I went down on one knee before her. "We can conquer this," I said.

She looked into my eyes as though she were suspicious of me and I were trying to trick her.

"No," she said softly. "We die too. We die when it is right for us to die."

"I don't want to die," I said. "To sleep, yes, and sometimes to sleep almost forever, yes, but not to die."

She smiled.

"What would you write for me?" she asked, "if you could write anything at all? What would you choose to put down on parchment for me to read and know?"

"Not what was in those old Egyptian texts," I said forcefully, "but something finer, more truly universal, something full of hope and vitality that speaks of growth and triumph, that speaks—how shall I put it any other way?—of life."

She nodded gravely, and once again she smiled.

She looked at me for a long and seemingly affectionate moment.

"Take me down into the shrine," she said. She reached out and clasped my hand.

"Very well," I said.

As I rose, so did she, and then she went past me to lead the way. This might have been to show me that she knew it, and, thank the gods, her retinue stayed behind so that I did not have to tell them to do so.

I went down with her, and with the Mind Gift I opened the many doors without touching them.

If this made an impression upon her she didn't acknowledge it. But I didn't know if we were at war with each other any longer. I couldn't gauge her frame of mind.

When she saw the Mother and the Father in their fine linen and exquisite jewelry she let out a gasp.

"Oh, Blessed Parents," she whispered. "I have come such a long way to this."

I was moved by her voice. Her tears were flowing again.

"Would that I had something to offer you," she said, gazing up at the Queen. She was trembling. "Would that I had some sacrifice, some gift."

I didn't know why but something quickened in me when she said those words. I looked at the Mother first and then at the Father, and I detected nothing, yet something had changed within the chapel, something which Eudoxia perhaps felt.

I breathed in the heavy fragrance rising from the censers. I looked at the shivering flowers in their vases. I looked at the glistening eyes of my Queen.

"What gift can I give you?" Eudoxia pressed as she stepped forward. "What would you take from me that I could give with my whole soul?" She walked closer and closer to the steps, her arms out. "I am your slave. I was your slave in Alexandria when first you gave me your blood, and I am your slave now."

"Step back," I said suddenly, though why I didn't know. "Step back and be quiet," I said quickly.

But Eudoxia only moved forward, mounting the first step of the dais.

"Don't you see I mean what I say?" she said to me without turning her head away from the King and Queen. "Let me be your victim, most holy Akasha, let me be your blood sacrifice, most holy Queen."

In a flash Akasha's right arm rose and pulled Eudoxia forward in a brutal and tight embrace.

An awful groan rose from Eudoxia.

Down came the reddened mouth of the Queen, with only the slightest move of her head, and I saw the sharp teeth only for an instant before they penetrated Eudoxia's neck. Eudoxia was helpless, head wrenched to one side, as Akasha drank from her, Eudoxia's arms hanging limp as her legs, Akasha's face as blank as ever, as the grip tightened and the drinking went on.

I stood horrified, not daring to challenge anything that I beheld.

No more than a few seconds passed, perhaps half a minute before Eudoxia gave a raw and

terrible scream. She tried desperately to raise her arms.

"Stop, Mother, I beg you!" I cried out and with all my might I took hold of the body of Eudoxia. "Stop, I beg you, don't take her life! Spare her!" I pulled on the body. "Spare her, Mother!" I cried. I felt the body shift in my grasp and quickly I drew it back from the curved arm which remained poised in space.

Eudoxia still breathed, though she was livid, and groaning miserably, and we both fell back off the dais, as the arm of Akasha returned to its age-old position, at her side, fingers laid on her thigh as though nothing had occurred.

Sprawled on the floor I lay with the gasping Eudoxia.

"Did you want to die!" I demanded.

"No," she said desperately. She lay there with her breast heaving, her hands shuddering, seemingly unable to rise to her feet.

I looked up searchingly into the Queen's face.

The sacrifice had given no blush to her cheeks. And on her lips there was no red blood.

I was stupefied. I picked up Eudoxia and rushed to get her out of the shrine, up the steps, through the various tunnels, and finally into the house above ground.

I ordered all the others out of the library, slamming tight the doors with the Mind Gift, and there I laid her down on my couch so that she might at least catch her breath.

"But how?" she asked me, "did you ever have the courage to take me from her?" She clung to my neck. "Hold tight to me, Marius, don't let me go just yet. I cannot.… I do not.… Hold tight to me. Where did you get the courage to move against our own Queen?"

"She was about to destroy you," I said. "She was about to answer my prayer."

"And what prayer was that?" she asked.

She let me go. I brought up a chair to sit beside her.

Her face was drawn and tragic, her eyes brilliant. She reached out and clung to my sleeve.

"I asked for a sign of her pleasure," I said. "Would she be given over to you or remain with me? She's spoken. And you see how it is."

She shook her head, but it was not a negation to anything that I'd said. She was trying to recover her clarity of mind. She tried to rise from the couch and then fell backwards.

For a long time, she merely lay there, staring at the ceiling and I couldn't know her thoughts. I tried to take her hand, but she withdrew it from me.

Then in a low voice, she said:

"You've drunk her blood. You have the Fire Gift, and you've drunk her blood. And this she has done in answer to your prayer."

"Tell me," I said. "What prompted you to offer yourself to her? Why did you say such words? Had you ever spoken them in Egypt?"

"Never," she said in a heated murmur. "I had forgotten the beauty." She looked confused,

weak. “I had forgotten the timelessness,” she whispered. “I had forgotten the silence gathered around them—as if it were so many veils.”

She turned and looked at me languidly. She looked about her. I sensed her hunger, her weakness.

“Yes,” she sighed. “Bring my slaves to me,” she said. “Let them go out and obtain for me a sacrifice, for I’m too weak from having been the sacrifice myself.”

I went into the courtyard garden and told her little gang of exquisite blood drinkers to go to her. She could give them this disagreeable order on her own.

When they had gone on their dismal errand, I returned to her. She was sitting up, her face still drawn and her white hands trembling.

“Perhaps I should have died,” she said to me. “Perhaps it was meant to be.”

“What’s meant?” I asked scornfully. “What’s meant is that we must both live in Constantinople, you in your house with your little companions and I here with mine. And we must have a commingling of households from time to time that is agreeable. I say that is what is meant.”

She looked at me thoughtfully as if she were pondering this as much as she could ponder anything after what had befallen her in the shrine.

“Trust in me,” I said desperately in a low voice. “Trust in me for some little while. And then if we should part, let it be amicable.”

She smiled. “As if we were old Greeks?” she asked.

“Why must we lose our manners?” I said. “Weren’t they nourished in brilliance, like the arts which still surround us, the poetry that still comforts us, and the stirring tales of heroism which distract us from the cruel passage of time?”

“Our manners,” she repeated thoughtfully. “What a strange creature you are.”

Was she my enemy or my friend? I didn’t know.

All too quickly, her blood drinker slaves appeared with a miserable and terrified victim, a rich merchant who glared at all of us with bulbous eyes. Frankly he offered us money for his life.

I wanted to stop this abomination. When had I ever taken a victim under my roof? And this was to happen within my house to one who appealed to me for mercy.

But within seconds, the man was forced down upon his knees and Eudoxia then gave herself over to drinking blood from him with no regard for my standing there and watching this spectacle, and I turned on my heel and went out of the library and remained away, until the man was dead, and his richly dressed body was taken away.

At last I came back into my library, exhausted, horrified and confused.

Eudoxia was much better for having feasted on the poor wretch and she was staring at me intently.

I sat down now, for I saw no reason to stand indignantly with regard to something that was

finished, and I felt myself plunged into thought.

"Will we share this city?" I asked calmly. I looked at her. "Can that be done in peace?"

"I don't know the answer to your questions," she said. There was something wrong in her voice, wrong in her eyes, wrong in her manner. "I want to leave you now. We will talk again."

She gathered her band of followers and all of them left quietly, by request, through the rear door of the house.

I sat there very still and weary from what had taken place, and wondering if there would be any change in Akasha who had moved to drink Eudoxia's blood.

Of course there would be no change. I thought back to my first years with Akasha, when I'd been so certain that I could bring her back to life. And here, she had moved, yes, she had moved, but how ghastly had been the expression on her smooth innocent face, more blank than the faces of mortals after death.

An awful foreboding came over me, in which the subtle force of Eudoxia seemed both a charm and a curse.

And in the midst of this foreboding I came to know a terrible temptation, a terrible rebellious thought. Why hadn't I given over the Mother and Father to Eudoxia? I would have been rid of them, rid of this burden which I had carried since the earliest nights of my life among the Undead? Why hadn't I done it?

It would have been so simple. And I would have been free.

And as I recognized this guilty desire inside of me, as I saw it flare up like a fire fed by the bellows, I realized that during those long nights at sea, on the voyage to Constantinople, I had secretly wished that our ship would meet with misadventure, that we would be sunk and Those Who Must Be Kept would have gone down to the bottom of the ocean, never to surface again. I could have survived any shipwreck. But they would have been buried just as the Elder in Egypt had long ago mentioned to me, cursing and carrying on, saying, "Why do I not sink them into the sea?"

Oh, these were terrible thoughts. Did I not love Akasha? Had I not pledged my soul?

I was consumed with self-hatred and dread that the Queen would know my petty secret—that I wished to be rid of her, that I wished to be rid of all of them—Avicus, Mael, Eudoxia most certainly—that I wished—for the very first time—to wander a vagabond like so many others, that I wished to have no name and no place and no destination, but to be alone.

These thoughts were too dreadful. They divided me from all that I valued. I had to banish them from my mind.

But before I could get my wits about me, Mael and Avicus came rushing into the library. There was some sort of disturbance outside the house.

"Can you hear it?" Avicus said frantically.

"Yea gods," I said, "why are all those people shouting in the streets?"

I realized there was a great clamor, and that some of these people were beating on our windows and doors. Rocks were being thrown at our house. The wooden shutters were about to be broken in.

"What is happening? What is the reason for this?" Mael asked desperately.

"Listen!" I said desperately. "They're saying that we seduced a rich merchant into the house, and then murdered him, and threw his corpse out to rot! Oh, damn Eudoxia, don't you see what she's done, it was she who murdered the merchant! She's caused a mob to rise against us. We have only time to retreat to the shrine."

I led them to the entrance, lifted the heavy marble door, and we were soon inside the passage, knowing full well that we were protected, but unable to defend our house.

Then all we could do was listen helplessly as the mob broke in and sacked our entire dwelling, destroying my new library and all I possessed. We did not have to hear their voices to know when they had set the house ablaze.

At last, when it was quiet above, when a few looters picked their way through the smoldering rafters and debris, we came up out of the tunnel, and stared at the ruins in utter disgust.

We scared off the riffraff. Then we made certain that the entrance to the shrine was in fact secure and disguised, which it was, and finally, we went off to a crowded tavern, where, huddled at a table amid mortals, we could talk.

Such a retreat was, for us, quite incredible, but what else could we do?

I told Avicus and Mael what had happened in the shrine, how Eudoxia had been nearly drained of all blood by the Mother and how I had intervened to save Eudoxia's life. I then explained with regard to the mortal merchant, for they had seen him brought in, and seen him removed, but had not understood.

"They dumped his body where it would be found," said Avicus. "They baited the crowd to gather as it did."

"Yes. Our dwelling is gone," I said finally, "and the shrine will be lost to us until such time as I go to bizarre and complex legal measures to purchase under a new name what already belongs to me under an old one, and the family of the merchant will demand justice against the unfortunate individual, whom I was before, if you follow me, so that I might not be able to buy the property at all."

"What does she expect of us?" asked Avicus.

"This is an insult to Those Who Must Be Kept," Mael declared. "She knows the shrine is under the house, yet she incited a riot to destroy it."

I stared at him for a long moment. I was too ready to condemn him for his anger. But quite suddenly I had a confession to make.

"That thought had not occurred to me," I said. "But it seems to me that you are precisely right. It was an insult to Those Who Must Be Kept."

“Oh, yes, she has done an injury to the Mother,” said Avicus. “Surely she has done that. By day, thieves may chip at the very floor that blocks the passage to the shrine below.”

A dreadful gloom took hold of me. A pure and youthful anger was part of it. The anger fed my will.

“What is it?” Avicus demanded. “Your entire countenance is changed. Tell us your thoughts, right now, from your soul.”

“I’m not so certain I can voice my thoughts,” I said, “but I know them, and they don’t bode well for Eudoxia or those whom she claims to love. Both of you, seal your minds off from everything so that you give no hint of your whereabouts. Go to the nearest gate of the city, and leave it, and hide yourselves for the coming day in the hills. Tomorrow, come immediately to meet me here at this tavern.”

I walked with them part of the distance to the gate, and seeing them safely on their way, I went directly to Eudoxia’s house.

It was a simple matter to hear her blood drinker slaves within, and I commanded them brusquely to open the door.

Eudoxia, ever the arrogant one, commanded them to do as I had requested, and once inside, seeing the two young blood drinkers, I began to tremble with anger, but I could not hesitate, and with all my force, I burnt them both at once.

It was appalling to watch, this violent fire, and it set me to gasping and to shaking, but I had no time for observation. Asphar ran from me, and Eudoxia shouted to me fiercely to stop, but I burnt Asphar, wincing as I heard his piteous screams, all the while fighting Eudoxia’s enormous powers with all the might I could command.

Indeed so hot was the fire against my chest that I thought I would die, but I hardened all my body, and hurled my own Fire Gift against Eudoxia with full force.

Her mortal slaves were fleeing out every door and window.

She rushed at me, fists clenched, her face a picture of rage.

“Why do you do this to me!” she demanded.

I caught her up in my arms as she fought me, the waves of heat passing over me, and I carried her out of her house and through the dark streets towards the smoking ruins above the shrine.

“So you would send a mob to destroy my house,” I said. “So you would do this after I saved you, so you would do this while deceiving me with your thanks.”

“I gave you no thanks,” she said, twisting, turning, struggling against me, the heat exhausting me as I fought to control her, her hands pushing me with stunning force. “You prayed for my death, you prayed to the Mother to destroy me,” she cried. “You told me yourself.”

At last I came to the smoking heap of wood and rubble, and finding the mosaic covered door, I lifted it with the Mind Gift, which gave her just time enough to send a scorching blast against my face.

I felt it like a mortal might feel scalding water. But the heavy door was indeed opened, and I protected myself once more against her, as pulling the giant stone down behind me with one arm, I held her with the other, and started to drag her through the complex passages to the shrine.

Again and again, the heat came to burn me, and I could smell my hair scorched by it, and see the smoke in the air around me, as she made some victory no matter how great my strength.

But I fended her off, and I never let go of her. Clutching her with one arm, I opened the doors, one after another, pushing back her power, even as I stumbled. On and on I dragged her towards the shrine. Nothing could stop me, but I could not hurt her with all my force.

No, that privilege was reserved for one far greater than me.

At last we had reached the chapel, and I flung her down on the floor.

Sealing myself off from her with all my strength I turned my eyes to the Mother and Father, only to see the same mute picture which had always greeted my gaze.

And having no further sign than that, and fighting off another crippling wave of heat, I picked up Eudoxia before she could climb to her feet and holding her wrists behind her back, I offered her to the Mother as closely as I dared without disturbing the garments of the Mother, without committing what for me was a sacrilege in the name of what I meant to do.

The right arm of the Mother reached out for Eudoxia, detaching itself, as it were, from the Mother's tranquility, and once again, Akasha's head made that slight, subtle and utterly grotesque movement, her lips parting, fangs bared. Eudoxia screamed as I released her body and stepped back.

A great desperate sigh came out of me. Ah, so be it!

And I watched in quiet horror as Eudoxia became the Mother's victim, Eudoxia's arms flailing hopelessly, her knees pushing against the Mother, until finally the limp body of Eudoxia was allowed to slip from the Mother's embrace.

Once fallen onto the marble floor, it looked like an exquisite doll of white wax. No audible breath came from it. Its round dark eyes did not move.

But it wasn't dead, no, not by any means. It was a blood drinker's body with a blood drinker's soul. Only fire could kill it. I waited, keeping my own powers in check.

Long ago, in Antioch, when unwelcome vampires had assaulted the Mother, she had used the Mind Gift to lift a lamp to burn their remains with fire and oil. So she had done with the remains of the Elder in Egypt, as I have already described. Would she do this now?

Something simpler happened.

Quite suddenly I saw flames erupt from Eudoxia's breast, and then flames run riot through her veins. Her face remained sweet and unfeeling. Her eyes remained empty. Her limbs twitched.

It was not my Fire Gift that had brought about this execution. It was the power of Akasha. What else could it have been? A new power, lain dormant in her for centuries, now known to her

on account of Eudoxia and me?

I dared not guess. I dared not question.

At once the flames rising from the highly combustible blood of the preternatural body ignited the heavy ornate garments and the whole form was ablaze.

Only after a long time did the fire die away, leaving a glittering mass of ash.

The clever learned creature who had been Eudoxia was no more. The brilliant charming creature who had lived so well and so long was no more. The being who had given me such hope when first I saw her and heard her voice was no more.

I took off my outer cloak and, going down on my knees like a poor scrubwoman, I wiped up this pollution of the shrine and then I sat down exhausted in the corner, my head against the wall. And to my own surprise, and who knows?—perhaps to the surprise of the Mother and Father—I gave way to tears.

I wept and wept for Eudoxia, and also for myself that I had brutally burnt those young blood drinkers, those foolish unschooled and undisciplined immortals who had been Born to Darkness as we say now, only to be pawns in a brawl.

I felt a cruelty in myself which I could only abhor.

Finally, being quite satisfied that my underground crypt remained impregnable—for looters were now thick in the ruins above—I laid down for the sleep of the day.

I knew what I meant to do the following night and nothing could change my mind.

12

In the tavern, I met with Avicus and Mael the following night. They were filled with fear and they listened with wide eyes as I told them the tale.

Avicus was crushed by this knowledge, but not Mael.

"To destroy her," said Avicus, "why did it have to be done?"

He felt no false manly need to disguise his grief and sadness and was weeping at once.

"You know why," said Mael. "There would have been no stop to her enmity. Marius knew this. Don't torment him now with questions. It had to be done."

I could say nothing, for I had too many doubts as to what I'd done. It had been so absolute and so sudden. I felt a tightening of my heart and chest when I thought about it, a sort of panic which resides in the body rather than the brain.

I sat back, observing my two companions and thinking hard on what their affection had meant to me. It had been sweet and I did not want to leave them, but that was precisely what I intended to do.

Finally after they had quietly quarreled for some time, I gestured for silence. On the matter of Eudoxia I had only a few things to say.

"It was my anger which required it," I said, "for what other part of me, except my anger, had received the insult of what she had done to us through the destruction of our house? I don't regret that she is gone; no, I cannot. And as I've told you, it was only done by means of an offering to the Mother, and as to why the Mother wanted or took such an offering, I can't say.

"Long ago in Antioch, I offered victims to the Divine Parents. I brought the Evil Doers, drugged and unknowing, into the shrine. But neither the Mother or the Father ever took this blood.

"I don't know why the Mother drank from Eudoxia except that Eudoxia offered herself, and I had prayed for a sign. It's finished, this matter of Eudoxia. She is gone, with all her beauty and her charm.

"But listen hard to what I must tell you now. I'm leaving you. I'm leaving this city, which I detest, and I will take the Mother and the Father with me, of course. I'm leaving you, and I urge you to remain together, as I'm sure you mean to do, for your love for one another is the source of your endurance and your strength."

"But why leave us!" demanded Avicus. His expressive face was charged with emotion. "How can you do such a thing? We've been happy here, the three of us, we've hunted together, we've found Evil Doers aplenty. Why would you go now?"

“I must be alone,” I said. “It was so before and it’s so now.”

“Marius, this is folly,” said Mael. “You’ll end up in the crypt again with the Divine Parents, slumbering until you’re too weak to be awakened on your own.”

“Perhaps, but if such a thing happens,” I said, “you can be more than certain that Those Who Must Be Kept will be safe.”

“I can’t understand you,” said Avicus. He began to weep again. He wept as much for Eudoxia as for me.

I didn’t try to stop him. The tavern was dim and overcrowded and no one took notice of one being, albeit a splendid figure of a male with a white hand covering his face, drunk perhaps over his cup of wine for all anyone knew, weeping into it, and wiping at his tears.

Mael looked dreadfully sad.

“I must go,” I tried to explain. “You must realize, both of you, that the secret of the Mother and the Father must be kept. As long as I remain with you, the secret isn’t safe. Anyone, even those as weak as Eudoxia’s slaves, Asphar and Rashid, can pick it out of your minds.”

“But how do you know they did!” Mael protested.

Oh, it was all too sad. But I couldn’t be deterred.

“If I am alone,” I said, “then I alone possess the secret of where the Divine Parents sit in state, or lie in sleep.” I paused, quite miserable and wishing that all of this could have been done simply, and despising myself as much perhaps as I ever have.

I wondered again why I had ever fled Pandora, and it seemed, quite suddenly, that I had put an end to Eudoxia for the same reason—that these two creatures were more surely linked in my mind than I was willing to admit.

But no, that wasn’t true. Rather I didn’t know it for certain. What I knew was, I was a weak being as well as a strong being and I could have loved Eudoxia, perhaps as much as I’d loved Pandora, if time had given me the chance.

“Stay with us,” Avicus said. “I don’t blame you for what you did. You mustn’t leave because you think I do. I was caught by her spell, yes, I admit it, but I don’t despise you for what you did.”

“I know that,” I said, taking his hand and seeking to reassure him. “But I have to be alone.” I couldn’t console him. “Now listen to me, both of you,” I said. “You know well how to find concealment for yourself. You must do it. I myself will go to Eudoxia’s old house to make the plans for my departure, as I have no other house in which I can work. You may come with me if you like and see what crypts there might be beneath the structure but such is a dangerous thing to do.”

Neither of them wanted to go near the house of Eudoxia.

“Very well then, you’re wise, you always have been. I’ll leave you now to your own designs. I promise I won’t leave Constantinople for some nights. There are things I want to revisit again,

among them the great churches and even the Imperial palace. Come to me at the house of Eudoxia, or I'll find you."

I kissed them both, as men kiss, roughly, with gruff and heated gestures and tight embraces, and then I was off on my own as I so longed to be.

Eudoxia's house was utterly deserted. But some mortal slave had been there, for lamps were lighted in almost every room.

I searched these palatial chambers most carefully and found no trace of any recent occupant. There were no other blood drinkers to be discovered. The sumptuous sitting rooms and spacious library all lay under a thin blanket of silence, the only sound being the several fountains in her lovely inner garden into which the sun might penetrate by day.

There were crypts beneath her house with heavy bronze caskets, and I made a count of these to confirm that I had, indeed, destroyed all her blood drinker slaves.

Then, without difficulty I found the crypt where she had lain during the sunlight hours, with all her treasure and wealth hidden there, and two gorgeous sarcophagi decorated thickly with gold and silver and rubies and emeralds and large, perfect pearls.

Why two? I didn't know, except perhaps that she had had a companion once who was now gone.

As I studied this magnificent chamber, a harrowing pain gripped me, a harrowing pain rather like the grief I felt in Rome when I realized that I had utterly lost Pandora, and that nothing could bring her back. Indeed, it was worse than that, for Pandora might surely exist somewhere, and Eudoxia did not.

I knelt beside one of the sarcophagi and I folded my arms beneath my head and, wearily, I shed tears as I had last night.

For little more than an hour I'd been there, wasting the night away in morbid and miserable guilt, when suddenly I was aware of a footfall on the stairs.

It wasn't a mortal, I knew that immediately, and I knew as well that it was no blood drinker whom I'd seen before.

I didn't bother to move. Whoever it was, it wasn't a strong one, and in fact, the creature was so weak and young as to let me hear its bare feet.

Quietly there appeared in the torchlight a young girl, a girl perhaps no older than Eudoxia when she'd been taken into Darkness, a girl with black hair parted in the middle and streaming down over her shoulders, her clothes as fine as those of Eudoxia had been.

Her face was unblemished, her troubled eyes gleaming, her mouth red. She was blushing with the human tissue which she still possessed. And the painful seriousness of her expression gave a sharpness to all her features and to the strong line of her full lips.

Of course I must have seen someone somewhere who was more beautiful than this child, but I could not think of that one. I was so humbled, indeed, so astonished by this beauty that I felt a

pure fool.

Nevertheless I knew in an instant that this girl had been the blood drinker lover of Eudoxia, that this girl had been chosen because she was incomparably beautiful, as well as extremely well educated and clever, and that before Eudoxia's summoning of us, she had closeted this girl away.

The other sarcophagus in this chamber belonged to this young one. This one had been deeply loved.

Yes, all that was logical and evident and I didn't have to speak for the moment. I had only to gaze at this radiant child who stood in the door of the crypt, the torch blazing above her, her tormented eyes on me.

Finally in a hushed whisper she spoke.

"You've killed her, haven't you?" she said. She was fearless, either out of simple youth or remarkable bravery. "You've destroyed her. She's gone."

I rose to my feet as if a queen had ordered me to do it. Her eyes took my measure. And then her face became completely and utterly sad.

It seemed she would fall to the floor. I caught her just before it happened, and then I lifted her, and carried her slowly up the marble stairs.

She let her head fall against my chest. She gave a deep sigh.

I brought her into the ornate bedchamber of the house and laid her down on the huge bed. She wouldn't remain on the pillow however. She wanted to sit there and I sat beside her.

I expected her to question me, to become violent, to turn her hatred on me, though she had hardly any strength. She couldn't have been made ten years ago. And if she'd been fourteen when it happened, I would have been surprised.

"Where were you hiding?" I asked.

"In an old house," she said softly. "A deserted place. She insisted I stay there. She said she would send for me."

"When?" I asked.

"When she had finished with you, when you were destroyed or driven away." She looked up at me.

She was no more than an exquisite baby of a woman! I wanted so to kiss her cheeks. But her sorrow was terrible.

"She said it would be a battle," she said, "that you were one of the strongest who had ever come here. The others had been simple. But with you, she wasn't sure of the outcome, and so she had to hide me away."

I nodded. I didn't dare to touch her. But I felt nothing but a desire to protect her, to enfold her in my arms, to tell her that if she meant to pound her fists on my chest and curse me she should do it, that if she meant to weep she might do that as well.

"Why don't you speak?" she asked me, her eyes full of hurt and wonder. "Why are you so

quiet?"

I shook my head. "What can I say?" I asked. "It was a terrible quarrel. I didn't want it. I thought that we could all exist here in peace."

At this she smiled. "She would never have allowed that," she said to me quickly. "If you knew how many she's destroyed … but then I don't know myself."

This was a small comfort to my conscience, but I didn't seize upon it. I let it go.

"She said that this city belonged to her, and that it took the power of an empress to protect it. She took me from the palace, where I was a slave. She brought me here by night and I was so frightened. But then I came to love her. She was so certain that I would. She told such stories of her wanderings. And then when others came, she would hide me, and she would go against them until the city was hers again."

I nodded, listening to all this, sad for her and the drowsy sorrowful manner in which she spoke. It was no more than I'd supposed.

"How will you exist if I leave you here?" I asked.

"I can't!" she answered. She looked into my eyes. "You can't leave me. You must take care of me. I beg you. I don't know what it means to exist alone."

I cursed under my breath. She heard it, and I saw the pain in her expression.

I stood up and walked about the room. I looked back at her, this baby woman, with her tender mouth and her long loose black hair.

"What's your name?" I asked her.

"Zenobia," she replied. "Why can't you read it from my mind? She could always read my thoughts."

"I could do it," I said, "if I wanted to do it. But I would rather talk to you. Your beauty confuses me. I would rather hear your voice. Who made you a vampire?"

"One of her slaves," she said. "The one named Asphar. He's gone too, isn't he?" she asked. "They're all gone. I saw the ashes." She gestured vaguely to the other rooms. She murmured a string of names.

"Yes," I said, "they're all dead."

"You would have slain me too if I'd been here," she said, with the same wondering and hurt-filled expression.

"Perhaps," I said. "But it's over now. It was a battle. And when a battle is finished, everything changes. Who else has been hidden away?"

"No one," she answered truthfully, "only me, with one mortal slave, and when I woke tonight, he was gone."

I must have looked very dejected for surely I felt that way.

She turned and with the slowness of a dazed person, reached under the heavy pillows at the head of the bed, and withdrew a dagger.

Then she rose and made her way to me. She held up the dagger with two hands, the tip pointed at my chest. She stared before her, but not into my eyes. Her long wavy black hair fell down around her on both sides of her face.

"I should take vengeance," she said quietly, "but you will only stop me if I try."

"Don't try it," I said in the same calm voice I had used for her all along. I pushed the dagger away gently. And putting my arm around her, I led her back to the bed.

"Why didn't she give you the Blood?" I asked.

"Her blood was too strong for us. She told us so. All her blood drinker slaves were stolen or made one by another under her direction. She said that her blood was not to be shared. It would come with strength and silence. Make a blood drinker and you cannot ever hear his thoughts afterwards. That's what she told us. So Asphar made me and I was deaf to Asphar and Asphar was deaf to me. She must keep us all in obedience and that she could not do if we were made from her powerful blood."

It pained me now that Eudoxia was the teacher, and Eudoxia was dead.

This one was studying me, and then she asked in the simplest voice:

"Why don't you want me? What can I do to make you want me?" She went on speaking tenderly. "You're very beautiful," she said, "with your light yellow hair. You look like a god, really, tall as you are and with your blue eyes. Even she thought you were beautiful. She told me you were. I was never allowed to see you. But she told me that you were like the North men. She described you as you walked about in your red robes—."

"Don't say any more, please," I said. "You don't have to flatter me. It won't matter. I can't take you with me."

"Why?" she asked. "Because I know about the Mother and the Father?"

I was shocked.

I should read her thoughts, all her thoughts, ransack her soul for everything she knew, I thought, but I didn't want to do it. I didn't want that feeling of intimacy with her. Her beauty was too much, there was no denying it.

Unlike my paragon, Pandora, this lovely creature had the promise of a virgin—that one could make of her what one wanted while losing nothing—and I believed that promise to contain a lie.

I answered her in a warm whisper trying not to hurt her.

"That's precisely the reason I can't take you, that, and because I must be alone."

She bowed her head. "What am I to do?" she asked. "Tell me. Men will come here, mortal men," she said, "wanting the taxes on this house or some other triviality and I shall be discovered and called a witch or a heretic and dragged into the streets. Or during the day they will come and find me sleeping like the dead beneath the floor, and lift me, hoping to revive me, into the certain death of the sun's light."

"Stop, I know it all," I said. "Don't you see, I'm trying to reason! Leave me alone for now."

"If I leave you alone," she said, "I'll start weeping or screaming in my grief, and you won't be able to bear it. You'll desert me."

"No, I won't," I said. "Be quiet."

I paced the floor, my heart aching for her, and my soul hurting for myself that this had fallen to me. It seemed a terrible justice for my slaughter of Eudoxia. Indeed this child seemed some phantom risen from Eudoxia's ashes to haunt me as I tried to plan my escape from what I'd done.

Finally, I quietly sent out my call to Avicus and Mael. Using my strongest Mind Gift, I urged them, no, commanded them, to come to me at Eudoxia's house and to let nothing keep them from it. I told them I needed them and I would wait until they arrived.

Then I sat down beside my young captive and I did what I had been wanting to do all along: I moved her heavy black hair back behind her shoulders and I kissed her soft cheeks. These were rapacious kisses and I knew it. But the texture of her baby soft skin and of her thick wavy hair drove me to quiet madness, and I wouldn't stop.

This intimacy startled her but she did nothing to drive me away.

"Did Eudoxia suffer?" she asked me.

"Very little, if at all," I said. I drew back from kissing her. "But tell me why she didn't simply try to destroy me," I said. "Why did she invite me here? Why did she talk with me? Why did she give me some hope that we could come to an understanding of the mind?"

She pondered this before she answered.

"You held a fascination for her," said Zenobia, "which others had not. It wasn't only your beauty though that was a large part of it. Always for her a large part of it. She said to me that she had heard tell of you from a woman blood drinker in Crete long ago."

I dared not interrupt her! I stared with wide eyes.

"Many years ago," she said, "this Roman blood drinker had come to the isle of Crete, wandering, looking for you, and speaking of you—Marius, the Roman, Patrician by birth, scholar by choice. The woman blood drinker loved you. She didn't challenge the claim of Eudoxia to all of the island. She searched only for you, and when she found that you weren't there, she moved on."

I couldn't speak! I was so miserable and so excited that I couldn't answer her. It was Pandora! And this was the first that I had heard of her in three hundred years.

"Don't weep over this," she said gently. "It happened in ages past. Surely time can take away such love. What a curse if it can't."

"It can't." I said. My voice was thick. The tears were in my eyes. "What more did she say? Tell me, please, the tiniest things you might remember." My heart was knocking in my chest. Indeed it seemed as if I'd forgotten that I had a heart and must now find out.

"What more. There is no more. Only that the woman was powerful and no easy enemy. You know Eudoxia always spoke of such things. The woman could not be destroyed, nor would she

tell the origin of her great strength. To Eudoxia it was a mystery—until you came to Constantinople, and she saw you, Marius, the Roman, in your brilliant red robes, moving through the square at evening, pale as marble, yet with all the conviction of a mortal man."

She paused. She put her hand up to touch the side of my face.

"Don't cry. Those were her words: " 'with all the conviction of a mortal man.' "

"How then did you learn of the Mother and the Father?" I asked, "and what do such words mean to you?"

"She spoke of them in amazement," she said. "She said you were rash if not mad. But you see, she would go one way and then the other, that was always in her nature. She cursed you that the Mother and the Father were in this very city, and yet she wanted to bring you here to her house. On account of this, I had to be hidden. Yet she kept the boys for whom she cared so little. And I was put away."

"And the Mother and the Father?" I asked. "Do you know what they are?"

She shook her head. "Only that you have them, or had them when she spoke of it. Are they the First of us?"

I didn't answer her. But I believed her, that this was all she knew, extreme as it was.

And now I did penetrate her mind, calling on my power to know her past and present, to know her most secret and casual thoughts.

She looked at me with clear unquestioning eyes, as if she felt what I was doing to her, or trying to do, and it seemed that she would not hold anything back.

But what did I learn? Only that she had told me the truth. *I know no more of your beautiful blood drinker.* She was patient with me, and then there came a wave of true grief. *I loved Eudoxia. You destroyed her. And now you cannot leave me alone.*

I stood up and went again to walking about the room. Its sumptuous Byzantine furnishings stifled me. The thick patterned hangings seemed to fill the air with dust. And nowhere could I glimpse the night sky from this chamber, for we were too far from the inner garden court.

But what did I want just now? Only to be free of this creature, no, free of the whole knowledge of her, of the whole awareness of her, free of ever having seen her, and that was quite impossible, was it not?

Suddenly a sound interrupted me and I realized that at last Avicus and Mael had come.

They found their way through the many rooms to the bedchamber, and as both of them entered, they were astonished to see the gorgeous young woman seated on the side of the immense heavily draped bed.

I stood silent while the two of them absorbed the shock. Immediately Avicus was drawn to Zenobia, as drawn to her as he had been to Eudoxia, and this creature had yet to speak a single word.

In Mael I saw suspicion and a bit of concern. He looked to me searchingly. He was not

spellbound by the young woman's beauty. His feelings were under his command.

Avicus drew near to Zenobia, and as I watched him, as I watched his eyes fire with a passion for her, I saw my way out. I saw it plainly, and when I did, I felt a terrible regret. I felt my solemn vow to be alone weigh heavily upon me, as if I had taken it in the name of a god, and perhaps I had. I had taken it in the name of Those Who Must Be Kept. But there must be no more thoughts of them now, not in Zenobia's presence.

As for the child woman herself, she was far more drawn to Avicus, perhaps because of his immediate and obvious devotion, than she was to the distant and somewhat suspicious Mael.

"Thank you for coming," I said. "I know it was not your choice to set foot in this house."

"What's happened?" Mael asked. "Who is this creature?"

"The companion of Eudoxia, sent away for her own protection until the battle with us could be finished, and now that it is finished, here is the child."

"Child?" asked Zenobia gently. "I am no child."

Avicus and Mael both smiled indulgently at her, though her look was grave and disapproving.

"I was as old as Eudoxia," she said, "when the Blood was given to her. 'Never make a blood drinker of a greater age,' said Eudoxia. 'For a greater mortal age can only lead to misery later on from habits learned in mortal life.' All of Eudoxia's slaves received the Blood at my age, and were therefore no longer children, but blood drinkers prepared for eternal life within the Blood."

I said nothing to this, but I never forgot it. Mark me. I never forgot it. Indeed, there came a time a thousand years after, when these words meant a great deal to me, and they came to haunt my nights and to torture me. But we will come soon enough to that, for I mean to pass over that thousand years very quickly. But let me return to my tale.

This little speech from Zenobia was spoken tenderly as all her words had been spoken, and when she finished it I could see that Avicus was charmed. This did not mean that he would love her completely or forever, mind you, I knew that. But I could see that there was no barrier between the child and himself.

He drew closer still and seemed at a loss to express his respect for her beauty, and then, surprising me completely, he spoke to her:

"My name is Avicus," he said. "I am a long-time friend of Marius." Then he looked at me, and then back to Zenobia. He asked: "Are you alone?"

"Quite alone," said Zenobia, though she did glance at me first to see if I meant to silence her, "and if you—all of you or perhaps one of you—do not take me with you out of here, or remain with me in this house, I'm lost."

I nodded to both my long-time companions.

Mael gave me a withering look and shook his head in negation. He glanced at Avicus. But Avicus was still looking at our child.

"You won't be left here unprotected," said Avicus, "that's unthinkable. But you must leave us

alone now, so that we may talk. No, you remain where you are. There are many rooms in this house. Marius, where can we gather?"

"The library," I said at once. "Come, both of you. Zenobia, don't be afraid, and don't try to listen, for you may hear only parts of what we say, and all is what matters. All is what will contain the true sentiments of the heart."

I led the way, and we quickly seated ourselves in Eudoxia's fine library just as we had only a short time before.

"You must take her," I said. "I can't do it. I'm leaving here and I'm taking the Mother and the Father, just as I've told you. Take her under your wing."

"This is impossible," Mael declared, "she's far too weak. And I don't want her! I tell you that plainly, I don't want her!"

Avicus reached out and covered Mael's hand with his own.

"Marius can't take her," said Avicus. "He's speaking the simple truth. It's not a choice. He cannot have such a little creature with him."

"Little creature," said Mael disgustedly. "Say what's really the truth. She is a frail creature, an unknowing creature, and she will bring us harm."

"I beg you both, take her," I said. "Teach her all that you know. Teach her what she needs to be on her own."

"But she's a woman," said Mael disgustedly. "How could she ever be on her own?"

"Mael, when one is a blood drinker such a thing doesn't matter," I said. "Once she is strong, once she truly knows everything, she can live like Eudoxia once lived if she chooses. She can live any way that she likes."

"No, I don't want her," said Mael. "I will not take her. Not for any price or on any terms."

I was about to speak but when I saw the look on his face, I realized he was telling the truth more completely than he knew himself. He would never be reconciled to Zenobia, and if I did leave her with him, I would be leaving her in danger. For he would abandon her or desert her, or even worse. It would only be a matter of time.

I looked to Avicus only to see that he was miserably at the mercy of Mael's words. As always he was in Mael's power. As always he could not break free of Mael's anger.

Avicus pleaded with him. Surely it would not change their lives so very much. They could teach her to hunt, could they not? Why, surely she knew already how to hunt. She wasn't so very human, this lovely little girl. It wasn't hopeless, and shouldn't they do what I had asked?

"I want her to be with us," said Avicus warmly. "I find her lovely. And I see in her a sweetness that touches my heart."

"Yes, there is that," I said. "It's very true, this sweetness."

"And why is such a thing of use in a blood drinker?" asked Mael. "A blood drinker should be sweet?"

I couldn't speak. I thought of Pandora. The pain in me was simply too intense for me to form words. But I saw Pandora. I saw her, and I knew that she had always combined both passion and sweetness, and that both men and women can have such traits, and this child, Zenobia, might grow in both.

I looked off, unable to speak to either of them as they argued, but I realized suddenly that Avicus had grown angry, and that Mael was boiling to a rage.

When I looked back to them, they fell silent. Then Avicus looked at me as if for some authority which I knew that I did not possess.

"I can't command your future," I said. "I'm leaving you as you know."

"Stay and keep her with us," said Avicus.

"Unthinkable!" I said.

"You're stubborn, Marius," said Avicus softly. "Your own strongest passions frighten you. We could be the four of us in this house."

"I've brought about the death of the owner of this house," I said, "I cannot live in it. It is blasphemy against the old gods that I linger this long. The old gods will bring about vengeance not so much because they exist but because I once honored them. As for this city, I've told you, I must leave it, and I must take Those Who Must Be Kept to where they are truly secret and safe."

"The house is yours by right," said Avicus. "And you know this. You've offered it to us."

"You didn't destroy her," I said. "Now let us return to the question at hand. Will you take this girl?"

"We will not," said Mael.

Avicus could say nothing. He had no choice.

I looked away once more. My thoughts were purely and completely with Pandora on the isle of Crete, something which I could not even envision. Pandora, the wanderer. I said nothing for the longest while.

Then I rose without addressing either one of them, for they had disappointed me, and I went back into the bedchamber where the lovely young creature lay on the bed.

Her eyes were closed. The lamplight was soft. What a lush and passive being she seemed to be, her hair cascading over the pillow, her skin flawless, her mouth half closed.

I sat down beside her.

"Besides your beauty, why did Eudoxia choose you?" I asked. "Did she ever say?"

She opened her eyes as if startled, which could be the case with one so young, and then she reflected before answering, to say finally in a soft voice:

"Because I was quick of wit and knew whole books by memory. She had me recite them to her." Without rising from the pillows, she held her hands as if she had a bound book in them. "I could but glance at a page and remember all of it. And I had no mortals to grieve for. I was but one of a hundred attendants to the Empress. I was a virgin. I was a slave."

"I see. Was there anything more?"

I was aware that Avicus had come to the door, but I said nothing to acknowledge him.

Zenobia thought for a moment, then answered:

"She said my soul was incorruptible, that though I'd seen wickedness in the Imperial palace, I could still hear music in the rain."

I nodded. "Do you still hear it, this music?"

"Yes," she said. "More than ever, I think. Though if you leave me here, it won't sustain me."

"I'm going to give you something before I leave you," I said.

"What is that? What can it be?" She sat up, pushing herself back against the pillows. "What can you give me that will help me?"

"What do you think?" I asked gently. "My blood."

I heard Avicus gasp at the doorway, but I paid no attention to it. Indeed, I paid no attention to anything but her.

"I'm strong, little one," I said, "very strong. And after you've drunk from me, as long as you wish and however much you wish, you'll be a different creature from the one you are now."

She was mystified and drawn by the notion. Timidly she lifted her hands and placed them on my shoulders.

"And this I should do now?"

"Yes," I said. I was seated firmly there, and I let her take hold of me, and as I felt her teeth go into my neck, I gave out a long sigh. "Drink, precious one," I said. "Pull hard to take as much blood from me as you can."

My mind was flooded with a thousand tripping visions of the Imperial palace, of golden rooms, and banquets, of music and magicians, of the daylight city with its wild chariot races crashing through the Hippodrome, of the crowd screaming with applause, of the Emperor rising in his Imperial box to wave to those who worshiped him, of the huge processions passing into Hagia Sophia, of candles and incense, and once again of palatial splendor, this time beneath this roof.

I grew weak. I grew sick. But it didn't matter. What mattered was she must take all that she could.

And at last, she fell back on the pillows, and I looked down at her, and I saw her cheeks stark white with the Blood.

Scrambling to sit up, to look at me, she stared like a newborn blood drinker as if she'd never had the true vision of the Blood before.

She climbed off the bed and walked about the room. She made a huge circle, her right hand clenching the fabric of her tunic, her face shining with its new whiteness, her eyes wide and swimming and bright.

She stared at me as if she'd never seen me before. Then she stopped, obviously hearing distant sounds to which she'd been deaf. She put her hands to her ears. Her face was full of quiet awe

and sweetness, yes, sweetness, and then her eyes played over me.

I tried to climb to my feet but I was too weak for it. Avicus came to help me but I waved him away.

"What have you done to her!" he said.

"You see what I've done," I answered. "Both of you, you who wouldn't take her. I've given her my blood. *I've given her a chance."*

I went to Zenobia and made her look at me.

"Pay attention to me," I said. "Did Eudoxia tell you of her early life?" I asked. "Do you know that you can hunt the streets as a man?"

She stared at me with her new eyes, too dazzled, uncomprehending.

"Do you know that your hair, if cut, will grow back in the space of one day, and be as long and full as before?"

She shook her head, her eyes passing over me and over the myriad bronze lamps of the room, and over the mosaics of the walls and the floor.

"Listen to me, lovely creature, I don't have that much time to teach you," I said. "I mean to leave you armed with knowledge as well as strength."

Assuring her again that her hair would grow back, I cut it off for her, watching as it fell to the floor, and then taking her to the rooms of the male blood drinkers, I dressed her in male clothes.

Then ordering Mael and Avicus sternly to leave us, I took her out with me into the city, and tried to show her the manner in which a man would walk, and how fearless he might be, and what was the life of the taverns, which she'd never even dreamt of, and how to hunt on her own.

All the while I found her enchanting as I had before. She seemed now to be her own older, wiser sister. And as she laughed over the usual wasted cup of wine at the table in the tavern, I found myself half resolving that I would urge her to come with me, but then I knew I could not.

"You don't really look like a man, you know," I said to her, smiling, "hair or no hair."

She laughed. "Of course, I don't. I know it. But to be in such a place as this, a place I'd never see if it weren't for you."

"You can do anything now," I told her. "Merely think on it. You can be male. You can be female. You can be neither. Seek the Evil Doer as I do and you will never choke on death. But always, whatever your joys, whatever your misery, don't put yourself in danger of the judgment of others. Measure your strength and take care."

She nodded, her eyes wide with fascination. Of course the men in the tavern shot glances at her. They thought I had brought my pretty boy out drinking with me. Before things got out of hand, I left with her, but not before she had tested her powers to read the minds of those around her, and to daze the poor slave boy who had brought our wine.

As we walked through the streets, I gave her random instructions in the ways of the world which I thought she might need. I enjoyed doing this far too much.

She described for me all the secrets of the Imperial palace so that I might better penetrate it to satisfy my curiosity, and then we found ourselves in a tavern again.

I warned her,

"You'll come to hate me for what I did to Eudoxia, and for what I did to the other blood drinkers as well."

"No, that's not so," she said plainly. "You must understand that Eudoxia never allowed me one moment of freedom, and as for the others they felt only contempt for me or jealousy, I never knew which."

I nodded, accepting this, but then I asked her,

"Why do you think that Eudoxia told me the story of her life, of how she herself had once wandered in a boy's clothing in Alexandria, when she never told you such things?"

"She had some hope of loving you," Zenobia answered. "She confided this to me, not directly you understand, but through her descriptions of you and her enthusiasm for seeing you. But these emotions were mixed up in her mind with wariness and cunning. And I think that her fear of you won out."

I was quiet, thinking it over, the tavern noises like music.

Zenobia was watching me and then she said,

"From me, she wanted no such knowledge of herself or understanding. She was content to have me as a plaything. And even when I read to her or sang for her, she would not really look at me, or care for me. But you? You, she saw as a being who was worthy of her. When she spoke of you, it was as if no one was listening. She went on and on, making her plan to summon you to her house and speak with you. It was an obsession full of fear. Don't you see?"

"It went so wrong," I said. "But come, there are many things I must teach you. We have only so many hours before dawn."

We went out into the night, holding fast to each other. How I loved teaching her! There was such a spell to it for me.

I showed her how she might climb walls effortlessly, and how easy it was to get past mortals in the shadows, and how she could draw mortal victims to herself.

We crept into Hagia Sophia, a thing she believed to be impossible, and for the first time since she'd been given the Blood she saw the great church she'd known so well when she was alive.

Finally, after we'd both claimed victims in the back streets for the night's thirst, at which time she learnt of her considerable new strength, we returned to the house.

There I found the official documents pertaining to its ownership, and I examined these with her, and suggested how she might maintain the house of Eudoxia for her own.

Avicus and Mael were both there. And as it came near to sunrise they asked if they might remain.

"That question you must put to Zenobia," I said. "This house belongs to her."

Immediately, in her kindness of heart she told them to remain. They could take the hidden places that had belonged to Asphar and Rashid.

I could see that she found the well-built Avicus with his finely molded features quite handsome, and she also seemed to look far too kindly and guilelessly upon Mael.

I said nothing. But I was feeling extraordinary confusion and pain. I didn't want to be separated from her. I wanted to lie down in the darkness of the crypt with her. But it was time for me to take my leave.

Being very weary, no matter how good the hunting had been, and it had been marvelous, I went back to the ashes of my house, and down into the shrine of the Divine Parents and lay down to sleep.

13

I am now at an important point in my story, for I mean to come forward in time towards the present by something slightly near to a thousand years.

I cannot say exactly how much time had passed for I am not sure when I left Constantinople, only that it was well after the reign of the Emperor Justinian and Theodora, and before the Arabs had risen with the new religion of Islam and begun their swift and remarkable conquest from East to West.

But the important matter here is that I cannot tell you all my life, and that I choose now to pass over those centuries which history has seen fit to call the Dark Ages, and during which I did in fact live through many small stories which I might confess or make known at a later date.

For now, let me say only that as I left Zenobia's house that night, I was greatly agitated for the safety of Those Who Must Be Kept.

The attack of the mob on our house had left me almost terror stricken. Those Who Must Be Kept had to be taken to safety well away from any city and any lodging of mine within a city. They had to be unreachable save by me.

Where could I take them, that was the question.

I could not go East due to the warring Persian Empire, which had already taken Asia Minor whole and entire from the Greeks, and had even captured the city of Alexandria.

As for my beloved Italy, I wanted to be near it, but not in it as the turmoil there was unendurable for me to behold.

But I did know of a very good place.

The Italian Alps, or the mountain range to the North of the Italian peninsula, was an area I had known in my mortal years. Several passes had been built through the mountains by the Romans, and I myself when young and fearless had traveled the Via Claudia Augusta, and I knew the character of the land.

Of course the barbarians had frequently swept through the Alpine valleys, both as they went down to attack Italy, and as they withdrew. And there was a great deal of Christianity in those lands now, with churches, monasteries and the like.

But I would not be seeking a fertile and populated valley, and certainly not a mountaintop on which a castle or church or monastery had been built.

I needed only the seclusion of a small, high and completely hidden valley that only I could reach.

And I would perform the arduous task of climbing, digging, clearing and creating a vault, and then bringing the Mother and the Father to this safe place. Only a superhuman creature could do this, but I could do it. I had to do it.

There was truly no other path for me.

All the while, as I thought this over, as I hired slaves and purchased wagons for my journey, as I made my preparations, Zenobia was my companion, though Avicus and Mael would have joined us if I had allowed. I was too angry with them still for their early refusal to protect Zenobia. And it did not assuage my anger that they wanted to remain with Zenobia now.

Zenobia sat with me long hours in this tavern or that one, as I made my plan. Did I care that she might read from my mind my thoughts on where I was going? Not at all, for I had only a dim scheme of it myself. The final location of the shrine of Those Who Must Be Kept would be known to no one but me.

From such a safe place, in the Alpine regions, I could venture out to feed upon the populace of any number of different towns. Indeed there had been a great deal of settlement in the land of the Franks, as they were called, and I could even venture into Italy if I wished, for it was very plain now to me that Those Who Must Be Kept did not require my daily vigilance or attendance by any means.

At last the final night came. The wagons had been loaded with their precious sarcophagi, the slaves had been dazed and mildly threatened and wantonly bribed with luxuries and money, the bodyguards were ready for the journey, and I was ready to set out.

I went to the house of Zenobia and found her crying bitterly.

“Marius, I don’t want you to go,” she declared.

Avicus and Mael were there, staring at me fearfully, as if they didn’t dare say what was in their hearts.

“I don’t want to go either,” I declared to Zenobia, and then I embraced her as warmly as I had ever done and I kissed her all over as I’d kissed her the first night I found her. I could not get enough of her tender baby woman flesh. “I have to go,” I said. “My heart will stand for nothing less.”

Finally, we broke off, both exhausted with crying, and no better for it, and I turned to the other two.

“You will take care of her,” I said sternly to both of them.

“Yes, we mean to remain together,” said Avicus. “And I don’t understand why you can’t remain with us.”

As I looked at Avicus, an awful love welled up in me, and I said softly, “I know I have done you wrong in all this. I have been too harsh, but I can’t remain.”

Avicus gave way to tears now, with no regard for the disapproving looks of Mael.

“You had only begun to teach me so much,” he said.

“You can learn it from the world around you,” I answered. “You can learn from the books in this house. You can learn from … you can learn from those you might some night transform with the Blood.”

He nodded. What more was there to say.

It seemed the moment for me to turn and go, but I could not. I walked into the other room, and I stood there, my head bowed, feeling perhaps the worst pain I had ever known.

I wanted desperately to remain with them! There was no doubt of it. And all my plans gave me no strength just now. I put my hand to my waist and I felt of the pain inside me as if it were fire. I couldn’t speak. I couldn’t move.

Zenobia came to me. And so did Avicus. They put their arms around me, and then Avicus said,

“I understand that you must go. I do. I understand.”

I couldn’t answer him. I bit down hard on my tongue to make the blood flow and, turning, I put my lips over his and let the blood pass into his mouth. He shivered with this kiss, and his grip tightened on me.

Then I brought the blood up in my mouth again and I kissed Zenobia in the same manner and she held me fast. I picked up her long light perfumed hair, and buried my face in it, or rather brought it as a veil over my face and I could scarce breathe for the pain I felt.

“I love you both,” I whispered. I wondered if they could hear.

Then with no more words, and no more gestures, I bowed my head and found my way, somehow, out of the house.

An hour later, I was outside Constantinople, on the well-traveled route to Italy, seated at the front of the first of the wagons where I might talk with the head of my guard who held the reins.

I was playing the mortal game of conversation and laughter, when my heart was broken, and I played it for many nights to come.

I don’t remember how long we traveled, only that there were numerous towns in which we might stop, and the roads were nothing as bad as I had feared. I kept a close eye on my bodyguards and gave out the gold generously to buy loyalty and on we went.

After I reached the Alps it took me some time to find the very secluded spot where I would build the shrine.

But finally one evening when the winter was not so cold and the sky very clear, I did spy above me a steep series of unpopulated slopes, just off the main road, that looked more than perfect for my plan.

Taking my caravan into the nearest town, I came back alone. I climbed over rough terrain which would have defeated any mortal, and found the very spot, a tiny valley above which I could build the shrine.

Going back to the town, I purchased a dwelling for myself, and for Those Who Must Be Kept, and then I sent my bodyguards, with my slaves, back to Constantinople, with great rewards for

all they'd done.

There were many warm farewells from my confused but amiable mortal companions, and very cheerfully they set out with one of the wagons which I gave them to make their way back home.

As the town where I was lodged was not safe from invasions, no matter how contented its Lombard inhabitants, I set about my work the following night.

Only a blood drinker could have covered the distance with such speed that separated my town dwelling from the final location of the shrine. Only a blood drinker could have dug through hard-packed earth and rock to create the passages that led eventually to the square room of the vault, and then made the ironbound stone door which would separate the King and the Queen from the light of day.

Only a blood drinker could have painted the walls with the old Greco-Roman gods and goddesses. Only a blood drinker could have made the throne of granite with such skill and in such time.

Only a blood drinker could have carried the Mother and Father one by one up the mountain and into the finished resting place. Only a blood drinker could have set them side by side on their granite throne.

And when it was finished, who else would have lain down in the coldness to weep again out of some habitual loneliness? Who else could have lain for some two weeks in quietude and exhaustion, refusing to move?

It was no wonder that in those first few months I tried to prompt some vitality from Those Who Must Be Kept by bringing to them sacrifices, like unto Eudoxia, but for these poor wretched mortals—Evil Doers, I quite assure you—Akasha refused to move her all-powerful right arm. And so I must finish with these miserable victims and carry their remains high into the mountains where I flung them on jagged peaks as so many offerings to cruel gods.

In the following centuries, I did hunt the nearby towns most carefully, drinking a little from many so as never to rouse a local population, and sometimes I did travel a great distance to discover how things were in the cities I'd once known.

I visited Pavia, Marseilles, and Lyons. There I visited the taverns as had always been my custom, daring to draw mortals into conversation, plying them with wine to tell me all that went on in the world. Now and then I explored the very battlefields where the Islamic warriors achieved their victories. Or followed the Franks into battle, easily using the darkness as my shield. And during this period—for the first time in my immortal existence—I made close mortal friends.

That is, I would choose a mortal, a soldier for instance, and meet with him often in his local tavern to talk about his view of the world, about his life. Never were these friendships very long or very deep, for I wouldn't allow them to be so, and if ever the temptation came over me to make a blood drinker, I would swiftly move on.

But I came to know many mortals in this way, even monks in their monasteries, for I had no shyness about accosting them on the road, especially when they passed through dangerous territory, and accompanying them for some time while asking them polite questions about how it went with the Pope and the church and even the small communities in which they lived.

There are stories I could tell of these mortals, for sometimes I couldn't guard my heart so very well. But there is no time now for that. Let me only confess that I made the friendships, and when I look back on it, I pray to some god who might be willing to answer me, that I gave as good a consolation from this as I received.

When I was most courageous of heart, I went down into Italy as far as Ravenna to see the marvelous churches which possessed the same magnificent mosaics as I had seen in Constantinople. But never did I dare to go further into my native land. I was too afraid to see the destruction of all that had once been there.

As for the news of the world which I learnt from those I befriended, in the main it broke my heart.

Constantinople had abandoned Italy, and only the Pope of Rome stood firm against its invaders. Islamic Arabs conquered all the world it seemed, including Gaul. Then Constantinople became involved in a terrible crisis over the validity of Holy Pictures, condemning them out of hand, which meant the wholesale destruction of mosaics in churches as well as ikons—a horrid war against art which scorched my soul.

The Pope of Rome would have no part of it, thank Heaven, and turning his back officially on the Eastern Empire, he made alliances with the Franks.

This was the end of the dream of the great Empire that included both East and West. It was the end of my dream that Byzantium would somehow preserve the civilization which Rome had once preserved.

But it did not mean the end of the civilized world. Even I, the bitter Roman Patrician, had to admit to that.

There soon rose among the Franks a great leader, eventually to be called Charlemagne, and his victories were many in maintaining some sort of peace in the West. Meantime there gathered around him a court where some of the old Latin literature was encouraged like a fragile flame.

But in the main it was the church which now kept alive the aspects of culture which had been part of the Roman world to which I'd been born. Ah, such an irony, that Christianity, this rebel religion, born of martyrdom during the Pax Romana, now preserved the old writings, the old language, the old poetry, and the old speech.

As the centuries passed, I grew stronger; every gift I possessed was enhanced. While lying in the vault with the Mother and the Father, I could hear the voices of people in towns far away. I could hear an occasional blood drinker pass close to me. I could hear thoughts or prayers.

At last the Cloud Gift came to me. I needn't climb the slope to the vault any longer. I had only

to will myself to rise from the road and I stood before the hidden doors to the passage. It was frightening, yet I loved it for I could travel even greater distances when I had the strength for it, which was less often as time went on.

Meantime castles and monasteries had come to appear in this land which had once been the territory of warring barbarian tribes. With the Cloud Gift I could visit the high peaks upon which these marvelous structures were created and sometimes slip into their very rooms.

I was a drifter through eternity, a spy among other hearts. I was a blood thing who knew nothing about death and finally nothing about time.

Sometimes on the winds I drifted. Always through the lives of others I drifted. And in the mountain vault I did my usual painting for Those Who Must Be Kept, covering their walls this time with old Egyptians come to make sacrifice, and I kept my few books there that comforted my soul.

In the monasteries I often spied upon the monks. I loved to watch them writing in their scriptoriums, and it was a comfort to me to see that they kept the old Greek and Roman poetry safe. In the small hours, I went into the libraries, and there, a hooded figure, hunched over the lectern, I read the old poetry and history from my time.

Never was I discovered. I was far too clever. And often I lingered outside the chapel in the evening, listening to the plainsong of the monks, which created a peace inside of me, rather like walking the cloisters, or listening to the steeple bells.

Meantime the art of Greece and Rome which I had loved so much completely died away. A dour religious art took its place. Proportion and naturalism were no longer important. What mattered was that those images which were rendered be evocative of devotion to God.

Human figures in paintings or in stone were often impossibly gaunt, with bold staring eyes. A dreadful grotesquery reigned. It was not for want of knowledge, or skill, for manuscripts were decorated with tremendous patience, and monasteries and churches were built at great cost. Those who made this art could have made anything. It was a choice. Art was not to be sensual. Art was to be pious. Art was to be grim. And so the classical world was lost.

Of course I found wonders in this new world, I cannot deny it. Using the Cloud Gift, I traveled to the great Gothic cathedrals, whose high arches surpassed anything I'd ever beheld. I was stunned by the beauty of these cathedrals. I marveled at the market towns which were growing up all over Europe. It seemed that commerce and crafts had settled the land which war could not settle alone.

New languages were spoken everywhere. French was the language of the elite. But there was English and German and Italian as well.

I saw it all happening, and yet I saw nothing. And then finally, perhaps in the year 1200—I am uncertain—I lay down in the vault for a long sleep.

I was weary of the world and quite impossibly strong. I confessed my intentions to Those Who

Must Be Kept. The lamps would eventually burn down, I told them. And there would only be darkness, but please, would they forgive me. I was tired. I wanted to sleep for a long, long time.

As I slept, I learnt. My preternatural hearing was too strong now for me to lie in silence. I could not escape the voices of those who cried out, be they blood drinkers or humans. I could not escape the drifting history of the world.

And so it was with me in the high Alpine pass where I was hidden. I heard the prayers of Italy. I heard the prayers of Gaul which had now become the country known as France.

I heard the souls suffering the terrible disease of the thirteen hundreds known now most appropriately as the Black Death.

In the darkness I opened my eyes. I listened. Perhaps I even studied. And then finally I roused myself and went down into Italy, afraid for the fate of all the world. I had to see the land I loved with my own eyes. I had to go back.

The city that drew me was one I had not known before in my life. It was a new city, in that it had not existed in the ancient time of the Caesars, and was now a great port. In fact, it was very likely the greatest city of all Europe. Venice was the name of it, and the Black Death had come to it by way of the ships in its harbor, and thousands were desperately sick.

Never had I visited it before. It would have been too painful, and now as I came into Venice, I found it a city of gorgeous palaces built upon dark green canals. But the Black Death had ahold of the populace who were dying in huge numbers daily, and ferries were taking the bodies out to be buried deeply in the soil of the islands in the city's immense lagoon.

Everywhere there was weeping and desolation. People gathered together to die in sickrooms, faces covered in sweat, bodies tormented by incurable swellings. The stench of the dead rose everywhere. Some were trying to flee the city and its infestation. Others remained with their suffering loved ones.

Never had I seen such a plague. And yet it was amid a city of such remarkable splendor, I found myself numb with sorrow and tantalized by the beauty of the palaces, and by the wonder of the Church of San Marco which bore exquisite testament to the city's ties with Byzantium to which it sent its many merchant ships.

I could do nothing but weep in such a place. It was no time for peering by torchlight at paintings or statues that were wholly new to me. I had to depart, out of respect for the dying, no matter what I was.

And so I made my way South to another city which I had not known in my mortal life, the city of Florence in the heart of Tuscany, a beautiful and fertile land.

Understand, I was avoiding Rome at this point. I could not bear to see my home, once more in ruin and misery. I could not see Rome visited by this plague.

So Florence was my choice, as I have said—a city new to me, and prosperous, though not as rich as Venice perhaps, and not as beautiful, though full of huge palaces and paved streets.

And what did I find, but the same dreadful pestilence. Vicious bullies demanded payment to remove the bodies, often beating the dying or those who tried to tend them. Six to eight corpses lay at the doors of various houses. The priests came and went by torchlight, trying to give the Last Rites. And everywhere the same stench as in Venice, the stench that says all is coming to an end.

Weary and miserable, I made my way into a church, somewhere near the center of Florence, though I cannot say what church it was, and I stood against the wall, gazing at the distant tabernacle by candlelight, wondering as so many praying mortals wondered: What would become of this world?

I had seen Christians persecuted; I had seen barbarians sack cities; I had seen East and West quarrel and finally break with each other; I had seen Islamic soldiers waging their holy war against the infidel; and now I had seen this disease which was moving all through the world.

And such a world, for surely it had changed since the year when I had fled Constantinople. The cities of Europe had grown full and rich as flowers. The barbarian hordes had become settled people. Byzantium still held the cities of the East together.

And now this dreadful scourge—this plague.

Why had I remained alive, I wondered? Why must I endure as the witness to all these many tragic and wonderful things? What was I to make of what I beheld?

And yet, even in my sorrow, I found the church beautiful with its myriad lighted candles, and spying a bit of color far ahead of me, in one of the chapels to the right side of the high altar, I made my way towards it, knowing full well that I would find rich paintings there, for I could see something of them already.

None of those ardently praying in the church took any notice of me, a single being in a red velvet hooded cloak, moving silently and swiftly to the open chapel so that I might see what was painted there.

Oh, if only the candles had been brighter. If only I had dared to light a torch. But I had the eyes of a blood drinker, didn't I? Why complain? And in this chapel I saw painted figures unlike any I had seen before. They were religious, yes, and they were severe, yes, and they were pious, yes, but something new had been sparked here, something that one might almost call sublime.

A mixture of elements had been forged. And I felt a great joy even in my sorrow, until I heard a low voice behind me, a mortal voice. It was speaking so softly that I doubt another mortal would even have heard.

"He's dead," said the mortal. "They're all dead, all the painters who did this work."

I was shocked with pain.

"The plague took them," said this man.

He was a hooded figure as I was, only his cloak was of a dark color, and he looked at me with bright feverish eyes.

"Don't fear," he said. "I've suffered it and it hasn't killed me and I can't pass it on, don't you see? But they're all dead, those painters. They're gone. The plague's taken them and all they knew."

"And you?" I asked. "Are you a painter?"

He nodded. "They were my teachers," he said as he gestured towards the walls. "This is our work, unfinished," he said. "I can't do it alone."

"You must do it," I said. I reached into my purse. I took out several gold coins, and I gave them to him.

"You think this will help?" he asked, dejectedly.

"It's all I have to give," I said. "Maybe it can buy you privacy and quiet. And you can begin to paint again."

I turned to go.

"Don't leave me," he said suddenly.

I turned around and looked at him. His gaze was level with mine and very insistent.

"Everyone's dying and you and I are not dying," he said. "Don't go. Come with me, have a drink of wine with me. Stay with me."

"I can't," I said. I was trembling. I was too charmed by him, much too much. I was so close to killing him. "I would stay with you if I could," I said.

And then I left the city of Florence, and I returned to the vault of Those Who Must Be Kept.

I lay down again for a long sleep, feeling the coward that I had not gone to Rome, and thankful that I had not drunk dry the blood of the exquisite soul who had approached me in the church.

But something had been forever changed in me.

In the church in Florence I had glimpsed new paintings. I had glimpsed something which filled me with hope.

Let the plague run its course, I prayed, and I closed my eyes.

And the plague did finally die out.

All the voices of Europe sang.

They sang of the new cities, and great victories, and terrible defeats. Everything in Europe was being transformed. Commerce and prosperity bred art and culture, as the royal courts and cathedrals and monasteries of the recent past had done.

They sang of a man named Gutenberg in the city of Mainz who had invented a printing press which could make cheap books by the hundreds. Common people could own their own copies of Sacred Scripture, books of the Holy Hours, books of comic stories and pretty poems. All over Europe new printing presses were being built.

They sang of the tragic fall of Constantinople to the invincible Turkish army. But the proud cities of the West no longer depended upon the far-away Greek Empire to protect them. The lament for Constantinople went unheeded.

Italy, my Italy, was illuminated by the glory of Venice and Florence and Rome.

It was time now for me to leave this vault.

I roused myself from my excited dreams.

It was time for me to see this world which marked its time as the year after Christ 1482.

Why I chose that year I am uncertain except perhaps that the voices of Venice and Florence called me most eloquently, and I had earlier beheld these cities in their tribulation and grief. I wanted desperately to see them in their splendor.

But I must go home first, all the way South to Rome.

So lighting the oil lamps once more for my beloved Parents, wiping the dust from their ornaments and their fragile robes, praying to them as I always did, I took my leave to enter one of the most exciting times which the Western world had ever seen.

14

I went to Rome. I could settle for nothing less.

What I found there was to sting my heart, but also to astonish me. It was an enormous and busy city, determined to rise from layers upon layers of ruin, full of merchants and craftsmen hard at work on grand palaces for the Pope and his Cardinals and for other rich men.

The old Forum and Colosseum were still standing, indeed there were many many recognizable ruins of Imperial Rome—including the Arch of Constantine—but blocks of ancient stone were constantly being pilfered for new buildings. However scholars were everywhere studying these ruins, and many argued for their maintenance as they were.

Indeed the whole thrust of the age was to preserve the remnants of the ancient times in which I'd been born, and indeed to learn from them, and imitate the art and the poetry, and the vigor of this movement surpassed my wildest dreams.

How can I say it more lucidly? This prosperous era, given over to trade and banking, in which so many thousands wore thick and beautiful clothes of velvet, had fallen in love with the beauty of ancient Rome and Greece!

Never had I thought such a reversal would occur as I had lain in my vault during the weary centuries, and I was at first too exhilarated by all I saw to do much but walk about the muddy streets, accosting mortals with as much graciousness as I could muster, asking them questions about what was going on about them, and what they thought of the times in which they lived.

Of course I spoke the new language, Italian, which had grown up from the old Latin, and I soon became used to it on my ears and on my tongue. It wasn't such a bad language. Indeed it was beautiful, though I quickly learnt that scholars were well versed in their Latin and Greek.

Out of a multitude of answers to my questions I also learnt that Florence and Venice were deemed to be far ahead of Rome in their spiritual rebirth, but if the Pope were to have his way that was soon to change.

The Pope was no longer only a Christian ruler. He had made up his mind that Rome must be a true cultural and artistic capital, and not only was he completing work upon the new St. Peter's Basilica but he was working as well upon the Sistine Chapel, a great enterprise within his palatial walls.

Artists had been brought from Florence for some of this painting, and the city was much intrigued as to the merits of the frescoes which had been done.

I spent as much time as I could in the streets and in the taverns listening to gossip of all this,

and then I made for the Papal Palace determined to see the Sistine Chapel for myself.

What a fateful night this was for me.

In all the dark centuries since I had left my beloved Zenobia and Avicus, I had had my heart stolen by various mortals and various works of art, but nothing I had experienced could quite prepare me for what I was to see when I entered the Sistine Chapel.

Understand, I do not speak of Michelangelo, so well known to all the world for his work there, for Michelangelo was but a child at this time. And his works in the Sistine Chapel were yet to come.

No, it was not the work of Michelangelo that I saw on this fateful night. Put Michelangelo out of your thoughts.

It was the work of someone else.

Getting by the palace guards easily enough, I quickly found myself within the great rectangle of this august chapel, which though not open to the public at large was destined to be used for high ceremonials whenever it should be complete.

And what caught my eye immediately among any number of frescoes was an enormous one filled with brilliantly painted figures, all involving, it seemed, the same dignified elder with golden light streaming from his head as he appeared with three different groupings of those who responded to his command.

Nothing had prepared me for the naturalism with which the multitudinous figures were painted, the vivid yet dignified expressions on the faces of the people, and the gracefully draped garments with which the beings were clothed.

There was great turbulence among these three exquisitely rendered groups of persons as the white-haired figure with the gold light streaming from his head instructed them or upbraided them or corrected them, his own face quite seemingly stern and calm.

All existed in a harmony such as I could never have imagined, and though their creation alone seemed enough to guarantee that this painting should be a masterpiece there was beyond the figures a marvelous depiction of an extravagant wilderness and an indifferent world.

Two great ships of the present period were anchored in the far-away harbor, and beyond the ships there loomed layers of mountains beneath a rich blue sky, and to the right there stood the very Arch of Constantine which still stood in Rome to this day, finely detailed in gold as if it had never been ruined, and the columns of another Roman building, once splendid, now a fragment standing high and proud, though a dark castle loomed beyond.

Ah, such complexity, such inexplicable combinations, such strange matter, and yet every human face so compelling, every hand so exquisitely wrought.

I thought I would go mad just looking at the faces. I thought I would go mad just looking at the hands.

I wanted nights to memorize this painting. I wanted at once to listen at the portals of scholars

who could tell me what it was about, for I myself couldn't possibly decipher it! I needed knowledge for this. And more than anything, its sheer beauty spoke to my soul.

All my gloomy years were gone as if a million candles had been lighted in this chapel.

"Oh, Pandora, that you could see this!" I whispered aloud. "Oh, Pandora, if only you knew of this!"

There were other paintings in the unfinished Sistine Chapel. I gave them a passing glance until my eyes hit upon two others by this same Master, and these were as magical as the first.

Once again there was a multitude of persons, all with the same divine faces. Garments were rendered with sculptural depth. And though I recognized the Christ with his winged angels appearing in more than one place in this exquisite fresco, I could not interpret these paintings any more than I could the first.

It didn't matter finally what these paintings meant. They filled me utterly. And in one, there were two maidens rendered so sensitively and yet so sensuously that I was amazed.

The old art of the churches and the monasteries would never have allowed such a thing. Indeed it had banished such carnality completely.

Yet here in the Pope's chapel were these damsels, one with her back to us, and the other facing us, a dreamy expression in her eyes.

"Pandora," I whispered. "I have found you here, found you in your youth and in your eternal beauty. Pandora, you are here on the wall."

I turned away from these frescoes. I paced the floor. Then I went back to them, studying them with my uplifted hands, careful not to touch them, just moving my hands over them, as if I had to look through my hands as well as through my eyes.

I had to know who this painter was! I had to see his work. I had fallen in love with him. I had to see everything ever done by him. Was he young? Was he old? Was he alive? Was he dead? I had to know.

I went out of the chapel, not knowing whom to ask about these marvelous achievements, for surely I could not wake the Pope in his bed and ask him, and in a dark street at the very top of a hill, I found an Evil Doer, a striding drunkard with a dagger ready for me, and I drank my fill of blood in a rush of eagerness that I had not felt in years.

Poor sad victim. I wonder if in my taking of him I gave him some glimpse of those paintings.

I remember so well the moment, for I stood as the top of a narrow stairs which went down the hill to the piazza below me, and I thought only of those paintings as the blood warmed me and I wanted to go back to the chapel at once.

Something interrupted me at that moment. I heard the distinct noise of a blood drinker near me, the bumbling step of one who was young. One hundred years? No more than that, that was my calculation. The creature wanted me to know he was there.

I turned around and saw a tall, well-muscled and dark-haired figure, clothed in the black robes

of a monk. His face was white and he did nothing to disguise it. Around his neck he wore a glittering golden crucifix upside down.

"Marius!" he whispered.

"Damn you," I said in answer. Yea gods, how could he know my name! "Whoever you are. Leave me. Get away from me. I warn you. Don't remain in my presence if you want to live."

"Marius!" he said again and he came towards me. "I have no fear of you. I come to you because we need you. You know who we are."

"Worshipers of Satan!" I said in disgust. "Look at that fool ornament around your neck. If the Christ exists, do you think He pays any attention to you? So you still have your foolish little gatherings. You have your lies."

"Foolish?" he said calmly. "We have never been foolish. We do the work of God as we serve Satan. Without Satan, how could there have been the Christ?"

I made a dismissive gesture.

"Get away from me," I said. "I want no part of you." In my heart was locked the secret of Those Who Must Be Kept. I thought of the paintings in the Sistine Chapel. Oh, those lovely figures, those colors …

"But don't you see?" he replied. "If one so old and powerful as you were to become our leader, we could be a legion in the catacombs of this city! As it is, we are a dreadful few."

His large black eyes were full of the inevitable zeal. And his rich black hair shimmered in the dim light. He was a comely creature, even coated with dust and dirt as he was. I could smell the catacombs on his garments. I could smell death on him as though he had lain down with mortal remains. But he was handsome, fine of build and proportion as Avicus had been, not unlike Avicus at all.

"You want to be a legion?" I asked him. "You talk nonsense! I was alive when no one spoke of Satan and no one spoke of a Christ. You're merely blood drinkers, and you make up stories for yourselves. How could you believe that I would come to you and lead you?"

He drew closer so that I could all the better see his face. He was full of exuberance and honesty. He held his head proudly.

"Come to us in our catacomb," he said, "come and see us and be a part of our ritual. Sing with us tomorrow night before we go out to hunt." He was passionate and he waited in silence for my reply. He was not a stupid creature by any means, and he did not seem callow like the other followers of Satan whom I had glimpsed in centuries past.

I shook my head. But he pressed on.

"My name is Santino," he said. "I have heard of you for a hundred years. I have dreamt of the moment when we would come upon each other. Satan has brought us together. You must lead us. Only to you would I give up my leadership. Come see my lair with its hundreds of skulls." His voice was refined, well modulated. He spoke a beautiful Italian. "Come see my followers who

worship the Beast with all their hearts. It's the wish of the Beast that you should lead us. It's the wish of God."

How disgusted I was, how much I deplored him and his followers. And I could see the intellect in him. I could see the cleverness and the hope of understanding and wit.

Would that Avicus and Mael were here to put an end to him and all his kith and kin.

"Your lair with its hundreds of skulls?" I repeated. "You think I wish to rule there? Tonight I've seen paintings of such beauty I can't describe them to you. Magnificent works rich in color and brilliance. This city surrounds me with its beautiful allurements."

"Where did you see such paintings?" he asked.

"In the Pope's chapel," I declared.

"But how did you dare to go there?"

"It was nothing for me to do such a thing. I can teach you how to use your powers—."

"But we are creatures of the dark," he said in all simplicity. "We must never go into places of light. God has cursed us to the shadows."

"What god?" I asked. "I go wherever I will. I drink the blood of those who are evil. And the world belongs to me. And you ask me to come down into the earth with you? Into a catacomb full of skulls? You ask me to rule blood drinkers in the name of a demon? You're too clever for your creed, my friend. Forsake it."

"No," he said, shaking his head and stepping backwards. "Ours is a Satanic purity!" he said. "You can't tempt me from it, not with all your power and your tricks, and I give my welcome to you."

I had sparked something in him. I could see it in his black eyes. He was drawn to me, drawn to my words, but he couldn't admit it.

"You'll never be a legion," I said. "The world will never allow it. You're nothing. Give up your trappings. Don't make other blood drinkers to join this foolish crusade."

He drew closer again, as if I were a light and he wanted to be in it. He looked into my eyes, trying no doubt to read my thoughts of which he could get nothing except what I had said in words.

"We are so gifted," I said. "There is so much to be observed, to be learnt. Let me take you back with me into the Pope's chapel to see the paintings I have described."

He drew even closer and something changed in his face.

"Those Who Must Be Kept," he said, "what are they?"

It was like a harsh blow—that once again another knew the secret, a secret I had guarded so well for a thousand years.

"You will never know," I responded.

"No, listen to me," he said. "Are they something profane? Or are they holy?"

I clenched my teeth. I reached out for him, but with a swiftness that surprised me, he escaped

me.

I went after him, caught him, and spinning him around, I dragged him to the head of the narrow stone stairs that went down the hill.

"Never come near me again, do you hear?" I said to him. He struggled desperately against me. "I can kill you by fire with my mind if I choose it," I said. "And why don't I choose it? Why don't I choose to slaughter you all, you miserable vermin? Why don't I do it? Because I loathe the violence of it and the cruelty, even though you're more evil than the mortal whom I killed for my thirst tonight."

He was frantically trying to get loose from me, but of course he had not the slightest chance.

Why didn't I destroy him? Was my mind too filled with the beautiful paintings? Was my mind too attuned to the mortal world to be dragged back into this abysmal filth?

I don't know.

What I know is that I threw him down the stone stairway so that he tumbled over and over again, clumsily, miserably, until he finally scrambled to his feet below.

He glared at me, his face full of hatred.

"I curse you, Marius!" he said with remarkable courage. "I curse you and your secret of Those Who Must Be Kept."

I was taken aback by his defiance.

"I warn you, stay away from me, Santino!" I said as I looked down at him. "Be wanderers through time," I said. "Be witnesses of all splendid and beautiful things human. Be true immortals. Not worshipers of Satan! Not servants of a god who will put you in a Christian Hell. But whatever you do, stay clear of me for your own sake."

He was planted there, looking up at me in his fury.

And then it occurred to me to give him a small warning, if only I could do it. And I meant to try.

I brought up the Fire Gift inside of me, feeling it grow powerful and I quelled it ever so carefully and I sent it down towards him, and willed it to kindle only the edge of his black monkish robes.

At once the cloth around his feet began to smoke and he stepped back in horror.

I stopped the power.

He turned round and round in panic and tore the scorched robes off himself, standing there in a long white tunic staring at the smoking cloth that lay on the ground.

Once again he looked at me, fearless as before, but enraged in his helplessness.

"Know what I could do to you," I said, "and never come near to me again."

And then I turned my back on him. And off I went.

I shivered even to think of him and his followers. I shivered to think that I should have to use the Fire Gift again after all these years. I shivered remembering the slaughter of Eudoxia's slaves.

It wasn't even midnight.

I wanted the bright new world of Italy. I wanted the clever scholars and artists of these times. I wanted the huge palazzi of the Cardinals and the other powerful inhabitants of the Eternal City which had risen after all the long miserable years.

Putting the creature named Santino out of my mind I went near to one of the new palazzi in which there was a feast in progress, a masquerade with much dancing and tables laden with food.

It was no problem to me to gain entry. I had equipped myself with the fine velvet clothes of this period, and once inside among the guests, I was welcomed as was everyone else.

I had no mask, only my white face which seemed like one, and my customary red velvet hooded cloak which set me apart from the guests and yet made me one of them at the same time.

The music was intoxicating. The walls were ablaze with fine paintings, though none as magical as what I had seen in the Sistine Chapel, and the crowd was huge and sumptuously dressed.

Quickly, I fell into conversation with the young scholars, the ones who were talking hotly of painting as well as poetry and I asked my dumb question: Who had done the magnificent frescoes in the Sistine Chapel which I had just beheld?

"You've seen these paintings?" said one of the crowd to me. "I don't believe it. We haven't been allowed in to see them. Describe to me again what you saw."

I laid out everything, very simply as though I were a schoolboy.

"The figures are supremely delicate," I said, "with sensitive faces, and each being, though rendered with great naturalness, is ever so slightly too long."

The company around me laughed good naturedly.

"Ever so slightly too long," repeated one of the elders.

"Who did the paintings?" I said, imploringly. "I must meet this man."

"You'll have to go to Florence to meet him," said the elder scholar. "You're talking about Botticelli, and he's already gone home."

"Botticelli," I whispered. It was a strange almost ridiculous name. In Italian it translates to "little tub." But to me it meant magnificence.

"You're certain it was Botticelli," I said.

"Oh, yes," said the elder scholar. The others with us were also nodding. "Everyone's marveling at what he can do. That's why the Pope sent for him. He was here two years working on the Sistine Chapel. Everyone knows Botticelli. And now he's no doubt as busy in Florence as he was here."

"I only want to see him with my own eyes," I said.

"Who are you?" asked one of the scholars.

"No one," I whispered. "No one at all."

There was general laughter. It seemed to blend rather bewitchingly with the music around us,

and the glare of so many candles.

I felt drunk on the smell of mortals, and with dreams of Botticelli.

"I have to find Botticelli," I whispered. And bidding them all farewell I went out into the night.

But what was I going to do when I found Botticelli, that was the question. What was driving me? What did I want?

To see all of his works, yes, that much was certain, but what more did my soul require?

My loneliness seemed as great as my age and it frightened me.

I returned to the Sistine Chapel.

I spent the remainder of the night perusing the frescoes once more.

Before dawn a guard came upon me. I allowed it to happen. With the Spell Gift I gently convinced him that I belonged where I was.

"Who is the figure here in these paintings?" I asked, "the elder with the beard and the gold light streaming from his head?"

"Moses," said the guard, "you know, Moses the prophet. It all has to do with Moses, and the other painting has to do with Christ." He pointed. "Don't you see the inscription?"

I had not seen it but I saw it now. *The Temptation of Moses, Bearer of the Written Law.*

I sighed. "I wish I knew their stories better," I said. "But the paintings are so exquisite that the story doesn't matter."

The guard only shrugged.

"Did you know Botticelli when he painted here?" I asked.

Once again, the man only shrugged.

"But don't you think the paintings are incomparably beautiful?" I asked him.

He looked at me somewhat stupidly.

I realized how lonely I was that I was speaking to this poor creature, trying to elicit from him some understanding of what I felt.

"Beautiful paintings are everywhere now," he said.

"Yes," I said, "yes, I know they are. But they don't look like this."

I gave him a few gold coins, and left the chapel.

I had only time enough to reach the vault of Those Who Must Be Kept before dawn.

As I lay down to sleep I dreamt of Botticelli, but it was the voice of Santino that haunted me. And I wished that I had destroyed him, which, all things considered, was a very unusual wish for me.

15

The following night I went to the city of Florence. It was of course splendid to see it quite recovered from the ravages of the Black Death, and indeed a city of greater prosperity and greater ingenuity and energy than Rome.

I soon learnt what I had suspected—that having grown up around commerce, the city had not suffered the ruin of a classical era, but had rather grown progressively strong over the centuries, as its ruling family, the Medici, maintained power by means of a great international bank.

Everywhere about me there were elements of the place—its growing architectural monuments, its interior paintings, its clever scholars—that drew me fiercely, but nothing really could keep me away from discovering the identity of Botticelli, and seeing for myself not only his works, but the man.

Nevertheless, I tormented myself slightly. I took rooms in a palazzo near the main piazza of the city, hired a bumbling and remarkably gullible servant to lay in lots of costly clothes for me, all made in the color red as I preferred it, and still do to any other, and I went at once to a bookseller's and knocked and knocked until the man opened his doors for me, took my gold, and gave me the latest books which "everyone was reading" on poetry, art, philosophy and the like.

Then retiring to my rooms, I sat down by the light of one lamp and devoured what I could of my century's thinking, and at last I lay flat upon the floor, staring at the ceiling, overwhelmed by the vigor of the return to the classical, by the passionate enthusiasm for the old Greek and Roman poets, and by the faith in sensuality which this age seemed to hold.

Let me note here that some of these books were printed books, thanks to the miraculous invention of the printing press, and I was quite amazed by these though I preferred the beauty of the old handwritten codexes, as did many men of the time. In fact, it is an irony that even after the printing press was very well established, people still boasted of having handwritten libraries, but I digress.

I was talking of the return to the old Greek and Roman poets, of the infatuation of the era with the times of my birth.

The Roman church was overwhelmingly powerful as I have suggested.

But this was an age of fusion, as well as inconceivable expansion—and it was fusion which I had seen in the painting of Botticelli—so full of loveliness and natural beauty though created for the interior of the Pope's own chapel in Rome.

Perhaps near to midnight, I stumbled out of my quarters, finding the city under curfew, with

the taverns which defied it and the inevitable ruffians roaming about.

I was dazed as I made my way into a huge tavern full of gleeful young drunkards where a rosy-cheeked boy sang as he played the lute. I sat in the corner thinking to control my overwrought enthusiasms, my crazed passions, yet I had to find the home of Botticelli. I had to. I had to see more of his work.

What stopped me from it? What did I fear? What was going on in my mind? Surely the gods knew I was a creature of iron control. Had I not proven it a thousand times?

For the keeping of a Divine Secret had I not turned my back on Zenobia? And did I not suffer routinely and justly for having abandoned my incomparable Pandora whom I might never find again?

At last I could endure my confused thoughts no longer. I came close to one of the older men in the tavern who was not singing with the younger ones.

"I've come here to find a great painter," I told him.

He shrugged and took a drink of his wine.

"I used to be a great painter," he said, "but no more. All I do is drink."

I laughed. I called for the tavern maid to serve him another cup. He gave a nod of thanks to me.

"The man I'm looking for—he's called Botticelli, or so I'm told."

Now it was his turn to laugh.

"You're seeking the greatest painter in Florence," he said. "You won't have any trouble finding him. He's always busy, no matter how many idlers hang about in his workshop. He may be painting now."

"Where is the workshop?" I asked.

"He lives in the Via Nuova, right before the Via Paolino."

"But tell me—." I hesitated. "What sort of man is he? I mean to you?"

Again, the man shrugged. "Not bad, not good, though he has a sense of humor. Not one to make an imprint on your mind except through his painting. You'll see when you meet him. But don't expect to hire him. He has much work already to do."

I thanked the man, laid down money for more wine if he wanted it, and slipped out of the tavern.

With a few questions I found the way to the Via Nuova. A night watchman gave me the way to the home of Botticelli, pointing to a sizable house, but not a great palazzo, where the painter lived with his brother and his brother's family.

I stood before this simple house as if it were a shrine. I could see where the workshop most certainly was by its large doors to the street which were inevitably open by day, and I could see that all the rooms both on the main floor and above it were dark.

How could I go into this workshop? How could I see what work was being done there now?

Only by night could I come to this place. Never had I cursed the night so much.

Gold had to do this for me. Gold and the Spell Gift, though how I would dare to daze Botticelli himself I had no idea.

Suddenly, unable to control myself any longer I pounded on the door of the house.

Naturally enough, no one answered, so I pounded again.

Finally a light brightened in the upstairs window, and I could hear footfall within.

At last a voice demanded: Who was I, and what did I want?

What was I to answer to such a question? Was I to lie to someone whom I worshiped? Ah, but I had to get in.

"Marius de Romanus," I answered, making up the name at that very moment. "I've come with a purse of gold for Botticelli. I've seen his paintings in Rome, and I greatly admire him. I must put this purse into his own hand."

There was a pause. Voices behind the door. Two men conferring with each other as to who I might be, or why such a lie might be told.

One man said not to answer. The other man said it was worth a brief look, and it was he who pulled back the latch and opened the door. The other held the lamp behind him, so I saw only a shadowy face.

"I am Sandro," he said simply, "I'm Botticelli. Why would you bring me a purse of gold?"

For a long moment I was speechless. But in this speechlessness, I had the sense to produce the gold. I handed the purse over to the man, and I watched silently as he opened it and as he took out the gold florins and held them in his hand.

"What do you want?" he asked. His voice was as plain as his manner. He was rather tall. His hair was light brown and already threaded with gray though he was not old. He had large eyes that appeared compassionate, and a well-formed mouth and nose. He stood looking at me without annoyance or suspicion, and obviously ready to return my gold. I didn't think he was forty years old.

I tried to speak and I stammered. For the first time in all my memory I stammered. Finally I managed to make myself plain:

"Let me come into your workshop tonight," I said. "Let me see your paintings. That's all I want."

"You can see them by day." He shrugged. "My workshop's always open. Or you can go to the churches in which I've painted. My work is all over Florence. You don't have to pay me for such a thing." What a sublime voice; what an honest voice. There was something patient and tender in it.

I gazed upon him as I had gazed on his paintings. But he was waiting for an answer. I had to pull myself together.

"I have my reasons," I said. "I have my passions. I want to see your work now, if you'll let me.

I offer the gold."

He smiled and he gave a little even laugh. "Well, you come like one of the Magi," he said. "For I can certainly use the payment. Come inside."

That was the second time in my long years that I had been compared to the Magi of Scripture and I loved it.

I entered the house which was by no means luxurious, and as he took the lamp from the other man, I followed him through a side door into his workshop where he put the lamp on a table full of paints and brushes and rags.

I couldn't take my eyes off him. This was the man who had done the great paintings in the Sistine Chapel, this ordinary man.

The light flared up and filled the place. Sandro, as he had called himself, gestured to his left, and as I turned to my right, I thought I was losing my mind.

A giant canvas covered the wall, and though I had expected to see a religious painting, no matter how sensual, there was something else there, altogether different, which rendered me speechless once more.

The painting was enormous as I've indicated, and it was composed of several figures, but whereas the Roman paintings had confused me in the question of their subject matter, I knew very well the subject matter of this.

For these were not saints and angels, or Christs and prophets—no, far from it.

There loomed before me a great painting of the goddess Venus in all her glorious nudity, feet poised upon a seashell, her golden hair torn by faint breezes, her dreamy gaze steady, her faithful attendants the god Zephyr who blew the breezes which guided her landward, and a nymph as beautiful as the goddess herself who welcomed her to the shore.

I drew in my breath and put my hands over my face, and then when I uncovered my eyes I found the painting there again.

A slight impatient sigh came from Sandro Botticelli. What in the name of the gods could I say to him about the brilliance of this work? What could I say to him to reveal the adulation I felt?

Then came his voice, low and resigned. "If you're going to tell me it's shocking and evil, let me tell you, I have heard it a thousand times. I'll give you back your gold if you want. I've heard it a thousand times."

I turned and went down on my knees, and I took his hands and I kissed them with my lips as closely as I dared. Then I rose slowly like an old man on one knee before the other and I stood back to gaze at the panel for a long time.

I looked at the perfect figure of Venus again, covering her most intimate secret with locks of her abundant hair. I looked on the nymph with her outstretched hand and her voluminous garments. I looked on the god Zephyr and the goddess with him, and all of the tiny details of the painting came to reside in my mind.

“How has it come about?” I asked. “After so long a time of Christs and Virgins, that such a thing could be painted at last?”

From the quiet figure of the uncomplaining man there came another little laugh.

“It’s up to my patron,” he said. “My Latin is not so good. They read the poetry to me. I painted what they said to paint.” He paused. He looked troubled. “Do you think it’s sinful?”

“Certainly not,” I responded. “You ask me what I think? I think it’s a miracle. I’m surprised that you would ask.” I looked at the painting. “This is a goddess,” I said. “How could it be other than sacred? There was a time when millions worshiped her with all their hearts. There was a time when people consecrated themselves to her with all their hearts.”

“Well, yes,” he answered softly, “but she’s a pagan goddess, and not everyone thinks that she is the patron of marriage as some say now. Some say this painting is sinful, that I shouldn’t be doing it.” He gave a frustrated sigh. He wanted to say more, but I sensed that the arguments were quite beyond him.

“Don’t listen to such things,” I said. “It has a purity I’ve almost never seen in painting. Her face, the way you’ve painted it, she’s newborn yet sublime, a woman, yet divine. Don’t think of sin when you work on this painting. This painting is too vital, too eloquent. Put the struggles of sin out of your mind.”

He was silent but I knew he was thinking. I turned and tried to read his mind. It seemed chaotic, and full of wandering thoughts and guilt.

He was a painter almost entirely at the mercy of those who hired him, but he had made himself supreme by virtue of the particularities that all cherished in his work. Nowhere were his talents more fully expressed than in this particular painting and he knew this though he couldn’t put it into words. He thought hard on how to tell me about his craft and his originality, but he simply couldn’t do it. And I would not press him. It would be a wicked thing to do.

“I don’t have your words,” he said simply. “You really believe the painting isn’t sinful?”

“Yes, I told you, it’s not sinful. If anyone tells you anything else they’re lying to you.” I couldn’t stress it enough. “Behold the innocence in the face of the goddess. Don’t think of anything else.”

He looked tormented, and there came over me a sense of how fragile he was, in spite of his immense talent and his immense energy to work. The thrusts of his art could be utterly crushed by those who criticized him. Yet he went on somehow every day painting the best pictures that he knew how to paint.

“Don’t believe them,” I said again, drawing his eyes back to me.

“Come,” he said, “you’ve paid me well to look at my work. Look at this tondo of the Virgin Mary with Angels. Tell me how you like this.”

He brought the lamp to the far wall and held it so that I might see the round painting which hung there.

Once again I was too shocked by the loveliness of it to speak. But it was plainly obvious that the Virgin was as purely beautiful as the goddess Venus, and the Angels were sensual and alluring as only very young boys and girls can be.

"I know," he said to me. "You don't have to tell me. My Venus looks like the Virgin and the Virgin looks like the Venus and so they say of me. But my patrons pay me."

"Listen to your patrons," I said. I wanted so to clasp his arms. I wanted to gently shake him so that he would never forget my words. "Do what they tell you. Both paintings are magnificent. Both paintings are finer than anything I've ever seen."

He couldn't know what I meant by such words. I couldn't tell him. I stared at him, and for the first time I saw a little apprehension in him. He had begun to notice my skin, and perhaps my hands.

It was time to leave him before he became even more suspicious, and I wanted him to remember me kindly and not with fear.

I took out another purse which I had brought with me. It was full of gold florins.

He gestured to refuse it. In fact, he gave me a very stubborn refusal. I placed it on the table.

For a moment we merely looked at each other.

"Good-bye, Sandro," I said.

"Marius, was it? I'll remember you."

I made my way out the front door and into the street. I hurried for the space of two blocks and then I stopped, breathing too hurriedly, and it seemed a dream that I had been with him, that I had seen such paintings, that such paintings had been created by man.

I didn't go back to my rooms in the palazzo.

When I reached the vault of Those Who Must Be Kept, I fell down in a new kind of exhaustion, crazed by what I had beheld. I couldn't get the impression of the man out of my mind. I couldn't stop seeing him with his soft dull hair and sincere eyes.

As for the paintings, they haunted me, and I knew that my torment, my obsession, my complete abandonment to the love of Botticelli had only just begun.

16

In the months that followed I became a busy visitor of Florence, slipping into various palaces and churches to see the work that Botticelli had done.

Those who praised him had not lied. He was the most revered painter in Florence, and those who complained of him were those for whom he had no time, for he was only a mortal man.

In the Church of San Paolino, I found an altarpiece which was to drive me mad. The subject of the painting was a common one, I had discovered, usually called *The Lamentation,* being the scene of those weeping over the body of the dead Christ only just taken down from the Cross.

It was a miracle of Botticelli's sensuality, most specifically in the tender representation of Christ himself who had the gorgeous body of a Greek god, and in the utter abandon of the woman who had pressed her face against that of his, for though Christ lay with his head hanging downward, she knelt upright and her eyes were therefore very near to Christ's mouth.

Ah, to see these two faces seamlessly pressed to each other, and to see the delicacy of every face and form surrounding them, it was more than I could endure.

How long would I let this torture me? How long must I go through this wanton enthusiasm, this mad celebration before I retreated to my loneliness and coldness in the vault? I knew how to punish myself, didn't I? Did I have to go out of my way to the city of Florence for this?

There were reasons to be gone.

Two other blood drinkers haunted this city who might want me out of it, but so far they had left me alone. They were very young and hardly very clever, nevertheless I did not want them to come upon me, and spread "the legend of Marius" any further than it had already gone.

And then there was that monster I had encountered in Rome—that evil Santino who might come this far to harry me with his little Satan worshipers whom I so desperately deplored.

But these things didn't really matter.

I had time in Florence and I knew it. There were no Satan worshipers here and that was a good thing. I had time to suffer as much as I chose.

And I was mad for this mortal, Botticelli, this painter, this genius, and I could scarce think of anything else.

Meantime, there came from Botticelli's brilliance yet another immense pagan masterpiece which I beheld in the palazzo to which it was sent upon being finished—a place into which I crept in the early hours of the morning to see the painting while the owners of the building slept.

Once again, Botticelli had used Roman mythology, or perhaps the Greek mythology that lay

behind it to create a garden—yes, of all things, a garden—a garden of eternal springtime in which mythical figures made their sublime progress with harmonious gestures and dreamy expressions, their attitudes exquisitely gentle in the extreme.

On one side of the verdant garden danced the youthful and inevitably beautiful Three Graces in transparent and billowing garments while on the other side came the goddess Flora, magnificently clothed and strewing flowers from her dress. The goddess Venus once more appeared in the center, dressed as a rich Florentine woman, her hand up in a gesture of welcome, her head tilted slightly to one side.

The figure of Mercury in the far left corner, and several other mythic beings completed the gathering which entranced me so that I stood before the masterpiece for hours, perusing all the details, sometimes smiling, sometimes weeping, wiping at my face, and even now and then covering my eyes and then uncovering them again to see the vivid colors and the delicate gestures and attitudes of these creatures—the whole so reminiscent of the lost glory of Rome, and yet so utterly new and different from it that I thought, for loving all this, I will lose my mind.

Any and all gardens which I had ever painted or imagined were obliterated by this painting. How would I ever rival, even in my dreams, such a work as this?

How exquisite here to die of happiness after being so long miserable and alone. How exquisite to see this triumph of form and color after having studied with bitter sacrifice so many forms I could not understand.

There is no despair in me anymore. There is only joy, continuous restless joy.

Is that possible?

Only reluctantly did I leave this painting of the springtime garden. Only reluctantly did I leave behind its dark flower-rich grass and overhanging orange trees. Only reluctantly did I move on to find more of Botticelli where I could.

I might have staggered around Florence for nights on end, drunk on what I'd seen in this painting. But there was more, much more, for me to see.

Mark, all this time, as I slipped into churches to see more works by the Master, as I crept into a palazzo to see a famed painting by the Master of the irresistible god Mars sleeping helplessly on the grass beside a patient and watchful Venus, as I went about clasping my hands to my lips so as not to cry out crazily, I did not return to the workshop of the genius. I held myself back.

"You cannot interfere in his life," I told myself. "You cannot come in with gold and draw him from his paintings. His is a mortal destiny. Already the entire city knows of him. Rome knows of him. His paintings will endure. He is not someone you need save from a gutter. He is the talk of Florence. He is the talk of the Pope's Palace in Rome. Leave him alone."

And so I did not go back, though I was starving just to look at him, just to talk to him, just to tell him that the marvelous painting of the Three Graces and the other goddesses in the springtime garden was as glorious as anything that he had done.

I would have paid him just to allow me to sit in his shop in the evening, and to watch him at his work. But this was wrong, all of it.

I went back to the Church of San Paolino, and I stayed for a long time, staring at *The Lamentation.*

It was far more stiff than his "pagan" paintings. Indeed, he had seldom done something quite this severe. And there was much darkness to the painting, in the deeply colored robes of the various figures, and in the shadowy recesses of the open tomb. But even in this severity there was a tenderness, a loveliness. And the two faces—that of Mary and Christ—which were pressed together—drew me and would not let me look away.

Ah, Botticelli. How does one explain his gift? His figures though perfect were always slightly elongated, even the faces were elongated, and the expressions on the faces were sleepy and perhaps even ever so slightly unhappy, it is so difficult to say. All the figures of any one painting seemed lost in a communal dream.

As for the paint he used—the paint used by so many in Florence—it was far superior to anything we had had in the ancient days of Rome, in that it mixed simple egg yolk and ground pigment to achieve the colors and the glazes and the varnishes to make an application of unsurpassed brilliance and endurance. In other words, the works had a gloss that seemed miraculous to my eyes.

So fascinated was I by this paint that I sent my mortal servant to procure all the available pigments for me, and the eggs, and to bring me by night an old apprentice who might mix up the colors for me, exactly to the right thickness, so I might paint a bit of work in my rented rooms.

It was only an idle experiment, but I found myself working furiously and soon covering every bit of prepared wood and canvas which my apprentice and my servant had bought.

They were, of course, shocked by my speed, which gave me pause. I had to be clever, not fantastical. Hadn't I learnt that long years ago when I'd painted my banquet room as my guests cheered me on?

I sent them away with plenty of gold, telling them to come back to me with more materials. As for what I had painted? It was some poor imitation of Botticelli, for even with my immortal blood I could not capture what he had captured. I could not make faces like those he had rendered, no, not by a very long way. There was something brittle and hopeless in what I painted. I could not look at my own work. I loathed it. There was something flat and accusatory in the faces I had created. There was something ominous in the expressions that looked back at me from the walls.

I went out into the night, restless, hearing those other blood drinkers, a young pair, fearful of me and rightly so, yet very attentive to what I did, for what reason I was unsure. I sent a silent message to all the immortal trash that might perturb me: Do not come near me for I am in a grand passion and will not tolerate being interrupted now.

I crept into the Church of San Paolino and knelt down as I looked at *The Lamentation.* I ran my tongue against my sharp teeth. I hungered for blood as the beauty of the figures filled me. I could have taken a victim in the very church.

And then the most evil idea came to me. It was purely evil just as the painting was purely religious. The idea came to me unbidden as if there really were a Satan in the world and that Satan had come crawling along the stone floor towards me and put the idea in my mind.

"You love him, Marius," said this Satan. "Well, bring him over to you. Give Botticelli the Blood."

I shivered quietly in the church. I slipped down, sitting against the stone wall. Again I felt the thirst. I was horrified that I had even thought of it yet I saw myself taking Botticelli in my arms. I saw myself sinking my teeth into Botticelli's throat. The blood of Botticelli. I thought of it. And my blood, my blood given to him.

"Think how you have waited, Marius," said the evil voice of Satan. "All these long centuries you have never given your blood to anyone. But you can give it to Botticelli! You can take Botticelli now."

He would go on painting; he would have the Blood and his painting would be unparalleled. He would live forever with his talent—this humble man of some forty years who was grateful for a mere purse of gold—this humble man who had done the exquisite Christ I stared at, his head thrown back in the hand of Mary, whose eyes were pressed to his mouth.

This was not something that would be done. No, this must never be done. I could not do it. I would not do it.

Yet I rose slowly to my feet and I left the church and began walking through the dark narrow street, towards Botticelli's house.

I could hear my heart inside me. And my mind seemed curiously empty, and my body light and predatory and full of evil, an evil which I freely admitted and totally understood. A high excitement filled me. Take Botticelli in your arms. Forever in your arms.

And though I heard those other blood drinkers, those two young ones who followed me, I did not pay it any mind. They were far too fearful of me to come close to me. On I went for what I would choose to do.

It was no more than a few blocks and I was there at Sandro's door and the lights were burning inside, and I had a purse of gold.

Drifting, dreaming, thirsting, I knocked as I had the first time.

No, this is something you will never do, I thought. You will not take someone so vital out of the world. You will not disturb the destiny of one who has given others so much to love and enjoy.

It was Sandro's brother who came to the door, but this time he was courteous to me and he showed me into the shop where Botticelli was alone and at work.

He turned to greet me as soon as I entered the spacious room.

There loomed behind him a large panel, with a shockingly different aspect to it from any of his other work. I let my eyes drift over it for I thought this was what he wanted me to do, and I don't think I could hide from him my disapproval or fear.

The blood hunger surged in me, but I put it away and stared only at the painting, thinking of nothing, not of Sandro, not of his death and rebirth through me, no, of nothing but the painting as I pretended to be human for him.

It was a grim and chilling painting of the Trinity, with Christ on his Cross, the full figure of God the Father behind him, and a dove representing the Holy Spirit, just above the head of the Christ. On one side stood St. John the Baptist opening the scarlet robe of God the Father, and on the other, the penitent Magdalene, her long hair her only clothing as she stared grieving at the crucified Lord.

It seemed a cruel use of Botticelli's talent! It seemed a ghastly thing. Oh, it was expertly done, yes, but how merciless it seemed.

Only now did I know that in *The Lamentation* I had seen a perfect balance of light and dark forces. For I did not see that balance here. On the contrary, it was astonishing that Botticelli could have done something as wholly dark as this. It was a harsh thing. Had I seen it elsewhere I would not have thought it was his work.

And it seemed a profound judgment on me that I had thought for one moment of giving Botticelli the Dark Blood! Did the Christian God really live? Could he deter me? Could he judge me? Is that why I had come face to face with this painting with Botticelli standing beside it looking into my eyes?

Botticelli was waiting for me to speak to him on account of this painting. He was waiting patiently to be wounded by what I meant to say. And deep inside me there was a love of Botticelli's talent which had nothing to do with God or the Devil or my own evil or power. That love of Botticelli's talent respected Botticelli and nothing mattered just now but that.

I looked up again at the painting.

"Where is the innocence, Sandro?" I asked him, making my tone as kind as I could.

Again I fought the blood hunger. Look how old he is. If you don't do it Sandro Botticelli will die.

"Where is the tenderness in the painting?" I asked. "Where is the sublime sweetness that makes us forget everything? I see it only a little perhaps in the face of God the Father, but the rest—it's dark, Sandro. It's so unlike you, this darkness. I don't understand why you do it when you can do so much else."

The blood hunger was raging but I had control of it. I was pushing it deep inside me. I loved him too much to do it. I could not do it. I could not endure the result if it were to be done.

As for my remarks, he nodded. He was miserable. A man divided wanting to paint his

goddesses on the one hand, and the sacred paintings as well.

"Marius," he said. "I don't want to do what's sinful. I don't want to do what's evil, or what will make another person, simply by looking at a painting, commit a sin."

"You're very far from ever doing that, Sandro," I said. "That's my view of it—that your goddesses are glorious as are your gods. In Rome, your frescoes of Christ were filled with light and beauty. Why journey into the darkness as you have done here?"

I took out the purse and put it on the table. I would leave now, and he would never know what true evil had come close to him. He would never dream of what I was and what I had meant, perhaps, perhaps to do.

He came to me and picked up the purse and tried to give it back.

"No, you keep it," I said. "You deserve it. You do what you believe you should do."

"Marius, I have to do what is right," he said simply. "Now look at this, I want to show you." He took me to another part of the workshop away from the large paintings.

Here was a table and on it were several pages of parchment covered with tiny drawings.

"These are illustrations for Dante's *Inferno*," he told me. "Surely you've read it. I want to do an illustrated version of the entire book."

My heart sank when I heard this, but what could I say? I looked down at the drawings of the twisted and suffering bodies! How could one defend such an enterprise on the part of the painter who had rendered Venus and the Virgin with miraculous skill?

Dante's *Inferno.* How I had despised the work while recognizing its brilliance.

"Sandro, how can you want to do this?" I asked. I was shaking. I didn't want him to see my face. "I find glory," I said, "in those paintings that are filled with the light of paradise, whether it is Christian or pagan. I find no delight in the illustrations of those who suffer in Hell."

He was plainly confused and perhaps he always would be. It was his fate. I had only stepped into it, and perhaps fed a fire that was already too weak to survive.

I had to go now. I had to leave him now forever. I knew it. I could not come again to this house. I could not trust myself with him. I had to get out of Florence or my resolve would break.

"I won't be seeing you again, Sandro," I said.

"But why?" he said. "I've been looking forward to seeing you. Oh, it's not because of the purse, believe me."

"I know, but I must leave. Remember. I believe in your gods and goddesses. I always will."

I went out of his house, and only as far as the church. I was so overcome with the desire for him, to bring him over to me, and visit upon him all the dark secrets of the Blood, that I could scarce catch my breath or see the street before me, or even feel the air in my lungs.

I wanted him. I wanted his talent. I dreamt dreams of the two of us—Sandro and me—together in a great palazzo, and from there would come paintings tinged with the magic of the Blood.

It would be a confirmation of the Blood.

After all, I thought, he is ruining his own talent, is he not, by turning to what is dark? How can one account for it that he would turn from his goddesses to a poem called the *Inferno*? Can I not turn him back to his celestial visions with the Blood?

But none of this must happen. I knew it even before I'd seen his cruel crucifixion. I had known it before I went into his house.

I must find a victim now; I must find many. And so I hunted cruelly, until I could take no more blood from the few doomed souls I found in the streets of Florence.

At last an hour or so before dawn, I found myself sitting against a church door in a small piazza, looking like a beggar perhaps if beggars fit themselves out with crimson cloaks.

Those two young vampires whom I had heard following me came with fearful steps towards me.

I was weary and impatient.

"Get away from me," I said. "I'll destroy you both if you don't."

A young male, a young female, each taken in youth and both trembling, they would not retreat. At last the male spoke for them, his courage tremulous but real.

"Don't you harm Botticelli!" he declared. "Don't you hurt him! Take the dregs, yes, you're welcome, but not Botticelli, never Botticelli."

Sadly I laughed. My head fell back and very softly I laughed and laughed.

"I won't do it," I said. "I love him as much as you do. Now get away from me. Or believe me, there will be no more nights for either one of you. Go."

Returning to the vault in the mountains, I wept for Botticelli.

I closed my eyes, and I entered the garden where Flora dropped her tender roses to the carpet of grass and flowers. I reached out to touch the hair of one of the young Graces.

"Pandora," I whispered. "Pandora, it's our garden. They were all beautiful like you."

17

In the weeks that followed, I filled the shrine in the Alps with many new riches. I bought new golden lamps, and censers. I bought fine carpets from the markets in Venice, and golden silks from China as well. From the seamstresses of Florence I commissioned new garments for my Immortal Parents, and then carefully dressed them, relieving them of rags which should have been burnt long ago.

All the while I spoke to them in a consoling voice of the miracles I had seen in the changing world.

I laid before them fine printed books as I explained the ingenious invention of the printing press. And I hung over the doors to the shrine a new Flemish tapestry, also bought in Florence which I described to them in detail, so they might choose to look with their seemingly blind eyes.

Then I went to the city of Florence and gathering up all the pigment and oil and other materials which my servant had procured for me, I brought it to the mountain shrine, and I proceeded to paint the walls in the new style.

I did not seek now to imitate Botticelli. But I did return to the old motif of the garden which I had so loved centuries ago, and I soon found myself rendering my Venus, my Graces, my Flora, and infusing into the work all the details of life which only a blood drinker can behold.

Where Botticelli had painted the dark grass rich with varied flowers, I revealed the small insectile creatures inevitably concealed there, and then the most flamboyant and beautiful of creatures, the butterflies and the varicolored moths. Indeed my style ran to frightening detail in every respect, and soon an intoxicating and magic forest surrounded the Mother and Father, the egg tempera lending a gleam to the whole which I had never achieved in the past.

When I studied it, I became ever so slightly dizzy, thinking of Botticelli's garden, indeed, thinking even of the garden I had dreamt of in old Rome, of the garden I had painted—and soon I had to shake myself and collect myself because I did not know where I was.

The Royal Parents seemed more solid and remote than ever. All trace of the Great Burning was now gone from them in that their skin was purely white.

It had been so long since they had moved that I began to wonder if I had dreamt those things which had happened—if I had imagined the sacrifice of Eudoxia—but now my mind was very much intent upon escaping the shrine for long periods of time.

My last gift to the Divine Parents—after all my painting was done, and Akasha and Enkil were decked out with all new jewels—was a long bank of one hundred beeswax candles which I

lighted for them all at once with the power of my mind.

Of course I saw no change in the eyes of the King and Queen. Nevertheless, it gave me great pleasure to offer this to them; and I spent my last hours with them, letting the candles burn down as I told them in a soft voice of all the wonders of the cities of Florence and Venice which I had come to love.

I vowed that every time I came to them I would light the one hundred candles. It would be a small proof of my undying love.

What caused me to do such a thing? I have no true idea. But after that I kept a great supply of candles always in the shrine; I stored them behind the two figures; and after the offering, I would replenish the bronze holder and take away all melted wax.

When all this had been done, I returned to Florence and to Venice, and to the rich high-walled little city of Siena, to study paintings of all sorts.

Indeed, I wandered through palaces and churches throughout Italy, quite drunken on what I beheld.

As I have described, a great fusion had taken place between Christian themes and ancient pagan style, which was developing everywhere. And though I still perceived Botticelli to be the Master, I was taken aback by the plasticity and wonder of much of what I saw.

The voices in the taverns and in the wine shops told me I ought to go North to see paintings as well.

Now this was news to me, for North had always meant the land of the less civilized, but so great was my hunger for the new styles that I did as I was told.

I found throughout all of northern Europe an intense and complex civilization which I had surely underestimated, most particularly I think in France. There were great cities in existence and Royal Courts which supported painting. There was much for me to study.

But I did not love the art which I saw.

I respected the works of Jan van Eyck, and Rogier van der Weyden, of Hugo van der Goes, and of Hieronymus Bosch and many other nameless masters whom I beheld, but their work did not delight me as did the work of the Italian painters. The Northern world was not as lyrical. It was not as sweet. It still bore the grotesque stamp of the work of purely religious art.

So I soon returned to the cities of Italy where I was richly rewarded for my wanderings with no end in sight.

I soon learnt that Botticelli had studied with a great master, Filippo Lippi, and that this one's son, Filippino Lippi, was working with Botticelli right now. Other painters whom I loved included Gozzoli and Signorelli, and Piero della Francesca and beyond that so many that I do not want to mention their names.

But all during my study of painting, my little travels, my long nights of adoring attention to this or that wall, or this or that altarpiece, I did not let myself dream of bringing Botticelli to me,

and I never lingered long near any place where he was.

I knew that he prospered. I knew that he painted. And that was quite enough for me.

But an idea had come to brew in me—an idea as strong as the earlier dream of seducing Botticelli had been.

What if I were to reenter the world again, and to live in it as a painter? Oh, not a working painter who took commissions, that would be nonsense, but an eccentric gentleman who chose to paint for his own pleasure, admitting mortals to his house to dine at his table and drink his wine.

Had I not done so in a bumbling way in the ancient nights before the first sack of Rome? Yes, I had painted my own walls with crude, hasty images, and I had let my good-natured guests laugh at me.

Oh yes, a thousand years had passed since then, more in fact, and I could no longer easily pass for human. I was too pale and too dangerously strong. But was I not more clever now, more wise, more practiced with the Mind Gift, and more willing to mask my skin with whatever emollients were required to dim its preternatural gleam?

I was desperate to do it!

Of course it would not be in Florence. That was far too close to Botticelli. I would attract his notice and were he to set foot under my roof, I would be driven to extremes of pain. I was in love with the man. I could not deny it. But I had another, most marvelous choice.

It was the gorgeous and glittering city of Venice which drew me with its indescribably majestic palaces, their windows open to the constant breezes of the Adriatic, and its dark winding canals.

It seemed I should make a new and spectacular beginning there, purchasing for myself the finest house available, and acquiring a bevy of apprentices to prepare my paints for me, and the walls of my own house which would eventually receive my best efforts after I had done some panels and canvases to once again learn my craft.

As for my identity I would be Marius de Romanus, a man of mystery and incalculable wealth. Simply put, I would bribe those I had to bribe to obtain the right to remain in Venice, and thereafter spend freely among those who came to know me in the smallest capacity, and give generously to my apprentices who would be recipients of the finest education I could obtain for them.

Understand please that in this time the cities of Florence and Venice were not part of one country. Far from it. Each was a country unto itself. And so being in Venice I was quite removed from Botticelli, and would be subject to very important laws which the citizens of Venice were required to obey.

Now as to the matter of my appearance I intended to be careful in the extreme. Imagine the effect upon a mortal heart were I to reveal myself in all my coldness, a blood drinker of some fifteen hundred years in age with purely white skin and flashing blue eyes. So the matter of emollients was no small thing.

Renting rooms in the city, I purchased from the perfume shops the very finest tinted salves I could find. Then to my skin I applied these ointments, carefully inspecting the results in the finest mirrors which could be had. I soon made a blending of salves which was most perfect for not only darkening my cold complexion, but for bringing back to visibility in it the finest little wrinkles or lines.

I myself had not known that these lines of human expression still remained to me, and I was most happy to discover them, and I rather liked the image that I presented to the glass. As for the perfume, it was pleasing, and I realized that once settled in my own house, I could have the proper salves made for me and have them always on hand.

It took some months to complete my entire plan.

And this was largely because I had fallen in love with one particular palazzo, a house of great beauty, its facade covered in glistering marble tiles, its arches in the Moorish style, and its immense rooms more luxurious than anything I had ever beheld in all my nights, and even my long ago days. The lofty ceilings amazed me. We had known nothing like them in old Rome, at least not in a private house. And on top of the immense roof was a carefully arranged roof garden from which one could view the sea.

Once the ink was dry upon the parchment, I set out to purchase for myself the finest furnishings imaginable—coffered beds, desks, chairs, tables, all the usual appointments including gold-threaded draperies for every window—and I set to the task of managing all this a clever and genial old man named Vincenzo, a creature of extremely solid health, whom I had bought almost as if he were a slave from a family who had no more use for him and kept him about in shameful neglect because he had once educated their sons.

I saw in Vincenzo just the sort of governor I would need for all the apprentices I meant to buy from their Masters, boys who would bring some skill already learnt to the tasks they had to do for me. I was also pleased with the fact that the man was already old which meant I did not have to be tormented by the spectacle of youth dying in him. Rather I could pride myself, perhaps foolishly, on visiting upon him a rather splendid old age.

How did I find the creature? I went about reading minds to discover what I wanted.

I was now more powerful than ever. I could find the Evil Doer effortlessly. I could hear the secret thoughts of those who sought to cheat me or those who loved the mere sight of me. And the latter was a dangerous thing.

Why dangerous, you might ask? The answer is that I was now more than ever susceptible to love, and when seen with loving eyes I knew it and I slowed my pace.

What a strange mood would descend upon me while walking in the arcade along San Marco if someone should be looking at me admiringly. I would turn about, taking my time, and double back perhaps, and only reluctantly move away, rather like a bird in some northern clime enjoying the warmth of the sun on its wings.

Meantime, with gold in his hands, Vincenzo was sent to buy fine clothes for himself. I would make a gentleman of him, in so far as the sumptuary laws allowed.

And seated at my new desk in a spacious bedchamber floored in marble with windows open to the winds off the canal, I wrote out lists of those additional luxuries which I desired.

I wanted a lavish old Roman-style bath built for me in this bedchamber, so that I could enjoy the warm water whenever I wished. I wanted shelves for my books, and a finer chair for this desk. Of course there should be another library. What was a house to me if it did not possess a library? I wanted the finest clothing, the fashionable hats and leather shoes.

I drew pictures to guide those who would carry out my designs.

These were heady times. I was a part of life once more and my heart was beating to a human pace.

Hailing a gondola at the quais, I traveled the canals for hours looking up at the spectacular facades which made up the waterways of Venice. I listened to the voices everywhere. I lay back sometimes on my elbow and gazed up at the stars.

At various goldsmith shops and painters' workshops I chose my first gathering of apprentices, taking every opportunity to select the brilliant ones who were for various reasons among the wronged, and neglected, and abused. They would show me profound loyalty and untapped knowledge, and I sent them off to their new home with gold coins in their hands.

Of course I procured clever assistants because those were necessary, but I knew I would be very successful with the poorlings. Force was not required.

Meantime, it was my wish that my boys should be educated for the university—not a customary thing with a painter's apprentice—so I chose tutors for them and arranged for these men to come to my house in the daylight hours to perform instruction as required.

The boys would learn Latin, Greek, philosophy, the newfound and much valued "classics," some mathematics and whatever they needed to proceed in life. If they excelled in painting and they chose it, they could of course forget the university and follow the painter's path.

Finally I had a houseful of healthy and noisy activity. There were cooks in the kitchen, and musicians teaching my boys to sing and play the lute. There were dancing instructors and there were fencing matches over the marble floors of the great salons.

But I did not open my doors to the populace as I had done in long ago Rome.

I was too wary to do such a thing in Venice, too unsure of my ruse, too uncertain of what questions my mad painting might arouse.

No, I need only have my young male assistants, I fancied, both to keep me company and to help me, for there was much to be done preparing the walls for my frescoes and covering my panels and canvases with the proper varnishes for my work.

As it turned out, there was not much for anyone to do for some weeks, for during that period I wandered the local workshops and studied the painters of Venice as I had studied the painters of

Florence not long before.

There was no doubt in my mind, after this studious examination, that I could mimic mortal work to some extent, but I could not hope to surpass it. And I feared what I would accomplish. And I resolved to keep my house closed to all but the boys and their instructors as arranged.

Taking to my bedroom study, I began a journal of my thoughts, the first I had ever kept since the nights in old Rome.

I wrote of the comforts I enjoyed. And I chastised myself with more clarity than I did in my mind.

> "You have become a fool for the love of mortals," I wrote, far more than you ever did in the ancient nights. For you know you have chosen these boys so that you might instruct them and mold them, and there will be loving in it and hope in it, and the intention of sending them on to be educated at Padua, as though they were your mortal children.
>
> But what if they should come to discover that you are a beast in heart and soul, and they run from your touch, what then? Will you slaughter them in their innocence? This is not ancient Rome with its nameless millions. This is the strict Republic of Venice where you play your games, and for what?
>
> For the color of the evening sky over the piazza that you see when you are first risen, for the domes of the church beneath the moon? For the color of the canals that only you can behold in the starlight? You are a wicked and greedy creature.
>
> Will art satisfy you? You hunt elsewhere, in the surrounding towns and hamlets, or even in distant cities, for you can move with the speed of a god. But you bring evil to Venice because you are evil, and in your fine palazzo, lies are told, lies are lived, lies may fail.

I put down the quill. I read over my words, forever memorizing them, as if they were a foreign voice speaking to me, and only when I'd finished did I look up to see Vincenzo, so polite and humble, and so dignified in his new clothes, waiting to speak to me.

"What is it?" I asked gently so as not to make him think I disapproved of him for coming in.

"Master, only let me tell you …" he said. He looked quite elegant in his new velvet, rather like a prince at court.

"Yes, do tell me," I said.

"It's only that the boys are so happy. They are all in bed now and sleeping. But do you know what it means to them that they have plenty to eat and decent clothes, and are learning their lessons with a purpose? I could tell you many stories, too many I think. There's not a dullard among them. It's such luck."

I smiled.

"That's very good, Vincenzo," I said. "Go have your supper. Enjoy as much wine as you wish."

I sat in the stillness after he had left me.

It seemed quite impossible that I had made this residence for myself, and that nothing had stopped me. I had hours before dawn during which I might rest on my bed, or read among my new books before making the short journey to another place within the city where a sarcophagus had been hidden in a gold-lined chamber in which I would sleep by day.

But I chose instead to go to the great room which I had designated as my studio, and there I found the pigments and other materials ready for me, including several wooden panels which my young apprentices had prepared as directed for me to paint.

It was a small matter to blend the tempera and I did it quickly so that I had a wealth of colors at my command, and then glancing over and over again into a mirror which I had brought into the room with me, I painted my own portrait in quick exact strokes with little or no correction until it was complete.

As soon as I was finished, I stood back from my creation, and I found myself staring into my own eyes. It wasn't the man of long ago who had died in the northern forest, or the frantic blood drinker who had taken the Mother and the Father out of Egypt. Nor was it the starved and dogged wanderer who had slipped soundlessly through time for so many hundreds of years.

It was a bold and proud immortal who looked at me, a blood drinker who demanded that the world at last give him some quarter, an aberrant being of immense power who insisted that he might have a place among the human beings of which he had in former times been one.

As the months passed, I discovered that my plan was working quite well. In fact it was working marvelously!

I became obsessed with my new clothing of the period, velvet tunics and stockings, and marvelous cloaks trimmed in rare fur. Indeed mirrors were an obsession with me now as well. I could not stop looking at my own reflection. I applied the salves with great care.

Each evening, after sunset, I arose fully dressed with the requisite disguise on my skin, and I arrived at my palazzo to a warm greeting from all my children, and then dismissing the many teachers and tutors, I presided over a good banquet with my children where all were delighted to have the rich food of princes, as music played.

Then in a mild manner I questioned all my apprentices as to what they had learnt that day. Our conversations were long, complex, and full of wonderful revelations. I could easily surmise which teacher had been successful, and which had not wrought the effects I desired.

As for the boys themselves, I soon saw which of the boys possessed the greater talent, who should be sent off to the University of Padua, and who should be schooled as a goldsmith or a painter. Of failures we had none.

You understand, this was a transcendent enterprise. To repeat, I had chosen all of these boys by means of the Mind Gift, and what I offered them in these months, which soon stretched to

years, was something they would never have had if I had not intervened.

I had become a magician for them, aiding them to realize accomplishments of which they hadn't even dreamt.

And there was no doubt that I found immense satisfaction in this achievement, for I was a teacher of these creatures, just as I had long ago wanted to be the teacher of Avicus and Zenobia, and during all this time I thought of Avicus and Zenobia. I could not help but think of them and wonder what had become of them.

Had they survived?

I could not know.

But I knew this about myself: I had loved both Zenobia and Avicus because they allowed me to be their teacher. And I had fought with Pandora because she would not. She was far too finely educated and clever to be anything but a fierce verbal and philosophical opponent and I had left her, stupidly, on that account.

But no amount of such self-knowledge caused me to not long for my lost Zenobia and for Avicus, and to wonder what paths they'd taken through the world. Zenobia's beauty had struck a deeper note in me than the beauty of Avicus, and I could not relinquish the simple recollection of the softness of Zenobia's hair.

Sometimes, when I was alone in my bedroom in Venice, when I sat at my desk watching the curtains blow out from the windows, I thought of Zenobia's hair. I thought of it lying on the mosaic floor in Constantinople, after she had cut all of it so that she might travel the streets as a boy. I wanted to reach back over a thousand years and gather it up in my hands.

As for my own blond hair, I could wear it long now for this was the style of the period, and I rather enjoyed it, brushing it clean without resentment, and going out to walk in the piazza while the sky was still purple knowing people were looking at me, wondering just what sort of man I was.

As for my painting, I went about it using a few wooden panels with only a handful of apprentices in my studio, locked off from the world. I created several successful religious pictures —all of the Virgin Mary and the Angel Gabriel appearing to her, because this theme—The Annunciation—appealed to me. And I was rather amazed at how well I could imitate the style of the times.

Then I set upon a major undertaking which would be a true test of my immortal skill and wits.

18

Let me explain what this undertaking was to be:

There was a chapel in Florence that existed within a Medici palazzo, and on the walls of this chapel was a great painting by a painter named Gozzoli of the Procession of the Magi—the three wise men of Scripture—coming to visit the Christ Child with their precious gifts.

Now it was a marvelous painting, full of rampant detail. And it was worldly in the extreme, in that the Magi themselves were clothed as wealthy Florentine citizens and there followed behind them a huge gathering of similarly clothed men and churchmen so that the whole was a tribute to the Christ Child and to the times in which the painting had been done.

This painting covered the walls of this chapel, along with the walls of the recess for the place where its altar stood. And the chapel itself was quite small.

Now I was taken with the painting for many reasons. I had not fallen deeply in love with Gozzoli as I had with Botticelli, but greatly admired him, and the details of this painting were fantastic in the extreme.

Not only was the Procession itself enormous, if not actually never ending, but the landscape behind it was wondrous, filled with towns and mountains, with men hunting and animals running, with beautifully realized castles and delicately shaped trees.

Well, choosing in my palazzo one of the largest rooms, I set out to duplicate this painting in the flat mode on one wall. What this meant was that I had to travel back and forth between Florence and Venice, memorizing parts of this painting, and then render it with all my supernatural skill.

To a very large part I succeeded in my task.

I "stole" the Procession of the Magi—this fabulous depiction of a procession so important to the Christians and especially to the Florentines and I laid it out in vivid and exact color on my wall.

There was nothing original to it. But I had passed a test which I had set for myself, and as no one was to be admitted to this chamber, I did not fancy that I had truly robbed Gozzoli of anything he possessed. Indeed if any mortal had found his way into this chamber which I kept locked, I would have explained that the original of this painting was done by Gozzoli, and indeed when the time came for me to show it to my apprentices, for the lessons it contained, I did so explain.

But let me return for a moment to the subject of this stolen work of art. Why did it appeal to

me? What in it made my soul sing? I don't know. Except that it had to do with the three kings giving gifts, and I fancied that I was giving gifts to the children who lived in my house. But I'm not sure if that is why I chose the painting for my first excursion into true work with the brush. I'm not sure at all.

Perhaps it was only that all the details of the work were so fascinating. One could fall in love with the horses in the Procession. Or with the faces of the young men. I shall now leave the subject as puzzled about it as I tell my story, as I was then.

Immediately after confirming my success with the copy, I opened a spacious painting studio in the palazzo and began to work on large panels late at night while the boys slept. I did not really need their help and I did not want them to see the speed or the determination with which I worked.

My first ambitious painting was dramatic and strange. I painted a gathering of my apprentices in full fancy dress listening to an old Roman philosopher who wore only his long tunic and cloak and sandals, and this against a backdrop of the ruins of Rome. It was full of vivid color and my boys were well rendered, I give myself that. But I didn't know if it was any good. And I didn't know if it would horrify.

I left the door open to the studio in the hope that the teachers might wander in there by day.

As it turned out they were far too timid to do it.

I proceeded to create another painting, and this time I chose the Crucifixion—an approved theme for any artist—and I rendered it with tender care—and once again I used the backdrop of the ruins of Rome. Was it sacrilege? I couldn't guess. Once again, I was sure of my colors. Indeed, this time I was sure of my proportions, and of the sympathetic expression on Christ's face. But was the composition itself somehow something that should not be?

How was I to know? I had all this knowledge, all this seeming power. Yet I didn't know. Was I creating something blasphemous and monstrous?

I returned to the subject of the Magi. I knew the conventions. Three kings, the stable, Mary, Joseph, the Infant, Jesus, and this time I did them freely, imputing to Mary the beauty of Zenobia, and glorying in the colors as before.

Soon my giant workroom was full of paintings. Some were correctly hung. Others were simply propped against the wall.

Then one night, at supper to which I'd invited the boys' more refined instructors, one of them, the Greek teacher, happened to mention that he had seen into my workshop through an open door.

"Oh, please, tell me," I said, "what did you think of my paintings?"

"Most remarkable!" he said frankly. "I've never seen anything like them! Why, all of the figures in the painting of the Magi …" He broke off, afraid.

"Please go on," I said instantly. "Tell me. I want to know."

“All of the figures are looking out at us, including Mary, and Joseph, and the three kings. I have never seen it done in that way.”

“But is it wrong?” I asked.

“I don’t think so,” he said quickly. “But who’s to say? You paint for yourself, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do,” I answered. “But your opinion matters to me. I find at moments I’m as fragile as glass.”

We laughed. Only the older boys were interested in this exchange, and I saw that the very oldest, Piero, had something to say. He too had seen the paintings. He had gone inside the room.

“Tell me everything, Piero,” I said, winking at him, and smiling. “Come on. What do you think?”

“The colors, Master, they were beautiful! When will it be time for us to work with you? I’m more skilled than you might think.”

“I remember, Piero,” I said, referring to the shop from which he’d come. “I’ll call upon you soon enough.”

In fact, I called upon them the very next night.

Having severe doubts about subject matter more than anything else, I resolved to follow Botticelli in that regard.

I chose the Lamentation for my subject matter. And I made my Christ as tender and vulnerable as I could conceivably do it, and I surrounded him with countless mourners. Pagan that I was, I didn’t know who was supposed to be there! And so I created an immense and varied crowd of weeping mortals—all in Florentine dress—to lament the dead Jesus, and angels in the sky torn with anguish much like the angels of the painter Giotto whose work I had seen in some Italian city the name of which I could not recall.

My apprentices were quite astonished by the work and so were the teachers, whom I invited into the huge workroom for the initial view. Once again the faces I painted elicited special comment but so did the bizarre qualities of the painting—the inordinate amount of color and gold—and small touches I had added, such as insects here and there.

I realized something. I was free. I could paint what I wanted. Nobody was going to be the wiser. But then again, I thought, perhaps that’s not true.

It was desperately important for me to remain in the middle of Venice. I did not want to lose my foothold in the warm, loving world.

I drifted out in the following weeks to all the churches once more in search of inspiration for my paintings, and I studied many a grotesque and bizarre picture which amazed me almost as much as my own work.

An artist by the name of Carpaccio had created a work called *Meditation on the Passion* which revealed the body of the dead Christ enthroned against a fantastical landscape, and flanked by two white-haired saints who peered at the viewer as if Christ were not there!

In the work of a painter named Crivelli, I found a truly grotesque picture of the dead Savior, flanked by two angels who looked like monsters. And the same painter had done a Madonna almost as lovely and lifelike as Botticelli's goddesses or nymphs.

I arose night after night hungry not for blood, though I certainly fed when I had to feed, but for my time in the workshop, and soon my paintings, all of them on large wooden panels, were propped all over the enormous house.

Finally, because I could keep track of them no longer, and went on to things new, rather than to perfect the old, I gave in to Vincenzo that he might have these works properly mounted as he wished.

Meanwhile our whole palazzo, though it had become famous in Venice as "a strange place," remained somewhat closed to the world.

Undoubtedly my hired teachers spoke of their days and evenings in the company of Marius de Romanus, and all our servants gossiped, no question of it, and I did not seek to put an end to such talk.

But I did not admit the true citizens of Venice. I did not lay out the banquet table as I had done in the old nights. I did not open the doors.

Yet all the while I was longing to do it. I wanted the fashionable world of the city to be received under my roof.

What I did instead of extending invitations was to accept those I received.

Often in the early evening, when I didn't want to dine with my children, and long before I needed to begin painting furiously, I went to other palaces where feasting was in progress, and I entered, whispering my name when asked, but more often being received without question and discovering that the guests were eager to have me among them and had heard of my paintings and of my famous little school where the apprentices hardly did any work at all.

Of course I kept to the shadows, spoke in vague but gentle words, read minds well enough to make the most clever conversation and in general almost lost my wits so great was this love to me, this convivial reception of me which was nothing more than most of the noblemen of Venice took for granted every night of their lives.

I don't know how many months passed in this way. Two of my students went on to Padua. I went out into the city and found four more. Vincenzo showed no signs of ill health. I hired new and better teachers from time to time. I painted fiercely. So on it went.

Let me say a year or two had gone by before I was told of a very lovely and brilliant young woman who maintained a house always open to poets and playwrights and clever philosophers who could make their visits worth her while.

Understand the payment in question was not a manner of money; it was that one had to be interesting to be admitted to this woman's company; poems had to be lyrical and meaningful; there had to be wit in conversation; one could play the virginal or the lute only if one knew how.

I was fiercely curious as to the identity of this creature, and the general sweetness of the reports of her.

And so passing her house, I listened, and I heard her voice threading through the voices of those around her, and I knew her to be a mere child, but one filled with anguish and secrets, all of which she concealed with immense skill behind a graceful manner and a beautiful face.

How beautiful, I had no idea, until I mounted the steps, entered her rooms boldly and saw her for myself.

When I came into the room, she had her back to me, and turned as if my arrival had made some noise which it had not. I saw her in profile and then completely as she rose to greet me, and I could not speak for a moment, so great was the impression on my mind of her form and face.

That Botticelli hadn't painted her was a mere accident. Indeed he might well have done so. She looked so very like his women that all other thoughts left my mind. I saw her oval face, her oval eyes, and her thick wavy blond hair, interwound with long strings of tiny pearls, and the fine shape of her body with exquisitely molded arms and breasts.

"Yes, like Botticelli," she said, smiling as if I'd spoken it.

Again, I could say nothing. I was the one who read minds, and yet this child, this woman of nineteen or twenty years seemed to have read mine. But did she know how much I loved Botticelli? That she could not know.

She went on gaily, reaching out for my hand with both of hers.

"Everyone says it," she said, "and I'm honored. You might say I dress my hair this way on account of Botticelli. You know I was born in Florence, but that's not worth talking about here in Venice, is it? You're Marius de Romanus. I was wondering how long it would be before you came."

"Thank you for receiving me," I said. "I fear I come with nothing." I was still shocked by her beauty, shocked by the sound of her voice. "What have I to offer you?" I asked. "I have no poems, nor clever stories about the state of things. Tomorrow, I shall have my servants bring you the best wine I have in my house. But what is that to you?"

"Wine?" she repeated. "I don't want gifts of wine from you, Marius. Paint my picture. Paint the pearls interwound in my hair, I should love it."

There was soft laughter all around the room. I gazed musingly at the others. The candlelight was dim even for me. How rich it all seemed, these naive poets and students of the classics, this indescribably beautiful woman, and the room itself with all the usual splendid trappings, and time passing slowly as though the moments had some meaning and were not a sentence of penitence and grief.

I was in my glory. I realized it quite suddenly and then something else struck me.

This young woman was in her glory too.

Something sordid and evil lay behind her recent fortunes here, yet she displayed nothing of the desperation she must surely feel.

I tried to read her mind and then I chose not to do it! I didn't want anything but this moment.

I wanted to see this woman as she wanted me to see her—young, infinitely kind, yet utterly well defended—a companion for the night's cheerful gatherings, mysterious mistress of her own house.

Indeed, I saw another great drawing room adjacent to this one, and beyond it a marvelously decorated bedroom with a bed made of golden swans and gold-threaded silk.

Why this display if not to tell everyone that in that bed, this woman slept alone? No one was ever to presume to cross that threshold, but all might see where the maiden retired of her own accord.

"Why do you stare at me?" she asked me. "Why do you look about yourself as if this is a strange place to you when surely it's not?"

"All of Venice is lovely to me," I answered, making my voice soft and confidential so that it would not be for the whole room.

"Yes, isn't it?" she said, smiling exquisitely. "I too love it. I'll never return to Florence. But will you paint a picture of me?"

"Perhaps I will," I answered. "I don't know your name."

"You're not serious," she said, smiling again. I realized suddenly how very worldly she was. "You didn't come here not knowing my name. How could you want me to believe such a thing?"

"Oh, but I don't know it," I said, because I had never asked her name, and had learnt of her through vague images and impressions and fragments of conversation overheard by me as a blood drinker, and I stood at a loss because I wouldn't read her mind.

"Bianca," she said. "And my rooms are always open to you. And if you paint my picture, I'll be in your debt."

There were more guests coming. I knew that she meant to receive them. I backed away from her and took a station, so to speak, in the shadows well away from the candles, and from there I watched her, watched her infallibly graceful movements and heard her clever, ringing voice.

Over the years, I had beheld a thousand mortals who meant nothing to me, and now, gazing at this one creature I felt my heart tripping as it had when I had entered Botticelli's workshop, when I had seen his paintings and seen him, Botticelli, the man. Oh, yes, the man.

I stayed in her rooms only for a short time that night.

But I returned within the week with a portrait of her. I had painted it on a small panel and had it framed with gold and jewels.

I saw her shock when she received it. She had not expected something so exact. But then I feared she might see something wrong.

When she looked at me, I felt her gratitude and her affection and something greater collecting

inside her, an emotion she denied in dealing with others.

"Who are you … really?" she asked me in a soft, lilting whisper.

"Who are *you* … really?" I repeated, and I smiled.

She looked at me gravely. Then she smiled too but she didn't answer, and all her secrets folded inside her—the sordid things, things to do with blood and gold.

For a moment, I thought my powerful self-control would be lost. I would embrace her, whether or not she would have it, and take her rapidly by force from the very middle of her warm and safe rooms to the cold and fatal domain of my soul.

I saw her, positively saw her as if the Christian Satan were giving me visions once more—I saw her transformed by the Dark Blood. I saw her as if she were mine, and all her youth burnt out in sacrifice to immortality, and the only warmth or riches known to her those which came from me.

I left her rooms. I couldn't remain there. For nights, no, months I did not return. In that time a letter came to me from her. I was quite astonished to receive it and I read it over and over and then put it in a pocket inside my tunic next to my heart.

My dear Marius,

> Why leave me with only a brilliant painting when I would have your companionship as well? We are always seeking for amusement here, and there is much kind talk of you. Do come back to me. Your painting occupies a position of honor on the wall of my salon so that I might share the pleasure of it with all who come.

How had this happened, this craving to make a mortal my companion? After so many centuries, what had I done to bring it on?

I had thought that, with Botticelli, it had to do with his remarkable talent, and that I, with eyes so sharp and heart so hungry, had wanted to mingle the Blood with his inexplicable gift.

But this child, Bianca, was no such seeming miracle, no matter how precious I found her to be. Oh, yes, she was to my taste as if I'd made her—the daughter of Pandora—it was as if Botticelli had created her, even to the somewhat dreamy expression of her face. And she did have a seemingly impossible mingling of fire and poise.

But I had in my long miserable years seen many beautiful humans, rich and poor, younger and older, and I had not felt this sharp, near uncontrollable desire to bring her to me, to take her to the shrine with me, to spill out to her whatever wisdom I possessed.

What was I to do with this pain? How should I be rid of it? How long would it torment me right here in the city of Venice where I had chosen to seek comfort from mortals and give back to the world in secret payment my blessed and well-educated boys?

On rising, I found myself shaking loose light dreams of Bianca, dreams in which she and I were sitting in my bedroom and talking together as I told her of all the long lonely paths I'd trod,

talking together as she told me of how she had drawn from common and filthy pain her immeasurable strength.

Even as I attended the feast with my students I couldn't shake off these dreams. They broke in on me as if I were falling asleep over the wine and meats. The boys vied for my attention. They thought they had failed the Master.

When I went to my rooms to paint, I was equally confused. I painted a large picture of Bianca as the Virgin Mary with a chubby Infant Jesus. I laid down the brushes. I wasn't content. I couldn't be content.

I went out of Venice into the countryside. I searched for the Evil Doer. I drank blood until I was glutted. And then I returned to my rooms, and I lay down on my bed and I dreamt of Bianca again.

At last before dawn I wrote my admonitions down in my diary:

> This desire to make an immortal companion is no more justified here than it was in Florence. You have survived all your long life without ever taking this evil step, though you know well how to do it—the Druid priest taught you how to do it—and not doing it, you will continue to survive. You cannot bring over this child to you, no matter how you envision it. Imagine her to be a statue. Imagine your evil to be a force that would shatter that statue. See her then in fragments. Know that that is what you would do.

I went back to her rooms.

It was as if I'd never seen her before, so great was her impression upon me, so soft and compelling her voice, so radiant her face and her worldly eyes. It was an agony and also an immeasurable consolation to be near her.

For months I came to her rooms, pretending to listen to the poems recited, sometimes forced to answer in the gentle discussions regarding the theories of aesthetics or philosophy, but all the while simply wanting to be near her, studying the minutia of her beauty, closing my eyes now and then as I listened to the song of her voice.

Visitors came and went from her famous gatherings. No one dared question her supremacy within her own domain. But as I sat, as I observed, as I let myself dream in the candlelight, there came to my observation something subtle and dreadful as ever I had beheld.

Certain men who came into these rooms were marked for a dark and specific purpose. Certain men, well known to the divinely alluring mistress, received in their wine a poison which would follow them as they left the genial company and soon accomplish their deaths!

At first, when I with my preternatural senses had smelled this subtle but certain poison I thought I had imagined such a thing. But then with the Mind Gift, I saw into the heart of this enchantress, and how she lured those whom she must poison, knowing little or nothing of why they had been condemned to death.

This was the sordid lie I had first perceived in her. A kinsman, a Florentine banker, kept her in terror. Indeed it was he who had brought her here, provided her with her nest of lovely chambers and ever playing music. It was he who demanded of her that the poison be placed in the proper cup to do away with those he chose.

How calmly her blue eyes passed over those who drank the fatal potion. How calmly she watched as the poetry was read to her. How calmly she smiled at me when her eyes happened to fall upon the tall blond-haired man who observed her from the corner. And how deep her despair!

Armed with this new knowledge, no, driven to distraction by it, I went out into the night roaming, for now I had the proof on her of guilt immeasurable! Was this not sufficient to bring her over, to force the Dark Blood upon her, and then say, "No, my darling, I haven't taken your life, I've given you eternity with me!"

Beyond the city I walked the country roads for hours, sometimes pounding my forehead with the heels of my palms.

I want her, I want her, I want her. But I could not bring myself to do it. At last I went home to paint her portrait. And night after night, I painted her portrait again. I painted her as the Virgin of the Annunciation, and the Virgin with Child. I painted her as the Virgin in the Lamentation. I painted her as Venus, as Flora, I painted her on small panels that I brought to her. I painted her until I could endure it no longer. I slumped on the floor of my painting room, and when the apprentices came to me in the dark hours of the dawn, they thought me sick and cried out.

But I couldn't bring harm to her. I couldn't bring my Evil Blood to her. I couldn't take her over to me, and now a most great and grotesque quality attached itself to her in my eyes.

She was evil as I was evil, and when I watched her from the corner of her room, I fancied that I studied a thing which was like unto myself.

For her life, she dispatched her victims. For my life, I drank human blood.

And so this tender girl, in her costly gowns with her long blond locks and soft cheeks, took on a dark majesty for me; and I was fascinated by her more than ever before.

One night, so great was my pain, so dire was my need to separate myself from this young woman, that I went alone in my gondola, telling my oarsman to row back and forth through the smallest canals of the city and not bring me back to the palazzo until I gave the command.

What did I seek? The smell of death and rats in the blackest waters. The occasional merciful flashes of the moon.

I lay down in the boat, my head on my pillow. I listened to the voices of the city so that I would not hear my own.

And quite suddenly, as we came into the wider canals again, as we came into a certain district of Venice, there came a voice quite different from all the others, for it was speaking from a desperate and deranged mind.

In a flash I saw an image behind the cry of this voice, the image of a painted face. Indeed, I saw the paint laid on in marvelous strokes. I knew the painted face. It was the face of Christ!

What did this mean? In a solemn silence, I listened. No other voice mattered to me. I banished a city full of whispers.

It was a woeful crying. It was the voice of a child behind thick walls who on account of the recent cruelties done him could not remember his native language or even his name.

Yet in that forgotten language he prayed to be delivered from those who had cast him down in darkness, those who had tormented him and jabbered at him in a tongue he didn't know.

Once again there came that image, the painted Christ staring forward. The painted Christ in a time-honored and Greek style. Oh, how well I knew this fashion of painting; oh, how well I knew this countenance. Had I not seen it a thousand times in Byzantium, and in all those places East and West to which its power had reached?

What did this mean, this mingled voice and imagery? What did it mean that the child thought again and again of an ikon and did not know that he prayed?

Once again there came the plea from one who thought himself to be utterly silent.

And I knew the language in which he prayed. It was no matter to me to disentangle it, to put the words in order, having as I did such a knowledge of languages the world wide. Yes, I knew his tongue and I knew his prayer. "Dear God, deliver me. Dear God, let me die."

A frail child, a hungry child, a child who was alone.

Sitting up in the gondola, I listened. I delved for the images locked away inside the child's most wordless thoughts.

He had once been a painter, this bruised and young one. The face of Christ had been his work. He had once mixed the egg yolk and the pigment just as I mixed them. He had once painted the face of Christ again and again!

Whence came this voice? I had to discover the source of it. I listened with all my skill.

Somewhere very near, this child was imprisoned. Somewhere very near, he offered up his prayer with his last breath.

He had painted his precious ikons in the far country of snowy Russia. Indeed, this child had been supremely gifted in the painting of ikons. But he could not remember that now. That was the mystery. That was the complexity! He could not even see the images which I was seeing, so broken was his heart.

I could understand what he himself could not understand. And he was pleading silently with Heaven in a Russian dialect to be delivered from those who had made him a slave in Venice and sought to make him serve others in a brothel through acts which to him were sins of the flesh which he could not abide!

I told my oarsman to stop.

I listened until I had found the exact source. I directed the boat to go back only a few doors

until I found the precise place.

The torches were burning brightly before the entrance. I could hear the music inside.

The voice of the child was persistent, and yet there came that clear understanding on my part that the child did not know his own prayers, his own history, his own tongue.

I was greeted by the owners of the house with great fanfare. They knew of me. I must come in. I could have whatever I wanted under their roof. Just beyond the door lay paradise. Listen to the laughter, and the singing.

"What do you desire, Master?" a pleasant-voiced man asked of me. "You can tell me. We have no secrets here."

I stood listening. How reticent I must have seemed—this tall, blond-haired man with such a chilly manner, who cocked his head to one side and looked away with his thoughtful blue eyes.

I tried to see the boy, but I could not. The boy was locked away where no one saw him. How would I proceed? Ask to see all of the boys of the house? That would not do it, for this one was in a chamber of punishment, cold and quite alone.

Then suddenly the answer came to me as though angels had spoken it, or was it the Devil? It came swiftly and completely.

"To purchase, you understand," I said, "with gold of course, and now, a boy you want to be rid of. One recently arrived here who will not do as he's told."

In a flash I saw the boy in the man's eyes. Only it could not be true. I could not have such luck. For this boy had beauty as bountiful as Bianca's. I did not count upon it.

"Recently come from Istanbul," I said. "Yes, I think that is correct, for the boy was no doubt brought from Russian climes."

I need say no more words. Everyone was scurrying about. Someone had put a goblet of wine into my hands. I smelled the lovely scent of it, and set it down on the table. It seemed a flood of rose petals descended. Indeed there was everywhere the perfume of flowers. A chair was brought for me. I did not sit on it.

Suddenly the man who had greeted me returned to the room.

"You don't want that one," he said quickly. He was greatly agitated. And once again, I saw a clear image of the boy lying on a stone floor.

And I heard the boy's prayers: "Deliver me." And I saw the Face of Christ in gleaming egg tempera. I saw the jewels set into the halo. I saw the egg and pigment mixing. "Deliver me."

"Can't you understand me?" I asked. "I told you what I wanted. I want that boy, the one who won't do what you try to force him to do."

Then I realized it.

The brothel keeper thought the boy was dying. He was afraid of the law. He stood before me in terror.

"Take me to him," I said. I pressed him with the Mind Gift. "Do it now. I know of him and

won't leave here without him. Besides, I'll pay you. I don't care if he's sick and dying. Do you hear me? I'll take him away with me. You'll never have to worry about him again."

It was a cruel small chamber in which they'd locked him, and into that chamber the light of a lamp flooded upon the child.

And there I saw beauty, beauty which has always been my downfall, beauty as in Pandora, as in Avicus, as in Zenobia, as in Bianca, beauty in a new and celestial form.

Heaven had cast down upon this stone floor an abandoned angel, of auburn curls and perfectly formed limbs, of fair and mysterious face.

I reached down to take him by the arms and I lifted him, and I looked into his half-opened eyes. His soft reddish hair was loose and tangled. His flesh was pale and the bones of his face only faintly sharpened by his Slavic blood.

"Amadeo," I said, the name springing to my lips as though the angels willed it, the very angels whom he resembled in his purity and in his seeming innocence, starved as he was.

His eyes grew wide as he stared at me. In majesty and golden light, I saw again in his mind those ikons which he had painted. Desperately he struggled to remember. Ikons. The Christ he had painted. With long hair and burning eyes, I resembled the Christ.

He tried to speak, but the language had left him. He tried to find the name of his Lord.

"I'm not the Christ, my child," I said, speaking to that part of him deep within the mind of which he knew nothing. "But one who comes with his own salvation. Amadeo, come into my arms."

19

I loved him instantly and impossibly. He was fifteen years old at the most when I took him out of the brothel that night and brought him to live in the palazzo with my boys.

As I held him close to me in the gondola, I knew him certainly to have been doomed—indeed, snatched at the last moment from an inconsequential death.

Though the firmness of my arms comforted him, the beat of his heart was barely sufficient to drive the images which I received from him as he lay against my chest.

Reaching the palazzo, I refused Vincenzo's assistance, sending him off for food for the child, and I took my Amadeo into my bedchamber alone.

I laid him upon my bed, a wan and ragged being, amid the heavy velvet hangings and pillows, and when the soup at last came, I forced it through his lips myself.

Wine, soup, a potion of honey and lemon, what more could we give him? Slowly, cautioned Vincenzo, lest he take too much after the starvation, and his stomach suffer as the result.

At last I sent Vincenzo away from us, and I bolted the doors of my room.

Was that the fateful moment? Was it the moment in which I knew my soul most completely, the moment in which I acknowledged that this would be a child of my power, my immortality, a pupil of all I knew?

As I looked at the child on the bed, I forgot the language of guilt and recrimination. I was Marius, the witness of the centuries, Marius, the chosen one of Those Who Must Be Kept.

Taking Amadeo into the bath, I cleansed him myself and covered him with kisses. I drew from him an easy intimacy which he had denied all those who had tormented him, so dazzled and confused was he by my simple kindnesses, and the words I whispered in his tender ears.

I brought him quickly to know the pleasures which he had never allowed himself before. He was dazed and silent; but his prayers for deliverance were no more.

Yet even here in the safety of this bedroom, in the arms of one he saw as his Savior, nothing of his old memory could move from the recesses of his mind into the sanctum of reason.

Indeed, perhaps my frankly carnal embraces made the wall in his mind, between past and present, all the more strong.

As for me, I had never experienced such pure intimacy with a mortal, except with those I meant to kill. It gave me chills to have my arms around this boy, to press my lips to his cheeks and chin, his forehead, his tender closed eyes.

Yes, the blood thirst rose, but I knew so well how to control it. I filled my nostrils with the

smell of his youthful flesh.

I knew that I could do anything I wanted with him. There was no force between Heaven and Hell that could stop me. And I did not need a Satan to tell me that I could bring him over to me and educate him within the Blood.

Drying him gently with towels, I returned him to the bed.

I sat down at my desk, where turning to the side I might look directly at him, and there came the full-blown idea of it, as rich as my desire to seduce Botticelli, as terrible as my passion for the lovely Bianca.

This was a foundling who could be educated for the Blood! This was a child utterly lost to life who could be reclaimed specifically for the Blood.

Would his training be a night, a week, a month, a year? Only I need decide it.

Whatever it was, I would make of him a child of the Blood.

My mind went back swiftly to Eudoxia and how she had spoken of the perfect age for the Blood to be received. I remembered Zenobia and her quick wits and knowing eyes. I remembered my own long ago reflection on the promise of a virgin, that one could make of a virgin what one wished without price.

And this child, this rescued slave, had been a painter! He knew the magic of the egg and the pigments, yes, he knew the magic of the color spread upon the wooden panel. He would remember; he would remember a time when he cared about nothing else.

True it had been in far-away Russia, where those who worked in monasteries limited themselves to the style of the Byzantines which I had long ago rejected as I turned my back on the Greek Empire and came to make my home amid the strife of the West.

But behold what had happened: the West had had its wars, yes, and indeed, the barbarians had conquered all it did seem. Yet Rome had risen again through the great thinkers and painters of the 1400s! I beheld it in the work of Botticelli, and Bellini and Filippo Lippi and in a hundred others.

Homer, Lucretius, Virgil, Ovid, Plutarch—they were all being studied once again. The scholars of “humanism” sang songs of “antiquity.”

In sum, the West had risen again with new and fabulous cities, whereas Constantinople, old golden Constantinople, had been lost to the Turks who had made it Istanbul.

But far beyond Istanbul, there lay Russia from which this boy had been taken prisoner, Russia which had taken its Christianity from Constantinople so that this boy knew only the ikons of strict somber style and rigid beauty, an art which was as remote from what I painted as night from day.

Yet in the city of Venice both styles existed: the Byzantine style and the new style of the times.

How had it come about? Through trading. Venice had been a seaport since its beginnings. Its great fleet had gone back and forth between East and West when Rome was a ruin. And many a

church in Venice preserved the old Byzantine style which filled this boy's tortured mind.

These Byzantine churches had never much mattered to me before, I had to admit. Not even the Doge's chapel, San Marco, had much mattered to me. But they mattered now, because they helped me to understand again and all the better the art which this boy had loved.

I stared at him as he slept.

All right. I understood something of his nature; I understood his suffering. But who was he really? I posed the same question which Bianca and I had exchanged with each other. The answer I did not have.

Before I could think of moving forward with my plan to prepare him for the Blood I must know.

Would it take a night, or a hundred nights? Whatever the time, it would not be endless.

Amadeo was destined for me.

I turned and wrote in my diary. Never had such a design occurred to me before, to educate a novice for the Blood! I described all the events of the night so that I might never lose them to overwrought memory. I drew sketches of Amadeo's face as he slept.

How can I describe him? His beauty did not depend on his facial expression. It was stamped already on the face. It was all wrought up with his fine bones, serene mouth, and his auburn curls.

I wrote passionately in my diary.

> This child has come from a world so different from our own that he can make no sense of what has happened to him. But I know the snowy lands of Russia. I know the dark dreary life of Russian and Greek monasteries, and it was in one of these, I am quite convinced, that he painted the ikons which he cannot speak of now.
>
> As for our tongue, he's had no experience with it except in cruelty. Perhaps when the boys make him one of them, he will remember his past. He will want to take up the paintbrush. His talent will come forth again.

I put the quill aside. I could not confide everything to my diary. No, not everything by any means. Great secrets I sometimes wrote in Greek rather than Latin, but even in Greek I could not say all that I thought.

I looked at the boy. I took up the candelabrum and I approached the bed and I looked down at him as he slept there, easy at last, breathing as though he were safe.

Slowly his eyes opened. He looked up at me. There was no fear in him. Indeed, it seemed that he still dreamed.

I gave myself over to the Mind Gift.

Tell me, child, tell me from your heart.

I saw the riders of the Steppes come down upon him and a band of his people. I saw a bundle drop from the boy's anxious hands. The cloth wrapping fell away from it. It was an ikon, and the boy cried out fearfully, but the evil barbarians wanted only the boy. They were the same inevitable barbarians who had never ceased to raid along the Roman Empire's long-forgotten Northern and Eastern frontiers. Would the world never see an end to their kind?

By those evil men, this child had been brought to some Eastern marketplace. Was it Istanbul? And from there to Venice where he fell into the hands of a brothel keeper who had bought him for high payment on account of face and form.

The cruelty of this, the mystery of it, had been overwhelming. In the hands of another, this boy might never be healed.

Yet in his mute expression now I saw pure trust.

"Master," he said softly in the Russian tongue.

I felt the tiny hairs rise all over my body. I wanted so to touch him once more with my cold fingers but I did not dare. I knelt beside the bed and leant over and I kissed his cheek warmly.

"Amadeo," I said to him so that he might know his new name.

And then using the very Russian tongue he knew, but did not know, I told him that he was mine now, that I was his Master just as he had said. I gave him to know that all things were resolved in me. He must never worry, he would never fear again.

It was almost morning. I had to leave.

Vincenzo came knocking. The eldest among the apprentices were waiting outside. They had heard that a new boy had been brought into the house.

I admitted them to the bedroom. I told them they must take care of Amadeo. They must acquaint him with all our common wonders. They must let him rest for a while, surely, but they could take him out into the city. Perhaps it was the perfect thing to do.

"Riccardo," I charged the eldest. "Take this one under your wing."

What a lie it was! I stood thinking of it. It was a lie to give him over to the daylight, to companionship other than my own.

But the rising sun gave me no more time in the palazzo. What else could I do?

I went to my grave.

I lay down in darkness dreaming of him.

I had found an escape from the love of Botticelli. I had found an escape from the obsession with Bianca and her tantalizing guilt. I had found one whom death and cruelty had already marked. The Blood would be the ransom. Yes, all things were resolved in me.

Oh, but who was he? What was he? I knew the memories, the images, the horrors, the prayers, but not the voice! And something tormented me savagely, even in my avowed certainty. Did I not love this child too much to do what I planned to do?

The following night a splendid surprise awaited me.

There was my Amadeo at supper gorgeously turned out in blue velvet, as splendidly clothed as the other boys!

They had hastened to complete the tailoring of his clothes to make me happy and indeed I was, almost to the point of being stunned.

As he knelt to kiss my ring, I was speechless, and with both my hands I bid him rise, and I embraced him, kissing him quickly on both cheeks.

He was still weak from his ordeals, I could see it, but the other boys as well as Vincenzo had gone a long way to put some color into his face.

As we sat down to supper, Riccardo explained that Amadeo could paint nothing. Indeed, Amadeo was afraid of the brushes and the pots of paint. And that he knew no language but he was picking up with amazing quickness our own tongue.

The beautiful boy with the auburn hair who was Amadeo gazed at me calmly as Riccardo spoke. And once again he said in the soft Russian tongue: Master, which the other boys did not hear.

You are for me. That was my answer for him. The soft words in Russian that I gave to him through the Mind Gift. *Remember. Who were you before you came here? Before they hurt you? Go back. Go back to the ikon. Go back to the Face of Christ if need be.*

A look of fear passed over him. Riccardo, not dreaming of the reason why, quickly took his hand. Riccardo began to name the simple objects of the supper table for him. And Amadeo as if waking from a nightmare smiled at Riccardo and repeated the words.

How sharp and fine his voice. How sure the pronunciation. How quick the look of his brown eyes.

"Teach him everything," I said to Riccardo and to the teachers assembled. "See to it that he studies dancing, fencing, and most of all painting. Show him every picture in the house, and every sculpture. Take him everywhere. See that he learns all there is to know about Venice."

Then I retired to the painting room alone.

Quickly I mixed up the tempera, and I painted a small portrait of Amadeo as I'd seen him at supper, in his fine tunic of blue velvet with his hair shining and combed.

I was weak from the heat of my own miserable thoughts. The fact was, my conviction had left me.

How could I take from this boy the cup he'd barely tasted? He was a dead creature brought back to life. I had robbed myself of my own Child of the Blood by my own splendid designs.

From that moment afterwards for months to come, Amadeo belonged to daylight. Yes, he must have every chance in the daylight to make of himself whatever he would!

Yet in his mind, unbeknownst to the others in any material way, Amadeo perceived himself, at my behest, as secretly and completely belonging to me.

It was for me a great and terrible contradiction.

I relinquished my claim upon the child. I couldn't condemn him to the Dark Blood, no matter how great my loneliness or how great his former misery had been. He must have his chance now among the apprentices and scholars of my household, and should he prove to be a princeling as I fully expected from his immediate brightness, he should have his chance to move on to the University of Padua or the University of Bologna where my students were now going one after the other as my myriad plans came to fruition beneath my all-encompassing roof.

Yet in the late evenings, when the lessons had ceased and the little boys had been put to bed, and the older boys were finishing tasks in my studio, I couldn't stop myself from taking Amadeo into my bedroom study, and there I visited on him my carnal kisses, my sweet and bloodless kisses, my kisses of need, and he gave himself to me without reserve.

My beauty charmed him. Is it pride to say so? I had no doubt of it. I need not work the Mind Gift to render him spellbound. He adored me. And though my paintings terrified him, something in his deep soul allowed him to worship my seeming talent—the deftness of my composition, my vibrant colors, my graceful speed.

Of course he never spoke of this to the others. And they, the boys, who surely must have known that we spent hours together in the bedroom, never dared think of what happened between us. As for Vincenzo, he knew better than to acknowledge this strange relationship in any respect.

Meanwhile, Amadeo recovered nothing of his memory. He could not paint, he could not touch the brushes. It was as if the colors, when raw, burnt his eyes.

But his wit was as sharp as any among the other boys. He learnt Greek and Latin quickly, he was a wonder at dancing, he loved his lessons with the rapier. He absorbed readily the lectures of the brighter teachers. He was soon writing Latin in a clear and steady hand.

In the evening he read aloud his verses to me. He sang to me, softly accompanying himself on the lute.

I sat at my desk, leaning upon my elbow, listening to his low and measured voice.

His hair was always beautifully combed, his clothes elegant and immaculate, his fingers, like mine, covered in rings.

Didn't everyone know he was the boy I kept? My minion, my lover, my secret treasure? Even in old Rome, amid a wilderness of vices, there would have been whispers, low laughter, some bit of mockery.

Here in Venice for Marius de Romanus, there was none. But Amadeo had his suspicions, not as to kisses that were fast becoming all too chaste for him, but as to the man of seeming marble, who never supped at his own table, nor took a drop of wine from a goblet, or ever appeared beneath his own roof during the light of day.

Along with these suspicions, I saw in Amadeo a growing confusion as memories tried to make themselves known to him and he would deny them, sometimes waking beside me as we dozed

together, and tormenting me with kisses when I would rather dream.

One evening, in the early and beautiful months of winter when I came in to greet my eager students, Riccardo told me that he had taken Amadeo with him to visit the lovely and gracious Bianca Solderini, and she had made them welcome, delighted by Amadeo's poetry and the manner in which he could pen tributes for her on the very spot.

I looked into the eyes of my Amadeo. He had been enchanted by her. How well I understood it. And how strange a mood descended upon me as the boys talked of her pleasant company and the fascinating English gentlemen now visiting her house.

Bianca had sent a small note to me.

"Marius, I miss you. Do come soon and bring your boys with you. Amadeo is as clever as Riccardo. I have your portraits everywhere. All are curious about the man who painted them, but I say nothing, for in truth I know nothing. Lovingly, Bianca."

When I looked up from the note, I saw Amadeo watching me, probing me as it were with his silent eyes.

"Do you know her, Master?" he asked me soberly, surprising Riccardo, who said nothing.

"You know I do, Amadeo. She told you I had come to visit her. You saw my portraits on her walls."

I sensed a sudden and violent jealousy in him. But nothing changed in his face. *Don't go to her.* That's what his soul said to me. And I knew he wished that Riccardo would leave now and we could have the shadowy bed, with its concealing velvet curtains, to ourselves.

There was something stubborn in him, something directed entirely towards our love. And how it tempted me, how it drew from me the most complete devotion.

"But I want you to remember," I said to him suddenly in his Russian tongue.

It was a shock to him but he didn't understand it.

"Amadeo," I said in the Venetian dialect, "think back to the time before you came here. Think back, Amadeo. What was your world then?"

A flush came to his cheeks. He was miserable. It was as if I'd beaten him.

Riccardo reached out for him with a consoling hand. "Master," he said, "it's too hard for him."

Amadeo seemed paralyzed. I rose from my chair at the desk and I put my arm around him where he sat and I kissed the top of his head.

"Come, forget everything. We'll go to see Bianca. This is the time of night which she likes the best."

Riccardo was amazed to be permitted out at this hour. As for Amadeo he was still dazed.

We found Bianca thickly surrounded by her chattering guests. There were Florentines among them, and Englishmen as I'd been told.

Bianca brightened as she saw me. She took me away from the others, towards her bedchamber where the elaborate swan bed was exquisitely adorned as if it were something on a stage.

“You’ve come at last,” she said. “I’m so glad to see you. You don’t know how I’ve missed you.” How warm were her words. “You are the only painter who exists in my world, Marius.” She wanted to kiss me but I couldn’t risk it. I bent to press my lips to her cheek quickly and then I held her back.

Ah, such radiant sweetness. Gazing into her oval eyes, I stepped into the paintings of Botticelli. I held in my hands, for reasons I could never know, the dark perfumed tresses of Zenobia, gathered up in memory from the floor of a house on the other side of the world.

“Bianca, my darling,” I said to her. “I’m ready to open my house if you will receive for me.” What a shock it was to hear these words come from my own lips. I had not known what I meant to say. Yet on I pressed with my dream. “I have neither wife nor daughter. Come, open my house to the world.”

The look of triumph in her face confirmed it. I would do it.

“I shall tell everyone,” she said immediately. “Yes, I’ll receive for you, I shall do it proudly, I shall do it gladly, but surely you’ll be there yourself.”

“May we open the doors in the evening?” I asked her. “It’s my custom to come in the evening. The light of candles suits me better than the light of day. You set the night for it, Bianca, and I shall have my servants make everything ready. The paintings are everywhere now. You do understand I offer nothing to anyone. I paint for my pleasure. And for my guests I’ll have food and drink as you say.”

How happy she looked. Off to one side I saw Amadeo gazing at her, loving her somewhat and loving the sight of us together though it gave him pain.

Riccardo was being drawn into conversation by men who were older than he and flattered him and loved his handsome face.

“Tell me what to lay out on my tables,” I said to Bianca. “Tell me what wines to serve. My servants shall be your servants. I shall do everything as you say.”

“It’s too lovely,” she answered. “All of Venice will be there, I promise you, you’ll discover the most wonderful company. People are so curious about you. Oh, how they whisper. You can’t imagine what a supreme delight this will be.”

It came about as she described.

Within the month I opened the palazzo to the whole city. But how different it was from those drunken nights in old Rome when people laid about on my couches and vomited in my gardens and I painted madly away on the walls.

Oh, yes, when I arrived, how proper were my finely clad Venetian guests. Of course I was asked a thousand questions. I let my eyes mist over. I heard the mortal voices around me as if they were kisses. I thought: You are among them; it is truly as if you were one of them. It is truly as if you are alive.

What did it matter their little criticisms of the paintings? I would strive to make my work the

finest, yes, truly, but what counted was the vitality, the momentum!

And here amid my best work stood my lovely fair-haired Bianca, free for the moment from those who put her up to her wrongdoings, recognized by all as the Mistress of my house.

Amadeo watched this with silent grudging eyes. The memories inside him tormented him like a cancer, yet he could not see them and know them for what they were.

Not a month after, at sunset, I found him sick in the grand church on the nearby island of Torcello to which he had wandered, apparently on his own. I picked him up from the cold damp floor and took him home.

Of course I understood the reason. There he had found ikons of the very style he had once painted. There he had found old mosaics from centuries past, similar to those he had seen in Russian churches as a child. He had not remembered. He had merely come upon some old truth in his wanderings—the brittle, stark Byzantine paintings—and now the heat of the place had left him with a fever, and I could taste it on his lips and see it in his eyes.

He was no better at sunrise when, half mad, I left him in the care of Vincenzo, only to rise again at sunset and hurry back to the side of his bed.

It was his mind that stoked the fever. Bundling him like a child I took him into a Venetian church to see the wondrous paintings of robust and natural figures that had been done in these last few years.

But I could see now it was hopeless. His mind would never be opened, never truly changed. I brought him home, and laid him down on the pillows once more.

I sought to better understand what I could.

His had been a punitive world of austere devotion. Painting for him had been joyless. And indeed all of life itself in far-away Russia had been so rigorous that he could not give himself over to the pleasure that awaited him now at every turn.

Beset by the memories, yet not understanding them, he was moving slowly towards death.

I would not have it. I paced the floor, I turned to those who attended him. I walked about, whispering to myself in my anger. I would not have it. I would not let him die.

Sternly, I banished others from the bedchamber.

I bent over him, and biting into my tongue I filled my mouth with blood and then I loosed a thin stream of it into his mouth.

He quickened, and licked his lips after it, and then he breathed more easily and the flush came to his cheeks. I felt of his forehead. It was cooler. He opened his eyes and he looked at me, and he said as he did so often, “Master,” and then gently, without memories, without terrible dreams, he slept.

It was enough. I left the bed. I wrote in my thick diary, the quill scratching as I quickly inscribed the words:

“He is irresistible, but what am I to do? I claimed him once, declaring him my very own, and

now I treat his misery with the blood I wish that I could give him. Yet in treating his misery, I hope to cure him not for me but for the wide world."

I closed the book, in disgust with myself for the blood I'd given him. But it had healed him. I knew it. And were he ill, I would give him blood again.

Time was moving too swiftly.

Things were happening too fast. My earlier judgments were shaken, and the beauty of Amadeo increased with every passing night.

The teachers took the boys to Florence that they might see the paintings there. And all came home more truly inspired to study than before.

Yes, they had seen the work of Botticelli, and how splendid it was. Was the Master painting? Indeed, so, but his work had become almost entirely religious. It was due to the preaching of Savonarola, a stringent monk who condemned the Florentines for their worldliness. Savonarola had great power over the people of Florence. Botticelli believed in him, and was thought to be one of his followers.

This saddened me greatly. Indeed it damn near maddened me. But then I knew that whatever Botticelli painted it would be magnificent. And in Amadeo's progress I was comforted, or rather pleasantly confused as before.

Amadeo was now the most brilliant of all my little academy. New teachers were required for him in philosophy and law. He was outgrowing his clothes at a marvelous rate, he had become quick and charming in conversation, and he was the beloved of all the younger boys.

Night after night we visited Bianca. I became accustomed to the company of refined strangers, the eternal stream of northern Europeans who came to Italy to discover its ancient and mysterious charms.

Only occasionally did I see Bianca hand the poisoned cup to one of her ill-fated guests. Only occasionally did I feel the beat of her dark heart, and see the shadow of desperate guilt in the very depth of her eyes. How she watched the unfortunate victim; how she saw him out of her company at last with a subtle smile.

As for Amadeo, our private sessions within my bedchamber became ever more intimate. And more than once, as we embraced, I gave the Blood Kiss to him, watching his body shiver, and seeing the power of it in his half-lidded eyes.

What was this madness? Was he for the world or for me?

How I lied to myself about it. I told myself the boy might still prove himself and thereby earn his freedom to leave me, safe and rich, for accomplishments beyond my house.

But I had given him so much of the Secret Blood that he pushed me with questions. What manner of creature was I? Why did I never come by day? Why did I take no food or drink?

He wrapped his warm arms around the mystery. He buried his face in the monster's neck.

I sent him off to the best brothels to learn the pleasures of women, and the pleasures of boys.

He hated me for it, and yet he enjoyed it, and he came home to me eager for the Blood Kiss and nothing else.

He taunted me when I painted alone, except for him, in my studio, working furiously, creating some landscape or gathering of ancient heroes. He slept beside me when I collapsed in my bed to sleep the last few hours before dawn.

Meantime, we opened the palazzo again and yet again. Bianca, ever the clever and poised one, had outgrown her early beauty, and preserving her delicate face and manner, had now the polish of a woman rather than the promise of a girl.

Often I found myself staring at her, wondering what would have happened if I had not turned my attention to him. Why after all had I done it? Could I not have wooed her and persuaded her; and then, thinking these thoughts, I realized, foolishly, that I might still choose to do so, and cast him off, with wealth and position, to mortality with all the rest of my boys.

No, she was saved.

Amadeo was the one I wanted. Amadeo was the one I was educating, training. Amadeo was the precious student of the Blood.

The nights passed swiftly, as if in a dream.

Several boys went off to university. One of the teachers died. Vincenzo took to walking with a limp, but I hired an assistant to fetch for him. Bianca rearranged several of the large paintings. The air was warm and the windows were open. On the roof garden we gathered for a great banquet. The boys sang.

Never once in all this time did I fail to apply the salve to my skin to darken it and make me appear human. Never once did I fail to work it into the flesh of both my hands. Never once did I fail to dress with fine jewels, and wear rings that would distract everyone. Never once did I move too close to a grouping of candles, or a torch at a doorway or on the quais.

I went to the shrine of Those Who Must Be Kept and remained there in meditation. I laid the case before Akasha.

I wanted this child—this boy who was now two years older than when I'd found him—and yet I wanted everything else for him, and my soul was torn, just as his heart was torn.

Never before had I wanted such a thing, to make a blood drinker for my own companionship, indeed to educate a mortal youth for this very purpose, and to groom him expertly that he might be the finest choice.

But I wanted it now and it filled my thoughts during every waking hour, and I found no consolation looking at my cold Mother and Father. I heard no answer to my prayer.

I lay down to sleep in the shrine and knew only dark and troubled dreams.

I saw the garden, the very one I had painted on the walls eternally, and I was walking in it as always, and there was fruit on the low-hanging trees. There came Amadeo walking near me, and suddenly there came from his mouth a chilling cruel laughter.

“A sacrifice?” he asked, “for Bianca? How can such a thing be?”

I woke with a start, and sat up, rubbing the backs of my arms, and shaking my head, trying to free myself from the dream.

“I don’t know the answer,” I whispered, as though he were there near me, as though his spirit had traveled to the place where I sat.

“Except she was already a young woman when I came upon her,” I responded, “educated and forced into life, indeed a murderess; yes, indeed, a murderess, a child woman guilty of dreadful crimes. And you, you were a helpless child. I could mold you and change you, all of which I’ve done.

“It’s true, I thought you were a painter,” I continued, “that you had the gift for painting, and I know that it’s still in you, and that did sway me, too. But when all is said and done, I don’t know why you distracted me, only that it was done.”

I lay back down to sleep once more, lying on my side rather carelessly, staring up at the glimmering eye of Akasha. At the harsh lines of the face of Enkil.

I thought back over the centuries to Eudoxia. I remembered her terrible death. I remembered her burning body as it lay upon the floor of the shrine in the very place where I lay now.

I thought of Pandora. Where is my Pandora? And then finally I drifted into sleep.

When I returned to the palazzo, coming down from the roof as was always my custom, things were not as I would have them, for all the company was solemn at supper, and Vincenzo told me anxiously that a “strange man” had come to visit me, and that he stood in the anteroom and would not come in.

The boys had been finishing one of my murals in the anteroom, and they had hastily left this “strange man” to himself. Only Amadeo had remained behind, doing some small work with little enthusiasm, his eyes upon this “strange man” in a manner which gave Vincenzo concern.

As if that were not enough, Bianca had been to visit, indeed to give me a gift from Florence, a small painting by Botticelli; and she had had “uneasy” conversation with this “strange man” and had told Vincenzo to keep watch on him. Bianca was gone. The “strange man” remained.

I went into the anteroom immediately, but I had felt the presence of this creature before I saw who it was.

It was Mael.

Not for a single second did I not know him. He was unchanged just as I am unchanged, and he had not paid much attention to the fashion of these times, any more than he had paid attention to the fashion of times in the past.

He looked dreadful in fact in a ragged leather jerkin and leggings with holes in them and his boots were tied with rope.

His hair was dirty and tangled but his face wore an amazingly pleasant expression, and when he saw me he came at once to me and embraced me.

"You're really here," he said in a low voice, as though we had to whisper under my roof. He spoke the old Latin. "I heard of it but I didn't believe it. Oh, I'm so glad to see you. I'm glad you're still …"

"Yes, I know what you mean to say," I said. "I'm still the watcher of the years passing; I'm still the witness surviving in the Blood."

"Oh, you put it far better than I could," he answered. "But let me say it again, I'm so happy to see you, happy to hear your voice."

I saw that there was dust all over him. He was looking about the room, at its fancy painted ceiling with its ring of cherubs and its gold leaf. He stared at the unfinished mural. I wondered if he knew it was my work.

"Mael, always the astonished one," I said, moving him gently out of the light of the candles. I laughed softly. "You look like a tramp."

"Would you offer me clothes again?" he asked. "I cannot really, you know, master such things. I am in need, I suppose. And you live so splendidly here as you always did. Is nothing ever a mystery to you, Marius?"

"Everything is a mystery, Mael," I responded. "But fine clothes I always have. If the world comes to an end, I shall be well dressed for it, whether it is by the light of day or in the dark of night."

I took his arm and guided him through the various immense rooms that lay between me and my bedchamber. He was suitably awed by the paintings everywhere and let me lead him along.

"I want you to stay here, away from my mortal company," I said. "You'll only confuse them."

"Ah, but you've worked it all so well," he said. "It was easier for you in old Rome, wasn't it? But what a palace you have here. There are kings who would envy you, Marius."

"Yes, it seems so," I answered offhandedly.

I went to the adjacent closets, which were small rooms actually, and pulled out clothes for him, and leather shoes. He seemed quite incapable of dressing himself but I refused to do it for him, and after I had put out everything, on the velvet bed in the correct order, as if for a child or an idiot, he began to examine various articles as if he might manage alone.

"Who told you I was here, Mael?" I asked him.

He glanced at me, and his face was cold for a moment, the old hawk nose as disagreeable as ever, the deep-set eyes rather more brilliant than I'd remembered and the mouth far better shaped than I'd recalled. Maybe time had softened the set of his lips. I'm not certain that such things can happen. But he did seem an interesting-looking immortal male.

"You told me you had heard that I was here," I said, prompting him. "Who told you?"

"Oh, it was a fool of a blood drinker," he said with a shudder. "A maniacal Satan worshiper. His name was Santino. Will they never die out? It was in Rome. He urged me to join him, can you imagine?"

"Why didn't you destroy him?" I asked dejectedly. How grim was all this, how distant from the boys at their supper, from the teachers speaking of the day's lessons, from the light and music to which I longed to return. "In the old times when you encountered them, you always destroyed them. What stopped you now?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "What do I care what happens in Rome? I didn't stay one night in Rome."

I shook my head. "How did this creature discover I was in Venice? I've never heard a whisper of our kind here."

"I'm here," he answered sharply, "and you didn't hear me, did you? You're not infallible, Marius. You have about you many worldly distractions. Perhaps you don't listen as you should."

"Yes, you're right, but I wonder. How did he know?"

"Mortals come to your house. Mortals speak of you. Possibly those mortals go on to Rome. Don't all roads lead to Rome?" He was mocking me naturally. But he was being rather gentle, almost friendly. "He wants your secret, Marius, that Roman blood drinker. How he begged me to explain the mystery of Those Who Must Be Kept."

"And you didn't reveal it, did you, Mael?" I demanded. I began to hate him again, hotly, as I had in nights past.

"No, I didn't reveal it," he said calmly, "but I did laugh at him, and I didn't deny it. Perhaps I should have, but the older I get the harder it is to lie on any account."

"That I understand rather well," I said.

"Do you? With all these beautiful mortal children around you? You must lie with every breath you take, Marius. And as for your paintings, how dare you display your works amongst mortals who have but brief lifetimes with which to challenge you? It seems a terrible lie, that, if you ask me."

I sighed.

He tore open the front of his jerkin and then took it off.

"Why do I accept your hospitality?" he asked. "I don't know the answer. Perhaps I feel that having helped yourself to so many mortal delights, you owe some help to another blood drinker who is lost in time as always, wandering from country to country, marveling sometimes and at others merely getting dust in his eyes."

"Tell yourself anything you like," I said. "You are welcome to the clothes and to shelter. But tell me at once. What's happened to Avicus and Zenobia? Do they travel with you? Do you know where they are?"

"I have no idea where they are," he said, "and surely you sensed it before you asked. It has been so long since I saw either of them that I cannot reckon the years or the centuries. It was Avicus who put her up to it, and off they went together. They left me in Constantinople, and I can't say that it came to me as a dreadful surprise. There had been terrible coldness between us

before the parting. Avicus loved her. She loved him more than me. That was all that was required."

"I'm sad to hear it."

"Why?" he asked. "You left the three of us. And you left her with us, that was the worst of it. We were two for so long, and then you forced Zenobia into our company."

"For the love of Hell, stop blaming me for everything," I said under my breath. "Will you never cease with your accusations? Am I the author of every evil that ever befell you, Mael? What must I do to be absolved so that there might be silence? It was you, Mael, you," I whispered, "who took me from my mortal life by force and brought me, shackled and helpless, into your accursed Druid grove!"

The anger spilled from me as I struggled to keep my voice down.

He seemed quite amazed by it.

"And so you do despise me, Marius," he said, smiling. "I had thought you far too clever for such a simple feeling. Yes, I took you prisoner, and you took the secrets, and I've been cursed one way or the other, ever since."

I had to step back from this. I did not want it. I stood calmly until the anger left me. Let the truth be damned.

For some reason this brought out the kindness in him. As he removed his rags, and kicked them away, he spoke of Avicus and Zenobia.

"The two of them were always slipping into the Emperor's palace where they would hunt the shadows," he said. "Zenobia seldom dressed as a boy as you taught her. She was too fond of sumptuous clothes. You should have seen the gowns she wore. And her hair, I think I loved it more than she did."

"I don't know if that's possible," I said softly. I saw the vision of her in his mind, and confused it with the vision of her in my own.

"Avicus continued to be the student," he said with slight contempt. "He mastered Greek. He read everything he could find. You were always his inspiration. He imitated you. He bought books without knowing what they were. On and on, he read."

"Maybe he did know," I suggested. "Who can say?"

"I can say," Mael answered. "I've known you both, and he was an idiot gathering poetry and history for nothing. He wasn't even looking for something. He embraced words and phrases on account of how they felt."

"And where and how did you spend your hours, Mael?" I asked, my voice far more cold than I had hoped.

"I hunted the dark hills beyond the city," he responded. "I hunted the soldiery. I hunted for the brutal Evil Doer, as you know. I was the vagabond, and they were dressed as though they were part of the Imperial Court."

"Did they ever make another?" I asked.

"No!" he said, scoffing. "Who would do such a thing?"

I didn't answer.

"And you, did you ever make another?" I asked.

"No," he responded. He frowned. "How would I find someone strong enough?" he asked. He seemed puzzled. "How would I know that a human had the endurance for the Blood?"

"And so you move through the world alone."

"I'll find another blood drinker to be a companion," he said. "Didn't I find that cursed Santino in Rome? Maybe I'll lure one from among the Satan worshipers. They can't all like a miserable life in the catacombs, wearing black robes and singing Latin hymns."

I nodded. I could see now that he was ready for the bath. I didn't want to keep him any longer.

When I spoke it was in a genial manner.

"The house is enormous as you see," I said. "There is a locked room on the first floor to the far right side. It has no windows. You may sleep there by day if you like."

He gave a low contemptuous laugh. "The clothes are quite enough, my friend, and perhaps just a few hours during which I might rest."

"I don't mind. Stay here, out of sight of the others. See the bath there. Use it. I'll come for you when all the boys are asleep."

When next I saw him it was all too soon.

He came out of the bedroom and into the large salon in which I stood relinquishing my hold on Riccardo and Amadeo with the strong admonition that they could go to Bianca's for the evening and nowhere else.

Amadeo saw him. Again, for several fatal moments, Amadeo saw him. And I knew that something deep inside Amadeo recognized Mael for the creature that he was. But like so many things in the mind of Amadeo, it wasn't conscious, and the boys left me with quick kisses, off to sing their songs to Bianca, and be flattered by everyone there.

I was impatient with Mael that he had come out of the bedchamber, but I didn't say it.

"So you would make a blood drinker of that one," he said, pointing to the door through which the boys had left us. He smiled.

I was in a silent fury. I glared at him, as always in such situations, quite unable to speak.

He stood there smiling at me in sinister fashion and then he said,

"Marius of the many names and the many houses and the many lifetimes. So you have chosen a lovely child."

I shook it off. How had he read from my mind my desire for Amadeo?

"You've grown careless," he said softly. "Listen to me, Marius. I don't speak to insult you. You walk with a heavy step among mortals. And that boy is very young."

"Don't speak another word to me," I answered, pulling hard on my anger to rein it in.

"Forgive me," he said. "I only spoke my mind."

"I know you did, but I don't want to hear any more."

I looked him over. He was rather handsome in his new attire, though a few little details were absurdly crooked and not tucked properly, but I was not the one to make them right. He struck me as not only barbaric, but comical. But I knew that anyone else would think him an impressive man.

I hated him, but not completely. And as I stood there with him, I almost gave way to tears. Quite suddenly, to stem this emotion, I spoke.

"What have you learnt in all this time?" I asked.

"That's an arrogant question!" he said in a low voice. "What have you learnt?"

I told him my theories, about how the West had risen again, once more drawing upon the old classics which Rome had taken from Greece. I spoke of how the art of the old Empire was re-created now throughout Italy and I spoke of the fine cities of the North of Europe, prosperous as those of the South. And then I explained how it seemed to me that the Eastern Empire had fallen to Islam and was no more. The Greek world had been irrevocably lost.

"We have the West again, don't you see?" I asked.

He looked at me as though I were perfectly mad.

"Well?" I responded.

There came a slight change in his face.

"Witness in the Blood," he said, repeating the words I'd spoken earlier, "watcher of the years."

He put his arms forward as though to embrace me. His eyes were clear and I could sense no malice at all.

"You've given me courage," he said.

"For what, may I ask?" I responded.

"To continue my wandering," he said. He let his arms slowly drop.

I nodded. What more was there for us to say?

"You have all you need?" I asked. "I have plenty of Venetian or Florentine coin. You know that wealth is nothing to me. I'm happy to share what I have."

"It's nothing to me either," he said. "I shall get what I need from my next victim, and his blood and wealth will carry me to one after that."

"So be it," I said, which meant that I wanted him to leave me. But even as he realized it, as he turned to go, I reached out and took him by the arm. "Forgive me that I was cold to you," I said. "We've been companions in time."

It was a strong embrace.

And I walked with him down to the front entrance where the torches shone too brightly on us for my taste, and saw him virtually disappear into the dark.

In a matter of seconds, I could hear no more of him. I gave silent thanks.

I reflected. How I hated Mael. How I feared him. Yet I had loved him once, loved him when we'd been mortals even, and I'd been his prisoner and he had been the Druid priest teaching me the hymns of the Faithful of the Forest, for what purpose, I didn't know.

And I had loved him on that long voyage to Constantinople, surely, and in that city when I'd given over Zenobia to him and Avicus, wishing them all well.

But I did not want him near me now! I wanted my house, my children, Amadeo, Bianca. I wanted my Venice. I wanted my mortal world.

How I would not risk my mortal home even for a few hours longer with him. How I wanted so to keep my secrets from him.

But here I was standing in the torchlight, distracted, and something was amiss.

Vincenzo wasn't very far away, and I turned and called to him.

"I'm going away for a few nights," I told him. "You know what to do. I'll be back soon enough."

"Yes, Master," he said.

And I was able to assure myself that he'd sensed nothing strange in Mael whatsoever. He was as always ready to do my will.

But then he pointed his finger.

"There, Master, Amadeo, he's waiting to talk to you."

I was astonished.

On the far side of the canal, Amadeo stood in a gondola, watching me, waiting, and surely he'd seen me with Mael. Why had I not heard him? Mael was right. I was careless. I was all too softened by human emotions. I was too greedy for love.

Amadeo told his oarsman to bring him alongside the house.

"And why didn't you go with Riccardo?" I demanded. "I expected to find you at Bianca's. You must do as I say."

Quite suddenly Vincenzo was gone, and Amadeo had stepped up onto the quais, and he had his arms around me, pressing my hard unyielding body with all his strength.

"Where are you going?" he demanded in a rushed whisper. "Why do you leave me again?"

"I must leave," I said, "but it's only for a few nights. You know that I must leave. I have solemn obligations elsewhere, and don't I always return?"

"Master, that one, the one who came, the one who just left you—."

"Don't ask me," I said sternly. How I had dreaded this. "I'll come back to you within a few nights."

"Take me with you," Amadeo begged.

The words struck me. I felt something within loosened.

"That I cannot do," I answered. And out of my mouth there came words I thought I'd never speak. "I go to Those Who Must Be Kept," I said as if I couldn't hold the secret within me. "To

see if they are at peace. I do as I have always done."

What a look of wonder came over his face.

"Those Who Must Be Kept," he whispered. He said it like a prayer.

I shivered.

I felt a great release. And it seemed that in the wake of Mael I had drawn Amadeo closer to me. I had taken another fatal step.

The torchlight tormented me.

"Come inside," I said. And into the shadowy entranceway we stepped together. Vincenzo, never very far off, took his leave.

I bent to kiss Amadeo, and the heat of his body inflamed me.

"Master, give me the Blood," he whispered in my ear. "Master, tell me what you are."

"What I am, child? Sometimes I think I know not. And sometimes I think I know only too well. Study in my absence. Waste nothing. And I'll be back to you before you know the hour. And then we'll speak of Blood Kisses and secrets and meantime tell no one that you belong to me."

"Have I ever told anyone, Master?" he responded. He kissed my cheek. He placed his warm hand on my cheek as if he would know how inhuman I was.

I closed my lips over his. I let a small stream of blood pour into him. I felt him shudder.

I drew back from him. He was limp in my arms.

I called for Vincenzo and I gave Amadeo over to him, and off I went into the night.

I left the splendid city of Venice with her glistering palaces, and I withdrew to the chilly mountain sanctuary, and I knew that the fate of Amadeo was sealed.

20

How long I was with Those Who Must Be Kept, I don't know. A week, perhaps more.

I came into the shrine, confessing my astonishment that I had confided the mere phrase "Those Who Must Be Kept" to a mortal boy. I confided again that I wanted him, I wanted him to share my loneliness. I wanted him to share all that I could teach and give.

Oh, the pain of it! All that I could teach and give!

What was this to the Immortal Parents? Nothing. And as I trimmed the wicks of the lamps, as I filled them with oil, as I let the light grow bright around the eternally silent Egyptian figures, I knew the same penance I had always known.

Twice with a gust of the Fire Gift, I lighted the long bank of one hundred tall candles. Twice I let it burn down.

But as I prayed, as I dreamt, one clear conclusion did come to me. I wanted this mortal companion precisely because I had put myself into the mortal world.

Had I never stepped into Botticelli's workshop this mad loneliness would not have come over me. It was mixed up with my love of all the arts, but most particularly painting, and my desire to be close to those mortals who nourished themselves gracefully upon the creations of this period as I fed upon blood.

I also confessed that my education of Amadeo was almost complete.

On waking I listened with the powerful Mind Gift to the movements and thoughts of Amadeo who was no more than a few hundred miles away. He was obedient to my instructions. In the night hours he kept to his books, and did not go to Bianca. Indeed he kept to my bedchamber, for he no longer knew simple camaraderie with the other boys.

What could I give this child that would prompt him to leave me?

What could I give him to more purely train him to be the companion I wanted with all my soul?

Both questions tormented me.

At last a plan came to me—one last trial must be passed by him, and should he fail it, I would commit him with irresistible wealth and position to the mortal world. How that might be done, I did not know, but it did not strike me as a difficult thing.

I meant to reveal to him the manner in which I fed.

Of course this was a lie, this question of a trial; for once he had beheld me in the act of feeding, in the act of murder, how then could he pass unscathed into a productive mortality, no

matter how great his education, his refinements and his wealth?

No sooner had I put that question to myself than I remembered my exquisite Bianca, who remained quite steadily at the helm of her ship in spite of the poisonous cups she had passed.

All this, evil and cunning, made up the substance of my prayers. Was I asking permission of Akasha and Enkil to make this child a blood drinker? Was I asking permission to admit Amadeo to the secrets of this ancient and unchangeable shrine?

If I did ask, there came no answer.

Akasha gave me only her effortless serenity, and Enkil his majesty. The only sound came from my movements as I rose from my knees, as I laid my kisses at the feet of Akasha, as I withdrew and closed behind me the immense door, and bolted it shut.

There was wind and snow in the mountains on that evening. It was bitter and white and pure.

I was glad to be home in Venice within minutes, though my beloved city was also cold.

No sooner did I reach my bedchamber than Amadeo came into my arms.

I covered his head with kisses and then his warm mouth, taking the breath from him, and then with the smallest bite, giving him the Blood.

"Would you be what I am, Amadeo?" I asked. "Would you be changeless forever? Would you live a secret for eternity?"

"Yes, Master," he said with a feverish abandon. He laid both his warm hands on the sides of my face. "Give it to me, Master. Do you think I've not brooded upon it? I know that you fathom our minds. Master, I want it. Master, how is it done? Master, I'm yours."

"Find the heaviest cloak to protect you against the winter," I said, "And then come up to me on the roof."

It seemed scarcely a moment before he joined me. I looked out towards the sea. The wind was strong. I wondered if it hurt him and I did fathom his mind, and I measured his passion.

And looking into his brown eyes I knew that he had left the mortal world behind him more effortlessly perhaps than any other mortal I might have plucked from my garden, for those memories still festered within him, though he was disposed completely to believe in me.

I wrapped him in my arms and, covering his face, I carried him with me down into a wretched district of Venice, in which thieves and beggars slept where they could. The canals reeked of refuse and dead fish.

There I found a mortal victim within minutes, and to Amadeo's amazement caught the miserable fellow with preternatural speed as he sought to stab me, and brought him up to my lips.

I let Amadeo see the cunning teeth with which I pierced the throat of the wretch, and then my eyes closed and I became Marius, the blood drinker, Marius, the slayer of the Evil Doer, and the blood flowed into me, and it did not matter to me that Amadeo was witness, that Amadeo was there.

When it was finished, I dropped the body silently into the filthy water of the canal.

I turned, feeling the blood in my face and in my chest and then slowly moving into my hands. My vision was dim, and I knew that I was smiling—not a vicious smile, you understand, but something secretive and beyond anything the child had ever beheld.

When at last I looked at him, I saw only amazement.

"Have you no tears for the man, Amadeo?" I asked. "Have you no questions as to the disposition of his soul? Without Sacred Rites, he died. He died only for me."

"No, Master," he answered, and then a smile played on his lips as though it were a flame which had sprung from mine. "It's marvelous what I saw, Master. What do I care for his body or his soul?"

I was too angry to respond. There had been no lesson in it! He was too young, the night too dark, the man too wretched, and all that I had foreseen had come to nought.

Once again, I wrapped him in my cloak, covering his face so that he could see nothing as I traveled through the air silently, moving over the rooftops and then breaking deftly and silently through an upper window that had been shuttered against the night air.

Through the rear chambers of the house, I moved from this breach till we stood together in the shadowy and sumptuous bedroom of Bianca, and through the salons before us, I saw her turn from her guests. I saw her coming to us.

"Why are we here, Master?" asked Amadeo. He looked towards the front rooms fearfully.

"You would see it again to understand it," I said angrily. "You would see it among those whom we claim to love."

"But how, Master?" Amadeo demanded. "What are you saying? What do you mean to do?"

"I hunt the Evil Doer, child," I said to him. "And you shall see that there is evil here as rich as there was in that poorling whom I committed to the dark water, unconfessed and unmourned."

Bianca stood before us, asking us as gently as she could, How had we come to be in her private rooms? Her pale eyes looked at me searchingly.

Quickly I accused her.

"Tell him, my beloved beauty," I said, my voice muted so that the company should take no notice, "tell him what awful deeds lie behind your gentle composure. Tell him what poison guests have drunk beneath your roof."

How calm she was as she answered me.

"You anger me, Marius. You come improperly. You accuse me without authority. Leave me and come again in the gentle manner in which you have come so many times before."

Amadeo was trembling. "Please, Master, let us leave here. We have nothing but love for Bianca."

"Oh, but I would have more of her, rather than love of her," I said to him. "I would have her blood."

"No, Master," Amadeo whispered. "Master, I beg you."

"Yes, for it's evil blood," I said, "and it's all the more savory to me. I would drink the stuff of murderers. Tell him, Bianca, of wine laced with potions, and lives forfeit for those who have made you the instrument of their most wicked plans."

"Leave me now," she said again without the slightest fear of me. Her eyes blazed. "Marius de Romanus, you cannot judge me. Not you with your magician's powers, not you with your boys. I will say nothing except that you must leave my house."

I moved to take her in my arms. I did not know when I would stop but only that I would reveal the horror of it to him, that he must see it, he must see the suffering, he must see the pain.

"Master," he whispered, struggling to come between us, "I will give up my petitions to you forever, if only you do not harm her. Do you understand? Master, I will beg nothing further. Let her go."

I held her, looking down at her, smelling the sweetest perfume of her youth, her hair, her blood.

"Take her and I die with her, Master," said Amadeo.

It was enough. It was more than enough.

I moved away from her. I felt a strange confusion. The music in the rooms became a noise. I think I sat upon her bed. The blood thirst in me was terrible. I might have slain them all, I thought, looking toward the crowd beyond, and then I believe I said:

"We are murderers together, you and I, Bianca."

I saw that Amadeo was weeping. He stood with his back to the company. His face was glistening with tears.

And she, she the fragrant beauty with her braided blond hair came to sit beside me, so boldly, and to take my hand, my very hand.

"We are murderers together, my lord," she said, "yes, I can speak for myself as you demanded. But understand that I am given the commissions by those who would as easily send me to Hell in the same way. It is they who mix the potions for the fatal wine. It is they who mark those who would receive it. And I know not the reasons. I know only that if I do not obey, I shall die."

"Then tell me who they are, my exquisite darling," I said. "I am hungry for them. So hungry you can't dream."

"They are my kinsmen, sir," she said. "Such has been my heritage. Such has been my family. Such have been my guardians here."

She had begun to weep but she clung to me, as though my strength were the only truth for her suddenly and indeed I realized it was.

My threats of moments ago had only bound her to me all the more firmly, and Amadeo drew close, urging me to kill all those who kept her under their power, all those who made her wretched, whatever the ties of blood.

I held her as she bowed her head. From her mind, so often confusing to me, I read the names as though they were written in plain script.

I knew the men, all Florentines who had come often to call on her. Tonight they held a feast in a neighboring house. They were money-lenders, some might have called them bankers, but those they murdered were those from whom they had borrowed and did not wish to repay.

"You shall be rid of them, my beauty," I said to her. I touched her lightly with my lips.

She turned to me, and gave me countless and violent small kisses.

"And what shall I owe for this?" she asked, even as she kissed me, even as her hands reached to stroke my hair.

"Only that you say nothing of what you saw in me tonight."

She gazed at me with her tranquil oval eyes, and her mind closed up, as though she would never reveal to me her thoughts again.

"You have my pledge, my lord," she whispered. "And so my soul grows ever more heavy."

"No, I shall take the weight from it," I said, as we made to go.

How sad seemed her sudden tears. I kissed her, tasting them, wishing they were blood and forever forswearing the blood within her.

"Don't weep for those who have used you," I whispered. "Go back to the gaiety and the music. Leave the dark commissions to me."

We found the Florentines drunk at their banquet, paying us no heed as we entered without introduction or explanation and took our places at the overladen table. A noisy band of musicians played. The floor was slippery with spilt wine.

Amadeo was eager for it, filled with excitement, attentive to my slow and methodical seduction of each one of them, as I drank the blood lustily, and let the bodies tip forward upon the groaning board. The musicians fled.

Within an hour I had slain them all, these kinsmen of Bianca, and only for the very last of them, he who had talked the longest with me, quite unawares of what was happening all about him—only for him did Amadeo beg and weep. Was I to show this one mercy when his heart was as guilty as all the rest?

We sat alone in the ruined supper room, the dead bodies around us, the food cold upon its silver and gold plates and platters, the wine running from overturned goblets, and for the first time, as Amadeo cried and cried, I saw dread in his eyes.

I looked at my hands. I had drunk so much blood that they looked human and I knew that were I to look into a mirror, I would see a florid human face.

The heat in me was delicious and unendurable, and I wanted nothing more than to take Amadeo, bring him over to me now, and yet there he sat before me, the tears streaming down his face.

"They are all gone," I said, "those who tormented Bianca. You come with me. Let's leave this

gory scene. I would walk with you, before the sun rises, near the sea."

He followed me as a child might, the tears staining his face as they ran still from his eyes.

"Wipe your tears," I said firmly. "We're going out into the piazza. It's almost dawn."

He slipped his hand into mine as we went down the stone stairs.

I put my arm around him, sheltering him from the sharp wind.

"Master," he pleaded, "they were evil men, weren't they? You were certain of it. You knew it."

"All of them," I answered. "But sometimes men and women are both good and evil," I continued, "and who am I to choose for my vicious appetite, yet I do. Is Bianca not both good and evil?"

"Master," he asked, "if I drink the blood of those who are evil, will I become like you?"

We stood before the closed doors of San Marco. The wind came mercilessly off the sea. I drew my cloak about him all the more tightly, and he rested his head against my chest.

"No, child," I said, "there's infinitely more magic in it than that."

"You must give me your blood, isn't that so, Master?" he asked as he looked up at me, the tears clear and glistening in the cold air, his hair mussed.

I didn't answer.

"Master," he said, as I held him close to me, "long years ago, or so they seem to me, in some far-away place, where I lived before I came to you, I was what they called a Fool for God. I don't remember it clearly and never will as both of us well know.

"But a Fool for God was a man who gave himself over to God completely and did not care what happened, whether it was mockery, or starvation, or endless laughter, or dreadful cold. That much I remember, that I was a Fool for God in those times."

"But you painted pictures, Amadeo, you painted beautiful ikons—."

"But listen to me, Master," he said firmly, forcing me to silence, "whatever I did, I was a Fool for God, and now I would be a Fool for you." He paused, snuggling close to me as the wind grew stronger. The mists moved in over the stones. There came noises from the ships.

I started to speak but he reached to stop me. How obdurate and strong he seemed, how seductive, how completely mine.

"Master," he went on. "Do it when you will. You have my secrecy. You have my patience. Do it when and how you will."

I thought on what he'd said.

"Go home, Amadeo," I answered him. "You know the sun is coming, and I must leave you with the arrival of the sun."

He nodded, puzzling over it, as though for the very first time it mattered to him, though how he couldn't have thought of it before I didn't know.

"Go home, and study with the others, talk with them, and shepherd the little ones at their play. If you can do that—go from the bloody banquet room to the laughter of children—then

when I come tonight, I shall do it. I shall bring you over to myself."

I watched him walk away from me in the mist. He went towards the canal where he would find the gondola to take him back to our door.

"A Fool for God," I whispered aloud so that my mind might hear it, "yes, a Fool for God, and in some miserable monastery you painted the sacred pictures, convinced your life would mean nothing unless it was a life of sacrifice and pain. And now, in my magic you see some similar burning purity. And you turn away from all the riches of life in Venice for that burning purity; you turn away from all that a human may have."

But was it so? Did he know enough to make such a decision? Could he forsake the sun forever?

I had no answer. It was not his decision that mattered now. For I had made mine.

As for my radiant Bianca, her thoughts were forever after closed to me, as though she knew the knack of it like a wily witch. As for her devotion, her love, her friendship, that was something else.

21

Now, where I slept in the daylight hours in Venice, was in a beautiful granite sarcophagus in a hidden chamber just above the level of the water in an uninhabited palazzo which belonged to me.

The room itself was lined with gold, a quite marvelous little cell, replete with torches, and a stairway led up from this chamber to a door which only I could force back.

On coming out of the palazzo one had to walk down a flight of steps to the canal—that is, if one were walking at all, which I, of course, was not.

Some long months ago I had arranged for the creation of another sarcophagus of the same beauty and weight, so that two blood drinkers could have lain down together in this chamber, and it was from this gilded resting place that I arose the following night.

I knew at once that my true house was in an uproar. I could hear the distant wailing of the little boys, and the frantic prayers of Bianca. Some carnage had taken place beneath my roof.

Of course I thought it had to do with the Florentines I had slaughtered, and as I rushed to my palazzo, I cursed myself that I had not taken greater care with this spectacular deed.

But nothing could have been further from the truth.

No one had to tell me, as I rushed down the stairs from the roof, that a drunken violent English lord had come rampaging into my house in search of Amadeo for whom he harbored a forbidden passion, which had been somewhat fed by Amadeo′s dalliance on random nights when I had been away.

And with the same knowledge, I quickly imbibed the horror that Lord Harlech, this Englishman, had cruelly, wantonly slain children no older than seven before he met in combat Amadeo himself.

Of course Amadeo knew how to use both sword and dagger and had swiftly fought this evil man with both in hand. Indeed, he had slain Lord Harlech but not before Lord Harlech had slashed his face and arms with a poisoned blade.

I came into the bedchamber to find Amadeo in a fatal fever, his senses having left him, the priests in attendance, and Bianca bathing him with a cool cloth.

Everywhere there were candles. Amadeo lay in his clothes of last night with the sleeve cut away where Lord Harlech had wounded his arm.

Riccardo was weeping. The teachers were weeping. The priests had given Amadeo the Last Rites. There was nothing more to be done.

At once Bianca turned to greet me. Her lovely dress was stained with blood. She came to me, her face pale, her hands gripping my sleeves.

"For hours, he's struggled," she told me. "He's spoken of visions. He has crossed a great sea and seen a wondrous celestial city. He has seen that all things are made of love. All things! Do you understand?"

"I do," I said.

"He has seen a city of glass as he described it," she said, "made of love as are all growing things. He has seen priests from his homeland, and these priests have told him that it is not his time to reach the city. They have sent him back."

She appealed to me.

"They are right, are they not," she asked, "these priests he's seen? It is not his time to die."

I didn't answer her.

She went to his side again and I stood behind her. I watched as she bathed his forehead again.

"Amadeo," she said, her voice calm and strong, "breathe for me, breathe for your Master. Amadeo, breathe for me."

I could see that he tried to obey her command.

His eyes were closed and then opened, but they saw nothing. His skin was the color of old ivory. His hair was swept back from his face. How cruel was the cut in his face made by Lord Harlech's blade.

"Leave me with him now," I said gently to the entire company.

No one protested. I heard the doors close.

I bent down and, cutting my tongue as I had so often done, I let the blood drip on the evil cut on his face. I marveled silently as the flesh healed.

Once again his eyes opened. He saw me and then he spoke.

"It's Marius," he said softly. He had never once in all our time together called me by name. "Marius has come," he said. "Why didn't the priests tell me? They told me only that it wasn't my time to die."

I lifted his right hand. There too the blade of Lord Harlech had made a cut and now I kissed it with the healing blood and watched the miracle once again.

Amadeo shuddered. It was painful for him and his lips drew back for a moment and then he settled as if into deeper sleep. The poison was eating inside him. I could see the cruel evidence of it.

He was dying, no matter what his visions had told him, and no slight tender kiss of blood could save him now.

"Did you believe what they said?" I asked him. "That it was not your time to die?"

Reluctantly, painfully, his eyes opened.

"Master, they returned me to you," he answered. "Oh, if only I could remember all they told

me, but they warned me that I would forget. Why was I ever brought here, Master?" He struggled, but he would not be quieted. He went on talking.

"Why was I taken out of some distant land and brought to you? I remember riding through the grasslands. I remember my father. And in my arms, as I rode, I held an ikon that I had painted, and my father was a great horseman and a great fighter, and there came down on us the evil ones, the Tatars, and they took me, and Master—the ikon, it fell into the tall grass. Master I know now. I think they killed my father when they took me away."

"Did you see him, child?" I asked, "when you dreamt these things?"

"No, Master. But then again, I don't remember." He began to cough suddenly and then the coughing stopped and he breathed deeply as if it were the only thing he had the strength to do.

"I know I painted the ikon, and we were sent out in the grasslands to place the ikon in a tree. It was a sacred thing to do. The grasslands were dangerous, Master, but my father always hunted there. Nothing frightened my father, and I could ride as well as he. Master, I know now the story of all my life, I know it yet I can't quite tell you—."

His voice dried up suddenly, and his whole body shuddered once more.

"This is death, Master," he whispered, "and yet they said it was not my time."

I knew his life was being measured now in moments. Had I ever loved anyone more than I loved him? Had I ever revealed more of my soul to anyone than I had revealed to him? If my tears spilled now, he would see them. If I trembled now, he would know.

Long ago, I'd been taken prisoner, just as he had! Was that not why I had chosen him?—that thieves had taken him from his life as I'd been taken from mine?

And so I'd thought that I would give him this great gift which was eternity! Was he not worthy in all things? Yes, he was young, but how would it harm him to be forever beautiful with the countenance of a young man?

He was not Botticelli. He was not a man of immense talent and fame.

He was a boy dying here whom few would remember except for me.

"How could they have said it?" he whispered, "that it was not my time?"

"They sent you back to me!" I gasped. I couldn't bear this. "Amadeo, did you believe these priests whom you saw? Did you believe in the glass city, tell me."

He smiled. And it was never innocent, no matter how beautiful, his smile.

"Don't weep for me, Master," he answered. He struggled to rise a little from the pillow, his eyes very wide. "When the ikon fell, my fate was made, Master."

"No, Amadeo, I don't believe it," I said.

But there was no more time.

"Go to them, child, call to them!" I said. "Tell them to take you now."

"No, Master. They may be insubstantial things," he said. "They may be dreams of the feverish mind. They may be phantoms wrapped in the garments of memory. *But I know what you are,*

Master. I want the Blood. I've tasted it, Master. I want to stay with you. And if you refuse me, then let me die with Bianca! Send back my mortal nurse to me, Master, for she comforts me far better than you in your coldness. I would die with her alone."

He fell back exhausted on the pillow.

Desperately, I cut my tongue and filled my mouth with blood. I gave it to him. But the poison was moving too fast.

He smiled as the blood warmed him and a film of tears covered his eyes.

"Beautiful Marius," he said, as if he were far older than I would ever be. "Beautiful Marius who gave me Venice. Beautiful Marius, give me the Blood."

We had no more time. I was weeping miserably.

"Would you truly have the Blood, Amadeo?" I asked. "Say it to me, that you forsake the light of the sun forever, and forever you will thrive on the blood of the Evil Doer as I thrive."

"I vow it, I will it," he answered.

"You'll live forever, unchanging?" I asked, "feeding upon mortals who can be your brothers and sisters no more?"

"Yes, forever unchanging," he answered, "among them, though they are my brothers and sisters no more."

Once again, I gave him the Blood Kiss. And then I lifted him and carried him to the bath.

I stripped off his thick and soiled velvet clothes. And into the warm water I placed him, and there with the blood from my mouth I sealed all the cuts in the flesh made by Lord Harlech. I shaved off for all time any beard that he might have.

Now he was ready for the magic as one who had been prepared for sacrifice. And his heart beat slowly and his eyes were too heavy to open anymore.

And in a simple long silk shirt I clothed him and carried him out of the room.

The others were waiting anxiously. What lies I told them I do not know. How mad I was in these moments. To Bianca I gave some solemn charge that she must comfort and thank the others, and that Amadeo's life was safe in my hands.

"Leave us now, my beauty," I said to her. Even as I held him, I kissed her. "Trust in me, and I shall see that you never come to harm."

I could see that she believed in me. All fear was gone from her.

Within moments Amadeo and I were alone.

Then into my grandest painted salon I took him. It was the room into which I'd copied Gozzoli's magnificent painting *The Procession of the Magi,* stolen from the original in Florence as a test of my memory and skill.

Into this intense color and variation, I plunged him, setting him down on his feet on the cold marble, and then giving him through the Blood Kiss, the greatest draught of blood which I had given so far.

With the Fire Gift I lighted the candelabra up one side of the chamber and down the other. The painting was bathed in light.

"You can stand now, my blessed pupil," I told him. "My blood runs through you after the poison. We have begun."

He trembled, fearing to let go of me, his head hanging heavily, his luxuriant hair soft against my hands.

"Amadeo," I said, kissing him once again as the blood flowed over my lips and into his mouth, "what was your name in that lost land?" Again I filled my mouth with blood and I gave it to him. "Reach back for the past, child, and make it part of the future."

His eyes opened wide.

I stepped away from him. I left him standing. I let loose my red velvet cloak and pushed it away from me.

"Come to me," I said. I held out my arms.

He took the first steps, unsure of himself, so full of my blood that surely the light itself must have amazed him, but his eyes were moving over the multitude of figures painted on the wall. Then he looked directly at me.

How knowing, how clever was his expression! How full of triumph he seemed suddenly in his silence and patience. How utterly damned.

"Come, Amadeo, come and take it from me," I said, my eyes full of tears. "You are the victor. Take what I have to give."

He was in my arms instantly, and I held him warmly, whispering close to his ear.

"Don't be afraid, child, not even for a moment. You'll die now to live forever, as I take your blood and give it back to you. I won't let you slip away."

I sank my teeth into his throat and tasted the poison in his blood as soon as it flowed into me, my body destroying the poison, my body consuming his blood effortlessly, as it might have consumed a dozen such young ones, and into my mind there came the visions of his childhood—of the Russian monastery where he had painted his flawless ikons, of the cold chambers in which he'd lived.

I saw monks half walled up alive as they fasted, eating only what would sustain them. I smelled the earth. I smelled decay. Oh, how ghastly was this passage to salvation. And he had been part of it, half in love with the sacrificial cells and their starving inhabitants, save for his gift: that he could paint.

Then for one instant I saw nothing but his paintings, one image tumbling upon another, rapt faces of Christ, the Virgin—I saw the halos studded with costly jewels. Ah, such riches in the dark, cheerless monastery. And then came the rich bawdy laughter of his father, wanting him to leave the monastery, to ride out with him into the grasslands where the Tatars rode.

Prince Michael, their ruler, wanted to send Amadeo's father into the grasslands. It was a

foolish mission. The monks railed against it, that Amadeo's father would take him into such danger. The monks wrapped the ikon and gave it to Amadeo. Out of the darkness and bitter earth of the monastery, Amadeo came into the light.

I stopped; I drew back from the blood and the visions. I *knew* him. I knew the relentless and hopeless darkness inside of him. I knew the life that had been forecast in hunger and bitter discipline.

I cut the flesh of my throat and I held his head near me. "Drink," I said. I pushed his head forward. "Put your mouth to the wound. Drink."

At last, he obeyed me, and suddenly with all his force he drew on the blood. Had he not tasted it enough to crave it? And now it came without measure, and he was passionate for it, and I closed my eyes, and felt an exquisite sweetness that I had not known since the long ago night when I had given my blood to my blessed Zenobia to make her all the more strong.

"Be my child, Amadeo," I whispered in this sweetness. "Be my child forever," I said. "Have I ever loved anyone more than you?"

I drew him back away from the wound, and as he cried out I sank my teeth into his throat again. This time it was my blood mingled with his that flowed into me. The poison was no more.

Again, I saw the ikons. I saw the dim corridors of the monastery, and then in the falling snow, I saw the two on their horses, Amadeo and his father. Amadeo held the ikon, and the priest ran beside him, telling him that he must place the ikon in a tree, that the Tatars would find it and count it as a miracle, and Amadeo, how innocent he looked to be such a bold rider, to be chosen to ride with his father for Prince Michael's mission, as the snow came down heavily, as his hair was whipped by the wind.

And so it was your undoing. Turn your back on it now. You have seen it for what it was. Look to the fabulous painting on the wall, Amadeo. Look to the riches which I have given you. Look to the glory and virtue which lie in beauty as varied and magnificent as what you see here.

I let loose of him. He gazed at the painting. I pressed his lips to my throat again.

"Drink," I said. But he needed no counsel. He held fast to me. He knew the blood, as I knew him.

How many times did we do it, the passing of blood from one to the other? I know not. I know only that never having done it completely since that long ago night in the Druid grove, I trusted to nothing, and made of him the strongest fledgling that I could.

And as he drank from me, I gave him my lessons, my secrets. I told him of the gifts that might one night come to him. I told him of my long ago love for Pandora. I told him of Zenobia, of Avicus, of Mael. I told him all but the final secret. That I kept from him.

Oh, thank the gods that I kept it. I kept it close in my heart!

Well before morning it was finished. His skin was wondrously pale, and his dark eyes fiercely bright. I ran my fingers through his auburn hair. Once again, he smiled at me so knowingly, with

such a quiet air of triumph.

"It's complete now, Master," he said, as if he were speaking to a child.

And together we walked back to the bedchamber where he put on his handsome velvets, and we went out to hunt.

I taught him how to find his victims, to use the Mind Gift to make certain that they were Evil Doers, and I also remained with him through the few hours of his mortal Death.

His powers were very simply enormous. It would not be long before he could use the Cloud Gift; and I could not find a test to outdo his strength. He could not only read the minds of mortals, he could make spells as well.

His mind, quite naturally, was closed to me, though this was still something I did not completely accept. Of course it had happened with Pandora, yet I hoped that it would not happen with Amadeo and only reluctantly explained it to him.

Now I must read his facial expressions, his gestures, the depth of his secretive and faintly cruel brown eyes.

Never had he been more beautiful, of course.

And having done all this, I took him with me to my very grave, as one says, to the gilded room of the two stone sarcophagi which awaited us, and I showed him how he must sleep by day.

It didn't frighten him. Indeed, nothing frightened him.

"What of your dreams now, Amadeo?" I asked him as I held him in my arms. "What of your priests and the distant glass city?"

"Master, I've reached paradise," he answered. "What has Venice in all her beauty been to me but a prelude for the Blood?"

As I had done a thousand times, I gave him the Blood Kiss and he received it and then drew back smiling.

"How different it is now," he said.

"Sweet or bitter?" I asked.

"Oh, sweet, very sweet, for you've fulfilled my heart's desires. You don't pull me heartlessly after you by a bloody thread."

I crushed him in my warm embrace.

"Amadeo, my love," I whispered, and it seemed the long centuries I had endured had been but preparation for this. Old images came to me, bits and pieces of dreams. Nothing was substantial but Amadeo. And Amadeo was here.

And so we went to our separate sleep, and as I closed my eyes I feared only one thing in the whole world—that this bliss should not last.

22

The next few months passed in freedom and pleasure such as I could have never imagined.

Amadeo was truly my companion and also my pupil, and I forced him with gentle discipline to learn all that I thought he should know. This included his lessons in law and government, in history and philosophy, and also his lessons with me in being a blood drinker, to which he gave himself with a cheerful willingness that surpassed my dreams.

I had thought that, being young, he might want to feed on the innocent, but when I instructed him as to how guilt would soon destroy his soul if he did this, I found that he listened; and he took my instructions in how to feed upon evil without allowing it to darken his own soul.

He was also my eager pupil in the lessons on how to be in mortal company, and he soon felt strong enough to have some conversation with the mortal boys. Indeed, he was soon expert in deceiving them, just as I was, and though they sensed that something had changed with Amadeo they did not know what, and they could not know, and they dared not risk the peace of our wondrous house with even their slightest doubts.

Even Riccardo, the eldest of my apprentices, suspected nothing really, except that his Master was somehow a powerful magician and the magic had saved Amadeo′s life.

But now we had to deal with our beloved Bianca, whom we had not seen since the night of the terrible illness, and I knew that this would be Amadeo′s most arduous trial.

What was she to make of Amadeo′s swift recovery from his terrible battle with Lord Harlech, and what did she think when she laid eyes upon Amadeo with his luminous skin and shimmering hair? What was he to think when he looked into her eyes?

It was no secret to me that he adored her, indeed, that he had loved her as I had loved her. And so we must go to her. Indeed, we had put it off for too long.

Abruptly one evening, we went to visit her, having fed well on this night so that we might feel and appear quite warm.

As soon as we came into her room, I saw immediately the strain in Amadeo, that he could not tell her of what had happened to him, and only in that moment did I realize how difficult this secrecy was for him, and how in spite of all his strength, he was still quite young and even weak.

Indeed, Amadeo′s frame of mind was far greater cause for alarm than that of Bianca, who seemed only happy to see Amadeo restored.

They were like a brother and sister together, and I thought of course of the vow I had extracted from him when I made him, and I wished I could take him aside and remind him of it now. But

we were in her drawing room and there were many other visitors, with all the usual music and talk going on.

"Come into my bedroom," she said to both of us. Her lovely oval face was beaming. "I am so very glad to see you. Why didn't you come before now? Of course everyone in Venice knew that Amadeo was recovered, and that Lord Harlech had gone back to England, but you should have written to me if you couldn't come."

I showered her with my apologies. It was my thoughtlessness. And indeed I should have written a letter. What had blinded me on such a score was my love for Amadeo. I had cared for nothing else.

"Oh, I forgive you, Marius," she declared. "I would forgive you anything, and look at Amadeo. It's as if he were never sick at all."

Gratefully I accepted her embrace, but I could see how Amadeo suffered when she kissed him, when she clasped his hand. He could not endure the gulf which separated them, but he must endure it, and so I did not move to leave.

"How goes it with you, my beautiful nurse," I said to her, "you who kept Amadeo by a thread until I could come to him. You and your kinsmen? Are you a happy lot?"

She gave a soft gentle laugh. "Oh, yes, my kinsmen, some of them have met with the most unfortunate end. Indeed, it is my understanding that the Grand Council of Venice believes they were murdered by those from whom they exacted heavy payments. My kinsmen should have never come to Venice with their evil designs. But I am blameless as everyone knows. Members of the Grand Council of Venice have told me as much. And you would not think it but I am now richer on account of all this."

Of course I saw it in a moment. Those who had owed money to her miserable kinsmen had, after their murders, given her costly gifts. She was richer than she had ever been.

"I am a happier woman," she said softly, looking at me. "Indeed, I am someone altogether different, for I know a freedom now that was inconceivable before."

Hungrily her eyes moved over me and over Amadeo. I felt a desire emanating from her. I felt it as she looked at both of us, that she wanted a new familiarity, and then she came to me, and putting her arms around me, she kissed me.

Quickly, I held her back and away from me, but this only impelled her to embrace Amadeo, and she kissed him on his cheeks and on his mouth.

She gestured towards the bed.

"All of Venice wonders about my magician and his apprentice," she said warmly. "And they come to me, only to me."

With my eyes, I let her know my love for her, that I would trespass now if she didn't strictly forbid it, and moving past her, I seated myself on her bed.

Never had I taken such a liberty with her, but I knew her thoughts. We dazzled her. She

idolized us.

And how lovely she was in her luminous silk and jewels.

She came and took her place beside me, nestled close, and unafraid of whatever she saw when she looked into my eyes.

Amadeo was astonished and soon sat beside her on her right. Though he'd fed well, I could sense his blood hunger, and that he fought bravely to keep it down.

"Let me kiss you, my exquisite one," I said. And I did so, counting upon the dim light and my sweet words to bedazzle her, and then of course she saw what she wanted to see—not some dreadful thing quite beyond her comprehension, but a mysterious man who had rendered her an invaluable service and left her wealthy and free.

"You will be safe always, Bianca," I said to her. "As long as I am here." Twice and once more I kissed her. "Help me open my house again, Bianca, with even more splendid food and entertainments. Help me prepare a greater feast perhaps than Venice has ever seen. We'll have wondrous theatricals and dancing. Help me fill my many rooms."

"Yes, Marius, I shall do it," she answered drowsily, her head leaning against me. "I shall be so happy."

"I shall give you all the money you require for it. And Vincenzo will carry out your instructions. Only tell me when you would have this take place."

I looked into her eyes as I spoke and then I kissed her, and though I did not dare to give her the smallest taste of my blood, I breathed my cold breath into her, and I pierced her mind with my desire.

Meantime, with my right hand I reached beneath her skirts and found her sweet naked secrets and easily moved them with my fingers, which inflamed her with immediate and undisguised desire.

Amadeo was confused.

"Kiss her," I whispered. "Kiss her again."

He obeyed me, and soon had her ravished with his kisses.

And as my fingers tightened and caressed her, as his kisses grew more fervent, she grew bloodred with her cresting passion and fell softly against Amadeo's arm.

I withdrew, kissing her forehead as though she were chaste again.

"Rest now," I said, "and remember you are safe from those evil kinsmen, and that I am in your debt forever because you kept Amadeo alive until I could come."

"Did I, Marius?" she asked me. "Wasn't it his strange dreams?" She turned to Amadeo. "Again and again you spoke of wondrous places, of those who told you that you must return to us."

"Those were but memories caught in a web with fear," said Amadeo softly. "For long before I was born again in Venice, I knew a harsh and pitiless life. It was you who brought me back from some thick margin of consciousness which lies just this side of death."

She gazed at him, wondering.

How he was suffering that he could not tell her what he was.

But having accepted these words from him, she allowed us to, in the manner of common attendants, help her with her disheveled dress and hair.

"We'll leave you now," I said, "and of the feast we'll make our plans at once. Allow me to send Vincenzo to you."

"Yes, and on that night I promise you," she said, "your house will be more splendid than even the Doge's palace, you will see."

"My princess," I said as I kissed her.

Back to her guests she went, and off we hurried down the stairs.

In the gondola, Amadeo began his entreaties.

"Marius, I can't bear it, this separation from her, that we can't tell her."

"Amadeo, say nothing more to me of this!" I cautioned.

When we reached the bedchamber and locked the door, he gave way to terrible tears.

"Master, I could tell her nothing of what had happened to me! And to Bianca I would always tell all. Oh, not the secrets of you and me or the Blood Kisses, no, but of other things. How often I sat with her, and talked with her. Master, I went to her so often by day and you didn't know it. She was my friend. Master, this is unendurable. Master, she was my sister." He sobbed like a small boy.

"I cautioned you on this, did I not?" I said furiously. "And now you weep like a child?"

In a rage, I slapped him.

And in shock he fell back away from me, but his tears flowed all the more.

"Master, why can we not make her one of us! Why can we not share the Blood with her?"

I took him roughly by the shoulders. He didn't fear my hands. He didn't care.

"Amadeo, listen to me. We cannot give way to this desire. I have lived a thousand years and more without making a blood drinker, and now you, within months of your own transformation, would make the first mortal for whom you feel inordinate love?"

He was crying bitterly. He tried to free himself from me, but I would not allow it.

"I wanted so to tell her of the things I see with these new eyes!" he whispered. The blood tears spilled down his boyish cheeks. "I wanted so to tell her how all the world is changed."

"Amadeo, know the value of what you possess and the price of what you give. Two years I prepared you for the Blood, and even so the giving of it was too rapid, spurred on by Lord Harlech's poisoned blade. Now you would visit this power upon Bianca? Why? Because you would have her know what has befallen you?"

I released him. I let him fall on his knees beside the bed, spilling his tears as he cried.

I sat at the desk.

"How long do you think I've wandered this Earth?" I asked. "Do you know how many times it

had crossed my mind in carelessness and wanton temper to make another blood drinker? But I did not do it, Amadeo. Not until my eyes fell upon you. I tell you, Bianca is not to be what we are."

"She'll grow old and die!" he whispered. His shoulders moved with his sobs. "Are we to see it? Are we to watch this happen? And what will she think of us as the years pass?"

"Amadeo, stop with this. You cannot make all of them what we are. You cannot make one after another without conscience or imagination. You cannot! For everyone there must be preparation, learning, discipline. For everyone there must be care."

Finally he dried his tears. He stood up and he turned to face me. There seemed an awful calm in him, an unhappy and grim calm.

And then there came a solemn question from his lips.

"Why did you choose me, Master?" he asked.

I was frightened at this question, and I think he saw it before I could hide it. And I marveled that I had been so unprepared to answer such a thing.

I felt no tenderness for him suddenly, for he seemed so strong as he stood there, so very certain of himself and of the question which he had just put to me.

"Did you not ask me for the Blood, Amadeo?" I responded, my voice cool. I was trembling. How deeply I loved him, and how I didn't want him to know.

"Oh, yes, sir," he responded in a small, calm voice, "indeed I did ask you but that was after many a taste of your power, was it not?" He paused, then continued. "Why did you choose me for those kisses? Why did you choose me for the final gift?"

"I loved you," I said without further ado.

He shook his head.

"I think there's more to it," he answered.

"Then be my teacher," I answered.

He came closer to me, and looked down at me as I remained seated at my desk.

"There's a bitter cold in me," he said, "a cold which comes from a distant land. And nothing ever really makes it warm. Even the Blood did not make it warm. You knew of this cold. You tried a thousand times to melt it, and transform it to something more brilliant, but you never succeeded. And then on the night that I came near to death—no, was, in fact, dying—you counted upon that cold to give me the stamina for the Blood."

I nodded. I looked away, but he put his hand on my shoulder.

"Look at me, please, sir," he said. "Isn't it so?" His face was serene.

"Yes," I said, "it's so."

"Why do you shrink from me as I ask this question?" he pressed.

"Amadeo," I said, speaking firmly, "is this a curse, this Blood?"

"No," he answered quickly.

"Think on it before you answer. Is it a curse!" I declared.

"No," he said again.

"Then cease your questions. Don't seek to anger me or embitter me. Let me teach you what I have to teach."

He had lost this little battle and he walked away from me, looking once more like the child, though his full seventeen years as a mortal had rendered him more than that.

He climbed upon the bed, and curled his legs beneath him, sitting there motionless in the alcove of red taffeta and red light.

"Take me back to my home, Master," he said. "Take me back to Russia where I was born. You can take me there, I know you can. You have that power. You can find the place."

"Why, Amadeo?"

"I must see it to forget it. I must know for certain that it was … what it was."

I thought on this for a long time before I answered.

"Very well. You will tell me all you remember and I will take you where you want to go. And into the hands of your human family you can place whatever wealth you wish."

He said nothing to this.

"But our secrets will be kept from them, as our secrets are kept from everyone."

He nodded.

"And then we shall return."

Again he nodded.

"All this will happen after the great feast that Bianca will start preparing. On that night, here, we will dance with our invited guests. Over and over again, you will dance with Bianca. We will use our greatest skill to pass among our guests as human. And I shall count upon you as much as I count upon Bianca or Vincenzo. And the feast will leave all of Venice in awe."

A faint smile came over his face. Again he nodded.

"Now you know what I want of you," I declared. "I want that you befriend the boys all the more lovingly. And I want that you go to Bianca all the more often, after you've fed of course, and your skin is ruddy, and that you tell her nothing, nothing of the magic by which you were saved."

He nodded.

"I thought …" he whispered.

"You thought?" I asked.

"I thought if I had the Blood I would have all things," he said. "And now I know that it's not so."

23

No matter how long we exist, we have our memories—points in time which time itself cannot erase. Suffering may distort my backward glances, but even to suffering, some memories will yield nothing of their beauty or their splendor. Rather they remain as hard as gems.

So it is with me and the night of Bianca's most supreme feast, and indeed I call it that because it was Bianca who created it, merely using the wealth and rooms of my palazzo for her finest achievement in which all the apprentices participated and in which even humble Vincenzo was given a dramatic role.

All of Venice did come to partake of our never ending banquet, and to delight in the singing and the dancing, whilst the boys performed in numerous and grandly staged tableaux.

It seemed that every room had its own singers or divine pageants. The music of the lute, the virginal, and a dozen other instruments blended to make the lovely songs that lulled and enchanted everyone, as the younger boys, royally costumed, went about filling cups from golden pitchers of wine.

And Amadeo and I did dance ceaselessly, stepping carefully and gracefully as was the fashion then—one walked to music, really—clasping hands with many a Venetian beauty as well as our beloved genius of the whole affair.

Many a time, I snatched her away from the illumination of the candles and told her how dear to me she was that she could bring about such magic. And I begged from her a promise that she might do it again and again.

But what could compare to this night of dancing and wandering amid mortal guests who commented gently and drunkenly on my paintings, sometimes asking me why I had painted this or that? As in the past, no critical word struck my heart deeply. I felt only the loving heat of mortal eyes.

As for Amadeo, I watched over him constantly, and saw only that he was divinely happy, seeing all this splendor as a blood drinker, divinely thrilled by the theatricals in which the boys played wonderfully designed roles.

He had taken my advice and continued in his love of them, and now amid the blazing candelabra and the sweet music, he was radiant with happiness and whispered in my ear when he could that he could ask for nothing finer than this night.

Having fed early, and far away, we were warm with blood and keen of vision. And so the night belonged to us in our strength and in our happiness, and the magnificent Bianca was ours and

ours only as all men seemed to know.

Only as sunrise approached did the guests begin to take their leave, with the gondolas lined up before the front doors, and we had to break from the duty of accepting farewells to find our own way to the safety of our gold-lined grave.

Amadeo embraced me before we parted to lie in our coffins.

"Do you still want to make the journey to your homeland?" I asked him.

"Yes, I want to go there," he said quickly. He looked at me sadly. "I wish I could say no. On this night of all nights, I wish I could say no." He was downcast, and I would not have it.

"I'll take you."

"But I don't know the name of the place. I can't—."

"You needn't torture yourself on that account," I said. "I know it from all you've told me. It's the city of Kiev, and I shall take you there very soon."

There came a look of bright recognition to his face. "Kiev," he said and then he said it in Russian. He knew now it was his old home.

The following night I told him the story of his native city.

Kiev had once been magnificent, its cathedral built to rival Hagia Sophia in Constantinople from which its Christianity had come. Greek Christianity had shaped its beliefs and its art. And both had flourished beautifully there in a wondrous place. But centuries ago, the Mongols had sacked this grand city, massacred its population, destroying forever its power, leaving behind some accidental survivals, among them monks who kept to themselves.

What remained of Kiev? A miserable place along the banks of the Dnieper River where the cathedral still stood, and the monks still existed in the famous Monastery of the Caves.

Quietly, Amadeo listened to this intelligence and I could see the pure misery in his face.

"All through my long life," I said, "I have seen such ruin. Magnificent cities are created by men and women with dreams. Then there come the riders of the North or the East and they trample and destroy the magnificence; all that men and women have created is no more. Fear and misery follow this destruction. And nowhere is it more visible than in the ruins of your home —Kiev Rus."

I could see that he was listening to me. I could sense that he wanted me to continue to explain.

"There exists now in our beautiful Italy a land that will not be sacked by those warriors, for they no longer menace the northern or eastern borders of Europe. Rather they long ago settled into the continent and became the very population of France and Britain and Germany today. Those who would still pillage and rape have been pushed back forever. Now throughout Europe what men and women can do in cities is being discovered again.

"But in your land? There is still sorrow, and bitter poverty. The fertile grasslands are useless—thousands of miles of them are useless!—save for the occasional hunter as mad as your father must have been. That is the legacy of Genghis Khan—a monster." I paused. I was becoming too

heated. “The Golden Horde is what they call that land, and it is a wasteland of beautiful grass.”

He nodded. He saw the sweep of it. I knew this from his solemn eyes.

“Would you still go?” I pressed him. “Would you still revisit the place where you suffered so much?”

“Yes,” he whispered. “Though I do not remember her, I had a mother. And without my father, there might be nothing for her. Surely he died that day when we rode out together. Surely he died in the hail of arrows. I remember the arrows. I must go to her.” He broke off as though struggling to remember. He groaned suddenly as though some sharp physical pain had humbled him. “How colorless and grim is their world.”

“Yes,” I said.

“Let me take them only a small amount—.”

“Make them rich if that’s your wish.”

For a long moment, he was silent and then he made a small confession, murmuring it as though he were communing with himself:

“I must see the monastery where I painted the ikons. I must see the place where at times I prayed I would have the strength to be walled up alive. You know it was the way of the place, don’t you?”

“Very well, I know it,” I answered. “I saw it when I gave you the Blood. I saw you moving down the corridors, giving sustenance to those who still lived in their cells, half immured and waiting for the will of God to take them as they starved themselves. They asked you when you would have the courage for it, yet you could paint ikons that were magnificent.”

“Yes,” he said.

“And your father hated them that they did not let you paint, that they made you a monk above all things.”

He looked at me as if he had not truly understood this until now, and perhaps he had not. And then came from his lips a stronger statement.

“So it is with any monastery, and you know it, Master,” he retorted. “The will of God comes first.”

I was faintly shocked by the expression on his face. Was he speaking to his father or to me?

It took us four nights to reach Kiev.

I could have made the journey much more quickly had I been on my own, but I carried Amadeo close to me, his head bowed, his eyes closed, my fur-lined cloak wrapped around him to shelter him from the wind as best I could.

At last on the sunset of the fifth night, we reached the ruins of the city which had once been Kiev Rus. Our clothes were covered in dirt and our fur cloaks dark and nondescript, which would help to render us unremarkable to mortal eyes.

A thick snow lay over the high abandoned battlements, and covered the roofs of the Prince’s

wooden palace, and beneath the battlements simple wooden houses that ran down to the Dnieper River—the town of Podil. Never have I seen a place more forlorn.

As soon as Amadeo had penetrated the wooden dwelling of the European ruler, and glimpsed to his satisfaction this Lithuanian who paid tribute to the Khan for his power, he wanted to move on to the monastery at once.

And into it he slipped using his immense blood drinker's skill to play the shadows and confuse those who might have seen him as he cleaved to the mud walls.

I was near to him always but it was not my place to interfere or instruct. Indeed, I was gripped with horror, for the place seemed infinitely worse than I had ever guessed from the probing of his fevered mind.

With quiet misery, he saw the room in which he'd made ikons with its tables and pots of paints. He saw the long mud corridors through which he'd walked once as a young monk, giving food and drink to those half buried alive.

At last he came out of it, shivering, and he clung to me.

"I would have perished in a mud cell," he whispered, looking at me, begging me to understand the import of it. His face was twisted with pain.

Then turning away swiftly, he went down towards the half-frozen river, searching for the house in which he'd been born.

With no difficulty he found it, and he entered it—the splendid Venetian, dazzling and confusing the family gathered there.

Once again I kept my distance, settling for the silence and the wind, and the voices I could hear with preternatural ears. Within moments he had left them with a fortune in gold coin and come out again into the falling snow.

I reached out to take his arm and comfort him. But he turned away. He wouldn't look at me. Something obsessed him.

"My mother was there," he whispered, as he looked down once more towards the river. "She didn't know me. So be it. I gave them what I had to give."

Again I tried to embrace him, but he shook me off.

"What's wrong then?" I asked. "Why do you stare? Why do you look that way towards the river? What would you do?"

How I wished I could read his mind! His mind, and his alone, was shut to me! And how angry and determined he looked.

"My father wasn't killed in the grasslands," he said, his voice quavering, the wind whipping his auburn hair. "My father is alive. He's in the tavern down there."

"You want to see him?"

"I have to see him. I have to tell him that I didn't die! Didn't you listen to them talking in my house to me?"

"No," I said. "I gave you your time with them. Was I wrong?"

"They said he'd become the drunkard because he had failed to save his son." He glared at me as if I had done him some dreadful wrong. "My father, Ivan, the brave one, the hunter. Ivan, the warrior, the singer of songs whom everyone loved—Ivan is the drunkard now because he failed to save his son!"

"Be calm. We'll go to the tavern. You can tell him in your own way—."

He waved me off as though I were annoying him, and he set off down the street with a mortal tread.

Together we entered the tavern. It was dark and full of the scent of burning oil. Fishermen, traders, killers, drank here together. Everyone took notice of us for a moment and then ignored us, but Amadeo at once spied a man lying on a bench to the back of the rectangular room which made up the place.

Again, I wanted to leave him to what he meant to do, but I feared for him and I listened as he sat down now close to this sleeping man.

It was the man of memory and the man of visions, that I knew, as soon as I studied him. I recognized him by his red hair and red mustache and beard. Amadeo's father, the hunter who had taken him out of the monastery that day for a dangerous mission, to ride out in search of a fort which the Mongols had already destroyed.

I shrank back into the shadows. I watched as the luminous child removed his left glove and laid his chill supernatural hand upon the forehead of the sleeping father. I saw the bearded man wake. I heard them speak.

In rambling drunken confession, the father gave forth his guilt in abundance as though it belonged to anyone who roused him.

He had shot arrow after arrow. He had gone after the fierce Tatars with his sword. Every other man in the party had died. And his son, my Amadeo, stolen, and he was now Ivan the Drunkard, yes, he confessed it. He could scarcely hunt enough to buy his drink. He was a warrior no more.

Patiently, slowly, Amadeo spoke to him, pulling him out of his ramblings, revealing the truth with carefully chosen words.

"I am your son, sir. I did not die that day. Yes, they took me. But I am alive."

Never had I seen Amadeo so obsessed with either love or misery, with either happiness or grief. But the man was stubborn, the man was drunk, and the man wanted one thing from this strange person prodding him and that was more wine.

From the proprietor I bought a bottle of sack for this man who wouldn't listen, who wouldn't look at this exquisite young one who sought to claim his attention now.

I gave the bottle of sack to Amadeo.

Then I moved along the wall so that I might better see Amadeo's face, and all I saw there was obsession. He must make this man understand.

Patiently, he spoke until his words had penetrated the drunken haze from which the man stared at him.

"Father, I've come to tell you. They took me to a far-away place, to the city of Venice, and I fell into the hands of one who made me rich, Father, rich, and gave me learning. I'm alive, sir. I'm as you see me now."

Oh, how strange was this speech coming from one infused with the Blood. Alive? How so, alive, Amadeo?

But my thoughts were my own in the darkness. I had no role in this reunion.

At last, the man, sitting up to face his son, began to understand.

Amadeo was trembling, his eyes fixed on those of his father.

"Forget me now, please, Father," he begged. "But remember this, for the love of God. I shall never be buried in the muddy caves of the monastery. No. Other things may happen to me, but that, I won't suffer. Because of you, that you wouldn't have it, that you came that day and demanded I ride out with you, that I be your son!"

What on earth was Amadeo saying? What did these words mean?

He was on the verge of crying the terrible blood tears which we can never really hide. But as he rose from the bench where his father sat, the elder caught him tightly by his hand.

He knew his son! Andrei, he called him. He had recognized him for who he was.

"Father, I must go," said Amadeo, "but you must never forget that you saw me. You must never forget what I said, that you saved me from those dark and muddy caves. Father, you gave me life, not death. Don't be the drunkard anymore, Father. Be the hunter again. Bring the Prince meat for his table. Be the singer of songs. Remember that I came to tell you this myself."

"I want you, my son, stay with me," said the man. His drunken languor had left him, and he held tight to Amadeo's hand. "Who will ever believe that I saw you?"

Amadeo's tears had risen. Could the man see the blood?

At last Amadeo pulled back, and removing his glove, he pulled off his rings, and he placed these in his father's hands.

"Remember me by these," he said, "and tell my mother that I was the man who came to see her tonight. She didn't know me. Tell her the gold is good gold."

"Stay with me, Andrei," said the father. "This is your home. Who is it that takes you away now?"

It was more than Amadeo could bear.

"I live in the city of Venice, Father," he said. "It's what I know now. I have to go."

He was out of the tavern so quickly his father could not see it, and I, once seeing what he meant to do, had preceded him, and we stood in the snow-covered muddy street together.

"It's time for us to leave this place, Master," he said to me. His gloves were gone, and the cold was fierce. "Oh, but that I had never come here and never seen him and never known that he

suffered that I had been lost."

"But look," I said, "your mother comes. I'm sure of it. She knew you and there, she comes," I pointed at the small figure approaching who held a bundle in her arms.

"Andrei," she said as she drew closer. "It's the last one you ever painted. Andrei, I knew it was you. Who else would have come? Andrei, this is the ikon your father brought back on the day you were lost."

Why didn't he take it from her hands?

"You must keep it, Mother," he said of this ikon which he had once linked to his destiny. He was weeping. "Keep it for the little ones. I won't take it, no."

Patiently, she accepted this.

And then another small present she entrusted to him, a painted egg—one of those treasures of Kiev which mean so much to the people who decorate them with intricate designs.

Quickly, gently, he took it from her, and then he embraced her, and in a fervent whisper assured her that he had done nothing wicked to acquire his wealth and that he might some night be able to come again. Oh, what lovely lies.

But I could see that this woman, though he loved her, did not matter to him. Yes, he would give her gold, for that meant nothing. But it was the man who had mattered. The man mattered as the monks had mattered. It was the man who had wrung the strong emotions from him. The man had brought from him bold words.

I was stunned by all. But wasn't Amadeo stunned by it himself? He had thought the man dead, and so had I.

But finding him alive, Amadeo had revealed the obsession—the man had fought the monks for Amadeo's very soul.

And as we made our journey back to Venice, I knew that Amadeo's love for his father was far greater than any love he had ever felt for me.

We did not speak of it, you understand, but I knew that it was the figure of his father who reigned in Amadeo's heart. It was the figure of that powerful bearded man who had so vigorously fought for life rather than death within the monastery who held supremacy over all conflicts that Amadeo was ever to know.

I had seen it with my own eyes, this obsession. I had seen it in a matter of moments in a riverfront tavern, but I had known it for what it was.

Always before this journey to Russia I had thought the split in Amadeo's mind was between the rich and varied art of Venice and the strict and stylized art of old Russia.

But now I knew that was not so.

The split in him was between the monastery with its ikons and its penance on the one hand, and his father, the robust hunter who had dragged him away from the monastery on that fateful day.

Never again did Amadeo speak of his father and mother. Never again did he speak of Kiev. The beautiful painted egg he placed within his sarcophagus without ever explaining its significance to me.

And on certain nights when I painted in my studio, working fiercely on this or that canvas, he would come to keep me company, and it seemed he perused my work with new eyes.

When would he finally pick up the brushes and paint? I didn't know, but such a question didn't matter anymore. He was mine and mine forever. He could do what he pleased.

Yet silently in my secret soul, I suspected that Amadeo held me in contempt. All I taught of art, of history, of beauty, of civilization—all this was meaningless to him.

When the Tatars captured him, when the ikon fell from his arms into the grass, it was not his fate that was sealed; it was his mind.

Yes, I could dress him in finery and teach him different languages, and he could love Bianca, and dance with her exquisitely to slow and rhythmic music, and he could learn to talk philosophy, and write poetry as well.

But his soul held nothing sacred but that old art and that man who lay drinking out his nights and days by the Dnieper in Kiev. And I, with all my power, and all my blandishments, could not replace Amadeo's father in Amadeo's mind.

Why was I so jealous? Why did this knowledge sting me so much?

I loved Amadeo as I had loved Pandora. I loved him as I had loved Botticelli. Amadeo was among these, the great loves of my long life.

I tried to forget my jealousy or ignore it. After all, what was to be done about it? Should I remind him of this journey and torment him with questions? I could not do such a thing.

But I sensed that these concerns were dangerous to me as an immortal, and that never before had anything of this nature so tortured me or made me weak. I had expected Amadeo, the blood drinker, to look upon his family with detachment and no such thing had taken place!

I had to admit that my love for Amadeo was all caught up with my involvement with mortals, that I had plunged myself into their company, and he himself was still so very hopelessly close to them that it would take him centuries to gain the distance from mortals which I had experienced on the very night when I was first given the Blood.

There had been no Druid grove for Amadeo. There had been no treacherous journey to Egypt; there had been no rescue of the King and Queen.

Indeed, as I mulled this over quickly I resolved I would not entrust him with the mystery of Those Who Must Be Kept even though the words had once or twice passed my lips.

Perhaps before the making of him, I had thought idly that I would take him to the shrine at once. I would beg Akasha to receive him, as she had once received Pandora.

But now I thought otherwise. Let him be more advanced; let him be more nearly perfected. Let him become more wise.

And was he not company and consolation for me now more than I ever dreamt? Even if a bad mood overtook him he remained with me. Even if his eyes were dull as though the dazzling colors of my paintings did not matter to him, was he not near at hand?

Yes, he was quiet for a time after the journey to Russia. But I knew his frame of mind would pass. And indeed it did.

Within a few short months, he was no longer aloof and moody but had come back to be my companion, and was once again visiting the various feasts and balls of the great citizens which I attended regularly, and writing short poems for Bianca, and arguing with her about various paintings which I had done.

Ah, Bianca, how we loved her. And how often did I search her mind to make certain that she had no inkling even now that we were not human beings.

Bianca was the only mortal I admitted to my studio, but naturally I could not work with my full speed and force when she was there. I had to lift a mortal arm to hold the paintbrush but it was more than worth it to hear her pleasant commentary with Amadeo who also perceived in my works some grand design which was not there.

All was going well when, one night as I came down upon the roof of the palazzo, quite alone, for I had left Amadeo in the company of Bianca, I sensed that a very young mortal was watching me from the roof of the palazzo across the canal.

Now I had come down so swiftly that not even Amadeo could have seen it had he been watching, yet this distant mortal marked my presence and when I realized it, I realized quite a deal more as well.

Here was a mortal spy who suspected me to be other than human. Here was a mortal spy who had been observing me for some time.

Never in all my years had I known any such a threat to my secrecy. And naturally I was tempted to immediately conclude that my life in Venice had failed. Just when I thought I had fooled an entire city, I was to be caught for what I was.

But this young mortal had nothing to do with the grand society in which I moved. I knew it the moment I penetrated his mind. He was no great Venetian, no painter, no cleric, no poet, no alchemist, and certainly no member of the Grand Council of Venice. On the contrary, he was a most strange sort of being, a scholar of the supernatural, a spy upon creatures such as me.

What could this mean? What could this be?

At this point, meaning to confront him and terrify him, I came to the very edge of the roof garden and peered across the canal at him, and there I made out his stealthy shape, and how he meant to cloak himself, and how fearful yet fascinated he was.

Yes, he knew me to be a blood drinker. Indeed, he had some name for me: *vampire.* And he had been watching me for several years! He had in fact glimpsed me in grand salons and ballrooms, so I might indeed write this off to my carelessness. And on the night that I had first opened my

house to the citizens of Venice, he had come.

All this his mind gave me rather easily without the young man realizing it, obviously, and then using the Mind Gift I sent a very direct message to him.

This is folly. Interfere with me and you will surely die. I won't give you a second warning. Move away from my household. Leave Venice. Is it worth your life to know what you want to know of me?

I saw him visibly startled by the message. And then to my pure shock I received a distinct mind message from him:

We mean you no harm. We are scholars. We offer understanding. We offer shelter. We watch and we are always here.

Then he gave way to utter fear and fled the roof.

With little difficulty I heard him make his way down the staircases through the palazzo and then I saw him come out into the canal and hail a gondola which took him away. I had caught a good look at him as he stepped into the boat. He was a tall man, lean and fair of skin, an Englishman, and he was dressed in severe clothes of black. He was very frightened. He did not even look up as the boat took him away.

I stood on the roof for a long time, feeling the blessed wind, and wondering in its silence, what I should do about this strange discovery. I thought over his distinct message and the power of mind with which he'd sent it to me.

Scholars? What sort of scholars? And the other words. How very remarkable indeed.

I cannot exaggerate how odd this was.

It struck me with full force that there had been moments in my long life when I would have found his message irresistible, so great had been my loneliness, so great had been my longing to be understood.

But now, with all of Venice receiving me into its finest company, I did not feel such a thing. I had Bianca when I wanted to ramble on about the work of Bellini or my beloved Botticelli. I had Amadeo with whom to share my golden tomb.

Indeed, I was enjoying a Perfect Time. I wondered if for every immortal there was a Perfect Time. I wondered if it corresponded to the prime of life in mortals—those years when you are strongest and can see with the greatest clarity, those years when you can give your trust most truly to others, and seek to bring about a perfect happiness for yourself.

Botticelli, Bianca, Amadeo—these were the loves of my Perfect Time.

Nevertheless, it was a stunning promise, that which the young Englishman had made. "We offer understanding. We offer shelter. We watch and we are always here."

I resolved to ignore this, to see what came of it, not to allow it to impede me in the slightest as I enjoyed my life.

Yet in the weeks that followed I listened for this strange creature, this English scholar, and indeed, I kept a sharp lookout for him as we made our way through the usual lavish and dizzying

social events.

I also went so far as to question Bianca about such a person, and to warn Vincenzo that such a man might attempt to engage him in conversation and that he must be very wise on that account.

Vincenzo shocked me.

The very fellow—a tall lean Englishman, young, but with pale gray hair—had already come calling. He had questioned Vincenzo, Would his Master wish to purchase certain unusual books?

"They were books of magic," said Vincenzo, frightened that I would be angry. "I told him that he must bring the books if he meant to offer them to you, and leave them here for you to see."

"Think back on it. What more was said between you?"

"I told him you had many, many books already, that you visited the booksellers. He … he saw the paintings in the portego. He asked if these had been done by you."

I tried to make my voice comforting.

"And you told him that the paintings had been done by me, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir, I'm sorry, so very sorry if this was more than I should have said. He wanted to purchase a painting. I told him that no purchase could be made."

"It doesn't matter. Only be careful on account of this man. Tell him nothing further. And when you see him, report it at once to me."

I had turned to go when a question came to me and I turned to see my beloved Vincenzo in tears. Of course I reassured him at once that he had served me perfectly, and told him he must worry about nothing. But then I asked him:

"Give me your impression of this man. Was he good or bad?"

"Good, I think," he said, "though what sort of magic he meant to sell, I don't know. Yes, good, I would say so, very good, though why I say it I can't tell. He had a kindness to him. And he liked the paintings. He praised them. He was most polite and rather serious for one so young. Rather studious."

"It's quite enough," I said. And indeed it was.

I did not find the man though I searched the city. And I had no fear.

Then two months later, I met, in the most auspicious circumstances, with the man himself.

It was at a luxurious banquet and I was seated at the table, among a great number of drunken Venetians watching the young people before us in their measured and leisurely dance.

The music was poignant, and the lamps were just brilliant enough to give the vast room the most enchanting glow.

There had been several fine spectacles before with acrobats and singers, and I think I was faintly dazed.

I know I was thinking again that this was my Perfect Time. I meant to write it in my diary when I returned home.

As I sat at the table, I leant on my right elbow, my left hand playing idly with the rim of a cup

from which I now and then pretended to drink.

And then and there appeared this Englishman, this scholar, at my left side.

"Marius," he said softly, and in full command of classical Latin: "Count me a friend and not a meddler, I beg you. I have watched you for a long time from afar."

I felt a deep shiver. I was startled in the purest sense of the word. I turned to look at him, and saw his sharp clear eyes fixed fearlessly on me.

Again there came that message, mentally, without words, from his mind quite confidently to my own:

We offer shelter. We offer understanding. We are scholars. We watch and we are always here.

Once again a deep shiver stole over me. All the company round was blind to me, but this one saw. This one knew.

Now he passed to me a round gold coin. On it was stamped one word:

Talamasca

I looked it over, concealing my complex shock, and then I asked politely in the same classical Latin:

"What does it mean?"

"We are an Order," he said, his Latin effortless and charming. "That is our name. We are the Talamasca. We are so old we don't know our origins and why we are so called." He spoke calmly. "But our purpose in every generation is clear. We have our rules and our traditions. We watch those whom others despise and persecute. We know secrets that even the most superstitious of men refuse to believe."

His voice and his manners were very elegant, but the power of the mind behind his words was quite strong. His self-possession was stunning. He could not have been more than twenty.

"How did you find me?" I demanded.

"We watch at all times," he said gently, "and we saw you when you lifted your red cloak, as it were, and stepped into the light of torches and the light of rooms such as this."

"Ah, so, it began for you then in Venice," I said. "I have blundered."

"Yes, here in Venice," he said. "One of us saw you and wrote a letter to our Motherhouse in England, and I was dispatched to make certain of who and what you were. Once I glimpsed you in your own house I knew it to be true."

I sat back and took his measure. He had put on handsome velvet of a fawn color, and wore a cloak lined with miniver, and there were simple silver rings on his hands. His pale ashen hair was long and combed plainly. His eyes were as gray as his hair. His forehead was high and bare of lines. He seemed to be shining clean.

"And what truth is this that you speak of?" I asked as gently as I could. "What is it that you know to be true of me?"

"You are a vampire, a blood drinker," he said without flinching, his voice as polite as ever, his

manner composed. “You’ve lived for centuries. I can’t know your age. I don’t presume to know. I wish that you would tell me. You have not blundered. It is I who have come to greet you.”

It was charming to be speaking in the old Latin. And his eyes, reflecting the light of the lamps, were full of an honest excitement tempered only by his dignity.

“I have come into your house when it was open,” he said. “I have accepted your hospitality. Oh, what I would give to know how long you’ve lived, and what you have seen.”

“And what would you do with that intelligence?” I asked him, “if I did tell you such things?”

“Commit it to our libraries. Increase the knowledge. Let it be known that what some say is legend is in fact truth.” He paused and then he said: “Magnificent truth.”

“Ah, but you have something to record even now, don’t you?” I asked. “You can record that you have seen me here.”

Quite deliberately I looked away from him and towards the dancers before us. Then I looked back at him to see that he had followed, obediently, the direction of my gaze.

He watched Bianca as she made her circle in the carefully modulated dance, her hand clasped by that of Amadeo who smiled at her, the light glimmering on his cheek. She seemed the girl again when the music played so very sweetly, and when Amadeo gazed on her with such approving eyes.

“And what else do you see here?” I asked, “my fine scholar of the Talamasca?”

“Another,” he answered, his eyes returning to me without fear. “A beautiful boyish one, who was human when I first laid eyes on him, and now he dances with a young woman who may soon be transformed as well.”

My heart beat furiously as I heard this. My heart beat in my throat and in my ears.

But he laid no judgment down upon me. On the contrary, he was without all judgment and for a moment I could do nothing but search his young mind to make certain this was true.

He shook his head gently.

“Forgive me,” he said. “I have never been close to one such as you.” He was flushed suddenly. “I have never spoken to one such as you. I pray I shall have time to commit to parchment what I’ve seen tonight, though I swear to you on my honor and on the honor of the Order that if you let me go from here alive I will write nothing until I reach England, and the words will never do you harm.”

I shut the soft seductive music out of my hearing. I thought only of his mind, and I searched it and found there nothing but what he had just said to me, and behind it, an Order of scholars as he had described it, a seeming wonder of men and women who wanted only to know, and not to destroy.

Indeed a dozen marvels presented themselves of shelter given to those who could genuinely read minds, and others who from the cards could somehow with uncanny accuracy predict fortunes, and some who might have been burnt as witches, and behind it libraries in which time-

honored books of magic were stored.

It seemed quite impossible that in this Christian era, such a secular force could exist.

I reached down and picked up the gold coin with the engraved word, Talamasca. I put it in one of my pockets, and then I took his hand.

He was fiercely afraid now.

"Do you think I mean to kill you?" I asked gently.

"No, I don't think you will do it," he said. "But you see, I have studied you so long and with such love, I can't know."

"Love, is it?" I asked. "How long has your Order known of creatures like us?" I asked. I held his hand firmly.

His high clear forehead was suddenly creased by a small expressive frown.

"Always, and I told you we are very old."

I thought on it for a long moment, holding on to his hand. I searched his mind again, and found no lie in it. I looked out at the young dancers moving decorously, and I let the music fill me once more as though this strange disturbance had never come about.

Then I released his hand slowly.

"Go then," I said, "leave Venice. I give you a day and a night to do it. For I would not have you here with me."

"I understand," he said gratefully.

"You have watched me too long," I said reprovingly. But the reproof was really for myself. "I know that you have already written letters to your Motherhouse describing me. I know because I would have done so if I were you."

"Yes," he said again. "I have studied you. But I have done it only for those who would know more of the world and all its creatures. We persecute no one. And our secrets are well kept from those who would use them for harm."

"Write what you will," I said, "but go, and never suffer your members to come to this city again."

He was about to rise from the table when I asked him his name. As so often happened with me, I had not been able to take it from his mind.

"Raymond Gallant," he responded softly. "Should you ever want to reach me—."

"Never," I said sharply under my breath.

He nodded, but then refusing to go with that admonition he stood his ground and said: "Write to the castle, the name of which is engraved on the other side of the coin."

I watched him leave the ballroom. He wasn't a figure to attract attention, and indeed one could picture him working with quiet dedication in some library where everything was splattered with ink.

But he did have a marvelously appealing face.

I sat brooding at the table, only talking now and then to others when I had to, wondering on it, that this mortal had come so close to me.

Was I too careless now? Too absolutely in love with Amadeo and Bianca to be paying attention to the simplest things that should have sounded an alarm? Had the splendid paintings of Botticelli separated me too much from my immortality?

I didn't know, but in truth what Raymond Gallant had done could be explained fairly well.

I was in a room full of mortals and he was but one of them, and perhaps he had a way of disciplining his mind so that his thoughts did not go out before him. And there was no menace to him in gesture or face.

Yes, it was all simple, and when I was home in my bedchamber I felt much more at ease about it, even enough to write several pages about it in my diary as Amadeo slept like a Fallen Angel on my red taffeta bed.

Should I fear this young man who knew where I dwelt? I thought not. I sensed no danger whatsoever. I believed the things that he said.

Quite suddenly, a couple of hours before dawn a tragic thought crossed my mind.

I must see Raymond Gallant once more! I must speak to him! What a fool I had been.

I went out into the night, leaving the sleeping Amadeo behind.

And throughout Venice I searched for this English scholar sweeping this and that palazzo with the power of my mind.

At last I came upon him in modest lodgings very far from the huge palaces of the Grand Canal. I came down the stairway from the roof, and tapped on his door.

"Open to me, Raymond Gallant," I said, "It's Marius, and I don't mean you any harm."

No answer. But I knew that I had given him a terrible start.

"Raymond Gallant, I can break the door but I have no right to do such a thing. I beg you to answer. Open your door to me."

Finally he did unfasten the door, and I came inside, finding it to be a little chamber with remarkably damp walls in which he had a mean writing table, and a packing case and a heap of clothes. There stood against the wall a small painting which I had done many months ago and which I had, admittedly, cast aside.

The place was overcrowded with candles, however, which meant that he had a rather good look at me.

He drew back from me like a frightened boy.

"Raymond Gallant, you must tell me something," I said at once, both to satisfy myself and to put him at his ease.

"I will do my best to do this, Marius," he answered, his voice tremulous. "What can you possibly want to know of me?"

"Oh, surely it's not so hard to imagine," I responded. I looked about. There was no place to sit.

So be it. “You told me you have always known of our kind.”

“Yes,” he answered. He was shaking violently. “I was … I was preparing to leave Venice,” he volunteered quickly. “As you advised.”

“I see that, and I thank you. But this is my question.” I spoke very slowly to him as I went on.

“In all of your study, did you ever hear tell of a woman blood drinker, a woman vampire as you call it—a woman with long rippling brown hair … rather tall and beautifully formed, a woman made in the full bloom of life rather than in the budding flower of youth … a woman with quick eyes, a woman who walks the night streets alone.”

All this quite impressed him and for a moment he looked away from me, registering the words, and then he looked back.

“Pandora,” he said.

I winced. I couldn’t prevent it. I couldn’t play the dignified man with him. I felt it like a blow to the chest.

I was so overcome that I walked a few paces away from him, and turned my back on him so that he could not see the expression on my face.

He knew her very name!

Finally I turned around. “What do you know of her?” I said. I searched his mind as he spoke for the truth of every word.

“In ancient Antioch, carved in stone,” he said, “the words, ‘Pandora and Marius, drinkers of the blood, once dwelt together in happiness in this house.’ ”

I could not answer him. But this was only the past, the bitter sad past in which I’d deserted her. And she, full of hurt, must have inscribed the words in the stone.

That he and his scholars had found such a remnant left me humbled and respecting of what they were.

“But now,” I declared, “do you know of her now? When did you learn of her? You must tell me all.”

“In the North of Europe now,” he said, “there are those who say they have seen her.” His voice was growing stronger, but he was still quite afraid. “And once a young vampire, a young blood drinker, came to us, one of those who cannot bear the transformation.…”

“Yes, go on,” I said. “I know. You say nothing that is offensive to me. Continue, please.”

“The young one came, hoping we held some magic by which he might reverse the Blood and give him back his mortal life and his immortal soul.…”

“Yes, and he spoke of her? That’s what you mean to say?”

“Precisely. He knew all about her. He told us her name. He counted her a goddess among vampires. It was not she who made him. Rather coming upon him, she had pity on him, and often listened to his ravings. But he described her as you did. And he told us of the ruins in Antioch where we would find the words she’d written in the stone.

"It was she who spoke to him of Marius. And so the name came to be known to us. Marius, the tall one with the blue eyes, Marius whose mother came from Gaul and whose father was a Roman."

He stopped, plainly afraid of me.

"Oh, go on, please, I beg you," I said.

"This young vampire is gone now, destroyed by his own will without our compliance. He went out into the morning sun."

"Where did he come upon her?" I asked. "Where did she listen to his ravings? When did this take place?"

"Within my lifetime," he said. "Though I myself did not see this blood drinker. Please, do not press me too hard. I am trying to tell you all I know. The young vampire said that she was ever on the move, through the northern countries as I told you, but in the disguise of a rich woman, and with an Asian companion, a blood drinker of very great beauty and abrupt cruelty who seemed to oppress her nightly and force her into what she did not want to do."

"I can't bear it!" I declared. "Go on, tell me—what northern countries? I can't read from your mind any faster than I can hear your words. Tell me all that the young one said."

"I don't know the countries in which she traveled," he answered.

My passion was unnerving him.

"This young one, he loved her. He imagined that she would repel the Asian. But she would not. It drove him mad, this failure. And so, feeding upon the populace of a small German town, the young one soon blundered into our arms."

He paused, to gather his courage and to make his voice steady as he went on.

"Within our Motherhouse he talked incessantly of her, but it was all the same theme—her sweetness, her kindness and the cruelty of the Asian from whom she would not break away."

"Tell me the names under which they traveled," I said. "There must have been names, names they used as mortals, for how else could they have lived as rich mortals? Give me the names."

"I don't know them," he said. He gathered all his reserve now. "Give me time and perhaps I can obtain them. But I do not in truth think the Order will give me such information to give to you."

Again I turned away from him. I put my right hand up to shield my eyes. What gestures does a mortal man make at such a moment? I made of my right hand a fist, and held my right arm firmly with my left hand.

She lived. Was I not content with that? She lived! The centuries had not destroyed her. Was that not enough?

I turned around. I saw him standing there, so very bravely, though his hands trembled at his sides.

"Why are you not terrified of me?" I whispered, "terrified that I may come to your

Motherhouse and find this information for myself?"

"Perhaps no such action is necessary," he responded quickly. "Perhaps I can obtain it for you, if you must have it, for it breaks no vows we've taken. It was not Pandora herself who sought shelter with us."

"Ah, yes, you make a lawyer's point on this score," I answered. "What more can you tell me? What more did Pandora tell this young one of me?"

"No more," he answered.

"Of Marius, this young one spoke, having heard the name from Pandora—." I repeated.

"Yes, and then here we discovered you in Venice. I have told you all!"

I drew back once more. He was exhausted with me and so frightened of me that his mentality was almost to the point where it might break.

"I have told you all," he said again gravely.

"I know you have," I said. "I see that you are capable of secrecy but quite incapable of a lie."

He said nothing.

I took the gold coin from my pocket, the one which he had given me. I read the word:

Talamasca

I turned it over.

There imprinted on it was the picture of a high and well-fortified castle, and beneath it the name: Lorwich, East Anglia.

I looked up.

"Raymond Gallant," I said. "I thank you."

He nodded.

"Marius," he said suddenly, as though screwing up his courage, "can you not send out some message to her over the miles?"

I shook my head.

"I made her a blood drinker, and her mind has been closed to me from the beginning. So it is with the beautiful child you saw dancing this very night. Maker and offspring cannot read each other's thoughts."

He mulled this over as though we were speaking of human things, just that calmly, and then he said:

"But surely you can send the message with your powerful mind to others who may see her and tell her that you search for her, and where you are."

A strange moment passed between us.

How could I confess to him that I could not beg her to come to me? How could I confess to myself that I had to come upon her and take her in my arms and force her to look at me, that some old anger separated me from her? I could not confess these things to myself.

I looked at him. He stood watching me, growing ever more calm, but certainly enrapt.

“Leave Venice, please,” I said, “as I have asked you to do.” I untied my purse and I put a good many gold florins on his desk, just as I had done twice with Botticelli. “Take this from me,” I said, “for all your trouble. Leave here, and write to me when you can.”

Again he nodded, his pale eyes very clear and determined, his young face rather willfully calm.

“It will be an ordinary letter,” I said, “come to Venice by ordinary means, but it will contain the most marvelous information, for I may find in it intelligence of a creature whom I have not embraced in over a thousand years.”

This shocked him, though why I did not understand. Surely he knew the age of the stones in Antioch. But I saw the shock penetrate him and course through his limbs.

“What have I done?” I said aloud, though I wasn’t speaking to him. “I shall leave Venice soon, on account of you and on account of many things. Because I do not change and therefore cannot play the mortal for very long. I will leave soon on account of the young woman you saw dancing tonight with my young apprentice, for I have vowed that she shall not be transformed. But oh, I have played my role most splendidly here. Write it in your histories. Describe my house as you saw it, full of paintings and lamps, full of music and laughter, full of gaiety and warmth.”

His expression changed. He grew sad, agitated, without moving so much as a muscle and the tears came up in his eyes. How wise he seemed for his years. How strangely compassionate.

“What is it, Raymond Gallant?” I asked. “How can you weep for me? Explain it to me.”

“Marius,” he said. “I was taught in the Talamasca that you would be beautiful and you would speak with the tongue of an angel and a demon.”

“Where is the demon, Raymond Gallant?”

“Ah, you have me. I have not heard the demon. I have struggled to believe in it. But I have not heard it. You are right.”

“Did you see the demon in my paintings, Raymond Gallant?”

“No, I did not, Marius.”

“Tell me what you saw.”

“Fearful skill and marvelous color,” he answered, not even hesitating a moment, as though he had thought it through. “Wondrous figures and great invention, which gave everyone utter delight.”

“Ah, but am I better than the Florentine Botticelli?” I asked him.

His face darkened. There came a small frown to him.

“Let me answer for you,” I said, “I am not.”

He nodded.

“Think on it,” I said. “I am an immortal, and Botticelli is a mere man. Yet what are the wonders which Botticelli has done?”

It was too painful for me to be here any longer.

I reached out with both hands and gently took hold of his head before he could stop me. His

hands rose and they gripped mine but they could do nothing of course to soften my own grip.

I came close to him, and I spoke in a whisper.

"Let me give you a gift, Raymond. Now pay attention to me. I will not kill you. I will not harm you. I want only to show you the teeth and the Blood, and if you will allow—and mark, I ask for your permission—I shall give you a drop of the Blood on your tongue."

I opened my mouth so that the fang teeth were visible to him and I felt his body stiffen. He uttered a desperate prayer in Latin.

Then I cut my tongue with my teeth as I had done a hundred times with Amadeo.

"Do you want this blood?" I asked.

He closed his eyes.

"I will not make this decision for you, scholar. Will you take this lesson?"

"Yes!" he whispered when in fact his mind said No.

I clamped his mouth in an ardent kiss. The blood passed into him, and violently, he convulsed.

As I let him go, he could scarcely stand. But he was no coward, this man. And he bowed his head for only an instant and then he looked at me with clouded eyes.

He was enchanted for these small moments, and patiently, I let them pass.

"My thanks to you, Raymond," I said. I prepared to take my leave through the window. "Write to me with all you know of Pandora, and if you cannot I will understand."

"Don't ever see an enemy in us, Marius," he said quickly.

"Don't fear it," I said. "I never really forget anything that happens. I will always remember that you spoke to me of her."

And then I was gone.

I came back to my bedroom study, where Amadeo still slept as though wine had drugged him when it had only been mortal blood.

For a little while I wrote in my diary. I tried to describe sensibly the conversation which had just taken place. I tried to describe the Talamasca from all that Raymond Gallant had revealed to me.

But at last I gave in to writing the name Pandora over and over, foolishly, Pandora, and then I put my head down on my folded arms and dreamt of her, and whispered to her in my dreams.

Pandora in the northern countries, what countries, what could this mean?

Oh, if I were to find her Asian companion, how I would deal with him, how quickly and brutally would I free her from such oppression. Pandora! How could you let such a thing happen? And no sooner had I asked such a question than I realized I was quarreling with her as I had done so often of old.

When it came time to leave the house that night to find our resting place, I discovered Bianca asleep in my studio on a long silken couch.

"Oh, but you're too lovely," I said to her, kissing her hair tenderly and squeezing her

beautifully curved arm.

"I adore you," she whispered, then went on with her dreaming—my fine and wonderful girl.

On we went to the golden room in which our coffins awaited us. I helped Amadeo lift the lid of his coffin before I lifted my own.

Amadeo was tired. The dancing had wearied him. But he whispered something sleepily to me.

"What is it?" I said.

"When the time comes, you will do it, you will give Bianca the Blood."

"No," I said, "stop speaking of that, you're infuriating me."

He laughed his cold uncompassionate little laugh. "I know you will. You love her too much to see her begin to wither."

I told him No.

And then I went to my rest, never dreaming that it was the last night of our life together, the last night of my supreme power, the last night of Marius de Romanus, citizen of Venice, painter and magician, the last night of my Perfect Time.

24

On the following night I rose as was my custom and waited the hour or so for Amadeo to open his eyes.

Being young he did not follow the sunset so quickly as I did, and the time of rising differs among blood drinkers even when age is not a question at all.

I sat in the gold-lined chamber, deep in my thoughts about the scholar named Raymond Gallant, and wondered if he had left Venice as I had advised him to do. What danger could he bring to me, I thought, even if he meant to do it, for whom would he incite against me and on what charge?

I was far too strong to be overcome or imprisoned. Such a thing was preposterous. The very worst that could happen was that if this man marked me as some sort of dangerous alchemist, or even a demon, I should have to take Amadeo and go.

But I did not like these thoughts, and so I chose during these quiet moments to believe in Raymond Gallant, to be fond of him and to trust in him, and to let my mind search the city around me to see if I might find a trace of his presence, which would displease me in the extreme.

I had only started this search when something utterly ghastly blotted out my reason.

I heard screams coming from my own house. And I heard the cry of blood drinkers! I heard the cry of Satan worshipers—the chant of condemnations—and in my mind's eye I saw my rooms filled with spreading fire.

I beheld Bianca's face in the minds of others. I heard the cries of my boys.

Quickly I threw off the cover of Amadeo's coffin.

"Come, Amadeo, I need you," I cried in this frantic, foolish moment. "They're burning the house. Bianca is in danger. Come."

"Who is it, Master," he said, flying up the steps beside me. "Is it Those Who Must Be Kept?"

"No, Amadeo," I said, taking him under my arm and flying to the roof of the palazzo, "It's a band of demon-worshiping blood drinkers. They're weak. They will burn by their own torches! We must save Bianca. We must save the boys."

As soon as I reached the house, I realized that they were attacking it in unimaginable numbers. Santino had realized his crazed dreams. In every room there was a zealous assailant putting to the torch whatever he could.

The entire house was filled with fire.

As I rushed to the top of the main stairs I saw Bianca far below me, surrounded by the black-cloaked demons, who tormented her with torches as she screamed. Vincenzo lay dead before the open front doors.

I could hear the shouts of the gondoliers pleading with those inside to come out.

I dropped to the bottom of the stairway, and with the Fire Gift burnt Bianca's young and blundering attackers, who all but tripped on their black robes as they went up in flames. Some I could only force away with physical blows because I had no time to direct my powerful gifts.

Quickly I carried Bianca through the thick smoke and out onto the quais. I heaved her into the arms of a boatman who at once moved to take her away.

As soon as I turned back to save the screaming boys, a host of black-clad monsters surrounded me and again I burnt them with the Fire Gift, battering at their torches clumsily as I did.

The house was everywhere in chaos. Statues fell over the railings. Tapestries were set ablaze and paintings smoldered, but the boys, what could I do to protect the boys?

As soon as I burnt one ring of monsters there came another, and from all sides the condemnations:

"Heretic, blasphemer, Marius, the idolater, Marius, the pagan. Santino condemns you to burn."

Again and again I knocked the torches aside. Again and again I burnt the intruders. Again and again I heard their dying cries.

The smoke blinded me as it might have a mortal. The boys were roaring in panic as they were carried out of the house and over the rooftops.

"Amadeo!" I called out.

From above, I heard him desperately call to me.

I ascended, yet at every landing they accosted me and I found myself whipping around and playing the same game of force and Fire Gift as rapidly as I could.

"Amadeo, use your strength," I called out to him. I could not see him. "Use the gifts I've given you." I could only hear his cries.

I set ablaze those who crowded close to me. I could see nothing but the creatures burning, and then more torches thrust towards me as I hurled them back.

"Do you want to burn!" I declared, seeking to threaten them but no lesson of power stopped them.

In their fervor they came on.

"Santino sends you his holy fire. Santino sends you his justice. Santino claims your pupils. Santino claims your fledglings. Now it is time for you to burn."

All of a sudden and indeed, it was all of sudden—there did come the fatal circle of some seven or eight of them swift enough to plunge the fire at me so that it caught all of my garments and my hair.

Against my body itself this fire burnt, swallowing my head and all of my limbs.

For one slight moment I thought I shall survive this, this is nothing, I am Marius, the Immortal One, and then there came to me in a fury the horrid memory of the blood of the Elder in Egypt set afire by a lamp, burning with lurid smoke on the floor of my room.

There came a memory of the blood of Euxodia in Constantinople, bursting into flame on the floor of the shrine.

There came the memory of the Druid god in the grove with his black burnt skin.

And I knew in the next instant, without memory or thought, that my blood had been fatally ignited—that no matter how strong my skin or my bone, or my will, I was now burning, burning with such pain and such speed that nothing could keep me from being destroyed.

"Marius," Amadeo cried out in terror. "Marius." I heard his voice like a bell.

I cannot say reason drove me in any direction.

I did know I had reached the rooftop, and the cries of Amadeo and the boys were moving far off.

"Marius," cried Amadeo one more time.

I was blind to all who still tormented me. I was blind to the sky. In my ears, I heard the old God of the Grove on the night of my making telling me that I was immortal, that I could only be destroyed by the sun or by fire.

For life, I reached with all my remaining power. And in this state, I willed myself to reach the proper railing of the roof garden and to plummet down into the canal.

"Yes, down, down, into the water, under the water," I said aloud, forcing myself to hear the words, and then through the fetid waters I swam as fast as I could, clinging to the bottom, cooled and soothed and saved by the filthy water, leaving behind the burning palazzo from which my children had been stolen, in which my paintings had been destroyed.

An hour, perhaps longer, I remained in the canal.

The fire in my veins had been quenched almost immediately, but the raw pain was almost unendurable, and when at last I rose it was to seek that gold-lined chamber where my coffin lay.

I was unable to walk to this room.

Fearfully, on hands and knees, I sought the back entrance of the house, and managed by means of both the Mind Gift and my fingers to unlatch the door.

Then moving slowly through the many chambers I came at last to the heavy barrier which I had made to my tomb. For how long I struggled with it I do not know, only that it was the Mind Gift which finally unfastened it, not the strength of my burnt hands.

At last I crept down the stairs to the dark quiet of the golden room.

It seemed a miracle when at last I lay beside my coffin. I was too exhausted to move further, and with every breath I felt pain.

The sight of my burnt arms and legs was stultifying. And when I reached to feel my hair, I realized that most of it was gone. I felt my ribs beneath the thickened black flesh of my chest. I

needed no mirror to tell me that I had become a horror, that my face was gone.

But what grieved me far worse was that when I leant against my coffin and listened, I could hear the boys wailing, wailing as a ship took them to some distant port, and I could hear Amadeo pleading with his captors for some kind of reason. But no reason came. Only the chants of the Satan worshipers were sung to my poor children. And I knew these Satan worshipers were taking my children South to Rome, South to Santino, whom I had foolishly condemned and dismissed.

Amadeo was once more a prisoner, once more a captive of those who would use him for their evil ends. Amadeo had once more been stolen from a way of life to be taken to another inexplicable place.

Oh, how I hated myself that I had not destroyed Santino! Why had I ever suffered him to live!

And even now, as I tell you this story, I despise him! Oh, how heartily and eternally I despise him because he destroyed, in the name of Satan, all that I held precious, because he took my Amadeo away from me, because he took those whom I protected, because he burnt the palazzo which contained the fruits of my dreams.

Yes, I repeat myself, don't I? You must forgive me. Surely you must understand the pure arrogance and utter cruelty of what Santino did to me. Surely you must understand the pure destructive force with which he changed the course of Amadeo's journey.…

And I knew that this journey would be changed.

I knew it as I lay against the side of my coffin. I knew it because I was too weak to recover my pupil, too weak to save the wretched mortal boys who would suffer some unspeakable cruelties, too weak even to hunt for myself.

And if I could not hunt, how would I gain the blood to heal?

I lay back on the floor of the room and I tried to quell the pain in my burnt flesh. I tried only to think and to breathe.

I could hear Bianca. Bianca had survived. Bianca was alive.

Indeed, Bianca had brought others to save our house, but it was far beyond saving. And once again, as in war and pillage, I had lost the beautiful things I cherished; I had lost my books; I had lost my writings, such as they were.

How many hours I lay there I don't know, but when I rose to take the lid from my coffin I found that I still could not stand. Indeed, I could not remove the lid with my burnt arms. Only with the Mind Gift could I push it and then not very far.

I settled back down on the floor.

I was too full of pain to move again for a long time.

Could I hope to travel over the miles to reach the Divine Parents? I didn't know. And I couldn't risk leaving this chamber to find out.

Nevertheless I pictured Those Who Must Be Kept. I prayed to them. Deeply, vividly I envisioned Akasha.

“Help me, my Queen,” I whispered aloud. “Help me. Guide me. Remember when you spoke to me in Egypt. Remember. Speak to me now. I have never suffered before as I am suffering now.”

And then an old taunt came back to me, a taunt as old as prayers themselves.

“Who will tend your shrine if I am not restored?” I demanded. I trembled in my misery. “Beloved Akasha,” I whispered. “Who will worship you if I am destroyed? Help me, guide me, for some night in these passing centuries you may have need of me! Who has cared for you for so long!”

But what good is it ever to taunt the gods and the goddesses?

I sent out the Mind Gift with all its strength to the snowy Alps in which I had built and concealed the chapel.

“My Queen, tell me how I may come to you? Could something as dreadful as this draw you from your solitude, or do I ask too much? I dream of miracles but I cannot imagine them. I pray for mercy, yet I cannot envision how it would come about.”

I knew it was vain, if not blasphemy, to beg her to rise from her throne for me. But was she so powerful that she could give some miraculous strength over the miles?

“How will I return to you?” I prayed. “How will I ever fulfill again my duties if I am not healed?”

The silence of the golden room answered. It was as cold as the shrine in the mountains. I imagined I could feel the snow of the Alps on my burnt flesh.

But slowly the horror sunk in.

I think I gave a soft, sad little laugh.

“I can’t reach you,” I said, “not without assistance, and how can I obtain that assistance unless I forsake the secret of what I am? Unless I forsake the secret of the Chapel of Those Who Must Be Kept?”

At last I climbed to my knees and struggled up the stone stairs very slowly; and painfully, I managed to stand, and with the Mind Gift, fasten the bronze door.

Safety, that was important, very important. I must survive this, I thought. I must not despair.

Then collapsing again and crawling down the stairs to the golden chamber, in the manner of something loathsome and lurid, I pushed doggedly against the lid of my coffin until it was open sufficiently for me to go to my rest.

Never had I known such injury, never had I known such pain.

A monstrous humiliation was mingled with the torture. Oh, there was so much I had not known about existence, so much I had not understood about life.

Soon the cries of the boys were gone from my ears, no matter how keenly I listened. The boat had carried them over the waters.

But I could still hear Bianca.

Bianca wept.

In misery and pain, my mind searched Venice.

"Raymond Gallant, member of the Talamasca," I whispered, "I need you now. Raymond Gallant, pray you haven't left Venice. Raymond Gallant of the Talamasca, please hear my prayers."

I could find no trace of him, but who knew what had happened to my powers? Perhaps all had dwindled. I could not even remember clearly his room or where it had been.

But why did I hope to find him? Had I not told him to leave the Veneto? Had I not impressed upon him that he must leave? Of course he had done as I had told him to do. No doubt he was miles beyond the point where he might hear my call.

Nevertheless I continued to say his name over and over as if it were a prayer.

"Raymond Gallant of the Talamasca, I need you. I need you now."

Finally, the approaching dawn brought a frigid relief to me. The roaring pain subsided slowly and my dreams began as they will do if I sleep before the rise of the sun.

In my dreams, I saw Bianca. She had her servants about her, and they comforted her, and she said:

"They are dead, both of them, I know it. They have died in the fire."

"No, my sweet one," I said. With all the power of the Mind Gift I called to her:

Bianca, Amadeo is gone, but I live. Do not fear me when you set eyes upon me, for I am badly burnt. But I live.

In the eyes of the others, I saw a mirror of her as she stopped and turned away from them. I saw her rise from her chair and move towards the window. I saw her open it and peer out into the dampness at the approaching light.

Tonight, when the sun sets, I will call to you. Bianca. I am a monster now in my own eyes and will be a monster in yours. But I will endure this suffering. I will call to you. Don't be afraid.

"Marius," she said. The mortals who gathered around her heard her speak my name.

But the sleep of the morning had come over me. I couldn't resist it. The pain was at last gone.

25

When I awoke the pain was excruciating. I lay for an hour or more without moving. I listened to the voices of Venice. I listened to the movement of the waters beneath my house and all around it, and through the canals and into the sea.

I listened for Santino's miscreants, in quiet dignified terror that they might yet be abroad in search of me. But they were gone completely, at least for now.

I tried to lift the marble lid of the sarcophagus and I couldn't do it. Once again, with the Mind Gift I pushed against it, and then, with the aid of my feeble hands I was able to push it aside.

Most strange and wondrous, I thought, that the power of the mind was greater than the power of the hands.

Slowly, I managed to rise from this cold and handsome grave which I had fashioned for myself, and I did at last, after great effort, sit on the cold marble floor, seeing the glint of the golden walls through a bit of light that seeped into the chamber around the edges of the upper door.

I felt a terrible agony and weariness. A sense of shame overcame me. I had imagined myself invulnerable, and oh, how I had been humbled, how I had been dashed against the stones of my own pride.

The taunts of the Satan worshipers came back to me. I remembered Amadeo's cries.

Where was he now, my beauteous pupil? I listened but I heard nothing.

I called to Raymond Gallant once more, though I knew it was in vain. I pictured him traveling overland to England. I called his name aloud so that it resounded off the walls of the golden chamber, but I could not find him. I knew that I would not find him. I did it only to be certain that he was far beyond my reach.

And then I thought of my precious and fair Bianca. I sought to see her as I had last night, through the minds of those around her. I sent the Mind Gift wandering to her fashionable rooms.

Into my ears there came the sound of playful music; and at once I saw her many regular guests. They drank and talked as though my house had not been destroyed, or rather as if they knew nothing of it, and I had never been one of them; on they went as the living do, after a mortal is taken away.

But where was Bianca?

"Show me her face," I whispered, directing the mysterious Mind Gift by the sheer simplicity of my voice.

No picture came to me.

I shut my own eyes, which gave me exquisite pain, and I listened, hearing the hum of the entire city, and then begging, begging of the Mind Gift that it give me her voice, her thoughts.

Nothing, and then at last I hit upon it. Wherever she was, she was alone. She was waiting for me, and there were none around her to look upon her, or talk to her, and so I must find her in her silence or solitude, and at last I sent out my call to her.

Bianca, I am living. I am monstrously burnt as I've told you. As you once nursed Amadeo, can you extend your great kindness to me?

Scarcely a moment passed before I heard her distinct whisper.

"Marius, I can hear you. Only direct me. Nothing will frighten me. I will bind up your burnt skin. I will bind up your wounds."

Oh, this was wondrous comfort, but what was I planning here? What did I mean to do?

Yes, she would come, and would bring to me fresh garments with which I could conceal my miserable flesh, and perhaps even a hooded cloak that my head should be concealed, and even a Carnival mask for my face.

Yes, all that was most true, she would do it, but what then when I found I could not hunt in this miserable state? And what if, hunting somehow, I discovered that the blood of one or two mortals meant nothing to me, that my injuries had been too great?

How then should I depend upon this tender darling to assist me? How deep into the horrors of my debility should I allow her to come?

Again I heard her voice.

"Marius," she pleaded with me. "Tell me where you are. I'm in your house, Marius. It is much destroyed but not entirely. I wait for you in your old bedchamber. There is clothing here that I have gathered for you. Can you come?"

For a long while I did not answer her, not even to comfort her. I thought upon it in so far as one can think when one is feeling such pain. My mind was not my mind. Of that, I was certain.

And it did seem to me that in this great distress I could betray Bianca. I could betray her utterly were she to allow. Or I might only take from her some mercy, and leave her finally with a mystery which she would never understand.

The betrayal would be the more simple thing, obviously. The alternative, to take her mercy and leave her with a mystery, that would demand immense self-control.

I did not know whether or not I had such self-control. I did not know anything about myself in my misery. I remembered my long ago vow to her, that she would always be safe as long as I was in Venice, and I shuddered in agony envisioning the strong creature I had been on that night. Yes, I had vowed forever to protect her for the care she had given Amadeo, that she had saved him from death until I could come at sunset and take him out of her arms.

What did it all mean now? Was I to break that vow as though it were nothing?

And on and on there came her calls like prayers. She called to me as I had called to Akasha.

"Marius, where are you? Surely you can hear me. Marius, I have soft clothing for you that will not harm you. I have linen for your bandages. I have soft boots for your feet." She wept as she spoke. "Marius, I have a soft tunic of velvet for you. I have one of your many red cloaks. Let me bring these things and come to you, and I shall bandage you and assist you. You are no horror to me."

I lay there listening to her weeping, and then finally, I made up my mind.

You must come to me, precious one. I cannot move from where I am. Bring the clothing which you described, but bring also a mask, and you will find plenty of these in my closets. Bring one that is made of dark leather and decorated with gold.

"Marius, I have these things," she answered. "Tell me where I must come."

I then sent her another strong message, quite infallibly identifying the house in which I lay, and told her how she must come inside, find the door made of plated bronze, and then knock.

I was exhausted from the exchange. And once again, I listened in quiet panic for the sound of Santino's monsters, wondering if and when they would return.

Yet in the eyes of Bianca's boatman I soon caught an image of her coming out of the burnt ruin of my house. The gondola was on its way to me.

At last, there came the inevitable knock on the bronze door.

With all my strength I began my slow progress up the stone stairs.

I placed my hands upon the door.

"Bianca," I said. "Can you hear me?"

"Marius!" she cried out. She began to sob. "Marius, I knew it was you. It was no trick of my mind. You're truly alive, Marius. You're here."

I was aroused by the scent of her blood.

"Listen to me, precious darling," I said. "I was burnt as you cannot imagine. When I open this door a very small space, you must give over to me the clothing and the mask. Do not seek to look at me no matter how curious you may be."

"No, Marius," she answered, her tone resolute. "I love you, Marius. I'll do what you say."

How plaintive were her sobs as they suddenly broke through. And how strong the smell of blood inside her. How hungry I was.

With all my strength, my blackened fingers managed to loosen the latch, and then I opened the door a small space.

The scent of her blood was as painful as all else that I suffered. I thought for a moment I cannot go on.

But the badly needed clothes were thrust at me, and I knew I must take them. I must somehow move to my restoration. I could not sink back in agony for that would breed but more agony. I must go on. Here was the mask of black leather, decorated in gold. Garments for a ball in Venice, not for one so miserable and ghastly as I.

Leaving the door with its small opening, I managed to dress myself fairly well.

She had brought a long tunic rather than a short one, and this was wise, for the stockings I might never have managed to put on. As for the boots, I was able to slip my feet inside them, much as this pained me, and the mask I tied to my face.

The cloak was of generous proportions and with a hood, which I cherished. I was soon covered from head to toe.

But what must I do now? What should I tell this angel of a young woman who stood in the chilled and dark corridor outside?

"Who has come with you?" I asked her.

"Only the boatman," she said. "Did you not say come alone?"

"Perhaps I said it," I answered. "My mind is clouded by pain."

I heard her crying.

I struggled to think. I realized a harsh and terrible truth.

I could not hunt on my own because I wasn't strong enough to venture forth from this place with any of my old gifts of speed or ascent and descent.

I could not rely upon her strength to help me in the hunt because she was entirely too weak for it, and to use her boatman was foolish if not downright impossible. The man would witness what I did, and he knew that I resided in this house!

Oh, how mad it all was. How weak I was. How very possible it was that Santino's monsters might return. How important it was for me to leave Venice and seek the shrine of Those Who Must Be Kept. But how could this be done?

"Marius, please let me in," she said softly. "I'm not afraid to see you. Please, Marius. Let me come in."

"Very well," I said. "Trust in me that I won't harm you. Come down the stairs. Make your way carefully. Trust in me that whatever I tell you is the truth."

With agonizing effort, I pushed the door open sufficiently so that she might come inside. A faint light filled the stairway and the chamber below. It was enough for my eyes. But not for hers.

With her delicate pale hand she groped her way after me, and she could not see how I crawled with my hands resting heavily again and again against the wall.

At last we had come to the bottom of the steps, and there she struggled to see, but she could not.

"Marius, speak to me," she said.

"I'm here, Bianca," I said.

I knelt down, then seated myself on my heels, and gazing up at the torches that hung on the walls, I tried to light one of them with the Fire Gift.

I directed the power with all my strength.

I heard a faint crackling and then the torch kindled and the light exploded, hurting my eyes. The fire made me shiver, but we could not endure without it. The darkness had been worse.

She raised her tender hands to shelter her eyes from the brightness. Then she looked at me.

What did she see?

She covered her mouth and gave a muffled scream.

"What have they done to you?" she asked. "Oh, my beautiful Marius. Tell me how to remedy this and I will."

I saw myself in her gaze, a hooded being of burnt black sticks for neck and wrists with gloves for hands and a floating leather mask for a face.

"And how do you think that can be done, my beautiful Bianca?" I asked. "What magic potion can bring me back from what I am now?"

Her mind was in confusion. I caught a tangle of images and memories, of misery and hope.

She looked about herself at the glittering golden walls. She stared at the shining marble sarcophagi. Then her eyes returned to me. She was aghast but unafraid.

"Marius," she said, "I can be your acolyte as surely as Amadeo was. Only tell me how."

At the mention of Amadeo's name my eyes filled with tears. Oh, to think this burnt body had within it the blood of tears.

She dropped to her knees so that she might look directly into my eyes. Her cloak fell open and I saw the rich pearls around her throat and her pale breasts. She had worn one very fine gown for this enterprise, not caring how its hem would catch the dirt or the damp.

"Oh, my lovely jewel," I said to her, "how I have loved you both in innocence and guilt. You don't know how much I have lusted after you, both as monster and man. You don't know how I've turned my hunger from you when it was something I could scarce control."

"Oh, but I do know," she said. "Do you not remember the night you came to me, accusing me for the crimes I'd committed? Do you not remember how you confessed your thirst for my blood? Surely I have not become since then the pure and simple damsel of a children's tale."

"Perhaps you have, my pretty one," I said. "Perhaps you have. Oh, it's gone, isn't it? My whole world. It's gone. I think of the feasts, the masquerades, the dancing, it's gone, all my paintings burnt."

She began to cry.

"No, don't cry. Let me cry for it. It was all my doing. Because I didn't slay one who despised me. And they have taken Amadeo prisoner. Me, they burnt because I was too strong for their designs, but Amadeo they took!"

"Stop it, Marius, you rave," she said fearfully. She put out her hand and touched my gloved fingers.

"Oh, but I must rave just for a moment. They took him and I could hear him begging them for explanations, and all the boys, they took the boys too. Why did they do this?"

I stared at her through the mask, unable to imagine what she saw or read from this strange artificial countenance in her heated mind. The scent of her blood was almost overpowering and her sweetness seemed part of another world.

"Why did they let you live, Bianca, for surely I had not come in time?"

"Your pupils, those were the ones they wanted," she answered, "they captured them in nets. I saw the nets. I screamed and screamed and screamed out of the front doorway. They did not care about me except to draw you on, and what could I do when I saw you but cry out for your help against them? Did I do wrong? Is it wrong that I'm alive?"

"No, don't think such. No." I reached out as carefully as I could and squeezed her hand with my gloved fingers. "You must tell me if this grip is too strong."

"Never too strong, Marius," she said. "Oh, trust in me as you ask that I trust in you."

I shook my head. The pain was so terrible I couldn't speak for a moment. My mind and body both were pain. I could not endure what had befallen me. I could not endure the hopeless climb which stood before me and my future self.

"We remain here together, you and I," she said, "when surely there is much to be done to heal you. Let me serve your magic. I have already told you that I will."

"But what do you truly know of it, Bianca? Have you truly understood?"

"Is it not blood, my lord?" she asked. "Do you think I cannot remember when you took Amadeo, dying, into your own arms? Nothing could have saved him such as that transformation which I saw forever after in him. You know that I saw it. I knew. You know that I did."

I closed my eyes. I took my breaths slowly. The pain was terrible. Her words were lulling me and making me believe that I was not miserable, but where would this path lead?

I tried to read her mind but in my exhaustion I could not.

I wanted so to touch her face, and then believing in the softness of the glove, I did it, stroking her cheek. The tears welled in her eyes.

"Where is Amadeo gone?" she said desperately.

"South by sea," I confessed, "and to Rome, that is my belief on it, but don't question me now as to why. Let me say only that it was an enemy of mine who made this siege upon my house and those I love, and in Rome is where he dwells, and those he sent to harm me and Amadeo come from Rome.

"I should have destroyed him. I should have foreseen this. But in vanity I displayed my powers to him, and brushed him aside. And so he sent his followers in great numbers so that I couldn't overcome them. Oh, how foolish I was not to divine what he would do. But what is the use of saying it now? I'm weak, Bianca. I have no means to reclaim Amadeo. I must somehow regain my own strength."

"Yes, Marius," she said. "I understand you."

"I pray with all my heart that Amadeo uses the powers I gave him," I confessed, "for they were

great and he's very strong."

"Yes, Marius," she said. "I understand what you say."

"It's to Marius that I look now," I said again guiltily and sadly. "It's to Marius that I look, for I must."

A silence fell between us. There was no sound except the crackling of the torch in its sconce high on the wall.

Again I tried to read her mind, but I could not. It was not only my weakness. It was a resolute quality in her just now. For though she loved me, there were thoughts conflicting in her, and a wall had been thrown up to keep me from knowing what they were.

"Bianca," I said in a low voice, "you saw the transformation in Amadeo, but did you really understand?"

"I did, my lord," she said.

"You can guess the source of his strength forever after that night?"

"I know it, my lord," she answered.

"I don't believe you," I said gently. "You dream when you say you know."

"Oh, but I do know, Marius. As I have only just reminded you, I recall only too well how you came into my very bedchamber thirsting for my blood."

She reached out to touch the sides of my face in consolation.

I put up my gloved hand to stop her.

"I knew then," she said, "that you fed upon the dead somehow. That you took their souls, or perhaps only their blood. I knew then it was one or the other, and the musicians who fled that banquet at which you'd slain my kinsmen—they spoke of your giving my unfortunate cousins a kiss of death."

I gave a low soft laugh.

"How very careless I was, and believed myself to be so masterly. What a strange thing. And no wonder is it that I have fallen so far."

I took again a deep breath, feeling the pain all through me, and the thirst unbearably. Had I ever been that powerful creature who so dazzled many that he could slaughter a gathering of mortals and no one would dare accuse save in whispers? Had I ever …? But there was too much to remember, and for how long would I remember before even the smallest part of my power was restored?

But she was staring at me with brilliant inquisitive eyes.

Then came from my lips the truth which I could no longer hide.

"It was the blood of the living, beautiful girl, always the blood of the living," I said desperately. "It is the blood of the living and only the blood of the living and must be the blood of the living, do you understand? It's how I exist and always have existed since I was taken out of mortal life by malicious and disciplined hands."

She made a small frown as she stared at me, but she did not look away. Then she nodded as if to tell me that I might go on.

"Come close to me, Bianca," I whispered. "Believe me when I tell you that I existed when Venice was nothing. When Florence had not risen, I was alive. And I cannot linger long here suffering. I must find blood to restore me. I must have it. I must have it as soon as I can."

Again she nodded. She stared at me as firmly as before. She was shivering, and she brought up out of her clothes a linen handkerchief and wiped at her tears.

What could these words mean to her? They must have sounded like old poetry. How could I expect her to grasp what I had said?

Her eyes never wavered.

"The Evil Doer," she confessed suddenly. "My lord, Amadeo told me," she whispered. "I cannot play the game any longer that I don't know. You feed upon the Evil Doer. Don't be angry. Amadeo confided his secret a long time ago."

I was angry. Instantly and completely, I was angry, but what did it matter? Hadn't this dreadful catastrophe swept everything in its path?

So Amadeo had confided the secret to our beauteous Bianca after all his tears and promises to me! So I had been the fool for confiding in a mere child. So I had been the fool to let Santino live! What did it matter now?

She had grown still and was staring at me yet, her eyes full of the fire of the torch, her lower lip trembling, and a sigh coming out of her as though she was about to cry again.

"I can bring the Evil Doer here to this chamber," she said, her face quickening. "I can bring the Evil Doer down these very steps."

"And suppose such a being should overpower you before you have reached this place," I said in a low voice, "how then should I establish any justice or revenge? No, you cannot take such a risk."

"But I will do it. Rely upon me." Her eyes grew brighter and it seemed she looked about, as though absorbing the beauty of the walls. "How long have I kept your secret? I don't know, only that nothing could pry it from me. And no matter what others suspected never did I betray you with one word."

"My precious, my darling," I whispered. "You will not take such risks for me. Let me think now, let me use whatever powers of mind still remain to me. Let us sit here in quiet."

She seemed perturbed and then her face hardened.

"Give me the Blood, my lord," she said suddenly, her voice low and quick. "Give it to me. Make me what you made Amadeo. Make me a blood drinker, and then I will have the strength to bring the Evil Doer to you. You know it is the way."

I was completely caught off guard.

I cannot say that in my burnt soul I had not thought of this very action—I had thought of it

immediately when I had heard her weeping—but to hear it come from her own lips, and with such spirit, that was more than I had ever expected, and I knew as I had known from the beginning that it was the perfect plan.

But I must think on this! Not only for her sake, but for my own. Once the magic had worked in her—assuming that I had the strength to give it—how then would we, two weak blood drinkers, hunt the city of Venice for the blood we needed and then make the long journey North?

As a mortal she might have brought me to the Alpine pass of Those Who Must Be Kept by means of a wagon and armed guards, whom I might have left in the small hours to visit the chapel alone.

As a blood drinker, she would have to sleep by day with me, and therefore we would both be at the mercy of those who transported the sarcophagi.

In my pain, I could not imagine it.

I could not take all the steps necessary. Indeed, it seemed suddenly that I could think of nothing, and shaking my head, I tried to prevent her from embracing me, from frightening herself all the more by embracing me and feeling the stiff dried creature that I had become.

"Give me the Blood," she said again with urgency. "You have the strength to do it, don't you, my lord? And then I shall bring here all the victims you require! I saw the change in Amadeo afterwards. He didn't have to show me. I will be that strong, will I not? Answer me, Marius. Or tell me, tell me how else I may cure you, or heal you, or bring you comfort in this suffering that I see."

I could say nothing. I was trembling with desire for her, with anger at her youth—at the conspiracy of her and Amadeo against me that he had told her—and consumed with desire for her here and now.

Never had she seemed more alive, more purely human, more utterly natural in her rosy beauty—a thing not to be despoiled.

She settled back as if she knew that she had pushed me a little too hard. Her voice came softer, yet still insistent.

"Tell me again the story of your years," she said, her eyes blazing. "Tell me again of how it was that Venice did not exist or Florence either when you were already Marius, tell me this story once more."

I went for her.

She couldn't have escaped.

In fact I think that she tried to escape. Surely she screamed.

No one outside heard her. I had her too quickly for that, and we were too deep in the golden room.

Pushing the mask aside and covering her eyes with my left hand, I sank my teeth into her throat, and her blood came into me in a rush. Her heart pounded faster and faster. And just

before it made to stop I drew back from her, shaking her violently and crying out against her ear:

"Bianca, wake!"

At once I slashed my tight dried wrist until I saw the seam of blood and this I forced across her open mouth against her tongue.

I heard her hiss and then she clamped her mouth, only to moan hungrily. I drew back the burnt unyielding flesh and cut it open once again for her.

Oh, it was not enough for her—I was too burnt, too weak—and all the while her blood went on a rampage through me, forcing its way into the collapsed and burnt cells that had once been alive.

Again and again I cut my twisted bony wrist and forced it against her mouth, but it was useless.

She was dying! And all the blood she'd given me had been devoured.

Oh, this was monstrous. I couldn't endure it—no, not to see the life of my Bianca snuffed out like one small candle. I should go screaming mad.

At once I stumbled up the stone steps, not caring what my pain or weakness, forging my mind and heart together, and rising up, I opened the bronze door.

Once at the head of the steps above the quais I called to her boatman:

"Hurry," and then went back inside that he should follow me, which he did.

Not one second after he entered the house did I fall upon the poor unfortunate innocent and drink all the blood from him, and then, scarce able to breathe for the comfort and soothing pleasure it gave me, I made my way back to the golden room, to find her where I had left her, dying still, at the foot of the stairs.

"Here now, Bianca, drink, for I have more blood to give," I said against her ear, my cut wrist on her tongue once more. This time the blood flowed from it, scarce a deluge but what she must have and her mouth closed over the fount and she began to pull against my heart.

"Yes, drink, my Bianca, my sweet Bianca," I said, and she in her sighs answered me.

The Blood had imprisoned her tender heart.

The night's dark journey had only begun. I could not send her in search of victims! The magic in her was scarce complete.

Bent over like a hunchback in my weakness, I carried her out and into the gondola, each step achingly painful, my movements slow and unsure.

And, once I had her seated against the cushions, half awake and answering me, her face never more beautiful, never more pale, I took up the solitary oar.

Into the darker regions of Venice I traveled, the mist hanging thick over the canals, to those dimly lighted places where ruffians abound.

"Wake, princess," I said to her, "we are on the silent battlefield, and very soon will see our enemy, and the little war we love so much will begin."

In my pain I could scarcely stand upright, but as always happens in such situations, those we sought came out to do harm to us.

Sensing in my posture and her beauty the very shape of weakness, they forfeited their strength at once.

Into her arms, I easily enticed a proud and youthful victim, "who would pleasure the lady if that's what we wished" and from this one she easily consumed a fatal draught, his dagger falling into the bottom of the boat.

The next victim, a swaggering drunkard who hailed us down with promises of a nearby banquet to which we'd all be admitted, stepped fatally into my grasp.

I had barely the strength for it, and once again the blood ran riot within me, healing me with such violent magic that it bordered upon an increasing pain.

The third who came into our arms was a vagabond, whom I enticed with a coin I did not possess. Bianca took him, her words slurred, disappointed that he had been so frail.

And all of this, beneath the veil of the ink-black night, and far away from the lights of the houses such as our own.

On and on we went. The Mind Gift in me grew stronger with each kill. My pain was eased with each kill. My flesh was more fully restored with each kill.

But it would take a wilderness of kills to restore me, an inconceivable wilderness of victims to bring back to me the vigor which I had possessed before.

I knew that beneath my clothes, I appeared as one made of ropes dipped in pitch, and I could not imagine the dreadful terror that my face had become.

Meantime, Bianca waked from her daze and suffered the pains of her mortal death, and now longed to return to her rooms for fresh clothing so that she might return with me to the golden lined room, in garments fit for her to be my bride.

She had had all too much of the blood of the victims and needed more of mine, but she did not know this, and I did not tell her as much.

Only reluctantly did I concede to her request, taking her back to her palazzo, and waiting uneasily in the gondola until she came, marvelously dressed, to join me, her skin like her purest white pearls.

Forsaking forever her many rooms, she brought with her many bundles, indeed all the clothes she wished to take with her, and all her jewels, and many candles, that we might be together in our hiding place without the roar of the torch.

At last we were in the golden chamber by ourselves, and she was brimming with happiness as she gazed at me, her secretive and silent masked bridegroom.

And only a single candle gave its slender light for us both.

She had spread out a cloak of green velvet that we might sit on it, and so we did.

My legs were crossed, and she leant back on her ankles. My pain was quiet in me yet terrible.

Quiet in that it did not lurch with each breath I took but remained steady and allowed me to breathe as I would.

Out of her many bundles she produced for me a polished mirror with a bone handle.

"Here, take the mask off, if you wish," she said, her oval eyes very brave and hard. "You will not frighten me!"

I looked at her for a long moment, cherishing her beauty, studying all the subtle changes which the Blood had worked in her—how it had made her so extravagantly and richly the replica of her former self.

"You find me pleasing, do you not?" she asked.

"Always," I said. "There was a time when I wanted so to give you the Blood that I couldn't look at you. There was a time when I would not go to your rooms for fear that I should lure you to the Blood with all my charms, such as they ever were."

She was amazed. "I never dreamt it," she said.

I looked into the mirror. I saw the mask. I thought of the name of the Order: Talamasca. I thought of Raymond Gallant.

"You can read nothing of my mind now, can you?" I asked her.

"No," she said, "nothing." She was most puzzled.

"It's the way," I said. "Because I made you. You can read the minds of others, yes.…"

"… yes," she answered. "The minds of our victims, yes, and when the blood flows, I see things. …"

"… yes. And always you will see things, but never with that tool fall for the allure of the innocent, or the blood you drink will suddenly appear on your hands."

"I understand it," she answered too quickly. "So Amadeo told me all that you'd taught him. Only the Evil Doer. Never the innocent, I know."

Again, I felt a terrible anger, that these two, these blessed children, had shut me out. I wondered when and how Amadeo had told her these secrets.

But I knew that I should put such jealousy aside.

The awful, awful sadness was that Amadeo was gone from me. Gone. And I could not possibly bring him back. Amadeo was in the hands of those who meant to do unspeakable things. I could not think of it. I could not. I would go mad.

"Look into the mirror," she said again.

I shook my head.

I removed my left glove and stared at my bony fingers. She gave an awful little cry and then she was ashamed.

"Would you still see my face?" I asked.

"No, not for both our sakes," she said. "Not till you've hunted more and I have traveled with you more and am stronger, the better to be your pupil as I promised, as I will be."

She nodded as she spoke, her voice quite determined.

"Lovely Bianca," I said softly, "meant for such harsh and strong things."

"Yes, and I shall do them. I will always be with you. You will come in time to love me as you loved him."

I didn't answer. The agony of losing him was monstrous. How could I deny it with a single syllable?

"And what is happening to him?" I asked, "or have they merely destroyed him in some hideous fashion, for you know of course that we can die by the light of the sun, or by the heat of a terrible fire."

"No, not die, only suffer," she said quickly, looking at me questioningly. "Are you not the living proof?"

"No, die," I said. "With me it's what I told you, that I have lived for over a thousand years. But with Amadeo? It could be death very easily. Pray that they do not design cruelties but only horrors, that whatever they do, they do it quickly or not at all."

She was filled with fear, and her eyes were watching me as if there were an actual expression on the leather face mask that I wore.

"Come now, you must learn to open this coffin," I said to her. "And before that, I must give you more of my blood. I've taken so many victims, I have more now to give and you must have it or you won't be strong as Amadeo, not at all."

"But … I've changed my clothes," she said. "I don't want to get them bloody."

I laughed. I laughed and laughed. The whole golden chamber echoed with my laughter.

She stared at me blankly.

"Bianca," I said gently. "I promise you, I won't spill a drop."

26

When I awoke, I lay quiet for an hour, weak and keenly in pain. So bad was the pain, in fact, that sleep seem preferable to wakefulness, and I dreamt of things long ago, times when Pandora and I had been together and when it had not seemed possible that we would ever part.

What finally jarred me from my uneasy slumber was the sound of Bianca screaming.

Over and over in terror she screamed.

I rose, somewhat stronger than the night before, and then once I was certain that I had my gloves and mask in place, I crouched beside her coffin and called out to her.

At first she couldn't hear me, so loud were her frantic screams. But at last, she grew quiet in her desperation.

"You have the strength to open the coffin," I said. "I revealed this to you last night. Put your hands against the lid and move it."

"Let me out of it, Marius," she pleaded, sobbing.

"No, you must do it for yourself."

Softer sobs came from her, but she followed my instructions. There came a grinding noise from the marble and the lid moved to one side, and then she rose, pushing the lid out of her way, and she freed herself from the box altogether.

"Come here to me," I said.

She obeyed me, shivering with sobs, and with my gloved hands I stroked her mussed hair.

"You knew you had the strength," I said. "I showed you that even with your mind you could move it."

"Please light the candle," she begged. "I need the light."

I did as she asked me to do. "You must try to quiet your soul," I said. I took a long deep breath. "You're strong now, and after we hunt tonight you'll be even stronger. And as I grow ever more strong, I will give you more of my blood."

"Forgive me for my fear," she whispered.

I had little strength myself to comfort her, but I knew that she needed what little strength I had. It was hitting me again like so many violent blows that my world was dashed, that my house was ruined, that Amadeo was stolen from me.

And then in a half swoon I saw Pandora of long ago, smiling at me, not recriminating me or tormenting me, but only speaking with me, as though we were in the garden together, at the stone table, and talking as we used to do of so many things.

But that was gone. All was gone. Amadeo was gone. My paintings were gone.

And there came again the desperation, the bitterness, the humiliation. I had not thought that such things could be done to me. I had not thought that I could be so miserable. I had believed myself so powerful, so very clever, so very beyond this abject grief.

"Come now, Bianca," I said. "We must go out, we must seek the blood. Come." I consoled her as I consoled myself. "Here, where is your mirror? Where is your comb? Let me comb your pretty hair for you. Look at yourself in the mirror. Did Botticelli ever paint a woman more beautiful?"

She wiped at her red tears.

"Are you happy again?" I asked. "Reach into the depths of your soul. Tell yourself that you are immortal. Tell yourself that death has no power over you. A glorious thing has befallen you here in the darkness, Bianca. You have become forever young, forever beautiful."

I wanted so to kiss her, but I couldn't do this, and so I labored to make my words so many kisses.

She nodded, and as she looked at me a lovely smile broke over her face, and for one moment she fell into a dreaminess which brought back all my memories of Botticelli's genius, and even of the man himself so safely away from all these horrors, living out his life in Florence beyond what I might ever do.

I took the comb from her bundle. I ran it through her hair. I watched her stare at the mask that was my face.

"What is it?" I asked of her gently.

"I want to see how badly—"

"No you don't," I said.

She began to cry again. "But how will you ever be healed? How many nights will it take?"

All her happiness of last night was shattered.

"Come," I said. "We go to hunt. Now put on your cape, and follow me up the steps. We do as we've done before. And don't for a moment doubt your strength, and do always as I tell you."

She would not do as I asked her. She hovered near the coffin, her elbow on the lid, her face stricken.

At last I settled near to her, and I began to speak words I never thought I would hear myself utter.

"You must be the strong one, Bianca," I said, "you must lead us. I haven't the strength for two just now and that is what you are demanding of me. I am ruined inside. I am ruined. No, wait, don't interrupt what I mean to say. And don't shed tears. Listen to me. You must give to me your small reserve of strength for I require it. I have powers quite beyond your imagining. But those powers I cannot reach just now. And until I can reach them, you must lead us forward. Lead us with your thirst and lead us with your wonder, for surely in this state you do see things as never before and you are filled with that wonder."

She nodded her head. Her eyes grew colder and more beautifully calm.

"Don't you see?" I asked. "If you can only come with me through these few nights, you do indeed have immortality?"

She closed her eyes and moaned. "Oh, I love the very sound of your voice," she said, "but I am afraid. In the coffin in the dark when I awoke, it all seemed a poisoned dream, and I fear what they may do to us if they discover what we are, if we fall into their hands, and if … if …"

"Yes, if?"

"If you cannot protect me."

"Ah, yes, if I cannot protect you."

I fell into a silence, sitting there.

Again, it did not seem possible that this had happened to me. My soul was burnt. My spirit was burnt. My will was scarred and my happiness ruined.

I remembered the very first ball, the ball which Bianca had given at our house, and I remembered the dancing and the tables with their golden platters of fruit and spiced meats, the smell of the wine, and the sound of the music, and the many rooms so filled with contented souls, and the paintings looming over all, and it did not seem possible that anyone could bring me down from that when I was so firmly placed in the realm of unsuspecting mortals.

Oh, Santino, I thought, how I do hate you. How I do despise you.

I pictured him again as he had come to me in Rome. I pictured him in his black robes smelling of the earth, his black hair rather vainly clean and long, and his face so very expressive with its large dark eyes, and I hated him.

Would I ever, I thought, have the chance to destroy him? Oh, surely there would come a time when he was not surrounded by so many numbers, when I might have him firmly in my hands and with the Fire Gift make him pay for what he'd done to me.

And Amadeo, where was my Amadeo, and where were my boys who had been so brutally yet carefully taken? I saw again my poor Vincenzo murdered on the floor.

"Marius, my Marius," Bianca said suddenly. "Please, don't sit in such quiet with me." She reached out, her hand pale and fluttering, not daring to touch me. "I am sorry for being so weak. Believe me, I am. What is it that makes you so silent?"

"Nothing, my darling, only the thoughts of my enemy, the one who brought those brandishing the fire, those who destroyed me."

"But you're not destroyed," she said, "and I will somehow get the strength."

"No, stay here for now," I said. "You have done enough. And your poor gondolier, he gave his life for me last night. You stay here now until I return."

She shuddered and reached out as if to take hold of me.

I forced her to remain at a distance.

"You cannot embrace what I am just yet. But I will go out and I will hunt until I am strong

enough to take you from this place and to one that is safe and one where I will be healed completely."

I closed my eyes, though of course she could not see it on account of the mask, and I thought of Those Who Must Be Kept.

My Queen, I pray to you, and I am coming and when I do you will give me the Blood, I thought, but could you not have given me one small vision of warning?

Oh, I had not even thought of this before and now it exploded in my mind. Yes, from her distant throne she could have done it, she could have warned me, could she not?

But how could I ask such a thing from one who for a thousand years had not moved or spoken? Would I never learn?

But what of Bianca who was trembling and begging me to pay attention to her now? I waked from my sleep.

"No, we'll do it as you wanted, I'll go with you," she said piteously. "I'm sorry I was weak. I promised you I would be as strong as Amadeo. I want to be. I'm ready now to go with you."

"No, you aren't," I responded. "You're only more afraid of being left here alone than you are of going. You're afraid that if you stay behind I'll never come back to you."

She nodded her head as if I had forced her to admit it when I had not.

"I'm thirsting," she said softly. She said it with an elegance. And then in wonder. "I'm thirsting for blood. I must go with you."

"Very well then," I answered. "My lovely sweet companion. Strength will come to you. Strength will take up its abode in your heart. Don't fear. I have so much to teach, and as these nights pass, when you and I are comforted, I'll tell you of the others I've known, of their strength and of their beauty."

She nodded again, her eyes widening.

"Do you love me the most," she asked, "that is all I want to know for now and you may lie to me." She smiled, even as the tears stained her cheeks.

"Of course I do," I said. "I love you more than anyone. You're here, are you not? And finding me crushed, you gave your strength to save me."

It was a cold answer, lacking in flattery or kindness, yet it seemed quite enough for her, and it struck me how very different she was from those I had loved before, from Pandora in her wisdom, or Amadeo in his cunning. She seemed endowed with sweetness and intellect in equal measure.

I brought her up the steps with me. We left the small candle behind as if it would be a beacon for our return.

Before I opened the door I listened carefully for the sound of any of Santino's brood. I heard nothing.

We made our way silently through the narrowest canals of the most dangerous portions of the

city. And there we found our victims again, struggling little, drinking much. Into the dirty water we released them afterwards.

Long after she was fragrant and warm from her many kills, a sharp observer of the dark and shining walls, I was still parched and burning. Oh, how dreadful was the pain. How soothing the blood as it flooded my arms and legs.

Near dawn we returned. We had encountered no danger. I was much healed but my limbs were still like sticks, and when I reached beneath my mask, I felt a face which seemed irreparably scarred.

How long would this take? I could not tell Bianca. I could not tell myself.

I knew that in Venice we could not reckon upon too many such nights. We would become known. Thieves and killers would begin to watch for us—the white-faced beauty, the man with the black leather mask.

I had to test the Cloud Gift. Could I carry Bianca with me towards the shrine? Could I make the full journey in one night or would I blunder and leave us scrambling desperately before dawn for some hiding place?

She went to her sleep quietly, with no fear of the coffin. It seemed she would show me her strength to comfort me, and though she could not kiss my face, she put a kiss on her slender fingers and gave it to me with her breath.

I had an hour then until the sunrise, and slipping out of the golden room, I went up and out over the rooftop and lifted my arms. Within moments I was high above the city, moving effortlessly, as though the Cloud Gift had never been harmed in me, and then I was beyond Venice, far beyond it, looking back at it with its many golden lights, and at the satin glimmer of the sea.

My return was swift and accurate, and I came down silently to the golden room with ample time to go to my rest.

The wind had hurt my burnt skin. But it was no matter. I was overjoyed with this discovery, that I could take to the air as well as I had ever done. I knew now that I could soon attempt the journey to Those Who Must Be Kept.

On the next night, my beauty did not wake screaming as she had before.

She was far more clever and ready for the hunt and full of questions.

As we made our way through the canals, I told her the old story of the Druid grove and how I'd been taken there. And how the magic had been given me in the oak. I told her of Mael and how I despised him still and how he had come once to visit me in Venice, and how very strange it had all seemed.

"But I saw this one," she said in a hushed voice, her whisper nevertheless echoing up the walls. "I remember the night that he came to you here. It was the night that I came back from Florence."

I could not think clearly of these things. And it was soothing to me to hear her talk of them.

"I had brought you a painting by Botticelli," she said. "It was small and very pretty and you later thanked me for it. This tall blond one was waiting upon you when I came, and he was ragged and dirty."

These things came clear to me as she spoke. The memories enlivened me.

And then came the hunt, the gush of blood, the death, the body dropped into the canal, and once more the pain rising sharp above the sweetness of the cure, and I fell back into the gondola, weak from the pleasure of it.

"Once more, I have to do it," I told her. She was satisfied, but on we went. And out of another house I drew yet another victim into my arms, breaking his neck in my clumsiness. I took another victim and another, and finally it was only exhaustion which stopped me, for the hurt in me would have no end of blood.

At last when the gondola was tethered, I took her in my arms and wrapping her close to my chest as I had so often done with Amadeo, I rose above the city with her, and flew out and high until I could not even see Venice at all.

I heard her small desperate cries against me, but I told her in a low whisper to be still and trust in me, and then bringing her back, I set her down on the stone stairs above the quais.

"We were with the clouds, my little princess," I said to her. "We were with the winds, and the purest things of the skies."

She was shivering from the cold.

I brought her down with me into the golden room.

The wind had made a wild tangle of her hair. Her cheeks were flushed and her lips bloodred.

"But what did you do?" she asked. "Did you spread wings like a bird to carry me?"

"I had no need of them," I said, as I lighted the candles one by one until we had many and the room seemed warm.

I reached up beneath my mask. And then I took it off and turned to look at her.

She was shocked, but only for a moment, and then she came to me, peering into my eyes, and she kissed my lips.

"Marius, I see you again," she said. "You are there."

I smiled. I went past her and lifted the mirror.

I couldn't see myself in this monstrosity. But my lips did cover my teeth at last, and my nose had taken some shape, and my eyes once again had lids. My hair was thick and white and full as it had been before and it hung to my shoulders. It made my face all the more black. I put aside the looking glass.

"Where will we go when we leave here?" she asked me. How steady she seemed, how unafraid.

"To a magical place, a place you would not believe if I told you of it," I answered. "Princess of

the skies."

"Can I do this?" she asked. "Go up into the heavens?"

"No, darling one," I said, "not for centuries. It takes time and blood to make such strength. Some night however it will come to you, and you'll feel the strangeness, the loneliness of it."

"Let me put my arms around you," she said.

I shook my head.

"Talk to me, tell me stories," she said. "Tell me of Mael."

We made a place to sit against the wall, and we were warm together.

I began to talk, slowly I think, pouring out old tales.

I told her of the Druid grove again, and how I had been the god there and fled those who would have entrapped me, and I saw her eyes grow wide. I told her of Avicus and Zenobia, of our hunting in the city of Constantinople. I told her of how I cut Zenobia's beautiful black hair.

And telling these tales, I felt calmer and less sad and broken and able to do what I must do.

Never in all my time with Amadeo had I told such stories. Never with Pandora had it been so simple. But with this creature it seemed only natural to talk and to find consolation in it.

And I remembered that when first I had set eyes upon Bianca I had dreamt of this very thing, that she would be with me in the Blood and that we should speak together so easily.

"But let me tell you prettier stories," I said, and I talked of when I had lived in old Rome, and I had painted on the walls, and my guests had laughed and drunk their wine, and rolled about on the grass of my garden.

I made her laugh and then it seemed my pain was gone for a moment, gone in the sound of her voice.

"There was one I loved very much," I said.

"Tell me of him," she said.

"No, it was a woman," I replied. I amazed myself to speak of such a thing. Yet I went on speaking. "I knew her when we were mortals together. I was a young man and she was a child. In those times, as now, marriages were made when women were but children but her father refused me. I never forgot her.

"And then later, after the Blood was in me, we came together she and I.…"

"Go on, you must tell me. Where did you come together?"

"And the Blood went into her," I said, "and the two of us were together. We were together for two hundred years."

"Oh, such a long time," she said.

"Yes, it was a long time, though it did not seem so then. Every night was new and I loved her and she loved me, of course, and we quarreled so often.…"

"But was it a good quarreling?" she asked.

"Yes, it was, how very right of you to ask that question," I said. "It was a good quarreling until

the last."

"What was the last?" she asked gently.

"I did a cruel and mistaken thing to her. I did a wrong thing. I left her without warning and without recourse, and now I can't find her."

"You mean you search for her even now?"

"I don't search because I don't know where to search," I said, lying just a little, "but I look always.…"

"Why did you do it?" she asked. "Why did you leave her as you described?"

"Out of love and anger," I said. "And it was the first time that the Satan worshipers had come, you see. Those of the very same ilk that burnt my house and took Amadeo. Only it was centuries ago, can you understand? They came. Oh, not with my enemy, Santino. Santino didn't exist then. Santino is no ancient one. But it was the same tribe, the same ones who believe they are put here on Earth as blood drinkers to serve the Christian God."

I could feel her shock, though for a moment she said nothing, and then she spoke.

"So this was why they cried out about blasphemy," she said.

"Yes, and long long ago, they said similar things as they came to us. They threatened us, and they wanted, they wanted what we knew."

"But how did this divide you and the woman?"

"We destroyed them. We had to. And she knew that we had to do it, and afterwards, when I fell sullen and listless and would say nothing, she was angry with me, and I grew angry with her."

"I see," she answered.

"It didn't have to be, this quarrel. I left her. I left her because she was resolute and strong and had known that the Satan worshipers had to be destroyed. And I had not known and even now, all these many centuries later, I have fallen into the same error.

"In Rome, I knew they existed, these creatures; in Rome, this Santino came to me. In Rome, I should have destroyed him and his followers. But I would have no part of it, you see, and so he came after me, and burnt my house and all I loved."

She was shocked and for a long time said nothing.

"You love her still, this woman," she said.

"Yes, but you see, I never stop loving anyone. I will never stop loving you."

"Are you certain of it?"

"Completely," I answered. "I loved you when first I saw you. Haven't I told you?"

"In all these years, you've never stopped thinking of her?"

"No, never stopped loving her. Impossible to stop thinking of her or loving her. Even the details of her remain with me. Loneliness and solitude have imprinted her most strongly on my mind. I see her. I hear her voice. She had a lovely clear voice." I mused. I went on.

“She was tall; she had brown eyes, with thick brown eyelashes. Her hair was long and rippling and dark brown. She wore it loose when she wandered. Of course I remember her in the softly draped clothes of those ancient times, and I cannot envision her as she might be in these years. And so she seems some goddess to me or saint, I’m not certain which.…”

She said nothing. Then finally she spoke.

“Would you leave me for her if you could?”

“No, if I found her, we would all of us be together.”

“Oh, that’s too lovely,” she said.

“I know it can be that way, I know it can and it will be, all of us together, you and she and I. She lives, she thrives, she wanders, and there will come a time when you and I will be with her.”

“How do you know that she lives? What if … but I don’t want my words to hurt you.”

“I have hope that she lives,” I said.

“Mael, the fair one, he told you.”

“No. Mael knows nothing of her. Nothing. I don’t believe I ever spoke one sacred word of her to Mael. I have no love for Mael. I have not called out to him in these terrible nights of suffering to aid us. I would not have him see me as I am now.”

“Don’t be angry,” she said soothingly. “Don’t feel the pain of it. I understand. You were speaking softly of the woman.…”

“Yes,” I said. “Perhaps I know that she lives because I know that she would never destroy herself without first finding me and making certain that she had taken her leave of me, and not having found me, and having no proof that I am lost, she can’t do it. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, I do,” she said. She crept closer to me, but she understood when with my gloved hand I touched her gently and moved her away.

“What was the woman’s name?” she asked.

“Pandora,” I said.

“I shall never be jealous of her,” she said softly.

“No, you must never but how can you say such a thing so quickly? How do you know?”

She answered calmly, sweetly.

“You speak too reverently of her for me to be jealous,” she said, “and I know that you can love both of us, because you loved Amadeo and me. I saw this with my own eyes.”

“Oh, yes, you are so right,” I said. I was almost weeping. I thought in my secret heart of Botticelli, the man himself standing in his studio staring at me, wondering helplessly what sort of strange patron I was, and never dreaming that my hunger and adoration were commingled, never dreaming of a danger which had come so close.

“It’s almost dawn,” she said. “I feel cold now. And nothing matters. Do you feel the same way?”

“Soon we will leave here,” I said in answer, “and we will have golden lamps around us. And a

hundred fine candles. Yes, one hundred white candles. And we'll be warm where there is snow."

"Ah, my love," she said softly. "I believe in you with my soul."

The next night we hunted once more and this time as if it were to be our last in Venice. There seemed no end to the blood I could imbibe.

And without confiding it to Bianca, I was eternally listening for Santino's brigands, quite certain that at any moment they might return.

Long after I had brought her back for safekeeping in the golden room, and seen her nestled there amid her bundles of clothes and soft burning candles, I went out to hunt again, moving swiftly over the rooftops, and catching the worst and strongest of the killers of the city.

I wondered that my hunger did not bring some reign of peace to Venice, so savage was I in cleaning out those bent upon evil. And when I was done with blood I went to the secret places in my burnt-out palazzo and gathered the gold which others hadn't been able to find.

Finally, I went to the very highest roof that I could discover and I looked out over Venice, and I said my farewell to it. My heart was broken and I did not know what would restore it.

My Perfect Time had ended for me in agony. It had ended for Amadeo in disaster. And perhaps it had ended for my fair Bianca as well.

At last I knew from my gaunt and blackened limbs—so little healed by so many kills—that I must press on to Those Who Must Be Kept, and I must share the secret with Bianca, for young as she was, I had no real choice.

It faintly excited me in my crushing misery that I could share the secret at last. Oh, what a terrible thing it was to put such a weight upon such tender shoulders, but I was weary of the pain and the loneliness. I had been conquered. And I only wanted to reach the shrine with Bianca in my arms.

27

At last it was time for the journey. It was far too dangerous for us to remain in Venice, and I knew that I could carry us to the shrine.

Taking one bundle of clothing with us, and as much of my gold as I could carry, I wrapped Bianca tightly against me and in less than half of one night, crossed the mountains, in bitter winds and snow.

By now Bianca was accustomed to certain wonders, and to be set down in a snow-filled mountain pass did not alarm her.

But within moments we were both painfully aware that I had made a desperate error in judgment. I was not strong enough in my present state to open the door of the shrine.

It was I, of course, who had created this ironbound stone door to block any human assault, and after several pathetic attempts to open it, I had to confess that it was not within my power, and we must find some other shelter before dawn.

Bianca began to weep, and I became angry with her. I made another assault upon the door just to spite her, and then stood back and bid the door open with all the power of my mind.

There was no result, and the wind and the snow beat down hard against us, and Bianca's weeping infuriated me to where I spoke words that weren't true.

"I made this door and I shall open it," I declared. "Only give me time to determine what I must do."

She turned away from me, visibly hurt by my anger, and then in a miserable yet humble voice she asked me,

"What is inside this place? I can hear a dreadful sound from beyond the door, all too like the sound of a heartbeat. Why have we come here? Where shall we go if we cannot find shelter here?"

All of these questions angered me, but when I looked at Bianca, when I saw her sitting on the rock where I had placed her, the snow falling on her head and shoulders, her head bowed, her tears glistening and red as always, I felt ashamed that I had so used her in my weakness and that I needed so to be angry with her now.

"Be still and I shall open it," I said to her. "You have no knowledge of what lies within. But you will in time."

I gave a great sigh and stood back from the door, my burnt hand still tightened on the iron handle and with all my strength I pulled, but I could not make the door budge.

The absolute folly of it gripped me. I could gain no admittance! I was too weak, and for how long I would be too weak I didn't know. And yet I made one attempt after another, only so that Bianca would believe that I could protect her, that I could gain entry to this strange place.

Finally I turned my back on the Holy of Holies, and I went to her, and gathered her to me, and covered her head and tried to warm her as best I could.

"Very soon, I shall tell you all," I said, "and I shall find us shelter this night. Don't doubt. For now, let me say only that this is a place which I built and which is known to me only and which I'm too weak now to enter as you can see."

"Forgive me that I cried," she said gently. "You won't see tears from me again. But what is the sound I hear? Can't humans hear it?"

"No, they cannot," I answered. "Please be still for now, my brave darling."

But at that moment, that very single moment, another new and altogether different sound caught my ear, a sound which could have been heard by anyone.

It was the sound of the stone door opening behind me. I knew the sound infallibly and I turned around, unbelieving and as fearful as I was amazed.

Quickly I gathered Bianca to me, and we stood before the door as it opened wide.

My heart was racing. I could hardly fill my lungs with air.

I knew that only Akasha could have done this, and as the door fell all the way back, I perceived another miracle of equal kindness and beauty of which I'd never dreamt.

A rich and abundant light poured forth from the door of the stone passage.

For a moment I was too stunned to move. Then pure happiness descended upon me as I gazed upon this flood of beautiful light. And it seemed I could not possibly fear it or doubt its meaning.

"Come now, Bianca," I said to her, as I guided her forward at my side.

She clutched her bundle to her chest as though she would die if she let go of it, and I held her as though without her to witness with me I would fall.

We stepped into the stone passage and made our way slowly into the bright and flickering light of the chapel. All its many bronze lamps were aglow. Its one hundred candles blazed exquisitely. And no sooner had I taken note of these things, amid a subdued glory that filled me with joy, than the stone door was closed behind us with a crushing sound as rock sounded against rock.

I found myself staring over the row of one hundred candles up into the faces of the Divine Mother and Father, seeing them as perhaps Bianca would see them, and certainly with refreshed and grateful eyes.

I knelt down, and Bianca knelt at my side. I was trembling. Indeed my shock was so great that I could not for a moment fill my lungs with air. There was no way that I could explain to Bianca the full import of what had taken place. I would only frighten her if I tried to do so. And careless words spoken before my Queen would be unforgivable.

"Don't speak," I finally said in a whisper. "They are our Parents. They have opened the door,

when I could not. They have lighted the lamps for us. They have lighted the candles. You cannot imagine the worth of this blessing. They have welcomed us inside. We can answer them only with prayers."

Bianca nodded. Her face was full of piety and wonder. Did it matter to Akasha that I had brought to her feet an exquisite blood drinker?

In a low reverent voice I recounted the story of the Divine Parents but only in the simplest and grandest terms. I told Bianca how they had come to be the very first blood drinkers thousands of years ago in Egypt, and that now they no longer hungered for blood or even so much as spoke or moved. I was their keeper and their guardian and had been so for all of my life as a blood drinker and so it would always be.

I said these things so that nothing would alarm Bianca and she would feel no dread of the two still figures who stared forward in horrifying silence, and did not seem even to blink. And so it was that tender Bianca was initiated into these powerful mysteries with great care and thought them beautiful and nothing more.

"It was to this chapel," I explained, "that I would come when I left Venice, and I would light the lamps for the King and the Queen, and bring fresh flowers. You see, there are none now. But I will bring them when I can."

Once again, I realized that in spite of my enthusiasm and gratitude, I couldn't really make her know what a miracle it was that Akasha had opened the door for us, or lighted the lamps. Indeed, I didn't dare to do it, and now that I had finished this respectful recital, I closed my eyes, and in silence I thanked both Akasha and Enkil that they had admitted me to the sanctuary, and that they had greeted us with the gift of light.

Over and over I offered my prayers, perhaps unable myself to grasp the fact that they had so welcomed me, and not too certain of what it really meant. Was I loved? Was I needed? It seemed I must accept without presumption. It seemed I must be grateful without imagining things that weren't so.

I knelt in quietude for a long time and Bianca must surely have observed me for she too was quiet, and then I could bear the thirst no longer. I stared at Akasha. I desired the Blood. I could think of nothing but the Blood. All my injuries were as so many open wounds in me. And my wounds bled for the Blood. I had to attempt to take the all-powerful Blood from the Queen.

"My beauty," I said, placing my gloved hand on Bianca's tender arm. "I want you to go to the corner there and to sit quiet, and to say nothing of what you see."

"But what will happen?" she whispered. For the first time she sounded afraid. She looked about herself at the shivering flames of the lamps, at the glowing candles, at the painted walls.

"Do as I tell you," I said. I had to say it, and she had to do it, for how was I ever to know whether the Queen would let me drink?

As soon as Bianca was in the corner with her heavy cloak wrapped around her and as far away

as possible, for whatever good it would do, I prayed in silence for the Blood.

"You see me and what I am," I said silently, "you know that I have been burnt. This is why you opened the door for me and admitted me, because I could not do it, and surely you see what a monster I have become. Have mercy on me and let me drink from you as you have done in the past. I need the Blood. I need it more than I have ever needed it. And so I come to you with respect."

I removed my leather mask and laid it aside. I was as hideous now as those old burnt gods whom Akasha had once crushed when they came to her. Would she refuse me in the same manner? Or had she known all along what had befallen me? Had she understood completely all things before the door was ever opened?

I rose slowly until I knelt at her feet and I could put my hand upon her throat, all the while tensed for the threat of Enkil's arm, but it did not come.

I kissed her throat, feeling her plaited hair against me and looking at her white skin before me, and hearing only Bianca's soft tears.

"Don't cry, Bianca," I whispered.

Then I sank my teeth suddenly, viciously, as I had so often done, and the thick blood flooded into me, brilliant and hot as the lamplight and the light of the candles, pouring into me as if her heart were pumping it willingly into me, racing the beat of my own heart. My head grew light. My body grew light.

Far away Bianca wept. Why was she afraid?

I saw the garden. I saw the garden I had painted after I had fallen in love with Botticelli, and it was filled with his orange trees and with his flowers and yet it was my garden, the garden of my father's house outside Rome long long ago. How could I ever forget my own garden? How could I ever forget the garden where I had first played as a child?

In memory I went back to those days in Rome when I had been mortal, and there was my garden, the garden of the villa of my father, and I was walking in the soft grass and listening to the sound of the fountain, and then it seemed that all through time, the garden changed but never changed, and it was always there for me.

I lay down on the grass, and the branches of the trees moved above me. I heard a voice speaking to me, rapidly and sweetly, but I didn't know what it was saying, and then I knew that Amadeo was hurt, that he was in the hands of those who would bring pain and evil to him, and that I could not go to him now, I would only stumble into their snares if I did, and that I must stay here.

I was the Keeper of the King and the Queen as I had told Bianca, yes, the Keeper of the King and the Queen, and I must let Amadeo go in Time, and perhaps were I to do as I should, perhaps Pandora would be returned to me, Pandora who traveled the northern cities of Europe now, Pandora who had been seen.

The garden was verdant and fragrant and I saw Pandora clearly. I saw her in her soft white dress, her hair loose as I had described it to Bianca. Pandora smiled. She walked towards me. She spoke to me. *The Queen wants us to be together,* she said. Her eyes were large and wondering and I knew she was very close to me, very close, so close that I could almost touch her hand.

I can't be imagining this, no, I cannot, I thought. And there came back to me again vividly the sound of Pandora's voice, as she quarreled with me on our first night as bride and groom: *Even as this new blood races through me still, eats at me and transforms me, I cling to neither reason nor superstition for my safety. I can walk through a myth and out of it! You fear me, because you don't know what I am. I look like a woman, I sound like a man, and your reason tells you the sum total is impossible.*

I was looking into Pandora's eyes. She sat on the garden bench, pulling the flower petals out of her brown hair, a girl again in the Blood, a woman-girl forever, as Bianca would be a young woman forever.

I reached out on either side of me and felt the grass beneath my hands.

Suddenly I fell backwards, out of the dream garden, out of the illusion and found myself lying quite still on the floor of the chapel, between the high bank of perfect candles, and the steps of the dais where the enthroned couple kept their ancient place.

Nothing seemed changed about me. Even Bianca's crying came as before.

"Be quiet now, darling," I said to her. But my eyes were fastened to the face of Akasha above me, and to her breasts beneath the golden silk of her Egyptian dress.

It seemed that Pandora had been with me, that she had been in the very chapel. And the beauty of Pandora seemed bound up with the beauty and presence of Akasha in some intimate way which I could not understand.

"What are these portents?" I whispered. I sat up and then rose to my knees. "Tell me, my beloved Queen. What are these portents? Did you once bring Pandora to me because you wanted us to be together? Do you remember when Pandora spoke those words to me?"

I fell silent. But my mind spoke to Akasha. My mind pleaded with her. Where is Pandora? Will you bring Pandora to me again?

A long interval passed and then I rose to my feet.

I went round the bank of candles and found my precious companion quite distraught over the simple wonder she had beheld of me drinking from the immobile Queen.

"And then you fell back, as though you were lifeless," she recounted. "And I didn't dare to go to you, as you'd said that I mustn't move."

I comforted her.

"And then finally you waked, and you spoke of Pandora, and I saw that you were so … so much healed."

This was true. I was more robust all over, my arms and legs thicker, heavier, and my face had

more of its natural contour. Indeed, I was still badly burnt, but a man of some stature and seeming strength now, and indeed I could feel more of the old strength in my limbs.

But it was now only two hours from dawn, and being quite unable to open the door, and not in any mood to pray that Akasha work common miracles for anyone, I knew I had to give my blood to Bianca, and so this is what I did.

Would it offend the Queen, that I, having just drunk from her would offer this powerful blood to a child? There was nothing to do but find out.

I didn't frighten Bianca with any warnings or doubts on the matter. I beckoned to her that she should come to me and lie in my arms.

I cut my wrist for her and told her to drink. I heard her gasp with the shock of the powerful blood and her delicate fingers stiffened to make her two hands into claws.

At last of her own volition she drew back and sat up slowly beside me, her eyes vague and full of reflected light.

I kissed her forehead.

"What did you see in the Blood, my beauty?" I asked.

She shook her head as though she had no words for it, and then she laid her head on my chest.

There was only serenity and peace in the chapel, and as we lay down to sleep together, the lamps slowly burnt out.

At last the candles were down to a few, and I could feel the dawn coming, and the chapel was warm as I had promised, and glittering with its riches, but above all with its solemn King and Queen.

Bianca had lost consciousness. I had perhaps three quarters of an hour before the day's slumber would come for me as well.

I looked up at Akasha, delighting in the last shimmer of the dying candles in her eyes.

"You know what a liar I am, don't you?" I asked her. "You know how wicked I have been. And you play my game with me, don't you, my Sovereign?"

Did I hear laughter?

Maybe I was going mad. There had been enough pain for it and enough magic; there had been enough hunger, and enough blood.

I looked down at Bianca who rested so trustingly on my arm.

"I have planted in her mind the image of Pandora, haven't I?" I whispered, "so that wherever she goes with me she will search. And from her angel mind, Pandora cannot fail to pluck my image. And so we may find each other, Pandora and I, through her. She doesn't dream of what I've done. She thinks only to comfort me with her listening, and I, though loving her, take her North with me, into the lands where Raymond Gallant has told me that Pandora was last seen.

"Oh, very wicked, but what does it take to sustain life when life is bruised and burnt as badly as my life has been? For me it is this extravagant and slender ambition, and for it I abandon

Amadeo whom I should rescue as soon as my strength is restored."

There was a sound in the chapel. What was it? The sound of the wax of the last candle?

It seemed a voice was speaking to me soundlessly.

You cannot rescue Amadeo. You are the keeper of the Mother and the Father.

"Yes, I grow sleepy," I whispered. I closed my eyes. "I know such things, I have always known them."

You go on, you seek Raymond Gallant, you must remember. Look at his face again.

"Yes, the Talamasca," I said. "And the castle called Lorwich in East Anglia. The place he called the Motherhouse. Yes. I remember both sides of the golden coin."

I thought dreamily of that supper when he had come upon me so stealthily and stared at me with such innocent and inquisitive eyes.

I thought of the music and the way Amadeo smiled at Bianca as they danced together. I thought of everything.

And then in my hand I saw the golden coin and the engraved image of the castle, and I thought, Am I not dreaming? But it seemed that Raymond Gallant was talking to me, talking very distinctly:

"Listen to me, Marius, remember me, Marius. We know of her, Marius. We watch and we are always here."

"Yes, go North," I whispered.

And it seemed that the Queen of Silence said without a word that she was content.

28

As I look back now, I have no doubt that Akasha turned me away from the rescue of Amadeo, and as I consider all that I have revealed here I have no doubt of her intervention in my life at other periods.

Had I attempted to go South to Rome, I would have fallen into Santino's hands and met with destruction. And what better lure was there than the promise that I might soon meet with Pandora?

Of course my encounter with Raymond Gallant was quite real, and the details of this were vivid within my mind, and Akasha no doubt subtracted these details by virtue of her immense power.

The description of Pandora which I had confided to Bianca was also quite real, and this too might have been known to the Queen had she opened her ears to listen to my distant prayers from Venice.

Whatever the case, from the night we arrived at the shrine I was set upon a course of recovery and of a search for Pandora.

If anyone had told me that both would take some two hundred years, I might have met with despair, but I did not know this. I knew only that I was safe within the shrine, and I had Akasha to protect me, and Bianca to content me.

For well over a year I drank from the fount of the Mother. And for six months of this time, I fed my powerful blood to Bianca.

During those nights, when I could not open the stone door, I saw myself grow more robust in appearance with each divine feast, and I spent the long hours talking in respectful whispers with Bianca.

We took to conserving the oil for the lamps, and the fine candles which I had stored behind the Divine Parents, for we had no inkling of how long it would be before I could open the door and take us to hunting in the distant Alpine towns or cities.

At last there came a night when it occurred to me most strongly to venture out, and I was clever enough to know that this thought had not come to me at random. It had been suggested to me by a series of images. I could open the door now. I could go out. And I could take Bianca with me.

As for my appearance to the mortal world, my skin was coal black, and heavily scarred in places as though from the stroking of a hot poker. But the face I saw in Bianca's mirror was fully

formed, with the serene expression that has always been so familiar to me. And my body was strong once more, and my hands of which I am so vain were a scholar's hands with long deft fingers.

For another year, I could not dare to send to Raymond Gallant a letter.

Carrying Bianca with me to far-flung towns, I searched hastily and clumsily for the Evil Doer. As such creatures often run in packs, we would enjoy a gluttonous feast; and then I would take such clothes and gold as needed from the dead; and off we would go to the shrine well before daylight.

I think when I look back on it that ten years at least went by in this fashion. But time is so strange with us, how can I be certain?

What I remember was that a powerful bond existed between me and Bianca that seemed absolutely unshakable. As the years passed, she was as much my companion in silence as she had ever been in conversation.

We moved as one, without argument or consultation.

She was a proud and merciless hunter, dedicated to the majesty of Those Who Must Be Kept, and always drank from more than one human victim whenever possible. Indeed, there seemed no limit to the blood she could imbibe. She wanted strength, both from me and the Evil Doer whom she took with righteous coldness.

Riding the winds in my arms, she turned her eyes to the stars fearlessly. And often she spoke to me softly and easily of her mortal life in Florence, telling me the stories of her youth, and of how she had loved her brothers who had so admired Lorenzo the Magnificent. Yes, she had seen my beloved Botticelli many a time and told me in detail of paintings which I had not seen. She sang songs to me now and then which she composed herself. She spoke in sadness of the death of her brothers and how she had fallen into the power of her evil kinsmen.

I loved listening to her as much as I loved talking to her. Indeed, it was so fluid between us that I still wonder at it.

And though on many a morn, she combed out her lovely hair and replaited it with her ropes of tiny pearls, she never complained of our lot, and wore the cast-off tunics and cloaks of the men we slew as I did.

Now and then, slipping discreetly behind the King and Queen, she took from her precious bundle a gorgeous gown of silk and clothed herself with care in it, this to sleep in my arms, after I had covered her with warm compliments and kisses.

Never had I known such peace with Pandora. Never had I known such warm simplicity.

Yet it was Pandora who filled my mind—Pandora traveling the cities of the North, Pandora with her Asian companion.

At last there came an evening when, after a furious hunt, in exhaustion and satiation, Bianca asked to be returned early to the shrine, and I found myself in possession of a priceless three

hours before dawn.

I also found myself in possession of a new measure of strength which I had perhaps unwittingly concealed from her.

To a distant Alpine monastery I went, one which had suffered much due to the recent rise of what scholars call the Protestant Reformation. Here I knew I would find frightened monks who would take my gold and assist me in sending a letter to England.

Entering the empty chapel first, I gathered up every good beeswax candle in the place, these to replenish those of the shrine, and I put all of the candles into a sack which I had brought with me.

I then went to the scriptorium where I found an old monk who was writing very fast by his single candle.

He looked up as soon as he found me standing in his presence.

"Yes," I said at once, speaking his German dialect. "I am a strange man come to you in a strange way, but believe me when I say that I am not evil."

He was gray-haired, tonsured, and wore brown robes, and he was a bit cold in the empty scriptorium. He was utterly fearless as he gazed at me.

But I told myself that I had never looked more human. My skin was as black as that of a Moor and I wore the rather drab gray garments which I had taken from some doomed miscreant.

Now as he continued to stare, quite obviously not in any mood to sound a general alarm, I did my old trick of placing before him a purse of gold coins for the good of the monastery which needed it badly.

"I must write a letter," I said, "and see that it reaches a place in England."

"A Catholic place?" he asked as he looked at me, his gray eyebrows thick and arched as he raised them.

"I should think so," I said with a shrug. Of course I couldn't describe to him the secular nature of the Talamasca.

"Then think again," he said. "For England is no longer Catholic."

"What on earth do you mean?" I asked. "Surely the Reformation has not reached such a place as England."

He laughed. "No, not the Reformation precisely," he said. "Rather the vanity of a King who would divorce his Spanish Catholic wife, and who has denied the power of the Pope to rule against him."

I was so dejected that I sat down on a nearby bench though I'd been given no invitation to do it.

"What are you?" asked the old monk. He laid down his quill pen. He stared at me in the most thoughtful manner.

"It's no matter," I said wearily. "Do you think there's no chance that a letter from here could

reach a castle called Lorwich in East Anglia?"

"I don't know," said the monk. "It might well happen. For there are some who oppose King Henry VIII and others who do not. But in general he has destroyed the monasteries of England. And so any letter you write from me cannot go to one of them, only directly to the castle. And how is that to happen? We have to think on it. I can always attempt it."

"Yes, please, let us attempt it."

"But first, tell me what you are," he asked again. "I won't write the letter for you unless you do so. Also I want to know why you stole all the good candles in the chapel and left the bad ones."

"You know I did this?" I asked. I was becoming extremely agitated. I thought I had been silent as a mouse.

"I'm not an ordinary man," he said. "I hear things and see things that people don't. I know you're not human. What are you?"

"I can't tell you," I said. "Tell me what you think I am. Tell me if you can find any true evil in my heart. Tell me what you see in me."

He gazed at me for a long time. His eyes were deeply gray, and as I looked at his elderly face I could easily reconstruct the young man he had been, rather resolute, though his personal strength of character was far greater now even though he suffered human infirmity.

At last he turned away and looked at his candle as though he had completed his examination of me.

"I am a reader of strange books," he said in a hushed but clear voice. "I have studied some of those texts which have come out of Italy pertaining to magic and astrology and things which are often called forbidden."

My pulse quickened. This seemed extraordinary good fortune. I did not interrupt.

"I have a belief that there are angels cast out of Heaven," he said, "and that they do not know what they are any longer. They wander in a state of confusion. You seem one of those creatures, though if I am right, you will not be able to confirm it."

I was so struck by the curiosity of this concept that I could say nothing. At last I had to answer.

"No, I'm not such. I know it for certain. But I wish that I were. Let me confide in you one terrible secret."

"Very well," he said. "You may go to Confession to me if you like, for I am an ordained priest, not simply a monk, but I doubt I shall be able to give you Absolution."

"This is my secret. I have existed since the time when Christ walked the Earth though I never knew of him."

He considered this calmly for a long time, looking into my eyes and then away to his candle, as if this were a little ritual with him. Then he spoke:

"I don't really believe you," he said. "But you are a mystifying being, with your black skin and

blue eyes, with your blond hair, and with your gold which you so generously put before me. I'll take it, of course. We need it."

I smiled. I loved him. Of course I wouldn't tell him such a thing. What would it mean to him?

"All right," he said, "I'll write your letter for you."

"I can write it myself," I said, "if only you give me the parchment and the pen. I need for you to send it, and establish this place for the receipt of an answer to it. It's the answer which is so important."

He obeyed me at once, and I turned to the task, gladly accepting the quill from him. I knew he was watching me as I wrote but it didn't matter.

Raymond Gallant,

I have suffered a dreadful catastrophe, following upon the very night which I met with you and talked to you. My palazzo in Venice was destroyed by fire, and I myself injured beyond my own imagining. Please be assured that this was not the work of mortal hands, and some night should we meet I shall most willingly explain to you what happened. In fact, it would give me great satisfaction to describe to you in detail the identity of the one who sent his emissaries to destroy me. As for now, I am far too weakened to attempt vengeance either in words or actions.

I am also too weakened to journey to Lorwich in East Anglia, and thanks to forces which I cannot describe I do have shelter similar to that which you offered me.

But I beg you to tell me if you have had any recent intelligence of my Pandora. I beg you to tell me if she has made herself known to you. I beg you to tell me if you can help me to reach her by letter.

Marius.

Having finished the letter, I gave it over to the priest who promptly added the proper address of the monastery, folded the parchment and sealed it.

We sat in silence for a long moment.

"How shall I find you," he asked, "when an answer reaches here?"

"I'll know," I said, "as you knew when I took the candles. Forgive me for taking them. I should have gone into a city and bought them from a proper merchant. But I have become such a traveler of the sleepy night. I do things far too much at random."

"So I can see," he answered, "for though you began with me in German, you are now speaking Latin in which you wrote your letter. Oh, don't be angry. I didn't read a single word, but I knew it was Latin. Perfect Latin. A Latin such as no one speaks today."

“Is my gold recompense enough?” I asked. I rose from the bench. It was now time for me to be off.

“Oh, yes, and I look forward to your return. I’ll see the letter is sent tomorrow. If the Lord of Lorwich in East Anglia has sworn his allegiance to Henry VIII, you’ll no doubt have your answer.”

I was off so swiftly that to my new friend, it no doubt seemed that I had disappeared.

And as I returned to the shrine, I observed for the first time the beginnings of a human settlement all too close to us.

Of course we were concealed in a tiny valley high upon an ominous cliff. Nevertheless, a small group of huts had caught my eye far below at the foot of the cliff, and I knew what was going to happen.

When I entered the shrine I found Bianca sleeping. No question came from her as to where I had been, and I realized the lengths I had gone to avoid her knowledge of my letter.

I wondered if I might reach England were I to travel the skies alone. But what would I say to her? I had never left her alone and it seemed wrong ever to do so.

Little less than a year went by during which time I passed nightly within hearing distance of the priest to whom I had entrusted my letter.

By this time, Bianca and I had frequently hunted the streets of small Alpine cities in one guise, while buying from their merchants in another.

Now and then we rented rooms for ourselves so that we might enjoy common things, but we were far too fearful to remain anywhere but in the shrine at morning.

All the while, I continued to approach the Queen at intervals. How I chose my moments, I do not know. Perhaps she spoke to me. All I can avow is that I knew when I might drink from her and I did it, and always there came the rapid healing afterwards, the renewal of vigor, and the desire to share my replenished gifts with Bianca.

At last there came a night, when having left a weary Bianca in the shrine once more, I came near to the Alpine monastery and saw my monk standing in the garden with his arms out to the sky in a gesture of such romance and piety that I almost wept to see it.

Softly, without a sound, I entered the cloister behind him.

At once he turned to face me, as if his powers were as great as mine. The wind swept his full brown robes as he came towards me.

“Marius,” he said in a whisper. He gestured to me to be quiet, and led me into the scriptorium.

When I saw the thickness of the letter he drew from his desk I was astonished. That it was open, that the seal was broken, gave me pause.

I looked at him.

“Yes, I read it,” he said. “Did you think I would give it to you without doing so?”

I couldn’t waste any more time. I had to read what was inside the letter. I sat down and

unfolded the pages immediately.

Marius,

Let these words not move you to anger or to hasty decision. What I know of Pandora is as follows. She has been seen by those of us who are knowledgeable in such things in the cities of Nuremberg, Vienna, Prague and Gutenberg. She travels in Poland. She travels in Bavaria.

She and her companion are most clever, seldom disturbing the human population through which they move, but from time to time they set foot in the royal courts of certain kingdoms. It is believed by those who have seen them that they take some delight in danger.

Our archives are filled with accounts of a black carriage that travels by day, comporting within two huge enameled chests in which these creatures are presumed to sleep, protected by a small garrison of pale-skinned human guards who are secretive, ruthless and devoted.

Even the most benign or clever approach to these human guards is followed by certain death as some of our members have learnt for themselves when seeking to penetrate the mystery of these dark travelers.

It is the judgment of some among us here that the guards have received a small portion of the power so generously enjoyed by their master and mistress, thus binding them irrevocably to Pandora and her companion.

Our last sighting of the pair was in Poland. However these beings travel very fast and remain in no one place for any given length of time, and indeed seem more than content to move back and forth across the length and breadth of Europe ceaselessly.

They have been known to go back and forth in Spain and to travel throughout France, but never to linger in Paris. As regards this last city, I wonder if you know why they do not stay there long, or if I must be the one to enlighten you.

I shall tell you what I know. In Paris, now, there exists a great dedicated group of the species which we both understand, indeed, so large a group that one must doubt that even Paris can content them. And having received into our arms one desperate infidel from this group we have learnt much of how these unusual Parisian creatures characterize themselves.

I cannot commit to parchment what I know of them. Let me only say that they are possessed of a surprising zeal, believing themselves to serve God Himself with their strenuous appetite. And should others of the same ilk venture into their domain they do not hesitate to destroy them, declaring them to be blasphemers.

This infidel of which I speak has averred more than once that his brothers and sisters were among those who participated in your great loss and injury. Only you can confirm this for me, as I do not know what is madness here or boasting, or perhaps a blending of the two, and you can well imagine how confounded we are to have one so loquacious and hostile beneath our roof, so eager to answer questions and so frightened to be left unguarded.

Let me also add that piece of intelligence which may matter to you as much now as any which I have pertaining to your lost Pandora.

He who guides this voracious and mysterious band of Paris creatures is none other than your young companion from Venice.

Won over by discipline, fasting, penance and the loss of his former Master—so says this young infidel—your old companion has proved to be a leader of immeasurable strength and well capable of driving out any of his kind who seek to gain a foothold in Paris.

Would that I could tell you more of these creatures. Allow me to repeat what I have suggested above. They believe themselves to be in the service of Almighty God. And from this principle, a considerable number of rules follow.

Marius, I cannot imagine how this information will affect you. I write here only that of which I am most certain.

Now, allow me to play an unusual role, given our respective ages.

Whatever your response to my revelations here, under no circumstances travel overland North to see me. Under no circumstances travel overland North to find Pandora. Under no circumstances travel overland North to find your young companion.

I caution you on all these accounts for two reasons. There are at this time, as you must surely know, wars all over Europe. Martin Luther has fomented much unrest. And in England, our sovereign Henry VIII has declared himself independent of Rome, in spite of much resistance.

Of course we at Lorwich are loyal to our King and his decisions earn only our respect and honor.

But it is no time to be traveling in Europe.

And allow me to warn you on another account which may surprise you. Throughout Europe now there are those who are willing to persecute others for witchcraft on slender

reasons; that is, a superstition regarding witches reigns in villages and towns, which even one hundred years ago would have been dismissed as ridiculous.

You cannot allow yourself to travel overland through such places. Writings as to wizards, Sabbats and Devil worship cloud human philosophy.

And yes, I do fear for Pandora that she and her companion take no seeming notice of these dangers, but it has been communicated to us many times that though she travels overland, she travels very swiftly. Her servants have been known to purchase fresh horses twice or three times within a day, demanding only that the animals be of the finest quality.

Marius, I send you my deepest good wishes. Please write to me again as soon as possible. There are so many questions I wish to ask you. I dare not do so in this letter. I do not know if I dare at all. Let me only express the wish and hope for your invitation.

I must confess to you that I am the envy of my brothers and sisters that I have received your communication. I shall not let my head be turned by this. I am in awe of you and with justification.

Yours in the Talamasca,

Raymond Gallant.

At last I sat back on the bench, the many sheaves of parchment trembling in my left hand, and I shook my head, hardly knowing what I might say to myself, for my thoughts were all a brew.

Indeed, since the night of the disaster in Venice, I had frequently been at a loss for private words, and never did I know it as keenly as now.

I looked down at the pages. My right fingers touched various words, and then I drew back, shaking my head again.

Pandora, circling Europe, within my grasp but perhaps eternally beyond it.

And Amadeo, won over to the creed of Santino and sent to establish it in Paris! Oh, yes, I could envision it.

There came back to me once more the vivid image of Santino that night in Rome, in his black robes, his hair so vainly clean as he approached me and pressed me to come with him to his wretched catacomb.

And here lay the proof now that he had not destroyed my beautiful child, rather he had made of him a victim. He had won him over; he had taken Amadeo to himself! He had more utterly defeated me than ever I had dreamt.

And Amadeo, my blessed and beautiful pupil, had gone from my uncertain tutelage to that perpetual gloom. And yes, oh, yes, I could imagine it. Ashes. I tasted ashes.

A cold shudder ran through me.

I crushed the pages to myself.

Then quite suddenly I became aware that, beside me sat the gray-haired priest, looking at me, very calm as he leaned on his left elbow.

Again I shook my head. I folded the pages of the letter to make of them a packet that I might carry with me.

I looked into his gray eyes.

"Why don't you run from me?" I asked. I was bitter and wanted to weep but this was no place for it.

"You're in my debt," he said softly. "Tell me what you are, if only so that I may know if I've lost my soul by serving you."

"You haven't lost your soul," I said quickly, my wretchedness too plain in my voice. "Your soul has nothing to do with me." I took a deep breath. "What did you make of what you read in my letter?"

"You're suffering," he said, "rather like a mortal man, but you aren't mortal. And this one in England, he is mortal, but he isn't afraid of you."

"This is true," I said. "I suffer, and I suffer for one has done me wrong and I have no vengeance nor justice. But let's not speak of such things. I would be alone now."

A silence fell between us. It was time for me to go but I had not the strength quite yet to do it.

Had I given him the usual purse? I must do it now. I reached inside my tunic and brought it out. I laid it down, and spilled the golden coins so that I might see them in the light of the candle.

Some vague and heated thoughts formed in my mind to do with Amadeo and the brilliance of this gold and of how angry I was, and of how I seethed for vengeance against Santino. I saw ikons with their halos of gold; I saw the coin of the Talamasca made of gold. I saw the golden florins of Florence.

I saw the golden bracelets once worn by Pandora on her beautiful naked arms. I saw the golden bracelets which I had put upon the arms of Akasha.

Gold and gold and gold.

And Amadeo had chosen ashes!

Well, I shall find Pandora once more, I thought. I shall find her! And only if she swears against me will I let her go, will I let her remain with this mysterious companion. Oh, I trembled as I thought of it, as I vowed, as I whispered these wordless thoughts.

Pandora, yes! And some night, for Amadeo, there would be the reckoning with Santino!

A long silence ensued.

The priest beside me was not frightened. I wondered if he could possibly guess how grateful I was that he allowed me to remain there in such precious stillness.

At last, I ran my left fingers over the golden coins.

“Is there enough there for flowers?” I asked, “flowers and trees and beautiful plants in your garden?”

“There is enough there to endow our gardens forever,” he answered.

“Ah forever!” I said. “I have such a love of that word, forever.”

“Yes, it is a timeless word,” he said, raising his mossy eyebrows as he looked at me. “Time is ours, but forever belongs to God, don’t you think?”

“Yes, I do,” I said. I turned to face him. I smiled at him, and I saw the warm impression of this on him just as if I’d spoken kind words to him. He couldn’t conceal it.

“You’ve been good to me,” I said.

“Will you write to your friend again?” he asked.

“Not from here,” I answered. “It’s too dangerous for me. From some other place. And I beg you, forget these things.”

He laughed in the most honest and simple way. “Forget!” he said.

I rose to go.

“You shouldn’t have read the letter,” I said. “It can only cause you worry.”

“I had to do it,” he answered. “Before I gave it to you.”

“I cannot imagine why,” I answered. I walked quietly towards the door of the scriptorium.

He came beside me.

“And so you go then, Marius?” he asked.

I turned around. I lifted my hand in farewell.

“Yes, neither angel nor devil, I go,” I said, “neither good nor bad. And I thank you.”

As I had before, I went from him so swiftly he couldn’t see it, and very soon I was alone with the stars, and staring down on that valley all too near to the chapel where a city was forming at the foot of my high cliff which had been neglected by all mankind for over a millennium.

29

I waited a long time before showing the letter to Bianca.

I never really concealed it from her, for I thought such a thing was dishonest. But as she did not ask me the meaning of the pages which I kept with my few personal belongings, I did not explain them to her.

It was too painful for me to share my sorrow with regard to Amadeo. And as for the existence of the Talamasca, it was too bizarre a tale, and too fully interwoven with my love for Pandora.

But I did leave Bianca alone in the shrine more and more often. Never of course did I abandon her there in the early part of the evening when she depended upon me totally to reach those places where we might hunt. On the contrary, I always took her with me.

It was later in the night—after we had fed—that I would return her to safety and go off alone, testing the limits of my powers.

All the while a strange thing was happening to me. As I drank from the Mother my vigor increased. But I also learned what all injured blood drinkers learn—that in healing I was becoming stronger than I had been before my injury.

Of course I gave Bianca my own blood, but as I grew ever stronger the gap between us became very great and I saw it widening.

There were times, of course, when I put the question in my prayers as to whether Akasha would receive Bianca. But it seemed that the answer was no, and so in fear I didn't dare to test it.

I remembered only too well the death of Eudoxia, and I also remembered the moment when Enkil had lifted his arm against Mael. I could not subject Bianca to possible injury.

Within a short time, I was easily able to take Bianca with me through the night to the nearby cities of Prague and Geneva, and there we indulged ourselves with some vision of the civilization we had once known in Venice.

As for that beautiful capital, I would not return to it, no matter how much Bianca implored me. Of course she possessed nothing of the Cloud Gift herself, and was dependent upon me in a manner which neither Amadeo nor Pandora had ever been.

"It is too painful to me," I declared. "I will not go there. You've lived here so long as my beautiful nun. What is it you want?"

"I want Italy," she said in a soft crestfallen voice. And I knew only too well what she meant, but I didn't answer her.

"If I cannot have Italy, Marius," she said at last, "I must have somewhere."

She was in the front corner of the shrine when she spoke these all too significant words, and they were in a hushed voice, as if she sensed a danger.

We were always reverent in the shrine. But we did not whisper behind the Divine Parents. We considered it ill-mannered if not downright disrespectful.

It's a strange thing when I think of it. But we could not presume that Akasha and Enkil did not hear us. And therefore we often spoke in the front corner, especially the one to the left, which Bianca favored, often sitting there with her warmest cloak about her.

When she said these words to me, she looked up at the Queen as though acknowledging the interpretation.

"Let it be her wish," she said, "that we not pollute her shrine with our idleness."

I nodded. What else could I do? Yet so many years had passed in this fashion that I had grown accustomed to this place over any other. And Bianca's quiet loyalty to me was something I took for granted.

I sat down beside her now.

I took her hand in mine, and noticed perhaps for the first time in some while that my skin was now darkly bronzed rather than black, and most of the wrinkles had faded.

"Let me make a confession to you," I said. "We cannot live in some simple house as we did in Venice."

She listened to me with quiet eyes.

I went on.

"I fear those creatures, Santino and his demon spawn. Decades have passed since the fire, but they still threaten from their hiding places."

"How do you know this?" she said. It seemed she had a great deal more to say to me. But I asked for her patience.

I went to my belongings and took from them the letter from Raymond Gallant.

"Read this," I said. "It will tell you, among other things, that they have spread their abominable ways as far as the city of Paris."

For a long time I remained silent as she read, and then her immediate sobs startled me. How many times had I seen Bianca cry? Why was I so unprepared for it? She whispered Amadeo's name. She couldn't quite bring herself to speak of it.

"What does this mean?" she said. "How do they live? Explain these words. What did they do to him?"

I sat beside her, begging her to be calm, and then I told her how they lived, these Satan worshiping fiends, as monks or hermits, tasting the earth and death, and how they imagined that the Christian God had made some place for them in his Kingdom.

"They starved our Amadeo," I said, "they tortured him. This is plain here. And when he had given up all hope, believing me to be dead, and believing their piety to be just, he became one of

them."

She looked at me solemnly, the tears standing in her eyes.

"Oh, how often I've seen you cry," I said. "But not of late, and not so bitterly as you cry for him. Be assured I have not forgotten him either."

She shook her head as if her thoughts were not in accord with mine but she was not able to reveal them.

"We must be clever, my precious one," I said. "Whatever abode we choose for ourselves, we must be safe from them, always."

Almost dismissively she spoke now.

"We can find a safe place," she said. "You know we can. We must. We cannot remain as we are forever. It is not our nature. If I have learnt nothing from your stories I have learnt that much, that you have wandered the Earth in search of beauty as well as in your search for blood."

I did not like her seriousness.

"We are only two," she went on, "and should these devils come again with their fiery brands, it will be a simple thing for you to remove me to some lofty height where they can't harm me."

"If I am there, my love, if I am there," I said, "and what if I am not? All these years, since we have left our lovely Venice behind, you have lived within these walls where they can't harm you. Now, should we go to some other place, and lodge there, I shall have to be on guard always. Is that natural?"

This felt dreadful to me, this talk. I had never known anything so difficult with her. I didn't like the inscrutable expression on her face, nor the way her hand trembled.

"Perhaps it is too soon," she said. "But I must tell you a most important thing, and I cannot keep it from you."

I hesitated before I answered.

"What is it, Bianca?" I asked. I was fast becoming miserable. Utterly miserable.

"I think you have made a grievous error," she said.

I was quietly stunned. She said nothing more. I waited. Still there came this silence commingled with her sitting back against the wall, her eyes fixed upwards on the Divine Parents.

"Will you tell me what this error is?" I asked. "By all means, you must tell me! I love you. I must hear this."

She said nothing. She looked at the King and Queen. She did not appear to be praying.

I picked up the parchment pages of the letter. I moved through them and then looked at her again.

Her tears had dried, and her mouth was soft, but her eyes were filled with some strange look that I could not explain to myself.

"Is it the Talamasca that causes you fear?" I asked. "I shall explain all this to you. But see here that I wrote to them from a distant monastery. I left few footprints there, my beauty. I traveled

the winds while you were sleeping here."

There followed nothing but her silence. It seemed not dark or cold but merely reserved and thoughtful. But when she moved her eyes to me, the change in her face was slow and ominous.

With quiet words I hastened to explain to her my strange meeting with Raymond Gallant on my last night of true happiness in Venice. I explained in the simplest manner how he had sought knowledge of us, and how I had learnt from him that Pandora had been seen in northern Europe.

I talked of all the things contained in the letter. I talked of Amadeo once more. I spoke of my hatred of Santino, that he had robbed me of all I loved save her, and how on that account she was, of all things, most precious to me.

At last I was willing to say no more. I was growing angry. I felt wronged and I couldn't understand her. Her silence hurt me more and more, and I knew that she could see this in my face.

Finally, I saw some change in her. She sharpened her gaze and then she spoke:

"Don't you see the grievous error you've made?" she asked. "Don't you hear it in the lessons you've made known to me? Centuries ago, the young Satan worshipers came to you for what you could give when you lived with Pandora. You denied them your precious knowledge. You should have revealed to them the mystery of the Mother and the Father!"

"Good Lord, how could you believe such a thing?"

"And when Santino asked you in Rome, you should have brought him to this very shrine! You should have shown to him the mysteries you revealed to me. Had you done it, Marius, he would never have been your enemy."

I was enraged as I stared at her. Was this my brilliant Bianca?

"Don't you see!" she went on. "Over and over, these unstoppable fools have made a cult of nothing! You could have shown them something!" She gestured towards me dismissively as though I disgusted her. "How many decades have we been here? How strong am I? Oh, you needn't answer. I know my own endurance. I know my own temper.

"But don't you see, all my understanding of our powers is reinforced by their beauty and their majesty! I know whence we come! I have seen you drink from the Queen. I have seen you wake from your swoon. I have seen your skin healing.

"But what did Amadeo ever see? What did Santino ever see? And you marvel at the extent of their heresy."

"Don't call it heresy!" I declared suddenly, the words bursting from my lips. "Don't speak as if this were a worship! I have told you that yes, there are secret things, and things which no one can explain! But we are not worshipers!"

"It is a truth you revealed to me," she said, "in their paradox, in their presence!" Her voice rose, ill-tempered and utterly alien to her. "You might have smashed Santino's ill-founded crusade with a mere glimpse of the Divine Parents."

I glared at her. A madness took hold of me.

I rose to my feet. I looked about the shrine furiously.

"Gather up all you possess," I said suddenly. "I'm casting you out of here!"

She sat still as she had been before, gazing up at me in cold defiance.

"You heard what I said. Gather your precious clothes, your looking glass, your pearls, your jewels, your books, whatever you want. I'm taking you out of here."

For a long moment she looked at me, glowering, I should say, as if she didn't believe me.

Then all at once she moved, obeying me in a series of quick gestures. And within the space of a few moments, she stood before me, her cloak about her, her bundle clasped to her chest, looking as she had some countless years before when first I had brought her here.

I don't know whether she looked back at the face of the Mother and the Father. I did not. I did not for one moment believe that either would prevent this dreadful expulsion.

Within moments, I was on the wind, and I didn't know where I would take her.

I traveled higher and faster than I had dared to do before, and found it well within my power. Indeed, my own speed amazed me. The land before me had been burnt in recent wars and I knew it to be spotted here and there with ruined castles.

It was to one of these that I took her, making certain that the town all around had been pillaged and deserted, and then I set her down in a stone room within the broken fortress, and went in search of a place where she might sleep by day in the ruined graveyard.

It did not take me long to be confident that she could survive here. In the burnt-out chapel there were crypts beneath the floor. There were hiding places everywhere.

I went back to her. She was standing as I had left her, her face as solemn as before, her brilliant oval eyes fixed on me.

"I want no more of you," I said. I was shuddering. "I want no more of you that you could say such a thing, that you could blame me that Santino took from me my child! I can have no more of you. You have no grasp of the burden I have carried throughout time or how many times I have lamented it! What do you think your precious Santino would do had he the Mother and the Father in his possession? How many demons could he bring to drink from them? And who knows what the Mother and Father might permit in their silence? Who knows what they have ever wanted?"

"You are an evil and negligent brother to me," she said coldly, glancing about herself. "Why not leave me to the wolves in the forest? But go. I want no more of you either. Tell your scholars in the Talamasca where you have deposited me and perhaps they will offer me their kind shelter. But be gone. Whatever, be gone! I don't want you here!"

Though up to that second I had been hanging upon her every word, I abandoned her.

Hours passed. I traveled the skies, not knowing where I went, marveling at the blurred landscape beneath me.

My power was far greater than it had ever been! Would I to try it, I could easily reach England.

I saw the mountains and then the sea, and then suddenly my soul ached so completely that I could do nothing but will myself to go back to her.

Bianca, what have I done?

Bianca, pray that you have waited for me!

Out of the deep dark heavens I somehow returned to her. I found her in the stone room, sitting in the corner, collected and still, just as if she had been in the shrine, and as I knelt before her, she reached up and threw her arms about me.

I sobbed as I embraced her.

"My beautiful Bianca, my beautiful one, I am so sorry, so sorry, my love," I said.

"Marius, I love you with my whole heart eternally." She cried as freely and completely as I did. "My precious Marius," she said. "I have never loved anyone as I love you. Forgive me."

We could do nothing but weep for the longest time and then I took her home to the shrine, and comforted her, combing her hair as I so loved to do and trimming it with her slender ropes of pearls until she was my perfect lovely one.

"What did I mean to say?" she implored. "I don't know. Of course you could not have trusted any of them. And had you shown them the Queen and the King some horrid anarchy might well have come from it!"

"Yes, you have said the perfect word," I answered, "some awful anarchy." I glanced quickly at the still impassive faces. I went on. "You must understand, oh, please, if you love me at all, understand what power exists within them." I stopped suddenly. "Oh, don't you see, as much as I lament their silence, perhaps it is for them a form of peace which they have chosen for the good of everyone."

This was the very essence of it and I think we both knew it.

I feared what might happen if Akasha were ever to stand up from her throne, if she were ever to speak or move. I feared it with all my reason.

Yet still, that night and every night I believed that if and when Akasha were ever waked, a divine sweetness would pour forth from her.

Once Bianca had fallen asleep, I knelt before the Queen in the abject manner which was so common to me now, and which I would never have revealed to Pandora.

"Mother, I hunger for you," I whispered. I opened my hands. "Let me touch you with love," I said. "Tell me if I have been in error. Should I have brought the Satan worshipers to your shrine? Should I have revealed you in all your loveliness to Santino?"

I closed my eyes. I opened them.

"Unchangeable Ones," I said in a soft voice, "speak to me."

I approached her and laid my lips on her throat. I pierced the crisp white skin with my teeth, and the thick blood came into me slowly.

The garden surrounded me. Oh, yes, this I love above all. And it was the garden of the monastery in spring, how wondrous, and my priest was there. I was walking with him in the clean swept cloister. This was the supreme dream, for its colors were rich and I could see all the mountains around us. *I am immortal,* I said.

The garden dissolved. I could see colors washed from a wall.

Then I stood in a midnight forest. In the light of the moon, I beheld a black carriage coming down the road, drawn by many dark horses. It passed me, its huge wheels stirring up the dust. There came behind it a team of guards all clothed in black livery.

Pandora.

When I woke, I was lying against Akasha's breast, my forehead against her throat, my left hand clasping her right shoulder. It was so sweet that I didn't want to move, and all the light of the shrine had become one golden shimmer in my eyes, rather the way that light would become in those long Venetian banquet rooms.

At last I kissed her tenderly and withdrew and then lay down and placed my arms around Bianca.

My thoughts were troubled and strange. I knew it was time to find some habitat other than the shrine itself, and I knew as well that strangers were coming into our mountains.

The small city at the foot of our cliff was now thriving.

But the most dreadful revelation of this night was that Bianca and I could quarrel, that the solid peace between us could be violently and painfully ruptured. And that I, at the first hard words from my jewel, could crumple into mental ruin.

Why had I been so surprised? Could I not remember my painful quarrels with Pandora? I must know that in anger, Marius is not Marius. I must know and never forget it.

30

The following night we hunted down a pair of brigands who were traveling the lower passes of our mountains. The blood was good, and from this small feast we went on to a little German town where we could find a tavern.

Here we sat, a man and his wife, one might presume, and over our mulled wine we talked for hours.

I told Bianca all I had ever known of Those Who Must Be Kept. I told her the legends of Egypt—of how the Mother and Father had centuries ago been bound and ill used by those who would steal their Precious Blood. I told her of how Akasha herself had come to me in a vision begging me to take her out of Egypt.

I told her of the few times Akasha had ever spoken to me in the Blood. And I told her finally, finally, of what a pure miracle it had been that the Divine Parents had opened the door of the Alpine shrine when I had come to them too weak to budge it.

"Do they need me?" I asked. I looked into Bianca's eyes. "I can't know. That's the horror. Do they want to be seen by others? I am in ignorance.

"But let me make my final confession. I became so angry last night because centuries ago when Pandora first drank the Mother's blood, she was full of dreams of bringing back to the Divine Parents the old worship. By that I mean, a worship that included the Druidic Gods of the Grove, a religion that went back to the temples of Egypt.

"I was furious that Pandora could believe in such a thing, and on the very night of Pandora's making I broke her dreams with my forceful logic. And I went beyond that. I pounded with my fist upon the Mother's very breast and demanded that she speak to us."

Bianca was amazed.

"Can you guess what happened?" I asked.

"Nothing. The Mother gave no answer."

I nodded. "And there came no rebuke or punishment either. Perhaps the Mother had brought Pandora to me. We could never know. But please understand how I fear the very notion that the Divine Parents might ever be worshiped.

"Bianca, we are immortals, yes, and we possess our King and Queen, but we must never for a moment believe that we understand them."

To all this she nodded. She weighed it all for a long time and then she spoke:

"I was very simply wrong in what I said to you," she told me.

“Not in all of it,” I answered. “Perhaps if Amadeo had seen the King and Queen, he would have escaped the Roman blood drinkers and come back to us. Yet there is another way of looking at it.”

“Tell me.”

“If he had known the secret of the Mother and the Father, he might have been forced to reveal it to Santino, and the demons would have returned to Venice, searching for me. They might have found both of us.”

“Ah, yes, all this is true,” she said. “I begin to see all of it.”

We were easy now with each other in the tavern. The mortals around us took no notice. I talked on in a soft voice, telling her the story of how Mael had once tried, with my permission, to drink Akasha’s blood and Enkil had moved to stop him.

I told her the dreadful tale of Eudoxia. I told her of how I had left Constantinople.

“I don’t know what it is with you, my love,” I said, “but somehow I can tell you everything. It was never so with Pandora. It was never so with Amadeo.”

She reached out and put her left hand on my cheek.

“Marius,” she said. “Speak freely always of Pandora. Don’t ever think that I shall fail to understand your love for Pandora.”

I thought this over for many long moments. I took her right hand in mine and I kissed her fingers.

“Listen to me, my love,” I said. “With every prayer, I ask the Queen if you might drink. But I gain no clear answer. And after what I witnessed with Eudoxia and Mael, I cannot take you to her. And so I shall continue to give you my blood in so far as it will make you strong, but—.”

“I understand you,” she said.

I leant across the table and kissed her.

“Last night in my anger I learnt many things. That I cannot live without you was one. But I learnt another. I can now cover great distances with ease. And I suspect my other powers have also increased beyond recent measure. I must test these powers. I must know how easily I can defeat those demons if ever they come near to me. And tonight I want to test my power of flight more than any other.”

“And so you are telling me that you want to take me back to the shrine now, and go off to England.”

I nodded. “The moon is full tonight, Bianca. I must see the isle of Britain in the light of the moon. I must discover this Order of the Talamasca with my own eyes. It’s scarcely possible to believe in such purity.”

“Why don’t you take me with you?”

“I must be swift,” I answered. “And if there’s danger I must be swifter still to escape it. These are mortals after all. And Raymond Gallant is only one of them.”

"You will be careful then, my love," she said. "You know now more than ever that I very simply adore you."

It seemed then we would never quarrel again, that such a thing was impossible. And it seemed imperative that I never lose her.

As we went out into the darkness, as I wrapped her in my cloak, I pressed my lips to her forehead as I took her into the clouds and homeward.

When I left her, it was two hours before midnight, and I meant to see Raymond Gallant before morning.

Now, it had been many years since my meeting with him in Venice. He had been a young man then, and perhaps middle-aged at the time that I wrote my letter to him.

So it did occur to me as I set out on my journey that he might no longer be living.

Indeed, it was a terrible thought.

But I believed in all he had told me about the Talamasca and so I was determined to approach them.

As I moved towards the stars, the pleasure of the Cloud Gift was so divine that I almost lost myself in the rapture of the skies, dreaming above the isle of Britain, plunging to where I could see the land perfectly against the sea, not wanting to touch the solid Earth so soon or roam it so clumsily.

But I had consulted many a map in recent years to find the location of East Anglia, and I soon saw below me an immense castle with ten rounded towers which I believed to be the very one engraved upon the gold coin which Raymond Gallant had long ago given me.

The sheer size of the castle gave me doubts, however, but I willed myself to set foot on the steep hillside quite close to it. Some deep preternatural instinct told me that I had reached the right place.

The air was cold as I began to walk, indeed as cold as it had been in the mountains which I had left behind me. Some of the woods had come back, which had no doubt been cut down once upon a time for the safety of the castle, and I rather liked the terrain and I enjoyed walking in it.

I wore a full fur-lined cloak which I had taken from one of my victims. I had my customary weapons, a thick short broadsword, and a dagger. I wore a longer velvet tunic than was favored at the time, but this did not matter to me. My shoes were new and I had bought them from a cobbler in Geneva.

As for the style of the castle, I figured it to be some five hundred years old, built in the time of William the Conqueror. I surmised that it had once had a moat and drawbridge. But these elements had long been abandoned, and I could see a great door before me, flanked by torches.

At last I reached this door, and pulled the bell, hearing a loud clang deep within the courtyard.

It did not take long for someone to come, and only then did I realize the curious propriety of what I'd done. In my reverence for this Order of Scholars I had not "listened" outside to discover

who they were. I had not hovered near their lighted tower windows.

And now I found myself, a curious figure no doubt with my blue eyes and dark skin, standing before the porter.

This young man couldn't have been more than seventeen, and he seemed both sleepy and indifferent as though my clarion had awakened him.

"I've come in search of Lorwich," I said, "in East Anglia. Have I reached the right place?"

"You have," said the boy, wiping at his eyes and leaning upon the door. "Can I say for what reason?"

"I seek the Talamasca," I replied.

The young man nodded. He opened the door widely, and I soon found myself in a great courtyard. There were wagons and coaches parked within. I could hear the faint sound of the horses in the stables.

"I seek Raymond Gallant," I said to the boy.

"Ah," he replied, as if these were the magic words that he needed from me. And then he led me further inside and shut the giant wood door behind us. "I'll take you where you might wait," he said. "I think that Raymond Gallant is sleeping."

But he's alive, I thought. That's what matters. I caught the scent of many mortals in this place. I caught the scent of food that had recently been cooked. I caught the scent of oak fires and as I looked up I saw the faint smoke of chimneys against the sky which I had not perceived earlier.

With no further questioning, I was soon led by torchlight up a winding stone stairway in one of the many towers. Over and over again I looked out of small windows at the bleak land. I saw the dim outline of a nearby town. I could see the patches of the farmers' fields. All looked so very peaceful.

At last the boy anchored his torch, and, lighting a candle from it, opened two heavily carved doors to reveal a huge room with sparse but beautiful furnishings.

It had been a long time since I had seen heavily carved tables and chairs, and fine tapestries. It had been a long time since I had seen rich golden candlesticks and handsome chests with velvet draperies.

It all seemed a feast for the eyes, and I was about to sit down when there came rushing into the room a spry elderly man with streaming gray hair in a long heavy white nightshirt who gazed at me with brilliant gray eyes, crying out:

"Marius!"

It was Raymond Gallant, it was Raymond in his final years, and I felt a terrible shock of pleasure and pain as I looked at him.

"Raymond," I said, and I opened my arms, and gently enfolded him. How frail he felt. I kissed him on both cheeks. I held him back tenderly that I might look at him.

His hair was still thick and his forehead smooth as it had been so long ago. And when he

smiled, his mouth seemed that of the young man I remembered.

"Marius, what a wonder it is to see you," he cried. "Why did you never write to me again?"

"Raymond, I've come. I can't account for time and what it means to us. I've come, and I'm here, and I'm glad to be with you."

He stopped, turning from right to left suddenly and then he cocked his head. He seemed as agile and quick as he had ever been. He was listening.

"They're all aware that you're here," he said, "but don't worry. They won't dare to come into this room. They're far too disciplined for that. They know I will not permit it."

I listened for a moment, and I confirmed what he had said. Mortals throughout the immense sprawling castle had sensed my presence. There were mind readers among these mortals. Others seemed to possess some keen hearing.

But I distinguished no supernatural presence here. I caught no inkling of the "infidel" he had described in his letter.

And I caught no menace from anyone either. Nevertheless, I marked the nearby window, and noting that it was heavily barred though otherwise open to the night, wondered if I could easily break through it. I thought that I could. I felt no fear. In fact, I felt no fear of this Talamasca because it seemed to feel no fear of me and had admitted me so guilelessly.

"Come, sit down with me, Marius," Raymond said. He drew me near to an immense fireplace. I tried not to gaze with concern at his thin palsied hands, or his thin shoulders. I thanked the gods that I had come tonight, and that he was still here to greet me.

He called out to the sleepy boy who remained still at the door.

"Edgar, build the fire and light it, please. Marius, you will forgive me," he said. "I'm very cold. Do you mind it? I understand what happened to you."

"No, not at all, Raymond," I said. "I can't fear fire forever on that account. Not only am I healed now, I'm stronger than ever I was before. It's quite a mystery. And you, how old are you? Tell me, Raymond. I can't guess it."

"Eighty years, Marius," he said. He smiled. "You don't know how I've dreamed of your coming. I had so much more to tell you. I didn't dare to write it in a letter."

"And rightly so," I said, "for the letter was read, and who knows what might have happened? As it was, the priest who received it for me could not make much of it. I understand everything, however."

He motioned to the door. Two young men at once entered the room, and I made them out to be the simple sort rather like the busy Edgar who was piling up the oak in the fireplace. There were richly carved stone gargoyles above the fire. I rather liked them.

"Two chairs," said Raymond to the boys. "We'll talk together. I'll tell you all I can."

"Why are you so generous to me, Raymond?" I asked. I wanted so to comfort him, to stop his agitation. But as he smiled at me, as if to reassure me, as he put his hand gently on my arm, and

urged me towards the two wooden chairs which the boys had brought to the hearth, I saw that he did not need my comfort.

"I'm only very excited, my old friend," he said. "You mustn't be concerned for me. Here, sit down. Is this comfortable enough for you?"

The chairs were as heavily carved as every bit of ornament in the room, and the arms were the paws of lions. I found them beautiful as well as comfortable. I looked about myself at the many bookshelves, and mused as I have often done on how all libraries subdue me and seduce me. I thought of books burnt and books lost.

May this be a safe place for books, I thought, this Talamasca.

"I have been decades in a stone room," I said in a muted voice. "I am quite comfortable. Will you send the boys away now?"

"Yes, yes, of course, only let them bring me some warm wine," he replied. "I need it."

"Please, how could I be so inconsiderate?" I replied.

We were now facing each other, and the fire had begun with a riot of deep good fragrance coming from the burning oak, and a warmth that I even enjoyed, I had to admit it.

One of the boys had brought Raymond a red velvet dressing gown, and once he was clothed in this, and settled in his chair, he did not seem so fragile. His face was radiant after all, his cheeks actually rosy, and I could easily see the young man in him that I had once known.

"My friend, should anything come between us," he said, "let me give you to know that *she* still travels in her old way, rapidly through many European cities. Never to England, for I don't think they want to cross the water, though no doubt they can, contrary to folklore."

I laughed. "Is that the folklore? That we can't cross water? It's nonsense," I said. I would have said more, but I wondered if it were wise.

He apparently took no note of my hesitation. He plunged on:

"She has for the last few decades traveled under the name of the Marquisa De Malvrier, and her companion the Marquis of the same name, though it is she who goes to Court more often than he does. They're seen in Russia, in Bavaria, in Saxony—in countries in which old ceremony is honored, seeming from time to time to need the courtly balls and the immense Roman church ceremonies. But understand, I have gleaned my account of this from many different reports. I'm sure of nothing."

The warm wine was being set upon a small stand beside him. He took the cup in his hands. His hands were shaking. He drank from the wine.

"But how do such reports come to you?" I asked. I was fascinated. There was no doubt he was telling me the truth. As for the rest of the house, I could hear its many inhabitants all around us, waiting in silence it seemed for some kind of summons.

"Forget them," he said. "What can they learn from this audience?" he asked. "They are all faithful members. To answer your questions, we go out sometimes in the guise of priests seeking

information about those whom we call vampires. We inquire as to mysterious deaths. And so we gather information which is meaningful to us when it may not be meaningful to others."

"Ah, of course. And you take note of the name when it is mentioned in Russia or Saxony or Bavaria."

"Exactly. I tell you it is De Malvrier. They have a liking for it. And I shall tell you something else."

"Please, you must."

"Several times we have found upon the wall of a church inscribed the name, Pandora."

"Ah, she's done this," I said, desperately trying to conceal my emotion. "She wants to be discovered by me." I paused. "This is painful for me," I said. "I wonder if the one who travels with her even knows her by that name. Ah, this is painful, but why do you assist me?"

"By my very life, I don't know," he said, "except somehow I believe in you."

"What do you mean believe, believe that I'm a wonder? That I'm a demon? Believe what, Raymond, tell me? Oh, never mind, it doesn't matter, does it? We do things because our hearts impel us."

"Marius, my friend," he said, leaning forward and touching my knee with his right hand, "long ago in Venice when I spied upon you, you know that I spoke to you with the purity of my mind. I read your thoughts also. I knew that you slew only those who were the degraded killers of their own sisters or brothers."

"That's true, Raymond, and it was that way with Pandora. But is it now?"

"Yes, I think so," he said, "for every ghastly crime imputed to the vampires whom these creatures may in fact be is connected to one who was known to be guilty of many murders. So you see it's not difficult for me to help you."

"Ah, so she is true to our vow," I whispered. "I didn't think so, not when I heard of her harsh companion."

I looked intently at Raymond, seeing with every passing moment more of the young man I had once known so briefly. It was saddening to me. It was dreadful. And the more I felt it, the more I tried to conceal it.

What was my suffering to this, the slow triumph of old age? Nothing.

"Where was she seen last?" I asked.

"On that point," he said, "allow me to give you my interpretation of her behavior. She and her companion follow a pattern in their roamings. They go in rude circles, returning over and over again to one city. Once they have been some time in that city they begin their circles once more until they have gone as far afield as Russia. The central city of which I speak is Dresden."

"Dresden!" I said. "I don't know the place. I've never been there."

"Oh, it cannot rival your gorgeous Italian cities. It cannot equal Paris or London. But it is the capital of Saxony and it lies on the Elbe River. It has been much adorned by the various Dukes

who have ruled there. And invariably, I say invariably, these creatures—Pandora and her companion—return to Dresden. It may not be for twenty years, but they come back to Dresden."

I fell silent in my excitement. Was this some pattern meant for me to interpret? Was this pattern meant for me to discover? Was it like a great round spiderweb meant sooner or later to ensnare me?

Why else would Pandora and her companion follow such a life? I couldn't imagine it. But how did I dare to think Pandora even remembered me. She had written her name in the stone of the church wall, not mine.

At last I heaved a great sigh.

"How can I tell you what all this means to me?" I asked. "You have given me marvelous news. I'll find her."

"Now," he said in the most confident manner, "shall we take up the other matter which I mentioned to you in my letter?"

"Amadeo," I whispered. "What happened to the infidel? I sense no blood drinker in this place. Am I deceived? The creature's either very far afield or he's left you."

"The monster left us soon after I wrote to you. When he realized he could hunt for his victims throughout the countryside, he was gone. We could do nothing to control him. Our appeals to him that he feed only on evil men meant nothing to him. I don't even know if he still exists."

"You must guard yourselves against this individual," I said. I looked about myself at the spacious stone room. "This seems a castle of remarkable size and strength. Nevertheless, we speak of a blood drinker."

He nodded.

"We are well protected here, Marius. We do not admit everyone as we admitted you, take my word for it. But would you hear now what he told us?"

I bowed my head. I knew what Raymond would tell me.

"The Satan worshipers," I said, using the more specific words, "the very ones who burnt my house in Venice, they prey upon humans in Paris. And my brilliant auburn-haired apprentice, Amadeo, is still their leader?"

"As far as we know," he said. "They are very clever. They hunt the poor, the diseased, the outcast. The renegade who told us so much explained that they fear 'places of light,' as they call them. They have taken to believing that it is not God's will for them to be richly clothed, or to enter churches. And your Amadeo now goes by the name of Armand. The renegade told us that Armand has the zeal of the converted."

I was too miserable to say anything.

I shut my eyes, and when I opened them I was looking at the fire which was burning very well in the deep fireplace.

Then slowly my gaze shifted to Raymond Gallant who was staring at me intently.

“I have told you everything, really,” he said.

I gave him a faint, sad smile and I nodded.

“You’ve been generous indeed. And many a time in the past when one was generous to me, I took from my tunic a purse of gold. But is such needed here?”

“No,” he said agreeably, shaking his head. “We need no gold, Marius. Gold we have always had in great abundance. What is life without gold? But we have it.”

“What can I do for you, then?” I asked. “I’m in your debt. I’ve been in your debt since the night we spoke in Venice.”

“Talk to several of our members,” he replied. “Let them come into the room. Let them see you. Let them ask you questions. That is what you can do for me. Tell them only what you will. But create a truth for them which can be recorded for study by others.”

“Of course. I’ll do this willingly, but not in this library, Raymond, beautiful as it is. We must be in an open place. I have an instinctive fear of mortals who know what I am.” I paused. “In fact, I’m not sure I’ve ever been surrounded by such.”

He thought on this for a moment. Then he spoke:

“Our courtyard is too noisy, too close to the stables. Let it be on one of the towers. It will be cold, but I shall tell them all that they must dress warmly.”

“Shall we elect the South Tower for our purpose?” I asked. “Bring no torches with you. The night is clear and the moon is full and all of you will be able to see me.”

I slipped out of the room then, hurrying down the stairs, and easily passing through one of the narrow stone windows. With preternatural speed I went to the battlements of the South Tower, and there waited in the mild wind for all of them to gather around me.

Of course it seemed I had traveled by magic, but that I had not was one of the things which I meant to tell them.

Within a quarter of an hour they were all assembled, some twenty well-dressed men, both young and old, and two handsome women, and I found myself in the midst of a circle.

No torches, no. I was not in any conceivable danger.

For a long moment I allowed them to look at me, and form whatever conception they desired, and then I spoke:

“You must tell me what you want to know. For my part, I tell you plainly that I am a blood drinker. I have lived for hundreds of years, and I can remember clearly when I was a mortal man. It was in Imperial Rome. You may record this. I have never separated my soul from that mortal time. I refuse to do it.”

For a moment only silence followed, but then Raymond began with the questions.

Yes, we had a “beginning,” I explained but I could say nothing of it. Yes, we became much much stronger with time. Yes, we tended to be lone creatures or to choose our companions very carefully. Yes, we could make others. No, we were not instinctively vicious, and we felt a deep

love for mortals which was often our spiritual undoing.

There were countless other little questions. And I answered them all to the best of my ability. I would say nothing of our vulnerability to the sun or fire. As for the "coven of vampires" in Paris and Rome, I knew little.

At last I said:

"It's time for me to leave now. I will travel hundreds of miles before dawn. I lodge in another country."

"But how do you travel?" one of them asked.

"On the wind," I said. "It's a gift that has come to me with the passing centuries."

I went to Raymond and I took him in my arms again, and then turning to several of the others I bade them come and touch me so that they could see I was a real being.

I stood back, took my knife and cut my hand with it, and held out my hand so that they could see the flesh heal.

There were gasps from them.

"I must be gone now. Raymond, my thanks and my love," I said.

"But wait," said one of the most elderly of the men. He had been standing back all the while, leaning on a cane, listening to me as intently as all the others. "I have one last question for you, Marius."

"Ask me," I said immediately.

"Do you know anything of our origins?"

For a moment I was puzzled. I couldn't quite imagine what he meant in this question. Then Raymond spoke:

"Do you know anything about how the Talamasca came to be? That is what we are asking you."

"No," I said in quiet astonishment.

A silence fell over them all, and I realized quickly that they themselves were confused about how the Talamasca had come about. And it did come back to me that Raymond had told me something of this when first I met him.

"I hope you find your answers," I said.

Then off I went into the darkness.

But I didn't stay away. I did what I had failed to do on my arrival. I hovered quite close but just beyond their hearing and their vision. And with my powerful gifts, I listened to them as they roamed their many towers and their many libraries.

How mysterious they were, how dedicated, how studious.

Some night in the far future perhaps I would come to them again, only to learn more of them. But just now, I had to return to the shrine and to Bianca.

She was still awake when I came into the blessed place. And I saw that she had lighted the

hundred candles.

This was a ceremony that I sometimes failed to do, and I was pleased to see it.

"And are you happy with your visit to the Talamasca?" she asked in her frank voice. She had that beguiling look of simplicity on her face which always prompted me to tell her everything.

"I was most pleased. I found them the honest scholars they professed to be. I gave them what knowledge I could, but by no means what I might, for that would have been too foolish. But all they seek is knowledge and I left them more than happy."

She narrowed her eyes as if she could not quite imagine what the Talamasca was and I understood her.

I sat down beside her, folded her close and wrapped the fur cloak around us both.

"You smell of the cold, good wind," she said. "Perhaps we are meant to be creatures of the shrine only, creatures of the cold sky and the inhospitable mountains."

I said nothing, but in my mind I thought of only one thing: the far-off city of Dresden. Pandora sooner or later always returned to Dresden.

31

A hundred years would pass before I found Pandora.

During that time my powers increased enormously.

That night after my return from the Talamasca in England, I tested all of them and made certain that, never again would I be at the mercy of Santino's miscreants. For many nights I left Bianca to herself as I made certain of my advantages.

And once I was utterly sure of my swiftness, of the Fire Gift, and of an immeasurable power to destroy with invisible force, I went to Paris with no other thought but to spy upon Amadeo's coven.

Before I left for this little venture, I confessed my goals to Bianca and she had at once beseeched me not to court such danger.

"No, let me go," I responded. "I could hear his voice now over the miles perhaps if I chose to do it. But I must be certain of what I hear and what I see. And I shall tell you something else. I have no desire to reclaim him."

She was saddened by this, but she seemed to understand it. She kept her usual place in the corner of the shrine, merely nodding to me and exacting the promise from me that I would be most careful.

As soon as I reached Paris, I fed from one of several murderers, luring him by the powerful Spell Gift from his place in a comfortable inn, and then I sought refuge in a high bell tower of Notre Dame de Paris itself to listen to the miscreants.

Indeed, it was a huge nest of the most despicable and hateful beings, and they had sought out a catacomb for their existence in Paris just as they had in ancient Rome centuries ago.

This catacomb was under the cemetery called Les Innocents, and those words seemed tragically apt when I caught their addle-brained vows and chants before they poured out into the night to bring cruelty as well as death to the people of Paris.

"All for Satan, all for the Beast, all to serve God, and then return to our penitential existence."

It was not difficult for me to find, through many different minds, the location of my Amadeo, and within an hour or so of my arrival in Paris, I had him fixed as he walked through a narrow medieval street, never dreaming that I watched him from above in bitter silence.

He was dressed in rags, his hair caked with filth, and when he found his first victim, he visited upon her a painful death which appalled me.

For an hour or more my eyes followed him as he proceeded on, feeding on another hapless

creature, and then circling back to walk his way to the enormous cemetery.

Leaning against the cold stone of the tower room, I heard him deep in his underground cell drawing together his "coven" as he himself now called it and demanding of each how he or she had harried, for the love of God, the local population.

"Children of Darkness, it is almost dawn. Each of you shall now open his or her soul to me."

How firm, how clear was his voice. How certain he was of what he said. How quick he was to correct any Child of Satan who had not slain mortals ruthlessly. It was a man's voice I heard coming from the lips of the boy I once knew. It was chilling to me.

"Why were you given the Dark Gift?" he demanded of a laggard. "Tomorrow night you must strike twice. And if all of you do not give me greater devotion, I shall punish you for your sins, and see that others are brought into the coven."

At last I couldn't listen anymore. I was repelled.

I dreamt of going down into his underground world, of pulling him out of it as I burnt his followers, and forcing him into the light, of taking him with me to the shrine of Those Who Must Be Kept, and pleading with him to renounce his vocation.

But I didn't do it. I couldn't do it.

For years and years, he had been one of them. His mind, his soul, his body belonged to those he ruled; and nothing that I had taught him had given him the strength to fight them.

He was not my Amadeo anymore. That is what I had come to Paris to learn and now I knew the truth of it.

I felt sadness. I felt despair. But maybe it was anger and revulsion which caused me to leave Paris that night, saying to myself in essence that he must free himself from the dark mentality of the coven on his own. I could not do it for him.

I had labored long and hard in Venice to erase his memory of the Monastery of the Caves. And now he had found another place of rigid ritual and denial. And his years with me had not protected him from it. Indeed, a circle had long ago closed for him. He was the priest once more. He was the Fool for Satan, as he had once been the Fool for God in far-away Russia. And his brief time with me in Venice had been nothing.

When I told these things to Bianca, when I explained them as best I could, she was sad but she didn't press me.

It was easy between us as always, with her listening to me, and then offering her own response without anger.

"Perhaps in time, you'll change your mind," she said. "You are the one with the power to go there, to fight those who would restrain him if you tried to take him. And that is what it would require, I think, that you would have to take him by force, insist that he come here to be with you, and see the Divine Parents. I don't possess the power to do these things. I ask only that you think on it, that you make no bitter iron resolve against it."

"I give you my word," I said, "I have not done that. But I do not think the sight of the Divine Parents would change the heart of Amadeo." I paused.

I thought on all this for a long moment and then I spoke to her more directly:

"You've only shared this knowledge with me for a brief time," I said. "And in the Divine Parents we both see great beauty. But Amadeo might well see something different. Remember what I've told you of the long centuries that lie behind me. The Divine Parents do not speak. The Divine Parents do not redeem. The Divine Parents ask for nothing."

"I understand," she said.

But she didn't. She had not spent enough years with the King and Queen. She couldn't possibly comprehend the full effect of their passivity. But I went on in a mild manner:

"Amadeo possesses a creed, and a seeming place in God's plan," I said. "He might well see our Mother and Father as an enigma belonging to a pagan era. That wouldn't warm his heart. That wouldn't give him the strength which he derives now from his flock, and believe you me, Bianca, he is the leader there. Our boy of long ago is old now; he is a sage of the Children of Darkness as they call themselves." I sighed.

A little flash of bitter memory came back to me, of Santino asking me when we met in Rome if Those Who Must Be Kept were holy or profane.

I told this to Bianca.

"Ah, then you spoke to this creature. You've never told me this."

"Oh, yes, I spoke to him and spurned him and insulted him. I did all of these foolish things when something more vicious was required. Indeed, when the very words 'Those Who Must Be Kept' had come from his lips, I should have put an end to him."

She nodded. "I come more and more to understand it. Yet still I hope in time that you will return to Paris, that you will at least reveal yourself to Amadeo. They are weak ones, are they not, and you could come upon him in some open place where you could—."

"I know well what you mean to say," I answered. "I wouldn't allow myself ever to be surrounded by torches. Perhaps I will do as you suggest. But I've heard Amadeo's voice, and I don't believe he can be changed now. And there is one thing more which is worth mentioning. Amadeo knows how to free himself from this coven."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I am. Amadeo knows how to live in the lighted world, and he is ten times stronger by virtue of my old blood than are those who listen to his commands. He could break away. He chooses not to do it."

"Marius," she said plaintively, "you know how much I love you and how loath I am to contradict you."

"No, say what you must say," I urged her at once.

"Think of what he suffered," she said. "He was but a child when it happened."

I agreed to all this. Then I spoke again:

"Well, he's no child now, Bianca. He may be as beautiful as he was when I made him through the Blood, but he is a patriarch in the dust. And all of Paris, the wondrous city of Paris, surrounds him. I watched him move through the city streets alone. There was no one there to restrict him. He might have sought the Evil Doer as we do. But he did not. He drank deep of innocent blood, not once but twice."

"Ah, I see. This is what has so embittered you."

I thought on it.

"Yes, you're right. It's what turned me away, though I didn't even know it. I thought it was the manner in which he spoke to his flock. But you are right. It was those two deaths, from which he drew his hot red feast, when Paris swarmed with mortals steeped in murder who might easily have been slain by him."

She laid her hand on mine.

"If I choose to snatch any one of these Children of Darkness from his lair," I said, "it is Santino."

"No, but you mustn't go to Rome. You don't know whether or not there are old ones among that coven."

"Some night," I said, "some night I shall go there. When I am more certain of immense power, and when I am more certain of the ruthless rage it requires to destroy many others."

"Be still now," she said. "Forgive me."

I was quiet for a moment.

She knew how many nights I had wandered alone. I had now to confess what I had been doing on those nights. I had now to begin my secret plan. I had now—for the first time in all our years together—to drive a wedge between her and me, while giving her precisely what she wanted.

"But let's leave talk of Amadeo," I said. "My mind is on happier things."

She was immediately interested. She reached out and stroked my face and hair as was her custom.

"Tell me."

"How long has it been since you asked me if we could have our own dwelling?"

"Oh, Marius, don't tease me on this account. Is it possible!"

"My darling, it's more than possible," I said, warmed by her beaming smile. "I have found a splendid place, a lovely little city on the Elbe River in Saxony."

For this I received the sweetest kiss.

"Now in these many nights when I have been off on my own, I have taken the liberty of acquiring a castle near the city, a much decayed place, and I hope you'll forgive me—."

"Marius, this is momentous news!" she said.

"I have already spent a considerable sum for the repairs—the new wooden floors and stairs,

glass windows, and abundant furnishings."

"Oh, but this is wonderful," she said. She put her arms around me.

"I'm relieved that you're not angry with me," I said, "for moving so quickly without you. You might say I fell in love with the place, and taking several drapers and carpenters there I told them my dreams and now all is being done as I have directed."

"Oh, how could I be angry?" she said. "I want it more than anything in the world."

"There is one more aspect to this castle which I should disclose," I said. "Though the more modern building above is more like a palace than a castle, its foundations are quite old. Indeed, a major part of the foundations were built in early times. And there are huge crypts beneath it, and a true dungeon."

"You mean to move the Divine Parents?" she asked.

"I do. I think it's time for it. You know as well as I that there are small cities and towns springing up all around us. We aren't isolated here. Yes, I want to move the Divine Parents."

"If you say, of course, I go along with you." She was too happy to conceal it. "But is it safe there? Didn't you remove them to this remote place so that you never had to fear their discovery?"

I thought on this for a while before answering.

At last I said:

"It is safe there. And with the passing centuries, the world of the Undead changes around us. And I can't endure this place any longer. And so I take them to a new place. And there are no blood drinkers in it. I have searched far and wide for them. They aren't there. I hear no young ones. I hear no old ones. I believe it's safe. And perhaps the most true answer to that logic is this: I want to bring them there. I want a new place. I want new mountains and new forests."

"I understand," she said. "Oh, I do understand," she said again. "And more than ever, I believe that they can defend themselves. Oh, they need you, I don't doubt it, and that's why on that long ago night they opened the door for you and lighted the lamps. I can still remember it so vividly. But I spend long hours here simply gazing at them. And I have many thoughts during these hours. And I believe that they would defend themselves against any who sought to hurt them."

I didn't argue with her. I didn't bother to remind her that centuries ago they had allowed themselves to be placed in the sun. What was the purpose? And for all I knew she was right. They would crush anyone who tried to subject them to such injury.

"Come now," she said, seeing me fallen into a mood. "I'm too happy with this good news. Be happy with me."

She kissed me as if she couldn't stop herself. She was so innocent in those moments.

And I, I was lying to her, truly lying to her for the first time in all our years together.

I was lying because I hadn't told her a word of Pandora. I was lying because I didn't truly believe that she could harbor no jealousy of Pandora. And because I couldn't tell her that my

love for Pandora lay at the very heart of what I did. What creature would want to reveal such a scheme to a lover?

I meant to place us in Dresden. I meant to remain in Dresden. I meant to be near Dresden at every sunset of my existence until such time as Pandora came again. And I could not tell this to Bianca.

And so I pretended that it was for her that I had chosen this beautiful home, and indeed it was for her, there is no doubt of it. It was for her to make her happy, yes. But that was not all of it.

Within the month, we began work on the new shrine, utterly transforming the castle dungeon in Saxony into a fit place for the King and Queen.

Goldsmiths and painters and stone masons were brought down the many flights of stone steps to enhance the dungeon until it was the most marvelous private chapel.

The throne was covered in gold leaf as was the dais.

And once again, the proper bronze lamps were found, fresh and new. And there were rich candelabra of gold and silver.

I alone labored on the heavy iron doors and their complex fastenings.

As for the castle, it was more of a palace than a castle, as I've said, having been rebuilt several times, and it was charming in its placement above the banks of the Elbe, and it had around it a lovely forest of beech, oak and birch trees. There was a terrace from which one could look down at the river, and from many large windows, one could see the distant city of Dresden.

Of course we would never hunt in Dresden or in the surrounding hamlets. We would go far afield as had always been our custom. And we would waylay the forest brigands, an activity which had become a regular sport for us.

Bianca had some concerns. And only reluctantly she confessed to me that she had some fear of living in a place where she could not hunt for herself without me.

"Dresden is big enough to serve your appetite," I said, "if I were not able to carry you elsewhere. You'll see. It's a beautiful city, a young city I should say, but under the Duke of Saxony it's coming along magnificently."

"You're sure of this," she asked.

"Oh, yes, I'm sure of it, and as I've told you, I'm also sure that the forests of Saxony and nearby Thuringia contain their number of murderous thieves who have always been such a special repast for us."

She thought on all this.

"Let me remind you, my darling," I said, "you can on any night cut your beautiful blond hair with the full confidence that it will grow back by day, and you can go out clothed as a man, traveling with preternatural speed and strength to hunt your victims. Perhaps we should play at this very soon after our arrival."

"Yes, would you allow me this?" she asked.

"Of course, I shall." I was astonished by her gratitude.

Again she showered me with grateful kisses.

"But I must caution you on something," I said. "The area to which we move has many small villages, and in these the belief in witchcraft and vampires is quite strong."

"Vampires," she said. "This is the word used by your friend in the Talamasca."

"Yes," I replied. "We must always cover the evidence of our feast, lest we become an immediate legend."

She laughed.

Finally the castle or schloss as they were called in that part of the world was ready, and it was time for us to make preparations.

But something else had come to my mind, and I was haunted by it.

Finally there came a night when as Bianca slept in her corner, I proposed to deal with this matter.

I knelt down on the bare marble and prayed to my motionless and beautiful Akasha and asked her in most specific words if she would allow Bianca to drink from her.

"This tender one has been your companion these many years," I said, "and she has loved you without reserve. I give her my strong blood over and over again. But what is my blood in comparison to yours? I fear for her, if ever we were to be separated. Please let her drink. Give her your precious strength."

Only the sweet silence followed, with the shimmering of so many tiny flames, with the scent of wax and oil, with the glitter of light in the Queen's eyes.

But I saw an image in answer to my prayer. I saw in my mind my lovely Bianca lying on the breast of the Queen. And for one divine instant we were not in the shrine but in a great garden. I felt the breeze sweeping through the trees. I smelled flowers.

Then I was in the shrine again, kneeling, with my arms out.

At once I whispered and gestured for Bianca to come to me. She obeyed, having no idea of what was in my mind, and I guided her up close to the throat of the Queen, covering her as I did so that if Enkil were to lift his arm I would feel it.

"Kiss her throat," I whispered.

Bianca was shivering. I think she was on the verge of tears, but she did as I told her to do, and then I saw her sink her small fang teeth into the skin of the Queen, and I felt her body become rigid beneath my embrace.

It was being accomplished.

For several long moments she drank, and it seemed I could hear their heartbeats struggling against each other, one great and one small, and then Bianca fell back, and I gathered her up in my arms, seeing the two tiny wounds heal in Akasha's throat.

It was finished.

Withdrawing to the corner, I held Bianca close to me.

She gave several sighs and undulated and turned towards me and snuggled against me. Then she held out her hand and looked at it, and we could both see that it was whiter now, though it still had the color of human flesh.

My soul was wondrously soothed by this event. I am only confessing now what it meant to me. For having lied to Bianca I lived with an unbearable guilt, and now, having given her this gift of the Mother's blood I felt a huge measure of relief from it.

It was my hope that the Mother would allow Bianca to drink again, and in fact this did happen. It happened often. And with every draught of the Divine Blood Bianca became immensely stronger.

But let me proceed with the tale in order.

The journey from the shrine was arduous. As in the past I had to rely on mortals to transport the Divine Parents in heavy coffins of stone, and I experienced some trepidation. But not as much as in former eras. I think I was convinced that Akasha and Enkil could protect themselves.

I don't know what gave me this impression. Perhaps it was that they had opened the shrine for me, and lighted the lamps when I had been so weak and miserable.

Whatever the case, they were carried to our new home without difficulty, and as Bianca gazed on in complete awe, I took them out of their coffins and placed them on the throne together.

Their slow obedient movements, their sluggish plasticity—these things faintly horrified her.

But as she had now drunk the Mother's blood, she was quick to join me in adjusting her fine spun dress and Enkil's kilt. She helped me to smooth the plaited hair. She helped me to adjust the Queen's bracelets.

When it was all done, I myself tended to the lamps and the candles.

Then we both knelt down to pray that the King and the Queen were content to be in this new place.

And after that we were off to find the brigands in the forest. We had already heard their voices. We quickly picked up their scent, and soon it was fine feasting in the woods, and a stash of stolen gold to make it all the more splendid.

We were back in the world, Bianca declared. She danced in circles in the great hall of the castle. She delighted in all the furnishings that crowded our new rooms. She delighted in our fancy coffered beds, and all the colored draperies.

I too delighted in it.

But we were in full agreement that we would not live in the world as I had lived in Venice. Such was simply too dangerous. And so having but few servants, we kept entirely to ourselves, and the rumors in Dresden were that our house belonged to a Lady and Lord who lived elsewhere.

When it pleased us to visit great cathedrals—and there were many—or great Royal Courts, we

went some distance from our home—to other cities such as Weimar, or Eisenbach, or Leipzig—and cloaked ourselves in absurd wealth and mystery. It was all quite comforting after our barren life in the Alps. And we enjoyed it immensely.

But at every sunset my eyes were fixed on Dresden. At every sunset I listened for the sound of a powerful blood drinker—in Dresden.

And so the years passed.

With them came radical changes in clothes which greatly amused us. We were soon wearing elaborate wigs which we found ridiculous. And how I despised the pants which soon came into style, as well as the high-heeled shoes and white stockings which came into fashion with them.

We could not in our quiet seclusion include enough maids for Bianca, so it was I who laced up her tight corset. But what a vision she was in her low-breasted bodices and her broad swaying panniers.

During this time, I wrote many times to the Talamasca. Raymond died at the age of eighty-nine, but I soon established a connection there with a young woman named Elizabeth Nollis who had for her personal review my letters to Raymond.

She confirmed for me that Pandora was still seen with her Asian companion. She begged to know what I might tell of my own powers and habits, but on this I was not too revealing. I spoke of mind reading and the defiance of gravity. But I drove her to distraction with my lack of specifics.

The greatest and most mysterious success of these letters was that she told me much of the Talamasca. They were rich beyond anyone's dreams, she said, and this was the source of their immense freedom. They had recently set up a Motherhouse in Amsterdam, and also in the city of Rome.

I was quite surprised by all this, and warned her of Santino's "coven."

She then sent me a reply that astonished me.

"It seems now that those strange ladies and gentlemen of which we have written in the past are no longer within the city in which they dwelt with such obvious pleasure. Indeed it is very difficult for our Motherhouse there to find any reports of such activities as one might expect from these people."

What did this mean? Had Santino abandoned his coven? Had they gone on to Paris en masse? And if so, why?

Without explaining myself to my quiet Bianca—who was more and more hunting on her own—I went off to explore the Holy City myself, coming upon it for the first time in two hundred years.

I was wary, in fact, a good deal more wary, than I should want to admit to anyone. Indeed, the fear of fire gripped me so dreadfully that when I arrived I could do nothing but keep to the very top of St. Peter's Basilica and look out over Rome with cold, shame-filled eyes; unable for long

moments to hear with my blood drinker's ears no matter how I struggled to gain control of myself.

But I soon satisfied myself, through the Mind Gift, that there were only a few blood drinkers to be found in Rome, and these were lone hunters without the consolation of companions. They were also weak. And as I raped their minds, I realized they knew little of Santino!

How had this come about? How had this one who had destroyed so much of my life freed himself from his own miserable existence?

Full of rage, I drew close to one of these lone blood drinkers, and soon accosted him, terrifying him and with reason.

"What of Santino and the Roman coven?" I demanded.

"Gone, all gone," he said, "years ago. Who are you that you know of such things?"

"Santino!" I said. "Where did he go! Tell me."

"But no one knows the answer," he said. "I never laid eyes on him."

"But someone made you," I said. "Tell me."

"My maker lives in the catacombs still where the coven used to gather. He's mad. He can't help you."

"Prepare to meet God or the Devil," I said. And just that quick I put an end to him. I did it as mercifully as I could. And then he was no more but a spot of grease in the dirt and in this I rubbed my foot before I moved towards the catacombs.

He had spoken the truth.

There was but one blood drinker in this place, but I found it full of skulls just as it had been over a thousand years ago.

The blood drinker was a babbling fool, and when he saw me in my fine gentleman's clothes, he stared at me and pointed his finger.

"The Devil comes in style," he said.

"No, death has come," I said. "Why did you make that other one whom I've destroyed this night?"

My confession made no impression on him.

"I make others to be my companions. But what good does it do? They turn on me."

"Where is Santino?" I demanded.

"Long gone," he said. "And who would have ever thought?"

I tried to read his mind, but he was too crazed and full of distracted thoughts. It was like chasing scattered mice.

"Look at me, when did you last see him!"

"Oh, decades ago," he said. "I don't know the year. What do years mean here?"

I could get nothing further from him. I looked about the miserable place with its few candles dripping wax upon yellowed skulls, and then turning on this creature I destroyed him with the

Fire Gift as mercifully as I had destroyed the other. And I do think that it was truly a mercy.

There was but one left, and this one led a far better existence than the other two. I found him in handsome lodgings an hour before sunrise. With little difficulty I learnt that he kept a hiding place beneath the house, but that he spent his idle hours reading in his few well-appointed rooms, and that he dressed tolerably well.

I also learnt that he couldn't detect my presence. He cut the figure of a man of some thirty mortal years, and he had been in the Blood for some three hundred.

At last I opened his door, breaking the lock, and stepped before him as he stood up, in horror, from his writing desk.

"Santino," I said, "what became of him?"

Though he had fed like a glutton, he was gaunt with huge bones, and long black hair, and though he was very finely dressed in the style of the 1600s, his lace was soiled and dusty.

"In the name of Hell," he whispered, "who are you? Where do you come from?"

Again there came that terrific confusion of mind which defeated my ability to subtract thoughts or knowledge from it.

"I'll satisfy you on those points," I said, "but you must answer me first. Santino. What happened to him."

I took several deliberate steps towards him which put him into a paroxysm of terror.

"Be quiet now," I said. Again I tried to read his mind, but I failed. "Don't try to flee," I said. "You won't succeed with it. Answer my questions."

"I'll tell you what I know," he said, fearfully.

"That ought to be plenty."

He shook his head. "I came here from Paris," he said. He was quaking. "I was sent by a vampire named Armand who is the leader of that coven."

I nodded as though all this were quite intelligible to me, and as though I weren't experiencing agony.

"That was a hundred years ago, maybe more. Armand had heard no word from Rome in a long time. I came to see the where and why of it. I found the Roman coven in complete confusion."

He stopped, catching his breath, backing away from me.

"Speak quickly and tell me more," I said. "I'm impatient."

"Only if you swear on your honor that you won't harm me. I've done you no harm after all. I was no child of Santino."

"What makes you think I have honor?" I asked.

"I know you do," he said. "I can sense such things. Swear on your honor to me and I'll tell you everything."

"Very well, I swear. I'll leave you alive which is more than I've done with two others tonight who haunted the Roman streets like ghosts. Now talk to me."

"I came from Paris as I told you. The Roman coven was weak. All ceremony had fallen away. One or two of the old ones had deliberately gone into the fire. Others had simply run away, and Santino had made no move to catch them and punish them. Once it was known that such escape was possible many more fled, and the coven was in a state of disaster."

"Santino, did you see him?"

"Yes, I saw him. He had taken to dressing in fine clothes and jewels, and he received me in a palazzo much larger than this one. He told me strange things. I can't really remember all of them."

"You must remember."

"He said he had seen old ones, too many old ones, and his faith in Satan had been shaken. He spoke of creatures who seemed to be made of marble, though he knew they could burn. He said he could no longer lead. He told me not to return to Paris, to do as I pleased, and so I have."

"Old ones," I said, repeating his words. "Did he tell you nothing of these old ones?"

"He spoke of the great Marius, and of a creature named Mael. And he spoke of beautiful women."

"What were the names of these women?"

"He didn't say their names to me. He said only that one had come to the coven on the night of its ceremonial dance, a woman like a living statue, and she had walked through the fire to show that it was useless against her. She had destroyed many of the fledglings who attacked her.

"When Santino showed attention and patience, she talked with him for several nights, telling him of her wanderings. He had no taste for the coven after that …

"… But it was the other woman who truly destroyed him."

"And who was this?" I demanded. "You can't speak fast enough for me."

"The other woman was of the world, dressing in high style, and traveling by coach in the company of a dark-skinned Asian."

I was dumbstruck, and maddened that he said nothing more.

"What happened with this other woman?" I finally asked, though a thousand other words flooded my mind.

"Santino wanted her love most desperately. Of course the Asian threatened him with pure destruction if he didn't give up this course, but it was the woman's condemnations that ruined him."

"What condemnations, what did she say and why?" I demanded.

"I'm not certain. Santino spoke to her of his old piety and his fervor in directing the coven. She condemned him. She said time would punish him for what he'd done to his own kind. She turned away from him in disgust with him."

I smiled, a bitter smile.

"Do you understand these things?" he asked. "Are they what you wanted?"

"Oh, yes, I understand them," I said.

I turned and went to the window. I unfastened the wooden shutter, and stood looking down into the street.

I saw nothing, but I couldn't reason.

"What became of the woman and her Asian companion?" I asked.

"I don't know. I have seen them in Rome since. Maybe it was fifty years ago. They are easy to recognize, for she is very pale and her companion has a creamy brown skin and while she dresses always as the great lady, he tends toward the exotic."

I took a deep easy breath.

"And Santino? Where did he go?" I demanded.

"That I can't tell you, except that he had no spirit for anything when I talked to him. He wanted her love, and nothing else. He said the ancient ones had ruined him for immortality and frightened him as to death. He had nothing."

I took another deep breath. Then I turned around and fixed this vampire in my gaze with all his considerable details.

"Listen to me," I said. "If you ever see this creature again, the great lady who travels by coach, you must tell her one thing for me and one thing alone."

"Very well."

"That Marius lives and Marius is searching for her."

"Marius!" he said with a gasp. He looked at me respectfully, though his eyes measured me from head to foot, and then hesitantly he said, "But Santino believes you to be dead. I think that this is what he told to the woman, that he had sent the coven members North to hurt you."

"I think it's what he told her too. Now you remember that you saw me alive and that I search for her."

"But where can she find you?"

"I can't entrust that knowledge to you," I said. "I would be foolish to do it. But remember what I have said. If you see her speak to her."

"Very well," he answered. "I hope that you find her."

With no further words, I left him.

I went out then into the night and for a long time I roamed the streets of Rome, taking stock of how it had changed with the centuries and how so much had remained the same.

I marveled at the relics from my time which were still standing. I treasured the few hours I had to make my way through the ruins of the Colosseum and the Forum. I climbed the hill where I had once lived. I found some blocks still from old walls of my house. I wandered in a daze, staring at things because my brain was in a fever.

In truth I could hardly contain my excitement on account of what I had heard, and yet I was miserable that Santino had escaped me.

But oh, what a rich irony it was that he had fallen in love with her! That she had denied him! And to think he had confessed to her his murderous deeds, how loathsome. Had he been boasting when he spoke with her?

Finally my heart was under my control. I could endure with what I had learnt from the young vampire. I would soon come upon Pandora, I knew it.

As for the other ancient one, she who had walked through the fire, I could not then imagine who it was though I think I know now. Indeed, I'm almost certain of it. I wonder what pulled her out of her secretive ways to visit some merciful release upon Santino's followers.

At last the night was almost spent, and I went home to be with my ever patient Bianca.

When I came down the stone steps of the cellar, I found her asleep against her coffin as if she'd been waiting for me. She was in a long nightgown of sheer white silk, tied at the wrists, and her hair was glossy and flowing.

I lifted her, kissed her closing eyes, and then put her down to her rest, and kissed her again as she lay there.

"Did you find Santino?" she asked in a drowsy voice. "Did you punish him?"

"No," I said. "But I will some night in the years to come. Only time itself can rob me of that special pleasure."

32

It was Bianca who gave me the news.

It was early evening, and I was writing a letter which I would later send to my latest confidante in the Talamasca. The windows were open to the breeze off the Elbe.

Bianca rushed into the room and told me immediately.

"It's Pandora. I know it. I've seen her."

I rose from the desk.

I took her in my arms.

"How do you know?" I asked.

"They're dancing now at the Court Ball, she and her Asian lover. Everyone was whispering about them, how beautiful they are. The Marquis and the Marquisa De Malvrier. I heard their heartbeats as soon as I entered the ballroom. I caught their strange vampiric scent. How can one describe it?"

"Did she see you?"

"Yes, and I put a portrait of you in my mind, my love," she said. "We locked eyes, she and I. Go to her. I know how much you want to see her."

I gazed down at Bianca for a long moment. I peered into her lovely oval eyes and then I kissed her. She was exquisitely dressed in a charming ball gown of violet silk and never had she looked more splendid. I kissed her as warmly as I have ever done.

After that, I went at once to my closets and dressed for the ball, putting on my finest crimson frock coat and all the requisite lace, and then the large curly wig which was the fashion then.

I hurried down the steps to my carriage. When I looked back I saw Bianca on the pavilion above gazing down at me. She lifted her hand to her lips, and blew a kiss to me.

As soon as I entered the Ducal Palace I sensed the presence of the Asian, and indeed before I ever reached the doors of the ballroom, he emerged from the shadows of an anteroom and put his hand on my arm.

Oh, for so long I had heard about this evil being, and now I confronted him. From India, yes, and most beautiful with large liquid black eyes, and a creamy brown skin that was flawless. He smiled at me with his smooth, enticing mouth.

His satin frock coat was a dark blue, and his lace was intricate and extravagant. It seemed he was studded with immense diamonds, diamonds from India where diamonds are worshiped. He had a fortune in rings on his hands. He wore a fortune in buckles and buttons.

“Marius,” he said. He gave me a small formal bow, as though he were doffing his hat when in fact he wore none. “Of course,” he said, “you are going to see Pandora.”

“You mean to stop me?” I asked.

“No,” he said with an idle shrug. “How could you imagine such a thing?” His tone was courteous. “Marius, I assure you, she has cast off many another.” He seemed perfectly sincere.

“So I’ve been told,” I said. “I must see her. You and I can speak later on. I must go to her.”

“Very well,” he said. “I am patient.” He shrugged again. “I am always patient. My name is Arjun. I’m glad that we’ve finally come together. Even with the Roman rogue, Santino, who claimed to have annihilated you I was patient. She was so miserable then and I wanted to punish him. But I did not. I followed her wishes and left him unharmed. What a dejected creature he was. How he loved her. I followed her wishes as I’ve said. I’ll follow her wishes tonight, as I always do.”

“That’s very good of you,” I replied, my throat so tight I could scarcely utter the words. “Let me go now. I have waited longer than you can possibly imagine for this moment. I can’t stand here and converse with you as though she weren’t steps away from me.”

“I can imagine how long you’ve waited,” he said. “I am older than you think.”

I nodded, and I slowly withdrew from him.

I couldn’t bear it anymore.

Immediately I entered the immense ballroom.

The orchestra was playing one of the soft fluid dances so popular in those times, nothing as spirited as music would later become, and the lavish room was full of radiant faces and busy dancing figures, and myriad colors.

I peered through the happy crowd, moving slowly along one wall and then another.

Quite suddenly I saw her. She didn’t know I was there. Her companion had sent her no mental warning.

She was sitting alone, artfully dressed in her fashionable clothes, her satin bodice very tight and graceful, her ornate skirts huge, and her lovely white face framed by her natural brown hair drawn back and up in a fancy style with rubies and diamonds.

I leant against the clavichord, smiling benevolently at the musician who played it with such skill, and then I turned to gaze at her.

How sad was her expression, how remote, how unutterably beautiful. Was she watching the colors of the room as I watched them? Did she feel the same gentle love for mortals which I felt? What would she do when she realized I was watching her?

I didn’t know. I was afraid. I couldn’t know anything until I heard the sound of her voice. I continued to look. I continued to savor this moment of bliss and safety.

Suddenly, she saw me. She picked me out of the hundreds of faces. Her eyes fixed on me, and I saw the blood rush into her beautiful cheeks and her mouth opened to speak the name Marius.

I heard it over the thin sweet music.

I raised my fingers to my lips, just as Bianca had done only a little while ago, and I blew a kiss to her.

How sad and happy at once she seemed, her mouth opened in a half smile as she gazed at me. She seemed as frozen in her place as I was.

But this was intolerable. What were these volumes of silence which divided us!

Quickly I crossed the dance floor and bowed before her. I lifted her cold white hand, and led her out and into the dance, and would take no resistance from her.

"No, you're mine, you're mine, do you hear?" I whispered. "Don't pull away from me."

"Marius, I fear him and he is strong," she whispered in my ear. "I must explain to him that we've found each other."

"I don't fear him. Besides he knows. What does it matter?"

We were dancing as if we said no such things to one another. I held her tight and kissed her cheeks. I didn't care what the mortals around us might think of this impropriety. How very absurd was the whole notion.

"Pandora, my blessed love, if only you could know how long I've waited. What use is it to tell you now that from the very beginning I have missed you in pure agony? Pandora, listen to me, don't close your eyes, don't look away. I knew within the year, the very year, that I had made a dreadful error!"

I realized that I was turning her too violently: I was pressing her hand too hard. I had lost the cadence of the dance. The music was a strange shrill noise in my ears. I had lost control of everything.

She pulled back to look into my eyes. "Take me out on the pavilion," she said. "We can talk in the river breeze. The music makes me dizzy."

Immediately I led her through a huge pair of doors and we found ourselves on a stone bench overlooking the river.

I shall never forget how clear it was that night, how much the stars seemed in my favor, and how brilliant the light of the moon on the Elbe. All around us were pots of flowers, and other couples or groups of mortals who had come to gain a little air before returning to the ballroom.

But in the main we had the shadows to ourselves and I gave way to kissing her. I felt her perfect cheeks beneath my lips. I kissed her throat. I felt her brown hair with its tight waves, which I had so often painted on my wild nymphs as they ran through my thick gardens. I wanted to pull it loose.

"Don't leave me again," I said. "No matter what is said between us tonight. Don't leave me."

"Marius, it was you who left me," she said, and I heard a tremor in her voice which frightened me. "Marius, that was so long ago," she said sadly. "Marius, I wandered so far and wide searching for you."

“Yes, yes, I admit to all,” I said. “I admit to every error. How could I guess what it meant to break the tie? Pandora, I didn’t know! Yea gods, I didn’t know! Believe me, I didn’t know. Tell me you will leave this creature, Arjun, and come back to me. Pandora, I want nothing short of this! I can’t make pretty words. I can’t recite old poems. Pandora, look at me.”

“I am looking at you!” she declared. “Don’t you see, you blind me! Marius, don’t think I too haven’t dreamt of this reunion. And now you see me in this shame, this weakness.”

“What? I don’t care! What shame and weakness?”

“That I’m a slave to my companion, Arjun, that I let him move me through the world, that on my own, I possess no will, no momentum. Marius, I am nothing now.”

“No, that’s not true, and besides it doesn’t matter. I’ll free you from Arjun. I have no fear of him whatsoever, and then you’ll be with me and all your old spirit will come back to you.”

“You dream,” she said and the first coldness came into her face and into her voice. It was in her brown eyes, a coldness that comes from sorrow.

“Are you telling me,” I demanded, “that you mean to leave me again for this creature? You think I will stand for it?”

“And what are you saying to me, Marius, that you will force me?” Her voice was low, distant.

“But you’ve told me you’re weak, you’ve told me you’re a slave. Is this not asking for me to force you?”

She shook her head. She was ready to weep. Again I wanted to pull down her hair, to see it loose, to take the jewels out of it. I wanted to take her face in my hands.

I did it. I held her face too roughly.

“Pandora, listen to me,” I said. “One hundred years ago, I learnt from a strange mortal that in your wanderings with this creature you circled again and again the city of Dresden. And learning this, I moved myself to this city to wait for you. Not a night has passed that I have not awakened to look through Dresden to find you.

“Now that I have you in my arms I have no intention of abandoning you.”

She shook her head. She seemed for a moment incapable of speech. I felt that she was imprisoned in her strange fashionable garments and lost in some painful reverie.

“But what can I give you, Marius, but what you’ve already learnt? The knowledge that I live still, that I endure, that I wander? With or without Arjun, what does it matter?”

She turned her eyes to me, wondering.

“And what do I learn from you except that you go on, and that you endure—that those demons in Rome did not destroy you as they claimed, that you were burnt, yes, I can see that in the color of your skin, but you survive. Marius, what more is there?”

“What on Earth are you saying!” I demanded. I was suddenly furious. “Pandora, we have each other! Good Lord. We have time. As we come together now, time begins for us all over again!”

“Does it, Marius? I don’t know,” she replied. “Marius, I’m not strong enough.”

"Pandora, that's mad!" I said.

"Oh, you are so angry and it is so like our quarrels of old."

"No, it's not!" I declared. "It's nothing like our quarrels of old because it's about nothing. Now I'm taking you from here. I'm taking you to my palace, and I shall deal with Arjun as best as I can afterwards."

"You can't do such a thing," she said sharply. "Marius, I've been with him for hundreds of years. You think you can simply come between us?"

"I want you, Pandora. I shall settle for nothing else. And if such a time comes that you want to leave me—."

"Yes, and what if it does come," she said angrily, "then what shall I do when there is no Arjun on account of you!"

I fell silent. I was in a rage. She was staring at me intently. Her face was full of feeling. Her breast heaved under the tight satin.

"Do you love me?" I demanded.

"Completely," she said in her angry voice.

"Then you are coming with me!"

I took her by the hand.

No one moved to stop us as we left the palace.

As soon as I had her in the carriage, I kissed her wantonly as mortals kiss and wanted to sink my teeth into her throat but she forbade it.

"Let me have that intimacy!" I begged. "For the love of Heaven, Pandora, it's Marius who is speaking to you. Listen to me. Let us share blood and blood."

"Don't you think I want to?" she asked. "I'm afraid."

"Afraid of what?" I demanded. "Tell me what you fear. I'll make it vanish."

The carriage rolled on out of Dresden and through the forest towards my palace.

"Oh, but you won't," she replied. "You can't. Don't you understand, Marius, you're the same being you were in those times when we were first together. You're strong and spirited as you were then, and I'm not. Marius, he takes care of me."

"Takes care of you? Pandora, this is what you want! I'll do it. I shall take care of every tiny detail of your entire existence as though you were my daughter! Only give me the chance. Give me the chance to restore in love what was lost to us."

We had reached my gates, and my servants were opening them. We were about to enter when she signaled to me that I must hold the coach. She was looking out the window. She was looking up at the windows of the palace. Perhaps she could see the pavilion.

I did as she asked. I saw that she was paralyzed with fear. There was no disguising it. She stared at the palace as though it were full of menace.

"What in the name of Heaven can it be?" I asked. "Whatever it is that frightens you, tell me.

Pandora, there is nothing that can't be changed. Tell me."

"Oh, you are so violent in your temper," she said in a whisper. "Can't you guess what reduces me to this abominable weakness?"

"No," I said. "I know only I love you with my whole heart. I've found you again and I'll do anything to keep you."

Her eyes remained fixed on the palace.

"Even give up the female companion," she asked, "who is inside this very house waiting for you?"

I didn't answer.

"I saw her at the ball," she said, her eyes glassy, her voice quivering. "I saw her and knew what she was, quite powerful, quite graceful. I never guessed she was your lover. But now I know that she is. I can hear her inside. I can hear her hopes and dreams and how they are pinned on you."

"Stop it, Pandora. It isn't necessary that I give her up. We are not mortals! We can live together."

I took her by the arms. I shook her. Her hair did come loose and then violently and cruelly I pulled at it, and I buried my face in her hair.

"Pandora, if you require this of me, I'll do it. Only give me time, give me time to make certain that Bianca is where she might survive well and happy. I'll do it for you, do you understand, if only you'll stop fighting me!"

I drew back. She appeared dazed and cold. Her lovely hair spilled down on her shoulders.

"What is it?" she asked in a low sluggish voice. "Why do you look at me this way?"

I was on the edge of tears, but I stopped them.

"Because I imagined," I said, "that this meeting would be so very different. And I did think that you would come with me willingly. And I did think that we two could live in harmony with Bianca. I believed these things. I believed them for a long time. And now I sit with you here and all is argument and torment."

"That's all it ever was, Marius," she replied in her low sad voice. "That's why you left me."

"No," I said. "That's not so. Pandora, ours was a great love. You must acknowledge it. There was a terrible parting, yes, but we had a great love, and we can have it again if we reach for it."

She gazed at the house, then back at me almost furtively. Something quickened in her and she suddenly gripped my arm with white knuckles. There came that look of terrible fear again.

"Come into the house with me," I said. "Meet Bianca. Take her hands in yours. Pandora, listen to me. Stay in the house while I go to settle things with Arjun. I won't be long, I promise you."

"No," she cried. "Don't you understand? I can't go into this house. It has nothing to do with your Bianca."

"What then? What now? What more!" I demanded.

"It's the sound I hear, the sound of their hearts beating!"

"The King and the Queen! Yes, they are inside. They are deep within the Earth, Pandora. They are as still and silent as always. You need not even see them."

A look of pure terror infected her features. I put my arms around her, but she only looked away.

"As still and silent as always," she gasped. "Surely that can't be. Not after all this time. Marius!"

"Oh, but it is," I said. "And to you it should be nothing. You needn't go down the steps to the shrine. It is my duty. Pandora, stop looking away."

"Don't hurt me, Marius," she cautioned. "You're rough with me as though I were a concubine. Treat me with grace." Her lips trembled. "Treat me with mercy," she said sadly.

I started to weep.

"Stay with me," I said. "Come inside. Talk to Bianca. Come to love us both. Let time begin from this moment."

"No, Marius," she said. "Take me away from that awful sound. Take me back to the place where I am living. Take me back, or I shall go on foot. I can't bear this."

I obeyed her commands. We were silent as she traveled to a large handsome house in Dresden whose many windows were dark, and there I held her still, kissing her, refusing to let her go.

Finally, I drew out my handkerchief and wiped my face. I drew in my breath and tried to speak calmly.

"You are frightened," I said, "and I must understand it and be patient with it."

She had that dazed cold look in her eyes, a look I had never seen in the early years, a look that now horrified me.

"Tomorrow night, we shall meet again," I said, "here perhaps in this house where you are dwelling, where you are safe from the sound of the Mother and the Father. Wherever you wish. But wherever you can get used to me."

She nodded. She lifted her hand and stroked my cheek with her fingers.

"How well you pretend," she whispered. "How very fine you are, and always were. And to think those demons in Rome thought they had put out your brilliant light. I should have laughed at them."

"Yes, and my light shines only for you," I said, "and it was of you I dreamt when I was burnt black by the fire sent from that demon blood drinker Santino. It was of you I dreamt as I drank from the Mother to regain my strength, as I searched for you through the countries of Europe."

"Oh, my love," she whispered. "My great love. If only I could be again the strong one whom you remember."

"But you will be," I insisted. "You are. I shall take care of you, yes, just as you wish. And you and Bianca and I—we shall all love one another. Tomorrow night, we'll talk. We'll make plans.

We'll speak of all the great cathedrals we must see, the windows of colored glass, we'll speak of the painters whose fine work we have yet to study. We'll speak of the New World, of its forests and its rivers. Pandora, we will speak of everything."

I went on and on.

"And you will come to love Bianca," I said. "You will come to treasure her. I know Bianca's heart and soul as ever I knew yours, I swear to you. We will exist together in peace, believe me. You have no idea of the happiness that awaits you."

"Happiness?" she asked. She looked at me as though she hardly understood the words I had spoken. Then she said:

"Marius, I leave this city tonight. Nothing can stop it."

"No, no, you can't say this to me!" I declared. I grabbed her by the arms again.

"Don't hurt me, Marius. I leave this city tonight. I told you. Marius, you've waited for one hundred years to see one thing, and one thing only—that I live. Now leave me to the existence I've chosen."

"I won't. I won't have it."

"Yes, you will," she whispered. "Marius, don't you see what I'm trying to tell you. I haven't the courage to leave Arjun. I haven't the courage to see the Mother and the Father. Marius, I don't have the courage to love you anymore. The very sound of your angry voice frightens me. I don't have the courage to meet your Bianca. The very thought that you might love her more than me frightens me. I am frightened of it all, don't you see? And even now, I am desperate for Arjun that he may take me away from all of this. With Arjun there is for me a great simplicity! Marius, please let me go with your forgiveness."

"I don't believe you," I said. "I told you I will give up Bianca for you. Good God, Pandora, what more can I do? You can't be leaving me."

I turned my back on her. The expression on her face was too strange. I couldn't endure it.

And as I sat there in the darkness, I heard the door of the carriage open. I heard her quick step on the stones, and she was gone from me.

My Pandora, utterly gone from me.

I don't know how long I waited. It was not a full hour.

I was too distressed, too perfectly miserable. I didn't want to see her companion, and when I thought of banging on the doors of her house, I found it too utterly humiliating.

And in truth, in pure truth, she had convinced me. She wouldn't remain with me.

I was about to tell my driver to take us home when a sound came to me. It was of her howling and crying, and of objects within the house being broken.

It was all I needed to push me into action. I left the carriage and ran to her door. I shot an evil glance at her mortal servants, which rendered them virtually powerless, and threw open the doors for myself.

I rushed up the marble steps. I found her going madly along the walls, pounding the mirrors with her fists. I found her shedding blood tears and shivering. There was broken glass all around her.

I took her wrists. I took them tenderly.

"Stay with me," I said. "Stay with me!"

Quite suddenly behind me, I heard the presence of Arjun. I heard his unhurried step and then he entered the room.

She had collapsed against my chest. She was shaking.

"Don't worry," said Arjun in the same patient tone he had used with me in the Duke's palace. "We can talk of all these things in a courteous way. I am not a wild creature, given to acts of destruction."

He seemed the perfect gentleman with his lace handkerchief and high-heeled shoes. He looked about at the broken pieces of mirror which lay on the fine carpet, and he shook his head.

"Then leave me alone with her," I said.

"Is this what you wish, Pandora?" he asked.

She nodded. "For a little while, my darling," she said to him.

As soon as he had left the room, and shut the tall double doors behind him, I stroked her hair, and I kissed her again.

"I can't leave him," she confessed.

"And why not?" I asked.

"Because I made him," she answered. "He is my son, my spouse, and my guardian."

I was shocked.

I had never supposed such a thing!

In all these years I had thought him some dominating creature who kept her in his power.

"I made him so that he would take care of me," she said. "I took him from India where I was worshiped as a very goddess by those few who had set eyes upon me. I taught him European ways. I placed him in charge of me so that in my weakness and despair, he would control me. And it is his hunger for life which drives us both. Without it I might have languished in some deep tomb for centuries."

"Very well," I said, "he is your child. This I understand, but Pandora, you are mine! What of this! You are mine, and I have you in my possession again! Oh, forgive me, forgive that I speak so harshly, that I use words such as possession. What do I mean to say? I mean to say I can't lose you!"

"I know what you mean," she said, "but you see, I can't turn him away from me. He has done far too well in what I have asked of him, and he loves me. And he cannot live under your roof, Marius. I know you only too well. Where Marius lives, Marius rules. You will never suffer a male such as Arjun to dwell with you on my account or for any other reason."

I was so deeply wounded that for one moment I couldn't answer her. I shook my head as though to deny what she had said, but in truth I didn't know whether or not she was wrong. I had always, always thought only of destroying Arjun.

"You can't deny it," she said softly. "Arjun is too strong, too willful, and has been too long his own master."

"There must be some way," I pleaded.

"There will come a night, surely," she said, "when it is time for Arjun to part from me. The same may happen with you and your Bianca. But this is not the time. And so I beg you, let go of me, Marius, say farewell to me, and promise me that you will eternally persevere and I shall give you the same promise."

"This is your vengeance, isn't it?" I asked quietly. "You were my child and within two hundred years I left you. And so you tell me now that you won't do the same to him—."

"No, my beautiful Marius, it isn't vengeance, it is only the truth. Now, leave me." She smiled bitterly. "Oh, what a gift to me this night has been, that I have seen you alive, that I know the Roman blood drinker Santino was wrong. This night will carry me through centuries."

"It will carry you away from me," I said, nodding.

But then her lips caught me by surprise. It was she who kissed me ardently, and then I felt her tiny sharp teeth pierce my throat.

I stood rigid, eyes closed, letting her drink, feeling the inevitable pull on my heart, my head suddenly full of visions of the dark forest through which she and her companion so often rode and I couldn't know whether these were her visions or mine.

On and on she drank, as though she was starving, and deliberately I created for her the luscious garden of my most cherished dreams, and in it I envisioned the two of us together. My body was nothing but desire for her. Through every sinew I felt the pull of her drinking and I gave no resistance. I was her victim. I held to no caution.

It seemed I was not standing any longer. I must have fallen. I didn't care. Then I felt her hands on my arms, and I knew I was on my feet.

She drew back, and with blurred eyes I saw her gazing at me. All of her hair had spilled down on her shoulders.

"Such strong blood," she whispered. "My Child of the Millennia."

It was the first time I had heard such a name for those of us who have lived so long and I was faintly charmed by it.

I was groggy, so strong had she been, but what did it matter? I would have given her anything. I steadied myself. I tried to clear my vision.

She was far away across the room.

"What did you see in the blood?" I whispered.

"Your pure love," she answered.

“Was there any doubt?” I asked. I was growing stronger by the moment. Her face was radiant with the blood flush and her eyes were fierce as they had always been when we quarreled.

“No, no doubt,” she said. “But you must leave me now.”

I said nothing.

“Go on, Marius. If you don’t, I can’t bear it.”

I stared at her as if I were staring at a wild thing of the wood, and so she seemed to be, this creature whom I had loved with all my heart.

And once again, I knew it to be finished.

I left the room.

In the grand hallway of the house, I stood stunned, and there Arjun was standing in the corner, staring at me.

“I am so sorry, Marius,” he said, as if he meant it.

I looked at him, wondering if anything could work me into a rage to destroy him. Were I to do that, she would have to stay with me. And oh, how the thought of it blazed in my mind. Yet I knew she would utterly and completely hate me for it. And I would hate myself. For what did I have against this creature who wasn’t her vile master as I’d always supposed, but her child!—a fledgling vampire of some five hundred years or less, young in the Blood and full of love for her.

I was far far from such a possibility. And what a sublime being he was as he surely read these thoughts in my desperate and unveiled mind and yet stood his ground with such poise, merely looking at me.

“Why must we part!” I whispered.

He shrugged. He gestured eloquently with his hands.

“I don’t know,” he said, “except she wants it so. It is she who wants ever to be on the move; it is she who draws designs upon the map. It is she who draws the circles in which we travel, now and then making Dresden the center of our roamings, now and then choosing some other city, such as Paris or Rome. It is she who says we must go on and on. It is she. And what can I say, Marius, except that it delights me.”

I went towards him and for one moment he thought I meant to harm him and he stiffened.

I took his wrist before he could move. I studied him. What a noble being he was, his grand white wig in sharp contrast to his lustrous brown skin, his black eyes staring at me with such earnestness and seeming comprehension.

“Stay with me here,” I said. “Both of you. Remain with me. Stay with me and my companion, Bianca.”

He smiled and shook his head. There was no contempt in his eyes. We were male to male and there was no contempt. He told me only No.

“She will not have it,” he said, his voice very placating and calm. “I know her. I know all her ways. She brought me to herself because I worshiped her. And once having her blood I have

never ceased in that worship."

I stood there, clutching his wrist still, and staring about me as if I were ready to cry out to the gods. And it seemed my cry would break the very walls of this house if I let it loose.

"How can this be!" I whispered. "That I should find her and know her only for one night, one precious night of quarreling."

"You and she are equals," he said. "I am but an instrument."

I closed my eyes.

Quite suddenly I could hear her weeping, and when this sound came to my ears, Arjun gently freed himself from me and said in his soft gentle voice that he must go to her.

I walked slowly out of the hallway, and down the marble steps and into the night, ignoring my carriage.

I walked home through the forest.

When I reached my house, I went into my library, took off the wig which I had worn to the ball, threw it across the room and sat in a chair at my writing table.

I put my head down on my folded arms and silently wept as I had not wept since the death of Eudoxia. I wept. And the hours passed, and at last I realized that Bianca was standing beside me.

She was stroking my hair with her hand, and then I heard her whisper.

"Time to come down the steps to our cold grave, Marius. It is early for you, but I must go and I can't leave you this way."

I rose to my feet. I took her in my arms and gave way to the most awful tears, and all the while she held me silently and warmly.

And then we went down to our coffins together.

The following night, I went immediately to the house where I'd left Pandora.

I found it deserted and then I searched all of Dresden and the many palaces or schlosses around it.

She and Arjun were gone, there was no doubt of it. And going up to the Ducal Palace where there was a little concert in progress I soon learned the "official" news of it, of how the handsome black coach of the Marquis and the Marquisa De Malvrier had left before dawn for Russia.

Russia.

Being in no mood for the music, I soon made my apologies to those gathered in the salon and I went home again, as miserable as I have ever been in my existence. As heartbroken.

I sat down at my desk. I looked out over the river. I felt the warm spring breeze.

I thought of all the many things she and I should have said to each other, all the many things I might have said in a calmer spirit to persuade her. I told myself she wasn't gone beyond reach. I told myself that she knew where I was, and that she could write to me. I told myself anything I needed to keep my sanity.

And I did not hear it when Bianca came into the room. I did not hear it when she sat down in a large tapestried armchair quite near to me.

I saw her as if she were a vision when I looked up—a flawless young boy with porcelain cheeks, her blond hair pulled back in a black ribbon, her frock coat embroidered in gold, her shapely legs in spotless white hose, her feet in ruby buckled shoes.

Oh, what a divine guise it was—Bianca as the young nobleman, known to the few mortals who mattered as her own brother. And how sad were her peerless blue eyes, as she looked at me.

"I feel sorry for you," she said quietly.

"Do you?" I asked. I said these words with my broken heart. "I hope you do, my precious darling, because I love you, I love you more than I have ever loved you, and I need you."

"But that's just the point, you see," she said in a low compassionate voice. "I heard the things you said to her. And I'm leaving you."

33

For three long nights I pleaded with her not to go as she made her preparations. I went down on my knees. I swore to her that I had said only what needed to be said to make Pandora remain with me.

I told her in every way I knew how that I loved her, and would never have abandoned her.

I told her that she would never be able to survive alone, and that I feared for her.

But nothing would turn her from her decision.

Only on the beginning of the third night did I realize that she was really going. Up until then, I had thought that such was absolutely inconceivable. I couldn't lose her. No, such a thing could not happen.

At last, I begged her to sit down and listen to me as I poured out my honest heart, confessing every bad thing which I had said, every cheap denial of her which had come from my lips, every desperate foolish thing I'd said to Pandora.

"But what I want now is to talk of you and me," I said, "and how it's always been between us."

"Yes, you may do that if you wish," she said, "if it makes the pain less for you, but Marius, I am going."

"You know how it was with me and Amadeo," I said. "I took him into my house when he was very young and gave him the Blood when mortality gave me no quarter. We were Master and pupil always, and there was mockery and a dark division. Perhaps you never saw this, but it was there, I assure you."

"I saw it," she said. "But I knew your love was greater."

"And so it was," I said. "But he was a child, and my man's heart always knew there was something finer and greater. Much as I cherished him, much as the mere sight of him delighted me, I could not confide to him my worst fears or pains. I could not tell him the tales of my life. They were too big for him."

"I understand you, Marius," she said gently. "I always have."

"And Pandora. You saw it with your own eyes. The bitter quarrel again, just as it had been so many centuries ago, the bitter fighting in which no real truth can be discovered."

"I saw it," she said in her quiet way. "I follow your meaning."

"You saw her fear of the Mother and the Father," I pleaded. "You heard her say that she couldn't come into the house. You heard her speak of her fear of everything."

"I did," she answered.

"And what was this one night between me and Pandora but misery, as it had been long ago, misery and misunderstanding."

"I know, Marius," she answered.

"But Bianca, what has it always been with you and me but harmony? Think of our long years when we dwelt in the shrine, and went out on the night winds where I could carry us. Think of the quiet between us, or the long conversations in which I talked of so many things and you listened. Could two beings have been closer than we were?"

She bowed her head. She didn't answer.

"And these last years," I pleaded. "Think of all the pleasures we have shared, our secretive hunting in the forests, our visits to the country festivals, our quiet attendance in the great cathedrals when the candles burn and the choirs sing, our dancing at the Court Balls. Think of all of it."

"I know, Marius," she said. "But you lied to me. You didn't tell me why we were coming to Dresden."

"I confess, it's true. Tell me what I can do to make up for it?"

"Nothing, Marius," she answered. "I'm going."

"But how will you live? You can't live without me. This is madness."

"No, I shall live quite well," she said. "And I must go now. I must travel many miles before dawn."

"And where will you sleep?"

"That is my worry now."

I was almost on the point of frenzy.

"Don't follow me, Marius," she said, as if she could read my mind which she could not.

"I can't accept this," I responded.

A silence fell between us, and I realized she was looking at me, and I looked at her, unable to hide a particle of my unhappiness.

"Bianca, don't do this," I pleaded.

"I saw your passion for her," she whispered, "and I knew that in a moment you would cast me aside. Oh, don't deny it. I saw it. And something in me was crushed. I couldn't protect that thing. I couldn't prevent its destruction. We were too close, you and I. And though I have loved you with my whole soul, so I believed I knew you completely, I didn't know the being you were with her. I didn't know the being whom I saw in her eyes."

She rose from the chair and moved away from me. She looked out the window.

"I wish I had not heard all those many words," she said, "but we have such gifts, we blood drinkers. And do you think I don't realize that you would never have made me your child except for the fact that you needed me? Had you not been burnt and helpless, you would never have

given me the Blood."

"Will you listen to me when I tell you that's not so? When first I saw you I loved you. It was only out of respect for your mortal life that I didn't share these cursed gifts with you! It was you who filled my eyes and heart before I ever found Amadeo. I swear this to you. Don't you remember the portraits I painted of you? Do you remember the hours I spent in your rooms? Think now on all that we've given each other."

"You deceived me," she said.

"Yes, I did," I said. "And I admit it, and I swear that I shall never do it again. Not for Pandora or for anyone."

On and on I pleaded.

"I can't stay with you," she said. "I must go now."

She turned around and looked at me. She seemed wrapped in quiet and resolution.

"I'm begging you," I said again. "Without pride, without reserve, I'm begging you, don't leave me."

"I must go," she said. "And now, please, let me go down to take my leave of the Mother and the Father. I would do this alone if you would allow it."

I nodded.

It was a long time before she came up from the shrine. She told me quietly that she would leave on the following sunset.

And true to her word, she did, her coach and four pulling out of the gates, as she began her journey.

I stood at the top of the stairs watching her go. I stood listening until the coach was deep into the forest. I stood unbelieving and unable to accept that she was gone from me.

How could this horrid disaster have occurred—that I lose Pandora and Bianca both? That I should be alone? And I was powerless to stop it.

For many months after that, I could scarcely believe what had befallen me.

I told myself that a letter would soon come from Pandora, or that she herself would return with Arjun, that Pandora would will it so.

I told myself that Bianca would realize that she could not exist without me. She would come home, eager to forgive me, or she would send some hasty letter asking me to come to her.

But these things did not happen.

A year passed and these things did not happen.

And another year and then fifty. And these things did not happen.

And all the while, though I moved deeper into the woods surrounding Dresden, in another more fortified castle, I remained near at hand in the hopes that one or both of my loves would come back to me.

For a half century I remained, waiting, not believing, and weighed down with a sorrow I

couldn't share with anyone.

I think I had ceased to pray in the shrine though I tended it faithfully. And I had begun, in a confidential manner, to talk to Akasha. I had begun to tell her my woes in a more informal manner than before, to tell her of how I had failed with those whom I had loved.

"But I shall never fail with you, my Queen," I said, and I said it often.

And then as the 1700s commenced, I prepared to make a daring move to an island where I would rule supreme in the Aegean Sea, surrounded by mortals who would easily accept me as their lord, in a stone house which I had prepared for me by a host of mortal servants.

All who have read The Vampire Lestat's tale of his life know of this immense and unusual place because he vividly described it. It far exceeded in grandeur any other palace in which I had ever lived, and its remoteness was a challenge to my ingenuity.

But I was most purely alone now, alone as I had ever been before the love of Amadeo, or Bianca, and I had no hope of an immortal companion. And perhaps in truth I wanted none.

It had been centuries since I had heard of Mael. I knew nothing of Avicus or Zenobia. I knew nothing of any other Child of the Millennia.

I wanted only a great and gorgeous shrine for the Mother and Father, and as I have said, I spoke to Akasha constantly.

But before I go on to describe this last and most important of all my European dwellings, I must include one last tragic detail in the story of those who were lost to me.

As my many treasures were moved to this Aegean palace, as my books, my sculptures, my fine tapestries and rugs and other such were shipped and uncrated by unsuspecting mortals, there came to light one final piece of the story of my beloved Pandora.

In the bottom of a packing case, one of the workers discovered a letter, written on parchment, and folded in half, and addressed quite simply to Marius.

I was on the terrace of this new house, gazing out at the sea and over the many small islands that surrounded me, when the letter was brought to me.

The page of parchment was thick with dust, and as soon as I opened it, I read a date inscribed in old ink which affirmed that it had been written the night I parted with Pandora.

It was as if the fifty years separating me from that pain meant nothing.

My beloved Marius,

It is almost dawn and I have only a few moments in which to write to you. As we have told you, our coach will leave within the hour carrying us away and towards the eventual destination of Moscow.

Marius, I want nothing more than to come to you now, but I cannot do it. I cannot seek shelter in the same house with the Ancient Ones.

But I beg you, my beloved, please come to Moscow. Please come and help me to free myself from Arjun. Later you can judge me and condemn me.

I need you, Marius. I shall haunt the vicinity of the Czar's palace and the Great Cathedral until you come.

Marius, I know I ask of you that you make a great journey, but please come.

Whatever I have said of my love of Arjun, I am his slave now too completely, and I would be yours again.

Pandora.

For hours I sat with the letter in my hand, and then slowly I rose and went to my servants and asked them that they tell me where the letter had been found.

It had been in a packing case of books from my old library.

How had I failed to receive it? Had Bianca hidden this letter from me? That I couldn't believe. It seemed some simpler more haphazard cruelty had taken place—that a servant had laid it on my desk in the early hours, and I myself had swept it aside into a heap of books without ever seeing it.

But what did it matter?

The awful damage was done.

She had written to me, and I had not known it. She had begged me to come to Moscow and I, not knowing, had not gone. And I did not know where to find her. I had her avowal of love, but it was too late.

In the following months I searched the Russian capital. I searched in the hope that she and Arjun had for some reason made their home there.

But I found no trace of Pandora. The wide world had swallowed her as it had swallowed my Bianca.

What more can I say to reveal the anguish of these two losses—that of Pandora whom I'd sought for so long, and my sweet and lovely Bianca?

With these two losses my story comes to a close.

Or rather I should say we have come full circle.

We now return to the story of the Queen of the Damned and of The Vampire Lestat who waked her. And I shall be brief as I revisit that story. For I think I see most clearly what it is that would heal my miserable soul more than anything. But before I can move on to that, we must revisit Lestat's antics and the story of how I lost my last love, Akasha.

34

The Vampire Lestat

As all know, who follow our Chronicles, I was on the island in the Aegean Sea, ruling over a peaceful world of mortals when Lestat, a young vampire, no more than ten years in the Blood, began to call out to me.

Now I was most belligerent in my solitude. And not even the recent rise of Amadeo, out of the old coven in Paris, to become the Master of the new and bizarre Théâtre des Vampires, could lure me from my solitude.

For though I had spied upon Amadeo more than once, I saw nothing in him, but the same heartbreaking sadness that I had known in Venice. I preferred loneliness to courting him.

But when I heard the call of Lestat, I sensed in him a powerful and unfettered intelligence, and I went to him at once, rescuing him from his first true retreat as a blood drinker and I brought him to my house, revealing its location to him.

I felt a great outpouring of love for Lestat, and impetuously perhaps, I took him down to the shrine immediately. I watched transfixed as he drew close to the Mother, and then in amazement as he kissed her.

I don't know whether it was his boldness or her stillness which so mesmerized me. But you can be certain I was ready to intervene if Enkil should try to hurt him.

When Lestat drew back, when he told me that the Mother had confided to him her name, I was caught off guard and a sudden wave of terrible jealousy took hold of me.

But I denied this feeling. I was too in love with Lestat and I told myself that this seeming miracle in the shrine meant only good things—that this young blood drinker might somehow spark life in the two Parents.

And so I took him to my salon, as I have described—and as he has described—and I told him the long tale of my beginnings. I told him the tale of the Mother and Father and their unending quietude.

He seemed a splendid pupil during all the hours that we talked together. Indeed, I don't think I had ever felt closer in my life to anyone than I did to Lestat. I was never closer even to Bianca. Lestat had traveled the world in his ten years in the Blood; he had devoured the great literature of many nations; and he brought to our conversation a vigor I had never seen really in anyone I had loved, not even in Pandora.

But the following night, as I was out tending to affairs with my mortal subjects, of whom there were many, Lestat went down to the shrine, taking with him a violin which had once belonged to his friend and fellow blood drinker, Nicolas.

And mimicking the skill of his lost friend, Lestat played the violin passionately and wondrously for the Divine Parents.

Over the short miles I heard the music. And then I heard a high-pitched singing note such as no mortal could ever have made. Indeed, it seemed the song of the Sirens of Greek mythology, and as I stood wondering what this sound could be, it died away in silence.

I tried to bridge the gap which separated me from my house, and what I saw through the unveiled mind of Lestat defied my belief.

Akasha had risen from her throne, and held Lestat in her embrace, and as Lestat drank from Akasha, Akasha drank from Lestat.

I turned and sped back towards my house and towards the shrine. But even as I did so, the scene shifted fatally.

Enkil had risen and had ripped Lestat loose from the Mother and she stood screaming for Lestat in tones that could deafen any mortal.

Rushing down the stone steps I found the doors of the shrine deliberately shut against me. I commenced to pound on them with all my force. And all the while I could see within, through Lestat's eyes, that Enkil had forced Lestat down on the floor, and Enkil, despite Akasha's screams, meant to crush him.

Oh, how plaintive were her screams for all their volume.

Desperately, I called out to him:

"Enkil, if you harm Lestat, if you kill him, I shall take her away from you forever and she will help me to do it. My King, this is what she wants!"

I could scarcely believe that I had shouted these words, but they had come to my mind immediately and there was no time to ponder them.

The doors of the shrine were at once opened. What an impossible and terrifying sight it was, the two stark white creatures standing there, in their Egyptian raiment, she with her mouth dripping with blood, and Enkil, standing there, yet as though he were in deep slumber.

In horror, I saw that Enkil's foot was resting against Lestat's chest. But Lestat still lived. Lestat was unharmed. Beside him lay the violin, smashed to pieces. Akasha stared forward as though she had never waked, looking past me.

I moved quickly and put my hands on Enkil's shoulders.

"Go back, my King," I said. "Go back. You have accomplished your purpose. Please, do as I beg you. You know how I respect your power."

Slowly he removed his foot from Lestat's chest, his expression blank, his movements sluggish as they always were, and gradually I was able to move him to the steps of the dais. Slowly he

turned to make the two steps, and slowly he sat down on his throne, and I with quick hands arranged his garments carefully.

"Lestat, run," I said firmly. "Don't for a moment question me. Run from here."

And as Lestat did as he was told, I turned to Akasha.

She was standing as if lost in a dream, and I put my hands very carefully on her arms.

"My beautiful one," I whispered, "my Sovereign. Let me return you to the throne."

As she had always done in the past, she obeyed me.

Within a few moments, they were as they had always been, as if it had been a delusion that Lestat had come, a delusion that his music had waked her.

But I knew it was no delusion, and as I stared at her, as I spoke to her in my intimate way, I was filled with a new fear that I did not express to her.

"You're beautiful and unchangeable," I said, "and the world is unworthy of you. It's unworthy of your power. You listen to so many prayers, don't you? And so you listened to this beautiful music and it delighted you. Perhaps I can some time bring music to you … bring those who can play it and believe that you and the King are but statues—."

I broke off this mad speech. What was I trying to do?

The truth is, I was terrified. Lestat had accomplished a breach of order of which I'd never dreamt, and I wondered what might lie ahead if anyone else attempted such!

But the main point, the point to which I clung in my anger, was this: I had restored the order. I had, by threats to my Royal Majesty, made him move back to the throne, and she, my beloved Queen, had followed him.

Lestat had done the unthinkable. But Marius had accomplished the remedy.

At last when my fear and my temper were better, I went down on the rocks by the sea to meet with Lestat and to chastise Lestat and I found myself more out of control than I imagined.

Who, but Marius, knew how long these Parents had sat in silence? And now this young one whom I had wanted so to love, so to instruct, so to enfold—this young one had brought out of them a movement which only further emboldened him.

Lestat wanted to free the Queen. Lestat thought we ought to imprison Enkil. I think I must have laughed. Surely I couldn't put into words how much I feared both of them.

Later that night, as Lestat hunted in the far islands, I heard strange sounds from the shrine.

I went down and discovered that various objects were shattered. Vases, lamps, lay broken or on their sides. Candles had been flung here and there. Which of the two Parents did these things? Neither moved. I couldn't know, and once again the fear in me increased.

For one desperate selfish moment, I looked at Akasha and I thought, I shall give you over to Lestat if that is what you wish! Only tell me how to do it. Rise against Enkil with me! But these words didn't really form in my mind.

In my soul I felt a cold jealousy. I felt a leaden sorrow.

But then I could tell myself it was the magic of the violin, was it not? For when in ancient times had such an instrument been heard? And he, a blood drinker, had come before her to perform, in all probability twisting and turning the music madly.

There was no consolation in this for me, however. She had waked for him!

And as I stood in the silence of the shrine, staring at all the broken objects, a thought came into my mind as though she had put it there.

I loved him as you loved him and would have him here as you would have him. But it cannot be.

I was transfixed.

But then I moved towards her as I had done a hundred times, advancing slowly so that she might refuse me if she wished, so that he might deny me with even the smallest show of power. And at last I drank from her, perhaps from the very same vein in her white throat, I didn't know, and then I moved back, my eyes on Enkil's face.

His cold features registered nothing but listlessness.

When I woke the following night I heard noises from the shrine. I found more of the many fine objects broken.

I felt I had no choice but to send Lestat away. I knew of no other remedy.

It was another bitter terrible parting—as miserable as my parting with Pandora, or my parting with Bianca.

I will never forget how comely he appeared, with his fabled yellow hair and his fathomless blue eyes, how eternally young, how full of frenetic hope and marvelous dreams, and how wounded and stricken he was to be sent away. And how my heart ached that I must do it. I wanted only to keep him close—my pupil, my lover, my rebel. I had so loved his rippling speech, his honest questions, his daring appeals for the Queen's heart and freedom. Could we not save her somehow from Enkil? Could we not somehow enliven her? But it was oh, so dangerous even to talk of such things, and Lestat could not grasp it.

And so this young one, this young one whom I had so loved, I had to forsake, no matter how broken my heart, no matter how lonely my soul, no matter how bruised my intellect and spirit.

But I was now truly afraid of what Akasha and Enkil might do if they were aroused again, and I could not share that fear with Lestat, lest I frighten him or even incite him further.

You see, I understood how restless he was even then, and how unhappy in the Blood, and how eager for a purpose in the mortal world, and keenly aware that he had none.

And I, alone in my Aegean paradise after he left, truly pondered whether I should destroy the Mother and Father.

All who have read our Chronicles know that the year in which this happened was 1794, and the world was rich in marvels.

How could I continue to harbor these beings who might menace it? But I didn't want to die. No, I have never really wanted to die. And so I did not destroy the King and the Queen. I

continued to care for them, to shower them with the symbols of worship.

And as we moved into the multitudinous wonders of the modern world, I feared death more than ever.

35

The Rise and Fall of Akasha

It was perhaps twenty years ago that I brought the Mother and Father across the sea to America and to the frozen wastes in the North where I created beneath the ice my fine technologically splendid house described by Lestat in *The Queen of the Damned* and from which the Queen rose.

Let me pass over quickly what has been mentioned here before—that I made a great modern shrine for the King and Queen with a television screen that might bring them music and other forms of entertainment and "news" from all over the planet.

As for me, I was living alone in this house, enjoying a whole string of well-warmed rooms and libraries as I did my eternal reading and writing, as I watched films and documentaries which intrigued me mightily.

I had entered the mortal world once or twice as a filmmaker, but in general I had lived a solitary life, and I knew little or nothing of the other Children of the Millennia.

Until such time as Bianca or Pandora should want to join me again, what did I care about others? And as for The Vampire Lestat, when he came forth with his mighty rock music I thought it hysterically funny. What more perfect guise for a vampire, I thought, than that of a rock musician?

But as his many short rock video films appeared, I realized that he was putting forth in that form the entire history which I had revealed to him. And I realized as well that blood drinkers all over the world were setting their cannons against him.

These were young beings of whom I had taken no notice, and I was quite amazed now to hear their voices lifted in the Mind Gift, searching diligently for others.

Nevertheless, I thought nothing of it. I did not dream his music could affect the world—not the world of mortals or our world—

—not until the very night that I came down to the underground shrine and discovered my King, Enkil, a hollow being, a mere husk, a creature drained of all blood, sitting so perilously on the throne that when I touched him with my fingers, he fell onto the marble floor, his black plaited hair breaking into tiny splinters.

In shock I stared at this spectacle! Who could have done such a thing, who could have drained him of every drop of blood, who could have destroyed him!

And where was my Queen, had she met the same fate, had the whole legend of Those Who

Must Be Kept been a deception from the beginning?

I knew that it was not a lie, and I knew the one being who could have visited this fate upon Enkil, the only being in all the world who had such cunning, such intimacy, such knowledge and such power.

Within seconds, I turned from the fallen husk of Enkil to discover her standing not three inches from me. Her black eyes were narrowed and quickened with life. Her royal raiment was the clothing I had placed upon her. Her red lips formed a mocking smile, and then there came from her a wicked laughter.

I hated her for that laughter.

I feared her and hated her that she laughed at me.

All my sense of possession came to the fore, that she was mine and that she now dared to turn on me.

Where was the sweetness of which I had dreamt? I stood in the midst of a nightmare.

"My dear servant," she said, "you have never had the power to stop me!"

It was inconceivable that this creature whom I had so protected throughout time could turn on me. It was inconceivable that this one whom I so completely adored now taunted me.

Something hasty and pathetic came from my lips:

"But what do you want?" I asked, as I tried to grasp what was taking place. "What do you mean to do?"

It was a wonder that she even gave some mocking answer to me.

It was lost in the sound of the television screen exploding, in the sound of metal ripping, in the sound of the ice falling.

With incalculable power she rose from the depths of the house, sending its walls, its ceilings, and its surrounding ice down upon me.

I found myself buried, calling for help.

And the reign of the Queen of the Damned had commenced, though she had never taken that name for herself.

You saw her as she moved through the world. You saw her as she slew blood drinkers all around her, you saw her as she slew blood drinkers who would not serve her purpose.

Did you see her as she took Lestat as her lover? Did you see her as she sought to frighten mortals with her petty displays of old-fashioned power?

And all the while I lay crushed beneath the ice—spared for what purpose I could not imagine—sending out my warning to Lestat that he was in danger, sending out my warning to all that they were in danger. And pleading as well with any Child of the Millennia who might come to help me rise from the crevasse in which I'd been buried.

Even as I called in my powerful voice I healed. I began to move the ice around me.

But at last two blood drinkers came to assist me. I caught the image of one in the mind of the

other. And it seemed impossible to me, but the one whom I saw so radiantly in the other's vision was none other than my Pandora.

At last, with their help, I broke the ice that kept me from the surface, and I climbed free under the arctic sky, taking Pandora's hand, and then gathering her in my arms, refusing for a moment to think of anything, even of my savage Queen and her deadly rampage.

There were no words now, no vows, no denials. I held Pandora in love and she knew it, and when I looked up, when I cleared my eyes of pain and love and fear, I realized that the blood drinker who had come North with her, he who had answered my summons, was none other than Santino.

For a moment, I was filled with such hatred I meant to destroy him completely.

"No," Pandora said, "Marius, you can't. All of us are needed now. And why do you think he has come if not to repay you?"

He stood there in the snow in his fine black garments, the wind whipping his black hair and I could see he was consumed with fear, but he would not confess it.

"This is no repayment for what you did to me," I said to him. "But I know Pandora is right, we're all needed, and for that reason, I spare you."

I looked at my beloved Pandora.

"There is a council forming now," I said. "It's in a great house in the coastal forest, a place of glass walls. We'll go there together."

You know of what happened then. We gathered at our great table in the redwood trees—as if we were a new and passionate Faithful of the Forest—and when the Queen came to us with her plan to bring harm to the great world, we all sought to reason with her.

It was her dream to be the Queen of Heaven to humankind, to slay male children by the billions, and make the world a "garden" of tender-spirited women. It was a horrific and impossible conception.

No one sought more diligently than your red-haired Maker Maharet to turn her from her goals, condemning her that she would dare to change the course of human history.

I myself, thinking bitterly of the beautiful gardens I'd seen when I had drunk her blood, risked her deadly power over and over by pleading with her to give the world time to follow its own destiny.

Oh, it was a chilling thing to see this living statue now speaking to me so coldly yet with such strong will and contemptuous temper. How grand and evil were her schemes, to slay male children, to gather women in a superstitious worship.

What gave us courage to fight her? I don't know except that we knew that we had to do it. And all along, as she threatened us repeatedly with death, I thought: I could have prevented this, I could have stopped it from ever happening had I put an end to her and to all of us.

As it is, she will destroy us and go on; and who will prevent her?

At one point she knocked me backwards with her arm, so quick was her rage at my words. And it was Santino who came to my assistance. I hated him for this but there was no time for hating him or anyone.

At last she laid her condemnation down on all of us. As we would not side with her, we would be destroyed, one after another. She would begin with Lestat, for she took his insult to her to be the greatest. And he had resisted her. Bravely he had sided with us, pleading with her for reason.

At this dreadful moment, the elders rose, the ones of the First Brood who had been made blood drinkers within her very lifetime, and those Children of the Millennia such as Pandora and myself and Mael and others.

But before the murderous little struggle could begin, there came another into our midst, approaching loudly up the iron steps of the forest compound where we met, until in the doorway we beheld the twin of Maharet: her mute sister, the sister from whom Akasha had torn the tongue: Mekare.

It was she who, snatching the long black hair of the Queen, bashed her head against the glass wall, breaking it, and severing the head from the body. It was she and her sister who dropped down on their knees, to retrieve from the decapitated Queen, the Sacred Core of all the vampires.

Whether that Sacred Core—that fatal root—was imbibed from heart or brain, I know not. I know only that the mute Mekare became its new tabernacle.

And after a few moments of sputtering darkness in which we all of us wondered whether or not death should take us now, we regained our strength and looked up to see the twins standing before us.

Maharet put her arm around Mekare's waist, and Mekare, come from brutal isolation I know not where, merely stared into space as though she knew some quiet peace but no more than that. And from Maharet's lips there came the words:

"Behold. The Queen of the Damned."

It was finished.

The reign of my beloved Akasha—with all its hopes and dreams—had come abruptly to an end.

And I carried through the world the burden of Those Who Must Be Kept no longer.

The End of the Story of Marius

THE LISTENER

36

Marius stood at the glass window looking out at the snow. Thorne sat by the dying fire, merely looking at Marius.

"So you have woven for me a long, fine tale," said Thorne, "and I have found myself marvelously caught up in it."

"Have you?" said Marius quietly. "And perhaps I now find myself woven within my hatred of Santino."

"But Pandora was with you," said Thorne. "You were reunited with her again. Why is she not with you now? What's happened?"

"I was united with Pandora and Amadeo," said Marius. "It all came about in those nights. And I have seen them often since. But I am an injured creature. And it was I who left their company. I could go now to Lestat, and those who are with him. But I don't.

"My soul still aches over the losses I've suffered. I don't know which causes me the greater pain—the loss of my goddess, or my hatred of Santino. She is gone beyond my reach forever. But Santino still lives."

"Why don't you do away with him?" asked Thorne. "I'll help you find him."

"I can find him," said Marius. "But without her permission I can't do it."

"Maharet?" Thorne asked. "But why?"

"Because she's the eldest of us now, she and her mute twin, and we must have a leader. Mekare cannot speak and might not have wits to speak even if she could. And so it's Maharet. And even if she refuses to allow or judge, I must put the question to her."

"I understand," said Thorne. "In my time, we gathered to settle such questions, and a man might seek payment from one who had injured him."

Marius nodded.

"I think I must seek Santino's death," he whispered. "I am at peace with all others, but to him I would do violence."

"And very well you should," said Thorne, "from all that you've told me."

"I've called to Maharet," said Marius. "I've let her know that you are here and that you're seeking her. I've let her know that I must ask her about Santino. I'm hungry for her wise words. Perhaps I want to see her weary mortal eyes gazing on me with compassion.

"I remember her brilliant resistance of the Queen. I remember her strength and maybe now I need it.… Perhaps by now she's found the eyes of a blood drinker for herself, and need not suffer

anymore with the eyes of her human victims."

Thorne sat thinking for a long moment. Then he rose from the couch. He drew close to the glass beside Marius.

"Can you hear her answer to you?" he asked. He couldn't disguise his emotion. "I want to go to her. I must go to her."

"Haven't I taught you anything?" Marius asked. He turned to Thorne. "Haven't I taught you to remember these tender complex creatures with love? Perhaps not. I thought that was the lesson of my stories."

"Oh, yes, you've taught me this," said Thorne, "and love her I do, in so far as she is tender and complex as you so delicately put it, but I'm a warrior, you see, and I was never fit for eternity. And the hatred you harbor for Santino is the same as the passion I harbor for her. And passion can be for evil or good. I can't help myself."

Marius shook his head.

"If she brings us to herself," he said, "I will only lose you. As I've told you before, you can't possibly harm her."

"Perhaps, perhaps not," said Thorne. "But whatever the truth, I must see her. And she knows why I've come, and she will have her will in the matter."

"Come now," Marius said, "it's time for us to go to our rest. I hear strange voices in the morning air. And I feel the need of sleep desperately."

When Thorne awoke he found himself in a smooth wooden coffin.

Without fear, he easily lifted the lid, and then opened it to one side and sat up so that he might see the room around him.

It was a cave of sorts, and beyond he heard the loud chorus of a tropical forest.

All the fragrances of the green jungle assaulted his nostrils. He found it delicious and strange, and he knew it could only mean one thing: that Maharet had brought him to her hiding place.

He climbed from the coffin as gracefully as he could and he stepped out into a huge room full of scattered stone benches. On the three sides the jungle grew thick and lively against a fine wire mesh and through the mesh above a thin rain came down refreshing him.

Looking to his right and left, he saw entrances to other such open places. And following the sounds and scents as any blood drinker could do, he moved to his right until he entered a great room where his Maker sat as he had seen her at the very beginning of his long life, in a graceful gown of purple wool, pulling the red hairs from her head and weaving them into thread with her distaff and her spindle.

For many long moments he merely stared at her, as if he could not believe this vision.

And she in profile, surely knowing he was there, went on with her work, without speaking a

word to him.

Across the room, he saw Marius seated on a bench and then he realized that a regal and beautiful woman sat beside him. Surely it was Pandora. Indeed, he knew her by her brown hair. And there on the other side of Marius was the auburn-haired boy he had described: Amadeo.

But there was also another creature in the room, and this without doubt was the black-haired Santino. He sat not far from Maharet, and when Thorne entered, he appeared to shrink away from Thorne, and then glancing at Marius to draw back again, and finally towards Maharet as if in desperation.

Coward, Thorne thought, but he said nothing.

Slowly Maharet turned her head until she could see Thorne, and so that he could see her eyes —human eyes—sad and full of blood, as always.

"What can I give you, Thorne?" she asked, "to make your soul quiet again?"

He shook his head. He motioned for silence, not to compel her but merely to plead with her.

And in the interval Marius rose to his feet, and at once Pandora and Amadeo on either side of him.

"I've thought long and hard on it," Marius said, his eyes on Santino. "And I can't destroy him if you forbid it. I won't break the peace with such an action. I believe too much that we must live by rules or we shall all perish."

"Then it is finished," said Maharet, her familiar voice bringing the chills to Thorne, "for I'll never grant you the right to destroy Santino. Yes, he injured you and it was a terrible thing, and I have heard you in the night describing your suffering to Thorne. I've listened to your words in sorrow. But you can't destroy him now. I forbid it. And if you go against me, then there is no one who can restrain anyone."

"That can't be," said Marius. His face was dark and miserable. He glared at Santino. "There must be someone to restrain others. Yet I can't bear it that he lives after what he's done to me."

To Thorne's amazement the youthful face of Amadeo appeared only puzzled.

As for Pandora, she seemed sad and anxious, as though she feared that Marius wouldn't keep to his word.

But Thorne knew otherwise.

And as he assessed this black-haired creature now, Santino rose from the bench and backed away from Thorne, pointing his finger at Thorne in terror.

But it was not quick enough.

Thorne sent all his strength at Santino and all Santino could do as he fell to his knees was cry out: "Thorne," over and over again, his body exploding, the blood flowing from every orifice, the fire finally erupting from his chest and head as he twisted and collapsed on the stone floor, the flames at last consuming him.

Maharet had let out a terrible wail of sorrow, and into the large room her twin had come, her

blue eyes searching for the source of pain in her sister.

Maharet rose to her feet. She looked down on the grease and ash that lay before her.

Thorne looked at Marius. He saw a small bitter smile on Marius's lips, and then Marius looked to him and nodded.

"I need no thanks from you," Thorne said.

Then he looked to Maharet who was weeping, her sister now holding tight to her arms, and pleading mutely with her to explain herself.

"Wergeld, my Maker," said Thorne. "As it was in my time, I exact the wergeld or payment for my own life, which you took when you made me a blood drinker. I take it through Santino's life, which I take beneath your roof."

"Yes, and against my will," Maharet cried. "You have done this terrible thing! And Marius, your own friend, has told you that I must rule here."

"If you would rule here, do it on your own," said Thorne. "Don't look to Marius to tell you how to do it. Ah, look at your precious distaff and spindle. How will you protect the Sacred Core if you have no strength to fight those who oppose you?"

She couldn't answer him, and he could see that Marius was angered, and that Mekare looked at him with menace.

He came towards Maharet, staring intently at her, at her smooth face which now bore no trace whatever of human life, the florid human eyes seemingly set within a sculpture.

"Would I had a knife," he said, "would I had a sword, would I had any weapon I could use against you." And then he did the only thing which he could do. He took her by the throat with both his hands and tried to topple her.

It was like holding fast to marble.

At once there came a frantic cry from her. He couldn't understand the words, but when her sister drew him back gently he knew it had been a warning for his sake. He reached out still with both hands, struggling to be free, but it was useless.

These two were unconquerable, either divided or together, it did not matter.

"Put an end to this, Thorne," cried Marius. "It's enough. She knows what's in your heart. You can't ask for more than this."

Maharet collapsed to her bench and there she sat crying, her sister at her side, Mekare's eyes fixed on Thorne warily.

Thorne could see that all of them were afraid of Mekare, but he was not, and when he thought of Santino again, when he looked at the black stain on the stones, he felt a good deep pleasure.

Then moving swiftly, he accosted the mute twin and whispered something hurried in her ear, meant only for her, wondering if she would get the sense of it.

Within a second he knew that she had. As Maharet watched in wonder, Mekare forced him down on his knees. She clasped his face and turned it up. And then he felt her fingers plunge into

the sockets of his eyes as she removed them.

"Yes, yes, this blessed darkness," he said, "and then the chains, I beg you, the chains. Otherwise do away with me."

Through Marius's mind, he could see the image of himself groping in blindness. He could see the blood flowing down his face. He could see Maharet as Mekare put the eyes into her head. He could see those two tall delicate women with their arms entangled, the one struggling but not enough and the other pressing for the deed to be accomplished.

Then he felt others gathered around him. He felt the fabric of their garments, he felt their smooth hands.

And only in the distance could he hear Maharet weeping.

The chains were being put around him. He felt their thick links and knew he could not break loose from them. And being dragged further away, he said nothing.

The blood flowed from his eye sockets. He knew it. And in some quiet empty place he was now bound exactly as he had dreamt of it. Only she wasn't close. She wasn't close at all. He heard the jungle sounds. And he longed for the winter cold, and this place was too warm and too full of the perfume of flowers.

But he would get used to the heat. He would get used to the rich fragrances.

"Maharet," he whispered.

He saw what they saw again, in another room, as they looked at each other, all of them talking in hushed voices of his fate and none fully understanding it. He knew that Marius was pleading for him, and he knew that Maharet whom he saw so vividly through their eyes was as beautiful now as she had been when she made him.

Suddenly she was gone from the group. And they talked in shadows without her.

Then he felt her hand on his cheek. He knew it. He knew the soft wool of her gown. He knew her lips when she kissed him.

"You do have my eyes," he said.

"Oh, yes," she said. "I see wondrously through them."

"And these chains, are they made of your hair?"

"Yes," she answered. "From hair to thread, from thread to rope, from rope to links, I have woven them."

"My weaving one," he said, smiling. "And when you weave them now," he asked, "will you keep me close to you?"

"Yes," she said. "Always."

9:20 p.m.
March 19, 2000

Dedicated to my beloved husband, Stan Rice,
and my beloved sister Karen O'Brien

Anne Rice

Blackwood Farm

A BALLANTINE e BOOK

Blackwood Farm

A novel by

Anne Rice

Ballantine Books

A Ballantine Book

Published by the Random House Publishing Group

Copyright © 2002 by Anne O'Brien Rice

All Rights Reserved.

Published in the United States by Ballantine Books, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York.

Ballantine and colophon are registered trademarks of Random House, Inc.

eISBN: 978-1-400-04020-9

This edition published by arrangement with Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

www.ballantinebooks.com

v3.1

Contents

Master Table of Contents

Cover
Title Page
Copyright

Epigraph

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22

Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Chapter 35
Chapter 36
Chapter 37
Chapter 38
Chapter 39
Chapter 40
Chapter 41
Chapter 42
Chapter 43
Chapter 44
Chapter 45
Chapter 46
Chapter 47
Chapter 48
Chapter 49
Chapter 50
Chapter 51
Chapter 52

Dedication

My days have passed away, my
thoughts are dissipated, tormenting my
heart.

They have turned night into day,
and after darkness I hope for light again.

If I wait hell is my house, and I have
made my bed in darkness.

I have said to rottenness: thou art
my father; to worms, my mother and
my sister.

Where is now then my expectation,
and who considereth my patience?

All that I have shall go down into
the deepest pit: thinkest thou that there
at least I shall have rest?

JOB 17:11–16 DV.

1

Lestat,

If you find this letter in your house in the Rue Royale, and I do sincerely think you will find it—you'll know at once that I've broken your rules.

I know that New Orleans is off limits to Blood Hunters, and that any found there will be destroyed by you. And unlike many a rogue invader whom you have already dispatched, I understand your reasons. You don't want us to be seen by members of the Talamasca. You don't want a war with the venerable Order of Psychic Detectives, both for their sake and ours.

But please, I beg you, before you come in search of me, read what I have to say.

My name is Quinn. I'm twenty-two years old, and have been a Blood Hunter, as my Maker called it, for slightly less than a year. I'm an orphan now, as I see it, and it is to you that I turn for help.

But before I make my case, please understand that I know the Talamasca, that I knew them before the Dark Blood was ever given to me, and I know of their inherent goodness and their legendary neutrality as regards things supernatural, and I will have taken great pains to elude them in placing this letter in your flat.

That you keep a telepathic watch over New Orleans is plain to me. That you'll find the letter I have no doubt.

If you do come to bring a swift justice to me for my disobedience, assure me please that you will do your utmost to destroy a spirit which has been my companion since I was a child. This creature, a duplicate of me who has grown with me since before I can remember, now poses a danger to humans as well as to myself.

Let me explain.

As a little boy I named this spirit Goblin, and that was well before anyone had told me nursery rhymes or fairy tales in which such a word might appear. Whether the name came from the spirit himself I don't know. However, at the mere mention of the name, I could always call him to me. Many a time he came of his own accord and wouldn't be banished. At others, he was the only friend I had. Over the years, he has been my constant familiar, maturing as I matured and becoming ever more skilled at making known to me his wishes.

You could say I strengthened and shaped Goblin, unwittingly creating the monster that he is now.

The truth is, I can't imagine existence without Goblin. But I have to imagine it. I have to put an end to Goblin before he metamorphoses into something utterly beyond my control.

Why do I call him a monster—this creature who was once my only playmate? The answer is simple. In the months since my being made a Blood Hunter—and understand, I had no choice whatsoever in the matter—Goblin has acquired his own taste for blood. After every feeding, I am embraced by him, and blood is drawn from me into him by a thousand infinitesimal wounds, strengthening the image of him, and lending to his presence a soft fragrance which Goblin never had before. With each passing month, Goblin becomes stronger, and his assaults on me more prolonged.

I can no longer fight him off.

It won't surprise you, I don't think, that these assaults are vaguely pleasurable, not as pleasurable to me as feeding on a human victim, but they involve a vague orgasmic shimmer that I can't deny.

But it is not my vulnerability to Goblin that worries me now. It is the question of what Goblin may become.

Now, I have read your Vampire Chronicles through and through. They were bequeathed to me by my Maker, an ancient Blood Hunter who gave me, according to his own version of things, an enormous amount of strength as well.

In your stories you talk of the origins of the vampires, quoting an ancient Egyptian Elder Blood Drinker who told the tale to the wise one, Marius, who centuries ago passed it on to you.

Whether you and Marius made up some of what was written in your books I don't know. You and your comrades, the Coven of the Articulate, as you are now called, may well have a penchant for telling lies.

But I don't think so. I'm living proof that Blood Drinkers exist—whether they are called Blood Drinkers, vampires, Children of the Night or Children of the Millennia—and the manner in which I was made conforms to what you describe.

Indeed, though my Maker called us Blood Hunters rather than vampires, he used words which have appeared in your tales. The Cloud Gift he gave to me so that I can travel effortlessly by air; and also the Mind Gift to seek out telepathically the sins of my victims; as well as the Fire Gift to ignite the fire in the iron stove here that keeps me warm.

So I believe your stories. I believe in you.

I believe you when you say that Akasha, the first of the vampires, was created when an evil spirit invaded every fiber of her being, a spirit which had, before attacking her, acquired a taste for human blood.

I believe you when you say that this spirit, named Amel by the two witches who could see him and hear him—Maharet and Mekare—exists now in all of us, his mysterious body, if we may call it that, having grown like a rampant vine to blossom in every Blood Hunter who is made by another, right on up to the present time.

I know as well from your stories that when the witches Mekare and Maharet were made Blood Hunters, they lost the ability to see and talk to spirits. And indeed my Maker told me that I would lose mine.

But I assure you, I have not lost my powers as a seer of spirits. I am still their magnet. And it is perhaps this ability in me, this receptiveness, and my early refusal to spurn Goblin, that have given him the strength to be plaguing me for vampiric blood now.

Lestat, if this creature grows ever more strong, and it seems there is nothing I can do to stop him, is it possible that he can enter a human being, as Amel did in ancient times? Is it possible that yet another species of the vampiric root may be created, and from that root yet another vine?

I cannot imagine your being indifferent to this question, or to the possibility that Goblin will become a killer of humans, though he is far from that strength right now.

I think you will understand when I say that I'm frightened for those whom I love and cherish—my mortal family—as well as for any stranger whom Goblin might eventually attack.

It's hard to write these words. For all my life I have loved Goblin and scorned anyone who denigrated him as an "imaginary playmate" or a "foolish obsession." But he and I, for so long mysterious bedfellows, are now enemies, and I dread his attacks because I feel his increasing strength.

Goblin withdraws from me utterly when I am not hunting, only to reappear when the fresh blood is in my veins. We have no spiritual intercourse now, Goblin and I. He seems afire with jealousy that I've become a Blood Hunter. It's as though his childish mind has been wiped clean of all it once learned.

It is an agony for me, all of this.

But let me repeat: it is not on my account that I write to you. It is in fear of what Goblin may become.

Of course I want to lay eyes upon you. I want to talk to you. I want to be received, if such a thing is possible, into the Coven of the Articulate. I want you, the great breaker of rules, to forgive me that I have broken yours.

I want you who were kidnapped and made a vampire against your will to look kindly on me because the same thing happened to me.

I want you to forgive my trespass into your old flat in the Rue Royale, where I hope to hide this letter. I want you to know as well that I haven't hunted in New Orleans and never

will.

And speaking of hunting, I too have been taught to hunt the Evil Doer, and though my record isn't perfect, I'm learning with each feast. I've also mastered the Little Drink, as you so elegantly call it, and I'm a visitor to noisy mortal parties who is never noticed as he feeds from one after another in quick and deft moves.

But in the main, my existence is lonely and bitter. If it weren't for my mortal family, it would be unendurable. As for my Maker, I shun him and his cohorts, and with reason.

That's a story I'd like to tell you. In fact, there are many stories I want to tell you. I pray that my stories might keep you from destroying me. You know, we could play a game. We meet and I start talking, and slap damn, you kill me when I take a verbal turn you don't like.

But seriously, Goblin is my concern.

Let me add before I close that during this last year of being a fledgling Blood Hunter, of reading your Chronicles and trying to learn from them, I have often been tempted to go to the Talamasca Motherhouse at Oak Haven, outside of New Orleans. I have often been tempted to ask the Talamasca for counsel and help.

When I was a boy—and I'm hardly more than that now—there was a member of the Talamasca who was able to see Goblin as clearly as I could—a gentle, nonjudgmental Englishman named Stirling Oliver, who advised me about my powers and how they could become too strong for me to control. I grew to love Stirling within a very short time.

I also fell deeply in love with a young girl who was in the company of Stirling when I met him, a red-haired beauty with considerable paranormal power who could also see Goblin—one to whom the Talamasca had opened its generous heart.

That young girl is beyond my reach now. Her name is Mayfair, a name that is not unfamiliar to you, though this young girl probably knows nothing of your friend and companion Merrick Mayfair, even to this day.

But she is most certainly from the same family of powerful psychics—they seem to delight in calling themselves witches—and I have sworn never to see her again. With her considerable powers she would realize at once that something catastrophic has happened to me. And I cannot let my evil touch her in any way.

When I read your Chronicles, I was mildly astonished to discover that the Talamasca had turned against the Blood Hunters. My Maker had told me this, but I didn't believe it until I read it in your books.

It's still hard for me to imagine that these gentle people have broken one thousand years of neutrality in a warning against all of our kind. They seemed so proud of their benevolent history, so psychologically dependent upon a secular and kindly definition of themselves.

Obviously, I can't go to the Talamasca now. They might become my sworn enemies if I do that. They *are* my sworn enemies! And on account of my past contact, they know exactly

where I live. But more significantly, I can't seek their help because you don't want it.

You and the other members of the Coven of the Articulate do not want one of us to fall into the hands of an order of scholars who are only too eager to study us at close range.

As for my red-haired Mayfair love, let me repeat that I wouldn't dream of approaching her, though I've sometimes wondered if her extraordinary powers couldn't help me to somehow put an end to Goblin for all time. But this could not be done without my frightening her and confusing her, and I won't interrupt her human destiny as mine was interrupted for me. I feel even more cut off from her than I did in the past.

And so, except for my mortal connections, I'm alone.

I don't expect your pity on account of this. But maybe your understanding will prevent you from immediately annihilating me and Goblin without so much as a warning.

That you can find both of us I have no doubt. If even half the Chronicles are true, it's plain that your Mind Gift is without measure. Nevertheless, let me tell you where I am.

My true home is the wooden Hermitage on Sugar Devil Island, deep in Sugar Devil Swamp, in northeastern Louisiana, not far from the Mississippi border. Sugar Devil Swamp is fed by the West Ruby River, which branches off from the Ruby at Rubyville.

Acres of this deep cypress swamp have belonged to my family for generations, and no mortal ever accidentally finds his way in here to Sugar Devil Island, I'm certain of it, though my great-great-great-grandfather Manfred Blackwood did build the house in which I sit, writing to you now.

Our ancestral home is Blackwood Manor, an august if not overblown house in the grandest Greek Revival style, replete with enormous and dizzying Corinthian columns, an immense structure on high ground.

For all its huffing and puffing beauty, it lacks the grace and dignity of New Orleans homes, being a truly pretentious monument to Manfred Blackwood's greed and dreams. Constructed in the 1880s, without a plantation to justify it, it had no real purpose but to give delight to those who lived in it. The entire property—swamp, land and monstrous house—is known as Blackwood Farm.

That the house and land around it are haunted is not only legend but fact. Goblin is without a doubt the most potent of the spirits, but there are ghosts here as well.

Do they want the Dark Blood from me? For the most part, they seem far too weak for such a possibility, but who is to say that ghosts don't see and learn? God knows that I have some accursed capacity to draw their attention and to endow them with some crucial vitality. It's been happening all my life.

Have I tried your patience? I hope to God that I have not.

But this letter may be my one chance with you, Lestat. And so I've said the things that matter to me most.

And when I reach your flat in the Rue Royale, I'll use every bit of wit and skill at my command to place this letter where no one will find it but you.

Believing in that ability, I sign my name,

Tarquin Blackwood,
known always as
Quinn

Postscript.

Remember I'm only twenty-two and a bit clumsy. But I can't resist this small request. If you do mean to track me down and eradicate me, could you give me an hour's notice to say some sort of farewell to the one mortal relative I most love in all the world?

In the Vampire Chronicle called *Merrick,* you were described as wearing a coat with cameo buttons. Was that the truth or someone's fanciful embellishment?

If you wore those cameo buttons—indeed, if you chose them carefully and you loved them—then for the sake of those cameos, let me, before being destroyed, say farewell to an elderly woman of incredible charm and benevolence who loves each evening to spread out her hundreds of cameos on her marble table and examine them one by one in the light. She is my great-aunt and my teacher in all things, a woman who has sought to endow me with all I need to live an important life.

I'm not worthy of her love now. I'm not alive now. But she doesn't know this. My nightly visits to her are cautious but nevertheless crucial to her. And should I be taken from her without warning and without some explanation, it would be a cruelty she doesn't deserve.

Ah, there is much more that I could tell you about her cameos—about the role which they have played in my fate.

But for now, let me only plead with you. Let me live, and help me destroy Goblin. Or put an end to us both.

Sincerely,
Quinn

2

For a long time after I finished the letter, I didn't move.

I sat listening to the inevitable sounds of Sugar Devil Swamp, my eyes on the pages before me, noting against my will the boring regularity of the handwriting, the muted lamps around me reflected in the marble flooring, the glass windows open to the night breeze.

All was well in my little palazzo in the swampland.

No sign of Goblin. No sense of Goblin's thirst or enmity. Nothing but that which was natural, and faraway, keen to my vampiric ears, the faint stirrings from Blackwood Manor, where Aunt Queen was just rising, with the loving help of Jasmine, our housekeeper, for a mildly eventful night. Soon the television would be going with an enchanting old black-and-white movie. *Dragonwyck* or *Laura, Rebecca* or *Wuthering Heights*. In an hour perhaps Aunt Queen would be saying to Jasmine, "Where is my Little Boy?"

But for now there was time for courage. Time to follow through.

I took the cameo out of my pocket and looked at it. A year ago, when I was still mortal—still alive—I would have had to hold it to the lamp, but not now. I could see it clearly.

It was my own head, in semi-profile, carved skillfully from a fine piece of double-strata sardonyx so that the image was entirely white and remarkably detailed. The background was a pure and shining black.

It was a heavy cameo, and excellent as to the craft. I'd had it done to give to my beloved Aunt Queen, more of a little joke than anything else, but the Dark Blood had come before the perfect moment. And now that moment was forever past.

What did it show of me? A long oval face, with features that were too delicate—a nose too narrow, eyes round with round eyebrows and a full cupid's-bow mouth that made me look as if I were a twelve-year-old girl. No huge eyes, no high cheekbones, no rugged jaw. Just very pretty, yes, too pretty, which is why I'd scowled for most of the photographs taken for the portrait; but the artist hadn't carved that scowl into the face.

In fact, he'd given me a trace of a smile. My short curly hair he'd rendered in thick swirls as if it were an Apollonian halo. He'd carved my shirt collar, jacket lapel and tie with equal grace.

Of course the cameo said nothing of my height of six foot four inches, that my hair was jet black, my eyes blue, or of the fact that I was slight of build. I had the kind of long thin fingers

which were very good for the piano, which I played now and then. And it was my height that told people that in spite of my all too precious face and feminine hands, I really was a young man.

And so there was this enigmatic creature in a good likeness. A creature asking for sympathy. A creature saying crassly:

"Well, think about it, Lestat. I'm young, I'm stupid. And I'm pretty. Look at the cameo. I'm pretty. Give me a chance."

I'd have engraved the back with those words in tiny script, but the back was an oval photo case, and there was my image again in dull color, verifying the accuracy of the portrait on the other side.

There was one engraved word on the gold frame, right beneath the cameo, however: the name Quinn, in a good imitation of that routine handwriting which I had always hated so much—the left-handed one trying to be normal, I imagine, the seer of ghosts saying, "I'm disciplined and not insane."

I gathered up the pages of the letter, reread them quickly, bristling again at my unimaginative handwriting, then folded the pages and put the cameo with them inside of a narrow brown envelope, which I then sealed.

I put this envelope in the inside breast pocket of my black blazer. I closed the top button of my white dress shirt and I adjusted my simple red silk tie. Quinn, the snappy dresser. Quinn, worthy to be a subject in the Vampire Chronicles. Quinn, dressed for begging to be allowed in.

I sat back again, listening. No Goblin. Where was Goblin? I felt an aching loneliness for him. I felt the emptiness of the night air. He was waiting for me to hunt, waiting for the fresh blood. But I had no intention of hunting tonight, even though I was faintly hungry. I was going into New Orleans. I was going, perhaps, to my death.

Goblin couldn't guess at what was happening. Goblin had never been more than a child. Goblin looked like me, yes, at every stage of my life, but he was forever the infant. Whenever he had grabbed my left hand with his right, the script had been a child's scrawl.

I leaned over and touched the remote control button on the marble desk. The torchères dimmed and slowly went out. The darkness came into the Hermitage. The sounds seemed to grow louder: the call of the night heron, the subtle movement of the rank dark waters, the scurrying of tiny creatures through the tops of the tangled cypress and gum. I could smell the alligators, who were as wary of the island as men. I could smell the fetid heat itself.

The moon was generous and gradually I made out a bit of the sky, which was a bright metallic blue.

The swamp was at its thickest here around the island—the cypresses, a thousand years old, their knobby roots surrounding the shore, their misshapen branches heavy with trailing Spanish moss. It was as if they meant to hide the Hermitage, and perhaps they did.

Only the lightning now and then attacked these old sentinels. Only the lightning was fearless of the legends that said some evil dwelt on Sugar Devil Island: go there and you might never come back.

I'd been told about those legends when I was fifteen. And at twenty-one I heard it all repeated, but vanity and fascination had drawn me to the Hermitage, to the pure mystery of it—this strong two-story house, and the nearby inexplicable mausolem—and now there was no real later. There was only this immortality, this brimming power which shut me off from actuality or time.

A man in a pirogue would take a good hour to navigate his way out of here, picking through the tree roots, and back to the landing at the foot of the high ground where Blackwood Manor stood so arrogant and aloof.

I didn't really love this Hermitage, though I needed it. I didn't love the grim gold-and-granite mausoleum with its strange Roman engravings, though I had to hide inside it from the sun by day.

But I did love Blackwood Manor, with the irrational and possessive love that only great houses can draw from us—houses that say, "I was here before you were born and I'll be here after you"; houses that seem a responsibility as much as a haven of dreams.

The history of Blackwood Manor had as much of a grip on me as its overweening beauty. I'd lived my whole life on Blackwood Farm and in the Manor, except for my wonderful adventures abroad.

How so many uncles and aunts had managed to leave Blackwood Manor over the years, I couldn't fathom, but they weren't important to me, those strangers who had gone North and only came home now and then for funerals. The house had me in thrall.

I was debating now. Do I go back, just to walk through the rooms again? Do I go back to seek out the large rear first-floor bedroom where my beloved Aunt Queen was just settling into her favorite chair? I did have another cameo in my jacket pocket, one expressly bought for her only nights before in New York, and I should give it to her, shouldn't I? It was a wonderful specimen, one of the finest—.

But no. I couldn't manage a partial farewell, could I? I couldn't hint that something might happen to me. I couldn't gleefully descend into mystery, into which I'd already sunk up to my eyeballs: Quinn, the night visitor, Quinn who likes dimly lighted rooms now and shies from lamps as though he suffers from an exotic disease. What good would a partial farewell do for my beloved and gentle Aunt Queen?

If I failed tonight, I would be another legend: "That incorrigible Quinn. He went deep into Sugar Devil Swamp, though everybody told him not to; he went to that accursed island Hermitage, and one night he just didn't come back."

The fact was, I didn't believe Lestat would blast me into infinity. I didn't believe he would do it without letting me tell him my story, all or at least in part. Maybe I was just too young to

believe it. Maybe because I'd read the Chronicles so avidly, I felt Lestat was as close to me as I was to him.

Madness, most likely. But I was bound and determined to get as near to Lestat as I could. From where and how he kept watch over New Orleans I didn't know. When and how often he visited his French Quarter flat I didn't know either. But this letter and the gift of the onyx cameo of myself was to go to that flat tonight.

Finally I got up from the leather-and-gold chair.

I went out of the splendid marble-floored house, and with no more than thought to direct me I let myself rise from the warm earth slowly, experiencing a delicious lightness, until I could see from the cool heights far above the huge long meandering black mass of the swamp, and the lights of the big house shining as if it were a lantern on the smooth grass.

Towards New Orleans I willed myself, using this strangest of powers, the Cloud Gift, traversing the waters of Lake Pontchartrain and moving towards the infamous town house in the Rue Royale, which all Blood Hunters knew was the house of the invincible Lestat.

"One hell of a devil," my Maker had called him, "keeping his properties in his own name though the Talamasca is hounding him. He means to outlast them. He's more merciful than I."

Merciful; that was what I was counting on now. Lestat, wherever you are, be merciful. I don't come with disrespect. I need you, as my letter will show.

Slowly I descended, down, down, into the balmy air again, a fleeting shadow to prying eyes if there were any, until I stood in the rear courtyard of the town house, near to the murmuring fountain, looking up at the curving iron stairs that led to Lestat's rear door.

All right. I am here. So the rules have been broken. So I'm in the courtyard of the Brat Prince himself. Descriptions came to mind from the pages of the Chronicles, complex as the bougainvillea vine running rampant up the iron columns to the upstairs cast-iron railing. It was like being in a very shrine.

All around me I could hear the brash noises of the French Quarter: the clatter of restaurant kitchens, the happy voices of the inevitable tourists on the pavements. I heard the thinnest sound of the jazz blaring out of doors on Bourbon Street. I heard the creeping rumble of cars passing sluggishly in front.

The little courtyard itself was tight and beautiful; the sheer height of its brick walls caught me off guard. The glistening green banana trees were the biggest I'd ever seen, their waxy stalks buckling the purple flagstones here and there. But this was no abandoned place.

Someone had been here to clip the dead leaves from the banana groves. Someone had taken away the shriveled bananas that always wither in New Orleans before they ripen. Someone had cut back the abundant roses so that the patio itself was clear.

Even the water gurgling from the conch in the stone cherub's hand down into the basin of the fountain was fresh and clean.

All these sweet little details made me feel all the more like a trespasser, but I was too damned foolishly passionate to be afraid.

Then I saw a light shining through the rear windows above, a very dim light, as if from a lamp deep in the flat.

That did frighten me, but again the all-possessing madness in me mounted. Would I get to speak to Lestat himself? And what if, catching sight of me, he sent out the Fire Gift without hesitating? The letter, the onyx cameo, my own bitter pleas wouldn't have a chance.

I should have given Aunt Queen the new cameo. I should have grabbed her up and kissed her. I should have made a speech to her. I was about to die.

Only a perfect idiot could have been as exhilarated as I was. Lestat, I love you. Here comes Quinn to be your student and slave!

I hurried up the curving iron stairs, careful not to make a sound. And once I reached the rear balcony, I caught the distinct scent of a human being inside. A human being. What did this mean? I stopped and sent the Mind Gift before me to search out the rooms.

At once a confusing message reached me. There was a human there, no doubt of it, and he was furtive, this one, moving in haste, painfully conscious of the fact that he had no right to be where he was. And this someone, this human, knew that I was here as well.

For a moment, I didn't know what to do. Trespassing, I had caught an intruder in the act. A strange protective feeling flooded me. This person had invaded Lestat's property. How dare he? What sort of a bumbler was he? And how did he know that I was here, and that my mind had searched his?

In fact, this strange unwelcome being had a Mind Gift that was almost as strong as mine. I sounded for his name and he yielded it up to me: Stirling Oliver, my old friend, from the Talamasca. And at the same moment, as I detected his identity, I heard his mind recognize me.

Quinn, he said mentally, just as if he were addressing me. But what did he know of me? It had been years since I had set eyes on Stirling. Did he sense already the change that had been worked in me? Could he tell such a thing with his quick telepathy? Dear God, I had to banish it from my own mind. There was time to get out of this, time to go back to the Hermitage and leave Stirling to his furtive investigation, time to flee before he knew just what I'd become.

Yeah, leave—and now—and let him think I'd become a common mortal reader of the Chronicles, and come back when he's nowhere in sight.

But I couldn't leave. I was too lonely. I was too hell-bent on confrontation. That was the perfect truth. And here was Stirling, and here was the entranceway perhaps to Lestat's heart.

On impulse I did the most forbidden of all things. I opened the unlocked back door of the flat and I went inside. I paused for only a breathless second in the dark elegant rear parlor, glancing at its roaring Impressionist paintings, and then I went down the corridor past the obviously empty bedrooms and found Stirling in the front room—a most formal drawing room, crowded

with gilded furniture, and with its lace-covered windows over the street.

Stirling stood at the tall bookcase to the left side, and there was an open book in his hand. He merely looked at me as I stepped into the light of the overhead chandelier.

What did he see? For the moment I didn't seek to find out. I was too busy looking at him, and realizing how much I loved him still for those times when I was the eighteen-year-old boy who saw spirits, and that he looked much the same as he had in those days—soft gray hair combed back loose from his high forehead and receding temples, large sympathetic gray eyes. He seemed no older than sixty-odd years, as if age hadn't touched him, his body still slender and healthy, tricked out in a white-and-blue seersucker suit.

Only gradually, though it must have been a matter of seconds, did I realize he was afraid. He was looking up at me—on account of my height just about everybody looks up at me—and for all his seeming dignity, and he did have plenty of that, he could see the changes in me, but he wasn't sure what had happened. He knew only that he felt instinctive and mindful fear.

Now, I am a Blood Hunter who can pass for human but not necessarily with someone as savvy as this man was. And then we had the question of telepathy, though I'd done my best to close up my mind the way my Maker had told me, that by simple will, it could be done.

"Quinn," said Stirling. "What's wrong with you?" The soft British accent took me back four and a half years in a finger snap.

"Everything's wrong with me, Stirling," I answered before I could rein myself in. "But why are you here?" Then I came right to the point like the blunderer I was. "Do you have Lestat's permission to be in this flat?"

"No," he said immediately. "I must confess I don't have it. And what about you, Quinn?" His voice was full of concern. "Why are you here?"

He shoved the book back into place on the shelf and took a step towards me, but I stepped back into the shadows of the hall.

I almost buckled on account of his kindness. But another inevitable element had come sharply into play. His sweet delectable human scent was strong, and suddenly I saw him divorced from all I knew of him. I saw him as prey.

In fact, I felt the immense impossible gulf that now divided us, and I was hungry for him, hungry as if his kindness would pour into me in his very blood.

But Stirling was no Evil Doer. Stirling wasn't game. I was losing my fledgling mind as I looked at him. My acute loneliness was driving me. My hunger was bedeviling me. I wanted both to feast on him and tell him all my woes and griefs.

"Don't come close to me, Stirling," I said, struggling to sound self-possessed. "You shouldn't be here. You have no right to be here. If you're so damned clever, why didn't you just come by day, when Lestat couldn't stop you?"

The scent of the blood was driving me crazy, that and my savage desire to close the gap

between us, by murder or by love.

"I don't fully know the answer to that, Quinn," he said, his British accent formal and eloquent though his tone was not. "But you're the last person I expected to find here. Quinn, let me look at you, please."

Again, I said no. I was shaking. "Stirling, don't try to charm me with that old easy manner," I pressed on. "You might find someone else here who's a lot more dangerous to you than I am. Or don't you believe Lestat's stories? Don't tell me you think his vampires exist only in books."

"You're one of them," he said softly. He frowned but the frown cleared in a moment. "Is this Lestat's handiwork? He brought you over?"

I was amazed at his boldness, polite as it was. But then he was so much older than me, so used to a graceful authority, and I was painfully young. Again, in waves I felt the old love for him, the old need of him, and again it was fusing perfectly, and stupidly, with my thirst.

"It wasn't Lestat's doing," I said. "In fact, he had nothing to do with it. I came here looking for him, Stirling, and now this has happened, this little tragedy that I've run into you."

"A tragedy?"

"What else can it be, Stirling? You know who I am. You know where I live. You know all about my family at Blackwood Manor. How can I just walk out of here now that I've seen you and you've seen me?"

I felt the thirst thick in my throat. My vision was blurring. I heard myself speaking:

"Don't try to tell me that if I let you go, the Talamasca wouldn't come looking for me. Don't try to tell me that you and your cohorts wouldn't be prowling about in search of me. I know what would happen. This is god-awful, Stirling."

His fear quickened, but he was struggling not to give in to it. And my hunger was becoming uncontrollable. If I let it go, if I let it play itself out, the act would seem inevitable, and seeming inevitable was all that conscience needed; but that just couldn't happen, not to Stirling Oliver. I was hopelessly confused.

Before I realized what I was doing, I moved closer to him. I could see the blood in him now as well as smell it. And he made a fatal misstep. That is, he moved backwards, as if he couldn't stop himself from doing it, and he seemed in that gesture to be more the victim than ever. That backwards step caused me to advance.

"Stirling, you shouldn't have come here," I said. "You're an invader." But I could hear the flatness of my voice in my hunger, the meaninglessness of the words. Invader, invader, invader.

"You can't harm me, Quinn," he said, his voice very level and reasonable, "you wouldn't do it. There's too much between us. I've always understood you. I've always understood Goblin. Are you going to betray all that now?"

"It's an old debt," I said, my voice having fallen to a whisper.

I knew I was in the bright light of the chandelier now, and he could see the subtle

enhancement of the transformation. The transformation was very fancy, so very fancy. And it seemed to me in my demented state that the fear in him had increased to silent panic and that the panic was sharpening the fragrance of the blood.

Do dogs smell fear? Vampires smell it. Vampires count on it. Vampires find it savory. Vampires can't resist it.

"It's wrong," he said, but he too was whispering as though my very stare had weakened him, which it can certainly do to mortals, and he knew there was no point to a fight. "Don't do it, my boy," he said, the words barely audible.

I found myself reaching out for his shoulder, and when my fingers touched him I felt an electricity that shot through my limbs. Crush him. Crush his bones, but first and foremost swallow his soul in the blood.

"Don't you realize …" He trailed off, and out of his mind I subtracted the rest, that the Talamasca would be further inflamed, that it would be bad for everyone. The vampires, the Blood Hunters, the Children of the Millennia had all left New Orleans. Scattered in the dark were the vampires. It was a truce. And now I meant to shatter it!

"But they don't know me, you see," I said, "not in this form, they don't. Only you do, my old friend, and that's the horror. You know me, and that's why this has to come about."

I bent down, close to him, and kissed the side of his throat. My friend, my deepest friend in all the world once. And now we'll have this union. Lust old and new. The boy I'd been loving him. I felt the blood pushing through the artery. My left arm slid beneath his right arm. Don't hurt him. He couldn't get away from me. He didn't even try.

"This will be painless, Stirling," I whispered. I sank my teeth cleanly, and the blood filled my mouth very slowly, and with it there came the sudden course of his life and dreams.

Innocent. The word burned through the pleasure. In a luminous drift of figures and voices he emerged, pushing his way through the crowd; Stirling, the man, pleading with me in my mental vision, saying *Innocent.* There I was, the boy of that old time, and Stirling saying *Innocent.* I couldn't stop what had begun.

It was someone else who did that for me.

I felt an iron grip on my shoulder and I was whipped back away from Stirling, and Stirling staggered, almost falling, and then he tripped and sank down sideways into a chair at the desk.

I was slammed against the bookcase. I lapped at the blood on my lip and I tried to fight the dizziness. The chandelier appeared to be rocking, and the colors of the paintings on the wall were afire.

A firm hand was placed against my chest to steady me and to hold me back.

And then I realized I was looking at Lestat.

3

Quickly I regained my balance. His eyes were on me and I didn't have the slightest intention of looking away. Nevertheless, I looked him up and down because I couldn't help it, and because he was as breathtaking as he has always described himself to be, and I had to see him, truly see him, even if he was to be the last thing I ever saw.

His skin was a pale golden that offset his violet blue eyes wonderfully, and his hair was a true mane of yellow, tousled and curling just above his shoulders. His colored glasses, almost the same violet tint as his eyes, were pushed up into his hair, and he was staring at me, golden eyebrows scowling slightly, waiting perhaps for me to regain my senses; I honestly didn't know.

Quickly I realized he was wearing the black velvet jacket with the cameo buttons that had been his costume in the Chronicle called *Merrick,* each little cameo almost certainly of sardonyx, the coat itself very fancy with its pinched waist and flaring skirt. His linen shirt was open at the throat; his gray pants weren't important and neither were his black boots.

What engraved itself into my consciousness was his face—square and taut, the eyes very big and the well-shaped mouth voluptuous, and the jaw somewhat hard, the whole more truly well proportioned and appealing than he could ever have claimed.

In fact, his own descriptions of himself didn't do him justice because his looks, though certainly a handful of obvious blessings, were ignited by a potent inner fire.

He wasn't staring at me with hatred. He wasn't steadying me anymore with his hand.

I cursed myself, from the pit of my heart, that I was taller than he was, that he was in fact looking up at me. Maybe he'd cheerfully obliterate me on that account alone.

"The letter," I stammered. "The letter!" I whispered, but though my hand groped, and my mind groped, I couldn't reach inside my coat for the letter. I was wobbling in fear.

And as I stood there shivering and sweating, he reached inside my jacket and withdrew the envelope. Flash of sparkling fingernails.

"This is for me, is it, Tarquin Blackwood?" he asked. His voice had a touch of the French accent, no more. He smiled suddenly and he looked as if he couldn't hurt anyone for the world. He was too attractive, too friendly, too young. But the smile vanished as quickly as it had come.

"Yes," I said. Or rather it was a stutter. "The letter, please read it." I faltered, then pressed on. "Before you … make up your mind."

He tucked the letter into his own inside pocket and then he turned to Stirling, who sat dazed and silent, eyes cloudy, his hands clinging to the back of the chair before the desk. The back was like a shield in front of him, though a useless one as I well knew.

Lestat's eyes fixed on me again:

"We don't feed on members of the Talamasca, Little Brother," he said. "But you"—he looked at Stirling—"you nearly got what you almost deserve."

Stirling stared forward, plainly unable to answer, and only shook his head.

"Why did you come here, Mr. Oliver?" Lestat asked him.

Again, Stirling merely shook his head. I saw the tiny drops of blood on his starched white collar. I felt an overwhelming shame, a shame so deep and painful it filled me completely, banishing even the faintest aftertaste of the attempted feast.

I went silently crazy.

Stirling had almost died, and for my thirst. Stirling was alive. Stirling was in danger now, danger from Lestat. Behold: Lestat, like a blaze in front of me. Yes, he could pass for human, but what a human—magnetic and charged with energy as he continued to take command.

"Mr. Oliver, I'm talking to you," Lestat said in a soft yet imperious tone. He picked up Stirling by the lapels and, moving him clumsily to the far corner of the parlor, he flung him down into a large satin upholstered wing chair.

Stirling looked the worse for it—who wouldn't?—still unable apparently to focus his gaze.

Lestat sat down on the velvet couch very near him. I was completely forgotten for the moment, or so I assumed.

"Mr. Oliver," said Lestat, "I'm asking you. What made you come into my house?"

"I don't know," said Stirling. He glanced up at me and then at the figure who was questioning him, and I struggled, because I couldn't help it, to see what he was seeing—this vampire whose skin still glowed though it was tanned, and whose eyes were prismatic and undeniably fierce.

The fabled beauty of Lestat seemed potent as a drug. And the crowning light of the chandelier was merciless or splendid depending entirely on one's point of view.

"Yes, you do know why you came here," said Lestat, his voice subdued, the French accent no more than a beguiling taste. "It wasn't enough for the Talamasca to drive me out of the city. You have to come into those places that belong to me?"

"I was wrong to do it," Stirling said. It was spoken in a sigh. He scowled and pressed his lips together hard. "I shouldn't have done it." For the first time he looked directly into Lestat's eyes.

Lestat glanced up at me.

Sitting forward he reached over and slipped his fingers behind Stirling's bloodstained collar, startling Stirling and glaring up at me.

"We don't spill blood when we feed, Little Brother," he said with a passing mischievous smile. "You have much to learn."

The words hit me rather like a wallop and I found myself speechless. Did this mean that I'd walk out of here alive?

Don't kill Stirling, that's what I was thinking; and then suddenly Lestat, as he still stared at me, made a short little laugh.

"Tarquin, turn that chair around," he said, gesturing to the desk, "and sit down. You make me nervous standing there. You're too damned tall. And you're making Stirling Oliver nervous as well."

I felt a great rush of relief, but as I tried to do what he'd told me to do my hands were shaking so badly that I was again full of shame. Finally, I managed to sit down facing the pair of them, but a polite distance away.

Stirling made a small frown as he looked at me, but it was entirely sympathetic and he was still obviously off base. I hadn't drunk enough blood to account for his dizziness. It was the act of it, the drawing on his heart. That, and the fact that Lestat had come, Lestat had interrupted us, Lestat was here and he was demanding again of Stirling, Why had Stirling come into the flat?

"You could have come here by day," said Lestat, addressing Stirling in an even voice. "I have human guards from sunup to sundown but the Talamasca is good at bribing guards. Why didn't you take the hint that I look after my properties myself once the sun has set? You disobeyed the directive of your own Superior General. You disobeyed your own common sense."

Stirling nodded, eyes veering off, as if he had no argument, and then in a weak but dignified voice he said:

"The door was unlocked."

"Don't insult me," said Lestat, his voice still patient and even. "It's my house."

Again, Stirling appeared to meet Lestat's gaze. He looked at him steadily and then he spoke in a more coherent voice.

"I was wrong to do it, and you've caught me. Yes, I've disobeyed the directive of the Superior General, that's true. I came because I couldn't resist it. I came because perhaps I didn't quite believe in you. I didn't believe in spite of all I'd read and been told."

Lestat shook his head disapprovingly and again there came that short little laugh.

"I expect that credulity of mortal readers of the Chronicles," he said. "I expect it even of fledglings like Little Brother here. But I don't expect it of the Talamasca, who have so ceremoniously declared war on us."

"For what it's worth," said Stirling, gathering his strength somewhat, "I was not for that war. I voted against it as soon as I heard of the declaration. I was for closing the Motherhouse here in Louisiana, if need be. But then … I was for accepting our losses and retreating to our libraries abroad."

"You drove me out of my own city," said Lestat. "You question my neighbors in these precincts. You rummage through all my public property titles and records. And now you trespass,

and you say it was because you didn't believe? That's an excuse but not a reason."

"The reason was I wanted to see you," said Stirling, his voice growing stronger. "I wanted what others in the Order have had. I wanted to see you with my own eyes."

"And now that you have seen me," Lestat replied, "what precisely will you do?" He glanced at me again, a flash of brilliant eyes and a smile that was gone in an instant as he looked back to the man in the chair.

"What we always do," said Stirling. "Write about it, put it into a report to the Elders, copy it to the File on the Vampire Lestat—that is, if you let me leave here, if that's your choice."

"I haven't harmed any of you, have I?" Lestat asked. "Think on it. When have I harmed a true and active member of the Talamasca? Don't blame me for what others have done. And since your warlike declaration, since you sought to drive me right out of my home, I've shown remarkable restraint."

"No, you haven't," Stirling quietly replied.

I was shocked.

"What do you mean?" Lestat demanded. "What on earth can you mean? I think I've been a gentleman about it." He smiled at Stirling for the first time.

"Yes, you've been a gentleman," Stirling responded. "But I hardly think you've been restrained."

"Do you know how it affects me to be driven out of New Orleans?" Lestat asked, voice still tempered. "Do you know how it affects me to know I can't wander the French Quarter for fear of your spies in the Café du Monde, or wander the Rue Royale with the evening shoppers, just because one of your glorified gossips might be wandering about too? Do you know how it wounds me to leave behind the one city in the world with which I'm truly in love?"

Stirling roused himself at these words. "But haven't you always been too clever for us?" he asked.

"Well, of course," Lestat rejoined with a shrug.

"Besides," Stirling went on, "you haven't been driven out. You've been here. You've been seen by our members, sitting very boldly in the Café du Monde, I might add, presiding over a hot cup of useless café au lait."

I was stunned.

"Stirling!" I whispered. "For the love of Christ, don't argue."

Again Lestat looked at me, but not with anger. He returned to Stirling.

Stirling hadn't finished. He went on firmly: "You still feed off the riffraff," he said. "The authorities don't care, but we recognize the patterns. We know it's you."

I was mortified. How could Stirling talk like this?

Lestat broke into an irrepressible laugh.

"And even so, you came by night?" he demanded. "You dared to come, knowing I might find

you here?"

"I think …" Stirling hesitated, then went on. "I think I wanted to challenge you. I think, as I said, that I committed a sin of pride."

Thank God for this confession, I thought. "Committed a sin"—really good words. I was quaking, watching the two of them, appalled by Stirling's fearless tone.

"We respect you," said Stirling, "more than you deserve."

I gasped.

"Oh, do explain that to me!" said Lestat, smiling. "In what form comes this respect, I should like to know. If I'm truly in your debt, I should like to say thanks."

"St. Elizabeth's," said Stirling, his voice rolling gracefully now, "the building where you lay for so many years, sleeping on the chapel floor. We've never sought to enter it or discover what goes on there. And as you said we're very good at bribing guards. Your Chronicles made your sleep famous. And we knew that we could penetrate the building. We could glimpse you in the daylight hours, unprotected, lying on the marble. What a lure that was—the sleeping vampire who no longer bothered with the trappings of a coffin. A dark deadly inverse of the sleeping King Arthur, waiting for England to need him again. But we never crept into your enormous lodgings. As I said, I think we respected you more than you deserve."

I shut my eyes for an instant, certain of disaster.

But Lestat only broke into another fit of chuckling and laughing.

"Sheer nonsense," he said. "You and your members were afraid. You never came near St. Elizabeth's night or day because you were plainly afraid of the ancient ones among us who could have put out your light like a match. You were afraid too of the rogue vampires who came prowling, the ones who wouldn't respect the name Talamasca enough to give you a wide berth. As for the daylight hours, you had no clue what you'd find—what high-paid thugs might have terminated you and buried you under the concrete basement floor. It was a purely practical matter."

Stirling narrowed his eyes. "Yes, we did have to be careful," he conceded. "Nevertheless, there were times—."

"Foolishness," said Lestat. "In point of pure fact, my infamous sleep ended before your declaration of war on us was made. And what if I did show myself sitting 'very boldly' in the Café du Monde! How dare you use the word 'boldly'? You imply I don't have the right!"

"You feed on your fellow human beings," said Stirling calmly. "Have you seriously forgotten that?"

I was frantic. Only the smile on Lestat's face reassured me that Stirling wasn't headed for certain death.

"No, I never forget what I do," said Lestat equably. "But surely you don't mean to take on the whole question of what I do now for my own survival! And you must remember, I'm not a

human being—far from it, and farther from it with every passing adventure and every passing year. I've been to Heaven and to Hell; let me ask you to remember that."

Lestat paused as though he himself were remembering this, and Stirling tried to answer but plainly could not. Lestat pressed on in a measured voice:

"I've been in a human body and recovered this body you see before you. I've been the consort of a creature whom others called a goddess. And yes, I feed off my fellow human beings because it's my nature, and you know it, and you know what care I take with every mortal morsel, that it be tainted and vicious and unfit for human life. The point I was trying to make is that your declaration against us was ill conceived."

"I agree with you; it was a foolish Declaration of Enmity. It should never have been put forth."

"Declaration of Enmity, is that what you called it?" Lestat asked.

"I think those are the official words," said Stirling. "We've always been an authoritarian order. In fact, we don't know much about democracy at all. When I spoke of my vote, I was speaking of a symbolic voice rather than a literal one. Declaration of Enmity, yes, those were the words. It was a rather misguided and naive thing."

"Ah, misguided and naive," Lestat repeated. "I like that. And it might do you good, all of you in the Talamasca, to remember that you're a pretentious bunch of meddlers, and your Elders are no better than the rest of you."

Stirling seemed to be relaxing, mildly fascinated, but I couldn't relax. I was too afraid of what might happen at any moment.

"I have a theory about the Declaration of Enmity," Stirling said.

"Which is?" asked Lestat.

"I think the Elders thought in their venerable minds, and God knows, I don't really know their venerable minds, that the Declaration would bring certain of our members back to us who had been inducted into your ranks."

"Oh, that's lovely." Lestat laughed. "Why are you mincing words like this? Is it on account of the boy?"

"Yes, perhaps I mince words because of him," Stirling answered, "but honestly, we members of the Talamasca think in language such as this."

"Well, for your records and your files," Lestat said, "we don't have ranks. In fact, I'd say that as a species we are given to rigidly individual personalities and obdurate differences, and peculiar mobility as to matters of friendship and company and meeting of minds. We come together in small covens and then are driven wildly apart again. We know little lasting peace with each other. We have no ranks."

This was intriguing and my fear melted just a little as Stirling came back in his careful polite voice.

"I understand that," he said. "But to return to the question at hand, as to why the Elders made

this warlike declaration, I think they honestly believed that those vampires who had once been part of us might come to try to reason with us, and we might benefit thereby in meeting with actual beings such as yourself. We might carry our knowledge of you to a higher realm."

"It was all scholastic is what you're saying," said Lestat.

"Yes. And surely you must realize what it has meant for us to lose three members to your collective power, whatever the cause of it, and no matter how it was accomplished. We were stunned by each defection, and mystified as to the dialogue, if any, that might have preceded what happened. We wanted to learn, you see. We wanted … to know."

"Well, it didn't work, did it?" said Lestat, his calm demeanor unchanged. "And you weren't content with the Chronicles alone, were you? They told you all about the dialogue. But you and the Elders wanted this eye-to-eye view."

"No, it didn't work," said Stirling, and he seemed now to be possessed of his full dignity and strength. His gray eyes were clear. "On the contrary, we provoked from you more audacity. You dared to publish a Chronicle using the name Merrick Mayfair. You dared to do this even though a great family by the name of Mayfair lives in this city and its environs to this day. You had no care when you did that."

I felt a sharp stab in my heart. My own beloved Mayfair flashed before my eyes. But here was Stirling being positively reckless again.

"Audacity!" said Lestat, his smile broadening as he glared at Stirling. "You accuse me of audacity! You're living and breathing now entirely because I want it."

"No doubt of it, but you are audacious," insisted Stirling.

I was about to faint.

"Audacious and proud of it," Lestat fired back. "But let's get one thing straight. I am not the sole author of the Chronicles. Blame your own versatile David Talbot for the Chronicle of Merrick Mayfair. It was David's story to tell. Merrick wanted the Dark Gift. Merrick Mayfair was a witch before she was ever a vampire. Who should know that better than you? There was no lie there. And it was David's choice to use her name, as well as the name of the Talamasca, I might add. What is all of this to me?"

"He wouldn't have done it without your blessing," said Stirling with astonishing confidence.

"You think not?" demanded Lestat. "And why should I care about some mortal family of witches? The Mayfairs, what are they to me? And what is a great family, pray tell, a rich family? Vampires loathe witches, whether they're rich or poor. Anyone who reads the story of Merrick Mayfair can see why. Not that Merrick isn't anything but a princess among us now. Besides, our eager readers think it's all fiction, and how do you know what's real and what's not?"

I wept inside thinking of my red-haired Mayfair! And on they talked.

"Thank God your readers think it's fiction," said Stirling, becoming faintly more heated, "and the Mayfair family is unaware of the truths you told; and a great family is one that has survived

the ages, and treasures bonds of love. What else? You seek a family, always and everywhere. I see it in your Chronicles."

"Stop, I won't listen to you," said Lestat sharply but without raising his voice. "I'm not here to be judged by you. You've had corruption in your ranks. You know you have. And I know full well myself. And now I find that you're corrupt, disobeying your Elders to come here. You think I'd give you the Dark Blood?"

"I don't want it," said Stirling in suppressed amazement. "I don't seek it. I wanted to see you, and hear your voice."

"And now you have, and what will you do?"

"I told you. Write about it. Confess to the Elders. Describe it all."

"Oh, no you won't," said Lestat. "You'll leave out one key part."

"And what is that?" asked Stirling.

"You're such an admirable bunch," said Lestat, shaking his head. "You can't guess what part?"

"We try to be admirable," said Stirling. "I'll be condemned by the Elders. I might even be removed from Louisiana, though I doubt it. I have other important work to do."

Again, there came that stab in my heart. I thought of the "great family of Mayfair." I thought of my red-haired love, my Mayfair witch, whom I would never see again. Was that his important work? I wished with all my heart I could ask him.

Lestat appeared to be studying Stirling, who had fallen silent, staring at Lestat, perhaps doing that little mental trick of memorizing all the details about which he would write later on. Members of the Talamasca were especially trained to do it.

I tried to scan his mind, but I couldn't get in, and I didn't dare to try with Lestat. Lestat would know.

Lestat broke the silence.

"Revoke it, this Declaration of Enmity," he said.

Stirling was startled. He thought for a moment and then he said:

"I can't do that. I'm not one of the Elders. I can tell them that you asked me to revoke the Declaration. That's all I can do."

Lestat's eyes softened. They drifted over Stirling and then to me. For a long moment Lestat and I looked at each other, and then I weakened and looked politely away.

I had glimpsed something as we looked at each other.

It was something I'd never heard mentioned in the Chronicles—a shade of difference between Lestat's eyes. One eye was almost imperceptibly larger than the other, and colored by a little blood. I'm not sure that as a mortal I could have detected such a small difference. I was confused by having seen it now. If Lestat counted it as a flaw, he would hate me for seeing it.

Lestat was gazing at Stirling.

"We'll make a deal, you and I," he said.

"I'm relieved to hear it," Stirling said. It had the same gentle arrogance of his earlier remarks.

"It's a simple bargain," said Lestat, "but if you refuse me, or if you go against me, I'll go against you. I could have done that before now, I'm sure you know."

"David Talbot won't let you hurt us," said Stirling with quiet spunk. "And there's an old one, an ancient one, one of the grandest in your tales, and she, the great authority, won't let you harm us either, isn't that so?"

"Stirling!" I whispered before I could stop myself.

But Lestat seemed only to weigh this for a moment. Then:

"I could still hurt you," he said. "I don't play by anybody's rules but my own. As for the ancient ones, don't be so sure they want to govern. I think they want utter privacy and complete peace."

Stirling reflected, then said quickly, "I see your point."

"You despise me now, don't you?" Lestat asked with engaging sincerity.

"Not at all," was Stirling's quick reply. "On the contrary, I see your charm. You know I do. Tell me about this bargain. What do you want me to do?"

"First off, go back to your Elders and tell them that this Declaration of Enmity must be officially withdrawn. It doesn't matter that much to me but it matters to others, and besides, I know that if you swear honorably to be no more than observers in the future, then you won't annoy us, and with me that counts for a lot. I loathe being annoyed. It makes me feel angry and malicious."

"Very well."

"The second request stems from the first. Leave this boy completely alone. This boy is the key point which you must leave out of your report. Of course you can say that a nameless Blood Drinker assaulted you. You know, have it all make sense and do justice to whatever you think you may have learned here. I anticipate your inevitable fascination with all that. But this boy's anonymity must become a point of honor … and there's more."

Stirling was silent.

"You know his name," said Lestat, "you know where he lives, you know his family. All that was plain to me before I interrupted him in his bumbling attack on you. Now you know that he's one of us, as the expression goes. You must not only leave him out of your records, you must leave him completely and utterly alone."

Stirling held Lestat's gaze for a moment and then he nodded.

"You move against this boy," said Lestat, "you try to take up your combative posture where he is concerned, and as God is my witness, I'll wipe you out. I'll kill all of you. I'll leave you nothing but your empty libraries and your overflowing vaults. I'll start in the Motherhouse in Louisiana and then I'll move to the Motherhouses all over the world. It's a cinch for me to do it. I'll pick you off one at a time. Even if the ancients do rise to protect you, it won't happen immediately,

and what I can do immediately is an enormous amount of harm."

I went from fear to astonishment.

"I understand you," said Stirling. "Of course you want him protected. Thank heaven for that."

"I pray that you do understand me," said Lestat. He glanced at me again. "This is a young one, an innocent one, and I'll make the decision as to whether he survives or not."

I think Stirling let out a little gasp.

As for me there came a flood of relief again, and then another wave of intelligent fear.

Lestat gestured to Stirling.

"Need I add that you're to get out of here now and never trespass on my property again?" he asked.

Stirling rose at once, and so did I. Stirling looked at me, and there came over me again the total realization that I'd almost ended his life tonight, and a recurrence of terrible shame.

"Good-bye, my friend," I said in as strong a voice as I could muster. I reached awkwardly for his hand and held it firmly. He looked at me and his face softened.

"Quinn," he said, "my brave Quinn."

He turned.

"Farewell, Lestat de Lioncourt," he said. "I think I understate my case when I say I'm deeply in your debt."

"You do but I find ingrates all around me eternally," said Lestat, smiling slyly. "Go on, Mr. Oliver. It's a good thing you have one of your prowling limousines waiting for you only a couple of blocks from here. I don't think you're up to walking far or driving a car by yourself."

"Right you are," said Stirling, and then with no further words he hurried down the hallway and out the back door, and I heard his heavy rapid steps on the iron stairs.

Lestat had also risen, and he came towards me and gestured for me to sit down again. He took my head in both his hands. There was no dreadful pressure; there was no pain. It was gentle, the manner in which he was holding me.

But I was too afraid to do anything but look up into his eyes quietly, and again I saw that small difference, that one eye was larger than the other by not even a fraction of an inch. I tried to repress the mere thought of it. I tried only to think *I will do whatever you want of me,* and without meaning for it to happen, I closed my eyes as if someone were about to hit me in the face.

"You think I'm going to kill you, don't you?" I heard him say.

"I hope not," I said shakily.

"Come on, Little Brother," he said, "it's time to leave this pretty little place to those who know so much about it. And you, my young friend, have to feed."

And then I felt his arm tight around me. The air was rushing past me. I was clinging to him, though I don't think I needed to, and we were out in the night, and we were moving towards the clouds.

4

It was like traveling with my Maker—the speed, the altitude and the strong arms holding me. I gave it all of my trust.

And then came the sudden plunge.

I was shaken as he let me go, and I had to stop myself from stumbling until the dizziness passed.

We stood on a terrace. A partially open glass door separated us from a lighted room. It was tastefully furnished in rather routine modern furniture—beige velvet chairs and couches, with the inevitable large television, muted lamps and scattered tables of iron and glass.

Two very pretty young brunette women were inside, one busy with a suitcase on the coffee table, and the other in front of a nearby mirror, brushing her long hair. They wore skimpy silk dresses, both pretty fashionable, revealing a great deal of their dark olive skin.

Lestat put his arm around me again and gave my shoulder a gentle squeeze.

"What does your mind tell you?" he whispered.

I let the Mind Gift loose, casting for the one at the mirror, and caught the whisper of murder at once. The other was even more accustomed to it, and it seemed that both of the women were party to a crime that was actually happening now somewhere at a distance from this place.

It was an elegant hotel, this building. Through a door I saw the bedroom. I caught the scent from a gin drink on one of the tables, I caught the scent of fresh flowers, and of course I caught the overwhelming scent of Fair Game.

The thirst rose in me. The thirst clouded my eyes. I tasted blood as though I were already drinking it, and I felt the abysmal and desperate emptiness that I always feel before I feast. *Nothing will ever fill you. Nothing will ever make this abominable hunger go away.*

"Fair Game exactly," said Lestat in a low voice. "But we don't let them suffer, no matter how rough we want to get."

"No, Sir," I answered deferentially. "May I have the one in front of the mirror?"

"Why?" he asked.

"Because I can see her face in the mirror, and she's cruel."

He nodded.

He slipped the door open and we came into the cool refreshing air of the room. The thirst was

too hot for it. The thirst was hopeless.

At once, the women cried out in protest. Where had we come from? Who were we? Vulgar words, threats.

With a remnant of my rational mind, I saw that the suitcase was filled with money, but what did it matter? How much more interesting was a huge vase of flowers near the far window, bursting with color. How much more interesting the blood.

Lestat drifted past me and caught the woman who ran to the right with both his arms. The rush of furious words from her came to an abrupt stop.

The other woman darted to the sofa, and I saw the gun there that she wanted so desperately to reach. I had her before she could lay her hand on it, and I crushed her against me, looking into her black eyes.

She gave me a string of curses in Spanish, and the thirst in me rose even more violently, as if her curses had drawn it out. I brushed her thick black hair back from her neck and ran my thumb over the artery. She was maddened, full of hatred.

Slowly, I bit into the fount of blood.

My Maker's lessons came back to me. *Love her sins, follow the path with her, make her evil your evil and you will do no evil.* I struggled to obey as her mind was broken open. I probed for the murders and I found them, rampant, savage and always over the white powder; and the wealth that had drawn her out of the deep filthy slums of her birth to finery and fortune, to those who toasted her beauty and her cunning; and murder after murder of those as covered in blood as herself. *Yes, love you,* I whispered, love the sheer will and the ever present anger; yes, give it to me, the rage in the warm sweet blood flowing, and suddenly there came, towards me, her unbounded love.

Without language, she said, *Surrender.* Without language, she said, *I see it!,* and *it* was all of her life, without pagination, and her ripened soul expanded, and there was a terrifying recognition of circumstance and inevitability, her crimes pulled up by the roots from her heart as though by the hand of Heaven.

But the hunger in me was sated, I was filled by her, I had had her, and I drew back, kissing the puncture wounds, lapping the tiny trickles of blood that I'd spilled, healing the evidence, even as the drowsiness overcame me and then gently, gently I set her down on one of the indifferent chairs. I kissed her lips.

I knelt down before her. I forced my tongue between her lips and, opening her mouth, I sucked on her tongue and sank my teeth into it delicately, and there came again a small rush of blood.

Finally there was no more.

I closed her large empty eyes with my left fingers. I felt her eyes through their lids as her blood washed through me. I bent and kissed her breasts. The blood sent shock after shock through me. I let her go.

In the usual daze, I turned and saw Lestat waiting, the royal figure, studying me, musing it seemed, his yellow hair looking almost white in the lamplight, his violet eyes wide.

"You did it right that time, Little Brother," he said. "You spilled not a single drop."

There was so much I wanted to say. I wanted to talk of her life, the great overreaching scope of it that I had so deeply tasted, the score she kept with fate; and how hard I'd tried to do what my Maker had told me to do, not merely to devour the blood but devour the evil, dip my tongue deep down into the evil, but she was beside the point.

She was a victim. She who had never been a Subject was now Past Tense.

The blood had me. The warmth had me. The room was a phantasm. Lestat's woman lay dead on the floor. And there was the suitcase of money, and it meant nothing, could buy nothing, could change nothing, could save no one. The flowers were bold and brilliant, pink lilies dripping with pollen, and dark red roses. The room was complete and final and still.

"No one will mourn them," said Lestat softly. His voice seemed distant, beyond my reach. "No need to find a hasty grave."

I thought of my Maker. I thought of the dark waters of Sugar Devil Swamp, the thick duckweed, the voice of the owls.

Something changed in the room, but Lestat didn't know it.

"Come back to me," said Lestat. "It's important, Little Brother, not to let the blood weaken you afterwards, no matter how sweet it is."

I nodded. But something was happening. We weren't alone.

I could see the dim figure of my double forming behind Lestat. I could see Goblin, designed as I was designed. I could see the crazed smile on his face.

Lestat pivoted. "Where is he?" he whispered.

"No, Goblin, I forbid it," I said. But there was no stopping him. The figure moved towards me with lightning speed, yet held itself together in human form. Right before my eyes he was seemingly as solid as I was; and then I felt the tingling all through my limbs as he merged with me, and the tiny stabs on my hands and my neck and my face. I struggled as if I were caught in a perfect net.

From deep inside me there came that orgasmic palpitation, that walloping sensation that I was one with him and nothing could part us, that I wanted it suddenly, yes, wanted him and me to be together always, yet I was saying something different.

"Get away from me, Goblin. Goblin, you must listen. I was the one, the one who brought you into being. Listen to me."

But it was useless. The electric shivers wouldn't stop, and I saw only images of the two of us as children, as boys, as men, all of it moving too fast for me to focus, to repudiate or confirm. Sunlight poured through an open doorway; I saw the flowered pattern of linoleum. I heard the laughter of toddlers, and I tasted milk.

I knew I was falling or about to fall, that Lestat's firm hands were holding me, because I wasn't in the room with the sunlight, but it was all that I could see, and there was Goblin, little Goblin frolicking and laughing, and I too was laughing. *Love you, all right, need you, of course, yours, us together.* I looked down and saw my chubby childish left hand, and I held a spoon in it and was banging with the spoon. And there was Goblin's hand on top of mine. And over and over came that bang of the spoon against wood, and the sunlight, how beautifully it came in the door, but the flowers on the linoleum were worn.

Then, as violently as Goblin had come, he withdrew. I glimpsed the humanoid shape for no more than a second, the eyes huge, the mouth open; then his image expanded, lost its conformity and vanished.

The draperies of the room swayed, and the vase of flowers suddenly toppled, and I heard dimly the dripping of the water, and then the vase itself hit the soft rug.

In a fog, I stared at the wounded bouquet of flowers. Pink-throated lilies. I wanted to pick them up. The tiny wounds all over me stung me and hurt me. I hated him that he had made the vase fall over, that the lilies were spilt now on the floor.

I looked at the women, first one and then the other. They appeared to be sleeping. There was no death.

My Goblin, my very own Goblin. That verbless thought stayed with me. My familiar spirit, my partner in all of life; you belong to me and I belong to you.

Lestat was holding me by the shoulders. I could barely stand. In fact, if he had let me go I would have fallen. I couldn't take my eyes off the pink-throated lilies.

"He didn't have to make the flowers fall," I said. "I taught him not to hurt things that were pretty. I taught him that when we were small."

"Quinn," said Lestat, "come back to me! I'm talking to you. Quinn!"

"You didn't see him," I said. I was shaking all over. I stared at the tiny wounds on my hands, but they were already healing. It was the same way with the pinpricks on my face. I wiped at my face. Faint traces of blood on my fingers.

"I saw the blood," said Lestat.

"How did you see it?" I asked. I was growing stronger. I struggled to clear my mind.

"In the shape of a man," Lestat said, "a man faintly sketched in blood, sketched in the air, just for an instant, and then there was a swirling cloud of tiny drops, and I saw it pass through the open door as rapidly as if it were being sucked out."

"Then you know why I came looking for you," I said. But I realized he couldn't really see the spirit that Goblin was. He'd seen the blood, yes, because the blood was visible, but the spirit who had always appeared to me was invisible to him.

"It can't really hurt you," he said, his voice tender and kind. "It can't take any real volume of blood from you. It took just a tiny taste of what you took from the woman."

"But he'll come again whenever he wants, and I can't fight him, and each time, I could swear, it's a little more."

I steadied myself, and he released me, stroking my hair with his right hand. That casual gesture of affection coupled with his dazzling appearance—the vibrant eyes, the exquisitely proportioned features—entranced me even as the trance induced by Goblin slowly wore away.

"He found me here," I said, "and I don't even know where I am. He found me here, and he can find me anywhere, and each time, as I told you, he takes a little more blood."

"Surely you can fight him," Lestat said, encouragingly.

His expression was concerned and protective, and I felt such an overwhelming need of him and love for him that I was about to cry. I held it back.

"Maybe I can learn to fight him," I said, "but is that enough?"

"Come, let's leave this graveyard," he answered. "You have to tell me about him. You have to tell me how this came about."

"I don't know that I have all the answers," I said. "But I have a story to tell."

I followed him out onto the terrace into the fresh air.

"Let's go to Blackwood Manor," I said. "I don't know of another place where we can talk in such peace. Only my aunt is there tonight and her lovable entourage, and maybe my mother, and they'll all leave us completely alone. They're utterly used to me."

"And Goblin?" he asked. "Will he be stronger there if he does come back?"

"He was as strong as ever only moments ago," I responded. "I think that I'll be stronger."

"Then Blackwood Manor it is," he said.

Again there came his firm arm around me and we were traveling upwards. The sky spread out, full of clouds, and then we broke through to the very stars.

5

Within moments we found ourselves in front of the big house, and I experienced a flashing sense of embarrassment as I looked at its huge two-story columned portico.

Of course the garden lights were on, brilliantly illuminating the fluted columns to their full height, and all of the many rooms were aglow. In fact, I had a rule on this and had had since boyhood, that at four o'clock all chandeliers in the main house had to be lighted, and though I was no longer that boy in the grip of twilight depression, the chandeliers were illuminated by the same clock.

A quick chuckle from Lestat caught me off guard.

"And why are you so embarrassed?" he asked genially, having easily read my mind. "America destroys her big houses. Some of them don't even last a hundred years." His accent lessened. He sounded more intimate. "This place is magnificent," he said casually. "I like the big columns. The portico, the pediment, it's all rather glorious. Perfect Greek Revival style. How can you be ashamed of such things? You're a strange creature, very gentle I think, and out of kilter with your own time."

"Well, how can I belong to it now?" I asked. "Given the Dark Blood and all its wondrous attributes. What do you think?"

I was at once ashamed of having answered so directly, but he merely took it in stride.

"No, but I mean," he said, "you didn't belong to this time before the Dark Gift, did you? The threads of your life, they weren't woven into any certain fabric." His manner seemed simple and friendly.

"I suppose you're right," I responded. "In fact, you're very right."

"You're going to tell me all about it, aren't you?" he asked. His golden eyebrows were very clear against his tanned skin, and he frowned slightly while smiling at the same time. It made him look very clever and loving, though I wasn't sure why.

"You want me to?" I asked.

"Of course I do," he answered. "It's what you want to do and must do, besides." There came that mischievous smile and frown again. "Now, shall we go inside?"

"Of course, yes," I said, greatly relieved as much by his friendly manner as by what he said. I couldn't quite grasp that I had him with me, that not only had I found him but that he was

wanting to hear my story; he was at my side.

We went up the six front steps to the marble porch and I opened the door, which, on account of our being out here in the country, was never locked.

The broad central hallway stretched out before us, with its diamond-shaped white-and-black marble tiles running to the rear door, which was identical to the door by which we had just entered.

Partially blocking our view was one of the greatest attributes of Blackwood Manor, the spiral stairway, and this drew from Lestat a look of pure delight.

The frigid air-conditioning felt good.

"How gorgeous this is," he said, gazing at the stairway with its graceful railing and delicate balusters. He stood in the well of it. "Why, it runs all the way to a third floor, doubling back on itself beautifully."

"The third floor's the attic," I said. "It's a treasure trove of trunks and old furniture. It's yielded some of its little secrets to me."

His eyes moved to the running mural on the hallway walls, a sunshine Italian pastoral giving way to a deep blue sky whose bright color dominated the entire long space and the hall above.

"Ah, now this is lovely," he said, looking up at the high ceiling. "And look at the plaster moldings. Done by hand, weren't they?"

I nodded. "New Orleans craftsmen," I said. "It was the 1880s, and my great-great-great-grandfather was fiercely romantic and partially insane."

"And this drawing room," he said, peering through the arched doorway to his right. "It's full of old furniture, fine furniture. What do you call it, Quinn? Rococo? It fills me with a dreamy sense of the past."

Again, I nodded. I had gone rapidly from embarrassment to an embarrassing sense of pride. All my life people had capitulated to Blackwood Manor. They had positively raved about it, and I wondered now that I had been so mortified. But this being, this strangely compelling and handsome individual into whose hands I'd put my very life, had grown up in a castle, and I had feared he would laugh at what he saw.

On the contrary, he seemed thrilled by the golden harp and the old Pleyel piano. He glanced at the huge somber portrait of Manfred Blackwood, my venerable ancestor. And then slowly he turned enthusiastically to the dining room on the other side of the hall.

I made a motion for him to enter.

The antique crystal chandelier was showering a wealth of light on the long table, a table which could seat some thirty people, made especially for the room. The gilded chairs had only recently been re-covered in green satin damask, and the green and gold was repeated in the wall-to-wall carpet, with a gold swirl on a green ground. Gilded sideboards, inset with green malachite, were ranged between the long windows on the far wall.

A need to apologize stole over me again, perhaps because Lestat seemed lost in his judgment of the place.

"It's so unnecessary, Blackwood Manor," I told him. "And with Aunt Queen and me its only regular inhabitants, I have the feeling that someone will come and make us turn it over for some more sensible use. Of course there are other members of the family—and then there's the staff, who are so damned rich in their own right that they don't have to work for anybody." I broke off, ashamed of rambling.

"And what would a more sensible use be?" he asked in the same comfortable manner he had adopted before. "Why should the house not be your gracious home?"

He was looking at the huge portrait of Aunt Queen when she was young—a smiling girl in a sleeveless white beaded evening gown that might have been made yesterday rather than seventy years ago, as it was; and at another portrait—of Virginia Lee Blackwood, Manfred's wife, the first lady ever to live in Blackwood Manor.

It was murky now, this portrait of Virginia Lee, but the style was robust and faintly emotional, and the woman herself, blond with eyes of blue, was very honest to look at, and modest, and smiling, with small features and an undeniably pretty face. She was dressed ornately in the style of the 1880s, in a high-necked dress of sky blue with long sleeves puckered at the shoulders, and her hair heaped on the top of her head. She had been the grandmother of Aunt Queen, and I always saw a certain likeness in these portraits, in the eyes and the shape of the faces, though others claimed they could not. But then …

And they had more than casual associations for me, these portraits, especially that of Virginia Lee. Aunt Queen I had still with me. But Virginia Lee … I shuddered but repressed those alien memories of ghosts and grotesqueries. Too much was taking my mind by storm.

"Yes, why not your home, and the repository of your ancestors' treasures?" Lestat remarked innocently. "I don't understand."

"Well, when I was growing up," I said in answer to his question, "my grandma and grandpa were living then, and this was a sort of hotel. A bed-and-breakfast was what they called it. But they served dinner down here in the dining room as well. Lots of tourists came up this way to spend some time in it. We still have the Christmas banquet every year, with singers who stand on the staircase for the final caroling, while the guests gather here in the hall. It all seems very useful at times like that. This last year I had a midnight Easter banquet as well, just so I could attend it."

A sense of the past shook me, frightening me with its vitality. I pressed on, guiltily trying to wring something from the earliest memories. What right had I to good times now, or memories?

"I love the singers," I said. "I used to cry with my grandparents when the soprano sang 'O Holy Night.' Blackwood Manor seems powerful at such times—a place to alter people's lives. You can tell I'm still very caught up in it."

"How does it alter people's lives?" he asked quickly, as if the idea had hooked him.

"Oh, there've been so many weddings here." My voice caught. Weddings. A hideous memory, a recent memory overshot all, a shameful awful memory—blood, her gown, the taste of it—but I forced it out of my mind. I went on:

"I remember lovely weddings, and anniversary banquets. I remember a picnic on the lawn for an elderly man who had just turned ninety. I remember people coming back to visit the site where they'd been married." Again came that stabbing recollection—a bride, a bride covered in blood. My head swam.

You little fool, you've killed her. You weren't supposed to kill her, and look at her white dress.

I wouldn't think of it yet. I couldn't be crippled with it yet. I'd confess it all to Lestat, but not yet.

I had to continue. I stammered. I managed.

"Somewhere there's an old guest book with a broken quill pen crushed in it, full of comments by those who came and went and came again. They're still coming. It's a flame that hasn't gone out."

He nodded and smiled faintly as though this pleased him. He looked again at the portrait of Virginia Lee.

A vague shimmer passed over me. Had the portrait changed? Vague imaginings that her lovely blue eyes looked down at me. But she would never come to life for me now, would she? Of course she wouldn't. Hers had been a famous virtue and magnanimity. What would she have to do with me now?

"And these days," I pressed on, fastening to my little narrative, "I find myself cherishing this house desperately, and cherishing as well all my mortal connections. My Aunt Queen I cherish above all. But there are others, others who must never know what I am."

He studied me patiently, as if pondering these things.

"Your conscience is tuned like a violin," he said pensively. "Do you really like having them here, the strangers, the Christmas and Easter guests, under your own roof?"

"It's cheerful," I admitted. "There's always light and movement. There are voices and the dull vibration of the busy stairs. Sometimes guests complain—the grits is watery or the gravy is lumpy—and in the old days, my grandmother Sweetheart would cry over those complaints, and my grandfather—Pops, we all called him—would privately slam his fist down on the kitchen table; but in the main, the guests love the place …

"… And now and then it can be lonesome here, melancholy and dismal, no matter how bright the chandeliers. I think that when my grandparents died and that part of it was all over I felt a … a deep depression that seemed linked to Blackwood Manor, though I couldn't leave it, and wouldn't of my own accord."

He nodded at these words as though he understood them. He was looking at me as surely as I

was looking at him. He was appraising me as surely as I appraised him.

I was thinking how very attractive he was, I couldn't stop myself, with his yellow hair so thick and long, turning so gracefully at the collar of his coat, and his large probing violet eyes. There are very few creatures on earth who have true violet eyes. The slight difference between his eyes meant nothing. His sun-browned skin was flawless. What he saw in me with his questioning gaze, I couldn't know.

"You know, you can roam about this house," I said, still vaguely shocked that I had his interest, the words spilling anxiously from me again. "You can roam from room to room, and there are ghosts. Sometimes even the tourists see the ghosts."

"Did that scare them?" he asked with genuine curiosity.

"Oh, no, they're too gung ho to be in a haunted house. They love it. They see things where there are no things. They ask to be left alone in haunted rooms."

He laughed silently.

"They claim to hear bells ring that aren't ringing," I went on, smiling back at him, "and they smell coffee when there is no coffee, and they catch the drift of exotic perfumes. Now and then there was a tourist or two who was genuinely frightened, in fact there were several in the bed-and-board days who packed up immediately, but in the main, the reputation of the place sold it. And then, of course, there were those who actually saw ghosts."

"And you, you do see the ghosts," he said.

"Yes," I answered. "Most of the ghosts are weak things, hardly more than vapor, but there are exceptions…." I hesitated. I was lost for a moment. I felt my words might trigger some awful apparition, but I wanted so to confide in him. Stumbling, I went on:

"Yes, extraordinary exceptions …" I broke off.

"I want you to tell me," he said. "You have a room upstairs, don't you? A quiet place where we can talk. But I sense someone else in this house."

He glanced towards the hallway.

"Yes, Aunt Queen in the back bedroom," I said. "It won't take more than a moment for me to see her."

"That's a curious name, Aunt Queen," he remarked, his smile brightening again. "It's divinely southern, I think. Will you take me to see her as well?"

"Absolutely," I answered, without the hesitation of common sense. "Lorraine McQueen is her name, and everyone hereabouts calls her Miss Queen or Aunt Queen."

We went into the hallway together and once again he glanced up at the curving stairs.

I led him back past it, his boots sounding sharp on the marble, and I brought him to the open door of Aunt Queen's room.

There she was, my darling, quite resplendent, and very busy, and not in the least disturbed by our approach.

She sat at her marble table just to the right of her dressing table, the whole making the L in which she was most happy. The nearby floor lamp as well as the frilly lights on the dressing table illuminated her wonderfully, and she had her dozens of cameos out before her on the marble and her bone-handled magnifying glass in her right hand.

She seemed dreadfully frail in her white quilted satin robe, with its buckled belt around her tiny waist, her throat wrapped well in a white silk scarf tucked into her lapels, over which rested her favorite necklace of diamonds and pearls. Her soft gray hair was curled naturally around her face, and her small eyes were full of an exuberant spirit as she studied the cameos at hand. Under the table, and where her robe was parted, I could see that she wore her perilous pink-sequined high-heeled shoes. I wanted to lecture. Ever a danger, those spike-heeled shoes.

Aunt Queen seemed the perfect name for her, and I felt an instinctive pride in her, that she had been the guardian angel of my life. I had no fear of her recognizing anything abnormal in Lestat, what with his tanned skin, except perhaps his excessive beauty. And I was happy with the moment beyond words.

The whole room made a lovely picture as I tried to see it the way that Lestat must see it, what with the canopied bed to the far left. It had only recently been redone in scallops of rose-colored satin, ornamented with darker braid, and it was made up already, which wasn't always the case, with the heavy satin cover and pillow shams and other decorative pillows in a heap. The rose damask couch and scattered armchairs matched the hangings of the bed.

Jasmine was there in the shadows, our lifelong housekeeper, whose silky dark skin and fine features made her a special beauty, just as surely as Aunt Queen. She looked uncommonly sharp in her red sheath dress and high heels, with a string of pearls around her neck. I'd given her those pearls, hadn't I?

Jasmine gave me a little wave, and then went back to straightening small items on the bedside table, and as Aunt Queen looked up and greeted me, crying "Quinn!" with a little touch of ecstasy, Jasmine stopped her work and came forward, slipping right past us out of the room.

I wanted to hug Jasmine. It had been nights since I'd seen her. But I was afraid. Then I thought, no, I'm going to do it for as long as I can do it, and I've fed and I'm warm. A greedy sense of goodness overcame me, that I wasn't damned. I felt too much love. I stepped back and caught Jasmine in my arms.

She was beautifully built, and her skin was a lovely color of milk chocolate and her eyes were hazel and her hair extremely woolly, and always beautifully bleached yellow and close-cropped to her very round head.

"Ah, that's my Little Boss," she said as she hugged me in return. We were in the shadows of the hallway. "My mysterious Little Boss," she went on, pressing me tight against her bosom so that her head was against my chest. "My wandering Little Boy, whom I scarcely ever see at all."

"You're my girlfriend forever," I whispered, kissing the top of her head. In this close company,

the blood of the dead was serving me well. And besides, I was hopeful and slightly crazy.

"You come in here, Quinn," called out Aunt Queen, and Jasmine softly let me go and she went towards the rear door.

"Ah, you have a friend with you," said Aunt Queen as I obeyed her, Lestat at my side. The room was warmer than the rest of the house.

Aunt Queen's voice was ageless, if not actually youthful, and she spoke with a clear commanding diction.

"I'm so pleased you have company," she said. "And what a fine strapling of a youth you are," she said to Lestat, satirizing herself ever so delightfully. "Come here so I can see you. Ah, but you are handsome. Come into the light."

"And you, my dear lady, are a vision," Lestat said, his French accent thickening just a tiny bit as if for emphasis, and, leaning over the marble table with its random cameos, he bent to kiss her hand.

She was a vision, there was no doubt of it, her face warm and pretty for all its years. It wasn't gaunt so much as naturally angular, and her thinning lips were neatly brightened with rose lipstick, and her eyes, in spite of the fine wrinkles around them, were still vividly blue. The diamonds and pearls on her breast were stunning, and she wore several rich diamond rings on her long hands.

The jewels as always seemed part of her power and dignity, as if age had given her strong advantage, and a sweet femininity seemed to characterize her as well.

"Over here, Little Boy," she said to me.

I went to her side and bent down to receive her kiss on my cheek. That had been my custom ever since I'd grown to the staggering height of six foot four, and she often took hold of my head and teasingly refused to let me go. This time, she didn't do it. She was too distracted by the alluring creature standing before her table, with his cordial smile.

"And look at your coat," she said to Lestat, "how marvelous. Why, it's a wide-skirted frock coat. Wherever did you get it, and the cameo buttons, how perfect. Will you come here this very minute and let me see them? You can see that I've a positive mania for cameos. And now as the years have gone by, I think of little else."

Lestat came round the table as I moved away. I was frightened suddenly, very frightened, that she would sense something about him, but no sooner had this thought gripped me than I realized he had the situation entirely under his command.

Hadn't another Blood Drinker, my Maker, charmed Aunt Queen in the same manner? Why the hell should I be so afraid?

As she examined the buttons, remarking that each was a different muse of the Grecian Nine Muses, Lestat was beaming down on her as if he were genuinely smitten, and I loved him for it. Because Aunt Queen was the person I loved most in all the world. Having the two of them

together was a little more than I could bear.

"Yes, a real true frock coat," she said.

"Well, I'm a musician, Madam," Lestat said to her. "You know in this day and age a rock musician can wear a frock coat if he wishes, and so I indulge myself. I'm theatrical and incorrigible. A regular beast when it comes to the exaggerated and the eccentric. I like to clear all obstacles when I enter a room, and I have a perfect mania for antique things."

"Yes, you're so right to have it," she said, exulting in him obviously, as he stepped back and joined me where I stood before the table. "My two handsome boys," she remarked. "You do know that Quinn's mother is a singer, though what kind of a singer I'm not quite prepared to say."

Lestat didn't know, and he gave me a curious glance and a slight teasing smile.

"Country music," I said quickly. "Patsy Blackwood is her name. She's got a powerful voice."

"Very much diluted country music," said Aunt Queen with a vague tone of disapproval. "I think she calls it country pop, and that can account for a lot. She has a good voice, however, and she writes occasional lyrics that aren't too bad. She's good at a sort of mournful ballad, almost Celtic, though she doesn't know it—but you know, a little minor-key bluegrass sound is what she really likes to do, and if she did what she likes to do rather than what she thinks she ought to do she might have the very fame she so desires." Aunt Queen sighed.

I marveled, not only at the wisdom of what she'd said, but at the curious disloyalty, because Aunt Queen was never one to criticize her own flesh and blood. But something seemed to have been stirred inside her by Lestat's gaze. Perhaps he had worked a vague charm, and she was giving forth her deepest thoughts.

"But you, young man," she said, "I'm your Aunt Queen from now on and forever, certainly; but what is your name?"

"Lestat, Madam," he answered, pronouncing it "Les-*dot,*" with the accent on the second syllable. "I'm not really very famous either. And I don't sing anymore at all actually, except to myself when I'm driving my black Porsche madly or riding my motorcycle at a raging speed on the roads. Then I'm a regular Pavarotti—."

"Oh, but you mustn't go speeding!" Aunt Queen declared with a sudden attack of pure seriousness. "That's how I lost my husband, John McQueen. It was a new Bugatti, you know what a Bugatti is" (Lestat nodded), "and he was so proud of it, his fine European sports car, and we were racing down the Pacific Coast Highway One, and on an unclouded summer day, screeching around the turns, down to Big Sur, and he lost control of the wheel and went right through the windshield. Dead like that. And I came to my senses with a crowd around me, only inches from a cliff that went sheer down into the sea."

"Appalling," said Lestat earnestly. "Was it very long ago?"

"Of course, decades ago, when I was foolish enough to do such things," said Aunt Queen, "and

I never remarried; we Blackwoods, we don't remarry. And John McQueen left me a fortune, some consolation, I've never found another like him, with so much passion and so many happy delusions, but then I never much looked." She shook her head at the pity of it. "But that's a dreary subject, all that, he's buried in the Blackwood tomb in the Metairie Cemetery; we have a large tomb there, an inspiring little chapel of a tomb, and I'll soon be in it too."

"Oh, my God, no," I whispered, with a little too much fear.

"You hush now," she said, glancing up at me. "And Lestat, my darling Lestat, tell me about your clothes, your odd and bold taste. I love it. I must confess that to picture you in that frock coat, rushing along on a motorcycle, is quite amusing, to be sure."

"Well Madam," he said, laughing softly, "my longing for the stage and the microphone is gone, but I won't give up the fancy clothes. I can't give them up. I'm the prisoner of capricious fashion and am actually quite plain tonight. I think nothing of piling on the lace and the diamond cuff links, and I envy Quinn that snappy leather coat he's wearing. You could call me a Goth, I think." He glanced at me very naturally, as though we were both simple humans. "Don't they call us snappy antique dressers Goth now, Quinn?"

"I think they do," I said, trying to catch up.

This little speech of his made Aunt Queen laugh and laugh. She had forgotten John McQueen, who had in fact died a long time ago into stories. "What an unusual name, Lestat," she returned. "Does it have a meaning?"

"None whatsoever, Madam," Lestat answered. "If memory serves me right, and it does less and less, the name's compounded of the first letter of each of my six older brothers' names, all of whom—the brothers and their names—I grew up to cheerfully and vigorously despise."

Again, Aunt Queen laughed, plainly surprised and utterly seduced. "Seventh son," she said. "Now that confers a certain power and I'm deeply respecting of it. And you speak with a ready eloquence. You seem a fine and invigorating friend for Quinn."

"That's my ambition, to be his fine friend," said Lestat immediately and sincerely, "but don't let me intrude."

"Never even think of it," Aunt Queen offered. "You're welcome under my roof. I like you. I know I do. And you, Quinn, where have you been of late?"

"Round and about, Aunt Queen," I answered. "Bad as Patsy in my roamings, round and about—I don't know."

"And have you brought me a cameo?" she asked. "This is our custom, Lestat," she explained, and then: "It's been a week since you have been in this room, Tarquin Blackwood. I want my cameo. You must have one. I won't let you off the hook."

"Oh, yes, you know I almost forgot about it," I said. (And with reason!) I felt in my right-hand coat pocket for a little tissue-covered package that I'd put there nights ago. "It's from New York, this one, a lovely shell cameo."

I unwrapped the paper and put it before her in all its glory, one of the largest shell cameos that she would own. The image was from the white strata of the shell, naturally, and the background a dark pink. The cameo was a perfect oval with a particularly exquisite scalloped frame of heavy 24-carat gold.

"Medusa," she said, with obvious satisfaction, identifying the woman's profile at once by her winged head and the wild snakes for hair. "And so large and so sharply carved."

"Fearsome," I said. "The best Medusa I've ever seen. Note the height of the wing, and a bit of the orange strata on the wing tip. I meant to bring it sooner. I wish that I had."

"Oh, there's no point to that, my darling," she said. "Don't regret it when you don't come to see me. I think I'm timeless. You're here now and you've remembered me. That's what counts." She looked up to Lestat eagerly. "You know the story of Medusa, don't you?" she asked.

Lestat hesitated, only smiling, obviously wanting her to speak more than he wanted to speak himself. He looked rather radiant in his rapture with her, and she was beaming back.

"Once beautiful, then turned into a monster," said Aunt Queen, clearly enjoying the moment immensely. "With a face that could turn men to stone. Perseus sought her by her reflection in his polished shield, and once he'd slain her the winged horse Pegasus was born from the drops of blood that fell to earth from her severed head."

"And it was that head," said Lestat confidingly, "that Athena then emblazoned on her shield."

"You're so very right," said Aunt Queen.

"A charm against harm," said Lestat softly. "That's what she became once beheaded. Another wondrous transformation, I think—beauty to monster, monster to charm."

"Yes, you're right on all counts," said Aunt Queen. "A charm against harm," she repeated. "Here, come, Quinn, help me take off these heavy diamonds," she said, "and get a gold chain for me. I want to wear Medusa on my neck."

It was a simple matter to do as she asked. I came around directly to the dressing table and removed the diamonds from her, giving her a sly kiss on the cheek, and put the diamond necklace in its customary leather box. This always sat atop her dressing table on the right-hand side. The gold chains were in a box in the top drawer, each in its plastic pouch.

From these I chose a strong chain of bright 24-carat gold, and one that would give her a snug but good fit. I threaded it through the bail attached to the cameo, and then put the chain around her neck for her and snapped the clasp.

After another quick couple of kisses, very powdery and rather like kissing a person made of pure white confectioners' sugar, I came around in front of her again. The cameo was perfectly nested against the full gathered silk of the scarf and looked both imposing and rich.

"I have to admit," I said of my new purchase, "it is really quite a trophy. Medusa is her wicked self in this one, not just a pretty winged girl with snakes, and that's rare."

"Yes," said Lestat agreeably, "and so much stronger is the charm."

“You think so?” Aunt Queen asked him. For all her dignity, the cameo befitted her more than the roaring diamonds. “You’re a curious young man,” she went on to Lestat. “You speak slowly and reflectively, and the timbre of your voice is deep. I like it. Quinn was a bookworm and swallowed mythology by the mouthful, once he could read, and, mind you, that wasn’t until very late. But you, how do you know about mythology, for surely you do? And obviously something about cameos, or so I judge by your coat.”

“Knowledge drifts in and out of my mind,” said Lestat with a little look of honest distress and a shake of his head. “I devour it and then I lose it and sometimes I can’t reach for any knowledge that I ought to possess. I feel desolate, but then knowledge returns or I seek it out in a new source.”

How they connected, the two of them, it was amazing to me. And then I felt a stab of bitter memory again, of my Maker, that appalling presence, that damnable presence, once connecting with Aunt Queen in this very room and in the very same easy way. The subject had been cameos then too. Cameos. But this was Lestat, not my Maker, this was not that loathsome being. This was my hero under my roof.

“But you love books, then,” Aunt Queen was saying. I had to listen.

“Oh, yes,” Lestat said. “Sometimes they’re the only thing that keeps me alive.”

“What a thing to say at your age,” she laughed.

“No, but one can feel desperate at any age, don’t you think? The young are eternally desperate,” he said frankly. “And books, they offer one hope—that a whole universe might open up from between the covers, and falling into that new universe, one is saved.”

“Oh, yes, I think so, I really do,” Aunt Queen responded, almost gleefully. “It ought to be that way with people and sometimes it is. Imagine—each new person an entire universe. Do you think we can allow that? You’re clever and keen.”

“I think we don’t want to allow it,” Lestat responded. “We’re too jealous, and fearful. But we should allow it, and then our existence would be wondrous as we went from soul to soul.”

Aunt Queen laughed gaily.

“Oh, but you are a specimen,” she said. “Wherever did you come from? Oh, I wish that Quinn’s teacher Nash was here. He’d so enjoy you. Or that little Tommy wasn’t away at school. Tommy is Quinn’s uncle, which is slightly misleading since Tommy is only fourteen, and then there’s Jerome. Where’s little Jerome? Probably fast asleep. Ah, we’ll have to make do with only me—.”

“But tell me if you will, Miss Queen,” asked Lestat, “why do you love the cameos so much? These buttons, I can’t claim to have chosen them with much care, or to have been obsessed with them. I didn’t know they were the Nine Muses until you told me, and for that I’m in your debt. But you have here a fine love affair. How did it come about?”

“Can’t you see with your own eyes?” she asked. She offered him a shell cameo of the Three

Graces and he held it up, inspecting it, and then he laid it down reverently before her again.

"They're works of art," said Aunt Queen, "of a special sort. They're pictures, complete little pictures, that's what matters. Small, intricate and intense. Let's use your metaphor of the entire universe again; that's what you find in many of these."

She was in a rapture.

"One can wear them," she said, "but it doesn't cheapen them to do it. You yourself just spoke of the charm." She touched the Medusa at her breast. "And of course I find something unique in every one I acquire. In fact, there's infinite variety in cameos. Here, look," she said, handing Lestat another example. "You see, it's a mythical scene of Hercules fighting a bull, and there is a goddess behind him and a graceful female figure in front. I've never seen another like it, though I have hundreds of mythological scenes."

"They are intense, yes," said Lestat. "I see your point completely, and it's truly divine, yes."

She looked about for a moment and then picked up another large shell cameo and offered it to him.

"Now that's Rebecca at the Well," she said. "A common scene depicted on cameos, and coming from the Bible, don't you know, from the book of Genesis, when Abraham sent a messenger to find a wife for his son Isaac, and Rebecca came out to greet this messenger at the village well."

"Yes, I know the story," Lestat said quietly. "And it's an excellent cameo too."

She looked at him eagerly, as much into his eyes as at his hands, with their lustrous fingernails.

"That was one of the first cameos I ever saw," she said, taking it back from him, "and it was with Rebecca at the Well that my collection began. I was given ten altogether of that exact same theme, Rebecca at the Well, though all were different in their carvings, and I have them all here. There's a story to it, to be sure."

He was obviously curious, and seemed to possess all the time in the world.

"Tell me," he said simply.

"Oh, but how I have behaved!" she suddenly remarked, "allowing you to stand there as if you were bad boys brought before the principal. Forgive me, you must sit down. Oh, but I am witless to be so remiss in my own boudoir! For shame!"

I was about to object, to declare it unnecessary, but I saw that Lestat wanted to know her, and she was having such a wonderful time.

"Quinn," she declared, "you bring those two chairs here. We'll make a cozy circle, Lestat, if I'm to tell a tale."

I knew there was no arguing. Besides, I was painfully stimulated that these two liked each other. I was crazy again.

As to the chairs, I did as I was told, crossing the room, taking up two of the straight-back

chairs from Aunt Queen's round writing table between the back windows, and setting the chairs down right where we had stood so that we could face her again.

She took the plunge:

"It came about in this very room, my introduction to the passion for the cameo," she said, her eyes flitting over both of us and then fixing firmly on Lestat. "I was nine years old then and my grandfather was dying in here, a dreadful old man, Manfred Blackwood, the great monster of our history, the man who built this house, a man of whom everybody was afraid. My father, his only living son, William, tried to keep me away from him, but one day when the old beast was alone he saw me peeping in at that door.

"He ordered me to come inside and I was too afraid not to do it, and curious besides. He was sitting here where I am now, only there was no fancy dressing table here. Just his easy chair, and he sat in it, with a blanket over his lap, and both his hands on his silver-knobbed cane. His face was stubbly with his rough beard, and he wore a bib of sorts, and dribbled from the edge of his mouth.

"Oh, what a curse to live to that age to be slobbering as he was, like a bulldog. I think of a bulldog every time I think of him. And mind you, a sickroom in those days, no matter how well attended, wasn't what a sickroom is today! It reeked, I tell you. If I ever become that old and start to slobber, Quinn has my express permission to blow my brains out with my own pearl-handled gun, or to sink me with morphine! Remember that, Little Boy."

"Of course," I rejoined, winking at her.

"Oh, you little devil, I'm serious—you can't imagine how revolting it can be, and all I ask is permission to say my Rosary before you execute the sentence, and then I'll be gone." She looked at the cameos and then about herself and back to Lestat.

"The Old Man, yes, the Old Man," she said, "and he was staring blankly into nothing before he saw me, mumbling to himself until he started to mumble to me. There was a little chest of drawers beside him where it was rumored he kept his money, but how I knew this I don't now recall.

"As I was saying, the old reprobate told me to come in, and then he unlocked the top drawer of this chest and he took out a small velvet box and, letting his cane fall over on the floor, he put the box in my hands. 'Open that up and hurry,' he said. 'Because you're my only granddaughter and I want you to have it, and your mother is too foolish to want it. I said hurry up.'

"Well, I did precisely what he told me, and inside were all these cameos, and I thought they were fascinating with all their tiny little people on them and their frames of gold.

" 'Rebecca at the Well,' he said. 'All of them of the same story, Rebecca at the Well.' And then, 'If they tell you I murdered her they're telling you the truth. She couldn't be satisfied with cameos and diamonds and pearls, not that one. I killed her, or more truthfully, and it's time for the truth, I dragged her to her death.'

"Of course I was awestruck by his words," said Aunt Queen, "but instead of being suspicious and horrified, I was impressed that he was addressing these words to me. And he went on talking, the slobber coming down the side of his mouth to his chin. I should have helped him wipe his face, but I was too young to do anything as compassionate as that.

" 'Those were the old days,' he said to me, 'and she wore those high-collared lace blouses, and the cameos looked so very precious at her throat. She was so precious when I first brought her here. They're all so precious in the beginning and then they turn rotten. Except my poor dead Virginia Lee. My lovely, unforgettable Virginia Lee. Would she had lived forever, my own Virginia Lee. But the others, rotten, I tell you, greedy and rotten every time.

" 'But she was the worst of all my disappointments,' he told me, fixing me with his mean eyes. 'Rebecca, and Rebecca at the Well,' he said. 'It was *he* who gave me the first cameo for her, when he'd heard her name, telling me the story of it, and *he* that brought several more, all of Rebecca, all gifts for her, he said, *he* being the evil spy that he was, ever watching us; they all came from him, all these cameos, if truth be known, from *him,* though there's no taint on it, and you're just a child.' "

Aunt Queen paused, appealing to Lestat mutely to assure herself, I think, that she had an audience, and then when she saw that both of us were rapt, she went on.

"I remember all those words," she said, "and in my girl's heart I wanted the enchanting cameos, of course. I wanted them, the whole box! And so I held it tight as he went on, barking his words, or maybe even gnashing them out, it's hard to say. 'She grew to love the cameos,' the old beast said, 'as long as she could still dream and be content at the same time. But women aren't gifted with contentment. And it was *he* that killed her for me, a bloody sacrifice, that's what she was, an offering up to him, you might say and I would say, but I was the one who dragged her to it. And it wasn't the first time that I'd taken some poor misshapen soul to those bloody chains, to be sure.' "

I shivered. These words sounded a deep dark chord in me. I had a passel of secrets that weighed on me like so many stones. I couldn't do anything except listen in a vague spell as she went on.

"I remembered those words 'to those bloody chains,' " said Aunt Queen, "and all his other words as he yammered away: 'She gave me no choice, if the truth be known.' He was almost bellowing. 'Now you take those cameos and wear them, no matter what you think of me. I have something there sweet and costly to give you, and you're just a little girl and my grandchild, and that's what I wish it to be.'

"Of course, I didn't know how to answer him," Aunt Queen went on. "I don't think for a moment I believed he was a real murderer, and I certainly didn't know of this strange accomplice to whom he referred, this *he,* of whom he spoke with such mystery, and I never did find out who the man was, not to this very day. But he knew. And he continued as if I'd lanced a wound. 'You

know, I confess it, over and over,' he said, 'to the priest and to the sheriff, and neither believes me, and the sheriff just says she's been gone some thirty-five years and I'm imagining, and as for *him,* what if his gold built this house; he's a liar and a cheat and he's left me this house as a prison, as a mausoleum, and I can't go any longer to him, though I know he's out there, he's out there on Sugar Devil Island, I can feel him, I can feel his eyes on me in the night when he comes near. I can't catch him. I never could. And I can't go out there anymore to curse him to his face, I'm too old now, and too weak.

"Oh, it was a powerful mystery," said Aunt Queen. " 'What if his gold built this house?' I kept it secret what he'd said. I didn't want my mother to take the cameos away. She wasn't a Blackwood, of course, and that's what they always said of her, 'She's not a Blackwood,' as though that explained her intelligence and common sense. But the point was, my room upstairs was full of clutter. It was an easy thing to hide the cameos away. I'd take them out at night and look at them and they bewitched me. And so my obsession began.

"Now, my grandfather did within a few months' time get right up out of this room and stagger down to the landing and put himself right into a pirogue and row off with a pole into Sugar Devil Swamp. Of course the farmhands were hollering at him to stop, but he went off and vanished. And no one ever saw him again, ever. He was forever gone."

A stealthy trembling had come over me, a trembling of the heart perhaps more than the body. I watched her, and her words ran as if written on ribbons being pulled through my mind.

She shook her head. She moved the cameo of Rebecca at the Well with her left hand. I could no more dare to read her mind than I would to strike her or say a cross word to her. I waited in love and full of old dread.

Lestat seemed quietly entranced, waiting on her to speak again, which she did:

"Of course eventually they declared him officially dead, and long before that, when they were still searching for him—though no one knew how to get to the island, no one ever even found the island—I told my mother all he'd said. She told my father. But they knew nothing of the old man's murder confession or his strange accomplice, the mysterious *he,* only that Grandfather left behind him plenty of money in numerous deposit boxes in various banks.

"Now maybe if my father had not been such a simple and practical man he would have looked into it, but he didn't and neither did my aunt, Manfred's only other child. They didn't see ghosts, those two." She made this remark as if Lestat would naturally regard this as peculiar. "And they had a strong sense, both of them, that Blackwood Farm should be worked and should pay. They passed that on to my brother Gravier, Quinn's great-grandfather, and he passed it on to Thomas, Quinn's grandfather, and that was what those men did, the three of them, work, work, work Blackwood Farm all the time, and so did their wives, always in the kitchen, always loving you with food, that's what they were like. My father, my brother and my nephew were all real countrymen.

"But there was always money, money from the Old Man, and everybody knew he'd left a fortune, and it wasn't the milk cows and the tung oil trees that made the house so splendid. It was the money that my grandfather had left. In those days people really didn't ask where you got your money. The government didn't care as they do in this day and age. When this house finally fell to me, I searched through all the records, but I couldn't find any mention of the mysterious *he,* or a partner of any sort, in my grandfather's affairs."

She sighed and then, glancing at Lestat's eager face, she continued, her voice tripping a little faster as the past opened up.

"Now, regarding the beautiful Rebecca, my father did have terrible memories of her, and so did my aunt. Rebecca had been a scandalous companion to my grandfather, brought into this very house, after his saint of a wife, Virginia Lee, had died. An evil stepmother if ever there was one, was this Rebecca, too young to be maternal, and violently mean to my father and my aunt, who were just little children, and mean as well to everyone else.

"They said that at the dinner table, to which she was allowed to come in all her obvious impropriety, she'd sing out my poor Aunt Camille's private verses just to show her she'd snuck into her room and read them, and one night, gentle though she was, Aunt Camille Blackwood rose up and threw an entire bowl of hot soup in Rebecca's face."

Aunt Queen paused to sigh at this old violence and then went on:

"They all hated Rebecca, or so the story went. My poor Aunt Camille. She might have been another Emily Dickinson or Emily Brontë if that evil Rebecca hadn't sung out her poetry. My poor Aunt Camille, she tore it all up after those eyes had seen it and those lips had spoken it and never wrote another verse again. She cut off her long hair for spite and burnt it up in the grate.

"But one day, after many another agonizing dinner-table struggle, this evil Rebecca did disappear. And, with no one loving her, no one wanted to know why or how. Her clothes were found in the attic, Jasmine says, and so says Quinn. Imagine it. A trunk or two of Rebecca's clothes. Quinn's examined them. Quinn's brought down more cameos from them. Quinn insists we keep them. I'd never have had them brought down. I'm too superstitious for that. And the chains!…"

She stole an intimate and meaningful glance at me. Rebecca's clothes. The shiver in me was relentless.

Aunt Queen sighed, and, looking down and then up at me again, she whispered:

"Forgive me, Quinn, that I talk as much as I do. And especially of Rebecca. I don't mean to upset you with those old tales of Rebecca. We best have done with Rebecca perhaps. Why not make a bonfire of her clothes, Quinn? You think it's cold enough in this room, what with the air-conditioning, for us to light a real fire in the grate?" She laughed it off as soon as she'd uttered it.

"Does this talk upset you, Quinn?" Lestat asked in a small voice.

"Aunt Queen," I declared. "Nothing you say could ever sit wrong with me, don't be afraid of it. I talk all the time of ghosts and spirits," I continued. "Why should I be upset that anyone talks of real things, of Rebecca, when she was very much alive and cruel to everyone? Or of Aunt Camille and her lost poems. I don't think my friend here knows how much I came to know Rebecca. But I'll tell him if he wants to hear another tale or two later on."

Lestat nodded and made some small sound of assent. "I'm very ready for it," he said.

"It seems when a person sees ghosts, for whatever reason, he has to talk of it," said Aunt Queen. "And surely I should understand."

Something opened in me rather suddenly.

"Aunt Queen, you know my talk of ghosts and spirits more truly than anyone except Stirling Oliver," I said calmly. "I'm speaking of my old friend of the Talamasca because he did know too. And whatever your judgment of me, you've always been gentle and respecting, which I appreciate with all my heart—."

"Of course," she said quickly and decisively.

"But do you really believe what I told you of Rebecca's ghost?" I asked. "I can't tell even now. People find a million ways not to believe our ghost stories. And people vary in their fascination as to ghosts, and I have never been very sure of where you stand. Now's a good time to ask, isn't it, when I have you in the storytelling mood."

I was reddening, I knew it, and my voice had a break in it which I didn't like. Oh, the thunder of ghosts and their aftermath. Let it distract me from Stirling Oliver in my lethal arms and the bloody bride lying on the bed. Blunders, blunders!

"Where I stand," she said with a sigh, looking directly from Lestat to me and back again. "Why, your friend here is going to think he's entered a house of lunatics if we don't break off with this. But Quinn, tell me now that you haven't gone back to the Talamasca. Nothing will upset me so much as that. I'll rue the night I ever told such stories to you and your friend if it sends you back to them."

"No, Aunt Queen," I answered. But I knew I had reached my limit as to how much I could conceal if this painful conversation went on. I tried to rejoice again quietly in the fact that we were all together, but my mind was jumbled with frightening images. I was sitting very still, trying to keep all tight in my heart.

"Don't go into that swamp, Quinn," Aunt Queen said, abruptly appealing to me, as if from the core of her being. "Don't go to that accursed Sugar Devil Island. I know your adventuresome spirit, Quinn. Don't be proud of your discovery. Don't go. You must stay away from that place."

I was hurt through no fault of hers. I prayed I could soon confess to Lestat or someone in this world that her warnings were now too late. They had been timely once, but a veil had fallen over all the past, with its impetuosity and sense of invincibility. The mysterious *he* was no mystery whatsoever to me.

"Don't think about it, Aunt Queen," I said as gently as I could. "What did your father tell you? That there was no devil in Sugar Devil Swamp."

"Ah, yes, Quinn," she responded, "but then my father never set out in a pirogue in those dark waters to roam that island as you do. Nobody ever found that island before you, Quinn. That wasn't my father's nature, and it wasn't your grandfather's nature to do anything so impractical himself. Oh, he hunted near the banks and trapped the crawfish, and we do that now. But he never went in search of that island, and I want you to put it behind you now."

Keenly, I felt her need of me, as vividly as if I'd never felt it before.

"I love you too much to leave you," I said quickly, the words rolling from me before I thought of precisely what they meant. And then as suddenly: "I'll never leave you, I swear it."

"My dear, my lovely dear," she said, musing, her left hand playing with the cameos, lining up Rebecca at the Well, one, two, three, four and five.

"They have no taint, Aunt Queen," I said looking at those particular cameos, remembering discordantly but quite definitely that a ghost can wear a cameo. I wondered, Did a ghost have a choice? Did a ghost pillage its trunks in the attic?

Aunt Queen nodded and smiled. "My boy, my beautiful Little Boy," she said. Then she looked to Lestat again. His demeanor, his kindliness towards her had not changed one jot.

"You know, Lestat, I can't travel anymore," she said quite seriously, her words saddening me. "And sometimes I have the horrid thought that my life is finished. I must realize that I'm eighty-five. I can't wear my beloved high heels any longer, at least not out of this room."

She looked down at her feet, which we could still plainly see, at the vicious sequined shoes of which she was so proud.

"It's even an undertaking to go into New Orleans to the jewelers who know I'm a collector," she pressed on. "Though I have out back at all times the biggest stretch limousine imaginable, certainly the biggest limousine in the parish, and gentlemen to drive me and accompany me and Jasmine, darling Jasmine of course. But where are you these days, Quinn? It seems if I do wake at a civil hour and make some appointment you can't be found."

I was in a haze. It was a night for shame and more shame. I felt as cut off from her as I was near to her, and I thought of Stirling again, of the taste of his blood and how close I had come to swallowing his soul, and I wondered again if Lestat had worked some magic on both of us—Aunt Queen and me—to make us feel so totally without guile.

But I liked it. I trusted Lestat, and a sudden mad thought came to me, that if he was going to hurt me, he would never have gone so far in listening to Aunt Queen.

Aunt Queen went on with a lovely animation, her voice more pleasant though the words were still sad.

"And so I sit here with my little talismans," she said, "and I watch my old movies, hoping that Quinn will come, but understanding if he doesn't." She gestured to the large television to our

left. “I try not to think bitterly about my weaknesses. Mine has been a rich, full life. And my cameos make me happy. The pure obsession with them makes me happy. It always has, really. I’ve collected cameos since that long-ago day. Can you see what I mean?”

“Yes,” said Lestat, “I understand you perfectly. I’m glad that I met you. I’m glad to be received in your house.”

“That’s a quaint way to put it,” she said, obviously charmed by him, and her smile brightened and so did her deep-set eyes. “But you are most graciously welcome here.”

“Thank you, Madam,” Lestat replied.

“Aunt Queen, my darling,” she pressed.

“Aunt Queen, I love you,” he responded warmly.

“You go now, both of you,” she said. “Quinn, put the chairs back because you’re big and strong, and Jasmine will have to drag them over the carpet, and you are free, both of you, my young ones, and I am so put out that I have ended this spirited conversation on a sad note.”

“On a grand note,” said Lestat, rising, as I took both the chairs easily and returned them to the writing table. “Don’t think I haven’t been honored by your confidences,” he went on. “I’ve found you a grand lady, if you’ll forgive me, an entrancing lady indeed.”

She broke into a delighted riff of laughter, and as I came around in front of the table again and saw her shoes glittering there as if her feet were immortal and could carry her anywhere, I suddenly detached from all decorum and went down on my knees and bent my lips to kiss her shoes.

This I had done often with her; in fact, I had caressed her shoes and kissed them to tease her, and liked the feel of her arch in them, and I kissed that too, the thin nylon-covered skin, often and now, but for me to do it in front of Lestat was outrageously amusing to her. And on and on she laughed in a lovely soft high laugh that made me think of a crowded silver belfry against the blue sky gone quite wild.

As I climbed to my feet, she said:

“You go on now. I officially release you from attendance. Be off.”

I went to kiss her again, and her hand on my neck felt so delicate. A ripping sense of mortality weakened me. The words she’d spoken about her age echoed in my ears. And I was aware of a hot mixture of emotions—that she had always made me feel safe, but now I didn’t feel that she herself was safe, and so my sadness was strong.

Lestat made her a little bow, and we left the room.

Jasmine was waiting in the hallway, a warm patient shadow, and she asked where in the house I might be. Her sister, Lolly, and their grandmother Big Ramona, were in the kitchen, ready to prepare anything we might want.

I told her we didn’t need anything just now. Not to worry. And that I was going up to my rooms.

She confirmed for me that Aunt Queen's nurse would come later, a ray of sunshine with a blood-pressure cup by the name of Cindy, with whom Aunt Queen would probably watch the movie of the night, which had already been announced as *Gladiator,* directed by Ridley Scott. Jasmine, Lolly and Big Ramona would of course watch the movie as well.

If Aunt Queen had her way, and there was no reason to think she couldn't, there might be another couple of nurses in the room for the movie too. It was her habit to make fast friends of her nurses, to inspect photographs of their children, and receive birthday cards from them, and to gather as many such young attendants around her as she could.

Naturally, she had her own friends, scattered about through the woods and up and down the country roads, in town and out of it, but they were as old as she was and could hardly come out to spend the night with her in her room. Those ladies and gentlemen she met at the country club for luncheon. The night belonged to her and her court.

That I had been a constant courtier before the Dark Blood was a fact. But since that time I'd come and gone irregularly, a monster among innocents, beleaguered and angered by the scent of blood.

And so Lestat and I left her, and the night—though I had almost murdered Stirling, and had fed without conscience on an anonymous woman, and had attended Aunt Queen in her storytelling—was actually quite young.

Lestat and I approached the staircase and he made a sign for me to lead the way.

For a moment I thought I heard the rustle of Goblin. I thought I felt his indefinable presence. I stood stock-still, wishing with all my heart for him to get away from me, as far away from me as if he were Satan.

Were the curtains of the parlor moving? I thought I heard the faint music of the baubles of the chandeliers. What a concert they could make if they all shivered together. And he had done such tricks, perhaps without deliberation, because he who had once been so silent now came and went with a bit of clumsiness, perhaps more than he could ever know.

Whatever the case, he was not near me now.

No spirits, no ghosts. Only the clean cooled air of the house as it came through the vents with the soft sound of a low breeze.

"He's not with us," said Lestat quietly.

"You know that for certain?" I asked.

"No, but you do," he replied.

He was right.

I led the way up the curving staircase. I felt sharply that for better or worse, I would now have Lestat to myself.

6

The upper hall had three doors on the right wall, and, due to the staircase rising against the left wall, only two on that side. The first door on the left led into my apartment, which was two rooms deep, and the last door on the left led to the bedroom on the rear of the house.

Lestat asked if he might see any rooms, and I told him that he could see most of them. Two of the three bedrooms on the right were uninhabited right now—one belonging to my little Uncle Tommy, who was away at boarding school in England, and the other always reserved for his sister Brittany—and were kind of fancy showpieces, each with its ornate nineteenth-century four-poster bed, ritual baldachin, velvet or taffeta hangings and comfortable though fancy chairs and couches, much like those in Aunt Queen's bedroom downstairs.

In the third room, which was off limits, there hovered my mother, Patsy, whom I hoped we would not see.

Each marble mantelpiece—one snow white and the other of black and gold—had its distinct detail, and there were gilded mirrors wherever one turned, and those huge proud portraits of ancestors—William and his wife, pretty Grace; Gravier and his wife, Blessed Alice; and Thomas, my Pops, and Sweetheart, my grandmother, whose real name had been Rose.

The ceiling lights were gasoliers, with brass arms and cut crystal cups for their bulbs, more ordinary yet more atmospheric than the sumptuous crystal chandeliers of the first floor.

As to the last bedroom on the left, it too was open and neatened and fine, but it belonged to my tutor, Nash Penfield, who was presently completing some work for his Ph.D. in English at a university on the West Coast. He had always cooperated with the four-poster bed and its ruffles of blue silk, his desk was clean and bare and waiting for him and his walls, very much like mine, were lined with books. His fireplace, like mine, had a pair of damask chairs facing each other, elegant and well worn.

"The guests were always on the right side of the hallway," I explained, "in the old hotel days, and here in Nash's room, my grandparents slept—Sweetheart and Pops. Nash and I spent the last year or so reading Dickens to each other. I tread anxiously with him, but so far things have worked out."

"But you love this man, don't you?" Lestat asked. He followed me into the bedroom. He politely inspected the shelves of books.

"Of course I love him. But he may sooner or later know something's very wrong with me. So far I've had very good luck."

"These things depend a lot on nerve," said Lestat. "You'd be amazed what mortals will accept if you simply behave as if you're human. But then you know this, don't you?"

He returned to the bookshelves respectfully, removing nothing, only pointing.

"Dickens, Dickens and more Dickens," he said, smiling. "And every biography of the man ever written, it seems."

"Yes," I said, "and I read him aloud to Nash, novel after novel, some right there by the fireplace. We read them all through, and then I would just dip down into any book—*The Old Curiosity Shop* or *Little Dorrit* or *Great Expectations*—and the language, it was delicious, it would dazzle me, it was like you said to Aunt Queen. You said it so very right. It was like dipping into a universe, yes, you had it." I broke off. I realized I was still giddy from being with Aunt Queen, from the way he had been in attendance on her; and as for Nash, I missed him and wanted him so to come back.

"He was a superb teacher," ventured Lestat gently.

"He was my tutor in every subject," I confessed. "If I can be called a learned man, and I don't know that I can, it's on account of three teachers I've had—a woman named Lynelle and Nash and Aunt Queen. Nash taught me how to really read, and how to see films, and how to see a certain wonder even in science, which I in fact fear and detest. We seduced him away from his college career, with a high salary and a grand tour of Europe, and we're much better off for it. He used to read to Aunt Queen, which she just loved."

I went to the window, which looked out on the flagstone terrace behind the house and the distant two-story building that ran some two hundred feet across. A porch ran along the upper story of the building, with broadly positioned colonettes supporting it from the ground floor.

"Out there's the shed, as we call it," I explained, "and we call our beloved farmhands the Shed Men. They're the handymen and the errand men, the drivers, and the security men, and they hang out back there in their own den.

"There's Aunt Queen's big car, and my car—which I don't use anymore. I can hear the Shed Men now. I'm sure you can. There're always two on the property. They'll do anything in this world for Aunt Queen. They'll do anything in this world for me."

I continued:

"Upstairs, you see the doors, those are small bedrooms, small compared to these, I mean, though just as well furnished with the four-poster beds and antique chests and Aunt Queen's adored satin chairs. Guests used to stay out there too in the old days, for less of course than they paid to stay in the big house.

"And that's where my mother, Patsy, used to stay when I was growing up. Patsy lived out there ever since I could remember. Down below is where she first practiced her music, over to

the left side, that was her garage—Patsy's studio—but she doesn't practice anymore and she's in the front bedroom now just down the hall. She's rather sick these days."

"You don't love her, do you?" Lestat asked.

"I'm very afraid of killing her," I said.

"Come again?" he asked.

"I'm very afraid of killing her," I said. "I despise her, and I want to kill her. I dream about it. I wish I didn't. It's just a bad thought that's come into my head."

"Then come, Little Brother, take me to where you want to talk," he said, and I felt the soft squeeze of his fingers on my arm.

"Why are you so kind to me?" I asked him.

"You're used to people being paid to do it, aren't you?" he asked. "You've never been too sure about Nash, have you? Whether he would love you half so much if he weren't paid?" His eyes swept the room as though the room were talking to him about Nash.

"A big salary and benefits can confuse a person," I said. "It doesn't always bring out the best, I don't think. But in Nash's case? I think it did. It's taken him four years to write his dissertation, but it's a fine one, and after he passes his examinations he'll be satisfied." My voice was quavering. I hated it. "He'll feel that he's independent of us, and that will be good. He'll come back and be Aunt Queen's companion and escort. He'll read to her again. You know she can't really read now. She'll adore it. I can't wait for it to happen for her sake. He'll take her anywhere she wants to go. It's all for her sake. He's a handsome man."

"You're facing mighty temptations," Lestat said, his eyes narrowing as he appraised me.

"Mighty temptations?" I asked. I was shocked and even a little revolted. "You don't think I'd feed off those I love, do you? I mean, I know I made this colossal mistake with Stirling, it was god-awful what I did; Stirling came within a hairsbreadth, but I was caught off guard and I was frightened, frightened that Stirling knew what I was, and knew me, you understand, and that Stirling understood—." *Off guard.* Bloody wedding dress, bloody bride. *You fool, you're not supposed to kill them when they're innocent, and on this her wedding night. She's the only bride you'll ever have.*

"That wasn't my meaning," Lestat replied. He brought me back to myself, out of my anguish.

"Come. To your room now, correct, Little Brother? Where we can talk. And you have a two-room apartment against the stairs."

A calm came over me along with a quiet happy expectation, as though he had enforced it.

He led the way and I came quietly behind.

We went into my sitting room, which was on the front of the house, and we had a good view of my bedroom through the open sliding double doors, and there was my enormous and regal bed, the baldachin padded in red satin, and the matching red chairs, thick and inviting, scattered from bedroom to sitting room, and between the front windows of the sitting room, my computer

and desk. The giant television, to which I was as addicted as anybody, was catercorner, near the inside wall.

Beneath the gasolier stood the center table with its two chairs facing each other, and this was where I often sat, upright and very comfortable, to read. I wrote here in my diary while I was watching television with one eye. This was where I wanted to be with Lestat. Not in the two chairs by the fireplace, which was dead this time of year.

I saw at once that my computer had been turned on.

Lestat sensed that I was alarmed and then he too saw the message floating in green block type on the black monitor:

NO LESTAT.

The very sight of it sent a jolt through me, and I went at once to the machine and turned it off.

"From Goblin," said Lestat, and I nodded, as I stood sentinel waiting for the machine to be switched on again, but it was not.

A violent series of chills passed over me. I turned around. I was vaguely aware that Lestat stood on the opposite side of the center table and that he was watching me, but I could scarcely pay any attention. The heavy draperies of the front windows were swaying, and the gasolier above me had started to move. There was that faint tinkling music from the glass cups and their baubles. My vision was clouded.

"Get away from me," I whispered. "I won't see you, I'll shut my eyes, I swear it." And I did it, screwing my eyes tight as any little child pretending to sleep, but I lost my balance and I had to open my eyes before I fell.

I saw Goblin standing to my right, opaque, detailed, my duplicate—and the computer was on and the keyboard was clicking, and a series of nonsense syllables were jabbering across the monitor while a vague rumble came from the small computer speakers.

I tried to shut my eyes again, but I was too seduced by him, his total double of me, even to my leather coat and black pants, and his crazed expression which surely didn't reflect mine. His eyes were glittering viciously and triumphantly, and his smile was like that of a clown.

"I'm telling you, go, Goblin," I said, but this only redoubled his power, and then the image began to thin and to expand.

"Let me hurt him!" Lestat said urgently. "Give me the permission."

In confusion, I couldn't answer, even though I heard Lestat plead with me again. I felt the tight grip all around me, as though a boa constrictor had me, or so I imagined, and my vision had left me, melting into the violent chills that I couldn't shake. I felt the tiny pinpricks all over my face and the backs of my hands, and I tried to lift my hands to ward them off but my hands hurt. Every bit of my bare flesh hurt, even to the back of my neck.

A panic took hold of me, as if I'd been caught in a swarm of bees. Even my eyelids were

attacked, and I knew that I'd fallen to the floor, but I couldn't orient myself. I could feel the carpet under my hand and I couldn't get up.

"Little Brother, let me hurt him," Lestat said again. And I heard my own voice as if it came from someone else.

"Damn him," I said, "hurt him."

But there had come that magnetic sense of union, Goblin and I, indivisible, and I saw the sunny room again in which a child stood in a wooden playpen scattered with toys, a curly headed toddler in little overalls whom I knew to be myself, and beside him his double, the two of us laughing together, without a single care—look at the red flowers in the linoleum, look at the sunshine, see the spoon flying end over end in an arc through the air—and fast after this there tumbled other images and random moments: laughter in the schoolroom and all the boys looking at me and pointing and murmuring, and me saying *He's right here, I tell you,* his hand on my left hand and my writing in crayon in that scrawl of his, love you, Goblin and Tarquin; and the pure electric shocks of pleasure left me without a body, without a soul. I was rolling on the floor, wasn't I?

"Goblin." I think I whispered. "The one to whom I belong and to whom I've always belonged. No one can understand, no one can fathom." Goblin, Goblin, Goblin.

The pleasure crested with unspeakable sweetness, and subsided into waves of certain bliss.

He was withdrawing, leaving me cold and hurt and lonely all over, fiercely, catastrophically lonely—he was deserting me.

"Hurt him!" I said the words with all my breath, terrified they weren't audible, and then my eyes opened, and above me I saw the great sprawling image of myself, face wavering and grotesque, and suddenly it was made up of pinpoints of fire!

Lestat had sent the Fire Gift to burn the blood he'd taken, and I heard Goblin's silent wail, his soundless raging scream.

Oh, no, it was wrong, not my Goblin, how could I have done it, how could I have betrayed him! His scream was like a siren. A rain of tiny ash descended on me, in fact it seemed flung at me, and his scream rose again, piercing my ears.

The air was full of the smell of the burning, like the smell of human hair burning, and the huge shapeless image hovered, drawing itself together into my solid double for one fateful and frightfully opaque moment, challenging me, cursing me—*Evil devil, Quinn, evil! Bad. Bad!*—and then it was gone, escaping through the door, leaving the gasolier creaking on its chain and the electric lights blinking, and sending a rippling wind through the lace panels on the windows as silence and stillness closed in.

I was on the floor. The blinking lights were unendurable. Lestat came to me and helped me to my feet, and ran his hands caressingly over my hair.

"I couldn't do it," he said, "until it was leaving you, because when it was with you the Fire

might have burnt you too."

"I understand," I said. I was in a fever. "And I never thought to do it, to punish him with it, but think how he learns now. He's quick. He knows already what's obvious to me and to you, no doubt, that if I try to burn him, if either of us does again, he'll fuse with me again and make the fire burn me."

"Maybe he'll do that," said Lestat, guiding me to the straight-back chair at the table. "But do you think he wants for you to die?"

"No, he can't want that," I answered. I was out of breath, as though I'd been running. "He takes his life from me. Whatever he was before I came along, I can't imagine. But it's my focus, my love, that makes him strong now. And goddamn it, I can't stop loving him, feeling I'm betraying him, and he feeds off that!"

The blinking of the lights had stopped. The lace curtains were still. Chills ran up and down my spine. With a noise of static in the speakers, the computer suddenly went off.

Stammering, I told Lestat about the image I'd seen, of myself in the playpen, of the old linoleum that must have been in the kitchen, and of Goblin with me, and that it wasn't something I remembered but something I knew to be true.

"He's shown me those images before when he's attacked me, images of myself as an infant."

"And all this over the years?"

"No, only now after the Dark Gift—with these attacks, when I fuse with him as I would with a mortal victim. It's the Dark Blood. It's become the currency of memory, the vampiric blood. He wants me to know he has these memories of a time when I saw him and strengthened him with that vision even before I knew how to talk."

Lestat had settled in the chair on the other side of the table, and in a split second I developed a positive superstition about him having his back to the hallway door.

I went to the door and closed it, and then, coming back, I unplugged the computer entirely, and I asked if we could rearrange the chairs. Lestat caught me as I reached out to do this.

"Be patient, Little Brother," he said. "The creature's pushed you right out of your mind."

We sat down again, facing each other, Lestat with his back to the front of the house, and me with my back to my bedroom.

"He wants to be a Blood Hunter, don't you see?" I said. "I'm terrified of him and what he can do." I looked up at the gasolier to see if the electric bulbs were blinking. No. I looked at the computer to make sure that its screen was blank. Yes.

"There's no way that he can become a Blood Hunter," said Lestat calmly. "Stop shaking, Quinn. Look into my eyes. I'm here with you now. *I'm here to help you, Little Brother!* And he's gone, and after the burning I don't think he's going to come back, not for a long while."

"But can he feel physical pain?" I asked.

"Of course he can. He can feel blood and pleasure, can't he?"

"I don't know," I rattled on. "Oh, I hope you're right," I said. I was almost about to cry. "Little Brother," how I loved the words, how I cherished them, and how sweet it was, as sweet as Aunt Queen calling me forever Little Boy.

"Get a grip, Quinn," Lestat said. "You're sinking on me." He clasped my hands. I could feel the hardness of his flesh. I had some hint of his strength. But he was gentle, and his skin felt silky and his eyes were totally kind.

"But the old tale in the Chronicles," I said, "of the first vampires—of how they were humans until a spirit entered into them. What's to stop it from happening again?"

"It's never happened since, to my knowledge," said Lestat, "and we're speaking now of thousands of years ago, of a time before ancient Egypt. Many a Blood Hunter, as you call them, has seen spirits, and many a human as well. And how do we really know what happened in the beginning, except that we were told through tradition that it was a powerful spirit who entered its human host by many fatal wounds. You think your Goblin has the power or the cunning for such a perfect fusion?"

I had to admit that he did not.

"But who would have thought that he could drink from me?" I asked. "Who would have thought that he would? The night I was made, my Maker said that Goblin would leave me, that spirits had an aversion to Blood Hunters and I'd soon find myself alone. 'No more ghostly companions for you,' he said. He said it meanly. Because he couldn't see them, you see. Oh, what a demon he was!"

Lestat nodded. His eyes were filled with muted compassion.

"In the main, that's so," he said. "Ghosts shy away from Blood Drinkers, as though something about us, understandably, horrifies them. I don't know the full explanation of it. But you know it's not always so. There are many vampires who see spirits, though I'm not one of them, except on a very few remarkable occasions, I should openly confess."

"You mean you really can't see Goblin," I said.

"I told you the first time that I couldn't see him," Lestat said patiently. "Not until he had drunk the blood. Then I saw his image defined by the blood. It was the same this time, and I sent the Fire to that blood. Now, what if he had attacked you again? I don't think those minute flames could have ignited you. There wasn't thrust enough. But just in case, I'll use another power if he comes again, a power you have as well, and that's the Mind Gift, as some call it, not to read his mind but to push against him, to drive him away with a telekinetic strength until he's so weary with defending himself that he can't hold steady and has to flee."

"But how can I push against what is not material?" I asked.

"He is material," Lestat corrected me. "He's just made of a material we don't understand. Think clearly."

I nodded. "I've tried to push him away," I confessed. "But something happens, something

happens in my reason, and he's on me, and the pleasure starts pounding, the guilty pleasure that he and I are together, and the chills are running rampant, as if my soul had chills, and there's a taunting rhythm to it, a thumping rhythm, and I'm his slave."

I felt a delicious numbness come over me even as I spoke of it, some last vagrant shiver of the union. I looked at my hands. All the tiny pinprick wounds had healed. I felt my face, and I could see the memories again. I felt a vast secret knowledge of Goblin, an unshakable dependence.

"He's become my vampire," I said. "He makes a meal of me, he locks into me. I'm … yes, I'm his slave."

"And a slave who wants to be rid of his master," said Lestat thoughtfully. "Has it been stronger with each attack, this guilty pleasure?" he asked.

"Yes, yes, it has," I confessed. "You know, there were years, important years, when he was my only friend. It was before Nash Penfield came. It was before my teacher Lynelle came. And even while Lynelle was here, it was me and Goblin together always. I never put up with anyone who didn't tolerate my talking to Goblin. Patsy hated it. Patsy's my mother, remember? It was at times a perfect comedy, but that's the way it was. Patsy would stomp her feet and scream, 'If you don't stop talking to that damned ghost, I'm leaving!' Now, Aunt Queen is perfectly patient, so patient that I could swear there have been times, though Aunt Queen won't admit it, that she saw Goblin herself."

"But why won't she admit it?" he asked.

"They all thought that Goblin was bad for me, don't you see? They all thought that they mustn't encourage it, don't you see? And that was why they didn't want me talking with the Talamasca, because they thought that Stirling and the Talamasca would nurture this damnable ability in me, of seeing ghosts and spirits, and so, if any of them saw Goblin, if my grandparents Sweetheart and Pops ever saw him, they didn't say."

Lestat appeared to ponder this for a moment. And once again, I noticed that very slight difference between his eyes. I tried to shut it out of my thoughts, but one eye was ever so much brighter than the other, and definitely tinged with blood.

He said, "I think it's time I read your letter to me, don't you?"

"Perhaps so," was all I could say.

He drew the envelope out of his inside coat pocket and he tore open the end of the envelope neatly, letting the onyx cameo slip out of it into his right hand, and then he smiled.

He looked rapidly several times from the deeply carved white image to me and back again, and then he rubbed the image very gently with his thumb.

"I may keep this?" he asked.

"It's my gift to you, if you want it," I said. "Yes, I meant it for you. It was when I thought we'd never meet face-to-face. But yes, keep it. It was made for Aunt Queen, let me confess it, but after the Dark Blood I didn't want to give it to her. But I don't know why I'm rambling on about such

a point. I'm honored you ask to keep it. It's yours."

He slipped it into his side coat pocket, and then he opened the letter and read it carefully, or so it seemed to me.

There was my plea to help me destroy Goblin, and my begging for his patience that I dared to enter New Orleans in search of him, and my report of how I had known and loved the Talamasca, a confession that brought the blood teeming into my face when I thought of Stirling and what I had almost done this very night. There was my admission of how I loved Aunt Queen and how I wanted to take my leave of her, if Lestat chose to punish me by death for disobeying his only rules.

I realized now that much of the letter's contents had been revealed to him in every other way, and that what he held was only a formal document of what he already knew.

Very respectfully he refolded the pages and doubled them over and put them back in his pocket as though he wanted to save the letter, though why I didn't know. The envelope had been cast aside.

He regarded me for a long time in silence, his face rather open and generous, which seemed a natural expression for it, and then he spoke:

"You know, I was on the scent of Stirling Oliver when I came upon you. I knew that he was entering my flat—he's done it more than once—and I thought it was time that he should have a little scare. I wasn't certain how I meant to arrange that, though I had no intention of revealing myself to him, but then I came upon you about to make the little scare quite final for Mr. Oliver, and it was from your confused mind that I caught the reason you'd come."

I nodded, then said hastily, "He doesn't mean any harm, you saw that. I can't tell you how thankful I am that you stopped me. I don't think I could have survived my killing him. I'm sure of it. It would have been the finish for me, and I'm terrified of my own clumsiness, that a death like that—. But you must realize he won't do any harm to us, either of us—."

"Oh, yes, now you're out to save him from destruction. Stop worrying. The Talamasca's off limits, I told you. Besides, I gave them what they've wanted for some time, don't you see?"

"Yes, a sighting of you, a talk with you."

"Correct, and they'll mull that over, and letters will be sent to the Elders, but I know perfectly well they can't harm us. And he and his cohorts won't come out here looking for you. They're too damned honorable. But you must tell me now, in case I've underestimated them, do you lie by day in a safe place?"

"Very safe," I said quickly. "On Sugar Devil Island, which they could never conceivably find. But surely you're right, Stirling will keep his promise not to come looking for me or seek me out. I believe in him utterly. That's why it's so ghastly that I almost hurt him, I almost took his life."

"And would it have been to the finish with him?" he asked. "Have you no self-control once you've begun?"

I was full of misery.

"I don't know what self-control I have. On the night of my making I committed a blunder, taking an innocent life—."

"Then that was your Maker's blunder," he retorted. "He should have been with you, teaching you."

I nodded.

"Let me dream that I would have broken off with Stirling, but I wasn't just frightened of him, frightened of him knowing about me, I was hungry for his death. I'm not sure how it would have gone. He was fighting me with an elegance of mind. He has that, an elegance of mind. Yes, I think I would have taken his life. It was tangled with my love for him. I would have been damned for it forever, and I would have found some way to put an end to myself right away. I'm damned for almost doing it. I'm damned for everything. I live, I live in a fatal frame of mind."

"How so? What do you mean?" he asked, but he wasn't surprised by what I'd said.

"It's as if I'm forever in the grip of Last Rites or dictating a Last Will and Testament. I died the night my Maker brought me over; I'm like one of the pathetic ghosts of Blackwood Manor who doesn't know he or she is dead. I can't come back to life."

He nodded, raising one eyebrow and then relaxing. "Ah, well, you know that argues much better for a long existence rather than recklessness and devil-may-care behavior."

"No, I didn't know," I said quickly. "What I know is that I have you here and you helped me with Goblin, and you see what Goblin can do. You see that Goblin has to be … has to be destroyed. And maybe me too."

"You haven't the smallest idea of what you're saying," he returned quietly. "You don't want to be destroyed. You want to live forever. You just don't want to kill to do it, that's all."

Now I knew that I was going to cry.

I took out my pocket handkerchief and I wiped at my eyes and my nose. I didn't turn away to do this. That would have been too cowardly. But I did look about me without moving my head, and when I looked back at him I thought, what a staggeringly beautiful creature he was.

His eyes alone would have done the trick, but he'd been gifted with so much more, the thick massive blond hair, the large finely shaped mouth and an expression eloquent of comprehension as well as intelligence, and under the light of the gasolier he was the matinee idol drifting before me, carrying me out of myself into some unmeasured moment in which I relished his appearance as if he couldn't or didn't know.

"And you, my timeless one," he said in a soft sure voice with no hint of accusation in it, "I see you here in your exquisite setting of mirrors and gold, of human love and obvious patrimony, and robbed of it all in essence by some careless demon who's left you orphaned and uneasily, no, torturously, ensconced among the mortals you still so desperately need."

"No," I said. "I fled my Maker. But now I seek you out, and so I have you, even if just for this

night, but I do love you, love you as surely as I love Aunt Queen, and Nash, and Goblin, yes, as much as I have loved Goblin, I love you. Forgive me. I can't keep it back."

"There is no forgiving," said Lestat. "Your head teems with images, and I catch them blinkering and crowding your brain as they seek a narrative, and so you must tell me, you must tell me all of your life, even what you think is not important, tell me all. Let it pour from you, and then we'll judge what's to be done with Goblin together."

"And me?" I asked. I was exuberant. I was crazed. "We'll judge what's to be done with me?"

"Don't let me scare you so much, Little Brother," he said in the kindest tone. "The worst thing I'd do to you is leave you—vanish on you as if we'd never met. And I don't think of that now. I think rather of knowing you, that I'm fond of you and have begun to treasure you, and your conscience shines rather bright for me. But tell me, haven't I failed you already? Surely you don't see me now as the hero you once imagined."

"How so?" I asked, amazed. "You're here, you're with me. You saved Stirling. You stopped a disaster."

"I wasn't able to destroy your beastly phantom," he said with an amiable shrug. "I can't even see him, and you've counted on me. And I threw the Fire at him with all I had."

"Oh, but we've only just started," I responded. "You'll help me with him, won't you? We'll figure it out together."

"Yes, that's precisely what we'll do," he responded. "The thing is strong enough to menace others, no doubt of it. If it can fight you as it did, it can attack others—that much I can tell, and that it responds to gravity, which for our purposes is a good sign."

"How so gravity?" I asked.

"It sucked the very air when it left you," he answered. "It's material. I told you. It has some chemistry in the physical world. All ghosts are material in probability. But there are those who know more of this than me. I only once saw a human ghost, talked to a human ghost, spent an hour with a ghost, and it terrified me quite out of my mind."

"Yes," I replied, "it was Roger, wasn't it, who came to you in the Chronicle called *Memnoch the Devil.* I read how you talked with him and how he persuaded you to care for his mortal daughter, Dora. I read every word. I believed it; I believed that you saw Roger and that you went to Heaven and Hell."

"And well you should," he rejoined. "I never lied in those pages, though it was another that took the dictation of it. I have been with Memnoch the Devil, though what he really was—devil or playful spirit—I still don't know." He paused. "It's more than plain to me," he said, "that you've noticed the difference between my eyes."

"I'm sorry, I couldn't help it," I said quickly. "It isn't a disfigurement."

He made a gesture of dismissal along with a kind smile.

"This right eye was torn from me," he said, "just as I described it, by those spirits who would

have prevented me from fleeing Memnoch's Hell. And then it was returned to me, here on Earth, and sometimes I believe that this eye can see strange things."

"What strange things?"

"Angels," he said, musing, "or those who call themselves angels, or would have me conclude that they're angels; and they have come to me in the long years since I fled Memnoch. They've come to me as I lay like one in a coma on the chapel floor of St. Elizabeth's, the building in New Orleans which was bequeathed to me by Roger's daughter. It seems my stolen eye, my restored eye, my bloodshot eye, has established some link with these beings, and I could tell you a tale of them, but now is not the time."

"They harmed you, didn't they?" I asked, sensing it in his manner.

He nodded.

"They left my body there for my friends to watch over," he explained, and for the first time since I'd seen him, he looked troubled, indecisive, even faintly confused.

"But my spirit they took with them," he went on. "And in a realm as palpable as this very room they set me down to do their bidding, always threatening to snatch back this right eye, to take it forever if I didn't do what they bid me to do."

He hesitated, shaking his head.

"I think it was the eye," he said, "the eye which gave them the claim on me, the ability to reach down to me, in this realm, and take me—it was the eye, stolen in another dominion and then returned on Earth to its rightful socket. You might say that as they looked down from their lofty Heaven, if Heaven it is, they could see, through the mists of Earth, this bright and shining eye."

He sighed as if he were suddenly miserable. He looked at me searchingly.

"This wounded eye, this tarnished eye," he continued, "gave them their compass to find me, their opening, as it were, between the dominions, and down they came to enlist my spirit against my will."

"Where did they take you? What did they do?"

"Oh, if I only knew that they were Heavenly beings," he declared in a low passionate voice. "If I only knew that Memnoch the Devil and those who came after him had shown me truths! It would all be a different matter and I could somehow save my soul!"

"But you don't know. They never convinced you," I pushed.

"How can I accept a world full of injustice, along with their august designs?"

He shook his head again and looked off and then down, as though searching for some spot for his focus, and then back to me as he went on.

"I can't entirely accept what I learned from Memnoch and those who came afterwards. I've never told anyone of my last spiritual adventure, though the others, the Blood Drinkers who love me—you know, my lusty troop of beloveds, I call them that now, the Troop of Beloveds—they

know that something happened, they sense it only too well. I don't even know which of my bodies was the true one—the body that lay on the floor of the chapel of St. Elizabeth's, or the body that roamed with the so-called angels. I was an unwilling trafficker in knowledge and illusions. The story of my last adventure, my secret unknown adventure, the adventure I haven't confided to anyone, weighs on my soul as if to make my spiritual breath die out."

"Can you tell me now of this adventure?" I asked.

It took a great sense of power in him, I thought, to look so readily abject, to show me such affliction.

"No," he said. "I haven't the strength for the telling of that story yet, that's the plain truth."

He shrugged and shook his head and then continued:

"I need more than strength. I need courage for that confession, and right now my heart's warm from being with you. You have a story to tell, yes, or we have a story to live together. Right now my greedy heart is fastened to you."

I was overcome. I cried like a silent baby. I blew my nose and tried to remain calm. Blood on the handkerchief. Body of Blood. Mind of Blood. Flash of his eyes on me. Violet.

"I should take my good fortune," I said, "and not question it, but I can't resist. What's kept you from destroying me, from punishing me for coming into your flat, for doing what I did to Stirling? I have to know."

"Why do you have to know?" he asked, laughing softly. "Why is it so very important to know?"

I shook my head and shrugged my shoulders. I wiped at my eyes again.

"Is it vanity in me to press the question?" I asked.

"Probably," he said, grinning. "But shouldn't I understand? I, the most vain of creatures?" He chuckled. "Didn't you see me preening for your aunt downstairs?"

I nodded.

"All right," he said. "Here comes the litany of reasons I didn't kill you. I like you. I like that you have a woman's lineaments and a man's body, a boy's curious eyes and a man's large easy gestures, a child's frank words and a man's voice, a blundering manner and an honest grace."

He smiled at me quite deliberately, and winked his right eye, and then went on.

"I like that you loved Stirling," he said. "I like that you honor your glorious Aunt Queen so candidly." He smiled mischievously. "Maybe I even like it that you went down on your knees and kissed her feet, though that gesture came rather late in the game of my deciding. I like that you love so many around you. I like it that you're more generous than I am. I like that you hate the Dark Blood, and that your Maker wronged you. Now—isn't that pretty? Isn't that enough?"

I was quietly delirious with gratitude.

"Don't think it so very unselfish of me to be here," he went on, eyes widening, voice gaining a little heat. "It's not. I need you or I wouldn't be here. I need your need of me. I need to help you,

positively need it. Come, Little Brother, carry me deep into your world."

"My world," I whispered.

"Yes, Little Brother," he said. "Let's proceed together. Tell me the history you inherited and the life you've lived. Tell me about this beastly and beguiling Goblin and how he has gained his strength. I want to hear everything."

"I'm in love with you," I responded.

He laughed the most beguiling and gentle laugh.

"Of course you are," he replied. "I understand perfectly because I'm in love with myself. The fact that I'm not transfixed in front of the nearest mirror takes a great deal of self-control."

It was my turn to laugh.

"But your love for me," he went on, "is the reason why you'll tell me all about yourself and Blackwood Farm. Start with the family history and then go into your own."

I sighed. I pondered. I took the plunge.

7

“Childhood for me involved two distinct polarities—being with Goblin, and listening to adults talk.

“Goblin and I were the only children here at Blackwood Manor because the tourists who came almost never brought children with them, and so I soon learned the vocabulary of adults and that it was fun to play in the kitchen and listen to their endless storytelling and arguing, or to tag after the tour guides—my great-grandfather Gravier and later my grandfather Pops—as they went through the house detailing its riches and its legends, including the gloomy tale of Manfred, the Great Old Man.

“Great-grandfather Gravier was truly the very best at this, having a deep sonorous voice and being a dignified man in a black suit with a white silk tie to match his white shirt, but he was very old when I was little and he went away to a hospital and died there, before I was five I think, and I have no clear memory of his funeral. I don’t think I went to his funeral. But he had made an indelible impression upon me.

“And he at once became a famous family ghost apparently, on the sole authority of my having come down the stairs one morning and seen him standing by the front door, smiling at me placidly and waving his right hand. He was gone in an instant.

“Everybody told me to stop telling such stories, Great-grandfather Gravier was in Heaven, and I must certainly know that, and we ought to light a candle for him before the Blessed Virgin on the little altar in the kitchen, which we did—which made a total of ten-odd candles burning on the little altar for various ancestors, rather like the altars one sometimes sees in Chinese laundries. And furthermore, it was said I shouldn’t try to scare people.

“Nevertheless, during every house tour ever given by anyone at Blackwood Manor, the whole world of our paying guests was told about my having seen Great-grandfather Gravier.

“Pops, Gravier’s only son and my grandfather, took up the job of guide with gusto after Gravier’s death, and though Pops was far more plain-spoken and rough at the edges, he was a grand storyteller, nevertheless.

“Gravier had been a man of considerable accomplishment, in that he had practiced law for years and even served on the bench as a local judge. But Pops was a rural man who had no ambition beyond Blackwood Manor, and if that meant he had to talk to the guests, he did it.

“My grandmother Sweetheart sometimes was recruited, much against her will, as she was always up to her elbows in flour and baking powder, but she knew all the family legends, and, heavy as she was, looked very pretty in a fine black gabardine dress with a purple orchid corsage on her left breast and a string of pearls around her neck. She was one of those women who, inclined to embonpoint, have round smooth wrinkleless faces until they die.

“And then there was Jasmine, our beloved black housekeeper, whom you’ve met, who could in a twinkling change from her kitchen clothes to a swanky black skirt and leopard-skin blouse, along with spike heels of which Aunt Queen would have been proud, to take everyone from room to room, very properly adding to the concoction of tales that she herself had seen Great-great-grandfather William’s ghost in his bedroom, front right, or across the hall from us, as well as the ghost of Great-great-great-aunt Camille tiptoeing up the attic stairs.

“I don’t know that you noticed Jasmine in her fancy red sheath tonight, but Jasmine has the figure of a model, rail thin with strong shoulders, and, with closets of loving cast-offs from Aunt Queen, she cuts a beautiful image as a tour guide, her pale green eyes positively flashing as she tells her earnest ghost stories and sighs before the portraits, or leads the expectant guests to the attic stairs.

“It was Jasmine’s brilliant idea to include the attic in the usual tour, that is, to take the tourists right up and into it, instructing them to notice the delicious smell of the warm wooden rafters as they stood there, and to point out the fine steamer trunks and wardrobe trunks from earlier times, some open and heaped with furs and pearls rather like props for *A Streetcar Named Desire,* and the wicker wheelchair in which Great-great-grandfather William had spent his last days on the lawn. The attic was—before my own inevitable raid upon it—a wilderness of rare and antique wicker, and tales devolved around it all.

“Let me return to the big picture.

“The bed-and-board guests were always company and a bit of an inspiration to me, because they were often friendly and attractive—I tend to see most people as attractive until someone comes along and points out to me that they’re not—and these people frequently invited me into their rooms, or wanted me to sit down at breakfast with them at the big table and chat about the Manor House, as we so pretentiously called it, and I warmed to all this friendship, and Goblin found it interesting because whenever I spoke to or of him, which was all the time, these guests thought Goblin the most intriguing thing in the world.

“ ‘So you have a little spirit friend!’ one said triumphantly, as though she had discovered Confederate gold buried outside. ‘Tell us about your little ghost,’ said another, and when I petted or stroked Goblin while talking of him, he was very happy, indeed. He would flash on solid for a long time, and only sadly go transparent and then dissolve when he had to.

“I couldn’t have done better had I been a paid performer whose sole occupation was to increase the mystery of Blackwood Farm. And I loved it. And then the guests kicked in their

support of the mythology gratis, as I've explained, with all their sightings of the Old Man, Manfred, scowling in a mirror, or sweet Virginia Lee, roaming from room to room in search of her orphaned children.

"I learned from all this, from the endless variety with which the tales of our house were woven, and I learned from adults how to think and feel like an adult, and Goblin fed off the easy way in which he fitted into everything. And I came to think of myself from early on as being a maverick like the Old Man.

"Manfred, the Old Man, had come out to these parts in 1881 with a new bride, Virginia Lee. He had started out as a saloon keeper in the Irish Channel but gone on to make a fortune in merchandising in New Orleans, but could find no locale suitable to his visions of splendor and so was drawn north across Lake Pontchartrain to this open land.

"Here he found a parcel of real estate that is composed of high ground on which he could build a fabulous mansion, with servants' quarters, stables, terraces and pastures, plus two hundred acres of thick swamp in which he could hunt, and a charming abandoned cemetery with its shell of a stone church, a tribute to those whose families had long ago died out or decamped.

"Manfred sent his architects to the fine homes of Natchez to choose the very best of attributes for this mansion, and he supervised its Greek Revival style, circular stairs and hallway murals himself.

"All was for the love of Virginia Lee, who had a particular affection for the cemetery and sometimes went to the empty little stone church to pray.

"The four oak trees that guard the cemetery now were already well grown at that time, and the proximity of the old graveyard to the swamp with its greedy hideous cypress trees and endless tangles of Spanish moss no doubt added to, and adds to, the overall sense of melancholy.

"But she was no sappy Victorian girl, Virginia Lee. She had been an educated and devoted nurse to Manfred in a New Orleans hospital where he suffered a severe bout of Yellow Fever and, like many an Irishman, almost died of the disease. It was with great reluctance that she gave up her vocation to nurse the sick, but Manfred, being much older and very persuasive, successfully enchanted her.

"It was for Virginia Lee that Manfred had the portrait of himself painted, which is now hung in the parlor, and always was, as far as I know. He was in his forties when the portrait was painted, but he had already come to resemble a bulldog in some respects, with heavy jowls, an up-thrust obdurate mouth and large mournful blue eyes. He had thick gray hair by that time, circa 1885, and he still had a full head of it when Aunt Queen had her strange meeting with him some forty years later, when he gave her the cameos before he disappeared into the swamp.

"He doesn't look like a mean man in the portrait. In fact, I've always found the picture strongly compelling, and the man himself must have been lacking in vanity, that he allowed such an honest portrait of himself to be hung in his house.

“Virginia Lee was undeniably pretty, as you saw from her portrait in the dining room, a girlish woman with pale blond hair and intense blue eyes. She was said to have had a quick sense of humor and an eternal but gentle sense of irony, and to be utterly loving to William and Camille, the two surviving children she bore before she died. As to those which she lost to lockjaw and influenza, Isabel and Philip, nothing could ever take her mind off them.

“Galloping consumption is the disease that took Virginia Lee, who had also become quite sick from malaria, and only after a valiant struggle during which she dressed herself completely and independently every day, including the Saturday on which she died, at which time she had carried on amusing conversation, with her famous good cheer and self-deprecating humor, in the front parlor, lying on the sofa, until she took her last breath around noon.

“She was buried in the sky blue dress that she wears in her portrait. And if our house has a family saint, it’s Virginia Lee. I’m not above praying to Virginia Lee.

“It was said that Manfred went out of his head when Virginia Lee died. He roared and mumbled. Not being able to endure the sight of a grave for Virginia Lee in the little cemetery—and it probably wasn’t legal to bury her there in his own backyard anyway—he bought a huge crypt for the entire family in the new Metairie Cemetery in New Orleans, which is where our family are buried to this day.

“I’ve seen the mausoleum twice—when Sweetheart died and when Pops died. I presume little Isabel and Philip were uprooted to the crypt from wherever they’d been buried, but frankly I never asked.

“It’s a small rectangular chapel of marble and granite, this Metairie Cemetery tomb, with two five-foot, well-carved granite guardian angels beside its bronze gates, and a stained-glass window in back. Three coffin slots lie on either side of the little aisle.

“You know how those tombs work, I’m sure. Coffins are placed in the slots until all the slots are full, and then when someone new dies, the oldest coffin is opened up, bones dumped in the vault below the ground, and the coffin smashed to pieces and discarded. The new coffin is given the place of honor above ground.

“It’s where I always thought I’d be buried when I died, but now it doesn’t seem that destiny will allow me that luxury or the long adventure I once contemplated to take me to that end. But who knows? Maybe my mortal remains could somehow be secreted into that crypt on some future occasion, after I have the courage to put an end to my own life.

“But let’s return to Mad Manfred, as those around the parish began to call my unfortunate ancestor, who took to going out into Sugar Devil Swamp alone and muttering and cursing, and sometimes not returning for days at a time.

“There was a general commotion to it because all knew that Sugar Devil Swamp had never been logged and was damned near impenetrable for a pirogue, and legends already existed as to bears that habitually hunted there, and cougars and bobcats, and even worse creatures which

howled in the night.

"That Manfred was snake-bit more than once and survived it was part of his growing reputation, and it was said he fired on a stranger he'd seen out there some distance from the house, and brought back the wounded poacher and heaved his body on the bank with oaths and vicious warnings to his workmen that this ought to be a lesson to anyone who dared to come into his swamp or onto his land.

"Soon it became known that there was an island out there, and it was to this island that Manfred went, pitching a tent for himself and shooting what he needed for food.

"You can just picture this guy tearing birds apart with his teeth.

"He made no secret of his island sanctuary, only warning again that no one must ever attempt to follow him to his 'lair,' as he called it, threatening open season on trespassers and boasting that he had shot and killed several bears.

"Rumor had it that the island was cursed and Manfred was cursed, and that his gold was ill-gotten from gambling, if not worse vices, and that his name, Manfred, he had taken from the play by Lord Byron, with the intent to signal other Demon Worshipers of his own ilk, and that he had sold his soul to the Devil long before he had ever laid eyes on the humble and sweet Virginia Lee, and that she had been his very last chance at salvation.

"As for their little children, William and Camille, it was Jasmine's ancestors who brought them up—Ora Lee and Jerome are the famous names—both of them Creole people of color with French accents, and something of a distinctive history, their parents having been free artisans before the Civil War.

"For Ora Lee and Jerome, Manfred built the bungalow out back to the far right, a real Creole-looking building, with a deep porch and rocking chairs, and two stories of good-sized rooms.

"Members of the clan have broken off all along to go to college and enter professions, but there are always some who stay in the bungalow, and they have their own vegetable and flower gardens and their own company whenever they choose.

"When I was a kid they still had their own cow and some chickens, but now it's too easy to go to market for anything a person needs.

"It's a charming house, a kind of tropical mansion in its own way, full of treasured antiques and various displays of needlework done by the women and furniture made by the men. It's also full of cast-offs from the big house, and Aunt Queen is famous for refurnishing the front room and giving all the old items to Jasmine, as if Jasmine had a warehouse rather than a family home. It's on a human scale, Jasmine's house. Blackwood Manor was built for 'giants in the earth.'

"Because African and Spanish and French and Anglo-Saxon genes were all scrambled in the lineage of Jasmine's people before they came, and down through the years by marriage to other people of all colors, Jasmine's family are all different shades of yellow, red, brown and black.

“Jasmine’s dark, as you saw, with the fabulous green eyes. She bleaches that close-cropped Afro of hers and something happens with that yellow hair and those green eyes that’s magic.

“Her older sister, Lolly, can pass for Spanish or Italian, and then there’s Jasmine’s brother, Clem, who has very dark skin and African features. He drives Aunt Queen’s car and takes care of all the fleet, including the black Porsche I bought in imitation of you and your adventures in the Vampire Chronicles.

“Little Ida, Jasmine’s mother, was very black with exquisitely fine features and tiny black eyes. She married a white man when she was pretty mature, and, after his death from cancer, she came back here with Jasmine and Lolly and Clem. She was my nurse or nanny till she died, Little Ida, sleeping with me till I was thirteen, and then dying in my bed.

“What I’m telling you now, this story of the Blackwood family, is what has come down to me from Jasmine and Lolly and Little Ida and Big Ramona, who is Little Ida’s mother, as well as from Aunt Queen, or Pops or Sweetheart. Jasmine has an eye for ghosts, as I’ve said, and I’m always afraid she’s going to realize I’m not really alive, but so far it hasn’t happened. And I hang on to my family like a pit bull.

“But to return to my story, if it hadn’t been for the fabled Ora Lee and Jerome, little William and Camille might have drowned in the swamp or starved from inattention.

“As to salaries for his hired help, Manfred couldn’t be bothered with any such thing, only heaving fistfuls of money into a big bowl in the kitchen. Jerome had to see that the man wasn’t robbed, and the keep of William and Camille and all the farmhands was provided for.

“The farm had its own chickens and cows in those days, and horses of course, and a fine carriage or two parked right beside the new automobiles in the back shed.

“But Manfred never bothered with anything but one black gelding, which he sometimes came ashore to ride back and forth across the broad lawns and pastures of Blackwood Farm, shouting and murmuring and cursing to himself, and declaring to his groom (most probably the versatile Jerome) that he was never going to die and join Virginia Lee, not until centuries had passed, that he would roam the earth, shivering from her death and honoring her memory.

“All this I learned by rote as you can tell.

“One spring day several years after Manfred had become a widower, carpenters and lumber were brought to the property, and the slow process of building the mysterious Hermitage on Sugar Devil Island began.

“Nothing but the finest kiln-dried cypress was seen to go off by pirogue into the swamp, in one small load at a time, along with a great quantity of other materials, including an iron stove and a great amount of coal, and only workmen from ‘away’ went out there to build, workmen who would go ‘away’ when the work was done, which is what those workmen did, solemnly afraid of uttering a word as to the location of the island, or what had been their specific tasks.

“Was there really such an island? Was there really a hermitage upon it? As I was growing up,

who was to say that it was anything more than a legend? And why was there no swamp tour to take our tourists out to search for this mysterious Sugar Devil Island, for surely everyone wanted to see it. It was a regular feature of life to see the tourists down at the landing, hankering to wade in the bog. But the swamp, as stated, and it can't be stated enough, is almost impassable.

"The great silent groping cypress is everywhere, along with the wild palmetto and the rankest water. And one can still hear the roar of cougars and bears. It's no joke.

"Of course Pops and I fished in Sugar Devil Swamp and we hunted. And in my boyish ignorance I once killed a deer in the swamp, and lost my taste right there for all hunting as I watched it die.

"But in all our exploits, including trapping crawfish by the pound, we never went deeper in than some twenty feet from the shores. And even at that distance, it's hard to see one's way back.

"As for the legend of the Hermitage on Sugar Devil Island, Pops put no stock in it, reminding the curious tourists that even if such a building had existed, it might have long ago sunk into the muck.

"Then there are the stories of poachers who disappeared without a trace, of their wives gone crying to the local sheriff to please search, but what could the sheriff hope to find in a swamp infested by roaring bears and alligators?

"However, the most evil omen that hung over this odd, private jungle was the disappearance into the swamp of Mad Manfred himself in the year 1924, as Aunt Queen has already described to us, to which our tour guides would invariably add that the Old Man dressed in his tailcoat and white tie and boiled shirt and fine leather shoes before that last excursion, and ranted and raved at himself in the mirror for an hour before bolting out the door.

"Yes, people searched, as the Old Man had been convalescent for two years before this bizarre and desperate flight, but they never found any island, and they had to shoot many a gator just to survive, and came back with the gators to sell for their hides, but not with Manfred.

"And so it was that the idea took hold that there was no real island. And that the Old Man had simply drowned to put an end to his wheezing and choking misery, for he was surely at death's door when he bolted for the pirogue and headed out as if to cross the River Styx.

"Then, some seven years later, when his will was finally opened, there was found contained within the strong exhortation that no Blackwood or anyone belonging to the Blackwood household was ever to fish or hunt beyond the mud banks of Sugar Devil Swamp, and the admonition, in Manfred's own hand, that Sugar Devil Island was a danger not only to flesh and blood but to a being's immortal soul.

"A very good copy of these pages of Manfred's Last Will and Testament, all notarized in the year 1900, is framed and mounted on the living room wall. Guests adored it. I remember my teachers, Nash in particular, just howling with laughter when they read it. And it did certainly

seem to me, as I was growing up, that the lawyer, the notary and Mad Manfred were all poets in Byronic cahoots with one another when they wrote this.

"But it doesn't seem that way to me now.

"Let me continue. Of William, Manfred's only surviving son, and Camille, his only surviving daughter, there are huge portraits in the parlor, very handsome paintings if nothing else, and the current tale that William has often appeared to family and guests, rummaging through a desk in the living room, is true.

"The desk is a beautiful piece, Louis XV, I believe, with inlaid wood, cabriole legs and ormolu —you know, the works—and I have myself glimpsed him once hovering near it.

"I have no doubt of what I've seen with my own eyes, but I will get to that when I return to the account of me and Goblin. It's enough to say right now that I never found anything in the desk. There are no secret compartments or documents.

"Camille's ghost is almost always seen on the attic stairs, a woman with tastefully coiffed gray hair, and in an old-lady black dress and old-lady thick-heeled shoes, with a double strand of pearls around her neck, ignoring those to whom she appears and vanishing at the attic doorway.

"And then there are the rushing feet of little children in the upstairs hall, these ascribed to Manfred's little daughter Isabel, who died when she was three, and his son Philip, who didn't live even that long.

"When it came to the rest of the family, it was simply a matter of elegantly painted portraits—Gravier's is especially fine, but then I did see Gravier, didn't I? But his wife, Blessed Alice, a lovely portrait subject, and Pops and Sweetheart, who reluctantly posed for their portraits, though it wasn't their nature, have never appeared to anyone. So far …

"Then there's the living legend of Aunt Queen—Miss Queen to all those of this parish—and of her heroic travels crisscrossing the globe. The guests were delighted to hear that she was 'presently in Bombay' or 'celebrating New Year's Eve in Rio' or 'resting in her villa on Santorini' or 'engaged in a major shopping spree in Rome.' It proved as exciting to them as any ghost story.

"That Aunt Queen was a great collector of cameos was also well known, and in those days, the public days, there was a dainty glass case in the parlor, perched on spindly legs in the corner, which held a display of her finest pieces.

"Bed-and-breakfast guests at Blackwood Manor never stole things, I'm relieved to report—I think they're far more interested in homemade biscuits, jam and architecture—and I was the one who periodically changed the display of Aunt Queen's cameos. I grew to like them. I could see the variations. Sweetheart had no real interest in them. And Pops was the outdoor man.

"Aunt Queen can be said to have been a living haunt, or a protective spirit, which was a remarkable thing to me when I was a child, because I felt safe merely thinking about her, and her visits were like the apparitions of a saint.

"Others died in this house. An infant born to Gravier and Blessed Alice; there are times when I

swear I can hear a baby crying. Guests used to hear it too, and sometimes they would remark on it rather innocently.

"Gravier had a younger brother, Patrick, who fell from a horse and died of the concussion in the middle upstairs bedroom. His portrait hangs in there over the fireplace. His wife, Regina, lived out her life here, much beloved by the Kitchen Gang, of which she was a baking, frying, slicing, dicing bonafide member. Their only daughter, Nanette, moved away long years ago to New Orleans.

"There, in a cheap French Quarter boardinghouse, Nanette drank a whole bottle of bourbon and ate a whole bottle of aspirin and died of the result. I don't know any more of it than that. If her ghost walks, it doesn't do so at Blackwood Manor. Patrick too seems to be resting well in the family crypt. So is his wife, Regina.

"Professional ghost hunters came once and found evidence of multiple hauntings, and made a tantalizing presentation to the guests who had gathered for the Halloween weekend, and so the tradition of the Halloween Weekend came to be.

"The Halloween Weekend was always marvelous fun, with huge white tents on the terraces and on the far lawns, with chilled champagne and Bloody Marys. Tarot-card readers and palm readers, fortune-tellers and psychics were hired for the event, and the climax was a costume ball to which people came from all the parish around.

"If Aunt Queen happened to be at home, which was seldom, a great number of old friends of hers joined the festivities, and the costumes were wonderfully lavish, the place being full of princes and princesses of all description, elegant vampires, stereotypical black-hatted witches, sorceresses, Egyptian queens, moon goddesses and the occasional ambitious mummy, dripping with white gauze.

"I loved all of the Halloween Weekend, you can tell by the way I dote on it. And it won't surprise you to learn that the expert ghost hunters never once took notice of Goblin, even when Goblin danced around them in a circle and did the abominable trick of stretching his mouth.

"Of course Goblin isn't the ghost of a living person, but these experts were very good at declaring that poltergeists were working their subtle activities in the kitchen and pantry, accounting for pings and pongs of noise that one could scarce hear, or the sound of a radio devolving from music into static; and poltergeists are pure spirits as far as I know.

"This was my life growing up—this and the Christmas banquet of which I've already told you, with the caroling and the singing on the staircase and of course the huge dinner of roast turkey, goose and ham along with all the usual trimmings, and the weather outside being sometimes cold enough for the women to wear their old fur coats that smelled of moth balls, and the gentlemen joining in the singing with full hearts.

"It seemed at times that the men singing the Christmas carols made me cry. I expected the women to sing, it seemed natural, but for the men to join in, men of all ages, and to do it with

such stout hearts, that seemed especially reassuring and wonderful. I cried every year. It was that and the purity of the soprano who sang 'O Holy Night,' and 'What Child Is This?' Of course I joined in the singing myself.

"And lest I overlook it, there was the Spring Festival, when the azaleas planted all around Blackwood Manor were blooming, in pink and white and red, and we would have a huge buffet, almost like that of a wedding, outside on the lawn. There was always an Easter Buffet as well.

"Then I suppose I should throw in all the weddings again and the commotion they brought, and the fascinating waiters I would meet in the kitchen, who to a one felt the 'vibrations' of spirits, and the brides becoming hysterical because their hair was not done right and the hairdresser had already gone, and Sweetheart, my darling Sweetheart, portly and ever solicitous, huffing and puffing up the stairs to the rescue and snatching up her electric curling iron and doing a few excellent tricks she knew to make everything right.

"There was Mardi Gras too, when, even though we're an hour and a half from New Orleans, we were booked solid, and we decorated in the traditional colors of purple, green and gold.

"Sometimes, a very few times, I went into the city to see some of the Mardi Gras parades. Sweetheart's sister, Aunt Ruthie, lived on St. Charles Avenue, which you know is the main parade route. But she wasn't a Blackwood, and her sons, though probably normal, appeared to me to be monsters with too much body hair and overly deep voices, and I felt uncomfortable there.

"So Mardi Gras didn't penetrate to me very much except for all the gaiety out here at the house, and the inevitable costume ball we held on the night of Fat Tuesday itself. It was amazing how many revelers came back at sunset from New Orleans, after hours of watching Zulu, Rex and the interminable truck parades, to drink themselves sick at our festive bar.

"Of course I did very occasionally encounter other children here—at the Halloween party and at the Christmas party in particular, and sometimes at the weddings—but I didn't take to them. They seemed to me to be freaky little people. I have to laugh at myself for thinking such a thing. But as I've said, my world was made up of spirits and adults, and I just didn't know what to do with children.

"I think I feared children as treacherous and even a little dangerous. I'm not sure why exactly, except that Goblin didn't like them, but Goblin really didn't like me to be with anyone very long.

"I hung with the adults by natural inclination and strong choice.

"I can't think about the weddings now, as we talk together, without thinking of something ghastly that I have to confess to you—something that happened far from Blackwood Manor, and on the night I was made a Blood Hunter. But the time will come for that, I know.

"That's the family history, as it came down to me when I was innocent and protected by the umbrella of Pops and Sweetheart, and Aunt Queen, who was ever like a fairy godmother, dipping down to Earth only now and then with her stacked heels and invisible wings.

“There are other family members—connections of William’s wives—he had two, the first of whom was the mother of Gravier, and the second, the mother of Aunt Queen, and of Gravier’s wife, and, of course, connections of Sweetheart’s. But though I’ve seen such cousins from time to time, they are not part of this story, and they had no impact on me whatsoever, except perhaps a feeling on my part of being unordinary and hopelessly strange.

“It’s time now for me to move on to the tale of me and Goblin, and the account of how I got educated.

“But before I do, let me trace the Blackwood lineage, for what it’s worth. Manfred was the patriarch, and William was his son. William begat Gravier. Gravier begat Pops. And Pops, late in life when he and Sweetheart had despaired of having a child, begat Patsy. At age sixteen, Patsy gave birth to me and named me Tarquin Anthony Blackwood. As to my father, let me state now plainly and unequivocally that I don’t have one.

“Patsy has no clear recollection of what was happening to her in the weeks during which I might have been conceived, except that she was singing with a band in New Orleans, with fake identification to get her into the club where the band was playing, and she and a whole mob of musicians and singers were hanging together in a flat on Esplanade Avenue, ‘with plenty of weed and plenty of wine and plenty of company.’

“I’ve often wondered why Patsy didn’t seek an abortion. She certainly could have managed it. And I’m tormented by the suspicion that Patsy thought that if she was a mother she would be an adult, and Pops and Sweetheart would give her freedom and money. She didn’t get either one. And so there she was at sixteen, with a baby brother of a child, and obviously no notion of what to do with me, as she went on with her dreams of becoming a country-western singer and of having her own band.

“I have to remember all this when I think of her. I have to try not to hate her. I wish I could stop feeling pain every time I think of her. I’m ashamed to say it again but I would like to kill her.

“Now on to the story of me and Goblin and how I was educated and how I educated him.”

8

“You’ve heard me say that Goblin is my double, and let me emphasize it, because the duplication of me is always perfect, and so I’ve had all my life a mirror held up to me in Goblin in which I could see, if not know, myself.

“As to Goblin’s personality? His wishes? His temper? All this was wholly different in that he could be a perfect devil when it humiliated me and embarrassed me, and I could seldom control him, though I did learn early on that if I ignored him completely, which took an immense act of will, he might fade and disappear.

“There have been moments when I did nothing but inspect Goblin, the better to know how I myself looked, and when some alteration came in my appearance, such as the trimming of my hair, Goblin would clench his fists, make ugly faces and stomp his noiseless foot. For that reason I often wore my hair bushy. And as the years passed Goblin took an interest in our clothes, and sometimes threw down on the floor the pair of overalls he wanted me to wear, and the shirt as well.

“But I’m plunging too fast into the condition of things, and not telling memories as they are lodged.

“My first distinct memory is a third birthday party in the kitchen, with my grandma Sweetheart and Jasmine and her sister, Lolly, and their mother, Little Ida, and her mother, Big Ramona—and all of them on high stools or chairs at the white-enameled kitchen table, gazing down at me as I sat at my child’s table, with Goblin right beside me, talking away with Goblin and telling him how to pick up his fork the way I’d been taught to do and eat his cake.

“He had his own little chair to the left of me and a place set for him, and milk and cake, the same as me. And at one point he grabbed my left hand—I’m left-handed and he’s right-handed—and he made me smear my cake all over my plate.

“I started crying because I’d never known him to be so strong—he had truly made my hand move, though not perhaps as he wanted it to—and I didn’t want my cake smeared, I wanted to eat it, and right away the kitchen was in a flying commotion, with everybody jumping up from the stools and Sweetheart trying to wipe my tears and at the same time tell me that I was ‘making a mess.’

“Goblin was as solid as I was, both of us in navy blue sailor suits for the occasion, and I had

some vague sense even then that he was at his strongest because of the heavy rain that was falling outside.

"I loved the kitchen on those rainy days, loved to stand at the back screen door and watch the rain come down in sheets, with the kitchen all warm and full of bright electric light behind me, the radio singing oldies, or Pops playing the harmonica, and all those beloved adults, and the smell of cooking from the stove.

"But let me return to my third birthday party.

"Now Goblin had ruined it and I was sobbing. And he, the little idiot, after crossing his eyes and rocking his head from side to side, took his two first fingers and stretched his mouth on both sides wide as he could, which made me scream.

"I know I would never have stretched my mouth like that, but he did it often with his mouth, just to get a rise out of me.

"Then he vanished, completely vanished, and I started to bellow his name.

"My last distinct picture of that event is of all the women trying to comfort me, the four black women who were as gentle as my grandmother Sweetheart, and even Pops coming in, drying the rain off himself with a towel and asking what was wrong.

"I was hollering, 'Goblin, Goblin,' over and over again, and Goblin wouldn't come back.

"A terror erupted in me as it always did when he would vanish, and how it was resolved then I don't know.

"It's dim, this memory, but it's fixed because I remember the giant number three on the birthday cake, and everybody saying so proudly that I was three years old, and then Goblin being so strong and so full of spite.

"Also Pops gave me a harmonica on that birthday and taught me how to blow in it, and I sat with him and we played together for a little while, and ever after we did that in the evenings right after supper before Pops headed up early to bed.

"What comes next is a series of memories of Goblin and me playing together alone in my room. Happy, happy memories. We played at blocks, with a marvelous set full of columns and arches, creating buildings of a vague classical bent to be sent crashing down, and for the purpose of crashing and banging we had fine little fire trucks and automobiles, but sometimes we just did the crashing with our hands or feet.

"Goblin didn't have the strength to do it on his own right away, but over time he acquired it, but before that he would take my left hand to do it, or to roll the fire truck into our marvelous structures, and then he'd smile, and break loose of me, and dance about.

"My memory of these rooms is pretty clear. Little Ida, Jasmine's mother, slept in the big bed with me, as I was already too old for a crib, and Goblin slept with us, and this room here was the playroom and filled with toys of all kinds.

"But I was easy with Goblin and he had no reason to be mean.

“And gradually, in spite of my young age, I began to see that Goblin didn’t want to share me with the world, and was happiest, by far, when he had my full attention, which made him strong.

“Goblin didn’t even want me to play the harmonica, because he lost me when I did, even though he loved to dance to the radio or to songs that the women in the kitchen sang. He had me laughing at him or dancing with him at those times. But when I played the harmonica, especially with Pops, I was in another world.

“Of course, I learned the knack of playing the harmonica especially for Goblin, nodding and winking at him (I could wink really early in life, with either eye) as he danced, and so he started to put up with it as the years passed.

“Most of the time, Goblin had what he wanted. We had our own table up here for crayons and drawing. And I let him guide me, his right hand on my left hand, but all he’d create was scribble scratch, whereas I wanted to draw stick figures, or figures made of circles, and faces with little circles for eyes. I taught him how to do the stick figures, or the egg people, as Little Ida called them, and how to make pictures of a garden with big round flowers that I liked to do.

“It was at this little nursery table that he first demonstrated his eternally feeble voice. No one could hear it but me and I caught it as so many bursts of fragmented thought brightening for an instant in my head. I talked out loud to him naturally, and sometimes in whispers which developed into murmurs, and I remember Little Ida and Big Ramona asking me all the time what I was saying, and telling me I wasn’t talking right.

“Sometimes, when we were down in the kitchen and I was talking to Goblin, Pops or Sweetheart asked me the same thing, what on earth was I saying, and didn’t I know how to talk better than that, would I please say whole words as I knew well enough how to do.

“I brought Goblin up to snuff on this, that we had to talk in whole words, but his voice was no more than broken telepathic suggestions, and out of sheer frustration he gave up on this means of speaking to me, and his voice only returned years later.

“But to continue with his infant development—he could nod or shake his head at my questions, and smile crazily when I said things or did things that he liked. He was dense when he first appeared to me each day and would become more translucent as his appearances, or lingering, increased. I had a sense of knowing when he was near, even if he was invisible, and during the night I could feel his embrace—a very light and distinct impression which I never tried, until this very moment, to describe to anyone else.

“It’s more than fair to say that when he wasn’t making faces and cavorting he impressed me with an engulfing love. It was stronger perhaps when he wasn’t visible, but if he didn’t appear to me at short intervals over the day and into the night, I began to cry for him and become severely distressed.

“Sometimes when I was running on the grass or climbing the oak tree outside, down by the cemetery, I could feel him clinging to me, piggybacking onto me, and I would all the time talk to

him, whether he was visible or not.

"One very bright day, when I was in the kitchen, Sweetheart taught me to write some words —'good' and 'bad' and 'happy' and 'sad,' and I taught Goblin, with his hand on mine, to write these words as well. Of course nobody understood that Goblin was doing the writing some of the time, and when I tried to tell them they just laughed, except for Pops, who never liked Goblin and was always worried 'where all this talk of Goblin would lead.'

"No doubt Patsy had always been around, but I don't remember her distinctly until I was four or five. And even then I don't think I knew she was my mother. She certainly never came up here to my room, and when I did see her in the kitchen I was already afraid that a screaming fight between her and Pops was going to break out.

"I loved Pops, and with reason, because he loved me. He was a tall gaunt man with gray hair all the time I knew him, and always working, and most of the time with his hands. He was educated and he spoke very well, as did Sweetheart, but he wanted to be a country man. And just the way the kitchen had swallowed up Sweetheart, who had once been a debutante in New Orleans, so the farm swallowed Pops.

"Pops kept the books for the Blackwood Manor Bed-and-Breakfast on a computer in his room. And though he did put on a white shirt and suit to conduct the tours of the place now and then, he didn't like that part of things. He preferred to be riding the lawns on his beloved tractor lawn mower or doing any other kind of work outdoors.

"He was happiest when he had a 'project' and could work side by side with the Shed Men—Jasmine's great-uncles, brothers and so forth—until the sun went down, and I never saw him in any vehicle except a pickup truck until Sweetheart died, at which time he rode into town in a limousine like all the rest of us did.

"But I don't think, and it's hurtful to say it, that Pops loved his daughter, Patsy. I think he loved her as little as Patsy loves me.

"Patsy was a late child, I know that now, though I didn't then. And when I look back on it as I tell you this story, I realize there was no natural place for her. Had she gone debutante like Sweetheart, well, maybe it would have been a different story. But Patsy had gone country and wild at the same time, and this mixture Pops, for all his country ways, couldn't abide.

"Pops disapproved of everything about Patsy, from the way she teased her hair and curled it down her back and over her shoulders to the tiny short skirts that she wore. He hated her white cowboy boots and told her so, and said her singing was a bunch of foolishness, she'd never 'make it' with her band. He made her shut the garage doors when she practiced so her 'racket' wouldn't disturb the bed-and-breakfast guests. He couldn't endure her flashy makeup and her fringed leather jackets, and he told her she looked like common trash.

"She shot right back at him, saying she'd earn the money to get the hell out of here, and she broke a cookie jar once in a fight with him—a cookie jar full of Sweetheart's chocolate fudge, I

might add—and whenever she left the kitchen, she never forgot to slam the screen door.

"Patsy was a good singer, I knew that much from the beginning because the Shed Men said it, and so did Jasmine and her mother, Little Ida, and even Big Ramona said it. And I liked the music myself, to tell the truth. But there was an endless procession of young men to the back garage to play guitar and drums for Patsy—and I knew Pops hated them—and when I played outside I crept close to the garage stealthily, not wanting Pops to see me, so I could hear Patsy wailing away with the band.

"Sometimes Goblin would get to dancing to Patsy's music, and, as happens with many spirits, Goblin can be caught up in dancing, and when he was dancing he rocked from side to side and made goofy, funny gestures with his arms, and did tricks with his feet that would have made a flesh-and-blood boy stumble and fall. He'd make like a bowling pin, rolling but never falling, and I would nearly die from laughing to see him carry on.

"I got to liking this dancing too, and being his partner, and trying to imitate his steps. And when Patsy came out of the shed to smoke a cigarette, and saw me, she'd swoop down and kiss me and call me 'darlin' ' and say I was a 'damned cute little boy.' She had a strange way of putting that last phrase, as if it were an admission over opposition, but no one would have opposed her in saying it, except her own self.

"I think I thought she was my cousin, until Patsy's screaming fights with Pops told me a different tale.

"Money was the cause of Patsy's screaming arguments with Pops because Pops never wanted to give her any, and of course I know now that there was plenty of money, always plenty plenty of money. But Pops made Patsy fight over every nickel; Pops wouldn't invest in Patsy, I see it now, and sometimes their quarreling made me cry.

"One time, when I was at my little table in the kitchen with Goblin, and one of these fights had broken out between Patsy and Pops, Goblin took my hand and guided my crayon to write the word 'bad.' I was happy when he did this, because it was right what he wrote, and then he sat real close to me and tried to put his arm around me, but his body was very stiff in those days. I knew that he didn't want me to cry. He tried so hard to comfort me that he became invisible, but I could feel him clinging to my left side.

"At other times when Patsy was battling for money, Goblin would pull me away, and he didn't have to try very hard. He and I ran up to my room where we couldn't hear them.

"Sweetheart was far too submissive to oppose Pops at the time of the kitchen quarrels, but Sweetheart did slip money to her daughter. I saw that, and Patsy would cover Sweetheart with kisses and say, 'Mamma, I don't know what I'd do if it weren't for you.' Then she'd ride off into town on the back of somebody's motorcycle, or in her own van, her much excoriated van which had 'Patsy Blackwood' written in spray paint on both sides of it beneath the windows, and we wouldn't see Patsy or hear any music from the studio for three days.

“The first time I realized that Patsy was intimately connected to me was a terrible night when she and Pops got to screaming at each other and he said, ‘You don’t love Quinn,’ plain and simple, and ‘You don’t love your own little boy. There wouldn’t be any Goblin in this house, he wouldn’t need Goblin, if you’d be the mother you’re supposed to be.’

“At that moment, I knew it was true, these words; she was my mother. They had an echo for me somewhere, and I felt a potent curiosity about Patsy, and I wanted to ask Pops what he meant. I also felt a hurt, a pain in my chest and stomach at the thought that Patsy didn’t love me, whereas before I don’t think that I had cared.

“At that moment, when Pops was saying, ‘You’re an unnatural mother, that’s what you are, and a tramp on top of it,’ Patsy grabbed up a big knife. She ran at Pops with it and Pops took a hold of both her wrists in one hand. The knife fell to the floor and Patsy told Pops that she hated him, that if she could she’d kill him, he’d better sleep with one eye open, and he was the one who didn’t love his own child.

“Next thing I knew I was outside with the electric light pouring out of the shed, and Patsy was sitting in a wooden porch rocker before her open garage studio and she was crying, and I went to her and kissed her on the cheek, and she turned to me and hugged me and took me in her arms. I knew Goblin was trying to pull at me, I could feel him, but I wanted to hug Patsy, I didn’t want her to be so unhappy. I told Goblin to kiss Patsy.

“ ‘Stop talkin’ to that thing,’ Patsy cried. She changed into a different person—rather, an all too familiar person—screaming at me. ‘It kills me when you talk to that thing. I can’t stand to be around you when you talk to that thing. And then they say I’m a bad mother!’ And so I stopped talking to Goblin and gave all my kisses to Patsy for an hour or more. I liked being in her lap. I liked being rocked by her. She smelled good and so did her cigarette. And in my dim childlike mind, I knew it marked a change of sorts.

“But there was more to it than that. I felt a dark feeling when I clung to Patsy. I felt something like despair. I’ve been told I couldn’t have felt such a thing at that age, but that’s not true. I felt it. I clung to Patsy, and I ignored Goblin even though he danced around and tugged on my sleeve.

“That night Patsy came up to watch television in here with Goblin and me and Little Ida, an unprecedented event, and we had a riot of laughter together, though what we actually watched I don’t recall. The impression made upon me was that Patsy was my friend suddenly, and I thought she was very pretty, I always had thought she was very pretty, but I loved Pops too and could never choose between the two.

“From that day forward, it seemed that Patsy and I had more hugs and kisses for each other, if not anything else. Hugging and kissing have always been big on Blackwood Farm, and now Patsy was in the loop, as far as I was concerned.

“By age six or so I had the run of the property and knew well enough not to play too near the

swamp that borders us to the west and southwest.

"If it hadn't been for Goblin, my favorite place would have been the old cemetery, which, as I've told you, was once beloved by my great-great-great-grandmother Virginia Lee.

"As I've described, the guests adored the place, and the tale of how Mad Manfred restored every tombstone just to quiet the conscience of Virginia Lee. The elaborate little cast-iron fence that surrounded the place had all been patched and was kept painted jet-black, and the small stone shell of a pointed-roof church was swept clear of leaves every day. It's an echo chamber, the little church, and I loved to go in there and say 'Goblin!' and hear it come back to me, and have him doubled over with silent giggles.

"Now the roots of the four oak trees down there have buckled some of the rectangular tombs as well as the little fence, but what can anyone do about an oak tree? No one kin to me would ever chop down any kind of tree, that's for certain, and these trees all had their name.

"Virginia Lee's Oak was the one on the far side of the cemetery, between it and the swamp, and Manfred's Oak was right beside it, while on this side there was William's Oak, and Ora Lee's Oak, all fantastically thick with huge heavy arms that dip down to the ground.

"I loved to play down there, until Goblin started his campaign.

"I must have been about seven years old when I saw the first ghosts in the cemetery, and I can see this very vividly now as I speak. Goblin and I were rollicking down there, and a long way off I could hear the thumping of Patsy's latest band. We had left the cemetery proper and I was struggling up one of the long armlike branches of Ora Lee's Oak that is closest to the house, though not really all that close to the house at all.

"I turned my head to the right for no apparent reason and I saw a small gathering of people, two women and a boy and a man, all drifting above the buckled and crowded community of graves. I was not frightened at all. In fact, I think I thought, 'Oh, so these are the ghosts that everybody talks about,' and I was silently stunned looking at them, at the way that all of them seemed to be made of the same translucent substance, and the way that they floated as though created mostly of air.

"Goblin saw them after I did, and for one moment he didn't move but only stared, the same as I was staring, and then he became frantic, gesturing wildly for me to get down out of the tree and come up to the house. I knew all his hand signals by now, so there was no question of it. But I had no intention of leaving.

"I stared at the cluster of people, wondering at their blank faces, their colorless matter, their simple clothes and the way that they all looked at me.

"I slid down the branch of the oak and went towards the cast-iron fence. The eyes of the ghostly gathering remained fastened to me, and as I see it now, as I gaze at them again in remembrance, I realize that they changed somewhat in their expression. They became intense and even demanding, though of course I didn't know those words then.

“Gradually, they began to fade, and to my severe disappointment they were no longer there. I could hear the silence that followed them, and a larger sense of the mysterious stole over me as my eyes moved over the graveyard itself and then the overpowering oaks. I had a peculiar and distinct feeling about the oaks—that they were watching me and had seen me see the spirits, and that they were sentient and vigilant and had a personality of their own.

“A real horror of the trees was conceived in me, and as I looked down the slope, towards the encroaching darkness of the swamp, I felt the giant cypress trees were possessed of the same secretive life, witnessing all around them with a deep slow respiration which only the trees themselves could see or hear.

“I became dizzy. I was almost sick. I saw the branches of the trees moving, and then very slowly there came into view the ghosts again, the very same collection, as pale and wretched as before. Their eyes searched my face, and I remained steadfast, refusing Goblin’s frantic gestures, until suddenly I backed up, nearly stumbling, and took off running for the house.

“I went, as always, straight to the kitchen door, with Goblin skipping and racing beside me, and told Sweetheart all about it, which immediately put her in a state of alarm.

“Sweetheart was already very stout by that time, and a permanent fixture in the kitchen, as I’ve described to you, and she took me up in her arms. She told me point-blank that there were no ghosts down there and I should stay away from the place altogether from now on. I found the contradiction in that, young as I was, but I knew what I had seen, and no one could dislodge it from my mind.

“Pops was busy with the guests in the front part of the house, and I don’t remember his ever responding.

“But Big Ramona, Jasmine’s grandmother, who had been working in the kitchen with Sweetheart, was very curious about the ghosts and wanted me to tell everything about them down to the flower design of the women’s dresses and that the men had no hats. She believed in the ghosts, I knew she did, and she launched into the famous story of how she saw the ghost of my great-great-grandfather William in the living room, going through the drawers of the Louis XV desk.

“But to return to the folks of the cemetery, the Lost Souls, as I’ve come to call them, Sweetheart was frightened at all this and said it was time I went to kindergarten, where I’d meet other children and have lots of fun.

“And so one morning, Pops took me in the pickup to a private school in Ruby River City. I was kicked out within two days. Much too much talking to Goblin, and mumbling and murmuring in half words, and not being able to cooperate with other kids. Besides, Goblin hated it. Goblin made faces at the teacher. Goblin took my left hand and broke my crayons.

“Back it was to where I wanted to be—either spying on Patsy and her music making, or working with Pops as he planted a row of beautiful pansies along the front of the house, or

eating the cake icing mix that was left in the bowl in the kitchen, while Sweetheart and Big Ramona and Little Ida sang 'Go Tell Aunt Rodie' or 'I've Been Working on the Railroad' or songs I've long forgotten, songs I've lost, much to my shame.

"I saw the Lost Souls of the graveyard several times after that, and I've seen them in the past year. They don't change. They linger and they stare and nothing more. They do seem to be locked together, a floating mass from which no one spirit can detach itself. I'm not even certain they have personality, as we know the word. But the way that they follow me with their eyes argues that they do.

"I must have been asked to leave at least four schools when my Aunt Lorraine McQueen came home.

"It was the first time that I can remember ever laying eyes on her, though she had been home several times when I was a baby, and told me so with much enthusiasm and sweet embraces and fragrant lipstick kisses and proffering of the most delicious chocolate-covered cherry candies, which she gave to me from a large fancy white box.

"Her room was the same as it is now, in location, and I have no memory of ever noticing it until I was taken in to see her on that long-ago day and she put me on her lap.

"Even counting the guests who had passed through Blackwood Manor, Aunt Queen was the prettiest of the women I'd ever beheld. Her spike-heel ankle-strap shoes struck me as very lovely to look at, glamorous is my word now, and I very much enjoyed her heavy perfume and the feel of her soft white hair.

"I calculate she must have been near seventy around that time, but she looked younger than Pops, who was her grand nephew, or Sweetheart, and both of them were in their fifties, I think.

"Aunt Queen was dressed all in tailored white silk, which was her favorite style of dressing, and I remember I dripped some of the chocolate-covered cherry candy on her suit, and she said airily that I mustn't worry, she had a thousand suits of white silk, and she laughed in the most delightful manner and told me I was as 'brilliant' as she had once predicted I would be.

"Her room was all done in white, with lace and silk decorating the canopy of the bed, and long gossamer high-waisted white ruffle curtains on her windows, and she even had a white fox fur with real heads and tails, which she had tossed over a chair.

"She told me that she adored for things to be done in white, and showed me her fingernails, which were lacquered in white, and the cameo at the neck of her blouse, which was white on pale pink coral, and said that she had needed all things to be white for the last thirty years, or ever since John McQueen, her husband, had died.

" 'I think I am just getting tired of it,' she declared in the most dramatic and interesting manner. 'I did so love your Uncle John McQueen. I never loved a man before him. And I never will marry again. But I'm ready to be drenched in color. Surely your Uncle John McQueen would approve. What do you think, Tarquin? Should I buy suits of different colors?'

“It was a positive landmark in my young life when she spoke these words. No one had ever asked me such a serious adult question before. In fact, she spoke to me entirely as if I were an adult. I adored her from those moments forward with a loyalty that has no limit.

“Within a week she was showing me swatches of colored damask and satin and asking me which I thought was the happiest and the sweetest color, and I had to confess, of all things, that yellow seemed to me to be the happiest, and I took her hand and led her to the kitchen to see the yellow curtains there, which made her laugh and laugh and say that yellow made her think of butter.

“But she did the room in yellow! It was all in light summery fabric, airy like the white she had used before, but the whole room was magical in yellow, and frankly I never liked it as much as I did with that first change.

“Over the years, she has done the room in many different colors, including bed hangings, draperies and chairs, and as for her clothes, she has done the same thing. But on that first day, she seemed a true royal personage of pure whiteness, and I remember reveling in her beauty and what seemed the purity of her manner and her words.

“As for the cameo, she told me all about it—that it was the mythical Hebe holding up a cup for Zeus, the king of the gods, who was in the form of an eagle, dipping his beak to drink.

“Now, Goblin had been sulking all this time by the doorway, hands in his overall pockets, until I turned to him and told him to come over and that I wanted to show him to Aunt Queen. I believe that I did my very best to describe him to her, since no one to my knowledge could ever see Goblin, except me, and I could swear that she looked at the space beside me, and I had an inkling, the barest inkling, that she did see him, at least for a moment, when she narrowed her eyes.

“She looked sharply to me again, as if snapping back, and demanded very gently, ‘Does he make you happy?’ and that too caught me off guard, as her earlier question had done.

“I think I stammered out something to the effect that Goblin was always around except when he was hiding, as if it wasn’t a matter of whether he made me happy or not, and then Goblin began to tug on my hand to drag me from the room. I said ‘Behave, Goblin!’ just as Sweetheart sometimes said to me, ‘Behave, Quinn!’ and Goblin, pouting and making faces, disappeared.

“I started to cry. Aunt Queen was very distressed at this and asked the reason, and I told her that now Goblin would not come back for a long time. He’d wait and wait until I was crying and crying, and then he would come.

“Aunt Queen pondered this for a long time and said that I mustn’t cry. ‘You know what I think, Quinn?’ she asked. ‘I think if you remain quiet and pretend you don’t need him, Goblin will come back.’

“It did the trick. As I was helping her and Big Ramona to unpack suitcases, as I was playing with Aunt Queen’s cameos, which she set out on her famous marble table, along came Goblin,

peeping around the door and then pouting and sulking and coming in.

“Aunt Queen didn’t mind my murmuring to him as I explained who she was and that everybody called her Miss Queen but we were to call her Aunt Queen, and when Big Ramona went to correct me and tell me to hush, Aunt Queen said, No, let me go on.

“ ‘Now, Goblin, don’t run off again,’ Aunt Queen said, and once more I was certain she could see him, but she said that she couldn’t, and was only taking my word for the fact that he was there.

“For the entirety of Aunt Queen’s visit she spoke to me as if I were an adult, and I also slept in her bed with her. She sent into town for some men’s white T-shirts, size large, and I wore these as my little white nightshirts. And I snuggled up to her spoon fashion as I did with Little Ida, and I slept so deeply not even Goblin could wake me before I heard Aunt Queen’s call to get up.

“Little Ida was a tiny bit put out over this, as she and I had been bedfellows since I was a baby, but Aunt Queen soothed her so that she let it go. I liked the white canopy over our heads better than the satin-lined baldachin in my own room up here.

“Let me move to another recollection which must come from the same time. Aunt Queen and I drove into New Orleans in her big stretch limousine. I’d never been in a car like it, but I remember little of it, except that Goblin sat on my right side and Aunt Queen on my left. Goblin tried to stay solid, but he flashed transparent numerous times.

“What struck me that day most strongly was that we got out on a shady side street with a long brick sidewalk, and all over that sidewalk were pink petals, and it was one of the most beautiful sights I’ve ever seen. I wish I knew now where that street was. I’ve asked Aunt Queen but she doesn’t recall.

“I don’t know whether those pink petals had fallen from a long flank of crape myrtle trees or from Japanese magnolias. I tend to think it was crape myrtles after a rain. I’ll never forget that stretch of sidewalk and that lovely path of flower petals, as though someone had strewn them especially for people to walk on and be transported out of reality and into dreams.

“Even now, when existence seems unendurable I think of that sidewalk, I remember the drowsy light and the feeling of being unhurried, and the beauty of the pink petals. And I’m able to take a deep breath.

“It has nothing to do with my story, except perhaps to state that I had eyes to see such things, and a heart to be sensitive to them. But what is germane is that we went to the house of a very affected and artificial lady, much younger than Aunt Queen, who had a whole room full of toys, and the first dollhouse I’d ever seen. Not knowing that boys weren’t supposed to like dollhouses, I was of course curious about it and wanted to play with it more than anything else.

“But the lady wanted to direct things, as I recall, and bombarded me with soft affected questions, in her phony baby voice, mostly pertaining to Goblin, who glared at her the whole while with a sullen and angry face. I didn’t like her soft tone when she asked, ‘Does Goblin do

bad things?' and 'Do you feel sometimes that Goblin is doing something that you would like to do but can't?'

"Young as I was, I caught her drift, and I wasn't surprised afterwards when Aunt Queen made a phone call to Pops from the limousine and said, quite oblivious to Goblin and me beside her, 'It's just an imaginary playmate, Thomas. He'll outgrow Goblin. He's a brilliant child and he has no playmates. So we have Goblin. There's no point to be worried at all.'

"It was very soon after my encounter with the beautiful flower-strewn sidewalk—and the lady psychologist—that Pops drove me to a new school. I hated it passionately, as I had the others, talked to Goblin belligerently and without cease and was sent home before noon.

"The next week Pops made the long drive into New Orleans to take me to a fancier kindergarten in Uptown, but with the same result. Goblin made faces at the children and I hated them. And the teacher's voice grated on me, as she talked to me as if I were an idiot, and Pops was soon there in the pickup truck to take me back to exactly where I wanted to be.

"At this point, I have a vivid yet fragmented memory, very distorted and confused, of actually being incarcerated in some sort of hospital, of being in a small cubicle of a room and of sitting in one of those vast playrooms again, complete with a dollhouse, and of knowing that people were watching me through a mirror because Goblin made signs to me that they were. Goblin hated the place. The people who came in to question me talked to me as if they were great friends of mine, which of course they weren't.

" 'Where did you learn all the big words?' was one prize question, and, 'You talk of being happy to be independent. Do you know what "independent" means?' Of course I knew and I explained it: to be on one's own, to be not in school, to be not in this place; and out of there I soon went, with a sense that I had gotten my liberty through sheer stubbornness and the refusal to be nice. But I had been badly frightened by this experience. And I know that I cried hysterically when I rushed into Sweetheart's arms, and she sobbed and sobbed.

"It may have been the night of my return home—I don't know—but very soon after, Aunt Queen assured me I'd never be left in a place like that 'hospital' again. And in the days that followed I learnt that it was Aunt Queen's doing, because Patsy loudly criticized her for it in my presence and this confused me because I so badly needed to love Aunt Queen.

"When Aunt Queen shook her head and confirmed that she had done wrong with the hospital, I was very relieved. Aunt Queen saw this and she kissed me and she asked after Goblin, and I told her that he was right at my side.

"Again, I could have sworn that she saw him, and I even saw Goblin puff himself up and sort of preen for her. But she said only that if I loved Goblin, then she would love Goblin too. I burst into tears of happiness, and Goblin was soon in a paroxysm of tears as well.

"My next memory of Aunt Queen is of her sharing my little table with me in this room and teaching me more words to write with my crayon—in fact, a great list of nouns comprising the

name of every item in the bedroom—and that she watched patiently as I taught all these words—bed, table, chair, window and so forth—to Goblin.

" 'Goblin helps you to remember,' she said gravely to me. 'I think Goblin is very clever himself. Does Goblin know a word we don't know, do you think? I mean a word you haven't learned so far?'

"It was a startling moment. I was about to say no, when Goblin put his hand on mine and wrote in his jagged way the word 'Stop' and the word 'Yield.' And the word 'School.'

"I laughed, I was so proud of him. But Goblin wasn't finished. He then wrote in short jerky movements the words 'Ruby River.'

"I heard Aunt Queen gasp. 'Explain each of those words to me, Quinn,' she said. But though I could explain 'stop' and 'yield' as signs we saw on the highway, I couldn't read 'school' or 'Ruby River.'

" 'Ask Goblin what they mean,' said Aunt Queen.

"I did as she asked, and Goblin explained everything silently by putting the thoughts in my head. Stop meant to stop the car, Yield meant to slow down the car, School meant to go slow when we were near the children, bah! ich! and Ruby River was the name of the water over which the car drove when we went to school or shopping.

"An unforgettable expression of seriousness came over Aunt Queen's face. 'Ask Goblin how he learned these things,' she said to me. But when I did this, Goblin just crossed his eyes, wagged his head from left to right and began dancing.

" 'I don't think he knows how,' I told her, 'but I think he learned them from watching and listening.'

"She seemed very much pleased with this answer, and I was immensely glad. Her solemn expression had frightened me. 'Ah, that makes a good deal of sense,' she said. 'And I'll tell you what. Why don't you have Goblin teach you several new words every day? Maybe he can start now with some more for us.'

"I had to explain to her that Goblin was through for the day. He never liked to do anything very long. He ran out of steam.

"Only now as I tell this do I realize that Goblin was talking coherently in my head. When did that start? I don't know.

"But in the months to come I did what Aunt Queen asked and Goblin taught me pages of common words. Everyone, even Pops and Sweetheart, thought it was a good thing. And the kitchen crowd watched in awe as this process unfolded.

"In jerky letters, I spelled out 'Rice,' 'Coca-Cola,' 'Flour,' 'Ice,' 'Rain,' 'Police,' 'Sheriff,' 'City Hall,' 'Post Office,' 'Ruby Town Theater,' 'Grand Hardware,' 'Grodin's Pharmacy,' 'Wal-Mart'—defining these words as Goblin defined them in my head, and this defining came not only with the pronunciation of the words, which Goblin gave me, but with pictures. I saw the City Hall. I

saw the Post Office. I saw the Ruby Town Theater. And I made an immediate and seminal link between the audible syllables of the word and its meaning, and this was Goblin's doing.

"As I revisit this curious process, I realize what it meant. Goblin, whom I had always treated as grossly inferior to me and devilishly a troublemaker, had learned the phonetic code to written words and was ahead of me in this. And he stayed ahead of me for a long time. The explanation? Just what he had said. He watched and he listened, and given a small amount of indisputable raw material he was able to go quite far.

"This is what I mean when I say he is a fast learner, and I should add he's an unpredictable and uncontrollable learner because that's true.

"But let me make it clear that though the Kitchen Gang told me Goblin was a wonder for teaching me all these words, they still didn't believe in him.

"And one night when I was listening to the adults talk in Aunt Queen's room, I heard the word 'subconscious,' and again I heard it, and finally the third time I interrupted and asked what it meant.

"Aunt Queen explained that Goblin lived in my subconscious, and that as I grew older he would probably go away. I mustn't worry about it now. But later I wouldn't want so much to have Goblin and the 'situation' would take care of itself.

"I knew this was wrong, but I loved Aunt Queen too much to contradict her. And besides she was soon going away. Her travels were calling her. Friends of hers were gathered in Madrid at a palace for a special party, and I could only think of this with tears.

"Aunt Queen soon took her leave, but not before hiring a young lady to 'homeschool' me, which she did, coming up to Blackwood Manor every day.

"This teacher wasn't really a very effective person, and my conversations with Goblin scared her, and she was soon gone.

"The next and the next weren't much good either.

"Goblin hated these teachers as much as I did. They wanted me to color pictures that were boring and to paste strips of paper from magazines onto cardboard. And for the most part they had a dishonest manner of speaking which seems, I think in retrospect, to assume that a child's mind is different from that of adults. I couldn't bear it. I learned quickly how to horrify and frighten them. I did it lustily to break their power. I wanted them gone. With the fury of an only child with a spirit of his own, I wanted them gone.

"No matter how many came, I was soon alone with Goblin again.

"We had the run of the farm as always, and we hung out sometimes with the Shed Men, watching boxing on television, a sport I've always loved—in fact, the only sport that I love to watch and still do watch—and we saw the ghosts in the old cemetery several times.

"As for the ghost of William, Manfred's son, I saw him at least three times by the desk in the living room, and he seemed as oblivious to me as Aunt Camille on the attic stairs.

“Meanwhile Little Ida read lavishly illustrated children’s books to me, not minding one bit that Goblin too was listening and looking, all of us crowded on the bed together against the headboard, and I learned to read a little with her, and Goblin could actually read a book to me if I had the patience to listen to him, to tune in to his silent voice inside my head. On rainy days, as I’ve mentioned, he was really strong. He could read a whole poem to me from an adult book. If we were running in the summer rain, he could stay perfectly solid for an hour.

“Sometime in these early years I realized that I had a treasure in Goblin, that his knack for understanding and spelling words was superior to mine, and I liked it, and I also trusted his opinion of the teachers, of course. Goblin was learning faster than I was. And then the inevitable happened.

“I must have been nine years old. Goblin, taking my left hand, began to write more sophisticated messages than I could have ever written. In the kitchen, where I sat at the big white-enameled table now with the adults, Goblin scrawled out in crayon on paper something like ‘Quinn and I want to go riding in Pops’ truck. We’d like to go to the cock fights again. We like to see the roosters go at it. We want to place bets.’

“Little Ida witnessed this and so did Jasmine, both of whom said nothing, and Sweetheart just shook her head, and Pops was silent too. Then Pops did a clever thing.

“ ‘Now, Quinn,’ he said, ‘you’re telling us Goblin wrote this, but all I see is your left hand moving. Just to get this straight, you copy those words for us. Tell Goblin just to let you copy. I want to see how your hand is different from his.’

“Of course I had a difficult time copying, and the printing was much neater and squared off when I did it, the way Little Ida had taught me to print, and Pops drew back and was amazed.

“Then Goblin grabbed my left hand again and guided it as he wrote in his characteristic spidery scrawl, ‘Don’t be afraid of me. I love Quinn.’

“I became elated with these developments and I remember saying to all assembled that Goblin was the best teacher I had. But nobody was as happy about this as I was, and then Goblin grabbed my hand again, very tight, and scrawled out, nearly breaking the crayon, ‘You don’t believe in me. Quinn believes in me.’

“It seemed utterly plain to me that Goblin was a separate creature and everybody ought to know it, but no one was ready to say it in words.

“However, Pops and I went to the cock fights the very next weekend, and as we were driving over to Ruby River City, Pops asked if Goblin was with us in the car. I said Yes, Goblin was cleaving to me, invisible, saving his strength to dance around in the aisle at the cock fights, but not to worry, he was right there.

“Then when we got there, Pops asked, ‘What’s Goblin up to?’ and I told him Goblin was there ‘in living color,’ by which I meant solid, and that he was running right alongside of me all over the arena to collect the bets that Pops won. Of course we had to pay off a few too that Pops lost.

"Just in case you've never seen a cock fight, let me briefly describe what happens. It's an air-conditioned building out in the country, with a crude lobby and concession stand in it selling hamburgers, hot dogs and soda. From the lobby you go into an arena that is round except for two entrances, the one through which you came and the one opposite through which the roosters and the handlers come in. In the center of this arena is a big round dirt-floor cage completely protected by chicken wire right up to the ceiling—where the birds fight.

"Two men enter the ring with their roosters, set them down on the floor and the roosters go at it, by their very nature, and as soon as one is bested the birds are taken out to continue the fight to the death out back. The handlers do everything they can to help their birds. They'll take them by the throat and suck the blood right out of their mouths to give them a second wind, and I think they blow in their hind ends too.

"Pops never went out back. It was dirty and dusty back there, which is why most of the people at the cock fights, no matter how well dressed, appear to be covered in dirt. Pops just liked the indoor portion of the battle, and he often stood up and hollered out his bets, and I did the running with the money as I described. There are some women at the cock fights, and lots of children, with a lot of children doing the collecting and the delivering, and it is a kind of American scene which is probably dying out.

"I personally loved it, and so did Goblin, as I've explained. We thought the cocks were gorgeous with their long colorful plumage, and when they leapt in the air to challenge their opponents, rising up some three feet or more, then dropping and rising again, it was a spectacle to behold.

"Pops knew everybody there. As I've said, he was a country man, and as I tell you this story I realize that he was deliberately country, throwing in his lot with the rural community when in fact he had a choice.

"He'd gotten his law degree from Loyola University in New Orleans, same as his father, Gravier. He could have been a different type of person. He chose to be who he was.

"He'd bred fighting cocks before I was born, and he told me all about it, how for two years they were fed on the best grain and let to grow their long plumes for the five minutes of glory in the ring. As for domestic poultry, he said they were miserably bred now and miserably treated and knew nothing of the grass or the fresh air. A fighting cock had a life.

"Well, that was Pops. He could come home from a cock fight, shower down, dress in his dark suit and go in and make sure that the Royal Doulton china had been properly set for dinner on the table, and call in Little Ida or Lolly to make the sterling silver settings more even and uniform all around. He played tapes of harmonica music in his truck and hired classical quartets and trios for the front rooms.

"He was a man between worlds, and he gave me the best of both of them, but why he hated Patsy when she had gone so totally country I don't understand. But then my mother did get

knocked up at sixteen and refused to divulge the name of the father, if she ever knew it, so maybe that put her in a bad light.

"Let's fast-forward now to my tenth year when the best of the home teachers came, a nonpareil—a lovely woman named Lynelle Springer, who played the piano exquisitely and spoke several foreign languages, who 'adored' Goblin and often talked to him quite independently of me, even making me a little jealous.

"Of course I knew it was a game, but Goblin didn't and he frolicked and did tricks for Lynelle, which I described to her in a whisper. Everything that Lynelle taught me I taught to Goblin, or at least made the motions. And Goblin grew to love Lynelle so much that he jumped up and down when she arrived each evening at the house.

"Lynelle was tall and slender with long curly brown hair, which she pinned back casually from her face. She wore a perfume named Shalimar and what she called 'romantic' dresses with high waists and flowing skirts, suggestive of the time of King Arthur, she explained to me, and she adored the color sky blue. She was thrilled that my ancestor Virginia Lee, for her portrait in the dining room, had chosen a gorgeous dress of sky blue.

Lynelle wore very high heels—Aunt Queen no doubt approved heartily—and had extremely full breasts and a tiny waist.

"Lynelle was enchanted by Blackwood Manor. She danced in circles in the big rooms. She explored everything with ebullient interest and was most gracious in her casual meetings with the guests.

"She pronounced me to be a 'rare intellect' at once. I opened my arms to her—and my world, as you can see, was very much influenced and punctuated by embraces and kisses, and Lynelle fell into this style with no inhibition at all.

"Lynelle bewitched me. I feared to lose her the way I'd deliberately lost all the other teachers, and experienced perhaps the greatest change of heart toward an aspect of my world that I'd ever known.

"Lynelle talked so fast that Pops and Sweetheart privately grumbled that they couldn't understand her. And I remember some deadly kibitzing that Aunt Queen was paying Lynelle three times what the other teachers had been paid, all because they had met in an English castle.

"So what? Lynelle was unique. Lynelle used Goblin's talents, inviting him to teach me new words and addressing her long cascades of lovely speech to both of us, her two 'elves.'

"That Lynelle had six young children, that she had been a French teacher, that she had returned to college to make up a pre-medical degree, that she was a scientific genius of sorts, as well as a sometime concert pianist—all this made Pops and Sweetheart all the more suspicious. But I knew Lynelle was a truly unique individual. I couldn't have been fooled.

"Lynelle came five evenings a week for four hours, and within a matter of a month, she conquered everybody on Blackwood Farm with her energy, her charm, her optimism and her

effervescence, and she positively altered the course of my life.

"It was Lynelle who really taught me the basics—phonetic reading of big words and diagramming of sentences so I could grasp the scaffolding of grammar, and the only arithmetic I now confess to know.

"She took me through enough French to understand many of the subtitled movies we watched together, and she loaded me with history and geography, pretty much designing her fluid and wondrous lectures to me around historical personages, but sometimes romping through whole centuries in terms of what had been accomplished in art and war.

" 'It's all art and war, Quinn,' she said to me once as we were sitting cross-legged on the floor up here together, 'and it's a shocking fact but most great men were insane.' She was careful to address Goblin by name also as she explained that Alexander the Great was an egomaniac and Napoleon 'obsessive compulsive,' while Henry VIII was a poet, a writer and a despotic fiend.

"Irrepressibly resourceful, Lynelle came flying in with whole cartons of educational or documentary tapes for us to watch by VHS and also introduced into my head the idea that in the day and age of cable television nobody ought to be uneducated. Even a boy hermit on Blackwood Farm should know everything just from watching TV.

" 'People in trailer parks are getting these channels, Quinn, think of it—think of it, waitresses watching the biography of Beethoven and telephone linemen going home to watch documentaries of World War II.'

"I wasn't quite as convinced as she was on these points, but I saw the potential, and when she persuaded Pops to give me a giant-size television I was overjoyed.

"She insisted on the scientific documentaries which I, in the course of things, would have skipped, and she took me through the magnificent film *Immortal Beloved,* in which Gary Oldman plays Beethoven to such perfection that every time we watched it I cried. Then there was *Amadeus* with Tom Hulce as Mozart and F. Murray Abraham as Salieri, a masterpiece of a film that left me breathless, and she reached back into history for *Song to Remember* with Cornel Wilde as Chopin and Merle Oberon as George Sand, and *Tonight We Sing,* all about S. Hurok, the great impresario, and there were dozens of other films by which she opened my world.

"Of course she showed me *The Red Shoes,* which ignited me with fire to be around people of grace and culture, and then *The Tales of Hoffmann,* which transformed my dreams. Both of these movies caused real physical pain in me, so vibrant, so lofty, so exalted was their world. Ah, it hurts me now to think about them, to see images in my head from them. It hurts. They were like spells, those two movies.

"Picture me and Lynelle on the floor in this room with no light except the giant television, and those movies, those enchantments flooding our senses. And Goblin, Goblin staring at the screen, stultified by the patterns he must have been perceiving, Goblin quiet for all his struggle to understand why we were so stricken and so quiet.

“When I cried in pain, Lynelle said the kindest thing to me:

“ ‘Don’t you understand, Quinn?’ she said. ‘You live in a gorgeous house and you’re eccentric and gifted like the people in these films. Aunt Queen keeps inviting you to meet her in Europe and you won’t do it. And that’s wrong, Quinn. Don’t make your world small.’

“In fact, Aunt Queen had never invited me to meet her in Europe, or, to put it more to the point, I had not known that Aunt Queen had invited me! No doubt Pops and Sweetheart knew. But I didn’t confess this.

“ ‘You have to keep on teaching me, Lynelle,’ I answered. ‘Make me into somebody who can travel with Aunt Queen.’

“ ‘I’ll do it, Quinn,’ she said. ‘It will be easy.’

“She almost made me believe it. And on she went, running rampant through archaeology and theories of evolution and dizzying lectures on black holes in space.

“She taught me to play some simple Chopin and a few exercises by Bach. She took me through the entire history of music, quizzing me until I could identify a period and a style and, even in Mozart’s case, a composer.

“I was in heaven with Lynelle.

“She taught me many Latin words to show me that they were roots for English words. She taught me to waltz, to do the two-step and the tango, though the tango made me laugh so hard that I would fall down every time we tried.

“Lynelle also brought the first computer into my bedroom, along with the first printer, and though this was long before the days of the World Wide Web or the Internet, I learned to write on this computer and managed to become very fast at typing, using the first three fingers of each hand.

“Goblin was enthralled by the computer.

“At once he took my left hand and pecked out the words ‘IloveLynelle.’ She was very pleased by this, and then, unable to free my left hand from him, I discovered myself typing all manner of words run together without spaces, and I gave Goblin an elbow in the chest and told him to get away. Of course Lynelle soothed his feelings with some kind words.

“It would be a long time before Goblin discovered that he could make words appear on the computer without my aid.

“But let me return to Lynelle. As soon as I could bat out a letter on the computer I wrote to Aunt Queen, who was on a religious pilgrimage of sorts in India, and I told her that Lynelle was a special emissary both from Heaven and from her. Aunt Queen was so pleased to hear from me that we began to exchange letters about twice a month.

“I had so many adventures with Lynelle.

“On Saturday, we went into the swamp together in a pirogue with a vow to find Sugar Devil Island, but at the first sight of a deadly snake, Lynelle positively freaked and screamed for us to

head back to land. I had a gun and could have shot the snake if it had approached us, which it wasn't doing, but Lynelle was terrified and I did what she said.

"Neither of us had worn long sleeves, as Pops had told us to do, and we were covered in mosquito bites. So we never made an excursion like that again. But on cool spring evenings we often sat on one of the rectangular slab tombs in the cemetery and looked into the swamp, until full darkness and mosquitoes drove us inside.

"Of course we were going to venture out there one of these days and find that damned island, but there were always more pressing things to do.

"When Lynelle discovered I had never been to a museum in my life, we were off in her roaring Mazda sports car, the radio blaring techno-rock, going over the Lake and into New Orleans to see wonderful paintings at the New Orleans Museum of Art, and then on to the new Aquarium, and on to wander the Art District for galleries, and on to the French Quarter just for fun.

"Now understand, I knew something of New Orleans. We often drove an hour and half to go to Mass at the gorgeous St. Mary's Assumption Church on Josephine and Constance Streets, because this had been Sweetheart's parish and one of the priests stationed there was a cousin of Sweetheart's, and therefore a cousin of mine.

"And during the Mardi Gras season we sometimes drove in to watch the night parades from the front porch of Sweetheart's sister, Aunt Ruthie. And a few times we even visited Aunt Ruthie on Mardi Gras day.

"But with Lynelle, I really learned the city as we meandered in the Quarter or prowled about in secondhand bookstores on Magazine Street or visited the St. Louis Cathedral to light a candle and say a prayer.

"During this time Lynelle also educated me for my First Communion and for my Confirmation, and both these ceremonies took place on Holy Saturday night (the eve of Easter) at St. Mary's Assumption Church. All of Sweetheart's New Orleans people were there, including some fifty that I really didn't know. But I was very glad to be connected with the Church in a proper way and went through a mild period of fascination with the Church, watching any videos that pertained to the Vatican or Church history or the Lives of the Saints.

"It particularly intrigued me that saints had had visions, that some saints saw their guardian angels and even talked to them. I wondered if Goblin, not being an angel, had to be from Hell.

"Lynelle said no. I never had the courage, or the clear urge, to ask a priest about Goblin. I sensed that Goblin would be condemned as morbid imagination, and at times I thought of Goblin that way myself.

"Lynelle asked me if Goblin put me up to evil. I said no. 'Then you don't have to tell a priest about him,' she explained. 'He has no connection with sin. Use your brain and your conscience. A priest is no more likely to understand Goblin than anyone else.'

"That might sound ambiguous now, but it didn't then.

“I think, all in all, the six years I had with Lynelle were some of the happiest in my life.

“Naturally, I was drawn away from Pops and Sweetheart, but they were proud and relieved to see me learning things and didn’t mind a bit. Besides, I still spent time with Pops, playing the harmonica after lunch and talking about ‘old times,’ though Pops was hardly an old man. He liked Lynelle.

“Even Patsy was drawn to Lynelle and joined us for some of our adventures, at which time I had to squeeze into the tiny backseat of the sports car while the two women chatted away up front. My most poignant memory of Patsy’s joining us has to do with Goblin, to whom I talked all the time, and the shock of Lynelle when Patsy cursed at me to stop talking to that disgusting ghost.

“Lynelle softened and intimidated Patsy, and something else happened which I think I only understand now as I look back on those years. It is simply this: that Lynelle’s respect for me, not only as Goblin’s friend but as little Tarquin Blackwood, had the effect of causing Patsy to respect me and to talk to me more sincerely and often than she had in the past.

“It was as if my mother never ‘saw’ the person I was until Lynelle really drew her attention to me, and then a vague interest substituted for the condescending and arrogant pity—‘You poor sweet darlin’ ’—that Patsy had felt before.

“Lynelle was a great watcher also of popular movies, particularly those which were ‘gothic’ or ‘romantic,’ as she called it, and she brought tapes of everything, from *Robocop* to *Ivanhoe,* to watch with me in the evenings, and sometimes this brought Patsy into the room. Patsy enjoyed *Dark Man* and *The Crow,* and even Jean Cocteau’s *Beauty and the Beast.*

“More than once we all watched *Coal Miner’s Daughter,* all about Loretta Lynn, the wonderful country-western star whom Patsy so admired. And I observed that Lynelle could talk ‘country’ pretty easily with Patsy. It made me jealous. I wanted my romantic and mysterious Lynelle to myself.

“However, I learned something about Patsy during these years, which I should have foreseen. Patsy felt stupid around Lynelle, and for that reason the connection petered away and at one point threatened to break. Patsy wouldn’t stay around anyone who made her feel stupid, and she didn’t have an open mind with which to learn.

“This turning away of Patsy didn’t surprise me and didn’t matter to me. (I think it was Ingmar Bergman’s *The Seventh Seal* that proved the death knell of our little movie-watching triangle.) But something else good happened as regards to Patsy, and that was that Lynelle liked Patsy’s music and asked if we could come in to listen, and then praised Patsy a lot for what she was doing with her one-man band, a ‘friend’ by the name of Seymour, who played harmonica and drums.

“(Seymour was an opportunistic jerk, or so I thought at the time. Fate had punishment in store for Seymour.)

“Patsy was obviously astonished by this, and jubilant, and we sat through quite a few concerts

in the garage, which Lynelle enjoyed more than me. Naturally enough Goblin loved them and danced and danced until he flat-out dissolved.

"As I tell you this, I realize that Lynelle was quite deliberate in this design. She sensed that Patsy was afraid of her and backing off from us—'You're a couple of eggheads'—and so she took me out there to Patsy quite cleverly to forge a new link.

"In fact, she pushed the matter further. She took me to see Patsy perform at a county jamboree. It was in Mississippi somewhere, right across the border from where we lived, and part of the county fair. I had never seen my mother on the stage, and people hollering for her and clapping for her, and it opened my eyes.

"With her teased yellow hair and heavy face makeup Patsy looked plastic pretty, and her singing was strong and good. Her songs had a dark bluegrass tone to them, and she herself was playing the banjo, and another guy, whom I didn't know very well, was sawing away on a rapid, mournful violin. Seymour was a pretty stiff backup with the harmonica and drums.

"That was all very sweet and made a huge impression on me, but when Patsy launched into her next number, a real hard-edged 'You've been mean to me, you bastard!' type of song, the crowd went nuts. They couldn't get enough of my little mother, and people were flocking towards the stage from all over the fair. Patsy upped the ante with the next one, her priceless 'You Poisoned My Well, I'll Poison Yours.' I don't remember much else except thinking she was a hit, and her life wasn't in vain.

"But I didn't need Patsy. I'm not sure I've ever needed Patsy. Sure Patsy was a hit with the yokels, but I had Beethoven's Ninth.

"And I had Lynelle. It was when Lynelle and I drove into New Orleans alone together with Goblin that I was most overjoyed.

"I have never known a human being who drove faster than Lynelle, but she seemed to possess an instinct for avoiding policemen, and the one time we were stopped she told a tall story about us rushing to the bedside of a woman in labor, and not only did she not get the ticket, the policeman had to be discouraged from giving us a full escort to the fictitious hospital in town.

"Lynelle was beautiful. There is no more perfect way to say it. She had arrived here at Blackwood Manor to find me a country boy who couldn't write a sentence and left me some six years later, a dramatically well-educated young man.

"At sixteen I completed all the examinations for high school graduation, and ranked in the top percentile on the college entrance exams as well.

"In that last year that we would be together, Lynelle also taught me how to drive. Pops fully approved, and I was soon roving with the pickup truck on our land and on the backcountry roads all around. Lynelle took me to get my license, and Pops gave me an old pickup to call my own.

"I think Lynelle would have left me a real reader of books too if Goblin hadn't been so jealous of my reading, so intent upon being included, so intent upon me sounding every word to him out

loud or listening to him sound it to me. But that skill—the skill of sinking into books—was to come to me with my second great teacher, Nash.

"Meanwhile, Goblin seemed to feed off Lynelle, even as he fed off me, though at the time I wouldn't have described it that way, and Goblin was getting physically stronger all the time.

"Big shocker. A Sunday. It was pouring down rain. I must have been twelve years old. I was working on the computer and Goblin cursed at me and the machine went dead. I checked all the connections, booted my program again, and there came Goblin, switching it off.

" 'You did that, didn't you?' I said, looking around for him, and there he was near the door, my perfect doppelgänger in jeans and a red-and-white checkered shirt, except that he had his arms folded and a smug smile on his face.

"He had my full attention. But I turned the computer back on without taking my eyes off him, and then he pointed to the gasolier. He made it blink.

" 'All right, that's excellent,' I said. (It was his favorite compliment and had been for years.) 'But don't you dare turn off the power in this house. Tell me what you want.' He made the motions to 'Let's go' and of the rain coming down.

" 'No, I'm too old for that,' I said. 'You come here and work with me.' At once I got a chair for him, and when he sat down beside me I explained that I was writing to Aunt Queen, and I read the letter out loud to him, though that wasn't necessary. I was telling Aunt Queen thank you for her recent offer that Lynelle could always use her bedroom if she needed to freshen up or change clothes or spend the night.

"When I got to the bottom and went to close, Goblin grabbed my left hand as always and typed without spaces, 'IamGoblinandQuinnisGoblinandGoblinisQuinnandweloveAuntQueen.' He stopped. He dissolved.

"I knew without question that he'd exhausted himself in turning off the computer. That made me feel safe. The rest of the day and night was mine.

"Another time, very soon after, when Lynelle and I were dancing to a Tchaikovsky waltz—really cutting up in the parlor after all the guests were gone to bed—Goblin socked me in the stomach, which took the breath out of me, and then dissolved, not as if he wanted to but as if he had to—gone in a puff, leaving me crying and sick.

"Lynelle was quite astonished by this, but she never doubted me when I told her Goblin had done it, and then when we were sitting, talking in our intimate way, adult to adult, she confessed to me that she had several times felt Goblin pull her hair. She had tried to ignore it the first couple of times, but now she was certain he did it.

" 'This is a strong ghost you have,' she said. And no sooner had she spoken those words than the gasolier up above us began to move. I had never seen that trick before, this slight movement of those heavy brass arms and glass cups, but it was damn near undeniable. Lynelle laughed. Then she uttered a startled sound. She said she'd been pinched on her right arm. Again she

laughed and then, though he wasn't visible to me, she spoke to Goblin in soothing terms, telling him that she was as fond of him as of me.

"I saw Goblin—now fourteen, you understand, because I was fourteen—standing by the bedroom door and looking proudly at me. I realized keenly that his face had more definition to it than it used to have in the past, principally because that slightly contemptuous expression was new. He was quick to dematerialize, and I was confirmed in my earlier opinion that when he affected matter physically he didn't have energy to 'appear' for very long.

"But he was getting stronger, no doubt of it.

"I vowed at once 'to kill' Goblin for hurting Lynelle, and after Lynelle took off in her shining Mazda, I wrote to Aunt Queen that Goblin was doing the 'unthinkable' by hurting other people. I told her about the sharp punch in the stomach as well. I sent the letter off by express so she'd get it in two or three days though she was in India at the time.

And to keep Goblin amused that weekend I read aloud to him by the hour from *Lost Worlds,* a wonderful book of archaeology that had been a gift from Aunt Queen.

"Aunt Queen called as soon as she'd received my letter and she told me that I must control Goblin, that I must find a way to stop him from his behavior by threatening not to look at him or talk to him, and that I had to make these declarations stick.

" 'You mean to tell me, Aunt Queen, you finally believe in him?' I asked.

" 'Quinn, I'm across the world from you right now,' she answered. 'I can't argue with you about what Goblin is. What I'm saying is you have to contain him, whether he's real and separate, or simply a part of you.'

"I agreed with her and I told her I knew how to control him. But I would concentrate on learning more than I knew.

"Meanwhile I was to keep her apprised of things.

"After that she raved about the coherence and style of my letter, which showed a vast improvement over earlier letters, and she attributed my progress correctly to Lynelle.

"I followed Aunt Queen's directions regarding Goblin, and Lynelle did too. If Goblin did something inappropriate, we lectured him and then refused to acknowledge him until his weak and puny assaults came to a halt. It worked.

"But Goblin wanted more than ever to write, and he moved into a new level of concentration, spelling out messages on the computer using my left hand.

"It gave me more than an eerie feeling, this takeover of my left hand, because Goblin didn't move my right hand, and so a strange rhythm of writing with one hand mastering the entire keyboard occurred. Lynelle would watch this with a mixture of trepidation and fascination, but she made an astounding discovery.

"And this astounding discovery was that she could communicate with me privately and secretly by typing out on the computer what she had to say using very big words. On that day

she wrote something on the order of:

“ ‘Our gallant and ever vigilant doppelgänger may not perceive the many perambulations that run through the cerebral organ of his much cherished and sometimes misused Tarquin Blackwood.’

“And it was plainly obvious from Goblin’s nearby dumb appearance that Lynelle was perfectly right. Goblin, for all his early gains on me, couldn’t interpret such messages. Lynelle typed out more, something like this:

“ ‘Comprehend, beloved Tarquin, that your doppelgänger, though once he absorbed all that you absorbed, may have reached the limits of his power to master fine distinctions, and this allows you a luxurious measure of freedom from his demands and intentions when it is desired.’

“I took over the keyboard and, as Goblin watched suspiciously, being very solid and curious, I wrote that I comprehended all of this, and that we now had the computer for very rapid communication of two kinds.

“It could be used for Goblin’s tapping out simple messages to me using my hand, and by Lynelle and me communicating with a larger vocabulary than Goblin could grasp.

“About this time in my adventures with Lynelle, she tried to explain these mechanisms to Patsy but met with a flat-out ‘You’re crazier than Quinn is, Lynelle; both of you ought to be locked up.’ And when Lynelle approached Pops and Sweetheart they appeared not to understand the significance of Goblin not knowing everything that was in my mind.

“Because that was it: Goblin didn’t necessarily read my thoughts! When I look back on it now it seems an earthshaking discovery, but one that I should have made a long time before.

“As for Pops and Sweetheart, I think they caught on that Lynelle believed in Goblin, which we’d withheld from them before, and they issued a couple of warnings that this ‘side of my personality’ oughtn’t to be encouraged, and surely a high-quality teacher like Lynelle ought to agree. Pops got tough about it and Sweetheart started to cry.

“I took time alone with Sweetheart in the kitchen, helping her dry her tears on her apron and assuring her that I was not insane.

“The moment is deeply inscribed in my memory because Sweetheart, who was always pure kindness, said softly to me that ‘things went terribly wrong with Patsy’ and she didn’t want for things to go badly for me.

“ ‘My daughter could have had a Sweet Sixteen Party in New Orleans,’ Sweetheart said. ‘She could have made her debut. She could have been a maid in the Mardi Gras krewes. She could have had all that—Ruthie and I could have managed everything—and instead she chose to be what she is.’

“ ‘Nothing’s going wrong with me, Sweetheart,’ I said. ‘Don’t misjudge Lynelle or me either.’ I kissed her and kissed her. I lapped her tears and kissed her.

“I might have pointed out to her that she herself had abandoned all the refinements of New

Orleans for the spell of Blackwood Manor, that she had spent her whole life in the kitchen, only leaving it for paid guests. But that would have been mean of me. And so I left it with assurances to her that Lynelle was teaching me more than anybody ever had.

"Lynelle and I gave up on the question of insight or commiseration with others as to Goblin—except for Aunt Queen—and Lynelle believed me when I complained of how difficult it was sometimes to stop Goblin's assaults.

"For instance, if I wanted to read for any length of time, I had to read aloud to Goblin. And that, I think, is why I am a slow reader to this day. I never learned how to speed through a text. I pronounce every word aloud or in my head. And in those times I shied away from what I couldn't pronounce.

"I got through Shakespeare thanks to Lynelle bringing the films of the plays for me to see—I particularly loved the films with the actor and director Kenneth Branagh—and she took me through a little Chaucer in the original Middle English, but I found it extremely hard all around and insisted we give it up.

"There are gaps in my education which no one could ever get me to fill. But they don't matter to me. I don't need to know science or algebra or geometry. Literature and music, painting and history—these are my passions. These are the things that still, somehow, in hours of quiet and lonesomeness, keep me alive.

"But let me close out the history of my love of Lynelle.

"A great high point came right before the end.

"Aunt Queen called from New York on one of her rare visits to the States and asked if Lynelle could bring me there, and both of us—along with Goblin—were delirious with joy. Sweetheart and Pops were glad for us and had no desire themselves to be away from the farm. They understood Aunt Queen's wishes not to come home just now, but they wanted her to know that they were having her room entirely redone, as she had requested, in Lynelle's favorite color blue.

"I explained to Goblin that we were going away, much farther away than New Orleans, and he had to cleave to me more closely than ever before. Of course I hoped that he'd stay at Blackwood Manor but I knew that wouldn't happen. How I knew I can't say. Perhaps because he was always with us in New Orleans. I don't know for sure.

"No matter what my hopes, I insisted that Goblin have his own seat beside me on my left on the plane. We flew first class—the three of us, with the stewardesses serving Goblin graciously—to join Aunt Queen at the Plaza on Central Park, and for a great ten days saw all that we could of wondrous sights, museums and the like. Though we had suites as big as Aunt Queen's, eternally filled with fresh flowers and boxes of Aunt Queen's beloved chocolate-covered cherries, Goblin and I bunked in with Aunt Queen as we had in the past.

"I was sixteen by this time, but it doesn't much matter to people like my people whether or not a teenager or even a grown man bunks in with his great-aunt or his granny; those are our

ways. In fact, to be utterly frank, I was still sleeping with Jasmine's mother, Little Ida, at home, though she was now very old and feeble and sometimes dribbled a bit of urine in the bed.

"But where was I? Yes, in New York with my great-aunt, at the Plaza Hotel, cuddled in her arms as I slept.

"Goblin was with us for the entire trip, but something peculiar happened to Goblin. He became more and more transparent as the trip progressed. He seemed unable to be anything else. He lacked strength to move my hand, too. I learned this when I asked him to write for me how he liked New York. He could not. And this meant that there could be no pinching and no hair pulling either, though I had pretty much punished him—by silence and scorn—for those acts in the past.

"I pondered this, this uncommon transparency in a spirit who has always appeared to me to be three-dimensional and flesh and blood, but in truth I didn't want much to worry about Goblin. I wanted to see New York.

"The high point of our trip for me was the Metropolitan Museum, and I will never forget no matter how long I live Lynelle taking Goblin and me from painting to painting and explaining the relevant history, the relevant biography, and commenting on the wonders we beheld.

"After three days in the museum, Lynelle sat me down on a bench in a room full of the Impressionist paintings and asked me what I thought I'd learned from all I'd seen. I thought for a long time and then I told her that I thought color had died out in modern painting due to World War I and II. I told her that maybe now, and only now, since we had not had a Third World War, could color come back to painting. Lynelle was very surprised and thought this over and said perhaps it was true.

"There are many other things I remember from that trip—our visit to St. Patrick's Cathedral, in which I cried, our long walk through Central Park, our roaming Greenwich Village and SoHo, our little trek to obtain my passport just in case I might soon be drawn off to Europe—but they don't press in on this narrative, except in one respect. And that is that Goblin was utterly manageable all the time, and in spite of his transparency seemed to be as wildly stimulated as I was, appearing wide-eyed and happy, and of course New York is so crowded that when I talked to Goblin in midtown restaurants or on the street, no one even noticed.

"I half expected to have him show up beside me in my passport photo but he did not.

"When we returned, Goblin appeared solid again, and could make mischief, and danced himself into exhaustion and invisibility out of sheer joy.

"I felt an overwhelming relief. I had thought the trip to New York mortally wounded him—that my inattention to him had been the specific cause of his fading severely and perhaps approaching death. And now I had him back with me. And there were moments when I wanted to be with no one else.

"Just after I passed my seventeenth birthday, my days with Lynelle came to a close.

“She had been hired to work in research at Mayfair Medical in New Orleans. And it would henceforth be impossible to keep up with her work, and with tutoring me.

“I was in tears, but I knew what Mayfair Medical meant to Lynelle. It was a brand-new facility, endowed by the powerful Mayfair family of New Orleans—of which you know at least one member—and its laboratories and equipment were already the stuff of legend.

“Lynelle had dreamed of studying human growth hormone directly under the famous Dr. Rowan Mayfair and being accepted by the revolutionary Mayfair Medical was a triumph for her. But she couldn’t be my teacher and boon companion anymore, it was simply impossible. I’d been lucky to have her as long as I did.

“The last time I saw Lynelle I told her I loved her. And I meant it with all my heart. I hope and pray that she understood how grateful I was for everything.

“She was on her way to Florida that day with two fellow female scientists, headed to Key West for a week of childless and husbandless relaxation.

“Lynelle died on the road.

“She, the speed demon, was not even at the wheel of the car. It was one of the others who was driving, and they were in a blinding rainstorm on Highway 10 when the car hydroplaned into an eighteen-wheeler truck. The driver was decapitated. Lynelle was pronounced dead at the scene, only to be revived and linger on life support for two weeks without ever regaining consciousness. Most of Lynelle’s face had been crushed.

“I only learned of the accident when Lynelle’s family called to tell us about the Memorial Mass that would be said for her in New Orleans. Lynelle had already been buried in Baton Rouge, where her parents lived.

“I walked up and down for hours, saying ‘Lynelle’ over and over. I was out of my mind. Goblin stared at me, obviously bewildered. I had no words. Just her name: ‘Lynelle.’

“Pops and Sweetheart took me to the Mass—it was in a modern church in Metairie—and Goblin became very solid for the event, and I made space for him in the pew beside me, but he agitated me considerably, demanding to know what was going on. I could hear his voice in my head and he kept gesturing. He shrugged, turned his palms up, shook his head and kept mouthing the words ‘Where is Lynelle?’

“The Mass was said by a very elderly priest and had a certain elegance to it, but for me it was a nightmare. When people went to the microphone to speak about Lynelle, I knew that I should step up, I should say all that she’d meant to me, but I couldn’t overcome my fear that I would stumble or cry. All my mortal life I have regretted that I didn’t speak at that Mass!

“I went to Communion, and as I always did after receiving Communion, I told Goblin flatly and furiously to shut up.

“Then came a frightening moment. As you might not expect, I believe strongly in the Catholic Church and in the miracle of the Transubstantiation—that the Priest in the Mass turns the wafers

and the wine into the true Body and Blood of Christ.

“Well, as I knelt in the pew after having received Communion, and after telling Goblin to shut up, I turned and saw him kneeling right beside me, his shoulder not an inch from my shoulder, his face as vivid and ruddy as my face and his eyes sharply glaring at me; and for the first time in all my life, he frightened me.

“He appeared quickened and cunning, and he gave me the creeps.

“I turned away from him, trying not to feel the obvious press of his shoulder against mine and his right hand slinking over my left. I prayed. I wandered in my mind, and then, when I opened my eyes, I saw him again—dazzlingly solid—and I felt the coldest escalating fear.

“The fear did not pass. On the contrary, I became vividly aware of all the other people in the church, seeing those in the pews in front of me with extraordinary peculiarity, and even glancing to the sides at others and then turning boldly to look over my shoulder at all those behind. I had a sense of their normality. And then again I looked at this solid specter beside me; I looked into his brilliant eyes and at his sly smile, and a desperate panic seized me.

“I wanted to banish him. I wanted him dead. I wished that the journey to New York had killed him. And who could I tell this to? Who would understand? I felt murderous and abnormal. And Lynelle was dead.

“I sat in the pew. My heart went quiet. He continued his efforts to get my attention. He was just Goblin, and when he cleaved to me, when he gave up the solid image and wrapped his invisible self around me I felt myself relax in his embrace.

“Aunt Queen flew home for the Memorial, but, as she was coming from St. Petersburg, Russia, and there was a delay out of Newark, New Jersey, she did not make it in time. When she saw her room decorated in Lynelle’s favorite blue, she cried. She threw herself on the blue satin comforter, turned over and stared up at the canopy, and looked like nothing so much as one of her own many slender flopping boudoir dolls, with her high heels and her cloche hat and her wet vacant weeping stare.

“I was so devastated by Lynelle’s death that I fell into a state of silence, and though I knew that as the days passed those around me were concerned about me, I couldn’t speak a single syllable to anyone. I sat in my room, in my reading chair by the fireplace, and I did nothing but think of Lynelle.

“Goblin went sort of mad on account of my state. He began to pinch me incessantly, and trying to lift my left hand, and rushing towards the computer and making gestures that he wanted to write.

“I remember staring at him as he stood over there at the desk, beckoning to me, and realizing for what it’s worth that his pinches weren’t any worse than they had ever been, and that he couldn’t make the lights blink more than very little, and that when he pulled my hair I hardly felt it, and that I could ignore him without consequence if I chose.

“But I loved him. I didn’t want to kill him. No, I didn’t. And the moment had come to tell him what had happened. I dragged myself out of the chair and I went to the computer and I tapped out:

“ ‘Lynelle is dead.’

“For a long moment he read this message and then I said it out loud to him, but I received no response.

“ ‘Come on, Goblin, think. She’s dead.’ I said. ‘You’re a spirit and now she’s a spirit.’

“But there was no response.

“Suddenly I felt the old pressure on my left hand, with the tight sensation of fingers curling around it, and then he tapped out:

“ ‘Lynelle. Lynelle is gone?’

“I nodded. I was crying and I wanted now to be left alone. I told him aloud that she was dead. But Goblin took my left hand again and I watched it claw the keyboard:

“ ‘What is dead?’ ”

“In a fit of annoyance and heightened grief, I hammered out:

“ ‘No longer here. Gone. Dead. Body has no Life. No Spirit in her body. Body left over. Body buried in the ground. Her Spirit is gone.’

“But he simply couldn’t understand. He grabbed my hand again and tapped out, ‘Where is Lynelle dead?’ and ‘Where is Lynelle gone?’ and then finally, ‘Why are you crying for Lynelle?’

“A cold apprehension came over me, a cold form of concentration.

“I typed in ‘Sad. No more Lynelle. Sad. Crying. Yes.’ But other thoughts were brewing in my mind.

“He snatched for my hand again, but he was weaker on account of his earlier efforts, and all he could type was her name.

“At that moment, as I stared at the black monitor and the green letters, I saw what looked like the reflection of a pinpoint of light in the monitor, and, wondering what it could be, I moved my head from side to side to block the light or get a clearer look at it. For one second it became distinctly the light of a candle. I saw the wick as well as the flame.

“At once I turned around and looked behind me. I saw nothing in my room that could have produced this reflection. Absolutely nothing. Needless to say, I had no candles. The only candles were on a hallway altar downstairs.

“I turned back to the monitor. There was no pinpoint of light. There was no candle flame. Again I moved my head from side to side and turned my eyes at every possible angle. No light. No reflected candle flame.

“I was astonished. I sat quiet for a long time, distrusting my senses, and then, unable to deny what I saw, I tapped out to Goblin the question, ‘Did you see the candle flame?’ Again there came his monotonous and panicky answers: ‘Where Lynelle?’ ‘Lynelle gone.’ ‘What is gone?’

“I went back to my chair. Goblin appeared for a moment, in a vague flash, and there came the pinches and the hair pulling, but I lay indifferent to him thinking only, praying only in a bizarre way of praying backwards, that Lynelle had never really known how badly she was injured, that she hadn’t suffered in her coma, that she hadn’t known pain. What if she had seen the car careening into the truck? What if she had heard some insensitive person at her bedside saying that her face, her beautiful face, had been crushed?

“She never suffered. That was the story.

“She never suffered. Or so they said.

“I knew I had seen the light of that candle! I had seen it plainly in the monitor.

“I murmured to Goblin, ‘You tell me where she is, Goblin. Tell me if her spirit went into the light.’ There came no answer. He couldn’t grasp it. He didn’t know.

“I hammered at him. ‘You’re a spirit. You ought to know. We are made of bodies and souls. I am body and soul. Lynelle was body and soul. Soul is spirit. Where did Lynelle’s spirit go?’

“He gave nothing back but his infantile answers. It was all he could do.

“Finally, I went to the computer. I wrote it out: ‘I am body and soul. The body is what you pinch. The soul is what speaks to you, what thinks, what looks at you through my eyes.’

“Silence. Then came the vague formation of the apparition again, translucent, face without detail; then it dissolved.

“I went on typing on the computer keyboard: ‘The soul—that part of me which speaks to you and loves you and knows you—that part is sometimes called spirit. And when my body dies my spirit or my soul will leave my body. Do you understand?’

“I felt his hand clamp onto my left hand.

“ ‘Don’t leave your body,’ he wrote. ‘Don’t die. I will cry.’

“For a long moment I pondered. He had made the connection. Yes. But I wanted more from him, and a terrifying urgency gripped me, a feeling very near panic.

“ ‘You are a spirit,’ I wrote. ‘You have no body. You are pure spirit. Don’t you know where Lynelle’s spirit has gone? You must know. You should know. There must be a place where spirits live. A place where spirits are. You *do* know.’

“There was a long silence, but I knew he was right beside me.

“I felt him grip my hand. ‘Don’t leave your body,’ he wrote again. ‘I will cry and cry.’

“ ‘But where is the home of the spirits?’ I wrote. ‘Where is the place where spirits live, like I live in this house?’

“It was useless. I typed it out in two dozen different ways. He couldn’t grasp it. And it was not long before he began to ask, ‘Why did Lynelle’s spirit leave her body?’

“I wrote out the description of the accident. Silence. And finally, his store of energy being exhausted and there being no rainfall to help him, he was absent.

“And alone, cold and frightened, I curled up in my chair and went to sleep.

“A great gulf had opened between me and Goblin.

“It had been widening for all the years that I knew Lynelle, and it was now immeasurable. My doppelgänger loved me and was as ever fastened to me but no longer knew my soul. And what was all the more ghastly to me was that he didn’t know what he was himself. He couldn’t speak of himself as a spirit. He would have done so if he could. He could not.

“As the days dragged on, Aunt Queen made plans to go off again to St. Petersburg, Russia, to rejoin two cousins she had left waiting there at the Grand Hotel. She prevailed upon me to go with her.

“I was amazed. St. Petersburg, Russia.

“She said in a very sweet and winning way that it was either go to college or see the world.

“I told her plainly I wasn’t ready for either. I was still hurt by Lynelle’s death.

“I said that I wanted to go, and in the future I would go with her if she called me, but for now I couldn’t leave home. I needed a year off. I needed to read and absorb more fully many of the lessons that Lynelle had taught me (that really won the day for me!), and to hang around the house. I wanted to help Pops and Sweetheart with the guests. Mardi Gras was coming. I’d go with Sweetheart into New Orleans to see the parades from the house of her sister. And we always had a crowd at Blackwood Farm after that. And then there was the Azalea Festival, and the Easter crowd. And I needed to be home for the Christmas banquet. I couldn’t think of seeing the world.

“When I look back on that time I realize now that I had slipped into a state of profound anxiety in which the simplest comforts seemed beyond reach. The gaiety of the guests seemed foreign. I felt afraid at twilight. Large vases of flowers frightened me. Goblin seemed accidental and unmysterious, an ignoramus of a spirit who could deliver me nothing of consolation or companionship. I was apprehensive on those inevitable gray days when there was no sun to be seen.

“Perhaps I had a premonition that there were terrible times to come.”

9

“Not six months had passed before Little Ida died in my bed one night, and it was Jasmine who found her when she came to wake me for breakfast, wondering why her mother had not come down. I was hustled away from the bed with crazy gestures and summonses and blank looks from Goblin and finally Pops dragging me out of the bedroom. And I, a spoilt brat who had just woken up, was furious.

“Only an hour later, when the doctor and the funeral director came, did they tell me what had gone down. Little Ida was the angel of my youth as surely as Sweetheart was, and she had died so quiet, just like that.

“She looked tiny in the coffin, like a wizened child.

“The funeral was in New Orleans, where Little Ida was buried in a tomb in St. Louis no. 1, which her family had had for well over a hundred and fifty years. A host of colored and black relations were in attendance, and I was thankful that it was all right to cry, if not even wail out loud.

“Of course all the white people—and there were plenty from out our way—were a little more subdued than the black people, but a good commingling shed tears.

“As for my mattress back at home, Jasmine and Lolly flipped it over. And that was all there was to that.

“I framed the best picture there was of Little Ida, a photograph taken of her at Aunt Ruthie’s house in New Orleans during Mardi Gras, and I hung that on the wall.

“In the kitchen now there was general crying, Jasmine and Lolly sobbing about their mother whenever the mood came on them, and Big Ramona, Little Ida′s mother, went silent and quit the big house altogether, sitting in her rocking chair all day for several weeks.

“I went out there again and again with soup for Big Ramona. I tried to talk to her. All she said was: ‘A woman oughtn′t have to bury her own child.’

“Crying came and went with me.

“I took to thinking of Lynelle constantly, and now Little Ida was mixed up with it too, and each day it seemed that Little Ida was more dead and gone than the day before.

“Goblin accepted that Little Ida was dead, but Goblin had never been too crazy about Little Ida —certainly he had loved Lynelle more—and so he took it rather well.

“One day when I sat at the kitchen table paging through a mail-order catalog, I saw that they had flannel nightshirts for men and flannel gowns for women.

“I ordered a whole slew of these, and when the goods arrived, I put on the nightshirt in the evening and went out to Big Ramona with one of the gowns.

“Now let me clarify here that Big Ramona is called Big Ramona not because she’s big but because she is the grandmother on the property, just as Sweetheart might have been called Big Mama if she had ever allowed.

“So to go on with my story, I came out to this little mite of a woman, with her long white hair in its nighttime braid, and I said:

“ ‘You come on and sleep with me. I need you. I’m alone with Goblin and Little Ida’s gone after all these years.’

“For a long time Big Ramona just looked at me. Her eyes were like two nickels. But then a little fire came into them, and she took the gown from me and looked it over, and, finding it proper, she came into the house.

“Thereafter we slept spoon fashion in that big bed, flannel to flannel, and she was my bedfellow as ever Little Ida had been.

“Big Ramona had the silkiest skin on the planet, and, having kept her hair long all her life, had a great wealth of it, which she always plaited as she sat on the side of the bed.

“I took to sitting with her as she went through the ritual, and we talked over all the trivia of the day, and then we said our prayers.

“Now Little Ida and I had pretty much let prayers go by the boards, but with Big Ramona we prayed for everybody in one fell swoop, reciting three Hail Marys and three Our Fathers and never failing to add for the deceased:

> *Let perpetual light shine upon them, O Lord,*
> *and may their souls and the souls of all*
> *the faithful departed rest in peace.*

“Then we’d chat about how it was a blessing Little Ida never knew real old age, or suffered illness, and that she was surely up there with God. Same with Lynelle.

“Finally, after all that, Big Ramona would ask if Goblin was with us, and then she said:

“ ‘Well, you tell Goblin it’s time to sleep now,’ and Goblin settled down beside me and kind of merged with me, and off I went to sleep.

“Gradually, over a period of several months, a semi-calm came over me entirely due to Big Ramona, and I was astonished to discover that Pops and the Shed Men, and even Jasmine and Lolly, credited me with kindness to Big Ramona in her time of grief. It was all our grief. And Big Ramona was saving me from a kind of dark panic which had begun in me with Lynelle and was now creeping closer with the loss of Little Ida.

“I took to going out fishing in the swamp with Pops, something I’d never been all that crazy about before. I got to like it out there as we poked our way through in the pirogue, and sometimes we went deep into the swamps, beyond our usual territory, and I got a kind of fearless curiosity about the swamps, and whether we might find Manfred Blackwood’s island, but that we did not do.

“One afternoon, late, we came upon a huge old cypress tree that had a rusted chain around it, grown into it in parts, and a mark carved on it that looked to me to be an arrow. It was an ancient tree, and the chain was made of large links. I was for pressing on in the direction of the arrow, but Pops said no, it was late, and there was nothing out there anyway, and we might get lost if we went any further.

“It was all the same with me because I didn’t entirely believe all the stories about Manfred and the Hermitage, and I was sticky all over from the humid air, and so we went home.

“Then Mardi Gras came, which meant that Sweetheart had to go to her sister Ruthie’s house, and this year she really didn’t want to go. She claimed she was feeling poorly, she had no appetite, not even for King cake, which was already arriving daily from New Orleans, and she thought she might be coming down with the flu.

“But at last she decided to go into the city for all the parades, because Ruthie was depending on her and she didn’t want the crowd of her elderly aunts and uncles and all her cousins to be disappointed that she wasn’t there.

“I didn’t go with her, though she wanted me to, and though her cough worsened (she called Pops every day and I usually spoke to her too), she did stay for the entire time.

“On Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent and the very day she returned, she went to the doctor without anybody prodding her to do it. Her cough was simply too bad.

“I think they knew it was cancer as soon as they saw the X rays, but they had to do the CAT scan, and then the bronchoscopy, and finally a biopsy by needle through Sweetheart’s back. These meant uncomfortable days in the hospital, but before the final pathology report came in Sweetheart was already breathing with such difficulty that they had put her on ‘full oxygen’ and had given her morphine ‘to lessen the sensation of gasping for breath.’ She was in a half sleep all of the time.

“At last they broke the news to us in the corridor outside her room. It was lymphoma in both lungs and it had metastasized, meaning she had cancer all through her system, and they did not expect her to last more than a few days. She couldn’t choose for herself whether she wanted an attempt at chemotherapy. She was in a deep coma, her breath and blood pressure getting fainter all the time.

“My eighteenth birthday came and went with nothing much to mark it, except that I got a new pickup truck and drove it back to the hospital as fast as I could to watch by the bed.

“Pops went into a protracted state of shock.

“This big and capable man who always seemed to be the one making the decisions was a shuddering wreck of his former self. As Sweetheart’s sister and aunts and uncles and cousins came and went, Pops remained silent and inconsolable.

“He took turns with me in the room, and so did Jasmine and Lolly.

“Finally Sweetheart’s eyes opened and would not be closed, and her breathing became mechanical as if she herself had nothing to do with the rhythmic heave of her chest.

“I ignored Goblin. Goblin seemed senseless to me, a part of childhood to be repudiated. I hated the mere sight of Goblin with his inane look of innocence and questioning eyes. I felt him hovering. Finally, when I could endure it no longer, I went down into the pickup truck and told Goblin that what was going on was sad. It was what had happened to Lynelle and to Little Ida, that Sweetheart was going away.

“ ‘Goblin, this is bad,’ I told him. ‘This is awful. Sweetheart’s not going to wake up.’ He looked grieved and I saw tears in his eyes, but maybe he was only imitating mine.

“ ‘Go away, Goblin,’ I said. ‘Be respectful and decent. Be quiet so that I can watch with Sweetheart as I should do.’ This seemed to work some change in him and he ceased to torment me, but I could feel him near me day and night.

“When it came time to shut off the oxygen, which was by then the only thing keeping Sweetheart alive, Pops could not be in the room.

“I was in the room, and if Goblin was there I didn’t know it. Aunt Ruthie and the nurse had the orders from the doctor. Jasmine was there and so was Lolly and so was Big Ramona.

“Big Ramona told me to stand close to the head of the bed and hold Sweetheart’s hand.

“Off came the oxygen mask, and Sweetheart didn’t gasp for breath. She just breathed with a bigger heave of her chest, and then her mouth opened just a little and blood poured down her chin.

“It was a horrible sight. Nobody expected it. I think Aunt Ruthie went to pieces and somebody was calming her. My focus was on Sweetheart. I grabbed a wad of paper tissues and went to blot the blood, saying, ‘I’ve got it, Sweetheart.’

“But more and more blood came, sliding down her chin, and then Sweetheart’s tongue appeared between her lips, pushing out more blood. Someone handed me a wet towel. I gathered up the blood, saying, ‘It’s all right, Sweetheart, I’m taking care of it.’ Pretty soon I had all the blood. And then, after four or five widely spaced breaths, Sweetheart breathed no more. Big Ramona told me to close her eyes, which I did.

“After the doctor came in and pronounced her dead, really dead—I went out into the hall.

“I felt a dreadful elation, a horror that seemed manic when I look back upon it, a hideous safety from the consequences of Sweetheart’s death due to the giant hospital enfolding us, the seamless fluorescent light and the nurses at their station very nearby. It was wild and pleasurable, this feeling. It was as if no other burden on earth existed. It was a great suspension,

and I hardly felt the tiled floor beneath my feet.

“Patsy was standing there. She was leaning against the wall, looking all too typical with her huge yellow hair, wearing one of her fringed white leather outfits, her nails glittering with pearlescent polish, her feet in high white boots.

“Only then, as I stared at her, at her painted mask of a face, did I realize that Patsy had never come to the hospital once. I went into a silent stammer. Then I spoke.

“ ‘She’s dead,’ I said, and Patsy came back fiercely:

“ ‘I don’t believe it! I just saw her on Mardi Gras Day.’

“I explained that the oxygen had been turned off and it had been very peaceful; Sweetheart had not gasped or suffered, she had never known of any danger, she had never known fear.

“Patsy suddenly flew into a rage. Dropping her furious voice into a loud hissing whisper (we were near the nurses’ station) she demanded to know why we had not told her we were turning off the oxygen, and how could we do such a thing to her (meaning herself); Sweetheart was her mother, and who gave us the right?

“Pops appeared, coming round the corner from the visitors’ waiting room, and I had never seen him so angry as he was then. He whipped Patsy around to face him and told her to get out of the hospital or he’d kill her, and then he turned to me, shaking all over, choked up and silent and trembling, and then he went into Sweetheart’s room.

“Patsy made a move towards the door of the room, but she stopped and turned to me and said a stream of mean things. They were statements like, ‘You’re always the center of it. You were there, weren’t you? Oh, yes, Tarquin, everything for Tarquin.’ I can’t clearly remember what her words were. Lots of Sweetheart’s people were gathering. Patsy went away.

“I left the hospital, got in the pickup truck, vaguely aware that Jasmine was climbing in the seat next to me, drove over to the Cracker Barrel Restaurant, went in and ordered lots of pecan pancakes, slopped them with butter and ate them till I was nearly sick.

“Jasmine sat there opposite me, nursing a cup of black coffee and smoking cigarette after cigarette, her dark face very smooth and her manner calm, and then Jasmine said very distinctly:

“ ‘She suffered maybe about two weeks. Mardi Gras Day was February twenty-seventh. She was at the parades. And here it is March fourteenth. That’s how long she really suffered, and that’s not all that bad.’

“I couldn’t speak. But when the waiter appeared I ordered more pecan pancakes, and I put so much butter on them they were swimming in butter. And Jasmine just went on smoking, and that’s how it was.

“The undertaker in New Orleans did right by Sweetheart, as she looked exquisite against the satin in the coffin, with her makeup just the proper way. There was a little eyebrow pencil where she always wore it, and a shade of Revlon lipstick that she loved. She was in her beige gabardine dress, the one she wore in spring for the tours, and there was her white orchid on her lapel.

"Aunt Queen was inconsolable. We clung to each other through much of the proceedings.

"Before they shut the coffin, Pops took the pearls from around Sweetheart's neck and the wedding band from her hand. He said he wanted to save these things, and he heaved a sigh and he bent and kissed her—the last one of us to do it—and the coffin was shut.

"No sooner had that lid come down than Patsy broke into sobs. That painted mask of a face just broke into pieces. She just cut loose. It was the most heartrending chorus to hear, as she cried and cried and called out 'Mamma' as the pallbearers lifted the coffin to carry it out. 'Mamma, Mamma,' she kept crying, and that idiot Seymour held her, with a stupid face and a limp hug, saying 'Hush' of all things, as if he had the right.

"I took hold of Patsy and her arms came around me very tight. She cried all the way out to Metairie Cemetery, her body shaking violently as I held her, and then she said she couldn't get out of the car for the graveside ceremony. I didn't know what to do. I held her. I stayed there. I could hear and see the folks at the graveside, but I stayed with Patsy in the car.

"On the long drive back home, Patsy cried herself out. She fell asleep with her head against me, and when she woke up she looked up at me—I was already about six feet tall at that point—in a kind of sleepy way, and she said softly:

" 'Quinn, she's the only person who's ever been really interested in me.'

"That night, Patsy and Seymour played the most deafening music yet to come out of the back-shed studio, and Jasmine and Lolly were in a rage. As for Pops, he didn't seem to hear it or care.

"About two days later, after spreading out her suitcases to be packed once more, Aunt Queen told me that she wanted me to go to college. She was going to look for another teacher for me—someone as brilliant as Lynelle who could prepare me for the finest schools.

"I told her I never wanted to leave Blackwood Manor, and she only smiled at this and said I'd soon change.

" 'You don't have a beard yet, my baby,' she said, 'you're growing out of that dress shirt as we sit here talking, and your shoes must be size twelve, if I have any knack for guessing such things. Believe you me, there are exciting things to come.'

"I smiled at all this. I was still feeling the dazed elation, the cruel excitement that surrounded Sweetheart's funeral for me, and I didn't really care about growing up or anything else.

" 'When that testosterone really hits your blood,' Aunt Queen proceeded, 'you'll want to see the wide world, and Goblin won't seem the fascination that he is now.'

"The next morning she left for New York to catch a flight to Jerusalem, which she hadn't visited in many years. I don't remember where she went after that—only that she was gone a long while.

"About a week after the funeral, Pops produced a handwritten will from Sweetheart's dressing table drawer that left all her personal jewelry to Patsy along with all her clothes.

"We were gathered in the kitchen when he read out the words, 'For my only girl, my dearest,

sweetest girl.' Pops then gave the will to Patsy and he looked away, and his eyes had that same flat metallic look which I had seen in Big Ramona right after Little Ida died.

"That look never went away.

"A trust fund was also left to Patsy, he mumbled, but there was a formal bank paper to deal with that. He produced an envelope of little Polaroid photographs which Sweetheart had made of her heirlooms, identifying each with writing on the front and back.

" 'Yeah, well that trust fund is next to nothing,' Patsy said, shoving the photographs and will in her purse. 'It's one thousand a month and that might have been big money thirty years ago but now it's small change. And I can tell you right now, I want my mother's things.'

"Pops took the pearl necklace out of his pants pocket and pushed it towards her, and she took it, but when he drew out the wedding ring, he said, 'I'm keeping this,' and Patsy just shrugged and left the room.

"For days and nights Pops did little or nothing but sit at the kitchen table and push away the plates of food set before him, and ignore the questions put to him, as Jasmine and Lolly and Clem took over the running of Blackwood Farm.

"I had a hand in the running of things also, and very gradually, as I conducted my first tours of Blackwood Farm and did my best to exert a charm over the guests, I realized that the crazy elation which had carried me through Sweetheart's vivid funeral was breaking up.

"A dark panic was reemerging. It was right behind me, ready to take over. I kept myself as busy as I could. I went over menus with Jasmine and Lolly, tasting hollandaise sauce and bé arnaise sauce, and picking patterns of china, and chatting with guests who had come back to celebrate anniversaries, and even cleaning out bedrooms when the schedule demanded it, and driving the tractor mower over the lawns.

"As I watched the Shed Men lay in the late spring flowers—the impatiens and the zinnias and the hibiscus—a desperate sentimental fury possessed me. I clung tight to the vision of Blackwood Manor and all it meant.

"I went walking down the long avenue of pecan trees out front, looking back at the house to treasure the sight of it and imagine how it struck the new guests.

"I went from room to room, checking on toilet articles and throw pillows and porcelain statues on mantelpieces, and the portraits, most definitely the famous portraits, and when the inevitable portrait of Sweetheart arrived—done from a photograph by a painter in New Orleans—I took down the mirror in the back right-side bedroom for the portrait to go up in its place.

"I think, in retrospect, it was a cruelty to show that portrait to Pops, but he looked at it in the same dull way in which he regarded everything else.

"Then one day he said in a low voice, after clearing his throat, Would Jasmine and Lolly take all of Sweetheart's clothing and jewels out of their room and put them in Patsy's room above the shed? 'I don't want what belongs to Patsy in my room.'

“Now, Sweetheart’s clothing included two ranch-mink coats and some beautiful ballgowns from the days when Sweetheart had been young and single and had gone to Mardi Gras balls. It included Sweetheart’s wedding dress and other fashionable suits that were years out of date. As for the jewelry, there were many diamonds and some emeralds, and most of it had come down to Sweetheart from her own mother, or her grandmother before that. There were pieces that Sweetheart had worn when she hosted weddings at Blackwood Manor, and favorite pieces—pearls, mostly—that she had worn every day.

“One morning, early, while Pops was in his half slumber at the table over a cold bowl of oatmeal, Patsy quietly loaded all these possessions into her van and drove away. I didn’t know what to make of it, except that I knew, as everyone did, that Seymour, Patsy’s bum of a backup band and a sometime lover, had a crash pad in New Orleans, and I figured she meant to take these clothes there.

“Two weeks later, Patsy came home in a brand-new van. It was already painted with her name on it. She and Seymour (the bum) unloaded a new drum set and a new electric guitar. They shut the door of the studio and began practicing at full volume. New speakers too.

“Pops was aware of all this, because Jasmine and Lolly were at the screen door commenting on all of it, and when Patsy came through the kitchen after supper he grabbed her by the arm and demanded to know where she’d earned the money for all the new things.

“His voice was hoarse from not speaking and he looked sleepy and wild.

“What followed was the worst fight they had ever had.

“Patsy was up front about the fact that she’d sold everything Sweetheart left her, even the wedding dress and the heirloom jewelry and the keepsakes, and once again, when Pops came at her she grabbed up a big knife.

“ ‘You threw that stuff into my bedroom!’ Patsy screamed. ‘You had them cart it out and shove it into my closets like it was trash.’

“ ‘You sold your mother’s wedding dress, you sold her diamonds!’ Pops roared. ‘You’re a monster. You should never have been born.’

“I ran between them and pleaded with them to stop, claiming that the guests in the house could hear them; this had to come to an end. Pops shook his head. He went out the back door. He went towards the shed, and later I saw him out there in a rocking chair, just smoking and looking into the dark.

“As for Patsy, she moved some clothes of her own out of the upstairs front bedroom, where she stayed from time to time, demanding that I help her, and when I demurred—I didn’t want to be seen with her—she called me a spoilt brat, a Little Lord Fauntleroy, a sissy and a queer.

“ ‘It wasn’t my bright idea to have you,’ she said, and then she headed for the spiral stairs. ‘I should have gotten rid of you,’ she hollered out over her shoulder. ‘Damned sorry I didn’t do what I wanted to do.’

“At that precise moment, she appeared to trip over her own feet. In a flash I saw Goblin near to her with his back to her, smiling at me. She let out a loud ‘Ow!’ The clothes fell down on the staircase, and with great difficulty she caught herself at the top step. I rushed to steady her. She turned and glared at me, and the dreadful realization came over me that Goblin had pushed her, or in some other manner made her trip.

“I was horror-struck. I picked up all the clothes quickly and I said, ‘I’ll go down with you.’ The expression on her face, the combination of wariness and excitement, of morbid respect and detestation, is something I’ll never forget. But what was in her heart I don’t know.

“I was afraid of Goblin. Afraid of what he might do.

“I helped Patsy load all her things in the van so Goblin would know I meant her no ill will. And then Patsy was off, declaring that she was never coming back, but of course she was back in two weeks, demanding to stay in the big house because she ran out of money and there was no place to go but home.

“That night, as soon as Patsy was safely away, I demanded of Goblin, ‘What did you do? You almost made her fall!’ But I got no answer from Goblin; it was as though he was hiding, and when I went back upstairs to my room and sat down at the computer he at once grabbed my hand and typed out,

“ ‘Patsy hurt you. I don’t like Patsy.’

“ ‘That doesn’t mean you can hurt her,’ I wrote, speaking the words aloud.

“At once my left hand was snatched up with extraordinary force.

“ ‘I made Patsy stop,’ he answered.

“ ‘You almost killed Patsy!’ I countered. ‘Don’t ever hurt anyone. It’s not fun.’

“ ‘No fun,’ he wrote. ‘She stopped hurting you.’

“ ‘If you hurt other people,’ I answered, ‘I won’t love you.’

“There came a silence and a chill in the room, and then by his power the computer was turned off. Then came the embrace, and with it a faint loving warmth. I felt a vague loathing of the pleasure this embrace produced in me, and a sudden fear that it would become erotic. I don’t remember ever feeling that fear before.

“Patsy had called me a queer. Maybe I was one, I thought. Maybe I was steered in that direction. Maybe Goblin knew. Goblin and me together. Fear stole over me. It seemed like mortal sin.

“ ‘Don’t be sad, Goblin,’ I whispered. ‘There’s too much sadness as it is, at home. Go off, now, Goblin. Go off, and let me think by myself.’

“In the weeks that followed, Patsy never looked at me in quite a familiar way, but I did not want to admit to anything regarding the event on the staircase, so I couldn’t ask her what she had felt.

“Meantime everybody knew that in her bathroom in the big house she was vomiting and

retching in the morning, and she took to hanging about the kitchen, saying that all the food disgusted her, and Pops, driven away from the table, spent his long hours in the shed.

"He didn't talk to the men. He didn't talk to anyone. He watched the television and he drank Barq's Root Beer, but he wasn't seeing or hearing a thing.

"Then, one night when Patsy drove up late and came into the kitchen claiming she was sick and Jasmine had to make her some dinner, Pops sat down at the table opposite her and told me to get out of the room.

" 'No, you let him stay if you've got something to say to me,' Patsy said. 'Go on, out with it.'

"I didn't know quite what to do, so I stepped into the hallway and leaned against the back doors. I could see Patsy's face, and the back of Pops' head, and I could hear every word that was said.

" 'I'll give you fifty thousand dollars for it,' Pops said.

"Patsy stared at him for a full minute, and then she said, 'What are you talking about?'

" 'I know you're pregnant,' he said. 'Fifty thousand dollars. And you leave the baby here with us.'

" 'You crazy old man,' she said. 'You're sixty-five. What are you going to do with a baby? You think I'd go through all that again for fifty grand?'

" 'A hundred thousand dollars,' he said calmly. And then he said, 'Two hundred thousand dollars, Patsy Blackwood, on the day that it's born and you sign it over to me.'

"Patsy rose from the table. She shot up and backwards, glaring at him. 'Why the hell didn't you tell me that yesterday!' she shouted. 'Why the hell didn't you tell me that this morning!' She made her hands into fists and stomped her foot. 'You crazy old man!' she said. 'Damn you.' And she turned and flew out the kitchen. The screen door banged shut after her, and Pops bowed his head.

"I came into the kitchen and stood at his side.

" 'She's already gotten rid of it,' he said. He bowed his head. He looked utterly defeated. He never said another word about it. He went back to his silent ways.

"As for Patsy, she did lie sick in her room for a couple of days during which Jasmine cooked for her and took general care of her, and then she was up and off in her new van for a series of country jamborees.

"I was very curious. Would Patsy immediately get pregnant just to make two hundred thousand dollars? And what would it be like to have a baby sister or brother? I really wanted to know.

"Pops set himself to solitary tasks around the farm. He painted the white fences where they needed it; he clipped back the azaleas. He laid in more of the spring flowers. In fact, he enlarged the garden patches and made them more brilliant than they'd ever been before. Red geraniums were his favorite flower, and though they didn't last too long in the heat he set out plenty of

them in the beds, and he stepped back often to get perspective on his schemes.

"For a while, a brief while, it seemed that somehow things would be all right. The joy had not quite fled Blackwood Manor. Goblin behaved himself, but Goblin's face mirrored my tension and my mounting conflict. The fear was winning over my mind.

"What was I afraid of? Death, I suppose. I longed to see Little Ida's ghost but it didn't happen, and then there was Big Ramona saying that people didn't appear to you once they'd gone to Heaven, unless they had a powerful reason for coming back. I wanted one last glimpse of Little Ida. I knew Sweetheart wasn't going to appear, but I had some peculiar faith in Little Ida. I wondered how long she'd been dead in my bed.

"Meantime, Blackwood Manor went on.

"Big Ramona, Jasmine and Lolly ran the kitchen to perfection as they had always done, handling the tours with equal aplomb, and Pops progressed to a rampage of repairs and renovations to keep himself exhausted all the time, so that he was in bed, out cold, by eight o'clock.

"Big Ramona did everything she could to cheer everyone, baking all her 'secret recipes' and even cajoling Patsy into staying with me for dinner a few times (when Pops was absent on errands), as if she felt that I needed Patsy, which frankly I did not.

"Some interesting guests came and went, Aunt Queen wrote loving letters, and Easter Sunday did see an enormous buffet with people from miles around and music on the lawn.

"Pops didn't help much with this Easter banquet and everyone understood why. He did appear, dressed in a fine white linen suit, but he mainly sat silent in a chair, watching the dancing and looking lifeless, as though his spirit had fled. His eyes were sunken. His skin had a yellowish tinge.

"He was like a man who'd seen a vision, and for whom normal life held no charm.

"When I looked at him, my throat tightened. I could feel my heart pounding. I could hear it in my ears. The sky was a perfect blue, the air was mild and the music of the little orchestra was lovely, but my teeth were chattering.

"Out in the center of the dance floor, Goblin danced. He was very solid, outfitted in a three-piece white suit just as I was. He didn't seem to care whether or not I saw him. He was winding his way in and out of the dancers. Then his eyes fixed on me and he became sad. He stood still and reached out to me with both arms. His face was marked with sorrow. And it was no mirror image, because I knew my face was blank with fear.

" 'No one can see you!' I whispered under my breath, and quite suddenly everyone there seemed alien to me, the way people had in the church at Lynelle's Memorial, or rather I felt myself to be a monster that I could see Goblin, a monster that he was my familiar, and there seemed no possibility of comfort or warmth in all the world.

"I thought of Sweetheart in the crypt in New Orleans. If I went to the gates of the crypt, would

I smell formaldehyde? Or would I smell something worse?

"I drifted away. I went down to the old cemetery. There were quite a few guests hanging about down there, and Lolly was passing among them with a bottle of champagne. I saw no ghosts in the cemetery. I saw only the living. Cousins of Sweetheart's talked to me. I didn't hear them. I pictured going upstairs to Pops' bedroom, taking his pistol out of the drawer and putting it to my head and pulling the trigger. I thought:

" 'If you do that, this terror will end.'

"Then I felt Goblin's invisible arms around me. I felt him wrap himself around me. There came what seemed a heartbeat from Goblin and a spiritual warmth. It was not a new thing for me to feel this. It had lately made me feel guilty. Only just now it seemed desperately important.

"And the elation returned to me, the wild elation I felt when I left Sweetheart's hospital room, and tears rolled down my cheeks. I stood under the oak tree, wondering if the sad ghosts of the cemetery could see all these living people. I cried.

" 'You come inside with me,' Jasmine said. She took me by the shoulders. 'Come on, Taw-quin, you come on,' she said. She only called me by my full name, pronouncing it 'Taw-quin,' when she was very serious. I followed her in, and she told me to sit down in the kitchen and have a glass of champagne too.

"Now, being a country kid I had drunk wine and whiskey plenty of times, though never much in quantity—but very quietly, sitting at the kitchen table—after Jasmine left—I drank a whole bottle of champagne.

"That night I was violently sick, my head hurt as though it was going to burst, the Easter party was over and I was vomiting as Big Ramona stood over me declaring in no uncertain terms that Jasmine was never to set me to drinking wine again."

10

“In the weeks that followed I felt better. I don’t think you can feel sheer panic continuously. Your mental system breaks down. It comes in waves, and you have to tell yourself, well, this will end.

“I went back to a leaden misery that was more easily manageable, and my mind was sometimes flooded with memories of Sweetheart, of her singing, and of her cooking, and of little things, unimportant and fragmentary things, that she had said, or would say, and then a terror would follow, as if someone had taken me bodily and put me out on a high window ledge nine stories up above a street.

“Meantime I hadn’t forgotten what Patsy had called me—sissy, Little Lord Fauntleroy, queer. I knew perfectly well from the realm of television and movie watching, as well as books, what that meant, and I had a deepening inevitable adolescent suspicion that that characterization was true.

“Understand, I was too good a Catholic to experiment with sexual stimulation when I was alone, and no good opportunities had come up for experimenting romantically with anybody else. I didn’t think people went blind from self-stimulation, but the contemplation of it filled me with a Catholic shame.

“But I had had wet dreams. And though I’d awakened disturbed and humiliated and cut them short, repressing the memory of what really drove them, I had a deep suspicion that they were about men.

“No wonder Pops had offered two hundred grand to Patsy for a baby. He thought I’d never marry, never have children. He knew from looking at me. He knew from the way I couldn’t hammer a nail into wood that I was queer. What had he thought about me raving over supper about movies like *The Red Shoes* and *The Tales of Hoffmann*? He knew I was queer. Hell, probably everybody who’d ever seen me knew.

“Goblin knew. Goblin was waiting. Goblin was a profound mystery of invisible tentacles and pulsing power. Goblin was queer!

“And what about the palpable embrace of Goblin, and the way that sometimes this embrace sent a cool delicious chill through all my skin, as though someone were stirring the hairs everywhere on my body and telling my body to wake up?

“There was something so eternally intimate about Goblin’s attentions that they had to be

sinful.

"Whatever the case, I did nothing but brood about it, and try to keep busy, and the panic grew in me, rising and falling, and it began to come at its very worst at twilight each day.

"Now that summer was coming and the days were longer, I knew the waves of panic longer—sometimes from about four p.m. till eight. There came that image to my mind of me putting a gun to my head and the thought that the bullet would make the pain end. Then I thought of what that would do to Pops and Aunt Queen and I put it out of my mind.

"It was around that period that I made everybody turn on certain lights at four o'clock, come hell or high water, and whether we had any guests at Blackwood Manor or not.

"I was becoming the Lord of Blackwood Manor—the Little Lord Fauntleroy, I suppose.

"Each evening, like a creature driven, I turned on classical music in the parlors and the dining room, and then I checked on the flower arrangements and the placement of furniture and went about straightening out all the pictures on the walls; and, as the panic went away a little, I sat in the kitchen with Pops.

"But Pops didn't talk anymore. He sat in a straight-back chair, staring out the screen door at nothing. It was awful to be with Pops. His eyes were more and more empty. He wasn't snapping back the way that Big Ramona had snapped back. There was no consolation I could give or take.

"Then one night, when the panic was on me heavy and it was mixed up with gloom and fear of being queer and mostly with gloom, I said to Pops:

" 'Do you think Patsy will get pregnant again just to sell you the baby?'

"This was a very uncommon kind of thing for me to say to Pops. Pops and I spoke in rather formal terms with each other. And one of the things we had never done was discuss Patsy.

"He answered in a quiet flat voice, 'No. It was just something of the moment. I figured I could save that one. I thought that that was something to do, to bring up that one. But the truth is, I don't even think she could carry one to term if she wanted to. She's gotten rid of too many, and that makes a woman's womb weak.'

"I was amazed at his candor.

"I wondered why I was alive. Maybe he'd given her money to carry me. But I didn't say anything. I'd rather be afraid of it than know. And Pops' voice had sounded too dead and metallic. I wasn't easy with Pops. I felt sorrow for him. Neither of us said another word about it.

"And then at last—at last—it was eight o'clock and I could sit down on the bedside with Big Ramona and she'd brush her long white hair and slowly braid it and I'd be safe, safe in the shadows, and we would talk, and then lie down to sleep.

"One afternoon, around three p.m., I was sitting out on the front steps of the house, looking down the long avenue of pecan trees at the changing of the light. It was a Tuesday, I'm almost sure, and we had no company, the last of the weekend guests having gone away, and the guests for the coming weekend not yet arrived.

“I hated the stillness. I saw that image of the gun at my head. What could I do, I thought, to stop thinking of putting that pistol to my head? It was too late to go out fishing in the pirogue, and I didn’t want to get all dirty in the swamps anyway, and everything—absolutely every single thing—was done in the house.

“Goblin was nowhere about. Goblin had learned to shy away from me when I got in these dark moods, when his influence to get me to do things was at its lowest. And though he would probably have come had I called him, I didn’t want to see him. When I thought of putting the gun to my head, I wondered if one bullet would kill us both.

“No, I didn’t want the company of Goblin.

“Then it occurred to me that I had not inflicted myself as Lord of the Manor on the attic; the attic was in fact an undiscovered territory, and I was too old to be forbidden to go up there, and I didn’t need to ask anybody. So I went inside and up the stairs.

“Now, at three o’clock there was plenty of light coming in the dormer windows of the attic, and I could see all the wicker furniture—whole sets of it, it seemed to me, with couches, chairs, et cetera—and the various trunks.

“I inspected first a wardrobe trunk that had belonged to Gravier Blackwood and was now standing open with its little hangers and drawers all vacant and clean.

“Then there were suitcases with old clothes in them that did not seem to be all that fascinating, and more trunks, all stamped with the name of Lorraine McQueen. New things. What were they to me? Surely there was something older, something that had belonged perhaps to Manfred’s sainted wife, Virginia Lee.

“Then I came upon a big canvas steamer trunk with leather straps to it, so big that the lid came almost to my waist, and I was already six feet tall. The lid was open a little, and the clothes were bulging out of it, the whole smelling strongly of mold, and the label on the top of the trunk read in faded ink ‘Rebecca Stanford,’ with the address of Blackwood Farm.

“ ‘Rebecca Stanford,’ I said aloud. Who could this be? Very distinctly, I heard a rustling noise behind me, or was it ahead of me? I stopped and listened. It could have been rats, of course, but we really didn’t have rats in Blackwood Manor. Then it seemed the rustling was a conversation between a man and a woman and someone arguing … *Just doesn’t happen.* I heard those words very distinctly, and then the woman’s voice … *Believe in him, he will do it!*

“She had pasted on the label, I thought. She’d packed her trunk and pasted on the label. She’d been waiting for him to come get her. Miss Rebecca Stanford.

“But where did all these thoughts come from?

“Then the noise came again. It had a rather deliberate sound to it. I felt the hair stand up on my neck. I liked the excitement. I loved it. It was infinitely better than depression and misery, than thoughts of guns and death.

“I thought, *A ghost is going to come.* Voices. No, a rustling. It will be stronger than the

apparition of William. It will be stronger than the vaporous ghosts that hover over the cemetery. It's going to come because of this trunk. Maybe it will be Aunt Camille, who has been seen so often on the stairs, coming up to the attic.

" 'Who are you, Rebecca Stanford?' I whispered. Silence. I opened the trunk. A mess of clothing was inside it and mildew had grown all over it, and there were other articles all tumbled with the fabrics—an old silver-backed hairbrush, a silver-edged comb, bottles of perfume in which the contents had dried up and a silver-backed mirror, all splotched and darkened and no good anymore.

"I lifted up some of the mass of clothing so that the items tumbled down into the lower portion of the trunk, and there I unearthed a mass of jewelry—pearls and brooches and cameos—all thrown among the dresses as if no one had cared about them, which was a puzzle to me because I knew when I held them that the pearls were real; and as for the cameos, I lifted them out one by one and saw that they were fine little works, specimens Aunt Queen would like very much, and all of them—all three—had gold frames, and good contrast to them, being made out of dark shell.

"Why were they here, so neglected, so forgotten, I wondered. Who had just heaped them here amid dresses that were molding, and when had such a thing been done?

"The noise came again, a rustling sound, and another soft sound like a footstep that made me pivot and face the attic door.

"There stood Goblin, glaring at me with alarm in his face, and very emphatically he shook his head and mouthed the word No.

" 'But I want to know who she was,' I said to him. He disappeared rather slowly, as though he were weak and frightened, and I felt the air grow cool as it often did after his disappearances, and I wondered why he had been so weak.

"By now, you can guess that I was so used to Goblin that I wasn't all that interested in him anymore. I felt superior to him. At this moment, I didn't think much about him at all.

"I set to work laying out the entire contents of the trunk upon the top of another trunk beside it. It was clear that the contents had just been heaped inside, helter-skelter, and all except the cameos and the pearls was a total loss.

"There were beautiful old mutton-sleeve dresses, dresses that went back surely to the days of long skirts, and there were old rotted lace blouses, two or more with fine shell cameos attached at the throat, and what must have been silk gowns. Some items fell apart in my hands. Cameos, all 'Rebecca at the Well.'

" 'So you loved just that one theme,' I said out loud. 'Were you named for it?'

"I heard the rustling again, and I felt something brush me, soft, as if a cat had brushed my neck. Then nothing. Nothing but the quiet and the dying afternoon around us, and a kind of dread I had to escape.

“There was nothing better than to explore this trunk.

“There were slippers that were dried up now and gnarled as if they were driftwood. An open box of powder had been tossed into the contents, and it still had a bit of sweet fragrance after all this time. A couple of perfume bottles were broken, and there was a small leather book with lots of pages of writing, but all of the writing had almost faded away. It looked like purple cobwebs.

“The mildew had gotten to everything, ruining all this finery and in some places covering the wool garments with a slimy blackness, making them a total loss.

“ ‘But this is sheer waste,’ I said out loud. I gathered up the pearl necklaces, of which there were three, and all of the five cameos, including two I had to take off the old blouses, and I went downstairs with these treasures and sought out Jasmine, who was washing some bell peppers for supper at the kitchen sink.

“I told her what I’d found and laid out the jewelry on the kitchen table.

“ ‘Well, you shouldn’t have gone up there!’ she declared. Much to my surprise, she got ferocious. ‘You just run wild these days, you know it? Why didn’t you ask me before you went up there, Taw-quin Blackwood?’ And on and on she ranted in that vein.

“I was too busy looking at the cameos. ‘All the same theme,’ I said again, ‘ “Rebecca at the Well,” and all so very pretty. Why did they get thrown up there in a trunk with all those things? Don’t you think Aunt Queen would want these things?’ Of course Aunt Queen had at least ten cameos of ‘Rebecca at the Well,’ I knew that much, though I didn’t know how she had come by the first of them, and if I had known I would have been more engrossed than I already was.

“At supper I told Pops all about it and showed him the loot, but he was no more interested in this than in anything else, and while Jasmine read me the riot act about meddling where I didn’t belong, Pops just said in his dead voice:

“ ‘You can have anything you find up there,’ which made Jasmine quiet down at once.

“At bedtime, I gave the pearls to Big Ramona, but she said she didn’t feel easy taking them, that there was a story to them and all the things that were in that trunk.

“ ‘You save them for some day when you get married,’ she said. ‘And you give those pearls to your new wife. You have them blessed by the priest first. Remember. Don’t you give them away unless they’re blessed by the priest.’

“ ‘I’ve never heard of such a thing,’ I told her. ‘A pearl necklace blessed by the priest?’

“I begged her to tell me the story—I knew she knew things—but she wouldn’t, and she said she didn’t remember it real well anyway, which I knew was a fib, and pretty soon she had me saying our evening prayers.

“It was her bright idea that night that we should say an entire Rosary, and we did it, meditating on the Sorrowful Mysteries, and then we made an Act of Contrition as well. All this we offered up for the Poor Souls in Purgatory, and then we said the famous prayer to the Archangel Michael to defend us in battle against the Evil One, and then we went to sleep.

“Next day, I wrote to Aunt Queen about the discovery, and I told her that I had put the cameos with her collection in the parlor showcase, and that the pearls were in her dressing table, if she should want them. I asked if she would please tell me the story that Big Ramona wouldn’t tell. Who was Rebecca Stanford? How did her things get in our house?

“I went back up and searched all of the attic. Of course there were wonderful items—old art deco lamps and tables and overstuffed chairs and couches that were rotting, and even a couple of typewriters of the ancient black species that weigh a ton. Other bundles of old clothes appeared mundane and fit for the rag pile, and there was an ancient vacuum cleaner that ought to have been donated to a museum.

“As for the wicker furniture, I had all of it brought down to be restored, pending Pops’ approval, which was granted with a silent nod. The Shed Men were happy to have a new project, so that went all right.

“I didn’t find anything else that was really interesting. Rebecca Stanford was the mystery of the moment, and when I left the attic for the last time I took the leather-bound book I’d found in her things, and there came again that uneasy and exciting feeling. I saw Goblin in the doorway and again he shook his head.

“That it banished despair, this excited feeling—that’s what I liked.

“The following day, Thursday, was another quiet one, an in-between day, and the panic started in on me, and after lunch I went outside to walk the avenue of the pecan trees and feel the crunch of the pea gravel under my feet.

“The light was golden and I hated it because it was already failing, and the dread was coming on me thick.

“When I reached the front steps I sat down with the leather-bound book I’d found in Rebecca Stanford’s trunk, and tried to make out the writing inside.

“It didn’t take long to decipher the name on the first page, and to my surprise it was Camille Blackwood. As for the rest of the writing, it was pretty near illegible but I could see that it was verse.

“A book of poems by Camille Blackwood! And it was Camille’s ghost that was always seen going up the attic stairs! I ran to tell all this to Jasmine, who was having a cigarette on the back steps. And again, there came the tirade.

“ ‘Tarquin, you leave that stuff alone! You put that book of poems in Miss Queen’s room until she comes home!’

“ ‘Now, listen, Jasmine, what do you think the ghost of Camille has been looking for? And you’ve seen her ghost same as I have. And why are you telling me to leave this book of poems alone? Don’t you see, she lost it, or it got put in the wrong place, and you’re acting like this isn’t momentous when it is.’

“ ‘And for who is this momentous!’ she fired back. ‘For you? Did you see Camille’s ghost on

the stairs?'

" 'Twice I did and you know it,' I answered.

" 'So how are you going to tell her you found the book, I'd like to know. You going to tell your Guardian Angel when you say your night prayers?'

" 'Not a half-bad idea,' I said. 'You've seen that ghost, you know you have.'

" 'Now you listen to me,' she said, 'I never saw that ghost, I just said I did. I said it for the tourists. I've never seen a ghost in my life.'

" 'I know that's not true,' I declared. 'I think you've even seen Goblin. There are times when you just stare at him, and I know it. You know, Jasmine, you don't fool me one bit.'

" 'You watch your tone with me, boy,' she said, and I knew that there was nothing more to be got from her.

"She just told me again that I was to put the book away. But I had other plans for it. I knew that if I held up each page to a halogen light I could probably make out a little of the poem on it. But it was not enough. I didn't have the patience or the stamina for that kind of detail.

"I put the book upstairs on my desk and went back down to sit on the front steps again, hoping some guest would drive up and something would change in the morbid miserable spell of the late afternoon. The panic was coming on strongly, and I said bitterly, 'Dear God, I would do anything to prevent this! Anything.' And I closed my eyes.

" 'Where are you, Goblin?' I asked, but he didn't answer me any more than God had, and then it seemed to me that the heat of the spring day lifted somewhat and a cooling breeze seemed to come from the swamps. Now, cooling breezes never came from that way, or at least not usually, and I turned to look down there to the far right of the house, to the old cemetery and the hulking cypress trees beyond. The swamp looked as dark and as mysterious as ever, hovering over the cemetery and rising up black and featureless against the sky.

"A woman was coming up the sloping lawn from that direction, a petite woman, walking with big deliberate steps while with her right hand she gathered up the edge of her dark skirts.

" 'Very pretty,' I said out loud. 'I knew you would be.' And then the strangeness of my words struck me, Who was I talking to, and I felt Goblin pulling on my left hand. When I turned to look at him a sort of shock passed through me, and he flickered, shaking his head violently No, and then he was gone. It was like a lightbulb when it burns out.

"To my right, the pretty young woman was still coming on, and I could see her smiling now, and that she wore a lovely old-fashioned outfit, a high-neck mutton-sleeve lace blouse with a cameo, and a tight-waisted skirt of dark taffeta to the ground. She had high-set breasts and full voluptuous hips, and they swayed as she walked. What a dish she was. Her brown hair was all pulled back from her face, revealing a serene hairline around her temples and forehead, and she had large cheerful dark eyes.

"She finally made it to the level part of the lawn where the house stands, and she gave a little

sigh as if the walk all the way up from the edge of the swamp had been hard.

" 'But they didn't bury you down there in that cemetery, did they?' I asked her. We were the best of friends.

" 'No,' she answered in a soft sweet voice as she came on and sat beside me on the steps. She wore a pair of black-and-white cameo earrings dangling from her pierced lobes, and they shivered with the subtle motion of her head as she smiled.

" 'And you're as handsome as everybody said,' she told me. 'You're a man already. Why are you so worried?'—so gentle—'You need a pretty girl like me to show you what you can do?'

" 'But who told you I was worried?' I asked her.

"She was just gorgeous, or so it seemed to me, and she wasn't just endowed by nature with an admirable face and large eyes, she had a pertness to her, a freshness, a quick refinement. Surely there was a corset shaping her little waist, and the ruffles of her blouse were stiffly ironed and flawless. Her taffeta skirt was a rich chocolate brown color that glinted in the sunlight, and she had tiny feet in fancy lace-up boots.

" 'I just know you've been worried,' she answered. 'I know lots of things. You might say I know everything that goes on. Things don't really go in a straight line the way living people think. Everything is always happening all the time.' She reached over and clasped my right hand with both of hers, and I felt the shock again, electric, dangerous, and delicious chills ran all over me, and I bent forward and I went to kiss her lips.

"Teasingly, she drew back just a little, and then, with her breast pressed against my arm, she said, 'But let's go inside. I want you to light the lamps.'

"That made perfect sense. I hated the long shadows of the afternoon. Light the lamps. Light the world.

" 'I hate the shadows too,' she said.

"We rose together, though I was faintly dizzy and I didn't want her to know it. We went inside the cool and silence of the house. I could just barely hear the sound of running water in the kitchen. Four p.m. Dinner not for another two hours, and how curious the house looked! What a curious fragrance it had—of leather and crushed flowers, of moth balls and wax.

"The living room was full of different couches and chairs with frames that were somber and black and shiny, real Victorian furniture, I thought, and there stood another antique piano, far older than the one that had been there before. It was a square grand. The draperies were a heavy midnight blue velvet, and the lace panels were full of gracefully drawn peacocks. The windows were open. How pretty, the breeze against the lace peacocks. How perfect, I thought.

"A thrilling ecstasy took hold of me, a certainty of the pure beauty of what I saw and the irrelevance of all else.

"When I looked over at the dining room I realized that it too was altered, that the draperies were a peach silk with gold fringe on them, and that the table was oval, with a vase of flowers in

the center. Fresh roses, natural garden roses on short stems, petals lying on the waxed table. Not cold magnificent florist roses. Just roses that could make your hands bleed. Drops of water on the round vase.

" 'Oh, but it's delightful, isn't it?' she said to me. 'I picked that fabric for the draperies myself. I've done so many things. Small things. Big things. I cut those roses from the back garden. I laid out the rose garden. There was no rose garden before I came. You want to see the rose garden?'

"A faint protest voiced itself in my mind that there was no rose garden on Blackwood Farm, that the rose garden was long gone for the swimming pool, but this seemed incomprehensible and unimportant, and to have mentioned such a thing seemed rude.

"I turned to tell her I couldn't hold off of kissing her, and I bent down and closed my mouth over hers. Ah. I never in my dreams felt that. I never tasted that. I never knew that. I felt the heat of her body through her clothes. It was so intense, I almost came. I put my arms around her and lifted her, and I put my knee against her skirts and pushed against her sex, and I put my tongue into her mouth.

"When she drew back, it took all my self-control to let her put her hand firmly on my chest. 'Light the lamps for me, Quinn,' she said. 'You know, the oil lamps. Light them. And then I'll make you the happiest young man there ever was.'

" 'Oh, yes,' I said. I knew right where they were. We always kept oil lamps at Blackwood Manor because, being out in the country like we were, we never knew when the electricity was going to go out, and so I found the oil lamp in the sideboard and I lifted it up and put it on the dining table. I raised the glass shade and lighted the wick with the cigarette lighter I always carried just for such things.

" 'Put it on the window, darling,' she said, 'yes, right there, on the sill, and let's go into the parlor and light the lamp there too.'

"I did what she told me, putting the lamp onto the windowsill. 'But that looks dangerous,' I said, 'with it under the lace panels and so near to the draperies.'

" 'Don't you worry, darling,' she said. She led me briskly across the hallway and into the parlor. I took the lamp out of the high Chinese chest between the two hall doorways. After it was lighted, I put it on the windowsill in the same manner as I had done across the hall. Now, that harp, that harp was the same, the big gold harp, I thought, but everything else was changed.

"This was the strangest dizziness. I didn't dare to think of having her, of her finding out that I didn't know how.

" 'You're my darling,' she said. 'Don't stare at the pretty furniture, it doesn't matter.' But I couldn't help it because only a moment ago—when I'd taken the lamp from the chest—it had been familiar and now it was different again, all those violet satin black-framed chairs, and there came a sudden chorus of voices, of people saying the Rosary!

"Candlelight flickered on the ceiling. Something was wrong, and terribly terribly sad.

“I was off balance. I was about to fall. I turned around. The sound of the voices was an inundation. And the room was full of people—people in black, seated on chairs and couches and in little gold folding chairs—and a man was sobbing.

“Others were crying. Who was the little girl who stared at me?

“There was a coffin lying before the front windows, an open coffin, and the air was heavy with flowers, drenched with flowers, the waxy smell of lilies, and then up out of this coffin there rose a blond-haired woman in a blue dress. In one swift gesture, as if she rode an invisible tide, she had come up out of the coffin and stepped down on the polished floor.

“ ‘Lynelle,’ I cried out. But it wasn’t. It was Virginia Lee. How could I not know the lovely little face of Virginia Lee! Our blessed Virginia Lee. The little girl let out a baleful cry, ‘Mamma!’ How could a woman rise from a coffin?

“ ‘You leave this house alone!’ she cried, and she reached out in a perfect fury at the woman who stood with me, her white hands almost touching her, but the woman at my side drove her back with a great hissing sound, a flash and sputtering, and the figure of Virginia Lee, our blessed sweet Virginia Lee, our household saint, the figure of Virginia Lee, and the coffin, and the bawling child, the mourners—all of it blinkered and went out.

“The chorus of voices died away, as if it were a wave on the beach being sucked back into the ocean. Hail Mary Full of Grace and then nothing. Breeze and the flicker of the oil lamp in the shadows, and that smell of burning oil.

“I was too dizzy to stand. She clung to me.

“The silence crashed around us, and I wanted to say something, I wanted to ask something; I tried to form the thought, Virginia Lee had been here, but I was holding the woman again and kissing her—and I was so hard it was painful, I couldn’t keep it back much longer, it was worse than waking from a wet dream—and saying, ‘No, I won’t let it go on, I can’t do that. That’s a mortal sin.’ But she said,

“ ‘Quinn, my darling Quinn. Quinn, you are my destiny.’ It was so inexpressibly tender. ‘Take me to my room.’

“Smoke was rising behind the thick lace. A woman was crying softly, brokenheartedly. The child’s sobs came like coughs. But the woman beside me was smiling.

“ ‘I’m light, I’m little,’ she said. ‘See my small waist? See how small I am. Carry me up the stairs.’

“Round and round and up and up. You can’t fall down from dizziness if you are going up and up. Never in my life had I felt such exultation. Never had I felt so strong.

“We were in a bedroom, and though the configuration of the walls and the archway made it seem that it was my room, it wasn’t, it was hers, and we were lying under her lace canopy and the bed was airy and the breeze was coming in from the windows and the lace was moving in the air.

“ ‘Now, my big boy,’ she said as she opened my pants and pushed to get them down and lifted up her skirts. Her skin was hot. ‘It’s perfect now.’ I slid inside of her! First time! The heat, the pressure, the tight sheath. I came in her, I flooded into her, I came, and felt her shivering and pushing her hips up against me, and her sex holding me, and then she was dying back, spent, with a short gasping laugh coming from her lips.

“I lay back. It didn’t matter, the smell of smoke, the sight of it. It didn’t matter, people rushing. She turned to me, and, rising up on her elbow, she said,

“ ‘Find what’s left of me out there, Quinn. Find the island. Find what they did to me.’ How passionate and exquisite she was, how wronged and frail. The cameo earrings shivered beside her delicate face. I touched her ear. I touched the place where the gold pierced it. I touched the handsome black-and-white cameo at her throat.

“ ‘Rebecca,’ I said. Beyond her stood Goblin shaking his head No. Goblin was so vivid, Goblin was using all his power.

“ ‘Do that for me,’ she said. ‘Do that and I’ll come back to you, Quinn. And it will be sweet, always so sweet. I was a creature born to make others happy. That’s what I believe in, Quinn. I’ve given you your first time, Quinn. Don’t ever forget me. To give pleasure. That’s all I’ve ever tried to do.’

“The cameo at her throat, it was so like those in Aunt Queen’s collection yet it was different. But all of this made sense. She’d died out there wearing this cameo. *Yes.* I reached out to touch her soft brown hair.

“ ‘Tawquin, Tawquin, Taw-quin,’ Jasmine shouted. She was running up the steps. I could feel it, the vibration of the floorboards.

“I was alone.

“I sat up. My pants were open. The semen was all over my jeans and on the bedspread. I saw to myself immediately, and then, grabbing for a wad of paper tissue from the nightstand, I wiped up the evidence and stood staring at Jasmine as she came into the room.

“ ‘You crazy boy,’ Jasmine cried. ‘Why did you put those lamps on the windowsills? Are you stupid? You set the curtains on fire! What was going on in your mind?’

“I flew into action. On fire! Blackwood Manor! Never. But she grabbed my arm as I tried to pass her.

“ ‘We put it out!’ she said. ‘Why did you do it?’

“It could have been a disaster.

“As it was, Lolly and Big Ramona, with the help of the Shed Men, replaced the burnt lace panels that afternoon. The heavy draperies were all right. They hadn’t caught.

“I was in a state of terror. I sat numb in my room. I hadn’t answered a single question. Goblin had come around. Goblin sat in the other chair on the other side of the fireplace and wore a worried look on his face. The computer switched itself on. But I wouldn’t go to it. I didn’t want

him to take my hand. I didn't have answers for him.

"Finally, in pure weariness of his being there and staring at me, I said, 'Why did she come? Where did she come from?'

"He couldn't answer. He was confused.

"I went to the computer and let him take my left hand. He tapped out: 'Rebecca was very bad. Burn down the house. Evil Rebecca.'

"I tapped out: 'Tell me something I don't know, like where did she come from?'

"Long silence. Nothing. I went back to brooding in my chair.

"Over supper, with Pops, Jasmine, Lolly and Big Ramona, I told them all pretty much what had happened. I told them the erotic part of it, that the ghost and I had been intimate. I tried to describe how very 'real' it had all seemed, and how reasonable to light those lamps as Rebecca had wanted, and I told them the things Rebecca said.

"I showed them a cameo that I had found in the attic trunk, one that I'd put in the case in the living room, one that had belonged to Rebecca Stanford, no doubt.

" 'Rebecca at the Well,' don't you see? And she was named Rebecca. Who was she, why did she come?'

"I felt a sudden dizziness. I looked down at the cameo on the kitchen table. It seemed I heard her saying something to me or I was remembering something. I tried to clear my head. I tried to remember. I strained to remember: *Died out there with the cameo on, died out there.* I shivered all over. *So many pretty lace blouses. That's what he had always liked, white lace.*

"I tried to talk clearly. I told them what she said about me finding the island, and the promise that she drew from me, that I would find 'what was left of her' out there.

"Pops looked as grave as ever when he spoke. His voice was listless. 'Don't go looking for that island. You can pretty damn well gauge that by now that island's gone. The swamp's swallowed it, and if you see this damned ghost again, you make the Sign of the Cross.'

" 'That's what you should have done, all right,' said Big Ramona, 'and she wouldn't have had any power because she came from Hell.'

" 'But how could she get out of Hell to come to me?' I asked.

" 'Those cameos of hers,' said Jasmine, 'you go put them back in the attic. Put everything back in that trunk just the way it was.'

" 'It's too late for that,' said Pops softly. 'Just don't let her get you again.'

"We sat there in silence. Then Big Ramona was boiling milk for our café au lait and it smelled good. I remember that, the smell of that hot milk.

"I just realized that Lolly was all dressed up because she was going out with her boyfriend, who was always trying to marry her and lure her away but never succeeded. She looked like a Hindu beauty, Lolly. And Jasmine, Jasmine in her plain shirtwaist dress of red silk was smoking in the kitchen, which was rare.

“The hot milk went into the coffee cups. I looked down into the steam.

“ ‘Everybody believes me,’ I said. ‘You all believe me.’

“Pops said to Jasmine, ‘Tell him.’

“ ‘Tell me what?’ I asked.

“Jasmine drew on her cigarette and crushed it out in her plate. Then she lit another one, just like that. ‘It was Goblin,’ she said, ‘who came in here and pointed and carried on about the curtains burning. It was Goblin, in a flash’—she snapped her fingers—‘as big as life.’

“ ‘Knocked the plate out of her hand,’ said Lolly.

“Jasmine nodded. ‘Knocked a plate off the drainboard there, too.’

“I was speechless. I was overwhelmed. All my life these very people had insisted Goblin didn’t exist, or I shouldn’t be talking to Goblin, or Goblin was my subconscious, or Goblin was just an imaginary playmate, and now they were saying these things. I had no answer. I felt amazement more than anything else.

“ ‘How could that creature knock that plate off the drainboard?’ asked Pops.

“ ‘I’m telling you, it happened,’ said Jasmine. ‘I was rinsing the dishes in the sink, and that plate went crash, and then, when I turned, there he was, and he was pointing to the door, and he knocked the plate out of my hand.”

“Everybody went quiet.

“ ‘And this is why you believe me?’ I asked. ‘Because you saw Goblin with your own eyes?’

“ ‘I’m not saying I believe one word of what you said,’ Jasmine fired back. ‘I’m just saying I saw Goblin. That’s all I have to say.’

“ ‘You know who that Rebecca was, don’t you?’ I asked, glancing around at everyone. Nobody said a word.

“ ‘I’m going to have the priest out here,’ said Pops in the same lifeless fashion in which he’d said everything else. ‘I’m going to get Fr. Mayfair here. This is just too many ghosts, and I don’t care if one of them was Virginia Lee.’

“ ‘And you, you idiot boy,’ said Big Ramona, ‘stop glorying in the fact that everybody believes you and get it straight in your head that you nearly burned down this house.’

“ ‘That’s the damned truth,’ said Jasmine. ‘I’m not saying I don’t believe you saw this creature, this thing, this woman, but Mamma’s right, you damned near burnt down Blackwood Manor. You set the damned place on fire.’

“ ‘Look, I know that,’ I said defensively. I got real defensive. ‘But who was she? Why’d she want to burn down this house? Did she die out there on the island? That has to be it.’

“Pops raised his hand for silence. ‘Doesn’t matter who she was. If she did die out there, there’s nothing left of her. And you do what I tell you about making the Sign of the Cross.’

“ ‘Don’t you ever be caught up by her again,’ said Lolly.

“And on and on it went for a half hour, them castigating me and excoriating me and

everything else in the book.

"When I left the kitchen, I was in a sort of daze. Memories of being with her were coming back to me and I didn't dare tell the Kitchen Committee. I just wanted out.

"I went into the parlor, maybe to convince myself that it was the parlor I knew and not that strange apparition, and I found myself looking at the portrait of Manfred Blackwood. So distinguished. So much authority in his bulldog face. It is amazing, the varieties of beauty. His huge mournful eyes, his flattened nose, his jutting chin and turned-down mouth all seemed harmonious and silently grand. I found myself talking to him, murmuring to him that he knew who that Rebecca Stanford was, and I would find out.

" 'Why didn't you come to try to stop her?' I asked him, watching the play of light on the portrait. 'Why did it have to be Virginia Lee?'

"I went into the dining room and looked up at the portrait of Virginia Lee. I had seen her, vital, in motion, I had heard her voice, I had seen her small blue eyes blazing with anger and outrage. The dizziness came again. I welcomed it, straining to catch the mumbled voices that were maddeningly beyond my hearing: *Mean to my children.* Crying, brokenhearted. *I'm afraid I'll die and someone will be mean to my children.* The chorus of the Rosary came from the living room. She was crying. *So mean to my poor children.*

" 'Virginia Lee,' I said. 'I didn't mean to do it.' But only the silence came back at me, and her portrait was just a portrait, and there were no more prayers. I was struggling to remember things that hadn't happened. I was sleepy all over. I had to lie down.

"When I reached my room I was utterly exhausted. I cleaned up the bedspread as best I could with a wet washcloth, and then I flopped down and went into a strange half sleep. I felt myself falling out of consciousness.

"Rebecca was talking to me. The room was her room again, and she explained again that things did not happen in a straight line. Everything was happening all the time. She was always here. *I grow no older. I never escape.* I wanted to ask her what she meant, but some arbitrary darkness crept in, and I turned over and fell into a deep sweet state somewhere between sleep and wakefulness, in which my body enjoyed its exhaustion and knew it was exhausted from having spent itself sexually, and she and her strange talk were all gone.

"I was deliciously drowsy when suddenly I realized Pops was in this room. Pops was standing at the foot of the bed.

"Pops started to talk to me in his dull, flat voice:

" 'All your life you've talked of ghosts and spirits, of Goblin, and seeing shades down there in the cemetery, and now this thing has come either into our house or into your imagination, I honestly don't know which. But you have got to fight for your mind. You have got to fight for some direction of your brilliance, you, at the age of eighteen, have got to determine some ambition, and that ambition must never be clouded by these ghosts.'

“I sat up out of respect for him, and he went on.

“ ‘I’m angry,’ he said. ‘I’m real angry that you nearly burnt down this house. But I don’t know what to make of what happened to you, and as angry as I am I’m convinced that something clouded your reason because you love Blackwood Farm as much as I do.’

“I said at once that this was true.

“ ‘Well, you get your mind in order, you hear me?’ he went on. ‘And in the meantime, put this woman’s cameos back in her trunk. Close that trunk. Shut it up tight. That trunk is Pandora’s Box. You let her spirit out when you opened it, so put everything you took out of it back.’

“He paused for a moment, and then he turned and stared at me with his wan expression and his pale face.

“ ‘I’ve given you all I can give you,’ he said. ‘I don’t have anything more to teach you. Lynelle taught things that I could never teach you. She was better than school, I don’t argue with it. But you’re wasting your time now. You’re wasting everything. And I know perfectly well that you won’t go to any college right now, and maybe even at age eighteen that’s not the right thing. But Aunt Queen has got to come home and she’s got to find you a new teacher and she’s got to take you on.’

“I nodded. Aunt Queen wasn’t terribly far away at this time. She was attending a seminar in Barbados, and I knew that Pops would call her and that she’d be coming home. I hated it, hated that he would interrupt her, but after what had happened she’d definitely be called home.

“Pops stared at me for a long time, and then he went out of my room.

“I felt a dull shock because in all the years I had lived with Pops he had never spoken that many words to me at any one time. Also I had seen that he was weak and washed out, and no longer the hale and hearty individual that he had always been.

“That I had caused him worry upset me something fierce.

“I went down to the parlor and I got the cameos out of the display case which I had taken from the trunk. I brought them up to my room, and I resolved that tomorrow by daylight, I’d go up to the attic and put them back. Maybe. Maybe not. After all, the ghost hadn’t said anything to me about opening her trunk.

“Again I fell into a doze, and there was a delightful wicked sense of Rebecca being there. *Just a thing for pleasure, that’s all I ever was, Quinn. That’s what I’ll be to you, Quinn. This is the time, Quinn, just a thing of pleasure, that’s all I ever wanted to be. Somebody’s jewel, somebody’s ornament, somebody’s pet, who knows?*

“Sometime very late Big Ramona came and roused me and told me to dress for bed. I did what she told me, and when I came out of the bathroom in my long flannel nightshirt, she looked at me and said:

“ ‘You’re too old for me to be sleeping with you.’

“ ‘That’s not true,’ I protested at once. ‘I don’t want that ghost coming back. I don’t want that

—what happened. If I need that, I'll take care of that somewhere else. I need you to sleep with me,' I said. 'Come on, let's say our prayers.'

"And we did, and we hugged each other close as we slept, and I slept so deep that there seemed no dreams to it, only deep deep rest until the morning light astonished me coming through the windows and spilling into the room.

"It was early, hours before my usual lazy adolescent time, but I got up quietly, taking great pains not to wake Big Ramona, and I dressed in my jeans and boots and got my heavy garden gloves and my rifle and my hunting knife, and, stopping silently in the kitchen to get a big knife —the very knife that Patsy had waved at Pops—I stole out of the house down towards the landing and the pirogue tied there.

"The little cemetery was bleak in the sunshine and overgrown with weeds, and somewhere in the back of my distracted mind I knew that Pops in the natural course of things would never have let it get that way, and that he was not himself anymore; that grief was bringing real harm to Pops, and I had to do something about those weeds. I had to clean up the tombs. I had to take care of more things. I had to take care of Pops too.

"I also knew that Goblin was near me but not showing himself, and I knew that Goblin was afraid.

"I didn't care about Goblin, and I thought perhaps that Goblin knew that too.

"As I look back on it now, I know that he knew it. He knew that once he had been the central mystery of my life and that he was that no longer—Rebecca had taken his place—and he was hanging back, weakened by my indifference and full of a panic which perhaps he had learned to feel from me.

"My heart was set on finding Sugar Devil Island, and so, with the pole in hand I pushed away from the bank and set out into the swamp."

11

“Now, I had been in the swamp plenty as a youngster. I knew how to fire the rifle. I knew how to fish. And Pops and I had ranged quite far from the banks of the farm. But there was a territory to which we adhered, and it had always seemed spacious enough for us because we caught lots of fish in it, and the swamp itself seemed so unvarying in its morass of cypress, tupelo gum and wild oak, its giant palmetto and endless snags of vine.

“But now, it was my single object to push beyond this territory and, in choosing a direction, I was guided only by my memory of the tree which had the arrow deeply carved into the bark, above its girdle of rusted chain.

“It took me longer to find than I would have liked, and the air was humid and heavy, but the water was at a good level for the pirogue, and so, taking out my compass, I did my best to chart a course in the direction to which the arrow pointed.

“If Pops and I had ever been this far, I wasn’t conscious of it. What I was conscious of was that I could get dangerously lost. But I didn’t care much about it. I was too sure of my mission, and when I began to experience feelings of dizziness I just pushed on.

“Again I heard voices speaking, just as if these whispers pushed at me and prodded me and broke my sense of balance, and once again a woman was crying, only it wasn’t Virginia Lee.

“You can’t do this to me, the woman sobbed. *You can’t do it!* And there came a rolling rumble of deeper voices—*Engraved forever!* said the woman, and then I lost the thread of it.

“I could hear it but not understand it. It was submerged in a tangle of dreams and half impressions. I was desperate to follow, to remember, but I had to keep my balance in the pirogue, I had to not drop the pole.

“The pole could fall into the slimy water and I’d have to go after it. Now, I’d been up to my waist in swamp water before and I didn’t like it one bit. The green light of the sun was flashing in my eyes.

“I thought I had caught more words, but then the memory was gone from me and nothing else came clear. I heard the birds crying, those strange seemingly isolated melancholy cries.

“Meanwhile the pirogue glided through the duckweed, and I was steering it steadily past the jungles of cypress knees, and I became aware of a huge tangle of blossoming wisteria to my right. The flowers were so vividly purple, so lusciously purple that I heard myself laugh out loud at

them.

"The dizziness came again, and there was a luxury to it, a sweetness, like being slightly high on champagne. The light was dappled and the wisteria was so pure. I could hear the voices. I knew one of them belonged to Rebecca, and that Rebecca was in pain.

"… they'll catch you, they'll find you out … That fragment I caught like one trying to catch a falling leaf. And then a laughter came over her voice, drowning it out, and no more words were clear.

"Suddenly, there rose up on my right a giant cypress, surely one of the oldest I'd ever seen, and there was the girdle of iron chain, as fiercely rusted as before, and the arrow, deeply etched, instructing me to veer to the left. Now that was surely new territory, in the opposite direction from Blackwood Farm. And when I checked my compass I learned I was correct.

"The pirogue was traveling very easy now, and my pole was going down deep. I dreaded more than ever falling into the water, and on I sped, when another mass of gloriously blooming wisteria appeared.

"You understand how wild that vine is, I know you do, and how beautiful it can be. And now the sun was pouring down on it, in shafts, as it might through a cathedral window, and it was spreading out in all directions, except that there seemed a channel into which I'd found my way.

"On and on I went until the configuration of rusted chain and carved arrow appeared again. This time it was only to tell me to go on in the same direction, and I followed it, knowing that I was very far from Blackwood Farm, maybe an hour from any kind of help, and that is a lot in the swamp.

"I glanced at my watch and discovered that I was wrong by thirty minutes. I'd been gone an hour and a half. The excitement I'd felt on waking grew stronger inside me. And when another cypress appeared with its ancient chain and its jagged arrow I veered slightly to the left again, only to come upon another girded tree whose arrow told me to veer right.

"I was drifting along, in even deeper water, when, gazing upwards, I realized I was looking at a house.

"At that moment the pirogue struck a bank. I was jolted nearly out of it. I had to get my bearings. Wild blackberries swarmed over the front of the boat and reached out to scratch me, but with the kitchen knife I slashed at them and then pushed them back with my gloved hands.

"It wasn't an impossible situation. And in the meantime I could see that my first visual impression had been an accurate one. There was a big house looming up in front of me, a house of natural weathered cypress built on pilings, and it occurred to me that I had gone off our land and might have come to someone else's home.

"Well, I'd approach with respect, I figured, and, when I had cut through more of the wild blackberries and pulled the pirogue up onto the bank, I turned around to find myself in a forest of slapping palmetto and sickly blue-gum saplings rising up like the ghosts of trees beneath the

desperate vicious arms of giant cypress trees on both sides of me and further on.

"I stopped, felt the dizziness again, and then I heard the humming of bees. I wiped at my face but my gloves were dirty and I probably got my face dirty, and though I had a linen handkerchief in my pocket, along with lots of paper tissue, it was no time for that.

"I walked on, making sure the land was solid, and realized I was climbing upwards onto a mound. At last a clearing broke in front of me, a very large clearing surrounded by immense cypress—in fact, it seemed then that the cypress had anchored the clearing and made an island out of it by their knees and their hateful sprawling roots.

"And in the midst of this clearing rose the house, some six to eight feet above ground atop its log foundations, a seemingly circular structure of two stories, each of connecting arches and in a rising succession of smaller sizes, like the two layers of a wedding cake. Adding to this impression was a cupola on the very top.

"A solid wooden stairs rose from the earth to the front doorway, and affixed above this front door was a rectangular sign with deeply etched and plainly readable letters:

PROPERTY OF

MANFRED BLACKWOOD

KEEP OUT

"If I'd ever felt as much triumph before, I didn't remember it. This was my house, this was my island; I had discovered what was only legend to other people, and it was all mine. I'd reclaimed Manfred's tale. I'd seen what William never saw, what Gravier never saw, what Pops never saw. I was here.

"In a heated delirium I surveyed the building, almost incapable of any true reasoning and not even remembering Rebecca's plea to me, or the deep simmering pain which I had just heard inside my head.

"The droning of the bees, the rattle and flapping of the giant palmetto leaves, the soft crush of gravel under my feet—all these things sort of embraced me and upheld me and seemed to wrap me in an incalculable fascination, as though I'd come into the paradise of another man's faith.

"I was also dimly aware, unwillingly aware, that though the ancient trees might have created this clearing, the clearing itself could not have remained free in any natural way. The swamp should have swallowed it up a long time ago. As it was the blackberries were eating at it, and the wicked, high-toned wisteria had a claim on it, sprawling out to shroud the undergrowth to the right of the house and to the back of it, coming up over the high two-story roof.

"But somebody was living here. Probably. But then maybe not. At the idea of squatters or trespassers I was incensed. I regretted that I hadn't brought a handgun. Should have. And might whenever I came back. It all depended upon what I discovered in the house.

"Meantime I had spied another structure, something seemingly solid and massive, well behind

the house. The wisteria covered half of it. The sun was striking off the surface of the rest of it, positively sparkling on it and making a dazzle through the spindly trunks of the newborn trees.

"It was to this structure that I went first, very reluctantly passing by the inviting front steps of the house but determined to discover what this massive shape was.

"I could only explain it to myself as some sort of tomb. It stood as tall as me, was rectangular in shape and appeared to be made of granite, except for panels set into it front and rear and each side, which were made out of a metal which appeared to be gold.

"I yanked off the nest of wisteria as best I could.

"There were figures carved into this metal, Grecian figures who seemed to be engaged in a funeral procession, and the procession appeared continuous from panel to panel, enclosing the structure to which there was no back or front or door.

"I must have circled it some ten times, running my hands over the figures, touching the finely carved profiles and folds of garments, and realizing very slowly that the figures were more Roman than Greek. I made this judgment because the human beings were not idealized as the Greeks would have made them but were in fact slender and particular people of several groups. At one point it occurred to me that this was of pre-Raphaelite design, but I wasn't sure of myself on that score.

"Let me say simply, the figures were classical, and the procession was unending, and though some of the figures appeared to be weeping and others tearing their hair, there was no corpse or bier.

"After I'd surveyed it carefully I began to try to open the thing. But it was no luck. The gold panels—and by now I was convinced that they were gold—seemed firmly fixed into the granite pillars that marked the four corners of the structure, and the granite roof, peaked like those of so many New Orleans tombs, was very securely in place.

"To make certain that the substance of the panels was gold I chose a place on one of the panels very near the granite, and with the edge of my hunting knife I scratched there and discovered that not only did no base metal show through but that the gold itself was soft. Yes, it was gold. It was lots and lots of gold.

"I was totally baffled by this thing. It was august, it was beautiful, it was quite literally monumental. But to whom had this monument been made? Surely this wasn't Rebecca's tomb!

"Of course Mad Manfred had to be responsible for this thing. It befitted his Byronic image of the builder of Blackwood Manor, his fancy, his munificent dreams. Nobody else would come out here and make a gold tomb. Yet how could it be Mad Manfred's mausoleum? How could his interment have been achieved?

"My brain was crazy with questions.

"Mad Manfred had been past eighty when he made his Last Will and Testament. I had seen the dated document. And at the time of his wild escape from the sickroom to the landing he had

been eighty-four.

"Who or what had awaited him on this island? And, of course, this tomb, if that is what it was, had no name or date or any writing on it. How utterly bizarre that one should make a mausoleum of solid gold and then leave it unmarked.

"I decided to take my time before going up into the house. I walked around the island. It wasn't very big. But over half of its banks were thoroughly blocked by the largest cypress trees I had ever seen. Choked in between where they could get the light were the wild tupelo gum and the black gum, making an impassable barrier, and then to the right of where I'd come ashore a mass of water oak and ironwood and the wisteria which I've already described.

"In fact, it was pretty evident that there was only a small place to come ashore, and I had done it properly by dint of sheer luck. Unless some other agency was involved.

"It was very still, except for the bees and a general pulsing drone that seemed to rise from the swamp itself.

" 'Goblin,' I called, but he didn't answer me, and then I felt him brush past me, soft as a cat against my neck, and I heard his voice in my mind:

"Bad, Quinn. Go home. They worry about you at home.

"The truth of that seemed very certain, but I had no intention of responding.

" 'What is this place, Goblin? Why did you say it was bad?' I asked. But he gave me no answer, and then, after a pause, he told me again to go home. He said, *Aunt Queen has come home.*

"I was powerfully intrigued by that statement. Goblin had never told me the whereabouts of others. But I was by no means ready to go back!

"I sat down on the stairs. It was solid, which was no surprise to me since it was built of cypress; the whole house was built of cypress, and cypress never rots.

" 'Rebecca,' I asked aloud, 'are you here?' There came that dizziness again, and, whereas I had been just a little afraid of it in the pirogue, I let myself slip deeper into it now, closing my eyes and lying back and looking up at the broken leafy light.

"There rose a wave of conversing voices, whispers, curses, a woman crying again, Rebecca crying, *Can't torture me like this,* and then a man muttering and saying, *Damnable,* and someone laughing. *What did you expect of me!* asked a voice. But the surging, driving conversation broke with no further clarification and washed away from me, leaving me almost sick.

"I felt a hatred for the voice that had spoken, the voice which had asked, 'What did you expect of me!' and it seemed a logical hate.

"I stood up and took a deep breath. I was sick. The damned heat had made me sick. I was also getting bitten by mosquitoes, and that was making me feel sick as well.

"I'd been too softened by staying indoors on hot days like this.

"I waited until my head cleared, and then I went up the stairs and through the open doorway, the door itself having been pushed aside.

“ ‘Fearless squatters,’ I thought, and, as I noted that the door contained a big rectangle of leaded glass, glass that was clean, I was outraged. But I also had the strong sense that no one else was in this house.

“As for the room before me, it was perfectly circular and its unbroken surround of arched windows appeared to be bare of any covering at all. A stairway to the far left led to the floor above, and to the far right was a big heavily rusted iron fireplace, rectangular in shape with a rising chimney pipe and open folding iron doors. It was chock-full of half-burnt wood and ashes. The ashes were spilt out on the floor.

In the center of the room was the most surprising thing: a great marble desk upon an iron frame and a Roman-style chair of leather and gold. The style I mean here is what people today call a director’s chair. But it’s a style as old as Rome.

“Of course I went immediately to this configuration of marvelous furniture, and I discovered modern pens in a heavy gold cylinder, a nest of tall thick candles all melted together on a gold plate and a casual heap of paperback books.

“I fanned out the books and perused their covers. They ranged from what we so arrogantly call popular fiction to books on anthropology, sociology and modern philosophy. Camus, Sartre, de Sade, Kafka. There was a world atlas and a dictionary and several picture dictionaries for children, and also a pocket-size history of ancient Sumer.

“I checked the copyright dates in a few of these books. And I also glanced at the prices. This was all recent, though most were now swollen and soft from the humidity of the swamp.

“The wicks of the candles were black and the pool of wax that surrounded them on the gold plate argued that they had been burnt down quite a ways.

“I was shocked and intrigued. I had a squatter who came here to read. I had a squatter who warmed himself at a fireplace. And the gold chair, how handsome it was, with its soft brown leather seat and back, and its crossed legs, and its ornately carved arms. One little test with my knife assured me that its simple frame was genuine gold. Same with the plate and cylinder which held the pens.

“ ‘Same as the mausoleum outside,’ I whispered. (I always talk out loud to myself when I’m confused.) ‘I have a squatter who likes gold.’

“And then there was the dark multicolored marble of the desk, and the simple iron frame that bore the marble’s weight.

“A squatter with taste, and intellectual interests! But how did he or she get here, and what had this to do with the attacks of dizziness I had felt as I proceeded? What had this to do with anything but trespassing, as far as I knew?

“I gazed about me at the open windows. I saw the stains of rain on the floor. I saw the flickering greenery. I felt faint again and batted at a mosquito that was trying to drive me mad.

“ ‘Just because this character has taste doesn’t mean he’s not upstairs waiting to kill you,’ I

reminded myself.

"Then, going to the interior stairs, I called out:

" 'Hello the house!'

"There was no sound above. I was convinced the place was deserted. If the mysterious reader had been here the books would not have been so swollen.

"Nevertheless, I called out again, 'Hello, Tarquin Blackwood here,' and I went up slowly, listening for any sound from above.

"The second floor was much smaller and tighter than the first, but it was made of the same firm planks, and light came in not only from the barren arched windows but through the cupola above.

"But those details I scarcely noticed. Because this room was markedly different from the one below it in that it contained a loathsome and hideous sight.

"This was a set of rusted chains attached to the wall opposite the chimney, chains which obviously had no other purpose than the chaining of a human being. There were handcuffs and ankle cuffs on these chains, and beneath these idle witnesses to some abomination there was a thick dark syrupy-looking substance and the remnants of a human skull.

"I was disgusted beyond imagining. I was almost violently sick. I steadied myself. I stared at the black residue, this seeming tar, and at the skull, and then I made out what seemed like the disintegrating whitish powder of other bones. There was also the evidence of rotting cloth in the morass, and something glinting brightly though it was caught in the dark viscid tar.

"I felt a cold stubborn rage. Something unspeakable had happened here. And the perpetrator was not on the premises, and hadn't been for several months, but might at any moment return.

"I approached this tarlike substance. I knelt down beside it and I picked out the glinting fragment and discovered it with no surprise to be one of the earrings which Rebecca had worn when she came to me. Within seconds my trembling fingers had found the mate. And there, in the nauseating substance, was the cameo Rebecca had worn at her throat. I collected this too.

"I was paralyzed with excitement, but that didn't keep me from seeing that a fifth chain, a chain quite separate from those which must have once bound wrists and ankles, also dangled from the wall, and at the end of it was a hook. This hook was caught in the dark filth, and the dark filth contained fragments of fabric and fragments of hair.

"It was this fifth chain that horrified me more than anything else.

"Chills ran over me. My head was swimming and I suffered a loss of balance, and a sense again of Rebecca speaking to me, Rebecca whispering to me, Rebecca crying; and then her voice rose, distinct in the buzzing silence of the house: *You can't do it, you can't!*

" 'Not Rebecca,' I whispered. But I knew that she had died here, I knew that for a century her bones had moldered here, I knew that even now, before my eyes, the tiny creatures of the swamp were eating at what was left of her—I could see them at work in the ugly residue—and soon

there would be nothing at all.

"She had sent me here. I had a right to touch the skull, and as I did so it disintegrated before my eyes. It was no more now than a heap of white powder along with all the other bones. I should never have touched it! But it was too late.

"Quite suddenly I flew into action. I stood up. I secured the earrings and the brooch in my pocket. I pulled out my hunting knife—the kitchen knife was in the pirogue—and I spun round to face the stairs. No one had come, that was obvious, but at any moment someone might.

"And who were they, or who was he, I should say, who could sit at a desk and read by the light of candles when such a horror existed on the floor above?

"This had been a house of torture, this place, and surely it had been my great-great-great-grandfather Manfred who brought his victims here, I reasoned, and here it was that Rebecca had met her end.

"Who was it now who knew these things and did nothing about them? Who was it who had brought a fine marble desk here and a golden chair? Who was it that was buried in that doorless mausoleum? The whole pattern was overwhelming to me. I was shaking with sheer exhilaration. But I had to determine certain things.

"I went to the windows and was amazed to discover how well I could see over the swamp. And there, way far away, I saw Blackwood Manor very distinctly on its raised lawn.

"Whoever lived in this place, whoever visited it, could spy upon the house if he wanted to; he could see—among other things—my very windows and the windows of the kitchen as well. If he had a telescope or binoculars, and I saw neither one here, he could have studied us all very well.

"It was chilling to see this clear view of the house, but I used it to check my compass. I had to get home and fast.

"The voices threatened again. The dizziness came over me. I reeled. The wild cries of the birds seemed to mingle with Rebecca's voice. I was near to fainting. But I had to resist this.

"I went down the steps, through the big room and down onto the island and explored every inch of it that I could reach. Yes, the cypress trees had created it and anchored it, and from the west and the north they were so thick that the island itself must have been invisible. Only the eastern bank, where I had come ashore, was the way of access.

"Regarding the strange structure of granite and gold, I couldn't discover anything more about it, except that when I cut back the wisteria the graven figures were as beautiful there as anywhere else. The worth of the gold must have been staggering, I reasoned, but no one had ever stolen it; no one—it seemed—had ever tried.

"But I was so hot now, so coated in sweat, so bitten up by the mosquitoes and harassed by the lonesome cries of the birds and the way that they mingled with the half-heard voices that I had to get out of here. I had to get safe.

"I jumped into the pirogue, caught up the pole, pushed off the bank and headed for home."

12

“Jasmine was waiting for me at the landing, in a perfect fit over the fact that I hadn’t told anyone where I was going, and she was losing her mind with worry; and even Patsy was here and Patsy was worrying because Patsy had had a dream that I was in danger and she had driven in from New Orleans just to see if I was all right.

“ ‘Aunt Queen’s here, isn’t she?’ I asked impatiently as I made my way to the kitchen with her. ‘And as for Patsy coming in from New Orleans, it’s probably because she needs money, and we’ll be in for a big argument tonight. But I don’t have time for this. I have to tell you what I found out there. We have to call the sheriff right away.’

“ ‘The sheriff? For what!’ Jasmine demanded. ‘And yes, your Aunt Queen is here. She arrived about an hour ago, and nobody could find you, and the pirogue was gone,’ and so forth and so on for a straight three minutes.

“No sooner had she stopped her harangue than Aunt Queen appeared, and she threw her arms around me, dirty though I was from the swamp. She was her usual elegant self, right to the perfect curls of her white hair and her soft green silk dress. With Aunt Queen, it’s silk or silk, that’s about the extent of it, and I can’t think of embracing her without thinking of silk.

“Patsy also came into the kitchen and sat down opposite me as I settled at the table, with Aunt Queen taking the chair to the right of me and Jasmine putting a beer down in front of me and then sitting to my left.

“I pulled off my dirty garden gloves and drank half the beer in one swallow, and Jasmine shook her head but got up to get me another.

“ ‘What is this about the sheriff?’ Aunt Queen asked. ‘Why do you want the sheriff?’

“I laid out the earrings and the brooch, and I told them all about everything I had seen. I told them about the skull just disintegrating, but that I knew the sheriff could get the DNA from the white powder left of it to prove it was Rebecca’s, and that for a DNA match there was hair in the brush that Rebecca had used, upstairs in the trunk that bore her name. There was hair in her comb too.

“Aunt Queen looked at Jasmine and Jasmine shook her head.

“ ‘You think the sheriff of Ruby River Parish is going to run DNA tests on a pile of white powder!’ Jasmine declared. ‘You’re going to tell this cockamamy story to the sheriff of Ruby

River Parish? You, Tarquin Blackwood, dedicated buddy of Goblin, your spirit duplicate? You're going to call the sheriff? I don't want to be in this kitchen when that conversation takes place.'

" 'Listen to me,' I insisted. 'This woman was murdered. There's no statute of limitations on murder, and—'

"When Aunt Queen spoke, she was very soft and reasonable-sounding. 'Quinn, my darling, I don't think the sheriff will believe this story. And I don't think he will send anyone into the thick of the swamp.'

" 'All right,' I said, 'I see. No one cares about this. No one believes it.'

" 'It isn't that I don't believe it,' said Aunt Queen, 'it's that I don't think the outside world will believe it.'

" 'Yeah, that's it,' chimed in Patsy. 'The outside world is going to think you're a crackpot, Tarquin, if they don't already from all these years of your talking about that damned spook. Tarquin, the more you carry on about this, the crazier everybody thinks you are.'

"At some point while all this was going on—my valiant struggle to get them to believe and investigate and their pleading with me not to make a fool of myself—Pops walked in and I reiterated the whole story for him.

"He sat at the corner of the table listening with his dull eyes, and then said under his breath that he'd go back there to this island with me if I wanted, and when I said I did want this, that it was exactly what I wanted, he seemed surprised.

"All the while, Goblin stood over by the sink listening to this conversation and looking from one to another of the crowd at the table as this or that one spoke. Then he came over and started pulling on my right shoulder.

"I said, 'Goblin, get away, I've got no time for you now.' And with a profound will I pushed at him mentally, and to my amazement he was gone.

"Then Patsy imitated my voice and what I'd just said, making fun of me, and gave a low sneering laugh. 'Goblin, get away,' she repeated, 'and now you're telling us there's a marble table out there and a gold chair.'

"I fired back at her that those details were of the least importance and then I positively demanded to see the sheriff and tell him what I had seen.

"Pops said No, not until he'd gone out there with me, and that if this woman had been rotting for over a hundred years a day or two wouldn't matter now.

" 'But somebody's living there, Pops,' I said. 'Somebody who must know these chains are up there and must have seen the skull! We have a dangerous situation here.'

"Patsy snickered. 'It's a damned good thing that you believe yourself, Quinn, because nobody else does. You've been crazy since you were born.'

"Aunt Queen did not look at her. It struck me for the first time in my life that Aunt Queen didn't like Patsy any more than Pops did.

“ ‘So what was your dream, Patsy?’ I asked, trying not to bristle at her insults. ‘Jasmine told me you came home today because you had a dream.’

“ ‘Oh, it can’t compare to your story,’ she said ironically and coldly, her blue eyes hard as glass. ‘I just woke up all scared for you. There was somebody who was going to hurt you, and Blackwood Manor was burning, and this group of people—they had you and they were going to hurt you, and Virginia Lee was in the dream and she told me, “Patsy, get him away.” She was real clear, she was sitting with her embroidery, and you know all the embroidery we still have that she did, and there she was in the dream, embroidering, and she put it aside and told me what I just said. It’s all fading now. But Blackwood Manor was on fire. I woke up scared.’

“I looked at Pops and Jasmine. They hadn’t told her anything about Rebecca or the oil-lamp scare, I knew by their faces. I looked up at Goblin, who was standing in the corner to my far left, and Goblin was looking at Patsy, and he seemed thoughtful if not a little scared himself.

“At this point, Aunt Queen called for the end of the Kitchen Committee Confab. We did have guests coming in, supper had to be prepared, Lolly and Big Ramona were waiting for us to clear out, and Aunt Queen wanted to talk to me later in her room. We’d eat supper in there, just the two of us.

“Nobody was calling the sheriff until Pops had gone to the island with me. And Pops said he wasn’t feeling very good, he had to go lie down. The heat was bad and he’d been working on the flower patches in the full sun; he didn’t feel good at all.

“I insisted on placing the earrings and brooch in a plastic bag so that any residue of tissue clinging to them could be analyzed, and then I went up to my room to shower, realizing I was starving to death.

“It was maybe six o’clock when I sat down to supper with Aunt Queen. Her room had just been redone in golden yellow taffeta, and we were at the small round table against the back windows of the house at which she frequently took her meals.

“We devoured one of her favorite dishes—scrambled eggs with caviar and sour cream, along with her favorite champagne.

“She was wearing silver spike heels and a loose-fitting silk-and-lace dress. She had a cameo at her throat, centered perfectly on her collar—Jasmine must have helped her—and we had the earrings and the cameo brooch from the island with us.

“The brooch was ‘Rebecca at the Well,’ the earrings were tiny heads, as is usually the case with small cameos.

“I began by telling her all about Rebecca’s trunk in the attic, and then Rebecca’s ghost and what had happened, and then I went over again everything that was on the island and how perfectly strange it was out there, and that there was clear evidence of murder on the second floor of the house.

“ ‘All right,’ she said. ‘You’ve heard many a story of Manfred, and you know now that after

Virginia Lee died and left him a widower he was considered a madman in these parts.'

"I nodded for her to go on. I also took note that Goblin was right behind her, some distance from her, just watching me with a kind of abstracted expression on his face. He was also leaning against the wall kind of casually, and something about that struck a bad note with me—that he would present such an image of comfort, but my mind was really not on Goblin but on Rebecca and Aunt Queen.

"Aunt Queen went on with her tale.

" 'But what you don't know,' she said, 'is that Manfred brought women here to Blackwood Manor, always claiming they were governesses for William and Camille, when in fact they were nothing more than playthings for him—starry-eyed Irish girls he got from Storyville, the red-light district in New Orleans—whom he kept for as long as it suited his purposes, and then from the picture they were abruptly erased.'

" 'God, you're telling me he killed more than one of them?' I asked.

" 'I don't know that he did any such thing,' said Aunt Queen. She went on. 'It's your story about this island that has put it in my mind that perhaps he did murder them. But no one knew what became of them, and it was an easy thing to get rid of a poor Irish girl in those days. You simply dropped her down in the middle of New Orleans. What more need be done?'

" 'But Rebecca, did you hear tell of Rebecca?'

" 'Yes, indeed, I did,' said Aunt Queen. 'You know I did. I heard plenty tell of her. And I'm telling you now. Now let me go on in my fashion. Some of these Irish girls were kind to little William and Camille, but in the main they didn't bother with them one way or another, and so they don't come down to us with any names or faces, or even mysterious trunks in the attic, though that would have been a significant clue.'

" 'No, there were no other suspicious trunks in the attic,' I interjected. 'But there are clothes, heaps of old clothes, clothes museums would pay for, I think. But only Rebecca's trunk.'

" 'Slow down and let me talk,' Aunt Queen said with a little graceful exasperation. 'Quinn, you're overexcited and it's a marvelous thing to see,' she said, smiling, 'but let me talk.'

"And talk she did.

" 'Now, while all of that was going on,' she said, 'Manfred was up to his famous tricks of riding his black gelding over the land, and disappearing into the swamp for weeks at a time.

" 'Then came Rebecca. Now Rebecca was not only more beautiful than the other women, she was also very refined and passed herself off for a lady with a gracious manner, which won everyone over to her side.

" 'But one night when Manfred was off in the swamps she got to cursing Manfred for his absence, and in the kitchen she got drunk on brandy with Ora Lee—that was Jasmine's great-great-grandmother—and she told Ora Lee her story, of how she, Rebecca, had been born in the Irish Channel in New Orleans and was as "common as dirt," as she put it, in a world "as narrow

as the gutter," she declared, one of thirteen children, and how she had gotten raped in a Garden District mansion where she'd been working as a maid, and the whole Irish neighborhood knew about it, and when her family wanted her to go into the convent on account of it she went downtown to Storyville, instead, and they took her into a house of prostitution as she had hoped. Now, Rebecca was pregnant from the rape, but whether she lost the child or got rid of it, this part was unclear.

" 'To Ora Lee, she said flat out that being in an elegant and fine house in Storyville, with the piano always playing and the gentlemen being so gracious, was far superior to being at home in a miserable shotgun house at St. Thomas and Washington by the river where her Irish father and her German grandmother used to beat her and her brothers and sisters with a strap.

" 'But Rebecca did not want to end her upward climb in Storyville, so she started to put on the airs of a lady and use what she knew of manners to make herself more refined. She also loved to do embroidery and crocheting, which had been beaten into her at home, and used her sewing abilities to make herself fine clothes.

" 'Wait a minute,' I interrupted her. 'Didn't Patsy say something about the embroidery in her dream, that Virginia Lee was embroidering? That's important. And you should see the embroidered things upstairs in that trunk. Yes, she knew embroidery, Rebecca—they're confused in Patsy's dream, but you know about the oil lamps and what I almost did.'

" 'I do know, of course I know,' said Aunt Queen. 'Why do you think I came home? But you need knowledge to arm you against this cozy lovemaking ghost. So listen to what the story was.

" 'The other prostitutes in the house in Storyville laughed at Rebecca, and they called her the Countess, but she knew that sooner or later a man would come who would see her attributes and take her out of that place. She sat right in the room where the women congregated for the man to make his choice, and she embroidered as if she was a great lady, and gave each gentleman her lovely smile.

" 'Well, Manfred Blackwood was the man of her dreams, and the tale came down in Jasmine's family that he had actually and truly loved Rebecca much in the same way that he had loved Virginia Lee. Indeed it was Rebecca, petite Rebecca with her brilliant smile and charming ways that finally took his mind off the grief.

" 'He was obsessed with giving her jewelry, and she loved it, and she was gracious and sweet to him and even sang old songs to him, which she had learned growing up.

" 'Of course, in her first weeks here she was all honey and spice to little William and Camille, but they didn't fall for it, or so the story says, just waiting for her to disappear like all the rest.

" 'Then Manfred and Rebecca went to Europe for a year, the two of them, and it was rumored they spent a very long time in Naples, because Rebecca loved it so, and they even had a villa for a while on the famous Amalfi coast. If you saw that coast, and you will someday, Quinn, you'll understand that it is one of the most beautiful places on earth.

“ ‘Imagine it, this poor girl from the Irish Channel in the dreamland of southern Italy, and think what it meant. It was there that Rebecca cultivated a love of cameos, apparently, as she had quite a collection when she returned, and it was then that she showed them off to Ora Lee and Jerome and their niece, Pepper, explaining all about “Rebecca at the Well,” the theme that was named for her, she exclaimed—poor creature. And ever after that she wore a cameo at her neck and earrings such as those you’ve found out there.

“ ‘Now, speaking of out there—right after their return from Naples Manfred took to spending more time in the swamps than ever before. And within months there came all the workmen from New Orleans and the deliveries of lumber and metal and all manner of things to make the notorious Hermitage on Sugar Devil Island—this place you’ve now seen with your own eyes.

“ ‘But as you know, Manfred paid off the hirelings when the secret place was completed, and he took to spending weeks out there, leaving Rebecca at home to fret and cry and pace the floor while my poor father—William—watched the woman change from pretty girl to banshee, as he put it to me later on.

“ ‘Meanwhile, it had become the scandal of the parish that Manfred kept Rebecca in his own bedroom—and that was your room, Quinn, the room with the front parlor to it; it became your room as soon as you were born. Pops, as you know, wants the back room upstairs so he can see out the back windows and keep an eye on the shed and the garages and the men and the cars and all that. So you inherited that front room.

“ ‘But I digress, and it will probably happen more than once. Now, let me see. We left Rebecca, with a cameo at her neck, in her fancy clothes, pacing the floor up there crying and murmuring for Manfred, who was gone for as long, sometimes, as two weeks.

“ ‘And, happy with his new retreat, he often took expensive provisions with him, while at other times he said he would hunt for what he ate.

“ ‘Now, it couldn’t have been a worse time for her to do it, but Rebecca wanted Manfred to marry her—make her an honest woman as they used to say in those days, you know—and she told everyone that he would. She even got the priest up here to accost him on one of his rare visits home and talk to him about it, how he ought to do it, and how Rebecca was a proper wife for Manfred no matter what her past.

“ ‘But you know, Quinn, in those days, what man was going to marry a prostitute from Storyville with whom he’d been living for over two years? Bringing the priest proved a terrible mistake, as Manfred was ashamed and annoyed. And the rumor spread that Manfred beat Rebecca for doing it, and Ora Lee had to interfere to make him stop.

“ ‘Somehow or other they made it up, and Manfred went back out into the swamp. Thereafter, when he came back from these forays into the depths of the bog he often had gifts not only for Rebecca, to whom he gave lovely cameos, but gifts of pearls and diamonds for Camille, and even fine stickpins and cuff links with diamonds for William to wear.’

“ ‘So he was meeting someone out there in the swamp,’ I said. ‘He had to be. How else could he come back with gifts?’

“ ‘Precisely, he was meeting someone. And his absences from the house grew longer and longer, and his conduct at home reclusive and peculiar, and when he was gone, William (my father) and Camille suffered downright meanness and heavy abuse from Rebecca, who grew to hate them for what they were—part of a family to which she did not legally belong.

“ ‘Imagine it, the poor children, now adolescents, at the pure mercy of this young stepmother, all left alone in this house with only the colored servants, the devoted and loving Jerome and Ora Lee and their niece, Pepper, trying to interfere.

“ ‘Rebecca would pyroot through their rooms whenever she wanted, and then came the incident of her finding Camille’s poetry in a leather-bound book, and reciting the poems at dinner to taunt poor Camille, wounding Camille all but mortally so that Camille threw a hot bowl of soup in Rebecca’s face.’

“ ‘I have Camille’s book,’ I told Aunt Queen. ‘I found it in Rebecca’s trunk. But why didn’t someone else find it when the trunk was packed? Why were there cameos in the trunk? I know everything was thrown in there but still—?’

“ ‘Because the woman disappeared under violent circumstances, and it was Manfred who grabbed up her things and heaved them into the trunk. And besides, the old madman had been absent when the affair of the poetry took place, and who knew how much he knew? He didn’t see the book, or care about it, that’s plain enough, and he didn’t bother to save the cameos you found in the trunk, either, though he did save five cameos as I’ll explain.’

“ ‘How did Rebecca disappear? What were the violent circumstances?’ I pushed.

“ ‘She tried to set fire to this house.’

“ ‘Ah, of course.’

“ ‘She did it with the oil lamps.’

“I gasped. ‘So that’s why everybody believed me!’ I said. ‘Jasmine and Lolly and Pops. They knew the story of what Rebecca had done in the past.’

“Aunt Queen nodded. ‘Rebecca set the lamps on the windowsills of the front rooms. She had a blaze started in four places when Ora Lee and Jerome caught her in the act, and Jerome struck her and shouted for the farmhands to come in and put out the fire. Now you know what a risk that was for Jerome, a black man, to haul off and slap a white woman in those days, but this crazy Rebecca was trying to burn down this house.

“ ‘The gossip was that Jerome knocked her unconscious. And that she had almost succeeded in her mad designs, the fire really blazing before they caught it, and the repairs costing a mint.

“ ‘Now, imagine what a danger fire was in those times, Quinn. We didn’t have the pumps on the banks of the swamp in those days, Quinn, we didn’t have the water out here from town. This house could have really gone up. But it didn’t. Blackwood Manor was saved.

“ ‘Of course Jerome kept Rebecca under close watch in the room without candles or lamps until Manfred came back from the swamp.

“ ‘You can imagine the tension, Quinn, with Jerome, a black man, taking on this responsibility, and Rebecca being locked up there in the dark, calling him a “nigger” and threatening to have him lynched and every other thing she could think of through the door. There were lynchings in those days, too. They didn’t happen hereabouts that I know of, but they happened.

“ ‘The Irish poor were never great lovers of the black man, I can tell you, Quinn, and the threats Rebecca made, to bring her kin up here from New Orleans, were enough to scare Jerome and Ora Lee and Pepper and all their folks.

“ ‘But they couldn’t let her out, and they wouldn’t let her out, so scream and rant in the dark she did.

“ ‘Well finally Manfred came back, and when he saw the damage and the extent of the repairs, when he realized that the house had almost been lost, he went wild.

“ ‘He grabbed Rebecca up off the bed where she’d been moaning and crying, and he beat her with his hands and his fists. He slapped her back and forth and punched her until Jerome and Ora Lee screamed to make him stop.

“ ‘Jerome wasn’t strong enough to hold Manfred, and he didn’t dare hit him, but Ora Lee stopped the brawl simply by screaming over and over so that all the colored and white staff came flooding into the house and up into the room.

“ ‘Rebecca, being surely one of the most unwise human beings that ever lived, was roaring that Manfred had promised to marry her, that she would be his wife or die here, that she would never leave. Jasmine’s family were all sort of holding her and reaching out to Manfred to please not hit her anymore.

“ ‘In his raging temper, Manfred sent for her trunk, and it was he, the man himself, who shoved every blessed thing that belonged to her into it, higgledy-piggledy, and told the men to drive her to the edge of the property and throw her off it with all that was hers. He threw fistsful of money at her, raining it down on her where she lay on the floor in a daze.

“ ‘But the wicked and unwise girl rose up and ran to him and wouldn’t let go, screaming, “Manfred, I love you. Manfred, I can’t live without you, Manfred, I won’t live without you. Manfred, remember Naples.” (Everyone remembered that “Remember Naples.”) “Manfred, remember, Manfred, I’m your Rebecca at the Well, come out to be your bride. Look at the cameo at my neck, Manfred. Manfred, I’ve come to the well to be your bride.”

“ ‘And it was then that he dragged her down the steps, out the doorway, across the lawn and past the cemetery to the landing, where he flung her into the pirogue and pushed away from the bank. When she tried to get up off the floor of the pirogue, he kicked her and she fell back.

“ ‘That was the last anybody saw of Rebecca Stanford alive or dead.

“ ‘Two weeks later—a fortnight as they called it in those days—Manfred came home. When he

saw Rebecca's trunk in the middle of the room he was angry, and told Jerome to put it upstairs.

" 'Later, Ora Lee discovered a velvet box in the top drawer of Rebecca's bureau, and in it several cameos along with a note in Rebecca's hand. It said "First cameos given to me by Manfred. Naples." And the date. Now, Ora Lee kept these cameos for at least a year, not wanting them thrown away, as they were very pretty, and then she gave them to Manfred, who tried to give them to Camille.

" 'Now, Camille had not gotten over her hatred of Rebecca and frankly never did. She wouldn't touch the cameos, but Manfred kept them, and now and then he was seen taking them out and looking at them and mumbling to himself.

" 'When my father married my mother, Manfred offered her the cameos, but my father wouldn't let her take them because he remembered Rebecca with so much hatred, too.

" 'Then, when I was a little girl, Manfred gave the cameos to me. I was ten years old. The Old Man said strange things to me. Wild things, things I didn't understand.'

"—And here, Aunt Queen told me the story that she repeated to both of us tonight, of Manfred's wild ravings, only in that first telling, when I was a boy of eighteen, she included less detail—.

" 'I had no temerity about keeping the cameos,' she declared. 'I had never even heard the story of Rebecca, and wouldn't for many years.

" 'I had already begun collecting cameos by that time, and had a score of them when I finally told my father how Manfred had given me my first few. But it wasn't my father who told me the story of Rebecca. It was Ora Lee who told me—you know, it was kitchen-table talk—and to tell the truth, Ora Lee had felt a liking for Rebecca, an understanding of the poor Irish girl who had wanted to better herself, a girl who was afraid of her own vicious Irish father and German-Irish mother, a girl who had reached the faraway coast of Italy with Manfred, where Manfred at a candlelight dinner had pinned the first cameo of "Rebecca at the Well" to Rebecca's lace blouse himself.

" 'And, Ora Lee insisted, Rebecca hadn't started out being mean to the children, or mean to anybody; it was what came as the result of her dissatisfaction over time. It was what came of Manfred's downright meanness.

" 'And as Ora Lee put it, in old age she was more able to understand Rebecca, and make no mistake, Quinn, Ora Lee thought Rebecca was murdered out there—you can be sure of it—but the point I was making was that in old age, Ora Lee was more forgiving of Rebecca and what she had done, though she couldn't forgive Rebecca's meanness to Camille.

" 'Even as Ora Lee told me these things, she begged me never to mention Rebecca's name to my father or to my Aunt Camille.

" ' "Your Aunt Camille was done in by those days," Ora Lee told me. "That poor child was always morbid, but she went deep into her shell and never came out anymore."

“ ‘To return to the history of your illustrious ancestor,’ Aunt Queen went on, ‘I didn’t need Ora Lee to tell me that he had kept bringing his Irish girls to the house and keeping them in the front bedroom upstairs for many a year. I was a girl of twenty or so when my mother told me all about it—how just after my birth my father had begged the Old Man to please stop his bad behavior on account of his grandbaby coming into the world.

“ ‘The Old Man had cursed and fussed and slammed his fist down on the dining table so hard as to rattle the silver, but he agreed. For a daughter-in-law he hadn’t bothered, but for a grandbaby, well, he would, and so he removed himself from the big upstairs best bedroom, in which you now reside, my blessed nephew, and he took this bedroom here on the back of the house. And even during my early years—before I was too young to remember—he slipped his women in by the back door.

“ ‘The changing of the room had a great significance for everyone. The priest of those days, Fr. Flarety, stopped calling on Manfred for his wicked ways, and by the time I was ten, by the time the Old Man gave me the cameos, he was pretty much just a pitiful slobbering old creature, raving at the empty air and trying to hail with his cane anyone who chanced to pass the door.

“ ‘My mother became the official lady of Blackwood Manor because Aunt Camille was a wounded being who could never take such a place.

“ ‘And as for the trunk, well, I suppose I forgot about it, and it just became one of many up there, full of uninteresting clothes. Oh, of course, I always meant to go and explore the attic, but thinking it a monumental chore to put a lot of chaos in order I never bothered, and neither has anyone else.

“ ‘And now, Quinn, you know more about what happened to Rebecca Stanford than anyone living, even me. Her ghost is a danger to you, Quinn, and to everyone around you.’

“ ‘Oh, but I don’t know,’ I answered. ‘I found those chains out there, Aunt Queen. Rusted chains. But I don’t really know what happened to her!’

“ ‘Quinn, the important thing is you don’t call up this ghost again!’

“ ‘But I never really called her in the first place.’

“ ‘Yes, you did, Quinn. Not only did you find her things, you wanted to know her story.’

“ ‘Aunt Queen, if that’s how I called her up, then why didn’t she appear to you years ago when Ora Lee told you about her? Why didn’t she appear to you when you were a little girl and Manfred gave you the cameos?’

“ ‘I don’t have your gift for seeing ghosts, Quinn,’ she came back fast. ‘I’ve never seen a ghost, and you’ve seen plenty of them.’

“I sensed a hesitancy in her, a sudden sharp introspection. And I thought I knew what it was.

“ ‘You’ve seen Goblin, haven’t you, Aunt Queen?’ I asked her.

“And as I said these words, Goblin came and crouched down at the arm of her chair and peered at her. He was extremely vivid and solid. I was shocked by his proximity to her, and I

loathed it, but she was definitely looking at him.

" 'Back off, Goblin!' I said crossly, and he at once obeyed, very sad and nonplussed to have made me so short with him. He withdrew, throwing beseeching looks at me, and then he vanished.

" 'What did you just see?' Aunt Queen asked me.

" 'What I always see,' I responded. 'My double. He's wearing my jeans, just as neat and pressed, and he's wearing a polo shirt same as me and he looks exactly like me.'

"She sat back, drinking her champagne slowly.

" 'What did you see, Aunt Queen?' I threw the question back at her.

" 'I see something, Quinn, but it's not like what you see. I see an agitation in the air; it's like the movement or the turbulence that rises above a hot road in front of one's car in the middle of summer. I see that and sometimes there's a vague shape to it, a human shape, a shape of your size, always. The whole apparition is no more than, perhaps, a second. And what's left is a feeling that something is lingering, that something unseen is there.'

"For the first time in my life, I was angry with Aunt Queen. 'Why did you never tell me this!' I demanded. 'How could you go year in and year out and not tell me that you saw that much of Goblin, that you knew—.' I was too out of sorts to go on.

" 'That's about the extent of what I see.' She went on as though I weren't frothing at the mouth, 'and I don't, by any means, see it very often. Only now and then when your spirit wants me to see him, I suspect.'

"I was not only angry—fit to be tied—I was amazed. I had been in a constant state of amazement since Rebecca appeared to me, reeling from one revelation after another, and now this, to discover that all these years Aunt Queen had been seeing Goblin.

" 'Is there anything else?' I asked with a hint of sarcasm, 'that you can confide at this time?'

" 'Quinn,' she said gravely, 'it's perhaps ridiculous of me to say that I've always done what I thought best for you. I've never denied the existence of Goblin. The path I chose was more careful and deliberate than that. It was not to ratify Goblin, not to reinforce him, one might say, because I've never known whether Goblin was a good creature or bad. But as we are laying it all out on the table, let me tell you that Big Ramona can see of Goblin about as much as I can—a turbulence in the air. No more, no less. And Jasmine can see that much too.'

"I was floored. I felt quite alone. My closest kith and kin had lied to me, as I saw it, and I wished with all my heart that Lynelle had not died. I prayed that somehow the spirit of Lynelle could come to me—since I possessed such a knack for ghosts and spirits—and I swore under my breath and to myself alone that I knew Lynelle could tell me what to make of all that had transpired.

" 'Beloved nephew,' Aunt Queen said—an expression she would use a lot as I got older, and she said it now with sweet formality and intimate devotion—'beloved nephew, you have to

realize that I take your powers very seriously and always have. But I've never known if they were a good thing.'

"A sudden revelation came to me, a certainty based upon what she had said, if not everything else, that my powers weren't for good. I told her in a half whisper, the only manly voice I could manage, about the twilight panic, the thoughts of taking Pops' gun and putting an end to my life, and I told her about how on the afternoon of Rebecca's coming to me I had sat on the front steps, watching that golden light go down and saying to the powers that be, Please deliver me from this, please anything but this. I didn't remember my prayer. I don't remember it now. Perhaps I gave her a more nearly accurate version. I don't know.

"There came a tender silence, and when I looked up I saw the tears on her cheeks. Beyond her, by the post of her bed, stood Goblin, vivid once more, and he too was weeping and reaching out to me, as if he would like to cradle my head in his left hand.

" 'Go away, Goblin!' I said sharply. 'I don't want you here now! Leave me. Go find Lynelle for me! Travel the spirit winds for me, but get away.'

"He flashed brilliant, at his most detailed, his most shining, and his face was full of hurt and insult and pouting lip, and then, snap, no more.

" 'If he's still in this room, I don't know it,' I confessed to Aunt Queen. 'And as for Rebecca, I have to find justice for her. I have to discover, if I can, what they did to her in that house.'

"Aunt Queen wiped her blue eyes with her napkin, and I felt more than a twinge of guilt that I had made her cry. I loved her, suddenly, no matter what she said or did, and I needed her and was so miserable at having been angry with her that I got up, came around, went down on my knees and embraced her and held her fragile form for some seconds in utter quiet.

"Then I looked at her shimmering, ankle-strap spike-heel shoes, and I laughed and I kissed her insteps. I kissed her toes. I gave her right foot an affectionate squeeze with my left hand.

" 'Tarquin Blackwood, you're certifiably insane, cease and desist,' she declared. 'Now sit down like a good boy, and pour me another glass of champagne.'

"We had finished one bottle, so I opened another, with the aplomb of a boy who has for years assisted in an elegant bed-and-breakfast hotel, and poured the foaming wine into her tulip glass.

"Of course she then poured out to me her horror at my having thoughts of putting a gun to my head, and I swore to her I would never do it, only think about it, not as long as she lived and Pops lived and Jasmine lived and Big Ramona lived and Lolly lived; and then I rattled off the names of all the farmhands and Shed Men, and I was being perfectly and convincingly sincere.

" 'But you see, what I'm trying to say to you,' I went on, now that we were both calmer and obviously a little drunker, 'is that spirits and ghosts must come from somewhere, and mine was a blasphemous prayer or a dangerous one and out of the darkness Rebecca came.'

" 'Now you're talking sense, my dear boy,' she responded.

" 'Of course, I know that, Aunt Queen. I've always known it. I'll never forget that she urged

me to light the lamps. I'll never be her pawn again. It can't happen. I'm too wary, too in control of it when I see these creatures, I swear it, but I do have to find out what they did to her, and she alone can tell me, and that will be where she's strongest—on Sugar Devil Island in that strange house.'

" 'To which you will not go, Tarquin, unless Pops goes with you! Do you understand?'

"I didn't respond, then I spoke my mind: 'It's not good for Pops to go out in the swamp right now. Pops isn't himself. Pops isn't hale and hearty; Pops hasn't been eating for days, and the heat out there, and the mosquitoes—no, I can't take Pops—.'

" 'Who then, Tarquin? For as God is my witness, you shall not go alone.'

" 'Aunt Queen,' I said, 'nothing's going to stop me from going out there in the morning. I'd go now, if it wasn't pitch-dark.'

"She leaned across the table. 'Tarquin, I forbid it,' she said. 'Need I remind you that you've described a mausoleum made of gold, and signs of habitation in the Hermitage—a desk and a golden chair! Somebody's using the island. And why, pray tell, if this tomb is made of gold—.'

" 'I don't know all the answers, but I have to go back out there, and don't you see, I have to have the freedom to invoke this ghost, and to let her speak to me—.'

" 'A ghost that seduced you! A ghost that used her charm and sensuality so palpably that you actually lost your virginity with her? Is this what I'm hearing—and you mean to invoke her?'

" 'I have to go, Aunt Queen, and frankly, I think you know that if you were me, you would.'

" 'I'd speak to Fr. Kevin first, that's what I'd do and that's what I want you to do. Now, we'll call Father in the morning.'

" 'Father!' I scoffed. 'He just said his first Mass. He's a kid!'

"And I was exaggerating but I was right that Fr. Kevin Mayfair was young, meaning around thirty-five or so, and though I liked him enormously, I didn't think of him with the same respect I felt for the old gray-haired priests of the pre–Vatican II days who said Mass with so much more flair.

"She rose from the table in such a little huff that she knocked over her chair backwards and then went striding in her dazzling high heels to her dressing table where she rummaged through her top drawer.

"Then she turned and I saw a rosary swinging in the light. 'This isn't blessed, but it will have to do for now,' she said. 'I want you to put this around your neck, under your shirt, over your shirt, on your bare chest, I don't care, but you're to wear it from now on.'

"I didn't bother to put up a fight. The rosary was small with perfectly round gold beads, and I didn't mind having it, though it did disappear under my shirt.

" 'Aunt Queen,' I went on, 'Fr. Kevin isn't going to believe all this about Rebecca and her ghost any more than the sheriff will believe it. So why should we call him? After Mass he always laughs when he asks me about Goblin. I think he's seen me speaking to Goblin in church. No, I

know I don't want to talk to Fr. Kevin. Just forget about that.'

"Aunt Queen was in no mood to give up. She'd told me that first thing in the morning she was heading for her favorite goldsmith in the French Quarter to get a gold crucifix on a chain for me, and then she'd head for the rectory at St. Mary's Assumption Church to have Fr. Kevin bless the crucifix, and then she would discuss the entire matter with Fr. Kevin and find out what he thought.

" 'And meantime,' she asked, 'what do we do about these earrings and this cameo brooch?'

" 'We're to save them. We have to. The DNA in this tissue can't be that degraded. We have to find out if she was the one who really died out there. That's what Rebecca wants of me; she wants recognition; she wants to be known.'

" 'And she wanted you to burn down this house, Quinn.'

" 'She'll never persuade me to do anything like that again,' I insisted. 'I'm wise to her.'

" 'But you care about what she wants,' said Aunt Queen, her tongue just a little bit thick from the champagne.

" 'It's justice, Aunt Queen,' I said. 'It's justice that I, a descendant of Manfred, have to carry out. Maybe it won't amount to much—say, just putting her cameos into the case in the living room with a special card explaining they belonged to a famous love of Manfred Blackwood. Maybe that will allow her spirit to rest. But for now, don't worry anymore about me. I'll do what I have to do, and I'll do what's best.'

"By that time I had pushed her past all patience, and after two more glasses of champagne I was humoring her, concealing my silent secret schemes.

"I loved her. I love her totally now. But I knew, knew for the first time that I had to deceive her, had in some way to protect her from protecting me.

"Of course I was going out to the island, and of course I was going to invoke Rebecca, but just how and when I wasn't so sure."

13

“I woke up very early, dressed in my hunting jeans and vest, and while Big Ramona still slept I sat down at my computer and wrote a letter to this strange invader of Sugar Devil Island, which went, sort of, as follows:

Dear Trespasser,

This communication is from Tarquin Blackwood and is to notify you that my family owns this island and this house, and that you must take your books and your furnishings and leave these premises without further delay.

The family has plans for this island and will be proceeding just as soon as you have vacated the Hermitage.

If you have any need to communicate with me, I reside at Blackwood Manor, and will be more than happy to talk with you by letter, by fax, or by phone, or in person—howsoever you desire,

Yours sincerely,
Tarquin Blackwood,
better known as Quinn

“Then, after supplying the relevant numbers for fax and phone, I hit the print button and, making four copies of the eviction notice, signed all of them and folded them and put them into my inside fishing-vest pocket.

“Then, I crept into Pops’ room, and, not finding him thereabouts—he had probably gotten up at five a.m. and was already at work in the flower beds—I took his thirty-eight pistol, made sure it was loaded, put that into my pocket and then, stopping quickly in the kitchen pantry, got a card of thumbtacks, which were always in there, you know, for the family bulletin board, and I headed to the pier.

“Let me add that I also had my rifle, my hunting knife and the kitchen knife, and I thought I was completely ready until I found Jasmine in her bare feet down at the landing by the pirogue, smoking a cigarette.

“ ‘All right, you crazy boy, I know where you’re going, and your Pops says to let you alone. So

I put that cooler of drinks for you in the boat. And there's a couple of sandwiches in there too, wrapped in foil.'

" 'Oh, I love you for that,' I said, and I kissed her, feeling an awareness of her as a woman suddenly, a thing which caught my brain rather like a power surge, and most definitely a surprise. I'll never forget it, the way that kiss ignited something. And I think I very boastfully squeezed her arm.

"Whatever, I don't think it ignited anything for her. And as I went to push off, she called out:

" 'Tarquin Blackwood, are you an imbecile?'

" 'No ma'am,' I said sarcastically, 'you expect me to change my mind?'

" 'How you're going to get people to believe what you saw out there if you don't take pictures of it, genius!' She reached into her apron pocket and took out a small flash camera—the kind you can buy nowadays anywhere, in which the film is already loaded and ready to go.

" 'Oh, thank God you thought of it!' I said.

" 'You can say that prayer again, Little Boss. Don't forget to press the button for the flash.'

"I wanted to kiss her again, but I was already drifting away.

"As for Goblin, he came after me, vivid and yet transparent, pleading with me not to go, saying, 'Bad, Quinn, bad,' over and over, and once again I told him in polite terms to leave me alone. He vanished then, but I suspect he was with me as I went on.

"In fact, I figured that he had to be; because where else could Goblin go? I was thinking a lot of late as to where Goblin was and where Goblin wasn't, and I was more than impatient with him, as I've said.

"Back to the swamp:

"There was a mist crawling over the water, and at first the swamp looked inviting and beautiful, harmonious and embracing—the stuff of poetry and photograph captions—but within a very short time it was the evil bog of mosquitoes and chain-girded cypress trees with arrows carved into their bark. The rustling of creatures in the dark waters and the sight of more than one alligator gave me the creeps.

"The dizziness returned, which alarmed me considerably, and the voices came once more, too low for me to really understand what they said. What was I overhearing? Did these ghosts quarrel with each other forever? Is that what Rebecca had meant when she said things don't move in a straight line?

"You can't do it, you have to let me go.…

"Why wasn't this ghostly discourse loud enough for me to be sure of every word?

" 'I'm coming, Rebecca,' I said aloud. 'You be straight with me, now, Rebecca. I know your tricks, and yet I'm coming. You be straight.'

"On and on I went through this dense green hell of tormented gray trees and anguished vines, of rattling leaf and fetid water, feeling ever fainter and probing deeply with the pole and

propelling myself forward as fast as I could.

"I'm begging you, God help me.…

"I knew it was Rebecca crying, Rebecca pleading, but with whom? Then came the inevitable sinister laughter and a man's voice speaking rapidly and angrily. Was it Manfred?

"A gator shot past me, his big slimy back visible for only a moment, and the pirogue rocked dangerously and then righted itself clumsily and on I went. I trembled, thinking about the gator, and I hated myself for it. I went on.

"Each time the dizziness came over me really heavily I slowed my pace, for fear of falling, and the high green thick of the swamp swallowed me treacherously, as I tried to make out what was being said:… *Loved you, always loved you, you promised, in Naples, forever, in the ruins …* And there came the deep voice, and the laughter rippling through it all.

"Were there three of them? Were there more?

"At last the weathered hulk of the Hermitage loomed in front of me, and the pirogue struck the bank amid the wild blackberries, and I was nearly knocked out of the boat. I quickly secured it to the nearest tree—a thing I had not done last time—laid the pole in it in intelligent fashion and then proceeded to explore the island once more.

"There had been gators on the island. I heard the plash as they went back into the swamp. What was I going to do if I encountered a mean gator? Well, it had never happened, and maybe it never would. I had no real fear of them, because they aren't generally vicious and they don't want trouble; nevertheless, this was the first time I had been in their august company without Pops or another man to take command.

"I stood listening. I could hear nothing but the mournful, broken cry of the birds. And that humming, that humming of bees and mosquitoes which I connected to the slime of sweat that now covered my skin.

"The house looked as empty as it had before. But that didn't mean a whole lot.

"Nevertheless, the mausoleum—or whatever it was—drew me, and I went back to it, studying it more carefully than I had the first time.

"No door of any kind, of that I was certain. So what in the name of God did it contain?

"As for the procession of figures graven in the gold, I was certain now they were Roman and that they were grieving; that the women were weeping and the men hammering on their foreheads with clenched fists.

"On an end panel which contained only a trio of weeping children there appeared some background engraving on a different plane from the figures—details that I hadn't noticed before at all.

"With my fingers I traced in one corner the image of a mountain, and the mountain had a high cone and was erupting, and above it streamed right and left a great heavy cloud. Far to the right, and somewhat below the position of the mountain, was the image of a small walled city, drawn

in tiny detail, and it seemed more than obvious that the evil cloud from the erupting mountain was a threat to the little town.

" 'Volcano. Ancient Rome. A city. People in mourning.' It had to be Mount Vesuvius, this mountain, and the city had to be the fabled city of Pompeii.

"Even I who had traveled almost nowhere in my life knew the full story of the eruption of Vesuvius in A.D. 79 and how it had buried Herculaneum and Pompeii. Only in the eighteenth century had they been officially rediscovered, and if there was anywhere I wanted to travel—outside of Ruby River Parish—it was to the ruins of Pompeii.

"The tragedy of those buried cities had always enthralled me and sometimes in a painful way. Years ago I'd seen photographs of plaster casts made of those poor Romans struggling to escape the cinder rain falling on Pompeii and they had made me cry.

"Of course Pompeii and Herculaneum were on the Bay of Naples, and Manfred had taken Rebecca to Naples. Vesuvius loomed over Naples, and Rebecca had cried, 'Remember Naples' when Manfred had been beating her, when he had carried her or dragged her out of the house.

"Again, the dizziness came and there rose the simmer of voices. I tipped forward until my forehead touched the gold carving. I was aware of the perfume of flowers. Was that wisteria? My senses were scrambled. I was dry-mouthed and sweating. And I heard Rebecca sobbing, *What they did to me, Quinn, what they did.*

"With a supreme act of will, I threw off the dizziness. I was on my knees. And as I looked up I realized there was an inscription running in a band along the top of the gold plates, just beneath the granite roof of the tomb, an inscription I hadn't seen for the glare of the vagrant sun on the gold.

"I went round the mausoleum twice. The words were in Latin, and I couldn't translate, but I could pick out the name Petronia, and the words for sleep and for death.

"I cursed myself that I didn't have any paper with me, except my letters to the trespasser, so that I could copy this down. Then I realized I had four copies of my letter, for posting in four places, and all I needed to do was sacrifice one copy. So, taking out my pen, I scribbled down the entire inscription, circling the monument twice to make sure I had the words correct.

"By now I was thirsting and I went back to the pirogue, picked up the small plastic cooler that Jasmine had packed for me and went up the stairs into the house.

"All was the same as I had found it yesterday. I crept up the staircase and stared again at the iron chains. I noted with a faint twinge of horror that the fifth chain with the hook was somewhat shorter than the other chains but I didn't know what it meant. There were hooks in the wall also. I hadn't noticed those before either, and in the morass of blackish tarlike substance I thought I saw more of the shape of human bones.

"I took out the camera, and with trembling hands I snapped two pictures, and then I backed up and took a couple more. What would it show? I wasn't certain. All I could do was snap another

two close-ups and hope that someone believed in what I saw.

"I knelt down and I touched what looked like the remnants of human hair. A jarring chill ran through me, and I heard the dreamlike laughter again, and then a scream that was so guttural it was almost a groan. It came again, a cry of pure agony, and I drew back, absolutely unable to come close again to the remains.

"I photographed the room and then I went downstairs and photographed the marble desk and the gold Roman-style chair. I photographed the fireplace with its heap of half-burnt wood and ash. I shot a close-up of the tumbled books on the desk.

"Next I went out of the Hermitage and photographed the whole place. I shot pictures of the mausoleum, and with my thumb over the flash so it wouldn't reflect in the gold I got close-ups of the figures, hoping there would be enough available light.

" 'Jasmine, I shall love you forever,' I said. I put the camera into my top vest pocket, zipped the pocket shut and resolved that I would now prove to all the world that, of Sugar Devil Island and Manfred's dark existence, I had spoken the truth.

"But what did it all mean? Was it some mad poet who made his way out here to sit in a golden chair in solitude, perhaps taking his work to and from with him, and only leaving behind those books which no longer mattered? Or was it a mere boy like me?

"And the time, what was it? Why it was just past noon, and I was hungry and getting sick.

"But I had to post my letters to the trespasser. I attended to that right away. I tacked up one such letter on the wooden door, placed another on the marble table, with books to anchor the four corners of it, and then tacked another on the wall near to the stairs.

"My duty was done, I figured, and now, to stop the nausea which was threatening, I brought the cooler over to the desk and sat down in the Roman chair. The leather sling seat was extremely comfortable, as it always is with such chairs, and I was overjoyed to discover that Jasmine had filled the cooler with six beers. Of course she had put some cola in there also, and there were the sandwiches, and even an apple nestled into the ice, but six beers!

"I don't think I will ever forget that moment. But there's no point in lingering on it. I have too much to tell. Let me only say that I whispered to the open air, 'Jasmine, can a woman of thirty-five find romance with a boy of eighteen? I'll meet you behind the big house at six.'

"By the time I finished that little ditty, I had swallowed half of the first beer. I tore open the sandwiches, which were thick with ham and cheese and butter—cold, delicious, visible butter—and devoured both of them in a few bites. Then I devoured the apple, finished the first beer and drank another one after that.

"I told myself that was plenty, that I had to keep my wits about me, but I was overexcited and instead of depressing me the beer had contributed to a kind of crazy elation, and with a third ice-cold can in hand I went back upstairs again and I sat down as close to the chains and their dark legacy as I dared.

“The sun was lowering outside, and only feeble rays managed to get through the labyrinth of green that crowded most of the house. Some light came in through the cupola and as I lay back looking up there, watching the light twinkle and shift, I heard in my head a thin high-pitched scream.

“Was it a bird? Was it a human? My eyelids were closing. I reclined, one elbow on the dusty boards. I drank more of the beer. I finished it. And then I realized I had to sleep. My body was forcing me to it. I had to sleep. I lay back feeling comfortable and warm, and I said as I stared up into the cupola:

“ ‘Rebecca, come to me, tell me what they did.’ I shut my eyes and I was dreaming, my body shapeless and vibrating in its half sleep. Her sobbing came to me clearly, and then before me, in a nighttime place of candles, I saw a leering face and I heard a low, vicious laugh. I tried to focus on the face but I couldn’t see it, and then when I looked down I saw that I was a woman, and that someone was stripping away from me a beautiful burgundy dress. My breasts were bare. My whole body suddenly was naked, and I was screaming.

“I had to get away from those who tormented me, and there before me a hand gripped the rusted hook, the hook at the end of the chain. I screamed a woman’s scream. I was a woman. I was Rebecca and yet I was Quinn and we two were one.

“Never had I known such pure terror as the hand with the hook approached, and then I felt an unendurable pain beneath my right breast, an agony as something thick yet sharp stabbed me and pushed against me, and then I heard the laughter again, chilling merciless laughter, and a man’s voice murmuring—no, arguing, pleading disgustedly—but the laughter covered the argument, it covered the pleading. No one would stop this! I knew I was hanging by the hook, that the hook held me by the rib beneath my breast, and my whole weight now pulled on the chain and its hook!

“I cried out, I screamed. I was a woman and a man screaming, I was Rebecca helpless and in torment and near to fainting yet unable to faint, and I was Quinn, protective and horrified and yet desperately trying to see the evil ones who were doing this, and there were two of them, yes, definitely two of them, and I had to know if it was Manfred. And then I was Rebecca screaming and the pain went on, the unendurable pain that was endured—it went on and on, and then the scene, blessedly, started to shift.

“ ‘Oh, God, Rebecca,’ I heard myself whispering. ‘I know what they did—hung you by the hook beneath your rib and left you here to die.’

“Someone shook me awake. I looked up.

“It was Rebecca, and she was smiling, and she said, ‘Quinn, you came. You didn’t let me down. You came.’

“I was shocked. She was as real as she had been in the house, only she wore the gorgeous burgundy dress she’d worn in the dream.

“ ‘Oh, thank Heaven, you’re all right!’ I cried. ‘It couldn’t be going on forever.’

“ ‘Don’t think about it now, my darling,’ she said. ‘Now you know it, and you know what the fifth chain was for. Just be with me, my darling.’

“As I sat up she sat down beside me and I turned to face her, and our lips met. I kissed her clumsily and she put her tongue into my mouth, and I was as aroused as I’d been in the house.

“I was pure male, quite divided from her and quite locked to her, enchanted by the low-cut burgundy dress and the pink nipples that had to be so close, and ah, how precious the cameo on its black ribbon around her naked throat.

“Her breasts were only half covered by the burgundy velvet, and I shoved my hand into her dress awkwardly, and when I felt her nipples I went a little bit mad.

“ ‘Love you, positively love you,’ I said with gritted teeth, and then I pushed the cloth down and I kissed her nipples until she drew me back up.

“I looked into her eyes.

“I wanted her too much to talk, and she allowed it, taking my hand and putting it under her skirts. Real, all real, all savory and frenzied, and finally, her little sex gasping for me, closing on me, and then the moment of fulfillment—so sudden, so jarring, so total. So gone.

“I found myself staring down at her—I was actually lying on top of her—and the flush in her cheeks took my breath away. I muttered some obscenity, some crudity. But I was so purely satisfied, so blissful that I could question nothing in these moments. I kissed her in the same open-mouthed passionate way I had kissed her the very first time.

“I lay back, tired to the point of stupor, and she was the one now looking down at me.

“ ‘Be my vengeance, Quinn,’ she said softly. ‘Tell the world my story, yes, but be my vengeance, too.’

“ ‘But how, Rebecca? How can I do that when those who hurt you are gone?’ I sat up, gently forcing her backwards.

“She looked urgent.

“We sat together. ‘Tell me truly, Rebecca, what can I do to make your spirit rest?’

“The horror of the earlier scene came back to me, the grim picture of her hanging on the hook, naked and helpless, and of those two evil ones who had done it to her.

“ ‘It was Manfred himself, wasn’t it?’ I asked her. ‘What can I do, Rebecca, to send your soul to peace?’

“She said nothing. She only kissed me again.

“ ‘You know you’re gone too, Rebecca,’ I said. ‘Along with those who did the deed, however awful it was.’ I had to say it. I had to tell her. ‘Rebecca, there is no one alive now who can suffer for what is done.’

“ ‘No, Quinn, I’m here,’ she said sweetly, ‘I’m always here, I see you always, I see everything. Be my vengeance, Quinn. Fight for me.’

“I kissed her again. I covered her breasts with kisses. We lay tangled and I felt the velvet of her burgundy dress. Her hair came loose, tumbled disgracefully in our lovemaking, and then I sighed, and, kissing her cheeks, again I passed into a blackness that was cool and enveloping as if I had drifted bodiless into the sex act itself.

“Sleep. How long? Hours upon hours.

“Then suddenly I was awake. I knew the heat, the sweat.

“And the darkness! Good Lord, the darkness!

“Nighttime on Sugar Devil Island. Nighttime in Sugar Devil Swamp. Oh, of all the idiot mistakes to have made, to have fallen into a drunken sleep here one good hour from home, with all the swamp creatures waking and hungry. What good was a pistol? What good a rifle if a snake drops on you from an overhanging tree? I didn’t mind poking at the gators to scare them off, but what about everything else, including the bobcats, that came out to feast after dark?

“I rose up, furious with myself. And I had been so sure that I wouldn’t be tricked by her, that I knew her for the evil thing that she was.

“Then it all came crashing back to me, what they’d done to her, and I gasped aloud.

“Vengeance? Oh, it had been enough to make a vengeful spirit of a choirboy, what they’d done. And she had died like that, I knew it. She had died and rotted there, but did she mean her vengeance to be on me?

“I saw the sticky semen on the boards, glittering in the light of the moon, and, looking through the windows, I thanked God for that moon. I needed that moon. Maybe I could get the hell out of here with that moon.

“I made the Sign of the Cross. I felt for the rosary under my shirt. (This one’s not blessed but it will have to do.) And hastily and shamefully I said a Hail Mary, telling the Blessed Virgin in my own words how sorry I was to call on her only when all seemed lost.

“Then I realized to my horror that my pants were still unzipped. I’d said a Hail Mary to the Virgin Mary while officially exposing myself. I put that to rights immediately and said another three prayers before I groped my way to the stairs and down to the first floor.

“I scooped up the gold plate with its little forest of wax candles, and, taking out my lighter, I quickly lighted every wick. Carrying my little tray of light, I went to the door of the Hermitage and looked out. Yes, the moon was up there all right, I could see it from this vantage point, but the swamp looked dead black, and once I pushed off from this clearing, once I tunneled into that blackness, the moon just might not do me any good.

“Of course, I didn’t have a flashlight or a lantern. I hadn’t planned on this! In fact, if anybody had said, ‘Will you spend the night on Sugar Devil Island?’ I would have answered, ‘That’s insane.’

“ ‘Wait till I get finished with this place,’ I said aloud. ‘I’ll have electricity everywhere. And these windows will have properly fitted glass. Maybe they’ll have screens as well. And these

plank floors will be covered with marble tiles that the swamp can't consume with its infernal dampness. No, this shall be a small Roman palace, what with even more elaborate Roman furniture, and the stove, I shall get a new stove. And then if I'm trapped out here, I'll have delicious pillows on a couch on which to sleep, and plenty of books to read by fine lights.' It seemed I saw the vision of the place, and Rebecca's fate had no part in what I saw. It was as if her grisly death had been erased.

"But for now? For now I was in the damned jungle in a tree house!

"Okay, what if I stayed here and didn't try to find my way home in this abominable situation? What if I just read some of those old books by candlelight, and kept my pistol on hand for any emergency either man or beast might send my way?

"Well, the worst consequence of my doing that would be that everyone at Blackwood Manor would think something terrible had happened to me. Indeed, they might be looking for me right now. That was more than a good possibility. They might be out there in a pirogue with flashlights and lanterns.

"Didn't that argue for me staying where I was?

"I set the plate of light down on the desk, and I went out the front door, down the steps, and crossed the clearing before the Hermitage so that I stood near to the bank.

"It was quite amazing how the few candles illuminated the windows of the Hermitage. Indeed, nobody coming close in a pirogue could have missed it. Maybe it was best to sit tight.

"But if so, why did it seem such a cowardly decision? Why did I feel I should get back to reassure those who loved me that I was all right?

"I checked in the pirogue. No, I did not have a flashlight or lantern. Big surprise.

"Then I peered into the swamp. I tried to see what lay before me. I tried to make out the small channel by which I had come to this point. I could see nothing in the blackness.

"I walked around the island as best I could. Why precisely I wasn't sure. Maybe I wanted to feel that I was doing something, and I listened, listened very carefully in case anyone out there was calling my name.

"Of course I heard the countless night birds and low gurgling noises coming from the water, but there was no human voice.

"I came back to the point where I'd tied up the pirogue and there stood Goblin, my perfect mirror image, watching me intently, his figure apparently illuminated, just as if it was solid, by the candlelight that came from the house.

"What a marvelous spectacle, it seemed to me, that could create such an illusion, and I racked my brain to remember if he had ever done something so spectacular before.

"I had seen him in shadows, in darkness and in light, of course, but never had I seen light falling on him, outlining his shoulder and his face. He made a sudden gesture with his right hand, beckoning me to come closer to where he stood.

“ ‘What do you want?’ I asked. ‘You don’t mean to tell me you’re going to be useful.’ I moved towards him and he reached out with his left arm to guide me in a turn. Then he pointed out into the swamp.

“For a moment I was only aware of a distant pool of moonlight—that is, an opening in the thick growth many yards from where we stood, where the water sparkled with clear radiance. Then I heard the sound of lapping. And Goblin’s left hand tightened on my arm, and he made the symbol to me with his right index finger that I should be very quiet.

“Again he pointed to this distant spot of visibility, and into it glided a pirogue apparently helmed by one man. And quite distinctly I made out the figure of that man.

“He wore a jacket and trousers, perhaps jeans for all I could see, and as I watched with Goblin he lifted up a human body from the pirogue and slipped it into the water slowly with hardly a splash!

“I was confounded. Goblin hurt my shoulder he squeezed it so tight.

“The distant figure now appeared to do the same thing again. With inconceivable dexterity and strength he lifted another body and dropped it down into the muck.

“I stood stock-still. I was horrified. The thought of danger to myself didn’t even occur to me. What filled my mind was the bitter sense that two dead bodies had just been fed to the swamp’s lethal darkness, and no one, no one, would believe me when I returned home with this tale.

“Only gradually did I realize that the figure was now motionless and in all probability facing me, and that he looked on steadily and that Goblin and I were partially illuminated for the figure by the candles in the house.

“Across the black water there came a sound of laughter. It was low, simmering, as the voices of my visions had been simmering, but it was real, this laughter, it wasn’t spectral. It came from the figure.

“And as I watched, as Goblin and I watched together, the figure guided his pirogue into the blackness and was gone.

“For some long agonizing moments Goblin and I stood together, and it was more than a comfort to feel Goblin’s left arm around me, and to rest my weight against him in an intimacy I would never have shown with a human being.

“But I knew he couldn’t keep up the solid shape for very long. I also knew that he could hear this individual, this character, who had just dumped the two bodies. Goblin would know when it was safe to leave.

“For the proverbial eternity we remained there, motionless and cautious, and then Goblin told me telepathically that we should escape the island as best we could.

“ ‘And what if I get lost, hopelessly lost?’ I asked aloud in a whisper.

“ ‘I’ll lead you,’ Goblin answered. And then he disappeared. Within a second the candles in the house were extinguished, and my familiar was pushing at me and tugging me to make me go to

the pirogue right now.

"All the way back to Blackwood Farm he guided me, sometimes in total darkness, other times by the light of the moon. In less than an hour I saw the lights of the house shining blessedly through the trees, and I shot straight for the pier.

"People were shouting. I heard someone scream. And then as I hurried up to the kitchen door, Pops came out to embrace me and say:

" 'Thank God, son. We didn't know what the hell had happened to you.'

"Aunt Queen came down the steps dabbing at her eyes.

"Sheriff Jeanfreau was there with one of his worthless, shiftless deputies, Ugly Henderson. All the Shed Men were hollering, 'He's home, he's okay.'

"Immediately I fired off at Jasmine, 'How come you put that beer in the cooler!' to which she answered that she wasn't the one who packed the damned cooler, her mother had done it, and then there was Big Ramona saying she wasn't even awake when I left (which was true), and Jasmine remembering that it was actually Clem. And where the hell was Clem?

"I didn't care. I wanted supper. I wanted everyone to gather round the kitchen table and listen so I'd only have to tell this story once.

"I demanded that Sheriff Jeanfreau stay. I even wanted worthless and annoying Ugly Henderson to stay. I told everybody that I wanted them to listen to me.

"Meantime, since it was only nine o'clock by my watch, I wanted one of the Shed Men to run the camera with its film over to the all-night drugstore in Ruby River City and get the pictures done in one hour, as the sign in the window always boasts.

" 'Where's Goblin?' I asked suddenly. I was in the kitchen. Big Ramona had just given me a wet washrag. 'Goblin, where are you?' and then I realized that after all he'd done, he didn't have the power to make me feel him or see him or hear him.

"… And so mercifully, and gratefully, and with a new respect for him, and a new love, I let him alone."

14

“They didn’t believe a word I said. When I bubbled over crazily with the horrible dream of the piercing of Rebecca, Sheriff Jeanfreau just laughed at me, laughed at my references to myself as both man and woman in the dream, and only a sudden expostulation of

“ ‘Please!’ from Aunt Queen shut him up.

“When it came to my depiction of the mysterious stranger dumping the two bodies, Sheriff Jeanfreau started laughing again and there even came some audible snickering from his worthless deputy Ugly Henderson.

“Patsy, who had come into the kitchen sometime during the proceedings, picked up on Ugly’s snickering and started some snickering of her own.

“And when I described how Goblin had led me back out of the swamp, the sheriff, figuratively speaking, rolled on the floor.

“I ignored all this with first-rate patience, devoured two plates of pancakes made by Big Ramona from the Cracker Barrel pancake mix and looked to Aunt Queen.

“ ‘You know Rebecca was murdered out there, Aunt Queen. All I’m asking is that somebody go out there and collect the remains and test them for DNA!’

“ ‘Oh, Quinn, my precious darling,’ ” Aunt Queen sighed.

“As for Pops, it was well past his bedtime, and he looked like he’d been rode hard and put away wet. I knew what a worry I was to him.

“THEN the snapshots came back from the drugstore! THE SNAPSHOTS!

“And round the kitchen table I passed them like so many playing cards. They were good shots too. You couldn’t tell much about Rebecca’s remains from the shots, but you could easily see the five rusted chains; and of course the outdoor shots of the Hermitage itself, and the mausoleum, were very good.

“ ‘Now you know damned good and well,’ I said, ‘that there’s a house out there, you can’t deny it; and if that metal there’—I jabbed my finger at the photograph—‘isn’t pure gold, then my name’s not Blackwood.’

“The sheriff was in the midst of another belly-jiggling fit of laughter when Aunt Queen gestured for quiet.

“ ‘All right,’ she declared. ‘We’ve heard all Quinn has to say. Now, this island is real and he

knows the way to it, and according to him these mysterious bodies were dumped at a spot some matter of yards beyond the banks of the island. In other words, he can take you to the very place from which he spied the dumping and a search of that small area would be entirely manageable.'

"The sheriff couldn't stop himself from laughing. 'Now, Miss Queen,' he said, 'you know how much I admire you, as does everybody in these parts.…'

" 'Thank you, Sheriff,' she at once responded. 'On New Year's Eve I shall expect a tribute of seven youths and seven maidens, handpicked of course.'

"Now it was my turn to die with laughter, because I knew this referred to the minotaur myth, but he hadn't a clue of that and only stared at me and then at her, and I was just stupid enough at eighteen to feel superior to him.

"Aunt Queen went on without missing a beat, ignoring my exultation.

" 'Now, I will personally pay,' said Aunt Queen, 'for the bagging and collecting of these chains and the black residue which Quinn has described. I will pay to have it thoroughly and completely analyzed as to its substance, and will go so far as to run DNA tests on it to determine, among other things, whether or not only one person perished in this spot, or more than one, and whether or not Rebecca Stanford—whose hair we have conveniently in a hairbrush in the attic—did indeed die in this place.' She paused for effect, her eyes narrowing.

" 'All I ask of you, Sheriff,' she continued in a high matriarchal fashion, 'is that you go back out there and you look for these mysterious bodies. I assume you and Pops can go by motorized pirogue in the morning.'

" 'The motors will never make it,' I piped up. 'We'll have to take the small pirogue, same as I did. The cypresses are just too dense.'

" 'Very well then, Pops knows how to handle the pole and I assume you do too, Sheriff Bobby Jeanfreau! So you take care of that, and consider yourself solemnly charged to find those bodies, while the labwork I will handle through my own personal physician, assuming that Ruby River City doesn't have a medical examiner on its payroll who is qualified in the field.'

"At this point, the sheriff, having been laughed at by me, very smoothly smiled and asked:

" 'And may I deputize Goblin, ma'am, so he can show Pops and me the way to the island?'

"Now it was Pops who became riled, though his tone was low and pretty much apathetic, given the state of things.

" 'We don't need for you to deputize Goblin,' he said. 'But I do think that you need a real team of people out there, not just to find those bodies but to examine this death scene with the chains, this residue as we're calling it; you need somebody to look to that in an official way.'

" 'Now, Pops, you know there's nothing to all this—' the sheriff countered. He was as stubborn as I'd ever seen him, and as ignorant, too.

"But Pops pressed on, his tone never changing except in terms of the contents of what he said. 'Now you listen to me, Sheriff,' he stated calmly. 'A body out there even on the second floor of a

house could decompose within a few years. And it is possible that Quinn has stumbled upon the scene of a crime, and he might have stumbled on the criminal himself. I'm insisting you take a team of men out there, and if you don't I'll call in the FBI.'

"Why this struck utter terror into the sheriff I'm not sure, but given some of the rumors of what went on in Ruby River Parish, including the cock fighting (which isn't illegal in Louisiana, by the way), I guessed he didn't want the FBI snooping around, so he agreed to the terms.

"In spite of Pops trying to restrain me I followed the sheriff all the way to his car, hammering on him about those two bodies: 'You've got to check and see who's missing! I'm telling you, I saw it. Two bodies, just dumped out there. You've got to search.'

" 'One thing at a time,' Pops said finally. 'Let them check out the house. And then if you think you can pinpoint the place where this stranger dumped the bodies, then we'll insist on a search.'

"Finally the sheriff and his snickering deputy were gone from the property, and Aunt Queen and Pops had ahold of me and told everybody else to leave the kitchen so we could be alone.

"Patsy was pretty ticked off that she couldn't stay, but Pops gave her one of the worst glowering looks I've ever seen on his face, and she finally retreated, in a sulk, to her apartment over the shed.

"A bitter lecture came from Pops as to my having disobeyed Aunt Queen by going out there by myself, about my having 'stolen' his pistol, and some strong statements about how I was in real danger from myself now, and it was time for me to leave Blackwood Farm and go out into the world.

" 'What do you mean "out into the world"?' I asked. 'Can't you see these pictures! There's this gold tomb out there, Pops, I've got to find out what's in it, and then there's the house itself. I'm not going anywhere. Pops, you know what I want to do,' I went on, full throttle. 'I want to run electricity out there to that house, you know, run the cables right through the swamp. I want to clean it up and make it livable again, a real Hermitage, but I can't do that until they collect and analyze Rebecca's remains. I can't do that until I've done right by Rebecca, even though if truth be told Rebecca doesn't always do right by me.'

"He looked sad and tired, moving slowly to exasperation.

"But I kept at him.

" 'And they have to catch this stranger,' I said, 'this murderer, this miscreant who is dumping bodies in our swamp.'

"There came a final change in Pops, a change I'd seen many times in the past. He became angry, angry with me, the way I'd seen him with Patsy.

" 'You're getting titched in the head, son,' he said. 'You need to get clear of here. You can enroll at LSU in Baton Rouge if you want to stay close to home, but I'm for you going up East to Harvard. Aunt Queen's looked over all the material given her by Lynelle on your schooling and your examinations, and you could easily get into an Ivy League school right now. You're going

out of here.'

" 'My darling,' Aunt Queen said, 'Pops is absolutely right. You have to think now of your future in the world and not the mysteries and histories of those who once lived in this house. This house will be here for you all your life. But you are at an age now when impressions mean everything, and it's time for you to get away.'

"I went silent. I had met with total resistance. I wondered if the gators could eat those bodies so quickly that there would be nothing left. I wondered if I could pinpoint the place on the island where I'd been standing when I saw the dastardly deed.

" 'You go to bed, Quinn,' said Aunt Queen gently. 'I know you saw something out there. I don't doubt you. And clearly the Hermitage exists. You've brought back proof of it. But it's late, and nothing can be done until morning.'

"Upstairs, I found Big Ramona in my wing chair by the cold fireplace with her rosary beads in her hand. Her full white hair was already braided. She was in her best rose-flowered flannel nightgown. She gave me a big hug and I went in to shower and change.

"After we said our night prayers and I let it be known I was too damned tired for a whole Rosary, we were soon snuggling spoon fashion and I was remembering that mysterious stranger in the weak light of the broken moon.

"Then I heard the computer switched on. A low green light emanated from the monitor.

"What a nuisance, I thought. 'Goblin, why do you do these things?' I murmured, but then I heard a strange sound. It was the clicking of the computer keys.

"I shot up out of bed and came into this parlor and stared at the computer. He had most certainly typed out a message:

QUINN, DANGER EVERYWHERE; I'M AFRAID.

"I was stultified. Never had he done this before. Turn it on and off, yes, but to write on it without my hand? I sat down at the computer and I wrote out the words as I recited them aloud:

" 'Goblin, I love you. I couldn't have come home without you. Explain what you mean about danger.'

"I moved my hands away from the keyboard and watched the rapid, seemingly magical depression of the keys as he wrote out:

I SEE IT NEAR AND FAR. GO AWAY. I LOVE YOU. DON'T LOVE REBECCA.

"I began to whisper my response to him, that is, to talk aloud to him as I had always done—that he needn't worry—when the keys started firing again, and I saw the writing on the screen:

THROUGH THE COMPUTER, QUINN. I AM STRONG IN THE ELECTRICITY, NOT STRONG NOW IN ANY OTHER WAY. TOO TIRED FROM SWAMP. QUINN, GO.

“This all but dumbfounded me, but it fitted with my growing understanding of him, and so I hammered out:

“ ‘Goblin, who was the stranger? Who were the bodies?’

“ ‘I don’t know,’ came his answers. ‘The bodies were dead.’

“That was a typical example of Goblin’s reasoning. For a long breathless moment I sat there, and then I typed out: ‘Goblin, I love you. Don’t ever think that I don’t love you. Put up with me and my off-and-on ways.’

“There came no answer, and then, before I could hit the save button to preserve this little dialogue, the computer switched itself off. Or rather Goblin switched it off.

“ ‘What does that mean?’ I said aloud, looking about me. But no answer came from the darkness. There was nothing to be done but to go back to bed.…

“And to lie there, awake, pondering all that had happened, including the fact that Goblin could now write on the computer without using my left hand to do so—a frightening discovery, though one which was all bound up in my head with the awareness that he had led me out of the swamp.

“In summary, what I mean is I felt guilty for how shabbily I’d treated Goblin.

“Goblin had my admiration again, the way he had gotten it when I was a little boy and he taught me to spell big words. Goblin and I were close again. Goblin knew I was telling the truth. Goblin understood everything.

“I felt it excitedly while at the same time rejecting totally his message. We were close, that’s what mattered.

“But we were to come even closer.

“Sometime during the night, as Big Ramona snored and I dozed in a half sleep, dreaming of Rebecca, there came into the room a stranger.

“Goblin, with a hand on my shoulder, awakened and alerted me. Sleeping on the left side of the bed I was turned to my left, and I opened my eyes to see Goblin staring past me in the direction of the fireplace. There came the tight squeeze from Goblin which on the island had meant caution.

“I rolled over as if it were merely natural in my sleep.

“I could see the figure at the mantel, and measuring it by that marker I calculated it was a tall man—and I knew by its outline that it was no man I knew, but its shape conformed with the shape of the man I’d seen in the swamp in the moonlight.

“I could see the outline of a bold head, well squared-off shoulders, and the glint of a hand on the mantelpiece. I was certain it was the same man! There came a tapping sound from the mantelpiece. There was something white on the mantelpiece.

“And then there came a low utterance of laughter.

“I climbed out of bed lickety-split, though Goblin tried with all his effort to stop me. And as I

rushed across the room in my bare feet I heard the sound of paper crumpled and I picked out of the shadows the sight of a white paper ball tossed into the fireplace.

"Before I took another step the man had vanished.

"My eyes searched the room. I rushed through the open doorway only to find the hallway empty. Attic and ground floor revealed nobody.

"All the guests of Blackwood Manor slept and so did its residents. And from the kitchen window I could see Clem, the night man, in the brightly lighted shed, sitting back with his feet up, watching the television.

"My heart was racing.

"What was the point of sounding an alarm? Who would believe me this time? I went back up to my room and I retrieved the crumpled paper from the fireplace. I knew what it was before I read it. It was my letter to the trespasser of Sugar Devil Island, warning him to get off the property.

"I straightened it out and turned it over. There was no response written on it. Then I remembered the tapping on the mantelpiece, and sure enough there was a letter there, or at least a piece of folded white paper.

"I was incalculably excited! Here was the smoking gun. I snatched up this paper with literally trembling hands and took it to my desk where I turned on my small halogen lamp in hopes of not awakening Big Ramona.

"The white paper was thick and fancy, and the writing was in script of a florid and large design. I could smell the India ink in which it had been written. This is an approximation of what it said:

Tarquin, my beloved boy,

I am not as amused by your notice as one might expect. On the contrary, I rather resent your intrusion into a portion of Sugar Devil Swamp to which I hold unwritten title, thanks to the generosity and foresight of your great-great-great-grandfather Manfred. If I had not set eyes on you tonight and not recognized you for the sensitive and serious young man which you are, I might take even greater umbrage than I do.

As it stands, allow me to explain that I want the island undisturbed by you, and it is my express wish that none of you or your family come there. I treasure my privacy, Tarquin, perhaps more than you treasure your life. Think on it, my boy.

The Resident of the Hermitage.

"I folded the letter, and, without bothering with a robe or slippers any more than I had during my earlier perambulation, I went downstairs to Aunt Queen's bedroom. I pushed open the door with a child's license.

“The light was on of course, and Aunt Queen was on her chaise lounge, swaddled in diamonds and satin covers, eating a pint of pink ice cream.

“Jasmine, who was bunking in with her, lay sound asleep in the bed.

“From the television there came the muted voices of Bette Davis and Olivia de Havilland.

“ ‘Tarquin,’ Aunt Queen said at once, ‘what is it?’ She muted the murmuring television. ‘You look like you’ve seen Banquo’s ghost. Come here and kiss me.’

“I kissed her more than willingly.

“ ‘He’s come into my room, Aunt Queen,’ I said breathlessly, waving the letter in her face. ‘And he’s left me this note. I saw him, Aunt Queen. He stood at my fireplace. Goblin told me he was there. And this is the note which he’s left me. Aunt Queen, I tell you something involving murder is afoot out there. And mad as it may sound it’s some sort of secret Byronic society.’

“ ‘Let me see this letter,’ she said. She set her ice cream aside. Meanwhile Jasmine had raised her head and was sliding out from under the blankets.

“I told them both what had transpired upstairs. Jasmine then read the note, and Aunt Queen read it a second time. I was too excited to do anything but pace.

“ ‘We’ve got to start locking the front and back doors,’ Jasmine said, ‘if people are going to come just walking right in without knocking.’

“ ‘We don’t lock the front and back doors?!’ I asked, appalled.

“ ‘No, you know we don’t,’ said Jasmine. ‘The guests come back at all hours from New Orleans. You ever had a key to the front or back door, Tarquin Blackwood?’

“ ‘This guy laughed at me,’ I said as calmly as I could, which wasn’t calm at all. ‘He laughed, I tell you. I heard him laugh and …” I stopped. It was the laughter I heard in those dizzy spells. It was the laughter that had accompanied Rebecca’s piteous pleas. Oh, but who would ever believe that!

“ ‘Tarquin, what is it!’ Aunt Queen pressed. ‘Don’t stand there staring. Jasmine, go run and tell Clem to check the entire property. Tell Clem we’ve had an intruder. Hurry.’

“Jasmine headed out.

“ ‘Tarquin, stop staring like that,’ said Aunt Queen. ‘There has to be a reason for this, I mean something that makes sense here. Maybe you’ve hit it. It is a secret society that meets out there, you know, a sort of romantic clandestine thing, and one of them has come into this house, which you know is open at all times, you know, and he has dared to go upstairs.…”

“ ‘There’s nothing romantic about dumping dead bodies,’ I said.

“ ‘Darling, maybe he was dumping something else, and it just looked that way.’

“I turned around in a small circle. I saw the faint outline of Goblin by one post of the fancy bed. Goblin nodded to me vigorously.

“I looked at her. She was looking past me to the place where Goblin stood.

“ ‘They were dead bodies, Aunt Queen,’ I said. ‘I know because Goblin knows and Goblin is

afraid.'

"A deep silence fell over her, and then she looked up at me. 'My sweet boy,' she said. 'I shall have this investigated in every conceivable way, make no mistake on it. But I am going to get you out of here.' "

15

“On the following morning, Sugar Devil Island, which had always been the biggest secret of Blackwood Farm, became host to a dozen crime fighters, including not only the sheriff of Ruby River Parish and his deputies but two private investigators hired directly by Aunt Queen, two private laboratory technicians and two gentlemen from the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

“In this way, the Hermitage became public knowledge. And as I stood there on the banks, directing people to the locality where I saw the bodies dumped in the open swamp, I was treated to the semi-welcome sight of people trooping all over Manfred’s sacred retreat.

“Pops had had real bad indigestion after breakfast and said that he just couldn’t go with us. It made him feel really bad, but he just wasn’t up to it.

“Aunt Queen, of course, could not be expected to make such a journey, but she did, handsomely turned out in khaki sportswear, which made her look like a nineteenth-century archaeologist. (I had forgotten that she had been to the Amazon only the year before for a retreat in the jungle.)

“And of course Jasmine was with us, in blue jeans, which she never wore, breasts poking through one of my hand-me-down checkered shirts, smoking Camel cigarettes and eyeing everybody with suspicion if not downright scorn.

“And I stood there, listening for anything that would lessen my feelings of being isolated and ridiculed.

“Of course, dead bodies in the swamp were nowhere to be found.

“But probing some six to ten feet of soft-bottomed muck was no easy task, and the alligators surrounding the island were particularly obtrusive and ‘friendly,’ which to me meant only one thing: they were expecting to be fed and they had probably just been fed on the bodies I’d seen given over to them.

“As for the remains, or the second-floor ‘residue,’ as it became officially called, a good sample of it was removed from the premises by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and by laboratory technicians from the private laboratory of Mayfair Medical, the giant private establishment only recently built by the famous Mayfair family of New Orleans, the family of which Fr. Kevin Mayfair was a Yankee member—which I’ve mentioned to you before.

“The FBI was there because they had the wherewithal to collect and test the residue, and

because they had extensive files on missing persons which might just provide a DNA match to seal the story for some miserable victim's family.

"Mayfair Medical was there because they too had a state-of-the-art laboratory, and Aunt Queen had hired them to do the test on our behalf, the Hermitage being a dwelling on our property.

"The sheriff was there to traffic in platitudes and truisms and puffed-up stories about the practical jokes he played on his friends, and in general to be a source of comic relief.

"As for the letter which the mysterious stranger had given me, this had not been given to the FBI as I had requested, but to Mayfair Medical. Would that destroy a 'chain of evidence' if DNA from recent missing persons was found in the Hermitage? No. Because nothing linked the letter to the Hermitage except my meager testimony.

"Or so I understood the situation to be on the morning of this wholesale melee in which interstate officialdom and southern recalcitrance met head-on in a dense and reeking bog full of reptiles and insects.

"The men from the FBI were respectable and respecting, which is probably why the sheriff and his men would hardly acknowledge their existence. I gave my full statement to anyone who asked, and that included the technicians from Mayfair Medical, both of whom were tremendously curious about the task at hand, i.e., the collection of the data.

"Nobody fingerprinted the mysterious marble desk and Roman chair, but just about everybody sooner or later touched it.

"Everybody—even the sheriff—was impressed with the gold mausoleum, if that was what it was, and repeated efforts by various parties failed to discover any way to open it. The gold plates (the sheriff insisted they were brass), I repeat, the gold plates were so securely fitted into the granite framework that only a very destructive crowbar might have managed to loosen them, which we, the proud owners of the mausoleum, refused to allow.

"Finally, at midafternoon it was decided to call off the search for remains and the sheriff and his men made their way out, cursing their little pirogues and their poles and the cypress trees with their outrageous roots and knees, the wisteria and the blackberries and the heat and the mosquitoes. The FBI gentlemen went the same route, behaving altogether in a more reserved manner, as our local handyman, Jackson, was steering their boat and it did not seem to be the FBI style to curse at things.

"Aunt Queen, Jasmine and I, along with our Shed Men, Clem and Felix (both Jasmine's brothers, and one Aunt Queen's oftentimes chauffeur), not wishing to remain on the island alone —Jasmine had seen the letter—hurried behind the FBI right back to the landing.

"Once safe within the orbit of Blackwood Manor I told Clem and Felix that I wanted to wire the Hermitage for electricity in the near future, and to please not forget where they had just been. Aunt Queen gave her consent and so they paid attention to me.

"Also they were too kind to snicker. Also they were tired, and I gave them both a cash bonus,

of which Jasmine expressed a certain refined jealousy. So I gave her a cash bonus too, which I was positive she wouldn't accept but she did, conspicuously stuffing it into her brassiere and winking at me.

"On that account I grabbed her and bent her way back and kissed her hard, to which she said in a whisper: 'Once you go black, you never go back.' And I nearly died laughing.

" 'Where did you hear that?' I asked.

" 'Forever and a long time ago,' she said. 'I'm surprised you never heard it. Watch your step, Little Boss.' Off she went, helping Aunt Queen up the slope, the two of them whispering suspiciously together.

"I don't know why I was so afraid. Everybody knew I'd told the truth about the existence of the island. Everybody had seen the marble desk and the golden chair. Everybody had seen the strange inscription on the mausoleum.

"Had I not gloried in those first few moments this morning when the chain of little pirogues came within sight of the island? Yes, I had! And had I not gloried in the moment of shock when everyone crowded onto the second floor of the Hermitage to see the evil rusted chains and the blackened morass on the floor? Yes, I had.

"But what did it mean now?

"It was four o'clock. The sun was lowering. The property, for all its vain magnificence, looked forlorn.

"I went low, very low.

"I stood out front, beyond Pops' close and beautiful flower beds, staring at the big columns of the house until Aunt Queen came out on the front porch and told me she'd been looking for me everywhere. I knew I ought to answer her but it seemed difficult for me to break the silence that surrounded me.

"I knew on some level that her genial, sweet face was just what I needed in my selfish little soul, but I couldn't speak. I thought of the mysterious stranger, I thought of the bodies slipping into the muck. I saw the moonlight as if it were shining on me now. I saw the dim figure who had stood at my bedroom fireplace. Glint of light on hand, on forehead, on cheek. Terror. I felt mystery, yes, but cold panic.

"Aunt Queen came near to me. She said words but I didn't hear them. Then out of the silence I heard her voice … something about men being on the property to guard it. Men paid from an agency in New Orleans, excellent security men.

"Cerebrally I knew these words meant something. They meant something good, and I formed mental images of these men—of their being at the doors, and sitting in the parlor, the kitchen, the dining room. I pictured. When I can't think or register, I picture. I listened.

"But nothing could touch the cold panic I felt, and my only recourse seemed a motionlessness.

" 'Quinn!' she said. She put her hand on my neck, and I looked at her and I thought, *How long*

will it be before she dies? And my throat was so tight I couldn't speak.

"Finally I came to the surface. I took her hand and kissed it, and I said, 'Let me help you up the steps, you always wear these impossible shoes, look at you, and what if you fall and you break a hip, what then, my beloved aunt, you won't be able to go to Katmandu or Timbuktu or Iceland.'

"She took my arm and into the house we went, and after seeing her to her room, and nodding to the security guard who sat in the far corner of the dining room, I went up the stairs.

"This memory's etched: but what isn't?

"The panic was still on me. Would it be washed away? I went into the bathroom, stripped off the dirty swamp clothes and stepped into the shower.

"I let the warm water splash over me, praying, if I was capable of praying, that this feeling of despair, this awful despair, would leave me. I tried to reach back to the excitement I'd felt when I first came upon the island. I tried to feel anything that would lift the awful despair from me. But excitement had turned to dread, and I was an expert on dread. Now it had other springs to feed it.

"I must have had my eyes closed. Because quite suddenly I realized Goblin was in the shower with me. And then I opened my eyes and saw him right in front of me.

"He was solid, so solid that the water washed over him, over his hair and his face and his shoulders. He was staring at me with big vital eyes.

" 'Go away, Goblin,' I said, which was what I always said when he came to interfere with my taking a bath or shower.

"But he showed no signs of backing off, and as I looked into his eyes I realized he was obdurately maintaining his stand and that the water was making him tremendously strong. I also realized that I had never seen the water washing down over him like this before. The water had at other times passed through him. He had volume here; he had new power.

"A sudden fear of him infected me. It was like the moment in the church at Lynelle's Memorial Mass, when he had knelt so very close to me after Communion.

"His cock was erect. So was mine.

"Never taking his eyes from mine for a moment, he reached for the soap on the small porcelain shelf, and he took this into his hands, and he lathered his hands thickly.

"*But how is this possible?* I thought. But he was doing it, he was holding the bar of soap, and as he put the soap back he reached under my scrotum and cupped it in his left hand and then put his right hand around my cock.

" 'No, don't do it, stop it, what are you doing?' I asked. But I was too far gone, and the motion of his right hand became rhythmical and my cock grew harder and harder and my willpower vanished.

"As I came he put his left arm tight around me and held me, and I felt his cock next to mine

and I held his neck, unable to stand for a moment.

"When it was over, I rested back against the warm tiles, still savoring the pleasure, weak all over from the pleasure, the water softly thundering down, staring questioningly at him. His image—if I even thought of it as an image—was more vivid than ever.

"I closed my eyes. I was filled with both love and hatred. Most of all I was full of shame, and I thought of how all the world would say I had done this to myself, only making up the story of Goblin; but he had done it and I knew that he could do it again anytime that I wanted it. Or anytime that he wanted it. Again. Yes, again, forever. Me and Goblin forever.

"When I opened my eyes he was still grotesquely close to me, his eyes gleaming, his lips smiling. Am I this handsome? I thought. No. Something else shines from my eyes.

" 'Get away now!' I whispered furiously.

"He put his lips to my ear. I heard his telepathic voice in my head, a thin ribbon of words under the thunder of the shower: *Pops does this. Clem, Felix, men do this. Love me. Not love Rebecca. No Rebecca.*

"Again I felt his left arm around my shoulder, and when he drew back I kissed him openmouthed and lusty and closer to him than to any living thing, and then I shuddered.

"I pushed him with all my strength and of course my mental strength went behind that physical push, and he dissolved, and to my faint horror steam rose where he had been, as if a fissure had been opened in the floor to emit that steam, and then there was nothing.

"There came a pounding on the door. I heard Big Ramona say,

" 'Tarquin Blackwood, come out of there!'

"She knows, I thought, the whole world knows. Angry, I toweled dry and opened the door for her because she wouldn't stop pounding.

" 'Good Heavens,' I said. 'Is this house on fire again?'

"Then I saw the tears on her cheeks.

" 'It's Pops,' she said. 'He's been fighting with Patsy, out yonder by the gates. That damned Patsy. Come on, son! Come on, you're the man of the house now, they need you!' "

16

“There are two sets of gates to Blackwood Farm—the formal gates that lead to the lane of pecan trees which come up to the front porch, and the other larger gates, way off to the east, for the caterer trucks, deliveries and tractors.

“It was out there, beside the big gates, that Pops had planted two big oak trees in memory of Sweetheart.

“He had apparently driven out there, sometime in the afternoon, with a flat of multicolored impatiens to plant around the trees, a project he’d mentioned on and off for a while now. And the Shed Men said later that he seemed confused and strangely unconcerned about the goings on at Sugar Devil Island. One side of his face had not looked right, and they had meant to go check on him.

“Patsy had gone out there, in her new truck, to talk to Pops, cursing to the Shed Men that she had to ask Pops for money again and she hated it, it wasn’t fair and all that. She’d left Seymour behind because he didn’t want to see any more scenes. And he’d been drinking beer with the Shed Men.

“It was Patsy who came screaming back, having already called for emergency help on her car phone, and the Shed Men drove out with Patsy to find Pops dead right by the flower bed. His hands were caked with earth.

“Big Ramona and Jasmine and Aunt Queen and I got there about the same time as the medical team. They couldn’t bring him around, and we all piled into our assorted vehicles, Aunt Queen in the ambulance with Pops, and headed for the small hospital in Ruby River City.

“But it was all up for Pops. We’d known that when we first saw him by the oak tree. Sobbing uncontrollably, Aunt Queen ordered an autopsy, saying she just had to know the cause, and we went on to make the funeral arrangements.

“Aunt Queen proved utterly incapable of doing it.

“So, quivering and incoherent, I went with Jasmine to McNeil’s Funeral Parlor and arranged for the pickup of the body, the night of the wake, and the directions for the drive into New Orleans for the funeral Mass at St. Mary’s Assumption Church and the burial at Metairie Cemetery.

“The nice people at the funeral home said I could put off all the rest—the autopsy would take

two days—but I thought why not get it over now? And so I picked a beautiful dark hardwood coffin that I thought Pops would like, being the handyman that he was, and I chose a Biblical quotation for the program from the Book of Psalms, and I arranged for a singer to sing Pops' favorite hymns, some of which were Catholic and some of which were Protestant.

"When I reached home I found Aunt Queen broken and unable to do anything but sob, and I didn't blame her. She said over and over that a woman shouldn't have to bury her great-nephew, that it was all wrong, terribly wrong.

"We called her favorite nurse, Cindy, who said she'd come right over. Aunt Queen wasn't really sick, but she often had Cindy to do her blood pressure and collect her bloodwork before trips abroad, and so Cindy was the loving person to whom we turned now.

"As for myself I was in a cold panic, the same cold panic that had been coming over me since Lynelle's death, but I hadn't reached the worst stage of it yet. I was still in the elation state that immediately follows the miracle of death, and, in my ignorant youth, I had a 'take charge' attitude.

"I went into Pops' room and picked out his best Sunday suit, a good shirt, belt and a tie, and gave these to Clem to drive over to Ruby River City. I sent underwear too because I didn't know if it was needed. And I had the strange idea that Pops might want his underwear.

"After Clem had left me, and I was standing alone in Pops' room, Goblin appeared, and without a prompt he put his arms tight around me. He felt as real as I felt real. And I kissed his cheek, and I saw his tears. A rush of the most intimate love passed out of me into him.

"This was an extraordinary moment, a moment of confusion and contrition. And in the dark corners of my subconscious I knew it was a dangerous moment. But my heart was leading the band.

" 'Goblin, I loved Pops,' I said. 'You understand, you understand everything.'

" 'Patsy. Bad,' he responded in the telepathic voice. I could feel his kisses on my cheek and my neck. For a split second, I felt his hand on my cock.

"I reached down and gently moved his hand away. But the damage had been done. I had to nail down hard on myself. Then I spoke to him:

" 'No, it's not Patsy's fault,' I said out loud. 'She was just being Patsy, that's all. Now, you go and leave me alone now, Goblin. I have to go downstairs. I have to see to things.'

"He gave me a final hug and I was amazed at his strength. I could see nothing in him that appeared spectral or ephemeral. But he vanished as I had asked him to, and the baubles of the chandeliers moved as if he had evacuated the room at his departure.

"I stood staring at the chandelier. It hadn't hit me yet that nobody alive inhabited this back bedroom anymore. But it was trying to hit me. Things were trying to get through. Goblin had been the image of my weeping soul. Oh, I had so misjudged Goblin, but who would ever understand?

“When I came down to the kitchen, Patsy was sitting at the table just staring at me and Big Ramona was on one of the stools by the stove just staring at her. Lolly was there too, all dressed up for a date, her copper skin and rippling yellow hair just gorgeous, and there was Jasmine in her apron in the far corner by the back door.

“I could hear Aunt Queen crying in her bedroom. Her nurse, Cindy, had arrived, and I could hear Cindy’s sympathetic tones as she tried to comfort her.

“Patsy’s eyes were glassy and hard and she was chewing a piece of gum that made her jaw look hard. She put a cigarette on her lip and snapped her lighter. She had her huge poofed-up stage hairstyle, and her lips were thickly made-up with frosted pink lipstick.

“ ‘So everybody’s going to want to know what we were talking about,’ she said. There was a little tremor in her voice, a note I’d never heard before, but I wasn’t sure anybody else heard it.

“ ‘Seymour says you wanted some money,’ Jasmine said.

“ ‘Yeah, I wanted money,’ said Patsy, in her hard voice, ‘and it’s not like he didn’t have it to give. He had it. Just wait till they read his will. He was loaded, and what did he ever do with it? But that’s not what set him off to cursing and shouting at me and then grabbing for his chest and throwing up and dying.’

“ ‘So what did?’ asked Jasmine.

“ ‘I told him I was sick,’ said Patsy. ‘I told him I was HIV-positive.’

“Silence. Then Big Ramona looked at me.

“ ‘What’s she talking about?’ she asked.

“ ‘AIDS, Ramona,’ I said. ‘She’s HIV-positive. It means she’s contracted the AIDS virus. She could come down with full-blown AIDS any time.’

“ ‘I’m the one that’s sick,’ Patsy said, ‘and he’s the one that up and dies because he was mad at me, mad that I got it. You ask me, he died of grief. Grief for Sweetheart.’ She broke off and looked from one to the other of all of us.

“ ‘Grief’s what killed him,’ she went on. She shrugged. ‘I didn’t kill him. You should have seen what he was doing out there. He’d rolled over one row of pansies with his truck, and there he was laying another bed of them, like he didn’t even know what he’d done with his truck. I said, “Look at what you’ve done, you sniveling crazy old man.” He started in on all that, “You sold her wedding dress!” like that wasn’t so over, sniveling crazy old fool, and he said he wasn’t giving me a red cent, and then I told him. I told him I had medical bills to pay.’

“I was too stunned to think, but I heard myself ask her, ‘How did you get it?’

“ ‘How should I know?’ she replied, looking at me with those brittle glossy eyes. ‘From some bastard who had it, probably a user, I don’t know, I’ve got an idea and then I don’t. It wasn’t Seymour, don’t you go blaming him. And don’t you go telling him either. Don’t you none of you tell anybody what I’m telling you. Don’t you go telling Aunt Queen. Seymour and I have a gig tonight. But the thing is, I can’t pay the rest of the pickers unless I have some money.’

“By pickers, she meant the guitar players who’d be backing her up.

“ ‘You expect one of us to go in there and ask Aunt Queen for money?’ asked Big Ramona. ‘Cancel your goddamned gig. You got no business playing music tonight when your father is stone dead at the mortuary in Ruby River City.’

“Patsy shook her head. ‘I’m flat broke,’ she said. ‘Quinn, go in there and get some money for me.’

“I swallowed, I remember that, but I don’t remember how long it was before I could answer her. Then I remembered that I had Pops’ money clip in my jeans. They’d given it to me, along with his keys and his handkerchief, at the hospital.

“I took it out and I looked at it. It was a wad of twenty-dollar bills, but there were also more than several hundreds. He always saved those hundred-dollar bills just in case something came up. I counted it all out—one thousand dollars—and I gave it to her.

“ ‘You telling the truth about being HIV?’ Jasmine asked.

“ ‘Yeah, and I see you’re all crying buckets,’ said Patsy. ‘He blew his stack when he heard. You’re just one big sympathetic family.’

“ ‘Anybody know outside of us?’ Jasmine asked.

“ ‘No,’ Patsy said. ‘I just told you not to tell anybody, didn’t I? And why are you asking me, you worried about your precious bed-and-breakfast? There’s nobody left to run it, case you haven’t noticed. Unless you all are taking over.’ She shot a mean glance at each of us in turn. ‘I guess Little Lord Tarquin here could become the youngest bed-and-breakfast owner in the South, now, couldn’t he?’

“ ‘I’m very sorry, Patsy,’ I said. ‘But it’s not a death sentence anymore, being HIV. There are drugs, lots of drugs.’

“ ‘Oh, save it, Little Lord Tarquin!’ she shot at me.

“ ‘Is that going to be my name from now on? I don’t like it,’ I fired at her. ‘I was trying to tell you about medicine, advances, hopes. They have a special clinic for research at Mayfair Medical, that’s all I’m trying to say.’

“ ‘Oh, yeah, research, fine with your wonderful education, you know all about those things,’ she hammered. ‘Lynelle’s little genius. You haven’t seen her ghost lately, have you?’

“ ‘Patsy, you’re not working any gig tonight,’ declared Big Ramona.

“ ‘Are you getting decent treatment?’ Jasmine asked. ‘Just tell us that much.’

“ ‘Oh, yeah yeah, I know all about decent treatment,’ Patsy said. ‘I’m a musician, remember. You don’t think I never shot up? That’s probably how I got it, needles, not being tacked to the mattress. And all it takes is one time and all that, and I never shoot up except when I’m drunk, and so there we are, Miss Patsy Blackwood’s not long for this world, ‘cause she got drunk and shot up with somebody else’s needle, but so far she’s not symptomatic.’

“She shoved the money in her shoulder bag and stood up.

“ ‘Where are you going, girl!’ Big Ramona said, standing up to block Patsy from the back door. ‘You’re not working a gig with your father dead.’

“ ‘The hell I’m not, and I’m working it in Tennessee so I got to get on the road. Seymour’s waiting.’

“ ‘You can’t leave here,’ I said. ‘You can’t not come to the funeral!’

“ ‘Watch me not come to it,’ she sneered.

“The screen door banged shut behind her. I ran after her.

“ ‘Patsy, you’ll regret this all your life,’ I said. I ran along beside her to her van. ‘Patsy, you’re not thinking. It hasn’t sunk in. You have to go through with this. Everybody will expect you to care enough to be there. Patsy, listen to me.’

“ ‘Like my life is going to be long, Quinn! My life? That old man. I told him I was HIV and he went crazy! You should have heard him cursing me and the crowd I run with; you wanna know what his final words were to me? “Damn the day you were born,” and then he went down, gasping and throwing up his guts. I wouldn’t come to his funeral if he was going to rise from the dead. If you see his ghost, you tell him I hate him. Now get away from me.’

“She and Seymour were off, screeching tires and all, and I just stood there, feeling the panic again, and within seconds the cold thought came over me that I didn’t care whether Patsy came or not. It would do nothing to lessen the pain in me. Probably, it didn’t matter to anyone.

“It would just be one of those things that people would talk about all over the parish.

“Only being near to my Jasmine or Big Ramona or Aunt Queen would help me.

“I made my way back inside. I could smell the pancakes Big Ramona was cooking up for me, and hunger seemed a reason to be alive, to put off for a little while telling Aunt Queen that Patsy would not be there for the funeral. In fact, maybe I’d never even mention it.

“The autopsy took only a day.

“Pops had suffered a massive heart attack.

“The funeral was enormous. It began with a long evening wake in Ruby River City to which all manner of people came, including shop owners, repairmen, carpenters, woodworkers—in summary, the many, many people in all walks of life whom Pops had known and who were devoted to him.

“I was staggered by the sheer number of young boys and young men who looked up to Pops and said he’d been like a father or uncle to them. It seemed that everyone respected Pops and he was much more well known than I had ever imagined.

“Ugly Henderson and his whole clan were there, and so were the Dirty Hodges, all cleaned up, which had never happened before, their only bathtub being full of greasy auto parts. Sheriff Jeanfreau was crying.

“As for Patsy’s absence, it was a total scandal. And the excuse that she had a show she had to work in Tennessee didn’t cut her any slack with anybody. People had not only expected her to be

at the funeral, they had expected her to sing.

"As it was, we hired an elderly woman who all but worshiped Pops for the handyman favors he'd done for her over the years, and she did just fine.

"Next morning when the procession set out for St. Mary's Assumption Church in New Orleans, the church in which Sweetheart and Pops had been married, people everywhere on the sidewalks of Ruby River City stopped out of respect.

"There was an old workman in a straw hat up on a ladder fixing something on the side of his house, and he stopped and took off his hat and held it to his chest as we passed. That single gesture will remain in my mind forever.

"Then to the Requiem Mass in St. Mary's there came another horde, many of them the country people who'd been at the wake, and hundreds of them being Sweetheart's side of the family, the New Orleans Mardi Gras crowd, and the procession had more cars than I could count when it went to the Metairie Cemetery to leave Pops' coffin with all the appropriate prayers at the open chapel vault.

"The sun was pounding down on us out there, in spite of the few lovely oaks that gave a little shade, but mercifully Fr. Kevin Mayfair was brief, and everything that he said, both at the church and at the cemetery, was heartfelt and fresh. I think when I heard him speak of it I believed again in eternal life, and I felt my panic was a sin against God, a sin of atheism.

"Optimism was a virtue; and the despair, the terror I often felt—it was a sin. As for the ghosts I saw, maybe that was somehow a gift from God. Maybe there would be a use for it.

"As for the mysterious stranger, he would be apprehended. Or he would move on, away from Sugar Devil Island to some other out-of-the-way place.

"I know how melodramatic that sounds, but I didn't fully understand my panic, and I don't now.

"Of course, Goblin was at the funeral—just as he had been at Sweetheart's funeral—he knelt beside me in church and he stood right at my side when others would permit, but I came to realize something as we stood before the little family mortuary chapel.

"What I came to understand was that Goblin's face was becoming more and more reflective of complex emotions. He had always made faces of sorts, but in general he looked blank and amazed. Only now, this was changing.

"What I remember from the funeral was that he seemed to have the face of a distinct character, a mingled confusion and wonder and a sharp attention to others present, his eyes roaming the crowd and frequently settling on Fr. Kevin Mayfair.

"Watching Goblin's eyes move, watching him take the measure of the crypt, all this had a hypnotic fascination for me. And when he looked back at me, to see that I watched, he smiled in a rather sad and sophisticated fashion.

"That's what it was—a sophisticated fashion. And when had Goblin ever seemed more than a

clown? Out there in the Metairie Cemetery he didn't look like a clown at all, and he seemed also rather detached from me and my emotions.

"I didn't think too much more about it.

"But before we leave the funeral, let me dwell on Fr. Kevin Mayfair. Fr. Kevin Mayfair was superb. He was an inspiration. He looked too young to be a priest, as I've more or less already noted, and on that day he didn't look any older.

"And for the first time I noticed how really handsome he was. I felt awakened to his red hair and green eyes and his good build. I'd say he's six feet tall about. And his manner of speaking was utterly convincing. That he believed Pops had gone to Heaven was beyond doubt.

"And a young priest that strong—well, it's an inspiration. I felt drawn to him, I felt I could go to Confession to him and tell him some of the things that were wrong with me.

"After the funeral we returned to Blackwood Manor for a huge reception to which dozens of the country folk came. The buffets overflowed with casserole dishes of food which the neighbors had brought, and fabulous dishes which Big Ramona and Jasmine had cooked up, and the two paying guests we had on the premises were honored to be asked to join in with us.

"Big Ramona's two sons, who had gone out into the world, as we always said—George, a dentist in Shreveport, and Yancy, a lawyer in New Orleans—were there with their wives, lending us all a hand with the food. And there were some half dozen or more of the black cousins there too.

"The security guards were everywhere, unobtrusively eyeing anyone or everyone and conferring with me repeatedly as to the 'mysterious stranger,' but I saw no one whom I could connect to that being.

"Repeatedly throughout the long ordeal Aunt Queen broke down and sobbed and said that nobody should have to bury a great-nephew and she didn't know why she had lived so long. I'd never seen her so broken. She made me think of a lily trod underfoot.

"At one point it seemed that everybody was talking about Patsy's absence but I was probably imagining it. I had just said too many times that Patsy couldn't possibly make it, and each time I found myself saying it I felt myself disliking Patsy a little more.

"As for the confession of her being HIV, I didn't know whether or not I believed her.

"At last the long funeral day was over.

"The paying guests checked out early, insisting that they were more than happy to do it and wanted to go off to gamble at the casinos on the Gulf Coast anyway.

"A quiet fell over Blackwood Manor. The armed guards took their positions, but the house and the land seem to swallow them.

"The dusk came on, with the grinding song of the cicadas in the oak trees and the rising of the evening star.

"Aunt Queen lay crying on her bed. Cindy, her nurse, sat beside her holding her hand. Jasmine

lay behind her, rubbing her back.

"Big Ramona packed up food into the refrigerator in the kitchen.

"I went upstairs alone. I sat down in my reading chair, there, by the fireplace, and I fell into a doze. The panic was never bad enough to stop a doze. And hard as it had been, I was deliciously tired now and elated to be alone.

"At once, as sleep came down over me, Rebecca was with me and she said in my ear, 'I know how bad you feel.' Then the scene dissolved and I saw her being dragged by a shadowy figure towards the chains, I saw her lace-up shoe bouncing on the bare floorboards and I heard her scream.

"I woke with a start.

"The computer keys were clicking.

"I stared at the computer desk. The gooseneck lamp was on! I could see my double sitting there—see his back, the back of his head and his shoulders and arms as he worked, and there persisted: the clicking.

"Before I could rise the sound stopped, and he turned, turned as a human couldn't turn, and looked at me over his right shoulder. He wore no grin or mournful expression, only a vaguely startled look.

"As I rose from my chair he vanished.

"The message on the computer screen was long:

" 'I know all the words you know, words you type. Pops dead like Lynelle and Sweetheart. Dead, gone, not in the body. Sadness. Spirit gone. Body left. Body washed. Body painted. Body empty. Spirit is life. This life. Life gone. Why does life leave body? People say don't know. I don't know. Quinn sad. Quinn cry. Aunt Queen cry. I am sad. But danger is coming. Danger on island. I see danger. Don't forget. Rebecca is bad. Danger to Quinn. Quinn will leave Goblin.'

"Immediately I typed out the answer. 'Listen to me,' I said aloud as I wrote. 'I will never leave you. The only thing that could part us is for me to die, and then, yes, my spirit would leave my body and I would be gone, I don't know where. Now ask yourself again, Where did the spirit of Lynelle go? Where did the spirit of Sweetheart go? Where did the spirit of Pops go?'

"I sat waiting and there was no answer.

"Then the keys before me began to move. He typed out: 'Where did these spirits come from?'

"I felt a tightening, a keen sense that I had to be careful. I wrote: 'Bodies are born into the world. Remember when I was a newborn? A baby? Bodies are born into the world with the spirit in them, and when those bodies die the spirit leaves.'

"Silence.

"Then the keys moved again: 'Where did I come from?'

"I felt a dull fear. It was the panic breaking through, but it was something more as well. I typed out:

“ ‘Don’t you know where you came from? Don’t you know who you were before you became my Goblin?’

“ ‘No.’

“ ‘You must remember something,’ I typed. ‘You must have been somewhere.’

“ ‘Were you somewhere?’ he asked. ‘Before you were Quinn?’

“ ‘No. I had my beginnings when I was born,’ I wrote. ‘But you are a spirit. Where were you? Were you with somebody else? Why did you come to me?’

“There was a long pause, very long, so long that I almost rose from the desk and moved off, but then the clicking keys came again:

“ ‘I love Quinn,’ the writing said. ‘Quinn and Goblin one together.’

“ ‘Yes,’ I said out loud. ‘We are, one together.’

“The machine was clicked off. The gooseneck lamp flicked on and off twice and then went dark.

“My heart was pounding. What was happening to Goblin? And how could I confide to anyone in this world about him, what with Pops dead and everything at Blackwood Farm hanging in the balance? To whom could I go to say this spirit is taking on new strength?

“For some period of time I sat there, and then I turned on the machine and asked:

“ ‘Danger, this danger you speak of, is it from the stranger who came into this room?’

“No answer.

“ ‘What did you see when you saw the stranger? What did he look like to you? You must remember that to my eyes he was only a dark shape. Goblin, listen. Tell me.’

“A breeze sifted through the room, something chilling against my cheek—but no answer. He didn’t have the strength. He had done enough for one day. Or he didn’t want to answer. Whatever the case, there was only the silence now.

“I was no longer sleepy, only tired, and a deep sweet exhaustion swallowed up my grief and my panic. I wanted to fold down into my wing chair by the fireplace and sleep again, safe in the knowledge that there were armed guards around the property and the mysterious stranger couldn’t harm me. But I couldn’t do that.

“No, Little Lord Tarquin was the man of Blackwood Manor now.

“I went downstairs to see to Aunt Queen.

“Fr. Kevin Mayfair was in her room, seated by the bed, talking softly to her. He was wearing his severe and spotless clerical black along with his white Roman collar.

“And when I watched him from the door, I knew for the first time that I found both men and women erotically beautiful. Rebecca in the lace-trimmed bed, Goblin in the warm steamy thunderstorm of the shower. Fr. Kevin Mayfair with that dark curly red hair and those green eyes and not a freckle on his pale face. Men and women.

“I went out back and walked way over to the right to the bungalow in which Jasmine,

Ramona, Clem and Lolly lived. Jasmine was in her green-painted rocking chair, just rocking and smoking.

"I was in a daze. I tried not to notice Jasmine's breasts in her tight shirt. I tried not to look at the front seam of her jeans. When she turned away from me to exhale I saw the light down the line of her throat to her breasts. Beautiful woman. Aged thirty-five. What were my chances? Like, maybe if I sold her a bill of goods that I doubted my manhood???

"Oh, that was a lovely thought. Wonderfully comforting. And where could we do it? Just go over to the shed, go up the steps and do it in Patsy's bed? I rolled that dream around for a moment. You don't get HIV from a bed. What if—and then—and so—and I felt the panic when I looked at the dim house—they had forgotten the four o'clock lights.

" 'What's going to happen now?' I asked.

" 'Come sit with me, little boy lost,' she said. 'I've been asking myself that very question.' "

17

“For the next week I was under lock and key, or armed escort.

“I didn’t find out about it until the morning after Pops’ funeral, when I tried to leave my room and discovered I had a security guard with me, pledged to go where I would go.

“I didn’t too terribly mind, since I alone knew how real the mysterious stranger had been and I didn’t want to be shocked by him. But I made a nuisance of myself by warning everyone about the dangers of the island.

“Our investigations proceeded rapidly, and I know that I focused on them to escape the pure horror of Pops’ death—the loss of the only man who had ever been my father. We had the reading of his will to attend to, and I was dreadfully concerned that he might have cut out Patsy altogether. If I had been left anything at all I resolved to split it with Patsy or at least to give her some of it.

“Meantime she was still out roaming the South, playing beer joints and small clubs, and Aunt Queen was desperately chasing after her by phone, trying to get her to come back so we could all face what Pops had done, whatever it was.

“Now let me return to the investigation.

“Regarding the mysterious letter, Mayfair Medical’s laboratory could find no discernible fingerprints on it and reported that the brand of paper was rare, marketed in Europe and not in the United States, the ink was India ink and that the writing did not indicate any pathology and might have been done by a woman or a man. They noted further that the writer had used a quill pen, pressing down uncommonly hard for such an instrument, implying that the letter writer had been extremely sure of himself.

“In other words, they could tell almost nothing about the letter. And it had been passed on to a true graphologist with our happy permission.

“As to the rest of our concerns, we had better luck.

“Mayfair Medical confirmed in short order that the DNA collected from the residue in the Hermitage matched the DNA in the hair found in Rebecca’s trunk. The materials were very old but there had been an abundance of both and the testing had been simple.

“Aunt Queen now felt certain that Rebecca had met her death at Manfred’s hands, and that my dreams weren’t entirely the work of a diseased mind, if she’d ever had any doubt in the matter.

“I cleaned all those cameos found in Rebecca’s trunk and the cameos I’d taken from the island. These I placed in the china cabinet on the first floor with a display card, explaining they were gifts from Manfred Blackwood to a woman with whom he had been passionately in love. I explained the connection between Rebecca’s name and the theme of the cameos, and I felt in so doing—in making this display for the public eye—I had done right by Rebecca.

“After long and intense discussion involving Aunt Queen, Jasmine and me (Aunt Queen had been bedridden since the night of Pops’ burial), we agreed that we would include in the tour information that the Old Man, Manfred, was believed to have murdered a young woman with whom he was romantically involved, and her remains had only recently been discovered and properly interred.

“As to this interment, I was going to handle it, if and when allowed to do it. A small marble tombstone was ordered with the name Rebecca Stanford carved on it, and the tombstone guys had it delivered in one day. I put it down in the cemetery to wait until I could bring the remains to the spot.

“Meantime, the FBI could find no DNA material from the site which matched the material of any current missing person. Nevertheless, they were deeply courteous about having been called in, and they did confirm that the DNA of several persons was present in the evil morass and that the whole resembled an antiquated but gruesome crime scene.

“Finally, a full week after Pops’ funeral, with Aunt Queen still in bed and refusing to take any nourishment, which had me and everyone else in near critical hysteria, I set out for Sugar Devil Island at dawn with all of the eight Shed Men coming in small pirogues behind me. We all had our guns—I now carried Pops’ thirty-eight—and two security men brought up the rear. Clem was with us too, and Jasmine was at my side, in her skintight jeans, with her thirty-eight pistol, determined to have a front-row seat for everything.

“We brought with us plenty of tools to open the grand gold-and-granite tomb, and I had with me a small ornamental casket—a jewelry case, actually, which had been purchased from a gift shop—into which I meant to place whatever remained of Rebecca. The horrid collecting of her remains had to be done with a small spade. There was no way out of it.

“It was a convivial party, with Allen, the nominal leader of the Shed Men, referring to us as the Pirogue Posse, but beneath my smiles and laughter was an absolute dread as we set out to reclaim the Hermitage.

“What could I do but warn all the men of what was involved? The trespasser had had the gall to come into the house! How much they believed was a matter of conjecture.

“At last, after some forty minutes of pushing and pulling our way through the bog, we came to the bank overgrown with blackberries. There stood the house like a ship that had run aground, the violent thorny wisteria trying desperately to swallow it.

“I went onto the island, cracked open a beer and just watched as the men verified with their

own eyes everything or almost everything that had been told to them. Allen and Clem, who had seen it all the first time around, also stood with me until the excitement was over.

"Then I said I would go and collect Rebecca's remains alone. I didn't want anybody trooping up there.

"There was immediate concern for my safety.

"Okay, Jasmine, you have your gun, you come with me," I said, but I went up first and I had my thirty-eight pistol raised.

"The sun was breaking pretty strong through the open windows of the second story. For a moment I was dazzled and then gradually I made out a living being before me: it was Rebecca, her dress torn off down her arms, her breasts naked, the hook snaring her rib bone as she hung by the hook, her face white, and the blood streaming from her mouth. She blinked her eyes but she couldn't talk. There was too much blood in her mouth.

" 'Good God, Rebecca,' I said, and I plunged at the figure, trying to get the hook out of her without hurting her more. She writhed and I could hear her gasping.

"This was absolutely happening. 'Rebecca, I'm here!' I declared as I tried to lift her.

"Then I heard Jasmine's voice, and I saw Jasmine's face, and the faces of Allen and Clem. We were all on the second floor of the house. I was lying on my back. And the sun was winking again in the cypresses.

"There was no more Rebecca. Only the rusted chains dangling and the dark slop there. I climbed to my feet.

"Jasmine said, 'Clem, you come here, please, brother, and hold this box while I shovel up what I can of this poor girl. Hold the lid back.'

"I went off down on the island and got sick to my stomach.

"Men were talking, talking about damaging 'gorgeous' gold plates to open the grave. I said, 'Do it. I have to know what's inside.'

"I sat on the steps of the house and I drank another beer, realizing that this woman might haunt me forever. What I'd done with the cameos was not enough, and the dreams were not enough, and coming here to do this, to gather her remains, was not enough; what would be enough? I didn't know. I couldn't think. I was sick and drinking too much beer and it was killing hot, and the mosquitoes were biting right through my shirt, and the men kept saying, 'Granite, solid granite.'

"Finally, at the first narrow side of the rectangular structure that they approached they found an opening beyond the gold plate, and they were able to push it back. It was a heavy door.

"They were all talking at once, groaning and fussing. Flashlights, who had the flashlights, here was a flashlight, well, will you look at that. I'm not opening that.

" 'Not opening what?' I said.

" 'A coffin.'

“ ‘Well, what the hell did you expect to find in a grave?’ I asked. I was wildly stimulated. Ordinary things meant nothing to me.

“ ‘Now you mind your tone, Little Boss,’ said Jasmine. She gave me another beer. What was this? Was I a mental patient she wanted to narcoticize? I said I was sorry. The beer was cold and good. I wasn’t going to complain about an ice-cold beer.

“ ‘Have you packed up little Miss Stanford in her neat little box?’ I asked.

“ ‘You’re losing it, Little Boss,’ she said. ‘Now mind your manners. Don’t talk to Allen and Clem the way you’ve been talking. You’ve always been Aunt Queen’s gentleman, don’t get rough now. Don’t let this place make you contrary.’

“ ‘What the hell are you talking about?’ I asked.

“She looked up thoughtfully at the Hermitage, and then at me, her face positively exquisite with its cacao skin and large pale eyes, eyes that were green or golden.

“ ‘Take after your Aunt Queen,’ she said. ‘That’s the only point I’m trying to make, and yes, I have the remains of your ghost girlfriend in the casket. God only knows whatever else I have in this casket.’

“ ‘Make love to me when we get home,’ I said. ‘I’m no good for ordinary life. You don’t see the ghosts I see. You didn’t see that girl hanging by the hook. I’ve been having ghosts. They’ve been having me. I have to have somebody real. Make love to me when we get home, you and me, all right? Be my chocolate candy. I’m real unsure of my masculinity.’

“ ‘You are?’ she shot back. ‘Well, you could have fooled me.’

“Clem stood over me. ‘Quinn, it’s an empty coffin. You better come take a look at this for yourself. This is sort of your show, sonny boy.’

“I did. It was made of heavy iron, very ornate, and lightly rusted, with a window in it through which one could see the face of the deceased, I presume, though I’d never seen one like it. It had taken five of them with two crowbars to open it. It was lined with something. I thought it was lead. It was dry and soft to my touch. It was lead.

“And the coffin was in a vault of lead. Yeah, it was lead. And well sealed. Though the vault went down some three feet there was no sign that moisture had ever penetrated it.

“I stepped down into the vault, and for a long time I stood there, inside the mausoleum—in the vault—merely staring at the empty coffin. There was just room to walk around it, which I did.

“I climbed back up and out into the sunshine.

“ ‘Do you know how many of us it took to open that gold door?’ Allen asked. ‘What do you make of all this? What’s that writing up there? You can read that, can’t you, Quinn?’

“I shook my head. ‘Manfred,’ I said. ‘Manfred had some plan to be buried out here, and those whom he trusted never fulfilled his dream. And so we have an empty coffin and an empty mausoleum. We have gold plates and an inscription in Latin. Look up there, that’s Latin. I wrote that down. Manfred did all this. Manfred had this thing built when he built the Hermitage.

Manfred did it all. And so we close it back up.'

" 'But what about all this solid gold!' Clem said. 'You can't just leave all this gold here for people to steal.'

" 'Do people still kill each other for gold these days?' I asked. 'Are any of you going to come back out here to steal this gold? Are we going to have a shoot-out over this gold? Let's go back where we came from. I can only take this place for so long. I don't like that a trespasser came into the house. Let's get out of here.'

"There was one more thing I wanted to check. I went back into the Hermitage.

"I was right!

"On the marble desk there were new books, books on philosophy and history, books on current events, novels. It was all new—a nice slap in the face. Even the candles were new, though the wicks were blackened. Oh, yes, the fearless one, my trespasser, had been here.

" 'So what are you going to do next, I wonder?' I said aloud. I flew into a rage. I grabbed up as many of the books as I could and threw them down the front steps of the Hermitage. I went back for the rest and threw them after the first. Then I hurried down the steps and pulled and tossed and kicked them all together.

"I took out my lighter. I set a small paperback volume aflame, and then another and another. It was going on its own now, with all the men just watching as if I was crazy, which I was.

" 'His books!' I said. 'He has no right on this property, and he leaves these books for me to see that he's been here again.'

" 'Lord God,' Jasmine said, as the flames rose and the fire crackled. 'We got a dead girl, a strange building, a bunch of weird books, and a regular tomb of gold with an empty iron coffin in it, and a crazy boy standing here!'

" 'Well put,' I said in her ear, 'and don't forget your promise to me, Milk Chocolate. It's you and me alone tonight.'

" 'I never made you any promise!' she said.

" 'I told you, I'm unsure of my masculinity,' I whispered. 'You've got to sacrifice yourself.' I kicked the fire to make it flare again. I hated burning books. I could hardly stand it to see a Merriam-Webster dictionary go up in smoke. But I had to do this.

"One or two more kicks and everything was incinerated. I turned and looked at Jasmine, expecting some wise remark, but all I saw was a sort of dreamy thoughtfulness in her face.

"Then she said:

" 'You know, boy, you really have me thinking about it. You should be more kind to a woman my age. You scamp. You think I don't have any feelings like that just 'cause I rocked your cradle?'

" 'How kind can I get?' I asked. 'You think I take up with just anybody?'

"Her expression never changed. She looked fine in her tight jeans. Her Afro was clipped close

and the shape of her head and her face was beautiful.

"She lived like a nun. I knew that for a fact. There had been no men at all in her life since her husband died years ago. And her sister, Lolly, had had three husbands.

" 'I'm crazed,' I said, staring at her, staring at her buxom breasts and her small waist. 'I have these visions; what am I supposed to do about it, what does Rebecca want of me? I saw Rebecca up there. I don't understand. Maybe they'll find out I'm crazy. I know one thing though.'

" 'What's that?' she asked.

" 'That I've got you on my mind bad, Ms. Café au Lait. I don't want to sleep with the dead.'

"Silence from her and then a partial smile, an uncharacteristic smile. Very slowly she ran her eyes over me, from toe to head.

"I felt my cock getting hard.

"The fire had consumed just about everything.

"The men had closed the tomb. She had the little casket under her right arm. Everybody was hot and sick and cursing and batting at the bugs, and the sun was flashing in the trees, and the water stank of things rotted, things dying.

"That's what it was about the swamp. Of course things were being born and things were thriving and marvelous creatures lived in the treacherous slime, but more things were rotting and suffering for lack of sun, and it was death that had the upper hand, and death you smelled in the black water.

"We left the island.

" 'Better to drink this beer up home,' said Clem, 'where Mamma can cook us up some food. I'm starving.'

"We were all pretty damned drunk before we got home, and under the influence I'd made one or two bad turns which might have kept us lost for hours.

"As it was, we made it back before dark, and after I took the longest piss of my life I went down with the casket and the shovel to the little cemetery.

"I was fully tuned for the slightest chill, the finest frisson, but I was feeling nothing. And I didn't see the old troop of spirits that sometimes accosted me. But it was their style to be seen from a distance. I'd never been among them.

"I found a patch of soil that was clear and I dug easily through the moist earth. Pretty soon I had a hole about two feet deep, and the casket fitted easily there, and I filled in the earth around it and over it.

"I put the heavy marble tombstone firmly in place.

"I made the Sign of the Cross. I said three Hail Marys and two Our Fathers and then the old prayer:

Let perpetual light shine upon her, O Lord,

and may her soul and the souls of all
the faithful departed rest in peace. Amen.

"The new grave looked mighty little among the old coffin-sized concrete tombs, but it was still respectable and even fine.

"When I looked up I saw Goblin by the oak tree, watching me. I was drunk and he was cold sober. I was filthy dirty. He was immaculately clean. He wasn't just appearing to me. He was studying me. And only as I looked at him did I realize that I hadn't seen him all day. I hadn't even felt him near me. I hadn't thought about him. For the last few days, I'd seldom seen him. I hadn't talked to him.

" 'Yo, brother,' I said.

"I walked or staggered up the slope and reached out to embrace him. He vanished and left nothing there for me to hold, and a cold feeling crept over me. But I was drunk enough to cry about nothing.

"And Jasmine was shouting, 'Suppertime.' Red beans and rice, gravy thick with pork fat and pork chops simmered with it.

"It must have been around nine o'clock before I was showered and shaved, and sobered up. I came down to be with Aunt Queen and tell her what her nurse, Cindy, had been telling her for days, that she had to get up, get going and above all to take some nourishment.

"I found her sitting up in bed against a mass of white lace-covered pillows in one of her gorgeous feather-trimmed white negligees, her glasses down on her nose as she read what appeared to be a letter of several pages.

"Cindy, the nurse, with her usual very bright smile, was in attendance. She excused herself as I came in.

" 'Well, I have it, beautiful boy,' Aunt Queen said. 'Come here, pull up a chair.'

" 'Only if you eat something will I do that,' I said. 'What is it you have?'

" 'I'm way ahead of you, angel face,' she replied. 'I've drunk two cans of relatively innocuous lipids, as Cindy can verify, so I have had enough food to feed an entire Hindu village for one day. Now sit down. I have a translation here of the inscription on the island. This just arrived.'

"I wanted to snatch the pages out of her hand, but she wouldn't allow it and read out the words,

" 'Here sleeps Petronia, whose mortal hands once made the most beautiful of cameos, even for emperors and kings. Guard me, ye gods and goddesses whose images I rendered so well. A curse on those who attempt to disturb my resting place.'

"She gave me the page of the letter. I read it over and over. 'Petronia,' I whispered. 'What can all this mean?' I gave the page back to her. 'Who translated it, Aunt Queen?' I asked.

" 'A man I want you to meet, Quinn, a man who's going to change the course of your life the

way Lynelle changed it, a man who's going to accompany you and me on the Grand Tour you should have had a long time ago. The man's name is Nash Penfield. He's an English professor from California, and I like him very much.'

" 'But what if I don't like him, Aunt Queen?' I asked. 'Aunt Queen, I don't want to go to Europe yet. I don't want to leave here. What's going to happen to this place? Aunt Queen, Pops just died. We can't be making plans.'

" 'We have to make plans, my dear boy,' she said. 'And Nash Penfield is flying here Friday. We'll have a nice dinner together and we'll see how you like him, and if you don't care for the man, which I truly cannot imagine, then we'll find someone else. But you need a tutor, Quinn, you need someone to take up where Lynelle left off.'

" 'All right. We'll make a bargain. You get up out of bed, eat three square meals tomorrow and I'll meet Mr. Penfield. How's that?'

" 'I'll go you one better,' she said. 'You check into Mayfair Medical tomorrow for a series of tests, and I'll get up, eat breakfast and go with you, how's that?'

" 'What tests?' I asked. But I already knew. They'd do brain scans on me, MRIs, electroencephalograms, whatever they called them. They'd be looking for lesions on the temporal lobe—something physical to account for what I claimed to see and hear. I wasn't surprised, even with all the verification that Rebecca Stanford had been real and had been murdered, I wasn't surprised.

"If anything, I was surprised that it hadn't come sooner. And I thought to myself, Well, we'll get this over with and I won't have to think about it anymore.

" 'All right, I'll check into Mayfair Medical,' I said. 'But I won't find myself on the psychiatric ward, will I?'

" 'My boy, I despise the idea of nuthouses as much as you do,' she replied. 'But I think I'd be remiss if I didn't request certain purely medical tests to be done. As for Mayfair Medical, it's a marvel, with the finest doctors and equipment in the South.'

" 'I know, Aunt Queen. You have to remember, Lynelle was going to work in research there. Who in the environs of New Orleans doesn't know all about Mayfair Medical? I've been there, beloved aunt, I walked those granite-tiled hallways with Lynelle. It was her dream come true, remember?'

"The fear came on me, it came on dark and strong when I thought of Lynelle in her breakneck high heels clicking on beside me through the hospital corridors, pointing out all the special features of this revolutionary clinic and hospital.

"I remembered the smallest, most special detail—that every ward in Mayfair Medical had broad comfortable benches along its walls, benches for the comfort of relatives and friends who were visiting with the patients. Every room was a private room. Every room had easy chairs for visitors.

“ ‘Oh, it’s too sad to think of poor Lynelle,’ Aunt Queen said, as if she were reading my mind or my wandering eyes. ‘Lynelle, Sweetheart, Pops, it’s too sad, too dreadful. But we cannot take our minds off the details of life, Quinn. The details will save us. We’ll have these tests done and we’ll discover if there’s anything to be worried about.’

“ ‘Worried about? You have a letter from the stranger! You know I didn’t write it or cook it up myself. I told you he was in my room, and he has been on the island since I warned him away. I burnt his books, I was so angry. And now this inscription. What can it mean? And the cameos. Why is it all connected?’

“She listened intently and affectionately.

“I told her the vision I had had of Rebecca hanging from the rusted hook, the hook having caught her rib. I told her how I had been unconscious on the floor afterwards.

“ ‘Jasmine said you fell down as if you’d been struck on the head. Your eyes never closed. And then you revived, just like that.’

“ ‘Did I have a seizure out there?’ I asked. ‘Is that what Jasmine really saw?’

“ ‘She didn’t see it,’ said Aunt Queen. ‘But we can talk about all this tomorrow afternoon on our way to Mayfair Medical. As for the mysterious intruder, we have guards everywhere. The Shed Men are in their glory. But regarding tomorrow morning …’

“ ‘Patsy’s been found and the will’s going to be read,’ I guessed.

“ ‘That’s it exactly. Now brace yourself for a scene. But I have my hopes. And I have my plans. Your grandfather was Gravier’s only living son. We’ll see what happens. Now you go on up now, Big Ramona’s probably waiting for you. Give me a sweet kiss. I love you.’

“I bent down to kiss her, to glory in her soft gray hair and her perfume. ‘Good night, my love,’ I said. ‘Where’s your bedfellow, Jasmine?’

“ ‘Oh, she is the most provoking creature. She’s tired from her trip to the island. She’s confused. She’s soon to be our salvation, and she knows it. I think she’s afraid of the challenge.’

“ ‘What do you mean?’

“ ‘Well, who’s to run this place when you and I leave?’ she said with a shrug. ‘Jasmine can do it.’

“I’d never even thought of this, and it seemed so right suddenly. How many times had I gone into the bungalow to find Jasmine and come across her rapping on her computer. And who did the tours better than Jasmine?

“ ‘That’s good, that’s really good!’ I said. ‘I want to talk to her.’

“ ‘No, let me explain it to her,’ Aunt Queen replied. ‘She’ll be coming later on. She’s gone up to fuss in Pops’ bedroom. I asked her to go through his jewelry, and she’s making a night of it up there. Just tell the darling girl to stop her inventory and come down at a reasonable hour. I’ll never go to sleep tonight if she’s not here.’

“Something clicked in my mind. It clicked in my body, too. Jasmine alone in Pops’ bedroom.

“I went up the stairs like a man going up to meet his bride. I looked in on Big Ramona and found her sound asleep. I went on to Pops’ room.

“The door was open.

“His bed is a big heavy four-poster—you saw it—it’s one of the oldest in the house. I saw Jasmine sitting on it, up against the velvet-covered pillows, and in her hand was a goblet of red wine. The bottle was on the nightstand.

“She was dressed all foxy, in one of her tightfitting leopard-skin tops that look brilliant with her mahogany skin, and close-cropped yellow hair, and a nothing of a leather skirt. One leg was up and the other stretched out. Spike heels. Flash of white panties. You never saw a more earnest invitation. And I was the only guest.

“I closed the door and locked it.

“She sighed and put the glass under the lamp on the nightstand. I sat beside her and then took her in my arms. I kissed her lips and felt the immediate fire. She pushed her breasts against me. I squeezed her breasts so desperately it was a wonder I didn’t hurt her. *God, this is Heaven; you’re in the wrong place.* I slipped my hand up her leg and touched her silk panties and the heat behind them.

“ ‘Pull’m down, tear’m off,’ she said in my ear. ‘Panties are cheap. Panties are nothing.’ She was crying. I could hear it.

“I kissed her on the mouth again, and her tongue shot between my lips. Oh, Lord, God. I kissed her plenty, and I ripped her panties over her ankles and off her spike-heel shoes, and I cradled her foot in my hand and kissed her instep.

“Under her breath she cried. I gobbled her wet tears.

“ ‘Lord, it’s wrong,’ she whispered. ‘I know it’s so wrong. You, my baby Tarquin, but I need it so bad!’

“ ‘So do I, lady,’ I said. ‘You can’t imagine!’ ”

18

“It was what we call the middle of the night. One, two in the morning—something like that. All of Blackwood Manor slept. I slept. Big Ramona snored. I woke now and then. I had a vague sense of a conversation with Rebecca. We were on the lawn, in the antique wicker chairs from the attic, and she was explaining to me that all the old wicker had been hers, that Manfred had bought it for her.

“She was so happy that I’d taken it down and had it restored, that Pops had painted it white. How handsome it was.

“ ‘You are my world, Tarquin,’ she said.

“But that was only part of what she tried to tell me. She was trying to talk of other things, things I must do, how justice would be achieved, and I was arguing with her.

“How thin and indistinct was all this. I woke and stared in front of me and all the fabric dissolved. Then I turned over again and I was talking to her.

“Suddenly, I was wrenched up out of the bed and dragged across the floor!

“I was fully awake in an instant.

“Into the bathroom I was forced by powerful hands that hurt my arms. My head was smacked against the wall. I was lifted off my feet and held that way, and by the thin light from the door through which I’d just been dragged I saw that it was a tall man who held me.

“His hair was cleanly brushed back from his high rounded temples, and his large dark eyes were fastened on me.

“ ‘Oh, so you burn my books, you little imp, do you!’ he whispered to me, his breath warm and odorless against my face. ‘You burn my books! You play with me!’

“I could feel my emotions coming together and I knew all of a sudden that what I felt wasn’t terror after all, it was rage, the same rage I’d felt when I’d done the thing that had so angered him.

“ ‘Get away from me and get out of my house!’ I cried. ‘How dare you come into my very room! How dare you trespass again!’

“I struggled violently to get free. I pushed against his chest with all my might. He was immovable.

“His eyes were a glare in the shadows. Of the rest of him, all I saw was an open white shirt

with white cuffs and a black coat. And he let me down on my feet slowly.

" 'You little fool,' he said, gripping my shoulders, and he smiled, and for the first time I saw his mouth, very finely shaped, with thick but perfectly sculpted lips.

"Again, I went wild in his grip. I pushed my knee against him, I kicked his shins. I gained nothing!

" 'Never go near the island again!' he hissed. 'Never touch what's mine, do you hear me?'

" 'You're a liar and a trespasser,' I said. 'Bring your claim in a court of law!'

" 'Don't you realize I could kill you?' he returned with blazing anger. 'I have no qualms about it whatsoever. Why do you protest? Why do you do foolish things? What's so precious to you?'

" 'What's rightfully mine!' I said. 'Get out of my house before I bring it down on you.'

"Of course I knew that no one could hear me. Ramona slept like the dead. The house was too big, the walls too thick, and here we were in a windowless tiled bathroom.

"Suddenly he released his grip. My shoulders ached. He didn't let me go, however. And then when he spoke it was more calmly:

" 'I'm not going to kill you. I don't want you dead. I have a theory about you. But you ever go near that island again and I will kill you, you understand me? You warn everyone away from that island forever. You make it off limits to the world, or I'll come back here and drag you out into that swamp and kill you slowly just the way Rebecca died, you impudent child.'

"He had scarcely finished the last two words when the big mirror to his right shattered and great dangerous pieces of glass fell with a loud noise all over the lavatory and the floor. I glimpsed Goblin behind him.

"Goblin's hands came up around the stranger's neck and I saw Goblin vanish as he obviously and fiercely exerted pressure.

"The man cursed in another language. He let me go, reaching for his own throat reflexively, and then the glass of the shower door broke and Goblin appeared again, tissue thin but visible to me and flashing a knifelike piece of glass at the stranger, which the stranger pushed away with his immense strength rather easily.

"Again the man cursed, looking hastily to the right and the left and then behind himself. I saw that his black hair was very long and worn in a slender wavy ponytail. He had sharply squared shoulders.

"He was maddened, pivoting and grabbing me again, but there came from Goblin another assault with both his fists, and more fine bits of glass hurled at the intruder, who let me go, backing up and twirling like a dancer.

"Glass was flying around the room. The stranger had to duck a fragment aimed right at his face. More glass clattered to the floor as the lower portion of the shower door broke into finer pieces.

" 'What is it?' he hissed, warding off the shards with thrusts of his hands that came so fast I

couldn't follow them.

"Goblin bore down on him with his fists and then throttled him again. He threw off Goblin with visible effort, and furiously.

"The light flashed on, then off, then on again. I saw him fully illuminated, a young man with perfect skin and satin black hair, his black suit very fine and his face, even in its obvious hatred, no less than beautiful.

" 'What is it, damn you!' he snarled at me. Daggers of glass were raining upon him and he batted them off like insects. The lights continued to flash.

" 'You think I'm going to tell you!' I charged. 'You're in my house now, same as when you read your books on my island! Get out of it, or who knows what will happen? I can see the creature who fights you now. It's plain as day that you can't!'

"I was boiling with rage. I stood poised, lacking only the nerve to try to thrust a piece of glass right into his chest, and then he was gone, gone silently and swiftly as though he'd never been there, and I was alone in the bathroom, in the dark, amid all the broken glass, and Big Ramona in her bare feet and in her rose-print nightgown was staring at me.

" 'Lord, Child of Grace,' she said. 'What have you done!'

" 'It's not me, it was him, didn't you see him! Oh my God, didn't you see him?' I pleaded with her.

" 'I don't know what I saw. Don't you move, don't you walk in that glass! I was sound asleep and I hear all this glass breaking.'

"Goblin stood before the lavatory, and in a reserved manner, a wise manner, he smiled at me. I threw my arms around him. I felt his shape.

" 'Thank God for you,' I declared. I caressed his hair. I kissed him. 'You scared him off. You did it.'

"The whole house was waking up. I could hear feet pounding up the stairs. I heard Clem holler out to me from the hall. I heard an alarm go off, though how or where I didn't know.

"And as they crowded into the bedroom, I knew what they saw. They saw me standing alone amid all the broken glass, as barefoot as Big Ramona, and embracing a form they couldn't see—the empty air for all they knew or had ever known."

19

“By the time we reached Mayfair Medical I was a gibbering idiot in a bloody nightshirt. I was in the back of Aunt Queen’s limo with her on one side and Clem on the other and Big Ramona in front of us, on the J seat, and Jasmine at the far end of the J, back to the driver, everybody begging me to calm down. Clem’s fingers were biting into my arm and Aunt Queen was exerting as much pressure as she could. At one point, Big Ramona told Aunt Queen to move, and she took ahold of me like a professional wrestler.

“It was the old story. The more you tell people you’re not insane the crazier they think you are. And they clearly thought I was crazy.

“How many times did I say that the intruder had been in the house? How many times did they tell me that was impossible? How many times did I tell them that Goblin broke the glass, Goblin saved my life, how many times did they exchange their urgent heartfelt glances?

“I was still raving when we pulled into the Emergency porte cochere, and they had a gurney ready for me. Of course I swore up and down that I didn’t need it. Then I realized I was barefoot and my feet were scratched from the glass. All right. Hospital regulations.

“I could have dressed properly before we ever left home, if only people had listened.

“But off I went into the Emergency Room, where the nightshirt was unceremoniously cut off and topical medicines were applied to the cuts and scrapes all over me.

“As to my head, I told them that the pain was killing me. The stranger had slammed me against the wall. Give me something for my headache if you do nothing else. You can forget about the scratches and bruises.

“And bruises there were aplenty. And when I saw how bad they were, I started yelling for Aunt Queen and Jasmine to come. Oh, if only Pops were here! Oh, damn!

“They began to tie me down and I went truly crazy.

“All the time, Goblin was with me, very strong, very visible, his face full of concern, but I didn’t dare try to speak to him and he knew it. After the energy he had used I couldn’t understand why he still looked so dense and so powerful. He didn’t like what was happening. He made no bones about it. And suddenly I became terrified that he would start breaking the glass and the whole scene would devolve into chaos.

“ ‘Goblin, don’t do anything in here,’ I said, staring at him. ‘It will only make it worse. Let me

just play it on out.'

"Then Dr. Winn Mayfair himself, proud scion of the legendary Mayfair family and working head of the whole complex, approached the gurney. It seemed a spell fell over the Emergency Room, doctors and nurses mesmerized by the mere presence of the guy.

"I calmed down too. I was quite literally bound hand and foot, and why should I object to this doctor examining me?

"Now, the only reason I knew anything about Dr. Winn Mayfair was that Lynelle had told me all about him. He had been born in New Orleans, reared in Boston and become a physician up North, coming South only when the family here contacted him and offered him a dream job at the new medical center.

"He had become the partner and confidant of Rowan Mayfair, the other M.D. member of the famous clan, the one who had created and endowed the center and designed all its special features.

"It was Dr. Winn who took over the actual day-to-day management of everything, whereas Dr. Rowan worked tirelessly in research having to do with human growth hormone, Lynelle's old dream.

"Somewhere behind the scenes was Dr. Winn's father, Dr. Elliott Mayfair, a cardiac surgeon, and he had also been persuaded to transplant back home, and Rowan, Elliott and Winn Mayfair were the backbone of the establishment.

"Dr. Winn had a reputation for having a very quiet voice and a very gentle touch. His field had been neurosurgery—the same field as that of Dr. Rowan Mayfair—and the two were said to be cousins who resembled each other in temperament and gifts, as well as physical looks, though they had only met recently, each quite astonished at the other.

"Lynelle had worshiped the guy.

"What I saw was a smooth, brilliant and attentive man, tall and lean, who had been roused from bed to meet Miss Lorraine McQueen and her legendary boy prodigy who communed with the Dead.

"He had beautifully groomed silver blond hair and cold blue eyes behind rectangular wire-rimmed glasses, and he talked to me under his breath, which tended to give his words a confidential tone, which I frankly welcomed. He also spoke slowly.

"At once he took my blood pressure himself, though a nurse had done it before, and then he looked into both my pupils. He put his stethoscope to my head, listening for the longest time, as though my brain were talking to him. Then he felt my glands and he inspected the bruises on my arms. His touch was reverent.

" 'I know your head hurts,' he said in a liquid voice, 'but we can't give you anything for the pain that might mask the symptoms of the head injury. As soon as they've finished with these lacerations, we're taking you for a CAT scan.'

“ ‘I didn’t do this to myself,’ I said. ‘I’m not insane. You won’t find any lesions in my temporal lobe. Mark my word. I’m miserable right now, but I’m not crazy.’

“He looked at me intently and for a long moment, and then he said, ‘They told me you were eighteen, is that right?’

“ ‘Just about nineteen,’ I said. ‘Does eighteen and a half mean anything?’

“He smiled. ‘Yes, I suppose it does,’ he said. ‘We won’t be looking for seizures or lesions now. We’re looking for bleeding from the wound that’s causing your headache. We’re going to be waking you up if you fall asleep. Now I’m going to get out of the way, and I’ll see you after the CAT scan.’

“ ‘You’re a neurosurgeon, right?’ I said. I wanted to hold on to him. ‘Well, I swear to you that what I saw didn’t come from my brain and I don’t want you to cut a piece out of it. I’d rather rave in a padded cell than have that happen.’

“Two orderlies, or at least that’s what I thought they were, had come to take me away, but he gestured for them to wait.

“ ‘Tell me yourself,’ he said, ‘what happened to you.’

“ ‘This stranger, this man who’d been trespassing on a swamp hermitage on our property—he got into my bedroom in spite of the guards around our house, and he dragged me out of bed, pulled me into the bathroom, banged my head against the wall and cursed at me and threatened me.’

“I stopped. I didn’t want to tell him about Goblin. Some deep instinct told me not to tell him about Goblin. But that instinct didn’t stop me from silently summoning Goblin, and, quite suddenly, Goblin stood at the foot of the gurney, still looking extremely solid and vividly colored, which was amazing after his ordeal, and he shook his head in a firm negation.

“ ‘There was broken glass,’ I said, ‘from the lavatory mirror and the shower door. I think I got a few scrapes, nothing more than that.’

“ ‘How did this intruder drag you from bed?’ Dr. Winn asked.

“ ‘By my arms.’

“Dr. Winn looked at both my arms. They were black and blue now. He studied them thoughtfully.

“Dr. Winn then asked me to lean forward so he could see the back of my head. I did, and I felt his amazingly gentle fingers touching a huge bump there. His touch sent a tingling all through me.

“Again, Goblin shook his head No. *Don’t tell him about us. He will hurt me.*

“ ‘Do you believe me now?’ I asked. ‘That I didn’t do this to myself?’

“ ‘Oh, yes, I believe you completely,’ he said. ‘None of your injuries are self-inflicted. For a variety of reasons it’s quite impossible for them to have been self-inflicted. But we’ve got to get that CAT scan.’

“I was immensely relieved.

“The CAT scan was a relatively simple ordeal, which revealed that there was no bleeding inside of my head and that my brain was not swelling, and immediately after Dr. Mayfair confirmed these results I was wheeled to a fairly lavish suite consisting of a living room and two bedrooms. One bedroom was mine. Aunt Queen was setting up shop in the other one. Jasmine, who had gone home for her clothes, was already back but would soon have to leave again.

“I promised to leave the IV alone and to cooperate with everything if the restraints were removed, and Dr. Mayfair agreed to this readily.

“ ‘There are guards on the door, aren’t there?’ I asked.

“Aunt Queen confirmed that there were. A uniformed police officer was right down the hall. And Clem was in the parlor.

“I could see that Aunt Queen had been crying. But even more distressing to me was the fact that she still wore her feathered negligee. She hadn’t had time to change. I felt bitterly angry and at the same time frightened.

“ ‘You know, this is a strange situation, my Little Boy,’ she said as she came to sit by my bed. (Goblin was hovering in the corner.) ‘We have two possible explanations for what happened tonight and either one is monstrous.’

“ ‘Believe me, there’s only one explanation,’ I said, ‘and this man is a threat!’ I then confessed to her how I had burnt the stranger’s books and how this had provoked him. ‘He’s an eccentric, I can vouch for that by the cut of his handsome black clothes and his long hair, but he’s strong as an ox, and Goblin gave him a terrific scare. He didn’t know what was hitting him or where the glass was coming from.’

“I stopped. I realized I had told her all this in the car. I had told her over and over. Was she listening to me now because Dr. Winn had said my wounds weren’t self-inflicted?

“She was deeply troubled. I wanted to be strong for her, not weak, not in a hospital bed. I picked up the small control pad for the bed and cranked it so that I could sit up.

“Dr. Winn came in to take his leave. ‘The CAT scan’s fine,’ he repeated. ‘And in the next few days we’ll run some more tests. All you have to do, Quinn, is stay in bed. I’ll be talking to you later this morning.’

“ ‘Doctor,’ I said, ‘would I try your patience if I asked you a question?’

“ ‘No, not at all, what is it?’

“ ‘There was a brilliant premed student; a friend of mine. She’d been accepted into a research project here. She died as the result of a traffic accident. I wonder if you knew her.’

“A change came into his calm face that was very eloquent of suffering. ‘You’re speaking of Lynelle Springer,’ he said.

“I nodded.

“ ‘You’re the boy she taught, the boy she talked so much about, aren’t you?’ he asked. ‘Of

course. Tarquin Blackwood, her pride and joy. She loved you the way she loved her own children.'

"I swallowed. I was about to cry. I hadn't expected this much of an answer. 'Is it true?' I asked, 'that after the accident she never regained consciousness? She never knew how badly she was hurt?'

" 'It's true,' he said. He spoke in a humble voice, a voice that was reverent. 'We had her here for two weeks. Her daughters came. They played tapes for her of music and poetry readings,' he said. 'But she was down too deep and her injuries were too great. Everything was done that could be done, and then she left us.'

"I felt immeasurable relief knowing all this. I felt like some key chapter in my life was finally closed so that it could remain with me in its entirety now without a host of little distractions. I also felt sure this man wouldn't lie to me—ever—about anything.

"Aunt Queen inundated me with kisses and told me she was going to get dressed.

"Fr. Kevin Mayfair came into the room and sat down beside me. Goblin, who still stood solidly at the end of the bed, eyed him suspiciously.

" 'So what do you want me to say?' I asked Fr. Kevin. 'They've probably told you all I told them. They've told you that Goblin rescued me. You know Goblin. Goblin comes to Mass with me every Sunday.'

" 'Don't be so scared of me, Quinn,' he said, his tone firmer and a little higher in timbre than that of Dr. Winn. 'I'm not the enemy. I'm not here to haul you up before the Spanish Inquisition. Your housekeeper, Ramona, she saw all this flying glass. If I'd seen it, maybe I'd never doubt Almighty God again. Maybe the Devil can do that for us.'

" 'It wasn't the Devil in that bathroom,' I said. 'It was an angry man, a tall, good-looking, vain man. He got past the guards and yanked me right out of sleep. And then Goblin, my Goblin'—I looked at him at the foot of the bed and saw him anxiously eyeing Fr. Kevin—'my Goblin, he broke the glass to drive the man away from me. He sent the glass flying at the man and the man couldn't see Goblin any more than you can. The man didn't know what was happening. You've got to understand, Goblin isn't from the Devil. There has to be some in-between kind of spirit that's neither devil nor angel. There has to be.'

"Fr. Kevin nodded. 'Maybe you're right,' he said, to my surprise. He looked off for a moment in an almost dreamy way, then back to me. I found him distractingly handsome. It wasn't just the true red hair and the green eyes, it was the alert expression and the excellent proportions of his face, the shortness of the nose and the length of his full mouth. His voice was kind.

" 'Two years ago,' he said, 'or maybe less, I wouldn't have believed you. But now? Since coming South I've heard so much of ghosts and family curses that I'm more flexible of mind and disposition.' He paused. 'But I'll tell you this. Whether they come from the Devil or inside our brains, whether they're ghosts or disembodied beings with no true origin, spirits don't do us any

good. I'm sure of it.'

"Goblin was becoming agitated. He was staring at Fr. Kevin with a cold hate.

" 'No, Goblin,' I said. 'Don't do anything, Goblin.' In a sudden fit of alarm, I looked around. There was a mirror above the lavatory. What if he broke it into fragments? He knew he could do this now!

"Goblin, the Learner.

"Goblin looked at me with the strangest smile, as if to say, Don't you think I know better?

" 'Listen, he's here,' I said to Fr. Kevin. 'You can't see him but he's at the foot of the bed. And it's rude to him to speak in his presence as if he were evil. He isn't evil. How he became attached to me, I don't know. Maybe he was just drifting, drifting and looking for someone who could see him, and then I came along, a child who had the gift. And we made our little brotherhood, him and me. I have no answers. But he saved me tonight. He saved me with an extraordinary show of strength. He broke the glass, not me, and I don't want him to think for one moment that I am ungrateful.'

"Fr. Kevin studied me intently throughout this speech and then he nodded. 'Well, let's leave it at this. If you need to talk to me, you call me. I've given my number to your Aunt Queen, and I'm in and out of Mayfair Medical doing rounds every day. I'm fast becoming the full-time chaplain here, and you'd be surprised what Dr. Rowan wants me to investigate. I'll stop back in later to see you.'

" 'What does she want you to investigate?' I asked. I was plenty intrigued. And I was simmering down, and I liked talking to him. He wasn't the cliché I'd expected him to be.

" 'Near-death experiences,' he said, 'that's what I'm investigating. You know, when people are pronounced dead and they see a bright light when they pass through a tunnel and greet a being of light—and then they're revived and they come back here to tell us about it.'

" 'Yes, I know. I read everything on that subject that I can find. I believe in it. I believe it happens.'

" 'Often those people aren't believed,' he said. 'I'm here to believe, but never to ask a leading question or maybe make a suggestive statement.'

" 'I follow you,' I said. 'Have you talked to people who've had the experience?'

" 'Yes,' he said, 'I have. Of course I give the Sacrament for the Sick too. And I hear confessions, and I bring Communion.'

" 'Do you believe me—what I've just told you?'

" 'I believe you believe what you're saying,' he said. 'Now do you want the Sacrament for the Sick? You know it doesn't require much of one.'

" 'I'm not sick,' I replied, 'and as to my sexual sins, well, I'm not ready to give all that up. I can't go to Confession just now. I can't take Communion. Sex is brand-new to me.'

" 'Yes,' he said with a weary little smile, 'it's difficult at your time of life.' He shrugged. And

then he flashed a brighter smile on me and said, 'I thought it was Hell when I was your age, and frankly I think so sometimes now. Priests go to Confession, you know. They go to other priests. It's not so easy.'

" 'I like you. I know that may not matter much—.'

" 'Oh, yes, it matters,' he said. 'But I have to get back to St. Mary's. I have my parish duties as well as some work later at the university. I'll see you this afternoon.'

"He stood up.

"Something flashed into my head. 'Father,' I said, 'what if you do see a ghost that's evil, a ghost that leads you into harm, a ghost who wants some kind of dark vengeance? What do you do? You make the Sign of the Cross and you pray? Is that your only weapon?'

"He looked at me for a long time before he answered. Then he said, 'Don't talk to it,' he said. 'Don't entertain it with talk or looks or any form of attention. Remember, it can't do much to you without your helping it. Just maybe it can't do *anything* to you without your helping it. Take the ghost of Hamlet's father, for instance. Suppose Hamlet had never gone to meet it and spoken to it. Suppose he had never given the ghost an opportunity to put a story of murder into his mind. The result was pure destruction for innocent and guilty. Think on it. What if Hamlet had refused to speak to that ghost?'

" 'You mean the ghost was evil?' I asked.

" 'The play tells us so,' he said. 'It could be named *The Damnation of Hamlet.*'

"I nodded.

"He left the room and I lay there, getting sleepy and woozy and thankful that Goblin now took the chair by the bed, and I took his hand in mine.

"I thought of the malicious stranger. 'Who was that bastard, Goblin?' I asked. 'How did he get in my room?'

"When I heard no telepathic answer I turned and looked at him, and I saw that same grave expression on his face that I had remarked down in the cemetery, after I'd buried the remains of Rebecca.

" 'Can't you talk to me, Goblin?' I said. 'Listen, I'll have them bring me paper and crayons tomorrow—a big sketchpad, you know—and we can write to each other.'

"He shook his head. He almost sneered. He did sneer. He looked cold and then angry. *Computer, Quinn, bring a computer here.*

" 'Of course,' I replied. 'Why didn't I think of that? I'll get a laptop, I'll tell them I have to have it.'

"I was getting sleepier and sleepier. He sat there, my guardian, and then he spoke to me telepathically again. *Anger makes me strong, Quinn.*

" 'Anger's bad,' I murmured. I was drifting off. I woke with a start, then reminded myself that I was safe. Aunt Queen came in. I heard her telling the nurse that I was falling asleep. They had

to wake me up.

"I heard Jasmine at my ear:

" 'Little Boss, listen to me,' Jasmine said, 'we're booked solid at the Manor for the next two weeks. I have to go on back home again and so does Mamma. We have no choice. But Miss Queen is all set up. And the guards are outside. Don't you worry on that account. I'll be back when I can.'

" 'Kiss me,' I murmured. I was falling asleep.

"Was it sleep? Rebecca and I were on the lawn again in the big wicker peacock chairs and the sun was slanting down on the zinnias that Pops had planted all along the side of the house, and Rebecca said in a rippling, rhythmic voice, 'Oh, of course I'd like to live in a civilized fashion and pretend it all never took place, that he married me and made me mistress of this house and that my children would have been loved by him, and you know that you always had love, you always had love, you don't know what it means to not have love, to have nothing, simply nothing, and you, with Jasmine, you didn't taken any measures, and what if a child came from that union, would you love that child, the child you had with that colored bitch!'

"I tried to wake up. I had to ask Jasmine. Could she have gotten pregnant, but then it seemed dreamlike that I'd been with her, and I feared she'd be mean to me if I brought it up, and I knew she hadn't taken measures and neither had I, and maybe there could be a baby, and it almost made me happy.

"I couldn't move my hands.

"I opened my eyes. They had tied my hands to the bed! 'What are you doing?' I tried to say more but Rebecca was talking. They had tied my feet. I began to shout for help.

"Aunt Queen stood over me: 'Quinn, darling, you ripped out the IV. You were talking out loud to someone. You were agitated. You pushed the intern away. He has to put the IV back.'

"This was too terrible, simply too terrible. I looked at the ceiling tiles. To get away, to get far away, I went into unconsciousness. And of course Rebecca was there, she was pouring coffee for me and smiling, and the marguerites were blooming with the zinnias, and I loved the marguerites so much, those little white-and-yellow daisies.

" 'You've got to find a way to get out of here,' I told Rebecca. 'You have got to find a way to escape this place and go into the Light. God's waiting for you. God knows what's happened to you, he knows about the hook, he knows what they did. Don't you understand that it's God who's going to give you justice?'

"('Wake up, Quinn. Quinn, wake up.')

" 'And why should I go when it's so nice here,' Rebecca said. 'Here, look, this is the blouse you found upstairs in the trunk. Big Ramona's been washing and ironing all my clothes just like you told her to do. I wore this specially for you, and you see my cameo? How pretty it is. It's Venus with the little cupid at her side. I took it from Aunt Queen's display. Oh, I just love being with

you. Have some more coffee. What are you going to do with all my old clothes?'

"('Wake up, Quinn, come on, open your eyes.')

" 'What am I going to do with you is more the question,' I replied, 'and I'm telling you, you're going home to God. We all do. It's just a matter of time.' "

20

“It took three days for me to get the laptop computer. In fact, Nash Penfield, the out-of-town teacher, purchased it when he arrived, and though I wasn’t to meet him until more favorable circumstances prevailed—my decision, not Aunt Queen’s—I was grateful that he had had the wherewithal to get the appropriate machine and a long extension cord.

“During those three days they ran every conceivable medical test, and at the end of the ordeal it was plainly clear that I had no lesions on the temporal lobe, no indication of epilepsy and no brain tumors.

“I was not suffering an electrolyte imbalance and I wasn’t anemic. I had no circulatory problems and I was clean of all narcotics.

“I had no thyroid problems or problems with my pituitary gland.

“The very minor swelling of my brain, as the result of the stranger slamming me at the wall, was quickly stopped. And my headaches vanished.

“We had a huge debate as to whether a spinal tap should be done, and I finally persuaded them to do it and get it over with. I survived the risk. They found no malignant cells in the fluid.

“In between my long journeys down the beautifully painted passageways of the hospital labyrinth I told the full story of the violent night to everyone who wanted to hear it.

“Dr. Winn Mayfair listened quietly and thoughtfully to my descriptions of Goblin and how Goblin had come to my defense, and Aunt Queen, who was in the room, did not interrupt, either to calm me when I became agitated or to add to what I had to say, though she was fast becoming an expert on the whole story.

“There was something deeply reserved about Dr. Winn. I didn’t feel compelled to ask for his approval so much as his expertise, delicate though he was with all his remarks. And I wasn’t surprised when he asked me to speak to a small select panel of psychiatrists.

“I said no. But Aunt Queen changed my mind. She had brought half her entire wardrobe to the hospital and was got up each day in one of her lovely sack-style dresses, with the appropriate cloche hat, and she sat at my bedside holding my hand warmly.

“ ‘Don’t you see, I have to do this!’ she pleaded. ‘I have no choice. If I don’t insist that you talk to these psychiatrists, we’ll stand accused of simple negligence. Think it over, Quinn. We could both be accused. We have to get this out of the way and get back to life the way we want it to

be.'

" 'And how's that, Aunt Queen? What's to happen with Blackwood Manor? Don't you realize that if you and I leave on one of your exotic junkets, there'll be no Blackwood on the premises? I'll meet this teacher, yes, I told you I would, but not here. I insist that it not be here.'

" 'I understand, absolutely,' she said. 'And don't you worry about Nash, he's happily ensconced in the middle guest room at Blackwood Manor, and even if the plan goes south, as they say, he will have had something of a delicious Creole vacation.'

" 'You may find this hard to imagine, but I could swear Jasmine is flirting with Nash. Something's come over Jasmine. And it's high time if you ask me. Jasmine was prancing around today in a fancy Chanel suit I gave her two years ago. She used to never wear the truly fine things that I gave her. I think Jasmine sees her destiny.'

" 'Which is what?' I asked.

" 'To run Blackwood Manor in our absence. She's completely capable, and Clem and Big Ramona will fully support her. I mean Jasmine has languished in domestic service all her life and she's sharp and well spoken and can certainly take on the responsibility for a portion of the profit.'

" 'I didn't know we made a profit,' I said. 'Pops said we operated at a loss perpetually.'

" 'Oh, Pops was pessimistic, bless his soul, and of course he was right. The guests pay for some of the maintenance and upkeep and that's the whole point, to keep Blackwood Manor in existence, isn't it? Maybe I should say earnings instead of profit. How does that sound to you? When Pops' will is read, everything will be easier.'

" 'When is that to happen?' I asked.

" 'Well, Patsy's home, she has been for two days. I imagine we could do it day after tomorrow.'

" 'All right,' I said. I was dazed by all this sudden information. I'd been so self-involved, so full of fear and strange dreams of Rebecca and glances from a Technicolor Goblin.

"This idea of Jasmine running Blackwood Manor began to excite me. It was perfect for Jasmine. Aunt Queen understood Jasmine as no one else did, not even Jasmine.

"Suddenly, and with surprising verve, I wanted to escape this place. If Jasmine was going to resist her 'destiny,' I wanted a chance to talk to her. The simple fact was that Jasmine *did* run Blackwood Manor to a large extent, and though I wasn't so all-fired sure of her brother Clem supporting her, he might become a second-string supervisor for the men—a job that Pops' helper, Allen, had done directly. I wanted desperately to get back.

"Besides, I wanted to see Jasmine all got up in a Chanel suit.

"(In my fiendish eighteen-year-old heart, I wanted a second shot at Jasmine.)

" 'All right, I'll see the panel of doctors,' I said. 'But I want my own clothes. I don't intend to run off. I just want my Armani duds, one of those handmade shirts you keep sending me from

Europe, and my lucky Versace tie. Oh yeah, and my Johnston & Murphy shoes. I want to look sane if nothing else. And also Goblin likes those clothes. Whenever I dress up for an event at home, he's delirious.'

" 'That's very reassuring,' she said. 'I'll see to it at once. And really you should wear your Church's shoes. And can we expect Goblin to be with you at this meeting?'

" 'Of course,' I said. 'You think I'd cut him out? Besides, I can't always control what Goblin does. He's been quiet here in this place. He's put up with a great quantity of contemptuous dismissal.'

" 'I suppose so,' she said, and I saw that she was staring right at the spot where Goblin stood staring at her in the same cold remote fashion.

"What I couldn't tell her was that Goblin had been acting strangely throughout the hospital stay. Also his appearance was no longer a duplicate of mine, though it might be when I was outfitted for the psychiatric panel.

"On the contrary, he didn't wear the hospital gowns or flannel nightshirts that I wore. He wore the jeans and shirts that were back home—an amazing development.

"But it was the ever-shifting expressions on his face which most frightened me. I was definitely seeing his entire visage in greater detail. And there was a frigid quality to him and a despairing look at times, and it was rarely if ever a mirror of my feelings.

"After all, I hadn't felt the usual spells of panic in the hospital. I felt a cowardly sense of safety. There was too much going on, what with Aunt Queen ordering high tea to be served in my room and Big Ramona dropping in with fancy nightshirts for me and Sweetheart's beloved sister, Aunt Ruthie, coming by with gourmet chocolates, and guards poking their heads through the door and various cousins coming to pay their respects, though what they thought had happened to me, I don't know.

"Anyway, after innumerable delays I had the coveted laptop; I was seated in an easy chair beside the hospital bed and I wanted to draw Goblin out. My mind was a tangle of thoughts about Goblin.

" 'I need to work now, Aunt Queen,' I said very gently. 'Kiss me and go off to Commander's Palace for dinner. You haven't been there since this started.'

"She was suspicious. 'But you've no phone hookup here; what are you planning to do with the laptop? Write a novel?'

" 'I'm talking to Goblin through it. It's easier for him than telepathy. He feeds off the electricity. He asked for this.'

" 'Oh, my darling Quinn,' she said with a flamboyant gesture of confusion and anxiety.

" 'Aunt Queen, let me tell you again, he saved my life. That bastard would have killed me!'

" 'Darling, what would happen if you simply stopped speaking to Goblin altogether? And as for the island, what if we destroy the Hermitage, dismantle the strange mausoleum and move all

of its gold panels back to the house and let the wisteria have the place?'

" 'You're shocking me,' I said. 'You're hurting me! I want the Hermitage. I've been inspired by that marble desk and golden chair. I want to paint the place, floor it in marble. Look, I know the grief I'm causing you. I know the pain you've been through with Pops' death, and I don't mean for this agony to go on, but I want that place, don't you see, and it belongs to us, not this interloper!'

"I glanced at Goblin. He was watching Aunt Queen in the most intense manner. And then he looked at me almost listlessly. It was as if he had acquired a taste for boredom. I had to talk to him. I had to make some judgment of what he now knew! I was the only person in the world who understood this problem.

" 'All right, precious dear,' said my beloved aunt. 'I'm going upstairs for supper.'

"She had previously made known to me, more than once, that there were four restaurants in this complex and the finest could rival any restaurant in New Orleans. This was all Rowan Mayfair's idea, to provide varying fare for relatives of the sick and the sick themselves. You could grab a quick meal in the generic cafeteria in the basement or mount to the rooftop Grand Luminière for the most succulent choices.

"Aunt Queen had become a regular at the Grand Luminière, and my meals came directly from their kitchen.

" 'I'm meeting Nash, you know,' she went on to say, 'and if you'd only just—'

" 'I'll meet him when I'm properly dressed,' I said. 'Not when I'm got up like Wee Willie Winkie.'

"She rose to go.

" 'And there's another thing,' I said.

" 'Yes?' she asked. She was so polite, standing over me, ready to plant her tender kiss, so solicitous.

" 'When *do* I get out of here?'

"Obviously this was a moment for a decision.

" 'Tomorrow, perhaps, after you talk to the panel of psychiatrists?' she proposed. 'It's scheduled for four p.m.'

"Already arranged, I thought, but I made no remark on it.

" 'All right,' I said. 'Then suppose you and I and Nash and Goblin have supper in the Grand Luminière after the appointment with the panel is over.'

" 'That sounds marvelous,' she said. 'You've made me very happy. Oh, so extremely happy. And you should see the restaurant. And you will! And I can't wait to tell Nash.' And after another wealth of kisses she was off with the fragrance of Lynelle's marvelous perfume lingering behind her.

"I looked at Goblin. He showed no inclination to move from his lazy position in the corner. He

was wearing my lucky Versace tie. It was positively flaunting.

"I flicked on the computer. 'You haven't talked to me since that first night.' I said it as I typed it. 'What's up with you? What's the matter? I've told everyone what you did. I've given you credit.'

"He was gone, and the fact that he had been so vivid made it all the more startling. The computer keys started to move; he wrote:

" 'I like being angry.'

"I was stunned.

" 'That's wrong,' I typed as I spoke. 'The man who hurt me was angry. Did you see the bad things he did to me?'

" 'Use bigger words,' said the computer in a rapid fire of keys. 'I told you I know all the words you ever used on the computer. I listen. I know. I know words and things. And when I was angry it was for you.'

" 'I know it was for me,' I replied, speaking and tapping it out. 'Surely you've heard me tell everyone.'

" 'Don't you see what is happening to you here?' he asked. The keys were moving at terrific speed. 'They are trying to take me from you. They are trying to divide us and we are Quinn Goblin and they don't understand about us.'

" 'It doesn't matter what they think,' I said. I spoke softly. 'I love you. I am loyal to you. They can't part us. It's impossible. But you can't be angry. You can't be violent. If you're angry and violent I can't love you.'

" 'Unless it's for you, you mean,' he countered. 'If it's for you, then it's good, isn't it?'

"He had never phrased anything in this way. It was a tiny yet momentous twist of sophistication.

" 'That's true,' I said. 'I do want you to protect me. Protect Blackwood Manor. Protect all those I love.'

" 'You make me laugh,' he wrote.

" 'Why's that?' I asked with belligerent innocence.

"The computer was pushed out of my lap to the floor. Before I could rise from the chair he was beside me, fully realized, and he kissed me on the lips. Then he drew back until he was no more than a foot from me, and his arms slipped around me and they gripped me.

"He moved his lips, and for the first time I heard a true voice come out of him, slow, masculine in tone and without inflection.

" 'You're afraid of me now,' he said, his lips moving sluggishly.

" 'Is that what you want?' I asked.

"I was terrified. Never once in my brawl with the stranger had I felt this kind of fear.

" 'You want me to be afraid?' I asked. 'I can't love you and be afraid of you. I'll come to hate

you if I'm afraid. Did you see how I hated the stranger? Make a choice.'

"Again, he came in for the kiss, and I felt his lips on mine, just as firmly as I had felt Jasmine's kisses. His hand went down between my legs. He ran his hand under my nightshirt.

" 'No, not here,' I said. 'Be patient.'

"Again he spoke to me. He *spoke*.

" 'But when you feel it, I feel it. I want it.'

"I felt his hand on my cock, and I gave in. I gave in quickly, and it was over within seconds.

"I sat back in the easy chair and closed my eyes. My body was lulled and humming. There was a time of silence. Perhaps five or more minutes. But he was still there. He was kneeling right beside me, but I couldn't look at him.

" 'Who *was* the stranger?' I asked. I opened my eyes. 'I've asked you over and over. Who was he?'

" 'I don't know,' he responded. The sound of the monotone voice was literally dreadful.

" 'Where is the stranger?' I asked.

" 'I don't know,' he responded again. 'If I knew, I would find him and hurt him. I don't know everything.' On it went, flat and low. 'I know lots more than you think I do.'

"I said nothing. I was too afraid. I tried to feel love, not because I wanted to love him but because I was going mad. By tomorrow I might be roaring mad.

" 'I want you to leave me now,' I said. I looked into his eyes. 'I want you to leave me to think, you understand me?'

" 'You think you can command me,' came that monotone voice. The lips were slightly disconnected from it. 'You can't command me,' he said. 'But for love, I'll leave you alone. Beware of what they do to you here.'

" 'Don't frighten me anymore,' I said.

" 'I don't want to frighten you,' said the voice. 'But you must understand they want to change you. They want to make you so you can't see or hear me.'

" 'That can't be done,' I whispered. 'Go now. I must be alone. Don't you ever want to be alone?'

"No answer.

" 'Where do you go when you're not with me?' I asked.

"No answer.

" 'Tell me,' I said. 'Where do you go when you leave? Or do you stay with me, invisible, just watching and learning?'

"No answer.

"I felt him leave. I felt a change of temperature in the room. I heard things stirring, the paper tissue ruffled in its box, the creak of the bed, the faint rattle of the Venetian blinds, then nothing.

"I made the Sign of the Cross. What was I going to do? Where was I going to go to find

someone who would understand this? Hell, I needed someone to tell me what to do.

"I went into the bathroom and washed the slimy semen off my legs. I washed my hands. Then I came back, and I took my rosary out of the nightstand. Big Ramona had found it for me. It was a garnet rosary from my First Communion. Lynelle's gift. I started to say it.

"But I couldn't meditate on the mysteries. I thought of the stranger. What if he came back to Blackwood Manor? If the Hermitage was destroyed, what would he do? I pictured him, those fiery dark eyes. How perfectly furious he had been, pivoting wild as a dervish as the broken glass assaulted him.

"And if I went to sleep, I'd dream of Rebecca."

21

“Goblin was on time for the meeting with the panel of psychiatrists. He was my faithful duplicate again, and the look of contempt and boredom had vanished from his face. He put his arm around me and I could see that he was afraid of what was to happen with the panel.

“As we entered the room—Goblin, me and Aunt Queen—I felt for one moment: What could it be like if I were to trust these people? If I were really to make an appeal to them? Could they help me, not with some cooked-up psychiatric diagnosis but with an active assault on Rebecca and Goblin and on the panic that had driven me to the Hermitage? Could they be a party to my efforts to fight the trespasser?

“My own sheer disloyalty to Goblin, born out of a brand-new fear, put me to shame. But, not being able to read my mind, for all his new attainments, he had no clue of it.

“I quietly demanded that a chair be placed beside me for Goblin to sit, and I laid my hand on his knee and felt him relax. I glanced at his profile and found his eyes chilly as he looked at the panel. I told the panel that, though they couldn’t see him, Goblin was sitting to my left and that he was looking at them and hearing everything being said by us.

“As for the panel, I was soon certain that it was impossible to expect anything exceptional from any member of it, and the examination was largely an uneventful half hour.

“Two of the doctors were young, sterile and heartless men, interns, I figure, and the one woman on the panel seemed tentative and overeager to please, and the chairman of the board was a big heavyset doctor who seemed himself to be suffering from terminal depression.

“Winn Mayfair was there and he studied me in dignified silence. His was by far the most interesting face.

“I told them quickly, and dryly, my whole story. I kept back nothing except the most recent and private details of my erotic relationship with Goblin. Of his heroics I made much. Of our sexual contact, I said nothing. When I described my love affair with Rebecca and the burial of her remains, the visits of the Mayfair Medical lab to the Hermitage and the attendance of the FBI, they looked to Aunt Queen, who confirmed what she could readily.

“ ‘You do realize,’ said the heavyset head doctor, ‘that no fingerprints whatsoever were found in the bathroom where you were supposedly attacked. Nothing on the walls, the lavatory or on the pieces of glass that could be examined.’

“I hadn’t known, and I was bitterly disappointed that I had to be told such a thing in these circumstances.

“ ‘The trespasser didn’t touch anything but me,’ I said quietly, my face burning with restraint. ‘The glass was in fragments.’

“ ‘You also know,’ said the chairman of the panel, ‘that your housekeeper Ramona didn’t see this intruder, and none of the guards on your property saw him either.’

“Again, I was hurt that Aunt Queen had not told me these things before, but I swallowed hard on my anger and simply shrugged.

“ ‘Dr. Winn Mayfair can tell you,’ I said. ‘My injuries weren’t self-inflicted.’

“We had come to an impasse.

“Then the doctors put the same routine questions to me that child psychiatrists had used years ago, with a few new wrinkles, such as, Did I hear voices? Did Goblin ever tell me what to do? Did I ever suffer blackouts? Did I know my own IQ? Had I no interest in attending college? I gave simple answers. I wanted it to be over.

“At last Winn Mayfair asked me in a very quiet and respectful voice whether or not he and the others could do anything for me. Did I perhaps have questions for those who’d been questioning me?

“I was completely taken aback by this. I never expected anything so friendly or reasonable. Common sense told me to stop and think this over. But then I heard myself responding:

“ ‘No, I think this has gone on long enough. I presume you will confer and send us word of your diagnosis?’

“ ‘We’ll do that, if you like,’ said Dr. Winn. ‘We thank you for coming.’

“ ‘You talk like I’m a specimen,’ I said, ignoring Aunt Queen’s little gasp. ‘Was I brought here for your sake or mine?’

“Dr. Winn was unfazed by the sharpness of my tone.

“ ‘This is a teaching hospital, Quinn,’ he said. ‘It’s reciprocal what goes on. As for your diagnosis, let me tell you now it’s perfectly obvious that you’re not a manic-depressive, a schizophrenic or a sociopath. Those are the ones that worry people.’

“He rose to his feet—a signal to all those present—and this time he shook my hand and ‘applauded’ my patience.

“The two antiseptic young men vanished, the woman went with them, the huge, heavy, depressed captain of the team wished me good luck, and Aunt Queen said jubilantly that we could now go up to the rooftop Grand Luminière for a nice supper.

“Goblin remained locked to my side, and in the elevator going up to the roof, I felt his right arm tight around me.

“I was calculating; I was going to break in Mr. Nash Penfield right. I wasn’t going to let him find out about all this in some delicate manner.

“The restaurant proved a marvelous surprise. Even Aunt Queen’s glowing compliments had not fully captured it. We were quite high up over New Orleans, which was great, and huge arched windows were open everywhere to the glowing afternoon around us. There was a colonnade along the east side, where one could stroll in the open air, along a balustrade with Tuscan columns. And within the circular room itself, between the vast windows, there were rich paintings in heavy ornate frames—a sampling of art from all different centuries.

“I noticed the Dutch art right away. ‘My God,’ I said to Aunt Queen, ‘we’re surrounded by Rembrandts.’

“ ‘No, dear, they’re all fakes, or reproductions, as Rowan Mayfair likes to put it. They were commissioned especially for the restaurant, but don’t you worry. You’ll be in Amsterdam soon enough, seeing some of the originals.’

“ ‘What a dazzling idea,’ I said. ‘Bringing it all here for people who don’t want to go wandering.’

“ ‘Now, now, toots,’ she said. ‘Don’t fret about wandering. There’s Nash. He’s already at the table. Please follow me.’

“I took the measure of the restaurant before I took the measure of the man, and saw that all manner of people in all manner of dress were seated at the white draped tables. Lots of patients in wheelchairs were dining with family members, it seemed, and many tables had people who appeared dressed for a night on the town, and then there were uniformed doctors and nurses.

“All the tables were round but they varied in size, and ours was set for four, which immediately delighted me.

“In summary, I knew it to be a boldly homogenized and democratic place, yet a place of genuine beauty and refinement, and my heart went out to the woman who had designed it.

“The windows were full of the sun-streaked sky, and I could see the twinkling lights of the two river bridges shining wonderfully in the dusk. I loved it.

“But now it was time to see Nash and to introduce him to Goblin.

“The man who was helping Aunt Queen with her chair was taller even than me (at that time), probably by about two inches. He had wavy black hair with a lot of gray at the sides, and he was dressed in a fine spring suit of blue-and-white seersucker.

“His eyes were pale blue and he had rather deep lines in his face, giving him a bit of a jowled look, but he was in fact slender. His expression was entirely wise and sympathetic, and he took my hand in his warmly.

“ ‘You’re Nash,’ I said. ‘I thank you for helping with my computer.’

“His voice came with a depth and color that any man would envy. In fact, it had an effortless professional sound to it that was charming.

“ ‘I’m delighted to meet you, Quinn,’ he said. ‘I understand Goblin is with you?’

“We were getting off on the right foot. I presented Goblin to him immediately and I noted

Goblin's cold stare as Nash tried his best to be courteous to something he couldn't see.

"We were immediately seated in a nice open circle, and when the waitress approached, I told her that an invisible personage was seated to my left, and that he would be having the same meal I would be having.

"She was horrified.

"Aunt Queen gave her immediate approval of the plan before the young woman could laugh or make some odd remark. And Nash immediately commented on the heavy silver of the table setting.

"I ordered a double vodka martini, with plenty of olive juice and olives, and that went over very well, too, thanks to Aunt Queen immediately ordering the same and one for Goblin, and asking to see the wine list.

"Nash asked for a glass of plain soda water, remarking that he had finished a lifetime of drinking earlier than one might have expected.

"The waitress departed in an anxious flurry.

"Then Nash began to introduce himself, his slow, careful sonorous voice telling of how he and Aunt Queen had met in Europe, where Nash had been shepherding a group of high school students on a tour of the Continent.

"This was apparently Nash's summer job throughout graduate school at Claremont College in California, but he was now finished with all course work for his Ph.D. and needed only to write his dissertation.

"Subject? A thorough investigation as to whether Charles Dickens had ever been edited, and what effect modern editing standards might have had on his work, with heavy reliance on an examination of how Dickens' writings had been abridged in England and America.

"I was immediately interested, and also attracted to this deep-voiced man with the gray at his temples, and I felt I could have listened to his easy eloquence for hours. In fact, I longed to do so. He had a natural wide-eyed expression when he spoke and an inveterate politeness that was totally disarming.

"But Aunt Queen quickly cut in to express her immediate desire: that as soon as Pops' will was read, we go on to Europe. Of course Nash agreed with her that I was the perfect age for the Grand Tour, and I believed Nash when he told me that I would never quite again be as impressionable as I was now. Then he turned to Goblin, and, trying to lock eyes with something parallel to me, asked Goblin what he thought of the travel proposal.

"I took Goblin's right hand, which felt heavy and warm, but he showed me nothing but that cold profile again and he was utterly silent.

" 'Goblin, what do you think? Do you remember our trip to New York?' The question came out of my mouth before I could realize that it was a blunder. Goblin had gotten weaker and weaker in New York, until he was scarcely more than a sheer phantom.

“ ‘Goblin, we won’t do anything that’s bad for us,’ I said. ‘Here, look at this martini.’ I held up the glass for him. And then I took a swallow of it myself. ‘Here’s to you, Goblin. We’re together. We’re going home to the house tonight. We’re through with this hospital and anybody and everybody that would have worked for our separation.’

“Of course this long speech was entirely audible to Nash and Aunt Queen, and Aunt Queen picked up the gist immediately.

“ ‘Come, Goblin,’ said Aunt Queen, ‘certainly you want to go to Europe. We’ll have so much fun together.’

“Again, I tried to elicit some reaction from him, but I couldn’t. He wasn’t playing at eating his food or drinking his drink, and he stared at Nash as if he was the enemy.

“ ‘No, Goblin, he’s not!’ I leaned towards him. I whispered. ‘He’s good for us. Remember how Lynelle was good? That’s how this man is. I knew it the moment he started talking to us.’

“Of course Nash and Aunt Queen could hear this, and Aunt Queen said at once: ‘I’m so supremely overjoyed. Quinn, dear, don’t drink that martini too fast. The wine I’ve chosen is excellent.’

“Goblin continued to stare forward.

“ ‘Never mind him for now,’ I said. ‘I think the hospital stay has exhausted him. Nash—I presume you do want me to call you Nash’ (‘Oh, absolutely,’ he replied) ‘—we’ve just been through a peculiar ordeal upstairs and—.’

“Before I could say more I heard Goblin’s ominous monotone: ‘Europe, I can’t,’ he said. ‘Too far for me. You remember New York. You talk like a fool. Goblin Quinn one person.’

“It was clear that no one else could hear him.

“ ‘I know,’ I replied aloud. ‘I understand. All right. We’ll think on it.’

“ ‘I once thought,’ he went on in the same chilling voice, ‘Europe existed in pictures and stories. Then Aunt Queen called from Europe, we saw movies of Europe, Lynelle taught you about Europe. Europe is real and far away. No going to Europe. No. Do this and we split apart. Quinn Goblin one person.’

“My anxiety was cresting. Plates of steaming food were being set down, wineglasses filled, and all the world of this restaurant saw me whispering to empty space, but I had no intention of weakening.

“ ‘Just listen to this man,’ I said. ‘Listen to Aunt Queen. It doesn’t mean we have to go.’ I leaned closer to him, dropping my whispering even lower. ‘I’m just humoring them, you see, I have to do it. Nash can be my teacher at Blackwood Farm. We’ll be together. Goblin, look at me.’

“ ‘No, I don’t want to look at you,’ he replied. ‘You are sly.’

“ ‘God in Heaven,’ I declared in a louder voice. ‘What do you want of me? I’m giving you my total loyalty. Nash, tell him that you can be my tutor at Blackwood Farm. It’s possible, isn’t it?’

“Nash stared intently at what he thought was Goblin’s face, and he wasn’t very far off, as I saw

it.

" 'Of course, I'd be delighted to teach Quinn at Blackwood Farm. The place is beautiful,' he said. 'Goblin, I'm new here. I want for you to approve of me. I know full well that Quinn will only accept me if you do.'

" 'Yes, that's it, that's why we're here!' I said forthrightly. 'Oh, if you could only see him,' I said to Nash. 'To me he's as solid as you.' I reached over and took Goblin's right hand. 'I love you, Goblin. It's love between us.' I kissed his cheek.

"I drew back, and in the small interval of silence I felt exposed in this crowded restaurant and maybe downright ridiculous. I had thought that Nash would be difficult to win over, but it was turning out to be Goblin. And I was out on a limb in this place, talking to what seemed to be nothing and no one, talking in fear because I knew what that invisible person could do and no one around me could even guess it. Not even Aunt Queen really had a guess at it.

"And then there came one of the rarest moments of my life.

"I was gazing from Nash to Aunt Queen when suddenly I noticed at the next table, behind them, a beautiful red-haired girl who was staring at me fixedly. It was as if Fr. Kevin Mayfair had been metamorphosed into his own divine sister.

"She had his same clear skin with a natural blush to the cheeks and the same rich red hair; and though she had breasts large enough to please any man, she wore ribbons on either side of her hair as if she were still something of a little girl in spirit.

"We locked eyes, the two of us, and then she looked from me to Goblin. *She could see Goblin!*

" 'Dull-witted Quinn,' he said to me in his icy loveless voice. 'She has been watching us from the beginning.'

"Of course. He had been staring at her, not at Nash, not at Aunt Queen; he had been staring past them at this person—the first person I had ever known, other than me—who seemed able to completely see him.

"The shock left me speechless. I knew Aunt Queen was asking me questions, and that Nash had just spoken up. But I made sense of nothing. And as I watched, a man who was seated beside this amazing young girl stood up and came towards us. He looked right at me as he approached.

"He was gray-haired, informal yet dignified in a blue blazer and slacks, and very vivacious of expression and of voice as he spoke to me.

" 'You'll forgive my intrusion, please,' he said. 'My name is Stirling Oliver. I'm a member of an organization. It's called the Talamasca. I want to introduce myself to you. We study the paranormal, you see, and I couldn't help but notice your companion.'

" 'You mean you can see him too?' I asked. But I saw at once he was telling the truth, and Goblin's eyes moved to his, but Goblin said nothing.

" 'Yes, I can see him very well,' said Mr. Oliver as he presented me with a little card. 'We're an old, old Order,' he went on. 'We've existed for perhaps a thousand years. We study ghosts and

those who can see them. We offer assistance. We offer information. I am so very impressed with your friend. Do forgive me.'

" 'Goblin, talk to Mr. Oliver,' I said.

"Goblin neither moved nor spoke.

"Aunt Queen interjected. 'I really must ask you to stop,' she said with uncommon force. 'You see, my nephew in spite of his prodigious height is only eighteen, and you really must go through me if you want to establish any sort of relationship at all with him. I don't entirely approve of those who believe in the paranormal.'

" 'But Aunt Queen,' I said. 'How can you say this! All my life I've seen Goblin! Please, I beg you, let me talk to this man.' But it was to the red-haired girl I looked, and then abruptly I rose, excusing myself to nobody, and I went to her table.

"She looked up at me with Fr. Kevin's green eyes. The little ribbons held back beautiful tresses of her long thick wavy hair. She smiled. She beamed. She was exquisite.

" 'I want to marry you,' I said. 'I'm in love with you. You can see Goblin, can't you?'

" 'Yes, I can see him, and he's an egregious whopper of a spirit,' she said, 'but I don't think I can marry you.'

"I sat down, probably taking the chair which Stirling Oliver had vacated, barely casting a glance at him to discover he was in fast discussion with Aunt Queen, and only now did I realize that Fr. Kevin and Dr. Winn were both seated at the table facing us.

" 'My name's Mona Mayfair,' the girl said. She had the most crisp lively voice. 'These are my cousins—.'

" 'I know them both. Fr. Kev, please, properly introduce us.'

" 'Quinn, you are so strange,' said Fr. Kev with the flash of a warm smile. ' "Properly introduce." Next you'll want me to announce the banns on Sunday. Mona, this is Tarquin Blackwood, he's eighteen, and he takes his familiar with him everywhere.'

" 'That ghost is no familiar,' Mona said. 'He's much too strong for that designation.'

"Oh, I loved her voice, the lilt of it, the easy way she laughed.

" 'I want to marry you, Mona, I know it,' I said. I stammered. I had never beheld anyone as purely lovable as Mona, and I never would, I was totally aware of that. The world hung by a thread, and I had to seize the world and snap that thread. 'Mona, come away with me. Let's just talk together.'

" 'Slow down, Tarquin, please,' she said. 'You're really cut and cute, but I can't just go off with you. I've got so many people watching me you wouldn't believe it.'

" 'Oh, it's the same way with me, every decision is made by committee. Mona, I adore you.' I looked at my hands. What rings had I put on for the odious meeting with the psychiatrists? I had a diamond-studded band on my right ring finger. I pulled it off. I offered it to her.

" 'Quinn,' said Fr. Kevin, 'cease and desist. You can talk to Mona in normal fashion. You don't

have to be offering her a ring. You don't even know her.'

" 'And look,' she said, pointing over at the table. 'Your ghost is standing up and staring at you. He knows I can see him and he doesn't know what he thinks about it. Look how he's looking down at Stirling.'

" 'Stirling, the Talamasca, that's what he said, right? I have to learn about it. You know this Talamasca, Fr. Kev?'

" 'About as much as a priest of the Church of Rome can ever know it,' he answered easily. 'Quinn, Stirling's a decent man. I can't endorse the organization, but he's been a good friend to Mona and to me.'

" 'You need somebody like him,' said Mona. 'Not me. I'm too ruined for you.'

" 'What on earth are you talking about?' I said. 'Ruined! You're gorgeous. I want to … I'm going mad. I knew I'd go mad today. First it's a panel of psychiatrists, and then it's Goblin acting sullen and weird, and now you're telling me you won't even think about marrying me! Let me just call on you, let me just bring you a bouquet of flowers and sit with you in your parlor with your mother, all right? I swear, I'll be a perfect gentleman.'

"Her smile broadened and I could see the most shadowy humor in her quick green eyes. I could see secrets, I could see cleverness and sweetness.

" 'I wish to God, if I wasn't who I am—' she said. 'Mayfairs like me always marry other Mayfairs. We have no choice. Nobody else understands us.' She sighed.

" 'I understand you. You've seen other ghosts, haven't you? You knew Goblin for what he was immediately.'

" 'I've seen plenty of ghosts,' she said soberly. 'Maybe you and I could just play for a while.'

" 'No, I don't think this is a good idea,' said Fr. Kev. 'Quinn, your Aunt Queen is getting pretty heated over there.' He rose to his feet. 'I think it's time for me to step in and restrain Stirling. I've never seen Stirling play it quite this way. I think Stirling thinks you need him, Quinn. And you come back with me now.'

" 'But I don't even know where you live!' I said to Mona.

"I stared at Dr. Winn. His cold blue eyes and impassive face told me nothing.

" 'Come on, Quinn,' said Fr. Kev.

" 'First and Chestnut Streets,' said Mona. 'Can you remember that? Riverside downtown corner. That's the Garden District—.'

" 'I know it totally,' I said. 'My grandma grew up on Coliseum Street. I'll come to see you.'

"I let Fr. Kev direct me back to my table. Stirling Oliver was in my chair talking heatedly to Aunt Queen.

" 'We only mean to help people,' he said. 'A person who sees spirits can feel very isolated.'

" 'You're right,' I said, 'you're so right.'

"And there stood Goblin staring down coldly on the proceedings and then looking over to the

blossom of loveliness that was Mona.

"Stirling rose. He put a white card in my hand. 'Take this. Call me if you feel you need to talk to me. And if your aunt, Mrs. McQueen, will allow it.'

" 'I despise having to be rude,' said Aunt Queen, 'but I do not think this is a very good idea, Mr. Oliver, and I do prevail upon you to leave my nephew to his destiny.'

" 'His destiny,' said Mr. Oliver. 'Oh, but that has such a ring to it.'

" 'Yes, indeed it does,' I said. 'Aunt Queen, I'm in love. I'm in love with that girl. Turn your head. You won't believe your eyes.'

" 'Good Lord,' she said, 'it's a female Mayfair.'

" 'What kind of remark is that!' I said.

"Fr. Kevin chuckled under his breath. 'Now Miss Queen,' he said, smiling, 'you've always tolerated me very well. I know you've had your driver bring you all the way over the lake just to hear me say Mass at St. Mary's Assumption.'

" 'You do say Mass with a lovely flair, Fr. Kevin,' she responded, 'and you are a priest of God, as we well know, and a consecrated priest of the Roman Catholic Church, no dispute on that matter—but we are talking about your cousin Mona, if I'm not mistaken? Yes, Mona, and that is entirely another matter. Darlings, I think it's time for us to go home. Quinn, dear, you've been discharged and your room packed up. Nash, you don't mind too terribly—."

" 'Aunt Queen, what is happening?' I asked.

" 'We're leaving, darling. Mr. Oliver? I wish I could say that it has been a pleasure. Your good intentions have been acknowledged.'

" 'Please, keep this,' he said as he gave her his card again.

"I still held the one he'd given me. I put it in my pocket.

"I looked back at the radiant girl. And as our eyes connected I heard the message, clear as if Goblin had spoken it to me: *First and Chestnut.*

"Goblin vanished. I was being rushed out of the restaurant. Never had I felt such angry bewilderment!

"Only when we reached the car did I demand that we stop.

" 'Goblin,' I cried. 'Don't you see? He's off plaguing her now. Goblin, come back to me.'

"Then came the cold murmured reassurance I required, like a gnat at my ear. 'You are a fool, Quinn. I don't want to be with her. She doesn't love me. I'm not hers. I am with you. I am yours. Quinn and Goblin one person.'

" 'Thank God,' I whispered.

"The big stretch limousine pulled out of the porte cochere, and I started to cry like a little boy.

" 'You just don't understand,' I said. 'She saw Goblin. And I'm in love with her. She's the most radiant gemstone of a creature that I've ever seen.' "

22

“That night I connected with Nash as I have connected with few people in my life, and we forged a bond which lasted for my mortal lifetime and beyond it. He sat up with me for hours, comforting me as I poured out my soul, as I agonized over my fatal glimpse of Mona Mayfair.

“I made him privy to every nuance of the panic I’d been experiencing since Lynelle died, and I even dared to tell him in profound words and circuitous sentences of how I feared the recent shifts of emotional temperature in Goblin.

“Of course I told him about the stranger, the stranger in whom no one believed, apparently, and that I expected in short order to be accused of having actually written myself the stranger’s letter to me.

“I positively raved about Lynelle’s loss. I could do no less when I thought of it.

“Nash’s deep voice, his strong arm around my shoulders, his gentle hand on my knee, it was beyond comforting. And there was something about him that was so proper yet relaxed, so inherently gentlemanly yet natural, that I felt I could trust him with my whole soul—even with the erotic adventures I’d had with my beloved Goblin and my terrifying Rebecca. I even told him about my sleeping with Jasmine.

“What did Nash really believe? Did he think I was insane? I didn’t know. I only knew that he was being very honest with me in every word that he spoke and in every gesture. I knew that he respected me, and this respect counted for everything.

“I knew that he felt compassion for me just because I was young, yet he took me seriously, and he said time and again as the night wore on that he understood and remembered what it had been like for him at my age.

“We started our marathon conversation in the front parlor, thankfully deserted early by our few guests, and we ended at the kitchen table, drinking coffee like fuel, though I kept lacing mine with luscious amounts of cream and sugar.

“Only when Big Ramona ran us out did we walk down to the old cemetery, and I told him all about the spirits I’d seen. I told him the things I wanted to tell Mona.

“We were under the big oak when the dawn came with its soft silent and shimmering light, and it was there that I told him I would always love him.

“ ‘You know, whatever happens with us,’ I said, ‘as teacher and pupil, as friends, whatever

comes to pass—whether we go to Europe eventually, or we study here—I'll never forget you listening to me tonight, I'll never forget your inveterate kindness.'

" 'Quinn, you're a battered soul,' he said to me. 'And probably the better for it. I can't deny how compelling you are to me, and the challenge that you present to me. Yes, I want to be your teacher. I'd be honored to be your teacher, and I do think there are things we could achieve together. But you don't know me yet, and you may come to change your mind about me when certain things become clear to you.'

" 'Nothing will ever change this love, Nash,' I responded. 'Any more than anything will change what I feel for Mona Mayfair.'

"He gave me the most reassuring smile.

" 'And now you need to go in and get dressed,' he said. 'The reading of your grandfather's will, remember?'

"How could I forget?

"I bolted down a huge breakfast in the kitchen and then went up to shower and change, half afraid of what I might find in the bathroom in the way of patchwork repairs, but everything was done to perfection.

"Feeling lightheaded and like a conquistador of grand emotions, I piled into the limousine with Aunt Queen and Patsy, who looked like deliberate and absolute trash in her red leather clothes, and Jasmine, dressed to the teeth in a gorgeous black suit and stiletto heels, and off we went to the lawyer's office in Ruby River City. Big Ramona and Felix were supposed to have come too, but there was no way the house could spare them. Clem, who was driving the limo, had also been alerted to come inside when we got there. And Lolly, who was up front with Clem, was also included.

"In short order, we settled down in one of those generic legal places of which I've seen several in my time, outfitted with blackberry leather chairs and a big glass-covered mahogany desk for the man who reads the document that is bound to make somebody feel rotten.

"Our pleasant-voiced lawyer, Grady Breen (Gravier's old and dear friend, and a relic of some eighty-five years in age), made all the appropriate offers of coffee or soft drinks, which we all in our anxiety declined, and then we were off and running.

"Last time it had been Patsy who was so brutally hurt with a trust-fund inheritance that didn't amount in her mind to a pittance. And everybody was silently betting it was Patsy again who would get scalded and leave the office yowling.

"But what unfolded surprised everyone. The smaller bequests—one hundred thousand dollars each to Clem, Felix, Ramona, Lolly and Jasmine—were no great shock. And that Pops had left them handsome annuities for retirement as well made everyone a little less nervous. In fact, I'm understating the case. This part of the will made Clem and Jasmine and Lolly jubilant. Jasmine started to cry, and Lolly held tight to her arm, tearing up as well, and Clem just shook his head at

the marvel of it.

“But then there came the real meat of the feast and no one could have been more amazed than Patsy. It seemed that Great-grandfather Gravier had left a trust fund to Pops which was bound by its original terms to go in its entirety to Pops’ only child, Patsy. The principal of the trust was in the high double-digit millions, and the income so handsome that Patsy positively screamed with astonished laughter.

“As to Pops’ remaining trust funds, also enormous, one went to Aunt Queen until her death and then to me, and the other was mine immediately. It was a dizzying amount of income.

“In summary, Pops had disinherited Patsy, but it made no difference because he couldn’t stop Grandpa Gravier’s trust from going to her. And his frugal ways over the years, his paying himself a pittance of a salary and rolling back into the big trust its earnings, had even increased Patsy’s fortune. Of course Patsy couldn’t touch the principal of the big trust, and when she died I would inherit it.

“Patsy was so delirious that she threw her arms around Aunt Queen, squealing and giggling and stomping the floor with her red leather boots.

“And even I felt happy for her.

“Aunt Queen kissed her cheek and told her warmly that it was indeed wondrous news, and now Patsy could buy some new clothes with her newfound money.

“ ‘Oh, am I going to buy new clothes!’ she declared. She ran out of the lawyer’s office before anyone could stop her. How she found transportation without Clem I couldn’t guess, except that she had her cell phone with her always these days, and Seymour was back at the house with her van. Whatever the case, never sensing the irony of Aunt Queen’s gentle words, she vanished.

“I sat there absorbing the fact that I now had a substantial income in my own right, some one hundred thousand dollars a month immediately available to me, though it came with strict and nonbinding advice that I take Aunt Queen’s guidance in everything.

“There was some fancy language pertaining to all that, something to do with Aunt Queen’s advanced age, and my precocity, and I interpreted from it that I was being entrusted with my income now because of my obedient nature and the fact that my mother could not be relied upon to provide the proper guidance.

“I was given two credit cards on the spot, each with a line of credit of a hundred thousand, a checkbook for a checking account which would carry a rolling balance of twenty thousand dollars a month, a money market account into which would be deposited eighty thousand a month, and I filled out some important papers, signed bank forms and cards, signed the credit cards as well, slipped them into my wallet, pocketed the checkbook, and my part of the transaction was over. I was intoxicated with new-funded manhood.

“What followed had to do with the various other employees who were left handsome amounts, of which they would soon be apprised, as Aunt Queen, appointed executrix for these, had some

six months to make them available to the designated persons. It was wonderful to hear of this. The men were going to be mighty pleased.

"Then came the description of the household trust, which had been established by the Old Man himself, Manfred. It had grown enormously over the years, and its sole beneficiary was Blackwood Farm. And try as I might I could not understand all its complications.

"That Blackwood Farm couldn't be divided, that its house could never be pulled down, that any architectural changes must be in keeping with its original designs, that all who were employed in the management and maintenance of Blackwood Manor and Blackwood Farm were to be well paid—all this was rolled out in complex language, spelling security for the estate that I loved, and making it very clear that the income we received from our paying guests meant absolutely nothing.

"There was also considerable language about the responsibilities for the farm trust now falling upon Aunt Queen, and then passing on to me, but this was also too complicated to follow. That Patsy would never own or control Blackwood Farm was the gist of this, and of course Patsy wouldn't give a damn about it.

"As for the present, the pure ownership of Blackwood Farm itself, including all buildings, swamp and land, passed from Pops to me, with a grant of usufruct to Aunt Queen, meaning she could live there throughout her lifetime.

"This left me astonished. But immediately Aunt Queen explained the wisdom of it. Were she to marry, she said, her husband might try to bring a claim of ownership against the land, and this was what Pops wanted to protect against. Of course, she was seventy-eight (or so she said) and she wasn't going to marry anyone, she remarked (Except perhaps the charming Nash Penfield. Laugh.), but Pops had to do it this way to protect me.

"But I couldn't help but note that Patsy didn't even have the right to live at the property, which Aunt Queen did. I kept quiet about it. Patsy would never know. And I certainly wasn't going to put her out on the porch with her bags packed.

"Besides, with her high monthly income—some half a million—she wasn't likely to be around much.

"What funded all of our trusts were enormous investments in such diversified instruments as railroads, international shipping, worldwide banking, precious metals and gems, foreign currencies, U.S. Treasury bills, pharmaceutical companies, mutual funds of every imaginable name and description and random stocks of all kinds, from the most conservative to the most speculative, the entire holding administered by the investment firm of Mayfair and Mayfair, in New Orleans, an arm of the law firm of Mayfair and Mayfair, which managed only a handful of very select private fortunes.

"It was quite impossible to find anyone superior to Mayfair and Mayfair when it came to investing, and it was also impossible to solicit their services today. The deal had been struck with

them in 1880 between Manfred Blackwood and Julien Mayfair. And nothing but good luck and high profits had followed down to the present time.

"Since I was in love with Mona Mayfair, all this made a very favorable impression on me. But in the main it was over my head. I had always known I was well-off, and how well-off had never been a matter of concern.

"Now, when all this was complete and done, came the biggest shocker. Pops had confided to his lawyer something of which we didn't even dream. But before we were asked to hear it, Jasmine, Clem and Lolly were invited to excuse themselves.

"Aunt Queen, on what instinct I'm not sure, asked Jasmine to remain. Lolly and Clem seemed unperturbed by this and went out immediately to sit in the parlor. Jasmine moved closer to me as though to protect me from whatever was coming.

"Our lawyer, Grady Breen, laid aside the many documents he had before him and started to speak to us with a note of sympathy in his voice that seemed genuine.

" 'Thomas Blackwood' (this was Pops) 'confided in me a secret before he died,' he said, 'and he made a verbal request of me as to this secret, that I advise you of it and ask of you that you do right by it. Now, as you may or may not know, there is a young lady in the backwoods hereabouts, name of Terry Sue, who has about five or six children.' He glanced at his watch. 'Probably six children.'

" 'Who on earth hasn't heard of Terry Sue?' asked Aunt Queen with a faint smile. 'I'm ashamed to say every Shed Man on the property knows Terry Sue. She just had another baby—.' Now Aunt Queen looked at her watch. 'Didn't she? Yes, I believe she did.'

" 'Well, yes, she did,' said Grady, slipping off his wire-rimmed glasses and sitting back. 'And it's a well-known fact that Terry Sue is one beautiful young woman, and a young woman who likes to have babies. But it's not that new baby that I want to discuss now. It seems that Terry Sue had a child by Pops about nine years ago.'

" 'That's impossible!' I said. 'He would never have been unfaithful to Sweetheart!'

" 'It wasn't a thing he was proud of, Quinn,' said Grady. 'Indeed, he was not proud of it, and he was deeply concerned that the rumors about it would never disturb his family.'

" 'I don't believe it,' I said again.

" 'DNA has proved it, Quinn,' said Grady. 'And Terry Sue of course has always known it, and out of affection for Sweetheart, for whom Terry Sue did baking, you know—.'

" 'Those big Virginia hams,' I said. 'She'd soak them and scrub them and bake them.'

" 'What tenderness,' said Aunt Queen. 'Seems she soaked and scrubbed something else. But Grady, you have a point to make with this revelation, don't you, dear fellow?'

" 'Indeed, I do, Miss Queen,' said Grady. 'Pops was in the habit of taking an envelope of cash over there to Terry Sue every week or so, and though whatever man she's with tends to run off the old ones, no one was ever tempted to run off Pops with his envelope. It was about five

hundred a week that he gave her. And this keeps the boy in a good Catholic school—St. Joseph's over in Mapleville—and that was the one term exacted for it, as far as I know. The boy's nine years old now, I believe. He's in the fourth grade.'

" 'We'll continue this, of course,' said Aunt Queen. 'Can we see this child?'

" 'I recommend you do,' said Grady, 'because he's a beautiful boy, handsome as you, Quinn, and he's bright too, and Terry Sue, for all her faults, is trying to bring him up right. His name is Tommy. One thing that might help, if you'll take my suggestion. Now Pops never would but …'

" 'But what is it?' I asked. I was flabbergasted by all this.

" 'Give her enough money to send all those children of hers to good schools,' said Grady. 'Equalize things, you know what I mean? If you take toys or video games or what have you out there, take it for all the children.'

" 'I see, yes, I understand,' said Aunt Queen. 'You'll have to give me a written report as to the size of the family and then we can arrange …'

" 'No, I wouldn't do it in writing, Miss Queen,' said Grady. 'I wouldn't put anything in writing at all. There's five little ones out there now, no, six as of this morning, and the latest boyfriend is a piece of trash, pure trailer trash, I should say, and in fact they do live in a trailer, the whole gang, and such a trailer you wouldn't believe, and there are the proverbial rusting cars up on blocks in the yard, it's just a classical situation out there, a regular motion picture set—.'

" 'Cut to the chase, my man,' said Aunt Queen.

" 'But there is that little boy whose father was rich, and he's growing up out there and Terry Sue is doing the best she can, and this new baby, this new baby makes six, I figure. I'll take the envelopes of cash for you, that much I can do, but don't put anything in writing.'

"Of course Aunt Queen and I both understood this. But we were eager and curious about this little boy, still unbelieving though I was emotionally. A little brother, no, a little uncle, named Tommy and with Blackwood genes in him, and maybe a resemblance to the many portraits all over the household.

"It being agreed that we were finished, Aunt Queen had risen and so had Jasmine, who had remained subdued throughout, and I was still sitting there, deeply preoccupied.

" 'Does the little boy know?' I asked.

" 'I'm not sure,' said Grady. He looked to Aunt Queen. 'You and I can discuss this further.'

" 'Oh, indeed, we should; we're talking about a family of six children living in one trailer. Good Lord, and she's so beautiful. The least I could do would be to purchase the good woman a decent house, if it wouldn't offend the pride of anyone squeezed into the trailer.'

" 'How come I never heard of her?' I asked. And to my bewilderment, they all went into peals of laughter.

" 'Then we'd have double trouble, wouldn't we?' said Jasmine. 'Men just fall over flat at the feet of Terry Sue.'

“ ‘Well something stands up straight in those circumstances,’ said Aunt Queen.

“ ‘There’s one last thing I should say,’ said Grady, flushed with merriment, ‘and I am taking a bit of responsibility here.’

“ ‘Out with it, man,’ said Aunt Queen gently. She didn’t much care for standing in her spike heels and sat down again.

“ ‘The man that’s living with Terry Sue now,’ said Grady. ‘Sometimes he takes out his gun and waves it at the children.’

“We were aghast.

“ ‘And he did fling little Tommy up against the gas heater and burn his hand pretty badly.’

“ ‘And you mean to tell me,’ said Aunt Queen, ‘that Pops knew of this sort of thing and did nothing about it?’

“ ‘Pops tried to be an influence out there,’ said Grady, ‘but when you’re dealing with the likes of Terry Sue, it’s pretty much hopeless. Now she herself would never raise her hand to those children, but then these men come in and she has to put food on the table.’

“ ‘Don’t tell me another word,’ said Aunt Queen. ‘I have to go home and think what to do about it.’

“I shook my head.

“Little Tommy? A son living in a trailer.

A gloom had come on me, a feeling of unrest, and I knew it was as much from lack of sleep as it was from learning all this and how rich Pops was, and thinking, though I didn’t want to think of it, of those terrible arguments he would have with Patsy when she begged for money.

“Why, he could have set up the band. He could have bought the van. He could have hired the pickers. He could have given her a chance. And as it was, she begged and cursed and fought for every dime, and what did he do, this man whom I had so loved? What did he do with his powerful resources? He spent his days working on Blackwood Farm like a hired hand. He planted flower beds.

“And there was this child, this little boy, Tommy, no less, named after Pops, living on a pittance in the backwoods, with a passel of brothers and sisters in a trailer, a little boy with a psychotic stepfather.

“How had Pops seen his life? What had he wanted from it? My life had to be more. It had to be much, much greater. I would go mad if my life weren’t more. I felt pursued by the pressure of life itself. I felt frantic.

“ ‘What’s his full name?’ I asked. ‘You can tell me, can’t you?’

“ ‘Please do tell us his full name,’ asked Aunt Queen with a decisive nod.

“ ‘Tommy Harrison,’ said Grady. ‘Harrison is Terry Sue’s last name. I believe the child is illegitimate. In fact, I know the child is illegitimate.’

“My mood grew even darker. Who was I to judge Pops, I thought. Who was I to judge the man

who had just left me so much wealth and who might have done otherwise? Who was I to judge him that he had left little Tommy Harrison in such a situation? But it weighed on me. And it weighed on me that Patsy's character had perhaps been shaped by her lifelong struggle against a man who did not believe in her.

"Our farewells were being exchanged.

"I had to come to the surface. And off we went to lunch with Nash at Blackwood Manor.

"As we came out of the office Goblin appeared, attired as I was, my double again, but dour as he had been in the hospital, though not sneering, only solemn if not sad. He walked beside me to the car, and I felt that he knew my sadness, my disillusionment, and I turned to him and put my arm around him and he felt firm and good.

" 'It's changing, Quinn,' he said to me.

" 'No, old buddy, it can't change,' I said in his ear.

"But I knew he was right. I had things to do now. Places to go. And people to meet."

23

“What brought me out of my daze about the newfound uncle and Pops’ wealth was the view of all the old wicker, painted white and grouped on the side flagstone terrace to the right of Blackwood Manor, just as it had been in my dreams of Rebecca. This was furniture I’d requisitioned from the attic, but the task of restoration had been completed while I lay in the hospital, and I marveled now to see the gathering of couches and chairs just as it had been when Rebecca served me her mythical coffee.

“ ‘Mona’s going to understand,’ I murmured aloud, ‘and that man, that kindly man, Stirling Oliver, he’ll understand, and then there’s Nash, Nash who seemed as great and kind as a teacher could be, Nash who gave me hope that I would get through this strange time with some equanimity.’

“But when he entered the front hall I was stunned to see a pile of luggage by the door, and Nash, in a blue suit and tie, with a hand out for my shoulder.

“ ‘I can’t stay, Quinn, but I must talk to your Aunt Queen before I talk to you. Let me have those moments with her now.’

“I was devastated. ‘No,’ I said, ‘you have to tell me. It’s what I said, wasn’t it, all the things I told you, you think I’m insane, and you think it’s going to be like this always, but I swear—.’

“ ‘No, Quinn, I don’t think you’re insane,’ he said. ‘But understand I must leave. Now let me speak with Miss Queen alone. I promise I won’t leave without telling you.’

“I let them go into the front parlor together, and then I went into the kitchen for lunch, where Jasmine was just telling Big Ramona that they were rich. I hated to break up their happiness with my glum looks and I blamed it all on hunger. Besides, Jasmine had always been rich and so was Big Ramona. They just never wanted to leave Blackwood Manor, everybody knew.

“And since one thing I could always do was eat, I devoured a platter of Sunday chicken and dumplings.

“Finally, I could resist the suspense no longer. I went to the parlor door, and Aunt Queen beckoned for me.

“ ‘Now darling, Nash is under the impression that you’ll be disturbed in time by the fact that he hasn’t so much chosen a bachelor’s life as been rather predisposed to it.’

“ ‘I have it all in a letter here, Quinn,’ said Nash in his kindly but authoritative manner.

“ ‘Are you telling me you’re gay?’ I asked.

“Aunt Queen was shocked.

“ ‘Well, to be frank,’ said Nash, ‘that’s exactly what I intended to tell you.’

“ ‘I knew that last night,’ I said. ‘Oh, don’t worry that you gave it away with some obvious gesture or mannerism. You didn’t. I just sensed it because I’m probably that way myself; at least, I’m bisexual, I have no doubt of that.’

“I was greeted by a stunned silence from Nash, and from Aunt Queen a low pleasant laughter. Of course I’d just made a little confession that might have hurt her, but I was very sure Nash would not be hurt at all.

“ ‘Oh my precocious one,’ she said. ‘You never fail to charm me. Bisexual is it, how Byronic and charming. Doesn’t that double one’s chances for love? I’m so delighted.’

“Nash continued to stare at me as if he could think of nothing whatsoever to say, and then I realized what had happened.

“Nash had resigned his post not because he was gay; he’d known he was gay long before he ever came here. He’d resigned his post because of what he’d seen in me and what I’d told him about my own predilections! Oh, it was so perfectly obvious and I’d been such a dolt not to catch on. I should have let him off the hook right away.

“ ‘Look, Nash,’ I said, ‘you’ve got to stay. You want to stay and I want you to stay. Now let’s just take a vow that nothing erotic will ever pass between us. That it’s, you know, inappropriate. You’ll become the perfect teacher for me because I don’t have to hide anything from you.’

“ ‘Now that’s a potent argument,’ said Aunt Queen, ‘no pun intended. I do mean, really Nash, Quinn has a point there.’ She made a pleasant airy laugh. ‘Good Lord, in schools all over this country gay men and women make excellent and sympathetic teachers. The whole issue is settled.’ She rose. ‘Nash Penfield, you must unpack your bags, at least until we leave for New York, and Quinn, you have to get some sleep. Now everything’s settled until suppertime.’

“Nash still seemed to be in a state of shock, but I shook his hand and elicited a wide-eyed and softly murmured statement that he would stay, and, not daring to take him in my arms, I headed up to my room to get three hundred dollars out of my bureau (I always had some money there) and to make certain that I had on the best suit of clothes I owned and the lucky Versace tie, which I had not worn to meet with our lawyer.

“As I came downstairs I felt something pull at me; I don’t mean it was the hand of Goblin so much as it was a feeling or a mass of feelings. I had gone without sleep a long long time. And what I thought of now was Rebecca. In fact, it seemed for a moment Rebecca was with me, and then she wasn’t.

Little redheaded bitch … black bitch!

“When I reached the side lawn I walked slowly over the flagstone terrace and through the new arrangement of wicker, and I had the feeling that Rebecca was very near. Rebecca was waiting

for me to fall asleep. Rebecca was waiting to talk to me. Yes, I had been on this very couch with her, and she had sat on that chair, and the coffee had been on this table. A dizziness came and went as it had that day in the swamp, but I knew I had to fight it. *A life for my life. A death for my death …*

" 'What did you say?' I asked. 'A life for a life?' Who was I talking to? I battled the dizziness. 'Murderous ghost, get away from me!' I whispered.

"What was I doing out here on the side lawn? So they had refurbished the wicker as I told them to do.

"I had to be gone. I headed for the shed.

"And within minutes I was rolling out in Sweetheart's old Mercedes 450 sedan, the car I had always much admired, though I think it was as old as I was.

"I was on the highway in no time and flying towards Mona Mayfair. But there was time to swing by the florist on St. Charles and Third and buy Mona a beautiful bouquet of long-stemmed roses.

"Then I drove to my final destination: First and Chestnut, riverside downtown corner. Of course the house wasn't near the river. The river was a world away. The expression was just a way of orienting oneself in New Orleans.

"The house was quietly fabulous. It didn't have the arrogant splendor of Blackwood Manor. Rather it was a Greek Revival town house with a side-hall door, four columns up and down, its stucco walls painted a twilight lavender, and beyond to the far right a partially concealed side garden. The whole mansion was set about six steps off the ground and the steps were white marble.

"I parked the car across the intersection and I made the diagonal now on legs that didn't feel, they just guided, and with the huge bouquet in my arms, breathless to offer it to her.

"The iron fence wasn't high and there was the doorbell. I debated. What would I say to the person who answered? Mona, I'm desperate to see Mona.

"But I didn't have to face this complexity. One half second after I appeared at the gate, the big white front door opened, and out she came, quickly closing the door behind her and rushing down the steps to the gate. She had a key for it and turned it quickly, and then we stood facing each other outside the bounds of the fence and I thought I was dying.

"She was about one hundred times more lovely than I remembered her. Her green eyes were much larger and she had a naturally rouged mouth that I wanted to kiss immediately. Her hair was clear red, and to cap it off she wore an exquisite white cotton shirt, unbuttoned way low, and skintight white pants that showed off her small rounded thighs beautifully. I was even in love with her toes. She had on thick sandals and I could see all her red toenails. I adored her.

" 'My God, Mona,' I said, and I took the plunge, covering her mouth with mine and grabbing for her tiny wrists, but she broke away gently and said,

“ ‘Where’s your car, Quinn? We have to get out of here quick.’

“We ran across the street like newlyweds running from a rice storm. We were driving out First Street towards the river in a twinkling.

“ ‘So where can we go? Oh, God, I don’t know where we can go,’ I said.

“ ‘I do,’ she answered. ‘You know how to get to the Quarter?’

“ ‘Absolutely.’

“She gave me an address. ‘The LaFrenière Cottages,’ she said. ‘I called them this morning.’

“ ‘But how did you know I’d come? I mean I’m thrilled that you called them, but how did you know?’

“ ‘I’m a witch,’ she said. ‘I knew when you left Blackwood Farm just like I know that Goblin’s in the car with us. He’s right behind you. You don’t even know it, do you? But I didn’t mean that. I meant only, I wanted you to come.’

“ ‘You put a spell on me,’ I said. ‘I haven’t slept since I saw you last, and half my night’s ravings have been about you and wanting to come to you.’ I could hardly keep my eyes on the road. ‘Only lawyers and wills have kept me from you, tales of infidelity and orphan children and roaming in ghostly furniture and forging alliances as strong as the one I mean to forge with you.’

“ ‘God, you’ve got some vocabulary,’ she answered. ‘Or maybe it’s just your delivery. It’s meant that you should come to me. I’m Ophelia always, floating in the flowery stream. I need your rushing poetry. Can you drive if I unzip your pants!’

“ ‘No, don’t do that. We’ll have a wreck. I think all this is a hallucination.’

“ ‘No, it’s not. Did you bring any condoms?’

“ ‘God, no,’ I said. We had reached Canal Street. I knew where the LaFrenière Cottages were. Lynelle and I had eaten three times in their tasty little French bistro. ‘Mona, Mona, Mona,’ I said. ‘We have to get condoms! Where?’

“ ‘No, we don’t,’ she said. ‘I have tons of them in my purse.’ ”

24

“The LaFreniere cottages were nestled around a central brick courtyard crowded with the de rigueur palmetto and banana trees, and in the center of the courtyard was a wishing well that may once have served some purpose. Now it was merely decorative, and people had taken to pitching all manner of change into it.

“Mona handled our check-in as if it were nothing, even telling me to put away my money, the bill would go to her family.

“When I protested she whispered, ‘Show your strength when we get in bed.’

“And off we went, into the little flag-paved cottage, to do just that, in a modern pewter ironwork bed with an enchanting canopy of metal leaves and grapes, and a light breezy fabric wound loosely around its four corners.

“As soon as the door was latched we both stripped off our clothes with the utter abandon of beasts, and when I beheld her naked, when I saw the pinkness of her nipples and the little blaze of red hair between her legs, I went appropriately crazy.

“It was Mona who helped me on with the condom and Mona who had the presence of mind to pull down the covers, so that we didn’t stain them, and finally they wound up on the floor as we went at it like little jungle animals.

“Whatever was going on with my life, I figured, I had fulfilled one of my wildest dreams, no matter that it was newborn, it was wild and from the heart and I would never never forget it. I would never forget Mona’s face as she blushed with the spasm that sent me into the final explosion of pure nirvana.

“When it was over we lay together, embraced, warm, contented and kissing each other playfully and gently.

“ ‘Oh, thank God,’ she whispered into my ear. She helped me with the soiled condom. She went for the towel to clean me off. She kissed me again and she said, ‘I wanted to put my mouth on it. Come, let me wash you in the bathroom and then I’ll do it.’

“I protested gallantly. I required no such sacrificial adoration!

“ ‘Tarquin, I want to!’ she said. ‘I wanted to do it in the car. I just had an overwhelming desire to do it. And I never got to do it. Come on, out of bed!’ and I was led like a slave into the tiled bath where she performed the arousing ablutions and then we were back amid the swirled

sheets, only she had her mouth on my cock, stroking it hard, fast, and licking at the tip, and then I died when I came. All strength, all energy, all dreams went out of me.

" 'Nobody's ever done that before?' she purred in my ear as we lay there.

" 'No,' I said. It was all I could do to speak. 'Could we sleep, just like this, snuggled up together?'

"In answer I felt the warm weight of the covers and then her cool arm against my back and her lips kissing my eyes. There was a moist heat coming from her breasts and from between her legs. And the breeze of the air conditioner, chilling down the room, made the nestling all the more wonderful.

" 'Tarquin, you are one beautiful boy,' she whispered. 'And your ghost is here, and he's watching us.'

" 'Go away, Goblin,' I said. 'Leave me now, or I mean it, I won't speak to you for the longest time, I swear it.' Then I turned over and looked around the room. 'Can you see him?' I asked her.

" 'No,' she said. 'He's gone.' She lay back on the pillows next to me. 'I am Ophelia once again,' she said. 'I am floating in the water, with only "nettles, daisies and long purples" to hold me up, and I will never sink to "muddy death." You can't imagine how it is with me.'

" 'How so?' I asked. 'I see you borne along forever, vital, precious, oh, so sweet—.' I tried to stay awake, to listen to her.

" 'Go on, sleep. Men want to sleep when it's over. Women want to talk, at least sometimes. I am Ophelia drifting in "the weeping brook," so light, so sure, "or like a creature native and endued unto that element." They won't find me till tonight, and maybe not even then. I tip these hotels pretty high, I think I may have them won over.'

" 'You mean you've done this before? You've come here with others?' Now I was wide awake. I rose up and propped myself on my elbow.

" 'Tarquin, I have a huge family,' she said, looking at me, her hair exquisitely mussed on the pillow. 'And one time it was my goal to be intimate with every one of my cousins. I succeeded with more than I can count without the aid of a computer. Of course it wasn't always in a hotel. It was more often in the cemetery at night—.'

" 'The cemetery!' I said. 'You're serious?'

" 'You have to understand that my life isn't normal. Most Mayfairs don't seek for a normal life. But my life isn't even normal for a Mayfair. And this goal, this goal of sleeping with all my cousins, it's been over for some time.' Her eyes looked suddenly sad, and she looked up at me imploringly. 'But yeah, I've been here, I have to confess, I have christened this room before with my cousin Pierce, but it doesn't matter, Tarquin, it's all new with you, that's what matters. And I was never Ophelia with Pierce. I'm going to marry Pierce but I'll never be Ophelia.'

" 'You can't marry Pierce, you have to marry me. My life's not normal either, Mona,' I said. 'You have no idea how strange it is and you and I are no doubt meant for each other.'

“ ‘Oh, yes, I do. I know your ghost goes everywhere with you. I know you lived all your life among adults. You have no real knowledge of children. That’s what Fr. Kev told me. At least that’s what I could drag out of him. I almost got Fr. Kev into bed, but in the final go-round he proved to be immovable. He’s what anybody would call a good priest, but he’s loosening up when it comes to gossip, though not, you understand, about anything he hears in the confessional.’

“Her eyes were so green that I could scarcely concentrate on what she was saying.

“ ‘And did he warn you off of me?’ I asked. ‘Did he tell you I was crazy?’

“She laughed a sweet laugh and she bit down on her lower lip as if she was thinking. ‘You’ve got it backwards. They’re out to protect you from me. Course they do want to keep me under lock and key. That’s why I was at the front door of the house waiting for you. I am now considered to be a raving slut. I had to see you before they did. And I’m not the only witch in the family.’

“ ‘Mona, what do you mean when you say “witch”? What are you talking about?’

“ ‘You mean you’ve never heard of us?’

“ ‘Yes, but only good things—like Dr. Rowan’s dream of Mayfair Medical, and Fr. Kev and how he came South to revisit the Irish Channel where he was born, that sort of thing. We go to St. Mary’s Assumption Church. We see Fr. Kev all the time.’

“ ‘I’ll tell you why Fr. Kevin came South,’ she said. ‘He came South because we needed him. Oh, there’s so much I wish I could tell you, but I can’t. And when I saw you in the Grand Luminière, when I saw you talking to Goblin and embracing Goblin, I thought, God, you’ve answered my prayer, you’ve given me someone with secrets! Only now I realize it doesn’t change things with me. It can’t. Because I can’t tell you everything.’

“She began to cry.

“ ‘Mona, you can tell me! Listen, you can confide in me completely.’ I kissed her tears. ‘Don’t cry, Mona,’ I pleaded. ‘I can’t stand it, seeing you cry.’

“ ‘I don’t doubt you, Quinn,’ she said. She sat up in the bed, and I sat with her. ‘I’m not sure Ophelia actually cries in the play, does she? Maybe crying is what keeps people from going mad. It’s just that there are things that can’t be told,’ she went on, ‘and there are things that nobody can do anything about.’

“ ‘It’s always been my way to tell,’ I said. ‘That’s why you saw me embracing Goblin. It would have been very easy at a certain age for me to stop embracing Goblin. I could have maybe sent Goblin away to wherever he came from. But I never kept him a secret. There is a ghost who haunts me too, and then there is a stranger, the man who beat me up and put me in Mayfair Medical. I just let these things come out. I believe we have to do that.’

“I handed her the paper tissues from the bedside table. I took another and wiped at her tears.

“ ‘I know I’m going to marry you, Mona,’ I said suddenly. ‘I know it. I know it’s my destiny.’

“ ‘Quinn,’ she said, wiping her eyes, ‘that isn’t going to happen. We can have a little while, talk to each other, be with each other like this, but we can’t ever really be together.’

“ ‘But why?’ I demanded. I knew that if I lost her I would regret it always. I thought that Goblin knew it. That’s why Goblin had gone away with no argument. He knew this was too strong, and he hadn’t said a word to me.

“Yet I remembered what Goblin could do now. Goblin could break these windows if he wanted. Goblin had told me that he liked being angry. Could I tell Mona that? Should I tell anyone that? I felt a twinge of my panic, and I hated it as unmanly. With Mona, I wanted to be manly.

“ ‘Come back with me to Blackwood Manor,’ I said. ‘It’s where I live. We can stay in my room, or I’ll put you in my Pops’ bedroom if you want the proprieties. Pops just died. The room’s all cleaned and ready. He didn’t die in the room. They packaged up his personal things right away. Where’s the phone? I’ll tell them to get it ready. Give me your size of clothes. Jasmine will go to Wal-Mart and get whatever you need to tide you over.’

“ ‘God, you’re as mad as one of us,’ she said with honest amazement. ‘I thought we Mayfairs were the only ones who did things like that.’

“ ‘Just come. Nobody in my house is going to mess with us. My Aunt Queen may have some sage advice. She’s pushing seventy-nine, or so she says; sage advice is to be expected. And I have a new private teacher, Nash, but he’s a perfect gentleman.’

“ ‘So you don’t go to school, either,’ she said. ‘Cool!’

“ ‘No, never have, going to school never worked with Goblin.’

“I flew into action. She watched with continued amazement as I spoke on the phone to Jasmine. Petite everything, white shirts, pants, cotton underwear, a few toiletries, and away we went.

“As soon as I got behind the wheel I realized I had been awake for over thirty-six hours. I began to laugh at the way everything looked, and at the way everything was working.

“ ‘Here, let me drive,’ she said.

“I was glad to give in.

“She took over like a pro and off we sped, catapulting out of the narrow French Quarter streets and on to the interstate.

“I couldn’t take my eyes off her, it was positively sexy the way she drove, that somebody so delectable could drive, and when she shot those green-eyed glances at me I felt weak and overjoyed, and in that mood, that crazy, elated mood, I spoke to Goblin.

“ ‘I love her, old boy, you understand, don’t you?’

“I looked into the backseat and there he was, gazing at me with that cold contemptuous expression he had adopted in the hospital. It took the breath out of me. And then came his dark monotone voice:

“ ‘Yes, and I enjoyed her very much too, Tarquin.’

“ ‘You’re lying, you bastard!’ I said. I wanted to choke him. ‘How dare you say that to me? I would have felt you if you’d been that close! You think you can sneak inside me!’

“ ‘Oh, he was there,’ Mona said as she pushed the car past eighty-five miles an hour. ‘I could feel him.’ ”

25

“Aunt Queen and Jasmine didn’t let me down. Whatever Aunt Queen’s misgivings about Mona, she would not hurt Mona’s feelings. When we arrived, Aunt Queen, with open arms, welcomed Mona to the house, and when I announced that this was my future bride Aunt Queen received this information with sublime equanimity.

“Jasmine showed Mona up to Pops’ room, where all her new clothes were waiting for her, and then we went off to my room, where we would really be during this visit, and we had a scrumptious meal at this very table where you and I are sitting.

“I don’t remember what we actually ate. What I remember is that watching Mona eat was a trip, because I was so infatuated with her, and seeing her handle her knife and fork with such quick gestures and talk in an animated way the whole time made me more truly abandoned to her.

“I know what I am saying is crazy. But I was so in love with her. I had never known such feelings before, and for the time being they utterly erased the habitual panic I suffered, and they even took away my reasonable fear of the mysterious stranger, though I should add here that there were still plenty of armed security men around our house, even inside of it, and this did also give me some feeling of safety.

“Of course Aunt Queen wanted to see me alone, but I graciously declined. And when the lunch things were cleared away and Jasmine had polished up the table (and by the way, Jasmine was a stunner in a light navy blue suit and crisp white blouse), I was ready to lock the whole world outside if I could do it.

“ ‘Now you understand,’ Mona explained. ‘This cousin Pierce whom I’m probably going to marry is utterly boring, I mean this cousin is like a loaf of white bread, he has no paranormal powers whatsoever and he is a lawyer already in the firm of Mayfair and Mayfair, where his father, Ryan, is a partner, and Ryan, my beloved Ryan, he’s a loaf of white bread too, and their life is just a direct line to conformity and security.’

“ ‘Then why the hell do you keep saying you’re going to marry him?’ I asked.

“ ‘Because I love him,’ she said. ‘I’m not in love, no, I could never feel that way with him, but I know him and he’s beautiful to me—oh, not beautiful like you, not even tall like you, but beautiful in a calm kind of way, and with Pierce, I hate to say it, but with Pierce I’ll probably be

able to do what I want to do. I mean Pierce himself is not intense, and I have enough intensity for three people.'

" 'Exactly,' I said. 'So this is a safe marriage.'

" 'It's a Mayfair marriage,' she returned. 'And Mayfairs like me always marry other Mayfairs. Now it's a cinch that with his background and my background some of our children will be witches—.'

" 'There you go with that word again, Mona, what do you mean, "witches"? Does the whole family use that word? Does Fr. Kev use it?'

"She laughed the sweetest laugh. 'Yeah, the whole family does use it but that's probably on account of the Talamasca, and Aaron Lightner, a member of the Talamasca whom we all loved. We lost him. He died in a terrible accident. But Stirling is our friend now, and Stirling uses the word. You see, the Talamasca is this organization that for centuries watched our family without us ever knowing it. Well, no, that's not entirely true. Sometimes our ancestors knew it. But anyway, the Talamasca made what they call the File on the Mayfair Witches, and after we all read that material we had a better understanding of our history, and yeah, we do refer to some of us as witches.'

"I was too intrigued to put another question. She took a big gulp of her café au lait and went on talking.

"(Jasmine had left us a pot of coffee on a small candle warmer and the warm milk in a pitcher and plenty of sugar, and that was a good thing because we kept drinking it and the littleness of the china cups was annoying.)

" 'A witch to us is what a witch is to the Talamasca,' said Mona. 'It's a human being who can see and command spirits. You're born a witch and Stirling Oliver has the theory that it has its origins in the physical brain, rather like a person's ability to see fine gradations of color, for instance. But because we can't study those receptors in the brain, because they can't be isolated by science, it sounds mysterious.'

" 'In other words,' I said, 'Stirling thinks that someday one will be able to diagnose a witch in someone like you or me?'

" 'Exactly,' said Mona, 'and Rowan believes this too, and she is carrying out extensive research on this at Mayfair Medical. She has her own lab and she does pretty much what she pleases. I don't want to make her sound like Dr. Frankenstein. What I mean is the Mayfair legacy is so big that she doesn't need grant money, and so she doesn't have to answer to anyone. And she does secret and mysterious research. God only knows all Rowan's projects. I wish I knew what she was up to.'

" 'But what can she do if she can't cut into actual brain tissue?' I asked.

"Mona explained all the routine brain tests that could be run, and I explained that I had been through these and no abnormality had been found.

“ ‘I get it,’ she said, ‘but Rowan is searching with us, she’s searching in ways that aren’t routine.’ Her face suddenly went dark, and she shook her head. ‘There are other tests, blood tests on those of us who have abnormal genes. Yeah, abnormal genes, that’s how you’d put it. Because you see, some of us do. That’s why my marriage to Pierce will almost certainly happen. He doesn’t have the abnormal genes but I do. So it’s safe for me to marry Pierce. He’s got the clean bill of health. But I wonder sometimes … maybe I shouldn’t marry at all.’

“ ‘But I have safe genes, don’t I?’ I insisted. ‘Why not forget utterly and totally about Pierce and marry me?’

“She stared at me for a long moment.

“ ‘What is it, Mona?’ I asked.

“ ‘Nothing. I was just thinking of what it would be like to be married to you. It doesn’t much matter about the clean bill of health. We’d surely have witch children. But I’m not too certain it would matter. But Quinn, you have to give up on that idea. It’s just not going to happen. Besides, I’m only fifteen years old, Quinn.’

“ ‘Fifteen!’ I was amazed. ‘Well, I’m eighteen,’ I said. ‘We’re both precocious. Our children will be geniuses.’

“ ‘Yeah, no doubt of that,’ she said. ‘And they’d have private teachers like I do now, and they’d travel the world.’

“ ‘We could travel the world with my Aunt Queen,’ I said, ‘and with Nash, and he would tell us about all the countries we would be visiting.’

“She had the most serene smile. ‘It would be a dream,’ she said. ‘I’ve been to Europe—this last year I went all over with Ryan and Pierce—Ryan is Pierce’s father. Ryan is the big lawyer in our lives, though we have a whole family firm of them actually. But anyway, what was I saying? Europe. I could go again and again and again.’

“ ‘Oh, think of it, Mona. You have your passport already, and I have mine. We could just steal you away. Aunt Queen’s been pleading with me to go!’

“ ‘Your Aunt Queen would never let you steal me,’ she laughed. ‘I can see she has a venturesome spirit, but she wouldn’t agree to kidnapping. Besides, the family would just come after me.’

“ ‘Would they really?’ I asked. ‘But why, Mona? You speak of your family as though it’s a giant prison.’

“ ‘No, Quinn,’ she said, ‘it’s really like a giant garden, but there are garden walls that separate us from the rest of the world.’ She was getting abysmally sad. ‘I’m going to cry again and I totally and egregiously hate it.’

“ ‘No, don’t cry,’ I said. I got the box of tissue for her and set it down before her. ‘I totally can’t bear the thought of you shedding one tear and if you do I’ll swallow it, or I’ll dry your eyes with these. Now tell me why they wouldn’t let you go to Europe. I mean we’d have Aunt Queen

as the perfect chaperone.'

" 'Quinn, I'm not just an ordinary Mayfair as I told you. I'm not just an ordinary witch. I'm what they call the Designée of the Legacy. And the Legacy is something that dates back hundreds of years. It's a great fortune that is inherited by a new woman in each generation.'

" 'How big a fortune?'

" 'It's in the billions,' she replied. 'That's why it could endow Mayfair Medical, and right now the Heiress is Rowan Mayfair. But Rowan can't have a child and I've already been named to succeed Rowan.'

" 'I see. They're grooming you and guarding you for the day when you have to take over.'

" 'Precisely,' she answered. 'That's why they want me to stop acting wild and sleeping with all my cousins. Since we got back from Europe I've listened pretty much. I don't know what it is with me and sex. I just love it. But you get the idea. I have to occupy a position of honor, if that doesn't sound too egregious. That's why they wanted me to go to Europe, to be educated and cultured and—.'

"Again her face went dark, and this time the tears came up to stand in her eyes.

" 'Mona, tell me,' I pleaded.

"She shook her head. 'Something bad happened to me,' she said. Her voice was breaking.

"I got up and I led her away from the table. I shoved back the bedclothes and the two of us kicked off our shoes and we climbed in against the nest of down pillows. Never had I loved my fancy bed so much as when I was lying under that baldachin over there with her. And you have to picture that we were fully clothed, except for the fact that when I started kissing her I opened her blouse all the way down, feeling her breasts, but she didn't mind.

"But then we tapered off, principally because I was so tired, and then I brought her back to the subject.

" 'Something bad happened?' I asked her. 'Can you tell me what it was?'

"For a long time she was silent and then she started to cry again.

" 'Mona, if anybody hurt you, I'll hurt them,' I said. 'I mean it. Goblin could even—. Tell me what happened.'

" 'I had a child,' she said in a hoarse whisper.

"I said nothing but I could see that she wanted to go on.

" 'I had a child,' she said, 'and it wasn't what anyone would call a normal child. It was … it was different. Very precocious, yes, and perhaps what is best called a mutation. I loved it with my whole soul, it was a beautiful child. But … it was taken away.' She paused, then went on. 'It was taken far away, and I just can't come back from that. I can't stop thinking about that.'

" 'You mean they made you give up your baby! A family that size with all that money.' I was appalled.

" 'No.' She shook her head. 'It wasn't like that. It wasn't the family. Let's just say that the

child was taken away, and I don't know what happened to it. It wasn't the family's doing.'

" 'The father's doing?' I asked.

" 'No. I told you this was something terrible. I can't tell you all of it. I can only say that at any time I might hear about that child.' She chose her words carefully. 'That child might be returned to me. Some news might come, good news or bad news. But for now there's nothing but silence.'

" 'Do you know where the child is?' I asked. 'Mona, I'll go get the child! I'll bring it back.'

" 'Quinn, you're so strong, so confident,' she said. 'It's really totally marvelous just being with you. But no, I don't know where the child is. I think the child is in England. But I don't know. And when we were in Europe I was sort of looking for it. There's no word from the man that took it.'

" 'Mona, this is ghastly.'

" 'No,' she said, shaking her head, the teardrops hanging in her lashes, 'it's not the way it sounds. The man was a loving man, and the child—the child was exceptional.' Her voice broke. 'I didn't want to give it up, but I had to. It had to go with this loving man, this gentle man that could care for it.'

"I was too perplexed to ask a sensible question.

" 'If you have an inkling where this man is, then I'll go to him.'

"She shook her head. 'We used to know how to reach him. Rowan and Michael—those are my cousins and foster parents now, they knew the man very well. But now we don't.'

" 'Mona, let me protect you in this, let me go after this man and let me go after the baby.'

" 'Quinn, my family has tried to do it. They've used the resources of the Mayfair Legacy to try to find both the child and the man and they can't do it. I don't need your vow that you'll try. I don't want you even to think about trying. I only need you to listen to me. I only need your vow that you won't ever tell another human being what I told you.'

"I kissed her.

" 'I understand,' I said. 'We'll have other children, you and I.'

" 'Oh, that would be so lovely,' she said. 'So very lovely.'

"We snuggled down into the covers, taking off each other's clothes, button by button and zipper by zipper, and then we were naked where I had always slept so chaste with Little Ida or Big Ramona. I felt the bed was being properly christened, and I was happy.

"Then I slept.

"In my dream Rebecca came knocking on the door. It was as if I was awake, but I knew that I wasn't. And in the dream I told her she had to go away. I told her I had done all that I could do for her. We fought, she and I. We fought at the head of the staircase. She went wild against me, and I forced her down the stairs, telling her she had to leave Blackwood Manor, that she was dead and gone and that she had to accept it.

"She sat down on the last step and began to cry piteously.

“ ‘You can’t come anymore,’ I told her. ‘The Light’s waiting for you. God’s waiting for you. I believe in the Light.’

“The living room was full of mourners again, and I could hear the cadence of the Rosary rising like a tide, the Hail Mary, Full of Grace, and then I saw Virginia Lee sit up from her coffin again, her hands clasped, and at once she made her graceful ballet step to the floor, her skirts billowing, and she came to snatch up Rebecca, and together they were hurtling through the front door of the house, the two ghosts, Virginia Lee and Rebecca, and I heard Virginia Lee cry out, ‘You come again to trouble my house, do you? You bring me down from the Light!’

“Rebecca screamed. *A life for my life. A death for my death.*

“All was silence. I sat on the steps in the dream, wishing I could wake up and be back upstairs in bed where I belonged, but I couldn’t.

“*A life for my life,* she’d said. Did she want mine? Nothing I’d done had satisfied her. It wasn’t enough.

“Someone tapped me on the shoulder. I looked up. It was Virginia Lee, very lively and pretty, though she wore her funeral blue dress.

“ ‘Get away from this place, Tarquin,’ she said. Her voice had such tender resonance. ‘Go on, Tarquin, leave this place. There is an evil here. That evil wants you.’

“I woke, sitting up, covered with sweat, staring forward. I saw Goblin in the corner near the computer merely watching me.

“Mona slept soundly beside me.

“I got into the shower and when I saw Goblin’s shadow outside the glass I finished up and dried off and dressed quickly. He stood behind me looking at me in the mirror over my shoulder. His expression was not as mean as it had been before, and I prayed he couldn’t sense my apprehension. He didn’t seem as solid here, even with the moisture in the air, as he had been in New Orleans. I was grateful for that.

“ ‘You love Mona, too?’ I asked as if I meant it.

“ ‘Mona is good. Mona is strong,’ he said. ‘But Mona will hurt you.’

“ ‘I know,’ I said. ‘You hurt me when you’re unkind to me, when you say unkind things. We have to love each other.’

“ ‘You want to be with Mona alone,’ he said.

“ ‘Wouldn’t you if you were me?’ I asked. I turned around and faced him.

“I had never seen such a face of trouble on him as I saw then. I had stung him and I was sorry for it.

“ ‘I *am* you,’ he answered.”

26

“The late afternoon was heavenly. To be that in love, to know that frenzy of the heart—even now, young as I still am, I look back on it as something that was part of the innocence of childhood. That it could come again, I don’t even dream of, that I should ever know such consuming happiness is impossible.

“After Mona woke, had her bath and put on her fresh Wal-Mart white pants and shirt we went down to walk around Blackwood Farm, and it seemed our roaming is what kept me sane as I spilled out my soul to Mona. I told her all about Goblin, all about Lynelle, all about my strange life as I perceived it.

“She was an eager listener. Also she was charmed by the house and the long drive lined by the pecan trees. It didn’t seem vulgar or overdone to her. She said she saw a symmetry and harmony in everything.

“Yes, it was bigger and more overbearing than a Garden District house, she conceded, but she could see why Manfred Blackwood didn’t want to be constrained and so he had found his perfect spot in the country.

“ ‘Quinn,’ she said, ‘we live in houses that were built by people’s dreams, and we have to accept that. We have to revere the dream and realize that someday the house will go to others after us. These houses are personalities in our lives. They have their roles to play.’

“She looked at the big columns. She liked the feeling of the place.

“ ‘Even the house I grew up in,’ she said, ‘poor as it was, it was a huge Victorian on St. Charles Avenue. It was chock-full of ghosts and people. You know, I didn’t grow up rich. I was a poor kind of down-at-the-heel Mayfair when it comes right down to it. My parents were both spineless drunks. They gave their lives to the bottle. And now I’m the technical owner of a private plane and the designated heiress to billions of dollars. It makes me crazy sometimes, the switch, but there I go again talking about dreams, because I always dreamed I’d be the Designée of the Mayfair Legacy.’

“She started to look a little bit sad, which alarmed me.

“ ‘Someday I have to tell you all about our family,’ she said. ‘But right now I’m with you. Tell me about you.’

“I thought she was absolutely brilliant. I had never thought much about the kind of woman I’d

marry, if any, and now it seemed perfectly right that she be brilliant as well as beautiful. And her beauty, it was natural. She wore no lipstick or eyebrow pencil. She had come out of the shower pure and young. I was totally captivated.

"It was getting dusk. The sky was streaked with amethyst and burning gold. I took her down to the old cemetery. I explained to her how the West Ruby River fed our lonely two hundred acres of Sugar Devil Swamp.

"I told her about Sugar Devil Island and the Hermitage, about the strange inscription on the mausoleum and about the strange trespasser breaking into the house, and that it was his attack which got me taken to Mayfair Medical.

" 'Can we go to the island, Quinn?' she asked. 'Can you show me? I have to see this place for myself. How can I be Ophelia forever if I fear to travel ever-flowing streams?'

" 'Well, not now, my precious immortal Ophelia,' I said. 'It's getting dark and I'm not macho enough to be going into the swamp in the dark. But I can take you there in the day. You saw the security guys all around? We'll take two of them with us. That way if the stranger shows his face we can blast him.'

"She was very curious. She wanted to know more about the Hermitage and its circular structure. Had there been a stairs up to the cupola?

" 'Yes, there is, and you know I never went up there. It was a circular iron stairs, and I hardly took notice of it, and I'm sure if you go up there you can have a better view over the swamp to Blackwood Manor.'

" 'I just have to see it,' she said. 'It's too grandly mysterious. And what do you plan to do about the trespasser?'

" 'I'm moving him out!' I said. 'He's already in a rage that I burnt his books. Well, when I get back out there with my men we're throwing out his marble table and his golden chair. He'll find them sunk in the muck where he dumped the bodies.'

" 'What bodies?' She was amazed.

"I doubled back and told her that part—of how I'd first seen him in the moonlight, dumping the bodies. She was very intrigued.

" 'But this is a killer, this person,' she said.

" 'I'm not afraid of him,' I countered. 'And after what happened when he attacked me upstairs, I know that Goblin can and will protect me.'

"I glanced back at Goblin who was coming behind us at a distance. I nodded at him. *My brave companion.*

"She looked at the darkening purple sky. The cicadas were singing everywhere. It seemed the Earth was purring. 'Boy, I wish there was time for us to go out there,' she said.

"I laughed. 'Neither of us has the sense to be afraid!' I admitted. She began laughing and then both of us were laughing, unable to stop it. I put my arms around her finally and just held her,

happier than I'd ever been in my whole existence.

"We walked on together, but all I could think of was lying down with her on the grass and letting the gathering shadows be the bed curtains.

"I told her again that when we went out to the island tomorrow we'd take the armed guards. I had my thirty-eight. I asked if she knew how to shoot a gun. She said Yes, she'd been taught at a place called Gretna Gun by her cousin Pierce, just so she'd be able to protect herself if she ever had to. She was used to firing a three fifty-seven Magnum.

" 'This Pierce,' I said, 'I don't want to talk about him. The marriage plan is a dreadful miscarriage of fate. I feel like Romeo standing in the way of whatshisname.'

"She laughed in the most delightful manner. 'Oh, it's so good to be with you,' she said. 'And part of it is simply that you're not one of us.'

" 'You mean that I'm not a Mayfair?'

"She nodded. The tears were threatening. I put my arms around her and she laid her head on my chest and I could feel her crying.

" 'Mona, don't, please don't. Feel safe with me.'

" 'Oh, I do,' she said. 'I really do, but you know they're going to find me.'

" 'Then maybe we can just hide you behind those big columns,' I said. 'We can just bolt the door to my room and see if they can break it down.'

"She stopped. She was all right for the moment and she wiped her eyes with a paper tissue. She asked me to describe the stranger again, and I did, and she asked if he could have been some sort of ghost or spirit.

"It was the most surprising question. I had never thought of that.

" 'There are all kinds of ghosts, Tarquin,' she said. 'And they differ in the illusions they can create.'

" 'No, he wasn't a ghost,' I said. 'He was too outraged by the flying glass to be a ghost. And he couldn't see Goblin.'

"Goblin was still with us, trailing in a desultory fashion and unresponsive when I waved.

"Now, it was the time of day when I usually felt the panic most keenly, but I didn't feel it because I had to be strong for her, and frankly she just created some sustained excitement in me which had banished the panic and all my bad and sad thoughts.

"I told her about the phantoms I saw, here among the tombs. And how they didn't speak, and they seemed a coagulated mass, and we talked about the nature of ghosts in general.

"She said Stirling Oliver of the Talamasca was a kindhearted and profoundly honorable man, British to the core, like all the best of the Talamasca, and full of wonderful ideas about ghosts and spirits.

" 'Now, I don't know if there is such a thing as a true spirit,' she said as we were stepping respectfully among the gravestones and around the long-raised tombs. 'I tend to think that all

spirits are the ghosts of something, even if they lived so long ago in the flesh they don't remember it.'

" 'Goblin's a pure spirit,' I said. 'He's not the ghost of anyone.' I looked back to see Goblin some distance away, with his hands in the pockets of his jeans, just watching us. I was afraid to say too much about him, about the speed with which he was learning, about his more dangerous aspects.

"But I turned and I waved at him, just a friendly wave, and I told him telepathically that I loved him. He didn't acknowledge me but his face wasn't mean, and all of a sudden I realized that he was again wearing my lucky Versace tie. Why was he doing that? Why was he all dressed up and wearing that tie? Maybe it meant nothing.

"I think Mona saw this—my noticing him. Well, I'm sure she did. But she went on. 'You never know with a spirit,' she said. 'It could be the ghost of something that wasn't human.'

" 'How on earth is that possible, Mona?' I asked. 'You mean it would be the ghost of an animal?'

" 'I'm saying things exist in this world that look human but aren't human, and there's no real telling how many species of these there are. There are beings walking the Earth fully disguised as humans, deliberately fooling us. So when it comes to a spirit, you never know what you're dealing with. It could be something good and loving, like Goblin.' She glanced at him. In fact, she smiled at him. 'Or it could be the ghost of something dreadful that secretly despises humankind and wants to hurt it. But the main thing is to understand that all spirits have a kind of organization.'

" 'How do you mean?'

" 'I mean that even though they're invisible to most people, they have a perceivable form and a nucleus of sorts in which the brain and the heart reside together.'

" 'But how do you know?' I said. 'And how is that possible?'

" 'Well, first off,' she said, 'it's what Stirling believes and he's been studying ghosts his entire lifetime. That's why he's spending so much time of late with me. I see ghosts constantly. And it's also what Rowan believes, you know, my cousin Dr. Rowan Mayfair.'

" 'But where is this nucleus? And how is it that a ghost can appear and disappear?'

" 'Science hasn't caught up with it yet,' she said, 'that's what Rowan is always telling me. But we have definite ideas about it. The nucleus and the particles that make up a ghost are simply too small to be seen by us and the force field that organizes them can pass effortlessly through the molecules that we can see. Think of tiny insects and how simple it is for them to pass through hardware cloth. Think of water passing through cotton or silk. That's the way ghosts pass through walls. It's all there to be known someday but right now we don't know it.'

" 'Yes, I see what you mean, as to how the ghost comes and goes through matter, but how does it appear to us?'

“ ‘It draws particles of matter to itself magnetically and organizes them into the illusion. The illusion can be so strong that it looks and feels solid. But it’s always an illusion, and when the ghost wants to disappear, or has to disappear, the particles are diffused.’

“I was too entranced to argue with her. She took it very seriously, what she had to say, and all I had really were questions. But I knew that Goblin was listening too, and I would have been more frightened on that account if I hadn’t known she knew it also.

“ ‘Now, some ghosts,’ she said, ‘those that are really strong, can make themselves so solid that they’re visible not just to one or two receptive persons but to everybody. They’re *there,*’ she said. ‘And God only knows how many of those ghosts are walking around among us.’

“ ‘My God, what a concept,’ I said.

“ ‘Just think of it—something that looks human but it’s a ghost, it’s come back to have another go at life or something. But most of the time a ghost uses his organizing principles to appear to one receptive individual.’

“ ‘But how is it you and I both see Goblin?’ I asked.

“ ‘It must be that we have the same kinds of receptors,’ she said. ‘I’m sure we do. And some of the ghosts I see? You probably could see them also.’

“ ‘That’s why we have to get married, Mona,’ I said. ‘We’ll only be lonely for understanding if we marry other people. We’ll always remember this moment.’

“The comment startled her or in some milder way caught her off guard. Then she said a little testily:

“ ‘Quinn, stop talking about our wedding as if it’s something that’s going to happen. I told you. I’m going to marry Pierce. I have to marry Pierce. Now maybe we could have an affair afterwards, but I seriously don’t think so, I think Pierce would be way devastated. That’s the worst thing about marrying Pierce. When I marry him, my erotic adventures will be over.’

“ ‘That’s a wretched thing to look forward to. I hate this guy Pierce. Maybe I’ll kill him.’

“ ‘Don’t talk like that, he’s the sweetest Mayfair on the planet,’ she replied, ‘and he’ll take care of me. Oh, let’s not talk about Pierce. Sometimes I know Pierce deserves somebody better than me and there are so many unsullied virginal types in the family! Maybe you’re right about Pierce. I mean for Pierce’s own sake—. Now let’s get back to the question of ghosts.’

“ ‘Yes,’ I said, ‘explain to me how the nucleus of a ghost is formed, assuming there is one. And let Pierce have one of the virgins, I think that’s a fine idea.’

“ ‘Stirling says the nucleus is the soul, the soul that refused to move on when it was separated from its earthly body.’

“ ‘So the soul has matter to it!’

“ ‘Maybe more what we call electricity,’ she said, ‘or energy, at any rate. Let’s think of it that way, something infinitesimal that is organized energy. It’s all through our bodies when we’re alive, but it contracts to a nucleus when we die, and that nucleus should go into the Light, as we

well know. And instead of going out of our stratosphere, as it should when it disconnects from the body, it stays behind, earthbound, and generates for itself a spirit body, a body of energy imprinted by the shape of its lost human body, and that's how it acquires its characteristics as a ghost.'

" 'And you think that it can forget that it was ever human?'

" 'Oh, I think so definitely. There must be earthbound spirits which are a thousand years old. There's no ticking clock for them. There's no hunger. There's no thirst. Without us to make them focus and tighten, they simply drift. I'm not even certain what they see or know when they drift, but then along comes a person who can respond to them, and they begin to evolve as a ghost for that person.'

" 'And you call yourself a witch because you can see these spirits?'

" 'Yes, and because I can talk to them, but I can't just make them do what I want. I haven't experimented with that power. That's too dangerous a power. The whole subject is dangerous, Tarquin.' She lowered her voice and she made a sly glance with her eyes at Goblin. 'Goblin probably knows, don't you, Goblin?' she asked. 'He probably knows all of this.'

"I looked back at Goblin. Goblin's face was thoughtful. It had lost some of its meanness, and this relieved me somewhat.

" 'Mona, we have to be together, always,' I said. 'Who else will ever love me the way you can?'

"Goblin drew closer. I put my hand out to stop him.

" 'Be patient with me now, Goblin,' I said. 'It's a different kind of love.'

" 'I'd never seek to take your place, Goblin,' said Mona.

" 'But truly, Mona,' I addressed her again. 'Who else will ever love me the way you can?'

" 'What are you talking about?' she said. 'You're tall and gorgeous and you have the most honest blue eyes I've ever seen. You know it's really something when a man has both blue eyes and jet black hair, and that's what you've got. You're what girls call adorable.'

"Of course I loved hearing these compliments—I was very unsure of myself—but they only strengthened my hope that nothing could separate us.

" 'Marry me, Mona,' I said. 'I'm serious. You just have to.'

" 'I'm beginning to like the idea, but behave yourself,' she answered. 'Let's go on about ghosts and spirits. You need to know things. We were talking about earthbound spirits, how they fail to go into the Light.'

" 'Are you sure of the Light yourself, Mona?' I asked her.

" 'Well, you see, that's the very problem,' she answered. 'When these people die they aren't sure of it, and they may not recognize the Light for what it is. They may not trust it. They cling to the Earth; they cling to mortals whom they can still see and hear.'

" 'And so we have this theoretical spirit whose nucleus doesn't go into the Light,' I said, 'this

soul that drifts—.'

" 'Yes,' she said, 'and it can start a whole adventure for itself, especially if it finds a receptive person like you or me, somebody who can see it even when its organizing powers are still weak. Then of course we help it focus by noticing it and talking to it, and paying attention to it, and its organization becomes stronger and stronger.'

" 'But what about a spirit like Goblin? He's not a ghost. He doesn't know where he came from.'

"She shot me a meaningful glance that said: Be careful. 'Goblin is pure spirit then,' she replied, 'but spirits are probably organized in exactly the same way—they have the nucleus and then a kind of loose body, a force field of a body, and it's this force field they use, just like a ghost, to gather particles to appear to someone.'

"We walked on out of the cemetery and towards the landing. The swamp looked dark and treacherous already—full of deadly things that want to kill. An evening song came from it that meant death. I tried to ignore it. Mona seemed to like it, to like the evening.

" 'Quinn, if only you could talk to Stirling,' she said. 'I think he would have so much to tell you. You know, it's so easy with Stirling. For centuries the Talamasca has given shelter to people who see ghosts. They welcome people like you and me, and not for selfish reasons. When I was in England I went to their Motherhouse there, and I even visited the Motherhouse in Rome.'

" 'Sounds religious, rather like the Trappist monks or the Carmelites.'

" 'Well, they are sort of that way,' she answered, 'but they aren't religious. They're good without being religious. Sometimes it's hard for Fr. Kevin to accept but he's getting used to it. You know how it is with us Catholics. Anything supernatural that isn't from God just has to be evil. And here you have the Talamasca studying the supernatural. But even Fr. Kevin is coming to like Stirling. Nobody could fail to be disarmed by Stirling.'

" 'Tell me about Fr. Kevin,' I said. 'What's his story?'

" 'He's a good priest,' she said. 'I ought to know. I tried hard to get him into bed, as I told you, but couldn't do it. He was born here in a big house on Magazine Street, the last of eight children. His eldest sister is a whole nother generation. We call them the Stainless Mayfairs because they are all very good and never get into any trouble. When he went into the priesthood they sent him up North, and now he's come back, principally because the family needs its own priest and also because he can teach here. He's quite the theologian when he wants to be.'

" 'Mona, why do you try to go to bed with so many people?' I asked. I knew that I sounded naive and childlike, but I had to ask her.

" 'Why do you do the same thing, Tarquin?'

" 'But I don't, not really. Aside from you, I've been to bed with one of the women on the property and that's all.'

" 'I know,' she said smiling. 'It's the gorgeous blond-haired quadroon, Jasmine.'

“ ‘How did you know?’

“ ‘We witches have a little bit of telepathic power,’ she said with the same generous smile. ‘I picked up on it, you might say. Didn’t you feel that that was a road you had to travel?’

“ ‘Yeah, I guess I did. But compared to you, I’m kind of retarded. I’m almost nineteen and I’ve slept with one spirit, one ghost and two real women, you being the one with whom I am in love.’

“ ‘I can guess about the spirit,’ she said, ‘but tell me about the ghost.’

“ ‘I can’t, not now. We’re too near her grave.’ I pointed to the little headstone in the cemetery. ‘But let me say her name’s Rebecca and she’s beautiful, and she met her end in a cruel, unjust way and I lost my virginity with her. She has great charm when she comes.…

“ ‘… And speaking of charm,’ I said, ‘I have a tutor who is like that and he’s coming right towards us.’

“It was Nash come down from the house to invite us to supper. He looked elegant and handsome in his sharply cut blue denim three-piece suit and a white shirt open at the collar.

“Now, I have to achieve that style, I thought, and he comes by it so daringly and so naturally.

“At once I introduced him to Mona and told him I was going to marry her. He was faintly amazed but accepted it totally seriously.

“ ‘Congratulations, Quinn, and my dear’—he took her hand—‘it’s a pleasure.’

“I felt his mellow voice could level mountains. And his face was truly enhanced by its lines and its folds. It gave him the look of wisdom.

“ ‘Of course, we’re still going to Europe, Nash,’ I said. ‘We’re all going. We’re stealing Mona.’

“ ‘Well, that makes things doubly exciting,’ said Nash with just a twinge of a smile and a touch of gentle irony. He gave his arm to Mona graciously to help her up to the high ground, and I felt ashamed that I hadn’t thought to do it.

“As for supper, we were all to join Aunt Queen on the other side of the house where the table was set on the flagstone patio using the newly refurbished wicker.

“ ‘Rebecca’s wicker,’ I explained to Mona. ‘Rebecca and I—it was in a dream—we had coffee together and we were sitting in these wicker chairs. You’ll see.’

“And I’ll see too, I thought. I’ll see if it matches the furnishings of my dream exactly, because I might have imagined it earlier when I’d wandered out there, so mystified and confused.

“As we walked on, past the front of the house, as I looked up at the reddened and darkening sky, I felt the panic again.

“But I drove it away. Time for something convivial and I was ready for it.

“Quickly I searched for Goblin. *Come with us, be with us.* I tried to smile at him, but I think he knew my multitude of fears. He could read my face if not my mind.”

27

“As soon as I saw the ensemble of white wicker tables and chairs I recognized them again as the setting in my dream. It sent the chills up me and the panic came again in a brilliant wave, almost causing my teeth to chatter.

“I could hear Rebecca’s voice in my head and I was afraid I was going to get dizzy. When I had described these dizzy states to the doctors at Mayfair Medical they had spoken of small seizures.

“But how could such an explanation account for this—furniture duplicating that which I had only seen well in a dream? The fact was the seizure theory accommodated nothing.

“ ‘Mona, my darling love,’ I said as we approached the table, ‘I need you.’

“ ‘What you need more than anything in the world,’ she said, ‘is to be with Stirling Oliver.’ But I could see the passion in her eyes; I could see that she was holding back. I could see the evidence of my progress with her.

“ ‘And what we all need is supper,’ said Aunt Queen, who greeted me with a kiss and then planted one on Mona’s cheek also.

“ ‘You know, dear,’ said Aunt Queen, ‘you really are quite beautiful.’

“Aunt Queen had decked herself out in a sack dress of beige satin, long strands of pearls, a shell cameo at her throat and the most glittering spike heels I’d seen ever. The band across her toes was studded with diamonds and the brilliantly wrought cameo of Apollo with his lyre at her neck was surrounded by tiny diamonds also.

“The entire supper arrangement was illuminated by soft floodlights attached to the side of the house and also by a ring of candles in hurricane lamps. The wicker was exceptionally detailed and well constructed—what an antique dealer would have given a small fortune to have—and as I studied it the atmosphere of the dream returned to me. Rebecca said in my ear, *Red-haired bitch.* I tasted dream coffee. The chills were quietly passing over me. A wave of terror passed over me. *A life for my life. A death for my death.*

“We were seated at once in the newly painted peacock chairs, and yes, I realized, Goblin’s place was there to my left as it always was, and I had not even thought to ask for it.

“My mind and body were aswim with sensations. Merely glancing at Mona on my right side made me want to carry her up to bed. And then a dull misery from Rebecca’s dream kept breaking through. *Go into the Light,* I silently prayed. I tried hard to focus on what was around

me. I had to be a man for Mona. And this was no place to become a centaur.

"Jasmine, got up exquisitely in a tiny-waisted violet suit with a frothy white blouse, brought the tarragon chicken and rice to us. Big Ramona, in her usual crisp white apron, was pouring the wine.

"I could see that Aunt Queen had been working some kind of magic with Jasmine. Jasmine was experiencing some change in status. Jasmine had a glamour to her, and surely I wasn't responsible for it.

" 'And look at the shoes on these lovely ladies, would you?' I said to Nash and Mona. 'It makes me want to kiss their feet.'

" 'Eat your supper, Little Boss,' said Jasmine in an under voice. 'You're not kissing my feet.'

"Mona laughed.

" 'Nothing succeeds,' Nash replied, 'like excess.' He smiled. 'I must say it is a pleasure being here in these glorious surroundings. I've never heard the cicadas sing like this except here in Louisiana.'

" 'And how have you spent today?' I asked. 'I feel that, having fallen in love with Mona, I'm neglecting you, but discovering one's future bride can be very distracting. I've become a happy madman.'

" 'And well it should distract you,' he replied. 'And you mustn't worry about me for a moment. This is all so new to me, so fascinating. I've been quite fine. I took a long early afternoon nap and then spent a wonderful time surveying your Aunt Queen's fabulous collection of cameos.'

" 'Cameos,' said Mona. 'You mean you have more than what we saw in the living room case?'

" 'Hundreds more,' said Aunt Queen. 'Spanning my whole life, and you can well imagine how long that is. But here, a toast to Mona Mayfair, our lovely young guest, and to Nash Penfield, who will soon guide us on the Grand Tour, and to my great-nephew, who this day came into part of his inheritance.'

" 'Mona's going with us to Europe, Aunt Queen,' I declared. 'Is there any way we could leave before midnight? Mona will be going as my bride.'

"Mona was clearly startled, but she didn't laugh. She only beamed at me, and then boldly she leaned over and kissed my cheek. 'You would really marry me tonight?' she asked. 'I think you're truly and egregiously in love with me.'

" 'Absolutely and forever,' I said. 'But we don't have to wait for the ceremony. We could fly out tonight, and get married in Paris. Aunt Queen does it all the time—just flying out. We'd need your passport of course, but I'd go back to the house with you—.'

" 'Darling,' said Aunt Queen, 'I don't think that's necessary. I think I see the Mayfairs coming up the drive now.'

"It was a giant black stretch limousine, just like Aunt Queen's car, crunching the gravel down

as it lumbered to a stop before the front steps of the house.

"Mona turned around, then she turned back and she looked at me. The tears rose in her eyes. 'Tarquin,' she said, 'would you really take me with you tonight?'

" 'Yes, absolutely!' I said. 'Aunt Queen, you know it's what you want, that I go to Europe, that I be educated! Nash, you can guide and tutor all of us.' I would die for Mona, I knew it. I would fight everyone in that car.

" 'Nash,' said Aunt Queen, 'go and greet them for me, darling. I see the security man rising to his feet. Call him off. I'll never make it across the lawn in these shoes. Be the front man, will you, dear?'

"Mona quickly explained that it was Ryan Mayfair, the lawyer and father of Pierce, and Dr. Rowan Mayfair, and her husband, Michael Curry, who were now approaching the table. I stood up naturally, but Mona did not, and I moved behind her chair and I placed my hands on her shoulders. I had my back to those coming up the lawn. I was being rude. I was bracing for battle.

" 'Don't worry, my brave Ophelia,' I said under my breath, 'you shall not perish while this brave Laertes lives.'

"But the most curious aspect to all this for me was not my own pounding heart, it was the cautious and almost hostile expression on Aunt Queen's face as the little party came around to the left of me, with Nash quickly inviting them to sit down.

"They all declined a chair. They were very much 'in a hurry,' but were very thankful. 'We've come to pick up Mona,' said Dr. Rowan Mayfair in a very soft and polite voice. I believe it's what you call a whiskey voice. 'Mrs. McQueen,' she said with a little nod of her head, 'you have a magnificent house.'

" 'Well, I hope someday,' said Aunt Queen, 'you can come to visit.' But she was not her usual warm self when she said these words, and she was scrutinizing the group of them in a way I've never seen.

"Introductions were made all around, Ryan Mayfair looking as if he'd been born in his Brooks Brothers suit and Michael Curry, being the oldest and rough cut but a very handsome guy in his safari jacket, with his beautiful salt-and-pepper hair and a very easy manner. He had a very Irish look to him with his square face and blue eyes. The lawyer was uncomfortable and Dr. Rowan Mayfair wasn't exactly at ease either. Dr. Rowan had a high-cheeked, sleek beauty to her with bobbed hair. There was something undeniably frightening about her, though her manner was low-key.

" 'Come on, Mona,' said Dr. Rowan, 'we're here to take you home. You gave us a bit of scare slipping out this morning.'

" 'I want you to leave me alone!' Mona said. It was practically a cri de coeur.

"I could scarcely bear the sound of it, and I flew into action without even moving. I held her shoulders. My heart was racing.

“But suddenly Dr. Rowan adopted an ominous face and said, to my complete shock, ‘Michael, take her.’

“Both Ryan Mayfair and Michael Curry moved towards Mona, and Mona screamed, backing up and overturning the chair, and I threw my arms tightly around her. She pivoted in my embrace and buried her face in my chest. She felt like the most fragile and precious little creature that I had ever known or loved, and I intended to fight for her.

“ ‘Come now, gentlemen,’ said Nash in a gentle commanding voice, ‘surely you’re not trying to take this young lady by force! Mrs. McQueen, are you a neutral party in all of this?’

“ ‘Indeed not,’ said Aunt Queen. ‘Jasmine, run get the men.’

“ ‘Wait a minute,’ said Michael Curry, and he made the universal gesture with both his hands for patience. He came on like the sweetest guy in the world. ‘Mona, please stop the theatrics and come home, you know you have to. Mona, I don’t want to be doing this. Nobody does, but you can’t go off like this. Look at it from our point of view.’

“ ‘I’m going to marry her,’ I said. ‘And if you lay a finger on her, I’ll break your face. Oh, I can see you’ve got brawn on your side, plenty of it, but I’m young and I’m meaner than I look, so don’t try me.’

“As for Goblin, he had risen to his feet and I had whispered to him to do nothing. What he could have done I didn’t know, but it frightened me and thrilled me at the same time.

“By now Clem and Allen were running towards the patio. And the security man had come from the front porch to stand by Aunt Queen, his hand on his gun.

“Aunt Queen motioned for Clem and Allen to come on and then stop.

“ ‘Aren’t you all being a bit ridiculous about this?’ Aunt Queen asked. ‘This girl is having supper with us. I’ll have my car bring her home this evening. I’ve never seen such hysterics before. Dr. Mayfair, I’m shocked.’

“ ‘I’m sorry, Mrs. McQueen,’ said Dr. Mayfair. Her voice was still low and husky, and very sincere. Yet a terrible power enforced her words. ‘Mona’s fifteen years old. Her parents are both dead. Sometimes she does things that are impulsive. I’m her legal guardian. I want her to come home, and as you can see, she won’t do it.’

“Michael Curry shook his head as if to say, The sadness of it, and then very gently he touched Mona’s hair. He spoke to her in a soft soothing voice.

“ ‘Now come on, honey, I know how you feel.’

“ ‘No, you don’t,’ she sobbed against me. ‘None of you do.’

“ ‘Mona, I love you,’ he said, and then he went on tenderly. ‘Let us take you back, sweetheart. You can see Quinn tomorrow. Quinn, you could come by the house, couldn’t you? We’d be glad to have you. What about tomorrow afternoon? Come on, darling.’

“I grabbed her head and whispered in her ear, ‘Go home and get your passport and be ready.’

“Dr. Mayfair shook her head as if she too hated this predicament. Or as if she’d heard my

whisper. The lawyer, Ryan, the smoothie in the suit, never changed his pained expression. I think he was mortified but resigned. He was a good-looking son of a bitch, I had to give him that, and that probably meant his son, the infamous enemy Pierce, was also good-looking.

"Finally Mona turned around and, still clinging tight to my arm, she looked at them.

" 'I hate you that you did this to me,' she whispered. 'I hate you all. I don't trust you.'

" 'Dear God, child,' said Aunt Queen. 'What do you want us to do?'

"Nash looked totally alarmed. Allen and Clem were ready for battle. The security man was on full alert.

" 'She has to come home, Mrs. McQueen,' said Dr. Rowan patiently and courteously. Her face was too serene. 'Quinn, can you come see Mona tomorrow? I think Michael's suggestion was a good one.'

"Mona turned to face me again, and with her back to the evil three she mouthed the word 'passport.' 'You'll come at three o'clock, all right?' she said. But her fingers secretly pressed the number two against the inside of my arm.

" 'Yes, three o'clock, I'll come.'

" 'You can be our guest for dinner,' said Dr. Mayfair. 'Mrs. McQueen, Mr. Penfield, I'm sorry for all this. Truly I am.' She had such a frank simple manner that her words were almost believable. I mean by that that I couldn't hate her as much as I wanted to. But she was still scary in a secret way.

"Mona kissed me on the cheek. I took hold of her and kissed her on the mouth. 'I love you,' I said. 'I'm coming to get you.'

" 'Be careful of all the ghosts,' she whispered. 'Be very careful, and remember, if I somehow become unreachable, or they pull some trick, go to Stirling Oliver. Oak Haven is the southern Retreat House of the Talamasca. Everybody knows where it is. Oak Haven Plantation. It's on the River Road near Vacherie.'

" 'Got it,' I answered.

"She backed up. 'I'll see you tomorrow,' she said. 'Aunt Queen, thank you for the supper. Mr. Penfield, it was so nice talking with you.'

"Suddenly she paused, staring at Aunt Queen, whose own face was the picture of distress. And then Mona went to her and embraced her and kissed her.

" 'Oh, darling, sweet little darling,' said Aunt Queen. 'God bless you and keep you. And here'—Aunt Queen unhooked the diamond-studded cameo from her throat—'you take this.'

" 'Oh, no, I couldn't,' Mona said.

" 'No, you must. Always remember us by it.'

"Mona was going to break into tears again. Taking the cameo clenched in her hand she pivoted and went off fast, and the uncomfortable trio followed her, all of them piling into the awkward stretch limousine, which made a U-turn in the drive and soon vanished in the direction of the

highway.

"Jasmine told our palace guard to go back to the kitchen. The security man seemed genuinely disappointed as he headed back to the front porch. Jasmine took my plate and gave me a hot helping of chicken and rice.

"I burst into tears. I just cried like a little kid. I cried and cried. I just sat there not caring who thought what and I cried. So what if I was eighteen. I cried.

"Nash came over to put his arm around me and Aunt Queen cooed to me and called me her poor darling.

" 'I never wanted anything so badly in all my life,' I said. 'I just love her.'

" 'Oh, my precious Little Boy,' said Aunt Queen. 'Why on earth does it have to be a Mayfair!'

" 'But what's wrong with them, Aunt Queen?' I asked. 'Good Lord, we went to their hospital! We go to their church. Fr. Kevin is a Mayfair. I don't get it.'

"Nash gave my neck a firm squeeze and went back to his chair.

" 'Jasmine, give Nash a fresh plate,' said Aunt Queen. 'And you, Little Boy, please eat something. How can you be six foot three and not eat something?'

" 'I'm only six foot one,' I explained, 'it's Nash that's six foot three. Nash, thank you for your moral support. Aunt Queen, I don't understand this.'

" 'Well, my boy,' she said, lifting her glass of white wine for Jasmine to refill, 'I'm not sure I understand it myself, but the Mayfair family has always been viewed with suspicion. Dr. Rowan Mayfair, the genius behind Mayfair Medical, is perhaps the most universally admired of the clan, and she has immersed herself in public life and public service.

" 'But even Dr. Rowan is a mysterious figure. At one point she was so severely injured that all hope was given up, and then she made a miraculous recovery.'

" 'Well, you can't blame her for that, surely,' I interjected.

" 'Can't I?' said Aunt Queen. 'I can tell you it wasn't through the intercession of a saint that she came back from the dead. That much is true.'

" 'But what are you saying?'

" 'As you saw, she's very restrained and sure of herself by nature,' Aunt Queen said. 'And perhaps she is a good person, perhaps she is a very good person. But the rest of the family is another matter.'

" 'But what do you mean? The lawyer was like a loaf of white bread.' (Of course I was stealing Mona's words, but so what?)

" 'He's quite well respected,' Aunt Queen admitted, 'though his practice is mostly dedicated to the family. I'm speaking of other things. And surely you haven't forgotten that he manages our money. But there has been talk for years of congenital madness in the female line. Well, and in the male line as well. Mayfairs were drugged, locked in padded cells, even let their house on First Street fall into ruin at one time, though now that Mr. Michael Curry has come it's wonderfully

restored, or so they tell me. Then there's the matter of Michael himself, almost drowned once in the swimming pool.'

" 'But what could that mean?'

" 'I don't know, darling, I'm only trying to convey that they're shrouded in mystery. It's a family with its own law firm and its own priest. Rather like the Medici, don't you think, and you know how the people of Florence used to rise against them and throw all their artworks out of the palazzo windows!'

" 'As if the people of New Orleans would riot against the Mayfairs!' I scoffed. 'You're not telling me everything.'

" 'I don't know everything,' she replied. 'They're a haunted family and some say they're cursed.'

" 'You met Mona,' I said. 'You know she's lovable and brilliant. Besides, we're a haunted family, too.'

" 'Something's wrong,' said Aunt Queen. She hesitated.

"I saw her eyes veer off. She looked at the place where Goblin sat watching her very steadily. She knew he was there, and as I turned to him I saw that he was locked to her.

"She went on, eating tiny bits of chicken daintily as she talked:

" 'There are many old stories about Mayfair women having unusual powers—an ability to call spirits, an ability to read minds, to know the future. But more than anything else there is this question of hereditary madness.'

" 'Mona can see Goblin, Aunt Queen,' I said, glancing at him and then back to her. 'She has that power. Where in the world for the rest of my life will I find a beautiful brilliant woman who can see and love Goblin?'

"I glanced at him again. He stared coldly at Aunt Queen. And she was staring at the spot where he sat. I knew she was seeing something.

" 'You know anyone who marries me,' I went on, 'is marrying Goblin.' I took his right hand and squeezed it. But he didn't respond.

" 'Don't be sad, Goblin.'

"Aunt Queen shook her head. 'Jasmine, more wine, please, darling. I think I'm getting drunk. Be sure Clem's on alert to help me to my room later.'

" 'I'll help you to your room,' I said. 'Those breakneck shoes don't scare me. I'm about to be married.'

" 'Quinn,' said Aunt Queen, 'did you see how they have taken Mona home? Now please forgive my candor, but it seems to me that they are very afraid of Mona forming any alliance that can lead to her getting pregnant.'

"Nash asked if he should excuse himself. Aunt Queen said absolutely not, and I also nodded to it.

“ ‘Nash, if we’re all going to Europe together,’ I said, ‘you have to know who we are.’

“He sat back nursing his soda quietly.

“ ‘Quinn, am I being unfair,’ Aunt Queen asked, ‘if I suggest that something intimate might have happened between you?’

“I was stunned. I couldn’t answer them. I couldn’t tell them all that Mona had told me—the story of the strange child, that it had been a mutation, that it had been taken away. I couldn’t pass on these confidences.

“ ‘Maybe we are crazy,’ I said, ‘both of us. She being able to see Goblin, imagine that. And both of us seeing ghosts. She talked of it all from a scientific point of view. I felt like I wasn’t a freak. I felt like she and I were of the same ilk. And now it seems this person, this precious person whom I so loved is being stolen from me.’

“ ‘Darling, it’s only for one evening,’ said Aunt Queen patiently. ‘You’ve been invited there tomorrow afternoon.’

“ ‘And you’re not dead set against my going?’ I asked. I started cleaning up the chicken and rice on my plate. I was hungrier than ever. I wonder what trauma could have shaken my appetite. ‘I thought you’d feel just the opposite.’

“ ‘Well, this may surprise you,’ said Aunt Queen, ‘but I think you might accept this invitation for a very good reason. Few people outside the family ever get to see the interior of that mysterious Mayfair house, and you ought to take advantage of the privilege. Also I have a hunch that when you see Mona again, some of this fire will burn itself out. Of course I may be wrong, the child’s gorgeous, but it’s what I’m hoping for.’

“I was plunged into misery but eating like a pig. ‘Listen,’ I said, ‘if I can get her away from there, with her passport, can we set out for Europe immediately?’

“I could see the continued amazement in Nash’s otherwise placid and dignified face, but Aunt Queen looked a bit provoked.

“ ‘Tarquin,’ she said, ‘we’re not stealing the girl. Jasmine, more wine please. Jasmine, you’re not yourself. When have I ever nagged you so much?’

“ ‘I’m sorry, Miss Queen,’ she said. ‘It’s just those Mayfairs scared me. The stories people used to tell about their house, it was awful. I don’t know if a boy Quinn’s age—.’

“ ‘Bite your tongue, beautiful!’ I said, ‘and you can pour me some wine, too. I’m going tomorrow.’

“ ‘They had a ghost!’ Jasmine said, quite belligerently. ‘It used to scare off any workman who ever tried to work on that property. You remember my cousin Etienne, he was a plasterer, and they called him to that house, and the ghost pulled the ladder from under him.’

“ ‘Oh, stuff and nonsense,’ I said. ‘And Etienne used to tell fortunes in the cards.’

“ ‘I can do that too, Little Boss,’ Jasmine sent back. ‘I can read your cards, if you want, and tell you what your fate is.’

“She took my plate and heaped it with a second helping. The chicken was really delicious now, and the gravy was thick.

“ ‘Jasmine’s telling you the truth, darling,’ said Aunt Queen. ‘They’re a haunted family, as I said.’ She paused. ‘Before Dr. Rowan came out from California, no one would go near that house. Now they have big family get-togethers there. They are an immense clan, you know. And that’s what I fear when I think of them. They’re a clan, and a clan can do things to you.’

“ ‘The more you say, the more I love her,’ I responded. ‘Remember, I got my passport in New York, when I was there with you and Lynelle. I’m ready to rumble. But what do you mean, they’re a haunted family?’

“ ‘For years,’ she said, ‘it was a dreadful ghost, just as Jasmine described. He did a lot more than push people off ladders. But he’s gone now, this illustrious ghost. And what surrounds them is talk of genetic mutations.’

“I had to be quiet. But it didn’t work. She went quiet too.

“ ‘What happened to the dreadful ghost?’ I asked.

“ ‘Nobody knows except that something violent occurred. Dr. Rowan Mayfair almost lost her life, as I mentioned. But somehow or other the family got through it. Now Mona, Mona came down from an intensely inbred line of the family. That’s why she’s been named the Designée of the Legacy. Can you imagine? Being chosen because you are inbred? If there are genetic problems, you might guess that Mona has them.’

“ ‘I don’t care,’ I said. ‘I adore her.’

“ ‘Mona didn’t grow up at the house at First and Chestnut. She grew up on St. Charles Avenue, not very far from Ruthie’s house, and her people went back to a plantation house in the country. There was a murder. Mona wasn’t a rich little girl, by any means.’

“ ‘Mona told me all this. So she wasn’t rich. Do I have to love somebody rich? Besides—’

“ ‘You keep missing the point. The child is now in line to inherit the Mayfair fortune.’

“ ‘She told me that, herself.’

“ ‘But Quinn, don’t you see?’ she persisted. ‘This child is under intense scrutiny. The Mayfair Legacy involves billions. It’s like the capital of a small country. And here she’s gone from an unstable family to inherit an unimaginable fortune. Nash, you explain it. The girl’s rather like an heir to the throne of England.’

“ ‘Exactly,’ said Nash in a very mild professorial manner. ‘In the sixteenth century it was an act of treason to court young Elizabeth or Mary Tudor because they were in line for the royal crown. When Elizabeth finally became queen, the men who had dallied with her were executed.’

“ ‘You’re implying the Mayfairs might kill me?’ I asked.

“ ‘No, indeed not, what I’m trying to say,’ Aunt Queen returned, ‘is that they will reclaim Mona no matter where she goes or how. You saw for yourself. They were quite prepared to pick her up bodily and carry her to that limo.’

“ ‘We should never have let her go,’ I said. ‘I have a terrible feeling about it.’

“I glanced at Goblin. He looked solemn and remote, his eyes on those opposite me.

“ ‘When you see her tomorrow …’ Aunt Queen began, but then she broke off.

“ ‘Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow,’ I murmured. ‘How long must I endure until I see her? I want to go to the house now and climb the vines to her window.’

“ ‘No, darling, don’t even contemplate such a thing. Oh, we never should have gone to Mayfair Medical, but how did I know that the little heiress would be in the Grand Luminière Café?’

“Jasmine refilled my plate with plenty more of the chicken and rice. I started eating again.

“ ‘I don’t trust anybody now except Mona,’ I said. ‘I love you, you know that, but I’m in love with her, and I know, positively know, that I will never love anyone as I do her. I know it!’

“ ‘Quinn, dear, it’s time for the worst tidbit of gossip.’

“ ‘I can take anything,’ I said between forkfuls.

“ ‘They’ve already arranged a husband for Mona,’ said Aunt Queen gently. ‘It’s her cousin Pierce.’

“ ‘She told me that, too,’ I said, fudging just a little. I gestured to Jasmine for more wine.

“ ‘Did she tell you that Pierce is her first cousin?’

“Even I was shocked by that. But I didn’t answer.

“ ‘Oh, darling,’ Aunt Queen said with a sigh, ‘I want to set our course for Europe right away, but we’re not going to be able to take Mona Mayfair.’

“ ‘Well, I can assure you,’ I said, ‘I’m not getting on any plane for anywhere without her.’ ”

28

“The night had too many hours, and surely the following morning would be an agony, or so I thought. Aunt Queen, Nash and I parted at about ten o′clock—after more insubstantial and agonizing conversation about the Mayfairs—with my promising to consider the European trip even if Mona′s family wouldn′t allow her to go, and my promising that if I remained behind, I would accept Nash as a new teacher.

“That part was easy for me. I liked Nash completely, and I believed his firm assurances that he would be entirely happy at Blackwood Manor if we were meant to stay there.

“When I went upstairs I found Big Ramona awake and the window open near the fireplace and a brisk breeze blowing through the room. Now, it was our custom to sleep with the air-conditioning on during warm nights such as these, so I was a bit surprised by this, and by the fact that Big Ramona climbed out of bed and came a-whispering to me as soon as I closed the door.

“ ‘It′s Goblin!′ she said. ‘He opened that window! I′m telling you, it′s the God′s truth. I shut it twice and he opened it twice. He′s down there! Look at the screen on your computer. See what he wrote!′

“ ‘You saw the keys move?′ I asked her.

“The words were ‘COME DOWN.′

“ ‘The keys move! Boy, I saw the window open and shut, are you listening to me! Do you see what′s happening to you with Goblin? He′s getting stronger and stronger, Quinn.′

“I went to the window and looked down over the east lawn. I saw him standing in the glow of the floodlights on the side of the house. He was dressed in a long flannel nightshirt, as was my custom by this hour, but I, of course, was still in my pants and shirt.

“ ‘Quinn, you go to Confession,′ said Big Ramona. ‘You tell the priest what you′ve done with this ghost! Don′t you realize he′s from the Devil? Now I know he was the one who broke all that glass.′

“I didn′t bother to argue with her. I went downstairs and out to him by the cemetery where he was wandering barefoot like a lost soul.

“ ‘You go to Europe with Mona, you leave me,′ he said. His lips were scarcely moving, but I could see his hair mussed in the breeze.

“ ‘I won’t leave you. Come with me,’ I said. ‘Why can’t you? I don’t understand.’

“He didn’t answer.

“ ‘I’m worried about you,’ I said aloud and under my breath, ‘worried about your feelings. You’ve become closer to me ever since you attacked the mysterious stranger. You’ve learned more things.’ Again there came no response whatsoever.

“I tried to hide my fear, reminding myself that no matter how sophisticated he had become and how at odds with me he might be, he couldn’t read my mind.

“As for me, I was restless and only partially focused on him. I was too in love with Mona to be focused on him. It was so wicked! After all these years. Did he know it?

“ ‘Come on, let’s walk out of this light,’ I said to him.

“I walked on back past the shed and onto the west side of the property, where the wicker patio lay in its own bath of electric light. He followed me, and when I glanced over to him, when I slipped my left arm around him, I saw that he had become my duplicate in clothing again. It seemed such a simpleton thing.

“ ‘Will you try to take me with you?’ he asked. ‘When you go to Europe? Will you hold my hand?’

“ ‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I’ll do it. You’ll be right next to me on the plane. I’ll hold tight to your hand all the way.’ With all my soul I meant it but I was speaking to a faded love when it was my blessed Ophelia to whom my soul belonged. I was her Hamlet and her Laertes and perhaps her Polonius as well. But I must not forget my Goblin, and it was not fear of him but loyalty that goaded me now.

“I had other things on my mind too. The Hermitage, for example, and how I meant to reclaim it from its wilderness neglect. I had already spoken to Allen, the supervisor of the craftsmen among the Shed Men, about running electricity out to it, and there were other things I meant to do.

“Of course the mysterious stranger was a real problem, more real than the Shed Men knew. But I was drawing pictures in my mind of how splendid I could make the place. And of how wonderful it would be to take Mona to the island, and how exciting it was that Mona wanted to see it and wasn’t afraid.

“Dreaming of all this, conniving and planning, dreaming of Mona tomorrow and whether we could escape to Europe, I struggled to be true and faithful to Goblin, when quite suddenly he stiffened and, squeezing my hand, said in his telepathic voice:

“Be careful. He comes. He thinks I don’t know him and he means harm.

“At once he vanished. Or at least he was gone from my vision, and at the same time the floodlights went out as if someone had tripped the switch. I found myself plunged into relative darkness.

“Instantly, an arm came up and hooked around my neck and a hand grasped my left arm

behind my back tightly. I struggled but it was useless. My free right hand couldn't do a thing against either grip, and the voice of the stranger spoke in my ear softly.

" 'Call for help and I'll kill you. Turn your spirit friend loose on me and I'll kill you. You and all your dreams will be gone.''

"I was in a rage. 'I fought you once,' I growled. 'I'll fight you again.'

" 'You're not listening.' His voice was low. It had no sound of menace. 'If your familiar strikes out at me again, you'll die here now.'

" 'So what's holding you back? Why don't you break my neck now?' I was furious.

" 'Really,' he said in my ear, 'you are the thinking man's victim.'

" 'I'm nobody's victim,' I responded.

" 'Of course not, because you're going to do what I want.'

" 'Which is what?' I asked. Remembering some advice from long ago, I tried to turn my head to one side so he wouldn't have full pressure on my larynx, but he only tightened his grasp on both my neck and my arm. I was in pain.

" 'Stop fighting me and listen,' he said in the same calm near-caressing voice. 'I'll leave you like a broken dove on the ground here for your Aunt Queen to find in the morning.' He went on in his reasonable way, just above a whisper. 'You know she comes out for a stroll before dawn, don't you? Old people don't sleep well. They don't need the full hours of the night. She comes with Jasmine and Jasmine is still dopey, but they make their little constitutional while the stars are still clear.'

" 'And you're watching,' I said. I was horrified. 'What do you want of us?'

" 'You're going to be enormously impressed with my generosity, but I have been eternally known for my generosity and my cleverness.'

" 'Try me,' I said. I was almost too angry to talk sense.

" 'Very well,' he said. 'I've done a great deal of thinking about you, and this island which we both claim. I've come to the conclusion that I want to share the Hermitage with you. That is, I'll allow you to use it by day and I shall use it by night as has been my custom.'

" 'By night? You come there only by night?' This was almost unendurable.

" 'Of course. Why do you think you found the candles, and the ashes in the fireplace? I have no use for it by day, but I don't want others troubling it ever. I'm to find no evidence of others when I come. Except for evidence of you. Your books, your papers, things like that. Now for the most important part of the bargain. You're to improve the Hermitage. You're to take it to a new level of excellence. Do you follow me?'

"He had loosened the grip just a little. I could breathe without it hurting. But he had me as firmly as ever, and my left arm, my good arm, was aching. I was paralyzed with fury.

" 'The improvements are key,' he said. 'You're to take care of them, and then we will both enjoy it happily. You'll never know I'm there perhaps. Oh we can share the books we read. We

can grow to know each other. Who knows, we may come to be friends.'

" 'What improvements?' I said. Obviously the creature was insane.

" 'First off I want it thoroughly cleaned,' he said, 'and the gold on the sarcophagus, it has to be cleaned and polished.'

" 'Then it is gold,' I said.

" 'Most assuredly,' he responded. 'But you may tell your workmen it's brass if you like. Indeed, tell them anything about the entire island which will keep them away.'

" 'But who was the grave intended for?'

" 'You need never concern yourself with that, and never open it again either.' The voice came soft as breath. 'Now let's return to the Hermitage. You're to have electric wiring installed throughout the place.'

" 'You've been reading my mind, haven't you?' I asked.

" 'Then I want glass fitted in all the windows, glass that opens and closes. I'm not particular as to the design, just so that the night can be seen and felt and the rain kept out of the interior. The flooring should be laid both in the first and second story—something of marble tile like the tile in your entranceway would be most excellent, though I think that it should be all white with a dark grout.'

" 'Good God,' I said, 'you *have* been reading my mind. Who are you?'

" 'Have I? I do have a gift for it. And handsome lamps should be purchased as well as marble tables such as that which is there already. And fine gold chairs in the Roman style, and couches. You know. I leave it to you, the taste of such things—you've been born to and bred on fine things—and you shall see that it's all correct.'

" 'This is a game to you, isn't it?' I asked. I was breaking into a cold sweat.

" 'Not entirely,' he said. 'I want these improvements. And I want the privacy afterwards. I want it all from you.'

" 'And you're serious.'

" 'Well, of course I am,' came the low, hushed voice. 'Now what else do I propose? Ah yes, a better fireplace, don't you think, for the bitter cold Louisiana nights in winter of which outsiders know so little.'

" 'How did you manage to spy on me? From what vantage point?'

" 'Don't be so sure that I did. I'm cunning. You wanted to reclaim the place. I know the style in which you live. I want to be friends with you, don't you see? It's nice having my arms around you. I offer peace if you do these things. If you needed wealth for it, I'd oblige.'

" 'And your part of the bargain is to leave the place entirely alone by day?'

" 'Yes,' he said, 'and not to kill you. That's the most impressive part—that I'll let you live.'

" 'Who are you?' I demanded again. 'What are you? Were those human bodies I saw you dumping in the swamp? They were, weren't they, and the chains on the second floor. Did you

never ask yourself what had happened with those chains?'

"I struggled. He tightened his grip.

"There came a dark slow laugh from him, a laugh I'd heard before though I couldn't place it. Or could I? Was it only in the swamp that night when I had seen him in the moonlight? I was too caught up in his strength and in my own sense of peril to know for certain.

" 'You can take away the chains if you like,' he said. 'Have it all cleaned as I told you. Have made a new stairs from first floor to second. Have it made of bronze. And caution your workmen not to speak of the place. Caution them to frighten others away. If and when they hire outsiders, let them choose from those at a distance rather than from those who are close at hand.'

" 'Like it was in Manfred's time,' I said.

" 'Like you tell it on your tours of the house and property,' said the voice. 'Now, I have a piece of advice for you.'

" 'What piece of advice?'

" 'You can see spirits and you've become enamored of a spirit named Rebecca.'

" 'How do you know?'

" 'Suffice it to say that I do know and I'm warning you against her. She wants a vengeance from you against those who have harmed her, and she'll settle for your life. You're a Blackwood and that's what matters to her. Your happiness fascinates her. It gives her strength. It causes her pain.'

" 'You've seen her yourself?'

" 'Let me humor you on this score. I have made myself privy to those dreams of yours in which she visits. And through those dreams I have come to know her tawdry desires.'

" 'She was tortured in the Hermitage,' I said. 'She was tortured with those chains.'

" 'You defend her to me? What is that to me? Allow me to suggest you remove the chains and put them with the casket of her remains which you've buried in the cemetery.'

" 'You spy on me night and day,' I said, my teeth clenched with anger.

" 'I wish I could,' he answered. 'Now I'm going to let you go and you can turn and you can look at me just as you please, and you keep your part of the bargain and I'll never hurt you or your family or your darling love with the red hair or her clan of witches.'

"His arms were removed. I spun around. He stood back.

"He was as I remembered. Six feet in height. Thick jet black hair pulled back from a square forehead with high temples and big black eyes with dark eyebrows that gave him a determined expression, and a long line of a smiling mouth, all very impressive, and a square jaw. Eyes positively flashing in the light. He was dressed in a fine black suit, and for one instant I saw all of him, and then he was turning, sporting the long thick black ponytail of hair—and gone as surely as if he'd dematerialized like Goblin.

"Goblin was immediately by my side, and Goblin said aloud, 'Evil, Quinn, evil. He doesn't

disappear. He uses speed.'

" 'Hold my hand, Goblin!' I said to him. 'I knew you were near but you heard his threats.' I was shaking violently.

" 'Had I come between you, Quinn, he would have crushed you. He was too ready for me, Quinn. He wasn't afraid.'

"I turned, still trembling so badly that I could scarcely stand upright, and I saw the inevitable lights in Aunt Queen's window. It was the lurid flare of the television.

"I embraced Goblin and then told him we must go to Aunt Queen. I was crazed with excitement.

"I rushed into the kitchen, across the back hall, and banged on her door. I found her in her chaise lounge as usual with her champagne, and some champagne sherbert, concluding the marathon drinking bout that had begun at dinner. Jasmine was fast asleep under the covers. *The Scarlet Empress* with Marlene Dietrich was on TV.

" 'Listen to me,' I said, pulling up a chair. 'I know I'm fast losing my reputation with you as a sane person.'

"I pulled out my cotton handkerchief and mopped the sweat from my face.

" 'That's quite all right,' she rejoined. 'You have a powerful reputation as my great-nephew.'

" 'The stranger attacked again. It was just outside. He got me in a choke hold.'

" 'Good Lord, Jasmine—.'

" 'No, wait, don't call anyone. He's gone, but before he left he told me just what he wanted. He made a list of demands, all having to do with the refurbishing of the Hermitage, and he proposed that after the renovation we share the place—that he would use it by night and I would use it by day. And if I didn't agree to his plan he'd kill me.'

"She was aghast. She said nothing. Her small blue eyes gazed fixedly into mine.

" 'But Aunt Queen, this is the strange part—not that he crept onto our land, not that he made the floodlights go off on the west side of the property, not that he got me in a choke hold—all that's normal stuff more or less. It's what he wants done to the building!'

" 'What do you mean?'

" 'The refurbishing. It's all precisely what I want! It's as though he read it in my mind. He did read my mind. The electricity, the new marble floors, the glassed-in windows, the new bronze stairs inside. He asked for nothing that I hadn't already thought of. I'd even mentioned it to you, mentioned it to the men, that they should remember the route to the place because I wanted to put in electricity. He read my mind, I tell you. He played with me on it. The creature's not human. He's some sort of spirit or ghost like Goblin. Only he's a different species, Aunt Queen, and I have to go to Mona, because Mona will know and so will Stirling Oliver.'

" 'Quinn, stop, be still!' she said. 'You're raving! You're in a tirade. Jasmine, wake up.'

" 'Don't bring her into this, she'll be a nuisance,' I said.

“Jasmine was already awake and sitting there silently passing judgment.

“ ‘I’m going up to write out a complete plan for the renovations, then I’m going to rest before I go to Mona,’ I said.

“ ‘Darling, it’s midnight. You must talk to me before you leave to see Mona,’ said Aunt Queen.

“ ‘Vow to me that you’ll allocate the funds for the Hermitage. It’s nothing compared to the money we spend all the time on Blackwood Manor. Oh, I can’t wait to see the Hermitage redone. But then I myself have the money, don’t I? I forgot that. I can afford it. How amazing.’

“ ‘And this splendid reinvention of a place you mean to share with a man who dumps bodies to alligators?’ she responded.

“ ‘Maybe I was wrong. Maybe something else was happening. I only know that it won’t hurt to carry out my own scheme for renovations and now he’s no obstacle, don’t you see? An hour ago he was a giant stumbling block to all I dreamt of for the Hermitage. He was an invader. Now he’s part of the scheme. He asked for nothing that I didn’t want already. Aunt Queen, he watches us. He knows you walk around the house in the morning. You need the guards with you. He’s cunning.’

“The expression on her face was dreadful. I think I had taken all the bubbles out of the champagne and all the alcohol out of it also. Sober and miserable, she stared at me. Then she slowly ate a spoonful of sherbert as though it were the only thing keeping her alive.

“ ‘Oh, my darling boy,’ she said. ‘Jasmine, are you listening?’

“ ‘How could I not listen?’ said Jasmine. ‘Someday, when I’m old and gray, we’ll have Quinn’s portrait on the wall, and I’ll be shuffling in front of the tourists talking about how he disappeared into the swamp and never came back—.’

“ ‘Jasmine, stop it!’ I declared. ‘Aunt Queen, I’m going up. I’ll kiss you good-bye before I take off to see Mona. I won’t go till tomorrow afternoon. I know I can’t drive in this condition. Besides, I have work to do.’

“Goblin and I ran upstairs together.

“I turned on the computer, in spite of Big Ramona sound asleep in the bed, and fortunately, as I clicked away, she never woke up.

“Goblin took his chair beside me. His face was blank, and he didn’t try to touch the keyboard. He watched the screen as I worked.

“I didn’t speak to him. He knew that I loved him. But he knew as well that I was yielding to the blandishments of an ever broadening world.

“Yes, I feared the stranger, but now the very devil had potently excited me. I was going mad.

“I wrote up a total renovation proposal for the Hermitage, going into detail as to how everything was to be done and spelling out the fine points as best I could, depending on my memory. I assumed Allen and the Shed Men would be doing everything, bringing in outside contractors only when they had to, so I went into greater detail possibly than they would need.

“I chose Roman red paint for the exterior, with dark green for the trim on the window and doors, and the finest veined white marble tile with black grout for the interior floors and for the front stairs descending to a broad terrace of white marble which should go down to the landing—and indeed, they should build a proper landing—and ordered a new bronze stairway to go between the stories and up to the cupola as well. This would be a gorgeous and costly retreat when I finished. But it would be more in keeping now with the strange gold tomb.

“As for the furnishings, I would order them from the same catalogs we used for Blackwood Manor, and of course I’d go over to Hurwitz Mintz in New Orleans to check their fine stock for choice pieces. I wanted torchère lamps everywhere and marble-top tables galore, as I had dreamed and as my strange and cunning partner had directed.

“When I thought this over, when I caught myself in the very act of calling him a partner, I paused and reflected, and I remembered that moment in the moonlight, and I knew what I had seen. There was no mistaking it. And then there came back to me the memory of his earlier attack on me, and of the letter he had written. And how he had just held me helpless only a short time ago. He had told me that he would kill me if I didn’t follow his instructions. Did I believe him?

“Of course I hated him. And I feared him. But not enough.

“I should have been far more cautious. I should have backed away from the venture. I should have loathed him. But what I had told Aunt Queen was true. I wanted these renovations. I wanted this rebirth of the Hermitage, and one of my greatest problems had been solved, and that was how to deal with the mysterious stranger. I didn’t have to battle the man for the place. We now had a partnership. And so I proceeded. Was I half in love with this monster? Was that the secret truth?

“I even remembered the man’s advice to discourage hired workmen from going to the island, or rather to put a wreath of mystery about it, and I wrote this into the scheme.

“Lastly, I wrote about what must be done first—the cleaning and polishing of the mausoleum, and wrote out the solemn stricture that it must never be opened again.

“Finally I finished my written plan for the renovations.

“I printed out the requisite copies. Then I drew a clean design for a sumptuous granite bathroom to be built onto the back of the round Hermitage, occupying no more width than one window, and, copying this four times by means of my fax machine, I finished my official plans.

“At this point Goblin spoke: ‘Evil, Quinn,’ he said. ‘Quinn Goblin will die in any direction.’

“I turned and looked at him and saw in his face a cold hard expression much as I’d often seen in him for the last few days. There was none of the old love or warmth or playfulness.

“ ‘How do you mean Quinn Goblin will die?’ I asked. ‘We won’t let that happen, old buddy. We won’t. I’m pledging that to you. Can you understand my words? They come from my heart.’

“ ‘They all want you,’ he replied in his monotone. ‘Mona wants you. Rebecca wants you. Aunt

Queen wants you. Nash wants you. The stranger wants you. Any direction and Quinn Goblin dies.'

" 'We'll never be separated,' I said confidentially. 'Perhaps they simply don't know how strong the bond is between us. But we know.'

"His expression remained cold, and then very slowly he dissolved.

"I had the distinct impression that he had dissolved of his own accord, not because he had to, and that he wanted me to know this, that he had withdrawn, and indeed I did feel the sting of it.

" 'It's true what I told you,' I said. 'Only you can make us die, only you can divide us, and that would be by leaving me.'

"Whether he was near or far, whether he had heard what I said, I had no clue. And I was too madly excited to care about him.

"I hurried downstairs to place a copy of my scheme with Aunt Queen, who received the work agreeably enough, and then I went out to find Allen's mailbox in the shed, and I put a copy in there for him. Allen was the head of the craftsmen, as I've indicated. He'd see that the work was done. I put a copy in Clem's box as a courtesy, as Clem was actually the boss, and then I headed back to the house.

"As I crossed the back terrace a wave of giddiness came over me. And when I look back on that moment—when I remember the starlight and the warm air, and the light streaming out of the kitchen door to greet me, when I remember the feeling of charged excitement, I remember how very alive I felt, how in love with Mona and how foolishly excited I was by the mysterious stranger, and how I held myself to be invincible even in the face of strong evidence that I was not.

"Goblin's strange words meant nothing to me, absolutely nothing. In fact, I even suspected him of the most base jealousy, and all of his recent behavior seemed cause to doubt his love. Yes, I was drawing away from him. Yes, Goblin Quinn was going to die. It had to happen because Manhood was going to make it happen.

"And on the battlefield of Manhood, Mona was my Princess and the Mysterious Stranger a dark knight riding near me or even against me in a joust of which I was only just learning the rules.

"We would come to know each other, the dark knight and myself. We would talk together in the Hermitage. I would penetrate the illusion of the bodies being given over to the dark waters. I would discover that it had been a sort of dream. Anything so very bad had to be a dream. Take Rebecca for instance. Rebecca came in dreams.

"What more could I do for poor Rebecca? Of course I could not give her 'a life for a life, a death for a death.'

"I went back upstairs. The windows were closed. The air-conditioning hummed. No sign of Goblin. I went to the window and looked down on the west lawn. I could see in the distance the dim white shapes of the cemetery in the moonlight. I said a prayer for Rebecca, that her soul was

in Heaven with God.

"Very reluctantly I lay down to sleep beside Big Ramona, and when I woke it was to the murky dawn, and I had the heavy tasks of Manhood upon me."

29

“My first manly task was to get to the Hermitage, and I wasn’t fool enough to think I could collect those rusted chains alone. I took Allen with me. The Shed Men always arrived around six o’clock, so they could go home at three, and when I told him where we were headed he was convivial and all but hopped into the pirogue with me.

“It was and still is Allen’s nature to find everything in life pleasurable. He’s a big roundly built man with neat white hair combed to one side, and silver-rimmed glasses and a perpetual smile; he plays Santa Claus at Christmas parties with huge success.

“Anyway, when we reached the Hermitage it wasn’t seven o’clock yet, and we went to our task with the best tools we had and soon gathered up all the rusted chains, dragging them down the steps after us.

“I had to force myself to set out for home, so strong was my fascination with the Hermitage, but I knew I had much to do this day and so after a little walk around, during which time I imagined my renovations with great approval and success, we were in the pirogue again.

“When we got back to the landing and I told Allen we were going to bury the chain with Rebecca’s remains he went into a state of sustained hilarity.

“Nevertheless, I dug deep in the soil. I found the casket. I made the hole very very wide. I wreathed the chains around the casket. And then Allen helped me fill in the dirt and the headstone was replaced, and as I said my prayers Allen prayed with me.

“I felt no shimmer of Rebecca. I felt no dizziness. But as I stood there in the still morning I felt sorrow for all the ghosts I had seen in the cemetery over the years and wondered if I was fated to be a roaming spirit after my death.

“Nothing like that had ever occurred to me before. But I thought of it now. I said another long silent prayer for Rebecca and then I whispered, ‘Go into the Light.’

“And so my first manly task had been completed.

“On to the second: of course Allen knew where Terry Sue lived, and to that spot we drove in the Mercedes. I told Allen I would go in alone, but even before entering the trailer I had a fair idea that Grady Breen, our attorney, had not exaggerated the state of ongoing disaster.

“There were the rusted ruined automobiles that he had described, one an old limousine and the other a pickup truck, neither with any tires, and two toddlers were roaming the yard, both

with filthy faces and diapers.

“I knocked, then went in. Tucked at the very end of the trailer there was a voluptuous woman in the bed, a woman with the face of a big china doll, nursing a baby, and a little girl, perhaps ten years old and barefoot, was stirring a pot on the stove of what looked and smelled like grits. The little girl’s arms were covered in bruises and she had a shy fearful manner to her. She had a pretty face and long black hair.

“The closeness of the place, the crowded damp feel of it was overwhelming. And so was the smell. I can best describe it as a mixture of urine, vomit and mildew. There might have been some rotten fruit in the recipe. And certainly there was excrement as well.

“ ‘I’m sorry to break in on you like this,’ I said to the woman. I felt like a giant under the low ceiling. ‘Congratulations on your new baby.’

“ ‘Did you bring any money?’ she asked. Her face stayed lovely—she looked like a Renaissance Madonna—but her voice was full of meanness, or maybe it was just practicality. ‘I’m broke and Charlie’s walked out on me again,’ she said. ‘My stitches are torn and I’m running a fever.’

“ ‘Yeah, I have plenty money,’ I said. I reached into my pockets and took out the thousand dollars I’d taken out of the kitchen petty cash box. She was appropriately flabbergasted. She took it with her left hand and shoved it in a pocket under the covers. Or just under the covers.

“The baby was miraculous. I had never seen one so tiny, so nearly newborn. Its little wrinkly new hands were marvelous. It already had a head of dark wispy hair. My heart went out to it.

“ ‘Brittany, hurry up with that grits,’ said the woman, ‘and go get those kids, I’m going to need you to walk into town and get some groceries.’ She looked up at me. ‘You want some breakfast? This child cooks the best breakfast. Brittany, put on the bacon. Go get those kids.’

“ ‘I’ll take her into town,’ I said. ‘Where’s Tommy?’

“ ‘Out in the woods,’ she said in a sardonic tone. ‘Like he always is. Reading a picture book. I told him if he didn’t take that book back to the store he was going to go to jail. They’re going to come get him. He stole that book. And they knew he did. That woman at the store is as crazy as he is. They’re going to come get him. And they ought to take her to jail too.’

“ ‘Does he have any other books?’ I asked.

“ ‘Who’s got money for books?’ she asked. She was becoming incensed. ‘Look around this place. See that broken window? Look over there. Look real good. See that little girl? She don’t talk. Brittany, give Bethany some grits. What happened to the coffee? Sit down here at the table. Just move that stuff. This child makes the best coffee. I’m telling you, I thank God every day that he sent me Brittany, and he sent her first. Brittany, go get Matthew and Jonas. I done told you twice to do that! This baby’s wet. Hurry up about it. I don’t have money for books. My washing machine’s been broken for two months. Pops never gave me money for books.’

“ ‘All right,’ I told her. ‘I’ll be back.’ I went out into the woods. It wasn’t dense, just the spinally piney woods in these parts where there aren’t many live oaks. I could see this little boy

sitting on a log and he was reading.

"He had black curly hair like mine and he was lean yet well proportioned. He had sharp blue eyes when he looked at me. The book was about art. It was open to Van Gogh's *Starry Night.*

"The boy had on a dirty polo shirt and jeans, and there was a huge black-and-blue mark on his face and one on his arm. On the back of his left hand was a visible burn.

" 'Did Charlie hit you?' I asked.

"He didn't answer me.

" 'Did he push your hand against the heater?' I asked.

"He didn't answer. He turned the page. A painting by Gauguin.

"I said, 'Everything's going to change. I'm your kin. I'm Pops' grandson and you're Pops' son, you know that, don't you?'

"He didn't say anything. Obdurately he looked back at his book and again he turned the page. A painting by Seurat.

"I told him my name. I told him everything would be better. I was about to leave him when I said, 'One day you'll get to go to Amsterdam to see Van Gogh's work in person.'

" 'I'd settle for New York,' he fired back, 'so I could see all the Impressionists and the Expressionists at the Met.'

"I was stunned. His words were so clear, so crisp.

" 'You're some kind of genius,' I said.

" 'No, I'm not,' he said. 'I just read a lot. I read all I wanted to read in the branch library and now I'm working on the Books-a-Million store in Mapleville, where I go to school. My favorite books are about art. Couple of times, Pops brought me books on art.'

"That was an astounding revelation. Pops and books on art. Where would Pops get books on art? What did Pops know of books on art? Yet he had done it for this bastard son whom he allowed to live in squalor in this place.

"Thank God I still had some more money, about fifty dollars. 'Here,' I said. 'This will work wonders at the bargain table. Don't steal anymore.'

" 'I never stole,' he said. 'That's my mother talking. You listen to my mother and you'd think Charlie pushed my hand up against the heater.'

" 'Gotcha. The point is, you can buy some to own with that.'

" 'Who's your favorite painter in the whole world?' he asked.

" 'Hard to say,' I answered.

" 'Like if you could only save one painting from the Third World War,' he pushed, 'what would it be?'

" 'Have to be Renaissance. Have to be a Madonna,' I replied, 'but I'm not sure which one. Probably one by Botticelli, but then maybe Fra Filippo Lippi. But there are others. Just not sure.' I thought of the beautiful woman inside nursing the baby. I wanted to mention her in connection

to a Madonna but I didn't.

"He nodded. 'I'd save Dürer,' he said. 'Salvador Mundi—you know, the face of Christ with the hair parted in the middle.'

" 'That's a good choice,' I said. 'Maybe much better than mine.' I hesitated. We'd come a lot further in this conversation than I'd thought possible when I drove out here. 'Listen to me,' I said. 'Would you like to go off to a good school, a boarding school, you know, get a fine education, get out of here?'

" 'I can't leave Brittany,' he said. 'Wouldn't be fair.'

" 'What about the others?'

" 'I don't know,' he answered. He sighed like a big man with a big burden. 'My mother, she doesn't really want us,' he said. 'She wasn't so bad when Brittany and I were little. But now that there's all the others, she hits us a lot. I have to get between her and Brittany and sometimes I can't do it. I don't let her hit the little ones at all. I just take the belt right out of her hand.'

"I was revolted, but I had no solution. I had all my life heard that there are real problems with the welfare system and with the foster care system, and I didn't know what to do.

" 'I understand,' I responded. 'You can't leave them behind.'

" 'That's right,' he said. 'I'm going to a better school now than Brittany but she's getting a good education. I can tell you that much. She does her homework and she's smart. I don't know the answer.'

" 'Well, listen to me,' I said. 'I'm not going to forget about you. I'll come back with more money. Maybe I can make everything better for your mother and all of you, and she won't want to hit the children.'

" 'How would you do that?'

" 'Let me think on it, but believe me. I will be back. Good-bye, Uncle Tommy.'

"That brought the first smile out of him, and as I waved he waved back.

"Then he jumped off the log and he ran after me. I stopped, of course, to let him catch up.

" 'Hey, do you believe in the lost kingdom of Atlantis?' he asked.

" 'Well, I do believe it's lost, but I don't know if I believe it's real,' I said.

"He laughed a real belly laugh.

" 'What do you think, Tommy? Do you believe in it?'

"He nodded. 'I hope to find the ruins actually,' he said. 'I want to lead a party to find it. You know, an underwater expedition.'

" 'Sounds wonderful,' I said. 'We'll talk about it as soon as I have time. I've got to go to work now.'

" 'Really? I thought you were so rich you didn't have to work or even go to school. That's what everybody says.'

" 'I mean work on my problems, Tommy, you know, special things that I feel ought to be done.

I'll see you soon again. I promise. Can I give you a hug?' I leaned down and did it before he could commit himself. He was a solid, loving little creature. I really adored him.

"When I got to the car Allen was shaking his head.

" 'I hope you don't want us to clean up this place,' he said. 'That septic tank in back is overflowing something awful.'

" 'So that's what that smell is,' I said. 'I didn't know.'

"As soon as I reached Aunt Queen on the car phone I described the situation to her and asked if I might instruct Grady Breen to purchase a decent house for Terry Sue and her children. The title should be in our name with full insurance of every sort, and the woman would need furniture, appliances, new kitchenware, the works.

" 'You can't imagine this level of poverty,' I explained. 'And this woman hits her children and I haven't begun to figure what to do about that except it might stop if the house and the conditions were improved. At least I hope so. As for Tommy, he's brilliant.' I filled in all the relevant details.

"Of course she wanted to call Grady herself. But I said it was something I had to do. It was a job of maturity and it was important.

"Within half a minute I had Grady on the phone. We agreed that the woman's house had to be in a moderately priced new development outside of Ruby River City, Autumn Leaves being the ideal tract according to Grady, with all new construction, new appliances, new pots and pans, new everything, and that she had to have a full-time cleaning woman and a full-time nanny for the children.

"Grady would become her personal financial advisor and financial guardian. We'd pay the taxes, insurance, utilities, television cable and hired help direct. And of course Terry Sue had to have an income, and we decided upon one that was about equal to what she would have earned as a secretary in Grady's office. We thought that would give her a real spiritual lift.

" 'It's foolproof,' I said. 'The nanny and the cleaning woman will be working for you, and Terry Sue will have no call whatsoever to hit her kids. In front of those people she probably will be ashamed to hit her kids.'

"Meantime Brittany would switch over to the Catholic school that Tommy was attending, the only Catholic school in Mapleville and one with the cachet of a private prep school, and we'd get some medical help for the little girl Bethany, who didn't talk.

"As for the mysterious Charlie who had walked out of Terry Sue's life, according to Grady, he wasn't 'all that bad by any stretch,' but the baby in Terry Sue's arms wasn't his and he was a bit disgusted that the real father hadn't stepped up, and who that might be was open to question.

"I advised Grady to have a DNA test done to determine if this baby had been fathered by Pops. I felt it was only right to do so. I had a deep suspicion that Pops was the father, that the baby had been conceived in the aftermath of Sweetheart's death, and that Charlie didn't know what to do

about it.

“ ‘Look, Grady,’ I said, ‘this is a situation that’s never going to be perfect, but I think we can do these things to make it better. If men come and go in this new house there’s nothing we can do about it. At least we have made Terry Sue independent. She doesn’t have to put up with anybody whom she doesn’t want. Just keep her income steady and what she does with it is her business. If she starves her children, then we give the housekeeper money for groceries. And the nanny cooks and serves. We’ll fix it till it’s not broken anymore.’

“What I didn’t confide to Grady was that I had dreams that Tommy would come someday to live at Blackwood Manor. I had dreams that Tommy would someday travel the world with me and Mona and Aunt Queen and Nash. I had dreams that Tommy would someday become a brilliant scholar and, who knows, maybe even a brilliant painter. Maybe Tommy would find the lost kingdom of Atlantis. In essence I had dreams that someday Tommy would become an official Blackwood.

“I also didn’t confide to Grady how much I judged Pops, though I tried not to do it, for leaving his son, Tommy, in this mess, and how loveless he had been to this woman Terry Sue. But then, maybe there was more to it than I in my youth could understand.

“Only after this was finished and I had almost reached home in the Mercedes did I remember my promise to take little Brittany to the grocery store. I told Allen he’d have to go back and take little Brittany to the grocery store and stock up the trailer.

“Of course he had a wisecrack or two, but in general he was agreeable and said he would go back in the pickup and take little Brittany wherever she wanted to go and buy them everything from soup to nuts.

“And so the second task of Manhood was done. Now for the third.

“I went home, showered and changed into my best Armani suit, pale violet shirt and lucky Versace tie, and with a passionate heart and a delirious head I went out to see my beloved Mona Mayfair, stopping only at a florist on St. Charles Avenue to buy her a big bouquet of daisies and other spring flowers. It seemed very fresh and soft and beautiful to me, this bouquet, and I wanted to put it tenderly into her arms. I dreamed of her soft kisses as the woman put the paper around the flowers, and driving towards the Mayfair house on First and Chestnut I counted the moments until two o’clock arrived.”

30

“If ever anybody was more in love than me that day I should like to speak to that person and hear it proved from his or her lips. I was floating with happiness. I parked half a block away, so as not to be espied by an evil opposing Mayfair, and then, bouquet in hand (I had pushed back the florist paper to make a mere cuff of it) I approached the gate, coming along the fence beneath a great shrub of crape myrtles that were already wildly and beautifully in bloom.

“In fact, the entire Garden District seemed fragrantly blooming and the streets so utterly deserted that I did not have to be subjected to ordinary individuals who weren’t in love.

“As for Goblin, when he appeared beside me I told him firmly that I had to complete this mission alone, and he was to leave me now if he ever wanted a civil word from me again.

“ ‘I love you, I’ve told you that. Now give me my time with Mona,’ I said crossly.

“To my astonishment he gave me loving kisses on my cheek and whispered ‘Au revoir’ to me and obediently disappeared. An aftertaste lingered, a shimmering feeling of good will and deliberate generosity that was as palpable as the breeze.

“Of course I had hoped that Mona would be waiting for me with backpack, suitcase and passport in hand.

“But soon as I reached the wrought-iron gate a tall, elegant individual came to meet me, shattering my hope of escape with Mona utterly, though he had a most compassionate look on his vibrant face.

“He was svelte, if not downright swanky, with prematurely white curly hair and quick inquisitive eyes. His clothes were positively dashing. They looked old-fashioned in cut, like something from a drama about the nineteenth century, but what part of that century I didn’t know.

“ ‘Come in, Tarquin,’ he said with a French accent. He turned the brass knob, whereas Mona had used a key. ‘I’ve been waiting for you. You’re most welcome. Come in. Please. I want to talk with you. Follow me into the garden, if you will.’

“ ‘But where’s Mona?’ I asked, being as civil as I knew how.

“ ‘Oh, no doubt combing her long red hair,’ he said with the most exquisite intonation, ‘so that she can throw it over yonder balcony,’ he pointed upwards to the iron railings, ‘and lure you like Rapunzel did her forbidden prince.’

“ ‘Am I forbidden?’ I asked. I tried to resist his beguiling manner but it was difficult.

“ ‘Oh, who knows?’ he said with a world-weary sigh, but his smile was brilliant. ‘Come with me, and call me Oncle Julien, if you will; I’m your Oncle Julien as surely as your Aunt Queen gave her embrace to Mona last night. And, by the way, that was a stunning gift, the cameo. Mona will always treasure it. May I call you Tarquin? I have already, haven’t I? Do I have that much of your trust?’

“ ‘You invited me in, didn’t you?’ I replied. ‘I thank you very much for that.’

“We were walking now on a flagstone path beside the house, and to our right lay a great garden with an octagonal pattern of boxwood around its lawn. There were Grecian marble statues here and there—a Hebe, I think, and a bathing Venus—and beds of exquisite spring flowers and some small citrus trees, and one bearing a single lemon of monstrous size. I paused to look at it.

“ ‘Isn’t it charming?’ he said. ‘The little tree puts all its heart into the one lemon. If it had many, no doubt they’d be of regular size. You might say the Mayfair clan does something very similar. Here, come let’s walk on.’

“ ‘You mean with regard to the Legacy,’ I said. ‘They put everything into one Designée,’ I continued, ‘and she has to be guarded from intrigues with those who aren’t marriageable and I’ve somehow been found wanting?’

“ *‘Mon fils,’* he said, ‘you have been found too young! There’s nothing in you that’s unworthy. It’s only that Mona is fifteen and you are not yet a man. And I must confess a little mystery surrounds you which I will explain.’

“We had gone up a few flagstone steps and were now walking past a huge octagonal swimming pool. Hadn’t Aunt Queen said something about Michael Curry almost drowning in this pool? I was befuddled. Everywhere there was beauty. And it was so very quiet.

“Oncle Julien drew my attention to the fact that the shape of the pool was the same as that of the lawn. And in each of the short pillars of the balustrade that octagon was repeated.

“ ‘Patterns on top of patterns,’ he said. ‘Patterns attract spirits, spirits who are lost can see patterns, that’s why they like old houses, grand houses, houses with big rooms filled with the touch of kindred spirits. I think sometimes that once a host of spirits have inhabited a house it’s easier for other spirits to get in. It’s an amazing thing. But come, let me take you into the rear garden. And we will escape the patterns to sit for a while beneath the trees.’

“It was exactly as he had said. As we passed from the flagstones around the pool through a large open double gateway we found ourselves moving out across a loose lawn to an iron table and chairs beneath a huge oak, where the grass grew sparse and the roots were visible, and other young trees to our right—willow, magnolia, maple—were fighting to make a grove.

“I could see the word ‘Lasher’ carved deep into the bark of the oak tree and there was a strange sweet fragrance in the garden, a perfumelike fragrance—something that I could not

associate with flowers. I was shy of asking what the scent was.

"We sat down at the black iron table. It was set with cups and saucers for us and a tall thermal pitcher, which he lifted now to serve.

" 'Hot chocolate, *mon fils,* what do you say to that?'

" 'Oh, marvelous,' I said with a laugh. 'How absolutely delicious. I never expected it.' He filled my cup.

" 'Ah,' he said, as he filled his own, 'you have no idea what a treat it is for me.'

"We sipped, waiting for the temperature to become comfortable, and I saw there were animal crackers on the plate and the old poem by Christopher Morley came to me about this very repast:

> *Animal crackers, and cocoa to drink,*
> *That is the finest of suppers, I think;*

"Quite suddenly, Oncle Julien recited the next two lines:

> *'When I'm grown up and can have what I please*
> *I think I shall always insist upon these.'*

"We both laughed.

" 'Did you plan it on account of the poem?' I asked.

" 'Well, I suppose I did,' he responded. 'And because I thought you'd enjoy it.'

" 'Oh, I'm so thankful. What a thoughtful thing to do.'

"I felt high. I felt happy. This man wouldn't separate me from Mona. He would understand love. But I was forgetting something. I had heard the name Julien Mayfair, I was sure of it. It was in some connection, but I couldn't remember.… Surely not from Mona. No.

"I looked up and to the left at the long three-story flank of the Mayfair house. It was immense and silent. I didn't want it to shut me out.

" 'Do you know of Blackwood Manor?' I asked suddenly. 'It was built in the 1880s. I know this house is far older. We live out in the country. But you have the charm and stillness of the country right here.' I felt foolish for my candor. What was I trying to prove?

" 'Yes, I know of the house,' he said, smiling agreeably. 'It's very beautiful. And my coming there was a macabre and romantic experience, which I wouldn't divulge to you in any detail, except that I must. It bears heavily upon your love for Mona. And so the light must shine in the dark.'

" 'How so?' I was suddenly alarmed.

"The chocolate was now at the perfect temperature. We both drank it at the same time. He sighed with pleasure, and then he filled our cups again. It was, as Mona would have said, perfectly egregiously delicious. But where was Mona?

“ ‘Oh, please tell everything,’ I said. ‘What does it have to do with my love of Mona?’ I found myself trying to calculate his age. Was he older than Pops had been? Surely he was younger than Aunt Queen.

“ ‘It was in the time of your great-great-great-grandfather Manfred,’ said Oncle Julien. ‘He and I belonged to a gambling club here in New Orleans. It was secretive and fashionable and we played hands of poker for bets that did not involve money so much as secret tasks to please the man who won. It was in this very house that we played, I well remember, and your ancestor Manfred had at home his son William, who was a very young bridegroom, and rather afraid of Blackwood Manor and all the responsibilities that it involved. Can you imagine such a thing?’

“ ‘That he was intimidated? Yes,’ I said, ‘I can imagine it though I don’t feel that way myself. I’m the young master there now and I love it.’

“He smiled gently. ‘I believe you,’ he said evenly. ‘And I like you. I see travel in your future, great adventures, roaming the world.’

“ ‘Not alone, however,’ I was quick to answer.

“ ‘Well, on this night in question,’ he went on, ‘when the gambling club was meeting here, it was Manfred Blackwood who won the hand and it was of Julien Mayfair whom he asked for the task to be done.

“ ‘We rode out at once in his automobile to Blackwood Manor and there I saw your marvelous home in all its moonlit glory, the columns the color of magnolia blossoms—one of those southern fantasies that nourish us perpetually in which northerners so seldom believe. Your great-great-great-grandfather Manfred took me inside and up the winding steps to an unoccupied bedroom and there he declared to me what I must do.

“ ‘He produced an artful Mardi Gras mask and a rich red velvet cloak lined in gold satin, and he said that, clothed in this apparel, I must deflower William’s young bride, for William himself, who soon appeared, had been absolutely unable to do it, and both Manfred and William had seen such masked trickery in a recent opera in New Orleans and they felt it would work here.

“ ‘ “But hasn’t your wife seen the same opera with you?” I asked William, for I too had seen it at the opera house in New Orleans only a week before. “Yes,” William responded. “Which is all the more reason why she will go along.”

“ ‘*Alors.* Never one to turn my back upon a virgin and having only respect and compassion for a young woman so far cheated of a gentle and loving wedding night, I donned the mask and the cloak and went about the enterprise, vowing that I should wring from the young woman tears of ecstasy or count myself a damned soul, and suffice it to say that I emerged from the bedroom some forty-five minutes later a victor on the Stairway to Heaven, having achieved my highest goals.

“ ‘Now from this union there came your great-grandfather Gravier. Do you follow my drift?’

“I was stunned into perfect silence.

“ ‘Now, within a few months after the birth of Gravier,’ Julien continued in the same affable and ostensively charming manner, ‘William was able, at my suggestion, to commence his connubial duties by means of the mask and cape, and never was your great-great-grandmother ever the wiser as to the nature of the first encounter, and so on went their conjugal bliss, or so Manfred told me, the mild-mannered William very likely depending upon the mask and cape as long as fate required.

“ ‘Now in time the young woman in question went to her reward in heaven, as we say, and William took a second wife, only to discover that he could not deflower her any more than he’d been able to deflower his first wife, and once again Manfred called upon me to don the mask and cloak, and so I did, becoming the father of the noble lady whom you call your Aunt Queen. Ah, such a blessed daughter—.

“ ‘But my point is you are related to me and to mine by blood.’

“I was speechless.

“As I looked at him, as I sat there with the heat pumping in my cheeks, trying to fathom what he was saying to me, trying to evaluate what he was saying, some small voice inside said it was impossible, he couldn’t be that old, he didn’t look that old, the numbers weren’t right for him to have been the father of Aunt Queen’s older brother, Gravier, or of Aunt Queen herself, but maybe he was very young then, I didn’t know.

“But far louder than any voice that troubled me about years or numbers was the voice that said, ‘Both you and Mona see spirits, Tarquin, and you are hearing an explanation of how that tendency came about. Oncle Julien’s blood gave you those genes, Tarquin. His blood gave you the receptors which Mona also enjoys.’

“As for the desk in the parlor of Blackwood Manor, the one round which William’s ghost appeared to hover, I intended to go home and tear it apart.

“Right then I sat there in total shock. I decided to drink the second cup of chocolate and I did. I grabbed for the pitcher and refilled my cup. Quietly he drank from his own.

“ ‘It’s not been my purpose to wound you, Tarquin,’ said Oncle Julien, his voice very soft with affection. ‘Far from it. Your youth and your sincerity appeal to me. And I see this lovely bouquet of flowers which you’ve brought to Mona, and this touches me that you want so desperately to love her.’

“ ‘I do love her,’ I said.

“ ‘But we are a dangerously inbred family, Tarquin. And you cannot be with Mona. Even if you were both of age, my blood in your veins rules it out. Over time I have come to see that my genes in my offspring tended to dominate, and this has sometimes caused grief. When I was … when I was thoughtless and free and rebellious, when I hated time and was desperate, I didn’t care about such things, but I care very much about them now. You could say I exist in a Purgatorial state of concern about them. That’s why I must warn you that you can’t be with

Mona. You must leave Mona to her ghosts and you must go home to yours.'

" 'I won't do it, Julien,' I said. 'I want to respect you and I do respect you, even though you deceived my ancestor, this shivering virgin whom you seduced in the very bed in which I sleep now. But I have to hear rejection from Mona's own lips.'

"He took a deep swallow of his hot chocolate and looked away thoughtfully as though it comforted him to see the maple tree and the willow and the huge strapping magnolia that promised to dominate the little glen.

" 'Tell me something, young one,' he said. 'Do you pick up a strange fragrance in this yard?'

" 'Yes, it's overpowering,' I said. 'I didn't want to ask about it. But I can smell it. It's sweet.'

"There seemed a sudden change in his demeanor. He went from charming ease to fatality.

" 'Once again, I must say it, *mon fils,* that you must absolutely never be with Mona,' he said. 'And you will forgive me that I brought you to this spot.'

" 'What do you mean? Why do you say that to me? Who's to say that we won't be faithful to each other until we're grown? Three years from now, can't she make up her mind for herself? I'll hold her to my heart, I'll wear her hair in my locket of her and when the time comes I'll walk with her down the aisle.'

" 'No, that can never be. Please understand how much I love Mona and how much I respect you and know you to be of fine character. But you can see spirits, *mon fils,* and you can catch the scent of the dead. You know that buried here in this spot are mutations who should never have been born to this family. Take my confidence, *mon fils,* that if you marry Mona your children may be these mutations as well. That you can catch the scent is proof of it, I must confess.'

" 'Are you telling me you killed and buried Mona's child here?' I demanded.

" 'No. Mona's child is living,' he answered. 'Its destiny is a different matter, I can well say. But there must be no more of such creatures, not by the name of Mayfair, and Mona will never have any other name.'

" 'You're wrong!' I said.

" 'Don't despise me, Tarquin, for your own sake,' he said. He seemed endlessly patient. 'I thought if I explained things to you it would be easier. And maybe it will be in the course of time.'

" 'Tarquin!' I heard my name called. I turned to my left. In the broad gateway by the pool it was Michael Curry there who had called out to me and beside him stood Rowan Mayfair, and both were looking at me as though I had done something wrong.

"I rose immediately.

"They came towards me. They were both in casual, at-home dress. And Michael had a build on him in his blue work shirt that made my mouth water.

"Rowan spoke first. She was kindly. 'What are you doing here, Tarquin?' she asked.

" 'Well, I'm speaking to Julien,' I said. 'We were just having hot chocolate and visiting here.' I

turned and gestured to the right but Julien wasn't there. I glanced at the table and then looked back to it. Except for my bouquet there was nothing there. No thermal silver pitcher, no cups, no animal crackers, nothing.

"The breath went out of me.

" 'My God,' I said. I made the Sign of the Cross. 'I tell you, I was speaking to him. I burnt my tongue on the second cup of hot chocolate. The pitcher, it was silver. He let me in at the front gate! He was telling me that I couldn't be with Mona, he said we were related. I …' I stopped. I sank down in the chair.

"Nobody knew better than me what had happened! Yet my eyes searched the garden for him. And again I stared at the empty table. I laid my hand on the bouquet. And where was Goblin? Why hadn't Goblin warned me? How impatient I'd been with Goblin, and Goblin had let me fend for myself!

"Dr. Rowan Mayfair came behind me and put her hands on my shoulders. I felt soothed immediately by the way that she massaged me. She actually bent down and kissed my cheek. Rampant, comforting chills went through me. Oh, the pure sweetness of it. Michael Curry sat opposite and he took my hand and held it firmly. He was like the uncle I never knew.

"God, how I loved them. How I wanted to be connected to them. How I wanted to love Mona with their blessing. Desperately, I needed their comfort now.

" 'I'm going to be locked up,' I stammered. 'Julien Mayfair. Was he ever a real man?'

" 'He was real, all right,' said Rowan Mayfair in her patient and sincere husky voice. 'He's a legend in the Mayfair clan. He died in 1914.' "

31

“They brought me into the house. It was dim and magnificent. They showed me the shadowy double parlor with its carved archway and shining floors and they took me through the handsome dining room with its murals of Riverbend Plantation, long ago sacrificed to the curvature of the Mississippi River as it changed its fickle path.

“Rowan was the tour guide, pointing out details with a low-key simplicity, her voice warm, though her gray eyes were always cold. She was very shapely in her white shirt and pants and seemed at times to be ruminating in a dream.

“Then it was in the sunlit kitchen that we settled at a glass table with brass dolphins as a base to it, and we were ranged in comfortable brushed-steel chairs. There was a cozy back stairs in the corner and a small gas fireplace for cold days, but this wasn’t one of them, and beyond the French doors we could see the rampant jasmine and the banana trees that grew around the wall of the rear garden where I had sat with Julien, so oblivious to the real world.

“ ‘But how do I know you’re real?’ I asked them logically. ‘He seemed in those moments as real as anybody, except—.’ And then I had to admit it, the things that were wrong, that he had been a friend to my ancestor Manfred, a sheer impossibility in terms of his appearance, and then there was the matter of his old-fashioned nineteenth-century clothes.

“ ‘Ghosts tip you off and then distract you,’ I confessed.

“Michael Curry nodded his head. I knew instinctively that he had seen spirits, plenty of them. And he was such a genial man, almost humble. Yet he gave an impression of incredible strength. He had exceptionally large hands and they looked gentle.

“ ‘What did he tell you, son?’ he asked. ‘Can you share this information with us?’

“ ‘That he had sired my great-great-grandfather,’ I said. I proceeded to recount for them the operatic drama and how it had been done. And that it seemed to mean that Mona and I both carried a sensitivity to see spirits and that was why we mustn’t marry on any account.

“It may have been utterly self-defeating to repeat these things to Michael and Rowan but I had no intention of holding them back. I thought they should know everything. They should know why Oncle Julien had interfered.

“With my eyes opened now I told them of Oncle Julien’s words, that he existed in a ‘Purgatorial state of concern’ about his genes dominating his offspring, and how he had asked me

about the sweet scent in the backyard, and of how I could smell that scent and had not wanted to say anything until asked.

"Both Rowan and Michael seemed fascinated by these confessions, and I went on to tell them that Oncle Julien had said that mutations were buried in the earth of the rear garden, but not Mona's child, Mona's mutated child was living, and this seemed to enthrall them and they asked that I repeat it and I did.

"At this point I became so miserable, so certain that they would not let me see Mona, and so sure of failure in every regard that I began to cry. I begged them not to turn me away. I told them how much I wanted to be part of them. I had no shame in it. And perhaps in my own heart I felt I was worthy somehow.

" 'I don't come as a pauper,' I said. 'I don't come as a beggar. I don't offer Mona a small cottage in which to live.'

" 'We know that, son,' said Michael Curry. 'And forgive us if we seemed lacking in respect when we came to Blackwood Manor, but Mona has put us through some wild escapades and at times we forget our manners. Yesterday was one of those times. Believe me when I say we worry about Mona.'

" 'But what is so very wrong with Mona being with me? Do you believe it's that we both see spirits?'

" 'No, it's not that in itself,' said Michael. He sat back comfortably in his chair as he addressed me. 'The fact is, there are medical reasons, good medical reasons that have to do with Mona's health.'

" 'It's Mona who has the right to talk about the medical aspects of things,' Rowan said in her softly running husky voice, 'not us. But we can tell you that Mona isn't acting wisely and we are trying to guard Mona from herself.' She was soft and sincere.

"I wasn't sure what to say. 'I understand your problem,' I replied, 'because I can't divulge the things that Mona has said to me. But can't I see her? Can't you let her come down? Can't I tell her about the ghost of Oncle Julien? Can't I ask her what she has to say?'

" 'You do understand,' said Michael, 'that this was a powerful apparition. This ghost chose to intervene in a powerful way. Have you ever seen a ghost like this?'

" 'Yes,' I said, 'I have seen ghosts that strong.'

"I told them both the whole story of Rebecca. And as I did so I knew I was being my own worst enemy again. But there could be nothing under this roof but frankness, or so it seemed to me. My love for them ordained that frankness.

"I also told them about Goblin. As much as I thought right.

" 'Don't you see that I belong with her?' I said finally. 'She's the only one who will ever understand me, and I'm the only one who'll ever understand her?'

" 'Son, you have your own ghosts,' said Michael, 'and she has hers. You have to move away

from each other. You have to seek a decent normality on your own.'

" 'Oh, God, that's impossible!' I said. 'We'll never achieve it. Besides, who's to say we can't achieve it better together if it's achievable at all?'

"I could see now they were pondering my words. I had made some incidental impression of intelligence on them if nothing else. They hadn't kicked me out of their house yet in any event, and now an overpowering urge to have hot chocolate came over me, a stupid, insidious desire to drink hot chocolate in large amounts.

"And to my utter amazement, Michael rose and said, 'I'll fix it for you. I'd like some myself.' I was stunned. They were a family of mind readers on top of everything else. I heard him laugh under his breath as he went to the pantry. Then came the noises and the deep delicious fragrance of the heated milk.

"Rowan sat there solemnly and pondering, and then, very softly, she spoke. Her voice as usual was much gentler than her angular face, with its high cheekbones and blunt-cut wavy hair.

" 'Tarquin, let me lay it out,' she said. 'Let me violate Mona's confidentiality. Let me make that judgment call. Mona has given me permission to do it, to tell you things about her, which really shouldn't be told. She isn't really old enough to give that permission. But let me go on. Mona endangers herself every time she has intimate relations with a man. Do you follow me? She runs the risk of hurting herself severely. We're trying to keep Mona alive.'

" 'But we used protection, Dr. Mayfair,' I insisted. Nevertheless this was frightening news. I had dried my eyes by this time and was trying to behave like an adult.

" 'Of course you did,' said Dr. Mayfair, raising her eyebrows slightly, 'but even the best of precautions can fail. There's always the possibility that Mona will conceive. And just the smallest miscarriage weakens Mona in ways that a normal woman does not have to worry about. It's all because of the baby born to Mona, the baby whom Oncle Julien mentioned to you in the garden outside. It left Mona vulnerable. And we're trying to keep Mona alive. We're trying to discover how to fix what's wrong so Mona won't be so vulnerable, but for that we need time.'

" 'Dear God,' I whispered. 'That's why Mona was at Mayfair Medical the day I saw her.'

" 'Precisely,' said Rowan. She was becoming a little more heated, but she sounded compassionate at the same time. 'We're not insensitive monsters,' she said. 'Really we're not. We're trying to get her to stop seducing her cousins and to cooperate with our regimen of blood tests and nutritional supplements so we can find out what's going wrong inside of her and why she so often conceives. Now, I've told you more than I should, and by the way, let me add that she is in love with you and she's stopped roaming since she met you; you have every right to know that, but we can't countenance her being with you.'

" 'No,' I said, 'what you can't countenance is her being alone with me. Let me see her here with you present. Let me see her with a vow of celibacy. What could be wrong with that?'

"Michael came to the table with the very silver pitcher I had seen in the garden and cups for

us all. It was the same damned china. The hot chocolate was as rich and delicious as it had been in the vision and I was ready for a second cup almost at once. I wanted to tell them about the pitcher and the china, but I wanted even more to talk about Mona.

" 'Thank you for humoring me on this score—I mean with this chocolate,' I said. 'I don't know what's the matter with me.'

"Michael refilled my cup for the second time. I drank deeply. It tasted better than anything known to man.

"I sat back. 'I've been level with you,' I said. 'Can't you be level with me? Tell her that I'm here—.'

" 'She knows that, Quinn,' said Michael. 'Her powers of clairvoyance are tremendous. She knew it when you came through the front gate. She's wrestling with the very things Rowan confided to you. The truth's coming full force on her. She's sick. And then there's the question of her lost offspring—the one that Julien told you was alive. She heard that news when you did, and she was the one who came to us and told us to come down and welcome you in.'

"I wanted to say this was a great consolation, which it was, but I wished they had told me before this time and I didn't want to complain. Also something else occurred to me. Why had they interrupted my conversation with Julien when they did? If they hadn't come, how much more would Julien have said?

" 'That's a question to which we don't have an answer,' said Michael, having read my thoughts again.

" 'But you stopped him. You stopped him from revealing family secrets,' I said. 'You thought it best.'

" 'We did,' said Dr. Mayfair. 'We thought it best.'

" 'Does it matter to you that I am one of you?' I asked in a sober voice.

"Neither of them had an answer for me. Then Rowan spoke in the most dejected manner. 'If only Mona wasn't ill,' she said. 'If only we could find a cure. Then everything would be different, Quinn. As it stands now, what is the point of asking you to cast your lot with us? What is the point of asking you to be genetically tested as all of us are? What is the point of you taking on the weight of our history and our curses and all we suffer and know?'

" 'Genetic testing?' I asked. 'To see if I have a susceptibility to see spirits?' I drank down the hot chocolate. Michael poured me another cup.

" 'No,' said Rowan, 'to see if you could produce the mutation in your offspring as Mona did.'

" 'I want it,' I said.

"She nodded. 'All right. I'll set it up at Mayfair Medical. You report in to Dr. Winn Mayfair. Call his secretary to arrange the time.'

" 'And now, where are you keeping my darling princess?'

"I heard her from the top of the back stairs: 'Quinn!'

“I rose at once and ran up to her, jogging left then left again with the little stairway, and then throwing my arms around her as we came together on the second floor.

“ ‘Remember my warnings,’ came Rowan’s voice from below.

“ ‘I promise, no penetration,’ said Mona. ‘Now leave us alone.’

“I picked her up off her feet.

“ ‘Oh, my egregious boy!’ she declared, her breasts hot beneath her snow white shirt, her red hair everywhere in my eyes and against my heart, her naked legs smooth and beautiful to my touch.

“I carried her down the hallway. ‘Where do we go, Princess Mona of Mayfair?’ I asked. ‘I have wrestled with angels and dragons to be with you!’

“ ‘To the very front of the house, Prince Tarquin of Blackwood,’ she answered. ‘There is my bower among the branches of the oaks.’

“We passed up a short few steps, out of a narrow hallway, to a big bedroom and through it into a large hallway and on past a regal staircase to the very front where my beloved, my red-haired beloved, signaled me to make a left turn.

“It was the very front bedroom, all right, and its two floor-length windows were open to the upper porch, and they seemed to be filled by the oak branches of the two trees which stood before the house.

“We fell onto the bed.

“I was all wound up with Mona’s virginal white blouse and its voluminous sleeves and lace, and we were tumbling in her white pillows, and I pressed my hand against her hot wet panties, and with the pressure of my palm brought her to the finish with divine blushes that made me come.

“Again we did it, and this time more slowly and playfully, and then again, and I was as always spent before she was, but I was in no mood to desert her in her need.

“It must have been an hour that we lay together, and all the while the door was partially open and there came no sound of any intruding person in the house.

“We were on our honor and on a small white lace baby quilt, which I had pretty much spoilt with my overspilled love. ‘Entirely washable, and destined for the purpose,’ said my Lady Love as she folded it and cast it away.

“Now it was the season for kisses and for snuggling and for lying back against the pillows and looking out of the windows at the oak branches in which the lithe little brown squirrels tripped among the clinging green ferns.

“ ‘I never want to leave you,’ I told her. ‘But awful things have happened to me since we were together,’ I confessed.

“I told her all about the stranger and his bizarre assault. I told her how he had read my very thoughts about the Hermitage. And how I had given the order for the renovations and he and I

would be partners in it, but I was more sure than ever that I had seen him dumping bodies by the light of the moon.

"She was fascinated.

" 'Doesn't that scare you?' she asked.

" 'Of course not,' I said. 'I'm more scared of Oncle Julien.'

"She laughed.

" 'Does Oncle Julien come any time you want him?'

"She looked sad.

" 'No,' she said, 'it's more like he comes when he wants to come, and now you have to tell me everything that happened to you with him. I overheard your telling Rowan and Michael, I admit. I was an eavesdropper. But you have to tell me. Describe him. Describe how he acted. I have to know. I'm so ferociously jealous when Oncle Julien appears to anybody else.'

"I recounted the whole experience for her. I described Julien's dapper clothes, his gentle manner. I described the flowered china pattern. She knew it. She said it was Royal Antoinette. She wasn't sure they even had it in his time. She said he had snatched the image out of the pantry. He was a clever ghost.

"She was deeply affected by the fact that he had said her child was alive. That meant the world to her. I had a jewel there to give her in that simple intelligence.

" 'But doesn't a ghost ever lie?' I asked. I went, in my mind, back over my experience with Rebecca. Perhaps she never lied to me. She only deceived me and there can be a difference.

"I got up out of the bed. I went to the window and looked into the oak branches. It was so beautiful here. You'd never guess that you were in the middle of the city—that the waterfront lay a scant eight blocks from here to the left, that St. Charles Avenue with its legendary streetcars was only three blocks to the right.

" 'You know what I think?' I asked.

" 'What is it?' she said, sitting up. She pulled her knees up and wrapped her arms around her legs. Her hands looked beautiful in her big laced ruffles. Her hair fell down around her shoulders in a way I'll never forget.

" 'I think I need you much more than you need me,' I said.

" 'Quinn, that's not true,' she said. 'I love you. You're the first person I've ever fallen in love with. It came on me all last night after they brought me home. It hurts and it's splendid and it's real. I need you because you're fresh and vital and you're not part of us.'

"She sounded so earnest.

" 'But I am,' I protested. 'I told you what Julien told me. He took the place of my great-great-grandfather William, I told you.'

" 'But you weren't brought up a Mayfair,' she said. 'And you come with a strong name and tradition of your own. You live in a manor house with its own legends and grandeur! Besides,

what does it matter? I need you and I love you, that's the point.'

" 'Mona, was it true what Dr. Rowan told me, that every time …?'

" 'Yes, it's true. They don't know why. But I'm constantly ovulating, constantly fertile; I conceive constantly and I lose the offspring, and every time it happens I'm weakened. More calcium is pulled out of my bones. Now, it is extremely possible—totally possible actually—that if they performed a hysterectomy on me, the problem would be solved, but then I'd never have children, and they're hoping that somehow they can solve the problem without that step.'

"I was frightened by all this, frightened for her. That I had unknowingly hurt her terrified me.

" 'If it means your life, Mona, you have to let them do the hysterectomy,' I said. 'You can't keep risking your very life.'

" 'I know, Quinn, I think about it constantly,' she said. 'And so does everyone else. There will come a moment when they say that it's time to do it, and that time may be very soon. Think about that, Quinn. Does the Lord of Blackwood Manor want a bride that can never have a child?'

" 'I love you, Mona. I don't need children. In fact, I know of a child we can have.'

" 'Just have?' she said, laughing. 'You mean just like that?'

"I told her about Pops, about Terry Sue and Tommy. Brilliant little Tommy sitting on the log with the book of paintings in his hand, and the black-and-blue mark on his face.

" 'Wow, think of it!' she said. 'It would be like Cinderella! You could just change his entire life!'

" 'Yep. I intend to do that, no matter what happens. So don't think about me anymore when you think about this hysterectomy. I'm pretty sure that Terry Sue is open to bargaining where Tommy's ownership is concerned. I'm going to help Terry Sue with the whole passel of them, that's a done deal. But there's one thing I have to ask you.'

" 'You already sound like the man of the house,' she said matter-of-factly. 'I'll do my best.'

" 'No, I'm serious, Mona.'

"I sat on the bed next to her and I kissed her.

" 'Do Rowan and Michael know where your child is?' I asked.

" 'No,' she said, 'I don't think that they do. Sometimes I think that they might—Mayfair Medical is a world unto itself—but no, they couldn't—. I can't stand that idea. I can't stand that they wouldn't tell me. But let's not talk about it, Quinn. Rowan is a cold calculating scientist in many respects, but Rowan has a conscience made out of pure gold. Let's just talk about us.'

"I put my arms around her. Pure gold. The image struck me. Pure gold. I thought of the mausoleum and the mysterious stranger telling me that the mausoleum was made of gold.

" 'There's no way in the world you could run off to Europe with me,' I said. 'You need the treatment that Dr. Rowan is giving you at the medical center, don't you?'

"She sighed. She nodded. 'It was a dream, running away. They're giving me hormone treatments and all kinds of nutrients, I don't know. I'm in and out all during the week. I'm wired

up for two and three hours at a stretch. I don't think there's much progress. I wanted to fly away. It was wrong of me to involve you in my dream, to let you believe it with me for a little while.'

" 'I don't mind,' I said. 'I don't have to go. In fact, I won't go. Not as long as we can see each other, and I think they trust us now. I think they know that I won't hurt you, and you know it too.'

"There came a rap at the door.

"Time for supper, and I was cordially invited to join them downstairs. In fact, they wouldn't hear of my not joining them, and after a quick call to Jasmine to report my whereabouts I appeared in the dining room to find Mona—attired in another gorgeous white shirt with billowing sleeves, this time over a tropical print miniskirt-shorts combination that was, if anything, more sexy than her bare panties had been earlier—and Michael and Rowan, somewhat formally attired.

"Michael looked quite the gentleman in his seersucker three-piece suit, and Rowan wore a lovely simple navy blue dress with a bold triple strand of pearls.

"Only on second glance did it register that Mona had put on Aunt Queen's cameo and that it looked beautiful at her throat.

"To my utter amazement Stirling Oliver of the Talamasca had come to join us and in keeping with the mild late spring weather he wore a white three-piece suit with a lemon yellow tie. I remember that tie for some reason. I don't know why. I remember men's ties. His gray hair was clipped short, combed straight back from his temples, and he looked like a man in his sixties of excellent health.

"They were all vivid impressive people and the house in no way overpowered them or diminished their easy charm.

"I was very glad to see Stirling again and had a strong sense that Aunt Queen would be disturbed if she knew. As it was I had little choice in the matter and that felt very comfortable for me.

" 'I saw your friend, Goblin, outside,' he said confidentially, as he shook my hand. 'He indicated you wished to be on your own.'

" 'Are you serious?' I asked. 'Did you really see him and talk to him?'

" 'Yes, he was right by the gate. He was very strong, but you must realize my talents for such perception are, if anything, rather over-developed. For me the world's a crowded place.'

" 'Was he angry or bitter?' I asked.

" 'Neither,' he said, 'but rather glad to be seen.'

"At this point Mona spoke up, taking our arms as she interposed, 'Why don't I invite him in? We'll make a place at the table for him?'

" 'No, not tonight,' I said. 'I want to be selfish. He has his moments. This is one of mine.'

"The dinner went on swimmingly, with lots of conversation about whether I should in fact go

to Europe, and Michael felt that there comes in each person's life a perfect time to go to Europe and one can go either too early or too late. I agreed with that heartily and then dared to ask if it was at all possible for Mona to go if Aunt Queen would agree to bring another female chaperone dedicated entirely to Mona, and I made it clear in euphemisms, which the august dining room seemed to require, that I would never risk Mona's health or well-being for cheap lust.

"I hope I made half the potent figure that I tried to be. When only Mona consented to everything I said, Rowan went on to state matter-of-factly that Mona couldn't be away from Mayfair Medical at this time, it was simply out of the question, and that if it was at all possible she and Michael would take Mona to Europe so that Mona could have the experience again.

"In fact, Mona went on to explain that it had been on her trip to Europe that her 'condition' had been discovered and the tour had been cut short for that reason and she had come home to undergo intense study at the medical center, plus injections of hormones and nutrients and other drugs as well.

"Throughout, nobody mentioned Mona's mysterious child. And I didn't mention the mysterious stranger.

"We went into the double parlor after the supper and there I drank more brandy than I should. But I fixed the situation with a call to Clem to come get me in Aunt Queen's stretch limousine, with Allen to drive the Mercedes home, which worked out very well, since Aunt Queen was 'entertaining' in her room.

"Michael and Rowan showed no letup of interest in me, or if they did I was a perfect fool. Stirling Oliver was affable and curious as well. We talked about seeing ghosts and I told them all the entire story of Rebecca, again using all the appropriate euphemisms, which the parlor seemed to require. I had the feeling in my semidrunken pride that Mona was enjoying all of this.

"Her eyes were glistening and she never once interrupted me, which struck me as amazing given how very brilliant I found her to be. When she did talk it was to bring me out for Rowan and Michael and Stirling, or to bring them out to me. Of the three, Michael was by far the more talkative and the more given to laughing at himself, though Stirling had a great sense of humor, but Rowan was modest for a doctor, and, as I had found her in the afternoon, her husky voice was much warmer and sweeter than her finely angled face.

"She had the sharp gray eyes of a beauty, and one could believe she was a neurosurgeon by the look of her long tapering hands. Michael was the older one, the rugged one, the one who had worked on 'this house' with his hammer and nails. He spoke of feeling its embrace and of loving its shining floors and its creaks and groans in the small hours. And all of these three alluded modestly and naturally to having seen ghosts.

"Stirling talked of a childhood full of spirits in an English castle. And of discovering the Talamasca during his university years at Cambridge. Michael spoke of nearly drowning off the coast of San Francisco and being rescued by, of all people, Rowan, and of his having come

through it with a power to know certain paranormal things through touch.

"Mona told them all laughingly that Oncle Julien had ransacked the pantry for Royal Antoinette to serve me the hot chocolate, and I told them about the poem by Christopher Morley which I had loved so as a child, and about the cocoa and animal crackers, which I had altogether forgotten to tell any of them until then, and they were impressed with it, and we speculated as to how spirits make up what they do.

" 'But it means God exists, doesn't it?' asked Mona. There was the most poignant tone in her voice.

" 'God or the Devil,' said Dr. Rowan.

" 'Oh, it would be too cruel if the Devil existed without God,' said Mona.

" 'I don't think so,' said Rowan. 'I think it's entirely possible.'

" 'Nonsense, Rowan,' said Michael. 'God exists and God is love.' And with a very deliberate nod to Mona he cautioned Rowan, and I saw at that moment that Mona was looking anxiously away. Then Mona spoke up.

" 'I guess I'll know soon,' she said, 'or I'll know nothing. That's the hard part. Blinking out like a burnt-out bulb.'

" 'That's not going to happen,' I said. 'When you have your treatments at Mayfair Medical, is it tiresome? Can I come and sit with you? Is it possible we could talk or I could read to you? What is it like?'

" 'That would be lovely,' said Rowan, 'until you get tired of it, which would happen at some point.'

" 'Rowan, for the love of Heaven,' said Michael. 'What's gotten into you?'

"Mona started to laugh. 'Yes, Quinn,' she said, laughing still, 'I have to be there for hours. I take the treatments intravenously, that's why I wear long sleeves, to hide the marks. It would be wonderful if you were with me. It doesn't have to be every time. And Rowan's right. When you get tired, I'll understand.'

" 'I'm ashamed that I've never asked if I could visit you during these treatments,' said Stirling. 'We've had so many suppers at the Grand Luminière Café. Why, it never crossed my mind.'

" 'And don't think that you have to,' said Mona. 'I watch the worst television imaginable. I'm hooked on vintage sitcoms. Don't give it another thought.'

"I wanted to vow that I would never get tired. I would bring flowers, and books of poetry to read. But I knew that the realist among us would think all this very lame, and so I let it go for the moment, thinking that later, when it came time to leave, I would ask when I could see Mona again.

" 'I know one thing,' Mona announced, quite suddenly. 'When it comes my time to die, I don't want it to be at Mayfair Medical. I still cherish my dream of going out like Ophelia, on a boat of flowers in a softly running stream.'

“ ‘I don’t think it works very well,’ said Michael. ‘I think the flowers and the floating part of it are wonderful, but then comes the drowning and it’s not so peaceful at all.’

“ ‘Well, then, I’ll settle for a bed of flowers,’ she said. ‘But there has to be a lot of them, you know, and no tubes and needles and bottles of morphine and such things as that. I can imagine the water as long as I’m on a bed of flowers. And there are no doctors around.’

“ ‘I promise,’ said Michael.

“Dr. Rowan said nothing.

“It was an extraordinary moment. I was horrified. But I didn’t dare to speak.

“ ‘Come on, everybody, I’m so sorry I made it glum,’ said Mona. ‘Quinn, let me cheer you up. Have you ever read *Hamlet*? Will you read it to me sometime at Mayfair Medical?’

“ ‘I’d love to,’ I responded.

“We had all seen Kenneth Branagh’s landmark film of *Hamlet* and we’d loved it, and of course I knew the Ophelia underwater scene so very well. It had been a still shot after Gertrude’s long description, all of it beautifully done, due to the fact that Branagh is a genius, we all agreed. I wanted to tell them all about Fr. Kevin’s warning about speaking to ghosts, based on what happened to Hamlet, but I wasn’t sure how I felt about it so I let it slide.

“The remainder of the evening was marvelous. We talked of so many things. Michael Curry loved books, the way that my old teacher Lynelle had loved them, and he thought it was fabulous that I had a new teacher in Nash Penfield, and he thought it perfectly fine that I had never gone to school.

“Rowan agreed wholeheartedly that I had probably missed nothing, that except for a certain margin of affluent American kids who occupy a tiny portion of the classes in ultrafine schools, ‘organized educational experience’ was more painful and unprofitable than anything else.

“Stirling Oliver thought it incredibly wonderful that I was getting such an intense education, wondering aloud what it would be like if so many others could have the same benefits. As for Tommy, whom I described to everyone, everyone believed that he and his brothers and sisters should be given ‘every chance.’ It wasn’t playing God to show them another world.

“I was very surprised by all this, and in a very real way I did not want to go home. I wanted to live in this house with Michael and Rowan and Mona forever. I wanted to know Stirling forever. But in another way, I couldn’t wait to go home. I couldn’t wait to be ‘me’ again, because I had been so strongly accepted. I wanted to tell Nash and Aunt Queen about it. I wanted to set about my studies with Nash. I wanted to set up my visits with Mona. I wanted once more to postpone my trip abroad.

“Now as to that—postponing my trip—Michael had a suggestion. Why not go for a couple of weeks? ‘One can see a lot of Europe in that time,’ he told me. ‘And if you have to choose one country then let me suggest either England or Italy. Either one will send you back transformed.’

“Everybody seemed to think it was a good idea. Stirling and Rowan also suggested Italy. I had

to admit it was a good idea. It would quiet Aunt Queen's desires for me for a little while and Mona would be waiting, she vowed, to hear of all my adventures when I returned.

"Meantime, Clem had come for me, and though the conversation was moving along fiercely, with Michael describing his own visit to Italy, I knew it was time to go.

"Besides, I was really getting drunk.

"On the front porch I took Mona in my arms, vowing to call her the next day and get the times during which she would let me visit with her at Mayfair Medical.

" 'I spend my life there, egregious and beautiful boy,' she said. 'Pick a time, any time.'

" 'When do your spirits flag?'

" 'Four o'clock. I'm so tired of it. I begin to cry.'

" 'I'll come at two and stay with you as long as you allow.'

" 'That will be till six,' she said. 'Then we have dinner in the Grand Luminière Café.'

" 'You can dismiss me then or have my attendance, as you wish. I come with no strings attached.'

" 'You really do love me, don't you?'

" 'Passionately and undyingly.'

"Our final kisses were long and lingering, and drunkenly sweet.

"Then Michael Curry saw me to the gate, which did need a key to unlock it.

"He took me in his arms. He held me tight, and he kissed me, European-style, on each cheek. 'You're a good boy, Quinn,' he said.

" 'Thank you, Michael,' I said. 'I really adore her.'

"As soon as Goblin and I were securely in the back of the limousine I burst into tears.

"On and on we drove, and I couldn't stop crying. And as we crossed the black waters of Lake Pontchartrain, Goblin put his arms around me and he said in his low voice, rather like Ariel in *The Tempest,* 'I'm sorry, Quinn; if I were human, I would cry too.' "

32

“It had been some time since Aunt Queen had held Full Court in her bedroom, or boudoir, as we called it on such occasions, but when I entered the house I was informed by an exquisitely dressed Jasmine—read slinky black cocktail dress and murderous high heels—that this was a special night.

“She was entertaining Nash, of course, because the two were getting on far better than Aunt Queen had ever dreamed, but also a visitor had arrived with gifts of stunning cameos such as Aunt Queen had never beheld. Jasmine threw in a bit of mockery with a roll of her eyes and a lift of her eyebrows. ‘All carved out of jewels,’ she said.

“I was solemnly requested to go upstairs, freshen up, put on my best black Italian suit with handmade English shirt and Church’s shoes and come down to meet the bearer of the stunning gifts. Since I was already pretty much dressed this didn’t involve much inconvenience.

“As to the courtly life, I welcomed the distraction. The liquor I’d drunk had worn off and left me electrified with love and concern for Mona, and I could not possibly have fallen asleep. The night seemed my enemy, with my frightened Goblin no doubt hovering near, and I wanted the lights and cheerful conversation of Aunt Queen’s room.

“ ‘Come, Goblin,’ I said, ‘let’s do this together. We’ve been apart too much lately, you know it. Come with me.’

“ ‘Evil, Quinn,’ he responded, with a sad face, which surprised me. Evil in Aunt Queen’s room? But he was dressed as I was, down to the hand-stitching of his collar and the lacquer of his shoe leather, and he came with me down the stairs. I felt his right hand in my left. I felt a gentle pressure, and then I felt his soft lips against my cheek.

“ ‘I love you, Quinn,’ he said.

“ ‘And I love you, Goblin,’ I replied.

“All this was very unexpected, as was the invitation to visit with Aunt Queen. I hoped the night would continue to give me wonderful things. I hoped I wouldn’t have to crash suddenly amid the knowledge that Mona was seriously sick and that she might not survive her illness, that that was exactly what she and her family had been trying to tell me all during the lively dinner, and Rowan Mayfair’s one outbreak of pessimism had been a sharp admission of the truth.

“What had Mona said, ‘blinking out like a dim bulb.’

“All was light and laughter in Blackwood Manor. A group of the guests were at the piano in the double parlor, and in the dining room yet another little group played cards.

“I passed all this with a cheerful smile and a wave and headed for the back bedroom, finding the door ajar and pushing it wide slowly to announce my presence to the convivial group inside.

“They made a circle, the company, with Aunt Queen in her glory, clothed in one of her priceless feathered white negligees, with a wide white ribbon and a glorious cameo on her bare throat. Her high heels were as always much in evidence, and right opposite her sat Nash, in black tie for the occasion, who stood up as I entered as if I merited such a thing, when I did not.

“Cindy, the nurse, was there in her crisp white uniform and she rose too, to deposit kisses on my cheek, which made me very happy.

“And then I saw, in full clarity, the guest of honor, the generous bringer of fine cameos, the newcomer to Blackwood Manor, who sat at the very opposite of me and did not rise and had no reason to rise as our eyes met.

“At first I simply could not identify what I saw. I knew but I did not know. I understood but I did not understand. All was abundantly clear. Nothing was clear at all. Then very gradually my mind absorbed the details, and do let me record them here so as to brand them into your mind, so as to make them plain to you as they came to be plain to me.

“That this was the mysterious stranger I had no doubt. I knew the shape of the head. I knew the shape and cut of the shoulders. I knew the high square forehead with its beautifully rounded temples, and the black eyebrows and the large black eyes. I knew the long mouth and the smile. I even knew the long black hair.

“But it wasn’t tied back now, this hair. No, it was a wealth of gorgeous waves and curls, tumbled down over the stranger’s shoulders. And it was perfectly obvious from the taut cut of the mysterious stranger’s black satin vest that the mysterious stranger had large full breasts. But the rest of the black tie ensemble of dinner jacket and trousers indicated a man’s body, and indeed the mysterious stranger, despite having glowing skin and rouged lips, was about six feet tall and did have a rather firm jaw.

“Was this a man? Was this a woman? I had no idea.

“And whatever it was, it sat there—sideways on the chair, with its right arm on the high back and its long legs comfortably in front of it and its left hand in its lap—challenging me with its silence, with its sly smile, as Aunt Queen reached for that slack hand, saying:

“ ‘Quinn darling, come here and meet Petronia. She’s brought me the most exquisite cameos, and she made them herself.’

“Shock. Heart-pounding shock. Fury and delirium combined in me as never before.

“ ‘The pleasure’s all mine, Petronia,’ I said. I felt all the liquor I’d drunk rising in me again. ‘But you are very beautiful, let me be so bold as to tell you. Having seen you twice or thrice by moonlight, before this moment, I could only guess.’

“ ‘How generous of you,’ she answered me, and I heard exactly the voice I’d heard in my ear last night, hushed and soft. Of course it was female. Or was it? ‘And you, just come from your red-haired vixen,’ she went on. ‘One would have expected to find you quite blinded by her light.’

“ ‘She’s not a vixen in any sense,’ I declared, my face burning. ‘But don’t let me be wearisome defending her. It’s a pleasure that you and I are now properly introduced.’

“She turned, laughing under her breath to Aunt Queen.

“ ‘He is quite the versatile gentleman,’ she said. She looked back at me, the eyes flashing. ‘I rather thought I would like you if we came to really know each other. And do stop trying to determine if I am a man or a woman. The fact is I’m a good part both and therefore neither one. I was just explaining to your Aunt Queen. I was born endowed with the finest traits of both sexes and I drift this way and that as I choose.’

“Nash had brought a chair for me to join the circle. Jasmine had poured the champagne in my tulip glass. I sat down across from this spectacle, this creature, and I felt Goblin take hold of my shoulder.

“ ‘Caution, Quinn,’ he said to me. And well he might because I was dangerously feverish of mind and soul and once again drunk. I was appalled by what was happening and monstrously exhilarated.

“I saw the mysterious stranger’s eyes shoot to my left where Goblin stood, but she could not see Goblin. She only knew that Goblin was there.

“ ‘So you think of me as a woman,’ she said to me now. ‘Forgive me for reading your mind, it’s a trait I can’t seem to keep in harness. Once one is blessed with such a gift it runs rampant.’

“ ‘Really,’ said Aunt Queen, ‘you mean it’s quite spontaneous? You simply hear people’s thoughts.’

“ ‘Some people more than others,’ she said. ‘Quinn’s thoughts come rather glaringly clear to me. And what a brilliant young man you are.’

“ ‘So people tell me,’ I said. ‘And how is it that the mausoleum on Sugar Devil Island bears your name?’

“ ‘It’s the name of Petronia’s great-great-grandmother, Quinn,’ said Aunt Queen, obviously trying to take the sharp edge off my foray into the conversation. ‘We’ve been talking about this very person, and about the subject of reincarnation. Petronia is a great believer in it, and that it happens over and over in her family, and of a time in ancient Pompeii, she has strange dreams.’

“A terrible sense of foreboding came over me. *Ancient Pompeii.*

“Goblin was squeezing my hand. The mysterious stranger was looking at me, and I could have sworn I saw Mount Vesuvius above the city as it roared and belched its fatal cloud Heavenward, pitching the city into panic far below. People ran screaming through the narrow streets. The earth moved. The cloud covered the sky. *I saw it.* Petronia was staring at me. We were there and we were here. Aunt Queen was talking. The rain of ash became a torrent.

“I was dizzy. Yes, dizzy, the fatal symptom.

“ ‘What are your strange dreams of ancient Pompeii?’ asked Nash in his wonderful deep voice.

“ ‘Oh, they’re truly tragic,’ came her low voice in response. ‘I see myself a slave girl in those times, a worker of cameos, the chief among a shop of such craftsmen, and my master has warned us all of the coming eruption, and I run through the streets trying to warn the citizens. Get out of the city. The mountain will bring disaster. But they don’t believe. They don’t heed.’

“I could see it as she spoke. I could see her, with her long full black hair, yet in a male’s tunic, running through the narrow stone streets, banging on doors, grabbing people by the shoulders. ‘Get out, get out now. The mountain’s erupting. It will destroy the city. There’s no time left.’

“I could see the buildings close around her, a little city of plastered walls, and she such a curious tall monstrous beauty. And no one listening. And finally, she took the slaves from their workbench. No. I didn’t just see it. I was there!

“Into sacks they put the cameos. ‘No time for that!’ she said. ‘Run!’ We were all of us—slaves, free men, women screaming, children—running towards the shore. The roar of the mountain was monstrous and deafening. I saw the black cloud spread out over the sky. The day vanished. The night descended. We had climbed into a boat, and we were rowed out fast over the choppy waters of the bay. Crowded boats surrounded us. Again came the voice of the mountain. And then the flicker of fire in the darkness. Pompeii was soon to die.

“She sat in the boat. I was with her. She was crying. Huge rocks were rolling down the mountain. People were running from the huge rocks. Chaos on the heaving shores. The earth shook beneath those who tried to flee in their chariots. She wouldn’t stop sobbing. The other cameo makers looked back in pure fascination. The rain of ash came down upon the city, upon the water. The waters of the bay were black. Boats were rocking. Boats were capsizing. The rowers went faster. We were moving out of the zone of danger. We were crossing the bay to safety. But the horror hovered over us. The mountain bellowed and spewed its deadly poisons. In the boat I held her trembling hand. She sobbed, she sobbed for those who wouldn’t listen, who wouldn’t run when she told them; she sobbed for the lost cameos, the lost treasures. She sobbed for the city fast disappearing in an evil mist of ashes and smoke.

“ ‘I’m not there!’ I told myself. I tried to move my lips and speak aloud, tried to push against this vision, tried to come back from it, tried to know where I was, yet I didn’t want to leave her sobbing in the boat, and all around were the other boats and people wailing and crying and shouting and pointing. My eyes were burning. And the night covered the day, as if forever, and without hope.

“Then came the electric shock of Goblin’s hand. He had slipped his fingers into my left hand as he so often did, and I opened my eyes. I looked at her, and I saw her and heard her low voice running on like a low brook as she spoke to Aunt Queen.

“ ‘These strange dreams,’ she said, ‘they lead me to believe I once lived there, knew the

people, suffered, died. I was as I am now, part male, part female; I loved nothing so much as making cameos. I was committed to it with a fascination that was total. I don't know how those who have no fascination live.'

"My heart beat wildly inside of me, but I couldn't shake the dizziness. I looked at Nash. I saw that his eyes were filmed over. Even Aunt Queen appeared dazed and wide-eyed as she stared at this being, this tall big-breasted creature with her raiment of long black hair.

"I shuddered. I would shake off this languor, this spell. I wouldn't be imprisoned by it, no. I did the most impulsive thing. I reached out, with Goblin's hand tucked over mine, and I motioned to clasp the hand of Petronia, and she, seeing this, accepted my hand and then pulled her hand back sharply, as sharply as if she'd been stung by a bee, all from Goblin's touch.

"I heard Goblin's secret laughter. 'Evil, Quinn,' he said to me. 'Evil!'

"Petronia's eyes searched for him but couldn't see him.

"I glanced at Goblin and saw him fully realized and saw him afraid. And then he said to me words that explained everything and nothing.

" 'Not alive.'

"What I had felt was even more baffling—a spirit thing like Goblin, electric, powerful, ready to form a current through Goblin to me. I couldn't grasp the principles of it really. But it was supercharged and terrifying. And the rage came back to me. How dare this being play with me? How dare he play with us all?

"Meantime, her voice was moving on in a hushed manner: 'And so I took up the art of making them because I loved them, and knowing of your love, I had to bring these few to you to keep with your others. It's been a long time since I visited the island, and of course the story came down to me of how my great-great-grandmother had wanted to be buried there, though it never did come to pass.'

" 'No, it never did, did it?' I said. 'And last night you caught me outside in a choke hold and you told me what you wanted done with the Hermitage, didn't you? And before that, you broke into my very room and dragged me from my bed!'

"I stood up, comfortably towering over her, as she looked up at me, smiling.

" 'I saw you dump those bodies,' I said. 'I know you did it. And you come here to be received by the person dearest to me in all the world!'

" 'Quinn, darling,' cried Aunt Queen, 'have you lost your mind!'

" 'Aunt Queen, this is the very person! I tell you this is the mysterious stranger. This is the one!'

"Nash was on his feet too and attempting to take me by the shoulders and turn me aside, and very slowly Petronia rose to her full height of over six feet, and with every inch over six feet grew out of femininity and into manhood, looking at me quietly with a gloating satisfaction in her pretty smile.

“Aunt Queen was frantic.

“Nash was begging me to be quiet.

“ ‘Deny it, I dare you,’ I said. ‘Say you didn’t come into my very room and drag me from my bed.’

“ ‘Mrs. McQueen,’ he answered. ‘I did not come into this house at any time before tonight.’

“ ‘ “My honored Lord, you know right well you did,” ’ I flashed on him from Ophelia in *Hamlet.* ‘You came into my room. You accosted me outside. You made threats. You know you did. You come here to torment me. That has to be the reason. You play with me. It’s a game that amuses you. It began with those bodies, dumped in the moonlight, when you knew I stood on the island and saw you there.’

“ ‘Quinn, silence!’ Aunt Queen declared. Never had I heard such a cry from her, such a total command. ‘I won’t have it,’ she said. She was shaking.

“ ‘Let me take my leave quietly,’ said Petronia. She took Aunt Queen’s hand.

“ ‘I am so sorry,’ Aunt Queen said. ‘So dreadfully, dreadfully sorry.’

“ ‘You’ve been very gracious to me,’ she said in the same feminized voice. ‘I’ll never forget it.’

“He turned his pretty face to me, and I saw the woman in him, and then he was gone, with straight shoulders and big long strides, gorgeous hair flying, and I heard the heavy vibration of the big front door.

“All those around me were shocked. Cindy, the nurse, was full of concern. Nash didn’t know what he should do or for whom to do it. And I sat down, knowing I was drunk and that I was going to be sick, and Aunt Queen stared at me with blazing anger and disappointment in her eyes. Jasmine was shaking her head.

“Finally, sinking down into her armchair, Aunt Queen spoke:

“ ‘Do you honestly expect anyone to believe the things you are saying?’

“ ‘It’s all true,’ I said. ‘How in the world could you believe her instead of me? What did she tell you—that she was man and woman, so much of each that she was neither one? You believe that? And that she believes in reincarnation? You believe that? That she made the cameos she gave you? You believe that? And that the mausoleum on the island was made for her great-great-grandmother. You believe that? I’m telling you, she came at me. Or he came to me. And he has the strength of a man, that I can vouch for. And he does read minds and that’s dangerous. And all the rest I’ve said—all along—is true.’

“Aunt Queen couldn’t look at me. Cindy brought her a hot toddy. It sort of sat there in the cup. Aunt Queen asked:

“ ‘Where were you tonight?’

“ ‘I had dinner with the Mayfairs,’ I said. ‘I went over at two p.m.’ I stopped. But what was the point of holding back? I had to tell Aunt Queen everything, didn’t I? She had to know the full measure of what I felt. And so I blurted it out:

“ ‘I saw a ghost while I was there. I spoke with him. I talked with him for twenty minutes or more without knowing he was a ghost. It was the ghost of Julien Mayfair, and he told me he had conjugal knowledge of Grandfather William’s wife, and I’m descended from him.’

“Aunt Queen sighed. ‘You are stark raving mad.’

“ ‘Not raving,’ I said. ‘I became a bit heated, yes, at the effrontery of that creature, but not raving, not really raving. That’s a far worse state, wouldn’t you say?’

“ ‘What do I do?’ she asked.

“ ‘Let me call Stirling Oliver. Maybe he can vouch for my sanity. He sees Goblin. He was at dinner tonight. I must see him and talk to him. I must tell him my feelings as regards that creature! I must talk to him. I don’t feel safe. I don’t feel anyone is safe from that creature. He’ll help you to understand.’

“ ‘And you think I’m the one,’ she asked, ‘who needs the understanding?’

“ ‘I don’t know, Aunt Queen. I want to kill that creature, that’s all I can say. And there’s something very vile and awful about the being. It isn’t merely that it’s a hermaphrodite, that I could well endure and find fascinating. It’s something else. Goblin senses it. Goblin calls it evil. I tell you the creature frightens me. You must understand, at least that I believe what I’m saying even if you do not.’

“She wouldn’t look at me.

“I went into the bathroom. I was sick. After a while I was able to drink a paper cup of water. And then I came out. They were all there, in the same state of shock as when I left them. I apologized to everyone.

“ ‘But you have to see it,’ I said, ‘from my point of view. You have to understand what my experience of this creature was. And then I come home and find him with my Aunt Queen.’

“Nash made the kind suggestion that perhaps I ought to go to bed. I looked very tired indeed. I agreed to it immediately, but I couldn’t let it go without stating that the stranger, alias Petronia, was no great respecter of my being in or out of bed.

“But when I bent down to kiss Aunt Queen, she was loving to me, and I was as tender with her as ever, and I told her that I had really told the truth.

“ ‘We will call Mr. Oliver,’ she said. ‘We’ll ask him to come here tomorrow. And we’ll talk to him. How would that be?’

“ ‘I love you so much,’ I whispered. ‘And there’s so much I want to tell you about Mona.’

“ ‘Tomorrow, my darling,’ she said.

“I could hardly drag myself up the stairs. And as soon as I had the comfort of the soft flannel nightshirt I was dreaming of Mona, with my arm around Big Ramona, and thoughts of talking to Nash running randomly through my mind. Every now and then I’d wake with a start, fearing Petronia was on me, strange evil Petronia, bent on hurting me, bent on destroying me, but it was only drunken imagination and finally I went into a deep comforting sleep.”

33

“It was about nine a.m. when I called Stirling, and, unable to contain myself, spilled out all of the story of recent events, as I invited him to dinner to discuss them in greater detail. Perhaps I wanted him to know this was a loaded invitation. I thought it only fair.

“He surprised me. He insisted that we meet for lunch. He asked if it wouldn’t be too inconvenient if we gathered at twelve noon. I went down to see Aunt Queen immediately. And finding her already awake, sitting up in her chaise lounge, watching a movie, saying her Rosary and eating strawberry ice cream, I was happy to have her agreement to lunch right away.

“Would Stirling come to Blackwood Manor? Of course.

“As Blackwood Manor was booked solid, we set up the small table in Aunt Queen’s room, and her bed was dressed in its finest satin along with a broad collection of her red-cheeked boudoir dolls, all got up in the flapper attire that Aunt Queen herself so much adored.

“Stirling arrived promptly at five minutes before twelve, though his flowers, a huge vase of pink roses, arrived before him, and we gathered in Aunt Queen’s room for Jasmine’s finest veal scallopini and pasta and white wine. Nash, who offered several times to absent himself, joined us, and to my amazement Aunt Queen started right in with the ‘strange tale’ of Petronia and how she or he—it varied during the story because at times Aunt Queen had seen Petronia differently—had arrived at Blackwood Manor with the gift of the cameos, which were then produced for Stirling’s inspection.

“Now this was the first time that I had seen these priceless pieces myself, and priceless they were. Because they were not cameos in the sense that we think of them, that is, ornaments carved from contrasting strata of shell or stone. They were portraits carved from gems, and in this case the gems were large amethysts and emeralds of Brazilian origin, and whereas amethysts are no longer very expensive gems, due to the discovery of such a supply of them in the New World, emeralds are expensive. And the carving of these small heads, each obviously of a particular Roman deity, was excellent if not absolutely magnificent.

“They were four in number, these gifts, and Aunt Queen had of course been incredibly grateful for this tribute, and then I had come home and pitched the gathering into confusion, as she was sure I was willing to explain.

“I did explain. I started at the beginning. I explained everything. I ate veal and pasta and

guzzled white wine, forgetting to blot my lips before drinking and thereby going through two and three wineglasses before remembering, but I was passionately pouring out my tale, beginning with Rebecca and her visions and how they had driven me to the island, and what I had seen there in the moonlight, and how things had spun out from there, and how in a rage I had burnt the trespasser's books, and how he or she had come at me, and on it went. I left out nothing.

"Jasmine brought plate after plate of veal and pasta for me. I was happy to devour it.

" 'So there you see it,' I said. 'And then you have Goblin saying "Evil, Quinn," in my ear, and then that shock when I take Petronia's hand, that feeling of something like electricity that reaches out for Goblin and travels through Goblin to me! And this thing, this being, this creature, this interloper who threatens me, he can't see Goblin but he knows that Goblin is there. He knows Goblin can send showering glass at him, and for all his speed and strength, he doesn't want to be cut.'

"At last I came to a halt. I knew Aunt Queen and Nash were watching me. I knew they were watching Stirling as well.

" 'No,' said Stirling quietly. He had finished his meal in spite of many many pauses in which he had stared at me with rapt attention. 'It doesn't want to be cut.'

" 'Do you say "it," on account of her ambiguous sexuality?' asked Nash politely. There was some subtle tension between Nash and Stirling. I couldn't figure it.

" 'No, I don't think so,' said Stirling. 'I hope not. But who knows? Let me say, she does not want to be cut.'

" 'Do you believe my nephew?' Aunt Queen asked. 'Does all of this make any sense to you?' She was very kind in her tone. She sat to my right and pressed my shoulder softly as she spoke. 'My nephew is prepared for what you have to say.'

" 'Yes, I am prepared,' I said. 'I know you to be a frank and truthful person. Michael and Rowan respect you. Mona respects you. I know what I see in you. Tell me what you believe.'

" 'Very well,' said Stirling. He took another swallow of his wine and set the glass aside. 'Let me advise you first as if you were my son. Go away now. Take the trip with your Aunt Queen that she wants you to take. No, don't be upset with me. Let me explain. Mona Mayfair is sick. But she may get sicker. The time to leave Mona is now. You will obviously write to her, call her, stay in touch with her. And when and if she takes the turn for the worse, perhaps with your aunt's permission you can come home.'

" 'Oh, absolutely,' said Aunt Queen. 'I think that's a very sensible way of looking at it, and we can ascertain from Dr. Winn Mayfair whether or not he agrees. We can talk to Dr. Rowan Mayfair. And of course, Quinn, you'll speak to Mona herself.'

" 'Now, let me explain further,' said Stirling. 'I think you should leave on this trip at once. I think you should get away from Petronia. I think you should leave tonight if you can, and if not

tonight then tomorrow, and if not tomorrow the day after that. But go. And go quickly, and in the meantime, have all the refurbishments done to the Hermitage on the island, exactly as the creature has insisted, but never, and I mean, never, have a workman on Sugar Devil Island after dark.'

" 'Well, that's no problem,' I said hastily. 'These guys come on at six a.m. and they want to be home in front of the television with a beer in hand by four o'clock in the afternoon.'

"But my speedy rejoinder hadn't taken the edge off Aunt Queen's response to this last remark on the part of Stirling, as I had hoped.

" 'You're saying that everything Quinn saw … happened?' she asked.

" 'Yes, I am saying that,' said Stirling. 'He's sane; if he testified in a court of law, I'd believe him. I believe him here and now.'

" 'Stirling Oliver,' said Aunt Queen, 'are you telling me that the swamps hereabouts are infested with vampires?'

" 'No, I'm not telling you that, Mrs. McQueen, because if I did, you'd think me mad and disregard everything else that I told you. Let's just say that Petronia is a creature of nocturnal habits and accustomed to having Sugar Devil Island to herself. Now, one night when she thought herself to be alone, she was caught up short by the landlord, and consequently began a game of cat and mouse with him, and has been his enemy ever since.'

" 'You do believe all this,' Aunt Queen said.

" 'Oh, definitely. But the important thing is this. Do what the creature wants right now. Refurbish the Hermitage. And remove Quinn from the vicinity. Take the trip to Europe. And expect to have big long-distance phone bills in every hotel. This young man is very much in love with Mona Mayfair, that I know full well from what I saw with my own eyes.'

" 'I don't know what to say to you, Mr. Oliver,' Aunt Queen responded. She was discouraged. But I was overwhelmingly glad to be believed, though not to leave Mona for a moment.

" 'Mrs. McQueen,' said Stirling. 'It is best that Quinn leave here with you now, you know that. The refurbishing of the island can well take place without him, and if he never sees Petronia again, all the better for him, surely you agree.'

" 'Yes, I do.'

" 'Then forgive me for this, but I'm going to say something to you which is going to make it simpler for Quinn to come to his decision. Please believe that I use this power respectfully.'

" 'Which power is this?'

" 'The same one Petronia claimed to have,' said Stirling, 'and when I came into this room today I used it, accidentally as always, unwillingly as always. But I couldn't help but know that your doctor had been here earlier, and he had told you that this trip to Europe would have to be your very last.'

" 'Oh, dear,' she sighed. 'I didn't want Quinn to know.'

“ ‘But I *should* know!’ I said at once. I was chilled to the bone. ‘Aunt Queen, we’re going! I had no idea the doctor was here. I just have to discuss this with Mona; Mona will understand everything.’ My heart ached.

“Jasmine appeared out of nowhere at this opportune moment and declared with full authority, ‘That doctor said there should be no trip to Europe, that’s what he said! And then Aunt Queen said she was going and then that doctor said this trip had to be her last, that’s what happened here this morning, I know because I heard!’

“ ‘We’ll go,’ I declared. ‘We’ll all go together, and we’ll stay as long as we can.’ Oh my precious Mona, what else can I do?

“ ‘It’s the best thing,’ said Stirling. ‘You asked me to come here, to listen to these stories, and I tell you, based on all I’ve heard, including this unforgivable little mental eavesdropping, that you should take Quinn away from here, away from Petronia’s temper and whims and go. You have a great prize to give your nephew in this trip. Give it to him while you can. And give it to yourself. You deserve to have this great gift from him.’

“ ‘Yes, that’s so true, Aunt Queen,’ I said. ‘Stirling, you’re a magician with words. You’ve teased out the truth of it. We’re going. I only need to talk to Mona.’

“ ‘Well, I think this is a marvelous resolution,’ said Aunt Queen, ‘but I’m still left with questions. Stirling, you speak as if you know of Petronia—.’

“ ‘No, I know nothing of her. I’ve never heard her name. I was judging from your story. All the elements were there to drive me to my conclusion that her tastes were nocturnal. Why else would she have agreed to split the usage of the Hermitage with Quinn, he for day, and she for night, were she not fond of the swamp after dark when few people like it save those who hunt for alligators, I suppose? As for the rest of her habits, she seems vicious and violent, and Quinn showed an enormous amount of courage in confronting her. I would imagine she left here very surprised last night.’

“ ‘She looked triumphant,’ I said. ‘She’d made me out to be a lunatic.’

“ ‘But you’re not a lunatic,’ said Stirling.

“ ‘No, you’re not,’ said Aunt Queen. ‘I’m immensely relieved. You’re not. But Stirling, you speak of her as though she’s a species of creature.’

“ ‘I didn’t mean to do that,’ he said. ‘That was unwise of me. I meant to disclose a feeling of impersonality by using that word, I suppose. As I said, I was trying to judge purely from the things you told me. I believe she’s a menace to Quinn and she’ll keep toying with him if you remain here. The important thing is to go away.’

“ ‘Nash, what do you think?’ Aunt Queen asked.

“Of course Nash demurred. It wasn’t really his place to comment, but Aunt Queen pressed him, as he had met Petronia and he had witnessed some of what had gone on.

“ ‘Quinn seems more than sane,’ Nash explained in his deep commanding voice. ‘I have to

agree. As to the trip to Europe, I think it's a marvelous idea. Now, Petronia, I must say that her theories on reincarnation gave me pause. She claimed herself to have lived in ancient Pompeii as we have discussed, and she spoke of witnessing the eruption of Vesuvius, and I must confess that I experienced a faint, what would you call it, a faint …'

" 'Disorientation,' I said immediately.

" 'Yes, exactly, I experienced a disorientation while she was talking, as though she were a hypnotist. It wasn't entirely comfortable. And it left me with a feeling of confusion that I didn't much like. I would never have mentioned it, except that you've asked me. But I can say in conclusion that Petronia seemed otherwise to be charming and perhaps, perhaps a little sly.'

" 'How so sly?' asked Aunt Queen.

" 'When a person hypnotizes a whole room, yet never acknowledges it, there is a slyness there,' said Nash. 'Don't you think?'

"I was very impressed with these statements. I had expected Nash to claim neutrality, and I loved him now more than ever before.

"Lunch was concluded, but not before I had eaten all the veal and pasta on Goblin's plate, with his respectfully requested permission, and Jasmine and Big Ramona cleared away both dishes and table so that we could sit and talk.

"Aunt Queen made the necessary calls to set our plan in motion. Nash averred that his suitcase had never been unpacked. And tipsy as I was, I asked if I could drive Stirling around Blackwood Farm to show him the old pastures and a little bit of the swamp that one could see from the road. Before we would drive I would take him down to the cemetery to see the tombs and the old church.

"I could see that neither Nash nor Aunt Queen wanted me to be alone with him, but they couldn't very well object to it, and as soon as we were alone, headed down to the cemetery, I understood quite fully why.

" 'Listen to me,' Stirling said. 'I don't want to frighten your Aunt Queen or say things to her that will make her suspect my sanity as she now suspects yours. But I believe completely that you saw this creature dumping bodies in the swamp and I mean every word of it when I ask you to promise that you will never, never return to Sugar Devil Island at night.'

" 'You've got my promise,' I said. 'If it hadn't been for Rebecca's dream, I would never have been there in the first place.'

" 'That is a story unto itself,' he said, 'and for now I can't comment on it, but reaffirm your promise to me and never waver, and from now on, please keep in touch with me. Realize that I am your good friend.'

"We had reached the tombs and I showed him Rebecca's headstone. Of course he knew the full story. We went into the little chapel. I was distressed to see so many leaves. I would have to tell Allen to sweep it out.

“ ‘I’m the man of this place now,’ I said, my voice echoing off the limestone walls. ‘I’ll have to run it from Europe. That won’t be an easy feat.’

“ ‘I have another promise I want from you,’ he said, looking out the door, as if to make certain no one was coming up on us. ‘If you do see this creature again, try not to think of anything that she can read from your mind. I know this is obvious, but try to use definite techniques to cleanse your mind of anything important. You wouldn’t want her finding out, for instance, as I have this very afternoon, that you have a new relation by the name of Tommy Harrison whom you’ve come to like—if not love—in a brief meeting yesterday morning.’

“I was shocked. I wasn’t conscious of having thought of Tommy.

“ ‘You give that fodder to Petronia,’ Stirling said, ‘and she’ll use it against you, the same way she might use Mona. And believe me when I tell you that it’s a good thing Aunt Queen will soon be beyond her apparent reach as well.’

“I shuddered. ‘Aunt Queen,’ I whispered. Then I remembered the way that Petronia had taken her leave of Aunt Queen and the words she’d spoken: *You’ve been very gracious to me. I won’t forget it.*

“ ‘I wish I had this gift for reading minds,’ I said. ‘I’d know what you’re holding back.’

“ ‘It isn’t such a great gift,’ he said as we walked on up the slope towards the house again. ‘You can’t take Tommy to Europe with you, can you?’ he asked.

“ ‘Oh, that would be splendid. I don’t see why not. I bet Terry Sue would allow it. Not with Brittany of course. That’s the little girl. She’s the workhorse. But Tommy. Tommy’s the dreamer who reads books in the woods. I’ll talk to Aunt Queen about it.’

“ ‘Whatever you do, try not to do it after nightfall. If you must make plans, and certainly you must, do it in New Orleans. Do it perhaps at the Grand Luminière Café in Mayfair Medical. That ought to give you time to see Mona. She’ll be in the center all day today and into the evening. I’m meeting her and Michael and Rowan there for dinner myself.’

“ ‘You know, I like your outspoken manner but it amazes me, the ease with which you make your suggestions. Again, I know you’re holding something back.’

“ ‘Know this, and I mean it from the heart. I hold back what I think I should hold back and nothing more than that. Take your Aunt Queen and Nash to dinner at the Grand Luminière Café tonight. Heed my advice on that.’

“ ‘But why is it so important?’

“ ‘Because creatures like Petronia don’t like witches. And they never go where they are.’

“I was dumbstruck. I couldn’t quite imagine what he meant.

“ ‘She’s a mind reader, no? And a trickster on top of it, wouldn’t you say?’

“ ‘Yes,’ I answered.

“ ‘Take my word for it,’ he replied. ‘She’ll never get within a hundred yards of Mayfair Medical. Rowan Mayfair would know she was prowling in an instant. So would Mona.’

“ ‘But what do you mean when you say they’re witches, Stirling?’

“We walked on to the Mercedes, which was parked in the shed. I opened the door for him and then came around to the driver’s side.

“He waited for me to back the car out and head down the road. I crossed in front of the house, turned right and went down the long pecan-tree drive.

“ ‘A witch to those of us in the Talamasca,’ he explained, ‘is a mortal man or woman who can see spirits and manipulate them, bring up spirits and exorcise them, communicate with them and control them, talk to them and hear their talk.’

“ ‘Then I’m a witch,’ I said, ‘on account of Goblin.’

“ ‘Very much more than likely,’ he said. ‘Though I don’t think you’ve experienced all the aspects I just explained.’

“ ‘No, I haven’t. But I think that I could. And if Rebecca comes back, my powers of exorcism may be taxed.’

“ ‘I’ll be here for you if you need me. I don’t think Rebecca will tempt you anyplace but here.’

“ ‘Is that the way it is with ghosts?’

“ ‘Some of the time,’ he said. ‘It depends on the type of haunting. Sometimes a person is haunted, sometimes a place. Do you yourself know whether Goblin’s a spirit or a ghost?’

“ ‘Oh, most surely a spirit,’ I said. ‘He knows nothing of where he came from or where he goes when he leaves me. There’s no life for him except in my consciousness. He’s probably with us right now.’

“I made an attempt to feel his presence, and I felt the answering grip of his hand on my shoulder and saw his face in the rearview mirror. He was very near me, of course.

“ ‘I love you, old buddy,’ I said to him.

“I saw his poker face break into a childish grin.

“ ‘You don’t know how much I’ve needed you, old buddy,’ I said to Goblin. ‘These last twenty-four hours have been mad.’ It was marvelous seeing that grin.

“Stirling smiled.

“During the rest of our time alone Stirling told me about the Talamasca, pretty much reinforcing what Mona had explained to me—that they had existed for centuries, that they had vast libraries pertaining to the supernatural, that they had a huge history of Mona’s family—confidential of course.

“ ‘Ah, but you see, I am a Mayfair,’ I said, ‘am I not? Oncle Julien told me I was, remember?’

“ ‘You have a good point there. But you don’t have time for Mayfair history right now. You have your own adventures. You’re going off on an odyssey. Have you made up your mind about little Tommy?’

“ ‘I’m totally for it. Can’t wait to ask Aunt Queen. But I have a question for you,’ I said. ‘What is your honest opinion of Nash?’

“ ‘A wonderful man, brilliant, very well-read, very refined. He’ll be a marvelous teacher and guide for you in Europe. Don’t you think so yourself?’

“ ‘Yes, but I sensed something between you, that you didn’t like each other. Was I wrong?’

“ ‘You were right to sense something,’ he said. ‘He doesn’t like me. He suspects my motives. He doesn’t understand the nature of the Talamasca, and not understanding our rules and our role he thinks me guilty of a brand of self-interest. When you come home, if you and I become friends as I hope we will, maybe he’ll change his mind. For now, please don’t trouble yourself about it. He’s an extraordinarily nice man.’

“ ‘I know what you’re talking about,’ I said. ‘He feels a lot of insecurity about being attracted to men. I don’t really.’

“ ‘You don’t?’ he asked.

“ ‘I thought you could read minds,’ I said. ‘I hope that sounded agreeable. I meant it to sound agreeable. I’ve had an unusual life is what I ought to have said. I lost my virginity with Rebecca, then had fun in the shower with Goblin, then fell in love with Mona, and I’m not certain what’s next. If Mona will marry me I’ll be happy to my dying day.’

“He didn’t answer me.

“ ‘What’s wrong?’ I asked. ‘Do I sound too cavalier for your taste?’

“ ‘No, you don’t at all,’ he said. ‘I was just thinking about Mona, and whether or not to say what came into my mind.’

“ ‘Oh, please do say it. I wish I could read it.’

“ ‘If you marry her, it’s likely to be until her dying day before yours.’

“ ‘No,’ I said. ‘No. That’s not true. That’s not true. Dr. Rowan Mayfair knows that’s not true. They’re working on it night and day. They’ll reverse Mona’s condition. I mean they’ll halt it. They’ll fix it. It’s not going to be that bad. She’ll probably even—’ I broke off. ‘I’m sorry,’ I said.

“ ‘You owe me no apology. I owe one to you. I shouldn’t have said what I did. I thought last night you’d understood what they were talking about.’

“ ‘I didn’t want to understand,’ I said. ‘But I knew.’

“We talked some more about the Talamasca.

“Anytime I wanted to visit Oak Haven I was welcome. Now it was time for parting and I drove Stirling back to his car. It was a handsome brown Rolls-Royce with cream-colored upholstery. He said the Talamasca spoilt all its members with fine cars and fine furniture.

“ ‘And what do we do in return for it?’ he asked rhetorically. ‘Live like celibates and work like dogs.’

“ ‘I like you very much,’ I said. ‘Thank you for coming to lunch and thank you for standing with me.’

“ ‘I had no choice,’ he said. ‘Please call me when you can. Let me know what’s happening. Here’s a card for your shirt pocket and one for your jacket and one for your inside pocket too,

and here, put this somewhere also.'

" 'Don't worry about me, Stirling,' I said. 'I know I'm much better off on account of your advice. I'm never going back out there at night, and I'm going to do what I can to get everyone out of this house before nightfall.'

" 'Yes, and something else too, Quinn. It's very tricky, fighting a being like Petronia, but something tells me that you've been wise in putting up a fight, in using Goblin as you've done, and I wouldn't hesitate to do that in the future. I hope you enjoy your trip to Europe. I hope you enjoy it immensely.'

"Very reluctantly, I told him good-bye, and I watched until the car had made its long slow journey down the avenue of trees and turned towards the highway. He seemed a wise man. And I wonder now if everything would have been different if I had confided in him more, trusted him more, not gone against him and everybody else in my pride and impetuosity."

34

“I hurried inside. There was much to do and I meant to do it quickly—and was overjoyed to discover Aunt Queen and Nash already making plans for our European adventure.

“ ‘Can Tommy go too?’ I asked. ‘I can have him back here in an hour with his birth certificate and all his clothes.’

“Aunt Queen appeared to give it instant and deep thought for a long moment, and then, before I could make my legal case, inquired: ‘Is he worthy of such a trip, Tarquin?’

“ ‘Just the word,’ I declared. ‘You have chosen it perfectly. He’s worthy, and it will be so very right for him. You’ll find him to be a delightful boy, I swear it to you. And if you don’t, we’ll line up a nanny for him, and he can be off on a day-by-day regimen of his own, but that won’t happen.’

“ ‘Well, then, I say, by all means, let’s take him with us.’

“ ‘Petty cash,’ I replied. ‘In case Terry Sue puts up an argument.’

“ ‘You mean she’d sell the boy!’

“ ‘Aunt Queen,’ I replied, ‘it’s to sweeten the deal. The boy’s worth the ransom. Terry Sue is the merely practical mother of six hungry kids.’

“I was soon furnished with the cash and rushing out the door. Goblin appeared at my side.

“ ‘We’ve got to win this one, old buddy,’ I told him. ‘You agree with me? The child’s brilliant. I can’t leave him behind.’

“ ‘You always know what to say, Tarquin,’ said Goblin. ‘But how can I go with you to Europe? Tarquin, I am afraid.’

“I felt a sudden stab of sympathetic fear.

“ ‘You’re very happy, Tarquin,’ he said. ‘Don’t forget me. Don’t forget that I love you. Don’t forget that I’m here.’

“ ‘No, I haven’t forgotten,’ I pledged. ‘I’ll hold your hand; remember, I told you. All the way to Europe, I’ll hold your hand. That’s how we’ll do it. You’ll sit next to me on the plane.’

“I doubled back into the house to make sure Aunt Queen understood this need for the extra first-class ticket for Goblin, to which she replied that she wouldn’t dream of putting such an important member of our party in the coach section, and what sort of an aunt did I think she was?

“Once again I was headed for the trailer, but Goblin, riding beside me, was still insecure.

“ ‘Europe is far away, Tarquin,’ he said.

“ ‘That doesn’t matter, old buddy,’ I said.

“ ‘Stirling said there were two kinds of hauntings,’ said Goblin. ‘Hauntings of a person and hauntings of a place.’

“ ‘God, you hear everything, don’t you?’ I asked him.

“ ‘Not everything, Tarquin,’ he answered. ‘I can’t be in two places, and sometimes I wish that I could. I’d go to the Retreat House of the Talamasca, Tarquin, and learn from them about spirits, Tarquin, so that I’d be the finest spirit ever made. I know I need you to see me, Tarquin. I know that I love you. I know those things are true even when I hate you, Tarquin.’

“ ‘That’s never, Goblin,’ I said sharply. ‘You have your moods, that’s all. But be quiet for now. I have to do this all-important job.’

“I had reached the trailer and found that all was topsy-turvy, as Grady Breen’s ‘ladies’ were moving ‘everything’ out to the new house in the Autumn Leaves development, on the outskirts of Ruby River City. How splendid that things were happening so fast! I had decreed it but not believed it. And who should come up to me but my nine-year-old self, with his black curly hair and in his navy blue Catholic school blazer?

“ ‘Do you want to go to Europe tomorrow night?’ I asked. ‘I’m not kidding you!’

“He was speechless. And then in a white-faced stammer he shook his head and said, ‘I can’t leave Brittany.’

“ ‘I’ll make it up to her, I swear. And I’ll tell her that myself. Okay? I can’t take her from Terry Sue right now. You know that.’

“I caught Brittany’s arm as she drew close. She had heard what we had to say. ‘I will make it up to you, sugar plum, I promise,’ I said. ‘Let me take him now on this trip, and I swear by God I’ll see you get to go too sometime real soon. Cross my heart. I’ll see that good things happen.’

“ ‘Oh, that’s okay,’ she said. ‘Tommy, you go on, you’re the one that’s always talking about books and things.’

“ ‘Brittany, you’re going to have fun in the new house,’ I went on. ‘You’re going to have new playmates and a new school, and there’s going to be a maid to do the work and a nanny to help with the children.’

“She couldn’t absorb it. I could see that plainly. But she was fascinated.

“Terry Sue was headed our way with the baby on her hip. She was dressed up in a pink polyester suit and pumps, and her hair was washed and combed, and she was sporting a brand-new set of drugstore fingernails.

“ ‘Why are you doing all this for us?’ she asked. ‘Pops never did it.’

“ ‘Never mind. Just let me take Tommy to Europe. Let me take him now. All I need is his clothes and his birth certificate. I have to make it to the federal passport office in New Orleans

before it closes.'

" 'I don't have no birth certificate,' she said. 'Tommy, go get your clothes. Did you say "Europe," you mean, like in Europe?'

" 'Hurry up, Tommy,' I said. He ran for the trailer. 'I can get the birth certificate at the courthouse. Thank you, Terry Sue. Here's five thousand dollars.'

"She stared at the envelope. 'What's that for?' she asked.

" 'I was going to give you this if you argued. Seems you ought to get it since you didn't.'

" 'You're crazy, Quinn Blackwood, just as Pops always said you was. He said you'd never come to nothing, but I tell you, you're sure somebody in my book!'

" 'Well, thank you, Terry Sue,' I said. 'That's really consoling. Someday you'll have to tell me everything else Pops said. By the way, that's not his baby, is it?'

" 'You're not getting any complaints from me, are you?' she answered. 'I don't know whose baby it is, hush your mouth.'

"Tommy flew at me at a dead run, with all his books in one arm and a pillowcase of clothes over his shoulder. I backed up, laughing, and threw my arm around him.

" 'You mind Tarquin now, Tommy Harrison, you hear what I say,' said Terry Sue. 'And you do your homework, too.'

"I put my right arm around her and kissed her forehead. 'I'll take good care of him,' I said. 'I'll write the school board. Grady Breen will take care of everything just the way he said.'

"Off we went.

"Of course it was too late to make the passport office in New Orleans, but I did get the birth certificate from the courthouse in Ruby River City.

"Then it was back to the house where I sat down with Allen and went over all the renovations that would be done to the Hermitage while I was gone. There was no doubt in my mind that I was doing this for myself. I loathed and despised the mysterious stranger! The vision of the Hermitage was mine.

"Thanks to last night's written request, Allen had already gotten me paint chips and samples of marble, and I was able to choose the most appealing colors and tile for the new floors. As to the bronze stairs, I drew pictures, and we agreed on a 'baroque' look to things and that he would call the local architects Busby, Bagot and Greene, who presided over all the antebellum restorations, and they could advise on the design of the windows and the construction of the bathroom, which was something I really couldn't do.

" 'Be fearless,' I said. 'You know my tastes, you see my drawings and my requests. Don't wait for my approval. It's more important to complete the task. And remember I'll be calling to talk to you. Forge ahead.'

"I could see that he was delighted to have something so interesting to do. Nevertheless, he shook his head and said it would be difficult, he wanted me to know that, hauling all that marble

out there, but he did know how to lay it and he wouldn't trust anybody but himself. As to painting, well, the hard work was the preparation, and again, that was hard, really hard, but he didn't trust anybody but himself.

" 'You're my hero,' I said. 'You can get it done. Now comes the final warning: Never be there after dark.'

" 'Oh, you don't have to tell me that,' he said. 'We'll be out of there by three o'clock.'

" 'Promise me,' I said.

" 'You've got my promise.'

" 'All right, you'll get your first call from me next week.'

"And so the tasks of Manhood were done.

"Around four o'clock the twilight anxiety came over me with unprecedented ferocity. I thought that the swamp was creeping up towards the house—Birnam Wood coming to Dunsinane—and my desire to see Mona became absolutely uncontrollable.

"In all this time I had never for one second forgotten about her, and how agonizing it would be to tell her good-bye. Why, I had not even told her I was going. Such pain lay ahead.

"I tried to call her at Mayfair Medical but I couldn't get through. The switchboard said she couldn't take any calls, and my lack of knowledge of where she was and what was being done to her was unbearable.

"I put on the laser disc of Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet,* and ran fast to the scene of Ophelia drowned under the glassy stream, and kept playing it back over and over again, switching between it and Gertrude's (Hamlet's mother's) description of how it had come about, haunted by the words:

> *Her clothes spread wide,*
> *And mermaid-like a while they bore her up;*
> *Which time she chanted snatches of old tunes,*
> *As one incapable of her own distress.*

"And then finally as the darkness thickened outside and Stirling Oliver's warnings came down heavy on me, as I thought of Rebecca and her wiles, as I thought of Petronia—I went downstairs to inform Aunt Queen, who was chatting away with Tommy and Nash, that we had to leave at once for New Orleans.

"Jasmine had already packed Aunt Queen's bags, Nash was packed, Big Ramona had finished with my luggage as well and Tommy's humble and entirely temporary wardrobe had been put into one of Aunt Queen's many spare suitcases.

"I announced that we must all head for the Windsor Court Hotel, book the finest suites available and then head for the Grand Luminière Café for supper. As I could not get Mona on the phone, I was more or less bound to go, as, surely, based on Stirling's promises, she was expecting

me.

“Of course, I was hit with questions and objections. But I was adamant, and won out, finally, simply because everyone was so excited about our trip and the only thing preventing us from getting on the plane was the matter of Tommy’s passport, which could be got with airline ticket in hand the following day.

“In truth there was one other very important matter. It was the matter of who was to run Blackwood Manor in our absence. And it was a very important matter indeed. And after much commiseration on the subject, it had already been decided that Jasmine was going to do it, but to alleviate her fears, it was also decided that she need take no new bookings and only fulfill those already made, and maintain the house for those drop-ins who came to see the site of their engagements or weddings, et cetera, or merely to visit the pretty house about which they had read in the guides.

“Now, Jasmine was very upset. She didn’t feel up to it. But Aunt Queen knew that she could do it. And so did I, and most significantly, so did Big Ramona, and so did Clem. Jasmine had the education to do it. Jasmine had the smarts. Jasmine had the good English, and Jasmine also had the sophistication.

“What Jasmine lacked was the confidence.

“So we spent our last hour at Blackwood Manor trying to convince Jasmine that she was up to the task and once she got hold of it—she was already doing ninety-nine percent of the work—she would do fine. As to her pay, it was to be tripled. And Aunt Queen would have worked out a percentage of the profits, except that the percentage system frightened Jasmine, who didn’t want to have to figure it out.

“At last it was decided that our attorney Grady Breen would take over the bookkeeping and that Jasmine could devote herself entirely to supervising and to hostess work, and Jasmine seemed a good deal more calm. That way Jasmine could get her percentage without fearing she’d signed some sort of pact with the Devil. Meantime, all of us told her how beautiful she was, how polished she was and how overqualified she was, which did not help as much as we had hoped.

“Clem and Big Ramona promised to back her up completely, and with kisses and embraces, as well as Jasmine’s tearful farewell, we hit the road for New Orleans in Aunt Queen’s stretch limousine.

“When after a brief stop at the hotel to approve our fabulous digs we reached the Grand Luminière Café, Mona rose from the table and flew into my arms, making me the envy of every man in the place. She was wearing one of her big white shirts, complete with white ruffles and bows at her wrists, but I could see the intravenous port with its evil carbuncle of tubing and tape on the back of her inflamed right hand.

“I sat down at the Mayfair table with her, and in an intimate voice told her of what the doctor had said to Aunt Queen, that this might be her last trip to Europe.

“ ‘Oh, I approve utterly and totally of your going,’ Mona said. ‘You must, you absolutely must. I’m doing fine. My condition is stable. Look, I have to be wired up again tonight.’ She held up the bandaged hand. ‘Do you want to come up to the room? It’s not all that appetizing, I can assure you—.’

“ ‘I’m coming,’ I said. ‘I never made love to anybody who was wired up.’

“ ‘Good,’ she said in a sweet whisper, ‘because I have three or four baby quilts to ruin, and then we can read *Hamlet* to each other. I have a copy of Kenneth Branagh’s version with all the screenplay directions, and we can pretend we’re seeing it all over again. In fact, you can recite Gertrude’s speech describing Ophelia’s drowning, and I will lie as if dead on the pillow. I’ve already strewn flowers all over the bed. Oh, I am Ophelia forever,’ she sighed.

“ ‘No, my Ophelia Immortal,’ I said, ‘and that’s the name under which I’ll write to you from Europe, and the name under which I’ll E-mail you on the computer, my Ophelia Immortal. I think it is the most splendid name I ever heard.’

“I told her how that afternoon I’d put the film on the TV just to watch that scene of Ophelia underwater. ‘I love you that you love it,’ I said, ‘but you’ll be Ophelia Immortal because you’ll never drown, you know that, don’t you? We have to get that straight, don’t we? That you’re Ophelia in suspended animation, one most “capable of her own distress” and of her ecstasy, and born up forever on “her melodious lay.” ’

“She laughed and kissed me warmly. ‘You really do know the words, don’t you?’ she said. ‘Oh, I love you for it. And E-mails, why didn’t I think of it? Of course, we’ll E-mail each other from Europe, and write also. We have to print out our letters. Our correspondence will be as famous as that of Héloïse and Abelard.’

“ ‘Absolutely,’ I said with a little shudder. ‘But nothing so long and chaste, my beloved; I’ll be home and you’ll be cured and we’ll soon be in each other’s arms.’ I laughed outright. ‘By the way, you do know that for his love of Héloïse, Abelard was castrated, don’t you? We don’t want anything so dreadful to happen to me.’

“ ‘It’s a metaphor for your restraint, Quinn, and that we can’t merge into the same person as Ophelia would have done with Hamlet if only his father hadn’t been killed.’

“I kissed her longingly and lovingly. ‘ “Oh, brave new world that hath such creatures in it,” ’ I quoted. ‘What other fifteen-year-old in the world would know such things?’

“ ‘You ought to talk to me about the stock market,’ she returned, her green eyes firing beautifully. ‘It’s perfectly egregious that Mayfair and Mayfair insists on managing my billions. I know more about stocks and bonds than anybody in the firm.’

“Stirling had just come to join the table. I realized I hadn’t said hello to the graceful Rowan and the stalwart Michael. I corrected all that, glorying in the warmth with which we all greeted each other, and I explained to Stirling hastily that the family had checked out of Blackwood Manor, that if Petronia wanted to find us she’d have to come looking at the Windsor Court Hotel.

“ ‘And the little gentleman with the black hair over there, that’s Tommy?’

“ ‘Precisely. Soon to become Tommy Blackwood. We’re leaving for Europe as soon as we get his passport. I’ll have his name changed at the passport office if I can get away with it. We’ll see what a little persuasion does.’

“ ‘Let me know if you have trouble with that,’ he said. ‘The Talamasca can help.’

“We didn’t join tables for dinner. I felt it was best. I wanted Nash and Aunt Queen to continue to get to know Tommy, and Tommy was doing splendidly well. He wasn’t shy or overexcited, and just as I had surmised when I met him, he was extremely bright. Literature and history were his loves, thank God. Math he couldn’t understand very well but he inched along. He’d benefited tremendously from his Catholic education so far, and Nash and Aunt Queen were both finding him fascinating, which was what I had hoped.

“After we had all had our ‘egregious’ desserts, I took Tommy over to be presented to the Mayfairs and to Stirling, and he comported himself with manners in keeping with the occasion, and then it was agreed my beloved family members would return to the hotel and I would go up with Mona to her room.

“I threw my arm around Goblin and I said in his ear, ‘Go back to the family. Stay close to them. And come to me if Petronia comes.’

“He was surprised. But at once he nodded and disappeared.

“Mona’s room was a luxury suite just like the one which I had occupied, with a parlor adjacent to it and a big double hospital bed. Mona had covered the bed with white eyelet baby quilts, as she had described to me. Only now she gathered up all the wilted lilies and daisies, and, choosing great handfuls of fresh ones from the baskets all around the room, she covered the bed afresh.

“Then she hopped up on the bed and leaned back on a huge nest of pillows, smiling playfully at me. And we both went into gales of laughter.

“Dr. Winn Mayfair stood by solemnly watching all these proceedings, and then he said in his soft respecting voice, a voice that always commanded respect in return:

“ ‘Very well now, Ophelia, are you ready for me to insert the line?’

“ ‘Go ahead, Doctor,’ she answered. ‘And be sure to understand, you can close that door afterwards. Quinn knows the line is the only thing that can be inserted, right, Quinn?’

“I think I blushed. ‘Yes, Doctor,’ I said.

“ ‘Do you fully understand the risk, Quinn?’ asked Dr. Winn.

“ ‘I do, sir,’ I replied.

“It was hard for me to look at the needle in the back of her hand, at the redness of her skin and the tape that overlay it, but I felt I had to, I had to experience it with her as best I could, and my eyes moved up the transparent tubing to the plastic sack of clear liquid which hung from its metallic hook at the top. At some uncertain juncture a tiny computer generated numbers and

beeps. A larger machine sat near, ready for some more complex connection, but fortunately none seemed to be needed just now.

"There were so many questions I wanted to ask Dr. Winn Mayfair, but it wasn't my place to do it, and so I had to rely on Mona's assertion that her condition was indeed stable and I knew that I had to leave her the next morning with her word that Aunt Queen's health was what mattered at this juncture in my life.

"Within moments after the doctor had left we were in each other's arms, overly conscious of the sacred wiring, and I was kissing her with all the drama I could effortlessly muster, calling her my eternal love and seeking only to pleasure her as she pleasured me.

"It was a long night of tender kissing and lovemaking, and the quilts probably bear their testimony to this time.

"Dawn had come, vague and pink as twilight over the city, before I said my farewell to Mona, and if anyone had told me then that I would never see her again—this soft, drowsy child amid her lace and her flowers, and her gloriously disheveled hair—I wouldn't have believed it. But then there were many things I would not have believed then.

"And there were more good times to come.

"I went straight from her hospital room, where I left her sleepy and beautiful and fresh as the flowers all around her in their moist baskets, to obtain the airline tickets, and from there to obtaining Tommy's passport, where Aunt Queen and I were both able to 'claim that we knew him as Tommy Blackwood,' and then we were on our way by plane to Newark, with Goblin strong and visible and in his own expensive first-class seat, and from Newark we flew out to Rome."

35

“Who can say how different my last few days in New Orleans might have been had I known that we would be gone on our European odyssey for a full three years?

“No one among our party knew that the festivities would go on so long, and indeed it was the spirit of living moment to moment which kept us going—forever checking Aunt Queen’s blood pressure and general stamina with her favorite physicians of Paris, Rome, Zurich and London—as we roved ever back and forth through the castles, museums, cathedrals and cities that Aunt Queen showed me with such love and enthusiasm, and with Nash’s wise instruction from which I drew constant overwhelming stimulation; always yielding to Aunt Queen’s desire to travel ‘a few more months,’ to yet another ‘little country’ or another great and grand ‘ruin’ that I should ‘never forget.’

“Aunt Queen’s health was failing, there was no doubt of it, or, to put it more truly, she was simply getting too old to do what she was doing, and that is what she would scarcely face.

“Cindy, our delightful nurse, was sent for and came to travel with us, which put everyone’s mind at ease somewhat, as Cindy could take vital signs and administer appropriate pills at appropriate hours, and also she was of that congenial brand of nurse who does not mind assisting with all sorts of personal tasks, and so became Aunt Queen’s secretary as well.

“Nash also fulfilled this function to a large extent for both of us, delivering our faxes to the concierges of the various splendid hotels in which we stayed, and taking care of all bills and gratuities so that we had never to worry with such things. Nash, also being something of a whizbang on his laptop computer, wrote out Aunt Queen’s letters to her friends.

“As to his commentary on all that we saw and visited, Nash took this very seriously, never failing to do his homework so that his observations were fresh and he could answer whatever questions we might have.

“He was a marvelous physical assistant to Aunt Queen, helping her in and out of limousines and up and down stairways, and was not above loosening and tightening the straps of her murderous shoes.

“But the point is, the more we traveled the more we enjoyed ourselves, the more Tommy and I visibly and joyfully marveled at everything—the little children of the group—the more I couldn’t bear the thought of saying to Aunt Queen, ‘Yes, you must terminate this, your last trip to all the

wonderful places you have always loved. Yes, you will never see Paris or London or Rome again.'

"No, I could not bear it, no matter how much I loved Mona, no matter how much my heart yearned for her and no matter how much I feared that all her E-mails and faxes and letters to me asserting her 'stable condition' were not telling the truth.

"So for more than three years we meandered gloriously, and I will not try to recount our adventures, except for certain very specific things.

"Allow me to say for the record, if nothing more, that Tommy proved himself to be a genius, just as I had first believed him to be, in the precocity with which he absorbed all the beauty and knowledge around him; and, with no resistance to any adult authority, he gave back his written essays both to me and Nash with verve and appropriate pride.

"The fact that he so much physically resembled me obviously fed my vanity, I'm sure of it, but I would have loved him had he looked wholly different. What I found so purely virtuous in him was that he was curious. He had none of the sullen arrogance of ignorance and was forever asking questions of Nash, and purchasing cultural souvenirs of all sorts for his mother, brothers and sisters, which we sent off from every hotel by overnight express.

"Meantime, Grady Breen sent frequent packets of photographs of Terry Sue, her brood, her nanny, her maid, her yard man and the house, affirming that we had indeed preempted her doom.

"I knew, of course, without ever telling Tommy, that I would never surrender him to Terry Sue again, unless he himself madly insisted upon it, a condition I could hardly imagine and of which I got no inkling at all. On the contrary, by the second year he did not correct me or even go silent when I said, 'When you come to live with us at Blackwood Manor,' and that was good enough for me.

"Of course Aunt Queen made a total pet of him, buying him clothes he outgrew almost instantly, and nothing pleased her so much as to see people in the hotel lobbies or in the restaurants turning to look at him, the little gentleman in his black suit and tie, as we came in.

"As for me, I was so overwhelmed and so often in our travels that it would make tiresome reading here to recount it. It is enough to say that I drew intense enjoyment from everything I saw whether it was a tiny hamlet in England or the splendor of the Amalfi Coast.

"There is but one aspect of our Grand Tour that I want to recount, and that has to do with the ruins of Pompeii, outside of Naples.

"But let me first dispense with certain other matters, including the mystery of Goblin, because, as Goblin predicted, I lost him at some point on the first evening as we crossed the sea.

"I'm not even sure of how it happened or when. I sat beside him in the luxurious cabin of a newly designed model 800 jumbo jet , in which each seat swiveled and had its own private television set, and where a level of unparalleled privacy enabled me to talk to him and hold fast to his hand. And this I did, assuring him, against his fears, that I would do everything I could to

keep him with me, and that I loved him.…

"… And then, quite slowly, he began to fade. I heard his voice grow faint and then become telepathic, and then it was gone altogether, but in those last moments I said, 'Goblin, wait for me. Goblin, I will return home. Goblin, guard the house for me against the mysterious stranger. I need you to do it. Make sure my beloved Jasmine and Big Ramona and Clem and Allen are all safe.'

"It was a song I had been singing to him ever since we took off, but now I put the case to him urgently, and then I saw him no more.

"The feeling of severance, the feeling of pure lonesome emptiness around me was shocking and awful, and it was as if someone had taken all my clothes from me and left me in a desert place. For a full hour, perhaps more, I said nothing to anyone. I lay back, hoping this feeling of misery would leave me, trying desperately to realize I was free of him, I mustn't complain of it, I was free to go on with the tasks of Manhood, to be Tommy's devoted nephew, to make Aunt Queen happy, to learn from Nash. All the world was quite literally waiting for me!

"But I was without Goblin. Utterly without. And I felt a quality of agony that I had never known.

"Strange that in this lengthening aftermath, as I lay back in the luxurious seat being served another glass of wine by the sweet stewardess, as the plane seemed enveloped in the silence of the engines, and I couldn't even hear the voices of Tommy and Aunt Queen, no, couldn't even see them, or Nash with his book—it was during this sudden long and cold interval that I realized I hadn't said farewell to Patsy.

"I hadn't even tried to find Patsy. None of us, to my knowledge, had tried to find Patsy. We hadn't even thought of her. Not even Clem had asked what he should do should she want the limousine. Nor had Big Ramona said, What do we do if she brings her singers and her drummers into the house?

"No one had given her a thought either negative or positive, and now I lamented it, that I hadn't tried to call her and say good-bye. A coldness stole over me. Did I miss her? No, I missed Goblin. I felt as if my skin had been peeled and the cold winds had me.

"Patsy, my Patsy. Would she have the sense to get the medical care she needed? I felt too weary suddenly to tackle the problem, and certainly too alienated and too far away.

"And then a fear gripped me, not just a fear but a certainty.

"And realizing that I couldn't possibly be reached by phone on this plane but that I could phone Blackwood Manor, I broke out my new credit card and phoned home.

"I could hear the glass breaking in the background before I heard Jasmine's voice.

" 'Thank God it's you,' she declared. 'Do you know what he's doing? He's breaking every pane of glass in this place. He's on a rampage!'

" 'Tell me exactly,' I said. 'Can you see him?'

“ ‘No, I can’t see him. It’s just the panes shattering. He went through the living room first. It was like a fist breaking them, one after another.’

“ ‘Listen to me. He’s not as strong as you think he is. Whatever you do, don’t look at the place where he’s breaking the glass. You don’t want to see him. That gives him power, and he’s going to run out of power altogether, working the way he does.’

“I could hardly understand her as she continued. He had apparently broken all the glass in the dining room. Right this very minute he was in the kitchen, where Jasmine was, but he had just stopped there, and she could hear the glass breaking on the second floor and the guests were running down the stairs.

“ ‘He stopped in the kitchen?’

“She confirmed it.

“ ‘He didn’t want to hurt you, then. You run get the guests out of the house. Let them go without a bill. Hurry. But don’t go up to where he is, except to get the guests. And whatever you do, don’t try to see him. That will only give him strength.’

“I hung on. It was hard to hear over the roar of the plane, yet the sound came to me over thousands of miles, the tinkling of that shattered glass as he worked his lonely fury. And I thought frantically, What do I do *before* I call Stirling. What do I do now at this minute as man of the house?

“After an eternity, Jasmine was back on the line. ‘He’s stopped,’ she said. ‘The guests have all gone. Boy, were they ever excited. They got their money’s worth and didn’t have to pay it! I’m telling you there’ll be tales told in Ruby River City and Mapleville tonight.’

“ ‘Are you hurt? Is anybody hurt?’

“ ‘No, it just all fell to the floor,’ she answered. ‘Quinn, we’ve got to close this place down.’

“ ‘Like hell, Jasmine,’ I said. ‘You don’t think he’s got the stamina to keep this up, do you?’ I asked her. ‘He doesn’t. Not without me to see him, don’t you get it? He’s run out. He took back what he could.’

“ ‘And who’s to say he won’t climb out of bed with a new bag of tricks tomorrow,’ she asked. ‘I wish you could see this place!’

“I held on while she had a big argument with Clem and Allen. One wanted all the glass replaced immediately, the other said Goblin would just break it. Then Big Ramona said it had to be fixed, as a thunderstorm was coming.

“ ‘Look, I’m the boss,’ I chimed in from the plane. ‘Fix the glass now. Tell them to get the best quality that the windows will hold. God knows we had some very weak glass in some of those windows.’ (She told them what I said.) ‘Now, Jasmine, I want you to put the phone on hold and go up to my room and pick it up at my computer desk.’

“It took her longer than I liked. I told her to switch on the computer.

“ ‘It’s already on,’ she told me. ‘And I know you turned it off when you left.’

“ ‘What’s on the screen?’

“ ‘ “QUINN, COME HOME” in big letters,’ she told me.

“ ‘All right, I want you to type in this response: “Goblin, I love you. But I can’t leave Aunt Queen now. You know how I love Aunt Queen.” ’ I heard the keys clicking. Then I spoke some more. ‘ “Please protect those I love from Petronia.” ’ (I had to spell that for Jasmine.) ‘ “Goblin, wait for me. Love me. Love, Quinn.” ’

“I waited a moment as I listened to her type. I thought of something, something that just might work. Now, years later, I wonder if wasn’t a disastrous thought. But all my love of Goblin seems now to have been full of disastrous thoughts.

“ ‘Jasmine, I want you to type another message,’ I said. ‘ “Dear Goblin, I can write to you through the computer. I can send you E-mail. I will send it regularly to you care of my computer name, King Tarquin. I’ll be using a new name to send. And you can send it to me as soon as I send that new name. You know the computer as well as I do, Goblin. Wait for my communication.” ’

“It took a good while for Jasmine to get this message straightened out, but it was typed in and then I instructed her from then on to leave the computer on. She was to put a note on it instructing everybody to keep hands off.

“ ‘Now we’ll see if Goblin isn’t happy,’ I told her. ‘And very soon you’ll be able to reach us at the Hotel Hassler in Rome.’

“I rang off. As Lord of Blackwood Manor I saw no reason to tell the others that almost every window of the house had been broken. I lay back thinking that my new E-mail name should be Noble Abelard, and I should insist Mona use the name Ophelia Immortal, and perhaps Goblin should be Goblin.

“And so these things did come to pass.

“By the time we left the Eternal City, I and Mona and Goblin had established these links for computer correspondence, and it happened that all of my travels fed into my loving letters to my treasure, Ophelia Immortal, and only slightly edited versions of these same epistles went to my beloved Goblin, whilst from Mona I received passionate and highly humorous letters and from Goblin weaker and weaker transmissions largely only confessing his need of me and his love.

“Whenever we hit a hotel which had good computer equipment I printed out all this material, and it became my journal of the journey, and I was self-conscious enough not to write all of my erotic blandishments to Mona, and it was rather fun to try to speak in fractured Shakespearean tones.

“As for Goblin, his slow demise worried me intensely and ate at my soul as if a dark hand were scratching at my very heart, but I didn’t know what to do about it other than what I had done.

“Meantime, there were no more disturbances at Blackwood Manor.

“But the legend of the breaking glass was now known throughout Ruby River Parish, and

guests were calling for bookings day and night. My impression over the phone was that Jasmine was having a wonderful time, despite her protests of anxiety, and we again raised her salary and that of everybody on the staff.

"Jasmine, of her own volition, began to accept new bookings, and, as it turned out, the place was filled for the whole time that we were gone. Soon Big Ramona was cut in for a percentage of the profits, and I believe, though I'm not sure, that Clem was too. That took care of Jasmine's family. I drew the line when it came to Allen and the Shed Men, as they were making twice the wages of anybody similar in Ruby River Parish, with free drinks and lunch thrown in.

"Sugar Devil Island was giving rise to much gossip, as the marble tile for the floors was now being ferried through the swamps by slow motorless pirogue and people were asking over their coffee cups in Ruby River City and Mapleville whether or not Tarquin Blackwood had lost his mind.

"How glad I was to be in an ancient palazzo in Venice while all that was going on.

"It was some consolation to me that Sheriff Jeanfreau and his deputy Ugly Henderson had told everyone my tale of the man in the moonlight disposing of the two bodies. Because I hoped sincerely that people would take heed of it and not go boating around the island after dark.

"Sometime during the first year, while we were still in Italy, I wrote to Stirling Oliver at Oak Haven and told him what I had done. I told him that Goblin's abilities to write to me via the computer were apparently waning, and that I felt a great emptiness in spite of all the excitement of the Grand Tour.

"Stirling and I corresponded for a few months. He cautioned me not to rouse Goblin by letters that were either too short or too long, and he told me that according to his best guess, Goblin was a ghost connected in some way to the locality of Blackwood Manor, rather than to me personally, but of this Stirling wasn't perfectly sure.

" 'Try to experience your freedom from him,' he wrote. 'That is, try to enjoy it, and tell me whether or not you succeed. You might also ask those around you if they see any change in you. Mrs. McQueen, in particular, might illuminate you in some way.'

"I took his advice, and, indeed, Aunt Queen did have some reaction for me.

" 'You're really with us, my little darling,' she said. 'You're not distracted, talking to him. You're not fearful of what he might do. You're not always looking out of the corner of your eye.'

"She went on without any coaxing. 'You're much better this way, my sweet little boy. You're infinitely better. I see it so plainly because I know you as no one else does. It's time to put aside the things of childhood, and Goblin is of childhood.' She looked kindly on me as she spoke these words.

"And thus it was that my correspondence with Goblin trailed off into silence, and my beloved spirit, my counterpart, my doppelgänger disappeared beyond my reach. And believe me, it was beyond my reach. I tried with some desultory messages to summon him from the shadows, but

they failed.

"And as Blackwood Manor prospered with every blessing under Jasmine's reign as Queen, as the carols were sung at Christmas, as the feasts were prepared at Easter, as the flowers bloomed in Pops' beloved flower beds, we traveled on our circuitous odyssey and Goblin drifted beyond the pale.

"Of course I didn't settle for only letters with Mona. Many a night I spent on the phone with her, and always we ended with passionate assurances that we lived only for each other—there was no question of it now, Ophelia Immortal and Noble Abelard would someday be in a chaste marriage (lust without penetration)—and our written correspondence became our fallback when odd hours kept us apart.

"Many times I got Michael or Rowan when I called, and I never failed to exact the confirmation that Mona's condition was stable, that she had no need of me, and many a time, much to my amazement, Michael volunteered that the relationship had been a godsend because Mona had stopped her erotic roaming and was now 'living' for my E-mails and phone calls and spending all the rest of her life hard at work on the Mayfair Legacy, seeking to understand and participate in the investments, and also working on the family tree.

" 'She's a bit scornful of her home teacher,' Michael said. 'I wish she'd read more books. But I do get her to watch classic films with me. That's one good thing, don't you think?'

" 'Oh, definitely,' I said. 'No one can move forward creatively until they've seen *The Red Shoes* and *The Tales of Hoffmann.* Am I not profoundly right?'

" 'Yes, you are,' he laughed. 'And she does have them under her belt. Last night I got her to watch *Black Narcissus.*'

" 'Now that's an eerie one,' I said. 'I bet she loved it.'

" 'Ask her,' he said. 'Here she is, Noble Abelard, give everyone there my love.'

"And so my life ran on for three blissful and action-packed years.

"I grew to be six feet four inches in height.

"I saw the world's most beautiful and wondrous sights. I went with my joyous company as far south as Abu Simbel in Egypt and Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, and as far north as Ireland and Scotland. I went as far east as St. Petersburg. As far west as Morocco and Spain.

"There was no great order and no great thrift to the manner in which we traveled. Back and forth we went often. It had something to do with the seasons. It had everything to do with desire and whim.

"Tommy and Nash worked intensely on homework for the school board of Ruby River City. But in the main, Tommy received his knowledge as I did—from Aunt Queen and Nash drawing our attention to things we might otherwise have missed, from Aunt Queen and Nash giving us the cultural background of the things we saw and telling us marvelous stories that had to do with the famous persons connected to monuments, countries, culture and time.

"There was such a richness to all of it that I felt a fool for not having yielded to Aunt Queen's requests that I travel made so many years before. It seemed the arrogance of ignorance that I had refused to join her. But as she said to comfort me, it was not a time for regretting things. It was a time for embracing the entire world.

"Let me also note that no matter how much we saw or how late in the day we toured, I still managed to read Dickens for Nash, and he greatly increased my appreciation of *Great Expectations, David Copperfield, The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Little Dorrit.* I also investigated the Brontë sisters with keen delight, swallowing *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre.* If only I had been a better reader I might have accomplished more. I tried hard with Milton, but I couldn't remember what I read of *Paradise Lost,* no matter how hard I tried, so I put it by for Keats, reading the odes aloud until I had them memorized.

"All was bliss for us as we roamed. But not so with everyone. In the middle of our second year, Jasmine called to let us know that Patsy had gone through her income entirely for that period (staggering), and had gotten Clem to invest his entire inheritance from Pops in a rock album which had flopped, and Clem was now blaming Patsy for having tricked him and wanted to sue her.

"At Aunt Queen's behest I got on the phone with our lawyer, Grady Breen, and ascertained that Patsy had spent all the money on a rock video, the making of which had cost a million dollars, what with a foreign director and cinematographer, and then all the big cable music networks had failed to give it airtime.

"Clem had not been wearing blinders when he sunk his hundred thousand into the deal, and he was, in Grady's words, no fool, but I told Grady to pay him off and be done with it. As for Patsy, if she wanted money, just give it to her. She did want money and he would give it to her.

"In closing, I asked Grady if Patsy was having any success at all with her music. He replied that she was very successful of late with the good clubs, playing House of Blues all over the country. Her album was selling about three hundred thousand copies. But that's nothing compared to the million copies she longed to sell, and which she needed to sell to attain the fame she wanted. She had simply overestimated her name-brand appeal with this video she had made. It had been a little too soon for her.

"I didn't dare to ask directly about her health. I put it simply: 'Have you recently seen her?'

" 'Yes,' said Grady. 'She was just on *Austin City Limits.* She's as pretty as ever. Your mother has always been a pretty gal. I'm old enough to say that much, don't you think?'

" 'Yes, sir,' I said.

"And so back at home, Patsy was still being Patsy.

"Now that I have said all the above—dispatching all subjects pertaining to this period—let me return to the matter of Pompeii.

"Of course I was eager to see the ruins, but I couldn't forget the spell which Petronia had cast

over me when she had come to Blackwood Manor, and Aunt Queen had thoughts of her own about it, though they were far less alarmist than mine. We had discussed Petronia but only with some strain, Aunt Queen not quite forgiving me for my denouncing of Petronia and not quite believing that Petronia wasn't human and that Petronia had dumped two bodies in the swamp.

"As for me, I believed everything, and I wanted to see if the ruins of Pompeii—the excavations of an entire city once buried under ash and rubble—would bring to mind the images which Petronia had planted in my mind.

"I wasn't finished with Petronia.

"Back at home the renovations of the Hermitage were being completed to the tune of hundreds of thousands of dollars, and packets of color photographs had come to me revealing the stunning little house. Its interior rafters had been boldly gilded, Oriental rugs from my catalog collection were scattered over its shining marble and I had even ordered some ornate furnishings for it by long-distance from Hurwitz Mintz, in New Orleans. The place now sported velvet sofas and torchère lamps. It had a cluster of swan-backed chairs. All the comforts were connected in its spacious bathroom. Its new glass windows were kept shining clean.

"Allen had reported more than once that 'someone' was using the place in the evenings, that books were found on the desk (and never disturbed) and there were candles in evidence and ashes in the fireplace. So my partner was back in action. What did I expect? Had I not capitulated to every demand? But who had first thought of these efficacious designs? Was it not me?

"I was foolishly fascinated.

"And I was outraged. And too young perhaps to know the difference.

"And so I came to Pompeii on our third trip to Italy, not too far before the very end of our odyssey, in a bold and combative and curious frame of mind, ready at last to see the legendary spot.

"Aunt Queen probably did not even remember Petronia's spellbinding tale of that long-ago night. Nash spoke of it casually to me. Tommy and Cindy, the nurse, were merely happy to see one of the most famous ruins in the world.

"Coming by private car from our luxurious hotel in Naples, we visited the city early in the day. We had a leisurely stroll throughout the narrow rutted stone streets, knowing that we would come back tomorrow and tomorrow, and I felt everywhere the slight, thrilling frisson of Petronia's words. The sun was shining brilliantly, and Mount Vesuvius seemed safe and silent, a pale bluish sentinel of a mountain rather than anything that could have destroyed this little city, this small grid of multitudinous lives, in the space of half a day.

"We entered many of the partially restored houses, touching the walls only lightly with great reverence or not at all. There was a hush around us, even though tourists came and went, and it was hard for me to lift the veil of death that hung over the city so that I could imagine it alive again.

“Aunt Queen was intrepid as she led our little party to the House of the Faun and the Villa of the Mysteries. At last we came to the museum, and there I saw the natural white sculptures which had been made of those who had died in the ash and left nothing but the shape of their bodies behind. Poured plaster had immortalized their final moments, and I felt so moved by these featureless figures, drawn together in sudden death, that I was about to cry.

“Finally we went back to our rooms at the hotel. The night sky over the Bay of Naples was pregnant with a thousand stars. I opened the doors to the balcony and looked out over the bay and counted myself one of the happiest people alive. For a long while I stood at the stone balustrade. I felt pure contentment, as if I’d conquered Petronia and Goblin and Rebecca, and my future belonged only to me. Mona was doing wonderfully well. Even Aunt Queen seemed immortal—never to die as long as I did not die. Always to be with me.

“Finally I was tired and happy to be so. Putting on my customary nightshirt, though it was a bit warm for the lovely fragrant night, I lay down on the fresh pillow and drifted into sleep.

“Within seconds, it seemed, I was in Pompeii. I was running, pushing before me a reluctant group of slaves who wouldn’t believe me that the mountain would soon rain down its fury on us, that it would demolish everything, including our lives. Through the gates of the city we ran and down to the seashore and into the waiting boat. Out to sea we went and then came the eruption, the dark spume rising, the sky darkening. A hideous roar came from the mountain. Everywhere boats rocked on the water. ‘Keep going!’ I shouted. People shrieked and screamed. ‘Make the crossing,’ I pleaded. Slaves jumped into the water. ‘No, the boat’s faster,’ I insisted. The oars were dropped. The boat went over. I was drowning. The sea rose and fell. I swallowed water. Again came that unspeakable thunder.

“I woke up. I wouldn’t dream this dream! I felt terror. I felt another body enveloping mine. And against the bright blue of the night sky I saw a figure on the balcony, a figure I knew to be Petronia.

“ ‘You devil!’ I declared. I shot up from the bed and I ran at the figure, only the figure wasn’t there. Shaking violently I stood at the balustrade and looked out into the darkness, as frightened as ever I’d been in my life, and as angry as well.

“I couldn’t abide this terror, yet I couldn’t put an end to it. Finally, grabbing my robe, I went out of the room and down the hall to Aunt Queen’s suite. I pounded on her door.

“Cindy, our sweetheart of a nurse, answered.

“ ‘Aunt Queen, I have to sleep with you,’ I said, charging towards her bed. ‘It’s a nightmare. It’s that evil Petronia.’

“ ‘You come get in this bed with me right now, you poor little boy,’ she said.

“And I did exactly that.

“ ‘Now, now, darling, don’t fret,’ she said. ‘You are shaking! Now go to sleep. Tomorrow we’ll go to Torre del Greco, and we’ll buy lots of beautiful cameos, and you can help me as you always

do.'

"Cindy climbed back into the other bed. The curtains blew out from the open windows. I felt safe with the two of them. I went to sleep again, dreaming of Blackwood Manor, dreaming of Tommy living with us, dreaming of Mona, dreaming of so many things, but never bad things, never ghosts, never evil spirits, never darkness, never disaster, never death.

"Had Petronia really been there? Was it a spell? I'll never know.

"But let me bring to a close the story of our happy wanderings. Because it did come time for us to go home.

"Aunt Queen could go no farther. She was simply too weak; her blood pressure was too high. She had sprained her wrist, and who knew when an ankle sprain would more severely hamper her? She was also battling some form of arthritis and her joints had begun to swell. Her exhaustion was defeating her. She could not keep up with her own pace. She was angry with her own weakness.

"Finally, Cindy, the nurse, became adamant. 'I love these grand hotels as much as anybody,' she said, 'but you belong at home, Aunt Queen! You're going to take a bad fall! You can't go on like this.'

"I joined my voice to Cindy's and so did little Tommy, who was by this time a pretty tall twelve years of age, and finally Nash chimed in with a solemn declaration: 'Mrs. McQueen, you've been valiant, but it is now time for you to retire to Blackwood Manor and reign in state as the irrepressibly entertaining steel magnolia which we all know you to be.'

"We were in Cairo when the decision was reached, and we flew on to Rome, where our adventure had begun, for a last few nights at the Hotel Hassler. I knew by this time that I had been negligent in not proposing the return because I had not wanted to be accused of self-interest in my love and longing for Mona.

"And I was anxious about Mona. She hadn't answered my E-mails for over two weeks.

"As soon as we were checked in—I was in a huge suite with a very long broad terrace, right below Aunt Queen, who had the penthouse with Cindy—I tried to reach Mona by phone and got a taciturn, somewhat solemn Rowan.

" 'She's in Mayfair Medical for some tests, Quinn,' she said. 'She's likely to be there for several months. She won't be able to see you.'

" 'My God, you mean she's taken a turn for the worse!' I said. 'Dr. Mayfair, tell me the truth. What's happening to her?'

" 'I don't know, Quinn,' she said in her beguiling husky voice. 'Those are hard words for a doctor to say, believe you me. But I don't. That's why we're testing her. Her immune system's compromised. She's been running a fever for months. Somebody sneezes in the same room with her and she comes down with double pneumonia.'

" 'Good God,' I responded. As usual Rowan's brand of truth was a little too harsh for me. Yet I

told myself fiercely that I wanted it. 'Why can't I talk with her by phone?'

" 'I don't want her upset by anything now, Quinn,' said Rowan. 'And if she knew you were on your way home, she'd be upset that she couldn't see you. That's why she's in isolation. She's in a plastic bubble as far as the world's concerned, with a VCR and a monitor and a stack of vintage movies. She's eating popcorn and ice cream and chocolates and drinking milk. She knows you're having fun in Europe, and that's the way it has to stay for now.'

" 'But Rowan,' I pleaded. 'Surely she's getting my E-mails!'

" 'No, Quinn, she's resting. I took the computer away.'

"I was maddened. Just maddened. Here we were on our way home at last and she was beyond my reach. But the worst news was that she was sick! Too sick perhaps to even handle the computer!

" 'Rowan, listen, has she been sick all along? Has she been protecting me from it?'

"There was a long silence, and then she said in her characteristic straightforward fashion, 'Yes, Quinn, I'd say that's what she's been doing. But I think you knew that when you left. You knew she was undergoing a continuous treatment. She's been at various plateaus. But she's never really rallied.'

"I gasped. I didn't know if it was audible.

" 'I've got to see her when I come home,' I said.

" 'We'll arrange it,' she responded, 'as soon as it's possible. But it can't be right away.'

" 'Can you give her my love?' I asked. 'Can you tell her I called? Can you tell her I've sent her letters?'

" 'Yes, that I will do tonight,' she said, 'when I see her. And tomorrow and the day after.'

" 'Oh, thank you, Rowan, God love you, Rowan. Please, please tell her how much I love her.'

" 'Quinn, there's something else I want to say,' she said, surprising me. 'I know Michael's said it to you. Let me say it too. You really helped Mona. You got Mona to stop doing things that hurt her. You made her happy.'

" 'Rowan, you're frightening me,' I said. 'You're making it sound past tense.'

" 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean it to sound that way,' she said. 'I meant to say that during this time she's been deeply and totally in love with you. She's been writing to you, or talking to you by phone, instead of fighting us. She asks about you all the time.'

"I felt the chills come over me. My darling Mona. What had I done in leaving her? Had I fallen so in love with the letters and phone calls of Ophelia Immortal that I lost Mona herself?

" 'Thank you, Rowan,' I said. 'Thank you always.' There were so many more questions I wanted to ask, but I didn't dare to try it. I was so afraid.

"That night the champagne flowed in Aunt Queen's suite. Nash, who had drunk far too much of it, but with our liberal encouragement, proposed toast after toast to the lady he loved most in this world, Mrs. Lorraine McQueen; and young Tommy, now age thirteen by a matter of two

whole days, stood up to read a poem he had written for the occasion, declaring himself to have become a man thanks to his guardian and inspiration, nephew Tarquin Blackwood. Only I failed to comport myself in keeping with the occasion. I could only smile and salute everyone with my glass and say how very happy I was that we were returning home at last, to take stock of all we'd learned, and to all those we had missed in our journeying.

"The fact was, a multitude of worries and apprehensions had a Byronic hold upon me. Not to see Mona was foremost among them. But I was also obsessed with Petronia, that she was occupying the Hermitage so boldly, and of course I was thinking of Goblin. Was I fool enough to believe that Goblin would not show himself to me as soon as I came within the orbit of Blackwood Manor? I was not.

"And so the three-and-a-half-year intermezzo was ended.

"The following morning we departed for Newark with a connecting flight to take us immediately to New Orleans."

36

“Clem and Jasmine both greeted us at the airport and I burst into tears embracing them, so glad was I to see them; and never before had Clem looked so handsome in his chauffeur’s black suit and official hat, and never had Jasmine looked so lovely in her tailored suit of gray wool and her signature blouse of white ruffled silk, her blond Afro full and shaped and her tears flowing freely.

“Cheerful old Allen had also come to collect the luggage in the pickup and I fell to embracing and kissing him, but then came a moment of truth when Terry Sue appeared in a candy pink suit, much like the last one I had seen her wearing over three years ago, with a new baby on her hip (the last one had not been fathered by Pops); and Tommy ran to her, putting his arms around her and kissing her.

“It took a moment for me to recognize the slender and beautiful teenaged girl beside her, and then I realized it was Brittany.

“Tommy looked to us as to what to do, and I, drawing him aside, asked what I should have asked before we had come to this juncture: ‘What do you want?’ ‘To stay with you,’ was his answer.

“ ‘I then went to Terry Sue and put it to her that Tommy wanted to finish out the trip with a spell at Blackwood Manor if only she would allow it, and I told her and Brittany how wonderful it was that they had come to the airport. I slipped Terry Sue all the twenties I had in my wallet, and that was plenty.

“ ‘All right, you behave yourself, Tommy Harrison,’ she said. And she gave him a big kiss.

“ ‘Brittany, I’ll call you tonight,’ he said to his sister.

“ ‘You’ve grown up to be a beautiful girl,’ I told her.

“Of course Aunt Queen was showering her with compliments, and had even taken off her cameo—one of the new ones from the town of Torre del Greco—and given it to her.

“These tender emotions I had anticipated, and, tired as I was, I let them grip me, and was glad of them, but as we drove away in Aunt Queen’s big car, as I sat back, exhausted from our long flight, and looked out the window, I was totally unprepared for the tremendous feeling that swept over me at the sight of the verdant grasses growing unkempt along the highway and the swaying oleanders in full bloom and the occasional oak trees, which meant we were truly home.

“I felt Louisiana all around me, and I loved it. And by the time we had reached the pecan tree

drive before the house I was so choked up I could hardly speak into the intercom to ask Clem to stop the car.

"I got out and looked down the long vista at the house. It was inexplicable, the feeling in me. It wasn't happiness. It wasn't sorrow. Yet it was rendering me helpless and bringing only the sweetest tears.

"Nash helped Aunt Queen from the car and she stood beside me. We both looked at the distant white columns.

" 'That's your home,' she said. "It will be yours forever,' she continued. 'You must take care of it after I'm gone.'

"I put my arm around her and I bent down and kissed her, realizing perhaps for the first time how very tall I was, and feeling awkward in my somewhat new body. Then I let her go.

"As we continued up the drive, one aspect after another swept the same feelings of love and anguish over me, or maybe it was sorrow. I couldn't identify it. As the wash of childhood memories paralyzed me and humbled me, I only knew I was home.

"Of course I thought of Goblin, but I felt nothing of his presence. And of course I thought of Patsy and I expected to see her by and by. But it was the very landscape itself that evoked these titanic emotions in me—the sight of Pops' flower beds, the rolling lawns, the oaks leaning their dark elbows over the cemetery, the creeping swamp with its uneven wall of gnawing trees.

"Things happened very fast after this. And my extreme exhaustion made the events of the day fragmentary and disconnected yet bright and clear.

"I remember that there were no paying guests in the house because Jasmine had held all the bedrooms for Tommy and Nash and Patsy.

"I remember that I ate a monstrous breakfast cooked by a tearful Big Ramona who chastised all of us ferociously for having been gone three and one-half years. I remember that Tommy ate with me and that he seemed as impressed by Blackwood Manor as he had been by castles in England and palazzi in Rome.

"I remember that a darling little boy came in, a charming Anglo-African blending of blue eyes, distinguished African features and curly blond hair, who told me proudly his name was Jerome and that he was three years old, on both counts of which I congratulated him, wondering who in the world were his parents. I announced that I found him to be verbally very far advanced.

" 'That's because he lives in this kitchen the way you used to do,' said Big Ramona.

"I remember that Aunt Queen's doctor came and said she had to have bed rest for at least a week, and her nurses should be there round the clock. It was old age, he whispered to me. And once she properly recovered from her overexertions she should be right fine. Her blood pressure was a medical marvel.

"I remember that I spent a desperate half hour on the phone trying in vain to reach Mona. Mayfair Medical would not even acknowledge she was there. And servants at the First Street

house would give me no information either. At last I reached Michael, who would tell me only that Mona was sick; pray for her, yes, but to see her was out of the question.

"It made me frantic. I was ready to go directly to Mayfair Medical and search for her, room to room, when Michael suddenly said, as if he could read my thoughts:

" 'Quinn, listen to me. Mona has asked that you not see her. She's made us promise repeatedly that we won't let you in. It will break her heart if we break our word. We can't do it. It would be selfish for you to come. Don't you understand what I'm saying?'

" 'Good heavens, you mean she looks sick as well as feels sick? She's deteriorated. She's—.' I was stymied.

" 'Yes, Quinn. But don't give up hope. We are a long way from doing that. We're trying to build her back up. Her appetite is good. She's holding her own. She's got her books on tape. She's got her films. She sleeps a lot. That's to be expected.'

" 'Does she know I'm back?'

" 'Yes, she does, and she loves you.'

" 'Can I send her flowers?'

" 'Yes, you can do that, but be sure you put Ophelia Immortal on the card, won't you?'

" 'Why can't I talk to her by phone? Why can't we use E-mail?'

"There was a long pause and then he said,

" 'She's too weak for it, Quinn. And she doesn't want to do it. She's sick to her stomach, son. But this won't go on forever. She'll get better.'

"As soon as I rang off I ordered tons of flowers, baskets and baskets of Casablanca lilies and marguerites and zinnias and everything I could think of. I hoped they would fill her isolation chamber. Every card was to be writ large, to my Ophelia Immortal.

"After that I remember that I drifted into the kitchen, light-headed with jet lag and grief, and I saw Tommy playing Scrabble with little Jerome and I thought how incredible that the little guy could play the game at the tender age of three, until I realized Tommy was actually just teaching him words like 'red' and 'bed' and 'web' and 'do' and 'say' and 'go.'

"I remember drifting into the pantry and thinking the child was one of Jasmine's little nieces or nephews and asking her, 'Who are his parents?' and hearing her say, 'You and I are.' I remember nearly fainting. But that's a figure of speech. She also said to me, 'His middle name is Tarquin.'

"I remember going back out, feeling I was floating, and staring at my son and at my adopted thirteen-year-old uncle, and feeling myself utterly and totally privileged with these two generations, and when Jasmine appeared I put my arm around her and kissed her and she pushed me away, saying under her breath that there had been enough of that, and I ought to know it.

"I was positively groggy as I made my way to Aunt Queen's bedroom, and she looked up at me

from her chaise lounge, where she was already under one of her white satin quilts with her feathered negligee stirring hither and thither with the motion of the overhead fan, and said:

" 'Darling boy, go to sleep. You're white as a sheet. I slept on the plane, but you didn't. You're staggering.'

" 'Are you drinking champagne?' I exclaimed. 'You must, for we have something to celebrate.'

" 'You come here to me!' Jasmine called out as she chased after me. But I wouldn't be deterred.

" 'Champagne it is!' I said, discovering the chilled bottle in the ice, and an extra glass, and that Aunt Queen was already happily swilling.

"What time was it? Who cared? I drank and then I told her all about Jerome, even as Jasmine dug her finely buffed fingernails into my arm and whispered curses into my ears to which I responded not one syllable.

"Aunt Queen was overcome with happiness! 'Why, splendid!' she declared. 'And all this time, Tarquin, I thought you were a virgin! Bring this child to me. And Jasmine, you amaze me. Why on earth didn't you write to us and tell us! This calls for child support among other things.'

"And so the handsome little infant was brought into the presence of the Queen, and groggily and happily I drank two more glasses of champagne before becoming totally incoherent. By then my son had been told that I was his father. And Tommy had received the news too, being advised by Aunt Queen that in this house we kept no secrets, a fact which would work to the betterment of all of us.

"I remember staggering to Aunt Queen's bed, and someone, some very blessed individual, sweeping away her many fancy quilts and boudoir dolls so that I could fall facedown into the immaculate pillows, and that same someone, no doubt, pulled off my shoes, and I was soon under the heavenly weight of the quilts and in the chill of the air conditioner, fast asleep.

"I dreamed a dream of Goblin. It was an awful dream that he was suffering and couldn't come to me. I saw him incomplete, a gaseous and hideous being, struggling to be solid, but without my will he was indistinct and loose and miserable. I knew myself in the dream as cold and cruel to him.

"I danced with Rebecca. She said, 'I would not take you for my vengeance. You have been too good.' 'Who then would you have?' I asked, and she answered me only with laughter. She went away and the music went with her. I opened my eyes.

"Aunt Queen lay beside me. She wore her silver-rimmed glasses. She was reading her paperback *The Old Curiosity Shop,* which I had given her on the plane, and she said to me:

" 'Quinn, Dickens is a madman.'

" 'Oh to be sure,' I said. 'It becomes wilder and wilder, all the darkness surrounding Little Nell; just keep going.'

" 'Oh, I will,' she said.

“ ‘She snuggled up to me. The feathers of her negligee tickled my nose but I loved it. I loved her frail arm so close to mine. I could read the book in her hands if I wanted to. I smelled her sweet perfume. She could buy anything in the world and she wore drugstore Chantilly, and a sweeter scent in all the world there is not.

“I remember seeing the violet sky through the windows.

“ ‘Lord, it’s almost dark,’ I said. ‘I have to go to the Hermitage! I have to see my Petrine masterpiece.’

“ ‘Tarquin Blackwood, you will not go out in that swamp at this hour.’

“ ‘Nonsense, I have to,’ I said, kissing her forehead and then her soft powdered cheek. ‘Both Mona and Goblin are denied to me, and of Goblin’s loss I have nothing to lament, I confess it, but I must go out there and claim what I’ve done.’

“I remember further protest, but I was deaf to it.

“I hurried up the stairs and into my room and into my closet, and I knew myself to be light-headed still as I pulled on a new pair of jeans and a new shirt and new boots (all purchased for my new size by Big Ramona as soon as she knew we were coming home) and then I took my thirty-eight pistol from the nightstand and headed down and out of the house. From the kitchen I took a bottle of water and a big knife, and from the shed a flashlight, and then I went down towards the swamp.

“Of course I was disregarding the terms of my bold and savage partner, but I had never agreed to them, had I? It was for myself that I had done the refurbishment and the renovation of the Hermitage. It was for me the fine furnishings that I would soon see. I had no fear of him, and if anything I felt a brooding curiosity to see him again and contend with him—perhaps to have a decent conversation with him. Perhaps to discuss ‘our’ little house and to discover whether we did indeed have a bargain, since I had achieved all of the splendid renovations, not he.

“That Goblin was not with me to help me did not matter to me. I would handle it. The Hermitage was mine.

“As I passed the little cemetery going down to the landing I stopped for a moment near Rebecca’s grave. I shone the flashlight on her tombstone. A frisson of the dream came back to me, and I heard her voice again in my memory as though she was near to me. ‘Not your life,’ she said. ‘Whose life then?’ I asked. And I felt a sense of foreboding, a dreadful sense of it—as though life itself were full of nothing but misery.

“Wasn’t Mona sick unto death, nauseated and miserable, and here I was going out to the Hermitage with no thought of her? Mona wanted so badly to see the Hermitage. But what could I do but pray for Mona?

“The sky was darkening. I had to go.

“When I returned I’d go to Mayfair Medical. I’d search the wards. What hospital room doesn’t have a window for nurses to peep inside? I’d get as close to Mona as I could. Nobody would stop

me, but for now it was the Hermitage that beckoned. I had to go.

"Into the pirogue I piled my gear, and, double-checking my gun for bullets, I set out. There was just enough light from the reddening sky to see the trees clearly and I knew the way now, and it soon became evident that the many pirogues of the renovation had plainly marked a trail. They had worn the way, one might put it. And I was soon speeding along.

"In less than half an hour I saw the lights of the Hermitage! And as I pulled up to its new landing and tethered the pirogue, I saw the brilliantly lighted windows and the gleam of the white marble stairs. All around the little house were neat beds of flowers, and the wisteria vine came crawling splendidly over its high roof. The little building resembled a small Coptic church with its many arches.

"In the doorway, facing me, indeed watching me, was the stranger, in his male attire, hair full and loose, neither beckoning me to come closer nor putting up his hand to forbid my coming ashore.

"How was I to know this was the last day of my mortal life? How was I to know that all those random little things which I have described to you would mark the end of my history—that Jerome's father, Tommy's nephew, Aunt Queen's Little Boy, Jasmine's Little Boss and Mona's Noble Abelard were about to die?"

37

“I found a paved path to the foot of the stairs. Allen had mentioned it to me on the phone but I had forgotten it. I had forgotten the flowers as well, and how tranquil and sweet they looked in the light from the windows.

“I came to the bottom of the marble steps. He was up there, merely looking down at me.

“ ‘Need I ask your permission to come up?’ I asked.

“ ‘Oh, I have great plans for you,’ he replied. ‘Come up and I shall put them into execution.’

“ ‘Is that cordial?’ I asked. ‘Your voice puts me in doubt. I’m curious to see the place but wouldn’t inconvenience you.’

“ ‘Then come up, by all means. Perhaps tonight is not the night for me to torment you.’

“ ‘Now you surprise me with your agreeable tone,’ I said. I came up the stairs. ‘But is it certain that you do mean to torment me?’

“He stood back, in the bath of light, and at once I saw that he was more definitely a she this evening. She had darkened her lips with red and worked a line of black kohl around each eye to make herself more bewitching. Her gleaming black hair was a raiment. And the actual garments she wore were a simple long-sleeve tunic shirt of red velvet and red velvet pants as featureless and simple. Around her small waist was a belt of onyx cameos, clasped in front, a real prize of a thing, each cameo being some two inches in size.

“She was barefoot, and her feet were beautiful with gold painted nails. Her fingernails were painted gold too.

“ ‘You’re beautiful, my friend,’ I said, feeling wonderful with excitement. ‘Is it permitted to tell you this?’ I bit my tongue before I said, I hadn’t expected to find it so. What I remembered from that long ago night was something harsher and more dreadful.

“She gestured for me to enter the house.

“ ‘Of course it’s permitted,’ she responded in her low voice as I moved past her, which might have done well for a man or a woman, and as she smiled now her face was radiant. ‘Look around your fine house, Little Gentleman,’ she said.

“ ‘Ah, “little,” ’ I quoted it back to her. ‘Why does everyone refer to me as little?’ I asked.

“ ‘No doubt because you’re so very tall,’ she replied amiably, ‘and because your face is so very innocent. I told you once I had a theory about you. My theory has proved correct. You’ve learnt

more and you've grown to a great height. Both developments are splendid.'

" 'Then you approve of me.'

" 'How could I not?' she replied. 'But take your time. Look around at your handiwork.'

"It was difficult for me to look at anything but her. However, I did as she had asked and found the room stunning. Its white marble floor was brilliantly clean. And the deep green velvet couches I'd purchased from afar were sumptuous, as I'd hoped. The gilded torchères, positioned between the many windows, shone their light up on the outrageous gilded rafters. There were low marble tables before the couches and their accompanying Grecian swan-backed chairs.

"And then there was her desk and her chair, same as they were before, only polished up a bit it seemed.

"And the new fireplace, a black iron Franklin stove of great proportions, with only a heap of gray ash in it tonight, thanks to the warm weather.

"The curving stairs to the second floor was a heavily carved bronze created with pivots, and very handsome too. Beneath it was the only bookcase in the place, small, of heavily carved wood, neat and crammed with thin paperback volumes.

"There was nothing here that wasn't lovely in its own right.

"At the same time, there was something completely wrong with it, something grotesque, impure, out of keeping with the night noises of the swamp. Had my adolescent madness done this or her total insanity?

"Even the cup on her desk was a golden chalice with jewels embedded in it. It looked rather like the ciborium used by the priest at Mass for the wafers of the Blessed Sacrament.

" 'And so it was,' she remarked, 'before a little thief sold it to me in the streets of New Orleans. It's still consecrated, don't you suppose?'

" 'Really,' I replied, taking note that she had read my thoughts. I saw two bottles of red wine, already uncorked, sitting beside the ciborium.

" 'Those are for you, King Tarquin,' she said. She gestured for me to walk about more if I wanted to. I did so.

" 'Ah, you know the derivation of my name,' I said. 'Not many people do.' Clumsily I tried to match her eloquence.

" 'King Tarquin of ancient Rome,' she said, smiling. 'He ruled before the beginning of the Republic.'

" 'And do you think he was real or merely a legend?' I asked.

" 'Oh, most real in old poetry,' she replied, 'and most real in my mind in that over these three years I have so often thought of you. You have done well by my fantasies. I don't entirely know why I crave this remote paradise, but crave it I do, and you have restored my little house and made it splendid. I slip away from other palaces where I'm too uncomfortably known and come here with no loss of comfort. Why, your men even come to clean this house by day. They mop

the marble and polish it afterwards. They clean the windows. I never expected this much attention.'

" 'Yes, I told them to do these things. They think me quite the madman, I must tell you.' Was this me talking?

" 'I'm sure they do, but that's the common price of all wild eccentricity, and small eccentricity isn't worth a damn, is it?'

" 'I don't know,' I said, laughing. 'I haven't settled that one yet.'

"I saw a big long heap of dark mink thrown over one of the couches—a bedspread, a wrap, something like that it had to be.

" 'Is that for cold nights?' I asked.

" 'Oh, yes,' she said, 'and also for flying. It's fiercely cold in the clouds.'

" 'You fly?' I asked, wanting to play along.

" 'Indeed, I do,' she responded with a straight face. 'How do you think I get here?'

"I laughed but not too loudly. It seemed an absurd fantasy to espouse.

"She was distractingly beautiful now, with the light of the torchères making a soft wreath of illumination behind us. Her breasts were prominent under the soft red velvet tunic, and there was something positively unsettling about her gorgeous bare feet with her golden toenails. As I looked down at them, indeed I couldn't stop myself from looking at them, I saw they were small feet, and that I found rather fetching. Also she wore a gold ring on her left big toe, and there seemed something deliciously evil about singling out that toe for this adornment.

"My three and one-half years of Catholic abstinence weighed heavily upon me suddenly, especially since there seemed something 'makeable' about her, maybe the fact that she seemed genuinely wild.

"I also found it beguiling that she was shorter than me now—no longer the six-foot devil who had borne down on me in the shower so long ago, fiercely threatening my life until Goblin had sent the shower of glass at her.

" 'And while we're on the subject of Goblin,' she said in the most agreeable tone, 'I can tell that the demon isn't with you. What a loss. Do you expect him to return and proffer his affections soon enough like a loyal dog, or do you think he's gone forever?'

" 'You puzzle me,' I said, 'taking such a sweet voice to speak such a hostile thing. I don't know whether or not I've lost him forever. Could be. Could be that he's found another soul with whom he's made a better communion. I gave him eighteen years of my life. Then distance divided us. I don't claim anymore to understand his nature.'

" 'I didn't mean to sound hostile,' she said. 'The truth is, and I do like to speak the truth when I can, that I never expected to find you so sanguine.'

"I didn't know what 'sanguine' meant. She moved towards the table, uncorked one of the bottles and filled the ciborium.

“ ‘Three and a half years has mellowed me, somewhat,’ I said. ‘And I never expected you to invite me in tonight. On the contrary, I expected to find you jealous of your nighttime hours. I thought you’d turn me away.’

“ ‘And why would that be, do you think?’ she asked. She brought the cup to me and extended it. And only then did I see the giant sapphire carbuncle on her finger. ‘Oh yes, this,’ she said as I took the cup. ‘I carved this likeness of the god Mars. I was consecrated to him once, but it was in jest. I’ve been the victim of so many jests.’

“ ‘I can’t imagine why,’ I said. I looked at the wine. ‘Am I to drink alone?’

“She laughed softly. ‘For the moment,’ she said. ‘Please go ahead. You’ll make me unhappy if you don’t.’

“My breeding was such that I couldn’t refuse the drink on that account, and so I drank, noticing a strange flavoring in the wine, though it wasn’t unpleasant. I drank deeply again. I was excited.

“ ‘You really mean what you say, don’t you?’ she asked. ‘You don’t see why people laugh at me. Or ever have, do you?’

“ ‘No,’ I said. In my typical fashion I drank even more of the wine, loving the taste of it suddenly and letting it hit my hungry heart immediately. Nothing for lunch. Nothing for supper. Awake on the plane. Awake round the clock. I had to watch myself.

“ ‘They laughed and they still laugh,’ she said, ‘because I’m both man and woman. But you see nothing to jest at there, do you?’

“ ‘I told you no. I think you’re rather magnificent. I thought you were before. My, but this wine is strong! Is it wine?’ I realized that the bottles carried no labels. I felt the floor moving beneath me. ‘Would you mind if I sat down?’ I asked. I looked about me for a chair.

“ ‘No, you must,’ she said. She drew up one of the swan-back chairs for me. It was a graceful thing, like the chairs on Grecian urns. I remembered having ordered it. And Allen had teased me over the phone about all the swans in my house of marble and gold.

“ ‘Yes, your workmen laugh at your taste,’ she said, reading my thoughts, ‘but your taste is excellent, have no doubt.’

“ ‘Oh, I don’t have any doubts,’ I said, more sure of myself now that I was seated. I laid the cup on the edge of the desk. My hand rested beside it. I think I had almost dropped it.

“ ‘Drink some more,’ she said. ‘It’s a special brew. You might say I blended it myself.’

“ ‘Oh, I can’t,’ I said. I looked up into her eyes. What powerful eyes. People with big eyes have such a gift. And hers were so enormous. So white and black.

“She sat on the desk looking down at me. She smiled reassuringly. ‘It seems I don’t know quite what to do with you when you’re so polite,’ she said. ‘You made an annoying enemy once, and now I want you to love me. Perhaps when all is said and done, you will.’

“ ‘That’s entirely possible,’ I said, ‘but there’re so many species of love, aren’t there? I’m

religious still, and something tells me you live freely.'

" 'Catholic,' she said. 'Of course. The grand Church. Nothing less would be worthy of you and Mrs. McQueen, would it? It seems one evening in Naples that I saw you and your party at Mass. No. It was in the catacombs of San Gennaro. Your family had booked a private tour. Why, I'm almost sure of it.' She lifted the ciborium and filled it from the bottle. She gave me the cup.

" 'You saw us in Naples?' I asked. My head was spinning. I drank the wine, thinking that just a little bit more might eliminate this precarious feeling. That happened sometimes, didn't it? Of course it didn't. 'How utterly remarkable,' I said. 'Because I could have sworn I saw you in Naples as well.'

" 'And where was that?' she asked.

" 'Are you my enemy?' I asked.

" 'Not at all,' she said. 'If I could, I'd deliver you from old age and death, from aches and pains, from the blandishments of ghosts, from the torment of your familiar, Goblin. I'd deliver you from heat and cold and from the arid dullness of the noonday sun. I'd deliver you into the placid light of the moon and into the domain of the Milky Way forever.'

" 'Those are strange words,' I said. 'I can't make sense out of them. I could have sworn I saw you in Naples, that I saw you on my balcony at the Excelsior Hotel, that I had a nightmare sent from you. Isn't that madness? Surely you'll tell me it was.'

" 'Nightmare?' she asked softly, sweetly. 'You call a fragment of my soul a nightmare? Oh, but who would want a fragment of another person's soul? You think you want Mona Mayfair's soul. You don't know what it would mean to see her now.'

" 'Don't play with her name,' I said. I was startled. Suddenly it seemed to me that everything that was happening was wrong. Mona, my beloved Mona. Don't speak of Mona. The wine was not wine. The house was overwhelming. Petronia herself was too large and grand for a woman. I was too drunk to be where I was.

" 'When I am finished with you, you won't want Mona Mayfair,' she said quickly, almost angrily, though her voice remained soft. She purred like a cat. 'And of my soul you'll know no more. My soul will be locked as though a key, a golden key, were turned inside it. It will all be silence between us, the silence you know now.'

" 'I have to get away from here,' I said weakly. I knew I couldn't stand. I tried. My muscles wouldn't work. 'I have to get back to the boat. If you have a modicum of honor, you'll help me.'

" 'I have none, so rest where you are,' she said. 'We'll part soon enough in my time, though not in yours, and then you may have this house as your Hermitage, and I even bequeath the tomb to you. Yes, you may have that, and you may take your chances with it, and you may crave this dark, lively swamp as I so often craved it. I think I've been waiting for you these long three and a half years, knowing I would relinquish everything to you when I saw you. Yes, waiting. Why is it that this must be done I can't answer—.'

“ ‘What? What must be done? What are you saying?’ I pleaded. ‘I don’t understand you.’

“ ‘It’s as though the evil builds up,’ she said, ‘and then it must be siphoned off into a new one, and I give birth as I never could in life.’

“ ‘I can’t follow you.’

“She turned and looked down at me, and there spread across her face the most transcendent smile.

“ ‘Why do I get the feeling that you’re a giant cat?’ I asked suddenly, ‘even to your lovely eyes, and I’m some luckless prey that you’ve randomly selected?’

“ ‘Never random,’ she said, her face exquisitely serious. ‘No, never random. But carefully, out of circumstance, and on merit, and out of loneliness. But never random, no, never that. You are much loved. You have been long awaited.’

“A wave of sheer drunkenness passed over me. I was about to slip into unconsciousness.

“The figure before me started flashing on and off, as if someone had ahold of the light switch and meant to drive me mad. I tried to stand up but I couldn’t.

“I put the ciborium on the edge of the desk and pushed it back with my right fingers. I saw her fill it again with wine. No more, I thought, but then she lifted it and put it to my lips. I took it. I tried to decline. She tipped it and I drank it as it spilled down my neck and into my shirt. It was delicious, much more so now than in the beginning. I fell back. I saw the ciborium lying on the floor. I saw the red wine on the marble.

“ ‘No, not on the beautiful white marble,’ I said. ‘It’s too like blood, look at it.’ Again, I tried to stand up. I couldn’t.

“She knelt down in front of me.

“ ‘I have cruelty in me,’ she said. ‘I have cruelty in me which will be answered. Don’t expect anything else from me. You’ll have the gifts I choose to give and those only, and I’ll make no mewling bastards such as others make, fodder for the old ones, but I’ll leave you strong when I leave you, and with all the gifts you need.’

“I couldn’t answer her. My lips would no longer move.

“Suddenly I saw Goblin behind her! He was indistinct, all force, not illusion, and she rose in a fury, trying to throw him off. He had pulled the choke hold on her, the very move she had once pulled on me, and she stomped her foot on the floor as she threw her elbow back at him. He dissolved yet came at her again, infuriating her.

“Again the light was flickering. My muscles were paralyzed. I saw her in the flicker as she darted across the room. She gathered up the huge wrap of mink and came towards me, and again he tried to stifle her, but she would have none of it. Slapping him away from her, she reached for me. And with one slender arm she snatched me bodily from the chair, and in the mink wrapped my entire body as though such a gesture was nothing to her, and then she enveloped me in her arms.

“She cursed at Goblin. ‘Say farewell to your lover!’

“We were in the open air. I saw Goblin clinging to us. I saw his face, his open mouth as he howled. He slipped down, down as though he were drowning.

“We were rising, and I saw the clouds below me. And I felt the wind against my cheek, and my skin was chilled, but it didn’t matter because all around me were the glorious stars.

“She pressed her lips to my ear. And just before consciousness left me entirely, I heard her speak.

“ ‘Pay heed to these cold beacons,’ she said, ‘for in all your long life, you may never find warmer friends than these.’ ”

38

“I awoke once during daylight. I lay on a soft bed on a terrace, and all around me were flowers. There were potted geraniums along the balustrade, and beyond those were white-and-pink oleanders, and I thought in my dizziness and my madness that I could see a distant mountain to my right, which I knew certainly by its shape to be Vesuvius, and when I rose, sick and aching, I staggered to the edge of the oleanders and I looked down on the tile roofs of the town way far below me and saw that I couldn’t escape in that way.

“Far to my left the road wound on with the cars like tiny beetles speeding along it. It was the coast of Italy in all its rugged glory, and beyond the road was the sizzling sea. The sun was high and blinding and it burnt down upon me, and there was no escape from it on this terrace.

“As for the house, it was locked against me. The dark green shuttered doors had nothing that I could even grasp. I fell back down on the bed and my eyes closed, though I willed them to stay open.

“My fevered mind said, *You must escape here. You must go down the slope somehow. You have to drop to the roofs below.* That this creature, Petronia, meant to murder me, I had no doubt.

“I felt unconsciousness creep over me again, hot and dark and full of desperation. Some drug was working in me still that I couldn’t fight.

“Then, against the blue sky I saw the shadowy outline of a woman and I heard her talking low and fast in Italian and I felt a sharp stab in my arm. I saw the outline of the syringe in her hand as she held it up with a dainty gesture, and I wanted to protest but I couldn’t. And next I knew, she was shaving my face with a small electric razor that was like a noisy little animal running all over my upper lip and my chin.

“She was speaking to another woman in Italian, and though I spoke a little Italian I couldn’t tell what it was she was saying, only that she complained. Finally she moved to one side, and I could see her, and she was young and brunette and with an upturn to her eyes.

“ ‘Why you, I would like to know,’ she said to me with a thick accent. ‘Why not me after all this time? I serve and I serve, and she brings you to me and says make him ready. I am nothing but a slave.’

“ ‘Help me to get out of here,’ I said, ‘and I’ll make you rich.’

“She laughed. ‘You don’t even want it, and they’re giving it to you!’ she said scoffing. ‘And

why? Because she has a whim.' Her voice was soft but insistent. 'Everything is a whim with her. To come. To go. To live in this palazzo. To live in that palazzo.' She laid down the syringe. I heard the clink of metal. She lifted a long scissors. She cut a lock from my hair.

" 'What did you put into me?' I asked. 'Why did you shave my face? Where is Petronia?'

"She laughed, and so did another young woman who appeared on the left side of me, opposite. She was also slender, fashionable-looking and pretty of face, just like the one who was trimming my hair. She stood with her back to the light, her shadow falling over me.

" 'We should kill you,' said the other woman, the new one, 'so that she can't do it. We could tell her that you died.'

"They both laughed at this joke uproariously.

" 'Why do you wish me harm?' I asked.

" 'Because she chose you instead of us!' said the one who had injected me. She was angry but she didn't raise her voice. 'Do you know how long we've waited? We've been teased by her since we were children. Always she has an excuse, except when she is angry, and then she offers no excuse for anything, and God help those who ask her for one!' She took a comb to my hair. 'You're ready as far as I can see.'

" 'Don't worry,' said the other one. She stood with folded arms. Her face was cold. She had beautiful sneering lips. 'We won't hurt you. She would know when she comes. And then she would kill us for certain.'

" 'Are you talking about Petronia?'

" 'You don't know anything,' said the one who had been combing my hair. 'She's just playing with you. She's going to kill you like all the rest.'

"I could feel the drug working in me, or was it my imagination? I was so hot, so miserable. I was neither drugged nor conscious.

" 'Don't try to get up,' said the woman with the comb. But I did try and I pushed her away from me.

"She fell back, murmuring in Italian. I think she was cursing. 'I hope she tortures you!' she said.

"I was flat on my back. I imagined myself crawling to the balustrade. I should have dropped down, no matter how low it was. I had been a fool not to try it. My eyes closed. I could hear their voices, their cheap, cruel laughter. I hated them.

" 'Listen to me,' I said. 'Help me to the balustrade. I'll go over it myself. You can tell her that I jumped. I'll probably die, and you'll be happy and free of me, just like … just like …' I couldn't make my mouth form the words. I wasn't sure I had said even what I thought I had said.

"I was swooning. I could no longer see.

"The bed was moving, and at first I thought it was my disorientation, but then I heard the squeak of the wheels. A coolness came over me and I felt my clothes being ripped from me, and

then, down into a pool of warm water, my body was slipped.

"Thank God for it, I thought. The sweat and the heat were gone. Someone was bathing me and I didn't hear the voices of the young women anymore.

" 'Listen to me,' said a voice right close to my ear.

"I tried to open my eyes. In a flash I saw the ceiling painted with murals—a great blue sky with flying gods and goddesses: Bacchus in his chariot and satyrs around him with wreaths and trails of green ivy, and the maenads with their hair ripped and their clothes in tatters following behind. Brand-new. Too bright.

"Then I saw the boy who was bathing me. He was one of those extraordinary young Italian beauties with a halo of black curls for hair, and a gorgeous naked chest and muscular arms.

" 'I'm talking to you,' he said with a thick accent. 'Can you understand me?'

" 'The water feels good,' I tried to say, but I'm not sure I managed the words.

" 'Can you understand me?' he asked again.

"I tried to nod but my head was against a rim of porcelain. I said, 'Yes.'

" 'She'll test you,' he said. He went on bathing me, lifting the water in his hands and letting it flow over me. 'If you fail her tests, she'll kill you. That's always her way with those who fail her. There is nothing to be gained from fighting her. Remember what I say.'

" 'Help me to get away from here,' I said.

" 'I can't help you.'

" 'Do you believe me?' I struggled to articulate it. 'When I say that I can reward you? I have plenty of money.'

"His eyes widened and he shook his head. 'Doesn't matter if I believe you,' he said. 'She would find me, no matter where we went or what you gave me. She's too powerful for me ever to escape her. My life was finished the night that she saw me waiting tables in a café in Venezia.' He made a short bitter laugh. 'I wish to God that I had never brought her that little glass of wine, that useless little glass of wine.'

" 'There has to be a way,' I said. 'She's not God, this woman.' I was losing consciousness again. I fought it. I remembered the cold air and the stars around me. What was she? What kind of monster?

" 'No, not God,' he said smiling bitterly. 'Just powerful and very cruel.'

" 'What does she want with me?' I asked.

" 'Try to stand up to her tests,' he said. 'Try to please her. Otherwise you die. She never does anything else with those who fail her. She gives them to us, and we rid the world of the bodies, and for that we are allowed to continue to live. That's our existence. Can you imagine the place the Devil has for us in his inferno? Now, if you believe in God, use this time to say your prayers.'

"I couldn't speak anymore.

"I felt him raise my arms, one at a time, and shave the hair beneath them. It was a strange

ritual, and I couldn't understand the desire of anyone for such a thing to be done.

"He seemed to sense my discomfort.

" 'I don't know what it means,' he said to me softly, 'but for you she has ordered us to take great care.' He shook his head sadly. 'Maybe it means nothing, maybe it means something. Only in time will we know.'

"I think I laid my hand over his and patted him to console him because he sounded so sad.

"All the while the water of the bath was warm and moving, and then he told me in my ear that he was taking me to a place where I would wake from the drugs I'd been given, but I mustn't make noise.

"I slept.

"When I woke, I knew that I was alone. I could hear the silence and stillness around me, and I found myself on a couch and surrounded by golden bars.

" 'How my friend loves gold,' I whispered, 'but then I have always loved it myself.'

"Within seconds I realized I was in a glorified round cage. The door was securely locked, and I wore no boot or even a sandal with which to kick at it, and my fist did little good.

"As for my clothes, I'd been dressed in a pair of black pants. No shirt.

"Now, outside of this cage there was a great marble room, precisely what one would expect in a hillside palazzo, and it had its large square floor-length windows open to a long terrace, as one might also expect, and there was the sunset streaking the sky with red, and the violet light simmering as the sun sank into the sea.

"Italy, so glorious, on the flank of the great mountain, and not very far no doubt from the ruins of tragic cities it had destroyed.

"I sat back on the couch, watching the windows fill up with early stars and the room darken before me, which only proved to put it in a gentler light.

"There was something so very decadent and perverse about the cage in which I was imprisoned that I loathed it intensely, yet it had an odd calming effect on me because I knew that in a monstrous game with Petronia I might have some chance. That had been the implication of the boy who had bathed me. At least that had been the inference which I drew. Nevertheless, I was revolted by everything around me. This was a completely new emotion for me.

"The lights came up slowly, revealing scattered lamps along the inner walls of the room and murals which somewhat mimicked those of Pompeii—that is, rectangular paintings framing in Roman red various goddesses who danced with their backs turned to the room.

"And as these lights filled the space with a golden illumination there entered not the proud arrogant Petronia whom I expected but two other creatures equally strange.

"One was a black man, so black indeed that he looked like polished onyx, and though he was at the very far end of the marble room, away from me, I could see the gold earrings in his ears.

"He had very delicate features and he had yellow eyes. His hair was very curly and short-

cropped and not totally unlike my own.

"The other man was a puzzle. He appeared old. Indeed, he had heavy jowls and receding temples and his hair was silver, but he appeared to be without blemish, as if he were made not from old flesh and blood but from wax. His eyes sagged slightly at the outside edges as if they were going to slide down his face, and his chin jutted, which gave him a firm look.

"This one, the old one, reminded me of someone, but I couldn't think who it was.

"Neither of these creatures looked human and there settled over me the certainty that they weren't.

"I flashed on the stars I'd seen last night, or whenever it had been as we'd risen into the air, and I felt a dreadful fatality—indeed, an awful sense that everything I'd known and loved was about to be taken from me and there was little really that I could do to prevent it. The test, the fight, the contest, whatever, would be a matter of form.

"I was mutely horrified and I sought to adjust my emotions. To be tantalized was my only hope. There was no time for wonder or curiosity.

"These two men came towards me but purely by accident. Though they looked at me, they seated themselves at a table in the center of the room. And there they began to play chess and to talk to each other, their profiles turned to me, which meant that the silver-haired man with the waxy jowls had his back to the star-studded sky and the black man looked out.

"Both of these creatures wore immaculate evening dress of a sort. They had on shining black dinner jackets and trousers and patent leather shoes. But they wore white turtlenecks of some very glossy material rather than shirts and black ties.

"They were soon laughing and joking with each other, and the language was Italian, so I couldn't follow what they said. But when I'd had a bellyful of it, I spoke up.

" 'So neither of you will enlighten me,' I asked, 'as to why I'm held captive here? You don't think I'd be in this predicament of my own free will?'

"It was the elderly-looking gentleman who answered me, his chin jutting even more as he did so. 'Well, now,' he said in clear English, 'you know you did something to be here. Now, what did you do to Petronia? She wouldn't have brought you here if you were innocent. Don't claim to be that with us.'

" 'That's exactly what I claim,' I said. 'I was brought here out of her caprice, and I ought to be released.'

"The black man spoke to the other. 'I do tire of her games, I swear it.' His voice was mellow and sweet, as though he was used to power.

" 'Oh, come, you know you enjoy it as much as I do,' said the elderly one. His voice was deep. 'Why else would you be here now? You knew she had this boy.'

" 'All I ask is to be released,' I said sharply. 'I can't send the authorities after you because I don't know who you are, and as for Petronia, all attempts in the past by me to have her

discovered or arrested have failed, and they'll fail in the future. I won't attempt any such thing. What I ask is to be let go!'

"The black man rose from his armchair and he came towards me. He was the taller of the two. I didn't stand up to measure my height against his. He reached through the bars and laid his cool hand on my head. He looked into my eyes. I hated him. It took all my self-control to remain still.

" 'You've done no wrong to anyone,' he said under his breath, as though he had read it from my mind. 'And across the world she brings you for her blood sport.' He sighed. 'Oh, Petronia, why the cruelty, always the cruelty? Why, my beautiful pupil? When will you ever learn?'

" 'You'll let me go?' I asked. I looked up at him. What a splendid being he was. His features were sublimely chiseled and his face looked kind.

" 'I can't do that, my child,' he said in an even voice. 'I wish that I could, but I believe your fate is decided. I'll try to make your agony short.'

" 'Why does my life mean so little to you?' I asked. 'I come from a world where every life is precious. Why is it so different for you?'

"The old man had approached by this time, walking in a sprightly manner completely out of keeping with the appearances of age in him, and he was peering through the bars at me too.

" 'No, you're not innocent, don't tell us that,' he chortled. 'You're the Evil Doer in some guise,' he protested. 'She wouldn't bring you here otherwise. I know her too well.'

" 'Not well enough,' said the coal black one. 'She does what she pleases and it's never enough for her.'

"I stared at the old man. 'The old man,' I said aloud, and then I realized it. 'The Old Man,' I said again. 'It's you. The portrait on the living room wall! It's Manfred Blackwood, that's who you are.'

" 'And who are you to say my name so boldly to me?' he demanded. He puffed himself up.

" 'You're demons, all of you. God, this is Hell.' I laughed. I felt the drug in me again. There was no escape. My words came in a rush. 'If it weren't for Julien Mayfair, you'd be my ancestor. I'm Tarquin Blackwood, that's who I am. She took me from the Hermitage, the Hermitage you built for her, and that I refurbished for her. Blackwood Manor's in my hands now. Your granddaughter, Lorraine, is still living, living to mourn for me and tear out her hair that I've disappeared from Blackwood Farm. Didn't Petronia tell you what she was up to?'

"He went into a fury. He tried to shake the bars but he couldn't. He pounded upon the lock. Now he was an old man in all his parts, his jaw trembling, his eyes tearing. 'Abomination!' he roared.

"The black one tried to calm him. 'Now, let this matter be in my hands,' he said. 'We have an order here of authority.'

" 'Do you see what she means to do?' the Old Man shouted. His jowls trembled. All of him trembled. His eyes were inflamed as he gazed at me. 'Who told you about Julien?' he demanded,

as if such a thing were important now.

“ ‘Julien himself told me. I’m a seer of spirits,’ I retorted. ‘But what does it matter? Get me out of this place. Your granddaughter Lorraine needs me. Blackwood Farm needs me. I have flesh and blood that need me.’

“Suddenly Petronia herself appeared. Clad in a black velvet tunic and pants with a belt of cameos, she came striding across the long room and up to the two men, declaring as she did:

“ ‘What is this, the convocation of the cage?’

“As Manfred tried to seize her by the throat she threw him backwards, so that his body went yards across the marble floor and slammed into the wall, his head snapped back in a blow that would have killed an ordinary human and out of his throat came a deep and terrible roar.

“ ‘Don’t dare to question me,’ she said.

“The black one, as though nothing could perturb him, reached out for her and slipped his arm around her neck. He was taller than her by some inches. Probably he was my height. He brought her head down onto his shoulder and I saw her hand tremble as she let him do it, and he whispered to her,

“ ‘Petronia, my dearest, why, why always the rage?’

“He held her and she allowed herself to be held, and the Old Man wept as he collected himself, came forward, wounded, furious, helpless, shaking his head.

“ ‘My own,’ wept the Old Man, ‘and your pledges to me are worthless, your bond is worthless —.’

“ ‘Leave me alone, you fool,’ she said, raising her eyes and turning her head to look at him. ‘I’ve kept my pledges to you ten times over. I’ve given you immortality! What in hell do you want? And then on top of it riches undreamt of. This boy is nothing to you but something sentimental, like the photographs you keep of your precious Virginia Lee and your son William and your daughter Camille, as if these people were anything to you in the dust of time. They are not.’

“The Old Man sobbed. Then he spoke, blubbering.

“ ‘Stop her, Arion,’ he said. ‘Don’t let her go on. Stop her.’

“ ‘Wretched, miserable, old man,’ Petronia said. ‘Old forever. Nothing could give you youth. I despise you.’

“ ‘And that’s your reason for what you’ve done to me?’ I asked. It would have been wiser perhaps to say nothing, but in some way this case was being tried before Arion, the black one, and I had to make some effort or die full of regret.

“Petronia looked at me, and, as if seeing me for the first time, she smiled. And as always happened when she smiled, she looked serene and lovely. She was still in the arms of Arion, and Arion was stroking her loose full hair. It was utterly loving the way that Arion held her. Her breasts were against him, and he seemed to adore her.

“ ‘Don’t you want to live forever, Quinn?’ she asked me.

“She slipped gently out of the embrace of Arion, and she took from underneath her black velvet tunic a gold chain, and on the end of this chain was a key, and with this she unlocked my handsome prison.

“She opened the door. With the meanest fingers imaginable she grabbed my left arm and yanked me from the couch and out into the room, slamming me up against the bars. It sent a shudder of pain through me.

“Arion remained close, staring at me, and the Old Man was some distance away. He had taken a small picture from his coat and he looked at it piteously. I wondered if it was of Virginia Lee. He was whispering to himself insanely.

“ ‘Are you prepared to fight for immortality?’ Petronia asked of me.

“ ‘Not at all, not one wit,’ I said, ‘nor for my life. Not against the bully that I know you to be.’

“ ‘Bully!’ She mocked me. ‘You call me that? After you had your familiar attack me with flying shards of glass?’

“ ‘He did what he could to protect me. You were in Blackwood Manor. You meant to do me harm.’

“ ‘And why isn’t he here?’ she asked.

“ ‘Because he can’t be. You know this,’ I said. ‘I’m no match for you. I saw what you did to Manfred a moment ago. You play an unfair game with me. You always have.’

“ ‘Stubborn,’ she said as she smiled, cruelly this time, and shook her head. ‘Always your way. Pride, that’s your sin.’

“Arion reached out for me and took my head in both his hands, and I felt his soft silky thumbs against my cheeks. ‘Why don’t you let him go?’ he asked. ‘He’s innocent.’

“ ‘But that’s the best kind,’ said Petronia.

“ ‘Then you mean truly to do it,’ said Arion, stepping back, ‘not merely to kill him?’

“ ‘I mean to do it,’ she said nodding, ‘if I find him fit for it, if I find him strong.’

“Before I could protest, before I could mock, before I could sneer or plead or whatever might have come into my head, she picked me up and threw me, as she had done with Manfred, against the far wall. The blow to my head was terrific, and I thought, This death is not going to take very long.

“At the same time I became enraged as I always do by such hurt, and, falling down on the floor, I sought to get up immediately, and I flew at her, missing her and falling on my knees.

“I heard her cruel laughter. I heard Manfred weeping. Where was Arion? I looked up and caught a glimpse of the two men seated in their chairs at the table. And where was she?

“She slipped her hand under my shoulder and yanked me to my feet and slapped me hard on the left side of my face and then threw me across the floor. I went sprawling. It was pointless to try to fight. It was everything to keep to my word. To give her no sport at all. But I couldn’t keep

to it. Again, I tried to get up.

"Now, I knew nothing of fighting. Or I should say all I knew of it was what I had watched in boxing, which was my favorite spectator sport. And there was no way to apply what I knew in this situation, and I had never acquired any skill at fighting myself.

"But as I rose to my feet this time I saw Petronia standing right before me, and it seemed commonsensical that if I ran low at her I could topple her, and so I did this, tackling her right below the knees, and over me she went.

"The men laughed at this, which was unfortunate. I would rather have had cheers. But spinning round I came down on her before she could rise, and I tried to put my thumbs into her eyes. She caught me around the throat with both her hands, and now, fully enraged, she threw me over and back on the floor and then dragged me across it until she had come to the balcony, at which point she grabbed both my wrists in one hand and slung me over the white railing and asked me if I would like to be dropped to my death.

"I could see the lights of the traffic far below on the winding road. I could also see the ocean boiling on the rocks just beyond it. I gave her no answer. I was dazed. I also thought I was doomed. I knew Manfred didn't have the power to stop her. And I didn't think that Arion would.

"That I had thrown her over only made things worse.

"Next I knew she had drawn me up and thrown me onto the floor again and was kicking me and dragging me about the room. I thought of her as a giant cat again, as I had in the Hermitage, and of myself as her prey.

" 'This is not the way to do such a thing,' Arion said to her. I heard it near me as though he had come up to her, but where we were in the room, I didn't know.

"Petronia said, 'We choose our own way, don't we? We must do it the way we want to do it. In a fraction of a second, all his wounds will heal. He'll know the power of the Blood when that happens, and it will be all the finer for him. Let me have what I need.'

" 'But why, my darling, why do you need it?' Arion said. 'I don't understand, my precious one, why the rage, always the rage?'

"They went on talking but they had switched back into Italian. I sensed that he was talking about the passage of time and that she had once been different, but that was all I could divine. The Old Man continued to cry.

"I tried to move and then I felt Petronia's foot on my throat. I was choking. She let up on the pressure and I saw her face above mine, her hair pouring down and tickling me as she drew me up to her with both her hands. My weight meant nothing to her. She came in close to me as though she meant to kiss me on the throat.

"I lay back on a couch, and she had her arms behind my back, and her mouth was open against my skin, and then I felt two sharp pinpricks on the side of my throat, and the world and all my pain went dim. I heard her heart beat.

"*Teach me,* she said. *I will not have my kiss be quiet.*

"That she was sucking my blood from me I knew, and that I was getting weaker and weaker I knew as well. And it did seem that all my life fled from me, that image after image of childhood, young manhood and the last few years of love and ecstasy and wonder fled from me with my blood—uncontrollably, unstinting and pure. What this intimacy meant in the greater scheme of things I was helpless to understand, and then she drew back and I went limp in her arms. I sank down, free, onto the floor.

"Petronia had hold of my arm. She was dragging me again. I felt the sharp kick of her foot in my ribs. I could no longer see. I could hear the Old Man cry out. I knew it was for me that he cried. But she merely cursed under her breath. The marble felt cold beneath me. I lay sprawled against it.

"Suddenly the scene changed. I was no longer in my body but looking down on it, and down on all the occupants of the room. I was at the entrance to a long dark tunnel, and a roaring wind surrounded me, a frightening wind, and at the end of the tunnel there appeared a wondrous light, a light truly beyond description, and in that light, huge gold-and-white light, I could see the figures of Pops and Sweetheart gazing at me. Lynelle was also with them. I wanted desperately to join them, but I couldn't move. Some hideous fascination with Petronia and Manfred and Arion prevented me from moving. Some putrid ambition kept me from turning and reaching out for those I so loved. There was no clarity in me. There was only turbulence. Then, as suddenly as this vision had come, it was gone. I had made no decision.

"I was back in my aching and bruised body. I was on the marble floor again.

" 'You're dying,' Petronia said. 'But I know you now, I know you from the Blood, and I won't let it happen, Tarquin Blackwood. I claim you as my own.' Again, her arms lifted me.

" 'Ask him what he wills,' said the black one named Arion.

" 'What do you will?' she demanded. She held me up on my knees in front of her. I could feel her velvet pants against me. 'Speak to me,' she said. 'What do you will?'

"Helpless and clumsy I fell against her crotch, grabbing for her leg and then recoiling, and near collapsing, as she jerked my shoulder and held me on my knees.

" 'What do you want!' she demanded again. What was I to say? To die? In this place, around the world from Aunt Queen, from Mona, from all I loved, to die without a trace?

"I raised my fist, trying to hurt her. I hit her but my fist had nothing behind it. I clawed at her velvet clothes. I tried to hit her again. I struck at her private parts.

" 'Oh, you want to see it, do you? You want to see what they all laughed at!' she said. 'Come now, pay me homage,' she said. I heard the snap opening, and then my hand was placed upon the short, very thick stub of her erect cock, then down lower, between two pendulous labia, the shallow crevice that was her vagina, then back again to her cock. 'Take it in your mouth,' she said to me angrily. I felt the pressure against my lips. 'Take it!' she demanded.

“I did the only thing I could do. I opened my mouth, and when she shoved her cock into it I bit down with all my might and main. I heard her howl but I hung on. And there came into my mouth a copious flow of electrifying blood such as I never expected—and madly I hung on.

“I bore down with my teeth and the blood, this liquid fire, streamed into me. It poured down my throat. I swallowed without meaning to swallow. It was as if my body, once drained by her, could not resist it, and suddenly I realized that her hands were cradling my head and her howling was laughter and that the blood was not blood as I knew it but a great rush of stimulating fluid that seemed to come from her heart and her brain.

“*Know me. Know who I am!* This she said to me, and there came a rush of knowledge into me which I couldn’t deny. I would have turned away from it if I could. I hated her that much. But I couldn’t turn away, and now I couldn’t let go.

“Long, long centuries ago she had been born to an actress mother and a gladiator father in the Rome of Caesar, a freakish child, half male, half female, a thing to be destroyed by ordinary parents but kept by hers for the theater, in which she grew to be a gladiator of great strength by the age of fourteen.

“Before that point, a thousand times she’d been shown privately to those who could pay for it, for those who wanted to touch her and have her touch them. Never had she known love for her own sake, or privacy, or a moment of delicacy, or a scrap of clothing that wasn’t for show.

“In the arena she was fierce and murderous. I saw the spectacle—the huge crowds roaring for her. I saw the sand red with the blood she shed. She won every match, no matter how heavy or great her opponent. I saw her in her shining armor, her sword at her side, her hair tied back, her eyes on Caesar as she made her regal bow!

“Years passed during which she fought, her parents commanding ever higher and higher fees. At last, when she was still a girl, she was sold to a merciless master for a fortune, and he sent her into the ring against the fiercest of wild beasts. Even these could not defeat her. Nimble and fearless she danced against lions and tigers, thrusting her spear deep and true to the mark.

“But she grew tired in her heart, tired of combat, tired of lovelessness, tired of misery. The crowd was her lover, but the crowd was nowhere in the dark of night when she slept chained to her bed.

“Then Arion had come, Arion had paid to see her as had so many. Arion had paid to touch her, as had so many. Arion had bought dresses to pose her. Arion had embraced her. Arion had liked to comb her long black hair. Then Arion had bought her and set her free. Arion had given her a heavy purse and said, ‘Go where you please.’ But where could she go? What could she do? She couldn’t bear the sounds of the circus during the games. She couldn’t bear the thought of the gladiatorial schools. What was there for her? Was she to be pimp and whore at the same time? She had tagged after Arion, loving him.

“ ‘You are my life now,’ she had told him. ‘Don’t turn your back on me.’ ‘But I gave you the

world,′ he had answered her. Unable to bear her tears, he had given her more money, a house in which to live. But still she came to him weeping.

“And finally he took her under his wing. He brought her to his city. He brought her to beautiful Pompeii. His was the cameo trade, he told her. He had three shops of cameo makers, the finest in all of the empire. ‘Can you learn this art for me?′ he asked her. ‘Yes,′ she said. ‘For you I would learn anything. Anything at all.′ She set to work with a passion she′d never known. She wasn′t fighting for multitudes, she wasn′t fighting for her own worthless life. She was fighting to please Arion, a fragile and total thing. Her enemies were clumsiness, impatience, anger. She studied with all the masters in his shops. She watched. She imitated. She worked in shell, in stone, in precious jewels. She mastered the chisel, the small drill. She learned all that she could.

“Finally, at the end of two years, she had her specimens to show Arion, fine and perfect things. She had done gatherings of gods and goddesses like unto the friezes on the temples. She had done portraits like unto the finest in the Forum. She had made art out of a craft. Never had he seen such work, he told her. He loved her. And such happiness she′d never known.

“Then came the terrible days of Vesuvius, the eruption of the mountain and the death of the idyllic little city where they had all known such happiness. Arion had fled the night before to the far side of the Bay of Naples. He′d sensed early on the evening before the eruption what was to happen. It had been her duty to see that the slaves of the shops escaped. But only a few would listen to her.

“And when it was all over and the air was full of ash and poison and the sea was full of bodies, when nothing remained where Pompeii had once stood, she had come to Arion′s villa—the very place where we were now—weeping and with only a handful of followers, to tell him that she had failed.

“ ‘No, my beloved,′ he said. ‘You have saved my finest prize, you have saved your own life when I thought that all was lost. What can I give you for this, my sweet Petronia?′ And in time he had given her the Blood that she was giving me. In time he had made her immortal as she was making me.

“She let me go. My lips stroked her cock as I withdrew.

“I fell back on the floor. But I could see with new eyes all around me. And I felt the bruises all over my body healing. I felt the pain leave my head. I sat up as though waking from a dream and I looked out the open window over the railing, and the pure azure of the evening sky caught me and held me and I didn′t hear the voices of the room.

“Arion came. He took hold of me and lifted me just the way she had done it, without effort, and then he reached up to his throat, and he said to me to Drink.

“ ‘No, wait please,′ I whispered. ‘Let me savor what she taught me of herself. If you will.′ I meant it reverently.

“But she flew at me and knocked me to the floor again and there came her foot against my ribs. ‘Trash!’ she said. ‘You dare answer that way to the Master, and who are you to savor what you know of me!’

“ ‘Petronia!’ said Arion to her. ‘Enough.’

“He picked me up. ‘My blood will give you added strength,’ he said. ‘Take it. It’s far older than hers, and you won’t be bound to her so very much.’

“I could have cried at her savagery. I had so loved her in the Blood, and I had been a fool for it, such a fool, but as he said now to drink, I ran my tongue over my teeth, why I didn’t know. And I discovered the eyeteeth were fangs, and with them I kissed his throat, as he had directed me, and there came a new stream of images and blood.

“These images I can’t claim to remember. I think that somehow, through some skill, he guarded his generous and older heart. I think he gave me the Blood and its strengthening power without all his secrets. But what he did give me was inexpressibly glorious and it filled my hurt soul after her rebuff.

“I saw Athens in him. I saw the famed Acropolis thronged and thriving. I saw it with temples and images brilliantly painted as I had been taught it was painted, not as we now see Greek art, as white and pure, but done in vivid blues and reds and flesh tones, oh, the marvel of it! I saw the Agora filled with people! I saw the whole town spread on the gentle slopes of the mountain. My head teemed with priceless visions, and where he was in all this I couldn’t guess. I felt the language of the people all around me, and I saw the hard stone street beneath my sandals, and felt his blood pumping into me, washing my heart and my soul.

“ ‘Only the Evil Doer, my child,’ he said to me as the Blood pounded. ‘Feed only on the Evil Doer. When you hunt, unless you take only the Little Drink, pass by the innocent heart. Use the power you will have from me to read the minds and hearts of men and women and ferret out the Evil Doer everywhere, and only from him take the blood.’

“Finally, he pulled me back. I licked the blood from my lips. I sighed. This was to be my only nourishment. I knew it. The knowledge had come to me instinctively. And much as I had loved the taste of his blood and the taste of Petronia’s blood, I hungered for a base human so that I would know that taste as well.

“He stroked my forehead and hair with his silky hands and he looked into my eyes.

“ ‘Only the Evil Doer, you understand me, young one? Oh, the innocent beckon. They do it unwittingly. And how savory they seem. But mark my word, they’ll lead you straight to madness whether you have an educated soul or no. You’ll come to love them and to despise yourself. Mark my words, it’s the tragedy of Petronia. For her there is no innocence and therefore no conscience and therefore no happiness. And so in misery she goes on.’

“ ‘I follow your rules,’ Petronia said. I heard her nearby.

“ ‘You did not with this one,’ said Arion emphatically.

“ ‘My grandson, my very grandson,’ cried the Old Man to himself in his misery. ‘You blaspheming wretch.’

“ ‘And so he will live forever,’ said Petronia solemnly. She laughed. ‘What more can I do? What more can I give?’

“I turned to look at her. With these precious eyes I saw her harsh loveliness as though it were a miracle.

“And I knew what had been done to me. Of its history, of its commonness, of its rules, of its limits I knew nothing. But I knew what had been done. *Immortality*. I knew it but couldn’t grasp it. Where was God? Where was my faith? Had the whole edifice collapsed in this monstrosity?

“I began to feel a wrenching pain. Was I deluded?

“Arion said:

“ ‘This is human death. It’ll take a few short moments. Go with the attendants into the bath. They’ll dress you afterwards, and then you’ll learn how to hunt.’

“ ‘So we are vampires,’ I said. ‘We are the legend.’ The pain in my gut was intolerable. I saw the male attendant I had known before. He was waiting.

“ ‘Blood Hunters,’ said Arion. ‘Defer to me with these words, and I’ll love you all the more.’

“ ‘But why do you love me at all?’ I asked.

“Placing his hand on my shoulder, he said,

“ ‘How could I not?’ ”

39

“All my life I’d believed in Heaven and Hell. Did Heaven look down upon this metamorphosis?

“I was a drunk man at the height of his folly, regretting nothing. I lay in the bath, naked, as the dark fluids poured out of me. At last the pain stopped and the streams of fresh water ran pure. The human death was over.

“I looked at the three servants—the Adonis and the two sharp-featured young girls. They were either horrified or perfectly astonished.

“As I washed in the fresh water, as I scrubbed with the sponge, it was the young Adonis who brought the soap to me, and the towel, and helped me out of the bath and into fresh clothes—the same fancy garments as the others wore—black dinner jacket, trousers and white satin turtleneck, so that I would look like my new companions who I was now to join, or so I imagined.

“I felt a sharp unconscionable hunger for the blood of these young servants, born of the very sight of the blood moving under their flesh and the strong smell of it in the air around us. I wasn’t one of them. I wasn’t their brother. They couldn’t feel what I felt. They couldn’t know what I knew.

“Arion’s admonitions came back to me. Evil Doers. I realized I was looking into the eyes of the roughest of the girls, who had most assuredly expected me to be murdered, and as I did so I could see into her mind: I could see her anger, see her bitterness, see her heated temper. And as I stared at her, with the tender Adonis adjusting my clothes, there came from her the nastiest voice.

“ ‘Why you?’ she demanded. ‘Why you instead of one of us? Who are you that it should be you?’

“ ‘Hush, no,’ said the boy quickly. ‘Don’t be so foolish.’

“The other girl affected a cold, cynical air, but she felt the same sentiment. She felt cheated and angry. Hatred emanated from both women, and I realized it was angering me, and I detested them, detested them that they would have dumped my body this very night with no thought more than that it was a cumbersome task for them.

“ ‘We work, we wait,’ said the brash one, ‘and then you’re brought here, and she chooses you. Why!’

“ ‘No, quiet,’ said the boy again. He had finished adjusting my turtleneck and the lapels of my coat. He looked pleadingly into my eyes, wondering, adoring. He seemed to feel some mammoth sympathy for me that I hadn’t died. He seemed to think it marvelous.

“ ‘How many others has she brought here?’ I asked him.

“He had no time to answer. The two doors to the bath were shut with a snap. And before the two girls or the boy could turn around, another two doors were also shut. No exit now remained except the terrace, and I knew the drop that existed beneath it.

“I turned around. I found Petronia against the doors behind me.

“ ‘Very well then,’ she said, ‘so you’ve finished dying, and you’ll never know it again unless you choose to know it. Now you’ll make another choice. You’ll choose your first kill. And that will be one of these. Be swift about it. I don’t care who it is. No. I do care. I’m curious. Go on!’

“ ‘The girls gasped and screamed and, reaching for each other, backed up against the marble-tiled wall. The boy merely looked at Petronia and did nothing. He seemed to feel a profound disappointment but never made a sound.

“ ‘I can’t do it,’ I said.

“ ‘You can and you will,’ said Petronia. ‘Choose one of these or I’ll choose for you. They’re Evil Doers par excellence. They would have hauled you away tonight, a mere carcass to them, had you died.’

“She came up beside me. Her face softened and she put her arm up over my shoulder and she looked up at me tenderly. She spoke in a gentle voice as the girls still shivered and whimpered in panic and the boy stood his ground, frozen.

“ ‘Quinn, Quinn, my pupil,’ she said in her loving voice, a voice I’d heard before so seldom from her. ‘I want you to go forth strong and on your own. So take my harsh lessons. Read their minds. Use the Spell Gift to charm. You’re hungry for them. Yes, yes, there, my pupil. Use your gifts and take the scent of their blood as your guiding genius.’

“I found myself staring at the hard-speaking one. Into her mind I did look. I saw her evil, her casual and vicious disconnect from the human herd, her brittle, cheap egocentricity. And as I drew close to her, her face was smooth, her eyes large and empty, as if I had put out my hand to her and stilled her. Her partner in crime had slunk away and with the boy moved across the room. She was all mine, deserted, enthralled, unprotesting. There was nothing but peace in her now.

“ ‘Devour the evil,’ said Petronia, near to me like my Bad Angel. ‘Eat it and make it into your clean and everlasting blood.’

“The girl had gone limp. She tumbled, silky and hot into my arms. Her head went to one side. Her mind was broken like the stem of a thorny rose. I kissed her throat. And then I sank my teeth and I felt her rich delicious blood pour forth, saltier than that of my vampire teachers, somehow more pungent, and there came the wretched story of her life, putrid, common, indecent. I sought

the lush taste of the blood only. I sought the rich thick flow of the blood alone. I repudiated the images. I turned my heart away from her heart. I turned my senses only to the thick seasoned blood, and then Petronia was pulling me back, and the girl was lying at my feet, a crumpled corpse with large empty black eyes, such lovely eyes, and blood all over her neck, and Petronia said,

" 'You've spilt the blood, look at it. Bend down now and catch all of it on your tongue. Clean the wound until nothing remains.'

"I knelt down and lifted her. I did as I was told.

" 'Make a cut in your own tongue,' said Petronia, 'and with a drop of your own blood seal the wound until it disappears.'

"I was intent as I did this. I watched the tiny punctures vanish, and then the girl, pale-faced and purplish, fell limp to the tiles as I let her go.

"I rose groggily. Again, I was the drunk man. The most common object or surface seemed to pump with life.

"In a daze I reached out for Adonis. I said, 'I thank you for your kindnesses to me.' He was too afraid to answer. He paused, merely staring at me as though I'd forced him to do it, and then I turned away.

"Was I walking out of the bath with Petronia? Were we going up a great staircase? The evening seemed a mist rather than a thing of light. The stars seemed to move in the night sky as we walked along a roofed terrace. I could hear and smell the sea.

"We came into the room where Manfred sat at his chessboard still with Arion, and both of them appeared magnificent to me, infinitely more glorious than the two girls and the boy.

" 'And so we have this charged vision,' I murmured. 'We see all things as though they were quietly on fire in all their parts.'

" 'I knew you would understand,' Petronia responded. 'I like your words. Don't ever be afraid to speak up to me. I watched you for years before I chose you—you and your spirits. It was language that drew me as truly as beauty.'

" 'I love you,' I said. 'Isn't that what you wanted?'

"She laughed a mild helpless laugh. Her warm arm was around my waist, and for the moment her beauty could touch my heart. She even had about her a gentle majesty. I felt that I adored her.

"We went out on the terrace and looked down at the sea. It was a clear green and blue below. I could see this in the dark, see it subtracting its color from the moonlighted sky. And see the stars above moving as if they meant to embrace us. Far away, there came marching down the slope a town of white buildings, so perilously perched it seemed unreal, and beyond, the snowcapped mountain.

" 'Want you to love me?' she repeated my question. 'I don't know,' she said. 'Maybe I wanted

you to love me for a while. Maybe I want it still. How do I know what I want? If ever I knew, I might have been content. But why do I tell such lies? Or more to the point, why do I believe them? I wanted you thus from the very first moment I saw you. I marked you for myself. And only for this night or a handful of nights after. And I resolved to leave you strong, I told you so, and so we go back to Arion, and he will leave you hungry again, won't you? Sweet Master?'

" 'Dare I talk of the things I saw in the blood?' I asked her.

" 'Try me,' she said in her new kindly manner, 'and if I detest what you say, who knows what I will do? Not even I know. What did you see in the blood?'

" 'When you fought in the arena, was it to the death?'

" 'Oh, always,' she said. 'Now weren't you a student of old Rome? There were countless women gladiators. I was only one of the finest, and always a favorite of the crowd. I was as you know me now, vicious. I stayed alive in those years by viciousness. It was natural. It was expected. And I took to it with a raging simplicity.'

"She beamed as she looked at me.

" 'It was Arion who tamed my heart,' she went on. 'It was Arion who turned me from vicious pursuits, from mockery and meanness into the making of cameos. Oh, you've never seen the fine things I made for Arion. Arion gave me rubies and emeralds, and I made whole stories for Arion in shell—the victories of emperors, the progress of legions. My work was famous throughout the empire. All day I bent over my workbench, dressed carelessly as a boy, my hair tied back with a rawhide string, nothing before me but that work, that all-important work, whatever it might be. Then night would come and so would Arion. Then I became the woman for him. I became something soft, something decent, something fine for Arion.'

" 'What is decent?' I asked.

" 'You know, you've always known.'

" 'But what is it now?' I asked. 'I knew what it was before, yes, but now I don't know what it is. I killed that wretched girl, that murderous girl. That wasn't decent. Tell me.'

" 'Oh, come now, it's much too early for such questions. We have hunting to do. Your night's going to be long. As I told you, I'll make no mewling fledglings. You'll be very strong when I'm finished with you.'

" 'Will I be decent?' I asked. 'Will I be honorable?'

" 'See that you are,' she said. Her face grew sad. 'Use your intellect for that,' she said quietly. 'Don't imitate me. Imitate those who are better than me. Imitate Arion.'

"We went into the big room again, where Manfred rose to meet us and to look at me and embrace me and to be separated from me only by the loving arms of Arion, whose fine black face utterly charmed me. How lean and caring he seemed, a creature of such miraculous contours and expressiveness.

" 'Drain him, Master,' said Petronia in the tone of a request, and now the Master took me into

his arms, and, pressing his teeth to my throat, did as Petronia had requested.

"Again, I felt the images of my life passing with the blood. I felt the sorrow I knew, the untold sorrow of being lost forever from Mona, from my son, Jerome, from Aunt Queen, from Nash, from Jasmine, my beloved milk chocolate Jasmine, from my beloved little Tommy, I felt all of this passing from me with the blood, but not leaving me forever, only revealed, opened like a fierce and terrible wound in me—*You have died, Quinn*—and I felt Arion taking it into himself as if he would relieve me, and a swoon of weakness came over me.

"I awoke seated in a chair, and for a moment the pain was more than I could bear. It was so terrible that it seemed the thing to do was to go to the railing and throw myself down on the rocks there to be smashed and truly dead. But I wondered, and wisely so, would such a thing accomplish death for me?

"Then pure hunger consumed me. I had never hungered so much, and blood was my only desire. I wanted Arion's blood. I wanted Petronia's blood. I stared at Manfred, as he peered keenly back at me.

" 'And so for our lessons,' said Arion. He stretched out his arms to me. 'Now, come, and to my throat, and take from me the Little Drink, only one fraction of what you want, and spill nothing when you do it. You learn to do the Little Drink, and you can feed from the innocent. You can feed from them gently without biting off a soul. You can leave them only dazed after your kiss.'

"I went directly to obey. The blood was so thick! And there again, the flash of sunny Athens! It was an agony, but I drew back at the appropriate moment as he had directed me, and with my tongue I lapped the few drops that threatened the whiteness of his satin shirt. He held me until I was steady on my feet, and then, covering my lips with his, he kissed me. He slipped his tongue into my mouth. He forced it up against my fang teeth. The blood came again. I reeled. I danced backwards.

" 'What is my life to be now?' I whispered, after he'd withdrawn. 'Ecstasy?'

" 'Ecstasy and control,' he said to me softly. 'Now drink from Manfred in the same way. Call your son to you, Manfred.'

"The Old Man stretched out his arms.

"I went to him.

" 'Come, child of my house, child of my legacy,' he said in his deep voice. 'Beloved child of my heritage. Drink from me the blood. It was Petronia in her wickedness who built Blackwood Manor with her gold, her miserable gold. I give you my love, luckless boy! I give you my blood. Take from me the image of the only pure thing I ever loved!'

" 'Short, and neat,' said Petronia near to me.

"I sank my teeth in his bull neck, as his large hand held my shoulder. But it was not Virginia Lee whom I saw, it was Rebecca, Rebecca hanging hideously on the rusted hook, and Manfred cursing Petronia as she howled with laughter, and Rebecca too tormented, the dark blood that

means death pouring out of her naked torso, the hook deep in her body, deep, run through her very heart for all I knew.

"Suddenly, Rebecca laughed! She stood alone, pointing at me, sneering. Laughing.

" 'Good God!' I shouted. I was pulled back. I staggered. The Old Man had clapped a handkerchief to his neck, and how miserable he looked. Arion had ahold of my shoulders.

" 'Aw, such pain,' said the Old Man. 'And why did you reach for her, Quinn, why that shrew? Why reach for such a thing?'

" 'Control, my child,' said Arion. 'Control. So that you can move through a room crowded with mortals, picking the ones you want, giving the fatal kiss and leaving with no one any the wiser.'

" 'But why did I see Rebecca?' I gasped. 'What was the reason?' I demanded. 'You meant for me to see Virginia Lee.'

" 'Aye, but how can I hide the guilt inside my soul?' asked the Old Man. 'You reached for it, you found it, you possess it.'

"I heard her hissing whisper: *And they howl and weep for you on your precious Blackwood Farm. When will they put your name on a gravestone?*

" 'Get away from me, luckless ghost,' I said. 'So you have in me a life for your life. Leave me.'

"There came no answer.

"And so my learning went on for hours amongst them.

"They schooled me until I could take the Little Drink, but never was I filled, and they laughed at my hunger when I complained of the pain, and if Petronia became sullen or impatient, Arion shamed her with his kindness.

" 'Now we go to hunt, the four of us,' said Arion. 'And you will search out the Evil Doer, using the power to read minds, and we'll watch over you.'

" 'It's a wedding,' said the Old Man in his bass voice. 'A rich American come to Napoli for his daughter's nuptials. You'll find the Evil Doer everywhere you turn. You lure him, you take him in such a way that no one's the wiser and from your tongue the drops of your own blood will seal up the wound. Are you ready, son, to be one of us? Truly one of us?'

" 'Picture it before we leave here,' said Arion. 'They've been drinking for hours. You want to move amongst them quietly. Anonymously. You want to leave your victims as if they're drunk. You want to take the Little Drink from the innocents as you desire it.'

"I nodded. 'Yes,' I declared. I was thirsting. And my heart was inflamed. I wanted with all my wretched soul to be one of them. I was one of them!

"Suddenly, Petronia lifted me and flung me out from her, out beyond the open terrace doors and into the night, and I fell down, down all the way to the beach below, and I landed quietly on the rocks, standing, just on the edge of the foaming green sea, still and quiet, gazing all around me.

"I looked up. How very far away she was, and from the terrace I could scarcely see as she

beckoned me. I heard her whisper as though she was near my ear, ‘Come up to me, Quinn.’

“I willed my body to rise, and I did rise, and faster and faster I moved until I drifted near her and over the railing of the terrace and then I stood beside her.

“She slipped her arm around me, her dark eyes flashing as she looked up at me, and whispered in my ear. ‘And so you see,’ she said, ‘we move by speed, not magic. I have you in my grip. And don’t you spill a drop when you drink. We expect perfection of you.’

“ ‘But do we kill?’ I asked.

“Arion shrugged. ‘If you wish,’ he answered. “If the evil is ripe for it and you are graceful and sly.’ ”

40

“A blue haze of cigarette smoke hung over the rooms. The faces came at me as if I were a camera lens. All were beautiful. All were imperfect. The voices were a senseless and deafening babble, the thoughts of so many minds a chaotic hubbub. I lost my sense of balance. I wanted to retreat, but I pressed forward.

“The smell of the food was revolting, the smell of the liquor strangely acrid and foreign, as if my body had never drunk it. The scent of blood rose from every inch of flesh pressed against me as I worked my way through the labyrinth.

“I saw the bride beneath the heavily laden pergola. Wraith thin. Pretty. Her bridal gown had long white lace sleeves, and she was smoking a cigarette which she held in her left hand, and when she saw me she beckoned urgently as if she knew me, and I saw in her mind: invitation, but what did she want?

“I couldn’t take my eyes off her as I pushed towards her, and her free arm hooked around my left arm as we came together, and I caught the scent of her blood, strong and pumping alive beneath her olive skin.

“She pulled me into a large bedroom and shut and locked the door behind her. Her big low-set black eyes looked at me imploringly. Smudged mascara. Pouting red mouth.

“ ‘You saw him, that bastard,’ she seethed, cursing. ‘On my wedding night, he does that to me!’ Her face was a breathtaking snarl of rage. She ripped at my coat and pulled me towards the bed. Her black hair was falling loose from its diamond-studded combs. ‘Come on, now, let’s do it, hurry, I want him to try to break that door down, damn him, the pig.’

“I caught her chin in my right hand and turned her face up to me. I kissed her mouth. What was that to me? The blood scent overwhelmed me. I went for her throat. I bit down hard and the artery exploded, the blood gushing down over her wedding dress as I tried to pull away; it was a positive fountain springing from her. She gasped. I closed my mouth over it, cursing myself, my clumsiness, my hunger, my luck. Oh, God in Heaven. I drank and drank. She was limp, in a brand of ecstasy, a litany of banal innocence thudding out of her, no evil, no design, no malice, no knowledge, no pain.

“On and on I drank the salted blood. I belonged to it, was a slave to it. Wanted nothing more than it. Except that she somehow not die, that there not be blood all over her white dress, her

splendid white dress.

"Her heart went out like a match or a candle. No way to bring it back. I held her, shook her. Come back. Mistake. Awful mistake. I drank again, like a fool, until there was no more to drink. I cringed. I moaned. She had no more life in her, no more blood to give. I tossed her like a doll. A broken bride doll. She was so dead! Look at the diamonds in her ruined hair.

"Someone took me by the hair of my head and swung me back against the wall. I hit it so hard that I went blind and senseless for a moment, and then in the blinkering light I saw her dead there, sliding off the foot of the bed onto the floor, the blood all over her dress, her pretty lace dress, her lovely white lace dress with its webs and circles of lustrous pearls, her hair fallen from her diamond combs, her face so sweet, no more anger, no more hate.

"It was Petronia who had flung me back and now she dragged me out the window under the pergola and threw me against the wall again. This time I felt the blood flow from the back of my head. I was in a shock of pain. She pitched me over the railing. I dropped down, down towards the sea. I felt I was dying. I was full of innocent blood and I was dying. I was weeping and I was dying, and the bride, the poor bride, she was dead, and I had left her covered in her own blood, all the brides of Blackwood Farm betrayed, Ophelia Immortal never to be my bride betrayed, blood on her white dress, Rebecca never to be Manfred's bride laughing.

"We were back in the palazzo and Petronia struck me over and over again, cursing me and herself that she had made me.

" 'Imbecile, you killed her. Imbecile, she was nothing but a tart, and for that you killed her! In a wilderness of killers, you killed her. She was nothing but a tart. You fool.' Again and again, there came the blows to my face—pain, but pain isn't death—then the kicks to my ribs. I clung to the floor.

" 'Stop her,' roared the Old Man. 'Stop her, stop her, stop her.'

" 'I take you to hunt a wedding, thick with killers, and you kill the bride!' she seethed. She kicked at my face. I rolled over onto my back. She kicked at my groin. 'Stupid, clumsy, fledgling, idiot, clumsy!'

"The Old Man roared: 'Make her stop!'

" 'And the blood on her dress, how you did it! Moron, idiot, fool! Where did you think you were? What did you think you were?'

"Finally Arion pulled her off me.

" 'It was our doing,' he said. 'We left him alone. He was too young. We should have been with him.'

"She was crying. She was in Arion's arms and she was actually crying.

"The Old Man sobbed.

"I lay there and dreamt of death.

"Oh, Lord, how could I have come to this? How could my senses have so richly misled me?

How could my greed have led me to this abysmal pass? I am in a place of darkness beyond panic and beyond anxiety. Lord, this is anguish. Yet I cling to what I am. I cling to all that I am.

"And somewhere very far away, others were searching for me. Rebecca was right. And they must have been saying, 'The gators got him, had to be. Poor Quinn. He's dead.'

"And I was."

41

“Before the sunrise Arion took me to the cellar beneath the house and showed me the crypt in which I would sleep. He told me simply that, young as I was, the sun could destroy me, and that even when I had attained a great age, such as he had, it would still render me powerless and unconscious. He told me also that fire could mean my death. But that no other injury could kill me.

“I felt, unwisely, no doubt, that I understood these things. He told me as well that all the wounds inflicted on me by Petronia in her rage would heal over the day’s time, as they weren’t very serious for one of my strength, and that he would come for me when the sun had set, and I should wait for him.

“ ‘Don’t be afraid of the narrow box, my child,’ he said. ‘Make it your refuge. And don’t be afraid of your dreams. You are an immortal now, and all your faculties are enhanced. Accept it and rejoice in it.’

“ ‘I lay down then in the crypt, and I did suffer the most unspeakable horror of it, but there was nothing to be done about it, the granite lid was closed over me, and very soon, weeping quietly, I lost consciousness.

“I dreamed a dream of Patsy. She smelled like cotton candy. Her lips tasted like candy apples. I dreamed I was a little child, and I sat on her lap, and she pushed me off, and I grew to be a man in a twinkling and I killed her. I drank her blood. It tasted like maple syrup. Her diseases and her meanness could not contaminate me. I tried to wake up. I dreamed this over and over and I woke once, or so I dreamed, with her body in my arms. A Barbie. I pushed her down into the green water of the swamp and as I watched her sink below the surface I felt horror. But she was gone and dead, and blood came up. It was too late to save her. Bye Patsy. Rebecca laughed. *A death for my death.* ‘Oh yes,’ I scoffed, ‘you think you planned everything.’ ‘The Damnation of Quinn,’ said Fr. Kevin.

“When I opened my eyes the next time Arion was there looking down at me. The sun had only just set and the sky was still red and the golden light filled the crypt, and he was pleased to see that I was conscious. He led me up the stairs and to the terrace.

“The stars drifted in the purple sky. The gold hung behind the clouds. It was magnificent.

“ ‘Some Blood Hunters don’t wake till the sky is full dark,’ he said, ‘and they never know this

quiet glory. I see you shade your eyes, but it doesn't hurt you.'

"In fact it didn't and it was only with difficulty that I absorbed the reality that I would never see 'the light of day' again.

"He saw the trouble in my face. He said, 'Look back on nothing. I'll take you out to hunt now. You're my apprentice for the evening.'

" 'And so I've disappointed her,' I asked, 'and she'll have nothing further to do with me?'

" 'No,' he said with a short honest laugh. 'She's eager to see you. But it happens that she's a miserable teacher. And so I've told her no, and that I'll take you out, and so we'll hunt the cafés and the clubs of Napoli.'

"He was dressed informally tonight in a black silk shirt open at the neck and a finely cut jacket of dark red silk and a pair of sleek trousers.

"He took me to a room where the young mortal boy waited to help me select a similar suit of clothes, which I did hastily. Once again, I thanked him for his kindness.

" 'If I had any money,' I said, 'I'd give it to you.'

"He smiled at me. And I patted his shoulder.

"Then we were off to the cafés and bars for more lessons.

"We moved through all manner of crowds, taking the Little Drink over and over until I was very skilled at it, and then, cornering for ourselves two 'perfect killers,' we had our fill of them in a back alley in the oldest part of Naples. We left their bodies because Arion said it didn't matter there, but there would be other times when it did and the bodies had to be disposed of. As it was, he slashed the throats of the two so it would seem they had bled to death.

" 'To thrive without killing,' he said, 'that is everything. If you can live without bringing death, you will endure. But now and then the urge to kill will overrule—you'll want the burning bitter heart—and so I've taught you how to do it.'

"I was exhilarated all this while, and the elegant figure of Arion constantly thrilled me. I imitated his grace. I wanted him for my model in everything. And in some ways he is my model to this very moment. He had a feline way of moving and speaking in a hushed tone that commanded respect and loyalty of me.

"His skin was so black that under the lights of the cafés and bars it had a bluish tinge to it, and his deep yellow eyes had tiny flecks of brown and green in them. His teeth were powerfully white, and his lips small for his face, and his smile very smooth and loving.

"Finally, after we had hunted perhaps more than was required, we settled in a somewhat quiet café where he could talk to me and educate me, and this thrilled me almost as much as our hunting.

"But as soon as the stillness settled over me, as soon as I had the coffee in my hands, which I couldn't and didn't want to drink, I found myself in a state of shock and I began to shiver violently.

“He reached over and laid his hand on mine, and then, kissing his fingers, he repeated the gesture. Then he drew back.

“ ‘Understand the gift you’ve been given, as best you can,’ he said. ‘Don’t forswear it in the first years. Too many perish in that way. Of course you despise Petronia for giving it to you—all this is natural and right. When she drained you, when she almost killed you, you saw a vision of those who’d gone to Paradise before you. And you turned away.’

“ ‘How did you know?’ I asked.

“ ‘I could read your mind then. It’s not the same now. We’ve exchanged too much blood. It’s the same with her too. Don’t let her fool you. She’s mercilessly clever and eternally whimsical and persistently unhappy. But for whatever it’s worth, she loves you and she can’t read your mind any longer.’

“ ‘Is she always a woman for you? Do you ever see her as a man?’

“He laughed. ‘She made her choice in life early on to be the woman with me. When she fought in the arena centuries ago, it was as a woman. Those who came up against her marveled at her musculature and her stamina. But they thought her a woman. She switches back and forth. She’s truly both. But we don’t need to talk of her now. Let’s talk of you.’

“ ‘And what is there to say about me?’ I asked. ‘Did I will myself into this? I did not. And yet I blame myself that it happened. I turned away from my grandparents in that vision of Paradise, you’re right, and can you tell me now, even if the answer torments me—was what I saw real?’

“ ‘I can’t tell you,’ he said with an easy graceful shrug. ‘I don’t know. I only know what you saw. It’s the same with my victims. Often they see the light of Paradise and those they once loved call to them, and so they leave my embrace, in spirit, and I am left with the corpse.’

“That answer rattled me. And I sat quietly for a long moment. I even picked up the cup of coffee and then set it down. The café was half empty. The street outside was noisy with passersby. There was a nightclub opposite. The music was throbbing beyond the neon sign. I wondered if I had been in this street when I was alive. I didn’t remember it. But Nash and I had gone a-wandering in Naples. It was possible. And now, how would I see Nash again? How would I even go home?

“ ‘Now let me take up the point again,’ said Arion. ‘Don’t be destroyed in the first years. It happens with too many. There’s so much danger all around you. It’s easy to despair. It’s easy to succumb to bitter hatred of yourself. It’s easy to feel that the world no longer belongs to you, when nothing is further from the truth. It’s all yours and the passage of the years is yours. And now you must simply and plainly live up to it.’

“ ‘How long do we have?’ I asked.

“He was surprised by the question. ‘Forever,’ he said with another shrug. ‘There is no lifetime for us. When I gave you my blood I tried to hide my life from you, but you saw the place of my mortal happiness. You knew it was Athens. You knew the Acropolis. You recognized it

immediately. You saw the Temple of Athena in all its grandeur. I couldn't keep from you the secret of the sheer brilliance of that time, and the Athenian sunshine, so harsh, so hot, so merciless and wonderful. You breathed this knowledge from me. And you must certainly know how long I have been alive, how long I've walked the Earth as we say, how many centuries I've wandered.'

" 'What sustains you? What supports you? Surely not Petronia and the Old Man.'

" 'Don't be so quick to judge,' he said gently. 'Some night far distant from now—if you survive—you'll laugh when you remember asking me such a question. Besides, I love Petronia, and I can control her. You wonder perhaps why I didn't stop her from making you, as we call it, why I didn't call upon my authority to stop her from defiling you? Because you must understand I saw her as giving you immortality.'

"He paused, smiling at me faintly and touching my hand again with his hand, which was warm.

" 'Were there other reasons? I don't honestly know,' he went on. 'Perhaps I harbored a heated desire to see you transformed. You are so very admirable. So young. So splendid in all your parts. And with the sole exception of Manfred, it's been centuries since she worked the Dark Trick, as some of us call it. Centuries. And she has an idea that the desire builds in us and then must be discharged, and so she brings someone into our midst and makes of that one a Blood Hunter.'

" 'But the girls who prepared me, and the boy—they spoke as if there had been others.'

" 'She plays with others, and then she destroys them. The servants? What do they know? They're told that the postulant is being prepared for great gifts, and then fails. That's all. Now the girl, I don't know about her. She's ignorant and greedy. But there is some spark in the boy. Perhaps Petronia will bring him to us.'

" 'And has it been well done?' I asked.

" 'Oh, yes, of course it's been well done,' he said, almost as if I'd insulted him with my question, 'not without much more cursing and kicking I think than was ever necessary, but in the main well done; I saw to it that it was well done, though I have more to tell you.'

"He made a little gesture with the coffee, playing with it, as though he liked to see it move in the cup and savor the aroma of it, which was dark and thick and alien to me. Then he spoke.

" 'I'm watching you, of course,' he said. 'When you drink from the evil ones you have to revel in it, not cringe from the evil. It's your chance to be evil as the one you kill. Follow your victim's evil as you empty his soul. Make it your adventure into crimes you yourself would never wantonly commit. When you've finished, you take your soul back with what you've learned and you're clean again.'

" 'I feel anything but clean,' I said.

" 'Then feel powerful,' he said. 'Disease can't touch you. Neither can age. Any wound you receive will heal. Cut your hair and it will grow back within the space of a night. Forever you

will look just as you are now, my Caravaggio Christ. Remember, only fire and the sun can harm you.'

"I listened intently as he continued.

" 'Fire you must avoid at all costs,' he said, 'for your blood will burn, and terrible suffering may result, which you may survive, healing slowly over centuries. As for the sun—one day of it cannot kill me. But in these early years, either can destroy you. Don't yield to the desire for death. It claims too many of the young in their impetuosity and grand emotions.'

"I smiled. I knew what he meant—grand emotions.

" 'You needn't find a crypt every day of your life,' he said. 'You're strong from me and Petronia combined, and even the Old Man's blood has been good for you. A room that is shut up and sealed away from the sun, a hiding place, that will suffice, but eventually you should choose a refuge to which you can retire, a place that is yours where no one can find you. Remember when you do this that you are some ten times stronger than mortals now.'

" 'Ten times,' I marveled.

" 'Oh, yes,' he said. 'When you took the pretty bride you broke her neck in the final moments. You weren't even conscious of it. It was the same with the killer in the alley. You snapped his spine. You have to learn to be careful.'

" 'I'm drenched with murder,' I said. I looked at my hands. I knew I would never see Mona again, because I knew that a witch like Mona would see blood all over them.

" 'You feed from mortals now,' said Arion in his usual graceful manner. 'It's your nature. Blood Hunters have existed since the beginning of time, and probably before that. Old myths are told and written that we once had among us parents from whom the primal fount poured forth to us all, and that whatever happened to them happened to us and so they must be kept forever inviolate. But I'll give you the books to read which tell these tales.…'

"He paused, looking around the café. I wondered what he saw. I saw blood in every face. I heard blood in every voice. At will I could receive the thoughts of any mind like so much static. He went on.

" 'Suffice it to say that the Mother rose from her slumber of thousands of years and on a rampage destroyed many of her children. It was at random that she moved. And I thank the gods that she passed over us. I could have done nothing against her power, because she had the Mind Gift—that is, to destroy by will—and the Fire Gift—that is, to burn by will—and she burnt those Blood Hunters whom she found, and they numbered in the hundreds.

" 'At last she herself was destroyed, and the sacred nucleus—the primal blood from which we all come—was passed into another, otherwise we would all have withered as so many flowers upon a dead vine. But that root has been preserved without interruption.'

" 'This one, this one who has the nucleus or the root, is he very old?'

" 'It's a woman,' he replied, 'and she is ancient, as old as the Mother was, and she has no

desire to rule, only to keep the root safe and to live as a witness to time, in a place apart from the world and its worries. With that kind of age comes a peace from the blood. She no longer needs to drink it.'

" 'When will that peace come for me?' I asked.

"He laughed softly, gently. 'Not for thousands of years,' he said. 'Though with the blood I gave you, you can go many nights with just the Little Drink or even nothing. You'll suffer but you won't become weak unto dying. That's the trick, remember. Don't become so weak that you can't hunt. That you must never do. Promise me.'

" 'It matters to you what happens to me?'

" 'Of course,' he said. 'I wouldn't be with you here if it didn't. I gave you my blood, did I not?' He laughed but it was kindly. 'You don't know what a gift it was, my blood. I've lived for so long. In the parlance of our kind, I'm a Child of the Millennia, and my blood is considered too strong for the young and unwise, but I hold you to be wise and so I gave it. Live up to it.'

" 'What do you expect of me now? I know that I'm to kill those who are evil and no others, yes, and the Little Drink must be done with stealth and grace, but what else do you expect?'

" 'Nothing, really,' he said. 'You go where you wish to go and do what you wish to do. What will sustain you, how you will live, these are things you must figure out for yourself.'

" 'How did you do it?' I asked.

" 'Oh, you ask me to go back so many years,' he said. 'My Master and my Maker were one, a great writer of the Greek tragedy just before and during the time of Aeschylus. He had been something of a roamer before he set to work in Athens writing for the theater, and he had traveled into India, where he bought me from a man I scarcely remember who kept me for his bed, and had educated me for his library, and who sold me for a dear price to the Athenian who brought me home to Athens to copy for him and be his bed slave. I loved it. The world of the stage delighted me. We worked hard on the scenery, the training of the chorus and of the solitary actor whom Thespis had introduced into the mix of the early theater as it was then.

" 'My Master wrote scores of plays—satires, comedies, tragedies. He wrote odes to celebrate victorious athletes. He wrote long epic poems. He wrote lyrics for his own pleasure. He was always waking me in the middle of the night to copy or merely to listen. "Wake up, Arion, wake up, you won't believe what I've done here!" he would say, shaking me and shoving a cup of water into my hands. You know that meter and rhythm were much more important to the Greeks back then. He was the past master of it all. He made me laugh with his pure cleverness.

" 'He wrote for every festival, every contest, every conceivable excuse, and was ever busy on every detail of the performance down to the procession that might precede it or the painting of the masks to be used. It was his life. That is, when we weren't traveling.

" 'It was his joy to go to other Greek colonies and there participate in the theater as well, and it was here in Italy that he encountered the sorceress who gave him the Power. We were living

then in the Etruscan city that would later become Pompeii, and he had been involved in putting on a theatrical in the festival of Dionysus for the Greeks.

" 'I can still remember the night he came back to me, and how at first he would have nothing to do with me, and then he brought me into his presence and clumsily he drank from me, and when it seemed that I would die, when I was sure of it, he gave me the Blood in a blundering terrible moment, weeping and desperate and pleading with me to understand that he didn't know what had happened to him.

" 'We were neophytes together. We were Children in the Blood together. He burnt his plays, all of them. He said that all he had written was worthless. He was no more among humankind. To the end of his existence he sought sorcerers and witches to try to find some way to cure the Evil Blood in himself. And he perished before my very eyes, immolating himself when scarcely twenty-five years had passed. He left me a hardened orphan.

" 'But I have always been a resourceful soul, and, never wanting death, have not been tempted by it. I saw Greece fall to Rome. I saw my Master's plays in the bookshops and the marketplaces for a very long time—centuries. I saw my Master's personal poetry read and studied by young Roman boys, and then I saw the rise of Christianity and the loss of thousands of works—poetry, the drama, yes, even plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides lost—history, letters—and with them the loss of my Master's name, and the salvage of a precious few from those days when I had known so many.

" 'I am content. I am resourceful still. I deal in diamonds and pearls. I use the Mind Gift to make me rich. I cheat no one. I am clever beyond what I need. And I keep Petronia always with me. I love the company of Manfred. He and I play chess and cards and we talk and we roam the streets of Naples together. I remember so vividly the night that she brought him here, cursing that she had had to keep a bargain.

" 'They had met here in Naples, she and he, and she had taken a fancy to visiting the swamps where he lived, and having there a hideaway. It had seemed to her an appropriate wilderness from which she could hunt the drifters and the drinkers and gamblers of New Orleans and all the Southland. And eventually, he built her a domicile and a fancy tomb such as she desired, and she loved to retreat to that place whenever she was angry with me, or whenever she wanted what was new and raw, and would be away from Italy, where everything had been done a hundred times over.

" 'But in time she'd come to promise Manfred that she would give him the Blood, because she had told him what she was, and at last she had had to keep her word, or so I told her, and do it she did, and brought him here, so that those he loved would think he had died in the swampland.

" 'Now it will be the same with you. They will imagine that you died in the swamp. Is that not so?'

“I didn’t answer him.

“Then I said:

“ ‘Thank you for all you told to me, and for all you’ve taught me. I’m humble in your presence. I’d be a fool if I claimed to fully understand your age, the value of your perspective, your patience. I can only offer gratitude. May I put one more question to you?’

“ ‘Of course you may. Put any question.’ He smiled.

“ ‘You’ve lived over two thousand years, perhaps closer to three,’ I said.

“He paused, then he nodded.

“ ‘What have you given back to the world on account of this?’ I asked.

“He stared at me. His face became thoughtful but it remained warm and cordial. And then he said gently, ‘Nothing.’

“ ‘Why?’ I asked.

“ ‘What should I give?’ he asked.

“ ‘I don’t know,’ I said. ‘I feel as though I’m going mad. I feel as though if I’m to live forever I have to give something back.’

“ ‘But we’re not part of it, don’t you see?’

“ ‘Yes,’ I said with a gasp. ‘I see only too clearly.’

“ ‘Don’t torment yourself. Think on this matter for a while. Think. You have time, all the time in the world.’

“I was near to weeping. But I swallowed it back down.

“ ‘Let me ask you,’ he said. ‘When you were alive, did you feel you had to give back something for life?’

“ ‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I did.’

“ ‘I see. And so you are like my old Master with his poetry. But you mustn’t follow his example! Imagine it, Quinn, what I have seen. And there are small things to do. There are loving things.’

“ ‘You think so?’ I asked.

“ ‘I know so,’ he said. ‘But come, let’s go back to the palazzo. I know Petronia is waiting for you.’

“I laughed a short ironic little laugh. ‘That’s comforting,’ I said.

“As we stood to leave the café I stopped and looked at myself intently in the mirrored wall. I looked human enough even to my enhanced vision. And no one in the café had so much as stared at us, except for an occasional pair of pretty girls who had come and gone after their espresso. Human enough. Yes. I was pleased with it. I was magnificently pleased with it.”

42

“When we returned to the palazzo, which we did by ordinary means, that is, walking, we were told by the young serving girl, who was now frightened out of her wits, that Petronia was in her dressing room and wanted to see me there.

“I found the room entrancing. The entire wall was covered in mirrors, and Petronia sat at a great curve of granite, on a bench that appeared made of the same material, with a velvet cushion on it, while the young Adonis finished her hair.

“She was clad as a man in a buff-colored velvet coat and pants, with a ruffled white shirt that would have looked good in the eighteenth century, I well imagined, and at her throat was a huge rectangular cameo that was crowded with little figures, the whole thing surrounded by diamonds.

“Her hair was pulled straight back from her face, and the boy was plaiting it for her. She had two threads of diamonds running over her head, which as I’ve mentioned was beautifully shaped for this kind of severity, and the two threads of diamonds were being plaited into her hair.

“The room was open to the sea like all the rooms of the palazzo which I had seen, though I think I forgot to mention it with the bath.

“The sky appeared violet to me in spite of the hour, and once again the stars seemed to be moving; in fact the sky appeared to be moving into the room.

“My breath was quite literally taken away from me, not merely by the stars and their various patterns but by the sheer beauty of Petronia in her sharp male clothing, with her bold head once again revealed by the austerity of her pulled-back hair.

“I stood for a long few moments gazing at her as she looked back at me, and then the young Adonis told her softly that the plait was complete and the diamond clasp applied to the end.

“She turned around and gave him what appeared to be a very large amount of money and said, ‘Go out, enjoy yourself, you’ve done well.’ He bowed and backed out of the room, as though he’d been dismissed by the Queen of England, and then he was gone.

“ ‘So you find him beautiful, do you?’ she asked.

“ ‘Do I? I don’t know,’ I said. ‘Everything charms me. As a human being I was an enthusiast. Now I think I’m losing my mind.’

“She rose from the cushioned bench and came towards me, and then she took me in her arms.

‘All the wounds I inflicted, they’ve healed. Am I right?’

“ ‘Yes, you’re right,’ I said. ‘Except the wound no one can heal, the one I inflicted on myself, that I killed the innocent young woman, that I murdered her at her own wedding. No one can heal that. And no time will heal it either, and I don’t suppose it should.’

“She laughed. ‘Come, let’s join the others,’ she said. ‘All your grandfather knows is how to play chess. He was a raving poker player when I first met him. He beat me at it, if you can believe it, and that Rebecca, she was cagey too, I tell you, and don’t go moping after her, but I must tell you—about the bride, I’ve had the most splendid night.’

“Within moments we were in the big room with the ominous and empty gold cage at the end of it. I pictured a giant bird inside it. Certainly I hadn’t looked like a bird. I thought of Caravaggio’s *Victorious Cupid.* Had I looked a little like that?

“ ‘I must tell you what happened,’ Petronia went on, drawing the attention of Arion. ‘It was the best luck. The bride’s father and husband, you know, were first-rate killers, and of course the little minx knew it, so salve your conscience with that if you wish, Quinn. But they sent an armed guard here tonight, some four bravos as we used to call them, because we were recognized, it seems, and you can imagine the fun I had with them. Now it doesn’t please me to bully mortals, no matter what you think to the contrary, Quinn, but there were four of them.’

“ ‘And where are they now?’ said Arion. He sat at the table with the Old Man, who was looking at the chessboard. I sat between them.

“Petronia walked up and down in front of us.

“ ‘Gone, into the sea,’ she responded. ‘In their car, over the cliff. Like that. It was nothing. But the fighting here before I disposed of the bodies, now that was a class act.’

“ ‘I’m sure,’ said Arion with faint disgust. ‘And that’s made you happy.’

“ ‘Supremely happy. I drank my fill from the last one, and that was the finest part of it. No. I take that back. The fight was the finest part of it, killing them before they could draw their weapons and make a nasty hole in my body! It was divinely exciting. It made me think I should fight more often, that it’s not enough to kill.’

“Arion shook his head wearily. ‘You should talk more elegantly for your fledgling. Tell him a few rules.’

“ ‘What rules?’ she inquired. She continued to stride back and forth, almost to the windows and then again to the murals, her eyes sweeping the room around her and then seeming to drift over the stars.

“ ‘Oh, all right. Rules,’ she said. ‘You never disclose to any mortal what you are or what we are. How’s that for a rule? You never kill one of our kind. Is that enough for you, Arion? I don’t know that I remember anything else.’

“ ‘You know you do,’ he said. He too was looking at the chessboard. He made a move with his queen.

“ ‘You cover up the kill as to bring no notice to yourself,’ she said with a flair, ‘and always, always!’ she stopped and stared at me, pointing her finger in a declarative manner. ‘Always, you respect your Maker as your Master, and to strike out at your Maker, your Master, is to merit destruction at his or her hands. How’s that?’

“ ‘That’s all very good,’ said the Old Man in his deep bass with his jowls trembling. He squeezed my shoulder and smiled at me with his big loose mouth. ‘Now give him the warnings. He needs warnings.’

“ ‘Such as what!’ said Petronia disgustedly. ‘Don’t be scared of your own shadow!’ she said pointedly. ‘Don’t act like you’re old when you’re immortal! What else?’

“ ‘The Talamasca, tell him about the Talamasca,’ said the Old Man, nodding at me, mouth turned up in the manner of a fish. ‘They know about us, they do!’ he said with an emphatic nod. ‘And you mustn’t ever fall for their blandishments. Do you know that word, my son? They flatter you with their curiosity, which is what they do to everyone! Flattery is their calling card. But you must never yield to them. They’re a secret order of psychics and magicians, and they want us! They want to lock us up in their castles here in Europe and study us in their laboratories as though we were rats!’

“I was speechless. I tried to wipe my mind clean of all thought of Stirling. But the Old Man was peering at me in a probing fashion.

“ ‘Ah, what do I see but that you’ve known them? They’ve already invited themselves into your life because you were a seer of spirits! Oh, this is most dangerous. What is this? A plantation house? You must never risk being in the vicinity of them again.’

“ ‘It was all broken off a long time ago,’ I said. ‘I saw spirits, yes. I’ll probably continue to see them.’

“Arion shook his head no. ‘Ghosts don’t come to our kind, Quinn,’ he said quietly.

“ ‘No, indeed not,’ said Petronia, walking and walking. ‘You’ll find that your familiar has vanished should ever you go back to spy perhaps on those you used to know and love.’

“I said nothing.

“I looked at the chessboard. I watched the Old Man put Arion’s queen in check.

“ ‘What other rules are there?’ I asked.

“ ‘Don’t make others,’ said Arion, ‘without the permission of your Maker, or the eldest of those who make up the group in which you live.’

“ ‘You mean I can make another?’ I asked.

“ ‘Of course you can,’ said Arion, ‘but you must resist the temptation. As I told you, you can do it only with the permission of Petronia, or in reality, my permission, as you are in my house.’

“Petronia made a contemptuous scoffing sound.

“ ‘That may come to be your worst temptation,’ said Arion. ‘But you’re too young and too weak to make the transformation. Remember it, what I’m telling you. Don’t be a fool in this.

Don't share eternity with someone you may come to despise or even hate.'

"I nodded.

"There was a long silence during which time Petronia stopped at the window and looked out at the stars.

" 'There is one other warning,' she said. She turned back and looked at me. 'If you go back to the swampland, and some night you might, just to spy on your beloved aunt, that great lady, or for some other simple reason, don't be tempted to hunt New Orleans. The Talamasca keeps a tight watch for us there, and though they're bumbling mortals they can do us harm. But there is one other danger and that is a powerful Blood Hunter who styles himself the Vampire Lestat. He rules New Orleans and he destroys young Blood Hunters. He's ruthless, iconoclastic and self-centered. He's written books about us which pass as fiction. A lot of the stories in those books are true.'

"I was quiet for a long time.

"She came over to the table, and, drawing up a chair, she put her arm around Arion and she watched the game. Arion had saved his queen, but just barely, and was now about to be checkmated in a very sly way. I saw it coming but I saw he didn't by the pieces he was moving and what his eyes were doing, and then quite suddenly there came the Old Man's surprise move, and Arion sat back, amazed and then smiling and shaking his head.

" 'Another game!' he said. He started laughing. 'I demand it.'

" 'And so you shall have it!' said the Old Man, his face all atremble.

"As the Old Man was setting up the pieces I slowly rose to my feet.

" 'I'm going to leave you, gentlemen,' I said. 'I thank you for your hospitality and your gifts.'

" 'What are you talking about?' said Petronia.

" 'I'm going home,' I said. 'I want my family.'

" 'What do you mean, you're going home!' she demanded. 'Have you taken leave of your senses?'

" 'No, I haven't. And I wish now to abolish our bargain. The Hermitage is mine. I reclaim it as of now. I need the mausoleum for my hiding place by day, and I need the rest of it for a getaway in the night. Now, I'll leave you to your chess, and again I thank you—.'

"Arion rose to his feet.

" 'But how will you get home?' he asked gently. 'You can defy gravity very well over short distances, and with great speed, perhaps more than you know. But you can't travel halfway around the world. It will be years before you have that skill.'

" 'I'm going the way any mortal would go,' I responded.

" 'And what will you do when you get there!' demanded Petronia, looking up at me.

" 'Live in my house as I've always done,' I said. 'Live in my room where I've always lived. Be with my family as I've always been. I'll do that as long as I can. I won't give them up.'

“Petronia rose slowly. ‘But you don’t know how to pretend to be human. You don’t have the faintest idea.’

“ ‘Yes, I do,’ I said. ‘I watched you do it, and you’re ancient by your stories and yet you managed in a roomful of people. Why should it be so hard for me? Besides, I’m determined to do it. I won’t relinquish the life I had.’

“ ‘Won’t you realize,” Petronia said, ‘that if you take those mortals into your secret, you’ll destroy them?’

“ ‘I’ll protect them from it with my whole heart,’ I said. ‘You won’t make me lose my nerve.’

“ ‘You can’t just leave here and do this, Quinn,’ said Arion gently. ‘Besides, why would you? You don’t belong with humans now.’

“ ‘Must I ask your permission?’ I countered, looking him directly in the eye.

“He shrugged gracefully, just as I knew he would.

“ ‘No, you don’t have to ask me.’

“ ‘I don’t give a damn what you do!’ said Petronia, just as I knew she would.

“I smiled. ‘Then the Hermitage is now mine?’ I asked.

“ ‘Take it as a present from me,’ she said venomously.

“I looked down at the Old Man. ‘Manfred, we’ll meet another night.’

“ ‘Be careful, my son,’ he said.

“I left the room, and, finding the grand stairs of the palazzo, was soon out, walking down a narrow winding path to the city below.

“Within twenty minutes I walked into the lobby of the Hotel Excelsior, where we had stayed on three occasions on our trips to Naples, and went to the desk of the concierge. He remembered me and immediately asked after Aunt Queen.

“ ‘I’ve been robbed. Everything’s gone,’ I said. ‘I need to make a collect call to my aunt.’

“The phone was at once placed at my disposal. And a suite was being prepared.

“It was Jasmine who answered. She began to sob. When Aunt Queen came on the line, she was damn near hysterical.

“ ‘Listen,’ I said. ‘I can’t explain this, but I’m in Naples, Italy. I need my passport, and I need funds badly.’ I told her over and over again how much I loved her and how unexpected this was, even for me, and that I would never be able to explain, but the thing now was for me to spend a decent night in the hotel and then start the flight home tomorrow evening.

“Finally Nash came on the line to give all the appropriate numbers to the cashier, and I was officially set up with every convenience, and I was told that airline tickets would be delivered to me. I explained to Nash that I would only travel at night—that I wanted to fly from here to Milan on an evening flight, then from Milan to London on another evening flight, and from thence to New York in one evening. From there, of course, I’d return to New Orleans.

“When I shut the door of the suite, I went into a state of shock.

“It seemed my life had been a series of escalating fears, and this fear I knew now was the worst. It was quiet and cold and worse than panic, and I felt my heart throbbing in my throat. It seemed there would never be any relief from this fear, never any relief from this pain.

“Tarquin Blackwood was dead, this I knew perfectly well. But a great remnant of me existed still, and that remnant, dazzled as I was by so many unwelcome gifts, longed only to be with Aunt Queen, with Tommy, with Jasmine, with all my beloved witnesses, my irreplaceable and adored kith and kin.

“No, I wouldn’t let go of my family. No, I wouldn’t go quietly from my place at Blackwood Manor and from all those whom I so loved!

“No—not without a struggle would I leave them, not without the noblest attempt to remain with them for as long as I could.

“As for Mona, my beloved witch, I would never, never see her again or let her hear my voice over a phone. Never would my evil touch her, never would my true fate be known to her. Never would my pain be mixed with her pain.

“An hour must have passed as I stood there, my back to the door, unable to move. I tried to breathe deeply. I tried not to clench my fists. I tried not to be afraid. I tried not to be in a rage.

“It was over and done with, this transformation. And I must go on. I must go home. I must do everything gently and with great conviction and love those who loved me with all my heart.

“Finally, I lay down on the bed, my throat tight, and my body full of tremors and I felt a sudden overwhelming exhaustion, and fell into a mortal sleep.

“It must have been dreamless. No Patsy, no Rebecca, though it did seem that I heard Rebecca laughing again, and that I didn’t care.

“The early light awakened me like scalding water.

“At once I pulled all the draperies and their under curtains, and was soon in a sweet chilled darkness. Then I crawled under the bed, and soon lost consciousness.

“The following evening I had a temporary passport, money in my pockets, a new American Express card and the tickets to commence the journey. As soon as I reached London I realized I had to chart a different course for home, so I made stops in Nova Scotia, Canada, and finally Newark. Then at last I was bound for New Orleans.

“During all this time, I practiced, fearfully, my skill at the Little Drink in airports, prowling the big crowds like a swamp cat, stalking this or that victim for hours before the opportune moment, that sweet moment, loving it and loathing it at the same time. There was no doubt in my mind that I looked human to people. I even looked agreeable. And in my hunting, I made no blunders. I made no kills. I never spilt a drop.

“Oh, it was an agony of fear and pleasure, drifting through a humanity I could only penetrate as a monster. And the swarming airports became hellish, like vast sets for some existential drama. But I was fast becoming as addicted to the hunt as to the blood.

“Finally, I came down the concourse in New Orleans and Aunt Queen opened her arms and then Nash did the same and then my lovely Jasmine and my little son, Jerome, whom I picked up and kissed, crushing him to me totally. And then there was Tommy, my reserved thirteen-year-old uncle, whom I so adored. I had to hug Tommy.

“If any of them found anything strange about me it was totally overwhelmed by my enthusiasm. As for how I had gotten to Italy, I promised only that someday I would tell them. Of course they raised bloody hell, but that was all I would say.

“As we piled into the limousine to go home, they broke the news to me that Patsy had full-blown AIDS but was responding well to the medicines; however, Seymour was suing her. He had it too, and he claimed she had never told him she had it and that she had given it to him. I didn’t know what to say. I thought of that dream I had, that awful dream. I couldn’t get the images of the dream out of my head.

“ ‘How’s she feel?’ I asked. They said fine.

“ ‘How’s she look?’ I asked. They said fine.

“ ‘How’s the band?’ I asked. They said fine.

“That was the end of it.

“As soon as I reached the house I hugged Big Ramona and I told her I was too old to be sleeping with her anymore, and she said it was about high time for me to be saying that, that she was just waiting. She couldn’t believe it when I turned down her pancakes.

“When I finally reached my room and shut and locked the door, I felt faint and mad. But I had fooled them. I had fooled them and I was back with them. I was with them and I had their love. I began to cry.

“I cried and cried. I went into the bathroom and I saw the blood streaming down my face, and that’s how I learned that we cry blood tears, and I wiped away the blood with a paper handkerchief, and I finally stopped crying, and then I realized Goblin was there.

“Goblin was sitting in my desk chair, facing me, and Goblin was a full duplicate of me right to the blood in his eyes and the blood tears streaming down his face.

“I almost cried out in terror, it was such a sight. My heart stopped beating for a moment and then caught up.

“I wiped and wiped at my face. I ran at him.

“ ‘Look,’ I said, ‘I’m wiping them away, can’t you see? I’m wiping them away! Look, they’re gone, the blood is gone, can’t you see?’ I was shouting at him, I was thundering. I had to lower my voice. ‘Don’t you see! The blood’s gone. I wiped it away!’

“He just sat there with the blood in his eyes and the blood dripping down his cheeks and then he ran at me. He ran into me. He merged with me, and I felt myself pushed backwards against the round table and then to the side and to the foot of the bed, and I couldn’t fight him off, he was in me, he was merged with me, and it felt like a pure fatal electric shock, and when he

withdrew I saw him huge and filled with tiny droplets of blood, and I collapsed."

43

“Now you have my story. You know my greatest shame, that I killed the innocent bride. You know how Goblin began his attacks on me.

“You can guess the events that happened after my homecoming. You know from this story how much I love my family. You know how much my life is enmeshed with theirs.

“I felt a great and terrible hatred for Petronia and what she had done to me! With a passion that can only be called vengeance I pitched myself back into my human life, my mortal world, my family existence. I would not have it otherwise, unless proved to me that all suspected me and shunned me. But nothing of that sort happened.

“On the contrary, people needed me and I knew it. My strange disappearance had severely wounded Aunt Queen, Tommy, Jerome, Jasmine and even Clem and Big Ramona. I made amends with my endless apologies, though I couldn’t and wouldn’t explain how my disappearance had come about.

“All I could do is what I did—promise that I would never disappear again, that though I had become something of a secretive bachelor and a night creature, and though I might from time to time be off for a night or two or even three, I would always be home afterwards. And no one should ever fear for me.

“And so ‘Quinn is going through a phase,’ they said with laughter. But Quinn was around a lot.

“I had my room outfitted as you see it, with heavy velvet draperies, so that the light can be shut out, and there’s a heavy lock on the door; but usually I spend the daylight hours in the mausoleum on Sugar Devil Island, where I feel completely safe from prying eyes, since I alone can open the crypt with ease, it having taken some five men to open it on the long-ago exciting day when we examined it.

“In a house where Aunt Queen is accustomed to rising at three p.m. and taking her six a.m. constitutional before going to bed, my habits proved normal, and so everyone has come to assume.

“Now, Aunt Queen has admitted that she’s actually eighty-five years old, not eighty, a nice little secret she kept from us when we stumbled through the ruins of Pompeii with her, but she’s spry and curious and full of the capacity to enjoy life in all its richness, as you saw for yourself,

and she holds court in her room every night with Cindy, the nurse, and Jasmine and various other assorted attendants, including me, especially if it's earlier in the evening, as I usually do not disappear on my nightly errands until the stroke of twelve.

"As far as the bed-and-breakfast is concerned, Jasmine was plum tuckered out, as we say around here, and simply did not want to go on with the running of it. And once we gave Tommy one of the bedrooms upstairs, and set up another one for Brittany when she came to visit, and put Nash in Pops' old room, that left only one room for a guest, so it seemed pointless to be renting it.

"And then Patsy, who is on the frail side now, took to staying in that last front bedroom. So the bed-and-breakfast was therefore crowded right out.

"But the parish all around couldn't do without the big Christmas banquet and the Easter buffet and the azalea festival and an occasional wedding, so Jasmine still sees to that with a tremendous amount of pride, though she complains about it as if she were the local saint.

"I was in the background when the carols were sung this last year, not daring to weep, but weeping in my soul as the soprano sang 'O Holy Night' twice just for me.

"Being a madman, I also instigated a midnight dinner on Holy Saturday—Easter Sunday morning, just because I couldn't attend the Easter buffet, and that went splendidly this year, right along with the usual afternoon buffet, drawing a whole different body of after-church guests. And I've been conniving to instigate some other late-night charity affairs and fund-raisers, it's just my brain has been a bit distracted of late.

"Tommy astonished all of us by asking of his own free will to be sent off to boarding school in England, to Eton no less, and Nash took him over and got him established, and when he calls us we all marvel that he is acquiring a British accent, and we are overjoyed. I miss him terribly. He will be coming home for the holidays sometime soon. He's now fourteen and growing tall. He still wants to lead an expedition to find the lost continent of Atlantis. I clip every article I read on the subject and mail it to him. And Nash does the same.

"Terry Sue and her children are doing well. The nanny and the housekeeper have made all the difference in their lives and things run smoothly there. Brittany and the other children are in good schools, and they will have a real chance in life. Terry Sue herself is happy. As soon as she gets her check every two weeks she goes to Wal-Mart to buy clothes and artificial flowers. Her house is absolutely chock-full of artificial flowers. It's a virtual rain forest of artificial flowers. You can't find a spot in her house to put another artificial flower. As soon as you walk in she tries to give you some old artificial flowers so she can get some new artificial flowers. She has had an operation to prevent the birth of any more children. Charlie, her gun-wielding boyfriend, after holding the entire family and the sheriff at bay with a three fifty-seven Magnum, finally shot himself in the head.

"Aunt Queen has decided that she's to be a finishing school for Terry Sue, and about twice a

week Terry Sue comes over to discuss clothing purchases with Aunt Queen, and Aunt Queen gives her advice on her nail polish and how to have her hair done. Brittany has also become the pet of Aunt Queen and now has a doll collection as the result of it.

"Jasmine, after a knock-down drag-out fight, allowed me to give Jerome my name, and even to have him call me Dad, but she wasn't happy about it. And then she gave in on having him driven every day into New Orleans to go to Trinity School. Jerome is very bright. Aunt Queen loves to read to him. Nash spent considerable time tutoring him. He's already making up stories of his own, which he dictates into a little tape recorder. He does it like a radio broadcast with all the sound effects.

"It deeply moves me that he's my son, and the only one I'll ever have, but I also feel a similar affection for Tommy, and I think back to what Petronia said to me in Napoli, that I could do honorable or decent things. I don't know whether or not she was thinking of such things as being the patron of mortals, but I think of it, and I feel that my work is just begun. I dream of being the patron of a pianist—you know, buying him sheet music, and paying for his records, and helping with his tuition and lessons, and things of this sort. It's a dream, but I think I can do it. I don't see why not.

"But I'm becoming distracted. Let me continue. The epilogue, yes.

"For nine months, Nash and I read Dickens together. We spent the early part of every evening at it, before I went to hunt, and while I was still safe from Goblin's attacks. We occupied the two chairs by the fireplace in Nash's room and traded off reading out loud to one another. We went back through *Great Expectations, David Copperfield* and *The Old Curiosity Shop*. We also read *Hamlet,* which set me to secretly weeping about Mona, and *Macbeth, King Lear* and *Othello*. We usually parted company by eleven p.m. and on those few days when Aunt Queen forced herself to endure daylight in order to shop for cameos or clothes, Nash accompanied her.

"Other nights Nash watched films with Aunt Queen, Jasmine, and Cindy, the nurse, and other assorted folks. Even Big Ramona got into the spirit of it.

"Then Nash went back out to California to finish his Ph.D. and when he returns he'll be Aunt Queen's escort again. She sorely misses him, and, as she's told you herself, she has no one just now and it hurts her.

"Patsy is doing well on the drug cocktail they're giving her for AIDS and she's been able to do a little work with her band. We settled out of court with Seymour for a huge sum of money, but he died shortly after receiving it. Patsy's sworn she doesn't infect people. Two more lawsuits have been brought against her by former members of her band.

"All this has worn out Patsy. She likes being in the big house in the front bedroom across the hall. I don't talk to her very much because every time that I come up those steps I have the overpowering urge to kill her. Every night. I can read her mind without wanting to, and I know she has negligently run the risk of infecting numerous people with AIDS and even now she would

do it except that everyone is wise to her. I feel the urge so strongly to take her life that I stay away from her.

"But let me go on.

"From the first night of my return, I have tried to increase my skill and learn my powers.

"I control my telepathy around my family, and around everyone but my victims, really, because it feels obscene to me, and also it feels like noise.

"I have traveled through the air, I have practiced speed. I have come and gone from the Hermitage to far-flung taverns and highway beer joints to hunt for drifters and Evil Doers, or to make a staple of the Little Drink, and I've been successful. Even when I've drunk my fill I've almost always left the victim alive. I've learned, as Arion said, to go with the evil, to make it part of myself for those important moments.

"I never go to hunt before midnight, and of course Goblin always attacks right afterwards. I usually don't come back to the house until his attack is over. I don't want the family in any way disturbed by what Goblin means to do. But sometimes I miscalculate.

"There have been no moral blunders on my part until tonight when I almost killed Stirling Oliver.

"But Goblin's attacks have grown ever more virulent, and as for communication with him, it is nil. He will say nothing to me. He seems to feel that in becoming what I am I have in some massive way betrayed him, and he will take from me what he wants—the blood. And no affection or conversation is needed.

"Of course, he may also feel that he was betrayed by my long absence in Europe.

"I've tried to talk to him, but to no avail. He seldom appears. He is present only right after I feed.

"And during this last year, as I proved to myself that I could hunt, that I could survive, that I could live with Aunt Queen and Nash and with Jasmine, that I could be with my son, that I could sneak into the human world every night of my life and then pass out of it into my grave, Goblin has grown far stronger and far more vicious, and so at last I've come to you to beg your help, and I think I've come to you out of loneliness.

"As I believe I've indicated, I know how to go back to Petronia but I don't want to do it. I don't want her sneering coldness. I don't want even the softer indifference of Arion. As for the Old Man, though he would open his heart to me, he seems locked in his dotage. What do any of them know of a spirit like Goblin? I've come to you to help me. You've been with the spirits. I risked my life to do it.

"I believe that Goblin is a menace not only to me but to others, and one characteristic is now certain—that he can travel with me wherever I go, no matter how far it is from Blackwood Farm.

"He is attached to me in some new way, and perhaps it has to do with the Blood. In fact, I'm sure it has to do with the Blood. The Blood has given him a link to me that is stronger than his

link to this place.

"There very well may be a limit to the distance he can travel, but I myself can't give up Blackwood Farm, that's the rub. I can't be away from those who need me. I don't want to be away from them. And as a consequence I must battle Goblin here for my home, and for my life, if I'm to live it.

"And I feel a great responsibility for Goblin. I feel that I created Goblin and that I nourished him and made him what he is. What if he should hurt someone else?

"I have one last detail and my story is closed.

"I have seen Petronia once since I left Naples. I was sitting in the Hermitage, amid all the shining marble and torchères, dreaming, thinking, brooding, I don't know what exactly, feeling my unhappiness in a sort of spectacular way, when she came up the stairs, all dressed in a white three-piece suit with her hair loose and flying and full of chains of diamonds, and she gave me your books, which she had in a little dark green velvet sack.

" 'These are the Vampire Chronicles,' she said. 'You need to read these and know these. We told you about them, but we don't know if you listened. Remember. Don't hunt New Orleans.'

" 'Get out of here, I loathe and detest you,' I said to her. 'I told you our bargain is off. This place is mine!' I stood up and ran at her and struck her hard across the face before she could get her wits about her. The blood flowed from her mouth where her fangs had cut her lip, and it soiled her white vest and she was furious. She slapped me hard this way and that before I could get back and be ready for it, and then she knocked me down and went to her trick of kicking me.

" 'What a charming greeting,' she said, ramming the toe of her boot over and over right between my ribs. 'You are the epitome of the grateful child.'

"I climbed to my knees, pretending to stagger and to be hurt, and then rose up and grabbed her hair and hung on to a hank of it with both hands so that she couldn't shake me off, cursing her all the while. 'Some night, I'll make you pay,' I said. 'I'll make you suffer for all your hateful blows, for the way that you did it, for the way you brought this curse on me.'

"She clawed at me as I pulled her hair with both hands; she clawed at my head and dragged me off herself, so that I had hair in my fingers, and then she slammed me down on the floor and she kicked me across the room and against the wall. Then she sat down at the desk and with her face in her hands she sobbed. She sobbed and sobbed.

"I climbed to my feet and slowly made my way towards her. I felt that tingling in all my limbs that meant the bruises she'd inflicted were healing. I saw bits and pieces of the diamond chains from her hair on the floor, and I gathered them all up, and I came to the desk where she cried and I laid them down where she might see them.

"She had her face buried in her hands, and her hands were stained with blood.

" 'I'm sorry,' I said.

"She took her handkerchief out and wiped her face and her hands. Then she looked up at me,

prettily.

“ ‘Why should you be sorry?’ she asked. ‘It’s only natural for you to hate a creature like me. Why shouldn’t you?’

“ ‘How so?’ I asked. I expected her at any moment to fly at me again.

“ ‘Who should be made into creatures like us?’ she asked. ‘The wounded, the slave, the destitute, the dying. But you were a prince, a mortal prince. And I didn’t think twice about it.’

“ ‘That’s true,’ I said.

“ ‘And so you … you fool the fools?’ she asked gesturing with her right hand in a roving motion. ‘You live with your mortals lovingly around you?’

“ ‘Yes, for now,’ I said.

“ ‘Don’t be tempted to bring them over,’ she said.

“ ‘I’m not tempted,’ I said. ‘I’d rather go straight to Hell than do it that way.’

“She looked at the diamonds. I didn’t know what to do about them. I looked around. I had gotten them all. She picked up the strands and put them in one of her pockets. Her hair was mussed. I took out my comb. I gestured, Would she let me comb it? She said Yes, and so I did it. Her hair was thick and silky.

“Finally she stood up to go. She took me in her arms and she kissed me.

“ ‘Don’t run afoul of the Vampire Lestat,’ she said. ‘He won’t think twice about burning you to a cinder. And then I’d have to fight him and I’m not strong enough.’

“ ‘That’s really true?’

“ ‘I told you in Napoli to read the books,’ she said. ‘He’s drunk the blood of the Mother. He lay in the sands of the Gobi Desert for three days. Nothing can kill him. It wouldn’t even be fun to fight him. But just stay out of New Orleans and you don’t need to worry about him. There’s something ignoble about one as powerful as Lestat picking on one as young as you. He won’t come here to do it.’

“ ‘Thank you,’ I said.

“She walked towards the door as though she was making a graceful exit. I didn’t know whether or not she knew there was blood on her clothing. I didn’t know whether or not to tell her. Finally I did.

“ ‘On your suit,’ I said, ‘blood.’

“ ‘You just can’t resist white clothes, can you?’ she asked, but she didn’t seem angry. ‘Let me ask you something. And answer me truthfully or not at all. Why did you leave us?’

“I thought for a long moment. Then I said, ‘I wanted to be with my aunt. I had no real choice in the matter. And there were others. You know this already.’

“ ‘But weren’t we interesting to you?’ she asked. ‘After all, you might have asked me to bring you home now and then. Surely you know my powers are very great.’

“I shook my head.

“ ‘I don’t blame you for turning your back on me,’ she said, ‘but to turn your back on one as wise as Arion? That seems rash to me.’

“ ‘You’re probably right, but for now I have to be here. Then later perhaps I can bring my suit to Arion.’

“She smiled. She shrugged. ‘Very well. I leave you the Hermitage, my boy,’ she said. And she was gone just as if she had vanished. And so our one brief visit ended.

“And so my story is at an end.”

44

I sat there in silence. We had perhaps two hours before dawn, and I felt that all my life was pressed against my heart, and, though I was a sinner, I had not sinned in holding anything back. It was all laid out before me. I wondered if Goblin was near me in any form. I wondered whether or not he could have been listening.

Lestat, who had been quiet this whole time, waited for a long moment in silence. Then he spoke up.

"Your epilogue was very thorough, but you haven't mentioned one person. What has become of Mona Mayfair?"

I winced.

"I have never received another E-mail or phone call from Mona, and for that I thank God. However, periodically Michael or Rowan will call. I find myself trembling as I listen. Will these powerful witches pick up something from the timbre of my voice? But it doesn't seem so. They tell me the latest. Mona is in isolation. Mona is on dialysis. Mona is not in any pain.

"About six months ago, maybe more, I received a typewritten letter from Rowan, written on behalf of Mona, explaining that Mona had had a hysterectomy, and that Mona wanted me to know. 'Beloved Abelard, I release you from any and all promises,' Mona had dictated to Rowan. They had hoped the operation would help Mona, but it hadn't. Mona needed dialysis more and more often. There were still medications they could try.

"My answer was to raid every flower shop in New Orleans, sending sprays and baskets and vases of flowers with notes that pledged my undying love, notes which I could dictate over the phone. I didn't dare to send anything touched by my own hands. Mona could lay her hands on such a note and sense the evil in me. Just couldn't take such a risk.

"As it stands now, I still send the flowers almost daily. Now and then I break down and call. It's always the same. Mona can't see anyone just now. Mona is holding her own.

"I think I actually dread the moment when they might say, 'Come see her.' I'm afraid I won't be able to resist it and I won't be able to fool Mona, and in those precious moments, perhaps our last precious moments, Mona's mind will be clouded with some dim fear of what I've become. At the very least I'll seem cold and passionless though my heart's breaking. I dread it. I dread it with my whole soul.

“But more than anything I dread the final call—the message that Mona has lost the fight, the word that Mona is gone.”

Lestat nodded. He leaned on his elbow, his hair somewhat mussed, his large blue eyes looking at me compassionately as they had throughout the long hours of my storytelling.

“What do you think is the point of the tale you’ve told?” he asked. “Aside from the fact that we must protect Aunt Queen from all harmful knowledge of what’s happened to you, and we must destroy Goblin?”

“That I had a rich life,” I said. “As Petronia herself said it. And she didn’t care about that life. She took it capriciously and viciously.”

Again he nodded. “But Quinn, immortality, no matter how one comes by it, is a gift, and you must lose your hatred of her. It poisons you.”

“It’s like my hatred of Patsy,” I said quietly. “I need to lose my hatred of both of them. I need to lose all hatred, but right now it’s Goblin who needs destroying, and I’ve tried, out of fairness to him, to make it plain to you how much I’m responsible for what he is, and even for the vengeance he wishes on me.”

“That’s clear,” said Lestat, “but I don’t know that I alone can help stop him. I may need help. In fact, I think I do. I think I need it from a Blood Drinker whose prowess with spirits is a legend.” He raked his hair back from his forehead. “I think I can persuade her to come and help me with this. I’m speaking of Merrick Mayfair. She doesn’t know your fair Mona, at least not as far as I know, and even if she did at one time there’s no connection now in any event. But Merrick knows spirits in a way that most vampires don’t. She was a powerful witch before she ever became a vampire.”

“Then the Dark Blood didn’t take away her powers with spirits?” I asked.

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “She’s far too complex for that. And besides, it’s a lie that spirits shun us. As you said yourself, I’m a seer of spirits. I wish to God I weren’t. I’ll need tomorrow evening to find Merrick Mayfair. Merrick is almost as young in the Blood as you are. She’s suffering. But I think I can bring her here, perhaps at one or two in the morning. I can’t imagine her refusing to come, but we’ll see. In either case, I’ll return. You have my firm pledge on it.”

“Ah, I thank you with all my heart,” I said.

“Then let me make a little confession,” he said with a warm, irresistible smile.

“Of course,” I said, “what is it?”

“I’ve fallen in love with you,” he said in a low voice. “You might find that in the nights to come I’m a bit of a nuisance.”

I was so amazed I was speechless. To say that he looked exquisite to me was an understatement. He was savory and elegant and all night as I had talked I had been so locked to him that I had felt myself under his spell, opening up, as if there were no boundary between us.

"Good," he said suddenly as though he was reading my mind. "Now perhaps I'll leave you early so that I can try to find Merrick right away. We have some time left before morning—."

A loud scream suddenly interrupted both of us. It was Jasmine, and I heard another scream right after it.

"Quinn, Quinn, it's Goblin!" she was roaring from the foot of the stairs.

I had to hold myself back and force myself to run like a mortal man as I descended with Lestat behind me.

Screams came from Aunt Queen's room. I could hear Cindy, the nurse, crying. Big Ramona was sobbing. Jasmine rushed towards me. She grabbed me by both arms and said:

"It was Goblin, Quinn! I saw him!"

We ran back through the hall together, I once again suppressing my speed, trying desperately to keep to a mortal pace.

As soon as I saw Aunt Queen lying on the floor by the marble table I knew she was dead.

I knew by her eyes.

I didn't have to see the blood streaming from her head, or the blood on the marble table. I knew, and when I looked at her bare stocking feet, when I looked at her humble stocking feet, I began to sob, covering my face with my handkerchief.

And there was the beautiful cameo of Medusa at her throat, the charm against harm, and it had done her no good, it hadn't saved her. She was dead; she was lost. She was gone.

She and her majesty and her goodness were gone forever.

What else was there? People were making frantic phone calls. Sirens were soon screaming. What did it matter?

How many times did they explain it before dawn?

She had taken off her treacherous shoes. That's why no one was holding her arm. She had taken off her terrible shoes. That's why Jasmine didn't have her by the arm. She had taken off her dangerous shoes. That's why Cindy wasn't at her side. She had gone over to the table to look at her cameos. She had wanted to find one in particular for Cindy's daughter.

On and on they said it, and the Coroner listened and Sheriff Jeanfreau listened and Ugly Henderson listened, and Jasmine and Cindy both said it had been Goblin who made her fall, it had been Goblin whirling in the air, Goblin like a small tornado in the room, and Aunt Queen had cried out twice "Goblin!" and thrown up her arms, and then gone down, her head crashing into the marble.

Cindy and Jasmine had seen it! They had seen the commotion in the air! They knew what it was. They heard her say it twice: "Goblin, Goblin!" and in her stocking feet on the carpet she fell, she fell and hit the marble table with the side of her head, and she was dead before she reached the carpet.

Oh, God in Heaven help me.

"Now, are you two ladies telling me that a ghost killed Mrs. McQueen?" asked the Coroner.

"Sheriff, for the love of Heaven," I said. "She fell! Surely you don't believe that either Cindy or Jasmine had anything to do with it!"

And so on it went, round and round, until I had to go, and I took Jasmine aside and told her to make all the arrangements with Lonigan and Sons in New Orleans. The wake should be tomorrow night, starting at seven. And I would see her then, and I told her to try as she might to arrange for an evening interment. Of course that would be highly irregular but maybe money could manage it.

"And for the love of Heaven," I said, "beware of Goblin."

"What are you going to do about him, Quinn?" she asked. She was trembling and her face was puffy from crying.

"I'm going to destroy him, Jasmine. But it will take just a little time. Until I can get it done, beware of him. Tell all the others. Beware of him. He's swollen with power—."

"You can't leave here now, Quinn," she said.

"I have to, Jasmine," I said. "I'll see you at the funeral parlor in New Orleans at seven tomorrow."

She was horrified, and I didn't blame her.

Lestat stepped in front of me and he gently took her by the shoulders, looking intently into her eyes. "Jasmine," he said in a low tone, "we have to go and find the woman who can put an end to Goblin. It's imperative that we do that. Do you understand?"

She nodded. She was still crying and she licked the tears from her lips as they fell. But she couldn't take her eyes off his.

"Keep little Jerome close to you," said Lestat, his voice soft and persuasive. "This creature wants to hurt everyone dear to Quinn. See that everybody is on guard."

He kissed her forehead.

Quietly, we withdrew.

At last, Lestat and I were alone on Sugar Devil Island and I gave vent to my grief, sobbing like a child. "I can't imagine the world without her, I don't want the world without her, I hate him with my whole soul that he did it, how in the name of God did he get the power, she was too old, too fragile, how can we make him suffer, how can we make him suffer so much that he'll want to die, how can we send him to whatever Hell exists for him?"

On and on I raved. And then we went to our rest together.

45

At sunset I rose hungry and miserable, but I understood that Lestat had to leave me to my mortal commitments so that he could contact Merrick Mayfair and see if she would render me support.

As soon as I reached the big house I realized that Nash and Tommy were both there. Tommy had flown all day and some of the evening to get home from England, and Nash had just arrived much earlier from the West Coast. The look of grief on both their faces was dreadful, and I could scarcely hold back my tears.

In truth, I didn't want to hold them back but the fear of the blood made it absolutely essential, so I gave myself up to hugs and kisses and saw to it that I had at least three linen handkerchiefs, and, saying next to nothing, for what was there to say, we all piled into Aunt Queen's luxurious limousine and headed into New Orleans for Lonigan and Sons in the Irish Channel—back to the turf where Manfred Blackwood had owned his first saloon.

The crowd at the wake was already enormous when we arrived. Patsy was at the open door and very soberly dressed in black—which amazed me, as she was a great one for skipping funerals—and it was plain that she'd been crying.

She flashed a small square of folded pages at me.

"Photocopy of her will," she said in a tremulous voice. "She instructed Grady a long time ago not to keep us in suspense. She left me plenty. It was a damn nice thing for her to do. He has a copy in his pocket for you."

I merely nodded. It was all too typical of Aunt Queen to have done this last little generous gesture, and over the evening I was to see Grady passing the little folded photocopy packets to Terry Sue and Nash, among others.

Patsy went on out to smoke a cigarette and didn't seem to want to talk.

Jasmine, lovely in her blue suit and signature white blouse, and lamentably exhausted from the long day of picking out the coffin, the vault and the dress for Aunt Queen, was near to collapse.

"I brought her fingernail polish," she repeated to me three times. "They did a nice job. I told them to wipe off some of the rouge, but it was nice. A nice job. You want to bury her with the pearls? Those are her pearls." Over and over she asked.

I said Yes.

Nash finally collected Jasmine and escorted her to one of the many little French chairs that lined the walls of the front parlor. Big Ramona was sitting in a chair simply crying, and Clem, having parked the limo, came in to stand over his mother and looked perfectly wretched.

Terry Sue was crying too as she held on to Tommy, who was sobbing. I wanted to comfort Tommy but I was so rattled by my own grief, and, holding back the blood tears, I couldn't do it. Brittany was white-faced and miserable.

Rowan Mayfair was there, which amazed me, looking softly delicate in her tailored suit with her carefully bobbed hair flattering her high cheekbones as always, and there was Michael Curry at her side, with a little more gray in his curly hair than I remembered, the two of them sharing a common radiance which alarmed me. Witches, yes. The Blood told me and they both nodded respectfully at me, suspecting nothing, and I veered away from them, wary of their power, with only a nod, as if I was too stricken to talk, which in fact was true.

There was no avoiding it: I had to approach the coffin. I had to look into it. I had to do it. And so I did.

There lay Aunt Queen in satin splendor, with ropes of pearls on her breast and a large rectangular cameo at her throat which I had never seen in her collection, and which for the moment I couldn't place. Then I recalled it. I had seen it on Petronia. Petronia had worn it when last I saw her at the Hermitage. And when last I saw her in Naples.

How did it get here? I had only to look up to see. There stood Petronia at the foot of the coffin, dressed all in dark blue with her glorious hair pulled back, looking sad and forlorn. In a swift motion that seemed no more than a blink of my eye she was beside me, and, curling her fingers gently around my upper arm, she whispered into my ear that Jasmine had allowed her to place the cameo on Aunt Queen and she had done it, and if I would allow it, it should remain.

"That way, you can keep her special treasures," she said, "yet know she was buried with something worthy of her, something she would have admired."

"Very well and good," I said. Then Petronia was gone. I knew it without looking. I felt it. I felt it and I felt a strangeness at having seen her among so many mortals, and I felt a new confidence in my own abilities to dissemble, but more than anything I felt an overwhelming misery as I looked down at my beloved Aunt Queen.

Lonigan was an undertaker par excellence as everybody knew, but he had really outdone himself in capturing the pleasant, almost gay expression of Aunt Queen. She was almost smiling. And her gray hair was in perfect soft curls around her face. The rouge on her cheeks was subtle and the coral lipstick on her lips was perfect. She would have been most happy with all that had been done. Of course Jasmine had helped. But Lonigan had wrought the masterpiece, and Aunt Queen's generosity shone forth from his work.

As to the salmon-colored dress and the pearls which Jasmine had chosen, they were lovely, and the rosary in Aunt Queen's hands—it was the crystal rosary from her First Communion,

which she had carried with her all through the great world.

I was so stricken with anguish that I couldn't move or speak. In desperation I wished that Petronia had lingered, and I found myself staring at the large rectangular cameo, with its little mythological figures—Hebe, Zeus, the raised cup—and the blood tears started to fill my eyes. I wiped furiously with the linen handkerchief.

Then quickly I withdrew. I went hurriedly through the crowded parlors and out into the hot evening and stood alone at the curb of the corner, looking up at the stars. Nothing would ever assuage the grief I felt now. I knew it. I would carry it with me all my nights until whatever I was now had disintegrated, until Quinn Blackwood had become somebody or something other than what he was now.

My time of privacy lasted only a few seconds. Jasmine came to me and told me that many people wanted to express their condolences and were hesitant because I seemed so upset.

"I can't talk to them, Jasmine, you have to do it for me," I told her. "I have to go now. I know it seems hard and I seem the coward to you. But it's what I have to do."

"Is it Goblin?" she asked.

"It's the fear of him, yes," I said, lying just a little, more to console her than to cover my own shame. "When is the Mass? When is the interment?"

"The Mass is at eight p.m. tomorrow at St. Mary's, and then we go to Metairie Cemetery."

I kissed her. I told her I would see her at the church, and then I turned to go.

But as I glanced back at the crowd leaking out of the doorways onto the street, I saw yet another figure who astonished me—the figure of Julien Mayfair, in his fine gray suit, the suit he had worn the day he so regally entertained me with hot cocoa, standing as if he was merely taking the warm air with all the others, his eyes fixed casually on me.

He seemed as solid as every other person present, except that he was a faintly different color than everyone else, as though he had been painted in by another artist, and all the tones of his clothes and skin and hair were done in darker hues. Oh, such a fine and elegant ghost, come from who knows where, and who in the world thought that as a Blood Drinker I wouldn't see my spirits?

"Ah, yes, she was your daughter, of course," I said, and though there was a great distance between us, and Jasmine was looking up at me uncomprehending, he nodded and he made a very sad little smile.

"What are you saying, you crazy Little Boss?" said Jasmine. "You punchy as I am?"

"I don't know, darling," I answered. "I just see things, always have. Seems the living and the dead have turned out for Aunt Queen. Don't expect me to explain it. But it's fitting, all things considered, don't you think?"

As I watched him, Julien's expression gradually changed, sharpening and strengthening and then becoming almost bitter. I felt the chills coming up my neck. He shook his head in a subtle

but stern negation. I felt the words coming from him soundlessly over the distance. *Never my beloved Mona.*

I drew in my breath. A flood of assurances came from that part of me which could reach him without words.

"Come around, Little Boss," said Jasmine. I felt her lips on my cheek and the hard press of her vigilant fingers.

I couldn't take my eyes off Julien, but his face was softening. It went blank.

He began to fade. And then dissolve just as Rowan and Michael, along with Dr. Winn Mayfair, came out of the nearest doorway. And who should be with them now but Stirling Oliver, Stirling who knew what I was, Stirling whom I had almost killed the night before, Stirling—gazing at me as if he accepted me when that was utterly morally impossible, Stirling whom I had so loved as my friend. I couldn't bear their scrutiny—any of them. I couldn't talk common talk of Mona, as if my soul didn't hunger for her, as if I didn't know that I could never see her again, even if they thought that I could, as if Julien's ghost hadn't just threatened me. I had to make a hasty exit.

And I did.

It was a night for a special killing. I pounded the hot pavements. I left the great trees of the Garden District behind me. I crossed the Avenue. I knew where to go.

I wanted a drug dealer, a wanton killer, a fine repast, and I knew where to find one; I had passed his door on gentler nights. I knew his habits. I had saved him for a time of vengeance. I had saved him for now.

It was a big two-story house on Carondolet Street, shabby to the world and rich inside with his electronic gadgets and wall-to-wall carpets, a padded cell from which he ordered executions and purchases and even put the mark on children who refused to run deliveries for him, having their tennis shoes tied together and thrown up over the electric wires to let others know that they had been killed.

I didn't care what the world thought; I broke in on him and slaughtered his two drugged-up stumbling companions with rapid blows to the head. He scrambled for his gun. I had him by the throat, broke him open like a stem. At once I had the sweet sap of his monstrous self-love, poison plant in the garden of hate, lifting his symbolic fist against any assassin, believing to the last drop of blood that he would triumph, that somehow consciousness wouldn't betray him, until finally he was just spilling out the child soul, the early prayers, the images of mother and kindergarten, sunshine, and his heart stopped, and I drew back, licking my lips, glutted, angry, full.

I took his gun, the gun he had reached for to shoot me, and, taking the pillow from off his couch, I pressed pillow and gun to his head and put two bullets in him, and then I did the same to each of his companions. That would give the Coroner something he could understand. I wiped off the gun and left it there.

In a flash I saw Goblin, eyes full of blood, hands red with blood, then he shot towards me as if

to grab my throat.

Burn, you devil, burn! I sent the fire into him as he surrounded me, as he sought to merge with me, and I felt the heat singe me, singe my hair, my clothes. *You murdered Aunt Queen, you devil, burn! Burn if I have to burn with you.* I fell to the floor, or rather the floor came up to take me, full of dust and filth, and I was sprawled out flat on the stinking carpet with him inside me, his heart thudding against my heart, and then the swoon—we were children, we were infants, we were in the cradle and someone was singing, and Little Ida said, Doesn't that baby have the most beautiful curly hair, oh so sweet to be with Little Ida, to hear her voice again, so sweet, so safe. Aunt Queen let the screen door bang behind her. "Ida, you darling, help me with this clasp. I swear I'm going to lose these pearls!" *You devil, you murdering spirit, I won't look at her, I won't feel it; I won't know it.* And I was with Goblin and loved Goblin and nothing else mattered—not even the tiny wounds all over me and the tug on my heart. "Get off me, you devil! I swear it, I'll put an end to you. I'll take you into the fire with me. Don't count me a liar!"

I rose to my hands and knees.

A gust of wind wrapped itself around me and then swept past the broken door. The panes of glass in the window shattered and clattered.

I was so full of hate I could taste it and it didn't taste like blood.

He was gone.

I was in the lair of the drug king, amid the rotting bodies. I had to get out.

And Aunt Queen was dead. She was absolutely dead. She was laid out on cream-colored satin with ropes of pearls. Someone remembered her little eyeglasses with their sterling silver chain. And her Chantilly perfume. Just a little Chantilly perfume.

She is dead.

And there is nothing, absolutely nothing, that I can do about it.

46

There came into my heart some wild dream that Mona would be at the funeral Mass, but no such thing happened, though Fr. Kevin Mayfair was the celebrant, and though all the Mayfairs I knew —Rowan, Michael and Dr. Winn—were there as they had been at the wake the night before. They all shared that eerie glow which so unsettled me. Stirling Oliver was also with them, and they gave me their polite nods when our eyes met.

The same immense crowd was there, filling the central nave of St. Mary's Assumption Church in a way I'd never witnessed at weekly Mass. In fact there were more people present because McQueens had flown in from far and wide who had not been able to reach New Orleans in time for the wake the night before.

It chilled me mercilessly to see the closed coffin lying on its bier in the main aisle, and since it was only just dark when I reached the church, I had been unable to see Aunt Queen before they shut her up for all time.

But I did not have to bear this misery alone, because both Lestat and Merrick Mayfair appeared at my side just as I was making my way past the Mayfairs and into the pew with Jasmine, Tommy and Nash.

This was so unexpected that for a moment I was shaken and had to be supported by Lestat, who took my arm firmly. He had trimmed his hair quite short, was wearing a pair of pale sunglasses to blunt the effect of his iridescent eyes and was dressed very conservatively in a double-breasted blue jacket and khaki pants.

Merrick Mayfair, in a crisp white linen shirtwaist dress, had a white scarf wrapped around her face and neck and a large pair of sunglasses that almost masked her face. But I was certain that it was she, and I wasn't surprised when Stirling Oliver, who was in the pew behind us, came up and spoke to her, whispering that he was glad to see her and hoped he might later have a word with her.

I could hear her plainly when she said she had many things on her mind but she would try to do what he wanted. It seemed then that she kissed Stirling on both cheeks, but I wasn't certain as her back was turned. I knew only that for Stirling this was a moment of incredible magnitude.

Fr. Kevin Mayfair commenced the Requiem Mass with two altar boys. I hadn't been to church since the transformation and I was unprepared for the fact that he reminded me so very much of

my red-haired Mona. I felt an ache just looking at him as he greeted us all and we returned the greeting. And then I realized I ached for him as I always had.

He believed completely in the sacred words he spoke. He was an ordained priest of God and the awareness of this permeated his entire being. The Blood revealed this to me. But even as a mortal I had never doubted it.

That Lestat and Merrick actually knelt beside me, making the Sign of the Cross and apparently praying in whispers, answering the anthems of the Mass, just as I did, was a shock but a pleasant one, as if the mad world in which I was lost could form its own flexible connective tissue.

When it came time to read a passage from the Bible and to speak of Aunt Queen, Nash made a very solemn and proper speech about nobility existing in Aunt Queen's eternal consideration of others, and Jasmine came forth shaking badly and spoke of Aunt Queen having been the guiding star of her life, and then others spoke—people I hardly knew—all saying kind things. And finally there was silence.

I remembered vividly how I had failed to speak at all the funerals of my life, in spite of my love for Lynelle and for Pops and for Sweetheart, and I found myself rising and coming forward to the microphone at the lectern just behind the altar rail. It seemed unthinkable that being what I was I would do this, but I was doing it and I knew that nothing would keep me from it.

Adjusting my voice for the microphone, I said that Aunt Queen had been the wisest person that I had ever known and that being possessed of true wisdom she had been gifted with perfect charity, and that to be in her presence was to be in the presence of goodness. Then I recited from the Book of Wisdom the description of the gift of wisdom, which I felt Aunt Queen possessed:

> "For wisdom is more active than all active things: and reacheth everywhere by reason of her purity.
>
> For she is a vapour of the power of God, and a certain pure emanation of the glory of the almighty God: and therefore no defiled thing cometh into her.
>
> For she is the brightness of eternal light, and the unspotted mirror of God's majesty, and the image of his goodness.
>
> And being but one, she can do all things: and remaining in herself the same, she reneweth all things.…"

I broke off there. "No finer language can be used to describe Aunt Queen," I said. "And that she lived among us to be eighty-five years of age was a gift to all of us, a precious gift, and that death took her so abruptly must be seen as a mercy if we are to remain sane, and to think of her and what decrepitude might have meant to her. She is gone. She, the childless one who was a mother to all of us. The rest is silence."

Then, scarcely believing that I had stepped up to the sanctuary of the church to deliver these words before a human crowd at a Requiem Mass, I was about to return when suddenly Tommy rose and anxiously gestured for me to wait.

He came to speak, shaking violently, and he put his arm around me to steady himself, and I put my hand on his shoulder, and he said into the microphone:

"She gave me the world. I traveled it with her. And everywhere we went, from Calcutta to Aswan to Rio to Rome to London, she gave me those places—in her words, in her enthusiasm, in her passion, and in … in … showing me and telling me what I could make of my life. I'll never forget her. And though I hope to love other people as she taught me to love people, I'll never love anyone the way I loved her."

Looking up at me to indicate he was finished, he clung to me as we made our way out of the sanctuary and back to the pew.

I was very proud of him and he took my mind off my own sins completely, and, as I sat down right beside Lestat I held Tommy's hand with my left hand and Lestat took my right.

When it came time to receive Communion, a great many people were moving out of the pews to get in line, and of course Tommy and Jasmine were going to do it. And on impulse I rose and went before them to get in line.

And to my utter shock, so did Merrick, and so did Lestat, following my example perhaps, or doing what they would have done in any case.

The three of us received the sacrament.

I took it in my hand as was my custom, then put it in my mouth. I don't know how they took it—whether in their hands or directly into their mouths. But they took it. I felt it dissolve on my tongue as always—such a tiny morsel of food not being repulsed by my body—and I prayed to the God who had come into me to forgive me everything I was. I prayed to Christ to redeem me from what I was. I prayed to know what I must do—if there was any way, honorable or decent or moral—for me to live.

Was Christ inside me? Of course. Why should one miracle cease just because another one had taken hold of me? Was I guilty of sacrilege? Yes. But what is a murderer to do? I wanted God to be inside me. And my Act of Contrition, my renunciation of all sin, was for the moment pure. I knelt with my eyes closed and I thought the strangest thoughts.

I thought of the omniscient God becoming Man and it seemed such a remarkable gesture! It was as if I'd never heard the story before! And it seemed that the omniscient God had to do it to fully understand His Creation because He had created something that could offend Him so deeply as humankind had done. How tangled it was. How bizarre. Angels hadn't offended Him so deeply. No. But human beings had. My head was so full of ideas, and my heart for the moment was full of Christ, and my soul wept its own bloodless tears, and I felt innocent just for this little while.

Fast-forward: the cemetery:

Lonigan and Sons had provided us all with small candles, each with its round paper shield so the wax wouldn't burn our hands. Fr. Kevin Mayfair finished the graveside ceremony with dash and charm. He wept for Aunt Queen. Many people were crying. Terry Sue was still crying. Flowers were heaped all around the coffin on its bier. We were invited to file past and touch the wood for the last time. The gates to the tall granite tomb stood open. The coffin would be interred on one of the shelves after we left.

Patsy broke into hysterical sobbing.

"How could you bring us out here at night!" she shouted at me, her eyes wet and streaming. "You, always you, Tarquin. I hate this place, and you have to bring us at night. You, always you, Tarquin."

I felt sorry for her that she was so unhappy and that everyone was staring at her, and not knowing how sick she was, and how insane she was in general.

Big Ramona tried to quiet her. Merrick Mayfair stood at my elbow watching her intently. I could feel Lestat watching her as well. I felt humiliated for her, but what did it matter to them, her strange theatrics? And why had she come?

She had not come to the gravesides of her own parents. But she had loved Aunt Queen. Everybody had.

And then Big Ramona guided her towards the car. Our lawyer, Grady Breen, tried to pet her and quiet her.

"Damn you, Quinn!" she shouted as they forced her into the limousine. "Damn you to Hell!" I wondered if she had some divining power to call out such perfect curses.

"We should meet tonight," said Merrick in a low voice. "Your spirit friend is dangerous. I can sense his presence. He isn't eager to be seen by me or by Lestat. But he's here. There's no time to lose."

"We'll meet at the house?" I asked.

"Yes, you go with your family," said Lestat. "We'll be waiting for you when you arrive."

"Your mother, she's headed there also," said Merrick. "She wants to leave, however. Try to keep her. We have to talk to her. Tell her that we have to talk to her. Use any means you can to keep her there."

"But why?" I asked.

"When we get together," said Merrick, "you'll understand."

The limousine was waiting for me. And so were Tommy, Patsy, Big Ramona, Nash, Jasmine and Clem.

I glanced back once at the coffin and the mortuary personnel and the cemetery workers as they prepared the crypt—just what they had not wanted us to see—and then I went back to take two red roses from the bank of flowers, and, glancing up, I saw Goblin.

He stood at the very door of the mausoleum. He was dressed as I was, in a black suit, and his hair was like mine, full but trimmed, and he stared at me with wild, sparkling eyes, and all through him, solid though he was, I could see an intricate web of blood, as it infected all that made up the illusion. The image remained for one second, perhaps two, and then winked out as though it had been a flame.

I shuddered. I felt the breeze. The emptiness.

Taking the two roses with me, I got into the car and we headed for Blackwood Manor.

Patsy cried all the way. "I haven't been right up to that damn tomb in all these years," she kept saying. "And we have to come in the middle of the night on account of Quinn, little Quinn, how fitting, little Quinn!"

"You didn't have to come," said Big Ramona. "Now shush, you're making yourself sick."

"Oh, damn you, damn you all, what do you know about sick?"

And so on it went for the long ride home.

By the time we reached the house my anxious hands had involuntarily crushed both roses into wanton petals.

47

Patsy was in the front bedroom across from mine, and as soon as we reached home, Cindy, our beloved nurse, went up to attend to her, to make certain she had taken her medicines and to give her some sort of mild tranquilizer. She was soon in an official Blackwood Manor flannel nightgown with no intentions of going anywhere, though when she saw me pass the door to my room she screamed at me that I had made her nauseated by dragging us all to the cemetery "at midnight."

It was not yet midnight.

As for Goblin, everyone knew the danger. I did not have to tell Jasmine and Clem to look after Jerome, or tell Nash to keep his eye close on Tommy. Everyone knew what Goblin had done to Aunt Queen. Even Patsy believed it and Big Ramona was now her companion and guardian.

No one was to climb the staircase alone. No one was to react with panic to the breaking of glass. Everybody was to remain within the house, in pairs or threes, including me, who had my "two friends" visiting in my private parlor.

And they were waiting for me just as they had promised. We clustered around the center table, Merrick, Lestat and I, and Merrick, a tall, very lean woman with almond-colored skin and full dark hair, who had taken off her white scarf and her big glasses, immediately began to talk.

"This creature, this ghost that's haunting you, he's related to you by blood, and the connection is more than important."

"But how can that be?" I said. "I've always believed him to be a spirit. I've been haunted by ghosts. They declare who they are. They have histories; they have patterns."

"He has a history and a pattern too, believe me."

"But what is it?" I asked.

"You have no idea?" she probed, looking me in the eye as if I was concealing something from myself perhaps.

"None whatsoever," I replied. I found it easy to talk to her. I felt she would understand. "He was always with me," I said, "from the beginning. I thought that I created him almost. That I drew him to myself, out of the void, and developed him in my own image. Oh, I know he's made of something. Ether. Astral particles—some form of matter. Something, yes, something that obeys natural laws. Mona Mayfair explained to me once that such spirits have a nucleus, a kind of

heart, and a circulatory system, and I understand that my blood feeds that system now, and that he's becoming stronger and stronger as he draws blood from me after I feed. But I've never had an inkling that he was the ghost of somebody."

"I saw him in the cemetery," she responded. "Just as you did."

"You saw him before our crypt? When I went to take the roses?"

"I saw him before that," she said. "He was very strong there. Tarquin, he's your twin."

"Yes, I know, my absolute doppelgänger."

"No, Tarquin, I mean he's the ghost of your twin brother, your identical twin brother."

"That's impossible, Merrick," I said. "Believe me, I appreciate your wanting to attack this problem head-on, but there's a very simple reason why that can't be so. There are two reasons, actually."

"Which are?" she asked.

"Well, first off, if I'd had a twin, I'd know. Somebody would have told me. But far more important, Goblin writes with his right hand. And I've always been left-handed."

"Tarquin," she said, "he's a mirror twin. Haven't you ever heard of them? They mirror each other exactly. And there's an old legend that argues that every left-handed person is the survivor of mirror twins, one of whom perished in the womb, but your twin didn't perish that way. Tarquin, I think we need to talk to Patsy. I think Patsy wants you to know. She's weary of the silence."

I was too shocked to speak.

I made a little gesture for patience and then I stood up and beckoned for them to come with me.

We crossed the hall. Patsy's door was open. Her room didn't have a parlor like mine, but it was spacious and beautiful, with a regal bed done up in blue-and-white ruffles, and a blue silk couch and chairs before it. She was sitting on the couch with Cindy, our nurse, watching the television while Big Ramona sat with her embroidering ring in one of the chairs. The volume of the television was so low it seemed unimportant. Big Ramona rose to go as we entered. So did Cindy.

"What kind of invasion is this?" Patsy asked. "Hey, Cindy, don't you go without giving me another shot. I'm sick. And you, Tarquin Blackwood, half the time you don't know I'm alive. When I die, are you going to drag everybody to Metairie Cemetery at the stroke of twelve?"

"I don't know, Patsy," I said. "Maybe I'll just strangle you and dump you in the swamp. I dream about that sometimes, murdering you and dumping you in the swamp. I dream I did it. You tasted like cotton candy and candy apples, and you sank deep down in the green water."

She laughed and shook her head as she looked at me and at my two friends. In her long white flannel nightgown she looked particularly thin, which worried me for her. And her blond hair, so often teased, was brushed out and hung down in waves, making her look young. Her eyes were

big and hard.

"You're so crazy, Tarquin Blackwood," she sneered. "You should have been drowned when you were born. You don't know how much I hate you."

"Now, Patsy, you don't mean that," said Cindy, the nurse. "I'll be up to give you another shot in an hour."

"I'm sick right now," said Patsy.

"You're loaded right now is what you are," said Big Ramona.

"Can we talk to you for a little while?" asked Lestat. He gestured gently and she motioned for him to sit beside her. He settled there and actually put his arm along the back of the couch behind her.

"Sure, I'm glad to talk to friends of Quinn's," Patsy said. "You sit down, all of you. It's never happened before. Nash is so stuck-up, he calls me Miss Blackwood most of the time. Jasmine can't stand the sight of me. She thinks I don't know that black bastard of hers is your child. Like Hell I don't know. Everyone in the parish knows. And she runs around saying, 'He is my son' like he came from a virgin birth, can you imagine? I tell you if that child's father had been anybody but you, Quinn, it would have been out with the trash, but it was little Quinn who got into Jasmine's panties and so it's just fine, according to Aunt Queen, just fine, let the little bastard have the run of the house, it's just—"

"Come on, Patsy, stop it," I said. "If anybody hurt that child's feelings, you'd be the first to stick up for him."

"I'm not trying to hurt him, Quinn, I'm trying to hurt you, 'cause I hate you."

"Well, I'll give you some real good opportunities to hurt me. You just need to talk to me and my friends."

"Well, that will be a pleasure."

Merrick had taken the chair in which Big Ramona had been sitting, and all this while she had been studying Patsy, and now in a low voice she introduced herself by her first name and she introduced Lestat also.

I sat down beside Merrick.

Patsy nodded to these introductions and said with a searingly vicious smile, "I'm Tarquin's mother."

"Patsy, did he have a twin?" Merrick asked. "A twin that was born at the same time he was or moments after?"

Utter silence fell over Patsy. I had never seen such an expression on her face. It went blank, yes, with a combination of stupefaction and dread, and then she screamed for Cindy. "Cindy, I need you, Cindy, I'm panicky! Cindy!"

She turned this way and that, until Lestat placed his hand firmly on her shoulder. He spoke her name in a whisper. She appeared to look into his eyes and to lose her hysteria as if it were being

drained out of her.

Cindy appeared in the door with the syringe poised.

"Now, Patsy, you just hang on," she said, and then she came forward and, sitting on Patsy's left, she very modestly lifted the gown and gave Patsy a shot of the sedative in her left hip, and then stood there waiting.

Patsy was still looking into Lestat's eyes.

"You understand," Patsy said. "It was the most pitifulest, terriblest thing—." She shuddered. "You can't imagine."

Without taking his eyes off Patsy, Lestat told Cindy that Patsy was fine now.

Patsy turned her eyes to the Oriental rug and she appeared to be tracing its patterns. Then she looked up at me.

"I hated you so much," she said. "I hate you now. I always hated you. You killed it."

"Killed it! How—?" I was stunned.

"Yes," she said. "You did it."

"What are you saying?" I asked. "How did I do that?" I wanted to probe her mind, but I'd never used that power with her and some profound inveterate distaste kept me from doing it.

"You were so big," she said. "You were so healthy, so normal. Ten pounds, eleven ounces. Even your bones were big. And then that other little one, my little Garwain, only three pounds, and they said he had given you all his blood in my womb, all his blood. You were like a vampire baby drinking up all his blood! It was so awful, and he was so small. Just three pounds. Oh, he was the most terriblest, pitifulest creature you ever saw in your life."

I was too amazed to speak.

The tears were rolling down her cheeks. Cindy took out a clean Kleenex and wiped them away.

"I wanted so badly to hold him, but they wouldn't let me," Patsy went on. "They said he was the donor twin, that's what they called him. The donor twin. He gave everything. And there he was, too tiny hardly to live. They put him in an incubator. They wouldn't even let me touch him. I sat there in that hospital day and night, day and night. And Aunt Queen kept calling me and telling me, 'This baby at home needs you!' What a thing to say to me! Like this tiny little baby in the hospital didn't need me! Like this little pitiful creature in the hospital didn't need me! She wanted me to come home and give my milk to a ten-pound monster of a baby. I couldn't even look at you! I didn't want to be in the same house with you! That's why I moved out back."

She wiped angrily at her tears. Her voice was so soft. I don't think human beings could have heard her. I'm not sure Cindy who sat right beside her could hear her.

"I sat there in that hospital day and night," she said. "I begged them to let me touch that tiny little baby, and don't you know he died in that machine with all those tubes and wires, and monitors and numbers clicking. He died! That little baby, that poor little Garwain, my Little Knight, that's what I called him, Garwain, my Little Knight, and then they let me hold him, when

he was dead, that poor tiny infant, I held him in my arms."

I had never seen her like this, never seen her cry such tears, never seen her in such abject sadness. On she went:

"And we had a tiny coffin for him, a white coffin, with him in a white christening gown, all nestled in it, poor little thing, and we went to the Metairie Cemetery, all of us, and Aunt Queen, for the love of God, why on earth did she bring you out there, and you were screaming and hollering and carrying on, and I hated her for bringing you, and she kept saying that you knew that your twin had died, you felt it, that I should hold you, can you imagine, that I should hold you, and there was my little Garwain in the teensy white coffin, and they put him in the grave and I had it carved on the stone, 'Garwain, My Little Knight,' and he's in there now, in his own little place."

The tears flowed down her cheeks. She shook her head.

"Don't you think they moved him for Pops' and Sweetheart's coffins, or Aunt Queen's. No, sir. They did not." She shook her head resolutely. "There are eight slots in that mausoleum, and they did not move him. I saw to that. And I never, never went back to that crypt since the day we buried him until tonight and only because Aunt Queen left it in Grady Breen's hands that I was to get a bonus check if I attended her pitiful stupid funeral. And Grady Breen tipped me off. He gave me a photocopy of the will last night, like I told you, because Aunt Queen said he could do it.

"Now talk about a bribe. If that isn't the limit. And she knew how I felt about that place, she knew, it was her who made me vow I'd never breathe a word to you, that nobody would ever tell you that you had sucked all the blood out of that child, that little three-pound donor child. Like you were the one who had to be protected. Poor Quinn. God help you that you did that, you damn son of a bitch. You don't know what hate is, unless you know how I hate you."

She sobbed into her paper tissue. Cindy was distraught. She rose to go, but Patsy pulled her down. Patsy's trembling fingers clung to her. Lestat's hand closed over Patsy's left shoulder and gently held it.

"Garwain," said Lestat. "And when Goblin began to appear, did it ever seem to you that it might be the ghost of Garwain?"

"No," she said sullenly. "If it had been Garwain's ghost, it would have come to *me* because I loved it! It would never have come to Quinn! Quinn killed it! Quinn took all Garwain's blood. Goblin was just Tarquin wanting a twin because he knew he should have had one, and he killed one, and so he made up Goblin out of nothing, and he used all his craziness to do it. He was crazy from the start."

"No one thought it might be the little one's ghost?" Merrick asked very gently.

"No," said Patsy in the same sullen voice. "Garwain, my Little Knight—that's what's written on the stone." She looked up at me. "And how you screamed at that funeral! How you screamed

and screamed! I didn't even look at you for a whole year. I couldn't stand it. I only finally did because Aunt Queen paid me to do it. Pops wouldn't give me a nickel. Aunt Queen paid me all the time you were growing up. It was a clean deal. Don't tell you about the twin, don't make you feel guilty about the twin, don't tell you you killed the little twin, and she'd take care of me, and she did."

She shrugged. She raised her eyebrows and then her face relaxed somewhat, but the tears still fell.

"Aunt Queen gave me fifty thousand dollars," she said. "It wasn't what I wanted, but she gave me that to get started, and to hold you, and so I did. Just one time. And she got Pops and Sweetheart and everybody on her side. You were the one they cared about. Don't ever tell Quinn he had a little brother who died. Like I didn't have a son? Don't ever tell Quinn about little Garwain. Don't ever let him know that he drained all the blood from that helpless little baby. Don't ever tell Quinn that awful story, like it was your story. And so now you come in here and you ask me, did you have a twin. You want to know, and Aunt Queen's dead, and thanks to Grady tipping me off about the bonus and what was in her will, I know it's got nothing to do with telling you anything. So there you have it. And I guess you know now. You know why I've hated you all these years. I guess you can figure it out finally."

I rose to my feet. As far as I was concerned we had discovered what we wanted to know. And I was too shocked and exhausted to say a word to Patsy. I hated her as much as she hated me. I hated her so much I couldn't look at her.

I think I uttered my thanks, and with my two friends I started to leave the room.

"Don't you have something to say to me?" Patsy asked as I reached the door.

Cindy looked so miserable.

"What?" I inquired.

"Can you imagine what I went through?" Pasty asked. "I was sixteen years old when that happened."

"Ah," I replied, "but you're not sixteen years old now, that's what matters."

"And I'm dying," Patsy said. "And no one in all my life has ever loved me the way that people love you."

"You know, that's really true," I responded, "but I'm afraid I hate you the way that you hate me."

"Oh, no, Quinn, no," said Cindy.

"Get away from me," Patsy said.

"That's what I was doing when you stopped me," I answered.

48

Before I could so much as think about what I'd heard I had to hear it from Big Ramona and from Jasmine as well, and so I went down the stairs and found them in the kitchen with Jerome and Tommy and Nash. They were around the oak table having a late supper of red beans and rice, and of course invited me to join them.

"I have to know something," I said, not accepting the chair that was offered. "Patsy just told me I had a twin brother who was buried in the Metairie Cemetery. Is this true?"

Immediately I received my answer. I could see it in their faces and read it from their minds. Then Big Ramona said,

"Patsy's got no call to be telling you that now. She's got no call at all." She started to get up.

I gestured for her to sit down.

"And Goblin," I said. "Did you never think Goblin could have been the ghost of that little twin brother, Garwain?" I asked.

"Well, yes, we thought it," said Big Ramona, "but what would have been the good of saying that to a little child, and then to a growing boy, and then to a young man who was off in Europe having a fine time, with Goblin disappeared and not making any more trouble, and then to a fine man come home to a peaceful household?"

I nodded. "I understand," I said. "And it was a smaller twin? A little tiny one?"

"She's got no call for worrying you with all of that," said Jasmine sharply. "Everything's an excuse with that girl. An excuse or a lie. Only reason she carried on about that tiny twin is she wanted everybody to feel sorry for her."

Nash rose to take Tommy out, but I gestured for them to go on with their supper. I could see that Tommy was curious but I didn't see the harm in it. Why keep the secret a moment longer? Nash looked concerned, as he so often did.

"And nobody did feel sorry for Patsy?" I asked.

There was silence all around. Then Big Ramona said,

"That Patsy, she's a liar. Sure, she cried over that little twin. She knew it was going to die. It's easy to feel sorry for something that doesn't have a chance, something that's not going to live a week. It's a lot harder to be a real mother. And Aunt Queen did feel sorry for her and gave her money to start her band. And then she didn't stick around to—."

"I understand," I said. "I just wanted to know."

"Aunt Queen never wanted you to know," said Big Ramona gently. "Like I said, there was no call for anybody to tell you. Pops and Sweetheart didn't want you to know either. Pops always said it was best forgotten. That it was morbid, and he used another word too. What was that other word?"

"Grotesque," said Jasmine. "He said it was morbid and grotesque and he wasn't telling you about it."

"He just never found a good time to tell you," said Big Ramona.

"Sure we thought Goblin was that twin's ghost," said Jasmine, "some of the time, at least, and some of the time we didn't. And I guess, most of the time, we didn't think it mattered."

Big Ramona got up to stir the pot of beans on the stove. She heaped some onto Tommy's plate. My son, Jerome, had peach cobbler all over his face and his plate.

"Now, if when you'd come home from Europe," Big Ramona said, "Goblin had been a big nuisance again, maybe we would have told you about that little twin—you know, to have some sort of exorcism. But you never mentioned Goblin again."

"And then out of nowhere he came," said Jasmine with a catch in her throat, "and he made Aunt Queen fall." She started crying.

"Now don't you start with that," said Big Ramona.

"It's my fault what happened," I responded. "I'm the one who brought him up and made him strong. Whether he was a ghost or spirit doesn't have a whole lot to do with it."

"Then it's not your fault either," said Big Ramona. "And now we have to get rid of him."

I felt a faint breeze in the air. The blades of the overhead fan started to whirl though the fan had been turned off. Jasmine and Big Ramona both felt it.

"Stick together," I said, "and don't look at him, or at any of his tricks. Now I have to go and talk to my friends. I have to talk to them about getting rid of him."

A plate came off the pantry shelf and was smashed on the floor. Jasmine moved shakily to get the broom. Big Ramona made the Sign of the Cross. So did I.

Nash put his arm around Tommy. Tommy seemed thrilled. Little Jerome ate his peach cobbler as if nothing was happening.

I turned and left the room.

He was making his doleful music in the chandeliers.

Big Ramona rushed past me up the steps murmuring that she had to be with Patsy and Cindy. I could hear Patsy's hysterical crying.

I stood outside her closed door listening to her for a long time, unable to make out the syllables, wondering what drug Cindy had injected into her hip that she was still so miserable, and I realized I felt chilled all over. Of course I had always known that she hated me, but she had never said it quite so clearly, quite so convincingly; and now I had my self-hatred to add to the

mix, and for the moment it was almost too much for me.

I went into my room and shut the door.

Lestat and Merrick sat at the table, two elegant and high-toned creatures facing one another. I took the chair with my back to the door. The computer was immediately switched on. The windows were rattling. A convulsion moved through the heavy velvet draperies. The trimming of the baldachin over the bed undulated in the breeze.

Merrick rose from the table, looking about, her mahogany hair a thick mass down her back. Lestat watched her keenly.

"Show yourself, spirit," she said in a low breath. "Come, show yourself to those who can see you." Her green eyes probed the room. She turned around, gazing at the gasolier, at the ceiling. "I know you're here, Goblin," she said, "and I know your name, your true name, the name your mother gave you."

At once, the windowpanes closest to us were shattered. The glass flew against the lace curtains but could not pierce them and fell, tangled and splintering and loudly clattering to the floor. The hot breeze of the night gusted into the room.

"Cowardly, foolish trick," said Merrick under her breath, as if she were whispering in his ear. "I could do that myself. Don't you want me to say your true name? Are you afraid to hear it?"

The keys of the computer fired like crazy. I saw nonsense marching across the screen. I drew near to it.

MAKEMERRICKANDLESTATLEAVENOWORIWILLCUTUPALLOFBLACKWOODMANORWITHGLASSIHATEYOUQUINN

Suddenly a huge amorphous cloud spread itself out beneath the ceiling, the billowing hideous shape of a human form made only of filaments of blood, with a huge and silently screaming face, the entire shape abruptly contracting and thrashing as it surrounded Merrick and whipped her with its tentacles as she fell over backwards onto the carpet.

She threw up her arms. She cried out to us. "Let it be!" And then to Goblin, "Yes, come into my arms, let me know you, come into me, be with me, yes, drink my blood, know me, yes, I know you, yes…." Her eyes appeared to roll up in her head, and then she lay as one unconscious.

At last, when I was just at the point where I could endure it no longer, he rose, a wind full of blood rising, thrashing wildly once more before the ceiling and then gusting through the broken window, more tiny bits of glass flying into the lace curtains, which he left stained with bits of blood and gore, as he left her bare arms and hands and face and legs covered with it.

Lestat helped her to her feet. He kissed her on the mouth and stroked her long brown hair. He helped her into the chair.

"I wanted to burn him!" he said. "God, I was seething to do it."

"So was I," I said. I straightened her white skirt. I took out my handkerchief and began to blot the bloody scratches he had left all over her.

“No, it was too soon for the Fire,” she said, “and our meeting had to come. I had to be sure of everything.”

“And he is the ghost of my twin? It’s true?” I asked.

“Yes, it’s true,” she said quietly. She motioned for me to stop with my handkerchief, taking my hand gently and kissing it. “He’s the ghost of the baby buried in Metairie Cemetery, and that’s why he’s always been strongest here,” she explained. “It’s why you couldn’t take him with you to Europe, as Lestat told me. It’s why he was transparent and weak when you went as far as New York. It’s why he was even stronger when you went into New Orleans. It’s why he appeared so very strongly by the mausoleum tonight. His remains are inside of it.”

“But he doesn’t really understand, does he?” I asked. “He doesn’t know where he comes from or what his real name is?”

“No, he doesn’t know,” said Merrick.

I could see the little wounds vanishing, leaving her again the alluring woman she had been before. Her long wavy brown hair was gorgeously mussed, and her green eyes were bloodshot still, and she appeared over-all to still be shaken.

“But he can be made to know,” she continued, “and this is our most powerful weapon. Because a ghost, unlike a pure spirit, is connected to his remains, and this ghost is most connected. He is connected to you by blood, and that is why, don’t you see, he feels he has always had a right to what you have.”

“Of course,” I said, “oh, of course!” Only now was it hitting me. “He thinks it’s his right. We were in the womb together.” I felt a deep rivet of pain in my heart.

“Yes, and try to imagine for a moment what death was like for this spirit. First off, he was a twin, and we know of twins that they feel the loss of the other terribly. Patsy speaks of your crying at his funeral. Of Aunt Queen begging her to console you. Aunt Queen knew that you were feeling Garwain’s death. Well, Garwain had felt this separation from you in the incubator as well, and at death, undoubtedly his spirit was confused and had not gone on into the Light as it should have gone.”

“I see,” I responded. “And now for the first time in all these months I feel pity for him again. I feel … mercy.”

“Feel mercy for yourself,” said Merrick kindly. Her entire manner was gracious. In fact, she reminded me very much of Stirling Oliver. “But when you were brought to that funeral for him,” she went on, “when you were carried there on the day of his interment, his poor miserable little spirit, cast adrift, found its living twin in you, Tarquin, and became your doppelgänger. Indeed, he became something far stronger than a mere doppelgänger. He became a companion and a lover, a true twin who felt he had a right to your patrimony.”

“Yes, and we began our long journey together,” I said, “two genuine twins, two genuine brothers.” I tried my damndest to remember that I had once loved him. I wondered if she could

see into my soul and sense the animosity I now felt for him, the enslavement which had been so vicious for me all during this long year since Petronia had so rudely made me. And the loss of Aunt Queen—the unspeakable loss of Aunt Queen.

"And now that you've been given the Dark Blood," said Lestat in a cross voice, "he wants what he sees as his share of it."

"But that's not all that's happening," said Merrick, continuing in her subdued fashion. She looked intently at me. "I want you to describe for me, if you will, what goes on when he attacks you."

I considered for a moment, then I spoke, my eyes moving from Merrick to Lestat and back again.

"It's like a fusion, a fusion I never felt when I was alive. Oh, he was inside me at times. Mona Mayfair told me that he was. She said when we made love that he was in me and she knew he was there. She could feel this. Mona considers herself a witch on account of the way she feels spirits."

"You love Mona Mayfair?" Merrick asked gently.

"Very much," I managed to reply. "But I'll never see her again. She'd know me for what I am the minute she looked at me. I avoided Rowan Mayfair desperately at the wake and the Mass. Her husband, Michael, too. They're both what the Talamasca calls witches. And then there was the ghost of Julien Mayfair at the wake. Aunt Queen was his child. I'm his descendant."

"You have Mayfair blood?" Merrick asked. "And you saw Julien?"

"My precious darling, I had hot cocoa with Oncle Julien in the days when I could drink it," I said. "He served me animal crackers with it on a china plate, all of which later vanished just as he did."

Very hastily I told her the whole tale, including the affair of the mask and the cape, and saw her lips spread in a generous and beautiful smile.

"Oh, our Oncle Julien," she said with a winsome sigh. "The beds he left unmade and warm, what a man he was. It's a wonder there's anyone in the city of New Orleans who doesn't share some genetic inheritance from him!" She beamed at me. "He came to my Great Nananne in a dream when I was eleven years old and told her to send me to the Talamasca. They were my salvation."

"Oh, God in Heaven," I declared. "You don't know what I almost did to Stirling Oliver."

"Forget that!" said Lestat. "I mean it! That's over and done." He raised his hand and made the Sign of the Cross. "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, I absolve you from all sin. Stirling Oliver is alive! Now that matter's closed as long as I'm Coven Master here."

Merrick broke into a soft, sweet laugh. Her dark skin made her green eyes all the more brilliant.

"And you are the Coven Master, aren't you?" she said, with a flirtatious flashing glance at Lestat. "You become that automatically wherever you go."

Lestat shrugged. "But of course," he said, exactly as if he meant it.

"We could argue about that, my magnificently feathered friend," she replied, "but we need this time while Goblin is exhausted. And must get back to the matter at hand. So Goblin is your twin, Tarquin, and you were going to tell me what it's like when the two of you are together now. Describe the fusion."

"It's positively electric," I said. "It's as if his particles, assuming he's made of them—"

"He is," she interjected.

"—are fused with mine, and I lose my equilibrium completely. I'm lost as well in memories, which he either engenders or falls prey to, I don't know which, but we travel back to moments in the crib or the playpen, and I feel only love for him as I must have felt as an infant or a toddler. It's a laughing bliss that I feel. And it's often wordless except for expressions of love, which are rudimentary."

"How long does this last?"

"Moments, seconds," said Lestat for me.

"Yes, and each time is stronger than the one before it," I added. "The last time—it came last night—there was a tug on my heart as well as tiny slashing wounds, much worse than I've felt before, and he exited through the window, shattering all the glass much the same as he did tonight. He's never been so destructive before."

"He has to be destructive now," she said. "He's foolishly increased the material makeup of his being. Whereas once he was almost entirely energy, he now has considerable matter as well, and he can't pass through solid walls as he once did. On the contrary, he needs a doorway or a window."

"That's exactly right," I said. "I've been witnessing it. I've been feeling the air change, feeling him leave."

She nodded. "It's in our favor that he's subject to gravity, but it's always so with ghosts. It's only more so now with him because he's developed an appetite for blood, and so encumbered himself. Can you tell me anything else about this fusion?"

I hesitated, then confessed. "It's very pleasurable. It's like … like an orgasm. It's like … it's like our contact with our victims. It's like the fusion with them, only it's much much milder."

"Milder?" she asked. "Do you lose your equilibrium when you take your victims?"

"No, no I don't," I answered. "I see your point. But the pleasure isn't as strong with Goblin. I'd admit it if it was. It's confusion I feel, along with mild pleasure."

"Very well. Is there anything more that you can tell me?"

I thought for a long time. "I feel sad," I said, "terribly sad because he's my brother, and he died, and he never had any life except the life I gave him. And now this has occurred, and he

can't go on. And I think—I know—I should die with him."

She studied me for several minutes, and so did Lestat, and then Lestat spoke up, his French accent rather sharp as he looked at me:

"That's not required, Quinn, and besides, even if you did try to take him with you into death, there's no guarantee that he would go."

"Precisely," said Merrick. "He might well let you go on and remain here to plague someone else. After all, he chose to be with you because you were his brother. But he could move to someone else. As you told Lestat, he's very cunning and he learns quickly."

Lestat said,

"I don't want you to die, Little Brother."

Merrick smiled. She said,

"The Coven Master won't let you die, Little Brother."

"So what do we do?" I asked. I sighed. "What is to be the fate of Little Brother's Little Brother?"

"In a moment I'll explain that," she said, "but let me explain what is happening now when you fuse with him. He is binding not just with you but with the spirit of the vampire inside you. Now, you know the old tales, that we are all the descendants of one parent in whom a pure spirit fused with a mortal, and that all of us to this very day are part of that one pure spirit, carrying in our preternatural bodies the immortal spirit which animates us and gives us our thirst for blood and our ability to live on it."

"Yes," I said.

"Well, your demon brother, being a ghost himself, is very like a spirit, and when he fuses with you now, he fuses with that spirit in you, and he knows a pleasure far greater than any he knew when you were mortal."

"Ah, I see," I said. "Of course."

"He doesn't understand it. He only knows it's like a sweet drug to him, and he drinks of the vampiric blood to experience the supernatural as long and as completely as he can, and only when his endurance is at an end does he release you and vanish into invisibility and weakness again, lulled and dreaming with the blood he's taken."

"Where does he go?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. He spreads out, losing his shape and his organization. Compare him to a great sea creature who is composed largely of seawater, only with him it's air, and he enjoys the blood as best he can until his energy burns it off, and he must wait for another opportunity, and all this takes time for him, just as appearances and communication have always taken time, as is so with all spirits."

She stopped for a moment and watched me closely, as if to see if I understood. Then she continued.

"The better you understand him, the better it will be for us when I try to send him out of the Earthly Realm, because I can't do it, I don't think, without your full cooperation."

"You have my cooperation," I said. "As for my understanding, I'm trying."

"Are you ready to let him go?" she asked.

"Let him go! Merrick, he killed Aunt Queen. I loathe and despise him! I hate him! I hate myself that I ever nourished him and fostered him! He's betrayed the womb we shared!"

She nodded to this.

The tears rose up in my eyes. I took out my handkerchief, but I had half a mind to let them flow. I was with the two people in the world who wouldn't be stunned by the sight of them.

"So how do we get rid of him?" I asked. "How do we get him out of the Earthly Realm?"

"I'll tell you," Merrick responded. "But first let me ask. When we arrived tonight, I saw a very old cemetery down by the swamp. Lestat said it belonged to you. He said you'd seen spirits there."

"Yes," I replied. "Dumb spirits, spirits that give you nothing." I wiped at my eyes. I felt a little more calm.

"But there are two or three raised tombs there, maybe three feet high."

"There's one that's about that height. The letters are all worn away."

"It's broad? Long?"

"Both. A rectangle."

"That's good. I want you to lay out wood and coal for a big fire on that tomb. You need plenty of fuel. The fire has to burn really hot and for some time. Then throughout the rest of the cemetery, I want candles. Candles on every grave. You know the kind of candles I mean, thick church candles." (I nodded.) "I'll light the candles. I'll light the fire. Just have these things ready for me. You can have your people do this part if you like, it's not important who does it."

"But surely you don't want them around," said Lestat.

"No, I don't. They have to go away from Blackwood Farm. Everybody."

"What do I tell them?" I asked.

"Tell them the truth," said Merrick. "Tell them that we are holding an exorcism to get rid of Goblin. The ritual is a dangerous one. Goblin in his fury might try to hurt anyone."

"Of course," I said. "But there's one problem. Patsy. Patsy is the only one who might not go."

"Patsy herself has given you the key to her character," said Lestat. "Here." He reached into his pocket and he took out a gold money clip bulging with thousand-dollar bills. "Give her this. Send her with her nurse to a fine hotel in New Orleans."

"Of course," I said again.

"Big Ramona will see that she goes," said Merrick. "You yourself see that everyone else is gone, and sending them to the Windsor Court or the Ritz-Carlton Hotel is a fine idea. I'm sorry I didn't think of it."

“I’ll take care of it,” I said. “But tell me—the actual exorcism. How are you going to do it?”

“The best way I know how,” she said. “My loving friends, the Troop of Beloveds, don’t call me a witch for nothing.”

49

I thirsted and I was alone.

I stood beneath the oak tree at the edge of the cemetery. I looked at the tomb which would be our altar tomorrow night.

Clem had known just where he would get our firewood—an old dead oak on the very boundary of the pasture. Tomorrow he'd come back and cut it with the chain saw, and the coal he'd buy in Mapleville. I wasn't to worry about a thing.

And for now he was gone with the rest of them. They had been glad to be going. There had been a positive excitement to their packing and laughter and talking, and rushing out to the limousine with suitcases, and hollering in the middle of the night.

Tommy had pleaded desperately to be allowed to watch the exorcism. Nash had finally guided him to the car.

Only Patsy had refused to go. Only Patsy had cursed at me and told me she wouldn't go along with my self-centered schemes to get rid of Goblin, only Patsy had remained behind. Finally I had sent Cindy the nurse away.

"I'll take care of her," I had said.

And so the moment had come. It had been so quiet, actually, with the closing of the door of her room.

"What are you doing in here?" she had asked me. "You spoilt brat."

Like a little child she looked in her cream-colored flannel nightgown, with her beauty parlor blond hair in rivulets down each side of her face.

"Get out of here," she had said, "I don't want you here. Get going. I won't leave this house no matter what you do, you little bastard."

And from her mind came the pure stream of animosity and jealousy, the pure hate she had so keenly expressed.

"I told you I don't want your money! I hate you."

And then behind her, the filmy figure of Rebecca, my long-ago ghost. Hateful ghost, vengeful ghost. Why had she been there?—Rebecca, in her pert lace blouse and full taffeta skirt, smiling. Get away from me, vengeful ghost. Why had she dared to be there? *A life for my life.* I will not hear you!

I had picked up Patsy and snapped her neck before she had even become frightened. Killed my mother, my own mother. Big empty eyes. Lipstick. Dead Patsy.

Not a drop of her blood had I drunk.

Did anyone see me carry her over the threshold like a bride? No one, except for Rebecca, vengeful, hateful Rebecca hovering near the graveyard, Rebecca, just a vapor, smiling, exultant, in her pretty dress. *A death for my death.*

And no one else saw me lay Patsy down in the pirogue. No one saw me go with her limp body out into the deepest waters of the swamp. And there she went down, down beneath the slimy green water—Cotton Candy Patsy no more. Barbie no more. My mother no more.

No one but me felt the shimmer of Rebecca. No one but me heard Rebecca's voice: "Now I count that a real fine vengeance: the life of Patsy for my life." Laughter.

"Get thee behind me, Satan," I had said. "I didn't do this for thee but for me."

And then no more Rebecca, just as there was no more Patsy.

It had been so startling, the ghost gone, and Patsy gone, and the dense deadful swamp so empty. Mothergone.

The gators had moved in the water. Eat up Mother.

I had gone back alone to the empty cemetery.

Hours had passed.

And the blood of my mother was on my hands though there was no blood. And I would lie when I had to tell about her leaving, as I had lied about so much else, Quinn the killer of his own mother, Quinn the killer of the womb that bore him, Quinn the killer of so many, Quinn the killer of the bride, Quinn who had carried his mother over the threshold, Quinn who had sunk Patsy in the waters of the swamp.

I was alone now on Blackwood Farm.

And such a thing had never, ever happened, my being alone on this my land. And I stood beneath the oak looking at the tomb on which the altar would be laid, and wondering if the evil creature Goblin whom my little brother had become, the killer of Aunt Queen, could really be forced into the Light.

I closed my eyes. How I thirsted. But it was almost morning. I couldn't hunt. I hadn't the stamina. And tomorrow night, how could I do such a thing? Yet I had to do it before we began. How foolish had been my planning that I hadn't put aside my sorrow and my murdering hate, and gone before now.

Why did I linger by the little cemetery? What was I trying to remember? Where were the mute ones who had long ago gazed on me in my innocent years? Why did they not come this morning as the sky turned purple and pink to tell me that I belonged with the dead?

Maybe the sun wasn't as painful as the fire. But how could I do my part in destroying Goblin by merely walking into the morning? I needed courage. I needed strength.

I have it for you. Come into my arms.

I turned around. It was Lestat. I obeyed his command. I felt his arms tighten as he closed them. I felt his hand on the back of my head.

Kiss me, young one. Take what you need. It's mine to give.

I pressed my teeth to his skin. I felt the surface give and the boiling blood fill my mouth and flood down my throat. I felt it, potent and divine. For a long moment the pure physical power of it overcame all imagery, but then there rose a deluge of pictures, vivid and high tempo and neon brilliant, a roaring carousel of life, the shuffling of centuries, the panoply without end of magnificent sensations, and at last, a jungle of myriad colors and flowers and the tender, pulsing core of his heart, his pure heart, his heart for me, his heart and nothing more could ever be wanted, nothing evermore.

50

Summer night. The sun didn't set until six-thirty. Quiet lay over Blackwood Farm.

Clem had banked the firewood high around the entire tomb, and wood and coal were layered on top of it. And everywhere stood the candles.

Merrick was there in a lovely full-skirted dress of black cotton with long sleeves, and beads of jet around her throat. Her hair was free. And she carried with her a very large bag covered with fancy and glittering beadwork with two grips for handles, which she carefully set beside one of the tombs, and she made the Sign of the Cross and laid her hand respectfully on that grave, which was to be the altar.

With a lighter she ignited the first candle. Then from the bag she took a long taper, and, once it was lighted, went to the other candles one by one. Slowly the little cemetery filled with light.

Lestat stood at my side with his hand in the small of my back. I was shivering as if I was cold.

At last the entire graveyard was illuminated, and as Clem had put several rows of candles in the little church, which I had forgotten altogether, they were lighted by Merrick as well, and a flickering light came from the church windows.

I felt a cold trepidation as Merrick lifted the can of kerosene and poured it over the coals and the wood lavishly, and then applied the taper and stepped back. I had never seen a freestanding fire of this size.

"Come here to me, both of you," she called out. "And be my helpers, and repeat what I tell you to repeat and do as I say. What you've believed in the past is not important. Believe with me now. That is everything. And you must put your faith in what I do and say to make this exorcism strong."

We both gave her our consent.

"Quinn, don't fear it," she said.

The fire was blazing and crackling. I stepped back, instinctively, and Merrick and Lestat moved back as well. Lestat seemed particularly to hate it. Merrick seemed in some way fascinated. Too fascinated, I thought, but then what did I know?

"Tell me the true names of Garwain's parents and ancestors, as you know them," said Merrick.

"Julien and Grace; Gravier and Alice; Thomas and Rose; Patsy—that's all."

"Very well. Now remember what I've said to you," she told us. And, stepping back, she

reached into the large black bag again and took from it a golden knife. With the knife she slashed at her wrist, and, drawing as close to the fire as she could, she let her blood splash into it.

Then Lestat, fearing for her, yanked her back from the scorching flames.

She drew in her breath as though she had been in danger and even frightened herself. Then she brought out a chalice from the bag, and she told me to hold it, and she slashed her wrist again, deeply and roughly, and the blood flowed into the cup, and she took it from me, and she heaved the blood into the flames.

The heat of the fire was dreadful now, and it frightened me and I hated it. I hated it with a Blood Hunter's instinct and a human's instinct. I was relieved when Merrick took the chalice from my hands.

Suddenly Merrick threw back her head and raised her arms, forcing us both to step away from her and give her room. She cried out:

"Lord God, Who made all things, seen and unseen, bring your servant Garwain to me, for he still roams the Earthly Realm and is lost to your Wisdom and your Protection! Bring him here to me, Lord, that I may guide him to you. Lord, hear my cry. Lord, let my cry come unto you. Hear your servant Merrick. Look not on my sins, but on my cause! Join your voices with me, Lestat and Tarquin! Now."

"Hear us, O Lord," I said immediately, hearing Lestat murmuring a similar prayer. "O Lord, hear us. Bring Garwain here."

Frightened as I was, I found myself suddenly locked to the ceremony, and as Merrick continued, Lestat and I murmured some of the more familiar chants.

"Lord, look with mercy on your servant Garwain," called out Merrick, "who from infancy has roamed in confusion among other mortals, lost from the Light and no doubt hungering for it. Lord, hear our prayer. Lord, look down on Garwain, Lord, send Garwain to us!"

All of a sudden, a huge gust of wind swept the nearby oak trees, and a shower of leaves came down on the fire, which sent up a roar of crackling, and the wind greatly excited it and increased it, and I saw above it, as best as I could, the figure of Goblin as my double, his eyes red in the light of the fire.

"You think a spirit doesn't know the tricks of a witch, Merrick," said Goblin in his low flat voice, which carried over the noise of the fire—a voice I hadn't heard in over four years. "You think I don't know you want to kill me, Merrick? You hate me, Merrick."

At once the figure began to thin out and grow immense and come down with full force upon Merrick, but she cried out:

"Burn now, burn!"

And we all cut loose with our force against him, crying out the single word, "burn," as we sent the power, and as he rose over the flames we saw him, a thing of myriad tiny flames, paralyzed above the fire and retracting and howling in a soundless and ghastly confusion, and then turning

in on himself and coiling so that he became a formed wind assaulting the altar, and then a funnel as he bore down on Merrick once again.

The noise was intolerable. The leaves were a hurricane upon us and the blaze flared. Merrick staggered backwards, but we kept up the force, crying out:

"Burn, Garwain, burn!"

"Burn till all of you is pure ghost as it should be!" cried Merrick, "and you can pass into the Light as God wills, Garwain!"

And then she turned and from the large black bag she snatched a small bundle, and, peeling back the white blankets that covered it, she revealed the small shriveled corpse of a child!

"This is you, Garwain!" she cried out. "This is you, brought from your grave, the body from which you departed, wandering astray, confounded and confused! This is your mortal body, your infant self, and from this self you have roamed lost and feeding upon Quinn! See this tiny form, this is your form, Goblin!"

"Liar!" came his voice, and he rose up on this side of the altar, right before us, my doppelgänger down to the buttons, raging at her and trying to snatch the tiny black shriveled infant out of her arms, but she wouldn't let it go and she roared at him:

"You are smoke and mirrors, you are air and will and theft and terror. Go where God will send you! Lord, I beg you, take this servant, take him as you will!"

His image wavered. He was trying to fuse with her. She was resisting him with all her power. I could see him faltering and fading. He grew pale and large and billowing in the firelight. What did the fire feel like to him?

Once again, he rose high above us, spread out above us like a canopy.

I raised my voice: "Dear God, who made Julien, Gravier, Patsy, take him, take this orphan! Grace, Alice, Rose, come for this doomed wanderer. Add your prayers to ours."

"Yes," cried Merrick, clutching the infant corpse tight to her breast, "Julien, Gravier, Thomas —I beg you, come from your eternal rest and take this child into the Light, take him!"

"I repudiate you, Goblin, now and forever!" I called out. "I do so before God! Before Pops, before all my ancestors, before the angels and the saints! O Lord hear my prayer!"

"O Lord, hear our cry!" pleaded Merrick.

She lifted the baby up, and I saw with my own eyes a living child! I saw its limbs move, I heard its mewling! I heard its crying!

"Yes, Goblin!" she cried out. "Your infant self, yes! Come into this form. Come into your rightful flesh! I adjure you, come as I command you."

High above the fire the giant image of Goblin shivered, horrific and weak and confused, and then plunged, plunged into the crying infant. I saw it. I felt it. I said in my heart: *Amen, brother, amen.*

There came a terrible wailing and once again the branches of the oak trees thrashed in the

wind.

And then there was utter stillness except for the fire. There was a stillness so total that it seemed the Earth had stopped turning.

Only the fire roared.

I realized I was on the ground. An invisible force had knocked me down.

I was seeing a brilliant light but it wasn't hurting my eyes. It was nothing short of magnificent and it was falling down on the fire, and yet something terrible was happening in the fire.

Merrick had gone into the fire. Merrick had climbed up on the altar and had gone into the fire with the baby and they were both burning. They were burning—unspeakable, irrevocable—but in the pure celestial Light I saw figures moving, thin figures—the gaunt unmistakable figure of Pops in the Light, and with him an infant, a tiny infant toddling along, and there also was Merrick, Merrick and a small old woman, and I saw Merrick turn and raise her hand as if to say farewell.

I lay transfixed by the Light, by its immensity and the undeniable sense of love that seemed part of its nature.

I think that I cried.

Then slowly the great wealth of blessed Light faded. Its warmth and its glory went away. The heat of the night closed around me. The Earth was the lonely Earth again.

Rediscovering my limbs and how to use them I rose to my feet and realized Lestat had pulled Merrick's body from the fire and was sobbing and trying to put out the flames that were consuming her, beating at her burning figure with his coat.

"She's gone, I saw her go," I said.

But he was frantic. He wouldn't listen to me. The flames were finally smothered, but half her face was burnt away and most of her torso and her right arm. It was a dreadful sight. He slit his wrist, he let the thick, viscid blood pour down on her body, but nothing happened. I knew what he wanted to happen. I knew the lore.

"She's gone," I said again. "I saw her go. I saw her in the Light. She waved farewell."

Lestat stood up. He wiped at his blood tears and at the soot on his face. He couldn't stop crying. I loved him.

We lifted her remains and put them on the altar together. We built up the fire and it wasn't long before the body was ashes, and we scattered them. And the fire and Merrick's body were no more.

The humid night was quiet and calm and the cemetery lay in darkness.

Lestat cried.

"She was so young among us," he said. "It's always the young ones who end it. The ones for whom mortality holds magic. As we grow older it's eternity that is our boon."

51

Lestat was still covered in soot. He didn't much care about it. We rang the front doorbell of Oak Haven, and it was Stirling himself who answered, in his heavy quilted robe, and perfectly astonished to see the pair of us right there at the Retreat House of the Talamasca—two wanderers in the night.

Of course he invited us into the library and we accepted the invitation, and we settled into the big leather wing chairs that were so comfortably arranged everywhere, and Stirling told the agreeable little housekeeper that we didn't require anything, and then we were alone.

Slowly, in a broken voice, Lestat told Stirling what had happened to Merrick. He described the ceremony and how Merrick had climbed onto the altar, and what he had seen—the baby come alive, and Goblin descending into it.

And then I told Stirling what I had seen—the Light and the figures moving in the Light. Lestat had not seen this Light but he never doubted me.

"May I put this into our records?" Stirling asked. He took out his handkerchief and wiped at his nose. He was crying inside for Merrick. And then the tears came and he let them flow for a moment and then he wiped them away.

"That's why I'm telling you," said Lestat. "So you can close your file on Merrick Mayfair, and know what became of her. So it doesn't end in silence and confusion, so you don't mourn for her forever without ever knowing where she wandered or what she became. She was a gentle soul. She preyed upon the Evil Doer only. No innocent blood ever stained her hands. And it was very deliberate what she did. And why she chose this moment I don't really know."

"I think I know," I said. "But I don't want to be presumptuous. She chose this moment because she wasn't alone. She had Garwain."

"And how do you feel now that he's gone?" asked Stirling.

"Free of him," I responded, "and rather shocked by all that's happened. Shocked that Garwain killed Aunt Queen. You knew he did that, didn't you? He frightened her and made her fall. Everyone knew it."

"Yes," Stirling said, "there was much talk about it at the wake. What will you do now?"

"I'm shocked that Merrick died," I said. "Merrick freed me of Garwain. Lestat loved Merrick. I loved Merrick. I don't know what I will do or where I will go. There are people who need me.

There have always been people who need me, people who matter to me. I'm enmeshed in human life."

I thought in silence of the murder of Patsy. I wanted desperately to confess it, but I loathed myself so much for it that I didn't speak of it at all.

"That's a good way to put it," Lestat said bitterly, " 'enmeshed in human life.' "

Stirling nodded to this.

"Why don't you ask *me* what I'll do?" asked Lestat archly, with a raised eyebrow and a wink.

"Would you tell me?" asked Stirling with a little laugh.

"Of course not," said Lestat. "But I'm in love with Tarquin, you can put that in your file, if you like. That doesn't mean you can entrap me at Blackwood Manor, and you do remember your promise to me to leave Tarquin alone, don't you?"

"Absolutely," said Stirling. "I'm a man who keeps his promises."

"I have a question for you," I said shyly. "I've talked to Michael Curry and Rowan Mayfair several times in the last few months, but they only put me off with vague answers. They won't really tell me much about Mona except that she can't see me, that she's undergoing a special therapy, that she's in intensive care. They say she can die from any kind of infection. I can't even talk to her on the phone—."

"She's dying," Stirling said. He sat staring at me.

Silence.

Then Lestat spoke:

"Why are you telling him this?"

Stirling was still looking at me.

"Because he wants to know," Stirling responded.

"Very well," said Lestat. "Come on, Little Brother, let's hunt. I know of two Evil Doers in Boca Raton who are alone in a magnificent waterfront mansion. It will be such fun, you wouldn't believe. Good night, Stirling. Good night to the Talamasca. Let's go."

52

The sky was still a deep lavender when I walked into the house the following night. Lestat was lingering in the cemetery saying some last prayer for Merrick, or to Merrick, I wasn't sure which.

Our hunting last night in Boca Raton had been marvelous and he had once again given me the gift of his all-powerful blood and I was exhilarated and confused and praying in my own way for some sign of what to do about Mona, wondering if I could just see her and talk to her; if I went to Mayfair Medical and insisted, could I perhaps use some spellbinding power to get to where she was? One last glimpse … one last talk.

But suddenly Jasmine and Clem both came rushing up to me at the foot of the stairs.

"There's a crazy woman in your bedroom," said Jasmine. "There was nothing we could do to stop her, Quinn. It's Mona Mayfair, you remember her? She's up there, Quinn. She drove here in a limousine full of flowers, Quinn, and she's a living skeleton, you're gonna die when you see her. Quinn, wait, we couldn't stop her. Only reason we helped her with all those flowers is she was so weak."

"Jasmine, lemme go!" I shouted. "I love her, don't you understand?"

"Quinn, she's got something wrong with her! Be careful!"

I ran up the stairs as fast as any mortal man dared and rushed into my bedroom and slammed the door shut and locked it.

She rose up to greet me. A living skeleton! Oh yes! And the bed was covered with her flowers. I stood there shocked to the core of my being, shocked and so glad to see her, so glad to rush to her and take her fragile form in my arms! My Mona, my frail and withering Mona, my pale and magnificent Mona, oh, my God, don't let me hurt you.

"I love you, my beloved Ophelia," I said, "my Ophelia Immortal, and mine always …"

Oh, look at the roses, the marguerites, the zinnias, the lilies.

"Noble Abelard," she whispered. "I've come to ask the ultimate sacrifice; I've come to ask, let me die here, let me die with you here, let me die here instead of there with their needles and their tubes, let me die in your bed."

I drew back. I could see the entire outline of her skull beneath her skin, and the bones of her shoulders underneath the spotted hospital gown that she wore. Only her full red hair had been spared. Her arms were like sticks, and her hands were the same. It was ghastly, the sight. She

suffered with every breath.

"Oh, my darling, my sweetheart, thank God you came to me," I told her, "but can't you see what's happened to me? Can't your witch's eyes see? I'm not human anymore. I'm not your Noble Abelard. I don't sleep where the rays of the sun can reach me. Look at me, Mona, look at me. Do you want to be what I am?" What was I saying? I was mad. I couldn't stop myself. "Do you want to be what I am?" I asked again. "Because you won't die if you want to be what I am! If you'll live off the blood of others forever. You'll be immortal with me."

I heard the lock of my door turn. I was outraged, then silenced. It was Lestat who entered.

Mona stared in astonishment. He had removed his sunglasses, and he stood under the gasolier as if he was bathing in its light.

"Let me work the Dark Trick, Quinn," he said. "That way, you'll be much closer to your princess. Let me take her for you with my strong blood, and that way your minds won't be closed to each other. I'm a past master at such Dark Tricks, Quinn. Mona, would you know our secrets?" He came to her. "Make your choice, pretty girl. You can always choose the Light some other night, *cherie*. Ask Quinn if you doubt it. He's seen it. He's seen the Light of Heaven with his own eyes."

She clung to me while he talked to her, pacing the floor, back and forth, telling her so many things—how it was with us, the rules, the limitations, the way he violated the rules and the limitations, the way the strong and the old survived, the way the new ones went into the flames. On and on he talked, and she clung to me, my Ophelia in her nest of flowers, with her legs so fragile and her whole little body trembling, oh, sweet Ophelia Immortal.

"Yes. I want it," she said.

Dedicated
to
my son,
Christopher Rice

Anne Rice

Blood Canticle

A BALLANTINE e BOOK

Blood Canticle

A novel by

Anne Rice

Ballantine Books

A Ballantine Book
Published by the Random House Publishing Group
Copyright © 2003 by Anne O'Brien Rice

All Rights Reserved.

Published in the United States by Ballantine Books, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York.

Ballantine and colophon are registered trademarks of Random House, Inc.

eISBN: 978-1-400-04194-7

This edition published by arrangement with Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

www.ballantinebooks.com

v3.1

Contents

Master Table of Contents

Cover
Title Page
Copyright
Epigraph

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22

Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31

Dedication
Other Books by This Author

Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee
in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart,
and in the sight of thine eyes; but know thou, that for
all these *things* God will bring thee to judgment.

ECCLESIASTES 11:9. *King James Version*

1

I want to be a saint. I want to save souls by the millions. I want to do good far and wide. I want to fight evil! I want my life-sized statue in every church. I'm talking six feet tall, blond hair, blue eyes—.

Wait a second.

Do you know who I am?

I'm thinking maybe you're a new reader and you've never heard of me.

Well, if that's the case, allow me to introduce myself, which I absolutely crave doing at the beginning of every one of my books.

I'm the Vampire Lestat, the most potent and lovable vampire ever created, a supernatural knockout, two hundred years old but fixed forever in the form of a twenty-year-old male with features and figure you'd die for—and just might. I'm endlessly resourceful, and undeniably charming. Death, disease, time, gravity, they mean nothing to me.

Only two things are my enemy: daylight, because it renders me completely lifeless and vulnerable to the burning rays of the sun, and conscience. In other words, I'm a condemned inhabitant of eternal night and an eternally tormented blood seeker.

Doesn't that make me sound irresistible?

And before I continue with my fantasy let me assure you:

I know damned well how to be a full-fledged, post-Renaissance, post–nineteenth century, post-modern, post-popular writer. I don't deconstruct nothin'. That is, you're going to get a full-dress story here—with a beginning, middle and end. I'm talking plot, characters, suspense, the works.

I'm going to take care of you. So rest easy and read on. You won't be sorry. You think I don't want new readers? My name is thirst, baby. I must have you!

However, since we are taking this little break from my preoccupation with being a saint, let me say a few words to my dedicated following. You new guys follow along. It certainly won't be difficult. Why would I do something that you find difficult? That would be self-defeating, right?

Now, to those of you who worship me. You know, the millions.

You *say* you want to hear from me. You leave yellow roses at my gate in New Orleans, with handwritten notes: "Lestat, speak to us again. Give us a new book. Lestat, we love the Vampire Chronicles. Lestat, why have we not heard from you? Lestat, please come back."

But I ask you, my beloved followers (don't all stumble over yourselves now to answer), what the Hell happened when I gave you *Memnoch the Devil?* Hmmm? That was the last of the Vampire Chronicles written by me in my own words.

Oh, you bought the book, I'm not complaining about that, my beloved readers. Point of fact, *Memnoch* has outsold the other Vam-pire Chronicles completely; how's that for a vulgar detail? But did you embrace it? Did you understand it? Did you read it twice? Did you believe it?

I'd been to the Court of Almighty God and to the howling depths of Perdition, boys and girls, and I trusted you with my confessions, down to the last quiver of confusion and misery, prevailing on you to understand for me why I'd fled this terrifying opportunity to *really become* a saint, and what did you do? You complained!

"Where was Lestat, the Vampire?" That's what you wanted to know. Where was Lestat in his snappy black frock coat, flashing his tiny fang teeth as he smiles, striding in English boots through the glossy underworld of everybody's sinister and stylish city packed with writhing human victims, the majority of whom deserve the vampiric kiss? That's what you talked about!

Where was Lestat the insatiable blood thief and soul smasher, Lestat the vengeful, Lestat the sly, Lestat the … well, actually … Lestat, the Magnificent.

Yeah, I like that: Lestat, the Magnificent. That sounds like a good name to me for this book. And I am, when you get right down to it, magnificent. I mean, somebody has to say it. But let's go back to your song and dance over Memnoch.

We don't want this shattered remnant of a shaman! you said. We want our hero. Where's his classic Harley? Let him kick start it and roar through the French Quarter streets and alleys. Let him sing in the wind to the music pumping through his tiny earphones, purple shades down, blond hair blowing free.

Well, cool, yeah, I like that image. Sure. I still have the motorcycle. And yeah, I adore frock coats, I have them made; you're not going to get any arguments from me on that. And the boots, always. Want to know what I'm wearing now?

I'm not going to tell you!

Well, not until further on.

But think it over, what I'm trying to say.

I give you this metaphysical vision of Creation and Eternity here, the whole history (more or less) of Christianity, and meditations galore on the Cosmos Big Time—and what thanks do I get? "What kind of a novel is this?" you asked. "We didn't tell you to go to Heaven and Hell! We want you to be the fancy fiend!"

Mon Dieu! You make me miserable! You really do, I want you to know that. Much as I love you, much as I need you, much as I can't exist without you, you make me miserable!

Go ahead, throw this book away. Spit on me. Revile me. I dare you. Cast me out of your intellectual orbit. Throw me out of your backpack. Pitch me in the airport trash bin. Leave me on

a bench in Central Park!

What do I care?

No. I don't want you to do all that. Don't do that.

DON'T DO IT!

I want you to read every page I write. I want my prose to envelop you. I'd drink your blood if I could and hook you into every memory inside me, every heartbreak, frame of reference, temporary triumph, petty defeat, mystic moment of surrender. And all right, already, I'll dress for the occasion. Do I ever not dress for the occasion? Does anybody look better in rags than me?

Sigh.

I *hate* my vocabulary!

Why is it that no matter how much I read, I end up sounding like an international gutter punk?

Of course one good reason for that is my obsession with producing a report to the mortal world that can be read by just about anyone. I want my books in trailer parks and university libraries. You know what I mean? I'm not, for all my cultural and artistic hunger, an elitist. Have you not guessed?

Sigh again.

I'm too desperate! A psyche permanently set on overdrive, that's the fate of a thinking vampire. I should be out murdering a bad guy, lapping his blood as if he was a Popsicle. Instead I'm writing a book.

That's why no amount of wealth and power can silence me for very long. Desperation is the source of the fount. What if all this is meaningless? What if high-gloss French furniture with ormolu and inlaid leather really doesn't matter in the grand scheme of things? You can shudder with desperation in the rooms of a palace as well as in a crash pad. Not to mention a coffin! But forget the coffin, baby. I'm not what you'd call a coffin vampire anymore. That's nonsense. Not that I didn't like them when I slept in them, however. In a way, there's nothing like it—but what was I saying:

Ah, yeah, we're going to move on, but—.

Please, before we proceed, let me whine about what was done to my mind by my confrontation with Memnoch.

Now, pay attention, all of you, new readers and old:

I was attacked by the divine and sacramental! People talk about the gift of faith, well, I'm telling you it was more like a car crash! It did sheer violence to my psyche. Being a full-fledged vampire is a tough job once you've seen the streets of Heaven and Hell. And you guys should give me some metaphysical space.

Now and then I get these little spells: I DON'T WANT TO BE EVIL ANYMORE!

Don't all respond at once: "We want you to be the bad guy, you promised!"

Gotcha. But you must understand what I suffer. It's only fair.

And I'm so good at being bad, of course, the old slogan. If I haven't put that on a T-shirt, I'm going to. Actually, I really don't want to write anything that can't be put on a T-shirt. Actually, I'd like to write only on T-shirts. Actually, I'd like to write whole novels on T-shirts. So you guys could say, "I'm wearing chapter eight of Lestat's new book, that's my favorite; oh, I see, you're wearing chapter six—."

From time to time I do wear—Oh, stop it!

IS THERE NO WAY OUT OF THIS?

You're always whispering in my ear, aren't you?

I'm shuffling along Pirates' Alley, a bum covered with morally imperative dust, and you slip up beside me and say: "Lestat, wake up," and I pivot, slam bang! like Superman dodging into the all-American phone booth, and voilà! There I stand, full-dress apparitional, in velvet once again, and I've got you by the throat. We're in the vestibule of the Cathedral (where did you think I'd drag you? Don't you want to die on consecrated ground?), and you're begging for it all the way; oops! went too far, meant for this to be the Little Drink, don't say I didn't warn you. Come to think of it. *Did* I warn you?

All right, okay, yeah, forget about it, so what, stop the hand wringing, sure sure, knock it off, cool it, shove it, eh?

I surrender. Of course we're going to revel in pure wickedness here!

And who am I to deny my vocation as a Roman Catholic storyteller par excellence? I mean, the Vampire Chronicles are MY invention, you know, and I am only NOT a monster when I'm addressing you, I mean, that's why I write this, because I need you, I can't breathe without you. I'm helpless without you—.

—And I *am* back, sigh, shudder, cackle, tap dance, and I'm almost ready to pick up the conventional frame of this book and fix its four sides with the infallible super glue of sure-fire storytelling. It's going to all add up, I swear to you on the ghost of my dead father, there's technically, in my world, no such thing as a digression! All roads lead to me.

Quiet.

A beat.

But before we cut to Present Time, let me have my little fantasy. I need it. I am not all flash and dash, boys and girls, don't you see? I can't help myself.

Besides, if you can't really bear to read this, then cut to Chapter Two right now. Go on, get!

And for those of you who really love me, who want to understand every nuance of the tale that lies ahead, I hereby invite you to go with me. Please read on:

I want to be a saint. I want to save souls by the millions. I want to do good everywhere. I want to have my life-sized plaster statue in every church in the world. Me, six feet tall with glass blue eyes, in long purple velvet robes, looking down with gently parted hands on the faithful who pray as they touch my foot.

“Lestat, cure my cancer, find my glasses, help my son get off drugs, make my husband love me.”

In Mexico City, the young men come to the seminary doors clutching small statues of me in their hands, while mothers weep before me in the Cathedral: “Lestat, save my little one. Lestat, take away the pain. Lestat, I can walk! Look, the statue is moving, I see tears!”

Drug dealers lay down their guns before me in Bogotá, Colombia. Murderers fall to their knees whispering my name.

In Moscow the patriarch bows before my image with a crippled boy in his arms, and the boy is visibly healed. Thousands return to the Church in France due to my intercession, people whispering as they stand before me, “Lestat, I’ve made up with my thieving sister. Lestat, I renounced my evil mistress. Lestat, I have exposed the crooked bank, this is the first time I’ve been to Mass in years. Lestat, I am going into the convent and nothing can stop me.”

In Naples, as Mt. Vesuvius erupts, my statue is carried in procession to halt the lava before it destroys the seashore towns. In Kansas City, thousands of students file past my image pledging to have safe sex or none at all. I am invoked at Mass for special intercession throughout Europe and America.

In New York, a gang of scientists announces to the whole world that, thanks to my specific intercession they have managed to make an odorless, tasteless, harmless drug which creates the total high of crack, cocaine and heroin combined, and which is dirt cheap, totally available and completely legal! The drug trade is forever destroyed!

Senators and congressmen sob and embrace when they hear the news. My statue is immediately put into the National Cathedral.

Hymns are written to me everywhere. I am the subject of pious poetry. Copies of my saintly biography (a dozen pages) are vividly illustrated and printed by the billions. People crowd into St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York to leave their handwritten petitions in a basket before my image.

Little duplicates of me stand on dressing tables, countertops, desks, computer stations worldwide. “You haven’t heard of him? Pray to him, your husband will be a lamb afterwards, your mother will stop nagging you, your children will come to visit every Sunday; then send your money in thanksgiving to the church.”

Where are my remains? I don’t have any. My entire body has become relics, scattered all over the world, bits and pieces of dried flesh and bone and hair put into little gold cases called reliquaries, some fragments fitted into the hollowed-out backs of crosses, some in lockets that can be worn on chains around the neck. I can feel all these relics. I can slumber in the awareness of their influence. “Lestat, help me to stop smoking. Lestat, is my gay son going to Hell? (Absolutely not.) Lestat, I am dying. Lestat, nothing’s going to bring my father back. Lestat, this pain will never end. Lestat, is there really a God?” (Yes!)

I answer everyone. Peace, the certainty of the sublime, the irresistible joy of faith, the cessation of all pain, the profound abolition of the meaninglessness.

I am relevant. I am vastly and wondrously known. I am unavoidable! I have pierced the current of history! I am written about in the pages of the *New York Times*.

And meantime, I'm in Heaven with God. I am with the Lord in the Light, the Creator, the Divine Source of All Things. The solution to all mysteries is available to me. Why not? I know the answers to positively every question.

God says, You should appear to people. It's the proper work of a great saint. People down there expect this of you.

And so I leave the Light and drift slowly towards the green planet. There is a slight, prudent, loss of Full Understanding as I slip into the earthly atmosphere. No saint can carry the Fullness of Knowledge into the World because the World couldn't grasp it.

I adorn myself with my old human personality, you might say, but I am still a great saint, and I am totally geared for an apparition. And where do I go? Where do you think?

Vatican City is dead quiet, the smallest kingdom on Earth.

I am in the Pope's bedroom. It's like a monk's cell: just a narrow bed, one straight-back chair. So simple.

John Paul II, eighty-two years of age, is suffering, the pain in his bones too much for true sleep, the Parkinson's tremor too strong, the arthritis too widespread, the ravages of old age so mercilessly upon him.

Slowly he opens his eyes. In English he salutes me.

"Saint Lestat," he says. "Why have you come to me? Why not Padre Pio?"

Not a great response.

But! He means no slight. It's a perfectly understandable question. The Pope loves Padre Pio. He has canonized hundreds of saints. Probably he loved them all. But how he loved Padre Pio. As for me, I don't know if he loved me when he canonized me, because I haven't yet written the part of the story in which I get canonized. And as I write this, Padre Pio was canonized last week.

(I watched the whole thing on TV. Vampires love TV.)

Back to the moment.

The frigid stillness of the papal quarters, so austere, despite the palatial dimensions. Candles glow in the Pope's private chapel. The Pope groans in pain.

I lay my healing hands upon him, and I banish his suffering. A quiet penetrates his limbs. He looks at me with one eye, the other squinched closed as is often his manner, and between us there is suddenly an understanding, or rather I come to perceive something about him which the entire world ought to know:

His deep selflessness, his profound spirituality, come not only from his complete love of Christ but from his life lived under Communism. People forget. Communism, for all its hideous abuses

and cruelties, is in essence a vaunting spiritual code. And before that great puritanical government shrouded John Paul's young years, the violent paradoxes and horrifying absurdities of the Second World War surrounded him, tutoring him in self-sacrifice and courage. The man has never, ever, in his life lived in anything but a Spiritual World. Deprivation and self-denial are intertwined in his history like the double helix.

It is no wonder that he cannot yield his deep-rooted suspicions of the tumultuous voices of the prosperous capitalist countries. He simply cannot grasp the pure charity that can arise from abundance, the sublime immensity of vision possible from the vantage point of secure excess, the selflessness and sweeping sacrificial ambition that can be born when all needs are luxuriantly met.

Can I broach this subject with him in this quiet moment? Or should I only assure him that he must not worry about the "greed" of the Western World?

Softly I talk to him. I begin to elucidate these points. (Yeah, I know, he's the Pope, and I'm a vampire writing this story; but in this story I'm a great Saint. I cannot be intimidated within the risks of my own work!)

I remind him that the sublime principles of Greek philosophy arose in affluence, and slowly, acceptingly, he nods. He is quite the educated philosopher. A lot of people don't know that about him, either. But I must impress upon him something infinitely more profound.

I see it so beautifully. I see everything.

Our biggest mistake worldwide is our insistence on perceiving every new development as a culmination or a climax. The great "at last" or "inth degree." A constitutional fatalism continuously adjusts itself to the ever-changing present. A pervasive alarmism greets every advance. For two thousand years we have been getting "out of hand."

This derives of course from our susceptibility to viewing the "now" as the End Time, an Apocalyptic obsession that has endured since Christ ascended into Heaven. We must stop this! We must perceive that we are at the dawn of a sublime age! Enemies will no longer be conquered. They will be devoured, and transformed.

But here's the point I *really* want to make: Modernism and Materialism—elements that the Church has feared for so long—are in their philosophical and practical infancy! Their sacramental nature is only just being revealed!

Never mind the infantile blunders! The electronic revolution has transmuted the industrial world beyond all predictive thinking of the twentieth century. We're still having birth pangs. Get into it! Work with it. Play it out.

Daily life for millions in the developed countries is not only comfortable but a compilation of wonders that borders on the miraculous. And so new spiritual desires arise which are infinitely more courageous than the missionary goals of the past.

We must bear witness that political atheism has failed totally. Think about it. In the trash, the

whole system. Except for the island of Cuba, maybe. But what does Castro prove? And even the most secular power brokers in America exude high virtue as a matter of course. That's why we have corporate scandals! That's why people get so upset! No morals, no scandals. In fact, we may have to re-examine all the areas of society which we have so blithely labeled as "secular." Who is really without profound and unshakable altruistic beliefs?

Judeo-Christianity *is* the religion of the secular West, no matter how many millions claim to disregard it. Its profound tenets have been internalized by the most remote and intellectual agnostics. Its expectations inform Wall Street as well as the common courtesies exchanged on a crowded beach in California or a meeting between the heads of Russia and the United States.

Techno-saints will soon rise—if they have not already—to melt the poverty of millions with torrents of well-distributed goods and services. Communications will annihilate hatred and divisiveness as Internet cafés continue to spring up like flowers throughout the slums of Asia and the Orient. Cable television will bring countless new programs to the vast Arab world. Even North Korea will be penetrated.

Minorities in Europe and America will be thoroughly and fruitfully assimilated through computer literacy. As already described, medical science will find cheap harmless substitutes for cocaine and heroin, thereby eliminating the evil drug trade altogether. All violence will soon give way to a refinement of debate and exchange of knowledge. Effective acts of terrorism will continue to be obscene precisely because of their rarity, until they stop altogether.

As for sexuality, the revolution in this regard is so vast that we of this time cannot begin to comprehend its full ramifications. Short skirts, bobs, car dates, women in the work place, gays in love—we are dizzy with mere beginnings. Our scientific understanding and control of procreation gives us a power undreamt of in former centuries and the immediate impact is but a shadow of things to come. We must respect the immense mysteries of the sperm and the egg, the mysteries of the chemistry of gender and gender choice and attraction. All God's children will thrive from our growing knowledge, but to repeat this is only the beginning. We must have the courage to embrace the beauty of science in the name of the Lord.

The Pope listens. He smiles.

I continue.

The image of God Incarnate, become Man out of fascination with His own Creation, will triumph in the Third Millennium as the supreme emblem of Divine Sacrifice and Unfathomable Love.

It takes thousands of years to understand the Crucified Christ, I say. Why, for example, did He come down to live thirty-three years? Why not twenty? Why not twenty-five? You could ponder this stuff forever. Why did Christ have to start as a baby? Who wants to be a baby? Was being a baby part of our salvation? And why choose that particular time in history? And such a place!

Dirt, grit, sand, rocks everywhere—I've never seen so many rocks as in the Holy Land—bare

feet, sandals, camels; imagine those times. No wonder they used to stone people! Did it have anything to do with the sheer simplicity of the clothes and hair, Christ coming in that era? I think it did. Page through a book on world costume—you know, a really good encyclopedia taking you from ancient Sumer to Ralph Lauren, and you can't find any simpler clothes and hair than in Galilee First Century.

I am serious, I tell the Holy Father. Christ considered this, He had to. How could He not? Surely He knew that images of Him would proliferate exponentially.

Furthermore, I think Christ chose Crucifixion because henceforth in every depiction He would be seen extending His arms in a loving embrace. Once you see the Crucifix in that manner, everything changes. You see Him reaching out to all the World. He knew the image had to be durable. He knew it had to be abstractable. He knew it had to be reproducible. It is no accident that we can take the image of this ghastly death and wear it around our necks on a chain. God thinks of all these things, doesn't He?

The Pope is still smiling. "If you weren't a saint, I'd laugh at you," he says. "Exactly when are you expecting these Techno-saints, by the way?"

I'm happy. He looks like the old Wojtyla—the Pope who still went skiing until he was seventy-three. My visit has been worth it.

And after all, we can't all be Padre Pio or Mother Teresa. I'm Saint Lestat.

"I'll say hello for you to Padre Pio," I whisper.

But the Pope is dozing. He has chuckled and drifted off. So much for my mystical import. I've put him to sleep. But what did I expect, especially of the Pope? He works so hard. He suffers. He thinks. He has already traveled to Asia and Eastern Europe this year, and he will soon be going to Toronto and Guatemala and Mexico. I don't know how he can do these things.

I place my hand on his forehead.

Then I leave.

I go down the stairs to the Sistine Chapel. It is empty and dark, of course. It is chilly too. But never fear, my saintly eyes are as good as my vampire eyes, and I can see the swarming magnificence.

Alone—cut off from all the world and all things—I stand there. I want to lie on the floor face down in the manner of a priest at his ordination. I want to be a priest. I want to consecrate the host! I want this so badly that I ache for it. I DON'T WANT TO DO EVIL.

But the fact is, my fantasy of Saint Lestat is dissolving. I know it for what it is and I can't sustain it.

I know that I am no saint and never was or will be. No banner of me ever unfurled in St. Peter's Square in the sunlight. No crowd of hundreds of thousands ever cheered for my canonization. No string of cardinals ever attended the ceremony because it never took place. And I have no odorless, tasteless, harmless formula that exactly mimics crack, cocaine and heroin

combined, so I can't save the world.

I'm not even standing in the Sistine Chapel. I am far away from it, in a place of warmth, though just as lonely.

I am a vampire. For over two hundred years I've loved it. I am filled with the blood of others to my very eyeballs. I am polluted with it. I am as cursed as the Hemorrhissa before she touched the hem of Christ's garment in Capharnaum! I live by blood. I am ritually impure.

And there's only one kind of miracle I can work. We call it the Dark Trick and I'm about to do it.

And do you think all this guilt is about to stop me? *Nada,* never, *mais non,* forget about it, get out of here, not in a pig's eye, pa-lease, gimme a break, no way.

I told you I'd come back, didn't I?

I'm irrepressible, unforgivable, unstoppable, shameless, thoughtless, hopeless, heartless, running rampant, the wild child, undaunted, unrepentant, unsaved.

And baby, there is a story to tell.

I hear Hell's Bells calling me. It's time to boogie!

SO SLAM CUT TO:

2

BLACKWOOD FARM: EXTERIOR; EVENING.

A little country cemetery on the edge of a cypress swamp, with a dozen or more old cement graves, most names long ago effaced, and one of these raised rectangular tombs black with soot from a recent fire, and the whole surrounded by a small iron fence and four immense oak trees, the kind weighted down by their dipping branches, and the sky the perfect color of lilacs, and the heat of the summer sweet and caressing and—

—you bet I've got on my black velvet frock coat (close-up: tapered at the waist, brass buttons) and my motorcycle boots, and a brand-new linen shirt loaded with lace at cuffs and throat (pity the poor slob who snickers at me on account of that!), and I haven't cut my shoulder-length blond mane tonight, which I sometimes do for variety, and I've chucked my violet glasses because who cares that my eyes attract attention, and my skin's still dramatically tanned from my years-ago suicide attempt in the raw sun of the Gobi Desert, and I'm thinking—

—Dark Trick, yes, work the miracle, they need you, up there in the Big House, you Brat Prince, you Sheik among vampires, stop brooding and mourning down here, go to it, there's a delicate situation up there in the Big House—and it is

TIME TO TELL YOU WHAT HAPPENED AND SO I DO:

I paced, having just risen from my secret hiding place, and I mourned bitterly for another Blood Drinker who had perished in this very cemetery, on the aforementioned blackened grave, in an immense fire, and of her own will, leaving us only last night, without the slightest warning.

This was Merrick Mayfair, only three years among the Undead or less, and I'd invited her here to Blackwood Farm to help me exorcise an evil spirit that had been haunting Quinn Blackwood since childhood. Quinn was very new to the Blood, and had come to me for help with this ghost, which, far from leaving him at his transformation from mortal to vampire, had only grown stronger and meaner, and had actually caused the death of the mortal dearest to Quinn—his great Aunt Queen, age of eighty-five, by causing the beautiful lady to fall. I had needed Merrick Mayfair to exorcise this evil spirit forever.

Goblin was the name of this ghost, and as Merrick Mayfair had been both scholar and sorceress before she sought out the Dark Blood, I figured she would have the strength required to get rid of him.

Well, she came, and she solved the riddle of Goblin, and, building a high altar of coal and wood which she set ablaze, she not only burnt the corpse of the evil one but went into the flames with it. The spirit was gone, and so was Merrick Mayfair.

Of course I tried to snatch her back from the fire, but her soul had taken flight, and no amount of my blood poured on her burnt remains could conceivably revive her.

It did seem to me as I walked back and forth, kicking at the graveyard dust, that immortals who think they want the Dark Blood perish infinitely more easily than those of us who never asked for it. Perhaps the anger of the rape carries us through for centuries.

But as I said: something was going on in the Big House.

I was thinking Dark Trick as I paced, yes, Dark Trick, the making of another vampire.

But why was I even considering such a thing? I, who secretly wants to be a saint? Surely the blood of Merrick Mayfair was not crying out from the Earth for another newborn, you can scrap that idea. And this was one of those nights when every breath I took felt like a minor metaphysical disaster.

I looked up at the Manor House as they call it, the mansion up on the rise, with its two-story white columns and many lighted windows, the place which had been the locus of my pain and fortune for the last few nights, and I tried to figure how to play this one—for the benefit of all involved.

First consideration: Blackwood Manor was buzzing with unsuspecting mortals, most dear to me on short acquaintance, and by unsus-pecting I mean they've never guessed that their beloved Quinn Black-wood, master of the house, or his mysterious new friend, Lestat, were vampires, and that was the way Quinn willed it with all his heart and soul—that no untoward evil thing would happen, because this was his home, and vampire though he was, he wasn't ready to break the ties.

Among these mortals were Jasmine, the versatile black housekeeper, a stunner when it comes to looks (more on that as we go along, I hope, because I can't resist), and Quinn's one-time lover; and their little son Jerome, begat by Quinn before he'd been made a vampire, of course, four years old and running up and down the circular steps just for fun, his feet in white tennis shoes a little too big for his body; and Big Ramona, Jasmine's grandmother, a regal black lady with white hair in a bun, shaking her head, talking to nobody, in the kitchen cooking up supper for God knows who; and her grandson Clem, a sinewy black man seemingly poured into his feline skin, attired in a black suit and tie, standing just inside the big front door looking up the steps, the chauffeur of the lady of the house just lately lost, Aunt Queen, for whom they were all still painfully mourning, highly suspicious of what was going on in Quinn's bedroom, and with

reason.

Back the hall upstairs was Quinn's old tutor Nash Penfield, in his bedroom, seated with thirteen-year-old Tommy Blackwood, who was actually Quinn's uncle by natural blood but more purely an adopted son, and the two were talking in front of the cold summer fireplace, and Tommy, an impressive young man by anyone's standards, was crying softly over the death of the great lady, to whom I just referred, with whom Tommy had traveled all over Europe for three years, "the making of him," as Dickens might have said.

Hovering about the back of the property were the Shed Men, Allen and Joel, sitting in an open lighted portion of the shed, reading the *Weekly World News* and howling with laughter at it, while the television was blaring Football. There was a giant limousine in front of the house and one in the back.

As for the Big House, let me go into detail. I loved it. I found it perfectly proportioned, which wasn't always the case with American Greek Revival houses, but this one, preening on its terrace of land, was more than agreeable and inviting, with its long pecan-tree drive, and its regal windows all around.

Interior? What Americans call giant rooms. Dustless, manicured. Full of mantel clocks, mirrors, portraits and Persian rugs, and the inevitable mélange of nineteenth-century mahogany furniture that people mix with new reproductions of classic Hepplewhite and Louis XIV styles to achieve the look they call Traditional or antique. Eh? And all pervaded by the inevitable drone of massive air-conditioning, which not only cooled the air magically but provided the Privacy of Sound, which has so transformed the South in this day and age.

I know, I know. I should have described the scene before I described the people. So what? I wasn't thinking logically. I was pondering fiercely. I couldn't quite leave behind the fate of Merrick Mayfair.

Of course Quinn had claimed that he saw the Light of Heaven receiving both his unwanted ghost and Merrick, and for him the scene in this cemetery had been a theophany—something very different from what it was for me. All I saw was Merrick immolating herself. I had sobbed, screamed, cursed.

Okay, enough about Merrick. But keep her in mind, because she will definitely be referred to later. Who knows? Maybe I'll just bring her up anytime I feel like it. Who's in charge of this book anyway? No, don't take that seriously. I promised you a story, you'll get one.

The point is, or was, that on account of what was going on in the Big House right now, I didn't have time for all this moping. Merrick was lost to us. The vibrant and unforgettable Aunt Queen was lost. It was grief behind me and grief before me. But a huge surprise had just occurred, and my precious Quinn needed me without delay.

Of course nobody was *making* me take an interest in things here at Blackwood Farm.

I could have just cut out.

Quinn, the fledgling, had called on Lestat the Magnificent (yeah, I like that title) to help him get rid of Goblin, and technically, since Merrick had taken the ghost with her, I was finished here and could go riding off into the summer dusk with all the staff hereabouts saying, "Who was that dashing dude, anyway?" but I couldn't leave Quinn.

Quinn was in a real snare with these mortals. And I was greatly in love with Quinn. Quinn, aged twenty-two when Baptized in the Blood, was a seer of visions and a dreamer of dreams, unconsciously charming and unfailingly kind, a suffering hunter of the night who thrived only on the blood of the damned, and the company of the loving and the uplifting.

(The loving and the uplifting??? Like me, for instance??? So the kid makes mistakes. Besides, I was so in love with him that I put on a damned good show for him. And can I be damned for loving people who bring out the love in me? Is that so awful for a full-time monster? You will shortly come to understand that I am always talking about my moral evolution! But for now: the plot.)

I can "fall in love" with anybody—man, woman, child, vampire, the Pope. It doesn't matter. I'm the ultimate Christian. I see God's gifts in everyone. But almost anybody would love Quinn. Loving people like Quinn is easy.

Now, back to the question at hand: Which brings me back to Quinn's bedroom, where Quinn was at this delicate moment.

Before either of us had risen tonight—and I had taken the six-foot-four inches tall, blue-eyed black-haired boy to one of my secret hiding places with me—a mortal girl had arrived at the Manor House and affrighted everybody.

This was the matter that had Clem looking up the steps, and Big Ramona muttering, and Jasmine worried sick as she went about in her high-heel pumps, wringing her hands. And even little Jerome was excited about it, still dashing up and down the circular stairs. Even Tommy and Nash had broken off their mourning laments earlier to have a glance at this mortal girl and offer to help her in her distress.

It was easy enough for me to scan their minds and get a picture of it, this grand and bizarre event, and to scan Quinn's mind, for that matter, as to the result.

And I was making something of an assault on the mind of the mortal girl herself as she sat on Quinn's bed, in a huge random display of flowers, a truly marvelous heap of helter-skelter flowers, talking to Quinn.

It was a cacophony of minds filling me in on everything from the beginning. And the whole thing sent a little panic through my enormous brave soul. Work the Dark Trick? Make another one of us? Woe and Grief! Sorrow and Misery! Help, Murder, Police!

Do I *really* want to steal another soul out of the currents of human destiny? I who want to be a saint? And once personally hobnobbed with angels? I who claimed to have seen God Incarnate? Bring another into the—get ready!—Realm of the Undead?

Comment: One of the great things about loving Quinn was that I hadn't made him. The boy had come to me free of charge. I'd felt a little like Socrates must have felt with all those gorgeous Greek boys coming to him for advice, that is, until somebody showed up with the Burning Hemlock.

Back to now: If I had any rival in this world for Quinn's heart it was this mortal girl, and he was up there offering her in frantic whispers the promise of our Blood, the fractured gift of our immortality. Yes, this explicit offer was coming from the lips of Quinn. Good God, kid, show some backbone, I thought! You saw the Light of Heaven last night!

Mona Mayfair was this girl's name. But she'd never known or even heard of Merrick Mayfair. So cut that connection right now. Merrick was a quadroon, born among the "colored" Mayfairs who lived downtown, and Mona was a member of the white Mayfairs of the Garden District and Mona had probably never heard a word spoken of Merrick or her colored kin. As for Merrick, she'd shown no interest ever in the famous white family. She'd had a path all her own.

But Mona was a bona fide witch, however—sure as Merrick had been—and what is a witch? Well, it is a mind reader, magnet for spirits and ghosts and a possessor of other occult talents. And I'd heard enough of the illustrious Mayfair clan in the last few days from Quinn to know that Mona's cousins, witches all, if I'm not mistaken, were undoubtedly in hot pursuit of Mona now, no doubt desperate with worry for the child.

In fact, I'd had a glimpse of three of this remarkable tribe (and one of them a witch priest, no less, a witch priest! I don't even want to think about it!), at the funeral Mass for Aunt Queen, and why they were taking so long to come after Mona was mystifying me, unless they were deliberately playing this one out slowly for reasons that will soon become clear.

We vampires don't like witches. Can you guess why? Any self-respecting vampire, even if he or she is three thousand years old, can fool mortals, at least for a while. And young ones like Quinn pass, no question. Jasmine, Nash, Big Ramona—they all accepted Quinn for human. Eccentric? Clinically insane? Yes, they believed all that about him. But they thought he was human. And Quinn could live among them for quite a while. And as I've already explained, they thought I was human too, though I probably couldn't count on that for too long.

Now, with witches it's another story. Witches detect all kinds of small things about other creatures. It has to do with the lazy and constant exercise of their power. I'd sensed that at the funeral Mass, just breathing the same air as Dr. Rowan Mayfair and her husband, Michael Curry, and Fr. Kevin Mayfair. But fortunately, they were distracted by a multitude of other stimuli, so I hadn't had to bolt.

So okay, where was I? Yeah, cool. Mona Mayfair was a witch, and one of supreme talent. And once the Dark Blood had come into Quinn about a year ago, he had forsworn ever seeing her again, dying though she was, for fear she might at once realize that evil had robbed him of life, and contaminate her he would not.

However, of her own free will and much to everyone's amazement:

She'd come about an hour ago, driving the family stretch limousine, which she'd hijacked from the driver outside the Mayfair Medical Center where she'd been dying for over two years. (He'd been walking the block, poor unlucky guy, smoking a cigarette, when she'd sped off, and the last image in her mind of him was of his running after her.)

She'd then gone to florist after florist where the Mayfair name was good as gold collecting giant sprays of flowers, or loose bouquets, whatever she could get immediately, and then she'd driven across the twin span as they call the long lake bridge and up to the Blackwood Manor House, stepping out of the car barefoot and wrapped in a gaping hospital gown, a perfect horror —a wobbling skeleton with bruised skin hanging on her bones and a mop of long red hair—and had commandeered Jasmine, Clem, Allen and Nash to take the flowers to Quinn's room, asserting that she had Quinn's permission to heap them all over the four-poster bed. It was a pact. Don't worry.

Scared as they all were, they did as they were told.

After all, everybody knew that Mona Mayfair had been the love of Quinn's life before Quinn's beloved Aunt Queen, world traveler and raconteur, had insisted Quinn go to Europe with her on her "very last trip," which had somehow stretched into three whole years, and Quinn had come home to discover Mona in isolation at Mayfair Medical quite beyond his reach.

Then the Dark Blood had come to Quinn in venality and violence, and another year passed with Mona behind hospital glass, too weak even for a scribbled note or a glance at Quinn's daily gift of flowers and—.

Now back to the anxious passel of attendants who rustled the flowers up to the room.

The emaciated girl herself, and we're talking about twenty years old, that's what I'm calling a girl, could not possibly make it up the circular staircase, so the gallant Nash Penfield, Quinn's old tutor, cast by God to be the perfect gentleman (and responsible for a great deal of Quinn's finishing polish), had carried her up and laid her in her "bower of flowers" as she'd called it, the child assuring him that the roses were thornless, and she had lain back on the four-poster twining broken phrases from Shakespeare with her own, to wit:

"Pray, let me to my bride bed, so bedecked, retire, and let them strew my grave hereafter."

At which point, thirteen-year-old Tommy had appeared in the doorway of the bedroom, and had been so upset by the sight of Mona, in his raw grief for lost Aunt Queen, that he'd begun to shake, and so the amazed Nash had taken him out while Big Ramona had stayed to declare in a stage whisper worthy of the Bard:

"That girl's dying!"

At which the little red-headed Ophelia laughed. What else? And asked for a can of cold diet soda.

Jasmine had thought the child was going to give up the ghost on the spot, which could easily

have happened, but the child said No, she was waiting for Quinn, and asked everybody to leave, and when Jasmine had come running back with the cold soda in a bubbly glass with a bent straw, the girl would hardly drink it.

You can live all your life in America without ever seeing a mortal in this condition.

But in the eighteenth century when I was born it was rather common. People starved in the streets of Paris in those days. They died all around you. Same situation prevailed in nineteenth-century New Orleans when the starving Irish began to arrive. You could see many beggars of skin and bone. Now you have to go to "the foreign missions" or to certain hospital wards to see people suffering like Mona Mayfair.

Big Ramona had made a further declaration, that that was the very bed in which her own daughter died (Little Ida), and that it was no bed for a sick child. But Jasmine, her granddaughter, had told her to shush, and Mona had taken to laughing so hard she was in agony and began to choke. She had survived.

As I stood in the cemetery, monitoring all these marvelous mirrors of near immediate events, I reckoned Mona was five-foot-one or thereabouts, destined to be delicate, and once a famous beauty, but the sickness—set into motion by a traumatic birth which was despite all my power still unclear to me—had so thoroughly done its work on her that she was under seventy pounds in weight and her profuse red hair only heightening the macabre spectacle of her total deterioration. She was so dangerously close to death that only will was keeping her going.

It had been will and witchcraft—the high persuasion of witches—that had helped her get the flowers and to force so much assistance when she arrived.

But now that Quinn had come, now that Quinn was there with her, and the one bold idea of her dying hours was consummate, the pain in her internal organs and her joints was defeating her. There was also a terrible pain in the entire surface of her skin. Merely sitting amid all the precious flowers hurt her.

As for my brave Quinn renouncing every execration he had laid on his fate and offering her the Dark Blood, no big surprise, I had to admit, but I wished to Hell he hadn't.

It's hard to watch anyone die when you know you possess this evil paradoxical power. And he was still in love with her, naturally and unnaturally, and couldn't abide her suffering. Who could?

However, as I have already explained, Quinn had received a theophany only last night, seeing Merrick and his doppelganger spirit both passing into the Light.

So why in the name of God had he not consented to merely holding Mona's hand and seeing her through it? She certainly wasn't going to live until midnight.

Fact of the matter, he didn't have the strength to let her go. Of course Quinn never would have gone to her, I should add, he'd protected her from his secret valiantly, as noted, but she'd come here to Quinn, to his very room, begging to die in his bed. And he was a male vampire, and this

was his territory, his lair, so to speak, and some male juices were flowing here, vampire or no, and now she was in his arms, and a monstrous possessiveness and high imaginative perception of saving her had taken hold of him.

And as surely as I knew all that, I knew he couldn't work the Dark Trick on her. He'd never done it before, and she was too frail. He'd kill her. And that was no way to go. Shoot, the child, having opted for the Dark Blood, could go to Hell! I had to get up there. Vampire Lestat to the rescue!

I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, "Lestat, is this a comedy? We don't want a comedy." No, it's not!

It's just that all the debasing subterfuge is falling away from me, don't you see? Not the glamour you understand, keep your mind on the image, baby! We're only losing those elements which tended to cheapen my discourse, and throw up a barrier of—artificial quaintness, more or less.

Okay. Onward. I went the human route, through the front door, clickity click, startling Clem, throwing him an ingratiating smile, "Quinn's friend, Lestat, yeah, gotcha, hey, and Clem, have that car ready, we're going into New Orleans afterwards, okay, dude?" and headed up the circular stairs, beaming down at little Jerome as I passed him, and giving Jasmine a quick hug as she stood stranded in the hallway, then telepathically turned the lock on Quinn's bedroom door and entered.

Entered? Why not went in? That's the artificial quaintness that has to go. You see my point? Matter of fact, I barreled into the room, if you must know.

Now, I'll let you in on a little secret. Nothing seen telepathically is ever one tenth as vivid as what a vampire sees with his own eyes. Telepathy is cool, no doubt about it, but our vision is almost intolerably vivid. That's why telepathy doesn't play much of a role in this book. I'm a sensualist anyway.

And the sight of Mona sitting on the foot of the big glowering four-poster was heartbreaking. The girl was in more pain than Quinn could conceivably realize. Even his arm around her was hurting her. I calculated without wanting to do it that she should have died about two hours ago. Her kidneys had shut down, her heart was sputtering and she couldn't fill her lungs with enough air to take deep breaths.

But her flawless green eyes were wide as she looked at me, and her fierce intellect understood on some complete mystical level, quite truly beyond words, what Quinn was trying to tell her: that the progress of her death could be utterly reversed, that she could join with us, that she could be ours forever. The vampiric state; the Undead. Immortal killer. Outside life for all time.

I know you, Little Witch. We live forever. She almost smiled.

Would the Dark Trick undo the damage which had been done to her miserable body? You betcha.

Two hundred years ago in a bedroom on the Ile St.-Louis, I had seen old age and consumption drop away from the emaciated form of my own mother as the Dark Blood realized its full magic within her. And in those nights, I'd been a mere postulant, compelled by love and fear to do the transformation. It had been my first time. I hadn't even known its name.

"Let me work the Dark Trick, Quinn," I said immediately.

I saw the relief flood through him. He was so innocent, so confused. Of course, I didn't much like it that he was four inches taller than me, but it really didn't matter. I meant it when I called him my Little Brother. I would have done just about anything for him. And then there was Mona herself. Witch child, beauty, ferocious spirit, almost nothing but spirit with the body desperately trying to hold on.

They drew closer to each other. I could see her hand clasping his. Could she feel the preternatural flesh? Her eyes were on me.

I paced the room. I took over. I put it to her in grand style. We were vampires, yes, but she had a choice, precious darling that she was. Why hadn't Quinn told her about the Light? Quinn had seen the Light with his own eyes. He knew the measure of Celestial Forgiveness more truly than I did.

"But you can choose the Light some other night, *chérie,*" I said. I laughed. I couldn't stop myself. It was too miraculous.

She'd been sick for so long, suffered for so long. And that birth, that child she'd borne, it had been monstrous, taken from her, and I couldn't see to the core of it. But forget that. Her conception of eternity was to feel whole for one blessed hour, to breathe for one blessed hour without pain. How could she make this choice? No, there was no choice here for this girl. I saw the long corridor down which she'd traveled inexorably for so many years—the needles that had bruised her arms, and the bruises were all over her, the medicines that had sickened her, the half sleep in agony, the fevers, the shallow ruminating dreams, the loss of all blessed concentration when the books and films and letters had been put aside and even the deep darkness was gone in the seasonless glare of hospital lights and inescapable clatter and noise.

She reached for me. She nodded. Dried cracked lips. Strands of red hair. "Yes, I want it," she said.

And from Quinn's lips came the inevitable words: "Save her."

Save her? Didn't Heaven want her?

"They're coming for you," I said. "It's your family." I hadn't meant to blurt it. Was I under some sort of spell myself, looking into her eyes? But I could hear them clearly, the fast-approaching Mayfairs. Ambulance *sans* siren pulling into the pecan-tree drive, stretch limousine right behind it.

"No, don't let them take me," she cried. "I want to be with you."

"Honey bunch, this is for always," I said.

"Yes!"

Darkness eternal, yes, curse, grief, isolation, yes.

Oh, and it's the same old beat with you, Lestat, you Devil, you want to do it, you want to, you want to see it, you greedy little beast, you can't give her over to the angels and you know they're waiting! You know the God who can sanctify her suffering has purified her and will forgive her last cries.

I drew close to her, pushing gently against Quinn.

"Let her go, Little Brother," I said. I lifted my wrist, broke the inside skin with my teeth and put the blood to her lips. "It has to be done this way. I've got to give her some of my blood first." She kissed the blood. Her eyes squeezed shut. Shiver. Shock. "Otherwise, I can't bring her through. Drink, pretty girl. Good-bye, pretty girl, good-bye, Mona."

3

She drew the blood from me as if she'd broken the circuit that kept me alive, as if she meant to kill me. A witch had me by the blood. I gasped and reached with my left hand for the post of the bed and missed it, falling gently back with her on the nest of flowers. Her hair was catching in the roses. So was mine.

In a blatant rush, I felt myself emptying my life into her—dank country castle, Paris, the boulevard theater, stolen, stone tower, made by Magnus, fire, alone, orphan weeping, treasure; did she laugh? I saw her teeth in my heart, my very heart. I pulled back, dizzy, and clung to the post, each one is unique, staring down at her.

Witchlet!

With glazed eyes she looked up at me. The blood was on her lips, just a touch, and all her pain was gone, and the moment had come, the moment of peace from pain, peace from struggle, peace from fear.

She simply couldn't believe it.

In the twilight between human and vampire, she breathed deeply and slowly, hungry hybrid, doomed hybrid, her skin plumping exquisitely and the sweetness unfolding in her face as the cheeks formed and her lips filled out, and the flesh around her eyes grew firm, and then the breasts were rising beneath her cotton gown, and a roundness came to her arms, such a delectable roundness, I am such a fiend, and she sighed again, sighed as if ecstatic, looking at me, yeah, right, I'm gorgeous, I know, and now she could endure the Dark Trick. Quinn was stunned. So in love. Get away. I pushed him back. *This is mine.*

I snatched her up from the flowers. Vessel of my blood. Petals falling. Whispered poetry was tumbling from her lips, "Or like a creature native and indued unto that element." I hugged her to me. I wanted my blood from her. I wanted her.

"Little Witch," I hissed into her ear. "You think you know all I can do!" I crushed her to me. I heard her sweet soft laugh. "Come on, show me!" she said. *I'm not dying.* Quinn was afraid. He put his arms around her and touched my arms. He was trying to hold us both. It was so warm. I loved him. So what? I had her.

I grazed her neck with my teeth. "I'm coming to get you, Little Girl!" I whispered. "You're playing in the big time, Little Girl!" Her heart was racing. Still on the brink. I sank my teeth and

felt her body stiffen. Lovely paralysis. Slowly I drew on the blood, her salt mixed with my own. I *knew* her: child beauty, nymphet, schoolgirl scamp, the one on whom nothing was lost, pronouncements of genius, nursing drunken parents, freckles and smile, her life a romp, and always dreaming, restless at the computer keys, designée to the Mayfair billions, burying father and mother, no more worry there, lover of more men than she could count, pregnancy—now I saw it!—horror birth, monster child, *Look at it: woman baby! Morrigan. "Walking Baby," said Dolly Jean. Who are these people! What is this you are showing to me! "You think you're the only monsters I know?"* Morrigan gone forever, monster child, *What is this mutant that grows to be a full woman at its birth, wants your milk? Taltos! Gone, taken, ruined her health forever, made her start dying,* have to find Morrigan, emerald around Mona's neck, look at that emerald! Mona fastened to Quinn, so in love with Quinn, tell Quinn, no, poetry of Ophelia sustaining her soul, heart beat, catching breath, dying for too long, *Don't you realize what this is! I do, I do! Don't stop! Don't let me go! Who is that trying to take you from me? I knew that ghost! Oncle Julien!*

He came at me. Angry phantom! In the midst of my vision! Was he in the room? This tall, white-haired man assaulting me, trying to wrench her from me! Who the Hell are you? I sent him flying back, receding so fast he became a tiny speck. Damn you, let her go!

We lay on the bower of flowers, she and I in each other's arms, no time, look at him, he's coming again, Oncle Julien! I was blind. I drew back, tore my wrist again, pushed my wrist to her mouth, clumsy, spilling blood, couldn't see, felt her clamp hard, body lurch, *Oncle Julien, you're out!* She drank and drank. Oncle Julien's face furious. Faint. Vanish. "He's gone," I whispered. "Oncle Julien gone!" Did Quinn hear? "Make him go, Quinn."

I swooned, giving her my life, see it, see it all, see the devastated core, move beyond regret, go on, her body growing stronger, the iron of her limbs, her fingers digging into my arm as she drank from my wrist, go on, take it, sink those teeth into my soul, do it, now I'm the paralyzed one, can't escape, brutal little girl, go on, where was I, let her drink on and on, I can't, I snuggled my face against her neck, opened my mouth, no power to—.

Our souls closing to each other, the inevitable blindness between Maker and Fledgling meaning she was made. Couldn't read each other's thoughts anymore. Drink me dry, beautiful, you're on your own.

My eyes were shut. I dreamt. Oncle Julien wept. Ah, so sad, was it? In the realm of shadows, he stood with his face in his hands and he wept. What is this? An emblem of conscience? Don't make me laugh.

And so the literal dissolves. She drinks and she drinks. And alone I dream, a suicide in a bathtub with streaming wrists, I dream:

I saw a perfect vampire, a soul unlike any other, tutored in courage, never looking back, lifted from misery, and seeking to marvel at all things without malice or lamenting. I saw a graduate of the school of suffering. I saw her.

The ghost came back.

Tall, angry, Oncle Julien, will you be my Hound of Heaven? Arms folded. What do you want here? Do you realize what you are up against? My perfect vampire does not see you. Go away, dream. Go away, ghost. I have no time for you. Sorry, Oncle Julien, she's made. You lose.

She let me go. She must have. I drifted.

When I opened my eyes, Mona stood beside Quinn and they were both looking down on me.

I lay amongst the flowers, and there were no thorns on the roses. Time had stopped. And the distant commotions of the house didn't matter.

She was fulfilled. She was the vampire in my dream. She was the perfect one. Ophelia's old poetry dropped away. She was the Perfect Pearl, caught speechless in the miracle and staring down at me, wondering only what had become of me, as another fledgling of mine had done long ago—when I'd worked the Dark Trick just as fiercely and just as thoroughly and just as dangerously to myself. But understand that for Lestat there are only temporary dangers. No big deal, boys and girls. Look at her.

So this was the splendid creature with whom Quinn had fallen so fatally in love. Princess Mona of the Mayfairs. To the very roots of her long red hair the Blood had penetrated, and it was full and shining, and her face was oval with plumped and smiling cheeks and lips, and her eyes clear of all fever, those fathomless green eyes.

Oh, she was dazed by the Blood vision, of course, and above all by the vampiric power that pervaded the cells of her entire frame.

But she stood resolute and quick, staring at me, as robust no doubt as she'd ever been, the hospital gown now skimpy and straining to contain her. All that juicy and enticing flesh restored.

I brushed off the petals that clung to me. I got up on my feet. I was dizzy still, but healing fast. My mind was clouded and it was almost a nice feeling, a delicious blurring of the light and warmth in the room, and I had a swift, profound sense of love for Mona and Quinn and a profound sense that we'd be together for a long time, just the three of us. Three of us.

Quinn appeared shining and steadfast in this feverish vision of mine. That had been his charm for me from the beginning of knowing him, a secular crown prince of sorts, full of openness and self-confidence. Love would always save Quinn. Losing Aunt Queen, he had been sustained on the love he'd felt for her. The only one he had hated, he had killed.

"May I give her my blood?" he asked. He reached out for me, squeezed my shoulder and bent forward hesitantly and then kissed me.

How he could take his eyes off her I didn't know.

I smiled. I was gaining my bearings. Oncle Julien was nowhere about that I could see.

"Nowhere," echoed Quinn.

"What are you saying?" asked the shining newborn.

"Oncle Julien, I saw him," but I shouldn't have said it.

Sudden shadow in her face. "Oncle Julien?"

"But he was bound to—." Quinn said. "At Aunt Queen's funeral I saw him, and it was as if he was warning me. It was his duty, but what does it matter now?"

"Don't give her your blood," I said to Quinn. "Keep your minds open to each other. Of course you'll depend on words, no matter how much you read of each other's thoughts, but don't exchange blood. Too much, and you'll lose the mutual telepathy."

She reached out her arms to me. I embraced her, squeezed her tight, marveling at the power she'd already achieved. I felt humbled by the Blood rather than proud of any excess to which I'd taken the whole process. I gave a little accepting laugh as I kissed her, which she returned in her enchantment.

If any one trait in her made me a slave it was her green eyes. I hadn't realized how clouded they'd been by her illness. And now as I held her back, I saw a sprinkling of freckles across her face, and a flash of her beautiful white teeth as she smiled.

She was a small thing for all her magical health and restoration. She brought out the tenderness in me, which few people do.

But it was time to move out of the rhapsody. Much as I hated it. The practical matters came to intrude.

"Okay, my love," I said. "You're going to know one last bout of pain. Quinn will see you through it. Take her into the shower, Quinn. But first, arrange some clothes for her. On second thought, you leave that to me. I'll tell Jasmine she needs a pair of jeans and a shirt."

Mona laughed almost hysterically.

"We're always subject to this mixture of the magic and the mundane," I replied. "Get used to it."

Quinn was all seriousness and apprehension. He went over to his desk, punched in the intercom number for the kitchen and gave the order for the clothes to Big Ramona, telling her to leave them right outside the door. Okay, good. All the roles of Blackwood Farm are played smoothly.

Then, Mona, stunned and dreaming, asked if she might have a white dress, or if there might be a white dress downstairs in Aunt Queen's room.

"A white dress," said Mona, as if she were caught in some poetic net as strong as her mental pictures of drowning Ophelia. "And is there lace, Quinn, lace that nobody would mind if I wore …"

Quinn turned to the phone again, gave the orders, yes, Aunt Queen's silks, make it all up. "Everything white," he said to Big Ramona. His voice was gentle and patient. "You know, Jasmine won't wear the white dresses. Yes, for Mona. If we don't use them, they will all end up packed away. In the attic. Aunt Queen loved Mona. Stop crying. I know. I know. But Mona can't go around in this disgusting hospital gown. And someday, fifty years from now, Tommy and

Jerome will be unpacking all those clothes and figuring what to do with it all and … just bring something up here now."

As he turned back to us his eye fastened on Mona and he stopped in his tracks as if he couldn't believe what he saw, and a dreadful expression came over him, as though he only just realized what had happened, what we'd done. He murmured something about white lace. I didn't want to read his mind. Then he came forward and took Mona in his arms.

"This mortal death, Ophelia, it won't be much," he said. "I'll get into the stream with you. I'll hold you. We'll say the poetry together. And after that, there's no pain. There's thirst. But never any pain." He couldn't hold her close enough.

"And will I always see as I see now?" she asked. The words about the death meant nothing to her.

"Yes," he said.

"I'm not afraid," she said. She meant it.

But she still had no real grasp of what had been done. And I knew in my heart, the heart I closed off from Quinn and the heart she couldn't read, that she really hadn't consented to this. She hadn't been able.

What did this mean to me? Why am I making such a big deal of it?

Because I'd murdered her soul, that's why.

I'd bound her to the Earth the way we were bound, and now I had to see to it that she became that vampire which I'd seen in my moment of intense dream. And when she finally woke to what she'd become she might go out of her mind. What had I said of Merrick? The ones who reached for it went mad sooner than those who were stolen, as I had been.

But there wasn't time for this sort of thinking.

"They're here," she said. "They're downstairs. Can you hear them?" She was alarmed. And as is always the case with the new ones, every emotion in her was exaggerated.

"Don't fear, pretty girl," I said. "I'm on to them."

We were talking about the rumblings from the front parlor below. Mayfairs on the property. Jasmine fretful, walking to and fro. Little Jerome trying to slide down the coiling banister. Quinn could hear all this too.

It was Rowan Mayfair and Fr. Kevin Mayfair, the priest for the love of Heaven, come with an ambulance and a nurse to find her and take her back to the hospital, or at least to discover whether she was alive or dead.

That was it. I got it. That's why they'd taken their time. They thought that she was already dead.

And they were right. She was.

4

I unlocked the bedroom door.

Big Ramona stood there with an armful of white clothes.

Quinn and Mona had disappeared into the nearby bathroom.

"You're wanting this for that poor child?" Big Ramona said. Small-boned woman, white hair, sweet-faced, starched white apron. (Grandmother of Jasmine.) Deeply troubled. "Now, don't you just grab for all this, I've got it folded!"

I stood back to let her march into the room and lay the pile on the flower-strewn bed. "Now, there's underwear and slips here, too," she declared. She shook her head. The shower was running in the bath. She passed me as she went out, making her share of little grumbling noises.

"I can't believe that girl is still breathing," she said. "It's some kind of miracle. And her family down there brought Fr. Kevin with the Holy Oils. Now, I know Quinn loves that girl, but where does it say in the Gospel that you have to let a person die in your house, and what with Quinn's mother sick, you knew that didn't you, and Quinn's mother run off somewhere, did you know that, Patsy's up and gone—"

(Flash on memory of Patsy, Quinn's mother: country-western singer with poofed hair and painted fingernails, dying of AIDS in the bedroom opposite, no longer up to putting on her fringed leather outfits with the high boots and war paint makeup and going out, just pretty on the couch in white nightgowns when I had last seen her, lady full of irrational and overriding hate for Quinn, a twisted kind of sibling rivalry from a woman who'd been sixteen when Quinn was born to her. Now vanished.)

"—and leaving all her medicine behind, sick as she is. Oh Patsy, Patsy, and Aunt Queen just laid in the grave, and then this redheaded child coming here, I'm telling you!"

"Well, maybe Mona's dead," I said, "and Quinn's washing her corpse in the bathtub."

She broke into laughter, muffling it with her hand.

"Oh, you're a devil," she said. "You're worse than Quinn," she went on flashing her pale eyes at me, "but don't you think I don't know what they're doing in that shower together. And what if she does die in there, what about that, are we going to be patting her dry with towels and laying her out like it didn't happen and—"

"Well, she'll be really clean," I said with a shrug.

She shook her head, trying not to laugh out loud, and then shifted emotional gears as she headed back to the hall, laughing and talking to nobody as she went on, "… and what with his mother running off, and she sick as a dog, and nobody knows where she is, and those Mayfairs downstairs, it's a wonder they didn't bring the sheriff." And into the back bedroom she went, The Angel of Hot Coffee, where Nash and Tommy talked in hushed voices, and Tommy cried over the loss of Aunt Queen.

It occurred to me with uncommon strength that I had grown too fond of all these people, that I understood why Quinn insisted on remaining here, playing the mortal as long as he could, why the entirety of Blackwood Farm had a hold on him.

But it was time to be a wizard. Time to buy some time for Mona, time to make her absence somehow acceptable to the witches below.

Besides, I was curious about the creatures in the double parlor, these intrepid psychics who fooled the mortals around them as surely as we vampires did, pretending to be wholesome and regular human beings while they contained a host of secrets.

I hurried down the circular stairs, grabbed up tiny Jerome with his big tennis shoes off the banister just in time to save his life as he nearly fell some ten feet to the marble tile floor below, and put him in the waiting arms of a very anxious Jasmine; and then, gesturing to her that everything would be all right, I went into the cooler air of the front room.

Dr. Rowan Mayfair, founder and head of Mayfair Medical, was seated in one of the mahogany chairs (picture nineteenth-century Rococo, black lacquer and velvet), and her head turned sharply as if jerked by a cord when I entered.

Now, we had seen each other before, as I noted, at Aunt Queen's funeral Mass in St. Mary's Assumption Church. In fact, I'd sat dangerously close to her, being in the pew right in front of her. But I'd been better camouflaged at the time by ordinary clothes and sunglasses. What she saw now was the Brat Prince in his frock coat and handmade lace, and I'd forgotten to put on my sunglasses, which was just a stupid mistake.

I hadn't had a really good look at her at all. Now I found myself instantly fascinated, which wasn't too comfortable since it was my role to fascinate as our conversation went on.

Her lean oval face was delicately sculpted and as clean as a little girl's and needed nothing in the way of paint to make it remarkable, with its huge gray eyes and cold flawless mouth. She wore a severe, gray wool pants suit, with a red scarf wrapped around her neck and tucked down into her lapels, and her short ash blond hair appeared to curl under naturally just below the soft line of her jaw.

Her expression was intensely dramatic, and I sensed an immediate and sweeping probe of my mind, which I locked up tight. I felt chills down my backbone. She was creating this.

She had fully expected to read my thoughts and she couldn't. And she was blocked from knowing what was going on upstairs. She didn't like it. But to put it more Biblically, she was

deeply grieved.

And being shut out, she tried to make sense of my appearance, not at all concerned with the superficial eccentricity of the frock coat and my messy hair, but of elements which were more purely vampiric—the subtle sheen of my skin and the electric blue of my eyes.

I had to start talking quickly, but let me fill you in first on my instantaneous take on the other Mayfair—Fr. Kevin—who was standing at the far mantel, the only other occupant of the room.

Nature had dealt him the same cards as Mona—deep green eyes and red hair. In fact, he could have been her big brother, the genes were so close, and he was my height, six feet, and well built. He wore clerical black with the white Roman collar. And he was not the witch Rowan was, but he was more than slightly psychic, and I could read him easily: he thought I was weird and he was hoping Mona was already dead.

I sparked off the memory of him at Mass in his Gothic robes holding the chalice in his hands. *This is my blood.* And for reasons I couldn't possibly explain, I was taken slap back to my village childhood in France, to the ancient church and the village priest saying those very same words, chalice in hand, and for a moment I lost my perspective on everything. Other mortal memories threatened, perfected in color and lucidity. I saw the monastery where I'd studied, so happy, where I'd so wanted to be a monk. Oh, this was sickening.

And with another decided chill, I realized that Dr. Mayfair had caught these images out of my mind before I closed it up again.

I shook it off, annoyed for a moment that the double parlor was so crowded with shadow. Then my eyes latched on to the stark, don't belong, figure of Oncle Julien, three-dimensional and exquisitely solid in a slim gray suit, standing in the far corner, arms folded, eying me with calculating opposition. He was fiercely actual, and fiercely bright.

"What's wrong with you?" Dr. Rowan Mayfair asked. Her voice was deep, husky and sensual. Her eyes were still picking me apart.

"You don't see any ghost in here, do you?" I blurted out without thinking, the ghost just standing there all the while as it came clear to me that of course they didn't, neither of them. This shining and self-contained menace had it in for me.

"No, I don't see anything," Rowan answered promptly. "There's a ghost in this room that I ought to see?"

Women with these husky voices have a miraculous advantage.

"You do have your ghosts here," Fr. Kevin said acceptingly. Yankee accent. Boston. "As Quinn's friend, I thought you'd know."

"Oh, I do, yes," I said. "But I never get used to them. Ghosts scare me. So do angels."

"And didn't you hold an exorcism to get rid of Goblin?" asked the priest, throwing me off guard.

"Yes, and it worked," I said, glad of the distraction. "Goblin's gone from this house, and

Quinn's free of him for the first time in his life. I wonder what it will mean to him."

Oncle Julien didn't budge.

"Where is she?" asked Rowan, meaning Mona, who else?

"She wants to stay here," I said. "You know, it's simple." I crossed in front of her and sat down in a chair with its back to the floor lamp, putting myself in a bit of shadow, and so I could see everyone, even my nemesis. "She doesn't want to die at Mayfair Medical. She managed to drive the limousine all the way over here. You know Mona. And she's with Quinn upstairs. I want you to trust us. Leave her with us. We'll take care of her. We can call Aunt Queen's old nurse to help us."

Rowan was staring at me as if I'd lost my mind.

"Do you realize how difficult it's going to be?" she asked. She sighed and a great weariness showed itself in her, but only for an instant. "Do you realize how difficult it can get?"

"You've brought the oxygen and morphine, haven't you?" I glanced over my shoulder in the direction of the ambulance out front. "Leave them. Cindy, the nurse, will know how to use them."

Rowan raised her eyebrows. Same weariness again, but her strength was greater. She was trying to figure me out. Absolutely nothing about me frightened her or repelled her. I found her beautiful. There was a limitless intelligence behind her eyes.

"Quinn can't possibly understand what he's taking on," she said gently. "I don't want him to be hurt. I don't want her to die in pain. Do you follow me?"

"Of course I do," I said. "Trust me that we'll call you when it's time."

She bowed her head, but only for a second.

"No, no, you don't understand," she said, the husky voice so expressive of concern. "There's no reasonable explanation for her being still alive right now."

"It's her will," I countered. *I'm telling you the truth, there is no reason to be concerned for her.* "She's resting, free of pain," I said.

"That's impossible," Rowan whispered.

Something flickered in her expression.

"Who are you?" she asked, that deep voice underscoring her seriousness.

I was the one being spellbound. I couldn't break loose of her. I felt the chills again. The room was too dim. I wanted to tell Jasmine to turn up the chandelier.

"My name doesn't matter," I said, but it was hard for me to speak.

What *was* it about this woman? Why was her stripdown beauty so provocative and threatening? I wanted to see into her soul but she was far too clever to let it happen. Yet I sensed secrets in her, a trove of them, and I felt an electric connection to the monster child that Mona had revealed to me when I made her, and other things.

I knew suddenly this woman was hiding something dreadful to her own conscience, that the

dominant note of her character was this concealment and this conscience, and a great striving rooted in her brilliance and her guilt. I wanted it, whatever she was hiding, just to know it for a moment, just to know it in warmth with her. I would have given anything—.

She looked away from me. I had unwittingly stared her down and lost her, and she was fumbling silently, and I almost saw it: *a power over life and death.*

Fr. Kevin spoke up:

"I have to see Mona before we go," he said. "I must talk to Quinn, about the exorcism. I used to see Goblin, you understand. I'm concerned for both of them. You have to tell Mona we're here —."

He had taken a chair opposite me and I hadn't even noticed. "Perhaps we should both see her," he said to Rowan. "Then we can decide what to do." His was a gentle voice, perfect for a priest, humble yet totally unaffected.

I locked eyes with him, and it seemed for an instant I caught hold of shared secrets, things that they all knew, these Mayfairs, things they couldn't tell, things so profoundly connected to their wealth and their roots that they could never be outgrown or expurgated or overcome. With Fr. Kevin it was doubly hard because he was the confessor of this family, bound by that sacred oath, and also he'd been told things he could scarce believe and it had profoundly changed him.

But he too knew how to lock his mind. And again, all I got when I probed him was that aching memory of my own childhood schooling, of my wanting so badly to be good. An echo of my own mental voice coming back on me. I hated it. Away with it! It struck me, sharp and hard, that I had been given so many chances to save my soul that my entire life had been constructed around these chances! That was my nature—going from temptation after temptation, not to sin, but to be redeemed.

I'd never seen my life that way before.

Had that long-ago boy, Lestat, fought hard enough, he could have become a monk.

"Accursed!" whispered the ghost.

"That's not possible," I said.

"Not possible to see her!" Rowan said. "You can't be serious."

I heard a soft laughter. I turned around in the chair.

To my far right the ghost was laughing. "Now what are you going to do, Lestat?" he asked.

"What is it?" asked Rowan. "What are you seeing?"

"Nothing," I insisted. "You can't see her. I promised her. No one would come up. For God's sakes, let her alone." I threw all my conviction behind it. I suddenly felt desperate. "Let her die the way she wants, for the love of Heaven. Let her go!"

She glared at me, glared at this display of emotion. An immense inner suffering was suddenly visible in her face, as if she could no longer conceal it, or as if my own outburst, muted as it had been, had ignited the dim fire inside of her.

"He's right," said Fr. Kevin. "But you understand, we have to stay here."

"And it's not going to be very long," said Rowan. "We'll wait quietly. If you don't want us in the house …"

"No, no, of course you're welcome," I said. *"Mon Dieu!"*

Again came the ghostly laughter.

"Your hospitality is wretched!" said Oncle Julien. "Jasmine has not even offered them a cracker and glass of water. I am appalled."

I was bitterly amused by that, and I doubted the truth of it. I found myself worrying about it and became incensed! And at the same time I heard something, something nobody in the room could hear, except perhaps the laughing ghost. It was the sound of Mona crying, nay, sobbing. I had to go back to Mona.

All right, Lestat, be a monster. Throw the most interesting woman you've ever met out of the house.

"Listen to me, both of you," I said, fixing Rowan in my gaze, and then flashing on Fr. Kevin. "I want you to go home. Mona's as psychic as you are. It distresses her dreadfully that you're down here. She senses it. She feels it. It adds to her pain." (All this was true, wasn't it?) "I gotta go back up there now and comfort her. Please leave. That's what she wants. That's what gave her the strength to drive here. Now I promise you I will contact you when it's all over. Please go."

I rose, and I took Rowan's arm and all but lifted her out of the chair.

"You are a perfect lout," said the ghost, disgustedly.

Fr. Kevin was on his feet.

Rowan stared at me, transfixed. I guided her into the hallway and to the front door, and the priest followed. *Trust in me. Trust that it's what Mona wants.*

Could they hear Mona's sobs now?

Without taking my eyes off Rowan's eyes, I opened the front door. Blast of summer heat, scent of flowers. "You go now," I said.

"But the oxygen, the morphine," said Rowan. Whiskey voice, they called it. It was so seductive. And behind her delicate probing frown was this conflict, this unadmitted and sinful power. What was it?

We stood on the front porch, like dwarves underneath the columns. The purple light was suddenly soothing and the moment lost its proportions. It was like eternal dusk here in the country. I could hear the birds of the night, the distant unquiet waters of the swamp.

Fr. Kevin instructed the orderlies. They brought in the supplies.

I couldn't break away from this woman. What had I been saying to her? The ghost was laughing. I was getting confused.

What is your secret?

I felt a physical push, as though she had stretched out her two hands and laid them on my

chest and tried to move me back from where I stood. I saw the ghost over her shoulder. It came from her, the push. It had to come from her.

Her face was engraved with a hostile beauty.

She tossed her hair just slightly, let it stroke her cheeks.

She narrowed her eyes. "Take care of Mona for me," she said. "I love her with all my heart. You cannot know what it means to me that I failed with her—that all my gifts, all my resources —."

"Of course. I know how you love her," I said. "I love her and I hardly know her." This was babble. This woman was suffering. Was I suffering? The ghost was accusing me. A tall man right behind her but she had no sense of him.

What was it that was slipping out of her conscious to me? Something so very dreadful that it had shaped her entire existence; and she felt it keenly at this moment. *I have taken life.*

I shuddered. Her eyes wouldn't let me move.

I have taken life again and again.

The orderlies swept by with more equipment. Cool air flooded out of the open front door. Jasmine was there. The ghost stood firm. It seemed to me that the curve of the limbs of the pecan trees marching down the gravel drive meant something, a secret communication from the Lord of the Universe, but what?

"Come to me," I said to Rowan. A life founded upon suffering, upon reparation. I couldn't bear it, I had to touch it, enclose it, save it.

I took her in my arms, Dear God Forgive Me, kissing her cheeks and then her mouth. *Don't fear for Mona.*

"You don't understand," she whispered. In a scalding moment I saw the hospital room, a torture cell of machines and pulsing numbers, glistening plastic bags feeding into dangling tubes, and Mona sobbing, sobbing the way she was now, and Rowan standing in the doorway. *Almost used the power, almost killed—.*

"I see, I do," I said. "And it was not the right time and she wanted to come to Quinn," I whispered the words in her ear.

"Yes," she said, her own tears rising, "and I frightened her. You see. She knew what I meant to do, she knew I had the power, it would have showed up as a stroke on the autopsy, just a stroke, but she knew! I almost.… I terrified her. And.…"

I held her so tight. I drew in my breath.

I kissed her tears. I wished I was a saint. I wished I was the priest who stood by the car waiting for her, pretending not to see our kissing. What was kissing? Mortal kissing? I kissed her mouth again. Mortal loving and all the while the thundering desire for the link of the blood, not her death, no, Dear God, no, just the link of the blood, the knowing. Who was this Rowan Mayfair! My head swam.

And the ghost beyond her glared as though he'd harrow Hell to bring its forces against me.

"How could you tell when was the right moment?" I answered. "And the thing to cling to is that you didn't do it. And now she has her time with Quinn." Oh, such deceitful euphemisms for one who detests all euphemisms, and with reason. I kissed her hard and eagerly and felt her body soften, felt her lock to me for one precious instant, and then the flash of icy coldness as she pulled away.

She hurried down the steps, her heels barely making a sound. Fr. Kevin was holding the door of the car open for her. The ambulance was already backing up. She turned and looked at me and then she waved at me.

Such a tender, unexpected gesture. I felt my heart grow huge, and its beating too much for me.

No, you poor darling. You didn't kill her. I did it. I killed her. I'm guilty. And she's sobbing again. And the ghost knows.

5

None of the mortals in the house could hear Mona sobbing. The walls were too thick.

Meantime, the middle of the dining room table was being draped and set for supper, and Jasmine wanted to know if Quinn and I would join Tommy and Nash; I told her No, we couldn't leave Mona, which she already knew.

I told her to please call Cindy, the Nurse, though she probably wasn't needed, and to put the oxygen tank and the medicine out of the way. (Actually, this lovely lady spells her name Cyndy, so we will start spelling it this way from here on.)

I went into the living room. I tried to clear my head. The simple perfume of Rowan on my hands paralyzed me. I had to get straight.

Snap to a tender affection for everybody in the house. Go to Mona.

What *was* all this succumbing to a human witch! The entire Mayfair family was full of troublemakers! Mayfair design and Mayfair will were quickening my pulse. I think I even cursed Merrick, that she had planned to immolate herself last night on that altar, that she'd somehow found a way to save her immortal soul, and left me to my own usual damnation.

And then there was the ghost. The Mayfair ghost had returned to his corner. He stood there giving me the most malevolent look I've ever seen on any creature, vampire or human.

I took his measure: a male, aged sixty perhaps, short curly hair, snow white; eyes gray or black; excellent facial features and regal bearing, though why the age of sixty I couldn't figure unless he'd felt most especially powerful at that earthly time of life, because I knew for a fact that he'd died long before Mona and could therefore haunt in any guise he chose.

These thoughts didn't bait him. There was something so intrinsically menacing in his stillness that I couldn't bear it.

"All right, then, be quiet," I said firmly. I detested the quaver in my voice. "Why the Hell are you haunting me? You think I can undo what I've done? I can't. Nobody can. You want her to die, haunt her, not me."

No change in him.

And no way could I trivialize and diminish the woman who'd just waved to me before stepping into the car, salt of her tears still on my lips to be licked. So why keep trying? What had befallen me?

Big Ramona, who happened to glance in from the hall, drying her hands on her apron, said, "And now we have another madman talking to himself, and right by the desk that Grandpa William used to go to all the time for no reason. Now that was a ghost that Quinn used to see, and me and Jasmine too."

"What desk, where?" I stammered. "Who is Grandpa William?" But I knew that story. And I saw the desk. And Quinn had seen the ghost over and over pointing to the desk, and they had searched it over and over, year in and year out, and found nothing.

Snap back, you idiot!

Upstairs Quinn tried tenderly and desperately to comfort Mona.

Tommy and the ever distinguished Nash came down for their dinner and passed, without noticing me, into the dining room across the way, their low conversation uninterrupted throughout, and seated themselves.

I went to the cameo case near the piano. That meant walking away from the ghost who was to my far right, but it made no difference. His eyes followed me.

This case was where Aunt Queen's cameos were displayed, and it was never locked. I opened the glass top—it was hinged like the cover of a book—and I picked up an oval cameo with a tiny display of Poseidon and his consort in a chariot pulled by sea horses, with a god to lead them over billowing waves, all of this spectacular progress intricately wrought. Cool.

I slipped the cameo into my pocket and went upstairs.

I found Mona lying on the bed, crying dreadfully among the flowers, with a desperate Quinn standing by the far side of the bed, leaning over her and trying to comfort her. Quinn was more frightened than I've ever seen him. I made a quick gesture to let him know everything was working well.

The ghost wasn't in the room. I could neither feel him nor see him. Cagey. So he doesn't want to be seen by Mona?

Mona was naked, Lady Godiva hair everywhere, her body shimmering and fine as she lay sobbing among the poetic blooms; and the neat stack of Aunt Queen's white garments had fallen and was scattered all over the floor.

For a moment I felt a deep stab of horror, a horror I deserved and couldn't escape, and which I didn't intend to confide to either Quinn or Mona as long as we all lived, no matter how many years or decades that might be; a horror of what whim and will can do and had done. But as usual with grand moral realizations, there was no time for it.

I looked at Quinn—my Little Brother, my pupil.

He'd been made by monsters he'd loathed and it had never occurred to him to weep in their presence. What Mona was doing was entirely predictable.

I lay down on the bed right beside her, and when I lifted her hair back and looked into her eyes, she went utterly silent.

"What the Hell's the matter with you?" I demanded.

A pause in which her loveliness struck me with all the subtilty of an avalanche.

"Well, nothing," she said, "if you're going to put it like that."

"For the love of God, Lestat," said Quinn, "don't be cruel to her. Surely you know what she's going through."

"I'm not being cruel," I said. (Who, me, cruel?) I kept my tight focus on her. "Are you afraid of me?" I asked.

"No," she said. Her eyebrows puckered. The blood tears stained her cheeks. "It's only that I know so well that I should have died," she said.

"Then sing a requiem," I said. "Let me supply some words: 'O heat, dry up my brains! Tears seven-times salt, burn out the sense and virtue of mine eye!' "

She laughed.

"Very well, honey bunch, let me hear it. I'm the Maker. Let it go."

"I knew that for so long, that I ought to die. God, when I think of it, it's the only thing I really know right now! I was supposed to die." Her words flowed calmly. "People around me got so used to it, they slipped up. They'd say, 'You used to be so beautiful, we'll never forget that.' Dying, that had become the central obligation of my life. I used to lie there and try to figure how to make it easier for people. I mean they were so miserable. This went on slowly for years—."

"Keep talking," I said. I loved her easy trust, her immediate openness.

"There was a period of time where I could still enjoy music and chocolate, you know, special things, like bed jackets with lace too. And I could dream of my child, my lost child. Then I couldn't really eat anything anymore. And the music only made me jittery. I kept seeing people who weren't really there. I thought Maybe I never had that child. Morrigan, gone so fast. But then I wouldn't have been dying if I hadn't had Morrigan. I saw ghosts.…"

"Oncle Julien?" I asked.

She hesitated, then: "No. Oncle Julien only came to me way, way back, when he wanted me to do something, and it was always in a dream. Oncle Julien is in the Light. He doesn't come to the Earth unless there's a really important reason."

(Deep carefully concealed shudder.)

She went on, the vampiric musicality sharpening her soft words: "These ghosts I saw were just really dead people like my father and my mother who were waiting for me—you know, the ones who come to take you across—but they wouldn't speak to me. It wasn't time yet, that's what Fr. Kevin said. Fr. Kevin's a powerful witch. He never knew until he came home South. He goes into St. Mary's Assumption Church in the night when it's completely dark except for the candles, you know, and he lies down on the marble, full-length, you know—."

(Secret heartache. *I know.*)

"—and with his arms outstretched, he contemplates Christ on the Cross. He imagines himself

kissing the bloody wounds of Christ."

"And you in your pain? Did you pray?"

"Not very much," she said. "It was like prayer would have required a certain coherence. This last year, I was incapable of that coherence."

"Ah, yes, I see," I said. "Go on."

"And things happened," she said. "People wanted me to die. Something happened. Someone … People wanted me to get it over with.…"

"Did you want to get it over with?"

She didn't answer right away, then she said, "I wanted to escape. But when someone … someone.… My thoughts became—"

"—became what?"

"Became trivial."

"No, not so," I insisted.

"How to get out of the room, how to get all the way down the steps, how to scoot behind the wheel of the limo, how to get the flowers, how to get to Quinn—."

"I see. Poetic. Specific. Not trivial."

"A destination with the sanction of poetry, perhaps," she said. " 'There with fantastic garlands did she come.' And so I did."

"Most certainly," I said. "But before you could do it—you were going to say something, you were about to say something about someone.…"

Silence.

"Then Rowan came," she said. "You don't know my cousin Rowan."

(I don't?)

Flash of pain in her clear brilliant eyes.

"Yeah, well, Rowan came," she said. "Rowan has this power.…"

"Was it for your sake or her sake that she was going to kill you?"

She smiled. "I don't know. I don't think she knew, either."

"But she realized you knew and she didn't use her power."

"I told her, I said, 'Rowan, you're scaring me! Stop it, you're scaring me!' And she burst into tears. Or was it me? I think I burst into tears! It was one of us. I was so scared."

"And so you escaped."

"Yes, I did, indeed I did."

" 'Which time she chanted snatches of old tunes.' "

She smiled again. Would she talk about the Woman Child? She lay very still.

I could feel Quinn's anxiety, and the outpouring of his love.

All the while, he hadn't moved the hand that lay on her shoulder.

"I'm not dying," she said with a shrug. "I'm here."

"No, you're not," I said, "that's finished."

"I've got to reach back and remember when I wanted things."

"No, you don't," I said. "That's mortal talk. You're Mona—Born to Darkness now." I tried to take it slowly, watching her smile come and go. Faint freckles on her face. The inevitable glister of her skin.

"That's it," I said. "Let your eyes drink me in. You're seeing colors you never saw before. You're realizing sensations you never even dreamt about. The Dark Blood's a magnificent teacher. You shiver because you think the pain's going to come back, but you couldn't go back to that pain if you wanted to. Stop shivering. I mean it. Stop."

"What are you asking of me?" she said, "that I surrender to you or to the Blood?"

I laughed under my breath. "I don't know why women always surprise me," I said. "Men don't. I think I underestimate women in general. They distract me. Their loveliness always strikes me as alien."

She laughed outright. "What do you mean, alien?"

"You're the Great Unknown, Sweetheart."

"Elaborate," she said.

"Well, think about Adam in the Bible, I mean this guy is the Wimp of All Time saying to Almighty God, the Creator, Yahweh Who made the stars, 'The woman gave me to eat!' I mean the poor slob is just a spineless hopeless jerk! And this is Original Sin, no less! The Primal Catastrophe. Oh, I mean—pa-lease. BUT! When you see a magnificent woman—like you—with your green eyes just the perfect distance apart, tinsel voice giving out intelligent words, lying naked and staring with an expression of keen unerring comprehension, you can sort of read into Adam an inevitable bafflement in the face of Eve, something that defies clarification, and that's how Adam could come up with such a ludicrous excuse! 'This completely weird, way out, strange, mysterious inscrutable seductive being which you made out of my rib, gave me to eat.' Get it?"

Quinn gave me a little laugh against his will. He was seething with possessiveness. Me and her on the bed. But this was nice, his laughter.

I locked in on her again. Enough about the Garden of Eden. (And enough about what had just happened downstairs on the front porch between me and someone infinitely better than any figment of my longing.)

Hell. It was the damned flowers all over the bed! She was patiently waiting, naked breasts against me, red hair snarled in the roses, just looking at me, green eyes and soft mouth actually sweet. A preternatural being, and I had known the most miraculous of them. What was getting to me? Kindly continue as if nothing was wrong. *As if you have not done Evil again, you fiend!*

"Surrender to both of us, me and the Blood," I said. "I want you and Quinn to be perfect the way I'm not. I want to take you through an apprenticeship that's flawless. You hear me? Quinn

was twice maimed when twice born. Bad mothers. I want to erase that from his heart."

I felt Quinn's gentle squeeze on my arm. An assent even though I was lying practically on top of the succulent little love of his life, now transformed into his immortal companion.

"The Blood told me things," she said. She was in no hurry. Her tears were dried, like ashes flaking on her cheeks. "It was coherent, the Blood," she said. "I didn't realize it until it was over. It felt too good. Then came the thoughts. I know you've survived centuries. You've even survived yourself. You went into a desert place like Christ. You didn't die because your blood's too strong. You're afraid you can't die. Everything you've believed in has been shattered. You tell yourself you have no illusions, but that's not true."

She shivered again. It was advancing too fast for her. Maybe too fast for me. Where was that ghost? Tell her about the ghost? No. I was relieved she couldn't read my mind anymore.

"I have no theology of us," I said to her. I was really talking to Quinn too. "God tolerates us, but what does that mean?"

She smiled almost bitterly. "Who has a theology of now, anyway?" she asked.

"Lots of people. Your Fr. Kevin, it seems," I replied.

"He has a Christology," she replied. "It's different."

"Sounds awfully good to me," I said.

"Oh, come on, he couldn't convert you if he had the next hundred years."

I thought bitterly of Memnoch, the Devil. I thought of God Incarnate, with whom I'd spoken. I thought of all my doubts that any of it had been real, of all my suspicions that I was the mere pawn of spirits in some elaborate game, and of how I'd fled Perdition, with its myriad roaring holographs of confrontational guilt for the cold snow-filled streets of New York, avowing the material, the sensual, the solid above all illusions. Did I really not believe in those things which I saw? Or had I simply found that cosmos to be unendurable?

I didn't know. I wanted to be a saint! I was frightened. I felt emptiness. What was the nature of her monster child? I didn't want to know. Yes, I did.

And then I fixed my eyes on her. I thought of Quinn. And there flared for me in dim luminescence a scheme of meaning.

"We do have myths," I said. "We had a goddess. But now is not the time for all those things. You needn't believe all I've seen. What I do have to give you is a vision. I think a vision is stronger than an illusion. And the vision is that we can exist as powerful beings without hurting anyone who's good and kind."

"Slay the Evil Doer," she said with inevitable innocence.

"Amen," I said. "Slay the Evil Doer. And then we do possess the world, the world you wanted when you were a crazed kid, daydreaming on your long restless walks all over New Orleans, your professed Wander Slut days, the little Sacred Heart Academy girl seducing all of her cousins, I know you, and thriving at home on junk food and the computer, yeah, I saw it, your drunken

parents safely out of your hair, their names already inscribed in the Book of Death, all that before anything broke your heart."

"Whoa!" She gave me back a soft laugh. "So vampires can say all those words without taking a breath. You got it. And you just told me not to look back. You like to give orders."

"So we ransacked each other's souls during the Dark Trick, that's what's supposed to happen," I said. "I wish I could eat your little mind now. You've got me puzzled. Dreaming dreams. I'm forgetting things, like, for instance, that those I make in the Blood usually wind up despising me or leaving me for simpler reasons."

"I don't want to leave you," she said. Then came the pucker of her red eyebrows again, tiny distinct wrinkles in the smooth flesh that vanished instantly. "I'm thirsting," she said. "Am I supposed to thirst? I can see blood. I can smell it. I want it."

I sighed. I wanted to give her mine. But it wasn't the right way to go about things. She needed her appetite for the hunt. I was flustered suddenly.

Even Quinn, with all the adolescent mortal lust boiling in his brain, was handling her rebirth better than I was. Let's get a grip.

I withdrew from the flower-strewn bower. Woke up to the room. And Quinn standing there, patient, with so much confidence in me that he kept his jealousy in check. I sparked off his blue eyes.

She ruffled the flowers on the bed into ruin and mumbled poetry again.

I took her hand and brought her up off the bed and onto her feet. She shook all the petals out of her hair. I tried not to look at her. She was as ripe and glowing as any dream-world sacrificial virgin. She sighed and looked at all the scattered clothes.

Quinn gathered them up, swooping down, circling her carefully as if he didn't dare to touch her.

She looked at me. No flaw remained. All the bruises of those needles, they were gone as I knew they would be. But I must confess (to you) that I'd been a little unsure. She'd been so weak, so worked over, so torn. But the cells had been there, hiding, waiting for the renewal. And the Blood had found them out and re-created her.

Her lips were trembling a little and she said in a half whisper,

"How long do you think before I can go to Rowan? I don't want to fake my death, tell them lies, all that, disappear leaving a space where I was. I—. There are things I want to know from them. My child, you know, she went away. We lost her. But maybe now …" She was looking around at the most common objects, the bedpost, the edge of the velvet spread, the carpet under her naked toes. She flexed her toes. "Maybe now.…"

"You don't have to die," I said. "Isn't Quinn the clear proof of that? Quinn's been living here at Blackwood Farm for a year. Things are in limbo for you. Later on tonight you can call Rowan. Tell her you're all right, that the nurse is here …"

"Yes …"

"She's a sweet and loving nurse whom I can dazzle like that, I've done it, I know, and they'll feed her Creole chicken and rice in the kitchen. You're blinding me, Beautiful. Put on your clothes."

"Right-O, Boss," she whispered.

A smile flitted across her face, but I could tell her mind was giving her no peace. One minute she was looking at the flowers as though they were out to attack her and the next she was plunged into thought.

"But what about the people left in this house?" she asked. "They all saw me when I came in. I know what I looked like. We tell them it's a miracle?"

I burst out laughing.

"Is there a raincoat in your closet, Quinn?"

"I can think of something fancier than that," he replied.

"Cool. And you can carry her down the steps? I already told Clem we'd be going into New Orleans."

"Right-O, Boss," she said again, with a faint smile. "What are we going to do in New Orleans?"

"Hunt," I said. "Hunt and drink from the Evil Doer. You use your telepathic power to seek them out. But I'm going to assist you. I'm going to lead you to the kill. I'm going to be there with you."

She nodded. "I'm positively parched," she said. Then her eyes went wide. Her tongue had just touched her tiny fang teeth. "Good God," she whispered.

"He's in Heaven," I said softly. "Don't let Him hear you."

She took the panties from Quinn and slipped them on, pulling them up over her little nest of red pubic hair. That was ten times worse than pure nakedness. The lace slip with its delicate straps came over her head, a bit long for her because she wasn't as tall as Aunt Queen had been, but otherwise it was fine, snug over her breasts and hips, the broad lace hem just above her ankles.

Quinn took out his pocket handkerchief and wiped the caked blood off her cheeks. He kissed her, and she fell to kissing him, and for a moment they were just lost to each other, kissing and kissing, like two long graceful cats licking at each other.

He picked her up off her feet and wouldn't stop kissing her. They were both of them purring. He wanted so badly to drink just a taste of her blood.

I slumped down in the chair at Quinn's desk.

I listened to the house. Clatter of dishes in the sink, Jasmine talking. Cyndy, the Nurse, was there crying at the sight of Aunt Queen's room; and where was Quinn's mother, Patsy? Clem out front waiting for us with that big car, yes, right, don't frighten her by carrying her through the air; take the car.

In a daze of small considerations, I watched her slip on the silk dress. The silk dress appeared handmade with embroidered cuffs and a tight embroidered collar that Quinn clasped at the back of her neck. It hung to her ankles. It looked divine on her—like a gown rather than a dress. She was a barefoot princess. Oh yeah, that's a cliché, well then, so is a fulsome and comely young woman. Shove it.

She put on a pair of slightly scuffed little white slippers, the kind you can buy in any drugstore, the ones she'd obviously worn over here, and after she put her head back and tossed her hair, she was almost complete. It was vampire hair now, and it needed no real brushing, each strand fighting with the strand next to it, the whole voluminous and gleaming, her forehead high and well proportioned, with eyebrows divinely set, and then she flashed on me. I'm still here, guys.

"It's tricky," she said gently, as if she didn't want to be rude to me. "He knows you have a cameo in your pocket, and so I know because I can read his thoughts."

"Oh, so that's what I've done here," I said, laughing under my breath. "I forgot about the cameo." I gave it to Quinn. I could foresee this triangular telepathy being something of a nightmare.

Yes, I'd wanted them free to read each other's thoughts, so why the Hell was I jealous?

Towering over her, he pinned the cameo carefully in the center of the embroidered white collar. It looked old and fine.

Then in an anxious whisper he put a question to her.

"You wouldn't wear Aunt Queen's high-heel shoes, would you?"

She went into a riot of soft laughter. So did I.

Till her dying day, Aunt Queen had apparently gone about in breakneck high heels with ankle straps and open toes, some covered in rhinestones or, for all I knew, real diamonds. She'd had on such wondrous shoes when I made her acquaintance.

One of the enduring ironies of her death was that she had been in her bare stocking feet when she suffered the fall that killed her. But that was the evildoing of Goblin, who had deliberately startled her and even pushed her.

So the shoes were innocent and there were probably piles of them in her closets downstairs.

But slap together the image of Mona, the tramp kid, in saddle oxfords, and any vision of Aunt Queen's heels, and it was uproariously funny. Why would Mona do such a thing as that to herself? And if you knew how much Quinn noticed women's high heels—namely Jasmine's and Aunt Queen's, it was twice as uproariously funny.

Mona was stuck someplace between vampire trance and total love, gazing into Quinn's earnest face trying to figure this.

"All right, Quinn, I'll try her shoes," she said, "if you want me to." Now that was pure transnatural female.

He was on the phone to Jasmine in an instant. Bring upstairs Aunt Queen's finest big white satin wrapper—one of the full-length articles with the ostrich feather trim, and a pair of her new heels, very glittery, and hurry.

It didn't require a vampire's hearing to pick up Jasmine's answer:

"Lawd! You're going to make that sick girl put on those things? Have you lost your mind, Little Boss! I'm coming up there! And Cyndy, the Nurse, is here and she is as shocked as I am, and she's coming with me, and you better leave that child alone. Lawd! I mean Lawd! You can't go undressing her like a doll, Taw-quin Blackwood, you lunatic! Is that child dead already? Is that what you're trying to tell me? Answer me, Taw-quin Blackwood, this is Jasmine talking to you! Do you even know that Patsy's run off and left all her medicines, and nobody knows where the Hell she's gone? Now, I don't blame you for not caring about Patsy but somebody's got to think of Patsy, and Cyndy's crying her eyes out down here over Patsy—."

"Jasmine, calm down," Quinn said. He went on in the most courteous and calm manner. "Patsy's dead. I killed her night before last. I broke her neck and dumped her in the swamp and the alligators ate her. You don't have to worry about Patsy anymore. Throw her medicines in the trash. Tell Cyndy, the Nurse, to have some supper. I'm coming down for Aunt Queen's shoes and negligee myself. Mona is completely better." He put down the phone and went straight out the door. "Latch this after me."

I obliged.

Mona looked at me searchingly.

"He was telling the truth about Patsy, wasn't he?" she asked. "And Patsy's his *mother*???"

I nodded. I shrugged.

"They'll never believe him," I said, "and it was the smartest thing for him to do. He can repeat that confession until doomsday. But when you know more about Patsy, you'll understand."

She looked horrified, and the Blood was intensifying it.

"Which was the smartest thing?" she asked. "Killing Patsy or telling them that?"

"Telling them is what I meant," I pursued. "Killing her only Quinn can explain. Patsy hated Quinn, I can attest to that, and she was a hard merciless woman. She was dying of AIDS. She didn't have much time on the mortal clock. The rest he can answer."

Mona was aghast, a virgin vampire about to faint from moral shock.

"In all the years I've known him, he has never mentioned Patsy to me or even answered by E-mail one single solitary question about his mother."

I shrugged again. "He has his secrets as you have. I know the name of your child. Morrigan. But he doesn't."

She flinched.

There was the pounding sound of argument rising through the floor below. Even Nash and Tommy, fresh from the supper table, had been pressed into the cause on Jasmine's side, and Big

Ramona declared Quinn a necromaniac. Cyndy the Nurse was sobbing.

"But still," said Mona, "to kill your own mother."

For one brief technicolor second, I let myself think of my own mother, Gabrielle, whom I had brought into the Blood. Where in the wide world was she—that cold silent unmovable creature whose solitude was unimaginable to me? It hadn't been so very long ago that I'd seen her. I'd see her again, some time or other. There was no warmth, no solace, no understanding there. But what did it matter?

Quinn rapped on the door. I let him in. I could hear the engine of the limousine started outside. Clem was getting ready for us. The night was hot. He was running the cooling. It would be sweet driving into New Orleans.

Quinn leaned back against the door when it was shut and bolted, and took a deep breath. "It would have been easier," he said, "to rob the Bank of England."

He thrust the glittering high-heel slippers into Mona's waiting hands.

She looked them over.

She slipped them on her feet, gaining a good four inches in height and a tension in her legs that even through the dress appeared ruthlessly seductive. The shoes were just a tiny bit too short, but it was hardly noticeable, the rhinestone-studded strap cutting across her toes exquisitely. He buckled one ankle strap as she did the other.

She took the long white negligee from Quinn and put it on, wrapping it about her and laughing as the shivering feathers tickled her. It was loose and shimmering and gaudy and glorious.

She ran all about the room in little and big circles. One of those things guys can't do????? Her balance was perfect. Just the beginning of her strength, and so some sense of frivolity inside of her wanted these impossible torturous slippers. Round and around, and then she froze against the far window:

"Why on earth did you kill your mother?" she asked.

Quinn stared at her. He seemed at a total loss. He went towards her in a great fluid gesture. He took her in his arms and pressed her to him as he'd done before and said nothing. Momentary fear. The mention of Patsy had enveloped him in darkness. Or maybe it was Aunt Queen's finery.

There came a loud rapping at the door. Jasmine's voice followed:

"You open up, Little Boss, and let me see that child, or I swear to God I'll get the sheriff."

Cyndy's sweet voice followed, so reasonable and kind. "Quinn? Quinn, please let me have a look at Mona?"

"Pick her up," I said to Quinn. "Carry her through them, past them, down the stairs and out the front door and into the car. I'm right with you."

6

We were out of the house and on the road within three minutes, maybe less, moving on mortal time so as not to alarm any further the full chorus of those shouting at us. Mona had sense enough to pull up the shivering feathers of the wrapper over her face so that nothing could be seen of her but heaps of red hair and dangling bejeweled feet, and we made our exit with polished polite assurances to the clamoring herd, directing the profoundly indifferent Clem to head for New Orleans "immediately."

It was I who gave the command with a quick smile that elicited the driver's sarcastic expression and shrug, but the mammoth limousine was soon rocking down the gravel drive, and Mona was between me and Quinn in the back seat, and then and only then did I begin to scan the city of New Orleans for possible victims.

"I can hear the voices like the din from Hell," I said. "Toughen up, baby. I'm looking for the eternal scum. Call them grim soulless mortals feeding off the downtrodden or the downtrodden feeding off each other. I always wonder—and never learn—whether or not the genuine Power Thugs ever stop to look at the violet evening sky or the overhead branches of an oak. Crack peddlers, child killers, teenaged gangsters for a fatal fifteen minutes, the morgue's never empty in our town, it's an eternal brew of calculated malice mixed with moral ignorance."

Mona dreamed, staring out the windows, caught up in every shift of the landscape. Quinn could hear the distant voices. Quinn could tune in from afar. Quinn was anxious, so in love with her, but far from happy.

The car gained speed as it took to the highway.

Mona gasped. She slipped her fingers around my left arm. You can never tell just what a fledgling will do. It's all so intoxicating.

"Listen," I said. "Quinn and I are listening."

"I hear them," she said. "I can't take one thread from the knots, I can't. But look at the trees. There's no tint on these windows. Mayfairs always tint their limousine windows."

"That was not Aunt Queen's way," said Quinn, staring forward, washed in the voices. "She wanted the clear glass so she could see out. She didn't care if people looked in."

"I keep waiting for it all to settle," Mona whispered.

"It never will," said Quinn. "It only gets better and better."

"Then trust me," she said to him, her fingers tightening on my arm. "Don't be so afraid for me. I have requests."

"Hit me with them, go on," I said.

"I want to go past my house—I mean the Mayfair house on First and Chestnut. I've been in te hospital for two years. I haven't seen it."

"No," I said. "Rowan will sense your presence. She won't know what you are any more than she knew at Blackwood Manor. But she'll know you're close. We're not going there. There'll come a time, but this isn't it. Go back to the thirst."

She nodded. She didn't fight me. I realized she hadn't fought me on anything.

But I knew she had heavy thoughts, more than usual links in the chain that bound fledglings to their living past. Something was catching hold of her, something to do with the warped images she'd shown me in the Blood—the Monstrous Offspring, the Woman Child. What had that been, that creature?

I didn't let Quinn pick this up from me. It was too soon to reveal all that. But he might well have caught it all in the room when I'd brought her over. I'd belonged to her during those moments, exclusively and dangerously. He might know all I'd seen. And he might be reading it from her now, though I knew she wasn't ready to reveal it.

The car was speeding across the lake. The lake looked like a huge dead thing rather than a body of living water. But the clouds rose in a triumphant mass beneath the emerging moon. When you're a vampire you can see the clouds that others can't see. You can live off things like that when faith is destroyed—the random shifting shapes of clouds, the seeming sentience of the moon.

"No, I need to go there," she said suddenly. "I have to see the house. I have to."

"What is this, a damned mutiny?" I answered. "I was just congratulating you in my mind that you didn't fight me."

"What? Do I get a merit badge for that?" she fired back. "We don't have to go close to the house," she went on, sob in her throat. "I just need to see those Garden District streets."

"Oh yeah, right," I said under my breath. "You care that you'll draw them right out of the house, right out of their peace of mind? You ready to follow up on that in some way? Of course I'm not saying you have to follow up. You understand, I'm just trying to respond to you and Mr. Quinn Blackwood as exemplary decent little people. I myself? I'm a scoundrel."

"Beloved Boss," she said with a straight face, "let me just go as close as we can, as close as you can figure. No, I don't want to rile them up. I hate the idea. But I was in solitary confinement for two years."

"Where *are* we headed, Lestat?" Quinn asked. "Will we hunt downtown?"

"Back of town is what I like to call it," I said. "No Creole like me is going to call it downtown. You know where the scum grows on the bricks. Listen for the city, Mona."

"I hear it," she answered. "It's like opening a floodgate. And then the discrete voices. Plenty of discrete voices. Bickering, threats, even the muffled snap of guns …"

"The town's full tonight in spite of the heat," I said. "People are out on the streets, thoughts flooding me in sickening waves. If I was a saint, this is what I would have to listen to all the time."

"Yeah, like prayers," she said. "All those petitions."

"Saints have to work," I said, as if I really knew.

And then with one fine blow it struck me. *Their presence.*

It hit Quinn at the same instant, and he said, "My God" under his breath. He was astonished.

"Close in on them," I said.

"What is it?" Mona asked. "I can't hear it." Then she locked her eyes on Quinn.

Oh, this was nothing short of providential! I was absolutely furious and deliriously happy at the same time. I closed my focus.

Oh, yeah, right, killing at random as they fed, a pair of male and female vampires, constitutionally cruel, high-toned, style versus character, brilliant gold and brand-name leather, drunk on their powers, lapping up New Orleans as if it weren't real, baiting the "great vampire Lestat," in whom they didn't really believe (who does?), prancing through my French Quarter streets to a lavish lair in a pricey hotel, key in the lock, blood full, laughter echoing to the ceiling, turn on the TV, done in for the night, innocent victims strewn in the back alleys, but not all of them, ready to groove on music or the color images of the mortal world, feeling totally superior, vague plan to sleep in the day in the filthy old whitewashed tombs of St. Louis No. 1 Cemetery, like, very bold! Unwittingly waiting to die.

I sat back laughing under my breath.

"This is too rich! Too deliciously wicked! She's up for it. Don't give it another thought. It's the lightning narcotic of enemy blood. It's perfect for her. And the sooner she learns to fight her own kind the better. Same for you, Quinn. You've never had to battle the cosmic trash that's out there."

"But this *has* to be perfect for her, Lestat," Quinn said. "You know what happened on my first night. I blundered. I can't let something ugly and bad happen to her—."

"You're breaking my tender little heart," I said. "Are you and she going in alone? I am going with you. You honestly think I can't handle this pair of mavericks? I've made myself too domestic for you, Quinn. You forget who I am and maybe I do too."

"But how will it end?" he persisted.

"Your innocence is so genuine," I responded.

"You should know that by now!" he said. And then at once, "I'm sorry. Forgive me. It's only —."

"Listen to me, both of you," I said. "We're talking the misbegotten of Hell. They've been

swaggering through eternity for a decade at most, just long enough to make them very cocky. I'll get the lowdown on their souls before I dispatch them, of course. But as of now I know they're outlaws. And I don't like them. And vampire blood is always hot. And the fighting will be good. They're greedy filth. They break the peace on my streets. That's a death sentence, at least when I have the time for it. And right now I have the time, and you have the thirst, and that's what interests me. No more questions."

A little laugh came from Mona. "And I wonder how their blood tastes," she said, "but I wouldn't dare ask you. Let's just say I'm up for it if you say so."

"You're a mocking little thing," I replied. "Do you like to fight? Fighting with mortals is no fun because it's no fair. No honor-bound immortal would do it any more than necessary. But fighting with these revenants is going to be great. And you can never tell how strong they're going to be, absolutely never. Then there are the images that come through their blood—sizzling, more electric than those from the human prey."

Squeeze of her hand.

Quinn was distressed. He thought of the night he first hunted: a wedding in Naples, and the bride had pulled him into a bedroom, intent on a caper to cut her new spouse, and he'd drunk her dry, spilling the first draught all over her dress. Over and over he relived that fall from grace, that awful moment of the full curse.

"Little Brother," I said. "Those were human beings. Look at me."

He turned towards me, and in the flashing lights of the freeway I peered into his eyes.

"I know I've played it elegant with you up till now," I said. "I've played the sage European and now you're seeing the rough side of me. And I have to remember you've been through Hell just telling me your story, and what with the death of Aunt Queen, it's been pure torture for you, and you richly deserve any good thing that I can conjure or give. But I have to rid the world of these two Blood Hunters. And you and Mona mustn't miss this opportunity."

"What if they're strong, what if they were made like me by someone very old?" he asked.

I sighed. "I've given you my blood, Quinn. And Mona's been made with it. My blood, Quinn. They're no match for you now. They're no match for her, I told you."

"I wanna do it!" Mona interjected immediately. "If you say they're fair game, then they're fair game, and that's good enough for me, Beloved Boss. I can't tell my own heart and soul what I'm feeling now, how much I crave this little battle. I can't find the words, it's so raw, so rooted inside me! It goes way back into the human part of me that's not going to die, doesn't it?"

"Yes," I said. "Precisely."

"Bravo," she said. "I'm picking them up. But, something's, something's confusing me …"

"Save it, we're almost there," I said.

A soft subdued expression came over Quinn, unmistakable in the light of the cars that flew by.

"What if they beg for mercy?" he asked.

“You can count on that happening,” I said with a little shrug.

“What if they know poetry?” he asked.

“It would have to be very fine,” I said. “Don’t you think? To make up for all those innocent victims?”

He wouldn’t let up. He couldn’t.

“What if they love you?”

7

Time out for one quick meditation on the matter of saints, as you know how much I want to be one and can't.

Now, when we left the Pope he was safely in his quarters, but in the time which it has taken me to faithfully record these events—don't worry, we'll snap back in less than five minutes!—the Pope has been to Toronto, Guatemala and Mexico, and in Mexico has canonized a saint.

Why do I make mention of this when Pope John Paul II has done many other things on this little trip, including beatifying a couple of guys and canonizing a saint in Guatemala as well?

Because when it comes to this saint in Mexico, I am particularly moved by the circumstances—that it was one Juan Diego, a humble Indian ("indigenous person," as some headlines claim) to whom Our Lady of Guadalupe appeared in 1531. This humble Indian, when first he told the local Spanish bishop about the Virgin's appearing to him, was ignored, naturally, until Our Lady worked a double miracle. She provided some gorgeous red roses for Juan Diego to gather for the bishop, roses growing impossibly in the snow on top of Juan Diego's home mountain, and when the little guy gladly opened his *tilma* (poncho) before the bishop to reveal these lovely blooms, there on the *tilma* itself was a full-color picture of Our Lady in unmistakable Virgin Mary form but with Indian skin.

This *tilma,* a garment made from cactus fibers, with its glorious picture of the Virgin Mary, still hangs intact in the Cathedral in Mexico City, and thousands flock to it every day. It is called Our Lady of Guadalupe, and there is no one in Christendom who has not seen this depiction of Christ's mother at one time or another in his or her life.

Okay. Now, I love this story. I always have. I think it's neat what happened to Juan Diego. When he was first trudging over the mountain, the Blessed Mother called to him: "Juanito!" Isn't that touching? And touching that thousands of Indians converted to Christianity after these miracles. And certainly it is wonderful that Pope John Paul II, ailing and eighty-two years of age, made it to Mexico to canonize Juan Diego.

But the Pope's critics aren't so happy. There are rumblings, says the press. Malcontents say there is no proof that Juan Diego ever existed.

Now, that is really rude!

And it points to a real misunderstanding of what the great spiritual wealth of Roman

Catholicism is all about.

If nobody can prove that Juan Diego existed, then obviously nobody can prove that he did not.

But let's suppose for a moment that Juan Diego doesn't exist, or didn't. The Pope is still infallible, right? "Whatever you shall bind on Earth shall be bound in Heaven," Christ said to Peter. Okay?

Even the worst critics of the Papacy admit that it's a modern marvel, no?

Therefore, without doubt, and without rumblings, at the instant that John Paul declared Juan Diego a saint, the little guy popped into existence in Heaven! Now think about what probably went through Juan Diego's mind. And don't forget that this is "an indigenous person" of the Americas no less, and here he finds himself in a Heaven which is, by anyone's description, totally beyond description.

In fact, if the latest crop of mystics are correct and the Heaven to which we go when we enter the Light is very much shaped by our own preconceived notions, Juan Diego, endowed by the full definition given him through the arguments and decisions of the Roman Curia is probably roaming around in his *tilma* made of cactus fiber, picking roses. I wonder if he has shoes.

Is he going to be lonely? Of course not. Only an atheist would entertain such a notion. Take it from me, the indescribable Heaven is an indescribable hurricane of magnificence.

But let's tone it down for our Foot of Sinai senses. Surrounded by his ever blooming garden, Juan Diego can if he wishes keep company with dozens of other saints who spent no time on Earth whatsoever, including the Blessed Virgin Mary's famed parents, Joachim and Anne, and St. Veronica whom I have personally met.

But it is much more likely that Juan Diego will find himself besieged by prayerful petitions. The voices from "indigenous persons" on Earth as well as the descendants of colonists will bring him in contact with the suffering and the misery of the planet he escaped.

What am I talking about?

Simply this. Whether he existed on Earth or not, Juan Diego is probably hard at work, dipping down through the astral layers in his human-shaped soul, listening earnestly to the faithful and relaying their petitions to the All Knowing One. He has to be. He is a saint of immense importance. And no doubt Our Lady of Guadalupe is looking down benevolently upon a whole new stream of tourists and venerators in Mexico City.

And the Pope has gone home to the Vatican, having canonized in his lifetime 463 saints.

I wish I was one of those saints. Maybe that's why I had to write this chapter. I'm envious of Juan Diego. Hmmm.

But I'm not a saint. And that didn't even take five minutes and you know it, so don't complain. It's just that I cannot forget my passion to be officially canonized.

Alas. Anon. *Alors. Mais oui. Eh bien.* Proceed to Chapter Eight directly.

8

So, nobody ever accused me of acquiring any real wisdom in my two hundred years on this Earth. I know only one way to proceed.

Clem let us out in front of the hotel, a new one, quite luxurious, and most expensive, and in the thick of things, so to speak, with an address on Canal Street, the great shabby divide of New Orleans, and an entrance out back to the French Quarter, the little world I preferred.

Mona was in such a trance that we had to propel her to the elevator, I on her left and Quinn on her right. Naturally everyone in the lobby took note of us—not because we were blood-sucking immortals bent on destroying two of our kind on the fifteenth floor, but because we were exceedingly and severely gorgeous, especially Mona, wrapped in feathers and shimmering fabric and poised atop a pair of breakneck heels.

Quinn was thirsting now as strongly as Mona was, and it would see him through what we had to do.

But I wasn't immune to the questions he'd raised in the car. Poetry, love. And me secretly aspiring to sanctity! What an everlasting life! And remember, honorary Children of the Night, what I said about telepathy. It ain't the real thing, no matter how good it is.

As soon as we reached the suite, I pushed the door in fairly quietly, without breaking its hinges, since I intended to close it again, and the spectacle into which I plunged on feline feet astonished me.

Ah, the Savage Garden of this Earth that hath such creatures in it!

The mavericks were dancing in dim light to the most intense music—a Bartók concerto for violin and orchestra flooding the room at max volume. The music was sad, ripping, overpowering—a command to abandon all things cheap and tawdry, a full-blown engulfing majesty.

And though they themselves were infinitely more arresting than I had ever anticipated, these two, I spied beyond them on the long deep burgundy-colored couch a cluster of mortal children, bruised, unconscious and obviously being used at random as blood victims.

All three of us were in the room with the door closed, and the insurgents danced oblivious to us, their senses drenched in lustrous sound and rhythm.

They were absolutely spectacular in appearance, with tanned skin, rippling jet black hair to the waist—being both of Semitic or Arabic descent—very tall and with large facial features,

including magnificent mouths, and they were inherently graceful. They danced with closed eyes, oval faces serene, in huge swaying and arching gestures, humming through closed lips to the music, and the male, who was on the surface almost indistinguishable from the female, every now and then shook out his immense veil of hair and swung it rapidly around him in a circle.

Their sleek black leather clothes were stunning and unisexual. Supple pants, sleeveless and collarless tops. They wore gold bracelets on their naked upper and lower arms. They embraced each other now and then and let each other go, and as we watched, the female dipped down into the cluster of mortal children and brought up to her lips a limp little boy, and drank from him.

Mona let out a scream at the sight of this, and at once the two vampires froze, staring at us. So similar were their movements, one would have thought they were grand automatons operated by a central system. The unconscious child was dropped to the couch.

My heart became a little knot inside me. I could scarcely breathe. The music flooded my brain, the ripping, sad, compelling voice of the violin.

"Quinn, shut it off," I said, and scarcely had I spoken when the music stopped. The parlor was plunged into a ringing vibrant silence.

The pair drew together. The figure they made was statuesque.

They had exquisite arched black eyebrows, heavily lidded eyes with thick eyelashes. Arabic, yes, from the streets of New York. Brother and sister, petty merchant class, real hard work, sixteen when made. It came flooding out of them, and also a torrent of worship for me, a torrent of exuberant happiness that I had "appeared." Oh, God help me. Juan Diego stand by me.

"We didn't dream we'd see you, actually see you!" said the female, with heavily accented words, voice rich and beguiling and reverent. "We hoped and prayed, and here you are and it is really you." Her lovely hands unfolded and reached out to me.

"Why did you kill innocent victims in my town," I whispered. "Where did you get these innocent children?"

"But you, you drank from children yourself, it's in the pages of the Chronicles," the male said. Same accented words, courteous, gentle tone. "We were imitating you! What have we done that you have not done!"

The knot in my heart grew tighter. Those accursed deeds, those accursed confessions. Oh God, forgive me.

"You know my warnings," I said. "Everyone knows. Stay out of New Orleans, New Orleans belongs to me. Who doesn't know those warnings?"

"But we came to worship you!" said the male. "We've been here before. You never cared. It was as if you were a legend."

Suddenly they realized their immense miscalculation. The male raced for the door, but Quinn caught his arm effortlessly and swung him around.

The female stood shocked in the center of the room, her jet black eyes staring at me, then

silently moving over Mona.

"No," she said, "no, you can't simply destroy us, you won't do it. You won't take from us our immortal souls, you will not. You are our dream, you are our model in all things. You cannot do this to us. Oh, I beg you, make of us your servants, teach us all things. We'll never disobey! We'll learn everything from you."

"You knew the law," I said. "You chose to break it. You thought you'd slip in and out, leaving your sins behind you. And you murder children in my name? You do this in my city? You never learned from my pages. Don't throw them in my face." I began to tremble. "You think I confessed what I did for you to follow my example? My faults were no template for your abominations."

"But we adore you!" said the male. "We come in pilgrimage to you. Bind us to yourself and we'll be filled with your grace, we'll be perfected in you."

"I have no absolution for you," I said. "You stand condemned. It's finished."

I heard Mona let out a little moan. I could see the struggle in Quinn's face.

The male tensed his entire body trying to get loose. Quinn held him with one hand wrapped around his upper arm.

"Let us go," said the male. "We'll leave your city. We'll warn others never to come. We'll testify. We'll be your holy witnesses. Everywhere we go, we will tell others that we've seen you, heard the warning from your own lips."

"Drink," I said to Quinn. "Drink till there's no more to drink. Drink as you've never done it before."

"I begrudge nothing!" whispered the male and he closed his eyes. All the struggling left him. "I am your fount in love."

Without hesitation, Quinn put his right hand on the huge mass of springy hair of the male and brought the head to the proper position, twisting it until the neck was bared, and then, closing his eyes, he sank his teeth.

Mona stared enthralled, then turned sharply to the female. The thirst transformed Mona's face. She appeared half asleep, eyes fastened to the female.

"Take her," I said.

The female gazed fearlessly on Mona. "And you, so beautiful," the vagrant said in her sharpened words, "you so beautiful, you come to take my blood, I give my blood, here, I give it to you. Only spare me for eternity." She opened her arms, these arms with gold bracelets, long fingers beckoning.

Mona moved as if in a trance. She embraced the sleek body of the female with her left arm, and pushed the hair away from the right side of the female's face, and bent her supple body down and took her.

I watched Mona. It was always a spectacle—the vampire feeding, a seeming human with her

teeth locked to another, eyes closed as if in deep sleep, no sound, only the victim shuddering and twisting, even her fingers motionless as she drank deeply, savoring the drug of the blood.

And so she was launched on the Devil's Road with this wretched sacrament, without the need of prodding, letting the thirst carry her through it.

The male collapsed at Quinn's feet. Quinn was dazed. He staggered backwards. "So far away," Quinn whispered. "An ancient one, from Jericho, can you imagine it, and he made them, and taught them nothing? What am I to do with this treasure of images? What am I to do with this curious intimacy?"

"Keep it close," I said. "Store it where the finer things are stored until such time as you need it."

I moved towards him slowly, then took the limp, soft victim from the floor and brought him into the tiled bathroom of the suite, a palatial marvel with a spacious tub completely surrounded by steps of green marble, and I threw the unfortunate one into the tub where he tumbled like a marionette without strings, settling silently. His eyes had rolled up into his head. He was murmuring in his native tongue, a fine collection of bronzed limbs and glints of gold, and the massive hair nesting beneath him.

In the parlor, I found Mona with her victim on their knees, and then Mona drew back, and for a moment it seemed she would lose consciousness herself, and they would be together in this, these two, their hair intermingling, but Mona rose and lifted the female.

I beckoned.

She carried the female, as a man would carry a woman, arm under her knees, arm around her shoulder. Dark hair streaming down.

"There in the tub, with her companion," I said.

Mona heaved her over with a sure gesture, letting her tumble in beside him.

The female was silent, unconscious, dreaming.

"Their Maker was old," Mona whispered, as if not to wake either of them. "He was tramping through eternity. Sometimes he knew who and what he was. And other times he didn't. He made the pair of them to run his errands. They found out everything on their own. They were so cruel. They were cruel for pleasure. They would have killed the children in the other room. They would have left them here."

"You want to kiss them good-bye?" I asked.

"I loathe them," she responded. She sounded so sleepy. "But why are they so lovely? Their hair so fine? It wasn't their fault. Their souls might have been beautiful."

"You think so? You *really* think so? You didn't taste their free will when you drank from them? You didn't taste an immense sweep of modern knowledge when you drank from them? And what was the summit of their existence, may I ask, other than bashing innocent souls; was it dancing and listening to fine music?"

Quinn came up behind her, keen for my words, and wrapped his arms around her. She raised her eyebrows and nodded.

"Watch what I do," I said. "Remember it."

I let loose the Fire with all my consuming power. Let it be merciful, Saint Lestat. I saw the outline of their black bones in the flames for a second, the heat blasting my face, and it was in that second, and that second only, that the bones moved.

The fire flashed to the ceiling, scorched it, and then shrank to nothingness. A tracery of the bones vanished. All that remained was black grease in the spacious tub.

Mona gasped. Her cheeks were beating with the blood she'd drunk. She stepped forward and peered down at the black bubbling grease. Quinn was speechless and plainly horrified.

"And so you can do that to me when I want to go, can't you?" Mona said, her voice raw.

I was shocked.

"No, dolly dear," I said. "I couldn't. Not if my life depended on it."

I let loose the Fire again. I sent it into the oily residue until there was nothing left.

And so the tall graceful long-haired dancers would dance no more.

I felt slightly dizzy. I shrank back into myself. I felt sick. I moved away from my own power. I collected all my force into my human-shaped self.

In the parlor, in the gentle manner of a human, I examined the children. There were four of them, and they had been beaten as well as bled. They were lying in a heap. All were unconscious, but I detected no blows to the head, no rushing of blood within the skulls, no permanent damage. Boys in shorts and skivy shirts and tennis shoes. No familial resemblance. How their parents must have been weeping. All could survive. I was certain of it.

The sins of my past rose up to taunt me. All my own excesses mocked me.

I made the requisite call to see to their care. I told the astonished clerk what I had discovered.

In the hallway, Mona was crying. Quinn held her.

"Come on, we're headed for my flat now. So it wasn't perfect, Quinn, you were right. But it's over."

"Lestat," he said, his eyes glittering as we pulled the weeping Mona into the elevator. "I thought it was nothing short of magnificent."

9

We had to drag Mona through the French Quarter streets. She fell in love with the colors made by spilt gasoline in mud puddles, with exotic furniture in the store windows of Hurwitz Mintz, with antique shop displays of threadbare gilded chairs and lacquered square grand pianos and idling trucks belching white smoke from their upturned exhaust pipes and laughing mortals passing us on the narrow sidewalks carrying adorable babies, who twisted their little necks to peer at us—

—and an old black man playing a tenor saxophone for money, which we gave him in abundance, and a hat-wearing hot dog vender from which Mona could not buy a hot dog now save to stare at it and sniff it and heave it into a trash bin, which gave her staggering pause—

—and of course we attracted attention everywhere, in very unvampirelike fashion, Quinn being taller than anyone we passed and perhaps four times as handsome, with his porcelain face, and all the rest you know, and every now and then Mona with hair flying broke from us and ran ahead frantically, the lazy evening crowds opening and closing for her as though she were on a Heavenly errand, thank God, and then she'd circle back—

—dancing and clicking and stomping like a flamenco dancer, letting the feather wrapper fly out, trail, sag, and then gathering it in again, and crying to see her reflection in shop glass, and darting down side streets until we grabbed ahold of her and claimed custody of her and wouldn't let her go.

When we got to my town house I gave two hundred dollars to my two mortal guards who were happily astonished, and as Quinn and I started back the open carriageway, Mona gave us the slip.

We didn't realize it until we'd reached the courtyard garden, and just when I was about to exclaim about the ancient cherub fountain and all the tropical wonders blooming against my much cherished brick walls, I sensed that she was totally gone.

Now, that is no easy feat. I may not be able to read the child's mind, but I have the senses of a god, do I not?

"We have to find her!" Quinn said. He was instantly thrown into protective overdrive.

"Nonsense," I said. "She knows where we are. She wants to be alone. Let her. Come on. Let's go upstairs. I'm exhausted. I should have fed. And now I don't have the spirit for it, which is a Hell of a situation. I have to rest."

"You're serious?" he asked as he followed me up the iron stairway. "What if she gets into some sort of jam?"

"She won't. She knows what she's doing. I told you. I have to crash. This is no selfish secret, Little Brother. I worked the Dark Trick tonight, and forgot to feed. I'm tired."

"You really believe she's all right?" he demanded. "I didn't realize you were tired. I should have realized. I'll go and look for her."

"No, you won't. Come on with me."

The flat was empty. No otherworldly bodies hovering about. No ghosts, either.

The back parlor had been cleaned and dusted earlier this very day and I could smell the cleaning lady's distant perfume. I could smell her lingering blood scent too. Of course I had never laid eyes on the woman. She came by the light of the sun, but she did her job well enough for me to leave her big bills. I loved giving away money. I carried it for no other purpose. I slapped a hundred on the desk for her. We have desks everywhere in this flat, I thought. Too many desks. Didn't every bedroom have a little desk? Why so many?

Quinn had only been here once and only under the most lamentable circumstances, and he was suddenly enthralled by the Impressionist paintings, which were quite divine. But it was the new and slightly somber Gauguin which caught my eye for a moment. Now, that was my purchase and had only been delivered in the last few days. Quinn hooked into that one too.

I made my usual beeline for the front parlor over the street, peeking into each and every bedroom on the way, as though I really needed to, in order to know that no one was home. The place had too much furniture. Not enough paintings. Too many books. What the hallway needed was Emile Nolde. How could I get my hands on the German Expressionists?

"I think I should go after her," Quinn said. He followed me, taking in everything reverently, mind on Mona, no doubt monitoring her every move.

Front parlor. Piano. There was no piano now. I should tell them to get a piano. Hadn't we passed an antique piano in a window? I had a sudden urge to play the piano—to use my vampiric gift to rip at the keys. It was that Bartók concerto still assaulting my mind, and the picture of those two macabre dancers accentuating the music.

Oh, give me all things human.

"I think I should go get her," Quinn said.

"Listen, I'm not one to talk much about gender," I said, flopping down in my favorite of the velvet wing chairs and throwing one foot up on the chair before the desk, "but you have to realize that she's experiencing a freedom you and I don't appreciate as men. She's walking in the darkness and she's afraid of nothing, and she loves it. And just maybe, just maybe she wants to taste a little mortal blood and she's willing to take the risk."

"She's a magnet," he whispered. He stood at the window, his hand pulling gently at the lace. "She doesn't know I'm tracking her. She isn't that far away. She's taking her time. I hear her idle

thoughts. She's walking too fast. Somebody's going to notice—."

"Why are you suffering, Little Brother?" I asked. "Do you hate me for bringing her over? Do you wish it hadn't been done?"

He turned and looked at me as though I'd grabbed him by the arm.

"No," he said. He walked away from the window and sort of tumbled into the chair in the far corner opposite me, diagonally, his long legs sprawling as though he wasn't sure what to do with them. "I would have tried it if you hadn't come," he admitted. "I couldn't have watched her die. At least I don't think so. But I am suffering, you're right. Lestat, you can't leave us. Lestat, why are those guards outside the house?"

"Did I say I would leave you?" I countered. "I hired those guards after Stirling came here," I said. "Oh, it's not that I think any of the Talamasca will come back here. It's just that if Stirling could walk right in here, then somebody else might."

(Flash on the Talamasca: Order of Psychic Detectives. Don't know their own Origins. At least a thousand years old, maybe much older. Keep records on all sorts of paranormal phenomena. Reach out to the telepathically gifted and isolated. Know about us.)

Quinn and I had visited with Stirling at the Oak Haven Retreat House of the Talamasca right after the exorcism of Goblin, and the immolation of Merrick Mayfair. Merrick Mayfair had grown up in the Talamasca. Stirling had a right to know she was no longer one of the (sigh) Undead. The Retreat House was an immense square plantation house on the River Road just outside of town.

Stirling Oliver had not only been a friend of Quinn's during his mortal years, but he was a friend of Mona's as well. The Talamasca knew much more about the entire Mayfair family than they knew about me.

It gave me no pleasure to think of Stirling now, much as I admired him and liked him. Stirling was about sixty-five years old and very dedicated to the highest principles of the Order, which for all its avowed secularity might have been Roman Catholic with its strictures against meddling in the affairs of the world or using supernatural persons or forces for one's own ends. If the Order hadn't been so fabulously and mysteriously and undeniably wealthy, I would probably have been a patron of it.

(I am also fabulously and mysteriously and undeniably wealthy, but who cares?)

I felt compelled to go see Stirling at the Retreat House and tell him what had happened with Mona. But why?

Stirling wasn't Pope Gregory the Great, for the love of Heaven, and I wasn't Saint Lestat. I didn't have to go to Confession for what I'd done to Mona, but a terrible Contrition settled over me, a profound awareness that all my powers were dark powers and all my talents evil talents, and nothing could come from me but evil no matter what I did.

Besides, hadn't Stirling told Quinn last night that Mona was dying? What had been the

meaning of that information? Wasn't he in some way in collusion with what had happened? No. He wasn't. Quinn hadn't left him last night to seek out Mona. Mona had come to Blackwood Manor on her own.

"Sooner or later, I'll explain all this to Stirling," I said under my breath. "It's as though Stirling will absolve me but that just isn't true." I looked at Quinn. "Can you still hear her?"

He nodded. "She's just walking, looking at things," he said. He was distracted, the pupils in his eyes dancing slowly. "Why tell Stirling?" he asked. "Stirling can't tell the Mayfairs. Why burden him with the secret?" He sat forward. "She's wandering along Jackson Square. A man's following her. She's leading him. He senses something isn't right with her. And she's on to him. She knows what he wants. She's luring him. She's certainly having a great time in Aunt Queen's high-heel shoes."

"Stop watching her," I said. "I mean it. Let me tell you something about your little girl. She's going to make herself known to the Mayfairs very soon on her own. Nothing's going to stop her. There are things she wants to know from the Mayfairs. I had a sense of it when—."

The room was empty. No Quinn. I was talking to all the furniture.

I heard the back door open and close, it was that fast.

I stretched out and scrunched down and put my head back and drifted, eyes shut at once.

I was half dreaming. Why the Hell hadn't I fed? Of course I didn't need to feed every night or even every month, but when you work the Dark Trick, no matter who you are, you must feed afterwards, you're giving from the very sap stream of your life. All is vanity. All is vanity under the sun and under the moon.

I'd been in a weakened state when I'd gone down to deal with Rowan Mayfair, that was my problem, that was why the creature obsessed me. Never mind.

Someone pushed my foot off the desk chair. I heard a woman's piercing laugh; I heard dozens of people laughing. Heavy cigar smoke. Glass breaking. I opened my eyes. The flat was full of people! Both windows to the front balcony were open and it was jammed with people, women in long low-cut sparkling dresses, men in fine black dinner jackets with flashing black satin lapels, the roar of conversation and merriment almost deafening, but deafening to whom, and a tray went by, held high by a waiter in a white coat who all but tripped over my legs, and there sat a child on the desk, a rosy child, staring at me, a dainty girl with quick black eyes and beautifully waved black hair, seven or eight, enchanting, precious.

"Ducky, I'm sorry!" she said, "but you're in our world now, I do hate to say it. We have you!" She was mocking up a British accent. She had on a little sailor dress, white with blue trim, and high white socks and little black Mary Janes. She drew up her knees. "Lestat," she laughed. She pointed at me.

Then, down into the desk chair facing me, slipped Oncle Julien, dressed for the party, white tie, white cuffs, white hair. The crowd pressed in on him. Someone was shouting from the

balcony.

"She's right, Lestat," Oncle Julien said in flawless French, "we have you in our world now, and I must say you have a divine apartment here, and I so admire the paintings which have only just come from Paris, you and your friends are so very clever, and the furniture, there is so much of it, yes, it seems you've crammed every nook and cranny, yet who could have asked for anything finer?"

"But I thought we were mad at him, Oncle Julien," said the little girl in English.

"We are, Stella," he said in French, "but this is Lestat's house, and whether we are angry or not we are Mayfairs first and foremost, and Mayfairs are always polite."

This sent little Stella into a regular riot of laughter, and she gathered up her little self—soft cheeks, sailor suit, socks, shiny shoes—and leapt from the desk right into my lap, plop.

"I'm so glad," she said, "because you are so absolutely dandy; don't you think, Oncle Julien, he's too beautiful to be a man, oh, I know, Lestat, you're not one to talk about gender—."

"Stop it!" I roared. A flashing, cleansing power went out of me, flushing against the walls.

Dead quiet.

Mona stood there, eyes wide, wrapper gone, sleek silk, Quinn right beside her, towering over her, face full of concern.

"Lestat, what is it?" asked Mona.

I got up, I staggered into the hallway. Why was I walking like this? I glanced back at the room. All the furniture had been moved—just a little. Things were askew! The doors were open to the balcony!

"Look at the smoke," I whispered.

"Cigar smoke," said Quinn questioningly.

"What is it, Boss?" asked Mona again. She came up to me and put her arms around me and kissed me on the cheek. I kissed her forehead, smoothed back her hair.

I didn't answer her.

I didn't tell them. Why didn't I tell them?

I showed them the bedroom with the sealed-up window that was painted to look like a window. I showed them the steel plating on the door and the lock. I told them about the human guards twenty-four hours. They were to pull the curtains around the bed, and sleep in each other's arms. No ray of the sun, no immortal, no mortal intruder, no one would bother them here. Of course they had a long time before sunrise. Talk, talk, yes. They could wander. But no spying on the Mayfairs, no. No probing for secrets, no. No searching for a lost daughter yet, no. No going home to Blackwood Manor, no. I told them I would meet them tomorrow at dusk.

Now I had to leave, had to.

Had to get out of here. Had to get out of there. Had to get out of everywhere.

The open country.

Near the Talamasca Retreat House.

Distant rumble of trucks on the River Road. Smell of the River. Smell of the Grass. Walking. Grass wet.

Field of scattered oaks. White clapboard house tumbling to ruin, the way they do in Louisiana, swaying walls and caving roof embraced and held suspended by the vines.

Walking.

I spun around.

He was there. Technicolor ghost, black tailcoat, walking as I had been, through the grass, tossing aside the champagne glass, coming on. Stopped. I lunged at him, grabbed him before he could vanish, had him by the throat, fingers dug into what sought to be invisible, holding him, hurting what would be immaterial. Yeah, got you! You impudent phantom, look at me!

"You think you can haunt me!" I growled. "You think you can do that to me!"

"I know I can!" he said in caustic English. "You took her, my child, my Mona!" He struggled to dissolve. "You knew I was waiting for her. You could have let her come to me."

"And just what crazy half-illuminated Afterlife are you from!" I demanded. "What are your half-baked mystical promises! Yeah, come on, what Other Side are you hawking, yeah, spill it, let's hear about Julien's Summerland, yeah, testify, how many ectoplasmic angels are on your side, give me the splendiferous images of your famous fabulous friggin' self-created self-sustained astral plane! Where the Hell were you going to take her! You're going to tell me some Lord of the Universe sends spooks like you to take little girls to Heaven!"

I was clutching nothing.

I was all alone.

It was sweetly warm and there was a numbing quiet in the vibration of the distant trucks, a winking beauty in the passing headlights.

Who missed the deep silence of so many past centuries? Who missed the deep darkness of the long ago pre-electric nights? Not me.

When I reached the Talamasca Retreat House, Stirling was standing on the terrace. Loose gray hair mussed, cotton pajamas, sashed robe, bare feet. A mortal couldn't have discovered him, standing in the shadows, waiting. An empathetic face, patient celibate alertness.

"I brought her over," I said.

"I know," he answered.

"I kissed Rowan Mayfair."

"You did what?" he answered.

"They're after me, the Mayfair ghosts."

He didn't respond, except for a small scowl and an undisguised look of wonder.

I scanned the Retreat House. Empty. Maid out in the back cottages. One postulant out there writing in a notebook by a gooseneck lamp. Saw her in her self-conception. Hungered for her.

Had no intention of feeding on her. Ridiculous idea. Absolutely verboten.

"Give me a bedroom, please," I asked. "Just a room in which heavy draperies can be drawn."

"Of course," he said.

"Ah, the Talamasca, ready again to count upon my honor."

"I can depend upon it, can I not?"

I followed him into the front hallway and then up the broad staircase. How curious it was, to be his guest, to be walking on this wool carpet as if I were a mortal. Sleeping under the roof that wasn't mine. Next I'd be doing it at Blackwood Farm. This could get out of hand. Please let it get out of hand.

And here the fragrant and cozy bedroom with all its inevitable details. Pineapples carved into the four posts of the bed, canopy of hand-worked lace through which you could peer at the faint water stains on the ceiling, loving, caring, patchwork quilt of loops and circles and careening colors, parchment lamp shades, dark clots breaking through the old mirrors, needlepoint tiptoe chairs.

"What Mayfair ghosts are after you?" he asked softly. It was respectful, his manner. "What have you seen?" And when I didn't answer, "What have they done?"

"Mona gave birth long ago to a daughter," I whispered. Yes, he knew all about it, didn't he? "But you can't tell me, can you, what you know?"

"No, I can't," he replied.

"She wants to find that child," I said.

"Does she," he said politely. He was afraid.

"Sleep well," I said and turned to the bed.

He left me. But he knew the child's name. That much I'd filched from him. He knew its name and its *nature* but he couldn't tell.

10

I knew that Rowan Mayfair was in the Retreat House when I opened my eyes. Heavy. Somebody who loved her was with her, somebody who knew all about her too. Way heavy. And Stirling in a state of angst.

I went to the right front window and drew back the velvet drape. The sky was scarlet over the distant levee. Oak tree branches filled the top of my view. It would have been a cinch to open this window and slip out onto the porch and disappear from this place quietly.

But I wasn't going to do it. Why give up an opportunity to see her again? There wasn't any harm in just seeing her. Maybe I could figure out the source of her power over me. Maybe I could nullify it. And if nothing else, I could give them some platitudes about Mona.

I stopped in front of the old mirror over the dresser to comb my hair. My black frock coat looked all right. So did the lace at my collar and cuffs. More than a bit of vanity there, and I knew it. So what? Have I ever said I wasn't vain? I have lifted vanity to a poetical level, have I not? I have transmuted vanity into the spiritual, have I not?

My body had fully restored itself from bestowing the Dark Gift, but my thirst was strong, rather in the style of a craving than a physical need. Was that because of her? Certainly not! I would repair to the first floor to discover this woman was an ordinary woman and nothing more and I would then come to my senses! How's that for a stiff upper lip!

I paused to close in on New Orleans, scanning for the Romantic Couple. They were just rising, crawling out from among the velvet pillows, Long Tall Quinn still groggy, rambunctious Mona already on the prowl. Caught clear images of her through Quinn's overprotective mind. She wasn't sobbing. She was taking stock of the paintings, still wearing that dashing feather-trimmed wrapper with flair. This augured very well for the next hundred years.

Suddenly they were both talking at each other in rapid rips and slashes of life story and love professions. Hunt and feed now or later? Little Drink or something serious. Where was the Boss? I sent a swift silent message to Quinn.

Yo, Little Brother. You're the teacher for now. The Little Drink is the name of the lesson. I'll be with you soon enough.

I went out into the hallway of the Retreat House, where the sconces were already lighted, and sweet yellow and red flowers adorned the demi-lune tables, and made my way slowly down the

main stairs. Saint Juan Diego, please preserve the Mayfairs from me.

Hum of heavy anxious mortal conversation below. Deep scent of mortal blood. Worry about the mortal Mona. Stirling intensely miserable, struggling to veil his conflicted heart. It takes the skills of a priest and a lawyer to be an effective member of the Talamasca.

All this coming from a garden room on the back of the house, just off the dining room, on the right side proper.

I made my way there. Real Rembrandts on these walls. A Vermeer. I took my time. Temples throbbing. Mayfairs, yes, witches again, yes. Why walk right into it? Nothing could have stopped me.

The furnishings of the dining room were regal and faintly charming. I saw the fine leavings of a recent meal on the long black granite table, with a mess of linen and heavy old silver. I stopped to examine the silver carefully.

Flash of Julien opposite in his everyday gray suit, eyes black. Hadn't they been gray before? "Enjoyed your rest?" he asked. He vanished. I caught my breath. *I think you're a cowardly ghost. You can't handle a sustained discourse. I personally despise you.*

Stirling called my name.

I moved towards the rear double doors.

The little conservatory was octagonal Victorian style, everything trimmed in white, and the wicker was white, and the floor was pink flagstone, and the whole was three steps down.

They were closely gathered at a round glass-top wicker table, far more cheerful than the dining room could ever have been, with lighted candles nestled among the countless flower pots, the sky already going dark beyond the glass walls and glass roof.

A lovely place to be. Scent of blood and flowers. Scent of burning wax.

All three mortals, who sat in comfortable wicker chairs virtually surrounded by magnificent tropical plants, had known I was coming. Conversation had stopped. All three mortals were watching me with a wary politeness now.

Then the two men shot to their feet as if I were the Crown Prince of England, and Stirling, being one of them, presented me to Rowan Mayfair as if I'd never met her, and then to Michael Curry, "Rowan's husband," and gestured for me to take the empty wicker chair. I did.

Rowan struck me immediately as uncalculatedly lovely, colorless and svelte in a short skirted gray silk suit and leather pumps. There came the chills again as I looked at her, in fact, an utter weakness. I wondered if she knew her dress matched her eyes and even the gray streaks in her dark hair. She was positively ablaze with an inner concentration of power.

Stirling wore a white vintage linen jacket with faded blue jeans and his pale yellow shirt open at the neck. I sparked off the linen jacket suddenly. It had belonged to someone who died of old age. It had been worn in the South Seas. Packed away for years. Rediscovered, loved by Stirling.

My eyes settled on Michael Curry. This was simply one of the most alluring mortal males

whom I have ever struggled to describe.

First off, he was reacting powerfully to my own apparent physical gifts without even being aware of that dimension of himself, which always confuses and excites me, and secondly he had the exact attributes of Quinn—black curly hair and vivid blue eyes—in a heavier, stronger, more physically comfortable frame. Of course he was much older than Quinn. He was in fact much older than Rowan. But age doesn't really mean anything to me. I found him irresistible. Whereas Quinn's features were elegant, this man's were large and almost Graeco-Roman. The gray hair at his temples drove me crazy. The sunburnt tan of his skin was wonderful. And then there was the easy smile on his lips.

He was wearing something, I suppose. What was it? Oh, yeah, the de rigueur New Orleans white linen three-piece suit.

Suspicion. I caught it from both Michael and Rowan. And I knew that Michael was as strong a witch as she was, though in wholly different ways. I knew too that he had taken life. She'd done it with the force of her mind. He'd done it with the strength of his fist. It seemed that other invaluable secrets were going to slip right through his gaze when suddenly he closed himself off from me artfully yet completely naturally. And he began to speak.

"I saw you at the funeral for Miss McQueen," he said. New Orleans Irish voice. "You were with Quinn and Merrick Mayfair. You're Quinn's friend. You have a beautiful name. It was a lovely service, wasn't it?"

"Yes," I said. "And I met Rowan yesterday at Blackwood Manor. I have news for you both. Mona's doing well, but she doesn't want to come home."

"That's not possible," said Rowan before she could stop herself. "That simply can't be."

She was beyond exhaustion. She'd been crying and crying for Mona. I didn't dare try to draw her in as I'd done yesterday, not in front of this man. The chills came again. A wild vision possessed me of snatching her up and away from this place, my teeth pressed to her tender neck, her blood mine, all the chambers of her soul yielding to me. I banished it. Michael Curry was watching me, but the man's mind was on Mona.

"I'm happy for Mona," he volunteered now, putting his hand over Rowan's hand on the arm of the wicker chair. "Mona's where she wants to be. Quinn's strong. He always was. When that kid was eighteen, he had the poise of a full-grown man." He laughed softly. "He wanted to marry Mona the first time he saw her."

"She is doing better," I insisted. "I swore I'd tell you if she needed you." I gave Rowan my level gaze. "I will tell you. It makes her happy to be with Quinn."

"I knew it would," said Rowan, "but she can't survive off dialysis."

I didn't answer. I didn't know what dialysis was. Oh, I'd heard the word, but I really didn't know enough about it to bluff.

Standing behind her, indeed behind the cluster of flowers just over her shoulder, was the

figure of Julien, with a grim smile on his lips, taking visible pleasure in my confusion.

A little shock went through me when my eyes met his, and suddenly Michael Curry turned and looked in that direction, but the figure had vanished. Hmmm. So this mortal sees ghosts. Rowan was unchanged. Rowan was examining me all too closely.

"Who is Stella?" I asked, looking again into Rowan's eyes. My only hope was to keep her talking. She was staring at my hand. I didn't like it.

"Stella? You mean Stella Mayfair?" she asked. Her low voice was sultry in spite of herself. She was feverish. She needed sleep in a cold room. Involuntary flash of the sorrow inside her, the knot of secrets. "What do you want to know about Stella Mayfair?"

Stirling was very uneasy. He felt deceitful but there was nothing I could do about it. So he was the confidant of the family, of course.

"A little girl," I said, "who calls people Ducky, and has black wavy hair. Picture her in a little white sailor dress trimmed in blue, with high socks and Mary Janes. Does it ring a bell?"

Michael Curry let out a genial laugh. I looked at him.

"You're describing Stella Mayfair all right. One time Julien Mayfair told me this story—Julien was one of the mentors of the Mayfair family—the story was all about Julien taking little Stella downtown with him, Stella and her brother Lionel Mayfair—he's the one who shot and killed Stella—but in the story Stella was wearing a sailor dress and Mary Janes. Oncle Julien described it. At least I think he did. No. He didn't describe it. But I saw her that way. Yeah, I saw her that way. Why in the world would you ask such a question? Of course I'm not referring to the living breathing Julien. But that's another tale."

"Oh, I know you're not. You're referring to his ghost," I answered. "But tell me, I'm just curious, I don't mean any disrespect, but what sort of ghost was Julien? Can you interpret? Was he good or was he bad?"

"My God, that's a strange question," said Michael. "Everybody idolizes Oncle Julien. Everybody takes him so for granted."

"I know Quinn saw Oncle Julien's ghost," I went on. "Quinn told me all about it. He'd come to see you and Rowan and Mona, and Oncle Julien let him in to the First Street property, or whatever you call it, and Quinn talked with Oncle Julien for a long time. They drank hot chocolate together. They sat in a rear garden. He thought Oncle Julien was alive, naturally, and then you guys discovered him back there all alone and there was no hot chocolate. Not that the absence of hot chocolate means anything metaphysically, of course."

Michael laughed. "Yeah, Oncle Julien's big on long conversations. And he really outdid himself with the hot chocolate. But a ghost can't do something like that unless you give him the strength to do it. Quinn's a natural medium. Oncle Julien was playing off Quinn." He went sad. "Now, when the time comes, for Mona I mean, well, Oncle Julien will come and take her to the other side."

"You believe in that?" I asked. "You believe in the other side?"

"You mean you don't?" asked Michael. "Where do you think Oncle Julien comes from? Look, I've seen too many ghosts not to believe in it. They have to come from somewhere, don't they?"

"I don't know," I said. "There's something wrong with the way ghosts act. And the same holds true for angels. I'm not saying there isn't an afterlife. I'm only maintaining that those entities who come down here so beneficently to meddle with us are more than a little cracked." I was really getting heated. "You're not really sure, yourself, are you?"

"You've seen angels?" asked Michael.

"Well, let's just say, they claimed to be angels," I responded.

Rowan's eyes were moving sluggishly and rudely over me. She didn't care what I asked about Julien or what Michael said. She was back in that terrible moment when she'd come into the hospital room, the death room, to bring death, and Mona had been frightened. Back there and here studying me. Why couldn't I just hold her for a moment, comfort her, vanish with her into a bedroom upstairs, tear this house apart, fly with her to another part of the world, build her a palace deep in the Amazon jungles?

"Why don't you try!" said Oncle Julien. He stood behind her again, arms folded, sneering insofar as it didn't mar his charm. "You'd like nothing better than to get your hands on her. She'd be such a prize!"

"Kindly go to Hell!" I said. And to myself, Snap out of it.

"Who are you talking to?" asked Michael, turning in his chair as before. "What are you seeing?"

Julien was gone.

"Why are you asking about Stella?" Rowan murmured, but she was hardly thinking of it. She was thinking only of Mona and of me, and of that ghastly moment. She was noticing my hair and the way that it curled, and the way that the candlelight played on it. And then the grief over Mona again, *almost killed her.*

Michael fell into deep absorption, as if nobody was there. There was something defenseless about the guy. Stirling was studying me with a sharp angry expression on his face. So what?

Michael was plainly much more forthright than Rowan, more conventionally innocent. A woman like Rowan had to have a husband like Michael. If he'd known how I'd kissed her yesterday in that greedy fashion he'd be wounded. She hadn't told him. Not even he could roll with a punch like that. When a woman of that age lets you kiss her it means something entirely different from what it means with a young girl. Even I knew that and I'm not human.

"You can't figure it with Julien," Michael said, suddenly emerging from his thought. "He makes mistakes—sometimes absolutely awful mistakes."

"How do you mean?" I asked.

"Julien appeared once, trying to help me, I think, yes, it had to be," said Michael. "But it

didn't work out. It led to a disaster. A total disaster. But he had no way of knowing. Absolutely no way at all. I suppose that's what I'm trying to say, that ghosts don't know everything. Of course, Mona has that old saying that a ghost just knows his own business, you know—and I guess that covers it, but there's more to it than that. Don't speak of it to Mona. Whatever you do, don't ask Mona these questions. I wouldn't … I mean, Julien made a dreadful mistake."

Well, now that's fascinating! So this dapper dude doesn't always know what he's doing. My thesis is correct! Why don't you appear now so that I can laugh at you, you impotent jerk?

I tried desperately to read the thoughts behind Michael's words, but I couldn't. These Mayfairs were so casually and maddeningly gifted. Maybe the man wasn't defenseless. He was just so strong he didn't bother to put up any defenses.

I glanced at Rowan. She was staring at my hand again. How could she not notice the sheen of my fingernails? All vampires have lustrous fingernails. Mine are like glass. She reached out, then drew back.

I had only moments here.

"Can you tell me what kind of mistake Julien made?" I asked.

"I think there's a photograph of little Stella in a sailor dress," Michael said, drifting off into his thoughts again. He didn't notice anything about me. He just alternated between intense thought and looking directly into my eyes. "Yeah, I'm sure there is."

"Did you say that Stella's brother shot her?" I asked.

"Oh, she was a woman by that time," Michael said, half dreaming. "She'd given birth to Antha. Antha was six years old. Stella nearly ran off with a man from the Talamasca. She wanted to escape the family and the ghost that went with it. Stirling knows all about it, of course." He looked at me as if startled. "But don't ask Mona. Don't say anything about all this to Mona."

"I won't say a word about it to Mona," I answered.

Rowan was sensing things about me, sensing that my heart rate was far too slow for a functioning mortal. Sensing things about the way that candlelight reflected off my face.

"I'll tell you what I think happens," said Michael. "When they come on an errand, they leave behind the totality of salvation."

"Ghosts, you mean," I said.

"What was that?" Stirling asked.

"Of course, the Totality of Salvation," I whispered. I smiled. I loved it. "Of course, they have to, don't they? Or every haunting would be a theophany, wouldn't it?" I flashed on Julien last night in my clutches, my questions to him coming angrily as accusations. He knew nothing about any Totality of Salvation, did he? Why, I'd already figured that out, hadn't I? That when I'd drifted to Earth in my fantasy as Saint Lestat I had to leave behind a certain Heavenly knowledge.

"I wouldn't trust any ghost, really," Michael said. "I think you're right about all that. But

Julien tries to do good. He has the family's welfare in mind when he appears. If only—."

"If only what?" I pressed.

"Why did you ask that question about Stella?" Rowan asked. Her voice was rich yet sharp. "Where did you see Stella?" Her voice rose. "What do you know about Stella?"

"You don't mean the ghosts have already come for Mona, do you?" asked Michael. "You realize what that means, of course. Shouldn't we be there? Shouldn't we be near at hand?"

"No, they haven't come for her," I replied. "She'll tell us when that happens, I know she will." But I felt the lie catch in me. They were trying to come for her, weren't they, in some sort of grim game, or was it my soul they wanted?

I stood up.

"I'll let you know when she needs you," I said. "I promise you."

"Don't go," said Rowan crossly but under her breath.

"Why, so you can keep studying me?" I said. I was suddenly trembling again. I didn't know what I meant to say. "Would you like it if I gave you a sample of my blood? Is that why you're staring at me?"

"Lestat, do be careful," said Stirling.

"What would I do with a sample of your blood?" Rowan asked, eyes moving up and down my figure. "Do you want me to study you?" she asked coldly. "Do you want me to ask questions about you? Who you are, where you come from? I have the feeling you do. I have the feeling you'd like nothing better than to let me take a sample of your skin, your hair, your blood, everything you have to give. I see that," she said, tapping the side of her forehead.

"Do you really?" I asked. "And you'd analyze all this in Mayfair Medical in some secret laboratory." My heart was pumping. My brain was on overdrive. "You're some genius doctor, aren't you? That's what's behind those gray eyes, those enormous gray eyes. Not the ordinary surgeon or oncologist, not you—." I broke off. What was I doing?

Julien's laughter. "Yes, isn't she a wonder? Play into her hands." Julien near the back door of the conservatory, deep in shadow, laughing: "You're no match for her, you impudent fiend. Maybe she'll construct a glass enclosure for you. They have such marvelous materials in this new century. Even such exotica as you—."

"Shut up, you miserable bastard," I whispered in French. "It sounds to me like you're far more fallible than you let on. What was your disastrous mistake, would you like to tell me?"

"Are you talking to Julien?" asked Michael. He glanced to the very spot. But there was nothing there.

"Detestable coward," I said in French. "He's gone. He won't let anyone else see him."

"Come, Lestat," said Stirling, tugging at me. "It's really time for you to go. You have Mona waiting for you."

Rowan never once turned to look at the ghost. She was angry. She rose to her feet. I felt that

push again, just as if she'd laid her two hands on my chest. Yet her face was radiant with a complex of anguish behind it that not even anger could mask.

"Where is Mona!" she demanded. Her husky voice had never been more effective. "You think I don't know you took her away from Blackwood Manor? I was there first thing this morning, as soon as I could get away from the Medical Center. Clem drove the three of you to the Ritz Hotel last night. I went to the Ritz Hotel. No Mona. No Quinn either. And no Lestat de Lioncourt. That's the name you signed in Aunt Queen's funeral book, isn't it? I checked the spelling and your flamboyant handwriting. You like signing your name, don't you?—

"—And you have such a lovely French accent, oh, yes. Where is Mona right now, Monsieur de Lioncourt? What in the name of Heaven is going on? Why are you asking questions about Stella? You think I don't know that you're behind everything that's happening? Jasmine and Big Ramona think you're some sort of foreign prince, with your melodious French accent and your mind reading gifts and your exorcism to rid the house of ghosts and spirits. And oh, yes, Aunt Queen absolutely adored you! But you sound more like Rasputin to me! You can't just steal Mona from me! You can't!"

A stinging hurt spread through me, over my face, my skin. I'd never felt anything quite like it.

Julien was back there, in the shadows, laughing cruelly, collecting just a seam of the light along the edge of his face and form.

Michael was on his feet and so was Stirling.

"Rowan, please, honey," Michael said, trying to calm her. He seemed hesitant to touch her, hesitant to enclose her with his arms, though this might have been welcomed by her.

"I've told you all I know," I said. I stammered.

"Let me see you out," said Stirling. I felt his hand on my arm.

"You tell Mona we love her," said Michael.

"Is Mona afraid of us?" Rowan whispered. The anguish inside her defeated her anger. She drew close to me. "She's afraid of us now, isn't she?" She and Mona, a shared history of horrors. Yes, an unbreakable link. *Child. Woman Child.* Morrigan. No admissions and explanations. Just an image. The same image I'd seen in the Blood. *Woman Child.* "I demand that you tell me! Is she afraid!"

"No," I said. I reached forward right through the aura of palpable power that surrounded her. I put my hands on her arms. Vague binding shock. To Hell with Michael. But Michael didn't stop me. "Not anymore," I said, peering into Rowan's eyes. "Mona's not afraid of anything. Oh, if only I could give you some peace of mind. I wish I could. Please, please wait for her to call you, and don't think about her anymore."

I felt her strength recede, and her eyes misted. A great glowing fire was quelled, and I had done it, and an ever present grief enfolded it. A protective surge rose in me and the wild fantasies reigned again inside of me as if no one else was present.

I let her go.

I turned and I left the company.

Behind me the ghost whispered contemptuously, “You’re not a gentleman, you never were!”

I muttered all the obscenities I knew in French and English in a tight whisper.

I walked a little too fast for Stirling. But we came together at the front doors of the house.

Rush of sweet warm air. The night was purring and grinding with the tree frogs and the cicadas. I defy a ghost to distract me from this! The sky was rosey and it would be all night. I closed my eyes and let the warm air hold me close and lovingly and totally.

The warm air didn’t care whether or not I was a gentleman, which I was not.

“What are you doing with Rowan?” Stirling demanded.

“What are you, her older brother?” I shot back.

We walked across the paved porch and onto the drive. Fragrance of grass. Roar of the River Road traffic as sweet as the roar of water.

“Perhaps I am her brother,” he said shortly, “but I mean it. What are you doing?”

“Good God, man,” I replied. “Night before last you told Quinn that Mona was dying. What was your motive? Weren’t you tempting him to go to her? He didn’t, as it turned out, but you were tempting him, goading him to use his power, to bring her over. Don’t deny it. You provoked him. You with all your records. Your volumes. Your studies. Quinn had fed on you, almost taken you. I saved your life, man. You who knew. And now you question me for a little word game with a mortal who detests me?”

“All right,” he said, “so in the back of my mind I abhorred the fact that Mona was dying, that Mona was desperate, and that Mona was so young, and I believed in sinister fairy tales and magic blood! But that woman is not dying. She is the magnate of her family. And she knows something’s profoundly wrong with you. And you’re playing with her.”

“Not so! Leave me alone!”

“I will not. You can’t entice her—.”

“I’m not enticing her!”

“Did you see Stella?” he asked. “Is that who’s haunting you?”

“Don’t go back to a civil tone with me,” I scolded. “Yes, I saw Stella. Did you think that was all part of a game? I saw her in the little sailor dress and she jumped into my lap. They were in my town house in the Rue Royale, both of them, Julien and Stella, with a whole crowd of people. Julien was out there in your fine little conservatory, taunting me. But in my flat last night, they said threatening things to me. Threatening things! Oh, I don’t know why I’m telling you.”

“Yes, you do,” he answered.

“I’ve got to get back to the intrepid wanderers,” I said. I took a deep breath.

“Threatening things?” he asked. “What threatening things did they say to you?”

“Oh, God in Heaven!” I said. “If only I were Juan Diego.”

“Who is Juan Diego?” he asked.

“Maybe nobody,” I said sadly. “But then again, maybe somebody, maybe somebody very very important!” and I went away.

11

I went up high in the air. I traveled fast—faster than a ghost, or so I figured. I drifted above the city of New Orleans, lulled by its lights and its voices. I wondered how Mona would handle this power, if she'd be weeping again. I let myself believe there were no ghosts who could touch me up here or anywhere if I used all my considerable powers, no ghosts who could make me afraid.

I said No to hunger. I said to thirst Be still.

I slipped down silently into the realm of my fellow creatures.

I caught sight of Quinn in the Rue Royale, pulling behind him a pile of suitcases, all dependent upon one huge rectangular bag equipped with excellent little wheels. He was whistling a melody by Chopin and walking very briskly, and I fell into stride beside him.

"You're the most dashing man on the street, Little Brother," I said. "What's with all the suitcases?"

"Are you going to let us stay at the flat, Beloved Boss?" he asked. His eyes were fired with love. In our short acquaintance, I'd never seen him so happy. In fact, I'd never seen him happy before at all. "What do you think?" he asked. "Do we crowd you? Do you want us out?"

"Not at all, I want you there," I replied. "I should have told you." We walked along together, me trying to keep up with his long legs. "I'm the worst of hosts and Coven Masters, to use the old lingo. Not a gentleman. A thoroughgoing Rasputin. Settle in. You had Clem bring clothes to the Ritz? (Yes.) Clever. Where's Princess Mona right now?"

"In the bedroom, working on the computer we bought at sunset, first thing she had to have," he said with an airy gesture. "She's recording every experience, every sensation, every subtle distinction, every revelation—."

"I get it," I said. "Hmmm. You've both fed."

He nodded. "Greedily, among despicable wretches, though I had to oversee the operation somewhat. She falls into states of utter paralysis. Perhaps if I wasn't there she wouldn't. Physically she's stronger than I am. I think it confuses her. It was a couple bums back of town, both drunk, nothing to it."

"But it was her first human victim," I said. "Particulars."

"The men were unconscious, it was a cinch for her. She's yet to confront the living breathing struggling type."

"All right, that can wait. As regards her being stronger than you, you know I can level the playing ground," I said quietly. "I don't share the gift of my blood with many. But I'll share it again with you." Was there anything in the world I wouldn't have done for Quinn?

"I know that," he answered. "God, I love her. I love her so much it's overtaken everything else in my mind. I don't even think about Goblin being gone. I thought when Goblin was actually gone I'd suffer some crippling emptiness. I was sure of it. It seemed bound to happen. But Mona's the partner of my soul, Lestat, just the way I used to dream it would be when we first met, when we were both kids, before the Blood ever came between us."

"That's the way it's supposed to work, Quinn," I said. "And Blackwood Farm? Have you any news?"

It was fun walking along the street again. Feet on the summer pavements with the heat of the sun still rising from them.

"Perfect," said Quinn. "Tommy's staying the week. I'll be able to see him before he goes back to England. I wish he didn't have to go to school in England. Of course, they're making calls to anyone or everyone connected to Patsy. It's the damned medicine. I should have gathered up her medicine and thrown it in the swamp with her. Then they would have assumed that she'd run away. I told them again that I murdered her. Jasmine just laughed. She said she wished she could murder Patsy right now. I think the only one who loves her, really loves her, is Cyndy, the Nurse."

I pondered the matter, perhaps for the first time since Quinn had done it only a few nights before. A body couldn't survive being dumped in Sugar Devil Swamp. Too many gators. It made me smile bitterly to remember that once others had tried to dispose of me in just the same way. But poor dead Patsy had lacked my resources when she tumbled down into the darkness. Her soul had fled to the Totality of Salvation, of course.

We walked on together through a crush of valiant tourists. The town was drippingly hot.

Last week at this very time I'd been a wanderer, hopelessly without companions, and then Quinn had come into my life, with a letter in his pocket, needing my help, and Stirling had tiptoed into my flat, daring me to discover him, and soon all of Blackwood Manor had materialized around me, Stirling became a player in my life, Aunt Queen had been cruelly lost on the very night I'd made her acquaintance, and then our beloved Merrick, gone from us, and now I was being drawn into the knowledge of the Mayfairs, and I was what? Scared?

Come on, Lestat. You can tell me the truth. I'm your own self, remember? I was darkly and passionately thrilled by all this, and I felt those chills again, merely thinking of Rowan berating me with all that heat only an hour ago.

And then there was Julien, who just wasn't going to appear right now and run the risk of Quinn seeing him too. I searched the early evening crowds. *Where are you, you wretched coward, cheap second-rate phantom, accused blunderer?*

Quinn turned his head just a little, never breaking his stride. "What was that? You were thinking about Julien."

"I'll tell you all of it later," I said, and I meant it. "But let me ask you, you know, about the time you saw the ghost of Oncle Julien?"

"Yeah?"

"What vibe did you get in your secret soul? Good ghost? Bad ghost?"

"Hmmm, well, good, obviously. Trying to tell me I had Mayfair genes. Trying to save Mona from me, trying to keep us from breeding some *awful mutation,* which occurs now and then in the Mayfair family. A benign ghost. I've told you the whole story."

"Yes, of course," I replied. "A benign ghost and an awful mutation. Has Mona mentioned the mutation? The lost child?"

"Beloved Boss, what's bothering you?"

"Nada," I said.

Now just wasn't the time to tell him.…

We reached the town house. The guards gave us a friendly nod. I gave them a generous tip. It was, for mortal men in long-sleeved shirts, quite unbearably hot.

We could hear the clacking of the computer keys as we went up the iron stairs. Then the low chatter of the printer.

Mona came charging out of the bedroom clothed in last night's white duds, page in hand.

"Listen to this," she said. " 'Though this experience is undeniably evil, in that it involves predation upon other human beings, it is without question a mystical experience.' So, what do you think?"

"That's all you've written?" I asked. "That's one paragraph. Write some more."

"Okay." She ran back into the bedroom. Clack went the keys. Quinn followed her with the luggage. He winked at me, smiling.

I went into my bedroom, which was opposite theirs, shut the door, hit the button for the overhead light, and peeled off all my clothes with a shudder of utter disgust, threw them into the bottom of the armoire, put on a brown cotton turtleneck, black pants, and a lightweight black silk and linen jacket with a highly visible weave, a pair of completely smooth black shoes which had never been worn and looked like a modern sculpture, combed my hair until there was no dust in it and then stood there, awash in a moment of total stillness.

Then I stretched out on my bed. Satin tufted tester above me. Satin counterpane below. Fairly shadowy. I turned my face into the down pillows, of which I always had a sizable heap, and with all my muscles sort of scrunched up against the modern world.

Not a masculine thing to do, not a macho posture, not a show of strength to otherworldly entities, not a take-charge attitude at all.

I was comforted by the sound of Mona's clicking away, the low note of Quinn's voice.

Footsteps on the boards.

But nothing could take the edge off Rowan's angry words, those eyes like hematite, her entire frame trembling with her passion as she accused me. How could Michael Curry stay so close to that blaze and not get scorched?

Suddenly, there was an agitation in me so great that only lying alone, scrunched up on the bed, could comfort me. Sleep. Sleep, but I could not. They weren't wicked enough for me, Quinn and Mona. No one was. *I* wasn't wicked enough for me!

And I had to see if the ghosts would come.

A clock ticked somewhere. A clock with a painted face and curlicue hands. Not a huge clock. A clock that with its whole soul knew only how to tick and might tick for centuries, maybe had ticked for centuries, a clock to which people would look, and which people would dust, and which people wound with a key, and which people might come to love; a clock somewhere in this flat, perhaps in the back parlor, the only piece of all this furniture that could talk. I heard it. I knew what it was saying. Its code was lovely to me.

There was a knock at the door. Funny. It sounded as if it was right by my ear.

"Come in," I said. Damn fool that I am. But I wasn't fooled by the sounds I heard. That wasn't the door opening. That wasn't the door being clicked shut.

Julien stood at the foot of the bed. He came walking up along the side. Julien in his downtown black tailcoat and white tie, hair very white under the chandelier. His eyes were black. I'd thought they were gray.

"Why did you knock?" I asked. "Why don't you just tear my world to pieces instead?"

"I didn't want you to forget your manners again," he said in perfect French. "You're atrocious when you're ill-mannered."

"What do you want? To make me suffer? Join the crowd. I've been tormented by much stronger creatures than you."

"You haven't begun to understand what I can do," he said.

"You made a 'disastrous mistake.' What was it?" I asked. "I wonder: do you even know?"

He paled. His placid face became visibly enraged.

"Who sends you here to play with the living?"

"You're not the living!" he said.

"Temper, temper," I said mockingly.

He was too angry to speak. It made him all the more vivid, blanched though he was with anger. Or was it sorrow? I couldn't bear the thought of sorrow. I had enough sorrow.

"You want her?" I asked. "Then tell her yourself."

He didn't reply.

I shrugged as best I could, being all snuggled up on the counterpane.

"I can't tell her," I said. "Who am I to say, 'Julien says you should expose yourself to the sun

and thereby enter into the Totality of Salvation.' Or is it possible that my questions of last night were more than pertinent and you don't know where you come from? Maybe there is no Totality of Salvation. No Saint Juan Diego. Maybe you just want her with you in a spirit world where you wander, waiting for somebody who can see you, somebody like Quinn or even Mona herself or me. Is that it? She's supposed to want to be a ghost? I am showing you my best manners. This is my most polite voice. My mother and father would be pleased."

There was a real knock on the door.

He vanished. I thought I saw something out of the corner of my eye. Had Stella been sitting to my left all this time? *Mon Dieu!* I was going mad all right.

"Coward," I whispered.

I sat up and crossed my legs, Indian style. "Come in," I said.

Mona burst into the room, dressed in a fresh long-sleeved rose-colored silk dress and rose satin stacked heels, a quivering page of paper once more held aloft.

"Hit me with it," I declared.

" 'It is my ultimate goal to transmute this experience into a level of life participation which is worthy of the immense powers that have been bequeathed to me by Lestat, a level of life experience which knows no moral shrinking from the most obvious yet painful theological questions which my transfigured state has made utterly inescapable, the first of which is, obviously, How does God view my essential being? Am I human and vampire? Or vampire only? That is, is damnation, and I speak now not of a literal Hell with flames, but of a state which is defined by the absence of God—is damnation implicit and inherent in what I am, or do I still exist in a relativistic universe in which I may attain grace on the same terms as humans can attain it, by participating in the Incarnation of Christ, an historical event in which I totally believe, in spite of the fact that it is not philosophically fashionable, though what questions of fashion have to do with me now in this transcendent and often luminous condition is moot.' "
She looked at me. "What do you think?"

"Well, I think you ducked out of the paragraph on that 'fashionable question.' I think you should scrap the thing about fashionable and try to make a more solid finish, perhaps with some very concise statement about the level on which you believe in the Incarnation of Christ. And you can always use 'transcendent' and 'luminous' in another sentence. Also you misused the word 'bequeath.' "

"Cool!" She dashed out of the room.

Naturally, she left the door open.

I went after her.

She was already pounding the keyboard, the computer humming on one of my many Louis XV desks; her red eyebrows puckered, her green eyes locked to the monitor when I took up my position, arms folded, looking down on her.

"Yeah, what, Beloved Boss?" she asked without stopping her writing.

Quinn was stretched out comfortably on the bed, staring at the tester. The whole flat was full of beds with testers. Well, six bedrooms, anyway, three on each side.

"Call Rowan Mayfair and tell her you're all right. What do you think? Can you pull it off? The woman's suffering."

"Bummer!" Clackity-clack.

"Mona, if you possibly could do it—for their sakes, of course. Michael is suffering."

She looked sharply up at me and froze. Then, without taking her eyes off me, she lifted the phone to the right of her on the desk and she punched in the number so rapidly with her thumb I couldn't follow it. Her generation, with Touch-Tone phones. Big deal! I can write with a quill pen in a flurry of curlicues you wouldn't believe; let's see her do that. And I don't spill a drop of ink on the parchment, either.

"Yo, Rowan, Mona here." Hysterical crying on the other end. Mona overriding: "I'm just fine, I'm hanging with Quinn, look, don't worry about me, I'm all better, totally." A storm of literal questions. Mona overriding: "Rowan, listen, I'm feeling great. Yeah, a kind of miracle. Like I'll call you later. No, no, no (overriding again), I'm wearing Aunt Queen's clothes, they fit me perfectly, yeah, and her shoes, really cool, like she has tons of these high-heel shoes, yeah, and I never wore shoes like this; yeah, fine, no, no, no, stop it, Rowan, and Quinn wants me to wear them, they're brand new, they're really great. Love you, love to Michael and everybody. Bye." Down with the phone over Rowan shouting.

"So it's done," I said. "I really appreciate it." I shrugged.

She sat there white faced, the blood having fled her cheeks, staring into space.

I felt like a bully. I was a bully. I've always been a bully. Everybody who knows me thinks I am a bully. Except perhaps Quinn.

Quinn sat up on the bed.

"What's the matter, Ophelia?" he asked.

"You know I have to go to them," she said, her eyebrows knitted. "I have no choice."

"What do you mean?" I said. "They just want off the hook. Now, admittedly, it's a very complex hook."

"No, no, no," she said, "for my sake." Her voice and her face were suddenly pitiless. "For what I have to find out," she continued coldly, shuddering all over as though a wind had blown through the room. "I know she's lied to me. She's lied to me for years. I'm afraid of how much she might have lied to me. I'm going to make her tell me."

"That was wrong of me, making you talk to her?" I asked.

"Ophelia," said Quinn, "take your time. It's yours to take."

"No, had to happen, you were right," she said to me. But she was shaking. Tears standing in her eyes. Preternatural emotions.

"It's about the Woman Child," I said under my breath. Was I free to reveal it to Quinn? What I'd seen: her monstrous woman offspring? "Doll face," I said, "why should we have secrets now?"

"You can tell him anything," she said, trying not to cry. "Dear God, I … I … I'm going to find them! If she knows where they are, if she's kept that from me.…"

Quinn was watching all this, keeping his counsel. But years ago she'd told him she had had a child, that she had had to give up that child. She had spoken of it to him as a mutation. But she had never explained the nature of that mutation.

And, to recap, in the Blood I'd seen a grown woman, something decidedly not human. Something surely as monstrous as us.

"You don't want to lay it all out for us?" I asked gently.

"Not now, not ready, not yet." She sniffled. "I hate it, all of it."

"I just saw Rowan Mayfair," I said. "I saw her at the Talamasca Retreat House. Something's deeply wrong with her."

"Of course something's wrong with her," she said with an air of exasperation. "I don't care what happens to her when she sees me. So she sees something that will never make human sense to her. I should care? I don't need to live with them the way Quinn lives with his family. I realize that now. It's impossible. I can't do what Quinn did. I need a legal name. I need some money.…"

"Think about it a little longer," I said. "There's no need to make such a decision right now. I got clear of Rowan and Michael tonight rather than disturb them, rather than create doubts that could harm them. It was hard. I wanted to ask them questions. But I had to give it up."

"Why do you care so much?" she asked.

"Because I care about you and Quinn," I said. "You offend me. Don't you know that I love you? I wouldn't have made you if I couldn't love you. Quinn told me so much about you before I ever saw you and then I fell in love with you, of course."

"I have to know things from them," she said. "Things they're holding back, and then I have to find *my daughter* on my own. But I can't talk about it just yet."

"Your daughter?" Quinn asked.

"You mean the Woman Child, it's living—"

"Stop! Not now," said Mona. "Leave me to my philosophy, both of you!"

Huge shift of gears. Her eyes shot to the computer.

She went back to banging on the keys. "What's a better word than 'bequeathed'?"

"Bestowed," I responded.

Quinn came up behind her and fastened a cameo at her neck without interfering with her ferocious writing.

"You're not trying to make her into Aunt Queen, are you?" I asked. She went on hammering.

"She's Ophelia Immortal," he said. He didn't take offense.

We left her. We went down the passage and out onto the rear balcony and down into the courtyard and found a couple of iron chairs. I realized I'd never used these chairs.

They were pretty after a fashion, Victorian, ornate. I didn't own anything that wasn't pretty after a fashion, or downright beautiful, if I could help it.

The garden enclosed us with its high banana trees and its night-blooming flowers. The music of the water in the fountain mingled with the distant sound of Mona writing, and Mona whispering as she wrote. I could hear the whine of the nightclub bands on the Rue Bourbon. I could hear the whole damned city if I tried. The sky was a faint lilac color now, overcast and reflecting the city glow.

"Don't think that," said Quinn.

"What, Little Brother?" I woke from listening to distant sounds.

"I see her as Aunt Queen's heiress," he said, "don't you see? Everything that Aunt Queen wanted to give of her clothes, her jewelry, all those things, whatever she wanted to give to Jasmine she'd already given, and there's plenty enough in bank boxes for Tommy's wife of the future or whoever little Jerome marries (Jerome was Quinn's son by Jasmine, let me remind you). And so I make Mona an heiress to maybe a tenth of the most extreme silk dresses. Jasmine never wore the extreme silk dresses anyway. And the glitter shoes which nobody really wants. And the shell cameos, which are common.

"If Aunt Queen somehow knew what had really happened to me, what I'd become, as we always say so delicately; if she knew that Mona was with me, finally, that Heaven and Earth had been moved, and Mona was with me, she'd want me to give those things to Mona. She'd be pleased that Mona was tripping around in those shoes."

I listened to all this and I understood it. I should have understood it before. But Mona's daughter, who and what was Mona's daughter?

"The clothes and shoes make her very happy," I said. "Most likely she's been sick so long that all her own clothes are gone. Who knows?"

"What did you see in the Blood when you made her? What was this Woman Child?"

"That's what I saw," I responded. "A daughter of hers who was a full-grown woman, a monster in her own eyes. It had come from her. And it was torn from her. She loved it. She nursed it. I saw that. And then she lost it, just like she told you. It went away."

He was aghast. He'd caught nothing like this from her thoughts.

But in the Blood you go where nobody wants to go. That's the horror of it. That's the beauty of it.

"Could it really have been so freakish, so abnormal?" he asked. His eyes veered away. "You know, years ago, I told you … I went to dinner at the Mayfair house. Rowan showed me the place. There was some secret, some dark hidden story present there the whole time. I could see it in Rowan's silence and in Rowan's drifting. But I couldn't see it in Michael. And even now Mona

won't tell us."

"Quinn, you won't tell her why you killed Patsy, either," I said. "As we move on year by year in this life, we learn that telling doesn't necessarily purge; telling sometimes merely is a reliving, and it's a torment."

The back door opened with a splat.

Mona came clattering down the steps, two pages in her hand.

"Dear God, I just love these shoes!" she said, making a circuit of the courtyard. Then:

She stood before us, looking like a waxen doll in the light from the upstairs windows, with one finger pointing, like that of a nun in school:

" 'I must confess that it has already become undeniably clear to me, though I have existed in this exalted state for only two nights, that the very nature of my powers and means of existence attest to the ontological supremacy of a sensualist philosophy having taken up residence within me, as I proceed from moment to moment and from hour to hour both to apprehend the universe around me and the microcosm of my own self. This requires of me an immediate redefining of the concept of mystical, which I have heretofore mentioned to include a state both elevated and totally carnal, both transcendent and orgasmic, which delivers me when drinking blood or gazing at a lighted candle beyond all human epistemological constraints.

" 'Whereas the hermeneutics of pain had once completely convinced me of my own personal salvation, indeed, whereas I had once worked out a comprehensive Prayer of Quiet in which I had embraced Christ and his Five Wounds in order to endure the Finality which seemed inescapable for me, I now find myself approaching God on a totally undefined path.

" 'Can it be that being a vampire, and having a vampire soul as well as a human soul, I am therefore removed from human obligations and all human ontological conditions? I think not.

" 'I think on the contrary that I am now responsible for the supreme human obligation: to investigate the highest use of my powers, for surely though I am vampire by my own free will and by a Baptism of Blood, I am still by birth, by maturity, by underlying physicality human, and must therefore share in the human condition despite the fact that I shall not in the ordinary scheme of things grow old or die.

" 'To return to the inescapable question of Salvation, yes, I do remain rooted in a relativistic universe, no matter how spectacularly defined I have become as to form and function, and I find myself within the same dimension in which I existed before my transformation, and therefore I must ask: am I perforce outside the economy of grace established by Our Divine Savior in the very fact of his Incarnation, even before His Crucifixion, both events which I firmly believe to have occurred within human history and chronology, and to be knowable through both, and commanding a response in both?

" 'Or can the Sacraments of Holy Mother the Church redeem me in my present state? I must conclude on the face of it, from my short experience, from the ecstasy and abandon which have

so rampantly replaced all pain and suffering within the organism which I am, that I assume that I stand excommunicated from the Body of Christ by my very nature.

“ ‘But it could be that I am never to know the answer to this question, no matter how thoroughly I investigate the world and myself, and does not this very unknowing only bring me all the closer to full existential participation in humankind?

“ ‘It seems wise to accept, in deepest humility and with an aim towards a validating spiritual perfection at the onset, that I may never hope at any juncture of my wanderings, be they for untold centuries or for a few short years of near unendurable ecstasy, to know whether I share in the Savior’s Redemption, and that that very unknowing may be the price I pay for my extra-human sensibility and inherently blood-thirsty triumph over the pain I once suffered, over the imminent death that once tyrannized me, over the ubiquitous threat of human time.’

“What do you think?”

“Very good,” I said.

Quinn piped up: “I like the word ‘perforce.’ ”

She ran up to him and started beating him about the head and shoulders with the pages, and kicking him with her high-heel shoes. He laughed under his breath and carelessly defended himself with one arm. “Look, it’s better than crying!” he said.

“You hopeless Boy,” she declared, erupting in streaks of laughter. “You hopeless, egregious Boy! You are patently unworthy of all the philosophical considerations I have positively lavished upon you! And what, I ask, have you written since your Blood Baptism, why, the very ink has dried up in the circuits of your cruel little preternatural brain.”

“Wait a minute, quiet,” I said. “Someone’s arguing with the guards at the gate.” I was on my feet.

“My God, it’s Rowan,” said Mona. “Damn, I should never have called her on her cell.”

“Cell?” I asked. But it was very much too late.

“Caller ID,” Quinn murmured as he rose and took Mona in his arms.

It was Rowan, most assuredly—breathless and frantic, and, followed by both guards, who were protesting heavily, she came racing back the carriageway and stopped dead, facing Mona across the courtyard.

12

The shock of seeing Mona, of apprehending her in the light that fell from the upstairs windows and the inevitable light from the glowing sky, was such that Rowan was stopped as if she'd struck an invisible wall.

Michael at once caught up with her, and he too experienced a similar immense surprise.

As they stood baffled, not knowing what to make of the evidence of their senses, I told the guards to back off and leave the matter to me.

"Come on up into the flat," I said. I gestured towards the iron stairs.

It was useless to say anything at this juncture. It wasn't a vampire that they'd just seen. They knew and suspected nothing of supernatural origin here. It was Mona's spectacular "recovery" which had them in total disbelief.

It was in essence a scary moment. Because though a big frank smile of undisguised jubilance had broken out over Michael Curry's face, Rowan's scowling countenance was full of something akin to wrath. All her personal history was coiled behind that wrath, and I was fascinated by it as I'd been by all her emotions before.

Only reluctantly, and somewhat in the manner of a sleepwalker, Rowan let me take her arm. Her entire body was tense. Nevertheless, I led her to the iron steps, and then I went before her, in order to lead the whole party. And Mona gestured for Rowan to follow me, and Mona, tossing her hair back over her shoulders, looking miserable, followed her.

The back parlor was best for such gatherings, having no bookshelves and a deep velvet sofa and lots of tolerable Queen Anne chairs. Of course there was ormolu and inlaid wood everywhere, and a blazing new wallpaper of wine and beige stripes, and the garlands of flowers in the carpet seemed to be having convulsions, and the Impressionist paintings on the wall in their thick encrusted frames were like windows into a far far better, sun-filled universe, but it was a good room.

I shut off the overhead chandelier immediately and switched on two of the smaller corner lamps. It was softly dim now, but not uncomfortably so, and I directed everyone to sit down.

Michael beamed at Mona and said at once, "Darling, you look absolutely beautiful," as if he was uttering a prayer. "My lovely, lovely girl."

"Thank you, Uncle Michael, I love you," Mona answered tragically, and wiped at her eyes

fiercely as though these people were somehow going to return her to her wretched mortal state.

Quinn was petrified. And his worst suspicion was rightly directed at Rowan.

She too appeared paralyzed except for her eyes, breaking away from Mona suddenly and fastening on me.

This had to be quick.

"All right, you see for yourself," I said, my eyes moving from Rowan to Michael and back again. "Mona's cured of whatever was wrong with her, and the entire wasting sickness has been reversed. She's utterly self-sufficient and whole. If you think that I am going to explain to you how this was done, or anything about it, you're wrong. You can call me Rasputin or worse names. I don't care."

Rowan's eyes quivered but her face did not change. The turbulence inside her was unreadable, indeed, unknowable, and if I caught anything definitive it was a high pitch of terror that hearkened back to things which had befallen her in the past. I couldn't fathom it, there wasn't time for such mental mining, and her confusion was putting up too much of a fight.

I had to go on.

"You're not going to walk away from here with any answers," I proceeded. "Get angry at me. Go ahead. Some night, many years from now, maybe Mona will choose to explain what happened, but for now you have to accept what you've seen. You no longer need to worry about Mona. Mona is on her own."

"It's not that I'm ungrateful," Mona said, her voice thick and her eyes filming red. She blotted them at once with her handkerchief. "You know I'm grateful. It just feels so good to be free."

Rowan fixed again on her. If Rowan found the slightest virtue in this miracle, it wasn't rising to the forefront of her mind.

"Your voice isn't the same," said Rowan. "Your hair, your skin—." She looked back to me. "Something's wrong." She stared at Quinn.

"This meeting's over," I said. "I don't mean to be harsh, truly I don't. But you know what you need to know. Obviously you know the phone number here, that's how you found us. You know where we are."

I rose to my feet.

Quinn and Mona followed but Rowan and Michael didn't move. Michael was taking his lead from Rowan, but then he reluctantly stood up, because Rowan or no Rowan, it was the courteous thing to do. This man was so lovable that even under these circumstances he didn't want to offend anyone, least of all Mona, and cause anyone any discomfort at all.

He simply did not see us the way Rowan did. He didn't look at people. He looked into their eyes. He studied Quinn's expression but not the physicality of Quinn. He didn't even care that Quinn was so tall. He scouted for the kindness in people and invariably found it, and his own kindness invested his entire being, infusing his considerable physical gifts. It was a rugged beauty

he possessed, and he put behind him a calm self-assurance that can only arise from immense strength.

"Honey, do you need anything?" he asked Mona.

"I'm going to need some money," said Mona. She ignored Rowan's fixed stare. "Of course I'm not the Heiress anymore. Nobody wanted to talk about that when I was dying, but I've known that for years. And I'd retire now anyway, if it wasn't the case. The Heiress to the Mayfair fortune has to bear a child. We all know that I can't do that anymore. But I want to ask for a settlement. Nothing like the billions of the Legacy. Nothing like that at all. I mean, just a settlement so that I won't be poor. That's no problem, is it?"

"No problem at all," said Michael with a very loving smile to her and a shrug. The man was totally appealing. He wanted to hug her. But he took his lead from Rowan, and Rowan had not moved from the chair. "It's no problem, is it, Rowan?" he asked. His eyes swept the room a bit uneasily. He fixed for a few seconds on the brilliant Impressionist painting above the sofa in front of which I stood. He looked genially at me.

He couldn't begin to guess what had transformed Mona. But he never dreamt of anything sinister or evil. It was amazing the degree with which he accepted it, and only as I searched his mind now, in this moment when he was confused by Rowan and without his habitual defenses, only in this moment did I understand. He accepted Mona as she was because he wanted so very much for her recovery to be true. He'd thought Mona was doomed. Now a miracle had happened to Mona. He didn't need to know who'd worked the miracle. Saint Juan Diego? Saint Lestat? Whatever! It was fine with him.

I could have told him a harebrained story about us pumping her full of lipids and spring water and he would have bought it wholesale. He had flunked "Science" in school.

But Rowan Mayfair couldn't escape being a scientific genius. She couldn't ignore the fact that Mona's recovery was a physical impossibility. And in her mind were memories so painful they had no pictures or people to them; they had only dark inchoate feelings and awesome guilt.

She sat silent and motionless in the chair. Her eyes moved accusingly and wrathfully from Mona to me and back again and round once more.

I had a sense, perhaps flawed, that she was moving towards a brave curiosity, but …

Mona approached her. Not a great idea.

I signaled Quinn, and Quinn tried to stop Mona but Mona shook him off. Mona was determined.

Yet Mona appeared wary, as if Rowan was an animal that could scratch. I didn't like this at all. Mona stood between Rowan and everybody else in the room. I could no longer see Rowan, but I knew that Mona was only inches from Rowan and this was not good at all.

Mona bent down with her arms out. She apparently meant to kiss or embrace Rowan.

Rowan moved back so fast to get away from Mona that she knocked over the chair in which

she'd been sitting and the table and lamp beside it, crash, thump, bang, shuffle, and plastered herself against the wall.

Michael went on full alert, shooting to her side. But what was there to see?

Mona stepped back to the center of the room, whispering "Oh, my God," under her breath, and Quinn took hold of her from behind and held her and kissed her cheek.

Rowan couldn't move. Her heart was pounding and her mouth was open and she shut her eyes as if she were about to scream. She had passed right through terror. It was utter revulsion, as if she'd seen a giant insect. It was the most explosive reaction on the part of a mortal to a vampire that I'd ever seen. It was panic.

I knew I could charm her because I'd done it before, crossed the barrier between the species without ever evoking that panic, and I determined to cross the barrier now with all my nerve. And this did take tremendous nerve.

"Very well, darling, very well, sweetheart," I said, advancing on Rowan as fast as I dared. "My precious, my darling," I said, as I slipped my arms behind her and under her, and caught her up and carried her past an astonished Michael, towards the door. Her body grew soft. (Thank Heaven.) "I have you, my sweetheart," I said to her, crooning in her ear, kissing her ear, "I'm holding you, precious darling," as I carried her out and down the steps, her body now completely limp, "I have you, my sweetheart, nothing can hurt you, yes, yes," her head falling against my chest and her hand clawing weakly at my shirt. She was gasping. "I understand, my precious," I said. "But you're safe, you're really safe, I would never let anything bad happen to you, I promise you, that's my promise, and Michael's here, he's with you, it's all right, darling, you know I'm telling you the truth, that these things are truly all right."

I could see these words sinking down, down into her mind, through the levels of guilt and remembrance and flight from the present, and what she'd sensed and couldn't deny and could only retreat from, and all the truths she had feared.

Michael was right behind me, and as soon as we reached the flagstones he took her from me effortlessly, and she fell into his arms in the same way.

Boldly I kissed her cheek, my lips lingering, and her hand found mine and her fingers coiled around mine. *Behold, thou art fair my love, thou art fair.* Her panic was still so great that she couldn't speak.

" 'A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed.' " I whispered in her ear. I kissed her again and again on her soft cheek. I stroked her hair. Her fingers gripped me, but the grip had softened, as she was softened.

"I've got you, darling," Michael said in exactly the same tone. "Rowan, my sweetheart, I have you, honey, I'll take you home."

As I backed off his eyes looked at me searchingly, and without enmity. I sensed something about his love for her, that it was immense and beyond pettiness, and that he claimed no

dominion over her, that he adored her. It was difficult for me to really accept.

Rowan lost consciousness. Her head fell forward and against Michael. He realized it with total alarm.

"It's all right," I said. "Just take her home and lie down beside her and don't leave her alone."

"But what the Hell happened?" he whispered to me as he cuddled her.

"Doesn't matter," I said. "Remember that. It doesn't matter. What matters is that Mona has been saved."

I went back upstairs.

Of course Mona was sobbing.

She lay across the bed in their room where the computer purred, and she was sobbing, and Quinn sat by her, as was becoming the custom.

"What did I do wrong?" Mona asked. She looked up at me. "Tell me, what did I do wrong?"

I sat at the computer desk.

She sat up, cheeks streaked with blood.

"I can't live with them the way Quinn lives at Blackwood Manor; you see it, don't you? I didn't do anything wrong."

"Oh, stop lying to yourself," I said. "You know very well you're angry with her, deeply angry. Your intentions weren't pure when you approached her. She's done something to you, deceived you, something, something you can't forgive. You practically told us right here in this room. You had to show her your power, you had to push it—."

"You really think so?" she asked.

"I know so," I said.

"You think she's kept secrets from you. Magic secrets, secrets you haven't explained to Quinn and to me. You've resented her all these years as the doctor, the mad scientist, yes, right, the mad scientist, the keeper of the keys to the magic, coming in and out of your death chamber, ordering this medication and that medication and never really telling you what was happening, but other secrets, darker secrets, secrets that you and she and Michael know, not so?"

"I love her."

"And now here you knew you had the powerful magic. You had the keys to a powerful secret. You condescended to her. And so she saw through this duplicity, this display of patronizing affection, and she was panic-stricken when she realized *you weren't alive anymore,* just as you wanted her to be. You wanted her to acknowledge your power, that next to you, the way you are, she was nothing."

"You really think so?" Tears. Sniffles.

"I know so. And you're not finished with her. Not at all."

"Hold on, Lestat," said Quinn, "you're being unfair. Mona confessed that they had a score to settle. But surely she wasn't thinking of all those things, not when she went towards Rowan."

"Yes, she was," I insisted.

"You've fallen in love with her," said Quinn.

"In love with who? Mona? I told you I love both of you."

"No," said Quinn. "You know I don't mean Mona. You've fallen completely in love with Rowan in a way that's not like your infatuation with us. You've connected with something deep inside of Rowan and we can't compete with it. It started last night. But you can't have Rowan. You just can't."

"Mon Dieu!" I whispered.

I crossed the hall, went into my bedroom and shut and locked the door.

There stood Julien in his natty white-tie regalia, arms folded smugly as he gazed at me, leaning against the tall mahogany headboard of the bed.

"That's right, you can't have her," he said, laughing under his breath. "I watched you slip into it like the fly into the honey. I loved it. Her taking you so unawares, oh yes, your tasting that kernel of evil with your oh-so-refined senses, kisses in the shadows, yes, and falling so blithely in love with her, so tenderly for you with all your loathsome powers. And you cannot have her. No, never. Not Rowan Mayfair. Never ever. Not the Magnate, not the Creator of the greatest family enterprise, not the champion of the family's public dreams, the family's philanthropic wonder, the family's guiding star! You can't ever have her. And you shall have all the fun of watching her from afar and never knowing what might happen to her. Old age, sickness, accident, tragedy. Won't it be something to behold! And you can't ever interfere. You don't dare!"

There stood beside him little Stella, aged eight or nine, in a lovely white dress, drop waist style, a white bow in her black hair.

"Don't be so mean to him, Oncle Julien!" she said. "Poor darling."

"Oh, but he is a mean creature, Stella dearest," said Julien. "He took our beloved Mona. He deserves nothing but the worst."

"Listen to me, you cheap backstairs ghost," I said. "I'm no sentimental rake out of a bad Byronic poem. I'm not in love with your precious Rowan Mayfair. The love I feel for her is something you can't know in your shallow wanderings. And Rowan's in more trouble than you can ever imagine. Now why don't you tell me what disastrous mistake you made with all your clever machinations and visitations? Or shall I get it out of Mona or Rowan or Michael? You haven't been an angelic success, have you? Take your little girl in your arms and get out of my sight. Is God giving you the power to writhe and spit with anger?"

Pounding on the door. Mona calling my name over and over again.

They were gone, the ghosts.

She came into my arms. "But I can't bear it if you're angry with me, tell me you're not, I love you with my whole soul."

"No, no, never angry," I said. "Let me hold you tight, my fledgling, my darling, my newborn

one. I adore you. We'll fix everything. We'll make everything perfect for everyone. Somehow."

13

Hotel corridors. Muffled voices. On and on. Dark blue carpet. Candle flame electric lights. Door after door. That's a pretty table. Oh, you rank materialist, be done with tables, and be gone on your filthy errand. What if some ruthless enterprising individual did a catalog of all the furniture you have personally described in your Vampire Chronicles, then what, I'll tell you what, that would put you to shame, you avaricious, shameless, hoarding, ever-hungry Seven Deadly Sin Committing fiend, what did Louis once say to you, that you made a junk shop of eternity? Move it!

Bedroom interior. Mirrors and mahogany. Wreckage of room service. (Look Ma, no tables!) Olive-skinned woman, dark of hair, half conscious on the pillows. Smell of gin. Drapes open on the crowded sparkling high-rise night. Tumbler full of ice cubes and gin and tonic, catching light in frozen bubbles.

She turned on her back, rose up on her elbows. Beige satin nightgown, lank, nipples brown.

"So they sent you, did they?" she asked, lids half closed, eyes scornful, painted mouth hard. "So how will you do it? Hmmm. Get a load of that blond hair."

I lay down on the bed beside her, on my left elbow. Bed thick with her sweet human perfume. Luxurious hotel sheets and pillows.

"You're some hit man," she said, sneering. She picked up the beautiful tumbler. "You don't mind if I have a drink before I die, do you?" She drained the gin and tonic out of it. It smelled like poison to me.

Ahhhhh, gambling debts, millions, how does one do that, but it was only the tip of it, she'd been in much deeper, flying back and forth to Europe, stashing the wealth for the wrong man. When she fired a gun she emptied it. Making a living. Her partner had vanished. She knew she was next. Didn't care anymore. All that money gone to waste. Drunk all the time now. Sick of waiting. Black hair oily and fine. One of those faces completely transformed by maturity. Lots of there there but who cares?

She fell back on the pillow.

"So kill me, you bastard," she purred. I mean slurred.

"You got it, sweetheart," I said. I covered her, and kissed her throat. Hmmm. Fragrance of nobody.

“What is this, Rape?” Snickering laughter. “Can’t you find a two hundred dollar ho in this hellhole city? You know how old I am? You have to put a spin on the job, a guy with your looks?”

I covered her mouth. She gave just a little to the press of my lips.

“And kissy face on top of it,” she drawled. “Stick to the pelvic moves, fancy man.”

“I have something better, honey, you underestimate me.”

I nuzzled against her neck, kissed the artery, heard the blood surging, opened my mouth slowly, tasting skin again, sank my teeth and drew fast so that she swooned before the pinprick pain could catch up. Oh, Lord God, this is from Somebody’s Heaven.

Easy.

Weightless, timeless, apocalyptic. Oh, baby, you’re no liar, don’t expect me to give a hoot about the things I’ve done, never, how could I, I’m not God, honey bunch, well, then, who, the Devil, oh, sweet, I told you, didn’t I, I don’t believe in you, I hate you, keep it going, I am, I am, as much as I can bother to despise anyone, I love this! hmmm, yeah, tell me about it, and then what was it? I almost, if you want to give it up, do it, but if you don’t, I don’t need it, it’s what you need, sidewalk hopscotch, colored chalk, I hate them, lemme go, jump rope, screen door bang shut, never could, kids crying, I just need the blood, oh, but wait, I see it, I never knew it could be so—back down that hallway, no, well, guess what? it isn’t. Laughter, light and laughter, I should have—.

Her heart couldn’t pump it any longer. I lifted her, drew harder, the heart stopped, arteries burst, blood blind, body slowly filling with weight, slipslide of satin, shock of downtown lights, the sparkle in the ice cubes, the Miracle of the Ice Cubes.

Blood to the brain, My Lord and My God, I’m out of here. Thou shalt not lie beside the corpse of thy victim, for the Deadly Sin of Pride I shattered the huge window, arms out, glass flying in all directions, Take me, Oh Twinkling Downtown Lights, Take me!—glass falling on the airwell gravel roof and the mighty modern unromantic ever-churning air machines.

Won’t the hit man be surprised?

14

The next night I awoke to discover the *National Catholic Reporter* had arrived in the mail, and I tore it open for news of Saint Juan Diego.

There was great coverage, including a wonderful black and white photograph of the Pope in his white mitre, listing badly to the right proper but doing fine otherwise, watching "indigenous dancers" at the canonization Mass in the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City. Huge crowd. Of course the article HAD to mention the fact that some people doubted that Juan Diego had ever existed!

But what did that matter to the faithful like me?

Only after I had devoured all the articles on the Pope's travels did I realize there was a note lying on the desk from one of the guards, saying that Michael Curry had come by in the afternoon and asked if I might call him. No one was answering the phone.

I'd come back so late last night that I had not seen Mona and Quinn, and they had not yet risen.

The flat was ominously quiet. Apparently it was too early for Julien and Stella as well. Or maybe my last speech had routed Julien for a while. But I didn't think so. He was, if anything, probably more energized and waiting for a moment in which to strike.

I was about to pick up the phone and call the number which Michael had given to the guard when I realized that Michael had just come to the carriageway below.

I went down to meet him. The evening was all aglow and full of the scent of the kitchens of the Quarter.

I motioned for the guards to let Michael come on back.

He was in a frantic state. He was wearing the same three-piece white suit as yesterday, shirt now open and tie gone, and he was all rumpled and smudged with dirt and his hair was mussed.

"What's the matter, man?" I asked, as I reached to take his arm.

He shook his head. He was choking on the words he wanted to say. His thoughts were scrambled. On some unconscious level he blocked me from reading him, while appealing to me at the same time.

I led him into the courtyard. He was sweating badly. The garden was just too hot. I had to take him in where the artificial winds blow.

"Come on," I said. "Let's go upstairs."

Mona appeared in the doorway just as we reached the back parlor, pretty blue silk dress, heels strapped at the ankles, just her hair tousled from bed.

"Uncle Michael, what's wrong!" She was instantly distraught.

"Hey, baby," Michael said weakly. "You're sure looking fine." He collapsed on the velvet sofa and he put his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands.

"What is it, Uncle Michael?" she said, obviously shy of touching him, settling uncertainly on the edge of a nearby chair.

"It's Rowan," he said. "She's gone out of her mind, and I don't know if we can bring her back this time. It's worse than it ever was before."

He looked at me. "I came here to ask you point blank if you'd help. You have a power over her. You calmed her last night. You might be able to do it again."

"But what's happening to her?" Mona asked. "Is she catatonic like before?"

I caught only jumbled images from Michael's mind. He didn't appear to register Mona's question. I had to settle for his words.

"Stirling's with her now," Michael said, "but he's not getting through. This morning she insisted she wanted to go to Confession. I called Fr. Kevin. They were alone for about an hour. Of course he can't tell anybody what she said. You ask me, I think Fr. Kevin's on the brink too. You can't take a regular priest like Fr. Kevin and plunge him into a family like ours, and expect him to survive, expect him to represent something, expect him to exercise his priestly functions. It's not fair."

"Michael," I said. "What is Rowan doing?"

He didn't seem to hear me. He went on.

"Mayfair Medical, all her work on it has been frenetic, you know that, or at least you did know that—" he looked at Mona—"but nobody else really realizes it, that she works to the point of exhaustion so that there will be no inner life, no quiet life, no life of the mind other than that which is locked to Mayfair Medical, it's a complete vocation, yeah, marvelous, but it's also a complete escape."

"A mania," said Mona quietly. She was badly shaken.

"Right," said Michael. "Her public persona is the only persona she really has. The interior Rowan has utterly disintegrated. Or it has to do with the secrets of Mayfair Medical. And now this breakdown, this complete disconnection, this madness. Do you realize how many people are riding on her energy? Her example? She's created a world that's dependent upon her—members of the family from all over come here to study medicine, the new wing is under way at the hospital, there's the Brain Study Program, she's monitoring four research projects, I don't even know the half of it. You chuck my own selfish needs, and then there's all that—."

"What actually happened?" I pushed.

"Last night she lay on the bed for hours. She was whispering things. I couldn't hear her. She wouldn't talk to me. She wouldn't come out of it. She wouldn't dress for bed, or take anything to eat or drink. I lay beside her—what you told me to do. I held her. I even sang to her. Irish people do that, you know. We sing when we're melancholy. It's the strangest thing. I thought I was the only one. Then I realized all Mayfairs do it. That's the Tyrone McNamara blood down through Oncle Julien. I sang these melancholy songs to her. I fell asleep. When I woke up, she was gone.

"I found her in the back garden on the lawn under the oak. She was barefoot out there, in her pretty silk suit, digging, digging where the remains were." He looked at Mona. "She was in her bare feet and she was digging with one of the gardener's big shovels. She was talking to herself about Emaleth and Lasher and she was cursing herself. When I tried to stop her, she hit me. I tried to remind her she'd had the remains removed. As soon as Mayfair Medical was complete, she had had a team out to scour for the remains."

"Emaleth and Lasher?" I asked.

"I remember," said Mona. "I was there when it happened."

"She was crazy that day," Michael said. "She kept repeating herself. She said that she belonged in the Talamasca. They sifted through that dirt like a pack of archaeologists. Yeah, you saw them, and that fragrance, it was so strong."

Mona was fighting back her usual tears. My heart went out to both of them. They were prisoners of these secrets.

"Go on," said Mona.

"I tried to tell her. They'd excavated the entire area. They'd brought everything to Mayfair Medical. She didn't seem to understand. I told her what she'd told me at the time. It was cartilage, cartilage of an infinitely more elastic species … that it wasn't even the scene of a crime! But she wasn't listening. She keeps pacing and talking to herself. She says I don't know who she is. She's always told me that. She started talking again about joining the Talamasca, retiring into the Order. As if it was a convent. She said she belonged there. In the Talamasca. In the old days, when women had done evil things they could be sent to monasteries. She said she would make a bequest to the Talamasca, and they would take her, they would take the Mad Scientist, because that's who she really was. Mona, she doesn't believe in my understanding. She doesn't believe in my power to forgive."

"I know, Uncle Michael."

"I'm a moral child in her mind," Michael said, his voice shaky. "And then she said the worst thing."

"What?" asked Mona.

"She said that you were … you were dead."

Mona didn't reply.

"I kept telling her you were fine. We'd just seen you. You were all right, you were cured. She

kept shaking her head. 'Mona's not alive anymore.' That's what she said."

Michael looked at me. "Lestat, will you come?" he asked.

I was vaguely amazed. This man was highly intuitive, but he was seeing in me only what he wanted to see.

"Will you talk to her?" he asked. "You had such a soothing effect on her. I saw it with my own eyes. If you and Mona could come. Bring Quinn. Rowan loves Quinn. Rowan doesn't notice many people. But she's always loved Quinn. Maybe because Quinn can see spirits, I don't know. Maybe because Quinn and Mona love each other, I don't know. She loved Quinn from the first time he came to call on Mona years ago. She's always trusted in Quinn. But Lestat, if you could talk to her … and Mona, if you could come and show her that you're alive, show her that you're fine, just hold her…."

"Michael, listen to me," I said. "I want you to go home. Quinn and Mona and I have to talk this over. We'll come to you or call you as soon as we can. Be assured, we're very concerned about Rowan. There's no other concern on our minds right now except Rowan."

He sat back on the couch, closed his eyes and took a long breath. He looked defeated. "I was hoping you'd come back with me," he said.

"Believe me," I said, "our little consultation won't take long. We have strong obligations. We'll call or come just as quickly as we can." I hesitated. "We love Rowan," I said.

He stood up, heaved a sigh and headed for the door. I asked if he needed a ride back home and he murmured that his car had brought him downtown.

He looked back at Mona. She'd stood up but she was afraid to embrace him, that was plain.

"Uncle Michael, I love you," she whispered.

"Oh, sweetheart," he said, "if I had my life to live over again and could just erase that one night."

"Don't think about it, Uncle Michael," she said. "How many times do I have to tell you? I climbed in the back window, for God's sakes. It was all my fault, from start to finish."

He was unconvinced. "I took advantage of you, baby," he whispered.

I was stunned.

"Michael, it was Oncle Julien too," Mona said. "It was Oncle Julien's spell. He made a big mistake. Besides, it doesn't matter now, don't you see?"

I was stunned again.

He stared at her, narrowing his eyes. I couldn't figure whether he wanted a blurred focus or a fine one. It was as though he saw her loveliness afresh.

"Oh, you do look so good," he sighed. "My sweetheart." He closed the gap between them and embraced her totally, a bear of a man enfolding her. "My darling girl," he said.

I was afraid.

They rocked together, his arms completely enclosing her. He suspected nothing. He drifted in a

dream. And she, newborn thing that she was, felt like a peach.

At last he broke away and said wearily that he had to return to Rowan, and I told him again that we would call him very soon.

He looked at me for a long moment, as though he was seeing me with new eyes, but it was only his weariness. He was seeing what he wanted to see in me, and he thanked me again.

"She called you Rasputin when she was angry," he said. "Well, I tell you, Lestat, you do have that sort of power and it's a good thing. I can sense the good in you."

"How in the world can you do that?" I asked. To ask that honest question felt extraordinarily sweet. This was truly one of the most baffling mortals I'd ever met. And to think, he was *her* husband, and I'd thought him the perfect husband for her when we'd first met.

He reached out and took my hand before I could stop him. Couldn't he feel how hard it was? Only the thinnest layer of flesh was permeable. I was a monster. Yet he peered into my eyes as though plumbing for something separate from the Deadly Sins that prevailed within me.

"You're good," he said, confirming it for himself. "You think I'd let you hold my wife in your arms if I didn't sense it? You think I'd let you kiss her cheek? You think I'd come to plead with you to calm my wife when I couldn't if I didn't know you were good? I don't make mistakes of that order. I've been with the dead. The dead have come to me and surrounded me. They've talked to me. They've taught me things. I know."

I held fast. I nodded. "I've been with the dead too," I said. "They left me in confusion."

"Maybe you asked too much of them," he said gently. "I think when the dead come to us they are crippled creatures. They look to us for their completion."

"Yes," I said. "I think that's true. And without a doubt I failed them. But I was with angels too and they asked too much of me and I refused them."

A look of quiet shock passed over his face. "Yes, you said it before. Angels. I can't imagine being with angels."

"Never mind my words," I said. "I talk too much of my own wounds and failures. With Rowan, something can be done, and I promise you, we will see to it."

He nodded. "Just come to the house, please, all of you."

"Are you and Rowan alone there?" I asked.

"Stirling Oliver is there, but—," he said.

"That's fine. He can stay," I replied. "We'll be there very soon. Wait there for us."

He nodded with a half smile that was trusting and grateful and kind.

He went on out the door.

I stood trembling, listening to him make the stairs, and then the carriageway. I shut my eyes.

A solemn silence fell over the room. I knew Quinn had come to the door. I struggled to gain control of my heart. I struggled. Mona cried softly into her handkerchief.

"Mona of a Thousand Tears," I said. I fought them myself. I won. "How could he have so

totally misunderstood me?"

"But he didn't," said Quinn.

"Oh, yes, he did," I insisted. "Sometimes I think the theologians have got it backwards. The big problem is not How to explain the existence of evil in this world. It's How to explain the existence of good."

"You don't believe that," said Quinn.

"Yes, I do," I said.

I fell into a sudden trance, thinking of the Pope in the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City with the "Indigenous people" dancing in their feathered headdresses. I wondered if the Spaniards would have murdered those Indians in their feathered headdresses for doing that on consecrated ground two centuries ago or three or four. Well, Hell, it didn't matter. Saint Juan Diego would protect everyone now.

I shuddered in order to clear my mind.

I sat on the couch. I had to ponder what I'd learnt.

"So it was Michael who fathered your child," I said to Mona as gently as I could.

"Yes," she answered. She sat beside me. She put her hand over mine. "There are so many things I'm not free to tell. But at the time, Rowan wasn't there. Rowan … Rowan did a terrible thing. I can't tell what Rowan did. Rowan left Michael. Rowan was the thirteenth witch. I can't tell it. But Rowan left Michael on Christmas Day."

"Go on, you were talking about Michael," I said.

"It was weeks later. The house was all dark. I climbed in the window. Michael was supposed to be sick. He was grieving for Rowan. I crept up there to his room. I knew he wasn't sick as soon as I touched him."

Quinn sat down close to us. I realized he'd heard our conversation with Michael. He didn't care for what Mona was telling me. It came as a huge shock to him that Michael had fathered the child of which he knew so little. But he remained quiet.

"Then Oncle Julien cast a spell on both of us," said Mona. "He brought us together. He was trying to help Michael stop grieving over Rowan. He wanted to prove to Michael that Michael wasn't really sick. But I wanted it. I really wanted it. I was being the Wander Slut in those days. I kept a list on my computer of all the cousins I seduced. I seduced my cousin Randall, and I think he was eighty then. He nearly shot himself on account of it. Me being thirteen and all that. It was perfectly disgusting. I had to confess to my Aunt Bea that I'd seduced Randall and ask her to come bring the medics—Oh, never mind. But he's just fine now. Imagine. I like to think he's lived to be ninety, thanks to me."

"Yes, of course," said Quinn dryly. "But with Michael you conceived the child."

"Yes," said Mona. "The child that they took away from me."

"It was giving birth to the Woman Child," I said, "that brought on the wasting sickness, and

the sickness wouldn't stop."

"Yes," Mona answered. "At first we didn't know what was happening. It came on very gradually. I had a little time. What good is it now to talk about these things? Rowan dug up the remains beneath the tree because she was trying to find something that might help me. At least in part that was the reason. But it doesn't matter now. What do we do?"

"But who were the creatures buried beneath the tree?" I asked. "Michael called them Emaleth and Lasher."

"Those are their secrets," Mona insisted. "Look, I escaped it all, on account of you, both of you. But there's no escape for Rowan, is there? Except Mayfair Medical. Except project after project. No. But I have to demand the truth from her. Did she try to find my child or not? Did she lie?"

"Why would she lie?" Quinn asked. "What would have been her motive? Don't you see, Mona, Lestat and I can't comprehend these things unless you tell us what they mean."

Mona's face grew dark. She was so pretty that it couldn't look sour, no matter how dreadful her thoughts. "I don't know," she said, tossing her hair. "I just had the feeling sometimes that if Rowan could get one of them … the mutation, the other species … she'd lock them up in Mayfair Medical until she'd run every test she could to see what their flesh or their breast milk or their blood could do for human beings."

"The other species?" I asked.

She sighed.

"Their breast milk in particular, it had curative properties. I used to lie there in the dark and imagine that my daughter was somewhere locked in the building. It was a fantasy. Rowan would force drinks on me. I'd imagine the breast milk of my daughter was mixed in it. It's all wrapped up in what the mutation is. But it doesn't matter now. What does matter is now we have to help Rowan, and I still have to get the truth from her—how I go about finding my daughter myself."

"You still want to find her?" Quinn repeated, as if he hadn't really understood. "Even now, after what's happened to you?"

"Yes," said Mona. "Especially now. I'm no longer human, am I? We're equals now, me and Morrigan, don't you see? Morrigan will live for centuries and so will I! That is—if Rowan's been telling the truth all these years, if she doesn't know where my daughter is, if my daughter's really still alive.…"

"Another species," I said, "not really a mutation. Babies that grow to maturity soon after birth."

"The curse of the family … I can't explain it—," Mona protested. "Don't you understand? Only a tiny number of the Mayfairs know what happened. All the rest live in blissful innocence! That's the irony. The family is so large and so good, so very good. They really have no idea what happened, they never saw, they never experienced, they never knew—."

"I understand your loyalty to them," I said. "But don't you see that Quinn and you and I are a family now?"

She nodded. "I'm a Mayfair," she said. "What can I do to change it? Nothing. Even the Dark Blood doesn't change it. I'm a Mayfair, and that's why we have to go there. I have no choice."

"When Oncle Julien appeared to Quinn," I said, "to tell Quinn that he had Mayfair blood in his veins, Oncle Julien knew about the species? He feared Quinn would have the genes for the species?"

"Please," said Mona. "Don't ask me any more questions. So many bad things happened! By that time Oncle Julien knew because we knew. He wanted to keep Quinn and me apart. But so much damage was done to me by Morrigan's birth it didn't matter. I couldn't have another child of any kind."

"Morrigan," I said. "Did you love this creature? Did she have intellect? Could she speak?"

"You can't imagine what it's like to give birth to one of these creatures," said Mona. "They speak to you even from the womb, they know you, and you know them, and they're hardwired with the knowledge of their kind—." She broke off as if she'd shattered a vow.

I put my arm around her and I kissed her, and brushed the veil of hair back which separated us and kissed her cheek again. She quieted. I loved the texture of her skin. I loved the feel of her lips when my fingers touched them.

Quinn watched these things but he didn't resent me any more than Michael had with Rowan. I withdrew.

"Do you want me to go there alone?" I asked.

"No, absolutely not," cried Mona. "I want to see Rowan. I want to make her tell me. Is it true my child has never, never, ever tried to reach me? I have to know."

"I think you've both told me what we'll do," I said soberly. "We'll exchange secrets. That becomes the framework of our dialogue. We tell Rowan and Michael exactly what we are. And they tell us about the Woman Child and if they know anything at all to aid Mona in her search. They reveal to us the things that Mona can't."

Mona looked up. Her eyes appeared to focus more clearly. I looked at her.

"Are you willing, my darling one?" I asked.

"Yes," Mona said. "It's really their story, not mine."

"Mona, you almost died in this story," I said. "How could it not be yours as well?"

"Oh, I forced my way into it," she said. "I wanted Michael. And she'd deserted him. All those nights in the hospital—I wondered, had she really forgiven me? And my child had lived and—." She shook her head and raised her hand as though to banish a specter.

I stroked her hair back from her forehead. She inclined to me, and I kissed her forehead.

"We have to go there, Beloved Boss!" she whispered. "We promised Michael. She's got to tell me the truth."

"This is all wrong," said Quinn. He shook his head. He clearly didn't like the idea at all. No one at Blackwood Farm knew Quinn's secrets. Even his clever Aunt Queen had died believing him her innocent boy.

"It's the only way to save the sanity of Rowan Mayfair," I said. "She knows but she doesn't know for sure, and it will eat at her and it will obsess her, and on account of her bond with Mona, she and Michael will never let it go. The damage has been done. Only some form of truth will repair it."

"You're right," said Mona. "But if they tell you and Quinn about the Taltos, if they take you into their trust, tell you things that even most all of the Mayfairs don't know, there will be a bond, and maybe that bond can somehow save us all."

Taltos.

So that was the name of this species. That was the name of the creature of the curious fragrance and the back-garden graves and the dying womb.

"Michael and Rowan have obviously kept one terrible set of secrets," I said. "They're fit to keep another. And the innocent Mayfairs will come to receive Mona. And her life won't have to be of the shadows. She'll come and go as you do, Quinn. That's the way it will work."

Quinn studied me silently, respectfully. Then he spoke up.

"Are you in love with Rowan?"

"Doesn't matter one way or the other," I said.

Mona flashed on me, the blood rising in her cheeks very hot, and her eyes quivering.

Intense, painful moment. Why was my soul not crusted over with barnacles for every life I'd taken? I spoke with the tongue of a mortal.

"We're going there to save Rowan, are we not?" I said. "Quinn, call for a car, will you?"

I left them and opened the door and went out onto the rear balcony. The breeze had picked up. The banana trees were dancing against the brick walls. I could see the white roses in the dark. An illicit fire burnt inside me. " 'The rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys,' " I whispered. " 'Thou art all fair, my love, there is no spot in thee.' " How reverently the wind received these strange words.

I would have liked the long way—a walk uptown through streets narrow and wide, the open-mouthed roar of the streetcar or its heavy metal clatter through Chrondelet Street, the vision of the pilgrim oaks struggling on lower St. Charles Avenue, the festering flowers of the Garden District, and the glistening moss on the bricks.

But there was no time for that except in my memory. My heart was thudding. And in Quinn's heart my heart was on trial.

"You know," Mona said as we waited at the curb for the limousine. "I haven't seen the house on First and Chestnut for two years. The day the ambulance came I thought I'd be back in a week or two, like always. Hmmm. I wonder if Oncle Julien's on the prowl in the old rooms."

No, darling, I thought, though I didn't voice it. He's right across the street, in the shadows of a shop bolted for the night, the discredited spirit, glowering at me. *Goddamn you!* But who knows, maybe he'll come along.

15

Love. Who knows about another's love? The more you love, the more you know the burnt out loss of love, the more you heed the silence of unknowing in the face of another's spiritual bondage.

Behold the house, which Quinn described in years-ago summer days when he went to call on beloved Mona, the house with crape myrtles pressed against its black fence, and the two famous sentinel oaks with their erupting roots beneath the broken flagstones.

White columns upstairs and down, side hall door, long windows, rocking chairs on the porch, cast-iron railings beneath their spilling festoons of flowering vines. And the great secretive side yard stretching back into a private and concealed darkness. It was into that sunny gulf that Oncle Julien had lured the young Quinn and told him of his Mayfair blood and that he must never marry Mona. Some ghosts just never give up! I spied the sparkle of the waters of the swimming pool far back there, and who knows what beyond, the graveyard of the mysterious *Taltos*?

Led into the double parlor by a trusting Michael with a relieved smile, I sensed at once a telltale fragrance. *Alien species.* Faint but true. Mona caught it, nose uplifted in that quick, slight vampiric gesture.

Quite a room.

Soaring mirrors over twin fireplaces of white marble. Mirrors at each end multiplying the long shadowy chamber and its chandeliers into infinity. Aubusson carpets, are they not, and the scattered furniture both common and fine violating the built-in division of the rooms with a great gathering area of couch and chairs beneath the central arch, and beyond, the long black Bösendorfer piano beneath a genteel veil of dust. Paintings of ancestors on the wall, for who else could they be, a stalwart woman with black hair in handsome riding attire, and on this other side, guess who, with his gleaming eyes and a smile I'd never see, Monsieur Julien Mayfair, of course, and the great German tall-case clock ticking and swinging faithfully.

Rustlings, as if the house was full of ghosts. Glance of the real true hateful Julien out of the corner of my eye. It was Michael who turned. Then Julien on the other side, and the sound of taffeta as though from an old-fashioned floor-length dress. Michael turned again. Murmur: "Where are they?"

"They don't like us," I said.

"They don't make decisions for us!" Michael said angrily.

First time I'd seen that emotion in him. It came and went swiftly. There's a big word for that: "evanescent."

"Who?" said Mona. "What do you mean?" She shook off her private spell. Glaze of emotion in her eyes. Lived here, loved it, ripped out of it, lost, breath of death on her neck, gone, home, touch.

Do I have to read her mind to know that? I do not. I read it in Quinn's eyes, and he, child of a great house, feels a wondrous comfort here, frightened as he is of the loss of love of the whole Mayfair clan, as if they had come at us, winding up the mountain road with B movie torches in hand.

Michael's blue eyes fastened on me. He was worn down yet immeasurably strong, proud of the house and mildly happy with the way I looked at it.

"I've plastered it, painted it, run its new wires, sanded its floors, and laid the gloss." Rolling murmur. "I learned those skills out west, and all that time I lived out there I never forgot this house, used to pass it as a little boy, never forgot it, and never dreamed of course that one day I'd be the master of it (chuckle), that is, if any man can be the master of this house, what this house has is a mistress, or even two, and for a time, for a long time…." He lost the thread. "Come, let me show you the library."

Only slowly I followed him.

The night outside beat hard on the windows, the song of the winged things, throb of the frogs, with the full authority of the big garden.

Narrow hallway, soaring walls. Evil stairs. Too straight, too long. The alien fragrance again. But more than that the smell of mortal death. How did I come by this? Hand touching the newel post, sparked off it. Mortal tumbling down and down. Stairs made for the word "headlong." These doors like temple doors rise up in protest to this domestic constriction.

"… added in 1868," said Michael, "everything just a little smaller in this room, but the best plasterwork in all the house." A wall of books, old leather.

"Oh, yes," I said, "a magnificent ceiling. Tiny faces up there in the plaster medallion."

Mona made a circuit of the room, heels silenced by the red carpet, went to the long window that opened on the small side porch and peered out as though measuring the world specifically by these particular lace curtains. Peacocks in the lace curtains. Then she pivoted and stared at Michael.

He nodded. Flash of menace to her in his remembrance. Something dreadful, something deadly come to the window. Hymns of death and dying. The family ghost made flesh and blood. Denial. *Hurry. Rowan waits. Rowan scared. Rowan very near.*

"Come on, sweetheart," he said to Mona.

Did I sound so intimate when I called her that?

For one moment I wanted to put my arm around her just to stake my claim. My fledgling now, my baby. Shameful.

Dining room a perfect square with a perfectly round table. Chippendale chairs. Surrounded by murals of the heyday of a plantation. A different sort of chandelier. But I don't know the name for it. It was set low, like so many candles.

Rowan sat alone at the table, perfectly reflected in the gloss.

She wore a dark purple robe, sashed, with satin lapels, mannish, except that with her piquant naked face and tiny shoulders she was so perfectly a female creature. Bit of white nightgown revealed. Indifferent hair second fiddle to her large gray eyes and virginal mouth. She stared at me as if she didn't know me. The pressure of knowledge behind her eyes was so immense, she might have been blind.

Then she looked at Mona. She rose out of her chair, right arm flung out, finger stabbing:

"Get her!" she whispered as though her throat were closing up. She ran round the table. "We'll bury her under the tree! Do you hear me, Michael!" She gasped for breath. "Get her, she's dead, can't you see it, get her!" She ran towards Mona, and Michael, brokenhearted, caught her in his arms. "I'll bury her myself," she said. "Get the shovel, Michael." A hoarse hysterical yet muted screaming.

Mona bit deep into her lip and cringed in the corner, eyes ablaze, Quinn struggling to hold her.

"We'll dig deep, deep," Rowan said, soft eyebrows knotted. "We'll bury her so she never comes back! Can't you see that she's dead! Don't listen to her! She's dead. She knows she's dead."

"You wish I were dead!" Mona sobbed. "You hateful, hateful thing!" The anger arched out of her like a great fiery tongue. "You hateful lying thing. You know the man who took my daughter! You always knew. You let it happen. You hated me because of Michael. You hated me that it was Michael's child! You let that man take her."

"Mona, stop," I said.

"Honey, please, my darling, please," Michael pleaded with Rowan for everyone and for his exhausted, bewildered self, holding Rowan effortlessly as she scratched at his arms.

I went to her, disentangled her from her lawfully wedded husband, and caught her up and peered into her intense manic eyes. I said:

"I did it because she was dying. Lay the sin on me."

She saw me. Truly saw me. Her body rigid as driftwood. Michael, behind her, stared. "Both of you attend," I said. "I speak now without sound."

Stuff of legend, vulgar names, hunters of the night, locked out of the day forever, live off human blood, hunt the evil ones only, feed on the trash lives if there are such things, always thriving among humankind, from the dawn of time, pass for human, body transformed by the Blood, perfected within its potential by the Blood, Quinn, Mona, me. You are right, you see, she is dead, but only dead to

human life. I worked the magic. Filled her with the enlivening Blood. Accept. It's done. It's irreversible. I did it. A dying girl defined by pain and fear could not consent. Two centuries ago, I didn't consent. A year ago, Quinn didn't say yes to it. Maybe no one really consents. It was my conviction and my power. Lay the sin on me. And so she thrives. And so she hunts the filthy blood. But she is Mona again. The night belongs to her, and by day the sun can't find her. I am guilty. Lay all blame on me.

I went silent.

She closed her eyes. She gasped as though exorcising a deep invisible clotted horror from her lungs. "Blood Child," she whispered. She lay against me. Her left hand went up to clasp my shoulder. I held her close, my fingers reaching into her hair.

Michael looked down as though, the window having closed, he wanted to think in solitude. Leaving her to me, he seemed adrift in the room. But he had caught all of my revelation and it had sunk deep into him and he was wearied, and sad.

Mona went to him and opened up his arms, and he received her with the utmost tenderness. He kissed her cheeks as though the truth had broken open in him a powerful chaste communion. He kissed her on the mouth, the hair.

"My baby darling," he said, "my pretty girl, my baby genius." It was almost like the embrace he had given her only a half hour before, only this time I really understood it. And the knowledge of her nature worked on him, slowly transforming the way in which he touched her.

There was lust in him, yes, bred into him, and fed over many years, a practical, vital lust, and it was part of his constitution, his vision, but for her he didn't feel it. Six years of caring for her had punished it enough, and now this aberrant truth made it so he could caress her once again and kiss her freely, and croon to her, and smooth her hair with his hands, yes, and she was with him again, father of her child, father of her death.

"Like the Taltos," she murmured. She flashed her wholesome, sweet smile. Intrepid youth. And surely he saw in the dusky room her gleaming skin more truly now, and the unnatural glisten of her eyes, and the volume of her red hair as it surrounded her beaming face.

She didn't catch the drifting sadness in him, the enormous ache. He let her go with such tact, and took one of the chairs and sat at the table. He bent over and ran his hands through his hair.

Quinn took the chair opposite him. He looked at Michael. And then Mona went quietly to Quinn's side. And so they were settled.

I stood holding Rowan. Where was my lust? The blood tempest that sweeps into its vortex all desire to know, to absorb, to abide, to possess, to kill, to love? It was a drenching storm inside of me. But I am so very strong. That is a given, is it not? And when you love another as I loved Rowan, you don't strive to hurt. Never. The trivial operations of the heart are burnt away in quietude. Burnt away in humility that I could feel this, know this, and contain it within my prudent soul.

I lifted her face, my thumb pressed into her cheek, a gesture which if done to me I couldn't

have borne, but I was tentative and ready to draw away had she showed the slightest unwillingness. She only looked at me with muted understanding. And all her flesh yielded to me, and the hand that held my shoulder closed warmly over my neck.

"And so," she said with that remarkable rich voice, that deep lustrous voice, "we Mayfairs of the inner circle, we have another sacrosanct secret, yet another breed of immortal come to us."

Slight and tenuous, she slipped from my embrace, and secretly kissing my hand, she went to Michael and laid her hands on his shoulders and looked across the table at Mona.

"And I will somehow wake from this gnosis," she went on, "and in the course of things, yes … the vital course of things, protect it utterly, this truth, and return to penetrate the world I've made to need me so much."

"Baby, you've come back," Michael whispered.

This was the creature I adored.

And when our eyes met I saw her full recognition, and a respect and comprehension of my devotion so profound that I could find no words in the swimming silence.

So poetry rises, surpassing the literal, *You are beautiful, my love, terrible as an army with banners, turn away your eyes for they have overcome me, a garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse: a spring shut up, a fountain sealed.*

16

Why did I love her so much? Surely someone will read these pages and ask: What was so lovable about her? What was it that caused you, of all beings, so to love? You, a lover of men and women, a vampire, a destroyer of innocent souls, so to love? You, the focus of so much easy affection, and forever flaunting your hopeful stinging charm—why did you love her?

What should I say? I didn't know her age. I can't write it here. I can't describe her hair other than to say it was clipped and turned-in on the ends, and her face was still smooth without the slightest trace of the furrows of age, and her figure boyish.

But one embraces such details in the boiling wake of the acknowledgement of such love. In and of themselves they are nothing. Or, if one believes that a woman so strong has shaped the lineaments of her face, the set of her brows, the straightness of her posture, the frankness of her gestures, the very way that her hair falls about her face, the length of her stride, the sound of her footfall—then perhaps they mean everything.

Beside the flaming red-haired Mona, she was the color of ashes, a woman drawn in charcoal, with a sexless and piercing gaze, and a soul so immense it seemed to fill every fiber of her frame and to emanate outwards into infinity, her knowledge of the world around her dwarfing that of everyone she'd ever known or would know.

Imagine it, such isolation.

She didn't talk down to people. She simply didn't talk to them. Only God knew the number of lives she'd saved. And only she knew the number of people she had murdered.

In the Mayfair Medical Center she had only just begun to fulfill her immense dreams. It was an engine of great and continuous healing. But what drew her through the world were projects yet unrevealed for which she had the wealth, the knowledge, the laserlike vision, the nerve and the personal energy.

What threatened this mammoth individual who had found for herself through tragedy and heritage the perfect goal? Her sanity. From time to time she gave in to madness as if it were strong drink, and when in her cups she fled from her sublime designs, drowning in memories and guilt, all judgment and sense of proportion lost, murmuring confessions of unworthiness and half-explored plots of escape that would seal her off forever from all expectations.

At this precious moment she regarded sanity as her State of Grace, and she saw me as the

Demon who had brought her back to it.

For her I connected the two worlds. That meant that she could.

Blood Child.

She lusted for me. For the entirety of what I was—that is, for all she'd sensed in our three encounters, and what she knew to be true now, both from my profession and her apprehension.

She wanted me completely. It was a desire rooted in all her faculties, that overrode and obliterated her love of Michael. I knew it. How could I not? But she had no intention of yielding to it. And her will? It was iron. You can draw iron with charcoal too, can't you?

17

“This secret has to be kept by you from anyone else,” Mona said. Her voice was quaking. She had a firm hold on Quinn’s hand. “If you keep it from everybody else, then in time I can come to be with them. I mean the rest of the family. I can know them for a little while. The way Quinn knows everybody at Blackwood Farm. I can have some time for my leave-taking. What did you mean when you called me Blood Child?”

Rowan looked at her across the round table. Then with sudden impersonal impatience, Rowan tore off the thick purple robe and stepped out of it, as if from a broken shell, a tense figure in a sleeveless white cotton nightgown.

“Let’s go out there,” she said, her soft deep voice more sure of itself, her head slightly bowed. “Let’s go where the other ones were buried. Stirling’s out there. I’ve always loved that place. Let’s talk in the garden.” She started walking, and only then did I notice she was barefoot. Her hem just skirted the floor.

Michael rose from the table and followed her. It seemed his eyes avoided ours. He caught up with Rowan and put his arm around her.

Immediately Mona led the way after them.

We passed through a classic butler’s pantry of high glass cabinets crammed full of vivid china, and then on through a modern kitchen, out French doors and down painted wooden steps onto a sprawling flagstone patio.

There ahead lay the huge octagonal swimming pool, shimmering with a wealth of submerged light and beyond that, a tall dignified cabana.

Long limestone balustrades enclosed the garden patches, which were bursting with tropical plants, and very suddenly the air was filled with the strong scent of the night jasmine.

Great arching branches of the rain tree poured over us from the left. And the cicadas sang loudly from the many crowding trees. There were no traffic sounds from the world beyond. The very air itself was blessed.

Mona gasped, and smiled and shook out her hair and turned for Quinn’s reassuring embrace, murmuring fast like a hummingbird beating its wings. “It’s all the same, so lovely, more lovely even than I remembered it. Nothing’s changed.”

Rowan stopped and looked up at the moving clouds as though allowing time for Mona to

absorb it all. For one second she glared at me. *Blood Child. File folder of facts.* Then at Mona. Then at the clouds again. "Who would change such a place?" she asked gently in her low melodic voice, responding to Mona.

"We're only the custodians," said Michael. "Someday other Mayfairs will live here, long after we're gone."

We waited, clustered together. Quinn very anxious. Mona in bliss.

I scanned for the ghost of Julien. Nowhere around. Too risky with Michael able to see him.

From a black iron gateway to the left, Stirling came to meet us, ever the gentleman in crisp tailored linen, and strangely silent, and Rowan walked on, fearless in her bare feet, and pointed toward the garden from which Stirling had just come.

Stirling's eyes locked on Mona for one quick intake of information, and then he went after Rowan and Michael back the way he had come.

We all followed into a different world, beyond the measurements of Italian balustrade and perfectly square flagstone.

It was all rampant elephant ear and banana trees back here, and a broad lawn beneath a huge old oak, and an iron table there and modern iron chairs, more comfortable I suspected than the relics of my courtyard. A high brick wall bounded the place opposite the gateway and a row of yews concealed it from the carport to the left, and an old two-story wooden servants' quarters shut it off from the world to the right, the building itself mostly hidden from us by high thick ligustrum.

There was someone out there in the servants' quarters. Sleeping. Dreaming. An elderly soul. Forget about it.

Wet earth, random flowers, mingling, rattling leaves in the wet summer air, all the night songs, scent of the river only eight blocks from here over the the Irish Channel, where a train whistle cut the night, leading the distant soft roar of box cars.

The cicadas died down suddenly, but the song of the tree frogs was strong, and there were the night birds, which only a vampire could hear.

Low lights along the cement path provided a very feeble illumination. And there were other such beacons scattered in the farthest reaches of the garden. Two floodlights fixed high in the oak spilled a soft luminescence over the scene. As for the moon, it was full but veiled behind the pink panoply of clouds, and so we were in a thin rosy and penetrable darkness, and all around us the garden was alive and balmy and seeking to feed upon us with countless tiny mouths.

As I stepped on the lawn I caught the faint scent of the alien species, the scent that Quinn had caught when he came here as a boy led by the ghost of Oncle Julien. I saw the scent hit Mona with her heightened gifts. She drew herself up as though revolted, and then took a deep breath. Quinn dipped down to kiss her.

Stirling played host with the gathering of the chairs about the table. He tried to disguise his

amazement at the vision of Mona. The miracle of Quinn as vampire he'd seen in frightening circumstances, and then again, later, the night we went to tell him that Merrick Mayfair was no more. But Mona … he couldn't quite keep it to himself.

Rowan's snow white gown dragged in the mud. She didn't care. She was murmuring or singing, I couldn't tell which or catch any words or meaning to it. Michael stared at the oak as though talking to it. Then he took off his wrinkled white jacket. He put it over the back of a chair. But he stood staring at the tree as though finishing a soliloquy. He was a big chunk of a man, gorgeously made.

Stirling helped Mona to her chair, and bid Quinn to sit beside her. I waited for Rowan and Michael.

Suddenly Rowan turned and threw her arms around me. She fastened to me about as tight as a mortal woman could do it, so much divine silk and softness to me, whispering feverish words I couldn't catch, eyes racing over me, while I stood stark still, my heart beating frantically. And then she began to touch me all over, open hands on my face, on my hair, then grabbing up my hands and slipping her fingers through my fingers. At last she thrust my hand between her legs and then drew back shuddering, letting me go and staring into my eyes.

I came quite close to losing my mind. Did anyone have a clue as to the crash and thunder inside me? I locked the casket of my heart. I punished it. I endured.

All this while, Michael never looked at us. He had sat down at some point, his back to the oak, facing Mona and Quinn, and he was talking to Mona, singing the fatherly chant again in a soothing voice as to how sweet and pretty she was, and that she was his darling daughter. I could see all that out of the corner of my eye, and then in sheer weakness, the lock inside me broke, and all was released. I gathered up Rowan's supple limbs and I kissed her forehead, the hard sweet skin of her forehead, and then her soft unresisting lips, and let her loose arms go, watching her slip into the chair beside Michael. Silent. Done.

I went to the other side of the table and sat beside Mona. I was bitterly full of desire. It was unspeakable to need someone in this way. I closed my eyes and listened to the night. Ravenous, repulsive creatures singing magnificently. And working the soft fertile earth, creatures of such loathsomeness I couldn't dwell on it. And the clatter of the riverfront train unendingly. And then the absurd song of the calliope on the riverboat that took the tourists up and down the waterway as they feasted and laughed and danced and sang.

"The Savage Garden," I whispered. I turned away as if I hated them all.

"What did you say?" Rowan said. Her eyes broke from their feverish movement just for one moment.

Everyone went quiet, except the singing monsters. Monsters with wings and six or eight legs, or no legs at all.

"It's just a phrase I used to use for the Earth," I said, "in the old times when I didn't believe in

anything, when I believed the only laws were aesthetic laws. But I was young then and new to the Blood and stupid, expecting further miracles. Before I knew we knew more of nothing, and nothing more. Sometimes I think of the phrase again when the night is like this, so accidentally beautiful."

"And now you do believe in something?" Michael asked.

"You surprise me," I said. "I thought you'd expect me to know everything. Mortals usually do."

He shook his head. "I suppose I have a sense," he said, "that you're figuring it all out step by step, like the rest of us." He let his eyes wander over the banana trees behind me. He seemed preoccupied by the night, and deeply hurt by things I couldn't hope to learn from him. He didn't mean to show it off, this hurt. It simply became too great for him to conceal, and so his mind drifted, almost out of courtesy.

Mona was struggling not to cry. This place, this secret backyard, so well hidden from the world of the Garden District streets with its crowded houses, was obviously sacred to her. She slipped her right hand into my left. Her left hand was in Quinn's hand, and I knew she held him as tight as she held me, pressing for reassurance over and over again.

As for my beloved Quinn, he was severely discomforted and unsure of everything. He studied Rowan and Michael uneasily. Never had he been with this many mortals who knew what he was. In fact, he had never been with more than one, and that was Stirling. He, too, sensed the presence of the old one in the back house. He didn't like it.

And Stirling, who had correctly surmised that the disclosure had been made, that Rowan was now subdued and deep in thought, seemed frightened in a dignified way also. He was to my far left, and his eyes were on Rowan.

"What do you believe in now?" Mona asked me, her voice unsteady but insistent. "I mean, if the old resignation of the Savage Garden was wrong, what has replaced it?"

"Belief in The Maker," I replied, "who put it all together with love and purpose. What else?"

"Amen," said Michael with a sigh, "someone better than us, has to be—somebody better than every creature who walks the Earth, somebody who shows compassion.…"

"Will you show compassion to us?" Quinn asked. It was sharp. He looked directly at Michael. "I want my secret kept as well as Mona's."

"Trouble with you is you think you're still human," Michael replied. "Your secret's utterly safe. It will be exactly the way you want it. Wait a safe period of time. Then Mona can return to the family. It's not a difficult thing at all."

"This seems amazingly easy for you," Quinn replied suspiciously. "Why is that so?"

Michael gave a short bitter laugh. "You have to understand what the Taltos was, and what they did to us."

Rowan said in a low voice, "And what I did to one of them too quickly, too foolishly." Her

eyes moved away into memory.

"I don't know or understand," said Quinn. "I think what Lestat had in mind was an exchange of secrets. There are things Mona simply can't explain. They hurt her too much. They involve you. She becomes caught up in a web of loyalty, and she can't be free. But one thing is clear. She wants to find her daughter, Morrigan."

"I don't know if we can help," said Michael.

"I can look for Morrigan now myself," Mona protested. "I'm strong again." Her hand tightened on mine. "But you have to tell me all you know. For two years I lay in that bed confused and crazy. I'm still mixed-up. I don't know why you haven't found my daughter."

"We'll take you all through it again," said Michael soothingly.

Rowan murmured under her breath, then came to the surface, eyes remote, uncertain, moving rapidly again over the table as over nothing.

"I knew about you," she said. Her words were hushed and ran on smoothly, "I mean, what you are—Blood Children, Blood Hunters, Vampires. I knew. It wasn't a simple matter. Michael knew. The knowledge came in stages." She looked directly at me for the first time as she continued:

"I had seen one of your kind one time, walking, in the Quarter. It was a male with black hair, very handsome, and set apart from everything around him. He appeared to be searching for someone. I'd felt a paralytic conflict, an attraction to him, and a fear of him also. You know my powers. They're not developed as they ought to be. I'm a witch who won't be a witch, a Mad Scientist who won't be Mad. I wanted to know *about* him. I wanted to follow him. It was a long time ago. I never forgot about it—knowing he wasn't human, and that he wasn't a ghost. I don't think I told anyone about him.

"But then this woman disappeared from the Talamasca. Her name was Merrick Mayfair. I hadn't known her, but I'd known of her—that she was a colored Mayfair, descended from a downtown branch of the family. I can't remember. I think it was Lily Mayfair, yes, or was it Lauren—I despise Lauren, Lauren has an evil mind—Lauren who told me there were lots of colored Mayfairs, but this Merrick wasn't very close to any of them. This Merrick, she had tremendous psychic powers. She knew about us, the First Street gang, but she really didn't want contact. She'd spent most of her life in the Talamasca and we'd never even known of her. Mayfairs hate it when they don't know about Mayfairs.

"Lauren said that she'd come once, this Merrick Mayfair, when the house was opened for a Holiday Tour, you know, a benefit for the Preservationists, after Michael had restored everything, after all the bad times were over, and before Mona was really sick. This person, Merrick, she'd gone through First Street with the tourists, imagine, just to see the nucleus. And we hadn't been here. We hadn't known."

A sword went through me at these words. I glanced at Stirling. He too was suffering. I flashed back on Merrick climbing on the flaming altar, taking with her into the Light the spirit that had

plagued Quinn all of his life. Don't reveal. Don't revive. Can't help.

But Rowan was talking about a time long before the other night when Merrick disappeared forever. Rowan was talking about Merrick's turning to us.

"Then she disappeared," Rowan said, "and the Talamasca was thrown into confusion. Merrick gone. Whispers of evil. That's when Stirling Oliver came South." She looked at Stirling. He was watching her fearfully but calmly.

She lowered her eyes again, her voice continuing soft and low, just above a threatening hysteria.

"Oh yes," she said to me, "I know. I thought I was losing my mind at times. I built Mayfair Medical not to be the Mad Scientist. The Mad Scientist is capable of the unspeakable. Dr. Rowan Mayfair has to be good. I created this immense Medical Center to commit Dr. Rowan Mayfair to good. Once this plan was under way, I couldn't afford to go down into madness—dreaming of the Taltos and where they'd gone, dreaming of strange creatures I'd seen and lost without a trace. Mona's daughter. We tried everything we could to find her. But I couldn't live in a shadow world. I had to be there for all the ordinary people, signing contracts, rolling out blueprints, calling doctors all over the country, flying to Switzerland and Vienna to interview physicians who wanted to work in the ideal medical center, the medical center that surpassed every other in its equipment, its laboratories, its staff, its comforts, its protocols and projects.

"It was to rivet me to the sane world, it was to push my own medical visions to the very limits —."

"Rowan, it's a magnificent thing that you did," Quinn said. "You speak as though you don't believe in it when you're not there. Everyone else believes in it."

She went on in the same soft rush of words as though she hadn't heard him. "All kinds of people come to it," she said, her words flowing as if she couldn't stop them, "people who have never given birth to Taltos, people who have never seen ghosts, people who have never buried bodies in a Savage Garden, people who have never seen Blood Children, people who have never even hoped for the extraordinary in any form, it helps all manner of human beings, it embraces them, it's real to them, real, that's what was important. I couldn't let it go, I couldn't ever retreat into nightmares or scribblings in my room, I couldn't ever fail my interns and residents, my laboratory assistants, my research teams, and you know, with my background, the neurosurgeon, the scientist at heart, I brought to every aspect of this giant organism a personal approach; I couldn't run away, I couldn't fail, I can't fail now, I can't be absent, I can't…."

She broke down, her eyes closed, her right hand forming a fist on the table.

Michael looked at her with quiet sadness.

"Go on, Rowan," I said. "I'm listening to you."

"You're making me angry," said Mona in a low sharp voice. "I think I hate you."

I was appalled.

"Oh, yes, you always did," Rowan said, raising her voice but not her wandering eyes. "Because I couldn't make you well. And I couldn't find Morrigan."

"I don't believe you!" Mona said.

"She's not lying to you," said Quinn in a chastising voice. "Remember what you just said. For years you've been sick, confused."

"Mona, honey, we don't know where Morrigan is," said Michael.

Mona leaned against Quinn and he put his arm around her shoulder.

"Tell us, Rowan, tell us what you have to say," I said. "I want to hear it."

"Oh, yeah, yeah," said Mona, "go on with the Saga of Rowan."

"Mona," I whispered, leaning to clasp her head and draw her to me, my lips at her ear: "these are mortals and with mortals we have a certain eternal patience. Nothing is as it was. Curb your strength. Curb your old mortal envy and spite. They have no place here. Don't you realize the power you have now to search for Morrigan? What's at stake here is the rest of your family."

Reluctantly she nodded. She didn't understand. Her mortal sickness had divided her from these people. I was only now realizing the extent of it. Though they'd come into her hospital room probably every day and all day, she'd been drugged, full of pain, alone.

A soft rustling sound broke my concentration. The person in the servants' quarters had awakened, and was rushing down the wooden steps. The screen door banged shut, and there came the skittering feet through the rattling foliage.

It might have been a tiny gnome, this creature that emerged from the elephant ears and the ferns, but it was simply a very old woman—a tiny bit of a thing with a small completely wrinkled face, black eyes and white hair in two long neat braids tied at the ends with pink ribbon. She was dressed in a stiff flowered robe, and clumsy padded fuzzy pink slippers.

Mona rushed to greet her, crying out: "Dolly Jean!" and picked up the bit of a creature in her arms and spun around with her.

"Lord, God in Heaven," cried out Dolly Jean, "but it's true, it's Mona Mayfair. Child of Grace, you set me down right now and tell me what's gotten into you. Look at those shoes. Rowan Mayfair, why didn't you tell me this child was here, and you, Michael Curry, giving me that rum, you think your mother in Heaven doesn't know the things you do, you thought you had me down for the count, I know, don't think I don't, and look at Mona Mayfair, what did you pump into her?"

Mona had no awareness that with her vampiric strength she was holding the woman in the air, and how perfectly abnormal it looked.

The spectators were speechless.

"Oh, Dolly Jean, it's been so long, so terribly long," Mona sobbed. "I can't even remember the last time I saw you. I was all locked up and taped up and dreaming. And when they told me Mary Jane Mayfair had run away again I think I just went into a stupor."

"I know, my baby," said Dolly Jean, "but they wouldn't let me in the room, they had their rules, but don't you think for a moment I wasn't saying the rosary every day for you. And one of these bright days Mary Jane'll run out of money and come home, or turn up dead in the morgue with a tag on her toe, we'll find her."

By this time we had all risen, except for Rowan, who remained sunk in her thoughts as if none of this was taking place, and Michael quickly took the apparently weightless Dolly Jean from Mona and set her in a chair between himself and Rowan.

"Dolly Jean, Dolly Jean!" Mona sobbed as Quinn led her back to her place at the table.

Rowan had never once even looked at either Mona or Dolly Jean. She was murmuring, her narrative moving along in her head, unbroken, and her eyes probing the dark for nothing.

"All right, settle down Dolly Jean, and you too Mona, and let Rowan talk," said Michael.

"Who in the world are you!" Dolly Jean demanded of me. "Holy Mother of God, where did you come from?"

Rowan turned suddenly and stared at Dolly Jean with apparent wonder. Then she turned back into her solitude and crowded reminiscence.

The old woman went quiet and still. Then muttered: "Oh me, poor Rowan, she's off again." Then, staring at me again, she let out a huge gasp and cried: "I know who you are!"

I smiled at her. I couldn't help it.

"Please, Dolly Jean," said Michael, "there are issues we have to settle here."

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph!" cried Dolly Jean, staring this time at Mona, who was hastily wiping away her latest tears. "My baby, Mona Mayfair, is a Blood Child!" Then her eyes discovered Quinn, and there came another huge gasp, and she cried out, "It's the black-haired one!"

"No, it's not!" Rowan declared in a furious rasping whisper, turning to the old woman again. "It's Quinn Blackwood. You know he's always loved Mona." She said it as if it was the answer to every question in the universe.

Dolly Jean made a jerky little turn in her chair, and with two dips or bobs of her head made a thorough examination of Rowan, who was looking at her with gleaming eyes as if she hadn't even seen her before.

"Oh, my girl, my poor girl," Dolly Jean said to Rowan. She put her tiny hands on Rowan and smoothed her hair. "My darling girl, don't you be so sad, always so sad on account of everybody. That's my girl."

Rowan stared at her for a long moment as though she didn't understand a word Dolly Jean spoke, and then she looked away again at nobody, half dreaming, half thinking.

"At four o'clock this very afternoon," Dolly Jean said, still stroking Rowan's hair, "this poor little soul was digging her own grave in this very yard. I noticed how well you covered it up, Michael Curry, you think you can cover everything up, and when I came down here to ask her what she was doing standing in a hole of wet mud she asked me to pick up the shovel and bury

her while she was still breathing."

"Be quiet, be still," whispered Rowan, looking far off as if at the night sounds. "It's time now for a larger vision. The Initiates have multiplied, and this is the inner circle. Be worthy of it, Dolly Jean. Be quiet."

"All right, my girl," said Dolly Jean, "then you just talk on as you were, and you, my sparkling Mona, I'll say my rosary all day long for you, and you too Quinn Blackwood. And you, the blond one, you gorgeous creature! You think I don't know you, but I do!"

"Thank you, Madam," I said quietly.

Quinn spoke up: "So all of you will keep our secret? This grows more dangerous for us by the moment. What can come of this?"

"The secret can be kept," said Stirling. "Let us talk this out. There's no going back now, anyway."

"Why, you think we're going to try to make the whole Mayfair clan believe in Blood Children!" Dolly Jean laughed and slapped the table with both her hands. "That's just hilarious! We can't even get them to believe in the Taltos! This brilliant doctor, here, she can't make them believe in the giant helix, she can't get them to behave themselves on account of the risk of having another Walking Baby! And you think they'd listen to us if we told them all about the Blood Children? Honey, they just take the phone off the hook when we call."

For a moment, I thought that Rowan was going to start raving. She glared at Dolly Jean. She was trembling violently. Her face had gone white, and her lips were moving but she was not forming words.

Then the strangest laugh came out of Rowan. A soft free laugh. Her face became girlish and full of delight.

Dolly Jean went into ecstasy.

"Don't you know it," she cried to Rowan. "You can't get them to believe in pneumonia! You can't get them to believe in the flu!"

Rowan nodded and the laugh slowly but sweetly died in a smile. I had never seen such expressions in Rowan, obviously, and they were glorious to behold.

Mona was crying and trying to talk at the same time.

"Dolly Jean, please simmer down," said Mona. "We've got to get some things settled here."

"Then get me a drink of rum," said Dolly Jean, "for Heaven's sakes, go on your young legs, you know where it is, no, tell you what, bring me the Amaretto, go get it with a shot glass. That'll make me real happy."

Mona went off at once, darting across the lawn and towards the pool, high heels clicking when they hit the flagstones, and off around the bend on her errand.

Michael sat there musing and shaking his head. "You drink that on top of all that rum and you're going be sick," he murmured.

"I was born sick," said the old woman.

Stirling stared at Dolly Jean as though she was something perfectly horrible. I almost burst out laughing.

Rowan continued to smile at Dolly Jean. It was sweet and secretive and honest.

"I'm going to pour that bottle of Amaretto down your throat," Rowan said gently in her husky confidential voice. "I'm going to drown you with it."

Dolly Jean bobbed up and down in the chair with squeals of laughter. She grabbed Rowan's face and held her tight.

"Now, I made you laugh, I did, you're all right, my genius girl, my doctor, my boss lady, my mistress of the house, I love you, girl, I'm the only one in the entire Mayfair clan that's not afraid of you." She kissed Rowan on the mouth and then let her go. "You just keep on taking care of everybody, that's what God put you here to do, you understand, you take care of everybody."

"And I fail and fail again," said Rowan.

"No, you don't, darlin'," said Dolly Jean. "Put another wing on that hospital. And don't you fret anything, you sweet girl."

Rowan sank back in her chair. She looked dazed. Her eyes closed.

Across the lawn, Mona came flying, silver tray in hand, with several bottles of liqueurs and bright shiny glasses. She set this down on the iron table.

"Now, let me see," she said. "We have three human beings." She put the glasses in front of Stirling, Michael, Dolly Jean, and Rowan. "Oh, no, four human beings. Okay, now here you are, all human beings have glasses."

I thought Quinn would perish from mortification on the spot. I merely cringed.

Michael picked up the bottle of Irish Mist and poured himself a small amount. Dolly Jean took the bottle of Amaretto for herself and swallowed a good mouthful. Stirling poured a shiny nugget of cognac and sipped it. Rowan ignored the proceedings.

A silence ensued in which Mona took her old place.

"Rowan," I said, "you were trying to explain how you knew about us. You were talking about Merrick Mayfair, about when she disappeared from the Talamasca."

"Oh, that's a good one," said Dolly Jean. She drank more of the Amaretto. "I can't wait for this. Go on, Rowan, if you've a mind to talk for once, I want to hear it. Carry on as if I wasn't here to cheer you along."

"You have to understand what the Talamasca meant to us," Rowan said. She paused. Then went on in a low voice, filling the quiet completely. "The Talamasca has known the Mayfair family through all its thirteen generations. Mona understands. Quinn, I don't know that you ever understood, but we could tell them anything. They knew all about the Taltos. They knew. It was like going to Confession to go to them. They have the solidity and the eternal self-confidence of the Roman Church. And Stirling was so patient. Mona loved him."

"Don't talk about us as if we're not here," said Mona.

"Patience, Mona," I said.

Rowan continued as if she hadn't even heard:

"Then it was Dolly Jean, our precious Dolly Jean Mayfair from Fontevrault Plantation, who said that Merrick Mayfair had become a Blood Child: 'Sure enough! That's what happened to that one!' Dolly Jean knew it. She'd called Tante Oscar. Tante Oscar had told her."

Rowan smiled at Dolly Jean, who nodded and took another huge mouthful of Amaretto. Rowan leaned over and so did Dolly Jean and their foreheads touched, and then they kissed tenderly on the mouth. It was as if these two women were lovers.

"You do right by me, now," Dolly Jean retorted. "Or I'll shout you down. Truth is I can't recollect what happened."

"Hush up," said Rowan softly, with another tender smile.

Dolly Jean nodded and took another drink.

Rowan sat back and went on:

"Dolly Jean had Henri take her and me downtown in the big car to visit Tante Oscar. It was the French Quarter, off the beaten path. Tante Oscar's an elderly colored Mayfair who lives up three flights of stairs in a flat with a balcony from which you could see the River. Tante Oscar was over one hundred years old. Still is."

Rowan's words were gaining speed.

"Tante Oscar was wearing at least three sets of clothes, dresses over dresses, and at least four fancy worked scarves around her neck, and topped by a long maroon coat with golden fur along the collar, I think it was foxes, little foxes with heads and tails, I don't know, and she had a ring on every bony finger, and a long oval face, and jet black hair, and huge egg-shaped yellow eyes. And there was wall-to-wall furniture in the flat, three buffets in a row, and three desks in a row, and dining room tables in three rooms, and couches and chairs all over, and carpets laid on carpets, and little tables with doilies and bisque figurines and photographs in frames, and sterling silver tea services everywhere you looked. Armoires were bulging with clothes and all askew."

Dolly Jean began to cackle as she took another drink, and Mona laughed under her breath. Rowan continued as if she didn't hear them.

"Gorgeous little twelve-year-old mulatto children were running everywhere, getting us coffee and cake, and getting the mail, and running downstairs for the newspapers. There was a TV on in every room and an overhead fan blowing. I've never seen such beautiful children as I've seen in New Orleans. The colors of these children were simply indescribable.

"Tante Oscar went to the refrigerator, which she called the ice box though it was brand-new, and opened it to show us that the telephone was in there because she never talked on it, and there was the telephone all right, right there in the middle of the milk and the yogurts and the jars of jam, but when Dolly Jean had called, Tante Oscar had heard the ring through the

refrigerator door because it was Dolly Jean, and she had answered.

"Tante Oscar told us that Blood Children had been living in the Quarter for two hundred years, feeding off the blood of the riffraff, and Merrick Mayfair was now one of them. It was meant to be. Merrick Mayfair's old Oncle Vervain had foreseen it, that his beloved little Merrick Mayfair would one day walk with the Blood Children, and he had told Tante Oscar and no one else. Oncle Vervain had been a great Voodoo doctor, and everyone respected him, but when he saw that in the future, it broke his heart. Tante Oscar said that now Merrick Mayfair would live forever."

I winced. If only I had seen that Light.… But how many chances would God give me?

"Of course Oncle Julien had tried to prevent this catastrophe—I think Oncle Julien is paying for his sins by wasting his time on earth—."

"I like that very much," I uttered before I could stop myself.

Her words flowed right on.

"—Tante Oscar explained to us. Oncle Julien had come in a dream to Merrick Mayfair's Great Nananne when she was dying and told Great Nananne to give Merrick Mayfair to the Talamasca. But Tante Oscar said it was the curse of Oncle Julien that his interference in the world of the living always failed."

"Did she really say such a thing?" I asked.

Michael smiled and shook his head. He looked at Mona and Mona was looking at him.

Rowan continued her tale:

"When I described the black-haired one, the one I'd seen walking, Tante Oscar knew him. She called him Louis. She said the Sign of the Cross would drive him off, though it had no power over him. He merely respected it. She said the one to fear was the blond-haired one who had a strange name and who, 'talked like a gangster and looked like an angel.' I never forgot those words, I thought they were so strange."

She fixed me in her gaze. I was lost to her.

"And then years later and only days ago, you came into the double parlor at Blackwood Farm and Jasmine called you 'Lestat' and you talked like a gangster and looked like an angel. I knew what you were deep, deep down in my mind where I didn't want to know. I knew. I could remember the camphor-ball smell of Tante Oscar's apartment and the way she said, 'the black-haired one will never drink if it means a struggle, but the blond-haired one, he'll do terrible things to you. He's the one to fear.' "

"It's not true," I said softly. "Even the damned can learn. It isn't like it says in our prayer books. Even vampires and angels can learn. God has to be an all-merciful God. Nobody is beyond redemption."

"Redemption!" she whispered. "How can I ever be redeemed?"

"Darling, don't say that," said Michael.

"You can never love this girl enough," said Dolly Jean. "Every morning she gets up, eats

breakfast and goes to Hell, I swear it."

Rowan smiled at me. In the pale light she looked girl-like, the lineaments of her face so refined and smooth, her gray eyes resting for the moment before they began their feverish searching again.

Oh to know the kiss of your lips, for your love is better than blood.

A pause. Her lawfully wedded husband distracted, unaware, and Rowan's eyes fixed on mine.

Forgive me.

"But I'm skipping all around in time," she said. "This is not an orderly story, is it?" She looked around herself, as if surprised to discover the garden and the dark, and the bottles glimmering in the light and the pretty shine of the glasses.

"Go on, Rowan, please," I said.

"Yes. Let me go back," she said, "to when Merrick Mayfair disappeared, yes." She nodded. "But overall, you see, I had heard and I had seen, and I told Michael these things, and Michael just listened as he always does to terrible things, with that ominous yet charming Celtic gloom growing ever greater in him year by year, but when I talked to Stirling I could see in his face that he understood everything. He wanted to meet Tante Oscar. And he did. He would only say, however, that they missed Merrick Mayfair, and nothing more than that.

"Then Lauren Mayfair, you know, the great lawyer of the firm of Mayfair and Mayfair, who knows all things legal and therefore knows nothing, she took it into her arid little mind to find out about this strange disappearance of a Mayfair who might just need her white family. Crap."

"Right on," said Dolly Jean. She took another slug from the bottle. "Lauren was just up in arms to find out a Mayfair of any kind was in the Talamasca, that's what she didn't like."

"She knew the house where Merrick Mayfair had been born," Rowan said, "and she checked it out and found that Merrick Mayfair still owned it. She went downtown. And whatever she saw frightened her. She called me. She said, 'It's renovated like a palace down there in a dangerous neighborhood, and all the neighbors are terrified to go near it. I want you to come with me.' And so I said I would. I was still laughing from that strange encounter with Tante Oscar. I thought, why not go downtown? I only have a hospital and research center to finish. Who am I to say that I'm too busy to do it?

"Dolly Jean said that we were fools to do such a thing—you just don't go near a Blood Child, specially if you know what it is, but if we were determined to go then do it after nightfall. A Blood Child only walked in the dark, and Dolly Jean said furthermore that we were to go by the front gate, very strictly, and knock on the front door, and not to do an untoward thing that would give a Blood Child legitimate cause to hurt us. (Dolly Jean was nodding and cackling all through this speech.) Then we rang up Tante Oscar, who heard our ring through the refrigerator door, and said all the same things all over again. Lauren Mayfair was fit to be tied, as they say here. She said she had had a bellyful of congenital insanity in the Mayfair family before her

twenty-first birthday. She said if one more person used the words 'Blood Child' to her she would sue. So I said, naturally, 'Well, why don't we call them vampires?' "

Mona burst out laughing and so Dolly Jean laughed so hard she had to pound the table with her left fist. She almost choked. Mona finally dissolved into giggles. Michael gestured to them to be quiet. Rowan was obviously waiting.

Rowan went on, her eyes fixing on me, then moving away.

"We went down there. It was the most godforsaken slum I'd ever seen. The very slabs of the sidewalks had floated away in the mud, buildings had collapsed into heaps of lumber, and the weeds were like fields of wheat. And there stood this classic raised cottage with its fresh white paint and planted garden. It had a high picket fence and gate, and a bell at the gate and we rang, and up on the porch, a tall woman opened the door and stood there in her bare feet with the light of the hall behind her. It was Merrick Mayfair.

"She knew who we were. It was astonishing. She complimented me on the Medical Center, and she thanked Lauren for coming to Great Nananne's wake years and years ago. She was very pleasant to us, but she didn't ask us in. She was quite fine, she said. She hadn't really disappeared at all, just become a hermit. I remember using every grain of second sight that I might possess when I looked at her, and a deep spell overtook me. It was the timbre of her voice, and the way that she walked, which set her apart. The center of gravity was not in her hips as it should have been in a human female. And her voice, it had a rich musical dimension to it. As for the rest of her, she was a shadow up there.

"Of course, Lauren had satisfied her abysmal legal mind that all was well. The superficial idiot. And her next attack was upon the Talamasca, which she proposed 'to run out of Louisiana,' but when she came up against their endless list of London and New York law firms, and the fact that an entire contingent of the family went up in arms against her, myself and Michael included, she settled very quickly for a schism in the firm, and for telling me how 'insane' I was, and that she was going to 'put Tante Oscar in a home.' I grabbed her and shook her. I didn't mean to do it. I've never done that to any person before. It was a terrible thing to do. But when she said that about Tante Oscar, I lost my temper. I just did it. I told her if she dared to attempt such a thing with any Mayfair, colored or white, anywhere, at any time, I would kill her. I went sort of out of my mind. How could she think she had the power to do such a thing? I backed away from her. I was afraid that—. I was afraid I would do something even more dreadful to her. And the whole matter was dropped. And she doesn't come near me anymore.

"And I had so much to do with the Medical Center that I really didn't want to talk the night away with Dolly Jean about Blood Children and what they did or didn't do. Though I couldn't resist going up to Tante Oscar's apartment one more time with Dolly Jean, but when they started talking about the 'Walking Babies' born out in the swamps, and I knew they meant actual Taltos babies, and the way the terrified swamp Mayfairs hacked them to death, I thought I was going

into trance mode, and I left.

"And now we come forward almost to the present, and suddenly Miss McQueen is dead, Quinn's beloved aunt, whom everyone adored, and it's her funeral we're gathered for, and Mona's much too sick to even be told, and the funeral's in grand New Orleans style, and there in the pew in St. Mary's Church before me I see you—Quinn, Lestat—and this tall woman, with the scarf around her head, and I see Stirling come up to her and he calls her Merrick, and I knew, I knew she was the same woman I'd seen before, and this time I was certain she wasn't human. Only I couldn't concentrate on it.

"At one point she turned and lifted her sunglasses and looked directly into my eyes, and I thought, What does it have to do with me? She smiled. And after that I felt sleepy and unable to concentrate on any thought in particular, except that Aunt Queen was dead and everyone was the lesser for it.

"I wouldn't look at Quinn. I wouldn't think about the change in Quinn's voice on the phone—how over a year ago, his voice and his entire audial demeanor had changed. That might be a mistaken notion after all. What did it matter to know such things? And what if the blond-haired tan-skinned guy next to Quinn in the pew looked like an angel? How was I to guess that when I met him in the double parlor at Blackwood Manor only a day or two later he would have 'captured' Mona and he'd talk like a gangster?" She laughed softly, just a little sweet private laugh.

"I had Mayfair Medical as my life, my mission in the real world. And this was a funeral Mass, I closed my eyes and prayed, and then Quinn stood at the podium and said warm and lovely things about Aunt Queen, and he had young Tommy Blackwood with him. Now would somebody who is not alive do that?

"And I had to get back to the Medical Center and find Mona in her bed of needles and bandages and the tape tearing her skin, and somehow convince her that Quinn was hale and hearty and fine, and had grown four inches since he'd gone to Europe so long ago, her beloved. …"

She stopped again, as though all the words had run out. She was staring at nothing in front of her.

"These matters are of no use to us," said Mona in a hard voice.

I was shocked.

Mona went on: "Why do you tell us all this? You're not the prima donna of what's happened here! All right, so, you tried to help me not die for years! If it hadn't been you, it would have been some other doctor. And you dug up the corpses of the Taltos out here, so what—."

"Stop, no!" Rowan whispered. "You're talking of my sins, you're talking of my daughter!"

"That's the whole point! I can't!" Mona cried. "That's why you have to do it. But you ramble on—."

"So you gave birth to one of them too," I said gently to Rowan. I reached across the table and covered her hand with mine. Her hand was cold, but at once she clasped my fingers.

"Traitor!" Mona said to me.

"Poor darling girl," said Dolly Jean, who was now drunk and falling asleep, "having those Walking Babies, and getting her womb torn out."

Rowan gasped at those words. She drew back her hand and her shoulders slumped as though she was drawing into herself.

Michael was deeply alarmed and so was Stirling.

"Dolly Jean, put a lid on it," Michael said.

"Rowan, can you go on?" I pleaded. "I understand everything you've said. You've been telling us exactly how and why you can keep our secrets."

"That's right," Quinn said. "Rowan's telling us how she can abide what we are."

The deep hurt flashed in Michael's eyes, private and almost lonely. "That's very true," he said under his breath.

"I gave birth to two," Rowan said. "I let the evil in after twelve generations. That's what Mona wants to hear. That's the secret we have to divulge in exchange for yours—."

"Oh yes!" cried Mona sarcastically, "more of the saga of Rowan! I want to know about my own child! About the man who took her away."

"How many times must I tell you, I can't find them!" said Rowan. "I've searched and searched."

I became furious at Mona. I had to take a deep breath. I reached over and snatched her out of Quinn's protective hold and turned her to face me.

"Now you listen to me," I said in a small voice. "Stop abusing your power. Stop forgetting that you have it. Stop forgetting the inevitable limitations of your kindred here! If you want to search for your daughter now, you have resources that Rowan and Michael can't even dream of! Quinn and I are here to find out what the Taltos is because you won't tell us! (She stared at me wide-eyed and slightly in terror.) Every time we ask you about it you dissolve into tears. In fact, you've wept more in the last thirty-six hours than any fledgling I've ever encountered in all my years, and it's becoming an ontological, existential, epistemological, and hermeneutical nuisance!"

"How dare you ridicule me!" she hissed. She took a deep cool breath. "You let me go this instant. You think I'm going to obey you in thought, word and deed! You're dreaming. I'm not the Wander Slut you make me out to be. I was the Designée of the Legacy of the entire Mayfair family. I know what it means to have self-possession and power. You don't look like an angel to me, and you sure as Hell don't have the charm of a bona fide gangster!"

I was stunned. I let her go. "I give up!" I said disgustedly. "You're a brash little infidel! Go your own way."

Quinn whipped her around and looked down into her eyes.

"Be still, please," he said. "Let Rowan talk the way she wants to talk. If you're ever to be Mona Mayfair again, that must be allowed to happen."

"Mona, this is very true," said Stirling. "Remember, this is an exposition of souls, a bartering of extraordinary revelations."

"Oh, let me get it straight," said Mona. "I triumph over death, and we gather here to listen to the personal memories of Rowan Mayfair?"

Dolly Jean, who had been dozing with the bottle, suddenly jumped into life, bouncing up and down and leaning forward, crinkled little eyes staring hard at Mona.

"Mona Mayfair, you button your lip," she said. "You know perfectly well, no matter how sick you've been, that Rowan almost never talks at all, and when she does talk she's got something to say, you and your fancy friends are learning about the Mayfair family, now how's that supposed to hurt you, I'd like to know, don't you want your handsome escorts to understand you? Shut up."

"Oh, you're just joining in with the chorus!" Mona said sharply to Dolly Jean. "Drink your Amaretto and leave me alone!"

"Mona," said Quinn as amiably as he could. "There are things we do need to know for your sake. Does it hurt so much to listen to Rowan?"

"Very well," Mona replied miserably, and she sat back in the chair. She wiped at her face with one of her thousands of handkerchiefs. She glared at me.

I glanced at her, then back to Rowan.

Rowan was watching all this with a remote expression, her face more relaxed than it had been all evening. Dolly Jean took another drink of Amaretto and sat back and closed her eyes. Michael was studying the three of us. Stirling waited, but our cross words had fascinated him.

"Rowan," I said. "Can you tell us what the Taltos is? We lack that basic knowledge. Can you give it to us?"

"Yes," she answered in a resigned voice. "I can tell you as much as anyone can."

18

Her expression remained placid, though she looked away, her inner focus gathering.

"A mammal," she said, "evolved totally apart from Homo sapiens, on a volcanic island in the North Sea thousands of years before us. We share perhaps forty-five percent of our genes in common. The creatures look like us except that they tend to be taller and more long of limb. Their bone structure is almost entirely what we would call cartilage. When the pure creatures mate, the female ovulates on demand and the fetus develops within a matter of minutes or hours, it isn't clear to me—but whatever the case, it puts tremendous stress upon the mother. Birth is accompanied by severe pain, and the infant unfolds as a small adult and begins to grow to maturity immediately."

Mona's entire demeanor changed at these words. She moved closer to Quinn, and he put his arm around her once more, kissing her quietly.

"The Taltos craves its mother's milk in order to grow," said Rowan. "And without that milk it cannot develop properly. In the hour right after birth it runs the risk of being stunted forever. With that milk, and with its mother's full telepathic nurture, the baby reaches its full height within that hour. Six and a half feet is the usual. The males can be seven feet. It will go on drinking its mother's milk as long as it can. Weeks, months, years. But the toll on the mother is heavy."

Rowan stopped. She put her hand up to support her forehead. A deep sigh came out of her. "The milk …" she said. "The milk has curative properties. The milk can work a cure in humans." Her voice broke apart. "Nobody really knows what that milk could do…."

Deliberate flash of images. *A bedroom with an elaborate half-tester bed and Rowan in the bed, sitting up, taking milk from the breast of a young female.* Shut out. *Gunfire. Several shots. Flash of Rowan digging in this very yard. Michael with her. Rowan wouldn't let go of the shovel. Body of the young female lying limp in the moist earth.* Heartbreak.

Rowan began again, voice strong, automatic:

"Nobody knows the lifespan of a pure Taltos. It could be thousands of years. Females clearly can become infertile in time. I've seen one who was past her prime. She was a simpleton. She was found in rural India. Males? I know of only one in existence—the one who took Morrigan. They may remain potent till they die. Taltos tend in their natural state to be extremely naive and

childlike. In ancient times, many died through clumsiness and accidents." She paused for a moment and then went on:

"The Taltos is telepathic, curious by nature and hardwired with a tremendous amount of basic historical and intellectual knowledge. It is born 'knowing,' as they say, all about the species itself, the island continent from which they came, and the places in the British Isles to which they migrated after the island was destroyed by the same volcano that created it. The glen of Donnelaith in Scotland was one of those strongholds. Maybe one of the last.

"That's what the Taltos was … when it was pure, before it knew about humankind or had any mixture with it. The population was culled by accidents, occasional pestilence, the females by overbreeding."

"What does this mean, hardwired?" I said. "I want to be sure I understand you."

"We're not hardwired," she said. "We don't come into this world knowing how to build a house or speak a language. But a bird is hardwired to build its nest, to do a mating call, or a mating dance. A cat is hardwired to hunt for food, care for its kittens—even to eat them if they are weak or deformed."

"Yes, I see," I said.

"The Taltos is a highly intelligent primate that is hardwired with a tremendous fund of knowledge," she said. "That and its extraordinary reproductive advantage are what make it so dangerous. Its naivete, its simplicity and lack of aggression are its vulnerabilities. It's also extremely sensitive to rhythm and music. You can almost paralyze a Taltos when you utter a long rhyme or sing a rhythmic song."

"I understand," I replied. "How did they become mixed with humans?" I asked.

She seemed at a loss. "Medically," she said, "I don't know the answer. I only know that it happened."

"Humans inevitably came to the British Isles," said Michael. "And there is a long history of "the tall people" and their fight with their more aggressive invaders. Interbreeding occurred. For human females it's almost always fatal. The woman conceives and then miscarries and bleeds to death. You can imagine the hatred and fear this inspired. As for the other way around, a human male would bring about an insignificant hemorrhage in a female Taltos. Nothing important there, except that if it happens repeatedly over years and years, it will use up the female's eggs." He paused, caught his breath and went on:

"Some successful breeding occurred and the offspring gave rise both to malformed 'little people' and Taltos with human genes, and humans with the genes of the Taltos. And as the centuries passed, all this became a matter of superstition and legend."

"Not so very neatly," said Rowan. Her voice was firmer than before, though her eyes still moved feverishly. "There were terrible wars and massacres and unspeakable bloodshed. The Taltos, being far less aggressive than humans by nature, lost out to the new species. The Taltos

were scattered. And they went into hiding. They pretended to be humans. They concealed their birthing rites. But as Michael said, couplings with humans did happen. And unbeknownst to the early inhabitants of the British Isles, there developed a kind of human who carried a giant helix of genes, twice the number of a normal human, and capable at any time of giving birth to the Taltos or a malformed elfin child struggling to be one. When two such humans happened to mate, a Taltos birth was even more likely."

Rowan paused. Michael hesitated, and then, as she put her face into her hands, he continued the story.

"The secret genes were passed on by the Earls of Donnelaith, Scotland, and their kith and kin, this we know for certain, and superstitious legends grew up about any occasional Taltos child born to their household.

"Meantime, a May Day orgy gave way to a misalliance between an Earl and a common woman of the glen, which led in three generations to the foundation of the Mayfair family. The Taltos genes were passed on in this way to what would later become a great colonial clan, first on the Caribbean island of Saint-Domingue, and then here in Louisiana.

"But even before the Mayfair family had a name, the Talamasca had become intimately involved with its origins—recording the story of a witch by the name of Suzanne, who had called up a spirit quite by accident, a spirit who appeared to be a brown-eyed man who answered to the name Lasher—a spirit who was to haunt the family right down to Rowan's generation. The ghost originated in the glen of Donnelaith, as did the Mayfairs."

Rowan broke in:

"You see, we thought it was the ghost of a human being," she said, "or some astral being without a human story. I believed this even as it courted me, and I tried to control it."

"And it was a Taltos ghost," I said.

"Yes," she said, "and it was biding its time, generation by generation, until a witch would come who would bear a Taltos child, a witch with psychic powers enough to aid it to possess that unborn Taltos fetus and be reborn within it."

Michael interrupted: "And I didn't know I had Mayfair genes in my blood. I never even dreamed. It was a dalliance between Oncle Julien and a riverfront Irish girl, and the child went to an Irish Catholic orphanage. And that was one of my ancestors."

"Oh, this Lasher was a clever ghost," said Rowan, shaking her head with a bitter smile. "Over the generations he brought this family great wealth in any number of ways. Strong witches appeared in various generations who really knew how to use him. And the men he despised and punished if they got in his way. Except for Julien. Julien was the only Mayfair male strong enough to use Lasher to perfection. And Julien regarded Lasher as an evil thing, but even Julien thought that Lasher had once been human."

"Lasher himself thought so," said Michael. "The ghost didn't fully understand who he was or

what he wanted, except to be reborn. He guided everything to that purpose: to come through, to be flesh and blood again. I saw the ghost from the time I was a little kid, passing the fence outside. I'd see him standing in the garden. I never dreamed that one day I'd live in this house. I never dreamed that one day—." He stopped, clearly unable to continue.

"The Legacy was established very early on," said Mona. "You had to keep the name Mayfair, whether you married out or not, if you were to be part of the family, if you were to be connected to the Legacy."

"And that way, the clan was kept close," said Rowan, "and there was much interbreeding."

"And there is one Heiress in each generation," said Mona, wiping her nose, "and that Heiress lives in this house and must be able to bear children."

"It was a matriarchy in legal and moral fact," said Rowan softly. "And Michael and I … we fit the design of Lasher perfectly. Of course my child was not pure Taltos. It was Taltos mixed with human. It was perhaps five months in the womb. And on the night of its birth, there came Lasher with all his force down into the infant manniken making it grow and cry out to me to use all my power. Rowan the Mad Scientist knew the circuitry and the cells! Rowan the Mad Scientist knew how to guide the monstrous offspring." She closed her eyes. She turned away, as though the remembrance was pressing against her.

Brilliant flash of the Man Baby, tall, slippery, face evincing wonder, gawky, pinkish limbs. Rowan clothing it as the creature laughed delightedly. Flash of it clutching her breast, drinking. Rowan sinking to the floor in unconsciousness. The creature drinking hungrily from the other breast as well. My Darling, what secrets these are, indeed.

Silence.

A look of pure torment on the face of Michael. How well I understood his pain now, that he had fathered these creatures, and apparently no others.

Stirling appeared fearful as before, yet shamelessly fascinated. Mona, her eyes closed, leaned against Quinn as he watched Rowan. Sounds of the garden—soft, inevitable, indifferent, sweet.

"Walking Babies, horrible things," said Dolly Jean from her sleep. "If only I'd a known that ghost was a Walking Baby, but the thought never entered my head.…"

"Not my girl," whispered Mona. "My girl wasn't a horrible thing. Her father was the demon, but not her."

Michael fighting with the creature called Lasher. Snow and ice. The creature tremendously slippery and crafty and flexible and invulnerable to the blows. The creature laughing and mocking Michael. The creature knocking Michael into the ice-cold swimming pool, Michael sinking down to the bottom. Sirens, trucks, Rowan and the creature running towards the car …

"I left with it," Rowan whispered. "This Man Child thing with no name other than the name of a ghost. I left Michael. I took it away. The Mad Scientist thought first and foremost to save it from those who might have destroyed it, and it had possessed the body of Michael's child and

sent that child's true soul Heavenward, and I knew that Michael wouldn't stop until he'd killed it, and so I fled with it. It was a dreadful error."

Silence.

Rowan remained turned to the side, as though away from all that she'd said, her eyes closed, her hands limp on the table. I wanted to enfold her in my arms. I did nothing.

Michael remained still. Father of this monster. No. *Sent that child's true soul Heavenward.* Father of the mysterious body only, the vehicle for the mystery.

"The Taltos," I said to Rowan, "it fathered a daughter in you? You bore two of these creatures?"

Rowan nodded. She opened her eyes and looked at me with a steady gaze. There might as well have been no one else there.

"The male was an atrocity," she said. "A spiritual monster. It had two goals—to remember what it had been, as Taltos memories inundated it—and to father a female with which to breed. I lost control of it almost immediately. I miscarried again and again as it drank my breasts dry. Only in the very beginning could I lure it into laboratories or hospitals, where, using my authority, I managed to accomplish some tests and secretly forward the material on to a laboratory in San Francisco.

"As the Heiress of the Legacy, I could draw all the money we needed from our foreign accounts, as long as I stayed one jump ahead of the family, which was searching for me. So the creature had the funds to drag me on a world odyssey. In the glen of Donnelaith, a torrent of memories came back to it. But it was soon desperate to get back to the States.

"I chose Houston as a city where we might settle and I could study it. Among hospitals and medical centers, I thought I could order the equipment for a laboratory and not be discovered. Unbeknownst to me this was perfect for the fiend. Having no luck with me, he was soon leaving me tied up, starved and near insane. Only much later did I learn that he was making the short journey to New Orleans to mate with random female Mayfairs. Of course his victims fatally miscarried, and were found dead in their own blood.

"The family was in a panic.

"Mayfair women began dying one after another. And they couldn't trace Rowan who had abandoned Michael for the fiend. And Rowan was now a prisoner. Soon Mayfair women everywhere were surrounded by armed guards. The creature came to First Street and almost gained access to Mona.

"But Mona, in the time of my desertion, had made love with Michael and was already carrying a Taltos child, though she didn't know it.

"At last, when I'd almost given up hope of life, I conceived another child of my own. And the child spoke to me. It said the very word 'Taltos.' It told me its name: Emaleth. It spoke of times its father couldn't remember. In the secret telepathic voice, I told it that when it was born it was

to go to Michael in New Orleans. I told it about the house on First Street. If I should die, it must reach Michael with word of my death. We talked to each other in silence.

"Lasher was jubilant when he heard the child's voice! He would soon have his bride. It was then, as he softened to me, that I managed to escape. With the filthy clothes on my back I made for the highway.

"I never made it home. They found me comatose in a roadside park, bleeding from an apparent miscarriage. No one dreamed I'd given birth to Emaleth, and she, poor orphan, unable to rouse me or draw more milk from me, had started her long trek to New Orleans on foot.

"I was rushed home. In the hospital they had to remove my organs to stop the hemorrhaging. It probably saved me from the wasting sickness that later almost destroyed Mona. But my brain had been severely damaged. I remained in a deep coma.

"I was unconscious upstairs when Lasher, dressed as a priest, slipped past the guards and into this house, and appealed to the Talamasca and to Michael to let him live. After all, was he not a priceless specimen? He counted on the Talamasca to save him. He poured out a tale of his former life. It's a fascinating study of the innocence of the Taltos. But Lasher wasn't innocent. Lasher had brought death. Michael fought him and killed him. And so his long rule of the Mayfair family came to an end. I was still comatose when Emaleth came and bent to give me her healing milk.

"When I woke and saw the Taltos daughter I had birthed, and realized I was drinking from her breast, I was horrified. This gangly creature with a baby face terrified me. It was a moment of dislocated lucidity. And here I was nursing from the creature as if I were a helpless baby. I grabbed the bedside gun. I killed her. I did that. I destroyed her. That quick and she was no more."

She shook her head. She looked away as we do when we sink into the past. Guilt, loss … her pain seemed beyond these words.

"It didn't have to happen," she murmured. "What had she done but make her way to the house as I had taught her? What had she done but brought me back to consciousness with her plentiful milk? One lone female Taltos. How could she hurt me? It was the loathing of Lasher that warped my mind. It was the revulsion at this alien species and my own atavistic behavior.

"And so she died, my girl. And there were two graves beneath this oak. And I, risen from the coma, a monster now myself, buried her." She sighed. "My lost girl," she said. "I had betrayed her."

Quiet. Even the garden was hushed. The low roar of a passing car seemed as natural as a breeze stirring the trees.

I was suspended in Rowan's sadness.

Stirling's eyes were moist and aglow in the shadows as he studied Rowan. Michael said not a word.

Then Mona spoke very gently.

"There was trouble in the Talamasca," she said. "It all had to do with the Taltos. Some members had tried to get control of Lasher. They'd even done murder. Michael and Rowan took off for Europe to try to investigate the corruption inside the Order. They felt a familial tie with the Talamasca. We all did. And during that time, I realized I was pregnant. My child began to grow out of control. It began to speak to me. It told me its name was Morrigan." Her voice broke. "I was enchanted, crazed."

"I went south to Fontevrault plantation house where Dolly Jean was living, and she and Mary Jane Mayfair, my cousin, my friend who later ran away, she and Dolly Jean, they helped me to give birth to Morrigan. It was really, really painful. And beyond scary. But Morrigan was tall and beautiful. No one could look at Morrigan and not say she was beautiful. She was shining and fresh and magical."

Dolly Jean gave a little cackle in her half sleep. "She knew a whole jumble of human things," she said. "Just a real beastie!"

"You loved her at the time," said Mona, "you know you did."

"I'm not saying I didn't," said Dolly Jean, squinting at Mona, "but what do you make of somebody who tells you she's going to take over the whole family and make it a clan of Walking Babies? Was I supposed to be tickled at that?"

"She was just born!" said Mona softly. "She didn't know what she meant. She had my ambition, my dreams."

"I don't know where she is," said Rowan in her deep heartfelt voice. "I don't know whether she's alive or dead."

Mona was deeply miserable, but I had so shamed her over her tears that she held them back painfully. I tried to take her hand. She drew away.

"But you knew the Taltos who came and took her!" Mona said to Rowan. "You had met him in Europe. He had heard the story of you and Lasher in your wanderings." She turned to me. "That's what happened. He had found them. Yes, another one, an ancient survivor. He was their friend. Of course, they didn't tell me and they didn't tell Morrigan. Oh no, we were children! They kept it to themselves! Imagine. An ancient one. Hadn't I suffered enough to be told about him? And when he came here, they let him take my daughter away."

"How could I have stopped them?" asked Rowan. "You were with us," she said to Mona. "Morrigan was maddened by the scent of the male on our clothes, on the gifts we'd received from him. And why he came, we'll never know. All we know is what you know. He was out in the garden. She went to the window. She ran out to him. There was no stopping either of them. We never saw them again."

"Mona, we searched for him by every conceivable means," said Michael. "Surely you must believe us."

"I want the files," said Mona, "the paperwork. His name, the names of his companies in New York. He was a rich man, a powerful man, this ancient wise one. You admitted that much."

"I'll be glad to give it to you," said Rowan, "but please understand, he liquidated everything. He vanished."

"If only you'd searched right away," Mona said bitterly.

"Mona, you agreed with us at the time," said Rowan. "We would wait until they contacted us. We respected their choice to be together. We didn't think they would simply disappear. We couldn't imagine it."

"We were afraid of hearing from them," said Michael. "We had no idea how they could multiply or survive in the modern world, how Ash could control them."

"Ash was the name of the man," I said.

"Yes," said Michael. His pain opened up as he spoke. "Ash Templeton. Ash *was* ancient. He had been alone for so long it was unimaginable. He'd seen his species become extinct. He was the one who told us the history of the Taltos. He believed that the Taltos couldn't survive in the world of humans. After all, he'd seen them wiped out. His was a tragic history. Of course, as we listened to his stories we had no idea that Morrigan even existed. We left Ash in New York. We loved him. We pledged eternal friendship. Then we got home and discovered Morrigan."

"Maybe it was some telepathic sense that guided him to Morrigan," I said.

"We don't know," said Rowan. "But he came here, he entered the side garden, he saw her through the windows, and she picked up his scent and she ran to him."

"For years we were afraid," said Michael. "We combed the news services for any story that might involve the Taltos. We were on the alert and so was the Talamasca. Mona, you must think back to the time before you were so sick. You must remember. We were afraid because we knew that the species might do great harm to human beings."

"Well put!" said Dolly Jean. "And Morrigan all fired up to rule the world, preaching that her vision came from her human father and mother. When she wasn't looking back she was looking ahead, or dancing in circles or sniffing at scents, she was a wild beastie."

"Oh hush up, Dolly Jean, please," whispered Mona, biting her lower lip, "you know you loved her. And all of you—I wanted to look for them long before you did. For years you wouldn't tell me that name. Oh, just leave it in your hands. Leave it in the hands of Mayfair and Mayfair. And now you say it as if it's nothing. Ash Templeton. Ash Templeton." She started to cry.

"That's not true," said Michael. "I acknowledged this creature as my daughter. You know I did. We began to search before we told you about it. We didn't know how sick you would get." His voice was raw, but he swallowed and moistened his dried lips with his tongue, and then he continued: "We didn't know yet how badly you would need the Taltos milk. We only learned that in time. But we tried to contact Ash, and we discovered that he had sold all his holdings. He'd vanished from the banks, the stock exchanges, the world markets."

"Whatever his feelings for us," Rowan said, "he chose to disappear. He chose to keep his future secret."

Mona was sobbing against Quinn. It broke Michael's heart to see it.

Stirling spoke up, his voice assuming a reverent authority:

"Mona," he said, "the Talamasca began to search for Ash and Morrigan almost immediately. We tried to do it in an unobtrusive way. But we searched. We found some evidence that they had visited Donnelaith. But after that, the trail went cold. And please believe me now when I tell you again: we've never found the slightest trace of them anywhere."

"That's actually quite surprising," I said.

"I'm not speaking to you," cried Mona, glaring at me and then drawing close to Quinn as if she was afraid of me.

"Some evidence of them should have turned up," I said, "no matter what happened to them."

"That's what I've always thought," said Michael. "For two, three years we lived in dread of their surfacing in some catastrophic way. I can't tell you all my fears. I thought: what if the young ones bred out of control? What if they rose up against Ash? What if they committed murders? And then when we stopped living in fear and started to search, nothing."

Dolly Jean chuckled again, bringing up her shoulders and letting her head sink down and rocking back and forth. "Walking Babies can kill humans easy as humans can kill Walking Babies. They could be breeding somewhere, breeding like fire, spreading in all directions, hiding in the valleys and the hills, in the mountains and on the plains, traveling over land and sea, and then comes the ringing of a loud bell, and they all walk out all over the world at the same time and they shoot one human being apiece, bang, and they take over the entire planet!"

"Save that for Tante Oscar," said Rowan under her breath with a cool lift of her eyebrows.

(I winked at Dolly Jean. She nodded and wagged her finger.)

Michael looked directly at Mona and leaned in towards her as he addressed her.

"I hope we've given you what you need," he said. "As for the files, I'll see that they're all copied and delivered to you wherever you like. They'll prove our efforts to track down every lead. We'll give you every scrap of paper we have on Ash Templeton."

"Of course," said Dolly Jean, "they could both be stone-cold dead in the grave like Romeo and Juliet! Two Walking Babies all wrapped up in each other's arms, just rotting away somewhere to cartilage. Like maybe he couldn't stand her ranting and raving and all her plans, and he tied a silk stocking around her neck and—."

"Stop it, Dolly Jean!" cried Mona. "Don't you say another word or I'll scream!"

"You're screaming now, be still!" whispered Quinn.

In my heart of hearts I entered into a debate with myself, and then I spoke:

"I'll find them," I said quietly.

I startled everyone.

Mona turned to me resentfully. "Just what do you mean by that!" she demanded. Her handkerchief was full of blood tears.

I looked at her as disdainfully as I could, considering how tender and pretty she was, and how wicked and fiendish I was, and then I looked across the table at Rowan.

"I want to thank you all for sharing your secrets with us," I said. I looked at Michael. "You've trusted us, and treated us as if we were sinless and kind, and I don't know that we are. But I know that we try to be."

A slow broad smile lit up Rowan's face, extraordinary to behold. "Sinless and kind," she repeated. "How marvelous are those words. If only I could work them into a hymn and sing it under my breath day and night, day and night…."

We looked at each other.

"Give me a little time. If they still exist, if they've parented a colony, if they're anywhere in the wide world, I know those who will know where they are—without question."

Rowan raised her eyebrows and looked off thoughtfully, and the smile came again—a lamp of loveliness. She nodded.

Michael seemed vaguely stimulated by my words, and Stirling was curious and respectful.

"Sure enough," said Dolly Jean, without opening her eyes, "you didn't think he was the oldest Blood Child in the world, did you? And you mark my words," she said to me, "you big old great thing, you sure are pretty as an angel, and you've got plenty charm enough to be a gangster. I've seen every gangster movie ever made three times and I know what I'm talking about. They put a little boot black on your hair, you could play Bugsy Siegel."

"Thank you," I replied soberly. "It was always my ambition to play Sam Spade, actually. I was all alone and forlorn when the *Black Mask* magazine first published *The Maltese Falcon.* I read the novel by the light of the moon. Sam Spade captured my ambition."

"Well, no wonder you talk like a gangster," said Dolly Jean. "But Sam Spade's small time. Go for Bugsy Siegel or Lucky Luciano."

"Stop this!" screamed Mona. "Don't you realize what he's just said?" She was painfully confused, trying to crush her sobs, trying to crush her rage against me. "You can really do this?" she asked in a little bewildered voice. "You can find Ash and Morrigan?"

I didn't answer. Let her suffer for a night.

I rose from the table. I bent to kiss Rowan on the cheek. My hand found hers and held it tight for a small, heated moment. *A precious garden closed against me, is my sister, my beloved bride.* Her fingers caught mine and held them with all her strength.

The gentlemen had risen to see me off. I murmured my superficial farewells, and only then did the secret grip release me.

I walked slowly into the formal garden beyond the pool, and would have gone up into the roaring clouds, to be as far away from the Earth as I could be. But Mona's piteous cry rang

behind me.

"Lestat, don't leave me!"

Across the lawn she came running, her silk dress billowing.

"Oh, you miserable girl!" I said, deliberately gnashing my teeth. I received her in my embrace, sweet bundle of panting limbs. "You intolerable witch. You wicked undisciplined Blood Child. You contemptible pupil. You worsling, you rebellious and obstinate fledgling."

"I adore you with my whole soul, you're my creator, my mentor, my guardian, I love you," she cried. "You have to forgive me!"

"No, I don't," I said. "But I will. Go take a proper leave of your family. I'll see you tomorrow night. I must be alone now."

Off to the deepest pocket of the garden I went—

—and thence to the clouds, and the merciless unknowing stars, and as far from mortaldom as I could get.

"Maharet," I called out to the very most ancient one, "Maharet, I've made promises to those I love. Help me to keep them. Lend your most powerful ear to those whom I love. Lend your most powerful ear to me."

Where was she, the tower of ivory? The great ancestor. The one who now and then came to our aid. I had no clue, because I had never bent my stiff neck to go in search of her. But I knew that in her centuries of endurance she had acquired powers that surpassed all dreams and fears of mine, and that she could hear me if she chose. Maharet, our guardian, our mother, listen to my plea.

I sang the song of the tall ones, the long-extinct ones, come again to form a colony, lost somewhere in the modern world. Gentle beings, out of time, out of place, and maybe out of luck. And of such tragic import to my fledgling and her human kindred. Don't make me say so much that other immortals might gather up my intent and use it to bad ends. Hear me, Sweet Maharet, wherever you are. Surely you know this world as no one else knows it. Have you spied these tall children? I don't dare to say their name.

And then I wrapped myself in comforting phantasms, roaming the winds for my own sake, dissolved now and then in the poetry of love, and envisioning bowers of love, places of Divine safety foreordained beyond Good and Evil, where I and the one I coveted could dwell. It was a doomed vision and I knew it, but it was mine to enjoy.

19

Post sunset. First taste of autumn in the warm air.

Mona and Quinn appeared at the garden doors five minutes after I'd called them. Every man on the dimly lit hotel terrace turned to check out the daring beauty with the flowing red hair. Whoa, short sequined job with straps, hem above her knees, and the audacious heels making her naked calf muscles flex, yes, hmmm, and Quinn in minutely tailored khaki and dress shirt and red tie, was her dazzling escort.

I'd been hanging back on the outskirts of the thick sinister little party, scanning one mind after another, letting the hubbub crash against me, smelling the perfume of the cigarette smoke, hot blood and male cologne, and grooving now and then on the pure avarice and cynicism of the group.

Speakers all around poured out a low thumping steel-band music that came on like a collective heartbeat.

The subject was women, Russian women, imported through the young arrogant pimp—slick brown hair, fashionably emaciated, Armani jacket, shiny enthusiastic face, who worked his guests, buyers all, in methamphetamine fits and starts, bragging about the "white flesh, the blond hair, the freshness, the class" he had coming in from his connections in Moscow and St. Petersburg. "You've never seen so much white gash."

The trade was so rich they could replace the girls every six months; we pass them on down the line, don't you worry, how was that for a guarantee? "I'm talking crème de la crème, I'm talking girls who'll score a thousand a half-hour, we package with clothes or without, I'm talking unbroken flow to point of purchase—." Slam. He'd seen Mona.

She and Quinn caught up with me. Buzz on her thickening. She was the only woman on the terrace. What gives? Was she the door prize?

I narrowed in on the pimp, and the big rawboned oversold bodyguard who was hovering around him, a drone in a badly cut dinner jacket with traces of white powder on his lapels. Drug slobs. All of them drug slobs.

"We're going to do it right here," I said in a whisper. Mona let out a cool laugh. Look at those naked arms. Whiff of cedar to the dress. Aunt Queen's closets. Quinn only smiled, sharpened for the hunt.

The music thumped and went into Brazilian jazz samba.

Even the white-jacketed waiters passing everywhere with little bits of ridiculous food and splashing glasses of champagne were high. The bald-headed man from Dallas pushed his way to the pimp: how much for the redhead? He wanted a right to top anybody's price, "hear me?" They were all giving him the word in passing whispers, and he was now staring at me full-time. A guy from Detroit with beautiful white hands was murmuring on about how he'd put her up in a pad in Miami Beach and give her anything she wanted, girl like that, you couldn't let this business dumb you down to where—.

I smiled at the pimp. I had my elbows on the black iron fence behind me, heel hooked on the lower bar, violet sunglasses down. Purple turtleneck, formal cut, butter-soft black leather suit coat and pants, how I love my own clothes. Mona and Quinn were dancing just a little, back and forth, Mona humming to the music.

The pimp sidled over, throwing sharp highly personal smiles here and there like cheap necklaces at Mardi Gras. On my right side (she was on my left) he said, "Give you a hundred grand for her now, no questions asked, got the cash in my coat."

"What if she doesn't go for it?" I asked, eyes on the shifting clattering party. Sudden smell of caviar, cheeses, fresh fruits, hmmm.

"I'll take care of that," he said, with a scornful laugh. "You just take the other guy and leave her here."

"And later on?" I asked.

"There is no later on. Don't you know who I am?" He felt sorry for me. "You're fancy but you're stupid. Two hundred thousand for her. Take it or leave it. Five seconds. No more."

I burst into a soft laugh.

I looked into his heartless frenzied eyes. Pupils enormous. Harvard Law School, drug trade, female slavery. Up and up and down and down. He flashed his glossy perfectly bleached teeth. "You should have asked around about me," he said. "Want a job? I'll teach you so much people will think you're smart."

"Let's rock, baby," I said. I slipped my hand under his left armpit and gently swung him around so that he hit the fence between me and Mona. I bent over and covered his mouth with my left hand before he could make a sound. She pivoted and opened her lips on his throat, her hair a perfect veil of privacy.

I felt the life drawn out of his frail limbs, heard her gasping swallows, his whole frame giving one full spasm.

"Leave him alive," I whispered. Who was I kidding?

Hand on my shoulder. I looked up. The big stupid-eyed bodyguard, almost too stoned to know why he was suspicious or what to do about it, yeah right, but Quinn was already drawing him away and had him paralyzed, the guy with his broad hunched back to the press of the party and

Quinn drawing quietly and slowly for the blood. What does that look like, that he's whispering in the dude's ear? Most likely.

The laughing, gulping, gurgling crowd rolled on, a waiter nearly stepping on me with his precarious tray. "No thanks, I don't need a drink," I said, which was true.

But I liked the pale yellow color of the champagne in those glasses. And I liked the spattering and burbling and dancing of the water in the fountain in the middle of the crowd, and I liked the pure rectangular lights of all the hotel windows climbing and climbing in beauteous parallel rows above us to the rosy sky, and I liked the low raw saxophone of the jazz samba dancing with itself, and I liked the fluttering of the leaves in the potted trees, which everyone on the terrace ignored but me. I liked—.

The dazed bodyguard staggered. An underling caught his arm, scheming and proud to have him at a disadvantage. The pimp was dead. Oops. Such a brilliant career slumped over the fence. Mona's eyes were electric. Drugs in the blood.

"Get the host a chair," I said to the first waiter I could snare. "I think he's overdosed and he's holding."

"Oh MaGod!" Half the drinks on his tray crashed into the other half. Customers turning, murmuring. After all, the host had slipped down to the tile floor. Not so good for the slave trade.

Out of there.

Luscious gloom of hotel mezzanine floor, marble and golden lights, mirrored elevator, swoosh of doors, glowing fields of carpet, gift shop full of pink stuffed monsters, heavy glass, outside pavements, filth, shrieks of tourist laughter, innocent and deodorized half-naked people of all ages in wrinkle-free scraps of brightly dyed clothing, paper trash in the gutters, glorious heat, screeching roar of the crowded St. Charles Street car rounding the bend onto Canal.

So many … many good people … so very happy.

20

We were back at the flat. Rear parlor. My darlings on the couch. The drugs in their blood had played out on the walk back. Me at the desk but facing them.

I told her to change clothes. That short sequined dress was just too damned distracting. And we had some heavy matters to address immediately.

"Are you serious!" she demanded. "You're not honestly telling me what I can and cannot wear, you don't for one minute think I'm going to listen to this, this is not the eighteenth century, baby. I don't know what castle *you* grew up in, but I assure you I don't change my mode of dress for feudal lords, no matter—."

"Beloved Boss, could you not simply ask Mona to change her dress instead of telling her!" said Quinn with restrained exasperation.

"Yeah, what about that!" she said, leaning forward, accentuating her cleavage swelling under the sequined band across her breasts.

"Mona, my darling," I said with perfect candor, "*ma chérie,* my beauty, please change into something less fetching. I find it hard to think, for you are so lovely in that dress. Forgive me. I lay my shameful omnisensual impulses at your feet. A tribute. I, having spent two centuries in the Blood, should possess a wisdom and restraint that makes such a request unnecessary, but alas, within my heart I feed a human flame that it may never completely go out, and it is the heat of this flame which distracts me now and renders me so powerless in your presence."

She narrowed her eyes and puckered her brows. Exploring me as best she could for mockery. Finding none. Then her lower lip began to tremble.

"Can you really help me find Morrigan?" she asked.

"I don't talk till you change the dress," I replied.

"You're a bully and a tyrant!" she said. "You treat me like a child or a slut. I won't change it. Will you help me find Morrigan or not? Now make up your mind."

"You're the one who has to make up her mind. You act like a child and a slut. You have no dignity, no gravitas! No mercy! We have things to discuss before we get to the finding of Morrigan. You didn't behave very well last night. Now change your clothes, before I change them for you."

"You dare touch me!" she said. "You liked it well enough when every human being at that

party turned to look at me. What don't you like about this dress now?"

"Take it off!" I said. "It's needlessly distracting."

"And if you think you're going to preach to me about the way I behaved with my family…."

"That's just it, they're not simply your family now. There's infinitely more to it, and you know it. You're forfeiting your intelligence for cheap emotional outbursts. You abused your powers last night, your singular advantages. Now change that dress."

"And what are you going to do if I don't change it!"

Her eyes were blazing.

I was flabbergasted.

"Have you forgotten that this is my flat?" I said. "That I am the one who has made you welcome here! That you exist because of me!"

"Go on, throw me out!" she declared. Her whole face went red. She shot to her feet and leaned over me, her eyes on fire.

"You know what I did last night after you left us and went away just because you were oh, so in love with Rowan! Oh, so very in love with *La Doctor Dolorosa.* Well, guess what! I read your books, your maudlin mawkish melancholy Vampire Chronicles, and I can see why your fledglings despise you! You treated Claudia like a doll just 'cause she had the body of a child! And what was that all about, making a child a vampire in the first place?—"

"Stop it, how dare you!"

"And your own mother, you give her the Dark Gift, and then you try to stop her from cutting her long hair or wearing men's clothes, and this in the eighteenth century, when women have to go around looking like wedding cakes, you're an autocratic monster!"

"You insult me, you abuse me! If you don't stop—."

"And I know why you're so fired up over Rowan, she's the first adult female other than your own mother who's ever caught your attention for more than five minutes, and Hello! Lestat Discovers The Opposite Sex! Yeah, females do come in grown-up sizes! And I happen to be one of them, and this is not the Garden of Eden, and I am not taking off this dress!"

Quinn got to his feet. "Lestat, wait, please!"

"Get out!" I roared. I stood up. My heart was cut so deep I could hardly talk. I felt that stinging hurt again all over my skin, the hurt I'd felt when Rowan had been railing at me at the Retreat House, an enervating, crippling pain.

"Out of my house, you wretched little ingrate," I shouted, "get out now before I throw you down the steps! You're a Power Slut, that's what you are, using every edge your sex or youth can give you, a moral lilliputian in grown-up shoes, a career adolescent, a professional child! You don't know the meaning of philosophical insight, or spiritual engagement, or true growth—. Out, out of here now, Heiress to the Mayfair Legacy, what a fiasco that must have been, go beat up on your mortal family at First Street, rave at them until you drive them out of their minds and they

crack you over the head with their shovel and bury you alive in the backyard!"

"Lestat, I beg you—." Quinn put his hands out.

I was too angry. "Take her to Blackwood Farm!"

"Nobody's taking me anywhere!" she cried. She ran out the door, hair whirling, sequins sparkling, slamming the door shut. Clatter down the iron steps.

Quinn shook his head. He was in silent tears. "This just shouldn't have happened," he whispered. "It was entirely avoidable. You don't understand, she's not even accustomed to being out of a sickbed, to putting one foot in front of the other, to putting one word after another—."

"It was inevitable," I said. I was shaking. "It's why I gave her the Dark Gift instead of you, so the anger would come at me, don't you see? But how could she attack so violently the things that have happened to me! She has no moral modulation, no moral rhythm, no moral patience, no moral kindness. She's a pitiless little hellion! I don't know what I'm saying. Go after her. She's so blatantly and arrogantly careless! Just go."

"Please, please," he said, "don't let this be a split between us."

"Not between you and me," I said, "no, never. Just go."

I could hear her sobs from the courtyard.

I stormed out onto the balcony. "You get off my property!" I shouted down to her. She was glowing in the dark. "Don't you dare stand there weeping in my courtyard. I won't have it! Get out!" I came down the steps.

She fled from me down the carriageway. "Quinn!" she wailed. "Quinn!" as if I was murdering her. "Quinn, Quinn," she squealed.

He brushed against me as he passed me.

I turned around and went up the steps. I clung to the balcony railing for a long moment, forcing some calm upon myself, my hands trembling, but it did little good.

As soon as I'd closed the door I saw Julien out of the corner of my eye. I tried again to quell my pounding heart. I refused to tremble. I collected myself, eyes roving the ceiling, ready for the next cheap diatribe to be flung in my face.

"Eh bien," he said, going on in French, his arms folded, his dinner jacket very black against the damask striped wallpaper. "You've done a fine job, *Monsieur,* haven't you? You've fallen deep in love with a mortal who'll never yield to you, only succeeding in driving a true rivet into her heart which her innocent husband won't fail to detect sooner or later. And now my innocent niece, whom you've so cleverly brought over into your world, is running rampant through the streets with a boy lover who hasn't a clue as to how to comfort her or contain her mounting madness. You are a fine example of the Ancien Régime, *Monsieur,* oh, but I should be calling you Chevalier, should I not? Or, what precisely was your title, anyway? Was there something lower?"

I sighed, and then slowly I smiled. I wasn't shaking too badly.

"*Les bourgeois* have always disappointed me," I said gently. "My father's title means nothing to

me. That it means so much to you is tiresome. Why don't we let the matter drop?"

I took my chair at the desk, caught the heel of my shoe on the rung and just looked at the ghost admiringly. Flawless white shirt. Patent leather shoes. Now, he knows how to dress, doesn't he? In my exhaustion and my grief for what had just taken place with Mona, I looked into his eyes and I prayed silently to Saint Juan Diego. What is there that can come of this that might be good?

"Oh?" he asked. "You've come to be fond of me?"

"Where's Stella?" I asked. "I want to see Stella."

"You do?" he asked, arching his eyebrows and tipping his forehead slightly.

"I don't like to be alone," I said, "as much as I give out. And I don't want to be alone at this moment."

He lost his look of resolute superiority. Grim gaze. He'd been a handsome man in his time, trim white curls, clever black eyes.

"Sorry to disappoint you," I said. "But since you do go and come as you will, it seems I must get used to you."

"You think I like what I do?" he asked with sudden bitterness.

"I don't think you know much about what you do," I replied. "Maybe we have that in common. I've been hearing about you. Rather ominous things, it seems."

Blank expression, then a slow yield to appraisal.

I heard a skipping step in the hall, definitely a child skipping. And there she came into the room, in a snow white dress, with her white sox and her black Mary Janes, a darling girl.

"Hello, Ducky, you have the most amazing digs," she said. "I simply love your paintings. This is the first time I've had a chance to look at them. I love the soft colors. I love the sailboats and all the agreeable people, people in lovely long dresses. There's a sweetness to these paintings. If I weren't a little girl, I'd suspect that they soothe people's nerves."

"I can't claim to have chosen them myself," I replied, "someone else did. But now and then I add one or more to the collection. I like the brighter, stronger colors. I like the greater, more savage force."

"What do you intend to do about all this?" asked Julien, plainly irritated by this exchange.

My heart had begun to assume its normal rhythm.

"About all what?" I asked. "And let me assure you that your mixing in it isn't a good omen, from what I've learnt. Seems some of your mortal descendants believe you're doomed to failure in all your Earthly visitations, did you know that? It's a special curse visited upon you, apparently, or so I'm told."

Stella had plopped into a Louis XV chair, her white dress going poof all around her. She looked up at Julien with alarm.

"You do me a bitter injustice," he said coldly. "You can't know my accomplishments. And only

very few of my descendants know them either. Now let's get back to your present obligation. Certainly you don't intend to let my niece run rampant with the powers you've given her."

I laughed. "I told you before," I said, "that if you want her, you will have to tell her. Why are you so afraid of her? Or is it that she won't acknowledge you? That she's completely unreceptive? That she's off on a supernatural tear and you're small potatoes to her now, hmmm?"

His face became hard.

"You're not fooling me, not for a moment," he said. "You're cut to the quick by Mona's words, you're cut to the quick by Rowan, that you can't have her, no matter how much harm you try to do to her. You're paying for your sins. You're paying now as we speak. You're terrified you'll never see either of them again. And maybe you won't. And maybe if you do, they'll show you a defiance that will demoralize you even more truly than you're demoralized now. Come, Stella. Let's leave this mountebank to his nightmares. I tire of his company."

"Oncle Julien, I don't want to leave!" she said. "These are new shoes and I love them. Besides, I find Lestat charming. Ducky, you must forgive Oncle Julien. Death has had the most oppressive effect upon him. When he was alive, he would never have said such things!"

She bounced to the floor, ran to me and threw her soft little arms around me and kissed my cheek.

"Bye, Lestat," she said.

"*Au revoir,* Stella."

And then the room was empty.

Perfectly empty.

I turned, disconsolate and shuddering, and put my head down on my arm, as if I could go to sleep on my desk.

"Ah, Maharet," I said, naming again our great ancestor, our mother, one who was for all I knew on the opposite side of the globe. "Ah, Maharet, what have I done and what can I do? Help me! Let my voice reach you over the miles." I closed my eyes. Once again, I used the very strongest of my telepathic power. *I have such need of you. I come to you ashamed of my failures. I come to you as the Brat Prince of the Blood Drinkers. I don't claim to be anything better or worse. Listen to me. Help me. Help me for the sake of others. I beg you. Hear my prayer.*

I was in this dark frame of mind, alone with this message, which engaged my soul completely, when I heard a step on the iron stairs outside.

Knock at the door.

My guard from the gate: "It's Clem from Blackwood Farm out front."

"How in the world did he find this address?" I asked.

"Well, he's looking for Quinn, says they need Quinn back there right away. Seems he's been up to the Mayfair house looking for Quinn and they sent him over here."

I might as well hang out a tasteful neon sign.

Now I had an immediate and mundane use for my telepathy: scan the blocks around for the Dazzling Duo and relay this message to Quinn.

Zap: nothing to it.

Quinn and Mona were in a small café on Jackson Square, Mona sobbing into an immense heap of paper napkins, Quinn enfolding her and hiding her from the world.

Gotcha. Tell Clem to meet me at Chartres and St. Ann. And please, Lestat, I beg you, come with me.

Meet you at Blackwood Farm, sweet boy.

Eh bien, so after the proper messages were conveyed to Clem, who was presiding over the choking, wheezing, seething limousine outside in the Rue Royale, at least I had a moment of stillness in which to think, and then a destination.

And I was NOT riding over the lake in the car with that unforgivable Valkyrie in her sequined chemise! I would take to the clouds, thank you.

I went outside.

That twinge of autumn again in my beloved heat. I didn't so much like it. I fretted the winter coming on. But what was all this to me with my broken heart, and illegitimate soul, and what *had* I done to Rowan with my furtive, disgraceful whispers? And Michael, that powerful and soft-spoken Michael, who had trusted me with his wife's heart, what had I done to him?

And how could Mona say such hurtful things, how could she? And how could I have behaved so childishly in response?

I closed my eyes.

I cleared my mind of all distractions and random images.

Again I spoke only to Maharet. Wherever you are, I need you.

And now came some artifice—to describe once more my needs without casting to the winds unnecessary details for every other immortal who might pick up my message and ponder the precise nature of what I sought. *To find a tribe of tall beings, tender of bone, ancient, simple, tangled with my fledgling, unknown to the world of records, history and location essential to the sanity of those I love. Guidance. Mistakes I've made with my fledgling, spiraling out of control. Give to me your wisdom, your keen hearing, your vision. Where are the tall creatures? I am your loyal subject. More or less. I send my love.*

Would she answer? I didn't know. In all honesty (yeah, like all the rest of this is a pack of lies?), I had only once, years ago, called out to her for help, and she had not answered me. However, I'd been guilty of the most ridiculous blunder at the time. I'd switched bodies with a mortal, and been abandoned by him. Idiocy. I had to go after my own supernatural body and recover it. And on my own—well, almost on my own—I'd found a solution to my problem. And so it had ended well.

But I had seen her since, this mysterious ancestor, when she did come to my aid of her own

volition, and she had taken great pains with me. She'd forgiven my ranting and raving and my temper. I'd described her in my writings, and she had borne it. From me, she'd borne many things.

Perhaps she had heard me last night. Perhaps she would hear me now.

If nothing came of the call, I would try again. And again. And if her silence continued, I would call to others. I would enlist Marius, my sometime mentor, and wise Child of the Millennia. And if that failed, I would scan the Earth on my own for the Taltos, be they one or many.

I knew I had to make good on my promise to find the Taltos—for Michael and for Rowan, my precious Rowan, even if Mona utterly deserted me, which was most likely the case.

Yes, I felt my heart shrinking. I had already somehow lost Mona. And soon Quinn would follow. And precisely how I'd done it, I really didn't grasp.

Somewhere in the back of my conscious was taking shape the horrid realization that a modern-minded fledgling was as complex as a nuclear reactor, a communications satellite, a Pentium 4 computer, a microwave oven, a cell phone and all the other intricate overarching newfangled creations I couldn't understand. Of course, it was all a matter of exploding sophistication.

Or mystification.

Vixen. I hated her. That's why I was crying my own blood tears, wasn't it? Well, there was nobody to see it.

Eh bien, it was on to Blackwood Farm, and as I ascended I prayed to Maharet. Maharet was my prayer of the winds all the way there.

21

Blackwood Manor was lit up like a lantern in the rural dark, doors thrown open on the front porch, floodlights on, Jasmine sitting on the steps crying with a white handkerchief, knees up, black heels, navy blue sheath, chocolate skin and bleached curls looking lovely as was routine, her crying brokenhearted and exhausting and terribly sad.

"Oh, Les-Dot, help me, help me!" she cried. "Where is Quinn? Where is Little Boss? I need him. I'm going out of my mind! And that boy's running rampant. Nash doesn't believe in ghosts, Tommy's scared to death of them, and Grandma's sending for the priest to drive the Devil out of me! As if it was my doing!"

I walked up to her, picked her up, with her utter soft silky willingness, and carried her inside. She lay her head against my chest.

The front room was full of people.

"The car's turning into the drive," I said, "what's wrong?"

We sat down on the living room couch, me with her in my lap. I patted her. She was really drained and miserable.

"I'm so glad you're here," she cried, "we've been so alone out here."

Little Tommy Blackwood, aged thirteen, Quinn's uncle by blood, sat in one of the chairs opposite and watched me in a really formal sort of way, his fingers on one arm of the chair. He was a truly marvelous young man, much as Quinn had described, and from his travels with Aunt Queen and the all too human Quinn in Europe, he had imbibed an entire attitude towards life which would stand him in good stead always.

Cool to see him again.

Nash Penfield, his tutor, was there also, attired in an impeccable herringbone suit, a man who seemed born to have a calming effect on others, though why he could not calm Jasmine I wasn't certain. He seemed puzzled as he stood near to Tommy's chair, eying Jasmine with profound concern, and nodding to me respectfully.

Big Ramona, Jasmine's grandmother, sat glowering near the couch, in a somber wine-colored gabardine dress with an ornate diamond pin just below her right shoulder. Big Ramona's hair was brushed back artfully to a twist on the back of her head, and she was wearing stockings and fancy black shoes.

"Oh hush up, girl," Big Ramona said at once to Jasmine, "you're just drawing attention to yourself. Sit up straight! Stop talking like a fool!"

Two of the Shed Men, still in their work clothes, were standing awkwardly behind her. One of them was cheerful Allen, with the round face and white hair. I didn't know the name of the other one. Correct. Yes I did. Joel.

And nobody said anything after Big Ramona bawled out Jasmine.

Before I could begin a mind search, Quinn came into the room, and Mona, the sequined harpy, went on back the hall like a streak of silver light, and into Aunt Queen's bedroom. Aunt Queen's bedroom was the only bedroom on the main floor.

A ripple of interest and wonder went through the assembly as to Mona's presence and Mona's appearance, but nobody had gotten a really good look at her. The insolent little monster.

It was Quinn who mattered here. He sat opposite me just inside the huge hallway door. His characteristic innocence slowly alchemized into a gentlemanly air of command as he scanned the gathering. Then he rose to his feet quickly as Cyndy, the Nurse, came in, looking quite lovely in her starched white uniform, also quite tearful and sad, and took a chair far away, by the piano.

Next there appeared the sheriff, a rotund and jocular human being whom I'd met the night of Aunt Queen's death, followed by a person whom I identified at once as Grady Breen, the family lawyer, aged, portly and stuffed into a three-piece pinstriped suit, whom Quinn had described to me when he'd been telling me his life story.

"Whoa, this is quite serious," I said under my breath.

Jasmine was shuddering against me, and clinging to me. "Don't you let me go, Lestat," she said. "Don't you let me go. You don't know what's after me."

"Honey bunch, nothing can get you when you're with me," I whispered. With loving hands I tried to distract her from the fact that my body feels like a chunk of marble.

"Jasmine, get off that man's lap," whispered Big Ramona, "and start behaving like the Head Housekeeper here, where you are supposed to be! I tell you, the only thing holding some people back is their own selves!"

Jasmine did not obey.

The two official gentlemen found chairs in the shadows rather close to Cyndy, the Nurse, as though they didn't want to invade the family circle. The sheriff's belly poured over his belt, which was laden with weapons and a crackling walkie-talkie, which he silenced with embarrassed suddenness.

Jasmine put her left arm around me and hung on as though I were trying to release her, which I wasn't. I stroked her back and kissed her head. She was a delicious little person. Her long silky legs were stretched out to my left.

The fact that Quinn had once made love to her, fathered little Jerome by her, was suddenly uppermost in my heated evil ever-churning half-human half-vampiric mind. Indeed people's

charms should not go to waste, that is my motto, may it never have dire consequences for the mortal world.

"If only I hadn't been so mean to her," Jasmine said. "She's never going to leave me alone." She ground her forehead against my chest. She tightened her grip. I closed my arm completely around her.

"You're just fine, honey bunch," I said.

"What in the world do you mean?" asked Quinn. He was deeply distressed to see Jasmine suffering. "Jasmine, what's going on? Somebody please bring me up to speed."

"So there's news of Patsy?" I asked. For that was clearly everybody's concern, and I was getting it in sputters and waves, whether I searched for it or not.

"Well, seems so," said Grady Breen. "But it seems to me that Big Ramona, well, what with Jasmine unable to talk, maybe you should tell the story."

"Who says I'm unable to talk!" Jasmine cried, head still bowed, body shuddering. "You think I can't tell you what I saw with my own eyes, coming right to the window of my bedroom, all soaked and wet and streaming with duckweed and swamp water; you think I don't know what I saw, that it was Patsy, you think I don't know Patsy's voice, when she said, 'Jasmine, Jasmine,' over and over again? You think I don't know it was a dead person who said, 'Jasmine, Jasmine,' over and over again? And me in that bed with little Jerome, and me scared to death he would wake up, and her clawing at the window with her red fingernails, saying, 'Jasmine, Jasmine,' in that pitiful voice?"

Quinn went bloodless with shock.

Cyndy, the Nurse, burst into tears. "She has to be buried in consecrated ground, I don't care what anyone says."

"Buried in consecrated ground!" said Big Ramona. "All we have of her is some of her hair pulled out of her hairbrush, what are you talking about, Cyndy? Are we going to bury a hairbrush, for the love of Heaven?"

Nash Penfield was so frustrated, I could feel it. I didn't have to read it from his thoughts. He had wanted to take charge for some time, for the sake of everyone. But he felt he had no authority to speak here.

Mona came clicking down the marble-tiled hall and appeared in the door, soberly dressed in a high-neck black dress with long sleeves and tight cuffs and a high hem, and black heels, calves once again flexed magnificently. She took a place to the left of Quinn. Her face was very sweet and serious, the little dissembler.

Everyone looked at her at once, even Jasmine, with a covert turn of her head, but no one knew what to make of it. I refused to even give her a glance. I have excellent peripheral vision.

"When did this ghost appear to you?" I asked at once to distract everyone from Mona and the inevitable questions about her transformation.

“Now tell the story from the start,” said earnest and forthright Grady Breen, “as we are dealing with what constitute legal documents.”

“What legal documents?” said Quinn patiently.

“Well,” said Big Ramona, moving just a little bit forward in her chair, her dark face very commanding, “I think that everybody present knows that for years the ghost of William Blackwood has appeared often in this very room, pointing at that French desk there between the windows, and no one has ever known what to make of it. Quinn, you saw that ghost plenty times, and Jasmine, you did too. And I have to confess, as God is my witness, so did I, though I always said a Hail Mary and the ghost went away like that, just like pinching out a candle flame. And when we opened up that desk, well, we always found nothing. Just nothing. And we put the key back into the cup in the kitchen, though why we so carefully kept locking up nothing I’m not the one to explain.

“But what you don’t know is that right after you took Mona Mayfair out of here, Quinn, that is, right after your mother went missing, leaving all her medicine behind, the ghost started to appear again night and day! I’m telling you, all I had to do was to walk in this room and there was Grandpa William standing there pointing at that desk! And same held true for my grandchild Jasmine. Jasmine, sit up straight!”

(The desk in question was fancy Louis XV, with one central drawer, cabriole legs and much ornate ormolu.)

“Well, finally, Jasmine says to me she just can’t stand this any longer, and she couldn’t reach Quinn and she couldn’t do her work, and neither could I, and then my boy Clem comes in here and even he sees this ghost, and so we decided, well, we were going to search that desk one more time, whether Quinn was here or not to give his permission. But before we had made up our minds that we were going to do this, Jasmine is laying up in the bed asleep with her blessed little boy, Jerome, and up to her window out there comes Patsy, yes, I’m telling you, Patsy, all full of swamp water and crying, ‘Jasmine, Jasmine,’ and scratching at the glass with her long painted fingernails, and Jasmine grabs up little Jerome and runs out of the house screaming!”

Jasmine nodded furiously, making of herself a tiny ball in my lap.

“Fact was,” said Big Ramona, “Jasmine was the only one on this property who was ever kind to Patsy! Except for you, Cyndy, honey, but you didn’t live here! And how’s Patsy’s ghost gonna crawl out of the swamp and find you all the way over in Mapleville? And then we told Grady Breen we were opening that desk, he best come on over here, because it was locked and the key was not in the cup in the kitchen after all these years of that key being in that cup in the kitchen, and we had to use a knife to get the desk open.”

“That makes perfect sense,” said Quinn agreeably.

Big Ramona cast her eyes in the direction of Grady Breen, a most respectful man, who now drew from his brown leather briefcase what appeared to be a sheaf of handwritten papers in a

clear plastic folder.

"And when we opened the drawer of the desk," Big Ramona proceeded, "what did we find but Patsy's handwritten letters, saying that 'by the time you find this I will be dead,' and then going on to describe how she meant to go out into Sugar Devil Swamp and lean over the edge of the pirogue and shoot herself in the right side of her head so she'd fall in the water, and that not one scrap of her remains would be left to put in the family tomb next to her father on account of her hating him, which we all knew that she did."

"She was so sick," cried Cyndy, the Nurse. "She was in pain. She didn't know what she was doing, God help her."

"Yes, indeed," said Grady, "and fortunately, well, no, not fortunately, but, conveniently, well, no, not conveniently, but coincidentally, Patsy had been arrested many times for drug possession and her fingerprints were on file, and so we were able to match up the prints on these pages with her prints, and also this is her handwriting—." Grady rose and hurried across the room and presented the plastic cache to a stunned and silent Quinn—"and she did write about ten drafts of her letter, as she apparently wasn't satisfied, even with the very last, when she apparently jumped the … I mean when she finally decided to go out there and execute her plan."

Quinn held the packet as though it was about to explode, merely staring at the letter that he could see through the plastic, and then he reached out and laid the packet on the famous haunted desk in which it had been discovered.

He said softly, "That's her handwriting."

Everybody nodded, mumbled, concurred, the Shed Men murmuring that Patsy was a great one for scribbling notes saying, "Have my van gassed-up right now!" and "Wash my car and do it right," and they knew that that was her writing too.

Then the hefty sheriff, a devoutly ignorant man, cleared his throat and announced: "And then of course we found the conclusive evidence in the pirogue."

"Which was what?" asked Quinn with a small frown.

"Her hair," said the sheriff, "which matched right up to the hair on her brushes upstairs, and everybody knew Patsy'd never gone out there for any other reason, so it had to be she shot herself out there, 'cause why else would she come to be in the pirogue?"

"You've made a DNA match this quickly?" asked Quinn coldly.

"We didn't have to. Everybody could see it was the same hair all stuck with her hairspray, you could smell it," said the sheriff, "but the DNA will be coming if you mean to bury the strands in that little cemetery of yours where you like to bury things and hold séances with big fires and such!"

"Sheriff, please be kind to this boy," said Cyndy, the Nurse, in a sweet voice, "we are talking about his mother."

"Yes, please, if we could stick to the facts at hand," said Nash Penfield, in his deep

authoritative voice. His frustration had gotten the better of him. He felt protective of just about everyone, but especially Tommy.

"So the coroner is satisfied?" asked Quinn. "And has ruled it suicide?"

"Well, yes, he would be!" declared the sheriff, "if you'd stop going around the house saying you murdered your mother and threw her to the gators, Quinn Blackwood! And Jasmine here would stop telling everybody Patsy's come a-crawling up to her window, all full of swamp weed, crying for help, for the love of the Lord in Heaven."

"She did, she did," gasped Jasmine under her breath. "Lestat, don't you let me go!"

"I won't," I whispered. "No ghost is going to get you, Jasmine."

"But Jasmine," said Quinn, "when did you see this ghost? Was it after you all found this note?"

"No, Grandma just told you, I saw her before I even knew about the letters, she came to the window, crying and clawing. And she's done it again! And I'm scared even to go to sleep out there. I don't know what she wants, Little Boss, what can I do for her? Little Jerome is upstairs in Tommy's room playing video games right now, I'm scared to even let him stay in the back house, what can I do? Quinn, you've got to hold another séance for Patsy!"

Suddenly Mona spoke up, and it was as if a light had gone on in that corner of the room.

"The poor creature probably doesn't know she's dead," Mona said tenderly. "Someone has to tell her. She needs to be guided into the Light. This often happens to people, especially if they die suddenly. I can tell her."

"Oh, please, could you do that?" said Jasmine. "That's it, you got it, she doesn't know, and she's wandering around, all forsaken and lost, coming out of the swamps back of my house and doesn't know what's happened to her."

The sheriff was smirking and raising his eyebrows and squinting his eyes. Nash was becoming extremely uncomfortable as he watched the man.

"That's what happened with Goblin, wasn't it?" Big Ramona asked. "You all told him he was dead and he went on. Well, you all have to do it again, you just got to."

"Yes, it was," said Quinn. "I'll tell her to go on. I don't mind doing it. I don't think it will require an entire séance."

"Well, you people ought to do that right away," said the sheriff, now on his feet and primed to depart, tugging at his heavy belt, "but I must tell you, it is the darnedest thing that every time you have a death out here you have a ghost right smack dab in the middle of it. Sure enough! Do you see the ghost of Miss McQueen carrying on like this? No, you do not! She's not scratching at any windowpane. Now that was a great lady!"

"What are you talking about!" Quinn demanded in a low voice. He looked up angrily at the sheriff. I'd never seen Quinn take on such an expression. I'd never heard Quinn talk in such a voice. "You trying to give us a lecture on who's a good dead person and who's not? Seems like

you should wait outside of Jasmine's window and give that lecture to Patsy. Or why don't you just go back to your office and dictate a book on manners for the lately dead?"

Big Ramona chuckled under her breath. I swallowed my laughter. Nash was greatly worried. Tommy was afraid.

"Don't you talk that way to me!" the sheriff said, leaning over Quinn. "You're nothing but a crackpot kid, Tarquin Blackwood. It's the scandal of the parish that you've inherited Blackwood Farm! It's the end for this place out here and everybody knows it. And there's other things you've done that are the scandal of the parish, and now you go around saying you murdered your mother. I ought to run you in."

A cold rage came over Quinn. I could see it happening.

"I did murder her, Sheriff," he said in an iron voice. "I snatched her up from her couch upstairs, broke her neck, carried her out into the pirogue and went deep, deep into the dark swamp until I saw the backs of the gators in the light of the moon, and then I threw her body into the muck. And I said, 'Eat up Mother.' That's what I did."

The entire room was thrown into consternation, with Big Ramona and Jasmine crying No no no, and Nash murmuring desperate confidential reassurance to Tommy, and Tommy glaring at Quinn, and one of the Shed Men laughing, and Cyndy the Nurse avowing that Quinn would never really do such a thing. Grady Breen was speechless, shaking his head and shuffling papers in his briefcase uselessly, and even Mona was shocked, staring at Quinn with her glassy green eyes in vague wonder.

"You going to run me in, Sheriff?" asked Quinn, looking icily up at the man.

The room fell silent.

The sheriff was squint-eyed and speechless.

Nash was fearful and poised to act.

Quinn uncoiled from the chair and rose to his full height and looked down on the sheriff. The combination of Quinn's youthful face and imposing height alone was frightening, but the menace flowing from him was palpable.

"Go on, Big Boy," Quinn said in a stage whisper. "Put those handcuffs on me."

Silence.

The sheriff froze, then turned his head away, backed up two feet, and sidled towards the door and went off into the hall and out the front, muttering that nobody at Blackwood Farm had a lick of sense, and, it was such a crying shame that the house would now go to rack and ruin, yes, indeed, RACK AND RUIN! Slam went the door. No more sheriff.

"Well, I think I'd better be going along," said Grady Breen in a cheery loud voice, "and I'll get you a copy of the coroner's report first thing." He made for the front door so quickly that he might have suffered a heart attack later in his car. (But he did not.)

Meantime, Tommy ran to Quinn and threw his arms around him. Nash looked on helplessly.

This caught Quinn very much off guard. But he at once reassured the boy.

"Don't you worry about anything," he said. "You go on back to Eton. And when you come home, Blackwood Farm will be here, always, safe and sound and beautiful as it is now, and making lots of people happy, with Jasmine and Big Ramona and everybody, the same as it is today."

The Shed Men murmured that that was certainly the case. And Cyndy the Nurse said it was true. Big Ramona said, "Yes, Lawd."

Now Jasmine saw that she was needed, and, giving her face a final wipe with her handkerchief, she released her grip on me, received a little torrent of my kisses and went to put her arms around Tommy.

"You come on in the kitchen with me, Tommy Blackwood," she said. "You too, Nash Penfield, I've got a pot of stewed chicken on the stove; you too, Cyndy …"

"*You* have a pot of chicken on the stove? Who is this 'You'?" asked Big Ramona, "that's *my* pot of stewed chicken. And just look at this Mona Mayfair, why the child's totally recovered."

"No, no, you all go on," said Mona, rising and gesturing for them to leave us. "Quinn and Lestat and I have to talk."

"Little Boss," said Jasmine, "I'm not sleeping downstairs in that house. I've moved upstairs with Jerome and Grandma, and I'm locking the shutters over the windows. Patsy's after me."

"I'll find her out there," said Quinn. "Don't worry."

"Does she come at any certain time?" Mona asked very kindly.

" 'Bout four in the morning," said Jasmine. "I know 'cause she stops the clock."

"That's about right," said Quinn.

"Now, don't you start again with that!" Jasmine rebuked him. "Now they found all those letters and they think she shot herself, you're off the hook, now cool it!" And she pulled Tommy away with her.

"But wait a minute," said Tommy, at once clabbering up and losing a little of his manly dignity in the pure sadness of a child. "I really want to know." He swallowed. "Quinn, you didn't kill her, did you?" It was heartbreaking.

For a long moment everyone was silent, and then Quinn said:

"No, Tommy, I didn't. It's important that you believe me, that I would never do a thing like that. It's just, I wasn't kind to her. And now she's gone. And I feel sad about it. And as for the sheriff, I don't much care for him, and so I said mean things to him."

It was the most perfect of lies, executed with such determination that it shone in the darkness of Quinn's thoughts as it was uttered. It was inflamed with the vibrant love that Quinn felt for Tommy. His hatred of Patsy was as intense as ever. That her ghost was on the prowl infuriated him.

"That's right," said Jasmine. "We just all wish we'd treated her better. She was an

independent person, wouldn't you say now, Little Boss, and sometimes we didn't understand her."

"Very well put," said Quinn. "We didn't try hard enough to understand her ways."

"Of course Tommy understands," said Nash. "We all understand. Perhaps I can explain this a little better, if Quinn will allow. Come, Tommy, let's have some supper in the kitchen. Now that Quinn's here, there's nothing to worry about any longer, and Miss Mayfair, if you'll allow me to say, you do look absolutely lovely. It's marvelous to see you again, and so fit."

"Thank you, Mr. Penfield," said Mona, as if she wasn't a wild beast.

But Quinn's face was very dark, and as soon as the room was empty except for the three undercover monsters, we drew together.

"Let's go upstairs," said Quinn, "I really need your advice just now, Lestat. I have to figure out some things. I have some ideas."

"You know I'll do anything I can," I responded.

I calculatedly ignored Mona in her penitential black, who led the way up the circular staircase.

22

Quinn's impressive bedroom suite—bedroom and parlor divided by a huge arch—had been completely cleaned since the making of Mona Mayfair into an irresponsible little demon. And the bed on which the Dark Gift had been given was all made up with its fancy dark blue velvet comforter and draperies.

There was the center table where Quinn and I had sat for hours as he'd told me the story of his life, and Mona and I took our places there, but Quinn seemed stunned by the sight of the room, and for a long moment he simply appraised his surroundings as if they meant something wholly new to him.

"What gives, Little Brother?" I asked.

"Pondering, Beloved Boss," he said. "Just pondering."

I was not looking at the harpy. Was I glad she was sitting to my right rather than roaming the world all vulnerable and tearful in her sequined chemise? Yes, but I was under no obligation to say so to one who had so furiously rejected me. Was I?

"Come, talk to us," I said to Quinn. "Sit down."

Finally, he did, taking his old place with his back to the computer desk, and just opposite me.

"Lestat, I'm not sure what to do."

"I can go out to her at four a.m.," said Mona, "I'm not afraid of her. I can try to reach her."

"No, darling," Quinn said, "I'm not thinking of Patsy just yet. I couldn't give less of a damn about Patsy, except for Jasmine's sake, really. I'm thinking of Blackwood Manor. I'm thinking of what's going to happen to it. You see, all the time we were in Europe, Aunt Queen and I were in charge by phone, by fax, by some means, and then all this last year we were both here, figures of security and authority. Now all that's changed. Aunt Queen is gone, simply gone, and I don't know that I want to be here very often. I don't think that I can be."

"But can't Jasmine and Big Ramona run the place, as they did while you were in Europe?" Mona asked. "I thought Jasmine was a whiz at that. And Big Ramona was a genius chef."

"All that's true," said Quinn. "They can do everything, actually. They can do the cooking and the cleaning, and they can meet and greet the drop-in guests. They can host the Easter Feast and Christmas Supper and every other imaginable event. Jasmine is extremely talented as a manager and a guide. Fact is, they can all do far more than they believe they can. And they all have plenty

of money, money enough to walk away from this place and be comfortable wherever they go. That gives them a feeling of security, and an air of independence. But they want to be right here. This is their home. But they want for there to be a presence, a Blackwood presence, and without that, they're insecure."

"I see," she said. "You can't make them think like owners of the place."

"Exactly," he said. "I've given them every opportunity," he went on. "Every type of advancement and profit sharing as well, but they want me in residence. They want my authority. And Tommy wants it. And then there's Tommy sister Brittany to think of, and Tommy's mother, Terry Sue. They'll be coming frequently to visit. They've become part of Blackwood Farm because of Tommy. Someone has to be at the very heart of this house to receive them. And Jasmine wants me to be that heart, not only for herself but for my son, Jerome, and I'm not sure that I can continue to be the Master of Blackwood Farm as I would have been if only—."

"The answer's simple," I said.

"What is it?" Quinn asked, startled.

"Nash Penfield," I said. "You make him resident curator, to run and maintain this property on your behalf and on behalf of Tommy and Jerome."

"Resident curator!" Quinn's face brightened. "Ah, that sounds brilliant. But would he take the job? He's finished his Ph.D. He's ready to start teaching."

"Of course he'll take the job," I said. "The man spent years in Europe with you and Aunt Queen. You described it as a luxurious journey."

"Oh, yes, Aunt Queen broke the bank," replied Quinn. "And Nash did seem to make the most of it in the best ways."

"Exactly. I suspect Nash is thoroughly ruined for ordinary life. He would love nothing better than to be curator here, to maintain the Easter and Christmas traditions for the sake of the parish, and whatever else you want, while earning a high salary, having a gorgeous bedroom and ample time to write a couple of books in his academic field."

"Perfect," Quinn said. "And he has the style and the grace to pull it off. Oh, this could be the answer."

"Run the idea by him. Suggest that in his idle hours he could begin to build a proper library on shelves put up on the inside walls of the double parlor. And he could write a short history of Blackwood Farm, to be printed up for the tourists, you know, with architectural details and blueprints and legends and such. Throw in the limousine and driver twenty-four hours a day, and a new car of his own every two years, and a deep-pocket expense account and paid vacations to New York and California, and I think you'll have him."

"I know he'll go for it," said Mona. "Downstairs he was desperate to intervene when the sheriff was acting like an idiot. He just didn't feel he had the right to do it."

"Precisely," I said, without looking at Mona. "It's a dream position for a man of his gifts."

"Oh, if he only would," said Quinn, with mounting excitement, "that would be key. And I could come and go from this room, with you and Mona, anytime that I wanted."

"It's far more interesting than what awaits Nash elsewhere," I said. "And he can play proper host to Tommy's mother, Terry Sue, and exert a guiding influence on little Jerome, maybe tutor him, in fact, and you don't have to tell him how to treat Jasmine and Big Ramona; he knows. He adores them. He was born in Texas. That's the South. He isn't some ignorant Yankee who doesn't know how to speak two civil words to a black person. He respects them completely."

"I think you've hit on it," Quinn said. "If he were ensconced in Blackwood Farm, it would work. It would work for a long time. Jasmine would be ecstatic. She loves Nash."

I nodded and shrugged.

"That's a grand idea," said Quinn. "In time I'll tell them Mona and I were married in Europe. They won't protest. It will be perfect. Mona, you really think he'll go for it?"

I refused to look at her.

"Quinn, he's already part of Blackwood Farm," she said.

Quinn went to the phone. "Jasmine," he said, "I need you up here."

Almost instantly we heard the vibration of the staircase as Jasmine came running up, and then breathlessly she opened the door.

"What's the matter, Little Boss?" She was panting. "What's going on?"

"Sit down, please," he said.

"You scared me to death, you miserable boy!" she declared. She took her chair. "Now what's on your mind to call me like that! Don't you know this whole place is in a state of crisis? And now Clem's saying he won't sleep in the bungalow, either, because he's scared of Patsy coming to him too."

"Never mind all that, you know perfectly well Patsy can't hurt you!"

He sat back down and he told her the whole plan, how Nash would be the curator, but before he was halfway through what he meant to say, she threw up her hands and declared it was a miracle. The whole parish would be happy. Nash Penfield had been put on this Earth for Blackwood Farm.

"Now, it's Aunt Queen who put that idea in your head, Little Boss, she's looking down from Heaven," Jasmine said. "I know she is. And so is Mamma, who died right there in that very bed. God bless us all. You know what people round here believe? They believe Blackwood Farm belongs to everybody!"

"Everybody?" asked Mona. "Everybody who?"

"All the parish around, girl," said Jasmine. "The phone's been ringing off the hook since Aunt Queen died. Are we still going to do the Christmas Dinner? Are we still going to have the Azalea Festival? I'm telling you, they think this place belongs to the whole parish."

"Well, they're right," said Quinn. "It really does. So do I have your consent to ask Nash

Penfield to take the job?"

"Yes, indeed!" Jasmine said. "I'll tell Grandma, you'll get no argument from her. You just talk to Nash Penfield. He and Tommy are down in the parlor. I wanted them to play the piano. Nash knows how to play. Tommy knows one song. But Tommy says you don't play the piano for weeks after a person dies. Now, we never abided by that here because we were always a Bed-and-Breakfast. And I say that Tommy can play that song."

Quinn got up and went out with Jasmine.

I followed them down the stairs. I wanted to see this thing through. I ignored the fact that Mona came afterwards and was behaving with such obvious grace and reticence. A complete facade.

Wise ones must not be deceived by such ploys.

Tommy was sitting at the square grand in the double parlor, an antique that apparently still worked. And he was crying just a little and Nash was standing over him. I could feel the pure love of Nash for Tommy.

"Tommy," Quinn said. "There was this woman in Beethoven's time who lost her child. She was bereft. Beethoven would come into her house, unannounced, and he would play the piano for her. She would be lying upstairs, distraught, and she would hear him playing down there in the drawing room, and the piano music was his gift to her, to comfort her. You play the piano if you like. You offer the music up to Aunt Queen. You go on. Part the gates of Heaven with your music, Tommy."

"You tell Little Boss what you mean to play," said Jasmine.

"It's a song by Patsy," said Tommy. "Patsy sent the CD to us while we were in Europe. I wrote home for the sheet music. Aunt Queen saw to it we had suites with pianos so I could learn the song. It's very Irish and very sad. I wanted to play it for Patsy, to see if it would quiet her soul."

Quinn said nothing. His face went pale.

"You go on, son," I said. "That's a good idea. Aunt Queen will be pleased and so will Patsy. Patsy will hear you. You play the song."

Tommy laid his hands on the keys. He began a simple, very Celtic-sounding ballad. It had its Kentucky Bluegrass sound too. Then, startling us all, he began to sing the lyrics in a low competent boy soprano that was as mournful as the music:

Go tell my friends for me
That I'm not coming back.
Go tell the gang for me
That I can dance no more.
Go tell the ones I love
That I have gone on home.

I'm walking in the graveyard now
And I am all alone.
And I'll be gone before the leaves
Begin to fall again.
They're rushing up and down the stairs
The bed is wide and soft.
But I lie still and oh, so cold.
Because my mother's gone.
Will I soon see her simple face?
I have no dreams or faith.
I wish that I could make a song
That tells how good it's been.
I had the stage, I had the light.
The music was the tale.
But things are tinged with purple now
And these sad notes I play.
I wait until the autumn comes
And I will be no more.

We stood together, bound by the sorrow of it, as if we were in a deep enchantment.

Quinn leant down to kiss Tommy on the cheek. Tommy just stared at the printed music before him. Jasmine had her arm around his shoulder.

"Now that was beautiful," she said. "And Patsy wrote that, now, she knew what was coming, she knew."

Then Quinn drew Nash off with him into the dining room. Mona and I went with him, but there was no real need for us.

I saw this as they sat down to talk.

I saw that Nash understood from the first words, and was completely desirous of this position that Quinn was describing to him. I saw that it had been Nash's secret dream. Nash had only been waiting for the time to present such a proposal to Quinn.

Meanwhile, in the parlor Jasmine was asking Tommy to play the song again.

"But you didn't really see that awful ghost of Patsy, did you?" Tommy was asking.

"No, no," said Jasmine, trying to comfort Tommy, "I was just carrying on, I don't know what got into me, don't you be afraid of Patsy's ghost, don't you think about that, besides, you see a ghost, you make the Sign of the Cross, nothing to it, now you sing that song again, I'll sing it with you.…"

"You play the song again, Tommy," I said. "You keep playing it and you keep singing it. If her

spirit's wandering, she'll hear it and it will comfort her."

I went out the unlocked front door into the warm humid air, down the steps and away from the light, and I walked back behind the house and over to the far right where the bungalow stood in which Jasmine and Big Ramona and Clem lived.

It was lighted cheerily. And only Clem was there, sitting on the front porch, rocking and smoking a very aromatic cigar. I gestured for him not to get up on my account, and I walked back behind the house and along the treacherous soft bank of the swamp.

I could hear Tommy singing. I sang the words along with him, soft, in no more than a whisper. I tried to picture Patsy as she had been in her heyday—country-western star, in her leather jackets with fringe and skirts and boots, with teased and bouffant hair, belting her original songs. It was the image that Quinn had given to me. Grudgingly he had said she could truly sing. Even Aunt Queen had mentioned to me with some reserve that Patsy could really sing. Ah, there hadn't been a single soul in the world of Blackwood Farm who had felt love for Patsy.

And all I'd glimpsed was the sick Patsy, bitter and full of hate, sitting on the couch in her white nightgown, knowing she'd never be well enough to perform anymore, hollering for Cyndy, the Nurse, to give her another shot, hating Quinn out loud and with her soul, her pinched and twisted soul, Patsy, who'd caught the plague from drug needles and didn't care how many times she'd passed it on.

And Quinn had done her in just exactly as he'd described it to the sheriff.

I walked on, with the swamp beside me. I let my vampiric hearing rove. Nash had begun to play Patsy's song, with more notes and a bolder expression. He and Tommy were singing it together. Sadness. Jasmine cried. Jasmine whispered, "Ah, the pure pitifulness of it."

The rural dark fell down around me. I let go of the music.

The swamp seemed the most savage and devouring place, with no pastoral symmetry or harmony to it. What thrived there was ravenous and battling to the death, and would never find a safe haven for itself—a landscape eating itself alive. Quinn had told me it was like that. But how could I not have known it?

Centuries ago, I'd been dumped for dead in the swamp by my fledglings, Claudia, the murderer, Louis, the coward; and I, a hideous and grasping thing, had survived in those stagnant, polluted waters, survived to come back and take my battered and shapeless revenge, sharpened to a fatal point by others.

I don't care about that.

I don't know how long I walked.

I took my time.

Patsy. Patsy.

The night sounds were at once particular and at the same time a deep hum on the warm breeze, and the moon was high, sometimes penetrating a break in the swamp that only revealed

its jagged hateful chaos more harshly.

Now and then I stopped.

I looked at the scattered stars—so cunningly bright in the country night. And I hated them, as usual. What comfort was it to be lost in the endless universe, a simpleton on a tiny speck of revolving dust, whose forefathers had read patterns and meanings into these countless unknowable points of cold white fire, which only mocked us by their unchanging indifference?

So let them shine over the vast pastureland to my right, over the distant clusters of oaks, over the warmly lighted houses now far behind me.

My soul was with the swamp tonight. My soul was with Patsy.

I walked on.

I hadn't known so much of Blackwood Farm bordered on the swamp. But I wanted to know. And I kept as close as possible to the water without slipping right into it.

Soon I knew Mona was somewhere near me. She was doing her best to conceal herself, but I heard the little sounds that she made, and I could smell a faint perfume from her that had clung to Aunt Queen's dresses, a scent I hadn't noticed before.

After a little while, I knew Quinn was with us, too, staying behind me with Mona. Why they so faithfully followed I didn't know.

I used my strongest vision to penetrate the reeking darkness to my left.

A strong chill came over me, moving down my back, a chill such as I'd felt when Rowan Mayfair and I had first met, and she had used her power to study me, a chill that was from a source outside of me.

I stopped, and I faced the swamp, and at once I perceived that a female figure was right before me. It was so close that I could have touched it without extending my hand more than a few inches.

It was tangled in the moss and creeper vine, still and lifeless as the cypress tree which appeared to support it, and it was soaked through and through, its hair in dank rivulets on its filthy white gown, and gleaming faintly in a light mortal eyes could not have seen, and it was staring at me.

It was Patsy Blackwood.

Weak, silent, suffering.

"Where is she!" Quinn whispered. He was at my left shoulder. "Where? Patsy, where are you?"

"Be quiet," I said. I kept my gaze on her, on her large miserable eyes, and the streaks of hair that ran down her face, and her parted lips. Such yearning, such agony.

"Patsy," I said. "Darling girl, all your tribulation in this place is finished."

I saw her eyebrows close in a slow listless frown. It seemed I heard a deep long sigh from her.

"You best go on, beautiful girl," I said. "Go on to glory. Don't roam this dismal realm, Patsy.

Don't make this darkness your home when you can turn to the Light. Don't you wander here searching and moaning. You go on. Turn your back on this time and place and beg for the gates to open."

Something quickened in her face. Her eyebrows went smooth, and it seemed that she shuddered.

"Go on, honey," I said. "The Light wants you. And here in this world, Quinn will gather all your songs, every song you ever recorded, Patsy, and put them all together, and they'll go out far and wide, Patsy, every single one, old and new, for always. Isn't that a splendid thing to leave behind, all those wonderful songs that people love, that's your gift, Patsy."

Her mouth opened, but she didn't speak. Her white cheeks were slick with the water of the swamp, her nightgown torn, her arms scratched and streaked with filth, her fingers struggling to close but unable to do it.

I heard Mona cry out. I felt a force move the damp air around me. Quinn was vowing in a low-running whisper that, having sinned in taking her life, he would give her songs life forever.

But nothing changed for me in the agonized and straining apparition, except that Patsy raised her right hand just a little, and her parted lips made just a small bit of a word. I couldn't hear it. It seemed she inclined towards me. And I inclined towards her—

—love me, love the way love must be, unsparing love, love Patsy!—

—across the perilous void I moved, as if stepping off the very world itself, and I kissed her lips, wet and reeking of the foul water, and I felt a great current come from inside me, a wind out of the deepest root in me that swept inexorably into her and carried her far, far away, up and out, her form growing faint and immense and brilliant—.

"Into the Light, Patsy!" Mona wailed, her words borne on the wind and swallowed by it—.

—teenaged cowgirl strumming her guitar, belting it: *Gloria!* stomping her foot, crowd screaming, searing flash of angels, numberless monsters of the unseen, those wings, no, I didn't see, yes, I did, get away! *Gloria!* I didn't see—*Gloria!* I'm clawing the grass trying to get into the Earth—Oncle Julien smiling, beckoning. *Gloria! This is the most dangerous game. You're no Saint Juan Diego, you know.* I will not, I will not, I will not go with you! Patsy in pink leather, arms raised, blinding light, belting *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*!

Blackness. It is done. I am separate. I am here. I feel the grass beneath me.

I whispered: "Laudamus te. Benedicimus te. Adoramus te. In Gloria Dei Patris!"

When I opened my eyes, I was lying on the ground, and except for Mona who cradled my head in her hands, and Quinn who knelt beside her, the night was quiet and empty.

23

Every now and then, I demand to be treated like the supernatural hero that I am.

I strode back to the house, ignoring Quinn and Mona (especially Mona), and opened the kitchen door, and told Jasmine that Patsy's spirit was definitely gone from the Earth, and that I was spent and that I needed to sleep in Aunt Queen's bed, no matter what anybody thought about it.

Obstreperous little Jerome jumped up from his tiny table and cried: "But I never got to see her! Mamma, I never got to see her."

"I'll draw you a picture, sit down!" said Jasmine and, with the incontestable authority of the lady with the keys, she led me across the hall and admitted me to the sacrosanct chamber at once, mumbling that Mona had made a mess of the closets only two hours before, but everything was now put right, and I flung myself theatrically upon the rose satin bed, beneath the rose satin canopy, nuzzled into the rose satin pillows and lay there, drenched in the scent of Chantilly, allowing Jasmine to pull off my dirty boots because it made her happy, and protected the bed, and I closed my eyes.

At once Quinn said in a soft, respectful voice, "Lestat, may Mona and I keep watch with you? We're so grateful for what you did."

"Out of my sight," I said. "Jasmine, please light all the lamps and then make them get out of here. Patsy is gone, and my soul is weak! I have seen the feathered wings of angels. Don't I deserve to sleep for this little while?"

"You get out of here, Tarquin Blackwood and Mona Mayfair!" Jasmine said. "Thank the Lawd that Patsy's gone! I can feel it. That child was just lost and now she's way up home and no more searching. I'm taking these boots to Allen. Allen's the boot expert on this property. Allen can clean these boots. Now, you two go on, you heard what the man said. His soul is weak. Now let him be. Lestat, I'm getting you a blanket."

Amen.

I drifted.

Julien was at my ear in heated French: "I'll follow you to the ends of the Earth through all your endeavors until you are ruined in madness! Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. All that you do is vanity, and for your own pride and glory! You think the angels don't know what you do and

for whom you do it!"

"Aw, yeah!" I whispered, "you spiteful ghost, you thought you had me between the worlds, didn't you? Is that where you live forever, watching them pass you by? You didn't give a damn for Patsy's soul, did you? And did she not descend from you as surely as Quinn? And Mona? You did the beast with two backs in this very house with Patsy's ancestor too, did you not, you don't know your own descendants when they're not to your taste, you merciless astral panhandler…."

I drifted deeper, brain descending into the sweetness of human exhaustion—far from the ring of the anvil between the worlds, far from the torrent of Heaven. Adieu, my poor doomed Patsy. Yes, and I had done it with a kiss, and yes, with a step, and yes, she had gone up, and wasn't it good? Had I not done good? Could anybody deny it was good? Yo, Juanito, wasn't it good? Wasn't the exorcism of Goblin good? I sank back into the safety of know-nothing sleep. And round about, the golden lighted room protected me.

What could I do that was good for Mona and Quinn?

Two hours later I was awakened by the chiming of a clock. I didn't know where in the house it was or what it looked like and I didn't care. The room was wholesome and reassuring, as if the purity and generosity of Aunt Queen had totally infused it.

I was refreshed. The evil little cells in my body had done their dirty and inevitable work. And if I'd had any terrible dreams I didn't remember them.

Lestat was Lestat again. As if anyone cared. Do you care?

I sat up.

Julien was sitting at Aunt Queen's little round table, the table at which she had taken her meals, the table between the bed and the closet doors. He wore his fancy dinner jacket. He smoked a little black cigarette. Stella sat on the couch in her pretty white dress. She was playing with one of Aunt Queen's floppy boudoir dolls.

"*Bonjour,* Lestat," said Stella. "At last you wake, you handsome Endymion."

"Everything you do," Julien said in French, "you do for your own selfish aims. You want these mortals to love you. You bask in their blind adoration. You devour it like blood. Are you tired of killing and destroying?"

"You're not making sense," I replied. "Being dead, you should know better. The dead should have an edge. You don't have one. You hang out in the alleyways of the other world. I saw you for what you are."

He smiled a wicked little smile.

"Exactly what is your paltry plan?" he asked in French, "to send me through the cloudy Heavens the way you did Patsy Blackwood?"

"Hmmm. Why should I bother with your salvation?" I asked. "As I told you before, I'm getting used to you. I feel privileged, having these little tête-à-têtes, no matter where you come from. And then there's Stella. Stella is a delight always."

“Oh, you’re so sweet,” said little Stella. She held the doll up by the arms. “You know, Ducky, you present the most bizarre problem.”

“Do explain,” I said. “Nothing delights me more than children who spout philosophy.”

“Don’t be sure that I’m capable of a philosophical observation,” she replied, frowning and smiling at me at the same time. She let the doll flop in her lap. She lifted her shoulders, then slowly relaxed. “This is what I think about you, Ducky. You have a conscience without a soul to back it up. Quite unique, I should say.”

A dark shiver passed through me. “Where is my soul, Stella?” I asked.

She seemed at a loss, but then she spoke: “Entangled!” she said. “Caught in a web! But your conscience flies free of your soul. It’s simply marvelous.”

Julien smiled. “We’ll find a way to cut that web,” he said.

“Oh, so you mean to save my soul?” I asked.

“I don’t care where it goes once it leaves this Earth,” Julien replied. “Haven’t I told you that? It’s the fleshly shell I detest, the evil blood that enlivens it, the appetite that drives it, and the consuming pride that motivated it to take my niece.”

“You’re overwrought,” I said. “Remember the child. You must have had some purpose in bringing her with you as a witness. Behave decently in her presence.”

The knob on the hall door turned.

They vanished. Such shy retiring individuals.

The doll fell over on the couch, and, having no elbows or knees, looked most bereft as it stared with its big painted eyes at the room around it.

Quinn and Mona entered. Quinn had changed into a big cable knit sweater and simple slacks, for the air-conditioning at Blackwood Farm was a force to be reckoned with, and Mona was still in her gorgeous black dress, her pale face and hands glowing. A cameo was now fixed at her neck, a very large and beautiful one of white and blue sardonyx.

“Can we talk now?” Quinn asked in a very polite tone. He looked at Mona with great concern, then his eyes returned to me.

I realized that Quinn had been quite right in his early description to me of his love for Mona. Mona’s unhappiness—indeed Mona herself, whether happy or sad—continued to supplant all Quinn’s own woes and griefs in his own heart. She continued to deliver him mercifully, at least for now, from the loss of Aunt Queen, and the loss of his doppelganger, Goblin. Whatever the little scorpion did to me, his love for her was a blessing.

How else explain the ease with which he accepted me usurping Aunt Queen’s magnificent bed in my, how shall we put it, vanity?

I pushed back against the pillows until I was firmly planted in an upright position, with legs comfortably stretched out and ankles crossed, and I nodded.

Seldom did I see my feet in black socks. I knew almost nothing personally about my feet. They

looked rather small for the twenty-first century. Bad luck. But six feet was still a good height.

"I want you to know that I adored Aunt Queen," I muttered. "I slept on top of the counterpane. I was shaken."

"Beloved Boss, you make a picture there," Quinn said kindly. "Make this your place here. You know my aunt. She slept all day. Every window's fitted with a black-out blind beneath the fancy velvet."

These words had an immensely soothing effect. I gave him to know that silently.

He sat on the bench before Aunt Queen's dressing table, with his back to the big round mirror and the soft lamplight. Mona sat on the couch, very near to the doll that the ghost of Stella had just left there.

"Are you rested now?" Mona asked, pretending to be a decently behaved creature.

"Do something useful," I said disdainfully to Mona. "Pick up that boudoir doll and set it down properly, so it doesn't look so lost."

"Oh, yes, certainly," she said, as if she wasn't a roaring revenant from Hell. She set the doll against the padded arm of the chair, crossed its legs and put its little hands in its lap. It stared at me gratefully.

"What happened to you out there, Lestat?" Quinn asked. His manner was very solicitous.

"Not certain," I replied. "Some force wanting to take me with her, maybe. We were connected as she started to rise. But I managed to get away. Not sure. I see angels sometimes. It's frightening. Can't talk about it. Don't want to relive it. But Patsy is gone on. That's what's important."

"I saw the Light," said Quinn. "I saw it without mistake, but I never saw the spirit of Patsy." He had such a sincere manner about him, nothing fanciful.

"I saw it too," said the banshee. "And you were fighting with someone, and you were cursing in French, and you cried out something about Oncle Julien."

"Doesn't matter now," I said, eyes on Quinn. "As I said, I'd rather not relive it."

"Why did you do it?" Quinn asked, respectfully.

"What on Earth do you mean?" I asked. "It had to be done, didn't it?"

"I realize that," said Quinn. "But why you? I'm the one who murdered Patsy. And you went out there alone and drew her spirit to you. You brought the Light down for her. There was a struggle. Why did you do it?"

"For you, I suppose," I said with a shrug. "Maybe I didn't think anybody else could do it. Or I did it for Jasmine, because I'd promised her the ghost wouldn't get her. Or for Patsy. Yes, for Patsy." I brooded. I said, "You're both so young in the Blood. You've seen so little. I've seen the howling wind of the Earthbound Dead. I've seen their souls in the void between the realms. When Mona said that Patsy didn't know she was dead, that settled it for me. So I went out there and I did it."

"And then there was the song," said the little harpy, looking at Quinn. "Tommy played the Irish song and it was so mournful."

"Speaking of her songs, I made good on the promise," said Quinn. "Or at least I've started. I called Patsy's agent, got him out of bed. We're going to reissue all her recordings, do a special publicity release—all that she could ever have wanted. Her agent's so thrilled that she's dead, he could hardly contain himself."

"What!" said Mona.

"Oh, you know, dead recording stars make plenty of money," Quinn replied with a little shrug. "He'll publicize her tragic demise. Bracket her career. Package it."

"I knew you would make good on the promise," I said. "And I would have seen to it, if you hadn't—that is, if you had given me leave. Now it's over, isn't it?"

"Her voice was marvelous," Quinn said. "If only I could have murdered her and not her voice."

"Quinn!" said Mona.

"Well, I think that's what you've done, Little Brother," I remarked.

He laughed softly. "I suppose you're right, Beloved Boss," he said. He smiled at Mona and her innocent shock. "Some night I'll tell you all about her. When I was little, I thought she was made of plastic and glue. She was always screaming. Enough about her."

Mona shook her head. She loved him much too much to press. Besides, she had other things on her mind.

"But Lestat, what did you see out there?" she asked me.

"You are not listening to me," I said with exasperation. "I told you, you maddening little miscreant, I won't relive it. It's closed for me. Besides, give me one good reason why I should even speak to you. Why are we in the same room?"

"Lestat," said Quinn, "please give Mona another chance."

I got furious—not at Mona, I wasn't going to fall into that trap again—but simply furious. They were such beautiful children, these two. And—.

"Very well," I said, thinking as I spoke. "I'm going to lay down the law to you. If I am to remain with you, I am the Master here. And I refuse to prove myself to you. I won't spend my tenure with you being constantly questioned as to the virtue of my authority!"

"I understand," said Mona. "I really, really do!" So seemingly heartfelt.

"Case in point," I said. "Whatever I saw out there, I choose to forget. And you have to forget it too."

"Yes, Beloved Boss," said Mona eagerly.

Pause.

I wasn't buying it.

Quinn was not looking at her. He was looking attentively at me.

"You know how much I love you," he said.

"I love you too, Little Brother," I said. "I'm sorry that my disagreements with Mona have put a distance between us."

He turned to Mona. "Say what you have to say," he told her.

Mona looked down. Her hands were folded one on top of the other in her lap and she looked abruptly forlorn and full of warmth, her coloring all the more intense on account of the black dress, her hair quite incidentally magnificent.

(Big deal! So what!)

"I showered you with abuse," she confessed. Her voice was smoother and richer than it had been before now: "I was so very wrong." She looked up at me. I had never seen her green eyes so placid. "I was wrong to speak of your other fledglings the way I did, to speak of your long-ago tragedies with such coarseness and attempted cruelty. I should have never spoken to anyone with such callousness, let alone to you. It was spiritually and morally crude. And it was not my nature. Please trust me when I say that. It was not my nature. It was downright hateful."

I shrugged, but I was secretly impressed. Good command of the English language. "So why did you do it?" I asked, feigning detachment.

She appeared to be thinking about it, during which time Quinn looked at her with obvious concern. Then she said:

"You're in love with Rowan. I saw it. It frightened me, really, really frightened me."

Silence.

Inexpressible pain. No image of Rowan in my heart. Simply an emptiness, an acknowledgement that she was far, far away. Maybe forever. *"Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken."*

"Frightened?" I asked. "How so?"

"I wanted you to love me," Mona said. "I wanted you to remain interested in me. I wanted you to be on my side. I … I didn't want you to be swept away by her." She faltered. "I was jealous. I was like a prisoner let out of a solitary confinement cell after two years, and having found riches all around me, I feared losing everything."

Again I was secretly impressed.

"Nothing was at risk," I responded. "Absolutely nothing."

"But surely you understand," said Quinn, "what it means for Mona to be deluged with our gifts and unable to modulate her feelings. There we were in that very garden behind the First Street house, the very place where the Taltos bodies had been buried."

"Yes," Mona said. "We were talking of things which had tortured me for years and I … I.…"

"Mona, you must trust in me," I said. "You must trust in my principles. That's our paradox. We do not leave behind the Natural Law when we receive the Blood. We are principled creatures. I never stopped loving you, not for an instant. Whatever I felt for Rowan at the family gathering in

no way affected my feelings for you. How could it? I warned you twice to be patient with your family because I knew it was right for you to do so. Then the third time, all right, I went too far with a little mockery. But I was trying to curb your insults, and your abuse of those you loved! But you wouldn't listen to me."

"I will now, I swear it," she said. Again, the assured voice, a voice I'd not heard last night or tonight earlier. "Quinn's been instructing me for hours. He's been cautioning me about the way I treat Rowan and Michael and Dolly Jean. He's told me I can't just blithely call them 'human beings' right in front of them. It's ill-mannered for a vampire to do that."

"Indeed," I said witheringly. (You gotta be kidding.)

"He's explained that we have to be patient with their ways, and I see that now, and I understand why Rowan had to talk as she did. Or that it wasn't my place to interrupt her. I see it. I won't make those blundering remarks anymore. I have to find my … my maturity in the Blood." She paused and then: "A place where serenity and courtesy connect. Yes, that's what it is. And I'm far from it."

"True," I said. I studied her, the picture she made. I wasn't quite convinced by this perfect Act of Contrition. And how lovely her little wrists looked in the tight black cuffs, and of course the shoes, with their wicked heels and winding snakelike straps. But I liked her words: "A place where serenity and courtesy connect." I liked them a lot, and I knew they'd come from her. All she had said had come from her, no matter what Quinn had taught her. I could tell by the way that Quinn responded to her.

"And about the sequined dress," she said, startling me out of that line of thought. "I understand now."

"You do?" I asked soberly.

"Of course," she said with a shrug. "All males are obviously much more stimulated by what they see than females. And why should we people of the night be an exception?" Flash of big green eyes. Rosy mouth. "You didn't want to be distracted anymore by all that skin and cleavage, and you were very honest about it."

"I should have made my wishes known with more tact and respect," I said in a dull monotone. "I will be gentlemanly in the future."

"No, no," she said with an honest shake of her red hair. "We all knew the dress was highfalutin trash, it was supposed to be. That's why I wore it to the hotel terrace. It was deliberately seductive. That's why when I walked into this house, I went right to change into something more presentable. Besides, you *are* the Maker. That's the word that Quinn used. The Maker, or the Master. The Teacher. And you have the authority to say to me, 'Take off that dress,' and I knew what you were talking about.

"But you see—I've been sick for a very crucial part of my life. I never knew as a mortal girl what it was like to wear a dress like that. I was never a mortal woman, you see."

A great sadness descended on me.

"I just went from being a kid to being an invalid," she said. "And then this, this range of powers which you've entrusted to me. And what have I done but strike out at you because I thought you … thought you loved Rowan." She stopped, puzzled, looking off. "I suppose I wanted to reveal to you … that I was a woman, too, in that dress.…" she said dreamily. "Maybe that was it. That I was a woman as much as she was."

It struck me in the soul, her words. The soul I wasn't supposed to have, the entangled soul.

"Ironic, isn't it?" she said, her voice roughened by emotion, "what womanhood means. The power to mother, the power to seduce, the power to leave behind both, the power to.…" She shut her eyes. She whispered: "And that dress, such an outrageous badge of it!"

"Don't battle with it anymore," I said. It was the first warmth I'd shown to her. "You said it the first time around, really. You said it."

She knew it. She looked up at me.

"Power Slut," she whispered. "That's what you called me, and right you were, I was drunk on the power, I was spinning, I was—."

"Oh, no, don't—."

"And we can transcend, we are so blessed, even if it is a dark blessing, we are miracles, we are free in so many marvelous respects—."

"It's my task," I said, "to guide you, instruct you, remain with you until you're able to exist well on your own, and not to lose my temper as I did. I was in the wrong. I played out the power hand same as you did, baby. I should have had much more patience."

Quiet. And this sorrow too will lift. It must.

"You do love Rowan, though, don't you?" she asked. "You really really love her."

"Accept what I'm saying to you," I said. "I am a very mean guy. And I am being nice."

"Oh, you're not mean at all," she said with a little laugh. She cleared her saddened face with the brightest smile. "I absolutely adore you."

"No, I am mean," I said. "And I expect to be adored. Remember your own words. I'm the teacher."

"But why do you love Rowan?"

"Mona, let's not delve into that too much," said Quinn. "I think we've accomplished a great reconciliation here, and Lestat won't leave us now."

"I was never going to leave," I said under my breath. "I would never abandon either of you. But now that we're gathered together, I think we can move on. There are other matters on my mind."

Quiet.

"Yes, we should move on," said Mona.

"What other matters?" Quinn asked a little fearfully.

“Last night we talked about a certain quest,” I said. “I made a promise. And I mean to keep it. But I want to clarify certain things … about the quest and what we hope to gain from it.”

“Yes,” said Quinn. “I’m not sure I fully understand everything about the Taltos.”

“There’s too much for us to understand,” I said. “I’m sure Mona would agree with that.”

I saw the trouble come back into her bright face, the pucker of her eyebrows, the soft lengthening of her mouth. But even in this I saw a new maturity, a new self-confidence.

“I have some questions.…” I said.

“Yes,” said Mona. “I’ll try to answer them.”

I reflected, then plunged: “Are you absolutely certain that you do want to find these creatures?”

“Oh, I have to find Morrigan, you know that! Lestat, how could you, you said you—?”

“Let me phrase it differently,” I said, raising my hand. “Never mind whatever you’ve said in the past. Now that you’ve had time to think—to become more accustomed to what you are, now that you know that Rowan and Michael weren’t lying to you, that you do know everything, and that there’s nothing to know—do you want to search out Morrigan simply to know that she’s safe and sound, or to reveal yourself to her in a true reunion?”

“Yes, that is the essential question,” said Quinn. “Which is it?”

“Well, for a true reunion obviously,” she answered without hesitation. “I never thought of any other possibility.” She was bewildered. “I … I never considered just finding out if she was all right. I … always thought we’d be together. I want so much to put my arms around her, to hold her, to—.” Her face went blank with hurt. She fell silent.

“You do see,” I asked as tactfully as I could, “if she wanted that, she would have come back to you a long time ago.”

Surely such thoughts had occurred to her before. They must have. But as I watched her now I wondered. Maybe she had dwelt on fantasies and lies—that Rowan knew the whereabouts of Morrigan and kept it secret. That Rowan had smuggled her the magic milk and it did no good.

Whatever the case, she was shaken now. Badly shaken.

“Maybe she couldn’t come to me,” she whispered. “Maybe Ash Templeton wouldn’t let her.” She shook her head and put her hands to her forehead. “I don’t know what kind of creature he is! Of course Michael and Rowan thought Ash was a … hero, a great all-knowing, wise observer of the centuries. But what if—. I don’t know. I want to see her. I want to talk to her. I want to hear it from her, what she wants, don’t you see? Why she didn’t come to me all those years, why she didn’t even … Lasher, he was cruel, but he was an aberrant soul, a.…” She covered her mouth with her right hand, her fingers trembling.

Quinn was beside himself. He couldn’t bear to see her so unhappy.

“Mona, you can’t give her the Blood,” I said softly, “no matter what her circumstances. The Blood cannot be passed to this species of creature. It is too unknown for us even to consider such

a thing. The Blood very likely can't be passed on to them. But even if it could, we can't make a new species of Immortal. Believe me when I say there are ancient ones of our kind who would never tolerate such a thing happening."

"Oh, I know that, I haven't asked for that, I wouldn't—." She went quiet, obviously unable to speak.

"You want to know she's alive and well," said Quinn in the gentlest manner. "That's paramount, wouldn't you say?"

Mona nodded, looking away. "Yes—that there's a community of them somewhere, and they're happy." She frowned. She battled her pain. She drew in her breath, cheeks reddening. "It isn't likely, is it?" She looked at me.

"No, it's not," I said. "That's what Rowan and Michael were trying to tell us."

"Then I have to know what happened to them!" she whispered bitterly. "I have to!"

"I'll find out," I said.

"You really mean that?"

"Yes," I said. "I wouldn't make a promise to you like that unless I meant it. I'll find out, and if they have survived, if they do have a community somewhere, then you can decide whether or not you want to meet with them. But once a meeting occurs, they'll know about you, what you are, everything. That is, if they have the powers that Rowan ascribed to them."

"Oh, they have those powers," Mona said. "They do." She closed her eyes. She took a deep painful breath. "It's an awful thing to admit," she said, "but the things Dolly Jean said were all true. I can't deny them. I can't withhold the truth from you and Quinn. I can't. Morrigan was … almost unbearable."

"How so, unbearable?" asked Quinn.

I could see this was a radical admission. She had said things quite to the contrary.

Mona threw back her hair, her eyes searching the ceiling. She was facing something she had always denied.

"Obsessive, incessant, maddening!" she said. "She went on and on about her schemes and plans and dreams and memories, and she did say that Mayfairs would become a family of Taltos, and once she caught the scent of the Taltos male on Rowan and Michael, she was absolutely unendurable." Mona closed her eyes. "The thought of a community of such creatures is—almost beyond my imagination. This old one, Ash Templeton, the one that Rowan and Michael knew—he had learned to pretend to be a human being, he had learned that centuries ago. That's the thing. These creatures can live indefinitely! They are immortals! The species is utterly incompatible with humans. Morrigan was new and raw." She looked imploringly at me.

"Take it slowly," I said. I had never seen her suffering so. In all her bouts of tears there had been a generosity and selflessness that made them seem quite challengeable. As for her rage, she'd positively enjoyed it. But now she was truly in torment.

"It's like me, don't you see?" she said. "She was a newborn Taltos. And I'm a newborn Blood Child, or whatever you want to call me. And we share the same faults. She was unruly and crashing into everything around her! And that's the way I've behaved, raving to you as I did about your written confessions, I … she … presuming, assuming, even rushing to the computer just the way she did, recording my responses the way she did, and going on and on the way she did, but she, she never stopped, she … I … she … I don't know…." Her tears came and she couldn't talk anymore. "Oh, dear God in Heaven, what is the squalid secret behind all this?" she whispered. "What is it? What is it?"

Quinn's face was torn.

"I know the secret," I said. "Mona, you hated her as much as you loved her. How could you not? Accept it. And now you have to know what happened to her."

She nodded, vigorously, but she couldn't speak. She couldn't look at me.

"And we have to go about this with great care," I said, "this search for the Taltos, but I vow to you again that we will do it. And I will find them or find out what became of them."

Quiet.

She finally looked at me.

A sorrowful motionlessness settled over her. She wasn't trying to stare me down. I don't think she even realized I was looking back at her. She looked at me for the longest time and her face grew soft and giving and tender.

"I'll never be mean to you again," she said.

"I believe you," I said. "I took you to my heart the first moment I saw you."

Quinn sat staring with patient eyes, the round mirror behind him like a great halo.

"You really do love me," she said.

"Yes," I said.

"What can I do to prove that I love you?" she asked.

I thought for a long moment, sealed off from her and from Quinn. "You don't have to do anything," I said. "But there is one small favor I might ask."

"Anything," she answered.

"Never mention my love for Rowan again," I said.

She locked on me, eyes so full of anguish that I could hardly bear it. "Only one more time, to say this," she said. "Rowan walks with God. And Mayfair Medical is her sacred mountain."

"Yes," I said with a sigh. "You are so very right. And don't ever think that I don't know it."

24

An hour before the first light.

Mona and Quinn had already retired into Quinn's bedroom.

It was confirmed that I would take the bedroom of Aunt Queen whenever I visited Blackwood Farm. As for Jasmine, she was so grateful to me for getting rid of the ghost of Patsy that she held me to be infallible and was overjoyed with the arrangement.

It was a sin, my taking that room! But I did it. And Jasmine had already closed Aunt Queen's daytime curtains on the coming sun, and turned down the covers, and tucked under the pillow as always the copy of Dickens' *The Old Curiosity Shop,* as Quinn had said to do.

Enough on that.

I stood alone in the little Blackwood Farm cemetery. Did I like being alone? I hated it. But the cemetery drew me, as they always do.

I called to Maharet, as I had done earlier on this same evening. I didn't even know if it was night where she was. I knew only that she was very far away, and that I needed her. Once again I poured out with all my strength the tale of the tall children and the young ones I couldn't name, and how much I needed Maharet's wisdom and guidance.

As the dawn came near to the moist Louisiana sky, I felt a vague forboding. Find the Taltos on my own? Yes, I could do that. But what would happen?

I was about to retire, so that I could enjoy the process of falling asleep instead of blanking out like a smashed light bulb, when I heard a car turn on the pecan-tree drive and head steadily and confidently for the front of the house.

As I mounted the rise of the lawn, I saw it was an antique roadster, a venerable English MG TD, one of those irresistible cars you don't see anymore except at car shows. Real low-slung, British Racing Green, bumpy canvas top, and the person who pulled it to a halt was Stirling Oliver.

Being only slightly less telepathic than a fledgling vampire, he saw me immediately, and we moved to greet each other.

The morning light was still well behind the horizon.

"I thought you once promised me to keep away from here," I said, "and to leave Quinn alone."

"I've kept that promise," he said. "I'm here to see you, and if I'd missed you, which I didn't

think I would, I would have given this to Jasmine."

He took out of his linen coat a single folded page on which somebody had written my name.

"What is this?" I asked.

"An E-mail I received for you, care of me, an hour ago. Came in from London. I've been on the road since to bring it to you."

"Then this means you read it?" I took him by the arm. "Let's go into the house."

We went up the front steps. The door was never locked. And apparently the lights in the parlor were never turned off.

I sat on the couch.

"Did you read it or not?" I said, staring at the page.

"I did," he said. "That would have been very difficult to avoid. It was also read by our man in London who sent it to me. He doesn't know where it originated, and he doesn't really know what it means. I've bound him to confidentiality."

"Why am I afraid to open this?" I asked. I unfolded the sheet.

To: Lestat de Lioncourt
New Orleans, Louisiana
c/o Stirling Oliver
Talamasca
Hand deliver without delay

My dearest indefatigable one:

If you absolutely must: Private isle, St. Ponticus, southeast of Haiti, once a resort, apparently taken over by those you seek six years ago. Harbor, airstrip, heliport, hotel, beach houses closed to public. Population of those you seek once numerous, cautious, secretive. Heavy human presence from beginning. Present state extremely unclear. Sense conflict, danger, rapid and confusing activity. Approach with caution from undeveloped east coast. Guard your children. Weigh wisdom of intervention if such is even possible. Ponder question of inevitability. Situation apparently localized. And *s'il vous plaît, Monsieur,* take the time to learn how to use E-mail! Both your young ones possess this knowledge! For shame! Be assured of my love, and the love of those here. M.

I was speechless. I read the letter over again.

"And this, all this confusing information, this is how I reach her by E-mail?" I said, pointing to the other data contained on the page.

"Yes," said Stirling. "And you can reach her instantly. Show this to either Mona or Quinn. Dictate your message to either Mona or Quinn. They'll send it."

"But why would she betray her location like that?"

"She hasn't betrayed anything. All you know is her screen name. And the message was probably relayed through several points. Believe me, she's quite clever enough to be untraceable."

"You don't have to tell me how clever she is," I said. "But I guess I asked you, didn't I?"

I was still stunned. I was holding in my hand a response to my most serious telepathic communication.

He handed me a map. He had folded it to the appropriate section and circled the island. I instantly committed it to memory.

"Why do you think she sent this message through you?" I asked.

"For convenience, obviously. She gathered the intelligence. She wanted you to have a precise summary of it. And also, it shows a kind of trust in us. She's acknowledging that the Talamasca is not your enemy or her enemy."

"That's certainly true," I said. "But what can she mean with all this about intervention and inevitability?"

"Lestat, if you'll forgive me, it's plain. She's asking you not to become involved in something where Darwinian forces may be at work. And she's telling you a drama is being played out on an isolated island where the world might not take notice."

"That isn't what she said. She said she couldn't tell what was going on. This message is extremely tantalizing. Well, to me, anyway. I don't think it will be to Mona."

"Both interpretations are correct," he said with a sigh. "What are you going to do?"

"Go there, old boy, what do you think?" I said with relish. "I can't wait. I mean, I have to wait. But I'll head out with them at sunset."

I folded the letter and put it inside my coat. I did the same with the map.

"Tomorrow I teach Mona about our most frightening gift. I've been putting it off—not wanting to overwhelm her. Quinn and I can take her to that island in less than half an hour."

"You have to teach her more than the art of flight," Stirling said. "The Taltos are much stronger perhaps than you imagine."

"In what particular way?"

He thought for a long moment. "You've met humans with the telekinetic ability to kill," he said.

"Yes," I said. "You're talking about Rowan. You don't have to be so cagey with me, Stirling. I've sought your hospitality. At First Street we sat at a round table together. For me, that's rather like the human custom of breaking bread. And now this E-mail from Maharet. So what are you driving at?"

"That Rowan's power, formidable as it is, didn't work for her with Lasher. That's why he was able to abuse her and keep her prisoner. The Taltos are simply too strong, too resilient, too elastic."

"That's a good point, but surely you don't think these creatures are a match for me," I said. "You have no idea of the evil engine that lurks behind this fancy facade of mine. Worry not. But I'll take the time to find out Mona's full capabilities. There's no calculating Mona's strength. We've spent so much time on her state of mind, we haven't developed those talents. Thank you for coming with this. Now I have to bid you *au revoir*. Why don't you stick around? I can smell bacon cooking in the kitchen."

"Take care," he said. "I'm devoted to you, all of you. I'll be anxious on your account until I hear from you."

I headed back to Aunt Queen's room.

Big Ramona, black cotton uniform, white apron, came barreling down the hall.

"Didn't you offer that Englishman a cup of coffee? All you had to do was stick your head in this kitchen, Lestat. You're underfoot enough around here to do that. Don't you go, Mr. Oliver! Can't you smell that coffee perking on the stove? You sit right down. You're not driving off without some grits and biscuits and scrambled eggs. I got bacon and ham on the stove. And Lestat, don't you go tracking that mud all around in Aunt Queen's room. Do you go looking for mud when you go outside? You're worse than Quinn. You take off those boots now, and Allen'll polish them again. Got to hand it to you, four o'clock, Patsy's ghost did not come! And I had a dream not half an hour ago, Patsy's in Heaven."

"Eh bien, Madame," I called out, reverting at once to stockinged feet and standing the boots neatly side by side outside the bedroom door. "Never have my boots received such loving attention. You know, this is really like living somewhere."

"Yes, indeed," she hollered over her shoulder, "should have seen that gal, all dressed in pink cowboy leather, singing, 'Gloria in Excelsis Deo!' "

I froze. *You saw that!*

I went into the bedroom, latched the door tight, surveyed the inviting bed, dove into it and pulled the covers up over my head. No more. No more! Down pillows, yes, Oblivion, will you please get on with it!

There came a nudge against my back, and I rolled over.

Julien on his elbow, white flannel nightshirt. Face-to-face.

"Dormez bien, mon frère."

"You know what's going to happen to you if you keep this up?" I asked.

"What," he replied sardonically.

"You're going to fall in love with me."

25

Quinn's bedroom. *Conférence extraordinaire.*

Mona was hysterical with joy over the message from Maharet. And by my leave at once E-mailed a letter of thanks on Quinn's computer, which somehow devolved into two pages, with me taking over the keyboard at one juncture to outline my intention of going at once to the island with my children to ascertain what had become of the Taltos. Mona signed off with her "screen name" of Ophelia Immortal, but not before including Quinn's name as well: Noble Abelard.

No sooner was that sent off by the magic of electronics than we were fast at work ascertaining that Mona had the power to light candles by the force of her mind, ignite also the kindling in the fireplace, and the logs, and that she could levitate to the ceiling with no effort whatsoever.

I wagered she could very likely make journeys of considerable length by air, but we had no time right now to test it. As for telekinetic power to push, she was very strong on this, able to push me back to the wall if I did not resist, and so could Quinn, but again we weren't able to test this to the max with resistance. No guinea pigs. My vocal suspicion was they could bring death to a mortal easily with this power, breaking down the heart and its feeding vessels inside his or her body with no difficulty.

"You visualize it, you send it, you stand behind it with the full force of your will, you feel it leave you."

Ultimately Mona and Quinn would only learn the full extent of their powers if the situation on the island involved real danger. If they couldn't fend for themselves with full effect against hostile forces, they could certainly escape with supernatural speed and dexterity, and I could easily take care of them.

Now, as to clothes, my instincts prevailed.

I had a little theory of what we might find on the island. I nixed the idea of Aunt Queen's safari clothes for Mona and Quinn's hunting clothes for him. Forget the jungles and the far east side of the island.

"What's the flashiest and fanciest suit you own?" I said to Quinn, all the while rooting through Aunt Queen's closets.

"Well, I guess the gold lamé suit I had made for the Halloween feast. It's a three-piece beauty,

but—."

"Put it on," I said, "with the fanciest dress shirt you own and a sequined tie if you've got one."

At last I drew from Aunt Queen's neat lineup exactly the thing: a black satin pinched-waist, deep slashed neck, sleeveless, knee-length dress trimmed in black ostrich feathers down the front and along the hem. Only an absolute stunner could wear such a thing. I tore off the ancient price tag and presented it to my princess.

"Go girl," I said. "And here are the black sequined shoes to match. (Four-inch heels, rhinestones galore.) Let's hit the road."

"This is how we go sneaking up to people hunting on a Caribbean island?" she said. She loved the duds. She was changing immediately.

I went to the dressing table.

Quinn had just returned in the shiny gold suit. Like all Quinn's suits, exquisitely tailored. The boy just didn't wear anything that wasn't finely sewn. Fact was, he had found a pale lavender satin shirt and sequined tie, and he was luscious.

"How about the pearls, can I heap them on her?" I asked.

"Absolutely," he replied. He went to work, putting necklace after necklace over Mona's head. All you saw was the richness of it, between the shuddering black feathers, her rounded little arms very peachy and her legs breathtaking under the flared short skirt.

She shook out her tangled hair.

"I don't get this," she said. "Aren't we supposed to be stealthy and careful and proceeding through the jungles?"

"We will be," I said. "But we're not mortals, honey pie. We're vampires. You can push the jungle out of your way with your mind, sweetheart. And if we run into hostile dudes, this is the perfect armor."

(As for me, beloved reader, allow me to remind you I am in a three-piece butter-soft black leather suit, with purple turtleneck and the shiniest boots in Christendom.)

Off we went to find the island of St. Ponticus.

I carried Mona with me up into the air, comforting her as much as I could and urging her to use her own power as much as I could, and Quinn journeyed on his own, being very adept at this gift and having used it since his Blood Baptism.

Within ten minutes Mona had her legs wrapped around me as well as her arms, she was so scared, but it didn't matter, she was hanging on, and she was learning, and I had her in my firm grip, and I resisted the urge to tease her by swinging her loose and holding her by one hand (chuckle, men are beasts), and we were headed for the gleaming rolling waters of the Spanish Main, now known as the Caribbean.

When I spotted the island in question, I made a swift descent until I spied the topography Maharet had described. Any closer and the gravity would have taken hold of me.

The decisive element was the airstrip with the words "St. Ponticus" painted in enormous letters on it. Probably faded to the human eye, but we could read them. There was a small Cessna plane on one runway, and then another very long vacant runway fit for a jet landing.

When I verified this I went back up to judge the island as a whole before drawing close to the buildings.

The island was oval-shaped. The resort covered the crescent-shaped south and southwest shore, with a huge margin of beach, and the rest of the island was jungle with rocky cliffs, apparently totally undeveloped.

I went low again. It was clear the island had plentiful electricity.

One immense villa dominated the landscape, fronting on the deepest southwest beach, with sprawling left and right wings and five stories of windows and spacious balconies. Its broad terraces led right down to the sand itself, and rooms on the lower floors of the palace had French doors and their own small courtyards, including gemlike swimming pools with low walls, and open gates to the beach.

On the west side was a giant swimming pool, sparkling with underwater light, and to the west of that deserted tennis courts.

Quite an affair, and off to the east what seemed to be a huge utility building with a restaurant attached to it. I could identify it by the open bar and the stools and the scattered tables, though not a soul was using it.

Then came the harbor, or marina, I'm sure they preferred to say, with a huge fancy white cabin cruiser at dock and many small boats tethered to the pier, and beyond it a heliport with what seemed to me to be a giant copter.

Last of all, and furthest from the villa, was the airstrip with the faded letters.

There were busy little beings visible on the island, carrying what appeared to be white crates between the cabin cruiser and the small plane.

I whispered to Mona: "Look down and use your vampiric gifts. What sort of people are these?"

"Those aren't Taltos," she whispered in my ear.

"You bet they're not," I said.

"They're carrying automatic weapons," she said in my ear, "they've got gun belts."

"Right you are," I said. "And knives in their boots, most likely. They're fair game, you understand, they're drug pirates and they're dirty."

Some of the men wore colored bandannas around their foreheads. All wore jeans. Racial characteristics varied. The blood scent rose in my nostrils. I was hungry for it.

"It's a positive feast!" she said. "But how are we going to do this! And what have they done to the Taltos!"

I felt my heart tripping. I ought to have been ashamed. I was getting more heated by the second.

I took her up again, and went towards the jungle of the east coast as Maharet had cautioned me to do. The whole island wasn't very big. One could have walked straight across it, even given the mountainous heights, in about two hours. But that is a great deal of jungle, really.

We arrived at the foot of an awesome cliff, where there was a little strip of beach, just enough for us to come together. Beautiful and boring.

I scanned the jungle around us. I picked up nothing clear. But the sheer thickness of the jungle, the sounds of all the little beasts, all this bothered me. It was a perfect hiding place, this jungle.

I scanned afar for the voices of the drug pirates. Activity of phones. Some music. I let my scan grow in power. It was all drug maneuvers. Cabin cruiser had brought in a load. The load would go out in the plane and the copter. Transfer was almost complete. A chaos of voices. Party going on in one of the rooms of the villa, maybe other rooms as well.

Mona was very shaken. "What if they've killed them all!" she cried. "What if they've taken over this island?"

"What if they're working for the Taltos," said Quinn. "What if this is how the Taltos support themselves?"

"I can't believe that," said Mona. "Besides, Ash Templeton had wealth. He didn't need anyone to help him to acquire more of it. He wouldn't have done this. He would have contacted Rowan and Michael had he needed help." She was fast becoming hysterical.

"Get a grip, Mona," I said. "The information's five minutes away. As for Maharet's advice, I'm overruling it. I'm going straight to the other end of the island. You can proceed through the jungle towards the back of the building if you like, but I want to enter by the front door. My blood's too hot for waiting. Are you with me?"

"You're not leaving us here," said Mona. She clung to Quinn all the same. "Can we follow your lead?"

"That's what I had in mind."

Quinn was plainly reticent. "I say we do what Maharet told us to do."

"Come on, Little Brother, get into the action," I said. "We're on the moral high ground."

We came down right above the airport-control building. Empty. Went around it, walking in a leisurely manner until we reached the enormous runway where the drug drones were just finishing their work with the little plane.

You couldn't have imagined more dangerous-looking creatures than this trio, in their cut off T-shirts and jeans with knives visible on their belts, guns stuck inside them, plus the big automatic weapons slung over their lean muscular shoulders.

When they happened to see us, they nodded and politely looked away. The clothes completely blinded them. Obvious presumption we were guests. Unwise to stare at us.

Then came strolling along the pilot, a cut above the little crowd, but just as mean, burnt brown from the sun, a human raisin, armed to the teeth but wearing a dirty bill cap instead of a

bandanna.

They were all talking fast and a little hostile to each other in Spanish, a generally resentful and bristling bunch. Had the plane been overloaded? Was anything pilfered? What took them so long? I caught the greed and the impatience and the universal distrust. Nothing at all about any tall children who inhabited this place before.

The pilot glanced at us, checked us out from head to toe, nodded, then went back to his conversation with the trio.

"I get it," said Mona under her breath, meaning the clothes. I nodded.

I walked across the distance between us, ignoring Mona's desperate plea for me not to do it.

"So where's the boss?" I said.

"Man, if you don't know, how should I know?" countered the pilot. Snarl for a face. Empty black eyes. "I'm off schedule. Don't hold me up."

"Where you headed?" I asked.

"Get that info from Rodrigo," he said. "You shouldn't be down here anyway. Get back to the villa."

Rodrigo.

I whipped him away from the others, sank my teeth, sought the blood fast and drew it out: *Where are the tall ones, the ones who lived here first?* Know nothing. Whoa, delicious rush of blood to my brain and eyes. Floating for one second. Heart exploded. Flung him down on the tarmac, dead, staring up at me, last breath of air through his dead mouth.

The trio of bandits stood trapped, then bolted. I hooked one and held him.

Mona and Quinn caught the remaining pair, quickly seeking for the blood. For a second Mona had a struggle on her hands, the bandit going for his knife of all things, but she hung on, pitching it away, and finally subdued him, using more nerve than innate strength.

Quinn was lithe and silent and perfect.

"Tell me about Rodrigo," I said to the man I held helpless by the neck, my fingers getting tighter. I jerked him around and sank my teeth. *Who is on this island?* The boss, his mother, his women, this is his sanctuary, he'll cut you to pieces—. The heart and the blood went dead. I had had enough.

The fresh blood swam up in my eyes, ignited my brain. I savored it, savored the tingling in my arms and legs. Battle juice.

" 'They are corrupt. They have done abominable works,' " I quoted with a sigh as we came together. Quinn was dazed by the feeding. Mona was reeling.

"They've been here for over a year!" she whispered. "That's all I could get. But where in the name of God is Morrigan?"

We passed the heliport and its adjacent building. Two inside, breaking for coffee before takeoff. Same mold, heavily muscled arms, jeans low on their hips, looked up at me calmly from

their steaming cups.

I sauntered to the table, Mona and Quinn inside the door. I sat down:

"You know what I'm talking about. The tall people who owned this place before Rodrigo took over. What's happened to them?"

The shortest of the two shrugged and smiled: "You asking me? I never been here before last week. That's the way Rodrigo works. Ask Rodrigo." He turned around and gave Mona the once-over with his eyes, then looked back to me with a sinister smile.

The taller of the two shrugged.

"Say your prayers," I said.

After that little fatal skirmish we headed for the big restaurant utility building, which stood seemingly vacant and all lighted up, the bar stools standing empty outside under the thatched roof and the tables scattered on its pink tiled terrace.

Stainless steel kitchen, glaring lights, groaning, rumbling, rattling machines. Scent of pine cleaners and soap. Countertops covered with trays of dirty dishes, stench of rotting food. Giant dishwasher churning.

"Come on," I said, "no life here."

We pushed on towards the immense palazzo.

We had to pass the ground floor suites with their private swimming pools, and here the internal lamps burnt and there was chattering and laughter.

I caught the sound of the Bossa Nova coming from somewhere deep in the main part of the building, a soft seductive music pulsing over the breeze-swept sands.

In the dark, beyond the low walls of the suites, we weren't visible as we moved along, scanning room after room. It was all drug goons who functioned as lackeys, bodyguards, unquestioning assassins, whatever the boss wanted, hooked to their giant televisions or chattering away on their cell phones, or even up to their waists in the pools. Blue walls. Bamboo furniture. Their rooms were pits of garbage, girlie magazines, bottles of tequila, beer cans, packaged chips spilling out of bags and bowls.

We scanned desperately for knowledge of the tall people. We got nothing for our pains.

My urge was to kill all of them. "They are all gone aside, they are all together become filthy, there is none that doeth good, no not one," saith the fourteenth psalm. But who am I, Saint Juan Diego, to mete out such a fate to these souls who might in some distant future repent and become saints of the Lord on High?

Nevertheless! I'm a ruthless dude. And they had to go if we were to extricate even one Taltos from this island.

Besides, there just wasn't any other way to do it.

Gathering Mona and Quinn to me, I blasted the lackeys one after another, feeling the strength leave me in the instant that it hit them. This was not exhilarating. This was not fun. This became

repulsive, and the only thing that made it endurable was my abhorrence of their boot leather souls.

We came on a pair, fancier than the others, Miami-retro Hawaiian shirts. Mona took the comely one with the dazzling rings and the naked chest, and I clamped down on the older, frightened one, who gave up images of contrition in the blood.

"They can't give us anything!" Mona said, wiping her lip. Her eyes were glassy and large. "Why don't they know?"

"Because they come and they go, and they know nothing about what actually happened here," I said. "We're cleaning them up, that's the point. When the big man calls for help he won't get it. Move on."

Two more suites. Low-level, groveling servants. Snorting coke and listening to salsa. Mad that they couldn't turn up the volume. Orders of the guy in the main building. The strength was getting a little more difficult, and I let Quinn have a go at them and he took them down swiftly, eschewing the blood.

Then Pay Dirt!

The last suite fitted partially into the body of the main building. Considerably larger than the others. Forget the powder blue walls and the rattan furnishings. This was a palatial cell of pure whiteness. White leather couches, chairs, broad pillow-laden bed strewn with glossy magazines. Vases of fresh flowers bursting with color. A wall of books. Immense dressing table laden with cosmetics. Burgundy carpet. Shining in the night.

And maybe just the strangest creature I'd ever seen in my long wanderings on the planet.

Mona let out the expected gasp, and Quinn put his hand resolutely on her shoulder.

As for the occupation of the beast, he was clacking away on his computer, which had a large printer connected with it, and he did not sense our presence any more than the drug bums in the other chambers. He paused in his work to pick up a full glass of milk and drain it. He set the glass on the table to his left, beside a large opaque pitcher.

He was easily seven feet tall, apparently male, though it was difficult for me to tell until I really caught the scent, thick and sweet, and his lustrous black hair was cut maybe shoulder length and brushed back and held away from his bone-hard face by the common red bandanna.

Sweet fragrance. Remarkable fragrance.

He had huge black eyes, enormous and beautiful cheekbones and baby fresh skin all over. Clothes? Sleeveless gleaming satin T, chocolate brown leather mock jeans exquisitely stitched up, enormous feet in open sandals. Spiderlike hands, and fingernails and toenails polished in shimmering metallic blue. Mouth baby soft and large.

He played delicately with the keys, oblivious to us, oblivious to all things, humming and turning his head from side to side as he wrote or calculated or sought or talked, and then—

—he rose up to his height of seven feet and pivoted and pointed to us, eyes wide, hostile,

mouth open.

"Blood Hunters!" he cried out in a weary exasperated and disgusted voice. "Pass over me, you fools of the night, I assure you my blood is bitter to you. What do you want me to do? Cut my wrist and paint the door post? Pass over. Go feast on the humans on this island! Kindly don't disturb me again."

Mona darted across the courtyard and around the pool and we went after her.

"Taltos!" she said. "I'm Mona Mayfair, the mother of Morrigan! You came down from me! You have my genes in you! Where is Morrigan!"

Rocking back on his heels, he gazed upon her as though he pitied her.

"You're a cute little pixie to be such a liar," he said with withering scorn. "You never birthed a human being in your life," he went on contemptuously and coldly. "You're a Blood Hunter. You can't birth. Why come into my room to lie to me about Mona Mayfair of all people, Morrigan's mother? Who are you? Don't you know where the party is, darling dear? Listen to the Bossa Nova, and go dance with the Drug Lord and his select minions. Drink their blood. It's hot with evil, you ought to love it."

The contrast between this large-boned baby fresh face and this dark free-flowing disdainful voice was shattering. But we were far from interesting to the creature, obviously, who was about to sit down again at the desk when Mona protested.

"I was human before this," said Mona, reaching out to take the creature's right arm. (He pulled back.) "I did birth Morrigan," Mona said. "I love Morrigan. My love has crossed into the Blood. I've come to find out if Morrigan is well and happy. Ash Templeton took Morrigan from me. You're descended from them. You have to be! Talk to me. Answer me! This is the goal of my life!"

The creature took the measure of each one of us. More easy scorn. A little amazed laugh. He slouched back with a gorgeous grace, the lids of his eyes coming just perfectly halfway over his big glistening eyes, and his baby mouth smiling brilliantly. He raised one eyebrow.

"Goal of your life?" he said mockingly. "Little redheaded Blood Hunter on stilts? Why should I care about the goal of your life? Ash Templeton, you said. Ash Templeton. Now that name is not known to me. Unless you refer to Ashlar, my father."

"I do, yes, I do!" said Mona.

I was cautious in studying him, out of courtesy and full awareness that this was a Taltos, this was the mysterious being, and we had found at least one, but then my eyes saw what I should have seen before—the creature was shackled to the wall by his right leg.

He wore a cuff of steel connected to a very long chain that was hooked to the wall behind the desk. It was a chain long enough to allow him access to the pool in the courtyard behind us, and conceivably to the bath, which lay to the right of the immense bedroom.

"You know where Morrigan is, don't you?" said Mona. She seemed suddenly so tragic as she

spoke these words. She'd been asking them forever, and now even this being wouldn't answer her.

I focused my force on the chain and broke it with a loud snap. I knelt on one knee and severed the cuff.

The creature jumped back, staring at the remnants of the shackles.

"Well, aren't we the little band of wingless angels," he conceded, his voice still sneering, "but how on Earth am I to escape? These stunted apes control everything. Listen to them. You hear the Bossa Nova? That's the big boy's song. Rodrigo, Lord of All. And his Mother, Lucia. Can you imagine living with this music for a year now? Isn't it sweet?"

"Oh, you'll escape all right," I said. "We'll take you out of here without question. Every human between here and the airstrip is already dead. And the others will soon join them. But we want to rescue all the Taltos. Where are the others? Do you know?"

"Morrigan," said Mona. "When did you last see her?"

"Morrigan!" the creature said, his head falling back, his voice like a black ribbon as the words flowed: "Stop saying her name. You think I don't know who she is? She's the mother of the entire Secret People. Of course I know her name. Morrigan is probably dead. Anyone who didn't cooperate with these Drug Merchants is dead. Morrigan was dying before they ever came. She birthed five males before she birthed Miravelle. That's too many children in too short a time."

He gave a weary shake of his head, eyes still half-mast, weight shifting from one hip to the other.

"Her own sons rose up and raped her in the hope of a female birth. At last Miravelle! And da da da DA! The tribe goes on! Morrigan was sick unto death, and her milk dried up, and then came the poison. If the Drug Men shot her they wasted their bullets. She was my mother, by the way, I loved her. Past tense. Get on with it."

I expected Mona's tears to come and I thought them justified, and I held her tight with my right arm. But they only stood in her eyes, forming a glaze in the light as she followed this cold, hard speech. She looked suddenly like a costumed waif in her feathered finery, gazing up at the face of this bizarre and sardonic creature.

This was a blow of such weight falling upon her that she could only stand there and let me support her. I wondered if she would slip from consciousness, so grave was her stare, so still her figure in my grip.

"Take it easy, my little one," I whispered. I kissed her cheek. "We have yet to explore the main building."

"Oh, Beloved Boss," she said in a faltering voice. "Oh, Beloved Boss, I have sought and so I have found."

"Not yet," said Quinn, eying the creature grimly. "Not till we search the island end to end."

"Well, aren't we the gallant little gang of Blood Thieves," said the tall being, "and we all love

each other, kissy, kissy! I'm impressed. Seems in my fathomless noisome memories of Paradise Lost and Come Again and Gone Underground and Lost and Species Wiped Out that you merciless little beings preyed upon humans rather ruthlessly. What is this, Valentine's Day for Vampires?"

"We're going to get you out of your little prison," said Quinn with equal coldness. "Will you kindly cooperate with us and tell us what Taltos are left here?"

"And I'd oh, so love it if you told us your name," I said sarcastically. "It's a bit hard to read your mind. I keep stumbling in the ice and snow when I try."

He gave a bitter laugh in a small show of sinister spontaneity.

"Oh, so the outside world has finally come," said the being, swaying with undeniable grace, his words flowing like glossy syrup. "Well, you're a year too late. I don't know who's left or where they are. I might be the sole specimen." He made a broad upward gesture with both hands, and a broad hateful smile.

"And you did say that Morrigan was your mother?" Mona asked tenderly.

"Out of Morrigan and Ashlar," he said. "Pure as they come. Oberon of the first rank, known by the younger ones as a cynic and eternal wet blanket. Though I've never called them by name. They are Mother and Father to me. If I'd killed my brother Silas when he first started talking sedition maybe none of this would have happened. But I don't think the Secret People could have gone on forever."

"The Secret People, that's a lovely name," I said. "Whose idea was that?"

"Yes, I've always thought it was sweet," he said. "And our life wasn't bad at all, let me tell you. But Father was naÏve to think it could last. Even Morrigan told him that. You can't keep a community of twenty Taltos perfectly under your supervision, you know, that sort of thing, no matter how much diversion and education and stimulation you provide. Father was a dreamer. Morrigan was an oracle. Silas was the poisoner. So it came to a bloody end."

Suddenly I divined a human presence behind the far door, and so did the Taltos.

A tall dark-skinned woman came in, perhaps fifty years in age, but extremely well groomed and seductive—black-rimmed eyes, heavily made-up face, blood red lips, and a head of luxuriant dark hair and a pinched waist, breast-heavy figure.

She was holding in her hand an obviously religious statue. She was fastidiously dressed in a mauve silk dress with a golden chain for a belt, black net stockings and sharp heels, flashy gold earrings, and she spoke immediately in heavily accented Spanish.

"Well, I finally found it but I had to move Heaven and Earth, I tell you, you'd think it should be common enough, with the Pope going all the way to Mexico, but I had to go on the Internet and find it, and here it is."

And there it was!

She set it down on the low white table along the wall! A brilliantly painted statue of Saint Juan Diego!

I was thunderstruck.

There he stood, brave little fellow, with his arms out, and the unmistakable image of Our Lady of Guadalupe in full rich color emblazoned on his *tilma,* and the famous roses dropping to his feet, and all this in unmistakable detail! Of course, the image of Our Lady was glued on, and the flowers were paper, but so what, it was Juan, my Juan Diego.

"And you left the party just to give this to me?" said Oberon with dripping mock affection.

"Oh, shut your filthy mouth," she said. "And who are these people?" Flash of brilliant smile. "Ah, you are my son's guests, are you not? Welcome."

"I'll give you a thousand dollars for that statue," I said. "No, I'll make you a better deal. I'll let you live. After all, what good would a thousand dollars be to a dead woman? Go get in one of those small boats in the marina and take off. Everybody else on this island's doomed, except for the tall people."

She stared at me with immense curiosity and utter fearlessness, eyes opaque, mouth hard. In a flash she had a black pistol in her hand. And in a flash I'd taken it from her and thrown it on the bed.

"You think my son won't cut you and your fancy friends to pieces? How dare you!"

"Better take my offer," I said. "Woman, thy faith has saved thee! Head for the marina, now."

"Lucia, I think he's telling you the truth," said Oberon in the same languid disdainful voice with which he spoke to us. "I can smell death. It's all around us. I think the rule of the Drug Merchants has come to an ignominious end. Alas, your Ariel is free, my precious and prosperous pussycat, why don't you go?"

Oberon moved slowly across the room, swaying a little from one hip to the other, dipping his head to this side and that, and dipping down to pick up the gun, and looking at it as if it was a curiosity, and as Lucia watched, perplexed, enraged, frustrated, furious, helpless, Oberon slipped the gun into the right position and shot Lucia three times in the face.

So much for Lucia. She went down with knees bent, arms out, face pulp.

"She was kind to me." he said. "The statue is for me. I visited the Cathedral of Our Lady of Guadalupe when the Secret People went to Mexico City. You can't have the statue. Even if you rescue me, I won't give it to you."

"Cool," I replied. "You're in such a good bargaining position. But who am I to steal Saint Juan Diego from anyone? I'm sure I can find another statue. But why did you kill her if she was so kind?"

Oberon shrugged. "To see if I could do it," he said. "Are you ready now to go after the others? Now that I'm packing, I am more than ready to play my part."

"Oh God in Heaven," Mona sighed. I could see the shudder pass through her. She took several shaky steps forward and then collapsed in the white leather chair, her heels together, her hand to her forehead.

"Oh, do tell me what's wrong, pretty little grandmother of the tribe," said Oberon. "What, you thought we were all little flutter-wing angels like Morrigan? Must I describe to you nature's purpose in designing the double helix, regardless of its number of chromosomes? It's to produce a variety of creatures within the species. Cheer up. We've a party to go to, don't we?"

Quinn's face was grim. "Maybe you should give one of us that gun," he said.

"Not on your life," Oberon replied. He slipped the gun into his low-slung waist. "Now where should we start? Let me fill you in on such facts as I possess. Now pay attention."

"Marvelous," I said. "Something besides performance art and gilded insults."

He chuckled. He went on undaunted, the voice black syrup again pouring thickly and slowly:

"I can tell you that Silas and the vast majority of the Secret People were gunned down on the day that the Drug Merchants came. Torwan and several other females were kept for a while. But they cried all the time. Torwan tried to get away in a boat, and they caught her on the pier and stabbed her to death. I saw that. Of the men, only Elath and Hiram and I were kept. Then Elath killed one of the Drug Merchants and they shot him, and Hiram disappeared. And I think I saw Isaac once, but I'm not sure. I think they're all dead. Except for Miravelle and Lorkyn."

"What about Mother and Father?" I asked.

Oberon shrugged.

"Handsome Blood Thief, I must confess I hold out no hope. They were dying from the poison when the Drug Merchants landed here. Father told us to hide. Miravelle took care of them. Miravelle slept with them. We'd long ago put a stop to the poisoning but the damage was done. And no one could stop Silas and his rebellion. Right before Silas made his fatal mistake, Miravelle and Mother apparently had an opportunity to blind Silas with a screwdriver, but Miravelle, precious little thing, just couldn't bring herself to do it, sob, and Silas got free of Mother and knocked her unconscious. Oh, so tragic. I know now that I should have killed Silas first time I ever laid eyes on him. Father should have killed Silas as soon as Silas started threatening the Secret People. Lorkyn could have done it. She was the coldest female ever birthed on this island. A beast, I tell you. Alas! Who would have ever dreamed that Silas would rise up and try to take on the outside world."

I shook my head. "Cut to the connection between the rebellion of Silas and the coming of these drug people?"

He shrugged. One of his great spidery hands smoothed his hair and firmed the red bandanna.

"Silas started the war against them," he said. "He spied upon their work on a small nearby island. Don't ask me where. I never went there. But Silas plotted against them. He took a gang of the most aggressive and warlike of the tribe to their island, and went in smiling and saying kind things, and slowly and systematically murdered the whole gang. He took their drugs and their weapons.

"Silas said the reign of Father had to end. Father was ancient, pure Taltos, unfit for the modern

world. Silas said we had Mayfair genes, human cleverness, human dreaming."

I stood beside Mona as she cried silently.

"The tribe celebrated, snorted the cocaine and shot off the guns. They smoked marijuana and went absolutely crazy. They killed two of us—Evan and Ruth—by accident. Can you imagine how stupid? Nobody had ever seen a dead Taltos before. It was ghastly. Silas had them ceremoniously dumped in the sea. Flowers flung into the water! Ludicrous. Silas began to shoot those whom he suspected of disloyalty!" He gave a deep disgusted laugh.

"Lorkyn made a speech. She said that going to the drug island had been a typical Taltos blunder. The drug people belonged to a great cartel. Their cohorts would come to get us. We had to take Father and Mother and get onto the yacht and leave the island. We could do it. Silas tried to kill her, but the others stopped him. Now that was a revelation. But Lorkyn has a way with her. No one was prepared to see her go down."

He shrugged, rolled his eyes, pushed the gun more firmly into the belt of his beautiful brown leather jeans.

"The drug people came," he said, swaying languidly as he went on. "By nightfall they were here. Silas and his allies ran at them, shooting off the guns they'd stolen. Rat tat tat! Can you picture it? They didn't even shoot from under cover." He sneered. "The Drug Merchants shot every Taltos in sight. They kicked open doors all over the villa. Quite an unforgettable experience, waiting for them to kick open one's door.

"It was the complete end of the Secret People. Those of us who were kept for a while? We were the quiet ones. The ones who didn't rush into battle.

"They didn't find me till the third day. I was simply lying in my room, upstairs in the villa. In they walked. They made a servant of me. They taught me to mix Caipirinhas out of cachaça and lime juice for Carlos. I knew the computer very well. I did the bookkeeping, spread sheets, payroll, all of that too. Then Lucia fell passionately in love with me. How could she not? She's well past the age where a male Taltos can make her bleed to death—.

"—That's what we males do to human women, you know, unless they're past their menarche. Lucia showered me with attention. She did this room all in white for me. She went to Miami Beach to have her inviting little privy chamber surgically tightened till it felt like the sheath of a twelve-year-old. She did that for me. Very nice. Of course I've never been with a human twelve-year-old. She was a delicious lover."

"Hmmm," I said. "You don't mind her lying there with a pool of blood for a face?"

"Not particularly. You said every human on the island was going to die. Didn't you mean it?"

He sat down in his desk chair. He turned, poured himself another glass of milk from the pitcher and drank it down.

He fell to studying the three of us again, Quinn and I standing and Mona on the edge of the white chair, knees up, her face beating with the blood, and her tearfilled eyes so unutterably sad

they were indescribable.

"Is that computer connected to the outside world?" Mona asked. Her voice was feeble, but she was still holding back the tears.

"Of course not," he said sardonically. "What kind of idiot do you think I am? If it had been, I would have gotten help. I would have tried to reach Rowan Mayfair at Mayfair Medical in New Orleans."

We were all of us silently shocked.

"How did you know about Rowan?" asked Mona. She wiped at her eyes. The black feathers of her dress brushed her cheeks.

"Father told all of us—if ever we found ourselves in grave trouble, we were to contact Rowan Mayfair at Mayfair Medical in New Orleans. I think that was two years after I was born. Father was already being poisoned by Silas but he didn't know it. He only knew he was getting weaker. He thought he was dying of old age. He had been to see his lawyers in New York. Very secret. No names. No numbers. That was Father's way. Morrigan was seldom if ever awake. Father knew things were going on behind his back. Morrigan woke up one time and accused Father of being in love with Rowan Mayfair."

In love with Rowan Mayfair.

"Why did she say that?" asked Mona in a broken voice.

"I don't know," he said wearily, with mock innocence. "All I know is, she's my only lifeline to the human world. Then suddenly you show up, Grandmother Dear, and you want to rescue us. Aren't you a child? You look like one. Playing with your mother's clothes perhaps?"

"Were you always of this disposition?" I asked. "Or has this enslavement altered you?"

He laughed a mirthless knowing laugh. He stared at the dead woman on the floor.

"You're a tricky one," he said. "I was born knowing Father and Mother were doomed." He smiled. "Father didn't have the temperament to control the young males. There were secret births all the time. You might say I sang a tragic song from the beginning. After all …" He stopped, yawned and then continued: "How is one to rule a community of Taltos unless one is willing to kill the unwanted births and those who breed against one's rules?" He shook his head. "I don't see any other way. Unless of course one puts chastity belts on the females. That could be done. You know, modern nylon chastity belts or some such. But that was certainly not the way of Mother and Father."

"What did the Secret People do here?" Mona asked. She was trying to speak firmly. "Did you simply live pleasurably on this island?"

"Oh, certainly not," Oberon responded. "Father and Mother provided a marvelous life for us. Father had a wonderful plane. It's in New York somewhere, stranded, dead, orphaned. Like Little Boy Blue's toys, waiting for him to come back. In that plane we visited all the great cities of the world. I loved Rome and Bombay in particular. I would love to see them all again—London, Rio,

Hong Kong, Paris. And Mexico City. We were shepherded everywhere. And we were taught to observe human beings and pretend to be human beings. As long as we did that, Father and Mother took complete care of us. Simply terrific life. Father was very strict and very cautious. No telephones, no Internet. That might have been a fatal error in the long run."

"Did you ever want to escape?" asked Quinn.

"Not me," he said with a shrug. "I loved the Secret People. Besides, human beings generally kill male Taltos. The women they let live. They use them. But the males they always kill. Everyone knew that. Our life here was good. We had superb teachers here on the island. Father had them flown in for two to three weeks at a time. Of course they didn't know what we really were, but that didn't matter. We had an excellent library in the main building—books, films, all that."

He took another glass of the milk, making a slight face.

"It's not cold enough," he whispered. Then: "Sometimes we had human guides on our trips. Like when we went to India. We had the yacht, you know, the cabin cruiser for going out on the water. And the cleanup crew came in twice a week and went through the entire property. And then there was the jungle. Elath and Releth loved to go off in the jungle. So did Seth. I'm not much for gnats and scratches and snakes and that sort of thing." He made a weary gesture with his long arm.

"No, it was quite a nice life. Until Silas started his rebellion with the slow poisoning of Mother and Father. And of course, though Silas never lived to find out, there were others breeding behind his back, and plotting against him too at the end. It was out of control, totally out of control." He shrugged again. "You might say it was a disaster." He leaned back and looked down at Mona as she sat crouched on the edge of the white chair.

"Don't be so sad," he said hatefully, "Little Grandmother of the tribe. It's not your fault. It's the way it is. Taltos can't live with humans. Taltos make fatal blunders. Father told me if it hadn't been Silas, it would have been another. The Secret People was an absurd idea. Near the end he talked a lot about Rowan Mayfair. Rowan Mayfair would know what to do. But he was a virtual prisoner in the penthouse by then. And Mother was only conscious occasionally."

Mona's heart was broken. The cautions in Maharet's electronic letter made sense. Darwinian principles, Stirling had called them. I wanted to wrap Mona in my arms.

But we had yet to enter the main body of the villa. And I could hear shouting now. A handful of mortals had discovered the dead we had left behind in the other suites.

The door burst open again, and this time the black greasy barrel of a gun preceded the man who had kicked it in. I sent the discrete power to hurl him backwards and destroy his heart. A spray of bullets struck the white ceiling. Too close. They might have killed this vile talking creature. What a loss!

I plunged through the door. I found myself in a long thatch-roofed porch. Another mortal lifted

his weapon. I sent the Fire. And in the sudden brilliant illumination, I saw another man running. The Fire caught him. *Be quick.*

When I turned around, a young woman, jeans, shirt, snarling curses in my face, came at me with a big automatic weapon. I disarmed her, and sent the power. She collapsed, blood gushing from her mouth. I closed my eyes. I was sickened.

I hoped to God that we'd cleared away most of the underlings. Maybe all.

The Bossa Nova was very loud now here in this courtyard. I could hear the whispered words in Portuguese, the swooning dance. The music said Peace. It said Slumber. It was so sweet, so hypnotic.

Through huge open doors I could see the deserted lobby with its lavish plants, the pink tile running to the broad central stairs. I was eager to get up there, get to the heart of the evil.

I went back into the white-walled room, shut the door, stepped over the dead Lucia and got to the point:

"When was the last time you saw any Taltos, living or dead?"

Shrug. "Maybe nine months ago? Every so often I think I hear the voices of Miravelle and Lorkyn. I woke up once and saw Miravelle walking out there on the beach with Rodrigo. Perhaps they were taken prisoner too for these ungodly men. Miravelle was sugar and spice—the idiot kind of Taltos, if you pardon my candor. When Miravelle plays tennis with you, she wants you to win! Notoriously stupid. It would have been easy to keep her. Lorkyn is cunning enough to hide her true spirit, and exceedingly beautiful. Red hair like Granny here. I know I've seen Lorkyn. But is she still alive now? Who knows?"

"Don't call me that," whispered Mona. She gave him a glacial smile. She seemed at a breaking point. "Oh, I know you mean it out of heartfelt respect, you're such a thoughtful creature, so full of innate love for everyone, but I will settle for Gorgeous, or Beautiful, or Darling One, or Toots, or even Sweetheart. You call me Granny again and I may chain you up to that wall and leave you here."

Another spontaneous laugh. "Very well, Toots," he said. "I didn't realize you were the boss of this little operation. I thought that position resided with the blond beauty here."

"And where is the room of Mother and Father?" I went on.

"Penthouse suite," he said. "Believe me, they were probably thrown into the sea a long time ago."

"How many people do you think are left in the main building now? I've wiped out all the men in this wing of the building, and one woman."

"Aren't you the feisty one!" he sighed. "How should I know? I can make a guess. Rodrigo, his two bodyguards, maybe a goon or two to fetch, and maybe … maybe … Miravelle and Lorkyn. It's a party in the first-floor bridal suite, that's Rodrigo's home away from home, one level above, dead center looking out to sea. Or so his mother told me." He pointed to the dead mother. "I'd

love to shoot one of the goons, assuming you haven't taken care of all of them."

"What about women? Does Rodrigo bring other women here? Are there likely to be some innocent guests up there?"

"Very unlikely," he said, head to one side. "If there are guests, they're dirty. This is a hideaway, a depot. Which has always given me the faint hope of seeing more of Miravelle or Lorkyn. You know, female Taltos are always, shall we say, feverish for fun? There's inevitably a slight issue of blood, but it comes afterwards and can be dealt with privately. And the milk! Well, let me tell you, the milk's delicious. Human beings can use them ad nauseam."

"All right, wait here for us, don't shoot anybody unless you have to and we'll take you out of here, Mona and Quinn, come."

"I have no intention of being left behind," said Oberon. He checked the gun in his belt. "I'll follow you. I told you I want to shoot a goon or two. Besides, if Lorkyn and Miravelle are here I want to see them. They're my sisters, for the love of Heaven. You think I'm going to sit in this room and listen for bullets flying?"

"Don't you know by their scent if they're here?" asked Mona.

He gave another amazingly soft laugh. "The males give off the scent, Grandmother," he retorted. "You should have studied up on the breed."

"That's what I'm trying to do," she said bitterly, the tears spilling. "Rescue it and study up on it, Oberon, my darling dear! I've come a long way to find you, you blessed little sweetheart of a thing. What a joy it is that we've met. I warned you, you call me Granny or Grandmother one more time, and I may just knock you flat on your back."

Rolling sarcastic laughter. "Okay, Toots," he said. "No more slips of the tongue. And you are gorgeous."

He stood up and stretched like a cat. Gave her a warped smile.

"Have any of you brilliant and crafty and conscientious Blood Thieves lifted a cell phone off your human victims? I want to call Rowan Mayfair."

"I have my own," said Quinn. "And I did lift a couple. But it's too early to call. Let's move."

"Well, come on, you little sugar pot," Oberon said, offering Mona his hand. "Let's go kill Rodrigo so he can be with his mother. And then we'll come back for Saint Juan Diego."

"Why do you like him so much?" I asked.

"Who, Rodrigo?" he asked. Big raise of his eyebrows. "I detest the man, I assure you."

"No, Saint Juan Diego," I said.

"Oh." Laugh. "I told you. I went to the Cathedral. Besides, when Lucia told me he'd been made a saint, I prayed to him for a miracle." Suddenly his eyes got wide. "Good Lord!" he said.

"What is it?" I asked. "Something has come as a surprise to the Cynic for All Seasons?"

"Don't you see?" He was flabbergasted. "Saint Juan Diego answered my prayer! You're the miracle!"

26

Rodrigo wasn't a slob. The lobby was clean, not a scrap of paper on the desk or in it.

Nevertheless, the hotel had the air of a haunted place, having been robbed of its vitality and purpose.

Mammoth kitchen, machines grinding away, countertops clean except for fresh trays littered with fancy china, remnants of lobsters, glasses of milk, fish bones, etc.

No human presence.

"Don't you see what that means?" Oberon said, staring at the plates. "That's Taltos food, all white. They very well might be up there." He was sloughing off his languor, growing even slightly excited.

I checked out the storage room, cases of powdered milk, some split open, powder on the floor, footprints, cans of condensed milk, empties in a pile.

"And explain that to me?" I asked.

He stared at it, shook his head. "I can't," he said. "Unless one of them comes down here in the night and guzzles. It's a possibility. You starve a Taltos for milk, and it will go after it. But let's get upstairs, my sisters are here! I know it."

"Hold on," said Mona, her eyes rimmed in red, her voice still quavering. "This doesn't prove a thing."

The big central stairway led to the mezzanine floor and into the spacious rooms of what had once been the library. Litter of laptops, bigger computer stations, walls of books, maps, world globes, televisions, huge windows open to the sea. Dust everywhere, or was it sand? The music from above was extremely loud. The place looked uninhabited and untouched.

"This was Heaven here," said Oberon, "you can't imagine the hours of pleasure I spent in these rooms. Saints Preserve Us, I detest that music. Maybe we should hit the breaker box to shut that off."

"Bad idea," said Quinn.

Oberon held his gun with both hands, and he had dropped his disdainful demeanor altogether. He was almost what one would call enthusiastic. But the music was attacking him like a horde of mosquitoes. He shuddered over and over again.

"First thing I'm going to shoot is that speaker system," he said.

Again we took the carpeted stairs. Scanning for humans. I caught the scent of one.

The suite was dead center and wide open to the broad iron-railed porch that looked down on the lobby, the emperor himself seated in a huge gold satin–sheeted bed to the right, bleached wood headboard carved with mermaids, talking rapidly into a phone, costume sleek leather pants, purple satin shirt open to reveal a chest of oiled muscles, lustrous short black hair brushed back from a polished brown face with extraordinarily pretty eyes.

Thick beige carpet, scattered chairs, lamps. Doors open to other rooms.

He clicked off the phone as soon as we entered.

"Oberon, my son, I wasn't expecting you," he said, musical voice barely accented with Spanish, drawing up one knee, eyes moving over the rest of us as he smiled cordially, toenails manicured and buffed to a shine. Extremely amiable manner. "And who have we here? It must be party time. But let's introduce ourselves first, shall we?"

He lifted a small black gadget and the inundation of purring dance music came to an end. The sound of the breeze was born again, sweeping through the great empty wall that fronted on the Caribbean.

"Oh, Rodrigo, I am ever so grateful to you for that," sighed Oberon. "I was looking everywhere for the source of that infernally simpering music."

"So that's why we're waving that gun around," said Rodrigo agreeably. "And where's my Mamma, didn't you bring her up with you? I can't raise anybody on this island. I'm humiliated. Please, my guests! Be seated! The bar is there—everything you could wish. Miravelle!" he shouted suddenly. "I have guests here! Where exactly did you come from? It's once in a blue moon a boat ties up at my dock. But you're most welcome. We are very private here, you understand, I can't invite you to stay—"

"Don't you worry at all about that," I said, "we'll soon be on our way. Just wanted to connect with Miravelle and Lorkyn."

"Is that so?" he asked skeptically. "Miravelle!" he called out again in a short Latin bark.

This time with results.

She entered from the left, the genuine article without doubt, maybe six and a half feet tall, yellow hair, oval face, baby flesh like Oberon, simple black linen sleeveless dress, sandals, round blue eyes, and when she saw Oberon she screamed and ran into his arms. He had only time to shove the gun in his belt before he enfolded her.

He lost all reserve embracing her and running his lips all over her. He pushed her hair back and broke into sobs suddenly as he kissed her.

"That's it, get back!" declared Rodrigo from the bed. He clapped his hands imperiously. "You hear me, both of you, I said get back! Oberon, did you hear what I said?"

But the two had fallen to kissing and speaking what seemed an alien language in high-pitched whistling words that none of us could understand, astonishing Quinn, though Mona seemed not

one bit surprised by it. It was a spectacle.

Rodrigo was off the bed in an instant. He had the cell phone unfolded and was barking orders in Spanish. Then shaking the phone.

"They're all dead," I said. "I killed them all."

"What are you talking about?" he said, the graciousness gone, his face the picture of rage. He drew his gun out of his belt and leveled it at me. "You're being rude to me in my own room," he said, "which I won't tolerate."

I sent the power to push the gun out of his hand and far to the right wall. It hit the sheetrock and fell to the floor. His eyes grew large, but he wasn't humbled by this display of strength. He glared at me, trying to make sense of what he'd just seen, then scoping Mona and Quinn.

Meanwhile the two Taltos had settled down somewhat and were watching him. Mona came up beside them. Quinn was beside me.

I scanned the hotel. There was another being walking on the floor above, but I didn't know whether it was Taltos or human.

"All right, what do you want from me?" Rodrigo said. "You want money, what? You killed all my men, you did that? For what reason? You want this island, it doesn't belong to me, take it. I was leaving tonight anyway. I don't care what you do. Miravelle, get away from him!"

He was suddenly distracted by a roar and a particular sound which I knew and couldn't place until he named it:

"The copter! They're taking off without me!" He ran to the open balcony. "Stop them, damn them." He want into a Spanish aria of denunciations and execrations.

I sent the scan. Two human beings. Male. What good was it to us or the future of this place to have them escape? I held tight to the iron railing of the balcony and I sent the Fire.

I didn't know if the power was viable over such a distance, but no one would know if I failed. My body was rigid with the attempt, the knot inside me burning with all the energy I could feed it, and suddenly the Fire hit the copter with a force that knocked it to one side. I gave every particle of consciousness in me to the heat. *The Fire.* The copter went up in flames. Then it exploded.

It was plenty far away from us, but everyone in the room cringed from the blast. It lit up the island.

Rodrigo was speechless.

I hung on to the rail, dizzy, sweating all over, and then I backed away, glaring at the spectacle of the huge machine coming down lopsided to the runway. It was slowly incinerated. I was sickened again, to think that I could do that, to think that I had done it. And the feeling of emptiness, of meaninglessness took hold of me. I believed in nothing. I was good for nothing. I ought to die. All that seemed fixed in my mind. I couldn't move or speak.

Quinn took over; I could hear his crisp voice right beside me.

"Well, old man," he said to Rodrigo, "it's no longer leaving without you. Any more favors you want from us? And now tell me: What did you do with the pair in the penthouse suite, the ones that Miravelle and Oberon call Mother and Father?"

Rodrigo turned slowly and looked at me, eyes narrow and vicious, and his mouth twisted with anger. He picked up his little cell phone again, and let loose a barrage of Spanish into it with only one recognizable word: Lorkyn.

Steps overhead.

"Hmmm. So she's alive too," said Oberon, from behind him.

A light singing voice came from Miravelle:

"Oh, please, please, if you're here to save us, let us go up to Mother and Father's room. Let us see them. Rodrigo promised they are there, they are on ice, let us go! They are safe and sound on ice. Please, Oberon, please! Before Lorkyn comes."

"You imbecile," said Rodrigo, his eyes fixed on me, then darting to Mona and Quinn, trying vainly to comprehend what we were, how to play this. He had no gun, but there was a knife in his boot, and he was desperate for the appearance of Lorkyn.

And Lorkyn satisfied everyone on that score immediately.

We could hear her striding down the steps from the floor above. We could hear her tread on the balcony, and then she appeared in the open doors to the suite.

I heard Oberon's deep despairing sigh before I made sense of what I saw, and Mona let out a bitter laugh.

The creature was the predictable six and a half feet tall, with the predictable baby flesh face and naked arms and legs, but her face was round, not oval, and she had almond-shaped green eyes, extraordinarily pretty, with lashes so thick you'd think they were fake but they weren't, and a kitten nose, and a sweet mouth, very pink, and a small firm chin. She had Mona's red hair, brushed back from her shining forehead and apparently clipped on the top of her head, because it appeared to be spilling down behind her.

She wore a leather sleeveless shirt, low-slung belt, miniskirt and high-heel boots, laced up the back.

The shocker? She was armed, not just with a gun in a holster over her shoulder, but with an AK-47 slung over her shoulder as well.

She sized up the situation in an instant. But for insurance Rodrigo let loose with another aria of Spanish in which he told her to kill us all, including Oberon, but to spare Miravelle.

"You move for that gun, precious," I said, "and I'll burn you to a cinder where you stand."

Oberon was transformed with rage.

"You filthy trash!" Oberon declared. "You murderous little traitor to the Secret People!" He began to shake all over, the tears spilling from his eyes. "You're in with them and you let me rot in that room below! You treacherous beast!" He drew out his gun and aimed it right at her.

Mona snatched it out of his hand.

"Honey darling," she said, shivering all over, "she's a specimen now. Rowan Mayfair can decide what to do with her."

"Rowan Mayfair?" asked Lorkyn in a soft ironic voice. "Rowan Mayfair has found this island?"

"Shoot them!" Rodrigo cracked out in English.

Lorkyn didn't move. "And Rowan Mayfair sends Blood Hunters to take us away from here?" Her voice had a sweetness to it that was entirely physical and had little to do with her intentions. Her facial features were mobile, expressive of emotion. But she dropped her voice to a whisper. "No wonder Father fell in love with this woman. What amazing resources she commands."

"Oh, he never did, he loved Mother!" cried Miravelle. "Please don't say all those old hateful things! We have Oberon free again. We're together! Rodrigo, you have to let us stay together."

"Shoot them!" screamed Rodrigo. He cursed Lorkyn a thousand times over in Spanish.

"Why not kill this one now?" Quinn asked pointing to Rodrigo.

"Lorkyn, where are the Mother and the Father?" I asked. "Do you know?"

"Safe on ice," she said.

"And where precisely would that be?" Mona asked with exhausted exasperation.

"I won't speak to anyone but Rowan Mayfair," said Lorkyn.

"Let me see them, please!" cried Miravelle. "Oberon, make her unlock the penthouse."

"Rodrigo, I don't think there's any reason now to keep you alive," I said.

"Let me shoot him," said Oberon.

"No," I said, "you'd take the gun and shoot Lorkyn."

Rodrigo went mad after a fashion. He tried to jump from the front balcony. I turned his head around on his neck, killing him instantly. I dropped him down to the tiles below. He lay there in a splat of blood.

I turned around in time to see Lorkyn shoved back against the wall, her arms out in the form of a crucifix. She'd reached for the gun in her holster and Quinn had done this by pure force. Lorkyn was staring at him. Her calm was impressive.

Mona was studying her as if trying in vain to understand her.

Oberon was glaring at Lorkyn, and bitterly weeping. Miravelle clung to him.

"You were in with them all the time," Oberon said despairingly. "What were you, the brains behind Rodrigo's glory? You with all your intellect and cunning? You could have reached help! You could have gotten us off this island! Damn you for what you did! Why did you do it?"

Lorkyn of the kitten face didn't answer. Her face never lost its softness, its expression of receptivity.

I went to her and gently removed her automatic weapon and broke it into pieces. I took the gun and threw it way out over the patio into the sea. She had a knife in her boot. Beautiful knife. I took it and put it in my own boot.

She said nothing to me, her exquisite eyes watching me as patiently as if I was reading her a poem.

I scanned but it got me nowhere.

"Take us to the Mother and the Father," I said.

"I'll reveal them to Rowan Mayfair and no one else," said Lorkyn.

"They're in the penthouse on ice!" said Miravelle. "Rodrigo always said. On ice. Let's go. I can lead the way. Rodrigo said that when he came into the penthouse, Father said 'Don't kill us, we can't do you any harm, keep us on ice and you can sell us to Rowan Mayfair and Mayfair Medical for millions of dollars.' "

"Oh, please," said Oberon through his tears, "Miravelle, darling dear, for once don't be a perfect idiot! They can't be in the penthouse on ice. I know where they are. I know where they have to be. If you can keep Lorkyn in custody, I know precisely where to go."

We moved as quickly as we could. Quinn had Lorkyn firmly by the arm. Oberon led the way. Down the stairs and down the stairs.

Once again, the giant kitchen.

A pair of huge doors. Refrigerator? Freezer? One was laden with locks.

I broke them off immediately.

As soon as the white mist cleared I stepped inside and I saw in the light over my shoulder the bodies frozen on the floor.

The tall black-haired man with the white hair above his ears, and the red-haired woman, both with their eyes closed, serene, tender to behold in each other's arms, white cotton garments, bare feet, angels sleeping together. Covered with frost, as if in the deep claw of intentional winter.

Scattered end to end on them, but not on their faces, were frozen yet once beautiful flowers.

I stood to one side gazing down at them, as the others peered through the door. I gazed at the frozen fluids on the floor, at the discoloration of their skin here and there, at the perfection of their embrace and their utter stillness.

Miravelle let out a high-pitched scream: "Mother. Father."

Oberon sighed and turned away. "And so down the long centuries he comes to this," he murmured, "at the hands of his own sons and daughters, and she the mother of us all who might have lived a millennium. And who put the flowers here, may I ask? Was it you, Lorkyn, you traitor to everything they believed? It had to be, did it not? You petty deserter. May God forgive you that you made peace with our enemy. Did you lead them here by the hand yourself?"

Mona stepped into the lighted rectangle of the door. "That's my daughter," she whispered. No tears. No sobs.

I felt the immense falling off in her of hope, of dreams, of love itself. I saw the bitter acceptance in her face, the deep drifting.

Miravelle was crying. "So he made them hard as ice, that's what he did," she cried. She put

her hands to her face and cried and cried.

I knelt down beside the pair, and I laid my hand on the man's head. Frozen solid. If there was a soul in there, I couldn't feel it. But what did I know? Same with the red-haired woman, so resembling Mona in her fresh Nordic beauty.

I walked carefully out of the freezer until I reached the warm air, and I took Mona in my arms. She was shaking all over but her eyes were dry and squinting in the white mist. Then she roused herself as best she could.

"Come on, Miravelle, my dear," she said. "Let's close the door. Let's wait for help to come."

"But who can help?" said Miravelle. "Lorkyn will make us do what she wants us to do. And all the others are gone."

"Don't worry about Lorkyn," said Quinn.

Oberon wiped away his tears disgustedly, and once again he took Miravelle in his arms and embraced her warmly. He reached out his right hand, with its long delicate fingers, and stroked Mona's bowed head, and drew her close to him.

We closed the freezer door.

"Quinn," I said, "punch in First Street for me, then give me the little phone."

He obliged with one-handed dexterity, still keeping Lorkyn prisoner with a left-handed grip.

Lorkyn's face was sweet and musing, revealing nothing. Oberon, though he held Miravelle and Mona both, was glaring at Lorkyn with undisguised malice.

"Watch," I whispered to Mona.

Then I was on the phone:

"Lestat to speak to Rowan about Morrigan."

Her low husky voice came on the line: "What have you got for me, Lestat?"

I told her everything. "How fast can you get here?"

Mona took the phone from me. "Rowan, they could be alive! They could be in suspended animation!"

"They're dead," said Lorkyn.

Mona surrendered the phone.

Rowan asked: "Will you stay until I get there?"

"We're creatures of the dark, my beloved," I said. "As mortals are wont to say: Make it snappy."

It was two a.m. when the jet landed. It barely made it on the long runway.

By that time, Mona and I—leaving Oberon and Lorkyn in the custody of Quinn—had spent two hours getting rid of every corpse on the island. To the devouring sea we fed the remains even to the grisly remnants of the charred and smoking copter—a grim task, save for the placid overpowering waves of the Caribbean, so quickly forgiving every unclean offering.

Just before the plane landed, Mona and I had also discovered Lorkyn's digs—quite gorgeous,

with a computer that was indeed hooked up to the outside world, and loaded with information about the Drug Merchants, and bank accounts in a dozen places at least.

But what had astonished both of us was the medical information of all kinds—countless articles downloaded from seemingly respectable sources on every aspect of health care, from studies of diet to neurosurgery and the intricacies of heart bypass operations and the removal of tumors of the brain.

In fact, there was far more medical information than we could conceivably examine.

Then we hit the material on Mayfair Medical.

And it was there, in that strange place, in moments sandwiched between violence and mystery, that I realized how immense the Mayfair Medical project was, how multifaceted and daring and full of promise. I saw the layout of the hospital and laboratories. I saw lists of doctors, lists of units and programs and research teams.

In addition, Lorkyn had downloaded dozens of articles about the Center which had appeared in medical journals.

And finally we came upon an immense amount of material on Rowan herself—her career, her achievements in research, her personal plans for the Center, her pet projects, her attitudes, her goals.

We couldn't possibly cover it all.

We decided we had to take the microprocessor with us. No choice really. Had to take Oberon's as well. No traces of the tragedy would be left for strangers.

Rowan and Stirling were first off the plane, Rowan in jeans and plain white shirt and Stirling in a tweed suit. Immediately they reacted to the spectacle of the three Taltos, in fact, Rowan appeared to go into a silent shock.

I presented Rowan with the microprocessors from the two computers, which she entrusted to an assistant who put them safely on the plane. Lorkyn watched all this with eyes as unreadable as Rowan's, though they looked much softer, perhaps part of a very sweet mask. She had been absolutely silent all during the wait and she showed no change now.

Miravelle was weeping. Oberon, having relieved himself of the bandanna and brushed his hair, looked beyond handsome, and deigned to give Rowan a slight nod of his head.

Then Rowan said to Mona:

"Where are the bodies?"

Out of the plane as if on cue came a crew of men in white scrubs, on down the metal stair carrying what looked like a giant sleeping bag. They had other equipment I couldn't decipher or describe.

We went back to the freezer.

All this time Lorkyn made no protest, though Quinn held her tightly, but she kept her large exquisite eyes on Rowan, except for occasional glances at Oberon who never stopped staring at

her with a look of pure venom.

Rowan stepped cautiously inside the freezer as I'd done before. She examined the bodies minutely. She touched the stains of frozen fluid on the floor. She studied patches of discoloration on their skin. Her hands returned to their heads. Then finally she withdrew and let the team do its work of taking the bodies to the plane.

She looked at Mona:

"They're dead," she said. "They died a long time ago. Most likely right after they first lay down together here."

"Perhaps not!" said Mona desperately. "Maybe they can survive temperatures that we can't." She looked frail and worn in her black feathered dress, her mouth shuddering.

"They're gone," Rowan said. Her voice was not cruel. It was solemn. She was fighting her own tears and I knew it.

Miravelle began to cry again. "Oh Mother, oh Father…."

"There's evidence of widespread decay," Rowan said. "The temperature was not consistently maintained. They didn't suffocate. They fell asleep as people do in the snow. They were probably warm at the end, and they died peacefully."

"Oh, that is so lovely," said Miravelle with the purest sincerity. "Don't you think, Mona? It's so very pretty. Lorkyn, darling, don't you think it is very sweet?"

"Yes, Miravelle, dear," said Lorkyn softly. "Don't worry anymore about them. Their intent has been fulfilled."

She had not spoken in so long that this warmth took me by surprise.

"And what was their intent?" I asked.

"That Rowan Mayfair know of their fate," said Lorkyn calmly. "That the Secret People not vanish."

Rowan sighed. Her face was indescribably sad.

She opened wide her arms and shepherded us out of the kitchen, a doctor leading us away from a deathbed.

We went out into the warm air, and the landscape seemed peaceful and given over to the rhythm of the waves and the breeze—cleansed by violence and mercilessness.

I looked beyond the lighted buildings to the huge mass of hovering jungle. I scanned again for any presence, human or Taltos. The dense growth was too thick with living things for me to detect any one creature.

I felt soul sick and empty. At the same time the three Taltos were worrying me in the extreme. What precisely was going to happen to them?

The crew with the frozen bodies ran past us to board the plane, and we made our way slowly to the metal steps on the tarmac.

"Did Father really ask for this, this freezing?" Oberon wanted to know. He had lost all of his

scornful manner. “Did he go willingly to this death?” he asked sincerely.

“That’s what Rodrigo always said,” replied Miravelle, who was now in Stirling’s arms, weeping piteously. “Father had told me to hide from the bad men, so I wasn’t with him. They didn’t find me until the next day. Lorkyn and I were together, hiding in the little house by the tennis courts. We didn’t see what happened. We never saw Father and Mother again.”

“I don’t want to board this plane as a prisoner,” said Lorkyn very politely. “And I’d like to know where I’m going. It’s unclear to me, the source of authority here. Dr. Mayfair, would you please explain?”

“You’re the victim of concern right now, Lorkyn,” said Rowan in the same mild tone that Lorkyn had used with her.

Rowan reached into her pants pocket, pulled out a syringe and, as Lorkyn stared in horror and desperately struggled, sank a needle into the arm by which Quinn held her. Lorkyn went down clawing at Quinn and then finally totally collapsed, all hips, knees and spidery hands, kitten face asleep.

Oberon watched with narrow eyes and a chilling smile.

“You should have slit her throat, Dr. Rowan Mayfair,” he said, with the rise of one eyebrow. “As a matter of fact, I think I can break all the bones in her neck if you’ll kindly allow me to try it.”

Miravelle spun around out of Stirling’s loving grip and glared at Oberon: “No, no, you can’t do such a horrible thing to Lorkyn. It’s not Lorkyn’s fault she’s wise and knowing! Oberon, you can’t do mean things to her, not now.”

Mona gave a short bitter laugh. “Maybe you’ve got your prize specimen, Rowan,” she said in her frail voice. “Hook her up to every machine known to science, vivisect her, freeze her in fragments and on slides, make her lactate the marvelous Taltos milk!”

Rowan stared so icily at Mona it was difficult to tell if she heard the words. She called for help from inside the plane.

The sleeping Lorkyn was placed on a stretcher with restraints and taken on board as we waited in silence.

Stirling followed with Miravelle, who was still weeping for Mother and Father. “If only Father had called Rowan Mayfair when he wanted to. But Mother was so jealous. She knew Father loved Rowan Mayfair. Oh, if only Father had not listened. And now the Secret People are just us three.”

Rowan caught those words, glanced at me and then at Mona. Mona registered them too with a dark flashing glance at Rowan. The darkness overcame Rowan.

Oberon stood quite free, the picture of relaxation, with his weight on one hip, thumbs in his back pockets, studying Rowan in detail, his huge eyes half-mast again and his cheeks still wet from weeping.

“Don’t tell me,” he drawled, his head thrown back, “you want me to get in that plane too and go back with you to your Center of Medical Marvels.”

“Where else are you going to go?” asked Rowan with a coolness that matched his own. “You’re going to leave Miravelle and Lorkyn?”

“Rowan’s your kin,” said Mona, her voice strained and impatient, “she’s your family, she’ll take care of you, Oberon. If you have an ounce of sense let it override your crushing sarcasm and caustic wit, and get on the plane, and behave yourself. You might just discover you belong to an extremely rich clan of remarkably generous people.”

“Your optimism touches me,” he tossed off to Mona. “Shall we assume that it was devotion to the remarkable generous clan that drove you to run away with a couple of Blood Hunters and allow them to transform you into what you are?”

“Oberon,” I said. “I set you free, did I not?”

“Here it comes,” he said, rolling his eyes, “for the sake of Saint Juan Diego, will I please behave for Rowan Mayfair, the only human being Father ever truly loved, and will I not blind Lorkyn with my thumbs first chance I get, or something even more deliciously cruel?”

“Precisely,” I said. “Cooperate with Rowan in every respect. You have nothing to lose by it. And don’t jump Miravelle and make a baby. Okay? And when you’re tempted to do otherwise, remember Saint Juan Diego.”

Oberon gave a short laugh, threw up his hands, then lowered them and turned them out, then went up the metal steps to the open door.

“This must be one hell of a saint,” said Rowan under her breath.

“On board,” I said, “Oberon can tell you all about him.”

“Wait, I’m forgetting the statue!” Oberon cried out at the top of the stairs. “How could I do such a thing?”

“I promise to bring it to you,” I said. “Besides, the Mayfairs will buy you whatever you want. Go on, board.”

He did as I told him to do, then appeared again:

“But remember, that’s the statue connected to the miracle! You have to get it!”

“I have no intention of forgetting it,” I said. He disappeared.

Now only Rowan was left, standing there with Mona and Quinn and me.

“Where are you going now?” asked Rowan.

“Blackwood Farm,” said Quinn. “We three, we stick together.”

Rowan looked at me. No one has ever looked at me in quite the same way that Rowan does.

She nodded.

She turned to go, then turned back and put her arms around me, a warm bundle of life entrusted to me. Every barrier inside me collapsed.

We kissed as if no one was there to see it, over and over, until it was a little language of its

own, her breasts very hot against my chest, my hands clutching her hips, my eyes closed, my mind mute for once as if my body had driven it back, or so inundated it with sensation that it could not tell me what to do. And at last, she pulled away, and I turned my back. The blood thirst was paralyzing me. The want was paralyzing me. And then there broke loose the love, the pure love.

I stood motionless, realizing it for what it was. Pure love. And connecting it suddenly and helplessly with the love I'd felt when I'd kissed Patsy's phantom at the edge of the swamp: pure love.

And my mind cast back over the centuries, like the mechanism of conscience determined to ferret out sin, only it searched for moments of *pure love.* And I knew them, secret, silent, few, splendid. Splendid in their own power, whether the loved one ever knew it or not, splendid to have loved—.

Flash on the couple in each other's arms, Ash and Morrigan, the white mist rising from them. Emblem of pure love.

The awareness dissolved. Quinn moved me away from the roar of the jet engines. We walked off the tarmac.

We were silent in the noise of the departing plane. At last it made its smooth ascent. And was gone into the clouds.

The age-old mystery of the Caribbean unfolded—another tiny island soaked in blood—that this most glorious part of the world should bear witness to so many tales of violence.

Mona stood looking out to sea. The breeze lifted her full red hair. Her eyes were beyond tears. She was the very picture of mourning.

Could she begin now? Really begin, my perfect one?

I drew close to her. I didn't want to intrude on this bereavement. But she reached out with her left arm and brought me in, and let her weight rest against me.

"This was my search," she said, eyes faraway, "this was my dream, my dream that overleapt the Dark Blood—the dream that carried me through all the pain that preceded it."

"I know," I said. "I understand you."

"That I would find my Morrigan," she said, "that I would find them living in happiness, that I would know her again with all her madness and we would talk the long nights away, exchanging kisses, our lives touching and then parting. And now … it's all ruin."

I waited, out of respect for what she'd said. Then I spoke:

"They did live in happiness for a very long time," I said. "Oberon described it to us. They lived for years as the Secret People." I reminded her as best I could of what Oberon had told us.

Slowly she yielded to a nod, her eyes on the placid and warm sea. It made no impression upon her. "They should have let us help!" she whispered. "Michael and Rowan would have helped! Oh, the folly of it! To think that Morrigan wouldn't let him call Rowan. Because she was jealous!

Oh, Rowan, Rowan."

I held my thoughts to myself.

"Come home to Blackwood Farm," said Quinn. "There's time to mourn and time to know Miravelle and Oberon and even Lorkyn."

She shook her head.

"No," she said. "These Taltos are not for me, not now. Miravelle is some pure and lithesome thing without my fire, without her mother's fire. The link is broken. Morrigan went down in pain. They'll care for Miravelle. Poor tender creature, salvaged from the ancient one and a mutant birth. I have nothing to give to Miravelle. As for Oberon, he's too dark for me, and what can I give him? He'll kill Lorkyn sooner or later, don't you think? And how will Rowan justify the keeping of Lorkyn? It's not my concern. It's not my passion. I want to be with you, you are my people."

"Don't try to decide these things now," I said. I felt so sorry for her. And in my heart I felt a burning concern for the tasks that lay ahead of Rowan.

"Maharet's words are clear." She went on in the same torn voice, her eyes never turning to me or to Quinn. "It was nature taking its course. It was inevitable."

"Perhaps, perhaps not," said Quinn. "But it is finished."

I turned, and looked at the distant villa with all its lighted windows. I looked at the broad mass of rocky jungle rising behind the brashly illuminated beach. I scanned. I caught the small beasts of the wild place, the tamarinds, the birds, perhaps a wild boar deep in there. I couldn't tell.

Yet I was reluctant to leave. I wasn't sure why.

I wanted to move through the jungles. The jungles I had not searched, and they were thick. Only this was not the time.

We bid the island good-bye. Quinn took Mona in his arms, and they made for the clouds.

I went back for the statue of my beloved saint, and was soon on my way to the safe refuge of Blackwood Farm.

27

I stopped at the flat, stripped off the leather clothes, put on a lavender dress shirt, purple tie, black linen three-piece suit, new boots, cut out for Blackwood Farm, dived into Aunt Queen's bed and went sound asleep.

(Saint Juan Diego was on the bedside table right beside me.)

Vague memory of Mona coming in before sunrise and telling me she'd E-mailed to "the mysterious Maharet" an account of the entire event. I said: "Bravo. I love you. Get out of here."

At sunset, when I awoke, I went out into the house to discover Stirling Oliver had come. He'd had an early supper with Tommy and Nash, who had gone into New Orleans for the evening, and was now waiting for me on the "wicker terrace" on the east side of the house.

I was so comforted by every aspect of Blackwood Farm and its unsuspecting humans that I could have wept, but I didn't. I made a little circuit of the big rooms. No sign of Julien's ghost. Why was he letting me off the hook? I rejoiced, whatever his reasons. Here at Blackwood Farm, the island of St. Ponticus seemed remote, the horrors of last night imagined.

The Dazzling Duo had not risen yet.

I took the statue of Saint Juan Diego and I headed outdoors.

The wicker terrace had been created by Quinn out of all the antique wicker furniture he'd found in the attic of Blackwood Farm when he was still a teenager, and he'd had it all restored and put out here, and it was quite atmospheric and charming.

The floodlights weren't on. There were just a couple of hurricane lamps flickering away, and Stirling, in a light tweed Norfolk jacket, was smoking a cigarette. His neatly trimmed gray hair was ruffled a bit by the breeze. But otherwise he was the picture of dignity. And the picture of a mortal with whom I could be at ease and talk as if I wasn't a monster.

I sat down in the chair opposite him, with Saint Juan Diego out of sight at my side.

There was that Fall bite in the air. I resigned myself to it, and breathed in the pure freshness of the breeze, and let my eyes linger on the pearly clouds and the frightening and inevitable little stars that soon shone through them.

"So hit me with it, baby," I said.

"Well," he said, his youthful eyes at once alert. "A plane of our people descended on the island as swiftly as could be managed, and collected the laptops and every other computer they could

find in the mezzanine library that Oberon described to us, remnants of the Secret People that Oberon wanted saved, and they were about to take their leave when a boatload of the unsavory characters arrived. We had an escort of five or six soldiers of fortune, you might call them, not members of the Talamasca you understand, but quite loyal in their work for us, so there was a parley of sorts. The unsavory individuals deemed it prudent to depart. Very quickly in fact. I would say that they surmised that their time on the island had ended. Our plane took off without mishap. Chalk it up to poise and persuasion on the part of our soldiers.

"Meanwhile, the firm of Mayfair and Mayfair traced the entire history of the island, finding a clear chain of title revealing the transfer from Lost Paradise Resorts to The Secret Isle Corp., only officer and stock holder Ash Templeton. Attorneys for the Corporation in New York notified other attorneys, who then notified other attorneys who were the true managers of Ash's affairs.

"They flew down this afternoon. Saw his body at Mayfair Medical. Revealed Last Will and Testament executed four years ago, leaving everything to Michael Curry and Rowan Mayfair, with some sort of trust arrangement for Ash's children. That was years after Ash left New Orleans with Morrigan. There was a bundle of accompanying letters. 'To be given to Michael Curry and Rowan Mayfair should I die or become incapacitated.' They've been given to Michael and Rowan."

"I don't quite get it," I said.

"Ash was taking steps," said Stirling. "He knew the Secret People were in trouble. He simply didn't take the steps fast enough. Communication was always sporadic. The estate lawyers didn't know the location of the Secret People or their name. Communication broke off two years ago. Ash should have given one of the firms a timetable and a course of action: 'If you don't hear from me every six months, etc.' "

"I see," I answered. "Any clue as to what was in the letters?"

"From what Michael told me, the letters are full of polite warnings, observations and requests that Rowan and Michael and the Mayfair family care for his children. Ash was immensely wealthy. The money in essence passes to Rowan and Michael in trust for Oberon, Lorkyn and Miravelle.

"No problem there. I don't know whether anyone's ever made you aware of it, but Rowan and Mona both made immense profits for the Mayfair Legacy. Rowan sits on the boards who invest the funds of the Medical Center Endowments and she's considered an incredibly shrewd moneymaker. I suppose what I'm struggling to say is that the Mayfair fortune continues to grow, in spite of the cost of Mayfair Medical, which is now the recipient of all sorts of grant money, and Ash's Last Will and Testament will be observed with complete honor by Mayfair and Mayfair, have no doubt."

"And you think you owe me this explanation?" I asked.

"In a way, yes," he said. "You did rescue the Taltos. And of course you can tell all this to Mona

when the subject arises. And I trust it will."

I nodded.

"While we're on the subject," he said, "might I ask, how do you live yourself?"

"On blood," I said.

"No, but I mean the financial part of it."

"Stirling, look to the Chronicles and your own Talamasca files. Hand to mouth immortals are the stuff of B movies. I have more wealth than I know what to do with. It's managed in Paris and in New York for me by mortals who know me by voice. When I do become ragged, it's a matter of moral disposition, nothing more."

"Fascinating," he replied.

"Go on with what's been happening," I said.

"Well, Rowan is so busy in the laboratory with the two bodies, she's scarcely looked at the letters. Michael is reading through them now. He'll show them to me later.

"Of course, the Talamasca has turned over all the computers from the morning raid to the Mayfair family. The computers are the property of Michael and Rowan by force of Ash's will. We had no choice but to do it. Perhaps they'll allow us to study the material later on."

"Has Mayfair and Mayfair taken any action about the island itself, to keep off the drug people?"

"They've contacted every form of authority policing that part of the World, I believe, but I gather that it's rather complicated. We offered to send back the soldiers of fortune. They may take us up on it. A private security force of some type has been sent there. Also some kind of cleanup crew. Apparently the cabin cruiser, the plane—these things were Ash's property. This Rodrigo whom you so obligingly destroyed was a major DEA target. This was made known to the family when they asked for protection for the island. The family has not cooperated with the DEA or invited them in. It's all being handled privately."

"Hmmm.…" I felt uneasy about the island. All that jungle. I wish I had taken the time to walk through that jungle. "Where are the Taltos?"

"You want the short answer, or the story?"

"You kidding?"

"Well, Miravelle and Oberon spent the morning and early afternoon at the First Street house in the company of Dolly Jean and Tante Oscar," said Stirling. "It was quite amazing. At times, I thought I was hallucinating. Apparently Tante Oscar has not left her French Quarter apartment in years. You remember, she wears three and four dresses at a time?"

"Yes indeed I remember," I said. "She spreads evil rumors about me. I'd set her right, but if she's really over a hundred years old, I might give her a heart attack."

"Good point. When Dolly Jean called her on the famous refrigerated telephone, she agreed to come to First Street if the car were sent, and she spent the afternoon with Dolly Jean and

Michael regaling 'the Walking Babies' with stories, or with Miravelle or Oberon regaling them, I'm not quite sure which, but all of it has been recorded for posterity by me and by Michael. Miravelle was shocked by a great deal that the two old women had to say, but Oberon was in hysterics. He thought them the funniest human beings he'd ever met, and he was stomping his foot and slamming the table.

"Naturally I was enthralled merely watching this entire collection of beings, including Tante Oscar." He drew on his cigarette. "She was indeed wearing some three or four dresses under her maroon fox-trimmed coat, and a black hat with roses on it and a little face veil, and she does have eyes like eggs. She entered the house making the Sign of the Cross over and over again, rosary beads running through her right hand, a battalion of exquisite twelve-year-old boys accompanying her up the marble steps and into the dining room. The boys soon discovered the swimming pool and were invited to swim and went to it with gusto. They might be still swimming now. Apparently they'd never been swimming in their lives before."

Stirling stopped.

The Dazzling Duo had appeared. Both were tricked out in safari jackets and khaki slacks, Quinn with an open shirt, Mona with an olive green turtleneck—a startling contrast to the formal clothes they'd always worn before.

They were both pale and a little gaunt. They had no need to feed, thanks to last night's repast, but apparently the dark adventure had taken their energy. Quinn appeared to be fasting. Mona looked wounded and frail.

Just for a moment, I saw in her the gaunt dying girl she'd been when I first laid eyes on her. It frightened me.

Kisses and hugs for Stirling, who rose to his feet to receive them.

I clasped her hand and she bent low to kiss me on the mouth. I felt a fever in her, as though her body were consuming her past dreams. And an ashen sadness clouded her vision.

She came right to the point, even before she flopped into a wicker chair and put her feet up on the table.

"Rowan has to know whether they're alive or dead by now," she said.

"Darling, they're dead," said Stirling, "there's no question. They've been brought up to a temperature of perhaps forty degrees, and connected to every sort of monitor known to Rowan. There's no life in them whatsoever. Only a gold mine of tissue and blood and bone which Rowan wants to examine."

"Oh, yeah, oh of course," said Mona in a low fast-running voice. She closed her eyes. She seemed so lost. "So the Mad Scientist must be overjoyed."

"What about the poison?" I asked. "Oberon said that Ash and Morrigan had been slowly poisoned by the rebel children."

Stirling nodded. "There were several compounds in their blood and tissue. Apparently they'd

been given arsenic, Coumadin and some other rare chemical that strikes at the musculature. The doses would have been fatal to human beings. But it's a tricky matter. There might have been other poisons which didn't survive in the bodies. There were also huge amounts of benzodiazepines."

"Evil Silas," whispered Mona.

"Has either Miravelle or Oberon said any more about the life of the Secret People?" Quinn asked. "I think the more Mona hears about that the better she will feel."

"To Hell with it," said Mona in a low voice.

Stirling went on gently.

"Yes, they've both talked a lot. So did some of the New York lawyers who represented Ash. Their life was very good, and it lasted some four years before this villainous Rodrigo took over the island. Oberon enjoys describing their trips and their studies very much. Miravelle has reverted more and more to a childlike state. Oberon becomes impatient with her."

"Where are they now?" asked Quinn.

"At Mayfair Medical. Rowan had them both admitted for tests earlier this evening."

"Oh, splendid, and they agreed to it!" Mona said. "How could I not know that? The two dead ones are not enough! Lorkyn isn't enough. She has to have the live ones immediately as well! That's Rowan. Did she say the poor children looked a bit peaked? Or did she just shoot something into their veins and then throw them on the stretchers? I wish I could mount a conscientious opposition, but I haven't the spirit for it. So let them disappear into the laboratories and secret rooms of Mayfair Medical. Good-bye, sweet Miravelle! Will I ever lay eyes on you again? Farewell, oh, acid-tongued Oberon, may you not alienate too many of the nurses with your withering wit, for they can make your life miserable. And who am I, the Blood Child, to seek such a privilege as to see these odd, out-of-time beings, except perhaps to turn them loose into the workaday world where they'd undoubtedly fall victim to some insidious human equivalent to Rodrigo the Drug Lord!"

"Mona, Miravelle and Oberon won't be kept there," Quinn said. "We can see to it ourselves. Rowan won't make them prisoners. You're making Rowan the enemy again for no reason. We can go to Mayfair Medical now and see them, very likely, if you wish. Nobody can prevent us."

"Listen to you!" Mona said, with a faint affectionate smile. "You think you know Rowan, and you don't know Rowan. And Beloved Boss here has fallen under her dark spell same as Ash Templeton apparently, who forswore her for his species and failed to save them for Morrigan's jealousy of her, Oh, Darkness, Oh, Piteous Darkness; Lestat, how can you find her glacial heart!"

"You're using Rowan as a lightning rod," said Quinn calmly. "What's the excuse now for hating Rowan? Because she pronounced Ash and Morrigan dead? Lestat told you they were dead. Let it go. Let it all go."

Mona shook her head, words rushing. "Where's the wake? Where's the funeral? Where are the

flowers? Where is the family with everyone kissing? Will they put Ash and Morrigan in the family tomb?"

I reached over and took her hand. "Ophelia," I said softly, "what need have they for flowers now, or kissing? 'Is't possible a young maid's wits should be as mortal as an old man's life?' Be still, my beauty."

She answered me with Shakespeare:

" 'Thought and affliction, passion, hell itself, She turns to favour and to prettiness.' "

"No, come back. Hold on."

She shut her eyes. The silence lengthened. I felt her draw breath.

"Stirling, tell her how it went," I said cautiously. "Tell her the comic parts."

"If I may say so," Stirling said, "after an afternoon with Tante Oscar and Dolly Jean, and all their stories of Walking Babies in the swamps, Miravelle and Oberon were ready for a hospital suite. And very likely Michael Curry was glad to see them go."

"Did they never try to escape the house?" asked Mona.

"Guards all around it," conceded Stirling. "But Mona, how can anyone let these two go unshepherded into a human world? Yes, the Secret People endured for some five years, it seems, and Oberon and Miravelle told the most wondrous tales of their life with Father and Mother, but the basic concept was falling apart from the start. The Silas Rebellion lasted two years. Rodrigo's takeover another two, and that's the story we have at this point."

"Well, what's going to happen to them?" Mona demanded.

"Oberon's placed his fate entirely in Rowan's hands, and after meeting Michael and wandering about the First Street property, and his high comic rounds with Tante Oscar and Dolly Jean, I think he's insisting that Miravelle do the same. You might say that Oberon committed himself to Mayfair Medical and committed his sister. That's where things stand."

"Any word on Lorkyn?" I asked.

"No," said Stirling. "None at all. Only Rowan knows what's happening with Lorkyn. Michael didn't have a clue."

"Ah, that's marvelous!" said Mona bitterly, her lip quivering. "I wonder if she will cut her up alive."

"Stop it," I said softly. "Lorkyn's filthy with the blood of others. She was the cohort of Rodrigo. Rodrigo slew Ash and Morrigan! Let it be."

"Amen," said Quinn. "I've seldom seen a more frightening creature than Lorkyn. What is Rowan supposed to do with her? Pass her over to the Drug Enforcement people? You think she wouldn't give them the slip? Rowan has a jurisdiction beyond the law, as we do."

Mona shook her head. She was becoming ever more fragile by the minute.

"And what about Michael?" she asked, with a note of hysteria in her voice, her face still pallid and her eyes hard with pain. "What's happening to my beloved Michael in all of this? Does he

guess that Rowan's enchanted with the great Lestat behind his back!"

"Oh, so that's it," said Quinn gravely. "And you, the child that bedded him and bore Morrigan, are now coming down upon Rowan for a bevy of kisses. Mona, bear up!"

She shot him a deadly glance. "You've never said a mean thing to me, Quinn!" she whispered.

Stirling was quite taken aback by all this.

I spoke not one word.

"You sell the love of Michael and Rowan short and you know you do," said Stirling with a bit of harshness. "Would that I could break all the confidences bestowed on me. I can't. Suffice to say Rowan loves Michael with her entire soul. Yes, there were moments of extreme temptation in New York with Ash Templeton. She, no longer able to bear, and this wise immortal, who could so well understand her … but she never yielded. And she won't break the foundations of her life for anyone else now."

"That's the truth," I said quietly.

Quinn reached over and kissed Mona. She yielded to it forgivingly.

"Where is Michael now?" she asked, avoiding my glance.

"Sleeping," said Stirling. "After Rowan rushed in and took Oberon and Miravelle away, a bit dramatically perhaps, Michael collapsed on his bed upstairs and fell into a deep slumber. I don't think it helped his peace of mind one bit that Tante Oscar had looked deep into his eyes before she left and declared him 'the father of doomed progeny.' "

Mona was immediately furious. (But it was better than being insane.) Her eyes were moist and rimmed in red. "That's just what Michael needs! How dare this creature come making such predictions! I'll bet Dolly Jean latched on to that too. Dolly Jean would never let an opportunity like that slip through her crafty little fingers."

"Yes, indeed," said Stirling. "She told Michael he had best sprinkle yellow powder all around his bed. I think that was the last straw for him."

"You know," said Mona, her hysteria cresting, her words racing again, "in my glory as Designée of the Mayfair Legacy, when I was going around in a cowboy hat and shorts and big-sleeve shirts, riding in the company plane, worth billions of dollars and eating all the ice cream I ever desired, I wanted to purchase a radio station. And one of my dreams was to give Dolly Jean her own show so that people could call in and chat with her about country ways and country wisdom. I was going to give Ancient Evelyn her own show—

"—you know Ancient Evelyn, don't you, Stirling?

"—Lestat, Ancient Evelyn just whispers and whispers—

"—and I was going to give a prize to anyone who could actually understand her. I figured whisperers would call in, you know, who would whisper right back to her the way she whispered to them. We'd have an hour of whispering. I'd give them prizes too, Hell, why not? Then there would have been the Michael Curry Hour, when people could have called up with stories of the

Irish Channel or Irish songs, and Michael and the callers could have sung them together. And of course I was going to have my own show, all about the world economy and world trends in architecture and art—(sigh). I had designs for every kook in the family. Never got to do that, got too sick. But Dolly Jean's still jiving. And Michael—Michael's wife cheating on him with you, and he's got no one to defend him."

"Oh, Mona let it go," said Quinn.

My pain was no one's concern but my own.

She collapsed back into a pale, glazed-eyed trance, but only for a moment:

"And you know the damnedest thing," she said, squinting as though she couldn't quite recall her theme. "Oh yeah, vampires, I mean, real vampires, they don't have any websites."

"Let's keep it that way," said Quinn. "They shouldn't have any websites."

"It's time for you to hunt," I said. "You're both thirsting. Make a night of it. Head up north. Hit the beer joints along the roads. Beat the hours down with hunting. By tomorrow, it's my guess Rowan will be ready to let us see the remains of Ash and Morrigan. And we can see Miravelle and Oberon too."

She gave me a dazed look. "Yeah, that sounds great," she whispered. "A regular sideshow. There's a part of me that never wants to see Rowan or Michael again. There's a part of me that never wants to see Miravelle and Oberon ever again. As for Morrigan—."

"Come on, my precious Ophelia," said Quinn. "We're going to take to the air, baby, we're going to do what the Beloved Boss said. I know that jukebox, pool table route. We go for the Little Drink with the truckers and the cowboys, and maybe we stop to dance to the Dixie Chicks now and then, and along comes some guy with a conscience full of pure coal and we lure him out to where the parking lot falls into the trees and we fight over him."

She laughed in spite of herself. "Sounds brutal and basic," she sighed.

He pulled her up out of the chair. She turned, and reached down to give me a warm hug and a kiss.

I was happily surprised. I held her tight. "My pixie," I said. "You've only begun on the Devil's Road. You have such wonders yet to discover. Be clever. Be swift."

"But how do real vampires connect on the World Wide Web?" she asked with painful seriousness.

"Beats me, sweetheart," I said. "I've never sufficiently recovered from my first sight of a steam locomotive. I almost got run over. What makes you think real vampires want to connect?"

"Stop putting me on," she said dreamily. "But you don't want me to create my own web page?"

"Absolutely not," I said somberly.

"But you published the Chronicles!" she protested. "Now what about that?" She put her hands on her hips. "How do you defend that, I'd like to know?"

"An age-old form of public confession," I said, "sacrosanct. Goes back to ancient Egypt. A book goes forth quietly into the world, labeled fiction, to be perused, pondered, passed from one to another, perhaps put aside for the future, to perish if unwanted, to endure if valued, to work its way into trunks and vaults and junk heaps, who knows? I don't defend myself to anybody anyway. Stay off the World Wide Web!"

"Sounds positively dusty to me," she said. "But I love you just the same. Now think about this radio station idea. Maybe it's not too late. You could have your own show."

"AAAAAAHHHHH!" I cried. "I can't bear it! You think Blackwood Farm's the World. It's not, Mona! There's just Blackwood Farm, and all the rest is Sugar Devil Swamp, trust me. And how long do you think we'll have Blackwood Farm, you, me or Quinn? My Lord, you've got a direct connection to the one who told you where to find the Secret People, you're E-mailing Wisdom Central, and you're carrying on about websites! Be gone from me, now! Save thyself from my wrath!"

I think I scared her just a little. She was so tired and gaunt that she fell back from the sound of my voice. "We're not finished with this discussion, Beloved Boss," she said. "Trouble with you is you get too emotional. I question anything and you just blow your stack."

Quinn picked her up and carried her off, making huge circles on the terrace as he went, singing to her, and so they disappeared from sight and her laughter rang out in the softly purring evening.

A warm breeze came to fill the silence. The distant trees were doing their subtle dance. My heart was suddenly beating too hard and a cold anxiety crept over me. I picked up the statue of Saint Juan Diego from the flagstones and set him properly on the table where he belonged. I said nothing about him. Ah, tacky little dude with thy paper roses, thou art surely destined for better representations.

I was in the depths. The pulsing night sang to me of the nothingness. The stars spread out to prove the horror of our universe—bits and pieces of the body of no one flying at monstrous speed away from the meaningless, uncomprehending source.

Saint Juan Diego, make it go away. Work another miracle!

"What is it?" Stirling asked softly.

I sighed. In the distance the white fence of the pasture looked pretty, and the smell of the grass was good.

"I've failed at something here," I said, "and it's a major failure." I studied the man to whom I'd just spoken.

Patient Stirling, the English scholar, the Talamasca saint. The man who got down with monsters. Starved for sleep yet ever attentive.

He turned to look at me. Clever, quick eyes.

"What do you mean?" he asked. "What failure?"

"I cannot impress upon her a sense of the gravity of her transformation."

"Oh, she knows," he said.

"You surprise me," I answered. "Surely you don't forget who I am. You don't buy this facade. There's some reservoir of goodness and wisdom in you that never lets you forget what's behind this mask. And now you think you know her better than I do?"

"She's reeling from one shock after another," he said calmly. "How can it be helped? What did you expect of her? You know she worships you. And what if she teases you with outrageous propositions? It was always her way. I feel no fear when I'm near her, no instinctive wariness of an undisciplined power. In fact, quite to the contrary. I sense that there may come a moment when you look back and realize that somewhere along the line her innocence was lost and you can't even remember when it happened."

I thought of the massacre last night, the ruthless elimination of Lord Rodrigo and his soldiers. I thought of the bodies heaved into the everlasting sea. I thought of nothing.

"Innocence is not our stock-in-trade, my friend," I said. "We don't cultivate it in one another. Honor, I think we can have, more than you may know, and principles, yes, and virtue as well. I've taught her that, and every now and then we can behave magnificently. Even heroically. But innocence? It's not to our advantage."

He drew back to think on this, with just a little nod. I sensed that there were questions he wanted to ask me, but he didn't dare. Was it propriety or fear? I couldn't tell.

We were interrupted and perhaps it was for the best.

Jasmine came across the lawn with another carafe of coffee for Stirling. She was in a sharp tight red dress and high-heel shoes. She was singing loudly:

"Gloria! Gloria! In Excelsis Deo!"

"Where'd you pick up that hymn?" I asked. "Is everybody around here committed to driving me to madness?"

"Well, of course not," she said. "What would make you say a thing like that? That's a Catholic hymn, don't you know that? Grandma's been singing it in the kitchen all day. Says it's from the Latin Mass in the old days. Says she saw Patsy in a dream singing that hymn. Patsy all dressed in pink cowboy clothes, with a guitar."

"Mon Dieu!" A shiver passed through me. No wonder Julien was leaving me alone tonight. Why not?

She poured two cups of the steaming coffee. She set down the carafe. Then she kissed me on top of my head.

"You know what Aunt Queen said to me last night in my sleep?" she asked in a cheery voice, her hand on my shoulder. I kissed her satin cheek.

"No, what?" I asked. "But please break it to me gently. I teeter on the brink."

"She said she was tickled you were sleeping in her bed, said she always wanted a man

handsome as you in her bed. She laughed and laughed and laughed. Grandma says when the dead come laughing and laughing in your dreams that means they're in Heaven."

"I think it does mean that," said Stirling very sincerely. "This coffee is perfection. How do you do this?"

"Drink up," I said. "You have that powerful little MG TD with you, don't you?"

"I certainly do," he said. "You could see it right out there in front of the house if you had eyes in the back of your head."

"I want you to take me for a ride in that thing. I have to deliver this saint here to Oberon."

"Can you hold this carafe and this cup for me while I drive? Jasmine, you mind if I borrow them?"

"Don't you want the saucer? That's Royal Antoinette, the saucer's the prettiest part. Just look at it. Come in a big package from Julien Mayfair, this pattern, service for twelve, present for *'La Famille.'* "

Zap. "No," I said. "Not from Julien Mayfair."

"Oh, yes, it did!" she said. "I have the letter. Keep forgetting to give it to Quinn. Was Julien Mayfair at the wake? I never met a Julien Mayfair."

"When did this package arrive?" I asked.

"I don't know. Two days ago?" she shrugged. "Right after Mona Mayfair came to join the menagerie. Which one is Julien Mayfair? Julien Mayfair been out here?"

"What did the letter say?" I asked.

"Oh, something about if he was going to be visiting Blackwood Farm all the time, he wanted to see his favorite pattern of china. What's the matter with you? That china's beautiful!"

I hadn't the slightest intention of explaining to her that Julien Mayfair was a spirit, and that this very pattern had figured years ago in a spell created by Julien in which he'd entertained an unsuspecting and all too human Quinn with hot chocolate and cookies and a long tale of how he, Julien, had coupled with Quinn's great-grandmother. Damn the infernal spirit.

"You don't like it?" Jasmine said. "I just really do think it's a lovely pattern. Aunt Queen would have been thrilled with it. This is Aunt Queen's style, these roses. You know that."

Stirling was concentrating on me too steadily. Of course Stirling knew Julien Mayfair was a ghost. Or dead. Why was I concealing the activities of this demon? What was I ashamed of?

"Yes, it's very quaint," I said. "Has an old-fashioned delicacy to it. Stirling, what about you drink all you want and then we take a ride?"

"I'm quite fine," Stirling said. He was on his feet.

So was I.

I clutched Jasmine to me with reckless abandon and kissed her madly. She shrieked. I held her face in my hands, looking into her pale eyes. "You're a lovely woman," I said softly.

"What are you so sad about?" she asked. "Why you look so miserable?"

"Do I? I don't know. Maybe because Blackwood Farm is a moment in time. Just a moment. And it will pass.…"

"Not in my lifetime," she said smiling. "Oh, I know Quinn's going to marry Mona Mayfair and she can't have any children. We all know that. But Jerome's growing up here. That's my boy, and he's Quinn's son, and Quinn has put his name on the birth certificate. I never asked Quinn to do that. Tommy's growing up here. And he's Tommy Blackwood. And Nash Penfield will grow old taking care this place, he loves it so much. And then there's Terry Sue, Tommy's mother. I don't know if you ever reckoned on Terry Sue, but if ever there was a sow's ear beaten into a purse of silk it's Terry Sue, that's Aunt Queen's little miracle, I'm telling you, and Terry Sue'll be giving the tours on the weekends soon, and so will her daughter Brittany. That's Tommy's sister now. Now that's a lovely girl, a polite girl. And she's going off to a good school, thanks to Quinn, all of it thanks to Quinn. And Aunt Queen. You don't know what all Aunt Queen taught Brittany. Blackwood Farm's just fine. You should have that faith. How can you help Patsy's ghost across the bridge and not know the future?"

"Nobody really knows the future," I said. "But you're right. You know all kinds of things I don't know. It figures." I picked up Saint Juan Diego.

"It's you and Quinn and Mona that'll move on," she said. "I feel your restlessness. But Blackwood Farm? It will outlast all of us."

She gave me one more quick kiss. Then off she went, hips swaying beautifully in the tight red dress, pencil heels making her legs fine, her tightly cropped blond head high—the lady with the keys, and the future.

I went with Stirling.

We climbed into the low-slung car, delicious smell of leather, Stirling slipping on a pair of handsome beige driving gloves, and we roared down the drive, rattling over every rock and pebble.

"Now this is a sports car!" I declared.

Stirling flashed his lighter in front of his cigarette, then threw the car into high gear. "Yes, baby!" he shouted over the wind, sloughing off twenty years of his life, "and when you want to stub out your cigarette, you can do it right on the road," he said. "It's a beauty."

We went roaring on into the swampland.

We didn't leave the paths of speed and recklessness for Mayfair Medical until about three hours before dawn.

For a long time I walked the corridors, marveling at the murals and the benches and seating areas for the patients' families, and the finery of the waiting rooms with their warm furniture and paintings. And the lobbies with their grand sculptures and sparkling marble floors.

And then I penetrated the halls of the laboratories and research areas, and lost myself in a labyrinth of secret places where white-coated individuals who passed me nodded, assuming I

knew where I was going carrying the statue of a saint close to my chest.

Enormous, more than my mind could contain, this monument to a family and to one woman. Affecting the lives of so many thousands. A great garden with so many seeds carefully planted to grow into a forest of self-perpetuating splendor.

What was I doing on the Sacred Mountain of the One Who Walks with God?

Find Oberon in the velvety quiet.

Oberon was standing at the window, in white scrubs, looking out at the lighted arcs of the two river bridges. Soft crystalline glow of downtown buildings. He spun around when I entered the room.

"Saint Juan Diego," I said, as I put the saint on the table by the bed.

"Oh, thank you," he said warmly, without a trace of the old disdain. "Now I'll be able to sleep."

"Are you unhappy?" I asked.

"No," he said softly. "Only wondering. In my cell I told myself that all beauty was contained in the ever changing waves of the sea. I had to believe it. But oh, the great world is such a wilderness of marvels. I am very happy. And my soul is not on guard for Miravelle, my sweet foolish Miravelle! I am safe. And so is she. And I am free."

28

The room was maintained at about 40 degrees. Even I was cold. Rowan's lips were blue. But she stood, uncomplaining, right inside the door, her arms folded, her back to the wall, allowing for us to take as much time as we wanted. She was wearing her white coat, even her name tag, and white pants. Her shoes were black, simple. Her hair was brushed back from her face. She didn't look at me. I was glad.

The walls were white. So was the tile floor. There was all kinds of equipment in the room, monitors, wires, tubing, tanks, but it was shut off and retired to the sidelines and into the corners. The windows were covered with white metal blinds, shutting out the colorful night.

Miravelle, dressed primly in a long pink cotton nightgown, cried quietly. Oberon, in white silk pajamas and robe, merely observed with those half-mast gleaming eyes.

Mona stood silent, the wanderer in safari clothes, her left hand against Miravelle's back, her right arm holding a huge bunch of random flowers. Mona's eyes were dry and she looked cold and careworn.

Quinn remained against the door with me. Quinn held the bouquet which Mona had asked him to carry for her.

The perfume of the flowers filled the room. There were daisies and zinnias and lilies and roses and gladiolus, and other flowers I didn't know, lots of different colors.

The bodies were lying on separate gurneys. The limbs looked pliant, the flesh greenish, the faces slightly sunken. Morrigan's full red hair had been brushed out as though she was lying in water. Did that make Mona think even more of Ophelia? Ash had eyelashes which were extremely long, and his fingers were long. He must have been seven feet tall. He had full black hair, almost to his shoulders, with lots of white above his ears. A beautiful mouth. Morrigan looked very much like Mona. The pair quite lovely to behold.

Their heads were positioned on pillows. The sheets were clean beneath them.

They wore fresh clothes, plain white cotton pants and V-neck shirts, much like the simple clothes they'd been wearing when we found them, which seemed an eon ago.

Their naked feet looked very dead. I wasn't sure why. Perhaps they were more discolored, or even a little misshapen.

I wanted to see Ashlar's eyes. I wanted to know if that was possible, to lift the eyelid and see

an eye. But I didn't want to speak, or to ask for anything.

Miravelle finally moved to put her right hand around Ash's face. She bent to kiss his lips. When she found they were soft, she closed her eyes, and the kiss was long and fervent. With her left hand she reached out, and Mona gave her half of the flowers.

Miravelle took these and distributed them all over Ash, moving up and down, until she had partially covered him. Then Mona gave her the rest, and she finished, leaving only Ash's face. Before she withdrew, she kissed his forehead.

It was Morrigan who drew the sobs from her. "Mother," she said. Mona, who cleaved to her, didn't say a word. But she laid her own hand on Morrigan's hand, and, finding it flexible, she curled her own fingers around Morrigan's fingers.

Quinn brought the flowers to Mona. Mona gave half to Miravelle. Together they laid them on the body of Morrigan.

Oberon observed everything in silence, but tears formed in his eyes. Tears wetted his cheeks. A slight frown marred his forehead.

Miravelle's broken ragged sobs finally died away. Mona motioned her slowly towards the door. Then Mona looked back.

"Good-bye, Morrigan," she whispered.

We all filed out of the room and followed Rowan down a short thickly carpeted corridor.

We entered a rather spectacular conference room. Michael was there, and so was Stirling, both in dark suits. That's how I was dressed, and same with Quinn.

The chairs in this surprising room were genuine Chippendale, around a finely buffed oval table. The walls were a cool lavender and there were wonderful paintings on them, paintings by expressionists, full of rich and throbbing color. I wanted to steal them for my flat. The windows were open to the flickering burning night. There was a marble-top bar against the inside wall, and glittering glasses and decanters.

Michael was drinking bourbon in heavy gulps. Stirling had a glass of Scotch.

Miravelle tried to dry her eyes but with little success. Rowan poured a small glass of sherry for her, and Miravelle laughed as she held up the delicate stem in the light, and then she sipped the sherry. She was laughing and crying at the same time very softly. Her pink nightgown looked very soft.

Oberon waved away any suggestion of a drink. He stared past the assembly out into the night. He didn't bother to wipe away his tears. Only now did I notice he had cleaned his fingernails of all polish.

Mona said:

"What will you do with them?"

Rowan sat back. She considered for a long time, then she answered:

"What would you do with them if you were me?"

"I can't imagine being you," said Mona simply.

Rowan shrugged. But her face was sad. She didn't disguise it.

Oberon spoke up:

"Do whatever you want with them, Rowan," he said, with a touch of the old disdain. "Hell, Father told Rodrigo to save the bodies for you, didn't he? It's plain enough. Rodrigo wasn't knowledgeable or reflective enough to imagine such a speech or such an intention. Father wanted something accomplished. The bodies are yours by the wish of Father. No more needs to be said."

"All that is very true," said Miravelle with a simple nod. "Rowan, Father loved you. He really did. You do what Father wanted, please."

Rowan didn't answer. She sat there staring off as was her custom and then she pressed a button under the table.

Within seconds the door opened, and Lorkyn came into the room.

I was once more utterly shocked by this creature's appearance, not only because she was unaccompanied but because she wore the white pants and coat of a doctor, along with the name tag, stating her name as Lorkyn Mayfair, and her face was as unreadable as it had been when we first confronted each other on the Secret Isle.

That kitten sweetness—small upturned nose, rosy mouth, big eyes—was, if anything, enhanced by the purity of the white clothes, and she had her hair swept up on top of her head again and pouring down her back, red as Mona's, and her eyes were just as green.

She took her place at the table freely, across from me and from Oberon and Miravelle.

Mona stared coldly at her. And Oberon was on full alert. Miravelle merely looked at her as though she was a curiosity. Only Rowan seemed to know why she was here.

It was Lorkyn who explained.

"I'll say this once for you, Oberon, and Miravelle. I do not intend to be mercilessly questioned. It's my intention to be heard."

"It better be sensational, darling," said Oberon bitterly.

"It is," said Rowan. "Please listen to what Lorkyn has to say."

"I was shifting money from Rodrigo to numbered accounts for us," said Lorkyn. "I was also tipping off the authorities in Miami Beach as to his activities there, getting rid of his contacts as quickly as I could. Keep in mind, I never would have had a line out or recourse to the financial info if I hadn't played the proper role for Rodrigo. I was also trying desperately to find out who Father and Mother were legally, who owned the Secret Isle legally. But I couldn't do it. I didn't have Father's last name. Years ago, when Father first suspected trouble from Silas, he destroyed every scrap of paper that would have enabled Silas to get control of his finances. Father's lawyers came in by plane and left with everything in their briefcases.

"If I'd had the names Templeton and Lost Paradise, I could have connected us to Father's

lawyers in New York.

"As for Rodrigo, I had no opportunity to kill him. Wherever we went there were dozens of armed men with us. That held true until the night he died, when this blond-haired archangel managed to slaughter every one of his gunsels before killing him. I never had that kind of power or advantage.

"But I was biding my time for it, and accumulating the money and figuring how to get both Rodrigo and his mother, and free you, Oberon, and you too Miravelle, and get clear of the island and safely to Mayfair Medical where we could find help."

Oberon was silent. It seemed that he wanted to believe Lorkyn but that he couldn't quite accept all that she said.

Lorkyn continued:

"In my spare time, which was plentiful, I did a great deal of research on Mayfair Medical. Since Father had told us about it, and told us about Rowan Mayfair, I wanted to know what this was all about. I wasn't going to call for help until I was sure that it was the wise thing to do. I scoured the Internet for information on Rowan Mayfair and Mayfair Medical. I read everything I could get my hands on. Nowhere could I find any real assurance that Rowan Mayfair had the power, the experience or the means to free us from Rodrigo and his crime family. It seemed to me that I had to take care of Rodrigo. And then I could get us off the island and we would contact Rowan from there. Now if you two don't believe me on this score, I have no way of proving it to you. My suggestion is you use your heads."

"Why in Hell didn't you simply contact the authorities," said Oberon fiercely. "Why didn't you E-mail the evidence you had to the Drug Enforcement Agency?"

"And if I had done that, just where do you think you would be right now?"

The anger vanished from Oberon's face, yet he held her gaze steadily, then:

"I don't know," he replied.

"Well neither do I," said Lorkyn. "Do you think they would have believed you were innocent? Do you think they would have believed the story of the Secret People? Do you think they would have locked you up as a material witness? Do you think Rodrigo's enemies couldn't have gotten to you before there was a trial?"

"I see your point," he said with an air of boredom.

"Do you really see it!" she demanded. She was at her most dramatic, though still relatively low-key. "Rowan Mayfair knows what the Taltos are."

"So what were you looking for?" Mona asked.

"I was looking for a haven," said Lorkyn. "Possibly the only haven that exists. And only after I arrived here, after I spent eight solid hours talking to Rowan, did the last of my suspicions drop away."

"Probably a little too soon," said Mona.

Lorkyn looked at Mona. Lorkyn raised her eyebrows. “Oh?”

Mona didn’t respond.

Rowan said nothing. She didn’t even look at Mona.

“Please excuse Mona,” said Quinn quietly.

“Go on, Lorkyn,” I said. “You spent eight hours straight talking to Rowan. So what gives?”

“This is a place where the Taltos can stay,” said Lorkyn.

“What, to be studied?” said Mona. “You’re going to be put in cages in a lab. You call that a haven? The woman knocks you out with a syringe on the tarmac next to her jet plane and you place all your trust in her?”

Lorkyn stared at Mona. It was a curious moment, the tall long-necked Taltos completely bewildered by Mona’s behavior. Then she drew back and went on:

“You’re misunderstanding me, Mona,” said Lorkyn with soft confidence. “I’m talking of this place as an environment, a community, a world in which we can live and function and be protected and thrive. I myself have studied a great deal in medicine. You knew this when you went into my computer on the island. You brought the hard drive to Rowan. You gave it to her. You gave her proof of my studies. I’ve given her oral proof of my studies. I want to continue my studies. I want to become a doctor. That’s my wish and Rowan has accepted me as a pupil here. I’ve found favor with Rowan. And there are opportunities for fruitful work here for Oberon and for Miravelle, and this is a self-contained universe in which the Taltos can be supervised without conspicuous constraints and be protected effortlessly and be at peace.”

“Ah, wondrously clever,” said Stirling. “I never thought of it.”

“Oh, I think it’s a lovely idea!” said Miravelle. “And we can wear nightgowns all the time, or at least I can. I love nightgowns.”

“There are, as you may know,” Lorkyn continued, her eyes fixed hard on Mona, “many apartments connected to this hospital, which are provided for the visiting families of the sick, and we can live in those apartments as we study here and as we work. We need never leave this compound, except when we have a preordained goal.”

Lorkyn turned her focus from Mona. She looked at Oberon.

“My progress was slow,” she said, “and my success incomplete. But Rowan has the evidence of my efforts. And Mona, you saw them. And you, Lestat, you saw them as well. Oberon, do you accept what I’m saying?”

Oberon was trying. I couldn’t penetrate his thoughts. But I could tell by his expression.

“Why did you never during the entire two years come to me?” he asked.

“You were Lucia’s lover,” Lorkyn said. “I heard you howling with pleasure in the night. What was I to say to you? How did I know what you might say to her?”

“You could have let me know you were alive.”

“You knew I was alive. You saw me. Besides, my movements were circumscribed. My real

freedom was on the computer. I studied. I had to find a safe place not only for us to go, but for us to stay."

"You're cold," said Oberon disgustedly. "You always were."

"Perhaps," said Lorkyn, "but now I can learn to be warm. Rowan Mayfair will teach me."

"Oh, that's rich!" said Mona. "Oberon and Miravelle, you had better order your winter furs."

Michael roused himself from his quiet reflections. "Mona, honey, please try to trust in what we're trying to do."

"If you say so, Uncle Michael," said Mona.

"Don't you agree, both of you?" asked Lorkyn, looking at Oberon and Miravelle, "that we need a haven? We cannot simply go out into the world."

"No, no, I don't want to go out into the world," said Miravelle.

Oberon thought for a long moment, the fabulous eyelids lowering and then rising.

"You're right, of course you are. Where else but here can we discover some contraceptive that allows us to couple without hatching another immediately? Of course. It's brilliant. Very well." He gave one of his languid graceful shrugs. "But do we have money from the accounts you managed to transfer?" he asked.

"We have wealth from Father," said Lorkyn. "Great wealth. The Mayfair family discovered it. That's no longer a problem. You need not feel beholden. We're quite free."

"No, never feel beholden," said Rowan softly.

"Very well. I feel this discussion has come to an end," said Lorkyn.

She rose. She looked at Rowan and something silent passed between the two women, some exchange of approval and confidence and belief.

Oberon rose to his feet and took Miravelle by the hand.

"Come, my blessed little idiot," he said to Miravelle, "we'll go back to my suite and continue watching *The Lord of the Rings.* By now they'll have the white chocolate candy for us and the cold cold milk."

"Oh, everyone's so good to us," said Miravelle, "I love you all, I want you to know. And I'm so glad all the bad men died and Rodrigo fell off the balcony. It was just the best of luck."

"Isn't it uplifting, the way she describes it?" asked Oberon archly. "And to think I get to listen to this eighteen hours a day. What about you, Lorkyn? You ever going to drop in to see your brother and sister and indulge in a little intelligent discourse about your medical studies? I might go simply mad if I don't speak to someone from time to time who can use four-syllable words."

"Yes, Oberon," she said. "I'll come to you more than you might think."

She came round the table and stood before him. A great relaxation came over him, and he took Lorkyn in his arms. There was an ardent kiss and a slow moving away, with reverence and a locking of thin delicate fingers.

"Oh, I am so happy," said Miravelle. She kissed Lorkyn on the cheek.

Oberon and Miravelle left.

Lorkyn gave formal nods to all the company, gesturing for the men to take their seats again, and she too went out the door.

The room fell quiet.

Then Rowan spoke: “She’s incomparably brilliant,” she said.

“I understand,” I responded.

No one else spoke.

Mona sat there still for a long time, her eyes every so often engaging Rowan.

Then very softly, Mona said, “It’s over.”

Rowan didn’t answer.

Mona stood up, and so did Quinn. Finally I did also. Michael rose out of courtesy, and Rowan remained in her chair, thoughtful, remote.

For a moment it seemed Mona was going to leave without another word, but just as she reached the door, she looked back, and she said to Rowan:

“I don’t think you’ll see me much anymore.”

“I understand,” said Rowan.

“I love you, sweetheart,” said Michael.

Mona stopped, her head bowed. She didn’t turn around.

“I’ll never forget you,” she said.

I was stunned. I was caught completely off guard.

Michael’s face crumpled as though he’d been hit by a heavy blow. But he said nothing.

“Farewell, my beauteous mortal friends,” I said. “You need me, you know how to find me.”

Indescribable expression on Rowan’s face as she turned and looked up at me.

And so I realized it. It came over me slowly. It was like a chill.

The cause that had bound us together was no more. It wasn’t only Mona’s turning away. We had no more reason to come to one another. No more mystery to justify our intimacy. And honor and virtue, of which I’d spoken so surely, demanded we cease to interfere with one another, cease to learn about each other. We couldn’t walk the same paths.

The Taltos had been discovered, recovered and would be safe within Mayfair Medical. Lorkyn’s speech had been the epilogue.

We had to withdraw.

Why had I not seen it? Why had I not felt the entirety of it? Mona had known last night, and the night before, when she’d stood on the island looking out to sea.

But I had not known. Not known at all.

I turned and followed my companions.

Down we went through the Sacred Mountain of Mayfair Medical in the shining glass elevator and through the wondrous lobby with its mystifying modern sculptures and richly tiled floors,

out into the warm air.

Clem ready with the limousine door.

"You sure you wanna go to *that* part of town?"

"Just drop us off, we're expected."

Silence in the car as we move steadily on, as if we are not with one another.

We are not Taltos. We are not innocent. We do not belong on God's Holy Mountain. We are not protected and redeemed by those whom we have served. They cannot thank us with grace, can they? They cannot open the doors of the tabernacle.

Give us the underbelly of the city, let us spread out, where the cheapest killers come to us in the wild tangled thickets of the empty lots, ready to sink a blade for a twenty-dollar bill, and the corpses rot for weeks in the weeds amid the charred wood and the heaps of brick, and I was ravenous.

Rampant moonflower, chimney stack tall as a tree, didn't they make this place for me? Whiff of evil. Crunch of broken boards. Morthadie. Cohorts behind the jagged wall. Whisper in my ear: "Ya'll lookin for a good time?" You couldn't have said it better.

29

I woke with a start. The sun had set a long while ago. I'd been so comfortable in Aunt Queen's bed. I'd even done the strangest thing before retiring. I'd yielded to Jasmine's lectures about my fine linen suit, and hung up all my clothes, and put on a long flannel nightshirt.

What was this mad pretense? I, who had slept in velvet and lace when coffined in the dirt, yielding to these encumbering pleasures? I'd fled the sun into the raw earth itself. I'd bedded down once in the crypt beneath a church altar.

Julien sat at the table. He packed a small thin black cigarette on his gold case, then lighted it. Flash on his cool elegant face. Perfume of smoke.

"Ah, now that is something."

"So you're drawing more and more energy from me, I see," I said. "Do you draw it from me even when I sleep?"

"You're stone-cold dead by the light of day," he remarked. "However, you've dreamed a pretty dream in the past hour. I rather like your dream."

"I know what I dreamt. What can I give you to make you go away, forever?"

"I thought you were fond of me. Was that all banter?"

"And so you failed," I said. "You aided Mona to couple with Michael, and the birth of Morrigan destroyed her. How could you have known? And as to Merrick Mayfair becoming one of us, that wasn't your fault. You merely entrusted her to the Talamasca. Don't you see you have to go on? You can't keep meddling and making mistakes. Lasher's dead. Morrigan's dead. You have to let them go, your adorable Mayfairs. You're playing at being a saint. It isn't gentlemanly."

"And will *you* let them go?" he asked. "Oh, I don't speak of my treasure, my Mona. She's lost. I concede that. You know what concerns me now." His voice was thick with emotion. "Is not the destiny of the entire clan at stake?"

"What are you talking about?" I said.

"Hasn't the one you covet redeemed the family's unseemly wealth? Hasn't she sanctified the family's incalculable power?"

"What do the angels tell you?" I replied. "Pray to Saint Juan Diego for your answer."

"Answer me!" he pressed.

"What answer can I give that you'll accept?" I asked. "Go to Tante Oscar, she'll know who you are. Or seek out Fr. Kevin Mayfair in his rectory. Put your questions to them. But go away from me."

"I beg you!" he said.

We stared at each other. He was amazed at his own words. So was I.

"What if I beg you," I asked, "to interfere no more! To leave them to conscience and fortune?"

"Do we strike a bargain then?" he asked.

I turned away from him. The chills had me. *Do we strike a bargain then?*

"Damn you!"

I got up, pulled off the nightshirt and put on my clothes. Too many buttons to a three-piece suit. I straightened my purple tie. I combed out my hair. And then there were my boots, outside the door, of course.

There was a master switch for the lights. I hit it. I turned around. He was gone. The little table was untouched. But the smoke lingered. And the perfume of the cigarette with it.

I beg you!

As soon as I slipped on the boots, I left the house by the rear door, walking fast over the wet grass, along the edge of the swamp. I knew where I had to go.

It was the city.

It was the downtown streets.

Just walking, walking and thinking, on the bum, walking. Forget the blood. Blood forget me.

And from downtown I walked uptown, faster and faster, beating the pavements, until it loomed before me on the outskirts of the city, Mayfair Medical, sprawling grid of lights against the close clouded nighttime sky.

What was I doing?

This was the Patients' Garden, wasn't it?

Empty at this hour of the night, a wilderness of ligustrum and roses and gravel paths. Harmless to wander here. No hope of seeing anyone in particular. No hope of mischief. No hope of—.

It was Julien before me, blocking the way.

"Ah, you devil!" I said.

"Now what are you up to? What goes on in your crafty mind?" he demanded. "Finding her in her midnight laboratory and offering her your blood again? Asking her to analyze it beneath her microscope, you trickster devil? Any cheap excuse to draw close?"

"Will you never understand? You can't sway me, man! Seek the Light. Your curses betray your origin. Now take my curse from me!"

I reached for him—I shut my eyes. I saw the spirit in me, the goading vampiric spirit that animated my flesh, that craved the blood that kept me alive, the spirit in my two hands as I caught him by the throat, and the spirit in him, the animus that sought to project the image of

the man that was no man, and I opened my mouth over his, as I had done to Patsy, and I sent the wind into him, the fierce wind of rejection, not love, of renunciation, of repudiation.

Be gone from me, you evil thing, be gone, you twisted, worldly spirit, be gone to whatever realm in which you belong. If I can free you from the Earth, I will it.

He blazed before me, solid, in a fury. I struck him with the full strength of my arm, shattering him, sending him so far from me, I couldn't see him anymore, and an anguished cry rang out from him that seemed to fill the night.

I was alone.

I gazed up at the huge facade of the Medical Center. I turned around and I walked, and the night was simple and noisy and warm around me.

I walked all the way back downtown.

I sang a little song to myself:

"You have the whole world. You have till the end of time. You have everything you could ever want. Mona and Quinn are with you. And there are so many others in the Blood who love you. It is truly complete now, and you must go your way.…

"Yes, you must go your way and return to the fold of those whom you cannot harm.…"

30

It was an hour before dawn when I returned to Blackwood Farm, a weary soul for my bloodless wanderings, and bound for bed. The Kitchen Committee, as Quinn calls it, was already having coffee and setting the dough to rise.

I had missed Tommy's departure. He had left me a note—very kind and somewhat unique—thanking me for helping Patsy's spirit go into the Light. Ah, yes.

I at once sat down at the haunted desk, and, finding the central drawer to contain Blackwood Farm notepaper as I knew it would now that the key was lost, I wrote a note to Tommy saying that I thought he would become an extraordinary man and do great things that would make everyone proud of him.

"Beware of ordinary life," I wrote. "Reach for something finer, greater. I believe that is the message of Blackwood Farm."

Jasmine, who was already fully dressed at that hour, with a white apron over her blue suit and silk blouse, went into ecstasies over my handwriting. Where did I get all these curlicues, these flourishes and this swift perfect use of the pen?

Why was I too tired to answer? Tired as the night that Patsy had crossed over? Was Julien really gone for good?

She took the note, slid it into an envelope and said it would go out with the first package of fudge which they were already cooking for Tommy.

"You know Quinn and Mona won't be back for a week," she said. "You and Nash are the only two in this great big house, and you won't touch a morsel of food we cook, you're so particular, and if you leave, there's just going be Nash and I'll cry my eyes out."

"What?" I asked. "Where did Mona and Quinn go?"

"Who am I that I should know?" she asked with exaggerated gestures. "They didn't even tell us good-bye. It was another gentleman came here to tell us they'd be gone for a while. And he was the strangest man I've ever seen in my life, skin so white it looked like a mask. Hair jet black and long to his shoulders, and such a smile. It almost gave me a fright. Check in Aunt Queen's room when you go to bed. He left a note in there on the table for you."

"That man's name is Khayman. He's kindly. I know where they went." I sighed. "You going to let me stay in Aunt Queen's room while they're gone?"

“Oh, bite your tongue,” she said. “It’s where you belong. You think I’m bubbling over with joy that Miss Mona is raiding Aunt Queen’s closets like the Queen of Sheba, just leaving fox furs and rhinestone shoes all over the floor? I am not. Never mind, I straightened it all up. You go on to bed.”

We went back the hallway together. I went into the room, found it softly lighted with only the dressing-table lamps, and stood there for a moment, just breathing in the perfume and wondering how long I could play out this spectacular hand.

The bed was already turned down for me. And a fresh flannel nightshirt was laid out, and sure enough, as they say on Blackwood Farm, there was a letter on the little table.

I sat down, tore open the parchment envelope and discovered the letter printed in a graceful cursive font.

My dearest rebel,

Your darlings want badly to be received by me and so I have granted their request. It is highly unusual, as you know, for me to bring ones so young to my compound. But there are excellent reasons for both Quinn and Mona spending some time here with me, acquainting themselves with the archives, meeting some of the others who go and come, and perhaps gaining some perspective on the gifts which they have been given and the existence which lies before them.

It is my strong feeling that their entrenchment in mortal life is not altogether wise, and this visit with me, this retreat among the immortals, will serve to insulate them against the shocks which may come. You are right in fearing that Mona does not grasp the full sacramental power of the Blood. But Quinn does not either, having been made against his will. Another reason for my bringing them here is simply that I have become quite real to Mona and Quinn, as the result of our communication regarding the Taltos, and I want to dispel any harmful mythmaking which might surround my person in their young minds.

Here they will come to know me as I am. They will perhaps appreciate that at the root of our lineage there exists not a great goddess but a fairly simple personality, honed by time, and linked to her own mortal visions and desires.

Both children seem to be exceptionally gifted, and I am in awe of your accomplishments with them, as well as your patience.

I know what you are suffering at present. Only too well, I understand. But I have every confidence that you will behave according to the highest standards which you have set for yourself. Your moral evolution simply doesn’t allow for anything else.

Let me assure you that you are welcome here. And I could easily have arranged for you to be brought to me with Quinn and Mona. But I know that you don’t want to come.

You are now free to spend weeks in mortal peace, lying in Aunt Queen’s bed, reading the

novels of Dickens over again. You are entitled to that rest.

Maharet

There it was, the evidence of my failure with Quinn and Mona, and the revelation of Maharet's marvelous generosity in bringing them to herself. What finer teacher could they have in all the wide world than Maharet?

I'd given Mona and Quinn all I could in my own fashion. And that wasn't enough. No, it simply wasn't enough. The problem was probably what Maharet had called my "moral evolution." But I wasn't so sure.

I'd wanted to make "the perfect vampire" in Mona. But my plan had been quickly swallowed by forces which had taught me more than I could ever teach anybody else.

And Maharet was so right that I did not want to be taken to her famous jungle compound. No, not for me that fabled place of stone rooms and screened enclosures, where she the ancient lady who looked more like a statue in alabaster than a living thing held quiet court with her mute twin sister. And as for the legendary archives with their ancient tablets, scrolls and codices of unimaginable revelations, I could wait forever for those treasures as well. What can't be revealed to the world of men and women can't be revealed to me. I had no taste or patience for it.

I was going in quite the other direction—caught in the thrall of Blackwood Farm—this lost corner of the South where things more mundane were far more precious to me.

I was at peace with it. I was also weak in my soul, without doubt. And it was from my battle with Julien, and sure enough, he was nowhere about.

I folded the letter.

I got undressed.

I put all my clothes properly on hangers like a decent mortal individual, put on the flannel nightshirt, pulled out the copy of "Little Nell" from under the pillow and read until the sun came creeping over the horizon and over my consciousness, locking me down into emptiness and peace.

31

This book's finished. You know it. I know it. After all, what more is there to say? So why am I still writing? Read on and find out.

How many nights passed? I don't know. I don't count well. I get numbers and ages wrong. But I feel time. I feel it the way I feel the evening air when I walk outside, the way I feel the roots of the oak tree under my foot.

Nothing could have made me leave Blackwood Farm. So long as I was on the property, I was safe. I even put off Stirling for a while. Just can't talk about the Taltos now, though it is a most interesting subject, of course, but you see, she's wrapped up in it, she's at the core of it—.

So when I wasn't reading "Little Nell" or *David Copperfield,* I went walking on the property, down along the swamp where I'd encountered Patsy, or through the little cemetery, or over the broad lawns to admire the flower beds that were still tended so faithfully even though Pops, the man who planted them all, is gone.

I had no predictable path, but I did have a predictable time. I usually went out about three hours before dawn.

If I had a favorite place it was the cemetery. All those nameless graves, and the four oaks that surrounded it, and the swamp so perilously close.

They'd cleaned away all the soot from the grave on which Merrick Mayfair had built her pyre. One would never know there had been such a blaze there. And the leaves were raked regularly, and the little chapel, quite a building, was swept clean every day.

It had no real door; its windows had no glass. It was a Gothic piece of work, all pointed arches. And inside there was a bench where one could sit and meditate.

But that wasn't my favorite spot.

My favorite spot was to sit at the foot of the biggest of the oak trees, the one that had a limb that lay on the ground above the cemetery, a limb that stretched into the swamp.

I headed there with my head down. I wasn't thinking of much of anything, except perhaps that I had seldom been this happy or this miserable in my life. I didn't need blood but I wanted it. I craved it unbearably at times. Especially on these walks. I dreamt of the prowl and of the murder. I dreamt of the soiled intimacy—the needle of my hunger plunged into heated hatefulness. But I didn't have the stamina for it just now.

The boundaries of Blackwood Farm were the boundaries of my soul.

I headed to my oak. I was going to sit there and look over the cemetery, look at the little iron lace fence with its ornate pickets, look at the graves, and the rising hulk of the chapel. And who knows? Maybe there would be a mist coming off the swamp. And the sky would turn the familiar and oh, so essential, purple before the sun came.

That was my intent.

I live in the past, the present, the future. And I was remembering that once, very near here, under the other oak tree, the one closer to the gate of the cemetery, I had met Quinn, all alone, after he had killed Patsy, and I had given him my blood to drink.

I've never in all my long wandering years been hated by anyone the way Quinn was hated by Patsy. Patsy had attached to him all the hate her soul could tender. Who can judge such a thing? Ah. My own mother, given the Blood by me, is simply uninterested in me, and more or less always was. A very different thing from hate. But what was I going to say?

Yes. That I had met Quinn, and I had given him to drink my own blood. An intimate moment. A sad and thrilling moment. And a conveying of power from me to Quinn. He'd belonged to me in that little while. I had seen his complex and trusting soul and how the Dark Trick had stolen it, and how there had emerged from the theft a bold and unyielding survivor of Quinn Blackwood, determined to make sense of what had occurred.

Our irrepressible creative power.

I loved him. Sweet, easy. No kindling of possessiveness or fierce want. No concomitant emptiness. And then to witness his fulfillment in Mona, that was finer than blood lust.

I thought of that as I approached my oak tree, as I was dreaming, and weaving into my dreams bits of poetry, poetry I stole and broke and wove into my desires: *You have ravished my heart, my sister, my spouse … how fair is my love.* Can I not envision? Can I not dream? *Set me as a seal upon thine heart.*

What is it to me that I catch the scent of a mortal? Blackwood Farm is a citadel of mortals. What does it matter to anyone that Lestat is walking, whom they've all made so welcome? So one of them now comes to cross my path. I close my mind. My mind collapses in upon itself and its poetry: *Thou art all fair, my love, there is no spot in thee.*

I found my tree and my hand found the trunk of it.

She was sitting there, sitting on the thick roots, looking up at me. Her white coat was spattered with dried blood, her name tag askew, her face drawn, her eyes huge and hungry. She rose up into my waiting arms.

I held her, this supple, feverish creature, and my soul opened. "Love you, love you as I've never loved, love you above wisdom, above courage, above the glamor of evil, above all riches and the Blood itself, love you with my humble heart which I never knew I had, my gray-eyed one, my brilliant one, my mystic of the medical magic, my dreaming one, oh, let me just

surround you with my arms, I don't dare to kiss you, I don't dare—."

She rose on tiptoe and pushed her tongue between my lips. *Want you, want you with my whole soul. Do you hear me, do you know what gulf I've crossed to come to you? There is no god in my soul but you. I've belonged to greedy spirits, I've belonged to monsters made of my own flesh, I've belonged to ideas and formulae and dreams and designs of magnificence, but now I belong to you, I'm yours.*

We lay down on the grass together, on the slope above the cemetery, under the canopy of the oak tree where the stars couldn't see us.

My hands wanted all of her, her flesh beneath the stiff cotton, the small full curve of her hips, her breasts, her pale neck, her lips, her privy parts, so wet and ready for my fingers, my lips grazing her throat, not daring to do more than feel the blood beneath the skin as my fingers brought her up to the climax, as she moaned against me, as her limbs went stiff with the finish, as she lay limp against my chest.

The blood thudded in my ears. It raced through my brain. It said *I want her.* But I lay still.

My lips were pressed to her forehead. The blood threaded through me turned to pain. The pain peaked, as her passion had peaked. And in the softness of her cheek and her lips, I knew a measure of sweetness and quiet, and the morning was still dark and the stars fought to flicker in the canopy of leaves above.

Her hand moved over my shoulder, over my chest.

"You know what I want of you," she said in that deep lustrous voice, her words underscored with pain and determination. "I want it from you, and I want you. I've told myself all the noble reasons to turn away from it, I've told myself all the moral arguments, my mind has been a confessional, a pulpit, a place beneath the porch where the philosophers gather. My mind has been a forum. In the emergency room I worked day after day until I could hardly stand any longer. Lorkyn's learned from me and me from Lorkyn, and programs of study have been designed for Oberon and Miravelle, and we have talked the nights through with formulations and proposals in which they are enshrined and encapsulated, and their collective well-being has been institutionalized, and good will surrounds them and stimulates them—and my soul, my soul has remained steadfast. My soul craves *this* miracle! My soul craves your face, you! My soul has been always with you." She sighed. "My love.…"

Silence. The songs of the swamp. The songs of those birds who always begin before morning. And the sound of the water moving, and the leaves all around us listing to a faint and uncertain breeze.

"This is something I never expected to feel again," she whispered. "I thought it would never come to me again," I felt her trembling. "That those parts of me had been forever burnt out," she said. "Yes, I love Michael and will forever, but what that love demands of me is that I set Michael free. Michael languishes in my shadow. Michael wants and should possess a simple woman who can bear him a wholesome child. And we've lived together in mourning for what

might have been had monsters not possessed us and ruined us. We've whispered our Requiems for too long.

"And then this fire is born. Oh, not because of what you are! What you are could terrify. What you are could repel! But because of who you are, the soul inside you, the words you speak, the expression on your face, the certain witness of eternity I read in you! My world collapses when I'm near you. My values, my ambitions, my plans, my dreams. I see them as the scaffolding of hysteria. And this love has taken root, this savage love which knows no fear of you, and only wants to be with you, wants the Blood, yes, because it's your blood, and all else melts away."

I waited. I listened to the rhythm of her heart. I listened to the blood inside her. I listened to her sweet breath. I held myself back—the raging animal that had so many times shattered the cage and taken the object of its desire. I wrapped her so close!

For an age it seemed I held her.

Then I found myself letting her go, folding her limbs against her own breast, and rising and leaving her, refusing her outstretched hands, refusing them with kisses, but leaving her and walking to the edge of the swamp alone, my body growing cold, so cold it was as if some northern winter had found me in the gentle heat and driven its teeth into me.

I stood alone, so very alone, looking into the gnawing unformed morass of the swamp, and thinking only of her and letting my imagination run rampant with the undisciplined glory of loving her, of having her. The world reborn in love, and common things overlayered with common despair leapt into colors brilliant and irresistible. What was this point in time to me? What was this place called Blackwood Farm that I couldn't take her with me and shake its dust from off my feet and soar with her to other lands of certain enchantment?

Oh yes, and what has this to do with pure love, Lestat? What is the luster of pure love? What is the luster of that most uncommon one who lies there waiting?

I don't know how long I stood there, apart from her. My rosy dreams of palaces, of wanderings, of bowers and realms of love were vaporous and great and small and vanishing.

And she was there, patient, wise—condemned by her own lips, wasn't she?

A sadness came to me, as pure as pure love, and then a pain, a pain as true as the pain I'd heard in her unhurried voice, her deep and total commitment.

At last I turned and I made my way back to her.

I lay beside her. Her arms were waiting for me. Her lips were waiting.

"And you believe this can happen?" I asked, speaking slowly. "You believe you can walk away from everyone who looks to you for a future they couldn't envisage without you?"

She said nothing. Then, "Let me fall into eternity," she sighed. "I am tired."

Oh, I understand, I do, and you have done so much!

I waited, then I spoke with careful words.

"You believe the ongoing world will know what to make of Lorkyn and Oberon and Miravelle

without your wisdom and your insight?" I asked. "You believe that ego-driven science can truly take custody of something so delicate, so explosive, so fine?"

No answer.

"You believe the Medical Center will reach its full perfection without your guidance?" I asked. I spoke the words as lovingly as I could. "There are plans yet in your heart, magnificent plans, and bold visions yet uncommitted to record. Who will pick up the scepter? Who has the courage? Who has the Mayfair billions coupled with the discrete power? Who passes from the operating table to the laboratory to the swarm of the architects and the scientists with the fierceness of a Gamma Knife? Who? Who can go beyond the daring already accomplished in the Medical Center? Who can double its size? Perhaps even triple it? And you have those years to give it. You know it. I know it. You have them chaste and pure and driven by compulsive virtue. Are you ready to turn your back on that?"

No response. I waited. I held her close, as if someone were going to steal her from me. As if the night was full of menace. As if the menace didn't come from me.

"And Michael," I said. "Yes, he has to be released, but is this the time to do it? Will he survive your coming to me? He's still snared in horrors. His heart's been broken by Mona's fate. Can you really slip away on Michael? Can you write the cryptic note? Can you say the dark farewell?"

For the longest time she didn't answer. I felt I could say no more. My heart ached as much as it had ever ached. We lay so near to one another, so bound in one another's limbs, so warm and belonging to each other that the night had gone quiet of all its random sounds for us.

At last she stirred ever so faintly, ever so tenderly.

"I know," she whispered. "I know." And then again, "I know."

"This can't happen," I said. "Never have I wanted anything so much, but it can't happen. You know that it can't."

"You don't really mean that," she said. "Surely you don't. You can't refuse me! You think I'd come to you like this if I didn't know how you really feel?"

"Know how I feel?" I said, holding her against me, clasping her tight to me. "Yes, you know how much I love you. Yes, you know how much I want you, and to slip away with you, away from anyone who could divide us, yes, you know. What are mortal lives to me after all? But don't you see, Rowan, you've made your mortal life magnificent. You turned your soul inside out to do it. And that simply cannot be ignored."

Her arms continued to hold me. She pressed her face against mine. I stroked her hair.

"Yes," she said. "I tried. It was my dream."

"It is your dream," I said. "Even now."

"Yes," she said.

I felt such hurt in me I couldn't speak for a little while.

Again, I let myself imagine we were in a dark bed, she and I together, and that nothing could

part us, and in each other we had found sublime meaning, and all the cosmic troubles were gone from us like so many veils torn away.

But that was fantasy, and weak as it was beautiful.

She broke the silence.

"And so I make another sacrifice," she said, "or you make it for me, a sacrifice so great I hardly grasp it! Good God—."

"No," I answered. "You make the sacrifice, Rowan. You've come to the brink but you move back from it. You've got to go back, you, yourself."

Her fingers moved against my back, as though trying to find some human softness in it. Her head nestled against me. Her breath came choked as if in sobs.

"Rowan," I said. "It's not the time."

She looked up at me.

"The time will come," I said. "I'll wait and I'll be there."

"You mean this?" she asked.

"I mean it," I said. "You haven't lost what I have to give, Rowan. It's just not the time."

A soft mauve light had come into the sky; the leaves were burning in my eyes. I hated it.

Lifting her gently with me, I sat up and helped her to sit beside me. Bits of grass clung to her, and her hair was prettily disheveled and her eyes glistened in the growing light.

"Of course a thousand things may happen," I said. "We both know it. But I'll be watching. I'll be watching, and waiting. And when the time comes, when you can really draw back from all of it, then I'll come."

She looked down, and then up at me again. Her face was pensive and soft. "And will I lose all sight of you now?" she asked. "Will you go away beyond my reach?"

"From time to time, perhaps," I answered. "But never for very long. I'll be guarding you, Rowan. You can count on it. And the night will come when we'll share the Blood. I promise you. The Dark Gift will be yours."

I rose to my feet. I took her hand and helped her to stand.

"I have to go now, beloved. The light's my mortal enemy. I wish I could watch the sunrise with you. But I can't."

I clasped her to me suddenly, violently, kissing her as hungrily as I ever had. "I love you, Rowan Mayfair," I said. "I belong to you. I'll always belong to you. I'll never never be far away."

"Good-bye, my love," she whispered. A faint smile appeared on her face. "You really do love me, don't you?" she whispered.

"Oh, yes, with my whole heart," I said.

She turned from me quickly, as though that was the only way to do it, and she walked up the rise of the lawn and to the front drive. I heard the motor of her car, and then I went slowly back around to the rear door of the house, and into my room.

I was so utterly unhappy that I hardly knew what I was doing. And at one point it struck me that what I'd just done was mad. Then it hit me that it just couldn't have happened. A selfish fiend like me just would not have let her go!

Who said all those noble words!

She'd given me the moment, perhaps the only moment. And I'd tried to be Saint Lestat! I'd tried to be heroic. Dear God, what had I done! Now her wisdom and her strength would carry her far away from me. Age would only enlarge her soul and dwindle for her the glow of my enchantment. I had forfeited her forever. Oh, Lestat, how I do hate thee!

There was plenty enough time for the nightshirt ritual, and as I finished with it, torn with thirst and torn with grief for what I'd just refused and might lose forever, I realized I wasn't alone.

Ghosts again, I thought. *Mon Dieu.* I looked quite deliberately at the small table.

What a sight.

It was a grown woman, perhaps twenty, twenty-five. Glossy black hair in marcel waves. Flapper dress of layered silk, long string of pearls. Legs crossed, fancy heels.

Stella!

It seemed monstrous, like the little girl I knew stretched and pulled and blown up; cigarette in a holder, poised in her left hand.

"Ducky, don't be so silly!" she said. "Of course it's me! Oncle Julien's so frightened of you now, he won't come near you. But he just had to send the message: 'That was superb!' "

She vanished before I could throw one of my boots at her. But I wouldn't have done that anyway.

What did it matter? Let them come and go. After all, this was Blackwood Farm, wasn't it, and Blackwood Farm has always opened its portals to ghosts.

And now I lay me down to sleep, and the book comes to a close.

Against the deep down pillow, I realized something. Even in grief and loss, I possessed Rowan. She was a presence within me forever. My loneliness would never again be as bitter. Over the years she might drift away from me, she might come to condemn the point of passion that had brought her to my arms. She might be lost to me in some other mundane fashion that would wring tears from me all my nights.

But I'd never really lose her. Because I wouldn't lose the lesson of love I'd learned through her. And this she had given me as I had tried to give it to her.

And so the morning dew covered the grass on that day at Blackwood Farm like any other, and I dreamt before the sun rose that:

I wanna be a saint, I wanna save souls by the millions, I wanna look like an angel, but I don't wanna talk like a gangster, I don't want to do bad things even to bad guys, I wanna be Saint Juan Diego.…

… But you know me, and come sunset, maybe it will be time to hunt the back roads, and those little out-of-the-way beer joints, sure enough, smell the malt and the sawdust, and yeah, right on, dance to the Dixie Chicks on the jukebox, and maybe crush a couple of heavy-duty Evil Doers, guys who are just waiting for me, and when I'm flush with blood, and sick of the smack and roll of the pool balls and that warm light on the green felt, who knows, yeah, who knows just how glorious the firmament with all its breaking clouds and lost little stars will appear as I rise above this Earth and spread out my arms as though there was no want in me for anything warm or good.

Be gone from me, oh mortals who are pure of heart. Be gone from my thoughts, oh souls that dream great dreams. Be gone from me, all hymns of glory. I am the magnet for the damned. At least for a little while. And then my heart cries out, my heart will not be still, my heart will not give up, my heart will not give in—

—the blood that teaches life will not teach lies, and love becomes again my reprimand, my goad, my song.

THE END

Anne Rice
October 5, 2002
New Orleans

For
Stan Rice
1942–2002

—the love of my life.

ALSO BY ANNE RICE

Interview with the Vampire

The Feast of All Saints

Cry to Heaven

The Vampire Lestat

The Queen of the Damned

The Mummy

The Witching Hour

The Tale of the Body Thief

Lasher

Taltos

Memnoch the Devil

Servant of the Bones

Violin

Pandora

The Vampire Armand

Vittorio, The Vampire

Merrick

Blood and Gold

Blackwood Farm

UNDER THE NAME ANNE RAMPLING

Exit to Eden

Belinda

UNDER THE NAME A. N. ROQUELAURE

The Claiming of Sleeping Beauty

Beauty's Punishment

Beauty's Release